

# Fun<sup>o</sup> <sup>the</sup> Whole Family

*A Novel*



**Jennifer E. Smith**

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# Fun for the Whole Family

*A Novel*

JENNIFER E. SMITH



Ballantine Books  
New York

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Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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Hardback ISBN 9780593358306

Ebook ISBN 9780593358313

[randomhousebooks.com](https://www.randomhousebooks.com)

*Book design by Virginia Norey, adapted for ebook*

Cover design: Elena Giavaldi

Cover illustration: Christopher Silas Neal

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For Declan

There's no such thing as fun for the whole family.

—JERRY SEINFELD

# Michigan

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1997

BY THE TIME THEY ACQUIRED a map, they were already seventeen states in. They'd never bothered to count before—not really, not officially—though they each had their own way of keeping track. Gemma had a leather pouch full of rocks, one from every place they'd been. Connor kept a journal, scribbling his observations as the country scrolled by unseen out the window. The twins, Roddy and Jude, collected snow globes. But there had never been any formal way of marking their progress, of ticking off states as they saw them.

That all changed when Jude discovered the map at a yard sale, propped up against a grim-faced old rocking horse. It was enormous, almost bigger than she was, with the world's ugliest red frame and a tear that went from the Florida Panhandle all the way to Oklahoma. She didn't care. She enlisted Roddy to carry it back with her, the two of them stopping every few feet along the gravel edge of the road to adjust their grip on the heavy frame.

At home, they burst into the kitchen, two proud fishermen hauling in their catch. Their dad was at work—was always at work—but Gemma and Connor were there, and they looked up from their homework to stare first at the threadbare map, then at the twins. For a moment, Jude worried she'd miscalculated. That it was a terrible idea. That nobody else would understand.

But of course they did. Connor hurried over to help them set it on the table; Gemma disappeared upstairs and returned a few minutes later with a box of colorful thumbtacks. They set to work, recalling stories, arguing over memories—that diner where Roddy spilled a milkshake, was that in Vermont

or New Hampshire? was it last August or the one before that they saw that black bear in upstate New York?—and when they were done, they stood back to admire their handiwork. There was a smattering of pins along the East Coast, the rest arranged like a fist around Lake Michigan. Seventeen in all.

Proof of what they'd seen.

Proof that she'd been there too.

They stared at the map, each examining it for their own kind of evidence. Gemma's eyes ran over the blocky states in the western half of the country as she tried to guess where she might be now. Connor was remembering the time he'd gotten carsick on a highway in Kentucky and she pulled over to rub his back, whispering stories about her adventures as his brother and sisters slept. Roddy wondered if she'd show up again this August; it always felt like a magic trick when it happened, but magic wasn't all that reliable, so it seemed best to keep his expectations low.

Only Jude was looking at the box of thumbtacks.

To her, it felt like a promise.

More.

There would be more.

# Gemma

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## *Illinois*

2025

It's been three years since Gemma has seen any of her siblings, three years since they've exchanged anything more than the occasional polite text, but somehow, she'd always known that when one of them finally got in touch for real, it would be to ask for something. She'd also known that—no matter how many times she'd told herself otherwise—she wouldn't be able to refuse.

The text arrives just after five A.M. in Chicago, which means it's three A.M. in Los Angeles, though Jude could be anywhere right now. Gemma is already awake; she sits up in bed, her heart beating fast. Beside her, Mateo shifts in his sleep, upsetting the dog, who gives him an indignant look. She stares at the phone, her sleep-deprived brain trying to make sense of the words: Meet me in North Dakota this weekend?

Behind the curtains, the night is punctuated by streetlamps, and Gemma blinks into the semidarkness, thinking: *North Dakota?* and then: *Jude*.

*Jude.*

She gets out of bed and walks quietly into the kitchen, phone in hand. The dog, Waffles, follows her, a mop of an animal, shaggy and smelly and not terribly smart. Gemma reaches for the coffeepot automatically, then remembers she's not allowed to have any caffeine right now. She glances over at the counter, which is crowded with vials of saline and packets of syringes, prenatal vitamins and pages of instructions from the fertility clinic. In the fridge there's more, the bottles of medication stacked neatly alongside the ketchup and the mayo and the expired jar of applesauce.



Gemma had never expected to find herself here, forty-three years old and still not totally sure she wants to be a mom, even as she waits to find out if their first round of IVF has worked. She'd always assumed she'd have figured it out by now, that she'd have enough distance from her childhood to know either way. Instead, she's continued to inch through this process with alarming ambivalence, first the months of medication to boost her numbers, then the three unsuccessful rounds of IUI, and now this: a single embryo, which will either stick or it won't, which will either turn her into a mom or not. She wishes she knew which she was hoping for.

When she looks up again, Mateo is standing in the doorway of their tiny kitchen with evident bewilderment. "What time is it?" he asks as he stoops to pet the dog, who promptly flips onto her back, gazing up at him adoringly. She might've belonged to Gemma first, but from the minute Mateo came into their lives, over a decade ago, she's had eyes only for him.

"I got a text from Jude," Gemma says, and Mateo straightens, looking surprised.

It's not as if she hasn't spoken to her siblings at all in the three years since their fight. But if anyone ever reached out, it was usually Gemma, whose job it had always been to keep them together. In spite of everything, she sent birthday cards and texts on holidays and congratulatory emails when she read something interesting about any of the other three in the news, which had been happening with increasing regularity. Sometimes she got something in return: a thanks! or a you too or simply a hollow-feeling xo. But usually she didn't.

"Wow," Mateo says, raising his eyebrows. "What did she say?"

"You wouldn't believe it."

"I'd believe just about anything when it comes to your sister," he says, his accent like music, her all-time favorite song. He walks over to give her a kiss, lingering for a moment in case she needs more. But she feels too fragile right now. Behind her, the sun is beginning to stream through the window above the sink, and the old man in the townhouse next door is playing the same tuneless rendition of "Heart and Soul" he does every morning. For years,

Gemma had thought about complaining, but then she ran into him in the courtyard one day and he told her how his late wife used to play the other half, the two of them side by side at their old piano, and she's since grown to love it. Even if it's badly off key.

Mateo grabs his favorite mug, the one with the Brazilian football logo on it, and starts to make coffee with an apologetic look. But Gemma's mind is elsewhere.

"She wants me to meet her in North Dakota," she tells him.

He laughs, then realizes she's serious. "Oh."

"This weekend."

"Oh," he says again, setting down the mug, clearly searching for the right thing to say. "Have you ever been?"

"To North Dakota?" Gemma says with a frown. "No."

"I thought you went everywhere as kids."

"Not everywhere," she says, thinking about their childhood map, the thirty-two states they'd marked off with pushpins before everything had fallen apart so abruptly the night of the fire in Texas. It's been a while since she's bothered to tally up her official number, to count all the states she's seen in the years since those breathless road trips with their mother, on travels with friends and adventures with Mateo, summer vacations and business trips to marketing conferences in random cities. If she had to guess, she'd say that maybe she's been to forty or so by now. But mostly she's lost track. They all have. Or at least that's what she thought.

"Maybe she's filming something," Mateo says, and then—trying and failing to sound casual—he adds, "Do you think you'll go?"

His eyes flick to her stomach, and the look on his face is so hopeful it could break her heart if she let it. She shakes her head.

"No," she says. "Don't worry."

"I'm not worried," he says with a too-quick smile, but she knows that's not true, and she feels a stab of guilt because it's her fault they're here. From the moment they met, Mateo was ready to be a dad. Everything about him fits the part, from his periodic table sweatshirt to his corny jokes to the way

his sixth-grade science students adore him. This had always been their plan eventually, to have kids, but it was Gemma who insisted on waiting, hoping something would tip her into feeling ready too; at first it was just a couple years, and then more, until nearly a decade had slipped by, and the question mark she'd been carrying around inside her all that time stopped mattering as much as the unforgiving fact of her biology.

Sometimes she can't help feeling jealous of Mateo's certainty. But it's easier for him. He grew up in a wealthy suburb of São Paulo, in a house with two loving parents and a protective older brother, an abundance of riches as far as Gemma is concerned. Her childhood was something different altogether. Until she was twelve, she and her younger siblings had a mom like any other. Frankie Endicott was maybe a little more scattered than most, a little less reliable, but she still managed to brush their hair and pack their lunches and give them baths before bed most nights. Then one day, she sent the four of them off to school with hugs and kisses, and when they came home that afternoon, they found a tuna casserole in the fridge with a note explaining that she would be gone for a while.

That was May. She didn't return again until August—and then, only long enough to whisk them off on the first of those summer road trips. But already, she didn't seem like their mom anymore. Already, she seemed more like a stranger.

Their dad, Paul, worked long and unusual hours as a feeder driver for UPS, and so it was Gemma who became responsible for making grilled cheese and forging permission slips and walking the twins to school, for making sure Connor didn't stay up too late reading and finding Roddy's inhaler before soccer practice and keeping tabs on Jude. It wasn't until years later, when their dad met Liz—a pediatric nurse whose best and worst quality was that she was not their mother—that their home finally regained a semblance of order. But by then, Gemma was nearly out of the house herself. Which meant she'd never really been a kid. Not when her mom was around. Not when she wasn't. Not even when she came back at the end of each

summer to take them on those freewheeling adventures, crisscrossing the country in great lurching strides before depositing them back at their dad's.

Especially not then.

Across the kitchen counter, Mateo is still watching her with an anxious expression. "I know we're talking about Jude here," he says very gently. "So if you feel like you need to—"

"I'm not going," Gemma tells him, because today is Tuesday, the fourth day of February, which means that in exactly five days she's meant to take a pregnancy test—and while she has no idea which way it will go, no idea what she's even hoping for at this point, she does know that she'd rather not be in North Dakota when she finds out. She shakes her head. "This is so typical. You can't disappear for three years and then out of nowhere just..." She trails off, her throat suddenly thick, and blinks a few times. "I'm not going. I can't."

Mateo frowns. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," she says firmly.

"Okay," he says, and then he brightens. "You've got plans this weekend anyway."

"I do?"

"Yeah, it's only the biggest event of the sixth-grade academic calendar."

"Right," she says with a faint smile. "The science fair."

He runs a hand along his rapidly balding head. "We've got to see whether Beatrice W's potato ends up with more hair than I have at this point."

Gemma walks over and kisses him lightly on the cheek. "It might, but you'll still be cuter," she says, and he grins. "I'm gonna run out for some milk."

Mateo opens the fridge and points inside. "We have plenty."

"Then I'm going for a walk," she says, already disappearing into their bedroom to get dressed.

Outside, it's unseasonably warm for February in Chicago, even at this early hour. The air still smells of rain from last night's storm, and in the distance, the sunrise is reflected in the flashing silver of the skyline. Gemma feels a deep fondness for all of it: the elevated train rumbling by, the old