

THE WATCH

A rusty, red car squeals to a halt in front of a lit suburban house in the late evening. He's in a rush.

He exits the car. In the back seat sits a plastic sign with metal brackets. He forgot to put it above his car window. He reaches his hand back in the car and pulls it out. He quickly rolls up his window and affixes it. It's a generic pizza-delivery sign for a local pizza place. He reaches back into the car, to his passenger seat, and grabs several pizza boxes.

From inside the home, a man of the same age as the delivery man opens the front door. The delivery man stands on his porch, pizza boxes awkwardly held high. Embroidered, red cursive print reads "Robert" on his wrinkled shirt. He smiles a forced smile.

The homeowner says something about how he'll be right back. The money's inside somewhere.

The door is left cracked open. Robert stands waiting for a few moments. It's taking longer than he expected. The door slowly opens a bit. A little girl's head peeks from around the door. She smiles.

Robert slowly looks down. He doesn't react to her immediately. The little girl bites the fingernail on her thumb, her other hand still hanging onto to the doorknob beside her head. Robert peers into her eyes and smiles a smile from his happiest memories.

A dark room sits in the stillness of an empty apartment. The door opens. A dim beam of light shines on the room's walls. Clouds and flowers have been

painted on the room's ceiling. A small bed is filled with untouched stuffed animals.

Robert is home.

He pauses for a moment. He can see into the room. He can see himself kneeling beside the bed. The nightlight is on in the corner, lighting up his little girl's face. He looks up and smiles at his wife standing behind him whose hands rest on his shoulders.

The apartment door slams shut.

It all vanishes. A cold wind blows through the veiled window in the room. He steps into the room and forces the window shut. He accidentally bumps the nightstand. A framed picture falls over. He looks down at it, the moon shining in its reflection. It's a picture of a woman, a mother, holding her daughter. He quickly sets the picture back up and exits the room. He shuts the room's door behind him.

An empty beer bottle clinks down against the counter. Robert slides it aside. He pulls some photos near. They're of a building, a school. Police officers are standing around, doing nothing, pretending to protect the children that were inside that day. There are other photos too, recent photos, that seem to cover every part of the exterior of the building. Every entrance, every road, every possible way to come or go.

Out of the corner of his eye, he notices the news articles pinned to a bulletin board. The largest of the articles says, "Three Children Kidnapped." A picture of the girl that once slept beyond this wall appears in the corner along with pictures of her two friends. A dozen more related

articles are pinned below it, among them, "Kidnapper Eludes Police After Lengthy Car Chase."

He gets up. He puts his hand on the wall and leans toward them. He rips one off. "Two More Kidnapped." He reveals his teeth grinding together. The two girls were friends. The psycho spared the third. The psycho almost got her. He's coming back for her.

Robert slams his fist on the dresser in front of him. A ring falls from its resting place on the corner of another framed picture. He picks it up and puts it on his finger, dropping the article on the floor. He reaches down. He brings the picture up to his face. It's him, it's his wife, it's his daughter.

His daughter.

A school bell rings in the distance. Along the side of the road, Robert sits patiently in his car on his watch. He would never miss his watch. Children begin to exit the building, walking happily towards the cars of their mothers and fathers.

A police officer stands near the door of the school. He's suspiciously staring at Robert. The officer brings his radio up to his mouth and says something into it. He waits for a moment. He says something again then lets his radio dangle at his shoulder. He's immediately distracted by a pretty little girl who walks toward him. She carries a nervous look on her face, a look that Robert has gotten used to seeing. The officer begins to escort the girl to her mother's car.

Robert puts his car in drive but stops before he releases the brake. He jumps. There's someone standing at his passenger-side window. It's a police officer.

Robert reaches over and rolls down the window. The police officer asks Robert how he's doing.

Fine.

The police officer asks if Robert has a child that attends this school.

He used to.

The police officer doesn't seem to understand. The officer instructs Robert to exit the vehicle, informing him that there's been a number of kidnappings and anyone who's not picking up their child needs to leave the area.

No, Robert says, attempting to explain himself.

The police officer shakes a little and jumps to the ground beside Robert's car. A gunshot has thundered across the playground. Robert looks over. A man is rushing towards the police officer escorting the little girl and pulling the trigger on a small revolver. Again, and again, bullets punch through the body of the police officer. The laughter and yelling of children turns into screams.

The police officer plummets to the ground. Mobs of children and concerned parents are running everywhere. One nervous girl stands crying, her escort dead beside her.

The man with the revolver rips her from the ground and runs off through the crowd. He disappears with her behind some cars.

This is it.

Robert throws his car into drive and squeals off. Left in the smoke behind him, the police officer yells coughing into the radio on his shoulder.

In the distance, Robert can see the man throw the little girl into a car. A concerned father of another child jumps the man, but the man kicks the father back and

fires one of his last bullets into the father's chest.

Robert steps on the gas but comes to a sharp halt when a group of children run out in front of him. They pause in terror. He wastes no time speeding up onto the sidewalk to get around them.

The shooter turns a corner ahead of Robert. Robert speeds toward the shooter. He's only a block behind. The shooter flies off onto a gravel road, kicking rocks and dust up into the air. Robert follows closely. He can't see much, but the thickness of the dust tells him he's right on the shooter's rear.

The shooter flies through a pair of trees and the dust disappears. He's on the road, barreling through oncoming traffic. Robert follows every move of the shooter's with remarkably lucky accuracy.

The shooter cuts in front of a semi-truck onto another gravel road. Robert slams the gas pedal under his foot and barrels off the road. He leaves the ground for the briefest of moments. He's in the sky for an eternity. He could never touch the earth.

Time cracks back into its place, and Robert's front tires crush the rear of the shooter's car. The shooter's car spins. It wraps itself against a tree. Metal and glass float through the air, the sun reflecting in the debris as though the cars were coming to rest in a dusty field of stars. The shrapnel crashes into the ground like buckshot fired from a gun.

Robert's veins are pumping with rage. He kicks his door open and storms over to the shooter's car. The driver-side door is already off, and the shooter lies unconscious against the steering wheel. He's dying.

Robert grabs the shooter by his bloody shirt, his hand ready to punch through the man's chest cavity to rip out the man's heart.

The silence, the ringing in Robert's ears begins to dissipate. He takes pause. He hears the cry of a girl, slightly hurt, but mostly alright, sitting scared in the back seat of the car. He lets go of the shooter and reaches into the car. He holds his hands out, reassuring the little girl that it's alright. She reaches for him. He reaches further. Her hand gets closer.

A gunshot is heard. Their hands fall, never touching. It was the last bullet from a now empty gun, a bullet that made its way up through Robert's chest.

Robert falls a little but catches himself on the frame of the car. Shards of glass rip through the flesh on the palm of his hand. He lets go. His knees hit the ground. His last sight is that of the little girl he saved. He sees in her *his* little girl. He sees in her that he has saved himself. And through his eyes, we see the future.

The deafening ring of a gunshot fades away. Officers in tactical gear are storming through a dusty, dilapidated house. The beams from their flashlights roll against walls filled with holes and covered in chipping paint. The officers are running downstairs. A locked door. They kick it open. Inside sit two little girls, bound, scared, and tired from crying. Their eyes squint in the presence of light. They will never suffer an ill-fate in this place. The girls are taken away.

In the corner of the dark basement room there sits a dusty doll that once belonged to Robert's little girl. The police officer approaches it carefully. He picks it up. He looks at it for a moment and decides

what he must do. One of those little girls will inherit the doll and love it just as Robert's little girl did. The memories of what was done in this old, torn house can now, one day, fade away.

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