

THELEEHARVEYOSWALDBAND

BEN PEEK

“MY BAND IS NOT HERE. They’ve left. They’ve gone. That’s why it’s just me on the stage tonight. I’m going to try and make it work for you all anyway.”

Years later, Zarina Salim Malik would write that it was these words that changed her life. It was impossible to think that at the time: the vowels of each word were slurred, mashed together, and lost within the heavy, deep bass voice that emerged from crackling speakers. But it was true. It would change her life. There was a magnetic quality that allowed the musician’s voice to rise over the chinks of glass and snatches of conversation and reach her and the other fifty New Yorkers in the Annandale Bar with a tone that implied that he mattered. That they should listen. It was a tone that ignored the fact that the audience present was not there because they cared for the opening act, but because they wanted prime choice in space for the later band they had actually paid to see, and because they had a dedication to music that had nothing to do with any individual performer or act. But the voice ignored that.

The stage in the Annandale was at the end of a small, shadow stained rectangular box of a room with a dirty wooden floor. It had metal fans against the left side that did nothing to cool the place down when it was full and opposite these was a bar where students worked for cheap wages and stole liquor but never cleaned. The whole room lingered in the taste and smell of cigarettes, beer and sweat. It was a shithole, but the bands were cheap and when the music mingled with her pulse, Zarina didn’t care. Nothing mattered but the music. But when that voice snagged the part of her mind that went on instinct, something different happened. She had

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never felt an intensity like this before, and she watched the shadows of the stage as the musician dragged a stool to the front; watched as the electronics squealed and drowned out everyone, then faded; watched even when Sara, slender, cute, blonde Sara in black and green and Japanese tattoos down her spine, that Sara, began to speak and she ignored her. In fact, Zarina leant over, ashed into the half filled metal tray they had been sharing, then stood—herself in black and red and an inch shorter than Sara, with only one tattoo of a sun coloured butterfly on her neck that her long black hair hid—and she said, “I’m going up front.”

The musician emerged from the shadows and into a weak yellow light as she did. He sat himself on the stool behind the lone metal stem of the microphone. He had a wooden acoustic guitar in his grasp and he was white. That last part surprised her. She hadn’t expected a tall, lean, unshaven, post-grunge-slacker musician in his late twenties with messy blonde-brown hair. He had no shoes and wore faded black jeans and a dirty white shirt covered in a pattern of girls in sunflower yellow dresses playing musical instruments. Sure, he was good looking if he was your type, but he wasn’t Zarina’s. Never would be. And yet, despite this, she sat at an empty table in the middle of the Annandale’s floor, aware even as she pulled back the dull metal stool how fucking weird this was, how her gaze hadn’t left the scene before her, how she’d totally turned obsessive. It had taken her months to draw Sara out. Months. And now she’d left her (she was following, but Zarina didn’t know this, didn’t much care) for a musician she didn’t even know the name of. But she sat. She waited. Sara settled next to her, her fine pale fingers touching her leg, their first touch and Zarina couldn’t focus on it. She was watching and listening to him. Watching as he plucked string after string, tuned with his bony fingers whose ends were coated in black polish and moved like magpies jabbing their narrow, sharp beaks into the earth when moving across cords. On instinct, Zarina reached beneath her shirt and turned on the microphone connected to her iPod. She had planned to bootleg *Robots Unconquered* when they played two hours from now—and she still would—but without ever having heard a note, she began recording this lone man whose band had left him just as his head bent towards the microphone.

(The following is an interview with John Fitzgerald (Jack Ruby), former drummer for the *theleeharveyoswaldband*. A short, squat man covered in coloured bright tattoos of skulls and women and revolvers, he sits in a cheap diner in Brooklyn, wearing blue jeans, a Hawaiian shirt, and leather jacket. He answers questions with a casual ease. The interview was conducted for *Rolling Stone* in May of 2006, one week after the death of Lee Brown (Lee Harvey Oswald), the singer and guitarist who, in 2002, became the sole member of *theleeharveyoswaldband*.)

You and bass guitarist Kevin Lynch (Jack Kennedy) left the band the day that the now infamous bootleg of the Annandale was recorded. Do you look back with regret at that?

For a while, I did, but not now. I just tell myself—I just say, how could I have known? No one could predict that that was going to happen. You can't regret that.

Not even when you have, in some circles, been labeled a villain?

It's the curse of those stupid stage names. You call yourself Jack Ruby and eventually you're going to be the villain. Besides, working with Lee... it was just impossible. The guy was the most illiterate person I'd ever met. I mean, he couldn't even sign his own name. He avoided giving signatures for that reason—but I saw him once, trying to fill in a deposit slip for cash. He couldn't even understand what the boxes were for.

That's a serious level of illiteracy there.

It was worse. I mean, I felt sorry for him—someone had fucked him education wise—but he couldn't read music, either. He couldn't write down those songs of his in a way we'd understand and it was just frustrating. You'd try and force a set list onto him, but what was the point? He couldn't read it, couldn't play it, couldn't do shit for it, but worse, he didn't want to do it.

If you bought up the fact that he should learn—that he should go to night school or some shit, and he'd just shut you out.

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Which just meant that every time we went on stage, we were playing whatever he thought of. Whatever popped into his head. Like, now, I might want a drink. Maybe a Coke. Maybe milk. Maybe a beer. That's how he played. Kevin and me were always playing catch up. Trying to keep a beat that was impossible to know in the first place.

But the music he made –

Was shit, most of the time. That Annandale bootleg was – fuck man, it was like seeing pictures of the Kennedy assassination from the grassy knoll.

From behind rain slicked glass, the streets of Detroit were a dark pattern highlighted by smeared yellow light. To Zarina, it felt as if hundreds of eyes were weeping brightly as she passed. She watched them from the passenger seat of a tiny blue hatchback that was driven by the plump, middle aged Emily Brown, who, as her name suggested, wore a baggy brown suit to match her cheaply cut brown hair and name.

"You're being quiet," Emily said.

"Yeah." They were at a red light. Emily only talked at red lights. "Just thinking."

"Try not to over think. Nothing good comes from that."

Zarina made a noncommittal sound, then said, "I think I'm making a mistake."

"Nonsense."

But she was. Zarina hunched down into her patched army jacket and stretched her black docs out so that they were under the little car's heater. She didn't know why she had done that: she wasn't cold – in a minute, the heat would seep through her boots and turn uncomfortable – and hunching made her jacket bunch at her neck unpleasantly. But she couldn't keep still; she fidgeted while trying to reason out why she was there. She should be back in her apartment uploading new recordings and making sure that someone was covering shows for the *Pixel Babies* and *Eddie Isn't Dead Yet* next Saturday. She should be cooking for Sara. She shouldn't be taking two unpaid days (Friday and Monday) from her call centre job to make this trip

to Detroit to meet the sole member of *theleeharveyoswaldband*. She should have said no and junked the email. But when she had read Emily's words telling her that Lee wanted to meet her –

“You’re fretting,” Emily interrupted as the hatchback stopped at another light. “I can see it on your face.”

“I don’t—I don’t usually meet artists I like.”

She laughed. “My. I’ve never heard Lee called that before.”

“It’s just—just meeting them, y’know?” Zarina continued, trying to push out her words, her fears. “Meeting them can just—can just fuck it all up. That’s what I tell Sara. That’s always what I tell her. Just the thought of meeting him has woken us up at night.”

“Is Sara your daughter?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

The light turned green.

The other thing, Zarina knew, was her life. She wasn’t ashamed of who she was, knew she didn’t have to justify anything—and wouldn’t, fuck the world if they thought she should—but after that one word, Emily shrank behind the smooth mat black steering wheel and chewed on her bottom lip, allowing the silence grow heavy as she drove slowly through the wet streets. It reminded Zarina of the very real possibility that Lee Brown could say something that would ruin his music for her. All he would have to say was some small-minded thing, some red state thing, and that would be it. Her fingers pressed into the palms of her hands, bones cracked, and she thought about that night, after the Annandale, when she had returned to her apartment. Without flipping the lights on, she had crossed the cold wooden floors, flipped on the stereo, dropped her iPod into its cradle, and with Sara’s cool white fingers sliding across her stomach, played *theleeharveyoswaldband* set. The set meant more to her than Brown ever could.

“Well,” Emily said, then paused. She cleared her throat like a careful teacher. “Well, it doesn’t matter. There’s no need to fret, anyway.”

“I shouldn’t have come.”

“Nonsense. You changed his life.”

“That didn’t have anything to do with me.”

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The Annandale Bootleg changed everything, didn't it?

It made Lee Brown a cult icon. I mean, seriously, I saw him on a fucking t-shirt the other day. Couldn't believe my eyes.

It is ironic that a man who couldn't read would be so embraced by net culture.

You got to thank Zarina Salim Malik for that.

You don't think it would have happened without her?

No.

Some people, y'know, some people—that fame will happen anyway, and it doesn't matter who is around. I've heard people say that if it wasn't for Sin-e that Jeff Buckley wouldn't have been found—but Sine-e was just a café that he played in it, y'know? Could've been any place, it wouldn't have mattered cause Buckley was just genius waiting to be found. Buckley was going be Buckley and didn't matter how it would happen.

But *theleeharveyoswaldband* wouldn't have been anything without Malik. The music was shit, Brown couldn't keep a band, he could never get regular gigs—and then she showed and bootlegged him in a pub and put it on the net and suddenly it's everywhere and people can't get enough of him.

Thanks, in part, to Xeni Jardin at Boing Boing who pushed the link through the site to the thousands of bloggers who reproduced it.

Exactly. Blog culture, the net—it just gave *theleeharveyoswaldband* an audience, and that allowed Malik, who eventually became Brown's manager and record label, to exploit it.

I remember reading this article that said that the success of the band rested in the fact that it never released a studio album, and that new recordings—new unique records—were put out at every live show and loaded up by dedicated bootleggers, making them part of the

process. Part of the music—the sharing, the distribution. It was basically saying that because it embraced everything established music didn't want too, that's why it worked. Which is some weird logic, you ask me, and ignores the fact that Brown was just messed up, and that the brains behind it all was Malik, a blogger with an already existing bootleg audience. But, apparently, the more messed up he became —

Well, the more of a cult figure she could make him.

Zarina had never been to a trailer park before.

She had seen them, of course, on television and in movies and across the web, but those images were nothing like the reality at the Rainbow's End Park. The rain smeared the yellow light from the trailer windows as it had done earlier, but with the city now a dark outline behind her, the light looked as if it was contained in a wet blur of battery chicken cages, made not from mesh wiring, but fibro and metal, and with each looking as if it were joined to the one next to it, and then the next, and so on and so forth as they sat like a school of lost things on the side of the mud and pebble paved road that Emily navigated her hatchback down. In the slick windows of the single wide trailers, Zarina watched the silhouettes of the occupants, but could not imagine what they looked like, what they were doing beyond the cliché of the environment. Beyond drugs, abuse, violence, neglect, and struggle. Each shadow animated itself in her mind; a flat puppet made from other people's limbs. Half way through the park, she became conscious of the weight of her own life, of her education, of the degree she had left incomplete, the college her parents had paid for, the advantages she had ignored to work in a call centre she hated for money she wasted, and the bootleg she had made without a second thought of the man who lived here.

The hatchback slowed, stopped with a jolt outside a single wide with the number 45 on the side. Beyond that, there was nothing to distinguish it. "I'm not sure about this," Zarina repeated softly, staring at the light behind the screen door. "I think I might have made a mistake."

"Nonsense," Emily replied. "Just nonsense. Now up to the door you go."

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The windshield wipers rubbed against the glass, a pair of black sticks lifting a curtain and dropping it. The last thing she wanted to do was step out into that wet, artificially lit lot it revealed, but how could she leave now?

Releasing her seatbelt, Emily leant over and grabbed hold of the door handle. With a shove, she pushed it out into the rain. The light flicked on above them and, lit by it, Emily smiled at Zarina. There was nothing warm in it: the brown in her teeth was darker than her pale skin, and the lines and bags around her eyes gave a look that mixed tiredness and apathy into one. It was clear that she didn't care what Zarina felt or what she was experiencing; this was just a stop before she returned home to her children and husband and the routine she had for her life.

With a faintly murmured thanks, Zarina stepped out of the hatchback. The rain fell heavily onto her jacket, through her dark hair, and splashed into the car. She closed the door and was rewarded with the red brake lights lifting immediately as Emily drove away. Didn't even stay to see if the door opened – which, when Zarina turned, she found to be incorrect on her part, as it was already open.

In the doorframe of his single wide, Lee Brown looked much as he had one the stage at the Annandale: unshaven and lean and with messy hair. He was wearing black jeans and a black t-shirt, but still had nothing on his feet. In his hands he held a brown towel, which he tossed into her hands as she entered.

“Thanks,” she said, rubbing her face.

“Isn't a thing,” he replied. “You can hang your jacket up behind you.”

The inside was, essentially, a box. It was covered in a wallpaper of girls in sunflower yellow dresses playing instruments: banjos, guitars, tiny drum kits, harmonicas, and a whole collection of other instruments that looked to be taken out of the sixties. The pattern covered the entire trailer, missing only the small kitchen behind her. The bedroom beyond that – though she couldn't see the bed, just a beanbag and a red electric guitar, foot pedals, and a small amp – was covered in it too. It was more than a little odd, she thought as she hung her jacket on the wooden rack, and she had no way to even begin explaining it. Drying and warming her bare arms, she turned and glanced into the kitchen again, taking in the stacked plates and empty cans and bottles, and finally came round to Lee, who had cleared space on a cheap table by pushing CDs and tools and strings and small instruments

such as harmonicas and kazoos to the side, and was now looking at her with a half hidden that kind of look.

Zarina didn't enjoy it. Mostly, she just ignored guys who looked at her like that, but it was a sharp and unpleasant reminder from Lee, driving home the knowledge that she shouldn't have agreed to meet him, that she should have realized that his music meant more to her than he—

He was speaking. Shit. She had missed everything he'd said. "Sorry?"

"I was asking if you had any problems with Em?"

"No. She was very nice."

"She can be a bit..." He paused, searched for the word, rubbed at his chin as he did, then said, "Bossy. Is cool if you found that."

"I'm fine."

"Cool. Take a seat."

Zarina wanted to grab her jacket first, wanted to wrap the wet fabric around her and hide her body in its folds, but she didn't. Instead, she pulled back the seat and sat down opposite to Lee. His gaze met hers: his eyes were brown with a touch of green and yellow around the centre. The silence between them began to grow uncomfortable and he picked up a silver harmonica from next to his hand and began twisting it end over end. He coughed to clear his throat, said, "I've never—you know, never been real good with this stuff."

Like she was better. "It's okay."

"Yeah, I know. It's just—just—"

"I wouldn't have picked Emily as your sister," Zarina interrupted. "You don't look much like each other."

"She's my foster sister."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, her folks took me in when I was about ten." The silver harmonica settled onto the table, the mouth's end pointed away from her. "My original family broke up and I was left on my own, and I jumped from foster family to foster family for a while. No one wanted to take me permanently."

"Why was that?"

"I was angry. I had a lot of problems with school," he said. "Plus I couldn't read."

"Really?"

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"Still can't."

"You never tried to learn?"

"I could read until I was nine, but then it left me. Figured I was better off."

He was casual, unashamed with his disability, and that surprised Zarina. She had never met anyone who was illiterate before, but she had believed that anyone who couldn't read would keep it a secret. That was hidden, covered up, lied about. She didn't know what to say but, watching Lee pick up his harmonica and turn it around, again, knew that she had to reply. "That's... odd. Did you ever—you know, see someone about it?"

"Yeah. Mostly they said it was in my head."

"You think they were right?"

"Not in the way they thought," he replied. "I know what's exactly in my head—not that Em's parents believed that. They just thought I was fucked up. I think she figures it, too, but she looks out for me anyhow. She doesn't need to, but family, hey? What's yours like?"

Zarina shifted uncomfortably. He wasn't looking at her as he had earlier, though she believed that she could still see that in the background. The desire had been overtaken by an invasive quality in his eyes, as if each was trying to dig beneath her skin and pull out her thoughts. "I don't much to do with my family."

"Why?"

"It's..." She hesitated, hated herself for it, hated the pause for what it implied. "It's a lifestyle choice."

"You're a smoker?"

She blushed. "No, I'm—"

"I know," Lee said, amused. "I got it."

She laughed to cover her embarrassment and stared at the long scratches in the table as she spoke. They had been made by a knife. "I'm—I'm sorry. I don't usually meet people like you."

"Yeah, I try not to come to places like this, either."

"That's not what I meant."

"No? You're not one of those trailer park girls, are you?"

"You're an idiot." She rose her head, grinned. "I meant I don't meet musicians, much. Especially ones who make music I like."

"Well, thanks for coming."

"I don't know why you wanted to see me anyway."

"It was Emily's idea, mostly." Lee pushed back his chair, stood. He dropped the harmonica and snatched up a blue coloured plastic kazoo. "You want a beer?"

"Sure."

He entered the kitchen and, at the fridge, tapped the kazoo on the door in an incomplete child's tune (was it Mary Had A Little Lamb?) as he pulled out two bottles of beer. "I thought I was kind of fucked at the Annandale, you know? Band was gone, I had no more gigs lined up, in couple of weeks I'd be out of rent for this. And on top of that, I was playing like I'd never played before. It felt good playing it, but I didn't think the audience liked it much—what audience there was, I guess. Then about a month later I started getting these calls to play. Calls from bars and venues that I'd never heard of."

He placed the slick brown bottle in front of her, the kazoo tapping against his own glass as he did. He was repeating the opening of the tune, never completing it. "I did the shows and at each one, the audience kept growing, and I kept getting more calls. I had no idea why until after one show when this guy shows with a CD he's bought of the Annandale gig."

"A CD?" Zarina interrupted.

"Yeah, I thought he bought it off you."

"No," she said emphatically. "I don't sell anything. The live shows on my site are free. I don't sell it. Making money out of it changes it."

Lee sat. "Don't change it for me," he said, his bottle opening with a hiss.

"It does. People are making off you and you're not seeing any of it, whereas my site, it's sharing the music that people enjoy. There's no money involved—it's just because everyone shares the interest."

"You're a bootlegger, right?"

"I make bootlegs," she corrected. "I don't sell bootlegs."

"The difference in that is just passing me by." He spun the bottle cap across the table. "You're living in a world I don't even want to know."

Zarina's bottle hissed open. "Look, downloading, bootlegging, it's just not simple right or wrong. Nothing's like that."

"Hey, I'm not fussed." Lee's blue kazoo rose into the air with his hands in an exaggerated comic gesture of hands off. He grinned. "I'm getting gigs. I don't care if someone is making a couple of dollars."

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“You should care.”

“Yeah, so I hear,” he said, lowering his hands. “It’s what Emily said.”

“She’s right. If someone is making money off you, you deserve some. Most people don’t want to take money from a musician of your level, so they’d rather pay to support you. Some aren’t like that, of course, but people do things for a lot of different reasons.”

Lee nodded, but he looked uncomfortable, so she added, “I’ll put a notice on my website, saying there are no authorized copies for sale out there. You can even start a PayPal account if you want.”

“You’re losing me now.”

“Lot of people download the Annandale show. I can put up a notice saying you need rent, and they’ll give you a bit of money. Help you get by.”

He twisted in his chair, agitated. “That’s not—”

“It’s no problem,” Zarina said, keeping casual. “People do it all the time.”

“That’s—I’m not—Look—”

His voice broke off suddenly and his head dropped into his hands. Zarina called his name, but there was no response; slowly, she reached forward and touched his shoulder but, again, no response. Lee had just shut down. That was the only way to explain it, and because she could hear his breathing, she wasn’t quite yet panicking. Still, she had seen it in his face as he fell into his hands, and watched as the life behind his eyes disappeared like a light being switched off and his face went slack and blank. She couldn’t begin to explain that or what was happening. didn’t even know how to explain that. Around her, the images of girls in sunflower yellow dresses stared outwards, the instruments they held in their hands having more in common with weapons than devices that created music.

His head still in his hands, Lee said quietly, “I can’t talk business. I just—I just cannot do that, okay?”

“Okay,” she said softly. “Whatever suits you.”

“It’s not that I don’t care, it’s just I got to keep focused.” His head rose and, in his gaze, Zarina saw a sense of fatigue that his previous liveliness had hidden. “If I lose focus, I become something else.”

“Okay.”

“You don’t understand.”

“No.” How could she?

“Like I said, I could read. Once. When I was a kid. I loved reading. When I was nine, I read everything that I could get my hands on, and when I was finished with a book, I would start writing my own stories. Just inspired to make my own, you know?” His fingers placed the blue kazoo on the table and began to pull out a guitar string, the movement causing albums to slide over the table. Lee didn’t notice. “But then, one day, I found music. My dad showed me how to play a little tune on a piano. Nothing big. A nursery rhyme. But the sound—the way it made me feel, it was like nothing else I’d ever experienced. It was creation like I had never been involved in before, and after that, nothing was comparable. It was love. I could find it in every musical instrument I picked up, as if it were lingering in the wood or metal waiting for me, and I pushed the words and books out of my head to make room for the music.”

There was no awareness of reality in Lee’s gaze. He was telling his story and he believed everything that he said. Zarina, however, was not important to it; he could have been telling it to anyone. But while he lingered on the music, she lingered on the details of his father what had really happened. It was the broken bit of the story, the edge that she could peel back to learn the secrets, but she knew—without questioning, just knew—that Lee Brown was incapable of doing that. It was when Zarina realized this that what she feared would happen, did, and in one quiet moment, the purity of his music was lost. She became detached, sympathetic, sorry, and aware that whenever she played *theleeharveyoswaldband* after this moment, the image of a young boy being abused by his father would be all that she could think of.

“You don’t believe me,” he said, the cord wrapping around his fist. “I can see that you don’t.”

“It’s not a question of that,” she replied gently.

“I’ve not slept for eighteen years.”

“What?”

“If I sleep, I will lose what’s inside my head. I will lose myself.”

“That won’t happen.”

“It will.” Gripping the cord tightly in his left fist, he reached into the mess of instruments and albums on the table to his right, and from beneath it all, pulled out a flat envelope that she had not seen. It was old and yellowed and creased and had the words Lee Brown written upon it in

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faded red ink. "The proof is in here."

Why do you think that Brown kept using the band name?

He loved the name. Just loved it. I asked him where he got it from once, and he said, "Me and the dead President have a lot in common."

That's all?

It was the only one he ever gave.

Still, I think *theleeharveyoswaldband* suited Brown and Malik more than it did when I was there. Kennedy's death signaled a change in American politics, and *theleeharveyoswaldband* did the same thing for American music.

You really think that?

Don't get me wrong: I don't think Malik made this culture of downloading, but she's become the figurehead for it. With *theleeharveyoswaldband* she's given it credibility like it never had before.

She knows it, too. You just have to read her interviews, listen to her on talk shows, whatever. She talks up the net and bootlegging and the creative commons copyright like a guru. You think of this stuff and you think of her. It's not surprising that she's become a hub for new bands, and that large labels have tried to bring her up on criminal charges.

I was reading an interview with executives from Sony the other day, and they were calling her dangerous and misguided.

That's suits for you.

In truth, the corporate level has nothing to fear from Malik right now. She's publicly said that she hasn't moved more than a hundred thousand copies from the millions of downloads that have

been made of the Annandale recording, and that's her best seller. When you compare that to a giant label that will move five million copies of an album from a high profile act, it's nothing.

But Malik isn't a problem. Neither is downloading. Suits'll just say that so they don't have to approach the real problem, and that's that their business model isn't producing long term acts, and what acts they do produce have no loyalty to the share holders and company brand names. More and more bands with an established audience are leaving to become independent. I mean, shit, Hanson did it. Can you believe that?

Are you talking from the point of view of a musician who is not in the care of a large label?

You saying it's jealousy?

Just asking.

The answer's no. The type of music I make has never been mainstream enough for that.

Why do you think Malik became involved in the business side?

You read her interviews and she'll tell you that she believed in the music—in Brown's music especially. She said it needed an outlet and she provided one.

Do you believe that?

No one is that altruistic. I mean, it's not like she this for free.

Inside the envelope was a series of blue x-rays. Zarina pulled out the smooth sheets and looked at them on the table, held them up to the light, and then placed them back on the table, but the truth was, she had never seen an x-ray before and had no idea what she was looking at. But she knew that it was important for Lee that she examine each. On the five sheets was the image of a skull, the bones displayed with a grey stain of skin and blood and veins around it and in the centre. Placing the final image down on the

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table, she returned her gaze to Lee, who was sitting straight up in his chair, the girls in sunflower dresses lined up behind him like soldiers. She said, "I have no idea what I'm looking at."

"It's a skull," he said.

"I know that."

"It's my skull."

"I know that, too," she replied gently. "I don't know what's wrong with it, though. I can't read these things."

"Can't you see that there's nothing in it?" His voice became strained: a desperate note caught on the tight cord held between his hands. "Can't you see?"

"Yes." She wanted to tell him that she wasn't a doctor, that she didn't know much, but even though she felt that these images were not right, that something was definitely missing, she didn't think he should take it to mean that his head was empty. Instead, all she said was, "Yes."

"You don't understand!" He released the cord, flung it on the table where it lashed across the envelope. "There's nothing in there. My head is completely empty. It's just bone and skin and the only thing that keeps me alive is thoughts that I can keep there."

"You can't live like that."

"I know!" he cried out, kicking back his chair to stand. "You don't think I know this? I'm not stupid!"

"I never said that."

"Stand up!"

"Lee," Zarina began.

"Stand up," he said, pushing the words through his teeth. "Stand up."

Zarina rose slowly and sadly. She knew what would happen, but found herself without anger. She regretted that she hadn't listened to Sara and stayed at home, but at the same time, with Lee trembling with anger in front of her, his gaze seeing something that she couldn't even begin to understand, there was only sadness. As when she had first seen him perform, her thoughts were of nothing but him, his presence all that she was aware of.

With a sudden movement, he snatched her hands. She closed her eyes, waiting, unwilling to watch... and heard a heavy thud. Opening her eyes, Zarina saw that Lee had fallen to his knees and lowered his head towards

her, while bringing up her hands. At first, she could feel nothing but his hair, thinner than she had thought, and then, slowly, small puckered scars, the shape of a drill head or screwdriver.

“What is this?” she whispered.

“They examined me,” he replied, his voice hollow. “When I stopped sleeping and reading, my father took me to a doctor who ran his tests. When he found that my head was empty, ran more.”

“More.”

“We didn’t have health insurance, but the doctor worked for free. He said he had never seen anyone like me. That I was special. He laid me out on a bed and shaved my head. There were injections. I could feel nothing, but I watched as he took his metal instruments and dug them into my skull. He told me as he worked that beneath the skin, past the bone, there was nothing but emptiness. Nothing but black.”

Zarina wanted to remove her hands, but couldn’t. She wanted to tell him how sick it was, how they had done awful things, how that had seriously fucked him up and had been seriously fucked up people, but the words would not emerge from her throat. It was dry, choked, and he pressed his head into her fingers, taking pleasure from her touch, starved for attention and affection in ways that she would never be able to understand. And she, knowing this, revolted but unable to deny him, stroked his scarred and tortured head, drew it into her grasp like a mother with her child.

“That’s why I can’t sleep,” he whispered, his voice slurring its vowels heavily in what Zarina would realize, a moment later, as tears. “I’ll die if I sleep. All my thoughts will cease to exist. All the music I hear and feel will go. It’ll fade away. I can’t let that happen. I can’t let it die. I have to make music in my mind.”

Do you think he’s dead?

Yeah.

Yeah, I do.

BEN PEEK

I've heard the theories that he's not. A kind of Elvis thing for the new century that says Lee just got tired and left and that wasn't really him with his veins cut open, but that's wrong. Even with that last interview with him saying he was tired all the time, it's wrong.

Lee couldn't leave music. It meant too much him. He was impossible to play with, but he loved it. You couldn't deny that. It was all he had.

So that's it?

Yeah. There are no encores here.



BEN PEEK is a Sydney based author. His fiction has been published in *The Year's Best Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy*, *Leviathan Four: Cities*, *Agog! Ripping Reads*, *Aurealis* and *Fantasy Magazine*, amongst others. A dystopian novel, *Black Sheep*, will be released by Prime Books at the end of 2006. A distorted, experimental autobiography, *Twenty-Six Lies/One Truth*, will be published by Wheatland Press in November 2006. Ben keeps a blog at <http://benpeek.livejournal.com>.