

Mothers and Sons

From Wild at Heart by John Eldredge

A boy is brought into the world by his mother, and she is the center of his universe in those first tender months and years. She suckles him nurtures him, protects him, she sings to him, reads to him, watches over him, as the old saying goes, “like a mother hen.” She often names him as well, tender names like “my little lamb,” or “Mama’s little sweetheart, or even “my little boyfriend.” But a boy cannot grow to manhood with a name like that, let alone a name like “son of my sorrow,” and there comes a time for the shift when he begins to seek out his father’s affection and attention. He wants to play catch with Dad, and wrestle with him, and spend time outside together, or in his workshop. If Dad works outside the home, as most do, then his return in the evening becomes the biggest event of the boy’s day. Stasi can tell you when it happened for each of our boys. This is a very hard time in a mother’s life, when the father replaces her as the sun of the boy’s universe. It is part of Eve’s sorrow, this letting go, this being replaced.

Few mothers do it willingly, very few do it well. Many women ask their sons to fill a void in their souls that their husband has left. But the boy has a question that needs an answer, and he cannot get the answer from his mother. Femininity can never bestow masculinity. My mother would often call me “sweetheart,” but my father called me “tiger.” Which direction do you think a boy would want to head? He will still turn to his mother for comfort “who does he run to when he skins his knee?), but he turns to Dad for adventure, for the chance to test his strength, and most of all, to get the answer to his question. A classic example of these dueling roles took place the other night. We were driving down the road and the boys were talking about the kind of car they want to get when it comes time for their first set of wheels. “I was thinking about a Humvee, or a motorcycle, maybe even a tank. What do you think, Dad?” “I’d go with the Humvee. We could mount a machine gun on top.” “What about you, Mom – what kind of car do you want me to have? You know what she said . . . “A safe one.”

Stasi is a wonderful mother, she has bit her tongue so many times I wonder that she still has one, as she holds her peace while the boys and I rush off to some adventure begging destruction or bloodshed. Her first reaction – “a safe one” – is so natural, so understandable. After, all, she is the incarnation of God’s tenderness. But if a mother will not allow her son to become dangerous, if she does not let the father take him away, she will emasculate him. I just read a story of a mother, divorced from her husband, who was furious that he wanted to take the boy hunting. She tried to get a restraining order to prevent him from teaching the boy about guns. That is emasculation. “My mom wouldn’t let me play with GI Joe,” a young man told me. Another, said, “We lived back east near an amusement park. It had a rollercoaster – the old wooden kind. My mom would never let me go.” That is emasculation, and the boy needs to be rescued from it by the active intervention of the father, or another man.

This kind of intervention is powerfully portrayed in the movie A Perfect World. Kevin Costner plays an escaped convict who takes a young boy hostage and heads for the state line. But as the story unfolds, we see that what looks like a boy’s ruin is actually his *redemption*. The boy is in his underpants when Costner abducts him. That is where many mothers want to keep their sons, albeit unconsciously. She

wants her little lamb close by. Over the days that follow days “together on the road” I might add, Costner and the boy who has no father – grow close. When he learns that the boy’s mother has never allowed him to ride a roller coaster, Costner, is outraged. The next scene is the boy, arms high in the air, rolling up and down country roads on the roof of the station wagon. That’s the invitation into a man’s world, a world involving danger. Implicit in the invitation is the *affirmation*, “you can handle it, you belong here.”

There comes a moment when Costner buys the boy a pair of pants (the symbolism in the film is amazing), but the boy won’t change in front of him. He is a shy, timid boy who has yet to even smile in the story. Costner senses something is up.

“What’s the matter – you don’t want me to see your pecker?”

“it’s . . .puny.”

“What?”

“It’s puny.”

“Who told you that?”

The boy, Phillip, is silent. It is the silence of emasculation and shame. The absence of the father’s voice is loud and clear. So Costner intervenes, and speaks. “Lemme see . . . go on, I’ll shoot you straight.” The boy reluctantly bares himself, “No, Phillip. That’s a good size for a boy your age.” A smile breaks out on his face, like the sun coming up, and you know a major threshold has been crossed for him.