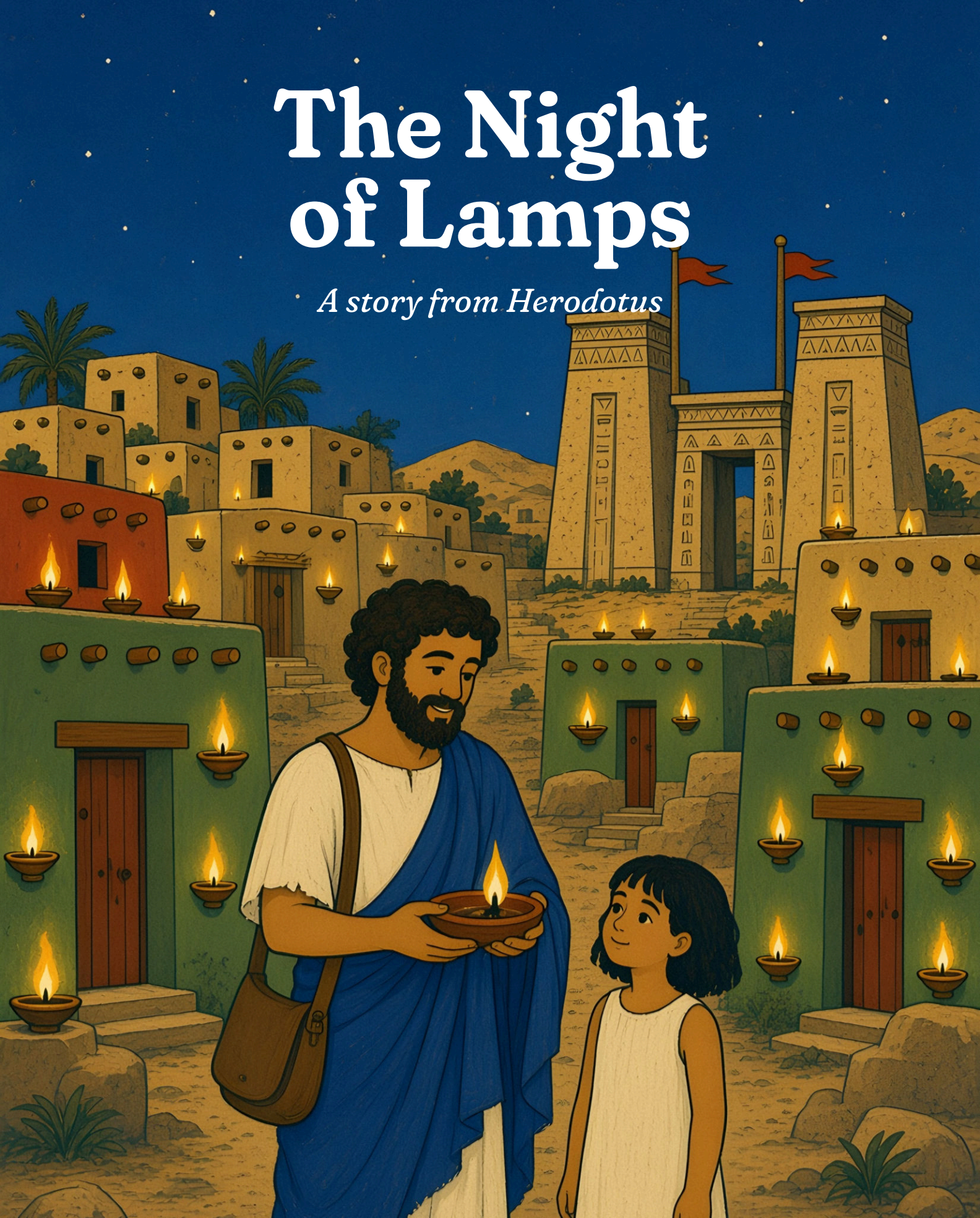
The Night of Lamps

A story from Herodotus



The Night of Lamps

A story from the Histories of Herodotus

Retold for ages 4–6

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The illustrations were made digitally in a lithograph pencil style. The text is set in Crimson Text, with display type in Fraunces.

Inspired by Herodotus, *Histories*, Book 2, chapters 59 and 62 (with 2.28 and 2.171), drawing on the English translation by A. D. Godley (1920).

A note for grown-ups

Where the story comes from

Herodotus (about 484 to 425 BC) was a Greek writer born in Halicarnassus, now Bodrum in Turkey. His *Histories* is one of the first big history books. He travelled widely, including to Egypt, and filled Book 2 with what he saw and what people told him.

What is true in this book

- Herodotus came from Halicarnassus and visited Egypt, including the city of Sais in the Nile Delta, where he talked with a temple scribe (*Histories* 2.28).
- Egyptians gathered at Sais each year for a festival of the goddess he calls Athena; Egyptians called her Neith (2.59).
- On the festival night, people kept lamps burning outside, all around their houses, all night. The lamps were saucers filled with salt and oil, with a floating wick. It was called the Feast of Lamps (2.62).
- Egyptians who could not come to Sais lit lamps at home that night, so lamps burned all over Egypt (2.62).
- He says a holy story explains the night, but he does not tell it, and he writes that he will keep silent about the sacred rites at Sais (2.62, 2.171).

What is simplified or imagined

- Herodotus never says he was there on the Night of Lamps; he reports the custom. Showing him at the festival is imagined.
- The fisherman, the market woman, the boy and his grandma, the sleepy girl and all the dialogue are imagined.
- The voyage, the Nile scenes and the closing scene of him writing are simplified. The festival's sacrifice is left out.

Say it like this

Herodotus: heh-ROD-uh-tus · Halicarnassus: hal-ih-kar-NASS-us · Sais: SAY-iss · Neith: NEET (or NAYTH)

Talk about it

- Why do you think the people of Sais put lamps all around their houses?
- Herodotus kept the priests' story secret. Why might that be kind?
- Does your family light candles or lights on a special night? What happens?

Long, long ago, in Halicarnassus, a busy harbor town by the blue sea, there lived a man named Herodotus.





Herodotus loved questions. He asked the fishermen, “What do you catch?” He asked the bakers, “What do you bake?” He asked travelers, “How do people live where you come from?”

Herodotus asked, and Herodotus listened.

One day, Herodotus got on a ship with a big white sail. The wind pushed. The waves rocked. *Splish, splash,* for many days.



At last he came to Egypt, a land of hot yellow sand and one long, wide river, the Nile. Herodotus rode a boat up the river.



He saw tall green reeds and white birds. He saw farmers in the dark, wet mud. Children waved from the shore, and Herodotus waved back.



The boat stopped at a town called Sais. In Sais stood a great stone temple for the goddess Neith. The people of Sais loved her very much.



Herodotus walked through the market. It smelled of bread and onions and warm dust. A woman was pouring oil into little clay dishes. Lots and lots of dishes.

“What are those for?” asked Herodotus. “For the Night of Lamps,” she said. “It is coming soon.”

Herodotus asked, and Herodotus listened.



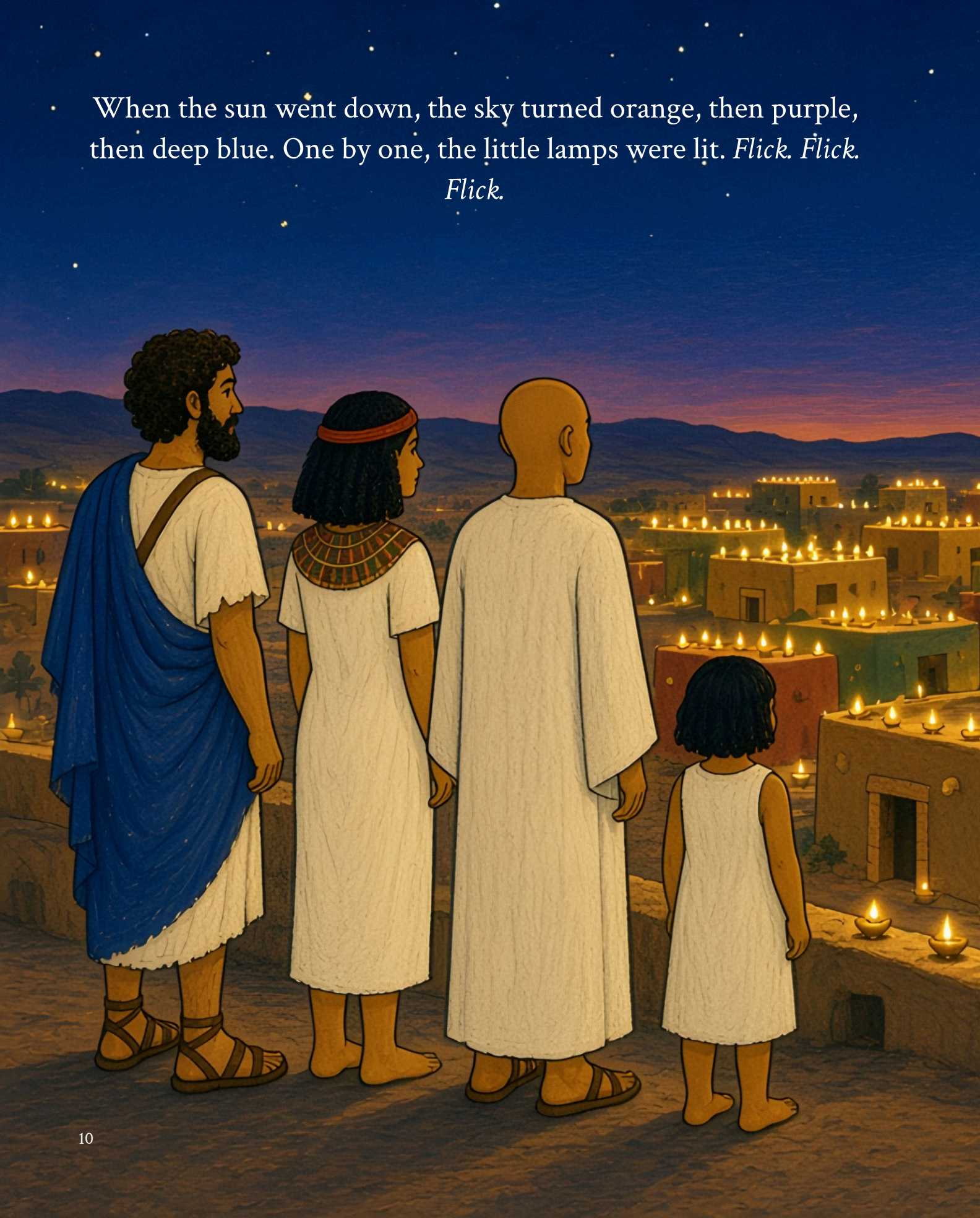


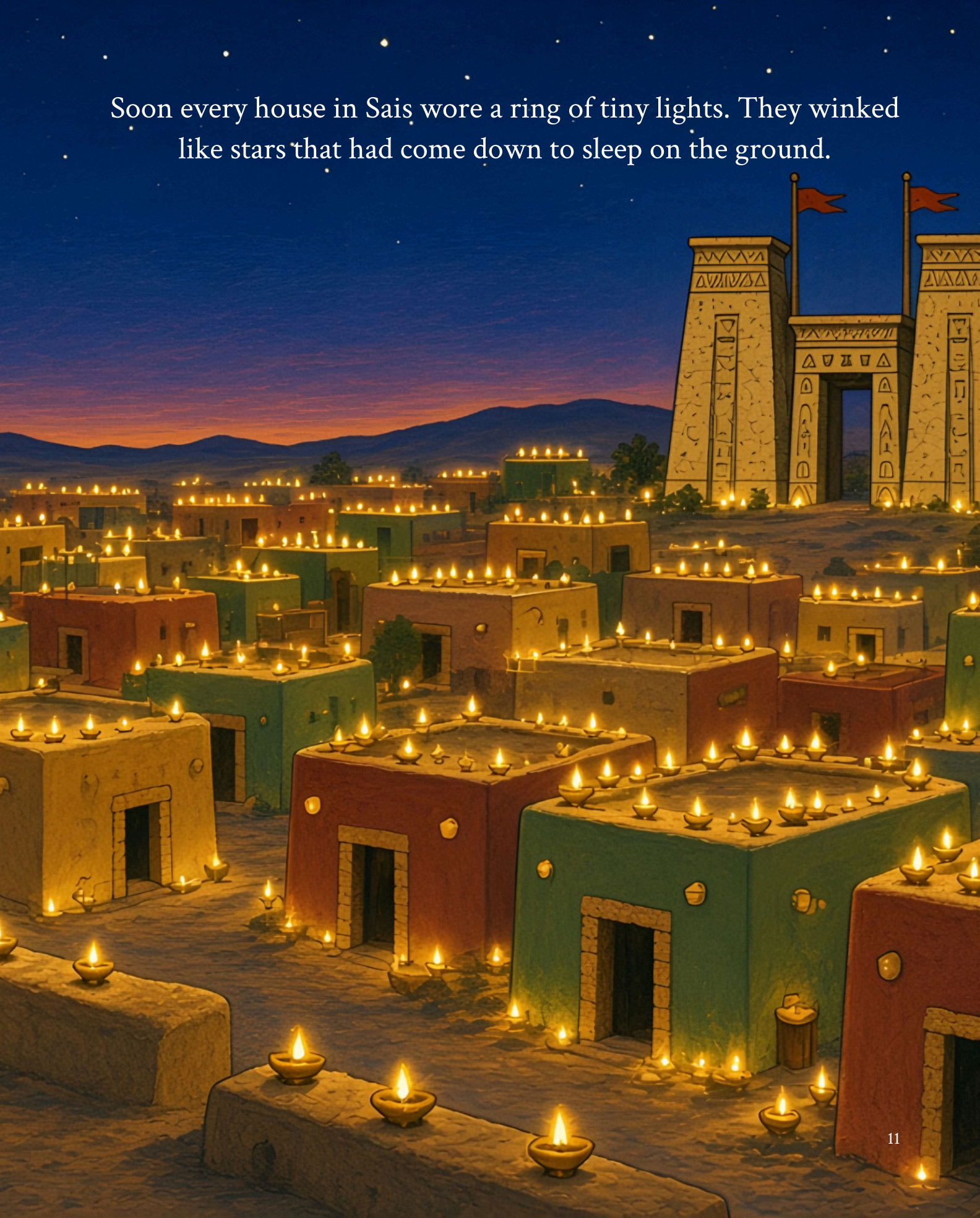
The people told him how to make a lamp. Take a little clay saucer. Fill it with salt and oil. Lay a wick on top, so it floats. Light the wick, and it glows.

On the Night of Lamps, people come to Sais from near and far. Every family sets lamps outside, all around the house. On the doorsteps. Along the walls. Beside the path.



When the sun went down, the sky turned orange, then purple, then deep blue. One by one, the little lamps were lit. *Flick. Flick. Flick.*



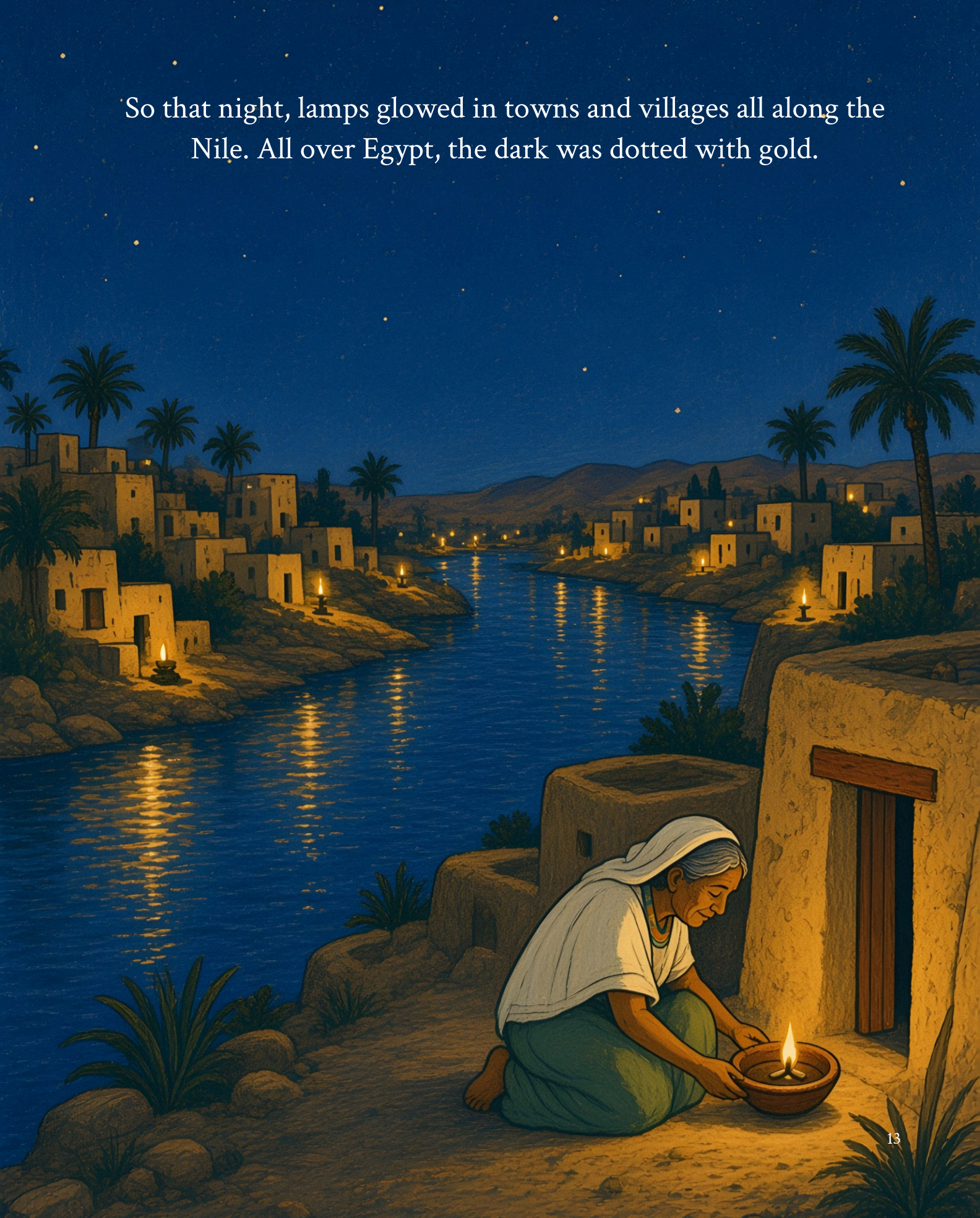


Soon every house in Sais wore a ring of tiny lights. They winked like stars that had come down to sleep on the ground.

A boy told Herodotus, “My grandma lives far away. She cannot come to Sais. But tonight she lights lamps at home too.”



So that night, lamps glowed in towns and villages all along the Nile. All over Egypt, the dark was dotted with gold.



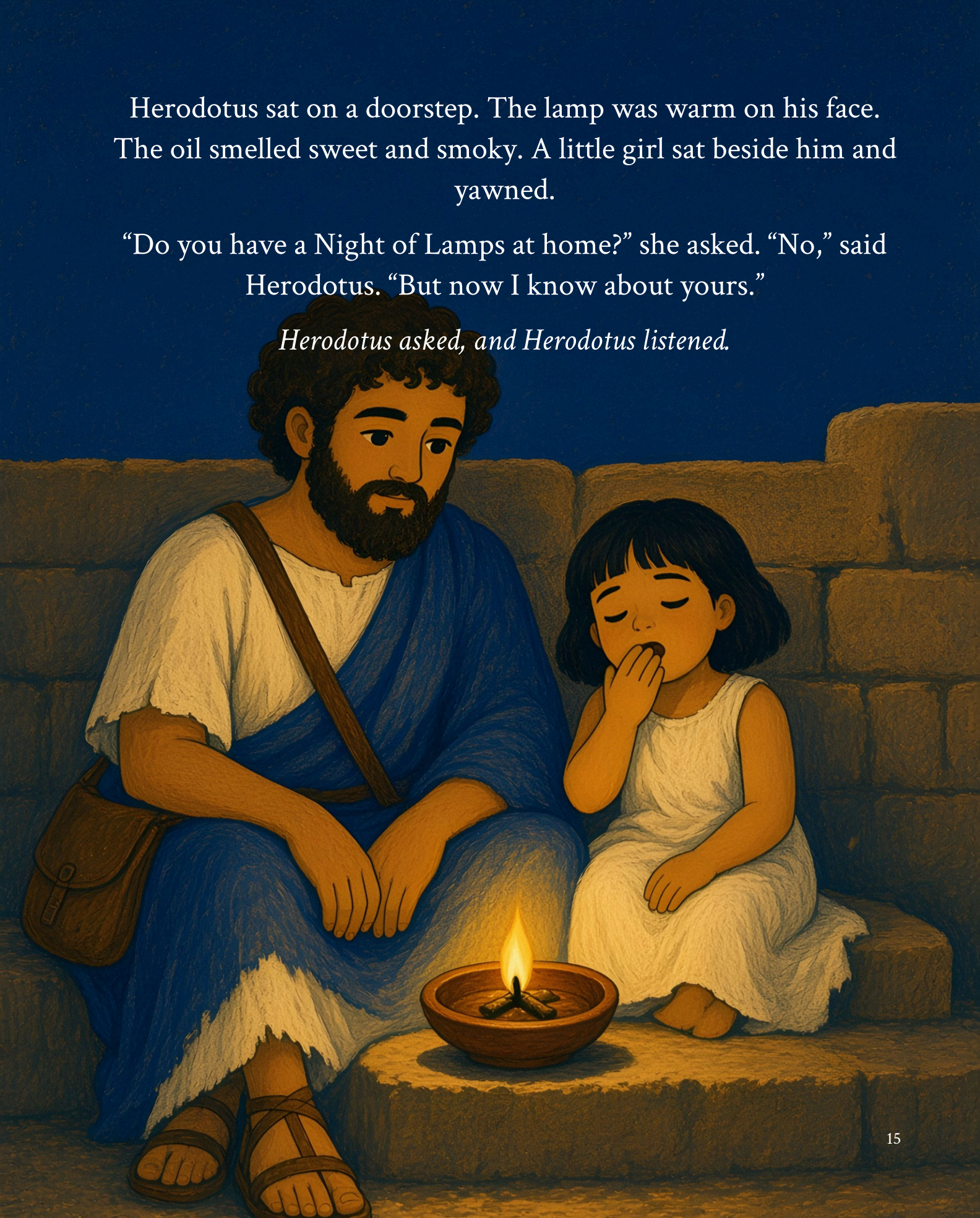
Herodotus asked the priests, “Why is this night so special?” The priests told him a holy story. Herodotus listened carefully. But the story belonged to them, so he kept it to himself.



Herodotus sat on a doorstep. The lamp was warm on his face. The oil smelled sweet and smoky. A little girl sat beside him and yawned.

“Do you have a Night of Lamps at home?” she asked. “No,” said Herodotus. “But now I know about yours.”

Herodotus asked, and Herodotus listened.



All night long, the lamps burned. When the sun came up, they went out, one by one. *Puff. Puff. Puff.*



Then Herodotus sailed back across the sea. He wrote down everything he saw and heard: the river, the temple, the little clay lamps. He wrote it all in a big book, so people far away could know too.

Every place has its own ways. It is good to look. It is good to ask. It is good to listen.

What do people do where you live, when night comes?



Where this story comes from

About 2,500 years ago, in ancient Greece, a man named Herodotus set out to learn how people lived in other lands. He travelled to Egypt, asked questions everywhere he went, and wrote what he learned in a long book called the *Histories*. People sometimes call him the "Father of History." In that book he describes the Feast of Lamps at Sais: one night each year, families all over Egypt set little lamps of salt and oil around their homes and let them burn until morning. This story is drawn from those few lines, and from Herodotus's habit of looking closely, asking kindly, and listening well.

The Night of Lamps

Long ago, a curious traveler named Herodotus sailed from Greece to Egypt to learn how other people live. In the town of Sais, he watched families set out little clay lamps, one by one, until the whole land sparkled with gold. A gentle, true-to-history story about looking, asking and listening.

For ages 4–6

