

UNCLE KENNY



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A Brooks Jensen Arts Publication



Everyone has an “Uncle Kenny” — or should have, a man who works hard — with his hands — his entire life. Kenny was actually my wife’s uncle, or I should say, one of her many uncles. On my side of the family, there was Uncle Lee — hardworking, slow talking, with hands so strong he had to consciously shake hands with a gentle touch. By the time I met Kenny, decades on the farm had taken its toll. His hands reminded me of his old tools — bent and scarred, a testament to years of use.

Kenny and I immediately hit it off when he learned that I like to play cribbage. He loved to play cards — wait, let me re-phrase that. Kenny loved to *win* at cards. Oh, he was a good loser, too — as long as you allowed him an opportunity to triumph before the night was over. We’d stop by their home and he’d invariably have the board out and the cards all ready. We played best of seven and I always lost. I’d enter the fray with enthusiasm and determination — and end with Kenny still the reigning champ. He enjoyed my visits — but if truth be told, not as much as I enjoyed losing to him and sharing his company.



Once, I was wandering around in the local grocery store over in Westby, waiting for a tire to be repaired across the street. Always on the lookout for photographic opportunities, I was proceeding up and down each aisle of the small store, looking for angles and potential compositions. Wearing my photo vest, I must have looked suspicious. The owner of the store came up to me with a stern, worried look and asked — in a not-too-friendly tone — what I was doing. I explained I was just waiting on my tire repair. Clearly not satisfied, he probed, “Where you from?” To set his mind at ease, I mentioned that my wife was Kenny’s niece and that we were staying over on the farm. After an awkward pause, I could tell he was not reassured, so in desperation I added, “That Kenny is one helluva cribbage player. He skunked me so bad last night that Palma took pity on me. She offered me a second piece of pie.” The grocer smiled and said, “Tell Kenny hi for me,” and then walked away. I passed the test.



I'd spent several days photographing the farm, Kenny's shop, the old homestead, his tools and coats and barns. He tracked me down out back by the grain bin.

"I thought you might want a portrait of me," he said, standing a little straighter than normal. I noticed he'd dressed up for the occasion. "Why, sure I do. Where would you like me to photograph you?" Without hesitation he pointed, "In my shop." He knew exactly the pose he wanted; I could tell he'd been thinking about it a while. I was glad — no, *honored* — to oblige him.









Kenny and Palma are gone now. I miss our nights of cribbage. I miss her pies. Not that I ever lost on purpose, mind you, but I could have been tempted. Losing to Kenny was not really losing at all — not the way I remember it, anyway.



Brooks Jensen is a fine-art photographer, publisher, workshop teacher, and writer. In his personal work he specializes in small prints, hand-made artist's books, and digital media publications.

He and his wife (Maureen Gallagher) are the owners, co-founders, editors, and publishers of the award winning *LensWork*, one of today's most respected and important periodicals in fine art photography. With subscribers in 73 countries, Brooks' impact on fine art photography is truly world-wide. His long-running podcasts on art and photography are heard over the Internet by thousands every day. All 900+ podcasts are available at [LensWork Online](#), the LensWork membership website. LensWork Publishing is also at the leading edge in multimedia and digital media publishing with *LensWork Extended* — a PDF based, media-rich expanded version of the magazine.

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