

# SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

**THE MORNING LIGHT MAKES PROMISES IT HAS** no intention of keeping, but why quibble? Look how it shines on my aging face and my fading to-do list. Look how it caresses my wife of twenty-five years. As if darkness has been banished. As if everything is lit from within.

**MY CAT FRANNY IS ASLEEP ON MY DESK CHAIR,** and I don't want to move her. Maybe I'll let her do my work today while I sit on the floor grooming myself, which is undoubtedly harder than it looks. Then again, so is writing sentences that move across the page on little cat feet; so is getting the English language to curl up in your lap and purr.

**IF ONLY I KNEW WHAT MY CATS ARE THINKING.** If only I knew what the birds are singing. If only I knew why people who speak the same language rarely understand each other.

**HOW ALONE I FEEL THIS MORNING, AS ALONE AS** the earth in photographs taken from space. But am I alone? Really? Here on this planet with 6 billion brothers and sisters? Our superficial differences keep me from recognizing how much we have in common — starting with the undeniable fact that we're all alive and breathing the same air. Breathing in. Breathing out. Hearts expanding with love and hearts contracting with fear. Is there anything I'm experiencing right now that hasn't also been experienced by innumerable others — even my loneliness, my sadness, my longing for something I can't name?

**IF I DO NOTHING ELSE TODAY, LET ME REMEMBER** to stop maligning myself. What an ingrained habit that is: the finger-wagging and finger-pointing, my own Republican attack machine finding fault with nearly everything I do. "Sy Safransky wants us to believe there are only twenty-four hours in a day. That's not change we can believe in." "Sy Safransky insists he's doing the best he can. But his best clearly isn't good enough." What do I say to the bullies in the room, to the disembodied scolding voices of the dead parents and dead teachers and dead rabbis? They're all gone now, and I'm a man in my sixties, a voice of authority myself. Why be pushed around by ghosts? Why try to curry favor with them by making jokes at my own expense? What a rich tradition of self-effacing mockery I can draw upon: the gallows humor of *shtetl* Jews who considered it a good day if they could make their tormentors laugh. But those tormentors are dead, too, just more ghosts jockeying for a place in line. So listen up, ghosts: After all these years of being criticized and diminished and demeaned, I say, *Enough!* A man's home can't be his castle if he's living in a haunted house. So, by the power

invested in me by the consciousness that is my birthright, I shove my boot up your phantasmagoric asses and kick you out the door.

**HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO UNDERSTAND YOU?** You give with one hand. You take away with the other. Let there be light, You say. Let there be rogue black holes roaming through the galaxy, swallowing stars that wander too close. Let there be peaceful Sunday afternoons in the backyard. Let there be noisy leaf blowers shattering the silence, and the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air. Let there be a child learning to walk. Let there be an old man pushing a walker, or being pushed in a wheelchair, or having his diaper changed. So what will it be today? Up or down? Boom or bust? Exaltation or disaster? Heaven or hell?

**IF A PLANE CRASHES, IT MAKES HEADLINES. BUT** there's no news crawl across the bottom of the television screen about how many species became extinct today or how many acres of rain forest were destroyed. For that matter, there's nothing about how many people started a vegetable garden or read a book for the first time or went out of their way to help an animal in need; nothing about how many people stopped lying to themselves about the sorrows of existence; nothing about how many of us were reminded of the transcendent power of love.

**MY MOTHER DIED FIFTEEN YEARS AGO. ON THE** night of her birthday recently, I dreamt that she was alive and well, in a manner of speaking, in the after-death realm and planning to visit me and my sister, Elyse. She thought she needed protection, however, and had arranged for two tigers to accompany her. Don't worry, she said; the tigers were well trained. My sister thought this was ridiculous, and I had to agree: I can't get an eight-pound cat to follow instructions; how was my mother going to manage two full-grown tigers? But, as the dream ended, my mother told us everything would work out. Well, happy birthday, Mom. I hope your tigers are taking good care of you. I never took you for a cat person, but we change, don't we? Until ten years ago, I wasn't fond of cats either. Then two gray kittens came into my life, and it was as if the Mother of All Cats — Guardian of the Temple, Daughter of Ra, Pussycat Supreme — asked me to kneel before her, and I haven't been the same man since. So, Mom, these habits we drag from one lifetime to the next — maybe we leave some of them behind. Maybe you'll come back as a big cat next time, a brief respite from the triumphs and travails of being human. I picture those tigers waiting for you where the road disappears into the jungle. A thousand scents overtake you as you lope together toward the trees.