

No One Can Know

New Essex, Connecticut

Fall, 1951

The long, black Cadillac limousine filled with six girls sped along the modern new Interstate that connected New Essex with New Haven. Crossing the Baldwin Bridge, the Old Saybrook Lighthouse reflected a brilliant autumn glow cast from the Connecticut River. Snug inside the fancy car, Dauphine Chatham smiled at the new girl, Suzanne Lightsmith, and was amused how she tried to look as demure and grownup as herself. Dauphine decided that Suzanne, cute in her pixie way, would never pose any threat and therefore be the perfect accessory, a sort of lady in waiting, as she plotted her way out of town. She'd set Suzanne up with Richard's roommate, Nate, who was homely but smart and sweet. Dauphine felt she cemented her role as the queen of their group with today's outing, supplanting Nancy Helms, despite her money. She did it by pure guile and hard work. Cream rises to the top, Nana said. Dauphine opened her purse and took out a cigarette. First she checked her lipstick in her compact. What a coup for high school seniors to

have dates with college men! All due to her --and Richard, of course. Ostensibly, she had nothing to gain by arranging today. She was practically engaged to Richard, even though Nana had warned her about counting her chickens before they're hatched. She lit the cigarette. If the day went as planned, everyone would be indebted to her. Nancy and Suzanne in particular might meet their future husbands. That would be a lifelong IOU.

"Tell us about the guys you're going to set us up with," Betty said. Everyone shrieked, wild with anticipation.

"Wait, I need to get fortified," Nancy said and knocked on the window, gesturing to the driver, an employee of her father. He leaned over and passed a brown paper bag through the sliding glass. "Here, who wants one?" She produced a bottle opener and popped the cap of a Rheingold from the six-pack.

"Oh baby, hand one over," Mary Ann said.

"Will we stink of beer when we meet the guys?" Suzanne said.

"I've got mints, if anyone wants them," Betty said.

"Dauphine, you are giving us stink eye over there. What are you thinking?" Nancy said. "You look like you're plotting something."

"Mints and beer, ugh," Suzanne said.

The fact was Dauphine was conflicted about joining in the drinking. Up until now, she'd felt superior to everyone; this was her future husband and all his closest friends they were going to see, the stakes were high. The way a girl acted mattered. But now she wanted to drink a beer, get silly and be carefree like everyone else. None of the others had to be on pins and needles,

afraid of how she may look or act, or fear someone judging her, like she sometimes felt Richard did.

“I’ll take one of those, are they still cold?” Dauphine said, breaking down, unable to resist the lure of alcohol. Nancy opened a beer and handed it to her, the fermented stuff hitting Dauphine’s empty stomach like a bomb, the effect coursing through her. Within minutes, she felt an effervescence, a sparkle, a twinge. She leaned forward, “Let’s start with a few ground rules!”

“Wait a minute, who says you can make the rules?” Mary Ann said, looking over at Nancy. She was not ready to have her best friend’s dominant position surrendered so quickly.

“Let’s hear what she has to say first—” Nancy said. She watched Dauphine light another cigarette.

“Nancy, you should listen because you are sure to be at Conn College next year and have the best chance of dating a Yalie,” She exhaled smoke in an extremely way. “Now, we may be local girls from New Essex, but we are the cream of the crop, the crème de la crème, as they say.” Dauphine said, using an expression she practiced to perfection around Denise. The thought of Denise sent a pang through her. Denise Hodges had befriended her at St. Agnes Home, a place where they both had been sent to get rid of their ‘problem.’ Denise was the niece of Senator Hodges and had taken Dauphine under her wing and taught her a wealth of things, literally opened up worlds--like this one --a world full of men just a stone's throw from their home town. “Listen, that’s what we want them to think that we are --without a doubt --the best girls they will meet all day.”

“What—my dad owns the garage in town, I don’t think that’s going to fly with those fancy guys,” Mary Ann looked around at everyone. “If they knew, of course.”

“Exactly. Mary Ann, you’ve got smarts and looks and that’s something money can’t buy and if you follow me, it’ll take you to the stars and back, or at least out of New Essex,” Dauphine said.

“I like New Essex, just wait one minute,” Mary Ann said.

“Let’s not kid ourselves,” Betty said, “We have no other purpose than to find ourselves a man to marry. We all know it’s true no matter what the teachers tell us.”

“They say if you educate a girl, you educate a whole family,” Suzanne said.

“If you want to keep your nose in a book after we graduate, that’s your decision, but I’m not going to put my head in the sand,” Betty said. “Jane Austen says a girl’s first bloom is at 19.”

“Who said anything about head in the sand,” Suzanne said.

“Oh yeah, when’s the second?” Mary Ann said.

“Second bloom comes when a girl is 30,” Suzanne said. Everyone howled.

“We’ll be on our first affair by then,” Nancy said.

“I will have three children, two boys and a girl in that order,” Betty said. “I want a big old white frame house that looks onto the Sound, a wide lawn running down to the beach.”

“Will you all please shut up,” Nancy said. “We’re getting way off the topic at hand and we’re almost in New Haven.”

Dauphine swallowed the last of her beer. She felt a delicious tipsy sense. “Mary Ann, I’ve got Mal Regan in mind for you. Richard told me he has Communist sympathies and that should work fine with your working-class roots.”

“Oh great, you’re gonna set me up with some Pinko! My dad will love that,” Mary Ann said. “He’s a Republican.”

“I think if someone has Communist sympathies that means he just believes in equality for all. My dad said that all this anti-commie fever is the government’s overreaction to world events,” Suzanne said.

“Suzanne, frankly no one cares about what your dad thinks about commies. Dauphine, who have you got for me?” Nancy said. “No one from the academy. I want a fresh start.” New Essex Academy was a boy's boarding school in their town. That was where Dauphine had met Richard just a little over a year ago. Now he was a sophomore at Yale and Dauphine was impatient as a wet cat to graduate their all girl's school and get closer to him.

Out the window, gray trunks of gnarled oaks and the evergreen of cypress shrubs gave way every few miles to tiny train stations—Clinton, Madison, Stoney Creek, all painted in fresh Victorian greens, reds and yellows. Inside the plush car and its creamy yellow seats was an effluvium of feminine energy.

“Nancy, I have Billy Auchincloss Mahoney in mind for you,” Dauphine said. “He’s a wild one but if anyone can handle him, you can.”

“Is that all you can tell me? I’m not intrigued,” Nancy said. “Alright, I guess. Mary Ann, you’re on warning. I may want to switch out with your Pinko guy at half time.”

“Let me get to the kiss part, before we see them,” Dauphine said. The car was moving along Chapel Street, getting closer. The glow of the second Rheingold had taken hold and she was floating, it was delicious. “How about this—kiss him if you get the chance!”

Everyone screamed.

The Caddy made a turn on High Street, traveling past the Corinthian columns of Skull and Bones, which Dauphine pointed out to the mystified girls. She would explain that whole

thing when there was more time. Though November, the trees still had remnants of yellows and reds on their branches. Richard stood at the appointed spot in front of Branford, and waved as he saw the Cadillac pull to the curb. Dauphine emerged first and threw her arms around him somewhat drunkenly, almost knocking him over.

“Whoa, Dupie!” Richard steadied her by grabbing her shoulders. He spun around to see who was watching. Only Nancy saw and pretended not to notice.

“I’ve been counting the days!” Dauphine said and continued to hang on Richard.

“Hello, I’m Nancy Helms, and this is my car.”

“God, Nancy. Is that all you can say?” Mary Ann looked at her friend aghast. “I’m Mary Ann Murphy and her best friend, or at least I was. And this is not my car. My dad owns a garage, just so you know sooner rather than later.”

Richard laughed and slyly checked out Nancy and Mary Ann head to toe.

“I know the girls from Hough School. What, you think I don’t remember you?” Richard said, pouring on the charm. “Look, here come the rest of the guys.”

Richard’s friends, all five of them, marched down the sidewalk like they were part of the college band, their eyes on the big, black improbable car just as Betty happened to be the last one to exit. They stared at her blond hair swept up in a sophisticated French twist and her powder-blue sweater set. A whistle sounded somewhere from the pack and then they all pushed and shoved one another as to who was the source. Dressed in the Saturday uniform of khakis and crew neck sweaters, they loomed large on the sidewalk, a mass of unmistakable male energy that registered in screaming decibels on Dauphine’s radar. This day could be a watershed day for her

and all her friends. She was writing the engagement announcements in her head. This was Yale, bastion of the best and brightest of the red-blooded American male.

“Nancy, come meet Billy,” Dauphine said, pulling her friend by the hand over to a young man wearing oversize tortoise-shell glasses who looked at them through sleepy blue eyes with keen, standoffish interest.

“I love the monogram,” Nancy said, always brash, pointing to Billy's chest. As Dauphine suspected, Billy responded to Nancy's style immediately.

“You do?” Billy said, breaking into a big grin. “Look, I even have one here.” He pulled up his sweater sleeve to reveal his cuff. This sent Nancy into peals of laughter that resounded around the whole group.

Dauphine turned to embrace Richard again with a feverish, childlike intensity.

“What is all this?” he laughed, but tried to free himself from the claustrophobic hold she had around his neck.

“I've missed you beyond belief,” Dauphine said. “Didn't you miss me?” Her tone was whiney, her mouth shaped in a pout.

“Of course, I've been waiting all week for this.” His tone was not quite the loving, sweet and enamored one she had fantasized about all the weeks they had been apart.

The day was clear and cold but the sun was warming and the girls from Hough School sat bundled up in the stadium amid the boys across two upper rows on the wooden bleachers. Dauphine inserted herself right in the middle and flirted with Richard, Neddy and Billy. She sipped demurely from the flask as it was passed around. The crowd roared when Yale gained a few yards on a running play, but Dauphine cared nothing about football. She watched Betty and

Suzanne mingle with Nathan and Mal, just as she had planned. If Suzanne were smart, she should put her apples with Nathan. He was such a straight arrow and bound to earn more money one day than Mal.

“Hey, pass me that flask next time,” Dauphine nudged Nancy and hiccupped loudly .

“You might want to sit one out when it comes around, girl. It’s when we are pie-eyed *things* can happen, if you know what I mean,” Nancy said, glancing sideways at Dauphine. Her concern seemed genuine and Dauphine decided not to take offense at the insinuation of promiscuity. She was probably over sensitive to people’s innocent comments. There was no way Nancy could know what had happened to her. No way.

She huddled down beneath the bench to light a cigarette when the whole stadium erupted—Yale had intercepted. But she was tipsy to the point where all she could think about was how Richard was scarcely acknowledging her. Why had he moved down the bleacher acting like Betty and Ned were the most interesting people he’d ever met? She crushed her half-finished cigarette with her shoe and moved down the bench and inserted herself next Richard.

As the game ended and the group left the stands, Neddy broke out in song, and though he sang quite poorly, the fact that he couldn’t care less, made everyone laugh. He seemed to have won over Betty as he helped her down the steps, his eyes on her shapely legs while clinging to his red plaid thermos that still contained some schnapps. The tipsy group of handsome young men and pretty young women spilled out on the field, everyone wedged up against one another, exuberant in their awful singing. As they funneled toward the Chapel Street Gate, Dauphine turned her face to the sky, roaring “Boola, boolala, boola boola!”

Dauphine's voice happened to ring directly into the ear of the toddler who rode on her father's shoulders. The child reacted with such a baleful cry that everyone in the vicinity turned to see what was the matter. Phillip Stockwell, a well-known professor of chemistry, looked up at his little girl and spoke softly to calm her. Oblivious, Dauphine and her companions sang even louder--"Bulldog! Bulldog! Bow, wow, wow, Eli Yale!" at which point, the child emitted an unearthly wail, crying to the point of apoplexy. Between sobs, she pointed directly at the noisemakers and let out one more howl and then stopped short, staring at Dauphine as though possessed.

Dauphine's carefree posture dissipated, she stopped singing and froze; the little girl's wail pierced her body in places she couldn't identify, perhaps somewhere along the interior curve of her spine. Richard, wanting to move away, pulled Dauphine's arm but for a few seconds she was rooted to the ground, gripped by this tiny being. Somewhere in her recesses, pea green walls appeared with the smell of starched cotton and blood. Margaret then let out a mournful yelp and thrust her pudgy fingers toward Dauphine. This time, truly unnerved, Dauphine put her hands to her mouth and caught up with Richard. In a few moments, she was singing again and the entourage stumbled toward Mory's. From then on, anything close to the sound of that baleful cry, sometimes coming from one of her own two children she would ultimately have, made her shudder and flee.

After a beery dinner, they returned to Berkley House where Billy lived. In the cavernous living room, a fire blazed in the massive deco fireplace at the far end and someone played Cole Porter tunes at the grand piano. Everyone paired off. Suzanne and Nathan chatted quietly, their knees touching, their gazes fixed on each other. In the shadows of the window seat slightly away

from the group, Nancy and Billy made out, knowing they were probably in full view of everyone. Betty and Neddy sat on the couch, he with his feet on the coffee table and his arm around her while they both stared at the fireplace, deep in conversation as though they had known each other for years. Mary Ann and Mal, the only ones still drinking on the sly from the silver flask, talked urgently about politics. Dauphine and Richard found a dark alcove on the way to the dining hall and necked crazily. After drinking so much, Dauphine's desire was unleashed and she kissed Richard, letting him all the way into her mouth.

"I've wanted you all day," she moaned.

Richard covered her face and neck in kisses, and she touched him over his khakis. He was hard. His hand moved slowly up her thigh under her skirt and his fingers worked around her panties. Her moans became quite audible, and she was only vaguely aware of them until Richard seemed to want to slow things down and pulled back. She firmly returned his hand to where she wanted it and they settled into slow rhythmic moves. After a few moments, Dauphine began gasping, her pleasure too much to contain, and she let out little screams that sounded like pain.

"Dauphine, shhhh, others will hear," Richard said.

"Don't stop," Dauphine murmured.

But when he did, she continued with her own hand, and her face contorted. She was on a mission that could not be stopped. She was deaf to the background noise from the living room, the piano music, the chatter that became loud whispers and tittering laughter. Dauphine let out a yelp that sounded almost like an animal in distress. When Richard put his hand over her mouth, she became aware of where she was. It was very quiet all at once. In the outer room she heard Nancy and Mary Ann talking, but their exact words could not be made out. She felt Richard's

gaze and smiled. But then she saw the panic in his eyes and realized she had done something wrong.

“Everyone heard us,” Richard said.

“They did?” She was still fuzzy. “What time is it?”

“Time to go. Look, you stay here and fix yourself, comb your hair, whatever. I’ll cut through the kitchen and circle back through the front entrance. I’ll divert the attention and then you come slip into the couch area. Act like nothing happened!”

The Helms family limo glided through the night back to New Essex. The mood in the car was subdued. Dauphine followed Richard’s instructions to pretend nothing unusual had happened.

“Everyone’s so quiet,” she said. “What does everybody think?”

Nancy and Mary Ann stared at Dauphine with a mixture of envy and haughtiness. Betty and Monica feigned sleep. Only Suzanne carried on as she normally might.

“I had the best time, thank you, Dauphine. Without you, this wouldn’t have happened. Imagine all of us Hough girls with Yale men! What a dream. Nathan was the absolute sweetest.”

“Yeah, I bet anything Billy will call me. But what about thanking me? It was my father’s car that got us there. We’d be cramped in some smelly milk train if it weren’t for me.”

“What do you guys think of Mal?” Mary Ann said.

“You sure did a lot of staring into each other’s eyes between the politics,” Nancy said. “I think Dauphine and Richard might have been doing more than that.”

Everyone turned to Dauphine.

“You haven’t told us anything of where you and Richard drifted off to,” Mary Ann said.

“That place has a lot of nooks and crannies, doesn’t it? Wonder if the architects had that in mind for football weekends?” Nancy said, poking Mary Ann with her elbow and eyeing Dauphine.

Dauphine was on tenterhooks. What with drinking so much, she knew she’d lost control and was flooded with intense shame. Why did she have these lapses? These base desires. What was wrong with her. It happened at the bonfire at Ocean Beach--drinking moonshine nearly cost her everything, it even resulted in a baby--she couldn't think about that, couldn't face the sound of the word in her mind. In fact, there never was a baby, that's what the nuns told her and Denise at the home. It would be easy to forget because a girl should say to herself it *never* happened and then someday, when she had her own *real* children, any memory would just go away. She recalled the toddler's manic crying episode at the stadium, her wails tormenting Dauphine. The child in no way was connected to her, she was just spooked. Nana always said she was too emotional and of course, the old woman was right. Now Suzanne had joined Nancy and Mary Ann in staring. Would it be best to admit what happened, but could she ever live down the embarrassing sounds she’d made? On the other hand, they’d all heard probably and nothing she could do or say would change that. There was something wrong with her, just like Nana said. The Chatham curse, she had a sullied, black core. It probably went all the way back to Tilly Smith, some bad seed, brought from England that persisted generation after generation. Look at her Daddy and the things he did to her down *there*... It wasn’t her fault, she was tainted by blood.

“You know, it’s a wonderful thing for a woman to enjoy her sexuality,” Suzanne said, in a tone of admiration. “It’s about time we stopped letting men have all the pleasure. We have no

idea of what we're even capable of feeling. Dauphine, you showed us a way. My dad is a doctor and I know he would agree."

There was silence at first, but then female voices flooded the car.

"Did you tell him what to do?" Mary Ann said.

"I'm so jealous. Is that ever going to happen for me? I always think I'd be too embarrassed to let myself go like that," Nancy said. "But if you did it, Dauphine, then it's okay, you know?"

"He used his fingers?" Betty said in a timid voice.

"You don't even worry about getting preggers that way!" Suzanne said.

Dauphine's angst began to evaporate, though she never joined in the conversation. She just smiled at the adulation--she was a pioneer, apparently. Creme de la creme, Denise would be proud. Even though St. Agnes seemed far away and barely connected to the present, she thought of Denise and how she would have liked to have been among them, settled in the creamy seats of this fancy car as it crossed the span at Old Saybrook, the yellow bridge lights shimmering against the black water. The nuns were right, *there was no baby*. Like on the precipice of some new horizon, the car traveled through the night, its occupants filled with visions of love, desire, and men. Dauphine gazed out into the darkness while the other girls grew sleepy, her mind churning, backpedaling through the events of the day, permitting only the conundrum of blue versus pink taffeta for her would-be bridesmaids to surface. Much to her disappointment, she would never see Denise Hodges again.