



*I'LL BE STRONG FOR YOU* BY NASIM MARASHI

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## Q&A: NASIM MARASHI



- 1. The novel opens with an airport scene: a young man leaving Iran, his wife seemingly unable to stop him from leaving. What drives young people in Iran to want to leave and what makes some of them want to stay? Why did you decide to stay?**

I see this as a global impulse. Young people around the world want to leave their hometowns and make new experiences—just like young Iranians. In Iran, maybe this urge is a little more common because of our circumstances. In my opinion, most young people who leave Iran do so because of the instability of the present and the unpredictability of the future. You may wake up one day to discover you can no longer buy the medicine you've been taking for ten years because of the sanctions. Or the price of the house you planned to buy has increased tenfold. Or the company you work for has downsized because of the sanctions. Or your book can't get published due to censorship. Leaving is especially important for women, who do not have social freedoms.

For some people, leaving your hometown or emigrating is not a big deal. You can leave, stay in a new city or country for a while, and sometimes come back. But for



us Iranians, emigration sometimes becomes exile. People leave without knowing whether they can ever come back. It's not a round-trip; it's a one-way ticket. They stay abroad and—perhaps influenced by other emigrants—they begin to fear a return. This fear multiplies over time and they end up staying abroad forever.

But, like other youths around the world, staying home means bonding with your roots and connecting with your language. It's a different choice. For me, as a writer, I decided to work with my roots and language. I'm always studying and updating them as I write. Iran is full of inspiration for my writing.

- 2. There are several novels that explore themes of emigration or immigration that are available to American readers. You focus on the point of view of women who, willingly or unwillingly, get left behind. Was this a conscious choice or a consequence of the reality in Iran? What themes did this perspective allow you to explore that you couldn't have otherwise?**

I started writing this novel two years after the Iranian Green Movement, which protested the 2009 election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. So many Iranians were fighting for their lives. After the protest died down, the situation became tough for everyone—but especially for young people. Some of us were arrested. Some of us who had important jobs, like journalists, got fired. And people became frustrated. For women, it was time to pursue our repressed demands. At the time, I had been fired as a journalist and I felt I had to record these experiences in the aftermath. Someone had to do it. We could not forget. I wanted to narrate those days after the uprising, and this novel allowed me to explore the lives that—while not entirely ruined—were strongly affected by what happened. Society as a whole was impacted in some way, but I wanted to tell the story from the women's point of view, as so much was at stake for us.

- 3. Roja's experience of being denied a visa to go study in France is heartbreaking and raw. Is this a common experience? What would it take for Roja to actually get the visa she needs to go to Toulouse?**



Being denied a visa is not common but it still happens. It depends on the relationship between the Iranian government and the governments of the country you want to go to. And it affects people's destiny. In 2009, the French Embassy denied student visas for many Iranians, mine among them. I had taken French for two years and had applied for university in France. I was admitted at the University of Évry. I had packed my suitcase and booked my ticket, rented an apartment in Évry, Île-de-France, and was waiting to go. One day, my cell phone rang. There was a woman on the line. She said the French government hadn't approved my student visa, and she hung up. I will never forget that moment. All my dreams collapsed in a few seconds, before my very eyes.

So I stayed and started to write. As for Roja, the truth is that the French government rarely answers revision letters. So there was no way Roja could get a visa that same year. My other friends and I certainly didn't. She would have to apply for a visa from another country or wait till the following year, be accepted again at the university, and apply for the visa all over again.

**4. The transition from university student to working adult is difficult, no matter where you live. What are the specific challenges for youths in Tehran today? Did you experience challenges and conversations with your friends similar to those of your three protagonists?**

Studying in Iran is very structured. Most of the young people in my generation didn't really have a choice and went to university after high school. However, the fields they chose to study were not generally something they loved. Some fields were considered better than the others. For example, medicine was considered better than engineering, and engineering was considered better than teaching. After graduation, young people miss the security of academic life and don't have many options. The fundamental point is that in Iran, life post-university is not entirely in your hands. The political situation may easily disrupt the plans you've been working toward for a long time. This happened to my friends and me. I studied mechanical engineering at university. But I hated it, so when I graduated, I started working as a journalist at a newspaper. It was a brave decision at that time. My family thought I was wasting my talents. Then the newspaper closed, and



guess what happened to me as a “brave” person? I was unemployed. One of my friends worked for an international company, and the company was shut down because of the sanctions. Another friend started her own business but went bankrupt due to inflation. I realize inflation exists elsewhere, but combined with the sanctions, this instability is more common in Iran.

**5. The relationship between Shabaneh and Arsalan is very cyclical and toxic—infuriatingly so at times—but also familiar. Have you witnessed your friends go through unhealthy relationships like this one? Would you say that living in Iran complicates relationships between men and women?**

The relationship between two people is one of the most complicated topics in human life—anywhere in the world. But in Iran there are some things that make relationships more difficult. For example, in my generation, it was not common for a man and a woman to live together before marriage, and so life together was a blind chance. Maybe if Shabaneh could live with Arsalan for a while and then decide, her situation would be different. I want to mention that young people now live much more openly in Iran. Now, especially in the big cities in upper-middle-class families, they can introduce their boy/girlfriend to the family, they can live together before marriage, they can cry in front of their families when they feel heartbreak from love. This is something that we barely had twenty years ago.

**6. You said in an interview that as an Iranian author you can't write explicitly about sex in your books, and yet this novel has some very sensual moments. How do you work around the limitations of the censors? Were you ever reprimanded or censored for your writing?**

In Iran, before you start to write a book, you need to decide whether you want it published here or not. And how you go about it is not always predictable, because sometimes censorship is stricter and sometimes it's looser. One day an inspector at the censorship office is good natured, and another day he is in a bad mood. It is also important which inspector gets to evaluate your book. Still, there are usually some considerations that can help. For example, we cannot write directly about sex and we cannot directly criticize the regime. There are other tips as well, like triangular relationships, are forbidden. Writers learn all this by experience.



In this context, writing can be disappointing. To write, you need to allow your imagination to soar, but you are constantly being shot down.

Sometimes there are ways to escape. Iranian readers have learned to pick up on writers' cues. You might not write an explicitly erotic scene, but you can describe the scene in such a way that the reader will recognize that moment as you wish her to. Iranian writers are so clever. Sometimes they use creative techniques. For example, a few years ago, a translator translated whiskey by inverting the letters to spell "yeksihw." The book was published and readers instantly knew what he meant.

My latest book is a novel in photos. The main location is a building that is used as an underground casino. Because the publisher thought a book about poker might be censored, we changed it to an Iranian board game, but I'm sure my readers will read my book correctly. I'm still waiting for the license for that book from the censors, and I hope this deception works.

- 7. With the pandemic, so many working women found themselves returned to their traditional roles as primary caregivers and had to give up their careers. How closely do different generations of women in Iran identify with their jobs? What themes regarding women and work did you want to explore in this book?**

In Iran, the number of employed women has increased in recent years. Whereas in my mother's generation less than half of the women worked outside the home, in my generation, more women work and earn money, especially in the big cities. There are some difficulties. For example, women sometimes earn less than men for the same job. But the main problem is the traditional patriarchal nature of society. Women still have the responsibilities of running the home and caring for children, and at the same time, they have to work. Work is divided between men and women, but most of the husbands do not participate in housekeeping tasks. So women are under a lot of pressure, and I hear many of them say they wish they weren't working outside the home.

- 8. There is a new generation of writers that has been labeled "post-Khomeini"—writers who grew up during the Iran-Iraq War. There are glimpses of that war in some of Leyla's recollections about Ahwaz. How did that war affect you and**



**your generation? How does being post-Khomeini affect your worldview? How does it affect your protagonists?**

After the Iranian Revolution, like so many people, authors became frustrated and took refuge at home with their loneliness. This situation is obvious in their writing. But the Iran-Iraq War changed people forever. War is such a strong experience that it can never be erased from the minds of those who have lived through it. During the Iran-Iraq war, my family lived in Ahwaz, a city near the border, and the war continued until I was five years old. During the war, in every moment, life was related to death. In our games as children, there was always someone who played a dead man because he was fighting on the front. This proximity of death can cause lasting fear—and also courage. As survivors, we are more afraid of war than others may be, but sometimes we say to ourselves, We came out of those days alive. What are we afraid of?

- 9. The protagonists in your novel take medicine for their anxiety, get laid off, listen to Leonard Cohen when they're feeling blue, watch Requiem for a Dream—this sounds a lot like American youths grappling with adulthood. What would you say the young people of Tehran have in common with American youths, and how are their lives completely different?**

Unfortunately, we are similar to American youths in many ways. We take pills when we are anxious, we drink a glass of beer when we are tired, we are active on social media and make and follow trends, our country has forests and highways, we have access to high-speed internet access, and we do not ride camels.

All kidding aside, the commonalities of human experiences have brought us global closeness, especially in the information age. Of course, our methods for problem-solving can be different sometimes. Iran was almost completely isolated for a long time after the revolution. Iranians did not travel much abroad, and tourists and foreign journalists did not come to Iran a lot, and this separation became a kind of myth. Today, many middle-class Iranian families travel abroad. Or, thanks to the Internet, they have more contact with their families outside of Iran. Tourists travel to Iran from all over the world. Iranian cinema is widely known and acclaimed. So



that sense of isolation is not felt quite as much anymore. I hope the most recent sanctions won't take us back to those days of separation.

**10. If you were to imagine your three protagonists ten years after the events of this novel end, where would they be? What would they be doing? Would they still be close, supporting each other? Would they have drifted apart?**

As it happens, it's been about ten years since I started writing this novel. And now I can imagine them. Adulthood tames people—so it probably would have changed my characters just like it changed me. If I close my eyes and imagine them, I can see that Shabaneh has probably given up. She lives with Arsalan and has one or two children. She is not happy, but she is content. She usually brings Mahan home for visits. I cannot imagine Leila at all. I can't even guess in which country she might be. Leila is introverted and unpredictable. When I wrote the novel, I wanted to let her be as unpredictable as she wanted. That's why I can't—and don't want to—guess what her future might be. But I know it is impossible for Roja to stop. She is in a small European city doing a big job. She may have a WhatsApp chat group with Leila and Shabaneh, and they still support each other, even if they are far away.

**11. Music plays a central role in Layla's narrative. For a long time, music was frowned upon in Iran. What was that like? What is it like now? What music do you enjoy?**

The story of music in Iran is very dramatic. After the Iranian Revolution, according to Islamic rules, the regime had forbidden playing music. They wanted to completely remove music from the lives of its citizens. They didn't consider music to be a part of human nature, so they didn't know people needed it. Musicians who were on the front lines during the Revolution were sacrificed. Many artists at that time, whose music was forbidden, were forced to emigrate or quit their jobs. Then things changed. First, they allowed music for revolutionary songs. After that, they realized they needed it during the Iran-Iraq War. Later, traditional music was allowed, and gradually, over time, we reached a point where hundreds

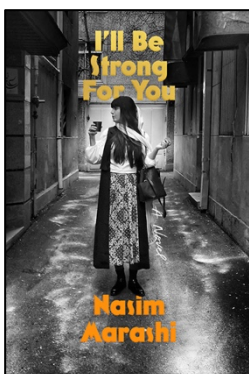


of bands work in Iran performing with different styles. They play their concerts and broadcast their albums.

I have been playing music since I was eight years old and I was going to study music in France. When my visa was denied, I quit playing and composing, but music is still my most important inspiration when I'm writing. I listen to different types of music depending on what I am doing. For example, when I'm plotting a novel, I usually listen to symphonies and am inspired by their forms. Or when I need to be creative, I listen to fusion music. And when I want to experience a certain atmosphere, music always aids me. For instance, when I was writing this book, I was listening to some old pop song by Googoosh.

**12. Shabaneh's little brother Mahan shaped her world and had a huge impact on how she wanted to move forward. What made you decide to touch on this subject? What kind of support systems exist for the disabled in Iran?**

I have a terrible recurring nightmare that started I was a child—my little sister wakes up, my mother wants to kill her, my father is not home, and I have to save her. This was a big fear in my subconscious: a person who is always dependent on me and the idea that I might fail them. It was always scary, especially when I was thinking of having a child of my own. Before I got pregnant, I spent a lot of time on the Instagram page of a woman who had a disabled child. This was around the time I was finishing writing this novel. That's how I got the idea for Mahan and for the sense of responsibility, as well as the pride and joy, Shabaneh has for her brother.



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