

# THE VICE PRINCIPAL

Houshang Moradi-Kermani

TRANSLATED FROM THE PERSIAN

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*If there's one author the mention of whose name is apt to cause an Iranian face to light up, it is Houshang Moradi-Kermani. He was born in Sirch Village near the city of Kerman in south central Iran in 1944. At the age of twelve, he left his village, first moving to Kerman and then to Tehran, where he attended university, graduating in English literature. His collection, The Stories of Majid (from which "The Vice Principal" is taken) was first published in 1979, the year of the Iranian Revolution—a year that saw a publishing boom—and has been reprinted over two dozen times. It has also been made into a television series, making the boy-hero Majid a household name. Moradi-Kermani is also the most translated modern Iranian author, and he continues to garner award after award in European literary circles while remaining virtually unknown to Americans. Majid, like the heroes in all of Moradi-Kermani's books, pulls himself up by his own resourcefulness despite the hurdles imposed by the dominating authorities. "The Vice Principal" appears here in translation for the first time.*

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The kids had turned the classroom upside down when the vice principal, all charged up, stuck his head in the door:

“What’s going on in here, you jackasses?”

The vice principal as usual was holding a switch in his hand and was the very picture of Jack the Ripper, all mean and stern. As his voice boomed in the classroom, the kids flew like frightened mice from the blackboard and the nooks and crannies of the classroom and stuffed themselves back in their seats. In an instant, the screaming and pell-mell subsided. The vice principal came into the classroom and stood just inside the doorway. He cast a harsh and bitter glance at the kids, who were doing their best imitations of innocent lambs, and said:

“What do you have this period?”

“Composition, sir.”

“Who is your teacher?”

“Mr. Hosseini. They say he’s been transferred and isn’t coming anymore.”

“All right, shut up then and do your work. If anyone makes a sound, I’ll come and paddle him until he’s black and blue.”

“May we go outside, sir?”

“No. Get your asses back in your seats right now. I’ll be back in a moment to take care of you.”

He left to make the rounds of the courtyard, looking in on the classrooms and inspecting the premises before coming back. No sooner had he put a foot out the door than the classroom turned again into a flea market. The hollering and commotion of the kids rose to fill the air. They flew out from behind the desks and started climbing atop each other’s heads and shoulders, onto the door, and up the walls. Bits of chalk, erasers, watermelon seeds, date pits, pens, and notebooks flew around the place, hitting the kids in the back of the neck and on the forehead, eyes, and ears. The foulest of

swear words were launched from every direction. The sounds of the hooves of a herd of galloping mules and crash landings onto desks and benches resounded in the classroom as plumes of chalk dust filled the air.

A few of the children sounded a false alarm, "The vice principal is coming." But he didn't come and didn't come.

When he finally did come, the period was just ending. At the back of the classroom, two of the boys were wrapped up in a wrestling match.

"Again you're at it, you jackasses!"

The wrestlers had clamped onto each other's legs like lobsters. Their faces had turned the color of cooked beets from the strain. The vice principal's words did not make it to their ears. As the two friends were thus occupied, the vice principal came up behind them and his arm got down to work.

He delivered seven, eight, ten hearty counts of the switch to their arms and legs and just below their fannies until their limbs went completely limp and they let go of one another.

Tails between their legs, they hopped back in their seats.

The vice principal laid his switch on the teacher's desk. He flared his nostrils once and went up to the board.

He took a piece of chalk and on the board he wrote:

"Who Renders the Greatest Service to Mankind?"

"This is the subject of the composition for next time. Write it and bring it to class. Anyone who doesn't do the assignment, woe upon him!"

"Sir, you aren't going to tell us more about it?"

"It requires no further explanation. It's in fact very simple. You are free to write your own opinion. Who serves people the most? Teacher, doctor, soldier, businessman, worker, merchant . . . in

short, whoever, it strikes you, does the greatest service for men and society. It's entirely up to you."

"Are you yourself going to take our class?"

"Yes, I myself am coming. Now, go quietly out in the yard."

It was as if the cage door had opened. The kids flew into the yard flapping their wings.

I was standing in front of the class reading my composition aloud from my notebook. The classroom was silent and no one dared breathe. Only from time to time the sound of a lone cough or psst-psst or hee-hee could be heard from the periphery. The vice principal was sitting in his chair. He had his switch on the table in front of him at the ready. He was sucking on hard candy and emitting slurping noises from under his thick mustache. He was a notorious smoker. He'd recently laid his cigarettes aside and had taken up eating hard candy in order to free himself from his smoking habit. Whenever he'd get the craving for a cigarette he would toss a few pieces of candy down the hatch instead.

I was reading my composition with gusto and dramatic flourish and my voice was echoing throughout the classroom:

*Yes, in this great world of ours, all men toil and their work is a benefit to the welfare of society. Doctors treat the sick, engineers draw up building plans, and teachers make the children of men literate, that in the future they shall not grow up blind and ignorant. Soldiers fight in wars and do not allow cold-blooded, godless enemies to lay a hand on our wealth, honor, and dear country. Police go without sleep all night and catch thieves and lead them to jail. Likewise, the grocer, spicer, shoemaker, carpenter, and blacksmith each serve mankind in some way.*

*Most of our parents expect that we will become doctors and*

*engineers and be respected members of society. And if it turns out that we can't get so far in our studies, we become teachers. And if we should give up learning halfway through, either because our parents can't afford to send us another year or because we acted lazy, then we go into business. Now business is a good thing. Society has a need for businessmen. Laborers too, for their part, work especially hard. Most of our fathers are businessmen or laborers and are proud of it. Thus, we cannot say who is the one who renders the greatest service to mankind.*

*However, if we think a little, we find there is someone in this society who serves men much. He puts in an abundance of effort and if one day he should turn his back or not be there, no one would be willing to perform his job and then we'd all become helpless. Yet despite all this, we don't like him at all and he takes no pride in his work. We all flee at the sight of him and if, God forbid, one fine morning our glance should fall on him in some back alley or on the avenue, we would block our eyes and immediately turn around and get off the streets and go home or back to our job. Yet, no one can be found who does not, sooner or later, have need of his services.*

*Yes, it is the town body-washer who, in my opinion, more than anyone, renders the greatest service to mankind.*

When I got to this point, some of the kids couldn't contain themselves and started cracking up, and the classroom was overtaken by whispers. The vice principal struck the desk hard with his switch—whack!

“Silence!”

Then, turning to me:

“Read! May God silence your tongue, once and for all.”

I read:

*Yes, it is the town body-washer who in my opinion serves mankind most. Because no one praises him and however much he may be the biggest expert in his work and wash the dead body well and wrap a shroud around it, one does not give him a prize nor applaud him. At no time or place has anyone ever seen it written in the newspaper, "We are thankful to so-and-so, the body-washer who washed our father nicely." Or have you ever seen that when a certain body-washer has worked hard and gained some expertise in his work, they give him more pay and his business becomes brisk and his clientele increases?*

*All of us who have gathered together in this classroom and are in the pursuit of knowledge and learning, whatever else we may become, we don't want to become a body-washer. In fact, we are afraid of body-washers. Now, for us who are children, we will say nothing. But even my grandmother, whose age is advanced and who dreams of the dead every night and even has a shroud which was brought back for her from Karbala and which she's put in the bottom of her trunk and sometimes checks up on and even sleeps in, even she is afraid of the body-washer. A short while ago, she happened to catch sight of Leila, the body-washer in the market, and quickly averted her gaze and pulled my hand and said, "Let's go fast, Majid." But Leila ran up in front of her and said, "How are you, Bibi?" Granny responded to her greeting with a curt, "Not bad," and ran into a side street with me in tow. She could have warmed up to her a little and, during the conversation, casually dropped the request that when, if God wills it, after 120 years she's gone to the other world, would Leila please wash her well. However, Granny had imagined that when Leila had asked how she was doing, she'd been checking out business prospects and wanted to find a customer and see when the matter of washing Granny was going to yield cash so that she could start thinking how to spend it. Maybe she'd use it as a favorable*

*promise of payment to the debt collectors. Granny was not at all thinking that everyone asks after each other's health and poor Leila too, like everyone, had simply wanted to say, "How are you doing, Granny?" Yes, until sunset that day, the color had clean gone out of Granny's face and she kept murmuring prayers under her breath and blowing the air around her to ward off evil.*

*But, this same Granny, whenever her eyes happen to fall on the doctor, do you think she so easily lets him go? She suddenly remembers all her pains and diseases and she goes on yapping so much about them the doctor can't flee from her fast enough. Thus we see that everyone fears the body-washer.*

I looked out of the corner of my eye. I saw the vice principal was furiously having a go at one of the hairs of his mustache and was hell-bent on pulling it out by the root, and instead of sucking the hard candy a little at a time, he was chewing it with vengeance. The twin sounds of the crunch-crunch of hard candy and the switch smack-against the desk were getting louder by the minute.

God knows how upset he'd become. The children were grinning from ear to ear and laughter was choked up in their throats. Whenever one of them couldn't contain it and exploded with laughter, the vice principal would respond with a hard whack on the desk with the switch.

"Shut up! Let me see what stinking load this jackass has dumped with this composition of his."

I got really frightened. I said:

"Sir, you want me to not read anymore?"

"No, go on, read that nonsense so everyone will see how much of a stupid idiot you are! Read!"

"Yes, sir."

So I read:

*In order to write this composition, I went and made some inquiries here and there about the life of Kal Asghar, the body-washer, and his wife, Leila, the body-washer. I found out the storekeepers don't like to sell goods to them. When they see those hands, they are frightened since they know that one day those very hands will wash their own lifeless bodies and those of each of their family members. Every time Kal Asghar the body-washer gets on his bicycle and goes for a ride around town, policemen turn their heads away in order that they not see him. Even if he commits an offense, they don't fine him. He has two daughters who are—and if you will, I mention them here only as sisters—right at the marriageable age and who radiate beauty like the full moon. However, no one comes to take their hand. Up to now, no one has even seen anyone inviting them to a wedding. Just imagine what it would feel like to be at a wedding and the body-washer is right there next to you. Would you be able to feel comfortable eating the fruits and sweets and wedding dinner? Certainly, I wanted to go over to Kal Asghar the body-washer's and ask lots of questions and include them in my composition. However, I was afraid of him. Even though it's a small town and everyone knows his body-washer, still, few people have any real details about their lives. Everyone just avoids them. They themselves, of course, know all these things but are polite enough to pretend not to notice and just go on practicing their trade, expertly washing the dead. Thus, they render a greater service to man than anyone else. Nor do they expect much from anyone. While in retaliation for this unkindness, they could give a few good kicks to the ribs and abdomen of anyone in town who dies, or at least give him a pinch when the next of kin isn't looking and thereby unload some of their pent-up grief. The dead person also, what with his condition, can't exactly start screaming and shouting and swearing and saying, "Ouch."*

*Now please compare him with the bath attendant at the*



*public bathhouse. Since we are alive and talk with him and engage him with a warm, "How do you do?" in the byways and streets and as long as we can afford it, we show no restraint in giving him a tip; despite this, when he's giving us a rubdown, it seems he's making us pay our fathers' debts. The way he puts so much force into rubbing the scrubbing pad and scrapes so hard into the delicate skin of our bodies you'd think he wants to remove our hides completely. For a few days, the place where he has mauled us really burns. And when he massages, he yanks and twists our arms so much that one would think he was a butcher with a predilection for tearing apart the thigh bones of a cow. Then when he applies the soap to our heads for the shampoo and rubs it in, he tugs at our hair with such a vengeance that our "Ows!" echo throughout the bathhouse. And in the same way, we fear that due to the sheer, overpowering force of his strong paws which bend our necks to the left and right, little by little our necks will become loose and will come out suddenly from between our shoulders, and our heads will remain in his hands and our bodies will fall on the floor of the bathhouse.*

*As we know, the body-washer never does this to a corpse and this is where it becomes evident to us how forbearing and kind body-washers are. But never mind all that! Still, with the sting of our tongues we torment the body-washer and shower snide remarks on him. For example, any time we see someone who looks a little odd and his clothes are mismatched and his hair is disheveled and his complexion is pale and there is rather a lot of gunk around his eyelashes and drool is dripping out of the corners of his mouth and he's got a nasty disposition, we say, "He looks just like a body-washer," and this is totally unfair since our very own body-washer has a proper black hat and coat which appear to have once belonged to some affluent person. And as opposed to*

*many of the people of this town, he isn't grouchy and there is always a sweet smile engraved on his lips.*

*In short, we don't pass up any opportunity to inflict evil on the body-washer. Yet he, with complete patience and forbearance and self-sacrifice and pleasant demeanor, nicely washes and shrouds all the people of the town, one by one from doctor to teacher, grocer, office worker, and policeman. He holds no grudge in his heart for anyone. He wouldn't hurt even an ant nor has he any expectation of respect and commendation from anyone. Therefore, we should conclude that . . .*

Suddenly, the back of my neck was stinging, my tongue froze in my mouth, and my notebook fell out of my hand.

I looked up and saw that while I was deeply engrossed in reading my composition, the vice principal had come up on tip-toe upon me and was now swatting me with the switch. The kids had put their fear aside and unleashed their laughter into the classroom. The vice principal laid another one on the back of my neck with his switch. His face had turned black as coal. I stood staring at him at a complete loss. He was about to explode with anger. The two ends of his mustache and the flaps of his nostrils were shaking. He had a fat and fleshy face with hanging skin. Whenever he'd get very upset, the skin of his face would form rolls and the rolls of flesh would take on a life of their own. His eyes had become the size of two bowls, huge and bloody. He turned to the kids:

"Shut up, shut up, jackasses!"

The kids swallowed their laughter. The class quieted down. I bent over and picked up my notebook. I said:

"May I sit down?"

"No, stay right there, I have business with you."

I ran my hand over the back of my neck, which was burning something terrible, and said:

“I think it would be much better if I sat down, sir. Seeing as how my composition is over. And then since you have already given me my beating, there’s nothing much left to do. Why not let someone else come and read his composition?”

The vice principal stared unblinkingly at me and chewed on the tip of his mustache.

“You’re trying to turn the class into a circus, aren’t you?”

“Me? Me, dare do such a thing . . . ?”

“Yes, you. In my classroom, clowning around. I’ll teach you a lesson on clowning around that you’ll remember as long as you live.”

“What clowning around, sir?”

I was shaking like a leaf. It dawned on me and there could be no denying it: I was done for. He said:

“What was that garbage that you read?”

“My composition. I wrote it and read it.”

He raised the switch up and then lowered it very hard. This time, instead of the back of my neck, the switch struck me in the face. It didn’t hit me in the eye, thanks to some miracle; it hit me on the lip. The switch was slender and flexible. It wrapped around my head and went all the way around and hit me in the earlobe, setting it on fire.

“What . . . that the body-washer does the greatest service to mankind? Is this how to write a composition? May the body-washer come and cart your ugly face out of my sight. Who wrote all this nonsense for you?”

“I wrote it myself. I’m good at literature.”

“To hell with your literature.”

My hands were shaking. My lips had gone dry. My ear was burning. I said:

“You said we were free to write whatever we wanted. You said, ‘It’s entirely up to you.’”

“So that means in your opinion, jackass, no one does more for people than the body-washer? You mean, doctors and teachers and shoemakers and bricklayers are useless?”

“I didn’t say they’re useless. I said all of them are good, all of them perform a service.”

“But you wrote, ‘The body-washer does the greatest service.’”

“Yes, I agree I did write that. But since people don’t like him, they even tease and bother him. But he doesn’t hold it against them and still goes on serving people.”

The vice principal sat down on his chair. If there was any time he deserved a smoke, this was it. However, instead of a cigarette, he took some hard candy out of his pocket and tossed it into his mouth.

He chewed it in a mad frenzy, crunch, crunch, crunch. His mouth might have sweetened up a bit, however, his mood remained as bitter as before. He said:

“Was your father a body-washer?”

“No, sir.”

“What about your grandfather?”

“Not him either; nobody in our family was ever a body-washer.”

“Do you yourself, when you grow up, want to become a body-washer?”

“No sir, I myself am afraid of the body-washer.”

“What do you want to become with this defective brain of yours?”

“Whatever God has planned. However, mostly I wish I could become a writer.”

Notwithstanding the foul mood and the all-consuming anger, all of a sudden he gave a laugh. His dirty, yellow teeth which had so

long ago become completely ruined from all the cigarette smoke emerged from under his mustache.

His laughter was bitter and soundless. He stuck his hand in his pocket and took out two big pieces of candy which were stuck together and stuffed them in his mouth and chewed, crunch, crunch, CRUNCH. I said:

“Shall I sit down, sir?”

“No, I’m going to make a human being out of you today. So, you say you want to become a writer, eh?”

“Yes, sir. God willing.”

“Pity your poor readers! A writer should have a gentle soul and talk about roses and plants and moths and love and kindness and forgiveness and self-sacrifice, not about body-washers and grave-diggers and such things.”

“I also talk about kindness . . . forgiveness . . .”

“Kindness? Of the body-washer, I’ll bet! And I suppose you read books, too?”

“When I can manage to get ahold of them, yes.”

“Have you read the books of Sadeq Hedayat?”

“I read one half-way but I didn’t understand anything. I gave up.”

“He always writes about body-washers, hearse drivers, the dead and these sorts of things. Have you read these things?”

One of the kids in the back, seeing an opportunity for himself, stoked the fire a bit:

“He reads all kinds of books, sir.”

The vice principal shot back at him:

“Shut up, no one asked you anything.”

My earlobe was burning. I rubbed it. The tip of my finger became bloody. I wiped off the blood with my thumb.

“Sir, shall I sit down?”

“No. You haven’t said what your purpose was in writing this trash.”

“Actually, to tell you the truth, I wanted to write something that would be new. Something no one had ever thought of. I knew everyone else would write about teachers and doctors and soldiers and these kinds of people; I didn’t want my composition to be like theirs.”

“So why didn’t you go after, for example, the gardener, the farmer? Do they not work hard? In cold and in heat, they plant the wheat. The wheat becomes bread and you, jackass, stuff that bread into your damned stomach.”

“What you say is completely true. However, no one dislikes the farmer. They say, ‘Don’t work too hard! Keep up the good work. God willing, your crops will be plentiful.’ But no one tells the body-washer, ‘God willing, your business will become brisk and you’ll get a lot of customers,’ even though this same farmer in the end will have to do business with the body-washer.”

The kids unbottled their laughter. The vice principal turned red. He stuck his hand in his pocket and took out some candy and threw it in his mouth and chewed it:

“So you always have a ready answer?”

“Please let me sit down.”

“No, wait. You wrote that nonsense on purpose so that the kids would laugh and you’d disrupt the class. Or else you wanted to make a fool of me. This was precisely your intention wasn’t it? I myself have studied and grown up in schools and classrooms just like this. You can’t pull the wool over my eyes. Your intention was to make a fool of me, wasn’t it?”

“No, I swear to God I had no such intention. Okay, yes, I did wrong. May I sit down now?”

“Is this the kind of nonsense you always write instead of compositions?”

“It depends on the composition . . . on the teacher.”

“If the teacher is a simpleton and can’t defend himself, do you, jackass, then make a fool out of him?”

“No, sir.”

“Then what, then?”

“If a teacher should say to the class, ‘It’s entirely up to you,’ I go around looking for something fresh and write that. I don’t copy from books like the others.”

“I suppose if you were to write juicy swear words and insulting language, that would be fresh?”

A drop of warm blood dripped from my earlobe onto my neck and found its way down my collar. With the palm of my hand, I wiped it and said:

“Swear words are not to be written, I guess.”

“Why not?”

I started to falter.

“Sir . . . may . . . I . . . ple-plea-se . . . sit down?”

“No, stay right there. I’m not done with you.”

“Since you gave me what was coming to me, what is the need to keep standing here?”

“Since you want to become a writer, let’s see when it’s possible to write swear words and dish them out to people.”

“As far as I know, it’s possible to write swear words in stories. Although not just any swear word.”

“For example?”

“For example, some swear words which aren’t dirty, you can have them coming from the mouth of a character in the story in order to show that that character hasn’t had a good family upbringing and can’t control his tongue.”

“Can you give an example? Give us a swear word that can be written.”

My tail had been caught in the trap in a bad way. I couldn’t

think of any example that could be said, and that too, in the classroom. Every swear word that came to mind was dirty. All the bad swear words of the world had come into my head. However, show me the guy who would dare open his mouth in front of the vice principal and let out one of those!

The vice principal was staring me right in the eye. He was chewing the end of his mustache. I avoided his eye and looked at the ground. He'd gotten up. The switch in his hand was dangling like a baby snake. The vice principal was hoping to God that I would let out a swear word and then he would rearrange my head and shoulders. I said:

"Sir, may I sit down?"

"Give a swear word, then you can sit down."

"I don't know any."

"You say that and expect me to believe it? You have to give a swear word. Even if the bell rings, I'll keep you standing here. Did you think there was no one who could straighten you out?"

The class was so quiet that if an ant had crawled up the wall, the sound of its feet would have been audible. The kids just sat there watching the whole time. Forty or fifty pairs of eyes. I guess they were waiting for me to say a swear word and watch how the vice principal would beat the living daylights out of me. Perhaps they were even wishing to pipe up with a few suggestions themselves. However they didn't dare and were waiting for me to be the one to do their dirty business. They'd sit back and, from the comfort of their own seats, safe and sound, have the satisfaction of watching my downfall without any risk to themselves.

The vice principal became extremely impatient at my having gone mute. He raised the switch and said:

"Give us a swear word, jackass!"



Suddenly, something sparked in my mind. I was so pleased with myself, I didn't stop to think. I blurted out:

"Jackass."

The vice principal cried out:

"What?!"

"Yes, sir. 'Jackass' is a good, respectable swear word. Not too dirty and conveys the personality of the character as well. It can be used in a story."

He took it personally. He got offended. I hadn't bargained on this. Things had gone very wrong. If only I'd given an indecent swear word and not said "jackass!"

Nor did the vice principal fail to rise to the occasion. Instead of the switch, he raised his foot and gave me a hard kick in the bladder. I almost fell to the ground but I caught myself. Pain seared through my side. He wanted to rip off my head. He forced his voice into a low growl.

"So you mean I'm uncivilized then, ja . . . ja . . . jacka-a-a . . .?"

He gagged on the rest of his words. I held onto my side.

"Sir . . . sir, I swear by the life of my Granny, I didn't mean anything. I couldn't think of any other swear word which I could say in front of you."

I didn't think things could get any worse when I heard someone open the door. Mash Reza, the custodian of our school, stuck his head in:

"Sir, shall I ring the bell?"

The vice principal, grating his teeth, bellowed:

"Ring it!"

Mash Reza left. The vice principal took my composition notebook from me.

"You need not come to school tomorrow. Tell your parents to come and pick up your school file. They can send you to whatever the hell place they want."

“Ding-aling-aling!” The bell went off. The kids broke up the class. The vice principal went outside. My composition notebook was in his hand. I ran after him.

“Sir . . . sir . . . please forgive me, I won’t write these sorts of things again. Please just tell me what I should do now, sir!”

“I told you to tell your parents to come to school.”

“I don’t have any parents, sir. I have a grandmother who, may such a thing not happen to you, suffers from pain in the legs. She can’t come.”

“If no one can come, you yourself take your file and get lost.”

The kids had gathered around us. The vice principal cleared a path for himself through the kids and went into the office. However much I ran after him and begged and pleaded, it was no use. I stopped just outside the office door. I craned my neck and glanced into the office through the window. I saw the vice principal putting my notebook on the principal’s desk and showing him my composition. The principal read a bit and smiled.

The kids had crowded around me and were showering taunts on me. Some of them did, however, feel sorry for me. As I was looking through the window into the office, I saw my composition was being passed hand-to-hand among the teachers. The teachers were all grinning from ear to ear. One of them began to read it out loud and the others laughed. Mash Reza was serving them tea. They drank tea and laughed.

During the last period and that afternoon and evening I was pretty well spent with grief. I was completely down and out. I huddled up dejected in the corner with my chin on my knees and arms wrapped around my legs. I was talking to myself: “I don’t dare tell Granny they’ve kicked me out of school. How could I tell her? The poor

thing would die of grief. Whenever she worries, it only makes her legs hurt all the more. Next thing you know, she'll have gone and fainted. What would I say is the reason they threw me out? By writing a composition, I sure have created a mess for myself. I'll lose all respect in Granny's eyes. The poor thing was happy that at least I could write nice compositions. How will she brag about me to everyone now? If it were just a matter of math and algebra and geometry, that would be one thing. If they said, 'He hasn't studied his lesson, he hasn't done his problems, we kicked his bottom. We threw him out,' fine, that is one thing. But how can this be happening to me who was always tops in composition? How Mr. Hosseini used to praise me! How the kids used to clap for me! I used to hope and pray Monday would come to read my composition in class. Now they are saying you've written nonsense, take your file and get lost. And I didn't even write anything bad. Fine, I won't write anymore. I won't write a thing. Actually, I don't even want to become a writer. It only leads to headaches. I'm not going to read books either. But is that possible? Can I really not write anything? Not read anything? If I don't write anything, what would I do? I'll flunk out of Composition. I'll have to repeat the class. I'll copy out of books like the others. No, I'll write, I'll write myself. Fine, they'll kick me out. They'll beat me until I die. Did you think they'd forever go on picking you up and patting little Sweetie on the back? If only I was good at math. I wish I could play soccer . . ."

The samovar in front of Granny was boiling. Granny poured a glass of tea and placed it in front of me. She was probing me carefully. She figured out things weren't all right with me. She knew something was up, that I'd withdrawn into myself.

"What's wrong with you, Majid?"

"Nothing, Granny."

"Don't hide it from me."

“It’s nothing, Granny.”

“Did your exam thing go badly?”

“No.”

“Don’t you give me none of that ‘No.’ Then what the hell happened that has made you so gloomy?”

“A person doesn’t have to be in a good mood all the time, you know. Even you yourself sometimes get gloomy.”

“I’m not going to let you off the hook until you tell me what happened.”

“Nothing happened.”

“Did they say something to you in school?”

I got up and left the room. I went out into the courtyard. I sat down by the courtyard pool. Granny got up and came and stood behind me.

“Okay, fine. Get up and come inside. If you don’t want to tell me what happened, then don’t. I’ll get to the bottom of it eventually.”

I went inside and spread out my bedding and got in under the covers. I pulled up the quilt over my head so that my eyes wouldn’t meet Granny’s. I held my ears so that I wouldn’t hear her voice. It became as clear as day to me that if she established eye contact or said anything to me, she’d get the whole story out of me and then all hell would break loose and we’d never hear the end of it.

However much Granny said, “Come, eat dinner, have some tea,” I didn’t respond. Nothing would go down my throat anyhow.

“Then get up and come and sit over here. Do your homework. Do some studying.”

I wasn’t capable of sitting up. My sides were aching. It was throbbing right in the spot where the vice principal had kicked me. I was having visions of my file under Granny’s arm as she was leaving the school and I running after her. Granny’s back was bent

under the burden of shame and grief. From under the covers I heard the sound of Granny crying. She was sobbing. I stuck my head out from under the covers:

“What is it, Granny. Why are you crying?”

“What do you care?”

“Granny, nothing’s happened. I’ve just caught a little cold, plus my head hurts.”

Granny didn’t say anything. She kept on sobbing and sniffing. I again stuck my head under the quilt. Granny got up. She went and fixed herself a water pipe and came back. She sat at my head and smoked the water pipe with great intensity, keeping it gurgling away nonstop. I was fighting the urge to cry. Tears welled up in my eyes. On both sides of my eyes they were spilling out and cascading down my ears. I said:

“Granny, believe me, nothing happened.”

Granny took her lips from the mouthpiece of the water pipe. The gurgling sound of the water pipe stopped. Calmly and in a pleading tone, she said:

“I hope something bad hasn’t happened to your uncle? Have you heard something and aren’t telling me? Why don’t you tell me and set me at ease.”

I raised myself up in bed to a sitting position.

“Granny, I swear, nothing has happened to Uncle.”

She said:

“All these things you do, you have no idea what you’re putting me through. I’ve been imagining all sorts of things. I can’t stop worrying.”

I saw that if I didn’t open up and tell her everything right out, the poor creature would stay awake until morning and plain die of grief. My heart melted for her. I was in a terrible bind. If I should lay everything on the table, that they’d kicked me out of school, woe upon us all. I’d never hear the end of it. Granny, at that time of

night, would raise a racket such that everyone in the entire neighborhood would come to know, and yet if I held my ground and didn't say anything, she'd let her imagination get the better of her. Granny was puffing on her water pipe. She was sobbing away and rocking her head back and forth. God only knows what all she must have been imagining. I put my head under the covers. I waited until the bubbling sound of her water pipe stopped. I said softly and all choked up:

"Granny, you have to buy me soccer shoes."

It was as if my voice came from the bottom of a well. I wasn't sure whether or not Granny had heard my words. I said:

"I want to play soccer. You have to buy me a sports jersey and shorts. Will you?"

She didn't answer. She kept on puffing faster and faster on her water pipe. I said in a loud voice:

"I don't want to be a girly wimp. I'm not going to read books anymore. Books make a person get crazy ideas . . . turn you into a nerd."

I pushed back the corner of the quilt and looked at Granny's face. Still smoking the water pipe, she said:

"Did they say in school you were a nerd?"

I didn't answer. It was clear she'd stopped imagining the worst. She continued on the same track:

"Did you yourself get the idea you'd like to have soccer shoes or did they say to at school?"

I said:

"You have to come to school."

I didn't say anything more. She started talking about everything under the sun and then started listing her grievances and lecturing.

"A person need not make such a big deal over these things. I was thinking something had happened."

I slid under the covers. My throat was about to explode from

wanting to cry. I was afraid I'd start crying out loud. I was afraid Granny would figure out the whole matter and I'd spill my guts out and then heaven have mercy on Granny.

That night, I didn't blink until morning. My eyes just remained wide open. Like someone who has gone to the grave with a guilty conscience, I kept turning from side to side. I racked my brains. I was about to go crazy. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, I sat up and exclaimed:

"Granny, Granny I don't want to become a writer and write books. They won't let me write what I want to write!"

But Granny was asleep and didn't hear my voice. The room was dark. I could hear the sound of Granny's slow breathing.

In the morning half-light, Granny was performing her ablutions when I startled awake and got out of bed. I got ready. Granny was still at her prayers. I took my bicycle and got out of the house without breakfast. Before Granny could come and shout, "Where are you off to?" I was already past the street corner.

I went straight to Mr. Hosseini's, our old composition teacher. I peeked in through the crack of the door and saw that not a creature was stirring in the house. I stayed and waited.

The sun was well up by the time I caught a glimmer of Mr. Hosseini coming up from the other end of the street. He had an overcoat on and had gone to buy bread and was just returning. Cheered, I went up to him:

"Hi, Mr. Hosseini, good morning!"

"Hello, how are you, Majid? What brings you over this way?"

"Nothing, I just came to say hi to you."

"So early in the morning!"

"I'd been missing you now that you don't come to our school anymore."

“That’s nice of you to think of me.”

I wanted to find a way to broach the topic but I didn’t know how. I followed him up to his house. He said:

“Come in, have you had breakfast?”

“No, I’m not hungry . . .”

“You seem a little upset to me. Are you in some kind of trouble?”

I involuntarily grabbed his sleeve:

“Sir, I beg you, I’m desperate. I’ve been kicked out of school.”

“What? What did you do to make them kick you out?”

“I wrote a composition. The vice principal didn’t like it. He beat me and then said, ‘Don’t come to school tomorrow.’ Granny is supposed to go and pick up my file.”

“Strange! What exactly was it that you wrote?”

I recounted the story of the body-washer and jackass to him. He laughed and said, “You did wrong, you know.”

I said: “If it had been you, even if you didn’t like it, you’d have let it pass. You’d have explained to me what I did wrong.”

He said softly and kindly:

“Now don’t worry. What’s done is done. These sorts of things happen often enough in life. You who want to become a writer must know and endure a lot of things. Don’t worry, they just wanted to shake you up a little. Come in, let’s have breakfast together. I’m getting late.”

“Sir, I don’t want breakfast. Please, can’t you do something? Please do something to prevent Granny from having to go to school. My self-respect is at stake here.”

“I’ll phone your principal. Don’t fret. Everything will work out, God willing.”

“Sir, how can we bring the vice principal around? Sir, I’m worried to death.”

“It’s not the end of the world, you know. The principal is familiar



with your family background. The vice principal is new. He'll speak to the vice principal."

"When should I go to school, sir?"

"In about two hours. I have to talk to your principal. Then you go see him yourself. He's a good and forgiving man."

"May God grant you a long life, sir. If I ever become a writer, I'll write a story in which I'll say that you were a great man."

He laughed and said:

"Your vice principal is also a good man. If he weren't strict, he wouldn't be able to run the school."

"Sir! He's not into literature at all."

"Fine! So he's not. After all, not everyone should have to be imaginative like you and be interested in writing and stories."

He patted me on the shoulder and offered me some bread. I broke off a piece of his fresh bread and put it in my mouth. Mr. Hosseini went inside. My spirits rose. I ate the bread and pedaled my bicycle into the street, and off I went.

In two hours. I was riding around the streets on my bicycle asking people "What time is it?" I would have to kill the two hours until it was time to go see the principal. I knew Mr Hosseini to be a man of his word and that he would definitely phone the principal. However, I was so filled with dread, I feared he would forget.

The schoolkids were walking to school with books and schoolbags in hand and I was wandering around in the streets, lost and bewildered. I wanted to go to school and stand there and wait. However, I was afraid the other kids would see me and there would go all my self-respect. I was yearning to be in school and in class. My books and notebooks were fastened to the front of the bicycle. Rubber bands were holding the books and notebooks in place on the handlebar.

I passed by a few schools. The kids, alone or in groups, were going in. Aimlessly I cruised around, pedaling my bicycle. The shopkeepers were opening their shops. They were shaking the dust off their goods and hanging them up for display on the doors and walls. An old man wearing a black suit was walking briskly down the sidewalk. He looked like a teacher.

“Sir, what time is it?”

The old man was in a big hurry. He didn’t answer. I asked again:

“Sir, what time is it?”

He turned around. He saw my books and notebooks on the front of the bicycle. He said:

“The bell is about to ring, hurry up!”

He didn’t say what time it was. He said, “Hurry up.” Time was passing slowly. I wished to tell the old man, “They’ve kicked me out of school,” but he’d gone and turned into a side street. The bazaar was good, the perfect place to kill time. I looked at a few shops and their miscellaneous trinkets. Time was going by swift as an arrow now. Accordingly, I turned into the coppersmith’s bazaar.

A boy of my size with a ragged appearance, dirty hands and face, and rubber sandals on his feet was struggling to carry a big, heavy pot out of the shop and was putting it next to the door. I stopped to watch him. Suddenly my stomach fell. I said to myself, “Majid, once they’ve kicked you out of school, you’ll be just like him. Starting tomorrow or the day after, Granny will grab you by the hand and bring you to one of these very shops.”

Then I was disgusted with myself and thought, “Majid, you stinking idiot, what the hell is to be done with you? What gives you the right to think there is something wrong with this boy that you’ve got to look at him this way? If only they’d let him study, he’d run circles around you.”

I got off my bicycle and leaned it against the wall. I said to myself, “Might as well get started practicing.” I went up to the boy:

“Hi, want some help?”

I took hold of the other end of the pot. He looked at me as if he'd just seen the boogey monster. He said:

“Who are you?”

“A person, same as you.”

I brought out a big copper tray and said:

“You folks don't need an apprentice, do you?”

He snickered and didn't answer. I looked at his feet, which were red from cold. The straps of his sandals left a mark on his thin and dirty little feet. His boss came, looking mean. He stormed at the boy, saying:

“Who is this?”

He gestured at me. The apprentice said:

“I don't know, I've never seen him before.”

The master laid a slap across the face of the apprentice.

“How many times do I have to tell you, when I'm not around, don't let every Tom, Dick, and Harry enter the store!”

I saw the situation was dire. I jumped onto my bicycle and got myself out of there in a hurry. I could hear the voice of the boy behind me crying and sending all sorts of obscenities after me. I turned at the intersection and entered the main bazaar. The sun had risen higher, and from the holes in the roof of the bazaar, funnels of light were creeping down and hitting the walls. The bazaar smelled of dampness. The walkway in front of the shops had been freshly sprinkled with water. The bazaar was still quiet. I asked of a shopkeeper who was putting out a shirt to hang, “Sir, what time is it?”

“Twenty minutes to nine.”

By the time I reached the end of the bazaar, those twenty minutes would be up. However, I would have to walk very slowly. I was

not on my bike anymore. I thought, "Right now the kids are sitting in class and here I am wandering around with nothing to do." Then I remembered the coppersmith apprentice. I said to myself, "What a fine mess you got him into first thing in the morning. Gosh, I hope his boss didn't beat him too much."

I got closer to the bookshop, which was about midway down the bazaar and from which I was in the habit of buying books or taking them out on loan. I saw that in front of the store there was some commotion, and shopkeepers and passersby were crowded together back to back. I went forward and craned my neck. A woman's voice could be heard shouting up a storm. Her back was toward me. The voice was familiar. It was Granny! Suddenly I froze like a statue. What in the world was Granny doing here?

Granny was scolding and cursing and saying all kinds of nasty things to the old bookseller:

"May God bring you misery, man. You have caused my child to go astray with your infernal books."

She was throwing the books on display in front of the old man's shop and screaming like there was no tomorrow. She didn't give anyone a chance to speak.

"Why do you give these books to my boy to read and ruin his head? Did you think this child just came in off the streets or something?"

She picked up a hefty book and was about to hit the old man on the head. They stopped her. She said:

"You are the one who caused my child to be thrown out of school. God won't forgive what you've done."

The old man was at a complete loss:

"Me? I am the one responsible? Do you even know who you're supposed to be having it out with? Why are you making all this fuss?"

"The person I'm supposed to be dealing with is you. Don't try to

pretend you don't know what I'm talking about, your name is Sadeq . . . Sadeq whatever, I don't know . . .”

“Who is Sadeq, Mother?”

“I've seen with my own eyes twenty times how my child saved up penny by penny and brought it and gave it all to you. Bought books from you. You've ruined him. You've caused him to go crazy. You've turned him out into the streets and I hope God tears you into tiny pieces. You should be ashamed of yourself, a man of your age. You gave those books to my child to read for what?”

I wanted to go up front but I didn't have the gumption. I was afraid of Granny. Not to mention I was curious to see how it would turn out.

The old man was standing there dumbfounded. Granny had let go of the books and burst out crying. A cloth seller who'd been watching the spectacle came forward to Granny:

“Mother, you know this poor guy's name is not Sadeq.”

Granny kept on crying and spoke through her tears:

“It's Sadeq Hedayat. Now I remember, that's it. It's his books that he's read and been ruined. It's affected his head. Their teacher said he writes things that the devil himself wouldn't be able to come up with. He went and wrote a story about the life of Leila the body-washer and brought it in and read it in front of the class. They say it's all his fault. He took my child and completely perverted him.”

The cloth seller spoke up:

“There's one bookseller on the other end of the bazaar. He spreads out his wares next to the wall, right there along the wall. He's your man. Go pick a fight with him. Maybe he is Sadeq Hedayat.”

The old bookseller had just figured out what was going on. His temper softened. He smiled and rubbed his eye with the palm of his hand and said:

“Mother, the one you’re after was a writer who died a few years back. I have never even stocked or sold his books. Go and ask, let’s see who gave your child his books to read. Go and catch hold of that one.”

Granny was sitting there crying. She was repenting what she had done.

“Now I don’t know where my child has gone . . . what he’s doing. He’s completely vanished.”

Finally, I worked up the resolve and, through the crowd, I went forward and took Granny’s arm:

“Get up, Granny. I haven’t gone anywhere. You are also wasting your time running around the bazaar looking for Sadeq Hedayat. Don’t make a laughingstock out of us.”

As soon as Granny’s eyes fell on me, she blasted me, “Where the hell have you been? Why didn’t you go to school?” Then she took my arm and dragged me: “Let’s go to school.”

We set out. The crowd was watching us. With a gesture of my head, I begged forgiveness from the old bookseller.

That morning, after I’d rushed out of the house in that state, Granny had figured out that something definitely must have happened at school. She’d marched straight to school to see the vice principal. The vice principal, in turn, agitatedly narrated for her the story of the “body-washer” right there in the school yard. He’d told her, “He read the books of Sadeq Hedayat and got all perverted.” Granny for her part had imagined that Sadeq Hedayat was that same bookseller of whom I was the trusted and loyal customer and she lost no time in going to the bazaar and staging the Apocalypse.

In any case, we reached the school. I was afraid to go in. However, Granny tugged my sleeve and we went straight into the office to the principal. The vice principal was in the school yard and was

wandering around among the kids with his infamous switch. In the office, we sat down. The principal was talking on the phone. I was hoping and praying that Mr. Hosseini was on the other end. In the end I never did figure out who he was talking to. The composition notebook was on the principal's desk. We waited until the principal's conversation came to an end and he put down the receiver. Granny hadn't even had a chance to wet her tongue when I got up from my chair. I said:

"Sir, I swear, I would rather the world come to an end than read inappropriate boo . . ."

The principal interrupted me mid-sentence:

"Don't speak until you are given permission. Behave!"

"Yes, sir."

I lowered my head and sat down. Granny spoke up:

"You please assign him some examples of nice handwriting, he has to copy it exactly as it is; he wouldn't dare write anything else."

The principal lit a cigarette and said:

"He has to compose it himself, Mother. Do you think this is first grade that we should give him words to copy out?"

"The minute he writes himself, you see how it turns out. Teach him however he should write that will please you. He's just a child. He's not yet been bumped around by life. He doesn't know anything about the bad and good out there. He thinks whatever he writes is okay . . . May God reward you, please help him. He doesn't have anyone. Treat him as your own child."

"It's not up to us. You yourself should sit down with him and give him guidance. Don't let him read just any trashy book and write any nonsense and bring it to class."

"Damn these books, sir, devil take them! To tell you the truth—you aren't a stranger from whom I'd hide it—he gets a penny and a dime from me, or sometimes his uncle, just to be nice, puts a coin in his hand. Instead of buying things or clothes or something to eat, he

takes it and goes straight to the booksellers. They too, when they see he's alone, they just give him anything that comes to hand to read and totally spoils his mind. Of course, unlike you, I'm ignorant, I don't have any learning; what do I know what he reads and writes?"

I got up and, without permission, I said:

"Sir, we hear that every book is worth reading once."

The principal knocked his cigarette ashes in the ashtray and said:

"There you've gone and spoken again! What kind of idiot has said such a thing? There are many trashy books out there which one should not so much as look at, let alone read, especially someone of your age who doesn't know the difference between good and bad."

Granny drew her chador around herself and produced a few tears for the occasion:

"All that I suffer is just my hard luck. Sir, begging your pardon, he wants to become a poet . . . what do you call it, a . . . writer. I guess in our family, we've had all sorts . . . except poets and writers . . . why should I hide it from you, I've had a hard life. I've suffered bad luck and going without just to get him this far. My prayer to God has been that he'll be able to earn himself a bit of bread and keep his head high before friend and enemy alike. But no, now I see all I've worked for has come to naught. Some folks are lucky, sir. He has a cousin just a few years older who went and got a regular job in an office. Now he collects wages from month to month. They give him two sets of clothes and two pairs of shoes a year. His life, thanks be to God, is getting in order. Now you please tell this one here, if he becomes a poet or writer, what will that get him? Will they pay him for that? Will they give him shoes and clothes? When he gets bigger, will they give him a wife? To tell you the truth I don't know what he's setting his heart on."

Quietly I said to Granny:

"Granny, you've always liked the stuff I've written, now what happened all of a sudden that . . ."



God rest her departed soul, she stuck her elbow out of her chador and gave me such a jab in the ribs it took my breath away. The principal, who saw that Granny had started up with her whole life story and was wasting his time going on and on, got up and went to the door. He called the vice principal in.

The vice principal came in all charged up, letting the switch swing up and down. He sat on the chair across from Granny and me. Granny made me understand with her gestures that I was supposed to go and kiss the vice principal's hand and ask for forgiveness. Both repulsion and shyness held me back. I played dumb and stared at the corner of the ceiling where the plaster had peeled and there was a spider's web.

The principal turned to the vice principal:

"Forgive him this time; let him go back to class."

"He has to put it in writing that he won't read any nonsense in class and that he'll maintain order in the classroom and school."

Granny said:

"He'll write whatever you want—actually, go ahead and punish him, beat him as much as he can take. Just don't kick him out of school and ruin his life. May God grant you a long life."

The vice principal got up and took a blank piece of paper from the desk and gestured in my direction: "Come and write!" I took a pen out of my pocket and the vice principal dictated while I wrote:

*I, the undersigned, in the presence of my grandmother, promise that from now on, I will restrain myself from writing anything that violates the order and discipline of the classroom and I will avoid disrupting class and I will not be disrespectful to the teachers. If I don't comply with these things, they have the right to expel me from school.*

The vice principal said:

“Now sign underneath.”

I didn't know how to make a proper signature, so I just wrote my name and drew a circle around it. Then the vice principal motioned to Granny:

“Mother, you also put your thumbprint underneath.”

He put ink on the tip of Granny's finger with the nib of his fountain pen, and Granny pressed her finger under the “Letter of Promise.” The vice principal picked up the “Letter of Promise” and said:

“We'll put this in your file. So help me, if you violate it . . .”

Granny said, “He wouldn't dare violate it. You should grind him up and turn him into mincemeat.”

Granny was making her way through the children in the school yard, her chador wrapped around her head, tightly covering her face. She left the school and I, composition book in hand, ran to class.