

THE THREEPENNY REVIEW

Noises in the Night

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Source: *The Threepenny Review*, No. 113 (SPRING 2008), p. 27

Published by: [Threepenny Review](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25650929>

Accessed: 22/06/2014 21:19

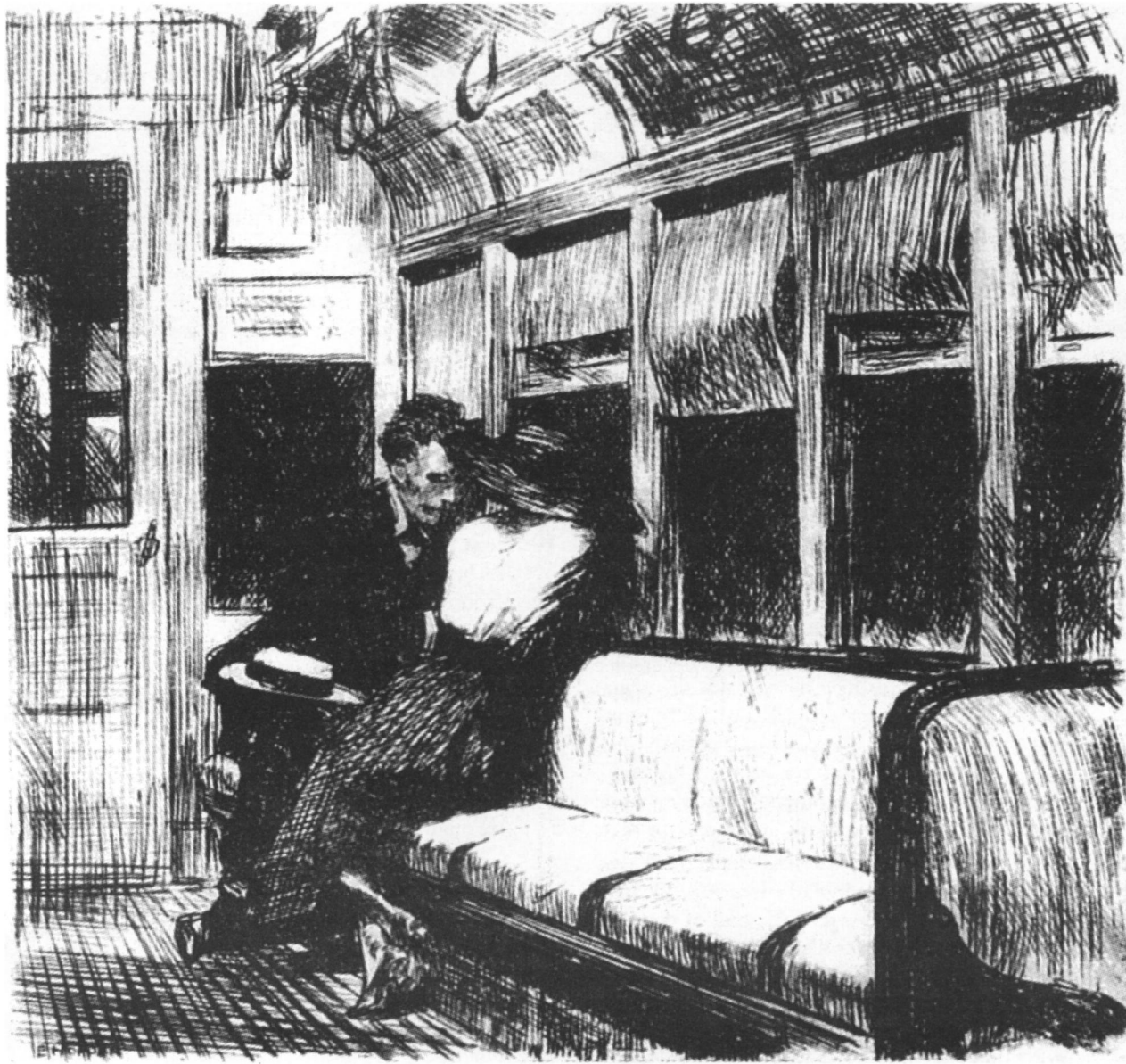
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Night on the El Train, 1918

MISCELLANY

Noises in the Night

Javier Marías

I SOMETIMES wish I were slightly harder of hearing, so that I didn't have to suffer quite so much from the degree of "noise pollution" that exists here in Spain and which is exceeded only by the levels reached in Japan. I'm referring to the strange noises that are made, it would seem, by *all* neighbors, but especially by those who live in the apartments above us when they get home at night.

In fact, I know of no one who has not, at some point in his life, in some apartment he's lived in, come to the conclusion that the upstairs neighbors are in the habit of dragging their furniture about in the wee hours or simply moving it around (beds included), and not just on one night, but almost every night. I'm sure you've had the same incomprehensible feeling. Are they so dissatisfied and uncertain about the position of their furniture that they have to experiment constantly, with the sofa here and the wardrobe over there, the armchairs in that corner and the tables over by the window? Now, there may well be a large number of individuals who really are in a state of hope-

less indecision as to how best to furnish their bedrooms and living rooms, but it's entirely impossible that there are so many of them that we've all had to put up with at least one. So what is going on? What unfathomable things do people get up to late at night, especially those who have to rise early to go to work or to take their children to school, and who do not appear to be remotely bohemian?

If one had to deduce their nocturnal lives from the noises they make, one would conjure up the most bizarre images. I've lived in apartments where I became convinced that my upstairs neighbors, at some late hour of the night, started playing marbles or perhaps pétanque, because the sounds that reached me were unmistakably those of balls rolling across the parquet. With others, it seemed to me that, as soon as they arrived home, all their buttons immediately fell off and dropped to the floor, or that the pearl necklaces they were wearing suddenly broke, which, given the repetitive nature of the noise, led me to conclude that husband and wife must be

mutually and respectively wrenching them off, possibly as some kind of foreplay. In an English apartment (appropriately enough) where I stayed for a month, I had the impression that I must be living underneath the little old ladies from Capra's black comedy *Arsenic and Old Lace*, except that instead of killing their victims silently with poison, as the little old ladies did, the tenants evidently spent all night dismembering that day's corpse, such was the sound of laborious sawing that came from above. Another time, I came to believe that an elderly man, shy and solitary, was in the habit, as darkness fell, of throwing large, multitudinous parties, given the bustle of footsteps (some even sounded like dance steps) that I could hear from below; this proved not to be the case, because when I did finally give in to the need to satisfy my curiosity and kept watch on the street door from my balcony, I saw not a single stranger pass—that is, not a single likely guest; this, however, did not prevent me hearing them up above, as if they were dancing without music or else chasing each other round the room. For years, a female friend of mine had a neighbor who, as far as she was aware, always entered and left her apartment wearing sensible flat shoes; when her neighbor was at home, however, the noise made by her footsteps convinced my friend that this neighbor must immediately put on a pair of high-heeled mules, to which my friend's imagination couldn't resist adding a couple of pompoms to

complete the image: in the end, she was utterly convinced that, each night, her discreet, sober neighbor made up for all that sober discretion by donning a negligée, the aforementioned high-heeled, pompomed mules, and, possibly, some sort of diabolical underwear, even if she wasn't expecting a visitor. I once asked some young people about the dull, continuous "papapam" emanating from their apartment, as if they were working some kind of printing press, and their answer was even more bizarre than my imagined explanation: "Oh, we're running an illegal whisky distillery," they told me.

I've found out more over the years: what we take to be the sound of lunatic furniture-shifting is sometimes merely a little rough, extemporaneous vacuuming or even a feverish opening and closing of drawers. On the other hand, one cannot help wondering why people would be opening and closing drawers in the small hours, not just once or twice, but twenty times, or why they would keep banging about with some ancient, metal vacuum cleaner. Of course, in Spain, where almost no one shows any consideration for anyone, there's nothing odd about hearing hammer blows in the middle of the night: it's someone hanging pictures or doing minor home repairs. However, having grown accustomed over the years to hearing so many inexplicable noises, one can't help thinking that the upstairs neighbors are, in fact, hammering nails into a coffin, and one is left with the thought: "I just hope it's theirs." □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)