



Inuksuk overlooking Hudson Bay -30 C



Above: White Spruce with tin foil star

Top Right: Snowman Contest in Cree Nation of Mistissini

Bottom Right: Snowman Contest at Whapmagoostui

Far Left: Christmas Day

Middle: Christmas Wreath gleaned from the land

Left: Painted cookies drying on a line

A VERY INUIT CHRISTMAS

By Andi Christine Bednarzig

“Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!” My husband and I sat on folding chairs arranged on the periphery of the gym. People from the community passed by, offering their hands in welcome. It was Christmas Day 2013 and we were at a feast on the Inuit side of a fly-in community on Hudson Bay. Great Whale River, or Whapmagoostui to the Cree and Kuujuarapik to the Inuit, is the only place in Canada where the two nations co-exist.

As recent empty nesters – too young to retire, but young enough for an adventure, we decided to sell our large, drafty Victorian home in the outskirts of Montreal and headed north. Over a span of five years, we lived in teachers’ residences in three very different communities.

Though it had been an easy choice for us to settle in the 1000 Islands, as my children and I had spent many summers visiting family, swimming off the docks in the river, boating and attending country markets and festivals.

Last Christmas was the first in our new home, perched on a granite outcrop in Rockport. I unearthed a large storage bin marked “Christmas Decorations” and put on some holiday music. Burrowing through years of accumulated baubles, I found a misshapen tissue box. Inside were a tangle of strings, crumbling painted cookies, cinnamon sticks tied in red bows, dried red winter berries and pine cones. I sat back and

reflected on that special Christmas of 2013 when we didn’t come home...

We found a wispy spruce, in a ravine protected from the brutal westerly winds that blew off the bay. I hadn’t brought ornaments, so we improvised by gathering from the land and making our own. On December 25th, after opening presents sent from home, we bundled up and headed to the Inuit feast. The gymnasium had been garlanded with lights and streamers for the occasion.

“There will be a draw,” a woman at the door said as she handed my husband a ticket for a ‘man prize’ and one to me, for a ‘woman prize’. She pointed at the stage filled with items to be won, some quite grand. My husband admired a bright yellow snow machine.

“Look at the ski-doo!” I poked my husband.

“Some lucky guy will be very happy tonight,” he mumbled.

We circled around the gym and greeted each person with a hearty handshake and a “Merry Christmas” before sitting down.

Little girls twirled on the gym floor in party dresses and shiny shoes as young boys in vests and white shirts chased each other. Teenagers in jeans, shuffled about in clusters talking and laughing, while elders and young families greeted each other warmly.

Dark burgundy hunks of raw caribou, seal meat, and white feathered ptarmigans lay in

huge piles in the centre of the gym on black plastic garbage bags that had been taped to the floor. Large coolers held mounds of fresh shrimp.

At an announcement and after prayers, we were invited to feast. Elders, as is tradition, came first. A few squatted down on the floor cutting hunks of meat with a traditional ulu, or knife; others brought meat back to their families sitting at the edge of the gym. The young mother beside me chewed meat for her baby, as a young man cut raw slivers for her.

At the other side of the gym, tables were laden with at least a dozen bronzed oversized stuffed turkeys, pots and pots of caribou stew, and a couple of cardboard boxes, lined with plastic, filled with macaroni salad. There were no utensils. A smiling Inuit woman passed us a pair of surgical gloves and indicated to “just dig in!”

We felt it was time for us to leave before the prizes and games, so I handed our raffle tickets to the young man beside me. A few weeks later, I was approached by the same man at the grocery store. “Thank you for the ticket,” he said. My ticket had won a brand-new bed. “My mother needed a new bed,” he smiled.

In another month, after the first snow falls, I will again unpack the makeshift decorations stowed in a tissue box, so I can bask, ever so fleetingly, in the memories of that warm place in the barren north. **LH**