

19. GREGORY: TACOS FOR THREE

Gregory stared at his clean-shaven face in the bathroom mirror. A bottle of spirit gum sat open on the marble countertop in front of him. He dipped a paintbrush and applied the glue gently to his upper lip. He waited patiently for a few minutes, then dabbed at his skin with his index finger to make sure it felt tacky. He placed the fake mustache carefully, pressing down the mesh backing until it became invisible against his skin. He took half a step back and inspected the results. The bristly lampshade mustache under his nose looked convincingly real. He was especially pleased that the color matched his dark brown hair perfectly.

Out in the living room he put on his tortoiseshell sunglasses and his new tweed cap, tucking his dark brown hair carefully under it. Another mirror check, this time in the hallway, brought a smile to his face. Even his own mother wouldn't recognize him.

As he went out the door, he threw his Burberry trench coat over one arm. It might be a bit conspicuous—Cassandra had seen him wear it on occasion—but he wanted to stay dry, and he reasoned that many people had tan coats just like it.

Climbing into a cab, he told the driver to drop him on the corner of Mott Street and Houston, about a block away from where Cassandra was supposedly meeting her new friend.

Every time he thought about Cassandra's plans he quivered with rage. Apparently, spending ten grand on an engagement ring wasn't enough to make her think twice about going on a date with another man. He had yet to set eyes on this Wilfredo person, and he was itching to get a look at him. The plan was to keep a close watch on the two of them tonight—from a safe distance.

He had purchased a micro wireless earpiece set, and last night at dinner he had surreptitiously tucked one of the two earpieces into the side flap of Cassandra's purse, with the microphone dot placed close to the top. He had tested it by asking her to order for him and pretending to slip away to the bathroom. Her voice had come through loud and clear. The only drawback was that he had to be within twenty feet for it to work.

Slamming the cab door, he slunk down Mott Street, heading toward the cupcake shop. He was about ten minutes early, which, knowing his fiancée, would leave him plenty of time to stake out a good spot. When the bakery came into view Gregory noticed a large man standing outside, his hands shoved into the pockets of a barn jacket. He was a little ragged looking, his longish hair hanging down from a cuffed beanie, and his unbuttoned blue flannel shirt revealing a stained T-shirt underneath. The man's head was bobbing from side to side, as if he were moving to music, although he didn't appear to be wearing headphones. If this was Wilfredo, Gregory was unimpressed.

There was a small bookstore just around the corner from the bakery with a slatted wooden bench out front, and Gregory stationed himself there, tugging down the brim of

his cap and pretending to look at his phone, while keeping one eye on the cupcake shop stranger. Sure enough, Cassandra showed up ten minutes late. She greeted the flannel shirt guy with a lingering hug and Gregory resisted the urge to spring up off the bench and pry them apart. His earpiece cackled with static but the conversation it picked up was garbled and broken—he was too far away. Judging by her gestures Cassandra seemed to be apologizing for her tardiness, but Wilfredo waved his hand dismissively and was all smiles. *Easy enough to be gracious the first time, chum*, Gregory fumed. He watched them peer dubiously into the bakery window, exchange some words, and then turn and walk west together.

It would seem that the coffee and cupcake plan had been scrapped. With growing suspicions Gregory stood up and followed them, careful not to get too close. The pair made a left on Elizabeth Street, so he made a left on Elizabeth Street. About halfway up the block they stopped in front of what looked like a small taqueria, and this Wilfredo person held the door open for Cassandra. Gregory wanted to run up and punch him in the nose, but he restrained himself.

Gregory lingered outside for a few minutes, making sure they didn't come right back out again, then he made his way over to the restaurant. Outside, a painted sign read BAJA TACOS. There was no way to see into the interior as the windows were blocked with colorful curtains. He tapped his upper lip to make sure the mustache was still holding firm, and walked in. It was an unassuming taqueria with colorful metal tables and chairs and white-tiled walls. It was packed with mostly young people hanging out after work, their tables

sprinkled with shot glasses. A young hostess greeted him and he asked for a table for one. She tried to seat him near the door, but Gregory demurred as he had spotted Cassandra and Wilfredo seated farther inside. Instead he pointed over to a small table along the back wall that was the right distance and ensured Cassandra would be facing away from him.

As he walked past their table Gregory looked the other way. His earpiece crackled to life and he heard a little snippet of their conversation faintly in his right ear. Maybe he'd missed his calling. Maybe he should've been a spy. At his table he took the menu from the hostess, hopped up onto a square stool, and turned up the volume on his earpiece so that two voices came to him clearly above the din of the crowded restaurant.

He had an excellent view of their table. Cassandra was already sipping a pink beverage and Wilfredo had a beer bottle in front of him—no glass. Gregory inadvertently let out an indignant snort. Suddenly worried that Cassandra might turn and look his way, he held the small menu in front of his face. Peeking over the edge moments later he saw that a smiling waiter had appeared at his table and was looking at him expectantly. Gregory glanced quickly at the paper menu and ordered the tacos al pastor, a side of guacamole, and a sparkling water. He had never warmed to tacos, considering them messy street food, so he wasn't expecting much from his dinner tonight.

The waiter went straight from his table to Cassandra's. Gregory saw Wilfredo's large hands nervously twirling the mini pencil used to mark their dinner selections. They were

beaming at each other, having just discovered that they were both vegetarians. Gregory cursed under his breath. Just his luck that this guy would turn out to be another veg-head bozo.

“I can vouch for the mushroom tacos,” Wilfredo remarked. “And the fried avocado tacos are amazing too.”

“I would kill for a mushroom taco,” replied Cassandra excitedly, her voice tinny in his ear. They ordered two tacos each and a side of street corn to split, and the waiter collected their menus. Gregory felt that he already had Wilfredo’s number. This guy’s schtick was to pretend to be friendly and easygoing until she let her guard down, at which point he would no doubt move in for the kill.

The waiter brought Gregory his sparkling water and said the guacamole would be right out. Gregory nodded and waved him away. With his hand cupped over his ear he listened in on the conversation taking place a short distance away:

“Thank god you were standing on that subway platform that day. I was terrified when that train started moving.”

“Anyone else would have done the same. I just happened to be close by.”

“Oh please, don’t be modest. It was so brave of you to jump in the way you did. Most people would have just watched in horror. You realize we barely broke free in time?”

The fathead had the gall to act embarrassed, and Gregory heard him change the subject, asking Cassandra where she was from. She filled him in on how she’d grown up in the Bay Area, but had lived in New York for the past ten years. He volunteered that he was from a small town upstate on the Hudson, and had moved to the city right around the same time as her.

Finally, she mentioned her fiancé. It had only taken fifteen minutes for her to mention him. Not that he was keeping track or anything. Gregory waited expectantly for Wilfredo's reaction.

"Have you picked a wedding venue yet?" Wilfredo asked.

Cassandra sighed. "We're still working on it."

Gregory's view of their table was suddenly blocked by the waiter, who had popped up with his guacamole, clearing some room on the tiny table before putting it down. "I hope you like it. It's freshly made!" The waiter's smile was grating, and Gregory glared at him until he wandered off.

Gregory hated waiters, he hated Mexican restaurants, and he hated tacos. But most of all he hated the breezy conversation that was being piped into his right eardrum. These two were having a grand time, and not even talk of her engagement seemed to have dampened their fun. Gregory tensed as he was struck by an alarming thought. Maybe this guy targeted married women? Wilfredo might specialize in spotting ring-toting women to yank from in front of buses and trains, using the whole heroism angle to lure them back to his apartment?

The smiling waiter appeared once more with Gregory's pork tacos. Plates of food had arrived at Cassandra's table as well, and she was already biting into the vaunted mushroom taco. "Oh man! This is *so* good. I've been craving Mexican."

"Amazing, right?" Wilfredo beamed. Gregory's eyes bulged as he watched Wilfredo dump an ocean of hot sauce onto his two tacos.

"Er, Wilfredo?" said a concerned Cassandra. "You do realize that's ghost pepper hot sauce?"

“Yeah. Don’t worry. I always do this.”

“I guess you’re just one of those guys who likes living on the edge.”

Cassandra was sampling her fried avocado taco. “Oh my god, this one’s even better. I can’t believe I haven’t been here before. My fiancé isn’t a fan of Mexican food, so I’ve been a bit taco deprived lately.”

“Well he doesn’t know what he’s missing.” Wilfredo clinked his raised beer bottle with her pink agua fresca. “To tacos.”

“To tacos,” she repeated. “The best food in the whole universe.”

Gregory looked down at his pork tacos. “The best food in the whole universe,” he muttered mockingly under his breath. With some trepidation he scooped a bit of guacamole up with a tortilla chip and took a tentative bite. His eyebrows shot up. Not bad. He took a bite of his pork tacos, and chewed thoughtfully. It was delicious, he couldn’t deny it. But boy were they messy, and it wasn’t long before guacamole found its way onto his fake mustache. He wiped at it, and then panicked that the darn thing had shifted.

The voices continued unabated in his ear. “How about you, Wilfredo? Which box do you check? Single or taken?”

“I’m single.”

“Not seeing anyone special?”

“Nope. I’ve been unattached for the last five years.”

“That’s a long time.”

“No kidding. I mean I go out on the occasional date, but nothing seems to stick.”

“But you used to have a girlfriend?”

“Yep. Nadia. We dated for four years, and lived together for one.”

“What happened?”

“She rode off into the sunset on the back of a motorcycle belonging to this guy she met in a bar.”

A momentary pang of sympathy hit Gregory, but he choked it down.

“Sounds rough,” said Cassandra sympathetically.

“Well. It’s just how things worked out. I’m over it. But it’s not easy meeting new people. Everyone’s doing online dating these days, and I just recently got my first smartphone.”

“So you’re a bit of a Luddite then.”

Wilfredo nodded hesitantly and Gregory harrumphed, sure that the man had no idea what that word meant. “I’m sorry,” Wilfredo said, “but I have to point out that there’s this strange guy with a mustache sitting alone at a table by the wall who keeps giving me strange looks. It’s been weirding me out since we sat down.”

Gregory, who was taking a sip from his sparkling water, nearly spit it out in surprise.

“Really? I’m going to sneak a look at him,” Cassandra said. Gregory hunched down, turning his face to the wall. “I can’t see his face,” her voice said in his ear. “But I wouldn’t worry. He’s probably just one of those harmless oddballs New York seems to have in spades.”

“You’re probably right. And it seems like he has finally lost interest in me, thankfully.”

“Tell me Wilfredo, how do you keep busy in this crazy city of ours?”

“I work as a stagehand and workshop guy at the Cornelius Theater.”

“No way! You mean you work backstage on Broadway? Making the magic happen?”

“That’s me, toiling away behind the scenes so everything goes smoothly on opening night.”

“That sounds like an amazing job.”

“It has its moments. Like today, when I walked in on our lead actress in her underwear during a fitting.” Gregory’s mouth fell open as he listened to Wilfredo explain about how he’d gone to school with the actress, and how he’d been taken aback to see her standing there in silky red undergarments, and how she didn’t even remember him from back in the day. “So she looks right at me and says: ‘Take a picture, it’ll last longer!’ I was mortified. I thought for sure I was going to get canned. And I mean I wasn’t gawking at her, I was just caught by surprise. Luckily, she doesn’t seem to have complained to anyone.”

Cassandra had been cracking up throughout the whole story, her rolling laugh ringing in Gregory’s ear. He loved her laugh. It was one of the things that had drawn him to her. And he realized only now that it had been ages since he’d last heard it. Yet here she was chortling away with this stranger.

“Oh my god, that’s the funniest thing I’ve heard in weeks.” Cassandra took a deep breath trying to bring her laughter under control. “I’m an actress myself, you know. Still waiting for my big break. Getting to Broadway is my dream.” Cassandra sketched out her acting experiences for him, and Wilfredo listened intently.

“I was a theater major too,” he confessed. “Before I dropped out.”

“What made you quit?”

“I wasn’t any good.”

“That can’t be true.”

“I had terrible stage fright. Standing onstage looking out at the audience all my lines would fly out of my head. But weirdly enough it looks like I’m going to have to dust off my acting skills. We had some major drama during rehearsal today. The lead actor fell off the stage and broke his leg.”

“What? Is he all right? Who is the actor?”

“He’ll be fine. You’ve probably heard of him. Sebastian Estrada? Latin heartthrob extraordinaire.”

“Wow. He’s a big deal! Sounds like a real setback for the play. But I guess it’s the understudy’s lucky day.”

“You’d think. But it turns out his understudy got a role in a music video and abandoned us for Tinseltown about a week ago.”

“Ouch.”

“So get this. The director was suddenly desperate for a warm body onstage, and Toby goes and talks up my acting experience. And the next thing you know the director grabs me and tells me to fill in at rehearsal tomorrow! So after our little dinner I have to rush home and learn the co-lead’s lines for the first four scenes.”

“That’s incredible! How exciting! This could be your big break!” She paused, and then her voice took on a note of concern. “I hope I’m not keeping you from memorizing the script?”

“Don’t worry, he doesn’t have a lot of lines early on. He’s more of the strong silent type. And I didn’t want to postpone our little meetup.”

I'll bet you didn't, Gregory thought furiously.

"Hey, do you need someone to run lines with? I'd be happy to help if I can."

Gregory's hands tightened into fists.

"Do you mean it?" Wilfredo asked. "Are you free tonight? It would be a *huge* help. My friend Toby—you remember Toby—said he'd give it a go. But he's got basketball tickets, and won't be home until late."

"Hey, it's not like I owe you a favor or anything," she joked. "You know, in some cultures saving someone's life means they become your slave forever."

"I'll settle for a rehearsal partner."

"Are you freaking out about tomorrow?"

"I've been doing a great job distracting myself."

"Well, let's get out of here and get to work. And don't even think about reaching for the check, mister."

"Hey, your fiancé won't mind, will he? You coming over, I mean. I don't want to cause any issues for you."

"Oh, don't worry about Gregory. I'm sure he will understand when I explain the situation."

No I won't bloody understand, Gregory fumed. Here she was having dinner with this nimrod, and now they were headed off to his apartment? Unbelievable! He gripped the edge of the table with white knuckles, willing himself not to look their way. He needed to ditch his disguise and find a way to intercept her. It was time to nip this in the bud before it got completely out of hand. He was clenching his jaw so hard that the earpiece suddenly popped out, and fell into his sparkling water. *Oh crap!* He looked up and saw Wilfredo

speaking, but now he had no idea what he was saying. He watched him flag down the waiter.

Gregory reached into his water glass with a fork and fished out the dripping earpiece. Drying it with his napkin he pressed it back into his ear. It was cold, and wet, and made no sound whatsoever.

He glanced over again in time to see Cassandra and Wilfredo dump some cash on the table and head for the exit. Gregory waved his credit card madly at the waiter, who wandered over with that moronic smile still plastered on his face. Taking the credit card, the waiter strolled off, stopping along the way to take the order at a crowded table. Gregory drummed his fingers on the metal tabletop. Maybe he should just bolt out of here without his card? But no, the waiter was finally approaching with his receipt.

“I hope you enjoyed your meal, sir.”

“Yes, yes, it was delicious. Where is the pen? I need a pen.” The waiter fished a white ballpoint from his apron. Gregory wrote in a seven-dollar tip, signed his name, and leaped off his stool.

“Don’t forget your card, sir!”

Gregory backtracked for his card and then dashed out of the restaurant. But once he got outside, Cassandra and Wilfredo were nowhere to be seen.