

Nature

by Gemini Wahhaj

The two brothers had been close in childhood, both in age and temperament, but after they graduated from the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, Asif left for higher studies in Lafayette, Louisiana and his older brother Zahid remained behind in Bangladesh. When Zahid married, he and his wife continued to live with his parents in their flat in Muhammadpur. Zahid rode an autorickshaw to his work in the commercial district of Motijheel (Zahid was also an engineer like his brother, but the only lucrative job he could get in Dhaka was at a bank) and his wife rode a bus to her job at another bank in Uttara, at the north end of the city. When they had children, the two boys and one girl had to share a bedroom, into their teens. Zahid didn't blame his brother for being absent from their lives, but he missed his only sibling very much. Zahid wrote emotional emails to his brother, asking Asif to return to Bangladesh after his master's degree.

What meaning can you find working in America? If you work in Bangladesh, the whole country will smile with pride at everything you accomplish, as you are a son of this land.

He even cut out job advertisements from the daily newspaper and mailed them to his brother.

After earning his master's degree in chemical engineering, Asif was immediately hired by an oil and gas company in Baton Rouge. A few years later, Asif wrote to Zahid that he was getting bored at his job. Zahid wrote to his brother again, urging him to return home.

There are so many jobs in Bangladesh. The private universities, the drug companies here, they will all scoop you up, like anything!

But when it looked like Asif might consider returning, he landed another job, in Lafayette this time, at a higher position with higher pay. When Asif married, a young Bangladeshi woman living in America whom he had met through the Internet, he and his wife came home for a short visit to attend a hurried wedding, at the insistence of their parents. A year later, they had twins, whom Zahid and his parents never saw. Asif changed jobs three more times in the next fifteen years, zig-zagging among cities near the Gulf coast, each time landing a promotion, at a higher pay scale. He explained to his elder brother once that the moment he landed a new job, he started looking for another job.

When their ageing parents became critically ill, Zahid began to nag Asif to return home, to spend the last few years of their parents' lives with them. Their parents perished quickly, one after the other, before Asif could consider making a career change. Their father had been a chain smoker and he had been the first to die, of lung cancer, deservedly, but their mother, who followed him just a year later, had probably been the victim of second-hand smoke. Asif showed up for both funerals, each time on a three-day grief leave.

The last time he visited Bangladesh, when their mother died, Asif wore a stylish Polo Ralph Lauren Shirt in a neon pink color, pulling a purple carry-on suitcase on wheels behind him. Zahid was struck by his handsome, rosy look—the sharp French beard that accentuated his pink lips and Ray-Ban titanium sunglasses that blocked his eyes. A musky, foreign perfume wafted off his shoulders and neck. At one time,

the two brothers used to look alike, but now Zahid was fat, his skin spattered with the dust of bricks and particulate matter that hung in the air of Dhaka City.

Zahid's heart ballooned at the sight of his younger brother. Childhood memories engulfed him. As boys, they had looked so alike that relatives couldn't tell them apart—the same skinny legs, impish smiles, tufted hair, and big eyes. It hadn't helped that their mother had dressed them in matching clothes or that their names were so similar. But what bound them together now, more than their looks, Zahid thought, were their memories of the place where they had been born and grown up together.

After their mother's funeral, Zahid began to poison Asif's mind with their childhood memories so that he could persuade his brother to return home. "Don't you remember how we used to catch fish by the gutter on our road? We had these glass jars that our mother gave us!"

They were eating dinner at their childhood home—rice and daal and fish floating in an oil curry, with the ceiling fan rotating overhead and their feet planted on the cool mosaic floor of their childhood days.

Asif nodded. His eyes seemed to light up. His lips, surrounded by his mustache and beard, broke into a childish smile.

"Why don't you move back to Bangladesh, brother?" Zahid coaxed him.

The mango wood dining table from their mother's wedding furniture was covered with a plastic cover, as it had always been, laden with dishes in bowls familiar to them, a big porcelain bowl with flowers printed on it, a flat porcelain dish painted with blue raindrops, and a fitted container with a lid to keep the rice hot. Everything was like old times, could be like old times, Zahid persuaded his brother, if only Asif willed it.

"What do you say, brother?"

Asif smiled and grunted. Encouraged, Zahid

leaned forward energetically, speaking rapidly, rocking his head back and forth, listing all the jobs that Asif could have. Zahid enumerated to Asif the many advantages of living in Bangladesh, near relatives, friends who knew him, and a niece and two nephews who adored him (Zahid's children). He listed all the facts (he had made an actual list once on the back of the morning paper, using his son's pencil). Asif was smiling politely, his bottom lip pushed too far down, his white teeth in a straight line.

"You're not going to come back, are you?" Zahid accused his brother in a frustrated tone. "Why not?"

Asif chewed on his fish, picked out a bone, then licked his fingers. He lifted the crystal glass and swigged ice-cold water, rolling the liquid in his mouth.

"What's the problem? Is it the traffic? Is it corruption you fear? Pollution?"

Asif made a helpless face, his youthful cheeks dimpling. "You'll get angry if I speak my mind."

"No. No, tell me." Zahid jerked his head. Dust flaked off his skin and flew off into the air. "Please, just tell. I'm listening."

Asif rubbed his jet-black beard, darted a nervous glance at his brother and spoke earnestly. "I just can't stand the traffic and the pollution. The dust and the crowding. The lack of trees. It's all . . . just concrete."

Zahid nodded, trying to listen patiently, tapping his feet under the table.

"Where I live now, in Baton Rouge," Asif continued, "I'm surrounded by nature. Just next to my house, there is a jogging trail and a lake lined with trees. I like being close to nature." Asif looked at his brother helplessly. "Are you angry? You asked me to speak my truth."

"I know, I know. Thank you." Zahid sat with what his brother had told him, trying to imagine what kind of pristine, idyllic place his brother lived in.

After Asif left Bangladesh, his words began to sink in for Zahid. Zahid still missed his brother, but he began to appreciate that Asif was happy where he was. He began to especially appreciate Asif's comment about wanting to be close to nature. But he still broke out of dreams about his brother at night, sobbing, his heart beating loudly. Out of longing for his sibling, Zahid Googled Louisiana on his phone or on his desktop at work, trying to look up nature there. He read about Lake Fausse Point, where you could rent cabins directly on the lake, with trails around the lake that led to fallen logs and small, wild animals, and Lake Bistineau State Park, with its hardwood forest of rows of cypress and tupelo trees. Louisiana had so much greenery. There were lakes, rivers, swamps, and bayous, marshes dotted with bald cypress trees, their roots sticking up out of the water, and in the summer the roads were lined with crepe myrtle trees. Cattle grazed on golden grass dried out in the winter sun. Whenever someone visited from America—say, someone from Louisiana who had come bearing gifts from Asif—Zahid made a point to ask about the natural beauty of Louisiana. Wasn't it true that there were alligators, bears, and rare birds in Louisiana? And that people went camping, fishing, and birding the year around?

From his online research and his conversations with people who knew, Zahid formed a picture in his head of the natural landscape of Louisiana. He began to understand why Asif was so happy in this state steeped deep in nature, full of spellbinding swamps, lakes, and wooded forests, in sharp contrast to Zahid's own reality in Dhaka.

Zahid's three teenaged children each rode a rickshaw to school (they attended separate schools, in three different areas of the capital city). Every day, Zahid and his wife worried until all their children returned home, each on a separate treacherous journey, winding through traffic and pollution. On his own journey to his

office, Zahid began to notice how the buses and trucks in front of him on the road pumped out black, murderous exhaust gases that rose in the air and coiled around him. He was forced to inhale the smoke as he sat trapped in his auto-rickshaw, at a lower height than the other vehicles on Mirpur Road. He also started to see the dust, invisible to him before, that now materialized everywhere—on his wife's ashen face and dirty clothes when she returned from work, on their furniture, which had to be wiped twice a day by the servants who worked tirelessly, on the outside walls of their building, on all the windows of all the buildings in Dhaka, and rising off the streets, not to mention the dust of dead skin and detritus of all the crowded population of Dhaka flying in the air.

At last, after so many years, Zahid began to understand what his brother had been trying to tell him. Like their parents, Dhaka city was composting, stepping closer to death every day. All the crowds, gaiety, shop signs, neon lights, and honking of horns could not stop that coming of death. Who could blame Asif for wanting to escape this great trap, the hell hole of concrete and dust and traffic jam, to live somewhere closer to nature?

Three months after their mothers' death, Zahid made up his mind. All these years he had been asking his brother Asif to give up everything he had built in his life in America and return to Bangladesh. Now, as Asif's brother, as his only surviving relative, Zahid felt that he had a responsibility to witness how Asif lived, what Asif cared about, and the nature that his little brother admired so much. Zahid confided in his wife that he was missing his brother after their parents' death and that he felt a great need to see his brother.

Then he wrote to Asif.

I am coming to visit you. Tell me when is convenient.

Although Asif was always busy, flying to con-

ferences and business trips abroad, he said to come right away, in December. Asif would take a week off, plus there were the days off for Christmas and New Year. The winter was wonderful in Baton Rouge. The weather was mild, yet cool. They might not be able to go away too much, as Asif's wife, who was a doctor, would still be working, and their twins had college applications due. But they would hang out in Louisiana—there was New Orleans with its restaurants and cafes just three hours away, the Tabasco factory on Avery Island, and, of course, there was a lot to do in Baton Rouge itself.

Zahid was ecstatic. He packed his clothes and gifts for his brother and brother's wife and the boys. As the day of his flight approached, he read more about Baton Rouge. There were parks everywhere—the Bayou Segnette State Park on the western bank of the Mississippi River with hot, humid summers and snowfall in the winter, the Bogue Chitto State Park with its varied landscape of swamps, streams, and forest, the Palmetto Island State Park with its wetlands and canoeing and kayaking, and, most wonderful of all, Lake Bistineau State Park, with giant cypress sticking upright out of the water. Besides the many lakes nearby, there were hardwood forests and tupelo swamps and beautiful bayous, and even a national wildlife refuge not far off, for birds, fish, and bear.

At the New Orleans International Airport, Asif looked more handsome than ever, clean shaved and smooth, tiptop in a sharp-looking business suit. The brothers embraced.

Asif lifted Zahid's two heavy suitcases and carry-on bag into the back of his BMW, joking, "What did you pack in these? All the bricks of Dhaka?"

As they flew over the freeway to Baton Rouge, Zahid looked around him with boundless wonder, admiring the number of lanes, the speed at which they moved, and the billboards in the

sky.

"I was reading about Louisiana. So much greenery," he said knowledgeably to his brother.

His brother lived in a subdivision near the Highland Lakes, an expensive suburb of Baton Rouge with custom-built houses over five thousand square feet, massive oak trees, and a private lake. When they arrived at Asif's house, Zahid could scarcely contain his excitement. He got out of the car and stood frozen in front of Asif's house, dumb with emotion at his first sight of his brother's home.

The elegant, white mansion stood two stories high, with arches and turrets and a fountain at the front, water slowly dripping over stones. Two chimneys rose from a majestic grey roof, shooting off into the picturesque blue sky, colonial balconies girded French doors upstairs and downstairs, and a row of coy, curtained windows guarded the rest of the front façade. There were three garages for three cars. But that was not all. There was a landscaped garden at the front and a garden at the back, with little, cheerful flower beds, and a wild section with trees in the back that melted into the forest beyond. Asif's wife and twin boys, both seventeen, stood smiling on the driveway to greet him.

Zahid turned to his brother and patted him softly on the shoulder. "I wish our parents had seen this, brother. Truly, you have created a paradise."

"Why don't you eat and take a nap and then I'll show you around?" Asif said when they were inside the house. He had hauled Zahid's two suitcases and one lumpy black bag out of the car and across the driveway, depositing them in the guest bedroom downstairs that would be Zahid's room.

Zahid nodded eagerly, looking around the dazzling white foyer with its glass vases placed on a long console table, a white chaise lounge lying lazily in the way, and the tall ceiling overhead,

hung with an opulent, golden chandelier. The house was immaculate. Zahid could scarcely wait to see the nature outside, right next to Asif's house.

"We're near a lake, yes?" Zahid asked his younger brother reverently, his voice a hoarse whisper. "It's home to many migratory birds in the winter, I read."

"Yes, yes. I will show you everything. I'm so glad you're here."

Zahid enjoyed the light lunch, of grilled chicken breast and Cesar salad, sitting at the majestic dining table facing a line of windows overlooking the backyard with a magnolia tree and a crepe myrtle, so familiar to him from his extensive reading. He appreciated the little, triangular paper napkins and the big, square-shaped modern plates placed in front of him.

"When you take your daily walk today, brother, I would like to go with you," he said, turning to Asif.

"Today? But you must be tired! And jet-lagged." Asif cried in surprise. "It is the middle of the night in Bangladesh!"

"No, please, I would like to accompany you. I am dying to see the beautiful nature near your house."

Finally, at four in the afternoon Louisiana time, Asif knocked on the door of the guest room to call Zahid for a walk. Asif had changed into jogging pants and a white T-shirt. In the foyer, Asif sat down on a bench and pulled on Nike shoes that he said were good for walking. He had another pair for running.

"Running shoes are not the same as walking shoes," Asif told his brother.

Zahid was mesmerized by each new piece of information. A different pair of shoes for running and walking! Such careful homage to nature!

The two brothers emerged from the tall front door and started to walk on the sidewalk, passing

neighbors who were also walking. Asif waved energetically to some people as they passed them. The sidewalk veered off into a concrete path over a water body. Little shrubs lined either side. Asif walked confidently, his body lean and upright, using long strides, lifting his foot clear off the concrete. Zahid tried to keep up with his brother. The path extended for several miles, winding up and down. Zahid stared around him, observing the sky above and the water flowing gently below them.

"What is that?" Zahid asked his brother. "Is that . . . is that a lake?"

"It's a retention pond to hold the rainwater," Asif said proudly. "The wonders of modern planning and technology."

Zahid stared a little distractedly at the water, the manicured banks with uniform grass and even spaced trees, confused that he was not staring at a river or a bayou or even a lake, but an artificially constructed reservoir to hold the rainwater. In front of them, for miles and miles, stretched the concrete footpath where his brother purported to walk every morning and evening. The sky above them colored and darkened, from a deep blush to a purple wound.

"Where is the lake?" Zahid cried. "Where is the swampland? Where are the birds?"

"What?" Asif said, far off ahead of him. "I can't hear you. You better walk a little faster. This is too slow to even call a walk. Pick up your pace, brother."

Zahid stepped up his pace, still swiveling his head around, trying to look further into the distance, searching for the things that he had read about, the forests, the swamps, the lakes, the alligators, the foxes, the bears, the muskrat, the raccoons, the owls, the bald cypress trees with their air roots sticking upright above the ground. He kept falling behind his brother, because he kept stopping to look, searching for nature. ▲▼▲