Cold weather needn't be gloomy. After all, you can look forward to some cross-country skiing, a bracing sauna or settling down beside a wood-burning stove. But if someone does tell you to cheer up, don't snarl in retaliation: learning to be positive can be a valuable technique.

PARTING SHOTS

Illustrator —— David Doran

KINDLING A PASSION
FIRE STARTER

The romance of living in the wilds can fade, especially when there are so many variables involved in simply keeping warm.

Writer —— Francheska Melendez

About the writer: Manhattan-born Melendez regularly contributes to Monocle and *Konfekt*. Moving to the Spanish countryside led this urbanite to acquire survival skills that she never thought that she would need.

Four winters ago, I viewed an apartment a few steps from the forest on the slopes of Spain's central mountain range. I gazed out of the windows onto the valley below, snowflakes gently lacing the boughs of the pines – this was it. When I learnt that the place had a wood stove as its primary heat source, I was undeterred. My heart was set.

It wasn't just the view that sold me. On reflection, it's possible that my idealism had its roots in a book I'd rather inexplicably picked up when I was still living the single life in the bustling centre of Madrid. *Walden* is a memoir written by 19th-century naturalist Henry David Thoreau that reflects on his two-year "experiment" of living in nature in Massachusetts.

Thoreau was very clear about his decision to move into an isolated house in the wilds. "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived," he wrote in the second chapter (titled "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For") of his 1854 work, which is somewhere between a survival manual and transcendentalist musing.

Now, there's no doubt that making a fire is one of those "essential facts of life". But as our first winter set in, it turned out that I was a terrible student of the fine art of combustion.

First, there was the question of heft. It is important to state that making a fire is hard work. There is wood to be hauled (during the winter of 2020, I had the brilliant idea of ordering a metric ton of wood that my husband and I stacked over the course of three back-breaking hours). There is wood to be chopped.

Then there are the thermodynamics. I became obsessed with armchair physics and engineering theories I picked up online – which were of very little use. There is a very specific layering of types of wood for optimal burning. There are pine cones and bark to be collected from the forest floor for kindling. Then there are embers to be stoked.

There are draughts of air to be controlled, not always successfully. Black smoke would fill the living room regularly as powerful gusts of wind (sometimes reaching speeds of more than 90km/h) would roar down our idyllic valley in winter.

It was probably about the third or fourth time that I contorted my soot-covered arm into just the right position to effectively clean our stovepipe that I realised that wood-fired heating was not for me. I was proud as a reformed city girl to have earned the primal life skill of being able to make fire. But the romance had left me. I now saw the cosy roaring hearth chiefly as a smoke-inhalation risk.

My heart broke at the realisation. I flicked back through Thoreau's *Walden* and reread the passages on self-reliance. He took it upon himself to construct, by hand, the cabin that he lived in during those "experimental" years in nature. He wrote, "It did me good to see the soot form on the back of the chimney which I had built, and I poked the fire with more right and more satisfaction than usual."

Our experiences couldn't be more different. In the book's conclusion, Thoreau offered his reader the advice "that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavours to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours". Had I officially failed? Or was I overly focused on the outcome rather than the process of my own experiments in nature?

My complaining must have made an impression in the community I'd begun to build within our village. A few weeks later, our landlord changed our stove to a more efficient cast-iron model from Norway that had the following prayer inscribed on its front: "I bury my embers / Late in the evening / When the day is done / May God ensure my embers / Never die out."

Though a bit solemn and ecclesiastical for my taste, the words offered guidance as to how embers can be preserved overnight in a bed of ash for easier lighting the next day. That practical advice served me well on icy mornings as the glowing embers made quick work of achieving a roaring fire.

An astute chimney sweep finally diagnosed the source of our fire woes: a chimney cap inappropriate for our windy location. It was the resulting backdraught that had extinguished countless fires, not my novice fire-building.

Along the way, I learnt a lot more than I'd ever thought I'd know about fire as an element. I recognise it now as a combination of all the others. Earth, where the wood grows. Air, which feeds and directs flames and smoke. Water, which is best kept to a minimum in logs seasoned for burning. And the fire itself, which Prometheus famously stole for humanity, as a symbol of the light of our minds and our ability to progress.

Eventually I learnt that Thoreau also struggled with fire when I discovered the premise for *Woodsburner*, John Pipkin's 2009 fictional prequel to *Walden*. Pipkin based his novel on a little-known story from Thoreau's earlier life. Prior to living on the edge of Walden Pond, the naturalist accidentally set fire to 120 hectares of primeval woodland in his hometown, leading to his being nicknamed "Woodburner" thereafter. In the pages of *Walden*, Thoreau also wrote of his bed catching fire due to a spark from the fireplace.

My own four-year experiment with wood fires ends happily this winter as I have moved with my family into a home of our own just on the other side of the village. It does not have a chimney. I'll be limited to enjoying the wisps of smoke rising from my neighbours' homes as I look across the hillsides. Those sinuous announcers of the dawn are always up before the sun climbs over the mountain ridge to the east.

In December, when I visit my in-laws for the holidays, I'll relish sitting in the warm glow of their expertly run wood stove. My father-in-law is an all-round master of the fire, so he will not require much, if any, assistance from me. Though he may well smilingly suggest that I help with the wood so that, as the proverb says, it will have warmed me twice: first in the chopping and later in the burning.

Then I'll sit by the fire sipping peaty whisky. And if I'm lucky, I'll find a copy of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* on one of the nearby bookshelves so I can reread the closing lines. Here, Scrooge celebrates his new-found sense of goodwill by ordering Bob Cratchit to commence the merrymaking with the command to "make up the fires".

Like Scrooge I'll have realised that the best lessons are born from our mistakes and failures. Or as Thoreau wrote "Things do not change; we change." I will relish the warmth of the fire, in good company, and savour the flickering flames in full knowledge of the work that goes into bringing them to life. ——— K

Konfekt comment: Nostalgia for the pre-electric past understates the effort required to heat a home with wood. Even so, a roaring, heartwarming hearth is always worth the work (and all the better for it).

NAKED AMBITION
FULL STEAM AHEAD

The ritual of hot and cold bathing has benefits far beyond wellbeing: welcome to sauna diplomacy, Finnish style.

Writer —— Heli Suominen

About the writer: Suominen is a diplomat and a journalist. She works as press counsellor at the Embassy of Finland in the UK and is the host of Diplomatic Sauna Society London.

I am at my happiest when I'm between a steamy sauna and a dip in the Baltic sea with my friends or family. The rounds of the hot room and cooling off make you ecstatic and serene at the same time.

In my love of sauna, I am a typical Finn. When you love something, you want to share it. Inviting guests to the sauna is an old Finnish way of extending hospitality. If you spend a weekend at a friend's country cottage, not to be invited to one would be very odd. The phrase "The sauna is warm" is heavy with meaning: the host is looking forward to the session and wants to ensure that the guest enjoys it too.

There are about three million saunas in Finland; that's more than one for every two of the 5.5 million Finns. When a Finn builds his own house, plans often start with the sauna. Before hospitals, the sauna was the place to give birth. Even if it is now more about wellbeing, it still carries all the traditions of past.

Sauna is a way to create trust and forge friendships in a way that I find more powerful than the classic cocktail reception or dinner. It is also one of the rare venues where no one checks their mobile phone. From a young age, Finns are used to the intimacy and (often) nudity of the sauna. It's an almost sacred, decidedly non-sexual space where everyone is equal and respected. So when we invite foreigners to sauna, we do our best to create a safe space – and one where it is fine to keep your swimsuit on. (It is common to have separate women's and men's slots at the sauna.)

The word diplomacy has two overlapping definitions. It is about the management of relationships between countries but, in broader terms, refers to the art of dealing with people tactfully, especially in sensitive situations. What links the two definitions is trust. You cannot reach a negotiated result without trust. To discuss anything sensitive in an honest way, you need trust. Think of the origin of the handshake in ancient Greece. It showed that you came without a weapon in your hand. What could be more disarming than taking off all or most of your clothes and sitting together in a small enclosed room?

It goes without saying that discussions in sauna are confidential. Finnish diplomats and business leaders have always used sauna's potential to ease tensions and to connect. Most of our embassies or residences are home to a sauna.

Our longest-serving president, Urho Kekkonen, was famously a firm believer in sauna's benefits. In 1960, at the height of the Cold War, Finland wanted to balance its desire to be part of the West with its goal of not provoking the Soviets. Kekkonen invited Nikita Khrushchev to the sauna in Helsinki and the two men bathed until 05.00, according to legend. Soon after the visit, the Soviet Union said that it was prepared to support Finland's relationship with the West.

Like most traditions, sauna has evolved. Policy decisions are now made in conference rooms and saunas are more part of leisure and team building. In summer 2021, after months of social distancing and working from home, prime minister Sanna Marin invited her all-female core team of coalition party leaders to Kesäranta, her official Helsinki residence. When the Finnish prime minister organises a garden party at her residence, you might sometimes find the sauna heated and ready to go.

In modern diplomacy, sauna is also a vehicle to showcase Finnish culture. This is why we launched the Diplomatic Sauna Society London. After a year as its host, I have seen many meaningful encounters and new friendships. Though I apologise for not being able to reveal more: what is said in the sauna stays in the sauna. ——— K

Konfekt comment: Need to solve a problem or seal a deal? Try swapping the boardroom for a sauna.