

THE GREEN SKY

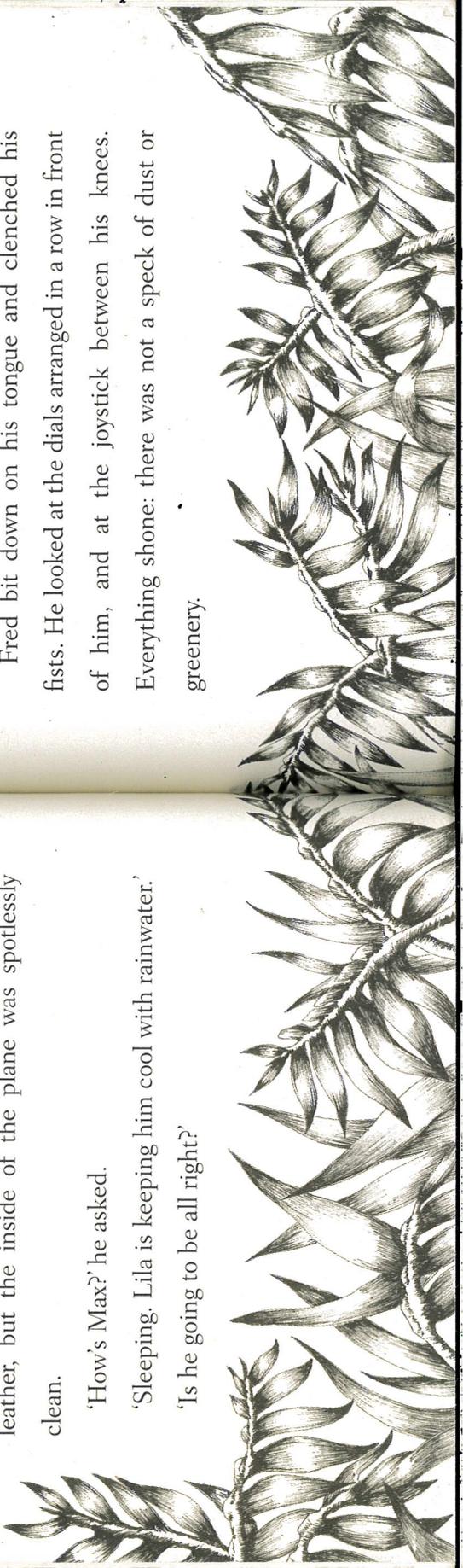
An hour later, Fred helped the explorer cut and pull down the curtain of vines, enough to roll the plane out of the stone shed and on to the boulevard of the ancient city.

Fred climbed back into the front seat of the aeroplane and looked through the windshield. Seat padding was sprouting up from holes in the black leather, but the inside of the plane was spotlessly clean.

'How's Max?' he asked.

'Sleeping. Lila is keeping him cool with rainwater.'

'Is he going to be all right?'



The explorer looked serious.

'As long as you can get him to the hospital in Manaus soon, yes. I hope so.'

'And if -' Fred began, and stopped.

'If not, no,' said the explorer shortly. There, was a muscle contorting in his jaw.

It felt entirely wrong to be sitting here, while across the stone boulevard Max struggled to breathe. The explorer must have seen Fred's rigid body, must have seen him shaking, because his voice grew less curt.

'He will live for now,' he said. 'But you must get him to a doctor. So concentrate.'

Fred bit down on his tongue and clenched his fists. He looked at the dials arranged in a row in front of him, and at the joystick between his knees. Everything shone: there was not a speck of dust or greenery.

'I clean the engine every day, to keep the rust off. And I run it every now and then, to check it's alive. Look after the things you love, or else you don't deserve to love anything,' said the explorer, swinging his bad leg in after his good one and settling in the back seat.

'I think we heard the engine!' said Fred. 'Twice. We thought it was an animal: a panther, or a bear. Or a person roaring.'

'Possibly. It could, equally, have been a panther; there are some in these parts.'

'Why did you hide it, though?'

'For many reasons. Among others, this particular plane is readily identifiable. It's well known to belong to the man I once was. For that reason, I must ask you to set fire to it on arrival, if the impact with the ground has not already done so.'

Fred twisted round to stare at him in astonishment. 'Burn it?'

But the explorer was already pointing at the dials. 'These are the things you need to know. Those dials are for speed and altitude; and that spirit level shows

if you're flying straight. You want the bubble in the spirit level to be in the direct centre.'

Fred muttered the words after him, trying to force them into his memory. 'Speed, altitude, spirit level.'

'The pedals bank left and right.'

Fred put his feet on the pedals. They were much smaller than the pedals in his father's Ford. He prodded them experimentally. Two wires running down each side of the inside of the plane shifted as he pressed the pedals.

'The joystick —' the explorer shook the back-seat joystick — 'goes up, down, left and right.'

Fred held the joystick. It was black with a red button on top. It moved loosely under his fingers.

'I have one too, in the back seat, so I can take control at any time. This wrench — like a window winder — controls the throttle, meaning how much power you give yourself. And that's more or less it. Now, you see the button I told you not to press — the black one, on the right?'

It wasn't a button so much as an oblong, like

the lid of a fountain pen sticking out from the dashboard.

'Yes.'

'Press it.'

Fred pressed it. His hands were shaking. Nothing happened.

'Again,' said the explorer.

Fred pressed harder.

The engine gave a moan, a cough, and then roared into action. The plane shook. Fred could feel it vibrating. It added to the wild prickling of his skin.

'Do you hear that? That's the sound of life becoming!' said the explorer. His eyes were glinting a little maniacally.

Fred whispered under his breath, 'Oh help.'

'Now - taking off is the easy part. You just point the plane in the direction you need to go - up through the hole in the canopy - open the throttle, pull back on the joystick, and fly.'

Fred's breath had given up entirely now. 'What about the rest of it?' He gestured at the dials.

'I'll tell you when you're up there. We'll have to shout: if there's a wind it'll be loud, and the intercom was one of the few things I couldn't fix. Luckily, we have no need of a radio control tower. Now - go.'

Fred's entire body was metal and stone. He had to force his feet to move, pressing the left pedal to point the plane down the boulevard runway.

'Now open the throttle,' shouted the explorer over the scream of the engine.

'How?' Fred roared.

'Wind the winder! At your left side!'

The plane gathered speed, the wheels jolting over the slabs of ancient stone.

'Pull back! Pull back!'

Fred pulled back on the joystick with all his strength. He felt the nose lift, the front wheels leave the ground, his stomach jerk, and suddenly they were hurtling straight for the top of the canopy. The sky above him was criss-crossed with green.

Fred let out a yell of fear, but the explorer pulled

back further on his own joystick, and the tail cleared the greenery of the jungle.

'It would be a good idea to open your eyes,' said the explorer. 'It makes piloting easier.'

Fred opened his eyes. They were in the sky.

'How did you know they were closed?'

'Mine were, when I first launched a plane,' said the explorer. The tinge of madness in his voice was still there. 'You're flying.'

Fred looked down. The jungle was an infinite sweep of green: a Turkish carpet for a god. His heart was roaring louder than the wind ripping past his ears.

The explorer leant forward and shouted in his ear.

'Use the stick to turn left. You need to get the feel of the controls.'

Very gingerly, Fred tilted the stick.

'More than that! You can be flying sideways without tipping the plane over. You need to feel you can take risks.'

Fred pulled the joystick hard to the left. The wing

dipped and the plane swooped in the air. His stomach swooped with it.

'Less! Less than that!' yelled the explorer.

A bird flew past them. The plane was heading straight towards it. 'Don't hit any birds!' roared the explorer. 'It's bad for the propeller!'

Fred jerked the joystick and the plane tilted straight up, shuddering in the sudden altitude.

'What now? Shouldn't you be controlling it?' Fred's voice sounded panicky.

'Of course not! Joystick a little forward!' called the explorer.

The plane levelled out.

'Follow the tributary to the river.'

Before Fred had time to breathe they were flying over treetops, above an enormous flock of parrots. And then, quite suddenly, there was nothing between his feet and the Amazon River except air and a millimetre of tin floor.

'Oh God,' muttered Fred. The water below was a blue-purple. He could see the shadow of the

plane skidding along its surface.

The explorer let out a noise that sounded like a growl, a guttural sigh. 'My God, it's beautiful. I'd forgotten.'

The river was staggering to look at. It made every inch of Fred thrum and burn.

'It's very easy to not want to come down,' said the explorer. 'If planes didn't run out of fuel, I would still be up here. It's the closest you will ever come to being inside a fairy tale. Now, if you've got the feel of the controls, you can try flying through that cloud.'

Fred tightened his grip on the joystick. 'I don't think I want to.'

'You should know how. It's important.'

'Can't I just keep doing this for now?'

'No! Up! Up!'

Fred pulled back and steered the nose of the plane into the cloud. The air was bitterly, shockingly cold and wet, and suddenly the world, which had been so intricately detailed, no longer existed.

'Keep going up!' said the explorer. 'Come out of the top of it.'

Fred pulled back on the stick and the nose of the plane rose. They flew up higher and higher into the blue. The joystick vibrated harder under his hand. He clutched it, trying to stop it shaking.

The explorer leant forward. 'Lighter touch, Fred! I know I said you can be firm with it, but you're holding it like a steak knife. Use the tips of your fingers. You gauge the wind by how the joystick shudders.'

Fred eased his grip. He felt the plane hum under his fingers.

'Better!' said the explorer. The wind dropped, and the roar in Fred's ears lessened.

He looked down at the green world beneath. 'Are you sure we shouldn't be getting back to Max?' he asked.

'The boy is safe for now,' said the explorer. His voice was sharp. 'I wouldn't be up here if there was anything I could do for him down there.'

'Sorry,' said Fred.

'He looks so like my boy,' said the explorer suddenly. 'Those eyebrows.'

Fred hesitated. 'You said ... cholera?'

'It happened a lot,' said the explorer. He seemed to be trying to sound matter-of-fact. His voice was tight; Fred could barely hear him over the engine. 'I buried my gold signet ring with him, so that anyone finding his bones would know that he was mine, and that he was loved. I made myself a replacement.'

The plane gave a shudder; Fred couldn't tell if it was the sky or the man behind him. 'If an adult tells you that you will understand everything when you're older, you are being lied to. In fact, some things I think you never understand.'

'I'm sorry,' said Fred. It felt very inadequate.

'Turn left. The government cared very little for its indigenous people at that time. I wanted his death to count. All that down there -' and the explorer dipped the nose of the plane to point downwards - 'I've made stores of plants, roots, fungus. Of things that might

have saved him, perhaps. The jungle can heal, if you know how. I have stores of medicine, of herbs, of information. Did you think I just drank cachaça and polished my teeth?'

'No,' said Fred. 'I never thought that.'

The explorer's voice sank lower. Fred strained to hear him. 'I would gladly have given everything I had - my life, of course, but that's so obvious it's boring: I would have burnt the entire rainforest to the ground, to hold him for a single minute. When you four tumbled down on to the city floor, I would have swapped your lives for his as easily as blinking. I would gladly have watched you die in exchange for holding him once more.'

He jerked the plane sideways, and Fred gripped the seat with his fingernails. 'That is no longer the case. I was afraid that my heart had simply ... run out. But it transpires that the heart has its own petrol station, its own coal, its own soap. It will renew, so use it hugely.' The explorer banked sharply left again, and began circling lower.

'Now, you're going to land the plane. I'll start bringing her in.'

Fred murmured a swear word under his breath, followed by another. Landing sounded like the least fun part of flying – mostly because, if you got it wrong, you were liable to be distributed over the world in small chunks.

'I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that,' said the explorer. 'I'll get you through the canopy hole, and then you will finish the landing. You want to land with your back and front wheels on the ground simultaneously. But if you can't, it has to be front wheels first: the back one is very fragile.'

Fred used his free hand to bring the collar of his shirt up to his mouth. He bit down, hard. It helped keep his hands steady, though it tasted of honey and mud and dead bird.

The explorer guided the plane towards the hole in the canopy. Fred craned round to look at him. His face was concentrated, and glowing. They dipped down through the hole.

'Now, take the controls!' called the explorer.

Fred aimed for the stretch of boulevard, and for the panther. As they hurtled downwards the thought of Max, somewhere on the stone below, overtook Fred, and he jerked the joystick forward and down, away from where the boy might be lying.

The front wheels hit the stone, and bounced off again. The impact threw Fred forward and his head smacked against the dashboard. The explorer took over the controls, wrenching the plane round; it bumped once, turned, sped up, and climbed into the air again, back out through the hole. Fred shook himself, disoriented. They were back in the sky.

'That wasn't bad!' called the explorer.

'What do you mean? It was terrible! I nearly killed us,' shouted Fred.

'Not bad for a first try. The instinct is to push down with the stick, to get the nose on the ground.' The explorer sounded calm. 'But you have to pull backwards, and up. You can practise that with the plane later, on the ground. You need to get the

instinct into your fingers. Now, I'll loop us, and come in again.'

This time, as they approached the stone, Fred pulled the joystick up. He held the stick steady in his hands; the nose was tilted too high to see the ground through the windshield so he leant out of the side, peering ahead, his heart screaming in his chest.

The plane touched down, rose again, bumped, and suddenly it was speeding along the stone floor towards the wall. The wall seemed to be coming up very fast.

'Slow! Slow to a halt! Good!' The explorer reached forward and pulled back the throttle, and took over the controls. 'Good.' The plane stopped.

Fred sat in the front seat, sweat coursing down his face, both hands gripping his knees. It was astonishing, he thought. It was like nothing else on earth. He felt wobbly, uncooked.

'Now - what was that word I heard you say in the sky?' said the explorer sternly.

'Sorry,' said Fred.

'Where did you learn that word anyway?'

'School.'

'Pilots never swear. It makes them look panicked. Kindly remember that, and never let me hear you swearing again, in any circumstances.'

'Sorry,' said Fred again. But it was difficult to feel truly sorry, difficult to feel anything except the roar in his ears and the bite of adrenalin in his blood.

'But, well done. That was a landing you should be proud of.'

Fred shook his head. 'I bounced.'

'But you rescued it. That's the only part that matters.'