



Odd Jobs

A Novel

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ACT I

Chapter 1

I loved that house. There wasn't much to it—seven hundred square feet of what the unappreciative call *character*—but it was built by hand in 1912, plank by board, nail by screw. Sometimes I'd close my eyes and imagine that first owner on a grainy black and white reel, sitting in front of his newly finished home on Sunnyside Hill, gazing at the mountain waters of the Bow River, tipping back a warm beer with a sigh. I envied that man of history, even though he probably never experienced such bliss.

What I loved was exactly what others did not: every botched alteration, every failed upgrade, every peeling layer of wallpaper and paint was there for the tracing, like Jacques Plante and his scarred mask: these are the blows I have taken, and survived. Walking from room to hall, from porch to soffit, from handy to buckshee, you not only traced the house's history but the entire evolution, or devolution, of 20th century design.

The frontis was 1930 pebbled stucco, the siding 1950 faded pink asbestos, the front door grey plastic faux-wood with a tinted oval peek-a-boo window that said disco and proud of it. There were two chimneys: a crumbling brick affair providing fresh winter air to the broken fireplace, the other a rusted steel pipe that long since freed itself from the gravity furnace. The floor was fir throughout, splintered and worn and gapped, except where lino-ed over in swirling floral green, or carpeted over in bright orange in the tiny second bedroom. The porch was pure entropy in motion, a snapshot of imminent collapse.

If you spent for more than a month in the place, you got to know its inner workings intimately. No two appliances could be switched on simultaneously. Use of the shower or washing machine met with groans of objection from pre-WWI copper. The gas stove was flawless; the gas oven required foot-long matches, courage and short hair.

In front of the house a century old catoneaster hedge propped up a rotten picket fence. In the back, the overgrown garden threatened a grey wind-beaten garage. The soil was floodplain peat. Tomatoes grew spontaneously, while stray carrots brazened their roots each August.

To me, the house was like an old ship on a journey through time. It hadn't just survived the journey, it'd thrived. And this, I thought, was what made the house admirable, what gave it *character*. It'd been battered, neglected, and suffered the quiet humiliation of being dressed in someone else's clothes. But its fundamental self was irrepressible.

It wasn't just the abodal history that made me love that house. Behind every structural, renovational, architectural story is a personal story. Like the house, I'd had my shiny-youth of new love, my stucco-ed divorce, my asbestos-ed fallout of pipe pain and dry-rot, my ill-conceived disco years, and my disastrous mid-life reno.

But alas, all good things must end.

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So it was with more than a passing sadness that I watched those three men take my house that warm solstice evening. The sun was throwing its pre-dusk wash over the land as Luc orchestrated the operation. Luc was a big bald Frenchman with both arms blanketed in tattoos. He brought along two beefy swampers and a flatbed truck, and the three of them smoked and parlez-ed non-

stop while deploying an array of jacks and pulleys and levers that would have made da Vinci proud. Pre-industrial contraptions that eased my house mercifully toward the sky.

I crouched down and peered at the sliver of light between the house and foundation. The two had been co-joined for nearly a century, and I imagined a depth to their parting as Luc backed the flatbed into that membrane of light. Luc had already ripped the rotted picket fence out. My catoneaster hedge lay trampled, and I winced as the wheels crushed a century limb into its own roots.

I stood up too quickly, and had to lean on the suspended house for support. Luc shouted at me to move away from the house, and I stumbled back into the dug-up terrain, touching a hand to the gauze on my ear. The lacerations on my face still stung, despite the fresh ozonol. Both my eyes were black, but I could see well enough. I suspected I had a concussion, but there were more pressing matters at hand than my own little aches and pains.

Luc and his men dashed about the house in a frenzy of de-jacking and de-levering, until it descended gingerly upon the flatbed, held in place by guy-wires and ropes and bungies that seemed absurdly flimsy for the task. Finally Luc's two swampers climbed in the truck cab, and Luc retrieved a small canvas lunch bag from behind the driver's seat and turned toward me. I looked up at his big round head, which his neck ran into without transition, like a slab of baloney on shoulders. He had three creases on his forehead, his eyes set way back in their sockets. No hair, no stubble. I suppressed a suicidal urge to smirk.

Luc shoved the bag into my chest.

'30 G's, you want to count it?'

I shook my head. He grinned. He climbed in the cab and I saw that the truck had no plates. A black stream of exhaust shot into the air, and the truck eased off the curb and onto the street.

I stood on the sidewalk and stared at the concrete crater that was once my house—shingles and planks and bricks strewn around the yard like a post-tornado event. The apex of the roof was

gone, like the house had had a brushcut. They'd cut the top off to clear the roadway height restrictions. The rusted steel chimney lay sprawled on the lawn, the brick chimney in a heap where it had slid off the roof after one swat from the 100 pound sledge.

As I watched the flatbed crawl down Fifth Street—with Memorial Drive and the Bow River sparkling beyond in the dusk—I felt an urge to wave. The street was narrow. The house and flatbed dwarfed the cars parked on either side of the truck. Luc had his head out his window checking his clearance, with one of the swampers looking out the passenger side, nodding *okay* with a cigarette out his mouth.

Then there was a loud groan, like a ship's hull, and one side of the roof slumped to starboard. The brake lights lit up, and the entire house just sort of parallelogrammed to the right, like a cardboard box. It happened so slowly that for a moment I thought I could dash over and hold it up. But I just watched, and listened. The ship-hull sound evolved to a cracking and snapping of wood, followed by the crimpling of a parked Mercedes' hood that was now the master bedroom floor, where Chick and I had consummated our marriage several hundred times—our history laid bare on the street for all to see. Maybe we would have been better off doing it on that beautiful German lid. Chick always had a thing for the Mercedes star, and was a bit of an exhibitionist to boot.

Finally came the sound that stopped me dead: the *krang* of chromium on chromium, of chromium on asphalt, and of chromium on curb. The high-grade chromium that meant Harley Davidson, the Devils bikers, and their dark world, all closing in on me.

As Luc and his two swampers emerged from the truck, I saw Donald—the lead biker, my ex-partner, now loan manager—step onto his front porch smoking his signature cigarello, staring at the carnage that was once his prized chopper, and was once my beloved house.

You see, the problem was, it wasn't really my house anymore.

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I felt faint. What had I done? Chick would kill me. But she'd have to get there first.

I turned and walked as quickly as I could across my cratered lot, stutter-stepped past my garage and down the alley, pressing my palm against the gauze on my ear to stop my brains from falling out. With a glance over my shoulder, I weaved through the lilacs near the base of Sunnyside Hill, and turned straight up the slope through the scattered elms and poplars until I was about half way up, where the hill briefly leveled off.

This is where the old road once was. Now just sewer mains and stumps of telephone poles rotting in the tall grass. That house originally stood right here. Until the second one-hundred-year flood within the space of five years destabilized the soil and the city moved the houses from the riverbank slope down onto the flood plain. Now I climbed on one of the sewer mains, strewn about the hill like rusted monuments to the brilliance of urban planners and civil engineers. I watched Donald and Luc and his swampers descend upon the crater in my yard. There was money, and blood driving them. They made wolves look like prairie dogs. They eyed each other, suspiciously. Between them I owed eighty grand, not counting the Harleys. They would have killed me for five.

I looked up at the elm above, its triple-trunked majesty, its great limbs fanning out with thick brush. I was afraid of heights. I took a breath and started to climb. Thank God I'd listened to Chick's daughter, Susan, and her shimmy lessons. There is much to be learned from the six-year-olds of the world, if you listen.

So there I was, at the peak of my potential: a forty-five-year-old man with a lunch bag of money, treed by three swampers and a biker on an abandoned hill of sewer mains. From the tree I

saw the police arrive at the Mercedes house and talk to the woman owner, now on the street in her robe, gesticulating wildly. Other neighbours gathered around to stare at the carnage and point up and down the street.

Within a minute the police were on the crater site. They shouted something at Donald and Luc and his swampers—all four disappeared into the alley. The policemen marched across the lot to the alley but Donald and Luc et al circled around to the street, like a wave that washed the neighbours back to their houses. Luc's truck barked and lugged off. Donald stared down the neighbours in their doorways and windows and then took up position on his front porch, awaiting, presumably, for the other two Harley owners to return and form a posse.

Now I wished I had risked the stop in my garage for some premium homegrown and that sorry excuse for a script. I had a good vista, and the weed would have helped clarify my thinking.

From my vantage point—half way up a tree half way up the hill—I was a good fifty feet above the neighbourhood rooftops. Dusk was falling. I imagined panning the opening scene across these treetops and rooftops to the swirling waters of the Bow River, the city skyscrapers reflecting the foothills and Rockie Mountains below a pinkening sky. I'd imagined this scene many times, and had even written it into that script that now lay in my garage.

I sighed deeply, and thought of my father. He would've been proud. He'd been a B-movie distributor in British Columbia, and he used to take me up and down the coast. We saw every flic that came out—he and I—hunched in deserted old theatres and ex-church basements with a sheet on the wall and metal chairs on a concrete floor. Metal on concrete—this was music. And those were the moments I'd relive, sitting in the dark back row as a teenage usher.

Alas, it seemed that finally, just as I was finding the vision, my dream would be quashed by death and decapitation, rather than lack of funding and dodgy partners.