

CHARLES NEWMAN

The following excerpts are from a novel THE PROMISEKEEPER which will be published by Simon & Schuster in June. In ECLIPSE the protagonist, Sam Hooper, first encounters Aaron and Odile Grassgreen and their children, Matthew and Steiglitz. The second excerpt is what they used to call a dream sequence.

ECLIPSE

They came toward him like a Disney cartoon, *sfumato*. One improbably lovely girl accompanied by fey gnomes and other friendly forest animals, characters who are likely to start talking even before their sketchy bodies have been completed by the great animator.

Aaron marched in front in Israeli army officer shorts, a Leica banging against his solar plexus, all thighs and no calves in thonged sandals; Steiglitz, her long black hair below her waist

already tall as her father, bearer of his crescent legs on Odile's edible torso; Matthew, tiny oblate testicles hanging out of an ancient Hebrew Boy's Club swim suit, held up by shopping twine; and Odile, in a Freedom Fighter's bikini, stomach firm as an apple, fuzzy blonde hair a mist on her unshaven perfect legs. She carried Aaron's tripod on one shoulder, a picnic hamper on the other, while the children bumping between their parents' mismatched stride, carried contraptions of Aaron's construction through which we shall view the eclipse.

Aaron took his time in the tunnel, reading the graffiti to himself in a high monotone, feeling what he couldn't see with his palms. The children advanced towards the light while Odile, a fading starlit, walked at deliberate pace behind Aaron to keep him moving. Sam looked for alcoves off the tunnel, but there were none.

They emerged on the beach, the light off the water blinding them and the sand scorching their feet. Odile hopped up and down, a palomino percheron, Aaron did not slow his pace, but grimaced horribly, which suited him. Steiglitz and Matthew ran full-tilt into the waves, the boy tripping and being dragged by his sister until he finally rolled and tripped her. Her foot smashed one of his lips. He held it mournfully.

"Oh, Aaron, take a picture," Odile wailed.

"It's the sun today, Shickaw, no kids, no family album crap. Go get some rays on the big white bod."

She ran off powerfully, spurting sand into Aaron's eyes, dropping the tripod in the sand. She carried the picnic hamper on her head like African wash.

"A very unhappy girl," Aaron said, apparently to Sam.

"Oh?"

"Yeah," he grinned, "She wants to be in *movies*."

Then he burst into a choking laugh, and Sam timed his chuckle perfectly to coincide with Aaron's convulsion.

The beach was black with eclipse seekers, bright with the aluminum shields and colored boxes they had brought to preserve their retinas. Children glanced apprehensively at the sky, their parents at their watches. Odile spread the blanket and the children ran back to roll themselves on it. The sun arched knowingly towards its newsworthy juncture. Sam sat down.

"It's the moon that covers the sun, isn't it?" Odile asked him without looking up.

"I guess," said Sam, "Except I always thought of it as

the sun sneaking up behind the moon.”

“Any way you look at it,” she snapped, “it’s just that much bigger than the moon, even when they’re up tight.” She held her thumb and forefinger apart like calipers.

She was sweating again, this time on her upper lip and chest, as she worked at the double-hinged hamper. Sam focussed on a particularly filthy spot between the thongs of her sundial sandals. It took just over a minute and a half for her self-consciousness to aggregate sufficiently so that she withdrew her feet beneath her fulsome haunch. Hoops was saddened by this; Odile’s modesty had the same effect on him as Mrs. Denehey’s insistence. Both presupposed his motives before they had actually formed. What a terrible thing it is to be trusted to do your best, he thought. Yet he would have had no compunction about biting those doubled thighs into parting in the pre-scheduled darkness. How long would he have? How dark could it get? Hoops looked around apprehensively. The police were everywhere, lounging in their new summer uniforms, pale blue permacrease bermuda shorts, off-white leatherette jack-boots, and royal blue overblouse with dolman sleeves; star and number embroidered over their heart. Some fenced playfully with their riot sticks, others made scheduled duty treks with sandwich information boards suspended from their shoulders.

NO INJURIOUSNESS!

DO NOT LOOK DIRECTLY INTO THE SUN

USE YOUR EYE BOXES

PERMUTANT DAMAGE MAY RESULT

YOU ONLY HAVE TWO EYES

VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED

“What’ve we got to eat?”

Aaron had stomped up to them and flung himself on the blanket. The children viewed him circumspectly.

“Cold rock Cornish game hen and vin rose, dear,” Odile curled her lips.

“Cold what?”

Matthew and Steiglitz laughed spitefully.

“Well, Sam gave us that check and I thought we’d celebrate,” Odile said rather too matter-of-factly.

“So look what lover got for all us kids,” Aaron teased inefficiently, “Fancy chikhen n’ wine.”

The children did not laugh again. Sam felt moved to intervene. Odile began to take the foil wrapped hens from the

hamper.

“Sam, will you play *sommelier*?”

Aaron put his hands on his fleshy hips and laughed idiotically. Sam blandly offered him the magnum.

“You want to open it, Aaron?”

Aaron shook his head in pointless defiance.

“Oh God,” Odile wailed, striking her fine head with the heel of her hand. “I forgot the corkscrew.”

“We never had a corkscrew, baby,” Aaron countered, “And we never drank wine at home that I remember.”

Sam saved the day by producing his late father’s penknife and with two effortless motions sent the cork spinning across the sand. Pale rose foamed over his knuckles. He filled up paper cups to the top and offered them to his despondent hosts. Odile downed hers in one motion and tilted the empty cup to Sam before Aaron had even brought his to his lips.

“Really savors the old taste buds, eh?” he snorted at her.

Sam noted that when Aaron snorted it was very disgusting.

Odile drank another glass and handed the foil-wrapped individual cold rock Cornish game hens around like grenades to her platoon. Aaron took his to a far corner of the blanket to watch the lake. Steiglitz demonstrated to Matthew how to disembowel an individual cold rock Cornish game hen with an index finger — wild rice and chesnuts spurted into her face — but she simply leaned down and allowed him to lick her clean. Odile watched them with a faint smile.

The wine relaxed Sam; he tore a small leg of the hen loose and the sweet husk of meat fell away from the bone as his mouth closed about it. Odile hunched over towards him. A driblet of wine ran from the corner of her mouth down her hard neck and disappeared hesitantly into her cleavage.

“An amusing little wine,” Sam said, and filled her glass again.

Odile was long gone by this time, however, so Sam read himself to sleep.

When he awoke, the sky alternated violently between mustard and magenta. Odile had passed out, curled feebly about the empty magnum, the blanket littered with individual cold rock Cornish game hen bones.

“ ‘Bout a half hour to go,” Aaron mumbled.

He was at work setting up the banquet camera, a monstrous black box with a tiny lens, burying each leg of the tripod securely in the sand. The lake was purple and smooth as slate, the Pumping Station gleamed black in the mighty distance. The kids were down at the water’s edge, filigreeing a sand pylon with hen’s ribs.

Odile began to roll and moan. Aaron ignored her, but between sighs and hiccoughs, she spoke:

“Help the child experience his world. Allow him outside so that he may feel the weather changes. Tell him what the different kinds of precipitation are...”

Sam started. Her voice was expertly modulated, disembodied.

“Experiencing something and hearing the name which goes with it is indubitably a prerequisite to speech...”

Aaron spoke to Sam without turning around.

“Not to worry, Sam. It’s just the Gulley catechism again. All the time when she sleeps. Impossible...”

Sam couldn’t speak. She was just going on in that pure voice.

“Supply his touch with variety. Inside, outside — animals that squeak, plastic rings — beware of styrene substances which may be poisonous if sucked indiscriminately — terry cloth, gravel, paper to crumble, paper to fold, a bit of satin, a cup without a handle...discarded purses give security ...give him a paper bag and say ‘bag, bag.’ ” Odile thrashed her hips in the damp sand.

“Mud, dough, snow, clay. Let him feel his food, too. But not his feces — instead use a deep bowl and lightweight spoon. The spoon should have a handle which will fill the child’s entire fist...use a simple word which always means toileting...”

Odile sat upright and opened her eyes.

“Eating,” she blurted, “Should be a pleasurable experience for every child!” Then she fell back, her breasts heaving irregularly.

“Come on now, Hooper, it’s coming,” Aaron said. Sam flung back his head. The sun had begun to score an alley in the clouds...distended, aerodynamic in shape, its head a clot of blood. The moon, we are informed, lay waiting indistinguishable from the clouds. Sam thought of lovely big Odile as

an indistinguishable moon that he could occasionally slip up behind and bathe in blood and spectacular excess energy. She was quite pale and immovable now; her lips dry, legs ungainly spread, eyes open but unseeing, not a wink.

The heavenly bodies' parabolas had intermeshed. The children returned from the water, as if on a signal, Steiglitz leading Matthew by the hand, to lie down immediately on the blanket next to defunct mother. Steiglitz, in fact, curled surreptitiously into the curve of her palpitating body and massaged her neck. Matthew lay on his back, hugging her feet dagger-like to his chest.

Aaron handed out the eye boxes — pepsi cases lined with aluminum foil with a pin hole to view through. All down the beach they drew similar contraptions over their faces — newspaper, stainless steel, brushed aluminum, hubcaps, corrugated board, pieplates with nail holes. They lay on their backs, senses sheathed, looking through a hole large enough for the sun and moon in conjunction but only barely large enough for the eyes.

“No point in two holes because you can only see one thing anyway,” Aaron said.

The sun was being obliterated. The moon bit on it relentlessly; a stupid scallop of a sun lulled in the dusk. Light and shadow were one.

Aaron lay on his stomach reading *Art News*. At ten second intervals on his chronometer he squeezed the bulb on the shutter cable, the camera emitting a strangely unmetallic tick.

The kids lay obediently beneath their boxes, sighing occasionally; Odile was gaseous. On the pretext of getting a better angle, Sam inched across the sand so that the top of his head touched her hips as he adjusted Aaron's box on his face.

The sun was only a crescent now. Its intensity had diminished, and the entire landscape seemed only a reflection of itself. The sky, lake and beach were slivers of a single perspective, of the same sombre hue. The luminous bodies of the curious ignited like punk against nature's opacity, its contrived contingencies. The buildings at the edge of the diaphanous beach glowed brighter than their windows. Cars slowed, waves petered out, talk ceased; Sam sneezed in the constricting box. Fighting mucous and tears, he found only the black disc of the moon, a penumbra of ornamental fire

surrounding it, and not darkness, but simply the palest perishable light about them.

“I wanna see!”

Sam’s head was thrown rudely from the box. Odile had leapt — though that is perhaps too strong a word — since she had arrived only to her knees — but she was nonetheless staring directly into the searing eclipse.

Sam jumped to his feet looking imploringly at Aaron who proceeded to leaf through *Art News* still squeezing the shutter bulb at the proper interval.

“If she wants to look, let her,” he said hoarsely.

“But she’ll burn her goddamn eyes out, you bastard,” Sam screamed. “Didn’t you see what the sign said?”

Odile had grasped one of his legs as a prop now and as Sam gazed down into her bloated face, he could see his own head in her remaining contact lens, a silly shocked visage crowned with fire, and he realized that it was only his skull that was protecting her from permutant damage. She looked through him into the sun, her arms and breasts lifeless upon her, swaying from her knees and repeating snatches of the Gulley chatechism fitfully.

“When the child has two new things at once, he can often do neither...”

“Aaron, for Christ’s sake do something,” Sam cried.

But there was no answer — only the perpetual lubric thuds of the shutter, until Odile herself, either stung by the light or simply exhausted, flung herself against the tripod and knocked the camera to the sand.

Aaron was up in an instant, and screaming incomprehensibly, began to beat her viciously across the shoulders with his forearms. Odile twisted away from him so she could still manage to view the sun while taking the blows on her tough legs.

Sam bent over them and again saw himself reflected for an instant in her eye’s lens; then resignedly, he threw a cross body block on Aaron, punishing the wind from him, spinning him off the blanket entirely. He then turned and fell across Odile.

Aaron struggled up, choking, Sam grabbed him in a leg scissors, squeezing him between his thighs until the artist turned bluer than the very shadows, and with Aaron grounded, Samuel Hooper shielded Odile’s eyes with his palms.

Matthew remained somnolent, but Steiglitz, misunderstanding Sam's intentions, began to kick methodically at his face.

So it was with some relief that out of the corner of his eye, Sam saw a policeman throw off his sandwich board and begin a sprint towards them.



...Give me one reason why I should have recognized him. He looked just like any one of those shortish ugly successful old men from whom we all make a good living serving. What am I going to do? Ask him where's his tie like some lady *maitre d'*? Provide him with the limpish house sportcoat last worn by the poloshirted son of a Dayton impresario? It's not for me to hide his collarbones. His agent knew we couldn't afford to care.

I showed him to a corner booth. The one where converging mirrors splinter the diners appropriately into mismatched halves for other spectators. And didn't think any more about it. As far as I know, Leonardo accomplished his usual no-nonsense serving. And it certainly wasn't the food. Yet, after the gazpacho, steamed turbot and zabaglione, I brought them the bill. And right there, before my eyes, the agent took a silver laundry pen from his vest, and handed it to the old gentleman who proceeded to scrawl all over the tablecloth. It was pretty illegible, but it said PICASSO. Then they both pushed past me, grinning horribly.

They certainly didn't anticipate anything like that in Purk Hotel School *Case Book*, I can tell you. I think I had read something in the papers about great artists like him not paying for things like that, but I never thought it would happen to me. Well, I ran around the serving table just in time. They were almost to the coat rack when I intercepted them. The agent tried to push by me but I gave him a short elbow. He crumpled exaggeratedly against the coat rack, managing his best lawsuit stare. Picasso, though, just stood there in his hot-shot Riviera sport shirt smiling pleasantly. He wasn't 'screeching hysterically in a foreign tongue' or anything like that. I'll give that to him. The agent caught his breath, hissed, pointed dramatically at me.

"Christ, Buster, don't you know who this is?"

I replied that I had indeed heard of M. Picasso.

"That signature is worth ten of your lousy meals right now and more than that in publicity." he averred.

I allowed as that might be so, but that I really could not accept anything more than the advertised price of the meal. Under the strained circumstances, however, and for the sake of international goodwill, you could say, I would not charge for the tablecloth.

The agent fell back quizzically, groggily, Picasso shrugged and wrinkled, I seemed taller than either of them. The agent and I exchanged baffled glances for several minutes, Picasso intermittently admiring our collection of celebrity photos.

The agent put a limp hand into an inside coat pocket. "OK," he muttered. Draping a polyethelene sheath of cards over his forearm, he selected one and waved it wearily at me.

"I'm afraid we don't take credit cards," I said, "It says so right on the menu. That particular one, as a matter of fact, involves a kickback of some 13%."

Then it was the agent who began to 'screech hysterically in a foreign tongue.' He yelled at Picasso and pulled on the delicate lapels of his sports shirt. Picasso produced the insides of his vaudevillian pockets, blushed and grinned at me. Neither had a cent on them.

"I know what you're driving at." the agent gasped, "You want *more* don't you? You wanna pretty picture! Right? OK."

He shoved Picasso back to the table, and made him take out his pen again. Working recalcitrantly, his whole fist about the cylinder, he put ears on the P and changed it into a goat. He

made a crucifix out of the I, and a pig in heat out of the C. Then he stepped back hopefully. The agent nodded but I didn't. Leonardo had a silly pleased smile on his face. (Our people work on a salary basis.)

The agent held up the table cloth, flourishing it like an arab for my better knowledge, which I disdained. Picasso shrugged and added a garland of flowers about the edge of the cloth. I didn't bat an eye.

It was getting along in the afternoon and nearly all of the guests had left. Leonardo was putting the unused pats of butter back into the cooking crock. They both had sat down again, disconsolate in their booth. Picasso seemed calm enough, but the agent looked as though he might make a run for it any minute.

"Look, Mac, what is it that you want?"

"Why, a fair price, sir."

He sunk in a glower.

"Free gifts don't go very far these days, you see," I tried to be polite about it.

Picasso nibbled on a salt stick and kept doodling away on the tablecloth. The agent watched him sadly.

"You're getting a goddamn masterpiece," he sighed.

"If he hadn't signed it," I said, "I could take it home and put it on the kid's bedroom wall. He could figure it out, then, lying on his back at night, and see it when he got up in the morning if he had time. But now you're making it what it is, I couldn't take it. Just pay for your meal and get the hell out of here. If M. Picasso liked the food, he'll be back."

The agent stared sullenly.

"Go ahead, ask him if he liked the food."

The agent translated.

"He liked it OK, I guess."

"Just OK?" I said.

"Nope," he admitted, "He liked it a lot."

"You see?" I said.

I folded up the tablecloth carefully, cheerfully, and presented it to them. Then I relaxed and sat down in the booth with our clients.

M. Picasso has his art all right, but its people like me who make or break civilizations.

"It's getting on toward dinnertime." I mentioned later.

Picasso was dozing in the corner of the booth. He looked like a newborn baby and, as he snored, little puffs of fog appeared on our converging mirrors. I supposed he was especially comfortable in his beltless white trousers and polo shirt. The agent and I then had a long discussion about the war, his surgery, and several marriages.

Leonardo dropped some dishes in the back, and M. Picasso awoke inquisitively. He stood up, stretched and began to putter about the restaurant, returning eventually to the gallery of celebrity photos we had inherited from the previous management. He seemed delighted with Frankie Crosetti, Wilbur Shaw, J. D. Salinger, Edward R. Murrow, Constance Bennett, Charles E. Wilson, Billy Graham, Emile Durkheim, Vincent Price, J. C. Penney, Lionel Trilling, Harry Hopkins, Van Cliburn, Ludwig Erhardt, and the rest of them.

I kept the agent hostage with a patient knee. Picasso asked Leonardo for a butter knife, who obliged him with a bow. Picasso then began to pry the celebrities from their frames, taking care not to mutilate or fold, stacking the prints neatly upon a Sèvres serving platter. Leonardo brought him a chair so he could reach the highest ones, and *cher maitre* took off his pointy shoes so as not to crush the plush.

At the very top, he took down the signed Karsh profiles of Ernesto Gallo, Solly Hemus, Stanley Edgar Hyman, Walter Slezak and A. Krishna Memon. Then he called for a thick Bechamel sauce, which he spread with a spatula into the frames, larding here and there with an adhesive mixture of Bel Paese and creme chantilly. He didn't spill a dollop, and very soon the wall was solid with white bechamel, each empty frame geometrically distinct.

In the upper left hand panel, with pastry guns and skewers of pistachio nuts, he began to construct an elephant of sweetbreads. Such an elephant proceeded clumsily through a bas relief of pecan palms and liver pate boulders. For perspective, he built a crenellated wall of transparent prosciutto, with battlements of snow peas and flying buttresses of green snap beans and Mrs. Mangle's Louisville lime pie. A bite-sized boy of vanilla extract with a skeleton of allspice proudly carried the head of veal roll giant towards the city. Picasso spoke sharply to his agent.

"David, returning with the Head of Goliath to Jerusalem." It was translated.

Picasso shrugged and went on to the second of the twenty-eight available panels. A cornstarch and watermelon rind Jehovah exploded from a macaroon sun upon a scene in which a marzipan boy was crushed beneath a cart of pappilote laden with lingonberries. The bulls drawing the cart were of striped sea bass, their craven aspic drivers prodding them with gaffs of celery stuffed with red caviar. The cart's wheel was emendated with spokes of crab and frog. The onlooking evangelists were of tamale and rhubarb, respectively, cloaked in artichoke, and, above, around and all about, cruised multitudinous cupids of apricot mousse. The Lord held a mitre of banana rhumbe, his coriander eyeballs fixed apprehensively upon his own proscenium: in this case, a decorous foliage of sculpted tongue and quatrefoil zucchini, dotted here and there with niches in which fey madonnas of guacamole with child of tartar conducted business as usual.

Picasso spoke sharply again.

"The Reliquary of St. Zenobius," the agent translated.

Picasso went on working while we got things ready for dinner, Leonardo keeping an eye on the agent for me. When he was finished, however, and the 28 panels gleamed with the whole of our kitchen, Picasso turned from his work and instructed us to sit. We pushed butcher's blocks together in the kitchen, laid our various uniforms over them and put on the best service. It was at this point that Norman the Chef became hysterical, opining that there was no food left to serve the clientele, much less ourselves, no matter what the significance of the occasion.

Picasso seemed to understand. He spoke at length to the agent, who summarized:

"This is the most outstanding of my works. I labored at it with the utmost ardor and technical attainment, completing it with all possible artistry, sense of proportion and knowledge of art. Let's eat."

Picasso started to sign his name at the base, but I gently took his hand and beckoned him to the table. All we then carried our plates to the gates of paradise and helped ourselves. Dishwashers and waiters, saladmen and pastrywomen, honored guests and employees, our heads ranging against the pans and servers as we sat to our buffet. And at either end of the table, *Purk School of Hotel Management, Ithaca (B.S., M.B.A.)* and *Academia de Bellas Artas, Barcelona (no degree taken)*.

I myself gormandized the wheel of the *Zenobius* reliquary, topped with the raisin eyes of the evangelists, and the curried pluvial of our Lord. Picasso had the bulls on their backs, angels of minced quail and the pepper and pimento abyss from the *Apocalypse*. Our agent had only a section of meringue quatrefoil, feigning nausea as the first fork punctured the masterpiece. I would have had him eat the whole of it for his better knowledge, holding his nostrils the while.

After dinner, we returned arm in arm to have a last look at the gates of paradise. They were nearly stripped, of course, the frames obscured by our hasty serving; bits of garlic sausage remained, as did clouds of sesame, caraway, anise. A whole uncooked beef tenderloin which had served as the *catafalque* of *St. Felix* sagged from its skewers; a film of blood had turned the bechamel to the dusk rose of transubstantiation.

“A new period. A breakthrough!” screamed the agent.

Picasso and I exchanged weary glances and began to put the photos back in place. We squeezed them into their frames, he deftly cleaning whatever sauce oozed from behind their glazed faces. We took particular care with the profile of Frankie Crosetti, as the remains of the panel distorted his face.

The restoration took longer than the creation. Leonardo had had to turn away a dinner crowd at the door.

When everything was back in place, Picasso took the agent firmly by the arm and asked if I could recommend a place for a later supper....