

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

I WENT TO BED TOO LATE LAST NIGHT AFTER indulging myself in the usual ways — eating too much, drinking too much, drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. This morning, I stand before the voters ashamed: a man unable to govern himself. I saw Time's wallet on the kitchen table, helped myself to what wasn't mine, and called it *freedom*.

THE DAY ARRIVES, DISGUISED AS A TUESDAY with record-breaking temperatures. The day arrives disguised as a major scientific breakthrough or a major terrorist attack. So many disguises. The day arrives as the falling dollar, as the mounting trade deficit, as the real-estate bubble that finally bursts, sending two-by-fours flying. Disguised as a car bomb, the day fails to go off as planned. Disguised as an order of Franciscan monks, the day bows its head in prayer.

I DIDN'T ACCOMPLISH ALL MY GOALS BEFORE the end of the year. In fact, I fell so far from perfection that they'll need a search party to find me. *That man over there*, the judge calls out, pointing in my direction. *Bring him to me*. And here we are again, facing one another in our eternal tableau. What would we do without each other? He'd be out of a job. I'd be out of control: sleeping until noon; lingering over a high-cholesterol breakfast followed by a fat joint and a bottle of very cold champagne; then summoning my harem of exotic and uninhibited young women, who, when they're not fulfilling my fantasies, spend all day reading back issues of *The Sun*.

YES, IT'S TRUE: AMERICA ISN'T THE COUNTRY SHE used to be; unhealthy habits take their toll. Tonight America sits in her mansion, brooding. Her hair is wild, her robe is soiled, the smell of death clings to her. She knows what they're saying: Britain and Germany — even France, that haggard slut — think they're better than her. Why? Because they've accepted the fact, or so they insist, that their best days are behind them? *Well, fuck them*, she thinks, *and fuck the lessons of history*. She stubs out her cigarette, stands unsteadily, then squeezes into an outfit that's been too tight on her since the end of World War II. Soon she'll be walking out the door with that little spring in her step that was once the envy of the world.

BORN AT THE END OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR, I grew up listening to my Jewish relatives condemn not only Adolf Hitler but every German who witnessed, and did nothing to prevent, the extermination of millions of European Jews. What difference did it make whether ordinary Germans were privately revolted by the depravities of the Nazis, my relatives

asked, if they did nothing to stop them? Well, the United States in 2006 isn't Germany in the 1930s, but I have a better idea today of what some Germans must have experienced as the Nazis began their rampage. How many suspected terrorists are being tortured right now by interrogators who claim to speak for me, an ordinary American, while I sit here petting my cat? If the interrogators were torturing my cat in front of me, I wouldn't just sit here writing about it. But they're not torturing my cat. And they're not torturing prisoners right in front of me, but in Iraq and in Guantanamo Bay and in dank cellars in Eastern Europe — far from the room where I'm sitting this morning, this comfortable room with no blood on the walls, no screams echoing down the hall; far from this room where I read the newspaper and shake my head in dismay that somewhere a hooded man in handcuffs is about to be kicked again. How vigorously I shake my head, thinking, *No, no, oh no*.

MY CAT NIMBUS IS ON MY LAP. I'M IN THE LAP of luxury: black coffee by my side, strong the way I like it; my notebook perched on the arm of my chair, which stays rooted to this spot no matter where my thoughts wander. If only my heart were as open as the arms of this chair. If only my awareness were as steady as the legs of this chair. Even George W. Bush could sit in this chair, and the chair would remember to be a chair. Even Jesus, should he choose to walk among us again, could take a load off. Go ahead, Jesus. Kick off those sandals. Make yourself at home. Yes, if I were as steady as this chair — unwavering in compassion, unflinching in the face of constant change — I wouldn't hesitate to invite Grief to join me. Even Death could park his bony ass.

WHEN I WENT RUNNING THIS MORNING, I thought to myself, *Not bad for a man my age*. Then, as clearly as if she were running beside me, I heard a recently departed friend whisper: *Enough already. The body is just an address. Nice house. Lovely neighborhood. Congratulations. Just an address*.

THE MONTH IS NEARLY OVER, BUT I'M IN NO rush for it to end. I want to slow time down, not speed it up. I guess I'm hungry for the kind of long, slow morning no one has tasted since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution; a morning filled with six different kinds of silence and slathered in sunlight so thick it made you dizzy just to open your eyes; a morning before computers, before television, before the rhythmic thumping of Johann Gutenberg's printing press woke everyone in Europe, and armies of words went rolling across the continent in all their murderous glory.