

# One Does Not Equal One

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For the first time, the plane does not land on my bed. I violently rub my eyes to be certain. I shake my feet a little bit pretending to shoo a fly. As an experience of freedom, I let the air caress my hair. I look at my wrist; it's six in the morning... I hear a very distant voice saying, "*Señores, rumbo a Madrid... Por favor pasen al stand número...*" I remembered Salma, whose father disappeared with my diary. Also, I remembered my father, who disappeared twenty-six years of my life. Far beyond, I see Safwan, and we are almost equal for the first time in my life.

## 24th November 1996

My mother says: "It was pouring so much that I couldn't see the sky, but I heard a loud knock on the glass from my small room in the hospital." She also says: "I never knew you existed. I prayed to God to have a handsome son who would comb his hair to the right side when he grows up, and be respected and held in awe in his village. To get this son, I followed a certain diet, eating certain foods and staying away from others, as the women of the village advised me. She always continues: "I gave birth to a handsome boy as I wished but, surprisingly, there was nonstop pain. Between my feet, I saw another head looking out. It was your head. It was a happy surprise for me,

and upsetting to your father who said, sadly, "I would have been more fortunate and happier if the twin had been males."

For twenty-six years, my mother did not stop describing that day to me, expressing her pride that she was the only one in our village who was able to give birth to a twin. She also did not stop at a final note expressing her happiness at giving birth to a girl like me. Nor did I stop believing what she says, perhaps because mothers don't lie, or because I'm an idiot.

When I grew a little older, I was able to realize the first difference between my brother Safwan and me. It was the first time I was assailed by doubts about what my mother said. It was a November night when my family gathered around the dining table. I, Aseel, sat next to my mother and on the other side sat my father and brother. On that day, my father told the first party, my mother and me, that "Aseel is no longer young, and must wear the hijab." My mother nodded yes and did not reply at all. The next morning, I headed to school accompanied by my brother Safwan as usual. My problem was not the sound of the then distant sea, but was something that collapsed inside a girl who was not ten years old.

I remember how the school teachers greeted me with continuous praise that morning. Their words seeped inside me like the waves of the Mediterranean leaked one day inside my mouth. I smiled at my heroic deed, which I felt at that time was heroic, as I wore the hijab and

you can describe me as a polite girl from now on. Later, when it became normal and usual, I felt a great hatred towards everything that happened.

I regarded my brother Safwan, who styled his hair on the right side, with a hatred that was strangely growing by days. I wished I had a quarter of my brother's freedom in styling his hair.

It started to create a psychological shock for me, when I dreamed of a bicycle, and then I saw my father returning back home carrying only one that was not mine. That day, my mother justified that it is shameful for a girl to ride a bicycle. Then she looked between my legs and said: "You may lose your virginity." On that day, my brother Safwan rode the bicycle and went out into the street. I kept monitoring my dream that was achieved by my brother for himself. A gigantic rock fell on my heart with every meter he crossed, smiling at his incredible ability to defeat time and distance. When I went to bed that day, my eyes turned into two nimbuses that rained all night.

It was not the only time that my eyes turned into two big nimbuses. It happened several times before. When the mathematics teacher said, while solving a mathematical equation, that one equals one, I could not stay silent. In the middle of the class, I stood and said: "But one does not equal one." The teacher smiled and replied: "If you prove it, I will give you a five mark bonus." I seriously replied: "Easy! I'm one and my brother Safwan is one, but I'm not equal to him in anything. Therefore, one does not equal one." Because the mathematics teacher considered what I said as a silly joke that deserves punishment, she punished me.

I was never wrong. One does not always equal one in real life. This was proven when Safwan and I got an equal score in high school. Despite the fact that our scores were the same, his "one" meant he was able to reach the first world, while my "one" was not able to exclude

me from ignorance. My father gave Safwan the choice to continue his studies in several countries, but no one gave me the opportunity to choose. In less than a year, he was sitting at the seats of the University of Barcelona in Spain, but I was not given the opportunity to choose. I became a student at a local university where campus security is available twenty four hours to stop love stories.

If my father had given me the choice at that time, I would have chosen Spain too. It was the place that Safwan and I dreamt of visiting, since my father told us about his adventures in the streets of Seville. He told us about his long dates with his beloved Angelina in La Ciutadella Park in Barcelona, and how he was capable of teaching her to pronounce Arabic phrases, such as "I love you" and "My love". Angelina never pronounced the letter "H" as "Kh". Also, when the summer approached and we went to spend an hour at the Mediterranean Sea, my father held a handful of sand and said: "The beach sand of Barcelona is much softer than ours."

My brother Safwan kept sending me pictures after he had travelled. I still remember his first picture on the bench of Ciutadella Park. At that time, I felt that I was way less than "one". Whenever he sent me new pictures or whenever he talked about a new place he visited, I stared at the faces carefully and I compared between two places that are not equal at all. As the years passed, I almost hated the person who accompanied me for nine months inside my mother's womb. I did not care anymore about his calls and pictures so that I no longer looked because I was afraid to stir from my dream. Yet, I kept telling him words that would make him happier, but they made me more miserable.

My brother loved a Polish girl with black hair and eyes as wide as two leaves of berries. I used to see my father's smile every time Safwan talked to him about her. I heard my father's advice and constant urge to marry a well-bred Arab girl like my mother. Safwan used to re-

spond sarcastically to all of my father's advice saying: "God's willing". She was not the only girl Safwan loved, who he said he loved, for he had received a lion's share of love, but I had never known love. When an elegant young man opened the door of my heart, and my hand trembled due to a trigger of something like love, I had to bear my father's curses and his nonstop punches even after he had turned into ashes.

My life stopped after my father threw three and a half years of my life in the garbage. He also banned me from attending the last semester at the university, arguing that my rude manners and bad behavior offended him and the family. I spent a whole month without stepping out of home. I did not meet my friends or the person I felt I loved. There was nothing to do for thirty days except reading my father's arranged books in the corner of the house. I got to know Marques and Paul Auster. On the personal level, the words of Juan Jose

Mias grabbed my attention. I never forgot his statement: "Whoever inherits flame has to eat it forever for the fear of a specific curse."

For long nights, the ghost of suicide trapped me in my room, which is one meter less than Safwan's room. Every time I held the knife, I made it spike up, and was not able to rotate it down. When I was about to do so, a mini notebook I had put on the desk rescued me. I was drawn to this notebook that had yellow pages like the walls of the Alhambra Palace. The spike of the knife turned into words thrust into my chest, turning it into a soccer field. My tears were a dry pen that could compose professionally on the papers.

To prove to the whole world that one does not equal one, I wrote a lot. I described Safwan as a sad dragon for losing his wings. I turned my hands into dragon wings of Kalesi in the *Game of Thrones* series. I entered love crossing the threshold my father did not allow me to break



Palestinian children playing (Contacto Agency).

into. I traveled to Spain and lived in a house overlooking the Llobregat River. I wrote words that equaled fifty government statements, and I depicted a sea with two beaches, one black and the other crystal blue.

I totally remember what happened on the last day of the month. My mother came into the room smiling after a month when she did not even offer me the light of a small lamp. She did speak a lot and she got straight to the point as she absolutely knew her aim. She said: "I have very good news." Your cousin proposed to you yesterday, and your father did not object. She continued: "He really suits you. He owns a large house and a car that can take up to five children. And when I was about to object, her words preceded mine, and she said: "Do not worry, you will love him. He is religious and he never skipped a prayer in his life!" Before getting out of the room, she said: "Think about it. Your dad is delighted and excited. Also, he told him that you said yes, so don't break his promise."

At that time, my mother did not lock the door behind her; however, she closed my heart forever. I stood in front of the mirror, and began to look at my body, which caused my cousin to be infatuated with me. It was extremely horrible although I was convinced that it was the most beautiful feminine body on this planet. I burst into tears like a colony of ants heading to a hole where they would unknowingly meet their end. I started taking off my clothes piece by piece until I saw my jutting breasts. They were just like two balloons that could be blown off with a spike, and my thighs, which had never been saggy, turned out to be like the thighs of an old woman in her sixties. Then, with my small right hand, which I could never shoo a fly with, I began to hit my female organ, one blow after another, without stopping, repressing my pain, until it was covered like on the delivery day. All of a sudden, a scream came out of me that I would never expect my small mouth would release.

I was obliged to feign happiness on the wedding day. My limbs swayed in a balanced way with every musical note coming out of the disc jockey. I was so entranced that I did not wake up until those traces of blood terrified me, but made my husband excited. For a whole hour, my mother's mouth did not stop joyfully ululating. As if we created an integrated living being and won the Nobel Prize, we were showered with congratulations. The next day, I found myself in front of a man I had never seen in my life. He liked to humiliate me during sexual intercourse, asking me to be a professional whore.

My mother lied to me; I didn't love him after years of marriage. And my father lied to himself. For the first time, I looked at my daughter Salma and I did not comprehend how fathers kill their children's dreams of peace of mind and happiness. I became a mother. It was like a silly joke. Every time I pressed Salma's mouth on one of my breasts, I looked at her hair that looked like mine, and the small mole on her nose that looked like an island in the middle of the Mediterranean. Like a flower in my heart's garden, I saw her growing. I always saw her more beautiful than Cinderella, whom I had fallen in love with in my childhood. But her father had never seen this at all. He blamed me. He also blamed God as he did not replace Salma with a male who could carry his name. Secretly, I did not stop taking contraceptive pills for the following years of marriage because I saw that he did not care about her existence, which was intolerable.

Like a slow turtle, years passed with my father, who died asking me to utter one word he had never heard. Then my mother spent two years of her life in amnesia, but every time I visited her, her eyes did not stop shedding tears. As for my brother Safwan, he settled down with a German girl who inherited authentic Arab features from her grandfather. He met her for the first time at La Sastrería Café. He sent me loads of pictures and videos of the wedding, which I met with a sad smile, turning them

quickly. I overcame my sorrows and his happiness through Salma, who was able to say “Te quiero” like a native Spanish girl.

I still remember the details of the night when everything went back to square one. The night, when my brother Safwan became a father for the first time was the same night my father became a father twenty-five years before. It was the twenty-fourth night of November, when I was busy writing an imaginary diary, until my brother Safwan intercepted it with the first picture of his daughter Elena. I remember what Safwan wrote with the picture: “Aseel, I became a father. I am very happy with this.” I felt how happy he was at that time. If he had left a copy of himself in the country before traveling, that copy would have been able to notice wrinkles on my cheeks. I contemplated the picture, forgetting my diary on the table, and I was attached to Elena’s Spanish-Arabic mixed lineaments.

That night, when my husband returned home, he did not pay any attention to my unusual prominent dimples, or to the picture of Elena’s face and my talk about her beautiful features, and directly went to the notebook that revealed my secret. He dropped the curtain on the many years I had spent with someone who did not caress me with a single word of love. And after a series of insults that never ended, and punches on different parts of my body, I had to see the pages of my diary flying over the neighbor’s roof without any personal attempt to rescue it.

The next morning, I found myself in the same room I had left one day in tears. Contrary to what I expected over the years, I returned again to my tears. My tears were not for my fate; they were because he deprived me of Salma, not because he loved her, but because he feared the social stigma. I stayed in the corner of the room like a mouse and the sounds that came out of my mouth were real squeaks of a mouse held inside the trap of life. I remem-

bered my mother, my father, Safwan, Salma and Elena. I remembered the bicycle and the teachers’ praise when I first wore the hijab. I remembered my four incomplete university years and the day I turned out to be a decent girl in my father’s eyes while wearing the white wedding suit.

Then one sentence decorated all the pages of my new notebook: “One does not equal one”.

## 24th November 2022

The first time my father talked about Spain, I visualized it as a girl in her twenties capable of grabbing attention. I had not stopped visiting her in my dreams, since my brother Safwan left his bags of memories, turning my bed into an airstrip. Later, just with my pen and inside my room, which was less than nine meters, I was able to create a paper plane that landed in a real airport. So I went to La Ciutadella Garden and took a picture exactly like the first one Safwan had sent me. Then, I spent an hour in an ancient house, its window overlooking the Llobregat River, contemplating the sky that rained laughs and dreams. I sipped from a cup of café solo at La Sastrería coffee shop, while carefully looking at the faces of male and female passengers.

Now, the waves of the Mediterranean are caressing my feet. I am looking at the water while slipping in my toes like a thief who carefully knows the ins and outs of the house. At the far end, I see Safwan as a fine figure of a man who no longer styles his hair to the right side. I look closer to see a picture of Salma and Elena playing hopscotch in a far country. I tilt my head to the other side and see my diary papers that have flown, turning into white doves of peace. I see my father as a wise old man, who grants freedom to his children, and urges my mother to say many more words of love. Only now, I could say that “one may well equal one”.