

Sixty Seven North

Rovaniemi is a city on the edge. It's where the electrified railway ends and the electrified sky of the aurora borealis begins. The Arctic Circle lies to the north like a giant halo, as if the place had been somehow beatified.

To reach Rovaniemi from the south you cross the Kemijoki river by a bridge called *Jätkänkynttilä*. That translates as *Lumberjack's Candle*, apparently because the beacon on the bridge's tower resembles one. But translation is not explanation, because these days very few people know what a lumberjack's candle is. In Lapland, you can vault over the linguistic hurdle only to find a cultural wall in front of you.

And to add further to this frontier atmosphere, Rovaniemi also boasts the world's most northerly MacDonald's restaurant. For some people, civilization ends here.

I walk past the golden arches to the map section of the bookshop, where I spend fifteen euros on a blank sheet of paper. I exaggerate slightly. The map has a few whorls of contour lines like a giant's fingerprints, and a spattering of blue lakes and rivers. But the rest of the sheet is an intimidating white expanse decorated with a lattice of grid lines. It looks like a bleached tartan rug.

In any other country the blank area would indicate moorland, or desert, or nothingness. But Finnish cartographers show tree cover as white. In a country that is essentially a forest, it saves a lot of green ink.

It's a short walk from bookshop to bus station. The northbound bus crosses the Arctic Circle without ceremony and deposits me – and, I notice, no-one else — at the trail-head. The transition is abrupt, unsettling in its speed. Tarmac and traffic behind me, a landscape of forest, river and sky ahead. The bus disappears in a cloud of diesel smoke and dust.

The trees, at least, are familiar. They are what we parochially call Scots pine,

otherwise known as *Pinus sylvestris*, or in literal translation, pine of the woods. But this is not just a wood. This is boreal forest, the great northern tree belt, stretching from here to Siberia, and back through Alaska and Canada. Gaia's emerald necklace, clasped with salt water.

I tighten the hip belt of my rucksack and start walking.

It's probably after midnight, though I'm not sure about that because my watch is buried somewhere at the bottom of my pack. I'm sitting on the pine-needled forest floor by my campfire. A red sun grazes the horizon and shines through the pines. The trees are tall, their shadows infinite. A shaft of ruddy light illuminates a cloud of mosquitoes. They oscillate under the spotlight, quivering. They remind me of a physics demonstration from long ago, and then the forgotten term enters my head: Brownian motion.

Wood smoke and pine resin season the cool air of evening. Or is it morning? Day, night, evening, sunrise – these normally precise words become hazy at sixty-seven degrees of latitude. I can hear – no, I can *feel* - a low rumble in the distance. It's the river, almost a mile away, engorged with a winter's worth of snow melt and moving boulders the size of a fridge.

The fire burns low. I split another birch log with my *puukko*¹ and cast the shards on the embers. It's like turning a light switch. The dry wood flares up and I stare at the dancing flames. Not for nothing is the camp fire known as the bush television.

What I am doing here is difficult to explain. There is no word for it in English. The

1 Finnish belt knife made of curly birch and silver-steel.

Japanese call it *shinrin-yoku* which translates literally as 'forest bathing'. I like that phrase. It implies immersion, and it chimes with John Muir's famous declaration: 'Break clear away, once in a while, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods. Wash your spirit clean.'

Perhaps the Finns have a word for *shinrin-yoku*, the long purposeless walk in the woods. Probably, they do – in Finnish the concept of a dead, desiccated standing pine useful for both firewood and shelter is neatly compressed to a single word: *kelo*². Land defines language.

My friends back home consider a solo trip to Lapland to be proof of my insanity, but they underestimate the rewards and overestimate the risks. I haven't seen any bears, much less been eaten by one. I haven't wandered over the Russian border. Nor have I trod on one of the land mines sown by the retreating Germans in 1945. The Finns dealt with that problem with typical efficiency: the initial de-mining was done by the prisoners of war who laid them. Then they left it to the reindeer to finish the job. They probably harvested the resulting minced venison too.

Russians and land mines and bears, oh my. But then I check myself for dismissing my friends' concerns. The border country between self-confidence and hubris is an easy place to get lost. Solo travel in wild places carries *some* risk, as demonstrated by Christopher McCandless, who died a lonely death in the backwoods of Alaska, this being the subject of the book *Into the Wild*. He saw nature as a benevolent provider and underestimated the difficulties. Adults – though, interestingly, not children – who lack exposure to nature tend to see nature as inherently hostile. The right path lies between

² The precision of the Finnish language is striking. For example, Finnish has two words for death. *Kuolema* means a natural death, while *surma* is the sort of thing the police are interested in.

these ditches. The Canadian wilderness guru Mors Kochanski nails it with his mantra: 'The bush is neutral. It is neither for me nor against me.'

The art of the possible is to turn something that is neutral into something that is for you. I take a currently non-aligned pine log, make a deep cut in the end with my Swedish folding saw, and then widen it with a few strokes of the *puukko*. Then I rotate the wood a quarter turn and make another cut, dividing the end into quarters. Two more cuts and it's divided into eight wedges of wood separated by air. If I had an ink pad I could use it as a Union Jack stamp. I thrust it in the campfire until it's blazing and stand it on end. The lumberjack's candle. It doesn't just give light. You can cook on one if you make it big enough.

I've seen four almost-sunsets since I left the trail-head, and in that time I have seen no-one. This may be the country that gave us Nokia, but my mobile phone shows no signal. There's just pine and birch, rock and water, sun and sky. And a feeling.

I've had this feeling before, but only after two or three days solo on the trail. The human concept of time contracts to a virtual unreality, just numbers behind glass. Only natural rhythms *matter*. Dawn, dusk, moon state, tides, seasons. Such things cannot be changed by human agency, and they are real in a way our nebulous constructs like interest rates and share prices are not. The twenty euro note in my pocket has reverted to its true value – out here it's only use is tinder, not tender. The banker's candle, perhaps.

I don't know what to call this disassociation with the artificial, this reconciliation with the natural. Connectedness, maybe. Even if it doesn't have a name, I'm not the first to have thought about it.

Carl Jung wrote: 'People who know nothing about nature are of course neurotic, for they are not adapted to reality'. Having seen much of both nature and neuroticism, I

reckon it's a bit more complicated than that. Nevertheless, research shows that exposure to nature is good for you, so the logical corollary is that a lack of nature might be harmful. Like other therapies, nature can be administered in various ways. But the concentrated essence of nature has a name, and it's called wilderness, and we need more of it.

It's the following Monday at seven fifty-eight in the morning. I'm sure about the time because I'm wearing my wristwatch. I arrive at work and hang up my field jacket. It smells of wood smoke.

'Welcome back to reality,' says my colleague.

'No,' I say. 'I've just left it.'