

## **Herd Immunity**

**1850 words**

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On the way to San Diego Dale told his girlfriend he broke into two houses in Idaho.

There was technically a third, a realtor was shutting down an Open House and she lost track of him wandering in at the end and she locked up and left.

The three cases, he told Carol, he was curious how people lived. How they decorated the place, who was in the photos, did they have any art pictures hanging up. What was in the fridge and kitchen cabinets.

Were they neat. Were the beds made. Was there a TV in every room. And a goofy one but he wondered it anyway, could you tell which side they voted for in elections.

Though the Open House one you didn't know if they were neat, since if they weren't they'd artificially cleaned up.

Carol's first response was not being shocked or screaming at him to stop the car this minute, the *what the FUCK did you just say?*

It was: You're in Idaho to start with, shouldn't take a nuclear engineer to guess which side they voted for in elections.

Which is about what Dale figured, she'd been through some things and wasn't going to have a heart attack.

Her second response was: You didn't take anything? Or you did?

Sure I nabbed a few things, he said. But I didn't dig around deep, that wasn't the main objective.

Her third response was: You ever talk to someone about this Dale?

That was reasonable, he appreciated that she wasn't necessarily judging him, she wasn't asking (yet) if he'd had a history from before Idaho too.

Dale didn't answer her question because it wouldn't be a good answer. He had a counselor in high school tell him he was worried about his direction, that he was reasonably smart and did okay on those standard tests, and that a simple *Why have you been getting in trouble?* wouldn't cut to it.

That this was something he'd be wrestling with and to please don't do anything stupid. Mr. Berger, nice enough guy.

Of course the other thing Carol may have been saying, reading between the lines: Normal breaking in for robbery purposes she can get a handle on, but breaking in to see how people live was over the top.

Dale met Carol out there. She was running a concession, a dunk tank at a church carnival. The guy being dunked said he was getting sunburned and took a break, and Carol filled in as the dunkee. She didn't have a swim suit or anything, wore the same shorts and tee shirt she'd been wearing all day, and when she got dunked you could see everything above the waist showing and majorly protruding when she climbed out of the tank.

Dale said hello to her later when the carnival was packing up, and they hit it off. Not right away, he almost blew it with a comment about her get-up, he said didn't you need a sport bra or something for that activity, to better restrain those beauties.

Which seemed like a fair question honestly, and still does--if you were running a dunk tank, don't you prepare in advance for the possibility you might have to spell the volunteer?

Another twenty minutes down the road Dale said let's stop. He wasn't starved but it was nice to not have

to mask up on road trips anymore and she agreed and googled ahead and found a Carl's Junior.

My brother got arrested once in Springfield, she said.

Massachusetts? Dale said, and she said no Illinois. She said he got handed some hard time, 5 years, got out of there in 3. She didn't expand on what happened so Dale didn't ask.

He did ask how the brother's doing now.

We barely speak, she said. Dale said that how it was before he got in trouble? Or since?

She said before. So she didn't lose any sleep when she heard about it. She asked Dale was he worried about surveillance cameras when he pulled his stuff. Or about someone coming home on him who carried a gun.

Dale said he wasn't worried about either one, though he probably should have.

She asked him was there anything interesting in the photographs?

He said one set jumped out. The photos were all framed the same. They were on a wall not in the living room or family room but in a transition alcove in between, where there was an exercise bike. They were

well-lit, with a set of lights mounted above and at an angle like you see in art shows.

That was another interesting thing, he said, which he should have mentioned before. All three houses had those stationary bicycles but it didn't look like anyone used it. The reason being, all three cases, you would have had to move the thing to be able to get on it.

What about those rollers like you see on TV, she said, you roll it out in the middle of the room?

I guess, he said. Just didn't have the feel of any recent use. One guy did have a set of weights in the basement.

Wait, you were in the basements too? Dale said yep. She said well what else was down there?

He said two of the three had woodworking machines down there. Some relatively serious looking stuff too. Thick cables running around. 220 outlets and such.

Well were you afraid you'd be down there and you'd hear someone come home upstairs and you'd have to hide out in the basement?

He said he heard a noise when he was down in one and considered it, they had like an accessory closet and would he have to spend the night in there until they left for work in the morning. But it was a false alarm.

But you *still* weren't worried about getting shot?

No, just caught in the act.

She said that alone is weird and Dale said it probably is.

How do you know they worked? Carol said.

Dale said that particular one, there was paperwork magnetted on the fridge. Which indicated the wife worked for sure, so he's assuming the husband too, since most men do.

Well what did she do?

He said if he had to guess she worked collections for a car loan place, seemed to point that way.

Carol said, They do a lot of that from home these days. Was there a home office?

He said not a dedicated one as he remembers, more like a computer station in the family room with some cabinets.

I'm just wondering, she said. If you did have to hide out overnight in the basement--and you thought you heard everyone leave in the morning, and you came upstairs.

And she was there? Working at home which I didn't expect?

Yes.

I might have tried something, yeah, is where you're going. At least make a move.

You're not serious, are you, she said. I know that look, it tells me you aren't.

I'm not sure. It might depend how she presented herself. A game-time decision.

That is such bullshit.

Right, he said. But we don't know *what* we're capable of until we're facing it. What, I'm scaring you now?

I can't answer that, she said. Something I'll have to process for sure.

Do you want the rest of my fries? he said.

Yeah okay. The financial lady, was this the same house had the photos?

The interesting ones? No that was the third one. They had them in chronological order. You could tell by the kids growing. You had a different dad as it went on.

So big deal a step dad.

Yeah but then the mom switched. Same three kids. So all right, you figure a step mom situation on the other end. But then the new dad switches back in with the new mom. Same three kids again. Everyone all smiles in front of the Christmas tree.

That is a bit odd, she said. Could they have changed appearance?

I thought of that, they fooled me, but I gave it a thorough scrutinize. Different.

Did anything switch again?

Nah that was it, the final one, the bottom right corner.

Well, she said, no doubt there's a simple explanation.

Could be. At some point I'm going to have to go back and figure it out. It's on my bucket list.

Back *in* you mean?

I don't know. Maybe.

She said, Well which house did you like best?

Real estate wise?

No, more, which one would you want to live in?

I tell you, the Open House one was laid out great. But living-wise I'd go with Number 2. They seemed the happiest.

The one with the bill collector mom.

Right.

What do you think the dad did?



I've wondered that. Probably something with his hands. He had a 70's muscle car body up on blocks in the garage. That restoration shit's not easy.

So you were in all three garages now too.

Not the Open House one, there was a dog in there, you could hear him. The other one, they had a ping pong setup, one of those good quality tables from like Sweden or Germany. It looked intense, there was a chalk board where they tallied up matches, different color chinks.

Nobody parked in the garages then?

Oh no, why waste that good space.

Why was Number 2 the happiest?

It smelled the best, it smelled like barbequed ribs. Also they had a big old farm table, they all ate together.

You know this how?

I assumed it. The others, you had those high stools in the kitchen, not clear the whole family could sit together that easy.

We never sat together in my house, she said. We grabbed stuff.

So did we, he said.

Have you done anything else bad? she said.

Here and there, he said.

Do you want to tell me about it?

Maybe the return trip, he said.

They bussed their trays and got back on the road.

Anyone have art up? she said.

Oh yeah, they all did. Total crap. Except for the kids' artwork, you have to allow that. And this one big picture where the scenes were different depending if you were standing left or right. That was a good one, that was in Number 3.

And straight on it was a blend. I love those.

It didn't do anything for me straight on.

Carol said, When we get to San Diego my sister looks a lot like me.

So? Dale said.

So don't get mixed up.

I wasn't planning on it. Easier still, I'd be okay pulling off.

I'd be okay too, she said. She googled it, there was a rest stop in 6.4 miles. That wouldn't do it, specifically, but it showed a small side road adjacent to it, where you should be able to work something out.

She said it was kind of stressful hearing all this, not that she completely minded.

Dale said good because it kinda felt like he was being cross-examined there, so he's a little stressed out too.