

## **Chilly Lily**

They're just sitting there staring off into space and completely oblivious to everything going on around them. Why? Why do people throw their lives away and give up on everything that life has to offer? As I keep walking, I see more and more homeless men and women lined up and down Ashbury Street. Dad says they could have once been people in society. He also says that it's not always their fault that they're living on the street. I disagree. I think that you must have done something terribly wrong to end up as someone begging for money.

As I continue walking down the busy San Francisco sidewalk, I keep wondering what is going on in their heads. Do they have families? Of course everyone does, but why are they alone? What could have happened that they can't stay with their family members instead of on the floor? All the hustling and bustling of the large crowds get to me, so I turn onto a side street hoping to find a cheap boutique or toy store I can find my little sister a birthday gift.

"Commy's, they're coming for us! Everyone, save yourself before it's too late!" a man is screaming at the top of his lungs in the middle of an intersection. Okay, that guy might just be crazy. I wouldn't want to call him family. His long beard and vintage army fatigues are the same dingy brown, as well as his cardboard sign and aged wrinkly skin. I have to admit, it is exciting being in the Haight and Ashbury. The colors, the people, the stores, and the whole demeanor of this neighborhood are exhilarating and carefree.

While shopping, I see that the majority of displaced senior citizens look about sixty to eighty years old. Then again, living on the streets could have ghastly effects on one's complexion and age is barely identifiable.

‘I have no job, no family, and no money, but you think your life sucks?’ is what another man’s sign reads. I can’t help but stand here and try to figure out his story as well.

“Look at you. You just think that money grows on trees, but it doesn’t. Weed does,” the homeless man sneers. I quickly walk in the other direction. Look at me? I’m not the one who is a hobo, I think to myself.

“Ashley, don’t stare. They just want to get your attention,” my mother calls out to me. Attention? The homeless don’t want attention. They want money. At least I think they do. This particular man looks young, late twenties, early thirties at the most.

The streets I’m coming up to are cleaner and I realize that the stores are classier. There are less homeless people sleeping and begging around here.

“Mommy, I don’t want to sleep here! It smells like poop, and we don’t have a bed! I want to go home,” a young girl cries. She looks no younger than ten years old. Her mom looks so tired. She has matted blonde hair and a big garbage bag. Her daughter kicks the bag and begins to cry a lot harder.

“Lily, I’m sorry. Please just lay down. I know its cold, but try to go to sleep,” the young mother whispers. “I’ll try to find a cheap hotel in the morning.”

My heart drops at the sight of the broken down family. I can barely imagine sleeping in an alley with no roof or even a blanket. I didn’t realize how lucky I am until now. Here I am buying hundreds of dollars worth of clothes when there are homeless little girls living on the streets of this cold city. I feel like a monster. How can I just sit here and act like nothing is wrong with this picture?

I walk over to them and say as friendly as possible, “excuse me, may I ask your daughter something?”

“Uh... sure?”

“Hi, my name is Ashley. I just bought this really cute Hello Kitty Blanket for my younger sister, but since its really chilly outside, I was wondering if you wanted to have it,” I ask the little girl. Her big blue eyes lit up so fast that my heart immediately felt warm.

“Really? Yes, please,” Lily gratefully accepted.

“You shouldn’t have. Please, we can’t accept this,” Lily’s mom declines.

“Take it. I wouldn’t want it any other way,” I try to convince her. The young mom’s eyes begin to swell up with tears, and I can feel the pressure from tears forming behind my eyes as well. “I know things may be tough, but you are a great mother.”

As we drive home from San Francisco, I think about all the homeless people that I saw today, and I will never know what happened in their past to get them where they are now. You can’t assume that they did something wrong, or chose to sleep on the streets because not always do people decide their fate. As much as you think your life is difficult, there is always going to be someone out there who has it worse off than you. Life isn’t something to take for granted. I realize that it can change within a blink of an eye and that I should cherish what I have.

Since meeting Lily, I have become more humble. I am so grateful for what I have and what my parents have given my siblings and me. I have built a stronger relationship with my mother, and she and I have become really good friends. I now see that no matter what, your family will be there for you whether it is through the toughest times or the

greatest. Like the material things, family can be taken away in seconds. I cherish every moment I have with them because it could always be the last. I realize that I used to take for granted the clothes that I am able to buy and the places that I have traveled. Some people don't get to leave on vacations. Some see a vacation as a trip to the store because they might be able to get some new shoes that don't have holes on the bottom. And there are those who don't even have the simple luxury of having a warm blanket.

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