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Excerpt from the novel *Other Lives*

*When will you be back home?*

He asked me on our way to the Mombassa airport. I didn't say that I was coming back nor did I say that I was leaving. I only said that I missed Lebanon. I know that longing is not for a specific place, but rather for myself that I am losing everyday, for what I lose while away, for what I have created from the images I have preserved in my head for so long. It is as though nothing now is left of them... More than fifteen years have passed since I left. I know that by going back to Beirut, I won't retrieve what I've lost but rather reconfirm my loss. I will reconfirm that what I have been missing is in my head, only in my head, and I won't be able to convey it to him.

I left Chris behind me. I also left his letter to me on the table next to my bed, without opening it. I know what's inside: money I don't want and a question about the date I'll come back to him. Since we've been married, he's been leaving me money in envelopes. Our hands have never touched, not even once, when he's given me money.

The day before my trip from Kenya to Lebanon, Chris was busy in his laboratory when I called him. His assistant answered my call and I put down the receiver for a few moments so that Chris could call me back. He didn't ask what I wanted because he was so taken up with what he himself wanted to say. In an excited, anxious voice—as though he were crying—he informed me that he had gotten amazing results from the experiments that he had begun one year before. Of course he was happy with the results of his experiments, but his happiness didn't make me forget my decision or my anxious desire to pack my suitcases, lock them and then put them by the door. I open an empty suitcase and without thinking put some clothes and other stuff in it. I start by opening the drawers in my wardrobe, I take out my underwear, cotton t-shirts and jeans. After I pile them up on the bed I think that it's too much—that I should go back and lighten my traveling load.

I tell myself that the airplane takes off tomorrow morning at eight, so I have to be at the airport at six. This means I have to wake up at four in the morning. It's already past midnight and I haven't slept yet. I am going to travel first from Mombasa to Nairobi. I don't know how long I'll have to wait in the airport there until the plane carries me to Dubai and then to Lebanon. Chris will accompany me on my journey as far as the Nairobi airport and then come back to Mombasa where our house and his work are. I won't miss anything. This is what I tell myself when I visit the rooms of the house in which I've lived for eleven years and haven't left except for a quick trip every year returning to Adelaide where my unbalanced father Salama and my silent mother Nadia live, or for a short break to South Africa. I also don't leave him except for intermittent weekend trips. I used to travel from Mombasa to Nairobi in order to pick up things that Olga sent me from Beirut. The hours of English language teaching that I used to give at UNICEF schools dedicated to eradicating illiteracy in Mombasa were not enough to fill the vast periods of my laziness in Kenya and neither were my private lessons teaching Arabic. Despite this, I've never gotten to know Kenya, neither through organized tourist trips to the Kenyan mountains and the savannahs that surround them, nor to its parks and wildlife reserves.

Beirut...How faraway it is now. How many lives have I lived since I left it? I thought while closing my second suitcase, pulling it to leave it by the door to the house. Did I live many lives or only one life enough for many women?

Questions I don't know how to answer. I'm aware that it didn't take me much time to know that since I left Beirut my life changed. From the time I arrived in Australia with my incomplete family, everything changed—even the names of holidays and when they fall. The Christmas holiday changed into the summer holiday in Adelaide, the Australian city where I lived for four years before I got married and moved to Kenya. Similarly the date of winter's arrival changed. Winter started coming in July.

We wouldn't have chosen Adelaide, except my mother's brother Yusuf lived there. He left before the Civil War in Lebanon started. He was an active member of the Syrian Nationalist Party and participated in the coup of 1961, fleeing before the Lebanese army could put him in prison. An Australian man who he met when he was training at the Tiro, the shooting range near the airport, helped him to flee. He helped him travel to Cyprus and from there on to Australia. I was five years old at the time. It was as though I still remembered my mother Nadia's fear and worry about her only brother. Perhaps this was the first shock she ever had, long before my brother Baha's death, receiving the false report of her brother Yusuf's arrest and liquidation before knowing the truth afterwards—his rescue and escape from the country. Nadia remembers the past in relation to incidents that happened in our lifetimes. She tells me that I was born on the day of the third military aggression against Abdel Nasser's Egypt in 1956 and that she was really afraid of losing me while I was still a baby in her belly on the day of the earthquake in Lebanon which cracked open many houses in the village including her parent's house in Hasbaya. She said that my brother Baha' was born after the events of 1958 in Lebanon when my father was in prison because of those events. She also says that my uncle Yusuf, her brother, traveled abroad a few days after the coup of 1961. Nadia is no different than my grandmother Nahil, my father's mother, who herself also sees dates of public importance in the family tree before she sees names of individuals, to say nothing of the fact that her memory recalls historical events in the past as marking my birth and even the birth of her son Salama, i.e. my father... It is as though the individual in my family has no story unless the beginning of his or her life can be associated with an important date in history. Often I believed that our destinies were linked to these dates that described our lives with a mystery that was difficult to untangle or expose.

I do not know if what I remember of my uncle Yusuf is what I saw and experienced myself or if the stories that his sister Nadia, my mother, told about him made me invent a memory that grew up with me and never left me. I imagined that I remembered the date that my uncle was arrested but my grandmother Nahil tells me that I was very little and that it was impossible that I could remember it. She tells me that I had not yet even completed my fifth year of life. Despite this, when I think about my uncle, I can imagine how angry he was the night before the coup, how he would curse the government and the state saying that some of the people in it were enemies within.

My uncle Yusuf arrived in Australia and lived in Paradise, one of the small suburbs of Adelaide. I found the name interesting after I learned that the largest cemeteries in the

area were located near it as was the first crematorium. It also had the first Druze cemetery built by the Druze who immigrated to Australia. Perhaps they chose this suburb for its name, which to them means that paradise is always on earth or a dream deferred, equidistant between earth and heaven.

We had to live in his house when we arrived at the beginning of 1980. I had not seen my uncle since I was a small child. He seemed like any Anglo-Saxon who had been born and lived in Australia, especially with the broad Australian accent that he had adopted soon after marrying an Australian woman who worked in an office for immigrants and refugees. He bought a house in Adelaide and didn't move from one place to another like most of the Lebanese who arrived on the continent before and during the war years.

When we emerged into the arrivals hall at the Adelaide airport my uncle ran towards us, hugged my mother for a long time and, while crying, started asking her how she was. She murmured a few incomprehensible words, also choking on her tears. He started reminding her of things that she seemed to have forgotten or whose details were perhaps buried under the weight of other memories that had forced her to be silent. My mother loosened the knot around her silence while hugging my uncle, murmuring a few words while her eyes teared up. She started speaking for a few minutes, and then returned to the silence that she had chosen from the time of my brother's death. In what followed, from the time of our arrival in Australia, it seemed as though her silence had started to tire her out, as though she had not chosen it herself, and it weighed on her.

Everything that she said about Yusuf was no longer as it was before. My mother's words didn't surprise my uncle though he knew the story of her becoming silent after my brother Baha's murder. But her words surprised me, like summer rain does. They revived me and helped me recuperate from the exhaustion of the wearing journey that lasted more than two days. I didn't care what she said about my uncle Yusuf my only concern was her speaking after her long silence. In the car on the way to the house, my uncle hugged her and she cried while my father looked out the car window at the people, buildings and streets. His face was red and sweat ran down the two sides of his head and neck as though he were in a sauna. He kept wearing his woolen sweater in which he traveled from Lebanon. He was insistent that the season was winter and didn't take it off although it was really hot in Adelaide. At that moment he seemed weak and yielding, with no power or might, while putting his head out the car window and turning it in every direction, looking at the buildings and people walking by as though he were watching a moving film passing him by quickly. He kept repeating like a broken record, "*Ism Allah, Ism Allah*, keep the Evil Eye far away."

My uncle hadn't changed, that's what my mother said, but he really started to belong to his new country over there—from a Syrian Nationalist to an Australian not at all different from the Anglo-Saxons. This didn't prevent him from also being an active and influential member of the Druze association that had many names throughout the different stages in the life of the Druze in Australia. It was first established under the name the Syrian Druze Association, then after Lebanese independence its name became the Lebanese-Australian Association for the Druze. After the emigration of a large number of the Druze to Australia in the 1960s, before the civil war in Lebanon, the name changed three times finally to remain the Australian Druze Association. Yusuf was in charge of it.

We stayed in my uncle's house for a few months before we found a house to move to. We rented a house nearby that was in an area with few buildings, just a number of

houses that largely resembled each other all lined up next to each other on one side of the street. We left my uncle's house carrying many things which we had gained, but having lost some of my mother's complicity with my uncle, a complicity that seemed to us always to be alive and burning for all those years that we were far away from my uncle.

We were not the only Lebanese in the neighborhood; there were many Lebanese families, especially Christians and Druze. Five Lebanese families lived on our very street. Other Lebanese families lived on the streets that branched off of ours and it didn't take us long to meet them. The gardens of the houses revealed that their inhabitants hadn't changed for a long time. These Lebanese families cared for their gardens and grew trees that reminded them of their villages and perhaps even their mountain houses.

Adelaide is a city of churches. In the neighborhood where we live there are at least four small churches that the Christian Lebanese attend every Sunday. These people needed to immigrate again after they immigrated first from their villages in the Lebanese mountains. In the nearby neighborhoods, some of the Protestant churches in which only a few people prayed changed into banks and coffee shops and real estate offices and houses for people who were hippies in the sixties.

Perhaps the thing that made my father the happiest in our new house was that it was located near a Lebanese bakery that had opened just one year before we arrived in Adelaide. He used to go by himself to the Awaziz Bakery on Victoria Street, which branched off our street, to buy Lebanese bread and manaqeesh covered in olive oil and zaatar. The bakery didn't only sell bread and manaqeesh but also various pickles, zaatar and sumaq which my mother Nadia used to buy to put in fattoush. After a while we started to see other things on the shelves of the bakery, like coffee beans, cinnamon and apple-scented tobacco. Sometimes, in addition to these things, the owner of the bakery would stock small Lebanese flags made in China as a response to his customers' longing for Lebanon.

*Translated from the Arabic by Michelle Hartman*