

For Marsha

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As I get older I am starting to understand more and more the human need to lay down roots. Speaking of roots, when I think about the inherent cause of my deepest personal insecurities which are fear of abandonment, not being cherished, lack of acceptance, lack of recognition for what gifts I do possess, and rejection, I can trace it back to feeling rootless at times. I have experienced (sometimes spectacularly) every single one of these fears listed and survived them, which indicates, naturally, that these fears are illusory. They are stories I have created for myself and have no real power, even if they come true as long I do not assign them meaning. I am still here and still trying and that is in part because I am starting to understand where these fears come from.

Rootlessness, rejection and exile can be devastating. Couple them with genius, mental illness, and a compulsion to write, and they can be fatal. A month ago I stumbled upon a story that has haunted me since. It was about a beautiful young woman, a writer, who at a tender age had achieved international success and renown for her novel *Pomegranate Soup*. Movie studios were wooing her, the literati and readers embraced her, but in the end Marsha Mehran died alone last May, at the age of 36, face down in her isolated bungalow in County Mayo, Ireland, her once lithe body bloated with disease, and with only 5 Euros in her possession.

Years earlier she had fled from Tehran with her family during the revolution and found temporary sanctuary in Argentina and eventually, America, and ultimately Ireland. She wrote a novel about an Iranian family who open a café amidst hostile neighbors and win everyone over with mystically charged cuisine and old-fashioned wisdom. The critics loved it, as did readers. It was only the beginning for her.

She was happy in Brooklyn, where she made her home for a time. She loved the intermingling of so many voices and flavours and ideas, seemingly disparate and yet all sharing the space. It seems she

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was a passionate, impetuous woman who enjoyed people and life. She married impulsively and her ebullient personality played out in the pages of her stories. Prior to her marriage in 2005, bad luck and a series of unfortunate events led her to a rejection from which she would not recover. At 17, because of a minor infringement, she was denied permanent residency in the US and spent years wandering the world, looking for a sense of place and permanency at various intervals. I think she tried to make the best of it, at least that is what her ex husband said. He described her sense of urgency with everything. She asked him to marry her soon after they met. Because of the extended separations due to the visa issues, their marriage ended in 2008. She moved to Ireland, where her ex was from and started to work on a new novel. From what I have gleaned in her work she writes about the dangers of isolation, yet she died alone, her body not discovered for days.

Besides the obvious tragedy of her life and death, I

was struck by and completely understood how painful the writing process was for her. It was as painful as living and consumed her. I understand that. I have experienced it and so have people I know. When she was editing her last work *The Margaret Thatcher School of Beauty* she wrote to her father: "I've spent the last five months working on the edit. Hardly a night has passed that I have not woken up midway through sleep, body drenched in sweat, heart beating out the rhythms of some ancient tarantella inside my chest. ...I looked like I had aged 10 years, eyes drooping, skin ashen, a vague recollec-

Luckily I have a demanding teenager in the house, a job to pay the bills and friends who need my attention from time to time.

Marsha does not appear to have had that grounding. Real life demands are a nuisance but for me personally have kept me from becoming too self absorbed and dwelling in my head. She also did not know how to ask for help. I know I have a hard time with that myself and I know many people who are like that. Usually these are high achieving, highly intelligent and emotionally strong people. But being able to ask for help is not a weakness, it is a



Marsha Mehran

tion that I had not washed my hair for a week straight" (Milmo, 1/15).

I have joked about looking terrible and not washing my hair for days when I am writing. I have even posted pictures of myself looking rough. I am not sure why I do that. Maybe as a reminder that I must not let things get too out of control. Also, because my thoughts about my work isolate me. Social media can be a bane but sometimes it helps to call out into the cyber wilderness and see if anyone calls back. I feel so lonely when I write—sometimes, not always—with only fictitious characters who are just voices really for company.

strength and comes from a place of deepself knowledge and understanding and the ability to slay demons. No amount of talent, beauty, or adoration can buffer us from pain that we are not prepared to face. In the end Marsha's demons, poor health, and loss of control of her life got her and when I read about that, it moves me because I see so much of myself in her, so much of all of us.

*Marsha's last novel described by CahalMilmo as "a magical-realist examination of her Iranian roots and Persian literature bound tightly with inspiration from her life in Buenos Aires as the Falklands War loomed" (The Independent UK).