

*'The Road meets Nightbitch meets What to Expect When You're Expecting'*

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EMMA  
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TILT



# TILT

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**THE BOROUGH PRESS**

The Borough Press an imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd  
1 London Bridge Street  
London SE1 9GF

[www.harpercollins.co.uk](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk)

First published by HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd 2025

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A catalogue copy of this book is available from the British Library.

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Source ISBN: 9780008667702

eBook Edition © March 2025 ISBN: 9780008667726

Version: 2025-02-24

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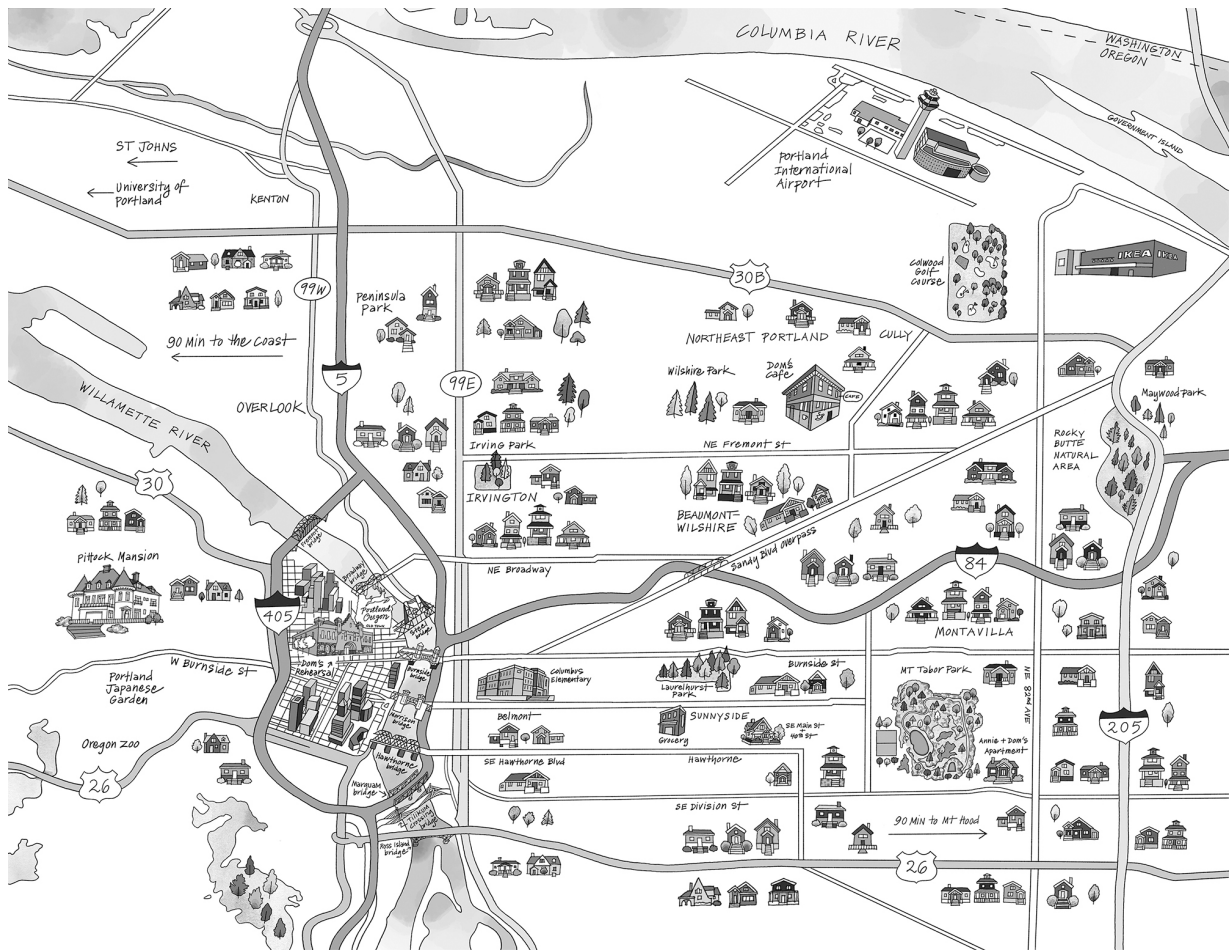
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For Sarah and Stuart



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## LATE MORNING

### *IKEA, NE Portland*

So here we are, thirty-seven weeks pregnant, at IKEA.

Picture me, Bean, if you can picture anything inside of there. My belly distended, a blimp exiting sideways out of my body. I walk in stiff little jerky motions like a stork. Grip on to stair railings. Every few minutes, I have to press my hands against my lower back to stop my spine from breaking in half. I look so disturbing that I make the other shoppers nervous; they watch me from the corner of their eyes to see what I'll do next. They stop me to say things like, *Bet you're ready for this to be over*, or *You look like you're about to pop!*

And IKEA. On a weekday. Dear god. Another reminder that I'm officially unimportant. Only the old people and college students and bartenders shop for furniture on a Monday. And of course the other pregnant ladies. Milling in the crib section like hungry alligators.

I'm wearing a lavender linen romper and Birkenstocks. The kind of thing I would see pregnant women on Instagram wearing and think, *Over my dead body*. The kind of outfit that takes the EDGE off, that says, *I am no longer into fucking, I am now a mother. Please speak to me only in high pitches*. But it turns out, Bean, that maternity clothes cost just as much as real clothes. And we still haven't paid off the bill the clinic sent me for my last ultrasound. So now I wear whatever hand-me-down maternity outfit I can get on Buy Nothing or at the thrift shop. Today: the lavender romper.

I've been standing in the kids section for at least an hour, trying to decide between the different crib mattresses, because of course a crib does not come

with a mattress, what was I thinking? That you were going to sleep directly on the wood? So now I'm googling the difference between a spring mattress and a foam mattress, and Google tells me that it can be worth it to spend the extra money on an organic crib mattress, because toxins cause cancer, and if you're going to get a foam mattress, make sure it's made without polyurethane, but of course IKEA does not list on their website what kind of foam their crib mattresses are made of, or if they do I can't find it, and I'm looking for somebody in a yellow shirt to help me, but they've all vanished.

Your father and I sleep on a mattress we got on Craigslist, a mattress we dragged together through the dingy hallway of a dingy apartment building in North Portland, after handing some creepy guy \$80 in cash. "Queen bed for my queen," your father said when we finally managed to squeeze it into the back of our car.

It's not just our shitty mattress, Bean. It's everything. Your father, Dom, is thirty-eight, still trying to get that big role. Still standing in line to audition. Still sending his headshots to casting agents. Still picking up shifts at the cafe that he's worked at since we first met. Your mother—Annie, speaking—thought she was destined to be the next Tennessee Williams, the millennial Beckett, wasted hours practicing that big, sweeping bow she'd do under those big Broadway lights, and is now thirty-five and spends her days staring at spreadsheets on a computer screen on the twenty-second floor of a glass building, pressing buttons with her fingers. Last I checked, your father and I have \$836 in a checking account at Wells Fargo, a Subaru with 160,000 miles on it, and a two-bedroom apartment by Mount Tabor we can only afford because the landlord feels too guilty to raise our rent or kick us out. And here I am, thirty-seven weeks pregnant at IKEA. On a Monday. With a credit card I'll probably die before I pay off.

What I'm trying to say is that nothing, nothing about the first year of your life, will look like the years that come after, so enjoy your toxin-free mattress while you can.

I decide on the most expensive crib. A rule of the universe, Bean: the most expensive option is always the best bet. I'm reaching for a crib sheet dotted

with gender-neutral penguins when a little boy runs around the corner of the aisle and bumps straight into my belly.

“Spencer!” his mother hisses, and then to me, “So sorry.” Her eyes are flat and dark and they don’t move with her mouth. The boy wipes his bangs out of his eyes and stares straight into my stomach as if he is making eye contact with you. He doesn’t look sorry at all. “Spencer,” his mother says again, all snap and spit. But this kid is gonzo, totally spaced-out. He reaches out his little hand and puts it on my belly.

“There’s a baby in there,” Spencer says, in that profound way little kids say shit. His mom has gotten a hold of him now and she yanks him to the side like he’s a sheet on a clothesline. *I’m sorry*, she mouths. Like her sorriness is a secret we moms share between ourselves.

Your kid is a weirdo, I want to tell her. But I force myself to smile and shake my head, like it’s no big deal, like I just can’t get enough of little Spencer, because I’m clearly ABOUT TO BE A MOTHER so I must LIKE KIDS. I mean, what do I know? Maybe you’re a total weirdo too, and I’ll chase you around stores with my eyes all dark and tired, mouthing *so sorry so sorry* to everyone we see.

And then of course the crib isn’t there. AISLE 8, BIN 31. An empty rack. No crib. So now I’m standing at the customer service desk, pleading with the disinterested girl in the yellow shirt, who keeps telling me there are three cribs left in stock.

“The rack is empty,” I say.

“You’re sure it was bin thirty-one?”

I nod. “I checked it twice.”

“Aisle eight?” She looks at me like I am the sixth-dumbest person she’s ever encountered. Her hair is cut in a sharp bob on one side, so blonde it is white; on the other side, her head is shaved. She has long acrylic nails painted in pink cheetah print that she keeps clicking against the desk.

“Aisle eight.”

“The system says there should be three. Must be in someone’s cart already.” She shrugs and turns around, dismissing me. On the back of her

yellow shirt is Hej! in big blue letters.

Of course. Of course your crib is in someone else's cart. The one time I'm able to make a decision, the one time I actually can get it together to do THE RIGHT THING, to drive all the way here and heave myself up the stairs and down the stairs, and now when your father gets home from the cafe, there won't be a newly built crib in your nursery, there will just be an empty room.

"When will you get more in stock?"

"It could be weeks," the girl says. "They come from, like, China." As if I didn't know that. As if I thought an egalitarian middle-aged Swedish man was sitting in a workshop sanding my fucking crib.

"I don't have weeks." This is the moment where I'm supposed to nod and say thank you and shuffle off. I know that. I'm not stupid.

"That's why we recommend buying cribs and other nursery items as early as possible, to avoid stock issues like this." Her foundation is thick and slightly orange, and when I look closely, I can see the sponge lines streaking softly across her cheeks.

Oh, give me a break. Like I've spent the last nine months just lying around eating croissants and coming up with baby names.

"We do have other crib models in stock." I swear to god she smirks at me. How old is she? Twenty-two?

"Is there someone you can call? Like a manager I can talk to? Who could triple-check?" I need that crib. You are meant to have that crib.

She sighs heavily. "Okay, umm, how about I go take another look," she says. "Just in case."

"It's the birch one ..." My palms are sweaty against the edge of the desk. If I don't hold on tight, I might just slide off and fall onto the ground. Never get up again.

"I know which one."

"With the rails."

"Yes, I'm familiar," she says, all snippy. "Just wait right here." She walks away, leaving me standing, swaying, against the customer service desk. *No fucking rush*, I want to scream at her yellow back.

JUST WAIT, starts off every piece of advice that anyone gives a pregnant woman.

You're tired now? Just wait.

You're anxious and scared now? Just wait.

You think you've felt love? Just wait.

As if there is another choice.

Now you're banging on me like a drum, and my hunger is little knives stabbing into me. I'm starving, and not just for any food, but a \$1.50 IKEA cinnamon roll. Once I get your crib, I'm going to reward myself with one. Or maybe four. That thick fake crusty icing. I won't even wait until I get home, just sit in the car and eat all four. Lick the icing off my fingers.

My feet are starting to pulse, which is always a bad sign. In the past month, my feet have inflated. Slowly, night after night, they have grown rounder and rounder. I adjusted the straps of my Birkenstocks wider, and then wider, and now they are as wide as they'll go, and my feet still ooze through the straps like pudding.

Why did I come here, Bean? My mother told me when I was a baby, she used to put me to sleep in a plastic laundry basket next to her in bed. She'd put her fingers through the little windows and I'd catch hold of them.

I'm suddenly so tired. And lonely. I want to be home.

Home where I'm going to open the fridge door and every-thing inside will bore me, where I'll close the fridge door and see a list written on the back of a ripped envelope that says *BEFORE BABY*, and nothing will be crossed off. Where I'll go lie on the couch and be unable to sleep and end up watching reality TV for hours, where I'll pass by the guest room which is supposed to be your nursery but is really just an empty room with a car seat still in a box.

I pull out my phone to text your father, but I can't think of what to say.

We haven't spoken since last night, since the fight.

What was the fight about?

Everything, Bean. And nothing.

Because all fights are about nothing in the grand scheme of things but then also in the grand scheme of things when taken all together, they tell a

larger story. Like each fight is a star in the sky and now that I've been with your father for a decade or so I can look up at the constellation of all our arguments and see a shape there, clear as day. What shape, Bean? I don't know. I don't want to know. I just look away.

Anyways, our fight: your father got offered a last-minute understudy role in a play, and he wanted to skip work today so he could make rehearsals. And I told him to turn it down, to go to work instead. Because we need the money. And now he's probably standing behind the counter at the cafe where he works. Wishing he was at the rehearsal. Wishing he was in LA. Wishing he was famous. Wishing he was twenty-two again, with his whole life stretching out in front of him.

But maybe when he gets home and sees the crib all new and built in the corner of the nursery, he'll like that. Unless I am too tired to build it by the time I get home, which now seems very likely, in which case I will try to drag it into the house and slide it down the hallway and prop it up against the wall, or even more likely it will still be in the car when he gets home and I will be on the couch with my feet up, and he will be pissed that I did this on my own, that I OVERDID it like I'm not supposed to, and that I didn't even check with him, didn't even take his crib preferences into consideration. He will stand in the living room looking at me on the couch and say, *Seriously? Without me?*

Well, shit.

I rock back and forth from foot to foot.

And then I spot the girl with the yellow shirt. Across the warehouse. She's talking to some old lady holding a bunch of fake potted plants. She's forgotten all about you and me and our crib. Are you kidding me? With her plastic nails and her creepy half-head of white hair. And me waiting here all fat and deflated, like a balloon left behind at a birthday party. I can feel my throat start to swell, my mouth throbbing. I imagine ripping her stupid hair out chunk by chunk. Now my eyes are burning. I bite my lip to make it stop, but it makes it worse. If I stand here one more minute, I'm going to start crying, and nothing is more pathetic than a pregnant lady who cries.

*Take a breath*, my mother says in my head, but it's too late for a breath. I'm right behind the girl and her shirt is screaming at me. Hej!

"Where. Is. My. Crib?" My voice barely sounds like my voice.

A hiss.

The girl looks back, surprised. The old lady hugs her plants closer.

"Huh?" The girl's eyebrows are frozen pencil lines on her forehead.

"My crib, remember?"

I can see the moment the girl remembers me—her eyes narrow, and she holds up a single cheetah-print finger. "I'll be right with you. Please calm down." She turns her back to me.

Calm down. The least calming words ever.

My face is hot, my eyes are throbbing. I see my hand on the girl's yellow sleeve, tugging. Why is my hand there? She starts to pull away from me and I tighten my grip. Then a ripping sound.

*Oh, shit.*

The three of us stand, frozen. Did I really just rip her shirt?

The girl looks down at her sleeve. There's a small rip on the shoulder seam, and she inspects it, sticks one long nail inside. "Jesus, lady," she says, but there's something about her face that looks satisfied.

"I want my crib." I'm too far gone to turn back now.

"I will be right with you," she says with a fake smile, batting her long eyelashes at me. Anger choking me. This fucking girl treating me like I'm nothing, like I'm nobody. Like now that I'm pregnant, I'm just a fucking joke who will wait and wait forever. But I'm done waiting. I lean in to look at her name tag.

"I'd like to speak to your manager."

Her eyes go wide. Yeah that's right. Go smirk all the way home after I get you fired.

"Are you for reals?" She says, "I was literally on my way to check on your crib right now."

I make a dry *ha* sound.

"Let's go then." She motions to me. "Right this way."

Behind us, plant lady is still shaking her head and huffing to herself.

The girl walks fast on purpose; I have to struggle to keep up with her. I can feel the skin of my stomach stretching, my hips grinding like gears in a machine. I can tell she is waiting for me to say something, to try to smooth things over. And, Bean, I know I should apologize. I know I've taken it too far, but I can't apologize now. Once I start being sorry, I'll never stop.

Down AISLE 8 we go, to BIN 31.

And then of course there they are, the cribs. All three of them. Bean, I swear to god, that rack was empty twenty minutes ago.

"What a coincidence," the girl says, practically purring. She makes a show of running her fingernail under the product name. "Yep, that's it. That's the one you're looking for." She grabs an empty cart that somebody left in the aisle and parks it a little too aggressively next to the rack. "You need some help loading that?"

I shake my head. All the fight suddenly gone out of me. I'm so heavy and tired and alone. I should have never come here, should have just ordered a crib off Amazon and stayed home. I put my purse on the cart and start dragging the crib from the rack. I can barely get my arms around the box.

"Sure you don't need a hand?" The girl is still standing there, watching me. As if she gives a shit.

"I've got it." I give the box a hard yank and it knocks into my belly.

"I'm just trying to help." She raises her hands up in front of her, like I have a gun.

"I've got it." My sandal straps are digging so deeply into my feet I swear I can feel my flesh splitting.

"Okay, whoa," she says, reaching for the edge of the box, which is teetering half off the rack. Her ridiculous nails scrape on the cardboard.

"Let go," I whisper-scream at her. "I'm fine!"

I start to rock the box violently back and forth, shimmying it onto the cart. So sweaty and swollen. I can't breathe in this building, under all these bright lights. The sharp corner of the crib keeps banging into you, into my belly, but

I can't stop now, I don't have any time to be careful, I need to get home, I need to get this all over with ...

And then a sudden jolt.

For one split second, there is movement on both sides of my skin. You, on the inside, giving me the most powerful kick, and on the outside, everything shifting. Then it stops.

I look down at my stomach. What was that? The girl in the yellow shirt looks scared.

"... the fuck?" she says.

At the end of the aisle, in the center of the warehouse, people are paused behind carts. One man drops a rolled-up rug and starts to run towards the exit. I see an older couple stop and look up at the ceiling. Animal fear travels body to body, cell to cell. We all hold our breath at once.

Then the shaking begins.

## 17 YEARS AGO

How did we get here, Bean? You and me, IKEA, Monday morning, AISLE 8, BIN 31, hand on metal rack, eyes wide in fear, body tensed like a firecracker about to explode?

I guess you'd have to start with this morning, when I woke up next to your father and my back hurt and my hips hurt and I thought, *Oh shit, I'm late for work*, and then I realized that I didn't have to go to work. That today was the first day of my maternity leave.

Or maybe before that, maybe last year, when your father and I decided—if “decided” is even the right verb for such a vague fumbling, our specialty, as you'll come to see, a type of passive groping around at adulthood—to have a kid. Or maybe before that, years before, when my mother went to bed with the flu and just never woke up, or even before that, in my early twenties, when a play that I had written was being produced and it was the first day of rehearsals and there was a man standing onstage and that man was your father. Maybe before that, and I'm a freshman at NYU and I'm standing on the street corner outside my dorm and I'm talking to my mom on the phone and I'm trying to explain that art school is not what I thought it would be, that whatever shape of human it is meant for, I am not cut out in that particular shape.

Yes, let's start there. It's November 2008, I'm eighteen. It's eight or nine at night, earlier on the West Coast, and my mother is driving home from her job as a housekeeping manager at a DoubleTree. I'm standing on the sidewalk, in the rain, in the sad no-brand boots my mom bought me from Walmart that she didn't realize had no chance in a New York winter. In the doorway behind me, a body sleeps in a pile of blankets. My cell phone is so

cold against my ear that I have to keep pulling it away and then putting it back again. The battery is down to 12 percent but I don't care—I've been waiting all day for this phone call.

My mom is explaining to me that she does not have enough money to buy me a flight home for Thanksgiving. And I'm explaining to her that, yes, I understand money is tight, I understand that every penny she had went into my tuition bill, but if I can't come home for Thanksgiving, I will slide into a dark pit of loneliness that I may never escape from.

"There's gotta be other kids staying at school over the holidays," she says. And how do I explain to my mother that the kids I am going to school with are so rich, so excruciatingly polished, that they look at me like I'm a coyote who has wandered in from upstate. My mother grew up in Pendleton, Oregon. Her parents ran a bowling alley. My mother has never been to New York. My mother thinks I'm the most talented eighteen-year-old in the country. She thinks I'm going to be the next Shakespeare, not because she has ever read anything by Shakespeare but because she doesn't know any other playwrights. How do I tell my mother that the other day in Drama Lab 101, I sat next to a boy who had already written and produced a short film that had "made the festival circuit"? How do I tell my mother this?

"Mom." I am crying now, my breath making little huffs in the New York air.

"You'll be home for Christmas in less than a month."

It's hard to get the words out. "I don't think I can make it that long." The rain fractures the headlights of yellow cabs that speed by, splashing water onto the sidewalk. Two girls sharing an umbrella jump back, laughing. I tuck myself into the shadows against the building. Wipe my tears away with icy fingers. "Annie," my mother says. "Annie." I can hear her turning the keys in the front door of her apartment, throwing her purse and coat down on the couch. "C'mon, honey." She thinks I'm just homesick. She thinks this is just about being somewhere new. And it is. But it's not missing home that's making me sick, it's being in New York. It's the way the kids already know everything—all the subway lines, all the shows—like a language I can't