

1st November, 1997

CUSSED BY A TRAMP

DEAR DIARY, I'm prejudice. My prejudice is against people who live rough and people who beg. I think I've become a judgemental snob and the same blinkered views people have about ethnic minorities are the same blinkered views I've had about unfortunate people who live rough. First of all, I should know that NOBODY in their right mind would choose to live rough. It's not a lifestyle choice; it's the only option they think they have. Why would I choose to sleep outside in the open on the floor, make myself vulnerable to attack and rubbish weather if I had another option? Although I'm sure if it were me, I'd break the law and go to prison, but I've got the luxury to say that because I haven't got the dilemma of shop doorway vs. jail.

Anyway, my preconceived ideas about tramps is that if it's an able-bodied white man, he has the best opportunities this country has to offer. No one and nothing is prejudiced against him. He's not a woman, he's not disabled and he's not black. I guess everyone thinks another group of people are better off than they are. People who are working think people on benefits have got it made. People on benefits think that people who are working are the lucky ones. Minorities think that the majority are better off and the majority think that minorities are better off.

I always think that if I can get up every day and take my tired carcass to work, tramps can too. Hell I see partially sighted and wheelchair bound people heading for work in the morning so I have no sympathy for those asking for money instead of working for it.

Well all that changed today when a young man said to me can you spare some change. I said no, I've got kids to feed you know! He said "I didn't f***** ask you about your kids"! Well I can't tell you how taken aback I was. A lippy tramp? How dare he! I said to him, what did you say knowing full well what he said to me. He repeated I didn't f***** ask you about your kids just like you haven't asked me my story! Again, I was stumped. This man was right, he didn't ask me my story, he asked me for money. I should have totally blanked him like I normally do, but for some reason I spoke to him. I said to him well what's your story then, thinking to myself what am I saying? He said that he came from Bristol with his best friend to look for work. He said they stayed in a hostel and found jobs quite quickly. They eventually rented a flat in Wembley and started to live life. His best friend got into the

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drug scene and also got the sack, they were thrown out of their flat due to rent arrears. They had to part company and they lost touch. He couldn't even afford food some days and he started drinking loads of alcohol whenever he got money. He would sometimes meet people and spend the night on their couches and floors but he mostly slept rough. He started taking drugs to forget that his life had come to this and it's all been a downward spiral.

He has no friends and is no longer in touch with his family. He misses his parents and sister but feels like a failure so he doesn't call home or ask for help and that's his story.

By the time he finished with me, I gave him £2. I walked to Marks & Spencer to get my lunch and on the way back to work, I purposely walked to where he was sitting and I gave him a prawn mayonnaise sandwich, a lemon drizzle cake and a carton of juice. I said to him call home because most parents would rather die than have their child sleeping rough on the streets of London.

Every single person who lives on the street has a different story and not everyone is an "honest" beggar but that young man who had the guts to stop me in my prejudiced tracks did us both a favour.

August Mayfield