

## CATASTROPHE

By Richard Graham-Yooll (September 2018)

Marvin Stroup, a professor of philosophy, floated out into the darkness above East Lansing's Chesterfield Hills neighborhood. Visibility was not good. The snow had intensified, and the streetlights were hazy blurs. He realized his disorientation when he found himself over Saginaw Road. Wrong direction. He headed south, crossed Harrison Road, and followed Grand River Avenue to the History Department building on the Michigan State University campus.

Hearing a police siren in the distance, Marvin hesitated outside the building, guilt prompting an unwarranted anxiety. Nobody could touch him now. Literally. Marvin smiled at the thought and continued on his way.

David Fenwick's room on the second floor was locked. Marvin passed through the door. The office, illuminated by a street lamp outside, was a mess with books on the floor and papers scattered randomly across the desk. There was a letter from the dean, an overdue library notice, and a pile of unmarked student papers. Nothing resembled the manuscript he sought. It would not be easy, but there was no choice, not after his first failure, and he had to hurry. He could already feel the pull of his distant body, an umbilical cord drawing him home, but he fought against it. There were more places in the room to search.

The door opened abruptly and Marvin froze. The light clicked on and David came toward him. Older than his colleagues, David was an associate professor of history, but he had started his academic career late. He headed to his desk, ignoring his uninvited visitor. He walked slowly, using a cane. Marvin was ready to slip away before he was noticed. Then, remembering he could not be seen, he positioned himself behind the desk to look over David's shoulder.

David shuffled through papers on his desk. One of them had to be the manuscript. His arrival could prove to have been a godsend.

Marvin waited despite a growing physical urge to leave. He had to prove his theory of the non-locality of consciousness and redeem the humiliation of that evening two weeks ago.

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"With respect, Marvin, your theory is hardly meaningful when we have yet to define the nature of consciousness."

The four MSU faculty members had gathered in Marvin's house for their bi-monthly dinner meeting. David Fenwick's face was expressionless and it was hard to determine whether his comment was hostile or a serious observation.

“And which theory are you referring to, David?” Marvin replied, smiling to mask his irritation. “The premise that consciousness is a quantum phenomenon is hardly controversial.”

“I don’t disagree with the premise,” said Peter Hawley, dean of the College of Social Science. “It’s your other theory that seems, bluntly, far-fetched.”

A voice called from the kitchen. “Can you give me a hand, honey?”

Marvin ignored the interruption. “You mean, non-local consciousness? Well, I can...”

“Dinner’s ready,” Sally called out. She walked awkwardly over to the dining table, carrying two dishes that looked too heavy for her.

David stood up to take a dish. Marvin did not offer to help. His domestic partner, Sally Flanders was not his intellectual equal. She was becoming annoying, and her cat even more so. She was not destined to remain with him much longer.

“You’ll see the result of my first experiment before we finish dinner,” Marvin announced.

Now he had everyone’s attention, except for Sally’s. She was looking toward the door, apparently listening to something.

“What kind of experiment?” Hawley asked.

“That sounded like a cat,” Sally said. “You didn’t leave Tiggy outside again? There’s snow in the forecast.”

“I’ll go check.” Marvin left the table. The others stayed silent trying to listen. There was a distant meowing. A door opened and closed. Marvin reappeared a moment later.

“Cat’s in the study,” he said. “Perfectly comfortable.”

“What’s he doing there?” Sally asked.

He held out his plate. “Not too much rice. He’s the experiment I mentioned.”

“What?” There was a change in her voice.

“Nothing to be concerned about. As I said, I made him comfortable.”

“What?” Sally repeated the word on a higher note.

“It’s the Schrödinger Cat idea.”

“Erwin Schrödinger considered proof of his famous thought experiment impractical,” Hawley said.

“On the contrary, I found an answer.”

“What have you done?” Sally croaked.

“Oh, Tiggy’s comfortable. I put a cushion in the container.”

“What container?”

“The one Tiggy’s in. As soon as I closed the lid, a laser released an atom of radioactive material. When it decays, it triggers a timer which starts a Geiger, which releases the prussic acid, which kills the cat.”

Sally stared, her face the color of chalk.

“The clever part is the timer. It’s activated early if the cat ceases to breathe. In that case, we will have established that Tiggy’s consciousness defined the actuality of her death.”

“Death?!” She echoed the word.

“The timer will stop in another five minutes. Then we’ll know –. Where are you going?”

Sally had left the table, running toward the study. She was about to interfere.

“Stop,” he urged as he ran after her. “Don’t be upset. Death is quick. We’ll buy a new cat.”

It was too late. Marvin heard a plaintive meow. The cat was alive and the experiment ruined. Sally and the cat retreated to the bedroom.

“I’ll repeat the experiment next time,” Marvin said, glaring in her direction.

For a few moments there was an awkward silence around the table.

Hawley coughed. “I’m more interested that other theory, non-local consciousness. Can you explain it?”

“Putting it simply, we do not have to be in our bodies to witness external phenomena,” Marvin said. “While we do not so far have a significant academic study to prove it, there’s a wealth of data, reports over centuries, which are remarkably consistent.”

“Hardly proof,” David said, his tone now undisguisedly scornful.

“It’s hearsay, I admit, but the quantity of data is impressive. Yoga practitioners have reported it, and there are references in Hindu literature. Buddhists, while in a meditative trance, can observe a distant event.”

“Even for hearsay, that’s hardly current,” David observed.

“We also have data over the last twenty years on NDE’s, near-death experiences.” Marvin continued. “In recent European studies a significant percentage of patients reported observing events and details of their surroundings while clinically dead.”

“The phenomenon of an NDE could be a chemical reaction in the body, not proof of an afterlife.” There was now no mistaking the scorn in David’s voice.

Marvin shook his head. “I never said it was proof of any such thing.” He reached for the wine bottle and refilled the glasses around the table. “In fact, it appears that nobody can stay out of body long. The phenomenon maybe significant, but it’s relatively brief. Let me show you.”

He smeared a spoon with olive oil and dipped it in his wine.

“The olive oil helps the wine form a globule in the spoon,” he explained. “Now imagine the wine is your consciousness and the spoon’s your body.” He held the spoon over his water glass. “I tip the spoon, and out spills consciousness. The spoon’s empty but we can still see the glob of wine in the water. If I move promptly, I can retrieve it.”

“What’s this got to do with non-local consciousness?” Sharon Greene asked, intervening for the first time.

An associate professor with the School of Social Work, Sharon was a short, plump brunette, more Sally’s friend than his. Ignoring her, Marvin held up the spoon to show the recaptured wine. “I’ll do it again, but this time we’ll give it a little longer.”

He turned the spoon, dropping the wine back into the water.

“Now imagine time passing.” He swirled the glass. The wine spread into streaks before fading into a faint pinkness. “You see? Consciousness does not last long outside the body.”

“If your theory’s right, proving it by experiment could be risky, even catastrophic,” Hawley said. “But I don’t see how you could possibly prove it.”

“Oh, I can prove it all right.” Marvin turned to David. “David, have you shown anyone the manuscript you are working on?”

“What manuscript?”

Everyone knew how secretive David was about his writing. There would be satisfaction in shocking him.

“Didn’t you say you had started on your monograph, a book on race and class?”

“Maybe.”

“Our next meeting is Friday, February 8. Dinner will be on me. I will quote a passage from your manuscript verbatim as proof.”

David smiled as if at some private thought. “You might find that difficult.”

“That’s the point. So make sure to keep your office locked in the meantime.”

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That Friday, two weeks later, Marvin returned home early, immediately after his afternoon lecture. There was a cold east wind and it had started to snow. Tiggy appeared at the front door, purring a welcome. Marvin hooked an ankle around the cat to help it outside.

Ignoring the wail of complaint, he closed the door behind him and turned the light on. He had to complete the experiment before Sally came home and his guests arrived.

He spread out a mat, opened a jar and filled a brass incense burner. The paste, prepared from a Sanskrit recipe, was a mix of resin, dried fungi and Nepalese herbs. The smell when he lit the burner was noxious. He crossed his legs and began to recite the mantra. A loud meow broke his concentration and a ball of fur white with snow emerged

through a flap in the front door. He stamped his foot. The cat hissed and backed out of sight.

He began again, taking long, slow breaths while reciting the mantra. He had a sensation of dizziness. When the room came back into focus, he was hovering a few feet above his body. It was working! Now it was time to get the proof.

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David moved slowly, agonizingly slowly toward his desk. Marvin could not wait long. It was like trying to stay at the bottom of a pool with bursting lungs.

David entered his password, opened a new page in Word and typed in a title. Sneaky bastard! No wonder he had been so confident Marvin would fail. He hadn't even started his book.

Marvin read over his shoulder as he wrote the opening paragraph. Quoting a passage that had only been written that afternoon would be dramatic proof.

*"Throughout human history, racial, cultural and religious tribalism has been the cause not only of division and conflict, but also the source of societal structures that create oppression by each level of a hierarchy upon the one below."*

David continued typing and Marvin wanted to read more, but the pull from his body was now too strong to ignore. It was past time to return. He read the first sentence again to be able to quote it verbatim before yielding to the invisible umbilical cord.

He could hold on no longer. He was out through the window and flying east along Grand River Avenue. He would be home in seconds. Then something snapped, like an elastic band breaking. The pulling ceased and he lost all sense of direction.

Marvin panicked. He was drifting in ever widening circles. The rush hour traffic, oblivious of his presence, crawled through the snow, squelching it to slush. The MSU clock tower loomed in front of him. He had turned around and was going in the wrong direction. Concentrating, he changed course. Discovering he could move by his own will, if only at a crawl, his panic eased.

Moving erratically like a feather in a gentle breeze, he followed the road to University Drive. The snow came down more heavily, blurring his vision. He counted the houses until he recognized the low lying shape of his own home now outlined in white. He had lost all sense of time. He could have been away for minutes or hours. He peered through the living room window, fearing Sally had returned.

She had not. The lights were out, but even in the gloom within, his body should have been easy to see, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the room. Now the house looked empty. Or almost empty. He could make out the small, dark shape of the cat curled up asleep on the sofa.

His body could not have moved away without him. He had to be there, somewhere in the shadows. Now the desire for incarnation was unbearable. He was fading away to

nothing. The evening gloom darkened into blackness. He had become a disembodied thought about to vanish into oblivion. He had a futile urge to scream.

Then the familiar pull returned. It was drawing him down to the sofa and he was aware of the warmth of a living body. He had returned. Only those who have spent time outside their body can know the pleasure of returning, of coming back to life. Blissfully relieved, Marvin fell into a deep sleep.

He was awakened by voices. "You did the right thing, calling 911." The female voice was vaguely familiar. "Hospital is where he belongs."

Someone turned on the light. Marvin blinked, still too tired to stand up. Two women, Sally and Sharon, were in the doorway.

"I came home early and it was horrible, finding him like that," Sally said. "They say he's brain dead. It might have been better if he had died outright."

"What you need is a drink," Sharon said. "Anything in the house?"

"Of course. Marvin keeps the wine in the living room cupboard."

Sharon opened a bottle while Sally brought two glasses from the kitchen.

"Hey, you can't just help yourselves," Marvin said. "What about me?" Somehow he was unsure his words could be heard.

"Hello, Tiggywiggy," Sally said, ignoring him.

She hung up her coat.

"Cheers!" Sharon passed her a glass before taking a seat.

Sally sat beside Marvin on the sofa. He grunted a greeting. The caress of her fingers along his spine relaxed him. Attempting to verbalize his pleasure, he made an unusual sound.

"You remember Tiggy?" Sally said. "This means he's happy. I'm afraid Marvin didn't like him. I think the feeling was mutual."

"I shouldn't say it," Sharon said, laughing, "But I sympathize with your cat."

Marvin snorted in protest, about to respond.

Sally interrupted before he could speak. "I think he wants to be friends. Why don't you pet him?"

Sharon came over to the sofa. "Kitty? Come on, Kitticat." No longer looking short and plump, she had grown enormous. A huge hand gripped Marvin around his waist and lifted him up from the sofa.

"Help!" Marvin cried, but no word came out.

His terrifying suspicion became real. As Marvin struggled to free himself he saw a cat's four paws windmilling beneath him. Except that they were his own. His bladder and bowels gave way in a reaction of utter terror.

Sharon held him away at arm's length. "Ugh, you disgusting cat!"

Sally shouted, "No, don't!"

Sharon seemed not to hear.

The front door opened and Marvin flew out into the cold, empty darkness of a Michigan February night.

THE END