

The Interlopers

Cassie sat in the front seat of the old family golf cart. The roof provided shade, but there were no walls or air conditioning. She had a red plastic radio with her. The music radiated a few feet in front of her before it got snuffed by the heat. It was hot, radiantly, deeply hot, the cored-out inner pit of summer. Cassie tapped her foot along to the beat.

The air a few yards in front of her shimmered and shook. She looked at her watch. Four forty-five. Pretty typical. Smooth, like a slice already cut, the air opened and one of the Interlopers stepped out. He was tall, taller than any human, around fifteen or sixteen feet. Some of them got even taller. His body was long, with no discernible features except for its outlines. He was wearing a suit with sharply pressed corners and peaked shoulders; he looked like a drawing scribbled in someone's notes. Cassie recognized him. He came around here often, sometimes with a shorter, fatter friend. Cassie reached into the glove compartment for the registry and held it out to him. He rummaged in his pockets, the sides of his body giving way to his hand like fabric, and pulled out his stamp. He leaned over, his torso bending like a slip of

paper, and pressed the stamp into the registry. When he got close, Cassie felt a faint fuzz on her skin, like touching an old TV screen.

“Thank you,” said Cassie. The Interloper tilted his head in acknowledgment and headed past her, the particles of his body moving against each other like black and white static. The sound of Cassie’s radio made the particles vibrate in time. Carly Rae Jepsen was playing. Cassie took a drink from a crumpled plastic water bottle. The water tasted warm and metallic.

She looked at her watch again. Five o’clock. The sun wouldn’t set for hours still, a hole scored fierce and snake-dry into the sky. Still, her parents didn’t like her to be out much later than this. These wide-open stretches of space, a fifteen-year-old girl alone in them—it didn’t sit well, though she was probably safer here than a lot of places. Out here it was only their family, a few scattered houses, the gas station, and the corner store where you could get lottery tickets, Juul pods, and packaged hotdogs. The next town was ten miles away, a drive they took every day to get to school but only once or twice a week in summer. Cassie screwed the cap back on her water bottle and put the cart in drive.

At home, her mother, Winona, was flicking through a magazine. Dinner was on the stove. Cassie put her radio upstairs and took a shower. She came down with her hair still wet and kissed Winona; a drop of water from her hair landed on the magazine. Winona hummed.

“Set the table, please.” She turned a page. “Anything good out there?”

“The tall one,” said Cassie, stretching to reach the cabinets. “You know, with the suit?”

“Mm,” said Winona. “And his stuck-up friend.”

“He wasn’t there today. How do you know he’s stuck-up?”

“You can just tell.”

Cassie heard Andrew's footsteps on the stairs. He never kept track of anything—shoes, clothes, homework—but he had an innate sense of time; he rounded the table with three minutes to spare. He grabbed the silverware Cassie had left out for him and they walked around the table, Cassie placing the cups, Andrew angling the knives. Winona took the pot off the stove, pulling her hair out of the cream-colored kerchief she wore. A few sweat-hazed locks curled across her face, her skin pinkened by the heat of the oven. She had deep, thick-lashed eyes and clear skin. She wore brick-colored lipstick that melted and shone in the heat. There was a hint of age in her, sun spots freckling her arms, the emergent bones of her fingers, but she was still a young mother, a mother of children. She poured water from a pitcher as Cassie and Andrew served themselves.

“I thought we might go get school supplies on Sunday,” she said. “The lists came today from Andrew's teachers. Cassie, you need some new binders, don't you?”

Cassie nodded, her mouth full, and reached for her glass of milk. Andrew dug in the pot for another ladle of beans. Winona smiled at him.

“I can't believe it's going to be your first day of eighth grade,” she said.

Andrew nodded; he was chewing. He had dark hair and big, lovely eyes with lashes like Winona's. He was twelve—he had skipped a grade—and the points of his knees and knuckles protruded where the rest of him hadn't winnowed out yet. He blinked often. Outside, the light was changing. The sunset streaked orange and pool-blue across the horizon. Winona got up and went to the fridge, bringing back a jar of raspberry jam. She spread it on a corn muffin. Cassie reached for the jar and put jam on her muffin even though half of it was soaked with sauce from the beans. The jam sparkled like rubies, low and lit dark from within in the lamplight. Andrew took a long drink of his milk.

“Mom, can I go back upstairs right after dinner?”

Winona nodded. Andrew picked up his plate and ran water over it. He took the empty pot, too, scrubbing the bottom before he left. Cassie was still finishing her last corn muffin. She dug her knife around in the jar of jam and licked a heart of it from the tip before digging the knife back into the jar again.

“Cassie,” admonished Winona, but idly, her gaze stuck on the stairs where Andrew had vanished. Cassie screwed the cap back on the jar of jam. The light was beginning to fade. It parched the stairwell at this hour, glaring in at an angle from the kitchen window. It would be gone quickly, chased out by the purple-black August dark, the air exhausted and sizzling like a hot pan run under water. Cassie cleared her dishes and went upstairs.

The house was quiet except for the sound of Andrew showering. It had been five months since their dad started driving trucks. Their whole lives, he had logged the Interlopers full-time. It was a good job: it gave them the house with solid banisters, the heavy-bottomed pots on the stove. Last winter, the government slashed the funding. It didn't even add up to part-time wages. In town there was a Rite-Aid, a Taco Bell, a few diners, and a Best Western. Their dad couldn't paint or do construction, couldn't work a line, and didn't want to learn, wouldn't bend himself to a new way of being pressed low to the ground, not this late in his life. Driving he already knew how to do. He interviewed and got behind the wheel with only the electric bill late.

Nobody asked Cassie to pick up the Interloper logs. Not her father or Winona. Not the government. But the first week her father was out of the house, she came downstairs and stood in the foyer, her bare toes digging into the floors. Winona was in the kitchen or the living room, and Andrew was upstairs—even before their father left, he had begun to take to their room, reading with his shoulders hunched and his hands wedged beneath his armpits, or making model

airplanes and crayon drawings he left half-finished, strewn across their desk. In the foyer, Cassie stood still. She felt the floor beneath her, and above her, the ceiling bearing down. She wanted to break past it, but she knew that beyond it there was only sky, endless space bowled out and away from her. She imagined herself protruding into it, bare, and felt the walls and ceiling of the house tighten around her like lungs; her heart beat quickly. She started taking the cart out in the afternoons and brought the logs home for Winona to sign. It kept something extra coming in, and nobody was looking too close at who did the work.

The phone rang, and Winona brought it upstairs. It was Nala, Cassie's friend from school.

"We're going to the pool tomorrow," she said. "Want to come?"

Cassie thought of the pool in the center of town, a listless green square with a white plastic slide, nubbed concrete that bit at your toes, and one myopic teenager who made \$7.25 an hour to chew his cud on the high, blazing lifeguard chair. Over the past few years, he had been the object of everyone's crushes, no matter who he was. Now they were getting too old for that. There had to be something specific about him they could decide to like—his eyes, a lock of hair gone haywire across his forehead, the pattern of his swimsuit bottoms. Cassie hadn't seen him yet. Nala had invited her a couple of times this summer already, but the trip meant she would miss the afternoon Interlopers. Now it was late, so late that school was about to start. It was her last chance. The water would be hot, *hot* hot. It was crazy that it didn't evaporate. Andrew might want to come, too.

"Okay," said Cassie. Maybe she could get back in time to log one or two Interlopers before dinner. "See you tomorrow."

She hung up the phone. When she came back to their room, Andrew was sitting on his bed, fresh from the shower, wearing shorts and no shirt, a towel over his shoulder, his hair dark and dripping. He had a book open on his lap.

“We’re going to the pool tomorrow,” said Cassie. “Want to come?”

Andrew looked at her and nodded, then ducked his head back to his book. He read with his arms crossed over his chest, dropping one hand to turn the pages and tucking it back into his elbow immediately even though he read quickly and this meant he had to repeat the motion many times. Cassie started rummaging in her dresser. She never kept her clothes organized and her pajamas were all mixed up with her day clothes.

“Cassie?”

She turned, shirts hanging from her hands.

“I don’t want to go.” Andrew was staring at his book without turning the pages, his arms still crossed over his chest. “Not just to the pool, I mean.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to go back to school.”

“You like school…”

It was true: when Andrew was in kindergarten, he would cry on the weekends because he missed class. He was a strange kid, sweet and a little aglow, like he was born somewhere else and had slipped into this world carrying with him a bit of the light from that other place. Adolescence had pushed gently into the center of his chest, causing him to fold in on himself, darken some in the center. At night, especially in the summer, he and Cassie liked to lie awake talking, and this was when she still saw it, the dark making outlines of his body, simpler than the actual thing, and his quick teeth, visible as pure light when he smiled.

Now he kept his eyes on his book. Cassie stared at the pajamas in her hands.

“Why don’t you want to go?” she said.

Andrew held a page of the book but didn’t turn it.

“I don’t have anything to wear,” he said.

“What do you mean?” She looked at his dresser. “You have lots of stuff.”

He shook his head.

“Andrew...”

His shoulder jumped, briefly, yanking towards the ceiling.

“You don’t like any of it?”

He didn’t answer.

“Mom would buy you something new if you asked her,” said Cassie, feeling her throat get tighter the longer Andrew went on staring down at his book. On impulse, she threw one of the shirts she was holding around his shoulders. He stared at her in shock. It was a pajama shirt, blue flannel with small white plastic pearled buttons. Cassie had bought it with Nala two years ago in the junior girl’s section at the mall.

“You could wear that,” she said.

Andrew didn’t say anything, but a dimple glimmered over his cheek, though of course it was just a game, and he couldn’t really wear her shirt.

“Come to the pool with us tomorrow,” Cassie urged. “I’ll buy you a rocket pop.”

Andrew nodded, small, and ducked his head back to his book, moving one hand from his armpit to hold the flannel around his shoulders. Cassie reached in her drawer for another shirt and pulled it on. Downstairs, the phone rang again. She heard Winona pick up. She already knew it was their father. The company he worked for advertised lots of home time in huge orange

letters on the backs of their trucks, but it wasn't true. He called often from tinny motel phones. Sometimes the three of them clustered around the phone, and sometimes he and Winona talked alone, her voice turned sweet as a summer sunset in a greener place. Cassie would listen from upstairs, imagining telephone lines spanning the country, thin and beautiful, glittering nuclei and nerves connecting their house in the desert to each other place their father had been.

Downstairs, Winona laughed. Cassie got up and went to brush her teeth. Their dad was out on a drive now, far, to Salt Lake City. When Cassie thought of him there, she saw the city as a set of high, towering pillars, carved deep like Ionic columns, jutting towards a bare blue sky, and on earth, lake beds sparkling and crusted over with salt like sugar, the color of the peach rings you got from the gas station. Cassie spat out her toothpaste and went back to their room. Andrew had already put away his book and pulled the covers up over his shoulders. She couldn't tell if he was still wearing her shirt. She turned out the light. Winona laughed again. Andrew let out a hushed breath and shifted deeper into the pillows, falling asleep. Cassie climbed into bed. She knew Salt Lake City didn't look the way she imagined. It was apartment buildings and convenience stores like anywhere else. Still, she liked to think of the roads as pink sugar arteries, which like all other arteries would flow back to their source eventually, winding together towards the heart.

The changing rooms at the pool were cool and dark. The water caught in the unlit corners of the tile floor, forming pools ringed with mold that lapped at their toes when they stood in front of the mirror. Nala pulled her hair into a ponytail, and Cassie adjusted her goggles. She wondered if Andrew was already down at the pool. When they had split with him to go to the

girl's changing room, he had cast a glance over his shoulder at them, clutching his tote bag close to the side of his body. Cassie had fought the wild urge to run to him. She and Nala shoved their feet into their sneakers without unlacing them, their heels pushing down the backs.

Down at the pool, there were a few families and a couple other teenagers. No sign of Andrew. Cassie and Nala put their towels down by some white vinyl lounge chairs.

"What do you think of Connor?" Nala pointed at the lifeguard. Cassie eyed him. It was hard to make him out—he was too high up on the chair. He had a skinny teenage boy's body, chest slightly concave, arms lean, only a shimmering of hair. The sun shone directly behind him, blotting out his face. Cassie scanned the pool, the stairs. Still no Andrew.

"He's okay," she said.

"Yeah, I agree," said Nala, squinting. "The last one was hotter."

"What was his name? Zach?"

"Yeah. I used to see him jogging by my house."

"Cool."

Nala crouched by the pool and hopped in. Cassie chewed her lip. She walked to the edge of the pool and stopped, craning her neck over her shoulder. There was Andrew, pushing his way out of the changing room, the tiny pouch of his stomach edging over his bathing suit. Cassie knew he would recognize their shoes and towels and put his stuff down by theirs. She dropped to her rear on the concrete, plugged her nose, and got in the water.

Cassie's father used to take her with him to log the Interlopers all the time. As he went downstairs to load the cart, he tapped the banister, loud and deliberate with his fingernails. The sound felt like sun on her face. In the driveway, he sat her on his knee, and she rested her head against his chest. She remembered the sun-dried texture of his shirt, the beating of his heart just

behind her ears. They always stopped at the gas station to buy drinks. They got five or six different flavors: Tropicana grapefruit juice, Sprite and Strawberry Fanta, aloe drink in square plastic bottles, small, fat glass jars of apple juice that sat in the cup of their hands like stones. They made it a rule to try one new flavor every time.

Her dad often logged the Interlopers at night, but he never took her, except once, on her ninth birthday. That evening, they had a huge yellow cake with pink frosting that Winona sliced into with the wide knife they kept in the sideboard. In the center there was raspberry jam. When her father finished eating, he stood up, wiping his hands on his pants.

“I’m headed out,” he said. Then his eyes caught Cassie’s. “You coming?”

Winona stared at him. Cassie looked between them, eyes wide, not daring to speak. For years she had longed to go see the Interlopers at night, longed for it with the universe-swallowing longing children have for certain undiscovered fragments of life which they have decided will be the ones to make them feel what they know magic to be. The force of it was tectonic, reverberating through Cassie’s body as a ringing alarm across open space. She was certain that if she opened her mouth, even to breathe, the sound of it would decide it for her: there was no way she could have this.

“Just this once,” said her father, sliding his eyes back to Winona. Andrew was still halfway through his cake. He was only six years old. Her parents held each other’s gaze a moment longer, then Winona looked away, stacking her father’s plate on top of hers.

“Be careful,” she said, watching as Andrew slowly peeled the pink icing off his cake and pushed it to the side.

At night, the desert opened for them like a different moon. The sand swelled out of their way in waves, hushed and sifting on the shore, which in the purple-light wash of the sky bowed

above them was soft and cold, and dry. As they carved through the sand Cassie imagined she could glimpse tiny animals skittering out of their path, Gila monsters and quail and the jumping mice she read about in the big-paged cardboard picture books at school, the mice with huge, hunched legs that catapulted them for miles across the sand. Her father pulled the cart to a stop. Purple shadows swirled in the air and mingled with the starlight, and above them, an orange light opened over the desert in the way streetlights open over the white lines of parking spots, over parking meters and the nubbed concrete of sidewalk curbs, like this was a city and they were standing on the corner beneath a vast lamp hanging from some fixed point in the universe. The orange met with the purple in the air, tides giving into each other, and opened new space in the way new planes of water suspend in the wake of breaking waves. The collision was quiet as dawn, immense motion perceptible only as whisper. Cassie heard her own breathing, and behind her ears, her father's beating heart.

The Interlopers began to emerge. They moved tall and loping across the sand. Her father held out the registry and each one pressed their stamp into it and continued past them. When the last one disappeared, Cassie exhaled.

“Where are they going?” she asked.

Her father shook his head.

“No one's ever followed them.”

“Why not?”

He fell silent. He didn't want to say that he didn't know, though it would be many more years before Cassie understood this. It is not possible for a child to assign their parent powerlessness like that. Cassie's father ran his hands through the hair at the back of her head. She felt the pressure of his fingertips, his hands cradling the curves of her skull, which when she

was a baby was soft and malleable, and could have been pushed into any shape. That's another thing you won't understand until many years later, when you are ready for kindness again—how afraid your parents must have been, holding your head in their hands for the first time. Cassie and her father stayed together in the golf cart, listening to the wonder of the purple wind, which when it scooped the sand from the desert floor and tossed it towards the sky seemed like it contained crushed-up stars, and held within it the hush immensity of collision in the universe, which is huge and inevitable as the tide and, though we must toil for years without quite believing in its coming, forgiveness, too.

At the snack bar, Cassie and Nala ate their rocket pops together. When they finished, Cassie bought one for Andrew, and they started walking back to the pool. At the top of the stairs, they stopped: the air felt strange, swelling and tense. Someone was shouting, someone was in the water, and Connor the lifeguard was rising from his post. Cassie knew, without needing to see, that it was Andrew who was drowning. She was already running, the pavement ripping burns into the soles of her feet. She saw the uneven body puncturing and re-puncturing the water. Connor was fighting with him: whenever he drew Andrew's body towards him, Andrew howled and lashed at him like he was trying to dispel the lanky teenage body from himself, rip it from his own ribs. Cassie came to the edge of the pool just as Connor overpowered him and wrenched him from the water, shoving his body onto the concrete. Andrew rolled onto his side, coughing and sobbing. Connor stood in the water for a moment, gasping, then he levered himself out of the pool. Andrew got up and he and Cassie collided. She clutched at him. The pounding of his heart radiated through his chest and into hers.

Connor stood there watching them. His red foam life preserver was still floating in the pool behind them. Staring over Andrew's head, Cassie got a close look at him. He had green eyes and a smattering of freckles over his nose, stick-straight tawny hair and a too-angular chin, the bones of his face flat like a square had been shoved under his skin. There were raised pink marks under his pectorals where Andrew had scratched and scabbled at him in repulsion.

"He needs to learn not to panic," said Connor, chest heaving, and Cassie didn't say anything, only tightened her grip.

That evening, she sat on the edge of the tub as Winona slathered aloe over her shoulders. Her whole back was burnt, and the soles of her feet were red and angry from the pavement. Andrew was in their room sleeping. Nala's mom had dropped them off late that afternoon. They had stood in the doorway as Winona stared at them, Andrew hunched into Cassie's body, and Cassie sensing that there was something enormous to say, but not knowing quite what it was, let alone how to say it.

Winona's hands on her back were cool and soft. Cassie blew her breath out between her teeth at the feel of the aloe on her skin. Above her, Winona made a low humming sound.

"You'd think living in a desert your whole life," she said, "you would learn not to get burnt."

Her hands moved down Cassie's arms and back to her shoulder blades. Cassie watched the worn white sun spots dotting her skin. That wasn't true. Children didn't learn how to live the way they needed to just by being in a certain place and not another.

"Can I go log the Interlopers tonight," she said. "Mom, just one or two of them."

Winona's hands stopped.

"You already know the answer to that."

“I can do it, I—”

“I said no, Cassie.”

“Mom—”

“Cassie, we don’t need the money,” Winona snapped.

In the silence that followed, Cassie recognized remorse, the gape of it opening beneath her.

“It’s okay,” said Winona, more softly. “We’ll be fine without it.”

Cassie’s back burned. Behind her, she felt Winona’s shoulders hitch, heard the tiny hiccup of breath that stilled her hands in their path down her back. It passed as quickly as it came. Cassie wished she hadn’t heard it. Winona ran her hands over her back one more time; a shiver coursed involuntarily up her spine. She kissed the back of her head.

“I love you, Cassie,” she said softly.

“I love you, too,” Cassie said. The words were true, but it was the first time in her life she had had to push them out from around anger. Winona got up and left her to get dressed. Cassie sat there on the side of the tub feeling the new boulder inside of her. In their room, Andrew was still asleep. He slept on top of the covers, still in his swim trunks, clutching a towel to his chest. Tear tracks glowed on his cheeks, luminous, wan and sticky in the grey-blue half-dark of the room. The house was silent. Cassie stood there for a moment in her underwear, deliberating. Her back still rang with aloe. She shoved her legs into her jeans.

The cart duned over the sand just like she remembered. The air was purple, internally dark and studded with radiance. It let Cassie in smooth. She drove the cart hard, harder than usual. The wind blistered past her. She felt a radiant bareness in her chest, like she had fallen and scraped her knee, but the scraped part was her whole body; she felt like an exposed bone sticking

straight through the desert night air. She pressed the gas pedal to the floor. Her heart beat hard in her ears like she was running and not driving at all. She drove until she recognized the old government post driven into the sand and wrenched the cart to a stop. Her hands hurt from gripping the wheel so hard. She sat there for a long time, her heart ringing in her ears.

The air gapped open and an Interloper stepped out. It was the tall one, the same as the last afternoon. The air came to attention, filled and vibrated with the static of his body. Cassie was crying. She didn't like to cry. It had been a long time since she last cried in front of her father and mother, and she never cried in front of Andrew. But this was her job. No matter what, she would do it. She reached for the registry. The Interloper approached her, but he didn't reach for the stamp when she offered it. He leaned close to her face. For a moment, Cassie's heart screamed. Her parents had never let her do this alone; maybe they had their reasons. She was only a child, a child still. The registry fell from her hands to the floor of the desert.

The Interloper lifted a hand. Even with her chin slack in shock Cassie's tears kept spilling down her face. She couldn't stop them. They sank through the Interloper's hand and dripped onto the desert sand, clearer than pool water, than starlight. The Interloper cupped her cheek. His skin was warm.

He dropped his hand and moved past her into the desert. Cassie picked the log off the ground and drove the cart back to their house. She let herself in, tiptoeing upstairs. Winona didn't wake. In their room, a bar of light from the window crossed over Andrew's face, which was slack and calm in sleep. His hair was still damp from the shower. Beads of water trembled at his temple, tremulous, catching the light. Skin still hot from the desert, Cassie pulled back the covers and climbed in next to him. The presence of love in a house is the only thing required to

keep it living. Cassie pressed her face into the soft place where Andrew' skull met the nape of his neck and slept.