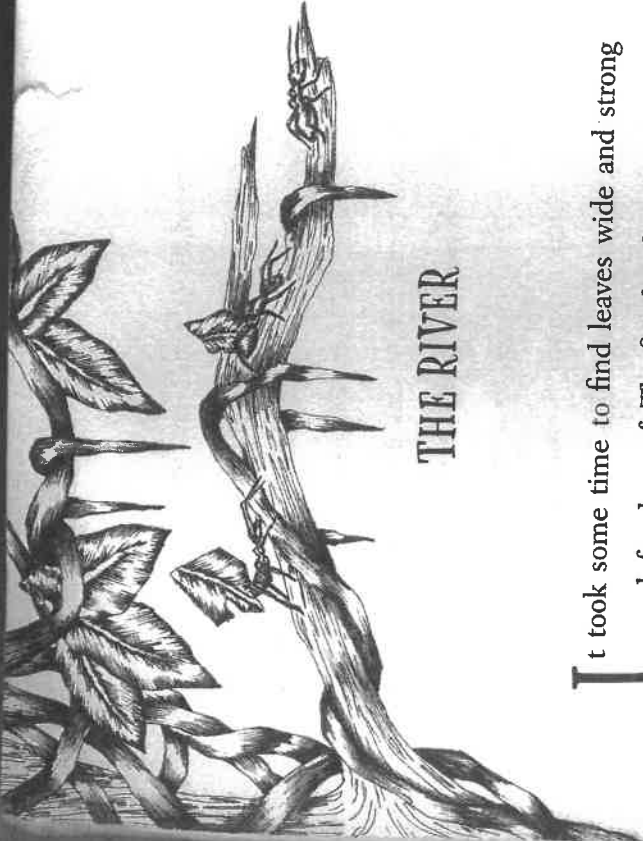




THE RIVER

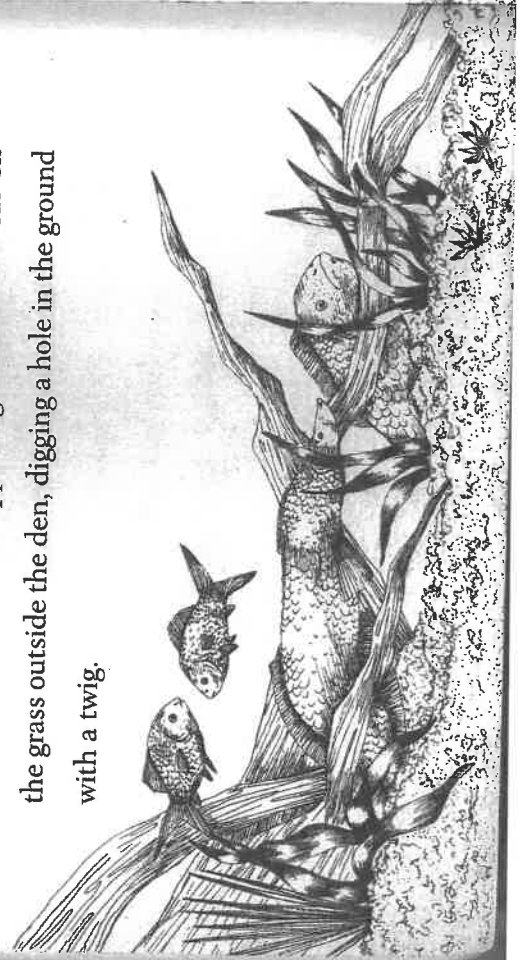
It took some time to find leaves wide and strong enough for the roof. The first batch Fred tried tore in his hands; the second turned out to have something in them that made his skin turn red and itchy; but the third tree had fleshy leaves as long as his arm. He and Lila tore them into strips and then 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 unrebelling 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.

'Unfortunately,' 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.