

**On Sounds**  
*by Faisal Oddang*

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Ever since I started getting sick a few days ago, I've acquired two new habits: counting death and sleeping—or rather, controlling my dreams, which requires sleeping. The latter is especially fun, because in my dreams I can see just fine. I can also direct the scenes inside the dream however I like. I have no idea how I came to possess this power (for lack of a better word), but it doesn't matter. For now I'll let myself enjoy feeling powerful for a change.

I don't know what death looks like, but I do know what it sounds like. I was six years old when I suddenly lost my vision, just several weeks before Father passed. That was also the first time I heard what death sounded like: cries, mostly. Nowadays I hear death almost every day, but it doesn't sound like it used to. For starters, the crying is now being replaced by announcements from the mosque through a loudspeaker, or sirens from passing ambulance cars. Today I counted seventeen deaths in total: four from the mosque, and the rest from the sirens. Mother said the mosque and the main road are very close to our house. The main road is the only access to a new mass grave that the city government built only a few months ago. People say the grave is almost full now.

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"Your father is with God now. God wanted him by His side, so He called him early." That's what Mother said when I asked why he had to die. I hung on to her every word, because I couldn't live with the alternative explanation, one that the kids at school believed and would use to taunt me, which was that my father died of shame for having a blind son.

"See, your father had to obey God. He was summoned, so he went."

It made sense: the people attending his funeral were actually sending him off before he left to be buried so he could be with God. I remember one particular holiday, at a beach not far away from our house, when I came up with the idea to hide Father's flip-flops as a joke. I buried them in the white sand. If only there was a way to repeat that moment over and over again.

"Your father listened to God, so from now on you have to be a good boy and listen to me, alright?"

Again, what she said made sense, so I nodded. Although I couldn't help but wonder: what happens if I miss him? Can I go see him? Can I go be with God, too?

“You can’t go unless you’ve been called.”

I nodded once again. From that day on, I waited and waited, but the call never came.

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“Wait, so you can see me?”

“This is a dream after all, Father,” I say.

“It’s been so long. How are you two doing?”

“We’re doing well, if by well you mean healthy. But if you mean financially, we’ve been better.”

“I’m sorry, kid.”

I don’t want him to apologize. After all, he had to do what God told him to do. So I close my eyes and revise the scene. No more apologizing. Instead, I want him to say: this too shall pass, everything is going to be okay. After all, my mother never said it, and especially not during the times when we would run into yet another financial trouble. The least my father could do is tell me what I want to hear, even if soon I will have to wake up to realizing that it could not be further from the truth.

Ever since my father left, everything changed. We had to sell the house and move someplace smaller so we could use the rest of the money to survive. It was Mother who chose the house we live in now. She said it was close to the mosque and the sound from the loudspeaker was comforting to her. It was also not too far away from the main road, which would be a convenient place to set up a gorengan stall.

“Once we have enough money to buy a cart for our stall, it’ll be just down the road. We won’t have to push it far,” she said, though I knew that the real reason why she wanted to be close to the main road was so I wouldn’t have to walk too far to get to the bus stop.

But just like Father’s passing, things can happen in the blink of an eye.

I hear it more and more frequently nowadays: from the television in Mother’s bedroom to the loudspeaker at the mosque, announcing the name of one neighbor after another. Mother has been telling me to stay home.

“The virus is everywhere. You could be wearing a mask, but you’ll never know if the person next to you is just as considerate,” she would say, to which I responded that, come to think of it, ever since the pandemic had come, fewer and fewer people were coming to my side to offer help. Normally they would offer to walk me across the street or give directions. “But then again, I’m used to it after all these years,” I said. “I can get by on my own.”

If I’d still had my sight back when Father died, perhaps I would be able to picture the look on my mother’s face right now. But I have no memory of Mother being sad, which is just as well, because if I did, I would imagine that’s how she looked all the

time.

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Every single person in this room is a different version of me, and there are so many of them: there's me on the beach playing in the sand, me trying to get across the street without a cane and without Mother to help me, me in various other situations, young and old, in different clothes, but they're all me.

"This is the best vacation ever," says a boy version of me. He's digging a hole in the sand, trying to bury a pair of flip-flops. Another me, who looks about five years older than the boy, stands beside him and smiles mockingly as he hears this. "Yeah, that's because it's the only vacation you've been on."

Meanwhile, another me is watching the scene unfold from outside of the dreamspace. He seems less than happy. I close my eyes and rewind the scene, only this time without the mean older boy, whom I recognize as myself from back when they wouldn't let me join my class farewell tour. It's not safe, the teacher had said, too big a burden.

As soon as he's erased from the scene, another version of me, this time a lot older in white and gray high school uniform, arrives and approaches the me who is digging the hole in the sand. The high school me squats and is about to grab a handful of sand when I close my eyes and quickly rewind the scene, repeating his arrival. This time, he addresses the little boy. "When you grow up, you get to go to high school and you'll make lots of friends. Don't mind Mother when she cries after you come home from your first day telling her that the kids at school pulled a prank on you and made you wash your face in the sand. It's not your fault, of course you didn't see the cat shit in the sand."

"But won't Father be mad at those kids?" asks the younger boy.

I try to think of the right words to say, the words I imagine the little boy version of me would have wanted to hear, before the high school me finally responds, "No, he won't be mad. He's very forgiving. Besides, it didn't happen, right?"

"Didn't happen, right?" Shouts another me from afar.

And then, another me from even further away: "Didn't happen right?"

"Didn't happen, right? Didn't happen, right?"

The question echoes on and on and on until more than a hundred versions of me are now screaming in unison, louder and louder and more painful, so painful that I am forced to stop, I must end this dream immediately and sure enough, I will myself to wake up and it is now precisely eighteen minutes after six according to the screen reader on my phone.

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I was laid off from my job several months ago, and since then my body has not been well. My thoughts often drift and I worry about Mother, and thinking about her makes me sad. I just know that things will only get harder from now on. We've barely managed by living off of Father's pension and the extra income from my last job as a content writer. But then they started letting people go, including myself. They didn't even pay me the remaining three months of my salary. Unbeknownst to Mother, I had gone to the office several days earlier by angkot using the last of my money, to see if I could get my salary, but when I arrived I was even more devastated: the office had closed because they couldn't afford to pay rent. Happened two weeks ago, said the building's parking attendant, who helped me cross the street to wait for the angkot home.

"Stop worrying so much," said Mother. "It is the root of all ailments, you know."

She was right, of course, but how exactly does one stop worrying when there is a chance one will not survive the next few months?

"I'm fine, Mother. They promised to pay me as soon as possible," I lied.

"We still have your father's pension."

I knew for a fact it wasn't enough. It could barely cover the monthly water and electricity bills.

"So long as we're healthy, we'll be fine."

After losing sleep for several days, I finally got sick, and that's when it all started. At first I willed myself to sleep, and then I willed myself to dream, and before long I started being in charge of the dreams, directing the sequence and controlling every single act including which parts to stop before telling myself to wake up.

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Laughter is fighting to escape from deep within me, but I know I have to keep it in. It's too early to celebrate. If I laughed now, Father would know something was up, and all that hard work of burying his flip-flops would have been in vain. The three of us have been planning this vacation for a while. Father said to pick a place, any place, and he would take us there, so I chose the beach.

"Do you want to go play in the water?"

I hear Father shouting in the back.

"Plenty of food stalls here. You want a snack? Something to drink, maybe?"

I said no back then, when it was not a dream, and I regretted it. So I close my eyes and rewind.

"I do, Father! I do!"

I run toward Father, who is holding a swim tube in his hand.

"I want a snack, too! And a drink!"

"You can have them later," says Mother. "Once you're back from swimming with your father."

Father lifts me up with one hand and carries me across the water. As soon as the water gets waist-deep, he props me up on the swim tube and pushes the tube left and right. We are having so much fun, I am giggling and giggling for a good several minutes before a big wave comes crashing, tipping the tube over. Father's strong hands pull me aside and I am carried all the way to the sand.

I keep giggling the entire time. Father and Mother are laughing, too.

"Again! Again!"

But as soon as I shout, something feels weird.

A loud ringing. Did water get inside my ears? And what is that sound? Is that the ambulance? The ringing gets louder and louder. I can hear the loudspeaker from the mosque. Wait, I don't like this part. These sounds have no business being in my dreams. Lucky for me, I can do something about it.

I close my eyes once again to rewind, picturing the scene in the water where Father was pushing me on the swim tube from side to side. But for the first time ever, nothing happens except for the loudspeaker from the mosque and the sirens from the ambulance, now ringing louder and louder.

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