



Video Story Transcript

WHERE ARE YOU FROM?

By: Storyteller Arif Choudhury
Email: arifchoudhury@hotmail.com

Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwLLK6svpPw>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

My name is Arif and I'm American. Or more specifically, I'm a Bangladeshi American Muslim who was born in Chicago and I grew up in Northbrook, a suburb of Chicago. So, sometimes it's funny to me when people ask me, "Arif, where are you from?"

Now I was born in America, lived here my entire life but I answer honestly. I say, "I'm from Northbrook."

And they might say, "No. I mean, uh, where were you born?"

And I answer honestly. I say, "Chicago."

It's a true answer but it wasn't the answer they were looking for. So, they may try a third time and say something like, "No, Arif, I mean, um, how did you learn to speak English so good?"

And I'd say, "You mean, uh, how did I learn to speak English so well? Same place you did - school." Sometimes the questions people ask me make me feel like I don't belong.

When I was in high school, it was a Saturday morning. I was sitting in a teeny, tiny desk and I had a number two pencil in my ear and one in my hand and I was filling in those tiny bubbles. I was taking the SATs and I was nervous. I was drenched with sweat because my family, my friends, my parents, my teachers were all telling me that this test would determine the rest of my life. So, after I filled in the bubbles for my name, I came to the first question. And it said, "The following question will not be scored. It is for informational purposes only. What is your ethnic origin?"

Well, then I took a deep breath and I was calm, I was cool, I was collected because I knew the answer to this question. It might be the only answer I know but I knew the answer. So, I read the four answer choices because there are just four answers choices: a) White, b) Black, c) Hispanic and d) Other. Well, I remember in class the teacher said eliminate the wrong choices first. So, I began to do that. a) White. No, I'm not white.

b) Am I black? I've actually asked myself that question before. When I was five years old in kindergarten, I was sitting during recess with the other boys in the sandbox and we're making these hills and valleys for little toy trucks to play through. And we'd taking our shoes and socks off and planted our feet in the wet sand. And I noticed after playing for a few minutes that one of the other boys (his name was Timmy), he was staring at me. He was staring at the dark skin on my knees and on my feet and he asked me, "Arif, are you black?"

All the boys froze and now they were all gaping at me. I looked back at my friends and for the first time I realized that all my friends were white. And I lived in an all-white neighborhood and they all had sandy blond hair and light brown hair and blue eyes and green eyes and freckles. And I looked down at the dark skin of my hand and I knew that I wasn't white but I wasn't sure whether not white meant black. So, I said to Timmy, "I don't know but I'll go home and ask my mom."

So later that day after school I sat in the kitchen with my mom having my afterschool snack when I sprung the question on her. I said, "Mom, are we black?"

She said, "No, we're not black. We're Bangladeshi."

So, the very next day at school, the boys and I were playing during recess again. And we were playing tag and Timmy was it, so he was chasing me all over the playground, up the hill and down the hill, up the hill. Up the jungle gym, down the jungle gym, up the slide, down the slide. He caught up to me and tapped me on the shoulder and said, "You're it! Hey, what'd you find out from your mom? Are you black?"

I said, No, we're not black. We're Bangladeshi.

And he said, "Bangladeshi. What's that?"

And I replied, "Uh, I don't know but I'll go home and ask my mom."

But by the time I was taking the SATs, I knew that I wasn't black so I didn't mark that answer choice. I didn't mark c) Hispanic either. And as I took my pencil, I filled in the little bubble for d) Other, I started to begin to feel like, officially, the other. And from time to time, that's exactly how I've been made to feel.

When I was in film school I had this big, bushy beard and mustache. It was kind of hippie and arty because, you know, a lot of filmmakers have big, bushy beards so I thought I'd try to fit in and be artistic. And I had landed this plum job working at a movie theater behind the bars of this window. Now one afternoon, an elderly man came up to buy a ticket for the afternoon matinee and he slipped the \$20 bill right through the hole in the bottom of this window. And I took the \$20 bill, made some change, gave it to him and I noticed that he had also put a small slip of paper right there on the counter and I picked it up. It about the size of a fortune from a fortune cookie. And I read it and it said, "Death is the punishment of the enemies of Israel." And I was shocked; I was stunned.

Why had he given this piece of paper to me because I wasn't an enemy of the state of Israel. And did he want me to die? Wow. I didn't think that death would be the occupational hazard of peddling overpriced popcorn. Now that happened before September 11th.

September 11th changed things for me and my family. I remember that morning. My mother shook me out of bed and flipped on the TV. And she, I and my younger brother Saif watched as thick clouds of smoke billowed out of the first of the two World Trade Center towers. I didn't know what was happening. I didn't know it was New York City. I just turned to my younger brother Saif and I said, "It better not be one of us. It better not be somebody who call themselves Muslim."

My mother was frantic. She said, "Nusra is not answering her phone. Why won't you answer her phone. Now Nusra is my younger sister. She's just a year younger than me and she was living and working just a few blocks away from the World Trade Center towers. Why wasn't she answering her phone? I began to become very nervous too. I thought about that as I drove to work that afternoon. I still had to work at the movie theater. When I got there, I opened the box office and flipped on a little black and white TV and I watched footage of the first tower coming down. And I wondered what was happening. Why was this happening?"

Then my mother called me and told me my sister Nusra was okay. She was stranded in a subway when the city of New York shut down all subways as a safety precaution. She was safe but dazed; she was wondering what was happening in her city. And then I turned to the TV and I watched footage of the second tower coming down. I just thought, why?

And then the news announcer informed us that the people who hijacked those planes, that ran them into those towers and then the Pentagon, and the fourth plane that was downed in Pennsylvania... that those planes had been hijacked by Muslim extremists. And then my throat started to close up because I was choked with questions.

I had to loosen my tie on and undo my button just to be able to breathe. Why had these people done this? Why have they killed thousands of innocent people? And what else were they going to do? Was my sister in New York really, truly safe?

And then my thoughts wandered back to the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. At that time, I was an undergraduate student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. And the nearby mosque in Springfield, Illinois had been burned down because people thought that Muslims had been responsible for that bombing when really a Christian white man named Timothy McVeigh had been responsible. I wondered what would happen now that people who call themselves Muslim were responsible. What would happen to people like me - Muslim-Americans?

Now I had that big, bushy, black beard and mustache. And one of my coworkers and the other manager said to me, "Arif, we're getting complaints from the patrons. They think that you might be with the Taliban."

I thought, "Taliban! Running an art movie theater in the suburbs of Chicago.

And he said, "Arif, people can do crazy things when they're afraid; you should shave your beard off."

I didn't want to do it. Why should I change how I look? Because of some extremist misuse of my faith or of other people's prejudices? But when I went home that night and I talked about it with my folks and I learned on the news that people who are sick, people who have a different religion, that wore turbans and had big, bushy beards had been shot and killed in Arizona and California, I shaved my beard off. No point getting killed or hurt for a fashion statement. The very next day on September 12th, a mob of about 200 people were walking from Oak Lawn, a south suburb of Chicago towards Bridgeview, the neighboring suburb, which had a mosque there. Now my uncle Jafar lived just a block from that mosque. And when he came home that evening from working as a doctor at the nearby hospital, he was met with an angry crowd and a police barricade. Luckily, in that small suburb of Bridgeview where the mosque was, the police there had barricaded the

mosque on all four sides to prevent people from hurting that mosque. So, my uncle showed his driver's license to the police officer on duty and said, "See that address. That's the house right over there. Please let me through."

Well, the police are being very cautious. They weren't taking any chances. They turned him away. So, he drove all the way from Bridgeview to my house 30 miles away in Northbrook to spend the night. But his wife and four-year old son were still inside their house. He couldn't get in and they couldn't get out.

And that's when I realized that now after September 11th, some people in America would look at me, at my uncle, at my father, my brother and think "terrorist." You know, uh, it's sad that people make those judgments about each other by looking at, at face value who a person is. But I, I wish that instead of people making a judgment and asking me, "Where are you from?" they'd say something like, "Hey, Arif, tell me a little about yourself."

So, I will. "I'm a son and a neighbor and a friend. I'm an accountant, a standup comic and a storyteller. I'm a Bangladeshi American Muslim and I'm proud to be American."