

The Day That

by Susan Yoder Ackerman



When it got so dark I couldn't tell the difference between my friend Sam and his black dog, Jessie, I always knew what was coming—the end of the fun.

"Steven!" Mom would call. "Time to come in!"

I used to just WISH the sun would keep shining. That the day would never end. That Sam and I could play and play all the way till morning!

Funny thing, I got my wish! This summer Sam and I got to play outside and the day never ended. Unless you count when I finally fell asleep with the morning sun shining on our tent.

I got my wish but I had to go way up north to Alaska to do it. Mom and I flew from Virginia to visit Sam's family, after they moved to a house near Anchorage.

We landed about nine o'clock. That's past my bedtime, but when we got off the plane, it didn't look like bedtime at all. The hot sun was high in the sky. People were wearing shorts.

"Sure doesn't look like night," I said. "Doesn't even look like Alaska. Where's the snow?"



Lasted All Night

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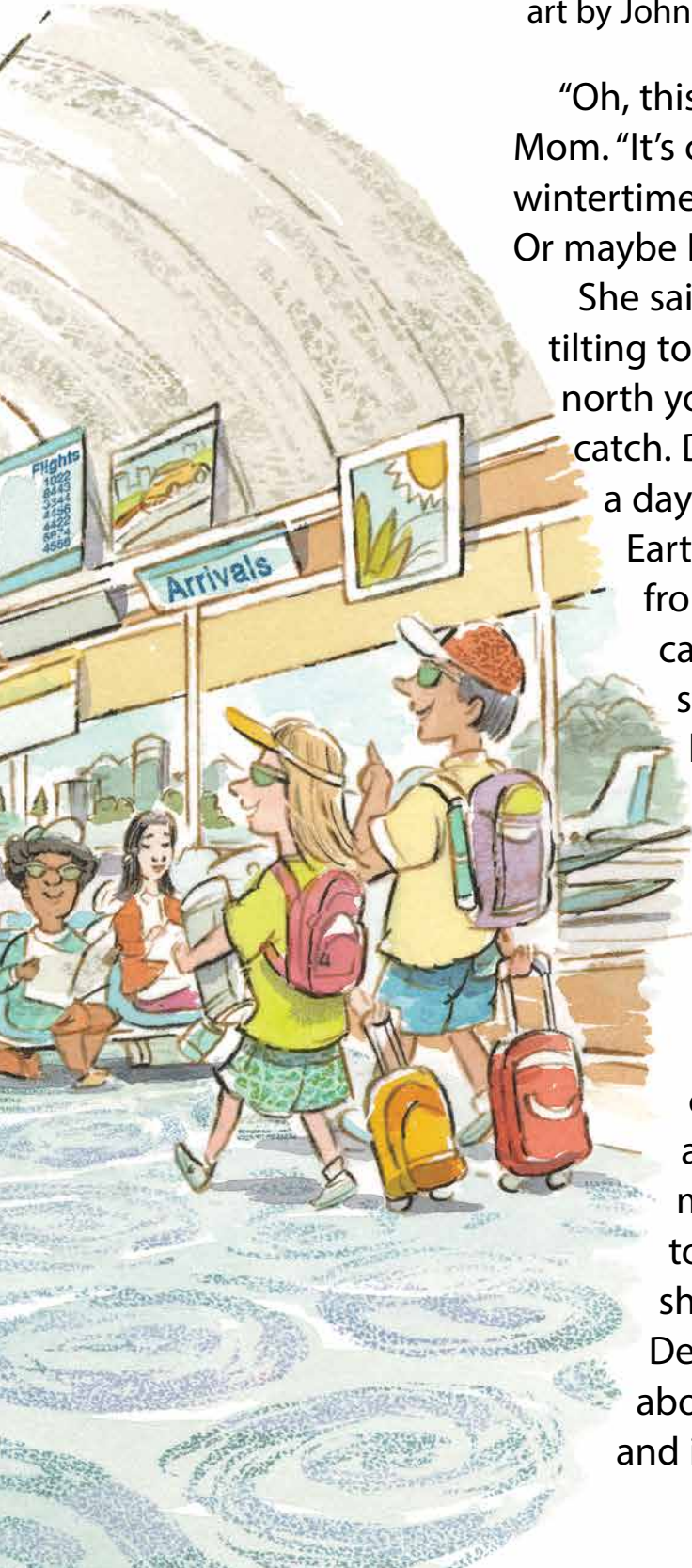


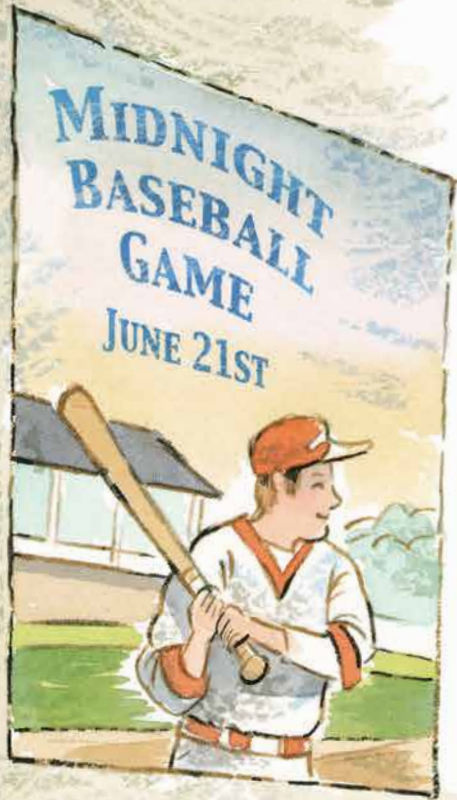
art by John Nez

"Oh, this is summertime Alaska!" said Mom. "It's completely different from wintertime. You can thank the sun for that. Or maybe Earth."

She said that the north half of Earth is tilting toward the sun now. The farther north you live, the more sunlight you catch. Days get longer and longer until a day comes when the north half of Earth gets ready to start tilting away from the sun again. On that day, called the summer solstice, the sun stays high in the sky for a very long time. In Anchorage, it never really gets dark. The sun dips below the horizon for a little while, but soon it's sunrise again.

"And that's today, June 21, the longest day of the year," said Mom. "People around the world celebrate the solstice with bonfires and dancing and staying up till morning. They know that after today, each day will get a little shorter until it's winter again. In December, the sun hardly peeks above the horizon in Anchorage, and it's dark all day long."



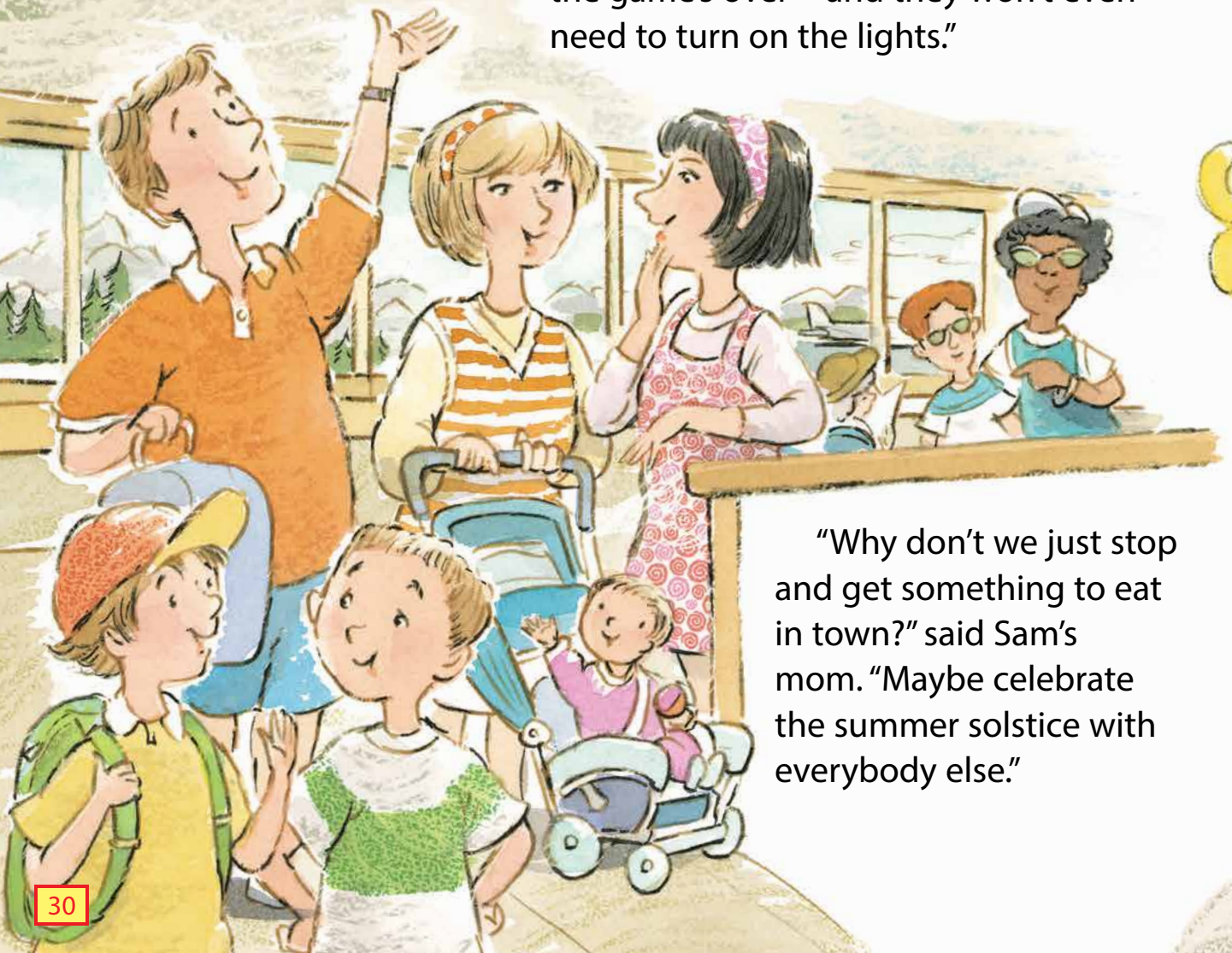


I shivered just to think about such gloomy winter days. "I'm glad we're visiting in summer," I said. I hoped that at last Sam and I would get a long day with no bedtime.

Sam's family met us at the airport.

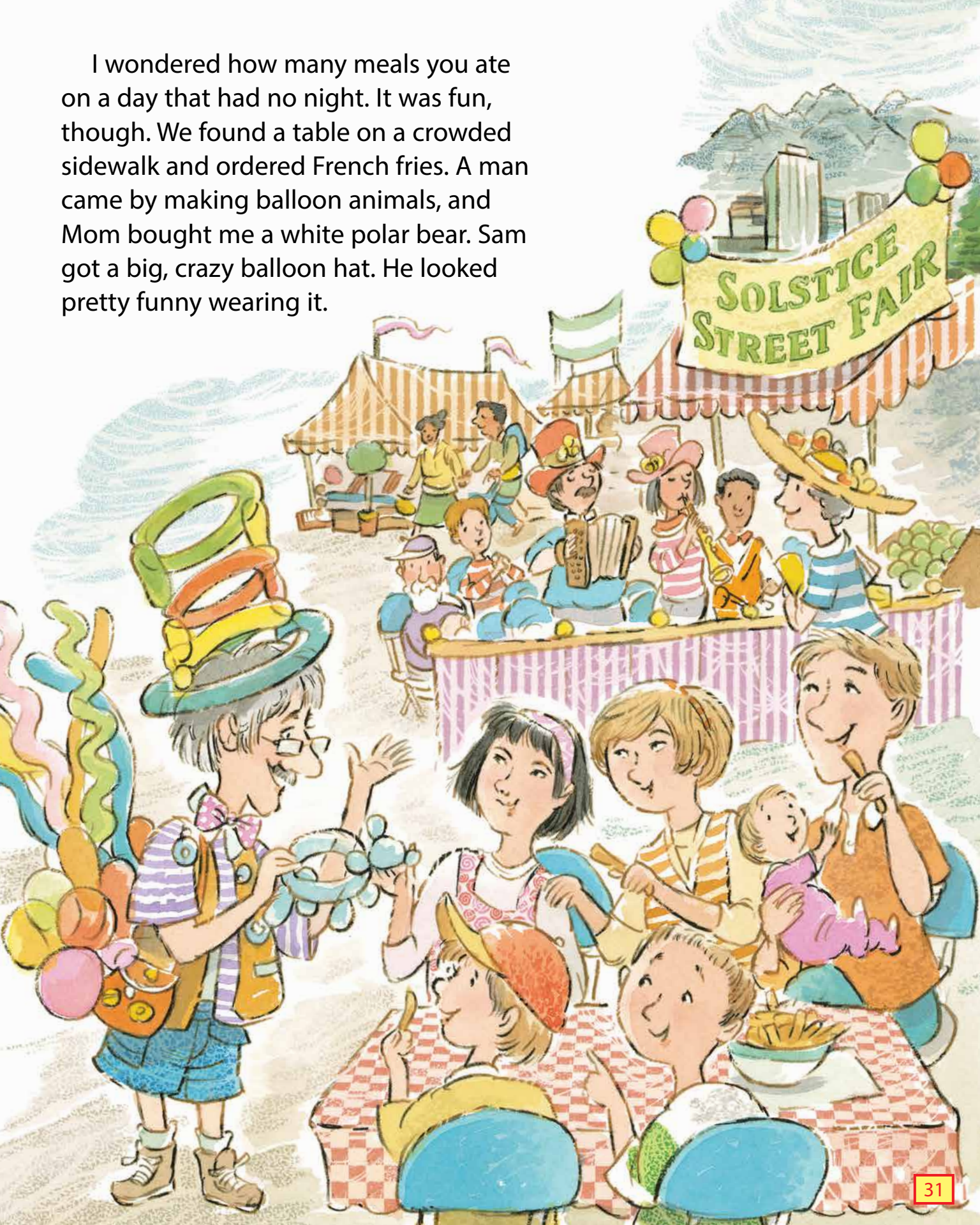
"I have a tent set up in the backyard," Sam said. "We can play outside all night! It won't get dark."

"The night is young," said Sam's dad. "How about watching a midnight baseball game? The sun will set while they're playing and rise again before the game's over—and they won't even need to turn on the lights."



"Why don't we just stop and get something to eat in town?" said Sam's mom. "Maybe celebrate the summer solstice with everybody else."

I wondered how many meals you ate on a day that had no night. It was fun, though. We found a table on a crowded sidewalk and ordered French fries. A man came by making balloon animals, and Mom bought me a white polar bear. Sam got a big, crazy balloon hat. He looked pretty funny wearing it.



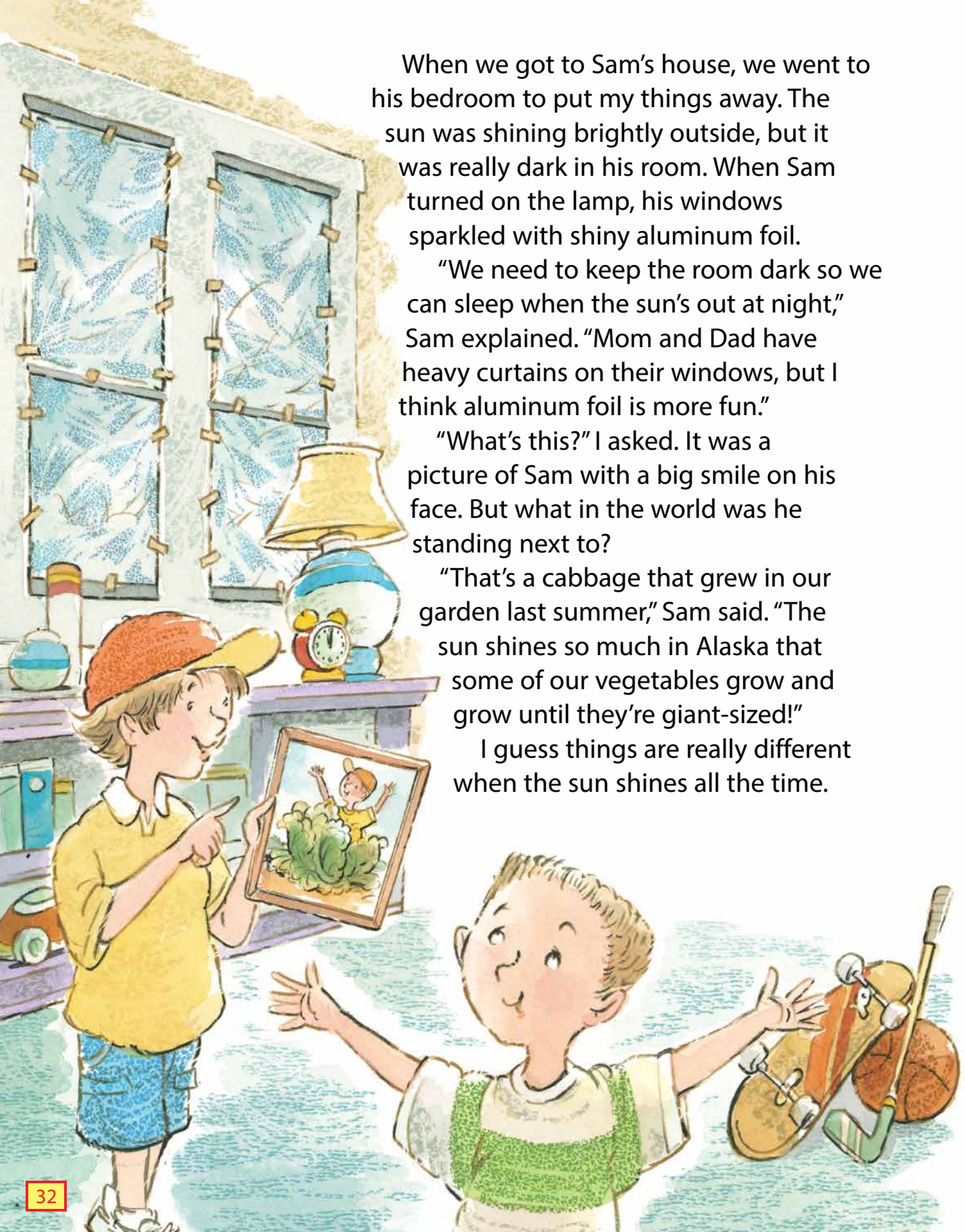
When we got to Sam's house, we went to his bedroom to put my things away. The sun was shining brightly outside, but it was really dark in his room. When Sam turned on the lamp, his windows sparkled with shiny aluminum foil.

"We need to keep the room dark so we can sleep when the sun's out at night," Sam explained. "Mom and Dad have heavy curtains on their windows, but I think aluminum foil is more fun."

"What's this?" I asked. It was a picture of Sam with a big smile on his face. But what in the world was he standing next to?

"That's a cabbage that grew in our garden last summer," Sam said. "The sun shines so much in Alaska that some of our vegetables grow and grow until they're giant-sized!"

I guess things are really different when the sun shines all the time.





"Come on!" Sam yelled. We ran into his backyard and dived into the tent. It was cozy in there with our sleeping bags and some games. I looked out a little screen window at a clear, running stream. Jessie followed us in, jumping and barking.

The sun was behind the trees now, but the sky was still bright. Sam's mom called, "Time for dessert!" The picnic table was loaded with blueberry pie.

The pie was good, but I felt kind of sleepy. What time was it anyway? No one seemed to care. Sam's little sister was asleep in the stroller. I guess babies don't stay up all night, even on the longest day.



"I'm glad the bears left some berries for this delicious pie," said Mom.

Bears. I hadn't thought about bears. Maybe they grew as huge as the cabbages.

Sam's dad saw the look on my face. "Never seen a bear near here," he said. "They like to stay deep in the quiet woods and mountains where they fish and eat berries all summer long. They're getting ready to sleep through the long, snowy winter."

"Maybe that's what we're doing too," said Sam's mom. "Catching all the sunshine we can before the dark days come back."

"Come on!" said Sam. "Let's play while we can!"

Mom said it was five o'clock in the morning when Jessie and Sam and I finally went to sleep with the sun shining full on our faces. What a wonderful day—the day that lasted all night!

