

The Cat That Went to Trinity
By Robertson Davies

Every Autumn when I meet my new classes, I look them over to see if there are any pretty girls in them. This is not a custom peculiar to me: all professors do it: I also count the number of young men who wear Chairman Mao coats, or horseshoe moustaches. A pretty girl is something on which I can rest my eyes with pleasure while another student is reading a carefully-researched but uninspiring paper.

This year, in my seminar on the Gothic Novel, there was an exceptionally pretty girl, whose name was Elizabeth Lavensa. I thought it a coincidence that this should also be the name of the heroine of one of the novels we were about to study--- no less a work than Mary Shelley's celebrated romance *Frankenstein*. When I mentioned it to her she brushed it aside as of no significance.

'I was born in Geneva,' said she, 'where lots of people are called Lavensa.'

Nevertheless, it lingered in my mind, and I mentioned it to one of my colleagues, who is a celebrated literary critic.

'You have coincidence on the brain,' he said. 'Ever since you wrote that book---*Fourth Dimension* or whatever it was called--- you've talked about nothing else. Forget it.'

I tried, but I couldn't forget it. It troubled me even more after I had met the new group of Junior Fellows in this college, for one of them was young Einstein, who was studying Medical Biophysics. He was a brilliant young man, who came to us with glowing recommendations; some mention was made of a great-uncle of his, an Albert Einstein, whose name meant nothing to me, though it appeared to have special significance in the scientific world. It was young Mr. Einstein's given names that roused an echo in my consciousness for he was called Victor Frank.

For those among you who have not been reading Gothic Novels lately, I may explain that in Mrs. Shelley's book *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, the hero's name is also Victor. And the girl he loved was Elizabeth Lavensa. This richness of coincidence might trouble a mind less disposed to such reflection such as mine. I held my peace for I had been cowed by what my friend the literary critic had said. But I was dogged by apprehension, for I know the disposition of the atmosphere of Massey College to constellate extraordinary elements. Thus, cowed and dogged, I kept my eye open for what might happen.

It was no more than a matter of days when Fate added another figure to this coincidental pattern, and Fate's instrument was none other than my wife. It is our custom to entertain the men of the college to dinner, in small groups and my wife invites a few girls to each of these occasions to lighten what might otherwise be a too exclusively academic atmosphere. The night that Frank Einstein appeared in our drawing room he maintained

his usual reserved---not to say morose demeanor---and Elizabeth Lavenza entered the room. Their meeting was in one sense, a melodramatic cliché. But we must remember that things become clichés because they are of frequent occurrences and powerful impact. Everything fell out as a thoroughly bad writer might describe it. Their eyes met across the room. His glance was electric; hers ecstatic. The rest of the company seemed to part before them as he moved to her side. He never left it all evening. She had eyes for no other. From time to time his eyes rose in ardor, while hers fell in modest transport. This rising and falling of eyes was so portentously and swooningly apparent that one or two of our senior guests felt positively unwell, as though aboard ship. My heart sank. My wife's on the contrary, was uplifted. As I passed her during the serving of the meal I hissed, 'this is Fate.' 'There is no armor against Fate,' she hissed in return. It is a combination of words not easily hissed, but she hissed it.

We had an unusually fine Autumn, as you will recall, and there was hardly a day that I did not see Frank and Elizabeth sitting on one of the benches in the quad, sometimes talking but usually looking deep into each other's eyes, their foreheads touching. They did it so much that they both became slightly cross-eyed, and my dismay mounted. I determined if humanly possible to avert some disastrous outcome (for I assure you that my intuition and my knowledge of the curious atmosphere of this college both oppressed me with boding) and I did all that lay in my power. I heaped work on Elizabeth Lavenza; I demanded the ultimate from her in reading of the Gothic novel, both as a means of keeping her from Frank, and straightening her vision.

Alas, how puny are our best efforts to avert a foreordained event! One day I saw Frank in the quad, sitting on the bench alone, reading a book. Pretending nonchalance, I sat beside him. 'And what are you reading, Mr. Einstein?' I said in honeyed tones.

Taciturn as always he held out the book for me to see. It was *Frankenstein*. Liz said I ought to read it,' he said. 'And what do you make of it?' said I, for I am always interested in the puny efforts of art to penetrate the thoroughly scientific mind. His answer astonished me.

'Not bad at all,' said he. 'The Medical Biophysics aspect of the plot is very old-fashioned, of course. I mean when the hero makes that synthetic human being out of scraps from slaughter-houses. We could do better than that now. A lot better,' he added, and I thought he seemed to be bracing on nameless possibilities. I decided to change the line of our conversation. I began to talk about the College, and some of the successes and failures we had met with in the past.

Among the failures I mentioned our inability to keep a College Cat. In the ten years of our existence we have had several cats here, but not one of them has remained with us. They all run away, and there is strong evidence that they all go to Trinity. I thought at one time that they must be Anglican cats, and they objects to our ecumenical chapel. I went to the length of getting a Persian cat raised in the Zoroastrian faith, but it only lasted two days. There is a fine Persian rug in Trinity Chapel. Our most recent cat had been christened Episcopuss in the hope that this thoroughly Anglican title would content it;

furthermore, the Lionel Massy Fund provided money to treat the cat to a surgical operation which is generally thought to lift a cat's mind above purely sectarian considerations. But it too left us for Trinity. Rationalists in the College suggested that Trinity has more, and richer, garbage than we have but I still believe our cats acted on religious impulse.

As I spoke of these things Frank Einstein became more animated than I had ever known him. 'I get it,' he said; 'you want a cat that has been specifically programmed for Massey. An ecumenical cat, highly intelligent so that it prefers graduates to undergraduates, and incapable of making messes in the Round Room. With a few hours of computer time it oughtn't to be too difficult.'

I looked into his eyes---though from a greater distance than was usual to Elizabeth Lavenza---and what I saw there caused a familiar shudder to convulse my entire being. It is the shudder I feel when I know, for a certainty, that Massey College is about to be the scene of yet another memorable event.

Nevertheless in the pressure of examinations and lectures I forgot my uneasiness, and might perhaps have dismissed the matter from my mind if two further interrelated circumstances---I dare not use the word coincidence in this case---had not aroused my fears again. One autumn morning, reading *The Globe and Mail*, my eye was caught by an item, almost lost at the bottom of a column, which bore the heading 'Outrage at Pound'; it appeared that two masked bandits, a man and a woman, had held up the keeper of the pound at gunpoint, while seizing no less than twelve stray cats. Later that same day I saw Frank and Elizabeth coming through the college gate carrying a large heavy sack. From the sack dripped a substance which I recognized, with horror, as blood. I picked up a little of it on the tip of my finger; a hasty corpuscle confirmed my suspicion that the blood was not human.

Night after night in the weeks that followed, I crept down to my study to look across the quad to see if a light was burning in Frank Einstein's room. Invariably it was so. And one morning, when I had wakened early and was standing on my balcony, apostrophizing the dawn, Elizabeth Lavenza stole past me from the College's main gate, her face marked, not by those liniments of slaked desire so common among our visitors at such an hour, but by the pallor and fatigue of one well-nigh exhausted by intellectual work of the most demanding sort.

The following night I awoke from sleep at around two o'clock with a terrifying apprehension that something was happening in the College which I should investigate. Shouts, the sound of loud music, the riot of late revelers---these things do not particularly disturb me, but there is a quality of deep silence which I know to be the accompaniment of evil. Warily and reluctantly I rose, wrapped myself in a heavy dressing gown and made my way into the quadrangle and there---yes it was as I had feared---the eerie gleam from Frank Einstein's room was the only light to guide me. For there was a thick fog hanging over the University, and even the cruel light through the narrow slits of the Roberts Library, and the fiery radiance from OISE were hidden.

Up to his room I climbed, and tapped on the door. It had not been locked, and my light knock caused it to swing open and there---never can I forget my shock and revulsion at what I saw!---there were Frank and Elizabeth crouched over a table upon which lay an ensanguined form. I burst upon them.

‘What bloody feast is this?’ I shouted. ‘Monsters, fiends, animals, what do I behold?’

‘Shhh,’ said Elizabeth; ‘Frank’s busy’

‘I’m making your cat.’ Said Frank.

‘Cat,’ I shrieked, almost beside myself, ‘that is no cat. It’s as big as a donkey.

What are you talking about?’

‘The Massey College cat,’ said Frank. ‘And it is going to be the greatest cat you have ever seen.’

I shall not trouble you with a detailed report of the conversation that followed. What emerged was this: Frank, beneath the uncommunicative exterior of a scientist, had a kindly heart, and he had been touched by the unlucky history of Massey College and its cats. ‘What you said was’ said he to me, ‘That the College never seems to get the right cat. To you, with your simple emotional, literary approach to the problem, this was an insuperable difficulty: to my finely-organized biophysical sensibility, it was simply a matter of discovering what kind of cat was wanted, and producing it. Not by the outmoded method of selective breeding, but by the direct creation of the Ideal College Cat, or ICC as I came to think of it. Do you remember that when you talked to me about it I was reading that crazy book Liz was studying with you, about the fellow who made a man? Do you remember what he said? “Whence did the principle of life proceed? It was a bold question, and one which has ever been considered as a mystery; yet with how many things are we upon the brink of becoming acquainted, if cowardice or carelessness did not restrain our enquiries”. That was written in 1818. Since then the principle of life has become quite well known, but most scientists are afraid to work on the knowledge they have. You remember that the fellow in the book decided to make a man, but he found the work too fiddly if he made a man of ordinary size, so he decided to make a giant. Me too. A cat of ordinary size is a nuisance, so I decided to multiply the dimensions by twelve. And like the fellow in the book I got my materials and went to work. Here is your cat, about three-quarters finished.’

The fatal weakness, the tragic flaw in my character is foolish good-nature, and that, combined with an uninformed but lively scientific curiosity led me into what was, I now perceive, a terrible mistake. I was so interested in what Frank was doing that I allowed him to go ahead, and instead of sleeping at nights I crept up to his room, where Frank and Elizabeth allowed me after I had given my promise not to interfere or touch anything, to sit in a corner and watch them. Those weeks were perhaps the most intensely lived that I have ever known. Beneath my eyes the ICC grew and took form. By day the carcass was kept in the freezer at Rochdale, where Elizabeth had a room; each night Frank warmed it up and set to work.

The ICC had many novel features which distinguished it from the ordinary domestic cat. Not only was it as big as twelve ordinary cats; it had twelve times the musculature. Frank said proudly that when it was finished it would be able to jump right over the College

buildings. Another of its beauties was that it possessed a novel means of elimination. The trouble with all cats is that they seem to be housebroken, but in moments of stress or laziness they relapse into an intolerable bohemianism which creates problems for the cleaning staff. In a twelve-power cat this could be a serious defect. But Frank's cat was made with a small shovel on the end of its tail with which it could, once a week, remove its own ashes and deposit them behind the College in the parking-space occupied by *The Varsity* where, it was assumed, they would never be noticed. I must hasten to add that the cat was made to sustain itself on a diet of waste-paper, of which we have plenty, and that what it produced in the manner I have described was not unlike confetti.

But the special beauty of the ICC was that it could talk. This, in the minds of Frank and Elizabeth, was its great feature as a College pet. Instead of mewling monotonously when stroked, it would be able to enter into conversation with the College men, and as we pride ourselves on being a community of scholars, it was to be provided with a class of conversation, and a vocabulary, infinitely superior to that of, for instance, a parrot.

This was Elizabeth's special care, and because she was by this time deep in my course on the Gothic Novel she decided, as a compliment to me, to so program the cat that it would speak in the language appropriate to that *genre* of literature. I was not so confident about this refinement as were Frank and Elizabeth, for I knew more about Gothic Novels than they, and have sometimes admitted to myself that they can be wordy. But as I have told you, I was a party to this great adventure only in the character of a spectator, and I was not to interfere. So I held my peace, hoping that the cat would, in the fullness of time, do the same.

At last the great night came, when the cat was to be invested with life. I sat in my corner, my eyes fixed upon the form which Frank was gradually melting out with Elizabeth's electric hair-dryer. It was a sight to strike awe into the boldest heart.

I never dared to make my doubts about the great experiment known to Frank and Elizabeth, but I may tell you that my misgivings were many and acute. I am a creature of my time in that I fully understand that persons of merely aesthetic bias and training, like myself, should be silent in the presence of men of science, who know best about everything. But it was plain to me that the ICC was hideous. Not only was it the size of twelve cats, but the skins of twelve cats had been made to serve as its outer envelope. Four of these cats had been black, four were white, and four were of a marmalade colour. Frank, who liked things to be orderly, had arranged them so that the cat was piebald in mathematically exact squares. Because no ordinary cat's eyes would fit into the huge skull the eyes of a goat had been obtained! ---I dared not ask how---and as everyone knows a goat's eyes are flat and have an uncanny oblong pupil. The teeth had been secured at a bargain rate from a dentist, and as I looked at them I knew why dentists say that these people must be kept in check. The tail, with the shovel at the end of it, was disagreeably naked. Its whiskers were like knitting needles. Indeed, the whole appearance of the cat was monstrous and diabolical. In the most exact sense of the words, it was the damnedest thing you ever saw. But Frank had a mind above appearances and to Elizabeth, so beautiful herself whatever Frank did was right.

The moment had arrived when this marvel of science was to be set going. I know that Frank was entirely scientific, but to my old-fashioned eye he looked like an alchemist as, with his dressing-gown floating around him, he began to read formulae out of a notebook, and Elizabeth worked switches and levers at his command. Suddenly there was a flash, of lightning it seemed to me, and I knew that we had launched the ICC upon its great adventure.

'Come here and look' said Frank. I crept forward, half-afraid yet half-elated that I should be witness to such a triumph of medical biophysics. I leaned over the frightful creature, restraining my revulsion. Slowly, dreamily, the goat's eyes opened and focussed upon me.

'My **Creator!**' screamed the cat in a very loud voice, that agreed perfectly with the hideousness of its outward person. '**A** thousands thousand blessings be upon Thee. Hallowed be Thy name! Thy kingdom come! O rapture, rapture thus to behold the golden dawn!' With which words the cat leapt upon an electric lamp and ate the bulb.

To say that I recoiled is to trifle with words. I leapt backward into a chair and cringed against the wall. The cat pursued me, shrieking Gothic praise and endearment. It put out its monstrous tongue and licked my hand. Imagined if you can, the tongue of a cat which is twelve cats rolled into one. It was weeks before the skin-graft made necessary by this single caress was completed. But I am ahead of my story.

'**No,**' I cried; 'my dear animal listen to reason. I am not your Creator. Not in the least. You owe this precious gift of life to my young friend here.'

I waved my bleeding hand toward Frank. In their rapture he and Elizabeth were locked in a close embrace. That did it. Horrid, fiendish jealousy swept through the cat's whole being. All its twelve coats stood on end, the goat's eyes glared with fury, and its shovel tail lashed like that of a tiger. It sprang at Elizabeth, and with a single stroke of its powerful forepaws flung her to the ground.

I am proud to think that in that terrible moment I remembered what to do. I have always loved circuses, and I know that no trainer of tigers ever approaches his beasts without a chair in his hand. I seized up a chair and, in the approved manner drove the monstrous creature into a corner. But what I said was not in tune with my action, or the high drama of the moment. I admit it frankly; my words were inadequate.

'You mustn't harm Miss Lavenza,' I said, primly; 'she is Mr. Einstein's fiancée.' But Frank's words---or rather his single word---were even more inadequate than my own. 'Scat!' he shouted, kneeling by the bleeding form of his fainting beloved. Elizabeth was to blame for programming that cat with a vocabulary culled from the Gothic Novel. 'Oh, Frankenstein,' it yowled, in that tremendous voice; 'be not equitable to every other and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice and even thy clemency and affection is most due. Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; dub me not rather the

fallen angel, whom thou drivest hence only because I love--nay reverence thee. Jealousy of thy love makes me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall once more be virtuous.'

There is something about that kind of talk that influences everybody that hears it. I was astonished to hear Frank---who was generally contented with the utilitarian vocabulary of the scientific man say---'Begone! I will not hear you. There can be no community between thee and me; we are enemies. Cursed be the day, abhorred devil, in which you first saw the light! You have left me no power to consider whether I am just to you or not. Begone! Relieve me of the sight of your detested form!'

Elizabeth was not the most gifted of my students, and the cat's next words lacked something of the true Gothic rhetoric. 'You mean you don't love your own dear little Pussikins best,' it whined. But Frank was true to the Gothic vein. 'This lady is the mistress of my affections, and I acknowledge no Pussikins before her,' he cried. The cat was suddenly a picture of desolation, of rejection, of love denied. Its vocabulary moved back into high gear. 'Thus I relieve thee, my creator. Thus I take from thee a sight which you abhor. Farewell!' And with one gigantic bound it leapt through the window into the quadrangle, and I heard the thunderous sound as the College gate was torn from its hinges.

I know where it went, and I felt deeply sorry for Trinity.