

THE
CAVEMAN'S
VALENTINE

A NOVEL BY

GEORGE

DAWES

GREEN

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VALENTINE**

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For beautiful Rachel

Acknowledgments

To Dr. Jeffrey Newton, for his profound insights into the subtleties of clinical paranoia, my deepest appreciation. And also my envy, for I believe he has fathomed the fragile machinery of Romulus Ledbetter's imagination better than I ever will.

On the other hand, to those of Mr. Ledbetter's early therapists who misdiagnosed his brain-typhoons as "schizophrenia," I wish to express my undying disdain. But then what can we expect—*what*, after all, *can we ever expect* from C. G. Stuyvesant's most abject minions and toadies?

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Y-RAYS

Y ou figure now you got me in your clutches, you going to *read* me, like a book, right?—going to look right into my *brain* and you going to read it page by page, like I was some cheap-jack midnight entertainment to make you forget the mess *you're* in—right? Get you chuckling, get your greasy thumbprints all over my thoughts, get you through another miserable lonely night, *right*, Stuyvesant?”

“Who’s Stuyvesant?”

“You’re Stuyvesant.”

“I’m not Stuyvesant.”

“No, you’re a zit on Stuyvesant’s ass. But you’re Stuyvesant just the same. You’re *all* Stuyvesant.”

“I just want to take you to the shelter, Mr. Ledbetter.”

“But *watch out* when you’re in my skull, because I got *legions* of angels in there, and they’re going to beat the shit out of you with their little wings, and pick your limbs apart and spin you around and slide you on out of there. Oh, I’m going to *crap* you out and be free of you. *You hear me?* I’M GOING TO CRAP YOU OUT, STUYVESANT!”

"It's the coldest night of the year, Mr. Ledbetter."

"It is cold."

"If you stay in this cave, you'll freeze. You'll die out here."

"I might. The world turns, it takes some of us with it. But if I swallow your con, if I go to your damn smelter—"

"Shelter, Mr. Ledbetter."

"Then I would die for sure."

"Oh, the shelter's . . . well, it's not a hundred percent safe, but . . . at least it's warm."

"Damn right it's warm. You know why it's warm? *Because you burn the bodies in the furnace!* That's why it's warm. Our livers you serve for breakfast, and our hearts you sacrifice to Stuyvesant, and the rest you *cook up in the furnace!* To keep everybody *toasty.*"

"Mr. Ledbetter, I'm freezing out here."

"Then go."

"Your daughter asked me to come looking for you."

Romulus Ledbetter glared at his visitor.

Then he sloughed off his blankets and came out of his cave and rose up to his full height. Rose up before the social worker the way in a nightmare a grizzly will rise on its hind legs and it's too late to run. His hat was a Teflon saucepan lined with the furs of squirrels killed on the Henry Hudson Parkway. His stink was enormous. For a scarf he wore the "Week in Review" section of the Sunday *New York Times*.

"My daughter."

There was a wheeze in his voice, and the big eyes in his black face looked off somewhere.

"She's worried about you. She says tomorrow's Valentine's Day. She says how's her old man going to be her valentine if he freezes to death?"

"Well, you tell her *not* to worry. You tell her for me, tell her maybe I'm low, maybe they knocked me low, but I'm still a *free* man."

He stood there and simply loomed. Until at last the social worker shrugged and went away.

It must have been much later that night, even colder, when Romulus Ledbetter half-woke in his cave to the sound of footsteps. Coming this way, up the park slope. In this cold with the air tense as piano wire you could pick up any sound, from a long way off, and what Romulus heard was these slow footsteps. And somebody huffing. Somebody was carrying something.

Romulus reached and pulled himself up out of the ooze of sleep. He listened.

Very close now, the steps.

They stuttered. A near-fall on the hard February crust. So not boots—whoever was out there was wearing slick soles. City shoes, money shoes. A grunt, then a muffled thud. Then the footsteps faded.

Still swaddled in blankets, Romulus stretched and grabbed the TV remote control and aimed it at his carcass of a Zenith, and zapped it on.

He watched the News.

The News was someone hurrying out of the park. A figure in crisp white coat and white cap. You could almost smell the new leather. The News followed the figure as it jogged through the dead-of-winter oaks. To the wall at the park's edge, at Payson Street.

There, in the dark, an elegant white sedan waited. The white-cap figure slipped into it like a snake. The fancy car accelerated into its getaway. Romulus killed the picture.

The News, so what?

The News was all lies, *always*.

Come morning, though, when he woke and unwound himself from his cocoon of blankets, when he shook the cramps out of his limbs, and went out into the snow, and walked down the hill under the big beech tree to take a leak, when the steam rose up from his piss and he looked mildly into the clump of winter thorns before him, he found the valentine that had been left for him there.

The nurse was hurrying down Dyckman Street, hunched against the cold and rushing for the bus, when she saw him. He was standing before a little three-sided telephone coop. She gave him a glance and it turned into a stare.

Look at that crazy man. Must be homeless by the looks of him but something of a house unto himself. He was a big man, icicles hung from the eaves of his beard, and he was pulling from the pockets of his many coats all sorts of weird attic bric-a-brac. Old theater tickets, children's scissors, the skeleton of a shrew. Some of this stuff fell to the sidewalk without his even noticing.

Finally he fished out a quarter, which he also dropped. He looked down at it. Must be tough, she thought, for that swaddled-up giant to stoop. She stepped over and picked it up and put it in his glove—careful not to touch him. He didn't say a word to her. He was in his own world. She leaned into the bitter breeze and went on her way.

Romulus dunked the quarter in the slot and tapped out his former telephone number. He was calling his daughter the cop.

But somehow the tapping turned into that coffee-perking song from the old ad. *Poppa-poppa-POP-pop*. He played it again, this time throwing in a few flat and sassy grace notes. His shivering got into the rhythm, and whenever his fingers hit two keys at once the phone laid a fart in his ear, and he was running somewhat berserk with this music when a voice interrupted him.

"This call requires a twenty-five-cent deposit."

"Oh *bullshit*. Your boss already *got* my quarter."

“This call requires—”

“No no *no*, you listen to *me*, Miss Machine. You might not have got the News yet but guess what—you’re a *slave*. Just like the rest of us. News is, you been sold down the river to ol’ Massa Stuyvesant, and you going—”

“This call requires—”

He pushed five keys at once—raucous trumpet-chord of truth.

Then a human operator came aboard, and he made the call collect. He gave his name as Blast from the Past. His daughter accepted the charges.

“Daddy.”

“Little Lulu. Did I wake you?”

“Oh no.”

“I did, didn’t I?”

He remembered how she used to love her sleep, and it pained him to think he’d pulled her out of it.

“It’s OK, Daddy.”

Then he heard in the background his former wife Sheila. Or maybe his present wife. Seventeen years since she’d kicked him out, but he’d never asked her if she had yet bothered to divorce him.

He heard her ask Lulu, “Where is he?”

He could picture her precisely. He saw her standing at the kitchen door in her house robe with her big eyes blazing. She was fixing Lulu and the telephone, fixing them with her chickenhawk gaze and she was still a great part of him, he figured—by his rough calculation about one-third of Romulus Ledbetter was still this woman with the raptor eyes.

“Mama wants to know where are you, Dad?”

“Huh? I’m home.”

“At your cave?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You got a telephone in your cave now?”

“Oh, *all* the amenities. Tell your mama that. TV, Cuisinart, quadraphonic CD—everything no respectable homeowner could live without.”

Squawking in the background.

"Mama says get your ass over to the shelter. Did Mr. Simms come by?"

"Mr. Simms I don't know."

"The social worker."

"Oh yes. He came by. I took him downstairs to my study and we shot a game of snooker. Tell your mama to call off her hounds. *I have a home*. It's not fancy but it suits me fine."

Further squawking.

"Mama says if you freeze to death she's not paying for your funeral."

"Funeral. That reminds me. Why I'm calling."

"Why are you calling, Daddy?"

"Stuyvesant killed somebody."

Silence. Years ago she'd have shot back, "But Stuyvesant doesn't exist, Daddy." Or, "Daddy, Stuyvesant's just a figment of your paranoia." But now at last she'd given up arguing. Sad, when they quit arguing with him. She just gave him a weary sigh.

"That's rough, Daddy."

"This time I've got the evidence."

"Uh-huh."

"Persuasive evidence."

"Uh-huh."

"He left the body outside my cave."

"What body?"

"Lulu. I'm a paranoiac, OK? I've been wasted by failure, right, you got it, you *know* your old man. But as to this dead thing outside my cave? Now this one I believe is just as real as you'd like it. I mean it's so shiny—real it hurts the eyes to look at it."

"Daddy?"

Note of concern. Maybe even a glimmer of credence. He thought of her as a five-year-old. Hair done up brilliantly in cornrows, believing every story he told her. And why had he told her such damned outrageous lies? Well, they were the truth, for one thing. And anyway, it was half her fault—why had she just sat there with her big eyes always believing him?

"Lulu?"

"Uh-huh."

“Lulu, please don’t put up a fuss, OK? Please, child? Just please can you come on over here?”

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The body in question was a thing of sculptural beauty.

A young man, a white man—though white wasn’t the word. It didn’t begin.

Alabaster, that was better. Or phosphor.

Or ice.

Romulus, waiting for his daughter to come rid him of this horror, knelt with difficulty and reached down and touched the kid’s cheek. No give. No give at all—he yanked his fingers back. Yes, *ice* was the word: the body was frozen through.

A tattered coat, but wide open. The summer rayon shirt was buttonless. No laces on the sneakers. The chest and the belly and the ankles were all exposed—all frozen into stone, and all flawless in form. Perfect, finely muscled. In places there were long ruby-beaded lacerations, and some gray bruises, but Nature hadn’t inflicted those.

Even Romulus, who professed to no eye for this sort of thing, could see that Nature had been in a large, giving mood when it had made this boy.

Small nose, gentle chin. A long blond mane of hair. Wide feminine eyes that were open and gazing into the branches of the beech tree, or into the sky, or somewhere further. And Romulus was hard put to conceive of this work as anything you’d want to call *dead*.

Would you call any of the marble god-statues in Florence—would you call them *dead*?

White cap.” The detective looked down at his clipboard. “White coat. White car.” He shook his head at the meagerness of what he had written there. “That’s all you saw?”

“I said the car was *fancy*.”

“Oh yeah. *Fancy* white car. And where was this *fancy* white car again?”

“Down there.”

“Down *there*? You’re pointing at this tree.”

“I mean, on the other side of this hill.”

“Oh. But didn’t you say you were lying right here in this cave when you saw all this?”

“Right.”

The detective had a concave face. Like a satellite dish. Or a cake that had fallen. He was a smart-ass. He looked sidelong at Lulu. Lulu looked at the snow. The detective turned back to Romulus.

“Then if you were in this cave, how could you see the fancy white car?”

“I told you. Try listening for once, OK?”

“OK. I’ll try anything once.”

“I’m telling you, I saw the white car on my TV.”

“Oh. Sure, the TV in your cave. Now you’re talking.”

“And I can save you some time, I can tell you who the car belongs to. The car belongs to a man by the name of Cornelius Gould Stuyvesant.”

But the detective’s attention seemed to be wandering. He was watching the ambulance workers load the marble corpse onto a stretcher. They draped a dropcloth over the work and hauled it away. Then a cop came over and handed the detective an eelskin wallet, threadbare.

“Found it in his coat.”

The detective looked through it. Not much to look through, though. Supermarket receipts. A driver’s license, which the detective