



# My Own Anything

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“I work in South City,” he said, eyes cast downwards.

That wasn’t what I meant when I asked where he worked. South City, like many suburbs of San Francisco, is covered in a blanket of second-hand fog and smoke. White and dreamy man-made clouds dance with the skyscrapers but somehow turn gray as they travel south. In fact, everything turns gray as you move south. The building facades of South City are nothing like the walls of Mission Street. The magic of the Marina District is lost in the current; even the local faces lose pigmentation with every mile. That’s where Jose is, far from where he wants to be.

“No, no, no. I meant what do you do in South City?”

His eyes float to the top of his head as if he’s searching for the answer somewhere in his mind. But I know it’s not the answer he’s looking for; rather a way to make the answer sound more like what he wants.

“I work in a warehouse...basically packing truffles. The nice ones.”

Jose Avina Lopez was born in the United States, but long before he could read, talk, or even walk, his family moved back to Mexico. He spent the first five years of his life in Guadalajara, living with his grandparents and many cousins, but in 2005, his parents decided to move back to the United States. He left the United States at a time before he could remember, and because of that, Jose spoke no English. He left Mexico before he

was old enough to go to school, and therefore could not read or write. He was suddenly a Spanish-speaking child in the United States who could not even read or write in his own language. Jose explains that this kind of situation is normal among people like him who have parents who grew up in another country where English is not spoken. In fact, many families struggle to choose between the comfort of their home countries and the opportunities available in the United States.

A daunting 27% of the United States population is composed of those who speak a language other than English in their household. Of this already-staggering statistic, 45% speak Spanish within their households. This means that Jose is far from alone in the adversity he’s had to face. Maybe this is why he never acknowledges his obstacles—because he feels that he is part of a larger group of people all fighting the same battle.

Jose explained that where he lived never had any significance to him. Amongst all the inconsistencies and changes within his childhood, he acknowledged that his family was one of his only constants. His father’s dedication to supporting his family, the early mornings when he would crawl back into bed smelling like fresh grass cuttings and motor oil, reminded Jose of this fact. He worked as a landscaper, crossing El Camino Real every morning, the back tires of his truck jolting him out of his seat as they flew across the train tracks.

His mother's love for him and his siblings was shown as she walked them to school, her hands soft from coconut butter and holding tightly onto his own. They too had to cross El Camino Real to reach their destination, the elementary school laying just beyond the busy street. "Cuidado," she reminded Jose every morning, "Cuidado!" But just as Jose relied on his parents, his younger siblings relied on him. He laughed as he imagined the legitimacy of his family "tree," the trunks connecting to a branch that held onto the twigs. His family was the only defining characteristic of "home," and as long as they were together, it didn't really matter where they lived or how much of an outsider he was.

In our kindergarten classroom, different corners of the room were set up to be different areas to play. One corner housed two tiny play kitchens where the girls prepared plastic eggs, plastic hamburgers, and wore pink play aprons. Another corner had wooden building blocks where I would spend most days stacking them up as high as I could before they all came tumbling down. There was also the boys' corner with small plastic trucks, cars, and various types of hats: firefighter hats, policeman hats, and construction hats.

Jose was always in the last corner. This was where kids who wanted to take naps could sleep, but Jose never slept. The last corner had an alphabet rug, each square meant for one student to sit in to keep the kids organized during storytime or other learning segments of class. But each square had a letter and word beginning with that letter. "A." "Apple." "B." "Bike." "C." "Cat." Jose spent his free play time on that rug, rolling over the different squares and trying to find the meaning within them. Some days he

would join most of the other boys in the cars and hats corner, taking turns pushing the big truck from one side of the corner to the other while wearing a cowboy hat.

On Tuesdays, my mom came in to read with Jose. They sounded out the letters Jose had been reading on the alphabet rug. As the weeks went on, the letters were strung into words, and the words became sentences. Jose began coming over to my house to spend extra time with my mom, his voice sometimes overpowering the noise of my after-school cartoons. Somewhere in his lessons with my mother, he must have misunderstood the meaning of the word "mom" because that became the word he used to address her.

As the years went on, and he developed a more accurate understanding of the word, he decided to continue calling her that and to adopt me as "hermana." But I wasn't his only sister. In fact, he has two younger siblings, Herman and Euria, whom he felt a special obligation to. He explained that once he was old enough, he could feel like one of the leaders of his family. He alone had gone through the United States school system and had learned how to speak perfect English. He knew how to succeed in a world that his parents were unfamiliar with, and he understood that he was in a position to help his younger siblings. He explained that in his eyes, there is no such thing as "friends," only family.

Jose hoped that his friends would be as consistent in his life as his family was—and only let himself become close to those he believed would.

One day Jose came to school wearing a new pair of glasses. His hair was slicked back with some new type of gel, and he looked as if he had been reborn. When I

saw him, I cocked my head and he laughed, asking, “What’s wrong?” His voice still carried the same sweetness, but it seemed like confidence had been added to the normally one-dimensional tone. That week he bought his first suit, the first of many. It was navy blue, so dark that it appeared black. I only noticed it when he bent his elbow and the light jumped off the crease, revealing the blue pigmentation. Seeing him in the blue suit with the glasses and the meticulously neat hair, it felt like he had discovered himself and that his vision was finally in sync with his facade. Jose had become what he always wanted to be. As a kid, he might have said a professional skateboarder or a boxer, but today he would say that he wanted to be his own boss.

“Do you mean you want your own company?” I asked, confused by the vague nature of his response.

“My own company, my own brand, my own anything. I just don’t want to rely on anybody anymore.”

In 2016, Jose’s parents separated. While inconsistency and adversity were never unfamiliar to him, it was difficult to imagine that something like this would happen to his family. They were the reason for all his hard work, and he always saw them as unbreakable. He always felt like the worst was behind them and that every day was movement away from the difficulty of the past. Jose will tell you that the separation was a result of his family’s financial issues, but what he’s hesitant to admit is that the money problems began because of his father’s growing problem with alcohol. The alcohol was only the beginning of the abuse. Jose would argue that although his father never physically hurt his mother, he

rejected every effort his mother made to help him. “She told me she couldn’t handle it,” he said quietly, “She was going to go live by herself.” With all the financial burdens Jose’s mother already carried, she realized that the only way she’d be able to afford living apart from her husband was to find another partner. “I guess she got along with the other person, and they had a kid,” Jose explained. His youngest brother, Ryan Caleb Lopez, was born in the middle of Jose’s senior year of high school, but all the love Jose has for his other two younger siblings is somehow missing from his relationship with Ryan. He’s the type of person who gives love naturally, but as he called his baby brother “a kid,” it was clear that his family was broken in his eyes. His one constant was gone, but Jose didn’t seem broken.

“My biggest fear? *Shit*...I don’t know. I feel like I’m going to separate from a lot of people.” Jose admits, hesitantly. He bites his lip to keep any more words from escaping, but he’s already said enough. His success is inevitable. For his entire life, he thought that the thing he depended on was his family, that his mother and his father were his crutches and that his siblings were his bandages.

But even as his crutches were taken away, he remained standing, which means that his constant was never what he thought it was. It wasn’t his family that he was reliant on, it was himself, his own aspirations, and his own character that were responsible for his vision.

“You think I’m crazy, but...I’m not. Some people think I’m crazy but they have not seen what I’ve seen. There’s a quote: ‘Don’t expect others to understand your path when they’re not given your vision.’”