

## AUNT ANNIE'S THISTLES (Part one)

We were a family of eight wild, wild kids and one very busy pop, growing up in the back woods of Quebec. When our mother passed away, while we were very young, a maiden aunt, one Aunt Annie, came to stay with us for a while. Then decided to stay on. For some mad reason she felt that she was equal to the task of steering us in the right direction.

I liked her right away, although I was to regret this indiscretion many times, as she brought the full weight of her disciplinary powers down upon me.

I was five when Aunt Annie came to our house. Even at that age, I realized that I was adept at bringing most people, especially my adversaries, on side. It was a major shock to my whole way of life, when the feeling grew on me; that this new person, that I was growing so fond of, could see through me, and could stymie my most brilliant attempts at manipulation.

Aunt Annie was a giant of a woman. As it turned out, in heart, as well as physically. But she would brook no nonsense. At this tender, but mischievous age, I found something that could acquaint with this very large person.

My love and admiration for Aunt Annie continued to grow, even though being subjected to the most vile punishments. Most of the clan quickly learned not to refuse her requests or suggestions. I accepted them as challenges. Full of ideas on how to make life more exciting, as long as I could just sit back and admire my handiwork. It didn't always work out that way. Things had a way of tangling me up in my mischief.

I often allowed myself to sleep in on Saturday mornings. This oversight usually left me at the mercy of every whim of Aunt Annie's for the day. I had lots to do, like tending to and replenishing my supply of tadpoles, that I kept in an old rusty boiler, out back in the summer kitchen. Of late they were dying off at a faster rate than usual. I loved to watch their legs sprouting, and their tails disappearing. At this particular time, some of them were almost ready.

My habit was to arise at the first sounds in the kitchen, where I knew Aunt Annie would be preparing another hearty breakfast. I would wolf



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down my vittles and sneak out at the first distraction, or when my jailer was busiest, with the stealth of an Indian tracker. This morning, I sat alone at the long table, lingering over my breakfast, and keeping a wary eye on my huge aunt, as she lumbered about the kitchen.

My sidelong glances told me that her disarming smile, this morning, was mixed with more than its usual portion of smugness. I stared at my plate with all the appearance of unconcern that I could muster. What dastardly chores did my favourite adversary have in mind for me this morning? I didn't want to hang around to find out.

I was aware that my aunt was keeping an eye on me, and the other on the open doorway. My only escape route. I was caught and we both knew it. The situation seemed hopeless. I began to despair. But I wasn't yet ready to capitulate. As I sat contemplating my next move, the playmates of mind, my thoughts, my plans, and my ideas for escape, manoeuvre for front and centre place, with their counterparts, my love and admiration for my aunt on the one hand, and my fascination with her unusual shape on the other.

In my young and active imagination, Aunt Annie's head took on the shape of an inverted triangle. Wide at the top, and tapering to a tiny double chin that curled up and wobbled, and seemed in danger of being bitten when she talked. Her narrow shoulders carried this parody on down to her massive bottom, giving the illusion of an inverted triangle set atop a large upright triangle. Her hairdo, and the clothes she wore, seemed designed to accentuate this distortion. This, coupled with her duck-like waddle, made her the butt of imitations and jokes from my siblings and playmates alike. This unhappy situation filled me with resentment. While

I was ever in her adversarial stance with my Aunt Annie, I never mocked her. Such a worthy opponent was she.

My love and respect for this new person in my life, was very deep indeed. I never lost my fascination for the chortling sound that passed for a giggle, that emanated from her, when she caught me off guard in the midst of some mischief, and was carrying me off to my fate.

My Aunt Annie had many disciplines in her arsenal. The next one more interesting than the last. I never knew what to expect, which made life all the more exciting. Aunt Annie never spanked. I liked that idea.

While we were getting acquainted, I, in my undiplomatic way, insisted on telling her of my feelings about her shapes and others of her characteristics. She laughed uproariously and to my great discomfort, she told this story to everyone around for days afterwards.

As I waited for the seemingly inevitable this morning, my list of chores, I kept a watchful eye out for that breach of security that so often came. I couldn't believe my good fortune. My aunt entered the pantry in search of something, and I deftly latched the door behind her, and went about my business, quickly. I could now spend the day as planned. Without interruption.

By mid-afternoon the hunger pangs were becoming unbearable. I knew that Aunt Annie should be taking her usual nap, and that I shouldn't have any trouble grabbing something to eat. But of late my errors were compounding. I felt the vice-like arms embracing me, and it wasn't a love hug.

My lovable tormentor carried me to a tree behind the house, chortling all the way, as she deftly dodged the thistles with her bare feet, and made her way through the yard with her squirming bundle. To my great discomfort, I noticed that she carried a rope in the other hand. She sat on me as she tied one end of the rope to my ankle and the other to the tree, in impossible knots. I wasn't sure yet what she was planning. But, I was getting the feeling that she had reached the end of her patience, and intended to get her message across once and for all. Was I to be sacrificed for the good of the pack? (To be continued)