
HOME / COMMENTARY / OPINION

This (gleaning) life

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ONLY on days of torrential rain did she not come out. In any other weather, in any temperature, at almost any time, she was at work on the street.

Crouched, with her broom and dustpan, sweeping and picking the leaves from the footpath across the precise width of her block of flats. Diligently, tirelessly, obsessively. It didn't seem to matter that her self-assigned task was pointless. Our street is lined with a canopy of long-established fig trees that shed their leaves continuously, in copious amounts, at different times of the year more than others.

I knew nothing of her, not even her name. She appeared to be in her late 70s. A creased face bleached with time and lost memories. A large frame resting on swollen ankles and struggling with a sore limp. Her clothes pointed to an Eastern European heritage, a "new Australian" as she would have been referred to. She was always wearing the same long, white and pleated skirt with pastel swirls, flat slip-on shoes, coloured tops and a dark headscarf. By dawn or moonlight, often with a background of squealing

She appeared to have no visitors, family or friends. She avoided or ignored neighbours, and shooed away wandering cats and dogs. She was always alone, and seemed to enjoy only the company of her leaves.

After a storm or at the last drop of a downpour, in a flash she would rush to claim her work station. She scanned first the area and evaluated the scale of the duty ahead. From across the street, I watched her shaking her head at the fresh pile of leaves, but I expected her to be secretly jubilating for the newly added responsibilities.

One sunny morning, she wasn't there. As the leaves slowly stacked up, she was nowhere to be seen. Was she sick? Dead? Had she moved or returned to her country? Then it became obvious the entire block of flats had been vacated for a makeover. Various tradesmen took turns at embellishing the block while the footpath became a disgrace, at least by the standard she had set.

One morning she was quietly back, and the footpath was immaculate again. Our street breathed a collective sigh of relief. Unbeknown to her, the neighbourhood had grown over time to consider her presence and occupation with respect. Day after day, she continued to stand as a reassuring beacon, possibly a gleaner and custodian of our own memories, hopes and regrets. For no fee she kept them all shipshape. She sometimes returned my greetings but always avoided eye contact, and only with a mumble and a forced smile. She was busy, you see?

Our gleaner has since disappeared for good, and with autumn leaves everywhere, she is greatly missed.