

MAKING MY PEACE WITH THE TEARDOWN



ILLUSTRATION BY MARLEY ALLEN-ASH

I'm still surprised by the gap I see when I turn down my street, a jarring disconnect with what I expect to greet me, **Yona Krum Eichenbaum** writes

When my neighbour of 24 years called to say she and her husband were moving across the country to be closer to family, I thanked her for telling me before the for-sale sign went up. I sighed and said we would miss them. We had watched each other's houses for years, collecting stray newspapers and deliveries when either of us was out of town. We had each other's keys.

A few months later, she called to say the house had sold. I congratulated her, and asked who would be moving in. She paused for a moment.

"Well ... it was sold as a teardown. The offer was generous. We won't have repairs or other contract contingencies to deal with."

"So great!" I lied, surprised by the sadness swirling around me like a gust of cold wind.

This was not my first teardown. The small house on the other side of ours had come down six years earlier, replaced by a large luxurious house out of sync with the older homes on the street. I knew what to expect: months of noise and dust, and an armada of trucks and construction machinery clogging our quiet street, beginning at 7 a.m. Dreading dust made sense, feeling sad didn't.

I hoped my malaise might evoke empathy. Instead, my economist husband tried to console me with a sunny financial forecast: Being sandwiched between two larger houses could increase our property value. My daughter advised me to make peace with it – there was nothing I could do, best to just accept it. True. But I wasn't feeling peace. My neighbours had moved. The house was in limbo. It stood empty but intact, windows dark. When spring arrived, and its lovely front yard was covered with blooms, I could only think of a lamb awaiting slaughter.

The months passed. My deck, with pots of lavender scenting the air, was quiet, mine to enjoy for the summer. I assumed construction plans were in the works, awaiting final approval by our strict village board. Fall came and went. Nothing.

One morning in early December, workmen surrounded the property with green construction fencing, signalling the beginning of the end. A week into the new year, I was jolted awake by banging and a bright yellow backhoe thrashing about like some crazed predatory creature. Unlike the brick house that defiantly stood and saved the Three Little Pigs, this large, old clapboard house offered little resistance. I imagined the crew huffing and puffing and blowing it down.

I could see that the west side still stood. But the roof was crumbling. The walls on the southeast side were shattered, empty rooms exposed like an open wound. Unable to watch, I decided to go out, taking a last look as I backed into the street and drove away. When I returned in the early afternoon, all that remained was a mountain of debris.

After the pandemic disruptions of the past few years, I needed no more evidence of life's fragility and impermanence. And there it was, right next door. I longed for an unchanging landscape, reality forever aligned with memory. I often visit Montreal, the city I grew up in. Its mostly unchanged streets with their familiar buildings and shops are reassuring, anchoring memories of my childhood and life there – especially now that my parents are gone.

Over the next week, a caravan of trucks hauled away the rubble. My three-year-old grandson – a huge fan of construction equipment and building sites – was in school during the demolition. When he visited, I pointed to the window, cheerfully explaining they knocked down the house next door. Trucks were taking away what was left. He asked where the people who lived there had gone. He looked stricken. "What about your house BeeBee, will they knock down your house, too?" I smiled, "No, no, my house is fine, they took this one down to build a beautiful new one."

I should have known better. Swinging madly about, scooping up debris, those long-necked shovels felt close enough to graze our windows. I shouldn't have brought him face to face with destruction so close to a place he cared about and felt safe in. After a few minutes he looked away and decided to play with his trains. He didn't ask to watch the machines again.

He was on to something. But I couldn't bring myself to think it – our 120-year-old brick house, with its sunny rooms, coved ceilings and original mouldings, a heap of rubble, replaced by something shiny and new. Was everything a little weathered, ripe for replacement? Was I?

After the site was cleared, the dig began. Day by day, the hole grew deeper and larger. Trucks came and hauled away a mountain of displaced dirt until only a small hill remained. Finally, it was quiet. They had gone, leaving behind a gaping hole, its shape an outline of the house to come, its sides draped in plastic sheets. The weather had turned frigid, too cold to pour concrete for the foundation.

It's been quiet for a few weeks now. I'm still surprised by the gap I see when I turn down my street, a jarring disconnect with what I expect to greet me. I think about losing a tooth, your tongue probing, encountering an un-

expected crevasse-like space, the familiar contours of your mouth altered and alien. The feeling eventually fades, but only when something new fills the space.

I opened the newspaper on a recent morning to find a horrifying photo of a building destroyed by a Russian missile attack in Kramatorsk, Ukraine. A rescue team was searching through the rubble. The walls were torn away, exposing the skeletal remains of apartments once filled with families and life. I don't know how many survived. But for those who did, life will be relegated to longing, without homes and familiar streetscapes to anchor their memories. I stare at the photo. And in my mind's eye, that gap on my street begins to shrink, receding into one of life's inevitable but not cataclysmic annoyances.

In the past few years, to keep pandemic chaos in perspective, I often thought about my parents, Holocaust survivors from Poland. Their prewar lives disappeared without a trace, no family, no homes to revisit, losses I am unable to fathom in the life I live. I imagine their reaction to my sadness about a teardown, its previous inhabitants healthy, happy and closer to family, "This is what you're sad about?"

I look at the newspaper photo again. And decide, before the weather warms and construction resumes, to make peace.

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