

Clare and Bink Fischer have a love so strong they're not about to let a little thing like death get in their way.

# Lance Olsen

## Live From Earth

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# LIVE *from* EARTH

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*Lance Olsen*



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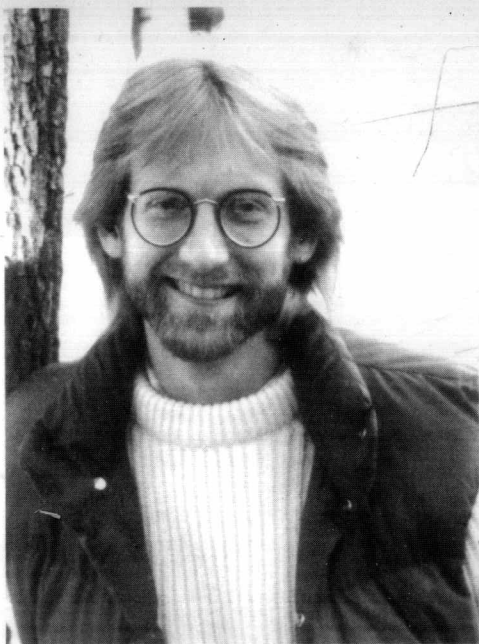
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Andi Olsen

Lance Olsen lives with his wife in northern Idaho.

*Andi, no one compares . . .*

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This novel is for  
VIOLET OLSEN and JOYCE GARVIN,  
who got it started; for  
DOUG WATERMAN and BRUCE ANDERSON,  
who kept it going; and for  
KATE WHOULEY and BOB WYATT,  
who brought it to fruition.

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*The poem "Fate, for Bink and Clare" is a slight reworking of  
Ken Smith's  
unpublished poem "Fate, for Andi and Lance."  
The idea for the artificial insemination business came from  
Peter Nelson.*

*YOU may not be interested in absurdity . . .  
but absurdity is interested in YOU.*

—DONALD BARTHELME  
*"A Shower of Gold"*

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\*Available in a Ballantine Mass Market Edition.

**ONE**

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*This Side*



# Chapter 1

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**S**itting on the porch steps of her farm cottage years later, Clarissa tried to imagine her husband's birth. How Bink already had a headful of long, thin, frazzled white hair when they helped him out of his mother's womb one October morning in 1950.

"Jeez," his father's disappointed voice rumbled somewhere above him. "It's a goddamn *albino*."

Bink opened his eyes and saw men in green gowns. He saw silver stirrups stuffed with flabby feet and scarlet toe-

nails. He saw an obese mostly naked woman the size of his headache.

"So this is Des Moines," he thought to himself.

"You can always have the ears fixed," the doctor, still wearing a surgeon's mask, said as they peered over him.

Bink's ears were the size of adults' ears.

At the time nobody knew he would grow into them.

Lying there on a towel, brownish clots of blood still clinging to his pinkpurple cheeks and neck and arms, quietly watching the activity spinning on around him, he looked like an inquisitive alien.

His mother began to cry, deep, hard, soulful, from that part of the heart where hope is kept.

"This is the worst day of my entire life," she said. "The absolute worst."

Head hurting, Bink looked over at her intently. He wanted to reach out and pat her on the tummy he had stretched. He wanted to put his arms around the neck that he had caused to strain just moments before. He wanted to comfort her, to tell her what he had already learned about the world, that sometimes our actions are questions, not answers.

## Chapter 2

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**B**ut as she sat there watching the morning fog burn off in the pastures below, Clarissa kept returning to how Bink had almost had the life scared out of him.

The day after the advance for Bink's first and only novel arrived, and the day before he headed up to New York for the Save Our Whales convention, the weathermen predicted the worst snowstorm of the season, so Clarissa and Bink decided they would drive up to Washington from Charlottesville a night early, take a room downtown, and celebrate.

When they walked into the Mayflower Hotel they were dazzled, felt like Hansel and Gretel in a forest created by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, huge, magical, filled with sparkling chandeliers, grand beds, marbled bathrooms, silk sheets. Golden mirrors in the ballroom. Chandeliers in the mirrors. Mirrors in the closets. Mirrors over the sinks, behind bathroom doors, on the tabletops. Clare even found one where the lightswitch should have been, having played hide-and-seek with her face for half-a-minute before she realized what she was looking at.

They called down for a bottle of scotch and hamburgers and french fries and choco-chocochip ice cream and spent the evening watching cable porno movies, first one about a horny family of hillbillies in the Ozarks and the two young girl-cousins and pet coon hound who came to visit them, then one about a female bodybuilder named Beave who had such control over her muscles she could make her privates sing a cappella, and Bink and Clare made love carefully, meticulously, like couples who have known each other for years and years.

Pulling back the curtains in the morning, they found snow falling upward in the bluegray streets because the wind was blowing so fiercely.

Clare had to keep wiping the fog off the inside of the baby blue Volkswagen's windshield as they fishtailed through grimy slush amid Fords and Buicks that crouched like crazy cats, yellow eyes aglow, rumps raised against the storm. They didn't pull up to the National terminal until nine forty for a ten o'clock flight.

Under the gray overhang they hugged each other long and warm and kissed.

"You take care of yourself," Clare said, holding onto the collar of Bink's raincoat.

His white hair whipped in the wind.

She remembered photographs she'd seen of Andy Warhol when he was first hot, back in the sixties, before he burned out like a malfunctioning satellite zipping through the stratosphere. He too had something about him that reminded her of an angel who couldn't fly.

"Hey," Bink said, "it's me."

"That's exactly why I'm saying this."

He grinned.

"You'll call tonight?" she asked.

"Seven on the dot."

He walked around back, opened the trunk, took out a briefcase and royal blue gym bag. Black grains of soot speckled the snow collecting along the curb.

"You have your ticket?" she said.

"I have my ticket."

A porter called out someone's name.

"You have your papers?" she said.

"I have my papers."

Wings, thought Clarissa.

"Seven?"

"You're worrying," Bink said.

"Of course I'm worrying. This is normal behavior among spouses."

A Honda honked. Clare glanced back. A middle-aged man with long black hair sat behind the wheel. Next to him sat an older woman wearing unnaturally pink makeup and cradling a Chihuahua that looked like a cross between a rat and a piranha.

"Love you," Bink said.

"Get going."

They kissed again and Bink jogged through the automatic doors.





He took a seat over the wing, one aisle back from the emergency exit, because he had read somewhere that over the wing was the safest place. He had also read somewhere that the rear of the plane was the safest place. He tended to favor the rear since when you sat over the wing you sat over a small black sea of high explosives. But the people in the rear were smokers and what could smokers know about safety? The experts said the place over the wing would be the sturdiest and the last to kiss the ground. Unless, of course, there was a belly landing. In which case it would be the first, the plane dissolving into a fireball.

The only thing Bink was sure of was that you had to be nuts to fly first class.

He buckled his seat belt and stared out the porthole. He could barely see the wingtip because the snow was spinning so hard and fast. When he closed his eyes he saw Frodo and Saposcat whooshing low over trees in their Dragon gunship back in Vietnam.

"You shoot," Frodo said.

"I'm not shooting," said Saposcat. "You shoot."

"Not me," Bink said.

"I'll shoot," Billy Schildkraut said. "What the hell."

They were looking for elephants. That morning the orders had come in. All elephants in Vietnam had to be destroyed because the Viet Cong could use them to carry supplies, artillery, themselves. The army had sent in defoliator planes a day earlier. Now all the trees below them were naked, prickly, covered with a fine powder.

Billy grinned at Bink, manned his 7.62 millimeter machine gun, and started zapping at nothing in particular.

Frodo, a crazy dooper-eyed dropout from the University