

Episode 1: The Alibi

-Mail Chimp Ad-

Automated voice

This is a Global-Tel link prepaid call from Adnan Syed an inmate at a Maryland Correctional facility...

Sarah Koenig

For the last year, I've spent every working day trying to figure out where a high school kid was for an hour after school one day in 1999-- or if you want to get technical about it, and apparently I do, where a high school kid was for 21 minutes after school one day in 1999. This search sometimes feels undignified on my part. I've had to ask about teenagers' sex lives, where, how often, with whom, about notes they passed in class, about their drug habits, their relationships with their parents.

And I'm not a detective or a private investigator. I've not even a crime reporter. But, yes, every day this year, I've tried to figure out the alibi of a 17-year-old boy. Before I get into why I've been doing this, I just want to point out something I'd never really thought about before I started working on this story. And that is, it's really hard to account for your time, in a detailed way, I mean.

How'd you get to work last Wednesday, for instance? Drive? Walk? Bike? Was it raining? Are you sure?

Did you go to any stores that day? If so, what did you buy? Who did you talk to? The entire day, name every person you talked to. It's hard.

Now imagine you have to account for a day that happened six weeks back. Because that's the situation in the story I'm working on in which a bunch of teenagers had to recall a day six weeks earlier. And it was 1999, so they had to do it without the benefit of texts or Facebook or Instagram. Just for a lark, I asked some teenagers to try it.

Do you remember what you did on that Friday?

Tyler

No. Not at all. I can't remember anything.

Sarah Koenig

Wait, nothing?

Tyler

No. I can't remember anything that far back. I'm pretty sure I was in school. I think-- no?

Sarah Koenig

That's Tyler. He's 18. I asked my nephew Sam. He's 18, too.

Sam

Not a clue. In school, probably. I would be in school. Actually, I think I worked that day. Yeah, I worked that day. And I went to school. That was about it.

Sarah Koenig

Actually, on second thought?

Sam

I don't think I went to school that day.

Sarah Koenig

You don't think you went.

Sam

Yeah, no, I didn't. I definitely didn't.

Sarah Koenig

Here's Sam's friend Elliot. He seemed to have better recall.

Elliot

Actually, I may have gone to the movies that night later.

Sarah Koenig

Do you remember what you saw?

Elliot

Now that I'm thinking. I'm sorry? Yeah, I think I saw *22 Jump Street*.

Sarah Koenig

OK. And did you go with friends?

Elliot

Yeah. I went with Sam and this kid Sean, Carter, a bunch of people.

Sarah Koenig

Wait, Sam, my nephew Sam?

Elliot

Yeah, yeah.

Sarah Koenig

Oh, OK. So Sam says he was at work.

Elliot

Oh, then it wasn't that night, then.

Sarah Koenig

One kid did actually remember pretty well, because it was the last day of state testing at his school and he'd saved up to go to a nightclub. That's the main thing I learned from this exercise, which is no big shocker, I guess. If some significant event happened that day, you remember that, plus you remember the entire day much better.

If nothing significant happened, then the answers get very general. I most likely did this, or I most likely did that. These are words I've heard a lot lately. Here's the case I've been working on.

Almost 15 years ago, on January 13, 1999, a girl named Hae Min Lee disappeared. She was a senior at Woodlawn High School in Baltimore County in Maryland. She was Korean. She was smart, and beautiful, and cheerful, and a great athlete. She played field hockey and lacrosse. And she was responsible.

Right after school she was supposed to pick up her little cousin from kindergarten and drop her home. But she didn't show. That's when Hae Lee's family knew something was up, when the cousin's school called.

About a month later, on February 9, Hae's body was found in a big park in Baltimore, really a rambling forest. A maintenance guy who said he'd stopped to take a leak on his way to work discovered her there. He'd noticed a bit of her black hair poking out of a shallow grave.

The cause of death was manual strangulation, meaning someone did it with their hands. A couple weeks after that, so six weeks after she first went missing, Hae's ex-boyfriend, a guy named Adnan Syed, was arrested for her murder. He's been in prison ever since.

I first heard about this story more than a year ago when I got an email from a woman named Rabia Chaudry. Rabia knows Adnan pretty well. Her younger brother Saad is Adnan's best friend. And they believe he's innocent.

Rabia was writing to me because, way back when, I used to be a reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*, and she'd come across some stories I'd written about a well-known defense attorney in Baltimore who'd been disbarred for mishandling client money. That attorney was the same person who defended Adnan, her last major trial, in fact.

Rabia told me she thought the attorney botched the case-- not just botched it, actually, but threw the case on purpose so she could get more money for the appeal. The lawyer had died a few years later. She'd been sick.

Rabia asked if I would please just take a look at Adnan's case. I don't get emails like this every day. So I thought, sure, why not?

I read a few newspaper clips about the case, looked up a few trial records. And on paper, the case was like a Shakespearean mashup-- young lovers from different worlds thwarting their families, secret assignations, jealousy, suspicion, and honor besmirched, the villain not a Moor exactly, but a Muslim all the same, and a final act of murderous revenge. And the main stage? A regular old high school across the street from a 7-Eleven.

Sarah Koenig

Hi, are you Rabia? Hi. Am I saying your name correctly?

Rabia

Rabia.

Sarah Koenig

Rabia. OK.

I went to go see Rabia. She was surrounded by paper-- files, loose stacks, binders, some crappy looking boxes-- all court documents and attorney's files from Adnan's case. Some of the papers were warped and discolored.

Sarah Koenig

Why do they look wet? They look wet.

Rabia

These have been damaged, because these--

Sarah Koenig

She explained that it was because the boxes had been in her car, on and off, for 15 years. Rabia is a lawyer herself. She mostly does immigration stuff. Her office takes up the corner of a much larger open space that I think is a Pakistani travel agency, though it's hard to tell.

It's in this little strip mall. Across the parking lot, there's a new Pakistani restaurant, an African evangelical church, an Indian clothing shop, a convenience store. On the sidewalk outside, I found a teeny weeny bag of marijuana.

Baltimore County is like this, at least on the west side. It's where a lot of middle class and working class people go, many immigrants included, to get their kids out of the badass city. Though the badass city is close by.

Rabia is 40. She's short, and she's got a beautiful round face framed by hijab. She's adorable looking, but you definitely shouldn't mess with her. She's very smart and very tough, and she could crush you.

Her brother Saad was at Rabia's office too the first time I went. He's 33, a mortgage broker, more laid back than Rabia. They told me about Adnan Syed, their friend-- not just a good kid, but an especially good kid-- smart, kind, goofy, handsome. So that when he was arrested for murder, so many people who know him were stunned.

Rabia

He was like the community's golden child.

Sarah Koenig

Oh, really? Talk more about that.

Rabia

He was an honor roll student, volunteer EMT. He was on the football team. He was a star runner on the track team. He was the homecoming king. He led prayers at the mosque. Everybody knew Adnan to be somebody who was going to do something really big.

Sarah Koenig

I later fact checked all these accolades, of course, and learned that Rabia was mostly right, though she sometimes gets a little loosey-goosey with the details. Adnan was an EMT, but he didn't volunteer. He was paid for it. He was on the track team, but he wasn't a star. He did play football. And he did lead prayers on occasion.

He wasn't homecoming king. But he was prince of his junior prom, and this at a high school that was majority black. They picked the Pakistani Muslim kid. So you get the picture. He was an incredibly likable and well-liked kid.

This conversation with Rabia and Saad, this is what launched me on this year long-- "obsession" is maybe too strong a word-- let's say fascination with this case. By the end of this hour, you're going to hear different people tell different versions of what happened the day Hae Lee was killed. But let's start with the most important version of the story, the one Rabia told me first. And that's the one that was presented at trial.

The state's case against Adnan went like this. He and Hae had been going out since junior prom. But Adnan wasn't supposed to be dating at all. Adnan was born in the US, but his parents are from Pakistan. And they're conservative Muslims-- no drinking, no smoking, no girls, all that.

Saad and Rabia's parents are the same way. Their families are friends. But even though Adnan and Saad and their buddies were Muslims, they were also, shall we say, healthy American teenagers who were going to do what teenagers do, so long as they didn't get caught.

So Adnan had to keep his relationship with Hae secret. The state used this against him in two ways. First, they argued, he put everything on the line-- his family, his relationships at the mosque-- to run around with this girl. So that when she broke up with him eight months later, he was left with nothing, and he was outraged. He couldn't take it, and he killed her.

And the second way they used it, as they said-- look at what a liar he is, how duplicitous. He plays the good Muslim son at home and at the mosque, but look what he was up to. Saad remembers the prosecutor's closing argument at trial.

Saad

His family didn't know that he actually drank, he smoked, he was having sex.

Sarah Koenig

This was proof of bad character, someone who could be a murderer. But Saad says, if Adnan is guilty of anything, it's of being a normal kid with immigrant parents.

Saad

So the prosecution had painted Adnan as a totally bipolar or a maniacal dual personality.

Sarah Koenig

We all grew up with that dual personality.

Saad

I know, it was forced. I'm the same way. I was like, they could paint the same thing. Because I was actually homecoming king, which I don't know if my sister even knows.

Rabia

I did not know this.

Saad

She did not know. So I was dating a girl that was--

Sarah Koenig

And why is homecoming king bad? That sounds like a good thing.

Rabia

We don't go to homecoming. We don't--

Sarah Koenig

Because it's a dance.

Rabia

It's a dance. It's a mixed gender--

Saad

So I was in the same boat. My parents, my sister, they didn't know about this at all. Right now, more than 10 year later, she's finding out. I know, I'll admit. On one side, my family thinks I'm a virgin. But on the other hand, I play-- you know.

Rabia

--way too much.

Saad

But it's the truth.

Sarah Koenig

TMI, TMI, TMI.

Saad

See that? That right there is kind of making her feel uncomfortable. She's like, whoa, whoa, whoa.

Sarah Koenig

So just on motive alone, Saad and Rabia found the whole thing ridiculous. As for physical evidence, there was none-- nothing. Apart from some fingerprints in Hae's car, which Adnan had been in many times, there was nothing linking him to the crime-- no DNA, no fibers, no hairs, no matching soil from the bottom of his boots.

Instead, what they had on Adnan was one guy's story, a guy named Jay. He's the third person you need to remember in this crime story besides Hae and Adnan. Jay was a friend of Adnan's. They'd been in school together since middle school.

They weren't super close, but they had mutual friends. Jay sold weed, and he and Adnan smoked together. The story Jay told police had problems, because it kept changing from telling to telling. But they were able to bolster the main plot points using cell records from Adnan's phone.

By the time I left Rabia's office that first day, I understood only one thing clearly, though maybe not the thing Rabia and Saad wanted me to understand. But what I took away from the visit was, somebody is lying here. Maybe Adnan really is innocent. But what if he isn't? What if he did do it, and he's got all these good people thinking he didn't?

So either it's Jay or it's Adnan. But someone is lying. And I really wanted to figure out who.

In the early morning of February 28, 1999, Adnan was arrested by Baltimore City detectives. He was asleep in his bed when they showed up at his house. They took him straight from his untidy bedroom to an interrogation room at Homicide downtown. What Adnan didn't know is that just hours before they picked him up, the cops had interviewed his friend Jay.

Detective

This is a taped interview of Jay, black male, 19 years of age. We're at the offices of Homicide, specifically the colonel's conference room.

Sarah Koenig

The police recorded two taped interviews with Jay. And I'm going to play you the second one from a couple weeks later, only because the sound quality is much better. Just a warning that the tape is a little upsetting to hear in parts.

Detective

Why don't you go ahead and tell us what you know about the death of Hae Lee.

Jay

OK. I'd left out, went shopping with a friend of mine, an ex-friend of mine, Adnan. We had had a conversation. During the conversation he stated that he was going to kill that bitch, referring to Hae Lee. I took it with context. It didn't stand out in my head any.

Sarah Koenig

Jay said he didn't take it too seriously. The cops have him start again from the top. On the morning of the 13th, Jay says, Adnan had left school and driven to Jay's house. Jay had graduated from school the year

before and was working, but not on that day. January 13 happens to be the birthday of Jay's girlfriend, Stephanie. And Jay, who didn't have his own car, needed to go buy something for her. So Adnan comes over. According to Jay, they go shopping at the mall.

Detective

When did you do that?

Jay

We left the mall. I took him to school. I dropped him off in the back of the school. He went up to class. He left his cell phone in the car with me, told me he'd call me. I went back to my friend Jenn's house and waited for him to call.

Detective

OK, now at this point, you know why he's leaving the car with you.

Jay

Yes.

Detective

And why is that?

Jay

Because he said he was going to kill Hae.

Detective

And the reason you have the car and the cell phone was why?

Jay

To pick him up from wherever he was going to do this at.

Detective

OK, and you had talked about this while you were shopping that day?

Jay

The details of the car and all?

Detective

The events, how they were going to plan out.

Jay

That day he told me, yes. He told me, I'm going to leave you with my cellphone and my car, and I need you to come get me. Yes.

Detective

After--

Jay

After he had killed Hae, yes.

Detective

OK.

Sarah Koenig

Later that afternoon, the call comes.

Detective

You received a phone call from Adnan.

Jay

Yes.

Detective

On his cellphone.

Jay

Yes.

Detective

Which is in your possession.

Jay

Yes.

Detective

And the conversation was what?

Jay

That bitch is dead. Come and get me. I'm at Best Buy.

Sarah Koenig

Jay drives to Best Buy and sees Adnan in the parking lot.

Jay

I noticed that Hae wasn't with him. I parked next to him. He asked me to get out the car. I get out the car. He asks me, am I ready for this? And I say, ready for what?

And he takes the keys. He opens the trunk. And all I can see is Hae's lips are all blue, and she's pretzeled up in the back of the trunk. And she's dead.

Sarah Koenig

They leave the parking lot. Adnan's driving Hae's car with her body in the trunk. Jay's driving Adnan's car. They ditch Hae's car at the I-70 Park and Ride. And then, to hear Jay tell it, they just kind of tool around Baltimore County together for a while as if nothing had happened-- buy some weed, cruise around, make some calls. After a while, Jay drives Adnan back to Woodlawn High School.

Detective

Why did you take him back to school?

Jay

He told me that I had to take him back to school because he needed to be seen there.

Detective

Was he going to a certain event?

Jay

It was practice, track practice.

Detective

Track practice.

Jay

Yes.

Detective

So he wanted an alibi?

Jay

Yes.

Detective

He wanted to be seen by people at track.

Jay

Yes.

Detective

And you guys had discussed that?

Jay

He just told me that he needed to be seen.

Detective

Yes.

Jay

He told me that he needed to be seen.

Detective

At track practice. You took him back?

Jay

Yes.

Detective

Are you having any conversation with Adnan at the time?

Jay

To the effect, yes. Don't tell anyone. He said that he couldn't believe he killed somebody with his bare hands, that all the other mother [BLEEP] referring to hoods and thugs and stuff think they're hard core. But he just killed a person with his bare hands.

Detective

So at this point he's bragging about it?

Jay

Basically.

Detective

He was proud of it?

Jay

Yes.

Sarah Koenig

After track practice, Jay picks Adnan up again. They drive around some more. By this time, Hae's family was worried, and they'd called the police, who in turn called a couple of Hae's friends, including Adnan.

The call comes in on his cell. The cops ask if he's seen Hae or knows where she is. Jay says after the call, they drive to Jay's to get some shovels, go retrieve Hae's car from the park and ride. They drive

around some more and finally end up at Leakin Park, where Adnan proceeds to bury Hae. It's evening by now, maybe 7:00 or 8:00 PM.

Jay

And he asked me if I was going to help. And I told him, [BLEEP] no. And he starts just shoveling dirt on top of her. After we leave there--

Detective

Let me stop there.

Jay

Yes.

Detective

You helped him dig the hole.

Jay

Yes.

Detective

How long did it take you both to dig the hole?

Jay

20, 25 minutes.

Detective

How deep did you make the hole?

Jay

Oh, maybe six inches at the most. It wasn't very deep at all.

Detective

Who did most of the digging?

Jay

Uh, it was--

Detective

Both of you?

Jay

Yeah.

Detective

Equal work?

Jay

I wouldn't say that, but yeah.

Detective

OK.

Sarah Koenig

So those are the key points. Adnan told Jay in advance he was going to do it. He did it. They buried her. Jay's story wasn't just the foundation of the state's case against Adnan. It was the state's case against Adnan.

In the picture Jay drew, it's cold. I mean, he's not describing a crime of passion here. This is something much darker-- to methodically map out the death of your friend, to strangle her with your own hands so close up like that. That would mean Adnan wasn't just a killer, but a master liar and manipulator, a psychopath, probably.

Adnan's in a maximum security prison in western Maryland. He calls me at my request about twice a week. He talks to me from a bank of eight pay phones in the rec hall, a pretty large room where other guys are sitting at tables with metal seats attached to them playing chess or cards or using the microwave or watching TV.

It can get a little loud sometimes. Once I asked if all eight phones were always occupied. And he said, usually not, because guys who have been in for a long time, often they have no one to call.

When I first met Adnan in person, I was struck by two things. He was way bigger than I expected-- barrel chested and tall. In the photos I'd seen, he was still a lanky teenager with struggling facial hair and sagging jeans. By now, he was 32. He'd spent nearly half his life in prison, becoming larger and properly bearded.

And the second thing, which you can't miss about Adnan, is that he has giant brown eyes like a dairy cow. That's what prompts my most idiotic lines of inquiry. Could someone who looks like that really strangle his girlfriend? Idiotic, I know.

When he first heard Jay's story of the crime, Adnan didn't say, well, it didn't happen like that, or, I didn't mean for it to happen like that. He said, it didn't happen. None of this is true at all. He says he had nothing to do with Hae's murder, and he doesn't know who did.

Hae was Adnan's first serious relationship with a girl. He says he loved her in the way of high school love, but then also in the way of high school got over her. So that when they broke up for good sometime before Christmas break of senior year, he says he was sad for sure, but not obsessed or anything.

Adnan Syed

I just sometimes wish they could look into my brain and see how I really felt about her. And no matter what else someone would say, they would see, man, this guy had no ill will toward her. Whatever the motivation is to kill someone, I had absolutely-- it didn't exist in me, you know what I mean? No one can ever say why.

People could say why. Oh, man, he was mad, this, that, or the other. But no one could ever come with any type of proof or anecdote or anything to ever say that I was ever mad at her, that I was ever angry with her, that I ever threatened her. That's the only thing I can really hold onto. That is like my only firm handhold in this whole thing, that no one's ever been able to prove it.

No one ever has been able to provide any shred of evidence that I had anything but friendship toward her, like love and respect for her. That's at the end of the day, man. The only thing I can ever say is, man, I had no reason to kill her.

Sarah Koenig

He's adamant about this. You can hear it, right? He's staunch. The problem is, when you ask Adnan to go back and tell his version of what happened that day, to refute Jay's story, everything becomes a lot mushier.

Yes, he hung out with Jay on the 13th, both during and after school. But he doesn't remember exactly where they went, or what they did, or what time it was. Here's what he's got.

January 13 unfolded like any other day, a normal, mostly uneventful day. He says there are a couple of things that do stand out, though. That day was Stephanie's birthday. Stephanie was one of Adnan's best friends and also Jay's girlfriend.

Adnan had gotten Stephanie a birthday present, a stuffed reindeer, which he'd given to her in second period, Miss Efron's English class.

Adnan Syed

And it occurred to me that day that I was going to ask her boyfriend, Jay, did he get her a gift? So sometime during the day before noon--

Sarah Koenig

Wait, Adnan, just hold up for a second. Why did you care whether Jay got Stephanie a present? What's it to you?

Adnan Syed

Well, Stephanie was a very close friend of mine, as I mentioned. And I just kind of wanted to make sure that she also got a gift from him, you know? She had mentioned to me that she was looking forward to getting a gift from him. She mentioned that she was really happy to get the gift that I gave her.

So as I would with any friend, I just kind of went to check on that. I kind of had a feeling that maybe he didn't get her a gift. And I had free periods during school. So it was not abnormal for me to leave school to go do something and then come back.

So I went to his house. And I asked him, did you happen to get a present for Stephanie? He said no. So I said, if you want to, you can drop me back off to school. You can borrow my car. And you can go to the mall and get her a gift or whatever. Then just come pick me up after track practice that day.

Sarah Koenig

So then what happened?

Adnan Syed

Well, then when school was over, I would have went to the library. I know that I usually check-- well, I didn't usually check. But if I was going to check my email, it would be using the library computer. You know, sometimes I would go there because track practice didn't start until around maybe 3 o'clock or 3:30-ish.

So it didn't start right after school. So there was a period of time of almost like an hour, an hour and some change, that was kind of free time.

Sarah Koenig

This hour and change after school, this is the crucial window. This is the time when the state says Hae was killed. School got out at 2:15. People remember seeing her after her last class heading to her car.

According to Jay's story and the cellphone records, she was dead by 2:36 PM. So sometime in those 21 minutes, between 2:15 and 2:36, she was strangled. So that's obviously the same window Adnan needed to account for. To quote Adnan, "My case lived and died in those 21 minutes."

So where does Adnan say he was? Well, maybe the library, but nobody testified to that at trial. Then to track practice-- he does remember being at track one day when it was snowing, which might have been that day. The coach testified that Adnan probably was there, but he can't be 100% sure because, as a rule, he didn't take attendance. After school is when his memories become nonspecific. Usually we did this, or we probably would have done that.

Adnan Syed

Probably track practice would have ended like, I'd say, 4:30.

Sarah Koenig

Jay did come to pick up Adnan after track. That part Adnan seems to more or less remember. It was Ramadan, so Adnan would have been fasting all day and hungry.

Adnan Syed

It probably would've been close to time for me to break fast. He would have came to pick me up, and we would have went to go get something to eat. And then we would have smoked some weed after, right? And then I would have had to have been home around 7, 8 o'clock, right?

Or usually like the last 10 nights of Ramadan, my father would spend the night at the mosque. So a lot of times I would take him food. I think my mother would make food for him, and I would take it usually before 8 o'clock. Because that's the last evening prayer.

Sarah Koenig

Did you ever leave the campus before the end of track practice? Did you ever--

Adnan Syed

No.

Sarah Koenig

OK.

Adnan Syed

No.

Sarah Koenig

You're sure?

Adnan Syed

I want to say that I'm 99% sure.

Sarah Koenig

OK.

Adnan Syed

The reason why I can't say 100 is because-- I mean, I do kind of understand that it comes across as-- I don't know if it does or doesn't. But it seems like I remember things that are beneficial to me, but things that aren't beneficial to me I can't remember. It's just that I don't really know what to say beyond the fact that a lot of the day that I do remember, it's bits and pieces that comes from what other people have said that they remember, right? And it kind of jogs my memory.

Yeah. I don't really know what to say. And I completely understand how that comes across. I mean, the only thing I can say is, man, it was just a normal day to me. There was absolutely nothing abnormal about that day.

Sarah Koenig

Adnan knows better than anyone how unhelpful this all is, how problematic. Because it plays both ways. If he's innocent, right, it's any other day. Of course he doesn't remember.

But you can also read it as, how convenient. He doesn't remember the day. So no one can fact check him, or poke holes in his story. Because he has no story.

Adnan Syed

I definitely understand that someone could look at this and say, oh, man, he must be lying. It's so coincidental that he doesn't remember what he did this particular time. I mean, I completely understand that, and I get that. Like I said, that's the hardest thing I've dealt with for these past 15 years.

There's nothing tangible I can do to remember that day. There's nothing I can do to make me remember. I've pored through the transcripts. I've looked through the telephone records. What else can I do?

There's nothing I can do. So perhaps I'll never be able to explain it. And it is what it is. If someone believes me or not, you know, I have no control over it.

Sarah Koenig

Adnan's trial was a long ordeal. Jay was on the stand for something like five days. A cellphone expert testified for two days, a lifetime when you're discussing cell tower technology. There were absences, and some bad weather closed the courts. So it was six weeks before both sides rested.

But the jury? They moved like lightning. After just a few hours, including a lunch break, they convicted Adnan of first-degree murder. Rabia Chaudry was there in the courtroom when it happened. She says his mother was crying. She was crying.

Rabia hadn't sat through the whole trial. So the first time she fully understood that the case came down to those 21 minutes was during closing arguments, when the prosecutor brought out a dummy's head and strangled it in front of the jury. That evening, after the verdict, Rabia went to see Adnan in lockup.

Rabia

And so I went to go see him. So this is the same day he's been convicted. And this is the first time I actually had a conversation with him about, what's going on? And I was like, you know, Adnan, the whole thing's turning on these 20, 25 minutes. Where were you?

And he's like, she disappeared in January, you know? In March, you're asking me, where were you after school for 20 minutes on a specific day? All the days are the same to me, you know?

Sarah Koenig

But then he mentions that there was this one girl, an alibi girl.

Rabia

He's like, the only thing I could offer is I remember there's a girl I go to school with. Her name's Asia McClain. He's like, right after I got arrested, she wrote me a couple of letters. And she said she also went to see my family. And she said she specifically remembers me being at the library, at the public library, right after school.

Sarah Koenig

The Woodlawn public library is just across the parking lot from Woodlawn High School. It's not technically part of the campus, but it might as well be.

Rabia

He said, I gave those letters to Christina Gutierrez, to my attorney. He's like, but apparently it didn't really check out. So he's like, I don't know. So they're not helpful to us. So this was the first time I heard of this girl Asia McClain. I had never heard of her before. Nobody had mentioned her before.

Sarah Koenig

Were you floored, like, wait, wait, wait, wait, what? I mean, like--

Rabia

I wasn't floored at the time. Because I thought, if this girl wrote and the attorney-- what criminal defense attorney's not going to check out a potential alibi? So I asked him, I said, do you have a copy of those letters? He said, yeah, I have a copy. I said, send me a copy.

Sarah Koenig

Adnan sends the letters to Rabia, and here's what she reads. The first letter, the first of two, is dated March 1, 1999. That is one day after Adnan was arrested. At the top of the letter, she notes, "I just came from your house an hour ago.

Dear Adnan-- I hope I spelled it right. I'm not sure if you remember talking to me in the library on January 13, but I remember chatting with you." She says, quote, "we aren't really close friends, but I want you to look into my eyes and tell me of your innocence. If I ever find otherwise, I will hunt you down and whip your ass. OK, friend?" At the bottom she added a little note. "My boyfriend and his best friend remember seeing you there, too."

That's letter number one. Then the next day, on March 2, she writes Adnan another letter. This one's typed. It's chattier. She talks about the gossip at school, the bits and pieces of evidence about the crime that are circulating, what the students are saying, what the teachers are saying, about her visit to his house.

Quote, "Your brothers are nice. I don't think I met your mother. I think I met your dad. Does he have a big gray beard? They gave me and Justin soda and cake. There was a whole bunch of people at your house. I didn't know who they were.

I also didn't know that Muslims take their shoes off in the house. Thank God they didn't make me take mine off. My stinky feet probably would have knocked everyone out cold. Why haven't you told anyone about talking to me in the library?" she asks him. "Did you think it was unimportant? You didn't think that I would remember? Or did you just totally forget yourself?"

Adnan says now that he does in fact remember seeing Asia in the library. The thing he remembers about it is so high school. Asia used to go out with Adnan's friend Justin. And Justin had confided that Asia was a proper young lady." In other words, Justin wasn't getting any.

So Adnan remembers thinking he would now get to tease Justin about seeing Asia with her new boyfriend. Maybe the new guy was getting lucky, ha, ha. Anyway, Rabia calls Asia up. It's been a year since she wrote the letters, but she agrees to meet.

Rabia

And she told me, that day after school I went to the public library. And Adnan was sitting at a computer, checking email or something. And I sat down next to him. We started chatting. And Adnan was a very popular boy in school. He was handsome and popular with the ladies.

So she was speaking to him. And her boyfriend shows up a little bit later with a friend. And she said her boyfriend was really angry at her, because he's like, why are you talking to him? You know, high school kids, why are you talking to him? Is he hitting on you?

And she remembered very specifically that that day she went to her boyfriend's house with him, and they got snowed in. And it snowed really heavily that night. And she remembered that for the following two days, school was closed. So she had very specific details about why she remembered that day.

Sarah Koenig

Asia wrote out an affidavit on the spot. In it, she says she and Adnan spoke for about 15 to 20 minutes while she was waiting for her boyfriend to give her a ride. Quote, "We left around 2:40," unquote. Remember, Hae is supposed to be dead by 2:36. And then, the kicker-- "No attorney has ever contacted me about January 13, 1999 and the above information."

So benefit of the doubt for a second-- maybe Adnan never actually showed the letters to Cristina Gutierrez, his attorney. Sure, he said he did, but who knows? Well, I know. Deep inside Gutierrez's notes on the case-- I have boxes and boxes of such stuff-- there's this in her handwriting. "Asia plus boyfriend saw him in library 2:15 to 3:15."

Then there's another note, dated July 13. It's more than four months after Adnan's arrest. This is written by one of Gutierrez's law clerks, who visited Adnan in jail. Quote, "Asia McClain saw him in the library at 3:00. Asia boyfriend saw him too. Library may have cameras."

Why, oh, why was this person never heard from at trial-- a solid, non-crazy, detail-oriented alibi witness in a case that so sorely needed alibi witnesses? I can't ask Christina Gutierrez, because she died in 2004.

So I put that question to a few defense attorneys. And they said, well, alibi witnesses can be tricky, especially if it's just one person. Because then it becomes one person's word over another. A single witness like that can backfire under cross-examination. Or they might take the jury's focus away from the weaknesses in the state's case.

So there are conceivable strategic reasons why Christina Gutierrez might not have wanted to put Asia McClain on the stand. But what is inconceivable, they all said, is to not ever contact Asia McClain, to never make the call, never check it out, never find out if her story helps or hurts your case. That makes no sense whatsoever. That is not a strategy. That is a screw-up.

When I first heard about the long-lost Asia letters and the lawyer's mistake, I thought, well, their fight is over, right? They've got an alibi witness who was never heard from. It's such a slam dunk. They're done.

Adnan's family hired a new attorney, who filed a petition in court based on the Asia affidavit. His argument was that Adnan's trial could have turned out differently if Gutierrez had checked out Asia's story. And so Adnan should get some form of what's called post-conviction relief.

The new lawyer figures he'll get Asia to come to the hearing. She'll vouch for her story. By this time, Asia had finished school and moved away. He finds an address on the West Coast, tries calling, sending messages-- nothing. Finally, he writes a letter to her, gives it to a private investigator, who goes out to Asia's house in hopes of delivering it.

Asia's fiance comes to the door, opens it part way, tells the investigator that she cannot speak to Asia, but that from what he knows of Adnan's case, Adnan is guilty and deserved the punishment he got. Later, the investigator gets a call from the fiance. "We don't have to talk to you. Leave us alone."

So Adnan's lawyer calls off the search for Asia, figuring once a witness turns on you like that, it's too risky to keep pushing. And then at Adnan's hearing on the new petition, it comes out that Asia had done the very thing they dreaded. Asia had called one of the prosecutors in Adnan's case, a guy named Kevin Urick, and undermined her own statement. This is from a recording of the hearing. Mr. Urick is testifying on the witness stand.

Attorney

Mr. Urick, how did you learn that the [INAUDIBLE] petition?

Kevin Urick

A young lady named Asia called me.

Attorney

And what did she say?

Kevin Urick

She was concerned, because she was being asked questions about an affidavit she'd written back at the time of the trial. She told me that she'd only written it because she was getting pressure from the family, and she basically wrote it to please them and get them off her back.

Rabia

I don't know what happened to her and why she would do this.

Sarah Koenig

Here's Rabia again. She says it's not true that Asia was bullied into writing that statement 15 years ago. And she can't fathom why Asia would discredit her own statement like that.

Rabia

I don't know why. The affidavit was written voluntarily. I'm an attorney. I'm a licensed attorney. I work on homeland security. I have no reason to make something like this up. I didn't even know she existed until after the conviction.

Sarah Koenig

So what do you think happened? Why would they have this sort of violent reaction to helping out Adnan now?

Rabia

I don't know. It was just really odd.

Sarah Koenig

So who knows what would have happened if Asia had shown up? Maybe it wouldn't have made a difference. After all, they had the original letters and the affidavit. That's all that should've mattered. But it didn't look good.

It would be natural for the judge to wonder, why can't the defense produce this Asia person? Why is she making this call to a prosecutor? I mean, anyone would wonder. I wondered. I wondered if maybe she was pressured into writing that affidavit. And I wondered if she was hiding something.

Like maybe she'd lied in those 1999 letters. Maybe she didn't really see Adnan at the library that day and had just wanted to insert herself into something exciting. And maybe now that she was grown up, she wanted nothing to do with any of it.

So three, four months after I first sat down with Rabia, I had become fixated on finding Asia. I'm like a bloodhound on this thing. Because the whole case seemed to me to be teetering on her memories of that afternoon. I have to know if Adnan really was in the library at 2:36 PM.

Because if he was, library equals innocent. It's so maddeningly simple. And maybe I can crack it if I could just talk to Asia.

I write her a long, gentle, pleading letter and send it off to an address I find online. I'm calling people who know her or who I think might know her. I'm checking the same loop of Facebook, MyLife, LinkedIn sites over and over, trawling for clues about where she might be or how she might think.

If you're wondering why I went so nuts on this story versus some other murder case, the best I can explain is this is the one that came to me. It wasn't halfway across the world or even next door. It came right to my lap. And if I could help get to the bottom of it, shouldn't I try?

I start running down all the other information in Asia's 1999 letters. She mentioned there were security cameras inside the library. So my producer and I went to see the very nice manager there, Michelle Hamiel.

Sarah Koenig

Was there a security system back in '99 that could've been checked at the time?

Michelle Hamiel

Probably, yes. I'm going to say yes.

Sarah Koenig

OK. And what system was it?

Michelle Hamiel

I have no idea. [LAUGHING] It was an old system.

Sarah Koenig

Yeah. But you think probably video?

Michelle Hamiel

It was video. And that was part of set up. Every morning you put a videotape in.

Sarah Koenig

Were you guys recycling the videotapes?

Michelle Hamiel

Yes. I think it ran for a week. So you had a Monday tape, a Tuesday tape, a Wednesday tape, and so forth.

Sarah Koenig

So even if, on the very day that Asia had written her first letter, Adnan's lawyer had run out to find the security tape, it probably would have been nonexistent by then. But what about the computer Adnan was supposedly using to check his email?

Sarah Koenig

To use the computer, did people have to sign in, write their name down?

Michelle Hamiel

They did.

Sarah Koenig

And what was the system then?

Michelle Hamiel

Piece of paper and pencil.

Sarah Koenig

And those, by any chance, weren't logged meticulously and kept for 15 years, were they?

Michelle Hamiel

No. [LAUGHING]

Sarah Koenig

Bummer. We got nothing.

Then there was the mystery of Asia's boyfriend, Derek, and his friend Jerrod. All winter and spring, every time I went to Baltimore, I went to Derek's mom's house looking for him, and to Jerrod's window tinting business. And then finally--

Sarah Koenig

All right, so you're Jerrod Johnson.

Jerrod Johnson

Yes, I am.

Sarah Koenig

You don't know how excited we are to be talking to you. I've been looking for you for, like, four months.

Jerrod Johnson

What did I do?

Sarah Koenig

You didn't do anything. But we were hoping maybe you remembered this moment. On January 13, 1999, do you have any memory, by any miracle, that you went to Woodlawn public library branch near Woodlawn High School to pick up Asia McClain with your friend Derek?

Jerrod Johnson

I have no idea. Asia McClain. Is that a person or a book?

Sarah Koenig

It's a person.

Jerrod Johnson

No, no recollection of it.

Sarah Koenig

Scratch Jerrod. Derek was my last hope. Eventually I caught him at home. Considering I woke him up, he was exceedingly courteous. He showed me a photo of Asia and him all dressed up. They dated most of senior year.

Sarah Koenig

What's up here?

Derek

This is our senior prom. Yeah.

Sarah Koenig

You guys both look really beautiful.

Derek

Yeah. That's Asia, yeah.

Sarah Koenig

But Derek couldn't remember that day either-- shocking, I know. He used to pick Asia up from school almost every day back then, either from the library or from the front of the school. And he says he spoke to a lot of her friends just to be polite.

Derek

And it's very possible that I could have spoken to the gentleman and her on that day. But it's very hard to remember 15 years later. But it sounds like this definitely could have happened. I don't think Asia would-- Asia's not the type of person that would lie just to--

Sarah Koenig

That's what I'm wondering.

Derek

She's definitely not that type of person to get involved with a lie. She's not that type of person. So it seemed pretty credible to me.

Sarah Koenig

One day I get a call on my cellphone from a blocked number. You guessed it-- Asia. I wish I could say that my charming, persuasive letter is what prompted Asia to call. But the truth is, she never got my letter. I had the wrong address. But she was calling because I'd followed up weeks later with a one-line email. And she was responding to that, a little confused.

Asia McClain

It's just crazy. I mean, I have a couple minutes if you want to chat about it.

Sarah Koenig

I recorded our conversation on the cell, which is why the sound quality is so bad. Sorry about that. Asia is now a 33-year-old stay-at-home mother. And she has not spent the last 15 years worrying about Adnan and whether he's guilty.

Asia McClain

I trust the court system to do their due diligence. Because I was never questioned. I was never informed of anything pertaining to the case. I don't know why he was convicted.

Sarah Koenig

Asia said she was spooked when the private investigator came to her house. I don't know if that's why she didn't testify at the hearing or why she made the call to the prosecutor. But she told me that when she got the knock at the door, quote, "that was not cool." Because to her, if Adnan did do it, quote, "the last thing you want is a murderer being pissed off at you, knowing where you live."

But she had a remarkably clear memory of what happened on January 13, 1999. She had an internship at the time, and so she got out of school much earlier than everyone else. Derek was supposed to come get her at the library along with Jerrod, but they were very late. She remembers seeing Adnan come in after Woodlawn let out for the day.

Asia McClain

Adnan came in. He sat at the table. And we weren't really close friends or anything like that, but we knew each other. And we chatted or whatever. And I can't remember.

I think I must have asked him how he was doing or whatever, and he said fine. And he told me that him and Hae had broke up. And I was like, oh, well, that's a bummer. And I was like, what happened? And he was like, oh, well, she is seeing this other guy, some white dude.

But he was pretty chill about it. He was just like, you know, well, if she doesn't want to be with me, then that's fine. I just wish the best for her-- that kind of attitude.

Sarah Koenig

I'm not sure why Asia's memory of this interaction is so clear all these years later. My best guess is that, because she wrote it down at the time in those letters and then the affidavit, that the details somehow stuck.

Sarah Koenig

Do you remember what time you were talking, this would have happened in the library? Do you remember what time that conversation would have happened?

Asia McClain

I don't. Because I know school let out around 2:15. So it was probably around 2:30.

Sarah Koenig

Because you had said you got out of school earlier than other people. So were you there, were you at the library, before 2:15?

Asia McClain

Oh, yeah, I had been at the library for a few hours.

Sarah Koenig

Oh wow.

Asia McClain

Yeah, I was pretty pissed when Derek showed up. And he asked me who Adnan was. That was teenager boy language. He's like, you know, who the hell is that?

And I said, don't even start with me. Because you're a few hours late. Don't worry about who that is, you know? I remember that day, because that was the day that it snowed.

Sarah Koenig

Were there snow days after that, do you remember?

Asia McClain

I want to say there was, because I think that was like the first snow of the year. I wouldn't have even remembered if it hadn't have been for the snow. And the whole-- I just remember being so pissed about Derek being late and then getting snowed in at his house. And it was the first snow of that year.

Sarah Koenig

The snow is important. Hae disappeared on a Wednesday. That night there was a huge ice storm, which is unusual in Maryland. It ended up being a state emergency. And school was closed for the rest of the week.

Asia started asking me questions about the case. Wasn't there DNA evidence? And what exactly was Jay's part in the whole thing? She wasn't sure Adnan was guilty. She said things I've now heard from so many people since. He seemed like he cared about Hae. He didn't seem angry or upset. I thought there was more proof.

Asia McClain

Even that day, I didn't walk away thinking, oh, I just started something. Do you know what I mean? If you want to base his innocence off of his composure at that moment, I would say he's innocent. But I'm 32 years old now, and I know that there's people out there capable of heinous acts that can keep a calm demeanor, you know?

And I know that there are people who flip out on a moment's notice and do something that they regret for the rest of their lives. Even now, it would be nice if there was some technicality, something that would prove his innocence. Great, you know? One less evil person I've met in my life, you know?

Sarah Koenig

But I think, Asia, you might be that technicality. Do you see what I mean? If you're saying that you saw him on this day at that time, that means the state's timeline for their whole theory of the case doesn't make any sense.

Asia McClain

It's a possibility.

Sarah Koenig

Because they're saying he was in the car with her at the very time that you're saying, no, I saw him at the library, and we were talking. Do you know what I mean? That's exactly the window where they're saying she was murdered.

Asia McClain

[SIGH]

Sarah Koenig

In case you couldn't hear that, it was a sigh. And I completely understand that sigh. That's how I feel a lot of the time. Because I talk to Adnan regularly, and he just doesn't seem like a murderer. A few minutes after I hung up with Asia, Adnan called on schedule.

Adnan Syed

Hey, Sarah, how are you doing?

Sarah Koenig

I'm good. I'm good. So I was just talking to Asia McClain.

Adnan

OK.

Sarah Koenig

You don't sound very excited.

Adnan

I had a-- well, I really--

Sarah Koenig

This was not the reaction I expected. I felt like I'd just interviewed an ivory-billed woodpecker. But when I told Adnan what Asia remembered, instead of being excited, Adnan said it was heartbreaking.

Adnan Syed

I mean, on a personal level, I'm happy. Because, in a sense, I'm not making this up. And at least, if nothing else, it's kind of like, at least someone other than Rabia knows that this did take place.

Anything that can kind of support what I'm saying to be the truth, that I didn't do this, is great. But from a legal perspective, it's like, I wish she would have come to this realization maybe like a year and a half ago, you know what I mean? Because it's kind of like, it's too late.

I'm sorry, I definitely appreciate it. And I definitely kind of hear the elation in your voice. But now I feel like I punctured your balloon.

Sarah Koenig

No, no, I totally see what you're saying. I hadn't thought about it in that way.

When I told Rabia I talked to Asia, she immediately burst into tears. Because they were all correct. It was too late. The judge ruled on Adnan's petition a few weeks before I spoke to Asia-- denied.

The judge wrote in his opinion that Christina Gutierrez's decision not to use Asia McClain as an alibi witness was strategic. After all, Asia's original letters didn't specify an exact time. And Gutierrez could've reasonably concluded that Asia was offering to lie in order to help Adnan.

And finally, he wrote, Asia's letter contradicted Adnan's own alibi. Asia says she saw him at the public library, but Adnan said he was on the school campus the whole afternoon. Maybe the judge didn't understand that Woodlawn library is basically part of the campus. But anyway, Asia's story, then, is legally worthless. A witness who says she saw you at the exact moment when the state contends you were strangling a young woman in a car is worthless.

A few days after I spoke to Asia, she wrote me an email. "I've been thinking a lot about Adnan," she wrote. "All this time I thought the courts proved it was Adnan that killed her. I thought he was where he deserved to be. Now I'm not so sure.

Hae was our friend, too. And it sucks feeling like you don't know who really killed your friend. Hae was the sweetest person ever. If he didn't kill Hae, we owe it to him to try to make that clear. And if he did kill her, then we need to put this to rest. I just hope that Adnan isn't some sick bastard just trying to manipulate his way out of jail." I wrote back, "Believe me, I'm on exactly the same page."

Coming up this season on Serial.

Male Speaker

I think that there are other people involved. I think maybe he was set up somehow.

Female Speaker

Clearly you could tell something was going on that wasn't good. I mean, it was just strange behavior for anybody.

Female Speaker

Basically threatened me, like, you know what happened to Hae. This is what's going to happen to you. That's how I felt that day.

Sarah Koenig

What are you thinking right now? You have the same smile I do.

Female Speaker

I'm literally thinking, like, could he have gone crazy?

Male Speaker

Jay told me he was being blackmailed by Adnan. Because Adnan knew that Jay couldn't go to the police.

Rabia

Like if this works, every question we've had for the past eight months, he knows it.

Male Speaker

Yeah, I mean, who else did it? They're running out of suspects.

Sarah Koenig

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