

DRYWALL AND A BEETHOVEN MOMENT

It was 1988, the proud moment we were to buy our family's first new house. "I'm building a new house," is what some would say or "I'm having it built". I just said, "I'm paying for someone to build it for us."

During those heady days of spring and early summer, I would stop off on the way home from work, to view the construction process. The workmen were all specialists in their trades, the contractor advised me. It was exciting, seeing this new stage on which the dramas of our lives would unfold, the excavation, the concrete poured into the foundations, the walls on training stilts for a while and then standing on their own, the roof beams alighting like hands folded in prayer. It was inspiring to see the floors laid in plywood, and finally the dry wall plastered in.

It was during the drywall period that I wandered up the earthen driveway and teetered along a plank to the concrete steps that hung miraculously suspended in mid-air beneath the door. I could hear the strains of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, near the end of the first movement. Now this is different, I thought. How different from the crisp commands, the sharp hammering and drilling, the quickly inhaled cigarettes of the carpentry epoch. The radios blaring rock music from the basement, from the bedrooms, from the rooftop. I poked my head inside.

"Hoy," I called. No answer.

I squeaked up the 3/4 inch fir plywood stairs to the living room. And just as the first movement was drawing to its final rondo, I heard what could only be the strains of a man weeping.

"Hoy," I murmured, seeing a white-gowned figure bent over a white plaster tray before a still-gleaming white wall. He looked like a surgeon, exhausted after a pancreatectomy.

The drywall specialist turned slowly. He reached for the paint-splattered stereo and turned Beethoven down from mezzoforte to pianissimo. He wiped real tears that coursed through tortuous white gutters down his cheeks.

"Well, you should hear the third movement," I blurted. "It's a real weeper."

"No, no," he cried. "Ist nicht die Musik!"

Well, if not the music, then what? Was he listening to his deaf and mirthless ancestor and pining for the spell of the Black Forest, the magic waters of the Rhine? The sweet memory of a stein of lager from the fields of Bavaria? And now in Canada, slapping on white paste to flat, white walls?

He yelled something else. I shrugged and put my hand to my ear. Shaking his head sadly, he clicked off Beethoven, turned fully around to face me and cried: "Ist meine hemorrhoiden!"