

Brown Onions

W.M. Akers

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."

“I’ll make you a deal. You try a cheeseburger with these onions on it, and if they’re as bad as you say they are, I’ll eat anything you want.”

“Anything? Like a jar of paint?”

“It has to be food.”

“So I could make you eat a big pile of anchovies with ketchup and sauerkraut?”

“If you hate the onions.”

“Deal. Call me when they’re ready.”

“Ah ah,” said Dad, handing Erika a knife. “You’ve got to help me make them, too.”

“What?!”

“If you watch it happen, I think you won’t be so freaked out.”

“Fine. How do we start?”

Erika’s dad took her through the whole process, step by step. First, they sliced all the onions up, nice and thin. Then they put them into the biggest skillet they had, covered them, and turned the heat to medium-high.

“But, won’t they burn?” she asked.

“Eventually. But we’re not going to let that happen.”

They stirred the onions every few minutes, making sure they didn’t burn. When they started to stick to the pan and get kind of brown, her dad pulled out the olive oil.

“This is the cool part,” he said. “Tip a little of this into the pan, add some salt, stir them around, and watch how fast they change color.”

She tipped a little oil into the pan, added some salt, and stirred the onions around. Within seconds, the slightly brown onions had turned the color of mud.

“Whoa! Are they done?”

“Not hardly.”

For the next half hour, they kept stirring every few minutes, and the onions got darker and darker. When they were almost the consistency of glue, Dad turned off the heat. He piled two cheeseburgers with onions and pushed one across to his daughter. She screwed her eyes shut and took a big bite. As she chewed, her face twisted into a grimace. Dad was shocked—she really hated them!

“Oh no,” he said. “You look disgusted.”

“I am. I don’t like what I’m about to say.”

“What?”

“Can I have some more onions?”

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What food does Erika hate?

- A hot dogs
- B burgers
- C onions
- D anchovies

2. How do Erika's feelings about onions change in the story?

- A At first she hates onions, but then she asks for more on her burger.
- B At first she loves onions, but then she doesn't like them on her burger.
- C At first she does not have an opinion about onions, but then she loves them.
- D Erika's feelings about onions do not change in the story. She always hates them.

3. Erika's father loves to cook caramelized onions. What evidence from the story best supports this conclusion?

- A He eats cheeseburgers with caramelized onions.
- B He says that caramelized onions are more than just sweet.
- C He sings and dances when he cooks caramelized onions.
- D He tells Erika that she has to help him cook the caramelized onions.

4. Erika states that caramelized onions are gross even though she has never tried them. She says she knows they are gross because "they're brown and gooey, and they smell like old socks." Based on this evidence, what can be concluded about Erika's opinion of caramelized onions?

- A Erika's opinion of caramelized onions is influenced by her bad experiences with onions.
- B Erika's opinion of caramelized onions is influenced by her father's opinion.
- C Erika's opinion of caramelized onions is based on the way they taste.
- D Erika's opinion of caramelized onions is not based on the way they taste.

5. What is this story mostly about?

- A Erika tries caramelized onions for the first time.
- B Erika's dad likes to cook caramelized onions.
- C Erika throws out hot dogs that have onions on them.
- D Caramelized onions are Erika's father's favorite food.

6. Read the following sentences:

"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?'"

As used in this sentence, what does the word "**perplexed**" most nearly mean?

- A excited
- B confused
- C unhappy
- D composed

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Erika's father loves onions and puts them on everything. _____, Erika thinks that onions are disgusting.

- A For instance
- B In conclusion
- C Most importantly
- D On the other hand

8. What does *caramelizing* mean?

9. What deal does Erika make with her father?

10. What does Erika most likely learn from her father at the end of the story? Use evidence from the passage to support your answer.
