

THE NIGHT THEY MET – JUNE 1973

It had been warm out the last few nights. Not unusual for summer in Southern California. But it wasn't so hot that Matthew Howard had no choice but to sit in front of the Emerson window air conditioner. Tonight, he decided he would go out. Stephan, his coworker and occasional friend, invited him to a "get-together". Something he hadn't been to in Idyllwild yet. In fact, he hadn't done much in Idyllwild at all since arriving several months ago. So when Stephan leaned over to Matthew and invited him to meet his friends from high school, he agreed. Idyllwild, he hoped, was a fresh start. A place to begin anew, to cultivate the relationships he had been unable to before. Perhaps it would all start with tonight.

Matthew was ironing his khaki slacks in preparation for the night. He had already put on the blue plaid shirt he had picked out, with a white t-shirt fresh from the bag underneath. He leaned over to unplug the iron from the outlet underneath the window. He had the curtains drawn, but left a small opening so he could watch the street outside. He pulled the khakis on, peering down the road through the curtains, looking for a set of headlights. The clock above the opening to the kitchen showed 7:14 p.m. *He should have arrived by now.* He crossed the room to the shoes he had lined up by the front door. He had mulled over what pair to wear earlier that night. He didn't want to appear too formal but also not too casual. If he went with a sneaker, he might look immature. He wished he still had his Hush Puppies—the brown suede ones. But they had to be thrown out before the move. He wished those could have been salvaged, but suede was difficult to clean.

He settled for a brown, hard leather pair of loafers. Casual enough without being too casual, he thought. He went down the narrow hallway of his house into the back bedroom. Some of his things were still in cardboard boxes, waiting to find a place. Leaning against the wall was a full-length mirror. He examined himself, pointing his toes and adjusting his trousers. *Is this what girls did the night of a party...?* he wondered. The thought made him laugh. As he stood in front of the mirror, considering changing his shoes again, he heard a honk outside. Stephan must have finally arrived.

"I can drive us up there, I'm taking a couple other friends up there too," Stephan had said at the market, pulling a fresh cigarette out of the carton and sliding it back into his shirt pocket.

"I'd rather follow you in my own car," Matthew said. He didn't like to be stuck in places. No escape plan. No way out.

Matthew stepped outside into the warm night. He held his key ring between his index and middle finger and lifted his hand to greet Stephan. In the passenger seat was a woman with wavy blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail. She had her feet on the car seat and her knees pulled up to her chest. The last bit of sunlight illuminated the glitter around her eyes. Matthew smiled at her politely.

“Are you sure you don’t want to ride with us?” Stephan asked, pointing to the stereo on his dashboard, “Not everyone has one of these, you know.” He said, mostly to the blonde woman in the passenger seat.

“I’d rather follow you,” Matthew said, perhaps a bit too quickly, “I’m not much into music.” He followed up, trying to cover up the curtness in his initial response. Stephan shook his head in disbelief, but had no protest.

Matthew turned to walk to his own car, a now red Plymouth Roadrunner. He’d rather liked the previous paint job of yellow, but red was fine too. The back seats could lay flat, and it only had two doors, which he liked. He lowered himself into the driver’s seat and started up the car. The radio came to life, and *In the Summertime* by Mungo Jerry played. He enjoyed this song and turned up the music slightly. He pulled out of the driveway, following behind Stephan.

When the weather’s right, you got women, you got women on your mind.

Matthew tapped his fingers on the wheel, humming along to the song.

We’re no threat, people, we’re not dirty, we’re not mean, we love everybody, but we do as we please.

Stephan took an abrupt turn down a dirt road. The blonde woman in the passenger seat lifted an arm out of the window. Matthew rolled down his own window, letting the warm breeze in. He could hear the blonde woman laughing. Stephan had his arm out of his window, tapping the side of his car in rhythm to whatever song he was playing. Matthew turned down the radio when a song he didn’t recognize came on. Matthew followed Stephan up the winding road littered with tall pines on the sides of them.

They drove for a short time before turning left down another road with large houses facing the cliffs overlooking the valley. They drove to the end of the cul-de-sac and pulled off to the side in front of a smaller house with the front door open and several people littering the lawn. The blonde woman jumped out of the car quickly and ran towards the house, leaving Stephan behind, still getting out of his seat. Matthew exited his car and pushed his keys down into the front pocket of his trousers. Stephan rounded the car, looking a little disappointed. Perhaps from his female friend leaving him behind. Matthew patted his shoulder and offered a smile. Stephan shrugged him off.

“I’ll see her inside. I’m sure she’s just excited to see Shelly,” Stephan said, leading Matthew through the grass and to the open front door. A beaded curtain hung in the hallway entrance to the living room, where the majority of the gathering was taking place. A few people were sitting on a couch, passing back and forth a joint. Some leaned on the walls, drinking from bottles. All were softly swaying from foot to foot, mostly to the beat of the song playing from somewhere in the house. Matthew spotted a stereo speaker in the corner and a turntable not too far away. A song he didn’t recognize was playing. Several voices were singing at once, with some background vocals riffing. He couldn’t help himself from swaying along with the rest of the room. Matthew and Stephan moved through the room into a softly lit kitchen, in search of the blonde woman, Matthew figured. The crowd parted for them, and Matthew spotted her head bobbing along to the beat of the song, her ponytail moving back

and forth. She was slightly crouched, her hands above her head, swaying to the music. She moved to the side to reveal another woman dancing with her. Her long, strawberry-blond hair hung to her waist. A pink bandanna was tied around her head, pulling her hair behind her ears. She wore a brightly colored crochet crop top. Her jeans flared at her calves. Her feet were bare. She moved her hips similar to the blond woman, her arms above her head and then coming down onto the blond woman's shoulders.

The song faded out and another song began with a guitar riff. He didn't know this song either. But both women excitedly played air guitar along with the song.

I want you to hit it. Good god, hit it and quit it.

The blond woman turned around and noticed Stephan and Matthew approaching them. She ran to Stephan, affectionately throwing her arms around his neck and moving to the music, mouthing the lyrics of the song. Matthew made eye contact with the strawberry blond. She moved forward, approaching him while still dancing. She had a dimple on her left cheek. She was still playing the air guitar and mouthing the words of the song dramatically. Matthew stood still as she got closer to him, crouching down, moving her hips side to side. She came up from the ground and placed her hands on his shoulders, like she had with the blond woman moments before. Matthew was unsure of what to do. Did he touch her? No, that wouldn't be appropriate, he thought.

You can shake it to the east, Shake it to the west

"What is this?" he asked, leaning slightly down to the woman. The woman smiled.

"Funkadelic!" she said, loudly into his ear. She smelled like patchouli and tobacco. The song erupted into another guitar solo, and both women faced each other, playing air guitar again. Stephan was playing air drums, but not to the beat of the song. Matthew wasn't sure what song he was pretending to drum along to.

As the music faded out, Stephan put an arm around the blond woman's waist and pulled her out of the kitchen. The strawberry blond looked at Matthew.

"I'm Shelly!" she said, in the moment of quiet between songs.

"I'm Matthew," he said, just as the next song started, drowning out his words. Shelly laughed and leaned in. He repeated himself. She nodded, smiling with her teeth.

"Would you like a smoke?" she asked, pulling her fingers up to her lips as a gesture. Matthew nodded. He didn't smoke. But he went with her through the kitchen door and out into the backyard.

There were a few people lying in the grass, pointing up at the clear night sky. There was a small metal table by the door with a few discarded packs of cigarettes and different-colored lighters scattered across it. Shelly picked up a

pack, pulled out two cigarettes, and pocketed a yellow lighter. Matthew followed her across the grass, watching her walk on her tiptoes.

They sat down on two off-white lawn chairs. She pulled her bare feet onto the edge of the chair and her knees into her chest, like the blonde woman had been sitting in the car. After lighting her own cigarette, she handed the yellow lighter to Matthew. He felt disappointed that he hadn't been the one to light her cigarette.

He was good at pretending to smoke by now. He had done it several times before. He'd let the cigarette burn, taking drags periodically but only allowing the smoke to stay in his mouth before blowing it into the air. Shelly did not notice he was pretending. *Why didn't she notice*, he wondered.

"Are you friends with Stephan? I don't think I've met you before," she said, smoke exiting her mouth as she spoke. Matthew nodded.

"We work at Village Market together," he said, ashing his cigarette over his knee. "I moved here a few months ago."

"Where did you come from?" Shelly asked, crossing her ankles.

"Far away," Matthew said, hesitating slightly. He didn't want to tell her too much. Give too much away. Perhaps she had seen the news in the last few months. He didn't want her to ask too many questions. "What do you do?"

Shelly didn't mind his lack of information and readily offered up her own life story. She worked as a waitress at the diner in town—Gill's Cafe, she said. She didn't like serving coffee; she wanted to do more. Maybe a nurse, she thought. Maybe she would move to Los Angeles, like some of her high school friends had. Matthew smiled along, listening intently, eventually tossing the butt of his cigarette into the dirt beside them. Shelly leaned against the back of the chair, looking up at the night sky above them.

"What do you want to do?" she asked, not looking at him. He pondered that for a moment. What did he want to do? He wasn't really sure.

"Maybe a pilot," he offered after a few moments.

Shelly turned to smile at him. "Oh, I love to fly."

Matthew returned the smile. He enjoyed sitting with her. He could hear people behind him hollering and running around, but he didn't bother to look at them. Shelly peered her eyes over the back of the chair, laughed slightly, and looked back up to the night sky. Perhaps he could take her flying one day, he thought. He could certainly learn. He really could be a pilot. He would like to stay in one place for a while, if he could. Idyllwild might be the place.

"Maybe," Matthew began, "I could take you out for coffee sometime."

Shelly turned to smile at him. “Maybe,” she said, trailing off the end of her word.

“Maybe,” he began again, leaning forward slightly, “I could call you sometime?” He had never asked for a phone number before. Was he too forward? But didn’t some people do this? Be assertive, forward? Confident?

Shelly smiled a bit wider, the dimple on her cheek concaving. “I don’t give strangers my phone number,” she said, looking back up to the sky.

Matthew stared at her a few moments.

A stranger?

He felt the back of his neck warm. He adjusted the sleeves of his shirt. He was warm. The night was warm. He should have stayed in front of the air conditioning in front of the window, watching the long grass blow in the wind. He cleared his throat as if he was planning to say something, but nothing came out.

Suddenly, he couldn’t hear anyone else around him. Had they all gone back inside? Had they overheard his shame and fallen silent so they could watch the fallout? He wouldn’t allow this.

“You know, you’re not as mysterious as you try to make yourself,” he finally said with a scoff.

Shelly turned to look at him with a furrowed brow. “What did you say?” she asked, leaning up slightly in her chair.

“I wouldn’t even waste my time,” he said, keeping eye contact with her.

“Get the fuck out of my house,” she said quietly, standing to her feet.

Matthew suddenly realized the weight of his words. He didn’t mean it, of course. He was upset, embarrassed. Shelly was standing above him, arms crossed against her chest.

“Shelly, I apologize, that was out—” he began.

“I said, get the *fuck* out of my house,” she said, raising her voice slightly.

Matthew got to his feet hesitantly. How could he fix this? He had to fix it. Shelly was small, short. But her presence was larger than she looked. He swallowed even though his mouth was dry. He turned back towards the open kitchen door. A few people had noticed their altercation and were watching without trying to rouse too much suspicion. He turned back to look at Shelly. She had already sat back down in the chair.

Matthew made his way through the house, pushing past people enjoying another song. He didn’t see Stephan or the blonde woman, but he could hardly think about them at this point. He felt like his body was moving in slow motion. He reached the front porch and walked quickly to his car. Stephan’s was still parked sloppily in front of

his. He ducked into the front seat, turning over the engine, and pulled away from the curb. How could he make it right? He had to fix it, he thought.

X

He wasn't sure what time it was. He had forgotten his watch on his bathroom counter. Maybe it was 10:30 p.m., he estimated. He had parked slightly down the street from the house. Only a few people remained at the party. He had watched as they all filtered out, Shelly walking them out to their cars and waving as they pulled away into the night. He hadn't seen anyone in several minutes and decided it was time.

The cars in front of the house had all left, except for the one he assumed was Shelly's—a white hatchback. The front door of the house was still slightly cracked. All the lights were still on, but there wasn't any more music coming from inside. He pulled into the driveway, behind the white hatchback.

After a few moments, the front door opened wider, and Shelly stuck her head out, looking for the source of the noise. She saw the red Roadrunner and stepped out of the house. She was still barefoot as she crossed the lawn, approaching the car. She leaned down, gripping the window sill, and stuck her head into the car. Her expression soured when she saw Matthew in the driver's seat, but she stayed.

"I thought I asked you to leave," she said, shifting her weight to one foot. Did she have a smirk? Matthew turned off the engine.

"I wanted to apologize. I am embarrassed by the way I acted," he said, leaning an elbow on the center console.

"You should be," she said, her face softening slightly.

"Could I apologize to you properly?" he asked, reaching across to unlock the passenger side door. "Take you out for a drink?"

Shelly looked down, hiding a small smile. She looked back to the house, the front door still open.

"I don't get in the car with strangers," she said, looking back up at him. She let go of the window sill and turned back to the house.

A stranger?

Matthew felt his breath quicken. He watched as she took small strides across the lawn. She turned back to him, smiling slightly.

Get her into the car.

His hand gripped the door handle.

Get her into the car.

He exited the car, his shoes quickly crushing the gravel beneath him.

Get her into the car.

She turned slightly to him, her smile dropped.

Get her into the car.

So he got her into the car.