

# Need

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On this morning, Charlie leaves for work earlier than usual. I think he told me why, but I don't remember. All I can think about is that it's a sign. Today's the day that was meant to be, the day that has been resting quietly, slumbering, in my head. I stand next to the sink, shifting my weight from one leg to the other, as Charlie grasps his lunch sack from the counter and brushes past me, out the back door to the garage. After I hear his car back out of the garage, I walk over and lock the door.

I became pregnant when I was nineteen. It seemed natural, like the correct progression of where our lives together should go. Another child followed just before my twenty-first birthday. Now, at the age of twenty-four, I have three children. I'm not always sure what to do with them. Charlie works long, hard hours. He's a good father—it's just that he's not around much. Sometimes, I stare at the kids a little too long, wondering just what they are. The three of them are thick as thieves, and it feels like I'm an outsider. I think they love me, but how can I really tell? They'll gather in the kitchen, standing on tip toe, looking up at me through

the abnormally long eyelashes they all inherited, waiting for me to dole out juice cups and fistfuls of Cheerios. Is this love? Depending on me for treats? Soon, they'll be old enough to get their own food out of the cupboard. The oldest can almost reach the countertop now. Soon, he can feed himself and them, and then I won't be needed anymore.

About six months ago, I became obsessed with watching water. I would stand in front of the kitchen sink, mesmerized by the *plink plink* of water drops slowly falling from the faucet. I couldn't tear myself away from the teardrops settling on the stainless steel bottom, near the drain, building up into a shallow pool, then slowly easing their way over and down the drain, disappearing. Then I found myself standing outside before dawn each morning, when the automatic sprinklers came on, drenching my perfect green lawn with man-made dewdrops. Charlie noticed my obsession early on. I could tell by the way he'd cock his head and look at me a little too long. Then he'd grab his lunch sack and leave for the base, never saying a word except, "I'll be home around eight." The kids ate their soggy cereal and then plopped down on the rug in front of the TV to watch cartoons. They looked like a den of garter snakes all curled and tangled together. An image of dousing them with the hose to break them up would flash across my mind, but I would overcome the thought and wander off to the kitchen to watch my faucet instead.

When I was younger, I dreamed of becoming a dress designer. I would sketch them on an art pad my father had given me as a birthday present, page after page filled with bold, flowing dresses. Some gathered at the waist to show an hourglass figure, but towards the end of my blank pages I started drawing billowing, shapeless dresses. Looking

back now, it's like I knew what was coming my way—I was designing my own maternity clothes.

I make pancakes in the shape of squares and triangles for the kids and set out strawberry syrup. They sit clustered around each other at the table, their elbows touching as they eat. The youngest one smears strawberry syrup all over her face and neck as she eats. I'll have to give her a bath. While pouring myself another cup of coffee, I look at the other two and decide they need baths, too. I walk down the short hallway to the bathroom, draw the stopper in the tub, and turn the water on. The tub soon starts to fill, and I turn to walk back into the kitchen. All three of them are still eating their pancakes, their little faces not even questioning why they have this treat instead of cereal. I tell them they will need baths before they can continue their morning. No questions, no whining. My little lambs.

I've always had a singular fear of water. As a small child, I can remember fighting bath time, terrified that my mother would hold me under the shallow water level until my eyes slowly closed forever. Then, as I grew older and took swimming lessons with the rest of my grade school class, the fear overtook me completely and I'd tremble while forcing myself to change into my swimsuit in the locker room. I remember it took me weeks just to work up the nerve to stick my feet in the water. I never could ease my body into the water the way all the other kids could do so effortlessly. I'd sit on the edge of the pool, alternating my gaze between the pale blue, chlorinated water circling around my calves and at the kids climbing the steps to the diving board at the deep end. Their yelps and hollers sounded unnaturally gleeful to me, like they were actually enjoying running off the diving board and

tucking their knees up to their chests as they hurled down to the water's surface. I never understood that happy sound they all made. It just didn't make sense to me. After all, why would you be happy falling into something that can kill you?

The oldest, a boy with a perpetual cowlick and the hawkish nose he inherited from his father, follows me into the bathroom. He's due to start kindergarten in a month, but I haven't bothered to register him. I was supposed to do it last month, but something told me to hold off, that it wouldn't be necessary. Like countless times before, he strips out of his pajamas, head down, concentrating on the fuzzy pink bathroom rug. He is a quiet child, but sometimes I find myself staring at him and a jolt of recognition will hit me. I, too, was a quiet child, always living inside my head, creating worlds of imaginary friends; I think he may be a lot like I was all those years ago before what I desired and what I had become were two very different things.

Charlie and I met in the tenth grade. He was my first—and last—boyfriend. I could tell he would take care of me. He opened the car door for me, he sent me bouquets of daisies for no reason, and one day when we were seniors, he proposed to me outside the lunchroom. I said yes. I wanted to be taken care of. Somehow, I knew my dream of becoming a designer wasn't going to be my reality. My reality was to be a wife to Charlie. After high school, he went into basic training and we then went to live on an army base in Mississippi. I was content there. Not happy, but content. I stayed home, cleaning the house, perfecting my pot roast, and planting rose bushes that would surely be another army family's rose bushes one day. It seemed important to me at the time to create a future, even though I knew my life would be one of constant movement.

Three states in seven years. Now we're in Iowa. I know no one but Charlie, but I do find small moments of comfort surrounded by row after row of corn fields, even when I lose my place trying to count them each day when I sneak off to walk alone for a few minutes.

The oldest climbs into the tub and crouches down, hugging his knees against the chilly air. I gently wash his hair and his little body, taking time to scrub the collected dirt from his fingernails and ears. I want him to be clean. I place my hands under his arms, but he thinks I'm going to lift him out of the tub, so he starts to stand. I push him down until his face is under the soapy water.

I towel off and walk back toward the kitchen. The chair with the booster seat lies toppled on the floor, and I can hear what sounds like hurt animals coming from the crack of the cabinet door under the sink. I don't seek out the other two. After the oldest rose to meet his grandparents and all the ancestors who came before, half the weight was lifted from my shoulders. All I need to do is start walking. The sun blinds me as soon as I cross through the back door. I make my way down the gravel road, past corn stalks now ten feet high, toward the farm hidden on the other side of the field. I now know where I am going.

I dream that I am drowning. I have fallen into a pond. Cattails whip my face and arms as I flail around, trying to find my footing so I can climb out. Putrid green algae is in my hair, eyes, and mouth. I keep trying to wipe it away, but I just smear more on me. My foot slips off a submerged, slippery rock and I sink below the water's surface. It's dark and cloudy under the water. I see light shimmering above my head. I should just be able to stand up again and break the line

between water and sky, but I can't. My legs won't straighten, as hard as I try. I can't hold my breath any longer. I gulp water, feeling it fill my lungs, weighing me down more. Charlie's face suddenly appears before me. His eyes are searching mine. All he says is: "Why didn't you come to me with your problems?" I don't answer. I just close my eyes and sink down to the bottom of the shallow pond.