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THE CITY WEEKLY DESK

The Great Escape

By **JOHN FREEMAN GILL** (NYT) 2839 words

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MAHBOOB AWAN, a dignified, matchstick-thin Pakistani immigrant, had \$20,000 and an escape plan. Weary of the hustle and squalor of his 26 years as a New Yorker, fed up with the cramped, roach-infested apartment that he shares with his wife and two little boys in Kensington, Brooklyn, he wanted out.

"New York has nothing for me," said Mr. Awan, a 56-year-old former newsstand owner. "If you want to live on welfare, the city is best, city pays rent for you. Otherwise, if you want as a human to make money and pay rent, you can't survive here."

Mr. Awan, dressed neatly in a charcoal sports jacket and almost-matching slacks, was sitting in a packed ballroom of the Marriott Hotel in Downtown Brooklyn, where a frenetic event billed in a brochure as a "Gigantic Land Auction" was unspooling. The brochure, printed in the reassuring colors of Old Glory, breathlessly promised "E-Z Financing! E-Z Qualifying!" on "300 Properties to Be Sold!!!"

Mr. Awan hoped that one of these parcels of vacant land, offered in 10 states from Massachusetts to California, would provide the missing piece of his dream of escaping from New York. "Anybody I see who leaves here," he said of the city, "I see two, three years later, and they get healthy, wealthy. That's reality."

The auction, which took place in October, was the fifth major event held in New York over the past 15 months by a California-based company called N.R.L.L. East L.L.C., which buys land from a variety of sources, including bank foreclosures, and auctions them off under the name LandAuction.com. Mr. Awan has attended all the New York auctions.

About three-quarters of the 783 registered bidders in the Marriott ballroom lived in the city, most of them in Brooklyn, according to the auction company. With starting bids as low as \$100 for property in enticing locales like Florida and Hawaii, the auction attracted many working-class and middle-class strivers: bus drivers, security guards, grocery store owners, waiters. Many were immigrants, some drawn by ads in the Korean, Chinese and Spanish press.

These would-be property owners, many of whom had been shut out of the city's gravity-defying real estate market, crowded into the cavernous ballroom as a promotional video played on two giant screens, its bubbly announcer declaring, "You can really own a slice of America for very little money!"

Shortly after 9 a.m., the auctioneer, Mark Buleziuk, wearing formal black-tie attire, stepped up to a podium as a "parcel map" appeared on a screen depicting a residential lot in Holmes County, Fla., a site the brochure described as "a world away from the hustle and bustle of the big city."

As Mr. Buleziuk lifted his gavel, a transformation occurred. His lips began moving faster than the human eye could follow, and out surged a mesmerizing torrent of syllables, punctuated by rapidly escalating dollar amounts. The bidding was on, pinballing around the room, with 300 properties sold over eight frenzied hours.

The affair had the feel of a traveling carnival of commerce. While Mr. Buleziuk's relentless patter of opportunity poured through the speakers at deafening volume, several tuxedo-clad auction workers charged up and down the aisles like hypercaffeinated groomsmen, gesticulating wildly and hollering "Heyyyy!" each time a bidder raised his number.

"Hey, now, seventeen-five!" Mr. Buleziuk cried. "You're a horse in the race, and you're in second place -- and down the stretch they come!"

'Outdoor Adventure'

For customers who wanted to investigate properties, LandAuction.com had made available for free, before the auction, maps showing the land to be sold, along with a brochure containing a description of each site. The brochure's pages were as richly adorned with exhortations to do research as the Marriott ballroom was decorated with red, white and blue balloons.

"You should inspect any parcel personally before bidding," read a notice at the bottom of virtually every other page. "Investigate before you buy! Look, listen, and inquire. Spend your money wisely."

Despite these urgings, many registrants acknowledged that they had done virtually no investigation and were bidding on land they had never laid eyes on. "Whatever they tell me in the booklet, that's what I go on," said a Haitian-born elevator operator from Brooklyn who would identify himself only as Harry and had just bought 10 acres in California -- he wasn't quite sure where.

The dream can prove elusive for bidders who buy land without doing their homework. At an auction in Midtown in October 2004, LandAuction.com listed a 1.5-acre parcel in the upstate New York town of Cairo; the brochure promised the buyer that "four seasons of outdoor adventure await you in Greene County's great northern Catskills."

Mr. Awan and a nephew emerged as the winning bidders for the parcel, for which they agreed to pay about \$8,800. But when they arrived in Cairo to visit their new land, they discovered that it might have behooved them to take more seriously the brochure's warning that "this property may lack road access." The land, some of which floods periodically, could be reached only by trespassing on neighboring property, and the neighbors refused to grant access.

Of his decision to buy the parcel, for which LandAuction.com had paid just \$2,700 two months earlier, according to Greene County property records, Mr. Awan later said, "That was a stupid movement I made."

After being asked about the matter by a reporter, Michael Schack, a senior vice president and general counsel of LandAuction.com, contacted Mr. Awan's nephew. "I explained to him that if he or his uncle felt that what they purchased did not match the descriptions in the brochure or the information provided

by LandAuction.com," the company would refund their money, Mr. Schack wrote in an e-mail message.

A spokesman for Attorney General Eliot Spitzer of New York said that the agency had received no complaints against N.R.L.L. East. But customers who bought land from N.R.L.L. Inc., a sister company, have not always been thrilled with their purchases.

In 1999, the district attorney in Santa Cruz County, Calif., filed a civil complaint against N.R.L.L. Inc., accusing the company of misleading customers into buying "unbuildable" land outside Santa Cruz. The company admitted no wrongdoing but settled the case, agreeing to refund purchasers' money. Mr. Schack, the LandAuction.com spokesman, who also speaks for N.R.L.L. Inc., said in an e-mail message that the company had had no prior knowledge of whether the land was buildable. He added that each successful bidder was required to sign a statement that he had been encouraged to inspect the land before the auction and had either done so or elected not to at his own risk.

The Race for Property 21

Mahboob Awan is a bounce-back man, buffeted by difficulty but confident in his resilience. Professionally, he has reinvented himself multiple times -- as a newsstand owner, as proprietor of a variety store, as a cabdriver -- and amid the frenzied bidding in the Marriott ballroom, where bargain hunters in jeans and backward Yankee caps speed-walked about, he cut a placid, contemplative figure.

Seated on a plastic folding chair, he listened calmly as the auctioneer announced Property No. 21, a 1.9-acre lot in the small southern New Jersey town of Corbin City, 24 miles north of Cape May and a half-hour drive from Ocean City. "I bid 21, if they stop at my price," he said. "If not, I stay quiet."

The bidding began at \$5,000 and ricocheted around the room, quickly soaring above Mr. Awan's \$20,000 limit. "Sold it for \$110,000!" the auctioneer shouted.

Mr. Awan shrugged. "Already I own place as where they're selling," he said in his imperfect English, referring to another Corbin City parcel he bought earlier in the year.

Mr. Awan was an old hand at LandAuction.com extravaganzas. Since the company's first New York auction in October 2004, he had purchased four properties in the Northeast, including a parcel near the Canadian border in Clinton County, N.Y., that he has never seen.

His prize acquisition, in his view, was a 123-foot-by-75-foot wooded parcel in Corbin City, which he bought for \$9,000. Mr. Awan thought he might build a house on it, to escape the pollution in the city. Ideally, he could live there with his family while realizing his goal of importing marble from Pakistan for use in people's bathrooms. It was to provide storage space for shipping containers full of marble that he had hoped to buy the second, larger Corbin City parcel at this day's auction. But he figured something would turn up at a later auction.

More immediately, he had a big trip planned for the next day. It was Ramadan, the holy Muslim month of fasting, and though Mr. Awan, a practicing Muslim, was in no position to journey to Mecca, he planned to make a more modest pilgrimage to his patch of land in Corbin City. He had recently paid \$575 to have the parcel surveyed. After 26 years of paying rent in Brooklyn with no equity to show for it, Mr. Awan was going to view for the first time the clearly delineated boundaries of the future he hoped to inhabit.

Their Own Little Forest

Mr. Awan's search for his future had begun seven years earlier, shortly after he was wed in Pakistan to a soft-spoken schoolteacher named Samina. His wife, who became pregnant soon afterward, remained in Pakistan while he brought his mother to the United States to help her get medical treatment for back pain.

While living largely off stock market investments, Mr. Awan rented a 620-square-foot shoebox in an apartment building on McDonald Avenue, in a neighborhood that is home to many working-class Muslims. But when his wife came to America in 2000 with their infant son and stepped inside her new home for the first time, she was devastated. "When I first came here," Mrs. Awan confessed recently, "I cried when I saw the place that we live. So small."

With the addition of a second son that year, the apartment became even more uncomfortable. Nowadays roaches amble across the floor as if they own the place, and the only decorations in the main room, aside from children's crayon scrawls on the dirty walls, are a carbon monoxide detector and a calendar from a drugstore.

Corbin City promised breathing room. "To the northeast is the Tuckahoe Wildlife Management Area, an area great for bird-watching," declared the LandAuction.com brochure.

Mr. Awan was undaunted by the disclosure in the brochure that "this property does not have public water or sewer available." To someone who has reinvented himself so often, the tasks of getting a well dug and a septic tank installed seemed eminently manageable.

So he forged ahead. The day after the October auction, Mr. Awan tucked the deed to his Corbin City property into the pocket of his jacket, climbed into his 1991 Chevy Caprice with his wife and sons, and hit the road.

On the Garden State Parkway, the industrial New Jersey scenery was gradually replaced by lush green trees. Three hours after leaving Brooklyn, while heading northwest on Route 50, Mr. Awan suddenly pulled his Caprice off the road beside a mass of trees. The four Awans tumbled out of the car and stood beside the highway as trucks thundered past, peering at a flimsy wooden stake from which a strip of pink plastic fluttered in the wind. This was the northeastern corner of their property.

The Awans' land, sandwiched between Route 50 and a looming aluminum warehouse on the lot behind them, was a scarcely penetrable little forest. Looking incongruous in his black loafers, Mr. Awan scrambled up the trunk of a fallen tree and tugged awkwardly at dead branches. But amid the tangle of nature and the whoosh of passing trucks, he and his wife saw possibilities.

While Mr. Awan and the boys hammered cast-off plumbing pipes into the ground to mark their land's boundaries, Mrs. Awan allowed her mind to roam. "When you come here," she said, "you can write poetry, too, I think."

It also seemed possible the land might one day help her improve her relations with her husband's siblings, who all have big houses in Brooklyn and New Jersey. "His brothers and sisters say they won't come because our house is so small," Mrs. Awan said. "I used to cry a lot, it depressed me so much." But her husband had reassured her. "When they hear that you own land and a house," he said, "their tone and attitude toward you will change."

As she spoke, Mr. Awan and his older son wandered back. Putting his hand on the boy's shoulder, he kneeled beside him and pointed skyward. "That's yours there," he said. "Those trees are yours."

An hour after the Awan family had headed back to Brooklyn, Robert Ohlsen sat at the bar of the Buck Tavern, a restaurant he owns in Corbin City, taking a break from overseeing the installation of a new awning. Mr. Ohlsen had attended the auction in Brooklyn the previous day and bid unsuccessfully on the 1.9-acre Corbin City parcel. Though Mr. Ohlsen thought it had sold far above market rate, he wasn't surprised that it fetched such a high price. "The audience," he said, "was filled with a lot of dreamers."

When told about the little parcel the Awans had bought on Route 50, Mr. Ohlsen did a double-take. "He can't build on that," he exclaimed, shaking his head emphatically. "It's zoned all highway commercial."

Bouncing Back Once More

Over at Corbin City Hall, Janet McCrosson, the municipal clerk, confirmed the nonresidential zoning of the Awans' property, which, according to Atlantic County records, LandAuction.com had bought the previous fall for \$2,500. "As is, nothing can be built on it," Ms. McCrosson said. Regulations also preclude using the land for a business, because it is far too small. "It is not as wide or as deep as the minimum it has to be to use it for anything," she said.

She said that Mr. Awan could apply for a zoning variance, although she did not recall the city's ever approving one for an undersized lot like the Awans'.

None of these restrictions appeared in the LandAuction.com brochure. What did appear was a blanket statement that the company assumed no liability for "zoning, building codes and regulations."

Asked about the restrictions, Mr. Schack, the LandAuction.com spokesman, wrote in an e-mail message that the company had been unaware of any limits on the use of the Awans' Corbin City parcel. "However," he wrote, "many of our experienced buyers will purchase properties at these prices and then assemble others around (or sell to the neighbor) into a larger and thus more valuable or developable piece of property."

A few weeks later, Mr. Awan sat barefoot on a sagging mattress in his apartment and thumbed through his real estate documents, talking about his good fortune in buying the Corbin City property. "There the air is coming from the sea, washes the pollution away," he declared happily.

Asked what he would do if he learned that it was true that local regulations would not allow him to build on his Corbin City land, Mr. Awan did not waste a moment second-guessing himself. "Clinton County, easy, I move there," he said, referring to the LandAuction.com property he had bought, sight unseen, near the Canadian border. He added, "I can work, survive in two countries."

By this month, Mr. Awan's plans had changed again. He now thought his escape route might take him as far as Georgia, or even Texas. "I go, circle around, look at different states, see where luck takes me," he said, his confidence unbruised. "It's nothing impossible for me."

Photos: WHERE THEY ARE -- The Awans' apartment in Kensington, Brooklyn. (Photo by Seth Wenig for The New York Times); WHERE THEY LONGED TO BE -- Mahboob and Samina Awan, above, on their newly acquired land in Corbin City, N.J., near Cape May, and an auction catalog listing for another site he bid on. (Photo by Richard Perry/The New York Times)(pg. 1); THE FAMILY -- Mahboob and Samina Awan with their sons, Fahad, left, and Mujtaba. (Photo by Richard Perry/The

New York Times); SOLD! The LandAuction sale in October, held at the Brooklyn Marriott. "You're a horse in the race!" the auctioneer yelled.; MANY DOLLARS, MANY DREAMS -- A LandAuction sale of properties last October; among bidders was Mahboob Awan, with mustache, in the second row from the back, facing the camera. (Photos by Above, below left and bottom, Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times)(pg. 8)

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