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.

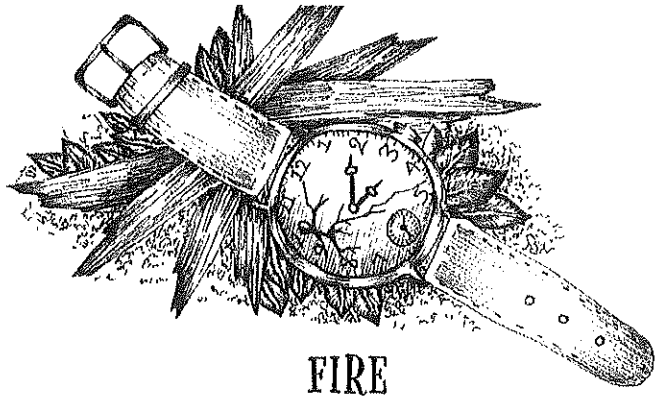
'But Mama's not here!' She blinked hard and wiped her nose on her wrist.

'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 scrabbled 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.