

Nº
001

THE NEW TOP OF THE WORLD

JOURNEY END OF IT



ULTIMA THULE, THE GREEKS CALLED IT, THE END OF THE EARTH, LAND OF CHAOS AND MAELSTROM. SINCE THE BEGINNING OF TIME, MAN HAS FELT COMPELLED TO FIND IT. THIS SUMMER, AN EXPEDITION LED BY ARCTIC EXPLORER DENNIS SCHMITT WENT IN SEARCH OF THE NEW ISLANDS BEING BORN AS THE ICE MELTS AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD. AND THERE, THEY STEPPED OUT ONTO A LAND UNTOUCHED BY MAN.

By JOHN H. RICHARDSON
Photographs by JEFF SHEA







Stray Dog West, the island discovered and explored by the expedition, is the most substantial new island to emerge during the dramatic melting of the ice that has taken place off the coast of Greenland in the last decade. It is now the northernmost land mass on earth, sitting a half mile north of Kaffeklubben, the previous holder of that title, which was discovered a century ago by Robert Peary.

We are standing in an empty corner of the Reykjavík airport—an architect, a math teacher, a retired Chicago lawyer, a businessman, and a reporter, all mountain climbers and river runners and adventurers of one sort or another. Jeff has climbed all seven summits and toured more than three hundred countries, Holly leads white-water canoe trips for the Sierra Club.

We are here because the Arctic explorer Dennis Schmitt has promised to take us to the end of the earth.

More than that, he promised to lead us to a new island untouched by man. And he said that this island would be the new *Ultima Thule*, the end of the earth, where Greek philosophers put the land of milk and honey and also the home of *chaos* and *maelstrom*, *Oceanus innavigabilis* on the ancient maps. But this quest has a modern twist. Two years ago Dennis made international news when he discovered a new island off the coast of east Greenland and named it “Warming Island.” He called it that because the temperature of Greenland increased by nearly 11 degrees between 1991 and 2003, unveiling the island by melting the ice that connected it to the mainland. And he believes that he can find more warming islands in the north, uncovered by the melting ice, evidence of our changing world. If an island is far enough north, it could even play a minor (but deliciously ironic) role in the change, extending the Danish two-hundred-mile limit deeper into the warming oil fields.

Each of us paid \$10,000. We are chartering a private plane that will drop us off on the north coast of Greenland. From there we will hike across the ice with our crampons and ice axes.

Dennis gathers us around, padding his soft bearish paws against our shoulders. He’s got a white beard and white hair and a pretty big gut. He’s gentle and distracted.

“Now we’re on an expedition,” he says. “Before, we had worries and cares. Now we leave them behind. We begin to create our own little world.”

There’s one problem already: Steve Kabala, the architect from California. He’s tall and skinny and deeply tanned. When he got on the plane in San Francisco, he asked the steward for two beers and two bourbons, but he already seemed so intoxicated the steward asked if he’d been drinking or taking medication.

Then he passed out.

When he woke up, these were his first words:

“Where’s my bourbon?”

Storyed Arctic explorer, composer, linguist who speaks Eskimo and nine other languages, world-class eccentric, Dennis Schmitt is a throwback to a time when there was much world left to discover. The farther north he is, the happier he gets.

Now we’re in the Reykjavík airport restaurant, and he’s drinking another beer.

There’s another problem, a rival expedition called the 2007 International Peary Land Expedition. The way Dennis tells it, it’s run by a pair of Walter Mitty academics named Frank Landsberger and Peter Skafte who went on a couple of expeditions with him and became obsessed with stealing his glory. Peter was part of the Top of the World Expedition in 1996, which brought Dennis on as “field leader” and then trashed him in its vanity-press memoir for straying too far ahead of the group. “When I told Dennis to slow down, it didn’t do any good, and the point was, we didn’t know if there were any polar bears near and what good is a shotgun when half the group is a mile behind?” For his part, Dennis could never forgive them for naming one of the mountains after John Denver, the singer best known for “Rocky Mountain High.” So Dennis went back without the Top of the Worlders in 1998 and the Top of the Worlders went back without Dennis in 2001, each exploring the shifting group of islands being born at the end of the earth that Dennis had taken to calling the Stray Dogs.

Now Frank and Peter were trying to raid this expedition, telling photographer Jeff Shea that Dennis was “unfit to lead” and Holly that he wasn’t good enough for her. They put in a bid on the same plane we are taking to the northern coast, the Twin Otter from the Polar Logistics Group, which is a problem because there aren’t many other ways to get into northern Greenland.

They tell the story quite differently, of course. “Dennis suffers from a personality disorder,” says Peter. “He makes all these fantastic claims.”

But Dennis thinks we’re well ahead of them. They probably won’t arrive in Greenland until late July, which would give us plenty of time to get there first.

The truth is, Dennis has lost a few jobs lately. There was some problem with a polar-expedition company called Oceanwide, and he stopped leading expeditions for the Sierra Club because he’s so bad with money. Already he seems to have a very shaky idea of how much he is spending on this trip. He doesn’t have health insurance.

But Dennis is not a normal person. Born a plumber’s son sixty-one years ago in Berkeley, California, he learned three or four languages by the time he was ten and had, for a time, a fantasy of never leaving the house so he could dream the world from his bedroom. Instead he studied linguistics at U. C. Berkeley with Noam Chomsky, who helped him get a job studying Eskimo. He lived four years at Anaktuvuk Pass, an Alaskan Eskimo village surrounded by mountains that called to him.

No
002





He is still the first and only person ever to climb Alaska's Brooks Range from Point Hope to the Mackenzie River. He made the first traverse of Axel Heiberg Island in northern Canada, which earned him one of many notices in *American Alpine Journal*. He speaks ten languages, including hard ones like Russian and Norwegian. I have seen him switch effortlessly from Danish to French to English. But he also lives in his parents' house in a shamble of rooms, composes classical music—he wrote the soundtrack to a 1978 movie called *The Alaska Wilderness Adventure*—and writes sonnets under the pen name “D O’Farrell.”

Right now he's off on a spontaneous lecture on “dream cultures,” speaking in the drifting cadences of a born academic. At Anaktuvuk Pass he met an Eskimo named Elijah Kakinaq who believed that his uncle's spirit was the raven, which stands for chaos, so he spoke to all ravens as if they were his uncle and put out little offerings near his meat larder so that his uncles would not bother his meat. And the dream culture works, you see, because the ravens saw the offering as the lure and avoided the meat, “so it works as a dream logic and it works also on a scientific level.”

About ten minutes into this, Holly interrupts. “I love your lectures, but in a group of six, you need to leave space for others to speak.”

Dennis takes the rebuke meekly, bowing his head.

“I can interrupt,” Jeff says.

“But not everyone can.”

“Actually,” Steve says, taking a sip on his beer, “it's brilliant.”

In Oslo, waiting to hear if his rifle made it through customs, Dennis pulls out a sheaf of papers. “This is top secret,” he says. “Four thousand dollars' worth of satellite photos.”

They show the coast of north Greenland.

“We could land here, or here,” Dennis says, “but this river has never been crossed.”

The long way is eighteen kilometers, about eleven miles.

Steve points to a much closer spot. “Do you think it's possible that he could put us down here?”



“It's possible.”

Here is Kaffeklubben, the official northernmost piece of land in the world. Half a mile long, it was discovered by Robert Peary in 1900 and seems reliably fixed to the coast. Flowers grow on it, especially a clumpy little ground cover called purple saxifrage. And here are the moving islands, including the one called Oodaaq and the one at 83°42' that Dennis discovered with Frank and Peter in 2003. These islands are the subject of some controversy, dismissed by serious end-of-the-earthologists because they aren't fixed “tectonic” features but mere “depositional” features, rubble bulldozed around by the Arctic ice. Both of them have disappeared on the satellite pictures, either pushed aside or gone back under. But Dennis says that this doesn't really bother him—if you take the long view, the poetic view, nothing is permanent or fixed, and even the continents drift. That's why he calls these islands the Stray Dogs.

But if the ice melts enough, who knows?

“This is probably the first target we'll do,” he says, putting his finger on the page. “The question is, can we get on the ice? Or is the shore lead too great?”

When our hotel opens, Steve goes on a beer run and the rest of us go to sleep. A few hours later, he bursts back into the room. “Renato's on the phone!”

After a grueling ten-hour trek, the expedition made camp on a plain between two rivers, with Kaffeklubben rising in the distance. The tundra (left) was wet and spongy this year, more so than in years past, says Schmitt. Musk ox seemed to be everywhere. One of the pilots had warned to stay clear of them, saying they were more dangerous than polar bears.





This is the seventh member of our expedition, an Italian journalist named Renato Pappa. Dennis raises his head from the pillow, his white hair wild.

"I'll go get him," Steve says. "I'll get a cab and go get him."

"He'll come here. Don't worry about it."

"I have to go. It's a mission. I need a mission. I went on a mission to buy beer and I lost my map."

He's totally plastered.

"This is not the mission," Dennis says, in a gentle voice.

"Not the mission?"

A couple of hours later, Renato arrives. Short and round, with a bald head and a gap in his front teeth, he looks like a comic actor from a cheeseball sex comedy. "Italy, America, okay, okay," he says.

But there is a problem.

"Renato handicap. Renato *scoliosi*. Renato very sports but handicap. Problem for you?"

Dennis and Holly look up from their bed in a sleepy daze. They've been trying to put this expedition together for three years. It fell apart last year in the bitter fight with Frank and Peter, and two weeks ago it almost fell apart again when the Danish government denied our helicopter permit and three more members dropped out. In the bunk next to them, Steve is passed out wearing nothing but undershorts.

Renato has \$10,000 in cash.

"No," Dennis says. "Maybe by tomorrow everybody will be handicapped."

More trouble. It seems that Steve—who's disappeared again—brought a bottle of illegal absinthe, the kind that killed Oscar Wilde and deranged the senses of a generation of French poets. He plans to drink it on the ice. Steve also takes methadone for a "back condition" and Xanax to help him sleep. Everyone is alarmed about this except Dennis, who seems to have no appetite for confrontation. The group should be the leader, he says.

"I'm going to have to be the bad guy," Holly says.

When Steve arrives, she tells him that some big complica-

tions have come up. For one thing, Renato has a back problem that was suddenly and severely reinjured when he tried to pick up his backpack.

"If it gets bad, I can probably help him," Steve says. "But I have to watch my own supply."

"These sorts of things tax our group," Holly continues. "Where we're going, we don't take it lightly. It's not Disneyland, it's not a walk in the park. This is the real deal, and we have to count on everyone to give his very best. So I am forbidding alcohol on the north coast."

Perhaps Steve was expecting this, or maybe it's just a subject that tends to come up in his life. In any case, he doesn't hesitate. "I asked before I signed up, 'Is this going to be a dry trip?' And you said no." Furthermore, he did not appreciate being pulled aside like a schoolboy at the airport yesterday. Robert Peary brought so much alcohol to the north coast of Greenland, he had enough to leave some behind in a cairn, and they named the whole place after him. "I'm kind of an old hand at this. People say you don't take alcohol up to the Sierra at twelve thousand feet. I say, don't take more than you can responsibly use."

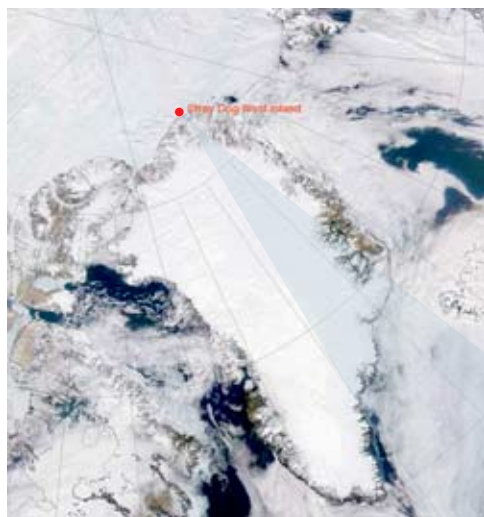
"But absinthe is really heavy stuff," Holly says. "And you're on medication."

"I'm going to jump in here," Bob says. "I've talked to you the most in the last day and a half, and you've had trouble focusing. You've been repeating yourself."

Bob is worried about bears. We need to be lucid around the polar bears.

"What you guys aren't getting," Steve says, "is that this is my chosen lifestyle."

But this sounds more coherent than it was. Steve launches a theme and meanders gently from thought to thought, pausing at a daisy here and there, often speaking in a kind of personal shorthand that's impossible to follow. He has something to share but he doesn't know if we're ready to receive it and he's been married for thirty-three years and sometimes a journey goes this way and sometimes it goes another way and frankly, he has things he wants to resolve on this trip. "If it wasn't for your arti-



Looking northwest from Kaffeklubben, the annual ice meets the permanent ice, the two masses crashing together and pushing up massive chunks of ice four stories high. The map below shows the route the expedition trekked to Stray Dog West, covering about forty-four miles through ice fields and melt pools in eight days.



cle,” he tells Dennis, “I wouldn’t be here. I got the sense that you march to a different drummer, that you understood the spiritual side of climbing. I want to talk to you about that.”

Dennis nods his white head. “Yes, we do have something to talk about.”

“You said that summits didn’t have any more to teach you, but I think they have something to teach me.”

Dennis seems embarrassed. “Well, that was a rhetorical device.”

But now Steve is tired and wants to take a little walk.

After he leaves, Holly brings up the medical forms that nobody filled out. “We have a lunatic, with guns in camp, and possibly polar bears.”

But Dennis shrugs it off. “So far, we’re fine. We’re in Oslo, we have the gun. Then we go north.”

If find a copy of the article that inspired Steve to be here in a book called *The High Lonesome*, reprinted alongside work by mountaineering legends like John Muir and Reinhold Messner. It opens with Dennis as a boy of six, dreaming of a range of mountains that “formed a magical ring around the North Pole and protected Santa Claus from such pedestrian influence as the Fourth of July.” Fourteen years later he walked off a plane and found the landscape of his dreams, “a landscape that inspired deep within me a terrible longing never to die, never to go blind to the world, a landscape of beautiful people magically different from myself, as true a fairy tale as ever I have witnessed on earth.” And here’s the section that Steve was talking about, when Dennis learns to stop craving summits: An Eskimo woman tells him that people are starting to call his first peak Dennis Mountain, or Ekkayoak Mountain, after his Eskimo name. *My mountain*, he thinks, “with a feeling the pharaohs must have known.” Then she starts laughing. “I jokes you real good on that time. You think someone can give you the mountain?”

On this subject, Dennis and Steve are in perfect harmony. “Of course a first ascent doesn’t matter,” Dennis says. “But there’s four billion years of history and there’s something about *experiencing* it for the first time. Napoleon puts himself in history by conquest, Michelangelo by painting. For mountaineers...”

“Conquistadors of the useless,” Steve says, quoting a book title.

“... it is being first.”

“To put order in a complex universe.”

“When you climb a peak, the world becomes more defined. You reach a high point that is both metaphorical and physical.

“Where all paths are revealed,” says Steve.

“Heaven is up. Mountains lead you closer to God.”

But there’s also a dark side, Dennis admits. “A lot of the time, you do something to prevent the competition from doing it before you. The most sinister of all the motivations.”

We fly to Svalbard, a cluster of remote islands in the high north sea between Norway and Greenland. From the air, it’s a spectacular moonscape of snowy valleys and craggy peaks, a vision out of a children’s book. We are going to camp here, right by the air-

port, and wait for the Twin Otter that will take us to Greenland’s north coast.

This is when we start to see the full dimension of the Renato problem. First, he refuses to pick up his pack and Dennis ends up carrying it. Then it becomes clear that every part of his tent mystifies him and he wants someone else to set it up for him. Then he notices a tiny rip in the seam of his utterly useless track pants and brings a little sewing kit to Holly.

“Put some duct tape on it,” she says.

The next day, Dennis takes him into the grocery store and they come out with canned food.

“But it’s so *heavy*,” Holly says.

“I showed him the right food,” Dennis says. “He just will not eat it. He wouldn’t even look at it.”

Later, there’s a phone conference with a woman at *Napoli* magazine. Dennis tells her that food is a problem, Renato has

No

074

SIGNS THAT THE TWENTIETH CENTURY IS FINALLY, AT LONG LAST, COMING TO AN END*

March 2, 2008

Election for successor to Russian president Vladimir Putin, who will leave office after eight years.

July 31, 2008

Bill Gates steps down as day-to-day chief of the Microsoft Corporation after more than thirty years.

January 20, 2009, 12 noon

President George W. Bush leaves office.

February 17, 2009

Analog television broadcasts are scheduled to end in the United States, as the Federal Communications Commission will require all stations to send their signals digitally.

May 2009

Jay Leno leaves *The Tonight Show* seventeen years after taking over for Johnny Carson.

*Except in Hollywood: December 25, 2008
Star Trek XI to be released; Leonard Nimoy returns as Spock.

very heavy food. But the woman talks over him and he ends up trying to hand the phone to Holly. “She wants to know about the food. What you’re feeding him each night.”

Holly stalks away. “I’m not going to give her menus! I cook what I cook and it’s good food.”

She doesn’t think Renato can make it on the ice. She wants to tell him now, before we get to Station Nord. But Dennis keeps refusing. “Half the things I’ve done, I never would have done if it wasn’t for people reaching inside themselves and doing more than they ever thought they could do. You have to give people a chance to be their best selves.”

This is also our first exposure to the twenty-four-hour Arctic sun, a relentless *now* that courses through you like an electric current tapped into the main circuit of eternity. There’s no need to eat, no need to sleep, it’s just high noon all day long. The sun wheels around the horizon in a circle and never goes down. The problem this poses for sleeping is nothing compared with how it bends your sense of time. All the subtle changes in light that mark the day’s passage are gone. Minutes get gooey and stretch out. You think it must be getting time for dinner but

it’s almost midnight—and still as bright as noon.

Perhaps this is why Dennis is starting to brood on the rival expedition. The Twin Otter is delayed again, which reminds him that Frank tried to convince the guys at Polog to let his expedition get the plane first. There was also the bitter incident nine years ago when Peter and his team got summit fever and tried to steal the first ascent of Hammeken Point. And the dispute over the island at 83°42’ that they all discovered together, despite the self-serving account Peter gives in *The Polar Times*. Frank and Peter will dispute all this later, of course, but that doesn’t change how upset Dennis is at the moment. Imagine, naming a mountain after John Denver! If he finds an island, he plans to give it a name dignified and neutral—Western Island, perhaps.

He has a secret plan. “If we see any sign of them when we get there,” he tells me, “we have to be ready to race to the island—you, me, and Jeff. We’re the strongest. We’ll form a scouting party and go on ahead.”

Dennis alarms us with his habit of picking up his gear and walking off without even looking to see if anyone will follow him. He does this in airports and he did it in Oslo, almost losing us on the way to the train station. He did it again today when there was



The terrain between Camps 1 and 2 posed problems. The ice in the arroyos between the ridges was deep slush this year, making trekking a “rich emotional experience,” as Schmitt put it. Hip-deep in spots, making you think twice before crossing the next one.

a last-minute hassle over how many people could get on the Twin Otter, just marched up to the airport and started putting his stuff on the scale. This is just the way the Top of the World folks described him. He's obsessed, which is a fascinating poetic quality in a fictional character but not so comforting in a person who is supposed to lead you into an arctic wilderness. But finally we're flying our sweet little Twin Otter over endless snow and craggy peaks, wisps of clouds and glaciers running down to the water. The snow runs down the gray ridges like poured milk.

"I've never seen anything like it," Steve says.

After three hours we reach Station Nord, twenty small green and white buildings surrounded by infinite snow way up in the top notch of Greenland. The Danish soldiers who live there are all young and handsome and radiate physical authority, with black clothes and curving modern sunglasses that make them look like characters out of a Bond movie. They spend most of their time driving giant American snowblowers back and forth over the runway or hanging out in the Station Nord bar, where we find Steve. He comes over to us talking about the noble light and the mountains that separate "what is profane from what is holy." He thanks Holly for this amazing opportunity. "I've spent all my life's savings to get to this place," he says.

**DENNIS
STEPS ON TO
THE GRAVEL,
THE FIRST
MAN ON AN IS-
LAND THAT IS
NOT ON ANY
MAPS, HALF
A MILE PAST
THE OFFICIAL
END OF THE
EARTH.**

"You have to have a dream," she says.

Steve is starting to seem more and more forgivable. He's always cheerful, always willing, his clothes so shabby it makes you want to look out for him—here's some duct tape, dude. Tape up that sleeve. Take *care* of yourself. "I have a lot of work ahead of me," he says, "and this is going to help me do it."

Then he goes back to his barstool, flashing a happy grin. "No tipping and they won't let you buy a drink!"

In the morning, Dennis wakes up and writes two sonnets. The one called "The Perfect Life" starts with a hearty meal of eggs.

"First course I'd, fit in feathers, find / At cackles fenced within the yard."

He comes out of his tent in a cheerful mood. "The weather report is good," he says.

Steve comes over in a new pair of boots. "I woke up wearing these," he says.

But Renato seems more and more disoriented. Last night I asked him to show me what he was writing in his pad, and the day's entire entry was a single sentence:

"Longyearbyen—Station Nord, 3 hrs."

After dinner, Holly and Dennis try to talk him into at least *trying* to carry a lighter pack. So Renato takes off his shirt to show us his hump. "*Renato scoliosi*," he says. And he also has a pain in his heel, which he suffers in silence because "Renato is not bad like a fox, Renato is good. Renato isn't stupid, Renato no English."

He says that Dennis and Holly told him it would be easy, that he could do it. The words come out of him in defeated little whimpers:

Renato paid ten million lire.

Is this the end, Station Nord?

These are the legs I have and they can't do any more.

He draws a cross on a piece of paper and writes a caption: "Renato Stop To Dead."

Wearily, Dennis and Holly shake their heads. "It's not in your back," Dennis says. "It's in your mind."

Expedition finished?

A couple of hours later, I look out the window and see him sorting through his pack, throwing stuff out.

And finally, we board the Twin Otter and fly through low clouds to the coast. There's Bliss Bay! There's Kaffeklubben!

And here are the Stray Dogs. The pilot carves circles in the air above them, giving us plenty of time to look.

"There's something!" Bob says.

"Is that dirty ice?"

"That's definitely something," Holly says.

"It's not north of Kaffeklubben."

"Yes it is. That's one of the good ones. We have it GPS'd."

"Jeff, get a shot of that one," Dennis says.

Oodaaq is definitely gone, Dennis says. The feature at 83°42' is gone too, replaced by a mound of snow. That leaves one good candidate, a black smudge at 83°40'37". It's the biggest and most solid looking of all the islands and it's about a half mile north of Kaffeklubben. Unfortunately there are melt pools everywhere, which is not a good sign for the planet or for us. We're going to be walking through the physical evidence of global warming, praying the water's not too deep.

From the air there seems to be nothing but landing spots, all flat and flinty between the mountains and the ice. But when the pilot comes down low to the nearest spot, tilting the plane to touch the right tire to the ground, a fierce rumble shoots through us.

Too rocky.

We make pass after pass but none work out. So we wheel around one more time and head back for Bliss Bay, eleven miles away. On a rocky plain marked only by a few faded red signs and four piles of rocks, the plane finally rumbles to a stop and we pile out onto the ground.

Damn, it's cold! And windy! It must be blowing thirty knots!

"Twenty knots," Jeff says.

Everything is quick then, unloading bags and shaking hands and taking pictures. To everyone's relief, Renato agrees to get back on the plane. He doesn't even argue. But first, a picture with the Italian flag. And a picture with the flag of some Italian soccer team. And a picture with an Olympic-style medal stamped with the name of the expedition and the latitude. And a few select hugs.

It's so cold, Jeff has to keep reminding him, "Smile, Renato, smile!"

While this is happening, the Twin Otter pilot takes Steve aside. "See that ridge?" he says. "That's where the musk ox feed. They're more dangerous than polar bears. Don't go up on that ridge."

What desolate beauty! Ice on one side, snowcapped mountains on the other, the air so clear it seems to bring the whole landscape right into your lap, eliminating distance the way the eternal sunlight eliminates time. Reduced to black and white, rock and snow, the landscape has the abstract quality of an idea

or a first principle. But setting up tents in a twenty-five-knot wind is not so abstract. It requires piles of rocks and rapid staking and even then the wind can blow your tent flat.

"See that white stuff coming?" Holly says.

White stuff? Damn! Too bad Renato didn't see this! Suddenly it's blowing sideways through the camp, so hard we have to crawl into our sleeping bags to wait out the blizzard.

Except for Jeff. Until now, he spent most of his time typing e-mails. In the Oslo airport, waiting in the departures line, he set up his laptop on top of his baggage cart. In Longyearbyen, he spent much of his time tapping the wireless feed at the Radisson lounge. He would roll in at five in the morning and sleep all day. Now he's strangely energized, hanging out in the vestibules of our tents. "Do you want to go on a hike for a couple of hours? What's the plan? How about you, Bob, up for a walk?"

He offers to make everyone soup.

An hour later, Jeff delivers dinner: albacore tuna and dried peas in a creamy sauce.

"This is the best soup I ever had," I say.

"It's not soup. It's noodles and tuna. Want some soup? I have tomato, creamed broccoli, and bouillon."

Jeff, who is fifty-two, is the real thing, a true explorer, modest about his seven summits and endlessly fascinated by every detail of the physical world. Suddenly I understand all of Hemingway's stuff about strong men who live in decent valor beyond the soft ways of civilization.

But now Jeff wants to climb the ridge.

"For how long?"

"Two... three... four hours?"

"Are we going to take a gun?"

No, he says. He's more worried about the snow. "Snow eliminates all your landmarks," he says.

He plans to take a compass.

An hour later, we set out for the ridge. The ground is so springy it's like walking on a sponge, one of the strange qualities of Arctic tundra. After the first ridge, we find another. Then another. And another. Land that looks flat opens as you approach, disclosing gorges. Maybe it's the light. There are no shadows, so everything is laid out in front of you all the way to the horizon. Jeff is ecstatic. He takes pictures of flowers, birds, rocks, ice. When an arctic hare goes by, he stalks it for forty minutes.

Then we turn around and look across the vast sheet of ice that keeps on going right up to the North Pole, 438 miles away.

And there's Kaffeeklubben—the end of the earth.

The next morning, the wind dies and we sort through our gear, moaning about how much we have to leave behind, Dennis entertaining us with stories from his days with the Floating Lotus Magic Opera. The show was written by one of Allen Ginsberg's lovers and they would change costumes at Lawrence Ferlinghetti's apartment. They opened for Janis Joplin. "Alan Watts would give the invocation in white robes, flanked by six beautiful girls. He would sleep with all of them."

He's unusually cheerful today.

He gives a basic safety talk. When Eskimos talk, they never look at each other. They look past each other, constantly surveying the horizon. "You should learn to do that. You'll see things you



The first human beings set foot on Stray Dog West, 5:00 P.M., July 12, 2007. Holly, Dennis, Jeff, Steve, the author, and Bob pose with the Explorers Club flag. Dig down four inches and you hit flinty soil, suggesting an island being born.

wouldn't see. If you see a funny rock, watch it and see if it moves."

And remember, it's surprisingly easy to get lost. The last time he hiked from this spot, the team got strung out and one man got separated from the group. They found him two days later, raving in his tent. If that were to happen to us, the important thing is to keep the mountains on one side and the ice on the other.

But there's a problem. Jeff has so much stuff in his empire of duffel bags, it will take him at least another half hour to get ready.

"For safety reasons," Dennis says, "we shouldn't travel alone."

So I agree to stay with Jeff. We have a map and a walkie-talkie, and Dennis has complete confidence in Jeff.

"See you later, guys."

"*Immaqa*," Dennis says.

That's Eskimo for "maybe," a word used so frequently it reveals their worldview. Because out on the ice you never know what is going to happen.

See you later, *immaqa*.

Jeff takes another two hours, then cooks up some mashed potatoes. Finally, we heft our packs.

With all my stuff plus the inflatable raft and the fly to Steve's tent and also the extra rifle, which is astonishingly heavy, my pack weighs at least sixty-five pounds in real weight and at least seventy-five in psychological weight. After a half hour, my hamstrings and back are in shock.

At the next ridge, my heart sinks. "That looks like some serious terrain."

Below us are ravines filled with snow and slush, ice bobbing down freezing rivers, endless springy bogs where the tundra pushes up in weird pentagonal mounds that sink under your feet. The sky is gray again, and the wind is blowing.

"It doesn't get any better than this," Jeff says.

We fall into a rhythm of stops and starts. You can't rest too long because it gets cold, but you can't hike too long without getting sweaty. Everything seems to be going okay until we disagree about the best way across a particularly challenging ravine. Jeff wants to go the long way, I want to plow right through. So we split up.

Immediately, I come across a musk-ox skeleton. I hold the skull up and shout to Jeff.

He yells back. "This is dangerous!"

Suddenly I see musk-ox tracks everywhere. They look fresh. I realize that I have no bullets for the gun.



At the first river, the water comes up to my knees and it's moving fast. The stones are loose and jumbly, slipping under my feet. I see a chunk of ice the size of a briefcase coming right at me.

After that we hit a ravine filled with slush. Jeff sinks up to his knees, so I take another route and sink to my crotch—stuck, frozen, completely unable to move. But Jeff's already too far ahead to hear me, especially in this wind. I call him the worst names I know and he just keeps ambling along.

So it's up to me. Using my hands and forearms against the surface of slush, I figure a way to scooch along even though it means bending with a heavy load above my own personal slush nightmare. When I reach the bank I collapse on my pack.

Fifteen minutes later, I find Jeff documenting the ass of yet another mangy bird and gently suggest that perhaps he should not be quite so obsessed with documenting the asses of so many mangy birds.

"Fuck you," he says.

I think he means it in a nice way.

After the second river, Jeff waits for me on the bank. "What color are musk ox?"

"Brown, I think."

"Are you sure they're not white?"

He points out an odd white lump ahead.

"I don't know. They could be white."

He gets out his camera. "I'm going to go up there and lie down. If I stay lying down, bring the rifle."

"The rifle?"

"And grab my tripod, will you?"

And on and on over snow gullies and slush rivers and gravel hills and mudflats from Mars in a world that is majestic and desolate and completely lacking in the tiniest human touch. Pain is building an alternate civilization in my back and knees and hamstrings. At one break, I flop down on some musk-ox turd and don't care enough to move. I'm now convinced that it was a terrible mistake to separate from the others. There are so many hills

and canyons we'll never find them. The walkie-talkie isn't working. We've already been hiking five hours. And it isn't exactly a comfort that even though we can see Kaffeklubben ahead, Jeff keeps insisting we've passed it. There is no way we've passed it. It's *clearly* ahead of us.

"It doesn't get any better than this," Jeff says.

By the seventh hour, I don't have much left. And Kaffeklubben is still ahead.

"We've passed it," Jeff says.

"It's *clearly* still ahead," I say.

But finally he sees them, tiny pencil-head figures far below. They seem to be gathering at a dark ridge. And here's Bob, heading our way. With his black rain slicker and walking stick, he looks like a character from *The Lord of the Rings*. "I dropped the tent," he says, and gives us the report:

Everyone's exhausted. It took ten hours to get to the ridge and Dennis is cranky because he was carrying three packs, a big one and two small ones, probably a hundred pounds. And he was worried about leaving us behind. But Steve was great. Steve set the pace.

Then Bob goes off to look for the tent, tracing the route they came by. I forget to offer him the gun.

Rain, then snow. Bob couldn't find the tent so Steve is now my roommate. I've entered the dream state of exhaustion where you can spend twenty minutes putting on a glove and another twenty taking it off. Setting up my tent, I crawl from corner to corner. [continued on page 238]

Nº

075

SIGN THAT THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY IS
TRULY ABOUT TO BEGIN

tinyurl.com/3x7f85

End of the Earth

[continued from page 217]

That night, the pain in my legs and back keeps waking me up and it's always the same daylight. It's like a horror movie.

At some point, Bob comes by the tent. "You up?"

"Sort of."

"Steve?"

"Up."

"What time is it?"

"Eleven thirty in the morning."

"Is it snowing?"

"It's cold," Bob says. "Freezing."

That day we huddle in the tents, too exhausted to move. Steve says he wants to download the script for *The Matrix* because that would reverse-engineer the movie back to the symbols that generated it, the floating green numbers at the root, because that way he can see "how information in a parallel medium that creates a pseudo reality is encrypted." He says he likes to use mirrored glass in his designs because it looks like the building is wearing shades. He talks about Proust and Henry Miller and Wilhelm Reich and misquotes beautifully the scene in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* when the hero drinks absinthe with a Gypsy. "It is the fireplace, it's the dog at your feet that brings in your Saturday paper...."

Speaking of absinthe....

Pouring me a cupful, he adds water. It

gets milky, just as it did for Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Arthur Rimbaud. Steve insists that it really is made of wormwood and has narcotic qualities. "*The Brothers Karamazov* is my favorite novel," he says.

"*The Brothers Karamazov* is my favorite novel," I say.

Steve says the tent is our orgone box and starts to confess some of the things he wanted to share on this trip, such as the connection between *The Matrix* and Dostoyevsky's *The Grand Inquisitor* and cannibalism among the Anasazi tribes of ancient New Mexico—imagine the Anasazi thinking the guy who was walking down the path might eat them for lunch. Now *that's* a matrix, and it is present in our daily lives, in the fight over the corner office. And that's what it's all about for him, part of the reason he's up here soaking up the noble light. "My role as an architect and agent of social reform is to prevent us from rebuilding the Tower of Babel," he says.

There is a secret that nobody else knows, he says. His back is seriously damaged and he's had two episodes of partial paralysis. He's not sure he can endure this trip and that's part of the reason he's here, to see if he can. But he was scared on the hike. He was carrying too much weight and he thinks that Dennis is obsessed, that Dennis used us to finance the trip, that Dennis sandbagged us with stories about adventure and discovery. He knew Renato had no business being here. And why didn't the walkie-talkies work? And why did we split up? And who is Jeff?

Too many things are going wrong.

"There are questions God has forbidden us to ask," he says.

At dinner, Steve pulls out a Tuborg. While the rest of us were carrying his goddamn tent, after all that crap about his back problems, he was carrying a six-pack of beer! Asshole!

"But how cool is it to have beer at a place like this," he says.

At least he's cheerful. Now Bob's the one fretting about Dennis. He thinks Dennis is trying to prove that he still has it but he's realizing that he's older and he's carrying too much weight and splitting up was definitely a mistake.

But Steve seems to have changed his opinion. "Dennis has fallen in love with the idea that each step farther north takes him closer to the pure thing. I love that. I thought only young men followed the Pied Piper."

He takes a sip of his Tuborg and nods his head. "He's brilliant, but he's quite insane."

Weird things happen that night. Dennis gets us up at one in the morning saying the weather's fine, let's go. We convince him to wait till five, at least. Then Jeff wakes us up to say he's going back to base camp for his long lens and his tent, which means that we have to wait yet another day before going on the ice. It makes no sense but we are in the dreamtime of constant sunlight and nobody wants to argue.

That night the Twin Otter appears and buzzes around Kaffeeklubben.

End of the Earth

“It has to be Frank or Peter,” Bob says.
A loud tent-to-tent summit follows.
“If it’s Frank,” Bob says, “we’ll probably head out soon.”
Steve sleeps through all of this, dead to the world.
“We’ll have to leave him,” Bob says.
But the plane goes on.

By now, Jeff has been gone for sixteen hours. I walk back toward the black ridge to look for him. After ten minutes, even though the ground looks perfectly flat, I can’t see our campsite at all.
How is he ever going to find us?
When I get back, Dennis is awake in his tent. “I think we should get up early and walk west four miles,” he says. “We may find Jeff camped there. If not, we spend a day on the ice and come back here. If there’s no sign of him, we’ll have to start back.”
And the Stray Dogs?
“We can at least do one,” he says.
Outside, it’s so sublime and desolate that I’m beginning to believe the two are connected. Maybe sublimity requires removing the ordinary things that make a view merely beautiful. It can’t be too cozy or comfortable. It can’t be too human. It must be forbidding. It must be difficult to acquire.
We realize that Jeff has one satellite phone and the other one is back in base camp, so we have no way to contact the outside world.

“Get the stove going,” Dennis says.
It’s 5:30 in the morning. Jeff got in at midnight, delayed by a five-hour photo session with a herd of musk ox. “We’ll make breakfast and get going.”
I have to shake Steve hard but he comes awake, talking about Mormons and crates of lobster.
It’s gray and windy and cold, but finally we are going to the ice. Holly has a pack with extra clothes, food, and medical gear. Dennis has an inflatable and a rifle. Jeff has his photo equipment and a stove. I have the other inflatable and a rifle.
The river that looked so fearsome before turns out to be easy. A light snow kicks up but we’re used to that. Dennis says we’ll keep going unless it gets worse.
We stop to rest every forty-five minutes. At 10:15, we pull out the GPS.
“We’re at longitude 31°5’92,” Holly says.
“We need to get to 31°11,” Dennis says.
We hike. Twenty minutes later, Holly checks the GPS again. “It’s 31°10’.”
We’re headed for the island Dennis saw from the plane, the one at latitude 83°40’37”—a half mile past Kaffeklubben.
We stop and eat for strength and Dennis explains how he came up with his name for the island group at a lecture in Paris, trying to capture the idea that they move around at the whim of the glaciers: *chiens égarés*.
“And the people who come here are stray

dogs too,” Steve says.
But Dennis isn’t listening. He’s gazing out over the ice. “This is close enough,” he says. “We’ll start on the ice from here.”
He uses a match to clean the dirt out of his rifle barrel.
The ice is solid and crunchy for the first two hundred yards. Then we start to hit the melt pools. The blue is even more astonishing down here among wedding-cake hills of wind-carved snow. It’s truly another world, alien and grand. But it isn’t flat. There are mounds and bridges and points with fancy ridges and melt lines. Dr. Seuss could have drawn it.
Our crampons bite the ice wonderfully. But sometimes there are steep slopes and sometimes the bottom is uneven, so we step very carefully, testing the ice ahead with our axes. We learn to read the grades of blue. The white areas are more solid. Sometimes it looks exactly like we’re walking on clouds.
But we are also very aware that getting wet would bring disaster. With the wind chill at about 10 degrees, hypothermia would set in fast. Every slip of the crampons shoots a bolt of alarm.
And Dennis keeps moving. He rarely looks back. Holly keeps asking him to slow down and guide us across the pools or at least watch to be sure we make it, but he just can’t seem to stop himself. It’s just like Steve said, he’s following a Pied Piper. It’s a rare and remarkable sight, beautiful and alarming, the histo-

End of the Earth

ry of Arctic exploration embodied in a single white-haired man.

Two hours later, it's snowing again. The shore is just a thin black line. Whenever I come out of a blue melt pool, the snow looks pink. The whole world is blue and pink and white, with a thin black line over there.

"We're about halfway," Dennis says.

Bob's right crampon starts flapping. It's missing a bolt. We wrap his foot in red duct tape and move on.

Another hour, another GPS check. Now we're at 83°40'30".

"We're doing all right," Dennis says. "The main thing is not to go into a pool."

It's been almost four hours in the cold and snow and constant fear of slipping in a melt pool. We're getting fatigued.

This is when things tend to go bad.

Then Dennis spots the "feature," as he calls it, a tiny black streak in the vast expanse of white. This is how the world ends, not with cliffs or giant whirlpools but in a final smudge, a last dot on the ellipsis. But the end of the world is really all around us, in the great erasure of the ice and snow, endless and indifferent as outer space. This is when things get a little weird. Jeff has his long lens out and wants to document every step, but Bob wants to keep moving.

"Bob, wait!"

He ignores us.

"Bob, wait up!"

Jeff mentions the time Peter tried to steal Hammeken Point. There does seem to be a bit of summit fever in the way Bob keeps inching toward the island.

"Bob, stop!"

In the rush, I go down hard. "John, are you all right?" It's Dennis, looking into my eyes.

And suddenly it seems a bit insane, all this struggle to conquer a heap of gravel, a perfect example of why the earth is warming up in the first place. And yet it all fits, from Renato's cans to Steve's absinthe to the delays associated with Jeff's constant wandering. Holly gets signs from lions and hawks. I take notes. Dennis picks up his bags and goes without looking back. We are all stray dogs, treading the line that separates what is profane from what is holy. We came here looking for something, came with something to share, came to keep some other guy from coming here first. And now we're moving again and Bob stands aside and Jeff flanks east and everyone is ready and Dennis steps onto the gravel, the first man on an island that is not on any maps, an island that could last a decade or a century. A brand-new island about a hundred yards long, one half mile past the official end of the earth.

Dennis reaches out. "Holly, come."

She scoots down an ice bridge, hurrying toward him. "He actually remembered me!"

Holly names the island Stray Dog West. 🐕