

FRAN, THE SECOND TIME AROUND

Chapter 20

No matter what I say to him, or don't say, Peter shows up. He looms in the doorway, sweeping in cold, windy air. And then he finds me in the den, as usual. Waiting. And not waiting. Waiting means you're expecting something, or someone. And that means you care. And caring hurts. It hurts much, much too much. This much I've learned. So I try to wait without actually waiting. Peter says this is a good thing. I don't tell him any of this; he just seems to figure stuff out. He puts into words ideas you might have, that you don't even know how to put into words yourself. Ideas that sort of float at the back of your brain, like transparent ghosts gliding across a haunted room.

"When you're waiting for something," he says, sitting in the old flowered wing chair, in that still way he has, "it means you're trying to avoid the present and jump to the future."

"But that's impossible," I say testily. "You can't skip through time."

"No, but you can focus on different points in time. By waiting—and thinking about the fact that you're waiting—you're focusing on the future, on what's to come."

"So?"

"So, if you were able to truly live in the present moment, to accept *now* for exactly what it is, and not be anticipating anything else..."

"Well, what?" I say, not really following the conversation.

"Well, you'd be happy."

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm not."

"You're telling me that I, me personally, I could be happy if I lived my whole life in the present moment, and never thought about or expected anything from the future?"

"More or less, yes."

"Even if I could do that—and I can't—it would be horrible. How could dwelling on every moment, when you feel like you're always about to explode into a thousand pieces—how could that make me happy?" I get up off the couch and begin pacing. Peter has this effect on me. He upsets me, all the time. Yet it's a different kind of upset—different enough from the way I've been upset, for months, that it's almost a relief. Sort of like scratching an itch that's been driving you crazy—like the way Dad's leg itched when he had the cast on. But still, I hate this idea of living in the present moment, when every moment is so awful.

Peter doesn't reply. Instead, he opens a book he has brought—one of several—and reads:

When faced with pain and misfortune, simply stop and center yourself in the present moment, here and now; take a deep breath, sit down and concentrate.

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"In a way, it means that all the comfort you need, all the answers you seek, are already contained within your own mind." I give him a blank look. He leafs through his book and reads another passage:

To find the answers to your life questions, you must look within. Nothing less will do. Nothing more is needed.

I shake my head vigorously. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Maybe you should go.” I continue pacing the length of the den. “What is all this crap, anyway?” I’m practically shouting at him now.

“Have you ever heard of Zen? Or Zen Buddhism?” Peter asks, raising his eyebrows just slightly.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of it. We had a unit on world religions last year. I didn’t pay much attention, though, ‘cause I’m not, you know, a believer. I guess I’m an atheist.”

“That’s beside the point,” Peter says. “The practice of Zen isn’t about God.”

“Well, what’s it got to do with anything? What’s it got to do with me? Why aren’t we learning the stuff from school I’m supposed to know?”

“We’ll get to that, Fran. Don’t worry about it right now.”

“Have you discussed all this with my parents?”

“No, I haven’t, Fran.” Peter looks at me expectantly. I nod slowly. He knows, and I know, that I’m unlikely to tell them a thing. These daily sessions have become my own private time and space, somehow; it’s just about the only time of the day when Mom or Dad isn’t crowding me, and Toby’s not conspicuously walking around on tiptoes. So I figure I can handle this any way I want. And I just don’t feel like playing by the rules, anymore. Look where it’s gotten me, after all.

“May I continue?” Peter asks.

“I guess so. I’ve got nothing else to do,” I say, rather bitterly.

“Zen is all about letting go.”

“Of what?”

“Of everything you’re fighting—everything inside you that is at war.”

“What do you mean? How?”

“Through Zen, we learn how to pull our own poison arrows out.”

When Peter says this, I stop pacing. I am full of poison arrows: I’d never thought of it like this before. But he’s right. He’s exactly right: That’s what it feels like. Like I’ve been shot with poison arrows, and the poison is festering inside me. And I can’t seem to get rid of it. To cleanse my system, somehow.

“How do you do this?” I ask. I don’t really believe there’s anything Peter can say, or anything I can do, that’s going to help. But still. . . .

“Well, partly through changing the way you think about yourself, in relation to the rest of the world. And partly through meditation.”

“Medication?”

“No. Meditation.”

“You mean, like chanting?”

“Not exactly. Look, let’s try something. Sit here, on the rug, and cross your legs.” I do as he asks, mainly because there’s no reason not to. Peter sits opposite me. He looks like a giant Buddha statue, with his legs crossed. “Just relax your hands in your lap. Close your eyes, and start breathing slowly and deeply—not too deeply or you’ll hyperventilate. Focus on your breathing; listen to it. Feel it.” Peter’s quiet voice is lulling me. I don’t believe in this meditation junk, but I have to admit there is something relaxing about just sitting here, breathing deeply. “Keep focusing on your breathing. . . that’s good. . . Now let your mind drift.” I stiffen, and my eyes fly open. Letting my mind drift is a very bad idea: I’m likely to go places, mentally, that I don’t want to go. There are images I’ve struggled for months to cut out—like a cancer that festers, making you sicker and sicker.

“Peter, I don’t want to think,” I say, in a warning tone.

“I’m not asking you to think. I’m asking you to stop thinking. Let your mind take you anywhere.”

“No,” I resist, still sitting cross-legged on the floor. He continues, anyway.

“When thoughts come, Fran, don’t repress or hate them. Just notice them.”

Just by saying this, Peter has opened up the gates of Hell. Images flash through my mind. Terrible images. Bright sunlight glinting off water. A metal gate. The flashing red light of an ambulance—red lights everywhere, and the blaring, deafening bleating horn that signals death and destruction. A stretcher with a small body all covered in white.

“No!” I yell, scrambling up from the floor. My heart is racing wildly. I can hardly catch my breath. “Get out!” I yell. “Get out! Leave! Go away! I don’t want you here!” No one is home to hear me. Only Peter. I feel his shadow rising over me. He’s murmuring something, gripping me in his big, bear-like arms. The noises in my head are so loud, I can’t hear him. I force myself to think of Helen Keller: Deaf. Blind. I hear no evil. See no evil. But I do, I do. I can’t control it. I am filled with poisoned arrows, and I don’t know how to remove them.