

Suburb Style

Suburb Style editor, Deborah Warland talks to local residents



Ajan Helmans on litter-picking duty

REFLECTIONS OF A SUBURB LITTER-PICKER OR HOW I LEARNED TO LOVE RUBBISH

featuring Ajan Helmans

Walking near to where I live on the Suburb, I picked up an empty plastic bag and put it in a bin. "Can you tell me why you did that?" a kindly voice enquired. Slightly embarrassed, I replied that I liked the streets clean so I often picked up what other people had left behind.

I was told that the Suburb Residents Association had a team of volunteers who help keep the streets clean. So I called the organiser and an hour later was the proud owner of an interesting stick with a kind of moving claw at the end. Now, for over a year, I have been doing my round of litter-picking two or three times a week.

It feels slightly obsessive. I could have gone to a therapist but, being Dutch, I am inclined to go for the cheaper option. And I love it. Out of the garden gate to the right, down Hampstead Way, then on to Meadway, Temple Fortune Lane, Farm Walk and back home. Halfway, I rest and read my newspaper at Piacere, the Iranian-run Italian coffee shop where you get the best cappuccino in North London.

You soon learn which supermarket provides bags that tear immediately. You discover which bags stay reasonably open against the wind so the rubbish does not fall out and blow away. You learn to collect with the wind so if you lose anything it is blown towards the place where you are going and not the place that you have just cleaned up.

It is a constant source of amazement what people leave on the street: unreturned library books, plastic bags with shopping from Marks or Waitrose and a carrier with recently dry-cleaned clothes which I found in the bushes of a public garden. When good clothes are not clean they go in my washing machine and then to Oxfam. Last spring I could have filled half of an exhibition room of the Tate Modern with single gloves and the other half with divorced shoes. Where are the owners? I do not see anyone walking on only one shoe; was there an accident, an argument, a divorce, or have they been abducted by aliens?

Twice I found a mobile phone. The first one was in front of a house under a car. When I called at the house the owner was very grateful. An hour later she brought me a pot of quince jam and the information that her mobile had broken because she had driven over it.

The second one was more difficult. I discovered it in some grass and it was quite wet. Where was the owner? It took me a long time before I managed to call a certain Beckie to ask if she might acquaint me with the owner. A very pleasant voice said: "Oh, dad, darling, I am so sorry but I do love you. You know that, don't you?" While I was contemplating possible answers, her voice got a touch of panic: "Dad, are you alright?"

"I am pretty sure I am not your dad," I told her.

"Who are you? What are you doing with dad's mobile? Why is dad not on his mobile?"

"Well, I found it," I explained, "and now I am calling one of his numbers to find out the owner. Can you give me his address so I can return it?" She calmed down a bit but was certainly not going

to give me such confidential information. "No!" she said, "Tell me where you live and he will come and collect it."

I have no idea what she told dad but when he showed up, he was accompanied by a kind of bodyguard son to protect him. He mumbled: "Thank you," turned around and disappeared. I did not receive a pot of quince jam.

Lots of people stop to talk: "How dirty they are, throwing their things around," "How good of you to clean up," "What a beautiful day!" "What an awful wind." Complete strangers say hello in the shops, recognizing you from the litter-picking.

The other day a charming woman asked me if I was paid for the job. I appreciated her sense of humour so I answered: "No madam, I am doing six weeks' community service for last year's murders in Hoop Lane!"

She suppressed a shriek and, looking wide-eyed over her shoulder, started to walk briskly away. I went after her to inform her that it was just a little joke and that I had not killed anybody for years. But in my confusion I shouted in Dutch: "Nee mevrouw, het was een grapje!" Hearing this reassuring information, she escaped at full speed so, deciding that she was a lost cause, I put all my efforts into putting a half-full shoe polish container into the appropriate bin.

If you would like to join the litter-picking team please contact Rosalind Josephs on 8455-0490 or you can email ralitter@hgs.org.uk

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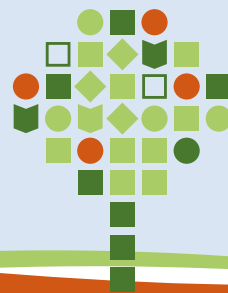
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