

# UNCLE-HOOD

By James Finn Garner

At this time of year, when we honor our fathers with loud ties and louder barbecues, I'd like to raise a glass to another male relative who deserves a tribute: the uncle. Like a yin to a yang, or a jester to a king, uncles provide an important counterweight to the influence of fathers. Not hindered as much by love and bloodlines, uncles are tied to you through no fault of their own. And because you're stuck with each other, they're free to do their best to shape you into an interesting companion.

For better or worse, uncles will disclose things that fathers cannot. Dads tell you the facts of life, but uncles show you how the world works. Dads teach you to throw a fastball, uncles teach you the spitter. Uncles are more likely to get you in trouble, but also more likely bail you out. Maybe, and that's a lesson in itself. Bribing maitre d's, buying fireworks, sizing up blowhards and phonies—who but your uncle could teach you so much, either to imitate or avoid?

I've been an uncle longer than I've been a father. While unclehood is easier day-to-day, it does carry responsibility. When my oldest nephew was in high school, I shared with him what little I knew of the history of Ireland and its three centuries of trouble under British rule. I was just making conversation, but those ideas got under his skin and agitated his 3/8 Irish blood. Now my nephew is a punk rock

Brendan Behan, singing in a Celtic band that puts a ska beat to 19<sup>th</sup> century miners protest songs. While his father indulges him, as his uncle I give him hearty encouragement. After all, I wasn't the one who paid his college tuition.

Would you ever trade in your father for your uncle? Not a chance. If your uncle announces he's going to quit his job and run off to become a professional tango dancer, your life remains intact, unless your aunt comes to stay with you. Once I was riding with my uncle as he drove down a city block the wrong way, and a passing motorist scolded him. After giving the guy some lip, my uncle drove on. Later that day, he reworked the story to the point where I heard the phrase, "And then I showed that guy my gun." Uncles make for good stories, but lousy alibis.

So raise a cheer for uncles. They might be better men than our fathers, or worse, richer or poorer, smarter or exceedingly dumber. What's important is, they're not our fathers. Fathers love us too much, but uncles? Uncles like us just enough, so they can reveal, like a jolly co-conspirator, what a glorious mess adulthood can be.