



## MANNERS

By Jane R. Snyder  
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I left my warm, rent-stabilized apartment that morning to pick up a handful of items at the Korean market near Columbia University. Tucked in between a 24-hour Laundromat and a Sunglass Hut selling overpriced eyewear, it was my favorite destination for fruits, vegetables, and fresh-cut flowers. On days when I felt a little blue, I often stopped there to purchase a single Gerbera daisy. In a pressed glass bud vase on my kitchen windowsill, one of those bright blooms could lift my spirits for days.

With the ground half-covered by the last snow of the season, I made sure to wear a heavy parka, my Cat-in-the-Hat wool scarf and gloves, plus hiking boots that could successfully navigate the over-zealous layer of kosher salt the doorman always spread on the sidewalk in front of my building. I remain convinced that our landlord's distaste for accepting liability lay behind that avid seasonal practice.

After a two-block walk against the wind, I entered the store and selected a blue plastic basket. Wandering through each aisle, I gradually filled it with Hazelnut coffee, a bag of carrots, two still-warm baguettes, a box of Breathe Easy tea bags, and a bunch of fresh dill for the vegetable soup I planned to simmer while I finished reading *The New York Times*.

I always walked around the grocery twice to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything. That particular day, as I worked my way back to the check-out counter, I added a wedge of Brie and three pounds of golden potatoes plus the paper.

The market seemed so busy on Sundays while college students slept in and grown-up West Siders woke to

contemplate their plans for the last half of the weekend. I always loved the activity and aromas that surrounded me while I waited in line to reach the cashier. When I turned to admire a Jack Russell puppy sitting contentedly between his master's Frye® boots, I noticed a woman fidgeting behind me.

What I remember most clearly are her wool socks, one navy blue pulled up to her knee and the other, a muted gray, slipping toward her ankle. Both of them sprung from a pair of once-white Keds® sneakers. Audrey Hepburn, Marilyn Monroe, and Jackie O had all worn the same style, but theirs had clean laces tied in a bow. On that bitter cold March morning, she wore no hat or gloves.

Beneath an unbuttoned tweed coat with a faux fur collar, her thin frame was clad in only a summer dress and a baby blue, cardigan sweater that was missing one button. Even with the gray in her untamed hair, I could tell she was far younger than she looked. Struggling not to drop the assorted coins in her left hand, she clutched a quart of skim milk against her body with her right forearm.

She looked so uneasy standing there amongst us regulars whose credit card lifestyles meant we could waltz home with anything we desired. When we made eye contact for a moment, I spoke up.

“Ma’am, would you like to go ahead of me?”

Her eyes widened as she took a quick breath. “Me?”

“Yes, Ma’am, I’m in no hurry and you’ve only got one item.”

She hesitated for a bit then slowly moved forward as I stepped aside and then back into line behind her. With those pennies, nickels, and dimes clinking in her hand, she turned to me with tears in her eyes.

“That’s right kind of you, Miss. I real appreciate your manners. Hard to find folks mind their manners, nowadays. Thank you... thank you, truly.”

I smiled back at her. “You can thank my mother and father.”

“They sure raised you right,” she replied. As the cashier beckoned her forward and gathered up the handful of coins she had deposited on the counter, she smiled. “Yessum, they raised you up mighty fine.”

Later that afternoon, as I tossed a handful of chopped dill into my soup, I wished I could have phoned my parents to tell them what that stranger had told me. But I hoped—wherever their gentle spirits were resting—that they'd heard.

