

THE ESTATE SETTLED

I have no words for how wonderful it feels to ski across a frozen lake, with wide and long skis that carry you effortlessly on the soft mattress of snow. I was elated. The weather was perfect, there was no wind except the mild one whipped up by our movement. The Sun, low as it was due to its summer vacation in the tropics, still gave some semblance of warmth on our faces.

My companion on this trip was one Väinö Mustonen. He was older than me, quite a lot actually. He was a friend of my father's. I could see it on his face too that he was as happy as I was to let the skis shuffle on the snow.

"Is it far still?" I asked.

Väinö paused and pointed forward with one pole. "Across this bay and over that little ridge, then about one more kilometre. In the summer you can drive up to that end of the lake and walk for about, umm, seven hundred meters – there's a road of sorts. Or take a boat from the village right to the cottage." He started skiing again.

I shrugged to get my backpack to sit better on my shoulders and followed him on. The Sun was so low, even though it was noon, it hid behind the low trees on the ridge ahead. Not a cloud was in sight. We soon reached the ridge and skied up it slanted, like a road in the Alps would slither its course. And then it paid us back with a nice slide to the other lake, and I could see my summer cottage on the opposite shore.

Half an hour later we had a small fire in front of the log cottage, and Väinö set up a rod for the coffee pot. "Let's have a little lunch before we look inside. We shouldn't use the stove or the fireplace; it's been four years since they were used last and I want the fire inspection to take place before anyone lights a fire there."

I agreed and bit into my sandwiches. Ham and cheese on rye. Add a whole boiled egg, or two, and coffee, and you're a new man entirely. I scanned the surroundings. The people of old had a real vision for placing houses. From the front yard I could see the lake as wide as my eyes could take it, and the little slope that led to the lake was gentle enough to walk even if a little tipsy before sauna. Ah, the sauna. I'd have to build one, but Väinö told me permissions wouldn't pose a problem in this little town.

"Four years you said, Väinö? How come it took so long to sell this? The place is perfect!"

"Well, the place is, but the estate isn't. Auntie Elma was not the easiest person you could meet. She would always be promising this part of the estate to someone or another in the family, and there's twelve of us in the estate. Sure, there was ample land to split twelve ways, and quite a lot of forest too, but you know how it goes. There's always someone who will be against someone getting just this or that bit of land, and somehow a certain little nook of wood is vital to two people at the same time. What was funny, though, was that no one

wanted this cottage. I mean, there's seventeen hectares of land around it, and the lake is practically all yours."

I was already hooked. On the seventeen glorious hectares at a bargain price, I could build a fantastic little resort here. Businessmen from all over the globe, exhausted after working hard to pull in profits, would compete for long weekend spots in my Executive Retreat. They could mingle with peers and create new business opportunities while bathing in the three saunas I'd build by the lakeside, before retreating to their log cabins equipped with fiber optic Internet connections. A little recreational gambling perhaps? Local beers on tap... the potential of the place was endless.

Väinö seemed to have something weighing on his heart still, as he pottered about casting glances at me. "The problem was, when Elma promised this place to every one of the members of the future estate, we simply couldn't find out who was to inherit it in the end. Nothing was on paper, Aunt Elma had talked with every one of us, and now, looking back, it was her idea to sow mistrust in the estate. She was like that, you know... not the easiest person. In the end the best thing was to just sell it."

None of this was my business of course. For me, this place looked like another good investment in my portfolio – cranky aunts didn't really matter. Acquire, renovate, develop, enjoy, sell. "Yes, that's the way it is," I said, just to say something. I bit into my semi-frozen banana, which certainly is not the best winter snack, and looked on as Väinö cleared the steps of snow to get to the door.

"The key is under the flowerpot as it has been for almost a century," he said, and turned the key in the creaky lock. The veranda was a late addition to the house itself, which was a solid log frame covered with slates of sorts. I made a mental note to lose all the outer covering when I'd finalized the purchase. The logs were simply marvellous, hand-carved behemoth trees built into a frame that would take another century with ease.

We went in. Väinö had a flashlight with a wide beam. "That's the kitchen... over there's the living room – of sorts – and there's the two bedrooms upstairs." The house was quite large even if it looked small from the outside. "And that's the room where Elma had her handloom and the rugs she made."

The house had been boarded up inside. A paint of nondescript, light color covered everything, and would exit through the door just as soon as my refurbishing team got in. We entered the living room, which still had its furniture. A quick glance told me there was nothing worth saving, apart from one large rustic table and the long benches on either side of it. In the corner was a rattan chair, well worn and still covered with a hideous shawl. I shivered for no reason.

"So... Elma lived here until she was taken to the Sunshine Home, right?" I asked with a fake cheery voice. I looked at a photo on top of the mantle of the fireplace. There was a woman in it, in her seventies or eighties. She belonged to that unfortunate group of people whose eyes do not smile even if the rest of the face tries to. Her grey eyes pierced mine. Väinö came over to me.

“No, this is where she lived until the end. Trust me, we tried to get her to move away, helping her live here was really a burden to us. She just would not budge when we pressed the issue. She just sat in her chair, smoked her pipe, and snapped out orders.”

Väinö swept the room with the bright flashlight, pointing out objects; a stuffed owl, reindeer horns used for hanging things, a painting by a nativist with all the colors faded and bleak under the flood of light. On one shelf there was a lonely, curved pipe – a full-bent billiard type. “That’s her pipe, by the way. She was a character. We’d get phone calls in the night, when she’d ask one of us nieces and nephews to pop in to do this and that, no matter what time of day. And then one day, it was a few days since the last call. I came here with my brother and we found her, in that rattan chair. I don’t think anyone’s sat there ever since.”

None of the items in the room were of the slightest interest to me. “I think I will strip the house of all the furniture and other stuff, and burn the lot in the back yard. I don’t really see myself in a rattan chair like that. If you want the owl or the horns, or the hand loom, better pick them up before the bonfire begins. It will be a sight.” Väinö looked somewhat irritated but said nothing.

I had seen enough. I turned around and went out to the fire which was still going strong, and warmed my bum and my hands alternatively. Thinking to myself, I decided not to burn just the furniture and stuff - I’d torch the entire place as soon as the deal was signed and send in a battalion of construction workers to build my Resort. I smiled in the freezing air, and then I remembered my new toy.

I have a deal with my wife. When she goes shopping for clothes, I will be her chauffeur, if I get to spend time at Clas Ohlson. It’s the IKEA of gadgetry. I never came out empty-handed, but when wife came along with her designer bags, I would get away with murder. I had bought so many tools and widgets and whatchamacallits that my garage was overflowing, but last Saturday I bought an infrared scanner slash camera for detecting heat loss. I nearly wet my pants with enthusiasm when I found the tool and at twenty percent off list price too.

You see, my idea was to scan the house already at this stage and give the scans to my trusty carpenter friend, so he could design the insulation and whatnot already now. In my mind, I had decided to buy the property and could not wait to get going with it. So, with this ingenious device, I could get the thermal scan and a regular picture at one go. There was a toggle in the handle with which I could switch and view them.

I dug in my backpack for the device, pulled the battery from my breast pocket where I’d kept it warm, and inserted it. I flipped the switch, and the 4” display lit up. I pointed it at my hand, and got a psychedelic view of it in rainbow colors, appropriately with cooler regions at fingertips and the side of the palm. A cautious swipe close to the fire showed me the device could read high temperatures and show them with fiery red shades. The highest temperature was also given in numbers. I grinned. Technology is great.

“What’s that?” Väinö asked. I hadn’t noticed he’d come out, but he was standing by me. I explained how the thing worked, and showed him my infrared hand and the edges of the fire. He was duly impressed and scanned the frigid horizon, and right at that moment realized it wouldn’t work the way I wanted.

“Has this place been vacant for years now, Väinö? Like, years?”

“Yes, it hasn’t been used for four years.”

“Well, that means my device is useless. I won’t be able to see much of anything, as this works with temperature differences. If the house has been vacant that long, it’s all the same, ambient temperature and all I can see is the same color everywhere.”

“Ah, I see. If the house was warm, you could see cooler regions and tell where the heat was escaping?”

“Exactly.” I was really disappointed. I pointed the sensor at the house, and the display showed a frosty blue color for the entire wall. Then I pointed into the woods, and nothing changed – it was all at minus ten Centigrade.

I gave the device to Väinö who played with it for a while. “Hmm...” he said.

“What?”

“Why does this thing show that window in a different color?”

I had a look. Surely he must have held his hand in front of the sensor or done something else wrong. But when I took the device and pointed it to the black window with tiny white ice flowers on it, there was a slight temperature gradient on the display, rather like quarter circle of nominally warmer color.

“I have no idea. Must be a calibration thing.” I pointed the sensor at the dimming sky to get a uniform reading, then pressed the CALIBRATE button. The thing went all red, then all blue and issued a faint bleep. The blue screen returned. I aimed the sensor again at the window, and the warmer area was still there, more pronounced if anything.

“No... it’s still there. Look, Väinö, did you leave the torch inside, pointing at the window? Or light a candle? Or a cigarette or something.” Väinö denied having done anything of the sort inside.

“At least you rolled a quick cigarette just now. I can still smell the tobacco. It’s just what my grandpa used to do, roll his own with *Admiral’s Rough Cut*.” I was quite sure by now that Väinö was leading me on, but his baffled look told me otherwise.

“Look, I’m a Camel man, but I haven’t smoked one all day.” As proof he offered a crumpled pack of the said brand from his breast pocket. But the whiff of smoke I felt wasn’t Camel.

“Well, maybe we should take a look in the house then.” We climbed the stairs and entered the cottage. I had a slightly nauseous feeling. Väinö held the flashlight and I pointed my IR camera wherever his light shone. I got the steady minus ten all over the place in the veranda, in the bedrooms, and the kitchen. Then we entered the living room.

I scanned the room clockwise from the doorway. Nothing happened on the screen as I aimed the sensor at the stuffed owl, at the reindeer horns, the bookshelf, and the naivistic painting. They were all at minus ten. But the rattan chair in the corner was not. It had a blob of

pink on its seat at +10°. I could clearly see the seat's form on the screen, even if the rest of the chair wasn't visible.

I passed the chair and scanned the rest of the room, and to my astonishment, saw the screen go all blue again. Returning to the chair brought about a definite hue, not pink this time, but a pale red, much like a winter sunset would cause in the high clouds. My hair stood up in my neck.

"What the hell is that thing doing?" Väinö asked as he pointed the flashlight at the chair. "Hey, it must be the lamp! I'll switch it off." Before I could say that it could not be the light, since the rest of the room was cold even if the light had been everywhere, he clicked the switch and the room went dark.

Acting on a hunch, I pointed the sensor at the bookshelf. There was a bright red spot on one shelf, and it looked like a fiery iris in a blue-grey eye on the display of my device. Väinö turned his lamp on again and pointed at the bookshelf, and we saw the bowl of the pipe releasing a steady stream of smoke. I was having less fun by the moment.

I moved the sensor and aimed squarely at the rattan chair. As we watched, the screen emitted more and more hues of red, getting more intensive by the moment. The digital display registered +15°, then +18°, then +25°. The formless red blob of the seat began to slide up onto the back of the chair and up the sides too. The armrests went from minus blues into the sickly pale reds too. I took a few steps and pointed the sensor at the armrest from an arm's length, and was amazed to see the temperature hike well above 30°, 37° to be clear. I went back to the doorway but didn't stop measuring.

Väinö was clearly having issues with his memories, because his hand trembled; he couldn't keep the flashlight steady and the movement of the shadows on the walls made the stuffed owl look like it was taking off. I didn't care for the bird, but instead I watched the temperature settle at 37° in the entire chair... just as if someone had sat in it and left just now.

But the temperature didn't stay put for long. No, it started to rise. And as it rose, we could see a form appear in the chair. Initially it was just like a pair of legs, but the heat soon built itself into a pair of thighs, then a pelvic region, and on to a back. It was like watching someone being beamed up by Scotty, I remember thinking.

We could not see anything in the chair if we looked into it ourselves, or if I switched between the modes of infrared and regular light. But in IR, there definitely was something in the chair. It was just as if a human sat in it, we just couldn't see her without the device.

And then the heat really went on. Even as I was about to suggest we pack it up and vacate the premises, and go talk to a shrink, the red took on a whole new hue. A deep red one, a jump from 30° to 150° within a few seconds. And then on to 220°, which was about the same as I had measured from the fringe of the fire in the yard.

Väinö said, "I must be crazy but I can see something in the chair."

I moved my gaze from the display, with its bright red human form now fully visible, and looked. What we saw in the chair was a wisp of smoke. A tiny but definite stream of white smoke emanated from the ugly shawl, right from the center of the seat. The display showed a

definite area of +300° in the seat, and that was the limit of the thermometer. The hot spot was round, and it seemed to spread quite fast across the seat.

And then the flame erupted in the chair, lighting the dry shawl and proceeding into the chair as if we were following an educational video from the Fire Department. The chair was in flames within seconds. The shawl burned itself off the chair and fell on the floor, igniting the dust bunnies as it landed. The rattan chair was crackling with fire, and its strands popped off it with the bindings burning off. Sparks flew and we just stood there like two dummies watching the fireworks.

But when the curtains caught fire, Väinö ushered me out of the door. As I turned to flee, I swear I saw someone standing in front of the fiery remains of the rattan armchair, but that vision merely spurred me on. When we stood by the little fire on the yard, stuffing our possessions into our backpacks, we cast sideways glances at the house, by now properly ignited and roaring with flames. I was happy there was that hill down to the first lake, as it gave me considerable speed and put some distance between me and the conflagration that used to be my dream cottage.

The last I saw of the house was when we climbed that ridge between the lakes. We stood on top of it, panting considerably from skiing faster than ever for much longer than would be advisable. Seeing the roof collapse on the house, sending a final blossom of red cinders was unreal.

Now, I have a friend at the Met Office. He's a spoilsport if there ever was one. Nothing is beyond his reasoning and explanations based on solid atmospheric physics. Yet I wonder what he would have made of the movement of the cinders. A layer of cooler air, he'd say, on top of a slightly warmer one, and an inversion boundary in between – that must have caused the cinders to spread out horizontally in all directions as they did, floating in the air and gleaming with an irate red hue, until they descended to glow on every branch of every tree and on all the snow-covered rocks.

Inversion layer, my ass, this message got to me loud and clear.

We left the scene behind and slid down the steep ridge onto the lake that carried us to the car. As the taller of us, I put the skis on top of the car. Väinö stuffed our backpacks into the trunk. We didn't talk. Only when we saw the first streetlights along the road did I venture to say anything.

"I wonder if the estate will let me renege on the deal?"

Väinö looked out of the window at the trees whizzing by.

"I'm quite sure they will."