

— A — WARMER SEASON



A NOVEL BY

J O S E P H
O L S H A N

AUTHOR OF CLARA'S HEART

A WARMER SEASON

A Novel by
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A
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Also by Joseph Olshan

Clara's Heart

For my grandmother, Rose Sanford

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One pushes upward into an empty city.

—*The I Ching* (46)

A
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1

"Remember, Danny, how you used to write all those beautiful poems in Italian," his mother said. *"Remember when Camilla was getting married in Vicenza and we were late getting there because we were waiting for you to finish your marriage ode?"*

"Rhyming is easier in Italian," Daniel reminded her. *"Besides, in Italy, you write poems. In America you write poison pen letters."*

The two of them and Daniel's sister, Alexis, were standing outside a small butcher shop. Ever since they had moved back to New York, his mother had wanted to explore the Italian neighborhood. This was their first excursion. Although most housewives preferred the conveniences of Shopwell and Finast, Irene had figured a better quality of product could be found at the "specialty shop," where she assumed one could get better bargains by speaking Italian.

"Please, Danny, go in there and order in Italian for me," she said.

"You order, Mom. You know what to say." Daniel and Alexis exchanged looks of exasperation.

Irene shrugged and strolled into the shop ahead of them, the rickety wooden door slamming behind her. Looking like a typical Italian urbanite, she was dressed in a white silk blouse and loose-fitting pants belted tightly at the waist. She was wearing a scarf

around her taut, smooth throat, her dark auburn hair kept in a hacked, tastefully disheveled manner. She had never wanted to move back to America, and when his father had announced that his accounting firm was transferring them to New York, she had unsuccessfully lobbied Daniel and Alexis to remain in Italy. Irene had loved Padua. Padua was close to Venice—most of her friends lived in Venice—and besides, she had virtually forgotten she was an American. Daniel, on the other hand, had spent the first twelve years of his life in Italy, and took his native country for granted. He was curious about living in America, considered himself American.

This assumption lasted until the family finally settled in this suburb of New York City and he entered school, where he discovered that he was actually more Italian. His schoolmates were undemonstrative with their hands and stood far apart when they spoke to one another, sharing talk about a whole tradition of hit singles and movies Daniel had never heard or seen. People vied for popularity and played foolish dating games like “post office” and “spin the bottle.” Feeling conspicuous and foreign, Daniel began stifling his knowledge of Italian and even Italian culture.

His Italian had always been a source of pride to his parents, who had never quite mastered the language themselves. By refusing to speak it, Daniel knew that he was adding to the frustrations his mother was facing in her native country. For one thing she had trouble meeting people; suburbanites were a far cry from her flamboyant artistic and intellectual Italian friends. Suburban social life centered around a tightly knit network of couples who played tennis and golf and did volunteer work. And then, soon after moving in, the Fells had discovered that their town was divided into two main constituencies: Jewish and Italian—they were Jewish.

When Alexis and Daniel finally went inside the shop, they found Irene struggling with her Italian in an attempt to place a meat order. The dark-eyed proprietress was squinting and brooding, repeating Irene’s ungrammatical sentences in proper Italian as dutifully as a parent correcting a child. The woman eventually began speaking in broken English, as if to suggest that more would be accomplished in that language. This annoyed Irene, who lost her nerve and forgot the phrase for butterflied lamb.

When she saw Daniel she elbowed him to finish placing their order.

He turned to her, scowling. She knew he didn't like speaking Italian any longer, so why was she forcing him? "Just speak in English," he told her.

"No, let her think we're European," Irene whispered fiercely. Then she smiled, half embarrassed at her own insistence.

"Mom, what are you trying to prove?" he asked.

"Just do what I say, Daniel." She spoke behind a frantic smile.

With a sigh, Daniel took over the ordering. He told the shopkeeper that his family was newly arrived from Padua—but that his mother was born in Latvia; that's why her Italian was accented and hard to understand. Alexis was smart. She kept quiet the entire time and looked bored. As soon as Daniel opened his mouth, the woman was charmed and her Italian turned rapid and lilting. She shyly complimented him on his perfect accent and insisted on charging the Fells fifty cents less per pound than the advertised price.

They went home with the choicest cuts of lamb and Irene boasted to his father how she was monitoring costs. Harold was suitably impressed. But when, a few days later, a bill came in for a \$500 dress she had charged in White Plains, Harold angrily pointed out the irony of cutting costs at the market after squandering money on designer clothing. As the years went by Irene forgot more and more of her Italian. And although she never became a typical suburbanite, she did settle into shopping at supermarkets.

PART ONE

2

The slaughter of helpless zoo animals is a misdeed difficult to forget. When it occurred one night at the children's park in Houghton, the news was picked up by several wire services and transmitted all over the United States and even through parts of Europe. Some hoodlums had hurdled the Cyclone fence that surrounded the small verdant park and, with a wire cutter, had clipped the diamond mesh of metal that protected the animals. Using blunt kitchen knives, they massacred frightened lambs, chased down and decapitated two dozen chickens and cut open the soft bellies of rabbits. Although the culprits had yet to be identified, the high school students whispered among themselves that the Polanno brothers were responsible for the crime.

The Polanno brothers ruled over the youth of Houghton with an invisible hand; their reputation always preceded them. Between one and three years past high school age, they had not yet graduated. Their stints in youth prisons had interrupted their scholastic careers. In between these stints they attended school fairly regularly. They managed to pass their courses without doing a stitch of work, either by intimidating other students into making copies of their homework assignments or by procuring the answers to multiple choice Regents exams. Vito, twenty years old, was a senior. He had a lanky build, hawk eyes and a face riddled with

acne. Mario, nineteen, was in eleventh grade, a pudgy fellow who would undoubtedly grow obese by the time he reached his middle twenties. Mickey, the good-looking one of the three, was eighteen and in tenth grade.

The Polannos were inseparable; Daniel never saw them apart. Indeed, he rarely saw them outside their black Trans Am. Their strength seemed to be in their triumvirate. The windows of the Trans Am were tinted with carbon, and when anyone saw the car careering through the high school parking lot, it was difficult if not impossible to detect anyone behind the window glass. This tended to give the impression that the Polannos were a single person rather than a threesome.

When the news first spread through the town how the throats of the animals had been slit and their bodies disemboweled, the police went through the usual motions of questioning certain kids whom they considered to be pivotal to the comings and goings of the Polanno brothers. But no one who knew anything—such as where the Polannos were the night of the incident—would divulge it. Quite simply everybody was afraid of having the Polannos after them, which meant getting beaten up long after you were made aware that they were after you. For several weeks before they actually descended upon a particular person, the Polannos used their intermediaries to stir up anxiety. You would be constantly reminded, “Oh man, the Polannos are looking for your ass,” and then repeatedly questioned, “So, did they get you yet or wha?”

The autumn the animals were slaughtered Daniel had reached his last year of high school. He was still a virgin, a condition that had become increasingly burdensome to him. What if he ended up going to college without any real sexual experience? Houghton was a fairly conventional town and all of the girls he had dated refused to go all the way. They were virgins, too. While this explained their reluctance, Daniel worried whether there was something unsexy about him. Plenty of his acquaintances claimed to have gotten their virginal girlfriends to make love—so why couldn't he? He didn't think it was a physical hindrance, unless being “blond and stocky” precluded the ability to attract women more strongly. Once a girl told him he had a cute bod. What did that mean? Was a cute bod something to dally with but not indulge in? Other boys he knew had been fortunate enough to date girls who had already given up their virginity. Did his problem have