



What Remains: Eco-Feminist Pursuits

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**Lebanon Barking: False Dichotomies and Playful
Commoning**

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It is unclear how long it took for the cats to die. But when Fadia came to work that morning and found them under the willow tree, their bodies had entered the stage of *rigor mortis*. The night before, rat poison was laid out by car park security or perhaps, even, by the Capuchin priests. It did not really matter who did the deed. It was Fadia's beloved cats who consumed the toxins that had been tucked in between bits of fatty meat. She looked on in disbelief. The felines were now merely corpses with beady glass eyes that looked up to the willow tree under which they lay.¹

According to Rafoul who ran the fresh produce shop close by, the priests had finally done it. They had put out the poison. For months they claimed to have done so but had, in actuality, not. They told Rafoul there was no choice because snakes and rats were in abundance and would forcefully enter the church before long. Rafoul was nearly as distraught as Fadia. Especially for the loss of Mighty the cat. His eyes glistened when he said, "Mighty killed the rats and the cockroaches."

Days earlier, a Capuchin priest shouted out to a man with his dog to beware. Poison had been sprayed across the thicket of Capucine flowers that lined the huge car park near the priests' residence. Half-jokingly, the man said to the father that there may be bigger problems than rats and snakes. He pointed toward the signs sprayed onto crumbling walls in red that said, "Death! Satan!" The priest sighed but turned to speak harshly to the man, "Anyway, dogs are not allowed here." For once, the man spoke back, "Is that why you put down poison?"

Further up the car park, Fadia had stood tutting at the man and his dog. She was emptying big pots of leftover cooked lentils and rice into piles not far from

¹ Acknowledgements: To everyone at the barking and the Knowledge Workshop, but most especially Mimi.

the willow tree. The carnivorous cats she cared for seemed to look on in disappointment. Fadia was also disappointed, but at the man who spoke back to the priest. She expressed her frustration, “You have no respect for our father.”

The man shrugged and said, “I don’t understand why no one can use the space. It’s not as if there are any cars coming to park these days.” Fadia ignored him. She scooped out the final portion of food from her pot. She turned to walk inside toward her office where she worked for a Christian organization providing sustenance for the impoverished. From her window, she gazed out across the empty car park. It was springtime and the bright orange Nasturtium flowers were in full bloom.

It is not wholly apparent who owned this exceptionally huge plot of land used as a multi-layered car park in the heart of Beirut. The Capuchins claimed they owned a portion. There were rumors that several banks held shares as well. Despite this property murkiness, an executive decision was made by someone, somewhere to rent out all of the vast empty space to a parking company. The first car park company arrived during the late 1990s. With little to show by way of profit, they ended their contract. The next one to arrive was in the summer of 2019. It was a giant in the parking business world. It came with lots of business ideas and rules to bring this huge carpark back to life. Greater measures were taken to prevent people, children, dogs, and all other life forms from entering into the premises. But did they succeed?

Far from idyllic, the car park with three different levels was a heavily contested site where structures that are intrinsically patriarchal confront spontaneous webs of more-than-human kin. This was perhaps especially the case for the lower-level car park. In the corner, grew a fig tree where, underneath it, a lady

had lived for at least a decade. The fig tree lady, as she was sometimes called, was mostly left to her own devices. Still, she did have company. Children used to cycle around her. A Bangladeshi cricket team held a match nearly every Sunday. Filipino women vigilantly practiced their Zumba dance during the very early hours of the morning. Then, on their days of rest, they picked edible plants some of which were sowed by someone I shall refer to as the Nasturtium woman. She, and the fitness fanatics were part of a spontaneous loosely defined cohort of women and men.

Those who brought their dogs to play in this relatively out-of-the-way the place called it the “Barking.” The decision to drop the “p” from parking and replace it with a “b” is because there is a no “p” in Arabic.

Even though the new parking company took over not long before the creeping apogee of Lebanon’s financial collapse in 2019, they seemed to be oblivious to it. One day, I found one of their “managers” standing a little way up the small hill that descended into the lower car park. He was just high enough to oversee the reluctant migrant workers crawl under the fig tree branches. They dragged out all of the fig tree lady’s belongings to throw them in a pile that had slowly start to lean toward the old limestone wall. The fig tree lady was shouting. I’d never heard her voice this loud. When I tried to say speak, the “manager,” turned to warn me that “You all” were next. “You all,” as in “we,” the women with our dogs, the children with bicycles and Bangladeshi cricket team. He told me in a matter-of-a-fact way that we were all dirty.

A few days later, the car park company launched its campaign. Security guards shouted and swore at people. The flowers pulled out. Then, came the threat of poison. And finally, the actual act of poisoning. Yet, in spite of their strategy for economic growth, the cars did not come. This was perhaps on account of pandemic and financial collapse. Nevertheless, the priests and the security guards persevered in prohibiting life on their barren and bare cemented

paradise. They tried to stamp out any sign of the fun interactions that took place on this piece of land and the fact that these playful exchanges which were emergent — albeit imperfect — practices of commoning.

Commoning

Through ethnographic narrative, I want to suggest in the following pages that certain kinds of fun and play at the barking can be viewed as practices of commoning. In her formative work, anthropologist, Kanafani draws an important analytical distinction between the commons and commoning in the context of Lebanon (2021). She notes that the commons, rather than commoning, has increasingly come to be a site for reflection, discussion, and debate amongst scholars, artists, and activists in Lebanon. This turn to the commons has the potential to confront gruesome tactics through which a certain category of land, known as *mashaa'* is (often illegally) closed off to make way for private property.² A case point are the members of the Ras Beirut Dalieh fishing community whose homes were bulldozed in 2015 (e.g., Saksouk-Sasso 2015). But Kanafani also suggests that whereas the commons typically speak to framings of property relations and access to *public* land, commoning goes opens up the potential “to think about complex assemblages of social, ecological and material relations and mutual obligation where people strive for the common good” (ibid:12). She argues that in Lebanon, where the “cookie-cutter” process of land enclosures has left little space for the commons to exist, one would do well by focusing in on practices of commoning.

This distinction is an important one for the barking. The land is allegedly private property. At least these are the claims by the security guards instructed

² For instance, the Mashaa' Collective has documented how coastal areas across Lebanon have long been appropriated by private investors in ways that are often violent. www.masha3.org

to hang up signs saying as such. There were rumors that the banks had taken over the land as part of collateral for an unpaid debt from a school whose building had long since been demolished. Another part of the story was that the Capuchin monks owned pieces of it. The monks' printing press house with its exquisite arches and lush garden, all now in ruins and overgrown, apparently testament to their connection to huge piece of land. However, it was never clear which part was theirs, and which belong to the banks.

If indeed any of these narratives are to be wholly believed. At some point, I hope to dive into the muddy waters of property ownership to try to better understand the logic through which certain actors found legitimacy in violent tactics such as poisoning and evictions.

For now, I want to bypass the issue of ownership to focus on commoning practices because it allows us to look at specific actions. In the case of the barking, these are playful and often spontaneous gestures, expressions and actions, emergent forms of individuality that facilitate mutual care not just for one another, but ultimately for other beings such as plant and animals. These practices of commoning claimed the right to exist in ways that went beyond the ugly harshness of the neoliberal logic encroaching into much of everyday life in Beirut. Commoning in this regard opens possibilities for people to interact in ways that go beyond the market mode.

Evidently, commoning is not just about the shared allocation of resources. Scholars such as Federici and Kanafani demonstrate that commoning is concerned with a certain set of social relations and actions (2003 & 2021). In her thesis, Federici argues that commoning practices also hold strong historical significance (2003). During the transition from European feudalism to capitalism, early enclosures did not just appropriate land other used for commoning. This grabbing of land that led to numerous landless peasants is also gendered. Misogynistic violence pushed women — or all that was rendered

as feminine — out of the commons and firmly into the domain of the household. Federici ultimately argues this moment of so-called primitive accumulation is not, as Marx postulates, a precursor to capitalism. The early enclosures that carved out reproductive and productive spheres to which specific types of gendered bodies have become fixed as feminine and masculine, is the very first capitalist act. This is an undertaking that ultimately configured the public and private nexus. In this regard, enclosures are not just about drawing the demarcations of private property. Enclosures too, speak to a specific set of social relations and actions. For Federici, relations of enclosures draw a gendered dichotomy not only between the means of production and reproduction but also across the self and body. On this point, Federici explores through much of her work the gendered repercussions of different capitalist projects, including colonial and neo-liberal ones, that not only aim to dispossess but also to disassemble collective modes of social reproduction. Commoning then is about merging the two domains of production and reproduction.³

As such, commoning can potentially exist autonomous from the market logic, including the dichotomy between public and private⁴. For as I will try to show, most of the people, the plants, and the animals converging there did not do so because this was the only *public* space left. The savage real-estate development that left few cracks and crevices for plants to grow had a significant role in turning the barking spontaneously into a place for commoning. Similarly, animals that wandered freely or with a leash hardly came to the land through

³ If, as Hassan and Haider argue, that housing is a cause feminists must take up, it is possible to argue that commoning is also a feminist cause. Hassan and Haidar argue that housing (or lack thereof), is intrinsically a feminist cause. This is because of how patriarchal capitalism in Lebanon manifests social disparity through the politics of housing tenure (2021). They show that housing tenability is contingent to the intersection of the *longue duree* of property ownership, patriarchy, and neoliberal policies advocating for private interest (ibid). Gendered and sexuality disparities within the experiences of access to homes (and, even spaces within one's home) as well as evictions from them are framed by this interconnection of capitalism and patriarchy. Commoning in this regard is a feminist cause because of how it breaks down the domains held up by patriarchy and capitalism.

happenstance. As did, the humans, who came here to share a space that in some ways were autonomous to the gendered binaries between public and private. Play was central to this commoning that broke down false dichotomies. And play is that to which we now turn.

Playful Commoning

In critiquing the progressive undertones of Marxian historical thought, Federici's analysis inadvertently engages with the anarchism Emma Goldman described as not being "a theory of the future to be realized through divine inspiration" (in Day 2010: 133). In treating commoning as a set of social relations and actions outside of capitalism, Federici draws closer to anarchism thinking as a possibility to "creating new conditions" (ibid). Despite the resonance with Goldman's anarchism, there are still significant divergences. In my understanding of Federici, there is no natural essence to the condition of being a woman. Goldman, however, did draw a gendered dichotomy when she suggested that women are instinctively drawn to pregnancy and birth (but not to marriage) (Day 2010).

Nevertheless, some analytical reflections can be gleaned from Goldman. This is because in my reading of commoning in much of Federici's work might intrinsically contain immanent forms of Goldman's conceptualization of individuality — I am thinking here of how Federici shows the way enslaved women in the Caribbean context kept gardens to feed enslaved households (e.g. 2003:113). This might be considered an innate creative and, and perhaps even, playful sense of personhood distinctive to the kinds of "rugged individualism" that thrive under capitalism (Day 2010). (For Goldman, this sense of individuality is shackled by political and economic systems that elevate the protection of private property as the central moral code to abide by (ibid).)

Individuality as something that is spontaneous and playful is important to the context of the barking. For I will try to show that the barking was composed of people from many walks of life, few who shared with others a common sense of self. Indeed, the desire to play is one shared commonality amongst the humans and at least some of the animals. Play was perhaps one of the most significant resources distributed at the barking. Children played their games. Dogs fetched sticks. Zumba moves performed. Cricket balls thrown. Birthday parties held. There were even attempts at Laughing yoga.

The anthropologist, Robert Hamayon, has shown through ethnographic study that play is intrinsic to human action (2016). Play, in its different modalities, entails diverse fictional framings that permit people to consider possibilities and values that are beyond the empirical reality in which they reside. This is not to say that play does not engage with the empirical world. In the Batesonian sense, there is a paradoxical dimension to play in that it is at once true and untrue (Bateson 1972, Hamayon 2016).

The classic Batesonian example here is that of dogs that play by “pretending” to bite one another (ibid). There is in this regard, a meta-narrative to playing in that the different forms it takes opens up possibilities for what could happen in the real world. A dog who is not typically a biter in reality but is so in play, could in reality, one day, bite back. Or perhaps, biting might come to represent an action that is no longer painful or violent. Reality could be the kind of bite we currently perceive to be as pretend.

The notion play can reframe how we understand and approach our world is central also to Winnicott’s thesis (2005). For him, playing is the ultimate path toward the real self, one that is no longer hindered by the external orders of society (ibid). Yet, play, as Harmayon would suggest, can have more insidious undertones. At the barking, for instance, the priests and security guards falsely

claimed for many months to have put out poison. When they finally did, everyone thought they were still just playing a threatening game.

How do such threatening games infringe into the fragile commoning of the barking? One unexpected result was the eviction of the fig tree lady. Her life, or what I know of it, is sketched out in the epilogue to this essay. I want to point out here is that nobody believed she would be removed. This is even though the security said they would. Someone asked me rhetorically, “How could priests allow something as unchristian as this? It is such an ugly thing to do” It was unimaginable — at least for some of those who dwelled or worked around the barking.

In contrast to such ugly and perverse games that reinforced hierarchies of “rugged individualism,” play amongst the barking collective was practiced as an attempt to conceive the car park as something more beautiful than just a car park. Here, play became less about buttressing coercive modalities of engagement. It was an approach orientated more toward permitting a sense of self, autonomous from the imposition of others. These were only instances of playfulness however — flashing moments, even. And yet, if only fleeting, play opened up spaces for a person to momentarily experience a sense of freedom and autonomy. Commoning thus refers to practices that permitted and not denied others the space to play out different fictional framings.

Before we turn to instances of playful commoning, a note about ethnographic method. Ethnography has come to mean many things. So has the ethnographic method. For me, ethnographic thinking and doing entails a certain sort of spontaneous, imaginative, reflexive, and collective engagement that goes beyond individualistic sensibilities but that still, ultimately requires some sense of individuality (Ethnographic Collective 2021).

Indeed, my stumbling into the barking was not intentional. I came there by chance one day when walking Mimi, my little to medium sized dog. Eventually I

visited the barking daily, morning and night for nearly five years. I made friends, human and canine. I also befriended one cat. That was Rafoul's beloved Mighty. Over the years, with my human and non-human friends I played, cried, argued, and felt sorrow (I am thinking here of when Mimi chased off another dog from the barking. I could never find that woman and her dog again.) Life is full of all those moments. As is ethnography. And just like ethnography, the barking was never exclusively a site of research. It was site of living.

In the spirit of the barking, the form of ethnographic writing I have chosen to deploy here is one interlaced with fiction. I have merged different characters together and changed the name of priest order. I attempt, through form, to portray, the affective ties forged at the barking as well to obscure those figures willingly capable to violently dispossess and disassemble those bonds. I have thus tried to create anonymity in a city where people live so closely together and where so much has been done to try to pull us a part.

There is an attempt at playfulness in the style I write in. In the tale of the Nasturtium woman, it will hopefully become clearer as to why individuality is something innate and playful. We see that the playfulness of individuality might be about trying to make the world beautiful. This beautification is not what Benjamin refers to as the aestheticization of politics underpinning both capitalism and fascism (2008). (That is aesthetics is portrayed as something which is apolitical.) Rather, the beautiful I am speaking of is the politicization of aesthetics, which for Benjamin, lays bare the brutal coerciveness of tyranny and oppression. In the sections on "muck" we see more instances of the politicization of aesthetics. For example, in the voluntary removal of dog poo and then, in protest, the mischievous hanging of poo bags in front surveillance cameras.

To make beautiful what is ugly (i.e., oppressive, and tyrannical), the politicization of aesthetics is thus to acknowledge that there are different ways

of seeing the world. At the barking, different ways of experiencing fun and joy could not infringe on someone else's fun and joy. At least that was the idea. A great deal of intense discussion (and at times, arguments) grew out of questioning the etiquette of giving snacks to other people's dogs. Although the dogs seemed to find no real issue with the free distribution of treats. In the section on muck, I look at another more serious infringement on people's fun by those who did not belong to the barking —

To conclude: There is no clear conclusion to this essay. This is as an attempt to reflect spirit with which this piece was written. That is, an attempt to trace the flux of life. It is imperfect and somewhat unfinished.

There is an epilogue to this essay. This epilogue tells the tale of the fig tree lady who lived a seemingly make-believe life but who brutally disappeared without trace. Even though I have chosen to make her story the final tale, we shall see that it is by no means the end of the barking saga. In choosing to give her story a distinctive place of its own at the end of this piece, I aim to amplify the violent games with which people, animals, and plants were treated for the sake of private property the moonlighted, intermittently, as a carpark. In bringing more prominently to the fore the financial collapse that coincided with her disappearance, I hope to show that this violence game is a nasty trick played on all of us.

Into the Thicket

When the Nasturtium woman speaks about her gardening techniques, she does so in Arabic, but she uses the French term for the flowers. *Capucine* as these flowers are called in French are in reference to their likeness in shape of the Capuchin monks' hood robes. The meaning is not lost on us. While we engaged in our barking practices, priests watched covetously from their rooms in a limestone building that towered over the car park. We tried to ignore their voyeurism. But we always said hello when one of the fathers walked past.

She and I were good friends. Our dogs were even closer. We saw each other every day for nearly five years. But she had developed care relations with Nasturtium for much longer. It was 30 years, give or take. One winter day, while I watched her till the soil with her secondhand boots, she told me about her first plantations. She pointed to an old crumbling arched building adjacent to the car park. It had most likely once been a stable before it was abandoned, eventually becoming a site where people threw their garbage. (This was long before the garbage crisis of 2015.)

She threw her first Nasturtium seeds onto the composting bin bags. She did not really know why she did it. She recalled that the sight of the garbage was annoying her. And she just threw the seeds across the bags. She said that when the nasturtiums bloomed, people stopped discarding their waste. From then on, she intentionally spread the seeds across the sloping piles of rubble that demarcate different sectors of the exceptionally large car park. She became especially busy during wintertime when she picked the seeds from the withered flowers. With her dog, who, in all honesty, was rather rotund, the Nasturtium woman moved to the rest of the city where she threw the flowers' seeds into derelict corners.

She seemed to find a lot of joy in her flowering work. She had lived in the neighborhood all of her life. She grew up in the apartment where she currently resided. She left it for a long period only once. This was during the civil war when she, her parents and siblings were forced to flee. They returned a few months later to find everything looted with the exception of one small coffee cup and a dress she had made. Sewing was never her forte. Plants and animals were. Ferns spilled over from her balcony. Across the city, she foraged for berries, oranges, and rosemary. In early spring, she stopped to smell the orange blossom of the sparse trees that lined a certain pavement. Her current dog belonged to a long line of abandoned animals she had adopted. Her

pockets were lined with snacks she made from leftovers ready to hand out to other dogs, especially the neglected ones.

Other people, including myself, assisted in her propagation. Although no one was as vigilant or fastidious as her. She was the Nasturtium woman. The flowers were hers but only in that she planted them for everyone to enjoy and for some to eat. There were, however, certain implicit rules pertaining to the appreciation of the flowers. The codes of the commons came to the fore during the first Covid-19 lockdowns when more people began to use the car park as a public space. There was little consideration to continue the upkeep of orange and green thicket. Rather, flowers were plucked out in their abundance to be take home to be placed in delicate glass vases or to ornate deliciously ice cakes. Nothing was necessarily wrong with either the bouquet or the floral dessert. But as Jennifer, a Filipino lady said to me, “They are taking but not giving.” But how is one supposed to reciprocate?

Muck

Humans with dogs who belonged to the barking were a loosely knit group comprised mostly of women and some men who took their dogs — or their bosses’ dogs — to sniff and play during the quiet hours of the morning and late afternoon. While the dogs fetched, their humans extended their care to the car park. There was no clear organization to these tinkering activities. At times, impromptu rubbish bags which hung on rusty nails protruding from crumbling walls, were removed, and taken to a nearby rubbish skip. On occasion, plastic bags and old food wrappers discarded the night before by joy riders, were picked from alongside the decaying walls that delineate the boundaries of the barking.

This particular cohort of canine lovers were vigilant about excrement. And not just the canine kind. Human feces increasingly became a problem when the

new car park company moved in. Eyewitnesses claim that security guards used the lower car park to relieve themselves. It is highly feasible. But then again, as the financial collapse came into full swing, the barking seemed to become a place of rest for those who no longer lived in a home. Some came to receive food from the charity where Fadia worked. But none stayed on for long — or at least so it seemed at daylight. The theory, nevertheless, was that the barking had become the public toilet for many different kinds of transient folks, company personnel and some.

If lavatory muck wasn't enough, barking commoners were regularly confronted by men who found pleasure in exposing themselves. This was especially to women, even more so to the Filipino women who walked their Madame's dogs. This masculine penchant toward a certain nationality is of significance here. Not least because of the coerced passivity imposed on domestic workers like those who come from the Philippines. The Filipino women, like the Bangladeshi cricket team were migrant workers in Lebanon. But perhaps, for brief moments at the barking when they played cricket or dances to Zumba, they were not. The question that arose: how to put a stop to the violent encroachments on their fun?

The Nasturtium woman shouted out to one of the imposing men. Dogs were sent over in the hope to scare him away. But all this was to no avail. The more serious the barking collective, the more adamant this horrible man. But then one day, one of the men is threatened in a joking way. Someone shouts out, "If he does not put away "it" away, "it" will be cut off." Everyone in the barking started to laugh. The man shrank into the shadows never to return. Was it the laughter that scared him away? Of course, we will never know. But perhaps there is collective power in the commoning of play.

Snakes in the Undergrowth

Differential treatment to migrant workers who came to have fun was not just by men who engaged in perverse acts. There were some people who came to have fun but did not belong to the barking could harsh. For example, cricket was typically played on Sunday afternoons. This was when the Bangladeshi men had their day off. During those hours, the lower parking level was mostly theirs. Although at times, they were told to stop playing by people. The word “dirty” was one expletive used by one man to describe the Bangladeshi men. This man, who walked his dog regularly, but never cleaned up the poo, claimed that the cricket team left the markers for the stumps (bases) after playing. These markers were twigs from the nearby fig tree.

Pettiness was only one way that racism reared its ugly head. The security guards were more blatant in their harassment. Migrant workers were threatened with the police. At times, only Lebanese were permitted to enter the car park. But this was only to be able to cut across the neighborhood. And then, the car park campaign intensified once more.

In September 2019, car park officials sent their “manager” to oversee workers pull out all of the Nasturtium. Before he had a chance to scream at me to leave the empty parking lot, I asked him what his crew were doing. All the Nasturtium must go. Snakes, he claimed, were hatching huge eggs in the undergrowth. As he spoke, a woman’s voice was heard in the distance. It was the Nasturtium woman peering in from a crack in the closed iron gate. She was pleading with the manager to spare some of her flowers. He snorted and shouted menacingly at me to leave.

In the year to follow, the guards vigilantly chased everyone away from the barking. Gates were locked. Entrances that did not have gates were blocked with bits of cement and barbed wire. Notices were put up announcing to the

neighborhood that the land was private property. No one was allowed to enter, human or otherwise. Only the priests could pass through to get to their residences. Surveillance cameras were hoisted onto poles. A security guard told me it was to make sure the cars were not stolen. I pointed out that the cameras were pointing to the pedestrian gate. The guard tutted and shouted at me to get out. In protest to the ugliness of the place, I learnt of some canine lovers who protested by hanging bags of dog poo along the walls of the vast and empty car park. I do not know who these protestors are — perhaps, another barking collective?

But their objections were ignored. The excrement dried up and the plastic bags fluttered away, or perhaps, someone cleared them up?

There were some lulls to the campaigns to keep life away. The letters on the laminated signs reminding everyone that this land is private property faded away so that they are illegible. Guards got ill or are late from one of the many other jobs they worked in order to earn a living wage. During these brief moments of lapses in vigilance, life seemed to return to the barking. Although, when we did, we realized that in fact some life had in fact remained. We noticed that there are still flowers waiting to bloom and snakes still residing in the undergrowth. We wondered if the priests notice them as they look out onto their garden of paradise.

Epilogue: The Fig Tree Lady

I spotted the old lady who lived under the fig tree. She was walking across one of the mid-level car parks. It was a sunny November day in 2019. She was wearing her winter clothes, unchanged since the previous year. It was a few weeks since I last saw her. Relieved, I called out to her, “Bonjour, Tante!” She turned to greet Mimi, my accomplice. I asked after her wellbeing. She nodded, smiled, and asked after us, all the while, looking down at Mimi.

Her weathered hands gripped several plastic bags with faded printed letters which made out the names of supermarkets— some had long since closed down. They were full of clothes and judging from Mimi’s reaction, there was probably some food tucked in there as well.

The old lady sighed, “They’ve taken my suitcase.” Mimi tilted her head. The old lady seemed to take Mimi’s reaction as a cue to carry on, “yes, there was a small suitcase. Well, not that small, but I’ve had it for many years. I had all my money. All my savings, all my dollars in that suitcase.” With that, she turned and gradually walked away. It seemed as if her tattered and oversized clogs were too heavy for her. Every step was slow and deliberate.

I called after her. But she ignored me. Or perhaps she did not hear me. She carried on shuffling across the gravel. When she walked under one of the few trees spared open aired multi-layered car park, a leaf gently floated down onto on her shoulder. She did not seem to notice. But it remained there. Delicately perched. Its brilliance was in such sharp contrast to her dark navy-blue turtleneck. I was sure that I could see the bright leaf even when the fig tree lady became a small speck in the distance.

The story is that the old lady had lived under the fig tree for more than a decade. She came from a “respectable family.” She had been a wife and a mother. Until everything changed overnight. She got up and picked up sticks, departing to the streets. No reason was given. Eventually she found the fig tree in the car park. There, she laid out her blankets where she rested for most of the day and night. Plastic bags filled with food retrieved mostly from the trash lined a makeshift bed that she inevitably shared with the city wildlife.

Her fig tree produced the variety of fruit inedible to humans. Birds and rats did seem to have a penchant for them. And the elusive fat snake (there only seemed to be one), had a penchant for the birds and the rats. She always seemed indifferent to all of it, including other humans who often tried to help.

Her silence almost implied she did not want help. That is, until she spoke to me about her suitcase. Could the fig tree lady have hidden a suitcase of dollar bills underneath the decaying leaves and fruits?

It was almost as if her story of the suitcase was a foreteller of what was to come. In many ways, the banks — including the Central Bank — had also been operating with fictitious dollars. Around the time the fig tree lady asked me about her suitcase, regular bank account holders noticed the strange disappearance of their money. The banks were unable to produce dollars out of thin air. During that time, the fig tree lady continued to search for her money in the thicket surrounding her home. And then, a few months later, she was thrown out from the crotch of her fig tree, which was perhaps, a threshold to commoning. I never saw her again.

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