

EDITOR'S
NOTE

Today's SLR is all about accomplishing what you have set your heart on. We meet Bangladeshi author Saad Z. Hossain whose debut novel was recently released in USA. Intrepid traveller and entrepreneur Sabrina Islam decides to tick off an item on her bucket list and travel to Kerala. One channels the frantic energy of Dhaka into a madcap novel. The other makes a beeline for quieter backwaters to come face to face with herself. Both remind us: "the only journey is the one within." (Rainer Maria Rilke)

MUNIZE MANZUR

FANTASIZING IN DHAKA TRAFFIC:
AN INTERVIEW WITH SAAD Z. HOSSAIN

Saad Z. Hossain writes in a niche genre of fantasy, science fiction and black comedy with an action-adventure twist. He was published in the anthologies *What the Ink?* and *Six Seasons Review*. He has written numerous articles and short stories for The Daily Star, New Age, and the Dhaka Tribune, the top English daily newspapers in Bangladesh. His debut novel *Baghdad Immortals* was published by Bengal Publications and launched at Hay Dhaka 2013. It was then taken up by an independent publisher, Unnamed Press, in USA. A revised edition of his novel, renamed *Escape From Baghdad!* was released in March 2015.

The novel is set in Baghdad in the immediate aftermath of the US invasion. A desperate American military with no discernible understanding of the complex cultural differences in Iraq has created a power vacuum that needs to be filled. Religious fanatics, mercenaries, occultists, and American soldiers are all vying for power. In the chaos of a city without rule, getting out of Baghdad is no easy task. Anti-heroes Dagr - a former economics professor, and Kinza - a streetwise hoodlum, become embroiled in a

SLR: When and why did you begin writing?

SZH: I started reading for fun at a young age. There wasn't any good television or video games or Internet, so for a solitary person, it was a major source of entertainment. The writing just kind of followed. At some point I got a computer, but it operated on floppy disks and had no games or anything, so pretty much all I could do on it was write. By this time I was writing a couple of hours a day. In middle school, we started a collaborative fantasy novel with some of my friends, where we each picked a character and wrote chapters. It's a lost masterpiece. My friend Andrew stole it and took it to Australia.

SLR: How does a Bangladeshi come up with an urban fantasy story based in Baghdad? What inspired you to write this?

SZH: It started as a writing exercise a couple of years ago. I joined a writers group called 'Writers Block' and I wanted to impress them so I wrote a short story which became the first chapter. Later on, I realized that they had very strict submission policies and I had to keep giving in stuff or they'd kick me out. So I just continued, and their



readership?

SZH: I think the first step is to write a lot of short stories and try to get them out there in anthologies, newspapers, blogs, wherever you can. It helps if you have an online presence and a body of work so that publishers can find you. After that, getting published in Bangladesh is a good first step. There are a number of good new publishing houses now who are interested in English writing, like Daily Star Books, Bengal Publications and Bengal Lights. Also the Hay Festival coming here allows good networking opportunities. So I think it's a good time to have a product.

SLR: What was the US book launch like? How did it compare to your BD launch?

SZH: It was great. I think they did a lot of promotional work, including getting a lot of reviews from famous authors. For example, I was reviewed on NPR by Daniel Jose Older. That was a big deal because a lot of people take good reviews seriously. Endorsements from people like Mark Haskall Smith and Lavie Tidhar, who are renowned authors, help put it out there for people to read. I think in Bangladesh the launch was great because we had a panel at Hay Festival, but I now realize the importance of follow-up efforts; reviews from other authors; and the online presence on blogs and Twitter.

SLR: Why is the US version, including the title, different from your BD version of the novel?

SZH: The title change was recommended by the publishers and I followed their expertise, of course. The US version underwent revision which I think made the story a lot tighter. Any time you take a second pass at a book, I think you'll be able to make a lot of improvements. I was happy with the end result. The ending is slightly changed as well, but both versions work.

SLR: Where can we buy your book?

SZH: The US edition - "Escape from Baghdad!" by Unnamed Press - is available in bookstores everywhere in the US and UK, including mail order on Amazon and Barnes and Nobles. An e-version should be available soon. The Bangladeshi version - "Baghdad Immortals" by Bengal Publications - is available here in Dhaka in bookstores like Arannya, Boi Bichitra and Bookworm.

SLR: What's brewing next for you?

SZH: I've been working on a couple of novels about the djinn, one set in present day Dhaka and one set in the future. I'm about 60,000 words into the first one, so I hope I can finish it soon and look around for someone to print it. The two books loosely follow a family of emissaries, who are human ambassadors to the djinn world. Again, this is a work of pure fantasy. There is no correlation to the djinns of Arabic lore or our own homegrown djinn mythology. My aim is to start you off on a known, comfortable premise, and then take you really far off the reservation, so that at the end you're scratching your head and wondering how it ended up like this.

it becomes too much like work. I also find that it helps to let things percolate in the background when you're stuck; your subconscious will often find a great solution when you're not paying attention.

SLR: How much of the story is realistic? Which part of it is research based?

SZH: The book is a complete work of fantasy. I have never been to Iraq, never been to war, there isn't any significant research. I looked at blogs from the war, and pictures and websites to get the background right, but otherwise it's all made up. That's the beauty of urban fantasy - you're trying to convey an atmosphere, rather than facts and figures. Luckily, the Iraq war was covered extensively on the Internet, so it wasn't too difficult to find the details I wanted. Like the names of streets, bases and weapons. I tried to get the details right as much as possible.

SLR: What was the hardest part of publishing your book on a global level?

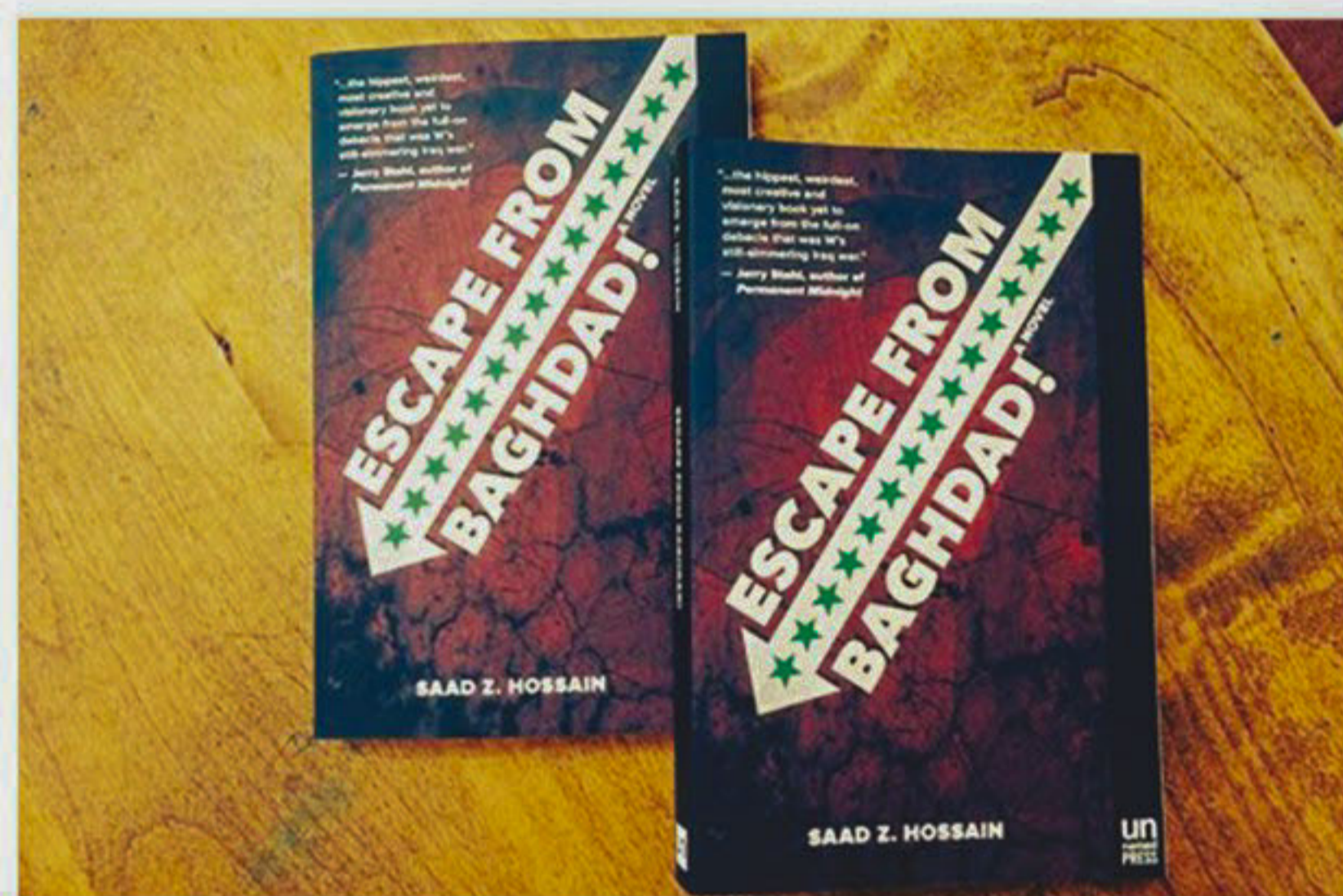
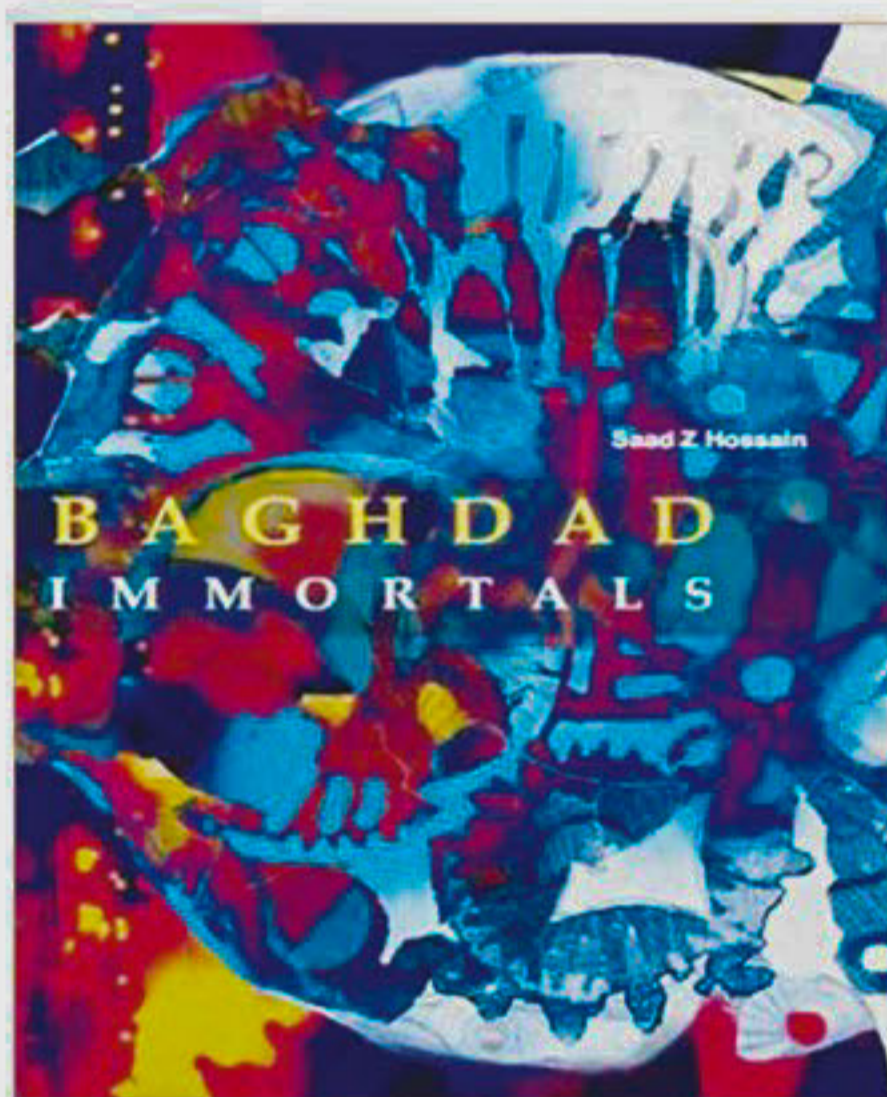
SZH: Writing the book is always the hardest part, because if it isn't relevant or entertaining, it's not going to do you any good. That being said, finding an interested publisher sitting in Bangladesh is hugely difficult. A lot of people along the way had to believe in the work and go out of their way to help me. One of my friends from Writers Block, Masud Khan, sent the work to his friend in California and forcibly made him read it. That gentleman turned out to be Chris Heiser from Unnamed Press. He read it and agreed to publish the work. His team put in an enormous effort in getting me reviewed. For an Independent press it's a big risk to publish a foreign author in America, so all along the way, people have taken a chance on me.

SLR: Any advice for other aspiring Bangladeshi writers who are aiming for an international

feedback process was really great. It kept me going. I don't think I would have ever finished it without the support. The Iraq war is also the really big war of our generation. I think it's a good setting to talk about the nature of violence and conflict, and what happens to the collateral damage.

SLR: What kind of writing process and routine do you follow?

SZH: I write in the car when I'm commuting every day for work. That's a solid couple of hours of non-moving traffic. The hantals have severely denied my output. I also try to write at night. I normally have several half-finished works going, some short stories, some science fiction and fantasy. I don't work in a linear way. I work on the stories in spurts, and they kind of inch along. When something is close to getting finished, I'll put some serious effort into it. If it's not fun, then



mystery surrounding an ancient watch that makes it imperative to escape. With a satiric eye firmly cast on the absurdity of human violence, *Escape from Baghdad!* is a hilarious look into what happens when the wrong people are present at the right time in an iffy place.

SLR caught up with the talented Saad Z. Hossain to find out more about how the plot thickens in the madness of Dhaka traffic; his choice of fantasy over any other fiction; and the importance of people taking a chance on you.

A gonzo adventure novel that shreds the conventional wisdom that pulp can be pigeonholed. — Kirkus Reviews

I loved this book an unreasonable amount... A madcap black comedy, this one is not to be missed. — Liberty Hardy, Bookriot

Bucket List: The Kerala Journal

SABRINA ISLAM

Day 1: The Journey

The glorious backwaters of Kerala have been calling me for years.

In 1995, I saw a beautiful poster of the state of Kerala, India in a Shatabdi Express train on one of my trips to visit our older son in Dehra Dun. The tranquil waters, the coconut trees, the beautiful kettuvallam (houseboats). It truly seemed like God's own country, and immediately made it to my bucket list!

This March as I register yet another year, my husband lectures me on QTR (quality time remaining) and encourages me to "just do it."

So, I take the plunge. On a beautiful day in Falgoun. I book a two week vacation in Kerala, on the southwestern tip of India. To rejuvenate, meditate, do yoga and indulge in photography. What more could my soul want? Be face to face with my inner self. I pack my bags and most of my camera equipment and set off for Kochi.

At Dhaka airport after scanning my luggage at the entrance, the security guys want me to open my suitcase; something that has never happened before. Two guys in brown uniforms call me over. One asks me to come around behind their scanners and identify the strange long object inside my pink hard-top suitcase.

"It's a tripod," I say.

Quizzical look on Guy Number One's face. I explain, "You know...that thing you put your camera on and take pictures."

Big frown.

"Where is your camera?"

"In my hand luggage," I offer nervously. Along with all my precious lens that I care for like my babies.

Guy Number Two says, "But there are lots of other things. What are those?"

I explain, "They are my external hard drives."

Excuse me again? Quizzical faces question me without uttering words. "Why do you have these? Where are you going? What do you do?" He sounds like a stern uncle.

I patiently explain, "I am going to India, to Kerala to take photos."

"Where are your papers and identification?"

Again I say, "Please, if you want to open my bags, go ahead...I am not a professional photographer. It's my hobby."

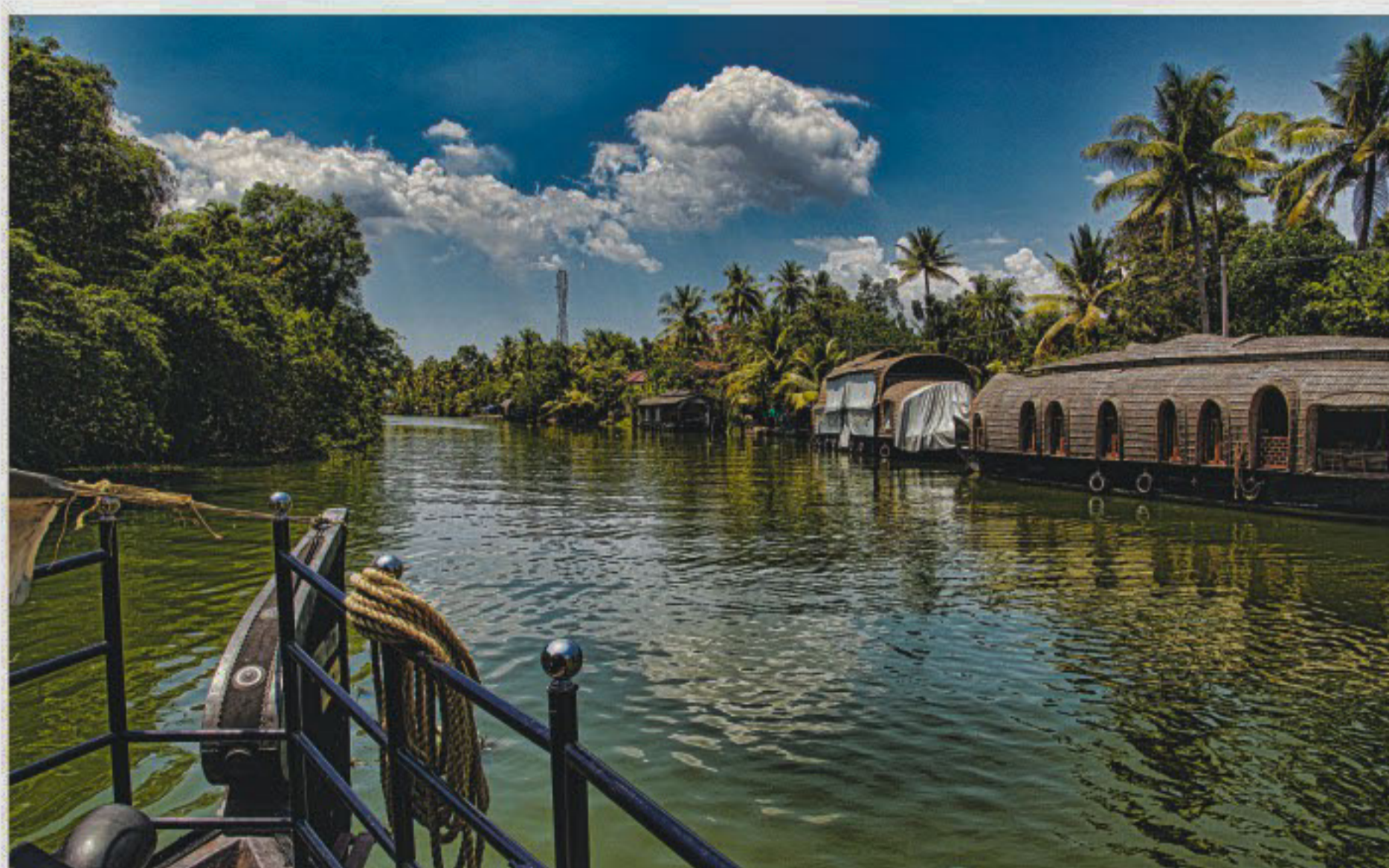
Some more questions. Some more nervous replies. And in my head I am thinking: oh dear, has my driver gone already? Should I call him back and just send it all back home?

Guy Number Two gets impatient with Guy Number One, "Let her go. It's ok. Go, go." The staff at the lounge promises they will announce my flight departure. They don't. I suddenly hear my name being announced and I run!

I am late in reaching the boarding gate, and as I hand in my passport, I hear someone say, "Okay, okay, don't take the bags out. No, no, it's okay, don't take it out, no need to offload..." I pray they are not talking about my bag!

As Jet Airways announces its landing in Mumbai, the reassuring lyrics of "It's a Wonderful World" calm me. I thank God for everything. Reaching Mumbai airport, I go through immigration smoothly. I sit nervously on my trolley, waiting for my pink suitcase. Did it get off loaded? Did it make it? I keep praying...

Forty-five minutes pass. Still no sign of my pink baby. All the other passengers leave. The sign now says the last bag has come through.



My throat dries up and my stomach starts to churn. Panic hits. I rush to the nearest Jet Airways Lost and Found counter.

"My bag didn't make it." I manage to say in a dry voice. A smart woman dressed in blue comes to my rescue. She's efficient. She makes some phone calls. A few minutes later a pink beauty shows up.

"Is that your suitcase?"

"Yes!" I haul it on my trolley. A nail breaks in the process. Note to self, trim nails really short before I fly again.

I rush for customs clearance, and I am asked to put my bags on the scanner. Now I know why it took so long! My pink baby has cross marks in chalk all over it!

Another round of questioning follows.

This time by white uniformed customs officials which always scares me and makes

me feel like a gold smuggler even though I never smuggle gold, honest! This time I have to open up everything and show them.

"Why are you carrying these? Why didn't you declare it? Didn't you know these are dutiable goods?"

Seriously? Even my personal camera and equipment? I feign ignorance. I pretend to be a dumb woman who knows nothing. I offer to go back and declare. He takes pity on me and lets me go but not before giving me a warning for future.

Again I rush to check in at the Air India counter. Then I run to catch the bus to the domestic terminal. I finally get to sit down and catch my breath. The sun is shining and there's a pleasant breeze. And it indeed seems like a wonderful world.

The Air India flight from Mumbai to

Cochin, or Kochi as it is now called, is smooth. The best surprise for post International Women's Day is to discover a smart salt and pepper haired woman as the pilot. I have a fear of flying, and therefore have great admiration for female pilots. They are my 'Sheros'.

The essential Tagore comes to my mind, "elem notun deshe". Land of kanchipuram, uttapam, dosa and idli.

My car transport to Coconut Lagoon Resort in Kumarakom is waiting. We take off at top speed. I try to tell the driver to slow down. He refuses to say much beyond his name and that it will take an hour and a half to reach the resort. I tighten my seat belt and say a prayer. It's 10 o'clock at night. He must be tired.

I take in everything around me. The two-day-old full moon is a brilliant orange hue and just rising over the coconut groves. The road is smooth and the sides are punctuated with huge billboards advertising gorgeous saris and jewelry. Men are sitting at roadside restaurants eating dinner. The signs for shops and restaurants are at least seventeen to twenty letters long, names that I could never pronounce. Kochi metro work is underway. One sign says, 'Men at work go slow'. Punctuation is important.

At 11:15pm, I reach Kumarakom. Wow!

I am led to a motorized boat which takes me through rivers and canals. At the resort, I am given a private bungalow. The bedspread has intricate patterns of flowers and the room smells of lemongrass. The only thing I am not comfortable with is the bathroom with its partially open roof. It seems to invite bugs. But the front veranda faces the lake and I am told I can see the sunset from there.

I fall asleep almost immediately. Tomorrow is another day.