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FLOODS AND FIRES

STORIES

Dan Leach

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“Families will not be broken. Curse and expel them, send their children wandering, drown them in floods and fires, and old women will make songs of all these sorrows and sit on the porch and sing them on mild evenings.”

– Marilynne Robinson, Housekeeping

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For Pat Leach,
my first and still favorite reader

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FLOODS AND FIRES

Without a word of protest, Hap Enders obeyed the directive to “Stay put,” as Sheriff Huntley shined his flashlight into the far corners of his garage. Huntley, who appeared in Hap’s memory as a fat, freckled bully with coarse red hair and pale blue eyes, was looking for a wanted man. Huntley’s hair, what little he had left of it, looked almost brown now, but his eyes were still a spiteful shade of blue. His reputation as a bully had followed him into adulthood, but in towns the size of Pinkerton, badges go a long way in the forgiveness of sins.

“Three years, Hap,” the Sheriff said, rubbing the stubble that covered his jaw with a swollen knuckle. “Up to three years if I find out you’re lying to me.”

“Like I told you before, Sheriff,” Hap said, raising two upturned palms in a gesture of innocence. “I haven’t seen Frankie since this morning.”

Sheriff Huntley shined his flashlight into the corner of the garage where it reflected against a motley collection of tools and two sets of golf clubs, neither of which had seen much use since Hap had stepped down as pastor of First Baptist. He used to play twice a week—once on Tuesday afternoons with his elders and again on Thursday evenings with a group of pastors from other local churches. He learned, after a conversation at a gas station with a former First Baptist member, that both groups still kept their tee times. The year the church hosted a tournament to raise money for a group of missionaries going to Romania, Hap was an eight handicap. But some time had passed since then.

“I guess we’ll see,” the Sheriff said and peeled back a tarp draped, for no particular reason, over a lawnmower.

The Sheriff approached the only other door in the garage aside from the entrance to the house, eyed it wearily, and paused.

“What’s in here,” the Sheriff said, putting one hand on his holstered gun and the other on the door-knob.

“Frankie, of course,” Hap said and smiled.

The Sheriff mouthed a curse and jerked the door open. When he discovered nothing more than a water heater, he clucked his tongue and cast a bitter look at Hap.

“Sheriff, can I offer you some sweet tea before you leave?” Hap said, returning the glare. “If you give me a minute, I might be able to dig up a doughnut too.”

The Sheriff made a show of clearing the phlegm in his throat and hocked a massive ball of it onto the pavement in front of Hap’s boots. He punctuated this gesture by pushing the brim of his hat forward and whipping around on his heels like one of those boys from the Citadel. It was an impressive imitation given the fact that Huntley, like the rest of the Pinkerton Sheriff’s Department, had attended community college.

“I’m not leaving yet,” he said over his shoulder and let himself back into the house.

Sheriff Huntley was searching for a man, who, according to witnesses, drove a Gerber knife into Bill Bentley’s windpipe following a dispute over eight ball. Witnesses also said that, following the stabbing, the man exited the bar, got onto his bike, and was last seen riding in the direction of his father’s house. These details were conveyed to Hap somewhere between the Sheriff’s initial insinuation of—“Where the hell is your boy?”—and his conclusion that followed several minutes later— “I know he’s here because he ain’t got no place else to go.”

“I’m sorry Sheriff,” was all that Hap had said. “Haven’t seen Frankie since this morning.”

As far as that last thing, the Sheriff was right. Aside from Hap's house, Frankie had nowhere else to go. After bagging groceries at the Bi-Lo—a job that George Mullinax had given Frankie as a favor to Hap—he might ride down to Rita's to drink a lemonade and watch football, but, never once in the ten or so years since high-school, had Frankie not come home to his father's house. He had lived there his entire life and, because of his condition, would, as far as everyone assumed, continue living there until Hap passed away or some other arrangement could be made.

Hap knew that in a town the size of Pinkerton it was more or less pointless to refer to Frankie's condition by its medical nomenclature. He had grown up in a small town himself and knew their tendency to fit the sprawling complexities of the real world into their crude perspectives and not the other way around. Hap had heard that, in some places, racism, sexism, and homophobia were teetering on the edge of extinction. In Pinkerton, though, all forms of prejudice were alive and well. Frankie had not turned five before someone—Hap never knew if it was one of Frankie's peers, or one of his own—deemed him a “half-tard.” Frankie's actual condition, not that anyone in Pinkerton would know or care, was Hydrocephalus.

More than once Hap considered leaving Pinkerton. In the end, though, he always arrived at the same grim conclusion—mainly that kids are kids, and kids in any town of any size find cruelty a good deal more convenient than kindness. Like the time they told Frankie to drink from the bottle of bleach that a janitor had accidentally left in the 2nd grade boys' restroom. Or the time they snuck out of a sleep-over to go snipe hunting and left him in the middle of the woods. Or the time they tied one end of a rope to the handlebars of his bike and the other end to the hitch of a pickup and went forty down Devil's Lake Drive. Like any time they called him friend.

When Hap considered other towns, it's true that none of them seemed especially worse than Pinkerton. But none of them seemed especially better either.

Frankie had lived his life in the crosshairs of men like Huntley. That tonight they got to use real guns to hunt him seemed about the only significant difference to Hap.

When the Sheriff had first arrived, Hap refused to let him in the house. As expected, Huntley got red in the face, made a few empty threats, and, when Hap still didn't budge, practically sprinted back to his cruiser. He barked something into his radio and twenty minutes later, two more cruisers pulled up. Five minutes after that, a third. There were five of them in all—Huntley leaning against his car, smoking a thin little cigarette, and the rest gathered around him.

Not one of them was over forty and, although Hap couldn't have recalled any names, he recognized all but one of them as boys who had grown up with Frankie. Whether it was at a swimming pool, a birthday party, or a little league game, at some point in their life, Hap had loomed over these men back before they had badges, or, for that matter, chest hairs, to brandish. Back when his very presence was a boundary that they feared and obeyed. They were, at one time, good boys.

The next time that Huntley knocked on the door, he was grinning so wide his cheeks had squashed his eyes into slits no bigger than dimes turned sideways.

“Like I told y'all before,” Hap said, not even bothering to open the screen door. “I'd invite you in, but I just turned on an episode of Jeopardy and I know you boys aren't too keen on games that involve grey matter.”

“Open the door, Hap,” Huntley said, his voice as smooth and steady as a radiator.

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Huntley tapped the glass with his state championship football ring. The ring was gold and large and studded with stones, but apparently too small now to sit on anything but his pinky finger. Depending on who you asked, Huntley was the best tight end Pinkerton High ever had, an accolade that kept him out of a jail cell more than a few times. For four years, Huntley and his all-state offensive line drove around town, drinking in plain sight, fighting without provocation, and taking the finest girls Pinkerton High could offer into the backseats of their fathers' cars. The town forgave such youthful indiscretions. In return, the boys won football games.

It was the same year that Huntley won his ring that Frankie was pulled out of class by a guidance counselor and told that he needed to start thinking about his options. "Realistic options," she clarified. When Frankie let on that he was confused, she spelled it out for him. He could bag groceries at the Bi-Lo like Jim Harmon's boy. Or, Goodwill always needed help. Or, if he was feeling lucky, he could try Trey Anderson who drained septic tanks in Pinkerton and three other counties. She told Frankie that Trey paid salary and then explained to him what that meant.

"The important thing is that we have to be realistic," she said, once more, in case there was any confusion. Frankie nodded. He said nothing about his dream of being a veterinarian.

Huntley kept tapping his ring against the glass, but Hap remained unfazed.

"Now I know under recent administrations our constitutional rights have diminished considerably, but surely an armed officer of the law still needs a warrant to enter a citizen's house?" Hap said and rested his forearm across the door-frame.

When he did this, Hap noticed a sadistic little gleam in the Sheriff's eyes, a gleam that turned into a flare as he looked over his shoulder at the other three officers and winked.

"Y'all hear that screaming?" one of the officers said, moving towards the house.

“I hear it,” another one said. “How about you, Ward? You hear that screaming?”

“I sure do,” the fat one, presumably Ward, responded.

“Excuse us, Hap, we’re going to have to ask you to step aside while we investigate this,” Huntley said, slinging open the screen door and shoving him so hard that he nearly toppled over. “We have probable cause to believe that someone in this house may be in trouble.”

Hap watched as the officers split up and searched the rooms in his house. He leaned against the doorframe and listened as they tipped over tables and ripped open doors. He listened as they screamed his son’s name. In the upstairs hallway, where voices travel like sirens down the stairwell, one officer whispered to another, “I know that retard is in here somewhere. I can feel it.”

“Hey, watch it,” the other whispered back, the rebuke so sudden and strong that Hap, like the first officer, was stunned to hear it.

But then, after a measured pause, the same voice whispered: “He’s not a retard, remember? Just a half-tard.”

Two decades of such whispers and worse had not brought Hap any closer to mastering the one piece of advice that he had given Frankie after each new injustice. “Jesus said to turn the other cheek, so that’s what we’ll do,” he would recite, doing his best to quell the bitterness burning in his own heart.

After exiting the garage, Huntley told Hap to open the attic. The attic, as the men learned after ascending the stairs, was at least ten degrees hotter than the other rooms in the house. The heat, combined with the rank odor of boxed and forgotten things, imbued the space with the

qualities of a tomb. Sheriff Huntley and the one other officer who had followed immediately removed their hats and wiped the sweat off their faces.

“To tell you boys the truth,” Hap said, using his sleeve to dab his own face. “I haven’t been up here in years.”

“Check out that corner over there,” Huntley grunted and shined his flashlight on a pile of boxes that all had “*CHURCH*” written in black magic marker across their sides.

“Watch out for opossums,” Hap said and, as if it had been his idea to come up, began rummaging through an open box labeled “*SARAH*.”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Huntley barked, pointing the gun at the back of Hap’s head. “Keep your hands where I can see them.”

“Easy there, Sheriff,” Hap said. “Just an old man looking through his dead wife’s things. Thought I might as well do something while y’all waste your time up here.”

Hap made a production of standing up slowly and raising his hands all the way over his head. Huntley seemed poised to make a new threat when a sound echoed through the room. It was the sound of something having moved.

“What was that?” Huntley said and moved his flashlight to the northeast corner of the attic.

“I told you,” Hap said and coughed violently for several seconds. “Probably a ‘possum.”

Hap continued coughing as Huntley waved his hands to signal for silence.

“Shut your mouth or you will spend the night in jail,” Huntley said through his teeth.

“Can’t help it if I’m allergic to insulation,” Hap said and continued coughing as another sound came from the corner.

“Check out over there,” Huntley said, drawing a bead on the corner with the beam of his flashlight.

The other officer obeyed, shining his own flashlight into the spaces between the stacks of boxes and giving the occasional box a kick for good measure. Hap struggled to choke down a new series of coughs and Huntley continued sweeping his light across the room.

“What is all that stuff?” Huntley said and leveled his light at a massive pile of equipment jammed up against the western wall.

“Relics from a former life,” Hap said.

“What?” Huntley said and began coughing himself.

“Church stuff,” Hap said, enunciating each syllable slow and clear.

“What is that?” Huntley said, steadying his light on a large wooden box.

“That’s a coffin,” Hap said.

“What are you doing with a coffin?” Huntley said, sneering his lip in a way that, because of his moustache, seemed more comical than threatening.

“It’s for show,” Hap said. “Used it in a play.”

“A play?” Huntley echoed, same tone, same sneer.

“Of course,” Hap said. “We wanted to remind people that, before Jesus, they were dead in their sins.”

The other officer drew his leg back and gave the coffin’s side a violent kick. It had been built out of ply-wood and cracked severely under the blow. He delivered one more kick to the side and then raised his boot to stomp down and crack the thing from the top when Huntley screamed, “Stop it! Stop it!”

“Come again,” Huntley muttered into the radio attached to his uniform.

A muffled voice spoke. Huntley smiled. Before the voice had stopped, Huntley waved the other officer over.

“They found the bike. It’s down by the creek. Tracks too,” Huntley said and tore off down the stairs with the other officers following suit, leaving Hap alone, in the heat and the dark.

Each time an officer ran out the front door, the screen door slammed behind them. Hap counted four slams and then listened for a full minute before moving. He walked quickly to the coffin and knelt down so that his face almost touched the floor.

He pressed his lips against a crack in the wood and whispered, “You okay, Frankie?”

For the next three hours, Hap ran from window to window trying to keep up with the search. At times, it seemed that twenty or more men were dragging the woods around his house. At times, it seemed to be just Huntley and a few others. The hounds’ whining would rise and then recede. Men would bark out one way or another. Huntley used one of those bullhorns and talked to Frankie like he was hiding up a tree.

When it was well past midnight and most of the other officers had gone home, Sheriff Huntley knocked on the door.

“What can I do for you, Sheriff?” Hap said, this time swinging the door wide open as if to invite in an old friend.

“If he calls you,” the Sheriff said, rubbing at the ashy bags that had built up beneath his eyes. “If he makes any attempt to contact you—”

“You’ll be the first to know,” Hap interjected. “Believe it or not, Sheriff, the Bible ain’t all about love. There’s a lot about justice in there too.”

Sheriff Huntley continued massaging his eyes, pressing in on the spot where his eyes met the top of his nose. He held his fingers there and, for a minute, it seemed like he was reflecting on this, considering the validity of it. Then he dropped his hands and turned his eyes, cold as ever, right on Hap.

“You don’t teach the Bible in this town anymore,” he said as if he was ridding vile from the back of his throat. “Not since they canned you.”

The Sheriff spat at Hap’s feet again but lacked the dramatic quality of the first time. He stomped off the porch and got into his car. All this Hap watched with his face pressed against the smudged pane of glass beside the door. Hap also watched as the Sheriff pulled out of the driveway, pretended to drive down Highway 12, and then looped back around and parked behind some trees that he assumed obscured him from Hap’s view.

Hap turned off all the lights and hurried upstairs into his bedroom. From drawn blinds, he watched Huntley watch his house. The clock on the bedside table flashed 1:16 a.m. in crystalline blue bars. Hap steadied himself against the window frame and waited.

The clock read 2:32 a.m. by the time the Sheriff’s tail-lights disappeared, this time for real, down Highway 12.

Every muscle in his body ached from the standing, but he ran like he was young, tearing out of the bedroom and down the hallway, taking the stairs to the attic two at a time, and practically barreling into the boxes that, half a lifetime ago, he had stacked on top of the coffin.

“It’s time,” he said and, there in the dark, pretended to be strong as he watched his only son rise from the dead.

Thirty minutes before Sheriff Huntley had arrived at Hap's front door, Ernie White, who owned a farm four miles to the south of Hap's, received a call. A re-run of *Andy Griffith* was on in the background, but he wasn't watching it. Along with his wife, he was working on a one-thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle that, when completed, displayed a dust-covered Robert E. Lee astride a grey horse. The phone rang and his wife got up to answer it. Ernie White, who had fought in two wars and had come home to work his farm and had raised three kids and had never once in his life committed a crime, fitted a piece of Lee's saber that had eluded him going on ten minutes and listened to his best friend of forty-plus years, ask him, through tears, to become an accessory.

Ernie interrupted, whispered so his wife couldn't hear, "*I'll park it beneath the willow. Keys on the front left tire. Shotgun in the cab,*" and returned to the living room just as his wife fit two pieces of blue sky together.

"What did Hap want?" she said.

"Nothing," Ernie replied. "Just wanted to see if I was planning on playing bridge tomorrow."

Busy working on Lee's boot, Ernie's wife mumbled something absentmindedly.

Hap and Frankie stayed in the woods until they came to Ernie's place. It was nearly three miles and, because Frankie had rolled his ankle in the fight at Rita's, they walked it slowly, staying clear of the road and slipping into the brush whenever a car approached. Twice a police cruiser passed them, the thin veneer of leaf and branch their only protection. When they talked, they talked in whispers and spoke mostly about the ankle, about whether or not he could make it the rest of the way.

When they arrived at Ernie's, his lights were off and his gate was locked. They were crouched behind some oaks to the south of his house. A caravan of cumuli had parked in front of the moon for most of their trip, but they drifted away, as if on cue, exposing a moon as round and white as a bleached sand-dollar. They spotted the willow. And then, the truck. It was shining like a promise in the soft light of the early morning.

They stuck to backroads even after they crossed the Pinkerton County line. They rode without radio and whispered when they spoke. They studied the silhouette of each approaching car and exhaled only after it became clear that the car did not have a light bar or any other indication of the law. After some time, they came to the mountain. The little plastic Jesus that Ernie had stuck on the dashboard started shaking real hard when the pavement turned to gravel.

"Dad," Frankie said, stuttering like always, but hoarser than usual.

"Yeah?" he replied, turning on his brights and slowing down to take the first of two dozen turns that were sharp enough to send an unsuspecting driver careening over the edge.

"Where are we going?" Frankie said and pawed at his left eye which was too swollen to see out of.

When Frankie first came home, Hap had cleaned him up—not properly, but just enough so that he would not drip blood on the way to the attic. Since then, Hap had avoided looking at his face. He looked now though, only for a moment. The eye was bad, but so was the gash on his head and the deep cut across his cheek and the finger on his right hand that looked as if it had been trapped beneath a cinder block. It did not, Hap thought, look like the work of one man. But, like the other times, Frankie would not tell unless he was asked and, like the other times, Hap knew the details before Frankie ever told him. Names and faces might change, but the ongoing

celebration of the strong over the weak had, more or less, been developed into a formula in Pinkerton. Their violence was as predictable as their politics and their victims were chosen with no more forethought than an alligator gives to a goat. “It is what it is,” a friend had once counseled Hap. He accepted the counsel without question. Frankie was born into an unfair fight and Hap had no illusions about the tables ever turning.

“Leave that eye alone, son,” Hap said, returning his eyes to the road. “We are going someplace safe.”

“Are we going to Pa Pa’s?” Frankie said.

“We are,” Hap said. “But not the place you’re thinking of.”

Frankie’s mouth hung slack as he projected his confusion onto the dashboard.

“Pa Pa built two cabins,” Hap said and rubbed Frankie’s shoulder. “But I never told you about the second one, did I?”

“You sure didn’t!” Frankie replied and waved his finger the way that parents on television do when a child has committed some harmless act of defiance.

“Well, would you like me to tell you about it now?” Hap said.

“Yes, sir, I would,” Frankie said and continued massaging the eye with his thumb.

“Okay. Well, your Pa Pa built one cabin when he was a young man. About your age, actually. And that’s the cabin we stay at when we go fishing. Like the time you caught that eight pound spotted bass. You remember that?”

Frankie nodded and smiled a bloody, but wide, smile. Hap winced, noticing, for the first time, Frankie’s canine, cracked clean in half.

“Well, when Pa Pa got to be about my age,” Hap continued. “He built another cabin. It was much smaller than the first one and it wasn’t built on a lake either. Your Pa Pa built this second cabin and didn’t tell anybody about it.”

“It was a secret?” Frankie said, eyes wide with wonder.

“That’s right,” Hap said.

“And you were the only one he told,” Frankie continued. “Because he was your father and you were his son.”

Hap felt the old familiar tension rising up in his chest, a tension pulled on one side by the whole truth—ugly and indigestible even for someone without Frankie’s condition—and on the other by a half-truth—sweetened for consumption like a cube of sugar that soaks up a bitter dose of medicine. Sometimes it seemed you lost whichever one you told. Like when Frankie asked why he wasn’t invited to certain birthday parties. Or when Frankie asked where his mother went. Like when he asked why Hap didn’t work for the church anymore.

“Nope,” Hap said, too tired to find a suitable lie. “He kept that house a secret until he killed himself, Frankie. He left me a note so that I could find his body and return it to the family plot in Pinkerton.”

Hap let fragments of that memory—the gun, the chair, the boards soaks in blood—flash across his thoughts, but like always he caught them before they got too far and cleared them away with a hard blink. He did not think of his father’s face.

“Oh,” Frankie said and struggled to process the information. “Why did you never talk about it, Dad?”

“Because,” Hap said, discovering his reason as he opened his mouth to speak it. “Things get forgotten when you don’t talk about them. And some things need to be forgotten. They’re better off that way. Does that make sense, son?”

Frankie nodded and they drove on through the darkness, thinking and not speaking. When, after half an hour of driving, Hap heard a wheezing sound, he looked over and found Frankie sleeping, curled up in fetal position and facing the door. Hap put both hands on the wheel to take a turn and then slowed down and looked over at Frankie. He had always slept like that—shrunk and curled up, as if braced against some impending blow.

Hap continued driving and, without intending to, thought about Huntley—where he was at that moment and in what position he slept. If Hap had to guess, he would have said on his back, loose and sprawled out, like a man who for twenty-some odd years had never feared anything, never stared into the darkness and trembled.

Jesus trembled when the truck bumped over a stone and His tiny plastic head shook with a spastic rhythm that drew Hap’s eye.

Why? Hap whispered to Him, the word slung like a stone straight from some strange corner of his heart.

And without intending to, he repeated the word three times, each time increasing in volume and intensity. Meanwhile Jesus just kept shaking His head.

I’ve been following You ever since I was a boy. I’ve seen You do the most amazing things and I’ve been grateful for Your grace in my life. And when I saw the bad, when I saw things so horrible that it don’t seem like a loving God could ever allow them, I never asked why, did I?

When I saw all the hurt and all the brokenness and all the injustice that You let go on down here, what did I say? I said that Your thoughts were higher. I said that Your ways were better. I saw all the bad and I followed You anyway and tried my best to make You proud.

And never once have I asked You why.

Frankie flinched in the seat beside him, both hands shooting up to protect his face from whatever force had threatened him in his dreaming. Hap placed a hand on his shoulder and held it there until Frankie relaxed again.

Looking back at Jesus, Hap continued.

Well, I'm asking now.

I know it's not right of me to ask and I know I, of all people, don't deserve to hear from You. But, I'm asking because I can't go on any further not knowing why. I'm sorry Father, but faith just ain't enough anymore.

Why? If all of this could be restored. If right now You have the power to fix everything. How—I mean—why wouldn't You—

Hap's mouth hung open, unable to finish the thought. He stopped trying.

You know what I'm asking.

You know my heart.

And if there's way that You can help me. If there's a way that You could speak to me tonight. Then I need to hear from You.

Please.

Hap slowed the truck to a halt. He closed his eyes and sat in silence for several minutes, waiting, and then, just as suddenly as he had spoken the first *Why*, he reached his arm out of the open window, his fingers outstretched as if reaching for something just beyond his grasp. He

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looked to the sky and waited. The soft wheeze of Frankie's breathing was the only sound for miles.

After a while, Hap opened his eyes. It was no longer dark outside. In the east, the tops of the trees were backlit by a pale blue glow. He looked ahead and recognized the upcoming turn as the final one before the cabin. He took it slower than the rest and pulled carefully into the drive. He removed the keys from the ignition and looked up at the cabin that, although he had only seen it twice in his life, took on a strangely familiar look in the morning light. He listened to birds and crickets and the wind in the trees. He smelled the air and it smelled clean and weightless.

Hap climbed out of the truck and went around to Frankie's side. He opened the door and, for a moment, watched Frankie sleep. Not wanting to wake him, Hap bent down and scooped his boy into his arms. When he straightened up, he was surprised at how light Frankie was. He turned, shutting the door with his hip, and started walking towards the cabin.

Leaves crunched beneath his feet, loud enough to stir Frankie. His one good eye opened and he said, "I'm sorry, Dad. I'm sorry for everything."

As if he were lifting a pillow, Hap brought Frankie's head to his lips and kissed him on his crown where blood had dried into his hair.

"Don't you ever apologize to me, son," Hap whispered in his ear. "You have done nothing wrong."

Frankie started, "But, Dad, I—"

"You're perfect," Hap said, setting him down on the stairs to the porch. "And that's all you've ever been."

Frankie touched his fingers to his eye and winced.

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“I’ll run to store a little later and get something for that,” Hap said, rubbing Frankie’s shoulder-blades.

Hap let his hand rest on Frankie’s shoulder as his mind raced to compose a list of all the things they would need. There was the food, the water, the clothes, and a dozen other things that they would need within the week. The list was staggering and, when the parameters of Huntley’s search widened, a simple trip to the grocery would become an incalculable risk. For every basic need, a dozen complications became apparent. But Hap ignored them all. His mind was perfectly blank and, with Frankie’s head resting on his shoulder, he breathed in the morning air and watched the first of a thousand new suns spilling through the branches.