

# *Yousef & Farhad*

*Struggling for  
family acceptance in Iran:  
the story of two gay men*







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# Foreword

In order to achieve a culture of tolerance and peaceful coexistence, respecting people who seem to be different from us should be taught to all kids from a young age. Unfortunately co-existence and mutual respect is mostly absent from many aspects of Iranian culture. LGBT people are not recognized or respected; they are humiliated and discriminated against. This degrading attitude toward LGBT individuals is most prominent in legal and official settings but can also be visibly seen in social interactions. Such behavior toward LGBT people is all too common in Iranian society, despite what Yousef says in the graphic novel: “I was raised to seek and speak the truth. I was raised to avoid lies and stay away from hypocrisy.”

Honesty and embracing the truth are a top educational priority for Iranian society and families, but still too many people prefer to turn a blind eye to the reality of LGBT lives. Even under the best circumstances, LGBT individuals are advised to conceal their emotions and live a hypocritical life by marrying someone of the opposite sex to deceive society. What people don't realize are the horrible consequences that result when LGBT people are forced to live such a double-life.

... In order to take the first step towards positive change, Iran should raise awareness and build a culture of diversity. We must teach ourselves that others are and can be different and they have the right to be who they are.

This graphic novel is an effort to portray the [prejudice and] pain of those among us whose fellow country men and women refuse to accept their existence.

I long for the day when we all accept that all human beings have the right to be diverse and live their lives differently from others.

*-Shirin Ebadi*

Nobel Peace Prize Laureate,

Founder of Defenders of Human Rights Center in Iran



# Introduction

The story of Yousef and Farhad, a young couple in Iran, is in many ways a classic love story, with all of its poetry, challenges and triumphs.

But a relationship between two men in Iran is rarely a simple romance. As is true in countries across the world, LGBTIQ Iranians are denied basic protection from their government. In fact, Iran is one of more than 75 countries globally that criminalizes homosexuality and is one of a few to go so far as to stipulate punishment by death.

Yet, daily life is infinitely more complicated than laws on the books. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex Iranians know how to navigate these complexities. Away from the prying eyes of the law, they manage family and community expectations of marriage, career, and children within the assumptions of a heterosexual marriage. In spite of it all, LGBTI Iranians find boyfriends and girlfriends, support from members of their families, and even the most unlikely of protectors. But their journey is not easy, and not everyone enjoys a happy ending. There is much work to be done.

Since 2012, we at OutRight Action International have been working in community with LGBTIQ Iranians and their allies. We run the world's most popular Persian website dedicated to LGBTI rights. We have created criminal defense guides for lawyers representing LGBTIQ Iranians charged with homosexuality. We have trained more than 110 Persian language journalists on sensitivity in reporting. This graphic novel is our latest project – our idea to reach people's hearts rather than just their heads. We partnered with two artists and gave them considerable license to imagine possibilities. As in projects like this, we seek to bring attention to the denial of human rights while helping to change the narrative around the LGBTIQ community in Iran.

There is no doubt that Iranian society is changing, including for LGBTIQ Iranians. With this extraordinary novel, we at OutRight hope to reach Iranian families struggling with the sexual orientation of their loved ones with an appeal for acceptance and dignity. The story has aspects that may seem like a fairy tale, but after all, dreaming is how we change the status quo. And reaching people through a story like *Yousef and Farhad* means reaching people where they live.

- *Jessica Stern*

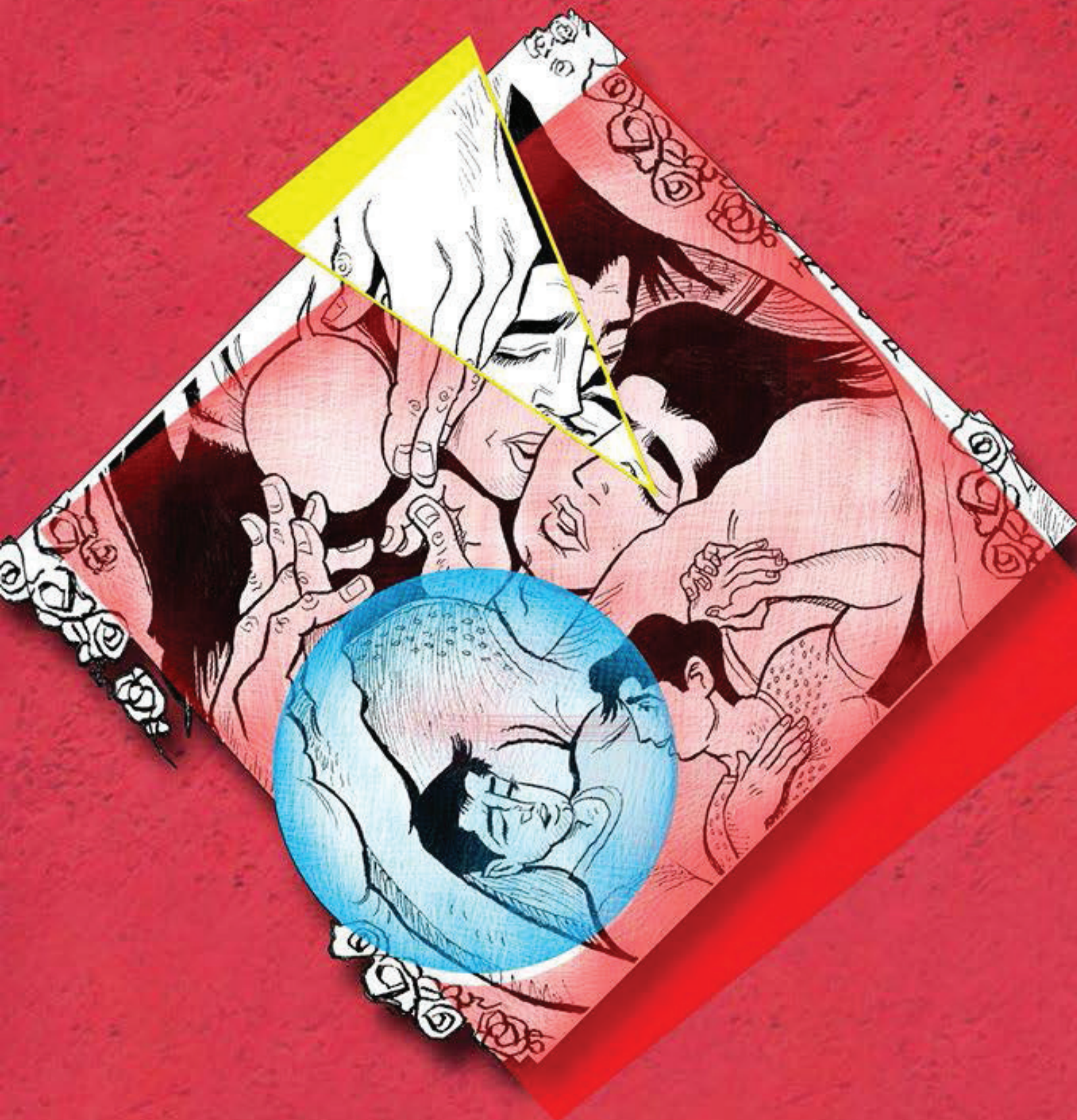
Executive Director

OutRight Action International

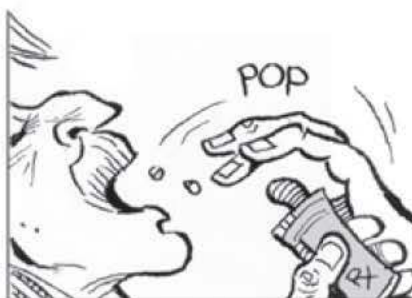


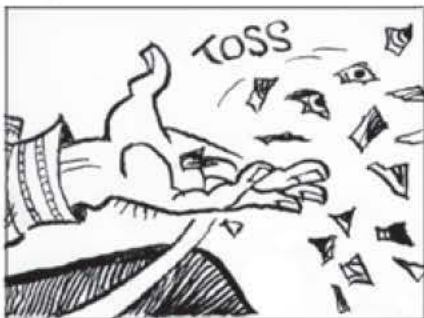
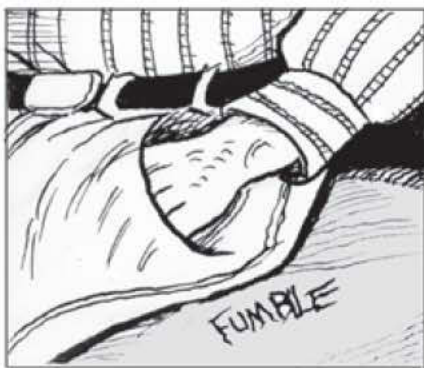


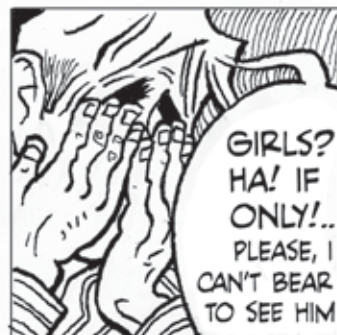
# *Yousef e Farhad*

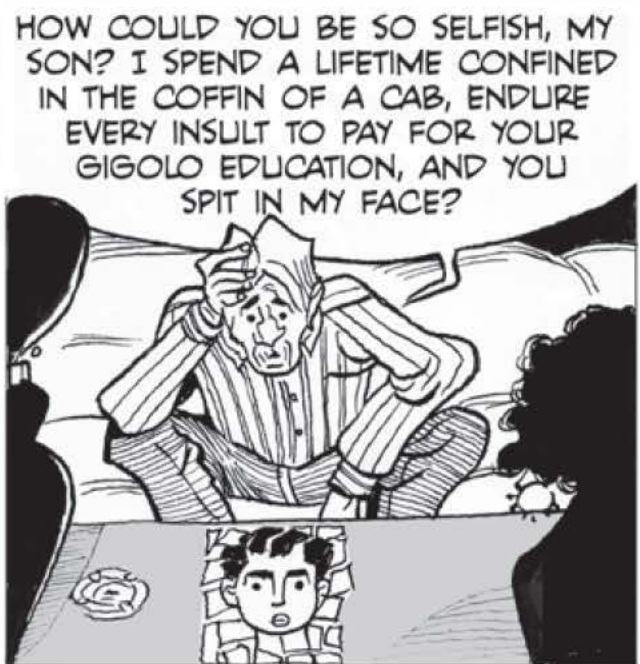
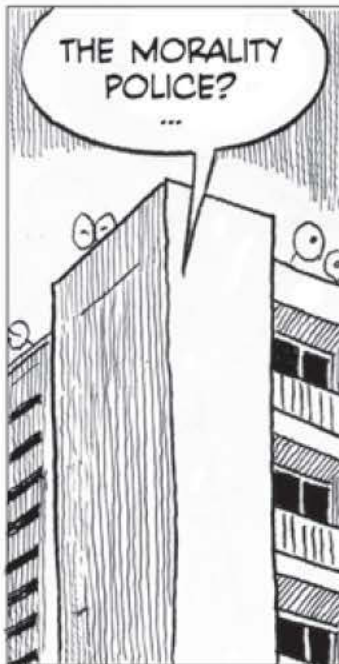
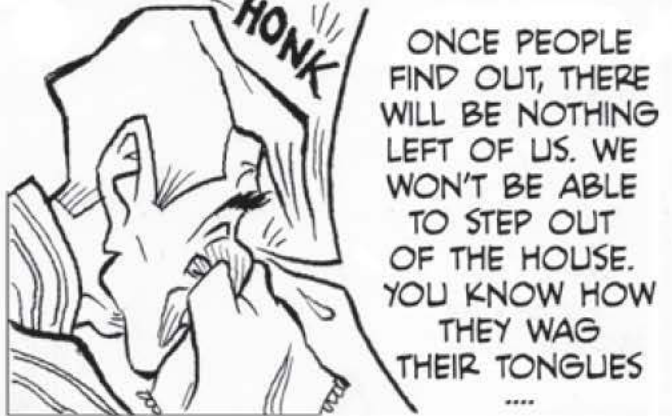
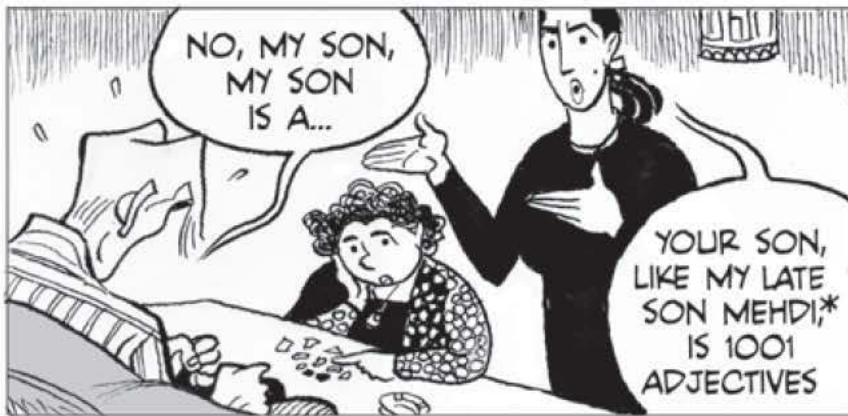
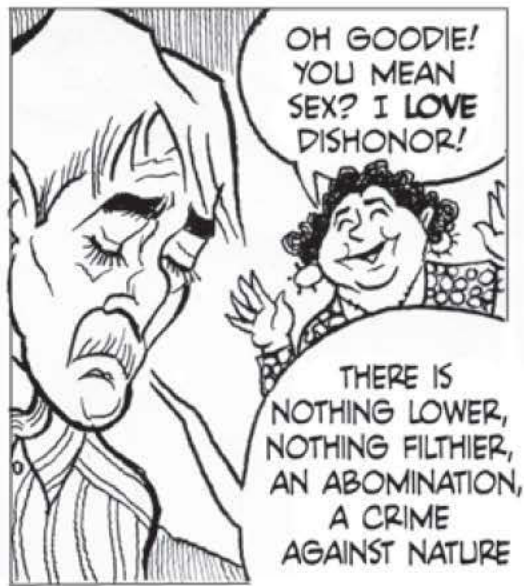












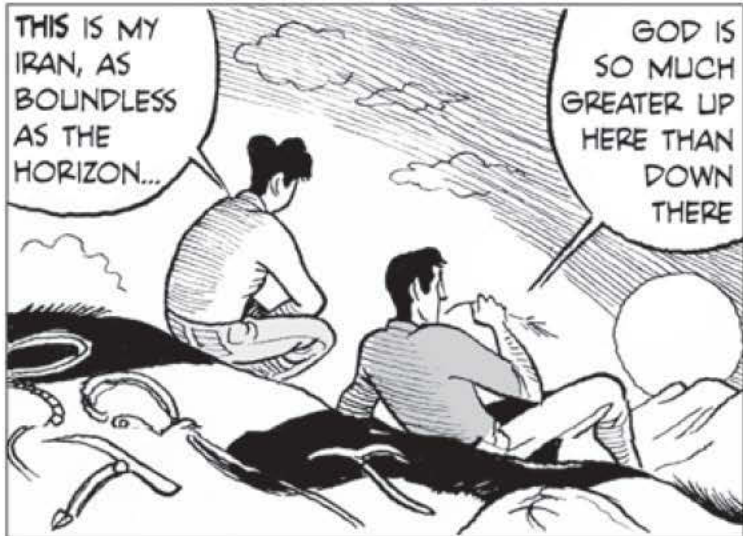


I HAD NO IDEA ...

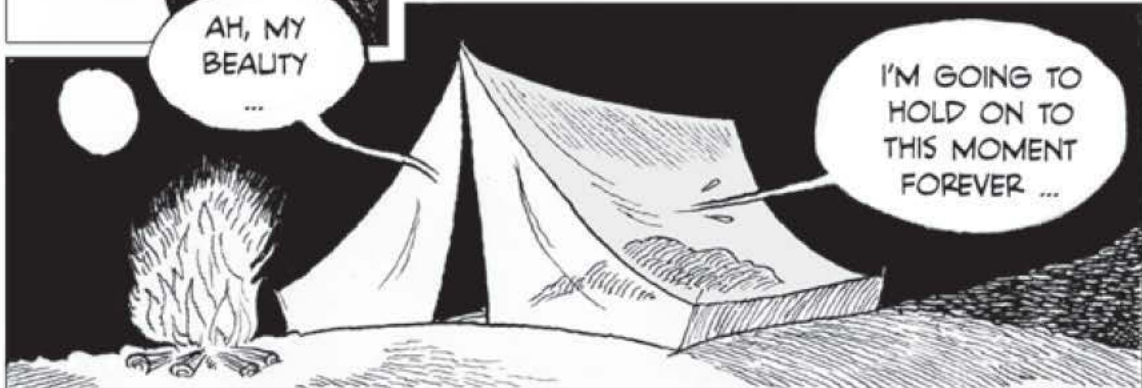


THIS IS MY IRAN, AS BOUNDLESS AS THE HORIZON...

GOD IS SO MUCH GREATER UP HERE THAN DOWN THERE



AH, MY BEAUTY ...



I'M GOING TO HOLD ON TO THIS MOMENT FOREVER ...



HOW?

I WILL ARREST THE MOON AND PROLONG OUR NIGHT



AND THE SUN?...



YOU ARE MY SUN...

MY SHAMS\*

YOUR FACE IS MY KAABA\*\*

YOUR SMILE IS THE ANSWER TO ALL MY PRAYERS. THE END OF ALL MY PILGRIMAGES

SHAMS?

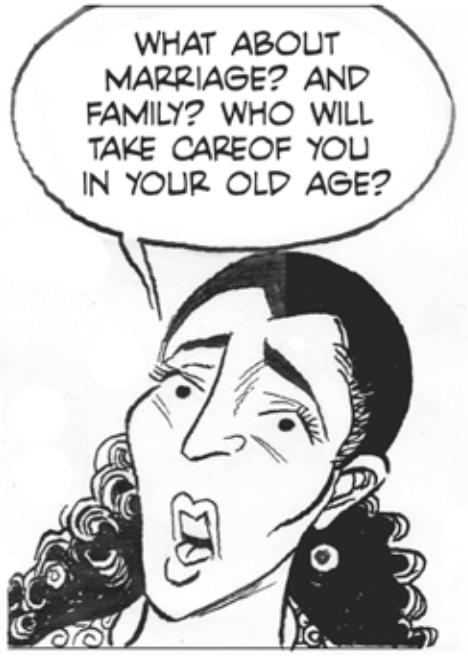
YOU MEAN RUMI'S LOVER.

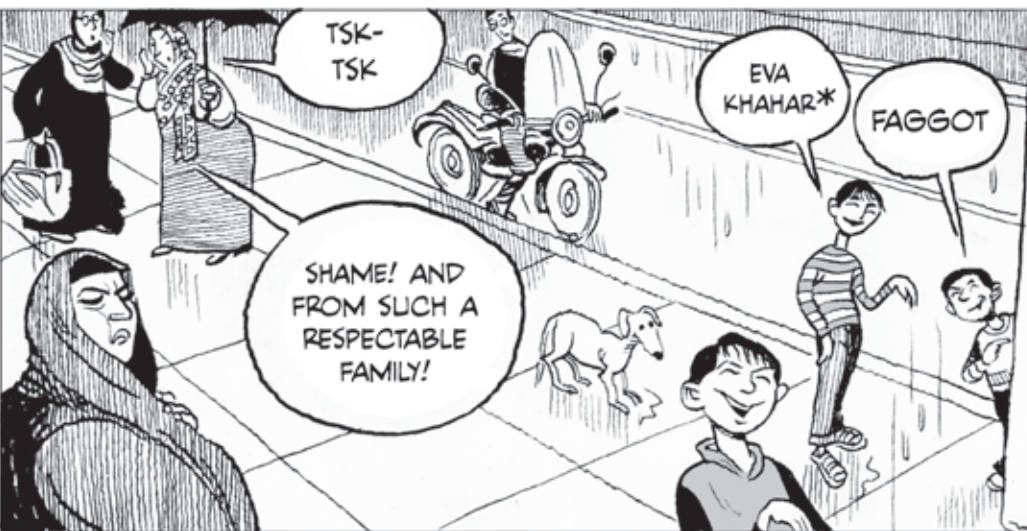
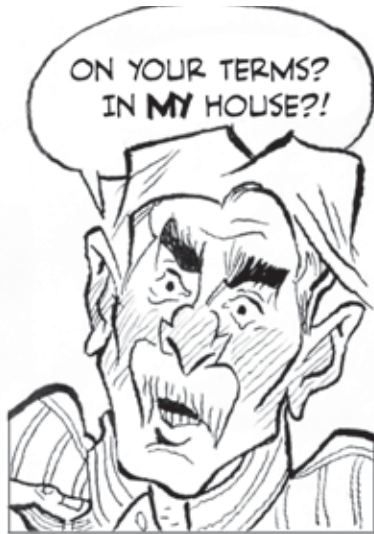
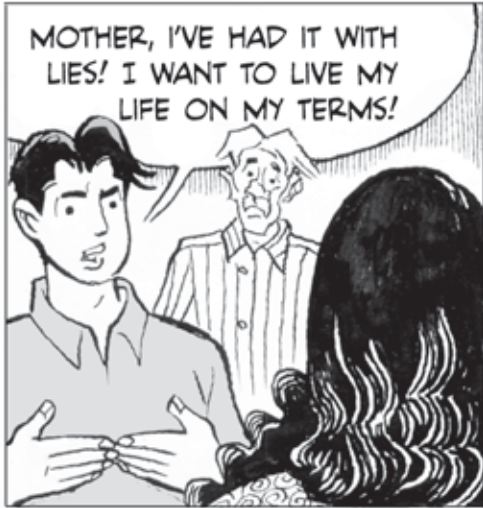
JUST LIKE HIM, MY LOVE, THE ARC OF MY BEING BENDS IN YOUR DIRECTION...

Illustration of a man kissing a woman's hand.

Illustration of a man in prayer with hands raised, and a large eye with a tear.

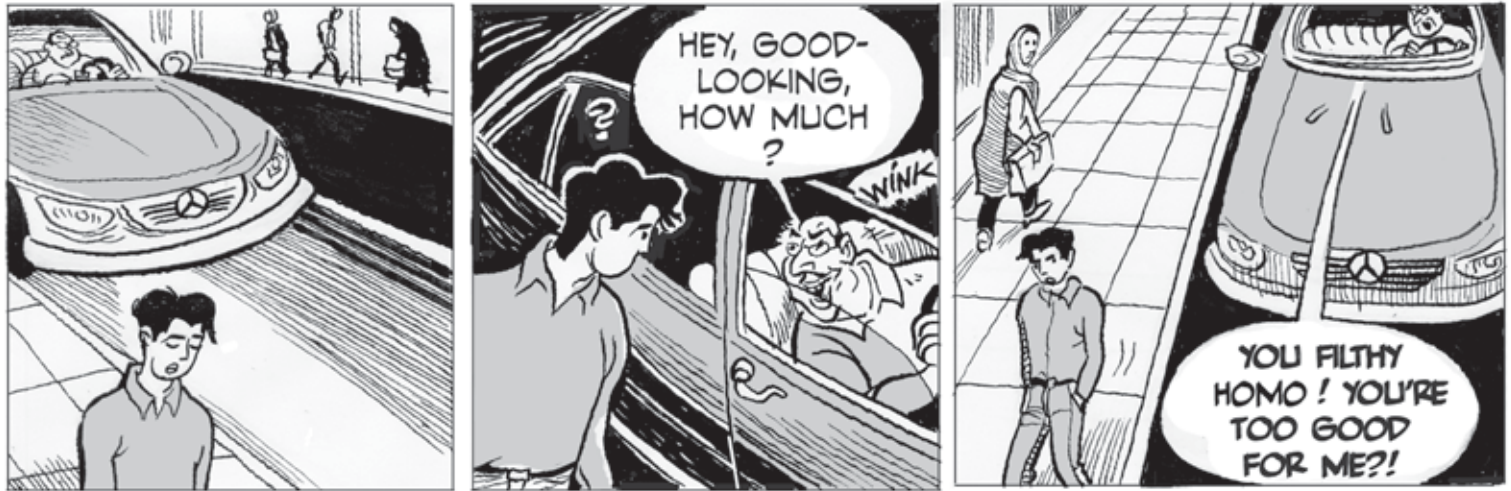
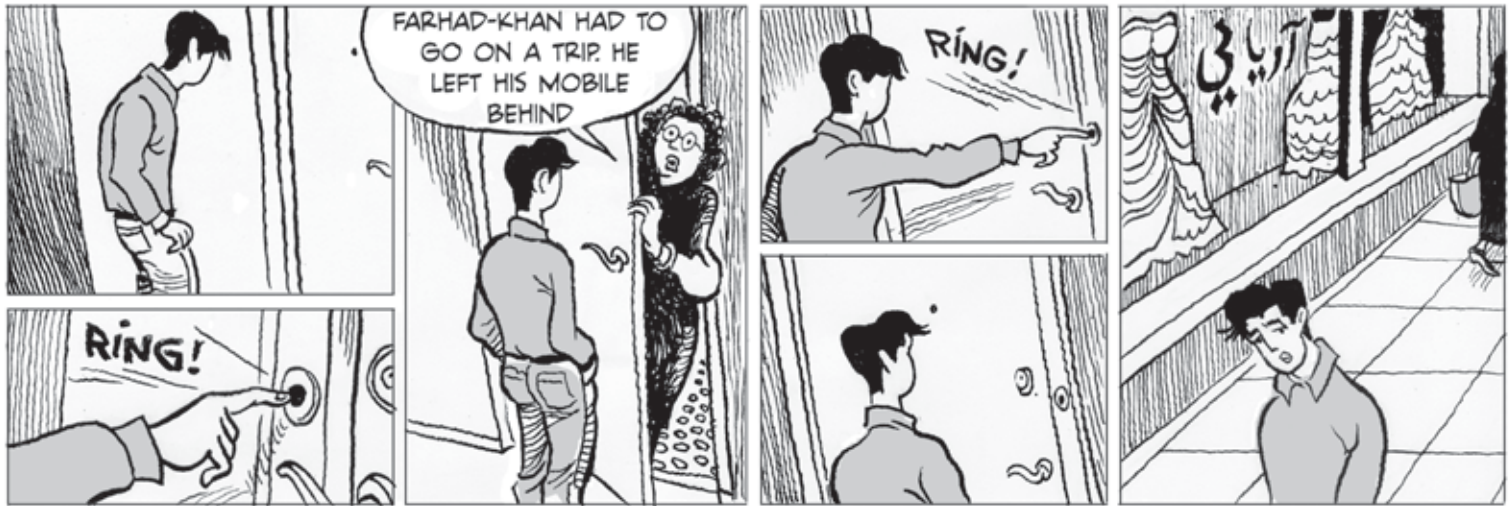


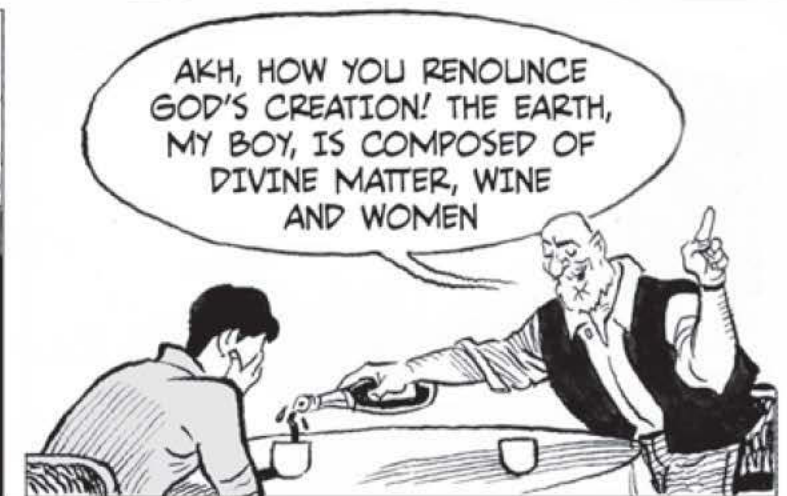
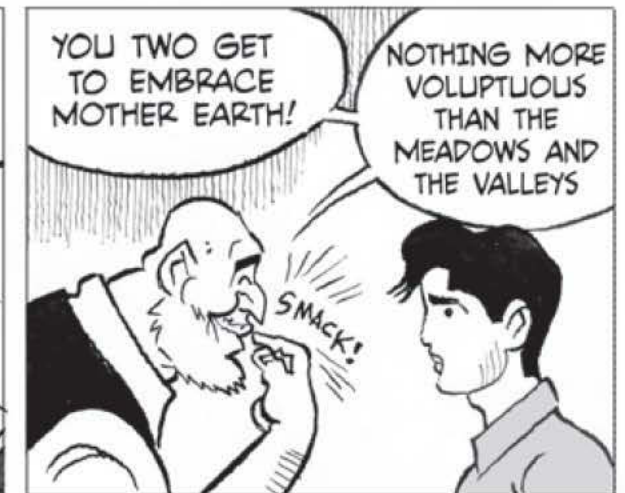
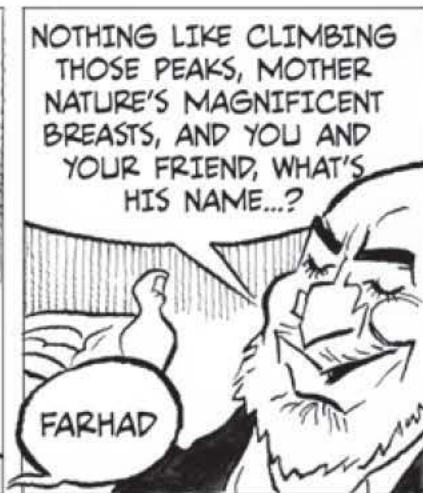


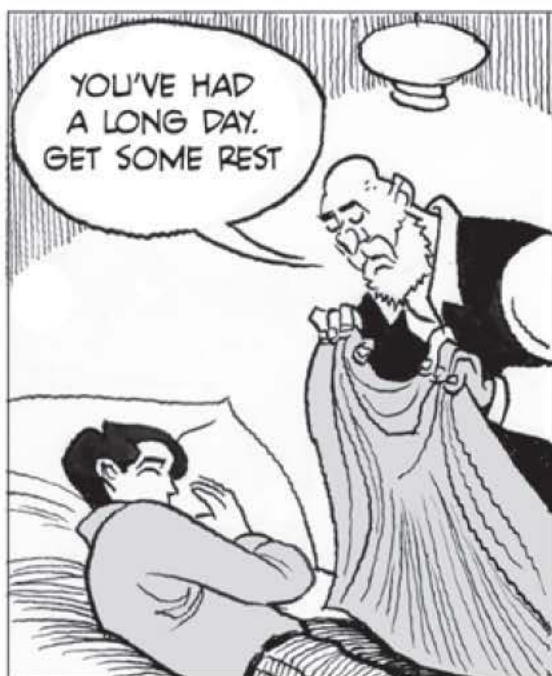
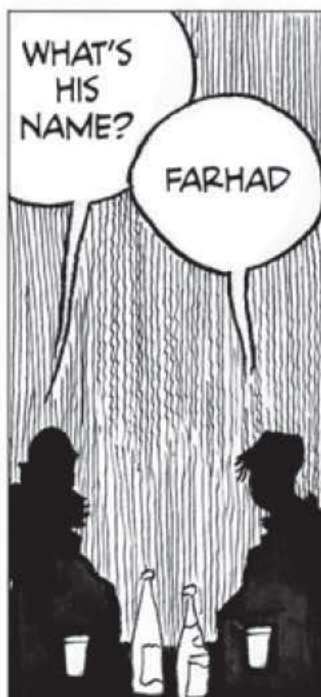


\* OOH, SISTER!

\*\* I AM IN LOVE WITH ALL OF CREATION FOR ALL OF CREATION EMANATES FROM THE CREATOR









To my beloved family and friends, my Iran,

The time has come for me to bid you farewell.  
In truth, I died many years ago. I have always known  
that such a day would come. I knew it when I was ten...  
I knew it when I was twelve.  
I knew it when I was sixteen.  
I have known it every time I felt love.

Time and time again, I have killed my love.  
I have killed it so many times, and in so many ways,  
that I have become death.

I was raised to seek and speak the truth.  
I was raised to reject and deny the lie.  
And yet, every day, I am asked to conceal  
the truth, to turn to the lie, to become the lie.  
All in the name of virtue.

I have become a veiled man.

Only I cannot cast off this veil.  
I have become my veil.

The shadow of death is stitched into my skin,  
its threads run through my every nerve,  
its dyes course through my blood.

Today, I stop performing.

For my last act, I will cast off this veil of virtue,  
and exit a world that is nothing but a shroud of hypocrisy  
Everything and everyone that I love  
has turned against me.

Every day I die in your midst, I die in your hatreds,  
I die in your fear, I die in your silences.

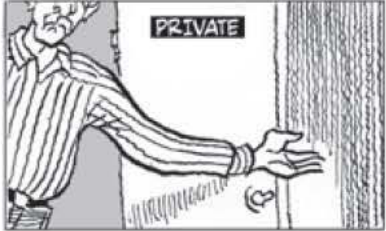
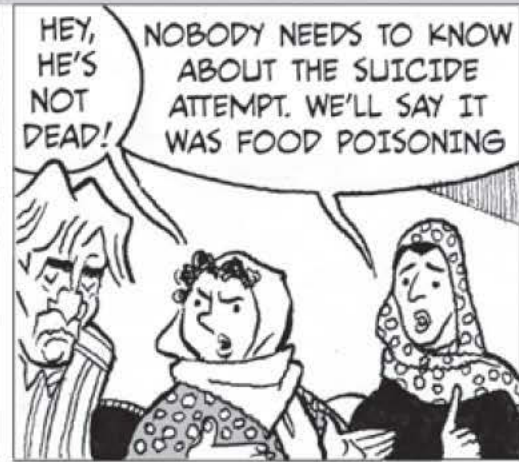
Forgive me for the sorrow I have caused.

Yusef



Father, please  
give this to  
Farhad

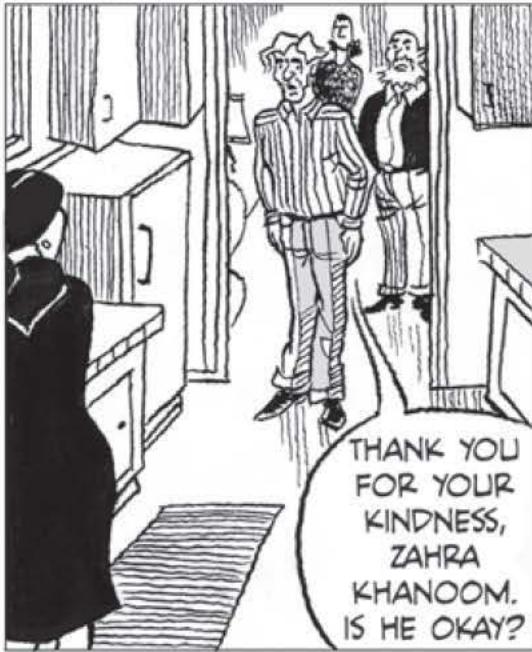
# اوترا EMERGENCY







**A WEEK LATER:**



THANK YOU FOR YOUR KINDNESS, ZAHRA KHANOOM. IS HE OKAY?

WOULD YOU BE IF YOUR FATHER HAD THROWN YOU OUT OF THE HOUSE?

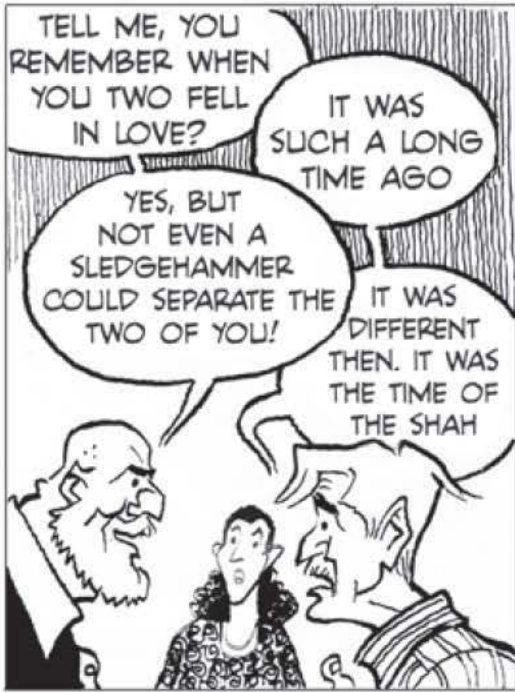


BUT WHAT ABOUT OUR REPUTATION? WHAT WILL PEOPLE THINK?



WHAT'S HAPPENED TO YOU? OUR DON JUAN HAS BECOME THE LOCAL MULLAH?

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?



TELL ME, YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOU TWO FELL IN LOVE?

IT WAS SUCH A LONG TIME AGO

YES, BUT NOT EVEN A SLEDGEHAMMER COULD SEPARATE THE TWO OF YOU!

IT WAS DIFFERENT THEN. IT WAS THE TIME OF THE SHAH



SO IT WAS OKAY FOR YOU TO HOLD HANDS, OKAY FOR YOU TO KISS, OKAY TO MAKE LOVE - IN MY ROOM MAY I REMIND YOU!

SHHHHHH, THEY WILL HEAR YOU!

LET THEM HEAR, PARI!



DO YOU REMEMBER WHO KEPT YOUR SECRET FROM OUR PARENTS?....

WELL LET ME REMIND YOU: ME!



DO YOU REMEMBER WHERE? LET ME COUNT THE WAYS: IN THE CLOSET; UNDER MY BED; IN MY CAR...

BUT THAT WAS DIFFERENT

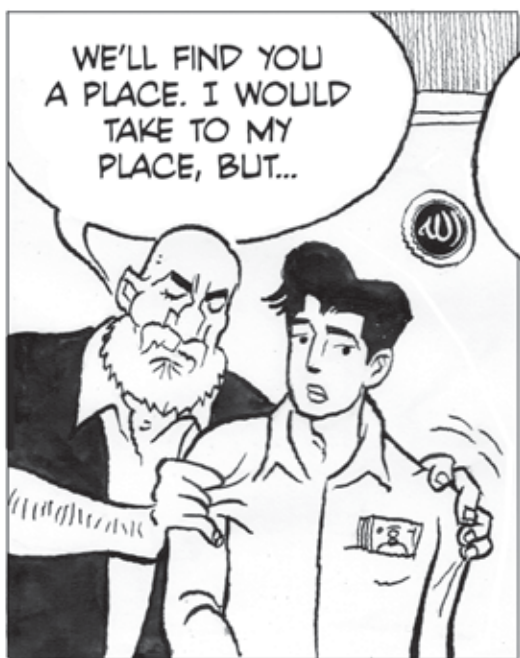


WHAT MAKES YOUR LOVE HOLIER THAN HIS? YOU WEREN'T MARRIED, WERE YOU?

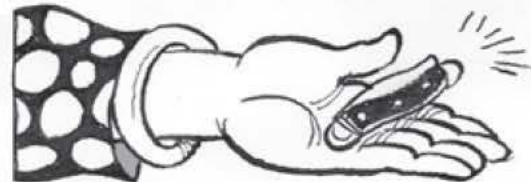
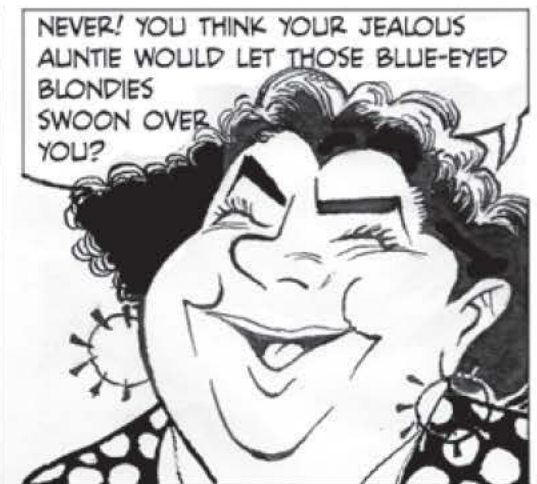
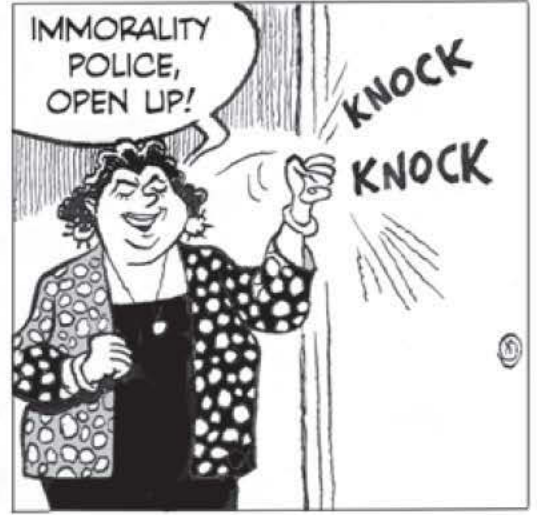
WERE YOU? AND IF HER PARENTS HAD FOUND OUT...



THEY WOULD'VE KILLED HIM - AND THEN ME

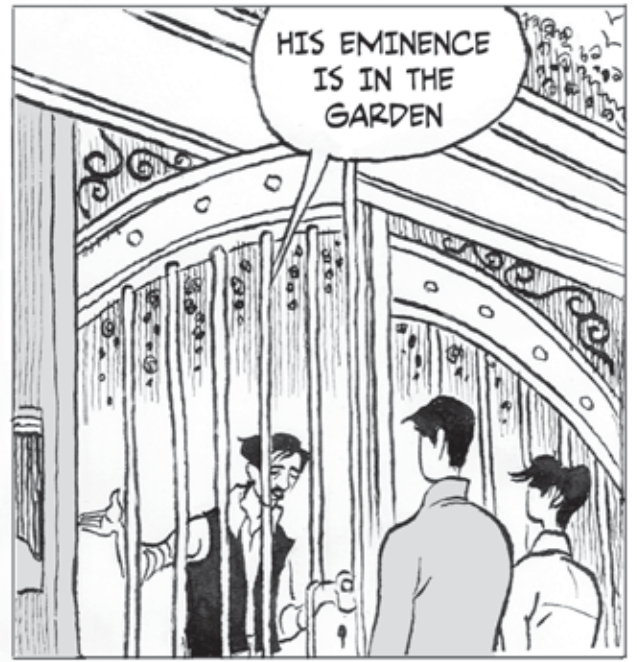


**A** FEW DAYS LATER:





QUM, HOLY CITY, CENTER OF RELIGIOUS LEARNING



HIS EMINENCE IS IN THE GARDEN



NOT IN HIS STUDY?

YOU KNOW THE AYATOLLAH



MY UNCLE'S A FRIENDLY FANATIC



A TOLERANT AYATOLLAH? ISN'T THAT AN OXY-MORON?

NEVER SAY NEVER. LOOK AT POPE FRANCIS



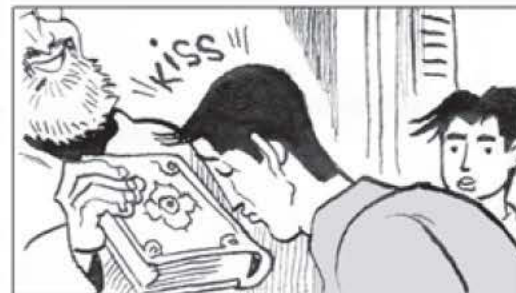
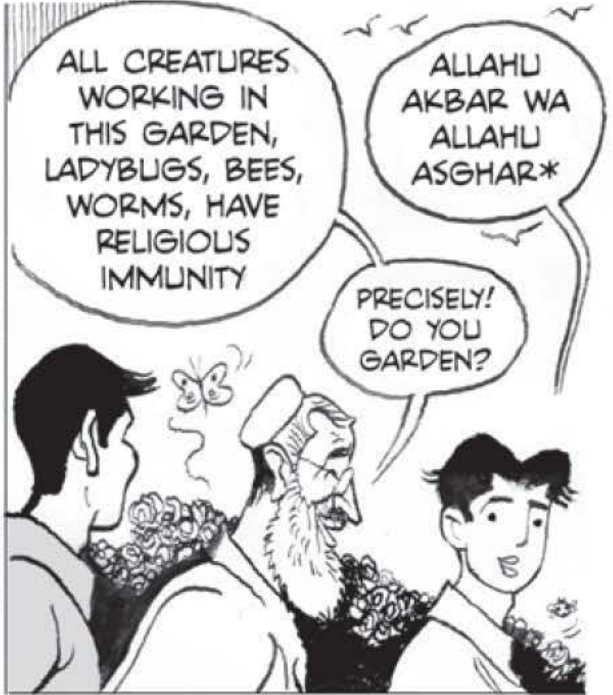
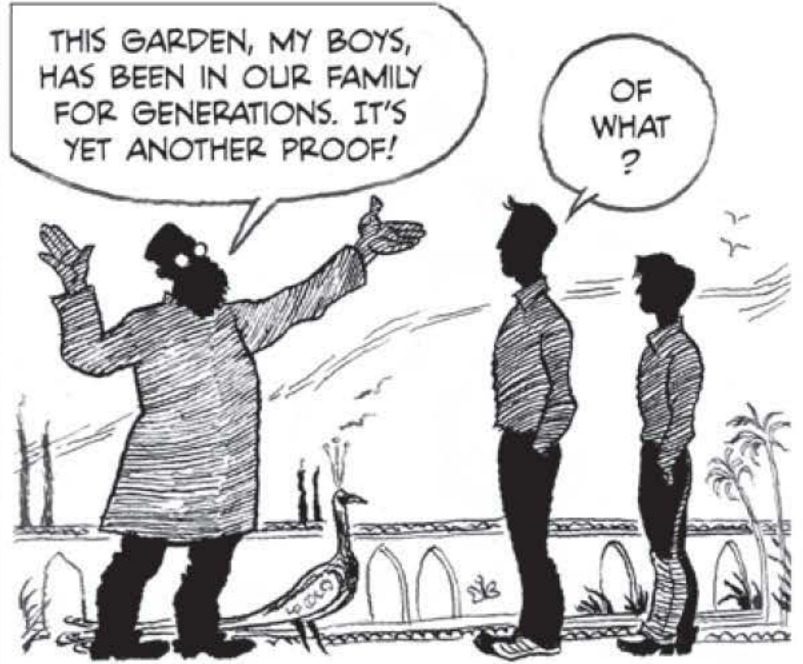
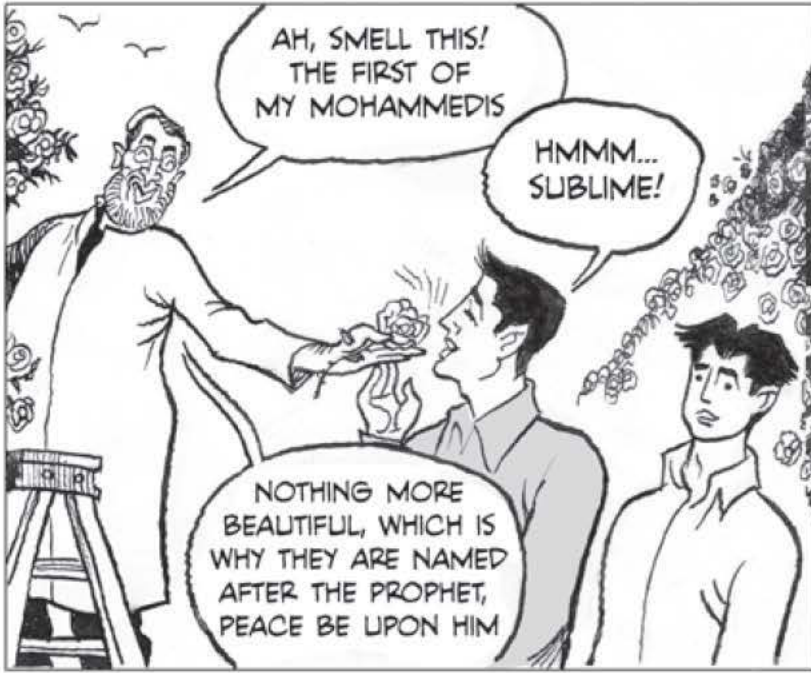
AND HE KNOWS?

YES, HE'S MY UNCLE. I TELL HIM EVERYTHING



EVERYTHING? ... THEN I'M DEAD!

RELAX



**B**ACK IN TEHRAN



# Afterword

## *Love Indivisible*

Iranians are no strangers to love. Of all our empires, the one that has withstood the ravages of time, is the empire of love.

Our civilization is held together by the oldest and most precious of elements: love.

Love is abundant: present in every heart and home across the planet. It is no precious metal. No need to cheat and lie or dig and die for it.

Love is not a body of matter. It has no mass. It is not subject to the laws of gravity. Its properties cannot be bound by time, fixed in space, frozen in numbers, stored as light or saved in mirrors.

No religion holds a patent on love. No tribe owns its properties. No tycoon sets its price.

Love is just there in the fabric and foundation of the universe. It is present in everything, flows through everyone.

Love creates time and space. Out of its own essence. It is a field of pure energy. It transcends and transforms all other forces. It is the great general equation that can bind our hearts and hands in friendship and unite our faces and faiths as one.

To be Iranian is to love, and to love with utter abandon, to love with no conditions, to love with no distinctions.

Of course, Iranians are not strangers to death either.

Iran has been conquered many times, and shattered many more. It has known terror and it has known treachery; it has known tyranny and trauma, captivity and servitude. Sometimes for decades, sometimes centuries.

But time and time again, no matter where we have been scattered, we have witnessed the rebirth of Iran, the rebirth of love and life out of the crucible of time.

Forget Darwin, Malthus and Spencer. Forget unions of coal and steel. Centrifuges too.

We have Attar, Rumi and Hafiz spinning and spiraling in our DNA.

Love is who we are. Love is how we have been. Love is what we will become.

Love flows through our poetry, our culture, our history and our religion.

It flows through our friendships, our families and our faiths — from A for Abraham to Z for Zoroaster.

Love is at the root of our languages. It radiates through each and every letter, dances on the tip of every tongue.

Love is in our nature and in our science, in our art and music, in our architecture and cosmology.

Love is in our soil and our seasons, in our mountains and in our skies, in our suns and in our stars.

Iran is nothing if not a shrine and a sanctuary, its prophets the mirrors, its poets the pillars, its mothers the fountains, its children the fruits of God's love.

Just as there can be no life without water, there can be no Iran without love.

Death is not the end of life. Death is the absence of love in life.

Our god is love unfolding through the universe.

We are born out of love, and with love, to love we return.

\* \* \* \*

When OutRight Action International invited us, as authors of *Zahra's Paradise*, to collaborate on a campaign to raise awareness about the state of the LGBTIQ community in Iran, Khalil and I knew we had to jump in.

Who can resist an invitation to launch a true jihad—a jihad for love.

Love, after all, is indivisible. It is the bedrock of all human rights, from the freedom to speak to the freedom to worship, the freedom from fear to the freedom from ignorance.

Iran's LGBTIQ community is placing love where it belongs: at the center of conversations about what it means to be human.



To love, as Yousef and Farhad love, is for them to create space and time, it is to create truth and trust.

To love, as they do, is to restore each other's honor and humanity. And ours.

Once we make love the axis of the universe, the pole that binds heaven and earth as one, which philosopher can split the universe back into male and female, good and evil, pure and impure, rational and emotional, sacred and satanic?

Once love comes into play and friendship becomes the rule, which preacher can build a wall to conserve hatred, which prince a barricade to preserve enmity, which merchant a fence to protect fear?

Who can contest the sovereignty or challenge the majesty of love? With which army? In which language? In whose name?

Despite all the propaganda against humans, all the problems with our labels, packaging, and systems, despite all the growling and snarling, moaning and groaning, being human can still be intoxicating.

As human beings, we are still capable of ravishing acts of love, still capable of leaps of faith, still capable of creating moments of utter grace.

It is hard not to stop and marvel at the wonder of it all, the rapture, the mysteries and the miracles that weave our lives, worlds and universes together as one. It is hard not to fall in love over and over again.

It is everywhere. In everyone. And everything.

Iran's LGBTQ community are the face of a culture and civilization touched by the scent of a love so sublime that it can turn death into life, absence into presence, enmity into friendship, shame into pride, cruelty into compassion, misery into joy, and silence into song.

Perhaps it is not they who need our love, but we who need theirs.

- *Amir Soltani*

Formerly a Sheikholeslami  
soltaniprojects@gmail.com

# Amir Soltani

Amir Soltani is a dreamer – a writer, filmmaker and human rights activist. His *New York Times* bestselling graphic novel, *Zahra's Paradise*, tells the story of an Iranian mother, Zahra's search for Mehdi, a student activist who has vanished in Iran's 2009 presidential elections. Published by FirstSecond, *Zahra's Paradise* became a global multimedia phenomenon, and was recognized as an innovation in human rights activism. It was translated into 16 languages and nominated for two Eisner Awards.

Two years later, in partnership with United4Iran and dozens of other human rights organizations, Zahra defied Iran's supreme leader and Council of Guardians and ran as a virtual candidate in Iran's 2013 presidential elections. She was the only candidate to run on a human rights platform calling for an end to executions, discrimination against women and minorities, corruption, intimidation and hypocrisy. IGLHRC's "LoveforAll" campaign on behalf of Iran's LGBTQ community is her latest virtual human rights campaign.

Amir's other human rights projects have included an "Open Letter to President Khatami," signed by over 12 Nobel Laureates and over 100 academics, in response to assaults on students and scholars at Iranian universities. He is currently working on *Dogtown Redemption*, a documentary film on poverty in the United States. Amir attended the Parthian School in Tehran, and studied social and intellectual history at Tufts and Harvard.

# Khalil Bendib

Khalil Bendib is an award-winning political cartoonist whose work is distributed to over 2,000 small and mid-sized newspapers nationwide. His cartoons have also been published in the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times* and other major newspapers.

His 2011 graphic novel *Zahra's Paradise*, co-authored with Amir, has been translated into 16 languages.

Mr. Bendib's website is [www.bendib.com/](http://www.bendib.com/). He can be reached at [kbendib@sbcglobal.net](mailto:kbendib@sbcglobal.net).



## **OUTRIGHT** ACTION INTERNATIONAL

Human Rights for LGBTIQ People Everywhere

Every day around the world, LGBTIQ people's human rights and dignity are abused in ways that shock the conscience. The stories of their struggles and their resilience are astounding, yet remain unknown—or willfully ignored—by those with the power to make change. OutRight Action International, founded in 1990 as the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, works alongside LGBTIQ people in the Global South, with offices in six countries, to help identify community-focused solutions to promote policy for lasting change. We vigilantly monitor and document human rights abuses to spur action when they occur. We train partners to expose abuses and advocate for themselves. Headquartered in New York City, OutRight is the only global LGBTIQ-specific organization with a permanent presence at the United Nations in New York that advocates for human rights progress for LGBTIQ people.

OutRight Action International  
<http://www.OutRightInternational.org>

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, individuals are doubly persecuted based on their sexual orientation. As in many countries, lesbians, gays and bisexuals are stigmatized by society and castigated – or worse – by family, friends, and social institutions. But the Iranian government itself casts these individuals into the shadows. When they are not being discursively wished out of existence by political and religious leaders, they are criminalized and harshly punished for their sexual orientation. They are chased from society by parents, teachers, and friends, only to find that the State offers no relief, and in fact sanctions their exclusion, leaving them vulnerable to further abuse.

The persecution of lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals in Iran is commonly justified by reference to religious precepts. But no great religion, and certainly not Islam, calls for harming or punishing another individual merely because of her or his identity or who they love. Islam teaches compassion, Divine justice, and empathy, even as some political leaders may use it to preach hate, intolerance, and vigilante justice. And the first responsibility of every modern State is to provide and protect the rights to life, liberty, and security of person for all individuals.

*Yousef and Farhad* is as beautiful as it is tragic. Their story offers an intimate and charming glimpse into the complexities of a society like Iran, but the characters' challenges are unfortunately all too universal, and their story all too common.

I look forward to the day when this tale will remind us of a cruel and unjust bygone era, when we will shake our heads and breathe a sigh of relief because we have left this dark blot on our human story far behind. For now, though, I invite you to treat this sad but touching and ultimately redemptive story as a poignant reminder that we have much work to do before we reach that point.

- Ahmed Shaheed

*UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*



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Human Rights for LGBTIQ People Everywhere