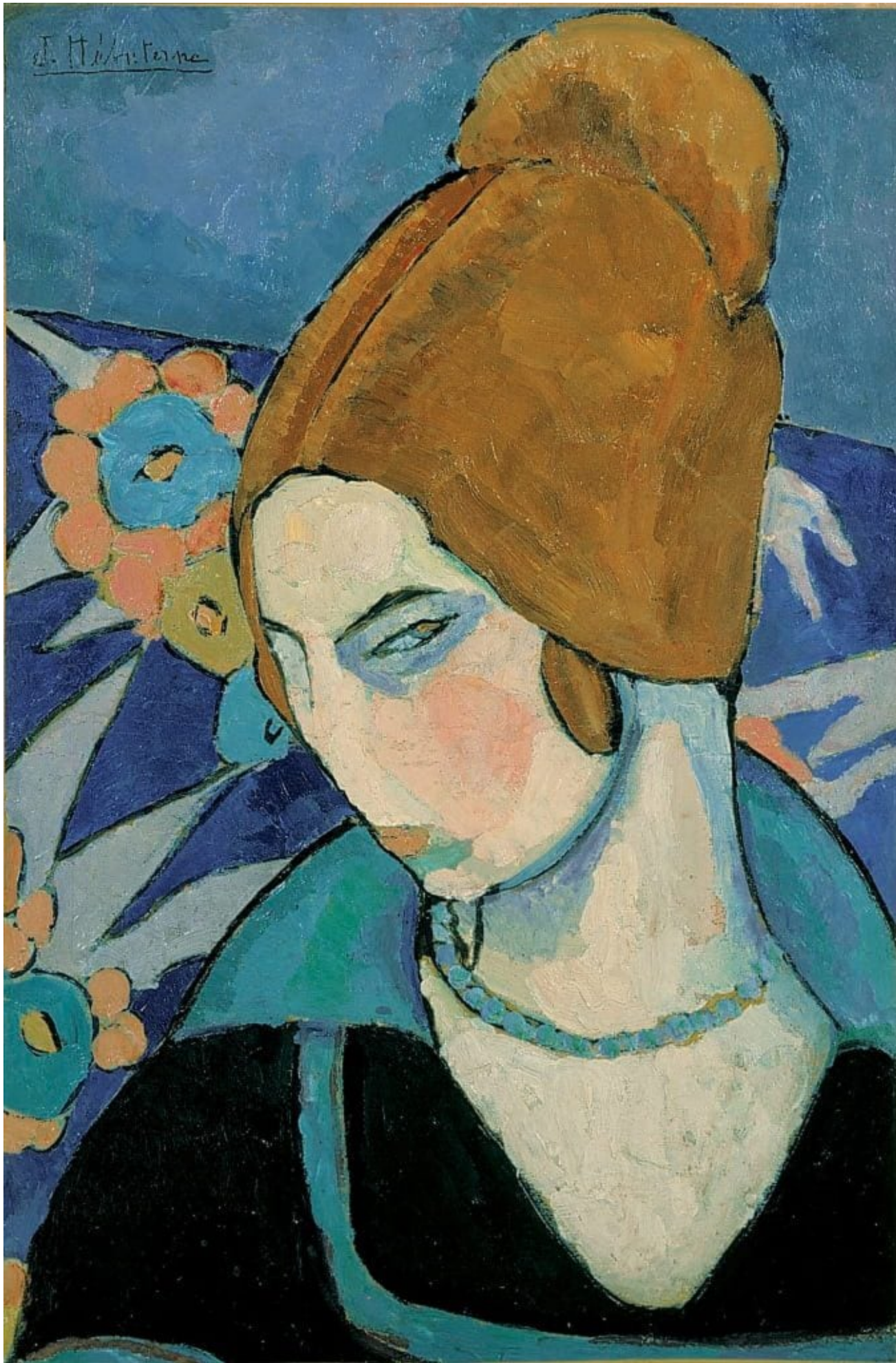


The Noise Above

By [Ellis Shuman](#) (November 2023)

J. M. W. Turner



Self-Portrait, Jeanne Hébuterne, 1916

TCHA! -TCHA! -TCHA! -TCHA! -TCHA!

A deafening hammering. A piercing drilling. Incessant, irregular, and irritating, to say the least. It stopped and started, continued for several minutes, and then, unexpectedly, there was a lull until it started up again. It seemed like it would never end. And it was all coming from the floor above her head.

She couldn't begin to imagine what was happening up there. Were they tearing down walls, or building new ones? Were they tiling or wiring or installing or cementing or plastering or who knows what? What she did know was that the work was loud, so very loud, and there was dust everywhere.

"Imma, you need to move out," Shelly insisted. "There's no way you can stay in your house with all that construction work going on overhead.

"I'm fine," she insisted. "It won't go on forever."

"Are you wearing those earphones I gave you?" Benny asked her. "Imma, you'll lose your hearing if you don't take precautions!"

"I can hear just fine," she replied, although there were times when she could literally not hear herself think.

"Live somewhere else for the duration," Shelly said.

"You can stay with me," Benny said, although she wasn't sure he was sincere with his invitation.

"I'm not leaving my home. I refuse, even for this! I'll manage, Benny. I'll survive, Shelly. After all, it's an annoyance only part of the day."

Part of the day? It started at seven in the morning and lasted until four in the afternoon. It didn't help if she turned the radio up to full volume. Occasionally she went outside, walked down the street, visited Esther next door, but no matter where she went, the noise followed her, ringing in her ears. Even at night, when the workers were long gone and their drills and hammers were silent, she could still hear the pounding and the banging in her head.

TCHA! -TCHA! -TCHA! -TCHA! -TCHA!

"I'll manage," she tried to convince herself as she lay in her bed. She knew Shelly and Benny had her best interests in mind when they said she should be move out for the duration of the building, but she was stubborn and insisted on staying. Maybe not moving out was a mistake, but she would never admit it. They may be right, but she refused to be wrong. Still, thoughts of how the mess of construction was interfering with her daily routine, along with the constant ringing in her ears, kept her awake for long hours.

When Motti was alive—in his hospital bed, but still capable of having a serious conversation—he insisted she sell their house after he was gone. "There's no way you can live there by yourself," he told her. "How will you support yourself?"

She knew her monthly pension and Bituach Leumi payments were far from sufficient to cover her living expenses. She could barely make ends meet. Purchases of food and medicine; covering the electricity, water, and gas bills; paying for heating and municipal charges—everything was more than her budget could cover. And there were birthday presents she needed to buy for her grandson. Eitan's Bar Mitzvah was coming up! She wouldn't forego her grandparenting duties.

"I'll manage."

It was Esther who first suggested that she build an apartment upstairs, above the one-story home that she and Motti had purchased on the moshav decades earlier, before the region became prime real estate.

"There's enough space for a two-bedroom apartment and you could rent it out."

"Rent out my house?" she asked.

"It would be a separate unit," Esther explained. "With its own kitchen, bedrooms, and bathroom. I'm sure you'd find a couple, or a young family, willing to rent it."

"And they'd come tromping through my house every day?"

"No, no! The apartment would have its own entrance. You wouldn't have to do anything except collect the rent," Esther said. "It's the extra income you need in order to live your life with dignity."

What would Motti think about this? she wondered. An apartment upstairs? That was an invasion of their privacy, he'd probably say. Having strangers living with her? No, Motti would never agree.

"Imma, it's a good idea," Shelly said, when she first heard of Esther's suggestion. "Your savings account in the bank is hardly earning any interest."

"That's for a rainy day," she said.

"What rainy day are you waiting for? You're not getting any younger."

Benny agreed with his sister. "I know an architect. He can plan the apartment for a very good price."

"A good price? You mean I'd have to spend my life savings already now?"

"An apartment will not drop itself on your roof without planning," he said. "I'm sure we'll get recommendations for a reliable contractor. Don't worry, Imma. Everything will be handled professionally. You have nothing to worry about."

But she did worry. How much would this cost? How long would the construction last? How would she find a couple to rent the apartment? What guarantees could she get that they'd pay their monthly rent? What if they didn't, and she wanted to evict them?

"Imma, you're getting ahead of yourself," Shelly said. "One step at a time. You'll manage."

"I'll manage," she said. But would she?

TCHA! -TCHA! -TCHA! -TCHA! -TCHA!

It was just after seven in the morning and the pounding was already so loud that she couldn't hear the morning newscast. Shouldn't they be finished with the drilling by now? Surely, these loud disturbances wouldn't last forever.

But they went on and on, and she was almost ready to call the whole thing off.

"It's going very well," Baruch assured her. Baruch was the contractor hired by Benny to build the apartment. "We're making good progress."

"Yes, but when will you finish?"

"These things take time," Baruch said. "Come outside and look."

She went out to her backyard with the contractor and looked up. What she saw was far from what she expected. On her roof were unfinished pillars and ugly gray blocks similar to the

Lego set she gave Eitan when he was much younger. There were no walls, no windows, no sense of it being something she could rent out.

"These things take time," Baruch repeated.

A wooden ladder leaned against her house, and as she stood in the garden with Baruch, a worker climbed down. This was the first time she had seen him, the first time she had paid any attention to the construction workers.

"This is Musa," Baruch said. "He's the foreman of the project."

She regarded the foreman for a minute. She had never come into close contact with an Arab worker before, although there was a village not far from the moshav. Musa was stocky, with a round face and short bristly hairs on his face. He wore a reversed baseball cap and stained work clothes.

"Musa is a good worker, very trustworthy," Baruch said, "but he doesn't speak Hebrew. Is it okay if he stores some of his work tools in your house? So that they won't get stolen. You know how it is around here."

"In my house?" she asked. What kind of tools was Baruch talking about? A toolbox? Screwdrivers and hammers? "I guess that's okay."

"*Shukran*," Musa said to her, and she nodded to him.

Shelly came over in the afternoon along with her grandson. Like always, Shelly was worried about her.

"Imma, are you taking care of yourself? You need to get out of the house more, especially with all this construction going on. How can you live with this dust and dirt?"

"Savta, can I go up on the roof?" Eitan asked, his eyes full of excitement.

"It's not safe," she said.

"What harm can he do?" Shelly asked. "After all, they left the ladder there. He's just a boy, a curious boy."

"Almost a man," she said. "I can't believe he'll be Bar Mitzvah next month. If only Motti was still alive. He'd be so proud."

"Imma, don't get so teary. Let me make you some tea."

A short while later, Eitan came back inside, his jeans and T-shirt spotted with dust. "Savta, it's so cool up there! It's just a frame, a skeleton of a house. There are no floors, no windows! Wires everywhere! Piles of tiles, maybe for the bathroom? A kitchen with no kitchen yet! So cool!"

"When are they putting down the floor?" Shelly asked.

"I don't know the schedule," she admitted. "Baruch tells me what I need to know when I need to know it."

Benny came over the next day, and like his sister, he was also worried about her. But Benny's worries were more financial in nature.

"Let me look into your bank account and see how you're managing."

"Benny, we've been through this a thousand times. You know my savings are sufficient to cover the cost of the construction."

"Do you need more cash?" he asked, and she knew he was talking about withdrawing cash from ATMs in order to pay Baruch part of the bills under the table. Payments in cash to avoid taxes. Admittedly, they lowered the cost of construction projects, but she preferred to do everything legally, above board.

“No more cash withdrawals,” she said. “I make bank transfers whenever Baruch asks for payments. I won’t do anything illegal, anything that could alert the authorities. Everything is going according to plan, according to schedule.”

When would Shelly and Benny stop worrying about her? She could take care of herself. Really. After all, isn’t that why she decided to build the apartment in the first place?

Her life went on as usual. Doctor appointments, afternoon tea with Esther, weekly visits of her children. Bridge nights at the community center. Grocery shopping at the Victory supermarket and grocery deliveries a few hours later. And the construction continued every day, nonstop from seven in the morning until four in the afternoon. She put up with it all, even though she worried the noise might make her partially deaf in one ear, as Benny had warned.

In the mornings, before the drilling and pounding began, Musa appeared at her door to retrieve the tools he had kept inside overnight. At the end of each day, when silence prevailed at last, Musa returned, carrying machinery as dirty as himself.

“Come in,” she said, although she knew Musa didn’t speak Hebrew. She moved aside as he went down the hall and carefully placed his tools on the floor. He turned to her, flashed a toothy smile, and walked out.

She looked down at the tools Musa left in her hall. Tools she’d never seen before and whose purpose she couldn’t even guess. What did she know about any of this? Blueprints and electricity wiring diagrams? She couldn’t understand anything that was going on above her head.

She made herself a cup of tea and sat down to enjoy the cooking show she watched religiously in the late afternoons.

TCHA-TCHA-TCHA-TCHA-TCHA!

Another day, more drilling. How much longer?

Shelly called in the afternoon to remind her that the entire family was gathering for a professional photoshoot at the banquet hall an hour before Eitan's party the following week.

"What will you be wearing, Imma?" Shelly asked.

"I'll probably wear the long blue gown," she replied. "The one your father liked so much."

"Blue is a great color on you," Shelly told her over the phone. "It'll look good with your gold bead necklace."

"I haven't worn that necklace in years. I was saving it for special occasions."

"Your grandson's Bar Mitzvah is a special occasion, wouldn't you say?"

"I know. Eitan becoming a man. Think of it!"

"I'll come by early to pick you up, Imma."

"Yes, yes."

She hung up and went back to the television. Benny would probably call soon as well, but she didn't mind the interruptions. While she felt she was totally independent, and could take care of herself, she appreciated her children's concern for her.

TCHA-TCHA-TCHA-TCHA-TCHA!

Sometimes she stood in the living room looking out at the garden, watching the workers go up and down the ladder. It was

strange that the ladder was the only way to access the floor above, but then, what did she expect? That Baruch should install a temporary elevator in her backyard?

The workers carried up bags of cement, rubber tubing, pails of sand and gravel, wooden beams, tiles, electrical equipment, and rolls of thick, black plastic. They came down the ladder with the same pails filled with debris, discarded tubing, and garbage of all shapes and sizes. Up the ladder in the mornings, down the ladder at the end of the day.

Despite the relentless racket, the days passed quickly. At four o'clock, Musa appeared at her back door carrying the power tools he wished to store in her hall overnight. Having the tools in her hall meant the workday had ended and she would have peace and quiet until the next morning. Baruch had said there were many thefts from construction sites. Helping the contractor protect his tools was the least she could do.

Musa put his tools down on the floor, turned around, and bowed his head as passed her. She started to say something, to thank him for his part in building the apartment, but she lacked a common language with the foreman. Before she had a chance to voice a word, he walked out the door. She watched as he trudged up the path to the street, where Baruch was waiting in his van to drive the workers back to their village. Such a short distance to their homes, but a world away. She sighed and turned to prepare her tea.

The day of the party arrived. Shelly would pick her up at four in the afternoon, she knew. Why so early? To drive to the banquet hall for the photoshoot, she remembered. She didn't enjoy having her picture taken, but she smiled at the thought of celebrating her grandson's special day.

She went into her bedroom to get ready. She took the long blue gown out of the closet and lay it carefully on her bed. Then

she went into her bathroom to freshen up. After putting on her dress, she stood at the mirror and admired her appearance. A few more wrinkles than the last time she looked, but overall, not bad for a grandmother.

The gold bead necklace. Shelly was right—it will look very good with this dress. But where was it?

She opened her jewelry box, but it wasn't among the rings, pendants, and silver necklaces carefully arranged inside. She looked on her dresser top and inside the drawer of her bedside table. When was the last time she wore the necklace? It must have been some time ago, maybe even a long time ago, on a night out with Motti. It should be in her jewelry box, where it belonged. She checked the table next to her recliner, where she kept the television remote control so she would never lose it. Where was the necklace? She was getting worried.

Shelly would be here any moment to pick her up, but until she found the gold bead necklace, she wouldn't be ready for the photoshoot. She wouldn't be able to fully enjoy her grandson's Bar Mitzvah party.

A knock made her turn to the backdoor. There was Musa, carrying his power tools. Seeing his toothy smile, she grinned, until a sudden realization crossed her mind.

"My necklace!" she shouted at him, and he stepped back. "Where is it? Why did you take my necklace?"

Musa put down the tools he was holding and held up his hands in protest. It was obvious he didn't understand what she was saying, but it was also obvious to her that he had stolen her necklace.

"Thief!" she shouted, pushing Musa back. His eyes widened, and he voiced words of protest in Arabic, but she pushed him harder.

The back door opened and Baruch walked in. "What's all this commotion about?" he asked.

"Musa stole my necklace! Your worker is a thief."

"Wait, slow down," Baruch said. "I'm sure you're mistaken. There must be a misunderstanding."

"No misunderstanding! I am never wrong about these things. Your worker comes into my house every day, walks down the hall, and now my necklace is missing. What don't you understand?"

Baruch said something to Musa, and the worker slunk out the back door. Then the contractor turned to her and touched her shoulder. "I can assure you Musa would never steal anything from a client's home. He has been working with me for years. He is an honest man, a good worker."

"My necklace is gone!"

"Let's talk about this again tomorrow, when you calm down. I need to drive the workers home. If your necklace is missing, I will compensate you. And if you have a problem with Musa, I'll make sure he doesn't work on this project any longer."

She sat down on her recliner. Baruch walked out the door, following Musa up to the road where the van was parked. The front door opened and Shelly walked in.

"Hi Imma. Are you ready?"

"My necklace was stolen!"

"Which necklace?"

"One of the workers took my gold bead necklace, the one I was going to wear tonight. I should never have let them into my house."

"What are you talking about? Here's your gold bead necklace."

Don't you remember I borrowed it a few months ago? I told you I'd bring it back in time for the party."

"You have it?" Shelly handed her the thin string of gold beads. She couldn't remember her daughter borrowing it. "But if you had it, that means..."

She ran to the back door and into the yard, calling, "Wait! Baruch, Musa, wait!"

But before any of the workers noticed her, their van pulled away, and she was left standing alone in the garden. She turned around and looked up. Above her house, the new apartment had taken shape and was nearing completion. It was as if she was seeing it for the first time. Walls, a red-tiled roof, windows, and electric shutters. Stairs leading up to a red paneled door. A real apartment. All that was left was to paint the outside walls—a light beige finish, a color choice that Motti would have appreciated. Wouldn't he be so proud of her accomplishment? She had done this herself. She had managed on her own.

Shelly was growing impatient at the delay, so she went inside and her daughter helped string the necklace around her neck. After Shelly closed the clasps in the back, she turned to the mirror and admired her appearance. Not bad for a grandmother.

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