

I Wish I Was An Only Child – Ahir and Tash Shah

[Guitar and flute sounds]

[People talking in background]

RACHEL MASON: Welcome to 'I Wish I Was An Only Child', where we, Cath –

CATHY MASON: That's me.

RACHEL: And me, Rachel Mason, speak to other siblings about the dynamic of their relationship so we can see where we're going wrong.

CATHY: This week we spoke to comedian Ahir Shah and his sister, Tash.

RACHEL: Tash is 8 years older than Ahir.

CATHY: What would you've said about their relationship? She is incredibly protective of him in the sweetest way.

RACHEL: I thought he wouldn't... as a performer, he allowed her lots of space to talk.

CATHY: Yes he did!

RACHEL: Which I wasn't necessarily prepared for.

CATHY: That's interesting. Yeah.

RACHEL: And maybe that's again because she's the older sibling so that dynamic is there.

CATHY: No, he felt quite... a lot less ego-led than a lot of performers.

RACHEL: Might be.

CATHY: Incredibly articulate, incredibly um... in tune with each other and their own –

RACHEL: She's also got really nice hair like me, which I think –

CATHY: Of course she has.

RACHEL: I need to get that in there.

CATHY: Why –

RACHEL: Because that is how we sum up our relationship.

CATHY: Yeah.

RACHEL: You've always said I've got the nice hair. Yours is pubic hair.

CATHY: I've basically got pubic hair on my head.

RACHEL: And obviously he didn't have pubic hair, but he had curly hair, wavy hair. And she had, as was common –

CATHY: Timotei advert hair.

RACHEL: Yeah.

[Flute sounds]

CATHY: Who's the funniest of the two of you?

AHIR SHAH: My sister.

TASH SHAH: [gasps] What? [laughs]

CATHY: Go on, explain.

AHIR: Well, it's just that I'm better at writing comedy because it would be fucking weird if I wasn't [laughs]. I would much rather – at a dinner party, I would much rather be listening to Didi than talking myself.

CATHY: Does that surprise you, Tash?

TASH: Um... you... I'm not surprised by it because you've said it. You've mentioned it to me before. I love that you think that I'm the most funny one out of the two of us! I'm down with that. [laughs] I think I'm really funny so that's great because it suits me –

AHIR: To the point that I like... I will quote her in like, when I'm talking to friends generally. And there will often be like, 'oh, this reminds me of this really funny thing that Didi said,' and go down that story and everything like... she's my go-to like quotable person.

CATHY: So did you really make each other laugh when you were younger?

TASH: Yeah.

AHIR: Well you used to have... when you were a teenager, you had that whiteboard in your room that you would –

TASH: Oh yeah.

AHIR: Do you remember? You would write down like the names of albums that you wanted to get. And then you had a little thing that was like, ‘Mum, Dad, Ahir’ and like funny quotes that we’d said.

TASH: Funnies, yeah.

CATHY: Aw!

AHIR: That would be in your room the whole time.

TASH: Yeah, no we really... we really did. And I know lots of siblings have that thing where it’s like they say, ‘oh, we make each other laugh in a way that no one else gets.’ And I’m sure – I’m guessing you guys have that. Do you have that?

RACHEL: Yeah, absolutely.

CATHY: Yeah.

RACHEL: Yeah, that shared history –

TASH: And it’s just the two of you. But I remember once my best friend from uni saying to me, ‘you guys laugh in exactly the same way. You laugh with your whole body.’ And we just have – and I

feel like that's sort of one thing that links us quite nicely in terms of just the way we respond to humour. No one makes me laugh like Ahir does. And we find the same completely obscure... the thing that everyone else in the room missed, we will both, you know... that whole DNA thing. We just... we both find that exact way that that thing was delivered, or you know, presented, to be as hysterical as the other person. And so it's annoying, though, that you have such an annoying laugh.

[All laugh]

AHIR: We were once at a comedy show, and at the interval an old woman who was sat in front of us turned back to look at me and said, 'oh, so you're the laugher.'

CATHY: [gasps]

RACHEL: Oh, that's horrible!

AHIR: And internally, I was like, 'motherfucker! It's a comedy show! What do you want me to do?'

[Flute sounds]

RACHEL: So can we just have a bit more in terms of background on where you grew up and how you grew up?

CATHY: How you grew up?

RACHEL: Well, parents still together? Parents divorced? How many siblings?

CATHY: Grew up that way.

TASH: Yeah, together. We grew up in Wembley, um, but I was born in the States so I – you know, there’s a big age gap between us. So I was, um, sort of 0-8 in a completely different place and then we moved back to England. And we lived in Wembley. Fairly lovely detached house with both our parents. But I mean... but Wembley still. Um, [laughs] but still Wembley.

CATHY: Oh, why were you in the States?

TASH: My parents um... my mum actually came to the UK when she was about 11, so she grew up in the UK. But they both... after getting married, they both moved to the States. It’s a whole story and it’s quite fun actually. But they – the short version is my dad was sort of like, ‘let’s go on an adventure.’ And that adventure took them to the strangest of places. They actually ended up living in Virginia in a place called Shenandoah Valley, which is really in the middle of absolutely nowhere, in a town called Goshen. And that’s where I was born and we lived there for a short amount of time, actually, before they moved to Chicago. And then we lived in Chicago until I was about 7 or 8.

RACHEL: Yeah, and then why did you move to Lon – England?

CATHY: Wembley.

RACHEL: Why Wembley?

TASH: Why Wembley [laughs]. My mum had – my mum grew up in Wembley.

AHIR: They went basically, uh, from – they were both born in India, went to Goshen, which is the opposite of India, and then

Wembley, which is the closest you can get to India without being in India.

[All laugh]

AHIR: So basically varying degrees of India around the entire thing!

RACHEL: Alright, and then I hear you came along?

AHIR: Yes, shockingly and unexpectedly.

RACHEL: Really shockingly and unexpectedly.

AHIR: Yeah.

TASH: Very much so. He's known as the total accident. Mum talks about you all the time [laughs].

AHIR: I overheard this for the first time when I was very young at my grandmother's house, uh, in London. Like Mum just offhandedly saying it to a friend and not realising that I was sort of scuttling around the room. And I remember just like running out of the room crying and Mum having to come and sort of reassure me that, 'no no no, we love you' and everything.

CATHY: Oh no!

TASH: Anyway. We love you anyway.

[All laugh]

CATHY: That's horrible! Aw!

RACHEL: They just wanted an only child.

TASH: Yeah, funnily enough I was an only child - that's what I said to Ahir, you know, when we talked about recording this podcast - for the first 8 years of my life. And I feel fairly certain Mum would've had more children. But, you know, being in the States and being sort of a little bit unsure about how things were going to pan out for them professionally and finances, etc., I think they sort of held off on growing the family. And then by the point in time they moved back and I was 8 years old, or 7 or whatever, they just thought, 'well, this is just not going to happen. May as well not try desperately to try to have another kid.' And therefore Ahir the accident appeared.

RACHEL: Yeah.

AHIR: Yeah, or rather when it got to 1990, they became fully aware that professionally and financially it probably it wasn't going to go the way they intended, so –

[All laugh]

AHIR: They were like, 'well, what else is there to do but fuck?'

CATHY: Maybe it's just the Wembley air. Maybe the Wembley air's just really sexy!

[Flute sounds]

CATHY: So hang on, Tash, how did you feel when he came along? Were you horrified?

TASH: Not at all. When he arrived, I had been – he obviously... Ahir was born December 28th, so right around Christmas time. And I had asked for a particular doll that sort of cried real tears. I –

CATHY: The one that wets the nappy and –

TASH: Why do children want these things? Awful. And I must've seen an ad for it and was like, 'I want that thing for Christmas.' And then Ahir was born and, you know, within two days I had absolutely no interest in this doll because I had a real life doll, you know? And one of my earliest memories is actually sort of running with him. I'd hold him like a rugby ball, sort of you know, and run up and down the stairs with him to sort of move him between downstairs, where my grandmother might be, and upstairs, where my mother might be. And I'd sort of transport him as like a rugby ball under my arm. And my grandfather would just scream like, 'Agangsha! Slow down!' And he'd be so scared that I was going to, you know, obviously really desperately badly injure this baby! But he, to me, was just a toy. He was a brand new, live human toy. So it was way better than any doll and I was super excited.

RACHEL: And that remained? It wasn't just for Christmas.

TASH: Yeah, oh absolutely. I – we'd, you know – even before sort of thinking about doing this, I remember saying to my husband, 'oh god, what are we even going to talk about?' Because it feels like it's almost – we just had a perfectly pleasant, lovely childhood. We just really like each other.

CATHY: Wow.

TASH: We... you know, there are of course sort of emotional tangents of that, but actually I was so stoked that he was around.

And it just meant that I could sort of hang out with this other person.

CATHY: Even though he was so much younger than you?

TASH: Even though he was so much younger. And I don't know whether there was a sort of maternal thing that kicked into me even at such a young age. But I really wanted to change the diapers. I really wanted to be responsible for lots of different things that my mum, you know, traditionally or historically would've been responsible for. I wanted to take care of him. Um, so I did a lot of that at age 8, you know, I sort of wanted to mother him as it were, you know, and I probably still feel a little of that now.

AHIR: Yeah.

CATHY: Aw!

AHIR: You still call me baby sometimes.

TASH: Yeah, he is my baby! [laughs] That's so lame.

RACHEL: Ahir, how does it feel to have a sister who was so maternally involved? I mean, that's amazing to be so involved.

AHIR: Yeah, well I mean of course, sort of, I wouldn't know it any other way.

RACHEL: Yeah.

AHIR: But I think a lot of it does have to do with the cultural background as well. And just the way a lot of Desi families are.

And like certainly in our school, everyone was very very close to their nuclear families and stuff. And it wasn't really until I got to university and started meeting a lot of white people that I met people who were entirely indifferent towards their siblings.

RACHEL: Hm.

CATHY: Right.

AHIR: And I was like, 'that's so weird!'

[Flute sounds]

AHIR: Between one another, I think the really nice thing that we had and that we still have is that sort of – despite the age gap and obviously despite the fact that Didi would be at university when I was just starting high school and then, you know, she would be in the world of work when I was still moving through that. We'd be at different stages of life inevitably, given the age difference. It always felt, from being a child, that we always had this one person who was there regardless of if we had any issues with our parents, or anything that was happening in the wider family, or in our personal lives or what have you. There was always this – this port of call was and is a constant, which I think is very very valuable. Um, to the extent that before recording this, I was speaking to my manager, who obviously Didi has known for several years as well. And he was saying to me that, 'the one worry I have, knowing the two of you, is that this could actually shape up to be quite a boring podcast.'

[All laugh]

TASH: I know, I thought that! I thought that.

AHIR: Because it's just going to be like, 'oh yeah, she's really good.' [laughs] It's like, is anyone interested in that? I don't know!

CATHY: But that's been the weird thing about doing the podcast. Because obviously we sort of want lots of dirt and grubbiness and terrible stories, but the people that do it are the ones that get on with their siblings.

RACHEL: Yeah, but we've unearthed some things?

[All laugh]

RACHEL: So how would you describe each other?

AHIR: Terrifyingly capable, needlessly anxious.

CATHY: Oh!

TASH: Oh my goodness, that's so lovely!

RACHEL: Tash, how would you describe Ahir?

TASH: Oh man, I mean that's just such a lovely, succinct description and like gives me lots to think about. And that sort of just, you know, someone who always just makes me think more. More and more and more about everything, um every single thing. I just – I don't have like a snippy, quick way of describing him. I would just talk for 25 hours about all the things I love about him. I just – he's just somebody who constantly makes me think in a way that pushes sort of everything I already thought. And then sort of guides it to a place that feels a lot more settled. And like I

can sort of explain things better to myself. I don't know, that's probably a –

CATHY: Is he like a therapist?

TASH: Um... I don't know that I go to him necessarily for that type of support or advice: 'there's this problem, can you help me fix it?' It's more just that organically, because of his interests and because of his work and his craft and his skills, he often just sort of quite naturally inspires you to think about something that you hadn't even considered before. And I think it's one of the reasons that I love his shows. And I really felt that it was the first time I'd seen stand-up comedy that I stepped out and I felt like it was a really funny sort of philosophy lecture, or something that makes you go, 'oh man, I'm going to think about that for another month, you know, until I sort of try and settle on a route myself.' And he sort of just brings that to our world all the time, I think. And it's just so impressive. I'm so impressed by him, actually. I was thinking about this this morning and again, sorry, it's not that exciting and juicy. But it's just –

CATHY: No, go. Go for it.

TASH: It's just like – I'm just trying to think, you know, if you would say what it is about him, you know, what's a really amazing thing about him. He's so disciplined and that – we're so different in that sense. I am not disciplined. I really am a little bit sort of – it's so sweet of you to say that I'm capable and all of this. And maybe this goes with the anxious bit, but I just – I'm sort of a bit more scatty and I'm a bit more haphazard and I'm a bit more – I feel a bit more sort of like I'll – I'm just a bit more, I think, all over the place. But you're so disciplined!

CATHY: What do you do, Tash?

TASH: Well I work for Spotify. And I've been working there for a decade, actually. So I've worked in lots of different capacities but in a marketing role, essentially. So um always a sort of more creative side. Um and yes, you need to be diligent at work and I am diligent at work. It's just when I think about the fact that Ahir is somebody who's self-employed and still, you know, works as hard as he does and has the ethic he does. I mean if I was a self-employed person, I would literally be homeless.

AHIR: [laughs] I don't –

TASH: I would.

AHIR: Well I don't think that's true. And I think that is – what is more the case is that you uh, you don't really have that sort of like brash arrogance, self-confidence that just allows you to like blow through things and be like, 'yes, obviously I can do this. I'm amazing. It'll be fine.' And everything. And the thing – you actually can do all of those things.

TASH: Maybe.

AHIR: But I think – I think it's just um... you know we all – we all sort of get conned by those people who are, you know, outwardly presenting of, 'yes! I will absolutely smash every element of this!' And I think that a lot of those people are, when it comes down to it, a lot less capable and just putting up a lot of front.

CATHY: Absolutely agree. Absolutely agree. It's the extroverts that get on generally. But you said Tash is anxiety driven. And you have

anxiety – you’re anxiety driven. Are you both – was there anxiety in the household as you were growing up?

AHIR: I think Didi’s more – Didi’s more the anxious one, I’m the more depressive one.

RACHEL: Sorry, hey, you keep calling different names. Lily, Didi –

AHIR: No, Didi. It’s always Didi. Didi just means sister. So I’ve –

RACHEL: Okay.

CATHY: Oh okay.

AHIR: I’ve never been angry enough at her to call her Agangsha, which is her full name.

CATHY: Ah.

RACHEL: Okay.

AHIR: I think if she does something that really infuriates me one day, I mean – ‘Agangsha!’ And she’ll know.

[All laugh]

RACHEL: Okay, so sorry, what would you –

CATHY: So the anxiety, just interesting. So you say you’ve got the depressive anxiety and you’ve got the anxiety anxiety.

TASH: I think you’re right. Oh god, I don’t know that I’ve really thought about this in this way. But I think you’re right in the way

that I sort of question things a lot. I'm sort of split. There are moments where I will be completely – you know, like moving to New York for two years and leaving Dylan, my husband, here. And I was like, 'I'll be back every three weeks'. Off I go to live in a different city for a couple of years. I made that decision –

CATHY: Without your husband?

TASH: Without my husband. And I made that decision over the course of two weeks. I literally said to my boss, 'should I do it? Do you reckon I could?' And it happened and by, you know, the next month I had essentially moved and had a flat and was living, you know, this pretty nice life. And so I'll do things that are spontaneous and strange in that way and I'll take the punt. But it's always around sort of... I feel like the reason I might do things like that is just because I see like a really fun component. You know, I think, 'that's going to be absolutely brilliant, a real laugh. I'll do it.' When it's really serious – when it's something serious, I probably will sort of mull over it way, way, way too much and create my own – probably – source of anxiety. And then maybe not act. And yes, Ahir has the more... yes, I guess it's a depressive anxiety, which sounds – is that what you'd call it, Ahir?

AHIR: I think also the useful thing is because the way we see the world, or the way we react to external things, isn't the same. Like it's useful that whenever I have a particular issue, I can call up Didi and she'll be able to say, 'okay, 1, 2, 3' –

TASH: Do this.

AHIR: Here is why you shouldn't be thinking of it in the way you're thinking of it.

TASH: Yeah.

AHIR: She'll be able to think about it in a way that's more healthy for me and then vice versa. She's able to call me and be like, 'oh, I'm pranging out about this thing.' And I'll say, 'well, have you considered it from this angle?' And we can sort of put those useful differences to work, in that sense. And I think also a lot of that just comes from – inherently from the level of comfort that you gain around someone from a lifetime spent –

RACHEL: Yeah.

CATHY: Totally.

AHIR: With them and around them, right? Like my sister is basically the only person I am wholly comfortable crying in front of.

TASH: Yeah. Yeah.

AHIR: When you were in Stockholm, working there for a little while, I remember last year, sort of in the Spring period, when I was going through a bit of a rough patch, and me just coming over and visiting you and letting it all out and for the first time properly doing an ugly cry about everything. And then you being able, very calmly, sat opposite me, be like, 'Yeah well what if we think about it like this?' And you're like, 'yes! That's exactly what I needed. Thank you!' It's great.

[Flute sounds]

CATHY: So you'll phone each other? If either of you have a problem, the first person you phone is your sibling?

TASH: Do you know? I would say no, actually. I don't know what you'd say, Ahir. I do –

CATHY: Yeah.

AHIR: No, it's –

TASH: It feels like we go to each other with really specific things. For example, I – if I'm having a thing with Dylan, if Dylan and I are in a bit of a funk and we're having – or we've had a fight, it's rare that I will phone you about that. And I was thinking, actually, that I – I think that's probably because I want you to feel like Dylan never does anything wrong because I want us to have this like lovely, perfect relationship.

CATHY: Oh, interesting.

TASH: And I don't ever want you to be upset with him.

AHIR: His nickname for me is dickhead! I –

[All laugh]

TASH: I mean you're very very close.

AHIR: I know this man isn't perfect! We are very close, yeah.

CATHY: Oh, you're very close?

AHIR: Yeah.

CATHY: Okay, okay.

AHIR: As I never tire of reminding him, Dylan's stag do was a very very nice time and he told me that he loved me, uh, before vomiting into a canal. And I'm like – the fact you said it before the vomiting in the canal, so it counts.

RACHEL: Yeah.

AHIR: And now you brotherly love me forever and you can't take it back, ha ha ha!

RACHEL: Definitely. But Tash, you don't want Ahir to see any – you want him to see a solid relationship with Dylan. You want him to feel secure. Is that what you're saying?

TASH: Do you know? Yeah. I do. I want him to think of my relationship as the one that's always just completely even-keeled, super – even though I know he's intelligent enough to know that there are always going to be bumps and everybody has bumps. And even though there have been moments when I've said to him, 'oh, we've had this really annoying fight and, you know, it's frustrating,' they're very few and far between. Because I just want him to feel that there is one. And it's funny because my mum and dad have, you know, an extraordinarily solid relationship in that they are, you know, they eloped to get married. You know, there was all this drama around that. And then, you know, we look to them as having led quite a romantic, silly little life, in terms of just flighty and –

RACHEL: And what was the elope – why did they elope? What's that about?

TASH: There are a couple of reasons. One because my dad was not the right kind of guy that my grandparents would've wanted my mum to marry.

RACHEL: Yeah.

TASH: First of all, she sort of met him on her own and it wasn't sort of something that families – that someone in the family had introduced her to, etc. So there was that. And you know, at the time he was a photographer and it was a bit like, 'well that's not a dentist or a doctor, so no.'

RACHEL: Mhm.

TASH: And secondly, I think – and sometimes I think more importantly as we get older, I think more importantly – because she was really just looking for an out of her quite strict household. And she met this guy who had lived in Hong Kong and, you know, she met him at quote unquote a house party, was like, 'yeah, you'll do. You know, you seem like a really kind of fun adventure. Completely away from my existing life, my quite boring' –

RACHEL: A way out.

TASH: A way out.

RACHEL: A way out.

TASH: Totally a way out. And because of that, they've had a pretty intense, strange relationship. But they do feel completely – it seems like they are totally obsessed with each other, even though they have –

CATHY: But why strange?

TASH: Strange in the sense that it wasn't super traditional. My mum, she was the primary breadwinner, so she was the person who had a really stable job, was a teacher – a fantastic teacher, you know. And sort of kept things ticking. Whilst we benefited from that in a really particular way, in that we spent so much time with our dad. We essentially had what we would now refer to as, you know, a stay at home dad.

RACHEL: Yeah.

CATHY: Hm.

TASH: But when that isn't the plan, when it wasn't that he had planned to be a stay at home dad, that brings with it its own complexities. And therefore –

CATHY: Of course.

TASH: So despite that tension – of which there was always tension, there was always sort of financial worries, and that was always a super prevalent, you know, thing growing up – they are obsessed with each other.

CATHY: Really? After how many years?

TASH: It's just crazy!

AHIR: You know, we can regard obsessed as a positive thing or a negative thing.

TASH: Yeah.

AHIR: And it is at varying times both.

TASH: Yes, yes. I think that's a really good –

AHIR: I would say that this is probably one of the, uh, main points of contention –

TASH: Yeah.

AHIR: That my sister and I have. Which is that... so for example, when we talk about will the other be the first port of call in every problem, that one has – well no, obviously not, because there are certain things that Didi would rather discuss with her husband or with her friends. There are things I'd rather discuss with my girlfriend or my friends and stuff like that. Like that's just the way things are normally.

The one, obviously, that we are definitely the first port of call for one another are our parents, who we have – again, very complicated relationship with, that has been somewhat elighted over the course of this conversation. And a lot of that is due to the fact that I think Didi quite understandably wants to present perhaps a rosier picture of the entire experience than is necessarily the case. And I appreciate that. And when, for example, we're talking to you or this is a relatively public – well, it is a public conversation ultimately – there are going to be things we're uncomfortable mentioning or wouldn't want to mention. Uh, but the thing – the thing that I think distinguishes our relationship is me having to be like, 'no no, it's just us now. There's no need for – there's no need to put on this thing, I was there too.'

[Flute sounds]

CATHY: Are they sort of the wild ones and you're the sort of straight ones? Is that what it is?

TASH: [laughs] I would say yes. I honestly think of them as... for example, that's why when I – and my dad, I feel like my dad is often our first port of call with lots of random things, like, 'should I do this? What do you think about this?' But they are, I mean I think of them as the wild ones. To answer your question, I – because when I made the decision, for example, to move to New York, I just don't know of many parents who'd be like, 'yes! You're of child bearing age, we have no grandchildren and you should definitely move away from your husband for two years.' And he was like, 'oh, brilliant! This is the best thing I've ever heard, you've ever done', you know? Because he just wants us to do nutty things. Like he wants us to sort of really live in a way that my mum doesn't sort of push us to do. My dad is the one who's like, 'you should go do this crazy thing I heard about, um, and just give it a shot.'

AHIR: Like I think in part it's because of the sort of like different things we sometimes need. Like our father is very good at like – he has total unshakeable faith in both of us, and everything. So it's always like, 'yes! Of course you should do that because you'll definitely smash it!' And that's like very very – yeah. And for you, obviously when you're talking about things like moving to New York or these sort of big decisions, that actually is I think in big part what you need to hear. Whereas often like when it's a case of – you know, think of the differences in our lives because of the fact of me being self-employed, for example. Quite often you really don't need to hear that person be like, 'yes! Definitely do it!

I can see absolutely no downside to this whatsoever!' And like yeah. So sometimes –

TASH: But he was like that! I mean he took you to comedy school, you know.

AHIR: Yeah yeah yeah.

TASH: He was the guy who was like, 'let's try and see. If you want to pursue this, go for it.' It may have, you know –

AHIR: Yeah for sure, for sure.

TASH: That's wild to me, that my dad – and to be frank, like this, you know, Indian guy who has sort of balked a little bit at tradition and ended up being without, you know, meaning to, being a stay at home dad, is the one who's going like, 'go and be a stand-up comedian, that would be cool!' You know. Super un-traditional. I mean we don't have any – we don't – none of our Indian friends' parents are like this. They're just not, you know.

RACHEL: What about traits you've got from your parents?

TASH: Any wild 'take a punt, go for it, who cares what happens' that I've got in me is my dad.

RACHEL: Yeah.

TASH: But I'm – I have, thank god, enough of the sensible streak that my mum has provided, which meant that any wild thing that I did, you know, was 95% of the time going to land fine. Whereas if my dad does a wild thing, it's really not even 50/50 [laughs].

AHIR: Yeah. My mother would check that the swimming pool was full of water before jumping off of the diving board, which uh –

[All laugh]

AHIR: My dad would be like, ‘eh, it’s a pool, they normally have water in them. Let’s go for it.’

[Flute sounds]

RACHEL: Okay, let’s get really deep: who is more likely to fall for a scam?

[All laugh]

TASH: Oh god, it’s probably me.

AHIR: Uh, I mean I’ve done the paid fringe before, so I think the answer’s already there.

[All laugh]

TASH: Oh that’s probably me, honestly. I think sort of the most positive thing of everything. So I’ll try and lean towards – ‘that’s probably – they’re probably in it for the right reasons and it’s probably a good thing.’ Thankfully I haven’t fallen for any, but –

AHIR: I got hustled out of £40 this summer by a scammer on the street.

CATHY: How?

AHIR: Uh, so – it was because – basically it was this dude – it was when lockdown had just eased and it was the first time I was going out, uh, for ages to do anything –

RACHEL: Big moment.

AHIR: Other than going for the food shop. Uh, and I was going to meet my friend Allie in a park and we were going to sit and have a beer and it was going to be absolutely lovely, glorious day. And this dude just stopped me on a street near and like claimed that, I don't know, he needed money to stop his car being clamped or something.

CATHY: Oh, that's a good one.

AHIR: But it had to be cash and I had to withdraw... it's all these things that when you look back on it, you're like, 'obviously that was going to' –

RACHEL: What?

AHIR: But I was so thrilled that I was outdoors.

CATHY: Oh no!

AHIR: And also because – I was like, 'sure!'

CATHY: 'What else do you need?'

AHIR: And uh, also – and this is like ludicrously naïve of me – but because he was a brown guy in his 40s, and I was like, 'he's not going to rip off a brother though, like come on, what's going on here.'

[All laugh]

TASH: Oh Ahir.

AHIR: Yeah, so who's more likely to fall for a scam? Me, because I can literally remember the last time I fell for a scam.

TASH: You did, yeah. I would never fall for something so ridiculous.

[Flute sounds]

CATHY: Do you ever fight? Ever? You don't, do you?

AHIR: Uh, I would say that the biggest point of contention for us for a long time was when I was a heavy smoker.

TASH: Yeah.

AHIR: And you very justifiably hated that. Um, and like at the time I would get annoyed about it because, bingo, drug addict.

[All laugh]

AHIR: Um and so I'd be like, 'uh, you're harshing my mellow.' Now I'm like, 'ah no, actually like, looking at someone you love slowly kill themselves is a really distressing thing.' So I can totally get on board with that.

TASH: That also – I actually think about it quite a lot. Because I think that actually comes down to a little bit of a control thing with me, in that – and this is me sort of self-diagnosing. But I think

that because of the way we grew up, and because of the way we were so close and I just – pretty much everything I did or said you believed or responded to in some positive way. And then you started smoking at the like – in high school. You know, you were older when you started smoking, right? I mean I think. And it was just like, ‘you’ve got to be kidding me!’ And I’m not one to be sort of – I’m not not naughty, do you know what I mean? Like have fun and do silly things. But smoking to me just felt like a really silly thing to pick up at that age. And so I think it actually in the beginning was more about the fact that I was saying, ‘hey, don’t do that man. It’s just kind of a silly thing to do,’ and you didn’t listen to me. Which was probably more frustrating for me than the fact that you were smoking, which makes me sound terrible. But –

AHIR: No, I think you were definitely, even if it was for the wrong reasons, you were doing the right thing, so it’s a –

CATHY: Didn’t it make you angry, Ahir?

AHIR: Uh, occasionally. But in a way that looking back you’re like, ‘well that was entirely unjustified.’

TASH: But even now, I – you don’t love it when I tell you anything about like vaping or smoking. You just shut down, basically.

AHIR: Yeah.

TASH: Because we –

CATHY: Does that make you angry, Tash, or –

TASH: Yes. [laughs]

CATHY: Okay, so come on, you do –

TASH: Well that's –

CATHY: Make us feel better!

RACHEL: That's not a real row, is it? It's just a minor – just –

CATHY: A silent row.

[Flute sounds]

TASH: We have a really different way of viewing our parents, I think, and our parents' relationship. And that sometimes causes a little bit of, you know, I will feel that they are doing something –

AHIR: Yeah, definitely.

TASH: For a particular reason, and Ahir will sort of shut me down and say like, 'no, you're being too sort of kind of emotional or this or that, or you're giving too much leeway,' and actually that I think we sometimes feel quite differently about. We've never had a blowout fight about it, but um... no, I think for me, yeah, it probably was the smoking thing to be honest. Um, I think that's probably the only time we've ever had a bit of a row.

AHIR: Yeah.

TASH: And even that, my solution was that I said I would become a vegetarian if you quit smoking because you were a vegetarian.

AHIR: Yeah.

CATHY: Aw.

AHIR: And that did – okay, here’s the thing with this. Uh [laughs] so Didi’s thing was, ‘I will become a vegetarian for a year if you stop smoking for a year.’ And I was just like, ‘that’s literally like – what can I do in response? Like this is something that I genuinely do think like is bad for the world.’

TASH: I did feel very clever.

AHIR: It was extremely clever. You absolutely Sherlocked me.

[Tash laughs]

AHIR: Uh, but then – and the first time that we met up, which was probably a couple of weeks into this whole thing, uh, I met up with you in Soho and you were just eating oysters [laughs]. You were like, ‘what? What’s wrong?’ I was like, ‘that counts! That counts! Stop eating those fucking oysters, put them down! Or you can have these, but then you have to stop.’

TASH: Pesky! [laughs]

AHIR: Right, um –

RACHEL: Did you stop? Did you stop then?

TASH: I did, yeah.

RACHEL: Did you –

TASH: I had – and then – and then I –

AHIR: But you don't actually eat much meat anymore right?
Either.

TASH: No, it did end up actually reducing how much meat I ate.
But yeah, the main reason actually was just to try and get him to
stop smoking. And it worked for that period of time, and then you
had a bad breakup and you went and started smoking.

AHIR: Well no, it wasn't that. It was – that particular time of
quitting ended when uh, when we were in Paris and were like –
and the stuff with the attacks there.

RACHEL: Ah yeah, I read about that.

AHIR: Yes, and the – the day after, I was just sat opposite my
then-girlfriend outside a café and was like, 'give me a cigarette,
people are trying to kill us with machine guns.'

RACHEL: Yeah.

TASH: That's right, that's right. Okay, so not a bad breakup. I
won't just uh – yeah.

RACHEL: We're trying to keep it light, but I just want to ask things
about like – Tash, how – when Ahir gets depressed, how that
makes you feel, how you cope with that.

TASH: Good question. It's funny because Ahir mentioned the time
we were in Stockholm and he had that massive cry. And I just
think – I think – what's funny is I think when I'm with you and you
have that type of a break – you know, an emotional breakdown or
you seem really really vulnerable, I actually think I – I can be a

little bit hard. I don't know if you would agree, but in those moments I'm quite, 'okay, but what are the three things we're going to do to change this, you know, turn this around?' And I'm not going to sit here and like let you wallow, and I'm not going to let you – yes, have a cry if you want to have a cry, but then like [snaps] come on, let's wrap this up and let's feel better and be better and try better, whatever.

AHIR: Yeah.

TASH: But actually when I'm not with him, and when I think about it, it actually crushes me that he could ever feel sad in any way. But when I'm with him, I want to show him just like, strength, you know?

AHIR: Yeah. Uh, I remember – it's sort of similar. Like when I was – at some point in my early 20s, I think I was coming home from a gig and we were texting. And I was like, 'oh, I died on my ass.' And I can't remember whether you texted me or you rang me or something, but you're like, 'are you alright? You –'

TASH: 'Oh shit.'

AHIR: 'Oh my god, like you –' And I was like, 'oh yeah, it's sort of something that, you know, cost of doing business sometimes'. And so I agree. It's when – when it's things that are happening to me, in principle on my own but in practice never really on my own just because there'll always be people around. And uh, it's easier to be worried about it when you're on the outside of it.

TASH: It's like you've chosen – you are somebody who, you know, you are emotional in a particular way, and it's – and I get worried, I'm a worrier. That's probably one of the things I would say about

me in terms of my own anxiety. A lot of my anxiety comes from just like being a bit worried about friends and family and are they going to be okay and is this going to be okay. And I think with Ahir, I – because I don't know how to fix it and I don't know how to manage it – other than just making sure he knows he has the space to come to me and that he is on top of things with like doctors and, you know, and being open about talking generally. Because I just don't have any control except for that bit, I think I just worry, you know, alone. I worry. And when I'm with him I want to show him just a side that's like, 'nope, we don't have any time for this. Like we have to be strong, we have to be better.'

CATHY: So it's the parental thing. It's the parental –

RACHEL: And the control. You used to, you know –

AHIR: And the control thing, yeah.

RACHEL: Yeah, yeah, definitely.

TASH: Well it's just you've chosen a career that terrifies me for your personality, you know?

CATHY: Why? Why? Because of failure?

TASH: Because it's very public when things go wrong, you know. You get a – like for example if he gets a bad review, which doesn't really happen, like a bad – he doesn't get bad reviews. But if he gets a review that's not perfect... I mean Ahir is – I don't know what anybody really knows about Ahir's sort of – how studious he was, but he's incredibly intelligent. Obviously he's incredibly intelligent, but he did really well at school. He was just a total nerd and got like a double first at Cambridge in politics. He's – so

when he gets – when he doesn't get a 5 star review, if he doesn't get a 4 star review, I worry that 3 stars is going to tank him. Which actually, I wish I didn't have to care about to be honest. I wish I didn't have to worry that, you know, every year you go through a cycle of putting yourself out there in such a vulnerable way. I mean we had a big chat – and the thing is I don't get cross with him. We don't have fights. But I think where there's tension in our relationship is when I feel that he is not really thinking about the emotional pressure and toll that it takes to do what he does. When he did 'Duffer', and you walk onto stage every day for an hour and you cry at the end of your show, and you talk about something that had such an emotional impact on you, that takes a huge toll on you. And I don't know whether that's the smartest thing to do, to choose to do every single day. And I get frustrated.

AHIR: But it literally was – it was a result of the conversation we had after I was done with that show, where you were like, 'you need to think very carefully' –

TASH: Yeah.

AHIR: Like given that this is going to be – between previews and touring and other festivals and what have you – this is going to be over like a year, 18 months of your life. And you need to think very carefully about whether you want to do that again. And that's why I did 'Dots' in the way I did it.

TASH: That's good to hear.

AHIR: Sort of intentionally didn't go, perhaps, as sort of like far down the mine as I could've done under different circumstances, uh, on your advice. And I think you were absolutely right.

TASH: Yeah, I just think you sometimes – I worry that you don't think about just how much the human body or the human mind is supposed to take. It's like you want to push and push and push and push. And I realise that as an artist, that's sort of like your bread and butter and it's where you see oftentimes the most genius and the most, you know... the most soul-bearing and the most spark that you see on stages is often when you're talking about something that is crushing you. But actually, that's terrifying for me. That that's what you want to get to.

RACHEL: There's a price to pay for that.

CATHY: Does that upset you, Ahir, to hear that? Or –

AHIR: Um no, not particularly, because I think that it sort of – it's something that Didi has expressed to me before and in these terms. And it's something that I have tried to act on because I think in large part she is right. I think that there's a certain amount that you will have to give over of yourself if you want to do a particular kind of stand-up or whatever it is that you want to do. And so I think we probably differ in the extent to which we think there's any way around this problem.

TASH: Right.

AHIR: But in acknowledging that there is a problem and there are ways to ameliorate it or make it worse –

TASH: Yeah.

AHIR: I certainly agree with her. And it took her talking to me about it to let me know that it existed in the first place.

TASH: I'm immensely proud of him for actually forging the path that he has and being as disciplined, you know, as he has been in order to make sure that he sort of has been as successful as he is. I'm so so proud of him. I am – that fear of, you know, what will a bad review do or, you know, is he going to write a show that is so emotionally taxing that it's going to actually cause some type of problem – that nervousness will always probably remain. But it's kind of good to hear you say that hearing me tell you, 'hey, maybe rethink this' actually works. Um, I might do that more often.
[laughs]

AHIR: Yeah. [laughs]

CATHY: We're coming to the end of this, but the thing we ask everybody, and you've sort of covered it –

RACHEL: Yeah, just answered it.

CATHY: But I'm going to say it again just in case there's anything else you want to add: is there anything you want to say to each other that you've never said before?

AHIR: Uh, no, not particularly. I think that the very nice thing about the relationship that we've always had is that – it's like the fact that I love you and I'm proud of you and I admire you and all of these things are like – they're not secrets to you, you know? These things are never – neither of us has ever kept any of that to ourselves. And a lot of that again is to do with the way we were raised and the openness with which we were always encouraged to say all of those things. So I don't know, like ... anything that I could say would've been heard –

RACHEL: Yeah, she knows. Yeah.

AHIR: For 30 years and will be heard for many many more years, um, because that's just the way that we are and the way that I hope we always will be, and know we always will be.

CATHY: Aw.

AHIR: Because I can't conceive of a circumstance where, you know... I can sooner see the sun running out.

[Guitar and flute sounds]

This has been a Little Wander production. Local artwork from Cathy Mason. Voice from Melanie Walters. Music from Rhodri Viney. With special thanks to Beth Forrest, Steve Pickup, Sam Roberts, Henry Widdicombe, and Jo Williams. Other podcasts from Little Wander include Here to Judge and Welcome to Spooktown. Subscribe now on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.

RACHEL: It's all about letting go, speaking –

CATHY: Your workshopping is horrific.

RACHEL: I know, it's awful.

