

## HER SON'S BOWL

In the lowlands, about fifteen miles west of Maeve and Jonna Dunne's house, a serious mother-son conversation was taking place at the Evans household. Alis Evans, recently widowed, was standing at the stove scraping scorched oatmeal from the bottom of a saucepan. She had become distracted by her son, Caden, who was almost in tears trying to justify his actions.

"Caden, you're a grown man now. You should have known better. You need to find a way to get our money back. That's all there is to it." Caden Evans was indeed a grown man who had turned fifty-two that spring. Earlier in the year, he had moved back home into a dumpy trailer on his mother's property. He sought refuge after the fairytale marriage to the woman of his dreams ended abruptly after just a few weeks. He didn't miss his ex much, though. He certainly didn't miss her angry face every time he did something stupid. But then, just a few months after that, his father suddenly died, which left him utterly rudderless. He had never felt a particular kinship with the overbearing man, but had relied heavily on his strength, standing aside when important decisions were to be made.

Alis, now in her late seventies, had also yielded to her husband's sensibilities. In her case, though, it wasn't due to a lack of fortitude, it was a matter of tradition. Both reared from solid, conservative Welsh stock, the family was expected to be deferential to the presumptive head of household, which was invariably the male.

Caden had benefited from those old-school traditions as well, although he had no context; no firsthand connection to his ancestors' conventional nature. He basked in what he believed to be a fact: that his was quite simply the preferred gender.

His mother had given him free rein as a boy to explore life on his own, but Caden had little interest in suffering failure for the sake of it. He didn't see the point in reinventing the wheel. Instead, he chose to follow close behind those who seemed to be going somewhere. And, of course, whatever innate sense of curiosity he may have had as a young man had been stifled by his father's overwhelming presence. But, despite his constant complaints about his father's opinionated nature, Rhys Evans' sudden demise left him stupefied. The presumption that he was to fill his old man's shoes was made clear as Alis ceremoniously handed him his father's weathered valise at the funeral.

Once Alis had scraped every last burned oatmeal morsel from the bottom of the pot, mixing it vigorously into the rest, she dolloped a healthy, heaping ladleful of it into her son's bowl. Caden whined, "It's burnt, mother. I can't eat that!" "You'll eat it and you'll like it, son. People in India are starving!" Caden mumbled under his breath as he grimaced taking a tiny bite, "Well, why don't they get a job?"

Alis, in an effort to underscore the urgency of their financial dilemma, continued to admonish her son, "What were you thinking? Those little trees will take a decade or more to mature! I'll be long gone by the time they yield anything. If your father were here..." Caden sprayed streams of oatmeal through his teeth as he heatedly said, "Well, he's not, mother! I am, okay?" She turned her back to him, grabbed a sponge,

sprinkled some baking soda on it and attempted to rub out an irreparable stain on the wall behind the stove. Then, despite her stoic nature, she began to quietly cry.

Although he was mostly incapable of empathy, he couldn't bear to see his mother agonize over something he had done. She was, after all, his only salvation. "I'm sorry, mother. I'll fix it. I'll think of something, I promise." She had no reaction. He tried to solicit a shred of affirmation from her, "Okay??" She weakly nodded, took the saucepan to the counter and poured whatever remained of the questionably edible oatmeal into a Tupperware bowl for later. She then proceeded to scrub the living daylights out of the bottom of the pan, breaking a sweat as a lock of her short, permed hair fell into her eyes.

Caden then dutifully finished his oatmeal, gulping down every bite without chewing so that he wouldn't have to actually taste it. He knew that, at least for the moment, his empty bowl would make his mother proud. Through the grating sounds of the furious Brillo pad in the kitchen, Caden sat at the table trying to recall precisely how he got into this mess in the first place.