

Attatah and Ahnah

Editor's Note — The essay "Attatah" and the poem "Ahnah" were written in 1972 in Washington, D.C. to commemorate the memory of the writer's grandparents.

Attatah

Three weeks before Christmas, my Attatah (grandfather) died in the Fairbanks hospital. He was Dad's father and the last of my grandparents to die. His body was returned to Kotzebue for the funeral.

The flight home was the longest one of my life. I am reminded of it each time I hear Sioux singer Floyd Westerman's song about the return of his mother's body home for burial. "Only thirty-five more miles and you'll be free," sings Floyd...

Attatah's body rested in the newly-built Friends Church near the center of the village. Outside, the ground was brown and grassy. Kotzebue did not get much snow that winter. The wind blew cold and dry air from the Chukchi Sea across the village. It was refreshing, but the reason for my return spoiled my homecoming.

I was disappointed that the funeral could not take place in the old church where Attatah had played the violin during services for most of his adult life. He looked completely at rest ... I remember admiring that distinguished crop of white hair and his hands.

My earliest memories are of his hands. He would call me to him with them, to his rocking chair. With his big hands, he would see how much I had grown. When he saw that I was still growing, he would grin and laugh. When he laughed, his hands would laugh too on my shoulders. His hands were those of a netmaker. Skilled and strong, they appeared ready to stitch another sturdy knot.

Attatah became blind as a young man. His hands were very important to him. And to me, they were like his grin or his voice. I watched his hands like other people watched eyes.

Toward the end of his life, after his wife died, many of his friends were gone. When he found an old friend, they talked about the way of life in the north. Few were left who knew the stories of the old days of Kotzebue Eskimos.

I can hardly remember what sounds came from that house before Effie died. After she died, and he was alone much of the time, the only sounds were of his rocking chair, and the chimes from his clock, or the wind if it was blowing.

Attatah's was the most peaceful house in the village toward the end. Sometimes, he liked to play his violin. He would play a jig or a hymn that some old trader taught him many years ago. It always sounded good. As he played, his fingers danced and his head nodded and his face would grimace.

When he finished, he would grin and laugh, and I would ask him to play some more. I always loved to ask him to play for me.

He stopped when he got tired, and rocked in his chair, and sometimes he would fall asleep. When I was small, I would shake him awake to ask for the money he always gave me for cracker jacks.

Actually, I never really did shake him, I just made a noise and he would tell me to wait while he opened his coin purse to give me a quarter. When I got older, I let him sleep. I would sneak out and fix the wooden latch. Now his house is boarded up.

Sometimes, as I stop while passing, I try to fool myself into thinking that I could hear the violin or the chair or chimes of the clock. But I always stop as I pass. I wish that I had asked him more about the old times in Kotzebue, and I wish that I knew how to sing his songs.

His death was more than the loss of a relative. He had a very special wisdom which I shall spend the rest of my life trying to define. The gravel and dirt of Kotzebue earth was lead in my hand when I threw it on his coffin. From him, I have something that must always be a great part of my life. Kotzebue villagers knew him as Johnny Richards. To me, he is Attatah.

Ahnah

No sacred song
or pretty sunset
ever soothed my soul
as much as watching
Ahnah comb her hair.

No skin
many decades younger
ever felt so soft and warm
as from the firm
gentle grasp
from Ahnah's hands.
No laughter
was such love and truth,
heard abundantly
as Ahnah's mirth.

No smile
was ever so generous
from eyes, lips, and wrinkles
and so easy to return
as Ahnah's smile.

No life
was ever as beautifully
summed
in such a peaceful visage
as Ahnah's death.

When in sorrow
I remember her laughter
and her smile
in spite of tears.

Thank you for your life,
Ahnah,
for none can live as
you did ever again.

Thank you for your love
My Ahnah, my grandmother.
I remember you
and love you
always.

—Thomas Richards, Jr.