

Brown Onions  
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There's a song called "Green Onions," by a band from the sixties named Booker T & the MG's. It's a fun little number with an organ and a little guitar. People have been dancing to it for decades. It's instrumental, with no words at all, but that didn't stop Erika's dad from singing along. He played the song every Friday night in the kitchen, singing words of his own invention as he danced in place. "Onions," he'd sing. "I'm gonna cook some onions. Car-me-lized onions, mmm, mmm, mmm, mmm onions." Erika's dad was not much of a songwriter. He wasn't much of a singer, either, and his dancing left a lot to be desired. Watching him bounce back and forth in front of the stove, singing his weird little song, Erika thought she'd never seen someone who looked more like a dad. It was hard to watch, but it wasn't embarrassment that kept Erika out

of the kitchen on Friday nights. It was the onions. Erika hated onions.

Green, yellow, white or red, she thought they were the most disgusting vegetable in the supermarket. If a burger came with onions on it, she fed it to her brother. If someone put onions on her hot dog, she threw it in the trash. If a piece of onion even touched something on her plate, she was finished—not just with what the onion touched, but the whole meal. Crinkly, crispy, and foully bitter, she simply couldn't imagine a worse vegetable. And there was nothing worse than the smell, which made Erika think of a chemical plant explosion. Erika's father, on the other hand, lived for onions. He put them on everything—salads and sandwiches, toast and eggs. He liked them raw and he liked them fried; he liked them roasted to a crisp. But there was no way of cooking onions that made him happier than the one he sang about every week: caramelized.

Caramelizing means to cook something on very high heat, so that the natural sugars inside turn dark and very sweet. It literally means to turn something into caramel, even though foods that have been caramelized don't taste the same way that caramel does.

"Caramelized onions taste smoky and rich and warm," Erika's dad would tell her.

"They're much more than just sweet. Cook them long enough and they turn almost to jelly. You can put them on anything..." he would trail off and get a glassy look in his eye, and Erika could tell he was thinking about onions.

Cook them long enough, and caramelized onions really do turn into jelly. As they break down under the heat, they turn dark brown and get very soft. They get sweeter and sweeter, but never lose that funky aftertaste that disgusted Erika and drove her dad wild. He liked to cook his for as long as possible, which was a problem for Erika, because turning onions into jelly takes as long as an hour. No matter how long he cooked them, no matter how soft they got, he always figured they could go a little bit longer. On Fridays he would caramelize a whole bag of onions, enough to last him the whole week, and enough to make the whole house stink for days. It never failed to spoil Erika's weekend.

One Friday, she couldn't stand it anymore. When the first notes of "Green Onions" sounded, and her dad pulled a sack of onions out of the pantry, Erika stood her ground. "Dad—quit it!"

"You don't like my song?"

"No! I hate your song. But not nearly as much as I hate your onions."

"You hate caramelized onions?" he asked, genuinely perplexed. "But, why?"

Erika wanted to sum up why they made her so angry, why they turned her stomach, why they were ruining her life. She could have ranted for an hour, but she was too angry to talk. All she could say was, "Because they're gross!"

"Have you ever tried them?"

"Well...no."

"Then how do you know they're gross?"

"Because they're brown and gooey, and they smell like old socks." signs, which suddenly don't seem so free.

Roger looks around the school and sees that they do, in fact, need new signs. The exit sign above the main door is cracked. The sign above the library just says "Librar." The menu next to the school cafeteria is so old it says you could get a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for 50 cents.

So, maybe it is a bit unfair to take something from a student who's going to vote for you. But Roger figures they have a good point about the signs.

Meanwhile, Kelly has been running around the school putting up signs of her own. They are all handmade from construction paper with fresh flowers on them. They say,

"Make the school beautiful. Vote Healthy for Kelly."

Maya tells Kelly they look nice, but she doesn't think they'll do anything.

"It's just lipstick on a pig," she says. "Just because you make it look nice doesn't mean it's not still a pig."

Kelly's handmade signs make Roger nervous, because they seem more honest and down-to-earth. Although his signs are really nice and professional, it's also obvious that they cost money. Roger feels like the students don't relate to him. He wants the other students to think he's just like them, so he organizes a barbecue during school lunch hours with free hot dogs. Actually, it's the Harrison brothers' idea. They even get him a deal on the hot dogs, from their cousin's supermarket, of course.

A few kids come by, but Roger also notices that a good amount of students stay in the cafeteria, eating food they brought from home. He can't figure out why someone would want to eat a stale sandwich when he's offering free hot dogs. The hot dog giveaway is definitely a flop. Roger goes home dejected and sad. The next day, the school holds a debate between the two candidates. The debate is moderated by their civics teacher, Mrs. Graham.

Roger and Kelly sit on stage, opposite each other. The auditorium is filled with students, all of whom will have the opportunity to vote. All the students are watching with great interest, as this is how they will make their decision. One wrong answer today and it could mean losing the presidency.

Mrs. Graham asks the first question. "As class president, how would you see fit to spend the school's extra money?"

Kelly answers first. "Well, I certainly wouldn't be spending our money on expensive signs and hot dogs," she says.

The audience gasps. This is a low blow. It's surprising that Kelly would say something like that.

Roger looks into the audience and sees the Harrison brothers sinking down into their seats.

Kelly continues, "I would like our school to be healthier, and I know we have many students who are vegetarian. They don't have many options for lunch, and if they forget to bring lunch from home, sometimes they don't eat lunch at all!"

At this, at least 50 students stand up and applaud. Even Maya stands and applauds, although she rolls her eyes a little, too. The other students join in the cheering.

Of course, a few students start booing, just to be jerks.

"Eat more bacon!" says one, cupping his hands around his mouth so the sound will carry.

"Eat a vegetarian!" says another, laughing and throwing pieces of paper.

"Okay everyone, that's enough!" the moderator says from stage. The students who are booing the vegetarians just look like troublemakers now. Roger looks into the audience. He finally realizes how many students are vegetarian; he has never thought to find out before. "What about you, Roger? What will you spend money on?"

"Well, I would like to have a new sign for the cafeteria," he says. "And that could certainly include any vegetarian options that the school may end up providing."

"Oh please! Without me to push for it, the school will never change its menu,"

Kelly says. "Roger offers empty promises. And he thinks he is better than me because I'm a girl!"

The students start to applaud and Roger watches the Harrison brothers sneak out the back door.

When the debate is over, Roger can tell that he lost. His failure is palpable; he can feel it. Students clamor around Kelly in a group, hugging her and telling her how they can't wait for the new lunch menu.

Only a few people come up to Roger.

"I liked your nice sign," says Peggy, pushing her glasses up on her nose and squinting.

"Thanks," said Roger. "Can I count on your vote next week on election day?"

"Oh, that," Peggy says. "Well, actually, I'm voting for Kelly. I just wanted to be nice to you."

After school, the Harrison brothers are waiting outside to talk to Roger. He notices they are carrying some of Kelly's signs.

"We're going to have to withdraw our support," Boyd Harrison tells him.

"We just don't think you look like the winning candidate," Trent Harrison says.

"And we really need to get behind someone who can help bring our dad more business."

"What are you talking about?" Roger says, angrily. "I was your guy! You supported me! I thought we were friends."

"Yeah, friends. Well, about that... You see, it's just that Kelly will bring in a lot more business for our dad's company," says Trent. Boyd nods in approval. "It's nothing personal. You're a nice dude and all. But Kelly has a little more... spirit."

"Kelly? Oh please!" Roger is yelling now. "Her signs are all handmade! Didn't you see them? It's just hipster junk!" "Oh, yeah, you noticed that? We went for a more 'indie' feel with these." Trent says.

"Tried to make them look handmade." Boyd interjects. "The hipsters love that. We're glad you noticed." Kelly is coming out of the school now, and the Harrison brothers walk away from Roger without saying a word. Each brother puts an arm around Kelly.

"How's our best girl?" they ask.

Kelly smiles. "Doing just great now," she says. "Now that Roger looks like a woman-hating meat-eating loser."

"We've got this election in the bag," Boyd says. "A vegetarian bag, that is." Trent holds up a bag of veggie burgers. "We've even been eating these at lunch, showing all those health-conscious kids that we're one of them."

"Well, you sure do look trustworthy now, don't you?" Kelly says, laughing. "But do you have any real food? I'm so sick of this vegetarian junk. My stomach is killing me!"

"You bet we do," says Boyd. "In fact, we have a whole bunch of hot dogs left over from Roger's barbeque yesterday. Let's go to our house and have dinner."

"By the way," Kelly says, "How did you convince people not to go get delicious free hot dogs? I think he could have really turned people to his side with that."

"It was easy," Boyd says. "We started a rumor that Roger left the hot dogs out in his car overnight. Nobody wanted to get sick. He was so depressed; he just left everything sitting there. We grabbed all the leftovers and took them back home."

"That's brilliant," Kelly says. "I can't thank you enough!"

"Well, you won't have to thank us once you're elected. Just make sure the school uses our dad's business. And, oh yeah, when the cafeteria goes vegetarian, you know which veggie burgers are the best choice."

Boyd dangles the bag in front of her and, for the first time, she reads the label:

"Harrison's Burgers." "Victory has never tasted so sweet," Kelly says.