

ARCTIC ATMOSPHERE

Kugaaruk, Nunavut

October 30, 2011, Issue 13



The sun descends at 2 p.m. Oct. 25 over Kugaaruk's bay, which froze during the past 10 days. Flurries dusted the ice with snow.

Memorable Moments

The dynamics of daily life change when you never leave town for months on end. Friday marked the Misesks' third month in Kugaaruk – three months in the same place with outings limited to the great outdoors, school, church, Co-op store, health centre, post office, wildlife management office and friends' homes. The slower pace in Kugaaruk makes one notice life in greater detail.

Here's a smattering of events – and those little details – from the past couple of weeks, as recorded in Aine's Journal.

October 17, 2011 ~ Adoption Requests ~

"Run!" Kim Walton, coach of the Kugaaruk girls' indoor soccer team, urged the teenagers to return to a sprint after 30 seconds at a slow jog. Monday night practices focus solely on cardio training.

John, coach of the boys' team, took a turn running the next drill; the two teams practice together. A water break followed and Mari and I were soon surrounded by girls. Our *panik* – Inuktitut for *daughter* – is ever popular with the Inuit, especially the teenage girls, some of whom are already mothers.

A portion of these young mothers, most of them unwed, raise their children but some give them, through Inuit customary adoption, to relatives or other members of the community. The custom attaches no stigma to a mother who gives her child up for adoption or to the adopted child. Many people in town have adopted children, and, apparently, even married couples sometimes offer a child for adoption.

John and I are frequently asked by his students and occasionally by an adult, "Can I adopt her [Mari]?" Sometimes they ask Mari directly, "Can I have you?" Often that question is followed by another. "Are you going to keep that one?" with a gesture toward my bulging middle. It still startles us.

By the end of soccer practice, Mari "sprinted" to the best of her abilities along the edge of the gym, clear

of the teens' path. I wonder if she knew what they'd been asking – she certainly wouldn't let anyone but John and I hold her.

October 18, 2011 ~ Unusual Encounter ~

While browsing the frozen foods in the back of the Co-op this afternoon, an Inuk woman stopped me with a question that caught me completely off guard.

"Did you go to World Youth Day?"

My mind zoomed to the staggering contrast between Denver in August 1993 and the half million people surrounding 14-year-old me to tiny isolated Kugaaruk in October 2011 at age 32 and I wondered what the woman would say next.

"You look so familiar to me at church. My cousin says she's seen you somewhere before too." I assured



Mari pulls her sled through Kugaaruk's newer subdivision on the east side of the hamlet during a typical overcast, grey morning.

**Ups & Downs** Oct. 22 – Oct. 28, 2011
Maximum = -2.2°C/28.0°F Minimum = -18.2°C/-0.8°F
Source: Environment Canada, Station Kugaaruk A, Nunavut [Oct. 26,28]
Mostly cloudy, but a few clear patches; scattered snow flurries
Oct. 30 **Sunrise = 8:04 a.m. Sunset = 3:22 p.m. MDT**

SMALL MOMENTS CON’T. — her that I’d never been in the North before July.

“I was at World Youth Day in Denver too and so was my cousin,” she said.

World Youth Day, an event established by Pope John Paul II in the 1980s to help young people nourish their faith, is a day recognized each Palm Sunday in Catholic dioceses worldwide and celebrated every few years on an international level, most recently in Madrid this past August. Denver marked the 8th WYD and the first in North America.

Isabella, my new Kugaaruk acquaintance, said four people from the hamlet traveled to Denver. I am tempted to dismiss the idea that she and her cousin could possibly recognize me from such an enormous event so long ago, but who’s to say they can’t? In that sea of thousands, we could have been sitting or standing next to each other for hours.

Regardless of whether Isabella and her cousin actually saw me in Denver 18 years ago, the encounter reminds me of the beauty of WYD – youth from across the globe (including California and the Arctic!) coming together to celebrate life in Jesus Christ, aptly expressed by the theme for the 1993 gathering: “*I came that they might have life, and have it to the full.*” (John 10:10)

October 19, 2011 ~ Dental Lessons ~

A trip to the health centre for my routine prenatal gestational diabetes test turned into a memorable moment for Mari. Of course, any outing in Kugaaruk becomes a highlight given the scarcity of places to go.

After downing the orange drink used for the test, I returned with Mari to the waiting room for an hour-long wait before my blood draw. We didn’t sit long before the howls of a distressed child reached us from the south end of the building. Mari stared down the hall, vainly searching for the source of the sound.

Shortly thereafter, a young mother brought a toddler — a bloodied ball of gauze stuffed in the former home of her two front teeth — sobbing into the waiting room. Sweets are extremely popular with the hamlet’s youth so it is uncommon to see a youngster’s mouth free from the effects of all that sugar. Teeth pulling and cavity filling are the orders of the day when the dentist visits town.

Mari stared in bewilderment at the crying child but when the dentist arrived in the room with a fistful of toothbrushes, cause and effect clicked in her mind.

I reminded Mari, a thrilled recipient of the toothbrush handout, that she’d better use her treasure often if she wants to prevent a trip to the dentist like the one she’d just observed.

The comment must have hit home because she spent ample time this afternoon brushing and saying, “I don’t want my teeth pulled out! I don’t want my teeth pulled out!”

October 28, 2011 ~ Soccer Travels ~

The school’s two indoor soccer teams piled into the school bus this afternoon, causing a hamlet “traffic jam” as snowmobiles, Hondas and other vehicles laden with giant suitcases ploughed through the snow to unload players. Mari and I watched the scene from the living room window and waved to John as the bus rolled out to the airport.

At 3:15 p.m. we heard the plane taxiing for take-off and ran to a north-facing window to watch the First Air flight circle back and head over the bay. The sun was heading downward; it was completely dark by 4 p.m. It’s a lonely feeling to watch one’s spouse fly out over an Arctic sunset. He’ll return home from the soccer tournament in Kugluktuk, Nunavut, around 12:30 a.m. Monday — weather permitting, of course.



Aine, John and Mari celebrate Canadian Thanksgiving Oct. 10 with caribou roast and pecan pie instead of turkey — the Miseks missed the Co-op’s turkey sale — and pumpkin pie. Not a speck of pumpkin, canned or fresh, could be found in Kugaaruk. Aine plans to purchase some if she makes it to Yellowknife for an ultrasound before American Thanksgiving Nov. 24.



Photo illustration by John Misek