



On

Salma

*An essay by* Rami Karim



My mother never told me why she left Beirut, only how. She told me she married my father, whom she had met a month earlier, because their fathers drove trucks together, that they became friends over weeklong journeys carrying sand and diesel from Tyre to Munich. My father was ambitious, which is a kind framing of his conceit. He was just beginning to manage a textile factory in Downtown Los Angeles when he met my mother. She kept from me that he had been married once before, and that through this marriage, had a daughter in Arizona who was eight years my senior. My mother never spoke of her wedding day but I saw photos in the albums she kept in her dresser. She didn't look much older than a teenager.

She told me about the ceremony at the Maronite church in Los Angeles, and how my father, Shia by heritage and agnostic by practice, lied about being saved so as not to raise the brows of the officiating bishop. She told me about how her father wept at the sight of her, and kept weeping until he boarded the plane to Beirut the next morning. She told me about her cousin Amal driving down from San Francisco with her husband and children to be her maid of honor, about the humble reception in the backyard of the house my father's family rented at the time, and the humbler honeymoon in Las Vegas, her first trip of what would become many. She said she enjoyed very little about it, that she didn't gamble since it was against her values. She said she was nonetheless grateful for the change of scenery.

My mother would brush her teeth in the same bathroom my brothers and I would shower in, at the same time, until our early teens when we forbade her from doing so. She never cared much for privacy. She was an accidental communist in this way.

My mother never told me that by 1969, non-Arab foreign banks controlled 40 percent of monetary depositions in Lebanon. There was no explanation of the war that began six years later, the one that brought her to Los Angeles. She sometimes shared bits of memories: her uncle's death in a skirmish with the wrong Christians, moving from Khaldeh to Naba'a, what drowning felt like,



Alone, 35mm film, 2016, by Rami Karim







Madonna, 35mm film, 2016, by Rami Karim.

but never anything coherent. The past lived with us as affect, formless and without reason.

My mother was direct to a fault, and if that was something you loved about her you would eventually grow to hate it. As an adult I suffer from never having learned the art of euphemism. My mother taught me to cherish directness even when it was painful. She was binaristic about it. In humans, there was only genuine and fake. She had her cards on the table consistently and would have been a terrible salesperson for this reason. At some point we began to experience one another as siblings. She was my younger sister, and in some ways we were orphaned, but with her I was never afraid. I would try teaching her English but it would never stick. She would work; I would pay the bills.

Since knowing my mother, I have met many Arab women. They range from visuals in the still-growing Orientalist archive to European-passing Lebanese in the diaspora. Muslim, Christian, Druze, atheists with a contempt for Islam, atheists who aren't as affected by it, strong willed careerists, stronger willed politicians, vocal feminists, more private ones, those who marry white men, those who marry their cousins, who never marry, who are queer, who are queer and marry. Growing up, I had no knowledge of these possibilities. I had only my mother.

My father's mother despised my mother and was estranged from our family since I could remember. She abused my mother for years before my father stood up to her. I remember the story about my mother warming milk for my older brother when she (my father's mother) took the pot off the stove and spilled it in the sink. This was the final straw for my mother, who then confronted my father's mother. She asked why she had done it, to which my father's mother responded "because I can." My mother called her cruel and was slapped across the cheek before she could assimilate the act into the present.

My father booked a motel room that night and returned only to pack for their move from his family home in Alhambra to a



one-bedroom in East LA, where they would start over. I avoid calling my father's mother "grandmother" out of foreignness more so than contempt. I met her a small handful of times, each time too scared to let my guard down enough to experience her as anything but a harsh, unapproachable woman. This was all I knew from the stories I had heard from my mother and her mother (my grandmother).

After receiving her paycheck, my mother would browse department stores so she could know what to look for at their off-price analogues. I would accompany her to both destinations every time. If I had homework, I would take it with me.

I think about my mother in past tense, but she is still living. I find retrospection useful because during these years, I knew her as my mother. Even when she was my sister, she was my mother. Since leaving home I am able to know her as a standalone human. I tell her this when I visit and she shoos me with a flick of her hand. She is terrified of change and convinced that my new conception of her poses an immediate threat to her physical and spiritual health.

To understand my mother, I have the romance of war movies. In her silence I am left to create my own images. Learning to sew, the shade of banana leaves, fresh figs, sticky palms, telling stories in a circle, a home shared by three families, hide and seek, graduating from flower girl to caretaker. To understand my mother, I could pray the rosary, be a good host, serve generous dinners. I could never wear makeup or talk about myself. I could drop out of middle school. I could fear snakes and bodies of water. I could want help and never receive it. Get rid of my accent, get by with a few phrases, drown speaking in fear. I could narrate my father, evade solitude, befriend the neighbors, take up hobbies, fail in communicating, mistake need for attachment, suffer from psychosomatic stomach pain, pray diligently for it stop. To understand my mother, if ever to grasp it, I would have to listen. She would have to speak.

Bosta, 35mm film, 2016, by Rami Karim.

