

If **Amelie Rose Baker** had a catch phrase, it would be "It's a long story." So she decided to start writing them down. After ten years as a high school history teacher, she is certain that if she can maintain the interest of thirty teenagers at 8:00 in the morning, then her writing can engage a broad audience.

Never Lunchables

by Amelie Rose Baker

All the things for school lunch my mother did not pack me:

a banana, jello cup, pudding cup, fruit cup, dunk-a-roos, goldfish crackers, saltines, triscuits, ritz crackers, peanut butter and jelly sandwich with the crust cut off, peanut butter and jelly sandwich with the crust still on, a ham and cheese sandwich, a grilled cheese sandwich, a hot dog in a bun, potato chips, doritos, chips ahoy, oreos, double-stuffed oreos, single serving mini pizzas, a slice of cold pizza from the night before, pepsi, coca-cola, sprite, ginger ale, hi-c, capri sun, kool-aid, lunchables, kraft american cheese, and absolutely no favorite piece of candy tucked in for dessert.

My lunchbox advertised no loyalty to the Yellow Power Ranger over the Pink, or Batman over Spiderman, or Madonna over the New Kids on the Block. My square, cloth lunchbox was swirls of dark pink and fluorescent blue with a zipper around the top. It was a timeless design, a classic, which my mother diligently cleaned to maintain for years.

Once lunchtime arrived, the ten-year-old boys ripped into their paper bags, the girls lay out all the goodies to decide in what order to eat them and I unzipped my bag cautiously, waiting for my classmates to be engrossed in their own bounty. Rolling around my lunchbox were two seaweed wraps. Seaweed comes in dried six-by-six squares, and is rolled tightly around a filling of rice. Seaweed gets soggy overnight before lunchtime. The rolls imitate a limp dick; of course, in fourth grade, I didn't know what a limp or erect dick looked like, but I did know it seemed unsavory. The saran wrap only helped the appearance in that now it was using a condom, trying to prevent the spread of STDs.

Contrary to what it resembled, each roll tasted delicious and wholesome, just as my mom intended. The rice was not mushy or crunchy; hidden within were a few pieces of the thicker, harder seaweed, kombu, nestled inside, and as a treat, a touch more tamari, that at home I was admonished not to overdo. Sometimes she

would add crunchy carrots or the less crunchy cucumber spears, but even those couldn't raise this roll to a respectable stiffness. I brought my mouth down to this black roll, trying to shelter it from public scrutiny.

The fresher version of a nori roll would not have been any more appetizing for my classmates. This was before sushi was the latest trend in cuisine, Japan's reach to the big cities, like Dallas, to the boondocks of Nebraska. Today sushi comes in attractive slices adorned with pinkish fish or other delicacies. It is sold for cheap at the local supermarket, and made gourmet for upscale eateries. I make homemade sushi the same as my mom, leaving the seaweed on the outside, and still my sophisticated friends hesitate. It is the same look of confusion and disgust faced by my ten-year-old self.

American cuisine does not have many offerings of soggy, black paper on menus, but for me it is as much down home cooking, same as mac n' cheese is for many. I would beg for another sheet of seaweed to snack on as my mom prepared those nori rolls. I would bite right into it, tearing off pieces, other times folding it ten or fifteen ways until it was a tight square to stick between my back molars, to gnaw and chew. It would start to melt and coagulate into a tight ball of pure seaweed

goodness. My cat Mimi relished any piece of nori I would share with him as we happily sat and watched cartoons.

I never asked my mom for more traditional lunches; we didn't communicate along those hierarchical lines, rather, I was welcome to present my case to her. I would try to appeal to her own needs and tell her how easily sandwiches could be prepared all at once for the week ahead, or that lunchables seemed to be a whole, well-balanced meal packed into one box. One final, desperate plea was to guilt her into changing the menu. She was willing to compromise – she would buy me a full-size bag of Cape Cod potato chips for me to share with my classmates; the theory being that potato chips were enticing enough to ignore the oddity that was my lunches. It is amazing how many ten-year-old friends you can make with potato chips, and I got to indulge in extra junk food out of this deal. But my mother had taught me well, I had no real craving for skittles, cheetos, dorritos, snickers, even the winnings from Halloween would go stale. Her parenting style was to communicate always in an explicit and direct manner with her only daughter. She explained to me that kale had just as much calcium as milk, that white bread was bleached to take on that alluring tone, that cans could leech unwanted chemicals into whatever they contained, and that brown rice has been, and will always be, the core of a healthy gut.

