

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

I DREAMT THAT I VOTED FOR GEORGE W. BUSH FOR president, then gathered with fellow Republicans on election night to watch the returns. When it began to look as if Bush had been defeated, several of us started to weep. Suddenly I realized I must be dreaming, because I remembered that Bush had actually won. I was about to tell everyone the good news when I also remembered that I'd voted for John Kerry. So I just kept weeping.

I TOLD A FRIEND I WAS STILL FEELING AGGRIEVED about last November's election. He suggested I take a more philosophical view. The ancient Chinese, he said, used to consider themselves fortunate if a great emperor came along once every five hundred years.

I'M NOT MUCH OF A JEW. BUT LAST WEEK, WHEN my wife, Norma, suggested that I trade in my '95 Volvo for a more environmentally friendly car — a used, diesel-powered Volkswagen or Mercedes-Benz retrofitted to run on biodiesel fuel — I hissed, "Those are Nazi cars." Maybe this is my kind of Judaism: to be kosher in my choice of automobiles; to worship Volvos! Still, it's no joke that Volkswagen and Mercedes-Benz not only supported the Nazi regime during World War II but also used thousands of concentration-camp inmates as slave laborers. And though I'm not much of a Jew, I've never forgotten the Jews in the camps; the Jews who, in their final moments, cried out not to be forgotten by Jews like me.

I DON'T KNOW IF I'M RESPONSIBLE FOR THE GENOCIDE of Native Americans or the enslavement of African Americans or any of the other crimes committed in this country before I was born. But what about the crimes being committed in my name today? Have I grown too comfortable to risk speaking out more often — comfortable not just materially but comfortable, too, with my familiar routines, even my familiar anxieties? Compromise bats her big blue eyes at me. No need to sit on the floor, she says, patting the place beside her on the plush divan.

I LOST TEN POUNDS LAST FALL, THEN GAINED IT back. Maybe I need to hire an armed security guard to keep me out of the kitchen at night — a square-jawed bully who won't respond to my friendly overtures or laugh at my self-deprecating jokes. I've been turning to food all winter the way an alcoholic turns to drink; the way a president turns to war; the way God, in His Immense Loneliness, turns to us for comfort: *Feed me*, God says.

ALWAYS REACHING FOR THE NEXT BITE INSTEAD of feeling fed.

I FASTED FOR THREE DAYS TO REMIND MYSELF that I can live with hunger. Now that I've started eating regu-

larly again, can I remember that hunger, like all desires, is satisfied for only so long? Then it arises again, as insistent as ever: it's here when I sit down to eat, and it's here again a half-hour later, whispering in my ear. By eating a little extra today, I can't guarantee that I'll have enough to eat next week or next year. I can't bring back to life my Russian ancestors who waited on long lines for bread. Hunger, old friend, old enemy, old teacher: I can't vanquish you by overeating.

I'M A BEGGAR AT GOD'S DOORSTEP, AND I'M KNOCKING, knocking, knocking. What if I'm asked to leave my rags at the door and come in? What will become of my rags?

BEFORE VISITING MY FRIEND C. IN THE HOSPITAL, I looked up her ailment in the *Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy*. What a book! Does God pick it up when He needs a chuckle, the way my father used to leaf through *1,001 Jokes for Every Occasion*? Does God slap His thigh, roar with laughter at His Astonishing Cunning? When the *Merck Manual* was first published in 1899, it was a slim 192 pages; today, it takes 2,655 pages to cover the full gamut of human misery. I thought about the progress we've made in treating certain diseases. I also wondered how many ailments didn't even exist a century ago: how many are caused by the air we breathe today, the water we drink, the food we eat, and by how physically inactive most of us are? At the hospital, I was shocked by the girth of the two receptionists: the woman must have weighed at least three hundred pounds; the man, four hundred. In a world where thousands die every day from hunger and malnutrition, it's easy to feel compassion for those who don't have enough food. But what about the beneficiaries of the progress we've made, those who sit all day in temperature-controlled cubicles with too much food, too much of the wrong food, no longer even sure what they're hungry for?

WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT TO KEEP EXPRESSING my opinions? Isn't that part of staying in a trance, entranced by my *yes* and *no* and *maybe*, while the stillness at the heart of things is neglected? But who wants to dwell in stillness when I can turn on the radio or pick up the telephone or, best of all, sit and talk with my beautiful and intelligent wife? Who needs the empty cup when the full cup is overflowing? If I run out of things to talk about, I can fill the silence with reading. If I run out of books, I can read my to-do list. I can read the ingredients on the can. And then there's the Internet, which keeps me up to date on the wayward drift of my fellow humans. Do I fear the stillness? Of course I do, just as I fear a God whose voice speaks to me from the stillness, but only when I'm still. God doesn't need me to sing God's praises. God already knows all the tricks a man can perform with a twenty-six letter alphabet. God doesn't tell me to shut up and sit down. But when I do, God is waiting.