

FISHING IN THE DARK

The explorer hadn't moved by the time the sun rose. He lay, snoring, where they'd left him, a beetle perched on his chin.

Max woke up first, and kicked Fred in the crotch as he scrambled to his feet. Max scratched himself all over and then went running across the stone square, shook the explorer's shoulder and sat down on top of him.

The explorer startled awake. Fred flinched, remembering what the man had said about his startle reflex, but he merely looked mildly, politely appalled.

'Can I eat this?' Max asked. He thrust a handful of grass into the explorer's face.

The explorer shifted Max gently on to the floor, sat up and began to blow on the fire. 'No, you can't,' he said.

'You didn't even look!'

'The chances that the answer is yes are so slim.' He looked up. 'That's poisonous. No.'

'Definitely poisonous or only maybe?'

'Definitely.'

'Oh. And this?' He held up the explorer's chin-beetle, which had fallen on the ground.

'You could eat that,' said the explorer. He gently took the beetle from him. 'But the Max of two hours from now would not thank you. As a rule of thumb, it's best not to eat things that are still moving.'

'But I'm hungry. It's only moving a tiny bit.'

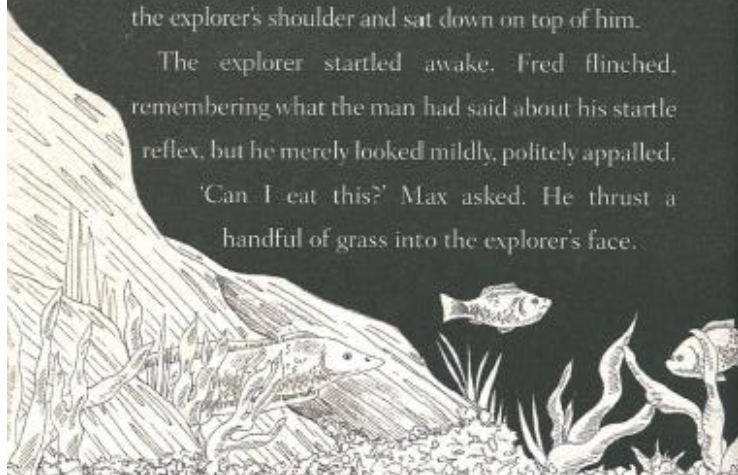
'I would still emphatically discourage it.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means no.'

'Oh.'

Max lay down on his back. He didn't cry, but his face looked blank, and older than it should be.



Quietly, under his breath, he began to sing to himself in Portuguese.

Fred scraped some dew from the leaves above him and used it to clean his face. He looked over at Max – properly looked – for the first time in days. The boy was growing thin, and his cheekbones stuck out under his eyes. Lila had worked hard to make him look cared for and clean, but he had a snail trail of snot across his face and green dust in his eyebrows.

The explorer was also looking down at Max. His face was shaping itself into peculiar expressions; his eyes were bright and his mouth tight.

Abruptly, he rose to his feet. His voice was brisk – artificially, unconvincingly brisk.

'What are you all sitting about for? Time is precious! Shouldn't you be preparing for your journey?'

'But how, exactly? We don't know what to do!' said Con. Her voice was almost a whine. Lila shot her a look.

The explorer's expression was very dry. 'If you have a preference for surviving, you'll need to know how to

spear fish. There have been expeditions when the men and I survived on fish for half a year.'

Max's face lit up. 'Fish? Right now?'

'Tonight. There's a small lake not far from here.'

'But I'm hungry now!' said Max.

'It needs to be dark. You can spend the day making spears.'

'I tried that,' said Fred. He slapped away a mosquito. 'But the vines I used to tie the flints on kept breaking off.'

'Vines?' The man looked shocked. 'You don't use vines to secure a spear! That would be like using packing tape to build a steam train. Idiot boy! You use intestines. Where are the guts from your bird?'

Con pointed to the jungle, where they'd buried the intestines and other rejected bits at a safe distance.

'Dig them up, and heat them over the fire, and use them as string.' He made a winding gesture, as if tying a knot. 'And don't bother me until then.'

He turned abruptly – they were getting used to it now – and strode away, towards the far end of the

courtyard, towards the tangle of vines that cut off the corner of the square from sight.

They undug the intestines. They were not a pretty sight, and being buried hadn't improved them. Con washed them in a half-coconut and Lila and Fred began laying them out on the stones, trying not to look too hard at the semi-translucent tubes.

Max tugged at Lila's ankle. 'Lila! Did you hear that?' 'What?'

The air was silent, bar the constant whirl of the insects in the trees above them. Then Fred jerked his head round: it was that same roar he'd heard before, choking through the air.

'It's coming from there – from behind the vines,' he said. 'I'm going to go and see.'

'No!' said Con. 'He said, "don't bother me" – and I happen to think if a person wears claws for cufflinks, you should do what he says.'

'But what if he's being eaten?' said Fred. 'Surely then it doesn't count?'

Lila shook her head. 'I agree with Con.'

Con looked round in surprise. 'Really?'

'Whatever it is, he doesn't want us to know, and we can't afford to make him any more angry.' Lila turned with unexpected firmness towards the fire. 'Let's make those spears.'

Reluctantly, Fred sat down. The morning was a sticky one, and nobody smelt better by the end of it. The intestines weren't easy to empty, and the process of heating them over the fire to harden them felt unexpectedly medieval.

'This is not how I pictured fishing,' said Con. 'I thought it was all old men sitting around on riverbanks telling people to be quiet. Like river-librarians.'

Fred opened his mouth to reply, but the guts dripped and spat hot fat at his teeth, so he shut it again.

He wondered if his fingers would ever lose the faint scent of dead bird. But by the time the sun began to set he had a long-handled spear, with a flint glinting in the light. Lila's spear was strong and straight, but the wrapping around the flint had gone awry where Baca had tried to get involved in the

process and covered himself in grease. Con's spear was the neatest. Her hands were competent and controlled, even with bird gut.

Fred went in search of water to wash the grease off his arms. Some of the stones had hollows that collected enough rainwater to wash a small patch; he moved from stone to stone across the citadel, gradually shedding the worst of the burnt-grease smell. As he came back he heard voices.

The explorer was kneeling on the ground, bent over his pith helmet. Lila crouched next to him.

'You have to be gentle with his knees and elbow joints.' The explorer was speaking, his voice low. 'They're still very fragile at this age.'

Lila nodded. 'I know.' She reached into the pith helmet. 'I can feel it, when he moves; they're so light, like seagull bones.'

'Make sure you check under the armpits for parasites. There.'

Baca's head reared up over the edge of the pith helmet and he let out a wail of protest.

The explorer gave something approaching a smile. 'He's being unnecessarily dramatic; the water's good for him. Now, hold him by his forearms.'

'Like this?' Lila lifted Baca from his bath, dripping, his legs dangling.

'Yes. Check his stomach for ticks.'

Lila checked, brushing her fingers over the sloth's belly, her eyes squinting with care. 'There's nothing.' Baca's fur was plastered against his skull, and his eyes were wide with the affront of it; he gave a squawk as he hung from Lila's hands.

'Now you need to dry him.'

Swiftly, Lila unplaited her hair. It fell in an uneven wave to her waist. She lifted the sloth into it, and rubbed him gently. Baca snuffled among the deep brown curls. Fred saw Con, inside the stone room, give the ghost of a smile. Max was half-asleep, his head on Con's lap.

The explorer raised his eyebrows. The corners of his mouth lifted half an inch. 'I doubt that particular strategy would be suggested in veterinary college. But, good.'

The sun was dipping over the top of the statue of the panther. The explorer looked up and saw Fred watching. He sprang to his feet, as if embarrassed to be caught mid-kindness, his bad leg catching on his good one, suddenly brisk again.

'Right! Are you ready to go? You each need to take some fire with you – the fish eyes shine red in the light. Find slow-burning wood: something dense, or it'll burn down too quickly.'

They set off in single file through the dark trees, each carrying a burning branch. Baca rode, still slightly damp, inside Lila's shirt.

The explorer moved without a single rustle; the rest stumbled behind him, stubbing their toes on unseen roots. A branch whipped in Fred's face and the leaves blackened in the flame of his torch, but the wood was too green to catch fire.

'Don't burn down the jungle, please,' said the explorer, without turning round.

Fred found to his surprise that the dark no longer seemed threatening. It still made his skin tingle, but

the pitch-black shadows under the trees no longer bit at his stomach in the same way. The change had been so slow he hadn't felt it come.

'There are ant mounds everywhere here,' said the explorer. 'Nothing too bad – the only dangerous ants are the bullet ants – but you don't want to disturb them if you can help it. I was attacked by a colony once, when I was asleep. It looked like my whole body was covered in warts.'

'Oh,' said Lila. 'Wow.'

'Quite. Not good for the morale.'

They went in a new direction, north-west, down a steep incline. Every time their branches burned down to their hands, they pulled new ones from the trees and lit them. Twice, Fred lost his footing and slid until he came up against a tree. Max tripped, ate a mouthful of mud, and they had to pause until his screaming died down enough for him to walk on. Lila tried to comfort him. The explorer turned away and studied a dung beetle with angry intensity.

The lake, when they came upon it, was larger than Fred had expected. The trees that grew all around it had spread their roots under the water. The explorer took off his shoes and waded in, knee-deep.

'Come on, quickly,' he said. 'What are you waiting for?'

Fred followed him into the water, feeling it soak his shorts and praying there was nothing in it with teeth. The lake was pure black, except where his burning torch cast a yellow light down through the water to the mud and stones of the lakebed.

In the glow of the flames, pairs of red lights flitted and flashed under the surface of the water. Max laughed, delighted.

'The bigger the eyes,' said the explorer, 'the bigger the fish. Move slowly towards them. Hold your torch close to the surface. You lower your spear as slowly as you can into the water, and then, at the last moment, you jab. Jab fast. Don't jab your own feet. Now split up.'

Lila and Con exchanged sceptical glances. They moved off across the lake, but they didn't split up. Their

breath was audible. It was hard to tell in the dark, but Fred thought they might have been holding hands.

Max reached out and took Fred's hand. His palm was warm, and sticky.

'Let's fish!' Max said.

Fred fumbled, trying to arrange his spear properly while keeping the flame away from his face. 'If I give you the torch to hold,' he said to Max, 'will you try not to burn my hair off with it?'

Max took the burning branch. 'Maybe,' he said.

The spearing was harder than Fred had expected. The spear was thin and supple in his hand, but every time he brought it down over a fish, the fish had gone.

A swarm of mosquitos passed over them – Max sneezed, and waved his burning branch over-emphatically.

'Max! I think I'd better take the branch.'

'No!' cried Max. 'No, no, no! It's mine! I'll be careful!'

A spear flew suddenly past them, inches from Fred's chest, and landed in the mud of the lake, its tip vibrating out of the water.

Fred jumped. Max gave a yell, rocked backwards, grabbed at Fred's knees, and the two of them toppled backwards into the shallows. The branch extinguished. Fred sat up, spitting water, and looked around for Max.

The explorer strode past, picked Max up with one hand, flipped him upright and set him down on his feet.

'Are you all right?' Fred asked Max.

'I'm wet!' he wailed. 'I don't want to be wet.'

'But otherwise?'

Max's face rippled as he debated whether or not to cry. He hesitated, then: 'My underpants are soggy. But I'm all right.'

The explorer picked the spear out of the mud from where he'd thrown it. 'Good boy,' he said to Max. On the end of the spear was a fish as big as a man's thigh.

'Breakfast,' said the explorer. 'Come here, Fred, and learn how it works. Max, stay on the shore and guard the fish. Here, I'll give you a torch.' The explorer strode through the water to the nearest tree, pulled

down a branch, lit it with his own and handed it to Max. 'Beautiful, no?'

'Should Max be left with fire?' asked Fred. 'He tends to eat things.'

The explorer turned to Max. 'Boy, do not eat the fire, or any other part of the world surrounding you, do you understand?'

'Yes,' said Max. He was sniffing the fish.

'You see? He understands,' said the explorer. 'Come on.'

Fred wrung the water out of his shirt, and waded into the lake to stand near the explorer. The man seemed to be in a good mood. Fred risked a question.

'When you go out into the trees —'

'Yes?' The explorer waded further in, the water lapping up to his thighs. Fred followed. The black water closed over his waist.

'— what are you doing there? You're gone all day, but you don't come back with food. Are you hunting?'

For a long time the explorer didn't answer. Instead,

he stared down into the lake. He was so still that Fred wasn't sure if he was breathing.

'There. See?' He pointed down at the murky water and the submerged roots.

Fred could see nothing, only floating leaves, and the moon.

The explorer's arm moved so fast Fred didn't see it start or stop, but suddenly there was a long thin fish flapping on the end of the spear.

'*Acestrorhynchus*,' he said. 'Needle jaw. Tastes like pike. Lots of bones, but delicious.'

He took a length of twine from his pocket; it had a thin flint, sharp as a needle, tied to the end. He threaded the fish on to the twine.

'You asked what I do during the days,' he said. 'I'm fixing the thing I broke.' Then he pivoted on his heel, and swept the subject away with a gesture. 'Look, see how I grip it? Get the spear less than a thumb's height above the fish before you stab down.'

Fred stood hunched over the water. Red eyes glinted in the dark. He stabbed many rocks, some

leaves and his own ankle. Then, astonishingly, he felt the tip hit a fish. The first stab hit only the tail fin, but the fish was slowed and Fred stabbed again, frantically, until he felt the flint meet flesh.

'I think I caught something!' He held his spear up to the light. On the end something wriggled; it wasn't large, but it was indisputably a fish.

'Wolf fish. They call it a *traíra* in these parts. Put it in your pocket,' said the explorer.

Fred checked to see if he was serious; but he didn't seem to be in a particularly jocular mood, so Fred put the fish in the pocket of his shorts. Its eyes stared up at him like a gym mistress.

He waited for a moment, rinsing the fish blood off his hands, before he dared try again. 'What are you fixing?'

The explorer waded deeper into the lake, up to his waist. He seemed to find it easier to speak here, in the dark. 'I was on a reconnaissance mission; I was flying, looking for any sign of life below. I was circling the city, trying to work out whether there was anything to see,

and my wretched engine failed. I crashed through the canopy. There was a fire, and it killed a lot of the foliage.'

'What happened to the plane? Could you salvage it?'

The man's eyes flicked down to the water, and he stirred his spear in the weeds.

Fred tried again. 'Is that what made the hole in the trees?'

'In the canopy, yes. But the canopy was there for a reason. Whoever built this city had planted the trees so that their leaves interlock; you can't see the city from above. You could stand on the mountaintop and look down and all you would see is uninterrupted green.'

'How long ago was it made?'

'I don't know. With a city so entwined with the jungle around it, it's hard to be certain about a date. A hundred years, probably several hundred more. It will take at least fifty to a hundred years for those trees to grow again. I've cut down the burnt trees where I can, and tried to replant in the same place.'

'I saw! There are new shoots down the middle of the square.'

'Precisely – but as you can imagine, cutting down a tree without a saw is not a relaxing pastime. It has taken time. Until the trees grow, I need to fix the canopy. I'm building a dustsheet, of sorts – of palm leaves and vines to cover the gaps I made. An invisibility cloak.'

'Is that what you do, when you leave during the day?'

'Exactly. It's slowish work.' He stabbed, brought up a fish and threaded it on the twine. The firelight cast the cuts and scars on his hands into sharp relief. 'I'm erecting new portions every month or so. I've fallen out of the trees more often than is ideal. But it will be a complete green roof, a living protection for the ruins.'

'But a protection from what?'

'From people surveying the land from the air,' he said shortly. 'From people looking for El Dorado. From people looking to pack places like this into parcels of stone and sell them to curious ladies and gentlemen in Chelsea for the price of a bus driver's yearly wages. From people exactly like me.'