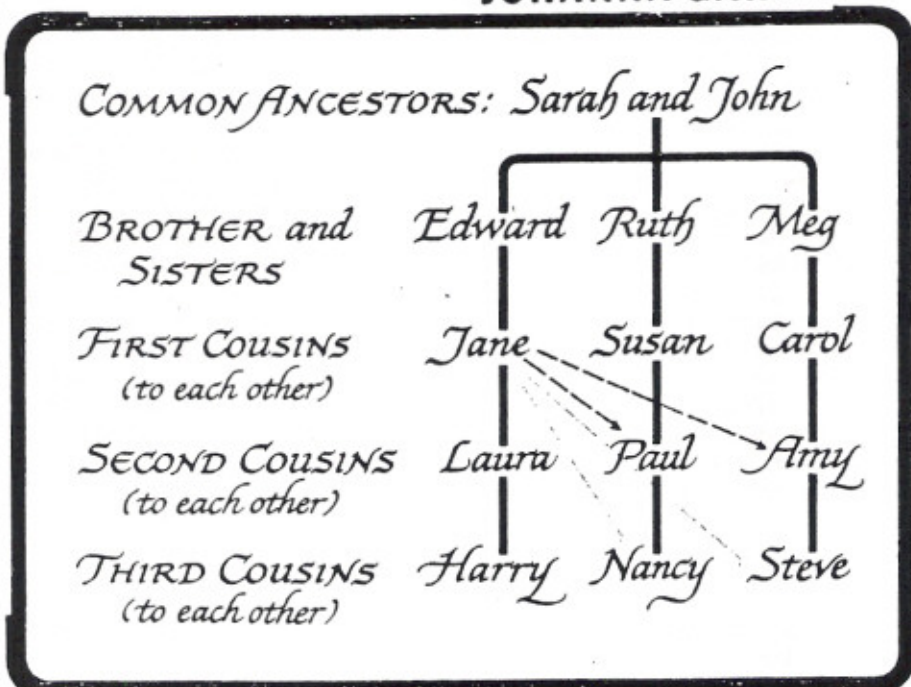


# KISSING COUSINS

*The Unsung Relatives*

BY  
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**First cousins** are children of brothers and sisters, so Jane, Susan, and Carol are first cousins to each other.

**Second cousins** are children of first cousins, so Laura, Paul, and Amy are second cousins to each other, and so on.

**First cousins once removed** (see ———→) are the children of your first cousin, so Paul and Amy are Jane's first cousins once removed. (Sometimes, confusingly, also called "second cousins," though

technically, they're not.)

**First cousins twice removed** (see ———→) are children of first cousins once removed, so Nancy and Steve are Jane's first cousins twice removed.

**Cousins by marriage** are simply those wed to your cousins of whatever kind. So that whoever Paul marries would automatically become Jane's first cousin once removed with the additional tag "by marriage" at the end.

"MY GOD," A FRIEND EXCLAIMED after I told her that I was going to yet another cousin's wedding, "I never met anyone with as many cousins as you have."

I guess I'd never really given much thought to my 45 cousins until then. But come to think of it, when I was growing up, my two best friends, my primary role models and protectors, my first crushes, my most influential teachers (of everything from the facts of life to the piano)—even my severest critics and bitterest rivals—were all, also, my cousins. Not only did I see these cousins regularly during the year, but during the summers we often trooped off to camp together. One summer, in fact, when I was about eight, three of the four campers in my bunk (Helen, Clare, and I) and our counselor, Phyllis, were cousins. Grace, the unfortunate outsider, left in the middle of the season, unable, finally,

to cope with the "in" references and the sardonic family humor.

My friend's observation made me curious about the unique role these friend-relations play in my own life, and in others, and about the nature of this mysterious blood tie that is officially closer than a friend, yet not a sibling.

Says Dr. Donald Bloch, director of the Ackerman Institute for Family Therapy in New York City: "The cousin relationship is distinctive in that, of all blood ties, it tends to be the least toxic and the most generally supportive. There's enough distance so that cousins are not deeply competitive and antagonistic, yet they're clearly family, with a common heritage. This makes for a nice mixture of closeness and distance."

Dr. Doris Grant, a psychologist, agrees. "I guess the closeness comes out

of a strong tribal feeling—what you might call a sense of clan. Unless there's been a rupture in the parents' generation, or you live so far apart that you just can't get together, you're likely to meet and re-meet over and over again, even if you don't like each other. With friends, you can easily drift apart. But because of the family tie, you're almost forced to stay in touch with cousins—especially while you're kids, but often, even afterward."

Dr. James Framo, professor of marriage and family therapy at U.S. International University in San Diego, California, and past president of the American Family Therapy Association, notes that cousins not only gather at weddings and other happy occasions, but also form an important support group at funerals.

In our family there were enough good amateur musicians to form a family orchestra—far more than would be likely in a random group of even the closest friends. The genes seem to dictate some surprising physical resemblances, too. My own daughter looks more like my brother's son than like her own brother. Even more unexpectedly, she bears a strong resemblance to a second cousin whose father—my first cousin—in no way resembles me. (See chart for an explanation of the multiple possibilities of cousin relationships.)

In our family—and in others I know of—the sense of clan was also promoted by a tendency on the part of the aunts and uncles to use the same or similar names for their children, especially the boys. There were two Franks and a Frances, two Elliots, two Philips and a Phyllis. We cleared the confusion by referring to them as, for instance, Elliot D. and Elliot R., but the similar names were another constant reminder of the family tie and history. And rightly so, since they were all versions of parents' and grandparents' names.

The sense of shared history was enhanced by what Dr. Michael Kahn, professor of psychology at the University of Hartford and coauthor, with Steven Bank, of *The Sibling Bond* (Basic Books), calls the "family mythology"—stories about mutual grandparents and great-grandparents, eccentric aunts, uncles, great-aunts and great-uncles that get passed along.

To share a history, even more, to hear a certain turn of phrase, have a mutual talent, see a certain facial configuration in the features of another who is not a brother or sister, is fascinating. Even now, people who have met my cousins Helen and Clare and me—separately—often comment spontaneously, "My God, you sound just like each

other!"

While many people report long and ongoing cousinly ties of the kind I had maintained—some ensure continuity through "cousins' clubs" that are strictly social; others are geared to exploring family history—still others report that they had comfortably drifted apart from childhood chums, and then found themselves occasionally turning back to them in times of stress or crisis. One of these was Carol, a teacher.

"When I was a child, there were two cousins who became my instant temporary friends whenever I saw them at family parties. The girl, Jane, was younger, and even though I liked her, I was sort of envious of her because I saw that my parents let her get away with a lot of things, like putting her elbows on the table. And I guess there was some subtle competition to be my grandmother's favorite, too.

"The boy, Harry, had a pet monkey and raised Venus's flytraps in his room. But I liked him anyway and always looked forward to seeing him and Jane. After there was a rift in the family, I lost track of them for about ten years. But one day, I found out that Harry was living near me in the city. We were both lonely, and single, and we began to hang out together when we didn't have dates. Sometimes we went to the singles bars together, and it was kind of fun having a male escort I didn't have to impress. I was amazed at how completely comfortable I felt with him. All those shared memories of the same relatives and our childhood peculiarities—I had mine, too—put us totally at ease.

"For about two years we stayed really close, but then I got married, and my husband didn't take to Harry so we see each other a lot less often now. But I still feel a bond with him. I mean, a friend can stop being a friend, but you can't stop being a cousin."

Even without the childhood connection, cousins often feel a strong bond. Richard Schuman, a psychotherapist in New York, told of the case of a young woman who had come to the city from the Midwest after a divorce and fallen into a deep depression that led to a suicide attempt. "Her parents wanted her to go back home, which would have been fatal. She didn't get along with them, and besides, her ex-husband lived nearby. On a hunch, Schuman suggested she call some locally based cousins whom she knew only slightly. "It was amazing," he said. "They immediately befriended her. One helped find her a job as a hostess in a restaurant—a job for which she was overqualified, but which lent structure to her life and gave her a

chance to pull herself together and feel competent. All in all, they joined forces and played an enormous role in her recovery."

Although Carol recalled having had nothing but platonic feelings toward male cousins as they grew up, many other friends of mine recalled a strong sexual attraction toward older cousins; some reported early sexual experimentation with those closer in age.

I remember my fascination with my handsome cousin Ernest—who was 21 when I was 12—who came to our house to tutor me in math. I recall that "crush" as a powerful memory of sexual awakening, though I was much too young for him to notice me. Eventually, I became so flustered in his presence (to his bewilderment and my hideous embarrassment) that I had to switch tutors.

When cousins' ages are closer, their sexual attraction is often translated into action, says Dr. Bloch. "There is a strong sense of familiarity, yet cousins are not seen as part of the strict incest taboo that brothers and sisters become aware of at an early age."

Although cousin marriage is forbidden in many societies, both past and present, it is encouraged in others—the Polynesians and Melanesians, for example, where marriage is organized along strict bloodlines. In some groups, marriage is permitted between "cross cousins" (a child of a father's brother or a mother's sister). Marriage between royal cousins has been encouraged for centuries—for many of the same property and inheritance reasons as in less developed societies—though the cousin connection is usually more remote, as was the case with Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, Queen Mary and King George V—the present Queen Elizabeth's grandparents—and Prince Philip and Queen Elizabeth.

In the United States, perhaps our most famous (distant) cousin marriage was that between Eleanor and Franklin D. Roosevelt. However, cousin marriage is held in some disrepute in many areas of this country, and is still illegal in a number of states.

According to Lynn Godmilow, chief of genetics in the department of obstetrics and gynecology at Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia, there is no reason why healthy cousins—even first cousins—cannot marry and produce perfectly healthy children. But, she adds, "the normal two to three percent risk that unrelated couples run of miscarriage or serious problems with a baby increases somewhat—to about four to five percent—between cousins. To some people, that increased risk seems

enormous; to others, it's insignificant."

Love, friendship, kinship, closeness in times of crisis. A pretty picture that has a dark side, too. Many cousins do not like each other, and even among close cousins, the rivalry tends to be intense at times.

The closer and more frequent the encounters between cousins, the more the relationship is likely to resemble that of siblings—and if cousins don't get along, it will also resemble the deep and abiding dislike that can exist between siblings. "In fact," said Dr. Kahn, "the relationship between the parent siblings is a very strong factor in how cousins will interact. Cousins are often proxy delegates for their parents. If their parents had a good relationship, they will often actively work to encourage contact and a positive relationship between their children. If the adult sibling relationship was negative or competitive, it may result in the same rivalry between cousins and their parents that the siblings themselves felt. ["My kid is in medical school; yours isn't."]

"In such competitive relationships, the shared history and mythology often get distorted. Who did what to whom twenty-five or thirty years ago is heard and passed on with so many changes that by the time the second or third cousins hear it, it's hopelessly confused."

How does it feel to be without these friend-relations—positive or negative? A little lonely and envious, say cousinless friends. People who lacked contact with cousins as children but know that such relatives exist sometimes seek them out in later years, either to satisfy their own need for a sense of family or to provide a larger family circle for their own children.

With many of today's young couples deciding to have one child or none, that invaluable resource, that multicousin pool, may be in danger of drying up. And even if the birthrate holds steady or rises again, as some experts predict, the high divorce and separation rates—to say nothing of the physical distances that separate even the closest-knit of families—make the prospects dim for future cousinly togetherness.

I feel lucky to be in the last American generation to have the luxury of "picking and choosing" among these semi-siblings—separate enough to have an exotic appeal, yet bound to us through powerful bonds of heredity and heritage.

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