

JOHN CAEDAN

Thank you for downloading this selection of excerpts from my books of fiction. It is just a tempting taste.

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It is my intention to present realistic, affirmative portrayals of achievers – on all levels – as they engage in enterprise, art, love, and sex. The delight of writing their adventures radiates in my center. I promise you'll detect the glow when reading.



Sonoran Desert, California August 2016

Emails are welcome, at <mailto:john@johncaedan.com>

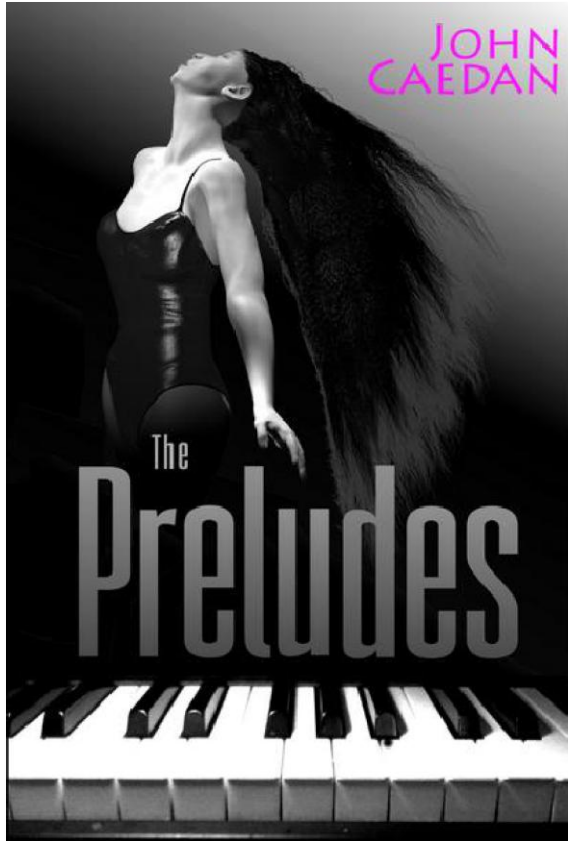
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Twelve turning-point days in New York with Georg Wojciechowski, an American composer. He is a striver who is stuck ... and now begins braking out. I can imagine his summary of events:

“Finally, I am becoming fierce again. But the trouble is still around somewhere. I don’t care, I’ll annihilate it with fire. Uh-oh, here comes something sure to vex me ... la femme.”

This is my summary: Can an American composer with an extreme drive for his art make room for a big love? In “The Preludes,” he goes for both, risking for the win. The woman in question – strong, smart, as driven as he – incites him instantly and joins the fight.

This novel might seem short in length, but readers say its reach is long. One put it this way: the unfolding is “fast ... and deliciously slow.”

I hope you enjoy the ride of these achievers.

John Caedan

P.S. Original music included!

The Preludes: Excerpt 1 of 3 “prologue”

Only at the zenith of the sun’s transit north did it reach position, once a year for several days only, to throw long first rays against the north face of the building this way. It was dawn in midsummer. Already the façade glowed golden, and now another tower’s shadow slipped down to let the sun burst through the north-facing sheet of glass on the top floor.

This rare solstice fire lit the south wall of a bright room. A large canvas hung there. The painting seized its share of sunlight and devoured it. Into ferocious reds went the heat, into long slashes of crimson went the scintillating brilliance, into the incessant layering of hue roiling through magenta and orange to the edge of yellow so pale it burned white hot went the power of the sun falling to earth.

A man slept beneath the painting sprawled on a jet-black sofa, head wedged between pillows, the straight brown hair-strands against vermillion covers the only shade of moderation in the room. In a streak, in one second, he rose upright on the floor, sheet streaming away from his naked body, his form still again, motion lost in the room. One arm hung straight down. It was extraordinary. Beneath the skin the muscles stretched taut, twining down the length, below the elbow forming a solid mass, tapering, the forearm nearly the thickness and heft of the barrel of a baseball bat. At the wrist began the expanse of a remarkable hand, nine inches high, arched and shaped now in an ex-expression of power.

Set in a defiant face, wide-open eyes burned with intent. There was not the slightest sign sleep had tamed him.

He raised his face to the painting. Its force washed over him. A flicker of recognition flashed in his eyes. Against this the lids narrowed, the skin over the forehead drew taut and he jerked around to find the object of fixation in this room, dominating it, an immense and imposing grand piano, ebony,

gleaming inside with polished brass. In five swift strides he reached the keyboard. At once music burst into the room, first a lonely repeated note poised on a knife edge, then a ragged figure that soon erupted like explosions through driving rain. Repeatedly he pulled from the deepest bass through four octaves to the top, crashing back to the bottom, ripping through the broken arpeggios of a half-saddened key. A melody arose slowly in the middle register, a bittersweet utterance above ferocity.

It was his Prelude No. 1 in E Minor, written in the night. It fell to the bottom of the keyboard, slamming to the end with a final low note, like the annihilation of fear.

The Preludes: Excerpt 2 of 3 “across central park”

Georg and Lin came sailing out of their lobby into a spectacular September 1st day dressed in jeans, cotton tops, sweaters, and athletic shoes, jumbling around, deciding which way to walk, in a happy mood.

“The park!” Lin insisted.

“Well, I have to get up to the Bronx.”

“The park!”

“Ay-yi-yi-yi-yi, well here, let’s take the path diagonally across, we can get a cab on Fifth Avenue.”

They jaywalked across Central Park South and entered Central Park, taking the path east and north, passing both the amusement rides and small zoo, in conversation all the while, soaking up air and sunshine. The leaves had not yet turned color – that transformation was a few weeks away.

“What was that you were playing this morning?”

“Carl Czerny.”

“Is that somebody Polish?”

“He was Czech, but born and lived in Vienna. All over the world, pianists know the name of Carl Czerny, but not one normal music lover does. He is only famous for fiendishly difficult but tremendously helpful exercises. I was playing from his School of Velocity.”

“A most appropriate title!” said Lin. “I was brushing my teeth at a furious pace.”

“I play him every day. Truth be told, I am not a genius pianist and performer, but rather a composer. Sometimes I can’t even play the pieces I compose.”

Lin whispered to him: “Did you capture that piece you played for me last night?”

“Yes.”

“Georg,” she said, back in normal voice, “these pieces I am hearing, where are you going with them?”

“Well, I’ve put together the elements of an event, namely the world premiere of these preludes. No one has heard any of them except my inner circle. To present a sheaf of preludes to the world is bold.”

“How so?”

“The great Romantic composers did it, especially Chopin and Rachmaninov. Later, Claude Debussy. They make a statement, taken as a whole, about the foundation of the composer’s commitment to ... I want to say to an aesthetic ... but it is more emotional than that, to a style and tone and meaning. An attitude. To what makes a piece unmistakably a work of Georg Wojciechowski. You are taking a stand on the root soul of your music and saying to the world, ‘this is what I believe in’.”

“I see. But ‘prelude,’ does that not mean ‘something that comes before?’”

“Yes. I am stating that in which I believe, musically, in this opus of small pieces, now get ready for something really big coming next in the same way.”

“What is your big thing coming next?”

“You always go for the roundhouse right hook, don’t you Lin Xin Qian?”

“That is a boxing idiom, I believe. Yes, why not go for the knockout? What do your preludes prepare us for?”

Georg stopped them on the path so they could turn face to face. The faintest sign of their breath condensing in the cool air confirmed summer approaching an end. Georg pushed out his answer without blinking.

“Grand opera.”

They resumed their walk in the distinct, fast-paced New York tradition, deterring all interruption from outside.

Georg marched along, silent and grim. Lin glanced over at him as if to inquire if more explanations were forthcoming. She did not to say a word.

Suddenly she took on a mischievous mood.

“Do you ever play the piano naked?”

“Off-balance! Nice one, Miss Xin.”

“Do you?” she insisted, smiling broadly.

“You know I do.”

“Yes.”

The Preludes: Excerpt 3 of 3 “mango”

From the terrace atop Georg’s building, the apartment showed few lights. A solitary figure cut a line through the long narrow pool – Lin swimming laps. Just enough illumination around the pool let her be observed, up and back. She wore the black one-piece swimsuit. Her strokes flailed in agitation, the water roiling as she thrust it out of the way.

Suddenly, she stopped in mid-stroke and mid-lap to stand upright, motionless. The water churning around her hips subsided. She reached for the lip of the pool, lifted herself out and without drying ran straight into the warm interior, making for the bar area. Water streamed off her body onto its tiled floor. She did not seem to care.

Lin opened the door of the refrigerator to retrieve a ripe mango. Finding a cutting board and knife, she attacked the fruit, peeling it longitudinally with the knife. Although the salon around her lay in darkness, one fixture made a pool of light precisely where she was working. Drops on her wet skin and the juicy mango glistened.

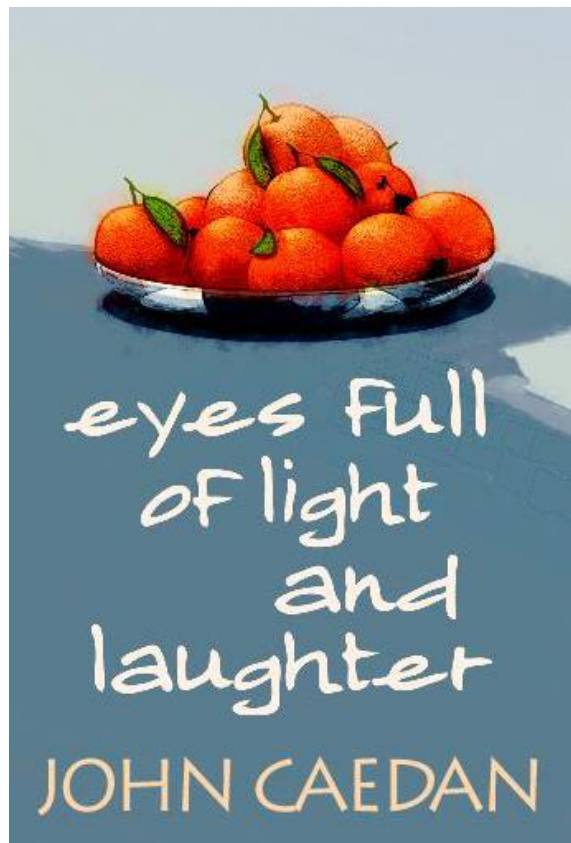
Halfway through the task, she slowed. Each gesture became that of an aching, a longing, piercing. She held half the mango and carefully sliced it into long pieces, arranging them in a fan on a beautiful porcelain plate. Now covered with juice, her hands completed each motion with expressiveness, something also found in her face, intent on opening the fruit, yet inflected with roused sensation.

She reached for the second half of the mango. It slipped into her hand, slowly, lusciously. All motion stopped. Then, with obsession, she lifted her hand to her face to inhale the scent of the ripe fruit. She inhaled again, with increasing abandon. Her mouth took on a glisten where the wet fruit touched it.

Georg stood at the piano in the dark with headphones around his neck, staring at Lin, fixed on her from the moment she rose from the pool. With as much hunger as for his art, desire surged up his spine, exploding in his chest and throat, behind his eyes turning white hot.

He threw off the headphones and ran across the room.

<https://thepreludes.com>



A book of intimacies

How much can happen during one moment in the crossing of lives? Sometimes a vivid nexus like a cloudburst, remembered forever. Or perhaps merely a warm glance, soon forgotten, yet added to the entirety of lifetime loving.

Is authentic intimacy possible in love? Many writers say no, with reams of paper expended on betrayal and withholding.

Trust, vulnerability, risking for intimacy – these are real. Love can flourish with them, can stay alive. So say the tales in this book.

Details: Twenty-four episodes with a new couple in each. Contemporary settings, romantic realism, no violence, cheating, or boredom. Descriptions of sex occur in two or three.

Eyes Full of Light and Laughter: Excerpt 1 of 3 ‘as annoying as ice cream’

Just before going too far, her hand froze. She stood naked, a little wet from the shower, considering. Then, instead of a big blast from the atomizer, she spritzed a faint smudge of mist into the air, and with eyes closed stepped into the fragrant cloud with a graceful twist and glide. The exotically scented fog settled on her hair, shoulders, and breasts. She held still, rapt in the thrill of it, the sophisticated scent so delicate it could afford to be this sweet, certain never to cloy the senses.

Breaking the spell, she padded to the side of the bed. With sure hand she bypassed two lesser options and lifted a white camisole top, holding it in place, consulting the mirror for confirmation. Yes, just so. She pulled on black underwear bottoms and stylish trousers with a slender belt first, then socks.

Confidence was high.

One quandary remained, however. Cotton top in hand, she stood in the center of the room, bottom lip caught between teeth, breathing slowly. Female acuity raced in consideration of much. Momentarily, she took a step across the room, opened her best underwear drawer, and selected the garment needed.

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Inevitably, ice cream made an appearance in the early afternoon. With ironic teasing running strong, the ice cream ritual did not raise embarrassment, nor had the carousel of wooden horses, nor the Ferris wheel – not even the preposterously romantic rowboat ride.

“Chocolate?” he asked.

“Of course. Is there any other flavor? You too, right?”

He shook his head with mock gravity and ordered vanilla. They strolled out onto a grassy area between two old-fashioned amusements, letting the sun into their faces as they licked down the creamy cones, glancing in each other’s eyes often, teasing the date-cute.

“We deserve some sort of award, don’t you think?” he asked.

“Why?”

“For bearing up under such a clichéd date without cracking.”

She laughed. “Who do you think is winning?”

“I am. I’m the man. This date is something no man should ever put up with.”

“But there’s pressure on the woman, too, don’t forget. What if I’m being too suffocating? That’s death, right?”

“Yep, suffocating is fatal.” He sobered. “But, nope. Not.”

Serious ice cream business quieted them. They traded tastes. She stopped their walk and turned to face him.

“It goes both ways,” she said.

He agreed with a nod.

She grew impish. “Do you think we’re in the blind spot?”

“The what?”

“The blind spot. That’s when everything that would normally be annoying doesn’t even bother you a bit. You are trying ... the two people are trying to please each other, to get to ... to get to mating, and so nature pushes everything aside except what makes them feel good about each other.” The heat of daring shone on her face.

He stared at her, frozen.

“I saw it on the Discovery Channel,” she threw in.

A smile broke across his features. “You’re about as annoying as ice cream.”

During the afternoon the irony vanished – they rode no more fairground rides, engaging with heads close together on a bench at the edge of the lake instead, exposing privacies, offering opportunities for trusting. Not shallow, either of them, they tangled splendidly, finding themselves across the boundary of risk. She noticed how excited she was underneath, yet how detached from expectation, a quite curious confluence, as if watching someone other than her falling for him.

Near sunset they headed to the parking lot in a comfortable silence. He broke it out of the blue.

“I know how we can find out,” he said.

“Find out what?”

“If we’re in the blind spot.”

“Oh, that! How?”

“Well, on a date like this ... the kiss at the end ... you know ...”

“The kiss?”

“Yes. Can’t you feel it coming?”

“I felt it coming, all right. You should have kissed me an hour ago. On the Ferris wheel.”

“We’ll find out in the kiss.”

They stared at each other, realization dawning, eyes growing big. “It’s In His Kiss!” they shouted together. This made them silly, made them sing lines of the famous song, playing with each other’s delightedness on a fine edge. “If you want to know ...”

He took her by the wrist, drew her behind a tree at the fringe of the parking lot, jolted to a stop and spun her body into his. She fell inside, head tilting to take his mouth, pressing with hands at the back of his head to show willingness. His arms around her waist cinched tight.

The sweet kiss held fresh for long seconds. His lips were never stiff or cold, never. Little pleasure sounds he could not contain thrilled like tiny leaps of joy. The scent of his skin imprinted on her, forever to hold the power of this moment in it.

As if summoned by gods, a force gathered in her pelvis and pooled at the base of her spine. It waited.

In a flashing instant, she gave her will. A whimper escaped her throat. The energy exploded up her back, down her arms, into the fingertips tangled in his hair. She arched against him, raising her breasts, turning from side to side to settle them deeply, offering their loveliness. Shuddering, he took her tighter in embrace. She melted in.

Then the kiss blossomed anew – it began at the touch of their lips, unfolded high, then reached back beyond the mind’s eye to approach the open heart.

She lifted her mouth from his to find his eyes searching her, holding her, adoring her. Her gaze fell to his mouth, which had made hers burn.

“Less annoying than ice cream,” he said.

“Yes,” she whispered.

As they made their way to the car, slowly because of the difficulty of taking their eyes from each other, she grew aware of a heartbreaking sweet scent, like a cloud of joy around her head. She put her fingers at the top edge of her camisole and pulled it open slightly. The scent increased. She realized it was the last of the incredible perfume from this morning, boiled by love.

*Eyes Full of Light and Laughter:* Excerpt 2 of 3 “all the way to dessert”

“What’s a ‘sweater girl’?”

Sam looked over at his great-grandson. “Where’d you hear that?”

“Well, someone said ‘I’m no sweater girl.’ What does that mean?”

He had little hope the boy would be generous with circumstantial details. Answer anyway.

“It’s a term from the olden days, you know, the fifties.”

“Sheesh. The nineteen fifties?”

“Yup, way back there.” He was always amused how far removed his salad days seemed to this teenager, when to him it was immediate as yesterday. These kids probably don’t grow out of their salad days anymore – green is probably green, all the way to dessert.

“Okay, what’s it mean?”

“A sweater girl is a young lady who looks really good in a sweater, really good, because she’s built on top and has a narrow waist.”

“Oh.”

“The sweaters we’re talking about are pullovers with no buttons or anything, or they button in back. The way polite girls used to say it back then was ‘shows off your figure.’ Basically, you have to have big breasts, special bras, and not be shy to pull it off. It was the big famous way for girls to look back in the fifties.”

“Okay.”

That was it. His great-grandson was not going to say anything else, he was sure. He tried to work up some gratitude for the miracle of being asked in the first place.

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They were arguing over who gets what.

“Listen, you’re giving me a hard time, kid. The blonde’s for me. Man, is she stacked.”

“What if I want her?” Sam asked.

“Not for sale, now lay off,” the other said, too rudely.

The two girls were talking in low voices thirty feet away. They glanced over. He locked eyes for a second with the slight one with wavy brown hair.

"I'm giving in this time."

His buddy stood up straight with a wise-guy smile. They sauntered over to the pair, offered their arms and went into the dance.

"You're Sam, right?" the brown-haired one said right away.

"Yes."

"I'm Margie. Margaret, but everyone calls me Margie."

"Is that what you like?"

"Yes."

"Okay, Margie it is."

"She's a big brain, ya know," the blonde girl said as they took seats at their table. "Smarter than them college professors."

Sam looked at his date. She was smiling slightly but shaking her head. "Yes, but can she do the Cha Cha Cha?"

"I'll try it if you do," said Sam.

"Okay." They smiled together. He was greatly relieved. The hard part was over, the ice was broken, she was not a disaster. He found himself on high ground. He was going to have a simple good time tonight, no expectations.

And so went his first evening at the side of the girl with the wavy brown hair. They talked much about simple things, but never in an ignorant way. He bought her two rum and Cokes, which lasted a considerable time, and she proved herself on the floor, doing a medium-cool jitterbug as well as the Cha-Cha. They whispered about their two companions, who seemed glued together on the floor and off, Margie holding the opinion that her friend 'was being too willing.' Sam did not say a word about that aspect, not inclined to follow that line of inquiry. He was conscious of Margie's diminutive body, its allure keeping up a drumbeat in his senses when holding her close, hand in hand, touching gently in front, during ballads.

That policy stuck while they walked to her house: her education, her professors, her dad, yes – anything more private, better left alone. They sat on a bench in one corner of her front porch finishing a point of conversation, comfortable in the clear evening air. A fine ache throbbed in his chest, the kind that seems to lift you off the ground.

"Margie, you're a swell dancer," he said. "I guess you can do the Cha Cha Cha."

She glanced away, then back over at him, the toss of her head jostling the wavy tresses. "I like the way you danced when the slow ones came on. Like that Patti Page song."

A shot of excitement ran up his back.

"Oh, I liked that too," he said. "I'll be asking you to dance the 'Tennessee Waltz' with me some time soon."

"That's a very sad and very beautiful song ..." She stopped short, looked down at her hands in her lap. "I'm not like my friend, you know."

"You don't have to say anything," he shot out immediately. "Don't say anything."

She looked up. "I don't have her blonde hair, and look how tall she is."

"She's a real bad dancer."

They both laughed. "How could you tell, Sam? She was draped all over your friend like an overcoat all night. You know, she's really a good kid, just sometimes she can't help herself." Then her voice and intonation slowed. "She'd never have to go one night a week without a date, if you know what I mean."

He nodded. "He's not actually my friend, Margie. He just gave me a ride to the dance."

She quieted. He waited. She looked right in his eyes.

"I don't have her figure."

She said it simply, her gaze steady and meaningful. It was only a second before he spoke, but it seemed an eternity.

“No, you have yours.”

She stood up and offered her hand back to him. He came to her side, and they walked across the porch. He would have taken a small kiss. He would have taken no kiss. Instead, just before she opened the door and ended their first night together, she offered to him in her glowing eyes a look that took his breath away. It was that of a woman revealed, a woman capable of a gigantic love.

“Good night, Sam,” she whispered.

“Good night, Margaret.”

Eyes Full of Light and Laughter: Excerpt 3 of 3 “most ardent of all”

The storm opened overhead. A slow mover, no wind, so the rain poured straight down, heavy and loud. Peering out the big bay window, he saw pools forming where low points in the grassy yard trapped the runoff. How must it sound pelting the roof of the greenhouse, and would she wait it out in there?

He wanted a fire. With kindling and dry oak laid up near the fireplace, he set a fine blaze going. With it came satisfaction, the appreciation of fire’s heat countering cool misty air rolling across the floor from open windows – storm and shelter simultaneously.

Through the downpour, the sound of a door slamming and a high-pitched squeal drew his attention. He walked out onto the porch with towel in hand to watch her run across the yard, swearing and laughing. He met her down a few steps and threw the towel over her head. They hurried inside.

“Didn’t you see it coming?” he asked.

“Guess so, but it was too fine in there this morning, absolutely perfect planting time, warm. The urge, had the damn urge to plant, you know?”

Having no such inclination, he denied knowing.

“Rite of spring,” she said.

She pulled off her tee shirt, replacing it with a knit cotton sweater of abundant neck and sleeves, a little too big, powder blue. He dried her hair. They settled on the floor in front of the fire. She kept up a running story of seedlings and peat moss, and how rich the compost smelled, even extolling the aroma of decomposed horse manure. The greenhouse and its demands suited her – she radiated joy like a spring goddess with feet in mud.

She sat between his legs backed against his chest. They watched the fire while she talked about gardening triumphs and delights. They gauged the storm’s intentions by the fierceness of the rain – it seemed to have nowhere to go, as neither did they.

Eventually, kisses. This pleasure merged them, two independent people, well situated each in the world and sure of themselves, physical affection dissolving anything extraneous to exposing the core of their bond, the courage to open the heart a reward for hard-won trust.

Sometimes they kissed with eyes open. Sometimes they would move back to say something hot or sweet or funny. One time she said, “My mouth is your mouth.” He was known for letting go of her eyes to behold her lips for long seconds. If this went on for any time, she might let her tongue emerge to circle and make the lips wet, then tilt her head to offer her mouth like a delicious flower begging for the other to drink nectar.

And thus, the enjoyment of a splendid afternoon. They shifted positions occasionally. He threw more oak on the fire when needed. Sometimes they talked, sometimes only gazed at each other with honest eyes. Most ardent of all, though, the magnificent kisses.

There came a break in the downpour. She stood, gestured for him to follow, and led him out onto the porch of their house, an oasis of dry decking in a soaked world. The air seemed clean and new, smelled of woodland and earthy mystery, while the lowering sun glinted off everything wet. A breeze now – he saw it stir a lock of her hair, moving it across her shoulder against the pale blue sweater. Her face shone with simple determination and mounting joy. She looked young. It flashed across his mind that she had looked exactly so under a white veil when walking to him three years ago.

“The rite of spring,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I was planting. I heard the storm coming. It was something else that made me stay out there.”

“What was it?”

“I decided at dawn. I put my hands in the soil all morning to make sure I was right.”

She looked in his eyes, very deep, all the way in.

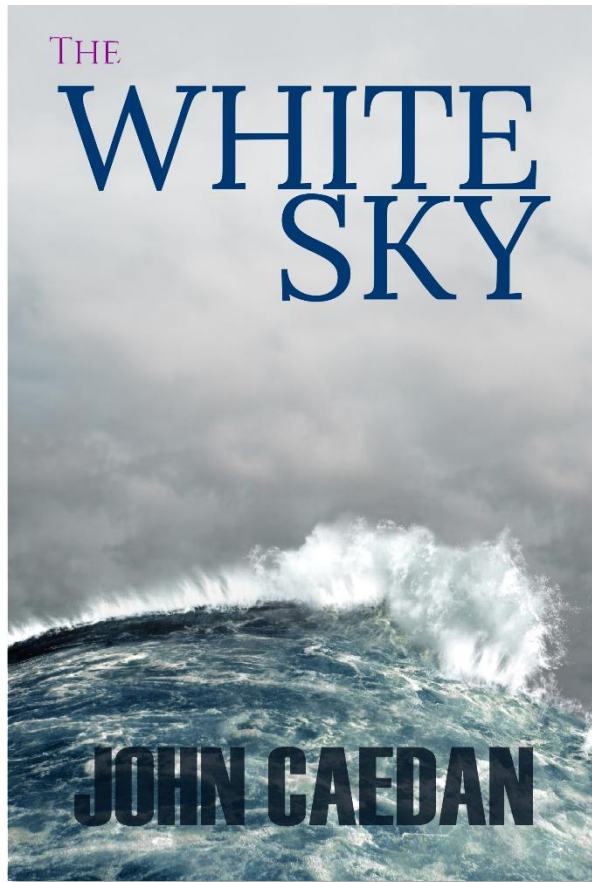
“I’m ready to conceive our child now.”

His mind opened like a white-hot nova. He looked silently into her soul for seconds and seconds more, her words becoming truer with each beat. No need to assent – he had been asking for over a year. Then she spoke.

“This weekend is the right time. I’m fertile right this minute.”

Desire flooded his face and head, unlike any before. It flashed down his back into his pelvis. He became only her mate. His hand went to her wrist and took it firmly, leading her to the door of their house. At its threshold, he lifted her in his arms. He did not stop looking in her eyes while carrying her all the way to the back of the house where their bed waited, clean, dry, and beckoning.

<https://eyesfulloflightandlaughter.com>



The transit of choice.

Four characters must choose in my novel *The White Sky*, must transition. A photographer of women, a sculptor of men, a runner of too many miles, and a healer facing the challenge to stop deaths – I see their inside struggles, watch their adventures on the outside, and rejoice in their transit as friends and lovers.

The story unfolds in Manhattan and on an island in the North Atlantic. At the shore, a confluence of two clans and a wise patron forms the setting of achievers in motion for goals while embedded in family warmth – including remarkable children, the start of two new matches, and three enduring marriages.

Can everyone at a big family celebration be strivers? Good people, ambitious, great parents, hard-working risk-takers? *In successful marriages?* That sounds ridiculous. Improbable. “He can’t make that realistic.” I hope you’ll give me a chance to prove I can.

The White Sky: Excerpt 1 of 1 “not now”

[Backstory: Andrés and Mila met ten hours prior to the scene below. They interacted on a ferryboat headed to an island, then went their separate ways. She phoned him after midnight, asking for him to visit. They entered into each other’s challenges as artists. In a moment of vulnerability, Mila disclosed her root motivation and mission. She is a sculptor who comprehends her subject by touch as much as by sight. She has already done so with Andrés, while on the ferry. They have not yet become lovers.]

Arriving after a careful drive down-island in the deluge, Andrés turned into the driveway and found the obvious place to park in back next to a small edifice facing Lagoon Pond. He saw Mila waiting outside under an overhang in a pool of light. He ran over to her. They hugged briefly.

Without a word, she drew him into the building where a fire flamed away in a Franklin stove. Hooded lights revealed one large room, obviously an artist’s studio.

“I could not wait. This project could not wait.”

“Tell me,” he said, shaking off drops of water while standing close to the fire. He already knew she had not called him for sex.

“All afternoon, and at dinner with my friend Veronica ...”

“Veronica?”

“Yes, isn’t that beautiful? I call her Raana most of the time. During dinner, I was obsessed by your shape under my hand. The sensation of it would not fade. I began to even feel the pose, the intent of the piece.”

“Wow.”

“By eleven I couldn’t take it anymore. I said goodnight to her and came in here and started to draw.” She pointed out a clutter of discarded art paper and several pinned-up sketches. Andrés walked to them.

Yes. An eerie minimalist sketch of his body. How strange. An evocation of him. As he strolled around the room, Mila explained her situation.

“Veronica’s family owns the boatyard across Beach Road on the harbor. They have this property here, too, with this industrial shed. They used to use it for spray painting and shellac work. Been vacant awhile. Now I have it for the summer. I can do sand casting here.” She pointed to a furnace in the far corner. “This furnace was salvaged from a company in Rochester that cast large bronze bells. I had it shipped here. I don’t have this capability in my studio in Buffalo. And on my teaching salary, I can’t quite afford to add it.”

“Then how do you work there?”

“For sixteen years my work was abstract structural sculpture. Constructions of metal, glass, paper, concrete. It’s only in the last four with clay, plaster, and stone. If I need to cast in bronze, I use an outside service for it in Buffalo.”

“Do you have images of all that work?”

“Yes, but not now, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I don’t want to stop for show and tell.”

“Rude, Mila.”

She froze. After a second she nodded grimly.

“Sorry,” she said without further explanation.

He took two steps and stopped within arm’s reach of her.

“I’ve been on the other side many times, as a photographer ... but not as a model. What do you need?”

“I want to charge right into what you might call a study, just from the waist to the shoulders, just the torso, and not life-size. Quickly.”

“Not the face? Head?”

“No.”

“How then?”

She looked into his eyes soberly. “I have to touch you again.”

“Okay.” Andrés unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it off. He was glad she did not insist on bare feet, or anything else naked – it was chilly in the studio, even with a fire blazing in the stove ten feet away. The rain noisily pelted the roof above them.

Mila indicated where he should stand, six feet from a working table, directly under an incandescent light pointing straight down. When he took up that position, standing with relaxation, she gave instructions.

“Just like on the ferry, just let me.”

“Yes.”

“It’s not fake or a sexual caress.”

“I know.”

“This will take longer.”

“I think I get it,” he said, “I have to be the object.”

“Correct. The not-dead object, but the standing-still object.”

“Okay.”

Mila transitioned immediately. She was no longer conversational, became sensorial. Her eyes closed. Andrés absorbed her first touch with a jolt, yes, but then became existentially the accepting recipient.

Mila conducted a full appreciation, using both hands, leaving nothing untouched on his torso. Sometimes she stopped moving, her hands splayed open against his flesh, quiescent for many long breaths, breaths of both. Twice, once from the front, once from behind, she pressed her body tight against his, laying both arms in full contact around and across his chest and shoulders. Containing. Enwrapping.

Andrés entered a state much as the first time she had touched him, yet now more detached, relaxed, surrendered. He noticed his tiredness. Above the fatigue lay his attunement to this drama of unusual circumstances, a unique point in time for his artist's sensibility. Then a certain pride that another artist might know him in this more naked than naked manner. Under all lay an erotic response, easily held at bay. He was proud of both the arousal and the restraint of it.

Mila finished. She pulled her touch away without a glance and took a place at her working platform. Tearing into a box labeled "Claystone-Red," she unwrapped a fifty-pound square-ended rectangular slab and stood it on end. Taking hold on either side, she lifted it a foot and dropped it hard onto an aluminum turntable. Immediately she attacked, using a wooden-handled cutting tool to slice off the corners and rough out the general shape of a human torso. At a certain point she stopped and looked up.

"I don't have a revolving platform for you to stand on."

"Okay."

"I don't want you to move the pose, so I'll have to walk around you sometimes – I can activate the casters and drag this worktable around the room."

"Okay."

"Can you hold a pose for forty minutes?"

"I don't know."

"There's a refrigerator over there with water and other drinks. Let's take a short break." Mila walked out of the studio.

Andrés draped a big beach towel over his shoulders and fetched a bottle of mango-orange juice. He joined Mila outside under the overhang of the building's roof. They sat next to each other on cane porch furniture. The rain had stopped.

He was reluctant to speak, sensing her focus. It was almost as if she were holding that which was to be the sculpture in the mind's eye of her hands. The air smelled wonderful, the breeze off the Atlantic flowing across the harbor to them. He wondered if she even noticed.

They said nothing.

Eventually Mila stood and gestured to him.

Inside, she positioned him, a simple erect pose, half-turned away.

"This pose is, 'I am not posing,'" she said.

"Okay."

"Steady and alert, but not responding to anything, not seeking anything, not worrying."

"Okay. I think I understand."

"Outward-focused, but relaxed also."

"What about my arms?"

"Dropped to the side. They won't be in the sculpture. Your shoulders will, though. Relaxation. Relax them."

She positioned herself at the worktable. She gave a few simple commands for him to move, hold, elongate or twist, until his posture met her satisfaction. Andrés inhabited the pose. Then she dug into the clay.

At half-angle, Andrés watched. Because she had explained her process, he believed he was observing in action the combined wisdom of her sight and the tangible essence of that which she had felt touching him. She glanced up occasionally. Once she unlocked the castor mechanism and moved it around behind.

He heard the work stop. He dared not move. Slowly she walked around to face him. Her hands were stained red with clay.

"It's not working. Even though this will just be a torso, your clothing is in the way. Stopping the flow of my sight. I need you fully naked."

"I understand," he said. He slipped out of his shoes, his pants and undergarment.

"I don't need to touch."

"Okay," he said with a small smile.

"This time," she added.

Andrés resumed his pose. He was amused by his own equanimity, not to mention unfazed by the irony of being totally nude with an artist scrutinizing every inch of him. He thought of all the women he had photographed naked, silently saluting them with affectionate comradeship. Mila resumed her work.

Eventually she rotated completely around him twice, rolling the workstation as needed. Andrés had to be corrected only once or twice with short orders to stay straight or let tension dissipate. His stamina was stretched now, and he was cold. He braved it.

Then, arousal. Like magic the situation ceased to be cold, stressful and mechanical. Apparently, libido had flown in through the window. He could not avoid its consequence. Mila saw it.

"Breathe into your calm space," she whispered.

"Not calm."

"Think about having to make a spreadsheet so your accountant can do your taxes. Hate it, dread it."

He laughed. "Do you say that to all your naked male models?"

"Yes," she replied, and walked across the room to take a bottled drink out of the refrigerator for herself. She opened it and fussed in the kitchen area.

"We're almost done," she told him across the space.

Andrés concentrated on breathing and actually visualized the dreaded task she had mentioned. It worked. He slowly calmed the desire, and specific body parts obeyed. Mila resumed manipulation of the umber clay, scraping, pushing, smoothing. If anything, her concentration attained the highest level of the night. After fifteen minutes, work came to a halt. She stood still except for eyes flickering between the sculpted clay and Andrés holding the pose steady.

"Okay," she finally said. "Done for now."

He released, bending over and back up, twisting at the waist, and arcing his head around.

"There's a clean robe right there," she said, pointing.

Andrés pulled the garment around his body, watching Mila carefully as she tidied up, washed implements. She made no attempt to cover the sculpture. He took that as permission. He strolled around the fourteen-inch-high piece, a male torso from waist to neck.

"Wow."

"It's okay," she said.

The sculpture was realistic, with no element of abstraction, metaphor or distortion in it. Nor idealism – only the real. He felt the thing take on a life of its own in his artistic sensibility, resonating, establishing a new category, 'Mila's true sculptures.'

"It's a study. Only a study," she said.

"Like long ago when I used to take a Polaroid to test the scene and lighting. Now I take cellphone shots prior to the real photography."

"Yes. I'm not really attempting to say anything yet, just establishing a setup and a working ethos."

"It's quite fine, Mila."

"Thanks."

His compliment sounded 'too goody' in his ear for a moment. Then he corrected himself. He did not want to be cool.

“Quite fine,” he said, walking around the sculpture. When his inspection finished with no disappointment, the overall impact of that which had come into existence hit home, like a delayed shock. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. He turned to look at Mila with new eyes.

“You are just now beginning to return to figurative?”

“Yes.”

“And drawing?”

“Yes.”

It was astonishing. His new eyes for her got bigger.

“I want to take this further,” she said. “It would be hard work, I won’t kid you. Please think it over, but I am asking you to model for this work. It could take days. Serious work, sculptor and model.”

“And apparently low pay.”

“I am a poor, starving artist.”

“But an hour for just for a study? I froze my behind off!”

“I’m not going to apologize for that. And I am paying you well.”

“You are?”

“Yeah, you spent the night in my bedroom naked, and now I’m going to make you breakfast,” she said with a wry smile, lighting a burner under a pot of water for coffee.

Andrés had previously noted her bed tucked into a corner with bookcases partially enclosing it like partitions. He turned his head in that direction, deliberately. Her eyes followed his into the corner.

“Mila?”

“What?”

“Why is it your mission to sculpt a man who loves women?”

She returned to fussing with the coffee preparation, not looking up from it. He walked over to where she stood at the gas stove. He twisted off the burner under the water. The sound of the snap jolted the room. He reached for her.

“Not now,” she whispered, and flung her body against him.

From John Caedan:

Included in editions of “The White Sky” you will find a supplemental text, called *Andrés + Mila*. It is the narrative of their sexual encounters for one month as new lovers. While the main body of “The White Sky” necessarily reaches the moments of their lovemaking, such as you just read at the end of the above scene, it stops there. So, anyone wishing to read the primary narrative, yet decline the explicit description of their trysts, can do so. They will not miss any important action.

On the other hand, readers can choose to read the full horizontal epic. The writing of sex is explicit.

Note: in the eBook version, the thirty-six Andrés + Mila scenes are behind a link. In printed versions, you will find them consolidated at the end of the book.

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