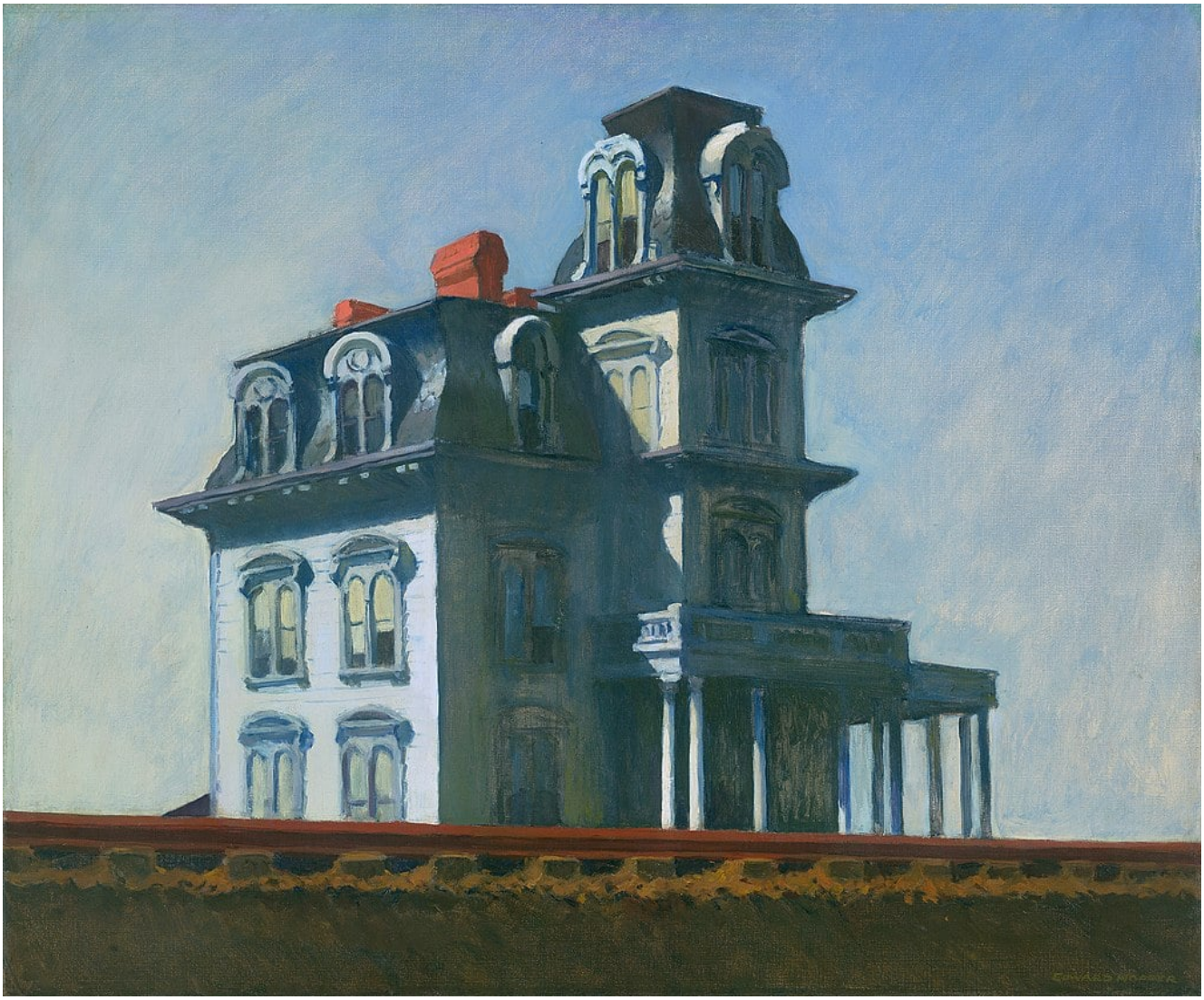
48RPM

by Armando Simón (April 2025)



House by the Railroad (Edward Hopper, 1925)

He was holding on to a record, staring at it. Just staring at it. His mind had been wandering all day and it continued to do so. It was not just any record but his only—his last—48 rpm record. It was inside its khaki green rough cardboard cover. The record was unique, unlike any of his other 200-plus Long Playing records. LP stood for long playing: they went at the slower velocity of 33 1/3 rpm and could play for a much longer time, half an hour on each side. They were lighter, flexible,

and unbreakable. Better. The 48s were heavier, rigid and easily breakable. He had had many others in the past, a present from his aunt—from her younger years, she had said to him—but, unavoidably, they had accidentally broken, one by one, until he now had the last fragile one out of a dozen or so. Before receiving this present from his aunt in his later years, he had wondered as a child why the old cartoons had at times shown records being thrown at a cartoon character, shattering. None of the records that the boy was acquainted with could break (no matter how much he tried). At best, they warped and became wavy when a couple had been forgotten and left inside the car on a hot summer day. Then, after he received the collection of 48-rpm records and one broke in his hand when he jammed it down on the phonograph, he understood.

Anyway, they did not sell records in record stores anymore. They sold metallic-looking CDs, compact discs, which were better than regular records. Just like the LP records had been better than the 48s.

He came to with a start, as he had done several times that day. He gingerly put the record down on its rack next to the other records and sighed. He realized that he had unconsciously picked up the record because of the struggle that was going on within him.

His aunt had died. In dying, she had left him her huge Victorian home. Its furnishings and savings she left to a cousin of his, her aunt having been childless. The cousin had already come and gone.

And now he was torn apart because a developer wanted to buy the property in order to tear it down and build something or other and had offered him a very nice sum.

Evans was in his forties and had a year ago gone through a messy divorce, from which he was just recovering. He wanted a fresh start, away from this worthless, backwaters state. New

York, maybe, or California. Maybe Oregon. Somewhere where it was bustling. This money would easily realize his goal.

Except … that he was not sure. It seemed wrong, somehow.

Part of it was that he had such good memories of that old house.

Both he and some of his friends had, at different times, remarked that the old saying was really true that, anymore, "you can't go back." Old schools, old dance halls, old neighborhoods that had held such poignant memories, when he or his friends had returned years later to relive those same feelings, the people in those areas had physically changed, radically so, or had moved away to greener pastures, usually out of state. Or the schools had been altered, radically so. Or the dance halls (chock full of love memories and might-have-been memories) had been razed to the ground in order to build a parking lot and a Kentucky Fried Chicken. And it was not that the change had been for the worse. No! Rather, it was that something had simply been taken away, something terribly personal, that could not be shared with anyone else because no one could have understood what that particular spot on a warm May evening had meant to a young boy who is soon about to enter the world as a young man, full of eager excitement and boundless optimism. No two people have the same memories, or the same experience and, so, each is unique.

And now Evans was being asked to agree—not forced to, mind you, but asked to—to rip out the physical manifestation of a part of his life and, try as he might, he could not become completely callused over the transaction.

He got in his car and drove towards his aunt's house. He was supposed to meet Mister Vittorini there. He drove slowly since he had plenty of time and since he was still torn by indecision.

Driving down Douglas Avenue, on an impulse, he stopped

opposite a nondescript museum. He had been there once before, years ago. If one did not read the small sign outside, anyone would think that this museum was just another two storeyed residence like the homes to the left and right of it.

He entered. It was quiet. Empty. Nothing razzle-dazzle. No Surround Sound. No dinosaur animatronics. Quite simply, each large room, roped off with a thick, burgundy velvet cordon, contained the mundane home furnishings of a typical home a century or so ago. It was always nostalgic going through the place, even though he had never lived at that time, and this in itself was curious. Nevertheless, the furnishings looked homey. Friendly. Welcoming. And it was also intellectually stimulating to see household objects that had since all but vanished or transformed out of all recognition.

A smiling elderly woman came from the back of the house and welcomed him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t hear you come in. You’re welcome to look through the house.”

“Thank you.”

He strolled around, asking for the name and the usefulness of certain items and she quietly named and explained.

At one point, Evans said, “It’s a shame a lot of these things are no longer around.”

“Yes, that’s true,” she agreed. “But you know what’s interesting? Our own things that we grew up with are going down the same route: black and white television, pogo sticks, the hula-hoop. I still have one of those old huge tape recorders; it’s funny putting it next to a modern, tiny cassette recorder.”

“Kids nowadays don’t see any of the old films if they’re in black and white’” she went on. My kids refuse to see Laurel and Hardy, or Abbott and Costello films. I try to tell them that today’s skateboard and video games may be tomorrow’s

Daniel Boone caps, or 3-D glasses, and they look at me like they don't even know what I'm talking about."

"It's a shame, really," he agreed.

"Yes, it's a shame with so many other things. Square dancing, for example, is disappearing. And that used to be so much fun! Banjo music has disappeared. And for that matter letter writing."

"Letter writing?" Evans frowned.

"Yes. Plain writing—I mean to friends and relatives. It's a lost art. Now, all one has to do is pick up the phone and call or write an email."

"Ah … yeah. You're right! I hadn't stopped to think about it."

The lady just smiled. It was obvious that working here had given her a lot of time to think on this subject.

The man had begun to feel uneasy and felt that he had to leave, so he bid her farewell and left.

He stopped briefly at Cero's, the unsurpassed candy store, a family business of two generations, that he had patronized since childhood and splurged (his favorite item, white butter rolls, could throw a hummingbird into a diabetic coma). The owner mentioned that the new highway construction on Kellogg might put him out of business and Evans showed the proper amount of concern and then left for his destination.

As he drove, he began to curse himself for syrupy sweet sentimentality. He was practically wallowing in it! His aunt was dead. He needed a new start in life. The money was good. He was just being maudlin—that was a new word that he had picked up.

This was America. What was important was the future.

Nevertheless, when he got there, he suddenly realized that the house's destruction would not only affect him personally but probably scores of individuals as well. The property probably had a lot of emotional significance to others. It was almost a landmark.

It was a large, pretty Victorian house with gables and a wooden wraparound porch, the kind that you rarely see any more, going all the way around the house.

Mister Vittorini was there waiting for him, ready to buy the whole lot for four times what Evans could have otherwise sold it for. The sum being offered was nothing to sneeze at.

They shook hands, greeting each other, went into some small talk before Evans came to what was troubling him.

"See, now, Mister Vittorini, it's not that I'm trying to get more money for the property. I'm not. It's just that I'm not sure that it's the right thing to do! You see, there's a lot of feelings behind this old house."

"I understand. They don't make houses like this any more. It's usually a bunch of boxes stuck together that they call a house. Modular, they call it. I don't blame you. If I myself bought it instead of doing it for a company, I'd be half tempted to chuck the deal and move in it myself." He chuckled.

Now Evans began to feel anxious that the deal was slipping away. "It's not that I don't want to. It's like I said, I'm not entirely sure. It's such a fine old house."

"Mister Evans, I want you to do what you think is right. But let me tell you about a trip I made this summer to Rome, OK? You ever been to Rome?"

Evans shook his head.

"Well, it was my first trip there. I'm Italian-American, so I thought I'd go over and see what the place looked like. And

Evans, let me tell you, that city is old. I mean old! Unnecessarily old."

"People live in buildings which are ugly. Cracked. Dilapidated. They are one or two, maybe four, centuries old. Musty. It'd be one thing if the buildings were pretty, but they give a new meaning to the word 'ugly.' Nobody tears down anything old to build something new. Europe is old. All of it. Not just the museums and the cathedrals, but people's homes. It's decrepit."

"I went to Belgium. I did the tourist bit. On one tour they took us to some place where little old ladies make lace that nobody wants, but the whole thing's paid by the government to keep it alive. They don't want that lace-making skill to disappear. Well, it should disappear. It's obsolete. An anachronism."

"Well, here in this country we look towards the future," said the visionary.

"And I'll tell you another thing! This state needs to attract industries and businesses. There's no reason on Earth why we can't compete in the near future with New York or California!"

"But, wait, do we really want Wichita to be like New York City, or Los Angeles, or Chicago, or New Orleans with all the smog and crime and traffic jams?" Evans countered and Vittorini sobered up.

"No, of course not," he replied in a much calmer vein.

"I think that we've got it pretty good in this here state, though New Yorkers see us as hicks," Evans added. "They're rude jerks anyway, so who cares what they think?"

Regardless, Evans knew that the sale was certain. He was just postponing the inevitable and he knew it. So did Vittorini.

The developer's office was nearby.

An hour later, he was driving home in an exultant mood, periodically glancing at the check in one hand. He had trouble believing the amount and kept looking at the zeros to make sure that it was true and that the check was real. All doubts had vanished from his mind. Vittorini had been right. The past can have an unhealthy stranglehold on a person.

He bounded out of his car, feeling happy and making all sorts of plans in his mind for a bright new future. He felt like celebrating! He poured himself a brandy snifter filled to the rim with Amaretto and decided to put on some loud Pink Floyd music—really loud. In his exuberance he accidentally broke the last 48 rpm record.

No matter, he told himself. *It was old. Anyway, I can now replace all of my old records with brand new CDs. They're better. Don't know why I've held on to these vinyl records for so long.* And he put in a compact disc into the player, turning up the volume so loud that it drowned everything else.

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Armando Simón is the author of *This That and the Other*.