

1230 words

## Duty.....

Scarlett Johansson is looking down at me, red hair flowing coquettishly over her breasts. Her smile is teasing, flirtatious, inviting; frozen in the moment that says she might be willing. Next to her Mario Lemieux smiles, too. I can almost feel the cold wet ice shavings from his hockey stop. Let's be buddies, his eyes say.

On Darin's dresser is the picture of him in uniform, on his last day of leave. Skeeter and Dooley are on each side of him, leaning against the hood of Dooley's car. He had seemed so grown up, heroic almost, with Skeeter and Dooley guffawing bursts of bravado, betraying their anxious self-consciousness. He really is growing up, I told myself as I dished up ice cream and cake.

Lying on his bed I try to imagine that I am him. What goes through my mind, if I am him. Do I imagine myself with Scarlett, or is she the portal to other imaginings? Is her promise the only comfort I have known? If so, it doesn't seem like enough to build a life upon. But is it any less than most of us know? I remember his beginnings, bitterly. I blame only myself. Like him, I was innocent.

What was it about Bobby Hendricks that so impressed me? That he had already graduated and owned his own car? That he drove an ore truck as big as a house? One fumbling, half-dressed moment in the back of his Pontiac and Darin's life began. And mine ended. Although I never said it like that to him. That is not something a mother should

ever share with her child. “You are my joy, I told him.” And he was, really. As much as I ever had joy.

Bobby disappeared long ago. Ran off to the oil fields when the mines shut down. I saw him a couple of years ago in Walmart; said he was in town for his mother’s funeral, no mention of his son as his eyes shifted around the aisle, searching everywhere I wasn’t. He looked old, skin wrinkled and gray from smoking. And smaller than I remembered. So you are what determined the course of my life, I thought to myself. I couldn’t believe it. But it’s as true as true can be. In the backseat of a Pontiac. We never foresaw each other, or ourselves; it would have been too much to bear. It still is, but we have no choice.

It’s just biology. We try to make more of it. Love, we say, like something special is happening to us and our lives are going to be wonderful forever because of it. But it’s just atoms and molecules. Animal magnetism drawing us into the back seat. I never married but I’ve been in a few Pontiacs since Bobby’s. Sometimes because I needed to and sometimes because I wanted to. Those were the worst ones, if you ask me. Hope can be a terrible thing.

He is here, in the picture on the dresser. This is his bed, this is his room. There is no taking it back, any of it. I guess he knows that now. Once it is done, it is done. Or maybe not: maybe he thinks it is just a dream that isn’t finished yet. When he awakens he’ll be back in this room, looking up at Scarlett and Mario. He’ll be cruising Main Street with Skeeter and Dooley. He’ll be a kid again. Maybe it is a dream. Maya. A delusion that we endure. If so, Maya lasts a long time. If I were the master of my soul I would not leave this room, this bed. I

would close my eyes and drift into bliss, leave all this behind. But I am not strong enough for that..... better to keep my feet on the ground, to feel the imagined earth between my toes. It may be a dream, but it is our dream. I entered first, so I must be his guide. I must embrace this dream if I am to be of any help to him.

Oh, God, I am responsible for this nightmare. It is because of my weakness that he suffers. If only I had tried harder I could have given him more; he wouldn't have had to do it. I forgot to pay attention as one day ran into the next; we were going along, getting by, until suddenly he is walking out the door dressed in camo. A stranger to me, head shaved, shoulders rigid. Like him, I tried to be brave. I mimicked the pride I should have felt, that he wanted me to feel. But I knew what I had done. I scooped the ice cream and hoped for the best.

What will I do when he is back in this room? I think I showed him the face he needed to see, as if he does not now bear the mark of our shortcomings. I've always tried to contain the burden within myself, to protect him from its poison. But there it is on his face. Forever.

I smiled the way I did when I cut the cake, the way he needed me to smile. I told him that everything is going to be O.K., that soon he would be back in this room and we'd pick up where we left off. He could go to college now that he had served, they would pay for it. Perhaps he'd like to start at the community college, I said. That's what Skeeter and Dooley are doing, I said, talking about the three of them cruising again in Dooley's car. He lay there stoically and watched my lips, listened for the sounds that would assure him. I spoke so fast I sounded giddy. The more I tried to paint him back into the world the

faster I spoke until he turned that side of his face toward the wall. I took his hand in mine and held it for a moment. It was like holding the hand of a corpse. He may look different, the nurse said, but inside he is still the son you've always known. I did not see him, not the whole of him.

I don't remember leaving, the long walk down corridor, each door leading to one of them. Or two. They were there, the victims and their mothers, but I did not see them, nor they me. I only remember the grief, the weight of it, dark and mysterious, suffocating, not unlike the weight of his beginnings in the back seat: mysterious, suffocating, irrevocable.

*The branch clawed at the sky above his shoulder, naked in the cold winter moon. The cloth upholstery's must hung dank in the air. I lay silent, motionless, his corduroy coat scraping my cheek with each stifled grunt.*

By the time I got to the street I was gasping, gulping air between my suppressed convulsions. I saw myself on my hands and knees, concentrating, because he needs me, on the sidewalk beneath my hands: the shoe worn aggregate, the mottled gum spots, wing tips and pumps swishing by. I imagined resting there, the hard concrete abrasive and unyielding, me clinging to the pain. But I went on, indistinguishable from the rest of them. A black diesel cloud settled over us as I ran to the bus stop on the corner.