

the fiction of

JOHN CAEDAN



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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.



Mojave Desert, California
August, 2016

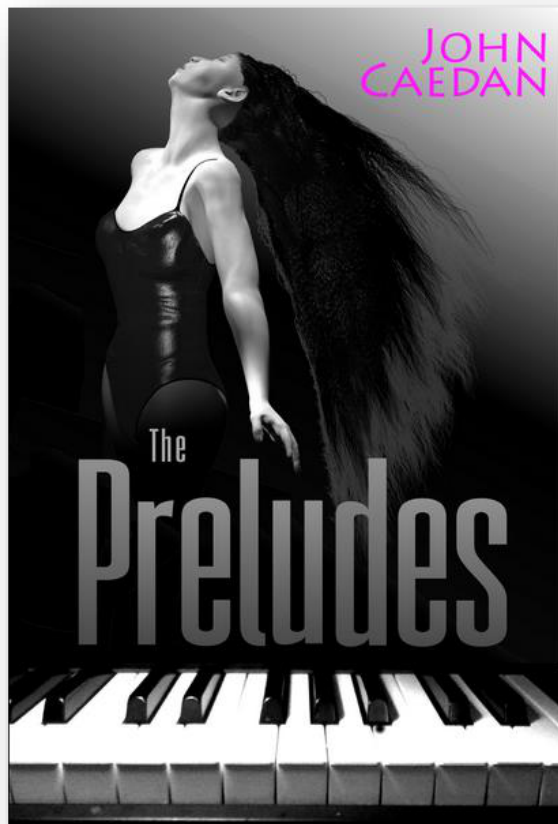
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THE PRELUDES

a novel

Twelve turning-point days in New York with Georg Wojciechowski, an American composer, a striver recently stuck. 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 ... *cherche 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, then joins the fight.

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

I hope you enjoy the ride of these achievers,

John Caedan

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 facade 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 giant canvas hung there. The painting seized 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 vermilion cotton 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 like ropes down the length, below the elbow forming a solid mass, tapering, the forearm nearly the thickness and heft of a baseball bat. At arm's end began the expanse and reach of a remarkable hand, nine inches high, arched and shaped in an expression of power.

Glowing in eyes set deep under the brow, monolithic focus might be mistaken for anger or grief. There was not the slightest sign sleep had tamed him.

He raised his face to the painting. Its force washed over him. In his visage rose the spark of recognition. 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 grand piano, ebony, gleaming inside with polished brass. In five strides he reached the keyboard.

At once music burst into the room, music like explosions through a driving rain. Repeatedly he pulled from the deepest bass through four octaves to the top, crashing back, ripping through arpeggios both saddened and exultant. A melody arose from within, a sweet utterance in the deluge.

It was his Prelude in D-Major, written in the night. It fell to the bottom of the keyboard, slamming to an end on its lowest note, profound as the obliteration 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. They were dressed in jeans, cotton tops, sweaters and athletic shoes, jumbling around, deciding which way to walk, obviously in a happy mood.

“The Park!” Lin insisted.

“Well I have to get up to the Bronx.”

“The Park!”

“Ai 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 ran into Central Park, taking the path east and north, passing both the amusement area and small zoo, in conversation all the while, soaking up air and sunshine. The leaves had not yet turned colors, but that transformation seemed imminent.

“What was that you were playing this morning?”

“Carl Czerny.”

“Sounds like 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 really difficult exercises. They help a lot. I was playing from his School of Velocity.”

“A most appropriate title!” laughed 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. To what makes a piece unmistakably identifiable as the 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 saying what I believe in 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 to face each other. Just the faintest sign of their breath condensing in the cool air floated between them. Georg pushed out his answer without blinking.

"Grand opera."

They resumed their walk with customary New York attitude, a fast-paced stride which deterred all interruption from others. Georg marched along, silent. Lin glanced over at him as if to inquire about more explanation forthcoming. She chose to say not a word. Then 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 a few hundred feet above Georg's building the apartment showed few lights. A solitary figure cut a straight line through the long narrow pool. Lin swimming laps. There was just enough illumination around the pool for her to be observed, up and back. She wore the black one-piece swimsuit.

Her strokes flailed in agitation, the water frothing as she thrust it out of the way. Suddenly she stopped in mid-stroke, mid-lap, and stood upright, motionless. The water churning around her hips subsided. Abruptly, she reached for the side of the pool, lifted herself out, and with one violent shake the only drying, ran straight into the interior, making for the bar area. Water dripped off her body onto its tiled floor. She did not care.

Lin opened the door of a refrigerator and pulled out a large, ripe mango. Finding a cutting board and knife, she attacked the fruit, peeling it longitudinally.

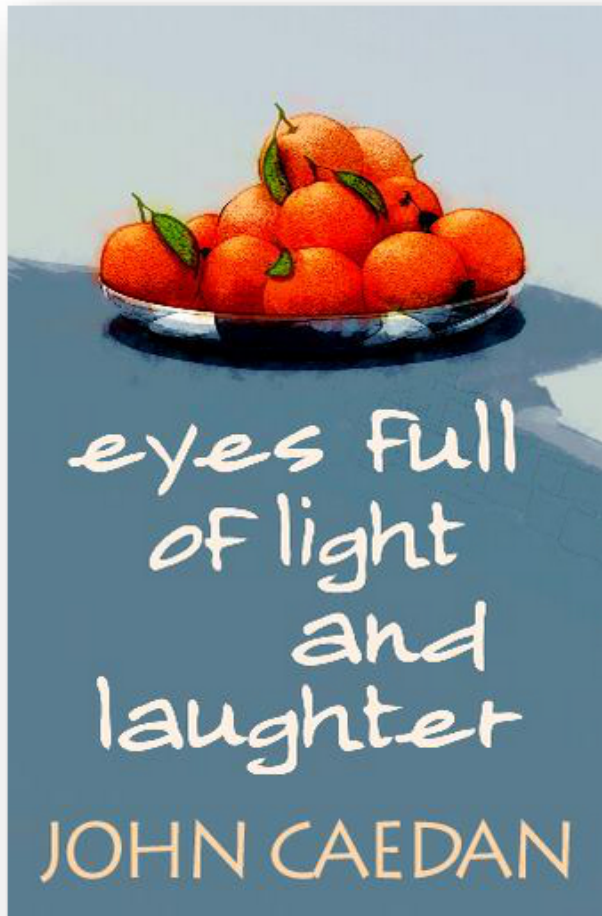
In the otherwise pitch-dark salon, one incandescent light formed a pool of brightness exactly where she stood. Every drop on her wet skin and the juicy mango glistened. Halfway through the task she slowed. Now each gesture seemed that of an aching, a longing so tangible she could move through jelled air only with difficulty.

She held half the mango and sliced it into thin pieces, arranging them in a fan on a beautiful porcelain plate. Now covered with juice, her hands completed every motion with expressiveness, a quality 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 it to her face to inhale the scent of the ripe fruit. She inhaled again, with increasing abandon. Her mouth took on a glisten where her fingers brushed against it.

Georg stood at the piano in the dark with headphones around his neck, staring at Lin, fixed on her since the moment she rose from the pool. Craving surged up his spine, exploding in his chest and throat, the core of his will turning white hot behind his eyes.

He threw off the headphones and ran across the room.



EYES FULL OF LIGHT AND LAUGHTER

A book of intimacies

How much can happen in one moment in the crossing of two lives?

Sometimes, a vivid nexus like a cloudburst, remembered forever. Or perhaps just a warm glance, soon forgotten, but 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. This book tells such tales.

Details: Twenty-four episodes, 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

better than ice cream

Just at the moment of 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 only a faint smudge of mist into the air of the bedroom, and with eyes closed stepped into the fragrant cloud with a graceful twist and glide. The exotically-scented fog settled onto her hair, shoulders, and breasts. She held still, rapt in the thrill of it, the delicate sophisticated scent so well made it could afford to be this sweet, certain never to cloy the senses.

Breaking the spell, she padded to the side of the bed. Immediately it was clear the rightness of deferring decision until after the shower, as with sure hand she bypassed three other choices and lifted the white camisole top, holding it in place, glancing into the mirror for confirmation. Yes, just so, with the worn jeans. A slender belt. She pulled on white bottoms and the jeans first, socks as well. Confidence was high.

One delicate quandary remained, however. She stood in the center of the room, bottom lip caught between teeth, breathing slowly, the focus of her considerable female acuity racing in consideration of much. Momentarily, she took a step across the room, opened her best underwear drawer, and carefully selected the needed garment; bare beneath the camisole would not serve this fine day.

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Inevitably, ice cream made an appearance that afternoon. Since they had long accepted light irony over how cute everything had unfolded for two thirty-five-year-olds on a third date, the ice cream purchasing ritual had not raised embarrassment, as had not the rowboat ride, nor the Ferris wheel nor the carousel of wooden horses, astoundingly.

“Chocolate, right?” he asked with a glance. She presented a smile as ironic as his, playing a fine game.

“Why, yes, of course. Is there any other flavor? You, too?” She watched him shake his head with mock gravity and order vanilla.

They strolled out onto a grassy area between two slow-moving old-fashioned amusements, letting the sun fully into their faces as they licked down the creamy cones, glancing in each other’s eyes now and then.

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

“Why?”

“Well, speaking for myself, but I bet for you, too, for bearing up under such a clichéd date without cracking.”

She laughed at that. “Who do you think is winning?” she asked impishly.

“I am. I’m the man. This date is something no man should have to 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?”

“Yeah, suffocating is deadly.” He paused and sobered a little. “But, nope, no suffocating.”

Serious ice cream business quieted them for a few moments. They traded tastes.

“Do you think we’re in the blind spot?” she asked with the look of taking a chance.

“The what?”

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

He didn’t say anything.

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

“I wouldn’t know; I can’t see a thing,” he said smoothly.

She laughed and rocked back and forth on the bench.

“See,” she announced, “that doesn’t scare me. Wow.”

During the afternoon they did not hop on any kiddie rides, instead tackling matters great and small. Their exchanges revealed certain privacies, offering the opportunity for trusting. They were not shallow, either of them; they tangled splendidly. She noticed how excited she was underneath yet how detached from expectation, a quite curious confluence, as if watching a person other than herself fall for him.

Near sunset they headed back to the parking lot.

“I know how we can find out,” he said all of the sudden.

“Find out what?”

“If we’re in the blind spot,” he answered with amusement.

“Oh, that! How?”

“Well, on a date like this I’m hoping there’s a kiss at the end.”

She paused for a perfect split second. "A kiss," she said, not like a question. "Yes. We will find out in the goodnight kiss."

They stared at each other, realization dawning, eyes getting big.

"It's in his kiss!" they shouted together. This made them a little silly, made them sing a few lines of the famous song, playing with each other's delightedness. Suddenly he took her hand and pulled her quickly behind a row of trees that served as a border between the amusement park and the parking lot. There was a spot of privacy there.

Then they were inside it without another word. Her arms slipped around his neck. She tilted her head to take his mouth exactly right, moving against his lips, slipping and rotating gently. She surrendered a sigh of satisfaction, moving her hands at the back of his head to show willingness.

Oh, perfect to not open me, to come inside me, just hold my mouth with yours, yes, just so, she prayed silently to him. She needn't have feared; the kiss held fresh for long, sweet seconds. To her delight, his lips were never stiff or cold, not ever. Inside his breathing she heard little pleasure sounds he could not contain, all the more thrilling for being so small. The scent of his skin, so close for the first time, imprinted itself on her, forever holding the power of this kiss in it.

Suddenly, as if summoned by gods, a force gathered in her pelvis to settle at the base of her spine, dangerous, potent. It waited. In a second of infinity she granted her will to the force, to the life she would lead afterwards. A whimper escaped her throat. The energy exploded up her back, radiating down her arms into the fingertips touching his hair. Her arms pulled him close, raising her breasts, pressing their round weight to his chest, turning from side to side to settle them deeply and offer their loveliness to him. Immediately she felt this act set off a shudder in him, made him take her in full embrace with strength. She met this with offering, surrender, melting.

Then, most precious of all, the kiss blossomed gently one more time. She felt it begin at the sweet meeting of their lips, unfold high, high, then back beyond the mind's eye to approach the hidden heart.

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

"Better than ice cream," he said softly.

"Yes," she whispered.

As they made their way to his car, slowly because of the difficulty of taking their eyes off each other, she grew aware of the most heartbreakingly sweet scent, like a cloud of joy around her head. She put her fingers at the top edge of her white camisole and pulled it open slightly. The scent increased. She realized it was the last of the incredible perfume she had applied 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 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.

"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 as immediate as yesterday. These kids probably don't grow out of their salad days anymore, green is probably acceptable 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."

"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 grandson was not going to say anything else, he was sure. He tried to work up some gratitude for the small miracle of even 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?" he 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 once or twice. He locked eyes for a second with the slight one who had 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 over at his date. She was smiling slightly but shaking her head.

"Yes, but can she do the Cha Cha Cha?" she said.

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

"Okay." They smiled at each other. He was greatly relieved that 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. That was that.

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 speculation about their two friends, who seemed stuck together with library paste on the floor and off, Margie holding the opinion that her friend 'was being too willing.' Sam didn't say a word, not in the mood to follow that line of inquiry. He was conscious of her small body, its allure keeping up a steady drumbeat in his senses ever since holding her close, hand in hand, touching gently in front.

That policy stuck while they walked to her house: her education, her professors, her dad, yes, anything more personal, 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. He had a fine ache of happiness in his chest, the kind that seemed to lift you off the ground.

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

She smiled 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."

That sent a shot of excitement up his back.

"Oh, I liked that a lot 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 replied

She stopped smiling, looked down at her hands in her lap.

"I'm not like my friend, you know," she said slowly.

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

"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," she giggled. "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 but didn't say anything.

For a moment or two she was quiet again. 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 walked her 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 up overhead. It was a slow-mover with 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 soon set a fine blaze going. As always, with it came satisfaction, the appreciation of fire's heat countering cool misty air rolling across the floor from the 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 a towel in hand to watch her run across the yard,

swearing and laughing. He met her down a few stairs and threw the towel over her head as they hurried inside together.

"Didn't you see it coming?" he asked.

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

Having no similar inclination, he denied knowing.

"Rite of spring," she said.

They settled on the floor in front of the fire. He dried her hair. She pulled her t-shirt off, replacing it with a knit cotton sweater of abundant neck and sleeves, a little too big for her, powder blue. 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 for crying out loud. The greenhouse and its demands suited her, he reflected; she radiated joy like a spring goddess with feet in mud.

She sat between his legs backed against his chest. They watched the fire for a while. She talked about a few 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, whole people, well situated, each in the world, and sure of themselves, dissolving everything not imperative for protection due to hard-won underlying trust.

Sometimes, like now, 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 once in a while and just looking right at her lips, her soft mouth, for long seconds. If this went on for any length of time she might let her tongue emerge to circle around and make the lips wet.

Never once during kisses had he failed to get her blouse open, or like now, a sweater loose and lifted that his hands might be on her, too. She longed to be touched so, always; she had whispered it a hundred million times: "Keep touching them while we kiss." Her lips parted, she tilted a little and offered her mouth like a delicious flower begging for the other to drink nectar.

And thus the enjoyment of a beautiful afternoon. They shifted positions occasionally. He threw more oak on the fire now and then. 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 up and gestured for him to follow. He realized something was changing; their day was changing. She led him out onto the porch of the 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 suppressed joy. She looked young. It flashed across his mind she had looked exactly so under a white veil when walking to him three years ago.

"The rite of spring," she began.

"What do you mean?"

"I was planting. I heard the storm coming. But it was something else that made me stay out there."

"What was it?" he asked.

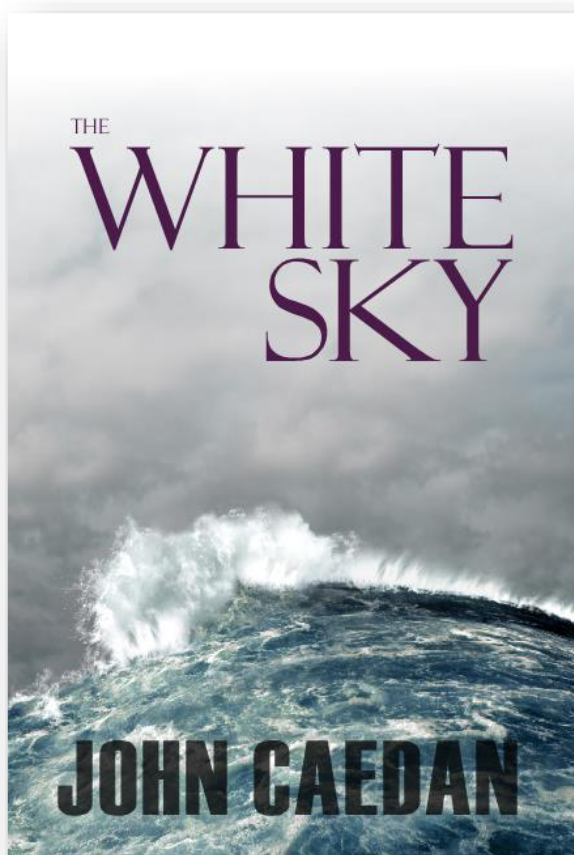
"I decided at dawn. I put my hands in the soil all morning to make sure I was right." She looked in his eyes, very deep, all the way in. What she said next came from the place their glances made their hearts touch. "I'm ready to conceive our child now."

He might as well have been hit by a bomb. His mind went gigantic, like a white-out nova. Not for a second did he let go her gaze. His mouth was open but there could be no words; he just loved her

with his eyes. There was no need to assent or assure or confirm; he had been asking for over a year. He looked silently into her soul for seconds and seconds more, the words becoming truer with each beat of time. Then she let him know they were together in it.

"This weekend is the right time. I'm fertile right this minute."

Desire began in his face and head, a pressure unlike any before. It flashed down his back into his pelvis. There were no words. 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.



THE WHITE SKY

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 hear 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 their 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 instantly delved into each other’s challenges as artists. In a moment of vulnerability, Mila disclosed her root motivation and mission. They interacted on a ferryboat headed to an island, then went their separate ways.

Mila 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. She phoned him after midnight, asking for him to visit. 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 immediately saw Mila waiting outside under an overhang in a pool of light. He ran over to her. They hugged briefly.

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 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 casting furnace in the far corner. “This furnace was salvaged from a company in Rochester that cast large bronze bells. 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.

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, no longer conversational, became sensorial. Her eyes closed. Andrés absorbed the 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 still hands splayed open against his flesh, absolutely quiescent for many long breaths, breaths of both of them. 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, relaxing, 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, substrata, 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 nearly 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?”

“Just 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 her. 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 her stop working. 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 definitely 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 a CPA 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. 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 hairs 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 through, 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 that 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, but avoid 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. You may need two bookmarks!