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An Unexpected Angel

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Erica Gaugler

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An Unexpected Angel

I believe in the inherent goodness of mankind; the spark of compassion present in every man's heart which fuels magnificent, overwhelming displays of munificence. And I believe that the most beautiful manifestations of these displays of kindness are in giving selflessly.

I walk with a noticeable limp as a result of a childhood bout with bone cancer in my hip. As I have matured, I have accepted my limp as a badge of courage; an integral part of who I am. However, I was not always so willingly accepting of this limitation. A year after the surgery that saved my life and reconstructed my hip, my mother and I were enjoying a day of shopping at the local wholesale food store. As we were exiting the store, an elderly gentleman who worked at the store stopped us to check our receipt and our purchases. After perusing the slip of paper, and nodding a "go ahead" to my mother, the gentleman turned his attention to me. He had a somewhat quizzical look on his face, and proceeded to ask me if I had gotten hurt in the store, as he noticed I was limping heavily. Annoyed that the man had the audacity to notice and, furthermore, comment on my limp, I murmured something unintelligible and started to walk away, feeling self-consciousness and a little angry. My mom just smiled sympathetically at the gentleman and quietly said to him that I did not get hurt in the store. Unwilling to share too much information about my past with a stranger, my mom just nodded and said that I had been through more in my twelve short years of life than most people. We left the store together.

What ensued next has been forever inscribed in my memory. As my mom pushed the cart towards the car, I launched into a tirade, grumbling about how cruel it is for someone to comment on the way that I walk. As if by fate, the man came running out of the store, heedless of the traffic, yelling for me. "Miss, miss", he said between breaths as he drew up to our cart, "Here. I want you to have this. I've carried it with me every day for a long time, and it's brought me quite a bit of good luck, but I want to give it to you." With that, he held out his hand. Encompassed in the folds of his aged hand was a small coin, engraved with an angel and a short prayer. The gentleman had given me his guardian angel!

I've never understood what compelled the man to give a complete stranger what was surely one of his most prized possessions. However, I have thought about the gentleman countless times in the subsequent years. When I have lost my faith in humanity, when it seems that there is no trace of kindness left in this fast-paced world, or when I fear that mankind has completely entangled themselves in selfishness, I think about the man who extended a piece of himself to a young girl, and it serves as a visceral balm for my soul. In that memory, I see the compassion that every man is capable of, I see the selfless altruism that stems from the desire to make this world a bit more beautiful. And I believe again.