

Saucy Meaty Onion Wrap

(c. 2019)

She was sitting across from me on the #6 train going uptown from Canal St. near Chinatown. I just assumed she got on at Canal since I did, and because she was Chinese. I'd lived on Canal St. for nearly 35 years at that point. I wondered what assumptions people made about me with my fairly fluid, relative identity. Was I Chinese by subway stop association and Tai Chi wannabe status? Surely not, but that didn't abate my ass-umption stream.

Anyway, I sat on the #6 train and watched the young woman with fascination as she ate her pita wrap, or whatever that was, some doughy thing lined with a token piece of lettuce and chock full of the main fare: drippy, saucy meat and onions. She had an ample mouth and she opened it really wide to fit in those big generous bites. But somehow, maybe because she was young and pretty, she accomplished it almost delicately. I don't know how. I never could do that. In fact, I would never eat anything like that, especially not in public. Never actually. Not even if I could fit my mouth around it without all the gooey, juicy stuff spilling all over my clothes and on the passengers next to me and falling onto the floor, so I'd have to bend down, dropping my bags while trying to clean it up so someone wouldn't slide and break their neck on my greasy wrap, and get all wrapped up in my karma and icky meaty mess. I just wouldn't even think of eating that. It wasn't just the slippery meat or the saucy sauce or white dough that was off limits to me for as long as I could remember. It was definitely

the onions too. Hell, even if I wasn't on my way to give a massage, I couldn't eat that. Even if I was heading straight home to be all alone by myself, I wouldn't because something could always happen along the way and then I'd really be sorry. What if I ate that tangy wrap and then someone sat down next to me on the subway and wanted to talk? I'd have onion breath! And what if I ran into a person I hadn't seen in a long time who wanted to greet me warmly with a hug? Or what if it was the one fateful night of my life when I met the guy who'd fall for me instantaneously and want so badly to kiss me passionately and never stop for the rest of our lives? What then? My mouth would taste like onions, like garbage. I was sure of it. Then he'd recoil and never kiss me or talk to me or see me ever again. I'd ruin my only chance. The odds were tough enough anyway, and too much stacked against me to chance messing with that malodorous, messy wrap and an ominous ingredient like rank breath. I was really terrified of it. To my knowledge, my inner body guards hadn't let garlic cross my path and palate in years. It was a serious prohibition. If I ever ate out, I'd study the menu and interrogate the waiter or waitress, compelling several trips for special inquiries and exclusions from the chef: no garlic, onions, leeks, shallots, scallions, chives... I had to be very careful. The balance was precarious. One wrong move and I'd be banished from all social good will — a pungent pariah. I seized up thinking of it and automatically shoved a ginger mint in my mouth for good measure. It was a major issue, directing my every alimentary daily picking, assessing ramifications of possible olfactory offenses, smells and tastes in my mouth, that is, in my head. — Note: My sister said I just smelled like fresh

vegetables, but that didn't assuage the fear. — I even worried when asleep, in my dreams, like the nightmares where someone was flying up from the street into my home through my windows to rape me. But I was asleep when he entered, with night breath. Oh no, I couldn't bare being so repulsive, even to an invader-abuser. The prospect was deeply troubling and contributed to my insomnia and severe reluctance to approach the unsecured realms of sleep.

It wouldn't even dawn on me to lie down till nearly dawn, until I had exhausted myself so thoroughly that I would almost, actually often literally drop while on my feet, pushing, pushing myself and pushing the tempo to revive me, till I'd nod out in motion, my knees buckling and I'd start to fall. Then I'd plead for permission to sleep.

My ever-searching spirituality was ambiguous, deity non-specific still, but eventually I'd hear my little pathetic, involuntary voice whimper in those wee hours, imploring, "Oh God, please can I go to sleep now?" Then maybe I'd allow myself to lie down with unconscious trepidation. What might I face? A man flying up through the windows and me lying there helpless, and with night breath no less?

Anyway, I was on that #6 train, captivated by the young Asian woman and her saucy meat and onion wrap. And it struck me as I watched her eat that drippy thing delicately and without worry, that I bet someone would want to kiss her. Maybe even that very night, I bet someone would want to kiss her if he got the chance, and he'd partake of her mouth with all those dangerously intense tastes and smells, and he'd

love it, and want more, as much as he could get. He'd want to go deeper and deeper inside her oniony, saucy, meaty mouth. I wondered if it was because she was pretty. I thought of Gloria at the Jazz club when Willy played, the year before he died. Her breath was really bad those nights. You could smell it from several feet away. I was afraid people would think it was me. She said her stomach was upset, which seemed to happen often. She asked for gum or mints, which of course I had on hand and shared with her, but that didn't help. I wondered if it ever even helped mask mine either. But with her, it didn't matter. All the men wanted to be with her. They all wanted her because she was pretty with that long, straight, black hair and exotic look, thin and beautiful. I can't say if she was real bright, and she was kind of flat-chested, like me. But in her case, no one minded. Men loved her because she was beautiful, and they didn't bother about her breath or little boobs. Not hers or the Asian woman with a savory, saucy, meaty wrap. And they both knew it. They weren't afraid. They could eat onions and whatever else they wanted and didn't have to hide. That's the difference between them and me. Maybe it was because they were pretty. Or maybe it was because they didn't care, because they felt no shame.

Then I got it. That was the culprit — Shame. Shame and self-revulsion —

The very most disgusting tastes of all.