

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

I STAYED UP LATE AGAIN WORKING ON MY BOOK—length collection of Notebook entries, then got barely four hours of sleep. If I deserve an A for effort, I get an F for time management. And so it goes, here in life's classroom, where I still imagine I can rewrite the rules: spend a few hours in the evening with Norma *and* work a few hours *and* get a decent night's sleep. Which class is this, exactly? Delusional Thinking 101? Today I'll refrain from judging Republicans who think they know what's best for our country, since I still don't seem to know what's best for me.

ONE DAY I'M IN LOVE WITH MY BOOK; THE NEXT day I hate it. Maybe we should go into couples counseling. I probably shouldn't have called the book "fat" yesterday just because it's twenty or thirty pages too long. But chubby is chubby, honey: Stop already with the second and third helpings of childhood angst and marital discord. Lay off the synonym buns.

CAN I FINISH THE FIRST DRAFT OF THE BOOK BE-fore my deadline? Here I am, in another race against time. Not fair! Time never falters, never stumbles, never looks over its shoulder to see if I'm gaining on it. Time doesn't sleep. Time doesn't complain. Time doesn't beg for a little more time. Not fair!

WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, FRIENDS RARELY COM-mented on my appearance. Now that I'm sixty-six, people regularly tell me how good I look. So have my wrinkles and gray hair *improved* my appearance? Maybe the young friend who complimented me the other day, not once but twice, was surprised that I was still breathing. Maybe looking good means *better-looking than a corpse*.

AFTER TALKING WITH TOM ABOUT HIS NEW-found commitment to Buddhism, I was ashamed that I couldn't remember the last time I'd meditated. How spiritually inadequate I felt, a boy who wasn't doing his homework. Every single day, the Buddha said, we should remember we're not here forever. Each moment is precious. So what am I waiting for? For the book to be finished? For tomorrow or the day after tomorrow in this disappearing act called a life?

I PROMISED MYSELF I'D MEDITATE RIGHT AFTER waking up this morning. But first I made coffee, fed the cats, read a lengthy story in *The New York Times*, and checked a couple of political blogs. After that I picked up a book I'd been given as a gift, a new translation of the Tao Te Ching. I opened the book at random, and the first words I saw were, "It takes just a tiny bit of willingness / to follow the path / but many things distract us."

NEW MOON IN THE SKY. SAME OLD SY.

WHEN NORMA AND I GOT MARRIED — HER SECOND marriage, my third — we knew the odds were against us: 65 per-

cent of second marriages and 75 percent of third marriages end in divorce. Also, Norma had a son; I had two daughters. Norma was twenty-eight; I was thirty-eight. Norma had been raised Catholic; I'd been raised Jewish. Last weekend, as we celebrated our twenty-eighth anniversary, I recalled the astrology reading a friend had done for us just before the wedding. When I asked him how compatible we were, he pretended he didn't hear the question. When I pressed him, he alluded to the uncertain prospects of a snowball in hell.

I DREAMT THAT NORMA AND I HAD TAKEN A SHIP to some exotic locale and had a surprisingly good time: no seasickness, no arguments, no wishing we'd never left home. What an auspicious dream to have as we're planning our next vacation. Maybe it won't be a fiasco, as so many of our trips have been. Does traveling bring out the worst in us? Does taking a week away from work mean we feel obliged to work twice as hard on ourselves? Soon enough, some wraithlike refugee from a long-ago argument makes its presence known, a stowaway that surprises us only after we've checked into our not-quite-as-advertised hotel, and I start to complain about the room, and Norma starts to complain about me, and before you know it we're looking for a different place to stay — Norma, Sy, and the stowaway.

I'M SAD THIS MORNING. IS IT BECAUSE NORMA AND I didn't make love last night? Is it because she seemed tired and distracted? Is it because I was tired and distracted? Maybe we can appoint a fact-finding commission to collect evidence, to take depositions, to see if either of us is guilty of being less than perfect. Perhaps we'll need to be tried by a jury of our merely human peers. If they throw the book at us, I hope it's filled with helpful suggestions about how to keep a marriage alive. Tonight we can light a candle and read the first chapter: "If the Earth Is Getting Warmer, Why Isn't Your Sex Life Heating Up?"

IT TOOK TWICE AS LONG AS I THOUGHT IT WOULD, and it's only half as good as I'd hoped, but the first draft of my book is finished. This morning our cat Zoey walked across my desk and vomited on the manuscript. My first bad review.

I WOKE UP WITH A HEADACHE. TOO MUCH VIAGRA? Actually, I don't even use Viagra anymore. Instead I order a generic version from an online pharmacy in Canada. The pills themselves are manufactured in India, which confers upon them a certain exotic (but hopefully not toxic) panache. I picture a sprawling yet spotlessly clean facility with bas-reliefs of the entire pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses above the main entrance, and incense wafting over the factory floor, and all seven hundred verses of the Bhagavad-Gita being broadcast in a continuous tape loop for the edification of the dozens of workers stirring up another batch of magic elixir. Yes, it takes a village in India to raise my penis.