Flying High!

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Business calls. I have an assignment in Mumbai (old Bombay). My president has said none but Arthur must go along and get all those pointers from the TATA Electrical Engineering Division on how best to handle the breakdowns at the Sapugaskanda and Kelanithissa distribution grids. I have no option," it means taking off tonight and getting back soon after consultations are over, maybe in one day, two days or even more than that. It's hours before sunset, one of those spectacular sunsets that filter the last glimmers of sunshine through the wheeze and exhaust fumes of hundreds of moving cars. Parties at city hotels and along the beach are in full swing. Clients and executives are mingling over beer and barbecue my nostrils dilate as I breathe in those aromas vicariously! The band is pounding out the latest numbers. Still, it was time for me to go, I had that plane to catch.

The company Jaguar is at my disposal for a long, cool, evening drive to the Bandaranaike International Airport, but that didn't help much to ease me. I knew what I had to do. I alone knew where I would get the job done. And there was only

one way to get to where to get done what needed doing. A moving cigar tube suspended six miles in the air. Yes, that's it, Air Lanka's wide-bodied A 340. I was in business class. My company had seen to that. But there's one thing they didn't know, my fear of flying.

First thing I stored was my carry-on luggage. One foldover suitcase. One big brief case with lots of documentation packed into it and one six-pound laptop in it. Another, smaller, cloth bag bursting with laundry I couldn't get done in a hurry- the Mumbai express laundries should take care of that. I was afraid to check my bags for two reasons. First, I wanted to see them again. Second, when my plane touched down on the other end…if it did…..I wanted to get out of the loathsome melee at the Mumbai airport to walk out through the green channel trundling my belongings like a treasure. So nearly one whole overhead compartment
was dedicated to my stuff.

I could have as well put them away. Of course Air Lanka's lissom lasses – oops! I mean Air Lanka's hostesses offered to help. But I don't like my stuff to be out of sight, mixed up with other people's stuff. Something could happen. What say if, one of the engines becomes loose and tears into the main fuselage. People might go through my baggage afterwards and find embarrassing materials. If I'm going to be torn asunder by flying shreds of metal, I want my possessions buried with me, safe from preying eyes.

God! this wasn't a good track my mind was taking. I had to chill. Flight attendants- smart young fellows were offering complementary beers and-or for us in business class, Courvosier on the rocks or with Ginger Ale. I took some. I had to sleep. Those who do not sleep on these flights are condemned to psychosis when on dry land the next day. Yet, I couldn't stop my mind from falling into a vortex, recalling terrors on flights in the past, and terrors present.

What if our Airbus flew over Jaffna, which was on our flight path, and LTTE SAM missile hit us? I nursed the Courvosier in my balloon glass for a while. It was pretty good. The plane's engines started up and did not explode.

The seats were certainly big enough. Mine definitely could have accommodated a hippopotamus. The plane taxied down the runway, and I surreptitiously reclined. I

was apprehensive of being caught doing so, but it seems business class passengers are exempt from keeping their seatbacks in an upright position. It was a good feeling. Everyone around me seemed to be reclining during takeoff and enjoying it. I passed out.

I woke up suddenly from a dream in which I was falling from the sky, screaming, my entrails trailing behind me in the sky behind my head, like a parachute.

I took out my work and looked at it. I determined that the best thing to do was to go through the entire bag for odds and ends that I could throw away. Turns out there was quite a bit. Then I did the same to my hard drive. It's amazing how cluttered your directories get if you don't care for them. That was all the work I could handle for a while. I closed my eyes, only to discover the ground rushing to meet me at 300 miles an hour. I decided to look out of the window, then decided against it. Before long, came the hot nuts. This is one of the big perks in business class. Hot, salty, spiced cashew nuts served attractively in a little cane basket tacked in with white paper servers are real bad for you, and they terrified me but I ate them anyhow. It was a generous portion too, and I ate all but a solitary nut, I wanted to be polite. There were pistachios, salty, fatty, and delicious. All warmed up by microwave and I washed it down with large gulps of beer.

The Airline dinner was coming on after a decent interval. I wasn't going to take a chance on a late night dinner at Mumbai's airlines hotel. The meal had attained microwave perfection-all neatly wrapped up in polythene, what came up looked as attractive as those chunky portions of polystyrene displays at the 7 to 7 food counters, the ground which looked so much like the real thing. In business class there are enticing choices -smoked ham, salmon fillets, marinated chicken breast with shallot potatoes, or there was biriyani for those who favored eastern cuisine. All of those filling to the body as to the senses. The ancho Chile sauce was kind of sticky, but I ate it, I guess that's the bottom line. The roll was particularly satisfactory. There was white wine and then red, then after-dinner brandy……I had a little. Then came some strawberries with chocolate. An irresistible cookie came afterward. I declined a second. I am on a diet.

A warm feeling of physical well-being stole over me, only slightly offset at one point by the sudden image of my body torn to pieces by a faulty piece of replacement equipment. It had come to my attention that many spare parts were supplied to airlines by people who think it's OK to take off a slab of metal, paint it silver, and call it new. Sometimes these bogus pieces don't work. I wondered what it was like

to hit water while you were still alive. The airplane coughed. It was nothing. A little burp of air around the vessel. Ding. A light went on above my head. The ‘no smoking’ sign came on, then ‘fasten your seat belts.’ There was a crackle over the speakers and captain Amarathunga’s voice ‘we’re hitting a bad patch. But don’t worry, things will soon be all right.’ He suggested we keep our seat belts fastened. I decided to relax and read. It was the “Truth about cats and dogs’ which I was taking up for the third time in four weeks. I was afraid.

My eyes roamed over the print but my mind raced back. To the bumpy ride I once had on Aeroflot. My glass of wine held delicately in my hand going to my lip was suddenly airborne and hit the roof of the Aeroflot as the giant dropped feet down with a thud. The airplane continued to judder and thump on its way, lights dimmed and came on again with not a word from the pilot or anyone for that matter. Mercifully we were approaching Katunayake, but in a squall, with rain beating around the plane and eerie flashes of lightning coming from the windows, a young Sri Lankan returning from Iraq told us he was going to jump off the plane before anything worse could happen. He was making for the entrance, but was not allowed. Another time, it was a smaller Indian Airlines Boeing coming into land at Katunayake in similar conditions. It was so bad, that an Iranian schoolmaster whom I had befriended at Mumbai, seated in the cramped plane at my rear, popped forward to ask, ‘brother, is this going to be the end?’ I reassured him as best I could, though not all that sure myself.

To think after all this that Nihal Jayakody has been appointed CEO of Shan Associates. The Business supplements of newspapers were ecstatic and positively beamish about the fact that Jayakody was busy firing senior middle managers. In general, I tend to think this is a bad idea. Senior middle managers are the salt of the earth, take my word for it. They risk their lives above us in the sky so often and this is the thanks they get.

Within 30 minutes I had gulped 3 cans of guava juice and drunk several bottles of Perrier. I was hydrating, while everybody around me was drinking brandy.

Our Airbus had now settled into a smooth flight, it felt like we were stationary, no movement at all. After a while I closed my eyes and was out for quite a while. At one time I woke up to find everybody else asleep. I leaned back in my recliner until I was just about prone again. Very soon hot towels came around and there was the soothing voice of an air hostess over the intercom saying we would soon be landing. I could just see the Mumbai harbor lights spread out down below through my

window, as the airplane made its gradual descent. Things were going to be all right. If I made it through the landing.

And I did too. This time..