The challenge came from a loyal reader: explain why sometimes we see a gold chain around Joe’s neck. We exchanged ideas and finally decided that it had to be a gift from a woman -there were enough of them in his life!- but she had to be a very special woman. Irish had an idea and in the space of one afternoon, joined a very beloved episode, “Different Pines, Same Wind” to our own Joe and Honor series. If you haven’t seen the episode, you are missing a great one. In it Joe befriends an
elderly woman, Carrie Pickett (played by Irene Tedrow) and helps her keep her “piney woods” from a logging operation. Their chemistry together is magnificent, making for a beautiful May-December almost love story. The line best remembered is spoken by the two with tender affection. “If I had twenty years more...,” “And I had twenty years less...”

Twenty Years Mean Nothing to the Pines

A What Happened Later Story

by the Tahoe Ladies

The jeweler pushed his small set of scales to one side. He looked at the odd-shaped nugget in his palm then said, “This isn’t river gold. A nugget of river gold this size and you certainly would have enough, young man.”

I was tempted to reach out and take back my gold nugget. Instead, I asked him once more if it was enough. He shrugged his shoulders and said that it probably was. When did I need it? And I did understand that I would have to pay for his time and trouble, didn’t I? In hard cash; not gold. I told him that I understood and even offered a down payment, but I would have to have it by Saturday.

“Why you in such a hurry? Surely the lady’ll wait.” The jeweler stared at me over the top of his glasses.

“Yes, she’ll wait but I don’t want her to,” I answered and tried to tear my eyes from the nugget in his palm. He was carelessly toying with it, rocking it back and forth then tossing it to his other hand. All the while, I watched it as if my whole life
depended on that thumbnail size almost-oblong piece of gold. It was thicker at one end, the end I had always thought of as the bottom, but then it thinned and kind of swirled, creating a tiny hole, like an eye. The surface of the nugget was faintly pockmarked but worn smooth with a dull patina.

“Give you two dollars for the chain,” he offered and I heard a faint sneer in his tone. Without meaning to, my hand closed tightly over the chain. It was worth a lot more than the two dollars he was offering; I knew since I had bought it years ago.

“Or I’ll give you a hundred bucks for the nugget and the chain.” His deprecating tone grated across my nerves.

“No, I promised that I would never sell it,” I explained and, reaching out, took the gold from him. I had to hold it one more time before…before it became something else…before it was gone forever.

So he couldn’t see the tears well up in my eyes, I turned my back. I eased over to the sunlit window and held my piece of gold up between my fingers. It was as though the sun’s bright beams were swallowed whole into the stone. A bell jangled and there were other voices but I wasn’t listening to any of it. Around me were bright jewels, but the brightest I held in my fingers. My vision began to dance and play tricks on me, for suddenly I was not in a San Francisco jewelry store, but in a dilapidated old cabin…

“Yes, Joe. Don’t argue with me now,” she fussed and slapped at my arm. I resettled myself on the side of her bed, careful not to jostle her too much. Taking my hat off, I dropped it over the bedpost and unbuttoned my jacket. As I did that, her eyes, still flashing, watched my every move.

“I’m not arguing with you. I’m just telling you that you ought
to use that gold for something else,” I did argue back. I took her hand in mine and my heart nearly collapsed on itself. That hand. Not that long ago it had been strong and callused from work. Now it was cool and the skin felt like dry crinkly paper. There was no strength left in either the hand or the woman, and it pulled at my soul.

“I done filled out the papers to give you the homestead, Joe. Doc…he helped me get it all right. That’s only fittin’ since your little section joins this ‘un.” Even speaking was becoming difficult for her and I longed to tell her to save what strength she had. She wouldn’t have listened and I wouldn’t have made her. So instead, I smoothed the pale gray sprigs of hair away from her face. How could I tell her that less than a day’s ride from this weather-beaten cabin was more land than she could imagine? That it, the Ponderosa, was my home and that I had no real need of this small part of paradise she called her own?

“But I don’t really need-” I began, twisting to face her. As I did that, the glow from the kerosene lantern splashed across her face and I saw the tears in her eyes.

“Joe, ever’body needs a place like this; a place where you can listen to the winds in the pines. Remember?” Her voice was but a whisper now and for a moment, I knew she wasn’t in that rickety old bed, dying. She was walking through her piney woods.

“Yes, Miss Carrie, I remember. I remember you holding an old flintlock on me ’cause you thought I was gonna steal your land. Proved you wrong, didn’t I?”

She gave a fading chortle that ended in a wheeze. Yes, Miss Carrie Pickett, fierce old lady that she was, was dying before my very eyes. I had come as soon as I had gotten the doctor’s letter but it wasn’t soon enough.
"Which is why I want you to have this. It’s the only gold nugget my Amos ever found. Some dust, but this was the only big ‘un. He give it to me. Told me to save it for hard times. Never had no hard times with Amos. Leastwise until the day he died, I didn’t. You take it, Joe. You save it for hard times. I hear tell that you can pawn such in some of them big cities. That true?"

"Miss Carrie," I fingered the stone again, feeling the warmth of it, the uneven surface, the weight of it for the first time. “I don’t think I could ever pawn something like this. Or sell it.”

“Tell you what, then. Keep it until you find the right girl.”

“The right girl? But you’re the right girl, Miss Carrie,” I teased.

“No,” she said, her voice quivering as tears sprang to her eyes. “Remember? If you had you twenty more years…”

She couldn’t finish it so I did. “And you had twenty less. Yes, Miss Carrie, I remember.”

“Good. Now hush up and let’s listen to my piney woods.”

Carrie Pickett died quietly in the night. The doctor and I were the only ones there and he’ll vouch with me that the moment she died, the wind hung silent in the branches of her beloved pines and cried.

I buried her as she asked, beside her Amos. I gave away her furniture – such as it was- to a young family down the road. The cabin, I burnt to the ground and when the ashes were cool, spread them around. Come the next spring, no one would ever know that a cabin had once stood beside that quiet lake. I rode home with Miss Carrie’s nugget in my jacket pocket. I carried it there for a while until I thought I had lost it once. Then I had it put on a fairly long chain and I wore it around my neck,
under my shirt, away from prying eyes and teasing words. I never told anyone about it. If my father or brothers ever saw it, they never asked about it.

Finally the day came when I found the woman I thought was the right one: Alice. I recall clearly taking the nugget from beneath my shirt and looking at it, wondering how you give something like that to a woman. How could I explain it? Simple. I couldn’t. So I slipped it off and put it away, feeling both ashamed and comforted at the same time.

Of all the things that burnt that terrible night of Alice’s death, the nugget and chain wasn’t one of them. Just that afternoon I had slipped it back on, intending to tell Alice all about it. Maybe even using it to explain why I wanted to name our coming child -a daughter, perhaps- after the amazing old woman. Of course, none of that was to be.

In the dark days that followed, there was but one warm spot in my existence: that precious stone once again pressing against my own flesh. One morning after I had left the ranch to sort my life out, I found myself just sitting on my horse. All around me stood towering trees. I had the nugget in my fist, trying to crush it. Why? I don’t know, but then I heard it once again: the wind in the pines.

A semblance of sanity returned.

Now, standing in that posh store in San Francisco, I could hear the pines singing to me. I found her, Miss Carrie, I whispered in my mind. She is just like you. A spitfire of a girl who can smile and make my knees go weak. A kiss from her is about like every dream you’ve ever had coming true all at once. She curls up beside me and I am warm all over. Best of all, I caught her listening to wind in the trees the other day. She understands, Miss Carrie. Without saying a word, she understands.
“Like I said, I can have it ready for you by Saturday.” The little jeweler had slipped up behind me and when he spoke, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

“What? Oh,” I mumbled, abashed at being taken off guard and wondering if I had spoken aloud.

“The nugget, sir?” He held out his hand, palm up, and wiggled his fingers. There was a smirk on his face.

For a few heartbeats, I stood there, listening to far-distant pine trees sighing in the afternoon breeze. This man would never hear them even if he were in the middle of the forest. Could I trust him?

“I’ve changed my mind,” I said abruptly. “Surely, you have wedding rings you can show me.”

An hour later, I walked out with a small box in my jacket pocket. It held a golden band that was now engraved for my beloved Honor. Around my neck, close to my heart, hung Miss Carrie’s nugget. I had decided that for as long as I was able to hear the winds in the pines, it would stay there.

The years have hurried by since that day in San Francisco. Yes, I married Honor. She gave me children and with them, more happiness than a man ought to be allowed. The Ponderosa is still home to me and mine and I’ve taken steps to keep it that way. Miss Carrie’s nugget of gold still hangs from its gold chain around my neck and close to my heart where it always has been…and always will be.

And I can still hear the winds sighing in the pines.

All I have to do...is listen.

The End
Next Story in the Honor series:

Old Shadows