

UNC1

by Edward K. Brown II

I

Knock. Knock.

"Who's there?"

"I don't know. Why don't you get off your fat ass and answer the door!?"

That was Unc and Selma's decorum when guests visited. Cliff, their nephew and godson, stood on the enclosed porch staring through the window to across the street at the houses wondering what life would be like in the neighborhood of Holmsberg. The only two things he knew about Holmsberg was that there was a prison approximately a mile away, and that his cousin, "Little Unc," was killed nearby the prison— a death Cliff was too young to understand. As he stared out the window, he awaited his sentence: life or death. Cliff knew who was at the door.

"This boy was born with a plastic spoon in his mouth," yelled Unc and chuckled in his garbled manner.

"Shut up you decrepit, old man," replied Selma from the kitchen. Selma prided herself for being able to see well, hear well and move well. Her husband, a WWII veteran, had trouble with most of his motor skills.

"Your Unc is in there sitting on his fat ass— again. That's all he does. Your son's in there too. As you already know, he's done something wrong, but I won't go into it."

"That boy was born with a plastic spoon in his mouth. Gark, gargle, goo (Ha, ha, ha). Hey Selma! Who's at the door?"

Selma poked her head out of the kitchen.

"Shit," she said as her head disappeared back into the kitchen.

"Hi Unc," sounded a meek voice.

"Shit," replied Unc. "D' you know what that boy did?"

Cliff stared so firmly out the window, trying to forget, that he went temporarily blind.

"Your middle-class ass of a son busted our television," complained Unc and Selma in unison.

Cliff's mother, Snooty (a nickname given to her when she decided to go to college), came into the living room, walked around the Pekinese dog named Soo who was lying in the middle of the floor, and sat on the clear-plastic covered couch. Snooty was pleased to hear that no new tragedy, caused by her son, happened.

Selma explained angrily. "First he pulled out the knob. Then he tried to cover-up himself by putting the knob back. But when he did, it got all jammed up in there. Now I have to unplug the TV to turn it off; plug the damned thing in to turn it on. Hell if I'm going to call a repairman to fix something as dumb as a knob. I had it estimated at fifty dollars. Damn. Lil' Unc was never that stupid."

Unc, taking the time to think, said, "Hey Snooty. Why was this boy born with a plastic spoon in his mouth? Plastic doesn't fix anything. Especially not my TV. I bet you even have a dentist who fills his cavities with plastic."

Snooty looked over to the porch as she frowned and tugged on her ear nervously.

She had heard this before, six months ago when the calamity happened, and she knew that this was not going to be the last time.

Turning to Unc, Snooty joked, "I always recycle my plastic-ware. I even sew his clothes."

Cliff's mother always tried to mend her son's pain— with a pair of plaid mauve pants.

"Hey you back there. Go get me a piece of candy from the dish in the dining room, and one for yourself," bellowed Unc.

Cliff strode across the living room waving hello to his mother. In passing he stepped on Soo's tail.

"YIPE!" Soo scurried into the kitchen with her tail between her legs.

"That boy. Come here baby." Picking up Soo, Selma entered the living room and sat in the orange, easy-chair rocker.

The dining room, with a full case of china on the room's left side, a dining table and chairs in the center, and a long bureau with the candy dish atop on the right side, was patterned with a petite, floral wallpaper. A window, with a radiator beneath the pane, composed the far wall. Within the dining room was the kitchen entrance, which was a few feet from the archway to the living room.

Decorated with the same wallpaper, the living room's interior design— from the archway circling counter-clockwise— began with a display case filled with Hummels: figurines, Rockwellian in nature. A small table with two chairs flowed along the wall stretching to the lamp with an automatic switch, which clicked on as the hour on the wall-clock, above, chimed six times. The television covered the remaining berth. The window-paned wall, which separated the porch from the living room, led to the stairway. Selma's and Unc's personal chairs for viewing television rest before the wall. Crossword puzzle books and a TV GUIDE lie on the table between the two chairs.

Unc sat there with his hands interlocked on his belly. A mirror hung the width of the third wall with Snooty sitting on the sofa tugging her ear, talking nonsense to clear the air. A coffee table, with various "suitable" magazines spread across, stood before the couch. Selma sat in the easy-rocker, which was perpendicular to the couch. She reached down beneath the cushion, pulled out a dog-brush and proceeded brushing the fur-balls out of the Pekinese's tail.

Cliff entered and tossed Unc the candy. The candy bounced off Unc's belly onto the floor.

"Now you know he can barely see without his glasses," chided Selma. "Snooty, something is wrong with that boy. Hey Unc."

"What?"

"Cliff, pick that candy up and hand it to that damned, blind-assed diabetic. How he drives a car I'll never know. And with his back, we sure do know he can do barely a damned thing. My hands still smell of liniment. Hey Unc!"

"What?!"

Cliff picked the candy off of the Oriental rug, handed it to Unc and sat in his aunt's chair. Sitting there bored, he began to ponder what sex would be like. Cliff wanted to go home, but the local news continued to drag on as did the women's conversation as he heard the quarter hour chime. He unwrapped his candy, slowly and tucked the piece in his mouth and smiled. Saliva burst throughout. His tongue wriggled with delight. Closing his eyes, Cliff sunk into the chair emoting.

Unc, enjoying his treat, rolled the candy around in his mouth so quickly that the clicking

was beginning to irritate Selma. His eyes gleamed as he adjusted his hands to grasp the arms of the chair and sunk into his seat. Meanwhile the ladies chatted, ignoring the two in their innocent saccharinity.

"Well, it's time we start heading home."

"And not too soon. When are you coming back?"

"We'll see. Cliff. Ready to go?"

He and Unc were too involved. Cliff was finally beginning to enjoy himself in this moment of sweet ecstasy. Unc straightened in his chair and looked at Cliff, wondering if they were missing-out on something. The deprived duo was silent in their exchange as Cliff walked over to Selma and kissed her cheek. Soo snapped at him. He waived to Unc and proceeded through the kitchen towards the door. His mother was close in following.

"Good night."

While in the car Cliff listened to his mother's berating. He regretted ever fiddling with the television, but what was he supposed to do? He tried to calm his mother down, but he had to keep his eyes on the road while she whacked him over the head with her hand.

"W' tch 't. ' ight' s ' ed."

"Articulate," she screamed while pressing hard on the brake peddle. "Speak slowly and ar-tic-u-late." She continued whacking him.

"OOOOOwwwww," enunciated Cliff roundly and crisply.

Once home, Snooty, waiting for the rest of the family to come home for dinner, telephoned Selma to tell her about her harrowing day. Cliff ran to his room to watch the last of the cartoons. The national news came on, so he changed the channel with his father's needle-nose pliers.

II

"Take out the trash before it's too late."

Cliff, eating his Captain Crunch while trying to guess which prize was going to be inside by reading the box's rear panel, measured the actual size diagram with his forefinger and thumb to see if the prize was worth excavating.

"I can hear them coming! TAKE OUT THE TRASH!!!"

Cliff chomped down the remaining crunch, slurped the milk from the bowl, grabbed the paper grocery bag filled with trash and rushed out the front door. Marking the curb with the full grocery bag, Cliff ran back to the front porch to grab the trashcans placed there by his father the previous evening.

The trash truck came to a halt and the garbage collectors looked at Cliff starkly, curiously, as if he should continue the job by slinging the garbage into the bin. One of the men grabbed the can out of Cliff's hands and dumped the refuse and banged the can on the bin's edge rattling out any goopy remains. The two other garbage collectors followed mechanically. When they finished each flung the can aimlessly on the ground.

"Get in," commanded a voice. Unc, at the driver's seat, signaled Cliff into the cab.

"Punch it."

Cliff did as told. A clink sounded and the jaws of refuse closed, compressed, and compacted the contents.

"Have your mother bring you by the house. There's some new junk in the basement."

Cliff smiled and jumped out the cab door to notice the garbage collectors adjusting the cans to a uniform, upright position. Cliff waived to Unc and went inside.

III

From within the kitchen Unc flicked the light-switch on and opened the door to the basement. He told Cliff to wait as he walked down the stairs backward, staring up at his nephew as he used the handrail as a guide.

"My bad back."

Cliff became lost in his uncle's glowing, glazed eyes. What was in the basement, he thought. His uncle's eyes beamed so fiercely each time they went beneath the house. Damp air rushed up the stairwell, yet Cliff felt the warmth resonating from Unc.

Each step down jarred Unc. His heavy body swayed and sighed. The hollow stairs whined beneath his weight.

"Almost there. Wait a minute," demanded Unc.

Cliff stood there waiting for the stairway to clear.

Soo approached and smelled Cliff's shoe, then followed Unc downstairs.

"Aunt Selma went to the store for cigarettes," mentioned Cliff after hearing Soo's cry.

"Okay, you can come down, but watch out for that damn dog."

Cliff chuckled and took the first step with trepidation. The stair did not whine for him as did for Unc, but the railing did move slightly from the wall.

"Don't fall," jeered the familial menace.

On the descent Cliff saw tin Art Deco containers, cigar boxes, tools, machine parts, nuts and bolts, and pickled items in baby food jars: all of which were covered with dust and cobwebs. He reached for a jar, but he stumbled on a step whose wood split from wear. The veins in his eyes pulsed as his eyes popped out of the socket.

"Don't grab shit! Just get down here!"

Cliff, whose eyes were now as glassy as Unc's, took the final steps with familiarity. Once at the foot of the stairs he turned and faced Unc. They smiled and glanced at the burning light-bulb through the stirred atmosphere.

Soo barked and urinated on the floor. The dank smell permeated through the air.

"Don't touch a thing," advised Unc as if they were in a museum. (As a happenstance, they were in a natural history museum; a collection of fine art lie beneath every house— even ones without a basement.)

Unc's installation fascinated Cliff. There was the samurai sword, which was always out of his reach. The sword was from the War when his uncle engaged in hand-to-hand combat. Three fingers on his left hand were sliced at the base knuckle before he shot the soldier with his automatic revolver. Unc always held up his left hand as a sworn testimonial to his account.

"Those fingers never bend," bragged Unc, "but I can give a mean karate chop." He swung at Cliff and garbled.

There were countless amounts of flat inner tubes, which Unc promised to patch and give to Cliff when his parents opened the pool. Clock radios, hand-wound mantel clocks with ornate sculpture lie about strewn. Chairs, springs, cushions, fabric, rugs, gilded picture frames,

books, a birdbath, and a kitchen sink on top of a Corinthian capital were found jumbled amongst unidentifiable artifacts. Rods and reels were suspended from the ceiling beams by hooks. Unc pulled one down and told his nephew about deep-sea fishing in Atlantic City, about crabbing, about good bait.

"We'll go down to the hatchery. I'll catch'em. You'll clean'em. Go look in the freezer."

Cliff stepped over the puddle left by Soo and lifted the lid to the freezer. In there lie a tuna decapitated.

"Good eat'n," smirked Unc as he brandished a notched fishing knife.

Cliff turned to fright when he saw the knife gleaming like his uncle's eyes.

"Wha' d' I g' t?"

"If you can get past me and up the stairs without getting cut, I'll give you whatever you see down here."

Cliff never liked playing with Unc, but he thought about the sword.

Soo twisted her head watching the event unfold.

"Hey Unc!"

"What Selma?"

Cliff darted past.

"Shit Selma. I thought you were getting cigarettes."

"I'm back. Where's Soo?"

"Down here pissing on the floor— right next to the washer," noted Unc where he found himself standing.

"Dammit. I told you not to let that..

"Cliff opened the door," exclaimed Unc. "Soo came down. I'm trying to.. "

"Never mind. Cliff, get your stale ass from down there."

"I want the samurai," demanded Cliff halfway up the stairs.

"You'll get what I gives ya, punk" replied Unc under his breath.

Cliff, realizing that he won, ran up to greet his aunt leaving Unc to peruse his eclectic collection.

"How ya doin'," smiled Cliff at Selma.

"Fine. How's yar Unc doin' ," she smiled back in reply handing over a dollar.

"He's okay'. He owes me." Cliff's smile turned into a full grin.

"I'm glad you survived."

Selma took in her nephew's expression and walked into the living room lighting a cigarette as she went. The porch glowed with envy. The envy poured into the living room. Selma stopped in the middle of the floor. A haze circled her head, which she broke when she exhaled. She rubbed her bottom lip after she drew on her cigarette. She stood there staring into the porch remembering. She turned to Cliff, who was standing beneath the archway, and wore his grin.

"You are my godson," she said tearfully, emphasizing the word "son."

Finally Unc came from the basement. He skinned his elbow climbing from the cavern. A groan came from his bowels when he swung the door shut with his foot. In his arms was Cliff's prize. A glass crashed to the floor from the counter. He fiddled with the compensation in his arms while trying to sweep the broken glass under the table with his foot. Unc noticed Cliff snickering at him.

"Don't say a thing," whispered Unc. "Where's Selma?"

Cliff gestured with his head towards the living room where Selma, with her sentiments, stood.

"Come here," whispered Unc. "Grab a broom. Fast! There's a dustpan."

Cliff did as requested and assisted.

Unc continued into the living room, placed the materials on the floor by the coffee table and sat in his chair.

Unsuspectingly, Cliff came from the kitchen.

"What'd you break in there boy," posed Unc.

"I didn't break anything!"

"What was that crash then? I heard it from here. Dammit. Selma, your godson broke one of your favorite glasses."

Selma looked towards the kitchen with amber in her eyes. She moved swiftly past Cliff.

"What'd you do? It's right here on top of all this trash. You tried to cover it up under this paper towel."

"Gark, gargle, goo."

"Shut up Unc. It isn't funny," cried Cliff.

"Wait until your mother gets here. Go sit on the porch and don't touch a thing," ordered Selma.

Sitting on the porch and not touching anything was frustrating for Cliff; he was born to ramble. He reclined in the sun on an ottoman that was directly behind Unc's chair. The window was open. Cliff plucked his nemesis on the back of his balding head.

"Hey," exclaimed Unc now too far sunk in his chair to remove himself without assistance. "Be careful or I'll come back there and kick your ass."

Cliff became bolder and tapped sharply Unc's bare spot, then he lay flat on the ottoman ducking the flying crossword puzzle books flung at him.

"Knock it off Unc! Who's going to pick up that shit," shouted Selma, coming into the room, figuring that she would be the one to clean up after him.

"Snooty," replied Unc.

They all laughed.

IV

Cliff's mother had a sixth sense that she was walking into a situation when she entered the house. She greeted everyone loudly as she walked into the empty kitchen. Frazzled from her day, interested only in picking up her son and taking him home, Snooty tripped over a tackle box and a fishing rod and reel left in the middle of the living room floor.

"Go pick up your shit on the floor, Cliff," grumbled Unc.

"Your mother almost broke her neck. How many times have I told you to put that junk on the porch," chided Selma.

Cliff, glad that the fishing gear was his, but disliked the manner in which it was presented, snatched the tackle box off the floor and slid the fishing rod and reel across the floor with his foot to the baseboard of the wall. The tackle chipped the paint.

Selma complained by demanding that Cliff come over that weekend to touch up the damage. This event reminded her of the broken glass.

His mother rebutted the claim with the clichéd spilled milk saying.

"Well then, you clean up the dried spilled milk on the porch a couple hours ago," retorted Selma.

Cradling the tackle box in his left arm, Cliff stood there and opened his tackle box to avoid looking at his leering, angered mother. Suddenly he recalled the word "articulation."

"In the box," consoled Unc from his chair, "those are flies. Those are hooks; those lead things, sinkers. Careful. Don't catch yourself. There's some extra line on the bottom, under the tray. We'll go to the hatchery Sunday."

Cliff lifted the tray out of the box to find the fishing line. There beside the line was a lidless, Styrofoam container. He placed the tray and box down and picked up the container, and began peeling the lid off. With the lid fused to the container, Cliff inadvertently flung the contents, dried dirt and dead worms, into the air and onto the floor.

V

Saturday morning. A white, wood-paneled station-wagon pulled up to the house. Cliff ran out the door carrying his newly acquired fishing paraphernalia. Prepared to get good and dirty, he wore his favorite plaid mauve pants.

Unc, stiff-necked, stared ahead honking the horn to signal his arrival.

Cliff jumped into the front seat.

"Put that damn stuff in the back!"

Sheepishly, Cliff did as Unc said.

Snooty came out to the car smiling, wishing the two an adventurous time.

"I'll catch'em. He'll clean'em," said Unc coyly as he started the car engine.

"See you," hummed Snooty.

"Bye," said Cliff anxiously.

His mother watched them pull away, waving so long.

During the excursion to the hatchery, Cliff hung his arm out the window and used his hand as a rudder to guide the motion of his arm as Unc spoke endlessly about catching and cooking catfish. The car stopped at the bait shop. Unc gave his fishing buddy five dollars and a verbal shopping list.

"Get corn meal, worms and eighth ounce sinkers."

Cliff knew the reason for the worms. He figured out the sinkers— but the corn meal?

"Make sure you get change."

Cliff came back to the car with the fishing ingredients and placed the bag beside his mentor and kept the change. The two drove down the hill toward the pond. In the parking

area, the gravel ground beneath the station-wagon's tires. Once parked, Unc reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small brown bottle. After unscrewing the cap, he allowed the potency within the bottle waft into his nose. Cliff, sensitive to Unc's "habit," peered straight ahead while watching peripherally. He saw Unc take a big swig, grab the corn meal and pour the remaining bottle contents into the container.

"I use to make my own when I fished regularly," said Unc licking his upper lip.

"What did you put in there," asked Cliff suspiciously.

Unc gave his apprentice a stern look as if asked to expose a secret too mature for such young ears.

"Don't tell your aunt because she'll kill me. This stuff belongs to her. She uses it in her cookies.

Cliff nodded his head to acknowledge the secrecy.

It's vanilla extract. Catfish love vanilla. C'mon. Let's go before it's too late."

They grabbed their gear and strode determined.

The morning fog was lifting exposing the algae-covered pond. There were some people with their lines cast and reeling in catch.

"See the circles," said Unc pointing to the water's surface. "That means they're bitin'."

The markers atop the pond disappeared as quickly as Unc indicated them. Unc baited his hook with the corn meal concoction; Cliff baited his with a big, fat earthworm. The worm, impaled at the center, drooped, twisting at each end.

"You'll never catch anything with something like that," snickered Unc.

"Yes I will. I've seen it on TV," railed Cliff.

"Yeah. On those damned cartoons."

Unc showed his godson how to cast. His godson's line and sinker became entangled around the rod. Unc's teachings continued for a full half-hour before the fishing rod became a natural extension of his son's.

"The art of fishing is the art of knowing," instructed Unc.

"Knowing?"

"Yes. Knowing when the fish is near; knowing when it's nibbling your bait; knowing when they're not bitin'."

Unc cast, paused to let the bait sink to the bottom of the pond, then reeled the line in slowly.

"Knowing is feeling the rod tug, feeling the line move." Unc looked out of the corner of his eye to see if his apprentice was paying attention.

Imitating his uncle's actions, Cliff inspected his line and grasped the rod tightly, waiting to feel a twitch. The tip of the fishing rod tip bent slightly.

"Unc! Unc! Unc," he called primitively.

Instinctively, Cliff's godfather took the rod and reeled in a bit, then pulled back on the rod in an upward motion to sense the tension, the fight of the fish.

"You've got one all right," said Unc handing the pending catch back to his young, field and stream nimrod.

Cliff jerked back on the rod spastically.

"Careful where you fling that thing!"

Cliff's catch came to the surface: a shiny, but tiny sunfish.

"A sunnie," laughed Unc. "Sonny caught a sunnie!" He laughed even harder.

Cliff grabbed the line and held the sunfish before his face. He studied the fish wondrously. The hook came through the mouth, piercing the eye. He cheered himself as the fish floated in the air wriggling, dangling from the line moving, motionless in time.

Unc, patting his nephew on the back, took the line and cut it a few inches above the fish. He gave an approving smile as he carefully removed the hook from the fish's mouth and tossed the fish back into the pond.

Cliff's mouth gaped as wide the pond.

"This is a hatchery. You don't keep these. Let's go where we can find some food," grunted Unc. He brought his line back and cursed the scaled scoundrel that ate his bait from the hook. He grabbed his gear and stormed toward the station wagon.

Cliff walked humbly behind.

The Delaware was visible from the hatchery; however, Unc and Cliff drove the short distance to an elevated pier. The pier stretched the length of the parking lot. A sidewalk separated the parked cars from the railing. Unc, now relaxed, cast his line a good distance with a flick of the wrist. Cliff, exhausted and frustrated, allowed his line to drop into the river.

A cool breeze came from the odorous waters. Cliff rubbed his nose.

"Don't be such a crybaby," cajoled Unc.

"I'm not," said Cliff staring at the water.

A fisherman stood a few yards away with a tall bucket full of catfish. He reeled in another and tossed his catch into his bucket. He grabbed his lot and walked past Unc and Cliff.

"They're so hungry," the fisherman said. "I practically have to drag this damn bucket, but I'm going to eat well tonight." He gave a hearty laugh.

Unc waved to the fisherman and winked to Cliff.

"Now you're going to see something," predicted Unc.

"What next," thought Cliff as he envisioned himself beside his uncle mimicking the actions and thoughts of his deceased cousin. Lost in the image of Lil' Unc, Cliff forgot who his parents were and where he lived. He realized that the fishing gear belonged to his cousin. Lil' Unc's identity consumed Cliff. He knew what was in those Art Deco containers above the stairs: Selma's sewing materials. He knew that he did not want to know what was preserved in those baby food jars. He knew why Unc played such horrid tricks: Lil' Unc was such a prankster. He knew why his punishment was to sit on the porch: his cousin loved to sit out there and read. Cliff began to understand the extension of life and death— the meaning of family history.

¹ UNC is loosely based on his relationship with Ed Brown's great uncle and aunt (Jim Williams and Thelma Williams).