Sandwiched

By Peter Albert

750 words

It got to the point that when I pulled my sandwich out of the brown paper bag, my high school friends just stopped talking.

“What is it today?” Tracey grinned, eyes sparkling.

Isaac didn’t even wait for my answer. “Can I have a bite?” he asked.

I loved that my friends, who ate Oreos and bean burritos from the vending machine, trusted that my sandwich was going to be delicious. I peeled back the aluminum foil to reveal two thick slabs of homemade bread containing a messy mound of halibut that my father had caught off Monterey, tossed with mayonnaise and sweet relish, layered with Jack cheese, romaine lettuce and sweet potato.

The sandwiches were always fragile. The bite might crumble the bread or squish out the filling, so I kept one hand ready to catch what tumbled so no food would go to waste. Any of my seven siblings would have done the same.

The sandwiches were always colossal. Even if four friends took a bite - even after my morning swim practice - there would still be enough left to hold me over until dinner.

And the sandwiches were always weird. My friends, undeterred, chewed with murmuring appreciation while I demolished the other half.

Then I folded up the foil (for reusing), put it back in the bag (also for reusing), ate the apricot, and saved the persimmon cookie for later. I didn’t want to lose four bites of that.

Being one of eight children, born to children of immigrants, set me up for this ritual. My father’s passion for fishing was handed-down as indelibly as his sing-song accent. His family cabin in the wilds of northern Québec was so close to the lake that trout could be reeled in and pan-fried without getting out of the chair. His skillet technique was the ever-adventurous *chasseur-gourmand*. *Truite amandine*. Mushroom omelets that began with browned butter and ended with pepper and herbs.

He met my mother in 1954 at a cocktail party in Manhattan. He was completing his metallurgy PhD at NYU. She was a researcher for Time magazine, fresh from the Rust Belt, the first in her blue-collar family to graduate from a university. Her mother was a maid, her father a sheet-metal worker. They had emigrated to Youngstown as children, escaping the brutal poverty of pre-Bolshevik Eastern Europe. Both sustained a reverence for education and science, and a thrift with materials like aluminum foil and

brown paper.

Like many Slavs, my mother was a cultural Francophile. My father's rustic French-Canadian-ness only added to his charm.

"When I saw him across the room," my mother admits, "I told my roommate that I didn't want to meet him because he looked like the kind of man I'd marry. And I wasn't ready to get married!"

Two martinis later, she seduced my father with a rousing version of "*La Marseillaise*."

They were married seven months later. He worked at IBM while she stayed home, cooking from scratch, recycling responsibly and reading to us nightly. We were Catholic, but our patron saints were Pierre and Marie Curie.

The sandwiches I ate read like the story of their union. My father caught the fish. My mother inherited her mother's ingenuity with homemade bread and jam, buying produce in bulk, and making leftovers out of leftovers. Naturally, my sandwich might consist of fresh-caught pink salmon, cheddar cheese, last night's broccoli and homemade cranberry sauce.

And red-leaf lettuce. We'd moved to California in 1971. The lettuce my mother bought was cleared first by Cesar Chavez. Her parents' struggles cast an empathetic shadow.

"The farmworkers in the Central Valley are getting cancer from the pesticides!" she explained in horror.

If Chavez was boycotting iceberg lettuce, she bought red-leaf. If he boycotted table-grapes, she bought berries from the local farmers, who were typically Japanese-ethnic. Soon, my mother discovered that she could trade the fresh tuna my father caught for flats of fruit.

At the table, our father sliced a translucent sheet of raw albacore with his hunting knife. "It's called *sashimi*," he announced adventurously. "It's a Japanese delicacy!"

"Bartering…" our mother mused as she poured cream on our bowls of olallieberries. "Like my grandmother might have done at a Polish marketplace!"

The next day, I opened my lunch bag. Wrapped in wax paper were two leftover pancakes, fused together with Québec maple syrup. Beneath this was a brick-sized, foil-covered lump.

My friends stopped talking.

"What is it today?" Kyle asked as Yolanda stared intently, pursing her lips.