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Lowell Student Speaker Series

February 21, 2011

“Via! Via! Via!”

Thank you Sandy for the introduction.

With the financial recession in 2008, my family struggled to find loans that we could pay back and work we could keep. Our neighbors would put up *For Sale* signs up in the off chance that anyone was looking to buy. But nobody was. Before long, we too had a foreclosure sign on our lawn and boarded windows. After saving for seven years, we had lost our dream home and what seemed to be our only accomplishment.

To make ends meet, my sister and I had all been working since we were fifteen. First, we made smoothies, and then we sold jewelry. Between the four of us, mom and dad included, we knew every in and out of our towns' shopping centers, commercial businesses, and restaurants. Mom joked that the employee discount saved us hundreds on expenses every month. So, after we moved to from Fredericksburg back to my hometown of Alexandria, I did what I did best: I looked for a job.

But this was a recession. After unsuccessfully searching for work in the employment guides, I printed out little posters like one would for a lost cat. This would be my first attempt at creating a baseball card for myself filled with stats about my available hours, height, bench press; you name it. It took a few weeks before I found something.

It didn't pay much; that is, of course, *when* it paid. I was to be a waiter, dishwasher, busboy, bartender, and occasional baby-sitter at a family-owned Italian restaurant called Pema's. I figured: I like to meet people, I like Italian food; this would be perfect.

In the summer of 2008, *via* became the slogan of my life. *Via* is an Italian word that means, “Go!” In it's trifacta form, *Via! Via! Via!*, it means “Frankie, where the hell are you? The pasta is ready to go!” When the head chef, Cesar, said it, it meant a pay cut.

A man with a thick beard and silted way of speaking, Cesar was locally notorious. He was known for *flipping* restaurants. His most recent project involved turning a Japanese restaurant into an American hot spot. He would joke with the managers that all he had to do was buy a fryer and a few Walker Texas Ranger posters. The man, my friends, was good at what he did.

He called me *gringo* because of my pale skin and because, after years of hiding my Spanish accent, I spoke Spanish like “a white boy with a tan”. He would yell and get into his temper tantrums, but at only 5’ 2” he didn’t seem too scary. His wife, however, stood at an impressive 5’ 9” and with heels, easily 6 feet with razor sharp nails. How they met they would never say.

While Cesar prepared the meals, his wife Leslie made sure the restaurant ran like clockwork. Unfortunately for me, I was one of the gears in this metaphor. Pushing, scratching, or yelling, she made sure I remained on task. I had the *special* pleasure of working alongside Leslie for forty hours a week during the summer. Since our family didn’t have an extra car, I would have a mid-afternoon jog, in a tuxedo, across the projects and the highway to Pema’s. Leslie would greet me the same way she greeted all late waiters-- with a death stare. No “buenas”, no “¿hola, cómo estas? “, just a stare.

By the third week the inevitable stare stopped making me so frightened. She would let me sweat for a minute, curse at me, and then clapped me off to cut the butter. Some days, I was instructed to clean her van in a tuxedo in the middle of summer.

Unlike my other jobs, this one began picking away at me. I learned to curse, yell, and cut bread at ungodly speed. I rattled off rude jokes in perfect Spanish. Despite the recession, my co-workers invited me to nightclubs and local gambling spots where the real money was made. I tasted a cigar for the first time and was slapped by my mother for doing so.

After years of fading into the background of every new school, of lying about why I was always late to class (I had to take the bus), of pretending that I was okay with the haunting silence of every damn meal spent alone, *I was still faking it.*

I thought if only I could *via* badassery, I might *via* into an existence and presence that I longed for. But I never did. I spent the summer relishing

in the moral character of Dorian Gray and serving bruschetta; and still, I entered yet another school as a senior, only to fade into the background. For months, I ignored everyone. I was frequently angry, I arrived to work early and left late, I even begin to yell “via” to the new waiters.

Then one day my mom didn’t take my money anymore. She noticed the bags under my eyes; how I never talked about any people I had met (there weren’t any); and how I wouldn’t talk about work. She put her hand on my cheek like she always does and said, “Vete a dormir angelito,” Go to sleep, angel. I quit the next day.

I’m am usually horrible at giving advice, but I’ll try. Don’t via for the sake of it. Don’t fake it; it’s not worth it. And never, ever, leave a tip that’s less than 15 percent.