

Lunches Packed With Love

I inherited from my mother a secret brown-bag ingredient: TLC

WHEN I WAS 11, I peeked into Dad's lunch pail and made the horrifying discovery that my mother still flirted with my father.

The evidence, a napkin resting on top of a stack of sandwiches wrapped in wax paper, was incontrovertible. Staring back at me was a drawing of a tiny woman wearing pedal pushers and a beehive bigger than a fresh batch of Jiffy Pop. This was Mom in 1968. And this version of Mom was *winking*.

"Love you!" she had written in a speech bubble next to the caricature. "Meat loaf for supper!"

The last thing you want to think about when you're 11 is the possibility of your parents goofing around with each other. I tossed Dad's Hostess Fruit Pie into the pail and dashed out the kitchen door to go tell my best friend, Eloise, that I would have to come live with her. Her father was a minister. Life had to be calmer at her house.

Mom penned all kinds of messages to Dad on those paper napkins, and he saved a whole pile of them. What embarrassed me as a dorky kid has become a cherished memory of my parents' ability to be silly with each other, no matter what.

It also launched my own brand of lunch pail notes. When my kids were young, I'd stick little drawings in their lunches. Lots of



sketches of our dog, Max, along with smiling flowers and friendly bumblebees. When they were teenagers, I'd copy words of wisdom from noted sages. Einstein, for example, or Bruce Springsteen.

"It ain't no sin to be glad you're alive."

Sing it, brother.

Perhaps inevitably, my kids grew up crafting their own handwritten gems. One of my favorites is 8-year-old Andy's note to the Tooth Fairy, who apparently missed his first note asking her to leave his tooth behind.

"Dear Tooth Dummy," his letter started. "Can't you read? Keep the quarter, just give me back my tooth."

This prompted a discussion about the perils of rushing to judgment and how Tooth Fairies are people, too—people with incredibly stressful jobs. Flying here, flying there, dodging every cat in the neighborhood, all so they can slip their hands under the pillows of sleeping children who expect cash rewards for spitting out a used-up tooth.

Okay, I may have overdone that lecture just a little.

My husband writes me love notes on recycled paper, because he's all about being green. Oh, the thrill of finding sweet nothings scrawled on Ohio secretary of state stationery from the 1980s. That guy sure knows how to woo.

Friends who know about my lunch pail notes eagerly share stories of their own family traditions. So many revolve around food. Maura's mom always drew hearts on the shells of hard-boiled eggs. Melinda wrote messages on her kids' bananas. When Celia was little, her mom used to reach into an imaginary pocket over her heart and sprinkle a secret ingredient over whatever she was baking.

"We mustn't forget the love!" she always said. Now Celia and her grown daughter reach into their own magic pockets in the kitchen.

We're into the third generation of lunch pail notes in our home. Whenever my 3-year-old grandson, Clayton, spends the night, he knows his lunch is going to have a napkin note from Grandma in the morning.

Like his father, the Tooth Fairy basher, he can be quite the critic.

Last week, I drew a particularly flattering picture of me—long eyelashes, chiseled cheeks to make Angelina Jolie weep—waving wildly and shouting his name. He took one look at it and shrieked, "Where's Grandpa?"

Yikes. Add in curly-haired guy in wrinkled shirt.

"You forgot his tie," he said.

I quickly scribbled a line of stripes down the front of the shirt.

Clayton smiled.

"Grandpa," he whispered, running his fingers across the napkin. "It's you." **P**