

## In and Out

David Stevens tapped his foot as his wife Gina scrambled around their bedroom, tossing shirts and socks into her overnight bag.

"I don't see why you're going over there," he said. "You know she'll be fine."

"That's not the point, Dave," Gina replied. "She gets lonely. It's only been a year since he drowned, you know. Besides, she needs a little help sometimes."

"You'd figure she'd get her own life eventually."

"She's sixty-seven, Dave."

"Yeah, but still."

"I don't want to hear it," she said. "By the way, did you see where I put that brown jewelry box dad gave me? I can't find it anywhere. It's got that carving of the flower on it."

"You mean the ratty one with all the scratches?"

"It's not ratty. It's just old." She buttoned her overnight bag and hung it over her shoulder before she looked at him and said, "It's just full of costume jewelry and Dad's watches, but I'd like to find it. Keep an eye out for it?"

He nodded at her as she made her way to the door.

"I'm not going with you this time," he said. "I'm tired of running across town every time your mother's a little lonely."

"Whatever. You're an ass, Dave."

She walked out of the room. Dave watched the doorway for a moment, irritated at the argument they'd just had.

"Whatever," he muttered, shaking his head and grinding his teeth before leaving the room as well.

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Nineteen-year-old Joseph Hind sat in a neighbor's bushes across the street, waiting for the couple to leave the house. Itchy and uncomfortable, he crouched behind a large prickly hedge, peeking through a gap in the branches. He was tall, so his long legs made it difficult to stay crouched without being sore. He'd been staking out the couple that lived in the house for the past three hours. Exhausted, he was close to giving up. However, every night this week he'd sat outside, watching them. Most nights, they left around eight and didn't come home until the morning, so he had a hunch that tonight would pay off. His girlfriend Tina, who had recently started living with him, noticed that he was staying out every night. Each time he left, she asked him where he was going and each time, he gave her a different excuse. Mostly, the excuses had something to do with hanging out with his friend Tom, who Joseph barely spoke to.

Every time he lied to her, she gave him a disappointed look. The dark circles under her eyes grew with his dishonesty. It killed Joseph to keep the truth from her, but if he came clean, she'd leave him. He couldn't let that happen. Staying with her was especially important now.

Three weeks ago, Tina had told Joseph that she was pregnant. At first, he'd been happy, or least appeared to be. He hugged her, smiled at her. He'd even mentioned finding their own place so they'd have more room. That was all for her benefit, though. When he was away from her, Joseph constantly worried. How would he pay for the kid? He had no job and no experience; they were even living with his parents, since he couldn't afford his own place. He'd already shaved his beard and beat the pavement to search for work. Every place had the same answer.

"We'll call you," they'd say. He needed cash, enough to get a place, pay some bills, and get ready for the baby while he kept looking. How else would he get the money?

While waiting, he pulled his dad's old semiautomatic pistol from the back of his jeans and looked at it.

"Just for protection," he said to himself, turning the gun over in his hands. As he did, a twinge of doubt struck him. He thought again about Tina. She would wonder where he got the money. He'd have

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to lie again. Joseph shook his head at this, clearing his thoughts. She wouldn't ask too much. Besides, this was a one-time thing.

*In and out*, he told himself.

The sound of car doors shutting shook Joseph from his daze. He focused again on the house across from him. The reverse lights on the couple's Lexus clicked on as the car backed out of the driveway. The window tint made it hard for him to see who was in the car, but they always left together anyway. Why should tonight be any different? He stayed still for several minutes after the car drove off. Carefully, he pried himself from the bush, tucking the gun in the back of jeans again.

Joseph kept his eyes open for anyone watching him as he crossed the street. It was close to midnight, and most of the people in the neighborhood were already asleep, but he didn't want to take any chances. Assured he wasn't being watched, he walked casually toward the two-story home.

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David yawned as he made his way down the stairs. Pictures lined the way down on his left side. Each one was of him or Gina or both, and most of them were taken on vacation. A few were of Gina's family. He briefly stumbled on the last step, slipping a little on the hardwood at the bottom, near the entryway to the living room. *Damn loose board*, he thought. Grumbling, David walked over to the front door and considered it. After a second, he turned the lock on the doorknob, ignoring the deadbolt completely.

*It'll be fine*, he thought. *Gina'll probably come home early anyway. She'd bitch if she had to fool too much with the 'bolt*. David walked into his living room. Unlike the upper level and the stairs, the living room and kitchen had hardwood floors; Gina liked them, but he'd seen no point in paying for two stories of them. She'd also picked out the curtains, which he hated. They were a deep maroon, which she had said "bore romantic tendencies." He just thought they looked depressing.

The couch and TV, however, were a different story.

He'd picked them out. The couch, a brown leather number with

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cup holders in each armrest, featured built in recliners on either end. Despite this, he often sprawled across the entire thing anyway. It faced away from the front door because, in David's own words, he "didn't give a shit who came through the front door, as long as they didn't drink all his beer." The TV was a fifty-inch LED display with wi-fi capability. He had no idea what he would use the wi-fi for, but he loved it all the same.

David made his way to the couch and plopped down on it. His shoulders relaxed as he lay across the furniture and kicked his shoes off in front of the sofa. He frowned at himself as he did. Small, churning feelings of guilt stirred in his stomach as he thought back to his argument with Gina. *She was only trying to get me to care about her mom*, he thought, wrinkling his forehead. *I should apologize to her when she gets home*. His guilt temporarily alleviated, he settled into sofa. For a moment, he considered watching TV, but his exhaustion caught up with him. In minutes, he was asleep, his body forming an outline in the expensive leather.

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Joseph crept up to the door of the house, his eyes moving back and forth along the road. Shaking, he took his backpack off and unzipped the front section. From it, he pulled a pair of cheap leather gloves. He slipped them on and closed the backpack, slinging it over his shoulder once again. As he approached, he tugged his wallet from his jeans, the gloves making it difficult to reach into his back pocket. He took a deep breath and reached for the doorknob. He jiggled it slightly to check if it was locked; it was. With another breath, he pried a used *Jillian's* card from his wallet. The card showed scratches from multiple uses on Joseph's own door, and splotches of color on the card were faded from sticking to other items in his wallet. He slid it between the door and the frame, praying that the deadbolt was unlocked. He situated the card slightly above the doorknob's latch and forced it into the lock. The entrance opened with a moderate click, and Joseph stopped to put the card back into his pocket.

"That's it for the 'In' part," he whispered.

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He slipped quietly inside the house, and edged the door shut. He turned the doorknob as he did, so it wouldn't make noise when it closed. He looked around the entryway, searching for a presence in the house.

*Get a move on, he thought, and moved toward the stairs. He ignored the living room, focusing instead on the upper level. Remember: small stuff. Look for bedrooms. Don't get weighed down. Grab some shit and go.*

He walked briskly up the steps, taking care not to trip on the carpet. As he came to the second story, he saw several doors. One on his right was open and though the light was off, he could tell it was a bathroom. The first door on his left was also open, and a large, wooden dresser was visible. He picked this room first.

After pulling them open, Joseph sifted through the dresser drawers. His hands moved rapidly, tossing grey boxer briefs and faded argyles aside as fast as he could. Every ten seconds, he looked over his shoulder toward the bedroom door, praying that no one would come home. Each time, no one did, and he would resume his search for the rolled-up cash that ignorant people sometimes kept in their sock drawers.

After five minutes, his search turned up nothing and he pushed the drawer shut with an angry grunt. The mirror mounted to the back of the dresser shook when he did. He froze after that, listening to the house. After a moment, he settled down, assured that he was alone. Still, he needed to move fast; he had no idea when these people would be coming home.

*That was a stupid idea, Joe, he thought to himself. Look at the silver handles on the dresser. You really think these people are going to keep their money in there? It's probably in a hedge fund or some shit.*

Joseph looked around the room. It was spacious. Their floor was carpet, unlike the hardwood in the rest of the house. A king-sized bed sat against one wall, with bed coverings made of expensive fabric draped over it. Two dark, wooden nightstands sat on either side of the bed, and a silver lamp sat on each nightstand. The dresser he had just raided was against the wall opposite the bed, and the clothes that he pulled out during his search were scattered in front of it. A chest

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at the foot of the bed stood open, with handmade afghans and family photos strewn around it.

As he continued to scan the bedroom, his eyes locked on something he hadn't noticed before. A small brown box peeked out from under the corner of the bed skirt. Joseph walked to the bed and crouched down to pick up the box. It was heavy, easily ten pounds, though most of the weight was probably the box. Deep, hand-carved grooves in the shape of flowers adorned the top of the box. There were several shallow scratches on the box, and its corners were rough and rounded from age. It had a small brass lock on it. The lock was old and rusted, and the bolt felt loose when Joseph lifted the lock a little between his fingers. Joseph placed the box on the dresser. He slipped a screwdriver from the pocket of his windbreaker and stuck its tip between the u-shaped bolt and the locking mechanism. As he did, he heard a creak from downstairs. He stopped for a moment, his eyes wide, paranoid that he was not alone. Several seconds passed before he returned to the lock. He used the screwdriver as a lever and pressed against the top part of the bolt. He felt the corner of the box catch part of his leather glove as he did, but he paid little attention to it. The lock popped open with little effort, and he took it off, tossing it on the floor.

*Jackpot.*

Several pieces of jewelry, including two bracelets, three rings, and a pendant, sat inside the box. They looked gold to him. A large pearl necklace was also inside the box along with two watches, underneath the rest. Joseph took off his black backpack and filled the front pocket with the jewelry. He was careful not to leave any behind. At that moment, he heard another soft creak from downstairs.

Joe immediately pulled the gun from the back of his jeans and flipped its safety off. He whirled to face the bedroom's open door. The doorway was empty, and the house was quiet again. His hands shaking, he kept the gun pointed forward.

*Just hold it steady.*

Joseph heard a click from the gun and its magazine hit the carpet with a soft thump.

"Shit," he whispered. "Fuckin' stupid." Joseph bent over and

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snatched the mag from the floor. He slid it back into the handle of the gun and pulled the slide back, chambering a round. Cheeks red, trained his sights on the door and listened carefully for any other creaks. After a full two minutes, he lowered the gun and flipped the safety back on. "Screw this," he said. "I'm out." He shoved the gun into the back of his jeans again and turned to the jewelry box. He closed it slowly, taking care not to let the lid snap closed. He zipped the backpack closed and slung it over his shoulder again.

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Downstairs, David Stevens held his breath and froze in place in his living room. He had been tiptoeing across the hardwood and had paused when one of the boards creaked. A few minutes before, David had stirred in his sleep when he heard the sound of his own dresser closing upstairs.

*Damn floors, he thought. That fucking contractor said they wouldn't start creaking for at least a year or two.*

David listened for the sound of running footsteps that he was sure would come. For a moment, he imagined a faceless attacker running into the room and pointing a gun in David's face, threatening to kill him. He shook his head and pushed that from his mind, focusing his thoughts completely on making it to the back door. If he could make it there, he could make it to a neighbor's house, maybe Jim or Karen, and call the police. He'd normally go for his gun, but his wife had made him move the gun safe to the spare bedroom upstairs. An eyesore, she'd called it. He resumed his careful walk, placing one foot in front of the other in short, measured steps. With each step, he stopped completely, waiting for more noise from upstairs.

Halfway through the kitchen, an unsettling realization hit David. His memory recalled an incident from the previous week when Gina had hassled him. She'd called him into the kitchen and complained about the back door.

"Why the hell is the screen door boarded up?" she'd said, and pointed at it. Sure enough, two large pieces of particle board were in place of where the screen door normally sat.

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“Oh, that,” he’d answered, taking a sip of beer. “The workers took out the back door early, said they’d replace it soon enough. What do you want me to do about it?”

“I want you to call and tell them to fix it early,” she’d replied. “I need to be able to get outside.” He never called them. He could try to break through the wood, but it would take too long and whoever was in the house would know for sure that David was there. More images of being held at gunpoint filled his head. He shivered.

*No, David thought. I’ll have to make it to the front door.* He turned and continued his slow walk the way he came, heading to the front of the house. He prayed the floorboards wouldn’t creak again.

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Before Joseph walked out of the room, he stuck his head out into the hallway. He looked at both ends, checking for a sign that anyone was there. To his left, the hallway continued, with more doors leading to other rooms of the house. The stairs were to his right, and he went that way, taking each step one at a time. He kept his ears alert for any sign of approaching company. He heard nothing. He relaxed and walked down the rest of the stairs without paying attention to his footing. As he reached the last step, he slipped on a loose board and stumbled a little.

The unmistakable creak of a footstep in the living room caused him to whirl and face the source of the sound. His turn threw him off-balance but he kept himself from falling, landing on his knee instead. His breathing quickened and gloved hands fumbled as he once again pulled his gun out. He held it in front of him, pointing it at David, who was five feet in front of him.

David raised his hands slowly, his eyes tracking the barrel of Joseph’s pistol. David’s chest rose and fell as he breathed hard, exhaling loudly through his nose. Joseph kept the gun aimed at the David, his grip tightening on the handle.

“D-don’t move,” Joseph stuttered. He rose and straightened himself. “I mean it. I’ll use it.” He gestured to the gun with his eyes. “Don’t fuck with me.”

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David lowered his hands a little.

“This isn’t something you can take back, you know,” he said, his breathing slowing. “You shoot me, you’ll remember it.”

“Whatever. Just don’t move.

“I won’t,” David said. He looked the boy over. “What’s your name?”

“None of your fucking business.”

“Well, ‘None of Your Fucking Business,’ I don’t want any trouble.”

David said. “I don’t know what your situation is, and I don’t pretend to understand what made you break into my home.” David took a stiff breath. “I don’t know what you took, and I don’t really care. All I know is that this isn’t how I want things to go down. Just take what you’ve got and go. No one has to get to hurt and I won’t ruin your life by calling the cops. I swear.”

“And I’m just supposed to believe you won’t call them as soon as I leave?”

“Do you really have a choice? I’m giving you an out, kid,” David said. He scrutinized Joseph. “Take it.”

The two of them stared at each other. The barrel of the gun remained pointed at David’s chest, threatening to end his life. After thirty seconds, Joseph’s shoulders slackened and his eyes watered a little. He lowered the gun several inches as he opened his mouth to speak. Just then, the doorknob turned and the door opened.

“Ma called me when I wasn’t even halfway there,” Gina said, looking down at her phone as she walked in. She lugged the overnight bag over one shoulder and carried her purse on the other. “So you’re lucky. It didn’t matter if you came or—” She cut her sentence short as she looked up and saw Joseph and David. Her eyes looked at David’s hand, then the gun. She screamed and dropped the overnight bag, her hand flying inside her designer purse.

The side of her purse exploded in sound, fire, and feminine sundries as five rounds tore through Joseph’s midsection. Red appeared on the walls and carpet of the stairs as he fell, clutching the front and side of his abdomen. Gina’s scream stopped as she pulled the purple, hammerless revolver from her purse. She looked from David to Joseph, her mouth agape.

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“I didn’t m-mean to fire them all,” she started, horrified at the scene in front of her. “It was just reflex.”

Joseph lay on the stairs, bleeding out and gritting his teeth. He pressed his hands against his skin to try and stop the flow.

Wheezing, he struggled to take breaths as he looked from David to Gina. They looked back at him, their eyes stunned, as he died in front of them.