

Season 8, Episode 6 Dynamo Dot Final Transcription

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor: A Podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Dorothy Liebes was sitting in her suite at the Gotham Hotel in New York City. It was December 1941 and she was folding brightly colored fabrics onto display racks when the telephone rang.

Loni Kappus: It was Frances Elkins calling from the St. Regis across the street. She sounded breathless. "Have you heard the news?" She asked.

Lizzie Peabody: This is an actor reading from Liebes' unpublished memoir found in the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art.

Loni Kappus: "The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor," she said. "We are at war." When she rang off, I rushed to the radio. The announcer's voices more frenetic than usual came blasting in from every point on the dial.

John Daly: This is John Daly speaking from the CBS newsroom in New York.

Speaker 4: Washington, The White House announces Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor.

Loni Kappus: Sneak air attack. No official reports yet on casualties or damage.

John Daly: A second air attack has been reported.

Loni Kappus: Washington stunned.

Speaker 5: We return you now to New York and we'll give you later information.

Lizzie Peabody: She went to the window.

Loni Kappus: Except for the hum of traffic far below on 5th Avenue, the room was still. I stood there trying to take in the enormity of the words, "We are at war," and wondering what now?

Lizzie Peabody: Dorothy Liebes, in her forties then, was on her way to becoming a name known across the design world. Standing there in New York City, she let her thoughts drift back to California where her textile studio was bustling away. She'd spent the last 10 years hustling to build her own business, spinning colorful bold designs so unique to her that their look could only be described as the Liebes Look.

Loni Kappus: My eyes drifted to the fabrics hanging in long shimmering folds on the racks. Suddenly, they seemed oddly trivial, a little girl's pretties.

Lizzie Peabody: With that phone call, Dorothy Liebes knew her world had changed. What she didn't know was that war would put her weaving skills to work in an entirely new way. Dorothy Liebes would bring thousands of artists to the bedsides of veterans and help her discover a more powerful purpose for her art than ever before. That's coming up, after the break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And thanks. People used to say that if you stood too close to Dorothy Liebes' loom, she might weave you into it.

Alexa Griffith: She just had boundless energy and this is something that comes through in her nicknames that people had for her, Dynamo Dot, Busy as a Liebes Loom.

Lizzie Peabody: Alexa Griffith is Manager of Content and Curriculum at the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum. She's been studying the life of Dorothy Liebes for the last 15 years through the journals and letters stored in the archives of American art. She says Dynamo Dot had other nicknames too, the Mother of Modern Weaving, First Lady of the Loom.

Susan Brown: There was no example of a woman who had gone before her and worked in the way that she worked at the scale that she worked. She was often called America's Greatest Weaver.

Lizzie Peabody: And this is Susan Brown, Acting Head of Textiles at the Cooper Hewitt.

Susan Brown: Which from a purely weaving perspective, I would say she probably was not. But I think what people meant by that was that she was the most influential figure in the textile world.

Lizzie Peabody: Dorothy Liebes was constantly experimenting. She called her studio a laboratory. Her weaving patterns were simple because the simpler the underlying structure, the more freedom she had to play with unusual materials like feathers, ticker tape, leather strips, bamboo and even metallics.

Susan Brown: She loved metallic yarns. She said, "Glitter is what sunlight does to grass."

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, I love that. Her fabrics were a feast for the senses rich in texture

Susan Brown: Nubby, hand-woven textures.

Lizzie Peabody: And color, which she called the magic elixir.

Susan Brown: She was fearless about color, bright clear colors in what were considered unusual or even clashing color combinations.

Lizzie Peabody: In one of the few known recordings of her voice, a radio reporter asks her about just this.

Speaker 8: Unusual combination, for example, very real blue and green together in the same piece of fabric.

Dorothy Liebes: Well of course, that's a nature combination, the blue sky and the green trees.

Speaker 8: Of course, yes.

Dorothy Liebes: Which is our number one source for color inspiration. But color, as you know, is the magic elixir. It's the alchemy of life.

Lizzie Peabody: Dorothy Liebes didn't plan to be a weaver. Growing up in Northern California in the 1910s and '20s, her mother was a teacher and her father was a rancher. And while she loved art.

Alexa Griffith: There was a very practical streak to her. So, she had planned on being an art teacher.

Lizzie Peabody: She moved to New York City to study art education at Columbia Teacher's College. And while there, a teacher of hers commented that her paintings looked more like tapestries.

Alexa Griffith: And so, while she was doing that master, she started to weave small items for hats and bags and accessories, scarves and things that she could sell. And she realized that she was quite successful at that. And then she saw from that experience that weaving could be a career for her.

Lizzie Peabody: Also, while in New York, Dorothy met Leon Liebes, a businessman whose family owned an upscale luxury department store back in San Francisco, and they fell in love.

Alexa Griffith: And so, she married into this very wealthy family and this family that was in the image business, and she was really on fire with her weaving.

Lizzie Peabody: The newlyweds moved back to San Francisco where everything appeared to go famously, at first. Through her husband's well-connected family, Dorothy met architects and designers and began working with them. See, her textiles were beautiful on their own, but she was most interested in how they could work within the architecture of a room to create a experience of a space. For example, the gauzy weave of a window shade could filter sunlight

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out during the day while multiplying and reflecting incandescent lights in the evening. She approached her fabric designs almost like an engineer.

Dorothy Liebes: We are influenced by architecture, by the scale and design of the furniture and the function. What's it going to be used for? How must this fabric perform?

Lizzie Peabody: Liebes was really good at what she did and she began to work with increasingly high profile architects and designers on custom made fabrics. And pretty soon, she got the idea to open a textile studio.

Alexa Griffith: And this was thrilling for her. She saw an opportunity to fill a gap in what architects and designers were needing for their clients.

Lizzie Peabody: There was just one problem.

Alexa Griffith: Her husband was very uneasy about it.

Lizzie Peabody: Why would that have been unacceptable to him do you think?

Susan Brown: I mean partly it was the time period. This was 1928, '29.

Lizzie Peabody: In that era, for a man of Leon Liebes' social class to have a wife working for money.

Susan Brown: It was not great for his image.

Alexa Griffith: He didn't mind that she was weaving as long as it wasn't a professional career, and this is really where their marriage broke down.

Lizzie Peabody: He couldn't get past the idea of her having a professional weaving studio and she couldn't get past the idea of not having one.

Alexa Griffith: And it's always struck me as really incredibly brave because she left him in the middle of a very tough economic climate in the United States. It was the beginning of the Depression.

Lizzie Peabody: With the Great Depression looming, Dynamo Dot left her marriage with just her loom and her clothes, and she did not look back.

Alexa Griffith: So, she really put all of her energy into that studio from the time that she separated from her husband.

Lizzie Peabody: Through the 1930s, she built her career. She became a close collaborator of architect Frank Lloyd Wright, designing fabrics for several of his projects, including his own homes at Taliesin and Taliesin West. Her fabrics hung in the Paramount Theater in Oakland, California, nightclubs and sumptuous hotel lobbies. She traveled around Europe, dined with Picasso and started adapting her custom hand-woven look for mass production. So things were going pretty swell for Dynamo Dot when she got that call at the Gotham Hotel in 1941. America was now at war and her fabrics didn't feel so important anymore. Returning to California, she felt helpless in the face of what she was seeing around her.

Alexa Griffith: She started to see injured servicemen in the streets of San Francisco. This is something that is really on her mind.

Lizzie Peabody: In a letter in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, she writes to the U.S. War Department.

Loni Kappus: It does seem to me that my lengthy years of experience in the textile picture could be put to some useful service for the government. If you know of any bureaus working on the clothing of our army where I could do a job in a volunteer way, please keep me in mind. I'm awfully eager to somehow do something in this war effort.

Lizzie Peabody: When nothing came of that, she started donating her hair, blonde, long enough to sit on and worn in a classic French twist.

Loni Kappus: I was told that the Air Force needed hair of a certain fineness for using crosshairs in the northern bomb site, and the person who told me this said he thought mine would meet the specifications.

Lizzie Peabody: So, Liebes was working away in her lab periodically sending boxes of her hair off to Air Force headquarters thinking, "Surely there must be something else I can do."

Alexa Griffith: And she's mulling it over. And then she gets a phone call from Helen Cutting.

Lizzie Peabody: Helen Cutting was a well-connected diplomat's wife with close ties to President Roosevelt. Trying to help the war effort and with the hospitals on the Atlantic coast overflowing with casualties, she'd converted her estate into a convalescent home.

Loni Kappus: "I know about your work as a weaver," she said, "And I wonder if you think it would be practical to try to teach convalescents to weave, or would it be too difficult?"

Lizzie Peabody: This was the spark. Not only would it not be too difficult, it was just the opportunity she was waiting for, a chance to share the joy she got from weaving with wounded soldiers returning from war.

Loni Kappus: I caught fire instantly. "You can teach a 10-year-old child to weave, Mrs. Cutting. I think you have a wonderful idea."

Lizzie Peabody: And once the fire was lit, why stop at weaving?

Loni Kappus: "It seems to me there are many things other than weaving that might be tried." I said. I began rattling off types of occupation that not only could have therapeutic value, but be useful to the men when they returned to civilian life.

Lizzie Peabody: Inspired by this call out of the blue, Dorothy Liebes turned her dextrous hands and unbounded energy to a new experiment. She would lead artists and craftsmen of every stripe out of their studios and into hospitals.

Loni Kappus: What followed enriched my life as few other events ever could do.

Lizzie Peabody: That's coming up after the break. It's 1942 in San Francisco. Every day more injured American soldiers return from the front lines of World War II to recover from their injuries, lying for weeks or months on end in hospitals facing a new reality on the other side of battle, their bodies and minds forever changed by the war. But thanks to an unexpected phone call, Dynamo Dot now had a dynamite idea to send artists into military hospitals to teach art classes. She enlisted the help of some shrewd friends in Washington D.C. to get the support of the War Department and the American Red Cross.

Loni Kappus: A special problem immediately presented itself, what to call the project.

Lizzie Peabody: She was strategic. She knew the name of the program would impact how people saw it and she knew her first obstacle for getting veterans interested in weaving would be entrenched ideas about who did weaving, women. The answer is women.

Loni Kappus: We could visualize the reaction of a hard-boiled marine or a professional soldier when told that he could learn embroidery or how to weave a baby blanket. Hence, we settled on the name Arts and Skills.

Lizzie Peabody: Arts and Skills. Now to be clear, the idea of art and hospitals wasn't new and Dorothy Liebes knew that. Occupational therapists were already using handcrafts like macramé for therapeutic work, say, to help patients with fine motor skills. But this program would be different in two ways. First, it was for pleasure, not therapy. And second, it would be taught by career artists.

Susan Brown: It was very, very important to Dorothy Liebes that these people be professionals, that they'd be making a living at their craft.

Alexa Griffith: So, she was really thinking about heightening the quality of the instruction and the quality of the output. And to that end, she really leveraged all of her connections.

Lizzie Peabody: Liebes whirled through her personal Rolodex, calling her artist friends and collaborators, encouraging them to volunteer. She crisscrossed the country by trains stumping for arts and skills wherever she could.

Loni Kappus: I went flea hopping all over the country, conferring with the heads of hospitals, recruiting artists and craftsmen and appealing for equipment.

Alexa Griffith: She is trying to get funding. She is trying to get in front of any politician or politician's wife that she thinks that she can get on the phone and call a meeting with to really make a case for this program.

Lizzie Peabody: And in January 1943, the Red Cross launched the Arts and Skills program with Dorothy Liebes as National Director. In cities across the country, volunteer art teachers put on jade green smocks with the Red Cross insignia and marched into veterans hospitals ready to get to work. And it didn't go so well.

Loni Kappus: We were called a bunch of society women and eager beaver volunteers.

Lizzie Peabody: For starters, the hospitals already had occupational therapists on staff who were not too pleased to see a bunch of artist types toting modeling clay and yarn around the wards. They were like, "We get it. You have time on your hands. You want to feel good about yourselves. Wonderful. How about not on my time and not on my ward?"

Loni Kappus: It was understandable, the predictable attitude of the professional toward the amateur.

Lizzie Peabody: But Dot was undeterred.

Loni Kappus: To avoid friction, we were prepared to approach the professional with shovels full of tact and diplomacy.

Lizzie Peabody: Yes, those delicate shovels full of tact. But volunteers kept coming back. They were committed.

Loni Kappus: Moreover, as thousands and thousands of casualties thronged into the hospitals overtaxing by sheer numbers the capacities of the professional staffs, the problem tended to dwindle away. We were accepted.

Lizzie Peabody: Well by the staff anyway, but the patients were another story. These soldiers had survived deeply traumatic experiences, were recovering physically but also mentally. They were grappling with huge changes in their lives, whether loss of mobility, limbs, mental capacity, and many were suffering from shell shock which is what we would today call post-traumatic stress disorder. Liebes soon learned you couldn't just walk up to a patient and cheerfully ask, "What would you like to learn today?"

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Loni Kappus: The answer usually was, "Nothing, just leave me alone."

Lizzie Peabody: But remember, Liebes had studied art education. She knew how to engage people. A few years before, she'd curated the craft exhibition at the Golden Gate International Exposition.

Alexa Griffith: She had the ceramic artist out of potter's wheel actually throwing pots. She had weavers and the textile display actually weaving. She knew that if you saw somebody making something with your hands and then that is opening a door, people are curious about that.

Lizzie Peabody: It's the Tom Sawyer effect.

Alexa Griffith: Exactly.

Lizzie Peabody: Back in the hospital, Liebes describes how one volunteer took a seat in the ward and began sketching a patient. After a minute or two, a soldier started watching over her shoulder, then another and another. And once the volunteer was sure she had the men's interest, she turned to one of them.

Loni Kappus: She said to the soldier watching her, "Would you care to finish it?" A shy grin came over the man's face. "I'd sure like to try," he said. "That's my buddy you've been drawing."

Lizzie Peabody: But for some patients, a direct approach was best. One volunteer just put a hunk of modeling clay in a man's hand and then walked away without saying anything.

Loni Kappus: For days with lackluster eyes and a blank expression on his face, he simply looked at it endlessly kneading the plastic, but not into any recognizable shapes. I happened to be in the ward when he screamed. Nurses and orderlies ran to his bedside. "Look," he cried. "Look what I made. I made it myself." He had fashioned a large egg and set it on the end on a flat base. His eyes were shining. When we were out of earshot, a nurse said, "Mrs. Liebes, this is marvelous. We just haven't been able to reach that boy. He's been a vegetable. Now look."

Lizzie Peabody: Painting and sculpture were helping bring soldiers' minds back from the war. But the First Lady of the Loom's greatest love of all was weaving. When asked by a radio interviewer what makes weaving so therapeutic, she didn't hesitate for a second.

Dorothy Liebes: One is the visual delight of color. Two, the tactile feel of yarn. Three, the satisfaction of seeing something grow under your eyes. It's a wonderful thing for a man to see something grow and not too slowly, the rhythm of it, the cadence of it is so delightful and it's a basic craft.

Lizzie Peabody: Patients usually started out with playing with the loom like a toy, but once they figured out its uses, they got more interested.

Loni Kappus: A typical example was the swarthy, tough-looking marine who was weaving a piece of cloth with a bright blue and yellow design. Making the rounds in a ward, I saw it and commented, "That would make a pretty scarf for a girl." He looked surprised. "Yeah, you mean you could make something out of this? I thought it was just for fun." For a moment, he was silent thinking. Then he said, "My girl's good at sewing. Can I send it home to her and tell her what you said?" "Of course," I said. "It's yours. You made it." He smiled a great sunburst of a smile. "I'm going to weave some more for my mom, my sisters and everybody I can think of, how about that?" There were times when I had to walk away quickly blinking back the tears. This was one of many.

Lizzie Peabody: As more patients joined the program, volunteers would display their work on carts, wheeling them around the wards for other patients to admire. News outlets started to notice.

Speaker 10: Although only a year old, the Arts and Skills program functioning in 30 military and naval hospitals throughout the nation has proven an unexpectedly successful method of rehabilitation.

Lizzie Peabody: As the program began to grow, more volunteer artists joined the ranks.

Loni Kappus: Artists of the caliber of the Alexander Calder, Grant Wood and Alexander Brook came into the hospitals. Henry Dreyfuss, one of the leading industrial designers, and Sam Marx, a fine architect and painter, and his wife Florene gave lavishly of their time.

Lizzie Peabody: Artists offered instruction in 28 different fields, from sculptured, block printing, industrial design, mosaics, cartooning, metalwork, architectural drawing, puppetry, whittling, paper making, book binding, plant grafting, knitting, photography.

Alexa Griffith: She absolutely leveraged her network of people across the art and design community and that is a key element in what made it such a successful program.

Daniel Blain: There is no doubt that the interest which has been stimulated in these men has been a potent factor in their high recovery rate.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Daniel Blain, Medical Director for the War Shipping Administration who would later become the first medical director of the American Psychiatric Association. At the time, he wrote.

Daniel Blain: This is not only serving to occupy their spare time in useful and helpful ways, but has sent many a man out with new interest in the outside world and the firm intention of carrying on some of the hobbies which he has learned.

Lizzie Peabody: After leaving the hospital, many men wrote back asking for art materials or asking to continue with courses. Another article in the archives is filled with testimonials.

Speaker 10: Two discharged seamen who learned fly tying at Treasure Island Hospital from the Arts and Skills teacher are now earning their living making fishing flies.

Lizzie Peabody: One patient went on to win an art scholarship after leaving the hospital, several others went to work in the textile industry. And my personal favorite.

Speaker 12: A veteran who is now superintendent of an apartment house in Brooklyn, New York embroiders in his spare time having learned this at Halloran. He writes, "I can hardly wait for evening to come so I can get to my embroidery."

Lizzie Peabody: The needle work in baby blankets that seemed so farfetched in 1943, they were filling the hospitals by 1945 in an article that is a true relic of the era, The Washington Post boldly declared of the Arts and Skills program, "The congenital resistance of the American male to the arts has been overcome." By the end of the war, the Arts and Skills division of the Red Cross was operating in 105 hospitals with a volunteer force of over 6,500 artists and craftspeople. Liebes arranged for patients' work to be displayed and even sold at art shows, including at the MoMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago.

Alexa Griffith: It's almost hard to imagine that she pulled it off, bringing all of these huge organizations together in the service of these workshops and for craft.

Susan Brown: It was huge.

Alexa Griffith: It was a huge success, yes. Yes.

Lizzie Peabody: The Arts and Skills program ended after World War II, but more therapeutic art programs quickly followed. Susan Brown says it's hard to make a conclusive statement about the program's impact.

Susan Brown: But certainly in the immediate post-war period, there was a huge explosion of creative activity both in the industries and in the studio craft movement, and also the rise of the art therapy movement which really took off in the 1950s.

Lizzie Peabody: Liebes herself wrote.

Loni Kappus: Nobody can say how many men returned to civilian life with a marketable skill learned in the hospitals. As a textile designer, I know some have done well in large textile mills. Numbers came to my San Francisco studio after the war to show me their work and ask advice. I tried to see as many as possible, but it became so time consuming I had to call a halt.

Lizzie Peabody: Dynamo Dot's career exploded after the war. She ushered in a new era of synthetic fabrics. Her work upholstered the insides of jets, ocean liners, the homes of royalty, draped Hollywood stars and fashion runways.

Alexa Griffith: There was no template for anybody doing what she saw herself doing.

Susan Brown: She had this confidence and optimism that her energy and her skill could make a difference, could affect a change, and it did. The look that Dorothy Liebes pioneered still dominates interior fabrics today.

Lizzie Peabody: Dorothy Liebes worked up until her death in 1972, becoming one of the most influential designers of the 20th century. And once you begin to look for it, you'll start to notice the colorful hand-woven Liebes look all around you. But for all she accomplished, Alexa Griffith says Dorothy Liebes is not a household name, at least not yet.

Alexa Griffith: If her papers had not been preserved at the Archives of American Art, this story could not be told. So as a historian, I think about that a lot because if you look at somebody like her who truly was at the apex of power, at the apex of privilege across her four decades of her career, and you see that speed with which she was removed from historical memory, and then imagine all the other stories that are out there.

Speaker 8: Well may I say that I've so enjoyed having this opportunity to meet you and I'm so grateful to you for giving me this much time, Mrs. Liebes. Our press party's over, it sounds like the vacuum cleaner's gone into-

Dorothy Liebes: Clean up department.

Speaker 8: Thank you once again.

Dorothy Liebes: Goodbye.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor: A Podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

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Lizzie Peabody: If you're curious about Dorothy Liebes' work, you are in luck. The Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum will be opening the first solo exhibition of Dorothy Liebes' work in over 50 years. That's coming in summer 2023. You'll get to see her dazzling fabrics and get a more complete look at the contributions she made to the fields of fashion, interior and industrial design.

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Lizzie Peabody: If you want to see photos of the Arts and Skills program, Dorothy Liebes and other volunteers working with recovering servicemen and examples of the artwork they made, you'll find it in our newsletter. Subscribe at si.edu/sidedoor.

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Lizzie Peabody: You can also check out all the primary source material we use to tell this story for yourself in the digital collections of the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. It is a treasure trove of letters, news clippings, sketches, and Liebes' entire unpublished memoir, which is quite a read. Dorothy Liebes' loom is at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, and her portrait is in the collections of the National Portrait Gallery. We'll link those in our newsletter as well.

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Lizzie Peabody: Special thanks this episode to Alexa Griffith, Susan Brown, Molly Hatesohl and Chris Gauthier at the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum. Thanks also to our colleagues at the Archives of American Art, Marissa Bourgojn, Erin Kinhart, Mackenzie Beasley, Ben Gillespie and Liza Kirwin.

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Lizzie Peabody: Thanks to Katherine Ott at the National Museum of American History and Stephanie Fox at the American Red Cross. Thank you also to voice actor Loni Kappus for reading from Dorothy Liebes' unpublished memoir. For more stories of important women in history, be sure to check out the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative. To learn more, go to womenshistory.si.edu or join the conversation using #becauseofherstory on social media.

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Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is James Morrison, Nathalie Boyd, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Tami O'Neill, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch and Sharon Bryant. Episode Artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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Lizzie Peabody: If you want to sponsor our show, please visit [sponsorship at prx.org](http://sponsorship.prx.org).

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Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

Loni Kappus: At a luncheon in Marie's home in Paris, I met Picasso. He was a stubby muscular man with broad shoulders. His dark eyes constantly darted around the room and they lit upon the scarf I was wearing fashioned from my own hand-loomed material. He stepped in front of me, reached upward, he was much shorter than I, and without so much as a buy your leave took the scarf from around my neck and stuffed it in his pocket. I presume he gave it to whoever was his girlfriend at the time. Marie, I noticed, was furious, but she said nothing until after Picasso had gone. Then she exploded. "What nerve, what a colossal nerve." I replied that I considered it a compliment if so great an artist liked my work. She refused to be mollified. "At least he could have said thanks," she insisted.