



# Valentine's Fall

A NOVEL BY CARY FAGAN

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Valentine's  
Fall

A NOVEL BY CARY FAGAN



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*To my father, Maurice Fagan,  
for his example*

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

## Ridiculous

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE was a young man — a boy, really — who was handsome, rich, easy to like, and stupid. A boy who was crazy in love with his high-school sweetheart. The sweetheart was a raven-haired beauty, not quite so rich, but a good deal smarter, if less easy to like.

One day, as so often happens, the sweetheart dumped the young man for another. The young man was stricken. To win her back, and with the unwitting help of a friend, he stole something old and valuable. But in trying so desperately, the young man died. The girlfriend grieved, the friend grieved, and the memory of the young man turned to legend.

I can see this isn't going to work. It isn't a fairy tale. It is pathetic and even laughable — a bathetic tragedy, if I remember the word properly from high-school English. From the sublime to the ridiculous. That's what I would say of somebody who stole a suit of armour from a museum, fell off the school roof, and died.

But that was only the end of the story for him.

## Get Up, John

THERE IS A LIVE RECORDING of Bill Monroe playing his instrumental tune “Get Up, John” at the Fincastle Bluegrass Festival, near Roanoke, Virginia, in 1965, the first bluegrass festival ever held. Naturally, it does not have the benefit of perfect recording conditions or overdubs or other improvements that can be made in the mix. It isn’t his most famous composition — that would be “Blue Moon of Kentucky.” It isn’t even his most famous instrumental, which might be “Bluegrass Breakdown” or “Rawhide” or “Jerusalem Ridge.” Monroe’s mandolin is backed only by Peter Rowan on guitar. His playing is very fast but not blistering, a cascade of vibrating rhythm, of changing doublestops and open drone strings, of the sound both delicate and rough that he could draw from his 1924 Gibson Lloyd Loar mandolin. He plays a series of variations, making the rhythm surge here, hang back there, suddenly thrashing his pick in successive downstrokes, touching the high harmonic note like a bell. It’s just the most alive, most human sound I have ever heard. You can feel the energy pouring from his hands into that small instrument. It’s as if he could go on for ever or might begin to falter, but he does neither, he makes the music rise like

a wave, hold there, and then, in a touching anticlimax, quit. It would be like Glenn Gould's *Goldberg Variations* or Pablo Casals's *Cello Suites* if they had written what they were playing.

The thing about music is that you can trust it. It's emotionally reliable. Playing or listening, it gives you what you need, when you need it. A lot of the time, that has seemed like enough to me. But it isn't enough. That's what I have sometimes failed to remember.

## *I Do Not Have a Dog*

I HAD AN AISLE SEAT because I don't like to feel trapped. And although, unlike so many musicians, I don't drink to excess, and only smoke a little weed to calm down after the occasional gig, I ordered a Scotch from the airline stewardess. The screen above the seats was showing a documentary on the beer industry in Czech with English subtitles, and while I was half-watching, not even using the earphones, I started to have trouble breathing. My heart was beating too rapidly and my chest hurt. I didn't know what was wrong. I was forty-two years old, too young to have a heart attack. I clutched the armrests hard.

And then I felt a small, warm hand on my own. "You will be all right," said a sweet voice next to me in accented English. I looked at the girl; she must have been ten or twelve. Reddish hair in braids and a big handful of freckles tossed across her nose. She held in her lap a magazine with pictures of American pop singers on the cover. They were vaguely familiar looking, but I couldn't have said their names.

"Last year was my first time flying," she said. "It gets more easy. You are just having a, what is it called? A fright moment."

Jesus, she was right. I was having a panic attack. Just the knowledge of what it was made my heart subside a little. I wanted to say something reassuring to her. After all, I was supposed to be the adult.

“Do you like music?”

“I like rap. In my school we all do. You are going to London too?”

“No, I have to change planes. I’m going back home to Canada. Thank you for talking to me. It’s very good of you. The funny thing is, I’m not afraid of flying.”

“Then maybe you are afraid of going home.”

The stewardess arrived with the girl’s Coke and my Scotch. I paid with Czech korunas. Now that I knew the girl, I was sorry for what I had ordered and just let it sit on my tray, the ice melting.

“Are you?” she persisted.

“Am I what?”

“Afraid of going home?”

“I don’t know. It isn’t really my home anymore, I’ve been away so long. Is somebody meeting you in London?”

“My grandparents. They have promised to do anything I want. Who is picking you up?”

“Nobody. I’m going to see my mother, but I’m kind of surprising her.”

“But then she can’t have a present for you.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

Whether it was a good idea to surprise my mother I was no longer so sure. The girl turned the page of her magazine. “I do not have a dog,” she said.

“Pardon me?”

VALENTINE'S FALL

"My father is allergic. Do you have a dog?"

"No. I know an old tune called 'Pretty Little Dog.' But it doesn't have any words."

"I would love a dog so much. I think all the time of it."

She said this so sadly yet resignedly that if I could have, I would have bought her a cocker spaniel or a retriever or whatever she wanted. I wished suddenly that I could give every kid a dog, that I could give one to Maggie and Birdy.

## The Dive

THE FIRST TIME I EVER spoke to Valentine Schwartz, he was preparing to do something so remarkably lacking in sense that I thought he must be joking. The school swimming pool was being drained, which meant that we could not have our first instruction class of the year. This was no loss in my opinion, but Mr. Tanhauser, our gym teacher, had made us change into our bathing suits anyway and gather on the deck for a lesson in personal hygiene, a subject that was still taught as if it were the 1950s.

A short man with a powerful upper body, Mr. Tanhauser wore a little gigolo moustache and was rumoured to own a Nazi SS uniform of his uncle's that he liked to parade around in for his girlfriend while she lay naked on his bed. As far as I could tell, being new to the school, the only reason for the rumour was Mr. Tanhauser's German surname and the way he barked orders like a drill sergeant. Teacher's nicknames, rumours of weird sexual preferences, who the prominent students were — these basic workings of Arthur Meighen Collegiate I was just starting to figure out. Where Valentine Schwartz fit was not so easy to say. On this first Wednesday in September, he was

among the twenty or more boys standing on the cement deck shivering with their arms around their chests. The pool was in a concrete-block bunker with a few narrow windows that faced the rutted playing field. The chlorine fumes — someone had dumped in a bucket of chemicals — made our eyes sting and irritated our lungs.

Not a single other student knew my name yet, but I already knew who Valentine Schwartz was. He was the kind of person you know about without anyone needing to tell you. In Valentine's case, it wasn't because he was the quarterback (which turned out not to matter at Arthur Meighen), or always got the lead in the school play, or was some *Reach for the Top* genius. Valentine Schwartz was none of these things, but other than being the son of a rich father among other rich kids, I didn't understand yet what had made him known, I didn't get it.

While we stood with our teeth chattering, Mr. Tanhauser was in the pool office chatting up the girl's gym teacher, Miss Mickelberry. To me this was preferable to listening to a lecture on social diseases, but Valentine Schwartz apparently required some diversion because he stepped onto the diving board.

"This is too goddamn boring," Valentine said. "I think I'll go for a little dip."

Five or six others standing near him laughed. They were the athletic guys who, inconceivable though it seemed, actually looked forward to gym. But Valentine didn't laugh. He stepped to the end of the board and looked down into the water, which had sunk three or four feet below its proper level, exposing the tiles along the sides like rows of stained teeth. "No, really," he said. "I am absolutely sincere about this. I don't need it any deeper to dive. I've practised in the shallow end at home. I

could be in the goddamn Guinness book for shallow diving. I'll bet anyone five bucks that I can do a perfect dive and not even touch bottom."

"You're on, Val," said a boy on the other side of the pool. He was curly-headed and pale and his white belly hung over his bathing suit. "Five bucks. But I get to call whether you touched bottom or not."

"No way. We need an impartial witness. This guy here."

And without even looking, he pointed at me. No words came out of my mouth. I had thought it best not to be noticed in the first week of school, to keep my mouth shut. But now every boy around the pool registered my existence. I looked at the water, which appeared to have sunk another inch. No matter whose side I came down on, I was bound to make somebody dislike me. It was only the third day of school.

"Somebody keep an eye out for Adolf," Valentine said, setting his toes against the end of the board.

"What happens when he asks you why you're all wet?" another boy asked. I knew him only as the driver of a beat-up Chevrolet with a faulty exhaust. I myself didn't have a driver's licence yet. I'd seen Valentine in a glossy new Toyota Celica, a present when he'd got his licence.

"Shit. I didn't think of that."

"You can say you lost your balance and fell in." This from a skinny kid near the wall. Felix something.

Valentine nodded. He stretched out his arms. He was a couple of inches less than six feet, with naturally bronzed skin and a beautifully proportioned body, like some statue by Praxiteles. Come to think of it, he had a rather Greek head too; close, curly hair, full lips, a prominent — well, too prominent — nose.

## VALENTINE'S FALL

I'd heard a couple of jokes already about Valentine's nose and had wondered whether it was for his nose alone that he was famous. Personally, I thought it gave him some distinction.

Now, I was no expert in the velocity of falling bodies or water resistance or whatever, but I had more than my share of common sense and that water did not look deep enough to dive into. Valentine was slowly raising his hands until they touched over his head in prayer fashion. One of the kids, the same one who asked how Valentine would explain being wet, began chanting Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead. "*Yisgodal va yisgodesh, shmai rabo.*" The kid's voice petered out and we all watched Valentine with intense concentration as his muscles became taut and he bent his knees as if to spring.

That was when I broke my rule about not speaking. I said, in the mildest voice possible, "Perhaps you shouldn't do it."

Valentine looked up. For the first time his eyes caught mine and he smiled. It was a thoroughly winning smile and he won me over with it. Then he lowered his head again and his feet lifted off the edge.