

# Forty-Cent Tip

Stories of New York City Immigrant Workers

BY THE STUDENTS OF THREE NEW YORK PUBLIC  
INTERNATIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS



  
next generation press



INTRODUCTION BY Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco

Edited by What Kids Can Do

## My Feet on the Ground

*Office cleaning person*

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Colombia

**A**N EMPTY OFFICE MAKES ME WONDER: Is my life as silent and isolated as my job? I am part of a doctor's office. That sounds good, hah! But I am just there after working hours, to clean the dust and vacuum the floor.

The day I left Colombia, I did it without regrets. Even though I worked in a pharmaceutical company in my country, I knew that here I would have to do any reasonable job that came my way. Now I work for a cleaning company, in the doctor's office and at a ballet academy. My benefits amount to only one, having a stable job. My salary is twelve dollars an hour, and I work seven hours per day. It is not a lot of money, but if you see my work, that is what it's worth.

I spend my afternoons working, and I know that I am not part of my daughters' life. I barely see them. That is my greatest sacrifice: being there for them, but not physically as I wish.

Now I am not killing myself, working long schedules and working on holidays as I used to. My work keeps life busy while I wait for my youngest daughter to graduate from high school so I can move, probably to another country or state. After sacrificing myself most of my life for my daughters, it is time for me to take a break. Eternal vacations, here I come. Five years from now, those will be my words.

I dream that one of my daughters will be a dentist in a faultless huge office like this, surrounded with advanced technology, working with Americans that are respectful and helpful. But for now, I just clean and clean. Hopes and dreams keep my feet on the ground. I do not speak as much English as you do, but I understand more than you imagine.



## Forty-Cent Tip

Waiter

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Colombia

**O**LÉ! OLÉ!” I HEAR THE SOUND OF PEOPLE SCREAMING for the bull killer as I help the poor bull that got hurt. Then, “Eduardo, come clean table number one!” Oh, I’m back to reality. It gets me mad. In my country, I was a well known veterinarian, but here I’m just a waiter who has no name. One day my name is Carlos, another day Oscar, taking on other people’s identities, because to the government I don’t exist. Like the weather in this city, every three months I change. I’m undocumented—so what? I still get food on my table.

I’m a dreamy person; my mind goes off to different places at the wrong time. When I’m at work, my mind is back in Colombia. Here, I have to clean tables and be nice to people. In Colombia, I helped animals and screamed at people for how they took care of them. Back in Colombia, I tried to save animals from dying. Here I serve dead animals on plates. It’s funny, if you think about it; you don’t know how good you had it until you lose everything.

I came to this country to make more money. I remember when my mother used to tell me, “In the U.S. you can find a job on every corner. It’s the only place where everybody is equal; it’s the promised land, *mijito*.” Mom, I love you, but that was the biggest lie anybody ever told me. I have been here four years, and I still don’t see the promised land. Yeah, you get money, but nobody tells you about the hard work of an immigrant, and people making fun of your English. You can never get respect if you come from another country. For a person who has graduated from university, it’s hard to think you will be working at a restaurant in New York City.

Don’t get me wrong, my job is okay. Except on the days when little kids are here, leaving the biggest messes ever. Or the old guy that always sits at table three, who wants his glass to look like thin air, as if it wasn’t even there. He always asks for the same meal, a steak with a Coke. It costs \$39.60, and he leaves on the table forty bucks. You do the math, to see how much I get for a tip.

But a job is a job. At least I have food and a very small home with one room. So thanks, Mom, for these ideas of coming here for a better life. It is good—but no better.



## Breathing My Own Death

*Asbestos removal worker*

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Czech Republic

**M**Y FAMILY WAS POOR, WITH SEVEN BROTHERS AND SIX SISTERS, and I left my home at sixteen, working on farms and for anyone who needed help with anything. Then I found my passion, working as a blacksmith for so long I don't even remember. About seven years ago, I moved my family from the Czech Republic to the United States. I didn't want my two daughters to struggle like me.

Any male that enters the United States from my country usually ends up in construction work. I had many jobs in construction, but they all used me because they knew my immigration status. Sometimes they wouldn't even pay me; if they did, it was very little. We had to buy our own tools. I could never complain to anyone, because even now I know only about five words in English.

A Czech friend who lives near me told me that I should do what he does, removing asbestos. As soon as he said that scary word, I thought of my health. But how could I refuse, when he said \$38 plus benefits? The dark cloud of asbestos left my head; money was what I concentrated on.

To get into asbestos removal, every state requires a different test. I took the test in Polish, but my Polish wasn't great either. I took it three times before I passed. I am so glad it's over; at 45, I cannot study anymore. But my daughter says I have golden hands, because without them we would be nothing.

I can't say that I hate my job. I can speak Czech there; that's a big relief. I get good money, and my family has great benefits. Still, things that are too good usually have a bad side. Sometimes I have to work for fourteen hours straight, to finish the job. I have to wear a special mask every minute that I work with asbestos—at least that's the law, but my company doesn't follow it. If we had an inspection, the company would have many violations.

It is not nice to see my co-workers who have been in the asbestos field for some time. They cough so much that they start to choke. Many have died or are seriously ill. I think a lot about my own health, and whether I will reach my hopes and dreams. In five years, I see myself back in my homeland, with my wife and my own house; my kids will come and visit us. But for now, I'll just stick to breathing my own death.



## Waiting to See You Again

*School bus attendant*

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Peru

**I**T'S ALREADY TEN P.M.; IF I'M LUCKY, I'll be at home around midnight. I'm still waiting for the bus. This is a quiet and dark place, and it's snowing; I can hardly feel my hands and face. The solitude makes me remember everything as if it was yesterday. "Mamita, regresa pronto," were my daughter's last words when we were saying goodbye in the airport. My son didn't even look at me; he put his head down and I saw tears running down his little face. That was when I came from Peru, five years ago.

In Peru I worked as a secretary for a prestigious company. The work was good. Even though I was a single mother, I never struggled to give my two kids what they needed. But the company went into bankruptcy and closed. I couldn't find another job like that one.

My niece had already been in this country seven years, managing a laundromat. She offered to help me find a job here to assure the well-being of my kids. The father of my children could take care of them while I was in this country. A few months later, I left my house and everything that I knew and loved.

Working at the laundromat with my niece was stressful and hard. I would open it on weekends and work from seven a.m. to nine p.m. I slept in her living room and paid a rent of \$450 per month. Her house was in Jamaica and the laundromat in Rockaway; I had to wait at the bus stop half an hour in winter. Six months later I left that house and quit that job.

Now I work every morning in a school bus for handicapped children of all ages. My job is to help them get in and out and to maintain order in the bus. It's hard with the teenage kids; they are stronger and very disrespectful. But I get benefits that I didn't have in the laundromat and enough money to maintain my kids in Peru.

I still dream about bringing them to this country, after I get my residency. My son and daughter are young adults and I know they need me more than ever. One day when my son answered the phone, I didn't recognize his voice; I thought it was some friend of his dad. My daughter graduates this year from high school. I'm so proud of her, but I feel sad that I won't be at her graduation day. I will never know if I made the best decision, but we all need to sacrifice something to get something.



## Please God, Don't Cry Today

Car wash worker

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Dominican Republic

**N**OT AGAIN! IT'S RAINING FOR THE THIRD TIME THIS WEEK; I'll have to take the day off. The water steals my job; my tips vanish in the air. Everyone who owns a car goes out on rainy days so the water can do its work for free. They do not see that I need to wash their car to survive.

Right now I am waiting for the cars to come. I don't use technology to do my job. My hands move up and down with a wet sop towel. It keeps my hands and body exercising, and I'm healthy, thanks to that and all the food that I eat. But I have to pay my dentist bill.

I came ten years ago looking for a better future and I'm still looking for it. Growing up in Brooklyn with the Dominican community, it was hard to learn good English. I know English, but not what's necessary to work at a law firm or at an executive office.

"Hey, *plátano*, the next car is mine!" my co-worker screams, as if I would get mad. All right, take it. "One day I'll own this place, you'll see." This cat does not believe me, and laughs at me. Not really, he laughs with me. Well, one day I'll buy this car wash. At my job, there isn't any way to go up. Either you own the place or you are a worker.

I'm working on the American dream. I'm legal, I have the green card. I'm saving money; in a regular week I make from \$420 to \$450, but at Christmas the tips I make are a lot more. Some woman once told me, "Work in a car wash equals a poor man." But I live well, and most important, I am saving more money than she imagines. I am twenty-two right now and I'm thankful for all the opportunities that I have. "*Gracias Dios por otro día de vida y de trabajo.*"

How I miss the sunny days in the Dominican Republic. Back then I didn't care if it rained. In twenty years, I'll be living back in Los Minas, my hometown, which is special in every way. I'll buy a huge house with a *balcón*, and two more cars. That is the place where I would rather be, instead of here at the car wash, where I keep on praying, "Please God, don't cry today, let me work the whole day."



## Bleach on Color Clothes

*Laundromat worker*

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Indonesia

**E**IGHT YEARS I'VE BEEN WORKING IN THIS LAUNDROMAT, washing and drying the clothes of customers. It is an easy job, because washing clothes is what I do for my family all the time. The only differences now are that I have to wash many more clothes every day, and I am washing for other people.

I don't have long work hours, only eight hours each day and six days a week. We don't have any vacations, holidays, or health benefits; I have to go to work when I'm sick. But in this job I can meet many new people and wash my own clothes for free. The boss is a nice person, which is why I have stayed for so long. Each morning, my co-workers take turns buying breakfast for each other and eating together. We help each other when we are tired of washing clothes, and we collaborate. I don't have to worry about getting hurt.

Even though the job is easy, I always make some mistakes. I might lose one or two of the customers' clothes when I'm not careful. Once I accidentally put bleach on clothes that had color; the colors went away and some of the delicate clothes were ripped. When the customer came to pick up the clothes, I told her what had happened. She screamed at me in front of everybody; I wanted to dig a hole and hide. I had to pay a hundred dollars to her to calm her down.

I knew a little English when I was in Indonesia, and after about ten years here, it has advanced. A medium English level is fine to know what to tell customers when they drop off the clothes.

In Indonesia, I was an accountant in a television factory. I came here to seek a better life. However, even with a higher salary, life here isn't as good as in Indonesia, where everything is much cheaper. There, I had a bigger house and even a housekeeper; here we can only rent a house. I don't take care of my family's expenses; my husband earns much more than I do. Four years ago, I brought my daughter here, and last year I brought my son. It would be better if I could bring my parents, too. But I am happy that my family can be together.

