

heart, I'd be a person in the world. What would it matter then that I was giving up "love"?

As it turned out, it mattered more than I had ever dreamed it would. As the years went on, I saw that romantic love was injected like dye into the nervous system of my emotions, laced through the entire fabric of longing, fantasy, and sentiment. It haunted the psyche, was an ache in the bones; so deeply embedded in the makeup of the spirit, it hurt the eyes to look directly into its influence. It would be a cause of pain and conflict for the rest of my life. I prize my hardened heart—I have prized it all these years—but the loss of romantic love can still tear at it.

A wooden barrier has been erected on my street around two squares of pavement whose concrete has been newly poured. Beside the barrier is a single wooden plank laid out for pedestrians, and beside that, a flimsy railing. On an icy morning in midwinter I am about to grasp the railing and pull myself along the plank when, at the other end, a man appears, attempting the same negotiation. This man is tall, painfully thin, and fearfully old. Instinctively, I lean in far enough to hold out my hand to him. Instinctively, he grasps it. Neither of us speaks a word until he is safely across the plank, standing

beside me. "Thank you," he says. "Thank you very much." A thrill runs through me. "You're welcome," I say, in a tone that I hope is as plain as his. We each then go our separate ways, but I feel that "thank you" running through my veins all the rest of the day.

It was his voice that had done it. That voice! Strong, vibrant, self-possessed: it did not know it belonged to an old man. There was in it not a hint of that beseeching tone one hears so often in the voice of an old person when small courtesies are shown—"You're so kind, so kind, so very kind," when all you're doing is hailing a cab or helping to unload a shopping cart—as though the person is apologizing for the room he or she is taking up in the world. This man realized that I had not been inordinately helpful; and he need not be inordinately thankful. He was recalling for both of us the ordinary recognition that every person in trouble has a right to expect, and every witness an obligation to extend. I had held out my hand, he had taken it. For thirty seconds we had stood together—he not pleading, I not patronizing—the mask of old age slipped from his face, the mask of vigor dropped from mine. In the midst of American dysfunction, global brutality, and personal defensiveness, we had, each of us, simply come into full view, one of the other.