

Mountain Men Don't Get Haircuts  
By Sarah Hoeynck

I was about to pull on my sunflower-print gardening gloves when a familiar rapping pelted the back door. Robbie's unmistakable frenzy of knocks—both fists at a time with an occasional kick for good measure. I swear, one day that boy is going to bash a hole clear through the glass. Then we'd have a real mess on our hands. Well, I would. He'd probably come out just fine.

The rattling continued and seemed to take on a rhythm. Was that the Ninja Turtles theme song? Dropping my gloves on the table next to my white straw hat, I opened the blinds to reveal my seven-year-old nephew wearing a faded orange Michelangelo t-shirt and grinning madly. His wild red hair stuck out in curly lumps beneath his coonskin cap—an unkempt little Davy Crockett. No wonder his mom had asked me to give him a haircut. Wait, what was he waving around? Were those nunchucks? Oh, Lord, help us.

“Aunt Rosemary!” he sang. “Look what Mom got me! Let me in. I want to show John.”

I stood my ground. “Only if you promise not to use those things inside.”

Without warning, Robbie jumped in the air and waved his new toy over his head, doing some kind of ridiculous attack move. “Hiyah!” he exclaimed, looking like an uncoordinated chimpanzee. When he turned back around, he plunked his hands on his hips, stretched to his full four-foot height, and puffed his scrawny, sunken chest out. “Don't worry. I'm an expert.”

“Robbie. I mean it.” I crossed my arms to show him I meant business.

“Okay, fine. I promise. Mountain man's oath.” He tucked the nunchucks in his back pocket and smiled sweetly, showing the gap in his front teeth. “Honest,” he assured me.

Yeah, right. Honest. But he looked so sincere, beaming like a garden gnome. Those adorable little cheeks and skinny arms. Harmless. But as soon as I unlocked the door and slid it

open, that little fireball bolted into the house, pulled out his weapon, and aimed it at our tape deck. Rosemary for the most gullible aunt on earth!

I caught his arm in midair, but, rather than grab the nunchucks, I plucked his hat off his head—the more valued prize. He halted and staggered backward, dropping the toy on the carpet.

Stunned, he shouted, “Hey, no fair. Give it back.”

There was no way I was going to give it back until he followed the rules. Instead, I held the hat high above his head and taunted, “You promised not to use those things in the house. You can have it back when you keep your promise.”

He leapt into the air, coming down hard on his knees. But he didn’t give up. “C’mon, Aunt Rosemary. Gimme it!” He tried pulling on my shirt, but I kept the hat aloft.

Suddenly, he tickled my left side—he knew my weaknesses. I dropped my arm and tried to swat his hands away. “Ha! Ha! Stop—Ah!!!” He only tickled harder until we collapsed into giggles on the living room floor. “Okay, okay. I give up. You win,” I wheezed.

He snatched the hat and put it back on his head, standing over me triumphantly. After my laughter subsided, I stood up. Patting the soft fur of his hat and tugging on the ring tail, I broke the news to him. “You know, you’re gonna have to take this thing off. Your mom wants me to give you a haircut.”

Like a cat, he sprung across the room and settled in a defensive position, squatting on his haunches and holding his arms out in front of him. “No way! I’m a mountain man. Mountain men need lots of hair to stay warm in the cold winters. I gotta prepare for the wilderness.” His jaw was set at a defiant angle, but he still wore that goofy smile. “So you can’t cut my hair if you want me to survive.”

“Survive what?” My son John had appeared in the living room archway. He wore a Ninja Turtles t-shirt as well, but his was clean, unlike Robbie’s stained one.

“Hey, honey. Robbie was telling me—”

Bounding toward his cousin, Robbie interrupted me. “John!” He seized John’s hand and yanked my surprised son out of the room. “Let’s go! It’s time to play Ninja Turtles. Look at—” he stopped, turning in frantic circles to find the nunchucks.

“Looking for these?” I asked, holding them up.

“Hiyah!” Robbie kicked toward me, grabbed his weapon, and brandished it at me.

“Hey!” I roared in my best mom-voice

Robbie stopped in midair.

“What did I say? Not in the house. Go play outside.”

With a wild shriek, he ran out of the room, calling for John to follow him. A crash preceded the thump of the sliding door. With a sigh, I trudged toward the kitchen. Great, what was it this time?

Thankfully, other than a kitchen chair toppled on its side, everything looked normal. Nothing broken. Yet. I should probably make sure the same goes for my rose bushes—they surely didn’t need pruning. I donned my garden gloves and tied the hat strap around my chin. Why in the world had Martha bought Robbie such a ridiculous toy? Like he needed something to get him into more mischief. He did that just fine on his own.

As I stepped into the yard, the late afternoon sunlight warmed my eyes. It was pretty hot for May. I’m sure my tomatoes needed a drink, and probably a little weeding, too. After grabbing my apple-shaped garden cushion, I turned the spigot and lugged the hose to the back of the yard. Robbie and John’s voices filtered through the trellises and stalks of my raised garden beds.

“. . . hold them in different spots and be ready to catch them over your shoulder, like this.” Robbie’s short breaths accompanied a few palm-slapping sounds. Then, he encouraged, “Go on, you try. I know you can do it.”

I peered around the leaves and saw Robbie’s sweet expression as he held his nunchucks out to John.

But John looked down at his immaculate, white sneakers and kicked the dirt. “I don’t know. It looks pretty hard.”

“Well, yeah, it is. But I can teach you, I promise. I’ll make you just as good as me,” Robbie proclaimed. “But you gotta practice. I could even let you borrow them for a while if you want.”

“Really? Okay. Thanks.” John took the toy, and I made a mental note to keep him updated on the no nunchucks in the house rule.

“Sure. No problem. I don’t really need to practice anyway. I’m a pro.” Without warning, he swiped the air with a karate chop. “Hiyah! Ninja Turtles attack!”

The sudden movement startled John, who shrunk back and dropped one of the nunchuck handles. It dangled listlessly at his side.

Robbie didn’t notice. He was too focused on his ninja moves, which were, I had to admit, pretty impressive. His kicks and jumps gained momentum as his grunts built to loud, continuous screams. Fueled by his screechy soundtrack, Robbie took off across the yard, darting past me. He headed straight for the big maple tree next to the house. As he got closer, he didn’t slow down. Instead, he hurtled his skinny body through the air with his right leg extended toward the woody nemesis. His foot struck the tree, and the solid foe sent him flying backward.

He landed with an “Oomph!” on the grass, coming down hard on his arm.

Oh, Jesus! Not again.

I ran toward him. A thick ooze of crimson blood seeped from his elbow. I was always sending this boy back to his mother with cuts and scrapes. He rolled onto his side and sat up, but I slid next to him and pushed him back down. “Stop! Don’t move, sweetie. Does anything hurt?”

“Whoah, you really hit that tree hard!” John’s awestruck voice came from over my shoulder.

Robbie smirked, “Yeah, I showed him who’s boss. Take that!” His leg jerked out again toward the tree.

“Hey! What did I say? Don’t move! Not until we make sure you didn’t break anything.”

“It’s fine, Aunt Rosemary. Nothing hurts.” Robbie pushed me back and stood up in a quick, smooth motion. At least his bones seemed fine. Nothing broken.

“Oh, really, nothing? What about this?” I grabbed his wrist and held his bloody elbow up to his eyes. “We need to clean this up.”

Tugging his arm back, Robbie reached into his back pocket and pulled out a grungy blue bandanna. He wiped his wounded elbow off and tied the bandanna around it with his good hand and his teeth. “There,” he asserted, “all better.”

“Oh, yeah, that looks really clean,” I countered. This boy was a marvel. John would be bawling his eyes out at such a cut.

“Mountain men don’t need to be clean. We just need to be prepared.” Glancing around, his eyes landed on the patio firepit. “Like for fire! Can we have a fire later? John and me can go collect the wood. We’ll need fuel to keep warm. Can we go? Please?”

I took off my glasses and massaged the bridge of my nose. “Go where? For what? We have logs inside.”

“Those are stupid and puny. We need real fuel, from the wilderness. Please? Please, please, please?” He slipped his hand in mind and squeezed it, gazing up at me with his big hazel eyes. God, the kid knows I’m a sucker.

“Alright, as long as you stay in the neighborhood.” Robbie released my hand and danced around in circles, whooping like a cowboy from an old Western. “There are some woods over by Lancaster. Maybe try there.” I raised my voice. “Just make sure to be back before dark. And I’m going to clean that elbow when you get back.”

“For sure, Aunt Rosemary.” Robbie circled John like a herding border collie. “Let’s go gather supplies!” He ran inside the house before John had a chance to respond.

Seeing my son’s hesitation, I knelt down so we were face to face. “Hey buddy, how’s it going?”

“Mmkay, I guess,” returned his meek voice.

“You know, it’s okay if you don’t want to go.” He raised his eyebrows hopefully. “I’d rather you stay here if you’re afraid.”

At the mention of the word “afraid,” John bristled. “I’m . . . I’m not afraid,” he stammered as he bit his lip. “Plus, I’ll have Robbie with me. He’s a mountain man. I’ll be safe with him.”

Or seriously injured. But this boy needed a little adventure in his life—something to get him away from his Gameboy and Nickelodeon. I tousled his hair. “That’s right. Your cousin’s a tough guy. He’ll protect you.”

John nodded, a look of uncertainty still lingering in his eyes. I reached down to tie his now-scuffed shoes. Just one afternoon with Robbie.

The sliding glass banged as Robbie called, “You ready? We need to get out and baze a trail.” He had a fresh band-aid on his elbow and a thermos of water slung over his shoulder.

“It’s *blaze* a trail, and nice job fixing yourself up. I guess you’ve learned where all the first aid stuff is at this point.” I finished tying John’s shoe and patted him on the back. “Have fun you two.”

Robbie took John’s hand and pulled him down the driveway. When John looked back, I flashed a supportive smile and waved. Their silhouettes waned in the distance. I picked up the nunchucks and set them on the picnic table with a chuckle. From Ninja Turtle to mountain man. My nephew was one tough little dreamer. I turned around to watch them go. Robbie marched forward at a brisk pace, pointing toward the horizon like Merriweather Lewis—a trailblazer embarking upon an untouched wilderness.

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When I emerged from the garden a few hours later, the air was soft with the gray light of dusk. The hot sun had stooped behind the Smith’s house almost twenty minutes ago, and evening dew collected on the rapidly cooling grass. The boys should be back soon.

After shaking the soil off my gloves and setting them inside, I popped open a Diet Pepsi and sat on the front porch to wait for the kids. Not a minute after I settled into the swing, I spied their figures in the distance. Right on time.

I raised my soda in salute and shouted, “Hello there, mountain men! What’d you bring this homesteadin’ woman?”

Neither boy answered, but Robbie waved a dark, bulky object over his head. It was too curvy to be a log. Oh no, was that an animal? Please God, don't let it be an animal. I stood up and squinted in order to discern the details.

Robbie no longer sported his coonskin cap. Instead, a haphazard crown of twigs and leaves encircled his head. A piece of long grass stuck out from his lips, and his feet were bare, like some kind of wood nymph or unkempt Tom Sawyer. What had happened to his shoes? I squinted harder.

Oh, thank the lord. That's what he was carrying—not a dead squirrel.

I finally looked at John, who walked with a slight limp. Something dark was tied around his knee, and Robbie's hat was on his head. My heart jumped, but then I saw that he was grinning from ear to ear. I sat back down and sipped my Pepsi. Stay calm, Rosemary. Let them tell you everything before you assume.

The boys broke into a run, racing to see who could reach me first. Robbie was clearly in the lead, but he slowed right near the end, letting John win.

Huffing from their exertions, they collapsed on the swing with me. "Hey there, guys. What happened to you?" I picked a dried brown leaf out of Robbie's hair. He grabbed my Pepsi and took a deep gulp. "Sure, help yourself."

Once he finished, he banged the can down and broke into the story, talking a mile a minute. "We were walking to those woods, but then we saw a raccoon, just like my hat."

John pulled the tail out to demonstrate for me.

Robbie continued. "We decided to hunt it, like mountain men, and we had to cross a creek to get to it. But then it started running away and was too fast for us." His cheeks glowed red from excitement, like he was reliving the chase. "When we were coming back, we both fell



into the creek. My shoes got wet,” he shoved the sopping Filas in her face, “and John cut his knee.”

“It was so cool, Mom! Robbie put his sock around my knee after it happened and called it a com—compress?”

Robbie nodded his approval.

“And told me how brave I was. Then he let me wear his hat!” John stood tall and flicked his head back, wearing Robbie’s grimy sock and Branson-purchased hat like they were Medals of Honor.

“Yeah, because if you get hurt in the wilderness, you’re a mountain man.” Robbie nudged John with his shoulder and grunted. They stomped around in circles and butted heads. Were they supposed to be mountain men or mountain goats?

“Okay there, mountain man. Stop hopping around and let me see that knee.” I peeled off the wet sock and saw that the cut wasn’t too deep. Robbie’s earlier injury from the tree was probably worse. “Doesn’t look too bad, but we still need to clean it.” I sniffed the sock in mock disgust. “And these socks of yours definitely need cleaning.”

Robbie grabbed it back and defended himself. “My socks are always clean. This one just got wet, that’s all. And it has John’s stinky blood on it.”

“Hey, my blood’s not stinky. Your blood’s stinky.” John poked Robbie’s elbow, where rust-stained crustiness peaked out of the band-aid he’d applied earlier. The two boys laughed and compared their wounds.

Not so timid anymore. If Robbie can make John this happy and outgoing, I guess I can handle some cuts and bruises. “Okay you two, that’s enough,” I exclaimed. “Let’s get you inside for some Bactine and sandwiches.”

While I cleaned their wounds, Robbie kept going on and on about the raccoon. “If I’d had my nunchucks, it would’ve been easy. Or a spear. But there weren’t any good sticks around for sharpening.”

“Mmhmm,” I mumbled as I applied antiseptic, pressure, and fresh band-aids to their cuts. Didn’t this boy ever get tired? “Okay, all done. Now give me those wet things and I’ll throw them in the drier so you’re ready to go home later.”

The three of us plodded into the kitchen. I set the bread, creamy peanut butter, and grape jelly on the wood-grained counter. “Who wants a PBJ?”

“I do!” Rather than wait for me, Robbie pulled out two slices and slathered them with peanut butter. “Do you have any anchovies?”

Anchovies? With peanut butter? Was this kid really from my bloodline? “No, sorry. Fresh out of anchovies,” I chortled.

Robbie scrunched his forehead in disappointment and slapped the two pieces of bread together. “No jelly for me. I don’t like it too sweet.”

Before he could take the snack, I grabbed it and threatened, “Uh, uh. Not until I give you that haircut. I promised your mom.”

The betrayal sputtered in his eyes. It was like I’d shot his dog. With a swift motion, he pushed the sandwich away and turned his back on me. “No way. Uh uh. You’re not touching my hair.”

John walked in and jumped onto the stool in front of the peninsula. “Why do you want to cut Robbie’s hair? I like it.” He reached for Robbie’s sandwich, but I swatted his hand away.

Robbie agreed, “If you cut my hair, I couldn’t wear my hat. It looks weird if your hair’s not sticking out of it. See how weird it looks on John?”

“Yeah, Mom. He’s right. It does look weird. Real mountain men don’t get haircuts. That’s why I’m growing my hair out like Robbie’s.” John reached into the jar and scooped a dollop of peanut butter into his mouth. Great, another little boy I’m going to have to chase with scissors.

“So that’s that. No haircut.” Robbie crossed his arms defiantly and stared me down. How is it that a seven-year-old can intimidate me?

Throwing my hands up, I surrendered. “Okay, okay. You win. But you’re going to have to tell your mom that you refused. I’m going to call her right now.” I picked up the kitchen phone, my finger hovering over the “8” button.

The scare tactic didn’t work on Robbie. “Good, you tell her. I’m going to find my nunchucks.” He exited toward the living room, and John ran after him.

After punching in the rest of the numbers, I wound the cord around my fingers. Martha wouldn’t be too pleased, but at least I’d tried. She knew how stubborn Robbie could be.

“Hello? Dickson residence.”

“Hey, Martha. It’s me. Listen, Robbie has outright refused the haircut. There’s no convincing him.”

“I figured. Oh well, I guess we’ll try next time.” An electric mixer whirred in the background. “Hey, I’m kind of tied up here baking these cookies for the sale tomorrow. Could you just tell Robbie to walk home when he’s ready?”

“Sure. I’ll send him on his way now.”

“Thanks a million. Take care.”

“Talk to you soon.”

After hanging up the receiver, I called the boys in and looked out the window. The purple twilight had faded to inky blue darkness. Just a faint glow of pale blue hung in the sky. Better get him home sooner rather than later. They clambered into the kitchen and I instructed Robbie to head home. “Your mom is expecting you.”

He froze. His eyes widened as he looked outside. The crickets were beginning their nighttime concert, and streetlights flickered on throughout the neighborhood. Darkness had fallen, painting the streets in shadow.

Robbie stammered, “You know, sometimes people get attacked by bears in the wilderness, and even mountain lions and wolves. They jump out of nowhere, and you can’t see them in the dark.” He gulped and talked faster. “They can even eat you. I . . . someone told me about this bear that ate a whole family when they were camping. It happened at night, and . . .”

He rambled on. I wanted to reassure him that of course there were no bears in the middle of suburban St. Louis. But as I watched his eyes dart from inside to outside, it dawned on me. Oh my God. My brave little nephew was actually afraid of the dark! Well, I guess it had to be something. Pretty much nothing else seemed to scare him.

“. . . and if you do go out, you shouldn’t go out without a weapon. Even my nunchucks would be no match for . . .”

Time to give this poor guy an out. “Okay, slow down,” I interrupted, “you’re really scaring me. You know, I was going to walk over later to give your mom something, but after hearing all of that, I don’t feel safe alone.” I raised my eyebrows and leaned down to his level. I lowered my gaze in shame and whispered, “But I would feel safe if a mountain man was there to protect me. Would you walk with me?”

Relief flooded his anxious eyes and eased the lines from his forehead. With a quick jerk, he kissed my cheek and shook my hand. “With pleasure!” he exclaimed. “It’s a good idea because of how much I know from today’s hunting trip. I’ll be prepared for what comes.”

After throwing on my magenta sweater, I went to tell John we’d be right back. He was planted in front of the TV watching a repeat of *Eureka’s Castle* and still wearing Robbie’s hat. I took it off, and he flinched.

“Hey!”

“Hey yourself. It’s not yours. I’ll get you your own.”

“Right,” he said, “because I’m a mountain man now too.”

“Yes, you are. I’m going to walk Robbie home. See you in a few minutes.”

I hid the hat behind my back and joined Robbie outside. Touching his bare head and tugging on his hair gently, I asked one last time, “And you’re sure you won’t let me give you a cut? You really could use one.”

With an emphatic shake of his head, he responded, “Mountain men have beards and long hair. It’s gonna take a while for me to get a beard, so I gotta keep the long hair.”

“Okay, little mountain man, you win.” I plopped the hat on his head and adjusted it over his messy red curls. “Lead the way.”

He gallantly offered me his arm and pronounced, “I’ll protect you.”

I coiled my wrist under his bandaged elbow, and together we walked arm in arm through the thick night. Two travelers returning home after a long day of exploring.