

Proof of Service

Gina says there are two mandatory employee trainings at Brighter2morrow. The official training keeps the client happy. The secret training keeps the rest of us alive.

Official rule #1: Collect Proof-of-Service

The only proof available to show services rendered, is what the client produced during hypersleep. Collected, analyzed and cataloged for your review upon waking. Why anyone would want a detailed survey of their own dung is beyond me.

“Revulsion, disgust, nausea?” Gina told me on my first day, “Surprisingly temporary.”

The fluids, Gina says, become background noise after the first month. I’d lose my mind at this job if it weren’t for Gina. I don’t remember Mom much, but I like to think her and Gina were a lot alike. Compassionate enough to notice when you’re hiding your tears. Loving enough to let you cry for a minute. Tough enough to tell you to suck it up after the minute’s over or else you’ll get a demerit from Management.

Mrs. Tillis’s family photos watched me unlock the door to her penthouse and push the squeaky service cart down the corridor to her bedroom. Mrs. Tillis appeared saint-like, haloed in pillows, wires and tubes u’ing up to machines. Sanctified in sleep.

I could do whatever I want to Mrs. Tillis right now. Sure, the likelihood of getting caught was high. But if you had nothing to lose, and everything to gain, what was stopping you?

Secret rule #1: Don't get caught skimming fluids.

The night before my 18th birthday, Dad sat by the front door of our apartment, sweating over his watch, grip tightening around the straps of my duffle, as the seconds ticked closer to midnight.

Mom was the one who wanted kids, he always said. After she died, he would have found a dumpster if it wouldn't have gotten him thrown in the work camps. We both knew what would happen the moment he was released of his obligation.

By streetlight, I walked from Dad's apartment, along with all the other kids who got kicked out on their birthdays, to the employment office. Hours later, I filled out Dad's name as an emergency contact on the Brighter2morrow application.

Mrs. Tillis ordered the basic bio-fresh package. Only took about 15 minutes to brush her teeth, turn her so she wouldn't get bed sores, change out the colostomy bags, dab the catheter ports with anti-bacterial swabs and collect the *Proof-of-Service*. There was time before the next shift. And I couldn't help myself.

I brushed and braided her hair. Then I sat down next to her on the bed, wrapped an arm around her shoulder, careful not to disturb any of the machines keeping her asleep, and nudged her head into the crook of my neck. I hummed *Rock-a-by Baby*. *Country Road*. *Moon River*. Every lullaby I knew. Twice.

Official rule #2: Follow the client's orders to the letter.

For enough money, you can request almost anything, as long as it's not explicitly sexual.

Clients get creative. Mr. Hammer ordered to be changed into a different three piece suit daily. Employees are instructed to take a picture of a dressed Mr. Hammer, including pictures of new underwear for *Proof-of-Service*.

Mrs. Kimball ordered her pubic hair trimmed and collected. You could do a lot worse than managing her reddish-grey clippings. However, Mrs. Kimball failed to disclose she'd contracted chlamydia before going under.

Mr. Brannigan requested manual ejaculations Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. On the notes it says the service is for "promotion of prostate health." What's not made explicit in the client's order was whether the service could be administered by electronic anal stimulation.

"Keep a vibrator and a liter jug of lube in service cart," Gina says.

Secret Rule #2: Don't be greedy.

"Sperm, by and large, is cheap," Gina says. "This is the issue when your gender tries to fuck everything."

C-suite sperm will only get you an extra loaf of bread. C-suite eggs can put your kids through college.

Anyone can learn how to collect blood. But for the big ticket items (bone marrow, stem cells), Gina has the number of a reputable harvester. To a harvester, clients aren't people. More like prize steers. Dollar signs superimposed on each limb and eyeball. They'll quote you a

tempting price on Mr. Woodhouse's gall bladder or the current market rate in Dubai for Ms. Donnelly.

"Your predecessor," Gina said, "nearly killed Mrs. Green. The poor lady woke up anemic with barely two eggs to rub together."

I ask what happened to my predecessor and a shadow falls over Gina's face.

Official Rule #3: Breach of employee code of conduct will result in punishment to the fullest extent of the law.

If a client's organs get trafficked during your shift, Gina says, Brighter2morrow won't sick the cops on you. No, you'll still have to show up to work the next day. But they will send a van full of guys in balaclavas to your family's house. Parents, brothers, sisters, sometimes cousins, even kids, maybe a neighbor or two, they take the Black Bag Express to the work camps. There they'll stay until Mrs. McCrory's spleen is returned and you work off the expense incurred to recover it, plus interest.

Secret rule #3: Don't get attached to the clients.

"Brighter2morrow triple screens for sickos after what happened to Mr. Burr," Gina said, "So it's unlikely you'll do anything gross. But for the rest of us, the client's vulnerability is overwhelming. I don't know how to explain it. It's the parental instinct on steroids."

On Wednesdays I swaddle Mr. Arp until he looks like a mummy with his face sticking out of the blanket. Saturdays I read Mrs. Keller board books from the lost-and-found. Thursdays I give

Dr. Brisson some tummy time. It's a pain getting him on the floor, but it's supposed to be good for abdominal muscles and neck strength.

"The problem is," Gina says, "clients wake up eventually."

This perfect angel you've been nurturing for the past three months turns back into the hedge fund manager that crashed the housing market.

Official Rule #4: Always wear your Personal Protective Equipment.

During the day, infected street people paw at your bunny suit. They cough droplets on your mask and goggles, asking for help from their bleeding mouths. As you push your service cart along the sidewalk, one skyscraper to the next, you become a moving buffet of pathogens.

"Carry extra everything," Gina says, "Gloves, bonnets, booties, wipes, gels, sprays, creams, blankets, towels. Acid. Fire. Anything. Everything. Bring it all. Never be caught lacking."

Infecting a client is grounds for termination, no questions asked.

Everyone competes for the graveyard shift. Curfew makes street people less brazen, unless they want a one-way trip to the work camps.

"I got kicked out at your age too," Gina says. It broke her parent's heart, but they couldn't afford it anymore, had to move into a smaller place where the rent was cheaper.

"I see you," Gina says, with a little frown like she might cry.

I want to tell her, at least you have a family that cares about you. Dad hasn't texted or called in months. He's probably at a strip club right now, chomping on a fat cigar, celebrating.

Secret Rule #4: Never follow the cosmetics team.

Clients can order a simple trim, a high and tight, even a full blow out. Service does their best to schedule the haircuts toward the end of the contract term. But every so often a Mr. Tillis wants a bi-weekly tighten-up and God help you if your shift is after the cosmetics team. The clippings invade your PPE.

And every single time, a hair will find its way into your mask and get stuck in the back of your throat. It will not be a normal hair either. It will be a magical hair that evades all efforts to pull it free. Stick your finger back there all you want, until you almost vomit. You're not getting that hair out until meal break.

Official Rule #5: Unauthorized personnel is prohibited.

The real joke is the first paycheck. After taxes and fees, there's barely enough to pay rent. Management is practically begging you to call the harvesters.

The first time I went hungry I asked myself, How easy would it be to sell Mr. Zenger's eyes and buy a log cabin far away? Grow food. Maybe meet someone. Have a baby. Disappear.

They would come for Dad. He would break his back on a boulder in the camps, be mercifully shot in the head over an open grave. Would that feel like justice or revenge?

I was more repulsed by the idea of a harvester taking a knife to one of my clients. That night I rubbed citrus scented diaper cream on a rash beginning to form around Mr. Zenger's waistline. My empty stomach felt like a screaming hot skillet. I called the harvester.

A knock at Mr. Malloy's apartment door. Through a warm, bearded smile Daniel introduced himself. He looked more like the type of guy that might collect lizards instead of heart valves. He rattled off a bunch of options and dollar amounts.

"I'm nervous," I said, "I don't want him to get hurt."

Mr. Malloy ordered a twice weekly shave. Unrequested was the warm lather and the straight razor *scratch-scratch* across his cheeks until they felt like polished leather.

"Who," Daniel pointed, "Him?"

Mr. Malloy also did not request to be wrapped up in his sheets like a burrito and shooshed as he snored.

"There's a demand for cerebral spinal fluid at the moment. Non-invasive. Zero scarring. Pretty lucrative. Not a bad choice for your first time."

We rolled Mr. Malloy onto his side. I held his hand as Daniel swabbed his lower back with an alcohol wipe.

"He's not going to wake up, like, paralyzed or anything, is he?" I asked as Daniel palpated Mr. Malloy's vertebrae with vinyl gloved fingertips.

He tore open a sterile syringe from its package with his free hand and teeth.

"Probably not."

Daniel peeled a stack of bills off a wad and put them in my hand before he left.

Secret rule #5: No leaving scars.

Even your babies can piss you off sometimes. Mr. Adams rolls off the bed, sending a colostomy splatter across the wall. Ms. Balkom neglected to disclose she suffers from night

terrors and fills her apartment with screams at any disturbance. Mr. Brody routinely pulls out his IV which means whoever is in the area has to drop whatever they're doing to go make sure he doesn't wake himself up.

“We all need to blow off steam,” Gina says.

A wet rolled up towel makes a satisfying crack across the bare ass of a client. You can beat a person's shins with a bedsheet wrapped around a broom handle until your arms get tired. I find satisfaction in the smaller punishments. Plucked nose hairs. Slapped titties. Vigorous noogies.

The second time I went hungry, I called Daniel.

“The market for spinal fluid seems to have cratered.”

I grab a chunk of Mr. Harris's arm flab and twist.

“I'm getting a lot of requests for skin, kidneys, glands of all kinds.”

My nails leave a trail of dead white skin and I lick my palm to wipe them away.

“What about eggs?”

“Always demand for C-suite eggs.”

“How's it done?” I sigh.

Daniel tells me about transvaginal ultrasound aspiration. Probes and needles. I bristle.

Daniel says, “Okay, well. Call me when you want to make some money.”

Official Rule #5: Respect the client's privacy.

The squeak of my service cart echoed up from the sidewalk to the faces of the apartment buildings. Past curfew, you can hear these little things you wouldn't otherwise during the day, like the traffic lights click as they change.

A government official stood in front of Ms. Balkom's building. Her contract expired last week. I'm was on auto-pilot, pushing past her building when the entrance opened and I felt a blast of cool air. There was Ms. Balkom, swishing toward me in a silk trench coat, trailed by the government official.

A mask covered her face, but I could tell by the hair. I helped the cosmetics team layer in the pasty dark chestnut hair die, the result of which shimmers under the halogens of the building's awning.

I wasn't thinking. I only saw the soft hair I stroked as Ms. Balkom slept. I open my arms as she swished closer. In retrospect, I recognized how silly I looked. A tiny, bunny-suited cleaner, face obscured by a mask and goggles, arms outstretched to this woman of consequence.

"Back away," the government official stepped between us.

Ms. Balkom brought her bag in front of her, shuffled backward in her heels.

A long car screeched to the curb. The government official opened the backseat door, held me at bay with an open palm. Ms. Balkom and the official dove in and the car peeled down the avenue, running red lights, the door swinging wildly until a hand reached out and nabbed it closed.

My arms drooped down and I watched the car screech around the corner. My safety goggles started to mist up.

Secret Rule #5: Seriously. Don't get attached to the clients.

“I warned you,” Gina says as I soaked the front of her Brighter2morrow jump suit with tears and snot. Those are basically worthless on the open market.

When I stopped blubbering, I said, “It happened so fast. I couldn’t help myself.”

“They’re not your babies,” Gina looked at me with her chin down, “Say it.”

I mumbled it. Gina knows.

Official rule #6: If you come upon an active crime scene, run to safety, then notify the authorities.

The cosmetics team has left hair everywhere in Mrs. Lindell’s bedroom. As I collect the Proof-of-Service, sure enough, a magical immovable hair appears in the back of my throat. Coughing, hawking, plucking. Nothing works. The hair has commandeered my uvula. Another hour until meal break.

Fuck it. You know what, Mrs. Lindell? We’re having a spa night.

I click on the TV, pull a nail kit from my service cart, burrow under the covers next to Mrs. Lindell, and rest her hand on my knee.

“What do you think?” I present the polish bottles to her, “Rajah Ruby? Vodka & Caviar?”

I hold the colors up to her nails as the news talks about the new virus. This one paralyzes you from the waist down.

“Ah, here we are. Rouge Fatál.”

A window crash, like a dissonant orchestra, surges from the dining room. Then silence. Then whispers. Then crunching glass.

Mrs. Lindell's penthouse is a shotgun layout, the only way to the front door from her bedroom is through the dining room.

Secret rule #6: There is usually nowhere to run. So hide.

The only place to hide in Mrs. Lindell's proto-modern revival decorated bedroom is under her bed.

Bootsteps down the hall. Two pairs prowl softly into the bedroom, circle the bed skirt.

The magical hair wants me dead. Like a bug's antenna, trying to crawl its way up and out my throat. I reach two fingers back as far as they will go, but the hair doges every pinch. A cough slips loose. The boots snap their toes toward the bed. Guns ratchet.

"What the fuck, Teddy!" One of the boot owners whispers, *"You said they were gone!"*

The other boot owner shooshes.

"Come out," a voice says, "slowly."

Two men, one maybe Dad's age and rounder in the gut, another younger and bird-like in his movements, point handguns at me as I crawl out from under the bed.

"Take a seat," the Dad-aged man points to Mrs. Lindell's feet.

I sit by Mrs. Lindell's side, wrap my fingers around her IV port.

Secret Rule #7: There is usually nowhere to hide. So fight.

"What are you doing?" the bird man rattles his gun.

“When I pull this IV out,” I say as though I’m talking to a child, “my employer gets an alert that this client is in trouble and a medevac team is here in thirty seconds.”

“Let’s bail, Teddy” the bird man says.

“Shut up,” the Dad-aged man holsters his gun and squats in front of me.

“Let us do our business. Then we’ll leave. And you never mention you saw us to anyone. Can I count on you for that?”

I grip the IV port.

“Wait. Look,” the man walks into hallway. A jangle of keys comes from the dark corridor. The man returns with a lanyard, holds out the a badge attached.

“Do you know who this woman is? What she’s done?”

Eileen Morgan Lindell, the badge tells me. Chief Discipline Officer. LightWork Carceral Systems. The work camps.

“We’re here to make her pay. For my family, for his family,” the man points to his partner, “for the families of everyone out there who committed the high crime of fucking up at their job.”

I’ve massaged warm oil into Mrs. Lindell’s legs to treat her varicose veins. I’ve powdered her crotch to prevent chafe so many times I’ve lost count.

“Alright. Fine,” the Dad-aged man says and unzips a pouch hidden inside his jacket.

A stack of bills wrapped in a thick rubber band tumbles next to me on the bed. Then another stack. More money than Daniel would offer for Mr. Toomey’s lungs. Another stack. More money than Daniel would offer for Mrs. Cleveland’s brain.

Enough for a log cabin far away. Enough for a baby. Enough to be the parent I never had.

“We’re not the only men with guns in a C-suite bedroom right now,” the man says, “Tonight is a reckoning. You can help make history. You can turn this around for all of us.”

The hair tickles my throat again and I cough, start *hwark*-ing it up, from deep in the lungs.

The Dad-aged man points to a water bottle on Mrs. Lindell's night stand. Bird man hands it to me. I wave it away, stick my fingers down the back of my throat, find the hair and tug it gently until it snakes out.

This hair. It's not long, straight and blonde like Mrs. Lindell's hair. It's short. Curly. Reddish-grey. Mrs. Kimball. The chlamydial client who ordered the pubic hair trimmings.

"All you have to do," the man holds his palms out, "is walk out of this apartment and pretend you never saw us."

Is this how Dad felt the night he flung me and my bags out the door? Was his temptation of freedom this intoxicating?

"Think about what these people are doing. To people like you and me."

What was his dream of escape? Maybe a tiki bar next to the blue waters of a beach.

Flowered shirts. Bronze waitresses.

"You hold the future in your hands."

Even your babies will drive you crazy some times.

Even so.

No one hurts my babies but me.

"Official rule #5," I say, yanking the IV out of Mrs. Lindell's arm, "Unauthorized personnel is prohibited."

A high whine comes from one of the machines keeping Mrs. Lindell asleep. The gun men scramble out and down the hallway. Glass break tears from the dining room. I plug the IV back in Mrs. Lindell's arm and message Gina that everything's okay.

An ad for steak is on the TV.

Not a restaurant. Not a particular brand. Just the broad concept of steak.

No one hurts my babies but me.

I call Daniel and ask him how much eggs are going for these days.

While I wait, I look up listings for log cabins.