

Episode 3: Leakin Park

-Mail Chimp Ad-

Ira Glass

Previously, on Serial.

Aisha Pittman

--he kinda just always generally annoyed me, because, just the constant paging her if she was out--

Adnan Syed

--each time that she ended the relationship or took a break, it was never a thing where I was like pestering her or, like, going to her house and knocking on the door--

Jay

--he said to me that he was going to, uh, tell her his car was broken down and, uh, ask her for a ride.

Automated voice

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

Sarah Koenig

From This American Life and WBEZ Chicago it's Serial. One story week by week. I'm Sarah Koenig.

The cops that investigated the murder of Hae Min Lee were both experienced Baltimore City detectives. Their names were Ritz and MacGillivray. Bill Ritz and Greg MacGillivray. And how I wish right now that I could play you tape of their perspective on this case, but they didn't want to be interviewed. When Bill Ritz finally turned me down after six weeks of back and forth, he said he didn't see the point. The case has been adjudicated. What good would it do? I also spoke on the phone, briefly, to MacGillivray and he said just a few

sentences to me and one of them was “beyond question, he did it.” Meaning Adnan did it. He didn’t hem or haw or hesitate. He remembered the case right away. “Beyond question he did it.” How did they arrive at that level of certainty?

Before Hae’s body was found, this was a missing person case. She disappeared January 13, and the investigation starts out a little slowly, which makes sense to me. She’s a not a small child, she’s eighteen. She’s got a car which is also missing. That first day, the police call around to her friends, they talk to Aisha, to Adnan, remember that’s when he tells them he was supposed to get a ride from her, but didn’t. The next day they call around to hospitals, hotels, motels, they check the area around the high school parking lot where she was last seen. You can see from their reports that they immediately hone in on the most time worn explanation for such disappearances: the boyfriends, current and former. That first day they call Don, her new guy. They check the area around *his* house which is in another county, northeast of Baltimore. Over the next two weeks they keep going back to Don, and to Adnan, asking more questions. They check Don’s alibi, he was indeed at Lenscrafters store the day Hae went missing, the manager tells them. And they talk to Adnan’s track coach to check Adnan’s alibi, and it’s inconclusive. The coach tells them he can’t be sure Adnan practiced that day. They don’t take attendance. On February 6, they do that awful, foreboding thing you see on TV sometimes, they take a team of dogs to check the wooded areas and fields around Woodlawn High School. They used Hae’s curling iron for a scent. On February 8, they make a report saying they’re going to check Hae’s computer, her AOL account, for clues. And then, on February 9, their search stops. And a new suspect emerges.

Detective

Testing one two three. Testing one two three.

Sarah Koenig

This is tape from a police interview of the man who finds Hae. He’s a little hard to hear on the tape. He’s soft-spoken. I’m going to call this man Mr. S. I don’t want to use his real name for reasons that I promise will become clear. Mr. S works in the maintenance department at a local school.

Mr. S

I think I may have discovered a body in Leakin Park.

Sarah Koenig

“I think I may have discovered a body in Leakin Park,” he says. Before I get to the slightly off-kilter story about how Mr. S discovered this body, just a word here about Leakin Park. It’s actually spelled LEAKin Park, L-E-A-K-I-N, but almost everyone in Baltimore pronounces it Linkin’ Park. It’s huge, over 1000 acres. On the western edge of Baltimore city. It’s got a reputation and not for the beauty of its woods or its trails or its nature center. What it’s known for, sadly, is its dead bodies. Mention Leakin Park to people from Baltimore as I often did, and you’re pretty much guaranteed to get a comment like this:

Unidentified Man

While you’re digging in Leakin Park to bury your body, you’re gonna find somebody else’s. That’s Leakin Park.

Sarah Koenig

When I told a rental car guy in west Baltimore I was working on a story about a girl who was found in Leakin Park, he said, “Oh yeah? My uncle was found dead in Leakin Park.” A macabre website dedicated to Baltimore murders lists sixty-eight bodies found there since 1946, though the list is missing at least seven years of stats and that number is probably low. A lot of law-abiding Baltimoreans, they don’t really know where Leakin Park is. Rabia Chaudry, that family friend of Adnan’s who first contacted me about this case, when she’s explaining it to me, she said, “Yeah and is Adnan supposed to get to Leakin Park so fast? It’s like an hour into the city.”

Rabia Chaudry

Leakin Park is nowhere near the school.

Sarah Koenig

Her brother, Saad, Adnan’s best friend, he didn’t know anything about Leakin Park either.

Saad Chaudry

After Adnan had initially got arrested, when I was on the phone with him, talking when he was locked up, I was like “Leakin Park? Where is that? Do you even know where that is? Have you ever

been there?” And he was like “I have never been there. I don’t even know where it is.” So living around here, we don’t know but it’s somewhere in the inner city.

Sarah Koenig

Where Hae was found is in fact less than three miles from where Saad and Rabia are sitting right now, in an office across the street from Woodlawn High School. About a seven minute drive. They had no idea.

Saad Chaudry

We wouldn’t go there. We’d go to the harbor or somewhere nice, but there’s no reason for us to go there.

Sarah Koenig

I’m explaining all this just to say that, the simple fact that Hae was found in Leakin Park, for a lot of people that alone made Adnan look innocent. “What’s a nice boy like you doing in a park like this?”

Mr. S

--and I walked around through the bushes and everything--

Sarah Koenig

So now, Mr. S, he also told the cops he had never been to that part of Leakin Park before, though he did seem to know that people go fishing back there. Here’s what he told the cops.

At his job, he had gotten a work order to shave down a door, but the school didn’t have the tool he needed, a plane. *He* had one at home though, so during his lunch hour he said he drove his truck home, got the plane from his basement, and before he left, grabbed some sustenance out of the fridge.

Mr. S

I grabbed a beer out of my refrigerator. It was a 22-ounce Budweiser I was drinking it on my way back to the school where I work at, and had to go to the bathroom, so I pulled over and I went further into the woods so nobody would see me urinate, and when I discovered what looked like a body--

Sarah Koenig

So was drinking this 22-ounce Budweiser and he's heading back to work and his route to the college is through Leakin Park, and suddenly he has to pee, badly, he says. He stops on Franklin Town Road, he's about three miles from work, there's a small pull off and some concrete barriers, and he walks back in there, quite a ways it seems like for a guy who just has to pee. Later they'd measure. 127 feet back into the woods is where he goes. This next tape is a little upsetting.

Mr. S

--and I got back that way and I was getting ready to urinate and I looked down and seen something that looked like hair and something is covered under the dirt and it looked no good again and until I seen something that looked like a foot.

Detective

What drew your attention to the area that you went to? There was something there.

Mr. S

It was an open area.

Detective

An open area?

Mr. S

Mm-hmm.

Detective

But there was also a fallen tree, is that correct?

Mr. S

Yes there was.

Detective

Did you go to that area for a certain reason?

Mr. S

No, no.

Detective

No?

Mr. S

No.

Sarah Koenig

They are suspicious of Mr. S who by this time has become a suspect in the case. This tape was made on February 18, nine days after Mr. S reported finding the body. They're going over the details carefully because there are parts of his story that are a little weird. One of them is this thing about the fallen tree. 127 feet back into the woods there was a fallen tree, essentially a forty foot log, lying more or less parallel to the road. On the other side of the log, if you kept going, you'd have gotten to a stream with the unfortunate name of Dead Run. Hae's body was buried right behind this log on the stream side. If you were standing on the *street* side of the log, so on the other side, it's not at all obvious that you'd notice her. So this story about why he stopped *where* he stopped, it doesn't quite seem right. Here's Bill Ritz.

Detective Bill Ritz

When you're walking back to this area where you finally stop, why did you pick that particular area?

Mr. S

(unintelligible) pick that area. I was going to go back further except for that's when I'd seen the hair and the foot. I left after that.

Detective Bill Ritz

So you were actually going to go back further?

Mr. S

Yes.

Sarah Koenig

In this part of the tape, you get a sense of how Ritz and MacGillivray operate together, or at least what I gather from listening to a bunch of these interviews. MacGillivray starts all non-judgemental, “just tell me your story. Uh huh. Uh huh.” Then Ritz comes in and says something like, “just help me understand here” and asks some harder question, exposing weaknesses in the narrative. Then MacGillivray will come back in but now it’s a tougher MacGillivray and he’s asking direct, sometimes harsh questions that seem like they’d be good at pushing someone off balance. Like this one, sort of out of the blue:

Detective Greg MacGillivray

Have you ever been inside that girl’s car before?

Mr. S

No.

Detective Greg MacGillivray

No. Okay...

Sarah Koenig

Back to the fallen tree. Here, Ritz is saying “wait I thought you told MacGillivray you stopped at the log to pee, but now you’re saying that you were on your way farther back?”

Detective Bill Ritz

--stop there, you said before you were getting ready to urinate and that's when you looked down and discovered the hair. Now you're saying you actually going to go back further?

Mr. S

Before I discovered her.

Detective Bill Ritz

Before you discovered her?

Mr. S

Mm-hmm.

Detective Bill Ritz

Maybe I'm a little bit confused. As you're standing on the south side of the tree, between the tree and the road--

Sarah Koenig

This doesn't ever get cleared up really and they sort of let it go. But a bunch of things are fishy. The path he takes in the woods, it doesn't really lead to the log. So why does he end up there? He didn't need to head toward the log to find a spot to pee, there so many other choices. And if you're walking through brush and brambles, wouldn't you sort of naturally avoid a big log you would need to step over? What they are trying to get at is, did you really just stumble on this body? Or were you looking for this body, because you already knew where it was? That is a reasonable question, because Hae's body wasn't just hard to spot, it was nearly impossible to spot.

Alright, we're in the State's Attorney's office, we just got delivered the first box of what they're saying is discloseable under whatever public information act that I did.

I didn't understand how camouflaged the body was until I saw photos of the crime scene, the way Mr. S found it, before they removed the body. I was in the State's Attorney's office in Baltimore. I went there with a crime reporter from the Baltimore Sun. His name is Justin George. I had been talking to Justin about this

story and he was interested in maybe writing about it too. We opened a packet of photos together. Some of them were awful to see as you'd imagine. There was one where you could make out a bit of black hair amid dirt and leaves.

How did he notice that?

Justin George

How could he notice the body? I don't understand that either. I mean it's pretty well covered.

Sarah Koenig

Yeah there's barely anything showing. Wait are we supposed to be looking at something there? What is that? Is that her? That all he saw?

Justin George

That looks to be part of the body. Yeah I expected it to be more visible than it is.

Sarah Koenig

Justin and I weren't the only ones who had this reaction. The city surveyor, a guy named Philip Buddemeyer went out to the burial site to measure the distance from the road. This is before they disintered her. Here's Buddemeyer testifying at trial.

Philip Buddemeyer

When I arrived at the site where the body was, there was a log on the ground approximately forty feet long. I stepped over the log, I walked along the *edge* of the log expecting to find the body real soon. I never saw one, at which time had I taken one more step I would have walked on the gravesite where the body was.

Female Court Official

And at that point there were others on the scene?

Philip Buddemeyer

Yes ma'am. There was a lot of people there.

Female Court Official

And at some point did someone point out to you the exact location--

Philip Buddemeyer

Yes ma'am. The detective pointed out the site. I looked down at the ground, and I said "I don't see any body." It wasn't freshly disturbed.

Female Court Official

It was not freshly disturbed.

Philip Buddemeyer

No. Yeah it just blended in with the natural surroundings of the ground.

Sarah Koenig

So here's a guy who's looking for the body, who knows where it's supposed to be, who can see there's a bunch of people standing around it, and *still* he can't find it. So does it seem reasonable that Mr. S who apparently wasn't looking for anything besides a secluded place to pee, discovered it? Just like that?

The other thing that's a little odd is this business of having to pee. The spot where Mr. S stops is only a few miles from his house, and only a few more miles from his work. Yet he can't wait. Here's Detective Ritz questioning Mr. S again.

Detective Bill Ritz

While you were at home, did you have to use the bathroom at all?

Mr. S

No. I didn't feel I had to go at the time.

Detective Bill Ritz

So within seven or eight minutes how much of the 22-ounce beer had you consumed?

Mr. S

I think it was almost--

Detective Bill Ritz

It was almost empty?

Mr. S

Mm-hmm.

Detective Bill Ritz

And that seven or eight minute period, you had to go to the bathroom, it was-- (cough) an urgent need would you need?

Mr. S

Yes it was.

Sarah Koenig

Yet Mr. S says he never did pee in the woods. Says he ended up waiting until he gets to work. Which, okay maybe that makes sense. He'd had a shock. But why would he walk so far in in the first place? He was just trying to have a quick pee. And why was he studying the ground? Ritz asks him about this.

Detective Bill Ritz

You got out of your vehicle, ventured back into the woods, when we measured it it was 127 feet off the roadway. As you're walking along, why are you looking down at the ground? Are you looking every step that you take or--

Mr. S

So I didn't stumble.

Detective Bill Ritz

So you wouldn't stumble?

Mr. S

Mm-hmm.

Sarah Koenig

Are you counting?

Justin George

Uh-huh. Ten. Eleven. Twelve--

Sarah Koenig

On a freezing day back in February of this year, we went out to Leakin Park. We wanted to know whether it was strange that he'd gone so far back into the woods. Like, what did 127 feet from the road look like? My producer Dana was with me, and so was Justin George from the Baltimore Sun. Right at the place where Mr. S had entered the woods, right at the road, Justin noticed a sign.

What's that?

Justin George

Look at it. I mean, the sign says a lot.

Sarah Koenig

It say's "This area patrolled. Dumpers will be prosecuted." You could barely read it. It's hard to read a sign that's covered in graffiti and pierced with seven bullet holes. In fact the cops found twenty cartridge casings in right about this spot when they collected evidence in 1999. Still I felt the park itself was quite lovely. Brambles and trees. It's rocky near the stream. It's uneven terrain, not hilly but it's not flat either.

It's not nearly as creepy as imagined it.

Justin George

I think it is at night.

Sarah Koenig

At night?

Justin George

Yeah. I think at dusk, I think it is. Very bleak. Twenty-one. Twenty-two. Twenty-three--

Sarah Koenig

We walked in what we thought was about 127 feet. Justin paced it out by the yard.

Justin George

Forty-two. It would be right about there.

Sarah Koenig

We actually wander around for a while, trying to find the right spot. Finally I remember we have a hand drawn map of the site, from that surveyor Buddemeyer who testified.

Forty foot long, fifteen inch log on the ground.

Once we get to the right location, it dawns on all of us, 127 feet back doesn't feel all that far, if you're looking for privacy. You can still see the cars on the road from where we're standing.

So if he's peeing, at *least* you'd want to come this far.

Dana Chivvis

There's not a lot of foliage--

Sarah Koenig

There's nothing. There's some dead leaves or whatever, you can totally see the cars. So actually that doesn't seem that weird to me.

Sarah Koenig

Suddenly, Mr. S's story seems eminently more believable. While we're in the woods, I fill Justin in on the evidence they collected here.

Right near the body was a liquor bottle from which they got cellular material and never tested. And a rope that was never tested, as far as I know. And then up at the road they found a condom and a condom wrapper but I think the condom was still rolled. I don't think it was a used condom necessarily. And they found a bunch of shell casings. They found bullets and shell casings and stuff from two different guns. And they found two Blockbuster video cases. But by the body was the-- I think the only thing they got right from the area of the body was the liquor bottle and the rope.

I know. It sounds like a game of Clue, except for the condom part. As for the liquor bottle, back at the taped interview with Mr. S, Detectives Ritz and MacGillivray want to find out if this guy could be the source of that liquor bottle. "Did you drink anything besides beer?" they ask. "Yeah," he says. "What?" "Whiskey." "What kind?" "Windsor Canadian whiskey." "What denomination?" "Maybe half a pint."

Detective Greg MacGillivray

Did you ever take a bottle into the car with you also? A half pint? Did you ever take that in the car? Keep you warm?

Mr. S

Sometimes.

Detective Greg MacGillivray

Keep you warm?

Mr. S

Mmm.

Detective Greg MacGillivray

Take a nip here and there. Yes?

Mr. S

Yes.

Detective Greg MacGillivray

Okay.

Sarah Koenig

Now Ritz comes in. "We've collected evidence," he says. "Cans and bottles from the crime scene. We're going to test them." He's bluffing here. They never do test. "Are we gonna find your DNA on one of those bottles?" he asks. "Maybe you threw a bottle out the window when you were driving past coming home from work. If so, you'd better tell us now."

Detective Bill Ritz

--and it's important we know that because what we're going to do is analyze that and come back six months or a month or three weeks from now and say "we have evidence that you were deceptive with us. We have DNA evidence that you were there." And then you say:

Detective Ritz, I forgot because I'd gone fishing out there that weekend. I told you people go fishing out there. I told you I drank half a pint, and I threw a bottle (unintelligible) So take a minute and think if there are any of the items that I described. Whiskey bottles, beer bottles, soda cans, or anything like that where you may have discarded in that general area.

Mr. S

I'm not sure. I could have, but I'm not positive cuz I know I throw a lot of bottles out the window.

Sarah Koenig

He says, "I'm not sure. I could have, but I'm not positive cuz I know I throw a lot of bottles out the window." Ah. Ritz asks, "What bottles?" "Beer bottles." "Whiskey maybe?" "It's possible," he says. "Anything else?" Well for a while, he switched to rum. "What rum?" "Dark rum, Bacardi." Finally MacGillivray can't stand it, he just starts listing different kinds of booze.

Detective Greg MacGillivray

No Jack?

Mr. S

Not-- Probably a long time ago.

Detective Greg MacGillivray

Vodka?

Mr. S

Years ago.

Detective Greg MacGillivray

Brandy?

Mr. S

No, no brandy.

Detective Greg MacGillivray

Cognac?

Mr. S

No.

Detective Greg MacGillivray

Just cheap stuff?

Mr. S

Yeah.

Sarah Koenig

“Just cheap stuff.” “Yeah.” Brandy! Brandy was the answer they were looking for. The bottle they found near Hae’s body was Coronet VSQ brandy. 200ML. And Mr. S? He blew right past it.

Consider for a moment, if Mr. S was just trying to relieve his bladder in peace that February day, minding his own business, and then he sees this terrible, sad sight and he does the right thing. Tells the cops. Shows them where she’s buried. Well how horrible now that they’re so suspicious of him, that they’re considering that maybe either he did it or he knows who did. How terrifying for Mr. S. After all, he seems like a nice, quiet guy, cooperative. Doesn’t appear to be a brandy drinker. Again, I can only go by the reports and files, but my guess is the reason the cops are holding on to Mr. S as a suspect, is because Mr. S has a little bit of a record, which isn’t necessarily a big deal. But, and here’s the part of the story where you’ll understand why I’m not using name, Mr. S is a streaker. And not the frat party kind. The freaky kind.

He’s got indecent exposure charges, to borrow a phrase from Adnan’s defense attorney, under circumstances that ‘bizarre’ doesn’t even begin to define. Mr. S is arrested May of ‘94 for running about naked in residential neighborhood. Two years later, March of ‘96, he’s spotted wearing a hoodie, sunglasses, white sneakers, and nothing else. The officer writes, “the southwestern district has received numerous calls for service in the past

three years to this area for the same incident, same description.” Past three years! The officer chases down Mr. S onto I-95. Mr. S jumps some chain link fences, the kind with razor wire at the top, ends up in the hospital. It gets worse. Or better depending whether you enjoy police reports as much as I do. December 7, 1998, so barely two months before Mr. S finds Hae’s body there’s this. At around noon, during what I have to imagine is what Mr. S’s lunch break, a lady named Margaret is driving along and here’s the report “black male dashed out in front of my car and began shaking his body in a up and down motion. The male had on no clothes. His penis was exposed as he faced my vehicle, shaking.” And this lady, Margaret, is a police officer. In uniform! She chases him, but he runs down into the metro stop. Margaret finds his work clothes in a pile and takes them which means unless Mr. S has a second outfit stashed someplace, he’s riding back to work in the altogether.

Then there’s another twist to this incident. The same day he flashes Margaret, so December 7, 1998, Mr. S files his own police report. “There’s been a theft,” he says, from his car. Someone has taken his cell phone, his money, his keys, his work clothes. But you and I, we know who has all of it. Officer Margaret.

Streaking isn’t a violent crime. or necessarily a sexual one. And there’s no evidence that Hae was sexually assaulted anyway. But you could imagine both sets of eyebrows rising on Ritz and MacGillivray’s faces when they see these reports. It’s strange behavior. They never ask Mr. S about it on tape, but I figure he knew they knew. And they knew he knew they knew. The same day they interview him on tape, February 18, they also give him a polygraph test, which he fails. Deception indicated was the conclusion. But the testor also said Mr. S seemed to be nervous cuz apparently he had an important meeting with a realtor that day. His wife was expecting him to pick her up. So the tester recommends a do over. About a week later, they give him another polygraph. This time with different questions. For instance, “Do you know if that girl you found died because she was hit with a tire iron?” I guess that’s a thing. This time the result is: no deception indicated. He passes. And very quickly, Mr. S fades from their view.

Here’s what my own thoughts were when I learned about Mr. S. I didn’t really think, “oh maybe he did it. Maybe he killed Hae.” But I did wonder if maybe he’d heard something about the crime and about where she was buried, because it did seem a tad unbelievable to me that he spotted her the way he said he did. One theory I had was maybe one of his step kids or a neighbor had told him about the body, because maybe they had heard about it through other kids at school. Then maybe Mr. S, just as a good samaritan thought, “someone needs to go find this girl, tell the cops.” But he doesn’t want to say he’s heard about it beforehand because he doesn’t want to get anyone else in trouble. Mr. S didn’t want to talk to me. After I made several requests, he asked if I would please leave him alone. Fair enough.

I tried every which way to figure out if he knew, or anyone in his family knew Adnan, or Jay, or any of the people Jay had told about the murder. And vice versa. Whether any of them had ever heard of Mr. S. I found no connections. The closest I got was, bear with me, I found out that Mr. S's sister-in-law was a math teacher at Woodlawn back in 1999 when all this happened. So I called her. Hae was her student, she said. An excellent student. Top of the line. But she didn't think Mr. S knew anything about the crime before he found the body. She put her husband on the phone, Mr. S's younger half-brother. And he said, "you know what's crazy? I used to live next door to the kid that did it!" That was back when Adnan was nine or ten. He said he used to throw the football around with him, that he always seemed like a nice kid. But again, he said he thought his brother stumbled on the body by accident. The he paused, chuckled and said, "I think he was running through the woods, streaking. And that's how he found it." When I told him that apparently he had stopped to take a pee, he said, "that's possible too."

So, maybe Mr. S is telling the truth. After all, why would a guy who's been in trouble, repeatedly for indecent exposure, seek out a dead girl, thus inevitably inviting more police contact to rain down upon him.

Mr. S wasn't the detective's only lead in this case. We know there were also looking at the boyfriends. And while I don't exactly know why they are suspicions about Adnan start to percolate, I have an educated guess. Next week, on Serial.

Serial is produced by Julie Snyder, Dana Chivvis and me. Emily Condon is our production and operations manager. Ira Glass is our editorial advisor. Editing help from Nancy Updike. Fact checking by Karen Fragala-Smith. Special thanks to Natasha Lesser, Lou Teddy, Scott Calvert, and Dave Rosenthal and Andy Rosen from the Baltimore Sun. Our theme music is composed by Nick Thorburn, scoring music by Nick and Mark Phillips who also mixed our show. Our website where you can listen to all our episodes and find photos, letters, and other documents from the case, SerialPodcast.org. Support for Serial comes from MailChimp, celebrating creativity, chaos, and teamwork since 2001. MailChimp. Send better email. Serial is a production of This American Life and WBEZ Chicago.

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