

In the Blink of an Eye

“Thirteen dollars an hour!?” I was in disbelief. “And what do you do there?” He had already explained it to me once before, but I just wanted to hear it again.

“I just sit in my car and watch the building,” Justin replied.

“Literally? That’s it? There’s nothing else they want you to do?”

“Nope. I’m just supposed to sit there and make sure the building doesn’t catch on fire.”

Not that the building was in any particular risk of catching on fire. My friend Justin, whom I had met five years ago freshman year of high school, was telling me about the new job he’d gotten working for a private security company. He was getting thirteen an hour to sit in his car and stare at the building that housed the Amazon.com server farm to make sure it didn’t burn down or something. Well, there was a little more to it than that, but being a lazy 20-year-old desperately searching for a job that paid decently for as little work as possible, that was the way I interpreted it.

“Why do they need you to make sure the building doesn’t catch on fire? Don’t they have alarms or something?”

“I dunno.”

Who cared. As long as they paid me....

“Does your company have any more openings?” I was very interested in being paid thirteen bucks an hour to sit in my car.

“Yea they do, I think. You should apply. You’ll get hired easily; they hire anyone. A lot of the people there don’t even speak English.”

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The next day I asked Justin for the name of the company, hopped on the computer and brought up their website. I followed their online application process and an hour or so later I was done. *Now I just sit back and wait for them to call* I thought. From Justin's description, I was probably one of their best applicants, plus I even had a referral from someone in-house. There was no way they weren't going to hire me. About a week went by without any word from the company. Worried, I went online and pulled up the Craigslist "jobs" section. There was no shortage of private security positions available. I pretty much copy-and-pasted the same email and sent it out to the several different ads with my resume attached. I don't even know why I had a resume. There was absolutely nothing on it that any 20-year-old wouldn't have. A week later I got a call. I was pretty sure I had the job at that point. I'd realized over the past five years of applying for entry-level jobs that if they call you, you're hired. The interview is a meaningless formality at that level. I once got hired as an assistant manager at Pizza Hit and all I wrote on my application was my name and phone number. The "interview" is basically just you and your new boss working out your schedule and him handing you a uniform.

The next week I showed up for the interview at a company that I later would later call "Scumcorp". They weren't even that bad, honestly. Just a little on the cheap side and I think it's fun to call people "scum". The guy interviewing me asked how much pay I expected. I said thirteen, it being my only point of reference in that industry. He offered me a job making eleven an hour, and claimed that my friend had gotten really lucky to get thirteen. I was a little disappointed with it, but it was still equal to the highest pay I'd ever had in the past, so I took it. Next, he told me what my post was going to be. I was going to be working behind the front desk at a retirement home. *Ughh!* I thought it so hard I was worried he heard me. *Don't you have*

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anything where I can sit by myself, far away from anyone who could possibly ask me to get up and do something? I really wanted to ask him that. Reluctantly, I agreed to what he offered and drove home feeling a little disappointed. But at least I had landed a job, and I was confident that over time I could get myself a more desirable post.

The next step in the process was supposed to be a basic security officer training course. My boss told me to show up next week for the class at 9 a.m. So, the day rolled around and I struggled out of bed at 8:40. It was probably the earliest I'd been up since high school, so I slipped into the minimum level of clothing acceptable for a work-related event and jumped in my car without eating breakfast. On the way there I began wondering what the other people there would look like; I still hadn't seen any of the people I'd be working with. Well, not really working *with*; it's kind of a solitary job. But still, we were going to be part of the same team so-to-speak, so naturally I was curious what they'd be like. I pictured the stereotypical "Paul Blart" mall cop. I didn't like that image. I was hopeful there'd be some other college-aged kids there just looking for part-time work like me. Twenty minutes later I was nearly there.

Shit, I hope this job doesn't turn out to suck, I thought as I pulled into the parking lot. It was in a small office park, tucked away in the back and kind of hard to find. It wasn't an impressive building by any means, which is pretty much what I expected. I got out of my car with just a bit of butterflies in my stomach, only because I didn't really know what to expect. That's the thing with starting new jobs: you're never quite sure what you're walking into. I'd had some nightmare jobs in the past: bosses that showed up high, paychecks that bounced, uniforms that were a giant hotdog, so I'm always weary when starting a new one. Walking in I was greeted by Gary, the same guy who'd interviewed me the week before. He led me to a

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small makeshift classroom in the back where there were four other guys already seated, plus and much older guy whom I assumed was going to be the instructor. I sat down in one of the empty chairs and spent the next few minutes enduring that awkward first-day-of-class silence. The other people sat there staring at their phones pretending to text someone while I just sort of looked around the room taking it all in. I've always been an observant person, never the type to be preoccupied with my phone every second of the day. Just then, one of the guys asked when the class was going to start. Immediately I noted that his voice was strangely high-pitched. *Holy shit, that's a lady!* I realized. Looking around at the faces of the other people there, I could tell they were thinking the same thing. One of them was a kid who looked my age, or maybe even younger. Another was an older man, probably in his fifties, whom I later found out was retired military just doing this for extra income. The third guy was an obese gentleman wearing paint-stained sweatpants that made me feel embarrassed for the fact that I'd applied to same job as him. And then there was, of course, the man-woman. Evidently, we were waiting for one other person to show up and that's why we weren't starting even though it was well past 9:00 at this point.

Finally, around 9:30 the guy showed up and we got started. The class must have been pretty boring because I don't remember much of it. The only thing keeping me awake was the obese guy two seats over. Every four or five minutes his eyelids would get really heavy and he would start nodding off. As this was happening his entire upper body was slowly tipping forward, like a giant tree at the beginning of its fall where it seems to be moving in slow motion. But somehow, right before he was about to go over the edge, he would catch himself

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and his body would jerk back into consciousness. This was happening despite the gallon jug of Mountain Dew cradled in his lap.

The rest of the class was a blur and before I knew it, I had made it through the entire six hours. At the end there was a written exam. I wasn't worried about it at all; my friend told me he could have aced it without even taking the class. He was right. It was pretty basic stuff, and I breezed through it. When I finished, I took the exam into the office where my instructor was sitting at his desk. He graded it extremely fast, and it dawned on me he had graded this exact test probably hundreds of times before. He handed it back with a "93" written at the top in red ink and shook my hand.

"Congratulations, you're a licensed security officer."

I showed up about ten minutes early for my first day of work. I was supposed to get there at 4:00 PM and work side-by-side with someone who already knew the post to get trained. I was happy that they'd selected the other kid my age, Jimmy, to be my trainer. I figured that'd make it easier to find stuff to talk about while we sat there next to each other for the eight-hour shift. Sitting in my car waiting for him to show up, I felt the butterflies return. In my head I replayed the stories that had been told to me by the other guards who'd worked the post before. There was one about a lady who called constantly just to ask what time it was. Why? Nobody knew. Another was about a guy who complained about people sneaking into his apartment and stealing stuff all the time. After the first two or three investigations turned up nothing, they'd pretty much realized the guy was suffering from dementia and just making it all up. Of course, he didn't realize he was making it all up. One more involved a man with bladder control problems, and unexplained puddles showing up in the elevator shortly after he'd been

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there. I tried to calm myself by realizing that the stories were probably greatly exaggerated.

Almost all stories are. Everybody wants to have interesting stories to tell. But the reality is most of our lives are boring, so we make stuff up, or at least stretch the truth. But, the one very real possibility, and the thing that had me worried the most, was having to call 911 for someone. Given that it was a retirement home, it was pretty much inevitable that you'd have to do it eventually. *I just hope it doesn't happen on my shift* I thought as I saw my Jimmy pull into the parking lot.

"Hey!" I yelled across the parking lot. I wanted to make sure I got his attention before he got into the building so we could walk in together and I wouldn't look like an ass who didn't know where to go.

"Hey" he said back, "You don't really have to wear the tie."

There was a cheap clip-on tie that went along with the uniform and looked incredibly cheesy. I didn't realize how self-conscious it made me feel till I took it off and instantly felt a weight lifted off my ego. It's amazing how much power a little piece of clothing has over you.

"Awesome. I hated that thing. And it was choking me, too."

We passed through the automatic front doors together and walked another ten feet or so to a receptionist-type desk in the corner. Just past the desk, he took a ring of keys from around his neck and unlocked the office door that led behind the desk. One cool thing about the job was the access you got. All those doors and corridors I used to look at and think *I wonder what's back there?* I now had keys to. I quickly discovered most of the time all that's back there is cleaning supplies, pipes, and masturbating security guards.

“So, this is where you’ll spend ninety percent of your time,” Jimmy explained. We were both standing behind the desk. “Basically, you just sit here unless something comes up where you have to leave. But you might go an hour or two with nothing happening.”

He explained to me a few of the most common things that would come up and how to deal with them. It was all pretty basic stuff—people signing up for events, answering phone calls, filling out maintenance work orders—and, honestly, the job was much closer to receptionist than security guard.

“When you first come in, just make sure you have these four things: the keys, the cell phone, the log book, and the flashlight. That’s all you really need,” he told me. We were supposed to record all of our foot patrols and any unusual activity in the Daily Activity Report, or DAR. “No news is good news” was what my boss had told me on the phone earlier that day. When nothing happens, there’s nothing to report. And when there’s nothing to report, that means the security is doing its job. And that was more than okay with me. After all, I was after the easiest job possible.

“The hardest part of this job is staying awake,” Jim joked. *Perfect.*

I made a point to memorize the ring of ten or so keys. He showed me the two that really mattered—the one to the office, and the one that opened all the rooms.

“This one opens the rooms.” Jim held up the largest key on the ring. “Anytime you enter someone’s room, you’re supposed to record it in the DAR. Lots of these people are really private, so try not to go into a room unless you really have to, like if it’s an emergency, if you smell smoke or something. Or, obviously, if someone’s pendant is going off.”

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There were these necklaces every resident wore called “pendants” which were basically these little Life Alert things where they can just press a big button on it in the event of an emergency and it goes straight to the front desk and alerts us. We were supposed to respond immediately to the room and assess the situation. If it was a real emergency—which apparently was only ten percent of the time, or so—we would call 911. The majority were false alarms—someone rolling over on the necklace in bed and accidentally setting it off and other things like that.

“You ever had an emergency?”

“I’ve had a couple. One turned out to be a false alarm. And on the other I just had to call 911 for a lady who had fallen over in her bedroom.”

“How long have you worked here?”

“About two months now.”

I figured it in my head. Two months on the job with one real emergency. Not too bad. With any luck I could go my first month or so without anything serious coming up. I was really worried about the shit hitting the fan my first day and not knowing what to do.

Near the end of the shift it was time to do a foot patrol. What we were looking for I have no idea. But hey, it beat customer service or anything else I’d done in the past, so I just did it. We covered all five floors of the building from end to end. The halls were a bleak light brown color accented with tan doors and trim. The elevators creaked and wobbled as we went up and down, and the doors took an unnerving amount of time to open when you reached your floor. You’d hear the “ding” and I swear it’d take a solid seven or eight seconds for the doors to squeak open. Elevator doors should take no more than three seconds to open. After three, I’m going into a mini panic attack. *Remember to take the stairs!* After we finished the building we

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went outside and went around the perimeter of the entire complex. Altogether it took us about a half hour. Returning to the building, it was just a couple minutes before midnight, which meant time to go home.

“So, yeah, pretty easy, right? Got any questions?” Jim asked as he got into his car.

Which key opens the office again? How do I set the alarm on the back door? What do I do if someone passes out? “Nope, I’m good,” I replied.

At 4 P.M. the next evening I arrived for my first real day of work. This time I was on my own. I didn’t feel completely ready, but then again, you never really do on your first day. I walked up to the desk and got the keys from the guard I was relieving. He got his stuff together and with a quick “Take it easy, man,” he was out the door. I had never seen that guy before and I wondered if he had any idea I was brand new. I let myself into the office, took my thing out of my backpack—headphones, my book—and took a seat behind the desk. There was hardly any activity for a while. I spent the first hour and a half just reading my book. Pretty easy so far, I thought. Over the course of the next few hours things came up here and there—clogged bathtubs, heaters not working, someone locked out of their room—but it was all minor and I handled it accordingly. I stared at the computer screen that displayed the pendant statuses. *I hope I never have to use that thing.*

Around 11 P.M. I decided to make my foot patrol around the building. There was something I really liked about the emptiness of the building that late at night. Completely still and quiet. It was like having the world to yourself for a little while. I always wondered what that would be like. It’d be great at first. No one else to judge you, no pressure, no obligations, just the whole world as your playground. But then it’d quickly get incredibly sad and lonely as the

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scope of reality set it. But that empty building at midnight was like that sweet spot, those first few hours of solitude where it felt amazing, but you knew that in a few hours everything would come back to life again. I finished my patrol and went back to record it in the DAR. Before I knew it, my first day had whizzed by without incident.

The next day at the exact same time I returned for my second day of work. I got a call in the mid afternoon. It was my boss. He told me I needed to take a CPR class and that the company offered them for free. I had half expected this since I'd heard Justin had to do one for his company. So, I scheduled a time for Wednesday of the next week to get the class done.

The class was six hours long even though I felt like we could've gotten through the whole thing in about two. We spent a lot of time at the beginning blowing through general health and first aid information which, apparently, we weren't even required to know, so the instructor was just throwing it at us as fast as she could while repeatedly saying, "I'm just trying to get you guys out of here as soon as possible." When we got to the actual CPR part of the class, I was happy to see the instructor slow down a little. For the last half hour or so, we practiced CPR and the Heimlich maneuver on dummies. We repeated it a few times while the instructor watched our form, and if we did it well enough she'd sign off on our certification and we'd be all set. We all passed on our first attempt. It was pretty easy to remember—tilt the head back, pinch the nose, two short breaths, thirty chest compressions. The hard part, she said, was not freaking out when it was a real emergency. I left the class feeling pretty confident in my new skill, but hoping I'd never have to use it.

I was working every Saturday and Sunday and going to school during the week. Five or six weeks in, the job had become routine. I could kind of just come in on autopilot and make it

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through the day fine. I had never gotten to that point with a job so quickly. I had really settled in and was liking it a lot. It'd turned out to be just what I wanted: a decent paying job where I hardly had to do any work. I structure each day the same way and got into a groove. I'd usually read my book for the first hour or so. Then mess around on the Internet. Then back to my book. Internet. Lunch/dinner break. Foot patrol. Book. Internet. All interspersed with minor issues that'd pop up, of course, but overall it was very easy. I had a few pendant "alerts" go off, but they turned out to be false alarms. Three months on the job flew by without incident.

One Saturday I showed up for work around 8 A.M. I was working the day shift that day, eight to four. In my usual routine, I called in on-duty, sat down at the desk and got my book out. The front desk phone rang. There was a second or two of silence before the pendant emergency recording came on. It prompted me to press "1" to acknowledge I'd received the message, then I hung up and looked at the computer screen to find the room number. Room 225. I'd dealt with this issue a handful of times now, so I wasn't too worried. Most likely a false alarm. I walked quickly to the room and knocked loudly on the door. No answer. I knocked again, louder. No answer. A lot of the people there could hardly hear, so this still was no reason for alarm. "Security! Security! Are you okay?" I knocked one more time. After getting no answer still, I decided it was time to enter the room. I isolated the room key on the keychain, turned the lock and went in. I didn't see anything at first. "Hello!?" Rounding the corner the living room, I saw her. The lady was laying on the floor just in front of the couch, one arm to her side and the other bent over her stomach, legs crossed at the ankles. It's extremely frightening to see someone laying like that on the ground, in this completely unnatural way. Seeing it, my brain knew immediately this was the real thing.

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I kneeled down beside her. *Shit, I can't believe I'm about to do this!* She had a pulse. I checked for breathing and didn't detect any. I checked again. *Yep, definitely not breathing.* I knew what I had to do, I just couldn't believe I was going to have to do it. I collected myself for a few seconds. I tried to recall what I'd learned in the class. I had to make sure I did this right. *Tilt the head back. Okay. Pinch the nose. Okay. Two short breaths.* I closed my mouth around hers and shot in two quick breaths. *Thirty chest compressions.* She was really old, I guessed in her seventies, so I was worried about hurting her with the chest compressions. In the class I was surprised by the amount of force we were taught to use for the compressions. The instructor said broken ribs were common after receiving CPR. I held back on my forcefulness with her a little bit, but not much. It was more important to do the CPR right than worry about breaking some ribs. After my first round of CPR she didn't show any response. *Shit! I am even doing this right?? I'm gonna get sued! Maybe she was breathing the whole time and didn't even need it. Did I just murder this lady with bad CPR??* No, I was just panicking. I checked again and still no breathing from her. I repeated the CPR. I didn't realize how much I was sweating till I took a step back to catch my breath.

Then I saw her arm move. *Oh, my god! She's alive!* I had never been so relieved in my life. She tried to sit up. I told her to just stay calm and I would call 911 for her. I got her a glass of water while we waited. 911 was there much faster than I expected. They had this place on speed dial. They loaded her up onto the stretcher and wheeled her out to the ambulance. One of the EMT's asked me a little bit about what I saw and what happened. I told him how I found her and that I'd done CPR. He thanked me for my help and they went on their way.

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Many of the other residents had come to see what all the fuss was about, seeing the ambulances arrive and realizing that this hadn't been just another false alarm. I tried to play it cool and told them everything seemed to be ok. Finally, once they had all dispersed I went back into the office to take a few minutes to myself. It was insane how that job could go from mind-numbing boredom to the most intense moment of your life in the blink of an eye. After I got myself some water I made all the requisite calls to the head administrator of the building and to my boss. I told them what had happened and that it had all been handled. Then I sat down at the desk and went back to my book.