Spider Webs

Jamie Hoey*

*Iowa State University

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No one likes Uncle Reno. Mostly because he is 40 and still lives with Grandma. Mostly because a 40-year-old man should not decorate his room with comic books and superhero action figures. Mostly because he is quiet and usually crabby. And mostly because he is an architect who complains about not having work but never actually looks for any either.

Grandma is the only one who is okay with Uncle Reno's strangeness. Sometimes she still calls him “my little Reno” and babies him. Probably she still cuts up his food. He never leaves home for long. Except for one time he was gone for a really long time. Nobody ever told me where he went. No one likes to talk about Uncle Reno.

In the summers, sometimes Uncle Reno works at a concrete place making bricks. They make fancy shaped bricks, all different colors. I think Uncle Reno is strong to have to lift bricks all the time. But he said they use conveyor belts.

Uncle Reno is the reason Mom doesn't like to go to Grandma's house for Sunday dinners, but Daddy makes her go. It’s tradition. One time Mom said we couldn't play with Uncle Reno because he isn’t allowed by schools. I didn't know what she meant, but Daddy screamed at her to never say that again. I wish I wasn't allowed by schools. Uncle Reno doesn't want to play with us much though. Even on Sunday dinner days.

I like Grandma's house. Even though it smells like musty basement in the summer and I am not allowed to go into Uncle Reno's room per Mom. I look through the stacks of yellow hardcover National Geographic books about mountains, bugs, deer, Africa, the jungle, Antarctica, and fish. The bookcase is right by Uncle Reno's door and I try to peek inside his room every time he goes in and out. I like the shark book the best. Mostly because of the pretty pictures. Also I like the monkey book. There is a picture inside of a line of monkeys that get taller and taller and the last one looks like a man. One of the monkeys looks like my other uncle Dugan.

Nobody likes Uncle Reno because he never leaves home. But everyone loves Uncle Dugan even though he built a hermitage in Grandma’s backyard. It looks like a little cabin but he calls it his hermitage. Uncle Dugan has a long brown beard and wears plaid shirts and looks like a backwoodsman. His hermitage doesn’t have electricity or running water and he takes showers outside in the rain and drinks water out of barrels he puts under the eaves of his cabin. Everyone likes Uncle Dugan mostly because he is happy and jovial and has two boys and two divorces.

Uncle Reno and Uncle Dugan are real brothers. My Daddy is their brother too, but not for real. Daddy said his dad got killed by a grizzly bear in Alaska when he was panning for gold. He tried to get away but he slipped in the icy cold river and fell down and the grizzly bear got him. Then Grandma married Uncle Reno and Uncle Dugan's dad, but his heart attacked him and he died too. Maybe that's why Uncle Reno and Uncle Dugan don't leave Grandma. Parents are not safe by themselves.

One time Uncle Reno came over in the winter time. I was playing outside with my red sled. Uncle Reno pulled me around and around in my sled very fast. Then we had a snowball fight and I cried when I got hit. Mom came running outside yelling at Uncle Reno to stay away from me. She pulled me inside and asked if I was okay and did Uncle Reno try to touch me. She looked very scared and serious. I said no.

Mommy says to stay away from Uncle Reno because he isn't safe. She says this a lot.

Me and my sisters play games a lot. Mostly we play outside so Mom can have a break from us. She locks us outside “just for a half hour,” she says, but then she watches her soap operas while we build teepees and run around the yard mostly naked. We have fun. Until the neighbors call Mom and she tells us to be “normal girls, who like to wear clothes and have tea parties.” Whatever. We try that, but we drink so much red Kool-Aid that we get hyper from all the sugar and start laughing and burping and then we pretend we are guys in a bar getting drunk. My sister Carrie gets apple juice for us and we pretend we're drinking beer. Mom yells at us again.

My sister Carrie looks like my Uncle Reno, who looks like Viggo Mortenson when he was in Lord of the Rings. Only Uncle Reno's hair is blonde and shaggy. Also he wears giant brown glasses. So mostly you have to really stare at him to make him look like Viggo. He doesn't like to be stared at. One time I told Carrie she was Uncle Reno's kid and she told Mom I said that. Mom screamed at me and told me never to say that again. She was very angry.

I change my story after that.

I tell Carrie that Uncle Reno had a wife once, and they had her. And then Uncle Reno’s wife died and he was so heartbroken that he gave Carrie to Mom and Daddy to keep. That makes Carrie cry. I tell her not to tell Mom.

“This is a very sensitive issue to everyone. Everybody loved Uncle Reno’s wife.” I tell her this very seriously. “Don’t say anything Carrie, people might cry.”

That is my secret story.
I used to be afraid of Uncle Reno a little bit. Because one time we were at Grandma’s house and I pulled the plug out of Carrie’s Water Baby she named Moses (even though it was clearly a girl) and water came out of it and Uncle Reno grabbed Moses and threw him into the bathroom sink. I thought he was mean. But when I made up the story about his wife dying I felt bad for him. I tried to talk to him once but he said he didn’t like “little kid talk.”

Mom throws a fit again when it is time for Sunday dinner. She throws a fit every Sunday. Daddy makes her go again. He always wins on Sundays because the next day Mom gets a manicure. We go over to Grandma’s house. She lives through the trees a little ways. Sometimes we walk, but mostly we drive. Mom says she doesn’t like to carry the dessert through the woods. I don’t think she likes to walk.

Grandma’s kitchen has brown linoleum with white square bands and yellow flowers on it. Sometimes me and my cousin JJ who is Uncle Dugan’s boy, play slap-jack on the linoleum, but mostly he lives with his mom in Wawina. Uncle Reno doesn’t talk to anyone much. He stays in his room or sits outside smoking his pipe on the back step that is concrete. Maybe he misses bricks on Sundays.

Mom yells at us to go outside because we are being hyper. Grandma has dishes and dishes of Jolly Ranchers. We already ate a lot of them. My favorite flavor is Fire.

Grandma says, “Don’t get all filled up on Jolly Farmers now!”

But why does she put them out every Sunday then?

We go outside and decide to have a beauty contest. I don’t know why. First we ask Mom if she will be the judger but she says, “I’m busy, go outside like I told you.”

We ask Uncle Reno to be the judger. He says fine. Carrie can’t walk straight and her arms fling too fast and she accidentally hits Uncle Reno’s knee. She is out. I am relieved, just in case she is Uncle Reno’s kid. At least he’s playing fair. Lainey trips on a stick and falls over. I can walk in a straight line and so Uncle Reno picks me to be the beauty champion. He gives us all dandelions and we dance in circles. Except for Lainey because she is mad she didn’t win. Uncle Reno doesn’t dance either. But he laughs and says we’re crazy cats. Carrie starts meowing really loud and we pretend we’re cats for a little while. Uncle Reno watches us and lights his pipe. I like the smell of his pipe smoke. It smells like sweet vanilla, and the smell hangs all around him and falls off when he walks by you.

We get tired of playing cats and then play All ‘ee All ‘ee Oxen Free.

It’s like hide and seek but the hiders have to run to the picnic table and jump on it before the seeker can catch them. When you get to the table you have to yell, “All ‘ee All ‘ee Oxen Free!” as loud as your lungs can go. Uncle Reno says “fine,” he will be the seeker.

We all run and scream, “Bloody Murder!”

Mom yells out the window for us to stop yelling that and also for Uncle Reno to stop playing with us. I don’t know why it’s called screaming bloody murder if you can’t actually scream those exact words. We scream it quieter after that.

When it is dinner time the adults sit at the big dining room table that has Grandma’s fancy lace tablecloth on it and big burgundy candles wrapped in ivy and baby’s breath in the center. Us kids sit on the brown linoleum and drink milk out of red, yellow, and lime green Tupperware cups with clearish sippy lids snapped on top even though we aren’t babies. Grandma is very afraid of spills even though her carpet is brown shag and you can’t even see the last spills I made in the corner by her plants.

There are pickles and pickled hot-beans, carrots, olives, celery and dip, beets, boiled ham, mashed potatoes, pasta salad, corn and homemade rolls, brownies with fudge frosting, and cherry cake with vanilla drizzle. I fill up on butter and rolls and pickled hot-beans. Uncle Dugan’s mustache gets all white with potato salad. I think I see some egg in it too; from breakfast maybe. Grandma tells him to use his napkin like a civilized person, but Uncle Dugan laughs and uses his sleeve instead. Grandma makes a frown at him.

“Im going green,” he says. But his shirt is blue, even I know that.

After we finish the milk, Grandma rinses out our cups and gives us red Kool-Aid. Her Kool-Aid is the best because she mixes two packages of Kool-Aid and two coffee cups of sugar into one little pitcher. I tried making it at home that way once, but Mom got mad at me. Grandma gives us brownies and a piece of cake for dessert. I accidentally take off my sippy lid and try to drink like a big person. When I set my cup on the floor Lainey knocks it over with her knee and the Kool-Aid rushing over Grandma’s linoleum and all over our pants. I start to cry because now Mom will yell. Mom hears me crying and starts yelling.

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Uncle Reno tells her to stop shouting. “It’s just an accident,” he says.

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Uncle Reno tells her to stop shouting. “It’s just an accident,” he says.

“She didn’t mean to spill.”

Mom glares at Uncle Reno and tells him to raise his own kids. I look at Carrie. Her teal corduroy pants with the elastic band are red on the knees. My hands are stained red and sticky. Mom takes away my brownies and cake.
“No dessert for you, go outside.”
I get up and go outside. I cry a lot. Mom doesn’t understand. She just
yells and bosses and watches soap operas. My chest hurts. I sit on Grandma’s
swing and dream about my heart attacking me. That would show Mom. She
wouldn’t yell at me again. Maybe she would play with us if I almost died. She
used to help us paint pictures and make puppets, but she doesn’t anymore,
not after Lainey was born.

Uncle Reno comes around the side of the house. He puts his finger
over his lips and wiggles his fingers for me to follow him. He smiles very
sneaky at me. I get up and follow him behind Grandma’s house. Sweet vanilla
air falls off of him and swishes around in the breeze. Maybe we are playing
hide and seek. Maybe we’re going to be spies and sneak peeks at people
through the windows. Maybe we will go on secret missions to steal Cheetos
off of the counter when no one is looking. I am not scared.

Uncle Reno’s shaggy hair fluffs when he takes a step.
Step, fluff, step, fluff, step, fluff.
We go all the way behind Grandma’s house where Uncle Dugan’s
hermitage is peeking through the rosebushes and his outhouse is hidden by
the hydrangeas.

On the concrete back step are two plates.
There are brownies and cake on the plates.
Uncle Reno sits down on the step and hands me a plate. “Don’t tell
your mom,” he says.

I smile at him and tell him he has pretty eyes. They are sparkly and
blue like Carrie’s. He hunches his shoulders and grunts and eats his brownies.
I eat all of mine. My chest doesn’t hurt anymore. It feels happy. We eat our
brownies first and then our cake. Uncle Reno eats the frosting with the cake
but I lick the vanilla drizzle off first, and then eat the cake. Mom’s cake is
good, but Grandma’s brownies are way better than the ones we eat at school.
I wish Grandma cooked at school.

“Uncle Reno,” I say, “how come you can’t go by schools?”
Uncle Reno’s fork stops halfway to his mouth then goes all the way
down to his plate.

“Because I gave a kid some candy and patted him on the head.”
Uncle Reno’s voice sounds mad. But I laugh. He tells crazy stories.

“You’re a crazy cat!” I say. Uncle Reno doesn’t laugh, though. He just
puts his plate down. A chipmunk runs out from under the rosebushes and
looks at us.

“You try to be nice and you get in trouble,” he says. He packs his
pipe and lights it.

“Want a puff?” he looks at me and grins a little.
“No thank you,” I say. “Mom says that will kill you.”
I think Uncle Reno says “good” really quiet, but then Mom yells,

“Taylor it’s time to go!”
I give Uncle Reno my plate and try to give him a high five but he
doesn’t give me one so I hit him on the shoulder instead.

“Bye Uncle Reno!”
He doesn’t say bye.

When I wake up the next day there is a big spider web on our deck.
The strings are all clear and silky shiny in the sun. Dew drops sprinkle all
of the threads, and sparkle with little rainbows inside of the drops. I stare
at it for a long time. I think it’s pretty. I run and get Mom to show her the
rainbows and diamonds.

“Oh Taylor, that’s gross!” Mom says, and knocks it down with a
broom.

Jamie Hoey is a senior in English studying literature. She lives with her
husband, Phil, and little dwarf bunny named Cougar. She enjoys tea, peanut
butter, and scarves - not necessarily in that order.