

Four Eyes Sandwich

A warm and lazy weekend afternoon always brings back memories of my Uncle Tip and the outdoor living room he set up each summer on his second floor front porch in our upstate New York city of Utica in the 1950s. The throne room, my Aunt Alice called it. The Command Post, Uncle Tip called it.

At the beginning of each summer Uncle would climb the attic stairs and with the help of a neighbor bring down two sisal carpets, an old dusty couch and chair, a floor lamp, a card table and a clothes hamper to use as an end table next to his chair. For some reason, I was never around when he would first call my house looking for me to help.

When the moving was done and I was off from school for the summer, I often had little to do if I tired of reading my mother's books. I enjoyed walking the few blocks to where Tip and Alice lived. My aunt could have won a Miss Manners award for being a good hostess and I knew all I had to do was wait long enough for her to come out from the kitchen and ask if I wanted a sandwich. In anticipation, I'd sit around and annoy my uncle with my imitation of Mel Allen while he tried to listen to the real Mel give the play-by-play description of a baseball game on the radio.

Uncle Tip owned a small collection of radios from the 1930's and I thought they were pretty cool. His wife considered them junk. He could always get one of them working well enough to listen to a ball game on the weekend.

Uncle Tip set up a radio on the hamper and plugged it in to an outlet his friend Tony had wired through the wall from the living room out to the porch. It was an old Zenith and it didn't work well. Every few minutes Uncle Tip twisted around in his chair and pounded the top of the radio to restore reception or vent his anger with an umpire's call of a strike that no one in the radio audience could see.

"How do you know it's a bad call if you're not there, Uncle Tip," I said.

"That umpire hates the Yankees," he said. "I know all these little secrets about major league ball," he said. "You could learn a lot about baseball by listening to me. You could learn a lot from me about anything, Snot-nose."

Now he was annoying me and I spoke up.

"Well I always wanted to know something."

"Shoot," he said.

"Suppose the bases are loaded and Mickey Mantle hits a ball so high no one is sure if it'll ever come back down in the park

"That wouldn't --" he said. But I interrupted him.

"Well, it *could*," I said. "The runners wouldn't know if they should run. The ball could have disintegrated or maybe a high wind above the stadium blows the ball in the river --"

"What river?" he said

"- and the coach calls a time out and the left fielder has an attack of ...of ..." I trailed off.

"What the hell are you talking about, David?" he said.

Now I had him riled up, which was my intent. He jumped up just as Mel Allen faded away like a ship gone over the horizon and he started pounding on the radio again. Standing, he could wallop the radio harder. If Poor Mel had been inside the cabinet he would have had a terrible headache. Aunt Alice appeared in the doorway to the house.

"You should buy a real radio," she said through the screen.

"The new ones are crap," said Uncle Tip.

"Yeah," I said, "they're not big enough to punch."

Uncle Tip smiled at me for the first time that afternoon.

"Can I make you a sandwich, David," she asked, and I heard a degree of tiredness in her voice that as a teenager I would have never imagined had anything to do with me.

"Make him one quick, Alice," Uncle Tip snapped, "so he can get outta my hair."

I didn't mention the obvious. He was as bald as a cantaloupe. Instead I ignored him.

"Can you make a Four Eyes Sandwich?" I asked Aunt Alice.

"I don't think so," she said, sounding even more tired.

"It's my brother Mike's favorite," I said.

"Tell her how to make it," Uncle Tip said to me as he fooled with the radio knobs in the hope of a clearer signal. "You need to be on your way. There's places to go, people to see, somebody else to bother."

Aunt Alice opened the door and kind of sagged in the doorway. Her hand held on to the door knob and she slowly swung back and forth, supported by the door like a dance partner.

"I'd come in and make it myself," I said, "but I'm no longer allowed to handle knives."

"Uh huh," was her only reply. No opening there for another story. She knew me too well.

“Mike starts with two slices of toast,” I began, “and slathers on the peanut butter while he fries up baloney in a pan,” I said. “Then he adds a layer of his favorite jelly and builds up the pile. Just before plopping on the top slice of toast, he carefully makes the eyes by laying four large potato chips down on the blackened baloney and centers 4 slices of hard boiled egg on each chip. Shake a little paprika on the four eyes and you’ve got eye strain, what Mike calls the Red Eye Special.”

Aunt Alice’s color changed and she began to look a little woozy.

“The hot baloney turns the peanut butter into a golden brown cream,” I said. “Two tablespoons of mustard and anything green will dull it to the color of a Boy Scout tent, but wait till I tell you what he does just before serving.”

Even Mel Allen on the radio seemed to hush in anticipation.

“Now, my brother sets Mom’s cookbook on top of his creation and puts his elbows on the front cover and presses down with his entire upper body weight.”

Aunt Alice put her hand to her mouth. I got up and walked over to Uncle Tip’s radio and tried to demonstrate, hoping Mel Allen wouldn’t mind.

“Get away from my radio,” was Uncle Tip’s predictable reaction.

“Then Mike takes the cookbook off and wipes it clean on his jeans,” I said, returning to my seat and feeling like I’d just been sent down from the blackboard for messing up an algebra equation or squeaking the chalk. “He squares off the mess with his pocket knife or a ruler from his book bag and wraps it in paper towels too keep it from oozing out all over the floor.”

Uncle Tip put his hand to his mouth and swallowed. Mel Allen began to cut in and out as if the ship over the horizon had carried the baseball game to the North Pole.

“When he uses the green boysenberry jelly,” I said, “it looks awful on the linoleum.”

“Uh huh,” said Aunt Alice, as she stepped onto the porch and let the screen door slam. She walked to the railing and steadied herself against it as if she was about to lean way out.

“And now Strike Three, as Mike calls it,” I said. “Just before serving ... to himself ... he takes the squirt bottle of ketchup and injects 500 cc’s of the red stuff directly into the side of the paper wrapped sandwich. And guess what oozes back out? Purple,” I almost shouted.

Aunt Alice was still standing, but she swayed a little.

“Sometimes,” I said, “he lies back in his chair and squeezes the oozy part into his mouth like a chef squirts a bag of frosting on a cake.” Aunt Alice’s shoulder lurched, but she hung on to the railing.

“But if the ooze gets on anything, it dries and turns ... *brown*. It looks an awful lot like –“

The radio exploded with the roar of the crowd as the volume shot up by itself, but the speaker soon crackled and went dead. There was a burning smell in the air.

“And that’s the Four Eyes Sandwich,” I said, feeling a little bilious myself.

No one said anything. It was one of those moments when everyone remains silent with their own thoughts. A wisp of smoke curled up from the back of the radio.

Uncle Tip squirmed around in his chair. Aunt Alice bent a little farther out over the rail and stared fixedly downward.

“I guess I’m not hungry,” I said

Little flames began to flicker from under the radio as it came back to life.

“Holy Moley,” said Uncle Tip.

“Brewer is ready.” Mel Allen said of the pitcher. “He delivers.”

While Uncle Tip and I sat mesmerized by the burning radio on the clothes hamper, Aunt Alice sprung to life.

“Mantle swings and sends a long drive over center field,” shouted Mel.

Aunt Alice grabbed the radio and threw it over the railing but it dangled there by its cord still attached to the wall plug

“Boy, oh boy” said Mel from inside the radio hanging twenty feet above the ground. Flames licked out from everywhere on the radio and the cloth covering the speaker caught fire. “It is going, going. It is *gone* ... it is gone into the –“

Aunt Alice pulled the plug from the outlet and the radio fell two stories and crashed into the ground.

We sat in stunned silence.

“Holy Moley,” said Uncle Tip.

Aunt Alice began to laugh.

“Maybe just a cookie, if you have one,” I said.

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