

ONE

Oliver Crisp was only ten years old, but they had been a busy and exciting ten years, because Oliver's mother and father were explorers.

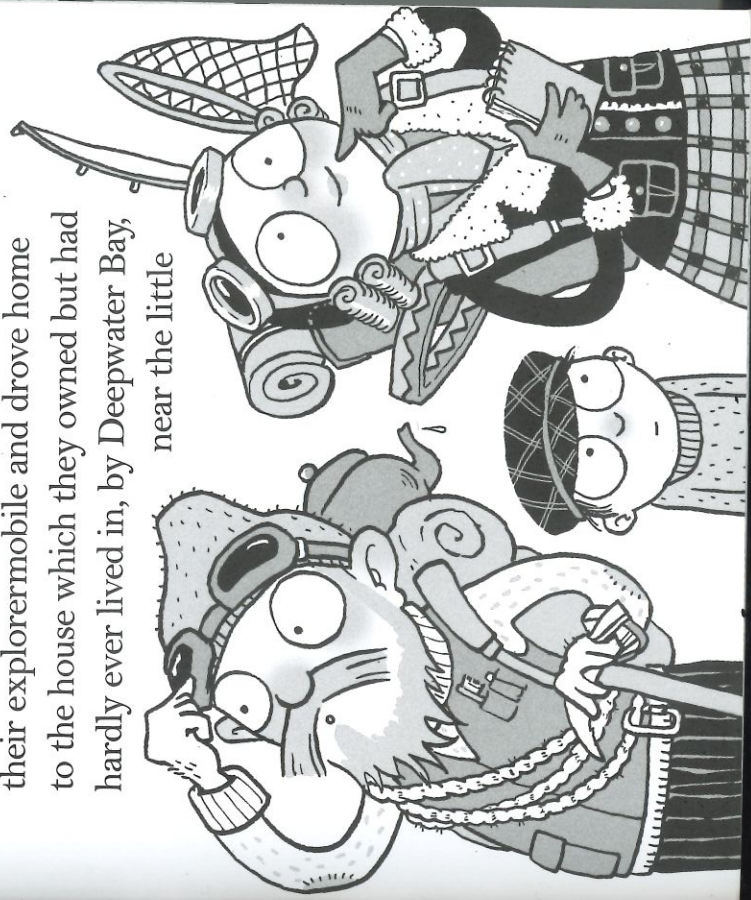
They had met on the top of Mount Everest.



They had been married at the Lost Temple of Amon Hotep, and had spent their honeymoon searching for the elephants' graveyard. And when young Oliver was born they simply bought themselves a back carrier and an off-road baby buggy and went right on exploring.

But at last there came a day when Mr and Mrs Crisp realized there was just nothing left to explore. They had trekked to the headwaters of all the great rivers, and stood on the summits of all the unconquered mountains. Thanks to them, the Lost City of Propacopaketl was lost no longer; the Mystery of the Mokele Mbembe Marshes had been solved. There were no more blank spaces left on the map.

So they packed their belongings aboard their explorermobile and drove home to the house which they owned but had hardly ever lived in, by Deepwater Bay, near the little



seaside town of St Porrocks. 'No more exploring for us,' they told each other sadly. 'It's time we settled down.'

Oliver wasn't sad, though. He was excited. He was tired of living the explorer's life. The house he was coming home to was one he'd only seen on holidays; brief two-week breaks before fresh expeditions. Ten years on the move! No time to make friends, or feel at home anywhere. No time to go to school. He'd never even had a proper bedroom of his own, just a bunk in the back of the explorermobile, and all his things were hidden away in trunks and storage boxes in the spaces under the explorermobile's seats. He thought it would be exciting to have a whole house to live in, and wake up every day to the same view. At Deepwater Bay he would have his own bedroom and bathroom, and he would be starting next term at the school in St Porrocks. (That might

not sound so good to you, but Oliver had never been to school, and he was excited about that, too.)

He perched between his parents as Mum steered the explorermobile carefully along the winding lanes. He was waiting for the moment when Deepwater Bay came in sight.

'It's not a very pretty house,' his mother reminded him. 'It's really rather old and creaky, and the wind blows right through it. It needs lots of work doing, but we never found the time. Or the money. There's not a lot of money in exploring.'

'OK,' said Oliver, but he didn't stop feeling excited.

They came over a sudden headland and there it was; the blue bay all dotted with shaggy, steep-sided islands. The house stood at the top of the beach. It was big and grey, with orange lichen dappling its roof.

'Wow!' said Oliver.

'Wow!' said his dad.
'Wow!' said his mum, stopping the
explorermobile on a curve of the steep
lane and just sitting there, staring in
sheer amazement.



'Wow!' they all three said again. Oliver was pleased that his parents sounded just as thrilled as he was. Then he looked at them, and saw that it was not the house that they were looking at, but all those scruffy islands in the bay.

'Where have *they* come from?' asked his father. 'I don't remember *them* ...'
Mum was rustling the map. 'They are not marked here!' she gasped.

'Nine ... ten ... fifteen ...' Dad muttered. 'They must be new islands! Volcanic, probably ...'

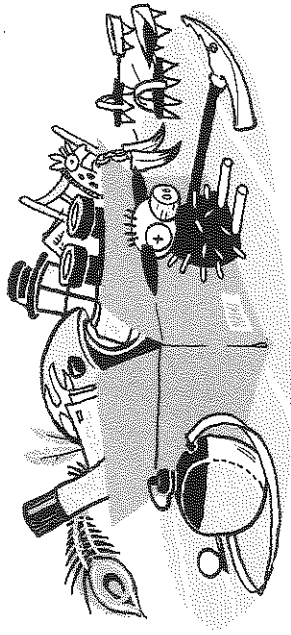
'Unmapped!' said Mum.

'Uncharted!' said Dad.

'Unexplored!' they whispered, both together.

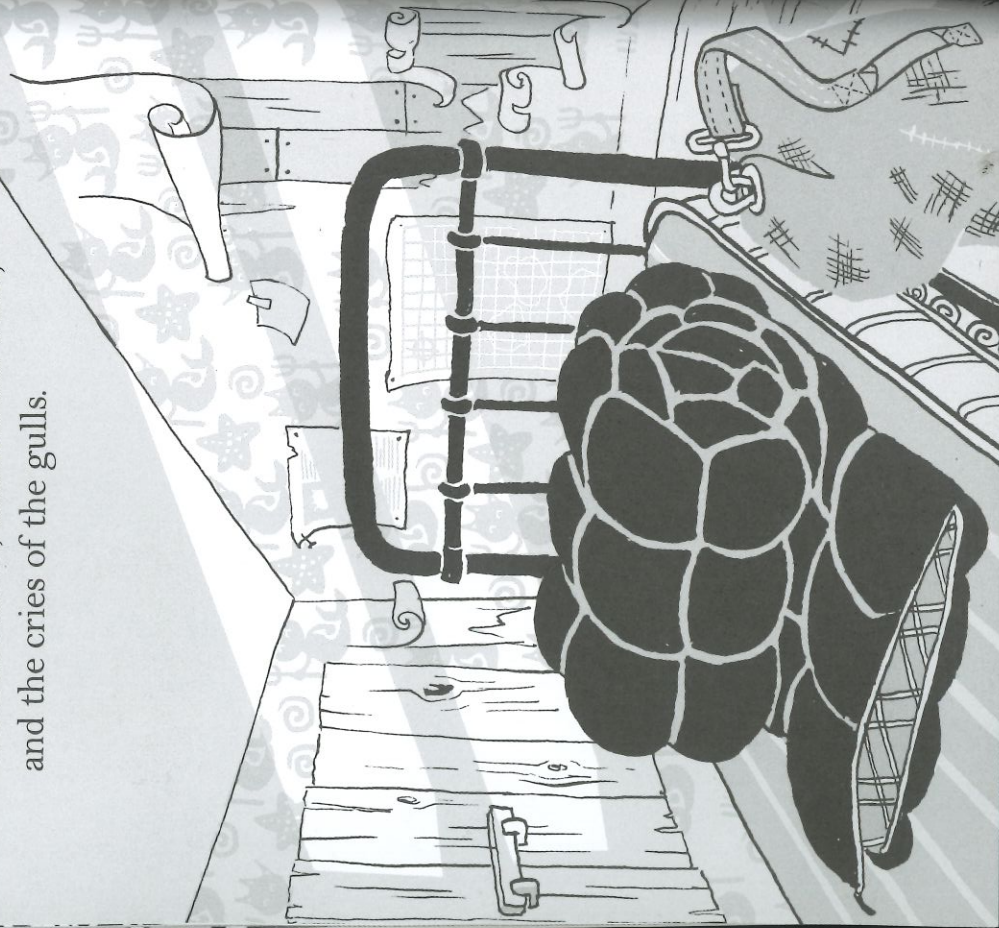
Oliver sighed. He'd seen them like this before, whenever they heard of a vanished city or a forbidden tomb. Still, he thought, at least they can explore these islands from home. He looked happily at the house while Mum,

with her eyes on the islands, started the explorermobile again and took it screeching down the zigzag lane to the beach.



Oliver started unpacking at once. While his mother and father fetched down their inflatable dinghy from the explorermobile's roof, he unlocked the house and carried boxes and bags and suitcases inside. He walked through the big, echoey, dimly familiar rooms, whisking dust sheets off the armchairs which had waited so long for someone to come and sit in them again. He ran

upstairs to his room and bounced on the bed. He loved his room already; the way the sunlight came into it and made a long golden stripe down the wallpaper. He opened the window to let in the air, and the sea wind, and the cries of the gulls.



'Oliver!' called his mother and father. They were down at the sea's edge, ready to go off and explore the new islands. They stood in the shallows, waving.



Their inflatable dinghy tossed between them as the waves broke under it.

'Oliver! Come with us!'

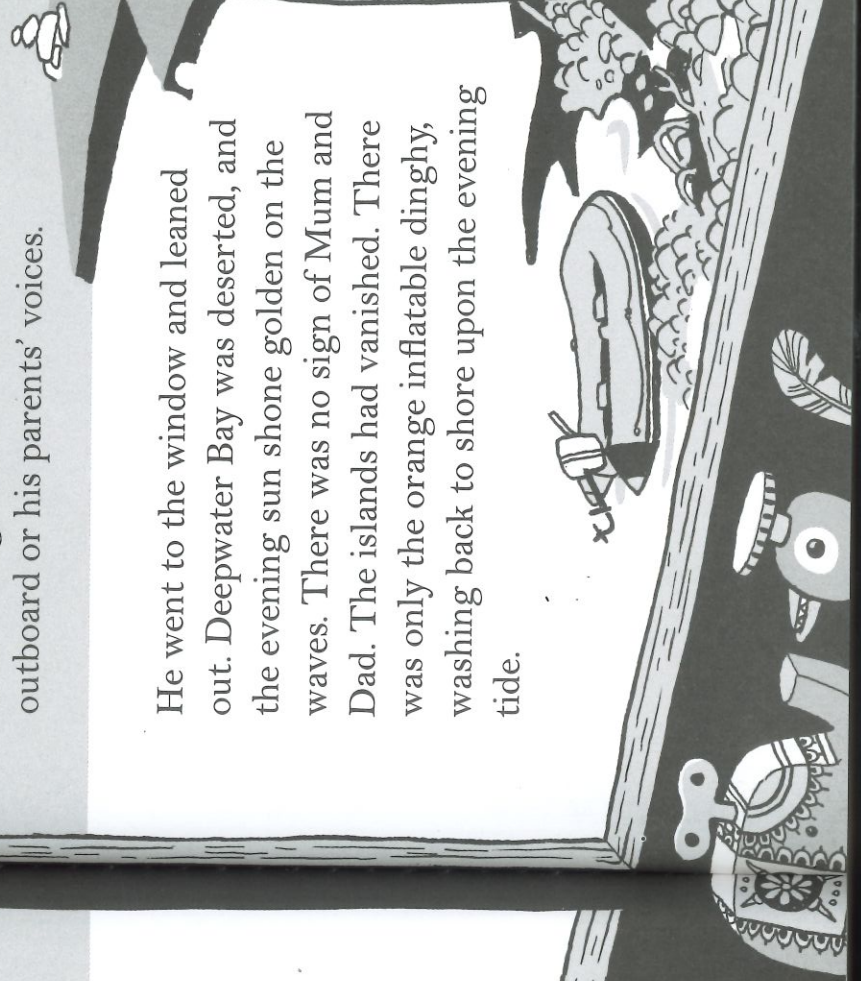
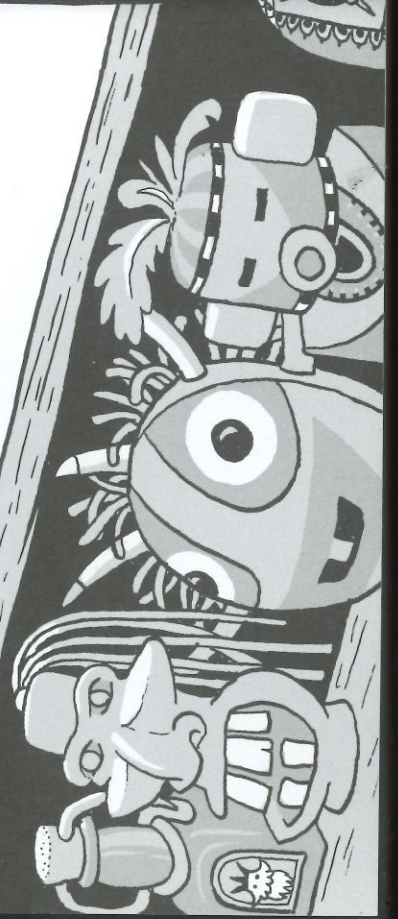
'I'm busy!' Oliver shouted back. 'Why don't you go and have a look around without me? I'll be all right.'

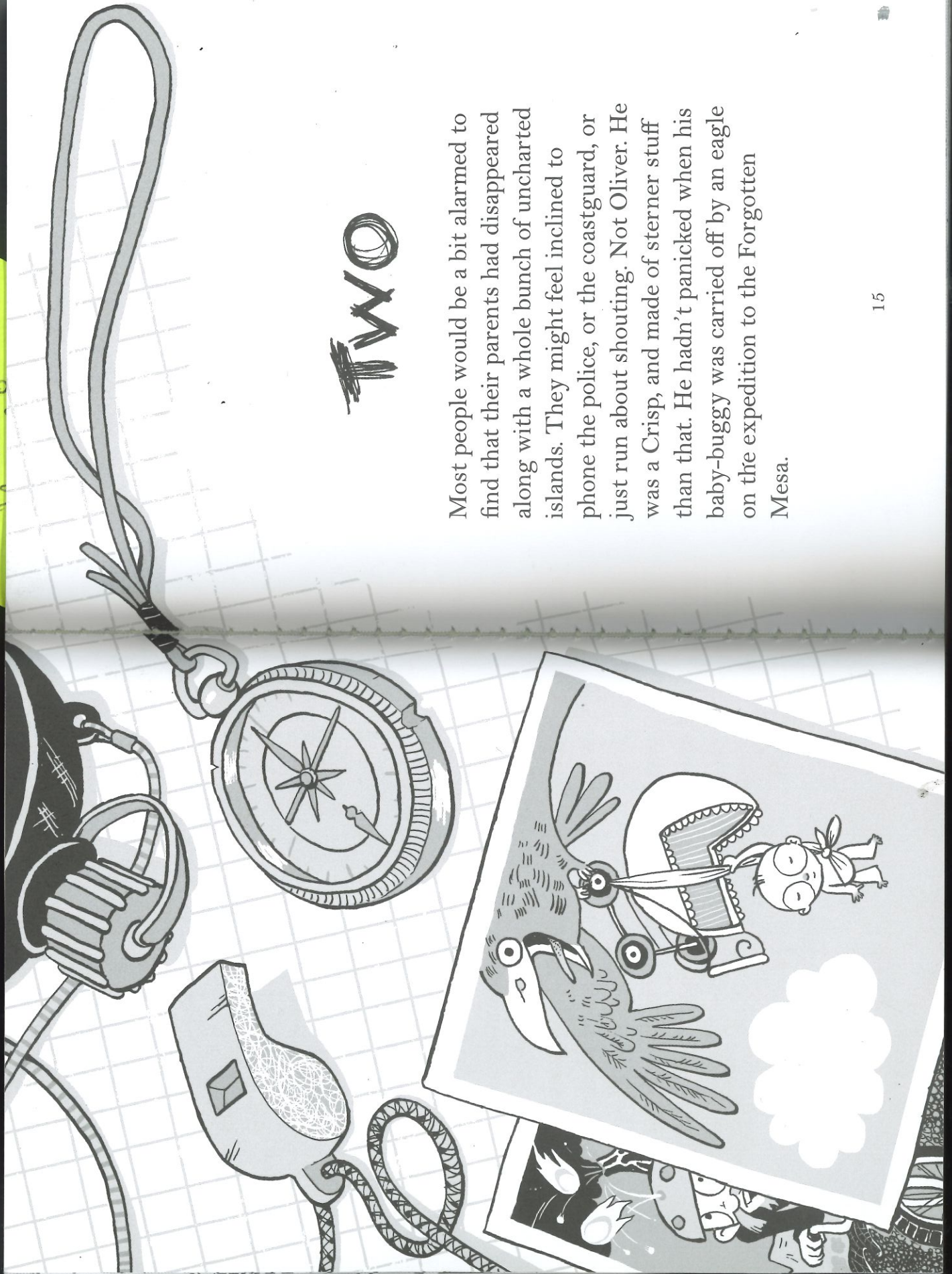
He sighed. He knew his parents loved him. It was just that, sometimes, he had the feeling that they loved exploring more.

The little dinghy's outboard motor drowned out the seagulls with its angry-bee buzz as Mum steered through the surf. It circled a small island just offshore, then took off with a roar across the bay towards the larger ones.

Oliver brought his suitcase upstairs and opened it. Carefully he set out his favourite things on shelves and on the windowsill. He arranged his books on the shelf beside his bed. He hung up his clothes in the cupboard. The bar of sunlight moved along the wall. And suddenly Oliver realized that it was quite a long time since he'd heard the outboard or his parents' voices.

He went to the window and leaned out. Deepwater Bay was deserted, and the evening sun shone golden on the waves. There was no sign of Mum and Dad. The islands had vanished. There was only the orange inflatable dinghy, washing back to shore upon the evening tide.





TWO

Most people would be a bit alarmed to find that their parents had disappeared along with a whole bunch of uncharted islands. They might feel inclined to phone the police, or the coastguard, or just run about shouting. Not Oliver. He was a Crisp, and made of sterner stuff than that. He hadn't panicked when his baby-buggy was carried off by an eagle on the expedition to the Forgotten Mesa.

He hadn't lost his cool when his parents took him on that ill-advised cycling trip around the crater of Mount Firebelly ('But it's supposed to be an *extinct* volcano!' Dad had yelled, while lava-bombs bounced off their cycling helmets.) He had barely batted an eyelid when a bear stole his sleeping bag on the north face of Mount Rainier. He barely batted one now: just ran downstairs and out on to the beach, looking around in case his parents had come ashore without him noticing.

But the beach, in the wintry afternoon sun, was long and empty and completely parent-free. The orange dinghy rasped against the sand, down on the foreshore where the small waves kept spreading neat doilies of foam under it.

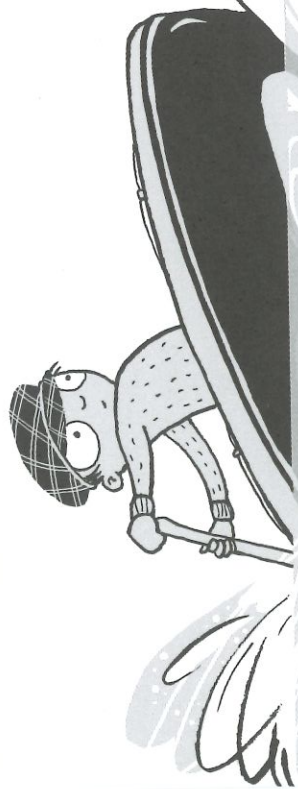
Oliver pulled it further up the beach and wondered what to do. Then he noticed that there was still one island left in the bay. It was the littlest and

lowest and least interesting of them, the one his mum and dad had ignored when they went motoring off to explore the taller ones. Even from the shore, with the low sun shining in his eyes, Oliver could see that they were not on it. But perhaps it held some clue to where they'd gone . . .

He ran back to the explorermobile and packed a rucksack with Useful Things. Then he locked the house up and put a note on the front door which read



How he hoped he would be!

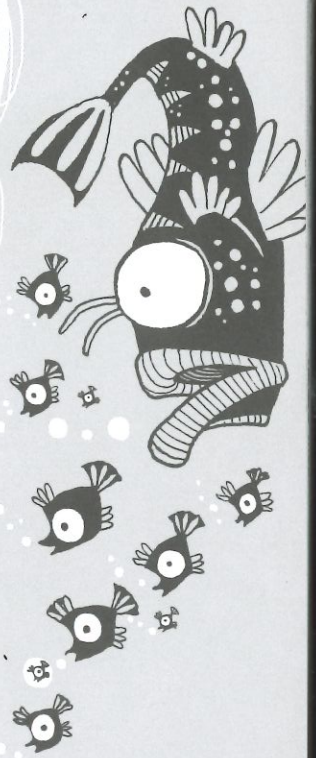


He scampered to where the dinghy waited, and shoved it out into the sea again. *Wap, wap* went the waves, slapping its blunt orange nose. Oliver heaved himself aboard. He couldn't work the outboard motor because his arms weren't strong enough to tug the starter cord, but there were oars stowed neatly on the bottom-boards and he pulled them out and started rowing. It didn't take him long to reach the island, where he



pulled the dinghy up on the sheltered, shoreward side.

The island was just as small as it had looked from the beach. Clumps of greyish grass sighed softly as the sea wind stirred them. There were snaggles of driftwood, festoons of weed, a length of old tarred rope. There was a ramshackle heap of twigs balanced on the pile of boulders which were the highest place on the island. That was all. It took Oliver less than



a minute to walk right across the island to the far shore, where he stood looking out to sea. All his hopes of finding clues faded, like the foam which kept washing around his toes and melting into the wet sand.

'Mum!' he shouted. 'Dad!'

The echoes came back at him from the cliffs around the bay. Echoes, but no reply.

'Mum!' he shouted, louder still. 'Dad!'

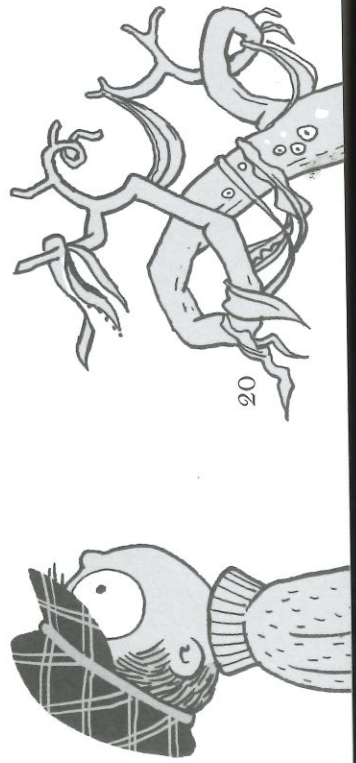
'Oh, put a sock in it, won't you?'

grumbled a creaky voice behind him.

'Some of us are trying to sleep!'

A pair of beady blue eyes were glaring at Oliver over the brim of that twig-heap on the island's crown. The heap was a nest, and the eyes belonged to the bird who owned it.

'But birds don't talk!' protested Oliver.



'Parrots do,' the bird said.

'Not really, not properly,' Oliver protested.

'And anyway, you're not a parrot.'

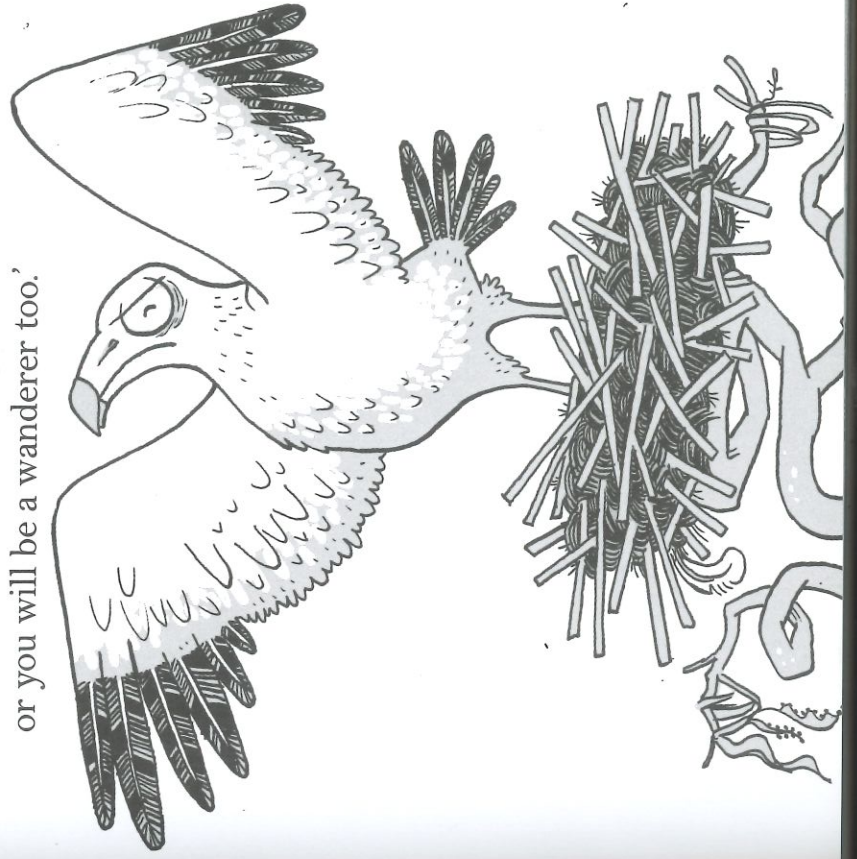
'Indeed I'm not,' the bird sniffed.

It stood up in its nest and spread its enormous, dirty-white wings. 'I am a

Wandering Albatross. *Diomedea exulans*.

Though you may call me Mr Culpeper.

And now you had best get back to shore, or you will be a wanderer too.'



'What does that mean?' wondered Oliver.

'Tsk,' the bird said, 'don't they teach you youngsters anything these days? Not all islands stay where you put them. Some move about. Here one minute, gone the next. This is one of them. That's why I nested on it, of course. I'm not stupid. Why go flapping about the world when I can just roost here and let the island do the wandering?'

Oliver looked down at the island. Between his feet he saw rock, sand, grit, dune-grass and ground-down seashells. It didn't look as if it were going anywhere.

'How do they move?' he asked.

'Who cares?' said Mr Culpeper, shrugging his wings.

'Where are they going?'

'Who knows?' said Mr Culpeper. 'But all the others have gone already, so this one won't stay much longer.'

As he spoke, the island shuddered. Small stones spilled and rattled, trickling down.

'Hop in your boat and be off with you,' said the albatross.

'Nof' said Oliver. 'Not me. I'm staying. Wherever those islands went, I must go too. My mum and dad were on one of them, you see.'

'That noisy couple?' said Mr Culpeper. 'Suit yourself, but you'd be better off without them, if you want *my* opinion.'

Oliver wasn't listening any more. The island lurched, almost throwing him off his feet. He crouched down. He curled his fingers and toes into the sand like roots, clinging on. The island sank a little. Water bubbled whitely around its edges. Then it turned slowly around and started to move out of Deepwater Bay, following the golden pathway that the evening sun had painted on the waves.