

How to Smile



By Torrey Mahall

How to Smile

A smile confuses an approaching frown. ~Author Unknown

That's my favorite quote. I've had it memorized since I was little, and considering I'm starting middle school this year, that's a long time. It shows you that no matter what happens you should always have a positive attitude. But some people don't believe in that and they just think life is a big flop. I know someone like this. Ellis.

Ellis moved to our community this summer. I knew she was from a rich family the moment I saw their car pull in the driveway. It took me a while to accept the fact that they would be our next-door neighbors, since I never had a neighbor before.

Like I said, they were rich. The car was like the vehicle version of Godzilla. It was the first time I had seen a SUV that big. The black paint was shiny, kind of metallic. Just by looking at it I knew it was one of those high-end cars with built in televisions and heated seats. A huge trunk, a bike rack. Everything you would want in a car. Except of course for the sour-faced girl looking out the window. She probably wasn't too excited about moving to a small, rural community like Middletown, Oklahoma.

Word got around about the new family in town. Everybody knows everybody, so gossip spread fast. The Richardsons (that was their last name) had two girls – Ellis, who was 11, and Emily, who was 15. They had moved because Mr. Richardson got a job somewhere else in the county, but this was the best deal he could find on a house. They had a goldfish named Sparky, even though they were probably rich enough to buy a pet more exquisite than a goldfish. And they had a giant black SUV in their driveway (which I already knew).

During the rest of the summer, everyone just kept on minding their own business and doing the regular stuff. Going over to friends' houses, playing video games, swimming, taking walks, basically just hanging out and relaxing, but nothing was happening at "our neighbor's house." Not like I'm spying on them or anything, but I hadn't seen anyone playing outside. I decided to just mind my own business too and see what happens on the first day of school.

When that day arrived, everyone was excited about meeting "the new girl." Again, Middletown was tiny, so we haven't ever had a "new kid" at the school. No one really has the desire to move into or out of this place. And since we've never had a "new kid" we don't know how to handle this.

When I arrived, everyone was swarming around the school, telling all their friends that there was a new girl. It was like a hive of bumblebees. Everyone wanted to meet her. The noise was incredible.

I walked up to my friend Judy. “Hey,” I said. “What’s going on? Is she really that big of a deal?”

“Yeah!” she replied. “Oh my gosh, Emma! I can’t believe you’re not jumping up and down and celebrating. She’s your *next-door neighbor!*”

“So?”

“So, that’s awesome! You just got a rich, popular, city girl for a neighbor! We’ve never met anyone from the city! She could be from New York, or Los Angeles, or Chicago!”

“Wait, she’s from a city?”

Just then, a car rolled into the school parking lot. It turned, and parked in one of the empty spots. Everyone became quiet. At that moment, it seemed as if time stood still. Time completely froze, as if giant hands had picked it up and placed it in a freezer. Never had middle school students been so silent for so long. Something moved, shattering the ice. It was the door of a giant black SUV. It was opening.

The rest of the morning was pure confusion. Everyone wanted to get to know Ellis. They crowded her like paparazzi. There were questions like: Why are you named Ellis? Where are you from? What grade are you in again? Was it nice where you lived? How old are you? She was so crowded by kids I didn’t even see her face. I felt like I was watching a Hollywood star walk down the red carpet.

After a while, Judy ran up to me. She had been interviewing Ellis along with all the other kids. “Wow,” she said. She had a disgusted expression on her face.

“What happened?”

“Everything went wrong!”

“Huh?”

“Oh my gosh, Emma, she’s a brat. All she did was complain. Like, I said ‘What city did you used to live in?’ And she’s all, ‘A city better than this crummy place.’ Whenever someone asked her something, she either told them to shut up or go away. Seriously!”

“Really? I don’t think she would have said stuff like that.”

“She did.”

Puzzling. Middletown was great! Why would someone think of it as 'crummy?' Either Judy was overreacting, or Ellis was having a bad morning. I guessed it was the bad morning.

Judy started talking again. "You know that quote you keep obsessing about?"

"I'm not obsessed with it."

"Yeah, whatever. Well, I think you should go up to her and tell her about it. I mean talks about being positive and you should smile a lot and always be happy and blah, blah, blah, all that inspirational junk. Just go and tell her to stop pouting and being...mad at everything. Give it a try."

"Nah. She'll get over it."

That afternoon, after school, Judy came over to my house to do homework. We finished it, as usual. But I still had Ellis on my mind. Was she really that mean? If we just got to know her...

"Remember when that Corolla ran into your mom?" Judy asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," I said. When I was in 3rd grade, my mom worked as a crossing guard near our school. She saw lots of my friends crossing the street. Then suddenly, this white Toyota Corolla, which was going really fast, came straight for her, ran her over, and kept on going. We never found out who it was, probably a drunk guy or something. But a girl behind me called 911, and my mom was taken to the hospital. She had a broken arm and leg. She's okay now though, but that's the worst thing that ever happened to me. I never mention it to anyone just for conversation. I don't like being reminded.

"Helloooo? Earth to Emma?" Judy waved her hand in front of my face.

"Oh, sorry."

"Well, anyway, I was thinking about something."

"Does it have to do with the accident?"

"I dunno. Sorta. After...your mom was in the ambulance and all that, remember when all the kids from the school came over to your house and knocked on your door and dropped off all those cards and treats and presents? Well, when someone experiences that much kindness in one day, you should feel overwhelmed. I mean, everyone, like, the whole school, came to show how much they cared. Isn't that amazing? Didn't you feel...like, amazed? I can't find the right words, but anyway, don't

you get this warm bubbly feeling inside that tells you like... I dunno... 'Wow, someone really cares about me,' or 'Incredible! They're so nice!' Do you get what I'm saying?"

"Why are you asking me...oh..."

I totally knew what she was talking about.

Five minutes later, we were at Ellis's front door, knocking wildly. Open up, open up, I thought. After a little more frantic knocking, an angry-looking girl opened the door. Her wavy blond hair was all static and tangled. She was wearing a white sweatshirt that said "New York Giants" across the front. She looked like she had forgotten how to smile.

"Hi, Ellis!" I said.

"You're from NEW YORK CITY?" Judy exclaimed.

"I was. But now I'm from Middlevillage."

"Middletown." I corrected.

"Whatever. Who are you?"

Judy said, "I'm Judy. That's my friend Emma. We go to your school..."

And then Ellis slammed the door in our faces.

"I told you. She's awful," Judy whispered.

"We need more people," I said.

"What?"

"More people. If Ellis sees the whole school in her front door, she'll be less likely to do... *that* again. We all need to work together to help her. She really needs it. If all of us arrive and tell her it's okay and she's welcome here, she'll get better. She'll change. Don't you think?"

"And how are we going to get the whole school to care about this?"

"I have an idea."

The next day at school, everyone was still as excited about Ellis as they were before. Her attitude didn't seem to affect anyone. They all continued doing the paparazzi thing. It was starting to bug me, even though it was only the second time.

Just as planned, Judy and I both "had to go to the bathroom" at the same time in algebra class. We rushed to meet each other at the lockers. I hurriedly pulled little slips

of paper out of my backpack, one at a time. We slid each one under the door of every locker. Except Ellis's. They all said: *Meet at 67 Oak Street today after school. Emma's house. 3:00 sharp. Surprise event. Tell parents it's a school project or bring them along.* Then we ran back to class.

At 3:00 that afternoon, people started arriving at my house. They knocked at my door. Some came with their parents, some didn't. Luckily, I didn't have to worry about explaining anything, since my mom and dad work until five at their offices. I am usually left home alone. So, we all just hung out in the living room while I explained our plan.

"Okay," I started. "As we all already know, there's a new girl at school. Her name is Ellis Richardson, and she lives next door. Judy and I went over to her house yesterday, and she slammed the door in our faces the moment we mentioned school. Some have you have tried to talk to her and she's ignored you or said something mean. I can tell she is still angry about moving, and needs a lot more kindness in her world. And we can help."

Judy rolled her eyes. "Basically what Emma's trying to say is we're going to see Ellis, tell her she's welcome, give her stuff, and make her feel better."

"But we all need to work together," I said. "Or else she'll probably slam the door."

Everyone clapped. For a moment I felt proud. I gave everyone a small basket. Each one contained some keychains, candy, or other little things I could find in the house. Like a parade, we all marched over to her house.

When we knocked, Ellis opened the door. She saw it was me, and it looked for a moment like she was angry enough to slam that door again. But then she saw everyone else. Her expression changed. I watched intently as each of us dropped a basket at her feet. At each one, she seemed to soften. When the last person gave one to her, she burst out crying.

"I'm sorry," she said through her tears. "I can't take it. It's been so hard, and I never wanted to move in the first place. I've been horrible to everyone. All of you...you've...you've done something wonderful. I...I don't know what to say."

"No thanks needed," I said. Ellis stood up shakily. The look on her face was so amazing, I felt like the proudest person on the planet. I changed her life, I thought. I stepped a bit closer and gave her a hug. A long one. When I stepped back, her smile was the biggest one I had ever seen. And the happiest. She finally learned how to smile, I thought. She finally learned how to smile.