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Short short stories

On Making Someone A Good Man By Calling Him A Good Man

Dave Eggers

The Guardian, Friday 30 April 2004

Stuart has the face of a Scottish warrior. He has been told this, though he is unsure if this means he has a historically accurate Highlands look, or that he simply looks like a particular actor from Braveheart.

Stuart has been friends with Margaret since they were small. Margaret, soft in every way, recently married Phillipe, who is an idiot. Stuart feels no jealousy toward Phillipe, for he and Margaret were never romantic, and from the start he tried to like Phillipe, but Phillipe has always made this difficult because Phillipe is a moron. Phillipe does not work, or not often, and feels no guilt about allowing Margaret to pay for food, for car repairs that he makes necessary, for rent. When he has his own money, he goes on sportfishing vacations without Margaret. Is he charming? He is not. Is he handsome? Passably. What, then, is his appeal? The narrator is not sure.

Anyway, one day, Stuart and Phillipe were together at one of the many birthdays and christenings at which they were thrown together. As they were talking about sportfishing, which at least means Phillipe will not talk about the lameness of the UN, Phillipe noticed a young boy being taunted by three others. Before Stuart could react, Phillipe sprinted toward the scrum, chased away the offenders, and was soon consoling the boy who after a few minutes was laughing at Phillipe's jokes.

When he returned, Stuart patted him on the back and said, "Phillipe, you're a good man." Stuart said this very seriously, because these words are used with the utmost

sincerity in his family. The primary aspiration of the men in his family is to be called, by their father or great uncle Alastair, a "good man". Although he felt initially that he might have jumped the gun, that one decent act doesn't necessarily define a man, Stuart was surprised to see that, over the weeks and months, Phillipe seemed to change. He was kind, even chivalrous, to Margaret, and began a steady job. He sent her and two of her friends to a weekend spa, and fixed the broken door to her closet.

Phillipe never said a word about being called a good man, and Stuart couldn't be sure that the words had had any effect on him. But the change in him was clear, and Stuart wondered if we, all or any of us, are so easily improved. If all we need is this kind of semantic certainty. If to be named is to be realised. If once something like that is settled - I am a good man! - we no longer need to struggle, to guess, to err.



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