

# 1

## Paul

*I never considered a difference of opinion in politics, in religion, in philosophy, as cause for withdrawing from a friend.*

— Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826)

Today I got the invitation to Ridge’s party! From the beginning I thought physical invitations were unnecessary, but Julia insisted I give her my address so she could send one. I was expecting a little card with balloons on the outside and handwritten details about the party inside. But at that point I didn’t fully know the reality of Julia. Let me put it this way: I’ve seen wedding invitations that weren’t as fancy. It even included a card you had to send back for the RSVP.

But hold on a second. You’re probably wondering what party I’m talking about. It’s for my friend Ridge’s birthday. I’ve known him all my life, practically, but we haven’t seen each other in ages. The party’s being put on by his girlfriend, Julia, who I don’t know at all but can’t wait to meet.

It all started a few weeks ago. I was trying to leave the office to get to the airport, but man-made crises just kept coming. I was standing at my desk, putting my coat on, when the phone rang. My landline almost never rings, and I thought about letting it roll to voice mail. But we’re not supposed to do that—it might be important. So I picked up. “Hello. Paul Fielding.”

“Hello, Paul. I’d like to introduce myself.”

I looked at the ceiling. Why me! The last thing I needed was someone selling real estate or insurance. But I had to listen—it might possibly be a client. Or a potential client. So I listened.

“I’m Julia Lambton. I’m a good friend of Ridge Cooper. You remember him?”

I didn’t know enough about posh accents to be able to tell if Julia’s was real or fake. If she was a “good friend” of Ridge’s, it could have been either. I decided to play dumb. “Ridge? Sure. Is everything OK?”

“Oh, yes. Never better.”

I needed to get going. “Glad to hear, uh...Julia?”

“Now, then. Ridge and I have been together for a while. He’s told me all about his old friends, and he’s mentioned you a few times. I’m having a bit of a surprise birthday party for him next month, and I’d like to invite you. I thought it would be a nice idea to get as many people as I can together.”

I sat back down at my desk. This was getting interesting. “Thanks! I’d love to see him again. How did you find me?”

“Ridge said the last time he talked to you, you were working at Quantum Consulting. Didn’t take a lot of detective work.”

“I guess. And is Ridge still at Burroughs and Clark?”

“Yes. He’s on a partner track. They love him.”

“Well, I’m not surprised. Are you a consultant too?”

“Dear God, no!”

Her reaction scared me, and I involuntarily said, “Oh, sorry.” I recovered enough to say, “Uh. So when is the party?”

“Next month on the fourteenth. It’s a Saturday. You free?”

“Hold on.” I pretended to check, but I knew I was available. “Yes. That’s fine.”

“Now, you’re in the city?”

“Yes. I mean my office is in Manhattan. I live in Queens.”

“Oh. Give me your address please. I’m sending invitations.”

“You don’t have to do that. Just tell me where it is.”

“No. I do things right. It’s going to be at my parents’ house. East Hampton. The invitation will have directions. And the dress code. Guests can stay over if they want.”

“Wow, sounds fancy.”

Julia partially suppressed a snort. “Well, it *is* Ridge’s birthday.”

“I appreciate your inviting me.”

“He’ll be thrilled to see you. But remember – it’s a surprise.”

“Of course.”

Julia lowered her voice. "Now, Paul." She made it sound like "Pole."

"Yes?"

"I need to check something else with you."

"What's that?"

"Ridge has also mentioned someone named Ben. But I get the impression he wasn't as close to him as he was to you. Do you think it would be acceptable to invite him?"

"Sure. Absolutely. We all grew up together. It's too bad we've lost touch lately. This will be a great way to catch up."

"You sure?"

"Definitely. Ben's—I don't know—a little different. He and Ridge used to have huge arguments about life and politics and everything. But we were the best of friends. Really."

"Do you know how to contact him?" Julia asked.

"I've got a phone number."

"Does he work?"

"Last time we met, he was doing a PhD in history. That was a while ago. He was hoping to teach."

"Oh, I see. You think he'll be presentable?"

"Presentable? What do you mean?"

"I can't have lumberjacks and hippies showing up. It wouldn't look right."

I didn't like how judgmental Julia seemed to be. "Don't worry. I'll vouch for him."

"Well, all right. Just give me your address, and I'll get the invitation out. And the number for Ben."

I complied. "Thanks, Julia. You need any help getting ready? Can I bring anything?"

There was an ominous pause. "No. I'm using professionals."

"Well, it's nice of you to do this for Ridge. And I look forward to meeting you."

"Oh. And no gifts. Just yourself—and a friend if you want."

“Thanks. It’ll just be me.”

“See you then.”

I sat back, thinking, yes! This was so cool! I looked forward to the party. I couldn’t wait to see Ben and Ridge again. We’d all grown up together in the same neighborhood and been friends since elementary school. After high school, we didn’t see each other as much and hadn’t kept in touch since we’d been working.

I hadn’t been surprised to hear Julia got a funny vibe about Ben from Ridge. I’ve always liked Ben, but his attitude was always an issue, especially with Ridge. In fact, that was probably one of the main reasons we drifted apart. Plus, let’s face it – Ridge can be a dick sometimes too.

Of the three of us, Ben was always the thinker, and Ridge was the doer. That by itself was the basis for arguments. But as we got older, things changed. They both got more extreme. Ridge figured out who and what he wanted to be and he made that his identity, adopting the mannerisms, looks, and mind-sets of the people he wanted to be like. Ben became more idealistic. In fact, to call Ben idealistic would be a huge understatement. He’d been the kind of kid who was a pain even in elementary school, telling everyone they shouldn’t eat red meat and their parents shouldn’t drive them around in SUVs and sodium lauryl sulphate was going to end life on planet earth. But when he wasn’t campaigning, he was fun to be around. Plus, he was able to overcome his scruples about using animal products enough to own a baseball glove. He was a great third baseman.

But it got harder to deal with him once we got to college. Ridge and I majored in business, while Ben studied history and philosophy. That led to huge discussions, mostly between Ben and Ridge. Ben insisted we were amoral, money hungry, and selling out to the capitalist system. My reaction was to think that might be true, but the capitalist system was the only game in town, and if it was going to give me a good job and a good living, I wasn’t going to get hung up on ideological issues. That would earn me a lecture about the way people like me perpetuated the system of exploitation.

Ridge was less diplomatic than me, criticizing Ben for studying the humanities. “No one cares about that shit,” he would say. “If it’s so important, why do bank tellers make more than history teachers?”

I still sort of agree with Ridge. Ben *could* be a whiner, but a lot of what he said made sense. And I often thought Ridge was a little extreme and insensitive. We all started from the same point. Our parents were all in the same socioeconomic bracket. Through no fault of Ben’s and no quality of me or Ridge, our lives went in different directions.

The last time we were all together was at a friend’s wedding about a year after Ridge and I got our MBAs and started working as consultants. We were making big money, but Ben was still running up student loans and working odd jobs.

The blowup at the wedding was all due to Ridge’s insensitivity. He started lecturing Ben about how he hadn’t made correct life choices. Ridge’s “proofs” were that we were both earning big money, wearing fancy suits, living independently in our own apartments, and pretty much done paying off our student loans, while Ben was deep in debt, living at home, earning next to nothing in unstable jobs, and, possibly worst of all, wearing a JCPenney suit.

Ben, leading with his chin as usual, insisted our different socioeconomic statuses were the result of not only some twisted flaw in human DNA but also the capitalist system, which valued people based on what they did for a living and what they earned rather than who they were. Needless to say, they didn’t find much to agree on.

Me? I don’t know. I agree I’ve made choices that have made me more comfortable than Ben, but that doesn’t make me better than him. And I think I can speak for Ridge when I say we’ve had to make sacrifices too. I don’t care what anyone says—no one in their right mind should want to be a management consultant. We do it for the money and rationalize the stress and travel and hard work with how rewarding it is after the fact—if we even think about it. After all, Ben might be the smart one and end up doing what he loves. But I’m not going to lose a lot of sleep over it. I’ve got too much going on.