Sita Brahmachari

ZEBRA CROSSING SOUL SONG

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For my son Keshin – a singer songwriter and a soul man

And for the Zebra Crossing Man who saved
Keshin's life when he was a boy

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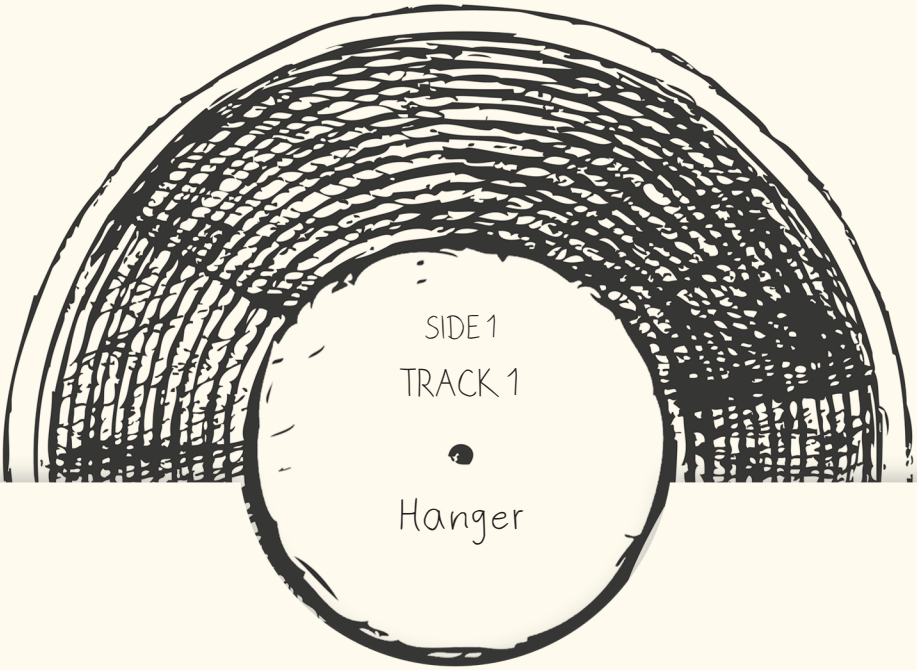
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I step out onto the road. There is time to cross, but it's tight. A woman in a flash red car is revving it up like she would run me over if she could. She waits till the very last moment to slam on her brakes so I'm forced to run the final few steps to the kerb.

She leans out of her tinted window and yells, "Why the hell don't you use the crossing?" Her cheeks are flushed and she's glowing redder by the second. She's nearly as red as her car now.

I saw this happen a couple of times when Otis was the zebra crossing man. Back when there still was a Zebra here.

That crossing's gone. They've replaced Otis and the Zebra he worked on with a Pelican! As if a few flashing lights could do what Otis used to –

Make me laugh.

Sing.

Teach me his music.

As if you can replace a Zebra with a Pelican. As if you can replace a human with a machine.

I mean, I know you can. Happens all the time.

It's like they think, 'What's the point of a person when a robot can do the job?'

But doesn't everyone know that you'll be missing something if you don't have a human at the crossing? Especially a one-off, one-of-a-kind human like Otis.

Even if he did lose it – that one time.

Am I starting to sound a bit like Otis?

I miss him on the crossing.

Most of all I miss his songs.

His velvet voice.

Him bending my ear.

Why couldn't they give him a second chance after all his zebra crossing years?

What did he call himself? "Me call me de healt' an' safety ferry man, makin' sure y'all safely cross this great big river of a road."

That final day … It's not like he hurt anyone, and the mother decided not to take it further with the police.

Doesn't everybody deserve a second chance?

Even when he was still the Ferry Man.
His words used to lilt through my head every day.
Just stuff like this.
He would say …

"Man can learn a lat about hu-man nature right here on de crossin', Lenny … It all about de way you cross … all about de manner of crossin', Lenny son. Why else you t'ink I pass me life as a ferry man? It important work you know!"

Otis always spoke like he was just saying what he was saying, but I could always hear something deep running underneath – an undercurrent to the river of his words.



Otis was a crossing man
Otis was a ferry man
Otis was a river of thoughts
Otis was a river of words

When I was in primary school Otis explained why people like this red-face, red-car woman get so worked up when *they're* the ones in the wrong.

What Otis taught me on this road has stuck in my mind
What Otis taught me on this road are words that bind

He taught me to think of words like songs in my head.
Otis was the best teacher I've ever had ...
And now school's ending
No island in the middle
Otis is gone
And I'm moving on
Otis was a crossing man
Otis was a ferry man



A car horn blasts me from my day dream back to the road. I'm about to stick the V-sign up at Red Car Woman, but stop myself as Otis's voice enters my head.

"Stay calm now, man. No waan get you'self all wound up ..."

No, that's not right. How did Otis say it? "All nyammed up ..."

"Over not'ing. It never wort' de aggro, Lenny son. Nat at all."

True! But *I* should be the angry one. I mean, *she* nearly knocks *me* over in her big chunk of red metal that could have seriously mashed me up. And here's me in my jeans and T-shirt, just some *body* with nothing to protect me.

Even when he was still on the crossing
His words used to lilt through my head
every day
Just stuff like this
He would say ...

"It all come from fear and hanger and a guilty con-shance. What is de point of gettin' up your blud pressure, man? All of we feelin' de

pressure. So dem should jus' calm demself down an' stop wid de hanger!"

Otis said "anger" like "hanger" ... he added the "h" on purpose, enjoying his own "Otis lingo". He could say "anger" without the "h" – he just didn't choose to. I remember him saying ...

"These feelin's all mix up in *all of we* so dyam deep. When me was a yout' man me would get hangry if me didn't eat ... I would feed de hunger ... but now me get a likkle in-sight ... All kinda anger comes from hungry in one manner of t'inkin' or another, you nat agree, Lenny son? Hangry for love. Hangry for power. An' so many people jus' plain hangry for food."

*

I should have seen the build-up coming way before the day that Otis lost it.

But I see it now – how the hanger and the hunger grew day by day in Otis towards the end.

At least he left me his old record player and email address in case, "You waan come visit your old friend 'pon me paradise hisland ..."

But he left me no answer to why he lost it that day on the crossing … and lost his job too, even if they dressed it up as "early retirement".

"Too much pressure in me blud buildin' on dis dyam road," Otis told me one morning. "Time to slow it down an' feel a likkle sunshine in me soul."

Now Red Car Woman is staring at me like she's waiting for *me* to say sorry.

I look up the road and I can hear the *beep, beep, beep* of the new Pelican as the road fills with people racing against the clock to get to school.



Children
Mums, Dads, Childminders
Prams, buggies
Scooters, heely-wheelies
Spokes of bike wheels turning, turning
All of them
Chatting on

Like nothing's changed
Like they're missing no one
Not missing Otis's smile
Not missing his laugh
Not missing his song
All of them
Chatting on
Like Otis isn't gone



A girl in a bright pink coat hits a bump as she glides along in her heely-wheelies and trips up half way across the Pelican. She flails one skinny leg in the air, squeals and clings to her foot. But now the lights are turning green. I catch the look of panic on the mum's face as she parks her buggy on the pavement, kicks the brakes on, and turns back into the road to scoop up her kid.

Otis hated those wheelies.

His words lilt through my head every day
Just stuff like this
He would say ...

"Man! I am sick of dese new-fangle t'ings. Me can deal wid it as lang as me can see dem wheels. A bicycle is one t'ing, but a wheel on your heel to cross a road! What a way fe de world to turn!"

*

Now that I look back there were signs things weren't right in Otis's world. Otis was the calmest, most chilled person I knew, but sometimes I would see this look in his eye like he was proper afraid someone might get hurt on his Zebra. It was there in his eyes the day he saved my life.

"If only man could have be-hind sight – hindsight dem call it – de world would be a far, far better place. If only man could see what we see lookin' forward in place of lookin' back an' feelin' sorry. When it all too late to change ... too dyam late ..."

With *be-hind sight*, as Otis called it, there were signs, for sure. He'd say,

"I mus' be vig-i-lant, Lenny son. A ferry man mus' have eye in de back of him head"

My ears are still zinging with the girl's squeals on the Pelican.

If that was Otis's Zebra he would have been there holding up the traffic with his Lol –



Lolly Pop Stick
Striding out into the traffic
Stopping the mother's panic
Putting a smile on that little girl's face
Turning her screams to laughter with a joke
If Otis was here
He would have sung her a song
If Otis was here
She would not have been crying for so long



"It laugh out loud, don't you t'ink? Dat me – Otis Linden Lawrence – destined to be a music-al man, ended up on dis Zebra? After all me dreams of fame an' fortune, all me no-shuns fe singin' songs for de universe, crossin' dem rivers, crossin' dem roads. But hear me now, here me stand, a humble ferry man.

Jus' crossin' over de road
Jus' de road
Getting by
Singin' me road songs
Singin' me soul songs
In a manner of talkin'
Here me stan', all de same
With me Lol an' me Lenny son …
Dat feelin' all right
Nat everyt'ing gwaan be black an' white
An' dat is Otis truth."

Why ever Otis stopped the traffic that day
Back before the summer holiday
Why ever he lost it
I can't say.

*

Red Car Woman is still staring at me.

"Can't you take your headphones off for just one moment?"

I pull them off and let them rest around my neck.

"What sort of example are you setting to those little ones?" She sticks out her hand and points her thumb back at the new Pelican. Now she jabs her finger at me. "You just walked out in front of me!"

I should say sorry. I must have shocked her, but the way she's yelling, there's no way *sorry* is coming out of my mouth.

"There used to be a zebra crossing here," I tell her.

She doesn't say anything. Just sits in her car ... waiting.

I hold both hands out, palms up, as if to ask, "What do you want me to say?"

She moves her hands to copy mine and gives me a pinched smile. "*I* don't see any markings!"

She's looking at me like I'm a fool.



No sign now of black and white
No island in the middle
No lights to cross at night
No sign of Otis
No gold-tooth smile
No glint in the eye
Every day
On my way
Every day
On my way home
No bad jokes
No good jokes
No songs
No high fives
No Otis philosophy
Psychology
No musings on “life an’ de universe”
No putting the world to rights
No be-fore sight
No be-hind sight
No saving the day
No saving my life
No island in the middle, Lenny son
No island



“I asked you a question!” the woman snaps at me. “You nearly caused an accident.”

Someone in a van beeps at her to move on. She mouths “Sorry!” into her mirror.

All polite
All contrite

“Idiot! You’ll get yourself killed!” She revs her engine and accelerates away.

“Have a nice day!” I call after her.

Otis’s words still lilt through my head
Every day
Just stuff like this
He would say …

“Me nat hunderstand, Lenny son. Why dem so hangry dese days over some small-ish likkle t’ing. What is all dis rage about? Why caan’t dem smile and wish you well? Whatever dem say I have only one t’ing fe answer like dem say in the U. S. of A. ‘Have a nice day …’ me say. ‘Have a nice day.’”