

# DOING GOOD

BY  
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She placed the candles on the table and stood back to survey the scene. The place settings were just right: best cutlery cleaned and polished, an almost matching collection of wine glasses – why couldn't they hang on to at least five matching wine glasses for goodness sake – and new dishes that fairly gleamed in the fading afternoon light seeping through the dining room window.

She sighed.

“What a big sigh,” Garth commented from the kitchen, where he was putting the soup on to warm. “What’s that all about?”

“Oh I don’t know, maybe a sigh of resignation.” Now she leant against the kitchen doorframe, absent-mindedly polishing one of the knives on her apron, eyes focused not on Garth but somewhere far distant through the kitchen window. “There’s just this inevitability about the kids growing up. Every holiday they’re a year older and, it seems, a year further apart from us.”

“You’re such a mother, Rachel. Every Christmas you want the magic of the season to roll back our life to an imagined happy family that never really was. Your nostalgia for family life is like childbirth, you repress all the bad parts. All those anxiety-filled weekends waiting to see if they’ll meet curfew; the hours spent driving them to dance or karate classes; the fights over money or clothes; negotiating safe passage through their bubbling cauldron of teenage emotions; the thoughtless clutter of boots and coats in the front hall; the general stress of not knowing where they are. Have you forgotten all that?”

“No, not forgotten. It just never bothered me the way it bothered you. What I remember is the tiny wriggling toes and that heart melting first smile; the giggles and laughter as they learnt how to skate; toasting marshmallows around a campfire in Algonquin; stories at bedtime and sloppy kisses goodnight. Have *you* forgotten all that?”

“Mostly I had, yes, but it’s nice that you remind me. Hey, if we add your romanticism to my pragmatism we can almost make an emotionally stable couple.”

“I’d give anything to have them both here again.”

As if on cue there was a knock at the door. Rachel leapt into action, stripping off her apron, bounding to the front door, glancing in the mirror to straighten her hair, and flinging open the door in greeting. Rachel and Stephanie embraced with the reckless abandon of mother and daughter separated for far too long. Garth hung back in the kitchen from where he had a clear view of the front door and could signal his own more muted pleasure with a wide smile and cheery “Hi.”

Kieran, the boyfriend – for they presumed that must be who it was – also hung back, respecting the needs of family and, in any event, weighed down by his hold on two overnight bags. Garth, wiping his hands on a teatowel, strolled out of the kitchen in time for the introductions. “So how are you dear?” asked Garth.

“Doin’ good, Dad, doin’ good.” Stephanie squeezed Garth’s hand as she kissed him on the cheek, simultaneously turning to indicate Kieran. The movement, like so much in her life, was almost effortless. “Mum, Dad, this is Kieran. Kieran, this is my Mum and Dad.”

“Pleased to meet you,” began Kieran, as he put the two bags down in the narrow hallway. Then followed an awkward pause as boyfriend tried to figure out how to address girlfriend’s parents. Garth solved the problem, shaking Kieran’s hand and saying, “Call me Garth and this is Rachel. Get those snowy boots off, toss your coats in the closet and come have a drink to warm up.”

“Stephanie, you should take those bags up to the bedroom first,” added Rachel, recalling her earlier conversation with Garth.

They were soon settled in the living room, drinks in hand, and the inevitable interrogations underway.

“So tell us about yourself Kieran,” started Rachel. “How did you meet this lovely daughter of ours?”

While he recounted the tale – one they’d actually heard already from Stephanie – Garth surreptitiously appraised the new boyfriend. He certainly seemed to live an interesting life, putting his social work credentials to work among the homeless of Montreal. His life intersected with Stephanie’s through her volunteer time at the aboriginal womens’ centre. As he listened Garth was pleased with himself for not falling prey to predictable paternal instincts – he didn’t presume the boyfriend was a latent axe murderer, wife-beater or even fortune-hunter. He seemed like just a sensible and well-meaning young man.

The conversation flowed easily. Indeed, Garth found himself slightly annoyed at the beckoning sound of bubbling soup from the kitchen. Eventually, interrupting his enjoyment of the exchange, he served the soup and called everyone to the table.

He liked the way Stephanie and Kieran held hands on their way into the dining room. He was pleased to hear her teasing him: “Did you bring your bib Kieran? You know how difficult it is for you to keep food and clothing separate.” The propensity to tease was a family trademark, and Stephanie’s quick recourse to it indicated a reassuring comfort level. Perhaps the liberal quantities of pre-dinner wine had helped.

Kieran, however, was momentarily confused once in the dining room. Glancing around the table he saw five places and, while math had never been his strong point, he could certainly see there were only the four of them. “Are we expecting another guest?” he asked.

This simple question generated an awkward silence; discomfort invaded the easy atmosphere.

“It’s something we’ve done every Christmas for the last three years,” noted Stephanie as they took their seats.

“Perhaps Stephanie’s never told you Kieran, but we haven’t seen her sister for three years now.” Rachel was holding it together well as she said this, but was staring into her soup, unable to give eye contact while she spoke.

“She just walked out on us,” explained Garth. “I believe she thought we were pressuring her with unrealistic expectations. And, thinking back, we probably were. She was never an ambitious kid, but we felt she was selling herself short and, I’m afraid, we probably let her know this once too often.”

“So every year now we set a place for her in the hopes that she’ll turn up,” added Stephanie.

“Hmmm. Pretty familiar sequence of events in my line of work I’m afraid,” responded Kieran. “I listened to a similar story last week from one of my street people. She left home and made her way to Montreal to get away from family pressures. Sometimes I think they perceive pressure from parents that, in fact, is more from themselves. Being on the street lowers the expectations they place on themselves as much as anything. This one had been a few years on the street, not that old though, getting by on odd jobs, selling artwork to tourists in the old city, dumpster diving, all the usual things they do to survive. She wasn’t a bad artist actually.”

“Lydia used to do art.” Rachel joined back in the conversation. “It was often the only thing that kept her going, right Garth?”

“Yes, I often wonder whether she’s kept it up. I always told her it was no way to make a living. Then she’d get upset and say something like “not the kind of living you expect”. What was the name of the young lady you were listening to?”

“I don’t know, when I asked her she didn’t say. That’s not unusual, it’s hard to gain the trust of most street people. They have their own strong community and outsiders like us social workers rarely get to become part of it. Yet that’s what I try to do – get into their heads a bit and find ways to get them back on track.”

Garth, deciding it was time to move on from this painful subject, collected the soup bowls and took them off to the kitchen. Stephanie reached for the wine bottle and tried to break the pall of sadness by cheerily asking “Anyone for a refill?” Before there were any answers she was off around the table topping up every glass. Rachel, however, was not to be diverted. She turned back to Kieran with more questions on his work.

“So what kind of things do you talk to them about? What did you say to this girl?”

“Depends on who they are and what kind of state they’re in. A lot of them are far gone into drug or alcohol abuse, some into prostitution and others just on the edge of one kind or another of mental illness. In those cases I’m just trying to get them hooked into some support services, detox centres, mental health clinics, that kind of thing.”

Kieran paused before going on. “Funnily enough this young woman wasn’t like that. She seemed like she was treading water, waiting for something to happen in her life. Didn’t seem to need anything more than direction. I gave her a few suggestions, tried to create some kind of rapport, even suggested she try to reconnect with her family. In the end I pointed her toward a youth employment centre. Left it at that. One of the problems with my job is you never really know whether you’ve done any good or not. You just launch things into a void and hope it makes a difference.”

Rachel was unsure whether the sound she heard was of Garth stacking dishes in the kitchen or someone at the door with the faintest of knocks. She excused herself to go check, leaving Kieran and Stephanie at the table.

“Who did that painting Steph?” asked Kieran, pointing at a small semi-abstract picture perched on the sideboard.

“Lydia did that when she was still in high school. Mum and Dad keep it there as a reminder.”

“It looks familiar.”

Rachel appeared at the door of the dining room, tears in her eyes but a broad smile on her face. Behind her, looking shy and dishevelled was a young woman in her twenties. Rachel, in the quietest of voices, said only “Lydia’s here.”

Lydia eased into the dining room from behind Rachel, eyes downcast in meek uncertainty. As she slowly looked up her gaze landed on Kieran. In an instant her face transformed from meek to startled. Kieran gasped.