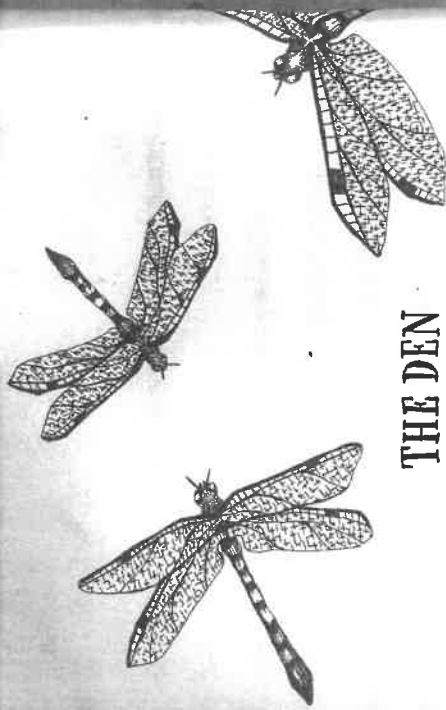




THE DEN

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.

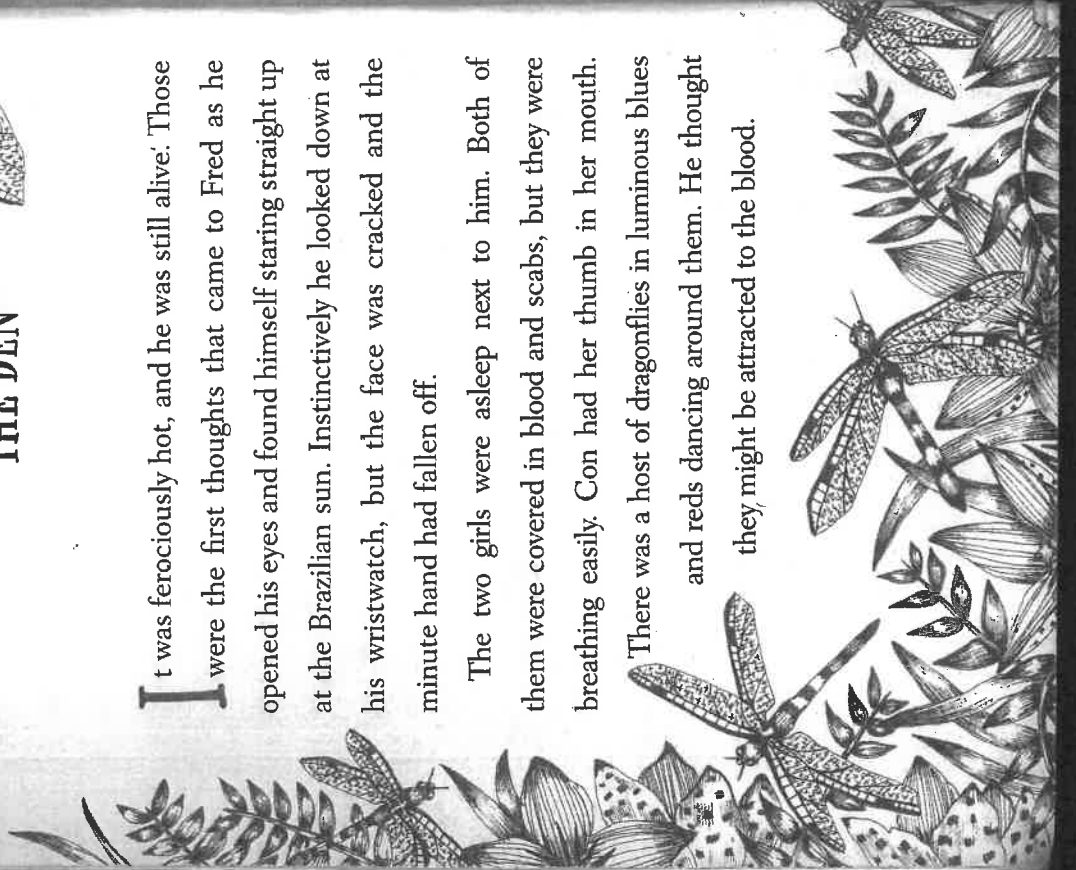
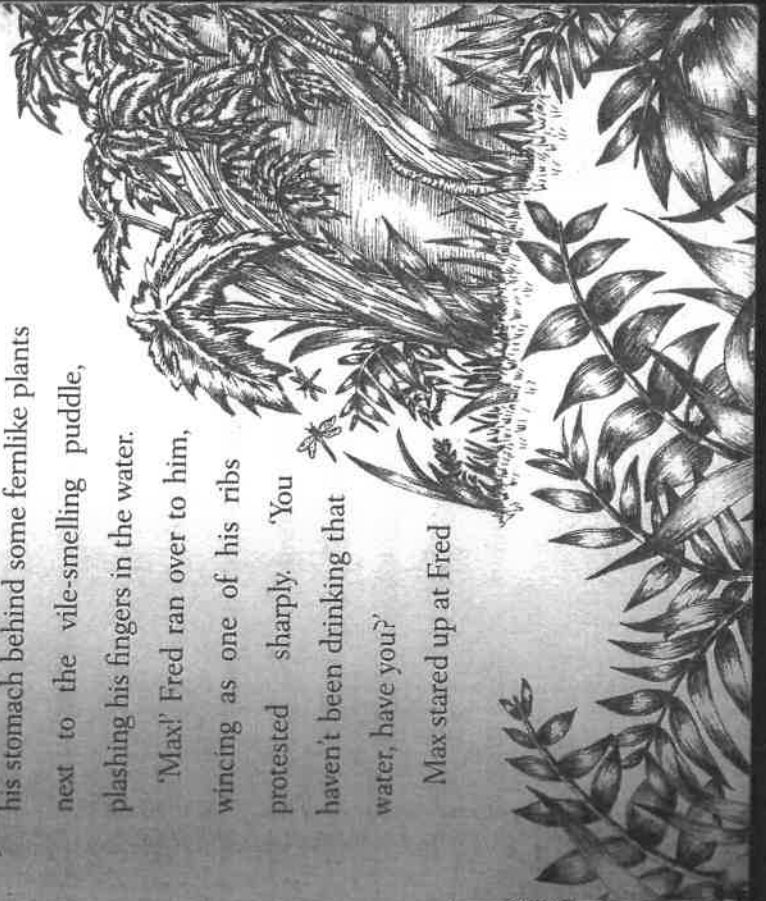
He ran to the edge of the trees. There was no trace of the boy.

'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 mass 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.'

Lila 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.

