



## THE GREAT DIVIDE

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY OF CLIMBING COUPLEDOM

**"I just want a boyfriend who climbs ... I just want a woman who will go to Yosemite with me ... I want a man/woman/dog who gets climbing ... I want to sleep with/date/marry another climber. ..."** Well, don't we all?

I had one of those – a husband, Eli – and, yes, it was great to put our hands down each other's pants at frigid belays, work out adhesions in each other's sore forearms, and support one another on endless projects. We had it good ... until it ended. And, boy, it sucks when it's over. I'm not talking about that lost love or lifestyle; I'm talking about divvying up the gear.

It's bad enough the first time you have to check "divorced" on the dental-office paperwork or buy a mattress by yourself. The worst, though, is showing up at Indian Creek and realizing you cannot protect *anything* when you used to have the rack for *everything*. When we were together, our gear seemed plentiful, excessive even. However, once cleaved in half, it looked embarrassing, puny even. Maybe that had to do with how we split it.

"Just promise me you won't take a can of spray paint to the gear room," I told Eli when we first broached the subject of the great gear divide, two months after our separation. I was

laid up with a broken foot, so we'd avoided the subject until then.

"Got a better plan?" he asked.

Ten years before, when we'd first gotten together, a couple we knew was in the process of splitting. The wife generously offered to divide the gear, and they settled on a plan wherein she would mark what was hers and he would come by later to pick up the rest. She neglected to mention that she'd decided that pretty much everything – save a dozen oval leaver-binners – was hers and that she'd be tagging it all with purple spray paint. Back then, still in our honeymoon phase, Eli and I

scoffed at such pettiness. “That will never be us,” we both said, happily commingling our cams and nuts in a Tupperware bin.

We’d separated the rest of the house via spreadsheets and email, but had decided the fairest and fastest way to divide the equipment would be to sit down together. Nevertheless, I was determined not to fight over every piece of gear – we would not fall apart over an anodized Neutrino. I briefly deliberated giving Eli the cams and taking all the rest, but stubbornly refused – the old yellow Alien was the only piece of gear that fit on the crux of my latest project and I *needed* it on my rack.



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We started with the carabiners, dividing by type. I never knew we had 39 ovals, 27 Ds, and 136 wire gates. This went fast: I took the extra oval, Eli the D. It got stickier once we got to the cams. There were the new cams, the still-good cams, and the gummy-lobed, cable-frayed, worn-webbing holdouts.

Beginning with the smallest, we grouped according to size, and took turns being the chooser and the loser. I got my Alien; I lost the new orange TCU. We weren’t even to the hand sizes when I needed a break. The red-tile floor of our gear room was covered in metal – a shared lifetime’s worth. “It looks like we’re going on an expedition,” I said.

“Might be easier,” Eli said.

“We could just stay together and go climbing,” I said, half in jest.

“Or have joint custody,” he suggested.

“I call weekends.”

We spent an inordinate amount of time that night contracting and retracting triggers, usually doing so in unison. In nine years, we’d never gotten to the point of dressing alike, but we racked the same, and both cocked our heads to the left and squinted when we inspected gear. “Normal people don’t do this shit,” I said to Eli when we pulled out the big pro.

“Climb? Marry? Divorce?” he asked.

*All of the above*, I thought.

**For most people, Christmas ornaments and wedding photos are the toughest.** “Save them for later,” my mother suggested, “for when

you’re ready.” I debated applying her advice to the nuts – eight biners’-worth of every make and size. “Do you trust me to divide these?” I asked Eli. “You could do the pitons.” And so it went. Finally, we came to the odds and ends, single items that could not be split down the middle. “What about this?” Eli asked, holding up a purple-speckled Soloist.

“That’s mine.” This was true – it was the first piece of gear I’d ever bought, in a New Jersey strip mall.

“But, you didn’t even know how to use it,” Eli said.

Also true; I *didn’t* know how to use it for the

first three years I’d owned it. I glared at him. “Keep it,” I said.

Neither of us wanted the Snargs or the Specters. They’d been decoration for years, but now I have four of each floating around in a tub somewhere. We each have one fifi hook and both need to get another. I saw items I’d long since forgotten: a dozen hexes, seven mountain axes, five candle lanterns, a half-dozen watches with missing batteries, four broken compasses, nine pairs of goggles. The list went on. We threw nothing away that night except for the tat webbing we’d pulled off the Diamond on our fourth anniversary.

The experience, four hours in total, took on a near lightness by the end. We both got things we probably didn’t want but refused to say we didn’t need. Eli has half of my favorite micronuts and a -40 F sleeping bag that is too short for him. I offered him one of my three pee funnels, but he said I could keep it.

That was months ago now, and I borrowed the tag line from him the other day, because I still don’t have my own. What have I learned? It’s a gamble to marry your climbing partner, and it’s hard to sort through memories when each piece on the rack recalls some joint experience. But, sharing cams, screws, and Camelbaks is something I wouldn’t trade and something I will likely try again. Next time, however, I’m spray painting my gear *before* I merge my rack.

*Senior Contributing Editor Majka Burhardt can be found at the crags, a half set of matching draws hanging off her hips.*