

The Sound of Barcelona

by Jeremy Holland

It's the drilling that wakes you up at nine o'clock on a Saturday morning. The same sputtering, spinning and wheezing that's been your weekend alarm for the last six years. Where it comes from, who knows? Some days it's the apartment next door, others the one above or below. What on earth are they doing? It doesn't matter. You just want it to stop and pound on the wall, cursing at the top of your lungs for peace and quiet. The drilling ceases at the bang of a bored hole. Five seconds of silence for a snooze before the hammering commences. It's time to get up whether you want to or not.

You're tired. The garbage trucks collecting the trash, the tricked-out scooters roaring down the street, the shouts and screams of drunks stumbling home make a decent night's sleep impossible. The morning drilling and hammering make weekend lie-ins rarer than a sunny day in April and a full time job means there's no sleeping in during the week. Staggering out of bed in a groggy and grumpy mood, you start the count down until naptime like a metro clock: *Proper siesta* minus six hours, fifty-nine minutes, thirteen seconds and counting.

At the elevator outside the flat, the light by the call buttons glows orange, indicating an open door somewhere in the building. Two minutes pass and still no sign of it. The drill has started again and is accompanied by Freddy Mercury wailing from a stereo at full volume. The stairs seem like the best option. Two flights down, the outside white iron-mesh gate of the elevator is flung open. The two red interior wooden doors are pushed in. There's no one around so you enter a cab the size of clothes chest and pull the squeaky gate closed. A door to a flat flies open and woman runs out. "What are you doing?" she cries in Spanish, flinging open the gate to stop the elevator from leaving.

You have no problems responding in the language, "*Estoy bajando,*"

"You can't."

"*¿Por qué?*"

"I'm almost ready to leave" she says. "Just five more minutes. Let me explain, I have to..."

The drill for an alarm clock leaves little patience for an explanation and you reply, "*Bueno,* by the time you finish getting ready, the elevator will have gone down and come up again," slamming the white gate and the two wooden doors before pushing the protruding button for the lobby.

The rickety elevator comes to an abrupt stop and the doors fly open. A heavy-set man bathed in cheap cologne storms in. The urge to give him a shove rises, but you think better of it, take a deep breath, and squeeze between him and the elevator wall, stepping into a white lobby and a pleasant surprise. There's none of the jackhammering, banging or shouting that usually vibrates off the stone walls at this time of day.

You go outside and the pavement is free of metal plates, yellow barriers and construction workers. There's no obvious difference between two years ago and now but it's not the moment to contemplate the reason for the racket or why it took so long. Instead, it's the time to renounce atheism and thank God that the noise has finally finished. People sit on shaded benches under trees at the square across the street and in the powder blue sky, a flock of escaped parakeets fly. A cup of coffee seems like the perfect way to start this beautiful day.

Three seconds later, a pile of dog shit on the ground evokes your frustration at the Spanish unwillingness to pick up after their animals. It's a short lived rise. Suddenly, your people-sense tingles and warns of an incoming pedestrian bent on a collision. It's an impeccably dressed elderly Spanish woman with dyed blue hair pushing a shopping cart. Her unblinking eyes are the size of coasters behind thick glasses and she sucks on the bottom lip of a toothless mouth in determination. She heads straight for you like a slow moving, heatseeking missile. You veer left to avoid impact. She's locked on target, steers her shopping cart and mirrors the movement. Hugging the stone wall of a building and brushing against a brass hand for a knocker, you give her the entire pavement to pass. She still insists on a collision. It has essentially become a game of pedestrian chicken, with people replacing cars and a random choice of targets. Her aim is to win. She's eighty and you're not even half that, so you give way.

There's no time to think about why the Spanish are incapable of walking in a straight line. The man ahead has decided to stop and light a smoke, leaving you less than a second to avoid slamming into his back. Dropping a spin move like a football player shedding his marker on a corner kick, you join the pedestrian flow and settle behind a couple leisurely walking hand-in-hand, anxious to find a quiet place to drink a coffee. They loudly discuss the state of Spanish politics and an opening appears to their left. They move in unison to stop you from passing, as if their matching square-rimmed glasses contained rear-view mirrors. Some space between them and a woman smoking and pushing a baby stroller appears to their right. Again, they deny you from overtaking them as their topic changes to lunch later that day with some friends. Sometimes walking in Barcelona is more frustrating than driving in L.A.

A red light presents an opportunity for some separation. Across the street is the famous Casa Batlló by Antoni Gaudí. An homage to Saint George, the curved purple roof is the back and head of a

dragon, the gray cross shaped chimney is the hilt of the plunged sword and the bone-shaped window frames are the skeletons of those devoured by the beast. The traffic light changes from red to green. Your focus shifts from the building to a bus barreling through the red the light. The next car stops and you jump out of the block and sprint ahead before the rest of the people even realize it's safe to cross.

Still in need of a coffee, you duck into a bright Spanish bar, take a stool at the counter and nod at the bartender. The man working finishes giving a single glass a thorough cleaning and places it on a rack. He then walks over and counts a full box of potato chips and checks the cash register tape.

You say, "Excuse me."

He straightens each of the *tapas* plates under the glass covering before finally sauntering over. "What?"

"Un cortado."

He leaves and you wait.

A deep, long hack and a cackling cough announces the arrival of an old Spanish man. His thinning gray hair slicked back, he smokes a pungent Ducado cigarette and wears a silver, three-day-old beard on a brown, weathered face. The bar is empty but he sits next to you and blows out a thick cloud of smoke. The bartender delivers your espresso topped with milk in a large shot glass. "*Hombre*, give me a *carajillo*," the man demands in a husky voice.

The bartender offers no reply, readies the espresso machine and grabs a bottle of brandy for the order.

"Politicians are sons of whores," the old man says in Spanish.

You agree, but avoid religious and political discussions and silently stir the sugar into the coffee.

He looks at you. The silence leaves him confused. He tries another approach to initiate a conversation. “Where *jou* from?” he asks in accented English.

“America.” You drink the shot of coffee.

“America! I know America. I was there many years ago.”

“Did you like it?”

“No. The cities are ugly and the food was terrible. Why you eat only hamburgers?”

“We eat other things.”

“When I was there — only hamburgers. You smoke?” He offers a cigarette.

“No, thanks.” You wave at the bartender and ask for the check, “*La cuenta, por favor.*”

He presses to have a chat and steps in so his head is under your chin. His breath smells like watered down whiskey left in a glass later used as an ashtray. “You like Spain? Spain is the best, no?”

“Yes, I do.” You count the exact change necessary and step back from the man.

He presses forward. “You like Spanish food? It's the best, no?”

“Yeah, take care.”

You run outside and gulp the fresh air. The buzz from the strong coffee has you ready to do something and makes a nap a remote possibility. On the to-do list for the last month has been to buy that all-on-one printer/scanner/fax advertised in all the newspapers. A wall of smoking teenagers blocks the metro entrance while at the red bus stop, a group of elderly Spanish ladies wait and chat. Strangers, they talk more as if they are neighbors. And, like the one who challenged you to a game of chicken, they are all immaculately dressed in freshly ironed blouses and skirts. The late morning sun leaves most people perspiring, but their perfectly madeup faces are completely free of one bead of sweat. At the arrival of the long red TMB bus, they let out a joyous cry and anxiously jostle for position, throwing the occasional elbow and hip-check to be the first in line.

The doors bend in to open. In no rush, you stand at the back of the tangled mob and wait for order to gradually form out of the chaos. Boarding is a slow process. People slowly funnel in, fiddle in their bags and pockets for their tickets to punch or the change to pay the driver and then proceed the minimal distance possible to secure a space. By the time the ticket machine beeps with your ticket, the front of the aisle is full and the bus is at the next stop. On the plus side, there are plenty of free seats at the back.

The bus is soon standing room only and full of grating chatter. A teenage girl two seats away talks on her cell about her boyfriend loud enough for the driver to understand. Behind her is a serious looking young man who offers his detailed analysis of the new Woody Allen movie to his girlfriend. She shows little interest, checks her reflection in the window and tosses her hair. Not being fluent in Spanish makes it easy for you to tune out the inane conversations taking place and the mind jumps to the future, imagining a dark room and a bed. *Proper siesta* minus three-hours, twenty-minutes and forty-four seconds and counting.

At a two-story electronics store near Ronda Sant Antoni, there are no signs. Monitors sit next to washers and dryers; televisions are placed with coffee machines. Searching for someone to help find the printer section, you see employees appear and disappear in a flash and give chase like a cat after a fly, until finally cornering a skinny teenage boy with a mullet.

You say, "I'm looking for..."

"We don't have it," he replies.

"I haven't told you what yet."

"We still don't have it."

"It's that all-in-one printer advertised everywhere."

"I told you, we don't have it. It doesn't even exist."

"How does it not exist? It's advertised in every newspaper."

"Look, it doesn't exist, okay?"

"Do you have anything similar?"

"No. Check another store." He struts away as if he's just made a million dollar sale, ending any desire to deal with Spanish service for the day. The time is now one o'clock. The stomach rumbles with hunger. Most restaurants don't open for another half-an-hour at least. To kill time, you head to the L'Eixample district to check out the buildings on the way to the little bodega near Provença.

The red-bus leaving the stop means a twenty minute minimum wait for the next one, so you decide to take the metro. A flood of people hurry up the stairs and a man with a sour face looks like he

wishes to play pedestrian chicken. Unlike the woman from this morning, he isn't elderly. There's no giving way and you grab the banister and puff out your chest to remind him who has leverage. He gives in with a grunt and goes around.

It's a short-lived victory. Rushing passengers stampede from both the entrance and the exit doors. You pause, think, and pick out the best lane to take. Weaving through the people like midfielder from Barcelona Football Club, you juke the oncoming waves of commuters and spin around anyone who stops suddenly. The aim is to get to the row of three turnstiles without touching anyone. You succeed and find a man repeatedly trying to make his stripped ticket work at the first turnstile. Three people line up to pass through the third. The middle is clear.

The station vibrates and the dark tunnel lights up. Fear of missing the train and having to wait on the platform in the stifling heat gets the heart racing and you scamper down the clear left-side of the escalator. Two women stand side-by-side and talk, stopping progress. They pause, look up at you and then back down the clear passage. They continue their conversation. "Excuse me, ma'am," you say with a light tap.

She looks perplexed, borderline annoyed, at the interruption and takes her time to move. "Can you believe him? He should have left earlier and not have to rush," she tells her friend as you sprint to the bottom.

The minute the metro doors open a scrum breaks out. Riders storm in and push back those struggling to get out. All the action takes place at the first car. At the second, a solitary, bald, portly man waits for people to get off, making it the better entry point and you bulldoze through the exiting commuters to get there.

The man steps in, turns, stops and crosses his arms over his belly. He has no intention of moving. The train beeps and powers to a start. Lowering the shoulder, you barge in just as the doors slide close. The man is full of hostility and his small brown eyes glare in anger. Paying him no mind, you step into a car that is far from full and see an open seat by a window.

The train jerking and swerving down the track makes walking a test of balance. The two ladies sit on the outside chairs, the inside ones used for their bags of recently bought clothes. Gossiping about the Princess of Spain's supposed eating disorder, they are oblivious to all those around and make little effort to accommodate those needing seats. Your solution to the problem is a light bump of the knees and quick step on the toes. They stop talking and take their belongings from the seat as you sit to a thud. They then resume their conversation.

In the middle of the aisle stands a man who continues to stare as if you're his dead uncle who has come back to life. People in most countries don't do that unless they want to get punched. Here, it is the norm. Over his shoulder is a young guy with a white-painted face. He whips out a large skeleton puppet from a black duffel bag and flips the switch to an old dusty radio. Gypsy music and fiddles blast from the speakers as he prances down the aisle, *the Nightmare Before Christmas* looking puppet singing and dancing to the rhythmic music. Kids start clapping and shouting, "*Olé, olé, olé! Oooooooooleeeeé!*" Soon everyone joins to create a chorus that rattles the walls and windows of the rumbling train.

The fading music has many reaching in their purses and wallets for loose change as the train slows to a stop. It no longer vibrates. Those leaving give the performer coins and wait by the opening doors. People storm in and people struggle out, all the while the bald portly man with crossed arms vigilantly guards the door.

Bursting out at the next stop, you're eager to get above ground. A congregating group of Spaniards discussing where to go next blocks the platform. A metal bench provides an unconventional way around. You hop on the wide plank and walk it like Indiana Jones before jumping down in front of a middle-aged man who manages the complex feat of walking and reading at the same time. Leaning on the moving railing, you let the escalator do its job and stop rushing. All of the running around, crowds, stress, and failure to accomplish the simplest of tasks can leave even the most patient person feeling exhausted and frustrated. A girl on her way down smiles as if to say, that's how you do it. The rumble of the next train drowns out the sound of your lighter hitting the ground as you take out the ticket to pass through empty the turnstiles and continue up the stairs.

Above ground, the blasting beeps from the cars at a red light pound your head. A mustached man in a white van lays on his horn, leans out the window and shouts at the top of his lungs, "I shit on your whore of a mother! Fuck! Come on, cunt! I'm in a hurry." It's not clear who he's yelling at, the car in front, the red-light or Gaudí's ghost. But, he's not alone. The street erupts into an explosion of horns and shouts that jackhammer into your brain. It's easy to hate this city sometimes. A tap on the shoulder belongs to a young girl who holds out a lighter.

She is blond with olive skin and brown eyes and wears a navy dress. "You dropped this," she says in Spanish.

"Oh, *gracias*."

"*De nada*. You look lost."

"Just wandering around and killing time before lunch."

"Are you visiting?"

"No, I live here."

"Really? I'm meeting some friends. Do you want to join us?"

If you had to sum up the Spanish and Catalans in two words, it'd be hospitable and non-cynical which in turn has made you more friendly and open. "Um, sure, why not?"

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"Here we are." She stops at a wrought-iron door whose bars are bent into the outline of flowers in a vase. She buzzes and two seconds later, she steps into a sunny stone entryway. Looking up to the glass roof, you count seven stories and no elevator.

"Come on. It's only on the third floor," she says walking up the first flight of short and worn steps to the *entresuelo*. Not as tall as the other stories of Spanish buildings, the low ceiling of the landing forces the head to duck as you pass what appears to be two flats suitable only for housing midgets. The next set of steps leads to *la planta principal*, or the principal floor, and the landing has no ceiling allowing for an unobstructed view to the top. One more story up is *la planta primera* or the first floor. And

that's when you hear it — the sputtering, spinning and wheezing of a drill. The girl sees the look of agitation on your face and says, "Don't worry, just two more flights."

The bar is a converted flat. Card-tables and folding chairs line walls decorated with local art. The smell of fried eggs, potatoes and fish wafts from the kitchen, making your empty stomach roar. At the end of the hall are open glassdoors which lead to a patio that offers a sense of space amid the surrounding congestion of the city. More importantly, there's no more drilling. "*Hola*," says the girl to a middleaged man behind the makeshift plywood bar.

"*Hola guapa*," he replies and the two of you stroll past people of all ages sitting at the plastic tables. Loud talk and laughter fill the

air and the birds sing in the branches of the trees that dot the patio. At the far back, a group of young Spaniards smile and wave enthusiastically to come over. A round of quick pecks on each cheek for introductions and a skinny boy in a Vans t-shirt says, "Welcome."

"Hello. Thanks for having me."

"No thanks necessary here. We're Spanish and Catalans, not English. What do you want to drink — beer?"

"Sounds perfect."

The boy turns, raises his hand, and belts to the waiter, "Hey, come here!"

The man, who is old enough to be his father, strolls to the table. "What do you want?"

"More beer."

The waiter says nothing as he heads towards the makeshift bar, ignoring the couple with empty glasses and dirty plates trying to get his attention.

The boy looks at you and says, "Where you from?"

"America."

"America?" The blond girl shrieks in horror. "I would never want to go there! I would much prefer to visit Australia; they are much more welcoming to foreigners."

You reply, "You think?"

"Have you ever tried to go Australia?" The boy in the Vans t-shirt comes to the U.S.'s defense. "You need a visa and the immigration

officers don't speak any Spanish! All they like to do is get drunk and fight. They are like the English, but bigger and tanner."

"What the hell are you saying?" replies the girl. "At least they don't have Bush."

"But he's not the president anymore. Now they have Obama!"

"So you're American?" asks a prematurely balding man in a Ramones t-shirt and black square glasses.

Turning away from the heated discussion about which is better, America or Australia, being waged by two Spaniards, you say, "Yes."

"I went to Boston once."

"Did you like it?"

"Yes. I like English music, especially Bruce Springsteen, U2, Pearl Jam. I hate heavy metal."

"That's great."

"Do you know Spain very well?"

A pause as the waiter arrives with bottles of beer and leaves.

"Yeah, I've been to Andalucia, Pais Vasco and Asturias."

"Do you like it here?"

"Yeah. Each city is different and unique and the people are friendly and welcoming."

"We like to party, no?"

"That you do. How do you know everybody?"

"We all went to high-school together, some of us since elementary school."

"Wow."

"Yes. We meet here every other Saturday. I like this place." He stops as the waiter arrives with a stack of plates that he sets at the edge of the table. "You like Spanish food?"

"Yes."

"It's better than American food, no?"

"It depends. You eat a lot of fried food."

"Yes. But we use oil and not butter. But enough talk. Now, it's time to eat."

One waiter brings a fold-out table that he places next to yours and leaves. A second waiter arrives with massive round pan full of yellow rice topped with unpeeled prawns and crayfish, shelled mussels, clams and diced squid, cuttlefish and tomatoes that he places on the new table. A third waiter arrives with plates of cured ham, sliced blood sausages and toasted bread rubbed with fresh tomatoes and garlic. "*Bon profit*," the two waiters say and leave.

"Eat, eat." The boy in the Ramones t-shirt hands you a plate.

"Thanks."

“Man, no thanks necessary here. This is not England. There, everyone is too polite. They say please, thank you and sorry even when they are bumping and pushing you.”

You laugh.

He piles his plate with paella and then goes for the ham. “Do you know the secret of a good paella?”

“No.” You take some sausage, ham, bread and rice, leaving the unpeeled seafood for the professionals after having come home too many times with more fish juice on your hands than meat in your stomach.

“Patience with the rice.”

“I see.”

Pa amb tomàquet is a Catalan staple and served with almost all meals. The toasted bread placates your hungry stomach while the tomato rubbed on it moistens your palate with a garlic bite. The boy was right about the rice - soft and sticky without even the slightest of crunch - your first mouthful brings with it the salty flavors of the sea and a memory of last weekend at the beach with friends. Most of the conversation takes place in rapid fire Spanish, making it easy to lose track of the shifting topics, people and locations. Your mind wanders to the serendipitous twists life in Barcelona brings and a smile crosses your face. Surreal situations, the strange characters, the chance of each day surprising you in a city whose buildings give it the feel of a Gothic fairytale in the sun, they are what make all the frustration that comes with living in your strange adopted land bearable. Tragic at times, but always amusing, they are the reasons why you live in this city.

An hour later, the pan is empty save for a few kernels of rice and the peeled shells of the seafood. The plates are gone and sleepiness

sets in with rush of blood to your bloated stomach. A picture of an unmade double bed with two pillows flashes in your head. *Proper siesta* minus one hour and counting. "That was good, no?" asks the young girl, her argument about Australia versus America long over.

"Yes, Thanks for inviting me."

"Enough with the please and thank you."

"Okay." You need to move and stand. Looking at the group of strangers sitting at the table and talking, you smile in appreciation for turning this into a great morning. "Thanks for having me. It's been a real pleasure." It's difficult not to be polite.

The young girl reprimands the cultural error with a scolding look.

"Sorry... I mean, I gotta get going. How much do I owe?" You count off a couple of twenties.

The boy in the Ramones t-shirt says, "Don't worry, man. It's on us."

"That's very kind. But seriously." You toss money on the table. "Thanks again for a great time. It was a pleasure to meet you all."

The boy stuffs the cash back in your pocket. "Please, don't worry. Keep the money. Just remember that not all Catalans are cheap."

"Don't worry. I know. And just remember - not all Americans are George Bush."

The girl who brought you laughs.

Four o'clock on a Saturday afternoon is the quietest time of the day in Barcelona. Most shops are closed and the streets are less

congested as the city's residents finish their lunch. The shaded square across from the flat is empty and there's not even the faintest drilling in the white lobby. Drunk with food and buzzed from beer, you smile at the image of a waiting bed and stagger into the elevator. Back in the room, there are no beeps, shouts or bangs. The unmade bed with two soft pillows waits like a loving wife after a long trip and the siesta-count down stops. Shutting the blinds to introduce complete darkness, you crawl under the thin sheet and close your eyes, drifting to sleep to the rarest of sounds in Barcelona: silence.

