

It was wonderful seeing your letter in my mailbox when we got home from BC. The topic was particularly relevant since we were met with plenty of snow when we got back to Ile Bigras. It occurred to me that you might no longer remember what it is like to live in a “real” winter – with minus temperatures and months of snow, so I thought I would tell you about some of the things I find most charming (and occasionally annoying) about a Québec winter on our island. I just need to look out the window to remember them.

All the people walking by are wrapped in winter gear: thick coats, hats of all shapes and sizes, bulky mitts and boots, and (in the case of kids) snow pants. We would always have to plan well in advance of any departure, especially when kids were involved. The usual procedure was:

1. Find the snow pants, coat, mitts, hat, and boots (they were usually scattered around the entrance to the house);
2. Start with the younger kid and get them into pants and boots (but not coat, hat, or mitts yet);
3. Get the next older kid into pants, boots, and coat (but not hat and mitts yet);
4. Get the younger kid into coat, hats, and mitts – then quickly send him outdoors while you;
5. Get the older kid into hat and mitts and send her outside.

Steps 4 and 5 must be done quickly or else:

- a. The older kid starts complaining of getting too hot and starts taking off her coat or pants; or
- b. The younger kid starts complaining of getting too cold, comes back in, and starts taking off his hat, mitts, and coat.

If either of these occur, you must then go back to step 2 and repeat the sequence from there!

I prefer the mornings after a nice fall of snow, when the sky has cleared, the sun is shining, and the fresh snow crunches under each step. This will only happen when the temperature is cold – like lower than -10 degrees.

We can tell when it’s really cold because we will see the mist rising from the river out our windows. Under those circumstances, the fast current in the middle of the river keeps the water from freezing, and it generates enough heat to create mist in the morning air. Some mornings this mist rises high enough to cover the trees and leaves them white, sparking, and frosty – like a magic world of ice and snow. I have tried to capture some of this in photos, but they always seem much less spectacular than the real thing. You can see one of my attempts in this letter.

If a breeze shakes the branches, the frost begins to fall and each crystal catches the sun, treating us to a gentle shower of sparkles from one end of the island to the other. It’s no wonder we fell in love with this place!

The snow brings evidence of the many creatures that share the island with us. A fresh fall may look like everything is asleep, but it doesn’t take long before it is covered with the tracks of squirrels, rabbits, skunks, cats, and dogs. If you look carefully, you can also see the holes made by the occasional shrew or mouse as they pop up to see what things are like above their burrows.



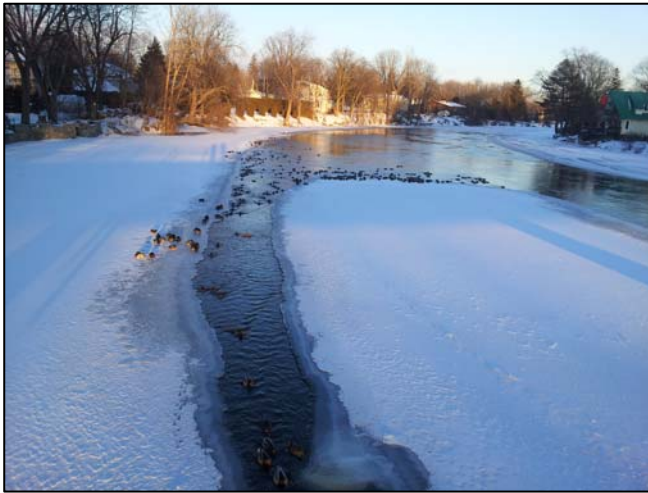


I remember one winter we even saw a deer on our porch. It was disoriented and frosty, so I figure it fell through the ice somewhere and was fortunate enough to scramble out before freezing. It was so confused that it stood at our front door long enough for me to even take a photo. The last I saw of it was when it scampered off through our back yard.

There is also a paddling of ducks that either forgets or refuses to go south for the winter. They usually hang out in the river near the bridge because one of the neighbours there provides food on the days when the snow or ice is too thick. I enjoyed walking across the bridge at those times since one or two of the ducks

usually hop in the water and paddle closer to the bridge in anticipation of some sort of morsel. I guess there are enough people who feed them that they have figured out this is a likely source of food.

I was even amazed to see a robin in our bush in January of 2012 – and again this year. When I grew up in Vancouver, the robin was the first bird to return with spring, so I don't know why they are hanging out in this type of cold weather.



The cold weather also brings out the skaters. Each fall, the city puts up the wooden sides of a skating rink in the baseball diamond. Then when the weather gets

consistently freezing, they flood the area with water and make a wonderful outdoor ice rink.

This is the kind of skating that JP grew up with. Most of the local kids would turn up at the rink on the

weekend or after school and form themselves into informal teams to play skinny hockey.

I always liked the way in which these hockey games and other activities would be inclusive of all ages and types of people. There were informal rules that one would never lift the puck from the ice, that the little kids would be passed the puck at regular intervals, and if there were skaters who didn't want to play hockey, then one end or corner of the rink would be left clear for them.

One of my greatest pleasures has been getting off the train after a long day at work, crunching my way through the frozen snow, and listening to the crack of the puck on the sideboards as the local kids make the best use of the cold weather. No matter where one is on the island this "crack" and the yells of the players could be heard as the games continued into the night under the lights of the park.

If one wanted to join in, all you needed was a pair of skates and a stick – although even these could be borrowed in a pinch. The weekends were full of these sounds and the back and forth between the ice and the warmth of the clubhouse – unless one chose to get out the cross-country skis, of course.



When Daegan and JP were very young, we would head off to the local golf course with our skis ready. That's where they learned about tracks and poles, sliding and wax. It wasn't until we accidentally came upon a rope tow on one of our excursions that JP first learned about downhill skiing. He wasn't very interested in cross-country skiing after that. Too bad, because downhill is so expensive. I have included a photo of your mother skiing down the hill in our front yard. This was taken in 1974.

Snow is also an occasion for sliding, of course, and that is why it was so nice to watch JP & Lies' kids get out the plastic sliders when they were here for Christmas in 2012. Just like with our kids, JP had them sliding down the hill at the park, and unlike us – he constructed a fancy toboggan run right down the hill and around the corner from our front porch. I wonder how much Charlie will remember of that time. Perhaps he might even remember the snow fort and igloo that JP created.



We certainly had a good time when JP brought his family out at Christmas. He wanted to give them a "real" Bigras Christmas and it certainly worked out fine for that purpose. We were fortunate that there was plenty of snow and the cold weather lasted for several days.

Maybe you would like to come out for a Bigras Christmas sometime.

Love,