

The Woman Who Could Not Take

The old woman was highly respected all around town. She could have been considered rich; such was the extent of esteem and affection carried towards her.

The old woman had no considerable possessions to call her own. The log house she lived in, a spit of land around it with a couple of knobby apple trees, some everyday clothing and the usual household effects, in addition to some annuity covering her basic needs - those were the unobtrusive circumstances of her life. Also, she was not a native to this town and therefore not entitled to any landed property.

Where she originally hailed from and what her life had been like before she came to town, whether she had been with a man or was connected to any relatives elsewhere, was unknown. She would not discuss those issues and the common respect she enjoyed did not allow inquiries of such intimate nature. The old woman had been part of the town for a long time, almost forever even in the understanding of the older villagers, and the fact that she was no native made only one abstract difference: She was not entitled to inheritance in any of the resident families which placed her beyond all pretensions and interests.

But it was not this fact alone to establish the outstanding position of the old woman. If someone had asked why she received such a lot of affection, more than other women of same age, there would have been but a reluctant answer, and this answer would have seemed to be imprecise:

The old woman gave.

For as long as the memory of the villagers reached back, this always had been the most conspicuous characteristic of the old woman: She gave. She called the children in from the street to her yard in order to give them quince bread or hot apple pie, she tinkered paper garlands for the village jubilee and brought them along to the meeting where the celebration of that jubilee was to be decided upon. She copied scores from an old choral book of hers as a gift for the village choir, she fetched antiques from her attic and gave them to the city people who were out to remodel the old house next to hers - she gave and she gave.

If, on the other hand, somebody wanted to do a pleasure to her by bringing an armful of fresh leek or a basket full of pears, she would crossly refuse the gift: She'd be well able to take care of herself, she'd not need any kind of care, and she would really not suffer any shortage of fruits or vegetables.

Also, with a harshness that almost ashamed the one who offered, she refused to let anybody help her with the yard work. She seemed to claim the privilege of giving and helping for herself and herself alone. At the annual village feast she could not accept to be part of a round of apple wine somebody else would throw without insisting that the following round had to be on her. Even the gift the township offered to her on the occasion of her seventieth birthday (which she had no way to refuse) she only received with a grumpy remark such as "getting older is not a merit after all!"

The old woman could not take.

People smiled at this peculiarity as being a funny crotchet of an old woman, even counted it into an old fashioned type of modesty which, lamentably, the younger generations were missing. Even when she gave the lower part of her land to her city neighbors, for free, so that those might have easier access to their garage, everybody declared her to be starry-eyed, but always with the undertone of admiration, being her unsuspected of any kind of venality.

But slow by slow the villagers ran out of reasons to explain the uncommon behavior of the old woman. There was no doubt in the value of her gifts or in her motives of giving at all: The gifts always were of high usefulness and seemed to be given from the heart. But the incapability of the old woman to accept gifts on her part which would have been the same useful and given with same pleasure was increasingly irritating.

It became obvious that the old woman, for the same reason why she gave so generously, was so unable to take: She loved, but she did not love herself. She considered herself and her gifts to be of lesser value than whatever was offered to her without reckoning up or comparing.

Nobody in town would ever have dared to spell it out, but everybody felt increasingly uncomfortable with the gifts of the old woman: She took herself and her gifts for being worthless - how could, what she offered, be valuable to others?

The harsh rejection of an innocent bunch of spring flowers plucked by a grateful child from its parents' yard to give to the old woman initiated the outbreak of the accumulated discomfort. The child had run home crying and hurt by the incomprehensive refusal, and the parents had dissuaded it from further attempts to do a pleasure to the old woman, knowing that nothing in the world is more painful to a child than to be turned down with its affection.

The other children of the neighborhood, though always susceptible to quince bread and hot apple pie, subsequently took large detours away from the old woman's log house and the gifts not asked for. The attitude of the older villagers, too, changed. They carefully avoided to allowing a chance for the old woman to give, and even at the most common occasions, the words "thank you" or "please" or "you are welcome" were put under taboo. At times it seemed as if the old woman had gotten under an absurd kind of social ban.

But none of these happened at purpose or even based on agreement or conspiracy: The town simply reacted to the obvious pretension of the old woman to her exclusive privilege of giving.

There were many voices rising in the taverns and bars to complain about the way things had developed. And nobody in town would have pretended to liking the old woman less than before. On the contrary, most of the villagers felt pity for her. But nobody wanted to deal with her any more; nobody wanted to accept anything from her without even a chance of being thankful.

Under this isolation, the old woman became stunted more and more. Giving had been her only tool for expressing her love, and the missing of this tool muted her. She did not attend the village festivities any more, she scarcely went shopping and she even resigned to sitting out in the evening sun in front of her house as she had loved to do before. And some day in fall, the old woman died, mute and almost unnoticed.

All of town came to her funeral. This was an expression of gratitude she could have nothing against - gratitude for the lesson she had taught her neighbors by behaving so strangely: It is wonderful to be able to give. It is the first half of love.

Love, though, only lives as a whole.