Alaska's Daughter
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Once in a while, maybe only a few times in a lifetime, we stumble upon something truly unique and undeniably beautiful. I met Elizabeth B. Pinson, “Betty,” on a park bench in Seattle the summer of 2002. This was clearly one of those moments. Never before had I encountered a stronger embodiment of the human spirit, courage, and grace. At ninety years old, this half German, half Inupiaq Eskimo from Teller, Alaska, held more life in her eyes than many a quarter her years. Though our encounter was brief, it would mark an important point in both our lives, and the beginning of a very special relationship. Because of it her manuscript fell into my hands.

Every year in August, a time in the Northwest when dark clouds seem most reluctant to blanket the skies, a reunion is held. This reunion is not centered on a family or graduating class; rather, it is centered on a town, the small but infamous town of Nome, Alaska. Since 1972, past and present residents of Nome have flocked to Woodland Park in Seattle’s Greenwood district for what has come to be known as the Nome Picnic. Nomeites, as we like to be called, mill from table to table filling paper plates from
Tupperware containers and brandishing nametags which include our years of residency. My nametag read: Bret, 73–75.

I was born in Nome though until that summer had not attended the picnic. As luck would have it my mother, a Nomeite from 1967 to 1975, was visiting the same weekend the picnic was being held. We decided to go with nostalgic hopes of uncovering lost memories from what seemed like a different lifetime. More than anything, I imagine, I was hoping to hear stories about my parents when they were my age—maybe even hit the jackpot with something vaguely incriminating that would make for interesting conversation over Christmas dinner. What I would hear instead would be a bit more profound.

I loaded a fresh roll of film into my camera as my mother and I coasted along slowly down the park drive looking for picnic site twelve where the reunion was being held. Large-leafed maple trees filtered the sunlight in broken patches across the green of the park and the blacktop, leaving some patches slightly cooler in the wake of the shade. That summer began my senior year in college, and I was enrolled in a black and white photography class. I imagined this gathering of displaced Alaskans to be an ideal opportunity to get some interesting photographs. As we pulled into the parking lot of site twelve, a group of mingling picnickers standing under the shade of a large shelter came into focus through the lens of my camera.

We were greeted by the Gallehers, dear friends of my parents who once ran a small airline out of Nome and now live in the Norwegian community of Poulsbo, Washington. After several introductions, I sank into the milling of the crowd, in search of photographs and stories of my own. Making my way around the grounds, snapping off candid shots here and there, I eventually came upon a kind elderly woman whose name tag read: Ruth, 32–37. Not wanting to be intrusive with my camera, we spoke for quite a while before I asked permission to take her photograph. A moment later, a younger woman approached and slightly out of breath announced that Betty had just arrived and was about to tell her story.

I helped Ruth to the area where I was told Betty was sitting. As we came upon a picnic table nestled in the shade, others were arriving and eager to listen. Some, I am sure, had heard Betty’s story many times before, but for others including me, this would be a first. Ruth sat down and was met with a warm smile. There, delicate and kind with soft blue eyes contrasting her Eskimo features, sat Betty, poised and elegant. She reached over and gave
Ruth’s hand a gentle squeeze of recognition. Ruth smiled. Betty pulled her hands back and folded them in her lap and began to speak.

Her voice, soft yet halting, carried an air of wisdom that was easily sensed. You could feel the mood of the small crowd that gathered around Betty change with her expressions. Her face told the story of her life almost as much as her words. When she spoke of the death of her grandparents during the influenza epidemic of 1918 and the tragedy that followed, which forever changed her life, her face was carved in stone. When she spoke of her father’s love and devotion, teaching her to once again walk after the loss of her legs, and the great outpouring of support she received from her village and from across the country, her face was soft as fresh snow. Her story took many twists and turns as she recalled witnessing Alaska’s history unfold before her, much of it centered on the small village of Teller, located seventy-five miles west of Nome. The sincerity and enthusiasm in her voice was infectious.

It’s hard to say how long Betty was telling her story; time seems to become a bit mischievous in the presence of a good storyteller. I was, by far, not the only person deeply moved and more than a little enchanted by her words, but I was the last person sitting with her long after her story had been told. We spoke for what must have been several hours, sharing one another’s experiences and finding many similarities outside of any generational barriers. When Betty mentioned that she had a completed manuscript that she had worked on for over twenty years and was at a loss to know what to do with, I nearly dropped my camera. I told her at that moment I would do everything in my power to help get her manuscript published. I kept my word.

The annals of history are rich with stories reflecting moments in time as perceived by individuals, heroic and otherwise. Many stories, however, are never told and pass quietly by, fading with the memories of the individual and those they have touched. Betty’s story is one that must not fade and needs to be told. The reflections of Alaska’s past seen through her eyes offer unique glimpses into an Alaska on the cusp of change, as well as of the difficulties and triumphs of growing up in a family of crossed cultures. Her incredible story of tragedy and survival offers a glimpse deeper still into the depths of human courage, strength, and compassion.

Betty made quite an impression on me that August afternoon at the park. It is rare to come across an individual as passionate and enthusiastic about life at any age, let alone at ninety. Betty embraces the best qualities of
Eskimo and western cultures with a tenderness and wisdom that is ageless. I gained a great deal of understanding from our encounter that day, both of history and of life. I was reminded that it is never too late to see a dream through to the end, and with just the right amounts of love, hope, and grace, anything is possible.
East is East and West is West
and never the twain shall meet.

—Rudyard Kipling,
“Ballad of East and West”