

A GIFT

2003 A GIFT

Each piece of bubble wrap lay reverently around the tiny gift in the brown box feels like a flower placed on a grave. The loneliness washes over in a weak low-tide ripple. A gray sigh slides off her lips. She raises her head, eyes straying from her package-to-be. Her hands become still, but not her heart. It flutters and her attention rushes inward to that place to take full stock of the feeling brooding and coiled there. Then, the slithery thing slinks off into the shadows of consciousness like some wild, scared creature that won't come too close or stay too long. It has happened too many times; the brief experience causes no new excitement, no fear of a larger, more painful encounter. There are no new cuts or bruises from the old familiar beast.

Back to work, the brain says. It's best to keep busy. What a joke. It's best to let sleeping dogs and feelings lie, undisturbed, unprovoked. Keep covering the little gift, protecting it as best you can from shocks and knocks. Close the box flaps. Rip off the tape. Make fast all the loose edges and corners. Seal them.

What is this thing inside the box, lying deep in the wrapping that it is so worthy of protection? A gift, a present, she thinks too sharply. So what? That is all it is, says the brain. That's all it can be. How can it be anything more? Can it say anything? No, it can't say a word. It lies there dreaming in a nest of bubble wrap. How ordinary. It lies there with no hopes, no expectations that things will be better, brighter because of its existence. It just is. It doesn't ask, doesn't question. It doesn't wonder how someone can stop loving. Nor does it ask when does one cease being another's sun and moon? No, of course it doesn't think about how it must have dawned that day when a loved one must leave or forever be like one of those little plastic images in a glass globe. It doesn't invite consideration of whether it was sanctuary or prison left behind.

It's just a tiny gift, lying in the darkness waiting, waiting for . . . what? She hopes it will be lifted from the security of the cushions, lifted to another pair of younger yet somber eyes, to the smile on the other's mouth, perhaps to a brief laugh of pleasure. Maybe it will be adored, placed close to her so she can lay eyes on it and reach out to it during the day. Maybe it will be cherished for a while, a source of beauty and comfort.

Is that too much to ask? Can such a tiny gift be responsible for so large a task, so great an undertaking? Will it be loved forever and ever? Will the once and most-favored gift, now dusty and neglected disappear one day in a cleaning frenzy; dropped into the trash?

She muses, finishing the address on the box. She ends the visit inside for good now and in closing the heart's door, she rests with her hand on the invisible knob. What does it matter what feelings attend when the box is opened? Yes, yes, it matters. She can't be sure, that's all. . . . not of this or of that . . . certainly not of even the next moment in time. It's just a little gift . . . so fragile. Let it go. Let it go. Let it

be, only a strand of love, just that and no questions asked. Just silence. Just acceptance. Just wait.

2008 A GIFT

Light pours through dusty windows. She empties dresser drawers of their contents to lighten the piece for moving. Her husband wants the room bare of furniture and framed hanging pictures for painting. Lingered over faded school pictures of earnest children, she empties the next drawer. In the very bottom and back is a small package, wrapped for mailing with an address long out of date and memory. Recognizing her own handwriting, she knows that it was the gift that was sent and returned unopened with the stamp, "Addressee Unknown." The name brings back the longing and pain of the moment the package was shoved there. A stain is all that is left of the tear that had dropped on the label.

Sitting down on the floor, she takes the package from the drawer and cradles it in her lap. She hardly remembers what is inside but she remembers why. She remembers how it came to be here instead of gone. Tearing through the taped paper, she exposes the box and turns it over to read the words printed on the side. Oh yes. Now she remembers and smiles just a little. She knows what it is, the intent and its unfulfilled purpose.

She opens the box and gently moves aside bubble wrap that cushions the gift. It has lain here forgotten and untouched for years and yet, it is unchanged. It never made it. It never was held, never was cherished, never brought the joy for which it was created. On the other hand, it never fell to be broken to bits, trampled underfoot or lost either. Here it is, still a beautiful and precious promise, waiting for something and someone to release it from the dark. She draws it out and holds it up.

How can a gift be a gift if it is never received? Wrapped up, lying in a drawer, it remains like a note played before the chord. It seems an anticipation and preparation without completion.

She lays the wrapping and box on the floor and stands. Walking to the window she holds the gift up to the sunlight. Even though the windows are dusty, the light is enough. Immediately, the sun beam is fractured into spectral colors, released to dance around the walls, ceiling and floor. The gift was intended to be a reminder of a promise made long ago, but no less a promise because of the time elapsed. Now, more is needed. The gift can no longer be boxed and contained. It needs to be given freedom and held on high.

She too had waited, wrapped up in darkness as had the gift. She had waited and wondered if and when she would open. But she tired of waiting in darkness and quiet despair. When she couldn't hold it together any more, she gave up. She surrendered and fell. She stepped off into space and flung her arms wide to embrace whatever was there. She felt release and relief. She fell like a star from the heavens not to tragedy, but to grace.

With grace, she was met by the promised miracle of light and truth. Just like the gift held up to the sun after its long anticipation, she also reflected and refracted. Her course had been altered and broken into

uncounted fragments. Seen through another lens, she became the promise and light. She had made herself vulnerable to breakage and trampling but in the process had opened her heart to the miracle. Once more she reflected on the words that were impressed on her heart one lonely, quiet day about a miraculous gift. She believed that expectation had led her to fall into God's grace.

The miracle was promised and the miracle had happened and it would come again in different forms, from different directions in full glory. Here in this almost empty room, she recognized it for what it was. It was a gift and a promise, meant to be placed in the hand of the one for whom it was intended.

Someone came up the steps. She heard the words she loved. "Where are you, Mom?" She turned to the loved one who had made the long trip back and simply said, "I have a gift that I've saved a long time for you." Holding it up to the light, the gift began to fulfill its promise once again and so doing, she passed it on.