

## THEM!

### Dating across the (non-climber) tracks

**WHEN THE HUMPHREY BROTHERS FOUNDED** a clothing line in 1920, in Cheshire, England, little could they have imagined that what would four years later become the Umbro (Humphrey Brothers) label would so profoundly affect my romantic life. Or that they would show me just how hard it is to date a non-climber. That might be because the Humphrey brothers wisely understood that their invention and my pastime do not mix.

I didn't know this until I met Joseph, a year ago. At the time, my previous 15 years of dating history (since I'd become a climber) consisted totally of other climbers... with their predictable selfishness and manky living habits. Sure, these men had rippling back muscles, but few acknowledged the importance of a good haircut or the benefits of health insurance. Weary of it all, I figured Joseph — a businessman, soccer player, and curly-haired, blue-eyed non-climbing wonder — would be good for me. However, after a few months of blissful separation of climbing and relationship, I did what all climbers do: I took Joseph to the rocks, out to Eldorado Springs Canyon. He wanted to. He asked to. He even posed the question, "Do I get to wear the sticky shoes?"

When Joseph showed up early to climb, I took his punctual arrival to be a good sign... until he hopped out of his car. The light reflected off his teal shorts, which glistened with a faint diamond pattern. I pretended they were prAna right up until he came close enough to reveal the telltale diamond logo: *Umbros*. ... My heart sank. I tasted the buckwheat waffles I'd eaten for breakfast coming back up, and then flashed back to chasing those ever-elusive high school soccer players. An entire repertoire of Umbros danced in my mind: solid shocks of cherry, cobalt, and candy apple, painfully bright and usually worn in thigh-clinging embrace by n00b jock types in full flail mode at the climbing gym. I cringed: this was the first man I'd called my boyfriend in 10 years.

I didn't ask him to change. I told myself I was his guide and he was my client — he could wear whatever "stretchy garment" he wanted, which helped... until he kissed me hello. *My boyfriend wears Umbros*, I thought. *Now what?*

**AS IT TURNS OUT**, silken shorts *do* offer superb mobility. They served Joseph well as he tackled the 5.5 first pitch of *The Bulge*. After he took four trips up this, I asked if he wanted to try a multi-pitch climb. "Is that like a picnic?" he asked. I started to repeat my question but then decided to call it a day. On the way home, we stopped to buy Joseph a pair of "climbing-appropriate" shorts: a poly-cotton blend, evenly dyed to an environmentally friendly chestnut brown, rugged yet stylish for the rock warrior with panache. He proceeded to wear them everywhere — except the cliff. My non-climber boyfriend had steadfastly decided to remain such. My friends were baffled.

"So who's the new boyfriend?" they'd ask.

"Joseph. He's yay tall, blue eyes — owns a coffee business."

"He's not a climber?"

"No."

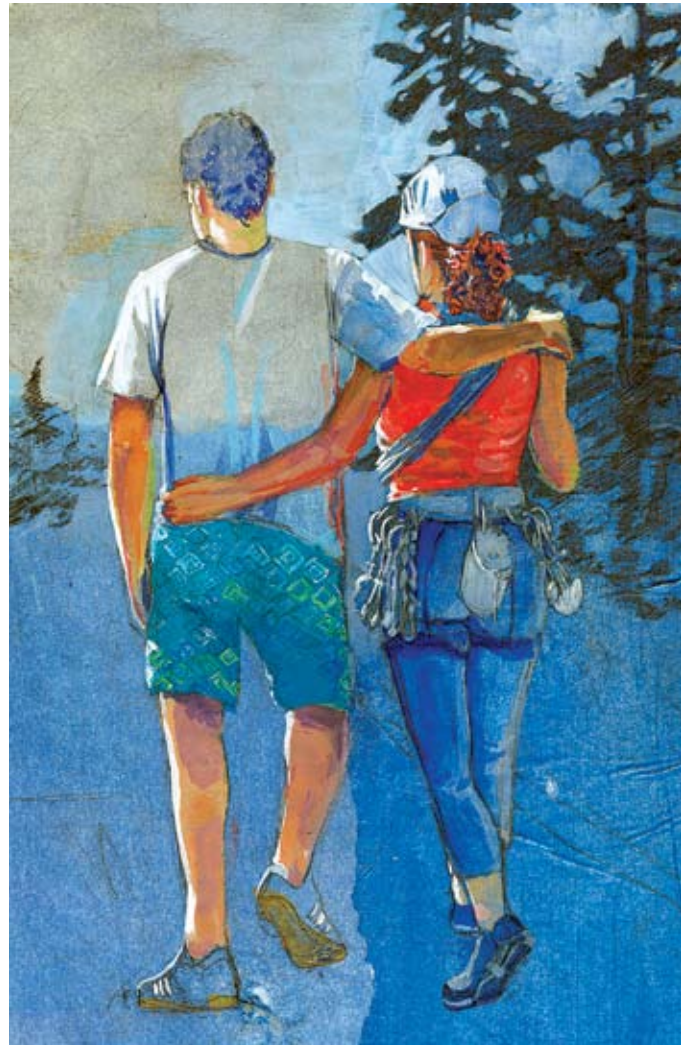
"But he wants to be one?"

"No."

"Wow. ..."

"Yeah."

Mind you, I've dated climbers. I even *married* one. Quite frankly,



it often sucks: after a day's cragging, climbers come home smelly and tired. They take off on a moment's notice and always return late. They have rough hands that snag on places you don't want snagged. Plus, climbing eats up time like a hungry hippo on uppers, and when you date (and climb with) someone as psychotically selfish as you, there's bound to be cliff-base ranting and teary-eyed blowouts.

Thus, the thought of dating someone whose only working knowledge of ropes might be some light BDSM appealed to me. With Joseph, I could indulge my cultural side — the one that likes to cruise art galleries, twirl prosciutto around spindly breadsticks, and make an ass of myself on the dance floor. He bridged the sociological gap I'd so carefully built between myself and the "real" world. For instance, at a climber holiday party, Joseph was the only man not wearing approach shoes. His leather loafers made me proud, his non-outdoorsy button-down shirt even more so. And when his BlackBerry chimed and he walked outside to take the call, I thought I'd finally grown up.

"What's it like?" my friends would ask.

"What?"

"Dating one of *them*?"

"He wears real shoes," I said.

Despite my joke, the questions persisted. The gist was that, though we all knew climber dudes who'd successfully dated female

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non-climbers, few of us knew *women* climbers who’d had the same luck. When I asked, albeit desperately, if any of my climbing buddies could conjure a single example of the latter, they drained their beers in contemplative silence.

My friend Kelly finally stepped in. “Just think,” he said. “You could be the first.”

And that is when I saw it: the golden opportunity. Because if I pulled this off, then so could other women climbers. We could date musicians and restaurateurs and optometrists and venture capitalists. And not venture capitalists who happened to be climbers, as well, but venture capitalists who wanted nothing to do with climbing. We climbers – misfits of the world – finally could fit in.

**BUT THEN CAME SPRING:** bluebird days with sun-warmed rock, cool cracks, and cloudless evenings. Really, Joseph, even after our eight months together (four of those shackled up), couldn’t compete. I scheduled climbing afternoons, days, weekends, weeks. It accelerated so quickly that within a month, I spent *all* my free time climbing. Without Joseph. Granted, he was busy with a new business and had trouble making plans. And really, it was ludicrous of him to expect that I set aside Saturday – one of his few days off – for a stroll through the farmer’s market. Still, we tried merging worlds for a while. Even when I woke up at 6:30 a.m. the day after returning from a work trip to sneak off to Lumpy Ridge with my friend Kristie, Joseph just rolled over and went back to sleep. When I came home that evening, he even asked about my day: had I “spotpointed” my route? he wanted to know. In the end, I did what we all do but never want to admit: I put Joseph in second place. I fell asleep in my polenta mid-date because of too many alpine starts, and I patted his bum and rolled over complaining of sore hip flexors when he wanted loving. Consequently, I became what I never wanted to be: the self-centered girlfriend who lives only to climb.

I’d like to say I found a way to stand up for myself as a climber *and* cohabitate with a non-climber, one who fulfilled my other side. I’d like to say I’m writing this with Joseph sitting next to me. But to make a long story short, his job took him to Miami – pretty much the last place on Earth I’d consider moving – and I let him go.

It’s July now, and I’m single again, typing with aching forearms from two back-to-back 14-hour climbing days. In this condition, it seems perfectly clear that if this thing, this addiction – climbing – did not matter so much, I would not do it. I would not risk love and career and sanity this way. I’m not writing off dating non-climbers again. Tomorrow, I could meet the perfect one. And I still want to tromp around alpine granite by day and wear stiletto heels at night. But these days, I’m focused on economizing: dating at the crag. I’ll let you know how it goes.

*Senior Contributing Editor Majka Burhardt is currently developing a high-beeled approach shoe, the better to merge her divergent interests.*