



of the skis and the poles provide a solid grip in the snow. Another try. No use, all the groaning and huffing in the world will not move the pulk. So this is how my trek to the North Pole is starting? I've got two kilometres of flat, smooth beach behind me and 800 kilometres of rubble ahead.

Mikko is skiing behind me. Always the optimist, I ask him to give my pulk a little shove – as if a small nudge would change anything. Mikko pushes with everything he's got and I'm moving again. Of course, that leaves him battling the same block and his own pulk. So he asks the guy following him to help. It is obvious that we would not make it alone in these conditions. Even if your own sledge is not stuck, there is always someone else who needs a hand.

We're making slow progress as the lead man is looking for the easiest route. The rest of us wait in the rear. Standing around, we get cold, so the group gradually falls apart. It's better to look for a route yourself and keep on the move. We've been skiing for an hour now and advanced only a few hundred whopping metres.

But despite all the struggling and wrestling we have to admit that the high-end *Acapulca* sledges, which have been tailor-made for these conditions and rubble ice, are excellent. They have a rounded prow that easily finds its way between blocks and slabs of snow and ice and thanks to their banana-like geometry, they rarely get stuck. Fully loaded, it takes more than one man to pull them over blocks, however. In other words, everyone needs someone to push his pulk or help in pulling it out of deep hollows.

It's -43.5 degrees Celsius. The sun makes an attempt at rising in the southeast but doesn't really succeed. There are blue, misty mountains of ice all around us, rising from the fog. The steam rising from our faces freezes in our beards and further accentuates the blueness of the landscape. The colours are most intense during sunrise and sunset.

The first days on the Arctic Ocean are an inspiration. I feel the silence inside my head. It's broken only by the squeaking snow, the booming of the ice, the sough-soughing of the skis and the snorting of the polar explorer. Inside the hood, a tiny, personal universe emerges. It is as if I had wrapped myself inside the hood, shutting everything else outside. Once in a while, strange things from somewhere afar penetrate into this universe of mine, and I hear all kinds of things in my subconscious. Suddenly I stir: someone just

Day 2, 6 March 2006, First kilometres behind us

83°08'50"N, 74°12'08"W, -40°C, 3.75 km, 1 m/s

We woke up this morning to a crisp -44 degrees Celsius. It takes a while to learn morning routines when it's so cold. It took us half an hour to get out of our sleeping bags and VBLs and put on our clothes.

For a couple of hours we skied along the level shoreline of Ward Hunt Island but very soon, the Arctic reality of rubble ice hit home. The weight of our pulkas seemed to increase steadily as the rubble got worse.

After several hours' struggle, we had travelled just over a kilometre.

Day gave way to night at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. We dug out our head torches to cook supper and do other chores.