

[#TBT](#). Dolly Madison

By Jeff Morgan

9/22/2022



By any stretch of the imagination, it wasn't going to be this guy's typical Saturday afternoon. Chores with Dad? Nope. Hacking around with the guys? Nope. This would be a totally different kind of day. I was meeting a 9th grade classmate—a girl—to buy her a soda downtown! I summoned up all the courage I had to ask her while we talked in the school hall on a Friday afternoon and she said, "Yes."

Here I was, almost 15 years old, unschooled in the ways of dating and all but clueless about girls. I always enjoyed being around girls in school and at mixed group activities like dances, but I was on the shy side. There was only one guy in my group of friends who had a girlfriend; and he was going to a private prep school, so I didn't get to ask him what dating was all about. I did know enough that I should pay for my date's soda, or the odds were she wouldn't have agreed to go.

After lunch at home—which Mom was kind enough to make, and thankfully not nosy enough to ask where I was going—I walked up to the corner of Chatham Street and Fairmount Avenue where we had agreed to meet. I had a pocket-full of coins, which to my mind should be enough for a couple of sodas. Right?

I didn't have to wait long before I saw her coming down the sidewalk by the Stanley Congregational Church. It was a mild day so she was wearing a white blouse tucked into her dark slacks, and white socks with penny loafers. Me? I was wearing clothing from Marks' Department Store; plain, clean, not too wrinkled. My sneakers were a little scuffed up but passable; perhaps she wouldn't notice. I had remembered to comb my hair, hoping my cowlick would stay in place. It would be a couple more years before I discovered Roots clothing store in Summit where I would buy my first Gant long-sleeve, light blue shirt; Levi corduroy pants; and Bass Weejun loafers.

We made nervous, small talk as we walked down Fairmount Avenue. I wondered if I should hold her hand but I didn't because...well, because I was too afraid to touch her and scare her away. We passed under the railroad bridge and—next to that familiar telephone pole with my initials carved into it—took the dirt path across to South Passaic. We crossed the street and walked by Ralph's Barber Shop where I always got my hair cut and the Sunnywoods Flower Shop, smelling the aroma of fresh flowers coming out of the open door.

At Main Street, we turned right and saw the Dolly Madison Ice Cream sign hanging over the sidewalk. We walked inside the luncheonette and took a table by the wall across from the counter where Ed and Tess, the husband-and-wife operators, were busy working. At the time, we were their only customers. They both glanced over and smiled at us. We each picked up a menu and looked at the drink selections. My date

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quickly told me she would like a Strawberry Ice Cream Float. I looked at the price for the float and got butterflies in my stomach. When did the prices get so high!

I went up to the counter, sat on a stool, and pulled the coins from my pocket. After doing a quick calculation, I thought I was going to embarrass myself by only getting a plain glass of water. Then I reached one more time into my pocket and fished out another dime, which gave me enough to get a small coke for myself. The butterflies were gone. When I took the drinks back to our table, she asked why I didn't get something more for myself, and I made up some excuse about eating a large lunch. Maybe she had figured out I hadn't brought enough money, and was amused by my predicament? Girls are smart like that. I was learning.

We managed small talk, finished our drinks, and left within half an hour. When we reached Chatham Street, she thanked me for the soda, and we said our goodbyes. For a fleeting moment, I thought about accompanying her up the hill to Broadview Terrace. The moment passed. I stood there watching her go, relieved that the whole affair was over. I could have easily embarrassed myself that day for the lack of a dime. Another lesson I was learning.