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The More the Merrier

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"THE MORE THE MERRIER?"

My family is very loving toward one another and enjoys meeting together. There are times, however, that I grimace when I hear the news of the clan gathering for dinner. For this not only means my three brothers and two sisters coming but their thirteen children coming also, three babies included. The ultimate result of our family get-togethers is confusion and disorder.

Before the first child steps inside the door, the house is clean; no dishes, no dust, and the countertop is spotless. I savor the silence until I hear my brother's car doors slam four times. I sound the alarm to my parents: "Here they are!" The door opens, its windows rumbling, and a myriad of tiny feet step on our metal threshold making grinding, high-pitched scraping noises. "Hello, we're here!" a child calls, while racing three others up the thirteen steps to our kitchen. My mother, "gramma," fights to get hugs and kisses from the squirming grandchildren. Only the girls, a ten-year-old and a one-year-old, will accept the love without making a fuss. After five minutes, a toy box has been emptied and scattered on the livingroom floor, jackets have been tossed on the couch, and two-teary-eyed, red-faced boys have already clunked heads together in a game they were playing downstairs. After awhile my sister and her five arrive. Bit by bit, as each family enters, the noise level rises to the point where grown-ups must talk louder and louder to make themselves heard until all conversation seems hardly worth the effort.

The next major event, other than the arrival of the families, is the project of getting everyone to the table: a difficult task for gramma. She calls, "dinner time," at least twice before anyone hears her. Then it takes about ten minutes to coax the children from their games and get all the people in their appropriate places. Once seated at the table, grampa says prayer. Every child must then be "dished up" by the nearest grown-up. They must have a little of everything—even SPINACH. After this task is done, there is a thirty minute interval where noise diminishes as children play with their food, slouch, and put their elbows on the table. Halfway through the meal gramma stops getting extra forks and spoons and stops heating gravy enough to join us at the table. Mothers with crying babies go hungry until they are sure their children have had enough to eat. After grampa reads a chapter of the Bible, babies' faces are wiped with a warm washcloth, and the table dismisses haphazardly.

The next project is kitchen clean-up, a chore usually done by two, oftentimes by one, me, and sometimes by no one. Clearing the table alone is a job in itself. Plates must be gathered and stacked to be washed. Some are already licked clean. Most have gruesome-looking leftovers on them. Silverware, three times the number of plates, must be collected along with glasses. The person with his hands in the water does the dishes while the other helper puts the food away in different containers of which the tops can never be found. After the dishes have been washed and dried, the stove must be scrubbed and the countertop must be washed of globs of this and that. The process of cleaning the kitchen usually takes two hours.

Next, there is an interlude where the grown-ups can talk among themselves after having told the children to go outside and play. Pie and coffee is often served at this time, and with the exception of snatching a marble from a baby's fist or changing a dirty diaper or two, it is almost relaxing.

Last of all, comes the time for everyone to pack up and leave. That is, leave at least ten articles they should be taking. The children are called and dressed to go. Some look half-heartedly for misplaced shoes and boots. One by one the families say goodbye. It is then time for me to straighten pictures on the wall, put toys back in the toy box, and create a lost and found.

In conclusion, as much as I love to have my family get together for a day, some enjoyment is robbed by confusion and disorder. Perhaps when the children grow up, instead of saying, "Two's company, three's a crowd," I will be saying, "The more the merrier."

JODIE GITCHEL