

SHE SENDS

CELEBRATING WOMEN CLIMBERS



ANGLE OF GRACE

By M. Loomis

I was four when she kicked me out of ballet.

It was serious; I would never stand on tippy toes in satiny slippers or float across the dance floor in high leaps and sashays. I wouldn't get the big tutu made of cotton candy and clouds. Officially I'd been expelled from that pink gauzy world of grace where all little girls are supposed to belong.

From there on out, every time I danced, those words echoed in my mind, playing like a broken record, "It would be best if Molly didn't come back ... best if she didn't come back ... didn't come back ... didn't come back ..." It played to a rhythm that tripped and tangled up my feet the second I'd start thinking about moving my body in time to the music and out of the garden of wall flowers that proliferates at every junior high dance. I was fated a klutz, destined to never find grace.

But finally, years later, I have found my own way of dancing, my secret source of grace.

It is not in a world of tutus and tights, hardwood floors and mirrored walls. Strains of ancient symphonies don't play in the background. It is a world tilted 90 degrees with walls of sandstone, limestone, any kind of stone. Piñon Jays are the accompaniment, singing in high soprano, hidden in the orchestral pits of pine and juniper boughs.

Today, my body isn't squeezed into a black leotard that rides up, lodged permanently between my butt cheeks. I wear gray shorts that used to be blue. It's only my toes that feel cramped and squeezed. There are no dusty windows filtering UV away from my arms and hands. The sun burns high in the sky and sweats drips off my forehead, running off strands of loose, stringy hair and setting loose into the wind.

Torking, twisting, tip-toeing, pinching, pulling, jamming and cramming, I combine steps and dance higher and higher. My body feels strong, like viscous liquid when I get it right — flowing with motion, fluid, quiet, and controlled despite its constant state of movement. Thinking is all I am doing — straining to see where my hand would fit best, cursing that I am not two inches taller, trying to decide a million things all in one instant. Do I keep moving or stop and place? Number one or number two? Thumb up or thumb down? Stick an edge there? Does that sound hollow? But somehow at the same time I do this without thinking at all. Some internal voice silent and serene, save for occasional grunts, guides me as I dance in my upward flow. Thunderheads gather to the west; within hours rain might pour down this granite face, running over the minute nodes and nubs of the rock, uninterrupted in its constant flow downwards, until it puddles in a pool at the base of the cliff. I run upwards instead, climbing quiet and fast, sliding and manipulating my body to move with little effort over each variation in my path.

"Off belay." I take a moment to rest, supporting my sweaty back against the cool stone. My heart slows in my chest and my breath struggles to follow its lead. I see my partner's white helmet poking out from the ledge below and I don't remember how I got here exactly. I can't remember each step or the exact sequence. But my face feels flushed, one knuckle is bloody, and I am smiling. The Piñon Jays are applauding. I have danced my way upward and found my angle of grace.