

## **Chapter One**

### ***Into the Void***

One day years before, I came home with a new backpack, the largest I could find. “What’s that for?” my girlfriend of the time asked.

“Not sure,” I replied. But its size made it look serious, which seemed important.

My one previous attempt at winter camping had been in high school, when four of us shivered all night in cheap sleeping bags lined with Space Blankets. As soon as dawn broke, we hurried back to the car with a newfound understanding of Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow.

This time I decided that if I were going to do something crazy, I would do it intelligently. I stopped reading fiction and began to study outdoor equipment catalogs, how-to books and naturalists’ musings. The writing was unintentionally entertaining: Bjorn Kjellstrom’s *Be Expert With Map and Compass*, with its illustrations of smiling figures in beanie caps finding their way hither and thither with the aid of their trusty compass and Kjellstrom’s pointers... John Rowland’s *Cache Lake Country*, with its thumbs-in-the-suspenders prose: “Sam was plumb scared to death...he was in a fix and no mistake”... *Backpacking*, by R. C. Rethmel, with its appendix on winter camping provided by the author’s “good friend,” one James (Gil) Phillips, who used polyurethane foam to the absolute exclusion of all other insulation. Snapshots of Gil in full regalia showed him looking warm enough, but he was standing in what was evidently a sunny yard in New Mexico. A background dog panted from heat.

Only rarely did a kindred spirit appear in the wasteland. Calvin Rutstrum first won my heart as the only winter guru not to solemnly intone, “If your feet are cold, put on your hat.” Although his way of the wilderness was more traditional than what I envisioned following, his workable ideas were timeless. Rutstrum also had a love of solitude rather than a dislike of mankind. He was didactic, like most self-educated men, but his noble character tempered the pontificating. He wrote into old age, long after he should have put the pen down, but the octogenarian’s last words in his last book were a touching thanks for having lived.

I took to naturalists for whiffs of the good writing I missed in the how-to manuals. The early Edwin Way Teale was distinguished by some of his fine lyric passages; Aldo Leopold by his tang; Jean Henri Fabre by his sense of wonder; Rachel Carson by her passionate use of facts; and Thoreau by the depth of his reflections, and by his eyeballs. His eyes had that mixture of sadness and purity

that is sometimes found on the faces of the truly great. They were as magnificent as August Strindberg's forehead. One would never find those eyes in the sockets of a clod.

Gradually I became aware that I wanted to do an extreme wilderness trip, which seemed to include winter camping. I worked off three principles. First, since gear "used on Everest" was readily available while gear "used at the North Pole" was not, I assumed that high-altitude mountaineering and extreme arctic travel required similar equipment – bombproof tents, five-pound down bags, offset-baffled parkas. Second, traditional equipment was for those who had mastered field repair and general woodsmanship; ignoramuses such as myself were safer with modern stuff. Third, I chose the best of everything – lightest, warmest, toughest, biggest – and only from what I perceived to be A-list companies. When you get to know equipment, you can make item-by-item judgments, but from the armchair it's impossible to tell the necessary from the overkill. So I erred on the side of caution, reducing the expenses of these Rolls Royce packs and Lamborghini bags by presenting myself to companies as an outdoor writer. Most were happy to offer me wholesale prices, which in this industry usually meant forty percent off. Soon I was equipped for the Worst Journey in the World.

I had no idea how much food to bring on this theoretical trek, but I had recently trained as a marathon swimmer, logging six miles a day in the pool. That much exercise leaves you free to eat as much as you can, and I discovered that I simply could not Hoover in more than 7,000 calories a day. My jaw ached from chewing, I got hemorrhoids from all the activity of a supercharged metabolism and I ran out of things I wanted to eat. Even a whole strawberry shortcake every day palls after a while.

By default then, 7,000 calories seemed like a good dietary target for an extreme cold-weather expedition. Hard spring sledding, I learned later, only burns about 5,000 calories, but during the midwinter cold of my first expeditions I needed the extra 2,000 calories to stay warm. In the end, making the most extreme choices in food and equipment worked.

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Although I originally fixated on Labrador, a chance trip to Ellesmere Island turned my world upside-down. This was the most extreme place in North America. It drew extreme people, nurtured extreme plants, harbored extreme animals and showcased extreme phenomena. It was everything I wanted. I forgot about Labrador.

I soon learned that the difficulty of traveling Ellesmere is nothing compared to the difficulty of getting there. There are no roads, no boats and only one scheduled flight, to the lone village of Grise Fiord on the south coast. Interesting enough, but it's like wanting to see an England in which all transportation ends at London.

The quest to reach Ellesmere begins two hundred and fifty miles to the south, in Resolute Bay on Cornwallis Island, "perhaps the most dreary and desolate

place that can well be conceived,” according to an early description. The town of Resolute lies two thousand miles due north of Winnipeg, in a part of the Arctic known as the Barren Wedge. Northern plants can endure almost anything, as long as they get one month of decent weather in which to grow. But summer in the Barren Wedge is typically windy, dank and foggy, so Cornwallis Island has the lushness of a gravel pit. First-time visitors are astonished when they fly another five hundred miles north and step into Ellesmere’s alpine meadows and warm sunshine.

Resolute is actually two villages: an “unlovely huddle” of interconnected government buildings near the airport, and the Inuit village. The two are connected by a four-mile gravel road of excruciating dullness that the truly desperate sometimes hike to kill time.

As the last stop of the southern jets and the staging area for science and adventure in the High Arctic, Resolute has a certain character. Visitors have plenty of time to explore this character when bad weather grounds all aircraft for days. Six days is my record, but this is by no means exceptional. One weatherman elsewhere in the Barren Wedge was socked in for a month and lost his vacation.

A passion for Ellesmere is like addiction to heroin: You have to subsidize the craving through humiliating pursuits. Hitchhiking on half-empty planes used to be a respectable means of northern travel, and early arctic obsesses – including such notables as Fred Bruemmer – rarely paid their own way. Communities put them up until they found a charter flight to hop on. Today it is sometimes possible to hitchhike back from Ellesmere, but planes to the island are usually full, and to show up in Resolute without firm plans is to risk never getting out.

In recent years, travel has become a little easier for me because I can barter my knowledge about the island. But just how does a dirt bag for whom two thousand dollars is a lot of money accumulate twenty journeys to the most expensive wilderness destination in North America?

The first trip was a magazine assignment, covered partly by the outfitter and partly by tourism agencies. Richer magazines, to ensure objective coverage, send their writers as paying clients, but smaller publications rely on outfitters to cover the cost, which is negligible if the tour is already going and there is space. Smart outfitters also give photographers the occasional freebie, because good photos are vital to the trade show exhibits where they find new customers and to the brochures which tantalize repeat clientele. My love of photography, which was born and developed on Ellesmere, is partly responsible for four of those twenty trips.

Another Ellesmere stratagem is to buy a piece of someone else’s charter. Sometimes there is enough leftover space for one or two people and gear. In the spring, adventurers attempting the North Pole need periodic resupplies, and their expedition managers in Resolute are always open to recouping part of the cost. The difficulty is that you never know the dates of the resupply flights ahead of time, or if they will have room. You show up in Resolute and you take your chances.

In summer, tour operators may also sell a place on their flights. This is a better arrangement, because the dates are fixed. However, most tours are full or

almost full, and it's hard to confirm your spot until shortly before the trip leaves. Outfitters understandably prefer to fill their planes with customers paying five thousand dollars for the full service rather than an independent tagging along on the flight for a few hundred bucks.

If flights don't go exactly where you want, you may sometimes side charter. Most travelers aren't aware of this option. It's as if, flying from New York to Chicago, you pay a small amount extra to be dropped in Detroit, just off the flight path. Twice I've side chartered the "sked" to Grise Fiord. The flight to Grise is cheap, and it's not far from there to interesting places. Once, a charter to Eureka made a ten-minute detour to drop us on western Axel Heiberg, a remote destination that would have cost four thousand dollars to reach on our own. Cost, including detour and our share of the charter, eight hundred dollars.

When they work, these little finesses make Ellesmere accessible. They're like good snow to the sledder. But sometimes all options fall through. You sit in Resolute for a week, camping behind the airport or watching your dollars fly away at one of the local hotels. The charms of Resolute have worn thin. You have worn thin on Resolute. The airline managers have stopped looking up when you walk in their office for news. The Polar Continental Shelf Project, with its many Ellesmere charters, will not accept your offers of good coin, leading you to be somewhat cynical of that science agency's well-publicized financial straits. The resupply flights of North Pole adventurers are full with sponsors and friends. "There's another resupply in two weeks, though." A promising flight falls through: Weather delays have allowed two groups to combine their charters, so instead of two half-empty planes, there is now one full one. Steel doors clang shut: At least two more days in Resolute before the next ray of hope.

You accept the ancient wilderness principle – travelers need either lots of time or lots of money, and you have come prepared to serve time – but once in a while, time is not enough. The only way out is with a credit card.

When I first went to Resolute hoping to extend the north's hitchhiking tradition by another few years, it was understandable that I should feel like a moocher. I was. Partners in crime likewise commented on how they felt like "stray cats" or "bag ladies" in Resolute. But sometimes we came prepared to spend substantial amounts, yet still felt like second-class citizens. Resolute's icy heart had seen too much. Too many foreign polar bear hunters willing to drop \$20,000 in four days, and leaving thousand-dollar tips in their wake. Too many North Pole expeditions with half-million dollar budgets. Too many planeloads of doctors and stockbrokers. Too many cruise ships disgorging ladies in furs – mink, not caribou – and men with glaring, corporate eyes who plunk down two thousand bills for a narwhal tusk during their hour on shore. Resolute is like Las Vegas: impossible to impress, no matter how much money you throw away.

At best, traveling to Ellesmere was so sweet that by using airline points and hooking rides, I completed one expedition on two hundred dollars. At worst, it was so disheartening and humiliating that I returned home never wanting to go north again – but like cold, fatigue, soft snow, high winds and partners from hell, I soon forgot Resolute and remembered only Ellesmere.

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Ellesmere's most extreme period begins in September, when the sun sets again after four thousand consecutive hours of daylight. By late October, Ellesmere is locked "in the black coffin of the Polar Night." Of all ordeals, explorers most dreaded the next three months. "A world without sun is like a life without love," wrote Nansen.

Expeditions continued their skeleton scientific programs, but mainly everyone read, smoked, played cards, argued, and slept twelve hours a night. The length of journal entries typically plummeted from one or two pages a day to three or four lines. At Christmas and New Year's, much ado was made of the special menus, usually written in mock French, with such delicacies as Salmon à la Paleocrustic or Muskox Tongue in Arctic Sauce.

Lectures, singalongs and weekly theater helped break up the monotony; the reason prospective arctic volunteers were asked at their interviews, "Can you sing or play an instrument?" Officers tried to teach some of the illiterate men to read. Short walks, half a mile to a mile a day along a trampled route, prevented total physical decrepitude. Most groups put out a weekly newspaper, full of gossip, line drawings and bad inside jokes. Usually, these newspapers died quickly. "We, the editors, found it interesting," reported one.

Snow magnified the reflected starlight so that even without a moon, it was possible to see a little. "The line below will give an idea of the size of type

**LEGIBLE AT MID-DAY,"** wrote one explorer.

Another claimed that the full moon equaled the light of a candle at forty-nine inches. Trying to reduce the darkness to numbers was one way of coping with it.

The darkness was not nearly as trying as the social friction of this confined life. Once, even two members of the fabled Royal Canadian Mounted Police lost their poise. "I told him to pay attention to his own affairs," reported one. "Immediately he invited me to take off my hat and fight. I refrained from this method as long as possible, but in December he carried it into personal affairs and it came to blows."

Intense pastel colors wash the frigid February sky and make this the most beautiful time of year. For the Inuit in neighboring Greenland, this is the end of the winter depression called *perlerorneq* – literally, to feel the weight of life. Custom dictates that the first time they see the sun, they take off one mitt and hold their bare hand in the air. The more devout also smile with half their face. Traditionally, all lamps in the community were put out and relit with fresh oil and new wicks. The world was reborn, and for Inuit and explorers alike, the exciting sledding season was about to begin.

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I didn't know exactly how cold it was that night, but I knew it was cold. It was as if I were on the dark side of the moon and the thermometer was in freefall until morning. Sleep was impossible. I couldn't stop shivering inside my sleeping bag. My breath formed delicate catkins of frost on the tent ceiling over my head. These fairy chandeliers – indicators of at least -30°F – can't be touched, however gently, without disintegrating. Sometimes I marveled at their loveliness, but now I just tried to blow them off before they became so heavy that they dropped off by themselves and hit some small uncovered part of my face like a spritz of frozen carbon dioxide. Because moisture from breathing gums up insulation, I couldn't bury my face in the sleeping bag.

It was a long night. As soon as the dark purpled, I got up. Movement was the only antidote for this cold. I stomped around outside to warm up, then checked the thermometer. Fifty-eight below. A surge of pride overcame the fatigue. I'd had plenty of minus forty nights, and except for the periodic frost spritzes, I slept pretty well. But -58°F was another dimension. The experience was so alien, so extreme, that I enjoyed it despite my misery, and it awakened a curiosity about the cold.

By such standards, most of my trips have not been particularly cold. Minus thirty sounds bad but it isn't really, except in a stiff wind. A good sleeping bag can handle -30°, just like a good backpack can handle eighty pounds but not a hundred and twenty pounds. Life only becomes difficult after about -44°F. Thanks to the moderating influence of the sea, mostly frozen though it is, -44°F is sometimes the winter minimum on Ellesmere.

Exceptions have occurred. In 1963, scientists at Tanquary Fiord experienced -77°F, just 4° shy of the North American record from Snag, Yukon. On March 4, 1876, explorer George Nares reported -74° on the northeast coast. Whisky placed outside froze after a few minutes, "so a few of us had the rare opportunity of eating it in a solid state." No doubt there were many quips that night about hard liquor.

Sledding below -30°F is difficult because of the friction on such cold snow. At -77°, it would be like trying to drag a Volkswagen with no wheels down the street. During the day, perpetual movement, four layers of clothing and 7,000 calories can overcome most any cold. But sleep would be hard.

On their winter quest for emperor penguin eggs in Antarctica, Apsley Cherry-Gerrard and his two companions survived -76°F – the record low for camping. "Dante was right when he placed circles of ice below circles of fire," Cherry-Gerrard commented in his Antarctic classic, *The Worst Journey in the World*. On Ellesmere, North Pole adventurers occasionally experience -72° on arriving at Ward Hunt Island in early March but they usually linger in the camp's heated weatherhavens till it warms up.

I've done two trips where the evening temperature was -40° or less about half the time. Strange things happen even then. Beard growth on the exposed face slows to a crawl, while hair under the turtleneck grows at a normal rate. Once I couldn't feel my left foot for several days, but it was not frostbitten. I eventually discovered that my sock had slipped down and was subtly restricting circulation. I

pulled the sock up and feeling returned to the foot a few hours later. As the weeks wore on, however, my perpetually cold toes went numb and the nerves didn't reawaken till a month after I'd been home.

But the real quirks of cold cannot compare to its imagined powers. Cowley Abraham, whose ship was blown south of Cape Horn into the subantarctic in 1683, found "so extreme cold that we could bear drinking three quarts of Brandy in twenty-four hours each man, and be not at all the worse for it." You have to wonder what drinking records they'd have set had they continued into the Antarctic itself!

An epic tale of frostbite, amputation and near death appeared in 1894 in the *Strand*, a fashionable London magazine. Written by one G. H. Lees, it was entitled "Lost in a Blizzard" and was introduced by the editors as "an absolutely true narrative of actual facts...written down from Mr. Lees' dictation, the loss of both his hands, of course, precluding him from writing."

It took place one wintry day near Indian Head, Manitoba, temperature a balmy -30°F. Riding his sleigh along a lonely trail, the narrator "began to feel very sleepy, through the intense cold," and got out to walk a bit. The horses bolted; he had left his gloves momentarily in the sleigh and so his hands were bare. Apparently he never thinks to put them inside his coat.

He first "ran some distance, when the cold seemed to make me faint; I lay down an hour before I could recover myself." When he got up, his hands were frozen. He then wandered for hours, tired, but naturally he "dared not sleep, knowing it would mean death." It was believed that extreme cold induced a hypnotic drowsiness, and that to fall asleep was never to wake up. However, as any camper knows, to fall asleep without enough insulation is to wake up cold, or not to sleep at all.

Frostbite was also thought to make fingers as brittle as icicles, for Lees next writes, "I crawled on my elbows, for I was now afraid of breaking my hands to pieces." At length, "being famished, I had to bite the snow off trees, though it pulled the skin from my lips." Passing over the fact that snow does not stick to the mouth like cold metal, another common misbelief is that if a civilized person misses a meal or two, he becomes starvation-maddened. The narrator had gone all of twenty hours without food.

Although such myths sound quaint now, the bogeyman of cold remains a good excuse for dismissing the Arctic as a land of Cain rather than an Eden.

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When we think of arctic sledding, we usually think of dog teams, but a person can haul too, and that's what I do. A simple harness of seat belt webbing slips across my chest and attaches to a seven-foot fiberglass sled with plastic runners and a nylon cover. The sled holds up to two months of supplies. When towing a sled, walking is faster than skiing, so I only ski in deep snow. Like a dog, I haul with four legs – the two I was born with and a pair of ski poles.

Manhauling has been described as “about the hardest work to which free men have been put in modern times.” Victorian geographical societies rightly saw arctic exploration as less dangerous but more arduous than the tropical variety. Arctic travelers didn’t die from malaria or native spears but they often had to haul their own gear on foot. This is no more dangerous than walking on a sidewalk. Less so, in fact: The one injury of my Ellesmere career happened when I was bitten by a dog while strolling to the National Archives in Ottawa.

Sledding is a lovely occupation, if you like walking. Coleridge considered a twenty-mile hike in the mountains nothing special. Beethoven composed while trekking in the Alps. Nietzsche wrote that only thoughts reached by walking have value. Bertrand Russell claimed that war would end if every young man walked twenty miles a day.

But not all cultured Europeans understood activity. In *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, Jules Verne’s heroes endured “three hours of terrible fatigue, walking incessantly.” Jean Malaurie, author of *The Last Kings of Thule*, that wonderful study of the Polar Inuit, makes a big deal of walking six miles per day and – whoopee-do – “penetrating inland to a depth of nineteen miles.” Even Mark Twain, that vigorous traveler from the vigorous New World, believed that walking was “merely a lubricant” for good conversation.

In his essay on walking, Thoreau writes that the origin of the word “saunter” may derive from the medieval peripatetics who claimed to be going to the Holy Land, “la Sainte Terre.” Sledding is, in this sense, a lot like sauntering. An imitation of Christ whose Golgotha is healthy exhaustion. For the Western soul, exertion may do what fasting does in the East.

Of nineteenth-century explorers, only John Rae had the walking gene. This first polar athlete snowshoed a total of 6,500 miles in the Central Arctic. Those who met him described him as “full of animal spirits” or “active as a squirrel.” As for the Ellesmere pioneers, American Adolphus Greely disliked exercise so much that he couldn’t bring himself to order a fitness routine for others. George Nares was typical of British leaders. Rather than a swashbuckling star ship captain who was always first in line for dangerous away missions, Nares remained in the stateroom, pushing his miniature battalions across the field of war with a shuffleboard cue.

Many of these early expeditions came to grief on Ellesmere – for which *The New York Times* recently credited the island with the highest misery-per-visitor ratio on earth. But all the scholarly analyses of expeditions gone wrong, all the excuses and the crowing, fail to acknowledge the role of luck in arctic sledding. When I landed in Churchill Falls, Labrador to begin my first winter trek, I had no idea whether I would be able to pull 250 pounds for ten miles a day. But by chance, the route I had blindly picked followed the wind-blasted lakes of the interior plateau. Superb conditions. By the time I reached the poorer coastal snow, my load had dwindled to almost nothing.

A few years later, a Toronto lawyer named Pat Lewtas embarked on a similar solo quest. Unluckily for him, he chose a stretch of Yukon wilderness where he quickly became bogged down in the impossible snows of the timberland.

A couple of years later he went to Baffin Island, but his bad-luck route faltered again in the rough ice of shallow inlets. On his third try, over the hard snows of the Barren Lands, he accomplished a flawless six hundred mile hike from Cambridge Bay to Arviat in central Nunavut.

Many early British sledding experiences happened to occur in the same idyllic snows as Lewtas's third journey. In the windswept Central Arctic, snowshoes were unnecessary – so when Nares explored northern Ellesmere in 1875, only one or two men brought them. After their miserable sledding mileage, Nares endured unflattering comparisons with those earlier, glory days of British sledging. Even in modern times, one armchair expert dissected several expeditions and concluded that 208 pounds per sledger was the maximum sustainable load. Nares's men averaged 240 pounds. Therein, he says, they goofed.

But the Arctic is not all the same. Conditions vary both over large areas and from bay to bay, hill to hill. Even one freak snowfall can ruin a trip. Thus, a 208-pound limit is meaningless: In good snow, 300 pounds is easy; in bad snow, 100 pounds is murder. The best windpacked snow is so hard that even ski poles make little impression, and a sled of almost any weight glides effortlessly. Meanwhile, hauling through powder snow is one of the Arctic's worst ordeals – or best cardiovascular workouts. The Nares expedition had to drag their one-ton sleds through powder and over the worst pressure ice in the world.

Since snow conditions make all the difference between an easy thirty-mile day and a hard three-mile day, it was disappointing to discover that the supposedly many Inuit words for snow is a myth. The myth began in 1940, when a talented amateur linguist named Benjamin Whorf misinterpreted an old anthropology text which stated that Inuktitut has four root words for snow. Whorf had never been to the Arctic but he seemed to understand that for northern peoples, snow types are important enough to deserve their own nouns. So in a somewhat casual vein, and with no good reason, he wrote an article claiming that, "To an Eskimo, this all-inclusive word [snow] would be almost unthinkable; he would say that falling snow, slushy snow, and so on, are sensuously and operationally different, different things to contend with; he uses different words for them and for other kinds of snow."

Whorf's article was picked up by the mainstream media and soon lodged in the public consciousness. Since then, the "many" Inuit words for snow have taken on a life of their own as a clever cultural symbol. "Many" became 50, 50 became 100, 100 became 200. I recently saw 300 on a public television spot about Inuit culture. The record hyperbole is currently 400, proffered some years ago by a magazine writer in need of a juicy metaphor.

Since Whorf, scholars have tried to debunk the myth, but without much success. It is, in the words of pop linguist Geoffrey Pullum, "too good to be false."

Finding out exactly how many Inuktitut words there are for snow is a thankless task that bogs down in philological hair-splitting about the definitions of "word", "snow" and "Inuktitut". Suffice it to say that English has as many or almost as many, if you count such terms as corn snow, powder, slush and windpack. Moreover, the two or four or a dozen Inuit snow words differentiate not

between fine gradations of traveling snow – so wonderfully appropriate – but to more mundane concepts such as snow on the ground versus falling snow. Apparently, like us, they just refer to traveling snow as great, pretty good or crappy.

Digging into the myth did leave me with one small reward. A California professor informs me that the Chamorro language of Guam has thirty-seven words for coconut. I haven't dug further into it, preferring to believe that the truth behind the myth is alive in the Tropics, if not in the Arctic.

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A sledder's day begins in low gear. Those hours in the sleeping bag are too sweet to abandon easily. They have an infant's reassuring lack of responsibility. The legs are tight from the previous day's exertions and must be periodically stretched with cat-like luxuriance. If you have been disciplined the night before – leaving two hours between supper and bedtime and not overdoing the fluids – the need to pee will not wake you prematurely.

The eternal daylight eliminates the need for a rigid schedule. It doesn't matter whether the traveling day finishes at six in the evening or one in the morning; it all looks the same. As long as the miles get done, you can indulge yourself as much as your limited resources allow.

After a good sleep, I sometimes spend a defiant extra hour in the sack, stretching and savoring the uterine warmth. Finally, bracing myself like a swimmer diving into a cold lake, I unzip the sleeping bag – ignoring the ripe odors – put on puffy camp clothing, step outside, pee, get the stove going for hot chocolate and melt snow for cereal. While lingering over breakfast, I melt the one and a half quarts of water for the trail. Iceberg ice tastes the best, and as it melts, it sometimes sizzles like bacon frying.

For the first few days, breaking camp takes three hours. Once the routine becomes automatic, it's down to two hours. With no dawdling, it can be done in one. On every trip, the efficiency has to be relearned.

The first three hours of sledding are the hardest of the day. It's not that sledding is pain; but you have to put the comfort of camp behind you. Only then does sledding feel natural. The stiffness in the legs has disappeared by then, the rhythm kicks in, the mind dances, the hours fly.

Apsley Cherry-Garrard's sledders in Antarctica claimed to spend their time thinking of "grouse moors and pretty girls," but that is hard to believe. Even when the girl you love is waiting for you at home, even when you stare at her picture every night, she seems impossibly far away, like a half-remembered dream. Too distant to dominate the stern arctic horizon. More likely, Cherry-Garrard's moors and lassies were topics of conversation in the tent, not mental company on the trail.

On his 1906 trek across Ellesmere's north coast, Robert Peary grimly spend whole days counting his footsteps, presumably to measure distance. "My brain is numb with the incessant 'one, two three,' " he complained. Why he didn't use a

sled wheel odometer, like other explorers of his era, is hard to understand, unless driving himself bananas was part of his peculiarly bitter form of discipline.

Every sledder counts part of the time, though; the metronomic regularity of one's steps is soothing, and it's helpful and entertaining to graph the relation between miles per hour and steps per minute. With my stride, 112 steps per minute – a typical sledding pace in good snow – covers 2.4 miles per hour; 90 steps per minute, 1.5 miles per hour. Seventy-three steps per minute means I'm on skis in bad snow and making about a mile an hour. That pace traps you in the dreary present. It does not let the mind soar with the detachment that effortlessly devours miles. I seem to need at least 85 steps per minute to achieve escape velocity.

I usually get one or two special hours per day, when a somehow stimulated brain invents jokes or feelingly recites old poems or catches a whiff of childhood sensations so alien and fleeting that they “tend toward the outermost limit of communicable thought.” Other hours feature blank staring at the landscape or scanning for wildlife, broken only by random thoughts caroming around the skull: “Will she get used to living without me? Will my left knee give out? Are those muskoxen or just rocks? I'll take off my sunglasses at five p.m. today. I don't like chocolate-covered peanuts any more. If I make fifteen miles, I'll have the potato casserole for dinner as a reward. Slight pain in right side: Maybe that couple who removed their appendices before overwintering in Antarctica were smart. I...did...it...my...way...tra la la.”

Many an hour, in fact, is dominated by some idiotic song that the brain, like some scratched old record, repeats obsessively. The songs come out of the blue, but the words usually have a dreamlike connection to what's beneath the surface of the mind. Once, the old Rolling Stones' song *Ruby Tuesday* just wouldn't go away. “Don't question why she needs to be so free/She'll tell you it's the only way to be/She just can't be chained/To a life where nothing's gained/Or nothing's lost.” That was in polar bear country and anxiety was high. Ruby's acceptance of risk seemed ridiculously meaningful. Hour after hour, day after day, the damned song played. A year later, with storm clouds gathering on several fronts in my personal life, I couldn't seem to free myself from *God on High*, the plaintive *Les Misérables* tune.

After the first hour on the trail, it's time for a quick drink. Before the invention of waterproof bottles, chronically dehydrated sledgers drank only at the noonday stop. Nowadays, many sledders use a big Thermos that keeps fluids hot all day, but my journeys began partly as ascetic exercises in self-denial. Take enough away, and how you appreciate the little that remains! Although my camp luxuries have increased, plain Nalgene bottles are one of those spartan regimes that I affectionately hang onto. The bottles lie on the sled, insulated in my down parka, and I space the day's drinking so that only the last couple of mouthfuls are slushy.

After two hours, the 1,000-calorie breakfast has lightened. Out come the high-energy snacks: chocolate, chocolate peanuts, fatty cheeses. The more water in the cheese, the harder it freezes. Until late April, even asiago has to be “cut” with violent swings of an ice ax. Sometimes I can avoid these time-consuming

reenactments of the murder of Trotsky by finding a grocer at home who will vacuum pack it in pre-cut chunks.

And so it goes. Midday hikes break up the sledding rhythm too much, so I push all day and try to camp in interesting spots. In early spring it's too cold for long lunches, anyway. By mid-May, heat, not cold, is the problem. You can still get frostbite in a wind, but on calm days the sun is so strong that even an undershirt feels too warm. Sledders then begin "sleeping upside-down" and traveling during the cooler night. There is a fierce, unconventional satisfaction to having breakfast at eight in the evening, sledding all night and bedding down at noon.

The changing snow conditions provoke never-ending mental arithmetic about how far you'll make that day. Of all arctic skills, learning to relinquish expectations is the most important. Since you are not in control, every camp, every stop along the trail, every type of weather, should be equally accepted. Much-anticipated sites are often disappointing; minor destinations, marvellous. Because the magic moments are so unpredictable, you live in what one traveler calls "a constant state of optimistic expectation."

In particularly optimistic states, I sometimes tried to build a snow house, but the architecture was beyond me. It is hard to say which was more difficult, building an igloo or understanding its theory. An igloo, according to scholars, is not a hemisphere but a "catenoid of revolution with an optimum height-to-diameter ratio." This shape, apparently, eliminates "ring tension and shell moments."

It gets worse. The best snow for block-cutting "has a density of about 0.30 to 0.35 gm/cm<sup>3</sup> and a hardness of about 150 to 200 gm/cm<sup>3</sup>."

In igloo construction, as in other arts, a thousand cutaway diagrams can never replace the master-apprentice relationship. I know the principles, but my walls never lean inward enough. So my end product is not a catenoid of revolution but a cone whose narrow end tapers upward toward infinity.

*Igloo*, language purists point out, means house, any kind of house, so it is the wrong word for a domed catenary of snow blocks. But that's a losing effort, like insisting on using Himalaya instead of Himalayas because Himalaya is already plural – or like the explorer who insisted on calling muskoxen exclusively by their genus name *ovibos*, because they are neither oxen nor musky.

Using an igloo is like traveling with dogs: The mystique cannot be denied. It is redolent of seal oil lamps, polar bear skin pants and sleeping mats of caribou fur. Old, infirm Inuit walking nobly off into the blizzard without spoiling it by saying, "I may be some time." Those were the days. Sometimes, those are still the days, although most Inuit just bring canvas tents on their snowmobile-drawn komatiks.

Unlike dinosaurs, igloos leave no trace of their passing – "But where are the snows of yesteryear?" – so their origin is lost. One archaeologist speculates that the artistic Dorset people may have passed it on to the Thule. There is at least an aesthetic link between the Dorsets' exquisite carvings and the thing of beauty that is a well-built igloo. "Maybe there are so many artists among the Inuit because of the traditional need to build igloos and carve harpoonheads," suggests another scholar. "Their small groups were so spread out, they couldn't rely on one

craftsman per community.” There might have been some selection pressure for spatial intelligence.

Explorers quickly discovered the benefits of snow houses, but ignored or embraced them, depending on temperament. John Rae and Leopold McClintock used igloos during their journeys in the 1850s – for which they were disdained by the British establishment of the time. “Anyone can go native,” sniffed Sir Clements Markham. The American explorer Charles Francis Hall occasionally used snow shelters but after spending two hours and forty minutes on one in 1871, he remarked, “This is a long time to keep tired men exposed to severe weather after dragging a heavy sledge for ten or eleven hours.” Three hours is actually a typical novice time; an experienced pair of hands can build one in an hour. And once in Iqaluit, I saw a man complete an igloo in an astonishing twenty-nine minutes. In the end, however, I had to resign myself to that nylon igloo known as a dome tent, for which no spatial intelligence is required.

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Extreme endeavors such as manhauling four hundred miles across the Arctic puzzle most people. Many are just curious, but occasionally some old sobersides will ask why when what is clearly meant is, Why do you want to do something stupid like that?

The big Why dangles over all our heads, but adventurers seem to be fairer game for the question. Yet one might just as properly ask, Why run marathons? Why birdwatch? Why work at a job you don’t like? Why believe in God? Why help the under-privileged? Why get up every morning?

Now and then I run past a line that seems to buzz around the Why of adventure. “To circle or cross a place meaningful to you is a reverential act.” “The difference between vice and virtue depends on whether the pleasure precedes or follows the pain.” That Ellesmere travel is a pursuit of virtue sounds a lot more impressive than, “I like it.”

British poet and mountaineer Wilfrid Noyce identified thirteen adventure motives (comments mine):

1. *The ascetic streak.* Hard travel teaches self-control and gives a purifying glimpse of life as a hair shirt – refreshing for pampered Westerners.
2. *Enjoying the contrast of civilized and primitive.* Meeting a little ship after months of living on raw seal meat, Knud Rasmussen describes with pure joy how, “Ten minutes later I was on board, with my teeth deep in an orange. A little later, I sat staring with wide eyes at a real cup of actual steaming coffee. There were such things as Bread, and Cheese, and Butter...” Unless you eat the seal meat, you can’t fully experience the Orange.
3. *The spice of danger.* Unlike mountains, the Arctic presents little danger from falling, avalanches, rockfall and deadly winds. Arctic travel is more the endorphine high than the adrenaline rush.

4. *Pleasures of technique, pursuit of excellence, physical movement.* You feel like a sorcerer's apprentice every time you sleep comfortably at 40° below. Also, trekking twelve hours a day is very different than exercising for an hour: The physical being awakes.
5. *Lure of wild country.* High altitudes are more extreme than high latitudes, but how many mountains are three hundred miles from the nearest village?
6. *Lure of the unknown.* A powerful motive during the first few trips, when the Arctic looms as strange and compelling as Mars.
7. *Escape.* Those who are ill-at-ease in their own culture look for home in distant places. Most travelers eventually find their personal Ellesmere.
8. *Fame, fortune.* "Most nonfamous people," writes essayist Cintra Wilson, "are frequently in a state of dull torture from the lack of boundless international adoration in their lives." Because adventure seems so dashing and difficult and arouses our Walter Mitty longings, it is one of the roads to celebrity in which no outstanding talent is required.
9. *Conquest and competition (nationalism).* A little out-of-date now, but the first Brazilians to the North Pole would still create a stir in their own country.
10. *Knowledge (science).* Often simply a ruse by adventurers to clothe, as Bill Tilman puts it, "their more or less frivolous aims with a thin mantle of science." Self-knowledge, on the other hand, is a driving force. Under extreme circumstances you quickly learn how much you're the person you want to be, and how much you're not.
11. *Fascination with machines (especially the airplane).* Around the World in Eighty Days types continue to flock to the northern skies in putt-putts of all kinds.
12. *Curiosity about people, places.* This refers largely to less extreme adventures. One can be curious about Morocco; it's too weak a term for Ellesmere. People-curious adventurers usually go where there are more people, although a few grand arctic figures – Frederick Cook, Jean Malaurie, Charles Francis Hall – fell under the spell of Inuit culture.
13. *Sense of purpose.* For some of us, what the Inuit call a journey in pursuit of its tail – one that has no purpose other than its own completion – holds more meaning than practical goals.

Noyce's forty-five year old list remains the closest anyone has come to encapsulating the Why. However, it does not address the basic mystery of why some people crave adventure while others avoid it. In particular, why go to extremes?

During one trek, I developed a theory which helped pass a lot of hours. It tries to explain the thirst for adventure and at the same time answer the basic question, what made Beethoven different?

Theory of Genetic Energy There is such a thing as genetic energy. Scientists may suspect that it exists but they do not yet have a yardstick to measure it. Nevertheless, we are all born with different amounts. It doesn't make us everything we are – there's personality too – but it determines how exaggerated these personality traits are. When our pride is stung, do we cringe slightly or conquer nations in revenge?

Genetic energy can be squandered or fully used. As with height, a good environment takes us only so far. Beyond this, we can't make giants of ourselves through "the omnipotence of unyielding human will." At a certain level of excellence, everyone is dedicated – but the higher the energy, the further you can push without hitting the ceiling or breaking down.

Energy is not the same as talent. Talent is the ability to do things easily. The sharpness of a lumberjack's ax is talent; energy determines whether he swings that ax a thousand times a day, or a hundred.

We can consciously channel some of this energy, but it tends to flow according to our predispositions. There are five channels for genetic energy: spiritual, physical, intellectual, sexual and practical. Honoré de Balzac funneled great spiritual and intellectual energy through his talent for writing, but it would be hard to find someone with less physical energy. In his few moments away from the desk, all this brilliant walrus did was sit.

Great individuals all have prodigious amounts of genetic energy. This is the basic gift that sets the Beethovens of this world apart. Some seem able to focus it all in one area; with others, it "runs madly off in all directions." Some fields of endeavor require more energy than others. Intuitively, it takes more to found a religion than to establish a business empire. A ranking of great figures by energy level would be Prophet, Leader, Poet, Writer and Intellectual. Finally, genetic energy in an individual – and in a species – decreases over time.

I inherited my genetic energy from my mother and her high-spirited family. It seems to have been just enough to glimpse, at times, how ordinary I normally was. But I had always been physically and spiritually restless, and this restlessness was enough to shape my life. It may have prompted me, for instance, to buy a huge pack when I hadn't camped since high school.

How does this relate to adventure? Today, survival in the West requires little energy. Sometimes, the ache of unused energy drives us to tilt at windmills – vacuum activities, like the caged flycatcher that pecks at imaginary flies. Then we discover that the happiest state lies near the edge of our capabilities. Extreme journeys take us to that edge.

The more genetic energy, the farther and more often we need to go. Much of the year, I pace endlessly, barely able to sit down. The few days or weeks after a hard Ellesmere trip are the only times I feel physically at peace. Soon the restlessness begins again. I pace and plot. Without some strange project to work toward, my days feel empty. Perhaps it's personal style, to expend energy in floods rather than in measured daily doses. Perhaps it's discontent with adult life. Not enough wonder.

If I had to walk ten miles to work, then carry backbreaking sacks of potatoes all day, voluntarily sledding across Ellesmere would be incomprehensible. But not for everyone. I once hiked the Karakum Desert of Turkmenistan with a Russian named Andrei Ilyachov. He was one of the poorest Russians I'd ever met, which is saying a lot. In a frustrating country which grinds down the strong and crushes the weak, Ilyachov spent his vacations biking hundreds of miles – without food or water. He had done this for years, in Siberia, southern Russia and Central Asia. He was not only able to adapt to the hard conditions of his everyday life, but he had so much energy left over that he devoted all his free time to making his life even harder. A holy fool.

How does this relate to adventure? Today, survival in the West requires little energy. Sometimes, the ache of unused energy drives us to tilt at windmills. Then, we discover that the happiest state lies near the edge of our capabilities, and extreme journeys take us to that edge.