 Resource 10

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.

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