



**'A TRIUMPH'**  
Philip Pullman  
ON  
THE WOLF WILDER



The  
**EXPLORER**

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RUNDELL

THE AUTHOR OF  
*Rooftoppers*

BLOOMSBURY



The  
**EXPLORER**

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BLOOMSBURY

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*To Charles*



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## FLIGHT

Like a man-made magic wish, the aeroplane began to rise.

The boy sitting in the cockpit gripped his seat and held his breath as the plane climbed into the arms of the sky. Fred's jaw was set with concentration, and his fingers twitched, following the movements of the pilot beside him: joystick, throttle.

The aeroplane vibrated as it flew faster into the setting sun, following the swerve of the Amazon River below them. Fred could see the reflection of the six-seater plane, a spot of black on the vast sweep of blue, as it sped towards Manaus, the city on the water. He brushed his hair out of his eyes and pressed his forehead against the window.

Behind Fred sat a girl and her little brother. They had the same slanted eyebrows and the same brown skin, the same long eyelashes. The girl had been shy, hugging her parents until the last possible moment at the airfield; now she was staring down at the water, singing under her breath, her brother trying to eat his seatbelt.

In the next row, on her own, sat a pale girl with blonde hair down to her waist. Her blouse had a neck-ruffle that came up to her chin, and she kept tugging it down and grimacing. She was determinedly not looking out of the window.

The airfield they had just left had been dusty and almost deserted, just a strip of tarmac under the ferocious Brazilian sun. Fred's cousin had insisted that he wear his school uniform and cricket jumper, and now,



inside the hot, airless cabin, he felt like he was being gently cooked inside his own skin.

The engine gave a whine, and the pilot frowned and tapped the joystick. He was old and soldierly, with brisk nostril hair and a grey waxed moustache which seemed to reject the usual laws of gravity. He touched the throttle and the plane soared upwards, higher into the clouds.

It was almost dark when Fred began to worry. The pilot began to belch, first quietly, then violently and repeatedly. His hand jerked, and the plane dipped suddenly to the left. Someone screamed behind Fred. The plane lurched away from the river and over the canopy. The pilot grunted, gasped and wound back the throttle, slowing the engine. He gave a cough that sounded like a choke.

Fred stared at the man – he was turning the same shade of grey as his moustache. 'Are you all right, sir?' he asked. 'Is there something I can do?'

Fighting for breath, the pilot shook his head. He reached over to the control panel and cut the engine. The roar ceased. The nose of the plane dipped downwards. The trees rose up.

'What's happening?' asked the blonde girl sharply. 'What's he doing? Make him stop!'

The little boy in the back began to shriek. The pilot grasped Fred's wrist hard for a single moment, then his head slumped against the dashboard.

And the sky, which had seconds before seemed so reliable, gave way.



## THE GREEN DARK

Fred wondered, as he ran, if he was dead. *But*, he thought, *death would surely be quieter*. The roar of the flames and his own blood vibrated through his hands and feet.

The night was black. He tried to heave in breath to shout for help as he ran but his throat was too dry and ashy to yell. He jabbed his finger into the back of his tongue to summon up spit. 'Is anybody there? Help! Fire!' he shouted.

The fire called back in response; a tree behind him sent up a fountain of flames. There was a rumble of thunder. Nothing else replied.

A burning branch cracked, spat red, and fell in a cascade of sparks. Fred leapt away, stumbling backwards into the dark and smacking his head against something hard. The branch landed exactly where he'd been standing seconds before. He swallowed the bile that rose in his throat and began to run again, faster and wilder.



Something landed on his chin, and he ducked, smacking at his face, but it was only a raindrop.

The rain came suddenly and hard. It turned the soot and sweat on his hands to something like tar, but it began to quench the fire. Fred slowed his run to a jog, then to a stop. Gasping, choking, he looked back the way he had come.

The little aeroplane was in the trees. It was smoking, sending up clouds of white and grey into the night sky.

He stared around, dizzy and desperate, but he couldn't see or hear a single human, only the fernlike plants growing around his ankles, and the trees reaching hundreds of feet up into the sky, and the panicked dive and shriek of birds. He shook his head, hard, trying to banish the shipwreck-roar in his ears.

The hair on his arms was singed and smelt of eggs. He put his hand to his forehead; his eyebrow had charred and part of it came away on his fingers. He wiped his eyebrow on the sleeve of his shirt.

Fred looked down at himself. One leg of his trousers was ripped all the way up to the pocket, but none of his bones felt broken. There was vicious pain, though, in his back and neck, and it made his arms and legs feel far-off and foreign.



A voice came suddenly from the dark. 'Who's there? Get away from us!'

Fred spun round. His ears still buzzing, he grabbed a rock from the ground and hurled it in the direction of the voice. He ducked behind a tree and crouched on his haunches, poised to jump or run.

His heart sounded like a one-man band. He tried not to exhale.

The voice said, 'For God's sake, don't throw things!'

It was a girl's voice.

Fred looked out from behind the tree. The light of the moon filtered deep green to the forest floor, casting long-fingered shadows against the trees, and he could see only two bushes, both of them rustling.

'Who is it? Who's there?' The voice came from the second bush.

Fred squinted through the dark, feeling the remaining hair rise up on his arms.

'Please don't hurt us,' said the bush. The accent wasn't British; it was something softer, and the voice was definitely a child's, not an adult's. 'Was it you, throwing poo?'

Fred looked down at the ground. He'd snatched up a piece of years-old, fossilised animal dung.

'Oh,' he said. 'Yes.' He was becoming accustomed to the dark, and could see the shine of eyes peering out from the grey-green gloom of the undergrowth. 'Are you from the plane? Are you hurt?'

'Yes, we're hurt! We fell out of the sky!' said one bush, as the other said, 'No, not badly.'

'You can come out,' said Fred. 'It's only me here.'

The second bush parted. Fred's heart gave a great leap. Both the girl and her brother were covered in scratches and burns and ash – which had mixed with sweat and rain and made a kind of paste on their faces – but they were alive. He was not alone. 'You survived!' he said.

'Obviously we did,' said the first bush, 'or we'd be less talkative, wouldn't we?' The blonde girl stepped out into the lashing rain. She stared from Fred to the other two, unsmiling. 'I'm Con,' she said. 'It's short for Constantia, but if you call me that I'll kill you.'

Fred glanced at the other girl. She smiled nervously, and shrugged. 'Right,' he said. 'If you say so. I'm Fred.'

'I'm Lila,' said the second girl. She held her brother on her hip. 'And this is Max.'

'Hi.' Fred tried to smile but it made the cuts on his cheek stretch and burn so he stopped and made do with a grin that involved only the left half of his face.

Max was at the breathless stage of crying, and he clung to his sister so tightly his fingers were pressing bruises on her skin. She was leaning over to one side to hold him up, shaking with the effort. They looked, Fred thought, like a two-headed creature, arms entwined.

'Is your brother badly hurt?' he asked.

Lila patted her brother desperately on the back. 'He won't talk – he's just crying.'

Con looked back towards the fire and shivered. The flames cast a light on her face. She was no longer blonde; her hair was grey with soot and brown with blood, and she had a scratch on her shoulder that looked deep.

'Are you all right?' he asked, wiping rain out of his eyes. 'That cut looks bad.'

'No, I'm not all right,' Con spat. 'We're lost, in the Amazon jungle, and statistically speaking it's very likely that we're going to die.'

'I know,' Fred didn't feel he needed reminding. 'I meant –'

'So, no,' Con's voice grew thin and high, 'I think it would be safe to say that none of us are all right, not at all, not even slightly!'

The bushes rustled. The rain hammered down on Fred's face.

'We need to find shelter,' he said. 'A big tree, or a cave or something that would –'

'No!' Max gave a sudden scream: a yell that was wet with spit and fear.

Fred stepped backwards, raising his hands. 'Don't cry! I just thought –' Then his eyes followed Max's pointing finger.

There, three inches from Fred's shoe, was a snake.

It was speckled brown and black, patchworked to match the jungle floor, and its head was as big as a fist. For one second nobody breathed. The jungle waited. Then Max let out a second scream that dug deep into the night and the four of them turned and fled.

The ground was sodden and they ran pell-mell, sending up mud into one another's eyes and grazing their elbows against trees. Fred ran as if his body were not his own, faster than he'd ever run, his palms stretched ahead of him. He tripped over a root and turned a full somersault, coming up spitting earth. He ran on. The rain blinded him and shadows flashed past him in the darkness.

There was a yell behind him.

'Please, Max!' said Lila.

Fred turned back, skidding in the mud.

'He won't run!' Lila bent over her brother. 'And I can't carry him!'

The little boy lay on his back, weeping up at the sky, his whole body shaking in the driving rain.

'Come on!' Fred heaved Max over his shoulder. The boy was far heavier than he'd expected and he screamed as Fred lifted him, but Fred grabbed both of Max's knees and started running, his whole body screaming with pain. He could hear Lila, her feet thumping close behind them.

The stitch in Fred's side was almost unbearable when he tore out of the trees and into a sudden clearing. He halted, and Max bumped his head against Fred's spine and yelled. Angrily, he began trying to bite one of Fred's shoulder blades.

'Please don't,' said Fred, but he was barely paying attention to the boy on his back. He stared, stunned, ahead of him.

They were standing at the edge of a wide circle of trees, open to the sky and lit by the fat moon. There was a carpet of green moss and grass, and the stars above them were clustered so thickly that the silver outnumbered the night. Fred lowered Max to the ground and stood bent over, his hands on his thighs, panting.

'Did the snake chase us?' said Max.

'No,' gasped Con.

'How do you know?' wailed Max.

Lila dropped to her knees, clutching at her side. 'Snakes don't, Maxie. We both know that. I just ...'

'Panicked,' said Con. Her voice was bitter. 'That's what happened. See! Look: no snakes. We were stupid. Now we're even more lost.'

The ground in the clearing sloped slightly towards a large puddle of water. Fred crossed over to it, his muscles aching, and sniffed; it smelt of rotting things, but he was feverishly thirsty. He took a tiny sip and immediately spat it out. 'No good,' he said. 'It tastes like a dead person's feet.'

'But I'm thirsty!' said Max.

Fred looked around the clearing, hoping to find water before Max started crying again.

'If you wring out your hair,' he said, 'there'll be water in it.' He tugged his dark fringe down over his forehead and twisted it: a few drops fell on his tongue. 'It's better than nothing.'

Max chewed on his hair for a second, then scrunched his eyes closed. 'I'm scared,' he said. It was said without whining, as simple matter-of-fact. Somehow it was worse than the tears, Fred thought.



'I know,' Lila said softly. 'We all are, Maxie.' She crossed to her brother and pulled him close to her. His small bony fingers closed over a burn on her wrist, but she didn't brush him away. She began to whisper in his ear in Portuguese: something soft, almost a song; a lullaby. They were both shaking slightly.

Fred swallowed. 'All this will look less bad in the morning,' he said.

'Will it?' said Con. There was bite to the question. 'Will it, really?'

'It can't look much worse,' he said. 'Once it's light, we'll be able to work out a way to get home.'

Con looked hard at him: there was challenge in the look, and Fred stared, unblinking, back at her. Her face was all geometry; sharp chin, sharp cheekbones, sharp eyes.

'What now, then?' she said.

'Our mama and papa say –' began Lila. The mention of her parents made her face crease and crumple, but she swallowed and went on. 'They always say: you need to sleep before you think. They say, when you're exhausted, you do stupid things. And they're scientists. So we should sleep.'

Fred found his whole body was aching. 'Good. Fine. Let's sleep.'

He lay down on his side in the wet grass. His clothes were soaked through, but the air was warm. He closed his eyes. Perhaps he would wake up in his bed at school, he thought, next to the snoring of his roommates, Jones and Scrase. An ant crawled over his cheek.

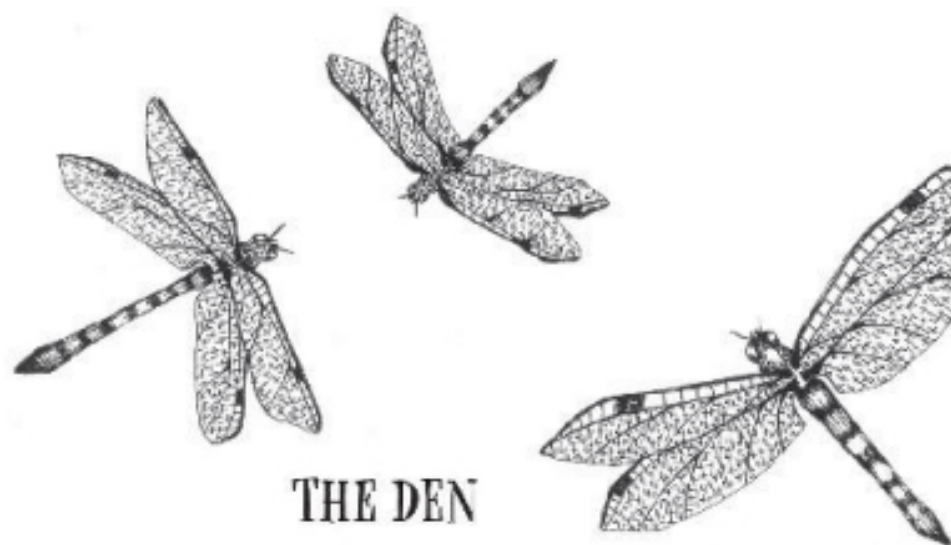
'But aren't we supposed to stay awake in case we die of concussion?' said Con.

'I think if we'd got concussion we'd be dizzy,' said Lila.

Fred, already half-asleep, tried to work out if he was dizzy. The world began to spin away from him.

'If we all die in the night, I'm blaming both of you,' said Con.

It was on that cheering thought that Fred felt himself dropping down, down, away from the jungle and the thick night air and into sleep.



## THE DEN

It was ferociously hot, and he was still alive. Those were the first thoughts that came to Fred as he opened his eyes and found himself staring straight up at the Brazilian sun. Instinctively he looked down at his wristwatch, but the face was cracked and the minute hand had fallen off.

The two girls were asleep next to him. Both of them were covered in blood and scabs, but they were breathing easily. Con had her thumb in her mouth.

There was a host of dragonflies in luminous blues and reds dancing around them. He thought they might be attracted to the blood.

But there was no sign of the little boy. Max was missing.

'Max!' Fred whispered, jumping to his feet. There was no answer, no movement except the burr of dragonfly wings.

Fred's heart started to pound. 'Max?' he called louder. Lila stirred in her sleep.

He ran to the edge of the trees. There was no trace of the boy.

'Max!' he roared, staring wildly around.

'What?' Max looked up; he was lying on his stomach behind some fernlike plants next to the vile-smelling puddle, plashing his fingers in the water.

'Max!' Fred ran over to him, wincing as one of his ribs protested sharply. 'You haven't been drinking that water, have you?'

Max stared up at Fred as he approached, then screwed his eyes shut and let out a scream that shook the baby flesh in his cheeks. Across the clearing Lila gave a yell as she startled awake.

'That's not very flattering,' said Fred to Max, but it was possible, he reckoned, that covered in blood and soot, and with less eyebrow than usual, he didn't look very reassuring.

The boy kept screaming, barely drawing breath.

Lila jumped to her feet. 'Max!' she called. 'What's happened?'

*Sugar*, Fred thought. He knew that you should give people sugar for a shock. 'Do you want a sweet?' He had some mint humbugs in his pocket. 'Please stop crying!' He fished the sweets out.

His hand came out wet: there was a cut on his thigh and half-dry blood in his pocket, and the mints had spent the night marinating in it. He grimaced and put one in his mouth. The taste hadn't been improved, but the sugar gave his blood a twitch.

'Do you want one of these?' Fred spat on a corner of his shirt and polished one clean. 'It's a mint.'

'No! I hate mints!' said Max.

'It's the only food I've got.'

'Oh. Then I'll take it,' said Max. He said it like a lord accepting a peasant's bread.

'Here,' said Fred. He put it in the boy's sticky hand. 'Eat it slowly if you can.'

Max sucked loudly. His nose began to run, down past his lips and on to his chin.

'Max!' Lila called. 'Come here!'

'Come on,' said Fred. The boy's face was intent on working on the mint, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration. He looked very breakable. Fred felt his chest tighten, but he said only: 'You should probably blow your nose.'

'I don't blow my nose,' said Max. They walked, both limping, towards Lila. 'It's not a thing I do.'

'I think you should.'

'No!' Max licked the snot off his upper lip and added it to his mouthful of mint.

Five-year-olds were not easy to argue with, Fred thought. Max had a sweep of dirt encrusted on his cheek, and his eyebrows turned up at the corners: it gave his face a mischievous tilt.

Fred hooked his finger into Max's shirt collar to steer him from thorns and what looked like rabbit droppings. The ground was mossy, speckled with patches of grass and creeper. One of the trees had scarlet flowers that had fallen and red-carpeted the forest floor.



Sitting among the flowers, under the bright white sun, Lila and Con were arguing.

'You! Boy, what's your name, Fred!' called Con. 'Come and tell this girl she's completely wrong.'

'She thinks –' began Lila, flushing.

'Obviously, I think we should go back and wait near the plane,' said Con. 'In case they see it from the air. So they can rescue us.'

'It makes more sense to stay here,' said Lila. She pulled her knees up to her chin. 'We'd just get lost, trying to find our way back. And I don't think anyone will see the plane. They don't know where we crashed; they'll have to search the entire jungle. We're on our own.' She fixed her eyes on a dandelion-like plant, fierce and unblinking. 'We'll have to find a way to get to Manaus ourselves.'

Fred looked at the girl properly. She had a scratch across one side of her narrow face, and hair woven into two dark plaits, one of which had been charred in the crash. She wore a scarlet skirt and a blood-red top, both now stained grey-green. She looked about his age. She was scowling at Con.

Con glared back. 'That's crazy. We need to stay near the plane and wait to be rescued. My family will have sent dozens of planes to search for us by now. A hundred planes, probably.'

'But,' said Lila, 'where we crashed is burnt by the fire. Half the trees are charcoal, and so there'll be no animals –'

'We don't need animal friends!' said Con. 'This isn't a fairy tale!'

'– for us to eat,' finished Lila. 'And back there, there's –'

'What?' said Con.

'There's the pilot.'

'He's dead,' said Con. She seemed genuinely puzzled. 'He can't hurt us.'

Lila spoke very quietly, but Fred was surprised by how authoritative she sounded. 'We should make camp here.'

'No!' said Con. 'That's completely illogical.'

'Fred?' asked Lila. 'You get the deciding vote.'

'No he doesn't!' said Con. 'That's not fair; one person shouldn't get to decide!' She glared at Fred from foot to chin. 'Not unless he agrees with me.'

Fred looked around the clearing again. The air was fresh here and the sky above them a blue that does not exist in England. He was just about to answer when he saw that at the far end, where the forest grew thick and

tangled, four trees had fallen together, their tops meeting in a point. The very tips of the hairs on the back of Fred's neck began to rise.

'Do you think there's anything odd about this clearing?' he said.

'That's not an answer to the question!' said Con.

'Why?' asked Lila.

'Those trees,' he said, 'over there.' He pointed.

'What about them? They fell over,' said Con. 'That's what trees do.'

'But they don't look like they fell, to me,' said Fred. He ran across the clearing. A sense was rising in him that something was strange. His curiosity pushed aside his fear.

The largest of the trees was immense: its trunk was as thick and tall as Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square. Three smaller trees leant against the thicker one. Each had grown a few feet from the next in a rough square, their branches entwined and darkened by green creepers.

'Leave it alone, Fred,' called Con. 'Stay in the open!'

'There's something odd here.' He ran his hand down one of the smaller trees. At the base was a mess of fernlike plants and a few mushrooms. He pushed the ferns down, and felt his stomach swoop.

The three smaller trees didn't have roots. They were logs, fifteen feet high, each carefully tipped against the central tree; he could see where they'd been hacked with an axe or a machete. Ferns had grown – *or been planted*, Fred thought – at their bases, disguising the places where the cuts showed.

'A den,' breathed Fred.

'What did you say?' called Con.

Fred pushed at the vines that stretched between each of the logs.

'It's like a tent,' said Fred. 'A den.' He bent down, ready to push past the foliage.

'No! Don't go in there!' said Con. It came out in a burst. 'It's not that I'm scared. But please don't. It's not a reasonable risk.'

Fred stared at her. 'A what?' He had never in his life considered whether a risk was reasonable; it sounded like something his headmaster would say.

'There could be anything in there! Jaguars, or snakes, or rats,' said Con.

'I can't *not* look!' said Fred, astonished.

'She might be right, though,' said Lila. 'About the snakes. Be careful.'

'I'll look!' said Max grandly, jumping to his feet.

'No you absolutely won't!' said Lila, grabbing his wrist. 'You're staying right here.'

Fred pushed aside the vines hanging down between the logs.

'Ach!' He winced: some of the tendrils had tiny but vicious thorns, and they'd caught in one of his cuts. He brushed away another handful of vines, and froze. His heart, which hadn't stopped double-beating since the crash, quickened to triple speed.

The trees met to make a tent, high enough for a man to kneel in, or for someone Max's height to stand. The air smelt deep green. There was a spiderweb in one corner, and below it was a pile of banana leaves, stacked a dozen leaves thick in the shape of a sleeping mat. They had been almost entirely devoured by ants.

Fred looked up, and felt his eyes stretch wide. 'Come and look at this!' he called. The space between the four tree trunks had once been covered in a roof of plaited palm leaves. He reached up and touched them. The palms were riddled with holes, half-rotted, and the light shone through, but he could see how intricately they'd been woven.

He crawled further in, slowly, looking for snakes in the green light. The ground squelched under his hands. In the far corner of the den was a hollow gourd, rotten with mildew. Fred touched it, gingerly; it was mulchy. He turned it upside down, wrinkling his nose at the smell. A cascade of flints spilt out. Half had been chipped into the shape of arrowheads; others were square and squat, large as a fist.

'You two!' He crawled backwards and stuck his head through the vines. 'Come in! Quick, you have to see this! Someone was here!'

'You're crazy!' spat Con. 'If someone was here, they won't want us trespassing. I've had enough of this.' She turned and began to march back into the trees.

'Wait! Con! We shouldn't split up,' called Fred. Infuriated, he scrambled out of the den and ran after her.

'Whose house is it?' She turned to face him. Fred was startled; there were tears in her eyes. 'You don't know, do you?'

'Of course I don't,' said Fred, 'but I just think –'

'What if they come back? I've read about it in ...' Con hesitated, casting around for an idea, '... *Goldilocks*. I know how it ends. I'm not getting eaten!'

'I'm pretty sure this place wasn't built by bears,' said Fred.

'It could be cannibals!'

'Cannibals are mostly a myth,' said Lila.

'Says who?'

'Everyone! Scientists. Our mama and papa.'

'How do they know?'

'Mama grew up in the jungle, near the Solimões River. And she's a scientist. A botanist.'

'Bottomist!' said Max.

Con scowled at him, the nerves in her face twitching. 'You overrate the wit of the word "bottom".'

Lila put a protective arm round Max and went on as if she hadn't been interrupted. 'And our papa's English, and he studies the plants of the jungle. For medicine. And our grandmother was a scientist's assistant; we were supposed to be going to visit her in England. We were going to get the boat from Manaus. She wanted to meet us before she died: she wanted to see what Max was like.'

Con snorted. 'Perhaps it's just as well we crashed.'

Lila ignored that. 'Listen, whoever lives here – if they come back – might be able to take us to Manaus.'

'Or they could *eat us for dinner*,' said Con. She stared from Lila to Fred, angry and bewildered.

'Just come inside,' said Fred. 'You'll see. Nobody's been here for ages.'

Grudgingly, very slowly, Con turned round. She bent down and edged into the shelter. Lila and Max followed.

Fred pulled at the rotten leaves lining the roof. 'We could weave new leaves for the ceiling,' he said, 'and make new beds. Then it would smell less like a sock.'

He began gathering armfuls of half-decomposed foliage and pushing it outside. Underneath, the earth was soft and dusty; it smelt of a thousand warm days, layered one over the other.

Lila brought in an armful of leaves, each as big as a pillowcase. She began to lay them down for beds.

'And we could hang some extra vines over the front of the den,' said Fred, 'so nothing can see in.'

Con crouched in the shelter with her arms crossed. 'Who died and made you king?' she asked.

'Nobody!' Fred turned, startled. 'But if we're going to sleep here, we might as well make it waterproof.'

'I'm not sleeping here!' said Con. 'Someone could come back here any second.'

'But they won't,' said Fred. 'Did you see those flints?'

'Yes?'

'They're covered in moss,' he said.

'So they're dirty. Fine. How is that supposed to be reassuring?' said Con.

'He means they're old,' said Lila. 'It's deserted.'

'But why do you want to risk it?' said Con. 'What if they come back and think we're intruders?'

'Or what if they're never coming back, and they've left behind this shelter?' said Lila. Her voice wasn't loud, but there was a toughness to it. 'If someone was here that means someone else thought it was a good place to rest. It means it's safe.'

'But you can't *know* for sure.'

'But we can't know anything for sure!' said Fred. 'Lila's right. As soon as we work out how to get out of here, we'll leave. But until then, it makes sense to stay in a place where other people have been.'

'Unless they EAT US!' said Con.

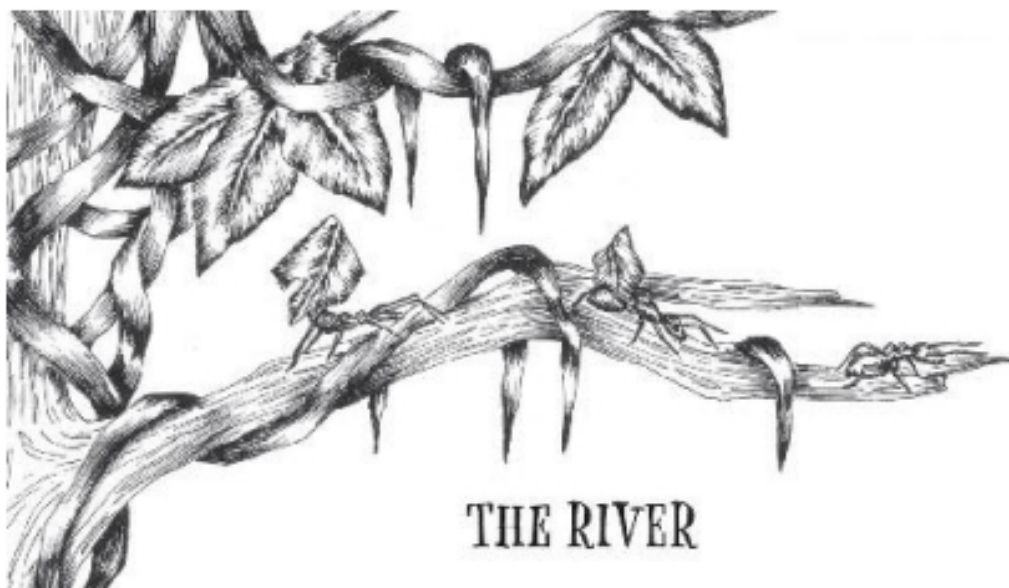
'I'm staying here,' said Max. 'I want to live in the tree-tent. And if you try to make me move I'll do a wee on you.'

'No you won't!' Con backed away, smacking her head on a tree trunk.

'He does sometimes do that,' said Lila.

Which, for the moment at least, more or less settled it.





## THE RIVER

It took some time to find leaves wide and strong enough for the roof. The first batch Fred tried tore in his hands; the second turned out to have something in them that made his skin turn red and itchy; but the third tree had fleshy leaves as long as his arm. He and Lila tore them into strips and then wove them into great squares, which they wedged in and out of the branches of the supporting trunks. Con sat on the grass outside the den, digging a hole in the ground with a twig.

Fred crawled into the den and looked up. The sun no longer filtered through a thousand ant holes. The light inside was dark green, an underwater, sunken-treasure colour. He felt an unexpected surge of triumph roar through him. 'It's good!' he called. 'You can barely see the gaps.' He heard Lila cheer. Fred backed out of the den and stood up too fast. Suddenly his head reeled, colours flashing in front of his eyes. His lungs tied in a double-knot.

'Are you all right?' asked Lila.

'Fine,' he said, more brusquely than he'd intended. Since his pneumonia he hated being asked if he was all right. He tried to smile. 'Thanks,' he added.

Fred had been sent to Brazil to convalesce with a distant cousin. The cousin's idea of a good time involved more playing bridge in a dark drawing room than Fred had expected. But, his father had said, it was the only sensible option.

'I can't be at home to look after you,' he'd said. 'The firm needs me.'

'I can look after myself,' Fred wheezed.

'That's not possible,' his father said gruffly. He had worked longer and longer hours each year, ever since Fred could remember. Fred could not remember his mother's face, except when he was asleep.

He'd never seen his father dressed in anything other than a suit, and over time the suits seemed to have seeped into his father's skin. His voice practically wore a tie.

'You're treating me like a baby,' Fred had said.

'Nonsense,' his father replied. 'Come on, you're a sensible boy.'

Fred's boarding school report always contained that word: 'sensible'. 'An unobtrusive presence in the classroom'. Sometimes, when they could clearly think of nothing else that distinguished him from his classmates, they added 'increasingly tall'.

Fred knew he was none of those things. Or rather, he *was* tall. Nobody would have argued about that: he grew out of clothes so fast that his ankles were constantly cold.

But he was not unobtrusive inside, nor was he sensible.

Inside, Fred was hunger and hope and wire. It was just that there had never yet been a chance to prove it; his father always insisted so unswervingly on clean shoes and unrebellious eyebrows. But Fred's mind was quick, with sharp edges. He wanted more from the world than it had yet given.

Now he tried to grin at Lila. 'I'm just dehydrated. We need to find something to drink,' he said. 'You can live for a long time without eating –'

'No you absolutely can't,' said Max indignantly.

'– but you can't live for long without water.'

'Do you think we can drink from the ...' Lila hesitated, searching for the words, '... tiny cesspool?'

Fred looked across at the puddle of water. 'We *could*, but I don't think we'd live very long if we did. But we're near the river – we must be,' he said.

'It was on our left when we crashed,' said Lila eagerly.

'Which direction did we run?' said Con.

'Well, the sun rises in the east. So, facing this way, left is north-east,' said Fred.

'How does that help, if we don't know which direction we ran?' snapped Con. She was pale and there were circles under her eyes, as if someone had pressed a paint-smeared thumb to her face.

'It doesn't, much,' admitted Fred. But north-east of here was England. The thump in his chest slowed a little: north-east led to his bedroom at home, his bookcase, his cricket bat propped up against the wall. It led to his father.

Con squared her shoulders as if readying to fight. 'Are we just going to guess, then?'

'I heard,' Fred said, 'that you can follow ants and they'll take you to water.'

'Ants!' said Con. 'We're going to take directions from *ants*?'

Lila stared hard at Con, and then at the ground, combing the leaves with her eyes. 'Do you have a different suggestion?' she said.

Con sighed, and bent to look under a log.

The first set of ants was a disappointment. Max found a trail of tiny red ones and bent down to stroke them. 'Look! They're shining!'

'Don't touch!' said Lila, snatching him back. 'Some ants out here are dangerous.'

'These ones?' asked Con, taking a step backwards.

'I don't know, that's the problem! The dangerous ones are called bullet ants, but I don't know what they look like.'

'Bullets, presumably,' said Con.

'Not necessarily,' said Lila. 'Dogfish don't look like dogs. I remember being very disappointed.'

'These ones just look like ants,' said Max.

'You're still not allowed to touch them,' said Lila. 'So don't try.'

They walked at a safe distance, all four of them with their chins on their chests, along a snaking line of trees. The ants led them to a large pile of leaves.

'Oh.' Fred nudged the leaves with a stick, just in case there was water underneath. He recoiled. The ants were swarming over the carcass of a bird. It looked like it had, once, been a vulture. Now, though, it was equal parts bones and smell.

'That isn't exactly what I was hoping for.' You could not, he thought, trust an ant's sense of priorities.

'What now, then?' asked Con, crossing her arms.

'Let's try again,' said Lila. 'Maybe those were the wrong kind of ants.'

It was Lila who found the trail of larger ants: ants with heads as big as ball bearings. They followed the track deep into the woods, Lila leading. Fred watched her. She was small and moved on the edge of her muscles,

like an animal – a deer or a lemur – as if she heard things other people did not.

‘I can’t believe we’re trusting ants,’ said Con. She brushed a cobweb out of her hair and ducked under a branch. ‘Even in fairy stories, it’s a wise owl or something. Nobody goes to bloody ants for help.’ She looked defiantly at Fred as she said the word ‘bloody’, and then a thorn caught on the skin above her eyebrow and she let out a yelp. ‘I *hate* this place!’

Fred looked back and found, with a lurch to his stomach, that the clearing had entirely disappeared.

‘Which way is the way back?’ he said. The green of the forest seemed to thrum around them.

‘Left at that tree that was covered in mushrooms, and then right at the bush with green thorns,’ said Con. She didn’t look at him – didn’t see the surprise on his face, which he immediately tried to hide.

‘We should mark a path,’ he said, ‘so we can find our way back.’

‘Fine,’ said Con. ‘Unless you want to ask the opinion of, I don’t know, a passing maggot?’

Fred tried to grin. ‘Well, maggots are much slower walkers than ants – they’d make terrible guides.’

She didn’t smile back.

Fred slipped to the back of the procession. Every three or four trees he broke a branch and stuck a leaf on the hinge it made.

Con shook her head. ‘That’s not going to be any good. You need something bigger.’ She tore one of the ruffles off her once-white blouse and tied it to a tree. ‘There.’

Fred turned to look at her, crouched in the dappled light. She moved stiffly, as if unaccustomed to using her own body. And her clothes seemed to sit on her like a bear trap. There are outfits that suggest of their own accord that their owner should sit still and smile nicely. Con had been dressed in one such outfit, before the crash had coloured it brown and green and red.

‘Good thing you’ve got ruffles to spare,’ he said, and grinned.

Con turned on him the kind of look that breaks noses. ‘Shut up, cricket jumper.’

Fred took a step backwards. ‘I only meant – it’s useful to have clothing with extra bits attached. Boys’ clothes don’t.’

‘Fine. Whatever you say. You don’t have to try to be nice to me, you know.’

‘What?’ Fred stared, bewildered.

'I just want to get out of this vile place and back to school. I don't mean to be rude, but I'm not really interested in making friends. Especially not with little kids.'

Lila heard them. 'I'm not a little kid,' she said quietly. She spoke without taking her eyes off the ants. 'I'm just small for my age.'

'How old are you?' Con turned to Fred.

Fred told her.

'But that's hardly older than me!' said Con.

'And me,' said Lila.

'I thought you were much older!' said Con.

Fred shrugged. 'Just tall,' he said.

'But that means there's no adults! Not even any nearly-adults. Just four children. In the Amazon jungle.'

'That,' said Fred, 'sounds true.'

'Unfortunately,' said Lila.

'Un-fornatuely,' echoed Max. He wandered off a few paces, blowing nose-bubbles with his snot. Lila darted after him and grabbed him by the sleeve. 'Stay close!' she said. Her face was bones and eyes and nerves.

As they walked on a smell came to Fred on the air, something sharp and fresh, something that smelt more blue than green.

'Is that the river? I think I can smell it,' he said.

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Con. 'You can't smell water –'

But then she broke off. Through the thickly ranged trees Fred could see a flicker of something that moved.

'Come on!' called Con. 'I've found the river!'

They stood where the ground curved down to meet the river. The river was a stark, bright blue.

'Do you think there are caimans?' Lila asked. Despite the sun overhead, she shivered.

In the long winter of Fred's illness he'd read dozens of books about explorers venturing out into the wild armed with only a pith helmet and a penknife. He had a shelf-ful, all dog-eared and food-stained, and they had all dwelt, at great length, on caimans.

He decided to be honest. 'Probably,' he said, but I don't know how else we're going to get water.'

'What are caimans?' asked Con.

'Alligators,' said Fred. 'Like crocodiles. But with longer snouts.'

'But they're smaller,' said Lila. 'Probably.'



'Probably?' said Con. 'Oh good.'

'The caimans like the sunny side of the bank,' said Lila. 'And we're in shade here. So we're *probably* fine.'

'*Everything's* a risk here,' said Fred. 'I'm going in.' Every hair on his arms stood on edge as he scanned the bank.

He pulled off his shirt, then put it back on again. It occurred to him that it needed washing as much as he did.

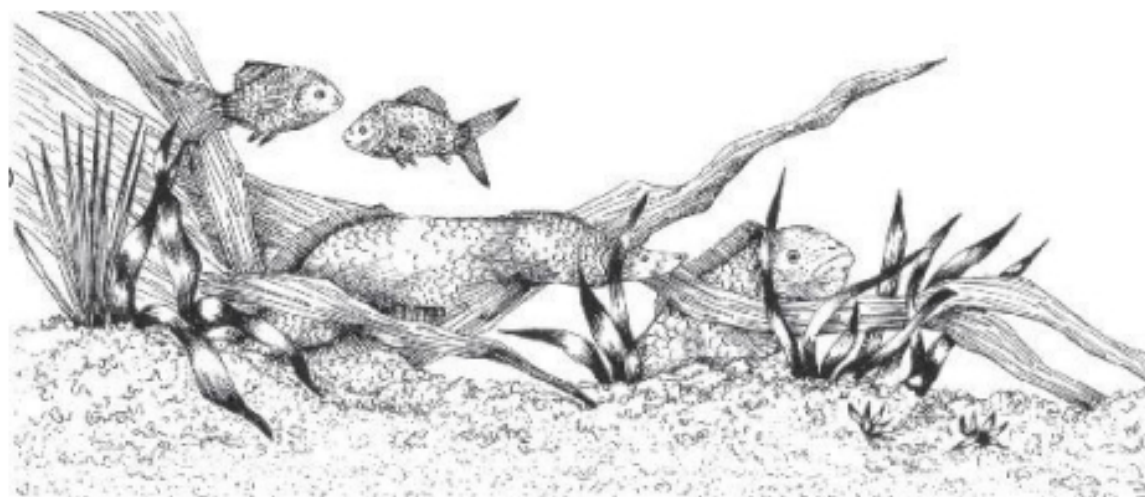
He slipped down the bank, his feet squelching in the mud, and dived in head first.

The river was a gift. It soothed the burn of his cuts and the ache in his feet. Fred trod water, then kicked downwards, below the surface where it was colder, and sucked in a mouthful of water.

It had a tang of mud to it, and a strand of waterweed wrapped itself around his tongue, but at that moment it was the most delicious thing he had ever drunk – better than hot chocolate at Christmas or fresh lemonade in summer. 'Come in!' he called.

Lila plunged in after him, carrying Max on her shoulders. Con hesitated on the edge, her face stiff and anxious.

'We didn't do swimming at school,' she said. 'Only ballroom dancing.' She entered the water slowly and swam in a nervous doggie-paddle, her chin high above the water.



Fred rubbed his arms and legs, feeling his cuts sting as he scrubbed the dirt off them, then kicked below the surface again, his eyes open in the dark water. A shoal of miniature fish swam by, followed by a single, larger one. He came up for air.

'There's fish!' he called.

'Try to catch one!' called Con.

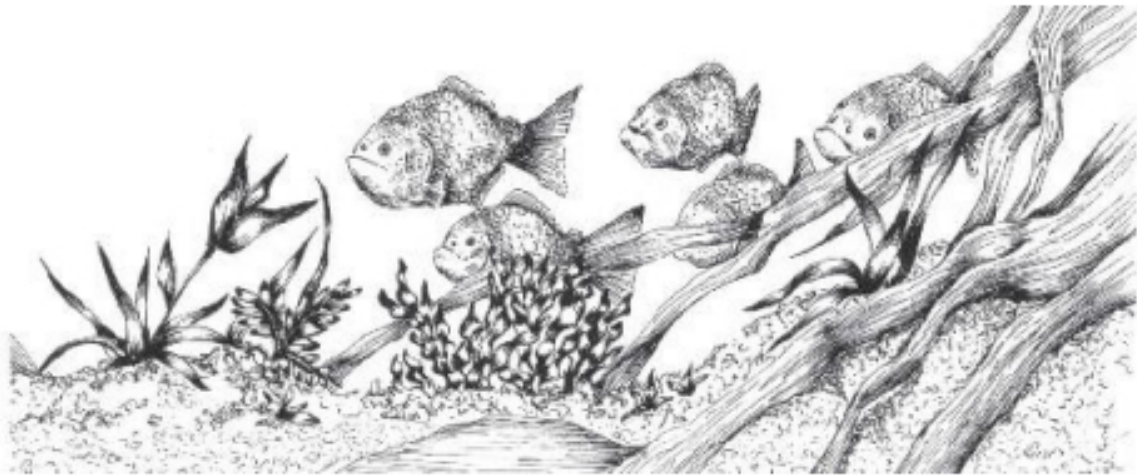
Fred plunged down again. The small fish darted away as he grabbed at them. The larger fish ignored him completely, but there was something eerie in its shape – almost circular, like a swimming dinner plate. The fish turned. It bared its teeth at him.

Fred sucked in a lungful of river water and shot, coughing, to the surface. 'Piranhas!' he yelled. 'Get out!'

Max was floating near him. Fred grabbed him and struck out for the bank, fear pounding through his limbs.

'What are piranhas?' Con asked.

'Fish with teeth!'



Con screamed a word Fred hadn't expected her to know, then swallowed a mouthful of water and disappeared under the surface.

Lila, wild-faced, grabbed Con by the shoulders. 'Don't thrash!' she said. She hooked one arm around Con's waist, kicking for the shore. 'Just breathe!'

Fred and Max scrambled up the bank, Con and Lila just behind them. They lay, panting, on the hot earth.

Con let out a groan and spat out a mouthful of weeds. 'Fish! Fish with teeth! Nothing is safe here. You can't even trust the fish not to eat you. What else? Pigeons with fangs? Monkeys with guns?'

'I read,' Fred gasped, 'that they don't bite unless they're very hungry.'

'They mostly eat small things, you know, birds and frogs,' said Lila. She wrung out her hair. It was covered in a dusting of red-brown river silt.

'It looked –' Fred drew in a great breath and felt his heart begin to slow – 'like it wasn't going to do anything. It was actually quite beautiful. Silver with a red belly.'

'Beautiful?' Con stared incredulously.

'As long as we're not bleeding into the water, we won't attract them,' said Lila. 'I knew that, but I panicked. We're still safe to swim here. I think they'll ignore us.'

'You *think*! You think you think you *think*!' Con was red in the face, sharp-boned, ferocious. 'They're fish with teeth! Piranhas! You can't *psychoanalyse* them!'

Lila looked at Con; her face was inscrutable. 'I think,' she said, 'that the plural of piranha is piranha, not piranhas.'

'Oh good,' said Con. 'It's always nice to be grammatically correct when you're being eaten.'

They padded damply back to the clearing. Lila used her wet shirt to wipe the mud off Max's face as they went. Their bodies steamed in the sun as they dried.

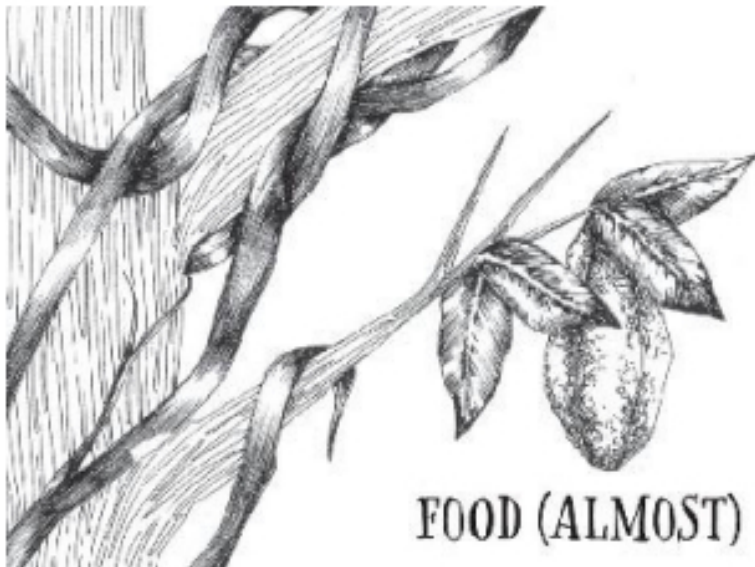
Coming back into the clearing felt surprisingly like coming home. A scarlet parrot alighted on a branch above Fred's head, cawed in surprise at the band of dripping children, and took off again.

Fred found the sharpest of the flints, and hacked off the bottom of his grey school trousers, making them into rough-edged shorts. The left leg was longer than the right, but he decided it didn't matter. The cut on his leg had begun to scab nicely. He pulled off his cricket jumper and wrung it out.

Something in Fred was beginning to glow: under the sun, and the cry of the birds, and the great expanse of vivid green around them. It was huge and dizzying.

It felt like hope.

*Either that, he thought, or concussion.*



## FOOD (ALMOST)

Although Fred had drunk so much water that the skin on his stomach was stretched tight, he was still painfully hungry. His insides ached and growled noisily. Con giggled. Fred thumped his front with a fist. His body felt at half-mast: weak and flimsily built.

He hadn't eaten anything since an apple before he boarded the aeroplane. He wasn't sure how long ago that was – a day and a half? He thought back: the flight had been on a Saturday, so today was probably – unless they'd all been unconscious for a long time – Sunday.

Fred shivered. He shook his head, trying desperately to clear the picture of the burning plane from behind his eyes. 'I think that there are insects you can eat,' he blurted out, more to distract himself than anything else.

The comment was greeted with a silence so unenthusiastic that it seemed to have its own particular smell.

'And we can find fruit,' he added. 'There's got to be some. There are monkeys, and the monkeys have to be eating something. Bananas, maybe. There were banana leaves in the den. Or berries.'

'How will we know if the berries are safe?' said Con.

'I'll test them,' said Fred.

'What if you die?' she asked.

'Maybe we should all test them, if we find any,' said Lila. 'But not Max.'

'Why not Max?' said Con. 'If we're risking our lives, why shouldn't he?'

'Because he's too young!' said Lila. 'And he has allergies.'

'That's not fair!' said Con. She smacked a small rock against a large one, making Max jump.

Fred could feel his own temper slipping away; the heat was burning, and his stomach felt bitter. 'Con,' he said. 'Come on.'

'You don't know me well enough to tell me to *come on*. Nobody voted you leader.'

Fred bit his tongue, feeling his nostrils flare angrily. 'I didn't say I was!'

Lila's face was crumpling. 'Don't.' She swallowed back a noise that might have been the beginning of tears, or a scream, and tried to change the subject. 'What were you saying about insects?'

'One of my books said you can eat the insects that eat cocoa pods.'

'What book?'

'Just a book about explorers.' It was a book about Percy Fawcett, a man who had come to the Amazon in search of golden cities. It was the kind of book that left you breathless and eye-stretched.

'What did your *book*,' Con pronounced the word with distrust, 'say the insects look like?'

'Small,' said Fred. 'It said not to eat any insect too big to put up your nostril.'

'Any further detail on that?' asked Con. Even her teeth looked sarcastic.

'No.' Fred wished, not for the first time, that more of his books had had pictures.

'Lila will know,' said Max proudly. 'Lila knows all about animals. She nearly got expelled for trying to keep a squirrel in her desk.' He grinned. 'Mama was so angry.'

'Shush, Max!' Lila glared at her brother.

'Well, insects aren't animals!' said Con. 'So none of this is useful.'

'Do you know?' Fred asked Lila. There was a spark of something stirring behind her eyes.

'I'm not sure,' said Lila. 'But, actually –' she jumped to her feet – 'Max, stay here. I'll be right back.'

'What? No!' Max put down the leaf he was chewing on and screwed his face into an angry ball. 'Wait!'

But Lila had gone, running out of the clearing, her half-burnt plaits swinging behind her.

The fifteen minutes that followed were not peaceful. Max tried to follow Lila, but Lila had disappeared into the undergrowth and couldn't be found. Fred picked Max up to stop him from running out through the unmarked,



thick-crowded trees. Max bit him on the back of the hand; Con called him a brat; Max bit Con on the shin.

Before Con could bite Max back Lila burst out of the trees. Her eyes were raw with relief. 'Thank goodness! I thought I was lost! I missed a turn somewhere,' she said, her breath jagged-edged and her forehead shining with sweat. She had made her jersey into a kind of sack, which she held in both arms.

'Did you find food?' asked Con.

'Yes,' she said. Then her honesty got the better of her and she added, 'Almost.' She opened her improvised sack and poured out dozens of pods on to the grass.

'They don't all have larvae holes in them,' she said. 'But I thought we could eat the cocoa beans too.' She began breaking them open with her nails.

Fred picked up one of the pods; there were two holes in the top. 'There's something in here.' He tried to shake the something out, but it didn't come. He poked a stick into a hole and shook it again, and a fat little grub, two centimetres long, tipped out on to his palm.

'That's it!' said Lila. 'That's the grub! You can eat it!'

'Oh good,' lied Fred. The grub lay on his hand: it didn't move, but seemed to be pulsating slightly. He sniffed it.



'Go on,' said Con. 'It was your idea.'

'Ugh.' Fred pinched his nose, braced himself, and bit the grub in half. It was soft, but its insides were sandy, and the crunch of it against his teeth made him shudder. He swallowed with difficulty. 'It tastes a tiny bit like chocolate,' he said.

'Really?' said Con. Her whole face, and even her ears, were sceptical. It's difficult to make ears register emotion, but Con managed it.

'But mostly like dirt,' Fred admitted. 'Peanuts and dirt.'

Soon the grubs lay in a pinkish writhing pyramid. Fred tried to feel grateful that they had any food at all. He failed, badly.

Lila picked the three plumpest and offered them, palm up, to Max.

'No! That's not food. Max only eats actual food. Mama says, don't eat insects.'

Lila sighed. 'He talks about himself as if he were another person when he's nervous.'

'Max isn't nervous,' said Max. 'Maxie is just being good.' He rubbed at a cut on his knee, and began to hiccup. 'I want to go home,' he said.

'I know you do,' said Lila. She pulled him closer. 'But this is all we have. I don't know what else to do, Maxie.'

He pushed her away. 'Mama would know!' His nail caught on the cut on Lila's cheek.

'But Mama's not here!' She blinked hard and wiped her nose on her wrist.

'What if we fry them?' said Fred. 'And make them into a pancake?'

'Fry on what? We don't have a pan,' said Con.

'But we've got stones,' said Lila. She scrubbed her face with her top and tried to sound bright. 'We could make chocolate pancakes. Sort of.'

'Sort of,' said Con. 'Really quite amazingly *sort of*.'



## FIRE

The grubs, when mixed with the cocoa beans and pounded with a clean stick, turned into a paste which, if you squinted and were of an optimistic temperament, looked like flour and water.

'Now we just make a fire and cook them,' said Fred.

'Just,' said Con.

'We need a flint,' said Fred.

'We need kindling,' said Lila.

'And *matches*,' said Con.

'I'll do the kindling,' said Fred. Most of the wood surrounding them had dried since the rain the night before. He held the hem of his cricket jumper in his teeth and made a hammock for the wood. The night in the jungle had not improved the taste of the wool.

He came back to the clearing and tipped the wood into a pile, a few paces away from the den.

'There were flints in there,' said Lila. 'We could rub away the moss and use them to make a spark. Flints don't go off.'

'Flints aren't enough by themselves,' said Fred. 'I've tried. You need a bit of steel.'

Lila ducked into the den to fetch the flint. Con was staring at Fred's watch. 'What's that made of?'

Fred stared down at the watch, covering it protectively with his hand. 'Glass.'

'And?'

'And steel,' he said. 'My father gave it to me, when I went to boarding school.'

'But it's broken,' said Con.

'I know that,' he said.

'So,' said Con, 'if it's broken, it's not really a watch any more, is it? But what it *is*, is a lump of steel.'

Fred jerked his hand back. His father never bought his birthday gifts; he left it to his secretary to take Fred to Harrods and pick out something sensible. This was the only gift Fred could remember his father choosing himself. He had had it engraved with Fred's initials.

Lila nodded. 'It might be the only way,' she said; her voice had sympathy in it, but grit too.

'Fine!' said Fred. He had an unaccountable, absurd need to cry. 'Fine! We'll use it.'

'Can I have first try?' asked Con.

'It's *my* watch!'

'I know. But I've never lit a fire before,' she said, 'not even the ones in the fireplaces at home.'

'Not even on Bonfire Night?' Fred asked.

'Not allowed.' There was longing and hunger in her eyes. She looked away from him, turning the flint over and over in her hand as if it was a jewel. But there was something written in her face, Fred thought, something in a code he couldn't begin to read.

'Here.' Slowly, he undid the strap. He held the watch in his fist, surreptitiously tracing the letters on the back with his thumb. Con watched in silence. He put it in her palm. 'I get second go.'

Lila heaped shredded leaves and dried grass in a pile. 'You do it over that,' she said, 'so the spark has something to catch.'

Con struck the back of the watch against the stone. Fred winced. She overshot and dug the flint into her own skin. She said nothing and tried again. She bit down on her tongue, concentrating, her eyebrows furrowed so deeply they nudged against her eyelashes, striking and striking until her fingers were raw.

Suddenly flint and steel let off a tiny spark. Con was so stunned she fumbled the flint.

'Again!' shrieked Max. 'Again, again!'

The spark came again, a brief flare into the world that vanished as it came.

'It needs to be lower over the kindling,' said Lila.

Con struck again, and again; the spark caught against a blade of grass, which caught against another. Fred's heart leapt and he dropped to his

stomach and blew on the scrap of fire, terrified he would blow it right out. The flame faltered.

'No! No, no, don't die!' said Con.

Lila added a handful of dry moss. Fred blew again. The fire seemed to breathe in, and then exhaled a cough of flames. Max whooped. Lila held out a sheaf of twigs. The fire caught at them, made five burning fingers, ate them whole. It belched upwards.

'More!' said Max. He was dancing in a tight circle, slapping at his ribs. 'Feed it more!'

Fred added a handful of bone-dry leaves, and then another and another. The fire made a noise like an idea being born, a crackle that sounded like hope, and sent up a column of flames.

They all rocked back on their ankles, grinning at each other.

'We could sleep in shifts,' said Con, 'to make sure it doesn't go out.' She looked at the fire with proprietorial pride. 'We made that. By ourselves!'

Fred put the watch quietly in his pocket. It was scratched now and deeply dented, but inside his pocket he clutched it so tightly it dug a circular bruise into his palm.

'It's the most beautiful fire I've ever seen,' said Lila.

'Yes,' said Con. 'By far.'

Max bit lightly at Lila's arm. 'Can we eat now? I'm so hungry I might die.'

Fred scabbled in the dust with his nails until he found a flat stone, and balanced it, wobbling dangerously, on four green-wood sticks over the centre of the flames. Lila divided the grub paste into four balls and spread them on the stone.

Eventually the pancakes began to bubble. Lila poked them. 'They're getting harder,' she said.

'And they smell like a shoe,' said Con. 'That probably means they're done.'

One of the trees near the den had vast fleshy leaves, as big as serving dishes. Fred pulled four of them down and dropped a grub pancake on to each one; they were hot to the touch, and gooey.

'They're probably best while they're so hot you can't taste them,' said Fred. He bit off half the pancake, trying not to chew much. It tasted disconcertingly animal. It was, he thought, like eating porridge mixed with fingernail-grime, but it was better – wildly, infinitely better – than nothing.

Con nibbled the corner of hers. She grimaced, but she didn't spit it out. 'To be honest, it's not that much worse than school dinners,' she said. And



she smiled half a smile.

Max kept his food scrunched in his fist, guarding it from the others. 'I don't like sharing,' he said. His pancake oozed out from between his fingers.

The clearing was growing darker every minute. Con stood. 'I'm going to go and use the ...' she hesitated, and coloured, '... the lavatory – so don't come over there. Or look round. Or I'll punch you.' She paused. 'Please.'

'We could decide on a place,' said Fred. 'Quite far off. And then we could mark a path – and nobody would get lost.'

They got up, all four of them standing close together in the gathering dark, and began looking for a suitably large tree far enough from their fire, but not far enough away to risk getting lost.

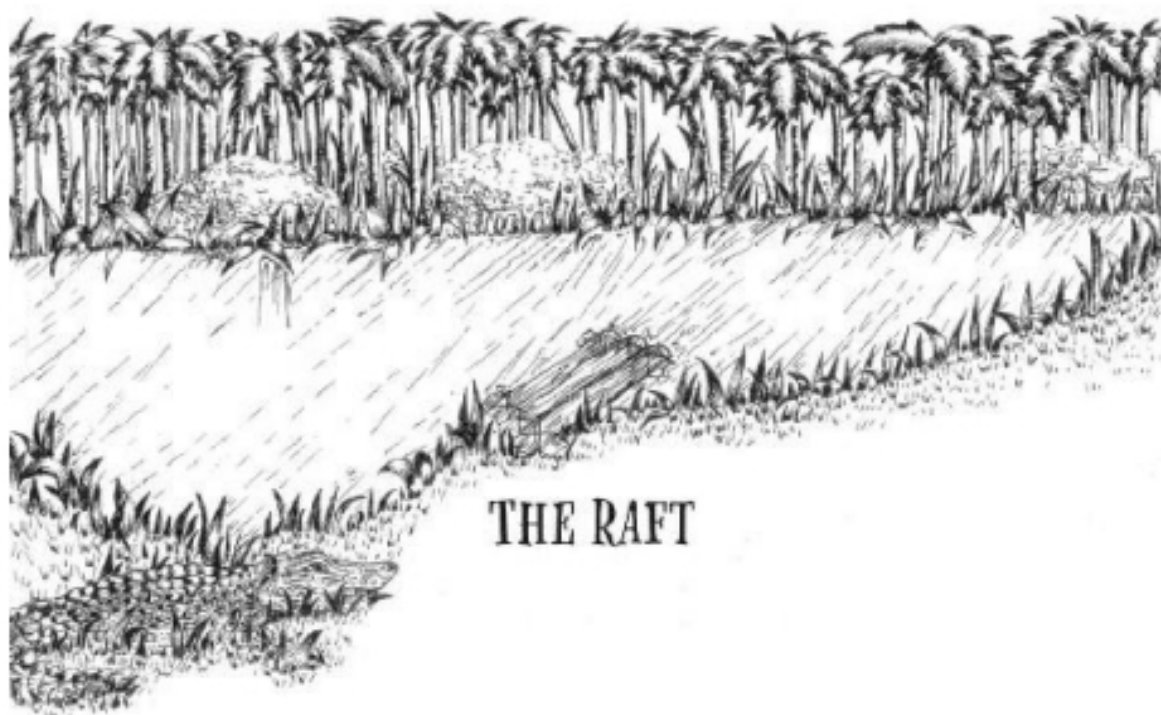
'This one's big,' said Fred.

'And this one,' said Con. The trees were immense, stretching at least as high as a church.

'We could make that one the boys' toilet, and this one the girls', said Con.

Lila's smile was sudden, and enormous; it showed that one of her teeth was wonky and she had a dimple in her cheek. 'We could call it the lavo-tree.'

It wasn't terribly funny, but once Fred started laughing he couldn't stop. Con choked and had to bite her fist. Max's laughter sent a ribbon of snot flying out across the glade. They laughed loudly enough to scare the birds, and to make the distant monkeys roar angrily from their night perches in the trees.



It was Fred's idea to build a raft. He knew that it wasn't, by any stretch of the imagination, what Con would call a reasonable risk, but following the river was the only way he could think of to get home. The river moved fast, and the splash and spit and spray of it sounded like a summons through the jungle.

'A raft?' said Lila. 'From what?'

They were sitting in the clearing in the morning sun, clammy with sleep and dew. They'd slept inside the den, taking shifts to watch the fire. It had not been a good night. It had grown cold, and Max's feet, which had begun the night in their proper place, had ended up in Fred's left ear. Fred's brain had chewed up the fears he had pushed aside during the day and spat them back at him while he slept. He'd woken, screaming, at dawn.

'We'll make it from wood,' said Fred. He swept up some of the dew from the grass around him and rubbed his face with it. 'There's a lot of wood available.'

'Do you know how?'

'I've read a lot of books about it,' he said. In the books, explorers cascaded down rivers, shouting things like 'Tally-ho!', but he assumed that was not compulsory. And he'd read in an article on the front page of *The*

*Times* about one man, Christopher Maclaren, who had lived for months on a raft, eating fish and drinking river water. He had made it sound easy.

'Why do we need a raft?' said Con.

'It would get us out of here.'

'To England?' she asked.

'To Manaus, and there would be people there who will get us home.'

'On a raft? To Manaus?' said Con. Her voice was thick with disbelief.

'People crossed the Atlantic Ocean on rafts,' said Fred.

'They were *adults*.'

'There's nothing that says only adults can make rafts,' said Fred, exasperated. 'You don't need a licence.'

'Fred's right: we should try,' said Lila. 'I think it's a good idea.'

'I knew you'd say that!' said Con. 'I knew you'd agree with him!'

'But,' Lila looked bewildered, 'don't you want to go home? Don't you want to see your mama?'

'Of course I do!' Con spat.

Fred looked down at the floor. He'd heard Con crying in the night, calling for help in her sleep.

'But if we just wait here,' said Lila, 'we'll wait until we die!'

'People will be looking for us! We should just stay here and they'll come,' said Con.

Lila shook her head. 'The jungle is very big, and we're small.'

'I'm not,' said Max promptly.

'You're small compared to a thousand miles of rainforest, Max.'

'We can send up smoke signals,' said Con. 'We already have some fire – let's use it.'

'We'd have to burn down half the jungle to make one big enough to reach that high,' said Lila.

'And a fire that big would kill us instead of getting us rescued,' added Fred.

Con was going red. 'I don't want to, all right? I really, really don't want to get on a raft and risk my life because someone else thinks it's a good idea.'

'It might not be a good idea,' said Lila, 'but it's the only one we've got.'

Fred's skin was beginning to ache, and his stomach to clench. It always did when people argued. He stood up.

'I'm going to make a raft. You don't have to help if you don't want to.'

The raft took more time, and involved more blisters, than Fred had expected. But it quietened the roar of fear behind his ribs, to be doing

something.

'It's not going to work,' said Con. Her arms were crossed so tightly across her chest that her fingers were almost touching at the back. The cut on her shoulder was still raw. 'And we shouldn't make ourselves hungry and tired when the only food we have is grubs.'

Fred said nothing, and went on pulling immense branches down from the trees. Most were too firmly attached to be any good, but he'd found that if he put his whole weight on them and swung his legs, every now and then one would break off with a satisfying crack. He worked faster and faster, brushing away leaves and insects as they fell in his eyes.

Once the wood was piled in a heap Lila heaved each piece to the fire. She laid each one across the flames. When the middle burned away, they were left with two pieces of roughly equal length, each as long as she was tall.

'I'll take off the burnt bits,' she said. 'It might as well look neat.' She hacked away the burnt edges with a flint, getting steadily more covered in soot.

'I want to help!' said Max. He strode around the clearing with his chest out, tugging liana vines down to the floor and piling them up. 'I'm actually the best at helping,' he said. He sat down and began to make the vines talk to one another.

After a few hours, Con unwound herself from her angry ball of limbs. Silently, she approached Max. She took up one of his vines, and a flint, and began to skin back the rough bark on the liana to expose the softer core, thick as a rope and almost as supple. She covered her face with her hair as she worked, and refused to meet anybody's gaze.

Fred watched her from the corner of his eye. Con was different when she worked. Before she had seemed all elbows and claws, touch-me-not and defensive eyebrows. But now she seemed absorbed, barely breathing as she bent over the vines.

Fred had never been as proud of anything as he was of that raft. It distracted him from the pounding hunger in his stomach and head. He hauled the branches to the water's edge, dragging them one in each hand, back and forth, beating out a path between the river and their clearing.

Con held out a handful of liana vines. 'Here,' she said. 'For rope. Maybe. I don't know.'

'We could dip them in the water to soften them,' suggested Lila.

'Thank you,' said Fred. 'They'll be perfect for tying the corners.'

Con nodded, unsmiling.

Fred soaked the lianas, and wound them round and round his fist until they were supple. His hands prickled with splinters and he bit them out with his teeth. He sweated so much that his shirt turned into a sort of wearable pond.

For lunch they ate the cocoa beans, raw. They were not delicious.

'It feels like an insult to chocolate to eat them,' said Con.

To try to fill their stomachs they chewed on the white flesh that lined the pods, which tasted exactly like the rubber at the end of a pencil.

'This isn't food,' said Max. His chin and lip were quivering.

'You have to eat it, Max,' said Lila. 'There's nothing else.'

'It tastes mean.' Max dug his fist into his eye and tugged at his eyebrows. 'I want to go home!'

'I know,' said Fred. 'Me too.' He decided he couldn't face any more grubs that day and set aside the last of the cocoa-plant larvae. He turned back to the chunk of wood he was hacking in two with a jagged-edged stone. 'We're trying.'

As the sun set Lila and Fred and Con went foraging, dragging a wailing Max behind them. Con found purple berries growing in great cascades on a tree.

'They're acai berries!' said Lila. 'People eat them at home. Or,' she frowned, looking down at the pile, 'maybe you're supposed to make them into tea?'

Fred tried one. 'It tastes a bit like a blackberry,' he said, 'if the blackberry were angry with you.' But it was a relief to have something to chew.

Con tried one and sighed. 'I miss school dinners,' she said.

'They might be better roasted?' said Lila.

They were not better roasted, but they ate them anyway. Fred crouched by the fire and crammed handfuls into his mouth, trying desperately to fill the churning hole where his stomach was usually located.

That night he woke in sudden and excruciating need of the lavo-tree. Minutes later, Lila woke with the same trouble, followed by Con and a hopping, wailing Max.

It was not, all in all, an easy night. Fred waded through his dreams to morning and woke feeling like he'd been kicked in the stomach. He turned on his side, groaning, and glimpsed through a hole in the green wall of the den the pile of vines they had prepared the day before. He sat bolt upright. *The raft!* he thought. He should be able to finish it that day.

The others were asleep, sprawled on their stomachs in the warmth of the den. He scrambled out of the shelter and ran down to the river where he'd stacked the wood. The sun was hot and the air was clear; his skin had already burnt a furious red, but he barely felt it as he knelt by the pile of branches.

He looped each of the branches together with lianas, working a figure of eight, tying them so many times over that the raft was deep green, every inch embroidered with vines. Fred worked fast, biting down on his wrist and swearing as quietly as he could when he drove a thorn into his thumb.

He made four squares, each about six foot by six foot. Then he stacked them into two thicker squares, and tied the two squares together, tugging the knots tight with his teeth.

'Yuck.' He spat out a beetle. Then he stood back. The raft was rough-edged and stained with soot, but it was sturdy, a double-thick, twelve-by-six-foot slab of wood.

Fred dragged it to the very edge of the water, drops of sweat running down his nose and into his mouth. He wished, wildly, that he could take a photograph; he almost could see how his father would raise his eyebrows in surprise and pleasure. Reluctantly, he turned back to the clearing.





Lila was waiting outside the den. Her arms were wrapped around her knees, and she was glaring at him furiously. 'You! I thought you were dead!'

'I was down by the river.'

'Scratch a message in the dirt next time!'

'Yes, of course. Sorry.' But Fred could barely concentrate on what she was saying. 'The raft is ready! Will you come and try it out?'

'Max has to brush his teeth first. His breath is disgusting. It's scaring the dragonflies.'

Lila picked four twigs and shredded the tops with her fingernails until they looked like paintbrushes.

'Here.' Lila handed one to Fred. 'If our teeth drop out it will just make everything worse.'

It did feel better, Fred had to admit, to sweep some of the fuzz from his teeth. But he was bursting with impatience. He gave three scrubs and dropped the brush.

'Come on!' he said, as soon as Con had spat, decorously, into the stagnant pool.

Fred led them at a run down to the river. They stood, panting, while he showed them where the loops had been made double-thick, and how he had added extra branches all the way around the outside.

'What do you want us to do,' said Con, 'clap?'

Fred did, secretly, just a little, but he grinned. 'No, I want you to get on it.'

He edged the raft on to the bank. It slid down the mud, landed on the water with a splash, tipped up on its right side – Fred drew in his breath – and righted itself. It swayed on the water, steady as a battleship; it was more beautiful, Fred thought, than any millionaire's yacht. He kept a firm hold of the liana tied to the right-hand corner.

'It floats!' said Max.

'Of course it floats,' said Con. 'It's wood.'

Fred waded into the water, crossed his fingers, and hauled himself up. The raft dipped and spun under his weight as he climbed on, then steadied, rocking on the current. He paddled it closer to the bank.

'Climb on!' he said.

'Max, wait –' said Lila.

Before anyone could stop him Max had tipped himself head first down the bank into the river. He came up spitting mud. 'Pull me up!' he said.

Fred hefted him by his armpits. Con and Lila followed more slowly, studying the water for piranha. Fred offered a hand to each. Lila took it; Con did not. The raft shook as they arranged themselves but soon they were sitting, crouched on the wood and vines, bobbing high on the water.

'It works!' said Max.

'For now,' said Con ominously.

'Let's go down river!' said Fred.

'Why?' demanded Con. 'We know it floats with us on it. That's what you wanted.'

'We needn't go far. Just to test it?'

Here, under the cover of the trees, the current was slow, but out in the middle of the river, it spat and bubbled with speed. Fred could feel his skin twitching to send the raft down those waters.

'Let's try,' said Lila. Her knuckles were pale where she was gripping the edges of the raft, but her eyes were hungry with curiosity. 'If we're going to sail it to Manaus we need to test it first.'

Fred seized the pole he had made; he'd smoothed its bark with the edge of a flint, and it was twice as tall as he was. The raft bucked under them. Fred felt his heart buck in unison.

'Careful!' said Con. The skin around her nose and lips was greyish-green. 'Don't go too fast. We need to be able to get back.'

But the current caught at the raft and spun them, dragging at the wood and pushing it fast down river. They sank a little in the water but remained

upright. Fred ducked, as an overhanging branch threatened to hit him in the eye.

'Is that a caiman?' asked Con, pointing at the far shore.

Max's eyes widened. 'Make it go away!'

'No! Of course not. It's just a log,' said Lila, taking her brother's wrist in her hand. But, over his head, she met Con's eyes and whispered, 'Maybe.'

Fred steered closer to the bank, his heart thumping.

They sped down the corridor of green. Fred tried to hold their course with the pole. Trees dipped into the water on either side of them, like curtains at the theatre, Fred thought, with the river as the stage. Two bright birds with yellow bellies flapped overhead.

'Blue macaws!' said Lila. 'I tried so hard to persuade Mama to let me have one of those as a pet; but she said Max was loud enough on his own without a parrot.'

'It's funny,' said Con, 'I never really thought much about birds before. The birds here make the birds in England look like they're dressed for a job interview.'

The sun beat down on the river, sending up green and silver light in their eyes. Fred followed the current downstream. They came to a fork in the river. 'Someone will have to remember which way we've come,' he said, 'or we'll get lost.'

There was a pause. Then Con said, 'I'll remember, if you like.'

Fred looked round, surprised. Con hadn't struck him as the volunteering sort.

'I've got – I've got a photographic memory, actually,' she said.

'Really?' asked Lila, fascinated. 'You mean, you see pictures? Do you remember everything that way, or only some things?'

'Mostly just maps, and formulae, and blueprints for things. I used to like taking them out to look at, during lunch break in school. In my head, I mean. The others thought I was weird.'

'In that case they're stupid,' said Lila bluntly. 'I'd love to be able to do that.'

The raft swept round a corner with Fred poling hard.

'We turned left coming out, so the final turn home will be right,' said Lila.

'Right: right,' said Con. She grinned. Her smile changed the whole shape of her face: her cheeks rose and pushed her eyes into little squints, and her mouth stretched up and out to her earlobes. Her touch-me-not

look vanished. 'If you shout out the directions, we could do it together. If you want.'

Fred kept poling. The branch was giving him new, shilling-sized blisters on the pads of his hands, but he didn't slow down. There was a twist, he found, that he could give the pole that made them speed faster. It blew Max's snot in a high ribbon up his face. The sun was hot and sharp out here. The air tasted brand new.

'Faster!' shouted Max. He rocked backwards and forwards on his haunches.

They hadn't gone far before there was another fork; one looked choked with weeds, so Fred chose the other. 'Left!' called Lila.

'Left,' Con echoed and nodded.

The left bend took them into a narrower river, winding slowly among close-set trees. Fred pulled up his pole and they drifted, staring down into the water. A shoal of fish swam helter-skelter under the raft. Max leant dangerously over the edge, dangling his fingers in the water.

Suddenly Con jumped. The hairs on her arms rose up in a blonde wave. 'What's that?'

'What's what?'

'Something down there. Silver. Down there! A piranha!' Con's voice came out thin and high. 'Max, get your hands out of the water!'

They all peered down into the water. There was something small and silver, trapped among the weeds. 'It's not moving,' said Fred.

'What is it?' said Con.

'It's ... I think it's not alive,' said Lila.

'A dead piranha?' said Con.

'It's ... a silver box?' said Lila. 'It's hard to tell. It's probably just a trick of the light.'

'I'm going to jump in and see,' said Fred. 'Just quickly.'

'No you're not!' said Con.

Lila, very softly, took hold of his wrist. 'Don't,' she whispered. 'It wouldn't be clever.'

'But it could be a knife!' said Fred. 'It looks man-made. Please. You keep the raft close by. I need to see. I'll be in and out: it's simple.'

'Fred!' said Con.

He pulled off his shirt, evaded Max, who tried to grab his ankle, and jumped over the edge of the raft.

The water was calm here without the current and cool against his skin. Fred kicked downwards. Weeds wrapped themselves around his ankle as

he went deeper. His lungs began shrieking at him. The silver something was just a little further – he brushed it with his fingertips, kicked desperately, and snatched it. It was sharp against his fingers.

He shot to the surface. 'Got it!' He held his fist up to show them, treading water.

But the two girls weren't looking at him. They were staring into the water a few metres from the raft.

'What's that?' whispered Lila.

Fred glanced down. There was something black, undulating through the water towards him.

Fred gasped, swallowed a mouthful of water and began to choke.

'An eel!' said Max brightly.

'An electric eel!' said Lila.

'Swim!' screamed Con. She snatched the pole and tried to steer towards Fred, jabbing the branch into the water. Lila held out her hand over the edge of the raft.

Fred swam the distance to the raft faster than he had ever moved in his life. He launched himself on to it. The raft tipped drunkenly under his weight. Con threw herself to the opposite end to stop it overturning, and Lila's hands grabbed at him; they were small but surprisingly strong as they hauled him up.

Fred lay on his stomach, gasping for breath, staring into the water.

The eel was immense. It looked like a deep-grey snake, as long as a grown man, winding in and out of the weeds.

Lila sucked in breath, and some of her own hair. 'Oh, wow,' she breathed. It wasn't just fear in her voice; it was fascination too.

'Are eels dangerous?' asked Con.

'I don't know, but if you call someone an eel –' gasped Fred, coughing. His heart was trying to break out from his chest. He swallowed: 'It's not a compliment. So maybe.'

'They are. Very,' said Lila. 'They pass an electric current through the water to shock their prey, and then eat them. They probably wouldn't be able to kill something Fred's size, but for Max it would be different.' She was shaking. She picked up the pole and, very slowly, so as not to risk tipping them all in, began to guide them away – away from the eel, and away from the canopy of trees.

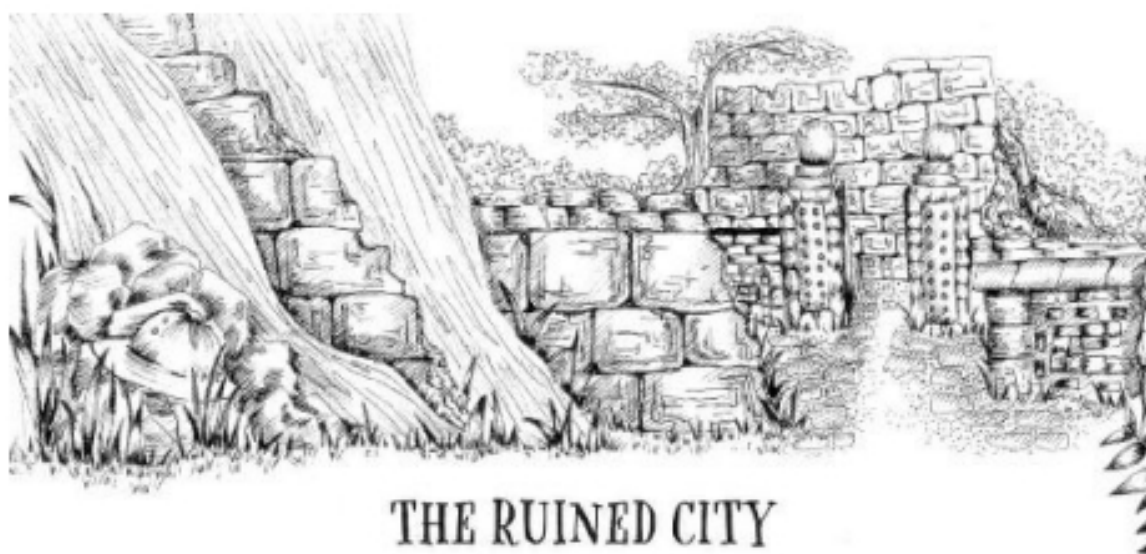
'What was it, down there?' asked Con.

'Here.' Fred opened his fist. It was a rusty rectangle, made of tin, coloured silver, with blue swirly writing.

'It's an empty sardine tin!' said Con, her voice full of disgusted disappointment. 'That's all.'

'Yes,' said Fred. He rubbed at the rust on the tin and closed his fingers tightly around its jagged edge. A sardine tin in the wildest place in the world. 'That's all.'





## THE RUINED CITY

The man was tall. His arms and hands were covered in scars and burns; old white scars criss-crossed with new red ones. He held the knife at the level of their necks, casually, as if it were a breadstick.

'Like the minotaur,' whispered Con.

At the man's side, close at his heels, waddled an enormous vulture with a red head and a curved beak. Its head came up higher than the man's knees.

'That small person in the dolorous trouser suit.' The man's nostrils had a high flare to them, and they twitched as he spoke. His voice was deep. His accent, Fred thought, belonged among good tailoring and fast motor cars. 'What's wrong with him?'

There was silence, except for Max's sobs.

'Well?' said the man. He twirled the knife in his fingers. The tip of his thumb was missing.

'He's crying,' said Fred.

'Why? He sounds like a dying screech owl. Like a lion blowing on a ship's whistle.'

Fred's heart was red-hot and beating double time. He was surprised that his voice sounded so almost calm. 'He's five.'

'That's not a reason.'

'You're pointing a knife at his head,' said Lila.

'That's not a *good* reason.' But he lowered the knife.

The man stepped closer, into a patch of green sun, and they could see him more clearly.

His dress was exquisite, but smelt pungent. His trousers, Fred saw, were quite ordinary: green khaki, worn through at the knee and spotlessly clean; but that – along with a white shirt, torn off at the elbow and patched with coconut fibre – was the only thing about him that was normal.

His shoes were made from what looked like alligator skin, with very thin vines for shoelaces. A jacket, sewn neatly from black furs, hung over his shoulders. The buttons were caiman teeth. He wore leather cuffs on each wrist and a signet ring on his little finger.

From a distance, he might have been on his way to a country-house party. Up close, he looked as though he had reconstructed a prime minister from once-living things.

Con swallowed. She spoke in a whisper. 'Is it just me, or does he look like the kind of person who won't definitely not kill you?' Her eyes were stretched open and her skin was taut over the bones in her face.

Fred's entire body had gone rigid, spine and shoulders and knees frozen, but he managed to nod his head half a centimetre. He spoke out of the corner of his mouth. 'Not just you.'

The man took another step towards them; his right leg swung slightly out to the side as he moved. Fred noticed for the first time that his right foot was strapped with three slim, highly polished pieces of wood. Despite the limp and the scars and the stubble, the animal Fred thought of was a panther. Something with strong jaws and sharp manners.

'Who are you?' said the man.

None of the children answered. They looked at each other. Nobody wanted to be the first to speak.

'How did you get here?' asked the man impatiently.

Fred tried to take a deep breath. 'Our plane crashed,' he said. 'And the pilot died. And we followed a map.' He put his hands in his pockets, attempting to look nonchalant while trying to find something he could fight with if he needed to. He could feel only a handful of squashed acai berries, which would not be very deadly in a battle.

'Show me.'

Fred handed him the scrap of bark, fumbling in his back pocket, his fingers suddenly uncooperative and clumsy.

The man glanced at it. 'Who drew this?'

Silently, Con raised her hand.

'Based on what?'

Con shook her head so that her hair fell in a protective wave across her face.

'Well?' said the man.

'We found a map in a tree,' said Fred, 'and Con made a copy, when it got wet.'

The man screwed up the bark in his hand.

'Please,' said Lila. 'Don't be angry. All we wanted to do was get home.'

The man looked down at the vulture, as if for inspiration. 'And what am I supposed to do with you now?'

'Nothing! Just let us stay for a little? We won't make any noise,' said Lila.

'That small one will.'

Max felt the man's gaze fall on him, and he began to cry again. The man let out a sound that was somewhere between a sigh and a growl.

Lila picked Max up. 'Sorry.' Her voice wavered, and Baca caught the fear from her skin and let out a mew like a cat. 'He's only five,' she whispered.

'You all keep saying that as if it's an explanation. Should I *like* him simply because he's small? I do not like undercooked food. Children are just undercooked adults.'

Con's lip began to quiver. Fred looked at her, surprised – but he moved his shoe half an inch, so that their feet touched.

The man looked at them, ranged in a line in front of him, shaking with nerves and expectation. He sighed.

'Are you thirsty?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Fred.

'Very,' said Lila.

'Very, very,' said Max. He sniffed tearfully, and wiped a great wedge of snot on his wrist.

'Wait here.' He glared at Max. 'Don't touch the vulture. He bites when he's anxious, and it takes very little to make him anxious. Vultures have nervous souls.'

The man strode across the great stone courtyard. He stopped at a tree trunk, a stump of wood as wide as a well, and lifted a slab of stone off its top. Fred shielded his eyes and stared; the tree trunk had been hollowed out and was full of water. The man dipped a large green bowl into the water, and stomped back to them.

'Here.' He thrust the bowl at Fred. The ring on the man's finger wasn't gold, Fred saw: it was bone, coated in flakes of iridescent snake scales.

Fred looked at the bowl in his hands. It was made from an explorer's pith helmet, the brim of the hat bent into a lip. Fred sniffed it. The man raised his eyebrows.

'I assure you it's perfectly clean,' he said.

Fred took a gulp. Thankfully it didn't taste of hair, only a little of wood, birds and the rainforest. He drank deeply, and passed it to Lila, who handed it to Max, who dunked his whole head in the hat.

The man waited until all four had drunk. Then he took back the bowl and offered it to the vulture.

As the vulture drank, the man rested his hand on the bird's head and stroked its wattle with his thumb. His face was tense. 'What is it that you want?' he said.

The children looked at each other.

'We want you to help us get home,' said Lila. She spoke very quietly, so quietly he had to bend down to hear.

'And why should I?'

'I can't look after Max much longer; he has allergies, and nightmares, and I don't know what I can dress him with if he keeps ripping holes in his clothes. Please help us.'

As she spoke the vulture waddled away from the man's side and headed straight for Max, who was hiccupping and sniffing. A line of snot dripped from his nose on to his ankle.

The vulture dipped its beak to Max's feet and pecked at the snot, then it wedged its nose into the side of Max's shoe and breathed in deeply through the holes in its beak.

'What's he doing?' said Max. His eyes were dilated with fear, wide and round as pennies, but he reached down and touched the bald head of the vulture. It snapped its beak. Max snatched his hand back, then, more confidently, returned it to the vulture's head.

It let out a guttural croak, which sounded almost like purring.

Then Max looked up, smiling, at the man. 'He's mine now,' he said.

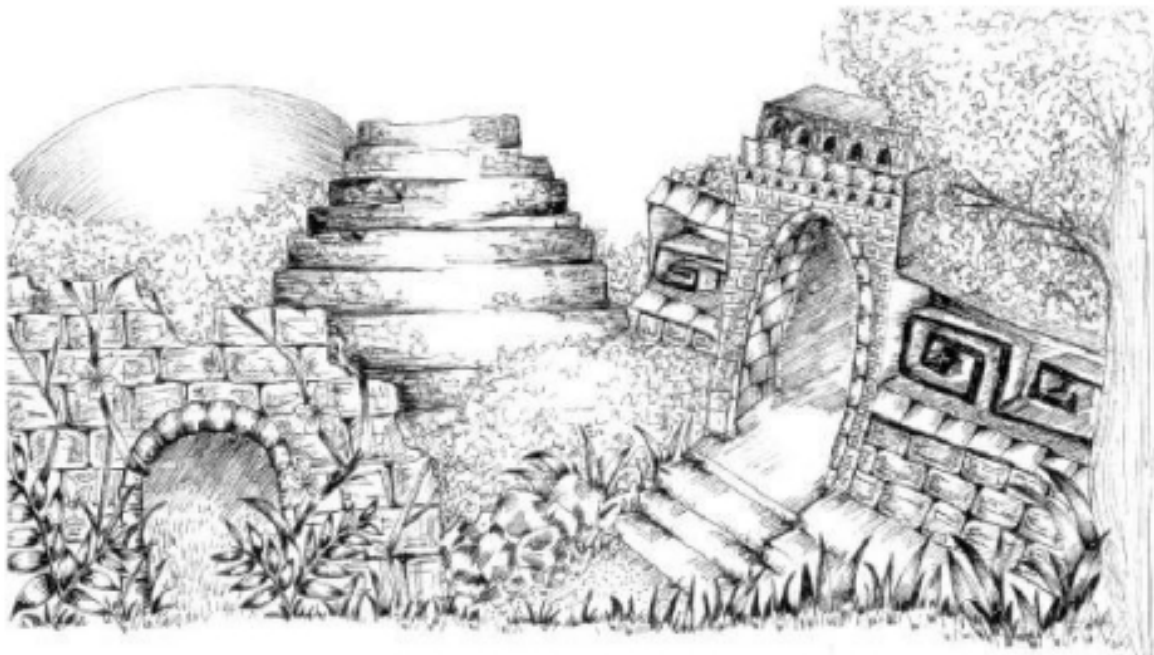
The man looked from Max to the vulture and back at Fred and Lila and Con. His face was emotionless, but his eyes were not.

'I shouldn't trust the instincts of that bird,' he said. 'He probably just thinks the boy smells like meat. But. All right. Come with me.'

He led them down the stone boulevard. There was a cascade of questions tumbling through Fred's head: who was the man? How had he

got here? Would he help them? But something in the man's walk did not encourage conversation.

The canopy was so thick overhead that the light filtered a succulent green down on to their path. The man led them to a place where blocks of stone and mud had been stacked to make three sides of a storeroom. It was empty but for the shocking-blue and green flowers which grew in the cracks. Vines criss-crossed over the top, forming a roof of sorts.



'Here,' said the man. 'You can sleep here.'

'Who built this? Did you?'

'No,' he said shortly. 'I did not.' He looked at the stone floor. 'I might make you some reed sleeping mats tonight. If I have time. The vines will shelter you if there's any rain. More or less.'

'Thank you,' said Fred. Con still hadn't spoken, but she nodded in thanks.

'But, beyond the statues, that curtain of lianas – you see?' He pointed. Fred followed his hand and saw, at the far end of the city square, falling from the wall behind the statues, a great swathe of tangling creepers.

They nodded.

'You don't go anywhere near there. Do you understand? That is my private space.'

Con tried to speak, but only a strangled burr came out.

'We understand,' said Lila.

'I mean it. Keep your word, or I'll cut off your ears and give them to the vulture to wear as a hat.'

'Don't!' wailed Max. He put his hands over his ears. 'I don't like him!'

'Shh, Max,' said Lila. 'He doesn't mean it.'

Fred looked at the man. He was fairly sure Lila was right, but it seemed risky to assume of a man who used teeth for buttons that he was joking.

Max tugged at the man's trousers. 'What time do we eat?'

The man looked down at him, baffled. 'Whenever you want.'

'Oh – but – we mean, whenever suits you,' said Con. Her voice was croaky, but she looked relieved that it had started working again.

'You eat whenever you catch and cook something. That's usually how it works. Unless you don't catch anything.'

'But – don't you – you're the adult.'

'I'm *an* adult, certainly. Look, there are berries. There may be some bananas on the trees in the west corner, if they weren't eaten by monkeys in the night. And you can hunt.'

'But,' said Con, 'you're the grown-up.' Her voice had truly come back now, and she scowled. 'Grown-ups cook for children. Those are the rules. That's how it's always been done!'

The man seemed to be losing patience. 'My dear.' He crouched in front of her, dangerously close. 'Which aspect of this –' he waved his hand at the stone pillars, at his scaly shoes, at the vulture – 'makes you think I would care how things have always been done?'

'But that isn't how it works in the real world!'

'This *is* the real world.' He thumped his knuckles on the stone floor. 'This, here. The real world is where you feel most real.'

'But, who are –' said Fred.

'But, please –' said Lila.

'But, don't you –' said Con. All three reached out, as if to grab him.

'Good lord,' said the man. 'It's like watching a dog eat a bee. You have six hands between you. Or eight, if you count the small one trying to eat a dragonfly.'

'Max!' said Lila. 'Stop that!'

'Do you at least have knives?' the man asked.

'We have one between us,' said Fred. 'We found it.' It didn't seem the right moment to explain that, technically, the knife almost certainly belonged to this tall, dark, unexpectedly dressed stranger: he might demand they give it back.



The man sighed. 'I'll give you each a flint. Then you can hunt, at least.'

He crossed to another stump of tree trunk, lifted a small boulder off its top and fished out something from the hollow space within. 'Here. They're already sharpened.'

He handed them each a stone, expertly chiselled to the size of a large arrowhead. Fred tested the edge with his thumb. It bit into his skin and a drop of blood ballooned out.

The man raised his eyebrows. 'You can use banana leaves as bandages. If you lose any fingers worth eating, give them to the vulture.' He handed a stone to Max. 'There you are, young cacophony. That one's the sharpest.'

'Max is too young for knives,' said Lila. She tried to take it from her brother, but he jerked away and held both hands behind his back.

'Is he? How do you know?' said the man. He sounded interested.

'It's ... just a fact! People don't give little boys knives.'

'I feel fairly sure I was given a knife at a young age. And I turned out perfectly normal.'

Fred looked at the buttons on the man's shirt; they glinted white and sharp in the sun. He said nothing.

The man sighed. 'It's getting late,' he said. 'You can have something from my own stores – but just tonight. Don't think it's going to be routine. You'll have to hunt for yourselves.'

All four let out deep sighs of relief. The man strode back to the hollowed-out trunk, and bent to a pile of stones next to it. Up close, they seemed to be arranged into something more definite than a pile; a rectangle, with wide slabs across the top. The man lifted two of the slabs, reached in and brought out the body of a bird, plucked but ungutted.

'Caracara,' he said. He dropped it into Fred's hands. It was cool, and clammy. 'They're common as rats here.'

'Thank you. Could you tell us how to gut it?' Fred asked tentatively.

'With the flints, boy!'

'But how's the best way? Sir,' he added, just in case.

'When the first man learnt to cook, he did so without recipe books. He worked it out. *You work it out.*'

They all four stared at him.

He sighed. 'Cut along the stomach, scoop out anything that looks too detailed, and cook the rest. As a rule of thumb, with innards, if it would take more than one colour to draw it, don't eat it. So, kidneys are fine – all reddish-brown – intestines less so, unless you're feeling exceptionally brave.'

'But – just quickly, before you go – how do we cook it?' said Lila.

'With fire.' He smiled a half-smile. 'Or that one – the blonde one, wearing her face like a weapon in a barroom brawl – could try to cook it by glaring at it.'

'Wait – please, just a second –' Fred made a last effort as the man turned to go. 'Who are you? What do we call you? What is this place? How did you get here? Are you an explorer? Do you live here? Are you planning to help us? We need to know!'

Fred thought of all the explorers he'd read about – there were so many who had strode into the jungle and never reappeared. Percy Fawcett, and his son Jack. Raleigh Rimell. Christopher Maclaren. He tried to remember what the photographs in the newspapers had looked like.

The man turned to face Fred full on. His face shifted from wry to something darker and harder to trace. 'I'm a bush pilot. Not an explorer. I used to ferry supplies back and forth from the smaller towns to Manaus. I crashed here some time ago.'

'What happened to your plane?'

'What happened to yours?' he countered.

'It burnt,' said Fred.

The man nodded. 'Exactly so.'

'And your name? I'm Fred – and that's Lila, and Con, and Max.'

A look as blank as an iron wall came down over the man's face. 'I'm not interested in names. This is the Amazon jungle, not the Travellers Club on Pall Mall.'

'But what do we say, then?' Con asked. 'I mean, if we need your attention?'

His eyebrows went up so high they nudged at his hairline. 'You don't,' he said, and turned away.

He strode across the square, his shoulders hunched, heading towards the place where the vines grew into an impenetrable curtain. He pushed past some branches, and disappeared. His footsteps, despite the limp, were astonishingly silent.

'You scared him off!' Max said to Con, his voice full of accusation.

'It wasn't just me! We all did,' said Con. 'And technically, I think we *annoyed* him off.'

'I didn't know,' said Lila, 'that asking someone's name would be so controversial.'

'I know what we call him,' said Max. He beamed up at them proudly. 'We call him the explorer.'

'But he just said he's not one!' said Con, exasperated. 'Weren't you listening?'

'He has an explorer's hat,' said Max. 'And a vulture. So there.'



## FLIGHT HOME

Lila woke Fred just before sunrise. The light was blue-grey, and her face was gaunt. She looked closer to eighty years old than twelve.

'You have to make sure he gets there, Fred,' she said. She took hold of his arm and dug her nails into it, to make sure he was listening. 'You don't have a choice.'

Fred could feel the heat radiating from her skin; the heat of hope, and desperation, and love. 'I know that,' he said.

He barely had time to splash water on his face before the explorer was calling them.

'Quick, all of you!' He stood in the middle of the stone city in a patch of sun, the light shining on the scales of his signet ring. 'It's time.'

They gathered around the aeroplane, just as they had in the airfield. It felt, Fred thought, like years ago. They were all four of them less neat now; their clothes were burnt, mud-covered, fish-flavoured, torn. Their faces and hands were covered in mosquito bites and scratches. They were slightly thinner, slightly rangier, slightly tougher.

Lila's hands were shaking as she took Baca and draped him over the explorer's neck. 'He makes a much better scarf than monkeys do.' Her eyes glittered, but she did not let a tear fall. 'Will you look after him?'

'What?' said the explorer, startled. 'Of course not.'

'But, please! He's not old enough to be alone yet – he needs –'

'He doesn't need me. He needs you. He's yours. You rescued him, you fed him. You need him.'

'But, my parents –'

'Your parents will understand. They will see these are not ordinary circumstances.' He placed Baca just below her shoulder, as if affixing a medal. 'You belong to each other.'

The explorer lifted Max and laid him in the back seat. 'Comfortable?'

Max's eyes were closed and his breathing was very shallow. His fingers had begun to swell.

'Not long now, little cataclysm.' He touched Max's head, and turned to Lila. 'He is a very loud enigma. But I am glad to have met him. Very glad.'

'He loved you,' said Lila. '*Loves* you,' she corrected herself, blanching.

The explorer swallowed, then nodded. He cupped his hands for her foot, and she climbed into the plane, cradling Max in her lap.

'Listen.' He looked down at Max's flushed cheek. 'When you get home, tell them how large the world is, and how green. And tell them that the beauty of the world makes demands on you. They will need reminding. If you believe the world is small and tawdry, it is easier to be so yourself. But the world is so tall and so beautiful a place.'

'And all of you – do not forget that, lost out here, you were brave even in your sleep. Do not forget to take risks. Standing ovations await your bravery.'

Con swallowed. 'But I'm afraid,' she whispered.

The explorer nodded, scarred and dusty and matter-of-fact. 'You are right to be afraid. Be brave anyway.'

He held out a hand to Con, and she took it like a queen and climbed into the plane. She squeezed in next to Lila on the back seat. Together they arranged Max across their laps.

The explorer looked at Fred for a long moment. Then he jerked his head towards the front seat. Fred swung up into the plane.

'Lila, hold Max steady: I'm about to shut the door.' He slammed shut the yellow tin door of the plane and fixed the catch. 'And one more thing! Remember – if you learn nothing else, remember to check daily for maggots. I once had an entire colony in the crook of my elbow.'

'In your elbow?' Fred's brain spun a full circle.

'Exactly so. It was a terrible blow to my vanity.' He turned to go.

Fred's eyes stretched wide. 'Wait!' he called. 'I think I know who you –'

But the explorer was already stalking back into the jungle. Fred stared after him.

Max gave a grunt of pain and Lila bent over him. 'We need to go,' she said.

Fred nodded. He shook himself, and set his feet against the pedals. He took a last look at the explorer.

'Ready?' he called to the back seat.

'Ready,' said Con. Her jaw was locked so tightly he could hear her teeth creaking, but she managed to smile.

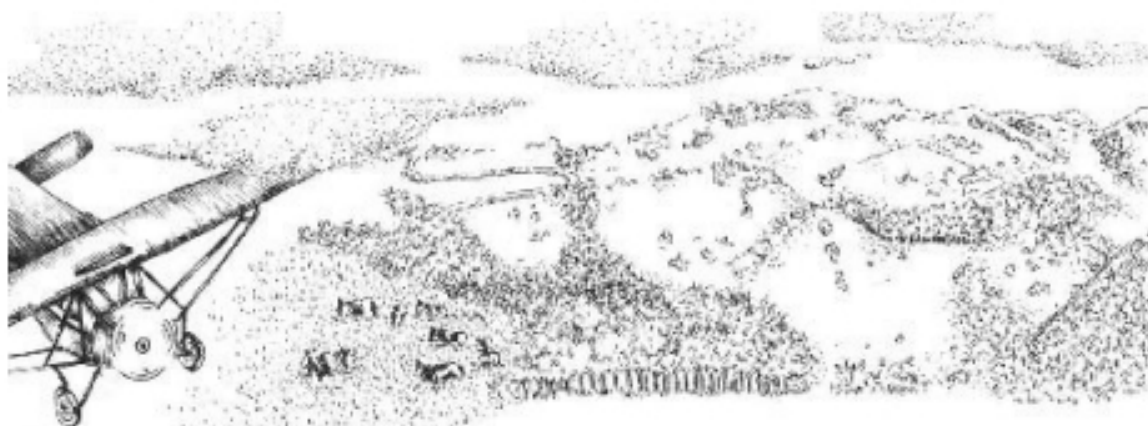
'Ready,' said Lila. She gathered Max closer to her and sheltered his head in her arms.

Fred glanced over his shoulder. Max lay still, breathing shallow breaths. Con and Lila were holding hands, and their knuckles were white.

Fred pressed the ignition button. The engine woke, sputtered, gave a roar like an animal.

He pulled back on the throttle and steered the nose of the aeroplane straight towards fear and towards home.





## ANOTHER KIND OF EXPLORING

The field they landed in was a large one, used for grazing cattle. It was long and as green as the Amazon. They bumped painfully, rose, and thumped down again. The cows bellowed in terror and scattered. The front wheels shook; the back wheel bucked. There was a moment where it felt as if they would flip wing over tip, but the plane shuddered, roared, and stilled.

The cows never fully recovered.

For the rest of his life, Fred would feel gratitude when he smelt freshly mown grass.

The rest of it was a blur: Fred and Con burnt the plane by dropping a lighted branch into the engine, Lila standing well back with Max in her arms. They sat in the grass, watching the yellow wings turn red, and waited. Before long the fire attracted a crowd. There were hordes of people shouting in languages Fred didn't know, with Lila attempting to interpret.

Then a journey by horse to a family with a motor launch; doctors; the boat ride; Manaus. A hospital for Max. Telegrams, telephone calls. A man and a woman tiptoeing into a hospital room and gathering Max and Lila so tightly in their arms they gasped for breath.

And then a huge ocean liner with a gold-walled dining room and steak and ice cream and a piano that Lila played, hesitantly, beautifully, seated between her two parents with Baca around her neck, while Con and Max

leapt in circles around the mirrored ballroom, scandalising the other passengers.

Fred sat with his knees tucked up on one of the silk-backed chairs and watched them. He tried to speak sternly to his body, but whenever he thought of his father his fingertips and knees began to quiver with nerves and hope. 'Don't,' he told himself. 'Don't. It's an office day. He has to work. He'll send the housekeeper.'

Each day the air grew cooler every hour; the smell of the sea changed from green to blue. And then, before he had time to set his thoughts into straight lines, to brush the green of the Amazon from his heart, the ship was heading towards the dock.

A row of people stood by the waterside, their fists tight, their eyes vivid with tension and longing. Fred raked them for a familiar face.

The crew lowered the gangplank, and Lila and Max let out a cry. Their grandmother stood at the barrier, her arms stretching out towards the ship. The two of them hurtled down the gangplank and were swept up in her embrace. Their parents followed, laughing. The old woman had the same wicked tilt to her eyebrows as Max.

'Con!' called a voice. Con turned, and her face flashed suddenly alight. Fred turned in time to see her great-aunt, standing upright and gaunt and shaking with emotion as she watched her great-niece descend the gangplank. Fred saw Con's aunt reach out and take hold of her wrist. She held it in both hands, as if to make sure Con was real.

Fred followed at a distance. Nobody called his name.

He stood still in the bustle of the customs shed, looking out towards the ship. He tried to still the roar of disappointment in his chest.

And then suddenly, Fred saw his father, his suit crumpled beyond recognition, his coat-tails flying, running towards him, pushing aside sailors and women in elaborate hats, flying faster than any aeroplane.

'I thought I'd lost you,' he said. He pulled him so close Fred felt his ribs creak next to his heart. 'I could not have borne it. I could not.'

Fred buried his face, hard, in his father's coat. He thought of the man, alone again, striding out through the jungle. He could almost hear his voice. *Every human on this earth is an explorer.*

Sometimes exploring is a word for walking out into the unknown. Sometimes, it's a word for coming home.



## EPILOGUE

### TWELVE YEARS LATER

Fred pushed open the door to the Ritz and strode towards the tea room as fast as he could go without running. He ignored the excited whispers from a crowd of boys following him across the foyer.

Max jumped up when he saw Fred coming and knocked over the sugar bowl. He was tall, now – as tall as Fred – and his face no longer had its baby roundness, but his eyebrows still pointed upwards at the ends.

'You came! We thought you might still be on expedition!' He embraced Fred, crushing him hard around the arms.

'Fred!' Lila had grown beautiful – so beautiful that Fred always hesitated each time they met, feeling oddly embarrassed, until she grinned at him. Her wonky tooth, slightly wonkier now, was still there. She gave him a bear hug. 'How was your trip? You've been in all the papers. "A new kind of explorer", they say.'

Before he could answer, a voice came from behind them. 'You all look so smart,' it said. 'You should have told me – I would have worn my ruffles.'

'Con!' said Max.

At first glance, Con looked very like she had done that first morning at the airfield, still with a jutting jaw, still at right angles to herself. But the blonde curls were gone, as was the expression of distrust. She wore her hair in a bob, high-waisted trousers and a felt hat that looked just a little like a pith helmet.

The hat had in fact been a Christmas present from Fred the year before. Fred's father still called the upstairs spare bedroom 'Con's room'.

A waitress approached with an armful of menus.

'Thank you,' said Con, 'but we decided what to have a long time ago.'

'Could we have one of every cake on the menu?' asked Fred.

'And four hot chocolates,' said Max. He grinned. 'In honour of the grub pancakes.'

As soon as the waitress had gone, Lila reached under the table. 'I brought someone to celebrate with us. He's very, very old. The waitress might not like it, though – can you make a barrier from your coats?' She lifted a bundle of grey fur from the wicker basket by her side. Very, very slowly, it opened its eyes.

'Baca!' said Fred.

'He's grown so enormous!' said Con.

'He's a very respectable old man these days,' said Lila. 'But he used to be such a terror.'

'A very slow-motion terror,' said Max.

'He kept trying to eat the covers of my biology textbooks.'

They passed Baca from hand to hand. His fur was less fluffy and he moved creakily, but his eyes were shining black and his nose was still inquisitive. He raised one slow arm and scooped a lump of brown sugar towards him.

Then Fred held out his hand, palm up. It was very faint now, the mark, but you could still see it. 'Still a secret?'

Lila held out her hand. 'Still a secret.'

Max spread his hand on the tablecloth. 'Of course.'

'Always,' said Con.

Fred looked down at their four upturned palms; his own was still covered in burns and blisters from his last expedition, Lila's speckled with animal scratches, Con's stained with ink.

Max broke the silence. 'Do you think he's still there?'

'I don't know,' said Fred. 'But I'll find out soon. I'm going back to the Amazon, as soon as the rains are over. I'm going to try to find it again.'

'But not to take anyone else to see it?' said Con.

'No!' said Fred. 'Of course not. Just to say we survived. Just to say we kept exploring.'

## A NOTE ON EXPLORERS

Although the explorer and the city in this book are fictional, both have roots in real life. Percy Fawcett, the man for whom our explorer goes looking, is real. Fawcett was an artillery officer with an astonishingly tough constitution and enough moustache for three men. He spent much of his life in search of what he called the City of Z, a city he imagined as richly sophisticated and peppered with gold.

In 1925, shortly after crossing the Upper Xingu, a south-eastern tributary river of the Amazon, he and his two companions disappeared. He was never heard from again.

Dozens of explorers like my fictional one went looking for him. Some came back empty-handed; others never returned at all.

Also real, alas, are the explorer's stories of indigenous people and their settlements being decimated by contact with Europeans, either through violence or through diseases to which they had no immunity. In 1500, before European invasion, the number of indigenous people in Brazil was in the high millions; now there are only 300,000. And the rainforest itself is under grave threat. In the last fifty years or so, 600,000 square kilometres of the rainforest have been destroyed. It urgently needs protecting.

The Amazon is the most astonishing place I have ever seen. I thought, before I went, that I knew what beauty was: I did not. If you want to know more about what you can do to help protect it, a good place to begin is [greenpeace.org.uk/amazon](https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/amazon).

But what is also true is that the world's rainforests are rich with history and secrets. In 2016, a fifteen-year-old schoolboy discovered what looked to be a lost Maya city, using satellite imagery and maps of the stars. A study of the imagery seemed to reveal a pyramid and dozens of buildings. It's very early stages, but some archaeologists believe there are Maya sites still to be discovered all over the region – that they may number in the high hundreds.

The thought of it blows your hair back. There is still so much of the world to know.