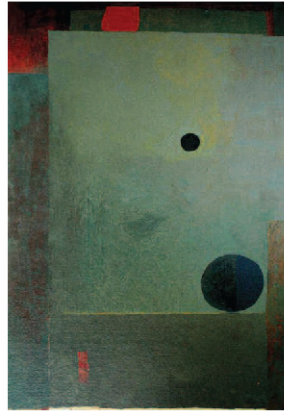


The following story is from the book

The Central Figures
The Báb
Volume Two



These stories are lovingly provided to download as a convenience to teachers or communities otherwise unable to acquire the book. Each book in this storybook series also includes an appendix with questions for discussion and reflection, a glossary of words and phrases used in the stories, a bibliography, and an index.

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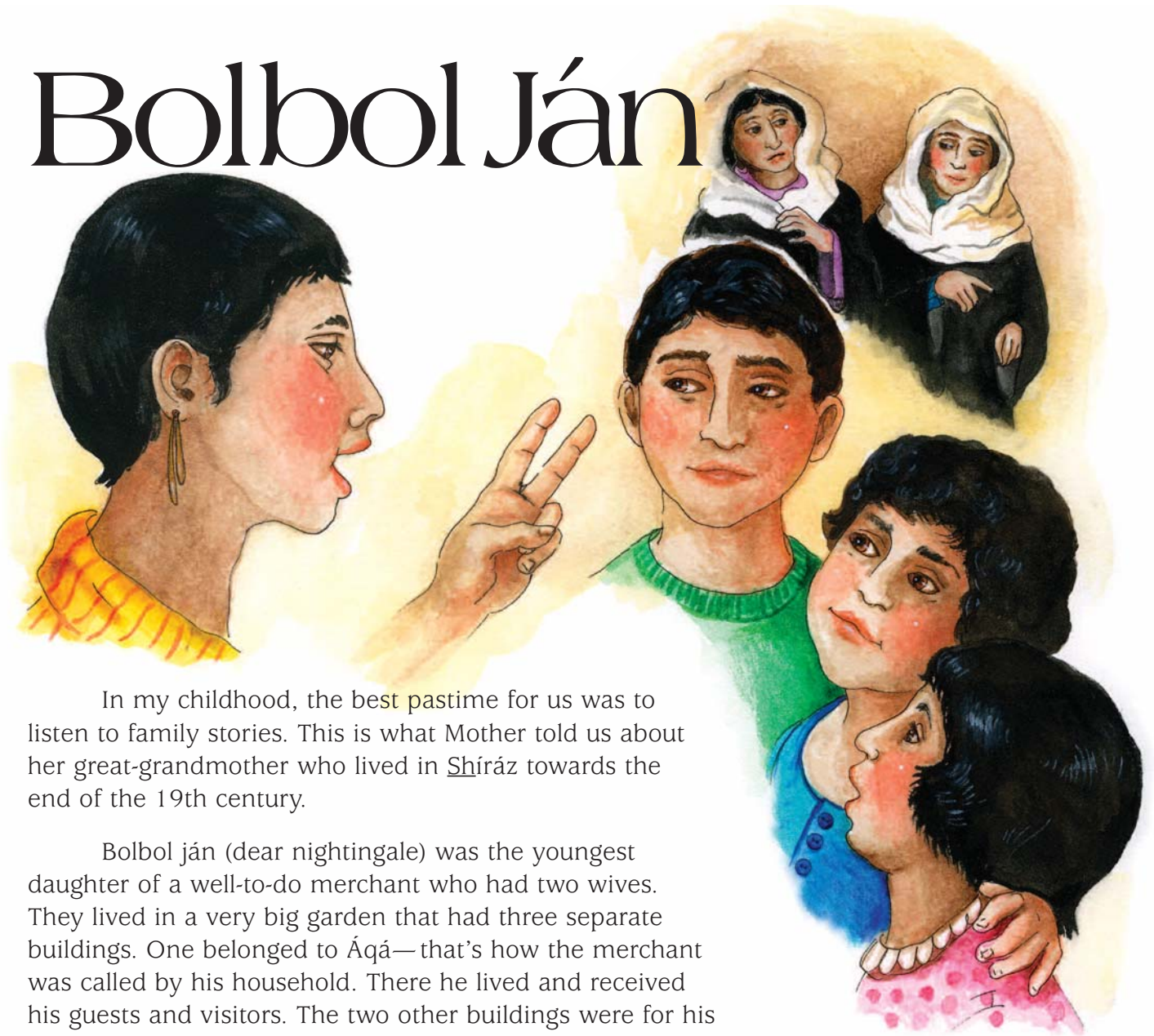

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O People of Persia!
Open your eyes!
Pay heed! Release yourselves. . . .
See the true state of things.
Rise up; seize hold of
such means as will bring you
life and happiness
and greatness and glory
among all the nations
of the world.

—‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 104

Bolbol Ján



In my childhood, the best pastime for us was to listen to family stories. This is what Mother told us about her great-grandmother who lived in Shíráz towards the end of the 19th century.

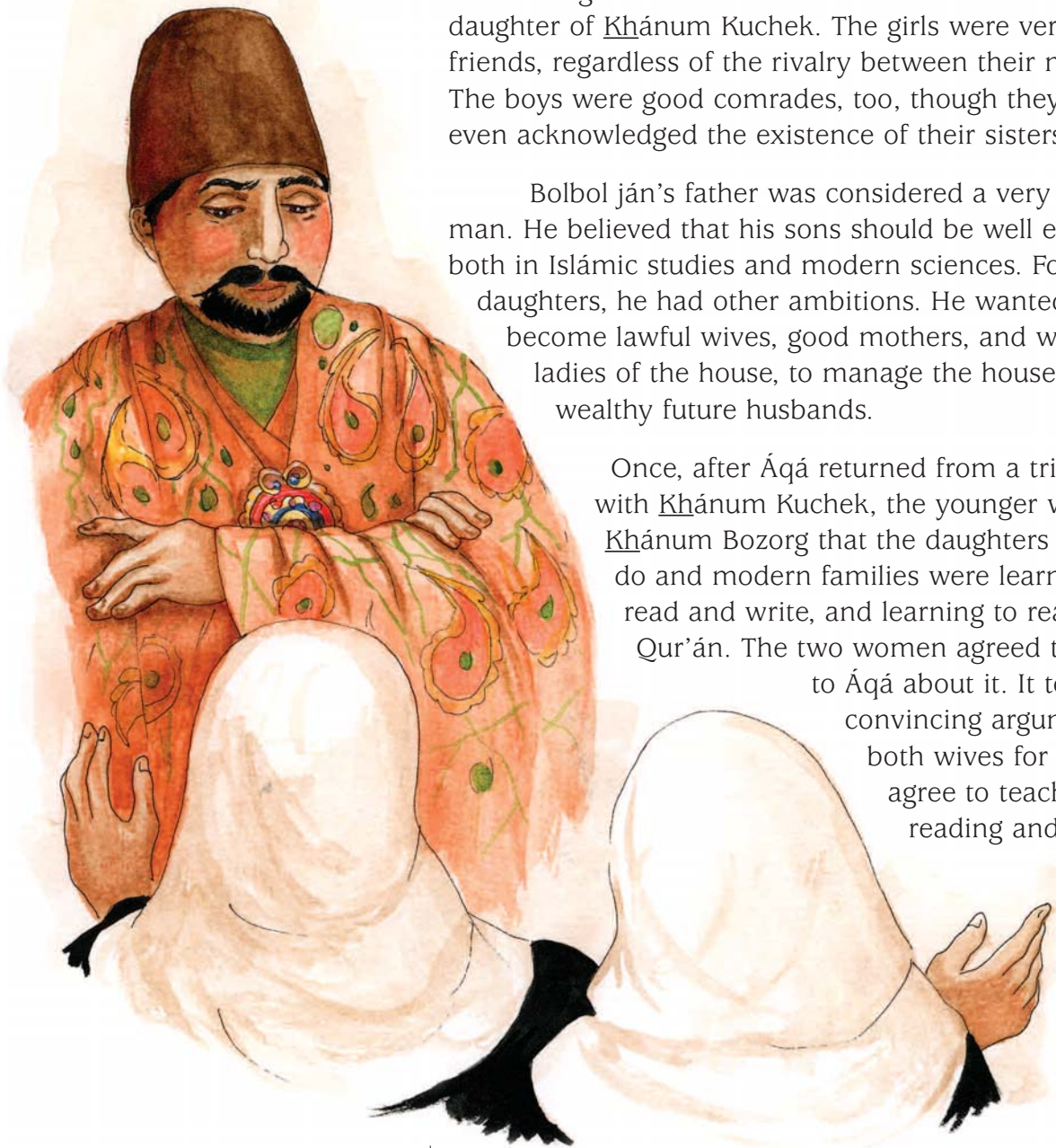
Bolbol ján (dear nightingale) was the youngest daughter of a well-to-do merchant who had two wives. They lived in a very big garden that had three separate buildings. One belonged to Áqá—that's how the merchant was called by his household. There he lived and received his guests and visitors. The two other buildings were for his wives: Khánum Bozorg, the older wife, and Khánum Kuchek, the younger wife.

Written by Lily Ayman
Illustrated by Winifred Barnum-Newman

Bolbol ján was the thirteenth child in that household of ten daughters and three sons. She was the adored daughter of Khánum Kuchek. The girls were very good friends, regardless of the rivalry between their mothers. The boys were good comrades, too, though they seldom even acknowledged the existence of their sisters.

Bolbol ján's father was considered a very modern man. He believed that his sons should be well educated, both in Islámic studies and modern sciences. For his daughters, he had other ambitions. He wanted them to become lawful wives, good mothers, and well-trained ladies of the house, to manage the households of wealthy future husbands.

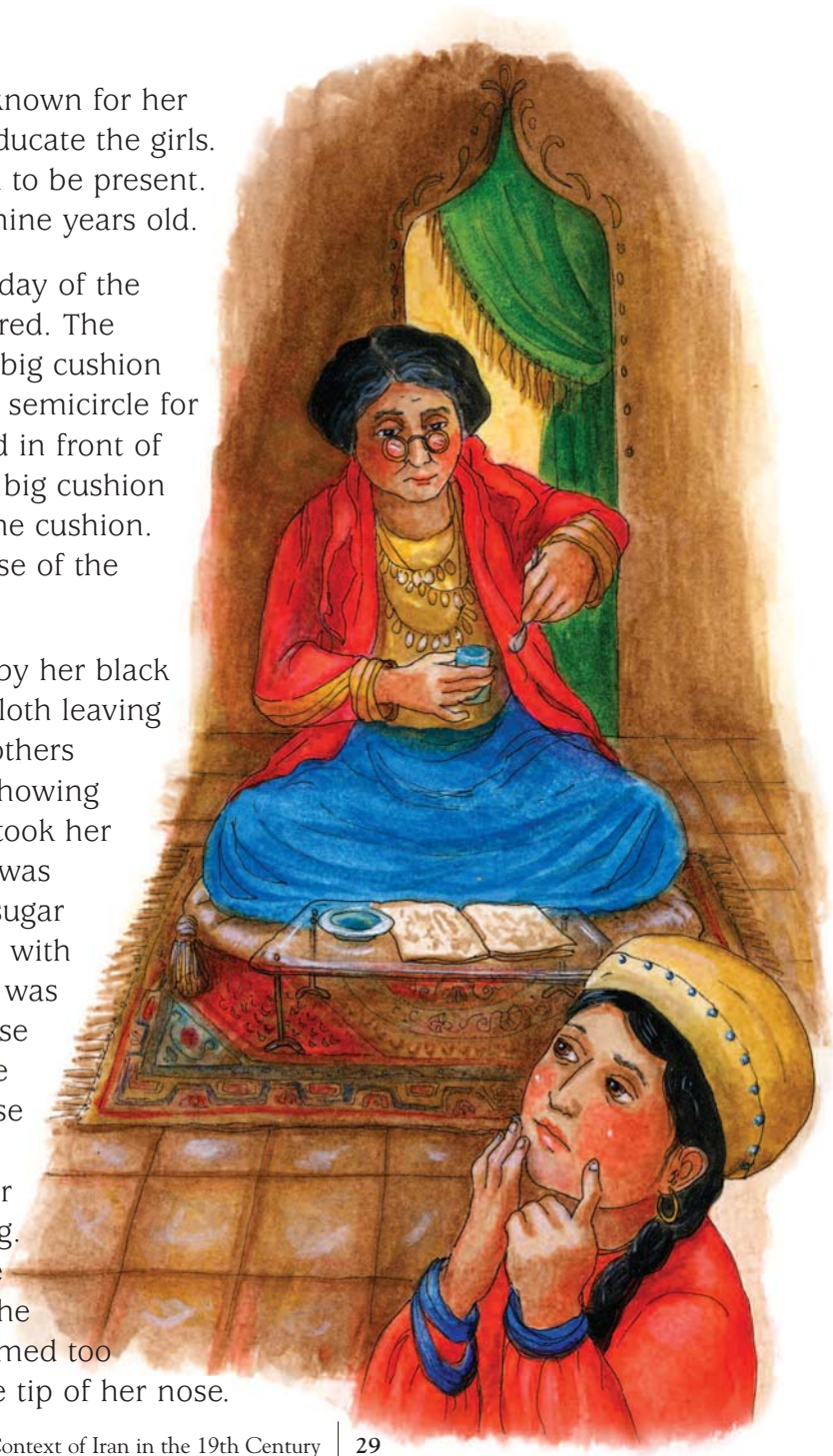
Once, after Áqá returned from a trip to Tíhrán with Khánum Kuchek, the younger wife told Khánum Bozorg that the daughters of well-to-do and modern families were learning how to read and write, and learning to read the Qur'án. The two women agreed to speak to Áqá about it. It took many convincing arguments from both wives for him to agree to teach the girls reading and writing.

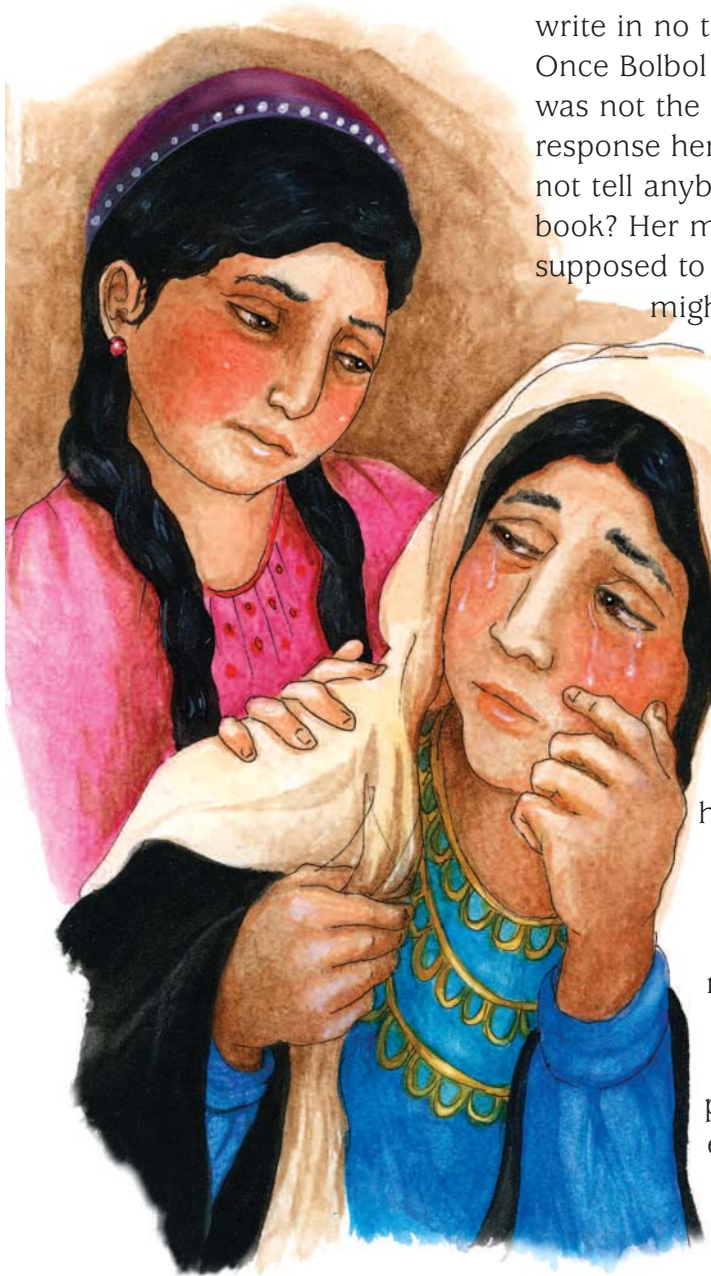


An old woman, who was well known for her knowledge of religion, was hired to educate the girls. The two mothers were also permitted to be present. This happened when Bolbol ján was nine years old.

She remembered well the first day of the class. A special room had been prepared. The teacher, Khánum Baji, would sit on a big cushion facing smaller cushions arranged in a semicircle for the girls. Small low tables were placed in front of each cushion. The teacher also had a big cushion behind her. A long ruler was beside the cushion. The pupils knew that the main purpose of the ruler was to discipline unruly girls.

Khánum Baji came in covered by her black chádor, her face covered by a white cloth leaving only her eyes to be seen. The two mothers greeted her. She kissed their hands, showing her respect for them. A maidservant took her chádor and face cover. A glass of tea was offered on a silver tray. She put four sugar lumps in it and started to mix the tea with the little silver spoon. Meanwhile she was telling the mothers how fortunate these girls were to be permitted to learn the Qur'án. She hoped that they would use this knowledge to keep themselves obedient followers of Islám, and never misuse the skill of reading and writing. Bolbol ján wondered what the misuse of reading and writing could mean. She did not dare to ask. Khánum Baji seemed too serious, with her round glasses on the tip of her nose.





Bolbol ján and her sisters learned how to read and write in no time. Her mother learned how to read, too. Once Bolbol ján saw Khánum Kuchek reading a book that was not the Qur'án. She asked her mother what it was. In response her mother made Bolbol ján swear that she would not tell anybody. But why could one not read any other book? Her mother said that a chaste woman was not supposed to read anything but the Qur'án. Other books might teach her wrong things. Men, she said, were more intelligent and could deal well with the information in books. "How very strange!" thought Bolbol ján to herself, and made the solemn promise not to tell on her mother.

One day she noticed that one of her sisters was absent from the class. She asked the others for the reason. No one answered. All that day Bolbol ján could not concentrate. Two times the strokes of the long ruler brought her attention back to the lesson. Finally the class was over. Bolbol ján went to her sister's room. She found her crying.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"I am not to continue classes. My fiancé does not want an educated wife. He says that it is enough for his wife to be chaste and obedient, bear healthy children, and keep a clean and pleasant home for him. He believes that educated women all go astray."

"And you are going to obey?"

“I have no say in this matter. Father wants me to marry him, and has commanded me to stop going to classes,” answered the sobbing sister.

One day when Bolbol ján was twelve years old, her mother called to her. “Congratulations, my dearest!” she said happily. “Tomorrow some ladies are coming to see you. They are going to see if you are suitable to marry the son of Mr. Etemad who has recently returned from Europe.”

“I, getting married?” said Bolbol ján, horrified.

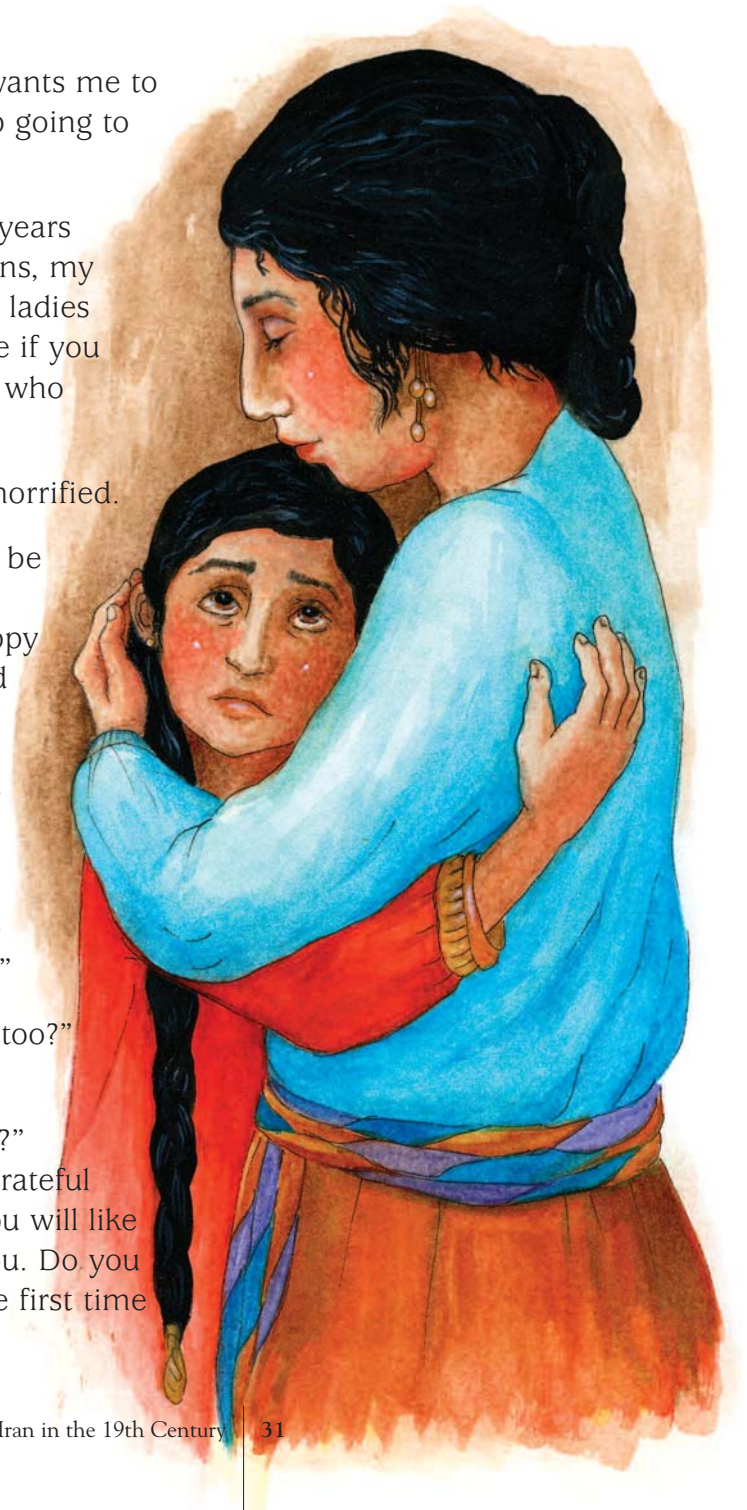
“Yes, my sweet. You are very lucky to be considered for such a marriage. He is a very wealthy, well educated man and is quite happy that you are a literate young lady,” answered her mother, embracing her tenderly.

“How old is this man, Mother?” asked Bolbol ján.

Her mother was surprised. “My dear, what does it matter? The older the man, the more appreciative he will be of your beauty.”

“But Mother, don’t I have to like him, too?” asked childish Bolbol ján.

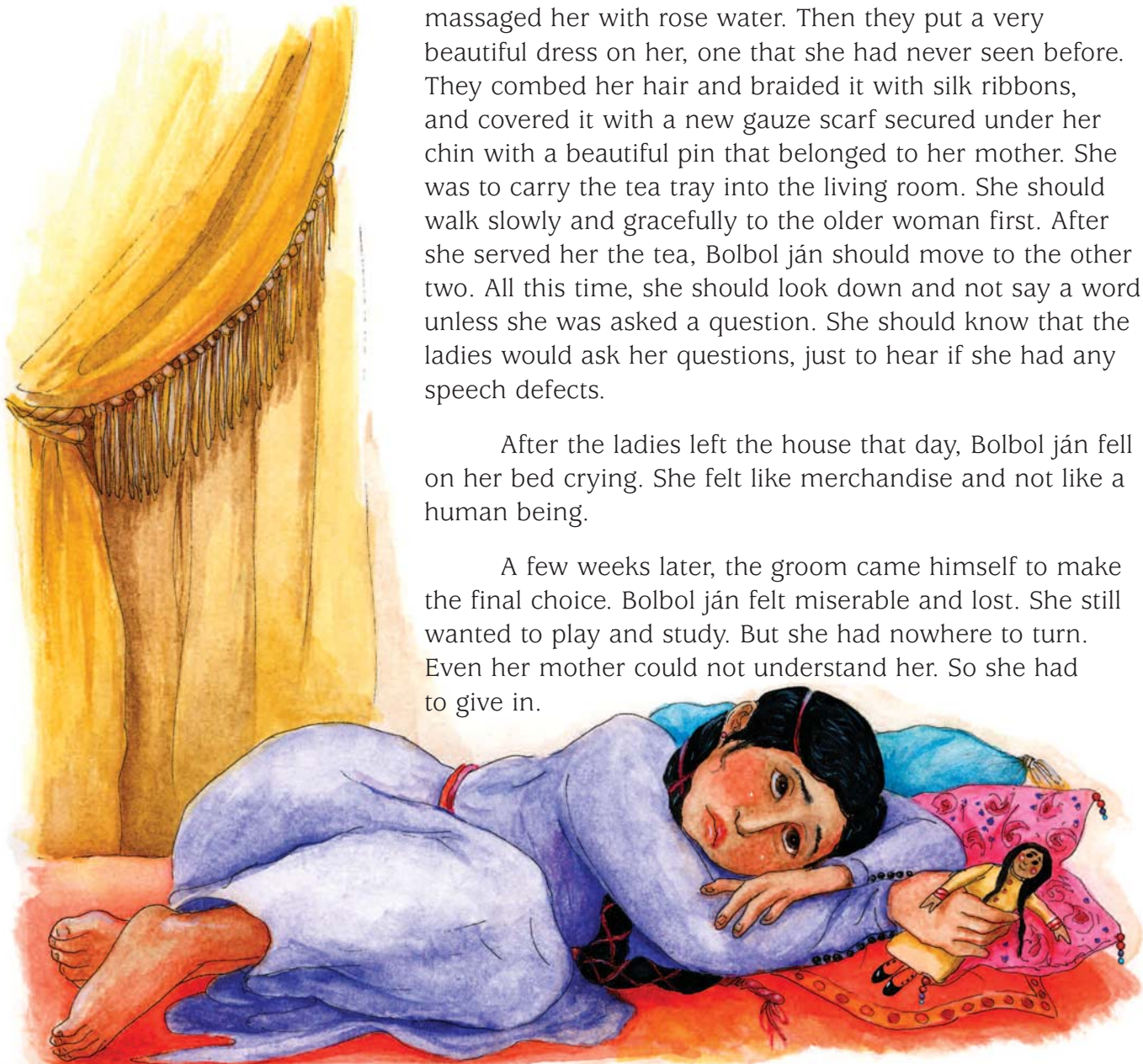
“Hush, my dear! What are you saying?” exclaimed the mother. “You should just be grateful to have found a benefactor to marry you. You will like any husband that your father chooses for you. Do you know that when your father married me, the first time I saw him was in our wedding chambers?”



Poor Bolbol ján spent a sleepless night. In the morning her nanny and her mother washed her and massaged her with rose water. Then they put a very beautiful dress on her, one that she had never seen before. They combed her hair and braided it with silk ribbons, and covered it with a new gauze scarf secured under her chin with a beautiful pin that belonged to her mother. She was to carry the tea tray into the living room. She should walk slowly and gracefully to the older woman first. After she served her the tea, Bolbol ján should move to the other two. All this time, she should look down and not say a word unless she was asked a question. She should know that the ladies would ask her questions, just to hear if she had any speech defects.

After the ladies left the house that day, Bolbol ján fell on her bed crying. She felt like merchandise and not like a human being.

A few weeks later, the groom came himself to make the final choice. Bolbol ján felt miserable and lost. She still wanted to play and study. But she had nowhere to turn. Even her mother could not understand her. So she had to give in.



On that special day she acted like a doll, letting her mother and her nanny fuss over her. This time a silk *chádor* was thrown on her scarf-covered hair, as she was going to serve a man. Then she took the tea tray from her nanny's hands. She walked slowly into the room. Bolbol ján kept her eyes lowered to the floor, presenting the tea to the guests. Just before leaving she glanced towards the man who was looking at her. He was a big man with a kind face, illumined by big brown eyes. He seemed about her father's age. She stepped out and ran to her room.

A few months later this man became Bolbol ján's husband. They apparently had a very happy life together. He never married another woman. They had five children, one of whom was my mother's grandmother. Bolbol ján made sure that all her daughters were well educated. My great-grandmother became one of the first educated midwives in Iran. ★

