

SYSAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

WHEN A FRIEND CALLED WITH THE NEWS, I assumed he was putting me on. A deer, he said, had crashed through the plate-glass window of a pottery store in downtown Chapel Hill. It was exactly one month after the 9/11 attacks, and I wasn't in the mood for a joke. I waited for the punch line: something about a terrorist deer? See for yourself, he said.

The store wasn't far from my office, so I walked over to take a look. I saw the shattered glass. I spoke to a woman who worked there. She said people inside the store had heard a tremendous crash — they thought a bomb had exploded — then looked up to see that a white-tailed deer had come flying through the floor-to-ceiling window. The deer, a large buck with a full rack of antlers, paused for a moment, shaking off the shards of glass that clung to him. Then he ran through the store, bolted out an open door in back, and quickly disappeared.

I shook my head in amazement. I knew that deer, displaced from their native habitats by new subdivisions and strip malls, sometimes strayed into suburban neighborhoods looking for food. But I'd never heard of one bounding across the most heavily trafficked street in town, then smashing through a storefront window. *That must have been a really hungry deer*, I thought. Or a really crazy deer. Then again, maybe I'd be a little crazy if another species — a species whose sense of smell and hearing wasn't nearly as keen as mine, a species who couldn't run as fast or jump as high — had driven me from my home.

Seven years later the incident still haunts me, having lodged itself in my psyche like some dream I find impossible to forget: a deer crashing into a shop window like those hijacked planes crashing into the Twin Towers; a phantasmagoric creature leaping from another world into this one so his message couldn't be ignored. And what might that message be? Perhaps that the violent actions of a handful of Middle Eastern terrorists aren't nearly as dangerous as the way humanity continues to terrorize the natural world. Half the planet's tropical and temperate forests are gone. Ice fields are melting. Thousands of species are threatened with imminent extinction. If the Department of Homeland Security was as concerned about the daily assaults on the environment as it is about the possibility of another hijacked airplane, wouldn't our lives be saturated with red alerts? Red for air pollution. Red for water pollution. Red for ozone depletion and deforestation and acid rain and global warming. Red: like the taillights of an eighteen-wheeler filled with the widgets every American needs. Red: like the stop sign at the edge of the cliff. Red: like the bloodshot eyes of the CEO riding shotgun, telling the driver to ignore all that tree-hugger bullshit and stay the course.

Then again, how much do I ignore? Sure, I cluck my tongue when I see a photograph of a polar bear surrounded by melting arctic ice. *Of course I'm concerned about global warming!* But it's the kind of concern that's quickly forgotten when I'm dealing with anything difficult in my personal life: an argument with my wife, Norma; a hot-water heater that needs to be replaced; what to eat for dinner. That's right, anything.

Inspired by the back-to-the-land movement and a desire to live simply, I moved to the countryside near Chapel Hill in 1972. It didn't take me long to realize that scribbling margin notes in Thoreau's *Walden* while being jostled on the New York City subway hadn't exactly prepared me for life in the North Carolina woods. After everything in my first vegetable garden died, a friend asked if, during the drought, I'd watered with a watering can or a garden hose. *There was a drought? I was supposed to water the garden?* Unable to split a log straight down the middle, let alone build my own house, I eventually bought a small cabin. I was proud that it had no indoor toilet — as if this attested to my pioneer spirit — but dreaded the nightly visits to that darkened spider sanctuary: my outhouse.

Since I moved here, the population of Chapel Hill has doubled. Many of the farms and forests that used to stretch in all directions have given way to suburbs and big-box stores. I've changed along with the town. Today I own a house with two bathrooms and all the modern amenities. I take comfort from the fact that I live in an environmentally friendly co-housing community where we recycle our trash, shut off the lights when we leave a room, and grow organic vegetables (I leave that to Norma). But this land was heavily wooded before our houses were built. Deer made their home here.

"For a transitory enchanted moment," novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote of Europeans arriving in the New World, "man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent . . . face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder." Now there are roads and sidewalks and shops where the trees were. Now I'm just another driver waiting for the light to change. In my mind's eye I see the old-growth forests that stretched from the Atlantic to the Mississippi. I see a deer — the curve of his wide antlers; his moist, glistening nose; the brightness of his unfathomable, obsidian eyes — as he walks slowly into a clearing. Suddenly he leaps: from a world we've left behind, a world that didn't begin and end with humans, to a busy street in twenty-first-century America. I see him flying through the air. Then everything shatters. ■