

SLEEPING BEAUTY

So I'm sat here in the so-called waiting room. It's just a wider bit of corridor really. It's quiet, not much noise coming up from the street. Maybe eleven at night. The occasional nurse goes by, sensible shoes clapping on the lino. The place is full of red plastic chairs, and there's a stained table with months-old car magazines and tired newspaper supplements. On the wall there's a crowded notice board, three layers deep. Just here's a coffee machine. A few feet away they've got a desk like a counter, with nobody behind it at this hour. It's got a box for your customer survey forms – "your opinion matters". On the wall there's a notice that tells you how to wash your hands. As if! And outside, the rain's coming straight from the Irish Sea to patter on the panes.

Aye, I'm not moving. Been here a few hours already, feels like a hundred years. That wicked witch, the insulant consultant – she won't let me in. She's truly maleficent. Maybe she's clocked my dirty, torn clothes, maybe she can smell the vomit, maybe it's 'cause I need a shave. Thinks I'm Undesirable, thinks I'll do poor Grace some harm. Well that's a laugh. I can't do her any more hurt than I have already. The witch says "the situation's critical", that they're "waiting for her to stabilise".

But poor Grace, at least she's got a chance now. If I hadn't found her she wouldn't even have that. I've probably saved her life. Even the Wicked Witch has to get that. If only she'd let me see her.

Right now I'm clean, see. Have been for almost a year. That's long enough, I thought. Maybe it'll be okay to go and look Grace up again. We used to be – well, you could call us lovers, I suppose. We spent a lot of time together. And I well remember her warm body next to mine, the way she moved her hips, the way she'd run her fingers down my spine. Though, I have to admit, that was pretty well always when we were on a high. Flying high together.

One day I said to her, 'why d'you hang out with me? I'm just a smackhead.' She laughed at that. 'You're no' *just* a smackhead,' she said. 'There's good inside you. You could sort yourself out if you wanted.'

'But,' I said, 'what about my ugly face? This is the face that's launched a thousand ships – on the Clyde.'

'Aw, come on,' she said. 'Beauty is about what's inside.' And then she stuck her tongue in my ear and I lost the thread, you know?

There were a good few of us then. We were young, living in our own world where the real world couldn't get to us. We'd hang out at "The Castle" – an abandoned tower-block, used to be called Newcastle House or something, only most of the letters had fallen off the sign. You'd know the place, just past the *Spinning Wheel* pub. There was a couple of empty flats on the fourth floor, without any broken windows so they weren't too bad in the winter. That's where we used to shoot up. Jeanie McDowell

used to get the stuff, we used to pay her. But she wasn't even the middle woman – you can bet there was a long chain to the real dealers, up from London. As for me, I used to get the needles. Someone I knew at the NHS supplies place. I knew it was important, see – I'd heard too much about what can happen if you go sharing them. 'You share your needles,' I'd say, 'and you'll have a bad trip you'll never come back from.'

Here's the Wicked Witch, slipping past. I grab her wrist. 'Can I see her yet?' I say. She pulls the hand away, but she doesn't run off. Instead she takes off her glasses and rubs a hand down her pale face. Blinks, tries to smile at me. 'Soon, Mr Reid,' she says. 'I know how anxious you are.'

Quite gentle, she was. Maybe she's not so wicked after all.

I had a bad trip. Thought I could see wee men with tiny daggers, hiding everywhere. Tried walking through a door that wasn't there, and a wall that was. And worse. Grace said, 'Alec, I don't want you dying on me. You'll have to get help.' Well, that's the only time in my life I've ever cried. (That's one thing my parents did for me – showed me how useless crying was.) And I agreed. I did it for her, for Grace, see. 'What about you?' I asked. But she said she'd be okay, she could handle it. And she'd never been shooting up as often as I was, so I believed her.

So in I went, and off they packed me to a place in the Highlands – isolated, no phones, lots of sheep, and lots of gales. I was in a bad way, and it was really, really hard. But I thought about Grace a lot: her wee face, her pointy nose, her hands down my spine. For her sake, I stuck it out. But I also thought, that's it now. I'll leave her alone. She's better off without me – after all, it was my fault in the first place. She'd never have done the stuff it if hadn't been for me. Hopefully she'd ditch it now.

No more sign of the witch. I grab a coffee from the machine. The clunks and the splashes echo down the corridor. When can I see her?

So, I got clean. Came back to town. Did okay. Sold the *Big Issue* for a while, then got a flat. But try as I might, I couldn't forget Grace. In the end, I had to try and see her. So I went to her dad's flat. Wouldn't talk to me – not at first, anyway. But in the end he told me he was worried. No word of her since Tuesday. 'But for Chrissake, Alec,' he said, 'don't get the police involved. I don't want her locked up, see?' I came away. Leave it to me, I told him – but I promised nothing.

Found my way to Jeanie's place. 'Is it you, Alec?' she said. 'Turning up like a ghost?' I told her she looked like one herself, and asked about Grace. 'Prob'ly at the Castle,' she said. 'She's always there these days.'

So now I was worried, see. Got there in twenty-five minutes. The Castle looked even more run down than before – the pavement was covered in great big weeds and there were brambles all across the entrance. Tried to clear them away, but they kept

springing back almost as if they were growing fresh. In the end I tore a plank off the fence and hacked them back as best I could.

Ran up the concrete staircases that smelt of vomit and piss, up to the fourth floor. And there they were, lying in the dark corners, all asleep. I tried to wake them, but I couldn't. Two of them had puked everywhere, another two were cold, like fish. Found the box where I used to keep the clean needles – empty. Looked as if it had been that way for months. And then I saw Grace, lying on her side, mouth open, her wee hands curled into balls. Couldn't wake her either.

I sprinted down to the *Spinning Wheel* and called the ambulance. As I paced up and down by the broken brambles, I swore I'd go and throttle Jeanie. She'd sold them a bad batch of the stuff, maybe that was it – but then, maybe it wasn't. Maybe they'd shared those needles once too often. Just a wee prick, and you'll sleep forever.

The witch comes through, and she's blinking. Looks like she's been working all day. Gives me the breaking-it-gently routine, but I say, 'Just tell me, Doc. I can take it.'

She nods. 'She'll survive,' she says, 'and what's more she'll probably make a full recovery. But she's still very ill. She's sleeping now, and we're going to keep her that way for a few days.'

'Any idea what she's got?' I say. 'Was it bad stuff? She caught pneumonia or something? Or – or something worse?' I'm thinking, AIDS.

She shakes her head. 'It's an infection, certainly, but it's too soon to be able to tell. I've been a bit busy, trying to keep her alive.'

I nod. 'Thanks,' I say.

'You can go in,' she says. 'Third door on the left. Don't touch anything.'

'What, you trust me?' I ask.

She snorts and tackles the coffee machine.

Hi there, Grace. You look a right mess. Your eyes are like pits, and your face is a saucer of old milk. There's lines on your cheeks that never used to be there. Still, you look peaceful while you're sleeping. Beauty, remember you said, is about what's inside. I hope to God we get another chance to find out, hey?

I promised the witch I wouldn't touch anything. But I break my promise. I bend, and kiss Grace lightly on the lips. And now, I'll wait here. Till she wakes.