

An extract from 'Chats with the Dead' by Shehan Karunatilaka

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

Richard de Zoysa
'Good Friday 1975'

Answers

You wake up with the answer to the question everyone asks. The answer is yes. The answer is, 'Just Like Here But Worse.' That's all the insight you'll ever get. 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 took decades of sitting under trees to discover. It is better never to be reborn, better never to bother. Should have followed your gut and croaked in the box you were born in. But you didn't.

So you quit every 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 the morons who valued them. You quit art class and insurance-selling and master's degrees. Each a game 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
1955–1989

But you have neither. And you have no more chips left at this table. And now, you know what others do not. The answer to the following questions. Is there life after death? What's it like?

Soon You Will Wake

This started ages ago, a thousand centuries ago, but let's start with last Tuesday. It's a day you wake up hungover and empty of thought. Isn't that most days? Funny. 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 in a queue, shouting at a woman behind a mahogany counter, which is not unusual. You've been furious at women behind counters before, who hasn't? Most Lankans are silent seethers, but you are one loud complainer.

'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 take. I have friends to look after.'

'I am not your aunty.'

The woman behind the counter looks upon you with neither interest nor scorn. She wears what looks like a chef's jacket, though this corridor looks more like a hospital than a kitchen. If you were a betting man, which you are, you'd take 5/8 on this being a railway station.

'I have two babas,' cries a young girl. 'How can they be without their amma?'

You realize you're not the only one complaining. You are surrounded by a swarm of people, each shouting at the woman in white. Most are old, a few look your age, many are younger. You try again.

'This is a big mistake. I don't eat meat. I smoke less than five a day.'

The woman is familiar to you, as perhaps your lies are to her. For a moment, it feels like you are all there is. Especially when she speaks.

'Aiyo, listen please. Every excuse we have heard. No one wants to go, not even the suicides. I was shot in the throat. My daughters were eight and ten. What to do? Please be patient and wait your turn. We are serving as fast as we can.'

You understand nought of what she is saying. So, you try again.

'Up north, Tigers are killing army, civilians, even their own people. Indian peacekeepers are starting wars. Down south, JVP Commies are killing rich *and* poor. Government is murdering the murderers, and killing non-murderers as well. Must be busy these days. I fully understand.'

'These days?'

The woman in white scowls and is joined by a muscleman in white at the next counter.

'There's a corpse every second. Sometimes two. Be patient, will you? Did you get your ears checked?'

'Nothing wrong with my hearing. I take photographs. I bear witness to crimes that no one sees. I am needed down there.'

She shakes her face at you.

'That woman has children to feed. That man has a church to run. You have photographs? Very impressive. If you want something found, you have to ask from Counter 49. If you want to go back, that is—very sorry—not possible.'

'You know very well about my photographs. Because we have met. You are Dr Ranee. Sorry, didn't recognize you without your loudspeaker. I have read your articles. 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 closed. 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? I met a Tiger, with the Mahatiya faction, who said he organized your hit.' You look around. Some are dressed in hospital smocks, some have dried blood on their clothes. Some are wearing suits, some are missing limbs. All are shouting at the woman in white. She appears to be having conversations with each of you at the same time. Are angels brilliant multitaskers? Or does everyone ask the same old questions?

You turn and face the people behind you. The queue seems endless and the air is foggy though no one appears to be exhaling smoke or carbon dioxide. You raise your hands like a prophet. Always the exhibitionist, you were. Always the show off, always the loudest in the crowd.

'None of you bhutayas exist! You are projections of my snoring brain. I have taken Jaki's silly pills. This is a hallucination. There is no life after death. When I close my eyes, you will disappear 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 lady in white, who may or may not be Dr Ranee, 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 squat. You must be asleep, of this you are certain. Soon you will wake.

And then you have a terrible thought. More terrible than this savage island, than this godless planet, than this bored universe, than this tennis ball at 23:45. What if, all this while, asleep is what you have been? And from this moment forth, you, Malinda Almeida, photographer, gambler, slut, will never get to close your eyes ever again?

The Box under the Bed

You were born before Elvis had his first hit. And died before Freddie had his last. In the interim, you have shot thousands. You have photos of 1983's savages, pics of Vijaya's killer and shots of Wijeweera being kicked in the head. You have the wreckage of Upali's plane on film and a Kodachrome snap of The Supremo's lover fleeing Mullaitivu. You have these images in a white shoe box hidden with old records by Elvis and

Freddie, the King and Queen. Under a bed that your Mama's cook shares with your Dada's driver. If you could, you would make a thousand copies of each photo and paste them all over Colombo. Surely, you still can.