

From the Kitchen

11 May 2011



I see him shuffling past the café window from time to time. Long, grey hair, a flannel shirt with buttons missing (summer or winter), corduroy trousers with the cuffs partly unravelled and hanging unevenly over his clean, black boots. I notice they are boots, not shoes, and that they are always clean and shining.

One day I was sitting on a bench outside the butchers' shop and he shuffled towards me. He ignored me as he rummaged in the bin at the end of the bench. I caught a whiff of the contents but there seemed to be a clean, soapy smell emanating from the old man. I was surprised, having expected him to be pungent.

I took the opportunity to examine him more closely, surreptitiously. He wasn't clean-shaven but he obviously shaved occasionally, because he had short stubble on his cheeks and upper lip and the beginnings of a beard on his chin. Shabby as they were, his clothes looked clean; and his hair also, to my surprise, was un-matted and looked washed.

As he moved on to the next bin to find something else to put in his plastic bag, one of the butchers came out with a customer, carrying her purchases to her car. When he came back he stopped in front of me. I looked from the old man moving slowly away, up to the butchers face.

"Interesting chap, that Terry." He pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "He probably doesn't need to be doing that."

I raised my eyebrows questioningly. The butcher sat down next to me and lit up a cigarette. He offered me one and I shook my head.

The butcher took his first deep draft and nodded down the road. "He lives in a homeless shelter run by the Salvos and catches the bus here a couple of times a week. Just before we close he comes to the back door and we give some sausages or meat – enough for him and some of his friends for two or three days. He does the same at the greengrocers and the bakers. He does okay."

"Does he have any family?" I asked.

"Not anymore. Had a son who got shot in Vietnam and his wife died twenty or so years ago. The story goes that he sold the home and drifted around the country for years and ended up here. The rumour is that he has a fortune stacked away somewhere, but no-one really knows."

"I noticed how clean he is and his boots seem to be polished. He doesn't look like a normal vagrant."

"Yeah. He was in the army up to the time his wife died. Still wears his army boots and can't get out of the army habit."

He butted his cigarette and returned to work. I sat for a while, thinking about all the people we see moving around us, living their lives their way. We make assumptions about them,

from the way they look, the state of their clothes, whether they drive expensive cars or rummage in street bins. We really know nothing about them, yet easily stuff them into pigeonholes, whether they fit or not.

I have personally experienced this pigeonholing. Some years ago I tore a calf muscle and hired a wheelchair to get around. Many people, when they talked to me, talked loudly and slowly, often using only simple words. Within a few days I started to question my own mental abilities – I started using only simple words myself and talking slowly, with clear enunciation. If this had gone on for too long I might have ended up mentally deficient. When I pointed out to people that the trouble was in my leg, not in my head, they looked puzzled – they were completely unaware how they were treating me and the underlying, unconscious assumptions they were expressing.

We limit ourselves so much by limiting the possibilities we allow for others. We are quick to reach conclusions about other people based on appearances. To some extent this may in the past have served as a protective mechanism to keep us out of trouble. However, we can be aware of this tendency in us and find the strength of character to overcome these first impressions. And there are times when a first impression is accurate. How can we tell? We can take a second look – take a second impression. We can try and look beyond the surface, find anomalies (such as polished boots on a ‘vagabond’), exchange a few words (how someone talks can tell us a lot). Above all, we can be charitable and offer the other person the opportunity to dispel our instant conclusions and to change our mind.