

Last Chance Saloon

The nurse tucked me in, sitting me upright, wearing nappy pants:

'Well Mr Swinston, is there any think else I can do for you?'

It is Alicia, my favourite. I looked across at my iPad, on charge.

'Of course.'

She brings it to me:

'Anything else?'

I blinked twice for 'no'.

'Right then. Do you want to test the call buzzer for me, please?'

I fumbled, found it, pressed.

The screen above the door lit up and I could see the nurses' station. Superimposed was a message "Call noted, someone coming". There was a timer counting up.

'Perfect! I'm off duty in half an hour but Julie and David will be here for you. Call if you need them and don't fret if they take more than the five-minute target time. There is a backlog in A&E, a crush at a big football match. Crush injuries are a real nightmare to diagnose. So, see you tomorrow at noon, okay?'

I blinked my eyelids once only, to indicate 'yes'.

'Lights to dim?'

Two blinks.

'TV on?'

Two blinks.

She smiled and left.

I am right-handed and, thankfully, this side has been spared.

I open a new Word document and begin to tap slowly:

This is day seven, they tell me. Four days are 'lost'.

I have been visited twice by Mr Nigel Hogg. He is their top man for strokes, apparently. I am not . . .

I feel drowsy and nod off.

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Mr Hogg sat beside me. I could smell nicotine and alcohol from his breath. He was wearing a copious application of spicy aftershave. As a retired detective, I tend to notice these things.

The Great Man was 'upbeat':

'Well, Mr Swindon, the news is mostly good. Your scans show the damage is relatively minor. We plan to monitor your progress for a further few days and redo the scans, check on the natural healing process. You are a very fit man, all those marathons. Fifteen, I'm told?'

My name is Swinston not 'Swindon', you prat. And ten marathons and fifteen half-marathons plus nine triathlons.

'I am very hopeful that you will heal naturally. Very hopeful.'

I read his body language and watch his eyes. He is a poor liar.

'Best to avoid surgery when ever possible, don't you agree. And sixty-seven is not old nowadays but still, well, you know, I'm sure you understand.'

His pager buzzes. He checks it. I look up at the digital clock. Exactly five minutes since he sat down. As expected, the nice nurse arrives, the smiley one, Alicia.

Hogg is on his feet.

Time for a quick fag and a swig of Vodka in his car before the next patient?

I can think it but can no longer say it aloud, nor would I:

I am dependent. He is all powerful. I am at his mercy.

Earlier today Mr Hogg is back, after the follow up scans. Now he was downbeat.

'Ah, Mr Swindon. Time for action. I've put you on my list for tomorrow morning at 10:15.'

His eyes are bleary, red veining in the corners. Less aftershave, sweatier stink of nicotine and alcohol. I think of Hamish Imlach singing.

'Nurse will take you through the tulips with the paperwork. Since your daughter, your next of kin is in Australia, she has arranged for your solicitor to countersign as her proxy. These are just formalities. Not to worry, we'll soon have you back playing ping-pong again, yes?'

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I haven't played ping pong since I was eight years old, at my cousin's house in North Berwick.

His pager sounds. Five minutes exactly. The other nurse, Anne (with an 'e'), the thin one with prominent teeth, also a smoker, knocks and enters. The two medics exchange a coded message with their eyes. The Great Man leaves.

Anne feels under the covers, checking my nappy, sighs, presses the buzzer and David comes. Together they change my nappy and freshen me with wipes, sit me up and remove my blank iPad and place it on charge.

Mr Peters of Peters and Houseman arrives. I haven't seen him since my wife died twenty-three years ago.

David is now in charge of paperwork.

We read through the key sections of the documents.

I give my one blink confirmations at each turn and make a scribbled version of my signature beside the various pencilled 'X' marks.

Mr Peters (is he Alwyn?) countersigns. David leaves and returns with photocopies for Mr Peters.

During these few minutes alone together, Peters fiddles with papers from his briefcase, avoiding eye contact, avoiding conversation. I study him, trying to remember what he looked like. Now he is bald, overweight, shabby. My guess is he is a recent widower, living on ready meals, ironing his own shirts, tippling steadily.

David returns, hands over the photocopies and Peters drops them into his briefcase, glances towards me, nods and leaves. David tucks me up again, brings back my iPad, asks all the right questions, checks my drips and leaves.

Next morning at around six am I am invaded by three lady nurses I haven't seen before. They are dressed in green overalls. They chat to each other as they prep me for surgery. They shave my head. It reminds me of the time I had to take our old brown Labrador Millie for a big tummy operation. They bag my grey wiry curls and take them away. For no reason I can articulate, this makes me feel sad.

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I am not offered breakfast. I can hear others being served by the two ladies on duty in the corridor. Everything is always cold anyway. The kitchen is miles away. I can't make out what they are saying. Something about a car crash. Something about 'undertaker'. I also hear they are 'not surprised'.

David and Alicia arrive. I can tell they are distracted by something.

Alicia, quietly, under her breath: 'You could see it coming.'

David, sotto voce: 'He's never got over his wife and daughter.'

'Do you think it was suicide?'

'Probably'.

They leave. I check the digital clock; 08:13. I drift off.

I am fully prepped, drowsy. The two trolley lads are chatting.

'Did you hear about. . .'

'No, give over, he might hear you.'

'No way, he's well under. I heard The Undertaker drove his car into a lamppost, head on. The ambulance guys said he was smelling of booze.'

'Smelling of booze, eh? So what's new.'

They park me in the holding area. The digital clock reads: 08:43.

Their handover form on a clipboard is signed by the tubby nurse wearing green overalls, from earlier, in my room.

'Ah, not quite under yet, Mr Swinston, Mr Gladden the Anaesthetist will check you over in a few minutes. You are being taken earlier than scheduled by Dr Fulton. She is truly wonderful. You are in really, really good hands.'

I close my eyes. Oblivion awaits.

I drift up and the room is bright. The digital clock reads: 17:18.

I hear the food trolley ladies in the corridor. I am reconnected to tubes and monitors. The monitor is beeping steadily. I am not offered food.

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Alicia appears. She checks the readings and smiles:

'Great to have you back Mr Swinston. How do you feel?'

I blink a 'yes'.

'Good. Your stats are looking good. You been gone for two days. They induced a coma to keep you still. You had a head brace at first, but we were told to remove it two hours ago when Dr Fulton checked you over. She's been a regular visitor. I'll ring her now.'

Time passed. Anne with the brown teeth enters. She had been crying. She tried to hide it with a lie:

'It's hay fever, don't worry, not contagious.'

She studies my clipboard, enters the readings and sighs:

'Good news Mr Swinston, you're on the mend. Dr Fulton sends her apologies. She's still in theatre, trying to clear Mr Hogg's list as well as her own. He was a great man, in his day but. . . .'

'Y-ye-yes, I sup-suppose h-he miss-missed his wife.'

'Your speech is coming back! Amazing. Yes, his wife Judith was my sister. Breast cancer. Tragic, two months, start to end. You're right, that was the beginning of the end for Nigel. He had an accident last night on his way home. Skidded into a lamppost. Instant, thank goodness. Anyway, life is for the living, eh? Let me send Jennifer a text.'

'Je-Je-Jennifer?'

'Dr Fulton. My daughter. She really is exceptional. Nigel was her mentor.'

I waited. She fiddled. It was a long text. When she looked up, she said:

'You have a visitor. Mrs Vera Graham. Former colleague, she said.'

'Ve-Vera?'

'Shall I send her in? Fifteen minutes only.'

'Yes please!'

I pushed myself upright. Turned on my iPad, looked at my camera image. Yul Bryner came to mind.

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The door opened and Vera peeked in. It was a double take situation.

'My God Tom, I hardly recognise you.'

'Ve-Vera, you loo-look amazing. How is Harry?'

'Ah, you haven't heard? He moved out about a year ago. With Hilary, DCI Woods as was. They retired on the same day. They have a vineyard in Tuscany. Frankly Tom, it was a relief. Harry and I were never a real couple. But, well, not his fault really, was it?'

'Di-Did he kn-know about us?'

'No. I don't think so. Well, not that he ever said. And, well, it takes two, doesn't it? On the grapevine, afterwards, I heard Hilary had been his lover. For over ten years, and I had not one clue he was seeing her. Not a clue. Anyway, let's leave them to it. When can we get you out of here? Have they said?'

'No, no-not yet.'

The door swung open. A tall slim forty-something woman with a bright, warm smile entered. There was a look of Nigel Hogg about her, same beaky nose.

'Mr Swinston, I'm Jennifer Fulton.'

She turned to offer her hand to Vera:

'My God Vera, what are you doing here?'

'Tom and I are old friends, close friends. We worked together in Edinburgh. Serious Crime.'

Vera reached forward and took hold of my hand, squeezed:

'Tom, Jen and I are members of the same Pilates class.'

Mrs Fulton spoke:

'Ah, right. Well, Mr Swinston, good to have you back with us. It seems the procedure was successful, in the end. You were wavering for a while but when we scanned you yesterday, we could see the clot had dispersed and we changed your medication. We'll keep you here for another few days, do another scan to check but hopefully we can set you on the homeward path with a physio and speech therapy package.'

'Thank you, D-Doctor.'

'Vera, will you be around for Tom, to help him adjust.'

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She looked at me, smiled and I smiled back.

'Yes, it will be my pleasure. We will make a good team. We always did, actually.'