

## A Silver Locket

by Rick Reil

It was a mid-week afternoon about a year ago. I'd told all the help to go home because the work was done, and frankly I didn't want to have to pay them for the rest of the day. It was the time of year when payables exceed receivables. It was only three p.m. but I decided to leave early, who was going to want my services on a Wednesday afternoon in the middle of January? To say I was suffering from melancholy would have been an understatement. Short days, cold weather, and lack of business are enough to get anybody down.

Just as I was turning off the lights and locking up, the phone rang. I answered it with my usual business-like greeting. The cheerful voice of an obvious elderly woman asked if I might have time to take her portrait that afternoon. Happy to have a paying customer I answered, "Of course, what do you have in mind?"

"Oh, just a simple portrait," she answered, "It's for my husband. I haven't had a professional photo taken since we were married."

"And how long ago was that?"

"Sixty-five years ago, next week," she sweetly answered.

"Does he know you're doing this?"

"No, it's a surprise, can you make me look a little younger? I'm eighty-three and not the pretty girl he married anymore."

"Yes," I laughed, "I think I can do that."

She said she needed about an hour to get ready and she could be at the studio by 4:30. I gave her directions and hung up.

The next hour and a half were spent tidying the place up and adjusting my lights. I put a Perry Como CD on the changer and turned the music to a moderate level. I was in the camera room finishing setting up when I heard the front door open. I stepped out into the waiting room and there she was. She was no more than five feet tall. Her back was curved and her snow white hair was very thin. Her face showed the lines and wrinkles of all of her eighty-three years and more.

She looked up at me and smiled. "You must be Rick," she said.

"Yup, that's me, and you must be Agnes."

She laughed and said that when she was born there were so many pretty girls' names and her mother had to give her "Agnes."

She told me she was the youngest of six daughters. "It was 1934 and I was the last of the kids, I guess she'd run out of pretty names."

I laughed, took her coat, and showed her the changing room where she prettied up her hair and checked her makeup. She came out looking no different than when she arrived, which is the norm for old ladies. She was happy and that was all that mattered.

I selected a background, an "Old Master's" traditional type that complemented her clothing. She had on a simple blue blouse and a black cardigan sweater. She wore silver earrings and a silver locket attached to a thin silver chain around her neck. Her glasses were large and about ten years out of style and showed the lines of her trifocal lenses. I knew it would take some computer work to erase the lines.

I asked her to sit on a posing stool and gave her a posing table to rest her arms on. As I was adjusting my lights I asked about the locket.

"I always wear it, there's a picture of my son in it. He was in the Army and was killed in action in Viet Nam in 1971. His name was Thomas but we always called him "Tommy Boy." He was just 18 and our only child.

It choked me up a little, he would have been my age had he lived. I lost several school friends in that war. I served in the Air Force during the war and also lost a few buddies who's aircraft were shot down.

"I'm so sorry, I've had to send some of my boys to war in Iraq but they returned home, I know what it's like to worry."

We continued the portrait session, I was pleased with the results and I asked how soon she needed the photo.

"How soon can you have it done?" she asked.

"We can do it right now if you'd like. Do you have about an hour?"

"Yes, that would be wonderful."

I took the card out of the camera and we went to my office and copied the images to a hard drive. I loaded them up in a viewer and after a few minutes we selected the best. I opened Photoshop and began my work. As I softened her wrinkles and facial and neck lines she began to talk.

"My husband's name is Lloyd. It's a funny name too. It has two "Ls" which never made sense. He was an iron worker. He worked on many of the dams on the Snake and Columbia Rivers."

"That must have been challenging."

"Oh it was, he's a big man and he was once so strong. He was over six foot three and weighed about two hundred and fifty pounds, mostly muscle. He would come home from work, walk in the door and pick me up like a rag doll. When Tommy was little he'd pick us both up at the same time and swing us around.

Tommy couldn't have had a better dad than Lloyd. He was loving, kind, and generous. It nearly killed Lloyd when Tommy died. We couldn't have any more kids though, we would have taken a dozen if we could have."

As I worked she continued, "Lloyd worked outside his whole life. A few years ago all that time in the sun caught up with him. He has skin cancer and not too much longer to live. That's why I wanted to give him

this portrait. He can't leave the house anymore and I hate to leave him alone. I hope this photo will keep him company while I'm away."

"I'm sure it will," I said as I turned my computer monitor so she could see her portrait. She gasped as she saw that the years had melted away. Her skin was almost smooth, her neck lines gone, her eyes bright and she looked more than a few years younger. She looked beautiful.

A tear ran down her cheek and she whispered, "He'll love it, oh thank you, I don't know what to say. What do I owe you?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"That I don't charge for sixty-five year anniversary portraits."

She smiled at me and sat there in silence while I printed her an 8x10. We walked out to the front office and I put it in a frame, wrapped it up and handed it to her. I walked her to the door and as an afterthought I said, "Agnes, you didn't tell me your last name."

"It's Peterson."

"Your son was Tom Peterson? Did he go to Jason Lee Elementary School in Richland?"

"Yes, did you know him?"

I choked, "Yes, he was a foot taller than me. In the fifth grade there was a kid in our class that was meaner than snot, he picked a fight with me one day after school. He knocked me down and was ready to do some serious damage when somebody grabbed him and threw him half-way across the playground. It was Tom and he told him if he ever picked on any of the kids at school again he'd regret it. He picked me up and walked home with me. After that we were great friends all through school. I was in the Air Force when I heard he'd been killed."

"Now I remember who you are," she said. She reached up and gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "I'll let Lloyd know I found an old friend today."

I opened the door and said goodbye. It was cold but my heart was warm. It was snowing lightly as I watched her get into her car and leave. I closed the door and felt my melancholy melt away as I thought of Tom.

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