

Crump Redivivus

Neil Godsell

SAMPLE

the voidery aperture

First published in the United Kingdom in 2016
by
the Voidery Aperture

www.thevoideryaperture.com

All rights reserved

Copyright © Neil Godsell, 2016

Neil Godsell has asserted his right to be identified as author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

This is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, incidents and dialogues either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, organizations, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

ISBN 978-0-9954812-0-6

SAMPLE

SAMPLE

Lomas

It was Bettina's idea, but I was as much to blame. For going along with it, I mean. For going along with it, looking for Crump, that old fraud Crump, affecting interest in his mundane disappearance, if he'd disappeared at all, whatever had happened to him, all that, and trying always to be meticulous and vigilant when the body, the physiological thing, the flesh, is predisposed to ruin everything, by which I mean one's plans.

Bettina

It's fair to say he encountered problems. And it's true that I was to blame. I had an idea about looking for Crump, and so I put that idea to Lomas, thinking it might perhaps do him some good, and to my surprise he went along with it and kept on going along with it and wouldn't stop going along with it, and that's why I was to blame.

Lomas

It's fair to say I encountered problems, such as technical problems, and personal problems too, including the eighteen months I had to spend in bed with only intermittent access to my box file. It was the strain of the extra work, in part, that put me there, my socks and old shoes by the bed, or slightly under it, and then of course my coat, the oldest of all, apparently vigilant on the stool beside the bed, the box file younger than the socks, its contents older than what contained them, everything suitably unassuming, just as waiting objects should be, as you'd expect.

Bettina

I think what I said was, Crump knew his business, knew his

subject, which had something to do with the nature of human existence. He'd gained insights which were said to have the potential to transform the life of any given person, making that life not only bearable but pleasant and even rewarding. Lomas had issues, which is what they used to call problems; he needed a project to give him a sense of direction or purpose. Crump had gone missing, and people were worried. So I suggested it, looking for Crump.

Lomas

He'll put you right on a thing or two, she said, assuming you can find him. Having something to keep you busy will do you good. Yes, it'll be good.

Saoirse

He came looking for me at the pub where I was working. Up on the moors. When I arrived for my shift he was lurking there, in the car park, in the rain. He looked a bit dodgy. I assumed some aging pisshead or pothead or smackhead had taken a wrong turn down in the valley and ended up miles out of his way and then decided to take in the view. He seemed to be scrutinizing me, actually. I brushed past him and went inside. I had to change some barrels and light a fire with logs and coal in the lounge. When I opened up, he was still standing there, in the car park, in the rain.

Lomas

I started where the information ended. Two years before, I'd been there looking for a person called Adele, who knew about Crump, or was supposed to know about Crump. The box file said so.

Lomas [box file]

Adele chose the venue, a former weaving shed or something. Black stone, moss between the slabs, a yellowish lichen encrusting the masonry, the whole of it colluding in the fiction that it's

always been like this, that some kind of ancient natural order governs this dark and rain-scoured outpost of 'tradition' with its foursquare setts and cracked old slates and lintels. Already I'm bored, and my inspection of the place has induced a slight but niggling headache. Sweat trickled down my back when I walked round the car park. Sky and moors, an impression of greasiness, the sky a yellowish smear from which a few pale swellings, discernibly clouds, loom aimlessly, not moving, while the moors below dissolve in their own acid. None of which has much to do with me. The sky a smear, the moors just moors. Adele is late.

Lomas

All in all, I was glad to be rid of him, this former self, this peevish and fanciful interloper defiling the backs of old envelopes, planting corruption in the archives, trying to stall me, trying to ruin my chances of resurrecting the project which he'd failed so ignominiously to complete. Even his manner of writing the findings up was flawed. I hoped he hadn't allowed his peevishness to colour the way he'd spoken to Adele, if he'd got round to it. I might have, or I might not. I couldn't remember.

Saoirse

He just kept talking about Adele, going on about that, all does she work here, when did she stop working here and where did she go when she left. Which wound me up and predisposed me to find him offensive, even after it became clear he wasn't a junkie or a drunk.

Lomas

She took against me even before I'd opened my mouth. This much was obvious when she rushed from her battered old hatchback, making her way towards a yard at the rear of the pub, and happened to glance at me, quite briefly, in disgust. And something else. Perhaps resentment. Yes, a finely tuned combination of resentment and disgust. The expression seemed

familiar, though she didn't.

Saoirse

He just sat there by the fire, drinking and steaming, probably thinking up his questions, how to put them, who best to put them to, me or Tania. Out of the two of us, she was clearly the more approachable one, but that day she was being even more annoying than usual. She'd been watching a show about corpses, how to dispose of unwanted corpses. She was telling me about that.

Tania

They said all you need is washing powder, loads of it, but it has to be biological. Non-bio doesn't work. What you do is, you put the body, the person's body you want to dispose of, in the bath or whatever and fill the bath completely full with powder. And they showed you – using a pig, I think it was. It turns the flesh into this kind of weird loose scum, and you just scrape that off the bones and wash it away. So all you're left with is a skeleton, and for that you need sulphuric acid or something. You dissolve it, and you're done. It's like, no way! I couldn't believe it. But apparently that's what you do.

Lomas

Observing Saoirse's clipped, perfunctory responses, I saw it again, still finely tuned but more subdued now, eyes and mouth, that combination of resentment and disgust, the constant pressure of which would not be inconsistent with an aptitude for hatred. Eyes and mouth weren't in the notes, that combination of resentment and disgust wasn't in there either, nor the name on the brushed steel badge she wore, the name by which her colleague, Tania, called her. There were two names on two badges, and none was Adele. So while Saoirse was bringing in pies and things from the kitchen, I asked Tania what I needed to ask, and got nowhere, other than learning that she thought Adele a good name for a baby girl, though Heidi and Amelia were her

favourites at the moment. On my behalf, she put the question to Saoirse, who was arranging the food in a grubby plastic display case on a shelf to one side of the optics, and who flatly denied knowing anyone of that name. When I asked them both about Crump, I got no further.

Tania

He looked faint. Not well at all. As if he hadn't eaten in days. And we'd already had one case that week of someone who'd come in and had a drink when they were obviously ill. That ended badly.

Lomas

I felt I could manage a packet of crisps, but nothing too fancy, none of your chilli vanilla or honey-glazed mint and prawn, just salted crisps, plain salted crisps, and maybe afterwards a bowl of soup and some bread. Except you couldn't trust the bread, the rolls and sandwiches were stiff with age, you could see, just as the sallow pies resembled uprooted cobblestones, slightly green and probably dangerous. Food from a tin was the answer, supposing they had it out back. Crisps, and afterwards tinned food. I wondered if Tania would agree to open a tin of marrowfat peas for me, and heat them up in the kitchen, and allow me to consume them in the bar; she seemed the sort who might well do that, offered some money, spoken to courteously, with money.

Tania

They should really stay in bed when they're like that, not go around boozing like they're kids. They make a mess, and then everyone suffers. But I felt sorry for him, this guy, he seemed quite nice. That's why I tried to help him out. So I asked Saoirse, did we know this bloke, this girl, the ones he asked about, their names, whatever they were, but she was actually quite off with me about it, verging on rude.

Saoirse

I don't do names. People come to the bar, I serve them, and that's it. I don't do names.

Tania

We'd already ended up throwing a load of stuff on the fire, what with the mess they made and the smell there was after they'd gone. He slid his hands down the back and stuck his fingers inside, and well, you know, you could just see. I couldn't handle it, not on a Tuesday afternoon. What made it more bizarre was this Pierrot kind of costume she was wearing, though it might have been pyjamas. She was only two days out of hospital, they said.

Lomas

And then quite late, about half past ten, as I was preparing myself to leave without a result, and having been told that there were no marrowfat peas in a tin, she caught my eye and nodded almost imperceptibly towards the door to the car park, so I went outside and waited by her car. It was raining still, I'd taken several hours to dry out sitting by the fire, but I was soaked again in minutes, and when she came splashing across to let me in, however long it was later, half an hour, maybe longer, and the light came on in the car, I could tell she was none too pleased by the state of my trousers and my coat.

Saoirse

You'll get the upholstery wet. It'll stink for the next six months.

Lomas

You should have told me to wait by the fire.

Saoirse

And make it obvious there was something going on?

Lomas

There isn't something going on. What do you think is going on?

Saoirse

I should have put down one of those vinyl things, those seat-covers people with dogs use.

Lomas

I'd be quite content to walk, if you prefer.

Saoirse

So now you're insulting my driving as well?

Lomas

As well?

Saoirse

Don't push it.

Lomas

She was glaring straight ahead and working the gearbox with unnecessary violence, braking hard and then accelerating harder, driving recklessly, the unlit road, the sudden bends and drops, and all those potholes, all those shattered verges crumbling into space.

Saoirse

You're steaming the windscreen up. For fuck's sake, make yourself useful.

Lomas

The cotton vest she tossed that landed in my lap smelled faintly of perfume, tintured with engine oil and foist. I rolled it up and wiped the glass, but when it came to doing the driver's side the elongated strokes were quite a strain because of my feebleness,

my convalescent feebleness, and though I tried to keep a steady hand, not wanting to block her line of vision, still I managed to provoke some hissed expletives, which not only came as no surprise but also induced a strangely comforting sense of inurement. We were descending into the valley, and soon there came traffic, lots of traffic, prompting some hazardous overtaking, quite alarming but only partially responsible for the rapid dissipation of that comforting sense of inurement, which gave way to a familiar kind of dread as we were inducted into a network flow of renovated commercial estates and gaping floodlit retail parks, two burning cars in a yard, a grinning youth extracting a sizable gun from his underpants, three females playing a game of dare with the firearm, never quite touching it, giggling nervously, first lunging, then recoiling, and a drive-in pizzeria where some youths were struggling to bundle a hooded figure into the boot of a big saloon. Saoirse's attention remained on the road, a sharp cut left into a cobbled lane that skirted a disused railway, someone lobbing a weapons-grade firework into the path of the car and Saoirse driving over it, unflinching, more lanes, rumble strips and speed humps and an underpass, two further detonations, then a block of flats that overlooked a canal. Here we stopped and she confronted me.

Saoirse

So then. What's all this about Crump?

Lomas

What? You tell me.

Saoirse

You'd like to know.

Lomas

That's why I waited in the rain.

Saoirse

Are you always this flippant?

Lomas

I'm not being flippant.

Saoirse

You're being flippant, obtuse and unpleasant. And if you don't tell me about Crump, this conversation's ending right now.

Lomas

I'm just looking into it. Finding things out.

Saoirse

What things?

Lomas

Don't know yet.

Saoirse

Christ. You lying bloody shit. You're working for that little bitch Adele.

Lomas

I don't actually know her. I might have done once. But not any more.

Saoirse

I heard you ask for her by name.

Lomas

Well, yes... to find out who she is and what she knows.

Saoirse

About Crump? What about him?

Lomas

I don't know yet – like I said. But I'm wasting my time here. I'm repeating myself already. It's no good, that. It's a definite sign of decline.

Saoirse

You need to wait here.

Lomas

What?

Saoirse

Stupid bastard, *fucking wait here*.

Lomas

She was out of the car and dashing up the road, and only now that I saw her mule heels buckling in puddles at the kerbside did I realize how unsuitable her footwear had been for driving. Not only that, she'd left the engine running, the offside door was open, rain was soaking the driver's seat, the dashboard was beaded with droplets and apparently I was meant to sit and wait. Or was it a test? I felt obliged to show some initiative, so I turned off the engine, got out and locked the car, tugged on both handles to check it was locked, then hurried after her, pausing only to stuff the box file down the front of my coat to shield it from the rain.

Saoirse

He just barged in, the insolent prick, he just barged in, came up and hammered on the door, the cheeky sod, all stupid questions and politeness, fake politeness, bumbling stupid insolent wanker, all an act of course, all sorry but what about this and what about that, demanding this, demanding that, and I just lost it I suppose.

Lomas

We were rolling on the floor like a couple of wrestlers in a tangle

of electrical cords and telecom cables, Saoirse, who'd initiated the struggle, hissing threats and accusations, how she'd bloody well fucking well show me, bastard well coming up here to gloat. I had to defend myself against her gouges and blows, and yet the more she struck and scratched at me, the more my compassion increased, and so I tried to restrain her by hugging her, pinning her arms to her sides, a strategy which served only to intensify her frustration, as I could tell from her manner of thrashing her legs and twisting her neck and trying to bite my ear, and when I thwarted her by pushing her head down firmly against my collarbone she redoubled her exertions with her legs, attempting to kick my shins and knee me in the groin. Instinctively I trapped the offending limb between my knees, and once our legs had interlocked she began to grind the base of her pelvis against my thigh in a fashion that seemed to me to be less than entirely combative, and then I thought I sensed a kind of mutual surprise, as though quite suddenly, against our will, we'd recognized an unlikely convergence of interests. Foolishly I allowed this idea to engross me, and next came that surge of discomfort I hadn't expected to feel so early on after my illness, and while I was busy feeling it Saoirse attempted to brain me with a six-plug trailing socket.

Saoirse

Sorry about that. I overreacted. It's something I do.

Lomas

The bedsitting room was a mess, an absolute tip. Tousled bedclothes on the mattress in the corner. Dresses, underwear, phones, that snarl of plugs and cables, books with covers ripped off, torn magazines and posters on the floor. More clothes piled against the skirting boards and packed around the bottom of the window to absorb the water leaking in at the top of the frame and seeping from the coving on the ceiling. Three old portable tellies stacked on a low metal stand, an obsolete indoor aerial balancing

on the topmost. I was slumped in the single armchair, still in my shoes and soaking coat. Saoirse had brought a cold wet flannel to act as a compress for my head. I sipped a large medicinal brandy while she leafed through the box file, smirking to herself.

Saoirse

These notes are useless. You couldn't find anyone from these. Least of all Crump.

Lomas

He's a man who knows how to stay hidden?

Saoirse

He had this way of dropping out of things. He started off with some firm ideas about life and what to do with it, but equally he was honest enough to admit when he'd made a mistake, and since he was happy to swap a failing idea for a stronger one, or what seemed at the time like a stronger one, certain people tended to see him as a loser or a crank. And there were others who encouraged it, that habit he had of changing his mind and trying all sorts of new things and ideas. They tried to turn him into something or someone he wasn't.

Lomas

That was how she broached the topic of Juniper.

[End of excerpt]