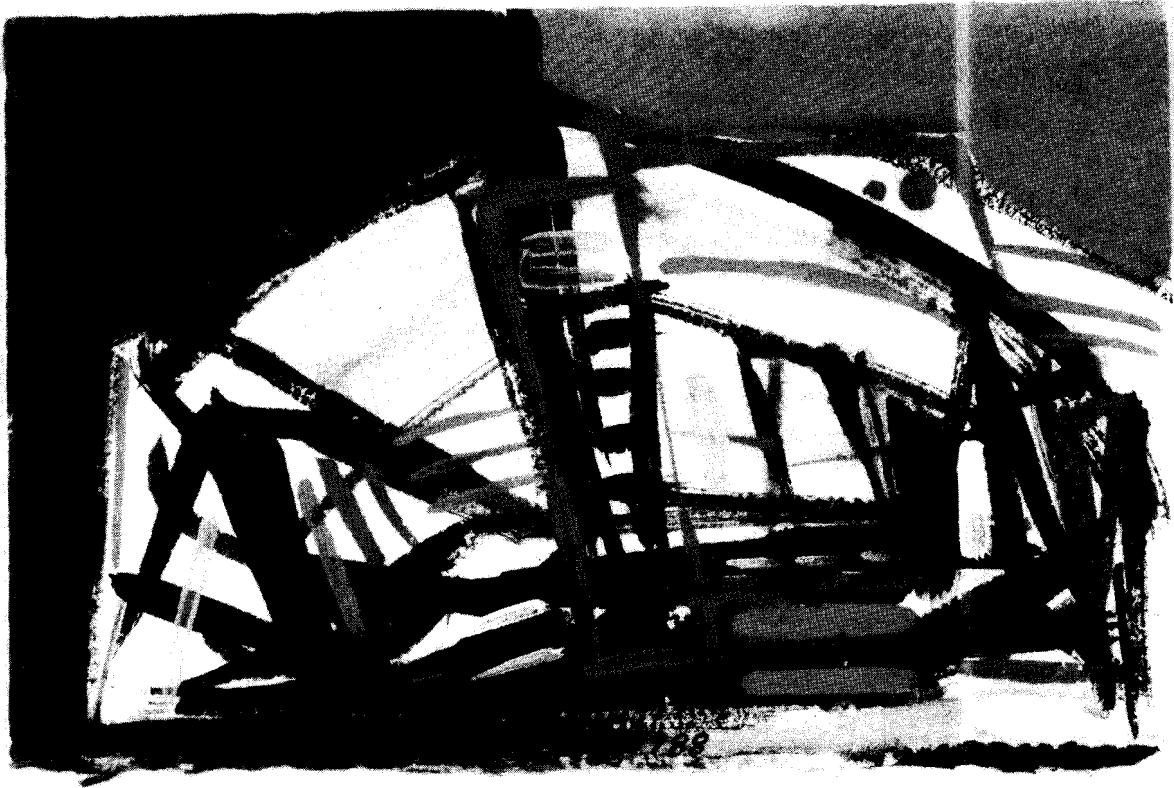


# Demolition

BY EVE CORBEL



**S**even o'clock in the morning on the day we will destroy Julia's kitchen. Frank unfurls the plans and we all peer down at them. East wall: take off the lath and plaster, leave the other side intact. South wall: same. West wall: get rid of it, but slow and careful, it's full of wires and pipes. North wall: blow it out, right to the back yard, make a new one three feet later.

Who writes this language? Knock out a dormer. Blow in a wall. Punch out a window. Like, plug in a big saw, grind away for a while, and there's your hole, now fill it in. What about the planning and measuring and chipping, what about how nothing in the house is square or plumb after half a century, what about architects, sub-contractors, building code, Workers' Comp, what about inspectors and insurance and contract law?

Frank pops his hammer and shucks off a chunk of plaster. There is a whisk of grey dust. Start there, he tells Dennis. Do this wall, he tells me and Ian, then take out the cupboards. We gather up hammers, sledgehammers, crowbars, pry bars. And something Ian calls The Persuader, a spear of cast iron taller than I am and almost as heavy. Break up the plaster, pull it off, then jam a crowbar up under the lath and pull quick, over and over and over.

The walls don't want to let go of their skin. Forty-five years ago

this stuff had to be coaxed on, neat rows of skinny sticks and gravity-defying grey mud; now the lath has forgotten the tree it came from and the plaster has curled into the very bones of the house. We coax the sticks off, then force them. They come away in jagged shards that poke our arms, catch our hair, sneak into our sleeves. Rip, wrench, yank. Nails squeal out of wood, brittle broken plaster smashes down and crumbles under our boots.

And dust. Grey grinding powder that does not settle, that I can taste behind my nose. A fog of it creeps up into us. Mixed with sweat, it makes wet sand that slithers under my collar and creeps down and scrapes my breasts.

Now start hauling rubbish. First the lath, gather up the sticks in prickly bundles, the second little pig going outside to the dumpster. Throw them clinking into the bin. Scoop up plaster chunks, heavy. Too heavy. Working in offices I was too big, big hips, big legs, big voice, here I am almost flimsy. Out to the dumpster with two overflowing kangaroo buckets. Back in for more plaster, more lath, back outside, and there are Julia's children, warned to stay back but drawn by the din. When they see me, they run. Mummeee, mummeee. In my dust mask, gloves, hard hat, heavy clothes, boots, coated with plaster-soot and bristling with lath, I am a monster. Not the soft woman mother who came to their

house two months ago, played peek with the baby while we talked about estimates and joists and containment angles.

Break time. We're out of the dust and into the green yard, freeing our eyes and mouths, our faces creased mean and dirty from the masks. Spit out sand. Long drinks from the garden hose, swallow grit and clear water. Dennis hoses down his whole head and flings it about like a dog, wild sparkles fly everywhere. Dennis as a disco ball. Ian tries to sell Frank his 50s-vintage pickup truck. Perfect for you, he says, for dragging wood and tools around. Frank says no, Dennis offers \$150 for the truck. Ian chucks cherry pits at him. Julia brings iced tea and says how violent this demolition stuff is, the noise, it sounds like screaming,

wood tearing from nails tearing from wood. Or a car accident. How's it goin' guys, says five-year-old Tim, with his father's exact inflection. Goin' guys, baby Megan says. This morning we saw Tim and his friends make her drink coffee from 7-Eleven cups in the garbage.

Gutting the kitchen. Eviscerating the kitchen. Butchering, disemboweling, purging the kitchen. Hack off the cupboards piece by piece, in reverse order of how they went in. Ian tries to sell me his truck. But no probably you wouldn't want to drive it, he says, it's so big and heavy and no power steering. I'm on the broom closet, built into a corner by someone who meant it to last. Hammer in the toes of the crowbar, push fast. A whole side of it comes away. Maybe you would want to drive that truck, says Ian.

These walls were never straight, the cabinets are a *trompe l'oeil*. Here a shim, there a shave, the carpenter made trapezoids look square, all with hand tools. His hair and blood are in here.

At night, at home, I taste the dust. Work clothes in the basement, endless hot shower, dinner, hours gone by, my head on a clean pillow, still I smell it, gritty and salty in my throat. And everything hurts. Scrapes, nicks, chafed eyes, bruised bones. My youngest said, your arms look like hamburgers, Mum.

Nine hours later we're back at it, smash-

ing and panting. The damn house fights back, pushes and tricks and confounds us. This rafter is an inch too long, clip off an inch and it's half an inch too long, shave off a quarter of an inch and it's two inches too short. Finally we're out the back of the house and Frank says build a catwalk from the kitchen to the dumpster. Just take a fourteen-foot 2x12 and nail on some struts. Just this just that he always says, after twenty years building. The first time

***Break time. We're out of the dust and into the green yard, freeing our eyes and mouths, our faces creased mean and dirty from the masks. Long drinks from the garden hose, swallow grit and clear water.***

I had to get on a roof he said just climb up just fling your leg over just jump off the ladder. Now it's just flip half a tree out from the bottom of the woodpile and just levitate it eight feet to the main floor of the house.

On my catwalk we haul rubbish. Fill the buckets, lug them out on the plank. Don't look down. Gather up lath, head down the skinny bridge one foot precisely in front of the other. Brace body but relax knees, swing trash into bin. Down the plank, up the plank, down, up. We find a new substance in the outside wall, piles of curly black insulation, rockwool. It itches and burns like fibreglass. Get rid of that too. Pry off the plaster, snap off the lath, bludgeon out the studs, shovel out the rockwool.

Lunch. Two sturdy sandwiches, one cantaloupe, banana bread, juice, milk, nuts, raisins, yogurt. Working in offices I couldn't eat this much in a day. Frank muttering about the stucco contractor, Ian trying to sell his truck, Dennis reporting on Tiananmen Square, me swapping childbirth stories with Julia. How did you get into this business, she says. I tell about the woodworking course, how I built some stuff for the house and the day care centre, learned to fix things. I don't tell how I started buying tools, for their names. Bench dogs, spokeshave, cold chisel, cat's paw. Half-round bastard rasp, who could resist that? Then one fine day my friends raise a toast to my 40th birthday and my business partnership with Frank and our first big job. This one. We will finish the demolition today.

Only this last part left, the rest of the outside wall. Cut and yank the sheathing, rafters, joists, and they all fight back, they

all hang on, they all won't let go. LET GO. Twist, wrench. What's left of the wall sneaks and grabs. Trips Dennis, wallops Frank on the shoulder, takes hairs from my temples and divots from Ian's scalp. Never mind, keep going. We rip through the skin, bones, veins of the building. Ian hollers from his post: ARTIFACT. Drop the crowbar, go look. It's a fingernail buffer, turquoise, nested in rockwool. Juice break, tearing, whacking, rubbish hauling. Me: ARTIFACT. A newspaper, February 1943, Japs to Work in B.C. Lumber Camps says the headline. Brittle and crumbling in my hands. Frank finds a huge red cardboard heart and Ian's out on the catwalk, nailing it to the dumpster. The rockwool stings. Bags and bags and bags of it down the bridge. More plaster. More lath. Up, down, up. Don't stop or you'll know how tired you are. ARTIFACT. A boot. A spearmint gum wrapper. A scrap of lined paper, HELLO in a child's handwriting, tucked in rockwool.

Then drag a tarp over the hole in the house and sweep up, chasing rockwool shreds around corners so Megan won't eat it. And staple sheets of cloudy plastic over the fought parts to keep the kids out. War zone in a fishbowl, it is violated, rough, still heaving. Forty-five years of life in the house released like steam, the smell, the force of love and fights, all soaked up by this wood when it was young. Julia stands at the door, hands over her belly: Oh, look at it, is this what it's like? I didn't realize it would be like this. Wet wind presses in under the tarp, lifts it, snaps it, rumbles it.

In the morning they move out, a week early. Julia says Richard came home last night to find them all packed, cots made up in the rec room, no way was Julia sleeping near that kitchen. Don't be ridiculous, he said, you're acting like the house is haunted or something.

Julia says, it is, isn't it.

A guy will come and haul away the offal. We will hammer wet 2x4s into a wood-scented skeleton. Copper pipes and vinyl wires will snake through the frame. An army of drywallers will bring gyproc and ghetto blasters and screw guns. We will leave solder, nails, roof-patch, tile, paint. Also hair and spit and skin. Then Julia and Richard's children will grow up.

I say, Yeah.

*Eve Corbel is a Vancouver writer, editor and building contractor*