



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.

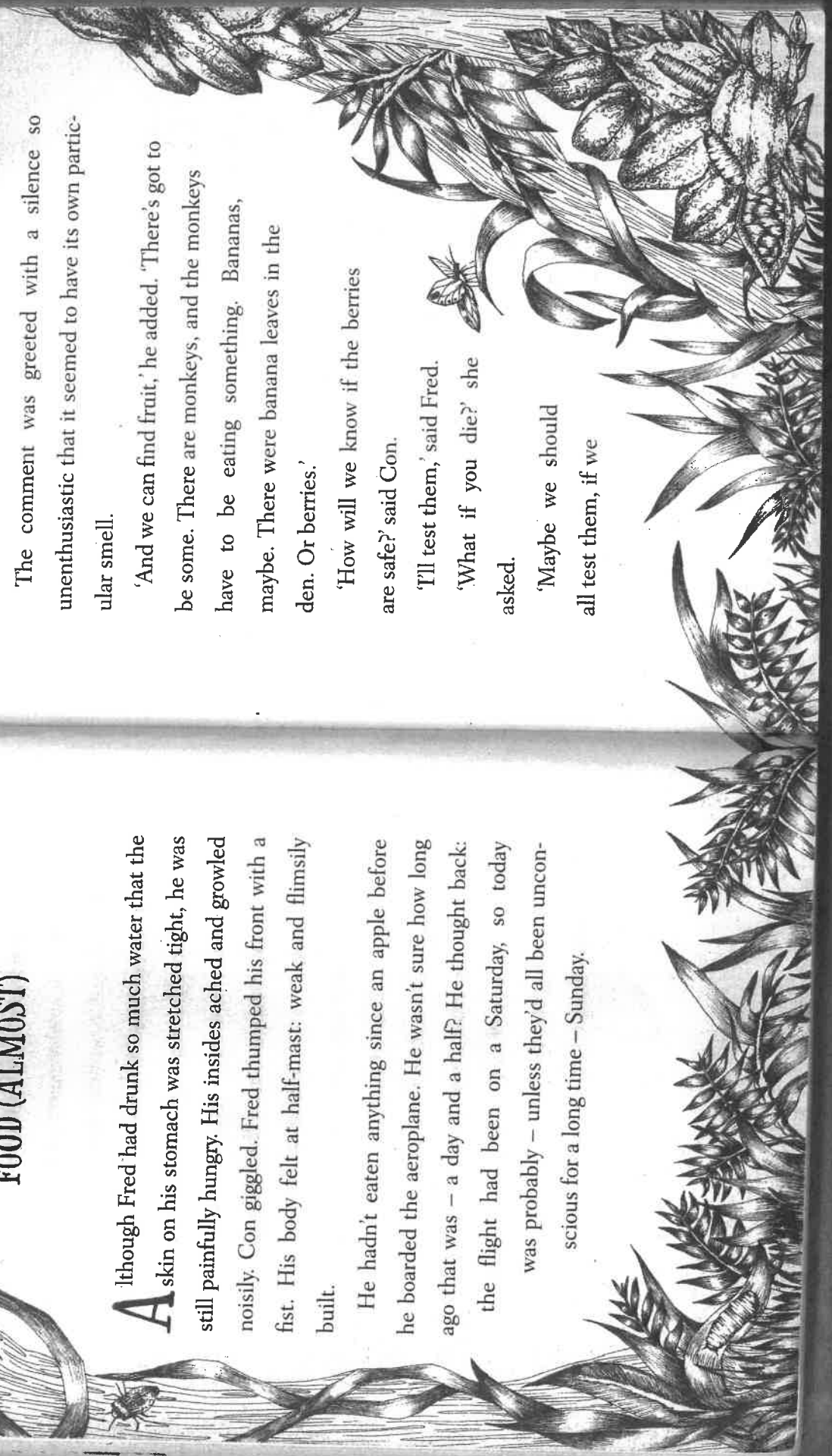
'And we can find fruit,' he added. 'There's got to be some. There are monkeys, and the monkeys have to be eating something. Bananas, maybe. There were banana leaves in the den. Or berries.'

'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*.'