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## The Penguin Push-Race

White was everywhere; well, almost. Even if the sky above was blue; down below, white ruled. It must have covered the whole world because, as far as any eye could see, there was nothing else. Axel thought so. He was a penguin, a very small, very young one, a child actually; and he asked his parents about the white. "It just is," said his father, which wasn't all that helpful. Then his mother added: "White is what we know. As long as we have white, we are all safe and everything's as it should be."

Axel was telling his young friends what he had found out; and, as some of them had learned the same from their parents, they figured it must be right. Then Mitsy chirped in: "Wrong! I was talking to Leonard the whale only yesterday, and he said he was born in a place that wasn't white. In fact," she added before anyone interrupted, "He will be going back there very soon with his Grandma and the other whales."

The young penguins weren't all-that sure how true this was. Apart from being extra-bossy, Mitsy was a know-it-all and didn't always get things right; and if you thought about it, when everything that could be seen was white, there was unlikely to be anything else; never mind what bossy-feet said. Axel was becoming fidgety. "All this talk is boring. Let's go and play with Flo."

Flo was a flat piece of ice who floated on the sea; and she usually stayed close to her mother who looked pretty much the same, except that she was huge. Her father was bigger still, a mountain really, a floating one; and when the penguins arrived, he called down to them cheerfully: "Hello kids. What are you up to today?"

"Can Flo come and play?" asked Axel. Neither of the parents answered straight away, so Axel added: "We're only going to push her around to give her a bit of fun. She can't swim like us, and all she ever does on her own is float."

"That never bothered me," said Flo's mother grumpily.

"Oh, let them go," her father put in, "As long as they promise to stay close by, where's the harm? I'll keep an eye on them."

After a long pause, her mother agreed. "Well, alright, but mind you stay clear of the wide-water channel."

So off they went, the penguins flippering and paddling in the water, pushing Flo along before them. "I wonder what the wide-water channel is?" asked Jigger, Axel's brother.

While all of the other penguins were pushing, Mitsy was standing on Flo, shouting directions: "Left. No, no - the other left! What are you - stupid?" Being who and what she was, Mitsy just had to answer Jigger's question in her usual way. "Don't you know anything? The wide-water channel is water that's wide; and it's probably called channel because it's ordinary water where the white stops."

"You know," said Greta, Mitsy's sister, "Although I hate to admit it, that might well be right, Jigger. Our Dad often tells stories about the whales swimming off every year through a big lot of water that isn't white."

"My Mum says," chirped in Flo, "That the water the whales swim in is so fast, if I ever got caught in it, I'd be swept away to some terrible place where there's no white at all."

Flo felt a bump, then there was laughter. Another sheet of ice had come to join them; and perched on top were two penguins much larger than the youngsters pushing Flo. Apparently, they were called King penguins. Whether or not that was the truth, the big penguins certainly thought it was. "You'd better believe the wide-water's fast," said Bozo, sniggering. "Yeah," said his pal, Trudge, "The channel's no place for little kids. You lot stay here paddling around in the kinder pool. We're tougher than you, and we're going to the wide-water channel to watch the whales leaving. We might even tell you about it when we get back, if you're lucky."

Bozo gave an order to the big penguins in the water, and they had just started flippering and paddling their sheet of ice away, when Mitsy blurted out: "You reckon you're so tough, but you're big and slow. We can beat you any day. We challenge you to a race. Or are you all beak and flippers?"

Axel had been whispering in the background for Mitsy to keep quiet. Now, it was too late. "You hear that, Trudge?" sneered Bozo. "These little squirts reckon they can beat US. Okay," he said, turning to Mitsy and her friends. "You're on - a penguin-push to the wide-water channel it is. Floating start; loser feeds the winner fish for a week."

The two sheets of ice lined up, Flo with her little penguins on one side, and a large slab of ice she thought was named Kelly next to her. Bozo and Trudge were standing on top of him, laughing and jeering at Axel and his friends. "Big mistake, kids," Trudge shouted, "Get ready to go fishing."

"I think he might be right, Axel," moaned Jigger, "We stand no chance against the big penguins."

"We can only do our best, Jigger." Said Axel, then he added: "Don't go blaming Mitsy. If I'd had her courage, I'd probably have said the same thing. Those big penguins are bullies, and they need teaching a lesson."

Like most races, this one began slowly; but as each team found its rhythm, both contestants speeded up. Flo went to the front for a while; then the slower, bigger, stronger penguins took Kelly into the lead. Mitsy was on top of Flo, calling the shots. "Icebits coming up." Icebits were small pieces of ice floating on the surface of the water. "Go right a bit - that will make them drift in front of Bozo to slow him down."

This was the way it went - Flo in the lead, then Kelly, then Flo again. As they were nearing the edge of the white where the wide-water channel started, Flo was again lagging behind, and it looked as if Bozo's bullies were going to win. "Last stand!" yelled Mitsy, and she jumped into the water to help. "Push, push, push!" she yelled. "Are we going to let these big lugs beat us? NO WE ARE NOT!"

With Mitsy's encouragement, her friends flippered and paddled for all that they were worth and Flo picked up speed. She coasted past Kelly and was very close to the winning line which was the start of the wide-water channel; then Mitsy realised something - they were going too fast! "Round the front, round to the front!" she shouted, "Or Flo will be in the channel!"

The little penguins swam quickly to the front of Flo and set to flippering and paddling as hard as they could to slow their piece-of-ice-friend down. Unfortunately, this helped Bozo to catch up. Flo stopped just short of the channel, allowing the bullies to edge past and win race.

As they crossed the finish line in front of Flo and the youngsters, Bozo and Trudge started whooping and hollering; until they noticed something. "Some of the kids have slipped into the channel," said Trudge. "They're too little and too tired to swim. They are being swept away!"

"Right, guys," ordered Bozo, "Rescue time." With that, all of the big penguins jumped into the wide-water channel. The water was running really fast; and that helped them catch up with the little ones and steer them back to the safety of the white.

A little later, they were all floating in the white at the edge of the channel watching the leaving of the whales; but nobody felt like saying much - it had all been too scary. Then Trudge commented: "You kids are really something. You even know when it's best to lose."

"But next time," added Bozo, "Lose WELL before you really need to - that rescue was kind-of tiring. And," he added, "You can forget the fish. I reckon if we just became friends it would be a better prize."

"That's a great idea," declared Axel.

"Well, perhaps" said Mitsy, "But there may need to be a few conditions,"

And everyone, including Bozo and Trudge, said: "Shut-up, Mitsy!"