

Life can always be different...

By Joanne Lee

As I stand in bus queues or wander through supermarkets, there is a sort of grey homogeneity about so much of life in 21st century Britain - and it depresses the hell out of me. The bland repetitions of the high street retail experience are mirrored in the identikit casual clothes, and in the 'designer' brands (whether real or fake) offering a kind of urban uniform to whomever seeks the anonymity it provides. Even the signs of contemporary teen rebellion seem straight off the peg from H&M or Topshop... The fashion industry may like to claim the monopoly upon creative sartorial expression, but all I see is its endless compulsion to repeat. For real difference I look to those eccentric characters in each of our cities that visibly punctuate the greyness with evidence of lives lived otherwise.

In Sheffield I often encountered a man who had carefully doctored his suit so that every seam had been cut open and frayed: it was clearly a deliberate alteration rather than the result of wear and tear, as not only were cuffs and trouser legs frayed, but he had removed all the suit's pockets, cut open the collar and unravelled all its seams. I also remember an old lady who wore her shoes bound tightly to her feet with thick black wool and once, in Brixton, whilst eating a sandwich in a park, I saw a striking figure who'd fashioned a robe from a baby-blue blanket and was proudly bearing a home-made spear of sorts: a wooden spoon lashed with string to the top of a broom handle. Only this week in Brighton, I spotted a tall,

bearded guy who was wearing a scuffed black academic gown teamed with huge white-rimmed spectacles minus their lenses, and singing out loud to the music on his headphones with obvious relish.

A cinema café I used to frequent provided sightings of a man who always wore a black beanie hat along with a vivid yellow vest from which sprang a shock of thick black chest hair. He was always to be found shuffling bits of paper, apparently transcribing lists of material from one densely written page to another. I longed to decipher the text, or ask him what he was writing, but something about his intensity precluded my interruption.

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Another Sheffield vest wearer, head topped this time by a flat cap, was a familiar sight speed-walking across the city, his chest and chin thrust forward and a carrier bag always gripped tightly in his right hand. In summer he'd remove the vest and go topless, though his scrawny body never seemed to get a tan. I believed for a time (erroneously, as it turned out) that he was the running man whom everyone else claimed to have seen, a man who apparently went everywhere at a tremendous clip but never wearing the tracksuit or shorts that might denote someone in training. I never encountered the mythical runner, and had to make do instead with the sighting from a bus in New York of a man wearing nothing more than a short satin skirt who waved enthusiastically at traffic as he ran along the central reservation of the main expressway to JFK airport.

Sometimes it's not the appearance but the activity that draws the city's eccentrics to our attention. A friend of mine often spoke of one of the regulars at her Sheffield local who spent the evenings counting and recounting his change, over and over again, to no particular outcome.

Here in Brighton, the 'Ten Pee Man', so named because he only ever asked passers-by for that amount, became so well known as to be immortalised in a locally produced comic strip. I have been told to look out for the man known for waving at Brighton's buses, his chest bedecked with countless badges: perhaps I am using the wrong routes, but so far he has eluded me.

Some years ago I worked on the checkout of a Tesco store, and one of our regular eccentric customers was a chap with a propensity for sustained but nonsensical oratory. From a distance he appeared to be a rather dapper gent, but up close, his brown suit, with its matching waistcoat, was visibly stained and shiny, and the reek of his body told its own story. There was something Dickensian about his character, an impression reinforced by his tendency to grandiloquent discourse. At first, one assumed he had something to say, and listened attentively, but soon one came to realise that his words made little sense. He would keep up the stream of speech until an impatient queue had formed behind him, at which point he'd finally conclude. In Nottingham, the xylophone man was well known: he was a busker who occupied the same spot in Listergate for years; he busked very badly, simply bashing his instrument tunelessly, but became such a familiar figure that after his death, a public campaign was pursued to create a memorial that would mark his regular pitch.

This last example is telling. Although the British public ostensibly have a disdain for engaging with the eccentricities manifest upon our city streets (whether from fear or embarrassment, it is sometimes hard to discern), there is always a tension between the attempt to ignore and the desire to stare: the fascination for difference remains. Live for a time in any city and you certainly will come to recognise the local eccentrics; mention them to friends and neighbours, to work colleagues or to the people beside you in the bus stop queue, and more often than not, they will know exactly who you mean. I've come to think of these marginal figures as human landmarks at the very heart of our urban life, their presence reminding us that here, even at 'home' in our over familiar streets, life can always be different.

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