

'The ultimate saviour of mankind is about to destroy it!'

The INVESTIGATIONS of the PARA-USUAL



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Shadowlands²

Historians of a whimsical nature consider the Ngorongoro Crater both the cradle of humanity and its grave. It is where the first human beings are said to have emerged. And the same location in which the final nail in their coffin was allegedly driven home.

In truth, what was launched there – Operation Green Sher-hey! – was not that nail. It was, rather, a contributory factor in the process that lead to it being struck home. A process that was to bring the climate to its tipping point. The point at which the glaciers and the sea ice thaw, swelling the oceans that overpower the vulnerable low-lying coastlands; crumbling like the walls of childish sandcastles swamped by successive surges of relentless surf. The point at which the seas become the non-discriminatory cleanser of coastal communities and the vastly populated cities ironically built to prosper from their proximity to the oceans. Driving the people ever more inland to a densely concentrated high ground. The comfortably-off, having believed themselves deeply rooted, forced to live the rudderless lives of refugees – those they once empathised with one day a year via the charity

teletons. This is the point that storms wrench with increasing frequency and unyielding ferocity. War, famine, flooding, drought, disease, become resultant realities that linger on the horizon. There is no way back to a former existence. There is no reset button. For this, though, the inflamed nostrils could not be held wholly responsible.

No. The linear sequence of events to the tipping point had its true origins in a less 'cradely' setting, the next day, the very morning after the operation's announcement. Halfway across the world from the Ngorongoro Crater, in London. In the hushed offices, to be exact, of the Royal Academy of Philosophy.

There, at that time, in that august institution, Professor O'Singh would never have believed possible that this could be the defining moment. What some would come to term the 'teetering point'; the point at which something threatens to tip. The beginning of a sequence of events leading up to the instant at which the climate would no longer prevaricate. When climate change would accelerate out of control.

The professor had come prepared to observe a certain degree of animated behaviour at the Royal Academy of Philosophy. The occasional chin-stroke. Or, at a stretch, a lot of chin-stroking – still, though, what might be considered low-key animation. But not this. Not assault. He backed up carefully out of the administrative office of the Academy, out of harm's way. Aided in his retreat by the ousting tendencies of the heavy, wooden, spring-loaded door. Something was amiss, he sensed. Something was not right.

His attacker, he noted, was male, sporting the hairstyle of a small lady from the 14th Century. A mere glimpse, nay a small portion of a stare, was sufficient to inform O'Singh of that. A fraction of an ogle, perhaps. For Professor Breville O'Singh was as efficient stripping information from the barest detail as a swarm of locusts paring down a caper or small pea. But there was something else. It occurred to the professor that his assailant inside that room had pounced and missed. And in that sense, in that case, figured O'Singh, the man who had intended to assault was no more than a 'potential' or 'ham' assailant.

'A "recreational" assailant!' exclaimed O'Singh, conclusively, trapping a sheet of paper he was clasping between the door and his nose.

Beneath the carpet, a floorboard squealed under the weight of the mountainous professor. Professor Breville O'Singh was a bear-shaped man or perhaps a man-shaped bear. A figure as imposing as a Cassius Clay, but always looking sorry for the imposition. Professor Breville O'Singh was apologetically large.

Alone he stood now in the sparse narrow wood-panelled corridor, squeezed between the office door and the antiquated cage lift. In his pale linen suit, he resembled a superannuated wrestler on safari.

O'Singh snatched the paper – the letter he had been clutching – down to chest level so he might hastily recheck a detail; scanned then the door for a sign that he may have stumbled into the wrong room. Moments before, O'Singh had torn out of that lift behind him full of irrepressible purpose. Now, here was he, motionless, head bowed, eyes clamped tightly shut, pressing his skull and a document between

bear-sized palms. The professor was summoning his inner resources in the same way an Olympic high-jumper psyches himself up before the run-up to straddle what is effectively a lofty stick.

The professor cocked his head. He was listening for sounds beyond the door. But he could hear not a peep, not a murmur from inside the office. He realised he was listening to silence.

Professor O'Singh rocked on his heels, nodded his head as if in resolving something internally, and felt again for the door's brass push panel. His lips twitched; his hand lingered on the door. He steeled himself. And pushed.

'A reasonably motivated squid!' exclaimed the professor loudly, as that very same offensive, interestingly coiffured gentleman sailed past attempting a very similar move as before. Except his leap this time came from the other side of the door.

O'Singh stood rooted at the threshold. Flummoxed, perplexed. He could trust only in his ability to maintain a supreme state of consciousness. 'A reasonably motivated

squid' – his immediate reaction. At a stroke, he had pinpointed where his attacker's pounce might sit on a scale of 'animal verve for pouncing'. Somewhere in that very narrow range between a poorly or dispirited leopard and an upbeat sloth.

Again, the gentleman launched himself – this time diagonally – hands held claw-like before him in a 'traditional' pouncing pose. This was pouncing resembling the approach of a golfer from the tee to the hole, each attempt a little more refined, bringing them closer to the target.

O'Singh peered down from his commanding height and realised that the much smaller man, the pouncer, was tilting at his considerable chest now with as much effectiveness as a sparrow manoeuvring a piano. Could this be in any way an indication of how well the job interview was going so far? – greeting by assault?

The professor felt an urge for clarification. He would ask a question. Directly.

'Pray, is this where the interview is to be conducted?' he enquired in his soft, South African lilt. O'Singh held out the letter he had brought, his invitation.

Beyond the wannabe assailant he noted the large, hushed, low-lit, wood-panelled room. A self-contained office located at the back.

Distractedly, the small man scrunched the letter in his hand. His paintbrush moustache twitched. His sharp features spasmed, then froze. A wide-eyed enlightened look surfaced beneath the gentleman's dishevelled, feminine, medieval thatch – a grey thatch at odds with the colour of his black moustache – signalling that a thought had inspired an alternative approach.

'You're fired!' he shout-whispered up at O'Singh's looming features, or rather he shouted as loudly as whispering permits without it being technically something said.

A gurgling sound permeated the ensuing silence. O'Singh could discern a culpable coffee percolator atop a low table wedged into a convenient recess – an ad hoc hospitality corner. Percolating the silence.

'Good day! You may depart!' hissed O'Singh's assailant, insistently, in a kind of verbal wheeze. 'Deparrt' – there was a definite Edinburgh curliness to his speech.

'Fired? Is it possible?' wondered O'Singh, out loud.

'So much so that it is happening,' confirmed the gentleman, breathily.

'It just occurred... I mean is it, technically speaking, possible to be fired from a job before one has been interviewed for it?' ventured O'Singh.

'You did come here for the job then?' probed the gentleman, in an 'Aha!' tone.

'Professor Breville O'Singh,' replied O'Singh, with muted alacrity – sensing the need through the overwrought gentleman, to keep his voice down – and offered him a hand for shaking.

Still the gentleman barred the entrance to the administrative office, nervously tugging at his pre-Renaissance fringe.

'And you must be...?' asked O'Singh.

'I must be someone unacquainted,' replied the gentleman, firmly. 'The position has been filled.'

'Ah... oh. So, do I understand therefore that I was awarded the position and fired from it before I came here to apply?' asked O'Singh, ponderously.

The pouncing gentleman sucked his teeth, considering that unusual scenario.

'Yes, yes you did,' he answered, experimentally.

O'Singh tried to articulate something or, failing that, utter something audible. But he could manage neither. The professor was flabbergasted. The stuffing had been knocked right out of him. The rug pulled from under his feet. And he was quite peckish. He had only had cheese for breakfast that morning and then only that holey Swiss variety.

'But if I may, I really need the position,' croaked O'Singh, at last, sheepish at having to resort to such strong language as 'really'. The big man's legs gave way slightly,

buckled, sending him scuttling sideways towards an upholstered chair propped near to the door.

The latterly-pouncing gentleman lunged for O'Singh, only O'Singh's bulk had already decided which forces would win out.

'This establishment offered me the last hope of a research post,' keened O'Singh, above the creek of the chair straining under his weight. 'The chance of discovering everything. A cure for cancer perchance. The reason we have toenails...'

Professor Breville O'Singh had kept believing throughout his career, until this very point, that his lateral thoughts might ultimately unlock huge swathes of knowledge. Some momentous revelation on a par with the Enlightenment back in the 17th and 18th centuries, when science said to superstition, you know what? What O'Singh felt was slipping through his grasp, was Enlightenment 2.0. At the very least. For each idea conceived, though short of grandness relative to say The Big Bang Theory,

might be one of innumerable tiny bang theories, which when aggregated might deliver together more than the big one – the discovery of everything.

'This wasn't a research post,' piped up the ex-pouncer, gleefully correcting O'Singh's presumption.

'Ab-absolutely. I understand,' sighed O'Singh. 'But an administrative role may have at least gained me a foothold here at the Academy. And perhaps led to, I hoped, maybe...'

The little man cast a hasty, anxious look towards the back office, then by way of offering condolence reached out and began tentatively prodding the professor in the mid-region. It was an action not unlike one might employ to fearfully poke at a whale to check if it is dead.

He stopped. Abruptly. The former pouncer's eyes widened with the formulation of an idea. 'Come, come. Please be standing,' whispered the gentleman, groping for something inside his tweed jacket.

'Yes, yes. I almost forgot to give you this,' he said, struggling with his jacket like a frantic escapologist.

The gentleman again darted an urgent look towards the back office. 'Take this,' he said with a gargoyle grin, foisting an official-looking brown envelope on the professor. 'My letter of recommendation.'

O'Singh straightened up and retrieved the letter from his armpit where it had been hastily deposited. He pulled the edges of the envelope to uncrumple it with his giant hands so he might squint at the scrawled inscription on the front.

'This is addressed to The IPU!' he exclaimed. 'Is this truly for the Investigations of the Para-Usual?'

'Voice. Keep down,' urged the letter-donor.

Just detectable, a creak of floorboard, quite possibly from the back office.

'Dear God, you have heard of The IPU?' asked the gentleman, in a tone combining hope and contempt.

'Yes, yes, oh yes. Ab-ab-absolutely. I just had not realised that they maintained operations,' marvelled O'Singh, in an excited whisper. 'But gosh! Fancy! I cannot... To think! What a turn of events. A hiring, a dismissal but then a... a recommendation for another post! I must really thank you so much!'

'Thank me by getting that job now,' urged the gentleman, magnanimously, pushing at O'Singh's midriff in the direction whence he had come. 'Go, immediately!'

'Right now?' asked O'Singh, instantly dropping anchor, not a little surprised at the gentleman's urgency. 'You mean right now? Today? This very day?'

'You need to be there absolutely by 11,' snapped the gentleman.

'Today? Really, today? Gosh! I mean, thank you so much. But, oh, there is plenty of time then, really,' said O'Singh, consulting his watch. The time showed a bit before nine.

An undisputable protest of floorboards and a heavy footfall sounded from inside the back office. Both men swung towards the source of the sudden noise.

'Dear God! Ten-thirty!' wheezed Woo. 'Orforfor-por-por-por-por-por!' The floorboards continued to creak long after they might reasonably be expected. O'Singh studied the gentleman staring downwards, vacantly, in some trepidation, as if he were waiting for something awful to pass.

'Er, still probably time...' suggested O'Singh, awkwardly. There was a strong suspicion that the floorboards had not been the things that had farted.

'Ten past Ten! Ten? – pffthtttttttttttttttttt! – ten's very urgent... isn't it?' demanded the gentleman, crazily, furiously downgrading the luxury of time for

O'Singh to linger. He was again shoulder down, tilting at the academic's chest, returning to futility as a way of shifting unshiftable bulk.

It dawned upon O'Singh then that time had been constricted so much now as to conspire against him. He thanked the gentleman profusely once more, then made his expulsion considerably easier by turning heel and bidding adieu. The floorboards strained in series in tune to O'Singh's exit.

Calm had only just been restored to the office, when there was a click. A white-haired, learned lady emerged from the inner office and closed the door behind her. Sat alone, she discovered the gentleman who had recommended O'Singh to The IPU. Sitting 'traditionally,' as he might say –upright and daintily cross-legged. For the Recommender-Pouncer was a traditional sitter.

'Professor Breville O'Singh!' announced the learned lady.

'Not present,' answered the Recommender-Pouncer, looking up with an affected air of disappointment.

'I thought we had two candidates attending?' said the learned lady, more to herself than to the Recommender-Pouncer.

'Fickle,' said the Recommender-Pouncer, rising from his seat and brushing himself down. 'That must have been the fellow I just met. Suddenly stammered something or other, then recklessly made off with himself. No explanation. If I were to write him a character reference, I would say, "Really quite discourteous". "Discourteous" and well, "flighty".'

He conjured up an expression of horrified grief and greeted the learned lady with a handshake. 'Vladimir Woo. Glad to make your acquaintance.'

'Mr Vladimir Woo, oh yes,' returned the learned lady, searching his eyes.

'Interesting. You left a message on my phone, in which you recited a letter of introduction.'

'Yes indeed. Pleased to have recited,' said Woo, bowing.

'A very impressive eulogy from your previous employers, but can you explain why you felt it necessary to read a letter of introduction addressed – as you stated in the recital – to the Investigations of the Para-Usual; The IPU?'

'The IPU is a different organisation,' proffered Woo, rather fazed by the question.

'That merely explains that the IPU is not this organisation, does it not? For your information, you are here now at the Royal Academy of Philosophy.'

And indeed, he was. Or at least for now. The learned lady was not to know that in a day or two she would be referring to the Royal Academy of Philosophy lamentably as the 'former Royal Academy of Philosophy'.

'Yes, that is clear,' said Woo, authoritatively.

The learned lady was now studying Vladimir Woo intensely, nodding her head and working her lips in a manner that conveyed, 'Yes? Do you have anything more, or are we done?'

'So, er, should you perhaps have been contacting The IPU?' she offered, finally.

'Bwapp-Prrrrrrrrrrrrawh!'

'Oh!' exclaimed the learned lady.

'Floorboards!' interjected Woo, manically.

He began stamping the carpet with the fervour of a one-man bushfire fighting operation. Remarkably, a floorboard creaked near enough in faithful recital of his fart. 'Your floorboards!' offered Woo gleefully, in diagnosis.

'You're right,' said the learned lady – a little concerned now – sniffing the air, wrinkle-nosed. 'Perhaps a rodent crawled under them and perished.'

'I know what it is now!' yelled Woo, unexpectedly, taking the learned lady aback.

'That letter to the IPU I recited highlighted my talents. It was to show you what they will lose by making myself available for this appointment...'

'You do know that we are offering a somewhat junior position here?' resumed the learned lady, after an awkward silence.

'Cream always rises to the top. A traditional saying, ma'am,' chirped Woo.

'It's lightly administrative... You may well be better off accepting the position at The IPU.'

'Not that backwater, ma'am.'

'Well, yes I concede it is...'

'It's not even a backwater. It's way further back than that; not really water, either. It's a, it's a "furtherback-mirage", is what it is.'

'But, it is...'

'The department is so forgotten, people can't even remember that they forgot about The IPU.'

'Uh well, did you remember to bring along a copy of the letter, anyway?'

Woo thought about a reply then grasped the hand of the learned lady and shook it vigorously once again.

'Pleased to meet you. Would I be correct in assuming that the position is for just one person?'

'Yes...'

'Well then, I am very well qualified, as it so happens, to represent one person. There is only one of me as plainly you can see. Though I confess I am in fact an un-joined conjoined triplet.'

'I see. Well perhaps Mr. Woo you might step inside,' sighed the learned lady, gesturing towards her office door.

As the door clicked shut upstairs in the interview room, the solid oak doors to the Academy's entrance sprung open down at street level to allow the departure of

Professor Breville O'Singh. And there, the professor stood akimbo at the top of the stone steps scanning three lanes of traffic drawn hypnotically towards London's West End. Hope was in his eyes, certainly a zealous glint. But hope was not enough without some kind of cash-injection. O'Singh looked down at his out-turned pockets. If only, he pondered, lint was a legitimate currency.