

The Gift

by Sari Cunningham

It had started out large, the gift. “You got me a Mac!” she squealed, and tugged at the red velvet ribbon hugging the crisp white paper.

She unfolded the paper and found herself staring at another package, this one smaller, wrapped in pale eggshell blue tissue and tied securely with gold cord. “My favorite color,” she murmured, gently stroking the paper. “*The Sibley Guide to Birds?*” she queried, fingering the tassels, slowly peeling back the tape.

She reached under the tissue and pulled out a third gift.

“It’s like peeling open my heart,” he said, “one layer for each year.”

Intrigued, she continued, laughing as she did so. She gave the pink silk bow a decisive yank, and slipped off the metallic green foil.

“Tickets to *Madama Butterfly* on Saturday?”

“Like one of those Russian babushka dolls, except more special, you know?” he persisted.

She shimmied a canary yellow parcel out from under the newspaper tied up with plain string. The knot on the purple ribbon wouldn’t budge.

“Pass me the scissors,” she said.

“I can’t wait to see the look on your face.”

She severed the knot, and slashed through the canary yellow.

“Careful,” he joked, clutching his heart in mock distress, “you just slit my aorta.”

Snip, snip went the scissors. A string of black beads cascaded onto the floor, shortly followed by a wad of bubble wrap. Another few snips and she had liberated a delicate pink covering of origami paper ensconced by dental floss. The package was getting smaller still.

“Silk lingerie?” she asked, without really expecting an answer.

She deftly sliced through the shoelace holding together the cotton cloth wrapped around a tiny box with a red bow on it. She paused for a moment, about to lift the lid.

“Oh, my God!” she breathed. “Oh my God! Bill! Is this what I think it is? After all this time...”

She pried off the lid and was about to rip open the daisy print paper ensnared by a silver-striped pink ribbon bedecked with a gaudy gold butterfly trinket, when Bill stopped her.

“No, wait, Sarah, that's the gift!”

She looked up at him, uncomprehending.

“It's a music box!” he said. “See, it's got this little handle on the side?”

“A music box,” she echoed, feeling the color drain from her face.

“Boy, I sure surprised you! What did you think it was in the end?”

“Never mind,” she said, as she slowly cranked the handle. “It's lovely. Thanks.”

The music squeezed out into the room in short herky-jerky hiccup spasms. She didn't recognize the tune, but the rhythm sounded oddly like her heart.

