I proceeded alongside my father, clutching his right hand, running to keep up with the long strides he was taking. All my clothes were new: the black shoes, the green school uniform, and the red tarboosh.1 My delight in my new clothes, however, was not altogether unmarred, for this was no feast day but the day on which I was to be cast into school for the first time.

My mother stood at the window watching our progress, and I would turn toward her from time to time, as though appealing for help. We walked along a street lined with gardens; on both sides were extensive fields planted with crops, prickly pears, henna trees, and a few date palms.

"Why school?" I challenged my father openly. "I shall never do anything to annoy you."

"I'm not punishing you," he said, laughing. "School's not a punishment. It's the factory that makes useful men out of boys. Don't you want to be like your father and brothers?"

I was not convinced. I did not believe there was really any good to be had in tearing me away from the intimacy of my home and throwing me into this building that stood at the end of the road like some huge, high-walled fortress, exceedingly stern and grim.

When we arrived at the gate we could see the courtyard, vast and crammed full of boys and girls. "Go in by yourself," said my father, "and join them. Put a smile on your face and be a good example to others."

I hesitated and clung to his hand, but he gently pushed me from him. "Be a man," he said. "Today you truly begin life. You will find me waiting for you when it's time to leave."

I took a few steps, then stopped and looked but saw nothing. Then the faces of boys and girls came into view. I did not know a single one of them, and none of them directed toward me, and one boy approached and asked, "Who brought you?"

"My father," I whispered.

"My father's dead," he said quite simply.

I did not know what to say. The gate was closed, letting out a pitiable screech. Some of the children burst into tears. The bell rang. A lady came along, followed by a group of men. The men began sorting us into ranks. We were formed into an intricate pattern in the great courtyard surrounded on three sides by high buildings of several floors; from each floor we were overlooked by a long balcony roofed in wood.

"This is your new home," said the woman. "Here too there are mothers and fathers. Here there is everything that is enjoyable and beneficial to knowledge and religion. Dry your tears and face life joyfully."

We submitted to the facts, and this submission brought a sort of contentment. Living beings were drawn to other living beings, and from the first moments my heart made friends with such boys as were to be my friends and fell in love with such girls as I was to be in love with, so that it seemed my misgivings had had no basis. I had

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1	tarboosh: A tasseled cap often worn by Muslim men and made from felt or cloth.
never imagined school would have this rich variety. We played all sorts of different
games: swings, the vaulting horse, ball games. In the music room we chanted our first
songs. We also had our first introduction to language. We saw a globe of the Earth,
which revolved and showed the various continents and countries. We started learn-
ing the numbers. The story of the Creator of the universe was read to us, we were told
of His present world and of His Hereafter, and we heard examples of what He said.
We ate delicious food, took a little nap, and woke up to go on with friendship and
love, play and learning.

As our path revealed itself to us, however, we did not find it as totally sweet and
unclouded as we had presumed. Dust-laden winds and unexpected accidents came
about suddenly, so we had to be watchful, at the ready, and very patient. It was not
all a matter of playing and fooling around. Rivalries could bring about pain and
hatred or give rise to fighting. And while the lady would sometimes smile, she
would often scowl and scold. Even more frequently she would resort to physical
punishment.

In addition, the time for changing one's mind was over and gone and there was no
question of ever returning to the paradise of home. Nothing lay ahead of us but ex-
ertion, struggle, and perseverance. Those who were able took advantage of the op-
portunities for success and happiness that presented themselves amid the worries.

The bell rang announcing the passing of the day and the end of work. The throngs
of children rushed toward the gate, which was opened again. I bade farewell to friends
and sweethearts and passed through the gate. I peered around but found no trace of
my father, who had promised to be there. I stepped aside to wait. When I had wait-
ed for a long time without avail, I decided to return home on my own. After I had
taken a few steps, a middle-aged man passed by, and I realized at once that I knew him.
He came toward me, smiling, and shook me by the hand, saying, "It's a long time
since we last met—how are you?"

With a nod of my head, I agreed with him and in turn asked, "And you, how
are you?"

"As you can see, not all that good, the Almighty be praised!"

Again he shook me by the hand and went off. I proceeded a few steps, then came/
to a startled halt. Good Lord! Where was the street lined with gardens? Where had
it disappeared to? When did all these vehicles invade it? And when did all these
hordes of humanity come to rest upon its surface? How did these hills of refuse come
to cover its sides? And where were the fields that bordered it? High buildings had
taken over, the street surged with children, and disturbing noises shook the air. At
various points stood conjurers showing off their tricks and making snakes appear
from baskets. Then there was a band announcing the opening of a circus, with clowns
and weight lifters walking in front. A line of trucks carrying central security troops
crawled majestically by. The siren of a fire engine shrieked, and it was not clear how
the vehicle would cleave its way to reach the blazing fire. A battle raged between a
taxi driver and his passenger, while the passenger's wife called out for help and no
one answered. Good God! I was in a daze. My head spun. I almost went crazy. How
could all this have happened in half a day, between early morning and sunset? I
would find the answer at home with my father. But where was my home? I could see
only tall buildings and hordes of people. I hastened on to the crossroads between the
gardens and Abu Khoda. I had to cross Abu Khoda to reach my house, but the stream
cars would not let up. The fire engine's siren was shrieking at full pitch as it moved