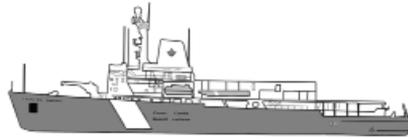


Chapter 11

Sharkface Crosses the Frozen Sea



CCGS Louis St. Laurent

Two days north of Walrus Island, Sharkface's confidence about crossing the frozen sea was waning. He could still turn back and abandon his adventure and in a few weeks, be lying on the warm beaches back home, but, after a bit of resting and eating in the Chukchi Sea, he resolved to go on. He had already made the decision when he didn't turn back after the killer whale encounter in Queen Charlotte Sound.

"If I survived an attack by a great white shark and being set upon by a pack of killer whales, I can survive a swim through a sea with some ice," he thought to himself, but he still had a dread of the vast frozen sea.

The water was ice free for the first week and the going was not bad. He followed the coastline and his dives were normal except they were shorter because the water was shallow. Even when there was no ice around he continued his habit of stopping to make sure there was open water above his head.

He had not seen another creature or heard another voice since he left Bennie on Walrus Island and he was beginning to feel very much alone. There seemed to be no whales or seals or even squid in these cold waters. All he could hear was the distant cracking of the ice.

One day, the land began to narrow and he could see both shorelines. Most of the ocean surface was now covered with ice, so Sharkface traveled nearer the coast where he could find a place between the floes to get a breath. There were days when he would follow a river of open water for miles, but now it was a struggle just to find a ray of sunlight shining above his head. Sometimes he backtracked as he searched for a way through the nearly-solid pack. He did not think much about what he would do if he could not find a place to get to the surface and then one day it happened.

He had been diving for nearly an hour with no open water in sight above his head. He had nearly run out of oxygen and he knew he would have to surface very soon or die. He searched and searched the bottom of the ice over his head for an opening, but found none. He was in big trouble.

Sharkface was close to his end when, without warning, his snorter blew up to three times its normal size. Suddenly he had air to breathe! This had never happened to him before and he hoped this reserve would be enough as he kept desperately searching for a hole in the ice. Just then he saw a beautiful shaft of light shining down from the ice above his head. He swam straight for it.

There was a circle of open water just big enough for him to get his chest through and he stuck his head out into the cold, refreshing air and took several deep breaths. He was saved from drowning under the ice, but his world was now very small indeed.

He was floating in the breathing hole of another kind of seal that lived all year in the pack. The ice seal kept it open with his teeth and claws and now Sharkface was taking up the whole thing, but he was not about to leave. The seal would just have to find another hole. He stayed in his new-found home and breathed and breathed. He had no interest in diving just now because there was nothing but ice for as far as he could see.

He thought about the seal whose breathing hole he had taken over and when he looked around, he saw the seal next to another of his holes and resting on the ice. Even if the hole closed completely, he knew the seal would not drown, and he felt better. What he did not know was that the seal had several other breathing holes and losing one to a misguided traveler was an inconvenience rather than a disaster.

Sharkface wished he could crawl out onto the ice himself, but he could only haul his huge bulk along a gently sloping beach. He thought about Bennie and how, with his sharp tusks, he could climb onto the ice, but he only had his 'puny little teeth' and so he was trapped in his small circle of open water.

Several days went by and still there was only ice in sight. He was in no danger as long as he could get his head out of the water, but this was becoming harder to do. The breathing hole

was getting smaller and smaller as the water around it began to freeze. He only kept it open by butting his head against the newly formed ice, but it was a losing battle and one day he could only get his snorter through the ice. If something didn't change soon, his last contact with the air would be lost and he would surely drown. Sharkface was once again in a state of despair; he couldn't think of any way out of this mess. Soon the breathing hole would close and he would be forced to go looking for another one. If he couldn't find it in an hour or so, it would all be over.

He thought about the warm beach on Guadalupe and all his elephant seal friends. He thought of Cuvier and Topsy and her long, gossipy tales. He thought of George and the octopus that had bitten his tongue and of Bennie and his broken tusk. He was going over all his great adventures and had just about decided that if this was how it ended, it was OK. He had lived a long and adventurous life and ... just then he heard a noise.

The low, rhythmic rumble of a ship was far away. If there were a ship out there in the ice, there must be some open water so Sharkface took several deep breaths, dove beneath the surface of the ice and went to find the source of the sound. As Sharkface got closer, he could hear the cracking, breaking ice, and its scraping against the hull and he could see a curtain of light that indicated a long stretch of open water. It looked like he was saved, but until his head was in the air, he was not sure. As he got closer to the light curtain he began to get the faint smell of oil and he knew the ship was close by. He surfaced in the wonderful open water

and looked around. He had never been happier in his life to have his head in the sunshine.

The *Louis St. Laurent* is Canada's largest icebreaker and the only one that regularly operates in the frozen sea. She is painted red and white with a white stripe across her hull, and she was just about the most beautiful sight Sharkface had ever seen. She was steaming to the east creating a long stretch of open water behind, like a wide highway, and he serenely followed in her wake. Rather than diving, he swam on the surface so he would not wander out of the open lead and into the ice during one of his dives. As he swam he thought, "This must be the big red ship that saved Benjie's life and now it is saving mine."

Louie, as she was called by those who lived and sailed in her, was in the Arctic charting the ever-thinning ice. Only a few years earlier the pack would have been too thick for her to sail between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans by this Northwest Passage, but recent warming had now made that possible. Her crew had been taking samples and making temperature measurements for several weeks and they were now headed back to her homeport of St. John's, Newfoundland.

After several days of following in Louie's wide, ice-free wake, Sharkface began to resume his normal mode of diving with renewed confidence. He still looked around near the top of his ascent to make sure he didn't come up under the ice, but his diving was now much more normal and relaxed. He even began to have his dreams again.

He was flying high above Guadalupe Island and once again the beaches were deserted, but this time there were small patches on the shoreline that looked like ice. He knew there was never ice this far south so he cruised lower to take a closer look. As he got nearer to the beach he realized the patches of white were not ice at all, but piles of bones, elephant seal bones. They were the bones of his ancestors. He awoke with a shudder at the bottom of his dive. Sharkface didn't know much about his ancestors. Elephant seals are not very family oriented. He spent only about a month with his mother and he didn't know his father at all. She told him a bit about what a large and powerful elephant seal his father was, but she didn't know anything about his grandfather, or any of his other relatives.

His fur seal friend, Townsend, once told him a story about the time the elephant seals on Guadalupe had almost all disappeared. The story took place long ago, and Sharkface was not very interested and soon forgot about it, but now he was curious. He thought Townsend's story might have something to do with the bones in his dreams, but he just could not remember. Suddenly, for some reason, he was sad.

The open water behind the icebreaker was so wide, Sharkface felt safe and kept on diving, then one day when he was on his way up to the surface, he awoke and saw nothing but ice above his head. He had drifted out of Louie's wake and was once again trapped in the ice. He nearly panicked, but calmed down long enough to continue his dive and look for the curtain of sunlight

below the open water, only this time it was dark and cloudy and the light was hard to see. He finally found it with a few minutes to spare and vowed he would quit diving all together and just swim behind the ship, following Louie wherever she went.

Louie and Sharkface sailed together for another two weeks until he was ready to head out on his own across the ice-free water. He said a silent, "Thank you," to the icebreaker, *Louis St. Laurent* and to the Canadian government who sent her up north. He also thanked the ice seal for the use of its breathing hole and he thanked his lucky stars -- or whatever they were -- that had kept him from drowning in the cold, frozen sea.

As he swam farther to the east, he began diving again and thinking about how hungry he was and how even the ghastly clams Bennie had served him at Walrus Island would seem now like a gourmet feast.

