

Life in Ancient Sumer

(A Boy's "Education")

Characters

HOADI, a mother
LANI, a girl
ZEF, a boy

AROEL, a father and scribe
NARAM, a foreman on a farm

Scene I: Early morning, Ur, Sumer, c. 3000 B.C.

- HOADI: Zef Zef! Time to get up! You don't want to be late for school again! Zef! Lani, be a good girl and wake up your lazy brother.
- LANI: Zef! Wake up or I'll water the hair on your empty head!
- ZEF: Leave me alone! I'll box your ears if you don't get out of here!
- LANI: Touchy, touchy, big brother. Mother, Zef refuses to move. What should I do?
- HOADI: Go and get your father.
- AROEL: Here I am. Zef, if you're not at the table in sixty seconds, I'll put you on a trading boat where you'll row like a naked slave the rest of your life!
- ZEF: I'm up!
- HOADI: The master teacher said if you're late once more, he'll remove you from the school.
- AROEL: Son, don't throw away your whole future.



- LANI:** I wish I could go to school like Zef.
- HOADI:** Hush, now, Lani. You know only boys can attend scribes' school.
- LANI:** Zef's so lucky. It's not fair!
- ZEF:** Won't you people listen to me for a change? I hate that school! I hate it! I hate it!
- HOADI:** Shame on you! How could you say such a thing? Don't you realize what your father had to do to get you enrolled?
- ZEF:** I don't care! I still hate it!
- HOADI:** Do you have any idea how disappointed this makes us feel? Don't you care about our feelings?
- ZEF:** How about mine? You don't know how horrible that school is. From sunup to sundown, doing nothing but sitting on a hard bench trying to learn two thousand stupid writing characters.
- HOADI:** Did you think becoming a scribe would be easy?
- LANI:** Nothing good is ever accomplished without hard work, sweat, and some pain.
- ZEF:** Does that mean getting beaten for not knowing your lessons perfectly? I've had enough of that. I'm quitting.
- HOADI:** How ridiculous! You're throwing away the chance to have one of the best jobs in all Sumer.
- LANI:** Let me take Zef's place. I know just as much cuneiform as he does.
- ZEF:** Dad, just face it. I'm not cut out to be a scribe. I don't care about the good pay or high prestige.



- HOADI: This is the worst tragedy our family has ever had to endure. How have I failed as a mother?
- AROEL: Calm down, now. I'm going to take the day off and see what other jobs might interest our son.
- HOADI: Where are you going?
- AROEL: All over town and into the countryside.
- LANI: I want to go! I want to go! Please take me, too!
- HOADI: No! I need you here.

Scene II: Farming area, later that day.

- AROEL: So you don't want to work in the court system?
- ZEF: Not there. They didn't argue and fight. The court guy tried to get everybody to agree.
- AROEL: It's called arbitration, and that "guy" was the public arbitrator. His job is to find a fair settlement both sides can agree to. We don't like bringing in the law, except as a last resort.
- ZEF: I'd rather be outside moving around, anyway.
- (*They come upon NARAM.*)
- AROEL: Naram, old friend, could you please show my son around—and put him to work for a few hours?
- NARAM: With pleasure.
- AROEL: Zef, without our fertile soil and efficient irrigation system, our city, as we know it, would not exist.
- ZEF: What do you mean?



AROEL: We produce food very efficiently. Half the population can produce enough food to feed all the people. This enables the other half to pursue tasks besides farming . . .

NARAM: Such as construction, handcrafts, trade, finance, education . . . Are you ready to work?

ZEF: Yes. I think I'm going to like this. Anything will be better than school.

*Scene III: NARAM's farm,
a few hours later.*

AROEL: Well, Son, how was it?

ZEF: I want to go home. I'm hungry, all my muscles ache, and my hands feel as if they've held hot coals for a whole minute.

AROEL: Those *are* nasty blisters. What did you do?

ZEF: Helped dig a new irrigation channel.

AROEL: Very important work! Without those channels we can't control flooding or conserve water for irrigation in the dry months.

ZEF: Yeah, yeah. Naram told me all about it. It's too hard, though. I'm starved. Please take me to the market.

AROEL: Do you have anything to barter for food?

ZEF: Of course not. Come on, Dad. You must have some money.

AROEL: Where would I get that?

ZEF: Dad, Dad. Don't play dumb. You have a good, steady job that I know pays very well.

AROEL: How do you know that, Zef?



- ZEF: Just look at our house. It has two stories. These farmers live in simple reed huts covered with dried mud. Mom has lots of jewelry and pottery. We all have expensive leather sandals.
- AROEL: Right. Now, don't you play dumb with me. What's my job?
- ZEF: You're a scribe.
- AROEL: Brilliant! Now, did I become one by eating some magical food, or by wishing real hard, or by making a special sacrifice at the ziggurat?
- ZEF: I see where you're leading. You win.
- AROEL: The game's not over yet. Do you realize how important writing is to our civilization? Without it, none of our complex business transactions would be possible—trading contracts, inventory and record keeping, property measurement and ownership deeds.
- ZEF: I see.
- AROEL: Without writing there'd be chaos. We'd all be back to hunting and gathering. Ready to go back to school?
- ZEF: Yeah. But can we get something to eat first?
- AROEL: Why not? I have a few silver coins. Let's jog to the nearest fruit stand.
- ZEF: Uh, Dad . . . One more thing. My legs are killing me. Do you think we could—
- AROEL: Hire a donkey cart? Why not? Isn't that why we Sumerians invented the wheel? But no more special requests. And when we get home be sure to tell your mother all you've learned today.
- ZEF: Yeah, yeah.

