

Memories of the Valley
The Christmas Angel
By Tasha Landry

Anyone from a small community knows them. The city dwellers, the scornful, the people who grew up in a small town only to flee as soon as humanly possible when given the chance. They swear will never come back, why would they?

I was born and raised in Pembroke, in the heart of the Ottawa Valley. I know quite a few of the above mentioned people, and I have been asked on many occasions why I stay, why don't I move somewhere bigger, more exciting? For those folks, and for anyone else who might be interested I have a story to tell.

It was a week before Christmas, 2011. I was at our local Walmart store, finishing up holiday shopping for my four boys. As a newly single mom on a tight budget this particular shopping excursion had broken the bank.

Did I mention I had my three year old Matthew in tow? That this baby boy of mine had just spotted another little boy leaving with a McDonald's Happy Meal and a huge grin on his face?

You can probably guess what happens next. Mr. Matthew, who in his defense, had been shopping all morning, was quite hungry. Mr. Matthew had decided he really, really wanted McDonalds for lunch. Unfortunately, at just three years old, my sweet little man couldn't understand what was wrong with Mommy, why Mommy couldn't agree to this one simple request.

Cue the pre-schooler meltdown! He started by begging, which led to stomping, which then led to uncontrollable tears. Feeling awful, I tried my best to help him understand that Mommy just could not afford to buy him the Happy Meal he so desperately coveted. I tried explaining that I

had very little money left, and we would need that money to get home. However, given the fact that he was just a wee little man who was overtired and hungry, he could only fathom two things – he wanted McDonalds and it wasn't going to happen. With this realization, the pitiful crying turned into full scale wailing.

As I desperately tried to get him to calm down with the promise of his favourite meal of spaghetti and meatballs as soon as we got home, I began to feel so alone. I felt as though every other Walmart patron was staring at us and judging me. I felt as though I had just won the title of "worst mother of the year."

As I sat on a bench, holding my weeping child, despondently looking around, I noticed an older, very well dressed woman looking our way. Immediately I thought "oh great here we go, another well to do know it all who is going to scorn me or tell me how to raise my child." As she started walking toward us I braced myself. She sat beside me, looked me straight in the eye, and quietly asked "excuse me dear, do you mind me asking what your little boy is so upset about?" I told her what was going on, feeling some embarrassment , with a good dose of motherly guilt heaped on top of that. After all, Matthew had been out all morning with me, and had behaved so well the entire time, what kind of mean old mommy was I to not reward the child with a four dollar meal when he rarely asked me for anything? The problem was that money was tight and I had to be really careful how I spent what little I had left. Of course knowing that did nothing to ease my guilt, it just layered depression on top of everything else I was feeling at that moment.

As I lapsed into silence I could see in her eyes such compassion and understanding that I could tell at some point in her life she too had been in this type of situation and she knew exactly how

I was feeling. Her eyes began to shine, then she smiled sweetly and patted my hand. That single gesture was enough to relax me, and I started to feel a lot less alone in the world. I was struck by such an overwhelming feeling of gratitude I very nearly hugged this woman I knew absolutely nothing about.

Suddenly she looked at me and said "It just so happens I have been looking for a child I can do something nice for this Christmas. It would make my day if you would allow me to pay for his lunch." When I told her that she didn't have to do that, she insisted, rushing off saying she would be right back, she just needed to make change. I expected her to come back with five dollars at best, and was already feeling very thankful. Imagine my surprise when she returned a few minutes later and handed Matthew a twenty dollar bill and with a wink and a smile, told him to buy Mommy something too! I told her not to worry about me, that twenty dollars was too much, to which she responded "Nonsense! Mommies need to eat too!"

As I started to thank her she held up a hand to quiet me, shook her head, and said "No! Thank YOU! By allowing me to do this, you are not just making my day, but my Christmas as well!" All she asked for in return was a holiday hug from Matthew who happily obliged. As she leaned in for her hug, such a peaceful and contented expression crossed her features. As she left us she just beamed. It really somehow felt as though we had done her the favour, when in actuality, she had made our day with her selflessness, and taught Matthew a valuable lesson about the joy of giving and showing gratitude. I like to think of this kind, soft spoken, generous soul as our very own Christmas angel.

I still love to tell this story, and to this day Matthew remembers his Christmas angel. Some memories are so special that we forever hold them in our hearts. For myself and for my son,

this is one of those memories. It never fails to fill my heart with gratitude, and with pride for this place that I call home. After all, this wonderful lady could have just passed us by without a second glance, but with kindness and compassion she not only opened her wallet but her heart to a young mom and her little boy. It wasn't a huge amount of money, and she probably didn't think twice about it, but it was a huge gesture, one which never will be forgotten.

So, for those city dwellers, those doubting Toms who cannot fathom what it is about the Ottawa Valley that keeps me so firmly rooted here, just think of this story, and it is plain to see! In the heart of the valley live the most friendly, caring, and compassionate folks this side of Ottawa "EH!"