

Hello and Thank You!

by tsipi keller

The night before Christmas Eve, feeling a bit aimless, she went for a walk, and then, without thinking, went into a crowded bar, perhaps to escape the cold, perhaps hoping for the generics of noise and company. Miraculously, someone was getting up from his stool, and she quickly claimed it, congratulating her propitious timing, and, in her heart, thanking the man who had warmed up the seat for her. He was a big man, and his rear had generously covered the entire leather square. She ordered a shot of her favorite French brandy — Raynal — a luxury she allowed herself only rarely, and sat there, sipping, thawing, trying to look chipper and jovial like the rest of them.

She signaled the bartender and ordered another shot. What would happen if she were to light up? The question lit up in her brain, and a small, drunken smile appeared on her lips. Would they arrest her? Cigarettes in the city had been criminalized, which made her resent the city and those who ran it, those who decreed the rules of conduct without consulting the populace. At least, not her kind of populace. Her kind of populace didn't count, they were not organized, no one was interested in their ill-informed opinions. Ill-informed because everybody knew cigarettes were bad for you, and those who still smoked could be safely shunned and ignored. Like all other undesirables.

She didn't think of herself as an undesirable, no, she didn't, but did find herself cowering in face of the presumed judgment of those around her. They had more money, more clout, more everything. Or, that was the impression they gave. Maybe deep inside, they cowered as much as she. There was always someone on top up in the social and business stratosphere. Whatever the case, she was a people, too, a real person, a person with a nose to sniff the goings on, a person who could open her mouth and say hello and thank you.

A notion of a thought, too vague for words, floated across the opaque slate behind her clear forehead. When she shut her eyes, she

saw a straight bright line that went from one end to the other, like the line stilled across the screen of a monitoring machine when the heart stopped beating. Like all machines, it was exact and indifferent, it performed its task as it was supposed to. Henceforth — she thought — I must make changes, small as they may be. So small that even I, the changer and the changed, won't notice them. Since I will be changed — she reasoned further — it stands to reason that I won't notice.

Yes! Again, she motioned the bartender to fill her glass, which he, dutiful and attentive, promptly did. I love you, she wanted to say. I love you for being there, behind the counter, so tall and reassuring, with a quick and honest hand that pulls yet another bill from the pile near my glass. I've come prepared, there's more in my pocket, just in case the pile grows thin and the last bill is suddenly, regretfully, gone.

Outside, the night was young and brilliant; inside, people talked and laughed as they usually do in bars. That was the idea, wasn't it? People gathered together because people needed people. It was in the songs they sang, and in the stories they told. Elections come and go, but the Republic still stands, some pundit had said on the TV. It was meant to comfort people like her, but it didn't.

She sighed. *Hello and thank you!* And, maybe later, *goodbye*. She was hungry, if only she could light up and still her hunger, she felt too lazy and too self-conscious to order food and eat it....

Next to her, something was ringing — a cell phone, it turned out. Now its owner was shouting into it, telling the caller where he was, who he was with, and what he was doing. Please don't shout, she wanted to say, but didn't want to antagonize him. No one else thought to complain, so she kept her mouth shut. Hello and thank you. And maybe goodbye. So simple and polite. She was polite, and she was simple. Maybe even simple-minded. Simple never hurt anyone, although it was impossible to tell for sure.

The man had finished giving his report and put his cell phone on the counter. She looked at the small, cute machine — it made her think of a small turtle, and then of a vulnerable penis at rest. Like all

machines, it was vibrant, and yet so still. One of its lights — a green one — was blinking, and she wondered why and what it might mean. Probably nothing, just like the weather. She felt a twinge of triumph, she appreciated the logic that somehow always threaded her thoughts.

She reached for the small, blinking machine and dropped it between her knees. It made a soft “click” as it hit the floor, and she flinched, instinctively. No one had heard it but her, and she looked down to see if it was still blinking. She might be lynched, she thought. By the mob. The machine went on blinking, which pleased her. The machine didn't mind where it was, on the counter or on the floor, and she considered it might be time to go home.

“Please, what time is it?” she inquired of the man who had just lost his cell phone. Her eyes rested pensively on his jaw, so set and determined, so sure of its place in the world; a Republican jaw, she mused. The Republic still stood thanks to men like him.

He turned from his friends and looked at her, then pointed at the big round clock above the bottles.

“Oh,” she said. “Thank you.” And *Hello!*

So, she thought. He would talk to his machine, but not to her — whatever happened to chivalry? But, he must have his reasons, we all do. She was a mischievous little bitch, and he saw right through her. Didn't even pretend, didn't even make the effort to pretend, that she was worth a millisecond of his time. Ah, well, to each his own, she thought. She could take a hint, sometimes even two!

The friends of the cell phone man began to discuss locks, and one of them said, shouted really: “If you want security, and you have six locks on your door, you know what to do, right? You make sure you lock only every *other* lock, so when the bad guys come and begin to unlock the locks, they'd be locking three, and so on. Get it?”

I get it, she thought. She looked at the diminished pile of bills. Just enough for the tip. She thought of deficits and the national debt as she gathered herself off the stool and walked the straight line to the door. She expected a heavy hand to land on her shoulder, but none did. Once I'm out, she thought, no one would miss me. No one

would think to think of me. Which, after all was said and done, was all for the good.

She walked home, she knew the way. Up and up the upward-sloping avenue, then a right into a side, quiet street. She liked the idea of side and quiet. She liked the idea of keys and locks and homeland security. This was the good life, the life of the city. It hummed its noises, its self-confidence, its ordered red lights. Yes, she was a people, a person, her smallness notwithstanding. Precious blood flowed in her veins, carrying oxygen to vital parts. Plasma and cells. The blood of our nation, someone had said on the TV. The sacrifices every one of us has to make.

