

PERSIAN ROSE

By Nadia Kardan, age 16

Editors' Note: This story was inspired by the experiences of Mona Mahmudnizhad (see page 18). It contains somber and powerful events. We encourage you to read and talk about it with your parents or teachers.



Goli got up from the floor where she sat to say her morning prayers. She peered at herself in the mirror, smoothed her denim mini-skirt, and admired her red spaghetti-strap top. It was illegal to wear these clothes and her make-up outside.

"Goli *jún!*" she heard her grandmother call.

"Yes, *Madar jún?*" she replied.

Madar *jún* came slowly downstairs. She smiled and stroked Goli's cheek. "You don't need to wear make-up and stylish clothes. You are already the prettiest young woman in Iran."

"Thank you, Madar *jún.*"

"Let's have breakfast. But put on long sleeves and pants. You don't know who could knock on our door."

Goli changed her clothes, then they sat down to a simple meal of toast, feta cheese, and tea.

Suddenly, Goli's brother, Bijan, and his friend, Amir, bolted through the door.

"*Sobh bi kheir*, Madar *jún*," Bijan said, as he kissed her on the cheek. He picked up a slice of bread and spread cheese on it before stuffing it in his mouth. "Hey, Goli."

"*Salaám, Khánúm e Rashidi*," Amir said to Madar *jún* politely. "*Salaám*, Goli."

Goli blushed as she smiled back.

"Hey, Goli, you want to go out with us?"

Bijan asked.

"No," Madar *jún* said, "Goli's going to help me cook for Bahá'í Feast tonight. Besides, she's teaching a children's class, and she needs to prepare."

"Amir and I will be with her. We'll be okay."

Goli wasn't interested in going out, only to constantly check if her hair was completely hidden by her scarf and endure taunts from people who knew she was Bahá'í.

Madar *jún* shook her head. "I feel best when she's out with her father."

After Bijan and Amir had gone, Madar *jún* said, "I'll make *khorescht e badamjun*. Get the eggplants, and we'll peel them."

Goli fetched the bag of eggplants and set two chairs around a waste basket. They began peeling the vegetables.

"What have you planned for the children tonight?" Madar *jún* asked.

"I'm going to tell them a story about Bahá'u'lláh, and they'll draw a picture about it."

"What story will you be telling?"

Goli looked down. "I'm not sure."

"The Ridván Festival begins soon. Tell them about that."

"Describe Ridván to me again, Madar *jún.*" Madar *jún* closed her eyes and smiled. "In Baghdád, there was a place, beautiful beyond words."



CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

They called it the Garden of Ridván, or Paradise. The fragrance of roses filled the air as nightingales flew above, singing a song to all below. It was there that Bahá'u'lláh declared that He was a Messenger of God."

That evening, Goli's home was filled with boisterous talking, children playing, and laughter. Bahá'í Feast happened every 19 days, and Goli always looked forward to it.

"Everyone!" her father, Reza, announced. "Please, sit down."

The group of about 15 people took their seats. Everyone took turns saying prayers.

Then Goli gathered the four children in her class and led them to the TV room. Leila was the oldest at 11. Kamron and Sami were 9, and Nika was 8.

Goli loved teaching. The kids told her constantly that they loved being with her, too. They were told that they were "worthless dogs" by others—and even by their teachers—because of their religion. School wasn't supposed to be like that, Goli thought.

"Tonight, I am going to tell you a story, and then we are going to draw pictures," Goli announced, smiling. "The story begins in a beautiful garden full of roses, called Ridván."

The kids sat on the floor and looked up at her eagerly.



About an hour later, Madar jún began to bring out the food with Goli's mother, Roya. It was time for the children to rejoin the group. Reza, her father, heard their laughter from down the hall.

Then Reza heard a car outside. He peeked out of the blinds. His heart nearly stopped when he recognized a police vehicle. The room slowly grew silent as everyone saw the look on Reza's face.

The doorbell rang. Reza opened the door slowly. Three officers stormed in.

"Good evening," Reza choked out, trying to look brave. "May I help you, officers?"

"What's going on here?" one asked.

"We were about to have dinner," said Reza calmly.

An officer scowled and said, "We were ordered by the Public Prosecutor of Tihrán to search the Rashidi home. Are you Mr. Reza Rashidi?"

"I am, sir. This is my home. You may search it if needed."

Roya cautiously took a few steps toward her husband. A guard roughly grabbed her arm and pushed her aside.

Bijan came forward, muttering angrily, "Don't touch—" His words were cut off when the guard pulled out his gun and pointed it directly at Bijan's forehead.

"*Sag e Bahá'í*," said the guard. Sweat glistened on Bijan's face as he held up his hands innocently.

The guard with the gun snapped at the other guards to begin searching. One began ravaging everything in sight. Then he moved to the kitchen, and the sounds of pots and dinnerware crashing echoed through the house. The third guard moved down the hallway, and barged into the TV room, where Goli was teaching her class.

Goli jumped. The children moved closer to her. The guard looked at the drawings on the floor.

"Sir, may I ask, who are you?" Goli whispered, her voice shaking.

The man ignored her and walked to a table with a Bahá'í prayer book and notebooks for the students. He ripped the notebooks open and saw prayers, drawings, and sentences about Bahá'u'lláh.

He pointed his gun at Goli. "Come with me," he said. Then he looked at the children. "Follow her!" His voice was like thunder. Nika was in tears.

In the living room, Goli felt suddenly cold when she saw the gun pointed at Bijan. The third guard grabbed her arm and pushed her toward the guard with Bijan.

"Take her," he said.

Goli looked around at the panicked faces of her family and guests. Then the second guard came into the living room. Finally, the guard lowered his gun from Bijan's head.

"You are under arrest," the guard who took Goli announced to Reza. The guard grabbed Goli's arm again. "As is she."

"She is a *child!*" her mother cried. "Why do you take my child? She's only 16!"

"Your child is a Bahá'í teacher," the guard responded. "She is under arrest."



One month later. One hour to live.

Goli wasn't afraid. She looked back on her month of interrogation and torture. She could have been home long ago, had she renounced her faith. But how could they expect her to lie? Her beliefs made up who she was.

30 minutes to live.

Goli was led to the gallows with nine other women. She was the last in line. The guards told them again that they could live—if they denied their faith. All stayed in line.

15 minutes to live.

Goli closed her eyes and prayed.

5 minutes to live.

She was next. She prayed for the woman before her, and then waited.

1 minute to live.

Goli slipped the noose over her own neck. She closed her eyes and felt no pain. She thought of the Garden of Ridván, Paradise, where the fragrance of roses filled the air as nightingales flew above, singing a song to all below.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nadia Kardan, age 16, lives in New Jersey, U.S. She says, "I like to write realistic dramatic fiction regarding numerous conflicts between different groups of people. I always want to make sure that my writing has something valuable that every reader can gain. I chose to write about Bahá'ís in Iran because . . . they can, at any time, conform to the majority beliefs and avoid any and all persecution, but they simply choose not to."

We hope this story encourages you to think about the human rights of all people. In many parts of the world, people of all faiths face tragic injustice with great nobility and strength.