

excerpt from *A Passive Man*

a novel by Chris Cefalu

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The blues were the first thing I heard that morning as I opened my eyes and lay groggily blinking and stretching, staring at the Rorschach of cracks on the plaster ceiling of my room. I lay a moment, listening to the familiar phlegmatic vocals of Muddy Waters, whose boasts and laments were clearly audible through the thin walls of our apartment. The words were somewhat muffled but it was not hard to catch the gist of the tale. The stories were all fairly similar, and after several minutes of lying awake, the various songs began to congeal for me into a single endless three-chord testimonial concerning women, liquor and a litany of existential complaint which always began – much like my own account begins – with five simple words: I woke up this morning.

The music was courtesy of Brian Buford, my roommate and, for all intents and purposes, my best friend in San Francisco. I know that he considered me to be *his* best friend and, as such, I was willing to concede the morning hours to his prized collection of old dead black men. The music didn't really bother me – in fact, it was not hard to see why Brian was so drawn to it. For all its crudity and repetitiveness it bore the unmistakable stamp of authenticity. I don't know whether the men who made those records were, in fact, yearning for fame and fortune like every other artist – most likely they were hoping for *some* degree of recognition

and remuneration – but the point is that it *sounds* like they weren't. It sounds like they just opened their mouths and let it come out naturally, without a thought in the world as to how it would be received.

Brian was deep into his blues phase at that time, obsessed by the mystery and exoticism of the music, and our apartment was piled with LPs bought at garage sales and thrift stores for nickels and dimes. It made no difference to me. Brian is continually fascinated by my inability to have any strong opinions about music one way or the other – for him, this is tantamount to agnosticism in a world where God's face is *everywhere* – but he also appreciates my flexibility, particularly in the morning.

I have always been slow to awaken, and the morning of my last day of bachelorhood I lay a long time, as I do most mornings, feeling my senses gradually sharpen and come into focus. As I waited to come fully to, I occupied myself with the ceiling, searching for the man with the hat. Sometimes he was as plain as day, and sometimes the cracks and holes would not congeal into any specific shape and I would be a frustrated astronomer, unable to make sense of the chaos overhead. I disdain superstition, so I would not say that I consciously considered my ability to locate the man with the hat to be a good or bad "omen," or anything similarly absurd. I will say, though, that I felt better when I was able to locate him before arising, and I mention it only to point out something I've grown more and more certain of in recent days, and that is that we do not *choose* what we believe.

I eventually grunted my bulk upright and sat, looking at myself in the mirrored closet door that afforded a full-length view of the bed. Teena was particularly fond of this aspect of my room's geography. Many was the time I would be lying on my back, gazing up at the enormous white globes of her bouncing breasts, only to notice that her eyes were rapturously fixed on her own body in the mirror.

Whereas Teena's attitude toward mirrors is typical of your garden variety exhibitionist, mine more resembles that of a hurt and scorned lover. Once it was different, to be sure, but, as I sat that morning, hunched on the edge of the bed, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I was treated to yet another disappointing reminder of the primary impediment to rehabilitating my own atrophied narcissism muscle: my bloated self. Once again the reflection had let me down and I stared resentfully into it, wondering, for the umpteenth time, why I hadn't removed those ghastly mirrored panels.

Teena claims to like my body, says it's "teddy bear-esque," which I suppose is true. But as someone who has always been overweight, it is no doubt difficult for her to understand the agony of the descent to Teddy from Beauty. For I was once a pretty boy. My French-Canadian ancestors bestowed upon me a particularly dark, brooding, vaguely European attractiveness that, to my great enjoyment, proved irresistible to a wide variety of girls and women, from the townies in New Rochelle where I was raised, to the Berkeley co-eds between whose ripe thighs I nestled for four grateful years.

But it wasn't the deprivation of easy sex which wounded me the most. It was the loss of what I felt to be my true face,

my own authentic exterior. Oh, I know the *reasons* behind my demise: poor food choices, lack of exercise, liquor, etc. But some part of me recoils at the *unfairness* of the sudden, swift punishment for what is not new behavior. I am the same, but now I am changed. It is not fair, and I would sooner blame the mirrors than my own habits, which I am terrified I will never be able to change and so prefer not to think about.

Teena never knew me when I was still young and beautiful, and I have no friends remaining from those days, so I have no objective verification of what I suspect: that back then I was better *inside* as well – stronger, sharper, less merciful. The added bulk seems to have slowed me down in all ways. I am tired more often now, and I feel softer all around. But God, how confidently I once faced the world! Once I relished the moment of disclosure. Standing, facing each other in some darkened dorm room in Stern Hall, disrobing slowly, shyly, opposite the ubiquitous Anais Nin books. I still recall one black girl – a poly sci major – her afro glistening in the light from the muted TV, murmuring "oh, you so *gorgeous*," as her soft, dark hands moved greedily across my lean, tightly muscled whiteness, the television bathing us both in blue. And I smiled because I knew that I *deserved* this, that I was not "getting lucky."

On this particular morning – the morning of July 6th – the man with the hat remained elusive, and finally I got up and padded into the bathroom. Then, out to the living room where I slumped into the big purple chair and gazed out the sliding glass doors, past the fire escape and onto 18th street. Brian and I lived in the Castro district, the holy land for

homosexuals from all across America. The usual parade of preening musclemen, mincing queens, hawk-eyed hustlers and dog-walkers was moving steadily along below. It was not my intention to land an apartment smack in the middle of "Dicksuck Central" as Brian cheerfully, and without malice, called it. But the city is so crowded and so expensive that when something opens up, a thousand hands grab at it, whatever and wherever it is. No doubt there were droves of twenty-something gay boys who would have coveted our ringside seat at the rainbow revolution. Brian and I were certainly among the least colorful of the building's residents. But one of the other tenants – a struggling (and also straight) graphic artist – happened to be a former classmate of mine, and when the place became available, a good word with the manager was all it took to hustle me into the space before anyone even knew it was vacant. This is how it's done.

Since moving to California I have gradually come to accept this as the paradigm of the future: everything overcrowded, overpriced and overrated. One of my favorite barroom topics is population growth. "Did you know..." I might drawl from my position atop the comfortable, padded barstools at Putzkammer's, ignoring the eye-rolling of Brian, who has heard all my spiels countless times. "Did you know that the U.S. population roughly *doubled* between the 1950s and the 1990s? That means that back in Eisenhower's America, there were literally half the people walking the streets that there are now. *Half.*"

It takes a moment for it to sink in, particularly for San Francisco residents who are accustomed to circling for an hour in search of parking, waiting for another forty

minutes in line to be seated, only to be crammed into some table, elbow to elbow with their fellow citizens, everyone yakking into their cell phones and waving impatiently at the service people, of whom there are never quite enough to go around.

It will be like this for most of us soon enough. California has always been a harbinger of things to come. Whenever I fly back east I am shocked to rediscover the vast tracts of largely unoccupied land across what used to be known, quaintly, as "the Middle West." We are all bunched together on the coasts, the hives growing thicker and thicker as we buzz in circles, seeking space. And we would sooner sting ourselves silly than admit defeat and move to the dreaded "fly-over" states. The city is, however, filled with people who have made the futile and foolish attempt.

"Oh, we *tried*. Trish and I cashed out and bought the most amazing four-bedroom house in Springfield, Missouri. You should have seen it. We felt like goddamn *millionaires*. But we couldn't take it. We moved back two years ago and now we're sharing a three-room flat in the Mission district with some crazy Mexican lady and her sons, I don't even know how many of them there are. But you know, we just couldn't take the *culture* out there."

As I sat, rubbing my unshaven face and staring out the window, Brian appeared from his room, all a-bustle, as is standard for him in the morning hours.

"Hey, Freddy lives!" he shouted at me as he passed, his arms full of some proof sheets. "Coffee's on," he said over his shoulder as he hurried back down the hall. "Better fuel up for the big day. Listen, you need me to do anything?"

I didn't answer because I knew he wouldn't be able to hear me over the music, and I hate conducting conversations with people who won't stay put. Instead, I poured myself a cup of coffee and returned to the purple chair. I had slept for over nine hours but I didn't feel rested, and the enormity of what was expected of me that Friday seemed more than even Brian's Trojan-strength coffee was likely to adequately prepare me for.

After a moment he returned with some kind of leather shoulder bag in hand. "What'd you say?" he said, as he dug through it, looking for something.

"I didn't say anything. And - Jesus, will you turn that down?" I motioned to the stereo, where Muddy was in the midst of noisily declaiming, "*That's all right baby, that's all right for YOU...*"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry." He flipped the volume dial. "So? Anything I can take care of? I'm meeting Jenny for lunch, but after that I'm free."

"And has Jenny the Super-Agent finally used her fabled Barnard accent to negotiate something more than free *hors d'œuvre* at the Tonga Room?"

"Now, Freddy. Just because Jenny didn't want to sleep with you on New Year's Eve is no reason to hold her in such low esteem."

"I think it is, actually."

"Anyway, it's a little premature to say for sure, but it sounds like it's going to work out with Delineate."

I looked at him closely. "Really?"

He stopped his bustling then and smiled shyly. "Yeah, I think so. Jenny thinks so."

There was a pause. "Hell, Brian. Congratulations."

He beamed at me. "Thanks. But there's still plenty of time for it to fall through somehow, so don't congratulate me yet. Now back to you. What do you need from me today?"

"You can meet me at the tux place at three and help me make sure I don't wind up looking like a goddamn waiter."

He raised his eyebrows. "Well, well. Freddy's nervous."

"Ridiculous."

He smiled fondly at me and ran a hand over his bristly blonde head. "Don't worry, Freddy. Your best man will be there. You'll be beautiful. You'll look just like George Clooney."

"Who?"

Brian's mouth opened.

"I'm joking, for crying out loud," I said. "Do you really think I'm that out of touch?"

"I'm still trying to determine exactly how out of touch you are, Freddy," he said, slinging the bag over his shoulder and heading out the door. "I'll let you know when I get it nailed down."