



a documentary by shayda frost

not for 547 consideration
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logline

With the Islamic Revolution of 1979, my mother fled Iran.
37 years later, she's decided to return.

There is an Iranian proverb –

Be har koja ke ravi aseman hamin rang has

Literally translated this means – ‘the sky is of the same color wherever you go’. It has to do with the idea of destiny, implying that changing the location does not necessarily change the situation. I have only heard this a handful of times, and never from anyone in my family.

Probably because they don't believe it's true.

During the Islamic Revolution, my mother fled her country at 19 years old. 35 years later, she has yet to return.

In the early days of December 1978 my mother, her parents and her three younger siblings boarded the last chartered flight for military families and left Tehran. The plan was to leave for a month, to assess the situation from afar. Five weeks later, on January 16, 1979, the Shah was overthrown and left Iran in exile. My family did not know then that that event would turn their trip permanent, that they would never again live in Iran - or, in the case of the four children, that they would never return at all.

After roughly 20 years, around 1998, my grandmother Zorah, went back as the first in my family to visit their country. Zorah-Jahn returned after her three-month trip, and it took her over six-months to smile again. I had always assigned this as the reason behind my mother's resistance to return to Iran. Though had I looked a little closer, I'd have realized it had nothing to do with that trip. My mother's desire to return left her decades before.

The result of this is that neither my sister nor I have ever been to the country from which we claim heritage. With this comes a tremendous guilt as I admit: I am unfamiliar with the land, inexperienced with the language, and a foreigner to my mother's land. Sadly, my mother is now every bit the foreigner that I am. She is a woman looking back to a country that no longer exists.

Despite the many restrictions, an improbable trip has turned into an impossible idea – document her journey 'home'.



act one.

A phone rings over black -

"Hi Maman, it's me."

"Salaam Shayda-Jahn, what's going on with you?"

"I decided about this documentary, the topic I'm committing to."

"Good, what is it?"

"It's kind of you."

It is New Years.

Specifically it is March 20 2014, a Thursday, and the date of Chahar Shambah Suri which marks the start of the two-week celebration of Persian New Years.

Parisa is visiting her sister in LA for a week. The two need to take pictures for their visa application so they can visit Iran for the first time. For the first time, they decided to celebrate Chahar Shambah Suri independently of their mother, Fariba's, insistence.

The two make their way to LA's 'Tehrangeles' in order to buy Persian lavashak, a dried fruit treat, so that Parisa can take it back to Atlanta for their grandfather. They get lost but manage to sort the directions out. The two intermittently discuss the trip to Iran, their expectations, the filming. Their bond is clear; but there is a quiet gap, an unspoken distance between them.

Parisa and Shayda guide us into this Persian world - but this culture is its own Americanized version, rooted in old world Iran - an old world that no longer exists, like the Persian empire itself. Shayda pulls us into and introduces the culture; but perhaps we can relate more to Parisa, for much like her, we are outsiders in this world, sitting on the fringe, wondering why we should care.

Some time after Parisa leaves, Fariba, the girls' mother, asks Shayda to make a trip to Atlanta. Fariba's father, Hanz, is starting chemotherapy again and she wants her daughter to make the trip home.

A phone rings over black -

"Shayda-Jahn."

"Hi, Maman."

"So this documentary, I know you want to speak to Pedar-Jahn.

He wants to - but also, he just wants to know though, who will see this?"

"I have no idea Mom."

"Is it for a class?"

"Well, kind of but.. It's for like - to make. To really make.

I have no idea who would ever see it."

"Oh. Ok. They don't want to use their last names.

Is that ok? Can we just not use the last names?"

"That's fine with me, but... you can easily find out who my grandparents are.

Mom, why do you care who would see this?"

"I don't know. We just... care."

What happened in 1979?

A brief view of the overthrow of Shah Pahlavi and the Islamic Revolution. Told through the use of archival footage interspersed with illustrated animation - an artistic and poetic portrayal of tragic transformation.

In Atlanta Shayda visits with mother and goes to lunch at her grandparent's house along with her uncle. They discuss the days leading up to the Revolution, and the last few days they had in Iran. Zorah, Shayda's grandmother, finds a photo album, they have only one, of their family from then. Though Hanz, Shayda's grandfather, had planned the departure for nearly a year, the family only knew two days beforehand. When they left it was suddenly. Nothing they didn't have to have was taken. Very few photos or keepsakes made the cut.

We spend some time getting to know the various family members, and the role they play within the family. This is still a family with allegiance to the Shah; some do not feel this way. This was a military family, they were sheltered, and in the end, they were lucky.

We seek out those with a different view on the Revolution and it's causes, starting with Fariba's husband, Peter.

Preparation for the trip to Tehran. Scenes to covered on each character independently and spliced together.

Iran.

act three.

To outline the second half of act two and the entirety of an act three is an impossibility.
I simply cling to hopes for the best and fears for the worst.

resolutions

There is a real possibility that this piece will be incapable of resolution.
I can not plan past the midpoint, past the trip itself to Iran. I will get what I can. But to plan scenes would be counterproductive as I am literally in the dark in regards to the country.
If I could - we would arrive in Iran, Fariba would reunite with her uncle, she would relearn her country with her daughters and in doing so would either - come to value it for what it is now, making peace with what it once was; or, fully mourn the loss of her once home as she is further embittered. We would experience the country, meet the relatives, and overall be surprised with our own assumptions of what we thought it would be, a lot more open than once expected.
Overall, the trip would bond my sister and mother in a way that they have been unable to in the past. It would be emotional and cathartic and freeing.

But the reality is none of these things may happen.
The reality is, I may not be able to film in the country at all.
I expect what is possible is, in a sense, home video - I will need to keep to the indoors, to keep it in the family, and exist in the shadows.
Even then the footage has the possibility to be confiscated.

Should this happen, I would embrace it. It would work itself into the story. It would even serve as a metaphor or sorts, being unable to gain footage from a country from which I claim heritage but am simultaneously denied full access to.

Perhaps I can get everything I want. Perhaps I will only be able to film indoor in-home coverage with just family. Perhaps I will end up with nothing at all. I can no better predict this than I can predict the likelihood that my sister and mother will ever see eye-to-eye.

Perhaps I will be left unresolved.
Therein lies the act three.

This documentary would take the form of primarily a character-driven piece. The two driving forces are set as my mother, Fariba, and sister, Parisa. The two would serve as conflicting protagonists, each representing two separate generational thinking and cultural world, as they try to connect with Iran and with each other.

fariba

"Before, I'd never go back, I had no real need. I'd only do it for you, but now I'm starting to get excited.. nervous."

"I'm just - still mad. I'm still so angry."

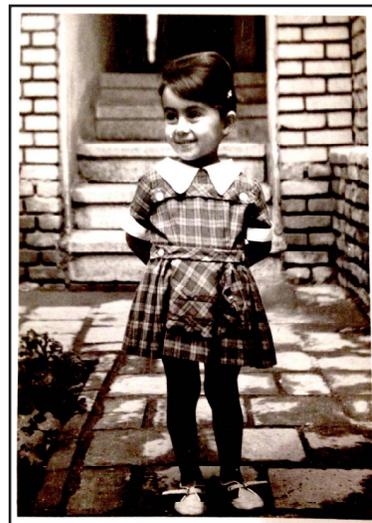
A country of many secrets, which seems to exist only behind a closed gate, has caused longing, love, regret, and guilt. My mother lives in her guilt.

Fariba fills the first role as one of two major protagonists.

Upon arriving in the US, Fariba was immediately thrust into University despite not knowing English. Eventually, the family moved to Atlanta and after a series of waitressing jobs, she was able to pick it up. During college, she met and married a southern American, Jack Frost.

In '95 after a very long and messy court battle, Fariba and Jack were divorced. By '97 she and her high-school boyfriend, Hossein (Peter), who followed her from Iran in 1979 had reconnected and eventually married.

At 40, she went back to school to become an attorney. Fariba currently runs a small practice in Atlanta, GA.



parisa

"Mom, she has this denial about her, the need to put on a good face. Me? No. It takes a lot to fake me."

Parisa fills the second role as protagonist. Together she and Fariba will serve as the major conflicting characters in which the piece is built around. In my sister's new age world and need to find herself, she's alienated herself from her family and from her past.

My sister refuses to show guilt.

At just 20 years-old Parisa has experienced a lot more than many twice her age, unfortunately not all of those experiences were positive. She is lost in herself. The once a stereotypically and outwardly successful girl has all but gone. After three-years of stop-starting her life, the result of addiction and rehab, she's in the midst of pulling herself back together - and maybe pulling herself back towards her family. Parisa has recently moved out of her parent's house and currently lives in Atlanta.

shayda

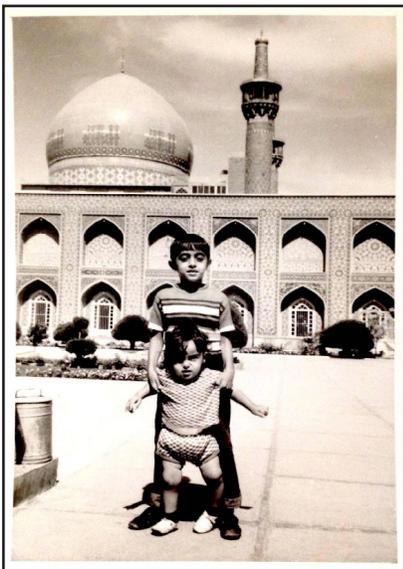
My own role in this piece will be to serve as a guide, the middle glue. I aim to structure myself as not just the access point into Persian culture for an unfamiliar audience, but as an entry point for the audience into an unfamiliar family.

I hope to find that this trip will serve as a way to bond our family once again, and if not to fully bond then to at least allow us to come to a better understanding and appreciation of one another. I have always been close to my mother and sister separately, but with their constant battle against the other, I find myself pulling away from them both. I suspect and hope we will find an Iran that, though possibly more strict, is nothing that we have let our imaginations fear.

peter (hossein)

Peter serves as a great representation of the other side of the revolution. He and his family did not agree or support the Shah, but neither were they in favour of the regime change that took place with the Islamic Revolution.

Peter and Fariba met at 15 years old and began dating. In '79, Peter followed Fariba to the US roughly a month after she left. Through a series of highly fortunate connections, he was able to obtain the necessary visa and left on literally the last commercial flight out of Iran. First moving to Indiana to be with Fariba, he then moved to Atlanta when her family moved. After two years the couple broke up, and Peter moved on to California where he trained as a chef. He met and married and had a daughter, Jazmine. Sixteen years later, he hears of Fariba's divorce through a mutual friend and decides to reach out. He currently owns a Persian restaurant in Atlanta, GA.



amir

Amir fulfills the role of the sceptic. He was only eight when moving from Iran, and has consistently felt an outsider to his heritage and is the family member that has most assimilated into the American culture. He feels regret for not having returned to see his grandparents before their death, but beyond this he has no real desire to go back to Iran.

*"I'd like to take my boys, but I know I won't.
It's too much. Too dangerous, too painful.
Maybe if things change. Maybe in 20 years."*

hanz & zorah

The grandparents will serve as an anchor. Their role is to tie the present protagonists to the history and connect them more firmly with the country.

Hanz was an Officer in the Shah's Air Force, he taught and trained in missiles and electrical engineering. Due to his ties to the Shah and living on base, it quickly became clear that he and Zorah needed to move the family from Iran. They never realized the move would be permanent.

"I had a friend, an American Officer, and he told me without telling me - open your eyes, chaos is coming."



other potential voices

Setare - Family friend, Twenty-three year old girl born and raised in Iran. She has moved to the States one month ago at the demand of her parents and is desperate to return, despite having to live without her family.

Undetermined - Peter's friend, Adult Iranian living in Iran currently, who was present through the Revolution, and did not support the Pahlavi Monarchy. They will be able to speak to the daily life of today's Iran, the struggles and the triumphs.

structure . tone . style

The structure and aesthetic between the two landscapes - the US and Iran - will absolutely be different and separate. This is not only a stylistic choice to help differentiate the two geographies, but also a practical one. The Atlanta and LA footage will aim to look more polished and planned, where the Iran footage will appear rough and more suited to the likes of home video. Because, essentially, home video is what Iran will be. The less of a 'production' that is made surrounding the filming, the more likely any problems in obtaining the footage will be avoided.

Tonally the piece will have an air of self-awareness. It will be recognized throughout the scenes and interviews that the people involved are consciously being filmed. The aim here is to achieve a sense of urgency and, hopefully, truthfulness. This will also allow for any anxieties or nervousness about speaking to the memories of Iran and it's regime to shine through candidly. Should filming in Iran prove unsuccessful, self-awareness will prove a useful tool.

- we are where we come from - *theme*

This documentary would take the form primarily of character-driven storytelling – focusing on my mother, Fariba, and sister, Parisa, serving to structure the piece as the two main conflicting characters. To travel to Iran would be an incredible journey in itself, but what is more is that it could be a story of great reconciliation for one small family – to reconcile a woman with her past, a girl with her identity, and a mother and daughter – separated by generation, by culture, and by social values – with each other.

significance

On a very personal level, this piece is a labour of passion and a need to connect and own an identity, for all of us involved - my mother, my sister, and myself. I have the optimism and naivety in approaching this story; but I cannot simply hope or act blindly – it might not be possible to tell this story but perhaps for that very reason this particular story should be told.

Overall, this piece reminds us that maybe we can change our destiny by changing our location, our past... but that this can only be achieved through accepting our past, not in running from it. This can be achieved through embracing it.

*“They don’t want to use their last names.
Can we just not use the last names?”*

*“You know if you try this, it could be the
first and last time you see Iran. I don’t
know what will actually happen... what is
actually allowed.”*

concerns

--- Practical Concerns & Questions ---

Filming in Iran -

I have had numerous conversations with family members, living both inside and outside of the country, and have sought legal consultation on the matter. The general consensus is that filming in the country is allowable, particularly if it is of a more home-video nature.

To elaborate, photographing in private residences, privately-owned businesses, and behind closed doors is allowable with the knowing consent of those being filmed and the permission of the space’s owner. Public filming is more tricky, as one cannot photograph anything government-owned, thus any real ‘tourist attraction’ or government building would be prohibited.

Music Rights & Clearance -

Much of the film’s music is planned to be improvised composition created by my grandfather, Hanz. The score will be an original composition created by a hired composer. Other music used in the pitch tape, and pieces that are currently being considered to be included, are all pieces which have yet to be cleared but have been chosen due to the fact that I have a personal connection to each of the artists. Thus it will be quite possible to clear both the master and recording rights affordably.

1979 Protest Footage -

Similarly to the music clearance issue, I do not anticipate trouble clearing archival 1979 footage, as I do not plan to use any media-owned footage. Instead I will utilize ‘home-video’ footage captured by family friends and distant relatives that were present at the time.

In film nist - This is Not a Film [2011]
dir. Jafar Panahi & Mojtaba Mirtahmasb
<http://www.thisisnotafilm.net/>

A clandestinely made documentary, follows a few hours in the life of acclaimed director Jafar Panahi – whose arrest sentenced him to six years in prison and a 20-year ban from making film. By depicting a day in his life, Panahi and Mirtahmasb try to portray the deprivations looming in contemporary Iranian cinema.

Ten
dir. Abbas Kiarostami [2002]
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Axtnu3GRsjk>
<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2005/apr/28/hayfilmfestival2005.guardianhayfestival>
Ten sequences examine the emotional lives of women at significant junctures.

10 on Ten
dir. Abbas Kiarostami [2004]
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPiVi3BTdqs>
Master Filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami shares ten lessons on movie-making while driving through the locations of his past films.

Drottningen och jag - The Queen and I
dir. Nahid Persson [2008]
<http://www.hbo.com/documentaries/the-queen-and-i#/>
Filmmaker and Iranian exile Nahid Persson Sarvestani talks with the widow of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the late Shah of Iran, who was overthrown in 1979.

Iran (Is Not The Problem)
dir. Aaron Newman [2008]
<http://www.iranisnottheproblem.org/>
A response to the failure of the American mass media to provide the public with relevant and accurate information about the standoff between the US and Iran.

inspiration

In this dead end
by Ahmad Shamlou (July 1979)

They smell your breath,
Lest you have uttered
'I love you'.
They smell your heart.

Such strange times, darling.

And they punish love
At crossroads
By flogging.
We must hide love in dark closets.

In this crooked dead end of a bitter cold
They keep their fire alive
By burning our songs and poems;
Do not dare risk the peril of thinking.

Such strange times, darling.

He who bangs on your door in the middle of the night,
Has come to kill the light.
We must hide light in dark closets.

Those that are butchers are stationed at crossroads
With clubs and cleavers stained in blood.

Such strange times, darling.

They cut off the smiles from our lips,
And the songs from our mouths.
We must hide joy in dark closets.

They barbecue canaries
On a fire of burnt lilacs and jasmine.

Such strange times, darling.

Satan, drunk with victory,
Sits at our funeral feast.
We had better hide God in the closet.