



That night, Fred, Lila and Con formed a conclave. They sat in a tight circle around the fire, their heads close together, planning in whispers. Max lay on his back on the stones and decorated himself with the small clover-like plants growing at his feet. Baca sat on Lila's lap, watching with careful eyes.

'I think we should cook something for him,' said Lila, gesturing with her

chin towards the statues and the vines.

'Then he might help us again.'

'Yes!' said Con. 'Men love food.'

'No! I don't want him to take my ears!' said Max.

'He was joking, Max,' said Lila.

'We hope,' muttered Con, but for once she said it under her breath.

'That sounds great – but we can't really cook,' said Fred.

'You don't get to have an opinion,' said Con haughtily. 'If weren't for you, we wouldn't have to worry about him. Anyway, "good cooking is simply paying attention and taking your time." She spoke as if reciting.

'I like that! Who told you that?' asked Lila.

'My gym teacher.'

'Are gym teachers famous for being good cooks?' asked Fred. He scratched a mosquito bite, and winced as it began to bleed.



TWICE-FRIED OISEAU SPECTACLE

'No. She was a terrible gym teacher too. She made us walk around the gym pretending to be riding a horse. She said it would be good for our self-confidence.'

'Was it?'

'What do you think?'

Lila grinned. 'We still have those berries,' she said.

'We could roast them for him. With some of the leftover bird.'

They looked at the bird. It had dried out a little in the sun. 'It smells very, very leftover,' said Con.

'At home,' said Lila, 'we have refried beans from the day before. Mama makes them with spices. It's delicious.'

Her smile faded a little at the word *mama*. Con looked for a long second at Lila, then briskly got to her feet. 'I'll find a stone we can use as a frying pan,' she said.

'We could call it, twice-fried bird spectacular,' said Lila.

'Twice-fried *oiseau spectacle*,' said Con. 'That's French. Posh food is always in French.'

A sudden sound made them stop talking. From the far side of the square, in among the vines, came a roaring. It sounded like a bear, or a tiger, or an engine, or a human in pain.

Lila reached for Baca on her shoulder. 'Is that ... him?'

The sound stopped as suddenly as it had begun. 'Maybe ... he goes there to scream? To roar? Maybe that's what he's doing?' asked Con. 'I'd quite like a room I could scream in.'

They sat in silence for many minutes, but the noise didn't come again. They returned to the food. The vulture approached. He sat on Max's shoe and watched balefully as they cooked, apparently resenting that they hadn't offered him any.

'I didn't know vultures could look so much like aunts,' said Con.

When the explorer finally reappeared, though, he seemed to have forgotten they were there. He looked briefly startled, then nodded at them, as if to

commuters sharing a train, and was turning away without a word when Max ran after him, weaving in and out of the young shoots growing up between the stones of the city floor.

'Come back!' said Max. It was an order, not a request. 'We cooked you food!'

The explorer looked surprised. 'What? Oh, that's very generous, but I won't, thank you.'

'You have to! We made it specially.'

The explorer crouched down in front of Max. 'I applaud your decision to move commandingly through the world, but you have vulture poo in your hair, which dents your gravitas.'

'Please?' said Lila. She had moved silently across the square, approaching him as you would a wild animal. Baca looked out through Lila's hair. 'Please just try it?'

She held out a leaf, on which was laid some of the bird and some roasted berries. They'd tried to make it look as much like a restaurant plate as possible. Due to an accident involving the vulture and Max's elbow the meat was more covered in ash than any of them

had planned, but, Fred thought, you could still make out what it was supposed to be.

'It's twice-fried wazoo,' said Max. 'It's special.'

'Well. Thank you,' said the explorer. He took a bite. Then he gave an exclamation and spat it into a bush. 'Good heavens! That tastes like being punched in a graveyard.'

'Oh! Oh. Sorry,' said Lila, her voice very small. 'We wanted to do something that you'd like, so we —'

'Please don't cut off our ears,' said Max.

'No — I apologise. It was a kind thought.' The explorer touched the ring on his little finger. 'I had rather forgotten how kind children can be.' Then he shook his head so hard that his shock of hair flicked sweat on to the stones. He turned, giving a half-bow. 'You'll forgive me — I must light a fire before dark.'

He paced to the far side of the square, close to his hammock, and knelt among the branches. It took him less than a minute to get the flames sparking from the wood; he moved so fast and with so much assurance that it was impossible to follow his hands.

He took a fish from his pocket and set it on a three-cornered spit. The vulture kept close to his ankles.

He sank down and squatted by the fire. Fred watched from a corner of his eye, while the others grimly attempted to chew the twice-burnt bird. The explorer sat, his elbows on his knees, staring at nothing.

'Do you think he's all right?' Fred whispered. 'He looks - I don't know - sad.'

Con looked over. 'He kills snakes with rocks. That sort of person doesn't get sad.'

As they spoke the explorer rose and crossed to a pile of coconuts at the foot of a tree. Each had been sliced open at the top and then had the lid replaced. The explorer drank deeply from one, threw away the shell and picked up another. After his third, he turned suddenly to the children.

'Do you drink?' he called across the square.

'It depends on what sort of drinking,' called back Con.

'Cachaça, my own version. Try some.'

They crossed the square warily, keeping a close eye

on the vulture. Lila slipped Baca down the front of her sweater and laid a protective hand on his head, and the other on Max's shoulder.

They hovered, the four of them, on the edge of the light cast by the fire. Fred bent his knees to sit, but none of the others did, so he tried to make it look as if he were testing his joints.

'Sit down, boy!' said the explorer. 'All of you. Do you not know what God gave you arses for? Here - drink this.'

'What is it?' said Fred.

'Sugar cañe. Coconut milk. And some other things. Herbs.'

'What kind of herbs?' asked Lila.

'Have you ever drunk anything that tastes like it will either kill you or make you immortal? That's this.'

Fred took a mouthful, then doubled over, coughing. It tasted of nothing, really, only hot and burning. It made his nose and eyes stream.

'More?' said the explorer.

'No, thank you. It tastes too much like being electrocuted.'

The explorer laughed. The laugh had thorns in it. 'You'll like it better when you're older.'

Con sniffed the liquid. 'Is it alcohol?'

The explorer shrugged. 'Technically, yes, but not the way you're thinking. It doesn't taste like wine, or have the same effect.'

Con shook her head. Lila, to Fred's surprise, reached for the coconut. 'Just so I know. If I want to be a scientist, I need to experiment.'

She drank. Baca tried to drink too, and had to have his upper body fished out of the coconut. Lila shook her head vehemently. 'It tastes like puking, the wrong way round.'

The explorer grunted. 'Ungrateful baggage.'

He took the fish from the spike, laid it on a stone, sliced it down the middle, and cut out four chunks from its flesh.

'Eat this. Better than that horrendous nightmare of a bird you concocted.'

The fish was hot and rich; it was unexpectedly meaty in flavour, smoky and bold. Fred ate his in two bites, and looked hopefully at what was left.

'Piranha,' said the explorer. 'The older they are when you catch them, the more they taste like chicken.'

The explorer seemed surprisingly disposed to talk. He made a sweeping gesture with his hand, hit the vulture in the chest, and sloshed some of the coconut's liquid over the bird.

'Tell me – what do you think of this?'

'The vulture?' said Con doubtfully. Her voice took on the tone that voices take when asked to comment on a newborn baby, when that baby is self-evidently horrifyingly ugly. 'It's ... nice. It smells very ... original.'

'Of the city! Of the jungle! They call it the green hell. Did you know that?'

Fred stared at the vast expanse of stone, at the green ceiling high, high overhead.

'They call the jungle the green hell because it is lacking in grand pianos. Men – and when I say men,

I mean idiots – used to come out here with pianos on the backs of elephants. And they used to be angry when their teacups broke in the storms.’

He grunted. ‘But if you’re willing to have a roughish, wildish kind of life – I find it closer to heaven than to hell.’

The explorer began to drink from another coconut shell. He sighed, and his eyes became misty. ‘There’s a lot written about love at first sight. And what is love at first sight but recognition? It’s instant knowledge: that this is a person who will make your heart larger – a lover, a child. The same applies to places. It’s why I wanted to seek them out. It’s why they need protecting.’

He stared, his eyelids a little uneven, at Fred. Fred stared at the fire, avoiding his gaze. There was a quality in this place that worked like flint on his insides: it was the light, and the vastness of it, and the sun, and the green. He could see why other people might feel it was too green, too loud, too endless, too *much*; but for him, it felt like a trumpet call to a part of him he had not known existed.

Fred’s face must have shown something of what he was thinking. The explorer hammered his coconut on the ground. ‘I can tell! I can see that you are falling in love with this place! How do you not yet see why it must be a secret? How do you not see how mad it would be to gamble with such beauty?’

Fred hesitated. He could not keep it secret; it was impossible. The world deserved to know about this much beauty. The headmaster would call an assembly and call him a hero. But he’d never seen anyone as utterly sure of anything as the man in front of him.

‘You don’t understand,’ said the explorer under his breath. ‘Speech is dangerous. Some of the most interesting things I have said I realised later I did not have a right to.’

Then, abruptly, he changed tack. He became brisk. ‘You said you followed my map. Does that mean you encountered the bees?’

‘Yes,’ said Lila. ‘We borrowed some of their honey.’ She explained how Max had seen the monkeys and the ants.

The explorer nodded. 'I used to do the same. Bees make good allies. I used to get the tobacco pouches made specially, by a man in the Burlington Arcade. I spent a lot of time in those parts of the jungle, but it doesn't do to be without tobacco for too long, and you can't carry too much on your person without attracting more attention from jaguars than is practical. I have tobacco pouches stationed across that whole sweep of the river. By the way, did you meet my dolphins?'

'Yes!' said Fred. 'We didn't know they were yours.'

The explorer hiccupped. 'They're good creatures, dolphins,' he said, his voice tripping over itself. 'I used to feed them sardines. I worry it was a mistake, though. They trust too easily. It's a mistake, to trust too easily.'

'And then there was the fire,' said Lila. 'A bad one. And so we came here. We thought it was the least-mad risk.'

'That's exactly it!' The explorer was becoming emphatic; he emphasised some of the cachaça over Fred's knees.

Fred tried not to laugh.

'Take risks!' said the explorer. 'That's the thing to do. Get to know what fear feels like. Get to know how to manoeuvre around it. But!' He paused to drink again.

'But?' asked Lila.

'But make sure the risks you take aren't taken to impress someone else.'

Fred frowned. It sounded like the kind of thing the masters said at school.

'That's the way people end up with jaguars chewing at their collarbones, and nobody to love them for it.' He wiped his eyes and stared at them.

'Risks, jaguars,' said Con. 'Noted.'

'I took a risk once. I loved someone. Two people. A woman. And we had a child. Did you know?'

'We didn't know, no,' said Lila gently. She exchanged a glance with Fred.

'I lost that gamble. I lost them.' He set down the coconut, and closed his eyes in a long, exhausted blink. 'But I am glad to have made the wager.'

'Did you ...' began Lila.

'I loved like I was unhinged,' he said. His voice was

rough. 'I came at love like a child making "up" arms. I worked out how to blink her name in Morse code.' He gave a drunken grunt of laughter. 'I was very young,' he said. 'People do not tell you that love is so terrifying. It is less like rainbows and butterflies and more like jumping on to the back of a moving dragon.'

Fred hesitated, wordless, but wanting to say something that would be large enough to meet the taut pain in the man's face.

Before he could say anything, the explorer drank again, finishing the coconut in two immense gulps. 'Do you all do nothing but stare? I thought children gambolled. And frolicked. Do some goliccking! Framble!'

Fred looked at the others. He had no idea how to gambol. He believed it involved running in circles with your arms in the air and lifting your knees as high as they would go, which was not, he thought, something that seemed sensible in the circumstances.

'I don't think we're really the frolicking sort,' said Fred.

'Disappointing,' said the explorer.

'Are you ... drunk?' asked Con.

'Of course not.' He belched, reproachfully. 'I'm just ... just ... perhaps the world itself is drunk. The jungle is a little more blurred than usual.'

'I think that stuff must be strong,' said Fred.

'That is impolite. I resent the implication.'

'Sorry.'

'Good,' the explorer slurred. 'I like people best when they're silent or sorry.'

'Do you need -' began Lila, but he closed his eyes and turned away from them.

'My head aches. I can't look you in the voice. I shall sleep now.' He lay down on the stone ground and closed his eyes. A noise like a motor car began to come from somewhere deep within his chest. Moving on the tips of their toes, the children returned to their own fire.

As the dark spread over the city a swarm of mosquitos appeared. One of them got caught inside Fred's nose and bit his nostril.

'Is there a way to get rid of the mosquitos?' said Con.

'I think smoking keeps them away,' said Lila. 'Some of the men my parents work with do it.'

'I heard that smoking makes you less hungry,' said Con.

'We could try,' said Fred, scratching his nose.

He rolled up leaves, and Lila filled them with shredded grass and lichen, and Con lit them.

'Is this like real smoking?' gasped Lila.

Hot acrid smoke billowed into Fred's eyes. 'I've never tried. Does smoking taste a bit like a garden died in your face?' he said.

'I think so,' said Con. 'From the smell.'

'Then I suppose, yes,' said Fred. He discreetly put his cigarette out inside a big, empty snail shell. It didn't seem worth the feeling that his tongue was about to drop out of his mouth.

Fred looked at the two girls, who were both spitting disgustedly into the fire. He'd never really known any girls his own age, but both Lila and Con could spit as far as any boy at school. Their spit had commitment, and impact. He saw them grin at each other in the firelight.

It was a peculiar night, that night. Fred's thoughts kept returning to the man lying asleep by the fire at the other side of the ruined city square, and to his lost son and wife. The explorer was so alone; living with only the green and the birds and the endless jungle. But, Fred thought, it wasn't as if he was so much less alone himself. The thought made him shiver.

He felt something touch his ankle. He jerked away, thinking of tarantulas, but it was a hand - Con's hand, gripping his ankle in her sleep. He hesitated. Then he reached down and pressed his thumb on hers. He hoped the touch said, 'We'll be all right. It will all be right.' It was hard to be specific with thumbs.

But it must have worked a little, because she grew still, and her breathing became heavy and regular. Lila muttered in her sleep. Baca lay entangled in her long dark hair. Fred looked up at the vine roof above him, scanning it for snakes, and then, his flint tight in his palm, he allowed himself to close his eyes.