



The First Well; a Bethlehem Boyhood

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June 1911. Men collecting water from a well
outside The Nativity Church Bethlehem.

*Source: Stereoscope from Underwood and
Underwood. Library of Congress.*

At school I saw the students writing. Each of them took his lead pencil, opened his copybook, and wrote on the ruled white paper. They raised their heads and looked beyond the teacher's head to the board, which was made of pieces of wood in a square frame, propped on a tripod. It had been painted black at one time, but it was almost white now because, though constantly erased, it retained accumulated chalk. Moreover its pieces of wood were falling apart. The teacher had written a few letters on this board, and the boys were writing. Each of them put out his tongue automatically, wet the point of the pen on the tip of his tongue, and wrote. Each had a small eraser with the picture of an elephant on it, and with it he erased errors. When the pencil tip broke, he sharpened it with a sharpener before he dipped the sharp black tip in his saliva again, looked at the board, and wrote.

That was my first day, or one of my first days, at the Greek Orthodox School situated behind the Church of the Nativity. I said to the teacher as I sat on the long bench with four or five other children like me, "Shall I also write, sir?"

He asked, "Have you brought your copybook and pencil with you?"

"No," I replied.

How can you write, then?"

I answered, "In the copybook of one of the boys who have copybooks."

The boys laughed. Even the teacher laughed, and he said "No, my boy. Bring your own copybook and pencil tomorrow, and then you can write."

A short while later, the teacher rang the bell. We went out to the playground. There was a large, slanting pine tree which almost divided the small yard into two parts. I jumped onto the bent trunk and climbed up to the highest branches. A group of other boys followed me. We hardly played at all when the teacher rang the bell again. We returned to the classroom. There were at least fifty boys of different ages. Most of the boys seemed to me older than I was: they were ten, twelve and some of them perhaps fifteen years old. And I was only five and I was barefooted. Most of us were barefooted, but some of the boys wore large boots, left to their parents by the Ottoman army.

Before noon we went home for the lunch hour. I went running and found my grandmother in the garden looking at the shadow cast by the almond tree on the wall of the house. She asked, "Why have you come back before time?"

"But it is lunch hour."

No, my dear. The shadow has not yet reached this stone, "she said pointing to a protruding stone in the wall. "So you think I don't know when noon is?"

"I don't know. The teacher let us out and said return at one o'clock."

My grandmother then called out, "Maryam, prepare lunch. Your son is back!"

I had a special relationship with my grandmother behind my mother's back. She knew my mother was quick tempered and that, if I did anything my mother did not approve of, I would be given a sound beating. So she covered up for me.

I approached her. Her dress was long, almost reaching the ground. I touched it, and she said "What's the matter, now? Have you something to say? Have you done something wrong?"

Looking at her honey-coloured eyes, I said, "Grandma, I want to buy a copybook and a pencil."

"A copy book and a pencil! Why?"

"In order to write."

"Tell your mother that. Ask her what you want or wait till your father returns in the evening."

When I entered the house, my mother was looking into the cooking pot and stirring its contents. She said, "Welcome to the schoolboy!"

"Mother", I said, "the teacher says I should take copybook and pencil with me to school."

Really? And how am I to get a copybook and a pencil?"

The copybook and the pencil cost half a piaster. That's what the boys say."

"And who says I have half a piaster? Come, sit and eat and forget the copybook and pencil. Half a piaster, indeed! And before you eat, take out some grass to the two sheep."

I took out some of the grass we collected in a large bag when we went out to the fields so that we did not have to take two sheep out to pasture every day. I carried it to the two white sheep tied in the hut. They were chewing their cud after having rolled in the dirt on the ground. As soon as they saw me, they rose. I gave them some grass, and they began to munch it eagerly as I rubbed their backs with my hand.

My mother poured out the food into a large dish placed on the floor, and we sat around it. "Listen! The noon hour is striking now!" she said as the steeples of the monasteries all over town started to ring their bells announcing midday, their sounds blended into the air, clear and joyful.

After lunch, I returned to school, and we played until the teacher rang his bell. We entered the classroom. No pupil wrote anything this time, but the teacher wrote letters of the Arabic alphabet on the board and asked a group of us to repeat them after he read them out aloud.

"Alif."

And we shouted, "Alif."

"Ba'."

"Ba'."

"Ta'."

"Ta'."

"Alif, Ba'."

"Alif, Ba'."

When we were sent out later in the afternoon, two of my friends and I began to repeat and sing rhythmically, "Alif, Ba' bubini, half a loaf and zucchini." We passed by the shop of Hanna Tabash, displaying copybooks, pencils, and erasers in the window. I entered and said to the salesman, "I want a pencil and a copybook."

Do you have half a piaster?

"No"

Go, then and bring half a piaster, and I will give you the best pencil and the best copybook."

I returned home and found my grandmother in the garden taking down the laundry from the clothes line. I looked at her with hopeful eyes. She understood me immediately, and without saying a word, she put her hand in her bosom, took out a knotted handkerchief and untied two knots. When the handkerchief was opened, there were four to five coins in it. She picked a half piaster coin and she said, "Here. Don't tell your mother. And show me your heels, gallop away!" I ran galloping away to the shop of Tabash. I handed the shopkeeper the dear coin and he gave me a copybook and a pencil. I asked him to sharpen the pencil for me, so he did and said, "If you don't have a sharpener, that's not necessary. Sharpen the pencil with a razor blade."

I rushed back home carrying what I had just bought. My mother was not at home, and my grandmother was occupied with family chores as usual. Near the door of our house, there was a long stone bench, so I lay down on my stomach, opened my copybook at the first page, and took the new, sharpened pencil to write. I wet its sharp point on the tip of my tongue. But what would I write? I tried to remember the letters which the teacher had written on the board that morning and in the afternoon. The Alif (A) was easy. Its shape in Arabic, as the teacher said, was like that of a stick. The Ba' (B) was a stick lying down with upturned edges. So I wrote A A A A then B B B and the line was full. I started another line, and yet another. But I found that that my lines were sloping down in spite of all efforts. I changed the position of the copybook in front of me and wrote, but the lines continued to slop downwards from right to left. The page was filled with slopping lines. I filled another, then another. Suddenly the pencil tip broke and I stopped.

That evening my copybook was the family's spectacle. My father said, "Well done!" Yusuf said, "Your lines are running downhill – perhaps to drink?" My mother said, "Write correctly and take care of your copybook. And don't lose the pencil. Do you hear me?" My grandmother winked at me in full understanding.

Next morning I took my "tools" to school. I said to the teacher, "I've brought my copybook and pencil, I borrowed an eraser and I began writing. But the boys next to me were not writing because they had no copybooks. They laughed and fidgeted. They continuously indulged in horseplay with their bare feet. One of them pushed another and kicked him under the bench. Another kicked my foot, causing my pencil to make a long scratch on the page in front of me.

At lunch my mother asked me, "Has the teacher seen your copybook?"

I said, "Yes, indeed."

When I tried to show her what I had written, she said,

"How can I read it when I don't know how to read?"

In the afternoon, we did not write anything. The teacher was sleepy. He sat at his table, asked an older boy to stand up in front of him, "Elias you are the prefect today. Who ever talks or laughs or even breathes – write me his name on the board.... And you, boys of the first and the second classes, open your reading books to page five and read. But no noise! And you three are sitting at the back, put your folded arms on the desks thus, rest your heads on them and sleep. And don't move, do you understand?"

He then close his eyes. His head soon fell onto his chest, and he was sound asleep.

We buried our faces in our folded arms, as the teacher had instructed us. But who of us, devils that we were, could sleep? With our heads on the desks, we spent hours chattering and laughing. When we raised our heads, Elias had written three or four names on the board. He had also put a cross next to one of them. Suddenly, the teacher gave a mighty snore and raised his head immediately afterward. His terrifying eyes roved about the boys' faces. Then he slowly turned his head toward the board and saw the names. He called out the first of them, "Jiryis! Come here."

Jiryis came out from among his companions and walked with fear toward the teacher, "I swear by God, sir, I did not speak and did not laugh."

Taking his long ruler, the teacher said, "Open your hand!"

"By God, sir..."

"Open your hand. And no nonsense!"

the boy opened his hand, and the teacher stuck him once on his palm with the ruler.

The teacher did likewise to a second person named. As for the person whose name was marked with a cross, the teacher hit him twice. Then the bell rang, and we were dismissed.

My classmate next to me on the bench was called Abdu. He accompanied me on my way back and convinced me to go with him to his home by saying, "Do you know how to make a cracker? This copybook has sixteen leaves, and for every two you can make one cracker."

His mother was preoccupied with her sewing when we sat on the floor in one corner of their house. Abdu took the copybook from my hand, but I took it back. He said, "Only one cracker then, that's all." I handed him the copybook. He opened it and removed the centre page; then he folded it in a special way while I watched him. He placed it under his armpit and pressed it with his arm. He then pulled it out quickly and gave it violent shake. It gave out a wonderful explosive sound. He folded it again and repeated the act. Again it cracked. Wonderful!

"Shall I make you one, too?" he asked.

"I'll make my own," I answered.

I removed another page from the copybook and made it a cracker- and it snapped!

Then we made another and yet another, until we came to the end of the copybook. Abdu's mother was giving us little attention, but from time to time she said, "Stop that noise, you boys!"

We went out to the streets, snapping and cracking. Our pockets were an arsenal of crackers. We saw friends of ours and distributed crackers to them. We all began to snap again and again, till the sun set and the crackers were all torn.

I hastened back home.

My grandmother asked, "Where is the copybook?"

"The teacher took it," I replied.

My mother asked, "Where is the copybook?"

"The teacher took it," I said.

"Why? To have fun looking at it?"

"To keep it in his drawer lest it be lost."

When my father returned from his work, he asked me, "Where is the copybook?"

I said, "Its with the teacher."

My brother Yusuf asked me the same question at supper and I gave him the same answer.

That night, I slept, thinking of the crackers. I was sorry I had not kept at least one to crack at school. But I was also afraid a little. How would I be able to buy another copybook?

On the next day, I went to school. I had nothing but the pencil, so I doodled with it on the top of the desk. Whenever its tip broke. I sharpened it with the help of one of

the other boys until it was half gone.

At home I was showered again with the same question, "Where is the copybook?" And I answered, "With the teacher."

In the morning of the third day, when the bell rang Abdu pulled me by the arm. I said, "what kind of school is this? Bells, bells! Always bells!"

He said, "Let's skip school, man. Will you come with me?"

I said, "Let's go."

We went running out of the playground gate toward Manager Square. There were cars parked there from which tall blond, elderly men and women got out carrying cameras. They spoke to us in a language we did not understand, so they gestured to us to stand in front of them with the Church of the Nativity in the background so they might take our picture.

Noon hour struck suddenly. I ran home and my grandmother welcomed me, the schoolboy, and she said, "I cooked the best lentil soup for you today. Fetch an onion, smash it and sprinkle some salt on it."

Onions whet one's appetite for lentil soup, and lentil soup whet's one's appetite for more onions. So I ate until I was full and then lay down on my back. My mother chided me, "Get up, get up! Go to your school. Have you forgotten and tell the teacher to give you back your copybook."

My grandmother said to her, "Take it easy. Let the boy rest a little."

My mother said, "By God you have spoiled him!"

I went to Abdu's home.

For several days, he and I went down the valley or loitered around Manager Square. When it was time for the school children to be dismissed, we returned home in order to make our parents believe we continued to go regularly to school.

Hardly four or five days passed, when my mother confronted me at noon time, standing at the garden gate waiting for me. When I pushed open the gate, she seized me by the ear and pulled with mighty strength saying, "Where is your copybook?"

"Mother I told you. It's with the teacher."

"With the teacher, you liar!"

She slapped my cheek. "I saw Abdu's mother this morning, and she told me everything." She slapped my other cheek.

"You've filled the street of Ras Iftays with crackers. You liar! You thief! And you made fools of us to! By God, you shall never see school again!"

In spite of my grandmother's protection, I was given a first-class thrashing. All my grandmother could do was thrust a piece of bread and tomato in my hand as I wept in the garden, and she pushed me out and let me escape. I went out and sat on the steps leading down to the street. I ate my miserable lunch, the salty tears burning my eyes and my mother's pinching still stinging my cheeks and thighs.

That evening, my father decided to send me to the Syriac Catholic school where he knew the teacher, for he was our neighbour. My father thought he would thus be able to know if I was regularly present at school and whether I was actually learning the alphabet like a decent human being.

Our house consisted of a small room built of rough stones. Attached to it was a terraced green plot in which grew two pomegranate trees an almond tree or two, and a large fig tree. Nearby was “the hut”, also built of rough stones, which had a flagstone courtyard, in the midst of which was a well. This courtyard was connected with another terraced green plot surrounded by pomegranate trees. A passageway separated the two green plots and ran between our dwelling and the hut where the sheep and chickens were kept. Branches of an old vine arched over the passageway, which stretched from an old gate whose rusted tin panels merged with time-worn wood.

Our one room house and our hut were both roughly roofed over with logs and the trunks and branches were clearly visible in the low ceilings. Extending from wall to wall, they were closely woven together and were covered with a thick layer of mud and soil. One of our tasks from time to time, especially before winter arrived, was to pack down the roof with a heavy stone roller. This of course, did not prevent the ceiling from leaking or water from seeping in when it rained, but it did diminish the damage and kept in contained primarily in the corners. I often lay on my back on the earthen floor of the room or on the straw mat and watched the rats that nestled in the crevices of the ceiling logs. They would fight until one rat defeated another and knocked him to the ground. Our cat Fulla, would pounce on the victim, picking him up and neatly and carrying him carefully between her teeth to the garden, where she would put an end to him in her own feline way. In spite of her apparent gentle nature and pleasant name, Fulla revealed the ferocity of a tigress when confronting her prey. I often saw her fix mice with a look that froze them with fear; then she ate them. But one day she was nearly beaten by a rat almost as big as she was. He raised his front foot and clawed at her snout while in a frenzied battle with her. She finally managed to at least make him flee and vanish from her sight.

Behind our house, walls and other houses rose in tiers to the top of the mountain, on whose slopes the town had been built many ages ago. In front of our house and beyond the entrance, an alley led up to a steep flight of stairs descending to the main road known as Ras Iftays or Star Street as it was later called. In order to reach the alley of our house from the main road, we climbed the irregular stone stairs, polished by many footsteps over the years. The stairway was not very wide. At the right of its bottom step was a magnificent house of regular smoothly chiseled stones, with an iron gate that had once, along time ago, been painted white. At the left of the bottom step was a high wall with a manger at its foot. A white donkey was tied in this manger and whenever it stood across the stairway entrance with its head in the manger and its hind part towards the house, it occupied more than half of the entrance. The donkey belonged to the Greek doctor who lived in the house. I don't think anyone called the Greek doctor by his name or even knew what it was. He was the most reputable doctor in town, and everyone simply called him by the only name they respected: the Greek doctor. His donkey enjoyed a class distinction among the many donkeys in the town because its aristocratic white colour stood out from the poor, grayish color of all the

other donkeys. We used to see the Greek doctor riding his donkey, with his medical bag in the donkey's red saddlebag. Haughtily, he would urge the animal on with a short bamboo cane as he went on his rounds. He was a short fat man. He was clean shaven, and gray hair was beginning to mix with the black at his temples. He wore a hat and never smiled at anyone or anything.

No friendly relations ever rose between the doctor-or his donkey- and me. Still one of my earliest experiences in this neighbourhood was with this respected donkey when I was five years old. I wanted to climb the stairs to go straight home, but the donkey stood in the way, almost blocking the entrance with its body. It apparently had finished eating its fodder and its dung and straw filled the two or three bottom steps. I avoided the dung as best I could and headed towards the narrow opening left for the passersby next to the donkey's rear end. The donkey was whisking away flies and the gadflies with its tail.. I don't think that I lingered to look at its tail and the insects when I passed, although I might have perhaps raised my hand in the direction of the direction of the tail to protect myself from its switching. Before I knew it, the donkey had given me a formidable double kick with its hind legs, giving my shoulder and chest such a powerful blow that I screamed as I sped by and climbed the upper steps, weeping and terrified. It was painful early lesson in my life that taught me never to get too close to donkeys, and to be exceedingly wary if I had to approach them and their likes.

Once my mother was very ill for a couple of days and unable to move around. I didn't know what exactly the matter was with her and when I saw her unable to get of her mattress spread on the floor. She was writhing in pain and moaning. My grandmother asked me to go down the stairway to the Greek doctor's house before he went out on his rounds and to ask that he come to our house to treat my mother. Had I not realized that the matter was serious, I would not have risked entering the doctor's house when his donkey was tied to the manger one or two steps away from the door. I summoned my courage and went into the house. The doctor was in the hall preparing to go out. Before I had time to say "good morning," as my grandmother instructed me, he frowned and asked what are you doing here, boy?"

"My mother is sick, doctor" I stammered.

"And who is your mother?"

"My mother? Er, she's Umm Yusuf, the wife of Hajj Ibrahim."

"Do you want me to visit her? Where do you live?"

I don't remember his words exactly, for in the first place, I did not understand many of them because of his Greek accent. But I must have explained what I wanted, for he accompanied me to the top of the stairway and to our house. He entered, and my grandmother received him by pulling out a pillow from a recess and placing it on the mat for him to sit on. The visit was not long: he examined my mother in one way or another, reassured her, then wrote a prescription which he gave to my grandmother. He stood up and asked to be paid a five-piaster fee for his visit. "Five piasters!" mother said in surprise in spite of her pain. "What have you done, doctor, to charge five piasters? My husband works from daybreak till sunset for five piasters."

I felt he was asking the impossible of us.

The doctor was displeased, but he said, “All right give me two or three piasters.”

My mother thrust her hand under the pillow, pulled out one shilling (one five piaster coin), and gave it to him, proudly saying, “No, no. Here you are. Thank you very much.”

The doctor took the shilling and dropped it in the small pocket of his waistcoat. I noticed the fine chain stretching from one of the buttons to the opposite pocket: he pulled it carefully took out a golden watch, which he opened to check the time. Then he closed the shining cover with a smart tap of his finger and returned the watch to his pocket. Picking up his bag, he went out.

My mother said, “Now you quick, run to your school darling.”

I had enrolled in a new school, and my mother had made me a cloth bag which I carried by a strap across my shoulder and in which I put my school things. In addition to my new copybook, I now had a reader and a calligraphy copybook. I took the bag and rushed in the direction of the New Road, where the school stood next to a newly built church. The school consisted of one large room furnished with long desks.

When I entered the school, Teacher Samuel stopped me. He addressed me in classical Arabic, “Why are you late, boy?”

I said, “I took the Greek doctor home to see my mother.”

“Why?” he asked. “Is she ailing?”

I said, “She has a bellyache, teacher.”

The boys laughed as though I had told them a joke. The teacher said, enunciating his words, “Say she is sick.....well may God heal her and sit down in your place.”

Whenever teacher Samuel spoke, my friends and I wondered at the strange words he uttered. Many of them we did not quite understand, though we guessed their meaning – then he gave us a reading book rushed us through its pages considering them not worthy of length study. *Ras, rus/Dar, dur* – we read the words and copied them from the book. He took our copybooks, corrected them in beautiful red ink, and returned them to us saying, “scrawls of chickens, that’s what your writing is!”

In between reading and writing lessons, he used to tell us stories by way of religious instruction. He told us how God made some clay and from it created a man He called Adam. And while Adam was sleeping under one of the trees of Paradise, God took a rib from his chest and from it created a woman that He called Eve. The teacher also told us a sad story about how the criminal Cain killed his good brother Abel. As I imagined God making clay as the construction workers did in Bethlehem, I also imagined Cain’s dreadful face, marked on the forehead with the disgrace of God’s curse, as the criminal wandered aimlessly in the wilderness and the city. I would look at people’s faces in the streets and at their foreheads, wondering whether Cain was one of them.

When I sat in my place that morning, the teacher was telling the story of the Flood and Noah’s ark, which Noah filled with birds and animals. The Greek doctor’s donkey crossed my mind, and I wished that Noah had left the donkey’s forefather to the waters of the Flood, for he would have saved us from that donkey who blocked our way and

threatened passersby with double kicks of his fearful hooves.

The afternoon, towards the end of classes, I needed to urinate badly. I raised my hand and said to the teacher, "May I go out teacher?"

He said, "We'll all go out in a few moments."

My neighbour Salim suddenly raised his hand and said, "Teacher, teacher I must go out!"

The teacher told him off, "In a moment, wait now. We'll all go out after reciting Hail Mary." Then he shouted, "Stand up!"

We all stood up; I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, trying to control my bladder as best I could. I noticed that my neighbour's predicament was no less distressing than mine. The teacher continued, "Let us pray."

We began praying: "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women..."

We hardly had time to end the prayer when we saw a furtive stream gently flowing under the seats toward the teacher. Salim had "done it." He could not control himself. The boys burst out laughing, "Salim pissed in his pants; he pissed in his pants!"

The teacher screamed at us, "Get out, you impolite, uncivil boys!"

Had we been delayed one minute longer, I would have committed the same crime as my neighbour. I shot like a bullet toward the backyard and emptied my bladder under a large fig tree while the boys were still hooting hilariously. When I returned to them, Salim was crying, his short pants and legs scandalously wet.

On our way back home, I saw the Greek doctor bustling along on his donkey. He passed by us, and I expected him to ask me something or to say a word that showed he recognized me. But he went on his way hurriedly, knocking his white donkey with his knees, urging it with a cluck of his tongue, his hat perched on his head like some strange bird. I wondered, was my mother better? Was she up and about? Or was she still in bed? And I hurried home before the doctor returned and tied his accursed beast at the entrance of the stairway.

My brother Yusuf was four years older than I. He and his friends appeared to me to belong to a world other than mine- the world of adults. Whenever he said anything, I was all ears and felt he was admitting me into his world. He, too went to school, but he hung out with friends who were his age or older. After he left home in the morning, I sometimes did not see him until he returned home- and that might not be until the evening.

In addition to Arabic books, he had an English book on each page of which was a colour illustration or a line drawing. I often sat by him, and he showed me the pictures and boasted of his ability to read the English words under each, which I could not because I had yet to learn English.

One evening, he brought me a cardboard box and said, "Do you know what this box is?" It is the 'Box of the World.' Come and look."

In the middle, there was a rough opening with a magnifying lens we called “the crystal.” I placed my right eye to it and closed my left. From the top of the box, my brother began to turn one or two spindles; and a paper tape, on which all kinds of pictures were stuck, began to move. As the spindles turned, the pictures inside the box passed one after the other before the lens: because they were enlarged and distorted, they acquired a strange magic.

My brother’s box fascinated me, and I wished that he would leave it at home for me and permit me to take it to my friends to show them. But he took it away, and I could not find it.

One afternoon, while Abdu and I were playing in the Square of the Church of the Nativity, we saw the real Box of the World. It was large, blue, wooden box, in the middle of which were three big lenses. Its owner placed it on a movable stand and put mirrors and oleographs of women, horsemen and horses on its top. He shouted, “Come and look! See the wonders of all time!” Abdu and I longed to go and look, but where could we come by the dear fee of half a piaster?

We stood near the box and looked in wonder at its form and decoration until two or three men came up. The owner sat them on boxes in front of glass openings. They placed their eyes close to the lenses and he began to turn the spindle from above and sing in rhyming words about Antar and Abla, al-Zir Salim, Aby Zayed, Kawkab al-Sharq and Munira Mhdiyya. Listening and gazing at the box which contained all these wonders, we ate our hearts out. The boy gathered around all looking in anguish. Other people came and sat in front of the lenses and peeped and others after them. Suddenly, my friend took out a sesame cake from inside his shirt and said to the showman, “Will you let me and my friend look if I give you this cake?”

The man said, “You and your friend for this measly piece?”

“Yes me and my friend,” he answered.

The man took the cake and bit of a morsel of it, saying as he chewed, “Okay come. You sit here and you sit there.”

Actually, only one client remained, and so he made us sit with him. He then began to recite his rhyming commentary, as the brightly coloured pictures passed in succession behind the magic lens: hunters with their horses and dogs, kings on their thrones, soldiers being shot and killed, half-naked women. There were hardly any connection between the pictures and his narration, but the suggestions were great. And the show ended all too soon.

That evening, when he returned from work, my father brought home an old tire. My mother brought a washbasin, and when she washed his feet, I noticed how large they were and how they seemed to be made of rock. My father then washed his face and dried it. He brought the toolbox, containing a hammer, an anvil, pincers, strange sharp knives, a whetstone whose black colour shone brightly with the oil on it nails of all kinds, chisels, and rolls of waxed threads and wires. He took the car tire and, using one of the knives, laboriously cut off two pieces. He then put his right foot in the curvature of one piece and made a mark with the knife at the toes. He took his foot off and cut the piece to the right length. He did the same with the other piece, while I

watched him closely.

With much effort, he pierced holes along the side of each piece and put a thin rope through them, first in one side and then in the other. Meanwhile, my mother was going to and fro in her wooden clogs, and occasionally out into the courtyard to assure herself that the pot was boiling on the fire, all the while calling to me and my brother, “Bring me some fire wood! Draw a bucket of water from the well! Fill the large water jar...”

My father finished what he was doing, and I saw him push his feet into the curved pieces of tire, tying them tightly around his ankles. He then said, proud of what he had made, “You see Maryam? The best sandals!”

I did not like the sight of these “sandals” and said “Dad why don’t you buy a pair of shoes from the shoemaker?”

He said when you grow older, you’ll understand. Do you know how much the shoemaker will charge for a pair of shoes? Twenty piasters! If he is charitable, he may charge fifteen... My old shoes are beginning to wear out because of use. I will therefore keep them for Sundays. So, what do you think now Mister?”

He took his feet out of the sandals and said, “Let’s have supper. Tonight I have a new story to tell you, the story of Ashrawiyya.”

I asked my brother, “Where is the box of the World?”

“I returned it to its owners,” he laughingly replied.

“At the Church Square today,” I said, “I looked in the large Box of the World. It’s fantastic!”

“If I had pictures to use,” he said, “I would make you the most wonderful box.”

My father interrupted, “What’s the matter with you, boys? Aren’t we going to tell a story tonight?”

We all said, “Of course, of course we are, Father.”

The following day was a Sunday. On Sundays we didn’t go to school and everyone went to church. As for me I headed towards Abdu’s house and brought him back home with me. He had a cardboard shoe box his father had come by two days earlier, and we spent that morning preparing the material for our project: newspaper for the ribbon, a bottle of glue, a piece of glass for “the crystal,” and two sticks we brought from the heap of firewood which my mother and grandmother collected.

Two or three hours later, everything was ready-except for the picture Abdu went home in haste and brought back three or four faded photographs which did not appeal to me very much. At that moment, I remembered my brother’s English book. My brother was away with his friends at Ras Iftays or in the playground of Father Antony’s Monastery. I took out the book from his school bag, and when my friend saw it, he could not believe his eyes. I got my mother’s scissors while she was too preoccupied to know what we were busy with in the garden, and we started to cut out the pictures out leaf by leaf, and to stick them on the ribbon, until nothing remained of the book but shreds. Abdu suggested that we burn the shreds to get rid of the evidence and that was exactly what we did. We went out to the alley and set them on fire. In two minutes, we concealed all the traces of our theft.

We took the Box of the World to our friends to show it them and arouse their wonder and jealousy. We called it the “Cinema” and shouted: “Free Cinema! No charge!”

We soon regretted our generosity. All the neighbourhood boys gathered and began snatching the Cinema from one hand to another. The box was battered and it collapsed in their hands. The glass piece dropped out of place, the cover fell off, and nothing remained but the picture ribbon. When I tried to save it, someone pulled one of it and it tore. Another pulled the other end, tearing it again. Finally, Abdu and I sat on the threshold of one of the closed shops, with the last remains of our wrecked project. Abdu then left for his home, and I was over-whelmed by a feeling of defeat, and I wept.

My misery was complete when my brother came along in the company of his friends as the sun was setting and he saw me huddled in the corner of the entrance of the closed shop. “Come on let’s go home,” he said merrily.

Although I tried to hide my tears, my brother Yusuf realized how miserable I was. “Are you crying?” he asked. “Who beat you? Just tell me who did and I will break his head.”

I pointed to the torn pictures, scattered at my feet, and I said, “the Box of the World- they tore it to pieces.”

He picked up some shreds, then threw them away. He helped me up saying, “Are you crying for this? I’ll make you a thousand boxes instead... come.”

But when I thought of what he would do to me when he discovered what I had done to his book. I began to cry again as I walked with him. All of a sudden he asked me, “Where did you manage to get the pictures?”

Trusting God with my fate, I said, “From your English book.”

“What?” he shouted. “What did you say?”

“From your English book.” I repeated.

He stopped walking and I expected him to slap me. He was strong and was known among his friends as always being ready to beat up those who attacked him, whether young or old.

He looked me in the face, holding me by the shoulders. I gasped as I wept, but he said, “Quiet! Damn the book!...”

Tomorrow I’ll get another one. But keep quiet, just keep quiet!”

He looked to the left and right, and said proudly, “I don’t want anyone ever to see you crying. Ever! Understand?”

He dragged me by the hand and we went running back home.

Extract from The First Well: A Bethlehem Boyhood by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, translated by Issa J. Boullata, University of Arkansas Press, 1995.

Jabra Ibrahim Jabra was born in Bethlehem in (1920-1994) and was a writer and painter. He was known for his short stories, novels, literary and art criticism and translations of Shakespeare’s plays. Jabra died in Baghdad, Iraq.