

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

THE BIRDS HAVE STARTED TO SING. THEY'RE SO easy to please. The sun comes up and they think they're in heaven. There are clouds; don't they notice? It's chilly; don't they care? Oh when will I learn to praise the light in me?

AT THE AGE OF EIGHTY, NORMAN MAILER SAYS that his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, published when he was twenty-five, was "sloppily written [with] hardly a noun in any sentence not holding hands with the nearest and most commonly-available adjective." Surely he's entitled to say what he wants to about the book. But had he been that self-critical fifty-five years ago, would *The Naked and the Dead* ever have been written?

I WON'T FIND WHAT I'M LOOKING FOR IN THE mirror of a perfect sentence.

I ASKED FOR A STOPLIGHT. I ASKED FOR A TRAFFIC cop. I begged God to do something about all these assholes behind the wheel: Greed. Lust. Envy. Ambition. *Just slow down*, God said.

THE INSTRUCTIONS THAT CAME WITH THIS IN- carnation aren't easy to decipher. One sentence can take years, even decades, to figure out — and even then I can't be certain I've got it right. I try to remember what Carl Jung said: "The serious problems in life . . . are never fully solved. If they should appear to be, it would be a sure sign that something has been lost. The meaning and purpose of a problem seems to be not in its solution but in our working at it incessantly."

YESTERDAY NORMA AND I CELEBRATED OUR twenty-first anniversary. In this house of marriage, we've made a home: nothing hidden in the cellar; no rooms that aren't lived in and loved. The blueprints for our perfect life together are stacked in the corner, where the walls don't exactly meet.

ALL THOSE YEARS: GONE. NOW, YESTERDAY, TOO, is gone. Last night's lovemaking is as out of reach this morning as that smiling groom with shoulder length hair and his lovely bride in her thrift-store dress. But it's impossible to hold on to the past, so why try? Wouldn't the morning like to hold me close, I who love the morning so? Wouldn't she like to hear me say again that I'm a morning person, that she's my one and only? But still she lets go.

I LIKED OUR OLD DOUBLE BED. IT SEEMED JUST right for two cats and their two humans. But Norma found it too confining, as if her dream-body were stuck in traffic on some crowded city street. She wanted spacious skies, wind-

swept plains. Now we sleep on a bed fit for a king and as wide as America's fat ass. Reaching for my beloved at night, I might as well be driving across Nebraska, trying to find a café I stopped at a lifetime ago, where I met a young waitress who slept in a small room on a narrow futon she rolled up each morning, as if rolling up the night itself. No, she didn't need any help, she said; that's what she loved about this little bed.

LEAVING FOR THE OFFICE YESTERDAY, I SAID goodbye to Norma with barely a glance in her direction. "Bye," she replied, not looking up from her desk. Halfway down the stairs, I stopped. I'd forgotten she'd be leaving town that afternoon and wouldn't be back for two days. I stood on the landing, contemplating the tyranny of my busy mind, which always has an excuse for rushing, for trying to squeeze an extra minute or two out of the day. And if it happens to be my last day? *All the more reason to be productive*, the mind insists. I thought about what I lose by not making every hello and goodbye more conscious. I shook my head. To let love die from a thousand acts of neglect — man, that's a funeral I don't want to attend. I bounded up the stairs.

IF HE HAD LIVED, TODAY WOULD HAVE BEEN MY father's ninetieth birthday. But he died when he was sixty, in 1974, the same year I started *The Sun*. I sent him the first few issues; he wasn't impressed. Was this why I'd walked away from a promising career in newspaper work, he wanted to know. He was often dismissive and sarcastic when we disagreed, which we did a lot in those days — arguments that left me frustrated and tearful, though I wouldn't cry in front of him. I'd wait until I was back in my car, pounding on the steering wheel. Once I asked him if he'd read any of the issues I'd sent. He just waved his hand. "You're too much of an idealist," he said. "What's wrong with having ideals?" I shot back. "Having ideals is one thing," he insisted. "Being impractical is something else." It was one of our last arguments. A couple of months later, I sat beside his hospital bed as the cancer that had ravaged his body for more than a year, razing one neighborhood after another, bulldozed the few proud houses that were left. Today, only a few months shy of sixty myself, I recall not just our irreconcilable differences but our incontestable bond. His temper notwithstanding, I never really questioned my father's love for me. Nor have I forgotten how physically affectionate he was, nor how funny, nor how his judgment of himself as a "failed" writer has both haunted and driven me, for better and worse. On impulse, I pick up the dictionary and look up *idealist*: "a person whose thought or behavior is based on ideals; a person who follows his ideals to the point of impracticality." What do you know, Dad. We were both right.