

Concours de Nouvelles de la Ville du Havre 2017 - 7^e édition

Catégorie étudiants anglophones

1^o prix

WOMEN WHO SMOKE

My mother

The freckled skin on her cheeks moves; the air palpates. The tip of the cigarette blooms and withers. A dense fog flits upwards.

She repeats and delivers a blow of air. I inhale, just a little — it smells like combustion and dry sand, something herbal and dead, not a thoroughly unpleasant smell — then hold my breath.

My mother is the type of person who takes everything seriously. The report card, the offhand comment my friend made to me, the neighbor's tic, her mother-in-law's sarcasm.

But if there's one thing she never takes seriously, that's —

“Mom, quit already.”

“No,” she says, calmly, pleasantly, not putting down the extinguished Marlboro in her hand.

The beauty pageant queen

The beauty queen was twenty at the time, a year older and several heads taller than I was. I watched with weariness as the cast of stylists contoured a sharp red line over her cupid's bow—it breathed perfection and utter boredom, the kind of trivialities the buzz of television feeds on.

Her vermilion lips only became a human mouth to me on a Thursday night, when the reporters spotted her standing at the doorframe of a murky bar. The cigarette between her front teeth, blowing white fumes, was the only authorization slip journalists needed to upgrade their description of her oral anatomy from “lush crimson” to “exhaust pipe.”

It was a case of bad and bad, Confucius and nihilists. In the culture of my East Asian home country, potential baby-bearers who smoked were morally depraved, wreckers of the female sex's self-respect, kamikaze crashing on the saccharine narrative of gentle and genteel women.

I loathed it, but I did not think much more highly of the hedonist nihilism of the west, where peer pressure made puffing burning leaves a look in vogue. I did believe in the freedom to commit suicide in the manner of one's choosing, however, and had an even bigger weakness for narratives of resistance. The more the journalists hounded the beauty queen, the more her martyrdom became palatable to my eyes.

My mother

My mother rarely smokes with other women. I am not sure if it is a choice for self-demarkation or the circumstantial tyranny of her generation.

But, for a fact, she is a rare breed: among a cohort of women nearing the end of the middle-aged spectrum, she acts like a millennial statement-maker. I could only count a handful who breathed tar on an hourly basis as she does, but none who combine the act with the rest of my mother's modus operandi: coiffing her hair like a teenage boy; terrorizing the streets with the rhythm of her gas pedal; shrugging on a pair of sneakers for office days.

I feel her eccentricity in the hushed whispers in her absence, which her friends think I don't catch. I feel it in one of their slips of the tongue, a comment on my acned forehead, "Poor dear, your mom won't teach you to put on make-up." I feel it in their genuine laughs at my mother's brazen sense of humor—genuine although distanced, as if laughing at a stand-up rather than engaging with the comedian.

My mother never expresses dissatisfaction, not even through a downturn of the lips. Her only consolation – or resistance – is the cigarette she lit.

Me

I blow a long, wispy breath over the mirror, hoping to tuck away my reflection behind the mist. The bridge of my nose curves clumsily onto my cupid's bow; my cheeks have no dimples and are puffy in all the wrong places. I spare only a small patch of mirror, enough to look at the teeth I'm brushing.

Water vapor does not linger long, and I soon stare back at myself again, the white of my eyes pallid and the irises insipid. The mirror shows my wooly hair and uneven lips, an inheritance gift with which I struggle to maneuver. While they look uniquely womanly on my mother's figure, if only because she has the confidence to wield them the way she wields her other sins, on me they look asexual, ugly, like an oversized child who has yet to blossom.

I stare at the sink, at the toothpaste foam and swirling water, avoiding my own eyes. I do not know how my mother reclaims her womanhood from the denials of her cohorts — I could not even reclaim it from my own flickering insecurities.

My mother

She inhales wrong, with shallow and hurried breaths. With half the stick incinerated, she starts blowing up another. My mother was never an adept at moderation, but by even her standards, three packs a day are excess. She stations herself to the front door, where the fumes flutter.

I watch her, appraising the twirls of the smoke, how the white spirals melt into the gray eggshell of the sky. I listen, too; the house has thin walls, and I am a light sleeper. The smoke quickly clears: it didn't take me long to be apprised of the ordeal. There is another woman—a woman not from our family.

I wait in silence for my mother to finish her smoke break, for her to meet the judge, to shake his hand, to pick up a pen, to anchor ink to paper, and then, to finish her second smoke break. It is a semi-conscious suicide to blow through the nicotine so quickly, but I know better than to raise any objections.

As we get into the car, and I head to my new home, I wonder if burning is a satisfactory substitute when one couldn't drown the pain.

The other woman

She is thin, with a long, broken face, long fingers, and long hair too. She gestures in staccatos, as if too hurried to complete the entire arc of an arm swing, and hides her nervousness badly. *Coral pink was last season, I want to say, the lipstick looks awful on you.* My mother never needed lipstick.

I am surprised when she pulls out a small box. She didn't appear to have the caliber to set foot upon this domain. The thought was certainly absurd, however, for if she could intrude upon even my mother's matrimony, a territory demarcated by law, why would *smoking*, a territory demarcated only by the constructs of my childhood, be any more of a prerogative? Her brand of death sticks looks like herself. "Women's cigarettes," long, thin, disingenuously aesthetic — the kind of drugs marketed as fashionable, only to appeal to consumers with no dependence but that on parading themselves.

Her wrist curves inwards; her mouth kisses the stick. She hardly resembles a smoker, the act of inhaling thick tar, calcinations, and ammonium masquerading as a gritless, stylistic exercise, a Marilyn Monroe copycat act. A woman like her, garish with coquettish vogue, would never earn the

ridicule of other women, would never have to swim against the current to be herself, would always try very hard to swim *with* the current.

“Your father tells me you do really well in school,” she says.

“My father tells me nothing about you,” I reply.

Me

I blow, but nothing comes out. A gust lashes past me, extinguishing the lighter. I can smell the pungent stench of the leaves, however, even when they lie still, having yet to burn up.

“You have to suck in.”

My cheeks burn before the cigarette does — a teenager caught in puerile trials and errors, this is what it is. But if the stranger — a young man in a round pair of glasses — found this ridiculous, he does not show it.

“Suck in the air when you light it,” he repeats. “Here, let me show you.”

I let the stranger put his lips around the cigarette — notwithstanding the countless plastic cups I have refused to share with friends — and it returns to me with the tip glowing orange, a small dot in the night. I press it to my teeth, puff, sucking in the smoke.

Then, the air is hurled out of my lungs — a regurgitation rather than a cough.

My mouth soured and my windpipe scorched, I heave, eyesight falling upon a window pane on the side of the road. My dour reflection gazes back at me, looking no more like a woman nor like a rebel than before.

I press my free hand to my chest, watching my heartbeat. It does not calm, nor does the pain subside. What a fraud this incendiary game is.

My mother

It is a pale morning, without rain and without sun. Through the window, the clouds cast a gray light onto the blank tiles and walls, rendering a bleak, ashy hue. I shift the boxes around and wipe the dust off the crocks, standing on tip-toes, attempting noiselessness.

The effort is futile; my mother awakes. As the bedroom door swings open, a swift blow of air escapes her throat. It repeats, changing into a thumping cadence, the coughs crisp and dry, a marker of age and habits.

I hand her the mug of tea on the counter and open the door to the balcony. Her new abode, a middling apartment in a middling neighborhood, does not have a front yard like my father's house, but she has appropriated the balcony for her drags. Now, my distaste for the smell has become decisive, but I sit next to her nonetheless, legs dangling off the edge.

Her fingers move against the box; a lone cylinder teeters inside.

"Yes," she answers before I ask. "This is the last. I want to start anew."

The freckled skin on her cheeks move; the air palpates. The tip of the cigarette blooms and withers. A dense fog flits upwards.

She delivers one last blow, then extinguishes.

2° prix

THE AMERICAN DREAM

The air is warm and heavy, the way it always gets before a storm.

He hurries home, head down, tan, dusty shoes scuffing up the tan, dusty ground as he walks past the tan, dusty buildings. He doesn't notice the posters anymore. They're all the same: black, white, red, stained, tattered, each preaching another band of heroes, another Saviour, another salvation.

He closes the door behind him firmly, shoving on the one corner that hasn't quite fit right since the last time the army pounded on it. He throws all three locks, takes off his shoes.

The ground is swept clean. The pictures on the walls have cracked glass but have been lovingly wiped free from the endless dust. The TV is off, the fan cutting lazily through the air.

There is no one visible, a quiet haunting, and he holds his breath until he hears his wife's voice drifting to him from the back room.

He follows that sound almost helplessly, a gentle breeze offering succor from the daily worry that weighs him down, from the muggy air filling his lungs so it feels like he's only ever a step away from drowning. His feet make no sound on the rugs, and soon he's leaning against the doorway.

She is holding a well-loved book, left behind by a lady at one of those international aid camps. That lady has long since left, as they always do. People come saying they'll help, thinking they'll be the one to make a difference, but they can't because they don't understand, and they don't understand because they can leave, and because they can leave, they always do. They come and go, but his family lives on, here, in the dust.

The book is a Western fairy-tale, with the story in English and Farsi, and colourful pictures.

Their dark heads are tucked trustingly into her shoulders, bodies curled into the spaces on the bed. She has one arm around the youngest, the other hand alternating between flipping the pages, and smoothing the other's hair.

The little Pig worked hard all afternoon and used the sticks the Man gave him to build a little stick house. Tired out from his hard work, the little Pig settled down and prepared for his afternoon nap.

He had just tucked himself in when along came the Wolf knock, knocking at his door. The little Pig sighed at the interruption.

His wife smooths the blanket, clucks her tongue to imitate the knocking. His children giggle, halfway to sleep already.

~ ~ ~

This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed home –

The boy is sprawled out in the silk-lined bed, counting out the nursery rhyme on the girl's hand as she sits against the headboard. His eyes are large and limpid, the blue light from the TV glowing off his enlarged pupils.

This little piggy had roast beef –

The TV is muted, showing the appropriate scene of devastation before cutting to somber white men in dark suits. Their mouths move in earnest explanation but there is no sound. The girl's eyes move off the screen, feverishly looking for a new focus. She moves restlessly under his stroking hand, sits up, moves towards the table.

“Why does the pig eat roast beef anyway? Like, isn't it cannibalism?” Her hands have an almost imperceptible tremor as she picks up the little plastic baggie. She turns her head to look back at him. Her red hair falls over her face, a strap slipping down her shoulder. Her pupils swallow up her irises, and she looks beautiful to him.

“Nah. Pigs and cows don't look the same, so they're different.” He sits up, takes the bag from her. He pours out some of the powder, and before he can stop her, she's licked her finger and touched it to the dust, holding it up to the light of the TV.

“Look! It looks like angel dust.” Her eyes have a fervent gleam to them as she twists her finger so the light refracts off the particles.

He grunts noncommittally, uses the black credit card to divide the powder into two straight lines.

“You know, like dust off an angel's wings.” She licks her finger clean.

“Why would angels have dusty wings?”

“They do in the book I'm reading. The dust makes people horny.”

“What, I'm not enough for you? You need to read that trashy smut?” He slants her a glance, teasing.

“Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up. At least they're happy, you know.” She shoves at him, misses his shoulder and almost falls over. “What is this stuff anyway?”

“The best blow money can buy.”

“Oooh. Classy. Gimme.” She shoves her hand imperiously under his nose. He passes her the straw as his phone beeps. The image swims before his eyes before coming into focus.

Reminder: talk show tomorrow! Will send host your concert dates so you don't need to rememb – is all he can read before the notification cuts it off.

“Publicist again?”

“Yeah.”

He shuts one nostril, breathes in deeply through the straw. He dabs his finger in water and snorts that too, to get rid of the dusty feeling in his nose.

The screen has moved on, hungry blondes shaking their heads over a young star dead in a Vancouver hotel room far from home, crime scene dusted with powder.

He can't remember when he laid down on the bed but he must've, because now he's staring at the ceiling. Her body lands next to his on the mattress, bouncing twice before settling down. She is laughing giddily, and so is he and then he's soaring somewhere above the ceiling and not coming down.

~ ~ ~

The Wolf said, "Little Pig, little Pig, let me in."

"No, no, not even by the hair of my chinny chin chin." Said the brave little Pig, scared but not willing to show it.

"Brave like me!" piped up a small voice.

"Exactly like you," she agrees.

"And hairy like Papa's beard!" said the other, not to be out-done.

Laughter is in her voice. "Yes, exactly like Papa."

Her eyes meet his from across the room, long lashes shuttering her eyes in a quiet tease. He scowls at her in play, heart lightening.

The Wolf growls in anger at the pig's response.

The air stills, and then a whistling wind whips through the air.

~ ~ ~

The mahogany ceiling fan blades chase each-other endlessly, a soft clacking noise in the large room. The Man stares up at it, as words drone on and on. There are motes of dust floating near the light and the eddies of air make them dance.

There is a suspected terrorist outpost in a city somewhere far away, and the men in the room, all decked out in uniforms and clanking ribbons, are arguing what to do. There's mention of deterrence, of war, of keeping the country safe.

He rights his chair, holds up his hand for quiet.

“I’ve heard what you’ve all had to say and I thank you, gentlemen, for your hard work and dedication to our country.”

He nods sharply to his left.

“Blow the joint. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a dinner I promised my wife I’d only be an hour late to.” Absent laughter follows him out as his security detail falls in around him.

The white hallways are pristine and echoing. The portraits on the walls look across at one another with stoic expressions. His footsteps ring across the marble floor.

~ ~ ~

The whistling is getting louder and louder, joined by a buzzing and sudden shouting in the streets. His children huddle closer into her arms, and he reaches out to join them.

Well then. I’ll huff and I’ll puff, little Pig.

Her voice quavers, her beautiful eyes trained on him.

And I’ll blow your house down.

3° prix

Days are darker than nights

I can’t breathe anymore. I am suffocating. I’ve already put some cold water all over my face. Twice in fact. I can’t see my reflection in the mirror. Only blurred lines. I am losing my balance. I want to hold on to something, to stand up. I want to fight back, but I am so tired. I can feel myself slowly collapsing on the bathroom floor.

* * *

From the window, we could see the sky, it was full of stars. The moonbeams were quite weak that night but still so fascinating.

“Look at the sky Ethan, it’s stunning tonight. The stars are all lit up.” I joyfully said.

“We talked about The Northern Lights in class today, Mum. The teacher told us that when rays of sunshine meets the earth’s air it makes beautiful lights in the sky. We can only see them under the poles. I’m sure we can in Canada! Mum I promise, I’ll take you there someday.” Ethan said, asking for a hug.

“Why aren’t you in bed little monkey?” Alex suddenly interrupted.

“Dad!”

“Jump on my back, I’ll drop you into bed!”

Ethan jumped on his father’s back and Alex threw him on to his bed. I was still in front of the window, staring at the stars. Alex and Ethan were in the middle of a fight, tickling each other. I smiled.

“Time to sleep now!” Alex said.

“Can you sing me to sleep Mum? Pleeeeease !” Ethan begged me.

“Alright, close your eyes and hold me tight.” I whispered and started to sing:

To know know know him, is to love love love him, just to see him smile, makes my life worthwhile. To know know know him, is to love love love him, and I do...⁽¹⁾

Ethan fell asleep, my lovely boy, I carefully put the blanket upon him, kissed him on the forehead and exited the bedroom. Alex was waiting for me in the corridor.

“You did not call me this afternoon, I was worried.”

“I guess I lost track of time...”

“And I had to call you this morning. You can’t keep doing these things to me. I already have a lot to handle and I can’t see you as another daily task.” he explained

“How is your work doing? Has the project you’ve working on all weekend been accepted?” I asked.

“Yes and no, still have some improvements to make. As always, nothing’s perfect.”

“Tiny changes I’m pretty sure, next time I could help you ...”

“No you can’t, it’s very serious business!” he laughed

I laid down on the bed, my wrist was still hurting. Alex got into bed and switched off the light.

*'Cause you make me feel, you make me feel, you make me feel like a natural woman...
When my soul was in the lost-and-found, you came along to claim it. I didn't know just what
was wrong with me, till your kiss helped me name it. Now I'm no longer doubtful of what I'm
living for and if I make you happy I don't need to do more. 'Cause you make me feel, you
make me feel, you make me feel like a natural woman...⁽²⁾*

* * *

Few days later, I received a call from Melissa, my best friend since college.

“Amber! Do you remember that next week you have a dinner with Richard and I? Saturday, my place!” she cheerfully started.

She then talked about her new job and this other female colleague that she could not bear. I listened to her patiently while trying to make up another excuse for not attending the dinner. I was not able to stand an evening with her like we used to do. I would have probably sat at the table, without saying a word, laughing a little... Even if Melissa and Richard were my closest friends, I was not sure that they realized that the sparkle in my eyes was slowly fading.

Alex got home very late, I tried to reach the alarm clock to check the time, but I had no strength at all.

* * *

Friday afternoons were my favorites because Ethan would always rush back to the apartment after school to help me with the dinner, those treasured moments were only for the two of us. That Friday, I turned the radio on, and our favorite song started...

Come on everybody, clap your hands, all you looking good! I am gonna sing my song it won't take long! We're gonna do the twist and it goes like this: come on let's twist again, like we did last summer. Yeah let's twist again, like we did last year! ⁽³⁾

We decided to dance together but several minutes later I started to have some trouble breathing and had to stop for a second. Ethan, however, was more than excited, he was thrilled with the music!

Let's rock, everybody, let's rock. Everybody in the whole cell block was dancin' to the Jailhouse Rock. Spider Murphy played – ⁽⁴⁾

The music suddenly stopped. Alex was home. His face was expressionless, a little bored maybe, but I knew that he was mad inside.

“Ethan, stop it! Go to your room and stay there for a while.” he snapped.

“But Mum said...” Ethan shyly replied

“I am the one who decides. My home, my rules. Go to your room Ethan, now” he strongly ordered.

I decided to intervene as soon as Ethan left the kitchen.

“What's wrong with us dancing? I don't understand!”

“Won't you shut up!” he erupted “Little boys don't dance! They do sport and spend time with pals. They do not stay at home with their mothers, dancing around! He is not a baby anymore and I want him to become a man. I don't want to hear any music again, am I clear enough?”

I stayed mute as usual. He came closer to me and firmly repeated.

“If I ever hear again one note of your bloody music again, one note of those old and stupid tunes, I swear this radio will be smashed into pieces. And you know I always keep my promises.”

* * *

Am I falling? Lights off. Trapped. A shadow? Wait. Go! Move! Stop. Should I cry out? Should I leave? Still falling? How? Can't breathe. Why am I under water? I am suffocating. Stop it! What's wrong with me? It's too dark to think. Quiet. Darkness. The lights! Turn the lights on!

Suddenly I realized that someone was jumping on my bed!

"Mum, wake up, wake up!"

Ethan was wide awake, I managed to reach the alarm clock this time and it was about 5 am. Suddenly I felt like something bad had happened.

"What is the matter honey?" I asked, slightly panicking.

"The sun is rising!" he excitedly shouted.

I breathed in and out to calm down the speeding of my heart.

"Come to watch it with me!" he pleaded.

I put my sweater on and followed him. Our small apartment did not have a balcony, so Ethan took me up to the roof. He opened the door and started to shout:

"WOW! THE SUNRISE! OH MY!"

"Shhh, you're gonna wake up all the neighbors!" I firmly whispered.

"Well, they should be awake! It's beautiful! It's the perfect way to start a day, don't you think?"

We stayed there for a while, watching the sun rising. We were there, Ethan and I, cuddling in the warm sunshine. I felt so free. It was nothing particular but it was beautiful. The same old buildings, the same sad city as yesterday but yet something was different now. Ethan was so close. It was like I was going to stay there forever with him, my precious little boy.

And a tune came to my mind just like that:

This is a man's world, this is a man's world, but it wouldn't be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl. Man thinks about little bitty baby girls, and of baby boys, man makes them happy, 'cause man makes them toys, and after man's made everything. Everything he can, you know that man makes money, to buy from other man. This is a man's world...⁽⁵⁾

“I wanted to see the sun with you this morning, Mum” Ethan said, breaking the peaceful silence. “But only with you, not with Dad. I know that he made you cry last night. I hate him.”

I froze. What I have been fearing the most was happening.

“Don’t say that, you don’t mean it, grown-ups argue sometimes. It is not your fault at all. Your dad works hard for us, you can’t hate him. Moreover, he is your father, he loves you and doesn’t deserve your anger.”

“But you don’t deserve to cry.” Ethan said.

I was speechless, I could not argue.

“Well, time for breakfast! Let’s make some pancakes!” I merrily declared.

We went back to the apartment. Alex might already have gone to work, but I did not want to think about it this morning. I wanted to forget what had happened last night. Making the pancakes was fun, we put the music on and we started to dance. Without anyone judging.

* * *

I took a piece of paper then put down some thoughts to clear up my mind. Why did everything have to be so complicated? My head was hurting, I felt bad. This scene kept coming back again, again and again. I decided to fold the piece of paper, I wanted to do some origami. I wasn't sure of my folding, I could not remember, it used to be so easy once. Why couldn't I do it anymore? Come on! Hurry, do it now! Stupid thing! Couldn't do a thing right! No wonder you were still stuck into this apartment. Silly you.

Stop it.

I breathed in and out. The voices in my head ceased. It felt so weird not to hear them anymore. I took another sheet of paper, did it well this time. The paper figure was so tiny and feeble. I dreamt that the bird that I had made was flying away.

Sometimes it's hard to be a woman, giving all your love to just one man. You'll have bad times and he'll have good times, doin' things that you don't understand. But if you love him you'll forgive him, even though he's hard to understand. And if you love him oh be proud of him, 'cause after all he's just a man. Stand by your man, give him two arms to cling to. And something warm to come to when nights are cold and lonely.⁽⁶⁾

* * *

“Amber? I know you are there ! Open the door!”

There were loud noises coming from the front door. It was Melissa, I recognized her voice. I realized that I had fallen asleep on the kitchen table, next to my paper birds. I lowered my sleeves to cover my bruises.

“I’m coming! Just looking for the keys.” I shouted back.

I had a final look in the mirror, I smiled, trying to make a good impression.

“I have only come to bring back your cooking stuff. Very useful by the way. The dinner with Richard and my friends was great, you should have come! Such a bad luck you were ill. I missed you! May I come in for a second? I won’t be long, I promise!” she asked.

“Well, er .. yeah... Alex won’t be here tonight so...”

Melissa came in but stumbled on the doorway. She was about to fall but I managed to grab her.

“Thanks! So clumsy! But, oh, sorry! Did I hurt you? You pulled such a face...”

“I bumped my head this morning. This is what happens when you jump to try to reach the top of the cupboard.” I answered.

“We are as hopeless as we were at college! Glad to know we haven’t changed!”
Melissa laughed.

We sat at the kitchen table, I poured some coffee and Melissa popped the same question everyone had kept popping for several months now:

“Are you sure everything is alright? Richard and I realized we barely see you, you gradually stopped inviting us. And every time we wanted to spend some time with you, you turned us down! It’s been a while since we enjoyed a real dinner together...”

I was sick of lying, pretending that everything was okay. I felt so empty, as if something had blown all my emotions away. The real me had left so many years ago. All I wanted was to tell Alex that I was sick of this life, sick of his constant calls to ask where I was, sick of being kept indoors, sick of being insulted every day, sick of being humiliated, sick of telling people I was clumsy, sick of lying about the bruises, or about my broken wrist...

I suddenly realized Melissa was holding my hand and I realized that I had had say all my thoughts out loud... Our eyes met and she hugged me tight, I cannot describe how I felt at this moment, the shame was gone.

“Why did you keep that from us?” Melissa interrupted

“I did not want to destroy your trust in him for some bruises or headaches... And I think I did not want to destroy my faith in him as well.”

“Well, you can’t possibly stay here any longer, look at you, you are shaking, take your stuff and come with me now.” She stood up.

“I can’t leave Ethan.”

“Of course you can’t! He’s coming him with us!”

“He needs his father.”

“A father that beats his mother?”

“I deserve it! But I’m not strong enough to confront him, it is my own business! And whatever you may think, he wants the best for Ethan!”

“I can’t let you talk any more nonsense! You are too precious to me and for Ethan. We must go! Now!”

“I should talk to him first.”

“Do you want me to stay? I think it is better if I’m here. I’ll call Richard.”

“No, no, I need to do this by myself and confront him, I have to. I need to.” I said, wiping my tears away.

“Okay, what time will he be back from work?”

“Today, er.... at 7.”

“So I’ll be here at 8, I’ll ask Richard to take the car.” She hugged me once more and then added “I’ll be here at 8, be strong, be brave, I know you are. Pack some stuff, take a suitcase or two if you want to, take Ethan’s clothes as well.”

I thanked her and cried on the kitchen table the second she left.

* * *

Bang bang, he shot me down. Bang bang, I hit the ground. Bang bang, that awful sound. Bang bang, my baby shot me down. ⁽⁷⁾

I can’t breathe anymore. I am suffocating. I’ve already put some cold water all over my face. Twice in fact. I can’t see my reflection in the mirror. Only blurred lines. I am falling. I am losing my balance. I want to fight back, but I am so tired. Someone is helping me, holding me tight, I feel so relieved.

“Is everything packed?” Melissa asks me.

She had arrived earlier than scheduled with Richard and thanks to them I am still on my feet. Alex had gone mad when I had told him that I couldn’t live this life anymore. I’m walking past the front door of this apartment in which I had been trapped, I am not looking back. I am not saying any goodbyes. Everything had already been said. Ethan was waiting for me in Richard’s car.

“So we’ll live at Melissa’s now?” he asks me.

“Yes, till I find a job and a place for us. Do you have everything with you?”

“Yes I have everything with me, because you are with me.” he makes a pause then adds: “it is a new start.”

Melissa gets into the car, smiles at me and squeezes my hand. Richard starts the car.

“Yes Ethan, it is a new start.”

She's got a ticket to ride. She's got a ticket to ride. She's got a ticket to ride. She's got a ticket to ride. But she don't care. She said that living with me, is bringing her down yeah. For she would never be free, when I was around. She's got a ticket to ride. She's got a ticket to ride. She's got a ticket to ride. She's got a ticket to ride. But she don't care. But she don't care. ⁽⁸⁾

Paying tribute to:

1. *To Know Him Is to Love Him*, a song written by Phil Spector for the group The Teddy Bears, 1958, Doré Records.
2. *(You make me feel like) A Natural Woman*, a song co-written by Carole King and Gerry Goffin for Aretha Franklin, 1967, Atlantic label.
3. *Let's do the twist*, a song co-written by Kal Mann and Dave Appell for Chubby Checker, 1961, Parkway.
4. *Jailhouse Rock*, a song co-written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller for Elvis Presley, 1957.
5. *It's a man's man's man's world*, a song written by Betty Jean Newsome and James Brown for himself 1966, King.
6. *Stand by your man*, a song co-written by Billy Sherrill and Tammy Wynette for herself, 1968, Epic.
7. *Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)*, a song written by Sonny Bono for Cher, 1966, Imperial, (covered by Nancy Sinatra the same year)
8. *Ticket to ride*, a song written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney for The Beatles, 1965, Parlophone/Capitol