

ABBASI INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

FERHEEN ABBASI ON HOW WE GOT ZAYN & NARU AND HOW SHE WAS ABLE TO CONVINCE OUR DAD

SAMIA: Hi Een! We're going to talk about our story with how we got Zayn & Naru. The first major question is: Why cats?? Why have cats always been something you're passionate about? Let's start with your stuffed animal Mow-Mow—I think that's like a nexus to this story, haha.

FERHEEN: I don't know how old I was, but sometime when I was young, I went to the store with Mom, and I saw Mow-Mow, and I fell in love. She wasn't even a cute stuffed animal cat—I still have her so I know what she looks like. She wasn't that cute, but I just fell in love. I wanted this cat more than anything in my entire life. I threw this bad tantrum in the store, so bad that Mom was embarrassed and was like, "Whatever, I'll buy this dumb cat." That's how Mow-Mow came into my life. I have so many childhood memories of playing with Mow-Mow. I think it also stems from the fact that in most families, you play with other children. But in our family, we didn't really get that opportunity unless it was cousins, and even then, it was only at specific times. When we were hanging out with cousins, it was always the evening time when we, as a family, went to their house for dinner parties. So, cousins were my only peers, because I never really got the opportunity to hang out with friends outside of school. So, stuffed animals became an outlet for me to have friends. Mow-Mow was the leader—the one stuffed animal that really spoke to me. Fun fact: Mow-Mow has a different name; everyone knows her as Mow-Mow, but she has a full name [that I keep to myself].

You can't forget that in our culture/religion, dogs are considered dirty and cats are not. Cats are more allowable, especially religiously. If anything, they're kind of revered. I don't know if that really influenced why I like cats.

SAMIA: Right, I guess the acceptability could've been a subconscious factor. I know you've always been that kind of person that whenever you see something cute, like a cat or dog, you always react in an excited way. But for me, it's never been like that.

FERHEEN: Yeah, I don't know, whenever I see something really cute, I just have a gut reaction, like, "AAHH, IT'S SO CUTE~!" There are a lot of people who have this reaction toward babies, but I don't really feel that way with babies. It's small cute things. For example, if I see a big dog, I don't necessarily have the same reaction.

SAMIA: Do you remember in high school or middle school trying to convince Mom or Dad to get a pet?

FERHEEN: No, it's always been that, "Mom and Samia are allergic." I knew that if you two were allergic, there's nothing I can do about that. At the end of the day, your safety comes first. There was also another big reason, too: Money. When I was in 4th grade, Dad lost his job and Mom had cancer. When that happened, our finances tanked; we were very poor. When that happened, I was like, "We can't afford a cat."

SAMIA: Right, and you want to be able to give the pet what it needs.

FERHEEN: Exactly. That was honestly what was always in the back of my mind. We always said it was because you all were allergic, but really, there was also this other thing of wanting to provide as much as I can for this animal—whether that's providing quality food, being able to spoil them with toys, have money for when they get sick. All those things combined, I realized that I needed to afford having a cat. I never felt that way until—tbh, even now I still don't feel like I can afford a cat. But honestly, it's because Sufyan is willing to help out financially that I feel more comfortable about it. But, of course, I still have a stock account specific for the cats...

SAMIA: Really?! Lmao, that's great.

FERHEEN: Yeah, it has like \$1,000 in it, but if anything happens and we need emergency money for the cats, that's where we go.

SAMIA: You'd always send me these Facebook adoption advertisements for cute cats. When did you see Zayn & Naru?

FERHEEN: The catalyst started when I went to visit Chihiro, my former coworker, who has a cat named Choppi, who is like an older version of Naru. So, Naru is a Lynx Point Siamese cat; he has distinct facial patterns and white fur. And I was like, "Oh my god, Choppi is sooo cute!" Even before that, I was looking at cats online, and yeah, these cats were really cute, but none of them really spoke to me. Then, when I came home that day from visiting Chihiro, I was on one of those generic adopt-a-pet websites, where you can enter in what kind of cat you want. So, I typed in, "Lynx Point Siamese" to see what came up. And Naru's picture came up. Naru—not only was he the cutest thing I've ever seen in my life—okay, wait, there are some cuter cats than him. The thing that really hit me is the fact that his original name was "Abu." Which was supposed to be from Aladdin, because Zayn's name used to be Aladdin—

SAMIA: Oh my god, Zayn is such an Aladdin!

FERHEEN: I know right, so when I saw this, I was like “Oh my god, his name is Abu, like dad!!” So I couldn’t stop laughing. In order to get any sort of information about Abu, I had to fill out an application. I was like, “fine whatever,” and it was a really extensive application. Right after I submitted the application, this woman from the organization called me about the application. She said that she liked my application and everything, but if we wanted to see the cat, I’d have to go with Mom and Dad. And I told her, “Well, I don’t know yet. Can I just go see him alone?” But she said, “Because you’re not the owner of the house, your parents would take over the responsibility if something happened to you. So, they have to go with you.” And then she explained, “There are 2 ways you can go see the cat, either at the foster home at the public adoption event where anyone can see the cat.” And I was thinking, “Oh my god, if we go to see the cat at this public place, anyone can see them and adopt them.” So, I thought that we needed to go to the foster home, because I really, really wanted him. It was a Thursday that day when I talked to the woman, and it was Saturday morning that we’d have to go see the cats. So it hit me that if I don’t do this tomorrow—if I don’t talk to Dad tomorrow—that cat would be gone. To clarify, I wanted to see Naru specifically; we weren’t planning to get Zayn.

SAMIA: So, how were you able to convince Dad about seeing the cat? What was that conversation like?

FERHEEN: Honestly, I couldn’t sleep that night at all. I kept replaying this future conversation in my head. How would I strategize how to talk to Dad about the cat? I kept thinking about it and came up with a plan. So, it was that Friday morning, a couple of hours before Dad would go to Jummah prayer.

He was in the kitchen, making chai or whatever, and I said, “Dad, I need to have a conversation with you. Do you have time right now?”

He was like, “Yeah, okay. I guess I have some time. Is everything okay?”

And I was like “Yeah, everything is fine, everything is okay. I just wanted to have a conversation.

So, I sat him down at the dinner table, and I said to him, “Dad do you remember the day after my birthday, I was crying, and I wouldn’t tell you why I was crying.”

He responded, “Yeah, you know, I remember. I was upset that you wouldn’t tell me.”

I said to him, “Now I want to tell you the reason I was crying. It was because I’ve been feeling very lonely lately. I feel lonely, because I just turned 27, and I feel like I can’t really do anything. I feel very stuck—for multiple reasons. I’m trying to go to med school and that transition period has been really hard, leaving Japan, as you know, was really hard for me. I’ve been very lonely, and it’s hard to hang out with friends. Whenever I try to, you always ask me, ‘Why? Why do you have to go?’ And I know you don’t mean it maliciously. But it makes me feel insanely guilty, because it makes me feel like I shouldn’t be doing that, even if there’s nothing wrong with it. And I explained to him that on my birthday, I actually lied to him and went to get ice cream with my friend Meghan after work. I didn’t want to lie to him, but I didn’t want him to ask me why. I’ve been feeling this sense of loneliness, Dad, and I’ve been thinking of strategies to fix this sense of loneliness and powerlessness. There are 2 options: 1.) Move out, get my own place, and live my own life. But you know that I don’t want to move out; I care about you, and I care about this family. 2.) There is another option. Just hear me out”—this is also when I start bawling—“I know this sounds ridiculous, but as you know, I’ve always wanted a cat my entire life. This house has been really tough. There’s a lot of anger in this house and stagnancy.”

SAMIA: Yeah, and we’re all adults now, which is super hard.

FERHEEN: Exactly, none of us are babies anymore, yet we’re treated like babies. There’s this weird negativity, and we don’t know how to push past it, as it stands. And I was like, “Dad someone told me”—It was probably my therapist—“that getting a cat would change the dynamic of the household. And Dad, I really want a cat. I found this cat online. The adoption people said I can visit on Saturday, but you need to come. The whole family has to agree, and I can’t go by myself.”

I showed him the picture of the cat, and the way his face lit up a little. He started doing that smile of “I’m not trying to smile, but I’m actually smiling inside.” And he was like, “...Yeah, that’s a cute cat...”

I was like, “I really want to visit on Saturday, and I know it’s ridiculous, but can we—”

And at this point, he was like, “Okay, stop crying! We can go visit the cat.”

Of course, I had mentioned to him, “I thought this was fate, because the cat’s name is Abu!!”

And he was like, “If we get this cat, we have to change the name...”

So, it kind of fell into place after that.

SAMIA: I want to know more about how you strategized this, especially for people who may want to convince a parent about a similar topic. How do you convince an immigrant parent, who has a lot of cultural/religious values, about something like this?

FERHEEN: 1.) I think it starts with the fact that Dad likes cats. If I had the exact same conversation with Dad about a dog, there would be nothing we can do to convince him (except a Husky? He really likes Huskies, for some reason lol). Because he has a softness for them—whether it's hearing about that client who had an outdoor cat and really liked it, or when our cousin Arifa fostered kittens, he really liked them. Whereas if you have a parent like Mom who is scared or doesn't have a visible sense of softness toward cats, it'll be difficult to convince them. So, if you have a parent who's more open, who has pyaar (love) in their heart for it, then maybe it might work. I also knew that Dad initially didn't like our fish at all when I first got them, but then after a week, he was like, "Ferheen I really like this fish. Can we get more fish?" And I asked him if he wanted to feed them and he did. That showed a level of openness.

2.) I think it really hit him that I am lonely. And he knows that; he went to visit me in Japan and knew how independent and happy I was. And then I came home, I haven't been exercising, I've been gaining more weight—not to say that gaining weight is a bad thing, but it's more about the fact that I changed a lot. When I was vulnerable with him, I think he got it. Dad has a very specific personality type—he is a homebody. You have to approach this in a way that's like, "I want to make this home better. The only way I can think of making this home better is introducing something else." That doesn't mean I'm going to get married and have a kid, haha. But it's like: How can you change a family dynamic? The easiest way to do that is with a pet. There are a lot of studies that show that. Tugging at his heart strings, in that sense. How can you bring hope back in this house?

So, I think for the people who are reading this, who really want a pet: 1st, they have to figure out what type of pet works. You can start by sending your family cat memes and starting to gauge their reactions. Having that partly emotional / partly logic based approach. This scenario was really specific, though, because in order to adopt them, I had to have our parents. For the most part, that doesn't always happen, and I would've gotten the cats by myself if I could.

SAMIA: Retrospectively, it was probably a good thing to get our parents involved.

FERHEEN: On the other hand, too, parents adapt. Desi parents, especially, they sometimes want to meddle in the lives of their children. And influence them. But when you become an

adult, it's like, "Back off!" But when you introduce a pet, it's like, "Hey, now you can take care of this pet!" I've seen so many stories of that happening in an immigrant family, where someone just brings a pet, their parents don't want, and the parents fall in love. It's something that they can transfer their feelings of "I want to take care of you."

SAMIA: So, going back to the adoption process...How did Zayn happen?

FERHEEN: So, we called the person back, and she coordinated with the foster mom, and we visited their house on Saturday. That's when Zayn came into our lives...

SAMIA: The lovable tyrant...

FERHEEN: The pictures online showed Zayn & Naru as very small kittens, so when we went to see them, they were double the size. Zayn was so extroverted, lots of energy, "I'm so excited." Naru, on the other hand, was just, like, hiding under the chair, very shy. Dad was like, "Oh I really like Naru; he's a really pretty cat." Honestly, I realized in that moment that we needed to get both cats. The reason why is that even though I wasn't there to get Zayn, the way the 2 cats were bonded, and the way that Zayn's energy brings out Naru from his shell. I was scared that if we only got Naru, he'd be lonely and hide the whole time. But if we got both, they'd have each other. Dad was like, "No, I don't want 2 cats, I only want 1." And I was like, "I'm just going to get both..." Thankfully, I didn't have to get dad's permission to get both. The person from the organization also called Mom to confirm that she was okay with getting the cats, and Mom was like, "Yeah." That's how we got both our cats!

SAMIA: I wanted to ask you about what you've noticed about family dynamics now that we've had the cats for a couple of months. What has it been like?

FERHEEN: This house has become much lighter. Whenever I was driving home from work or class, there was this heaviness about having to go back home. But now, I get excited. There's a different energy that I personally feel. Now, we also have conversations about the ridiculous things that the cats have done. In our family group chat, it's all pictures of our cats. Little things like that, that make me feel like this was a good idea. Mom is still hesitant with the cats and gets jumpy sometimes when they make sudden moves, but she'll say things like, "Oh, Bobos!" And she talks to them, even if she doesn't touch them. That's good enough for me.

SAMIA: An unintended consequence I just thought of is that we clean more? We make our space more clean, putting food away quicker after meals so the cats don't get into it, vacuuming more. There's a consciousness of making sure the cats are safe, but also not wanting them to get into things that we don't want them to mess up,

things like that. How have the cats helped you, especially with COVID-19 and shelter-in-place?

FERHEEN: The loneliness has disappeared for a couple of reasons. 1.) The cats themselves—well, Zayn is just Zayn—but Naru, is a very affectionate cat and has definitely bonded with me. In light of this pandemic, I've been in my room a lot, just working, and he will come and just lie next to me for hours. It's really cute and makes me think, "Wow, this cat loves me and wants to spend so much time with me." 2.) In the beginning, at night time, they'd wake me up constantly, but it's gotten a lot better. They're very cuddly at 6 am, and it helps relax me. I was think about it the other day, but the cats don't know there's a pandemic. They don't know that there's something wrong. So, that helps me to know that everything is going to be okay.

SAMIA: I think in the same way, when I didn't have a job and then started working remotely, Zayn and Naru would just come to my room and cuddle with me or hop onto my windowsill. It reminds me that there's more to life then this idea of a 9 to 5 job and work and it's the simple things that matter. They're just babies—they're excited by dust bunnies and small spaces to crawl into and boxes and sniffing around our house. So, it's like: How are you introducing new energy to things that feel stagnant? Just reminds me to slow down and go play with a cat or something.

SUFYAN ABBASI ON NOT BEING MUCH OF A PET PERSON
TO SUDDENLY UNDERSTANDING THE JOYS OF HAVING CATS

SAMIA: Hi Yuni! I want to know about how you usually feel about pets and animals before we got the cats.

SUFYAN: I always kind of loved cats and dogs and stuff, I was actually a little bit afraid of dogs but they're cute. But like, I always felt kind of weird about having animals, because animals should live out in the wild. They should be out, be free—it felt weird that we were putting them in our house and making them live with us. And, of course, we had fish; fish are cool, because they don't care where they are. Or like, I always thought tarantulas would make the best pets because they only live in a 1 foot by 2 foot tank, and that's how they live their entire lives anyway. So, I always thought there was this ethical thing to do with animals. Then we got Zayn and Naru. And I realized that they're totally happy getting fed

every day. They just don't care. They can't really care less about how they don't get to run around in the wild. All their needs are met here. Anyway, I love them.

SAMIA: That's so cute! Tell me how you felt when we first got them, compared to now.

SUFYAN: On the topic of animals, I never knew why people considered themselves "pet people." I was always grossed out when people kissed their animals and stuff. But now, I totally don't mind kissing Zayn & Naru on the forehead and giving them so many cuddles. Now I understand. They just bring so much joy. For me personally, I feel like there was always something I was missing in my life. I would use video games or whatever to give me happiness. Now that I have the cats, they've just helped me feel better about life. Just in general. Which is really nice. Just thinking about things in their perspectives. Which is like, they don't know that the world is on fire.

SAMIA: Thinking about right now, you're working from home. You're here all the time and get to spend more time with them. How does that feel?

SUFYAN: Yeah, I definitely think the tensions would rise a lot in our house, in our family. Just people, in general, when they're put together for a long time, in confined spaces, there tends to be more tension. I think Naru and Zayn definitely have cut the tension, and help de-stress everyone. They're really cute, and they do silly things, it's nice to have clowns in the family.

SAMIA: They're such babies, they do such dumb things, haha. Something you've said before is that you've always wanted a little brother. Now, the cats are like little brothers. Can you explain some of that in your words?

SUFYAN: Yeah, it's funny when people call themselves pet parents. Like, no, I don't want to be their parent! I don't want to discipline them. I want to play with them, and get rough with them, and steal their stuff from them. I have 2 sisters, and I've always just been jealous and wanted a little brother. Someone I could teach the ways of being a bro, hahaha. I see Zayn and Naru as my little bro's. I think that's the relationship I want. I mess with them. I give them treats and stuff. I don't discipline them, really. That's not what I want to do.

SAMIA: And Zayn has grown this attachment to you; that's been so cute. What has that been like?

SUFYAN: I think he's kind of marked me as his territory. I think that's the more apt definition of our relationship. I always try to assert my dominance. I think that's what it is. I like to think I'm above him in the hierarchy and that he's come to respect me. He likes to sleep with me a lot. It's nice to have an animal come up to you and want pets from you. What I've been doing is giving treats to them whenever I come home from work, just to get them to feel positive reinforcement with me. I think Zayn knows that if he's very affectionate with me, I'll give him treats, haha. I think it's more self-serving.

SAMIA: He'll meow at your door, like, every day at 10 AM. He'll come say salam. Any other random reflections?

SUFYAN: I think people should be very wary of why people don't want pets. Pets are a lot of work and responsibility. I think understanding that is super important. Maybe they don't want to take on that and don't have the energy to do that. Cats can leave hair everywhere, you have to scoop their poop, there's a lot of extra chores and stress that comes with pets. So being considerate of that is important. You should address that angle to really convince someone who is apprehensive. I think specifically in an immigrant family, there's a tension between pets and pets being seen as a white person thing or a Western thing. I don't see many Indian people with pets. Maybe Indian immigrant parents might feel like, "That's not an 'us' thing." And if their homelands had a different relationship to animals, like cats and dogs roaming the streets. "Those aren't pets, they're dirty." So, it could be an image problem where there aren't enough people they may know with pets in their life. Recently, more of our cousins and family members have gotten cats, so it's way more normalized in the younger generation. For the people with older parents, that's going to be a tough hurdle in comparison. Getting over all the stigma of having an animal in the house.

FAROOQ ABBASI ON HIS RESISTANCE TO PETS TO FALLING IN LOVE

FERHEEN: How did you experience pets in India?

FAROOQ: We had many pets, street pets, like cats and dogs. We saw goats - goats aren't street goats but people had them in their home. I've seen donkeys once in a while and cows everyday. So one of my nephews went to India and said "is it a zoo over here?"

FERHEEN: So I'm just curious, when you were growing up, did you feed any cats or dogs? Or stayed away from them?

FAROOQ: Stayed away from them. I don't think we fed them. Street dogs and cats fed themselves outside whatever people threw away after dinner. They eat whatever stuff is outside.

FERHEEN: Did you ever see kittens? Or just big cats?

FAROOQ: Just big cats.

FERHEEN: How did you feel when I told you about the cats?

FAROOQ: You know from the beginning, I was opposing any kind of pets in our house. The reason is cleanliness and taking care of them. It's not that easy. That was my biggest fear if we couldn't take care of them properly. Then it's not a good thing. I didn't want them to suffer. But when you told me, like emotional blackmail, I agreed with that. That was the reason why I agreed.

FERHEEN: So before I ask more specifically about your experiences with the cats, recently in the past year or so, you've had experiences with cats that have made me think you were more interested in cats than previously thought. Specifically I have two instances: the first instance is when we went to Arifa's house and she was fostering those little baby kittens. Do you remember that? Can you tell me about that experience?

FAROOQ: Yes, a little bit. They were very cute kittens and when I held them, they were very cute and nice. I probably held them for the first time in my life. I felt great about it but it didn't mean I wanted any cats in my house.

FERHEEN: Can you tell me about Michelle?

FAROOQ: Oh yes! That is a cute cat. I was working at one of my client's houses and they have a cat named Michelle. That cat was so cute! She stayed outside. Hardly I saw her inside the house. She went outside and slept in the middle of the walkway. Every neighbor on that street knows Michelle and whenever they pass by, they say "Hi Michelle, how are you?" - all the kids - next door, they have a daycare, and then when all the parents come to get the kid, they stand there and talk to and pet Michelle. It's so nice. She's a very nice cat. Never ran away, and just sat there. She entertained everyone.

FERHEEN: So it seems like in this year, you've had these positive experiences with cats, right?

FAROOQ: Yeah. I did.

FERHEEN: So now I want to ask you specifically about Zayn and Naru. You mentioned that you were hesitating before and your concerns were absolutely valid. Now I want to know, how do you feel about them now? We have had them for about 3 months now - how do you feel?

FAROOQ: I think we should have gotten them a long time ago. I feel that this is a very good addition to our family. It's beautiful. Entertaining them, feeding them, cleaning them, cutting nails. That's a challenge but we do all these things. The main thing is that they come and brush against you when you're standing there. It seems that they love you so much. When you come from outside, they run from wherever they are and come to you and it shows you that they love you so much. They are very nice cats. Beautiful.

FERHEEN: I have one more question for you. What is your favorite thing about them?

FAROOQ: Zayn is really a character. When he has a moment, he just wants me to pet him. Pet him and pet him and he doesn't want me to leave. When he's purring, then you know that he just wants me to pet and pet and pet until he's say ok I'm done but it lasts for at least 3-4 minutes, but that's the biggest feeling and love that Zayn gives. And Naru is always easy - you hold him and you love him and whenever you grab him, he is just phenomenal. You can pet him anywhere, even his belly, and he doesn't care. Both have different characters but both are so beautiful. It's great to have them.

FERHEEN: And this is for my curiosity, but of course us kids talk about our cats to our cousins and send pictures. Do you have any sort of similar interaction with you and your family?

FAROOQ: I just briefly talked to them but I haven't sent them pictures. I will, iA.

FERHEEN: And maybe it might make them happy especially during these tough times.

FAROOQ: That's true.

FERHEEN: Especially with videos and stuff. Especially in the morning when they're meowing so much for khana! It might bring some joy. Perfect. So those are the formal questions. Is there anything else you'd like to mention?

FAROOQ: I think we should've gotten them a long time ago.

FERHEEN: But you know what though - we wouldn't have these ones.

FAROOQ: Yeah we couldn't have gotten these ones. That's true.

FERHEEN: So I think that this was the perfect moment to get them.

FAROOQ: Or at least we could've got them when they were babies.

FERHEEN: I agree. I wish we had gotten them when they were tiny babies - -

FAROOQ: And then we could've trained them properly.

FERHEEN: Exactly, but you know, it's okay. Well, thank you Abu!

FAROOQ: My pleasure.