

The Story Behind the Story: Marsha Mehran and *Pomegranate Soup*

I was born in Tehran, Iran, on the eve of the Islamic Revolution. Though my parents had no ideological ties to the upheaval, and were not religious, they came from old Bahai families and were considered infidels by orthodox Muslims. Bahais had often been treated as second-class citizens in Iran. During and after the revolution, living situations for Bahais worsened; several community leaders, including my great-uncle, were assassinated. Amidst such chaos, and with their own academic ambitions in mind, my parents decided to emigrate to America. They were luckier than most, with a modest nest egg and letters of acceptance from the University of Arizona. But in order to move to the US, they would need visas.

On November 4, 1979, the day my father planned to file their visa applications with the American Embassy, a band of revolutionary students bombarded the consulate's Tehran headquarters and took the employees hostage. This momentous turn of events, known to all Iranians as 'The Revolution', launched my family into a peripatetic existence that crossed five continents, numerous cultures, and equipped me with a trunk full of adventures, both public and personal.

With the embassy under siege, my parents were not able to obtain their visas and were forced to abandon their dreams of American academia. Following a friend's advice, they moved to Buenos Aires and opened a Middle Eastern café, El Pollo Loco (The Crazy Chicken), where the heady smells of dolmehs and spicy beef kabobs were an instant hit with Argentinean locals. I attended St. Anthony's, a Scottish private academy where students spoke English exclusively and where pledges to the British monarchy were a morning prerequisite. Bagpipe ceremonies and kilts school uniforms instilled in me a lifetime love for all things Celtic. Meanwhile, at four years old, I was learning three languages simultaneously (Farsi at home, English at school, and Spanish

in the streets). Every night before going to bed, I was required to say goodnight in all three languages: “Shab-e kher, Buenas Noches, and Goodnight!”

Amid threats of military coups and a teetering Argentinean economy, my parents were forced to sell their beloved café. In the summer of 1984, we left again for Miami, Florida, where softball, florescent *Now and Later* candies, and Madonna were the order of the day. My father found work as a sous chef in a vegan restaurant, and my mother, swathed in powder pink, sold Mary Kay cosmetics door-to-door. Adjusting to the rhythms of American life, I immersed myself in dodgeball, Saturday morning cartoons and sugary cereal. At home, the *sofreh*, an embroidered picnic cloth, was still covered by platters of buttery lima bean rice, delicate herb stews and pistachio cake, but in the shopping mall across from our tenement apartment, I indulged in corn dogs, cherry Slurpies, and peanut M&Ms.

Revolutions come in all varieties. The biggest one to rock my childhood occurred at age fourteen, when my parents announced their divorce. Somewhere along the line, between chopping root vegetables and learning to pronounce ‘Let Mary Kay Make Your Day’, their marriage had lost ground. I went to live with my mother in Australia, where my grandparents had migrated after the Revolution. Australia struck me as barren, with its fried egg barbies and flat VB beer; but the colorful vocabulary --‘mate’, ‘g’day’, ‘too right’ -- and the warmth of my new schoolmates helped ease the pain of my parents’ separation. Although my father eventually migrated to Australia as well, my teenage years were a bewildering mélange of happy school days, custody battles and tears.

By the age of nineteen, my familial wanderlust had become personal. Feeling hemmed in on such a distant continent, I left Australia for the bright lights of New York City with only two hundred dollars in my pocket. I took on a variety of bizarre jobs in Manhattan -- a Broadway poster girl, personal assistant on film sets, hostess in a restaurant owned by Russian mobsters, and the odd, humiliating waitressing gig -- while I pursued my newest venture: writing. Manhattan was also where I met my future husband. He was Irish and

worked as a bartender in Ryan's Irish Pub on Second Avenue, and, according to my father, was an Iranian once-removed. "Ireland," my father joked, when I notified him on my impending nuptials, "Ireland is really Iran-Land." Mad, perhaps, but my father's joviality was heartening.

My husband Christopher and I spent the next two years in Ireland, living in a small cottage in the West that boasted an awesome view of Croagh Patrick, the country's holiest mountain. I came to love the smell of peat fires, the spirited fiddle sessions, and the cracking humor of the Irish, all of which inspired my first novel, *Pomegranate Soup*. There was something fatalistic about my marrying an Irishman, I felt. As though my Celtic schooling had somehow pre-destined such a meeting.

My husband and I now divide our time between Ireland and Brooklyn, where my next novel is set. I often muse on the strange, circuitous journey my young life has taken: the melding of Persian, South American, American, Australian and Irish cultures. Ultimately I am a mixture of all of these. All I know is that my soul is Persian, and I write and dream in English. Linguistically, the Celtic language, like Farsi, derives from the Indo-European family of tongues. Eire, the Irish word for Ireland, is named after the Gaelic goddess Ériu - not far off Arya, meaning *noble*, from which Iran, "realm of the Aryas," takes its direction. But all these are semantics, as they say. After a childhood of traveling and rootlessness, I have finally found a home.

A Conversation with Marsha Mehran

Author of

Pomegranate Soup

Q: *Pomegranate Soup* is your first novel. What inspired you to write this book?

A: I was living in Ireland in 1999 with my husband, who is Irish. “Multiculturalism” wasn’t even in the vernacular; I was one of only a handful of ‘foreigners’ living in County Mayo. When I walked down the village main street, people literally came out of shop doors to stare at the “brown girl” passing by! At the local pub, I was often asked if I was Japanese or Chinese (ethnic groups which I do not remotely resemble). During this time I met a Middle-Eastern family that ran a deli outside of Castlebar. They sold cans of chickpeas, tahini, and Mediterranean condiments, which are common in supermarkets today, but were a rarity back then. This Lebanese family reminded me of my own parents, who had escaped the Islamic Revolution in Iran and moved to Argentina, where they opened a Middle Eastern eatery. They carried that same haunted, lonely looks on their faces that my mother and father had, as they struggled to build a life in a country so vastly different from their homeland. The image of this family stayed in my mind, even as I moved back to New York and began writing my first novel, a story about Iranian women. Nearly two years later, still toiling with the manuscript, it dawned on me that something was missing from my story -- a sense of joy. A happiness and vitality that is particular to Iranians, to Persian culture itself. I wanted to express the beauty of my birthplace; a vision I knew was incongruous with the dark, violent images Westerners see when they think of Iran. Above all, I wanted readers to smell and taste one of Iran’s

greatest contributions to the world: its delicate, perfumed cuisine. Somehow, all these memories and emotions came together as I began to write *Pomegranate Soup*.

Q. Although *Pomegranate Soup* is not autobiographical, how much of your protagonists do you see in yourself?

A: I am a mixture of all three sisters, actually. There is a little of maternal Marjan, a bit of neurotic Bahar, and even a dash of the free spirit that guides Layla, in me.

Q. *Pomegranate Soup* offers not only a fascinating picture of Revolutionary Iran, but also a buffet of traditional Persian dishes. What inspired you to make food such a prominent aspect of the story, and is there a specific Persian dish you love the most?

A: I'm mad about cooking. Chopping and frying is so relaxing to me; a perfect expression of love. When you give of yourself through a dish, you aren't just feeding somebody's physical hunger, but a deeper longing for home, for a safe place to rest. I have to say that my favorite Persian dish is *gheimeh*. It's a delicious stew made from tomatoes, yellow-split peas, lamb, and French-fried potatoes.

Q. Persian cuisine is still fairly unknown to the greater American population. Why do you think this is?

A: Maybe it's a public relations thing - not enough advertising. There are approximately 1 million Iranian-Americans living in North America, most who moved here after the revolution. So, it probably is just a matter of time, really. I'm definitely ready to spread the word!

Q. It is fascinating how many of our Western ingredients and dishes have a direct connection to Iran. The ancient Silk Road connecting Europe and Asia ran right through the Iran, isn't that so? How do you think this influenced world cuisine?

A: With dishes dating back three millennia, Iranian cuisine has influenced the eating habits of countless cultures: Ancient Greeks, Romans, Chinese, Indian, Arabic, medieval Europeans, you name it. Lemons, oranges, pistachios, barberries, saffron and pomegranates, were instant sensations in ancient Greece and Rome, flavoring their bland dishes and changing the course of language forever. Many of our words for foods find their etymological roots in Iran. Lemon, for example comes from *limoo*, the word orange from *narang*, and so on. Most importantly, Persian cuisine, with its myriad ingredients and balance of sweet and sour flavors, has endured because it is undeniably tasty. A spoonful of saffron rice, buttered and sprinkled with dill and lima beans, is pure heaven.

Q. Persian cuisine, surprisingly enough, has also influenced our own views on healthy eating. The Surgeon General's daily nutritional recommendation -- the food pyramid we've been taught to follow for so long --has its genesis in the Persian Zoroastrian system of balancing. Where does this balancing theory come from and how is it implemented in Iranian homes today?

A: Zoroastrianism was founded by the Persian prophet Zoroaster around 600BC and is now believed to be one of the first, if not the first monotheistic religion. It's dualistic in nature, and its basic concept concerns opposing forces: good and evil struggling for supremacy. This theory of opposites extends to every aspect of life, including diet. Foods, like people, are believed to have natures, hot or cold, *garm* or *sard*. Melancholia or lack of energy can be treated with Garm foods. Hot-temper, fevers, and nervous tension will be alleviated by Sard foods. Good health is obtained when there is a balance. Most modern-day

Iranians, my mother included, still believe in this system of gastronomic balancing. During my school years, if I had an important exam coming up or needed to have all my wits about me for an assignment, my mother would insist I eat *ajil*: a mixture made from dried fruit such as raisins and figs and walnuts, almonds and pistachios. She believed that this garm food would raise my energy levels and help with concentration. (I would always ace a test when I followed her advice!) To calm me down on hot days, or when I was particularly temperamental, cucumber and yogurt dip combined with white basmati rice was a good sard remedy. Likewise, in the book, Marjan keeps a close watch over her moodier sister Bahar, feeding her dishes according to her state of mind.

Q. In the US we take our meals wherever we can: the dinner table, the couch, in the car, squeezing them into our busy schedules, almost like an afterthought. It's completely the opposite in Iranian homes, with their tradition of the *sofreh*. How does the *sofreh* affect the way Iranians eat?

A: Not until my late teens did I ever use a dining table for something other than collecting books, errant newspapers and household bills. All my childhood meals were celebrated on a piece of embroidered cloth called the *sofreh*. Sitting cross-legged along its borders, families are able to 'touch base' in the most fundamental of ways. A picnic three times a day! A typical meal could last up to two hours, and if the weather was particularly hot, the entire contingent would move outdoors. Rooftops or any patch of grass would do. In the book Marjan has a wonderful memory of spending a hot summer's night eating and telling stories on her childhood home's sunken rooftop. I, too, have distinct memories of dining around a *sofreh* on our rooftop in Buenos Aires, while my mother told me fantastical tales of Scheherazade and the *1001 Nights*.

Q. There are some dishes and ingredients that are quintessentially Persian. Fresh herbs, for instance, aren't just used as seasonings and/or garnishes. What is it about herbs that Persians love so much?

A: Nothing, absolutely nothing beats a warm piece of lavash bread folded over creamy feta cheese and a fat sprig of sweet basil or mint. Herbs reign supreme in Persian cuisine. Platters piled with bunches of tarragon, marjoram, mint and basil accompany every meal, as does homemade cheese and just-baked bread. Persian supermarkets, unlike their Western counterparts, devote long refrigerated aisles to fresh herbs, which are sold by weight and not sprig. Stews, salads, rice, egg dishes, ground meat mixtures - all contain at least a cup, if not more, of chopped herbs. Marjan Aminpour has a special affinity for herbs, a green thumb for planting them wherever she goes. They give her strength and hope. I also grow my own herbs. I use small terracotta pots, lining them along my sunny kitchen windowsill. It was a practice I picked during my time in Ireland, where the inclement weather made it hard to grow delicate plants outdoors. I love my little collection of sweet basil, lemon mint, dill, and cilantro!

Q. I love the image of the bubbling samovar in the novel, which is so central to the Aminpour sisters' café. Coffee is the caffeine of choice in the US, but in Iran there is an entire ritual surrounding tea. Can you tell us a bit more about this?

A: There was a period in my childhood when samovars seemed to be taking over our household. My mother had an obsession for them and scoured garage sales and Persian grocery stores for antique, brass, miniature, and electric versions of the water boiler used to make tea. No matter what time of day, visitors to our home were ensured a hot cup of tea thanks to these miraculous

machines. Persian tea is easily obtained at any Middle Eastern grocery store nowadays. However, if you're looking for an approximation in the general supermarket, an even mixture of Earl Grey and Darjeeling will do. Persian tea exudes a rich, orangey perfume and a dark amber color. The thing to remember is that Persian tea is always meant to be taken with some sort of sweet accompaniment, such as sweetened nuts, fruit, nougat candy, dried mulberries, or raisins. But beware: Persians never sweeten their tea beforehand. Rather, cubes of crystallized sugar are clenched between the teeth, before a sip is taken, allowing for the synthesis to occur right on the tongue.