

“YOU’RE JUST YOURSELF”

FOR LESSON

*Growing Up
and Fitting In*NARRATOR **Mohammed Fayaz**

FAYAZ I remember as I started to get older and started to identify as, like, more queer or understand that I was gay, I started to, like, feel very awkward as, like, everyone was talking about, like, politics. Or, like, for me, I don't know. I'm a big dreamer. And I'm a big, like — I'm a — I like conversation. I love talking to people. And I love — I'm the type to, like, my friends joke I can, like, talk to a wall. I can, like — and we'll go there. Like, I like to, like, skip all the nuances, skip all of the — not the nuances. Skip all of the, like, getting — warming up to someone and just kind of going for it.

And so, often in our culture and my family in particular, it's difficult because no one wants to talk about anything real. So, I can, like — I'm pretty sure every single family gathering I've been to, like, the men — also, our things are segregated, less so in more recent years. But the men are sitting in one place, and the women are sitting in another. And it could even just be, like, a giant living room, and they're just at opposite ends. And it's rare for, like, even kids to be — kids is fine. But, like, once you hit puberty, like, 12, 13, 14, you start hanging out with your own either age group or gender.

And, as, like, a young queer baby who — now I identify as, like, pretty gender-fluid, gender-nonconforming. But at the time I didn't have that language. And so, to know that, like, to be in a room with men and all they want to talk about is, like, how was the traffic getting here and, like, what bridge did you take, and all that kind of stuff was so frustrating for me because I'm sitting here like, wow, like, I'm queer, or, like, I'm, like, not like this at all, or I don't want to talk about sports. I don't know who the prime minister of India is. Like, I don't know what all this stuff is going on is.

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And the women are just, like, in the kitchen, which I love to cook now. And I want to be in the kitchen with them where, like, the young girls are hanging out talking about, like, whatever show is on, like, Disney Channel at the time. And I want to be there, or talking about, like, *America’s Next Top Model*, and I want to be there talking to them about it. But instead I’m just, like, stuck with, like, a bunch of men.

Or, like, young, like, young adults, like my cousins in their 20s who are, like, going outside and sneaking off cigarettes and, like, wanting to hang out with them, but also not fitting in there either because they’re not talking about anything real. Cars, sports, like, things that are not — have no substance to me, so it’s difficult to kind of like feel a part of the family.

But just, it was just this thing where — also just being an awkward teenager is never, like, ideal for anyone. And so, having to navigate all of these things at once has definitely made, like, those days as, like, glossy as they are, and they’re, like, the perfect day, everyone gathers. Even if my mom is, like, not talking to someone in the family and they’re there, it’s like a thing. But it’s not a thing. And it’s just like we’re all kind of, like, getting really good at avoiding each other and stuff. All these, like, family dynamics that you see everywhere, it’s like all of that’s happening on top of, like, a young person’s, like, identity coming out, too.

ALI And how did you navigate that in those places?

FAYAZ Honestly, I’m talking about it now, and I have no idea how I made it through, like, a sane person.

ALI Okay. So, you’ve — you know, tell me about how you came to realization of your queerness, of your queer identity.

FAYAZ I’ve known for, like — I’ve known in the way that I think most queer folks you can talk to know that they’re different. And from a very young age I was just super soft and very, like — I didn’t like being too far away from my mom when I was, like, a toddler. And growing up I had lots of friends in middle school and stuff, but they were all women, all of them girls. I just didn’t have anything in common with the boys. And, like, I didn’t like the aggression. I didn’t like the humor or just the energy.

And energy is something I think about a lot nowadays in the folks I have around me. So, to kind of know that I was operating the same way as a kid is kind of cool on some, like, witchy-like, just a really cool vibe to tap into that I’ve always had. And I used to play with dolls when I was kid. And I know people say, like, not — just because, like, a boy is playing with dolls doesn’t mean anything. But, I know that it is, like, an early expression of, like, how I felt with, in relation to just, like, beauty and, like, fabric and apparel and clothing and, like, all of these ideals and stuff, always very creative.

So, I draw. I’m an illustrator. So, I’ve always been drawing. I remember the earliest memory of drawing is like the third grade, just like doodling. I remember I used to draw, like, bugs in, like, my notebooks and stuff. And just always kind of being — kind of understanding that, like, all this stuff is going on in the world and, like, I don’t fit into any of it. None of this really applies to me. I don’t — and I look in TV, and I don’t really see myself as a character. Even, like, watching, like, Bollywood movies that were super-hetero-normative, I wouldn’t really see myself in those, even though these are, like, my people. And then watching American TV I wouldn’t really see any queer kids or queer characters at all. And so, knowing that, like, it’s almost as weird — having this mirror of society

held up to you and not seeing yourself in it at all almost helped me kind of just look inwards. And I start to then find myself better.

And it’s hard to talk about now because I’m thinking about it. And I’m like, this is so ridiculous. Like, the hoops and hurdles that a young queer child has to go through to, like, solidify their existence when in reality, like, the way I live my life now is that, like, queerness to me is very — like, whatever rules there are, whatever boundaries there are, they don’t exist, when in reality you wake up and you’re just like yourself, and that’s it. And those, like, 30 seconds after you wake up or, like, those 30 seconds right before you’re about to fall asleep, when all you are is you and no one you know, nothing you’ve done, nothing you’re about to do is relevant at all, it’s like that peace and that, like, calmness is what I am, like, achieving for.

There’s a word that my mom uses a lot — *sabr*. I don’t know if it’s Arabic or Urdu, but it just means, like, peace and, like, a respite almost, like, after the storm, like, after all of this, just, like, finding peace. And I use this word a lot with friends who are going through, like, recent losses in their families and stuff, and most recently for a really good friend who lost his mother. And I told him this word, and I told him it’s not even about, like, getting over it. It’s just about finding that moment where the tock is clicking — where the clock is ticking and you’re just, like, not tormented.

BIO Mohammed Fayaz was born in 1990 in Brooklyn. He was raised in the Jamaica Estates and Middle Village neighborhoods in Queens. As a young adult, he channeled his creativity into art, with a particular focus on depicting people of color. He created early promotional materials for the group Papi Juice, which was founded to celebrate queer and trans people of color, and became one of their core organizers.

CITATION Fayaz, Mohammed, Excerpt from oral history interview conducted by Zaheer Ali, October 22, 2018, Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.52; Brooklyn Historical Society.