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**THE
SEVEN MOONS OF
MAALI ALMEIDA**

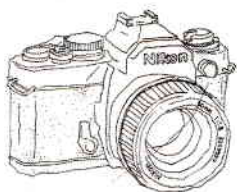
SHEHAN KARUNATILAKA

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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?'

'The moon is always up there, even when you can't see it. You think it stops circling the earth, just because your breath stops?'

You understand none of this. So you try another approach. 'Look at this crowd. Must be all the killing up north. Tigers and Army killing civilians. Indian peacekeepers starting wars.'

You look around to see no one listening to you. The eyes continue to ignore you and glisten in their blue-green hues. You look around for the figure in black, but it has vanished. 'Not just up north. Down here also. Government is fighting the JVP and bodies are piling high. I fully get it. You must be busy these days. I understand.'

'These days?' The woman in white scowls and shakes her head. 'There's a corpse every second. Sometimes two. Did you get your ears checked?'

'My hearing is fine. I take photos. I bear witness to crimes that no one else sees. I am needed.'

'That woman has children to feed. That man has hospitals to run. You have photos? Sha! How impressive.'

'These are not holiday snaps. These are photos that will bring down governments. Photos that could stop wars.'

She makes a face at you. The chain around her neck is an Egyptian cross, once worn by a boy who loved you more

than you loved him. She fiddles with it and screws up her nose.

It is only then that you recognise her. Her toothpaste ad smile had been all over the newspapers for much of 1989. The university lecturer slain by Tamil extremists for the crime of being a Tamil moderate.

'I know you. You are Dr Ranees Sridharan. Couldn't make you out without your loudspeaker. Your articles on the Tamil Tigers were superb. But you used my photos without asking.'

The thing that makes you most Sri Lankan is not your father's surname or the holy place where you kneel, nor the smile you plaster on your face to hide your fears. It is the knowing of other Lankans and the knowing of those Lankans' Lankans. There are aunties, if given a surname and a school, who can pinpoint any Lankan to the nearest cousin. You have moved in circles that overlapped and many that stayed shut. You were cursed with the gift of never forgetting a name, a face, or a sequence of cards.

'I was sad when they got you. Truly. When was it? '87? You know, I met a Tiger with the Mahatiya faction. Said he organised your hit.'

Dr Ranees looks up from her book, she gives a weary smile, and then shrugs. Her pupils are clouded white, as if stuffed with milky cataracts.

'You need to get your ears checked. Your ears have patterns as personal as your fingerprints. The folds show past traumas, the lobes reveal sins, the cartilage hides guilt. All things that prevent you from entering The Light.'

'What's The Light?'

'The short answer is Whatever You Need It To Be. The long answer is, I don't have time for the long answer.'

She passes you an ola leaf. A dried palm leaf, said to have been used by seven rishis three thousand years ago to write the

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fortunes of everyone who would ever live. Angular incisions would rip the grainy texture, so South Asian scribes developed sensuous curves on lettering to stop the leaf from tearing.

'Did you take photos of 1983?'

'I did indeed. What's this?'

The ola leaf has the same words written in all three languages. Circular Sinhala, angular Tamil, scribbled English and not a rip in sight.

EARS _____

DEATH _____

SINS _____

MOONS _____

STAMPED BY _____

'Get your ears checked, your deaths counted, your sins coded and your moons registered at Level Forty-Two. And get it stamped by a Helper.' She closes her book and, with that, the conversation. You are replaced at the front of the queue by a man in bandages who will not stop coughing.

You turn and face the people behind you. You raise your hands like a prophet. Always the show off, you were. Always loud, except when you weren't.

'None of you ghouls exist! You are phantoms from my snoring brain. I have swallowed Jaki's silly pills. This is hallucination. There is no damn life after death. If I close my eyes, you will vanish like farts!'

They pay as much attention to you as Mr Reagan does to The Maldives. Neither the car crash victims, the abductees, the old folk in hospital gowns, nor the late lamented Dr Ranee Sridharan, notice your outburst.

The chances of finding a pearl in an oyster are 1 in 12,000. The chances of being hit by lightning are 1 in 700,000. The odds of the soul surviving the body's death are one in nothing,

one in nada, one in zilch. You must be asleep, of this you are certain. Soon you will wake.

And then you have this terrible thought. More terrible than this savage isle, this godless planet, this dying sun, and this snoring galaxy. What if, all this while, asleep is what you have been? And what if, from this moment forth, you, Malinda Almeida, photographer, gambler, slut, never get to close your eyes ever again?

You follow a throng stumbling through the corridor. A man walks on broken legs, a lady hides a face of bruises. Many seem dressed for a wedding, because that's how undertakers decorate corpses. But many others are dressed in rags and confusion. You look down and all you see is a pair of hands that do not belong to you. You wish to inspect the colour of your eyes and the face you are wearing. You wonder if the lifts have mirrors. It turns out, they barely have walls. One by one, the souls enter the empty shaft and fly up like bubbles in water.

This is absurd. Even the Bank of Ceylon doesn't have Forty-Two floors.

'What's on the other floors?' you ask anyone with ears, checked or otherwise.

'Rooms, corridors, windows, doors, the usual,' says a particularly helpful Helper.

'Accounting and Finance,' says a broken old man leaning on a walking stick. 'A racket like this won't fund itself.'

'It's all the same,' wails the dead woman with the dead baby. 'Every universe. Every life. Same old. Same old scene.'

You rarely dream, let alone have nightmares. You float along the edge of the shaft and something pushes you. You scream like a horror movie damsel as the wind takes you skywards. You are startled by the figure in black floating behind you. Its cloak of black garbage bags fluttering in a

feral wind. He watches as you ascend the shaft and bows as you float away.

You try another question and ask what The Light is. But all you get are shrugs and insults. A frightened child calls you a ponnaya, an insult which alleges both homosexuality and impotence, and you will plead guilty to only one of these charges. You ask the staff about The Light and get a different answer each time. Some say heaven, some say rebirth, some say oblivion. Some, like Dr Ranees, say whatever. The options hold little appeal for you, aside from maybe the latter.

At Level Forty-Two is a sign with one word on it.

CLOSED

Figures float through this vast corridor, not noticing the walls until they bump into them. There is a reception with no one in it. And a line of red doors, each one obeying the sign by staying shut.

At the centre of the hall stands the figure in black, uninterested in the aimless wanderers who collide around him. He stares at you and beckons you over. His eyes track you as you float away; this time they glint in yellow.

The universe yawns in the time it takes for you to get back to Dr Ranees's counter. Outside, the night fills with winds and whispers. In this place, there are only counters and confusions.

Dr Ranees notices you and shakes her head. 'We need more Helpers. Less complainers. Everyone is doing their best.'

She looks at you. 'Except for those who aren't.'

You wait for her to finish her thought, but it appears she already has. She pulls a megaphone from under her desk. Now this is the Dr Ranees you remember, shouting at campuses when TV cameras were around.

'Please do not get lost. If you haven't had an Ear Check, don't come here. Level Forty-Two will be open tomorrow.'

Come back then. Remember you have seven moons. You must reach The Light before your last one rises.'

You are about to launch a rant of expletives when you notice it once more, the figure wrapped in black garbage, beckoning with both hands. Its eyes flicker like candles and it is holding what looks like your missing sandal. Dr Raneer follows your gaze and drops her smile.

'Get that thing out of here. Maal, where are you going?'

Two men in white leap over their counters and sprint towards the figure in black. The man with the Afro who looks like Moses raises his arms and bellows in a language you have never heard spoken. Next to him is a muscleman in a white robe who sprints towards you.

You fade back into the crowd, drift between the broken people with blood on their breath and reach the figure holding your footwear.

You float towards it, this garbage bag grim reaper, like you floated towards many things you shouldn't have. Casinos, war zones and beautiful men. You hear Dr Raneer screeching but you ignore her like you did your Amma right after Dada left.

The figure smirks with teeth as yellow as its eyes.

'Sir, let us get out of this place. It is a brainwashing bureaucracy. Like every other building in this oppressive state.'

The hooded figure stands with its face to yours. Though the face is in the shadow, you see it is a boy, younger than you once were. One eye is yellow and the other looks green, and you are unsure what silly pills could bring on a hallucination like this. The voice appears to be nursing a sore throat.

'I know your name is Maali-Sir. Don't waste your time here. And please stay away from The Light.'

You follow him to the lift shaft, but this time you descend. The angry falsetto of Dr Raneer and the baritone bellows of Moses and He-Man become distant echoes.