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**THE
SEVEN MOONS OF
MAALI ALMEIDA**

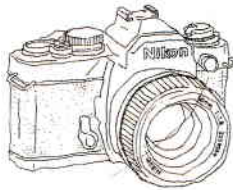
SHEHAN KARUNATILAKA

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**THE
SEVEN MOONS OF
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FIRST MOON



*Father, forgive them,
for I will never.*

Richard de Zoysa
'Good Friday 1975'

ANSWERS

You wake up with the answer to the question that everyone asks. The answer is Yes, and the answer is Just Like Here But Worse. That's all the insight you'll ever get. So you might as well go back to sleep.

You were born without a heartbeat and kept alive in an incubator. And, even as a foetus out of water, you knew what the Buddha sat under trees to discover. It is better to not be reborn. Better to never bother. Should have followed your gut and croaked in the box you were born into. But you didn't.

So you quit each game they made you play. Two weeks of chess, a month in Cub Scouts, three minutes in rugger. You left school with a hatred of teams and games and morons who valued them. You quit art class and insurance-selling and masters' degrees. Each a game that you couldn't be arsed playing. You dumped everyone who ever saw you naked. Abandoned every cause you ever fought for. And did many things you can't tell anyone about.

If you had a business card, this is what it would say.

MAALI ALMEIDA
Photographer. Gambler. Slut.

If you had a gravestone, it would say:

MALINDA ALBERT KABALANA
1955–1990

But you have neither. And you have no more chips left at this table. And you now know what others do not. You have the

answer to the following questions. Is there life after death? What's it like?

SOON YOU WILL WAKE

It started ages ago, a thousand centuries ago, but let's skip all those yesterdays and begin last Tuesday. It is a day you wake up hungover and empty of thought, which is true of most days. You wake up in an endless waiting room. You look around and it's a dream and, for once, you know it's a dream and you're happy to wait it out. All things pass, especially dreams.

You are wearing a safari jacket and faded jeans and cannot remember how you got here. You wear one shoe and have three chains and a camera around your neck. The camera is your trusty Nikon 3ST, though its lens is smashed and its casing is cracked. You look through the viewfinder and all you see is mud. Time to wake up, Maali boy. You pinch yourself and it hurts, less like a short stab and more like the hollow ache of an insult.

You know what it's like to not trust your own mind. That LSD trip at the Smoking Rock Circus in 1973, hugging an araliya tree in Viharamahadevi Park for three hours. The ninety-hour poker marathon, where you won seventeen lakhs and then lost fifteen of them. Your first shelling in Mullaitivu 1984, stuffed in a bunker of terrified parents and screaming children. Waking in hospital, aged nineteen, not remembering your Amma's face or how much you loathed it.

You are in a queue, shouting at a woman in a white sari seated behind a fibreglass counter. Who hasn't been furious at women behind counters before? Certainly not you. Most Lankans are silent seethers, but you like to complain at the top of your lungs.

'Not saying your fault. Not saying my fault. But mistakes happen, no? Especially in government offices. What to do?'

'This is not a government office.'

'I don't care, Aunty. I'm just saying, I can't be here, I have photos to share. I'm in a committed relationship.'

'I am not your Aunty.'

You look around. Behind you, a queue weaves around pillars and snakes along the walls. The air is foggy, though no one appears to be exhaling smoke or carbon dioxide. It looks like a car park with no cars, or a market space with nothing to sell. The ceiling is high and held by concrete pylons placed at irregular intervals across a sprawling yard. What appear to be large lift doors mark the far end and human shapes crowd in and out of them.

Even close up, the figures look blurry-edged with talcum skin and have eyes that blaze in colours not customary for brown folk. Some are dressed in hospital smocks; some have dried blood on their clothes; some are missing limbs. All are shouting at the woman in white. She seems to be having conversations with each of you at the same time. Maybe everyone is asking the same questions. If you were a betting man (which you are), you'd take 5/8 on this being a hallucination, most likely induced by Jaki's silly pills.

The woman opens a large register. She looks you up and down with neither interest nor scorn. 'First must confirm details. Name?'

'Malinda Albert Kabalana.'

'One syllable, please.'

'Maali.'

'You know what a syllable is?'

'Maal.'

'Thank you. Religion?'

'None.'

'How silly. Cause of death?'

'Don't remember.'

'Time since death?'

'Don't know.'

'Aiyo.'

The swarm of souls presses closer, berating and badgering the woman in white. You gaze upon the pallid faces, sunken eyes in broken heads, squinted in rage and pain and confusion. The pupils are in shades of bruises and scabs. Scrambled browns, blues and greens – all of which disregard you. You have lived in refugee camps, visited street markets at noon, and fallen asleep at packed casinos. The heave of humanity is never picturesque. This heave throngs towards you and heaves you away from the counter.

Lankans can't queue. Unless you define a queue as an amorphous curve with multiple entry points. This appears to be a gathering point for those with questions about their death. There are multiple counters and irate customers clamour over grills to shout abuse at the few behind the bars. The afterlife is a tax office and everyone wants their rebate.

You are pushed to one side by an Amma with a young child on her hip. The child stares at you as if you have smashed its favourite toy. The mother's hair is caked in blood which stains her dress and smears her face. 'What about our Madura? What has happened to him? He was in the back seat with us. He saw the bus before the driver did.'

'How many times to tell madam? Your son is still living. Don't worry, be happy.'

This comes from the man from the other counter, who wears a white smock and an Afro and looks like Moses from the big book. His voice rumbles like the ocean and his eyes are the pale yellow of beaten eggs. He repeats the title of last year's most annoying song and then opens a ledger book of his own.

You take another picture, which is what you do when you don't know what else to. You attempt to capture this car park of chaos, but all you see are cracks in the lens.

It is easy to tell who is staff and who isn't. The former carry register books and stand around smiling; the latter look unhinged. They pace, then stop, then stare into space. Some

roll their heads and wail. The staff do not look directly at anything, especially the souls they are counselling.

Now would be an excellent time to wake up and forget. You rarely remember your dreams and, whatever this is, the chance of it sticking is less than a flush or a full house. You won't remember being here any more than you remember learning to walk. You've taken Jaki's silly pills and this is just a trippy dream. What else could it be?

And then you notice a figure leaning against a sign in the corner, dressed in what seems to be a black garbage bag, who looks to be neither staff nor customer. The figure surveys the crowd and its green eyes shine like a cat's under headlights. They fall upon you and linger for longer than they should. The head nods and the eyes do not break gaze.

Above the figure, a sign reads:

DO NOT VISIT CEMETERIES

Next to it is a notice with an arrow:

→ EAR CHECKS AT LEVEL FORTY-TWO

You turn back to the woman behind the counter and you try again. 'This is a mistake. I don't eat meat. I only smoke five a day.' The woman seems familiar to you, as perhaps your lies are to her. For a moment, the jostling seems to stop. For a moment, it feels like you are all there is.

'Aiyo! Every excuse I have heard. No one wants to go, not even the suicides. You think I wanted to die? My daughters were eight and ten when they shot me. What to do? Complaining won't help. Be patient and wait your turn. Forgive what you can. We are short-staffed and looking for volunteers.'

She looks up and raises her voice at the queue.

'You all have seven moons.'

'What's a moon?' asks a girl with a snapped neck. She holds the hand of a boy with a cracked skull.

'Seven moons is seven nights. Seven sunsets. A week. More than enough time.'

'Thought a moon was a month?'