

SNOUT SURFING ON A WHITE SEA

You open the door for me. I'm out. I'm lead dog.

So rich. So many. So fresh. I dash to the street and I hear you call.

Do I have to come? No. I can ignore that voice. It's not the danger voice. It's not the one I need to heed.

Where? There, there. That bank. Sniff the streak. Female, healthy. Not that healthy. Not able to make puppies.

Wait! New dog. There – male. Sick. What kind of sick?

Oh, don't put that on me. Don't pull me away. I haven't figured him out yet.

I let her put the rope on me because this is the one who puts food in my dish. She takes me out. At our place she puts wood in the stove. She can do a lot of things I can't do, but why doesn't she use her nose. She walks way up there and never bends down to sniff. How can she know her world? There's so much wrong with her, but so much right too.

I started this morning the best way possible. My great espresso maker came through again, and with a modest piece of toast smeared with jam I had a loyal breakfast. My perfect quiet cabin, my calm life, the chaos of the outside world kept away by these sturdy walls of wood.

Behind me – years of the raising kids, of racing down city streets to an office. Ahead of me – a day free of demands. I get to do whatever I want. I'm totally independent and free, except for Bessie.

From my armchair in the living room I see Bessie asleep on my bedroom floor. I hope she's forgotten the scare she had last spring when we walked on the river. It was not the wisest idea, to take her on the ice in April but I didn't know when we started out that there were fissures. All it took was one crack, one paw going down one inch and she yelped. I'd like to try her on the river again. How long do dogs remember?

I open my journal and pick up my pen. I watch my hand write, "November 22. Today, I'll take Bessie for a walk on the river."

Suddenly, she's in front of me, tail wagging, eyes bright. She was lying down in the bedroom over there, I wrote 'walk', and suddenly she's here. I didn't say it out loud. What just happened?

Oh, this place, deep cold, wet cold. There are no new smells, just the scent of snow. Good snow. Rub my nose in it. Stick my snout in and breath it in. But there's something else about this place – isn't there something else? Something I don't like? She's petting my shoulder. She does that when I'm afraid. Am I afraid of this place?

She's tugging me along. Guess I have to. Ohhh - I don't like the feel. Slippery.

There's this edge of the path. That edge. This. That. It's okay.

The trail stretches along the shore, weaving through the ice flows that chunk up against the bank. I feel safe here. Even if there's a crack in the ice, I'll only go down a foot or two before I hit solid ground.

I love the wild expansiveness of the Yukon River but you won't catch me crossing it, not yet. It's too early in the season. There are all kinds of risks. There can be cracks where ice flows have jammed into each other, leaving open channels between them. There can be overflow, where the river has bubbled up from below. When the water on the surface freezes, it might not be thick enough to support the weight of a person. A light flouing of snow can hide the thin ice so you don't even know it's there until you lose your footing on it. Dogs can read the ice and that's why people unleash them and let them go first. They sense the dangerous spots and go around. Still, there are stories about people falling through the ice and the worst part is that most of those stories are true.

What scent has Bessie picked up? Why is she barking? There's nobody around, nothing, just outcroppings of jumble ice.

Short, sharp bark. 'Danger, maybe.'

Dog. Male. Sick – that same sick dog I sniffed yesterday. But yesterday he was on the trail near our house. This is a different place. He was just here. Just passed. Just marked the snowbank. No human scent. He's alone. He's alone and he's sick.

She's tugging. Doesn't she get it. Bark again.

Come on, Bessie. There's nothing here. No reason to bark. But it's not like you. What is it? Where you're pointing, there's only snow and ice.

What's that? Out there in the middle of the river. A dark mass – a head – in the – what the heck is that? It looks like something thrashing in water. No. Don't make us go off the trail.

It isn't a human – it's not. That's a relief. It's just as bad – it's a dog. A hole in the ice and a dog has fallen in. I can't go back to town for help – it would be an hour at least before I get back and by then it'll be too late. I can see the dog is weakening . It's whining, too weak to bark I guess. The paws scratch the edge of the hole for purchase.

What'll I do about Bessie? I have to go there, but she doesn't have to. She's afraid of the ice so she'll go back to shore. She'll be safe. There you go, girl. Go home.

Of course I have to lead. If she's going, I'm going. Across the ice, I find a safe path towards the whine. As I get closer I can smell – it's the sick dog, the male.

Bessie leads me, finds me a safe path across the river. She stops and let's me go on. I'm glad she's staying put so I don't need to worry about her.

Now that we're here, close to the whining dog, I'm not going to just walk to an open fissure. Good thing I've got my heavy parka on because I need the insulation. I crawl on my belly, elbowing my way forward inch by inch. I keep telling the dog to hold on even though I have no idea how I'll get it out.

At the edge of the hole the ice is firm. I'm relieved. A rescue might be possible. The dog is surprisingly calm, both paws on the solid edge as if it's waiting for a treat. It seems to know it's being rescued. I reach out with one arm and check the neck for a collar. Thankfully there is one. The ice here is flat – I have to shimmy around a few feet to find a crack that I can stick my

feet into. When I'm as secure as I can be I swing my other hand up to the dog's neck and yank as hard as I can. A pain shoot from my shoulder down my back. But I've pulled the dog up onto the ice far enough for him to scramble out of the dark hole.

This is so good so good so good. I don't get this ever! Any left? I sniff the plate. I lick the plate. All gone but the smell. I find her on the chair and nuzzle her hand. Does she get it? Don't give me those hard lumps anymore - give me this big meat every day.

When she leans forward she whines. What's wrong with her? There's a cloth around her neck and one arm is folded in behind it. Still, she pets me. She rubs my ears. I raise my head so she can scratch my throat the way I like it. She knows. She scratches. She knows.

This is how it should be. That sick male was here but a human came and took him away. I got it good. So good.