

For Better or Worse

by Bridie Flanigan

In some ways, I think of myself as very different from the rest of my family. They're all Type A, highly motivated, workaholics, and I pick a new hobby to drop everything for once a week. But, in some ways, I see the familial resemblance: we're passionate people with poor volume control who, if possible, would have potatoes with every meal. In my experience, I know that families have an impact on personal identity, in little ways like these and in way more important ones. For better or worse.

In "The Party" by Margaret Kimball, Margaret (or "Margi") describes a time when as a sophomore in high school, she threw a party to become more connected at her school. Her father and new stepmother saw this party as a way to smooth over tensions between Margi and her stepmother and be seen as a more "normal" family. Unfortunately, Margi and her parents had very different visions of what the party would look like. Margi's father worked to shut down the drinking and smoking that she had been encouraging, and the party was unsuccessful for all involved.

Margi's identity was influenced by her family because when her home life was chaotic and unconventional, it was reflected in the rest of her life, and how she saw herself. Her family was struggling to appear "normal," and to "fit in," and in her school life, Margi was doing the same thing. Even though Margi and her parents had different ideas for how the party would go, in a way, they all were looking for the same thing. Near the end of the story, Margi said about her father, "Why didn't my dad just shut down the party after the first drink was poured? The stakes were so high. He was holding onto some kind of rope" ("The Party"). Margi's parents

were grasping at straws, and as a direct result (the way I see it), so was she. Because she didn't see her family as normal or functional, she didn't think that she could be either.

I know what it's like, to feel like you're not enough, or you're not who you're supposed to be. For parts of middle and high school, I was in a really difficult mental place. And because of that, I had trouble with things at home. My motivation was low, and my judgement was poor, so I made a lot of mistakes. I forgot things, I lost track of what I was supposed to do, and I did things that I wasn't. Nothing horrible or illegal or anything, just things my mom said I couldn't. Like, I wasn't allowed to have my phone in my room at night, but I was caught sneaking it multiple times. I wasn't allowed to have games on my phone (because I tend to spend too much time on them when I do), but I would download them anyway. Because these things were so minor, and by many people's standards, not bad at all, I wouldn't have felt bad about them in any other context. But knowing that I let my mom down completely crushed me, every time it happened. To me, she represented everything I was supposed to be, but wasn't. So, if she was disappointed in me, the WORLD was disappointed in me. And I was disappointed in myself. When I look back at the lowest points of my life, I realize that from an outside perspective, it probably seemed like I wasn't doing too bad at all. My grades dropped, but by "dropped," I mean they went from A's to B's. My stuff was always a mess, but what teenager's stuff isn't? But, because I lived in a house with the highest expectations, I had the highest expectations for myself. It's not an inherently negative thing: I think I have my family's expectations to thank for much of my academic and personal success. But I didn't always see it that way, and I didn't always have reason to. When you're already struggling, that kind of pressure can be way too much. It took me years to learn how to manage the pressure (and not blow it out of proportion).

In my mind, Margi's experience was the same as mine, just in the opposite direction. Her family was dysfunctional and struggled to fit in, so she saw herself as someone flawed, who had to work to fit in. My parents strived for perfection, so I demanded the same thing of myself. Our families impact our identity because when we see ourselves, we tend to look through their eyes. Even my most honest perspective of who I am largely has to do with how my family sees me, and sees us as a unit. Families impact identity, because they impact how we see ourselves, and who we allow ourselves to be.

There's no such thing as a "perfect family." As much as we love them, I don't think there's a person on Earth who feels nothing but excitement when on their way to Thanksgiving dinner. But families, no matter how you define them, have a huge impact on identities that cannot be understated. For better or for worse.

Works Cited

"The Party: A Comic by Margaret Kimball." *Believer Magazine*, 15 June 2021, believermag.com/the-party/.