

Auntie · *Alyce Ingram*

THE LAST THING PAPA had said to him before leaving as he zipped up their garment bags was: “God bless Auntie . . . she’s worth her weight in gold . . . and I swear if you give her one whit of trouble while we’re gone I’ll send you to Saddle Town the minute we come back. So watch it, Fella.” Then Auntie had arrived from the depot backing herself out of the taxi rump first like a wrinkled-in-the-seat-black-silk-hippopotamus pulling out her own luggage and Papa and Mama, after quick hugs, had jumped into the same taxi and driven off leaving him alone with Auntie who changed into a sleeveless yellow sunflowered wrap-around the very first thing and was now sashaying around the kitchen banging pots and pans like she was at a shivaree, saying: “This big bear we’ll use for applesauce . . . this medium sized bear for porridge . . . and this little bear to stew prunes in for a certain little fella to keep him regular.”

Oh, how he hated Auntie (who was not really his aunt but was only Papa’s third cousin). Hated her even more than he hated Papa and Reverend Torkelson and his teachers at school and Sunday School. Would like to kick that big fat backside of hers right smack in the middle and send it sailing so high it would get stuck in the propeller of the plane Papa and Mama were flying in so they’d crash on a mountain top somewhere and freeze to death—or better still, catch fire. Auntie was such a dumb thing. Such a dumb, dumb thing. Still calling him *Little Fella* as though he never had birthdays and was still the same little kid she took care of last year and the years before that as far back as he could remember whenever Mama needed a vacation on account of her nerves.

Now Auntie sent him down to the basement to bring up dusty fruit jars for applesauce and when he had finished his job she said breakfast was ready and she squeezed herself into the booth across from him saying: “First we’ll invoke the Lord’s blessing,” then praying a mile-long prayer in which she thanked the Heavenly Father for the food before them and she asked Him to guide her that week in keeping an eye on one certain little fella who drove his poor mother nearly out of her mind with his naughtiness so that she was again on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

As Auntie prayed he studied her carefully for she kept eyes squeezed tightly shut while resting forehead on fingertips that met as thumbs

pressed temples. He did not ever dare to inspect her this closely when her eyes were open for she had once told him that at the slightest glance into his eyes she could read his mind and tell every thought going on in his head to Jesus and he suspected she was not bluffing though why on earth she found it necessary to tattle to Jesus was something of a puzzler since Mama had told him just last night that Jesus knew every single naughty thing he ever did even before he planned doing it. Then she had tacked on the kitchen bulletin board a clipping from the evening's paper showing a bad boy found hanging in the shower stall out at the Saddle Town ranch for delinquents after he'd been brought back from trying to run away.

Now as Auntie approached the end of her prayer he noticed that she still wore her orange hair exactly the same way as always with a wing on both sides and a coil on top of her head like a fat coppery snake stuck through with a wicked-looking fancy comb that now, suddenly, she snatched from its place and, raising her left arm high, dug at the armpit that already looked raw as hamburger. Then, as though finally tired of praying, she barked an abrupt *Amen*, jumped up out of the booth, grabbed a box of cornstarch from the pantry shelf and patted some under the inflamed arm before returning to her seat and beginning to eat.

His own breakfast nearly gagged him to look at. The prunes looked as though they had been stewed in pee-pee. The cocoa was not sweet enough and the oatmeal was gummy but he knew he could never talk her into sugared corn flakes and chocolate chips as he did his mother and he knew, too, that if he didn't clean up his bowl quickly Auntie would fry the contents for his next morning's breakfast topped with syrup and that would be even worse.

"No time for shilly-shally," Auntie said when he cleaned up his bowl. "All play and no work makes Jack a bad boy it says somewhere in the Bible so the first thing we'll do is pick up the apples from the patio and sort the bad from the good for applesauce. You take the bad."

He loathed the job she had assigned him—handling the mushy brown spoiled apples—but noted that one good thing you had to say for Auntie was the fact that you never had to bother much with talking when she was around. She did it all herself. Now, while selecting only good apples for her bucket, she was saying that he had come to his parents too late in life and it would have been better if he had got there earlier in his parents' marriage or, better still, had not got there at all, considering Mama's delicate

constitution. “It wouldn’t of been so bad if you’d’a been a girl,” she said looking suddenly very angry while stomping to pulp a fat wriggling angle-worm that appeared in her path. “Girls don’t have tick-tocks to play with—which is another thing your mother instructed me to break you of in her absence. Believe me no one ever heard of Jesus playing with *his* when he was little.”

The shrill ring of the telephone now took Auntie running into the house for which he was glad because when Auntie started a conversation about tick-tocks there was no telling where it would end. She soon returned, however, in rare good humor saying that Reverend Torkelson was coming to three o’clock tea whereupon she quickly finished picking up the good apples and then began clearing leaves from the patio in long sweeping strokes as though her broom were a scythe. It now seemed to him that Auntie was (temporarily, at least) unaware of his presence so he slackened his pace to give his back a rest.

“Get along there, Little Fella,” Auntie suddenly boomed and she swatted him across his hind end with the broom after which she selected herself a good apple and began to chew noisily while leaning on the broomstick that she now began using to scratch her armpit going round and round so hard he wondered the thing didn’t come up through her shoulder. Catching him eyeing her she immediately threw the broom aside as though mad at it and stretched her arm up over her head again to blow on the raw armpit as if, he thought, to cool the thing before eating it. The idea so tickled him that he could not conceal a giggle which galvanized Auntie into action. Quickly she broke off a branch of bridal wreath and gave him a good switching across the legs then ordered him to go and dump his bucket of bad apples “of which you are one” into the compost pit Papa had dug back of the utility shed where he dawdled for a time picturing himself pushing Auntie into the hole and burying her but he guessed that in time she would smell bad in which case Papa would go snooping and he himself would wind up in Saddle Town for sure. No, this was not smart thinking. Much smarter to wait until next summer when he was a bit older—then run away.

Upon his return from the compost pit he saw that Auntie had finished sweeping leaves into a big pile, had pushed the shay, the tubular chairs and the matching table off onto the grass and was now hosing down the patio. Since he hated the job so much, he did not instantly obey her when she yelled

for him to fill his bucket and start scrubbing out with a hand brush all the empty clay pots lined up against the side of the house.

“I can’t hear you with the water running,” he yelled back pointing to his right ear and suddenly realizing these were the first words he had spoken since her arrival.

“Can’t hear, can’t he,” Auntie now cried. “Well, we’ll soon fix *that!*” and she aimed the nozzle full force directly at his ear as though to clean it out but instead threw him to the ground with the impact. The next thing he knew they were both fighting for possession of the hose but Auntie was winning and now dousing him from head to foot as she pinioned him to her left hip with his neck in the crook of her elbow.

“Let go—let go,” he shouted while struggling to free himself but could not for Auntie had thrown aside the hose and got him in a hammerlock on the ground. She was now panting heavily, her hot breath pushing into his face almost smothering him and when he looked into her wet, open mouth and saw her shining large teeth he thought in a flash of how his mother used to say *Auntie just adores children. Could eat them with a spoon . . . it’s a shame she never had any of her own.*

Now Auntie was mounting him like a hippopotamus so with all the strength he could muster and a bite to her tittie he jerked himself free from under her and as she started to climb to her knees he kicked her in the rump so hard she toppled.

“Oh you little bastard,” Auntie howled doubling up her fists and trying again to get on top of him but the kick in the rump seemed to have done her in and in no time at all he was the victor and she was pleading: “Let me go . . . let me go . . . I give up . . . Auntie gives up.”

Suddenly, before he could decide what to do with her next, he yanked her hair for good measure and it came off in his hands. Auntie, he saw, was as bald as a chicken hanging in the butcher’s locker and he need never fear her again.

“Hi ya, Baldy,” he shouted and smashed her wig down on his own head while striking an elbow-on-hip pose in imitation of her own when scolding him.

“You beast . . . you filthy little beast,” Auntie panted climbing to her feet. “Now you give that back to me and march upstairs to your room where you’ll stay locked up until your parents come back and whip you to a pulp.”

“Bull,” he said (for the first time in his life aloud) knowing that now the shoe was on the other foot. Auntie, without her wig was afraid of him, he was on top. “Now you march to *your* room, Old Lady. And when I say march I mean *march*.” And when she did not instantly obey he snatched up the bridal wreath switch and whipped her rump all the way up the stairs chanting *I see London, I see France. I see Auntie’s underpants* for her wrap-around had parted showing her pink pantied backside.

“Now you get in there and stay,” he commanded at the top landing shoving her into her room and locking the door on the outside. “We’ll just stay in there until we can behave ourself,” for these were the words Auntie spoke to him when locking him up for the day after he had been naughty.

“You let me out right this instant,” Auntie bawled, “or they’ll put you away in Saddle Town the minute they get back.”

Auntie’s words froze him to the spot for he knew that now for certain he was headed toward Saddle Town whether or not he let Auntie out. With her big fat mouth she would blab the whole story to Papa the minute he stepped in the door. Then, to make matters worse, Reverend Torkelson would back her up for when he came to tea at three o’clock Auntie would still be begging to be let out.

Suddenly, now, he couldn’t think what to do about Auntie for he was famished. At this instant he was so hungry he believed he could eat a hippopotamus without even cooking it so he ran downstairs, threw open the refrigerator and devoured with his hands a bowl of leftover potato salad and three uncooked wieners doused with catsup from an almost full bottle that he emptied quickly by shaking it all over the kitchen because it felt so good. Then, still hungry, he made himself a thick peanut butter and jelly sandwich and jellied up the counter so badly he doubted Mama would ever be able to get it clean. Finally he stood atop the utility stool, got down the box of bakery goods Mama had hidden for Auntie’s tea guests, threw on the floor the almond cookies whose flavor he loathed and gobbled up the chocolate cupcakes as he listened to Auntie howl, screech, threaten, coax and now, finally, plead.

“Auntie’s so cold, Lover,” she was begging pitifully. “So very cold. Please let Auntie out to make ourselves a nice spot of lunch and I promise I’ll never tell. Please, please, Little Fella. Let me out to make myself a cup of tea . . . Auntie’s so cold. . . .”

“Cold, are you?” he yelled while trying to think. “Cold, are you, you

fat old bitch. Well I'll soon warm you up. I'll warm you up so much, Fatso, you'll melt."

And he tore Auntie's wig off his head, grabbed a packet of matches from the drawer and set the wig afire before throwing it up the stairs then watched from the patio as Auntie screamed out the window with arms outstretched that she was afraid to jump.