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A Likely Encounter

*The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* by Ursula LeGuin vividly reminds me of several encounters I have had with homeless people while visiting New York City throughout the years. After reading and analyzing the text, I regard these past encounters in a different light. I see these people, with whom I’ve encountered, in a more personal manner. One specific encounter with a New York City homeless woman stands out in light of this text. Although I don’t know their stories, I feel as if after reading this short story, I can empathize with them in a way.

The day before the 2012 super bowl, New York City was splitting at the seams with elated New Yorkers and fans from all over the country. The scene was quite similar to LeGuin’s opening paragraph describing the parade-like atmosphere of Omelas. The crowds of people migrating towards the football stadium and local bars were eerily similar to the parades and processions of various types of people in the short story. Everyone was joyous and animated on the outside. As a tourist, I was taken aback by the camaraderie and pride that the native New Yorkers felt towards their city and team. For many people, including myself, New York City was the city of dreams. It had no visible flaws in my adolescent mind. I was not an ignorant child. I knew what homelessness was. I knew that it was a problem, but I did not see it there. On that trip, I did not notice it. Why did I totally disregard an incredibly large faction of the New York population? They were not hiding in a dark cage like the child in Omelas. They were sitting right on the curb or walking around the park. They were right under my nose, but I just couldn’t smell them.

Reflecting upon many encounters after analyzing Omelas, I realized that I did encounter a homeless person that cheerful weekend in the city. On the way back to the hotel after a long and tiresome day of shopping on Fifth Avenue, I overheard an older lady conversing with a young looking woman, who happened to be sitting on the side of the street with a small miniature poodle. Being the nosy person that I am, I tried to grasp everything these two were saying. From what I could hear, the young woman had a very privileged life up until her freshman year of college. She couldn’t handle the stress and started acting out; then, her parents cut her off and she could not afford to pay the tuition. So she dropped out, bought a puppy, and looked for a real job. She found one quite quickly and began working at a waitress in a local diner. For about a year, she lived paycheck to pay check, only buying food and water for herself and her puppy. However, once the stock market crashed in 2009 and the recession blew in full force, she lost her waitressing job and, in a couple months, lost her apartment.

When I first overheard this young woman’s story, I didn’t know if I believed it. I thought maybe she was lying. Maybe she stole the dog to get more money for drugs. But now, after reading Omelas, I see this entire encounter differently. I do believe her. In order for everyone else to be happy that day, or that year, or that decade, she has to be hurting. That’s how it works in the city. That’s how it works in life. This unfortunate young woman, however smart she may be, cannot be happy if we all want to live long and comfortable lives.

Unfortunately, in this encounter, I represent the young children who come to see the young child in the cage and leave content and happy just because that is the way life works. I left New York with a feeling of happiness and fulfillment. I adored the city and, in a way, I still do. However, now I feel more like the ones who ran away from Omelas. When I think of others like that young woman, I think of the child in the cage, unwillingly suffering for other people’s happiness. The utopian city of Omelas is an example of every city in the world and is a statement about the way society treats those few people who may not be as fortunate as others.