

Out in Left Field

(A true story)

Joleen Ashman Robison

WITH APPREHENSION I AGREED to allow the new girl at Manetamers to cut my hair. Really I had no choice. My hairdresser had run off to Texas with one of the sales reps in the middle of the week, and I desperately needed a cut. I sat fidgeting as she combed through my hair and asked the usual questions about what hairstyle I wanted.

As I answered, I noticed her hair. For fine hair it looked good, quite good. That was reassuring, and she nodded agreeably to my requests for no hair spray, for plenty of hair to hide my ears, and for a little backcombing around the face. Maybe she'll be okay. In an hour or so I will know. Stop worrying, I told myself. Even if it turns out terrible, hair does grow out.

Leaning back into the shampoo bowl, I decided if she was going to be my regular hairdresser, I might as well find out something about her; after all, I'd be seeing her once a week. While she lathered the shampoo, I learned that her name was Sheryl and that her husband had come to Lawrence to finish a doctorate in biology at the University of Kansas. They had no children, had married a year ago, and used to live in Georgia, where they had both grown up.

"What is your husband studying for his dissertation, Sheryl?" I asked for lack of something clever to say.

She answered, "Marmots."

With the water running in my ear and with her sugary Southern drawl, I heard her say, "Mormons."

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What? I reared up in the chair. My eyes flew open in spite of the shampoo. In the mission field, meeting someone with a tie to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a rarity. Just as I was going to tell her I was a member of the Church, she flipped me upright in the chair, wrapped a towel around my head, and began dabbing at drips of water rolling down my forehead.

"Mormons?" I mumbled limply.

"Yes. I don't know a lot about them. They give me the creeps. You want about an inch taken off?" she asked as she combed out my wet hair.

"Yes, about an inch." Give her the creeps? Uh-oh. I'd better bide my time before mentioning I'm LDS, lest I risk getting scalped. First I'll find out more about her husband's research.

"What sort of things is he hoping to find out?" I asked.

"For one thing, he wants to learn more about their eating habits," she said in her pecan praline accent. "There's lots of literature on the subject, but no one has actually gone out in the field, observed, and taken notes. Bob thinks lots of the old research came from armchair scientists who have never actually lived in their communities."

I should have known, I thought to myself as Sheryl began parting off sections of my hair. The outside world makes such a big deal about the Word of Wisdom. Important doctrines such as temple ordinances take second place to whether or not we drink a cup of coffee.

She went on, "Bob's out in the Rockies now. I hate being dumped here not knowing a soul."

Hmm. Could this be my golden opportunity for missionary work? She may think we are creeps now, but stranger conversions have occurred. Mustn't move too fast. Just calm down, I told myself. She's not going to get away. Your hair isn't cut yet, and it will need to be blown dry and curled. So I asked another question, "How come you didn't go with him to the field and then both of you come here in the fall?"

She smiled, "I really can't blame Bob. I'm the one who wanted to do it this way. I detest living in the mountains among them, and the work is incredibly boring. I tried it last summer and hated every minute. Besides, none of them wanted their hair done, so I didn't have a thing to do." With that remark she burst into laughter.

I slumped in the chair unamused. That was an insult to LDS women. I failed to see the humor. My reflection in the mirror must have shown I was perturbed, but Sheryl didn't seem to notice. As she whacked at my hair, she glibly babbled on in her ridiculous drawl, "You are the only person besides my husband's supervisor who has ever acted remotely interested in the subject."

"Oh, I'm interested all right," I assured her. As she concentrated on cutting the hair at the nape of my neck, I began to wonder if he was doing the study in my home state of Utah. "Is he perchance in Utah?"

"No, he's working at a rather elaborate base set up years ago in Colorado where he can be totally unobtrusive. They don't seem to know he's there."

I'll bet, I thought to myself. Any small Mormon community, whether in Colorado or Utah, will be well aware of an outsider living in their midst. I wasn't ready to divulge my firsthand knowledge of the subject yet, so I urged her on. "What other things will he be doing?"

"It is a short season, but Bob also hopes to do some reproduction charting. You know, they reproduce like rabbits."

Now I was downright angry. Not all Latter-day Saints have large families. And those who do have chosen to because they are providing mortal tabernacles for waiting spirits. Perhaps right now I should explain.

Sheryl grabbed the blow dryer and began running her fingers through my hair, lifting it to allow the hot air to circulate. The noise made it impossible for either of us to talk and be heard. Good. I'd heard quite enough anyway. Next week I'll change shops, find a new hairdresser, and I won't leave a tip today. So there.

With that idea, I relaxed and began leafing through this week's *People* magazine, but my mind refused to concentrate on the latest Elizabeth Taylor crisis. Before I walk out of the shop, I'll let her know that I am Mormon. And if her husband is so hell-bent on doing actual observation, I'll invite them to attend the Lawrence Ward.

After Sheryl turned off the hair blower, she said, "One of the most interesting things Bob is able to do with actual observation is study social structure. They organize around family units. It gets rather complicated when you get several generations, as you can imagine, prolific as they are." She laughed again.

I nodded and thought, ah yes, families are forever. For a while longer, I must converse with this girl, even though she has certainly tested my patience. "How did your husband become interested in his dissertation subject?"

"This professor he likes has studied them for years, and he got Bob interested."

I thought to myself, Wonder if it's someone I know. None of the professors in the ward are in biology. And I'm sure none of them study members of the Church. "Who is your husband's professor?" I asked.

"Dr. Armitage. He's world famous," she said twisting my hair in the sizzling hot curling iron.

I thought, Armitage . . . never heard of the man. If he's done any great studies, you'd think I'd have seen his name in *DIALOGUE*, the *Ensign*, or *Sunstone*. This is puzzling. Well, here goes.

"You know there are some living in the Lawrence area," I said.

"You have to be kidding. Are you absolutely certain?"

Before I could answer, she went on talking, yanking my hair as she backcombed vigorously, "I will call Bob first thing tonight and tell him. That is amazing. I had no idea they ever got to this part of the country. Mrs. Robison, how come you know something like that?"

The time had come to tell her. I took a deep breath. Yes, and I was ready, "Because I am one."

That shocked her. For sure! She had bewilderment written all over her face. And what is she going to say now after all the mean digs she gave the Church?

"A marmot?" she asked incredulously.

"Marmot?"

"You know, little fat furry animals."

"Oh. No. I thought you said Mormons."

Between hoots of laughter, she doused my hair with hair spray, making it stiff as a helmet. I sat in silence.

"Oops. You don't use spray," she said apologetically. "Tell you what. If you come back next week, I promise not to spray your hair and to listen while you tell me all about Mormons. Y'all come back, hear?"