

You're Not Qualified

by Ben Wright

This was it. My chance to get out of the hole I felt I had been living in.

I had just flown from Ottawa, where I had been living for three years working dead-end jobs, to Toronto. I was on my way to Atlanta, where a dream job and the chance to be closer to be my long-distance girlfriend of two and a half years waited.

This wasn't supposed to be happening, at least not in my mind. I felt like I'd beaten overwhelming odds just to get to this point.

I grew up relatively poor in eastern Canada, the third of four kids. We moved every few years and never really put down roots. Our family battled through mental illness, emotional abuse, and then the breakup of our family when I was 13.

There were many times we would have gone hungry, if not for the kindness of people in our community. Every once in a while a box of groceries would just appear at our door. We were so broke the one fall that we waited until the potato harvest was over and then picked the leftover potatoes ourselves, just like the story of Naomi and Ruth in the Old Testament.

Coming from a low-income, single-parent family, there was no money for college. Kids from poor, broken homes weren't college material anyway, were they?

My mother disagreed though, and so with her encouragement I scraped together enough student loans and small scholarships to pay for my first degree and then earned a scholarship for grad school at Wake Forest, where I earned my second.

Wake Forest, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, was where I fell in love with the South, and where I met the girl who became my girlfriend. I was eager to get back down there. There were no jobs for me in Ottawa, and Atlanta was booming, ripe with opportunity.

Moving from Canada to the United States is harder than most people realize, but after a few years of exploring options everything was coming together. I had landed an internship with the Atlanta Thrashers. It didn't pay much, but it was a shot at a new life.

All I had to do was clear customs and immigration in the busiest airport in Canada, at 4:30 on a Friday afternoon. Easy enough, right? I had packed up my apartment, shipped my belongings ahead to my girlfriend's parent's house, and I had my job offer in hand.

It was hot in the immigration area. The airport was loud, busy, crowded, and filled with the smells of a thousand people from all over the world. I waited for my turn and then approached the Customs and Border Patrol agent with my papers and passport, my carryon bag slung over my shoulder.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Atlanta."

"Why?"

"For a new job with the Atlanta Thrashers and the Atlanta Hawks."

"Oh wow. Good for you. That's really cool. Do you have an offer letter?"

"Yes I do. Here it is."

"That looks good. Go ahead."

That was it?

"I'm free to go?" I asked, trying to hide my relief as my heart jumped.

"No, you have to go in there first. I'm not an immigration officer. This is just the screening."

'In there' turned out to be a much smaller room. A quiet room filled with tension. Rows of people sat in uncomfortable chairs waiting for a turn to talk to the next available agent. As each

person was motioned forward for their turn to be processed, we all shuffled over one seat, inching closer to our turn to discover our fates.

As I waited, I watched the agents and listened to their questions so I would know what to expect.

'Don't let it be that agent,' I thought to myself. He was bald, muscular, and imposing, towering over everyone who approached his station. I don't know if it was the muscles, the tattoos, or just the way he carried himself, but something about him screamed former military. He was giving travelers he spoke to a hard time, as if their presence was an annoyance.

He was irritated, constantly looking at his watch as if his shift was about to end.

Anyone but him, my mind pleaded. Please not him.

Then it was my turn.

I got him.

"Where are you going and why?" he asked.

"To Atlanta for a job. Here is my offer letter and my resume."

He looked.

I waited.

"You aren't qualified."

He stamped my boarding pass "Denied entry"

He looked down his nose at me, and I felt an inch tall. I'd worked so hard to get to this point. Done everything right, or so I thought. And now he had the power to say I wasn't good enough?

"But I have a job offer," I said, trying to plead my case. "They think I'm qualified. It's to work for an NHL team and NBA team."

"No. You aren't qualified for this position."

"I have an American master's degree."

"That doesn't matter to me, and I have the final say."

"So what do I do?"

"You leave this area.... What you do after that isn't my concern" he said with contempt.

He pointed to the door and I left, dejected. I held myself together and called my girlfriend. She cried a lot. I cried a lot. She asked how we could appeal the agent's decision.

"I don't think we can," I said.

I called my hiring manager, and he talked to some lawyers. They recommended trying again at a different airport on a different day, with a rewritten offer letter.

Stranded in Toronto on a Friday evening with my belongings on the way to Georgia, I talked to an airline representative. She was understanding and got me on a flight back to Ottawa. I used a payphone to call a friend to pick me up- I didn't have a cell

phone because I had sold it, along with many other things, to pay for my move to Atlanta.

I stayed with him for a couple of day, and on Monday morning, I would try again. This time I was flying direct from Ottawa, with a new letter in hand that clearly spelled out why I was qualified for the job I'd been offered.

Would it be enough to convince the next agent? Was I flagged in the system? What notes had the previous agent left in my file? Did I even have a file? I had no idea how this worked.

I was a bundle of nerves for two days, barely able to sleep or eat. It felt like a lifetime.

Monday morning arrived and I took the bus to the Ottawa airport. I cleared security and headed into the US immigration preclearance office. It was quiet. Calm. I was the only traveler there.

I was called forward to a desk and offered a seat. The agent was middle-aged, and skinny with glasses. He looked bureaucratic. I didn't know every rule for the type of work permit I was applying for, but I was sure he did. I was hoping my paperwork be good enough for him.

"Where are you going and why?"

"To Atlanta for a job. Here is my offer letter and my resume."

"Have you worked in the United States before?"

"Only as a college student on a student visa."

He looked at my papers.

I thought my heart was going to beat right out of my chest.

"Give me a few minutes to check something," he said.

Oh no.

He got up and went into an office.

I don't know how long he was gone. It probably wasn't more than a few minutes but it felt like days. The longer he was gone the more I worried.

He came back and sat down.

"So... what happened on Friday in Toronto?" he asked.

Not knowing what he had seen in my file, a million responses ran through my head in an instant. I wanted to blame it on the previous agent, to complain about the arbitrariness of the system. I knew better, so I proceeded carefully.

"Well, I guess I didn't have my paperwork in order," I said. "It was my first time applying for a work permit and I really didn't know what I was doing."

There was a long pause as he glanced over my documents again.

"That sounds right," he said knowingly, as if he had heard everything I had left unspoken.

He stamped my passport, granting me work authorization and a new lease on life.

"Welcome to America," he said with a smile. "Have a great flight."