

SETTLING

SHORT SHORT STORY NO.32

Alan has been preparing his speech all day. 'I've really enjoyed spending time with you,' he imagines himself saying. 'But I feel like there's something missing, you know? Some spark?' He plans to deliver the speech to Olivia, who he's been seeing for three weeks and with whom he's tried hard to fall in love but it's just not happening. She's a perfectly nice girl – interesting, attractive, good sense of humour – but there's something missing.

He hasn't had a girlfriend in four years and wants one. He's kind, thoughtful, filled with love. He met Olivia through a friend and God knows he's tried; He's really tried. Two nights before, she asked him to come home with her, to stay the night, and he found an excuse to say no. He hasn't so much as kissed a girl in a year, let alone had sex with one. The fact that he found this excuse so quickly made his mind up.

'Sorry I'm late,' says Olivia, sitting down opposite him and smiling. She looks very pretty tonight, he tells himself, but it doesn't change things. He orders her a drink and they make small-talk until, his heart pounding, he takes a deep breath and looks away.

'I've been thinking,' he says cautiously. 'About us, I mean. About where we're going. I thought we should talk about it.'

'I've been thinking the same thing,' says Olivia, reaching a hand across the table and taking his for a moment before releasing it. 'I'm so glad you said it.'

'It's hard to know how to put this,' he says nervously.

'It's been so much fun these last few weeks,' she replies, lowering her voice and leaning forward a little. 'I've really enjoyed the time we've spent together.'

'So have I,' he says casually, preparing for the *But*.

'I was thinking that maybe we could go away for a weekend soon,' she says quickly. 'And I wanted to talk to you about my cousin Jane's wedding which is coming up in a couple of months. I know it's a little... unfashionable to say these things, but I'm just so happy that Max introduced us. I've never felt so comfortable with a boyfriend so early in a relationship.'

Alan's mouth opens a little in surprise. He didn't realise that she liked him that much. He thought she felt the same way, that he was a nice person but not The One. He looks around and frowns. A young couple are sitting nearby, kissing. At a table close by a man is sitting alone, reading a book, a pint before him, an empty beside it. By the bar, a middle-aged couple in evening wear are enjoying pre-dinner drinks. He looks back at Olivia and smiles.

'Do you know, I've never been to Amsterdam,' he tells her. 'And I've always wanted to go there. Or maybe you had somewhere better in mind?'