

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

I DON'T WANT TO READ THE HEADLINES THIS morning. I don't want to know how many people were killed yesterday to defend my right to call George W. Bush a killer. The terrorists we've been told to fear are dangerous, all right, but are they any more dangerous than the man in the White House? On the fifth anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks, I grieve for those who lost their lives. And I grieve, too, for the way my country has responded to that loss, like an angry man ripping his neighbor's door from its hinges, then tearing the entire house apart.

THE PRESIDENT WANTS TO SPREAD DEMOCRACY throughout the Middle East like peanut butter and jelly on stale Wonder Bread. *Nothing wrong with these sandwiches*, the president insists to the people of Iraq. *Most popular bread in America. Just scrape the mold off the bottom and stop complaining. Or maybe you'd rather be eating a shit sandwich at Abu Ghraib.*

IF TERRORISM IS A THREAT TO DEMOCRACY, SO is errorism: refusing to admit blunders; twisting other people's words; consistently making statements known to be untrue. We may never learn all the facts about George W. Bush's presidency — whether, for example, in the months before September 11, he deliberately ignored warnings about al-Qaeda because he already had his eye on Iraq, and knew a terrorist attack would be a perfect opportunity to turn lemons into lemonade. What we do know, however, is that the president no more troubles himself about separating fact from fiction than a suicide bomber, strapping on an explosive vest, worries about paying next month's rent.

MY WIFE SNORES! MY PRESIDENT LIES! THIS ISN'T the America I was promised.

I DREAMT THAT I WAS HIKING THROUGH THE Middle East for peace. How odd. Wouldn't it have made more sense to sign an online petition or march in a demonstration here at home? But maybe conventional politics has as little to do with creating a more peaceful world as the width of our bed has to do with the depth of our dreams. After all, Americans sleep on the biggest, most luxurious beds in the world. Yet the American dream, which once stood not only for economic success but for individual freedom and social justice and the virtues of an informed citizenry, keeps being redefined in ever more materialistic terms: a three-car garage; a house as big as an airplane hangar; a cheap supply of oil; and, to protect that oil, the most powerful military in the world. Maybe we should all get out of bed tonight and try sleeping on the floor. Maybe we should close our eyes and lean against a wall — the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, perhaps, which rises from the dream realm like fifty thousand soldiers struggling to wake up. Or maybe we should curl up in our parked cars, as if we were taking a

trip together that required no oil, no war; we'd be moving the world one step closer to peace by not moving at all.

HOW EASY IT IS TO KEEP UP WITH CURRENT events these days, and how tempting, with so many sources of information only a mouse-click away. There's always one more dot to connect, one more theory to ponder, one more witness with something different to say. But all the screaming headlines will still be screaming their little heads off the day I die — and no matter how many newspapers and magazines and blogs I read, I won't understand this mysterious world any better by then. Maybe I need to focus more on what's enduring and true — the one story that illuminates all our seemingly separate stories. Meanwhile, History sits at the bar, raising his glass to whoever will pay for his next drink.

NORMA KEEPS REMINDING ME I CAN'T PREDICT the future. But here I am, exactly as old as I imagined I'd be this fall. What else did I get right? That the earth still orbits the sun; that a light-year is still a light-year; that I drag some darkness with me wherever I go. At night, under stars that blaze in and out of existence, shall I complain that the days are too short and the nights too long? What a crybaby I've become, wanting Mother Nature to tuck me in at the end of the day and read me a happy story — no floods, no earthquakes, no sidewalks too hot to touch. But I live on a planet that is also mortal.

ONE OF MY READERS CHIDED ME RECENTLY FOR being a "death-obsessed worrywart." He's right; even my dead friends agree. So I asked them for a favor. I asked the dead to throw a bone to the living, a word of reassurance, a hint of what's to come. Nothing spiritual, I told them. Keep God out of it. A message that's the same for men and women, believers and nonbelievers, red states and blue. The dead said: *Tell them dying isn't easy; then again, being born isn't either. Tell them they have no idea what being dead is like; it's as unfathomable as being alive. Tell them love is love on both sides of the veil.* Then all I heard was laughter from the vault of heaven to the bowels of hell.

WHEN MY CAT NIMBUS CAME IN LAST NIGHT, she was wet from being out in the rain. After I dried her off, she followed me to bed and curled up between my legs. Then, purring, she drifted off to sleep. I don't know who was happier: Nimbus at being comforted or I at being able to comfort her. This morning, when I woke up, I didn't want to roll out of bed and get right to work. I wanted to curl up between God's legs. I wanted a reason to purr. Then I felt embarrassed: Here I was, a roof over my head, food in the pantry, a loving wife beside me, my daughters both healthy young women. Here I was, my magazine thriving, my car running, my legs able to carry me up and down the stairs. Just what more did I want from the Merciful One? No more thunder and lightning? A promise I won't get wet?