

# **An Immigrant's Tale: Loving Your Job, America Style**

*by Chris Colin*

The other night, I was at a dinner table with a varied group, and we drank wine, and a perfectly friendly woman let her freak flag fly. Freaky to me, anyway, if not to other pinko Northern Californians within earshot of her abbreviated immigration polemic: "We're letting them in the country and letting them vote, and pretty soon ..."

The ellipsis was hers; it stood for the decay of the country that would've accompanied Bush's dying immigration bill.

Having already honked at a litterbug on Lombard Street that afternoon, I decided my obnoxiousness quota had safely been met and so kept quiet. This allowed me to think, and I thought about whether anti-immigrant people know many immigrants. Not a new thought -- merely the kind you might have when you're thinking of an immigrant friend of yours and wondering what he'd make of this otherwise perfectly friendly woman at dinner.

Erwin Garcia immigrated from Camagüey, Cuba, in July 2005. He is neither the job-swiping Mexican nor the dirty-bombing Middle Easterner near the dark heart of anti-immigrant hysteria. Nor is he here illegally; he met an American-born friend of mine when she was researching her dissertation in Cuba, and in 2005 they were married. But he is an immigrant all the same, and as politicians scuffle to define what America is all about -- that's the fundamental, visceral question roiling any immigration debate, isn't it? -- I thought I'd see what Erwin had to say about it. Ironic to that scuffle, after all, is that the newly arrived often have the most clear-eyed perspective on the country, especially if they grew up under an entirely different political and economic system.

In particular, I wanted to talk to Erwin because his experience as an immigrant is inseparable from his experience looking for work, which became necessary as soon as he arrived. That, and his job is sort of memorable.

The quickest way to understand what he does is to step into a restaurant bathroom. Or stroll into your office kitchen and look next to the bulletin board. Or walk past a scaffolding. Those signs you see -- Employees Must Wash Hands, Emergency Care for Adult Choking, This Is a Designated Construction Site -- well, it's not that Erwin makes them. He works for the company, Poster Compliance, that takes orders for them, and renews them when your business is due for an updated one. Erwin's job is data entry.

And he loves it.

In my experience, people sometimes enjoy their jobs, but rarely do they use the L-word if there isn't a boss in the room. I thought possibly there was a language gap. Or maybe he was being sarcastic -- he's got a sense of humor, Erwin does. I asked in a few different ways.

"You love your job."

"Yes."

"I don't mean you like it. You love it."

"I love it."

To understand this requires understanding all that led up to it. I first met Erwin the afternoon he landed in California. Several of us -- friends of his now-wife -- had gathered to hear what this new arrival, with his virgin eyes, might teach us about our country. What would leap out at this person who'd never set foot in a capitalist society? The size of our Hummers? Our billboards? All those varieties of cereal? He arrived and, indeed, something had profoundly affected him.

"Las Vegas," he said, shaking his head. Ha. We laughed and shook our heads in the way one does. Las Vegas.

Except he wasn't laughing. He'd had a brief layover there, and it was soon clear he hadn't experienced the funny/ironic depressingness we, ourselves, associated with that city. Senior citizens hunched lifelessly over slot machines struck Erwin as neither funny nor ironic. Eventually, we located our gravitas and confirmed that, yes, those casinos are unjokingly tragic. But by then it was time for him to go inside and unpack. I remember thinking, with that special capitalist's shame, that the transition was going to be rough for him.

Erwin had no choice but to throw himself into the very system that had spawned a phalanx of slot junkies. He took what he could find: first a data-entry job for someone his wife knew, then landscaping work, a stint at a catering company, some time in Berkeley Bowl's produce department, more time as a cashier at Ikea. None lasted long -- some were temporary to begin with, others just a bad fit for a person new in the country.

When I tell Erwin I was surprised he hadn't liked the groovy Berkeley Bowl -- I'd assumed it would be a warm, welcoming place for someone fresh off the plane -- he laughs.

"In Berkeley, they act so friendly. And it's supposed to be so, you know, Berkeley. But so many people I met there, they were weird. They asked so many questions. They were friendly, but they wanted to hear me say thank you for letting me work here," he said.

Erwin remembers one shopper at Berkeley Bowl asking where he was from. He said Cuba. She asked a few more questions. On the surface it was an ordinary conversation, coming out of ordinary, even welcoming, curiosity. But Erwin says there was also a strange undercurrent -- maybe a kind of pride over bequeathing this poor immigrant a spot in paradise. Indeed, at the end, the woman gestured around the store and said, "You must feel very lucky."

"I'm stocking fruit -- do I have to feel lucky?" Erwin recalls thinking. He felt that the woman, a middle-class Berkeleyite, didn't seem to be holding herself to the same standard.

That wasn't the only friction he encountered as he came to understand working in America. Not surprisingly, he finds Americans' general relationship to their jobs jarring at times -- "They put their life into whatever their career or job is," he says. The frantic American career track strikes him as unsavory, too. Though Erwin would like to make documentary films one day, he's loath to take the frenzied path that would get him there fastest.

But since being here, he's also changed; Cuba is now jarring to him, too. A little over a year after arriving in the United States, he got to make a trip home. The attitude toward

work there struck him as stranger than he'd remembered it. He describes seeing a store there that had only three pairs of orthopedic shoes for sale -- and three employees in charge of selling them.

"I was like, 'What are they doing here? Who's going to come to this store? These people are parasites! They're wasting their time and the state's money! Which means everyone's money!'"

Living in Cuba, Erwin had earned \$7 a month doing accounting work for an office that sold fishing supplies. Accounting had been chosen for him -- the Cuban government said he could either do that or become a waiter. His monthly salary was enough for less than a week's worth of dinner. No matter, the most significant economy is the underground one, he says.

"The real work starts when you get off work," he says. "You learn to make money. If you work at a gas station, you'll steal a gallon, then get on a bicycle and sell it. This is Cuba."

Erwin grew up the son of a neurologist -- "Not just any neurologist, but from Cuba's first class of them. Fidel signed his diploma." The honor didn't amount to much in the paycheck department. Erwin's heart broke when he saw his father selling rice on the street to make ends meet. He was wearing a hat to disguise himself. Later, his father went to Chad for two years of work.

"Look at that. A doctor in Cuba has to go to Africa to make money," Erwin says.

From \$7 a month, Erwin now earns \$12 an hour, plus benefits. But that doesn't seem to be what he loves about his job. Compared to his experiences in Berkeley, he says everyone in Lafayette is friendly and accepting, with no weird feelings about him coming from elsewhere.

"We're like a family. We talk about what we did over the weekend, what we're doing the next weekend, we talk about movies -- then we work again."

And the work is satisfying, he says; moreover, it also seems to be attended by a certainty that a person really can do anything he wants in America. Making documentary films doesn't strike Erwin as some distant, impossible dream -- on the contrary, it's something he expects to get around to, when he's ready. And so maybe with this, and after weirdness at the Berkeley Bowl, and a father's trip to Chad, and the chaos of moving your life from one country to another -- maybe things could be worse, job-wise, and you don't just like yours, you start to love it.

Two years after Erwin swapped one culture for another, one economy for another, one language for another and in some ways one self for another, I remind him of that first afternoon we met, when he was despondent over the Las Vegas misery he'd witnessed.

"Do you remember that?"

"Of course," he says. He hunches over to recreate the gamblers' gloomy posture. But then he sits up and chuckles at the memory.

"No!" I protest. "I can't believe you're laughing -- you hated it!"

"Well, I wouldn't want to do [what they were doing]," Erwin concedes with a shrug. "But it's their life. We all have a choice of what to do. Choice is a good thing."

Spoken like a true -- well, what?

"After I came here, I realized how Cuban I am. That happens to everyone -- they become more Cuban after they leave. But also I'm not Cuban, I'm not American," he says. "I'm Cuban American."

### **About The Author**

Chris Colin was a writer-editor at Salon, and before that a busboy, a bread deliverer and a bike messenger, among other things. He's the author of "What Really Happened to the Class of '93," about the lives of his former high school classmates, and co-author of The Blue Pages, a directory of companies rated by their politics and social practices. His writing has appeared in the New York Times, Mother Jones, the New York Observer, McSweeney's Quarterly and several anthologies. He lives in San Francisco.