

Concours de Nouvelles de la Ville du Havre 2018 – 8^{ème} édition

Catégorie Anglophone

1^{er} prix

The flat mate

Part 1: Shelley

“You disgusting b****! How dare you....”

These kinds of words have ceased to affect me, as this is the third time I get caught living with another woman’s husband. Love, huh? No way. Those men, they don’t love you. Snap out of it. If they love you, why did they secretly meet and stay with women like me? They love me? No, of course not. Not in a million years. They lust after my youth and my beauty. They want the feeling of dominance and the good times that I bring. But I knew this day would come, again. So keep calling me whatever names you want, I don’t care. And good luck trying to get your husband back. I’m afraid the devil’s already gotten the best of him.

There’s always a transition phase in between relationships. For the average girl, it would probably be hours of ice-cream eating and sobbing in front of a TV screen showing some cheesy chick-flicks, or b*tching for days on end with their besties. For me, it is days of wandering the streets looking for a new place to stay until I find my next target. Oh, these vulnerable men in their mid-life crisis, with their expensive suits and their eyes looking as if they are ready to devour any young, hot, beautiful girl who happens to walk by. All four of them had been nice and generous to me until one got tired of me and the other three not so lucky as their wives found out. Humiliation soon was replaced by brief moments of this fulfilling glory from date nights and jewelry and clothes. I was living in the secret hotel rooms that they got for me, and I had nothing to lose.

While waiting for my next relationship, I still need to eat, to sleep, to keep my beauty, and the job waitressing at the café cannot meet all those needs. After my shifts, when no customer from the café wants to spend the night with me, I'll resort to the alley where all the girls are, waiting to be someone's escort. And there it was, pathetically stuck on the phonebooth, an ad by someone trying to find a flat mate. College student huh? Not bad.

It was a rainy night. I arrive at the flat in an alley even more narrow than the one where I saw the ad. What kind of college student would choose this sh*thole to live? Never mind, this cheap rent will definitely last me a month or two.

"Hi. Are you Shelley? I'm May. Nice to meet you. Come, this way." Said my shy-looking new flat mate.

"Hey. Nice place you got there."

She didn't reply, just continued stepping up the creaking stairs.

Then I follow the skinny girl to the meagre flat where furniture is pretty much just barely enough to get by. Good thing that's all I need. At least the lack of any decorations makes the place look more spacious. Throwing my bags on to the floor, I rushed to the bathroom to get my make up fixed for the party tonight, ignoring the faint voice with a slight accent: "The rent should be paid by the fifth of each month. And the electricity is..."

Is fifty-fifty. Geez, there are only two people here, no need to state the obvious. I stay in my room, you have yours, the kitchen and bathroom are shared. May, huh? Must be an immigrant from some Asian country. This must be your first time living in this big city alone. Poor little thing. I'll try not to be too harsh on you.

My days usually start from the evening. Sometimes I would go out with the customers and spend the night with them at some motel and come home before dawn. And that is also the time when May gets up to prepare meals for her literature school and a part-time job in District 1. She's meek and quiet, so no conflict will happen between our lifestyles.

Sometimes I would have no customer and spend the night wandering in shops, looking at beautiful designs that I dream to make. That dream was long gone as my parents are no longer here to provide for me and my treacherous aunt had stripped me off all my inheritance. I knew my family was no good. Probably that's why I ended up like this. Suits me well actually. I am now a waitress/escort/slut that would probably end up being a resident at a brothel someday. I don't even mind that anymore.

However, lately, I found myself staying at home more often. I would have dinner with May and her cooking is rather good. It is nice to enjoy a home meal from time to time, I must admit.

"So, how come you never question what I do or where I come from?" I asked.

"Well, it doesn't matter that much as long as we can live together peacefully right?" she said, helping herself to another piece of cabbage.

She's right. This type of person could be a good stay-at-home wife.

Later on I noticed even more proof for that theory. She's always quiet by her writing desk and when she doesn't write, she would go about cleaning the flat and even help clean my messy room. It helps her to think, she said.

Sometimes I would come home drunk and vomiting and make such a fuss over some guy. May would shush me up and put me to bed. When I wake up, my clothes would have been washed and the mess would have been cleaned. It's such a long time since I last experience this home-like feeling.

I have developed a liking to this place. I can't explain why I just want my shift to finish and go home right away. No midnight parties or random hookups. The nights are cold and the alleys are dangerous, while at the flat I'm shielded from men's judging and lusting eyes.

Part 2: May

"Ding doong..."

Okay, here you go. It's alright. Not every city person is unfriendly and aggressive like the last. You have moved to a new place now. It will be fine. Just open the door and welcome her.

So Shelley has moved in for nearly a month now. With her presence, my insomniac nights seem less dreadful, as she often comes home in the middle of my episodes and bother me with her shenanigans. At first, I was in deed bothered. I was already tired from a full day study at school and work as a private tutor, and now I have to take care of this party girl or else her vomit and yelling would ruin the place, or worse, get us kicked out of here. It's my karma I guess, since I had left my family in pursuit of my futile dream to become an author. But instead of being inspiring and eventful like I had thought, my days went by without me making any progress. My projects at school keep getting rejected by professors, so do all my attempts at writing for local news. I had to turn to a part-time job, which took away even more of my time because I needed to commute. This stressful life style started to affect my sleep as I found my brain unable to shut off when it was supposed to. It started a while back, since the beginning of winter. My life was going nowhere, this big city was much scarier than I could handle and my sense of purpose was starting to fade. As I was trying to cope, I had to take on new position of a nanny for my new room mate Shelley, whose mischiefs have given me more than just trouble.

Shelley always tries to appear so tough and reckless. But I don't think so. When she lets her guard down, she's like a wounded kitten rolling up in a pile of blanket and old clothes on her bed. I notice her crying several times when she's drunk. She was blabbering about something then the next moment tears started falling from her eyes. That was the moment I found out that she was tricked by her own family and now she has to sleep with men to be able to afford her life. I felt something like empathy so I started taking care of her more, cooking for her and helping her with cleaning. I have lots of time when I don't sleep anyway. And Shelly started to warm up to me. I can feel it. She still doesn't talk to me much since our schedules do not allow us to see each other so often, but definitely something has changed.

I still try to keep up my writing as it is the only thing that keeps my mind focus. I was writing a novel for a contest due by the end of the month. These days, I realized my main character started to behave like Shelley. During the nights I stayed up looking after her, I had time to observe, and write. She has a certain depth that she in herself does not see. What a shame.

I couldn't help thinking about Shelley as she became my new source of inspiration. She didn't know that I was writing about her, she didn't know at all that my pen has fallen in love with every word describing her. I can't sleep now not because of my worries about making ends meet, but because I have too much feelings I need to write them down. I write frantically on my table while she sleeps soundly in my bed. She doesn't talk much but to me, each of her actions seems to speak a thousand words. She spends more time with me now than outside. I didn't dare to ask, but I'm happy I have her as a company. Shelley, an interesting character with a wound only herself can heal. Within the next two weeks, I finished her story and submitted to the judge.

Part 3: Shelley

It's nearly Christmas. While it is the busiest time of year for students like May, for me, not so much. Men had to go back to their families and to drown themselves with work. At least the kind of men that I'm after. That day I was quite content because finally I had put together the perfect sweater for Amy, to thank her for putting up with me, with the help of some of my drag friends. But I got home to find a note on the door saying: "Happy holidays you ****", I immediately knew it was up to something no good. When I opened the door, a horrifying scene was laid before my eyes. All our belongings and furniture were messed up. The curtains and clothes were torn, there were pieces of broken glass everywhere, the chairs and table were smashed. It was all we have. It was all that May has. Who did this? I knew exactly who. But it didn't matter now that Amy was about to come home and she will be devastated. I have brought this to her and now I need to face the consequences. I needed to clean it up. I cannot let her suffer this. They knew where I live now. They can come back.

So I cleaned up.

And Amy came home. While I was sweeping the broken glass with what is left of the broom. We looked at each other and I could see her gaze directed toward something more than my mere appearance or the mess that was going on. She looked directly into my soul and that moment I knew that she knew. I knew that she knew who I was, what I was doing and she accepted it. My entirety. It terrified me. The moment was brief but to me it felt like forever. I stripped for money but I have never felt so naked. Finally, she spoke.

“I’ll help you.”

No, May. Please don’t do this. I can’t face your kindness. Not now.

As I stood there, petrified, helplessly watching May trying to keep composure and putting her beloved table back together, I felt something I have never felt before. Was it grief? Was it pain? Was it love? I don’t know. It was all too complicated to comprehend. All that I know was that she deserves better and I caused her trouble.

“Come on. Don’t just stand there. Come here and help me.” May said with her gentle voice.

So I picked myself up and helped her.

That day, I left. I am sorry May but I cannot continue living like this. I cannot hurt anyone else anymore and I dare not put those I love in danger. Now I realized I do have something to lose. That’s you.

So I left the sweater, an envelope of my saving and a note on her bed. She’s gone for school long ago. She’s strong and she’ll get through this. But I cannot be there to drag her down. I need to find those people and settle with them, on my own. Then I’ll work hard and build my life from the start. Then I will come back to find you, to make it up to you, my flat mate, my home.

Part 4: May

I came home to find Shelley had gone. I was going to tell her that my story got the prize. I was going to thank her for being my muse. My heart was filled with joy till the moment I

found her note. I didn't want her to leave. We have just started to know each other. And I still have so much to tell her. Where can I find you now Shelley? Who am I gonna spend my sleepless nights with now? I stand there in the middle of the room, unable to keep tears from my eyes as I see the emptiness she left behind.

2^{ème} prix

Insomnia

There is a scent pushing all the way against the back of the throat, wood burning and cooking oil gripping the palate. And as well a sound, the frenzy of the forbidden city getting ready, gripping the Palace.

Over there, someone is walking in the early morning wind, red lips and long hair swaying in circles. Purple shadows appear in her strides, and inside her eyelids, each step her head heavier, like a pendulum. The forbidden city's eunuchs are beating the red carpets. She lied onto them yesterday with eyes wide open the whole night. Breath.

Some sounds just come in waves. Each silence shocks her square hips, press onto her chest, a wave of heat tingling her scalp. Just getting out would be fine. Walking with the outer side of the feet, praying not hear the name. Someone must have recognized the jaw. The straight elbows. She pull them backwards like a puppet when she thinks to hear a known voice. Please.

It seems like the name, as a shout emerging of out the cocoon of the ears. Just walk and you'll be out, the dress ruffles. Just walk and the name will be distant. He does. Almost here. The gates are open now.

The guards look, a yellow light in their pupils. Pass. Pass. Breath.

Take the final look before leaving, the dress is almost on the ground of the sandy road.

Escaped.

As he turns back around, a sent passes onto the wind. From his sweat, a light perfume. Everywhere in his borrowed costume, a light perfume.

The fearful blue of his palms is the blue of her veins, but the red of his lips is the red of her mouth, anyone could have told so. This time was close. Next one, he will bring her

some flowers perhaps, in that handkerchief with the king's initials that they used to stifle their laughter in.

3^{ème} prix – ex-aequo

Asleep while awake

“My thoughts are like rush hour traffic. They have lots of places to go, but they move frustratingly slow. My ears are clogged, my vision hazy and I have a headache. I’m slacking at work, my sex-life is bad, and my friends think I’m an asshole. I’m not sleeping, doctor.” He scribbles some notes sloppily into his journal. He keeps checking his watch while I speak, impatient to close up for today I suppose. He writes me a prescription for sleeping pills and a pat on the back as I leave. “If these don’t do it for you Mr. Lunde, nothing will,” he says.

They don’t. I go to work the next morning, five useless pills and two hours of sleep later. I stare at excel sheets, make graphs, work on some investment plan for the next quarter, and sit for an hour and 45 minutes in a meeting, in which my boss, a disgustingly fat guy called Tore, explains how the Swedish pickled herring industry is looking shaky this year, and so we should “back out of that deal before I can say Surströmming”. “Hahaha, why don’t you shut the fuck up before I can say diabetes, Tore”, I think inside myself walking out of the meeting room. The seventh coffee of the day marks the end of the day.

On the bus ride back home, people hop on and off, nose deep into their phone. The passengers all avoid sitting next to each other, until it starts to get cramped and the slight personal space invasions become unavoidable. The guy in front of me keeps getting notifications on his phone, but doesn’t put it on silent. The Facebook Messenger “PLING” sounds drill into my aching head.

I remember the noise-cancelling headphones in my backpack, and block it all out. The cranial rush-hour loosens. Why am I not sleeping? There’s nothing to worry about: a well-paid job, a beautiful girlfriend, and a nice 100 square meter apartment in the middle of Oslo, all to myself. I’ve been on holiday three times this year, to the Canary Islands, Greece, even

Thailand. I'm all set: 25 years old, rather good-looking, fresh out of Business School, ready to enjoy life.

And I would, but the Sandman hasn't exactly been knocking on my door. For almost three months now, it's been bad, and somehow, getting worse. Perhaps I won't sleep at all at some point. There's this documentary about the guy who set the world record in most time not sleeping in one go, Randy Garner. He lasted 11 days and 25 minutes, but at the end his brain was basically not functioning. When you don't sleep, you're basically never awake either. I daydream about that sweet feeling of nothingness, the feeling of being dead while you're very much alive.

That same night, my eyes drill into the white ceiling, that little crack right above my pillow, for about 5 hours without catching even as much as a minute of shut eye. That's enough of that, I think, and I put on my shoes, my jacket, my gloves. I make my way down to the ocean and feel the fresh breeze on my face. It's 3:30 AM, and every street is empty. Alone with the seagulls and a couple of hobos, we listen to the crashing waves as the city sleeps. I notice 24-hour convenience store and buy myself some cookies and an ice tea. 24-hour stores have a form of raw energy. They have an entirely different business-model from most places: Owen Wilson DVDs, Turkish football-jerseys and homemade halloumi? These places thrive off people like me.

I sit down on a bench looking out on the Oslo fjord. The sky is already quite bright, illuminating the dormant city as I smoke my cigarette. Some seagulls fly over to try to catch some of my crumbs, and I play around with them making them go back and forth. I sit there, content with myself. Back and forth, to and fro, just for some crumbs. I leave them the half-finished pack of cookies and watch them feast. Are they happy? It would be nice if someone left me a box of cookies sometime.

The crushing weight of my body and my burning red eyes clouds the pleasant moment, but I'm still wide awake, so I get up from the bench. Over by the edge of the dock, I look down. The oily surface ripples gently with the wind over the dark depths. I stand there observing, listening, studying it, and suddenly feel a push. In the fall, I try to look behind me, but can't quite make out the shapes. The five-meter drop plunges me deep beneath the surface, and only the slight yellow glow of the rising sun is visible. The clothes fill up with water and

swimming becomes nearly impossible, and the weight pulls me down for a while. The bottom comes into view, the black, haunting ocean floor, the kind of nothingness that haunts you, like the utter silence in your house home alone as a kid, the moving shadow among the trees in a forest at night, the darkness that you feel penetrate deep inside you, and could swallow you whole. My muscles fill with blood and tense up, I struggle to get my coat and boots off, and I start to swim, as fast as I can, climbing upwards. My lungs are caving in and my vision starts to get cloudy. The water starts to get brighter and brighter, but I still can't see the surface clearly. My movements become cramped and small, and I barely move upwards. My mind starts to swirl and I scream, although I know no one can hear me. I think of that echoless void that awaits me below, and I keep moving. Thrusting harder and harder with my arms. My vision is almost entirely black when I finally feel my head liberated from the weight of the water and my lungs fill with air again. I somewhat regain my breath and make my way to a ladder. I almost died. "Who... who pushed me?" I wonder as I feel myself pass out from exhaustion on the dock.

Some retiree out for a morning stroll wakes me up. When she inquires as to why I'm lying soaking wet and asleep in the harbor, it all seems very unclear. She takes me for a lunatic when I babble some inaudible explanation, and walks off, leaving me dripping and dumbfounded on the dock. I walk back to my apartment, trying to make sense of it all. I genuinely felt a push, but was it a person, a ghost... God? I'm not a superstitious man, yet all scenarios seem as likely. I try to light a cigarette, but tremble too much and drop it on the ground.

I manage to get back home and make breakfast. I'll think clearer with some food in my system. I open the window to smoke a cigarette and let the nicotine soothe my body. Smooth jazz plays in the background and I watch the smoke rise from the tip, in sync with the music. The contrast between the poisonous and the beautiful, a flower of evil lightly ascending to the skies, it's all quite astounding, especially with what happened. The bright colors of my neighbor's television set interrupt my musing. I realize it's been on for the entire time I've been home. One, two, three, four hours? Come to think of it, it was on yesterday evening... Has it ever been off? No, he's caught my eye before, during my sleepless nights. 4 AM, 6 PM, 10 AM, he's always watching TV, dressed merely in his tightsy-white underwear. He alternates between the couch and the kitchen to make himself a huge

sandwich now and then. How is he able to keep up this life-style? He must be unemployed. But even unemployed people go out. They go to the park, see their friends, try to find a new job, they don't just sit there. He's bald, fat, and his building's pretty run down, although he does keep a pretty clean apartment. That's probably all we have in common.

My thoughts are a mess, so give sleep another go, in vain. I try to read a book, but drift off after a couple of pages, thinking about TV-guy over there. Doesn't he go to bed? Maybe he has insomnia as well. I smoke another cigarette and try my best to make eye-contact. Maybe we could throw each other a little wave and bond over our shared plight, but he never takes his eyes off the screen. He sits there, sedated, staring into the pixels.

Chasing crumbs or not, is there meaning? If the seagulls get enough crumbs, they can use that energy and take flight. They soar over the cities, the coasts and the seas, riding the waves of wind. On land, on the sea, in the air, they are truly free. Maybe you need to dig through some garbage, eat some crumbs now and then. But it's worth it.

I go to the airport, and on the way, scroll up and down a list of countries on my phone. Madagascar, it is. First class, Champagne and complimentary peanuts. I watch Oslo and my life disappear, and as we finally break through the line of clouds, I lean back on my chair and feel my heavy and tired body. My ears are clogged and my vision hazy, but I close my eyes and right there, I fall asleep.

3^{ème} prix – ex-aequo
Conversations with the Sky

It's during those suspended hours, not quite morning nor night, after the bars have faded into sleep but before birdsong colors awake, when the quiet suffocates. I think the silence scares me, so I turn to the only one left to talk to at such a godforsaken hour: the sky.

I love sleeping because of dreaming. But without the fridge's hum or grumble of passing cars, the da-dum pulse in my ear loudens, and with each beat, I feel the wasted

seconds of my life leak out. Then, I think about my mortality. And from there, there's no stopping thoughts. They just won't shut up. Like the world's trying to screw me out of this one, simple respite. So when I can't fall asleep, I go confront the sky.

I like to open my window and lean out and look out over the sleeping rooftops. Past the buildings shadowed, faded lights, and window shutters closed all night, the sky the only passerby to see me stare out alone at a city not my own.

The sky is the only one who sees our true face, bare. They say humans build homes to protect themselves from the elements, but I think we just want to hide our many-faced, duplicitous selves from the sky; but we shouldn't because even the sky wears a thousand faces, plays a thousand different roles, an indefinite performance whilst we relax the pretenses once a day in the vulnerability of sleep.

"Who needs sleep when I've got you as company?" I say to the sky. It is the sky who truly protects us from the elements, holds us in earth, acts as the boundary between life and dark space. "The world would be doomed if I had your job. Would've high-tailed it out of here long ago."

My eye has been twitching lately. People's faces tend to blur more into the air like a heatwave warping reality. And I cry more; when I see children holding hands; when I walk down an empty stairwell; when I run out of honey for tea. I think I'm going mad. Apparently, sleep deprivation will do that to you. The other night I saw a cat-like creature, slightly larger, perusing all the alleyways on my street like a surveyor as if I'd crept into a realm I wasn't supposed to be in. Before I could follow, the street lamps flickered and it vanished. As I said, my vision is failing, and I'm going mad.

Yet despite this, the sky hasn't opened up and sucked me away or catapulted me to space. It watches and listens, ever present. It loomed above when I was born, and will loom above when I die. A constant, I steady myself against its certainty. "Hear that sky," I shout. "You're my rock. Symbolically speaking, of course, because otherwise logical fallacy..." You know, sky and earth being opposites.

I must be so alone to be talking to the sky.

During these middle nights, I want to whisper away like smoke from chimney tops into the night smog. To join the sky. To disappear in dreams only brought by sleep.