

Oven Obstacles

For two years, my wife and I had been separated by the Georgia Strait, an inconvenient 28-kilometre wide seaway that separates Vancouver Island from the BC coast. After Angel was drawn to the mainland by attractive employment, our lives had become a trying succession of lengthy phone calls, weekend ferry passages and frenzied romantic interludes before each trudge home.

Having recently bid farewell to my employer in Victoria, I set about tying up loose ends and preparing to vacate my rented home. With only days left before Angel and I were to be finally reunited, all was going according to plan.

Only one impediment stood between me and the love of my life. The oven, an ancient hulk with large-radius rounded corners and cataract-crazed dials, had to be cleaned.

I was casually dismissive of the task since I'd used the appliance a mere handful of times, usually when my BBQ's propane tank had expired on a half-grilled slab of sizzling something. However, popular lore and Angel held that things could get ugly so I armed myself with rubber gloves, safety glasses, and chemicals in brightly coloured containers bearing the image of a skeletal hand and other encouragingly dire warnings.

Rejoicing over the benefits of modern technology, I liberally sprayed the caustic liquid about the oven's interior. Wise counsel had led me to first cover the heating element with aluminum foil to protect it from the assault I was unleashing on surrounding surfaces. I confidently retired to other matters while giving the cleaning solution time to work its magic.

Returning to wipe the spray off the oven, I found that the ostensibly life-threatening liquid had done, well, little. Desultory attempts to scrub some of the deposits suggested that what appeared to have been molten lava had previously been spilled onto and physically fused with the floor, sides, and – egad – ceiling of the oven.

While furiously reviewing my scant mental archive of recent cooking projects, I extracted from my toolbox a more promising weapon. Accompanied by a dramatic “sha-winnng” that originated, reverberated and died all inside my head, a half-inch razor blade reluctantly emerged from the scraper's plastic handle.

After twenty minutes of hand-to-hand combat, the futility of my efforts was manifest in the blade's now alarmingly serrated edge.

[Expletives deleted]

Flopping onto the kitchen floor to catch my breath, I surveyed my unexpectedly creditable adversary. The mysterious substance in my oven was now detaining me from my weekly game of touch football with friends. Was this the final resting place of a misguided cheese fondue gone horribly wrong? Had a previous tenant's child stored his plastic action figure in what had

seemed to be wasted space, thereby consigning both the inanimate hero and me to our respective fates?

I had managed to reduce the lava mounds inside the oven to flat-topped protuberances, so some progress was being made. However, my twisted back protested that our advance was not without casualties.

Pulling myself together, I set the oven's heating element to reach the temperature that the instructions on my bottle of liquid savagery advised was best for rapid results. At 200 degrees, I jerked open the oven door, sprayed the liquid with abandon, nimbly dodged the blowback of steam and smoke, and slammed the door shut.

Leaning my weight against the steel handle, I gleefully visualized newly energized microscopic scrubbers giving the stains what for, as seen through the microscopes and monocles of the fringe scientists who had developed this fearsome product in their underground Laboratory of the Damned.

I set upon the oven's removable baking racks. In the half hour during which I struggled with the miracle of "stainless" steel, I contemplated the filthy, rusted BBQ by whose side this second front in my struggle was taking place. There my old flame-throwing friend stood: reliable, Spartan, the very model of a low maintenance, high-fidelity cooking appliance. Shame forced me to glance away when I sensed the BBQ ask, "Why do you lavish such attention on my lesser rival?..."

By now, the oven racks had conceded some ground to my efforts, and it was clear that there were in fact multiple layers of grime, each one more tenacious than the previous. Had considerate previous tenants left me this latent invitation to exercise? I pondered the archaeology of oven remains while gradually abrading through successive layers.

Once the embers of battle inside the oven had cooled, I re-entered the carnage to resume scraping. The corrosive fumes had my head doing the tilt-a-whirl, and I could feel my airway slowly liquefying from sinuses to lungs. While wiping a stream of tears from my burning eyes, I noted with alarm that my Timex watch had softened into a tribute to Salvador Dali. The stings of my bloodied knuckles and minor burns encouraged my conjecture about how much damage deposit I would forfeit by just walking away.

In contrast to my self-inflicted wounds, the intended target of my offensive remained unaffected. Worse yet, the heating element had welded the protective foil onto itself, and only the tiniest flakes of aluminum now submitted to removal.

Spotting some chemical residue on the interior light bulb, I reflexively wiped it off before realizing that – sizzle, POP! Shattered light bulb glass now adorned the oven bottom in addition to a thousand flecks of tin foil and the still-impervious lava deposits.

[Multiple highly inventive expletives deleted]

Emboldened by my initial taste of victory over the baking racks, I declared unlimited hostilities on the oven proper. With a flourish I threw open the double doors to the vast armoury of my tool room. My twitching fingers savoured the cold steel of an industrial power grinder. *This day would be MINE.*

The move out inspection went well. We walked around my freshly cleaned home, the garbage bin stuffed with the confetti-like remains of several grinding pads. I fairly burst with pride as I drew my landlord's attention to the kitchen. When my hand motioned toward the oven, a shaft of sunlight burst through the adjacent window onto the object of my righteous conquest.

While moving on to the next room, my landlord breezily mentioned, "Oh that old thing, we're replacing it before the new tenants move in."

After I recovered from my nervous breakdown, Angel helped me move to Vancouver where we now live together. As a pre-emptive measure, we've relegated the oven in our new home to the purpose for which it is undeniably best suited: storing our well-used barbecuing implements.

Bio: David Caplan is a Vancouver-based freelance writer whose home now features a self-cleaning oven. His website is www.thotwerx.com.