THE HOLE IN THE ICE

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THE HOLE IN THE ICE

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7/80/200

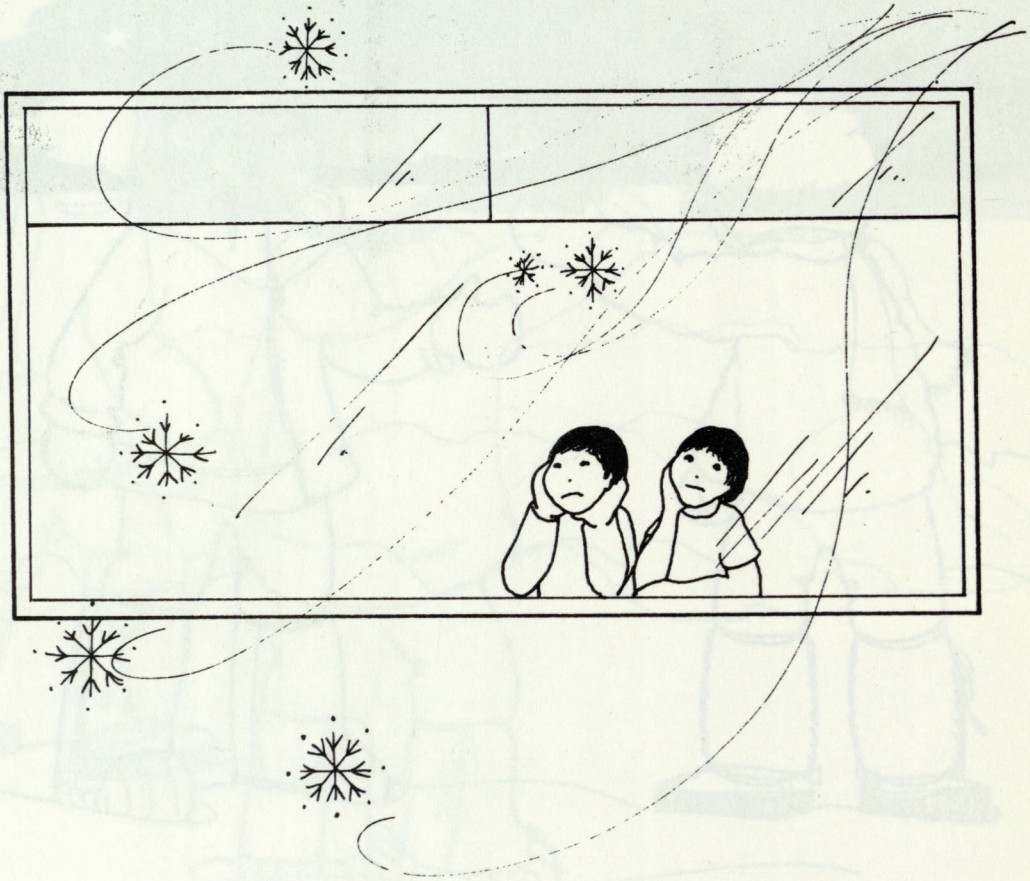
Joe and Junior were playing near the river. It was frozen and the air was very cold. The hardpacked snow crackled as they walked on it. Although school had just finished, it was almost dark.

Joe and Junior looked out over the tundra. They saw a cloud. It was close to the ground. The cloud didn't get any larger or any smaller and it didn't move.

"Let's go over there and look at it," said Joe.

"It's too late today," said Junior. "There isn't enough light left. Let's go tomorrow instead."

"Let's go early then. I'll meet you here. I hope the cloud is still there."



The next day it snowed. The day after that, the wind blew. Then there were five days of school. It was a week before Joe and Junior could go and look at the cloud.

The cloud was still there. It wasn't any larger and it wasn't any smaller. The boys walked toward it.

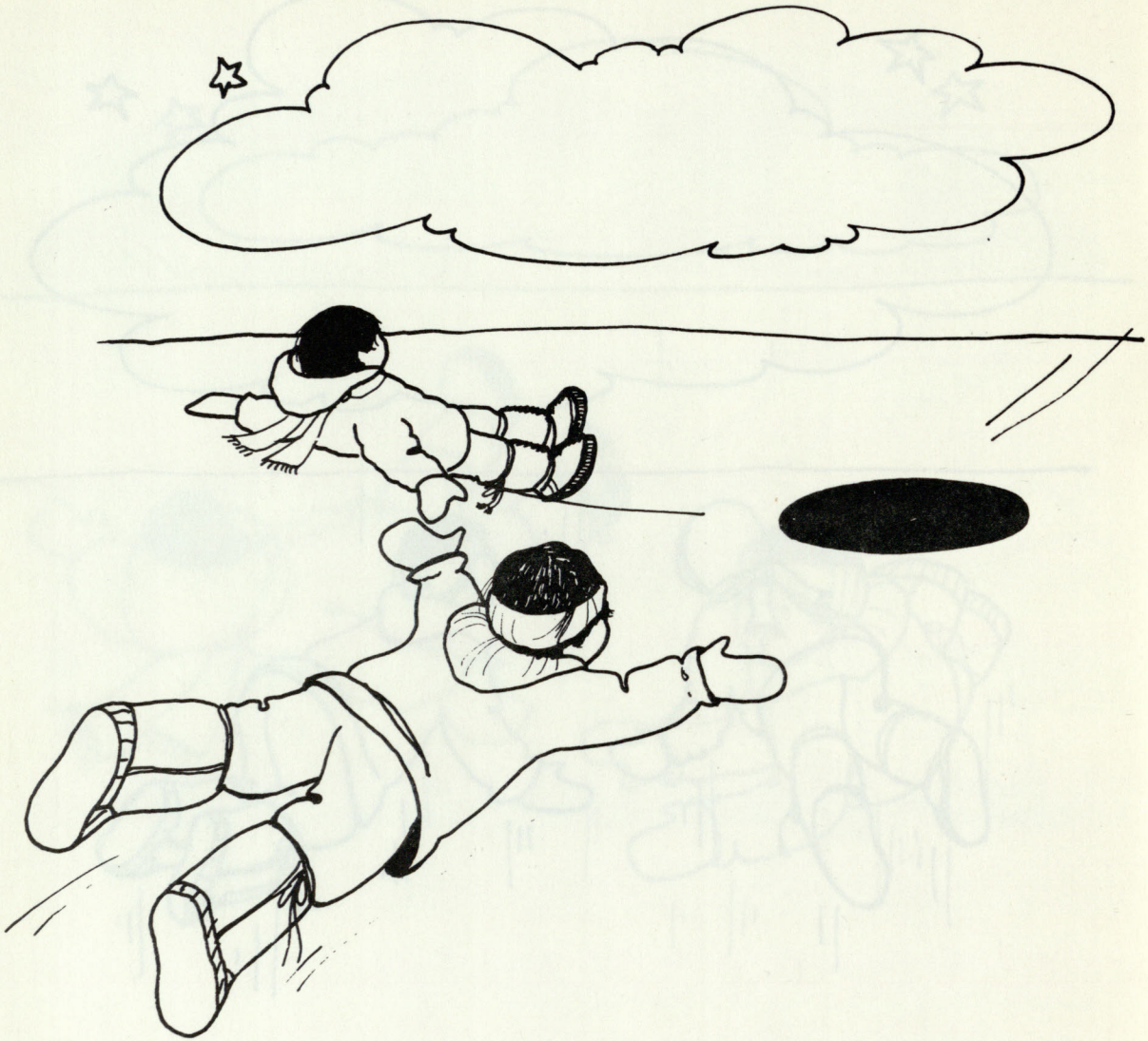
"Hey, Joe, we should have taken your dad's sno-go."

"Dad's using it today. He went hunting."

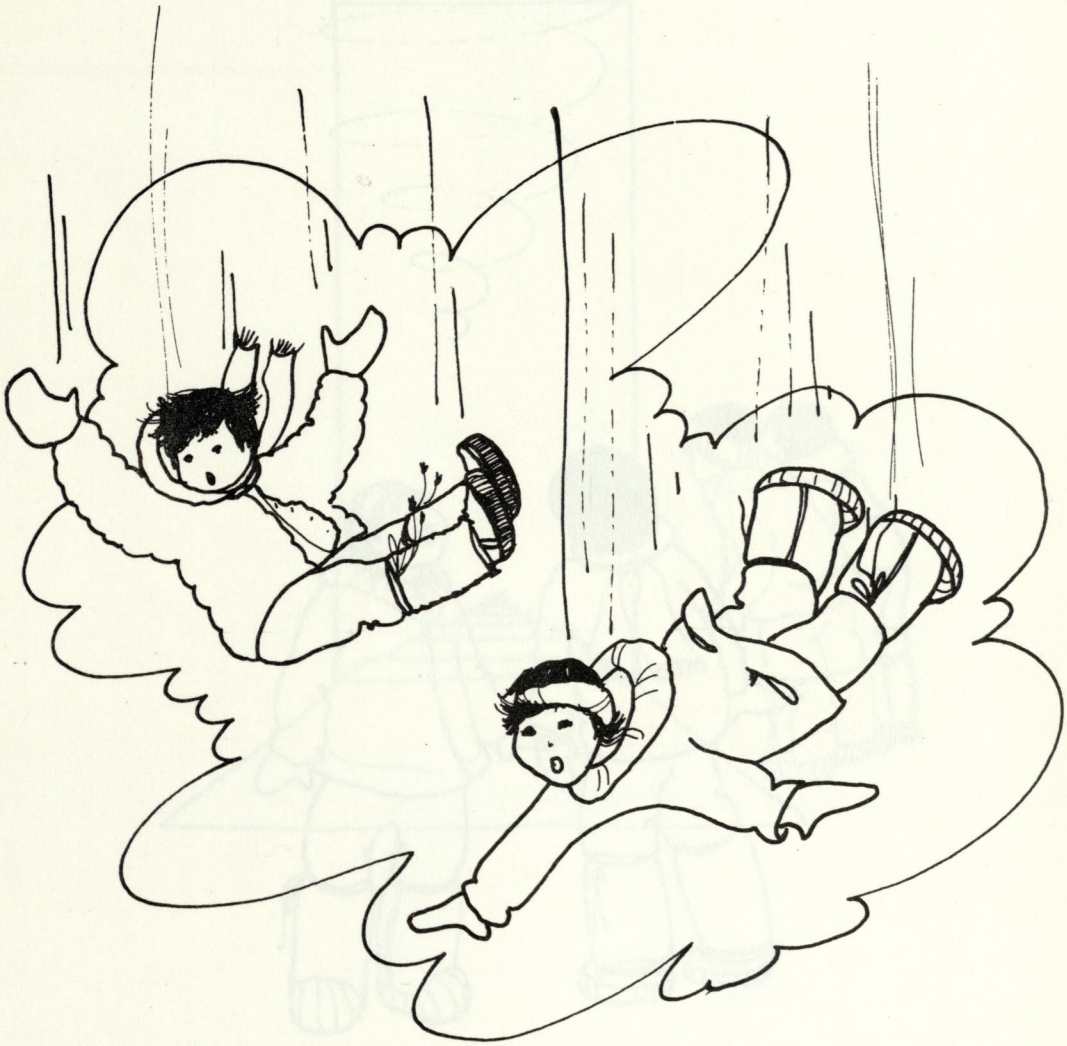
"I didn't know the cloud was so far away. I'm getting tired of walking."

The boys watched the cloud and not the ground. Suddenly, Junior slipped and fell flat on his back. Before Joe finished laughing, he was flat on his back, too. The boys turned over to look at the snow beneath them. It had turned into ice, smooth, glassy ice.

Joe and Junior tried to stand. They couldn't do it. The best they could manage was crawling on their hands and knees. The cloud was very near, almost overhead. They crawled along toward it.



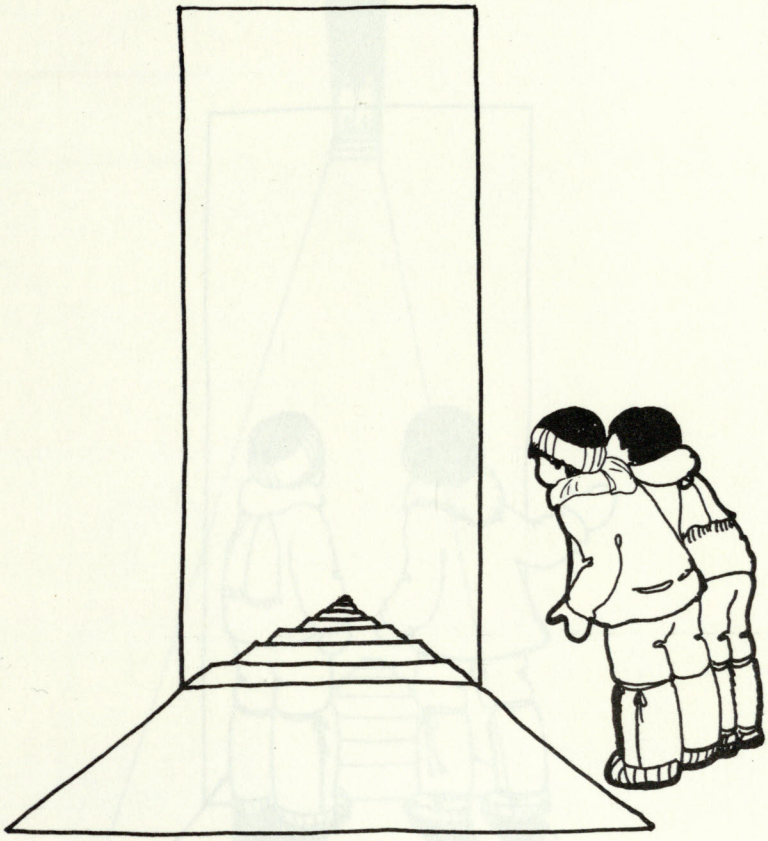
Suddenly Joe yelled, "Hey, Junior, I'm sliding!"
"Me, too!"
"I can't stop!"
"Watch out, Junior, there's a hole. There's a hole in the ice!"
"Joe, I can't stop! I'm going to slide right into the hole!"
"Ohhhhhhhhhh!"



Down they went. The air was like fog. They couldn't see a thing. Instead of falling faster, they began to slow down. They fell more and more slowly. Finally, with a very tiny bump, they came to a stop at the bottom.

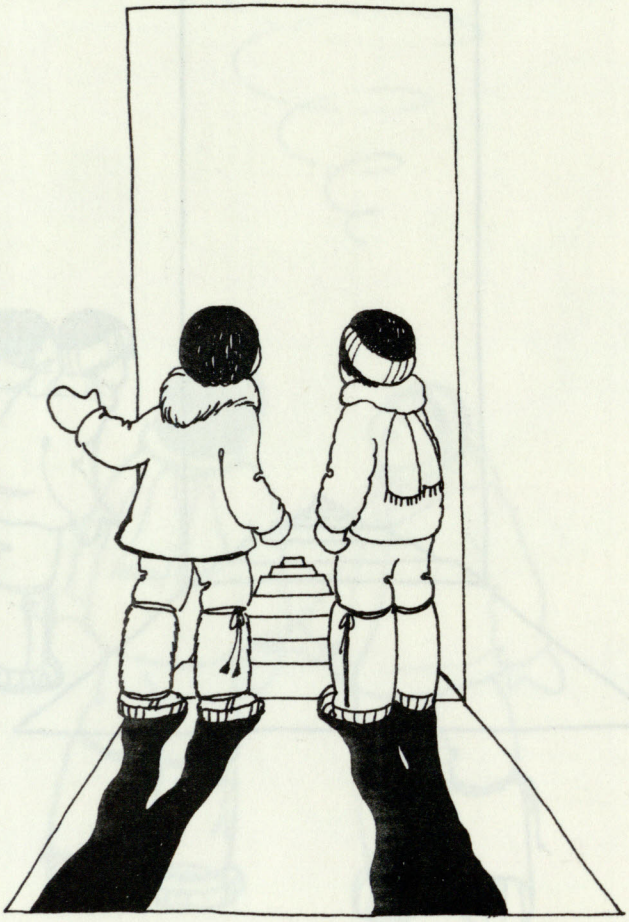
"Where are we? That was a crazy fall. We aren't even hurt."

"Yea, it was a crayzy fall, all right. But how do we get out of here? We can't climb back up and we aren't anywhere."

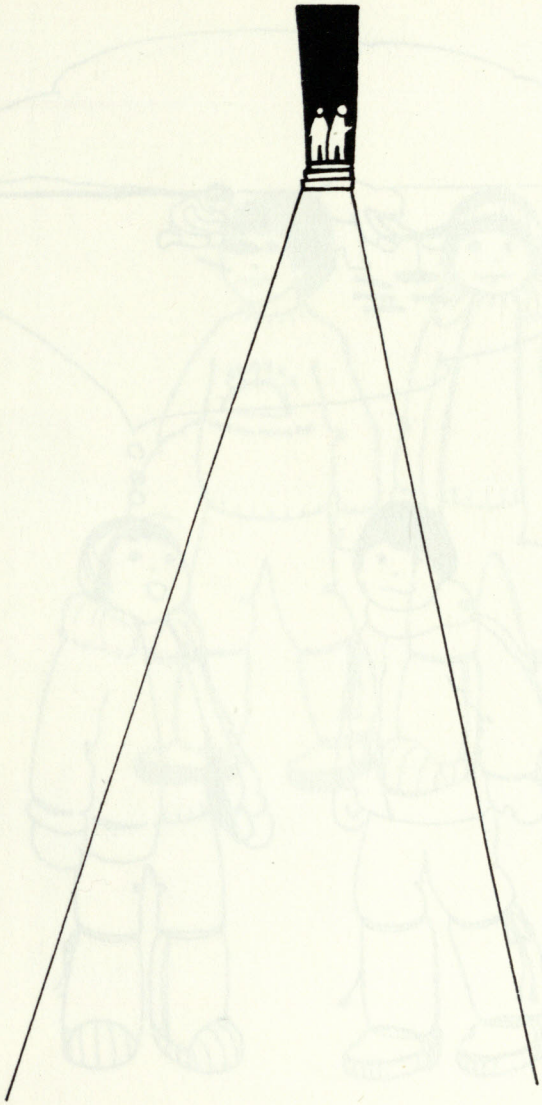


Then Joe and Junior saw a long strip of light. The strip got wider and wider. It turned into a door. Steps led downward.

The boys walked to the door and looked inside. "What shall we do?" said Joe.



"Well, we can't go back so we might as well go in."
"Yea, I guess so, but I feel funny. I think that I'm afraid."
"Me, too. But what else can we do?"
"Nothing, we can't just stand here forever."



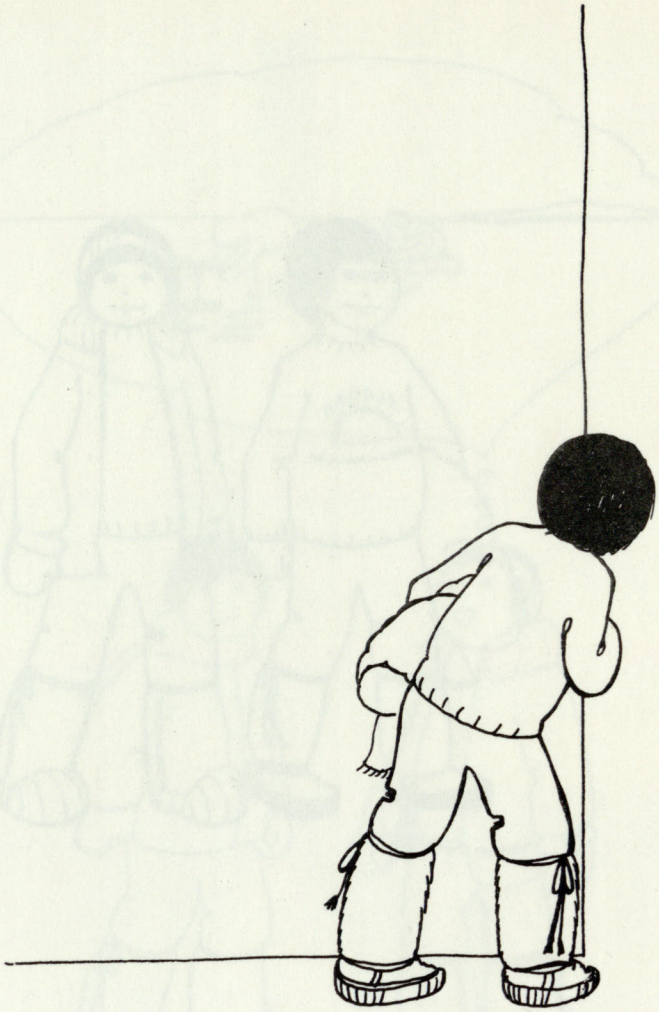
Joe and Junior walked through the door. It closed behind them. They stood at the top of the stairs and looked down. There was nothing to see but a long hallway. It was well lighted and it was empty.

"Come on, Junior. There's only one way to go."

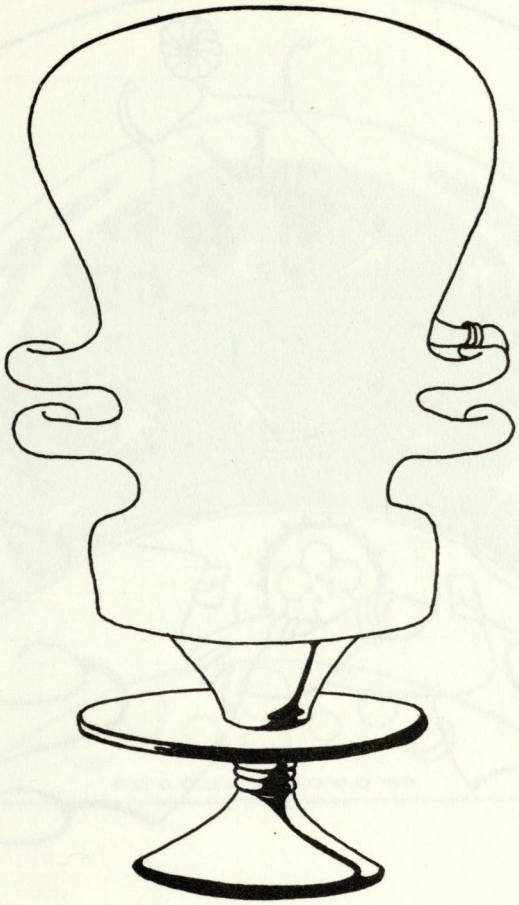
"I know, but I wish I was at home. We should have gone ice fishing. Then we'd be a long way from here."

"It's no use standing here wishing. Let's go."

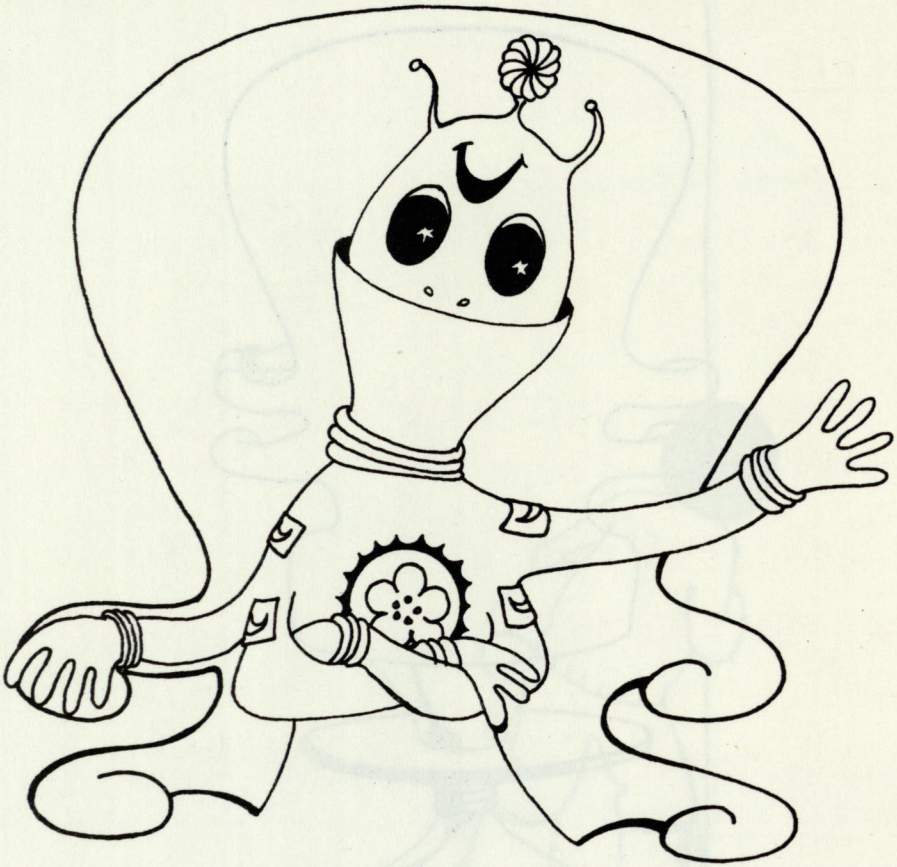
The boys walked down the hall. It was very quiet. They couldn't hear the humming any more. Their mukluks didn't make a sound on the floor.



The hall turned. There was still only one way to go and the boys kept moving. The light was getting brighter. They could hear the humming noise again. It filled the air like the buzzing of a far away bee. As the boys walked along, the buzzing got louder.

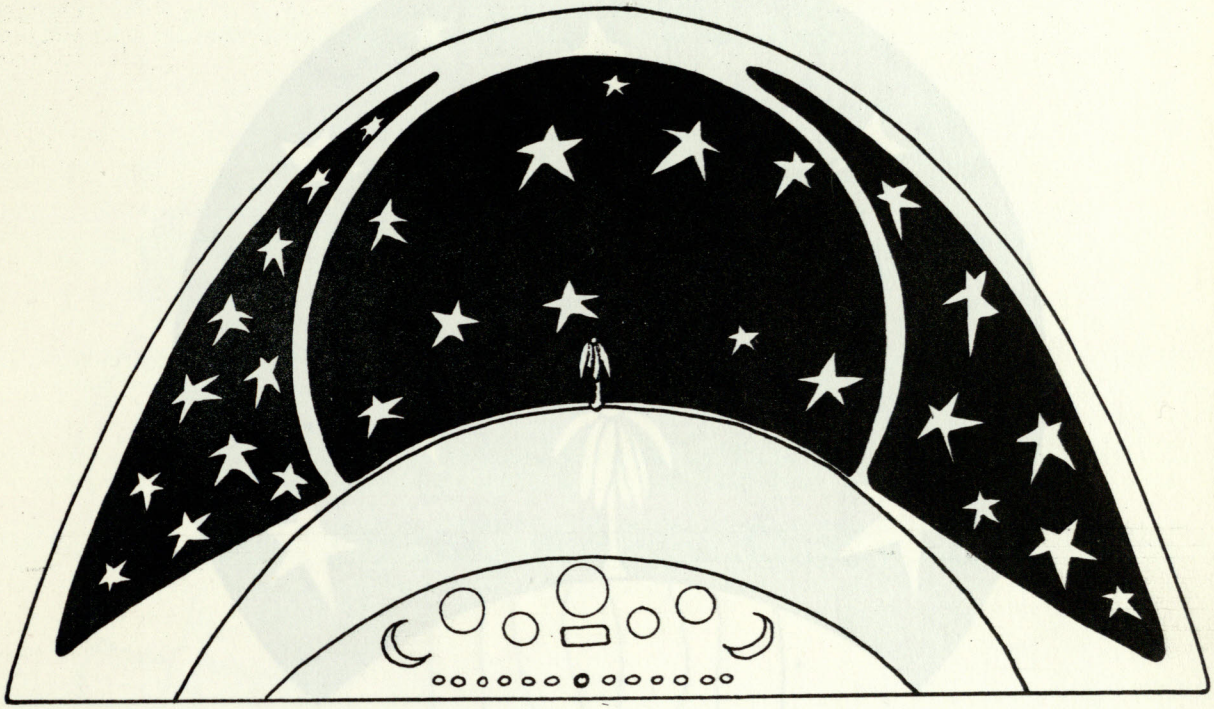


The hall made another turn. Then it ended. They could see a room. There was only one chair in the room. It was very large and the boys could see only the back of it.



They went into the room. The chair turned around slowly until it faced the boys.

"Welcome and peace. I am a visitor on your world. I was forced to land here and I can't leave."



"Where is your airplane?" said Junior.

"I have no airplane. I came in a space ship and you are inside of it."

"Did you come from far away?"

"Yes, from a world that goes around a star far away from here."

"Did it take you long to get here?"

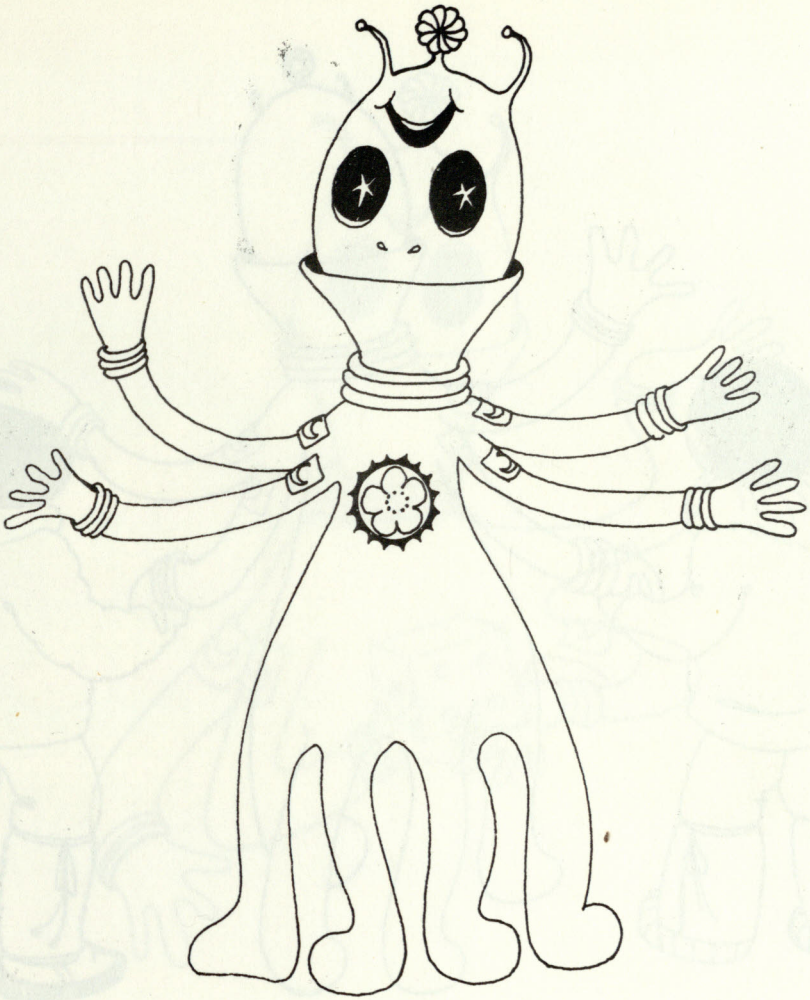
"I started my trip long before you were born."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes. In this whole big ship, there is only me. And here I will die because I can't go home."

"Why can't you go home? Is your spaceship stuck in the ice?"

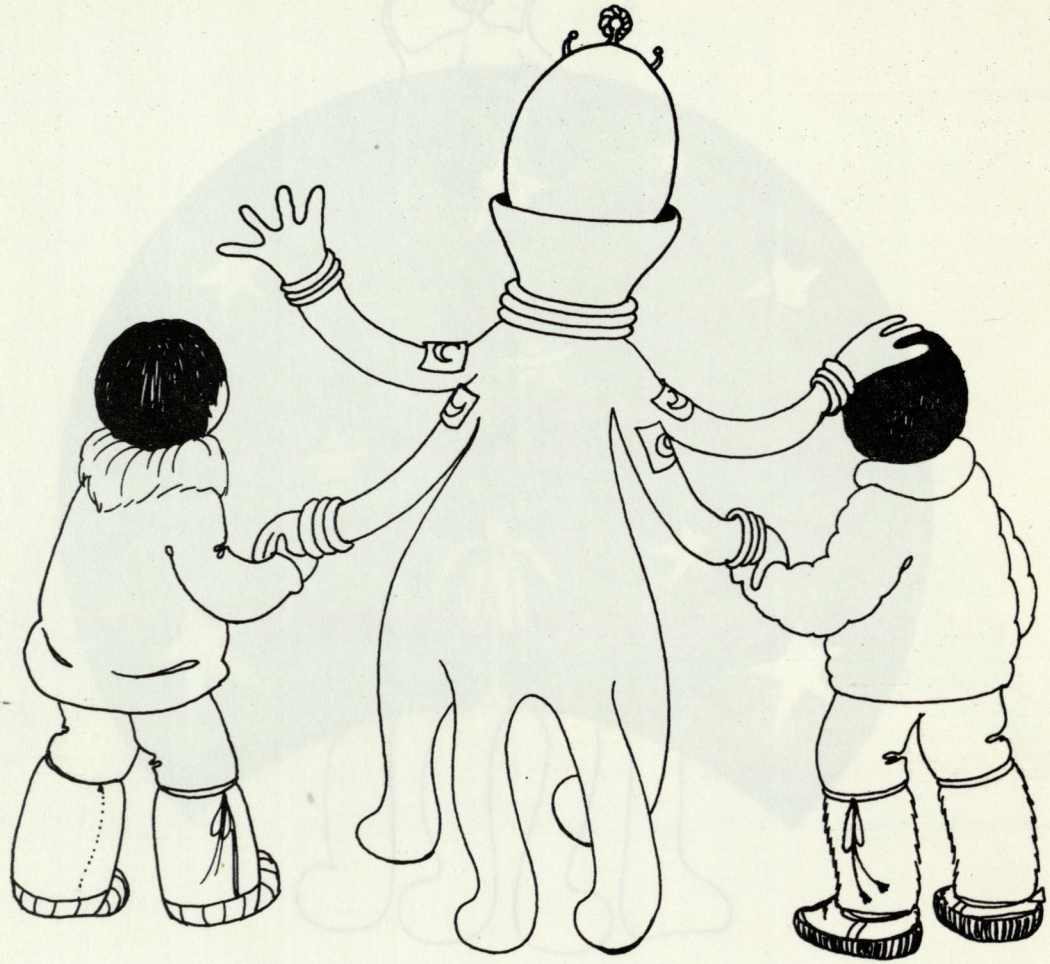
"No, I just hid it here under the ice. I need oil to fill my astrogator. All the oil is gone and I can't tell where I am going anymore."



"Come with us to the village. My Dad will help you. He has a whole can of oil. It's for his sno-go. And he has other kinds of oil, too."

"Can I go to the village with you? Will the people be afraid of me?"

"No, not when you are with us. We'll tell them about you. Say, what's your name?"

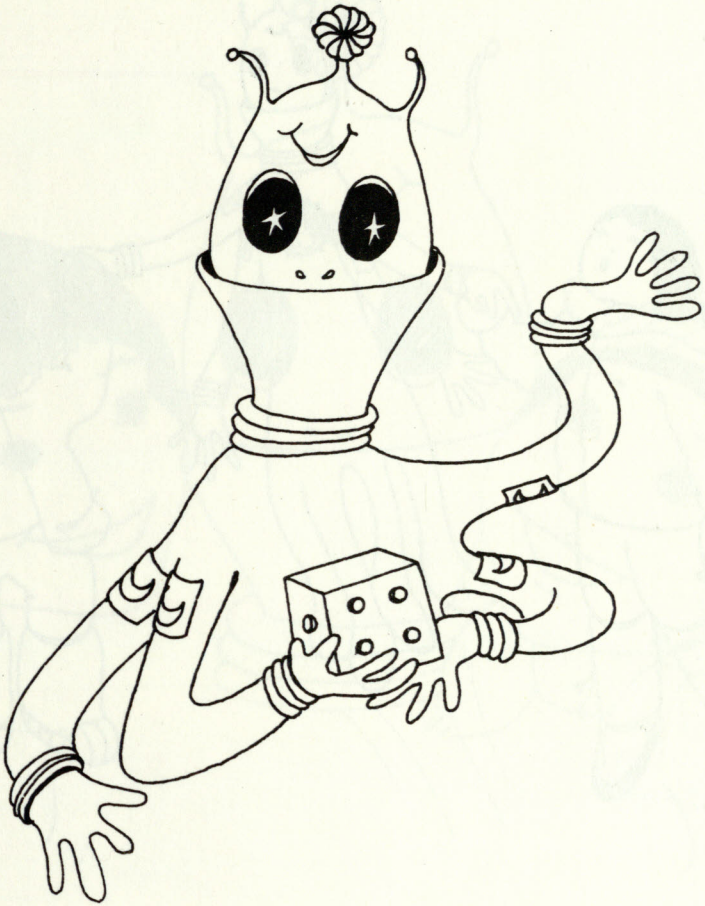


"I have many names. One of them is Charis. You can call me Charis."

"Charis, can we get out of here?"

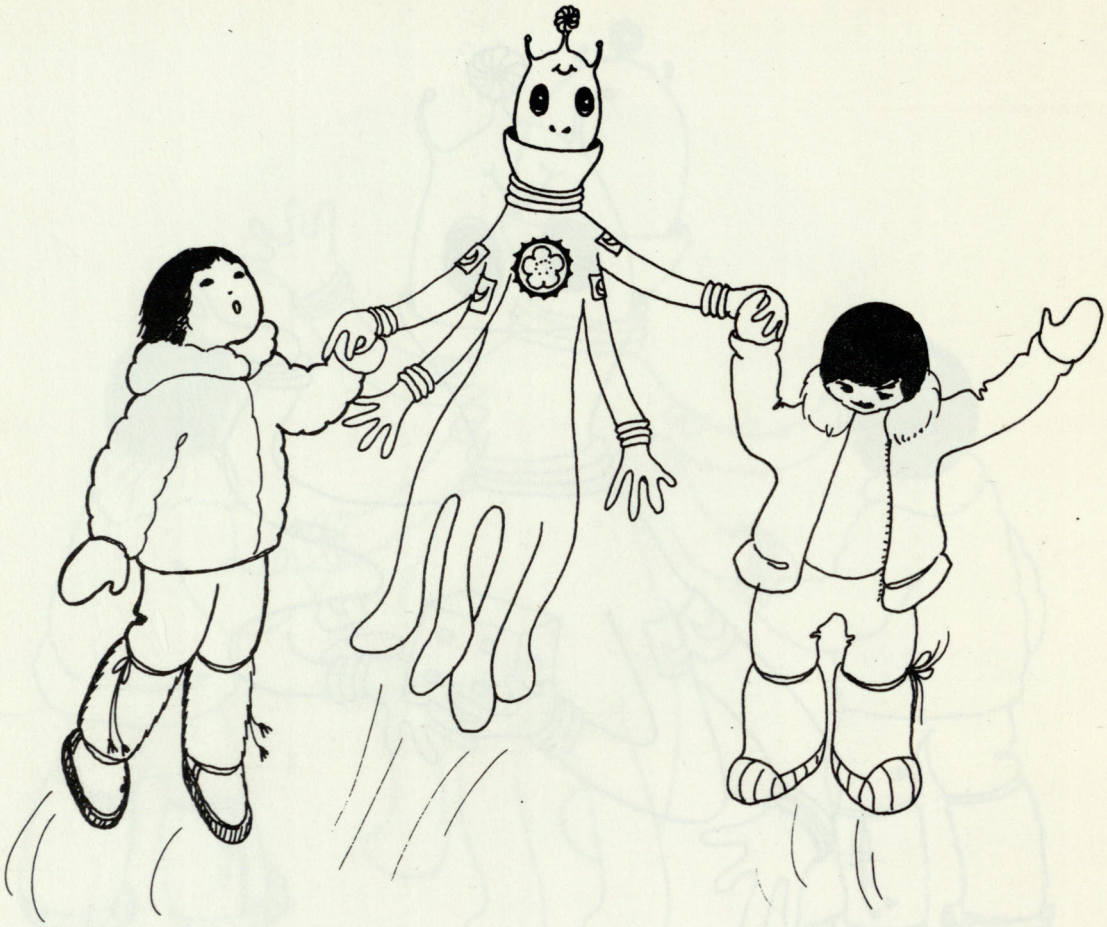
"Oh, yes," laughed Charis. That's no problem. Just follow me."

"Charis, you'll need a parka. It's very cold outside and it must be almost dark by now."



"I don't need a parka. I have another way to keep the cold air from touching me. I won't be cold at all."

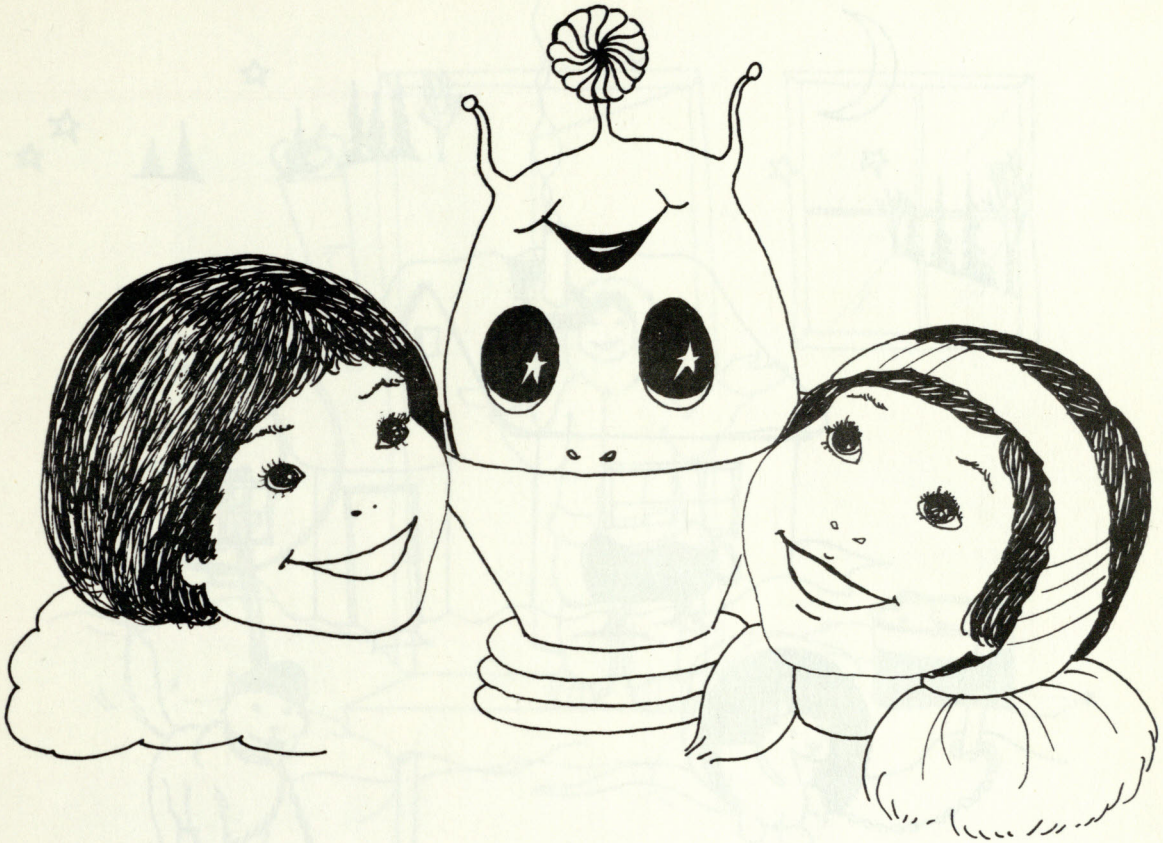
The boys followed charis back the way they had come. Charis took a little box out of his pocket. He pushed a button and the door opened. They went out. Then Charis pushed another button and said, "Hold on to my hands."



Charis, Joe and Junior began to move upward. They moved faster and faster. As they neared the top, they slowed down. Charis stepped off the column of air and onto the ice.

"Wait, Charis," cried Joe. You can't stand on that ice. We'll all fall down in the hole again."

Charis laughed. "Don't be afraid," he said. "As long as you hold on to my hands, you'll be safe."



Charis and the boys walked back toward the village. As they walked along, the boys asked Charis about his world.

"What's it like where you come from, Charis?"

"Well, the biggest difference is color. Our snow is green and our grass is white and our sky is pink."

"That must look very funny," said Junior.

"Yes, it would look funny to you. But to me, it's home."

"Say, don't you get tired of all this snow and the cold and the long winter darkness?"

"No," laughed Joe. "To us, this is home."

Charis and the boys reached the village. Dim yellow light was comming out through the small windows of the houses. The dogs began to bark. They pulled against the ropes where they were tied. The dogs sounded fierce, but every tail was wagging.

"This is my house, Charis," said Joe. "Come inside and talk with my dad."

"Are you sure it's all right? You'd better go in first and tell them that I'm here."

"OK, Charis, you wait right here with Junior. I'll only be gone a minute. Are you sure you're warm enough?"

"Oh, yes, I'm fine. Don't worry about the cold. I can't even feel it."

"Hi, Mom. Where's Dad?"

"He's lying on the bed listening to the news. What do you need him for?"

"I've got something very important to tell him."

"Go on in then."

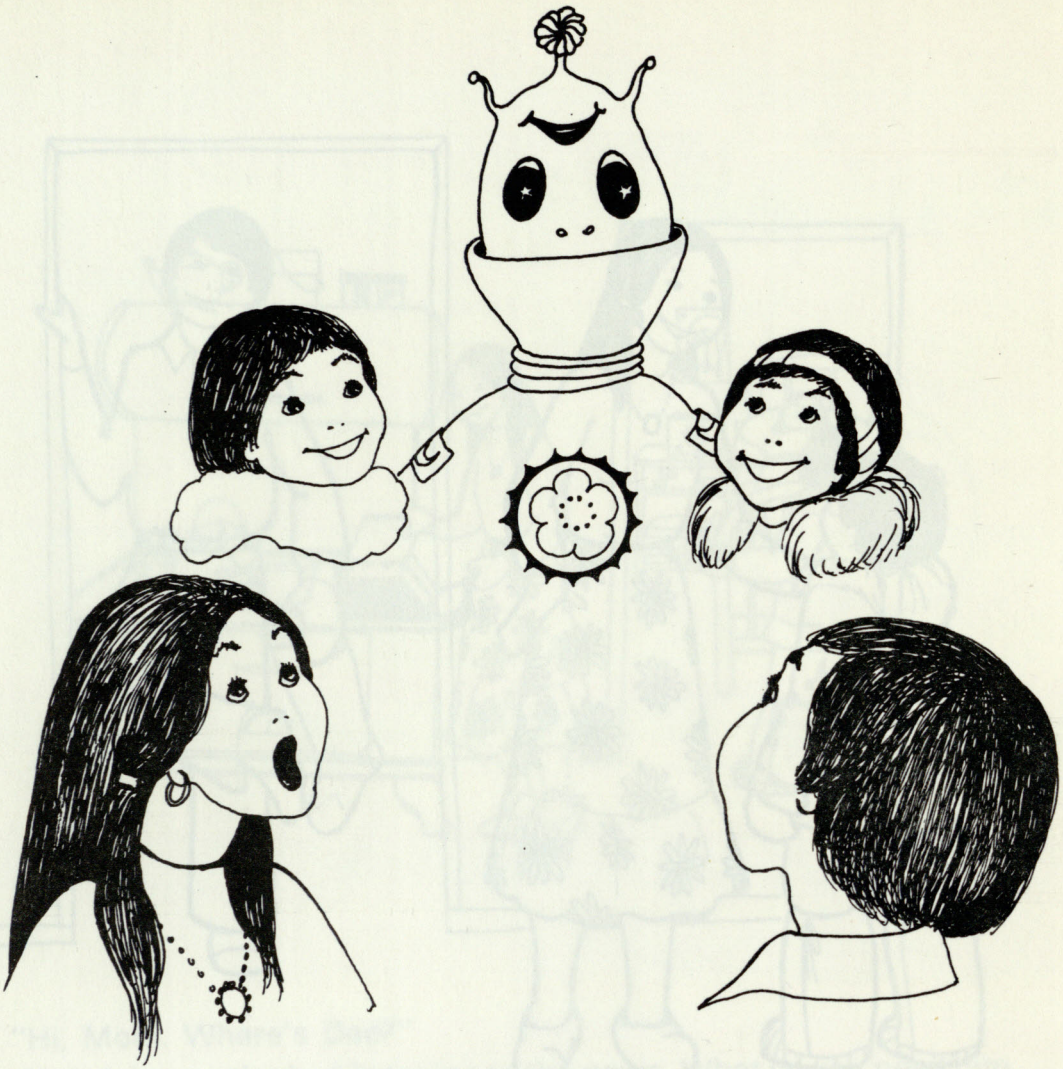
"Dad, there's a man I want you to meet. He's from a spaceship and he needs some oil."

"What?"

"Don't be surprised when you see him. Ne's not exactly like us, but he's very nice. And his name's Charis."

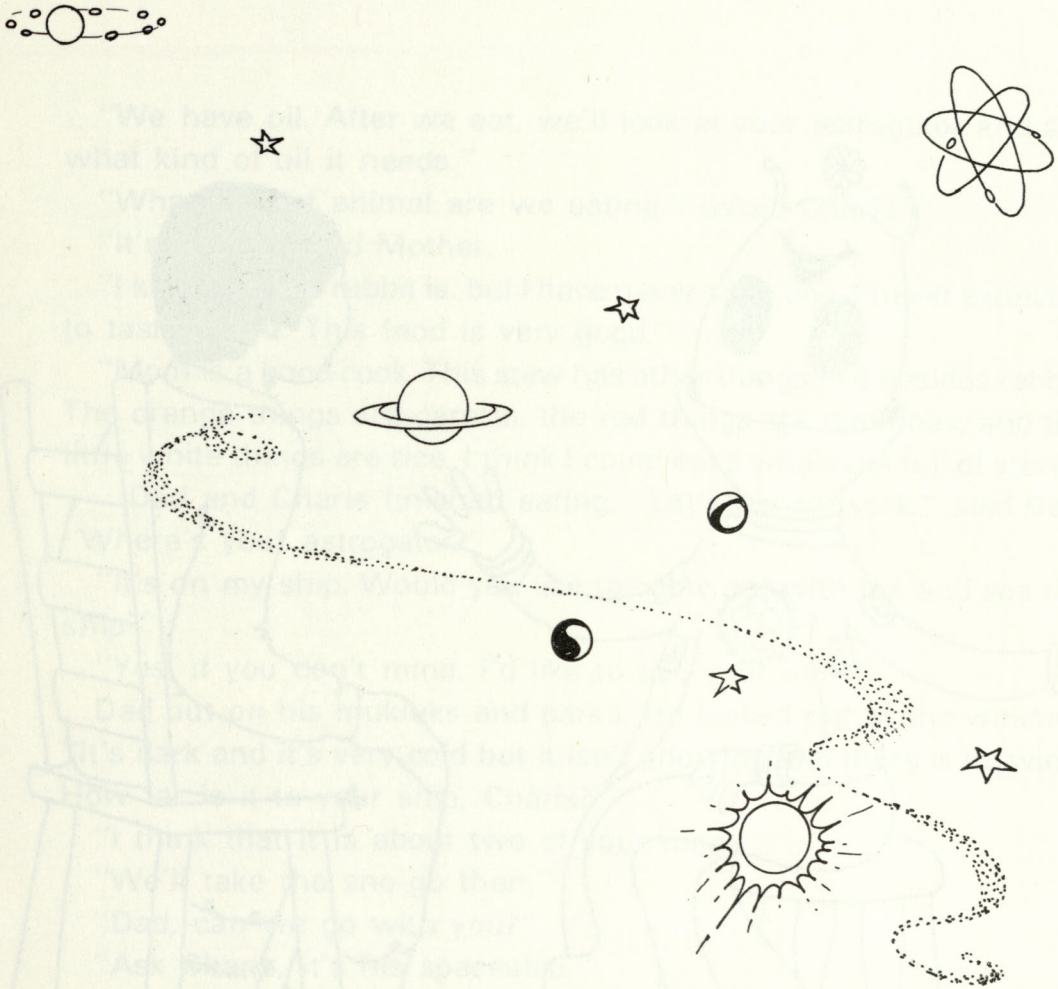
Joe's mother was calm. She said, "Joe, go and invite Charis in for dinner. You might as well bring Junior, too. I know he must be with you."

"Thanks, Mom. Now remember, he's very nice. Even though he looks a little different, he's very nice."



Joe hurried out to get Charis and Junior. "Come in, it's OK. Mom says for you and Junior to eat with us."

Charis entered the house. Joe's parents were surprised. They thought Joe was playing a trick on them. But when they saw Charis, they knew that all Joe had told them was true.

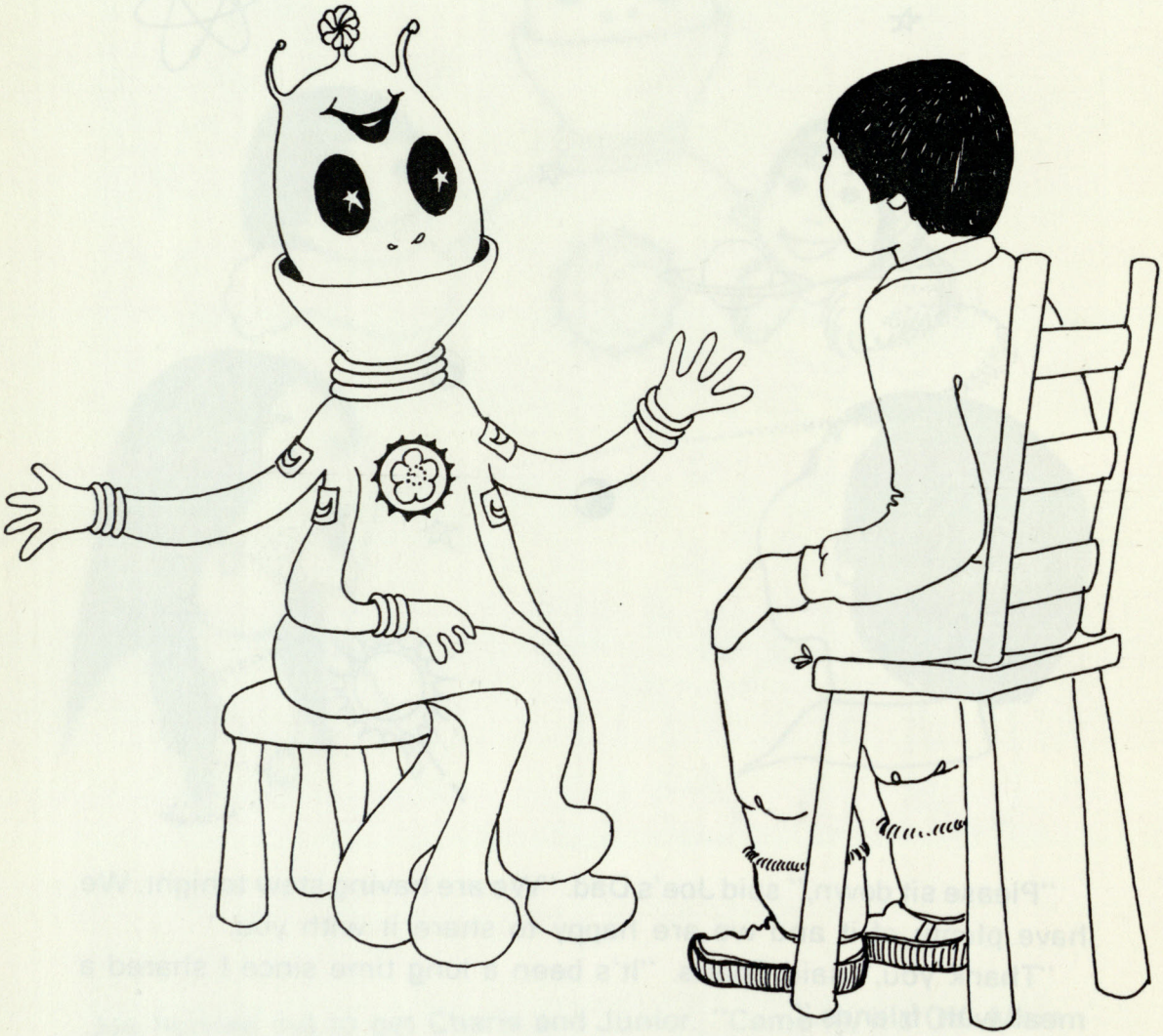


"Please sit down," said Joe's Dad. "We are having stew tonight. We have plenty of it and we are happy to share it with you."

"Thank you," said Charis. "It's been a long time since I shared a meal with friends."

"How long have you been here on Earth, Charis?"

"I have been here about thirty of your earth days. I was lucky to be able to land here. The oil came out of my astrogator and without it, I'm lost."



"We have oil. After we eat, we'll look at your astrogator and see what kind of oil it needs."

"What kind of animal are we eating," asked Charis?

"It's rabbit," said Mother.

"I know what a rabbit is, but I have never seen one. I never expected to taste rabbit. This food is very good."

"Mom is a good cook. This stew has other things in it besides rabbit. The orange things are carrots, the red things are tomatoes, and the little white things are rice. I think I could eat a whole pot full of stew!"

Dad and Charis finished eating. "Let's get to work," said Dad. "Where's your astrogator?"

"It's on my ship. Would you like to come out with me and see the ship?"

"Yes, if you don't mind, I'd like to see your ship."

Dad put on his mukluks and parka. He looked out of the window. "It's dark and it's very cold but it isn't snowing and there is no wind. How far is it to your ship, Charis?"

"I think that it is about two of your miles."

"We'll take the sno-go then."

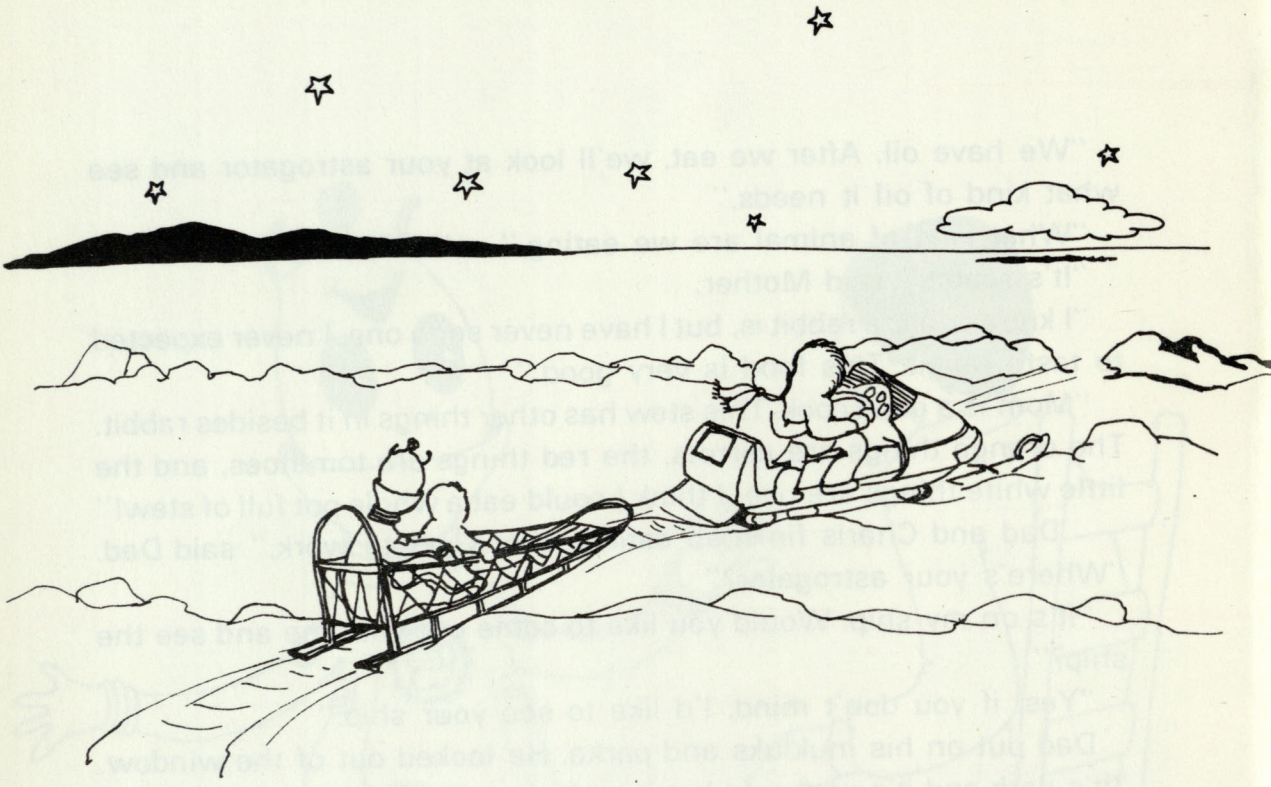
"Dad, can we go with you?"

"Ask Charis, it's his spaceship."

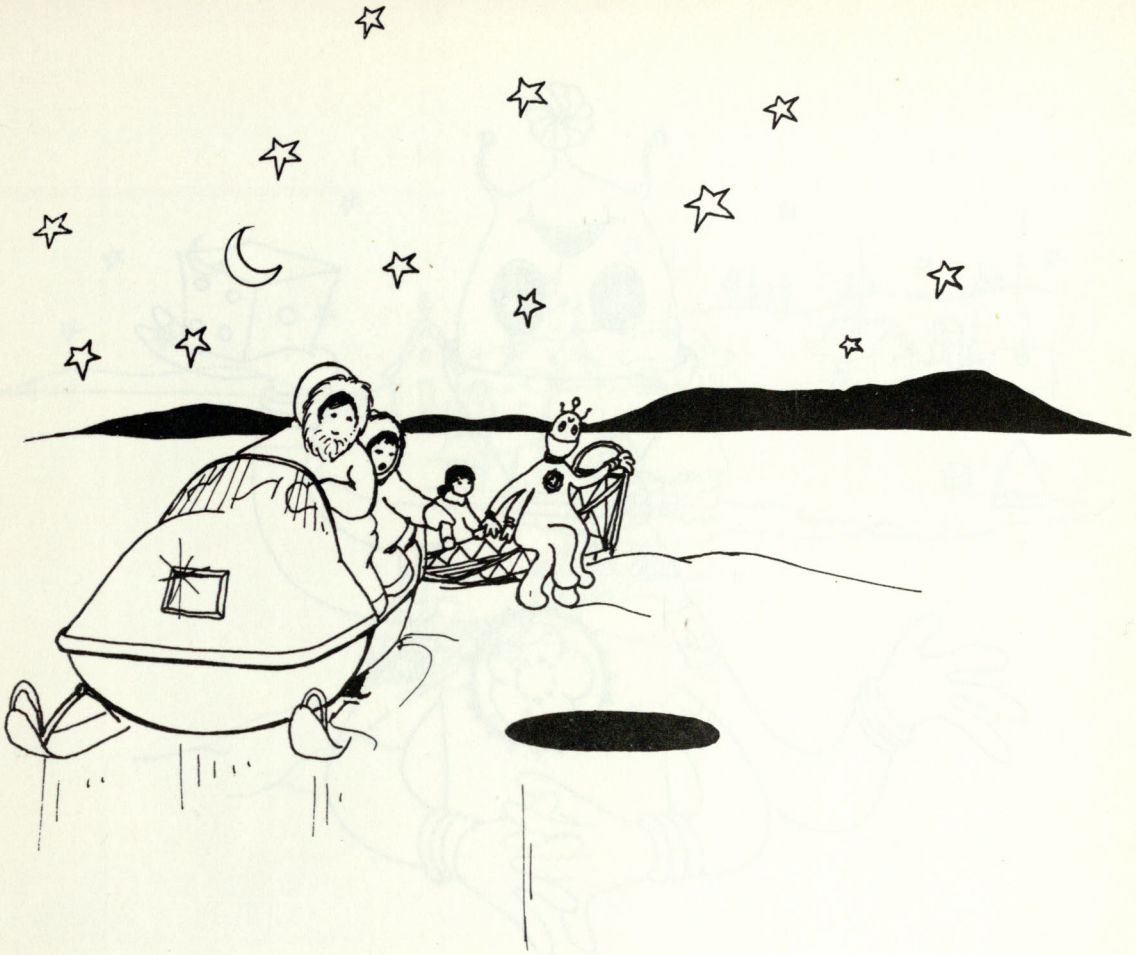
"Charis, can we go with you and Dad?"

"It's all right with me. After being alone for so long, I like to have friends with me."

"Joe, if you are coming, go and tell Junior's folks where he is. While you're gone, I'll hook the sled to the sno-go. Hurry back!"



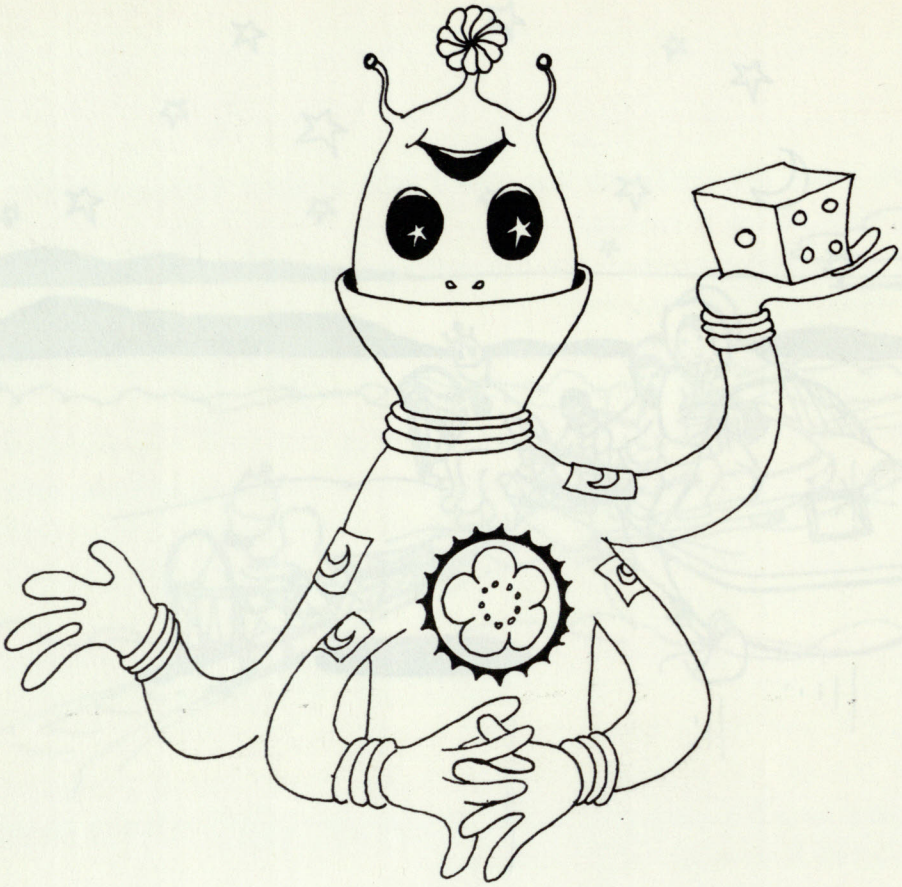
Dad pulled the sled over and hooked ti onto the sno-go. He started the motor and turned on the lights. Charis got in the sled with Junior. Joe rode with Dad to give directions. It was a much shorter trip on the sno-go than it had been on foot.



They stopped when they came to the smooth ice.

Charis said, "This happened when I landed. My spaceship was hot and it melted the snow. It's all right to drive on it. But don't get off the sno-go when we get to the hole. Let me get off first."

Dad drove the sno-go slowly across the ice. He stopped close to the edge of the hole and waited for instructions from Charis.



Charis took the little box out of his pocket and pushed a button. Then he said, "Take my hands so that you won't fall. Step off into the hole and we'll go down to the door."

They reached the bottom of the hole. Charis pushed another button and the door opened. They went in and walked down the hall until they reached the control room.

"Here's the astrogator," said Charis. The oil came out of it through this little hole."

"Dad looked at the astrogator. He said, "I think we could put oil back into it if we can find the right kind of oil."

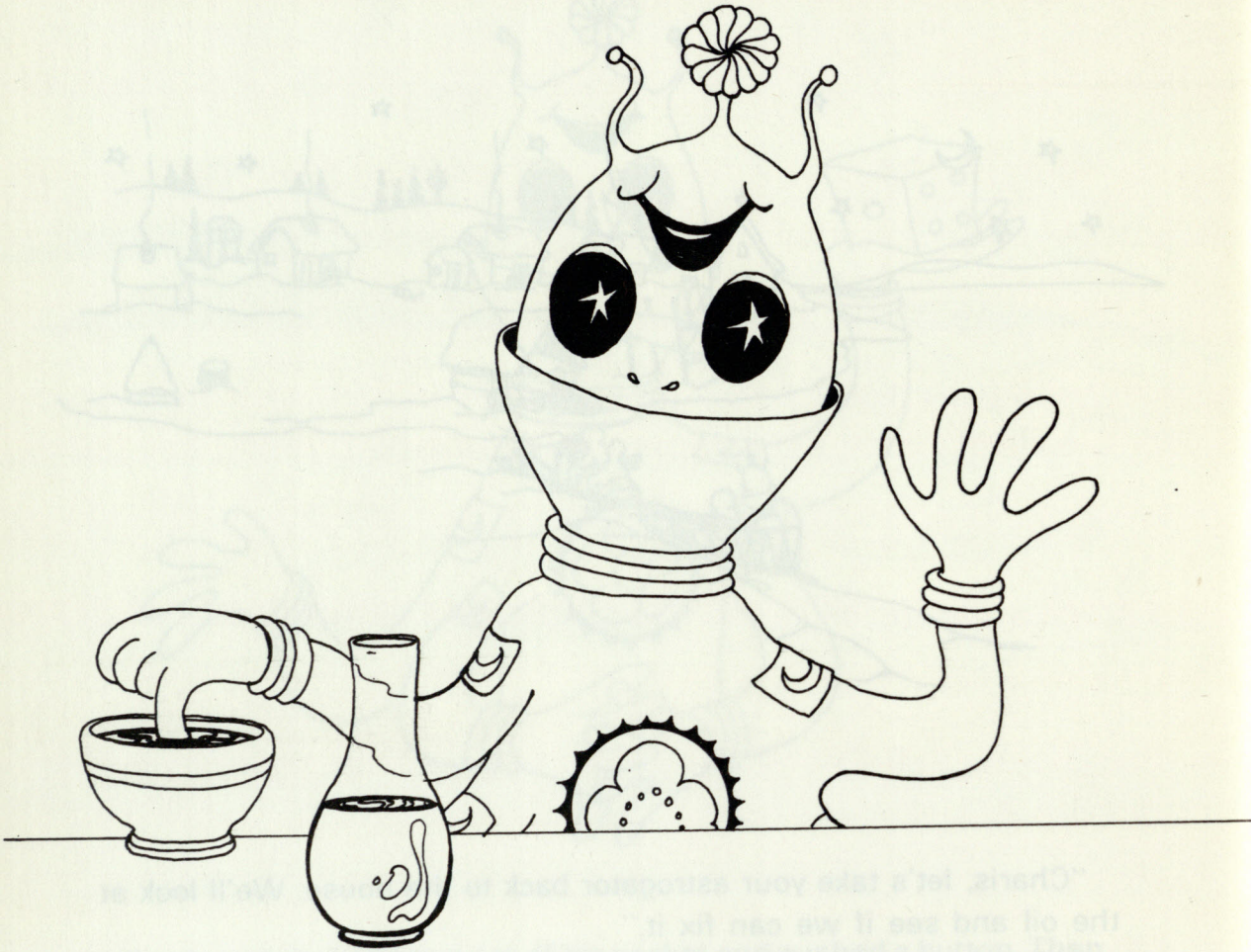
"Charis, let's take your astrogator back to the house. We'll look at the oil and see if we can fix it."

"All right, we can take it with us. But I'll have to hold it because it must be kept warm."

Back they went the way they came. They went into the house and set the astrogator in the center of the table. Then Dad brought all the kinds of oil he had.

Charis looked at each kind of oil. He poured out a little and smelled it. Each time he shook his head saddly. None of the oil would work.

Mother came in. She said, "Have a bite to eat while you sit here. Maybe you can think of something else to try." She set a plate of dried caribou and a little bowl of seal oil on the table.

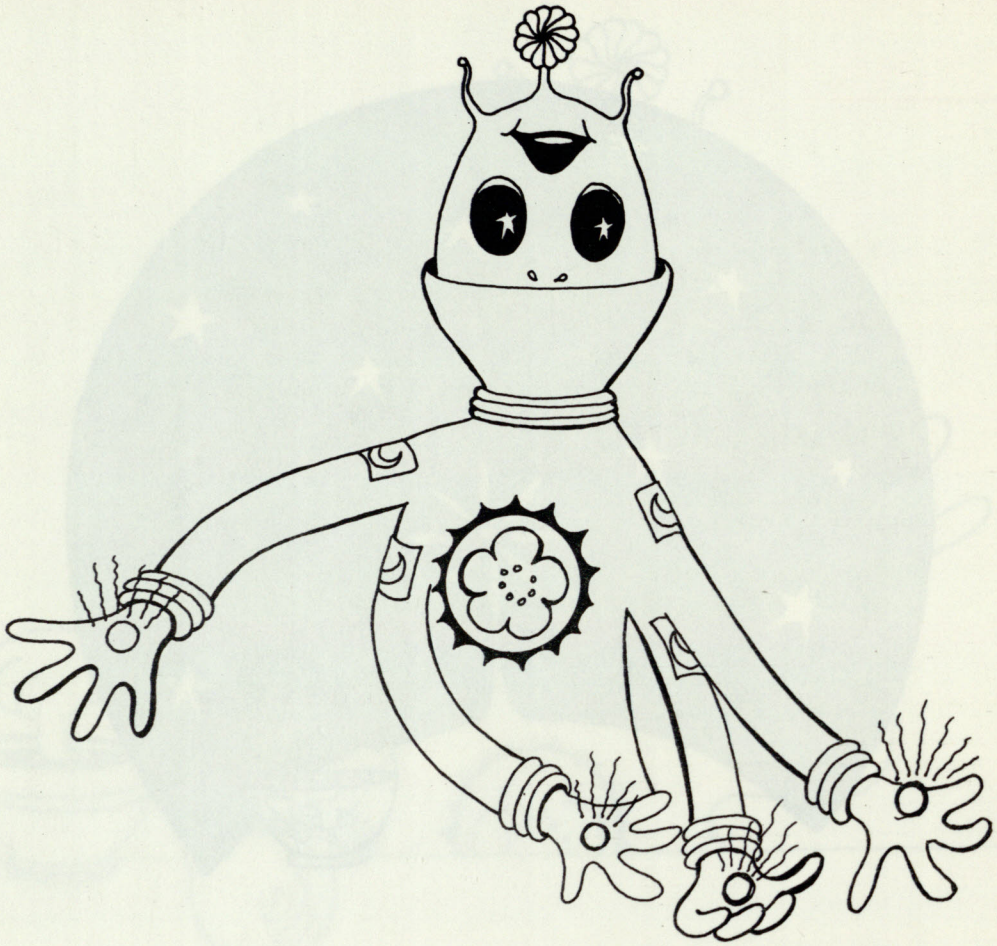


Dad looked at the seal oil. "Charis," he said, "Look at this seal oil! I'll bet it's just what we're looking for!"

Charis looked at the seal oil. He put his finger in the bowl and felt it. He smelled it. "It's just right," he said. "If you can put it in the astrogator, I can go home!"

Dad found a way to fill the astrogator with the oil. The little needle floated free in the center. Dad plugged the little hole so the oil could not run out again. Then he gave Charis a bottle of seal oil. "If the oil runs out of your astrogator again, you can fill it up."

"Thank you," said Charis. "You have made it possible for me to go home! As much as I like you and your world, I wouldn't be happy living here."



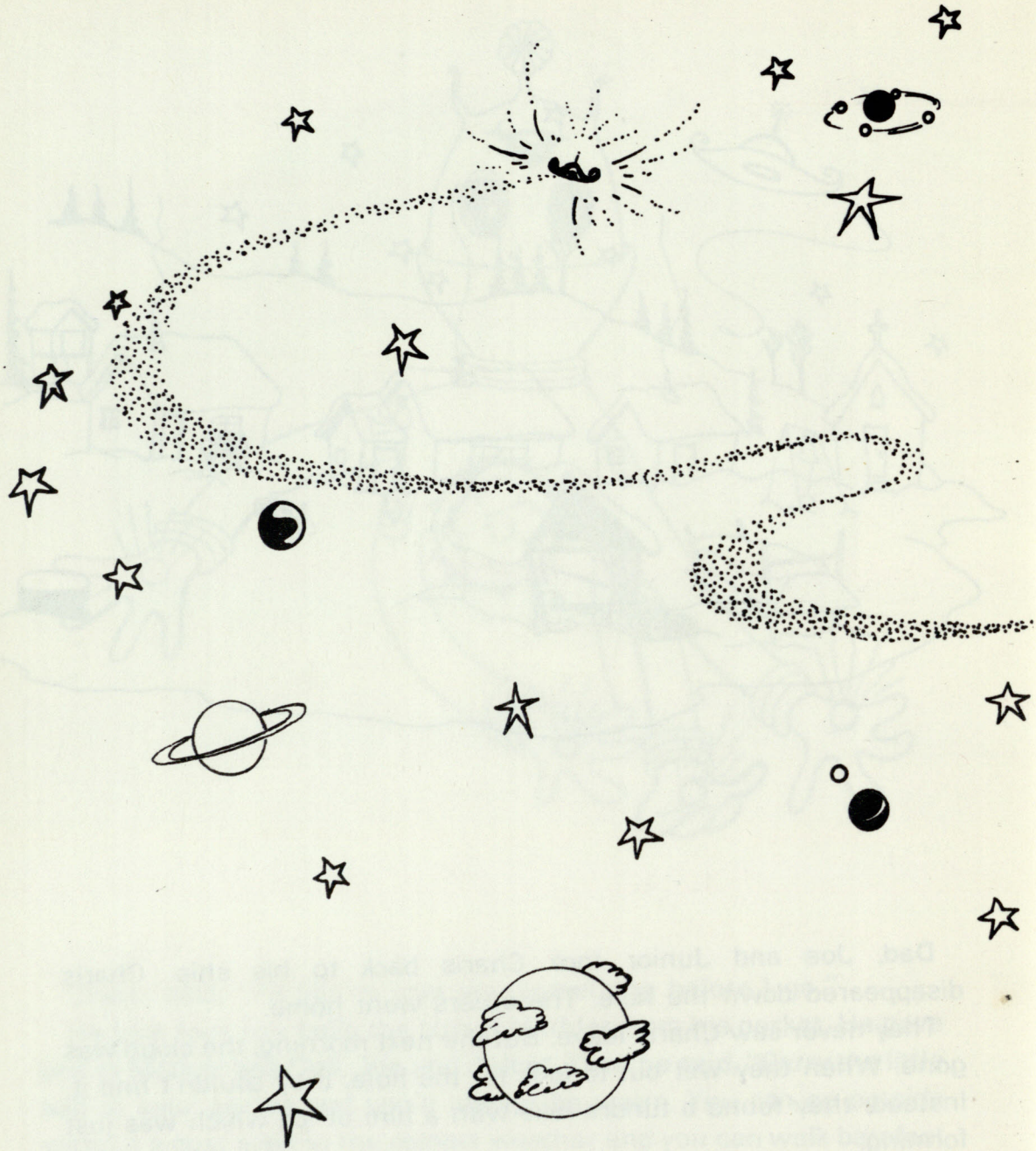
Charis said, "I'd like to give you something before I go."

He took four tiny balls the size of marbles from his pocket. He gave one to Mother and Dad, Joe and Junior. Then he said, "Carry the little ball in your pocket and you'll always be warm. You can go outside without a coat even in the coldest weather and you can walk barefoot in the snow. The little ball will work for your lifetime, but it will only work for you. No one else can use it."

Dad, Joe and Junior took Charis back to his ship. Charis disappeared down the hole. The others went home.

They never saw Charis leave. But the next morning, the cloud was gone. When they wet out to look for the hole, they couldn't find it. Instead, they found a tundra lake with a film of ice which was just forming.

"Goodbye, Charis, on your trip to the stars. We'll always remember you."



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