

Waiting for Fran

by Carol Prescott

I am walking along the beach, waiting for the hurricane. There is a palpable anxiety in the air. The sea is slate gray and angry. The waves, twice as large as usual, break haphazardly. Most of the beachfront cottages look abandoned – only a few vehicles are parked in the asphalt driveways. The sandpipers, usually so solitary, are quarrelsome, spending more energy driving each other off than searching for sand crabs in the receding foam. A 30-foot length of picket fence extends down to the shoreline from an old motel. The sand beneath it has washed away and the fence follows the waves, the jagged ends of the wooden slats careening menacingly through the water.

I came here to think, yet my time has been spent doing anything but reflecting. I've been sleeping late, watching old movies and reading magazines left by previous renters. Even my walks, usually a time of peaceful reflection, seem a chore. I stride along quickly, humming jingles from TV commercials, thinking but not thinking.

I return to my rental cottage. The center of the storm is two hundred miles away, off the coast of South Carolina, but already the screen door is banging and there are occasional howls of wind. I put the beach chairs in the shed, take down the porch swing, and roll up the welcome mats. The sky has begun to darken, although it is only mid-afternoon. I fill the tub with water then locate candles, matches and a flashlight. The batteries in the radio are dead, but it is too late to buy more. The corner grocery is closed, boarded up along with the other shops. I sit on the wood floor of the living room and leave the front door ajar. The feel of the wind is less unnerving than the pressured stillness of the closed-up house.

When the evacuation order came yesterday, I considered returning home, but decided to stay. The storm matches my mood, provides a diversion. I turn on the television, stare at a tennis match and wonder why the balls aren't blowing wildly. Then I remember New York is 400 miles away. After it ends, the announcer calls it the match of the decade and I wonder why.

I open my last bottle of wine—an expensive cabernet that I bought when there was still a chance D. might come. There are many reasons he won't--the storm is just the easiest to name. I change stations to the weather channel, where a perky blonde attempts to hide her cheerfulness as she tracks the course of the storm. It is called Fran, only the sixth named storm of the season, despite it being after Labor Day. The swirling images are shown over and over, bright colors highlighting the wind velocity. The red center is headed for the town I'm in.

The refrigerator contains steak and salad, bought out of determination to show myself a good time. Instead, I eat stale popcorn and grapes. I switch the channel, pausing briefly to watch Audrey Hepburn and Peter O'Toole hiding in a museum closet, kissing. Once I found this scene enchanting, but now I just wonder how long it's been since they died.

When D. announced he wasn't coming, his work was impossible, his teenage daughter had a recital, his sister was in trouble again, I told myself the week at the beach would be a perfect time to get back to writing. I packed up my laptop and notebooks, but they are still in the trunk of my car.

The house phone rings and I have a surge of hope--and trepidation--before remembering I never gave D. the number. My mother, thousands of miles away, has also been watching the weather channel and has tracked me down through my office. To me, my reassurances sound hollow, but we have conspired for years in my lies, and she accepts them readily.

I check my cell phone and there are two messages from a friend who knows I'm here, checking to see if I'm OK. I don't call her back. At first, my friends listened patiently to D.'s latest excuses, offering support and sympathy, expressing hope that things would work out. As time passed, their

encouragement of my anger turned to puzzlement at my complacency. Now their frustration is more pointed. They ask why I expect him to change when he gets everything he wants.

From her desk in the newsroom, the perky blond questions a field reporter encased in yellow Gore-Tex and being pummeled by rain on a beach 50 miles south of me. He is unable to hear her, so they cut back to the swirling maps.

Years ago, before I thought to worry about losing my looks, I got a thrill from the emotional upheaval, the clandestine meetings, the audacity of being the other woman. After D. went back to his wife, I enjoyed plotting to lure him back, sending late-night texts, mailing him postcards signed by characters from books we'd read together. Now it seems futile, I am living on the memory of stolen moments, while he has an entire life with his family.

Now there is only waiting. But it is a waiting that lacks suspense. The scenes have been played many times, the lines are memorized and unchanging. Even the pain of abandonment, once so profound, seems tedious.

The rain has reached my beach and I push the door closed, leaning against the force of the wind. A young Audrey Hepburn is riding a scooter through the streets of Rome, clinging to an older Gregory Peck. I switch channels.

The reporter gleefully relates that the wind has shifted, turning the storm toward the densely populated coast to the north.

I feel little relief, and perhaps some regret, that the drama has passed me by.