

I Wish I Was An Only Child – Konnie & Dr Rupa Huq

[Guitar and flute music]

RACHEL MASON: Welcome to I Wish I Was An Only Child, with me, Rachel Mason –

CATHY MASON: And me, Cathy Mason.

RACHEL: Where we speak to other siblings about the dynamic of their relationship to see where we're going wrong.

CATHY: This week, we spoke to presenter, screenwriter, and children's author Konnie Huq.

RACHEL: And her sister, Labour MP, columnist, and academic Dr Rupa Huq.

[Flute sounds]

RACHEL: Welcome! Hello!

CATHY: Welcome!

RACHEL: Thank you for doing this. Thank you for chatting to us.

CATHY: Thank you, thank you, thank you. The question we ask everybody at the beginning: who's the funniest?

KONNIE HUQ: Oh, definitely her.

DR RUPA HUQ: I would say actually her. Her? Which is –

KONNIE: This is the thing – you know what?

RUPA: This is exactly what it is.

KONNIE: We're a different type of funny. I'd say you're sort of more dry and acerbic, and I'm just warm and funny. [laughs] No, I don't know.

RUPA: Funny peculiar, I win that one.

KONNIE: You can judge throughout this podcast.

RUPA: Yeah, yeah.

KONNIE: By the end of it, you'll go, 'my gosh, Konnie is so unfunny! It's definitely Rupa that wins.'

RUPA: No, you'll be in hoots of laughter.

RACHEL: So – so – we should give it some context that there's three years between you. Three years' age difference, right? And you've got – there's a third sibling, Newton, yes? Who's the oldest.

KONNIE: Yes.

RACHEL: So Rupa, you're the middle child. Konnie, you're the youngest child. Just because, obviously, it gives the listeners – what – what we're really interested to hear about is it's obviously quite a female-heavy household. Female-led.

RUPA: Yeah, my poor dad. All those hormones.

KONNIE: I know.

RUPA: He was outnumbered big time.

CATHY: That's tough.

RACHEL: Yeah, so we're sort of interested in what – what your childhood was like.

RUPA: Yeah, I think it was kind of unconventional. But then who is normal? Who knows, you know? You always – what you grow up with and what you have around you, you think is normal. But, um, the older sister had been an only child for six years.

RACHEL: Hm.

RUPA: So then I came along and there was a little bit of friction. And I think there's stories of like, she's going up the stairs with a carving knife and like, 'I'm going to kill the baby!' I mean, I don't know how much of these have been a bit embellished over time, but there was the thing that – like I even remember when Konnie was little, one of my earliest memories is our old, old house, which is in my now-constituency. And I've knocked on the door when you're doing door knocking as an MP.

CATHY: Oh, wow!

RUPA: 'Hello, your representative – do you know, I used to live here! Can I see my room please?'

KONNIE: Did they let you in?

RUPA: Yeah, I've done that on two houses. Because like I've left my footprint around this borough. But anyway, um, I do remember loads of people came to see the baby, because Konnie didn't have a name at the beginning. And then my older sister was getting out these photo albums like, 'I was cute too!' And like showing these people.

CATHY: Aw!

RUPA: Even though I would've been three, I was thinking, 'oh, they've come to see – ' So yeah. So, um, I think if you have that role usurped and you're an only child for a long time –

RACHEL: Yeah.

RUPA: It maybe throws you. Whereas I was quite little when Konnie was born, so I do remember her being the baby, but I think because we're closer in age we were like, I don't know, howling toddler-type things at the same time.

RACHEL: Is that – how do you remember it, Konnie?

KONNIE: Yeah, I mean I – obviously I don't remember that far back, but I do – you know what you were saying about a very female household? Like I would definitely say, although – although we're all female, like I wouldn't really say any of us are very girly girls. And I know you're not supposed to sort of stereotype, but I'd say all three of us were quite – would you agree, Rup? Sort of like tomboys?

RUPA: Yeah. Lego, cycling, all of the things our sons like now.

KONNIE: Like none of us particularly sort of played with – I don't know, Barbie dolls. I mean, I'm really stereotyping, guys.

RUPA: You had Cindy, which was –

KONNIE: I did have a Cindy, which I was given, but I was –

RUPA: Yeah, but it wasn't your big toy, was it? I mean like, I don't know, it wasn't the thing you played with all the time. We had stuff in the house – but yeah, no, you're right. You're right.

KONNIE: And also, similarly, um, like, I don't know. We've – like my dad was – isn't – wasn't – isn't, uh, he's passed away, unfortunately – very alpha male. So it wasn't like he was sort of a football fan or anything like that. It never felt like a sort of problem that we were all girls and he was in a sort of house of hormones, um, oestrogen, you know. So I think from that point of view, like I wouldn't – you know, he's quite in – not 'in with the girls,' down – like it didn't feel annoying to him or anything. I don't think he minded.

RUPA: Yeah. My mum wanted boys more, actually, to be honest. She used to call us like the equivalent of the word 'son'. [laughs]

RACHEL: Really?

RUPA: বেটা. Yeah, so we were – all three she called us. And I think, um, my dad actually has, um, told the story that – because in those days men weren't at the birth. And so he would be – he worked, um, when we were very little but when he changed jobs and things, he was at the Prudential Insurance company in Holborn and he would go on the Central Line from Hanger Lane everyday. And he would phone in on, I guess the phonebox or

whatever, and say, 'what was it?' And my mum would be saying, [cries] 'another girl!'

KONNIE: 'Oh no!'

RUPA: He was like, 'great, bring it on!' And he was quite an original, um, sort of archetypal 'new man' because he changed nappies and stuff before that was done, and especially in our culture maybe even more so. So – and he really loved babies. Like, um, you know, all our kids, he really played with them all the time and stuff.

RACHEL: Yeah.

KONNIE: It's funny, actually, because my mum also had a daughter that passed away very very young – before me and Rup were on the scene – and a miscarriage. And they were both girls as well. So it would've been five –

RUPA: I think, Konnie, actually it's two in between me and our older sister. That's why there was the gap. And when we go to Bangladesh, they're buried there because I think they shipped them over there for burial.

RACHEL: Oh, wow.

RUPA: So in the family grave there are two little girls. One actually came home and had a birth certificate, um, and the other one was a sort of stillbirth, you know, as a baby.

RACHEL: Yeah.

RUPA: So yeah, so that – and apparently my dad had some big old, um, sort of – I don't know, postnatal depression thing. And my mum was always the more practical, pull yourself together –

KONNIE: Get on with it.

RUPA: Sort of thing.

CATHY: So were they – were their roles quite different? Was your dad sort of more maternal and your mum more paternal?

RUPA: Do you know my mum passed her driving test. They started at the same time learning, and then my dad couldn't be arsed and gave up driving. And my mum passed. And when I was a baby – so again, another lady who's my now-constituent who we grew up calling Auntie Marjorie – and that's not just an Asian thing, but I think in the 70s you did – and he was Uncle Peter –

RACHEL: We had that.

RUPA: Right. And when I was a baby apparently she would be left with me while my mum was learning to drive. And so in the 70s we would go to – another neighbour had a house in Exmoor. And so that was our idea of a holiday. We never went anywhere because it was too expensive to go. Airline tickets to go to foreign places or Bangladesh were a lot then. I don't think many carriers did it. Later in the 90s, the Middle Eastern companies came.

But anyway, the point is, yeah, in the 70s we would drive to Exmoor. My mum driving, my dad reading the map, getting us lost, my mum getting infuriated. And a woman in a sari – because she was – she wore the traditional kind of gear in those days. So it

was an odd sight to see, do you know what I mean? For the general public. Anyway –

RACHEL: Yeah.

RUPA: But they're both no longer with us, which is very sad, and we both – all three of us miss them everyday.

RACHEL: Yeah.

CATHY: And was there parental favouritism?

KONNIE: I do think I was the baby of the family. Like, you know, the youngest always gets a bit of, you know, gets away with murder more than the others. Um, and I guess, you know, being the oldest for six years, a solo artist essentially, my eldest sister obviously had a lot of sort of pampering before we came on the scene. So I'd say sort of, I don't know, Rup was probably the one that got the raw deal, really.

CATHY: Are you the classically ignored middle child?

RUPA: Middle child syndrome. You're not anything special, you're not the first born –

CATHY: Exactly.

RUPA: You're not the baby, you're just the stuck in the middle one. Although Konnie has also – they got poorer every child kind of thing. The Huq family fortunes were draining away. So Konnie always points out she had the least photographs.

KONNIE: Oh yeah, that's true.

CATHY: Right. That's interesting.

KONNIE: There's hardly any.

RUPA: Well, not – maybe even not for a financial thing, but just like, novelty's worn off and you've got two others to deal with so you're not – and in those days it was a proper camera that you had to develop the negatives and all that stuff. Not now, on a phone I suppose that's easier.

KONNIE: Also sort of working in the media now, often you do stuff and they ask you like, 'can we have photos of when you were a baby?' And there's like only one. I have to wheel out the same – the same photo.

RACHEL: Oh, that's sad.

CATHY: That's really sad.

RACHEL: That is sad.

RUPA: Two, come on.

KONNIE: Yeah, no no. I mean, actually –

RUPA: Don't exaggerate!

KONNIE: In later life we found some slides, didn't we?

RUPA: That's true.

KONNIE: Do you remember those slides?

RUPA: From a like carousel thing.

KONNIE: And it – yeah. And it was really like these Kodak little slides for a slide projector. And they had some baby photos of me, so I got a new slew.

RUPA: Yeah.

KONNIE: You know, a few years down the line, which was quite exciting. Um, but I got all the hand me down clothes. That's for sure. Like I'd always be wearing –

RUPA: I had them too.

KONNIE: Yeah, that's true.

RACHEL: Alright, so you – you got them third-hand. Third-hand, oh dear.

KONNIE: Yeah.

RUPA: And – and Konnie, that's your thing now. It's gone, isn't it? What is it? Is it – exactly.

KONNIE: It's done me proud.

RUPA: That's interesting, it has.

KONNIE: Because, you know, I don't need fancy clobber. I'm quite happy to go around scrappy.

[Flute sounds]

CATHY: Was Newton a – quite maternal with you both?

RACHEL: Because of the age gap, you mean?

CATHY: Yeah.

KONNIE: Not really, because she was nine years older. Like she went off to uni sort of when I was what, nine or whatever? She started architecture, which is a really long –

RUPA: Yeah.

KONNIE: And she finished it, sorry. I made out like she started but she didn't – so sort of really in those sort of – in my years from about nine upwards, it was sort of she –

RUPA: Yeah, she would in the holidays take us to ice skating in Richmond. Doesn't exist anymore. But stuff like that.

KONNIE: She took us to Madonna. The Madonna gig.

RACHEL: Wow.

KONNIE: And actually, um, she took us to the first – because when I – when I got my first job in TV, we – us three sisters had sort of just gone out on a day out, essentially, to these open auditions. And like so it was – she – she and Rup, I guess, took us. I mean I guess I was sort of 16 by then anyway, but yeah. Madonna concert definitely.

RUPA: Yeah, she took me to a Red Wedge concert with Billy Bragg on Clapham Common. Again, I was – I don't know, I guess I was 13 or 14. She was 20 or something like that.

RACHEL: Amazing. Meanwhile you were introducing me to – did you – you introduced me to fairly good music? I can't remember.

CATHY: I doubt it.

RACHEL: No no, okay.

CATHY: I doubt it. But how did you get on as kids?

KONNIE: Um... I think – I mean, I think, like I said, because she was a bit older, Newton, then she was sort of – I do remember like I think, 'oh, she's' – to me sometimes it almost felt like, 'she's so cool and she's a grown-up.' And she like had – because her bedroom, essentially she had another room you go through to get to it, and you – you went up the staircase and you turned right to get to her bedroom, walking through another, and you turn left to go to the rest of the house. So almost she sort of had her own wing, it felt like.

CATHY: Oh, right.

KONNIE: And she – she like – I would say, like I was into pop music from a very early age because she, you know, was into I don't know, whatever. Spandau Ballet or, you know, whatever it was at the time. Culture Club and Smash Hits and Just 17. And, you know, she'd have the song lyrics and all the magazines. And so from quite a young age, I think I was into fashion and music just because of having an older sister. And in sixth form at school, you wore your own clothes as well.

RUPA: Well, your uniform is your own clothes as well, just –

KONNIE: Yes, but yeah, you're –

CATHY: Borrow the uniform.

KONNIE: And I remember, you know, when she turned 16. So I would've only been – what, my gosh, I should be able to do my – 7 or whatever. So yeah, I was 7 and she was already sort of like a grown-up because she was a sixth former wearing trendy clothes to school, and – so I think I grew up a lot faster. Not a lot faster, but I was a lot more into sort of popular culture from a young age.

RACHEL: And how amazing that you had – because you all went to the same school, didn't you?

RUPA: Yeah, but we didn't completely overlap, though.

RACHEL: Oh yes.

RUPA: Um, yeah. I think there were always two at one time. We never had three at one.

KONNIE: Yeah, so she left.

RACHEL: But that's still lovely to be able to have –

KONNIE: Yeah.

RACHEL: We went to separate schools. But did – and it sounded like the school, I think you'd said somewhere that it was very

much, 'girls can do anything.' So it – it sounded like an amazing school.

KONNIE: Do you know what? It was – because we recently did, which was quite fun, didn't we? We all three of us did an interview for the 'Old Girls' magazine.

RACHEL: Which is what I read, yeah.

KONNIE: Um, but yeah. It was – yeah, the school was, yeah. Because I do think going to an all girls' school, I think the one thing that's really good is you're not sort of competing. So it helps you to sort of be a bit more confident, or a bit more – like you were saying, the school did encourage that. And you're not sort of as inhibited, I think. Especially being an Asian girl in – back in those days at school. Where you can almost sort of be a bit invisible or in the group of the Asian girls or whatever. Because things weren't as inclusive and diverse. I think that that, you know, that sort of helped us all do okay. I'm not – would you agree, Rup?

RUPA: Um, I mean, the school certainly, um – so I have to go there nowadays as a dignitary. Like to give out certificate and things as the local MP.

KONNIE: You have to be careful what you say, then.

RACHEL: Yeah.

CATHY: Oh no, we're not going to get the truth.

RUPA: Yeah. So I mean, when people say, 'oh, what's that school like?' I'm like, 'I went there in 1983, I don't know if I can actually, you know, assess what it's like now.'

RACHEL: Yeah.

RUPA: But, um –

KONNIE: It's a lot better now, actually, then when we went.

RUPA: Yeah, it's got a swimming pool. I think in those days it was a bit rickety, wasn't it? And like they've got new buildings. It's unrecognisable, really.

KONNIE: Yeah, and it wasn't considered a very good – I mean, we actually, in our year, so – because we both ended up going to Oxbridge. But that was quite outlier for our school at that time I think.

RUPA: I mean with my sister's generation, going away anywhere was, um, radical for a sort of Asian person. Uh, which she didn't, to be honest, and she could've, but she stayed in London. And I remember even when I got into Cambridge, my mum was, um, really upset. Because she'd have rather I'd have gone to LSE on the tube everyday.

RACHEL: Really?

RUPA: I mean she got over it when she saw the amazing buildings and everything.

KONNIE: Yeah.

RUPA: But um, I think the – it felt like growing up, to be honest. The dynamic was there's always two against one in a fight. So there's never any equilibrium. So Konnie and Newton were the more trendy ones. So sometimes it was them two like, 'oh, you're so square, Rupa.' Or sometimes it was me and Konnie saying, 'oh, you're so old.' Or sometimes me and Newton saying, 'oh, you're so young.' So it mixed around.

CATHY: So I was going to say, because Konnie, if you were looking up to Newton as being sort of cool and you were following her, what were you doing with Newton, Rupa? How were you feeling? Were you resentful of her or was it –

RUPA: No, I remember thinking actually I was lucky that I had – because again, sort of, um, our parents couldn't help with certain homework because they hadn't been in that system. So like I remember in 1982 we went on a school trip to the Isle of Wight and that was my first time away from home sort of thing. And I had my sister's Isle of Wight project and I just basically plagiarised the whole thing. Um, but we added my own ideas and then won a prize for like the best Isle of Wight project.

RACHEL: Oh wow.

RUPA: Because I was taking her version and combining it with my own stuff.

RACHEL: Yeah.

RUPA: And I thought I was so lucky I'd got an older sister.

RACHEL: That's brilliant. I love that. So what about –

RUPA: It must've been harder for her, do you know what I mean? Because no one could help her with French or whatever because – yeah.

RACHEL: Yeah. And also, being the oldest she had to pave the way, didn't she? So –

RUPA: Exactly.

RACHEL: Always the hardest.

KONNIE: I was the same at uni. I did a dissertation really similar to Rupa's. And like Rupa really helped me with my dissertation and then I added my own stuff and then I got a first for it.

RACHEL: Oh, that's brilliant.

CATHY: Brilliant.

RACHEL: That's how it should work.

CATHY: That's exactly how it should work.

RACHEL: So – but you all fundamentally got on. So what about some awful rows? Do you remember any really bad ones?

KONNIE: Do you know what? Am I imagining this? No, I can't be imagining this. I remember this quite clearly. That in – I think it was in your bedroom, Rup, for a while there were two twin beds.

RUPA: Hm, I think you're right. I think it was like quite a big room and they had stuff that they couldn't put anywhere else.

KONNIE: I would sometimes lie across the gap.

RUPA: Yeah.

KONNIE: And everyone would climb across me like a bridge, which is – [laughs]

CATHY: Why?

KONNIE: And it scarred me for life! Just because it seemed like a fun thing and I'm the youngest, obviously. So it's like – do you see what I mean?

RUPA: Yeah. Yeah.

KONNIE: So like, it's a – there's a gap between the two beds and I'm lying across and then they'd go from one bed to the other.

RUPA: Loads of stuff my brain has blocked out, I think.

KONNIE: Yeah.

RUPA: Including any unhappy moments.

CATHY: Really? That's interesting. So you don't remember hating each other?

KONNIE: I don't remember any –

RUPA: Maybe momentarily but not – yeah. Not really.

KONNIE: Do you know what I do remember? Is that my mum, like they would never – my mum and my dad would never get very

angry or like – it was quite a sort of pacifist household. But Rup, do you remember?

RUPA: My dad was very placid as well.

KONNIE: Yeah, he was the softer.

RUPA: I think if he was angry, he would speak in English.

CATHY: Oh really? Right.

RUPA: That was if he was serious.

CATHY: Yeah yeah yeah yeah.

RUPA: He would've sort of switched it. But we – they spoke Bengali in our house. And again people found that weird when they came around. We answered in English.

KONNIE: Yes.

RUPA: And completely everyone knew what the other one was saying and there's nothing we could say that they wouldn't know and vice versa. I mean even if there was some vocabulary they'd, um, like some new term they didn't know, they would know from the context what we meant. So I think, um, yeah. We had this weird bilingual thing, and when we went in 1989 to Bangladesh all our cousins thought we were really weird because we could speak it but like in an English accent.

KONNIE: Oh yeah. They would laugh at us when we tried to say things in Bengali because our accents were so terrible.

CATHY: Oh wow.

RUPA: But we had the words.

KONNIE: Yeah.

RUPA: We did know the stuff. But just –

RACHEL: Yeah.

CATHY: Yeah.

RACHEL: Yeah. And – and so who – who, um, got in trouble most out of you two, Rupa and Konnie? Who –

KONNIE: I would say – oh, right, out of us two. I – I mean I remember Newton getting in trouble most. Because we were younger and she would like go out. Like she got – one day, do you remember, Rup? When we were in the house and we heard like a screech?

RUPA: Yes, I do.

KONNIE: Crash and cracking glass.

RUPA: Yeah.

KONNIE: And like then my mum was like, 'where's Newton? Where's Newton? Where's Newton?' And like two seconds before she had been in her bedroom. And I was like, 'she's in her bedroom.' But only she'd run out to go out to a party or something and got run over.

RUPA: I do remember this, actually.

RACHEL: Oh no.

RUPA: Yeah.

KONNIE: And I was like, 'it can't be! She was in her bedroom two seconds ago.' But literally, yeah. And we could – do you remember? You actually heard the screech of brakes and the –

RUPA: I do remember this. It was about like 1984 or something.

KONNIE: It was so funny!

CATHY: That's terrible.

KONNIE: I put it in my second Cookie book. Because like the kids' books that I write are sort of based on us three. And so I put about when she gets run over and, uh, yeah. There's other things like my middle – the middle sister in that is really into politics. And Rup was always really into politics. Like –

CATHY: From a young age?

KONNIE: Yeah.

RUPA: From the Neil Kinnock days I think. He would – all these loser speeches he would do. 'I warned you if the conservatives win! You must never be old and never be young and never be' – and I thought, 'ooh, this is quite stirring stuff.'

KONNIE: Yeah, she wore red socks to school everyday because of her Labour –

RUPA: They were regulation colour.

KONNIE: Yeah yeah, they were.

RUPA: I think they were navy or red but nobody went for the red option.

KONNIE: But everyone wore navy and she wore red. Um, uh –

CATHY: Can I just find out the end of the running over story, please? I – I won't sleep. Was she alright?

RUPA: Did she go to hospital? I think she went to hospital.

KONNIE: She did go to hospital. She'd broken her pelvis and then she'd got –

CATHY: That's quite bad.

RACHEL: Yeah.

KONNIE: Yeah, she – um, and she was on crutches for ages. Um, but she had really nice wooden crutches, not the ugly metal ones. And I remember like she looked really cool and trendy. She always seemed just cool and trendy.

CATHY: So Konnie, did you go and break your pelvis to copy?

KONNIE: Uh, no. No, definitely not.

[Flute sounds]

RUPA: And I think I was the square one.

KONNIE: You're definitely the introvert. Rupa's definitely the introvert.

RUPA: Yeah. Yeah yeah. I amassed a huge collection of vinyl records and things like that and –

KONNIE: Yeah.

RACHEL: And didn't – didn't have many friends? What else? What else?

RUPA: Um [laughs] you know me too well, don't you?

KONNIE: You had your group of friends, didn't you? That you –

RUPA: I think –

KONNIE: Wouldn't you say?

RUPA: Yeah, I mean – I don't know. I was the only one who had a Saturday job, though, wasn't I? Oh, no, did you have a Saturday job, Konnie?

KONNIE: I fitted shoes in Russell and Bromley Ealing Broadway location, and –

RUPA: Oh, okay. Because Rafi doesn't have one. I keep saying, 'when I was your age, I had a brown pinafore in WH Smiths every Saturday.'

RACHEL: Uh, I worked in a shoe shop.

RUPA: Oh, did you?

RACHEL: Yeah, I did. And I'm embarrassed because you'd know it was – was it Simpson's or something? I can't remember. Anyway.

KONNIE: Oh.

RACHEL: It was like – it doesn't exist anymore.

KONNIE: Oh, no, it's Stead & Simpson. It's called Stead & Simpson.

CATHY: Yes.

RACHEL: Yes. Yeah.

RUPA: Stead & Simpson, yeah.

RACHEL: I loved it in Cheltenham because basically I would just wait for the like donut break. That was the highlight. Simple as that. And – but I loved – you did – you – and I worked in Cheltenham Ladies College. Cleaning and cooking, which was quite impressive.

KONNIE: Oh, I scooped ice creams as well.

CATHY: You scooped up what?

KONNIE: Ice creams. I started on a cart in Ealing Broadway Shopping Centre. Proper rolled out the ice cream cart. But I also then did a –

RUPA: You got poached.

KONNIE: Well, no, I wasn't poached. It was just a coincidence. I got a job at Leicester Square Haagen-Dazs as well. So, anyway –

RACHEL: So – but talking of jobs, did you – did – Konnie, did you think you, Rupa, would end up doing what she's doing and vice versa? You'd – well, she was always into politics, I suppose. With the red socks, so –

KONNIE: Yeah, I mean, yeah. Very young, like Rupa was into politics. And then, you know, quite early on you were an MEP candidate. And then you were a candidate in – was it Becken – Amersham and Chesham. In like a real Tory safe seat, um, she was a Labour candidate before she became our MP. Can I just say we moved to this constituency before she became MP? Um –

RUPA: So I can't be horrible about her. There's two votes in that house.

RACHEL: Yeah, that's true.

CATHY: Exactly.

RACHEL: Got to be careful.

KONNIE: And the rest. I know people.

RACHEL: And Rupa, what about Konnie?

RUPA: Well, do you know? Actually, a Labour MP colleague of mine who must be the same year as Konnie, 1975, the other night Whatsapped me these pictures of Konnie on 'Newsround'. In fact it was the 1992 general election. And both he and Konnie were

interviewing Neil Kinnock, because they chose – he’s a Scottish MP. He’s a Scottish Labour MP. Ian Murray, he’s a good friend, actually. He said, ‘look what I found.’ And there’s these pictures of Konnie and him. He’s in a tie. He looks really sweet and angelic. And Konnie looks a bit bored. And I look completely pissed off. Because I was the adult. So again, taking on the Newton mantle, my parents worked all the hours god sends or whatever. Like they had to have an adult to go with you to the ‘Newsround’ interview. And Krishnan Guru-Murthy was the presenter but he’s not in the picture. But, um, yeah. So again, that was early on. Konnie, how old were you in 1992? Pretty little.

KONNIE: Um, that’s a good question. How old was I in 19 –

RUPA: A teenager or something.

KONNIE: Uh, I would’ve been – yeah, 15.

RUPA: Because I was actually voting in that election. I think that was my first time I was allowed to vote.

RACHEL: But – but Rupa, were you frustrated because you were the chaperone? Is that what you’re saying?

RUPA: No, I thought it was quite good. We went to Pizza Express as well so we got a free pizza.

RACHEL: Great.

KONNIE: Yeah!

RUPA: I was home from the holidays in Cambridge, I think. And I think my mum said, 'oh, someone has to take Konnie to this thing.'

RACHEL: Right.

RUPA: 'Because she's not 16 or something, or 18 or whatever. Can you do it?' And so yeah, we got a free pizza.

KONNIE: Yeah, and –

RUPA: And actually, Ian Murray said – I said, 'didn't we go to Pizza Express?' He said, 'I was shocked that Krishnan Guru-Murthy had a pizza with an egg on it. I couldn't get the concept.'

CATHY: That is weird. That's not right.

[All laugh]

KONNIE: In those days it was weird, yeah. Fiorentina. Um –

RUPA: Yeah, yeah, venison pizza!

CATHY: Ugh.

KONNIE: It was Julie Etchingham as well, who was the then presenter that had been on 'Newsround' for ages and ages and ages.

RUPA: Oh really?

KONNIE: I think, yeah. So now you're saying I'm really – you're making me think, 'am I imagining this?' But yeah –

RUPA: He's got these funny pictures and I look really frizzy-haired and just really sulky. And Konnie's looking down and he just is looking glowingly at Neil Kinnock.

KONNIE: I was interviewing Neil Kinnock on behalf of the Green Party. And he was on behalf of the Labour Party, Ian Murray. So there you go.

[Flute sounds]

CATHY: Have you ever been embarrassed by each other?

RACHEL: Oh, I was going to ask that.

RUPA: Constantly.

CATHY: Oh, go on then.

RUPA: Constantly she's embarrassed by me.

KONNIE: No!

CATHY: Really?

KONNIE: Never!

CATHY: Come on, we want stories.

RUPA: I remember when – okay, this could be long, though. I don't know if I can take a long routed story.

CATHY: No, keep going. No no, do it. Do it.

RUPA: Um, I'm just thinking how to condense it. Um –

KONNIE: She's thinking how to say it tactfully so that she doesn't spoil sisterly relations for life.

[All laugh]

RUPA: Um, I once ended up sitting in on a John Peel broadcast because – this is the late DJ. Um –

KONNIE: They know John Peel.

RACHEL: I know John Peel, we know John Peel.

RUPA: You know who I'm talking about? Okay.

CATHY: Love John Peel.

RUPA: Right, yes.

KONNIE: They look younger than they are, Rup. They're – they're on a par with us.

RUPA: They're half our age. They're half my age, Konnie!

CATHY: I'm obsessed – I'm obsessed with The Fall. I'm obsessed with The Fall.

KONNIE: Oh really?

CATHY: Yeah, of course.

RACHEL: Well, you two can talk music in a minute.

CATHY: We can talk – we can talk so much music.

RUPA: Oh well, which year of Fall? There's a lot of Fall. 70s, 80s, 90s.

CATHY: Oh, do you know what? I like – I like all of it. I mean, we've been to hundreds of Fall gigs and they're just – I miss them so badly.

RUPA: Oh, I've seen them a few times.

CATHY: They're the best – come on, how good are they? Anyway, go on.

RUPA: So 1992 –

CATHY: Yeah.

RUPA: I was actually, for the Labour Party, stewarding at a Neil Young concert. So the Labour Party set up a steward's arm of Labour students. And um, I guess we donated our fee. But we didn't know because we thought it was great to get into a concert for free. And so the stewarding force were all Labour students. And I bumped into – I wandered into the backstage area and found John Peel. And said, 'John, would you be interested in my Cambridge University dissertation on the politics of rave?'

RACHEL: No.

RUPA: And he said, 'ask me sometime when I'm not pissed and looking for my wife and children.' And he wrote down his number.

CATHY: No!

RUPA: And so I rang it. I was a bit scared of what to do with it for a while. And it was in the days of landlines and some kid answered it. And I said, 'oh hi, can I talk to John please?' And he went, 'Dad! Dad! Someone on the phone for you!' And then he's like, 'yes, what can I do for you?' And um, I thought asking about the dissertation sounds a bit boring. And I said, 'can I come and sit in on the show?' Because he used to sometimes have people like saying, 'my friend bla bla's just won the pass and he's here today.' And he said, 'well, it's not a spectator sport. It's just an old bloke putting on records. But if you must.'

CATHY: Oh, that's lovely!

RACHEL: And did you go?

RUPA: Yeah. And then I ended up recording a jingle in Bengali on his show. Because just before it started, he said, 'do you know any other languages?' And I said, 'Bengali, depending on how hard it is.' And he wrote on, um, a piece of paper in capitals, 'it is sad but true. John Peel may be fat and old, but he does play some damn find records on the radio. Go, Johnny, go!' And he said, 'can you do that?' And I said, 'I don't know the word for records.' And he said, 'improvise, woman! Say songs!'

So then they turned on the microphone and I said, [speaking Bengali]. And then he said, 'can you do it with more oomph, please?' So I just did my most Indian accent, [speaking Bengali with exaggerated accent] sort of thing. And then I said, 'what happens now?' And he said, 'you know, sits in an archive room in the BBC for 50 years. What do you think?' Anyway, that day

ended and I must say he was a little bit funny about – we finished at midnight or something, and he said, ‘how are you getting home?’ And I said, ‘a BBC taxi would be nice.’ And he said, ‘but it’s coming out of my programme budget!’ And his assistant said, ‘it’s fine, we’ll get you a taxi.’ And he’s like, ‘not from my budget, you’re not!’ So anyway, he’s dead now. He can’t answer back but that is exactly what happened.

RACHEL: Exactly.

RUPA: And then the next day, I was listening to the radio and my voice starts wafting out of the speakers, ‘যাও (yao), Johnny, যাও (yao)!’ And it really –

CATHY: Wow!

RUPA: And my PhD supervisor rang me and said, ‘I just dropped my washing up in the sink and broke it. That was you, wasn’t it? I can’t believe anyone else would say that.’

CATHY: That’s amazing.

RUPA: So this is sort of 1993. And then about 1998 when Cornershop is big, and ‘Brimful of Asha’, me and Konnie blagged into a concert. I think I must’ve been on her plus one or something, of Cornershop at the Southbank. And John Peele was there. And I was running up to him to say, ‘it’s যাও (yao), Johnny, যাও (yao) Rupa, John!’ Because he – and then Konnie was like, ‘you’re so embarrassing! That band’s really cool! Why are you going there? You’re too embarrassing! You’re so square!’

[Konnie laughs]

RUPA: So that's a long answer to your question.

[Flute sounds]

[Spooky music]

KATH HUGHES: I proper loved learning about Spooktown lore and all that.

ED EASTON: Quick question: is it Spooktown town? So it would be called Spooktown town centre? Or is it Spook Town?

KATH: I think it's Spooktown town centre.

ED: Good.

[Both laugh]

ED: That is what I want. Spooktown town hall.

KATH: Welcome to Spooktown returns on Monday 15 of March.

ED: New episodes every Monday!

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[Flute sounds]

CATHY: So Rupa, are you the ballsy sister?

RUPA: I don't know. I'm a bit schizo-everything. Can be extrovert, can be introvert, can be – yeah.

KONNIE: Yeah.

RACHEL: Well yeah, because you have to be – you stand up in Parliament and talk, so you have to be –

RUPA: Yeah, I knock on doors for Saturday and Sunday – not at the moment in a pandemic, but just a normal thing is opening supermarkets, whatever, that kind – but she does opening supermarkets better than me.

KONNIE: But I remember quite young you – I don't know. Did you do stuff for NME and Melody Maker or you knew someone high up there or something?

RUPA: Yeah, I was writing letters and things.

KONNIE: You were writing stuff for them.

RUPA: Yeah.

KONNIE: Which is quite, you know, like especially for an Asian –

RACHEL: Sorry, I'm still laughing that you – you were competing about who's better at opening supermarkets. Sorry, Rupa, but you were like, 'who's better at that?'

CATHY: But see, Konnie gets paid a shitload.

RUPA: Yeah. She just – she just cuts that ribbon with such panache.

CATHY: So Rupa, you're the most driven.

RUPA: Um, I think Konnie's super ambitious and achieving as well. I think – I don't know. All three of us – my mum was proud of all of us. And she would like show pictures on the bus of her grandsons. All boys, I must say, the next generation.

CATHY: So you've had all boys?

KONNIE: Yeah.

RUPA: Yeah.

CATHY: Ah, interesting.

RACHEL: That's amazing after her having all girls and wanting – that's – yeah.

KONNIE: I know. We made up.

CATHY: And they're all going to have girls.

RACHEL: Yeah.

RUPA: There's one I can hear coming up the stairs now. Hi, we're still doing it. You're not allowed in here.

RACHEL: Who's – so who's the messiest?

KONNIE: Rupa. For sure.

RUPA: Me. Definitely.

RACHEL: Rupa.

RUPA: If I move this around – I won't inflict that.

RACHEL: Can I confess, Rupa? I watched, um, 'Tea with an MP'. A clip online.

CATHY: I told her not to say this.

RACHEL: You did a little interview and your desk made me so happy.

[All laugh]

RUPA: Chaos!

CATHY: It's exactly like my desk.

RACHEL: A could of cups, a Lucozade bottle, like piled high with papers. I – it was joyous. Because I always think that's somebody who's –

RUPA: Fire hazard.

RACHEL: Well, no. Who's working doing their – I'm really clean and boring. Tight clean. I didn't mean that. Tidy. I'm anally OCD tidy, Cath is chaos, right? She –

CATHY: Because we've got a lot of shit going on in our brains.

RACHEL: Exactly. You've got more going on. There's more important stuff. But it really made me laugh, so – so Rupa, you are the messiest.

CATHY: Konnie, are you really tidy?

KONNIE: Do you know what? So I used to be a lot messier, but because Charlie's so messy, I had to become tidy by default. Because otherwise it would be chaos. Um, so I would say naturally – naturally I'd say all three of us are quite messy. Because our dad was so –

RUPA: Hoarder.

KONNIE: Into tidiness.

RUPA: Oh, was he?

KONNIE: No, what did you say?

RUPA: I just said 'hoarder.'

KONNIE: Oh, no.

RUPA: Remember, we've been cleaning out their house. I found all sorts of things. Like his school certificate from 1950 or something.

KONNIE: But everything will be filed away. Like he would, you know, every – he might have loads of stuff, but everything's in box files, neatly labelled and like everything is put meticulously in its place. And he used to tidy up the house. And literally, do you remember Rup? You – I don't know, would be drawing a picture and then you'd go to get a drink from the kitchen or something, and like we'd all go mad with him because he'd tidy things and we'd go, 'but we hadn't done – finished that!' Or, 'I needed that writing', or whatever. He – do you remember?

CATHY: Rachel does that.

RACHEL: Yeah.

KONNIE: We'd all go mad with him the whole time because he would just tidy things away too sort of, um, overzealously.

RUPA: Yeah, he had to make a bed that was completely flat, do you remember that?

KONNIE: Yeah. Yeah yeah.

RUPA: Like, he was just like, 'I'll make your bed for you!'

KONNIE: Yeah, like in the army.

RUPA: And even his ironing of his shirts, you know. If I had anything that I needed a shirt for –

KONNIE: Yeah.

RACHEL: He – he – yeah. Yeah. So because he was so tidy, the three of you are quite messy, is what you're saying? In comparison?

RUPA: I think so, yeah.

[Flute sounds]

CATHY: What is the thing you most envy of the other? What's the trait you would have from the other?

KONNIE: I think Rupa has got really good, like a memory and she's really good at like reading information and taking it in and knowing – just being quite clever and intelligent, you know? Um, and I kind of – I guess all politicians have to do that, you know? Be versed up on everything that's going on and, you know, be able to read a thing and actually be able to extrapolate the important parts of it and formulate in your own head where you sit on the argument and how it fits in with everything else. Like she's really good at that. And I'm not.

RUPA: Hm. Konnie is, um, well she has a magnetic personality that lights up any room she goes into. But she's also super numerate, so she can do every times table. She can do a lot of mental arithmetic. And she has perfect eyesight.

CATHY: Konnie, I didn't know that.

RUPA: And I have to have bifocals or whatever. They're varifocals or whatever because the years have been cruel to me. But she's got perfect eyesight and can do any mathematical, uh, process in her brain.

CATHY: That's amazing!

KONNIE: Although don't they say that everybody will – needs glasses once they get past 50? Is that true?

CATHY: Yeah, they definitely do. Definitely, yeah.

KONNIE: So – so I haven't – I haven't got long.

RACHEL: So she'll – Konnie will catch up.

CATHY: She'll get there.

RACHEL: Yeah, she'll catch up. You'll feel better. So let's end then with is there anything you want to say to each other that you've never said before?

KONNIE: I love you, man! I couldn't have made it this far without you!

CATHY: You've said that before, come on.

KONNIE: No, we just – I don't –

RACHEL: It can be really silly.

KONNIE: Um, I owe you some money.

RUPA: Yeah, I'm sure you've got – I've got a library book of yours somewhere.

KONNIE: Oh, actually you've got my letter that I need to get off you.

RUPA: Oh yeah yeah yeah, I have. I put a whole load of things in an envelope. I was going to bring them round.

KONNIE: Okay, I'm sorry. We're saying really boring admin things. You wanted something –

RACHEL: No, that's perfect.

CATHY: Konnie, just make something up.

KONNIE: Yeah, we're not those people, man.

RACHEL: Exactly.

CATHY: Perfect.

RACHEL: Lovely!

CATHY: Thank you so much.

KONNIE: Thank you, that was fun.

RACHEL: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

CATHY: You two both have exactly the same voices. It's very disconcerting.

KONNIE: People always say that.

RUPA: And also when we were little, people would phone up and say, 'can I speak to Ms. Huq?' And like, 'which one? There's three.'

CATHY: Yeah. It's really weird. I find that very bizarre.

RUPA: And also if it was a bloke, you would have to quickly get there before my dad was picking up the extension, saying, 'hello? Hello?'

[All laugh]

[Guitar and flute music]

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.

CATHY: Gorgeous!

[Clicks record button]

RACHEL: Stop.