



On the longest night

of the year in the frozen icescape of the Arctic, the mother white bear gave birth to her single boy cub. Although the sun would not rise above the horizon, the little cub brought sunshine to the heart of his mother. In years long past, large healthy mother bears had always given birth to twin cubs, but now, in the mid-twenty-first century, mother bears were smaller, and their little cubs were born alone. Still, the mother love was the same, and she and her little boy cub lay nestled in their winter den, deep in the snowdrift along the ice-packed shoreline.

Mother Bear nursed her healthy son in the huddled warmth of their ice cave for many months so that he could grow strong and big. While she had not eaten since last fall and would not eat again until spring, which is natural for mother bears, she was able to provide nourishing milk for her cub son throughout the cold winter while the frigid winds blew, icy with bitterly cold temperatures. The ice cave was the cub's nursery, where he was fed, protected and loved by his mother.

When spring came to the island chains along Baffin Bay, Mother Bear introduced Cub Bear to the Arctic world. Even though Mother Bear was very hungry, having lost one third of her weight, Cub Bear was well fed, and delighted at his new world. Never during the long winter in the snow den had he imagined so many sights and sounds and smells among the rough and tumble of pushed-up sea ice, snow drifts, and rock outcroppings that followed the shoreline. While Mother Bear began her search for sea swimmers along the air holes and cracks in the ice, Cub Bear bounced and ran and rumbled along, often bumping into his mother just like the clumsy, goofy little boy cub that he was. Whenever he was hungry, Mother Bear was close by for a meal of warm milk.

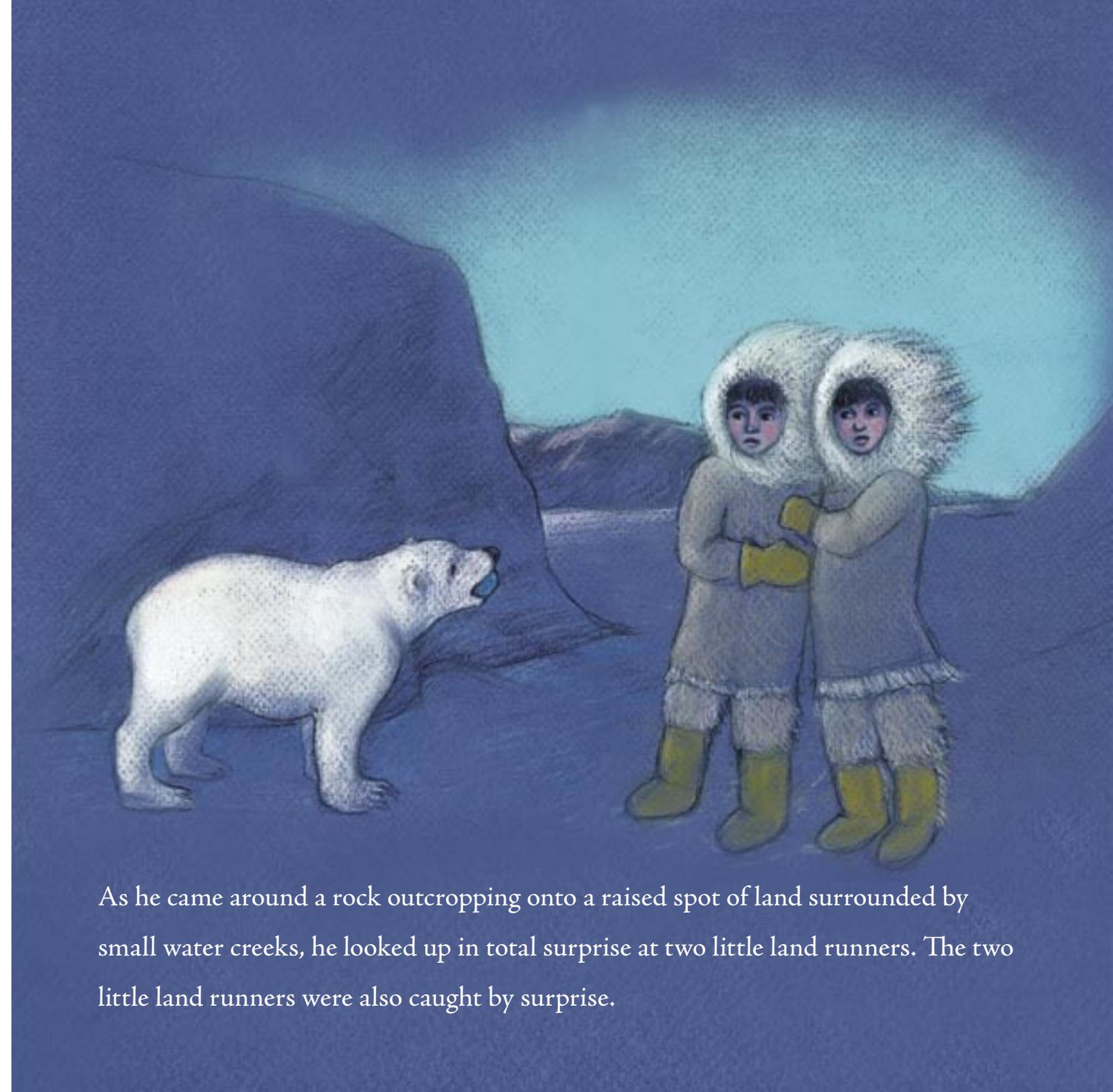


~Cub Bear was looking everywhere in his new and wonderful world, and soon he began to marvel at the sea swimmers, the land runners, and the sky fliers that he encountered each day while Mother Bear was looking for food. Mother Bear was able to catch a sleeping sea swimmer, which seemed very tasty, and this food also helped Mother Bear to end her eight-month hunger fast. Cub Bear was happy to see how eating the sea swimmer had helped to raise his mother's spirits with this first breakfast of the year.

One day in the summer, when his mother had been sleeping for a very long time, Cub Bear decided, just for fun, to take a walk around the area to see if he could find any land runners or sky fliers to play with, or even a sea swimmer to play Wait and Chase. So he walked around the rock outcroppings and muddy coastal marshes, splashing and jumping and having a good time. And then he smelled it. It was the smell of the contraption, and Cub Bear remembered what his mother had so firmly said about how it might harm him.

Cub Bear's senses were on full alert as he sniffed around to see where the contraption might be. He walked around and around sniffing, and found a round egg of one of the sky fliers. Well, that was a good surprise, so he picked it up and carried it while he sniffed for the scent of the contraption. He noticed parallel lines in the earth that left a track from the water's edge to the uplands where the big valley and ice mountain were.

As he put his nose along the trail, he was convinced that indeed this was the same contraption smell he had memorized. Since he could not see the contraption, he was not really worried that his mother would be angry with him, so he trotted along and carried his new egg in his mouth.



As he came around a rock outcropping onto a raised spot of land surrounded by small water creeks, he looked up in total surprise at two little land runners. The two little land runners were also caught by surprise.

Inuits lived in the natural way with the other animals of the Arctic. That is why, every year, the community nurse tested all the children for these poisons. Some children were allowed to eat fish only once a week. The storytellers had told all the children that long ago the ice pack never melted. As time went on, the Earth got warmer from the factories and cars burning off carbon dioxide, causing something that was called 'global warming.' "Now," they said, "there are little areas of partial ice in the winter. Since there is less ice, the seals that make the icy waters their home have moved away. Without the ice and the seals, the great white bear has no food and no habitat, so they are dying off."

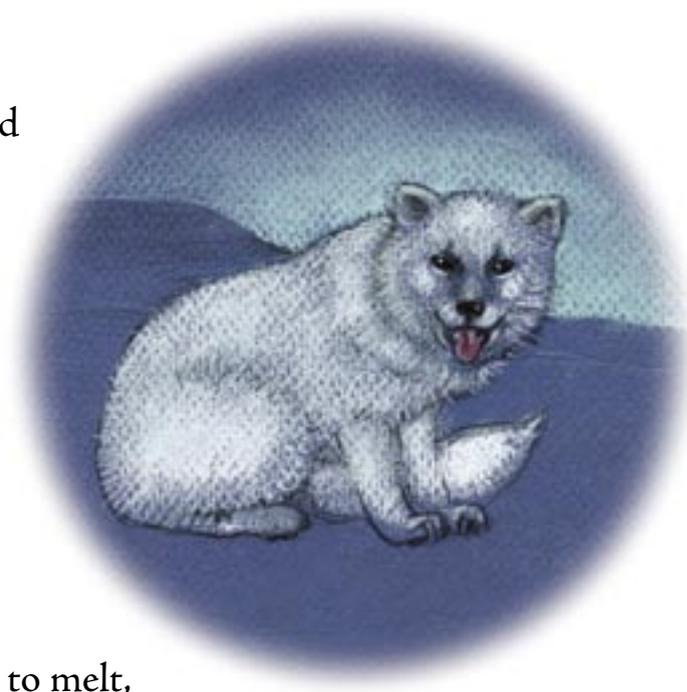
The twins, however, also remembered stories of white bears eating people, even children, and these thoughts sat in the back of their minds. So they were hardly ready to believe their eyes when they ran into the bear cub.

But since all three were looking at each other, it must have been real. Olneg knew it was real when he reached out and picked up the shore-bird egg, which delighted Cub Bear very much. Wanata then reached into her parka pocket and pulled out a ball made of seal fur that she and her brother used to play Catch. When she tossed it to the bear cub, he bounded over the rocks and ice to pick it up and throw it back towards the children.



In the Arctic, where the polar bears live, mercury, pesticides and chemical toxins are collected, after flowing from industrial countries, factories and power plants in the southern latitudes. Poisons accumulate in fish, which are eaten by seals, which are in turn eaten by polar bears.

White bears had been a major part of the Inuit ways for millennia, providing food and clothing to the people. It had always been said by the old storytellers that the Inuits' destiny was interwoven with that of the white bears.



“Boy, they all seemed to die off so fast,” Oltva exclaimed. “First, the ice pack began to melt, and then seals no longer came with the ice. And then the white bear population began to drop off, and probably no more than a dozen or so are left,” he continued. “I heard the scientists with the Wildlife Service down at the community center say they estimated that there were ten times more polar bears in the zoos around the world than there are here in the Arctic Circle. It makes my heart sad that my children may never see a white bear in our land.” Then, looking up at his brothers with a wink in his eye, he jested, “Well at least that means there are more fish for us to hunt and sell for money. At least we are still surviving up here, in the farthest north land of the people, *Nunavut* – our land.”

The twins, with unleashed emotion, both exclaimed, “Oh father, oh father, we have seen the white bear, but it was small and young like us!”

“What?” the father turned his head to look back at the children. Their uncles turned their heads around too. “What silliness are you saying? You know it is not of our tribe to tell falsehoods. You know *iliqqusiq* – the Inuit way of tradition!”

“No, no, father, it is true,” both children echoed and sat up straight while they testified solemnly with hands on their hearts. “We played with him for two days when we first came to set up the new camp.”

“What?” barked their father. “You played with a white bear cub and did not tell us? Why, that is terrible.”

With a furrowed brow he looked back again and questioned, “You probably did not tell us so we could not tell you not to go near the cub white bear. Oh children, you could have been killed.”



“No, no father, it was perfectly safe. We never touched it... but we could have,” said Wanata shyly to her scolding father.

“We played Hand Pull and Give and Take. Except he ate the fish,” giggled the young boy, which made his sister giggle too, as she added, “It was great fun, father, really, and you would have had a good time too.”

“I’ll bet I would,” said the father as he gave a knowing look to his brothers who were shaking their heads in disbelieving unison. “I believe you twins, because you have never broken the truth code with me before, and you obey the truth rules of the tribe and *iliqqusiq*. But you must remember that the cub’s mother, who was undoubtedly very near by, could have killed you. Obviously, she was up-wind or she would have sensed you, lucky for both of you. She would play Hand Pull with you, all right, just before she served you as supper to her cub.”

“You had an experience,” he went on, “that can only mean some strong totem is communicating with you two and that could mean either great danger or great fortune for your futures. We will meet with our shaman when we reach the southern community,” he declared, “to learn the meaning behind this strange encounter with the bear cub.”

And with a look of stern wisdom, he said that the matter was closed. For the rest of the journey back south to their winter village, they spoke no more of the children’s fantastic tale.