

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

MY DAUGHTER MARA IS GETTING MARRIED NEXT week — my daughter who is in her thirties now, not her twenties; not a teen; not a young child crossing the street for the first time; not an infant I rock in my arms at 3 A.M., too tired to think straight, the sleepless nights stacked up like planes in a holding pattern, the pilots growing drowsier and drowsier. Wake up! She's getting married!

WHEN MARA'S BOYFRIEND, CHRIS, CALLED TO ASK my permission to propose to her, I was caught off guard. Since women, at least in this country, are no longer considered their father's property, I didn't know that any suitors still felt bound by this old-fashioned ritual — especially when they were already living with the object of their desire. Still, I was touched by the gesture, which fit with what I already knew of this intelligent, good-hearted, unfailingly courteous young man. After assuring him he had my blessing, I got off the phone and told my wife the news. "What did you ask him?" Norma wanted to know. I looked at her blankly. "You mean you didn't grill him?" As father of the bride, I'd apparently failed my first test.

OF THE TWO MILLION COUPLES WHO GET MARRIED each year in the U.S., nearly half end up divorced. It takes many of us a long time to realize that the perfect partner — someone who shares our likes and dislikes, and who couldn't agree more with our political opinions and religious convictions and sexual preferences, and who'd never in a million years want to sleep with the window open when we want the window closed — doesn't exist. For some, it even takes a "practice" marriage or two to figure out that practice doesn't make us (or anyone else) perfect — only more able, perhaps, to accept imperfection. As Leo Tolstoy observed, "What counts in making a happy marriage is not so much how compatible you are, but how you deal with incompatibility."

MARA ONCE TOLD ME THAT BEFORE SHE REACHES up to hug her six-foot-four fiancé, she sometimes hops onto a kitchen step stool to compensate for the height difference. Or they'll hug on the stairs leading up to their apartment, with Chris one step below her. This arrangement strikes me as not only eminently practical but also a wonderful metaphor for marriage itself, in which we're constantly called upon to raise ourselves up for another and also to humbly lower ourselves — not in self-abasement but in the spirit of forgiveness and love.

IF I SOUND LIKE I KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT MARRIAGE, it's because I've been married three times — which also makes me a less-than-reliable witness. (Even Tolstoy saw his idyllic marriage turn sour, and, in the end, he left his wife of forty-eight years.) On their wedding day, I'll wish Mara and

Chris all the intimacy and ecstatic communion that's possible between two people. And I'll encourage them to remember, as they deal with the unpredictable and sometimes painful twists and turns life has in store for them, that we're all vulnerable, and that at some point in a marriage we find ourselves with the stool kicked out from under us, or in a heap at the bottom of the stairs. And I'll suggest that instead of giving in then to the temptation to close their hearts, they keep opening them. And that instead of turning away from whatever is painful, they give their marriage a chance to grow.

I DREAMT LAST NIGHT THAT MY DAUGHTERS WERE still young: Mara was four; Sara, two. I woke up in tears. How I loved those girls. How I love them still. Yet who they were at four and two feels closer to me this morning than this make-believe world of 2008. "Scoot over here, girls, and I'll tell you a story." "About what, Daddy?" Mara asks. "About the future," I say. "How far in the future?" Sara wants to know. "A future when you're thirty and Mara is thirty-two." "Is that older than ten?" Sara asks. "Oh, yes," I say. "In fact, it's more than ten thousand days from now." "Ten thousand?" they repeat in unison, unable to grasp such a big number. And for their father, too, it's almost impossible to imagine: a future in which we're not drawing pictures or playing Uno or curled together in the old Sun office on that worn-out, cut-velvet sofa reading *The Story of Babar* again; a future in which Mara is about to be a bride and Sara her maid of honor; a future in which their father is worried that he'll be so teary eyed when he escorts his daughter down the aisle that he'll trip over his own feet. Thank God he's been practicing walking for sixty-three years.

LIKE MOST BRIDES, MARA WANTED A PICTURE-perfect wedding. But with the economy sputtering, the war machine in full throttle, and the planet roasting on a slow spit, picture-perfect depends on how much we leave out of the frame. Even in the best of times, though, no one knows what the next moment may bring. We imagine our lives belong to us; from one breath to the next, I suppose they do. Seven years ago Mara was in a car accident that almost took her life; today, completely recovered, she's a radiant and elegant bride. At the end of the aisle, the tall, handsome groom is waiting. I give Mara to him, as if she were mine to give. He takes her hand, as if she were now his.

TIME, THAT ILLUSIONIST, SHOWS US THERE'S nothing up his sleeve, then, as if from thin air, produces summer, fall, winter, spring. Delighted, we applaud. Then, one by one, the places we've lived, the people we've loved, appear from behind one curtain and disappear behind another. Amazing! Then, in the blink of an eye, we, too, disappear. How about that!