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UK

21 October to 4 November 2025



Dear readers,

The initial spark for *The Persians* came to me when I wrote a short story called 'Auntie Shirin'. It's about an Iranian woman named Shirin who's arrested for attempted prostitution while on a family vacation in Aspen in 2005 – she flirts with an undercover cop at a nightclub. The story is told from the point of view of her niece, Bita.

I wondered what could crack open Shirin, this proud, over-the-top, arrogant woman. Any greatness her family had in Iran has all but evaporated when they moved to the United States – despite their money, they're not respected. In America, they are nobodies. Shirin shares characteristics with some Iranians I know – men and women. Pride can be a defense mechanism, a shield. I wanted to get inside that pride; bring her down to earth. Sometimes the worst thing you can imagine might not end up being the worst.

I've found writing fiction is a lot about trying out things you don't think will work because they're too ridiculous. I start by playing. When I let go of rigidity and let myself experiment, I can uncover new truths.

I'd been writing short stories for many years by then, but this was the first time I focused my pen on Iranians. This may have the result of a defiance I was feeling about being Iranian – it was 2017 and the United States, where I'd lived since I was a small child, had for the first time in my life elected a president who proudly attacked immigrants, had instituted a 'Muslim ban', did not want people like me in the country. In such a climate, it felt like shirking to not grapple with where I came from.

But I also realised that, if I were to tell the truth, the story I needed to tell would not fit neatly into the expectations of the typical immigrant-to-America narrative. It would also not rely on the usual Iranian tropes – there'd be no pomegranates, no scent of saffron wafting through kitchens. I wanted to tell the story of a unique Iranian-American family in all its absurdities and contradictions.

After the story was published, I found I couldn't stop thinking about these characters. Shirin and Bita, but also Seema (Bita's mother), and two characters who still lived in Iran – Elizabeth (Shirin and Seema's mother) and Niaz (Shirin's daughter that she left behind). I wanted to know everything about these women across three generations of a family. Who they were, why they acted the way they did, what they wanted from life and each other.

Soon I was writing about something much bigger than I'd anticipated. To know these characters, I had to travel through time and place – I was going to Iran from the 1940s through the mid-2000s, to Los Angeles from the 1980s, to New York in the near present. I was writing about love and loss, but also money and growing up, art and revolution. I was asking the question: at the end of an era, what do we get from history, and from our families? And more generally, how do we find meaning in our broken world?

Most importantly, what always pushed me along were my five main characters – they came alive on the page, each with her own full and urgent story to tell. A story of dreams and disasters, fears and longings, triumphs and missteps. Each character in *The Persians* is on a journey to understand who she has been and who she wants to be. She must decide whether to free herself of old myths and whether there is a new future out there for her and possibly the family as a whole. I think the result is both funny and sad.

I really hope that you enjoy *The Persians*.

Best wishes,

Sanam Mahloudji

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