

SYSAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

WHEN NORMA MENTIONED TO OUR NEIGHBOR MANNY that we'd be going away soon to celebrate our nineteenth wedding anniversary, Manny, who's been married fifty-two years, said, "It's a good start."

NORMA AND I AGREE THAT ONE OF THE STRENGTHS OF our marriage is our ongoing conversation about the nature of reality. Some might call this "walking a spiritual path together," but that sounds sentimental and grandiose. How many nights have I ended up sleeping on the sofa because one of our philosophical discussions got out of hand?

IT'S IMPORTANT TO SPEAK THE TRUTH, AND IT'S IMPORTANT to know when to shut up. Truth is strong. Love is stronger.

LAST NIGHT, A MINOR DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN NORMA and me turned into the worst kind of conflagration: an argument about how we argue. This morning, the last thing I feel like doing is finding a place at the beach for our anniversary celebration. But I promised I'd take care of it. Maybe a stateroom on the Titanic? If we're lucky, we'll end up in the same lifeboat together. Or maybe we'll go down with the ship, arguing about the meaning of drowning.

ARE WE MORE MARRIED SOME DAYS THAN OTHERS? IT seems so. Does our marriage survive anyway? It seems so.

NORMA LOVES OUR NEW KING-SIZED MATTRESS. TO ME, it's as if we're sleeping in different zip codes. In the middle of the night, I hear her breathing. But when I reach for her, I can't find her. I drift back to sleep, remembering when I hitchhiked from New York to California in 1971, standing at the side of the road with my thumb out, realizing for the first time what a big country this is.

THE HUNGARIAN POET MIKLÓS RADNÓTI SPENT MANY hard years in the work camps before being executed by the Nazis during World War II. After the war, his wife had his body exhumed. In the pocket of his trench coat, she found a notebook of poems. In one, addressed to her, he wrote: "I still smile sometimes. I smile because / even seeds hiding in the earth are happy when they've outlived / another winter. I

think about you, love, and love, / a sleepy mood, walks like a tiger and toys with me."

WE'D MADE LOVE ON THE OLD OAK BED FOR YEARS. SO, in my dream, when we arrived at the enormous oak tree, I knew. The snake was there in the dark shade, waiting, curled around an enormous root. And the snake flicked his tongue, and the tree sank its roots deeper and deeper. And maybe it started raining then; I couldn't say for sure. Or maybe one of us was crying. Sometimes we cried. Sometimes we cried out together.

THERE ARE MANY WAYS OF LISTENING, SHE TOLD ME, watching my face closely. I knew she was seeing what no mirror had ever shown me. This is one way, she said.

JEALOUSY, OLD FRIEND, WE USED TO SPEND A LOT OF nights together, telling the same old stories, the ones we never tired of repeating. I bought drinks, you bought drinks — what did it matter? We were the kind of friends who could finish each other's sentences. We dressed in black then. We looked so cool. Now I'm not so sure. Don't you think we look a little ridiculous?

NORMA AND I LIVED ON NEXT TO NOTHING WHEN WE got married. These days, there's enough to go around. Does that make a difference? It does. Is it an important difference? That depends. Back then, we took baths together almost every night. We talked philosophy; we fooled around. Our bathtub is bigger now. We still talk; we still fool around.

IT'S BEST NOT TO CONFUSE NORMA WITH THE TWENTY-SIX-year-old woman she was when we met, or, for that matter, with the middle-aged woman she is today — with the ache in her shoulder after she's gardened all morning or the wisps of gray in her beautiful long hair. Which is the real Norma: the woman she was twenty years ago; the woman she is today; the woman she'll be twenty years from now? Who's asking?

TIME BRINGS OUT TODAY'S SPECIAL. EVERY DAY IT'S THE same routine. *You call this a meal?* I scowl. Time looks me in the eye. *Twenty-four hours*, he says. *That's it.*