

# THE QUARRY

## Dirt

Fiona Wildgoose

The truck had the company name on the side, done with a home-made stencil and pink spray-paint:

TOBY AND BINAAR: REMOVALIST SERVICE

Dina rode in the truck all day with the two happy young men and listened to their enthusiastic singing with bemusement. They had a fondness for Cheryl Cole.

The trip took under an hour once they got on to Windsor Road, and for the last five minutes of it they were free of the established suburbs and driving through flat, old farmland. Here the mountains loomed as a thick blue line on the horizon, and to Dina it seemed that the distance between was broken only by a few fences and stands of wind-break trees.

‘Going to the new house,’ Binaar sang, adlibbing between CD tracks.

‘Going to the McSuburb,’ Toby added.

Dina smiled and said, ‘It’s not a McSuburb, it’s a “curated residential experience”.’

The boys laughed through the next chorus, as the wide gates of Dina’s new suburb slid into view on the left. The polished stone plaque glinted at them in the afternoon sun:

“Greenhills on Windsor – *your life starts here*”

Dina stood on the new-laid road in front of her new beige house and watched the removal van drive away. It was done. All her stuff was in one place again.

‘They would not stop singing the whole time!’ Angela, her wife, was messing around with the front screen door with a phone hanging from her ear. ‘I reckon Dina liked it, meant she didn’t have to speak to them. Hang on. Hey! Coming in?’ she called, waving, then the wave turned into a vicious slap to her bare forearm, ‘Shit, these mozzies.’

Dina turned to her wife. ‘You signed on the dotted line, remember?’

‘Yeah, but I wanted to live next to a *picturesque wetland*, like it had on the pamphlet. Fuckers didn’t mention it came with a mosquito-specific Hellmouth.’

‘We will live next to a wetland, but they’ve got to finish building it first. You saw the satellite images, there was barely a creek running through here before.’

Angela slapped at her arm again.

‘Shit off!’ she snarled, then spoke to Dina in a pained voice, ‘Seriously, come inside. I need to pretend we have neighbours.’

‘Give me a minute,’ Dina said.

The sun was sinking low, and if she squinted she could almost imagine that the house on the next block over had a roof. With a little more effort she could pretend that the expanse beyond was a new suburb full of green smells and warm rectangles of light, and not three acres of torn soil awaiting forty-eight identical beige houses. There were dozens of concrete slabs down, and the four lots next to hers had their timbers in. Only her house, No.2 Parkway Close, was finished, aside from the show-home, No.1 Parkway Close, which was the developer’s office and was empty between 5pm and 9am. The two houses sat opposite each other in the deepening gloom like guardian monoliths locked in an unblinking stand-off. Dina stood between them on the road and gave a sigh, breathing in the rich smell of cooling soil.

Maybe the imagining would be easier in half an hour when the sunset was sufficiently advanced, and then maybe she wouldn't spend the night trying to shake the feeling she was becalmed, her house a beige boat on a clay sea. She went inside.

Dina and Angela took breakfast in what would become their sliver of a backyard. There was no fence or grass yet; it was a trampled patch of soil full of crumbly concrete from their slab, but they had brought a bench for the pavers by the back door. Dina sipped her tea and stared out over the dirt expanse while Angela sat forward, eating watermelon and spitting the seeds out.

'This is so weird,' Dina said, as she rubbed the night's grit from her eyes; this morning it was dirt-coloured, 'I can't stop thinking about all the trees that used to be here. It's that *smell*. It's pushing buttons in my head.'

'I know, it's strong, eh? Binaar reckons it's 'cause they dug down to the clay layer.'

'And it's really quiet. I thought there were supposed to be crews out today?'

'Me too. You should go over and ask Connie,' Angela said, chomping and spitting.

'Her name's not Connie.'

'Uh-uh. She works in a developer's office, her name is Connie.'

Dina looked at the ground where the pips – dozens, now – were hidden amid the dirt and gravel. The soil was trampled; evidence of work boots and wheel barrows and Utes and small, caterpillar-wheeled machinery, with the bottle tops and cigarette butts and sandwich wrappings that came with them.

Just then the wind picked up, whipping red-brown silt from the drying dirt and throwing it into the air. The field before them transformed into something otherworldly: a ruddy haze obscuring the distance and great curls and waves of dust dancing ever higher into the sky above. Angela began to splutter.

'Bugger this for a joke,' she said as she took her watermelon inside.

Dina sat mesmerised until her vision was obscured with tears and she, too, fled into the house. Angela was running around closing doors and windows and swearing every time a gust blew grit into her face. Within fifteen minutes, the haze was higher than their house.

‘It’s a sign,’ Angela said.

‘You think the ghosts of the trees are sending us a message?’

‘Yes. It’s that we should get on with the unpacking before our mortgage eats us alive.’

Dina sighed.

‘Let’s start upstairs,’ she said.

It rained that night, clearing the air and washing wet swathes of red-brown stain into the gutters, across the concrete slabs, and on to the roofs and beige walls of Nos. 1 and 2 Parkway Close. Dina woke to the sound of Angela banging around downstairs.

‘Good morning,’ Dina said as she stepped into the family room. The back door was wide open and a chill breeze swept in, forcing her to wrap her dressing gown tight. Angela poked her head around the corner from the kitchen.

‘Fucking. Dust. Everywhere,’ she said, then resumed sweeping.

Dina looked around, blinking the night’s fog from her eyes. Every surface had a coating of fine, red-brown dust.

‘Wow,’ she said, ‘is this... *more* than yesterday?’

‘Yeah. And I closed everything! Might have to pack the ventilation holes with tissues...’

Outside the morning sun was drawing steam out of the dirt in little curls that turned to chaos when the wind grabbed them. Angela tossed the broom aside and snatched up the dustpan.

‘... and I tried to speak to Connie about it when she drove in this morning, but she was yelling at someone on the phone. Totally ignored me. You notice there are no crews out again, today? Construction was supposed to be kicking along,’ Angela continued, trailing off

to a mutter as she closed her eyes, ‘Christ. I hope the developers haven’t gone bankrupt or something.’

‘Let’s go for a walk, get away from this,’ Dina said.

‘There’s nothing within walking distance except more dirt,’ Angela said bluntly.

Dina stood back as Angela bustled around the back room, sweeping the surfaces with grim determination.

‘I’ll... go unpack things that won’t stain,’ Dina said.

The hours passed, and Dina woke from an unintentional afternoon nap to the sound of the front door slamming. She opened the bedroom window – immediately flinching from the dust-laden breeze – to see Angela throwing her bag into the car.

‘Where are you going?’ Dina called.

Angela looked up, squinting, and flapped a hand at her angrily.

‘Close that damn window!’ she cried.

‘Sorry! But what... why are you charging off without even saying bye?’

‘I can’t! I fucking can’t! The dirt has it in for me!’

Dina shut the window and hurried downstairs, just catching Angela before she drove away.

‘Hey!’

Angela wound down the window. ‘You keep unpacking, okay? I’m going to figure something out. I’ll be back in an hour or so.’

Dina closed the front door and turned to face her empty house. The smell of the dust was less potent than the smell of the clay outside, but it was drier, more intrusive. She stood with it until the sun dropped low and a shaft of light from the kitchen window broke across her ankles, and the sound of a car door stirred her from her reverie. It wasn’t Angela; the timbre was wrong. The next moment Dina was turning the door handle and hurrying into the street.

‘Connie,’ she cried, ‘Wait!’

The woman glanced up at her from the boot of her car, a scowl on her face and a phone at her ear. Dina realised her blunder too late.

‘Oh, sorry! Um, I don’t remember your name. Can I just ask you about the—’

Connie slammed the boot shut, and strode to the driver’s door.

‘No, Jeff,’ she said, ‘I’m not interesting in tabling something. I’m suffocating here!’ As she got into the car she threw a nasty hiss in Dina’s direction, ‘These people are beasts!’

With that she slammed the door and drove away.

Dina frowned, then strode up the driveway of No.1 and banged on the door.

‘Hello?’ she called, ‘Anyone? Whoever the hell works with not-Connie? I’m a resident and I have some bloody questions!’

When no answer came, she peered through the front window. What was the formal living room in No.2 was the main office in No.1, complete with curved reception desk and binder-lined bookshelves. It was unbelievably clean: nothing in the bin, no post-its, and no plants. Connie didn’t seem like a neat type; she seemed like an eating-fish-tacos-over-her-keyboard type.

Dina glanced over at No.2, at the empty driveway. Ribbons of red dust tumbled down the street ahead of the breeze, coming to rest in the gutters for only a moment before a gust picked them up and rolled them out again. An uncomfortable feeling stirred in her guts.

A moment later she had picked up a fist-sized lump of concrete from among the chunks of clay in No.1’s front garden.

It took more force than she expected to break the glass. The month-old deadbolt turned smoothly and she was in, sneaking behind Connie’s desk with a dreadful excitement running through her bones. The desk bore only a stack of blank paper, a few pens, a laptop, and a printer. Dina poked the laptop tentatively. It was made of cardboard, with a high-res print of a keyboard and screen, and an exploratory prod told her the printer was similarly constructed. She looked around, taking in the stock photos of a smiling, blonde, white woman, and on instinct she walked to the bookshelves and pulled out a binder.

Empty.

Another instinct – a firmer, and more troubling, one – led her inexorably down the hall to the back room. A breeze reached her from somewhere, bringing with it the smell of damp, freshly cut grass. Dina looked up, and out at the yard.

It was green.

She slid the glass door aside and stepped out into a garden – a metre wide sliver of green boxed in by a tight fence of corrugated teal panelling. Sunset was fading, and the encroaching night brought with it a lone dog barking, voices and laughter from nearby, and music – a familiar refrain that drew Dina out the back gate and down the access path to the road.

*“I see it, I want it, I stunt, yellow-bone it.  
I dream it, I work hard, I grind 'til I own it...”*

Dina smiled, some of her anxiety fading. Before her sat the neighbourhood of her imaginings: the rectangles of light, the lawns and trees, the scent of eucalypts. And someone was playing Beyoncé.

Confused but elated, she turned to see her own house. Her mouth fell open. The windows were dark, the front garden was a trampled mess of dirt and weeds, and the garage door was ajar in a way that suggested a serious hoarding problem. The sweet night breeze brought a rush of dust, and the smell of clay.

Dina turned around, staring at the lawns and young trees, the clean modern frontages and wood-panelled detail under-lit from the garden beds – a whole suburb of gallery spotlights – and back to the squat goblin that sat on her land. She swallowed, her throat thick with grit.

Just then, strange sound reached her: a gentle shoosh-shoosh, coming from behind and some distance away. She turned. A man was wandering along the gutter, carrying a hand-held pesticide sprayer. As she watched, he deposited a barrage of strategic sprays into a drain.

Dina regarded him silently for many moments. He looked up and waggled the sprayer so that the reservoir sloshed.

‘You should keep clear, Miss. This ain’t good for humans, neither.’

He began spraying again, and Dina quickly scuttled up the nearest driveway. Behind her, the front door opened and she was flooded with inviting light and Beyoncé coming from quality speakers.

‘Oh hi! You must be new. Please, come in!’

The woman’s face was familiar, and Dina found herself agreeing automatically.

Dina stood in the entry hall to a house that was identical to her own. The music was coming from the living room, accompanied by low conversation. In the hall was a man dressed from head to toe in pastel yellow. He was leaning into a golf swing, sans club.

‘Tok! Whooooosh!’ he said, as he mimed watching the ball disappear into the distance. A trio of spectators clapped dutifully.

Dina stepped into the living room and was confronted by a group of blonde women who smiled at her with their teeth.

‘Oh hi!’

‘You’re so interesting!’

‘Where’s your husband?’

‘Yes, we must introduce him to the boys.’

Dina looked over at the group of men standing nearby. They were gathered in the middle of the room, listening to the surround sound focal point with expressions of intense concentration. None of them moved. Dina was quietly crafting a polite dodge for both the concepts of ‘husband’ and ‘the boys’ when she realised the women weren’t paying attention; they had resumed their conversation the moment she broke eye-contact.

‘Oh, honey! They sell pre-sliced eggplant, now?’

‘Game changer!’

There was another round of applause from the hallway.

No-one noticed Dina backing carefully into the kitchen, putting distance between her and the teeth.



*“Sometimes I go off (I go off), I go hard (I go hard)  
Get what's mine (take what's mine), I'm a star (I'm a star)”*

The fridge was huge; double doors in chrome that matched the kettle and toaster. Dina walked by the marble-topped island, running her fingers along the cool stone until she reached the microwave nook. Without looking, she prodded the microwave and was unsurprised to feel it shift a good inch: cardboard was very light, after all. She wandered over and leant on the toaster heavily and precisely, her elbow sinking through it until it no longer resembled an appliance so much as a punched hat. The kettle she knocked to the floor, where it rolled until it ran up against a small pile of red dust.

The night had grown colder, and Dina shivered as she stepped out into the backyard. She had taken only a step towards the back gate when a glint caught her eye.

There, sitting in the metre-wide strip of grass that comprised the backyard, was a ride-on lawnmower. Dina stared at it for a long while, until the song filtering through from the party behind her died away and the silence that followed sent a jolt of fear down her spine.

She had remembered where she had seen the hostess' face before.

The mower forgotten, Dina threw the latch and ran out the garden gate. She ran straight through No.1, not daring to look at the stock photos as she passed. She emerged into the quiet and dust of her street just in time to see Angela step out of the car with a grin on her face. With a triumphant flourish she popped the boot and showed Dina a box containing an over-sized, industrial vacuum cleaner.

‘Look! The damn dust doesn’t stand a chance!’

‘Ange, call Toby and Binaar. Tell them to come back first thing tomorrow.’

‘What? Why?’

‘We can’t live here. No-one can.’

Angela gave her wife a long look, and then quietly pulled her phone from her pocket.