

Fred could see the reflection of the six-seater plane, a spot of black on the vast sweep of Amazon River, as it sped towards Manaus, the city on the water.

Behind Fred sat a girl and her little brother. They had the same slanted eyebrows and the same brown skin, the same long eyelashes. The girl had been shy, hugging her parents until the last moment at the airfield; now she was staring down at the water, singing under her breath. In the next row, on her own, sat a pale girl with blonde hair down to her waist. Her blouse had a high neck-ruffle which she kept tugging down whilst grimacing. She was determinedly not looking out of the window.

The airfield they had just left had been almost deserted, just a strip of dusty tarmac under the ferocious Brazilian sun. Fred's cousin had insisted that he wear his school uniform and cricket jumper, and now, inside the hot, airless cabin, he felt like he was being gently cooked.

The engine gave a whine, and the pilot frowned and tapped the joystick. He was old and soldierly, with brisk nostril hair and a grey waxed moustache which seemed to reject the laws of gravity. He touched the throttle and the plane soared higher into the clouds.

It was almost dark when Fred began to worry. The pilot began to belch, first quietly, then violently and repeatedly. His hand jerked, and the plane dipped suddenly to the left. Someone screamed behind Fred. The plane lurched away from the river and over the canopy. The pilot gasped and wound back the throttle, slowing the engine. He gave a cough that sounded like a choke. Fred stared at the man – he was turning the same shade of grey as his moustache. 'Are you all right, sir?' he asked. 'Is there something I can do?' Fighting for breath, the pilot shook his head. He reached over to the control panel and cut the engine.

The roar ceased. The nose of the plane dipped downwards. The trees rose up. 'Make him stop!' The little boy in the back began to shriek. The pilot grasped Fred's wrist hard for a single moment, then his head slumped against the dashboard. And the sky, which had seconds before seemed so reliable, gave way.