

## *On Making Him a Good Man by Calling Him a Good Man*

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Stuart has the face of a Scottish warrior. He has been told this, though he is unsure if this means that he has a historically accurate and fierce Highlands look, or that he simply looks like a particular actor from *Braveheart*. Stuart has been friends with Margaret since they were very small. Margaret, soft in every way, recently married Phillippe, who is an idiot. Stuart feels no jealousy toward Phillippe, for he and Margaret were never romantic, and he actually wanted to like Phillippe, from the start he tried to like Phillippe, but Phillippe has always made this difficult because Phillippe is a moron. Phillippe does not work, or does not work often, and feels no guilt at all about allowing Margaret to pay for food, for car repairs that he makes necessary, and for rent. When he has his own money, he goes on sportfishing vacations without Margaret. As we said, he is an idiot. 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 Phillippe were standing near each other at one of the many birthdays, bar mitzvahs, and christenings at which they find themselves. As they were talking about sportfishing, which at least means Phillippe will not talk about the ineffectiveness of the U.N., Phillippe noticed, at the corner of the building, a young boy being taunted by three others. Before Stuart could react, Phillippe sprinted toward the scrum, and chased away the offenders, and was soon consoling the young boy, who after a few minutes was laughing at Phillippe's jokes. When Phillippe returned to the gathering, Stuart, who saw the entire scene unfold, patted Phillippe on the back and said, "Phillippe, you're a good man." Stuart said this very seriously, because he was greatly impressed by Phillippe's heroics, and because the words *good man* are used with the utmost sincerity in his family. In fact, the primary aspiration of the men in his family is to be called, by their father or grandfather or great uncle Daniel, a "good man." So Stuart called Phillippe a good man, and 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 next weeks and months, Phillippe seemed to change. He stood straighter, he showed up on time. He was kind to, even chivalrous to, Margaret, and undertook a steady job. He sent her and two of her friends to a weekend spa, and fixed the broken door to her closet. Phillippe never said a word about being called a good man, and Stuart couldn't believe that the words had any effect on him. But the change in him was clear: he was becoming what Stuart had called him, a good man. 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 realized. If once something like that is settled—I *am* a good man—we no longer need to struggle, to guess, to err.