

My home is Kiana and the North Slope

by James R. Gooden

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KIANA — The trip from my home in Northwest Alaska to my job on the North Slope takes me through many lives and experiences.

OPINION

**Inupiat Paitot
People's Heritage**

My journey begins with the final tick as the shiny clock in the kitchen strikes its last second. It is time to leave my family to return to work. My impatience to leave shows in my sweaty palms and the jittery feeling in my stomach on my way to the airport.

The pilot hits the start-up buttons with a quick flick of his long narrow fingers and gazes into the instrument panel, checking and rechecking the procedures before takeoff.

The short, gray-haired man of average height is in his early 50s. He shows his experience and confidence with a wide smile, exposing perfectly white teeth. Humming comes from both engines, like bees swarming a disturbed beehive.

The aircraft lifts off the snow-covered runway like a wooden toy glider airplane takes to the air. We take to the air smoothly, then slowly bank right, leaving the small village of Kiana behind.

After changing planes in Kotzebue, I head for the Anchorage International Airport, where people are coming and going from one end of the airport terminal to the other. Some walk in confusion. Others know exactly where they are going.

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The confused faces show the sign of a question mark. They glance at their watches, then gaze up at the signs that tell them where they should be. They rush with bags in their arms in a desperate dash to meet their planes.

A mother, using a quiet but stern voice, commands her children to stay close by and not to wander off. Her husband is nearby to assist, but has his arms full, also. His facial expression shows control and readiness to handle any situation. He smiles at his wife and calmly leads the anxious family in the right direction to meet their plane.

Elsewhere in the Anchorage terminal, the many cubicles begin to fill with people from all walks of life. Some look around to see if they know anyone, others gaze aimlessly. Low and loud voices are in the air as people meet. Loud laughter fills the aisles as grandparents rush with open arms to swallow their grandchildren with affection.

A look of sadness, a tissue in one hand and tears running down both cheeks, takes hold of a woman across from me. She looks tired and drawn. She is with a younger woman, who

looks around the wide open space.

From time to time the younger woman glances at ramp doors, anticipating someone walking through. The older, gray-haired woman wipes tears from her already swollen eyes. She accepts a cup of cold refreshment and takes a small sip. She continues to glance at the door. The woman sits herself next to the older woman, placing an arm around her shoulders in a comforting gesture. The wait continues.

A voice over the intercom announces the boarding of my flight. All quickly rise to their feet and scramble for their belongings. Some stretch their arms, some slowly get into line, as they have done so many times before.

Like cattle, the people wander toward the gate to board the airplane. We enter the long silver plane and begin to search for our seats. The plane fills. The smell of oil fills the air. Mechanics, on their way back to work, show cracks on their thick fingers and dry roughness on both hands.

The "No Smoking" sign is turned off, and the plane is instantly filled with smoke. A few overhead lights are turned on in the darkness of the aircraft. Blue-gray smoke in puffs of clouds hits the beams of light.

The lowering of the wheels on the aircraft indicate we are near our destination and in the final approach over the snow-covered terrain. A screeching sound hits the whirling tires as they hit the blacktop of the runway. The wind howls as the air passes over the huge wings of the plane. Bodies and heads jolt forward as the pilot hits the brakes periodically.

The plane comes to a stop in front of the small Deadhorse terminal. The

wind is blowing, and snow is slithering by on the ground, like snakes. The cold brisk air pushes in even before the doors open. The men and women grab for their hats and coats to slap them on before the doors open. The cold hits hard, reminding you who is boss around here. Mother Nature has control.

Everyone hurries to be the first one out to be the first one in. They rush down the steps in hopes that they can reach the building before they freeze. The wind tosses their jacket ruffs violently. Pant legs are flapping as everyone makes a quick dash for the warm metal-framed structure. We are on the frozen landscape of the North Slope.

Home again.

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Inupiaq Eskimo James R. Gooden wrote this piece in an English composition class at Chukchi College, a branch campus in Kotzebue of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Gooden lives in Kiana, a small village on the Kobuk River in Northwest Alaska. He is a Migrant/Indian Education tutor, a husband and father of four children.
