

CLOUDLAND

ALSO BY JOSEPH OLSHAN

Clara's Heart

A Warmer Season

The Waterline

The Sound of Heaven

Nightswimmer

Vanitas

In Clara's Hands

The Conversion

CLOUDLAND

Joseph Olshan



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This is a work of fiction.

All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For Lynn Darling

On n'aime bien qu'une seule fois: c'est la première . . .

Jean de La Bruyère

(The first love is the only love.)

PART ONE

ONE

IT WAS UNDER AN APPLE TREE that I saw her—up the road on the walk that I’ve taken hundreds of times in my life. I noticed her pink parka and thought: she’s out here drinking in the unusual warmth of late March; her face to the sun, hardy soul she must be, sitting there tanning in a crater of melting snow. I didn’t have my dogs with me because they’re older and arthritic and because the muddy road was deeply rutted, slippery with glare ice.

I usually go a half mile up the road to the red farm with a glass greenhouse where my painter friend raises orange trees that bear fruit all winter. Then I make a slow turn and wander back. I’m usually thinking about my deadline; that day I was grateful that a trusty reader from Mississippi had sent me a formula for ridding white T-shirts of armpit stains. When I passed the orchard, there she was again: the pink parka, the face still canted to the sun at the same angle, and—I realized for the first time—completely still. Now I stopped, partly because of how motionless she was, but also because I could hear Virgil and Mrs. Billy barking back at the house. The shift in wind direction had probably brought them her scent.

Sinking into the soft, crusty snow, I took wobbly steps toward

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her, somehow knowing not to call out, but still not knowing how she might be. Ten feet away I saw the depression of snow around her, soaked in rusty brown. Now certain she was dead and the stain was blood, I made myself march on until I stood before the pale gray face, the slight double chin. I turned away for a moment, overcome with nausea. When I forced myself to look at her again I noticed beads of ice melting on her brow. I was thankful that her eyes were closed. Her parka was pretty well zipped up, but her throat was exposed and blotchy and eggplant purple, her lips bruised and black. I knew it was Angela Parker, a nurse who had disappeared in mid-January from a rest area off Interstate 91 and whose blood was found all over the inside of her car.

When she'd first gone missing and her picture was published everywhere, I actually thought I recognized her as someone who'd taken my blood several times at the hospital. I remembered the kind manner distracting me from the needle, nimble fingers making the draw much less of an ouch. She was the sixth victim in two years.

Long before Angela Parker was buried in the orchard snow, I'd imagine all sorts of marauders: hunters heading home from a day in the woods; drug runners from Canada on their way down through Vermont toward Boston or Providence. My driveway is just a quarter-mile long, so the rumor of passing cars filters through to me, especially when leaves have fallen and there is no buffer to the sound. I hear most of everything that passes.

And motorists have always mistaken this road for a more popular thoroughfare another half mile down Route 12. They usually recognize their error by the time they're cresting the first long hill, which is precisely where my driveway begins. Often at night I've been sitting at my writing desk, sifting through correspondence from people who read my advice columns, when a pair of headlights telescopes through my rolled-glass windows. Somebody will have made a wrong turn onto my land, their car

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paused, its lighted eyes staring and blinding. Sometimes a car has ventured close enough to the house that the motion detector lamps have switched on. I've stopped working and waited until the vehicle began moving again.

But after the discovery of her body was reported all over the northeast, I found myself wondering if the killer would read the article, would learn that I was a forty-one-year-old woman living alone up here on Cloudland. I began to worry that each wandering tourist was the man whose DNA the police had been unable to detect—always the killer in my mind's eye, never some flatlander looking for Advent Road, whose famous B & B has been written up in all the travel magazines.

A few years ago, my editor at the newspaper syndicate said to me, "I can't imagine anyone would dare to bother you when you have dogs and a domestic pig no less."

"Why would a bunch of animals stand in the way?"

"Because they'd protect you."

I looked at my babies and thought: Would you? Could you? My house pig, Henrietta, often got angry and territorial. She'd rush the dogs and knock them over. I always wondered if she had it in her to take out a murderer before that murderer could stick his knife into her heart.

The night Angela Parker was stabbed and dumped unceremoniously in the apple orchard, there were no lost tourists, no invasion of headlamps; we had a snowstorm with blizzard conditions. The flakes were funneling down like pestilence, stinging my nineteenth-century windows. The wind was howling, its drafts seeping through the old bony rafters of the house. I was trying out a recipe for marble cake that somebody from Omaha had sent me, mixing white flour with cornmeal and threading dark chocolate into the batter. I heard the town truck dredging through, its yellow wing plow carving the fresh snow up into waves. The plowman remembers a single pair of virgin tire tracks

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winding along the deep drifts, tracks that, in his estimation, miraculously made it up Cloudland Road's first big hill before they vanished.

Earlier that day Angela Parker had met some of her hospital coworkers at a ski resort in southern Vermont. Driving home she stopped at the Hartland rest area on Interstate 91 sometime between five and seven P.M. She called her husband from a pay phone to say she'd made it that far in the storm. But she never turned up at home, and the following day her car was found in the parking bay of the rest area. By then she was already ten miles away from where she was abducted, just up the road from me. And to think that each time I went for a walk I had passed within fifteen yards of this mother of two lying in a vault of snow that would entomb her for the rest of January and February and most of March. Her husband grew so distraught when she disappeared that he ended up begging his parents to move up from Tewksbury, Massachusetts, to take care of him and his children.

When they finally brought her down from Cloudland, the road was so clogged with spring mud that the funeral home had to borrow a four-wheel drive. I couldn't help but watch them load her rigid body onto the stretcher, just the way I couldn't help watching when Hiram Osmond, our local "knacker man," arrived with chains to winch my dead farm animals up into his pickup truck, taking them home to hack and boil. I also watched hunters lug their quarry out of the forest: dead bucks with glazed, opaque eyes and huge pink slits in their bellies. I watched the seasons blend: a spike of warmth in midwinter, then a venomous cold that gave rise to the frost heaves that sent cars careering off the road. But when the ice finally thawed and the ponds caved in with a bellow, those apple trees where I found her had begun to throw their buds.