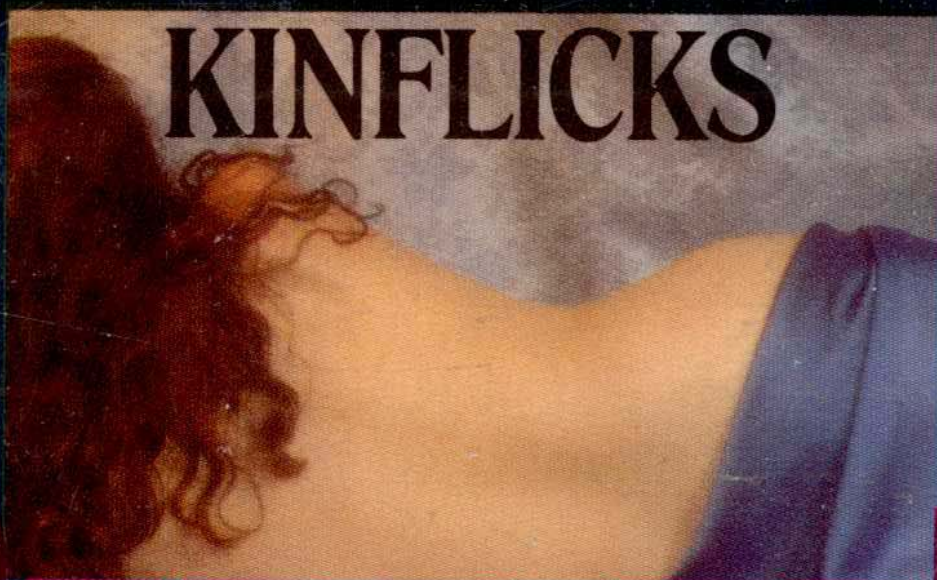


When husband, children, and home disappoint,
a woman always has one more option:
falling in love with her best friend.

LISA ALTHER

BUSINESS AND SOCIETY



BEDROCK

07841-5 (Canada \$6.99) U.S. \$5.99

BEDROCK

江苏工业学院图书馆

Lisa Alther

藏书章

IVY BOOKS • NEW YORK

Sale of this book without a front cover may be unauthorized. If this book is coverless, it may have been reported to the publisher as "unsold or destroyed" and neither the author nor the publisher may have received payment for it.

Ivy Books

Published by Ballantine Books

Copyright © 1990 by Lisa Alther, Inc.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Ice Nine Publishing Company, Inc. for permission to reprint an excerpt from "If I Had the World to Give," words by Robert Hunter. Copyright © 1979 by Ice Nine Publishing Company, Inc.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 89-43360

ISBN 0-8041-0781-5

This edition published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First International Ballantine Books Edition: August 1991

First U.S. Ballantine Books Edition: October 1991

For Carey Kaplan

**We dance along Death's icy brink,
But is the dance less full of fun?**

***The Kasidah*—HAJI ABDU EL-YEZDI**

Many thanks to the following friends for all the good suggestions and stolen jokes: Richard Alther, Sara Alther, Blanche Boyd, Andy Canale, Jody Crosby, Brenda Feigen, Françoise Gilot, John Izzi, Steve Izzo, Carey Kaplan, Rollie McKenna, Janice Perry, Kate Pond, John Reed, Mary Twitchell, and Vicky Wilson. With special thanks to Jody Crosby for the years of unflagging patience and encouragement while this book was *in vitro*.

I

||||

1 ≡ Roches Ridge

An ivory BMW with two pairs of skis on the roof descended a long hill, granite cliffs spiked with fir trees rising up on either side of the road. The driver, Turner Shawn, had a pleasant, ruddy face and a sparse crop of graying blond hair. His wife, Clea, dressed in stretch pants and a turtle-neck, sat beside him studying Roches Ridge, Vermont, which lay below them in the winter sun, on a granite outcropping that plunged down to the marshes of Mink Creek, where the creek flows into Lake Champlain.

Clea Shawn was a sophisticated woman. Men had insisted they loved her in several languages. By this time she'd been in love so often that her heart felt like a sponge mop. On a regular basis passion had seized her up, swirled her around, and squeezed her dry. These were not flings, they were obsessions, the kind that dominate days and dictate dreams, that compel salmon to leap up waterfalls and men to ride down them in barrels. She had come to regard the symptoms—the flushed face and clammy palms, the pounding pulse and restless nights, the wish to buy new sheets and work out at her health club—with dread.

Yet Clea was a woman who adored love. Hormones had always been her recreational drug of choice. An aficionado of that moment when fervor swamps common sense, she lacked a gift for restraint.

Snow was piled hip-high along streets that outlined a central green with its Victorian bandstand, bronze Civil War soldier, and War of 1812 cannon. White frame colonials encircled the green. In the distance in one direction was Camel's Hump, capped toothlike with snow; and in the other, the

Adirondacks. Although she'd traveled the world, Clea had rarely seen a spot so lovely.

"Turner, this place is gorgeous." She felt alarm as her palms turned clammy. Turner nodded and smiled. After their bout of lovemaking that morning, on the orange shag carpet in the condo overlooking the Alpine Glen ski trails, he'd have agreed if she'd maintained the earth was flat. "The old man can still put it to you," he'd murmured as he lay beside Clea, who lacked the heart to admit she'd faked her orgasm, another disturbing symptom of fresh passion in the offing. Her obsession with Turner had subsided after all these years into sororal affection—warm and comfortable, but lacking the note of complication and compulsion she required. A safety strap from a ski pole in the roof rack began slapping against the roof.

While Turner inspected the ski rack, Clea zipped her parka, took her Nikon from the back seat, and began snapping shots of peeling colonial cornices and returns. Starr's IGA, St. Sebastian's Catholic Church, the Community Congregational Church, a grade school with a soccer field behind it, Al's Getty station, the Center for Sanity, a volunteer firehouse, a doctor's office, Coffin's Funeral Home, Casa Loretta, the Karma Café, Earl's Barbershop, Orlon's Bait and Tackle, with a fly-specked sign in the window: YES, WE DO HAVE NIGHT CRAWLERS!

Everything a person really needed, Clea concluded as she stood before the redbrick post office, the only structure in sight dating after 1880. She felt suddenly ashamed of the junk that cluttered her life, the urgent trips to Bloomingdale's or the Atrium to find the right place mats or neck scarf, her tangled web of illicit relationships. It was clear that Roches Ridgers lived simple, honest lives, requiring only the essentials.

Casa Loretta was paneled in barn board. Turner and Clea sat at the Formica table, regarding a pink plastic rose in a ceramic bud vase and eating Ridgeburgers brought by a woman with a remarkable bleached blond hairdo piled eighteen inches high, with spit curls at the ears. A badge over her left breast read: HI, I'M LORETTA. ASK ME ABOUT OUR SOUTH OF THE

BORDER SPECIALS. John Denver sang “Rocky Mountain High” from the neon Wurlitzer in the back corner.

“Turner, I like this town,” Clea heard herself confess. She’d fallen in love with cities before—New York, Paris, Bombay, Kyoto, Sydney—but never with a village: She had always been opposed to settlements of fewer than one million, unless they were situated in foreign countries, which made them picturesque rather than merely boring. In fact, she’d spent her first twenty-one years trying to *escape* small towns, and the small minds that sometimes infest them. Her particular crossroads to bear was Poplar Bluffs, Ohio, eighty miles upriver from Cincinnati, on a limestone cliff overlooking the Ohio River. Population 3,813, mostly senior citizens who passed their days behind morning glory vines on front porches, discussing brands of denture adhesives and abhorring the behavior of all ambulatory townspeople. Clea had fled to Cornell, then to New York City.

Turner was unimpressed, being accustomed to Clea’s mentally setting up housekeeping in each spot they visited. And they’d visited plenty, with his international marketing career, vacations with their children, and Clea’s photo assignments for travel magazines.

“I really mean it, Turner.” Abruptly Clea found herself longing to get back to the basics, not recalling that the basics might include tedium, loneliness, disease, violence, and death.

“Good French fries.”

“Turner, all you need is an airport. I’ve got enough contacts now so I can live anywhere. And the children love to ski.” An empty nest belonged in the forest, not on East Forty-ninth Street. Theo was in his last year at Hotchkiss and Kate in her first at Smith. Clea had always led an active life apart from them. But last September she’d been appalled to discover a giant cavity in her heart, which parenthood had evidently been filling. The day the children left for school, Turner left for Rome. Clea spent the afternoon crying in bed. Those infants who’d sucked so hungrily at her breasts, who’d clutched her fingers when confronted with strangers, were now going on blind dates and opening checking accounts and picking majors without her assistance.

"Clea, you're like an express train." Turner laughed. "I can either climb aboard or stand aside."

"And all these years you've climbed aboard, my love. In sickness and in health."

"Infidelity and out of fidelity," he added with his sweet smile. "Ever since I first saw you at that DU freshman tea at Cornell. Drunk on whiskey sours. Black hair falling across one eye. Singing 'Roll Your Leg Over.' Off-key."

"We could keep the brownstone. A pied-à-terre. What's all this money for anyhow?" On top of her free-lance fees she had income from her parents' estate. And Turner earned the salary of a successful corporate executive.

"You're forgetting that you love New York, Clea. You'll get over this mugging business. Just give it time."

Clea was kneeling among Big Mac cartons in an alley off West Eighty-eighth Street. A man in a torn maroon parka held a gun to her temple. With his free hand he tore the gold hoops from her earlobes.

"Please don't shoot," she whispered. "I've got two children."

"Lady," he said, cocking the pistol, bloodshot eyes burning through the holes in his leather ski mask, "I wouldn't care if you ran the orphanage."

"What about Elke?" asked Turner, faintly alarmed.

Clea shook her head. Elke. Elke and she talked on the phone most days and lunched every week. "She could come up here. I'd visit her. Letters. The phone. God, Turner, I can't plan my life around Elke." The time when she *had* planned around Elke had passed. They first met in Elke's studio while Clea photographed her for *American Artist*. Afterward, Clea's every waking moment, and much of her sleep as well, was tintured with a yearning for Elke. But after Saint John, when it became clear they weren't going to run off with each other, the urgency slackened a bit, if not the affection and respect.

A diminutive man in cowboy boots and a string tie with a turquoise thunderbird clasp was paying his bill to Loretta. Possessed of the brown wizened face and fetal carriage of a mummy, he paused to sign a petition demanding reinstatement of Vermont's death penalty.

Loretta looked up from the cash register to smile at Clea, hair piled atop her head like an osprey's nest. Clea said, "This town is absolutely beautiful."

"Couldn't say. Been here all my life."

The man in the string tie said from the corner of his mouth, "Not yet, let's hope, Loretta."

And Clea's poor roving heart stood still.

Back in New York, Clea struggled to put Roches Ridge out of her mind with her usual round of household maintenance, photo assignments, health club workouts, and dinner parties. But one stormy afternoon she sat at the mahogany claw-foot desk in the fourth-floor office of her Turtle Bay town house, sorting through photos from the Alpine Glen ski weekend for a *Vermont Life* feature. The stunted urban maple in the courtyard tossed and lashed, splattering the windowpanes with rain. One photo showed sunlight glinting off icicles on the gingerbread cornice of a large white Victorian house on the Roches Ridge green. Clea remembered taking the picture, but she didn't recall a frail young white-blond woman in a high-necked Edwardian gown, who played a golden harp in the front window. It looked almost like a double exposure. Clea loved this kind of gratuitous composition, unplanned yet right.

As she studied other shots of Roches Ridge, with the white mountains in the background and the electric-blue sky overhead, Clea felt her pulse speed up and her breathing quicken. Grabbing the remote control, she switched on the TV for distraction. But when the Waltons bowed their heads over Thanksgiving dinner while John-Boy asked the blessing, Clea's eyes flooded with tears. She cried for the rest of the program, head on her desk.

Clea's companion at a Sutton Place dinner party that evening was an attractive young editor from *Getaway* magazine, with whom Clea had been flirting for several weeks. There was talk of a long weekend together in Antigua to cover the carnival. They exchanged innuendos about the fireworks visible from the hotel room balcony.

In the midst of verbal maneuvers designed to elicit sexual histories so each could make an informed decision concerning the risk of fatal infection, Clea found herself yawning.

For Jim at age thirty-two, an affair with an older woman was probably exciting, but for Clea even excitement had become boring. She'd been through this too many times. In her youth she'd thought passion was profound. Each new lover seemed to be whispering in her ear the combination to the lock on the portals of permanence and purpose. But each passion eventually waned, sputtered, flared, and died, like a Girl Scout campfire in a drizzle. So in time she learned to do a mental calculation whenever she felt an attraction brewing: Was present rapture worth eventual disappointment? Usually she ignored the answer and proceeded anyway. But she sometimes deliberately sidestepped a stroll down a moonlit beach with a lover because she knew its memory would distress her when they broke up. In more recent years she had come to regard men as dragonflies, and marveled at the gossamer wings when they alighted, without expecting them to linger. But tonight's courtship of Jim was feeling more like a gin rummy game—draw, play, and discard. Appalled to see herself in this cynical light, she pleaded a headache and departed.

As she entered her empty house and glanced around at the plush furnishings she'd selected and maintained so assiduously, she realized her current *modus vivendi* was moribund. New York City, so diverse and vital, had recently swiveled to reveal its shadow side. And her affairs, always diverting, had turned tedious. So steeled was she to let go that she couldn't even take hold anymore. And she thought she'd scream if she had to summarize her autobiography to one more new paramour.

That night Clea dreamed nonstop of the little Vermont village, white and silent under the winter sun, inhabited by a race endowed with droll good humor and rock-solid integrity. Waking in her king-size bed, Clea listened to the echoing house and the endless rain against the windows. Turner was in Brussels. Promoted to vice president in charge of international marketing of Fresh-It toothpaste, he'd be away constantly now. Theo and Kate were ensconced at their respective schools cramming for midterms. Elke was no doubt working through the night on her new sculpture in her West Thirteenth Street studio. Jim was probably at Maxwell's

Plum, chatting up some less world-weary younger woman. *And Clea was kneeling in Big Mac cartons, earlobes dripping blood, nostrils filled with the stench of rotting produce from a nearby garbage can, armpits wet with sweat. . . .*

Switching on the light, she picked up the Roches Ridge photos from her nightstand and studied them, heart beating a restless tattoo. What had gotten into her? Small-town life, suffocating when she was eighteen, now seemed to proffer safety, continuity, and purpose.

By late afternoon Clea was in Roches Ridge, discussing local real estate over a cup of coffee with the bouffanted Loretta Gebo at Casa Loretta, Home of the Taco Pizza. Turner, Kate, and Theo could leave her, but she could also leave them. She'd keep the home fires burning still, but home is where your house is, and hers was going to be in Roches Ridge, on a spine of granite that wouldn't shift or vanish.

2 ≡ Calvin Roche

Calvin Roche stacked his VCR and his boxes of "Dallas" tapes in the back of his battered pink '64 T-Bird with its green tags reading TEX. He was pretty darn happy to be unloading this house on that flatlander from New York City. He'd been trying to get rid of it and move to Abilene, Texas, ever since Boneeta died of a stroke two years before.

As he hobbled toward the house in his pointy-toed cowboy boots, Calvin eyed the huge gray stone wreck. What the hang she wanted with this dog was more than he could figure. She turned up at his door one day looking like Mandy Winger on "Dallas" (plus crow's-feet and graying hair), so excited that she shifted from foot to foot like she had to pee. Some Roche built this place in the late 1700s, and it had been nothing but trouble ever since. The sills were all eaten up with dry rot,

and the bathtub was about to fall into the cellar. But by the time Mrs. Shawn discovered this, he'd be living in Abilene, with no forwarding address.

Laying a couple of suitcases atop the VCR, Calvin reflected that over the years smart Roches had found reasons to leave—the gold rush, the Civil War, World War I. He himself went to Abilene during World War II to guard German POWs while they weeded colonels' flower beds. He spent his time off in the Silver Dollar Saloon, with disabled cowboys who talked about punching cattle all over west Texas. After the war Calvin meant to return to Vermont only long enough to break up with Boneeta and say goodbye to his parents. But he and Boneeta were next-door neighbors and sweethearts since childhood, and Boneeta won out.

Soon there were four babies. To keep mittens on their hands and Chef Boyardee in their bellies, Calvin worked in the McGrath quarry, cutting granite for gravestones. As he operated the forklift, he imagined he was throwing calves on the west Texas range. His co-workers called him Tex. When Boneeta put on sixty pounds, he started calling her Burrito. Saturday nights, in his red satin western shirt and string tie, he and Burrito (twice his width even without her crinolined skirt) did the Texas Schottische with the Fancy Steppers at Brad Bradbury's Country and Western Colonial Inn on Route 7. Fridays nights were devoted to "Dallas." Calvin was convinced he'd fit right in at South Fork as one of Ray Krebbs' ranch hands.

Now Boneeta lay in the cemetery behind the Congregational church. The other half of her headstone already had his name on it, with a blank space for his death date. (Sonny Coffin tried to get him to burn Boneeta and bury her ashes beneath a brass plaque, but Calvin's pension depended on a healthy gravestone trade.) Calvin's children were working in the aerospace industry in Utah and on the assembly line in Detroit. It was true he'd roughed them up some when they were kids. But only when he'd been drinking too much Lone Star ale and recalled that their existence was preventing him from riding the range. He'd written trying to explain, but his children never answered. It was like being one of those transsexuals he read about in the *National Enquirer* who claimed

they were women trapped in men's bodies: He was a Texan who'd been born a Vermonter.

Now, however, there was nothing to stop him from assuming his true identity. He pictured himself in leather chaps, vest, and boots, Stetson on his head and coiled lasso in his hand, loping across a prairie on a quarter horse. Or playing a guitar around a campfire, with a tin mug of coffee and a saddle by his side. At least he could sit around the Silver Dollar and swap lies. It beat the hang out of sitting alone in this old stone crypt, watching "Dallas" reruns on the VCR and waiting for the bathtub to sink into the cellar.

Calvin was shoving his olive army duffel bag into the T-Bird when Clea Shawn drove up in her ivory BMW. She got out, buttoning her plaid-lined trench coat.

"Hello there, Mr. Roche."

"Howdy, m'am. Just on my way out." He tried to conceal his impatience to leave. She might start wondering why he was in such a wicked rush. She might discover the rotting sills.

Clea was studying his embroidered cowboy boots and Levi's jacket. "Off to Texas right away, Mr. Roche?"

"Yes, m'am, sure am."

"Well, have a safe trip."

"Thank you, m'am. Sorry the place is such a mess. Eight generations create quite a clutter."

"Don't worry." She patted his bony shoulder, so low she could have rested a breast on it. "I'll take good care of your lovely house."

Calvin climbed into his T-Bird, thinking she ought to take his lovely house, burn it, and collect the insurance. Build a nice tight new split-level with all right angles and no rats. Waving his Stetson as though riding a bronco, he called, "Have a good one, Mrs. S.!" He'd picked up this valediction from Ishtar at the Karma Café. Ishtar came from California, changing her name from Barbara Carmichael while living in a tepee along Mink Creek with a dozen other lezzies, who called themselves the Boudiccas. Normally Calvin didn't have much use for weirdos, but he liked Ishtar because she explained that his love for "Dallas" proved he'd been a cowboy in a past life. Last week when he told her he was moving to