

SYSAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

THE TERRORISTS WHO HIJACKED MY COUNTRY came to me in a dream last night. But by morning I'd forgotten all the details: how they did it; why we let them.

THE CONSTITUTION MUST BE HERE SOMEWHERE, the president insists. *It was here a few years ago. It didn't just get up and walk away.*

AFTER 9/11, I PROMISED TO STOP DEMONIZING our leaders. That's what al-Qaeda does, and it's just a matter of degree. The president and I have much in common, after all. Nearly the same age, we're both diligent about exercising; both men of faith; both in love with our wives. We're each, in our own way, engaged in a war against evil. We each, in our own way, deceive ourselves about the progress we're making.

NEARLY A YEAR AGO I MADE A LIST OF EVERYTHING I wanted to get done before my sixtieth birthday — an ambitious list. Like Mount Everest it rose, its snowy peak lost in the clouds. Today, with my birthday only a few days away, I'm still hanging around base camp, still checking my gear, still fiddling with the goddamned oxygen mask. I crane my neck and look up in mute adoration. What a list!

OF COURSE POLITICIANS DISAPPOINT US. THEY'RE flawed human beings who pretend to know how to govern other flawed human beings. But we all know the dirty little secret, which is that most of us can't even govern ourselves. Not when we're up against the ungovernable nature of existence. Not when Grief sits down and rests her head on our shoulder, or Lust smiles at us from across the room. Not when we remember what we try so hard to forget: the promises we've made; the promises we've broken.

DESIRE SAID, REPEAT AFTER ME, AND I DID AND I did and I did.

IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE I'VE BEEN SMITTEN WITH a movie star. But last week, as I watched *Before Sunrise* and its sequel, *Before Sunset*, the French actress Julie Delpy overthrew my democratically elected government and established herself on Beauty's throne. Look at that enigmatic smile: so innocent, so mocking. Look at that eyebrow raised just so. Just what I need: one more unattainable object of desire; one more reminder that democracies come and go while Beauty laughs at it all.

I CAN UNDERSTAND WHY NORMA FEELS THREATENED if she thinks I'm attracted to another woman. I know how easily I feel threatened if I think she's attracted to another man. But when we try to talk about it, sparks fly and

the lights go out. We sit in the dark, feeling helpless, staring at the frayed wires in our hands: red wires, green wires, blue wires. All those wires!

JEALOUSY NEVER FORGETS A FACE.

WHEN THEY WERE YOUNGER, MY TWO DAUGHTERS argued incessantly. Their bickering frustrated me, but nothing I did seemed to help, least of all my lectures about kindness and love. One day a friend gave me some advice: "Don't do anything," he said. "Let them work it out. And don't keep insisting that they act lovingly toward each other just because they're sisters. That's your romance, not their reality." I followed his suggestion. My daughters didn't immediately stop fighting, but I think I became a more agreeable, more accepting father who didn't blame them when they didn't cooperate, who didn't keep insisting that they be different than they were. Today, listening to the news, I realized that I react to humanity's familiar conflicts the way I once did to my daughters' battles. *If only my brothers and sisters were wiser and more loving, I think. If only they'd get along.*

MY DAUGHTER MARA SOUNDS UPSET WHEN SHE calls. She's just heard that an asteroid may be on a collision course with the earth. I've read about asteroid 1950 DA, too. Though the odds of a direct hit are only one in three hundred, that's pretty high when it comes to asteroid-impact odds; in fact, 1950 DA is the only known asteroid scientists can't entirely rule out as a threat. A direct hit, Mara says, would be catastrophic. Tens of millions of people would die. I smile when I realize that my daughter got only part of the story. "Don't worry," I tell her, trying not to sound patronizing. "Even if it is heading toward us, it won't get here for another eight hundred years." "So?" Mara replies. For a moment I don't understand. Then I realize how oblivious I'm being to the risk faced by a future generation: men, women, and children who will cling to their lives as tightly as I cling to mine — or, for that matter, to Mara's. I'm the one who got only part of the story.

NOW THAT I'VE TURNED SIXTY, I PROMISE NOT to forget my young friends. I'll be a spy in the land of the aged, leaving messages wherever I can, letting them know if the water is safe, if the food is edible, if each breath is any less precious.

I DREAMT THAT I WAS SITTING IN A CAFE, A NEWS-paper before me, my indignation rising with each story I read. To no one in particular I blurted out, "God, look at all the suffering in the world." Then I heard a voice — so sad, so tender. "Yes," it said, "look at all the suffering."