

Let's Taco 'Bout Love

Most girls binge on a few pints of ice cream after a bad breakup, but not Rosa. Rosa bought a whole ice cream truck. She didn't even mind when the sales guy admitted that the dilapidated food truck would no longer go in reverse. After all, she was moving forward with her life; she'd have no need to look back.

As Rosa pulled into her parent's circular driveway, she could practically feel the heat coming from her mother's glare. She winced. Instead of pulling up in the cute little Honda that Mama had given her for her graduation gift, there, traded for its place, was a bright yellow truck with a 'What's Your Curry?' logo emblazoned on the side.

As the wheels of recognition began to turn in Mama's head, her eyes grew wide and her eyebrows shot up. Spinning on her heels and heading for the house, Mama's *chanclas* furiously slapped the pavement. The bang of the screen door sharply punctuated her outrage. Mutters rose above the thwacking of the knife on the cutting board.

"Two years! I save my pennies for two years to buy her that car and what does she do? One little breakup and suddenly poof, she's running away from her problems in a little piece of junk *trastajo!*"

Rosa couldn't help herself. When Mama got in this mood, Rosa regressed to her feisty 13-year-old self. "Not running, Mama! Driving away! I'm going to use *abuela's* recipes and run an ice cream truck."

Mama glared harder, waving the knife at Rosa. "If *abuela* knew about this she'd climb out of her grave and wear out your hide with a *chancla* herself. You can't fix everything wrong in your life with ice cream."

“Maybe not with ice cream, but *helado* should do the trick.”

Mama yelled over the howling blender. “So my Rosa is going to be like that Juan guy who drives around blaring mariachi?”

Rosa giggled. “Hey, If people buy as many of my ice creams as you buy of his tacos, I’ll be set.”

After several weeks of scrubbing the scent of curry out of every corner (and her hair), planning her routes, and testing recipes on willing cousins, Rosa was ready.

Early one morning Rosa hung her parking permit from the useless rear-view mirror. Settling into the driver’s seat, Rosa gently tapped a bottle of ice-cold cream soda against the cracked dashboard. “I dub thee, the Ice Queen.” Her ex-boyfriend had always called her that when they fought. It had stung every time. Now, it tasted sweet to change the insult to a badge of pride.

Stomach churning, Rosa started the engine. Fingers trembling, she pressed play and tinkling notes filled the air. Rosa was in the ice cream business.

Rumbling through the streets, she felt a surge of pride as people stared at her jingling cream and mint truck. Here she was, Rosa the Ice Queen, bringing people together in a common love of sugar, cream, and sticky deliciousness.

She pulled into the local park and set up shop. Sliding her serving window open, Rosa grinned at the squeals of delight from the kids around the park. ‘*Helado!* Mama! An ice cream truck!’

As she scooped and served, Rosa’s mind filled with possibilities. Dreams of adding waffle cones and bowls to her menu seemed tantalizingly possible. Maybe she’d even be able to hire her little sister as an assistant.

Rosa’s sweet day dreams were unceremoniously cut short as the sound of her happy jingly music was drowned out by trumpets and guitars playing mariachi music. Then she saw it—clouds of

black exhaust trailing behind a dingy old yellow taco truck who had the nerve to pull up and parallel park in the spot right in front of hers. In a moment, it smothered her freshly painted shiny truck in clouds of exhaust. The scents of cinnamon-sugar and tacos filled the air beneath the pong of burnt gasoline. Coughing and waving away the exhaust, Rosa didn't need to see to know it had 'Wanna Taco 'Bout It?' emblazoned on the side.

She'd seen the truck before. Juan Ramirez-Espero and his *taqueria*-on-wheels cruised the neighborhoods, blasting mariachi from dawn through dinner. Every time he stopped, parents came running, money in hand.

Rosa's heart sank. She'd never have come here if she knew *he* would be her competition. Even she'd never been able to resist the charms of Juan's pork *carnitas*. Her money danced out of her wallet every time he passed by and mariachi music made her mouth water. She'd practically lived on his *carnitas* the last week or two. Her mama's street seemed to be part of his new regular summer route.

Sliding open the windows, Juan hollered, "Tacos! *Carnitas!* You know you want 'em!" People actually cheered. Rosa growled, but then again so did her stomach.

Gathering her courage, Rosa determinedly strode up to Juan's truck window. She made sure to leave her wallet behind. She was intent to give him a piece of her mind—not a piece of her hard earned cash.

"What's your problem? You have the whole west side of the park by the fountains unoccupied, and you park right next to my food truck. Can't you find somewhere else to give people diarrhea?"

“Hey come now, *senorita*, it's still a free country isn't it? Us food trucks gotta stick together, huh!”

“Speaking of which, you nearly nicked my fender when you parallel parked in front of me, and my brand new mint paint job is now covered in soot thanks to the smoke clouds from your wreck.”

“I'm sure I can find some way to make it up to you, miss..?”

“Rosa.” She practically growled the word at him.

“Well, Miss Rosa, it's nice to meet you, though I feel like we've met before, no?” His eyes narrowed a little in thought. Then he flashed a disarming grin at her. “Oops, here comes some customers, excuse me, please.”

Rosa stalked off, glad to use the excuse to avoid telling him how she'd practically lived off of his *carnitas* tacos every day for two weeks straight during finals week in college. It was hard to be that close and not drool.

Juan's confident smile made him resemble a fallen angel, especially with that heavenly aroma of smoky pork. But, no matter how tempting his pork or his smile, Rosa had a hard time forgiving Juan as customer after customer seemed to head toward her truck, only to veer at the last second towards Juan's. Her line melted faster than ice cream in the sun.

Then out of the corner of her eye, Rosa saw him pointing at her. A customer walked over to her truck. “Juan said it's gonna be another ten minutes till his churros are fried, and I should get some of your *helado*.” Rosa couldn't believe it. Was Juan sending customers to her? Maybe there was a bit of angel in him after all.

Hours passed, tacos grilled, churros fried, and ice cream melted. Crowds bought churros from Juan, and he sent them over to Rosa's for creamy bowls of *helado* to dip them in. Grateful, she sent her new customers over to Juan's for churros and tacos.

Rosa heard her stomach growl as yet another customer came up to the window with an overflowing red oval basket from Juan's. Rosa turned her smile up a notch.

"Can I get you some ice cream to go with those tacos?"

"Juan said to give you this, Miss. Two pork *carnitas*, extra creamy *salsa verde* and pickled jalapenos on the side? Oh, and a *horchata* with no ice? I didn't even know he sold that, Miss."

Rosa's eyes widened as she recognized her favorite order. Juan remembered?

Glancing over at Juan's truck, she saw him wiping down his counters, a slight smile on his face. The crackling smoky *carnitas* tasted like heaven and the spicy tang of jalapeno in the salsa was just right. Rosa wished she had more time to savor, but her line was growing again. She went back to scooping with a smile, the taste of tacos lingering long after the last bite.

During the few lulls between customers, Juan would yell silly questions at her from his truck as he prepped ingredients.

"Rosa! Got any napkins to wipe my tears away? I just ran out. Is it from chopping all these *cebollas* or is it my broken heart? Give a guy a break, eh?"

Grinning, Rosa sent a customer back to Juan with a stack full of white napkins. "Yeah, Juan, you're gonna be crying when I tempt all your customers away from those *fuegos* you call tacos!"

Mid-afternoon Juan popped up at her order window. "Hey, Rosa, *linda*, I need that basket. You gonna keep it all day? I mean, if you want a souvenir I could sign." Juan trailed off as he looked

through her window and caught sight of a framed photo hung on her truck's wall. "Why do you have a picture of Guadalupe Rosalinda De la Cruz?"

"She's my *abuela* and my inspiration."

"Lupe De la Cruz is your grandmother? She was the first person to ever buy a taco from me! And she told me my salsa verde wasn't fit for a dog."

Rosa laughed, "Ha, yes, that sounds like *abuela*."

Juan chuckled, "Luckily, she took pity on me and gave me the recipe I use today. I owe a lot to that woman."

Rosa's eyes widened, "Are you kidding me? My mama has wanted that recipe for years! *Abuela* wouldn't give it to her."

A customer yelled, "Hey! Juan! Are you gonna flirt all day or are you gonna sell me some carnitas? My money is burnin' and so is your meat!"

"Oh, gotta go. We're gonna 'taco' bout you later! Are you using your *abuela*'s recipes? I still dream of that *helado* she made for fiestas when I was a kid."

Rosa caught herself grinning and giggling all day. It was the most exhausting, and exhilarating day she'd had in years. The lines didn't stop, and neither did the questions.

"Eh, Rosa! So do you have your *abuela*'s *helado* recipe then?"

"What? Juan, I'm not telling you that. You've already taken the family salsa recipe and the horchata recipe from us. One more recipe and you'll have a monopoly and can start building hotels on 'em."

“Well, actually, the *horchata* recipe is my own, but I’m glad to hear you think it’s up to your *abuela*’s standards!”

The crowds headed home. The last diehard *futbol* players ended their games, and Rosa sold a few last-minute half-melted bowls.

As the sun sank, a blissfully exhausted Rosa happily scooped the last creamy swirls into a bowl, washed empty ice cream bins, and folded down her awning. Rosa felt a deep satisfaction in her efforts today, like she could finally move forward with her life.

Except she couldn’t. Rosa groaned. Juan’s truck was still directly in front of hers, and despite there being plenty of room to back up behind her, her truck didn’t go in reverse.

Knocking on the door to her truck, Juan grinned and held out a small bag of fried churros.

“Crazy day, eh? You look like you could use a churro. I happened to know where to get some fantastic ones. Got any of that fabulous ice cream left? We could taco load off.”

Remembering her predicament, Rosa sighed and absently took the churros and crunched one.

“Now’s not the time, Juan.”

Juan frowned, “What’s wrong? I thought we made an excellent team. I helped you. You helped me. We should do that every day! We could make a hel-of-a-lado money.” He grinned, inviting her to share the silly joke.

Rosa shook her head and busied herself, too embarrassed to look at him. “I just really want to go home.”

“Well, why don’t you?”

“I can’t move.”

“I've been told I have that effect on women.”

“My truck, Juan!” Rosa tried to toughen her glare as her cheeks grew hot. “I can't.” She groaned and it all burst out. “It doesn't go in reverse... and now I can't move until you do.”

“And here I thought you just couldn't get away from the smell of good tacos. I actually have a couple more hours of cleanup still to do around here.”

“Juan!,” she cried.

“But,” he grinned, “I suppose I wouldn't want to leave you stranded here. I'll move my truck, then I'll give you the number of the best mechanic I know.”

“Who?”

Juan dug out a tattered business card from his wallet that read Juan's Mechanic Service.

“Who else? Looks like I am the Juan for you, Rosa.”

Rosa nearly choked as she chortled with a mouth full of churro. Regaining her composure, she dipped the churro in the ice cream. They really were perfect together, she thought. The churros and the *helado*, I mean, she told herself.

Rosa took another bite. Deep fried happiness filled her heart. “You just might be.”