

Paul Jasper Richards'
**The Hole
Through The World**

ALSCAR PUBLISHING

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U.K. English Version 2.0

For
Jane
Alasdair, Scarlett, Bella.

"A children's classic, layered with humour, greed, immortal spirits and an unforgettable story ending that will stay with you forever!"

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Part One: The First Journey

CHAPTER ONE

Stone Age Homecoming

Grandma stared down at me with her big, baggy eyes; “Be a good boy for me,” she said, in a droll voice, which was usually a sign she had taken too many pills.

“I will Grandma, I will,” I promised, as a lady grabbed my arm and marched me to the getaway car. I was moving to my parents’ house for the first time in my life – it had been hastily arranged.

The car continued to sputter and backfire, as if it hadn’t been driven for years. The rusty heap was almost as sickly as Grandma who was moving to a nursing home. My absent parents had finally been tracked down to a government building, on a southern island, but they arrived looking dazed and confused, and appearing incapable of caring for each other, let alone me!

Father impatiently revved the engine as I was bundled onto the back seat. The handbrake suddenly snapped, catapulting us down the street, on course for Daybrook. I scrambled to the window for one last look; one last wave to Grandma, but she was gone.

Holding back the tears, my attention gradually shifted to my unfamiliar hosts: I knew the dentist and even the road sweeper better than these people. I had started to wonder if my parents even existed! Until now my only image had been a faded photograph, placed next to Grandma’s telephone. It was all I had to look at when they phoned each year: Two strangers, wishing me happy birthday, and recounting their

epic adventures from around the world. I so much wanted to join them, but each time I asked, the conversation always ended with another excuse.

“Son – stop daydreaming,” shouted Dad, switching off the radio so he could be heard. “It’s great to finally meet you,” he smiled broadly in the rear-view mirror. “I’ve missed you so much. I really want to get to know you better. – What’s your name? he asked.

“Steven,” I whispered nervously, as the car began to misted over and father had to push his head out of the driver’s window to see where he was going.

“He’s only joking! That man knows your name – I think!” laughed Mum, tearing a strip off her dress to clear the windshield.

A worrying smile interrupted my gloom: I had expected mum to arrive in the latest survival gear, but her clothes looked like they had been sown together from old rags! Her dress was a mishmash of patterns, with tiny bells, stitched along the seams. Every time she moved her outfit played a tune! There was no escape: Even Mum’s bleached-blonde hairdo could be seen from miles away! I watched with amazement as her spiky hair began to move on its own, until I suddenly remembered what Grandma had once told me: “Nothing about your mother is real.”

It was the year Mum was isolated from the rest of the world and couldn’t ring on my Birthday, so instead of hearing about her faraway adventures, Grandma burst into a frenzied, character attack, calling her everything from a liar to a thief, from stubborn to lazy; “In fact she’s just like your father,” Grandma had raged.

Father looked taller and much thinner than Mum. He was clutching the driving wheel like a chimpanzee hugging a branch, with his back bent and his arms folded around his knees. He seemed to be wearing a brown suit, with missing pockets, that had clearly shrunk in the wash: He now looked like a Swiss yodeller, with white socks pulled up to his knees to meet the bottom of his trousers. Unfortunately there was still a gap, revealing a mysterious tattoo, weaving up his leg. It was not the only mark on his body. As I rested my head against the door I spotted a row of upturned spades on the back of his neck. They disappeared behind an enormous, black beard, which seemed to sprout as if no blade had ever touched his skin!

“Don’t fall asleep son – we’re nearly home,” father cheered, widening my tired eyes, and swinging the car into a dead-end street.

“Wow – what big houses!” I marvelled, winding down the window for a better look. The road was wide; the buildings wider: Sparkling, miniature palaces, with iron gates, manicured lawns, and sweeping drives. “How can we afford to live here?” I asked.

“I won the house in a game of cards – from a diamond geezer...” Father began to brag, before a Texas poke in the ribs from mum, stopped him talking. Suddenly my eyes caught sight of a building at the far end of the road that stuck out from the rest for all the wrong reasons. Dad drove closer. My heart sank. It can’t be that house – please, not that house...

“Here we are,” muttered Mum, putting down the map, “We’re home.”

It was that house!

The garden was so overgrown it looked like nobody had lived in it for years! Tiles were missing from the roof; paint had peeled off the timber cladding and even a bedroom window was boarded up! If this was the outside, what was it like within?

“Mind you don’t step on anything Steven,” Father warned, with good reason.

“I’ll try,” I replied, but it was not going to be easy. The hallway floor was smothered with cardboard boxes and wooden crates, some precariously piled right up to the ceiling!

“What’s in all these boxes?” I questioned, smelling something unpleasant drifting throughout the house.

“This and that,” answered father, who appeared to be unsure himself. But, with further investigation, I gradually discovered ‘this and that’ meant anything and everything! In the living room we uncovered boxes of books, cups and saucers, mouldy clothes and even a crate containing an ants’ nest, borrowed from the zoo! “Remind me to take that back in the morning,” Father groaned, as a swarming mass of biting insects escaped and marched up his sleeve!

Upstairs the scene was even grimmer: On the landing stood three giant, glass jars of wine, just visible through a thick layer of black dust – the same dust that covered the entire house!

“How long have these wine jars been here?” I asked, with a horrible feeling it might not be wine inside!

Father rubbed his sock against one of the labels to reveal a date under a picture of Rhubarb. “Eleven years son – I must get around to bottling the stuff,” he replied,

bending down to remove the bung and sniff the contents. “It’s been a long while since I smelt that sweet aroma.”

“Is that because of all your adventures around the world?” I asked curiously.

“Your room,” continued Father, ignoring my question. “The door’s here somewhere,” he insisted, before being distracted by the glow of fools gold, radiating from one of the boxes.

“What have you found?” I asked excitedly.

“Nothing. Now go back down and annoy your mother.”

Mum was sprawled across a chair, lazily reading a crime novel, as I steamrollered down the stairs and into the living room.

“I’m busy?” she frowned, without lifting her haystack head of hair.

“What’s on the old box television?” I asked, moving the ants’ nest away from the couch.

“A plant pot, three mouldy tea cups and your father’s hiking boots,” she replied, with a giggle.

“Err – what?” I asked. “Oh – very funny, but what is there to watch?”

“Nothing, it doesn’t work. It hasn’t worked for years – There’s a soccer ball in the back yard – go and play with that.”

“OK,” I grumbled, “but when am I going on one of your adventures?”

“Adventures?” puzzled mum, pulling the book slowly over her face. “Life’s one long adventure – have you been out the back yet?”

I shook my head and climbed into the kitchen to look through the window.

“Where is the garden?” I wondered, as I suddenly realised finding the ball was going to be my first adventure! The back garden was more overgrown than the front! I zipped up my coat and unlocked the kitchen door. A crumbling, concrete slab marked what was once the start of a path. With a brush in one hand and the dustpan, as a shield, in the other, I jumped onto the slab to begin my mission. It was not going to be easy: The sun was setting as I slowly weaved a trail through a thick wall of bamboo, made of towering Japanese knotweed, which made our English garden look more like an Asian jungle!

“I come in peace!” I yelled, like the first explorer, entering the densest, darkest, and wildest terrain in the world! Nobody had ventured along this path for centuries – I was convinced! Suddenly I froze: there was something blocking my path! A rusty handle had appeared from behind a wall of ivy: It belonged to a door, but a door to where? I began to brush away the leaves. This was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to me! Perhaps the door led to a secret hideout, brimming with gold, or a lost land full of talking animals, or even just a secret garden! My heart raced, but then my mind filled with darker thoughts: What if it was a trap and a giant goblin or furious dragon was hiding behind the door? But this was my first adventure and there was no turning back if I wanted to impress mum. I tentatively turned the handle and forced the door. The rusty hinges had almost seized up as a gap formed around the frame. Holding my breath, crossing my fingers and even gripping the brush as a secret weapon, I peered within...

It was almost too gloomy to see anything. I stared for a few seconds until my eyes readjusted to the dark. In the corner was a flat, soccer ball, covered in cobwebs, behind an old mattress, which was leaning against the side of a poky, wooden room.

“It’s a storage shed!” I moaned in disappointment, but I had at least found the ball and completed the mission. I forced the door wider and stepped inside to collect it...

CRASH – SMASH – BANG!

A thunderous boom echoed around the shed and out as I plunged through the rotting floorboards!

“Help!” I screamed, as a cloud of earth and woodlice smothered my body, suffocating and disorientating my senses. “I’m trapped!” I spluttered, spitting soil and small creatures out of my mouth! I rubbed the dirt from out my eyes and gradually felt around with my hands: I wasn’t dead and I didn’t seem to be hurt – I may even have stumbled upon a secret room! But as the air cleared I could see no sign of lost treasure: I was just stuck in a small, muddy hole! I began to gaze worriedly at my new position: The top of my head was level with the remains of the shed floor!

“I’m trapped,” I blubbered in a sorry state. “Someone help me – please!” I shouted again, but no one could hear me and if I didn’t do something soon I would starve to death! Eventually I noticed two arrow shaped, flint tools, laying by my feet: This was no sink hole – I could feel the ruts and scraps of human digging. There was even small holes carved into the floor. I felt inside one, but all I could feel was warm air. I tried another and my hand touched a large bone!

“HELP!!!” I screamed, but this time I wasn’t waiting for help; I took the flat spearheads and pushed them into the side of the hole. Mustering all my strength, I balanced on the flint tools and wrapped my elbows over the remaining wooden flooring to haul myself out. I leaned across and picked up the ball before tipping over the old mattress to hide the damage. The springy bed pushed a blanket of warm air out of the shed as I pulled the door to and scrambled, still shaken, back to the house.

“Mum – It’s OK – I’m alive and back from the Stone Age!” I cried, but she was asleep, and suddenly waking her to say I had broken the shed didn’t seem a very good idea!

“What’s a matter?” asked Father, peering into the kitchen. “Have you been rolling in the mud?”

“Err. Sort of – I’ve completed my first adventure – I’ve found the ball and some flint spearheads!” I boasted. “Now I need to start my homework.”

"Homework!" gasped father, as if it was a dirty word.

“Yes! Grandma given me a list of topics to study for my new school, starting with gravity,” I yawned. “I thought I might write about your trip into Outer Space!” I explained, causing an even scarier look of horror from my father!

“One thing at a time!” he insisted. “I have some bathroom scales you could use for an experiment. Err. Now let me think... Where did I put them...” Father mumbled, scratching his head as he glanced around the room. “Look behind the settee,” he ordered. The back of the couch was another dumping ground, stuffed with anything that wasn’t in a box! I held my nose and lowered my hand, like it was a pick-up crane

in an arcade game, but with each grab I just pulled out the strangest of items – coloured wigs, toy guns and even a false nose!

“Dad – It’s not here,” I moaned. “Dad? Where are you?” Suddenly the front door rattled and Father burst back into the room. “I think these will be perfect!” he panted, holding out a set of gleaming, digital scales. I nodded politely as he passing them over with his tattooed, right hand, inked with the letters A–C–A–B across his knuckles.

“What do the letters mean?” I asked innocently.

“Always Carry A Bible,” whispered Father, looking up to the sky and crossing his fingers. “Now is there anything else you would like?”

“A movie size television would be nice!” I cheekily suggested. Father sighed and turned away.

“Wait! What am I supposed to do with these scales,” I shrugged, as he disappeared up the stairs.

“Weigh yourself!” he laughed.

I groaned and looked around for somewhere to place them. I cleared away a few boxes and laid the scales flat, before stepping on top and waiting for my weight to stop flashing.

“That’s odd,” I thought out loud, “I weigh more on these scales than I do at Grandma’s!”

“Not to worry son, you don’t look fat,” Mum yawned, as she overheard my worries.

“But there has to be a reason,” I argued.

“They must be broken,” mum decided. “Who knows where that man got them from!” she muttered, as her eyes almost opened. “Ask your new teacher for the answer – that’s what they’re there for.”

“I will,” I replied, before being distracted by the deafening noise of father tipping boxes of new shoes and designer handbags down the stairs!

“Steven! I may have found your room!” he called, shifting an old wardrobe out of the way. “Yes, here it is!” he grinned with delight, as the wardrobe suddenly collapsed, filling the house with a dense cloud of dust. I rushed up the stairs as my bedroom door magically appeared through the haze!

“You may need a new wardrobe son,” father laughed. “Go in and check - You never know what you might find inside!” he added, enticing me over. I clambered across and squeezed my head around the blocked door. “Well?” he asked, impatiently. “Is there another wardrobe?”

“No – there’s nothing in here.”

“Not even a carpet?” he asked in surprise.

“No – not even a bed!” I moaned loudly. “And the window’s boarded up,” “Oh well, you’re lucky to have a roof over your head,” insisted father, prodding me inside with a stick. “It’s school tomorrow, so you’ll need plenty of rest.”

“But I can’t sleep like this,” I cried. Father looked at his watch and reluctantly nodded in agreement, before an icy draft of air caught hold of the door and slammed it shut. The room echoed as voices filtered through the damp floorboards. I hunched my coat tightly round my body to keep out the cold and awful smell of pigeon dropping!

The front door rattled open and the sound of tiny, reindeer bells faded. I raced across to the window and peered through a gap in the wooden boarding. Under the cover of darkness, a tall, thin figure weaved across the road and disappeared behind the house opposite. The building remained in darkness: Nobody appeared to be home until a mattress poked out of an upstairs window and was gradually lowered down to a smaller, brunette figure in the front garden. “Mum? Dad?” I puzzled, watching with fascination as bed sheets, a quilt and even a carpet followed. If this was all for me, the neighbours were the friendliest I had ever known!

CHAPTER TWO

The Power Of Gravity

“Sadly we have a special boy starting school today,” Mr. Bird began, curling his nose like an angry parrot. “He wants to join our class,” he explained, parading me around the room, like an animal in a zoo! My new enclosure had a leaky roof and smelt of blocked drains and sweaty children. The walls were filled with empty display boards and the tables were squeezed together between a series of buckets, left to collect the rainfall.

“Steven should have been here for registration, but his parents forgot to wake him up!” Mr. Bird moaned, to a heckle of “Shame!” from a child at the back of the classroom.

I looked longingly for the friends I had left behind at my old school, as the teacher tried to raffle me off. “Who is going to be Steven's friend?” asked Mr. Bird. “He's from THE house!” he added, to gasps of horror as a street view of my crumbling home flashed onto a giant screen, at the front of the classroom!

“I will sir,” bellowed Jake, a muffin-shaped boy, who hadn't been listening properly. He was leaning his chair against the back wall, appearing friendless, but he hoped not for long.

Mr. bird pecked the end of his pencil as he looked at Jake then again at my second-hand uniform. "Perhaps it's too soon for a friend. Let's sit you at the broken table, to make you feel at home," he decided, to a roar of laughter from the teaching assistant.

I reluctantly sat down as Mr. Bird continued the science lesson: He was rambling about the power of gravity. He seemed to be talking in riddles as he explained how mass is always the same, but your weight can change! Mr. Bird was being deadly serious and only smiled when I told him my parents had travelled into outer space!

“Outer Space! That’s very funny Steven. Have they walked on the moon as well?” he smirked, “because tonight I want everyone to calculate a family member’s weight if they were stood on the moon!”

“My mum’s fat!” shouted Jake, “and she’s broken our scales!” he added, in a desperate attempt to avoid doing any homework. The teacher tried to ignore him as the lunch bell rang. Mr. bird buttoned up his lab coat and perched at the oak door, like a grey teal duck, waving us out with his pointed head.

“She’ll still be fat where ever you put her!” Jake continued to moan, while looking around for someone else to annoy. He quickly noticed I was unsure which way to go. "Steve - I bet your mum's not fat," he decided, sliding across the table to introduce himself. “My name’s Jake – Jake the Cake - Let me guide you to the dining hall,” he offered, grabbing my arm tightly. This was probably because nobody else would eat with him, and I soon understood why!

“Did you know,” Jake swaggered, with a mouthful of food.

“No Jake, what this time?” I sighed. He seemed to do nothing but boast and the more I failed to be impressed, the harder he tried!

“Did you know that my Grandma owns the fastest poodle in the world?”

“That’s incredible,” I yawned, as Jake stopped eating for a second to remove a picture from his pocket.

“And my Great Nan is the oldest woman in Daybrook!”

“Amazing,” I replied, unsure whether the photograph in his hand was of his Great Nan or his three-legged poodle! “I have to go now to collect my locker key from the office — see you back in class,” I said, as Jake the Fake, pulled a half eaten, Krispy Kreme from his other pocket.

“But you haven’t heard about my world record attempt for eating the most jam doughnuts in one minute!”

“Another time,” I replied, sprinting down the corridor before he could stop me.

After lunch, Mr. Bird, in his twisted wisdom, decided to sit me next to Jake, after seeing us both eating together, but it felt like a punishment.

“Have I told you that this pen is the longest lasting biro in the world?” Jake continued to boast as he prodded it into my arm.

“No, but I can quite believe it – you don’t seem to have written anything: All you do is talk and eat,” I groaned, wiping his cookie crumbs off my work.

“It’s the perfect life!” smiled Jake, showing off a row of fillings. “At least I’m not miserable and boring.”

“That’s not true,” I replied. “I live in an amazing house where gravity makes me weigh more at home than anywhere else!”

Jake, for once, stopped and stared, before eventually spluttering, “That can’t be true: It breaks all the laws of science.”

“What laws?” I asked, but Jake, who clearly didn’t know any laws or follow any rules, decided to summons the teacher.

“Sir – Sir – Mr. Bird, over here Mr. Bird,” Jake pleaded, swinging his arms wildly in the air.

“Yes Jake, what is it now?” sighed Mr. Bird, swooped across the room like an endangered, grey falcon.

“Tell Steve you can’t weigh more in different places on Earth.”

“But you can!” replied Mr. Bird, much to Jake’s annoyance. “As I told you this morning, Gravity can vary: Your weight depends on where you are in the world!”

“Are you sure you’re a real teacher?” asked Jake, slumping back into his seat.

“It’s true! You weigh more at the Equator than at the North Pole and your weight even varies with the density of the ground beneath your feet,” he explained, removing a pad from his pocket to show us yet another boring, science program!

“Is that why I weigh 5 pounds more at home than at school,” I interrupted.

“No!” laughed Mr. Bird, as his neck quivered like a bush-turkey. “I’m talking minute amounts – your scales are clearly broken. Why don’t you take the school’s scales home tonight to finish your homework,” he offered.

“Yes sir, I will,” I replied, but scales were not the only thing I brought home that evening. As I rushed up the drive I couldn’t help feeling annoyed that Mr. Bird had insisted Jake came with me to guard the school’s property!

“What a dump! You don’t really live here - do you?” he asked, with one hand masking his mouth to protect against possible infection.

I ignored him.

“Mum, I’m home.” There was no reply. In the kitchen was a scribbled note, stuck above the over flowing, rubbish bin. It read:

Gone shoplifting with dad, back at 7, Mum.

“How do you live and breathe in a dump like this?” Jake howled.

“Quite easily,” I replied, kicking an empty rum bottle in Jake’s direction to make room for the school’s scales. “There you are – I still weigh more on these.”

Jake the bully elbowed me off to weigh himself. “Wow! So do I. There must be something in the house that’s making us weigh more,” he decided. “Let’s explore.”

Jake was upstairs in a flash before I had a chance to stop him, opening all the drawers and emptying every cardboard box. “Look what I’ve found!” Jake suddenly yelled from my parents’ bedroom. “It’s one of those old video cassettes – I found it hidden under some clothes at the back of a cupboard.”

“Put it back. Its private property,” I screamed.

“Nonsense,” Jake roared excitedly, and before I had time to snatch it out of his stealing palms he was scrambling into the lounge, in search of a video recorder. “Where is it? Which box is it in?” he asked impatiently.

“We don’t own a video or a DVD, or even a computer, and the television is so old we’re putting it in a museum,” I sneered.

“Well what’s that?” he asked, pointing to a brand new, 90 inch television, half hidden behind the curtains.

“I don’t know – I’ve never seen it before,” I insisted, but Jake was sure I was lying and stuck his head back into the boxes to see what else I was hiding.

“Get off! Go away!” he suddenly screamed. “Ants, millions of ants! Let’s get out of here.”

“That’s our ant colony,” I laughed, but Jake still wasn’t listening; he was too busy wiping the swarm of angry ants off his face! Jake always dived head first into everything!

“Not to worry,” he eventually spluttered, “my Great Nana lives close by. She has an old video recorder,” he revealed, plucking the last ant out of his gigantic mouth. “We’ll watch it on hers,” he added, retrieving the school scales, and stumbling through the hallway.

“No! Give it back,” I protested, but I was wasting my breath. I rapidly found myself chasing him down the street, and shortcircuiting through a maze of backyards. “It doesn’t belong to you.” I continued to yell, as I reluctantly followed him through the French doors of a Victorian villa.

“Well now you’re here, we can both watch,” Jake beamed, pushing the tape into the video player. I lowered my head: I didn’t want to look. It had been hidden for a reason.

Jake ran the tape past the adverts and the beginning of an old, Britain’s Most Wanted, television program. “There has to be something better than this – it’s boring,” he moaned, having hoped for a horror movie or a secret film, showing proof of Alien landings!

“I’m still not looking – Give it back – NOW!” I cried, as Jake the Pain picked up the remains of a cream cake, from his Nan’s abandoned plate, and rammed it into his mouth!

“It’s just a video of people in a bank,” Jake garbled, with his mouth still full, before curiously sticking his creamy nose against the screen. “Wait a minute – one of these villains looks just like your mother!” he joked, with a burst of laughter. I kept my head lowered – I wasn’t about to play his silly games.

“And the man in the woman’s wig could be your dad! He’s a real gorilla, with long arms and hairy legs - just like you!” Jake giggled.

“You’ve never met my parents!” I suddenly remembered, glancing up at the screen. “No, but they both look like you, and why hide a copy of this program?” asked Jake, who was smarter than he looked.

“Rewind the tape and play it again – slowly,” I ordered. The woman reappeared with strange, purple hair and dark sunglasses, but underneath the disguise she did have mum’s button nose and tiny scar on her cheek. The man, however, was clean-shaven and looked nothing like my father.

“Can’t you see? The man could be your older brother!” Jake insisted, as he became bored with the video and decided to weigh himself on the school’s scales. “That’s strange,” he puzzled, “I weigh even more here!”

“That’s because you’ve not stopped eating!” I snapped, while still staring at the image of the man on the screen: I couldn’t help noticing his long, white socks, his dark, baggy eyes, and the strange tattoos around his neck: Could it be Father, without

his face-masking beard? I was unfortunately being to believe, but it wasn't what it looked like:

"Britain's most wanted is a talent show!" I announced, and in a frantic effort to quickly escape, I flew at the video recorder and tipped it upside down, shaking it violently!

"What's going on?" Jake's Great Nan suddenly cried, waking up from a long sleep. I hadn't noticed her lying behind me on a leather couch! "And who is that?" she asked, adjusting her glasses, and gradually sitting upright, as if she was ninety-nine! "And what is he doing to my video player?"

"I want my tape back!" I shrieked.

"Jake – he's trying to steal my video! Call the police!" Nan roared, who was not great at doing anything for herself!

"It's OK Nana," laughed Jake, pressing the eject button. The tape poked its head out of the machine and I gripped it like a vice, before pulling my hood up and escaping through the French doors.

I could still hear the old lady moaning above the delighted voice of Jake the Grass, as I leapt over the fence: "Nan – I can't wait until school tomorrow to tell everyone about Steve's dad holding up a bank, dressed as a woman! Ha – ha – ha!"

I careered home. My parents were still out. I replaced the video as best I could at the back of the clothes drawer. My heart was silently crying as I took a short cut, dropping through a gap in the floorboards, onto the kitchen table. I held back the tears of shame as I crossed out Mum's message and wrote:

Gone for good, won't be back, Steven.

I collected a few vital provisions: A toothbrush, a thick winter coat, and three chocolate spread sandwiches from the fridge. This was it – I was running away forever and I was ready for anything!

CHAPTER THREE

A Trip Through The World

The shed was just how I had left it – dark, eerie, and with a smelly, old mattress covering the floor! Did I really want to spend the night in a tramp's hostel? But these were desperate times and besides, Grandma had moved to a nursing home and I had nowhere else to go.

With a deep breath, I stepped inside and crouched on the edge of the mattress. The shed was even smaller and older than I remembered. I unzipped the top of my coat and pondered how long I could last before returning to the house. Suddenly I realised the mattress was warm and dry: It should have been freezing cold and damp! I slowly stood up and a gush of hot air whistled past my trouser legs. The heat was coming from under the shed! I had almost forgotten the mattress was hiding the hole in the floor! I quickly leaned it up against the wall and stared back into the murky pit: It still looked very scary, and I was certain someone had dug out the hole to hid a body! But if the bones were human, why didn't they bury them instead of covering the hole with an old shed?

As I stood worrying about what lurked below, a worm wriggled its head to the surface and rolled over a shiny, emerald pebble. I looked again and thought I could see a string of clear stones, close to the bones! I quietly smiled to myself: Could they be uncut diamonds? Was I right all along about hidden treasure? Was this once a Stone Age gem mine? Dad had even boasted that a diamond geezer once owned the

house, but if they were precious stones, I had only one way to retrieve them:

Reluctantly I held my breath and leapt back in...

CRACK – SNAP – POP – ZOOOOOOOM...

“Help...” I screamed over and over again. The ground at the bottom of the pit had given way, swallowing me whole!

I was helter-skeltering, tumbling down and down, faster and faster. I was accelerating; I was like a non-stop express train, like a rocket to Mars; spinning, whizzing and hurtling, deeper and deeper. I was as quick as thought, as fast as lightning: Transonic, supersonic, hypersonic, that was me! Hotfooting it faster than a bullet from a gun! Traveling further and further into the hole...

My body stiffened with every muscle wrestling against the accelerating pressures on my frail frame, as if someone had placed a gigantic thumbscrew around my chest and was turning it so tightly that the sound of cracking ribs could almost be heard! In fact my whole body felt like I was being forced through a hot funnel which was getting smaller and smaller!

CRASH.

I had hit something. No time to stop and look, I was still going down, but for how long? Within seconds, when I thought the end was nigh, something very strange occurred: The pressure on my body began to reduce: Somebody, it appeared, was unscrewing the pain!

Was I falling as fast?

What was going on?

All I had hoped, since first plummeting through, was hitting water at the bottom and not turning into strawberry jam, but now other thoughts occupied my muddled mind:

Mr. Bird had made Jake jump off a chair at school to show how gravity pulls you to Earth: It was what made apples fall from trees, and pennies drop down wishing wells. But he also said gravity accelerates you faster and faster the longer you fall! If Jake had leapt from an airplane he would have rocketed to the ground! But I was slowing down! My speed was drastically decreasing! I was undoubtedly coming to a stop!

“I think I’m in for a wonderful, soft landing,” I announced, bending my knees slightly in preparation.

BUMP – SMASH!

I had landed, but it took me by surprise – my whole body crashed against the floor, yet I wasn’t hurt! The landing had been soft, but the ground was rock hard! A split second later;

“Ahhh...”

I was falling back into the hole! I hadn’t landed on the floor at all – I had landed on the ceiling!

I acted quickly – quicker than I had ever done before, snatching a vine that was slipping through my fingertips. “Got it,” I cried in relief, as my body jerked to a halt.

For a moment I clung tightly, happy to hang and catch my breath. Only the damp, hairy vine was saving me from the hole below, or was it above?

I felt around with my spare hand – I couldn't see anything. The place was as black as coal and touch was king! Eventually my hand stumbled upon another vine. I fastened my fingers around it, in a cast-iron grip, and slowly transferred my weight. I let go of the old vine and felt for another: Steadily but surely I swung blindly forward, like a monkey through a starless forest! But I was no ape and just when there seemed to be no end to this underground jungle, my foot hit something solid! It was rock. I pawed the surface with the tip of my shoe. I was in luck; I could feel a ledge, just big enough to stand on. Now all I needed to do was somehow leap onto it!

I took another deep breath and readied myself.

“One – two – three...” I yelled, letting go of the rope and leaping into the black! My hands sprung against the rocky surface. I intuitively gripped onto a ridge in the wall as my feet fumbled for a steady foothold on the slippery ledge.

I was safe, but for how long?

After a few minutes of recovering my strength and catching my breath, like the end of an army obstacle course, I decided I had three courses of action: one, cry for help; two, eat my chocolate spread sandwiches, or three, move off the ledge.

Crying for help was easy, but no one came: Eating the chocolate spread sandwiches in the dark was harder, but moving from the ledge – that was impossible!

I stood frozen to the spot for what seemed like hours, hoping this was just a bad dream and I would wake up at any minute! My idle mind was beginning to imagine the scenery around me: The black hole below, with its smooth, granite walls, and the long, straggly jungle vines dangling from a stormy sky, like giant tree roots. I rub my

eyes and looked again, but the image didn't disappear: This was no mirage – they really were roots hanging from a rocky ceiling! A tiny spot of light was coming from somewhere above my head, illuminating part of the hole, and where it entered was my way out!

I could now see the ledge disappearing into the distance. I shuffled along until reaching a kind of ladder, carved into the rock, leading directly towards the light! I cautiously clambered up, rising above the tree roots, into a tiny shaft, but the tunnel was becoming more like a rabbit hole – getting smaller and smaller! My lungs began to fill with fresh air, but I was still trapped in the hole. I was just a finger's length from freedom. Frantically I scrapped the soil with my nails. Suddenly my hands were through! I shovelled more and more earth away with my open palms, but most of it seemed to be falling back into the hole and covering my face! I gritted my teeth and wriggled forward until I gradually slithered out, like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon.

I lay in a sprawled heap, almost hidden by giant ferns. I was too tired to move, only my eyes limped worryingly from side to side: "What strange land was this?" I thought, as sky-scraping trees crisscrossed a deep blue, ceiling of warm air.

To my left I could see the hazy, red sun rising in the sky. The forest's base was cooler, darker and almost suffocating, with head-high bracken and strange, pounding noises! But among the unknown, high-pitch cries brought memories of vacations at the seaside with Grandma: I could hear seagulls – I think. Was the sea close by? There was only one way to find out. I rose to my feet, unfastened my coat and, brandishing my toothbrush like it was a machete, ploughed towards the sound.

Fifty, sixty, perhaps even a hundred stumbling strides later, I suddenly emerged from the forest onto a grassy bank. I was almost blinded by the sun reflecting off a vast expanse of water, flowing silently across my path. Seagulls circled overhead, like hungry vultures. I sniffed the air and could smell the faint whiff of salt and seaweed. The river must lead to an estuary, but which way was the ocean? If I could find it, the coastline might be my best way of finding help.

I sniffed the air once more and pointed; the birds swiftly flocked the other way, causing me to impulsively chase after them!

The grassy bank flew under my feet, while the sun's rays cooked me like a roasted chicken! I was hot, red faced and extremely sweaty – except for my body odour, this place was nothing like England!

The seagulls, now just a few dots on the horizon, suddenly about-turned and swooped past in the opposite direction, frightened by a loud bang.

I slowed down and looked around to see where the noise had come from. Both sides of the river were covered in dense forest. A broken branch floated by. I had run up stream, into the heart of the Island! The noise repeated like the sound of a beating drum, quickly followed by howling pipes.

Tribes! The island was inhabited!

I had read history books about lost tribes: They were probably spying on me at this very moment! I nervously peered through the wall of trees, but the dense undergrowth and overhanging branches, blocked any chance of a sighting.

The pipes continued to bellow, louder and more aggressively this time: They must be sending a message. My imagination was running wild! The deep, low-pitched pipes played.

BOOOOOM – BABOOOOM – BOOM – BOOOM – BABOM

It must mean, ‘The boy is next to the River!’

“I surrender! Please take me alive,” I cried, sticking my dirty hands above my head, but nobody came, and after a few minutes my arms were beginning to ache: Perhaps they weren’t hunting me after all! They could even be friendly!

The rhythmic beat of an accompanying drum was drawing me towards them, like the mystical notes of the Pied Piper! I knew I should be running as far away as possible, but I was slowly stepping back into the enchanted forest!

