


A Call from *Antarctica*



Jo's dad is working in Antarctica. Jo's grandfather bought a radio transmitter because Jo is sad that she can't receive many messages from her dad. Unfortunately, they didn't have enough money to set up the radio antennae. Jo's principal, Mr Sadler, provided a solution to their problem by setting up a radio transmitter and tower at Jo's school and starting a radio club for the students. But Jo and Grandpa are still worried...

The school radio station was to have the call sign VK3 GBE and for days while it was being set up, nobody wanted to talk about anything else. The whole school watched while a work team set up a tall tower in the school grounds and Grandpa attached the antenna to it and answered the children's questions.

At first, Jo found it odd to cycle to school with Grandpa on his bike beside her, but after a few days she became used to it, especially as everyone called him Grandpa. As well as asking questions, the children swarmed in and out of the shed while he set up the equipment. One of the art classes painted RADIO SHACK on a board, and fastened it to the door. Other classes put up maps of the world; Jo and Grandpa put up one of Antarctica. Coloured pins would be used to mark every place reached by the radio. Mr Sadler wanted to have an official opening with parents attending. He planned to make a speech through the loudspeakers which were in every classroom, and Grandpa connected the transceiver to the speakers so that everyone would be able to listen in to an overseas transmission.

Late one afternoon, a week before the opening, Grandpa said, "Right, Jo. It's all ready. First call to the Antarctic."

The children had gone home and it was very quiet in the radio shack. Grandpa warmed up the set and found the right place on the dial.

"We'll try the main base first and see if your dad's there or somewhere else out on the ice," said Grandpa.

A faint crackling and a weird fading sound came through the transceiver and then there was silence.

"Can't get through," he muttered. "Must be something wrong."

He fiddled with the dials, adjusted the antenna on the tower by remote control, and tried again.

"No good," he said at last. "I'll see if it's receiving."

He tried again. There were more cracklings and wobbling and a series of beeps.

"Sounds like morse," said Jo, who had picked up quite a lot through helping Grandpa brush up for his exams.

"Grandpa, I think it's SOS!"

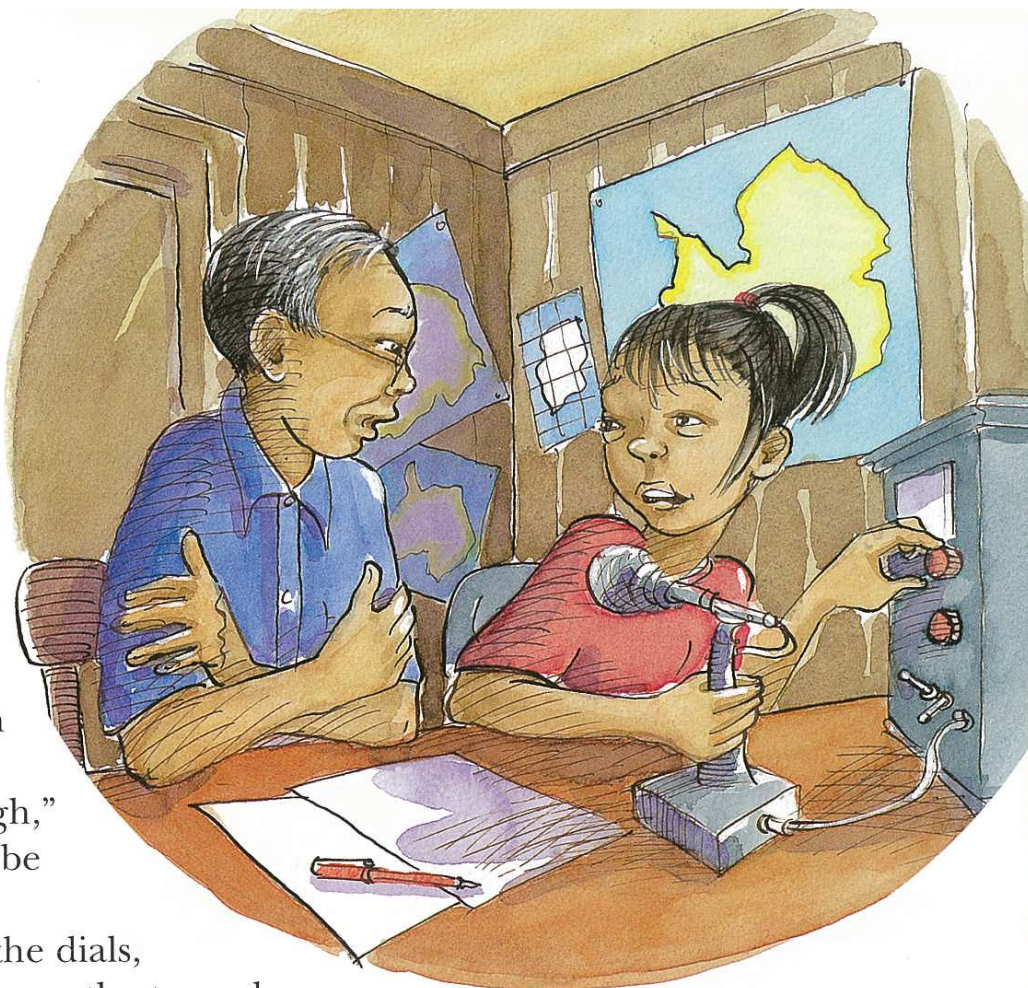
"Yes, it is," he said, listening intently.

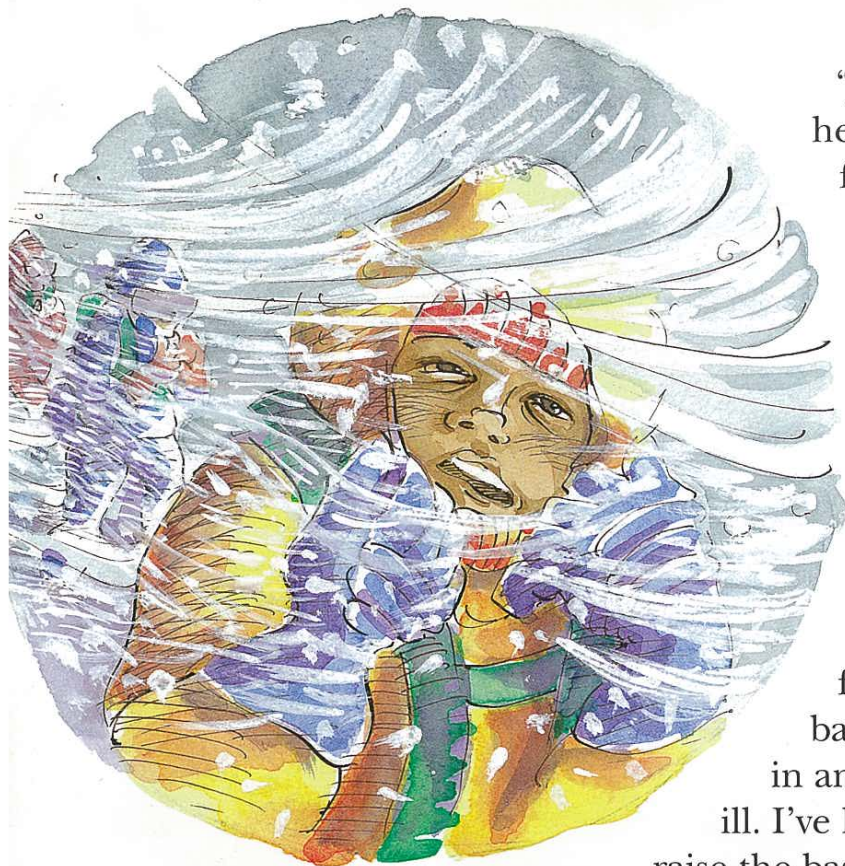
Suddenly a voice came through, faintly but clearly, "VK3 GBE, this is VKO XYZ portable, are you receiving me? Over."

"It's Dad!" screamed Jo. "It's Dad! I know it is."

"All right, Jo," said Grandpa. "Take over the microphone. Do it properly now, the way you've been taught. Portable means he's somewhere away from the main base, probably at the new one they're setting up."

Jo's heart was thumping but she said steadily, "VKO XYZ, this is VK3 GBE. Jo speaking. J for Juliet, O for Oscar. Dad, we're receiving you. Over."





"Jo! Thank goodness!" they heard Dad say. "I've been trying for ages to get you. Someone called Zak sent me your call sign through our main base, and it's the only one I could remember. We're in trouble, Jo. We need help. Are you receiving me? Over."

"Yes, we hear you. What do you want us to do, Dad? Over."

The voice fluttered and faded, then became clearer, "...a bad blizzard. We three are snowed in and icebound. My two mates are ill. I've had to take over the radio. Can't raise the base. Jo, you must ring John

Haggard... tell him to take charge. He'll radio the nearest base for a rescue team. Be quick, Jo. I can't..." His voice faded into cracklings and static.

Grandpa said, "The school office is locked. You go home on your bike, Jo, and ring John Haggard. On STD. You'll find his number in the teledex. I'll stay on duty here in case your dad comes through again. Ride carefully."

Jo raced home, thankful she still had her bike. She fell off at the gate, but didn't even notice that her hands were badly grazed. She rushed to the telephone. Luckily, John Haggard had not yet left his office.

"All right, Jo," he said. "I'll take over. I'll let you know as soon as there's any news."

The rest of that week was like a bad dream. Jo wanted to sit beside the telephone or the transceiver, but Grandpa thought it would be better if she went to school as usual while he sat at the radio set. The whole school knew what was happening, and Mr Sadler asked Jo if she would like to postpone the opening.

"No, that wouldn't be fair," said Jo.

The opening was to be at two o'clock on Monday afternoon. On Monday morning when Jo arrived at school, Mr Sadler said, "Jo, would you like to stay in the shack with Grandpa?"

Jo thanked him gratefully and rushed across to join Grandpa, who had been waiting by the transceiver nearly all weekend.

"I've received New Zealand and Italy," he said. "Everything except the station we want."

Suddenly he said, "Something's coming through again... Jo, I think it may be the Antarctic at last... listen..."

There was a crackling sound and then a voice, "VK3 GBE, this is VKO XYZ. Are you receiving me?"

Grandpa answered and beckoned Jo to the microphone.

The voice continued, "Someone here...wants to speak to you."

Dad's familiar voice came through clearly: "Jo! Grandpa...we're back at the main base. All safe. The other two are recovering. Thanks to you. Over."

"Dad!" exclaimed Jo with relief and excitement. "Dad, it's not just us. The radio station belongs to the school. The official opening's this afternoon."

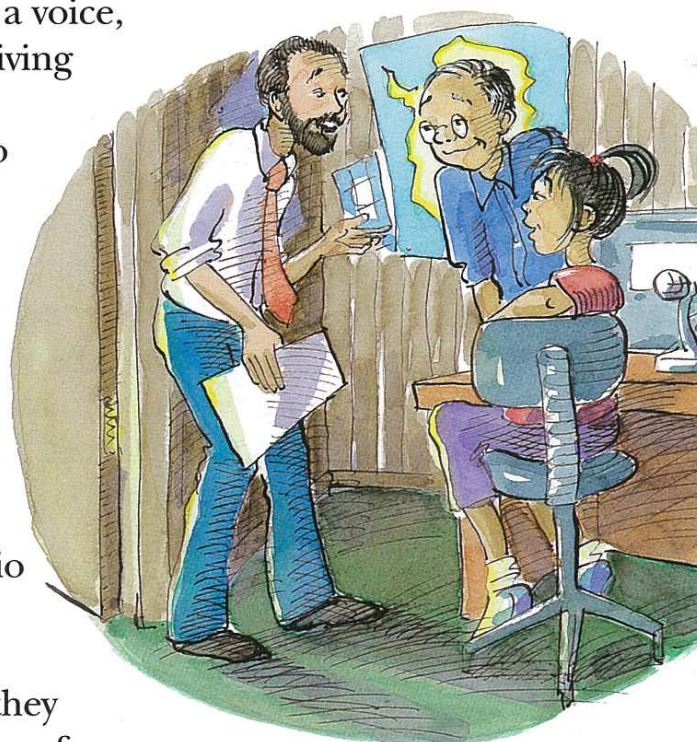
"Tell them we owe our lives to them," they heard Dad say. "And to you. Thank everyone for us. I'm proud of you both. Over and out."

Mr Sadler came quickly into the shack. He was beaming.

"There's a telephone message from John Haggard. The men have been rescued. They're all back at the main base and recovering."

"We know!" cried Jo. "Dad spoke to us. He sent a special message to the school for the opening."

Mr Sadler laughed. "We know that too," he said. "Someone switched on the loudspeakers. We heard the whole conversation!"



from *Ham and Ice* by June Epstein