

kiss the top. I just hugged the edge, closed my eyes, and waited for Andy to come and remove my shackles.

It began to snow.

I SHIVERED INSIDE THE BILLOW of my sleeping bag, Andy snoring beside me, a damp, gray tarp wrapped around us, the snow making a deeper and deeper shroud. Tomorrow would be a mammoth piggy-back down to the valley. I wiggled deeper into my bag, the cold seeping through me, and put my hands in my armpits to cuddle myself warm.

Andy must have wanted me to experience what he had on El Cap, eleven times before: that feeling of being free and strong, high on the summit, amid the fanfare of the peaks and towers below. And it *had* been amazing to climb again, to untie stubborn knots, to dangle my feet in marvelous space, to live once more a snapshot of a climber's life. But instead of feeling the way Andy wanted me to feel, I wanted to run away. Climbing again was like stepping back down into the tomb where I'd laid my walking-self to rest. Now I saw clearly why I go hand-cycling for miles and miles, why I can never turn around until I've reached the end of the road, why I push myself past the day's end into the darkness.

I wanted to be back in my wheelchair, to be able to move on my own, in my own direction. As long as I kept moving, I wouldn't have to sit vigil by that tomb.

—Karen Darke,  
Inverness, Scotland

## Fulcrum

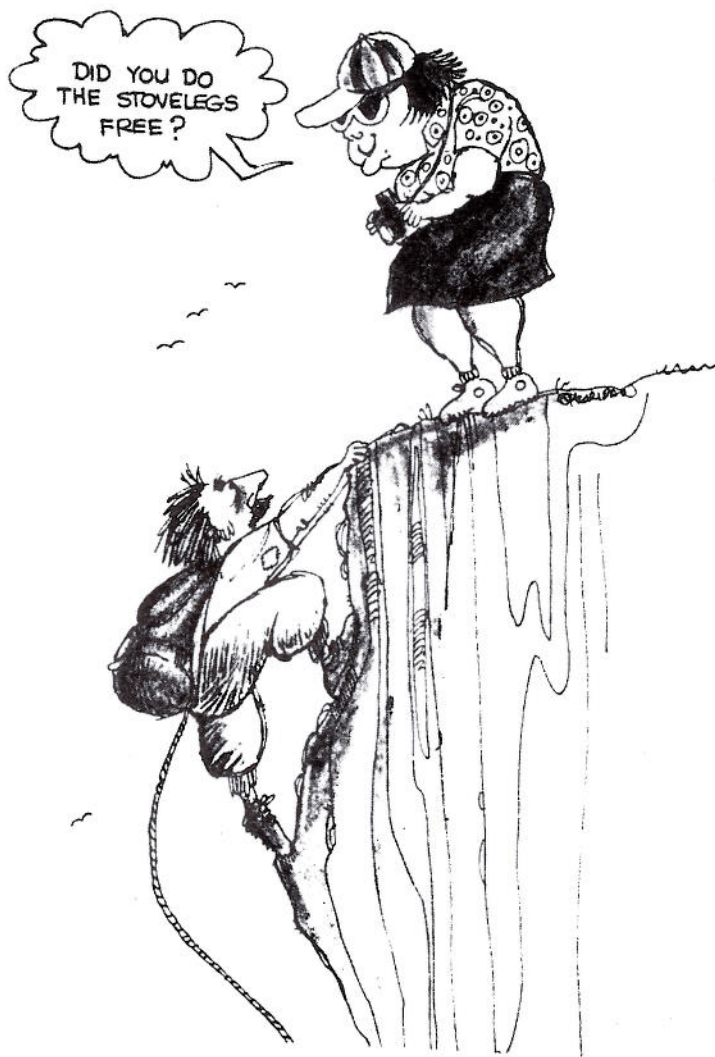
A WHOOMP and the snow lurched. Damon thought of Erika's face. The night before, the smooth skin at the corners of her mouth had wrinkled and slid after she found him drinking amid piles of gear.

Just now he'd been in a shallow alley, the only constriction of the ascent, when his track undercut the slab. His climbing skins that slid so easily forward were clumsy to turn, impossible to slide backward. The rock seemed to rise; the snow resolved into a grid of faint crevasses. As the snow began to move toward him, too slow to be a menace, he shouted back to his partner, but the surface he stood on was moving too. He lost his balance and went down.

His arm swept through loose hoar, pushing down on nothing, weighted by his pack. The snow came over him, in layers, like sunroofs sliding into place, darker over dark.

Now *we're into something hard*, he thought. It was the sort of thing Erika would say. Then one boot pulled off; his other ski caught and twisted, and the snow solidified into concrete.

He squirmed, belatedly, pushing with one hand while his other arm was cast. The rough glove scratched against his nose. He thought of his partner and turned his eyes away from an imagined probe point, but that motion



jolted pain behind his kneecaps and the small of his neck and he swore and his mouth filled with snow.

The silence around him was haunted with the absence of sound: no steady creak of bindings, no clacking heels on riser plates. How far had he traveled? He spat and remembered his uptrack winding into the mountain, into the gully. Every step was a choice.

"You drink harder than you climb now," Erika had said.

She had beautiful shoulder-length black hair. When people saw her hair, they assumed

she was satisfied. But her eyes were dark and still, a little eerie, unreadable. That was the first thing he'd noticed.

She'd walked smoothly into the climbing gym, a natural athlete. Damon couldn't figure out what he didn't like about her.

"It's your head," he called up, when she got stuck on a move.

She twisted her neck, looking over a tanned shoulder. "I can't reach."

"Kick your free leg out the other way."

"My foot is turning on nothing!"

"You have to find the fulcrum, the point of rest between balance and counterbalance. It isn't seen so much as felt."

She gave up. After being lowered, she stepped back, without looking, and her hair washed his face, and then in a moment he couldn't take his attention away. He hadn't expected that.

"What are you afraid of? Falling?" He laughed at her.

"Getting hurt."

"So hang your butt out so high your fall won't hurt."

"You mean because I'll die."

"I mean not hurt." He grinned.

She cast down that flat gaze.

Why had he ever convinced her to move with him to the old lumber town in the mountains? He liked watching her walk, detested her timidity, loved the unconscious twitching of her mouth, felt repulsed by her breath. She'd brought a huge pile of clothes. Like our relationship, she laughed: a snowball growing.

Her clothes pile would reappear in the bedroom closet after each big fight. At first he thought she was cleaning, mentally making a new start.

Snowflakes pile up, form layers, until one more lands and hinges the whole mass down.

*Which one?* he thought. It seemed important.

SOMEWHERE ABOVE HIM huge footsteps thumped, went away, started, stopped. Damon yelled. The sound was empty. For an instant it felt as though there were no walls around, as though he were floating, naked and numb. He panicked and tried again to move. His lower arm, encased at a harsh angle, ached. He thought of prisoners held in stress positions: within moments he knew he would answer anything.

He wanted to scream, *It was Erika—not*

