

Foreword by bestselling author JANETTE OKE

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An Almost Silent Friendship

Non-fiction

Marcia Lee Laycock

The bitter Yukon wind tried to bite through our parkas as we stood on the tarmac of a small airport, waiting to board a plane to Alaska. But my friends and I were so excited, the cold couldn't dampen our enthusiasm. We smiled and chatted with one another as our luggage was loaded. We were on our way to a women's retreat.

I was a brand-new Christian and these women were new friends, so I stood back a little and just listened as the conversation flowed. I was still going through a bit of an identity crisis as I adjusted to the idea of being a Christian and tried to fit into the new culture to which I now belonged. At times I felt more than a little out of place and alone.

As the plane bounced over the frozen terrain and lifted into the air, I let my mind speculate on what the weekend would be like. I'd been asked to give my testimony, but I wasn't worried. I expected the gathering to be small, as most were in our tiny northern town. Since I had been raised in a tradition where "retreat" meant deny yourself, examine yourself, and don't dare say a word, I expected we would meet in silence. I expected the meals would be meagre. And I expected to be somehow changed. The last one was the only expectation that became a reality.

When we arrived at our destination we were picked up and driven to a school. All the sessions, we learned, would be held in the gym. When I walked into that building, I'm sure my shock was evident. Almost 300 women were there, many of them native women from all over Alaska and the Yukon Territory. And they were all talking at once. Strike expectations one and two. Then we were ushered into a dining area.

Strike expectation number three. The tables were laden with steaming main dishes and tantalizing desserts.

After the meal, the first session was announced. I started to shake. Could I tell my story in front of them all? I wondered if it would be a sin to run out the back door.

Then I saw her. She was taller than most of the other native women there, with a long greying braid and chiselled, weathered features. Our eyes met across the room, and something connected between us. With that one look, I was somehow given courage and my knees stopped shaking. A moment later, it was time for me to speak. I don't remember exactly what I said, although I know I praised God for changing my life and for bringing me into a fellowship of believers who had reached out to me and my husband during a difficult time in our lives.

Afterward, a few women came over to talk to me. As I was engaged in conversation with them, I felt someone's hands on my shoulders and heard a soft mumble of prayer. When I was finally able to turn around, the woman was moving away. I saw the back of her tall statuesque form and the long greying braid as she melted into the crowd.

Throughout that weekend we "met" several more times, without a word being spoken between us. Just when I was feeling like the clichéd fish out of water, I'd look up and there she would be, with a look, a smile, a nod—always from a distance. I tried to seek her out a few times, but I was never able to find her when I had a free moment to talk.

Then it was time to pack up and head home. I tried to find her as we got ready to leave, and was disappointed that I had to climb into the bus and head out to the airport without seeing her one more time. But God had arranged a meeting. I found her sitting in the airport.

Almost expecting that she would melt away before I could speak with her, I approached her hesitantly. Her smile beamed like a beacon when she saw me, and she motioned for me to sit beside her. Our conversation was brief, but I felt another immediate bond as the woman, whose name was Lorna, told me she lived in a remote village on the Yukon River. I lived on the Klondike, which feeds into the Yukon. When I told her that, she smiled again, nodded, and said that every morning she

would wake up and look at the mighty Yukon and think about Jesus. The simplicity of that image touched me deeply. She said she knew I would speak often about what God was doing in my life and she pledged to pray for me as He used me in that way. As I remained seated, she rose and laid her hand on my head, closing her eyes in silent blessing. Then she was gone.

There have been many times over the years, especially when I stand in front of an audience, that I have thought of that dear woman. I see her eyes and am given courage. I see her smile and feel the assurance that I am among family. I have sensed, most of all, the whisper of her prayers. I believe she was a divine appointment. I believe she was part of the circle of friends that God had arranged for me as I moved out of my lonely, dysfunctional world into the family of God.

I look forward to the day I will meet Lorna again. I envision being able to sit together by the banks of the mighty river of life and talk about Jesus.

