



SARA FARIZAN

on writing

IF YOU COULD BE MINE

Tale as Old as Time

My favorite Disney princess is Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*. When the film came out in 1991, I was seven years old and not terribly thrilled to see the movie in theaters as I was more of a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles fan than interested in the exploits of princesses and when their prince was going to show up and save them. During the movie, in the midst of all of the songs and inanimate objects cracking jokes, I began to feel very anxious. It wasn't because of the plot (I was pretty sure there was going to be a happy ending) but because I perhaps admired Belle a little too much. She was cerebral, a misfit in her town, very kind and open-minded. But I didn't want to be Belle like so many other little girls that year; I was jealous of the brutish Beast for winning her affections. It didn't worry me so much that she was animated and maybe in a somewhat abusive relationship with a beast, but that she was a girl. I didn't understand what any of that meant until middle school, but I knew to keep quiet about it.

Growing up in Massachusetts, I always felt very different, but, ironically enough, never because of my ethnicity. My parents had immigrated to the United States from Iran in the 1970s, met in Boston, married, and had me and then my sister. I was always very vocal and proud of my heritage, even if Iran wasn't exactly the most popular country to claim ties to. I had been there as a child. My parents always made it a point to celebrate Persian holidays, and they spoke Farsi as well as English with us at home. Iran



Photo Credit: Mark Karlsberg/Studio Eleven

SARA FARIZAN

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became this place that I felt a strong connection with, but sometimes it was a place I couldn't relate to. When I visited Iran as a teenager, though it was nice to see relatives and culturally stimulating to be there, I felt like a foreigner with strange notions and ideals. I didn't want to be a doctor or a pharmacist or an engineer or marry a man with that sort of job and then have his babies. I also knew I was gay, and that this was something that was extremely forbidden, met with derision, and potentially dangerous.

I had a difficult time accepting my sexuality as a teenager and was deeply closeted until college. I loved my parents and I didn't want to disappoint them, especially because I knew the culture they were raised in. I also heard what kids at school would say about teenagers who were out at that time and that all their hurtful words could be applied to me. I began reading as much as I could about what my feelings meant and tried to find books that spoke to my experience. While there was literature about LGBT teenagers, it was limited, and almost all of the characters were white Americans. While I am American, and . . . I am technically Caucasian, I was growing tired of reading the same kinds of stories and wishing there was something else.

When I did finally come out to my parents, it was not easy, and they had their concerns, but I am lucky that they love me and accept me unconditionally. (They even love me enough that they let me pursue creative writing in lieu of anything scientific.) I began to think about how much I struggled with my sexuality and coming out and what it would mean for someone like me to grow up in Iran, having the same feelings I had but being unable to express them as openly as I can in the United States.

I was hesitant to write about Iran because I did not grow up there and did not want to become a mouthpiece for any group of people. My inner teenager, however, still wanted the book she had wished for years earlier, and so my research began. After several months of reading, visiting Iran, watching documentaries, and speaking with people, I felt equipped to write a world for my protagonist, Sahar, to inhabit. While my novel, *If You Could Be Mine*, deals with LGBT issues, my hope is that all readers will relate to what I think is a universal story of being in love with someone you can't be with. Kind of like Belle and the Beast, though I have a feeling they are divorced now due to his anger management issues.

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