

Unwritten

by Alison Wells

'I love you,' said the man at the book signing.

He was one of the last. The shop was closing. The staff were starting to turn off the lights. She was sitting in the glow of a table lamp with her latest novel in stacks around her. There had been a respectable turn out, her nerves had faded once she'd seen a queue of several.

'I've read all your books,' he said. 'I feel I know you.'

'That's nice,' she said. 'Who will I write it for?'

'For me,' he said. 'For Tom.'

He loved her. He must mean her work. 'I just love you, you're brilliant,' they'd gushed earlier.

He stood aside momentarily. He let the last two ladies with their plastic shopping bags hand over their books and ask for a personalised message.

She was distracted; she had to ask them twice what she should write. She was aware of the man at her shoulder, his presence in the dark, rubbing out the edges of her on that side, melding her with his shadow.

She wasn't afraid. She stood up to get her things, the back of her neck felt vulnerable, virginal but the air was still warm from the press of people. The sensation she felt was from the inside, not from air.

He came forward, lit up. 'The things you say,' he said. 'I know what you mean.'

'It's fiction' she said, looking at her bag as she rummaged for her keys.

'Never do anything to alienate your readers' her publisher had told her. 'Be courteous, friendly and uncontroversial — try and hide your frown lines.'

'It's fict...' she repeated, more softly, looking at him. But she saw in his eyes. He knew. She had always been better at atmosphere than plot but she thought it had been enough to distract them; the

narrative was the shiny neon light guiding them to the playhouse. They weren't meant to look too closely at the subtext, duck into the alleyway or the authentic cookhouse on route, or some red light backstage dressing room where she sat half-undressed in front of a mirror, all shallow breath and heaving breasts, rouge, heart on sleeve. I solemnly decline to let you read between the lines.

She thought he would kiss her, he came so close but he thumped closed the book and made for the door. She chatted with the bookshop manager, thanked everyone and stepped into the street, black, damp, quiet.

Her car was parked just down the now empty city centre thoroughfare. As she walked, water - under the tyres of a moving vehicle - wished like shorebound waves.

He was sitting in the café window. She recognised the shape of him without truly seeing. The glare from the café flared in her face, like a blush. There was the quickening of her footbeats heartbeat. The light subsided, dropped. There was a gap between the buildings, all dark, wet on the inside, up the walls. The next building was shut up, gloomy. She saw her car alone on the street.

He was not the only one in the café. There was a couple holding hands, tightly, in anticipation of separation. The owner was staring into space. He had a moustache and a head of black, oily hair, flat on top. He looked like he'd just slid out from under a car. He was sweating, wiping his hands with a cloth. He wasn't staring into space. He was looking at his own reflection in the café window, against the night. He was seeing what he had come to after all these years. He didn't sigh.

She sat down across from him. Behind his head were plumes of smoke. A heavily jowled woman puffed and coughed in the corner. She had a chin mole. She was out of a fairytale. She was eating the gingerbread. She rummaged in a canvas bag and took out an apple, green on one side, red on the other. She plonked it on the table and continued to rummage. She looked at the owner. His lip quivered slightly.

The author looked at Tom. She wasn't sure of the name yet. The oil cloth was greasy but someone had put forget-me-nots in glass vases on each of the tables. He began to tell her how he had come across her books, which one he had liked best but in the end she took his hand and they held on tight, in anticipation of separation. After a while they went out, he kept holding her hand up the steps to his flat.

He wanted to meet her, tomorrow, again and again. He said they had so much in common, so much to talk about. He said this while he traced a line from her fingertips, along her arm, across her shoulder and neck, up to her cheek over which he laid his warm palm. She rolled against him with familiarity. They lay along the length of each other, restful, as if they had always done. But they didn't talk then. They played music instead which they made love to, then didn't, just listened, the notes playing in and around their heads, all joy, and then he kissed her and it all began again.

Later his eyes tired from the fill of her and his eyelashes dipped.

She slipped from the bed while he dreamed of them walking in parks, watching movies, buying mince.

She was naked but warm and she saw the bookcases and cd racks with the books, not only hers but other authors she loved, music she was into. She looked into his wardrobe where he hung his clothes with the same sort of absentmindedness as her own. She took out a shirt and breathed him in, as if he was dead, as if she was saying goodbye.

She got dressed and went into the kitchen. There were two cups where they'd had tea and bourbon biscuits. They were facing each other on the otherwise empty table, just the tiniest residue of crumbs spilled during laughter.

Before she left she went to look at him, searing him into her memory. She already felt nostalgia, the first sharp flickers of pain. She felt in her pocket for her notebook and pen. Then she went outside into the same darkness, the same rain.

