

I Take My Cousin to Her Prom

My cousin Rozzie is 3 ½ years younger than me. A most remarkable coincidence is the fact that my two cousins, Barbara and Rosalind, were born on the same day: May 13, 1931. Rozzie is the daughter of Louis Goldstein, and Barbara is the daughter of Ruth Goldstein Kestenbaum, brother and sister. At one time I wondered if the two couples planned to conceive at the same time.

As I was growing up, the Goldsteins and the Kestenbaums were the only cousins I knew. My mother and I would visit them from time to time. Actually, my mother would visit, and I tagged along. My mother would be engaged in conversation with the grownups, while I sat quietly by myself. I had little or nothing in common with the grownups, or with Rozzie, her younger brother Eddie, or Barbara.

When I entered college, I felt more comfortable talking with both my older and younger cousins, but I saw less and less of them. By this time, I chose not to tag along. From my earliest years, both fathers, Louis Goldstein and Arthur Kestenbaum, served as role models and I admired them both. Louis taught biology at Clinton High School, and Arthur sold men's clothing at Bancroft's on Madison Avenue.

Louis and his wife Esther were teachers, and they pushed their children, not only to excel in school, but to accelerate, to skip classes. Rozzie was two years younger than her classmates when she graduated from high school.

For many high school graduates, the culmination of 12 years of school (or 10 years of school for Rozzie) is not the graduation ceremony but the prom. When I graduated from Stuyvesant, I chose not to attend the prom. I certainly did not believe I missed anything. I didn't have a girlfriend, and it struck me that it would be silly for me to get dressed up and spend all that money to take someone to a prom for whom I had no feeling, and to take her someplace where I would feel uncomfortable. That was 1945.

It was now June 1947, and I was completing my sophomore year at CCNY. One evening I received a call from my cousin Louis. He wanted to ask me for a favor. Would I take Rozzie to her high school prom? Wow! I was taken aback, and after a few moments of hesitation, I stammered, sure. I really don't know how these things work with girls. Rozzie attended a coed high school. Do the boys ask the girls to go to the prom with them? Do the girls ask the boys? I believe Louis explained that no one had asked Rozzie to the prom, and her friends were going. It occurred to me that she may have been seen as "too young," by the boys in her class. An unanticipated disadvantage of skipping. Louis explained that he would like me to take her to her prom. He told me that he would take care of all expenses. I said I would be delighted.

Thinking about Louis' request, I had all kinds of mixed feelings. First I was flattered; then I wondered if I was called out of desperation. No where else to turn. Or was it a stroke of genius? Ask Jacob! He is our handsome, smart, cousin who is in college. How was I really seen? For years, I believed we were looked upon as the poor relations. That was then. This was now.

The evening of the prom, I put on my best (and only) suit, and took the trolley to Rozzie's house on Sedgwick Avenue, corsage in hand. Rozzie and her friends had arranged for a limousine, and off we went to the Copacabana. By now, my ability to make small talk had improved considerably. Besides, I was a couple years older than the others. I was very gallant, complimented Rozzie, and entertained her friends. I had never been to a night club, though I had

been to a few jazz clubs on 52nd Street. I looked forward to the show with great anticipation. The featured entertainer was Jimmie Durante! I loved Jimmie Durante. I used to do imitations of Jimmie Durante. I couldn't have been happier, and more important, Rozzie was happy. We danced, we talked, we ate, we drank, we laughed. We had a great time. The night club photographer took a picture of our table, and before we left, we each had a Copacabana match book with our picture. We all looked great. For a moment I wondered if I would have had an equally good time at my prom.

1-2-12