

Special Something in My Lunchbox

My lunches were *the ultimate* cold lunches of cold lunches. I'm not talking brown paper bags filled with squished PB&J, and crackers with spray cheese. Think enormous, organic turkey sandwiches sealed with pink Saran Wrap and flower stickers, colorful fruit salads, and veggies complete with homemade dill dip.

Oh! And don't forget about the freshly baked homemade chocolate chip cookies—one for me, and, of course, one for my BFF, Libby.

I always brought cold lunches to school, but a Lunchable never met the inside of my lunchbox unless Dad made a quick stop at the family-owned grocery store on our drive to school just so I could give the ever-so-popular cold marinara a try. One thing's for sure: Lunchable cardboard pizzas may've been all the rage in my elementary school, but they definitely didn't earn you a spot at the cool table in the *high school* cafeteria.

You could draw a map in your wide-ruled notebook of where every clique sat, and heaven forbid you got stuck sitting with the un-athletic, bookworm-fantastic, band geeks at one of the *round* tables. Everyone knew that a seat at one of the round tables could easily rob you of your reputation, and that a damaged reputation was enough for the queen bee of your clique to kick you to the curb.

Within moments of stepping foot into my high school cafeteria and glancing at the hot lunch line, I could always tell which cliques were fighting and who was best friends with whom

that week. The only thing worse than standing in the hot lunch line was standing *alone* in the hot lunch line. Standing alone screamed “outsider,” and everyone knew that “in” was the only place to be. Staying in the “in crowd,” however, was the hardest part.

The odds of doing something “so *not* cool” were higher than doing something “so *totally* cool” in any clique of queen bees and wannabees. A simple game of “she loves me, she loves me not” could drive you from “most popular girl in school” status to sitting at one of the round tables trading Pokémon cards. Chatting about Charizard and Pikachu was *so* fifth grade, and no sophomore wanted to be caught with their old Pokémon card collection.

Luckily, getting demoted to the outcast table was never a worry of Libby’s or mine. Unlike the snotty girls with their ever-shifting seats just a few spots down from us, you’d never find Libb and I playing musical chairs; we had been best friends since our first *shuffle-shuffle-hop-step* in dance class when we were three years old, and we knew we’d always be in sync.

She and I always sat next to each other at the cool kids’ table where the name-brand food in our lunchboxes was just as cool as having “Abercrombie and Fitch” stitched boldly across the front of our sweatshirts. While the queen bees judged their neighbors’ so-last-season Hollister outfit and off-brand fruit snacks at the other end of the table, I shielded my little off-brand yellow lunchbox as I unzipped its three sides. To spare myself weird looks, I cracked the top just enough to sneak out my freshly baked treats. Keeping the lunchbox lid closed was my best tactic for hiding the “birdseed bread” turkey sandwich I loved from the mean girls who made fun of me for eating the “weird” organic bread from the freezer section at the grocery store.

But, it wasn’t one of the eighty-six kids in my class taunting me about my organic lunches, or the “Birdseed Bread” song I heard lunch after lunch that got my feet tap dancing anxiously under the table.

There was something special inside my lunchbox, something so special to me that all through high school I played “reach inside and pull out a surprise” to avoid the lid of my lunchbox flying open.

Dessert is always supposed to come first, right?

I feared what could happen if the lid were to open, a spotlight shining brightly inside, and my favorite part of my lunch exposed for all to see. I could only imagine all of my peers pointing and laughing at what I knew my mom so purposefully taped inside my lunchbox every day.

Without a doubt, a small, hand-written note, filled with love and lifelong lessons, was always waiting for me.

Carefully crafted with my mom's love, some notes were long and others shorter. She wrote me a note every day from kindergarten through senior year. It was her way of loving me, encouraging me, and guiding my steps while I was out navigating a world of brats and bullies.

And, believe me, my lunch table was full of them.

So, while the mean girls shared the latest gossip up and down the weathered lunch table, my mom shared encouraging lessons on life through her notes. She reminded me to believe in myself, to work hard, be a true friend, spend time with God, trust His plan, help others, have compassion for the bullies, and follow my heart.

I cherished her every word, but—fearful of the mocking I might receive—I read each one discreetly. (Can you blame me?) No one else's mom was writing them sweet notes during those growing-up years when we all needed them most. Oreos were about as sweet as it got in most lunchboxes, but even though Oreos had a long shelf life, the expiration date on my mom's words read "everlasting."

Each note she left in my lunchbox became a part of my roadmap for overcoming the bullies and mean girls, especially in high school. Her words empowered me to follow my own road—the road *less* traveled—when many of my peers were flying down the road *most* traveled by curious teenagers.

Peer pressure may've been my classmates' co-pilot, but Mom and Dad were my fearless navigators, and my mom's lunchbox notes were my very own GPS.

I knew where I was headed. I had direction, and no one at my lunch table (except for Libb) ever caught a glimpse of one of my secret roadmaps—Mom’s notes. After all, after years of wellie-wearin’ weather, the last thing I needed was another “bullystorm” rollin’ in.

But, who was I kidding?

The bullying had started early—and the rumors only rumbled louder as I grew taller.