

Marshmallow Fluff

ON AN UNEXCEPTIONAL DAY, in the spring of 2006, a third-grader named Nathaniel went to his Cambridge, Massachusetts, school and for lunch had a sandwich he liked so much he told his father about it. It was called a fluffermutter, a peanut butter sandwich billowing with a sweet, sticky, marshmallow cream called Marshmallow Fluff.

His father, state Senator Jarrett Barrios, was not enthused.

In a State House teeming with fellow Harvard graduates, Barrios stood out as perhaps the most fastidious legislator of them all. The son of Cuban immigrants, he advocated for poor and immigrant families. An openly gay man, he was an outspoken supporter of gay marriage. And as chairman of the public safety committee, he helped take assault weapons out of the hands of criminals.

In June 2006, when Nathaniel ate his fateful lunch, Barrios had been training his vigilant eye on the childhood obesity crisis. Marshmallow Fluff seemed to him an obvious culprit—nutritionally hollow, as its name implied, and most damning of all, half sugar. “I’m not even sure we should be calling it a food,” he told the *Boston Globe*. So, he aimed to lift fluff from the hands of children, as he had guns from criminals, and filed an amendment to a school junk-food bill to restrict servings of fluff in public schools to one per week.

On its face, the move seemed plausible enough—assuming that parents would not want their kids eating sugar sandwiches. But fluff runs deep in this country. “Every time I open the pantry to get it, it’s there,” said Tali Kwatcher, a homemaker from Dover, Mass. “Nowadays, everyone’s so carb and sugar conscious. But I’ll bet if you asked them if they have a jar of fluff in their kitchen, they’d say, ‘Oh yeah, sure.’”

Not that they would think to mention it.

“I think [Barrios] could have done all the research in the world, and he just couldn’t have known what people’s reaction would be unless he’d grown up here,” said a State House insider.

Outsiders may know New England for its baked beans and chowder. But fluff has been the stuff of people’s kitchens for generations, the twentieth-century veneer on their

Puritan bones. The ensuing fallout would hound Barrios for the remainder of his career, demonstrating once and for all a people’s passion for their marshmallow paste.

IN SUBSTANCE, MARSHMALLOW FLUFF is the whipped culmination of just four ingredients: egg whites, corn syrup, vanillin, and sugar. Its psychological stamp, however, is more complex, forged in the impressionable, high-metabolism era of childhood. It is on this fertile ground that the typical New Englander encounters his first fluff. In his

Outsiders may know New England for its baked beans and chowder.

But fluff has been the stuff of people’s kitchens for generations, the twentieth-century veneer on their Puritan bones.

school lunches, it is the soft, white complement to Wonder Bread; on wintry days, the dreamy dollops melting in cocoa; in mom’s hands, the saccharine adhesive for frostings, fudge, Rice Krispie treats, and whoopee pies.

Ingestion is just one way that fluff is internalized. The jar itself is as familiar as a favorite scent: its blue-and-white label features a sketched spoonful of fluff, drawn in 1960s-era Dick, Jane, and Spot style. A ruby-red lid dresses the top. “We see the iconic packaging and say ‘fluff’ without even reading the label,” says Michael Costello, an artist raised in Burlington, Mass. “It’s so ingrained in our minds.”

The consistency—airier than melted marshmallow, gooier than a meringue—obeys its own fluffy physics.

