



Source: Nicholas Blanford, 'Hezbollah land grab heralds war', *The Times* in *The Australian* online, 27/02/07.

Tags: [home](#), [dreams](#), [plants](#)
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She looks out the eastern window of her property. The Illawarra flame tree stands alongside its best friend the lemon-scented gum, a majestic giant. The two of them, long overdue their telegrams from the Queen, appear nowhere on the plans of the nextdoor development. The paper is thin. She lays them before her, the black and white photocopies of dotted and bold lines, angles, elevations, floor space, height ratios, terraced setbacks and hundred year flood lines. All in impossibly small print that even with her newly acquired accoutrements of aging, she cannot discern. She pushes the glasses up the bridge of her nose, banking on a trick of the light, perhaps. But no, they are not there.

Surely it is illegal to cut down trees as old as these?

This forgotten valley was under the cloak of a Roads and Traffic Authority buy-back ruling for years. You couldn't give these houses away. The river is the only water for miles. Polluted and pungent it was a source of shame, an open sewer in which the filth and detritus of a city floated past daily. A blindspot. No one admitted they lived here. These days the industry run-off and overpowering smell are long gone. Gross waste traps have been installed, a new walking track built and special interest groups are met with carefully worded rhetoric about regeneration and respect. The area has been reborn but nonetheless seems miscast in its role as prime waterfront.

Even now, you wouldn't let your dog swim in it. It looks good enough, but things are never as they seem. The river runs through 13 councils, a political hot potato, in everyone and no one's territory. The real toxic stuff lies deep within the silt and sediment. The river is tidal so the water flows, fish who were one day in Sydney Harbour may the next be in Earlwood or even Homebush. On the surface there's plenty of life, people, dogs, black and white cockatoos, rosellas and even a pelican who glides along at dusk. There used to be two. No one knows what happened to its mate. Perhaps she died.

Back then when businesses were given a licence to pollute the river, the council ripped up the original mangroves and the banks were reinforced with sheets of metal for the run-off tracks. Easy. In it flowed, after hours, in set amounts, all perfectly legal. Now the banks are giving way. The metal sheets, (also long overdue their telegram), need replacing. To do this the river must be dredged. But by whom and at what cost? And where? Surely not in our backyards or the neighbouring golf course. It would go out of business.

'The river looks so nice now, so many people use it, you can't bring up all this toxic material. It's a public health and safety nightmare' say 13 councils, for once a unified front. 'But to replace the sheets and not dredge would wipe out all life in the river system and possibly beyond'

say all the concerned residents and action groups. Government is called in. The stand off continues and the poison sleeps. Who likes to stir calm waters?

Her new glasses have white 'go fast' stripes down the sides, on the arms. They are black on the outside and green on the inside, very smart. Wearing them she feels very smart. They are for close up things like reading and writing. She will write another letter to council, she must. She will marshal her troops, call in favours or else be wiped out. She will have a cup of tea with the old woman down the street, a real shit stirrer who's lived here forever. She turns up at every presentation and award ceremony and asks the too big, too hard questions that no one has the answers for. And she loves trees, she will call the arborist, get a preservation order while her blood boils at the hide of them all.

Her eyes wander from the trees, blurry and ghostlike, back to the plans. The proposed four storey flat roof concrete structure with its raised, paved and pooled backyard, free of trees, messy leaves, shade and the bother of deep soil planting, is a fortress. From within it's a palace, providing dominion over the surrounding land. Strategic. One way vision only. Can't see in through its sheer cliff-like concrete walls. Nothing penetrates once inside. And once inside, they are not coming out. The windows are closed to air, relying instead on heaving machinery to pump life into the unyielding dwelling.

It's not just that she will be deprived of light, sun and privacy, or that she will be condemned to exist next to such ugliness. It's that she can't sit by and let it happen. She wants to fight for the charm and historical integrity of where she lives. She doesn't want to live next door to such a thing, nor to people who don't care for the same things that she does. It makes her feel little, alone, outnumbered, unsafe.

Over the fence last Sunday morning while she was watering her plants, she asked them if they knew the effect of their plans on her home, on her way of life, on everything—the neighbours, the neighbourhood and the people who walked every day and looked into our backyards as they passed.

They said 'We've worked hard for this land. It's ours and we'll build our dream home.'

'It's not a dream,' she says, 'it's real, and the trees, what of the trees?'

'Ah yes, the trees, it's unfortunate, the trees, but we no longer fight our enemy with swords of wood.'

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Victoria Spence.