

# Uncle William

*A short story*

Joyce drew out a chair and joined the boy at his table in the rear of the shop.

‘Where’s your Uncle William today then, Dan?’ she asked.  
‘Post Office. Be back soon.’

The boy, who was nearly thirteen, spent an hour at the shop every afternoon, doing his homework until his mother came to pick him up. He welcomed this interruption; Joyce was his favourite among the customers of his uncle’s Art Supply shop. He thought she was cool.

‘Maybe he’s got a secret date,’ she said.

The boy laughed at the unlikely idea of his forty year-old uncle having a date.

‘Maybe you’d like to be his date,’ he suggested.

‘Don’t be daft. You know I frighten him to death. And my paintings give him the horrors.’

The bell above the door announced William’s return. He carefully rolled up his shirtsleeves and retreated to the protection of his counter. The shop resembled an old-fashioned apothecary’s premises, its stock displayed in purpose-built cabinets of dark oak and bevelled glass.

‘Good afternoon Miss Novak,’ he said.

‘Joyce, for goodness sakes. What’s all this Miss Novak?’

The boy was not altogether wide of the mark in his frivolous suggestion to Joyce. For a single woman of her age (she was thirty-seven) there were not many eligible men in this town. She viewed William, with his successful business, as a

possibility, if a bit on the dull side. But if she was out to attract this timid man, it seemed to Dan that she was going about it in quite the wrong way.

She unwrapped the painting she had brought in to be framed and placed it on the counter. William busied himself with a tape measure, trying to hide his shock at the raw emotion she had poured onto the canvas. A nude, female figure that seemed to be diving backwards was depicted with violent strokes of thick, unmixed colour. From where he sat the boy could see his uncle's ears reddening.

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Dan had been collected by his mother and the hands of the oak-framed clock on the wall had reached five thirty. Orders for brushes, sketchbooks and varnishes were ready to be phoned through in the morning. William slid the bolt and turned the sign behind the glass door to 'closed'. Then he moved about the shop, checking that everything was in its place and casting occasional glances at Joyce's painting where it leaned against the wall.

He paused in front of a small watercolour landscape that hung discreetly in a corner. He had painted it on a trip to the Lake District when he was seventeen. He had dared then to see himself as an artist, but the shop was already beginning to claim him. Three years later his father died and William took charge.

In some respects he was not the figure about whom Joyce and Dan liked to joke; he was not unaware of the old-fashioned image that he presented. The dated atmosphere of the shop was cultivated to attract the customers he really wanted – the artists. They came from far and wide, knowing

that they would always find exactly what they needed. William had no time for modern retail practices that eliminated a line if it failed to reach a certain level of sales. One old customer, who had been painting steam locomotives for fifty years, was the only purchaser of a particular type of sable brush.

The other unsuspected aspect of William was that he did not intend to remain single. Even if he had completely failed to learn the language of courtship, he was sure that in due time he would find a partner to share his life and the demands of the shop.

Taking a last look at Joyce's painting before wrapping it up, William was reminded of Sally, the brazen neighbour of his youth who, with her bright red lipstick and provocative clothes, had teased and tormented him. He had been both repelled and attracted - attracted in spite of the pure feelings that he had silently harboured for a sweet-looking girl he saw on the bus every day.

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At ten o'clock the next morning Violet slipped into the shop, embarrassed as always to have her arrival announced by the bell suspended over the door. She had been coming there for nearly four years to buy her supplies and occasionally to frame one of her tiny, meticulously executed paintings of small animals. William greeted her cordially.

Violet was usually dressed to conceal herself, but today she wore a close-fitting sweater, of a soft blue colour. She lived alone, in a cramped attic flat. She worked long hours and earned little, exploited by a publisher who commissioned her delicate studies of nature to illustrate books and magazines. Recently she had dared to join an evening class in

assertiveness and was steeling herself to carry out the homework exercises prescribed by the teacher. ‘Value yourself’ she intoned quietly as she walked through the shop. She unrolled a sheet of grey cartridge paper on which she had mounted a dozen small reproductions of her paintings. William smiled as he looked at twelve little field mice, each set in its cosy-looking habitat.

Four years of casual contact with William across the counter of his shop had reassured Violet that this was a decent man. She had listened as he talked about the properties of pigments when suspended in different binding media. That seemed to be the limit of his conversation, but she was not put off by his awkwardness – on the contrary, it drew her to him the more.

William took up his tape measure. He held the reel with one hand and with the other he drew the metal tape across the paper, towards the end of the counter where Violet stood. His hand was approaching the front of her blue sweater. She would have had to step back to allow the tape to reach the edge of the picture. But she made no move.