



ANOTHER KIND OF EXPLORING

The field they landed in was a large one, used for grazing cattle. It was long and as green as the Amazon. They bumped painfully, rose, and thumped down again. The cows bellowed in terror and scattered. The front wheels shook; the back wheel bucked. There was a moment where it felt as if they would flip wing over tip, but the plane shuddered, roared, and stilled.

The cows never fully recovered.

For the rest of his life, Fred would feel gratitude when he smelt freshly mown grass.

The rest of it was a blur: Fred and Con burnt the

plane by dropping a lighted branch into the engine, Lila standing well back with Max in her arms. They sat in the grass, watching the yellow wings turn red, and waited. Before long the fire attracted a crowd. There were hordes of people shouting in languages Fred didn't know, with Lila attempting to interpret.

Then a journey by horse to a family with a motor launch; doctors; the boat ride; Manaus, A hospital for Max. Telegrams, telephone calls. A man and a woman tiptoeing into a hospital room and gathering Max and Lila so tightly in their arms they gasped for breath.

And then a huge ocean liner with a gold-walled dining room and steak and ice cream and a piano that Lila played, hesitantly, beautifully, seated between her two parents with Baca around her neck, while Con and Max leapt in circles around the mirrored ballroom, scandalising the other passengers.

Fred sat with his knees tucked up on one of the silk-backed chairs and watched them. He tried to



speak sternly to his body, but whenever he thought of his father his fingertips and knees began to quiver with nerves and hope. 'Don't,' he told himself. 'Don't. It's an office day. He has to work. He'll send the housekeeper.'

Each day the air grew cooler every hour; the smell of the sea changed from green to blue. And then, before he had time to set his thoughts into straight lines, to brush the green of the Amazon from his heart, the ship was heading towards the dock.

A row of people stood by the waterside, their fists tight, their eyes vivid with tension and longing. Fred raked them for a familiar face.

The crew lowered the gangplank, and Lila and Max let out a cry. Their grandmother stood at the barrier, her arms stretching out towards the ship. The two of them hurtled down the gangplank and were swept up in her embrace. Their parents followed, laughing. The old woman had the same wicked tilt to her eyebrows as Max.

'Con!' called a voice. Con turned, and her face flashed suddenly alight. Fred turned in time to see her great-aunt, standing upright and gaunt and shaking with emotion as she watched her great-niece descend the gangplank. Fred saw Con's aunt reach out and take hold of her wrist. She held it in both hands, as if to make sure Con was real.

Fred followed at a distance. Nobody called his name.

He stood still in the bustle of the customs shed, looking out towards the ship. He tried to still the roar of disappointment in his chest.

And then suddenly, Fred saw his father, his suit crumpled beyond recognition, his coat-tails flying, running towards him, pushing aside sailors and women in elaborate hats, flying faster than any aeroplane.

'I thought I'd lost you,' he said. He pulled him so close Fred felt his ribs creak next to his heart. 'I could not have borne it. I could not.'

Fred buried his face, hard, in his father's coat.

He thought of the man, alone again, striding out through the jungle. He could almost hear his voice.

Every human on this earth is an explorer.

Sometimes exploring is a word for walking out into the unknown. Sometimes, it's a word for coming home.

