

Honey, I Hate It

The place: The IKEA store in Stoughton, Massachusetts. No matter what preconception you have of how big it is, it's bigger. Its address is One Ikea Way; its phone number is 344-IKEA; it flies its own flags out front. It is not so much a retail store as it is a small, pleasant independent republic — one with humane social services, nicely designed recreational facilities, and a government founded on the principle that people like to buy stuff.

10:01 Two parents with a baby and a toddler cast a wistful glance at Småland, the daycare center located just inside the store entrance. Småland's admission criteria — which these kids clearly don't meet — are spelled out on signs: "ALL CHILDREN BETWEEN 37" AND 54" ARE WELCOME TO PLAY HERE!" and "ONLY POTTY TRAINED CHILDREN ADMITTED TO SMÅLAND."

10:04 Three women stand at the top of the escalator, puzzling over a store map and talking past one another. "We take a left and then we go down this way — "

"But what floor are we on?"

"Is the floor we came in on the ground floor?"

"So are we on two?"

"Because I want to go downstairs, eventually."

The map resembles a board game (the game of "Life," actually), with a circulation path curving back and forth within a square labyrinth. Despite a few shortcuts indicated on the floor plan, you have to journey past pretty much everything in the store in order to find your way out again.

10:10 A couple in their 30s walk into a living-room vignette where a TV is playing an IKEA informational video in Spanish. The bookshelf is full of books in Swedish. It's cozy and small, and there's a price tag on everything. The man sits on a white couch, and the woman lies down,

puts her feet in his lap, and says, "What do you think?"

10:11 The video is now offering helpful shopping hints in English. *Browse all you want. Try things out. Enjoy shopping on your own. No pressure.*

The woman's cell phone rings. She answers it and talks on the phone for a while, holding the man's hand and occasionally kissing it.

10:17 Having finished her phone call and checked her messages, the woman takes her feet off the man's lap and stands up. They begin looking at the couch more critically, pulling off the cushions and peering at the construction. The man checks the price tag. "Three-ninety-nine."

"That's a steal," the woman says. "But we don't want white." She plucks a literature sheet from the display on the coffee table. "Oh, look, sweetie, it comes in other colors."

The video continues to play, with its soothing soundtrack: *It's OK to change your mind.*

10:20 In the living-room vignette across the way, another couple has settled on a couch, the woman drinking coffee and the man typing with his thumbs on a BlackBerry.

10:27 In a section devoted to chairs and couches, a woman and her pre-teen



▲ Photo by Joan Wickersham.

daughter are looking at cushion covers. "These are kind of nice," the mother says.

"They're boring," the daughter says coldly, walking away.

The mother looks after her. "They have to be interesting?"

10:30 "I have a business and I'd be ordering a large number of these love-seats," a woman tells a store employee. "Is there a discount if you buy over a certain amount?"

"No," the salesperson says, polite but unapologetic.

10:32 A large vignette, with "WELCOME TO MY HOME" lettered above the opening. Inside is a compressed simulacrum of a whole house: living room, kitchen with dining area, bathroom, and bedroom, including a baby's crib and changing table. Again, everything has a price tag, from the furniture and appliances to the towels in the bathroom and the hooks they hang from. A woman slumps on a leather sofa. "What do you think of the seat, hon?"

"Too long. Slippery," her husband answers.

Posted on the wall is a small sign specifying the paint color and the floor tiles.

Wandering shoppers peer around in a way that is at once dazed and frantic, like children beginning an Easter-egg hunt.

10:44 Downstairs in housewares a woman pushing a cart that contains a rubber cutting mat, some wooden hangers, and a small desk lamp pauses and asks her husband: “You want dish towels?”
“No, I don’t want dish towels.”

10:47 Two men with two small children are making their way through the kitchen section. “Eli, did I say you could push the cart in here?”

“No,” the little boy says.
“Then don’t push the cart, OK? We’ll be out of the breakables section pretty soon, OK?”

Stopping in front of a display, the other man asks, “Can you think of any good reason why we’d need a rolling storage box?”

11:10 In bedding, a mother with a teenage son is holding a packaged sheet and reading the label. “One Twin Top

Sheet. Is that what we’re assuming these beds are going to be? Regular twin? Or do we need ‘Long?’”

“I don’t know what a top sheet is,” the boy says.

11:16 An announcement over the store’s PA system: “Carts are available at the foot of the stairs. Grab one there . . . because you are going to need it.”

11:27 A man and woman fingering small bathroom rugs. “I’d rather just have carpet,” he says.

“Carpet? What do you mean, carpet?”
He thinks, then says: “I don’t know. I guess, just, carpet.”

“In a *bathroom*?”
He’s apparently made some sort of gaffe, but doesn’t understand what it is. Valiantly, uncertainly, he sticks to his guns. “Yeah.”

She shrugs. “Then *you* find it. *You* pick it out.”

She walks away. He lingers, not sure whether he’s won or lost.

11:38 The aisles are more crowded now. Wandering shoppers, carrying big empty yellow bags from bins labeled “BORROW A BIG YELLOW BAG” peer around in a way that is at once dazed and frantic, like children beginning an Easter-egg hunt.

11:50 The ladies’ room is immaculate and enormous. Lots of stalls, and no line. At the end of a long row of sinks, a miniature washbowl is mounted about 18 inches from the floor, where a little girl slowly washes her hands while her mother diapers the baby on an adjacent changing table. “Go easy on the soap, Jenna.”
“But I like soap.”

12:12 As in the rest of the store, the cafeteria’s aesthetic is bright, unfancy, modern. The menu nods to the store’s Scandinavian origin without belaboring it: along with some basic American choices, you can order Swedish meatballs with lingonberries. There’s also a kids’ menu,

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play area, and baby food warming station, with a microwave, bibs, high chairs, and brightly colored plastic cups and dishes, all items for sale elsewhere in the store.

1:15 The place is jammed with people speaking in many different languages.

1:20 A series of loud, rhythmic bangs. A young boy whose parents are looking at a model kitchen is systematically opening and closing every single drawer in a pair of twelve-drawer sideboards.

1:29 In another model kitchen, a woman opens cabinets and exclaims over the interior fittings. "I like this!"

"A rack," her husband says, willing to recognize a feature but drawing the line at expressing an opinion.

"Nice!" She goes on to the next cupboard. "And look — these slide out."

"A pantry," he says.

"I like it!"

1:40 A middle-aged couple stands in a dark, glamorous model kitchen whose

sandblasted glass cabinet doors glow softly blue from within. "See, we could do this but have the stove over here and then put the sink over there," he says.

"And then this counter would be next to the door into the dining room," she says, sharing the same intent vision of this kitchen superimposed on what they currently have at home.

This particular vignette, with four small round tables, and plentiful racks for glassware and wine bottles, resembles a small café or bar. A sign on the counter reads: "SMALL BUSINESS OWNER! LET YOUR COMPANY SHINE WITH LIGHTING FROM IKEA!"

2:05 People mill around an area featuring all the components of kitchen design — an array of cabinet interiors, doors, and legs; countertops; sinks; hoods; and appliances. There is also a bin of aprons, which some laughing teenagers are throwing at each other. Planning tables with computers allow shoppers to lay out a kitchen floor plan; convert it to a 3-D perspective; and then, in a kind of retail version of BIM,

price out the ramifications of various choices and changes. One couple stands at a computer working through the program with a saleswoman; but most people are just drifting through. A woman trails her hand along a piece of reddish granite countertop. "I think this is what Jane has."

2:20 Lines of people wait for the elevators with full carts, bulging yellow bags, and restless children. Everyone is exhausted. They're headed downstairs to pick up flat-packed furniture from the massive warehouse, or to buy elderflower drink or herring or gingersnaps in the Swedish food market.

Two women collapse on a red leather sofa nearby. "So next let's see about replacing that chandelier. Have I told you how much I hate that chandelier?"

"Oh, yes," the other laughs. "You've told me." ■

Joan Wickersham is a writer in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her new book is *The Suicide Index: Putting My Father's Death in Order* (Harcourt).



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