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Opening extract from
Crump

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CHAPTER ONE

Starting Out

Kevin Crump was happy - and because Kevin Crump was happy, he smiled.

He smiled when he woke up early that morning in his dark and smelly bedsit; he smiled as he splashed through the puddles and the drizzle to the train station; he even smiled at other commuters on the platform, though no-one smiled back. In fact, he only stopped smiling when a spotty youth with diamond earrings in the crowded carriage told him, in very specific and street-wise terms, that if he didn't do so immediately he'd get his head kicked in and worse. But then, after a couple of minutes, when both he and the other noisy and uniformed school kids had got off the train, Crump started smiling again - only to himself, this time, just in case someone else got the wrong idea. He knew that like most, if not all, males of the species, he looked dangerously like a pervert when he smiled, but he just couldn't help it. Kevin Crump was happy, so Kevin Crump smiled.

He looked out of the window at the passing cityscape, past the reflections of the long faces of the grumpy commuters in the window glass, and smiled - for today was truly a happy day for Kevin Crump and a wonderful day to be alive. As if to agree, a shaft of sunlight peeked out from behind a cloud, and he blinked into the bright, beautiful sunshine. He would make the deliberate mental effort to lodge the memory of that

moment in his brain so that, in future years, after he'd achieved his academic ambitions and made something of himself, he'd be able to look back to that very moment, the moment when he, Kevin Crump, had sat smiling on that train, when it had been bliss to be alive at the dawn of a new and better day.

Crump – for that is what Kevin had been called by everyone but his mother since he was eight years old – was not usually a 'smiley' person, not at all like one of those girls at the supermarket he went to, whose vacant cheery faces looked like they'd been sprayed on. He liked to think his usual lack of smiling was because he was intelligent and intellectual, and even when he was thinking of pleasant or happy – or even sexual – things, he didn't smile all that much. He tended to agree with the mediaeval idea that smiling was a sign of idiocy, so wasn't too displeased at his natural unsmiling visage. The truth was he just wasn't a 'smiler' – but he wasn't a grumpy person either. Neither a frowner nor a smiler be, he thought. He was just, well, somewhere in between. Not too happy, not too sad. Just average. In the middle, nothing special, but nothing bad either. A blank slate. Not a bad thing to be, really – average and blank. After all, he smiled a bit when he was happy, and he frowned a bit when he was not, and what was wrong with that?

Today, Crump was happy and smiling because he was starting a new job. And not just any job either, but a post as a lecturer at Thames Metropolitan University. That is why he was travelling, via two crowded rush-hour trains, via Waterloo to historic Greenwich, a World Heritage site, home of the world-famous Mean Time and, quite literally, zero hour – or at least zero longitude – and famous throughout the world. He smiled again at the thought of his starting his academic career: he was now, officially, a university lecturer – and if that wasn't a reason to smile he didn't know what was, even though he had got the job at the last minute. Today, it would not be inaccurate to say, Kevin Crump was perhaps the happiest that he had ever been in his entire adult life. And so he smiled. Today was a

beginning – a beginning of a new beginning – and a beginning he would remember for the rest of his life. And he knew it.

Crump, twenty-nine years old, slightly scruffy and lost-looking like a stray mongrel puppy come in from the rain, with thick ginger (he preferred ‘strawberry blonde’) hair and wiry thick glasses balanced on a long thin nose – today, Kevin Crump, an average achiever at school and university, an average teacher at a further education college, a man of average height and build who was so average he could have put that in his passport if his passport had been interested – today, Kevin Crump, a boy born and brought up in the dull suburbs of London, son of a nurse and a union official, and grandson of a Welsh miner – today Kevin Crump was joining academe, was actually becoming a lecturer at a university – a real, proper, British university, and consequently respected internationally as one of the best in the world.

It was the first step on a university career that could lead him, well, who knew where? Anywhere – perhaps even to the very top. To a senior lectureship and beyond – maybe one day even to a head of department job, and eventually on to an elite university – in Britain or anywhere in the world. And it would give him a regular and secure income for the rest of his life too – eventually that is, when he had a long-term contract at a university and not the short-term one he had accepted. It would also allow him the respect that he had always yearned for but which he had never enjoyed in any job, ever. It would, in other words, set him up for life.

It really didn’t matter that he had originally been rejected for the job in favour of another candidate after attending an interview before the summer break, or that he had been fully expecting to be teaching full-time again that autumn term in his usual job at West London College. All that mattered was that he’d got a phone call two weeks earlier offering him the position at Thames Metropolitan University due to ‘unforeseen circumstances.’ Crump had no idea what this meant specifically – he didn’t ask, and wasn’t told either. He only had

a two year, 0.8 fractional contract and the pay was at the lowest end of the scale, meaning he'd still have to work a day a week at the college on his free day. He'd also accepted that he'd have to be as flexible as possible and take any classes he was asked to take – or in other words be a bit of a dogsbody – but it was an opportunity that he just couldn't miss and a great first step on the journey of his new university career, so dogsbody was fine. For now.

Everyone had to start somewhere. And didn't all great journeys start with but a single step? Thames Metropolitan University was that single step – a foot in the door, and a good place to start for a novice lecturer. And when in the future he was teaching at a better university, one that was not languishing at 116th position out of 123 in the university league tables, he would be in the fortunate position of being able to compare the two, to learn from both experiences, to cross-fertilise as it were.

Thames Metropolitan University was 'diverse, vibrant and inclusive' – or so it said in the prospectus. He liked that – it made life more interesting. He was used to teaching both foreign and ethnic minority students at the college, as well as 'challenging' students and those with dyslexia or other learning difficulties – such as the difficulty, or even inability, to read or write or speak or string a sentence together in any comprehensible way. It certainly didn't mean that the students, or the teachers for that matter, were any *worse* than those at any of the top twenty universities – like the redbrick northern university he had scraped into more than a decade before through clearing, having flunked one of his A-levels. If the students had got into university, especially from inner city comprehensive backgrounds, then they must have some brains at least – and quite probably more than those born with silver spoons sticking out of one of their orifices who'd had the usual behind-the-scenes benefits of such a background, from private tutors to parental expectations. It didn't matter either that they could enter the university with low A-level grades – or even with no

exam passes at all if they were over the age of 23 and classed as 'mature' students. It didn't matter at all – to think it did was petty and elitist. Nobody was 'thick' – people just didn't achieve due to their lack of opportunities and bad teaching. Everyone had potential and he, Kevin Crump, university lecturer, was there to unlock it. It was his job. It was his duty. It was his mission. And he would do it to the best of his ability.

But none of these silly details mattered. What did matter, and mattered in a real way, was that he was here, now, getting off the train at Waterloo, rushing over to the smaller Waterloo East station to catch his connecting train, and then, after arriving at Greenwich, making his way down the High Street through the September drizzle to the university.

Today was, without any shadow of a doubt, the day that Kevin Crump had gone up in the world, the day that he really and truly had become a middle-class professional – an achiever, a winner, one of the team; the day he had grown up and become a man, a man going places, a man ready for anything life or the world could throw at him – except, that is, the little globular bomb of bird shit that, at the precise moment he passed through the gates and entered the impressive university campus, fell silently from the sky and baptised him with a long white streak on the sleeve of his jacket. He felt it hit his arm, saw the white shit-mark, and cursed the unseen feathered shitter somewhere in the sky as he wiped it off with one of the tissues he always carried in his pocket. But no matter how much he tried to rub it off, there was still a dirty white stain in the fabric of his jacket – in fact, he had made it bigger by rubbing, though it had faded and was less visible than before.

Can't be helped, he thought. He'd put it into the dry cleaners on the way home and wear his other jacket tomorrow, the tweedy one – he only had two, being more used to wearing a T-shirt or a jumper as a teacher at the college. He wasn't sure about the dress code at Thames Metropolitan University, but thought it best to wear a jacket and a shirt and tie, at least at

first. He had learnt from his teaching that if you wore smart clothes for the first week the students would respect you more, even if you changed into casual clothes for the rest of the year. It was all about image and gravitas, but it worked.

The campus was beautiful. It deserved to be. Thames Metropolitan University now occupied the buildings of the Old Royal Naval College in Greenwich – a baroque riverside masterpiece designed by Christopher Wren in the 17th century, just like St Paul's Cathedral some way off on the other side of the Thames. The university had only taken over the site seven years earlier after moving from a depressingly dirty-grey tower block in one of the less salubrious areas of South-East London – an eyesore of a building that, like so many others, had won armfuls of awards on its construction in the late sixties, but which had now been demolished to make way for an equally hideous shopping mall that had won armfuls of awards too.

The architectural splendour made the university look ancient (which it wasn't), prestigious (which it wasn't) and elite (which it wasn't either). When the university was called plain old South-East London Polytechnic it had been one of the worst polys in the country, right at the bottom of every applicant's list, a sanctuary for all those who scraped a couple of low grade A-levels, if that. But then, just like all the others, it had metamorphosed into a university in 1992 and now occupied one of the most stunning historical sites in London.

Crump had been to the campus at Greenwich before, but only once – for the interview before the summer for the other job. After getting that phone-call a fortnight before offering him his new job, the head of department had requested that he not visit before today, so as not to get in the way, he supposed – it was always hectic in the run-up to the start of term.

Having grown up in the suburbs of London, he'd naturally been to Greenwich before, with the school – to see the Royal Observatory, the Meridian line and, of course, the Cutty Sark, the last surviving 19th century tea clipper now in dry dock just a stone's throw from the campus. It was a pilgrimage all

children growing up in London and its environs were almost obliged to make, but he had only been a kid when he had last set foot on the ship's decks. He made a mental note to visit again, now he was going to be here four days a week – perhaps for several years.

My God, the buildings of the Old Royal Naval College were magnificent! Even in the morning drizzle the honey-coloured stone shone. Well, not shone exactly – but it had the age and quality that looked elegant and beautiful in any weather. It *glowed* is what it did – glowed with the pride of history. What it had, quite simply, was class. Pure, well-bred, well-proportioned, history-drenched, good old-fashioned class.

He would enjoy working here, he could tell. He knew it. He felt it. Crump had always thought that he should have been born into a more, well, refined and cultured background. It was, he decided, 'him', though he had never admitted this feeling to anyone for fear of ridicule, or worse.

Standing in the middle of the campus, on the car-less road, equidistant from each of the four elegant buildings that the university occupied, Crump looked out over the dark slow-flowing river to the new-built apartments on the old East End dockland site on the other side. He closed his eyes, sighed and smiled at the *rightness* of it all. Inhaling deeply, he smelt the air – it tasted sweet, of history. Crump was exactly – precisely – where he was meant to be.

Where would he be this time next year, he thought, or in five years, or ten? The future lay open like a... like a... like a what? Like an oyster perhaps? Crump thought. No, too clichéd. Like a... road? An open road? Weak simile that. Like a... box? A door? A...vagina? The future lay open like a vagina? He'd heard worse similes in award-winning novels, but even though...

NAH! NAH! NAH! A loud beeping blasted his ears. He opened his eyes.

“Oi you fuckin' ginger twat!”

Crump looked round. A dirty, white delivery van was behind him, the stocky driver leaning out of the window and making a

wanking sign, his large biceps looking as though they were stretching his white T-shirt to near-ripping point as he did so. A bit like Mike Tyson, he thought. The van man was now smiling broadly at Crump who was not, by now, smiling at all. The driver had large white teeth, three of them gold, two diamond-effect stud earrings as well as large gold chain around his thick neck and a zig-zag design cut into his close-cropped hair. Crump knew that this man looked 'hard' – like a rapper or a gangsta – in fact, this was the kind of look sported by the kind of person Crump went out of his way to avoid.

He also knew his own face bore the dazed expression of a frightened rabbit staring into the headlights as he stood there, despite there being no headlights for him to stare into, but he didn't know what else to do, so did nothing except raise his eyebrows quizzically, as a rabbit would no doubt do, if a rabbit had eyebrows. The hard-looking driver frowned and slowly shook his head in an expression half-way between pity and disgust, as though he had been confronted by some escaped mental patient wandering in the road. Crump, for some reason, smiled – albeit weakly – and the driver suddenly stopped smiling, and now looked very angry indeed.

“Yeah you, white boy,” he said, “get out the fuckin way ya ginger cunt!”

The driver spat a large globule of spit out of the window onto the road without taking his eyes off Crump. It plopped in a puddle.

As if following a barked order from a sergeant major, Crump jumped out of the way and the white van sped past narrowly missing him, the driver staring at him and shouting obscenities which included, Crump noticed, the phrase 'white cunt' several times. Should complain about that really, he thought, but then how would that look on his first day at a new job? Don't want to make a bad impression or frighten the horses – or rabbits. How bad would that look? First day and already a troublemaker.

And he *had* been standing in the road – well, not road

exactly, not a public road for the general public, but how else were people to deliver things to the university if not by that private access road? No, he had been stupid, standing there dreamily taking in the atmosphere, enjoying the baroque architecture, the view of the Thames and the promise his future held. It was, he decided, his own stupid fault that the van driver had nearly run him down and called him a 'ginger twat' and a 'white cunt'. He would try not to get in the way in future. Lesson learned.

There were four main buildings on the Greenwich campus of Thames Metropolitan University. Each building was identical – a rectangular block with an inner gravelled courtyard onto which corridors and rooms looked out. Crump's new place of work would be in building two – the 'Mary Seacole' building.

The other three buildings were called 'Nelson Mandela', 'Marcus Garvey' and 'King Abdullah', the latter named after a generous beneficiary and home to the newly-established Centre for Islamic Studies. There was also the 'Stephen Lawrence Learning Zone' which everyone called a library, because that was precisely what it was. These buildings had previously been called after Kings and Queens – Queen Anne, Queen Mary, King William, and King Charles, due to the extensive Royal associations of the area – but soon after moving in, the University Council had made the bold and pioneering decision to change these outdated Royal names to names of relevant significance which also, happily, reflected Britain's, and especially London's, multicultural society and the diverse nature of the university's staff and students.

There was nowhere else in Britain that had all its buildings named after people of colour, though the councils of not a few towns and cities had got a bad case of Mandela-itis in the 1980s, naming every new-built concrete monstrosity, whether a school hall, a student union building, or any council office block, after a black South African leader who had never set foot in their town and would be unlikely to ever do so, or even know of its existence.

Crump was not entirely sure what connection Nelson Mandela, or Mary Seacole, or any of the others, had with Thames Metropolitan University or its buildings – he would do some research later – but he certainly wasn't going to question the wisdom of the name change which would, the report said, make the university 'more inclusive' and 'give black and minority ethnic students a sense of ownership'. It would hopefully also encourage applications from cash-rich foreign students as well as helping the university meet its targets in widening participation – attracting as many students as possible from low-income households, many of whom were black or Asian, thereby improving the university's place in the league tables via value-added diversity scores.

This was obviously the right decision in 21st century Britain, especially as more than half of Thames Metropolitan University's students were BME (Black and Minority Ethnic). The abbreviation had recently replaced 'ethnic minority' as the preferred term for 'non-whites', but always reminded Crump of BMX bikes, and, no matter how hard he tried, whenever he heard the phrase his mind's eye saw an surreal image of Nelson Mandela frantically pedalling a BMX bike through some South African township on the way to freedom after his years of captivity. He also wondered what on earth was wrong with the phrase 'ethnic minority' anyway, but knew how the manufacture of new words and phrases, especially referring to race or gender, was a thriving industry in the world of academics, think tanks and government departments.

As he ambled along the Wren-designed colonnade towards his destination, Crump remembered his interview earlier that year, and how he had passed several students smoking and spitting and swearing, and generally hanging around outside the Seacole building. Not one of them, he noticed, had moved out of the way to let him pass, and he had been pushed and jostled more than once as he passed students on the campus that day. The students there seemed to have no manners at all – he was sure that students would never have been so rude at

his old university. But then, that would be his job: to mould those smoking and spitting and swearing students into the leaders and productive citizens of tomorrow – to build a new, equal society where anyone, of any race, from any background, could achieve and help make the world a better place. It was just a shame they couldn't all do it with good manners, that was all.

But Crump believed absolutely in his mission. He had said so in the interview as he'd discussed how he had managed diversity at his college teaching job – (this actually took up most of the interview) – and had gone into a long, detailed, explanation of why all white people were intrinsically racist, even if they didn't know it, and should feel guilt at the terrible burden of slavery that all black people had to bear, so should accept 'positive action' in all its forms even if that meant blameless white people would be disadvantaged and racially discriminated against due to their skin colour. It had gone down well, as had his statement that all institutions were guilty of institutional racism. He knew it would, and that's why he had said it. Whether or not he actually *believed* what he was saying was neither here nor there – he knew the way interviews worked and what the panel expected, and he knew the education system well too, albeit at a college and not a university.

The interview panel consisted of a bored-looking middle-aged man with a red face and a weary seen-and-heard-it-all-before look in his eyes, an obese black woman with huge white teeth in colourful African dress and hat, and a tiny, nervous, bird-like Asian woman who sat between her colleagues rather as though she were their stunted and deformed child. They were duly impressed by Crump's performance and beliefs, or so it seemed. And they never once asked about his qualifications or intelligence or education or knowledge, or whether he loved his subject, but just about how he would manage diversity through differentiation, what he knew about the latest research on learning styles and, most important of all,

how he would promote equality of opportunity in his teaching – they asked him about this again and again. He gave text book, fashionable, politically correct answers, and he knew it. This is what an old friend, also in teaching but now abroad, had told him to do in his last letter – especially the bit about slavery and how all white people were racist and therefore ‘positive action’ was needed to redress the balance. The friend had worked in a secondary school for several years before leaving to go and teach English abroad, so knew what he was talking about.

Crump also stated that, in order to better reflect the society we live in, women should be positively encouraged to go into management, as they were ‘under-represented’ in senior roles, through similar programmes of ‘positive action’, so to more truly reflect society. He didn’t agree with this kind of discrimination either, believing that people should achieve through merit and merit alone – and as a white male he was also aware that the belief that he should become a victim of racism and sexism for his gender and skin colour was not only very unfair and wrong, but would also mean that unfair discrimination against him personally was justified and right! But he wanted the job. God, he wanted the job. He gave what he thought were the right answers and, then, he got the letter two days later telling him he hadn’t got it. He didn’t know why.

“You could be anyone, innit?”

The obese female security guard with dyed, dark-red hair and lipstick to match stood at the entrance to the Seacole building and was refusing to let Crump in. Embarrassingly, he had forgotten his security pass – and on his first day too. A couple of young students in hoodies pushed past him, flashed their cards and swaggered into the building.

“B...but... I’m a member of staff,” he said, hoping this would sort things out.

“I don’t give a toss if you fink yer the master of the bleedin’ universe, mate. If you ain’t got no security pass you ain’t comin’ in.”

Crump would have loved to correct her sloppy English – he

could even have shown her that her tautological use of negatives actually derived from the Old English Anglo-Saxon syntactical pattern, and he was sure he could have even taught her how to pronounce her Ts properly – but thought better of it. She was very large security guard woman.

“C...couldn’t you, y’know, check with the department upstairs? They are expecting me...” he said.

“What, with *my* knees?”

Your knees look just as obese as every other part of you, Crump thought, but he hadn’t meant for her to actually climb the stairs personally.

“No, I mean, couldn’t you...y’know...call upstairs with your...?” He put his hand to his ear to signify a phone.

The security guard rolled her eyes, sighed and shook her red-haired head. Her jowls wobbled.

“Look, we’re short-staffed ‘ere today – I gotta check students’ passes.”

A couple of students rushed past without her even glancing at their passes, Crump noticed.

“Come back later, innit? Then I can call upstairs for yer,” and then she added, somewhat facetiously Crump thought, the word ‘sir’.

Crump really hated it when people used the word ‘sir’ to him, and also wished they would stop saying the word ‘innit’ – the obese security guard woman had just managed to use two of his most hated words in the English language, and almost in the same breath! She was clearly enjoying the power she had to pettily prevent Crump from entering the building – he felt that she could easily have called upstairs, or even let him in without calling anyone.

With his briefcase and his glasses and his jacket and tie, he hardly looked like a terrorist or a thief, but he knew that the more he protested, the more the security guard would be enjoying watching him squirm, like a big fat spider watching a fly struggling into paralysis in its web.

Embarrassingly, he felt a sudden, momentary, and

unexpected, urge to cry, but managed to swallow hard and steel himself against the adversity he was facing. He felt, bizarrely, as though he were five years old on his first day of school. It was intimidating, overwhelming and somewhat confusing, and he had a gut-wrenching knot of anxiety in his stomach – and he hadn't even entered the building yet. It was all just so frustrating!

“But...” the pitch of his voice was higher now, he could tell, “but... I'll be late. It's my first day.”

The security guard looked at him as though he were the most pathetic man ever to walk on the face of the earth.

“Well you shoulda foughta vat when yer forgot yer pass,” and then she again added, with a sneer, the sarcastically spat out word, ‘sir’.

“But I...”

“What part of the word ‘no’ doncha understand?” she interrupted.

The security guard gave a smug smile of intransigence as she let several students into the building, again without even looking at their security passes. Just to spite him, he thought. Her flabby white cheeks wobbled as she shook her head and Crump noticed that he and the security guard were the only white faces amongst the crowd of students waiting to enter the building. He hadn't noticed until then. That was fine, though. Crump liked diversity in all its forms – his views on diversity had been what had got him the job, after all – but he couldn't help feeling that this security guard woman – this *white* security guard – was not letting him into the building *because* he was white, or, rather because his skin was *not* brown or black. Could that be true? Was he being treated in a racist manner by a white person for being white? Was that possible? Or was he just getting paranoid and frustrated? More paranoid and frustrated than usual, that is.

It was best not to jump to any conclusions. After all, he didn't actually have a security pass so she was only doing her job, and had a legal duty not to let those without passes into the

building. He could have been some Islamic terrorist hell bent on blowing up students of English language and literature, for example. Not likely, but possible. It was just a shame this security guard couldn't just bend the rules a little and accept that the be-suited, bespectacled, ginger-haired man with a suitcase in front of her was almost certainly not a member of Al-Qaeda.

That damn security pass! He knew there was something else he needed to bring in on that day, but he'd been in such a rush that morning he hadn't realised that he'd forgotten anything at all until he'd reached the entrance to the Seacole building and seen the security guard asking to see people's passes. Perhaps he'd been too busy smiling to think clearly? He just knew that all that smiling would end in tears.

The security guard was now laughing and joking with a couple of students – both muscular black men of about twenty – and then she let them into the building in a way that was, Crump thought, almost sexual. In fact, it was very sexual, and there was definite body contact as the men rubbed past her. She noticed him still standing there watching her, his hair dampening in the rain. Crump felt a cold trickle of rainwater run down the back of his neck.

“Look – I can't let you in, an' I can't call upstairs coz I'm too busy – so either go home and get yer pass or come back later when I got time to call upstairs.”

How long did it take to call upstairs? She had time enough to chat to students, after all. Crump couldn't help thinking that, as a security guard, she should perhaps be showing him some deference for being a university lecturer, or at least some politeness and/or helpfulness and/or respect. But as soon as the thought came into his head he was ashamed at what he recognised as snobbery on his part. It was he who should be respecting the security guard – she was, after all, on a far lower salary than him or other lecturers, and was probably struggling to afford to live in London. But then he was struggling to afford to live in London too. In fact, everybody in a normal job, and

especially those on a single income, was struggling to live in London. But he knew what he meant, anyway. And, even though she was white, she rather bizarrely had the distinctive strains of Jamaican patois somewhere in her heavy London accent, which somewhat unnerved him. Was she trying to sound *black*? If so, *why*? But she had probably been very oppressed in her life, because of her class and gender, and had probably been brutalised by men too, which was why she was oppressing him. It was his duty to understand her natural reaction to a man like him, not her duty to conform to his patriarchal assumptions of superiority. But even though... She could have at least called upstairs to the department and asked if he was expected. That would have sorted everything out in an instant.

I'll be back, Crump thought – though he didn't say it. He decided he'd go somewhere to have a coffee – (he'd noticed several cafes on the High Street) – and then try and find a call box to call the department from. He didn't have a mobile phone any more – he had accidentally dropped it into the washing up a couple of weeks earlier, and even though he'd tried to dry it out it still didn't work. He hadn't got round to getting a new one yet and wasn't even sure he'd bother – he had to admit as well that he hardly ever got calls from anyone anyway and had only got the mobile in the first place for emergencies, like being attacked or kidnapped or mugged, or stuck in mud when the tide was coming in, or if his car broke down. But he didn't have a car, never went anywhere near mud, and doubted whether an attacker or kidnapper or mugger would allow him to make a call for help before any attack or kidnap or mugging took place.

And some people said mobiles could cause brain cancer – (the 'jury was out' on the matter) – so, even though he wasn't able to call his department due to his lack of a mobile phone, at least he would not be even slightly statistically increasing the probability of his getting brain cancer either, which was a plus.

There is always a bright side if you look hard enough, he

thought, as he stood getting wet in the rain. The stress of it all, however, may well have cancelled out any health benefit – Crump could feel a little nerve starting to twitch in the corner of his left eye. He reached up to hold it still and could feel it twitching under his fingertips, like a tiny insect trapped under his skin.

“It’s Kevin, isn’t it?” a deep voice boomed.

He turned round and saw a large red face smiling at him – it was the middle-aged man from the interview panel before the summer. Crump smiled – a friend at last.

“Y...Yes,” he said, “well...people...call me Crump... actually... usually...”

“Then Crump it shall be! The name’s Sandy,” and with that he grasped Crump’s hand and shook it hard.

Sandy looked at the security guard whose ample adipose frame was now blocking the entire entrance to the Seacole building.

“Oh for fuck’s sake Tracey you old tart – let the boy in!”

“He ain’t got no pass, Sandy!”

For some reason Crump couldn’t remember any of the names of those that had interviewed him in June. But Sandy was one of them and now Sandy was here, and Sandy was his friend. A big boy on his first day of school to keep the bullies at bay, to show him the ropes, to be his protector, and Crump would owe him one for the favour. He wouldn’t forget this, though he had to admit he was somewhat shocked at the rather sexist language usage – the word ‘tart’ was surely not in keeping with the gender equality policies of Thames Metropolitan University? He’d have to check, but it was unlikely that such language was ever acceptable in an academic context, except perhaps in the food technology department, which used to be domestic science, which used to be the cooking and catering department before that. But far from being offended, the security guard was *smiling* at Sandy, who, Crump now decided, smelt distinctly of alcohol – whisky, if he wasn’t mistaken. The red face grinned.

“Trace, he works here – so let him in, eh?” And then, plaintively: “Look at him, he’s a lost puppy.”

They looked at Crump, who looked back and blinked, slightly startled at being called a ‘lost puppy’. He was twenty-nine years old, an experienced college teacher about to become a university lecturer and, most importantly, he was human, not canine. What did Sandy mean, ‘lost puppy’? A dribble of rainwater ran down his nose and formed a droplet at the end of it. Crump wiped it off and sniffed. He almost whimpered.

“Now what kind of a welcome is it when a grumpy bint like you makes his life difficult? Abuse of power... ‘innit!’” Sandy said to Tracey the security guard, enunciating each syllable like an old roué of a Shakespearean actor.

He then smiled at Tracey and winked, and she smiled back coyly. Again, the use of the word ‘bint’ perplexed Crump. He had the utmost respect for women and would never call his girlfriend that, if he had one. But Sandy’s charm seemed to be working.

“Don’t worry ‘bout Trace – she’s a star really,” Sandy whispered to Crump, before turning and winking again at the security guard “she’s just got a thing about big black men – ain’t ya Trace – so always tries to get revenge against all the white men in the world for not satisfying her in her youth.”

Tracey let out an enormous rasping smoker’s cough of a laugh. Sandy grinned at Crump who was somewhat confused at this change in the security guard’s demeanour – she now seemed like a happy friendly person, when a moment before she’d seemed like a pain in the neck, to say the least.

“I satisfied you though, didn’t I?” leered Sandy.

Tracey smiled widely, blushed the colour of her hair and shook her head. She seemed to be enjoying being leered at by this man, even though if Crump had behaved like that he was sure he’d be up on a charge of sexual harassment. He knew a bloke at the college who’d got into trouble for calling a female colleague ‘love’ and only managed to keep his job by convincing the disciplinary panel that it was a term of address to both women and men common in his native Sheffield.

Tracey shifted her vast bulk out of the doorway, with all the casual yet oft-rehearsed insouciance of a hippo rolling over in mud.

“OK Sandy – just for you then,” she said, and with that she waved them into the building. “But don’t – forget – yer security pass – again,” she barked.

“Oh, yes...er no...er thank you,” said Crump, but Tracey just rolled her eyes and sucked air into her teeth in the manner he had observed amongst black teenage boys at his college – very rude, perhaps, but an Afro-Caribbean cultural mannerism to which one must be sensitive.

But Tracey the security guard was white. Pasty, even. Perhaps she *had* been obstructive to him because he was white, after all. Perhaps she *did* hate white men? But she didn’t hate Sandy, and Sandy was white. But then, Sandy had ‘satisfied’ her, apparently. An image of Tracey the obese security guard standing naked squeezed itself into his mind and Crump suddenly and momentarily felt rather queasy.

“Don’t worry about Tracey – she may look like an ugly fat-arsed cow, but she’s not so bad really.”

“Oh,” said Crump, not knowing what else to say – and really rather taken aback by the words ‘ugly’, ‘fat-arsed’ and ‘cow’, though acknowledging that he had thought exactly the same things about her moments earlier.

He followed Sandy along the ground floor corridor of the Seacole building and past the lifts where a large crowd of students was hanging around. The doors of one of the two lifts opened and some waiting students pushed their way into the lift, with no consideration for queuing or who was nearest the doors, or for letting the lift’s occupants out first. Two Chinese-looking girls looked particularly frightened as they just about managed to leave the lift in one piece. Crump looked on at this scrum and Sandy shook his head.

“Welcome to the glorious seat of learning that is Thames Metropolitan University,” said Sandy, “Don’t ever bother with the lifts – we’re only on the first floor anyway – and the last

thing you'll want to be doing is standing in a confined space with some of *our* students." And then he added, loudly, "Bloody animals!"

Sandy laughed and one of the small, frightened-looking girls turned round – she looked like she was about to cry. Crump looked back at her, wanting to help, but not knowing how to. The students in the lift stood silent and staring at him. A couple of them started smirking and laughing as the lift doors closed. One of the Chinese girls burst into tears and ran off, comforted by the other.

"Come on Crumpet, up the stairs," called Sandy.

Nobody had called Kevin Crump 'Crumpet' since school. He hated it – hated it so much he couldn't say; hated it with all his heart and every fibre of his being; hated it because whenever he heard that word it all came flooding back – those times at school, all the name-calling, the bullying, all of that. The past. The pain. And he didn't even like crumpets very much!

But Sandy had saved him, got him into the building and was now, he had decided, his one and only friend at the university. Crump decided to say nothing. He would mention it later, when he was settled in, if Sandy continued to use the nick-name. He was Crump, and Crump he would stay – he would make that clear from the start. But not just now. Even though now was the start. He would make it clear soon, anyway...

He was rather surprised to see Sandy bounding up the stairs two at a time. It was a job to keep up with him, and Crump was out of breath when he reached the top. Amazingly, the middle-aged, grey-haired, red-faced, grinning man standing in front of him wasn't in the slightest bit breathless and stood at the top of the stairs waiting for Crump like a cocky teenager waiting for his out-of-shape, middle-aged, flabby dad.

"My name's Sandy and I'm an alcoholic," Sandy bellowed at Crump as he climbed the stairs, "that's why I'm as fit as a flea."

“Oh, right,” said Crump, panting and out of breath, and not knowing what else to say.

“Joking, old boy, joking – I just likes me tot o’ whisky from time to time – I’m not a *real* alcoholic.”

“Oh, right...”

“And I’m absolutely bloody determined to live for as long as possible – I’ve got two years to go to retirement, and I want every single fucking penny of that pension I’ve been waiting for – for nearly thirty fucking years...”

Crump finally reached the top of the stairs, wheezing like a sickly child.

“So there’s absolutely no bloody chance whatsoever of my drinking myself to death, no matter how much they’d all like me to.”

Crump had just had time to register what he’d said and wonder who ‘they’ might be exactly, and why they would want him to drink himself to death, and whether he had really been a lecturer for thirty years, when Sandy was off again, marching down the first floor corridor to the right of the stairwell.

“Follow me, my dear boy! Follow me!” he called as he strode off.

Crump scurried after Sandy, who was now walking down the corridor at speed and humming, for some reason, the theme from Indiana Jones. He didn’t know why, but Crump felt like a naughty eight year old following his headmaster to his study to be punished. Sandy marched to the end of the building, turned a corner and continued marching down an identical corridor.

The name and number of the room he was meant to go to was on the letter the university had sent him, but Crump had forgotten to bring it with him, together with his security pass – and he had also forgotten to bring his welcome pack, which had details of where his office was located and where the staff room was, though it wasn’t called a staff room at all – it was called a ‘team room’. It was the same at the further education college – the staff room was called a team room there too, and had been

for couple of years, though Crump had mistakenly called it a *tea-room* for his first term there and only noticed his mistake when a colleague facetiously pointed out with a smirk that he could have coffee, too, at break time if he so desired.

‘Why couldn’t things be called what they were any more?’ thought Crump, as he hurried after Sandy – it would all be so much easier if they were. How does the phrase ‘team room’ improve on the phrase ‘staff room’ in any way whatsoever? But Crump knew why and how these things happened. A manager would go on ‘*a course*’ and come back pumped up with American-style corporate management psychobabble and all the latest buzz-words, and everyone would have to stop using the perfectly good words and phrases they were all used to, and replace them with silly new phrases which made no sense. This, allegedly, was called progress.

After reaching the end of the second, longer corridor, which ran parallel to a busy road Crump could see from the window, they emerged into the foyer of the department – more specifically, the Department of Cultural, Creative and Communicative Studies where he was now a junior lecturer. There was a very modern-looking glass door and partition through which Crump could see the department’s two secretaries at work on their computers. He remembered these from his interview too – they were both large, middle-aged women, one white, one black, and were clearly not to be messed with. The withering look the white one had given him when he had got lost before his interview the previous June made him feel about three feet tall, probably smaller. Crump suspected that this particular secretary, with short hair and a gruff, sneering manner was probably a lesbian, but he certainly wasn’t going to risk enquiring, and it wasn’t relevant anyway, of course – she would be just as intimidating whether straight or gay. There were easy chairs and a rack of leaflets and magazines in the department foyer, and a couple of worried-looking young students were leafing through magazines nervously as they waited.

“Come on, come on! Don’t want to be late for our first *departmental* meeting now, do we?” boomed Sandy, emphasising the ‘mental’ of *departmental* loudly as he said it.

All in all, Sandy seemed rather a cynical man, but he was clearly at home in the department and Crump was sure he could learn a lot from him: everybody needs someone on their side.

Crump had no idea that there was to be a meeting that morning. He had expected just to arrive at his office – (though he couldn’t remember the exact number of the office, but he could always ask someone) – and get down to the business of settling in. He had an appointment with his immediate manager and mentor, as well as with the head of department the next day, but hadn’t expected any meetings at all on that day. Crump was sure that this hadn’t been mentioned in any information in any letter or welcome pack he had received, but maybe it had been. He would have to check at home later, but surely he would have remembered something like that? Surely they would have let him know about it? If not, then why hadn’t he been informed?

He followed Sandy down a corridor leading off the foyer, and suddenly felt rather annoyed at not being told of this meeting, but decided not to mention it to anyone. It was his first day, after all – he didn’t want to get a reputation for complaining. He had to accept that he was a last minute stand-in for this job – and, unlike everyone else, he hadn’t had the whole of the summer to prepare for the new term either. It was best, in such situations, to keep one’s head down and try not to be noticed, although he was aware that the smeary white bird-shit stain on his jacket may have been having the opposite effect.

Sandy swung open a door marked ‘TEAM ROOM’ and held it open. He was here at last, in his department, in the bosom of academe. The future, Crump thought to himself smugly, was wide open. Like an oyster, a door or a box. Or possibly, even, a vagina.

He went inside.