

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Mawaan Rizwan

JVN [00:00:01] Welcome to "Getting Curious". I'm Jonathan Van Ness. And every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by an incredibly talented writer, actor and comedian who also is a dear friend of mine who happened to join me on the U.K., Australia and New Zealand legs of my tour, Mawaan Rizwan. Where I ask, "How funny are you, queen"? And just really quickly, before we get started, I want to send you a little bit of extra love and extra support through this week. I know this is such a difficult and challenging, confounding time. And for anyone who is affected by the coronavirus, which is literally about everyone right now in the world. Thank you. I love you. Keep the faith. And I just love you so much. Thanks for listening. And without any further ado, let's hear this week's episode of "Getting Curious". Welcome to "Getting Curious", this is Jonathan Van Ness. Our guest this week is a stunning person and incredibly, hilarious comedian. You're a writer. You're a producer. You are someone who I think is a, really quickly on their way to becoming a world renowned sexual comedic icon.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:01:13] Stop it. I like the addition, the word "sexual". No one's ever done that before. That needs to happen more.

JVN [00:01:17] Yeah, I had to throw. Well, I've seen you with your top off, so-.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:01:21] Thank you.

JVN [00:01:21] Yeah. So welcome to the show, Mawaan Rizwan.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:01:26] Yeah, Jonathan, I'm so glad we're doing this.

JVN [00:01:27] So will you just like set the stage for where we are, when we are, like what are we doing?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:01:36] Yeah. So it's 2020. My name is Mawaan Rizwan. I have been doing standup comedy for nearly 10 years.

JVN [00:01:44] No, no, no, no. Like, literally, where are we?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:01:47] Oh, where are we? We're in Australia.

JVN [00:01:49] Doing?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:01:50] We're doing "The Road to Beijing" tour.

JVN [00:01:52] Which actually doesn't go to.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:01:55] To Beijing.

JVN [00:01:56] It's not, we're not actually going to be.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:01:57] Very important you say that now in the show as well, right?

JVN [00:01:59] Yeah, I do. I have to clarify it.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:02:01] Because you, post-coronavirus-.

JVN [00:02:02] Yeah.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:02:02] It's a very different title. So. Yeah, no a yet. I mean so we've done New Zealand, we've done the UK where in Australia. I'm having the best time. I have never been on a tour that's so joyous and has so many thousands of people in a room who are like immediat-, from like minute one ready to just conjure love. You, I, you know this, right? You know what kind of people you attract and the kind of energy you conjure up is magical.

JVN [00:02:32] Ah, that was like the nicest thing you've ever said to me. So the question is like, who is, I basically, want to like profile you in a really gorgeous way. It's like, who are you? You're such an incredible person. I do feel like you are just right. You're hitting your springboard about to like Yurchenko into like world domination. And so really, it's like, you know, I think you've had like a really interesting kind of road here and I really just kind of wanna hear about it.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:02:57] Yeah, OK. So.

JVN [00:03:00] Comma.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:03:01] Yeah, go on.

JVN [00:03:02] Your job. You're, you are a standup comedian.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:03:04] Yeah. But was a scriptwriter and also actor cause Mawaan got to pay those bills.

JVN [00:03:10] And scriptwriting is hard.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:03:11] Oh my god. It's so hard.

JVN [00:03:12] Because it's not like a book.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:03:13] And so lonely.

JVN [00:03:14] It's not like a book. I get to write like exterior. Like so-and-so's doing blah blah blah.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:03:20] Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

JVN [00:03:20] Is that what you do?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:03:21] Yeah. And then you got to just be in your room alone all day imagining what these people might say to each other. And it drives you nuts. And then you leave after eleven hours of doing that on your laptop, you leave the house and you have an actual

human interaction. And I am bugged out. Like I don't know how to speak to people 'cause I've been in imaginary heads all day.

JVN [00:03:39] Do you have like an example of this, like where you go to order coffee, you just and you just say like something completely otherwise.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:03:46] No, like my housemates will come home from work and then I'll just be in, I'll just be in script writing mode and I'll just being like, you know, when you're analyzing people and their behavior, and I'm like, Oh, that's really interesting. Oh, you. That's how you chose to go out, get the milk out of the fridge. So that says it's so much about your character and your narrative arc. You know what I mean? And I just need to stop and like hug them and be like, hi. Hello human.

JVN [00:04:07] 'Cause it's like, it's like what a character choice. Like you went like to like, to the fridge that particular way.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:04:13] Yeah. Yeah, exactly. And you know, like in script writing, everything's a metaphor. It's like, oh, you know, this character buy mangoes for the first time. She's eating the mangoes in a way. That's saying something about where she is and how happy she is about her divorce. You know what I mean, where in-.

JVN [00:04:28] Because if she was really sad about it. She'd be drinking herself silly like in the morning.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:04:31] Yeah. She wouldn't be buying those mangoes in the first place because mangoes.

JVN [00:04:35] Represent.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:04:35] Are the fruit of freedom, baby.

JVN [00:04:37] Oh.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:04:37] They're my life.

JVN [00:04:38] OK. Well, you know what? Let's let's just kind of I think we should transition here to, to mangoes because mangoes are part of what made me fall in love with your style.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:04:49] Sure.

JVN [00:04:49] I was minding my own business in Canada, hosting my very first like special that I had ever done. And I knew that you were that you were there and I had seen some of your things. But. never IRL. And so you strut out on stage and you do at the end of your set this beautiful music video about mangoes.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:05:08] Yeah, yeah, yeah. I have a song about mangoes. It's about mangoes. But, you know, if you, once you get to third verse, maybe it's a bit something. It's about

something more than mangoes. Maybe it's about the patriarch and how men are so scared to buy any other body shower gel, that doesn't say for men on it. You know what I mean?

JVN [00:05:29] Yes.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:05:30] Yeah, I don't tell people that. But you listen to a few times and you'll get it.

JVN [00:05:34] I have, well I guess really only gotten to listened to it in real life that one time.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:05:39] Yeah.

JVN [00:05:40] Which is rude of me. Anyway.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:05:42] It's fine. I'll perform it for you anytime you like, Jonathan.

JVN [00:05:44] You? All right. So but then some, like, subsequently like we have to like really reverse like roll back the clocks because I think most standup comedians we can safely say we have a fair amount of baggage that, you know, we're trying to process in like towards comedy, a lot of which your comedy is about, is about, you know, your journey. And so you were born in.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:06:06] I was born in Pakistan.

JVN [00:06:08] And then you came to-.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:06:11] The, I came to the UK when I was like three or four.

JVN [00:06:14] And comma.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:06:16] Yeah.

JVN [00:06:17] One of the things that you worked on is how gay is Pakistan?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:06:22] Yeah.

JVN [00:06:23] What did you find out?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:06:25] Okay. So, so growing up in, in Essex, in England, I was always told that like my South Asian identity or my queer identity couldn't coexist. Like, that's not possible. I'm, my Pakistani friends used to be like "Bro, I can't be gay. I'm Pakistani". As if those have any correlation. You know, that's like saying I can't be vegan and I'm left handed.

JVN [00:06:49] Right.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:06:50] It's just bullshit, right? And so I made this documentary for the BBC where I went to Pakistan and I wanted to know, I wanted to see the side of Pakistan that my parents didn't show me. So I chose a subtle title. "How Gay is Pakistan"?

JVN [00:07:03] Well, you gotta hit the nose on the head sometimes.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:07:05] Yeah, very cryptic. And it was amazing. It was heartbreaking. It was hopeful. I got given this medicine by a religious leader to cure me of my gayness.

JVN [00:07:16] What was the medicine?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:07:17] I think it was that herbal was, probably some herbal thing or paracetamol, I don't know. The point is it worked. I'm well straight now, so that's good. What, didn't waste my money there.

JVN [00:07:28] He's joking if you can't hear it in his voice. He still loves dick so fucking much.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:07:33] Imagine the, imagine if I came on this podcast to be like the real reason I'm here to talk to Jonathan is because I've got this medication that will be really great for our community. Imagine if I did that? Imagine it.

JVN [00:07:43] No. And you busted it out now?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:07:43] Yeah, and I charge you 1200 rupees for it.

JVN [00:07:47] Well, I once, I once did go to this 12-Step program, but in this 12-Step program, they said that Jesus was the thing that saves you. And then the first thing that the guy asked you when I sat down was like, "Son, do you think Jesus could deliver you from your homosexuality"? And I said, "I've got to get coffee". And I went to Starbucks and I never came back.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:08:05] Yeah, fair enough.

JVN [00:08:05] I freaked out. But so anyway, you were in Pakistan. How long did you stay for this documentary?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:08:09] So I was out there for a couple of weeks. I met loads of people. I met, I met-. There's an amazing underground queer scene in Lahore and Karachi and Islamabad. And I just, it was incredible, you know, like we never meet a lot of us and never meet our queer ancestors. You know what I mean? Like those stories are the first to get killed off. My skin color, I can't deny it. Like that, those stories actually have stuck around for me. The queer stories have never I never got to meet that wayward aunty that people talk about or that great grandfather who, you know, had to like get disowned by the family or whatever. And I do get told those stories that-, they're very vague and fogged and covered up in the way the heteronormative world wants to cover them up. So to go there and meet face to face people who were fighting everyday, you know, transgender women in Karachi who are like who can't help but be visible and are doing all this amazing where it was when I say it was so healing. And I cried and I laughed and I smiled. And I. It was amazing. It was incredible. It changed so much for me. And if I saw that documentary when I was 17 on television, it would've changed my life, man. It would have saved so many years of trauma and pain and confusion.

JVN [00:09:27] What year did you make this documentary?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:09:29] Oh, it was a while ago, it was about six years ago.

JVN [00:09:32] Can people still find?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:09:34] Oh, it's in, it's on Netflix in America.

JVN [00:09:36] Oh.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:09:37] Yeah. So Americans, go for it.

JVN [00:09:39] Which is the most who listen to this. So that's-, so "How Gay is Pakistan?" on Netflix.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:09:42] It's on Netflix. Yeah.

JVN [00:09:44] So what did you, I mean, so that's an interesting thing you've seen. It's like trans women fighting for their lives in Pakistan because by name like they you can visibly see that some of these women are trans. And so like their life is harder because they don't pass in the same way that like other like classically passingly transpeople wouldn't have to fight for their lives in the same way?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:10:04] Yeah. But also the transgender community in in South Asia. They, they have always been a big part of the culture. You know, back in the day they used to be advisers to emperors and they were highly regarded. And then over time, they got sort of denounced to beggars. And and as things got more religious as well, they got pushed aside. And so a lot of people associate the Hijra community, which is the transgender community with begging. I met this amazing woman called Bubbly in Islamabad who, who spent years on a campaign trying to get some of the young trans women that she mentors into jobs like being a receptionist at an art school, jobs where people can visibly see, oh, you've got a job just like me. It's all good. Yeah, it was incredible. It was incredible.

JVN [00:10:55] So in the, in a, because I mean, Pakistan like on a government level is like, is it safe to be openly gay in Pakistan when you were there? When you, like, not obviously as a child, but going back and doing this documentary, did you find that it was safe for people to live openly their life, to live a homosexual lifestyle there?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:11:14] So on a political level, on a government level, no, it's not legal. Pakistan still runs under the colonial British law. Which, you know, that means that sodo, sodomy is punishable.

JVN [00:11:31] So that's like the same law that we saw, like Alan Turing, who was instrumental in cracking the code of the Nazis like be like chemically castrated in as late as like the 50s in the United Kingdom. So the United Kingdom is like a very, you know, hundreds year long story-.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:11:43] Oh yeah.

JVN [00:11:43] Campaign of like extreme, you know, violence to gay men.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:11:48] Yeah, absolutely. And when they when they colonialized that part of the world, that law was brought in, then they left, they moved on. And that part of the world is still suffering from that law.

JVN [00:11:58] Did you, in your time there did you? Because, I mean, the first thing that makes me think of is like HIV AIDS treatment, treatment. Is that like when we know that, like, you know, homosexuality is stigmatized and then HIV AIDS is like so thoroughly stigmatized. It's like if you can't say to your doctor, hey, like, I'm, you know, having, engaging in unprotected anal sex with other men, you know, it becomes this culture of secrecy. And that's really where, like disease can spread.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:12:23] What that's the most scary thing isn't it? When people in denial like guys, can you not act like this is, like this doesn't exist because then you're not, you know, in terms of health on a health level. People are suffering. But they what they've done, so in Pakistan, I met this organization called the NAZ Male Health Alliance. And they with the UN, they get funding to work with people who have HIV and work on a health level. So the government's like, oh, that's OK, because that's to do with health. But under that guise they're also doing some amazing work around solidarity, around community people having a place to go where they can meet some of the other queer brothers and sisters and non-binary people. So, so that that was really helpful.

JVN [00:13:10] Ok. We were getting a really quick break and be back with more Mawaan Rizwan right after this. Welcome back to "Getting Curious", this is Jonathan Van Ness. We have Mawaan Rizwan, stunning person, love looking at you, love spending time with you. So what was organization again that we're just-, the name of the organization that was partnering with the U.N.?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:13:29] NAZ Male Health Alliance.

JVN [00:13:31] So you, when you look back at that experience now, it's like you said that in the moment, like you is very hopeful, but also very devastating. And well, I mean, just sad and like hopeful at the same time, has, have you heard anything like from the people that you worked with since? I mean, do you check in with, like queer stuff in like Pakistan, just like when you're reading BBC News or like, 'cause I always find when I see something like on HIV, like, come on the news, I'm like reading it. Like do you like? I mean, I'm sure that that's like, really-? Stuck with you.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:14:03] Of course. Yeah. I think about it nearly every day. But, you know, it's hard because I feel this weird distance with Pakistan because so every time I go to certain places around the world, you know, especially America, I get a really hard time, you know, in our border, at the border. What, what it's called?

JVN [00:14:22] The like immigrations, customs, borders.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:14:25] The customs, that's it. Customs. I'm so traumatized by them. I forget to remember the word. So, yeah, when I got to customs, I get a hard time and they they really like interrogate me about why did you go to Pakistan? What was the reason? What's your connection in Pakistan? And it's like I have to prove myself innocent. You know, just because I'm associated, I was born in that country. I can't help that. And recently, I don't ever want to talk about loads. But recently with your tour as well. And, you know, I wanted to, I was gonna support you out in the US and my visa application just ah, just terrible, terrible what happened there. And I couldn't

do that. And it was an amazing opportunity. And I wanted to be there and I wanted to experience it. So I have this funny relationship with Pakistan, where the world, the you know, the embassies they have they they associate that country with, you know, basically restrict to my freedom, even though I'm a British citizen now. So I don't go back there a lot cause also-

JVN [00:15:23] Because it creates like headaches in-

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:15:24] Ah. Yeah.

JVN [00:15:26] Because then like in terms of, so basically to me like that, it points to this, it's Islamophobia. It's like I mean that's what it kind of comes down to. It's like, you know, the United Kingdom, the United States have basically sai-, like created this, you know, overwhelming fear within their own enforcement agencies about Islamic people and or about Muslim people, not of Isl-. But yeah, about Muslim people and it's so unfair. And I'm, you know, it's, I'm so sorry that you had to go through, to go through that. So comma. It's, I mean so you were-. Do you remember living in Pakistan when you were a little booby baby? I mean, I feel like I remember being like I think I have like flashes of random memories from being like two and three, like finding a tea bag and like tearing it down the middle 'cause I thought that was like how you made tea. And I remember my mom being like, no, like because like, there was like a hot cup of water. I was like, uh, and like tore open the tea, like over it. Like, do you have any memories of like-?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:16:26] I remember like, I remember like what a fence looked like outside our house. And then I remember like the smell of the sweet shop, which I didn't know I remembered until I was in Lahore, my place of birth for this documentary. And I walked pass this like hole-in-the-wall sweetshop. And I was like, "Oh, god, what's that smell"? And I tracked it back and I just couldn't leave that place. It was so beautiful. And it was like I went back to my birth. It was, I can't explain it, but Lahore has this sweet smell in the air, which is also with a bit of pollution and dust all mixed together and sweat and mangoes and roses. And it's amazing. And so I have little flashes like that in my memory. But, yeah, I mean, I was. I was three or four when I came to the UK and-. Yeah. So I definitely have an attachment there like a big part of my identity is my Pakistani heritage. And at the same time, I'm kind of, I feel like a baby of the world. You know? Like I. I think, I think the reason my my mom really wanted to bring us to the UK was for a better standard of life. There was, there was a lot of stuff that she, as this bad ass person wanted to do. That was she, you know, that she didn't have the resources and were restrictive for her. So she was the first woman in her village, in a town, to ride a bicycle. And everyone was like, "Oh, my God, she rides a bicycle. She's a prostitute". So she-

JVN [00:17:51] 'Cause she like sat on a bicycle seat?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:17:53] Yeah. And she like didn't need, you know, the company of a man to travel whenever, and everyone was like, "Oh the scandal". Which is actually makes no sense really. So my mom was a-. You know, she had big dreams and she knew that the society around her weren't going to let her achieve those dreams. And she knew that she had to hustle and find a way out of there to give her kids the opportunity to do what they wanted. And so it meant that grow-, growing up, there was a very strict environment in the house. My mom was like, "I've made way too many sacrifices for you to be getting a B-plus in math. Don't you dare". Like that's a slap in my face.

JVN [00:18:30] Or you'd get a B what?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:18:31] To get a B-plus.

JVN [00:18:33] Oh, In math?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:18:34] Yeah.

JVN [00:18:34] I thought you I said, "placemats", I was like, what's that?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:18:38] You know, "placemats". Everyone too that.

JVN [00:18:42] So wait. So when you went to Lahore to do "How Gay is Pakistan"? How old were you?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:18:47] I must have been 23, 4.

JVN [00:18:52] And then how does your mom when she left Pakistan with you?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:18:56] Good question. So 26 years ago. What's 26 minus 60? That age.

JVN [00:19:04] 34.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:19:04] Yeah.

JVN [00:19:05] So I think, watch it be like.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:19:07] Wow, she was young. I forget.

JVN [00:19:09] So yeah. I mean I just was wondering like what that's like. It's like when you went back, you're like, you know at that age like just thinking about what gender means to a female or to like a young mom in Pakistan. What that like you know, I think, you know, you don't think of your gender as being something. I mean, obviously, I think in America, we you know, we, just did an episode on the gender wealth gap. And I think that we, you know, we talk about obviously there's a lot of differences in, in, you know, the possibilities that you can have, your life can have based on your gender, your, you know, if you are cisgender, if you are trans, like, you know, those all have a lot to like, what your opportunities will be, what your struggles will be. And, you know, I think what the opportunities and the struggles will be for our sons and our daughters and, you know, the differences and similarities. So there's something that we talk about a lot in America. But I think what you were just talk-, and, you know, the Western world but-. I think what you're talking about and I think that's something I think we, a lot of people don't think about it like what ,what your gender means to you if you are born in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, like the Middle East, it does seem to be, it would be a different conversation than what are we in the Western world?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:20:17] Totally. You know, it's funny, like with everything I know now, the conversations I have, my parents, I made a, I made a rule of myself. I said I'm never, I'm not going to live a lie with my parents because like generation after generation. And I think this is a hangover from colonialism as well. This sort of like don't make a fuss. Okay. Do as you're told. Get by. You

know, don't, don't, don't draw outside of the lines too much, 'cause you draw attention to yourself and life is hard as it is for us. So that has led to us being so secretive with each other, you know? And so I said, I always said to myself, I'm going to be really open with my parents. I sat my mom down and I do this in standup bit and I'm doing it on the on this tour as well. The bit about, you know, telling, telling my mom all the shocking things in my life, all in one go, because I was like, listen, mate, you know about queerness, as you might as know about ketamine and my nipple piercing, you know, and you're going to hear this. Otherwise one of us is gonna die without knowing who the other one is. And I don't want a relationship like that with your mum, or dad. So I have these conversations and I'm like yay, I'm teaching about all these things and look at me like opening their minds. And then I learned that actually they have had of, you know, a rich life and they've seen it all and they've done it all, they just haven't talked to me about it because that's not what we're meant to do.

JVN [00:21:31] Your dad too?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:21:33] Oh, yeah. I mean, my, you know, like-.

JVN [00:21:36] I feel like he's not in the set as much. Or is he?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:21:39] Yeah, he's a bit more shyer than my mom.

JVN [00:21:41] Because you know, because that lunch story is, the story where you guys are at lunch where you sit her down to talk to her about it is like.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:21:47] Yeah.

JVN [00:21:48] Hilarious.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:21:49] Yeah, I mean-.

JVN [00:21:50] But I feel like we should-, really you need to buy a ticket and come to the show but rest assured it's fucking hysterical.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:21:56] And it's all true. My mom, I legit told my mom all the shocking things about my life.

JVN [00:21:59] Thought you were going to blow her hair.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:22:02] Yeah, yeah, yeah. And then she was like, "Okay, great. Are you done? Because now is my turn". And then she tells me she's like, "Yeah, I've, I've I used to drink alcohol, me and your dad are getting a divorce. And when I was 15, I was in love with a woman. Anyway, should we get the menu"? I was like, "Mom. What"? And how are you going to just unpack this? Like just like that? It's so casual. All those years I've been fighting with you around, like, what is for me to be your queer son? Now you want to bring up that you had relationship with a woman for six years in the 60s in Pakistan? Mmm. Like what? And so she's been through it all. And she is such a bad ass. And she has always defied the gender norms of where she grew up and what it meant to be. You know like this is what bugs me about a lot of the med-, like media and television and shows and stories you hear, especially of women of my mom's age and my mom's

background. You see them in a certain way, you know, like the immigrant mother who sort of, you know, who, the housewife or the one who sort of is in the shadow of of her of her husband who brought kids over here and, you know, and sort of subservient. And my mom was not, my mom was, she worked three jobs. She was on it, in every respect. She was a survivor. She was a hustler. She went out to live in New York. You know, for for quiet, she, she tried to settling there at first and had this crazy bout with immigration. She used to sell hair clips on Brooklyn Bridge. And she tells me, she was like, "Oh, yeah, I spend all day every night, dollar, dollar, dollar, dollar". And then, you know, most of that would go to her, the babysitting fee. So, yeah, my mom has broken all the rules around gender. So she's actually been a big inspiration for me, you know, growing up like I used to dress up in her clothes all the time. And I think a lot my work now, which is why I resonate with a lot of your stuff as well. Just about, you know, just not caring so much about that stuff and not being so binary and boring. You know what I mean, and people can't be what they can't see. People need to see a range of people, queer people, non-binary people living authentically so that they can feel like they can comfortably exist in their own skin and you in the person they are. Right?

JVN [00:24:12] Yeah. So what was going up in Essex like? I mean, Essex is like, it's like pretty close to London.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:24:18] Yeah.

JVN [00:24:18] Like, can you get the tube from Essex to London or does it not go that far?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:24:21] You can get overground.

JVN [00:24:23] You can get overground.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:24:23] Yeah.

JVN [00:24:24] From Essex to London.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:24:25] Yeah.

JVN [00:24:25] So did you grow up like, like would you guys go to London on like the weekends like or was it not so much?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:24:30] Yeah sometimes. Yeah. So do you, there's a show called "The Only Way is Essex". That's what is most famous for it. "And they all talk like this, babes".

JVN [00:24:39] Yes.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:24:39] Yeah. So that's like there was a bit of that going on and my school actually was very segregated like like all the black people would hang out together. All the Asian people would hang out together. All the white people would hang out together. And then my brothers, who my brother is five years younger than me, apparently wasn't like that in his years. So I think it changed. But my year, it was very like I remember once I had this thing where like me and this girl like they were ru-, like we were potentially going to get together. And it was all like looking like it was gonna happen. And then, you know, there was just massive uproar and all the white boys were like, "Ah". Can you be beep her name when I say it?

JVN [00:25:15] Yeah, okay.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:25:16] Everyone was like, "Ah *****, she's gettin' with-. She's gettin' with Mawaan, she's gettin' with a Pakistani. And that causes massive uproar. And then it never happened.

JVN [00:25:24] So you got, so racism cock blocked you?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:25:24] We could have been happily married by now. Yeah. Imagine. Imagine.

JVN [00:25:29] Rude. If only you you know. Well, I mean, do you occasionally tend to go for the random p-, well that's a butt. Do you like vaginas sometimes?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:25:36] No.

JVN [00:25:37] No.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:25:37] So I mean it wasn't gonna work out anyway.

JVN [00:25:39] Right, right. Like other than. Yeah.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:25:40] But-.

JVN [00:25:41] Sexuality and racism. Both.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:25:43] Yeah. Yeah.

JVN [00:25:44] Oh, we have to take a really quick break right. We'll be right back with more Mawaan Rizwan right after this.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:25:48] So you can process what I just said.

JVN [00:25:50] Welcome back to "Getting Curious". This is Jonathan Van Ness. So we have Mawaan Rizwan. And so you moved to the United Kingdom when you're a small boy. And so it's just you and your brother?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:25:59] Me and my sister.

JVN [00:26:00] You and your sister.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:26:00] And then my brother was born in the UK.

JVN [00:26:01] Oh, right. So you and your sister come with your mummy. And then. And then.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:26:06] And then my dad followed like six years later, he had, we had a crazy old bout with immigration.

JVN [00:26:12] So even, because I thought that Pakistan had like a cuter relationship with immigration for the United Kingdom, because isn't it like, because isn't it that like, you know, the United Kingdom came in and like did all that stuff to Pakistan? So they're like, oops, sorry, we really like fucked up your role, but if you want to come live here afterwards like you can. Err-.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:26:27] I wish. I mean I don't know like I only know my story, my mum's story and also the people grew up around and it was tough like, we on our road, there used to be like a family getting deported a month and we got a deportation letter. So after about six, seven years in the country we've got a letter through the post and I just remember seeing my mom in the living room and she opened it and she just just broke down. She was on the sofa, just like she just couldn't move. And she basically told me, you know, everything we've built, all that hard work we've done is it was all for nothing. And my mom used to, she used to, she used to do a lot of work for the Labor Party and she used do rallies. And she's to help other immigrants, she used to teach English to a lot of other immigrants in our area. And she was doing this like, she was at this rally, and then she'd go up and did this speech and she just broke down. And there was a solici-, a solicitor in the audience who heard her story was really moved. And he said, I'll do your case for free.

JVN [00:27:38] Is solicitor like British for immigration lawyer?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:27:40] Lawyer. Yeah, basically. So he. Yeah. So otherwise she would have been able to afford that. But then also a Labor MP was like this woman has done so much for the community, here's all the culture enriching activities she's involved in. She contribute so much. You know, they just, they just had her back. People had her back and the community stood up for her. And that was more often than not. You know, that wasn't the case for a lot of people, and especially people who couldn't speak English, like there were people who, who, who tried, struggled, were sent back. And that was more of a reality. You know, we were lucky. And then my dad was another six year battle. We used to have times when my dad used to go to sign on every two weeks he'd go to the immigration office and sometimes they would just keep him, they would just detain him. And this is in the days before a mobile phone. So my mom just used to like stay up all night crying. We'd be like, "Where's dad"? "Well, I don't know. I don't know if they sent him back and if they're just keeping it for the night". So some horrible, tumultuous frickin times, man. And, you know, people think, oh yeah, okay, fine, but you stayed in the country, you got a better life. Stop complaining. But the repercussions of that. We-, you know what it did to our relations. My, my parents. They've broken up. I think that the strain that puts on a relationship, the-. The amount of therapy I'm doing to undo some of that shit, which is why I love comedy, comedy was a was sa-, a saving tool for me or my brother. You know, cause we got to be silly. And we knew that if the people were laughing in the room, things were going to be OK. I associate comedy with hope. And I remember making these YouTube videos, that's how I started comedy, and when I used to put my parents in them, they were funny. Like for once they weren't arguing, they weren't stressed about being deported back to Pakistan. They weren't talking about money. They were just silly. My mom used to put, I used to give her a wig and she used to transform into these characters, and I thought, "What the, what? Mom, you're really good". And I remember being like oh my god, I think I could actually like my parents, because they're funny.

JVN [00:29:50] I love when you, when you realize like that the power dynamics in your relationship with your parents are shifting 'cause you're an adult and you can start to see them more as people,

which is really very fun. But what I want to talk about, like serious stuff again more, so. OK. So when we first heard this conversation, you were saying that you felt like you couldn't bring together your Pakistani identity and then your queer identity. And so I think that's really interesting because really like that, you know, that is like what intersectionality is. Like you are British, you are Pakistani, you are gay. This is an intersectional, you know, beautiful person that you are. I also think that in the, in the spaces that the United Kingdom and the United States are in, especially in light of, you know, we we are on "Getting Curious", we're just interviewing Deborah Archer, who is an incredible civil rights advocate and lawyer. And she was explaining to us. Well, I was basically saying asking her, you know. There's so many white people and so many people in United States who just want to say like "Well you know slavery was like 150, 175 years ago, like it's it's over. Like it's, you know, this like I don't see race, I don't see color like we're, I just see people". And really, that is, you know, a really incredible, I think it's kind of short sighted, like insensitive thing to say, because it's like there's so much time lost, wages lost, opportunity costs lost. You know, for hundreds and hundreds of years for black and brown, you know, Americans. And I think, you know, for British people, it's like there is this. I think the culture of expressing an injustice or like the culture around expressing unfairness is so different in the United Kingdom than it is in the United States. I think that's one thing that's very different. Like we, you fucking pinch our toe, we are gonna fucking scream about it. I think in the United Kingdom it is a lot more silent. I've been spending a lot more time there recently and you know, to see what the vitriol that like Meghan Markle has gone through and and to see like the, this really intense loathing for-. So, I mean, obviously, I'm talking about Pierce Morgan, but there's other British talking heads to do this, where it's like you've gone out and you've painted our whole country is racist, like you've gone out and you've written this op-ed or you've done this and you have made our country seem racist. And I think it's. And, you know, we've, Tan has weighed in on that. We've had Tan on this show, he's talked about his experience with racism in the United Kingdom. But I think that it's like to say that there is, that there is racism present in a society or country doesn't mean that the, that there is something evil or like unfixable or like there, every society will always have issues, like we're always, and I think basically I guess what I'm trying to say, but I'm talking a whole lot about it. Is it it's like as someone who is an intersectionally marginalized person, albeit extremely talented, has, you know, really navigated their way in the world very well, his way in the world very well. What do you think about the state of race in the United Kingdom, of the state of race in the United States? You know, does the same hopeful and devastation feel that you, that you had on like queer people in Pakistan kind of feels the same. It's like both. I don't know. Tell me.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:33:05] Yeah, I mean, I don't I can't compare it to the U.S. because I've not spent much time there. It's funny, you know, because I, like, we're at a-, we're at a stage where there is a lot, there is backlashes. And then there's going, "What do you mean I'm, you can't just call me racist". Like people, in a way, it's like, don't make it about you. You know, this isn't, in a way it's like we don't, I don't care to call someone racist and I don't care to like really make a point of them as a person being racist. I'm just there pointing out what you did there. There was a lack of empathy in that. You know, there's a-. I think people have to be proactive in the way they learn how to grow around this stuff because we are so uncomfortable about talking about it. You know what I mean?

JVN [00:33:59] Yeah. I guess you though specifically and your family have been so affected by systemic racism. Like it is, this, it's, it's systemic racism. Like your dad getting taken away when, because like why did your dad have to go and check in every two weeks?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:34:19] So they could make sure that he's not like running away, becoming a criminal. They could just keep an eye on him.

JVN [00:34:25] So, it's-.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:34:26] And also it's a power thing being like, look your here without a state, you know?

JVN [00:34:30] But what an American immigrant or would a, would a, would a French, would a Canadian, would a American, would any immigrant in that time have had to have gone and checked in every two weeks?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:34:42] No, I don't know why they did it. I guess-.

JVN [00:34:44] It seems like it's like a Paki-, is it a Pakistan? Is it all Middle Eastern thing like?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:34:49] I mean, we didn't. So growing up, I, I wouldn't, I didn't see that systemic racism. I just saw it as this is a thing that happens.

JVN [00:34:55] Right.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:34:56] Any actually a lot, people around me will go through similar things, so I thought, "Oh, I guess this is normal".

JVN [00:34:59] But that is systemic racism. Like the fact that, that is systemic racism. The fact that, you know, you couldn't get into the United States is, that is systemic racism because you check a box of this person was born in Pakistan. This person has visited Pakistan. This person has a penis. That means by our standards of, you know, admitting someone, it points to terrorists, it points to threat, it points to and it doesn't see any of the-. You are a brilliant writer. You're a brilliant actor. You are a brilliant entertainer. You're approvingly brilliant entertainer, like as your videos that you produced, written and directed have massed, you know, millions and millions of views, which is like a light and a life experience that like, you know, a lot of people won't get to share in a more experience, too, because of the systemic racism that you have encountered. So I guess it's like, you know, Boris Johnson is, you know, newly elected. Brexit is, it has happened. They are, they are seeming like they're gonna move to a points based immigration system. Is there? I guess the question is like, is there a silver lining? I mean, I guess there is. I mean, it's like, I feel like you've navigated this like system, but you're also like an able bodied man. Like, I, you know, I wonder, like for a female, for a, it just is there, is there other cool people doing cool things like that you like-? Who are you following on the ground? That's British. And Pakistani. Like doing cool stuff.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:36:31] I actually there's a night I go to in London called "Hungama", which is a queer hip hop Bollywood night. And so I me-, I mean, that's my, like, spiritual home. You know what I mean? When I'm feeling down, I like I go there and some of the performers there and what they doing is run by someone called Ryan Lanji. And there's this also Glam Rioux. Have you heard of Glam Rioux? They're just, they're just doing their thing in their own way. And they're not letting people tell them what they can and can't do. And it's funny, you know, when you, when I'm in a room full of queer people of color. There is a, there's a, there's a hunger. There's a passion there. And I think part of that is the immigrant work ethic. We would, you know, that was instilled in

us when we were kids. We-, you know, the idea that, like, I struggled to get to this country, I've made loads of sacrifices. So you, my child, will not let me down. These are the marks you have to hit. That pressure. And sometimes it was horrible. Sometimes it really got us through, you know, we got good grades. We, we knew how to work our asses off at the age of 12. We were like, you know, failure wasn't an option. And this, that's given us a lot of strength, but that's also given us a certain amount of fucked-upness. You know what I mean? Like we've, to navigate through this world and still be a healthy, well-balanced person who kind of spends time investing relationships, does the work on themselves, does the therapy, you know, has a well-balanced life. Like, I am working so hard to make sure that I'm not only achieving all the markers of success that I feel like I needed to to prove myself to the world. And so I thought I was past all that. I thought we were through all that and now I'm just this like beautiful, you know, free spirit who just makes comedy and can do stuff that's so real and free and I can dance and rap and tell jokes and then you hit a wall and you're like, "Oh, oh shit. Okay, reality check". So I don't know is the answer. I was too trying to work out how I navigate through all that and still have a well-balanced life. And not be bitter all the time.

JVN [00:38:47] Yeah.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:38:48] You know, I mean, I'm fucking angry, man.

JVN [00:38:51] Yeah.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:38:52] Which is weird because I'm not an angry person. And I'm like how do I turn this anger into comedy because if I can't turn it into comedy, I was-, I can't process it. That doesn't my way of coping with shit.

JVN [00:39:01] Yeah. I mean. Yeah, comedy feels like a really good, a really good outlet. It's like one that I very much, you know, also use. I just have one more question. Do you think that the, is-? Well, I guess comparison is the thief of all joy but like if Donald Trump wins this year, would I be better off or worse off moving to United Kingdom? Obviously, like you're probably going to have Boris for five more years, but he doesn't seem like he's such a climate change denier.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:39:35] No, here's what we're going to do. Okay.

JVN [00:39:37] Make a different country?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:39:38] We're going to go to New Zealand.

JVN [00:39:39] Oh.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:39:40] We're going to live on a shack, on a beach. And we're going to delete our Twitter accounts.

JVN [00:39:45] Wait. And now I have one more thing and then we'll start to go. So you accidentally turn your mom into an actress.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:39:51] Yes. Let's unpack this.

JVN [00:39:52] Yeah.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:39:53] Yeah, yeah, yeah. So basically, you know, cause I used to put my mom in my videos as she happened to be this amazingly charismatic, beautiful, talented person. And I was like, oh, that's funny. I never saw that side cause you were so busy paying the bills. But basically my, my mom got spotted. I got a call from a producer in India one day. This is after I, you know, I got, some of my videos went viral and I got a bit of an online audience and they were like "Yeah, we're casting for a lead role in a primetime TV series". I was like, "OK. Tell me more". They're like, "Oh, no, no, no. We don't want you, we want your mom". So I asked my mom. I was like, "Mom. There's this is thing. Do you wanna audition for it"? And she was like, "Yeah, why not? I'll give it a go". So we sent off this tape. Don't think anything of it. Three months later, I get a call from the same producer. She's like "Yep, we want to cast your mom as the lead. Send her on the first plane to Bombay". So my mom moves out to India.

JVN [00:40:43] What year is this?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:40:44] This is, like sev-, six, seven years ago, now. Starts working as a Bollywood actress, ends up staying there for five years. She can't go to a supermarket in India or in a South Asian area in the UK without getting mobbed. Yeah.

JVN [00:40:59] We got to get her on the Gram.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:41:01] I know.

JVN [00:41:01] Not that, because we already talked about that one with the-, we got to get a checkmark, girl.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:41:05] I-.

JVN [00:41:05] You could retire next year. Like off of your mom's endorsements on Instagram. You could literally, like, write your comedy when you feel, like when and if you feel like it.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:41:12] You know what though? She doesn't need any more encouragement. She loves the attention.

JVN [00:41:14] You could be her son-ager. You could be her son-ager.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:41:17] Really? You think?

JVN [00:41:19] Yeah. I want my mom to be my momager, but she doesn't want to do it.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:41:22] Momager, I love it.

JVN [00:41:24] You could be a powerbroker son-ager.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:41:27] I'll propose it to her. Well, she's actually move back to the UK now, and she's signed with my agent. My mom's a dream, man. She's. She's incredible.

JVN [00:41:34] So what is, what's coming up for you? You work on "Sex Education", which we love.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:41:39] Yeah.

JVN [00:41:39] Massive fans, very excited for Season 3 because it just got officially renewed.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:41:43] Yeah, we're writing season three now. It's such a dream job, man.

JVN [00:41:48] It is very much like, runaway success you have to watch it. You watch or you wrote Season 2, episode 2.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:41:57] 2. Yeah.

JVN [00:41:57] Yes, nailed it. So make sure you watch that. And then what else is coming up? Where else can people find you?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:42:01] So I'm doing my new, I'm doing a new Edinburgh show at the Edinburgh Fringe this August. All my live dates, tickets are on Mawaan.co.uk and MawaanR on Instagram. Yeah, I'm about, doing shit. I've got a, I've got a sky comedy series coming out in, in October.

JVN [00:42:22] A Sky comedy series.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:42:23] Sky Comedy series.

JVN [00:42:24] That's like all over the United Kingdom, isn't it?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:42:26] Yeah. And it's, I think it's gonna be on Now TV as well.

JVN [00:42:29] Okay. Last question, I swear to god.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:42:30] Yeah.

JVN [00:42:31] And then actually there's one more after that So-

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:42:32] It's called "Two Weeks to Live", by the way.

JVN [00:42:33] "Two Weeks to Live" is the-.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:42:34] Yeah.

JVN [00:42:34] Of the Sky comedy series?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:42:36] Yeah with Maisie Williams.

JVN [00:42:37] Oh, my.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:42:38] Yeah.

JVN [00:42:39] Subtle namedrop. Oh, my God. Are you both were you both starring in it?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:42:45] Mmhmm.

JVN [00:42:45] Girl!

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:42:45] We have a, we're a, we're a couple.

JVN [00:42:48] So if you didn't name your comedy style in like, one sentence.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:42:55] One sentence. OK.

JVN [00:42:56] It can be run on.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:42:57] Slut dropping realness, surreal, silly, but with heart.

JVN [00:43:04] That sounded nice. Love that.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:43:05] That's the best I can do.

JVN [00:43:06] That's great. Was the beginning "slut dropping"?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:43:09] Yes. Slut dropping realness.

JVN [00:43:10] Oh, I love that.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:43:10] I slut drop a lot in my, I think that's my life mission. Also my life mission is to change the name from "slut drop" to "sex positive descent". The name is so judgey, we need to change it.

JVN [00:43:21] I think if you keep showing your taint onstage, it's gonna happen.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:43:24] Okay.

JVN [00:43:25] Yeah. You just like keep showing your taint to everybody.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:43:27] Sure.

JVN [00:43:27] I'm just kidding.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:43:28] I'll do it.

JVN [00:43:28] But I think that could make everyone happier. Then last question is-. I just like to see a taint. I always have. My last question is. In this part of the podcast like what do we miss? What do you want to talk-, it's Yogi recess, like you really wanted to do, like Revolve Trikonasana,

but I didn't see that coming because everyone hates doing Revolve Trikonasana so I skipped it. I just taught triangle.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:43:47] I don't even know what that is.

JVN [00:43:49] It's like I just did triangle pose in today's yoga class, but like you wanted to do revolve triangles and now you go do that for like a minute and a half.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:43:56] Oh. The best bit I love doing at the end of yoga class.

JVN [00:43:58] Not literally that, honey.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:43:59] I know.

JVN [00:44:00] Oh.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:44:01] I know. But I like to tell you anyway.

JVN [00:44:02] OK.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:44:03] I, you know, when you just, when you sit still and do nothing.

JVN [00:44:05] Savasana.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:44:06] I love Savasana.

JVN [00:44:07] Yeah.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:44:08] I wish the whole class could just be the savasana.

JVN [00:44:10] Yeah. So but it's like the last minute of things that we missed. Did? Did like-? 'Cause, you know, someone told me the other day on the podcast that I non-binary splain a lot, like I talk over people. So did I like interrupt you on something. You need to get a whole thought out? Like I'm sure a did. What do you want to talk, is there anything else we need to talk about?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:44:24] No, I thought you let me talk way too much.

JVN [00:44:27] Really?

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:44:28] I was like, when is, when is he going to interrupt me? This is a tangent and a half.

JVN [00:44:33] I didn't-, no one, none of it is that tangent-y. It was all very, really good.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:44:37] Okay, good. So I think I've got it all out. This has been like therapy. Thank you.

JVN [00:44:41] You're so welcome. You have a lot of rows of eyelashes.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:44:45] Yeah, I know. I know. I love them. I, I, sometimes I just, I, I, thank the universe for my eyebrows and my eyelashes.

JVN [00:44:53] Yeah. They really gave you a gift.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:44:54] Gift. Yeah. A gift from my ancestors.

JVN [00:44:56] Well-.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:44:57] Thank you, Mama.

JVN [00:44:58] Well, thank you, Mawaan.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:44:59] Yes, Jonathan, it's been so fun. And now we're gonna go to a show.

JVN [00:45:02] Now we're going to do a show in Australia and literally Brisbane. Bye.

MAWAAN RIZWAN [00:45:07] Bye.

JVN [00:45:07] You've been listening to "Getting Curious" with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Mawaan Rizwan. You'll find links to his work on the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quin. Thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend and show them how to subscribe. S'il vous plait. That means, "if you please" in French. I also hope you're doing well through all of this incredibly challenging time. And I love you so much. Thanks so much for supporting "Getting Curious". And I'll see you next time. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter at CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Emily Bossak. "Getting Curious" is produced by me, Julie Carrillo, Emily Bossak, Rae Ellis, Chelsea Jacobson and Colin Anderson.