

Shehan KARUNATILAKA

Short prose and excerpt from a novel

SHORT EATS

The funeral was never meant to be a somber affair. He had stated clearly to all visitors at the cancer ward. So there was laughter, music, whisky for the old, ganja for the young. The spread was sumptuous, no frugal mala batha here.

The guests were mostly friends of his wife who knew him hardly, but pigged out on cured ham, mince pies and pastries filled with curried flesh. The champagne was served when the video came on, and there projected on the wall was his smiling face delivering his own eulogy. If-you're-seeing-this-I-must-be-gone, sort of thing.

He thanks them for coming and insists they eat, drink and make merry. Boasts of a spread prepared by star chefs flown in especially. He talks of struggle, of unfairness, of parting gifts, of vaccines made from cancers and then the video cuts to his torso hanging from a hook.

Then to masked chefs with cleavers. Then to familiar looking short eats. It ends with him grinning at camera. Saying bon appetit as Pachelbel's D minor soars. The guests stare at the closed casket and begin to retch.

NOT A JATAKA TALE

When Bodhisattva arrived in Ceylon, the animals gathered at the Great Rock. Jackal asked it first. 'Do beasts have souls?' Peacock was next. 'Can I be reborn a predator? I want to eat creatures like me.' Kingfisher asked, 'May I be born outside the beastly realm?' 'Maybe as a Deva or a Naraka?'

The Great One replied, 'Why not a Human?'
'Hehe,' said Crocodile. 'See how ugly they are.'
'Eeya!' said Pangolin. 'Look how unhappy.'
'No one is where they haven't chosen to be,' said the Enlightened One.



Tortoise said he wanted to be faster than Rabbit. Deer wished she was not so edible. Leopard wanted to be vegetarian so she didn't have to chase meals. Hawk wanted to swim and Frog wished to fly. Only Human wished to be reborn as Human. The beasts hid in the trees and sniggered at the hairless ape.

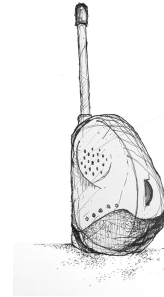
Bodhisattva put fingers to lips. 'What is more foolish? To be only what you are? Or to be what you are not? He sighs. 'Every time I come here, I think maybe this time they'll learn.'

'That we are all one?' asked a serene snake.

'That we must try on all hats, before we give up headgear?' asked a mindful gecko.

'Nope. Nehe,' said the Holy One, limping towards Nibbana.

'Not one of you buggers ever wants to be reborn as me.'



BABY MONITOR

He bets on stocks at 3am. On his desk: a computer, a mug of tea and a baby monitor. He works in solitude while his petulant wife snores in her room. When she was in labour, he scrolled phone texts and learned of a departed lover. Conceivably, the father of the child he was staring at spreadsheets at witching hour to finance.

Sound comes over the monitor, the creaking fan, the slurping dog, the purring wife, and then a hiss. He turns off the jazz, and listens to the air, to the squeak of the fan's metronome. To another hiss. *The child. Is not yours.*

He glides to the baby's room, feels the air, sees the window. The fluttering curtain and the hooded figure bending over the cot. The figure, wrapped in cloak, reaches in. Our man screams.

The figure picks up the baby and shuts the window. What is it darling, asks the wife pulling on a t-shirt. The figure lets the hood fall from his face. I don't know, love, says the figure. I think your dead husband's back in the study. I thought I heard jazz.



JABOK!

This is an anthology squeezed into two hundred words. It is told in Lankan onomatopoeia. Words like *jabok!* to denote something huge falling into water. Or *pat-pat!* for things happening quickly. Or *chatas patas!* for stuff exploding. Words that sound like sounds. So *ting-ting!* Let's begin.

Homegrown terrorists hijack plane with 249 passengers. *Dishum dishum!* Government shoots plane out of sky killing everyone. *Tak-tak!* Govt. shapes it up with a *human-shields-this-is-war-these-things-happen* argument. People eventually stop *kutu-kutu-ing*.

Story Two. His toenails are filthy so *pat-gaala* she rejects him so he *gnuru-gnurus* and joins the movement and shoots her uncle who is a *shos-shos* powerful man so army brings whole *jing-bang* and 13 get shot *dading biding* and down south thousands are burned alive. All because of a dirty toenail. *Hoo*.

Finale. *Thadang!* JVP tell him paste posters or die. *Pataas!* Cops tell him inform on JVP or die. *Zung-gaala!* He hides in forest and thinks 'I'm Sinhala Buddhist, don't both you represent me?' *Hai hooi! Ammo!* He returns to find his wife and children slaughtered. *Chee-chee*. Police say must be JVP, who say must be Police. If only this were fiction. *Aiyo*.

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Excerpt from *CHATS WITH THE DEAD***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 masters' 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 Rane. 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 Lankan's Lankans. There are aunts, 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 Raneer, 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.

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Excerpt from *Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew*

Sport vs Life

My wife asks me why I love sport more than her. More than I do my son and our life together. She asked me this a long time ago, when boys on motorbikes, wielding *Das Capital* and T-56s, had the nation facedown in the sand. I told her then that she was talking nonsense. But perhaps she wasn't.

When you say it like that it sounds ludicrous. Your wife and family vs the All Blacks vs the Chicago Bulls vs Bloomfield CC. That is not what I'm trying to say. Not exactly anyway.

I admit to being a hack and, in my personal life, to being a tad uncouth. I lay no claims to being a poet or a philosopher or a connoisseur of anything other than old arrack. But beauty, who has not an eye for that? Even the toad on the lotus notices the butterfly.

Some people gaze at setting suns, sitting mountains, teenage virgins and their wiggling thighs. I see beauty in free kicks, late cuts, slam dunks, tries from half-way, and in balls that turn from off to leg.

When the English toured in 1993, their supporters arrived in droves and formed a jolly, beer sipping troupe called the Barmy Army. A T-shirt of theirs read as follows: "*One day you will meet a goal, that you'll want to marry and have kids with.*"

Anyone who saw Diego Maradona in 1986 will agree that the T-shirt speaks the truth. To be in the right place at the right time and to watch a gifted athlete in full cry is one of life's true pleasures.

There is more drama in watching Miandad hit a 6 off the last ball or in Jonah Lomu skittling British bulldogs than in anything that has ever won an Oscar or played on Broadway. Granted, I have only been to the Lionel Wendt and I hardly ever visit the Savoy. But I willing to bet everything I owe on this.

Like me, Mr Jonah had faulty kidneys, though unlike me, his were not his fault. If he had played till his 30s, we would be speaking of him as we now speak of Babe Ruth. Whether I play till my 90s or even to my 100s, I may not get the same reception.

In sport, has-beens can step onto a plate and smash a last ball into oblivion. A village can travel to Manchester for a Cup tie and topple a giant. Villains can heroes become. The slow one now can later be fast.

In 1996, subcontinental flair overcame western precision and the world's nobodies thrashed the world's bullies. 60 years earlier a black man rebuked Nazi race theory with 5 gold medals in Berlin before Mein Fuhrer's furious eyes.

In real life, justice is rarely poetic and too often, rarely visible. Good sits in a corner, collects a cheque and pays a mortgage. Evil builds empires.

Sport gives us organisms that attack in formation. Like India's spin quartet and the 3 Ws from the Caribbean. Teams that become superhuman before your very eyes. Like Dalglish's Liverpool, Fitzpatrick's All Blacks and Ranatunga's Lankans.

In real life if you find yourself chasing 30 runs off 20 balls, you will fall short, even with all your wickets in hand. Real life is lived at 2 runs an over, with a dodgy lbw every decade.

In real life, as Sri Lankan cricket grows sweeter, your wife will grow sourer. The All Blacks may underachieve for 2 more decades, but your son will disappoint you more. I hope you read this Garfield. I hope you forgive.

The answer to my wife's question is of course a no. I would go down in a hail of bullets for her and for Garfield many times over. And while Aravinda de Silva has delighted me on many an occasion, I wouldn't even take a blister for him.

But the truth, Sheila, is bigger than both of us, whether it be written on the subway walls or on the belly of a lager lout's T-shirt. In 30 years, the world will not care about how I lived. But in 100 years, Bulgarians will still talk of Lubcek and how he expelled the mighty Germans from the 1994 world cup with a simple header.

Sport can unite worlds, tear down walls, and transcend race, the past and all probability. Unlike life, sport is eternal. Unlike life, sport matters.

Pradeep Who?

Begin with a question. An obvious one. So obvious it may have already crossed your mind. Why have I not heard of this so-called Pradeep S. Mathew?

This subject has been researched lengthwise and breadth-wise, I have analysed every match our man has played in. Answers, I believe I have. Why, you ask, has no one heard of our nation's greatest cricketer?

Here, in no particular order. Wrong place, wrong time, money and laziness. Politics, racism, powercuts and plain bad luck. If you are unwilling to follow me on the next God-knows-how-many pages, reread the last two sentences. They are as good a summary as I can give from this side of the bottle.

Deadline

I was waiting for my death sentence when I made my decision. The last months of my worthless life would be dedicated to a worthy cause. Or at least a wordy one. Not world peace or cancer cures or saving whales. God, if he exists, can look into those. No. In my humble opinion, what the world needs most is a halfway decent documentary on Sri Lankan cricket.

It is not unusual that, meal-missing, arrack-swilling, WG Karunasena should expect death in his early 60s. It is a surprise though, that, type-writer-using, cinema-ignorant, WG Karunasena should be thinking about making a film.

Was I bitter? Of course. Was I scared? Perhaps. Was I grateful? If I were a betting man, which I am, I would lay everything I owe on the answer being Yes.

In 1969, I won Ceylon Sportswriter of the Year for my articles on Ceylon's Golden Era of Boxing, because the editor of *The Observer* needed nine pieces on his desk by Monday. If I had more deadlines in my life, and less arrack, who knows what might have been achieved?

No one knows about this visit to Nawasiri Hospital. Not Sheila who has begun to notice my falling hair, my swollen fingers and the rings under my eyes. Not Ari who has remarked on how my handshakes as I pour. Not even Kusuma, the servant, who wakes up every other morning to clean my acidic, blood-stained vomit.

Life in this decaying cage is becoming difficult. The chills, the night sweats, the piggish feeling. There are days when it feels like something is trying to claw its way out of my stomach.

The doctor is younger than my son and has a put-on smile that does not soften the blow, but rather, gives it malice.

"Mr Karunasena, your liver is being destroyed. And it will get worse."

I sigh. "At least I have my heart."

My giggle is as pathetic as my attempt at humour. He ignores and begins scribbling.

"Can't you give me pills?"

"Whatever pills I give, your arrack will drown," says the smiling assassin.

I read in the *Daily News* that a majority of humans are unhappy with their jobs, their bodies, and the person who shares their bed. If life is essentially disappointment, then all deaths should be embraced and welcomed, no? Is that not what Buddhism preaches?

"I can give you pills for the nausea and the fever. I can also refer you to our alcohol counsellor." The doctor tears off a leaf of prescription paper branded by a pharmaceutical company I have not heard of. "The rest, Uncle, is up to you."

The things they don't teach you at school. How to love. How to die. How to stage a dramatic comeback. Is it possible to hammer 3 goals in extra time after trailing 0-2 for 90 minutes? Or to land a knockout punch at the end of the 12th?

"How much time?"

I keep my tone even and my eyes fixed, hoping the pup won't see that the old dog is ruffled.

"If you stop drinking and start eating, exercising, Uncle can bat on for another 10, 20 years," he says.

Too late to score at 10 an over and turn a paltry 170 into a magnificent 300? Too late to turn brick into marble?

In my life I have seen beauty only twice. I'm not talking *Tharuniya* magazine front cover beauty. I'm talking staggering beauty. Something so beautiful it could make you cry. Sixty four years, two things of true beauty. One I have failed to cherish, the other I may yet be able to.

Sheila at the Hotel Oberoi 31st Nite Dinner Dance, 1963.

PS Mathew vs New Zealand, at Asgiriya 1987.

"What if I cut down to two drinks a day,?" I ask.

He doesn't look surprised. But at least he lets go of the smile.

"A year or two. Maybe more."

Thus it was settled. I would attempt to do a halfway decent documentary on Sri Lankan cricket. There is nothing more inspiring than a solid deadline.

Sheila

"I don't mind you writing as long as you don't depress people."

My beloved wife is making me sweep the kitchen. The last time I held a broom, Argentinian General, Diego Maradona was a thin, teetotaling teenager.

"You used to be a poet, Gamini. Now you're just a *grumpus*."

She says I cannot spend my retirement in my room, reading about cricket and drinking. So I have chores, which at 64, I find abominable. But as long as I am helping around the house, we are not talking about my drinking and in my retirement, such mercies are welcome.

"Don't talk rot, Sheila. When we were young it was fashionable to be angry. Angry young man and all. Now I am *grumpus*?"

"That's not a cricket bat, Gamini. Sweep properly."

It was true. The world had changed and I had not. As with everything, my fault entirely.

"Heard from Garfield?"

"Just go men." Sheila is cutting onions and not crying. She keeps jabbering. "He's doing well. You better stop this business and talk to him. He's calling tonight."

"Tonight I will be writing."

"Do whatever the hell you want." she says.

She adds the red chilli to the dry fish.

I say nothing, keep sweeping and decide to do just that.

Pradeep Why?

Another question. Why am I chasing a man who played only 4 test matches for Sri Lanka? A man who denied me interviews, delighted me on occasion, disappointed those he played with and disappeared 3 years ago. A man whose name is remembered by a minority smaller than our native *Veddha* population.

I asked myself this, right after my bath and my morning tea. My tea is taken milk-less with 3 teaspoons of sugar and 5 tablespoons of Old Reserve. As you will soon see, I take arrack with a lot of things that society deems un-arrack-mixable.

So when, precisely or roughly, did Pradeep Mathew stop being another Lankan spinner of the 80s? When did he become something worth obsessing about? A cause that I would champion. To answer that I will take you to a boxing match between two men in dinner jackets. One was my dearest friend, the other, my oldest enemy.

Wicket

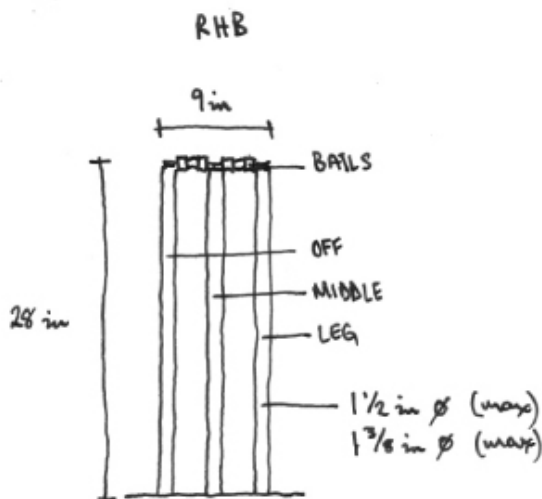
The word wicket can refer to the 3 stumps that the bowler attempts to hit. "The ball almost hits the wicket there."

To the surface they're playing on. "The Eden Gardens wicket is dry and difficult to bat on."

The bowler's performance. "Laker's taken 7 wickets in this match so far."

The batting line-up's mortality. "South Africa lose 5 quick wickets."

Its versatility is only bettered by a 4-letter word that serves as noun, verb, adjective, adverb and expletive.



Clean Bowled

The simplest dismissal is when the bowler knocks over the batsman's wickets. Mathew did this with most of his victims. He sent left-arm chinaman, googlies, arm balls and darters through pads and feet. Here is a not so random sample of batsmen whose bails he dislodged. Border. Chappell. Crowe. Gattling. Gavaskar. Gower. Greenidge. Hadlee. Imran. Kapil. Lloyd. Miandad.

You are shaking your head. You are closing the book and frowning at the cover. Re-reading the blurb at the back. Wondering if a refund is out of the question.

Punch-up at a Wedding

In the buffet corner, weighing over 100 kilos, from the bridegroom's hometown of Matara, sports journo, talent broker, amateur coach: Newton *"I came to eat, not to be insulted"* Rodrigo.

In the champagne corner, weighing under 180 lbs, teacher, preacher, video fixer, uninvited guest: Ariyaratne *"I have watched every test match since 1948"* Byrd.

Ari was my neighbour and my drinking partner, I had smuggled him in and he had smuggled in a bottle. The Oberoi wasn't Ari's usual watering hole. He had tanked up already at somewhere far less plush. I should have expected trouble.

We were at the wedding of the Great Lankan Opening Batsman or the GLOB as we shall call him. The GLOB was a man of the people and had invited to his wedding, members of the press, ground staff and a sprinkling of international cricketing celebrities.

Thirty tables away, Tony Botham and Kris Shastri were swooning over a gaggle of girls. Both were former players who became commentators and then became players. The buffet table had seven types of buriyani. Next to vats of chicken, Tyrone Cooray, the Minister for Sports and Recreation was laughing with Tom Whatmore, the then coach.

And this is roughly or precisely where it began. Not in Jonny's film room in '85. Not a year later, with a midget in a rainstorm. Not even during the '87 Asgiriya test match. It began at the Lanka Oberoi in 1994. With Ari Byrd, Thomian blazer torn along the creases, pressing a chicken drumstick into the face of Newton, shrieking *"You came to eat, no? Ithing Kaapang! Eat!"*

I have seen many fights. Boxing bouts in Kurunegala, barroom brawls in Maradana, Never have the combatants been less skilled, more drunk or better dressed.

A waiter guards the buffet table as the men in torn suits roll against empty chairs. Newton takes a hard bite on the chicken, chomping down on two of Ari's fingers.

"Ah-wa!"

Ari's scream is high and girlish. Our table, composed of inebriated journalists like myself, chuckle, sip and gaze around with pleasure at sari-clad women, exotic dancers and international celebrities, who, thanks to Ari's scream, are gazing back, though perhaps not with as much pleasure.

Most observe from the dancefloor. Disapproving aunties and jolly uncles, push through the has-beens and never-will-bes. Hand on mouth in mock shock. "This is what happens when you invite the riff raff," cackles a crow in a sari. No one for a moment considers stopping the fight. Not even us.

Two reasons. (a) Sports journalists rarely saw anything in the way of entertainment, especially those days, especially on the cricket field. (b) We all disliked Newton and felt he deserved this bludgeoning with buriyani chicken.

Newton made a lot more money than any of us. "For me, of course, journalism is a hobby. A calling. Pocket money." Newton brought young cricketers to Colombo and sold them to clubs, he also studied race sheets, politically and literally backing the right horses always. I knew this pudgy man as well as I knew the gentleman who was dousing him in gravy.

"Shall we do something?" asks Brian Gomez, TV presenter and prankster. Brian once typed a letter on Oxford stationery asking Newton to visit the British High Commission to receive his Queen's scholarship. The next day Newton wore a suit to work.

"Let them be," says Renganathan, Tamil cricket writer. Renga is a good bugger, but unhealthily obsessed with Roy Dias. When he was editor at the *Kreeda*, he ran one issue with 17 articles on this wristy batsman of the 80s.

Newton gains the upper hand. He smears rice in Ari's eyes and crawls under the table. Elmo Tawfeeq of the *Daily News* tries to separate them, gets elbowed twice and decides to sit down. Elmo once told us that he hit Imran Khan for a 6. In actuality, he played club cricket with a Bangladeshi who Imran once hammered for 6.

These are the men I have spent my years with and they are all drunk. Failed artists, scholars and idealists who now hate all artists, scholars and idealists. The band has stopped playing and I hear raised voices in the distance. Newton and Ari knock into veteran scribes Palitha Epasekera and Rex Palipane and I decide to intervene.

I gulp down the last of my rum, but before I can offer my service, there enters the bride of the GLOB, shining under yellow lights. A delicate petal, bouquet in hands, tears in eyes.

In the distance, her husband advances with concern smeared across his brow, thinking what I was thinking: these animals would tear his flower apart. The flower drops her bouquet and screams in an accent that sounded like Sydney, but could've been Melbourne. In a voice that was anything but petal-like.

"Get the fuck out of my wedding! You fucking arseholes!"

We could take a fist from a brute, but not a curse from a bride. The waiters assist us in packing up the fight. Released from Ari's gin-powered grip, Newton picks up a mutton curry with intent.

“Put that down!” The GLOB descends on the scene. “*Yanawa methaning!* Get out of here!” Both Newton and Ari heed the great man. With the GLOB is Ravi de Mel, has-been fast bowler. He looks for the softest target, finds it and snarls. “Ah Karunasena. Who else? Kindly take your friends and bugger off.”

Fearing unfavourable press, the GLOB puts on his man-of-the-people smile and pats me on the back. “Don’t get angry, Mr. Karuna. Wife is bit upset. Don’t you know?”

As we are led out, I see a dark man with a crew cut. He is leaning on table 1051, surrounded by sycophants. Indian captain Azharuddin is chatting to him, though the man doesn’t appear to be listening. Our eyes meet and he raises his hand. I return the wave but he has already averted his gaze.

That may or may not have been the moment that started what you are about to read. But it was most certainly the last time I ever saw Pradeepan Sivanathan Mathew.

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Today Newton looks like a hippo, those days he was more like a rhino. Mathew may have caused the fight, but it was started by Newton. He had issues with me that went beyond cricket and provoked me knowing that I would never have responded. He didn’t count on noble, smashed-on- stolen-gin Ari, leaping, quite literally, to my defence.

The ballroom smelled of flowers, buriyani and thousands of clashing perfumes. Strategic buffet tables separated cricket refugees from social parasites. The deluxe section featured the national team, some minor celebs, film stars, models, and people wealthy enough to own film stars and models.

The middle section was filled with aunties and uncles, media and business types. They got the best view of the dancefloor and the band, neither of which seemed to interest them. And then there was us. The journalists, coaches, ground staff, b-grade cricketers, c-grade friends.

Our table sat ten. Me, Ari, Newton, Brian, Renga, Elmo, a Pakistani from the Associated Press, his friend and a young couple who looked lost. At the other end of the room, there was a bar serving scotch, vodka and champagne. Our table has a bottle of arrack and several glasses of passion fruit cordial. We are men of simple tastes, anything, or even with nothing, with arrack will do.

“I should be drinking Chivas with Botham and Sobers,” says Newton. “They must’ve misprinted my ticket.”

“So go, will you,” says Ari. “Maybe Shastri will ask you to dance.”

The band plays a synthetic love song and the happy couple hold each other and move from side to side. We make quick work of the booze. Everyone whacks two shots, Ari and I whack four. The Pakistanis, Allah be praised, do not drink. As the lights dim, I explore unoccupied tables for bottles to steal. When I return with gin, conversation has turned to cricket.

Brian Gomez, ever the patriot, proclaims that this Sri Lankan team could be our greatest. Ari says they are ok, but nowhere near the true greats like Lloyd's Windies or Bradman's Invincibles. "Clive Lloyd's team is the best I've ever seen," proclaims Renga. We hide our smirks. Every time Renga sees a film or witnesses a cover drive, he proclaims it to be "the best he's ever seen."

The Pakistani Journalist talks of an all-time football XI featuring Zico, Best and Maradona. We sip stolen booze and begin fantasising. What if Ali fought Tyson? Or Navaratilova played Billie Jean? It was a good way to pass the time. Better than staring at the dancefloor, pretending to grin.

We agree that Lloyd's team were literally heads and shoulders above. Elmo offers that Bradman's Invincibles were invincible only because of Bradman. "You eliminate him, good team. Invincible? That I don't know." We all toast to Clive Lloyd. The young couple slink off to another table.

Newton is petulant throughout.

"Our team couldn't even draw a two day match with Bradman,"

"Don't say that," says Brian. "We beat New Zealand."

The dancefloor writhes with famous names and dolled-up women who do not belong to them. By the roar of the house band and the machinations of the dancers, it is evident that the alcohol denied to our table has been free flowing at the other side of the room. Understandable. Dolled-up women prefer to have their bottoms pinched by international cricketers and not by those who write about them.

The Pakistani journalist begins the scribbling on napkins. As the only man at the table with an education outside of Asia, he convinces us with diagrams and eloquence that the perfect cricket team should be composed as such.

2 solid openers
3 aggressive batsmen
2 genuine all-rounders
1 agile wicket-keeper
2 unplayable fast bowlers
1 genius spinner

Seduced by his Parthan lilt and logical arguments, we nod collectively. The Windies were great, but not perfect. No spinner. No all-rounder. Lloyd had four types of hurricane at his disposal: the elegant Holding, the belligerent Roberts, the towering Garner and the fiery Marshall. Who needs spinners, countered an argumentative Newton?

Booze flows and conversation splinters. Tony Botham toasts to the GLOB and his bride, who begin doing the rounds of the ballroom. Ari and the Pakistani journalist whisper and scribble on napkins. The rest of us charge our glasses and clap as the band turns to baila and a bald man with a moustache commandeers the mic from a bearded man in a hat. Both are middle aged, pot-bellied and wearing leather trousers.

The GLOB and his bride walk swiftly past, denying themselves the joy of embracing eight sweaty men who are arguing over paper napkins.

Ari and the Paki Journo silence the table with an announcement. Elmo, Brian and Renga listen while wiggling their bellies to the *bajaw*. "Gentlemen. We have constructed the world's greatest cricket team."

Ari and the Pakistani have prepared a slide show of napkins. Dinner arrives at the tables, but is pushed aside for the presentation. "Of course, I don't agree with some choices," says the Pakistani.

First slide:

Openers

- Jack Hobbs (Eng-20s)
- Sunil Gavaskar (Ind-80s)

Newton raises his glass. There is much nodding. "The masters." says Elmo.

Next slide:

Middle Order

- Sachin Tendulkar (Ind-90s)
- Don Bradman (Aus-40s)
- Viv Richards (WI-80s)

There is applause. We grin at each other with appreciation. "How about Zaheer Abbas?" says the quiet friend of the Pakistani Journo. We all glare at him and he pipes down into his passion fruit. And remains silent for the rest of the evening.

Next slide:

All-rounders

- Garfield Sobers (WI-60s)
- Wasim Akram (Pak-90s)

I mention the word "Hadlee". Ari and the Pakistani inform me that sadly there are no New Zealanders on this team. "What about Sri Lankans?" asks Brian and we all snigger. It was 1994. We were drunk, but not stupid.

Next slide:

Wicketkeeper

- Denis Lindsey (SA-60s)

And here the group erupts. Denis Lindsey over Tallon? Knott? Bari? Madness. Newton claims that our list is pathetic. The rest of the critics hurl their knives. Not me.

I saw Lindsey tour Lanka as part of a Commonwealth side in the 60s and keep wickets to the fire of Wes Hall and Freddie Trueman and the wiles of Chandrasekhar and Prasanna. I have never seen that level of agility in anyone outside of a cartoon film.

Apartheid was responsible for many tragedies. Soweto, Biko, Sharpeville, Rivonia. Somewhere at the bottom of a long list would be the short careers of Graeme Pollock, Barry Richards and Denis Lindsey.

Next slide:

Fast Bowlers

- Sidney Barnes (E-10s)
- Dennis Lillee (A-70s)

Some say ooh. Some say ahh. Some say Sidney who? I mention that the great Lillee took all his wickets in England, Australia and New Zealand. That over a 12 year career he never took a wicket in India or the West Indies. No one listens to me.

The clatter of plates and chatter of guests replace baila as the dominant noise. Across the ballroom everyone digs into the roast chicken and richly flavoured rice. But our table is undivided in its attention.

Who could the genius spinner be? A leggie like Grimmet or Qadir? An offie like Laker or Gibbs? A left-armer like Bedi or Underwood?

Final slide:

Spinner

- Pradeep Mathew (SL-80s)

And the pandemonium begins. The Pakistani shakes his head and says he had nothing to do with it. Renga, Brian and Elmo hoot with laughter. "Yo'll are cocked, ah?"

Newton launches into a tirade.

"If you want to put a Lankan, put Aravinda or Duleep. Pradeep Mathew? How can you call yourselves sports journalists? Bloody fools."

Ari puts up his hand.

"This list is based on stats and natural ability. Both Mathew and Lindsey have strike-rates and averages that rank them with the greats."

I step in. "I saw Lindsey in 63. *Maara* reflexes. Jonty Rhodes nowhere. He jumped in front of the batsman to take a catch at silly mid-off."

"You bloody drunkard, it was '66," says Newton. "Yo'll are idiots. Mathew can't even make the current side."

And in the economy section of the crystal ballroom, gobbling chicken buriyani amidst famous acquaintances, Ari and I begin telling them. About the multiple variations, the prize scalps, the balls that defied physics and that legendary spell at Asgiriya. No one believes us.

Newton calls me a drunk a few more times. I call him a bribe-taking pimp. The rest of the table retreat, while Ari begins slurring.

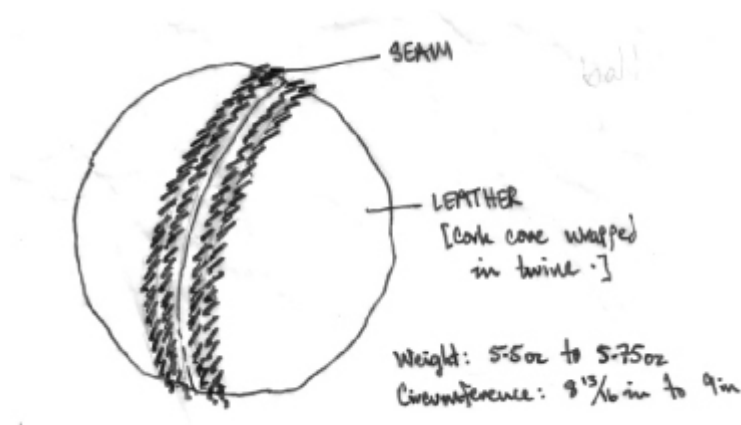
And as the temperature ascends, I look around and I see the man himself in a circle of people, looking lost. At his side is a pretty girl, whispering in his ear is the Indian skipper, hanging on each syllable is career reserve Charith Silva and Sri Lankan cheerleader Reggie Ranwala.

Mathew is glaring at me, as if he knows his name is about to cause a brawl. As if he knows I will spend the next five years searching for him. As if he knows he will never be found.

And then, Newton calls me a talentless illiterate who should be writing women's features. And then, Ari stuffs a chicken into Newton's open mouth. And then, all is noise.

Willow and Leather

The ball is made of leather with a hard seam running its circumference. The bat is made of willow. The sound of one hitting the other is music.



Birds

Today I cannot write. There are birds outside my window. They are being shrill. People, mainly birdwatchers, think birds are treasures to Lanka and their songs more melodious than the collected works of Boney M and Shakin Stevens.

I find a fish market more melodic. These sparrows and parrots remind me of the parliament during my reporting days. I cannot write. I cannot think. There are birds outside my window. So I will drink.

Spinners or Plumbers?

The Great Lankan Opening Batsman once claimed that just because he could hit a ball with a bat didn't make him better than anyone else. Was he being falsely modest or genuinely humble? Like many of our local umpires and selectors over the years, I will give him the benefit of the doubt.

But there is a truth to what he says. Does Sri Lanka need more schoolteachers, more soldiers or more wicket-keepers? What's more useful to society? A middle-order batsman or a bank manager? A specialist gully fieldsman or a civil engineer? A left-arm spinner or a plumber?

I have been told by members of my own family that there is no use or value in sports. I only agree with the first part.

I may be drunk, but I am not stupid. Of course there is little point to sports. But, at the risk of depressing you, let me add two more cents. *There is little point to anything.* In a thousand years, grass will have grown over all our cities. Nothing of anything will matter.

Left-arm spinners cannot unclog your drains, teach your children, or cure you of disease. But once in a while, the very best of them will grasp further than their reach to bowl a ball that will bring an entire nation to its feet. And while there may be no practical use in that, there is most certainly value.
