**Chapter I Transcript**

**SARAH KOENIG:**

Chapter I.

**BRIAN REED:**

When an antique clock breaks, a clock that's been telling time for 200 or 300 years, fixing it can be a real puzzle. An old clock like that was handmade by someone. It might tick away the time with a pendulum, with a spring, with a pulley system. It might have bells that are supposed to strike the hour, or a bird that's meant to pop out and cuckoo at you. There can be hundreds of tiny, individual pieces, each of which needs to interact with the others precisely.

To make the job even trickier, you often can't tell what's been done to a clock over hundreds of years. Maybe there's damage that was never fixed, or fixed badly. Sometimes, entire portions of the original clockwork are missing, but you can't know for sure because there are rarely diagrams of what the clock's supposed to look like. A clock that old doesn't come with a manual.

So instead, the few people left in the world who know how to do this kind of thing rely on what are often called witness marks to guide their way. A witness mark could be a small dent, a hole that once held a screw. These are actual impressions, and outlines, and discolorations left inside the clock of pieces that might have once been there. They're clues to what was in the clockmaker's mind when he first created the thing.

I'm told fixing an old clock can be maddening. You're constantly wondering if you've just spent hours going down a path that will likely take you nowhere, and all you've got are these vague witness marks, which might not even mean what you think they mean. So at every moment along the way, you have to decide if you're wasting your time or not.

Anyway, I only learned about all this because years ago an antique clock restorer contacted me, John B. McLemore, and asked me to help him solve a murder.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Something's happened. Something has absolutely happened in this town. There's just too much little crap for something not to have happened. And I'm about had enough of Shittown and the things that goes on.

**BRIAN REED:**

From *Serial* and This *American* *Life,* I'm Brian Reed. This is *Shittown.* "John B McLemore lives in Shittown, Alabama." That's the subject line that catches my eye one day in late 2012, while I'm reading through emails that have come into our radio show, *This* *American* *Life.* The email's from John B McLemore. "Shittown" is capitalized. "I am an old time listener who just recently rediscovered your show," John writes. "I live in a crummy little shittown in Alabama, called Woodstock. I would like to tell your producers of two events that have happened here recently. I would hope you have the facilities to investigate."

One of the events, John writes, involves a local police officer with the County Sheriff's Department. John's heard that a woman has been saying this officer sexually abused her. The guy's still on the force. So that's one. The other event is a murder of a guy in his early 20s named Dylan Nichols. The murderer, John says, is a son of a prominent local family. His name is Kabrahm Burt. The Burts are millionaires. They own lots of land in the area, as well as a large timber operation, with lumber yards and saw mills all over, one of which is right near John's. It's called K3 Lumber.

John says it seems the Burt Family has effectively made this event disappear, except that Kabrahm is now going around town bragging about it, quote, "Bragging about how it only took 30 seconds of kicking this boy, Dylan Nichols, in the head for him to become a paraplegic, and only a few more days for him to die." "We really need people like you to come down to this pathetic little Baptist shittown and blow it off the map," John writes. "I would like to talk to you by phone if possible. This is just too much to type."

[DIALING]

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Hello. Hello?

**BRIAN REED:**

John?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Hello?

**BRIAN REED:**

Hi, it's Brian.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Hey.

**BRIAN REED:**

Here we are. This is happening.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

That awkward moment of silence when you realize, after about a year, it's finally happened.

**BRIAN REED:**

When I make this call, it's been a year since John first emailed. We'd written back and forth a couple of times over the months but we never talked, until one day he sent me a message, and this time it had a link to a news report. The news story was about a sergeant with the Bibb County Sheriff's Department—Bibb County is where John lives—who'd been indicted for pulling women over and forcing them into sexual acts, both on the side of the road and back at the station. Another guy allegedly helped cover up this abuse.

I thought, if corruption like this existed in the Bibb County Sheriff's Department, then maybe the other rumor John had written to me about could also be true, that maybe it was possible a murder had happened and had then been covered up.

So finally I get him on the phone and we talk for a while.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

My life is kind of a nut house, because I take care of my mom that has Alzheimer's, and we're in about our seventh or eight year of that. So sorry about the other day when you tried to call and all hell had busted loose.

**BRIAN REED:**

No, I'm sorry you have to deal with that. I'm sorry.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

And of course, losing the dog the other week. That didn't help. You know, I take in strays, which shouldn't surprise you. Considering where I live, you shouldn't be the least bit surprised that these people around here just dump their dogs out on the side of the road. At one time, I've had as many as 21. I got 14 now—well, 13. Yeah, so that was really hard, because that was an old dog and a good dog. Yeah, that's another one of my projects that I take on. I'm sort of the local Humane Society.

**BRIAN REED:**

Do you have a lot of property?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I like to say it's my grandfather's property. It's 128 acres.

**BRIAN REED:**

And you grew up in Woodstock, is that right?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Yeah, Woodstock. This whole area needs to be defined. If you look at the demographics charts of the state of Alabama and go over the poorest counties, Bibb County is maybe the fifth worst county to live in. We are one of the child molester capitals of the States. We have just an incredible amount of police corruption.

We have the poorest education. We've got 95 churches in this damn county. We only have two high schools and no secondary education. And we got Jebus, 'cause Jebus is coming and global warming is a hoax. You know, there's no such thing as climate change and all that. Yeah, I—I'm in an area that just hasn't advanced, for lack of a better word.

I'm going to have to eat a Tums here. Sorry about that. Oh, it's one of those awful cherry-flavored ones. That would be the first one to hop out.

**BRIAN REED:**

Is your stomach bothering you?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Oh, I have constant acid reflux. You know, I've had it all my life.

**BRIAN REED:**

So can you tell me, why did you email me?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Well, you know, the original reason, which I gave you, was just some of the things I'd heard about some of the goings-on down here. Remember I told you about the boy Dylan Nichols that got murdered. And apparently, that was swept under the rug. I guess we'll cover that one first.

**BRIAN REED:**

So just tell me what happened. I mean, you kind of mentioned this in an email, but there wasn't a lot of detail. And I did a little googling online and didn't really find much. So yeah, tell me, what do you know?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I'm hoping that's one of the things y'all have the capability of doing, is finding much. All I've managed to find out is that Dylan Nichols went to school down here at West Blocton High School. Basically, I've got these kids out here digging a hole between the house and the yard in the summer, and we're going to plant some cast iron plant. That's aspidistra elatior, in case y'all don't know.

**BRIAN REED:**

I don't know what either of the things you just said are, but that's fine.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

OK, well, that's the scientific name. That's the cast iron plant. You know how these kids talk on cell phones all day long? You can't get them to do nothing because they're on their cell phone. And they're tweeting, and they're YouTubing, and they're always on Facebook. And I'm out there on the back porch. And if you keep your mouth shut, you'll be surprised what you can learn. Because kids around here have grown up so destitute they don't have enough sense to be ashamed of anything. They just tell everything.

One of them yakking away that Dylan Nichols is in such and such hospital. He's a quadriplegic now. He just got into a fight with Kabrahm Burt, and he's not expected to live through the night. Well, buddy, when I heard the last name Burt, you know, my attention just piqued. I decided I'd stick my nose in and ask, this isn't by any chance related to the famous Burt family down there that runs the K3 lumber store in Green Pond and the KKK Lumber Mill in Vance, is it? Oh yes, that's Kendall's son.

Took them a day or so to do their work out here, and they chatted and chatted about it. And over the course of the next few days of them tweeting to girlfriends and tweeting to other friends, it come to pass that indeed Dylan Nichols had died. Deader than hell. And Kabrahm Burt's whereabouts was unknown.

Well, later on, I have the Goodsons working out here, two boys. It just so happens that one of them, Jake Goodson, apparently he knew the Kabrahm boy. And right at the darned Little Caesars pizza in Woodstock, just happened to run into him. Hadn't seen him for a year. Asked him where he'd been.

"Well, I've been in drug rehab. I've spent such and such months in rehab." "Well, what happened?" Well, that's when the Kabrahm boy just got out there and spilled the darn beans. And the story that I was told is that they were at some party, and the Nichols boy, Kabrahm and his buddy had ganged up on him and was calling him a bitch boy and a bitch boy, or a bitch boy and all that. And the boy eventually smacked one of them and they jumped on him.

Well, the boy they jumped on, that's Dylan Nichols, pulled out a little knife and cut the throat of Kabrahm's friend. Well, Kabrahm pulled his belt off and wrapped it around the neck of the friend's whose throat got cut and got the Nichols boy down on the ground somehow and kicked him in the head repeatedly, and kept kicking him in the head until he was basically unconscious.

Well, of course, you know the rest of the story from the first part that I told you—the boy, paraplegic, died in a few days. Jake is nosey. He asked him, how did he just get by so easy? And you know, the Burt Boy, Kabrahm Burt, had told him they just claimed it was self-defense, and the other guy kept his damn mouth shut.

Of course, Kabrahm's family has got plenty of money, so naturally it wasn't murder. Now—

**BRIAN REED:**

So just to clarify, so you're hearing this from a guy named Jake Goodson?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Mhm.

**BRIAN REED:**

He ran into Kabrahm, and Kabrahm told him that we told the other guy to keep his mouth shut and we claimed self-defense? That's what he told him.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

There you go. Now at some time, I was up there at that hardware store. And Kendall, that's Kabrahm's father, is back there on the phone, yakking at Big Mouth. He's one of these big mouth Rush Limbaugh types. Loves Glenn Beck. Running that mouth, running that mouth. And what I heard come out of that office was, "He's my son. I love him, but he's guilty as hell, and I know it."

And he finally realized that someone was standing out there, waiting to be waited on, and pulled up, slammed the hell out of that damned door, and then got a lot quieter with that conversation.

**BRIAN REED:**

Really?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

We've obviously got too much little dipstick gossip going around for something not to have happened. We've got the kid out bragging about it in front of the Little Caesars Pizza Hut, and we've got a teeny little snippet of conversation inconveniently audited over at the store one afternoon. So this crap happened.

**BRIAN REED:**

And as far as you know, is Kabrahm Burt just living in town now?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

He's working up there at the damned K3 lumber yard. He's covered up with tattoos. He's almost skin and bones. He looks like a crack head. Hell, I saw him this week!

You know, I contacted you for a while, and then I quit contacting you. I go through these stages of depression. When you live in an area like this, it's like the Darfur region of Sudan. You realize you're in one of these areas where stuff happens and you can't help it. And after this dude got arrested—you know that recent email I sent you about that Ervin Lee Heard that had been basically falsely imprisoning women and using them for sex slaves? No one talks about that.

**BRIAN REED:**

Ervin Lee Heard is the name of the Bibb County police officer who had been sexually abusing women he pulled over.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I decided, you know what? I need to contact him again. I need to get out of my depression. I need to get over this attitude problem I've got, that nothing can be done and tell someone some of the crap that goes on down here.

**BRIAN REED:**

Because what do you get depressed about?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Oh my God. I am 49 years old. Or is it 48? Well, I'm closer to 49. I should have—boy, if you use this in the future, you'll sure have to have a cuckoo bird bleep it. I should have got out of this goddamned fucking shit town in my 20s. I should have done something useful with my life. I love my home. I don't know why. I've lived here all my life. My mom's lived here all her life. My dad's lived here most of his life. And Grandpa Miller's lived here all his life. Places like that should be important.

I'm looking out over a yard. We got a rose garden here that's 300 fucking feet long. I planted a hedge maze out here. It's the only one in the state. You can go to Google Maps and enter 33.202461—

**BRIAN REED:**

Whoa, whoa. Slow down. Let me type this in as you're telling me.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

That should actually bring you to the center of the maze.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tell me the numbers again.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

33.202465, negative 87.1—

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm going to hide a couple of coordinates here for John's privacy. I type them into Google Maps.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

That should be close to within a few feet.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh, there we are. That's your yard?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh my god.

**BRIAN REED:**

It's an aerial view of acres and acres of forest. And then there, in the middle of the woods, is a huge labyrinth made of concentric circles of hedges with a path weaving through them.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

It also has little gates in it now, which that picture doesn't show. So you see, you can swap the solution around. It actually has 64 possible solutions, depending on how you swap the gates around.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh wow. So it really is a maze.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

64 possible solutions, yes!

**BRIAN REED:**

That's crazy. Do you ever just go in and get lost in the maze?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Well, it's not tall enough to get lost yet. It's only about hip high. You can still see over it. You'll be able to get lost one day. Yeah, in other words, if you're asking, do I use it to walk around in when I'm thinking? Sure, sometimes, I do.

**BRIAN REED:**

Yeah.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

You know, I've never had anyone to really sit here and ask me, I guess, what I'm depressed about. Because I'm looking out over the trees here, and I realize that the people in the South Forty trailer park have a much worse life than I do. But I think the thing that's happened is I've gotten myself in an almost prison of my own making, where all my friends have died off. Because I only had contact with people much older than me. Even when I was a kid in school, I didn't want to hang around other kids. Because kids are talking about getting girls, or deer hunting, or football. Whereas I was interested in the astrolabe, sundials, projective geometry, new age music, climate change, and how to solve Rubik's cube.

But you can't tell a redneck that the cool Greenland melt falling directly into the less dense water where the thermohaline convector normally heads back south is sufficient—firstly, try to explain that the Earth is more than 5,000 years old.

**BRIAN REED:**

John, I'm curious. Is there anyone down there that you're able to talk about these gripes or ideas with, and you feel like you're on the same page?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

My lawyer, the town lawyer! He is the only—everything I've talked with you about, I've talked with him about. Now, he lives in Tuscaloosa. He's got too much sense to be living down here. But absolutely, I'll go over there and talk with the town lawyer every now and then.

**BRIAN REED:**

But that's it? That's all you've got?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Ah, you're beginning to figure it out now, aren't you? So why don't I move? There's got to be people in Fallujah right now, or Beirut, that just asked each other the same question. You know, why the hell don't you get out of here, Hassan? And Hassan's answer is, I don't know. Hassan has probably gone out there and made a sand maze or something. His aging mother can't decide which one of her hijabs she's going to wear that day, and she ends up peeing all over herself, and he has to clean her up or some damn something. He keeps thinking, OK, maybe one day it'll get better, although secretly he knows it never will.

I have this old crummy Ford truck. You can't be a redneck and live in Alabama without a damn Ford truck, can you? And I keep thinking, could I put everything that I would put in that truck and drive down that driveway for the last time? But then again, who would take care of Mama? Who would feed the puppies? Who'd water the flowers? Who'd prune the maze? You must think I'm just totally nuts at this point.

**BRIAN REED:**

No, I understand. It's home.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I'm sorry if I got off subject and all that.

**BRIAN REED:**

No, it's all good. I can point you back to it a little bit. Why do you think it's important to try and figure out what happened with this?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I believe we have a genuine murder that resulted from some kids probably picking on a boy that defended himself, that's almost certainly been covered up.

**BRIAN REED:**

After that first conversation with John, I do some research online, and I find no evidence of this murder. I see there is a place called K3 Lumber, owned by the Burt family. K3, in rural Alabama? Is that just a coincidence? The family also owns a large timber operation. John called it the KKK lumber mill. But it's actually named KyKenKee Inc. And on their website, they explain that the Ky, Ken, and Kee in KyKenKee refer to the three brothers who currently run the family business—Kyle, Kendall, and Keefe Burt.

Kabrahm Burt is Kendall's son. His name begins with a K too, by the way. I discover a Facebook page for a Kabrahm Burt in the area, with just a single disturbing post that tells people to raise hell and kill black babies, though he uses a word other than black. I don't know if Kabrahm made this page or what.

I also find court records for a DUI charge that suggests that maybe he did disappear for a little while, like John mentioned. At one point, there was a stretch of court dates he didn't show up for and a notice from his lawyer telling the court he hadn't been able to reach Kabrahm. Other than that, I find nothing—nothing about a murder or even assault involving Kabrahm, or an obituary for a Dylan Nichols, or any event in newspapers or court filings that seems like it could be the fight John is talking about.

Honestly, there's not much about Bibb County online at all. But John kept emailing me. He kept insisting this was a story I needed to cover. And when I call him back to say I was having trouble finding anything, or to just quickly double check something with him, almost without fail, we'd end up on the phone for hours, with him going on and on, not just about the murder, but about his life in this town.

We talked on weekends. Once, he got in touch at 1:30 in the morning because a bunch of cops had been in his yard.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

And I had the praetorian class cowering behind that uniform.

**BRIAN REED:**

It felt as if, by sheer force of will, John was opening this portal between us and calling out through it, calling from his world, a world of—

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Proleptic decay and decrepitude.

**BRIAN REED:**

So eventually, I decide I'll come check it out.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I was just dying for them to search this house without a warrant. I think they knew it.

**BRIAN REED:**

That's right after this.

[AD]

John says his home town is filled with "proleptic decay and decrepitude." I'm not ashamed to say I had to look up the word "proleptic." It means using a word or phrase in anticipation of it becoming true. When I go to Alabama, I don't want to cause any trouble, proleptically speaking, so John and I discuss a plan. After all, what he's alleging about the murder, that Kabrahm Burt has beaten someone to death, feels comfortable enough to make small talk about it out in the open, and a bunch of people know but no one has done anything, it's pretty scary. A reporter showing up from New York asking questions, who knows how people might react.

**BRIAN REED:**

I do not want to do anything that's going to put you in any kind of danger.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

You've got more experience with this than I do. This is your stock and trade.

**BRIAN REED:**

Well, I've never gone into a small town and investigated a murder. And this is your small town.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

It's up to you.

**BRIAN REED:**

John and I agree—when I come, I need to keep a low profile. I won't talk to any authorities yet. The one thing I want to do, I tell him, is meet with Jake Goodson. That's the guy John originally heard the rumor from, the one Kabrahm supposedly admitted everything to outside the Little Caesars.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

It's wherever you want to be with it. If you're fine with it, I'm fine with it.

**BRIAN REED:**

OK, are you sure?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I guess so.

**BRIAN REED:**

You guess so?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Too damn late to back out now.

**BRIAN REED:**

No, I don't—see, that's what I don't want you—

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I think you're second guessing this more than I am.

**BRIAN REED:**

It's John's road.

**BRIAN REED:**

On a windy afternoon in October 2014, I'm driving through Woodstock, Alabama, about 40 minutes southwest of Birmingham, headed to meet John for the first time. To get to his house, rather than use his address, he suggested I navigate by latitude and longitude. And even then, I miss his place the first time past. It's just thick woods all around. From the road, I have no idea there's a house back there.

But when I come back by, I notice there's an opening in the trees and a dirt driveway cut through the forest. It takes me deep into the woods, trees arching over it, until finally I reach a clearing with an old wooden house with three chimneys that looks like it hasn't changed since the Civil War. The whole place feels like it's of another time. And it is, literally. John doesn't follow daylight savings, so his property is on a time zone separate from the world around it.

The front door of the house opens and a man comes bounding out of it.

**BRIAN REED:**

John, how are you? Nice to meet you.

**BRIAN REED:**

There's no "nice to meet you" back, no "how you doing," no handshake. John just takes off around the side of the house with a pack of dogs following him.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Let's go and see if we can see the Mexican petunias blooming.

**BRIAN REED:**

Sure.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Come on, pipsqueak.

**BRIAN REED:**

He's a redhead, with red goatee and glasses, looks a bit younger than his 48 years, in ratty jeans and ratty sneakers, and a Sherwin-Williams t-shirt that he probably got for buying a can of paint at the hardware store. Presumably, he's giving me a tour, but I'm scrambling to keep up with him. He's naming the plants all around us as we move—goldenrod, Russian sage, a climbing lady banks rose. There are stone walls everywhere, wildly colored bushes, a giant bed of purple petunias stretching for hundreds of feet. There are apple trees leaning on trellises, tilted at a precise angle to lengthen their stems.

There's a sweet smell floating on the breeze—the smell of the thorny elaeagnus bush, John tells me. John's 13 dogs are running around freely, and they have a dog house that is an actual house, with two floors and a small swimming pool outside, made of stone.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

You're not afraid to walk about 110 feet, are you?

**BRIAN REED:**

No.

**BRIAN REED:**

John and I go past his workshop, which I'll later learn is filled with disassembled clocks, as well as the rare machines and tools and chemicals he uses to restore them. We go past a big trailer and two old school buses, one yellow and one blue. They're filled with lumber for John's house that he's aging, to get the wood as close as possible to what they used to build the house 200 years ago.

We go through a small, gated cemetery, where the people who built this place have been buried since the 1880s. "Having finished life's duty," one footstone reads, "they now sweetly rest." Later, we'll also meet John's mother, Mary Grace McLemore.

**MARY GRACE McLEMORE:**

How do you like down here?

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm sorry?

**MARY GRACE McLEMORE:**

How do you like down here?

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm enjoying myself very much.

**MARY GRACE McLEMORE:**

Sir?

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm enjoying myself very much.

**MARY GRACE McLEMORE:**

I'm glad.

**BRIAN REED:**

Yes.

**BRIAN REED:**

She's a tiny, brittle-looking woman, who I swear to you, can go a whole conversation without blinking once. She's been on this land her whole life. Forever seems about right.

**MARY GRACE McLEMORE:**

This is an old area.

**BRIAN REED:**

Yeah?

**MARY GRACE McLEMORE:**

Where we live, it's real old.

**BRIAN REED:**

How old?

**MARY GRACE McLEMORE:**

Since time, I reckon.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Rosemary that the winter killed, an old house that looks like Nosferatu.

**BRIAN REED:**

Finally, John and I reach a hill. We come to the crest, and there it is, the maze stretching out below us. Though he and I have completely different reactions to it.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Oh God, here we go. See the brown from here?

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh my gosh.

**BRIAN REED:**

John's upset. They've been in a drought for weeks, a D1 drought. He's been monitoring it. And he sees the hedges turning brown. But I'm just in awe. The maze is so cool.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh my gosh.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

The effects of climate change.

**BRIAN REED:**

I mean, you may see climate change, but this is an incredible approach, John.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

You know, we're going to have to get the damn cutters. I said before you all came out here I was going to get out here and do something, but it never happened. I just got miserably depressed and said, aw, screw it.

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm like, I have chills.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Chills? I have chills looking at all the brown bushes over here on this side.

**BRIAN REED:**

I don't even see the brown. There's all these green—this is incredible.

**BRIAN REED:**

We entered the maze, and John re-arranges the position of three gates inside—

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Let's go ahead and put this one here.

**BRIAN REED:**

—to set a new solution.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Let's go ahead and move this one off to here. There you go. Now it's all screwed up now. Let's see.

**BRIAN REED:**

John built the maze as a series of splits. One path comes to an end, then it splits left and right. Each of those paths end, then they split left and right. Over and over again, you have to choose which way to go. John and I are walking through, trying to reach the middle.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

You know, I designed this thing myself, so it was designed by a madman. That's what people tell me.

**BRIAN REED:**

I do feel like I'm walking around in your brain or something.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Just imagine when it gets over your head.

**BRIAN REED:**

Saved on John's computer is a comic. And when I think about it now, I realize it captures his worldview perfectly. It's three drinking glasses with arms and legs and cute little faces, each with the same amount of liquid inside. The first one smiles and says, "I'm half full." The next one frowns and says, "I'm half empty." The last one throws both arms up and says, "I think this is piss."

Later, John will take me on a tour of Bibb County, and this worldview will be on full display. He'll rattle off a constant stream of grievances as we go. Historic buildings are being demolished overnight. Dollar Generals and Walmarts are popping up in their stead, serving a populace that is getting fatter and more tattooed by the day.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Another junkyard.

**BRIAN REED:**

No positive comment, no matter how innocuous, survives his virtuosic negativity. At one point, I mentioned that the landscape around here is really quite pretty.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

There you go. There's our legacy, going down the road.

**BRIAN REED:**

Lumber truck.

**BRIAN REED:**

Carting away that pretty landscape, one tree at a time. In the afternoon, it'll start to thunderstorm, something John has been saying all day that they desperately need to combat the drought. So that's good, right?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

We're getting rain, what? About 10 weeks too late, now that everything's died.

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm glad you're getting something.

**BRIAN REED:**

Everything I say.

**BRIAN REED:**

That's a beautiful butterfly.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Yeah, we don't have as many butterflies as we should have this year either. That's something else that disturbs me,

**BRIAN REED:**

It's a comprehensive tour.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Off on the right is where I went to high school. I like to call it Auschwitz.

**BRIAN REED:**

Yeah.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

See the crematorium? See the long little killing facility on either end?

**BRIAN REED:**

No, it looks like a high school with a baseball game going on in front.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

To me, it looks like Auschwitz.

**BRIAN REED:**

Before the jaunt around Shittown, back inside the maze, John and I have stopped walking for a second. We've hit dead end after dead end, and now John is craning his neck and scoping out our options.

**BRIAN REED:**

He scouts his direction.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

It is. It's kind of funny to be lost in something you designed yourself, isn't it? Let's see. Oh no!

**BRIAN REED:**

We're stuck.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Hm.

**BRIAN REED:**

Are you really lost or are you putting it on for me?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

We are actually lost in our own maze. Isn't that exciting? Oh, I see what I did. Oh, I see what I did. Oh, I see what I did.

**BRIAN REED:**

Evidently, while the various gate combinations create 64 different solutions, there is one combination that leaves you with absolutely no way out.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Oh God. It's possible to set it up where there is no solution, and I accidentally did that.

**BRIAN REED:**

It's like a null set or something?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

A null set. There you go.

**BRIAN REED:**

I can't tell if John's being straight with me. John seems so smart and in control. It's hard to believe he could accidentally be stumped by his own maze. I could see him engineering this situation to make things more, I don't know, literary, conjuring this garden path metaphor that he knows I won't be able to resist.

On the phone before I got here, John had said he could introduce me to Jake Goodson. Jake, again, is in his early 20s. He's one of the guys John hires to work on his property, and who John first heard about the murder from. Jake's the one who learned about it from Kabrahm outside the Little Caesar's pizza. But now that I'm in Woodstock, all of a sudden, John can't reach Jake. He's been working long hours at the local steel mill, John says—a job that won't be around much longer, by the way, once our supply of cheap fossil fuels implodes.

But anyway, John's called Jake's wife, and his brother too, trying to reach him, but still no luck. Eventually, I head to my hotel and John and I check in later on the phone.

**BRIAN REED:**

No word, right?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Yeah. I'm just totally annoyed that I can't get a hold of him. Gets on your damned nerves. And I know you're on a schedule. You ain't got time for a bunch of bullshit. It's shit or get off the pot.

**BRIAN REED:**

John keeps emailing me updates. "Not a damn thing so far," he writes. An hour later, just a subject line, quote, "So far, the null set," 8:38 PM. I had to leave Bibb County to find a hotel, so I'm in Bessemer, a small city about 15 miles down the highway, where the far reaches of the Birmingham Metro Area dissolve into the rural counties like Bibb to the west. I'm at a Best Western just off the exit ramp, behind a Waffle House.

Even though I'm exhausted from traveling, I turn on the lamp and pull out the bedtime reading John's given me. Bedtime reading, that's what he called it. There's William Faulkner's short story, *A* *Rose* *for* *Emily,* narrated by the gossipy collective townsfolk of imaginary Jefferson, Mississippi, who tell the tale of Miss Emily Grierson, an unmarried, middle aged outcast, who lives alone with her father, and after he dies, holes up in her house for years.

There's the Guy de Maupassant story, *The* *Necklace,* about a woman who longs for a much grander, more spectacular life than the one she has, and gets it for a single night, only to have to pay for it dearly every day for the next 10 years.

And then there's *The* *Renegade* by Shirley Jackson, about a woman who recently moved from the city to a small country town, whose family dog, Lady, is accused one morning of killing a neighbor's chickens. The woman listens in growing dread throughout the day, as townsperson after townsperson laughs at the torture and death that will befall Lady as a result, including, finally, the woman's own children, who describe to Lady's face in gleeful detail how they will use a spiked collar to chop off her head.

I notice a unifying theme to all these stories, a creeping sense of foreboding—in these places that are allegedly home to polite society, an undercurrent of depravity.

Morning comes. No word from Jake. In the meantime, I try to come up with some other ideas. The obvious one in a situation like this would be to contact the victim's family. But at this point, I still don't know if anyone's actually died, and so that's an awkward phone call to make.

I can't get local hospital records. I try, but they're not public. Ditto with death records in Alabama, also not public. Again, I found no obit or news story about any of this in the papers. I was able to find two Dylan Nicholses is in Bibb County. Both were the right age, early 20s. One spelled his first name D-Y-L-A-N. The other spelled it D-I-L-L-O-N. It looked like D-Y-L-A-N had played football at Bibb County High School a few years earlier. But other than that, he had basically no footprint online, which is strange for someone his age. Like maybe that means you're dead?

D-I-L-L-O-N, on the other hand, appeared to be alive and well and actively maintaining his Facebook page. Not only that, he'd gone to Kabrahm Burt's high school and was Facebook friends with him, which made both John and me wonder if somehow the rumor got messed up, and maybe Dillon wasn't the dead guy. Maybe he was the friend with Kabrahm, who'd gotten his throat cut and kept quiet about the whole thing. So I held off on contacting him.

So too afraid to talk to the cops, too afraid to talk to the Burts or the Nicholses, I lay out another idea to John. My thought is, we believe the murder happened sometime in the summer of 2012. If we can somehow narrow the time period to just a couple weeks, maybe, we can go to the public library and look through the archive of Bibb County's local newspaper, the *Centerville* *Press.* The old issues aren't online, so maybe there's an obituary or some other clue in there that I haven't been able to see. John has an idea for how we can nail down a more precise date.

**BRIAN REED:**

So what is this?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Just every time I spend a dollar working on this damn place.

**BRIAN REED:**

He shows me a notebook, a makeshift ledger where he keeps detailed track of all the projects on his property. We sit on his twin bed, and he flips through and shows me his whole system, how he notes the people who worked each day, a rotating crew of young guys and handyman types from around town, what they were working on, how much he paid them.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

The red means it was for the yard. Of course, if it doesn't have the red, it's in the house. And if you see a letter M with a circle around it, that meant we were planting the maze.

**BRIAN REED:**

John's pretty sure they were laying the slate area behind his house when word was going around about the murder. Whenever they were working on that, that's probably when it happened, he says.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Yard, shed, rock, roof, tar. Yeah, work in dog pen, slate, and bridge. This event would have happened right around this time period, August of 2012.

**BRIAN REED:**

August 7, August 8, $900, $500. And then August 12, it's the same. You paid him 20 bucks on August 12?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Yeah, that means someone didn't have enough gas to go home.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh. Can we pinpoint any closer than August? What do you think?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Probably pinpoint between the 7th and 21st, which sound real good. It's about the closest you're going to get. Between the 7th and the 21st. The 7th and the 21st.

**BRIAN REED:**

So we're off to the library, to the microfilm machine in the back room. Though by this point, I'm noticing that John's been acting kind of weird. Weird for him. Like, evasive. I'm trying to get him to look through the newspaper archive with me, but instead, he's just wandering over by the bookshelves, avoiding me.

**BRIAN REED:**

All right, John. Yeah, come on over. You're not interested to see this?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I figured you was gonna do your thing and I was gonna go out—

**BRIAN REED:**

This is our thing. We're trying to figure out if this guy died. This is not my thing.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

There's not room for two faces in front of that little bitty machine.

**BRIAN REED:**

Yeah, there is. Come on. Come and help me.

**BRIAN REED:**

Then, as we're going through issues—

**BRIAN REED:**

All right, *Centerville* *News.*

**BRIAN REED:**

I don't know, it feels like he's trying to rush me through this, like he doesn't want me to be as thorough as I am being or something.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

If we go all the way into September and don't find anything, I bet there's no—well, you probably don't even need to go past—

**BRIAN REED:**

Let's do September. Hm. Look at this front page, all right? This is Wednesday, September—

**BRIAN REED:**

Spinning the broken microfilm wheel with my finger, I read through every issue of the *Centerville* *Press,* mid-July through September. It gives a pretty detailed snapshot of the summer of 2012 in Bibb County, Alabama. Some cousins drove in from Forsyth, Georgia, with a four-tier cake for Kelsey Connel's Sweet 16 party. 1,965 people called complaints into the sheriff's office. 20 people violated probation. And police discovered 14 illegal piles of garbage.

The mayor of Centerville started campaigning for reelection. Some brothers went off to space camp together. A guy hired a hitman to unsuccessfully try and kill the West Blocton police chief. And Jean Ingram served chicken salad for lunch one day to Benny and Jo Russell.

You know what did not happen in the summer 2012, according to the reporting of the *Centerville* *Press?* A murder by a guy named Kabrahm Burt or the death of a guy named Dylan Nichols.

After looking at every police blotter, every obituary, we've got nothing—nothing, nothing, nothing.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Are we gonna hit that or not?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

What's that?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Right there in front of you.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Oh yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

But John doesn't seem to care that we're not making much progress. He's goofing off. One afternoon, I find him in his shop with Tyler Goodson, Jake Goodson's brother. Tyler does work on John's yard too. He's here to chop up a fallen tree. But it's also clear he and John know each other pretty well. They chat easily, and Tyler has a pile of belongings that he's keeping here at John's house while he's trying to get a permanent place to live.

If Tyler has his shirt on, you know he must be going to court. At least that's what his mom will tell me one day. Today, apparently, he's not on the docket, because he's standing here, shirtless and tattooed, with an anatomical heart on his chest that says "Misery loves company," sharpening a chainsaw, tooth by tooth. John's pointing to the bottle of Wild Turkey on the workbench.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I ain't gotta drive you tonight nowhere, do I?

**BRIAN REED:**

No.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Hand it over here. You want a hit, Brian?

**BRIAN REED:**

Sure.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Make your sticker poke out.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Oh, I bet he don't hit it like I do.

**BRIAN REED:**

John is getting drunk. Tyler is filing away, telling stories about run-ins with the cops. I am standing in an antique clock shop in the middle of the woods. I take a drink. Then Tyler and John show me the 19th century French carriage clock they're restoring that they found in the junkyard, its pieces scattered about the bench. And at one point, suddenly, for no apparent reason, and certainly not because I asked, John yank's up his shirt and flashes me.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I wasn't gonna show you that abuse.

**BRIAN REED:**

The entirety of John's chest is tattooed, and his shoulders too, though it's all perfectly covered when he's wearing a t-shirt. The flashing is quick, so I can't take it all in, but I see a glimpse of what's possibly a beaker and maybe a clock-type thing. It takes me aback, because John has made clear to me how much he loathes tattoos. They're one of the things he hates about Shittown. I believe he once called them "an expression of hopelessness." Doesn't compute.

**BRIAN REED:**

That's your entire chest, John.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I know.

**BRIAN REED:**

And nipple piercings.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Oh, we weren't gonna talk about those.

**BRIAN REED:**

Then, as if, of course, this is the next logical subject of discussion, John gets on the topic of the Small Quantity Hazardous Waste Generators Regulation of 1998 and its effect on the electroplating trade.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

—gold chloride and chelate it up into solution with a single salt potassium cyanide, you buffer the pH around 10.4 and—

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler and I give each other a look. John, meanwhile, is on his own plane. He's rolling.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

You know, it's usually operated on 140 to 160 degrees Fahrenheit, 2 or 3 amps per square foot.

**BRIAN REED:**

Do you have a spare coin, John asks? He wants to make me a souvenir. I dig out a dime from my pocket. He starts futzing around in the back room of his shop.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

It smells like Chernobyl after the blast in here.

**BRIAN REED:**

Untangling wires, filling up beakers, like a drunken mad scientist.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Do not breathe any of that. If you smell anything that smells like almonds, you need to get the fuck away.

**BRIAN REED:**

I'd say it's about this point that I ask myself, is John fucking with me? Is he just a bored guy who contacted me on a lark and never expected me to actually follow through? Is this murder not real and he knows it? It's not only the fact that he is right now pouring potassium cyanide into a bucket in front of me that makes me wonder this.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

There you go, there you go. Oh shit, oh shit.

**BRIAN REED:**

It's all the little moments from our conversations over the months that I've ignored or written off as just one of John's quirks. For example, the couple of times, months in, when he casually raised the possibility that, you know what, maybe Dylan Nichols didn't actually die.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

He's either died or he's been paraplegicized. It's one of those two.

**BRIAN REED:**

Or the times he seemed cagey about putting me directly in touch with Jake Goodson.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

He doesn't know this is being investigated. He might get real scared and get real quiet. If you call him, would you want to allude to the fact that I had spoken to you?

**BRIAN REED:**

Or all the times John offered to reimburse my employer for my travel expenses to Alabama, no matter how much I told him I'd never let him do that, because he was so worried that the investigation might turn out to be a goose egg.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Well, let's face it, you're broke. I mean public radio's broke.

**BRIAN REED:**

We're not broke. We're good. We're good. We are very lucky. We're good.

**BRIAN REED:**

And then just so many odd little interactions I've had with John—the poetry recitations he's given me, the never-ending emails about every topic imaginable, the long personalized lectures on climate change, the uncomfortable moments like this one, when I was talking to John about how he would explain to people in town what I was doing down there if they saw me with him.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Since everyone around here thinks I'm a queer anyway, I could just tell them I'm sucking your damn dick.

**BRIAN REED:**

That would be a really good way to introduce me to your neighbors.

**BRIAN REED:**

Now John's acting as if he's not interested in the murder. I'm possibly breathing in dangerous chemicals. What am I still doing here?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Which I'm sure it is.

[CLATTERING]

Where'd it go? Oh my goodness, the dime has escaped.

**BRIAN REED:**

In the shop, Tyler continues to sharpen the chainsaw, and John drops my dime into a bucket in the large sink, hooks up wires to a car battery, runs them into the bucket, and then zaps it, cranking up the current until the dime turns gold.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I may be dead and gone one day, but you'll have a souvenir from Shittown, Alabama.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

A golden penny.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

A gold dime! Motherfucking gold-plated dime. [BURP] Shit.

**BRIAN REED:**

For thousands and thousands of years, we did not have clocks, or calendars, or any method for telling time in the way we think of telling time now. And time was happening nonetheless. As humans, we must have sensed it. Maybe we heard it, the rhythm of it, as we sharpened a tool. It's amazing, if you think about it, the sheer variety of methods we've concocted over the centuries to keep track of time. We pour sand through a glass. We swing pendulums back and forth. We count the cycles of radiation coming off an atom. We count Mississippis.

When John was a teenager, he became fascinated with what was possibly the very first formalized way humans came up with to keep track of time, watching the sun, and the stars, and the phases of the moon. He built his own version of something called an astrolabe, which he's showing me.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Where we're standing is the zenith. That's this point over here.

**BRIAN REED:**

The astrolabe looks kind of like a clock crossed with a compass. It's a flat dial with a map of the night sky laid over it, and a pointer, or I guess a sight, attached on top of that. You pick a star in the sky, and aim the sight at it, twist the sky map until it aligns with the sight in a certain way. And then the dial shows you your direction, as well as the month, day, and time.

It's a beautiful, complex device. And as a kid, John longed to figure it out, to put himself inside the brains of the people who puzzled through the earliest versions—the Greek astronomer Hipparchus, who devised the mathematics behind it, or the 10th century Islamic scholars, who refined the invention to help them time their daily prayers.

John wanted to go through what they had to go through to create an astrolabe. Which is why he made his own, designed specifically for the coordinates of this house. It hangs on the wall of his mother's bedroom. That's what he's showing me, his astrolabe, when Skyler Goodson happens to walk in the front door.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Oh, Skyler's here to come collect her money. This is Jake's wife. Oh, you brought spaghetti. And is Jake bringing his ass over here?

**BRIAN REED:**

Skyler is the wife of Jake Goodson, the guy I've been desperately wanting to talk to. She's 21, outgoing. She has her little son with her, who's crawling on all fours at our feet, pretending to be a dog. We make some small talk, and eventually, as casually as I can, I ask her, you don't happen to know about the incident John and I have been talking about, do you?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

She knows.

**BRIAN REED:**

John says quietly. But Skyler seems confused.

**SKYLER GOODSON:**

Sometimes you have to remind me a little bit.

**BRIAN REED:**

The big fight between Kabrahm Burt and that dude, John tells her, that resulted in the dude's death. I can see Skyler recognizes what he's talking about. Yes, she says. Yes.

**SKYLER GOODSON:**

He straight up told us that he killed him, cold-blooded murdered him.

**BRIAN REED:**

He told you that too?

**SKYLER GOODSON:**

Yes.

**BRIAN REED:**

She says she was with Jake when it happened. The Little Caesar's, seeing Kabrahm for the first time after he'd vanished for a while, Kabrahm telling them he'd claimed self-defense and gotten off. According to Skyler, it all went down just how John said it did.

**SKYLER GOODSON:**

Well, he pretty much, in those words, pretty much said that he had murdered the guy, And just—

**BRIAN REED:**

He used the word "murder?"

**SKYLER GOODSON:**

Yeah, had killed, that he had killed him.

**BRIAN REED:**

So not "murder," "killed."

**SKYLER GOODSON:**

He probably used a little bit of everything. Like, it was a casual conversation, like hey, how you been? Well, this is going on in my life. I got arrested because I murdered somebody. And yada, yada, yada. And let me tell you about it. And it was just like, there was nothing to it, that he had just beat him to death. And I can't just—I just can't imagine sitting there and repeatedly hitting somebody until they die.

**BRIAN REED:**

Yeah, me neither. What did you guys say? I mean, what were you—

**SKYLER GOODSON:**

Just stood there. Just stared at him. It didn't sound like it was something that you should be having casual conversation about. It seems like he should've still been in hiding.

**BRIAN REED:**

Skyler says she'd actually heard about the murder before talking to Kabrahm, that it was kind of an open secret. That's the thing that freaks her most about this, even a couple years after it happened, the fact that so many people know and still have done nothing, the complicity.

I mentioned my trip to the library to her, my hope that there'd be some record of this in the newspaper. But she has no illusions about that.

**SKYLER GOODSON:**

Most of it's probably hidden. It's not even in there.

**BRIAN REED:**

What do you mean?

**SKYLER GOODSON:**

This town has a way of forgetting information and hiding information. If somebody don't want people to know about it, then it won't be there.

**BRIAN REED:**

John stands by as Skyler talks. He's uncharacteristically quiet, a small grin on his face. I'm hanging on Skyler's every word. I can't believe I'm finally getting a firsthand account of all this. But John is calm, matter of fact. Like, what's the big surprise? It's a shittown. This is what I've been telling you all along.

[MUSIC - THE ZOMBIES, "A ROSE FOR EMILY]

*S-Town* is produced by Julie Snyder and me, with editing from Ira Glass, Joel Lovell, Sarah Koenig, and Neil Drumming. Whitney Dangerfield is our digital editor. Starlee Kine is a story consultant. Fact-checking and research by Ben Phelan. Seth Lind is our director of operations. Mixing by Lyra Smith. Matt Tierney is our technical director. The *S-Town* staff includes Emily Condon, Elise Bergerson, Julie Whitaker, and Kimberly Henderson.

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We're of course also on Facebook and Twitter. And you can follow us on Instagram @stownpodcast.

[AD]

A reminder that you don't have to wait for Chapter II. All seven chapters are available right now. *S-Town* is a production of *Serial* and *This* *American* *Life.*

**Chapter II Transcript**

**SARAH KOENIG:**

Chapter II.

**BRIAN REED:**

In one of my first phone conversations with John, before we'd met, I asked him if he thought it was possible that maybe Kabrahm Burt hadn't killed anybody, if it was possible that the murder he'd contacted me about was actually just a rumor, a fiction. No, John said, there was little doubt in his mind that it was true. And then, by way of explanation, he launched into this parable.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Let me tell you something I saw one time.

**BRIAN REED:**

I should admit that at the time, this story was completely lost on me.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Me and Roger Price had went up to the truck stop together to get a little dinner. We came back by, and was passing by the South Forty trailer park. So Roger's one of these dudes, he's a darn transmission mechanic. He's not really talkative. He's a good dude, but he just—you know, he only has one tooth. And it's really amusing to see how he can balance a cigarette on that one tooth. And the whole time he's talking—

[LAUGHTER]

—this cigarette is just bouncing around all over that one tooth, and he never loses that son of a bitch. So we're coming by this "Welcome to South Forty" sign, and there's this girl out there walking around in front of the damn sign holding a cell phone, and she's got on a pink top and nothing else—no fucking panties, no goddamn socks, barefoot. And I remark that to Roger. I don't remember what I said. I probably said, "my God, look at her," or something like that. And Roger's sage advice was, usually when you see jokers that look like that, they done something to get like that.

**BRIAN REED:**

That's the lesson?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

That went just straight through you.

**BRIAN REED:**

Like so many things having to do with John, it took me a long time to understand the meaning of this story—years. But I think I finally get it now. From *Serial* and *This* *American* *Life,* I'm Brian Reed. This is *Shittown.*

My second night in Alabama, I finally get to talk to Jake Goodson. Jake's the guy who'd originally told John that Kabrahm Burt had bragged to him outside the Little Caesars about beating a guy to death. I sit with Jake in John's kitchen, asking him to rack his brain for any extra details that could help me solve this. It was a while ago, he says. His memories are fuzzy. But he makes a suggestion that, I don't know, seems crazy to me.

**JAKE GOODSON:**

I don't know. I mean, I could get him and ask him, and he'll be able to tell me. He'd probably come up here and talk to you about it.

**BRIAN REED:**

Who?

**JAKE GOODSON:**

Kabrahm.

**BRIAN REED:**

Kabrahm lives right nearby. Why not just get it from the horse's mouth?

**BRIAN REED:**

No.

**JAKE GOODSON:**

Probably so.

**BRIAN REED:**

That makes no sense. I would stick a microphone in his face and he would tell me about a guy he killed?

**JAKE GOODSON:**

Probably. He's burnt up. He wouldn't know no better. He'd probably just laugh about it with you.

**BRIAN REED:**

I told Jake no thanks, at least not now. I do not feel like I'm armed with enough information to confront Kabrahm yet. Aside from seeming far-fetched, the idea also just sounded potentially dangerous, for John, for Jake, and for me. But then the next night, a bunch of other people proposed the exact same thing.

**MAN 1:**

He'll talk to you, dude.

**MAN 2:**

I mean, he's burnt out.

**MAN 1:**

He's arrogant, dude. He don't give a fuck.

**BRIAN REED:**

He would talk to me about it?

**MAN 3:**

I know he would. I'm pretty sure he would.

**MAN 1:**

He'd probably tell you truth.

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm chatting with a few guys in a tattoo parlor, all of whom have heard about the murder. Some are pretty sure they heard it from Kabrahm himself.

**MAN 4:**

You want me to call him and ask him?

**BRIAN REED:**

No, don't do that.

**MAN 4:**

Why? I'm not a puss, dude. I don't give a fuck.

**BRIAN REED:**

Apparently I'm the puss, because I do not want the dudes I'm talking to to call Kabrahm right now. Already, this tattoo shop does not feel like the safest place to walk into alone at night, trying to dig up info about a covered-up murder by a guy everyone seems to know, all of which are things I've just done. The last thing I want right now is for the alleged murderer to show up.

I was invited here by Tyler Goodson, Jake's brother, whom I met in John's workshop while he was filing that chainsaw. He's one of the owners. Tyler knows Kabrahm. They're both in their early 20s, and I thought maybe some of Tyler's friends who hang out here might have more information about the possible murder. John didn't feel like coming with me because he doesn't like driving at night.

When I walk in, at first it seems like a pretty small place, just a couple of tattooing stations and a little waiting area. But if you push the back wall of the shop, it swings open. It's a secret door, which leads into a hidden clubhouse in the back. There's a bar with some people around it, a pool table, a small stage with motorcycles parked there, and a brass stripper pole that's currently vacant.

The shop is called Black Sheep Ink, and I'll learn that the guys who hang out here take the name to heart. They see themselves as a collection of misfits, of self-proclaimed criminals and runaways and hillbillies. And Tyler has built this place as a haven for them, a place to swap their tales of getting jerked around by cops and judges and clerks and bosses, and to cultivate a sense of pride in their status as the outcasts of their world.

There's this gentleman, whose name I never do catch, who tells me, quote, "I'm so fucking fat, I don't care no more," and lifts up his shirt to show me the giant words he has tattooed on his stomach—"Feed Me."

**MAN 4:**

Tell him. Tell him. Give him a picture. I'm a 6-foot, 350-pound bearded man in a John Deere hat with "Feed Me" on my belly, just so y'all get a clear picture here.

**BRIAN REED:**

There's a guy who's been wearing the same trucker hat for seven years.

**MAN 5:**

Seven years, same hat.

**BRIAN REED:**

Then there's this guy.

[JACKHAMMER NOISE]

People call him Razor.

**RAZOR:**

Beep, beep. Back it up. I was parked on the side of the road. I looked down there. I said, son of a bitch. He wakes up. You have Willard come by, see him laying in the yard, thought he died. Ambulance is there. They already called the ambulance, man. Bastard's laying out there in the yard, got an ounce of pot laying beside him, six beers. He's just shit-faced.

**BRIAN REED:**

I believe he's telling a story about his friend Willard, who is impervious to death.

**RAZOR:**

You know, I run over him three times in one fucking night. Three times, dude, one night. The bastard won't die.

**BRIAN REED:**

And then there's Tyler, who's been sleeping at the tattoo parlor lately because he can't afford anywhere else to spend the night, who's 23 years old and has three daughters with three different women, and who's been haunted his whole life by people assuming he's just like his father—his father who abused him and his siblings and his mother, and who is a convicted sex offender for having sex with a minor. One day, Tyler will tell me that he often wakes up in the morning in a puddle of sweat, having dreamt during the night of killing his dad.

Tyler's friendly to me when I arrive, welcoming, but as I'm getting out my recording equipment, I hear murmurs from other people wondering who I am, wondering if I might be a cop. People are asking me questions, feeling me out. A few guys ask if I'll smoke a bowl with them out of some deer antlers. I don't want to be stoned, but I also don't want to seem like a narc, so I pretend to take a puff.

I pretend to do a number of things that make me feel very uncomfortable in order to keep as low a profile as possible, such as act like I'm not shocked or upset or scared when someone says this to me, a radio producer with a microphone, in the first few minutes that we're talking. At the risk of ruining any surprise, the statement is racist and nonsensical, replete with multiple uses of a terrible word.

**BUBBA:**

You know, we had a tax-free labor. It didn't have nothing to do with a bunch of niggers picking cotton. And we worked our ass off, and we got—we earned everything we got.

**BRIAN REED:**

This is a tattoo artist who goes by Bubba.

**BUBBA:**

So now we have no—if you got a taxpaying job, you got to take care of some nigger's wife that's in jail because she's drawing a child support check—

**BRIAN REED:**

Later, Bubba will display a rather fluent knowledge of the differences between various white supremacy groups. Mind you, we're in a majority-black city right now, Bessemer, about 20 minutes from Bibb County, heading towards Birmingham. But everyone in here is white, including me. Someone mentions offhand that the small tattoo area in front is about as much shop as you want here in Bessemer. Otherwise, the place will be filled with black people who'll piss you off and won't pay anything—hence the secret door.

Before I left for Alabama, my girlfriend, Solange—now my wife—who is black and whose family is from the South, had insisted I make my Facebook and Instagram accounts private, because they're filled with pictures of us together. I told her she was being silly, overly paranoid. Now I'm grateful I decided at the last minute to follow her advice.

When someone asked me what the women looked like up in New York, I tell them they're all shapes, sizes, and colors. When someone asks what my ethnicity is, I tell them about the Italian part without mentioning the Russian Jew part. But there's no hiding the fact that I'm a Yankee.

**BRIAN REED:**

What's that?

**BUBBA:**

Y'all just as racist as we are.

**BRIAN REED:**

It's quieter.

**BUBBA:**

Y'all left them the fuck down here.

[LAUGHTER]

**BRIAN REED:**

In an effort to change the subject, I turn the conversation to one of the few things I know I have in common with these guys—

**BRIAN REED:**

So you guys know John?

**BRIAN REED:**

—our mutual acquaintance, John B. McLemore.

**MAN 6:**

Oh, yeah.

**MAN 1:**

He's a character.

**MAN 5:**

I ain't never met nobody else like him.

**MAN 6:**

Nobody. Nobody. Nobody like him.

**MAN 7:**

—nobody else like that folk.

**MAN 6:**

He been bugging the piss out of you?

**BRIAN REED:**

What's that?

**MAN 6:**

Has he been bugging the piss out of you?

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm not there yet, but it's exhausting to hang out with him for a long day.

**MAN 6:**

Damn right.

**WOMAN:**

(AMUSED) Who says "exhausting?"

**MAN 2:**

He's exhausted after all day.

**BRIAN REED:**

Well, it's—

**MAN 6:**

He needs to slow the fuck down is what you want to tell him. Slow down.

**BRIAN REED:**

They tell me John comes around the tattoo parlor pretty often, and likes to lecture them and give them a hard time. He'll argue with them about their views on the South, on politics, on race. Bubba says he'll submit them to tirades about the coming climate and energy apocalypses.

**BUBBA:**

About how we was running out of fossil fuels and the world was going to come to a fucking end, and—

**BRIAN REED:**

John tells off their customers for talking about what he sees as inane shit, tells these guys that their lives are amounting to nothing, that they're examples in the flesh of what's wrong with this place.

**JOEL:**

He thinks everybody's a failure. Everything that's going on is a failure.

**BRIAN REED:**

This is another tattoo artist, Joel.

**BRIAN REED:**

He calls you guys failures?

**JOEL:**

Fuck yeah, he calls us failures, you know what I mean?

**BRIAN REED:**

Like jokingly, or—

**JOEL:**

No. Everybody's a failure. Like in his brain, everybody's a failure. For all I know, you could be a failure. You know, sometimes I wish he'd kind of fail—

**BRIAN REED:**

These guys dish it out, too. They tease John for his many peculiarities, like how he'll devour whatever leftover food is around, no matter how old or rock-hard it is, his inability to buy new shoes to alleviate his athlete's foot, which he's allegedly had for three years, his extemporaneous solving of math problems, his utter aversion to being in a room with more than two or three people at a time, his living with his mom his whole life, his being a loner.

It's friendly, though. They like John. After all, John is the granddaddy of all black sheep, so this crew gets him. They truly seem to accept him, though that doesn't stop them from wondering—

**MAN 4:**

Love to know what he's worth.

**BRIAN REED:**

"I'd love to know what he's worth," the "Feed Me" guy says.

**MAN 4:**

Just not because I give a fuck, but just to know why does he live like that, you know what I mean?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

—poor as a church mouse.

**BRIAN REED:**

That's Tyler saying he lives like he's poor as a church mouse. And Tyler would know. He and John are close. He's the only reason all these guys know John.

Tyler helped build John's maze. He's done all sorts of different odd jobs for him. He's over there all the time. And as far as the church mouse, I did notice that John's refrigerator is pretty bare. His mom invited me to stay for dinner one night so long as I didn't mind eating like po' folks, she told me, in a way where I couldn't tell if she was joking. They live without air conditioning, without TV.

It's mysterious to me, too, because at the same time, John has all these dogs he feeds and brings to the vet, this elaborate yard that requires constant upkeep. He mentioned to me that he spent more than $60,000 on the maze alone. "Feed Me" guy says to Tyler—

**MAN 4:**

I don't understand why, if he's as loaded as you say—

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Oh, he's worth millions.

**BRIAN REED:**

Millions?

**MAN 4:**

Have you not done any research on John?

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler explains that John's family comes from money. He says that one of his grandpas was a judge, and that John got an inheritance, played the stock market with it, and made even more money. Plus, aside from all that, Tyler says John made good bank restoring old clocks. All of that sounds like it could be true enough. But then Tyler and his friends start listing off John's assets, and I can't tell if any of that is real, or if they're just letting their imaginations fill in the blanks about their local Boo Radley.

They claim John has $400,000 in cash, 100-some-odd thousand worth of tools in the workshop, all the antiques around his house. You're going to get $150,000 if you sell that old-ass shit, Bubba says. Rare books in the basement, a single clock worth $10,000 that's just sitting on the floor in a plastic storage bin. Not to mention, says Tyler—

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Gold that his granddaddy—his granddaddy's gold, his daddy's gold.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler's up on the counter of the bar, crouching. He has a brown briefcase he carries around with him. He calls it his minister's case. It has a sticker that says minister slapped on the outside, and it's filled with his tattoo machines and a gun and his welder's cap and some nipple jewelry, and his Black Sheep Ink business cards, and also his minister's license, which he got online because he wanted to found a non-denominational church, where people of all backgrounds could come together and talk it out.

This clubhouse is meant to be a version of that. He says it's his church. Tyler stares down at us from the corner of the bar, like he's about to divulge a secret. When it comes to John, he says, there's no telling—

**TYLER GOODSON:**

What he's got, because there's a lot of shit that I'm sure I don't know about, because I've been finding stuff out slowly over the years. And there's secret little dungeons and shit under his damn house, man. I ain't playing. I've built gates for them. I've built gates for these secret dungeons.

**BRIAN REED:**

I've built gates for the dungeons, Tyler's telling me—dungeons in John's basement. He soon clarifies they're actually old crawlspaces, but the way John had him rig them up, Tyler says, with tiny doors and these locking iron gates inside, dividing them into sections—what was the purpose of all that? It was creepy. But Tyler digs creepy stuff, so he also thought it was cool.

That guy Bubba, the one who's especially outspoken about his racist views, as the night goes on, I put together that he's the one who gave John all his tattoos, the tattoos that John showed me abruptly at his workshop that cover his whole chest. Bubba, he explains that being a tattoo artist is a lot like being a therapist. People sit in his chair for hours on end, and each person he works on is getting that tattoo for some specific reason.

It's his job, as he sees it, to uncover that reason. Maybe it's a meditation, a milestone, an excuse to get out of the house, a new girlfriend, a death. John's motivation was especially bewildering to Bubba, because John had made it clear almost every time he came in the shop how deeply he despised tattoos.

**BUBBA:**

If you got a tattoo on you, he'd tell you you wasn't shit. You're a low life. You shouldn't have that on you.

**BRIAN REED:**

So as shocking as it was to me when John lifted up his shirt to show me all his tattoos, it was far more shocking to Bubba when John strolled in one day at the age of 47 and asked him to start putting them there.

**BUBBA:**

I thought he was going to commit suicide. You know, that's what I thought in my mind.

**BRIAN REED:**

Why?

**BUBBA:**

This is something you're completely against. You think fucking failures have tattoos, you know what I'm saying? Why in the fuck would you just start tattooing your whole upper body like that, you know what I mean? And around your neck—pistons. Tattooing pistons on him, you know? Redneck-ass tattoos, you know?

So I mean, first thought, I thought he was going to kill himself. I thought he was going to get tatted the fuck up and blow his brains out or something. Fuck, I don't know. And then the more I got to doing it, you know, I realized, you know, we're in a rut. You know, we need some money and he helped us out. I mean, he helped a lot.

**BRIAN REED:**

Bubba and Tyler co-own Black Sheep Ink together. And Bubba started noticing, they'd have a bill about to come due for the business, they'd be wondering how they were going to pay it, and then conveniently, John would come in and hand over $300 or $400 and ask for another tattoo on his chest. Bubba says people around here don't throw down money like that. But John would, just in the nick of time, and then schedule another appointment for soon after.

**BUBBA:**

He might not have said I'm helping you out, but when you sit down and pay me $2,000, $3,000 in a couple week span, you just helped me out. You know, you just got all my bills caught up. You just got everything back to where it needed to be, you know?

**BRIAN REED:**

You think that's why he did it?

**BUBBA:**

Now I do. He keeps a book, man. He writes down everything. So he knows when we're having a bad time. He'd ask certain things, like what's the rent, you know, what's your power bill, when's it due? And he already knows this shit, because he writes shit down. And he just planned his tattoo out to where it pretty much paid everything up in increments.

**BRIAN REED:**

Wait, it was like that exact almost?

**BUBBA:**

Yeah.

If it wasn't for John, we'd be shut the fuck down.

**BRIAN REED:**

If it wasn't for John?

**BUBBA:**

Yeah. If it weren't for John, I'd be tattooing at my kitchen table right now. And I think he sacrificed his skin to help us out.

**BRIAN REED:**

Bubba says John is an emotional guy, and sure, a lot of that emotion is disgust, but there's also sympathy, in particular for Tyler. If he's helping the tattoo parlor, he's only doing it because of Tyler and his brother, Jake.

**BUBBA:**

He's just watched them boys, man, and he knows how his daddy was. I mean, the kid was laying block at 5 years old.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler, that is.

**BUBBA:**

You know, on the job site working. Not going to school—working. Go to school two days a week, work five days a week, you know what I mean? So he just seen it and he knows it wasn't right, sees what—how Tyler's been programmed to be the way he is by his raising and his upbringing, you know, and feels sorry for him, I guess. I don't know. Or knows that he's smarter than what he's letting on. I mean, I don't know.

**BRIAN REED:**

That Tyler is?

**BUBBA:**

Yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

When John hires Tyler to chop down trees in his yard or build iron gates in his crawlspaces, he doesn't really need that stuff done, Bubba says. He's just trying to find an excuse to put money in Tyler's pocket. When Tyler gets caught driving with a suspended license and ends up in jail, something that happens now and again, Bubba knows John's the one to call because he'll bail him out.

**BUBBA:**

He loves Tyler. I mean, Tyler's his boy. I mean, that's his boy. Tyler's brother, he cares about Tyler's little brother Jake, you know. John can say anything he wants to, but he loves Tyler probably just as much as you would your own son, your own flesh and blood. And I ain't figured it out.

**BRIAN REED:**

We're standing in the backyard as we're talking, behind the tattoo shop. A train whistle starts to blow in the distance. Eventually, someone comes out and tells me I might be interested to know that Kabrahm's sister, Kashion Burt, is here, like right inside, 15 feet away from me. Why don't we just go ask her about the murder?

This town. I go to the bar, leave $6 for my beer, and, careful to avoid Kabrahm's sister, head out the secret door, not knowing what I eventually will know months and months from now—that Kabrahm Burt didn't murder anybody, but also that before this is all over, someone will end up dead.

**BUBBA:**

You coming up here when you get off?

**BRIAN REED:**

More in a minute.

[AD]

**BRIAN REED:**

Kabrahm? Hey, I'm Brian Reed.

**KABRAHM BURT:**

Nice to meet you, Brian.

**BRIAN REED:**

So I'm doing a radio story. I'm a reporter. I'm here from New York. Is there somewhere quiet we could sit?

**BRIAN REED:**

It's a year later, and I'm pulling into K3 Lumber on a Friday morning, nervously asking if Kabrahm's around. I feel comfortable doing this only because I have finally determined that the incident John contacted me about, where Kabrahm allegedly got into a fight and beat a guy to death, although it did, in fact, go down almost exactly as John and Jake and Skyler and others told me, was wrong in one relatively important detail—the "to death" part. The guy Kabrahm beat up did not die. They just thought he did for a while. That's what I eventually gathered from talking to people more.

Once I heard that, I started contacting law enforcement to find out what did exactly happen. It turns out the incident in question actually took place in adjacent Tuscaloosa County. A chief at the sheriff's department there read to me from a detailed case file showing that the police had investigated the fight thoroughly, that no one had been killed, and that they had closed the case not because they were paid off or anything, but because none of the guys involved wanted to press charges. And so here I am at K3 Lumber to ask Kabrahm why he would go around bragging to people that he had killed a guy he had not killed. He's with some coworkers in the lumber yard in a plaid shirt, green trucker hat, and dark sunglasses.

**BRIAN REED:**

Kabrahm? Hey, I'm Brian Reed.

**KABRAHM BURT:**

Nice to meet you, Brian.

**BRIAN REED:**

There's a particular philosophy I've encountered down here, and will continue to encounter. That is the fuck-it philosophy, a belief that there's no sense in worrying or thinking too much about any given decision, because life is going to be difficult and unfair regardless of what you do. It's more than a belief, really. It's a way of moving moment to moment through the world. And from the get-go, Kabrahm seems to be a subscriber. I show up with a microphone and ask if I can talk to him on the record about a matter I've yet to name, and he's immediately game. Fuck it. And we walk over behind some stacks of lumber to be alone.

**KABRAHM BURT:**

What you want to talk about, Bud?

**BRIAN REED:**

So basically, were you at one point going around telling people that you'd killed someone?

**KABRAHM BURT:**

No. A boy cut my buddy's neck right here with a knife. But no. Like, I beat the piss out of him. What happened was—

**BRIAN REED:**

What happened was, Kabrahm says, they were at a party, and he doesn't know how the fight started because he and almost everyone else were zonked out of their minds.

**KABRAHM BURT:**

Drinking and doing everything else under the sun.

**BRIAN REED:**

Like substance-wise?

**KABRAHM BURT:**

Like taking Xanax, and mixing speed with it and stuff.

**BRIAN REED:**

According to the police report, it was a clear, moonlit night, about 4:00, 4:30 in the morning, on August 4, 2012, just a few days outside the time window John had discerned from his records. Kabrahm says all he remembers is they were in the middle of the woods, chilling around a fire. A fight broke out, and then suddenly, this dude Dylan—not Dylan Nichols, as John had told me—he was not involved—but another Dylan with a different last name, came up from behind with a knife and cut Kabrahm's buddy, Tim, in the neck. So Kabrahm went after him, held Dylan's head down, punched him, hit him with a beer bottle.

Tim got involved. He might have bit the guy in the cheek. Dylan kept swinging his knife the whole time. He stabbed Kabrahm, too

**KABRAHM BURT:**

Right up here.

**BRIAN REED:**

Up in your thigh, there.

**KABRAHM BURT:**

Yeah, like almost cut my gooch meat.

[LAUGHTER]

**BRIAN REED:**

And then it was over. Kabrahm thinks the whole thing lasted maybe 15 seconds. It wasn't some beautiful, drawn-out movie fight, he says. It was a real-life fight, which means it was scrappy, awkward, and quick, and left his friend Tim clutching a four-inch gash on his neck that was gushing blood.

**BRIAN REED:**

Did you think, like, Tim might be—like, it might be life-threatening?

**KABRAHM BURT:**

Yes. That is the craziest shit I've ever seen in my life.

**BRIAN REED:**

Kabrahm looked around and saw almost everyone at the party, maybe 30, 40 people, scattering. Tim was in a bad way, so someone had called 911, and now people were driving away or hiding in the woods before the police got there. The ambulance came, carted Kabrahm and Tim to the hospital, and after getting a few stitches near the meat of his gooch, Kabrahm went outside to smoke a cigarette and bumped into a group of random girls from the party.

**KABRAHM BURT:**

Telling me all kinds of crazy shit, like somebody had died. Like, oh, that boy you got in a fight with died.

**BRIAN REED:**

What did you think?

**KABRAHM BURT:**

I was thinking, I don't think that boy died. I said, you wouldn't think so. Hell, the fight didn't last that long.

**BRIAN REED:**

But still, you had, like, this part of your brain that was like, maybe.

**KABRAHM BURT:**

Well, yeah. I started coming down off them Xanaxes, you know, and you get to thinking like, oh God, I hope I didn't do something stupid. I don't think nobody died, but if they did, I ain't gonna hang around to find out.

**BRIAN REED:**

Kabrahm says he was kind of wigging out wondering if he killed someone. He called a buddy of his to come pick him up at the hospital. That buddy was in a motel room full of methheads in Bessemer, Kabrahm says, and judging from police records and other sources, it seems possible the rumor that Dylan had been killed started in that motel room, and then spread from there.

Kabrahm says by the time he got to work on Monday, it had already taken hold. People were coming up to him at the lumberyard and other places around town asking if he killed a guy.

**BRIAN REED:**

And so you never—I just want to ask you this again—you never maybe were drunk one time and saying, yeah, I beat that guy to death to anyone? Because I heard that you were bragging about it from multiple people.

**KABRAHM BURT:**

Number one, that wouldn't even be something to brag about. It ain't like a deer or something, you know?

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm glad to hear that. I'm glad to hear you say that, I got to say. So where would people get that from?

**KABRAHM BURT:**

Just a damn small town, man. Shit gets fucking twisted.

**BRIAN REED:**

But saying that you told them directly to their face?

**KABRAHM BURT:**

Hell, I don't know, buddy.

**BRIAN REED:**

I don't know either. I can't tell if what Kabrahm is saying to my face right now is true or not. I spoke to Kabrahm's father, too, Kendall Burt, and told him that John said he'd overheard him on the phone here at K3 one day saying something about how his son was guilty as hell, and he knew it. And Kendall told me he doesn't know what John heard him say, or if he heard him say anything, but that he's a tough-love kind of guy, and that if his son had done something like killed a person, he would never cover that up.

According to Kabrahm, there is a moral to this story. He shares it with me after I wonder aloud to him about something one of the police officers told me. Why did his buddy Tim, rather than pressing charges against the man that almost killed him with a knife, decide instead to shove his middle finger in the face of the cops when they came to talk to him in his hospital bed?

**KABRAHM BURT:**

I mean, nobody wants to be a tattletale.

**BRIAN REED:**

I mean, dude almost died. He got stabbed in the neck.

**BRIAN REED:**

Kabrahm takes a drag of his cigarette.

**BRIAN REED:**

You're shrugging your shoulders.

**KABRAHM BURT:**

If he gonna live like white trash and shit, then hell, you might as well not tell on nobody, because, you know, if that's the life you're trying to live, you can't be mad when, you know—low-down, dirty shit like that happens when you hang out with low-down, dirty people.

**BRIAN REED:**

You there?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I'm here.

**BRIAN REED:**

Cool.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I'm waiting on tea to boil.

**BRIAN REED:**

Do you have time to talk? I have some stuff I'd love to talk to you about.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I'm sitting here—

**BRIAN REED:**

Are you busy?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

—right now at 2:25 with my orange pants on, waiting for Tyler to get his ass back over here. I figured you was calling to lower the boom or some damn stuff—go to town.

**BRIAN REED:**

Yeah, it's my turn to talk a lot. I have a lot to catch you up on, actually.

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm excited to tell John what I figured out, finally, after all this time. I now narrate the story of the real crime back to him, almost a year and a half after he first told me about it, with details colored in and facts illuminated, including the rather germane one that Kabrahm did not kill anybody. After I'm done, John summarizes my findings.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

A bunch of fussing and fighting, snaggletooth, stolen trucks, meth labs, stabbing, hooping, hollering, and going to jail? I can't believe how much you've worked on this son of a bitch, and at the same time—

[SIGH]

My God.

**BRIAN REED:**

What? Why the sigh?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I'm sitting here looking out the window at the clouds going by, just in loathing disgust at the town that I live in and the fact that I didn't pack my bags and get the hell out of here decades ago. I think it's the part about hiding in the woods that did it. That's just so classic Bibb County. I don't know how many times I've heard that expression in my life—"hiding in the woods." I think hiding in the woods in Bibb County is like having your afternoon tea in London.

**BRIAN REED:**

You know, there is another way John could have responded to all this news. I dare call it the normal way. That sigh he let out, rather than being one of despair, could have been one of relief—relief that a young man has not been killed, that local officials have not been bought off by a powerful, rich family, and that, in fact, law enforcement has done what appears to be a competent job responding to this incident. Shittown, at least in this case, doesn't look so, so terrible to me.

**BRIAN REED:**

I don't know. Progress, right?

[LAUGHTER]

**BRIAN REED:**

But no. I've learned that sometimes you catch John in a spell of depression, sometimes you catch him in a bout of mania, and sometimes, like today, I think, you catch him in an alchemy of the two.

[SIGH]

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I'm trying to think of a snappy comeback to that.

**BRIAN REED:**

Because what is it, if not progress?

[LAUGHTER]

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Oh my God. Oh, Lord, it's just a clusterfuck of sorrow, isn't it?

**BRIAN REED:**

A clusterfuck of sorrow.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

It's kind of like progress as in ISIS is making progress. You know, it's that type of progress.

[LAUGHTER]

It's like ISIS, is all I can come up with. Oh, shit.

[LAUGHTER]

**BRIAN REED:**

Damn, man. I'm over here busting my ass off. When you contacted me, you wanted to know what actually happened. So it's progress in that sense, right?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

It's progress in that sense.

**BRIAN REED:**

I am not saving the world over here. Climate change is—

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

You are definitely not saving the world.

**BRIAN REED:**

No. Climate change—

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Not by a long shot.

**BRIAN REED:**

Climate change is not ending. I am not bringing jobs and sustainable employment to Alabama and lifting people out of poverty. But you asked me to try and figure out what happened here. On that front, I've made progress.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I think you've done pretty goddamn good.

**BRIAN REED:**

Well, thank you.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I guess if I sound like I'm disinterested today, it's firstly because I'm tired and wore-ass out. And secondly because, you know, I just—I'm not the most cheerful person. You know, I spend most spare time now either studying energy or climate change, and it's not looking good. So yes, sometimes it's hard for me to get focused back on something when the whole goddamned Arctic summer sea ice is going to be gone by 2017. And we're fixing to have heat waves in Siberia this year, and sometimes I feel like a total idiot because I'm worried about a goddamn crackhead out here in fucking Shittown, Alabama.

So yeah, that's just a personality disorder of mine. You know, sometimes when you call me, I'm kind of in an upbeat mood. And sometimes, like today, you caught me in one of these tired, somber, you know, reflective moods, where I've been, you know, sitting there mulling over climate change for about the past 10 damned hours. Oh, I mean, my God—

**BRIAN REED:**

When John says he's been mulling over climate change for the past 10 hours, what I think he means is that he's been mulling over climate change for the past 10 hours. I don't think he's exaggerating. It's like work for him, like he's made it his job.

We've now been talking to each other for a year and a half, and while some of that time we've discussed the murder, there's been so much other stuff John wants to chat about. It's interesting stuff, but it's all over the place. Even if I haven't talked to him in a while, nearly every day he sends me emails about all sorts of global calamities that he continues to keep up with, even though they've fallen out of the news.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

How many people are still concerned today about the Philippines?

**BRIAN REED:**

He's referring to Typhoon Haiyan from 2013. Or how about the tsunami in Sri Lanka in 2004, John says, or the terrible flood in Pakistan the year before last?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Not hearing a lot about that, are you?

**BRIAN REED:**

How about the fallout from the Ebola outbreak, or the nuclear disaster in Fukushima, or—a deeper cut—Chernobyl? The list goes on and on. And it's not just catastrophe. John also gives me lectures and sends reports on the systemic problems he sees leading to complete breakdown of the social contract—problems in our food production chain, our health care industry, our monetary policy.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

—all the fucking hedonic regression, geometric weighting.

**BRIAN REED:**

He also shares a variety of disturbing stories that he manages to dig up from all corners of the country, about the son of a US senator suffocating 21 dogs, or a KKK branch giving out bags of candy to children as a recruitment effort in South Carolina, or a guy down the street from John trying to kill his wife by running her over with a Bobcat.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I was on Homefacts last night. The city of West Blocton has outdone Vance as being the child molester per capita capital of Alabama.

**BRIAN REED:**

This is another data point John likes to send me now and again—the number of sex offenders per capita in his area. Vance and West Blocton are both towns in Bibb County.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Vance is now one child molester for every 192 citizens. West Blocton is for about over 63 or 4.

**BRIAN REED:**

Why do you check that statistic so often?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Why do I check crude oil plus lease condensate production so often, or why do I go pore over the tables from the IPCC so often?

**BRIAN REED:**

The IPCC being the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

—and I've tied down a couple other people—

**BRIAN REED:**

For the longest time, I thought the only connection between all of John's random interests was that it was all shitty. But the connection is deeper than that. He's distressed by the lack of outrage compared to the amount of shittiness in the world. To him, that ratio is totally out of whack.

That's why he was still upset about the Kabrahm rumor, even after I told him it wasn't true. Even though the murder and the cover-up weren't real, everyone sure did believe they were, and still they did nothing. That part, the inaction—that's more disturbing to John than the idea of the murder itself.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

You know, I really hate that these kids know all the things that they know, and they just accept them as normal.

**BRIAN REED:**

I know. That seems to really bother you, huh?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Accept it as something you can't do nothing about.

**BRIAN REED:**

The shitty misfortunes John fixates on, they're not a bunch of disparate things. They're all the same thing. His Shittown is part of Bibb County, which is part of Alabama, which is part of the United States, which is part of Earth, which is experiencing climate change, which no one is doing anything about. It maddens John. The whole world is giving a collective shrug of its shoulders and saying fuck it.

What I admire about John is that in his own misanthropic way, he's crusading against one of the most powerful, insidious forces we face—resignation, the numb acceptance that we can't change things. He's trying to shake people out of their stupor, trying to convince them that it is possible to make their world a better place.

Yes, that lady over there, she's barefoot and she's pantsless, but we can lend her shoes. We can give her some pants. Instead of just putting our heads down and speeding past her and muttering that she must have done something to get like that, we can ask her if she's in trouble, and we can offer her help. There is a different way.

That's why John rants and raves at the tattoo parlor. That's why John adopts dozens of stray dogs. That's why he devotes night after night to studying and writing about climate change. That's why he contacted a national radio show and asked me to come investigate. And that's why I now see John is devoting so much energy to what is arguably his most ambitious project of all—radically altering the life of Tyler Goodson.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Tyler almost embodies everything I hate about this Shittown in one convenient package. Have you ever thought of it that way? I bet you haven't dared.

**BRIAN REED:**

As the months have gone by since my trip to Alabama, I've heard more and more about Tyler. I've learned all about his tough childhood, the petty legal troubles that continue to dog him, his persistent financial problems, his struggle to support his three daughters, whom he had by the age of 21, and whom he loves dearly.

John has devoted his life to restoring old clocks. Methodically and thoroughly, he sorts through the busted parts of these timepieces, trying to revive a sense of beauty and order. And in a way, that's what he's attempting to do with Tyler. Every time John picks up the phone and I ask what he's up to, Tyler's either there or he was just there, or he's waiting for him to get there. It seems like he's giving him consistent work.

John's also been accompanying Tyler to court and hiring him a lawyer to help him clear up some misdemeanor charges and get his driver's license back. And Tyler's recently moved to the trailer park across the street from John, so now he can easily walk to John's place. John's even talking about writing Tyler and his brother Jake into his will.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I don't want these two bastards to know this, but when I fall over dead, each one is going to get 20 ounces of gold each.

**BRIAN REED:**

I'll keep that secret.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

That's assuming the goddamn cops don't come in and steal it.

**BRIAN REED:**

But John's relationship with Tyler is not just as a benefactor. I can tell that they get something more from one another. John will mention a walk he and Tyler took through the woods, or an expedition they made to the junkyard to search for treasures, or he'll recount some bit of their conversation. They like to spend time together.

One day, John was on the phone with me, and he looked out his window and started listing off the flowers that were in bloom in his yard, and the ones that were dying. He sighed and said,

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

It's tedious and brief. That's a sundial motto—tedious and brief.

**BRIAN REED:**

Before we had clocks, we had sundials, and I never thought about this until I started talking to John, but watching a sundial, which could be as simple as a stick in the ground, as the shadow crept along, you were actually witnessing the rotation of the Earth. It's so much less abstracted than a clock, a level closer to time itself. Anyway, John told me sundials often have mottos engraved on them. John says "tedious and brief" is one.

**BRIAN REED:**

What do you mean, "tedious and brief?"

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Your life is tedious and brief. All sundial mottos are sad like that.

**BRIAN REED:**

There are hundreds of these mottos. "Life passes like this shadow." "Make haste, but slowly." "Use the hours, don't count them." "Even as you watch, I'm fleeing." "Soon comes night."

These little reminders are out there, hidden in crannies around the world. I recently happened upon a sundial in the cemetery of an old Catholic mission next to a grave. Because of John, I knew to look for the motto. It read, "Nil boni hodie. Diem perdidi." "I did nothing good today. I have lost a day."

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

You know, I told you, I used to make sundials, but I made them for the mathematical exercise. You know, I would pick difficult dials to do as a test of my abilities of geometry and trigonometry. And these are things I wish Tyler and Jake could experience. There's a real excitement in geometry and trigonometry that's just, you know—I think when we was building the swing—you know, I built a swing for Tyler—

**BRIAN REED:**

This is one of the ways John and Tyler have been passing the hours together lately. They've been constructing an adult swingset, a giant rectangular frame, to the side of John's house, not far from the apple trees, with a single John Deere tractor seat hanging from it. It has a 20-foot arc of action, John says, which I understand to mean it's a pretty gnarly swing. When John first told me about it, he'd said he was building it for himself. But now he amends that.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I think I built a swing for Tyler, actually. I found out that an old man of 50, when he swings in a swing for about 20 minutes, his back hurts and his knees hurt, so I didn't build it for me after all. I done found that out. So I think I built it for Tyler. Fuck it.

Oh, and I built him a pull-up bar, because he wants to be strong. I told him, well, it's nice to be physically strong, but you need to be strong between the ears, because physical strength goes away. You know, you need to have strong neurons. And I told him, you need to have a little bit of general algebra. You should always have some trigonometry and you should have some geometry.

**BRIAN REED:**

What did he say?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

He never—I remember this conversation. He said he never saw how it is that had anything you could do much with.

**BRIAN REED:**

I like imagining this odd pair, a polymathic, middle-aged clock restorer and a tatted-up kid in his 20s with a Harley and a revolver in his briefcase, out in John's yard on a summer's day, staking swingset poles into the ground, the dogs circling around them, maybe a butterfly fluttering by. I like imagining John interrupting their work for a minute to give Tyler a math lesson, feeling gratified that he has someone to give a math lesson to, and Tyler perhaps taking something from it, but at the very least humoring John, because he's grateful that John's helping him get his life together. I like knowing that this is how two people have chosen to spend an afternoon together in Bibb County, Alabama. "Take the gifts of this hour," one sundial says. Another, "It's later than you think."

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

And I point out the diagonal chain that was going to shore up the upright—

**BRIAN REED:**

Of the swing set?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Yeah. I told him that the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the square of the two sides. He hadn't used Pythagoras' theorem. So we could calculate the length of the chain without climbing up on the goddamn top of the pole and pulling it in diagonal with the tape measure. That was my answer.

**BRIAN REED:**

And what did he say?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

"Mm," or something like that.

**BRIAN REED:**

Mm.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Yeah. He has a lot of his daddy's mannerisms. "Mm" is often heard when there's not a significant answer. Hold on, hold on. I'm gonna piss in the sink. I hope that's politically incorrect. That's something that flips Tyler out. Yes, I just pissed in the kitchen sink, because—

**BRIAN REED:**

I can't—

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

If the phone had enough signal, I would just go out there and piss near one of the gardenias or the azaleas or the camellias or the crepe myrtles because, you know they like acid.

[BLOWING NOSE]

But I didn't think the phone had enough signal, so instead of wasting three or four gallons to flush the commode, I just peed here in the kitchen sink and used about 1 cupful of water to flush the sink. And I got a little short dick, but I got a pretty good aim, so I can usually aim right for the center of that damn thing without splashing everywhere.

[LAUGHTER]

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh, man.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

But in any event—what was the question? I forgot.

**BRIAN REED:**

I forgot too.

[PHONE RINGING]

**SKYLER:**

Hello?

**BRIAN REED:**

Hey, is Jake around? Is this Skyler?

**BRIAN REED:**

It's been a couple weeks since I last spoke to John, and I just got a text from Jake, Tyler's brother, asking me to call him when I get a chance.

**SKYLER:**

Yeah, this is Skyler. I was the one that called you. Jake texted you for me.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh, hey.

**SKYLER:**

Has any—hold on just one second. Has anybody called you?

**BRIAN REED:**

No, not that I know of. I have a few missed calls, but I don't think they're from anybody down there.

**SKYLER:**

Oh.

**BRIAN REED:**

Why?

**SKYLER:**

Well, we have some bad news to tell you.

**BRIAN REED:**

OK.

**SKYLER:**

John B. killed himself Monday night.

[MUSIC - THE ZOMBIES, "A ROSE FOR EMILY]

*S-Town* is produced by Julie Snyder and me, with editing from Ira Glass, Joel Lovell, Sarah Koenig, Neil Drumming, and Nancy Updike. Whitney Dangerfield is our digital editor. Starlee Kine is a story consultant. Fact-checking and research by Ben Phelan. Seth Lind is our director of operations. Mixing by Lyra Smith, and Matt Tierney is our technical director.

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[AD]

*S-Town* is a production of *Serial* and *This* *American* *Life.*

**Chapter III Transcript**

**SARAH KOENIG:**

Chapter III.

**SKYLER:**

Has anybody called you?

**BRIAN REED:**

No, not that I know. I have a few missed calls, but don't think that they're from anybody down there. Why?

**BRIAN REED:**

From *Serial* and *This* *American* *Life,* I'm Brian Reed. This is *Shittown.*

**SKYLER:**

Well, we have some bad news to tell you.

**BRIAN REED:**

OK.

**SKYLER:**

John B. killed himself Monday night.

**BRIAN REED:**

Are you kidding me?

**SKYLER:**

No.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh my gosh.

**SKYLER:**

With everything that happened, we wasn't able to call yesterday. His body was found yesterday morning, and it happened yesterday morning. It happened between last Monday night and Tuesday morning.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh my God.

**SKYLER:**

Yeah. So right now, his mother is OK.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh, Skyler.

**SKYLER:**

Now we're just trying to get her taken care of and make sure she don't go to a nursing home.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh my gosh.

**SKYLER:**

And the way he killed himself is he drank cyanide.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh my God. Oh, I'm so sorry. I—

**SKYLER:**

I mean, we're just—it hurts, but we're just trying to focus on his mom right now. They took her to the hospital for evaluations to make sure that John hadn't tried to give her any of it. But her system was clear. She's been healthy and everything. She knows what's going on. She understands to a certain point, and she just basically wants to go home. And you know—

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm sorry, I'm still trying to take all this in. I'm trying to follow what you're saying, but it's just so shocking. I'm hearing you, but it's not all registering. He emailed me the other night.

**SKYLER:**

Hold on one second. I'm walking outside right quick. [INAUDIBLE].

**BRIAN REED:**

John. Sitting in the studio in a daze on the phone with Skyler, I searched my inbox for the last message from Hiruit Nguyse, the pseudonym John used for his email address.

**BRIAN REED:**

I mean, the last thing he wrote me—I mean, I didn't even get a chance to totally read all this.

**BRIAN REED:**

He sent it on Sunday, Father's Day, 8:55 PM.

**SKYLER:**

And it happened Monday.

**BRIAN REED:**

It's Wednesday now, early evening. Just three days ago, John was alive, standing at the computer in his bedroom, emailing me, thinking of me, sending me a graph of the increasing gold reserves of the Russian central bank, saying, what do the Russkies know that we don't? I don't know why we do this when we're told that someone has died. Hold up our last interaction with them and point to the nearness of it in time to explain our disbelief, as if time gives a shit.

**SKYLER:**

And I bet you're feeling the same thing that I'm feeling. You probably didn't message back. You were busy.

**BRIAN REED:**

I just wrote back today, like a couple of hours ago.

**SKYLER:**

I understand how you're feeling. We're all feeling it. I talked to him Friday night. Me and John sat on the phone for four hours, no lie. You know how you can get to talk to him and not stop. We stayed on the phone for four hours, and he was fine. I knew he had issues, but he was fine.

He talked about how bad this world was. Like the main thing we talked about the other night was how bad this world was, and what it's coming to and everything, and how me and Jake shouldn't bring anymore kids and nobody else should bring anymore kids into this world because of how bad it's going to end up getting. But I mean, he was fine. It was just a casual conversation about it.

**BRIAN REED:**

It was a John conversation.

**BRIAN REED:**

John talked about committing suicide. He talked about it to me, and I knew that he talked about it to others. He never called me on the verge of it or anything like that. When it came up, it was usually very matter-of-fact. Like, of course. This is my plan. I'm going to do this someday. The way someone might talk about their plans to retire or move.

John actually wrote me several emails that Sunday, Father's Day, the night before he committed suicide. The one about the Russian gold reserves was the very last, but there was a string of messages just before that. I'd recently sent John a series I produced for *This* *American* *Life* about the frayed relationship between cops and African Americans. While I was working on it months ago, I hadn't been so good about keeping in touch with John. So when it was finished, I wanted to share it with him so we could hear what had kept me so busy.

On Sunday night, he wrote me as he was listening, telling me how disgusted he was with the police abuses I was reporting about, how our country wasn't worth defending, how he would let his mother lay over and die before he called his local police. And then he sent me an email titled "Collapse List," which is the email that I saw come in, but didn't get a chance to fully read, because it was very long. John prefaced it by saying that he was inspired to send it after listening to our cop episodes.

And then the bullet points start. 99% of rhinos gone since 1914. 90% of big ocean fish gone since 1950. 50% of Great Barrier Reef gone since 1985. Ocean plankton declines of 1% per year means 50% gone in 70 years. Ocean acidification doubles by 2050, triples by 2100. One million humans net are added to the Earth every 4 and 1/2 days. We must produce more food in the next 50 years than we have in the past 10,000 years combined. Earth has only 60 years of farming left at current world soil degradation rates.

On and on it goes like this, like his ledger of expenses. And that's after a disclaimer from John, saying note that I do not include energy or economic issues with this list. It's numbing. I found out later that John didn't actually write this list. It's made its way around apocalyptic websites and comment threads, so you'd expect this kind of thing to be wildly inaccurate. But after checking some of the statistics, it doesn't seem to be.

When I look at this right now in the shadow of John's suicide, I guess it's clear this was a fixation of a person in a deeply depressed mental state. When I read it just three days before, I didn't see that. Hell, I didn't see it as I was looking at it again today, just a few hours before Skyler called, when I finally sat down to reply to it and told him, quote, "This is fascinating." I just saw it as the normal, cynical John B. McLemore I become used to. I saw it as a glass full of piss. All the world was a shit town to John, and he bore every disgrace of that world in his heart.

Skyler tells me that as we speak, Tyler, her brother-in-law, is at the hospital with John's mom, working to get power of attorney so they can bring her home and care for her in her own house. Skyler says John called and messaged several people the night he killed himself, and that Tyler was one of them. It also appears that Tyler was the last person besides John's mother to see him alive.

I ask if there will be a funeral. They're working on that, Skylar says, but yes, there will likely be a service in a few days. Skylar says it'll probably be small, just the Goodson family and John's mom.

**BRIAN REED:**

I mean, I want to—I would like to come down and see you guys. I don't know. I don't know what's appropriate, I mean, I was slowly doing a story that involved John. And I got to know him and care about him, and know you guys. And I'm not sure where that leaves me. Like, who am I to this situation? You know?

**SKYLER:**

If you wasn't anything to this, I wouldn't have called.

**BRIAN REED:**

Before John and I ever spoke, he warned me in an email, quote, "I must tell you, it will take a long time for me to just impress on you what a crud-fuck town and county this is." When John was alive, I had trouble seeing the shittown that John was seeing. I saw parts of it, but not the full and glorious relief in which he saw it.

But in the aftermath of his death, a whole other story unfurled in front of me piece by piece. A story I could picture John laying out for me with outrage and humor and sadness, maybe even written by one of his favorite short story writers. I could see John handing it to the next visitor he coaxed down to Bibb County as their bedtime reading, saying, read this, it'll help you understand this place I've lived nearly every one of my days. It'll help you understand me.

John brought me to Bibb County to search for a body of the man he believed wrongly had been killed by Kabrahm Burt. John hoped if we could expose that murder, uncover the body, so to speak, finally everyone would see shittown for what it was. But that dude in the fight with Kabrahm, his wasn't the body that would expose shittown. John's was.

The day after I learned of John's suicide, I called Tyler to give my condolences, and also because he was seemingly the last person to be with John besides John's mother, to see if something had happened that prompted John to do this now. I tell him I'm sorry, ask him how he's holding up, and immediately he starts telling me the story of the days and moments leading up to the suicide. I called him from my own phone, but I interrupt and ask if he'd mind me calling him back from the studio.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Hey.

**BRIAN REED:**

Hey, man. All right, so I'm recording, just so you know.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

OK. Well, I'm going to start from the beginning, then, from Father's Day. Because he wanted to spend Father's Day with me, and we done planned something. Because you know, I ain't ever had no daddy worth a damn. He's just about the only daddy I've got.

**BRIAN REED:**

They'd planned to spend Father's Day together, but in the end they didn't, because John went and did something a couple of days before that made Tyler mad.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I was pissed off at him because I brought one of my young ones over there to swing in the swing. And John just had me give him a haircut. He wanted me to skin his head, and I did. And my little girl was kind of poking at him, said John, you got a haircut like my daddy's, ha, ha, ha. And he said, well, you'll have it soon enough at Julia Tutwiler. That's a women's prison. And that pissed me off. My little girl didn't understand that, but I did. And buddy, that pissed me the fuck off.

**BRIAN REED:**

Why did he say that?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I don't know. And I calmly said, Noelle, go get in the truck, baby. We're going to go on over to the house. And I calmly eased out of there. But that shit he said pissed me off. And I didn't show up the next morning and didn't talk to him all day. Come Saturday night, he called me. And I'd kind of been ignoring him.

But I finally answered him that evening. And hell, I about broke down crying whenever I was telling him, because he was like, what's wrong? I said John B., I just don't understand why you say the shit you do. I said, the shit that you say in front of me I can kind of handle. But when you say this shit in front of my girls, I said, I just don't know how to take it, buddy. I said, I just figured you was trying to run me off. And he said, no, that's the last thing I want to do is run you off. He said, what in the hell did I say to make you mad? He didn't have not one clue what he said that pissed me off.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh, really. I'm sure he meant it as a joke that went wrong, you know?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I guess. I don't know.

**BRIAN REED:**

That's all I could think of.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Well yeah, it's like I don't discipline my kids enough. So he's thinking that they wind up in fucking prison. I don't know.

**BRIAN REED:**

So did he say he was sorry? Or what did he say when you told him?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Oh, yeah. I mean, we was all right. He about started boo-hooing on the phone, and I did too. And he told me he loved me, and I told him I loved him. I think that might have been Sunday, because the next morning I went over there and—

**BRIAN REED:**

This was Monday, June 22, 2015, the day John died. Tyler says they called it their Father's Day.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I was supposed to do yard work or something, and we decided that we was going go fishing down there at the Cahaba River. I lied to everybody and told everybody that I was over there cutting his grass. But we was really out fishing. And then that day, we had a great day. We had a great day, except for the few little spells he had.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler says he bought John a small bottle of whiskey, and John was sipping it as they drove to the Cahaba River. John was getting nostalgic and blue as they rolled along old backroads where he used to drive with his dad, who died years ago. They went by his aunt Gertrude's old house, his old girlfriend's house. Everybody's dead and gone, John told Tyler.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

And he kind of got upset on the ride down there. But once we got to the river, he was fine. We had a good time.

**BRIAN REED:**

And what did you guys talk about? He said, Tyler, you've just got to learn to just stop and take some time for yourself, and try to enjoy life. And he said, this is the most important day of your life, talking about being out there on that river. And hell, John can't swim. I mean, hell, we wasn't in no deeper water than about waist deep, and he wouldn't go nowhere without me holding his damn hand like a kid. We waded up and down the river and stuff, and I was slipping over rocks finding some crawfish and hellgrammites and stuff, showing him. And he never done stuff like that before, so it was new to him.

**BRIAN REED:**

Did it seem like he was saying goodbye?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I don't know. Hell, we spray painted our damn names up there on the damn bridge.

**BRIAN REED:**

Really?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Hell yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh, Tyler, I'm really sorry, man. I'm really sorry. That's really hard.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

It damn surely is.

**BRIAN REED:**

At the end of the day, Tyler dropped John off at his house.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

When I brought him home, he was just about lit. He had a pint of Wild Turkey 101 in him. A pint of Wild Turkey would have anybody gobbling. I mean, I shouldn't have left him that drunk, but I done got tired from being out all day, and I had to get back home to my kids. But he was begging me to come back over there.

**BRIAN REED:**

Back at his trailer with his girlfriend and two of his young daughters, Tyler kept getting messages from John. He says John was imploring him to come back, come back, put your kids to bed and come back. And he also started threatening to kill himself.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

He texted me a couple times to tell me. He said—I got all the messages on my phone. He said, it's all I can do to keep him blowing my fucking brains out right here in the driveway. You know, I paced the hallways in my place just worried about him. I was pretty damn concerned.

But you know, he's done said this stuff so many times. And my old lady was sitting here on the porch with me, because I'm like, look, I'm about to just go over there. And she said, Tyler, if you keep running over there every time he says he's going to kill himself, you're going to go crazy from this shit. He just keeps on telling you that to keep getting you to come down there, and you can't just live your whole life around John. Because that's the way it's gotten.

He's just gotten so—he don't want me to leave. You know, I've been down there all day. He wants me to stay down there all night. And I've got clothes down there, and I've got a bed in the dining room. So I mean, I'm just pretty much residing there anyways. Because I take care of Mama, take care of him, I'm taking care of the dogs, the yard, everything. It's like they depend on me. So I said, yeah, you're probably right. And I went there and laid my ass down and went to sleep.

**BRIAN REED:**

The next morning, Tyler says, when he got the news, he went to John's immediately. There was police tape up. It was a crime scene. John's body had already been taken away, but Tyler noticed something on the porch floor and stooped to look. There were John's glasses, twisted up, with some kind of blood or vomit on the lenses. That's where John died, on the porch.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I don't know, man. I hadn't been able to sleep. I hadn't been able to eat. Shit has got my fucking brains so damn fucked up, Brian.

**BRIAN REED:**

What's that?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Got my damn mind so damn fucked up thinking about this shit.

**BRIAN REED:**

I felt for Tyler. Not only was John, as John put it himself, a kind of ersatz father for Tyler, he was the person Tyler spent almost every day with. He was also his employer, his source of income and of stability. Tyler told me about something else that happened right after John died. The next day with the house empty, he made sure all the dogs were fed, locked up all the doors—

**TYLER GOODSON:**

And I went straight to the hospital looking for Mama.

**BRIAN REED:**

He means John's mother, Mary Grace.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I call her Mama, so. Well, on my way up to the hospital, I got a phone call.

**BRIAN REED:**

It was from a married couple Tyler didn't know. The woman was John's cousin. She and her husband said they'd just driven in from Florida where they live, and that they were at John's place right now with a local police officer trying to get into the house, which was locked. The police officer had told them Tyler probably had the keys, and the cousins wanted him to come back and let them in.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I said well, I'm trying to go check on Mama at the hospital. I said, y'all hadn't been to the hospital yet? They said no, we was trying to get some clothes out of the house. And you know, it sounded crazy from the start.

**BRIAN REED:**

Had you ever heard about them before?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

No, never. John always told me that he had some distant cousins or kin, and he said they weren't nothing but trash and drunks and wasn't no good for nothing. Well, I turned around and went to the house. We went back to John's house. And while I was coming down the driveway, I called the hospital room, and I got Mama on the phone—you know, John's mama.

I told her, I said Mama, your cousins are down from Florida. I said, have they been by there to see you? She said, well lord, no. I said well, they're at your house trying to get in. I said, what do you want me to do? She said, do not let them in my house. She said, if they ain't even come up here to see me yet, they ain't going in my house. She said, do not let them in. I said, yes, ma'am.

**BRIAN REED:**

When he reached the end of the long driveway, Tyler saw a Woodstock cop he knows and a middle-aged couple waiting for him in front of the house.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

So I walked out there just as polite as can be. I said, I'm sorry, you all don't know me. But Mama told me herself to not let anybody in her house. She said for you all to come to the hospital. And buddy, they blew up. They started cussing me. The fella that was with her said, "I don't give a fuck," right in my face. I mean, they was furious that I wouldn't let them in the house.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler was angry, but he says he tried to stay calm.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I said, y'all haven't even went up there to check on that poor lady. I said, y'all don't give a damn about her, it looks like. And then the woman was just—she was cussing me. She said, she will not come back to this house. And then 30 minutes later, they was at the hospital in front of me in there pretending to cry.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler had not let the cousins in the house. Instead, they were now all at Mary Grace's bedside, and Tyler says the cousins were going on about how heartbroken they were about John Brooks, how glad they were to see Mary Grace. They started naming relatives they had in common, talking about other family members who died over the years.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I swear to God, they was in there trying to squeeze a tear out. "Oh, I miss you, Mary Grace. I'm so sorry." They was just putting on an act, and you could tell it, buddy.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler says Mary Grace explained to the cousins who he was, that John loved him to death, and that he'd been helping take care of her and the house for several years. He says she told them she wanted to go home and have Tyler keep taking care of her and the dogs, that she was planning to go with him to the family lawyer's office tomorrow and get the legal stuff in order to make that happen. And Tyler says he and Mary Grace also had plans to make funeral arrangements for John. The cousin protested a bit, but Mary Grace insisted, and eventually the cousin gave in. She said, OK, if that's what you both want. And they left Tyler and Mary Grace together.

But the next day, Tyler says, when he went to take Mary Grace home, the hospital wouldn't release her. John had said Mary Grace had Alzheimer's. I've since learned she doesn't, but she does have significant dementia and memory loss. So even though she was demanding that they let her leave with Tyler, a case worker said she couldn't, because they deemed her mentally unfit to make decisions for herself. And Tyler isn't next of kin, the cousins are.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

These damn Florida folks, they ain't no good for nothing, man. It's got me so damn mad.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler is sure the only reason they're here is to cash in on John's estate.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I'm telling you, man. His mama has got pearls and diamonds, and then, I know he's got gold. I mean, he's showed me the gold. I don't know where it's at now. I mean, I know John's worth millions. But I'm worried about Mama and them puppies and that property. I ain't even studying the damn gold.

**BRIAN REED:**

According to Tyler, right now as he and I speak, Mary Grace has technically been released from the hospital. But she's still stuck there, because her cousin hasn't come to take her out. She's pacing the hallways, he says, frustrated, confused, crying, missing her puppies, asking Tyler why John abandoned them like this, asking him questions he's also asking himself. More after this.

[AD]

I'd been told by Skyler that John's funeral would be small, probably just the Goodson family and his mother, Mary Grace. But when I arrive at Green Pond Presbyterian Church on this sweltering Monday morning, a week after John died, June 29, 2015, far more people have showed up than I expected. There are 30, maybe 40 people here, and I know who very few of them are. We're gathered in the cemetery behind the church, where a small tent and some chairs are set up for a graveside service.

John's coffin is suspended above an open grave, next to the headstone for his father, Tom McLemore. There is no headstone for John. People flitter among small clusters, shaking their heads, talking loudly, muttering certain words that I overhear again and again. In particular, the words "so smart" and "genius." Tyler is wearing a black t-shirt for the occasion, along with dark jeans and boots.

He's carrying a framed picture of John as a boy to give to John's mother, and one of John's old children's books from when he was a kid that Tyler says he'd recently been reading to his daughters. I came to the funeral with the Goodson family. Tyler led our procession here on his motorcycle. But it's clear now that we've arrived that they are not the ones running this event. A Cadillac pulls up close to the cemetery gate, and out of the back seat climbs Mary Grace with her cane, escorted by a middle-aged couple that I assume to be the cousins. Everyone hushes as they walk Mary Grace to a chair directly in front of the coffin. We all move in closer to the grave.

**BROTHER BEN:**

We are gathered today for the rights of John Brooks McLemore.

**BRIAN REED:**

An older man introduced as Brother Ben, who's in a wheelchair with a fedora in his lap, begins to speak. I record on my cell phone.

**BROTHER BEN:**

Let's pray at this time. Our father God, we can say with the sombrest of odes, I have fainted. I have been overwhelmed. Unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

**BRIAN REED:**

Immediately we're praying, and immediately I'm disoriented, because John was an atheist. And not a casual atheist or an atheist by default. He was as fervent a critic of religion as the most zealous evangelists for it. From the very first time I talked to John, he made it clear how hypocritical he thought religion was, how vacuous and damaging. He could be straight up mean about it. He created video mash-ups of footage of worshipers speaking in tongues, dancing around, and rolling on the ground, set to songs like this.

[MUSIC - "ROLLIN'" BY LIMP BIZKIT]

He once mentioned to me in passing that his favorite bible verse was Ezekiel 23:20. He didn't recite the verse, but I've since read it. The choicest line is, quote, "There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys, and whose emission was like that of horses." Watch their jaw drop when they read that sweet little bit of information, John had told me.

**BROTHER BEN:**

Can I get a witness right there?

**BRIAN REED:**

In his 20-minute service, Brother Ben only talks briefly about John himself. One thing I knew about John, he says, and all of you will probably echo this—

**BROTHER BEN:**

He just was very, very smart, and very intelligent.

**BRIAN REED:**

Brother Ben says there's a story someone told him the other day from when John was a boy. Mary Grace went to a local garage and asked if they had any extra motors her son could tinker with.

**BROTHER BEN:**

John got that motor and tinkered with it, all right. He took it down and put it back together just perfectly.

**BRIAN REED:**

He put it back together just perfectly, he says. And that's the story. John had a brilliant mind, Brother Ben says. Mechanics would call in for help with pesky motors, and then we're back to scripture. To me, it was sad to see the life of someone with such personality remembered with so little, to see John honored with a service so utterly devoid of him. But for the person here who matters most, Mary Grace, it does seem to serve its purpose. Near the end, as Brother Ben is beginning the final prayer, she thanks him for helping lay her son to rest.

**MARY GRACE:**

Makes me feel good that you thought so much of him.

**BRIAN REED:**

"It makes me feel good that you thought so much of him," she says. Enough to put him at peace.

**MARY GRACE:**

At peace. I'm sure he's at peace now.

**BRIAN REED:**

Mary Grace begins weeping. Tyler's mother, whom I met for the first time right before the funeral, is standing next to me. She has tears in her eyes. And as Mary Grace speaks, Tyler's mom clutches my arm. "He'll always be with me in my heart and my mind," Mary Grace cries. "I just cannot bear the thought of not having him." The cousin puts her hand on Mary Grace. "Brother Ben is going to say a prayer now," she tells her.

**BROTHER BEN:**

Father God, thank you again for the mind that he had.

**BRIAN REED:**

When the service is over, there's some milling about. People give their condolences to Mary Grace, then the cousins help her toward the car. Tyler is there, and for a few moments, I see him and Mary Grace talking. Then I see the female cousin intervene and guide Mary Grace away from him. Later, Tyler will tell me that he was just telling Mary Grace that he loves her, that he hopes he gets to see her again, and that she thanked him for being by her side and said he was welcome to go back to her house anytime he wanted.

And then, according to Tyler, the cousin jumped in and said, "No, Mary Grace, that would be trespassing." Even without being able to fully hear this interaction myself, I can still sense that it's a tense moment. And as the cousins walk Mary Grace to the car, I can hear Tyler's mother half shout to them, "I hope you do the right thing." Then Mary Grace gets in the Cadillac and is driven away.

One scripture Brother Ben referenced at John's funeral was Luke 12:15. Brother Ben told us, "Take heed. Beware of covetousness. For a man, a person's life consists not in the abundance of things which we possess."

"Life is not stuff," Brother Ben told us. Death, though? Death can leave a lot of stuff behind. It can go very quickly from the spiritual to the material.

The way Tyler understood it, John wanted to leave him and his brother something when he died, which was my understanding too. John told me as much on several occasions. And minutes before he committed suicide, John texted Tyler saying, quote, "Anything you want in this house you can have," unquote. Obviously those communications don't mean much legally without a will, and that seems to be the situation. Tyler and Skyler told me after John died they heard that he didn't have a will, which was shocking to them.

Seeing what's happening to Tyler, watching the cousins squeeze him out of John's affairs, it doesn't seem like what John would have wanted. In fact, it strikes me as exactly the kind of scenario that would have tormented him, someone who's vulnerable like Tyler trying to stand up and take responsibility for making things better, and still getting screwed. Tyler's been a consistent part of John's life in recent years. Meanwhile, Tyler says, the cousins haven't been around for decades. I don't think this was the clockmaker's intention.

I find it hard to believe that John would have taken his life without having a will. This is the same guy who kept detailed track of every expenditure he made, who logged every shot his dogs got. For him to leave none of his affairs in order, no arrangements for his mother's care, it's weird. But I visit his lawyer, the memorably named Boozer Downs, and he confirms it.

**BOOZER DOWNS:**

He didn't do anything that would help the situation, really.

**BRIAN REED:**

No will. John never finished it, he says.

**BOOZER DOWNS:**

But that'd been going on for years, trying to get stuff in order. And he just wouldn't. Just wouldn't. We talked about it, but he never would do anything.

**BRIAN REED:**

Boozer says John discussed suicide with him too, and besides discouraging him from doing it, he at least tried to get him to make proper arrangements. For instance, he suggested they find some nonprofit or other organization to take care of the property and the maze and the dogs.

**BOOZER DOWNS:**

I said, we can find somebody. We can get a historic trust. There are lots of things. And he didn't have any faith in that. He said, oh, those son-of-bitches will just go sell it. And nobody's going to take care of it anyway. And I've spent too much money, and they'll just sell it out. As smart and as thoughtful as he was about so many things, why didn't he tell us what he really wanted?

**BRIAN REED:**

At one point, I ask Boozer what we're actually talking about here when it comes to John's estate. What assets are there? And it's when we get to that that Boozer becomes kind of cryptic.

**BOOZER DOWNS:**

That is one thing he asked me not to mention to people. He had an idea of what he wanted to do with his assets. And whether he really did it, I don't know.

**BRIAN REED:**

So he told you he had plans for his assets that he wanted you to keep secret?

**BOOZER DOWNS:**

Yes, yes, yes. But he didn't tell me where it was and how he was going to do this. He just told me the form it was going—what he was going to convert to, so.

**BRIAN REED:**

Did he talk to you about being unbanked?

**BOOZER DOWNS:**

Yes.

**BRIAN REED:**

This is something John mentioned to me once or twice that I didn't pay much attention to at the time, but now that he's dead, suddenly feels significant. He said that he was unbanked. That, intriguingly, he kept his money in assets somewhere other than a traditional bank account. John, it's probably no surprise, was not a fan of financial institutions.

**BRIAN REED:**

What happens in the case of someone being unbanked?

**BOOZER DOWNS:**

I've never had that before, so I don't know. But I guess if you think somebody has some valuable asset they've hidden in the walls or in the mattress or something, you go looking.

**BRIAN REED:**

It's literally a treasure hunt?

**BOOZER DOWNS:**

I've never had that before. I would guess so. That's my best guess.

**BRIAN REED:**

While I'm at Boozer's office, he invites someone over to meet me that he thinks I should talk to. Her name is Faye Gamble. She's Woodstock's town clerk. And in fact, Faye, not Tyler, was the last person to speak to John before he committed suicide. She and I go back to her office at Town Hall just down the road from Boozer's.

It's a small building with the mayor's office in it and the Woodstock police station, and a common room that retirees play cards in the mornings, some game called Skip-Bo. But on one Tuesday a month, it becomes the municipal courtroom. Faye tells me she met John when she first started as clerk 10 years ago. He'd been friends with the woman who'd been town clerk before her, and once Faye took over, he came into her office one day and introduced himself.

**FAYE GAMBLE:**

It was funny how he introduced himself, because his introduction was, I guess you know who I am. And I said, no sir. And he said, oh, I'm John B. McLemore. And from that day on, I've always known him as John B.

**BRIAN REED:**

John would swing by Town Hall and shoot the breeze with Faye. They'd compare how their plum trees were doing. He'd chat about Socrates and Kant with the town building inspector. Faye had visited John's maze and admired his flowers. But John would also complain, Faye says, about the way the town was run, the economy, the state of the area. He used Town Hall the same way he used Tyler's tattoo parlor.

Faye says she and the building inspector tried to get John to put his intellect to productive use, to pick a project that would help the town, and work on it. The inspector even gave him his first computer, an old one they had lying around, to encourage him to do research about local environmental issues for them. But that never ended up happening. And in the meantime, John had started calling Faye, talking about suicide. Once in the last year, he even called her at night sounding as if he was about to go through with it. She'd always been able to talk him down until last week.

**FAYE GAMBLE:**

I was eating dinner after a funeral visitation. And he called me on the phone and told me—do you want this?

**BRIAN REED:**

Are you comfortable talking about it?

**FAYE GAMBLE:**

Yes.

My phone rang at 9:15, and it was all again just like he always answered. He wanted to know if it was Faye Gamble, and I told him yes. And he said, this is John B. McLemore, which I knew who it was. And he said, I just want you to listen to me. I'm going to commit suicide tonight, and I just want you—do not call the police, because if you do, I will shoot them. He was very hyped up. And I was just saying John, John, please just listen to me. Listen to me. And he was like, this is not going to work tonight. You're not going to talk me out of this. You just listen to me.

**BRIAN REED:**

John gave Faye instructions. He told her to euthanize his dogs. He told her where to find an envelope with cash to pay for that. And he was telling me about what he was going to do it with. And he was telling me step by step about... he was actually mixing something, getting something out of the refrigerator, and he was going to drink this.

And he told me what it was, the potassium cyanide, and that it would be quick. So I listened and I said, John, you do not want to do this. And he says, I'm doing it right now. I am getting it out of the refrigerator. And then he started drinking the mixture. And then he was screaming at me, telling me how it burned, and how he hurt, how horrible it was, the pain. And then I heard the screen door, and then it just went totally silent, except for dogs barking.

**BRIAN REED:**

Faye, I had no idea that that's how it happened. That's horrible.

**FAYE GAMBLE:**

Every night it's a replay. I'm still just—there's not a night that I don't think about him, that I don't wake up and dreaming about it, or thinking about him. Not a night.

**BRIAN REED:**

Faye tells me she understands that to someone hearing about this, it could sound like what John did to her was cruel, like he must have been angry at her to submit her to such a terrifying, traumatic phone call. But she said it wasn't like that. She didn't get the feeling that he was taking something out on her. Faye doesn't know why John chose to contact her.

Maybe he just wanted to talk to someone he trusted. Maybe he thought she could handle it. She says he did give her other instructions besides to euthanize the dogs, but she's vague with me about what some of them were. She says he told her where to find quote, "certain things," unquote, that, quote, "He wanted me to know where certain things were."

What those certain things are she leaves to the imagination. Faye says John also told her that a bunch of Tyler's belongings would be in the workshop. And while Faye says John didn't mention anything that night about a will or leaving assets to Tyler and his brother, she says he had told her previously that he wanted to do that, just like he told me.

Right after the funeral, there's a luncheon at the house of someone who works at the local bank. But Tyler and the rest of the Goodsons don't feel welcome there, so they go to Tyler's grandmother's place instead. This is their family headquarters. Pretty much all day and into the night, you can go to Granny's and expect to find some combination of Tyler's family hanging out around the little concrete table under the tree in back, which is where they are now, having their own post-funeral gathering.

People wander in and out, seeming a little out of it, saying the things you say in a day like this. Things like, "this all feels like a bad dream," and "I keep thinking I can just pick up the phone and call him." The gathering includes Tyler's uncle Jimmy, his mom's brother, who, one methed-up night in 1993, was beating on the door of somebody's trailer and got shot in the head as a result. And because it was too risky to take the bullet out, it's still lodged in his brain 22 years later. Anyway, it affects the way Jimmy communicates. He understands what's going on around him.

**JIMMY:**

Death. Death. Oh, death.

**BRIAN REED:**

But his vocabulary is limited. So as Tyler tells me how hurt he is that the cousins stopped him from talking to John's mother after the service, Jimmy kind of just chimes in affirmatively in the background.

**TYLER:**

I don't know what folks think of me when they look at me, but they don't have a fucking clue.

**JIMMY:**

Yes, huh.

**TYLER:**

They look at me, tattoos and scruffy face, I guess. I don't know, they just judge. I mean, I'm sitting out there at that funeral thinking, none of these folks even knows me, really. And they have no idea that I paid for the fucking tip on that old woman's cane out there.

**JIMMY:**

Yes, huh.

**TYLER:**

You know what I mean? Simple shit like that, it don't mean a hill of beans, but it's just, none of them have a clue what I might mean to that little old woman.

**JIMMY:**

No. Money, money.

**TYLER:**

Yeah, that's all they care about.

**JIMMY:**

Goddamn right. Money!

**BRIAN REED:**

Maybe Tyler's naive to think that he could add an 88-year-old woman with dementia to the roster of people he's responsible for taking care of. But it's sort of sweet that he wants to. It would be nice if at least he could stay involved in her life and keep some connection to John's life. Maybe take care of his dogs, maintain the maze, take part in his funeral. He didn't get to speak at John's service. I asked him if he had words in mind that he wished he could have shared in remembrance of his friend.

**BRIAN REED:**

Is there something you would have wanted to say? You can say it now. What would you have wanted to say there?

**TYLER:**

Well, John B., I mean, he had to know that I cared about his ass. You know, because I mean, whenever I left from there, he'd say, "I love you, man," every time. And I said, "I love you too, John B." And sometimes he'd say, "just because I say I love you don't mean I'm trying to get up your butt or anything." I said, "I know, John B. God damn." Because he knew. I mean, he might have had a little sugar in his tank. But he knew, he didn't ever try anything with me like that, you know what I mean.

**BRIAN REED:**

That's what you would have said?

**TYLER:**

Yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

When John introduced himself to me via email, he began, quote, "Me, I am 47, unmarried, sort of, ahem, like ahem—let's just say I might be a fan of David Sedaris, or in other words, I might know who Audre Lorde and Ann Bannon is, if you get the idea. Of course, that could get you killed around here." I took that to mean John was gay, though when we talked about it after, he told me that he'd gone both ways in his life. And whenever it came up, he never called himself just gay. It was always semi-homosexual or a semi-practicing homosexual, or celibate homosexual.

I haven't been sure if other people around here knew this about John, if Tyler knew. But apparently he does, and he's fine with it. Which is not nothing in Bibb County, where at this same moment in the summer of 2015, it is one of the handful of places in the country defying the Supreme Court decision declaring same-sex marriage a constitutional right by refusing to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. "I ain't got a queer bone in my body," Tyler says he used to tell John. "But if you do, that's your business." I can imagine John appreciated that about Tyler.

Tyler will be the one who makes John's tombstone. It'll be a couple of months before he does it. But as time goes on, no one else will get John one. John loved old cemeteries and gravestones, and it'll start nagging at Tyler that John's in the ground, decomposing into worm dirt, without so much as a marker. Tyler won't have any money for it, so he'll find an old piece of gray concrete—actually a leg off one of the benches at the table in back of his granny's house—and he'll paint it a rich brown so that it looks like a carved piece of oak, or cherry, almost.

The cement is curvy, with a design in it like two base clefs. The whole thing once it's painted will look like the flourish on a fancy pillar. When he's finished it, Tyler will haul the heavy stone into the cemetery and place it at the head of John's grave. It's shorter and squatter than most tombstones, and will look like nothing else in the whole cemetery.

On top of the stone, Tyler will inlay a pretty piece of stained wood into which he's burned John B. McLemore, 1966 to 2015, with his favorite photo of John sealed into it with polyurethane. A picture of John leaning back in a chair, outside, feet up on a table, shirt off, his chest of tattoos and nipple piercings in its full glory. It's a version of John that was hidden from the everyday world, a version that most of the people at his funeral surely did not know. But Tyler did.

**BRIAN REED:**

What's the name of the book that you brought to his funeral?

**TYLER:**

*Just* *Only* *John.* I got it in there. I read it to the girls last night. And it was everything I could do to finish it. And I gave the girls a hug and tried to get out the room as fast as I could, because I just fucking crying my eyes out over that damn book. But It's just a kidbook, and it's a kid, he wanted to be a fucking dog or a tiger or something like that. And some witch put a spell on him, and if said he was this, he would be that.

But he wouldn't know how to act being that. So everything he wanted to be, he's just John. And yeah, it just broke me up trying to read it to them. And the babies knows it's his book. And they'll talk and tell me all the time, "I know you miss John, Daddy, and we miss him too. And we're not going to color in John's books, Daddy." And stuff like that. I miss that old fucker.

**BRIAN REED:**

John once said to me, "Tyler embodies everything I hate about this shittown in one convenient package." What he meant was that Tyler was the product of everything he hated, of violence, abuse, injustice, hopelessness, and John was trying to counteract all that by helping Tyler. As Tyler and I are talking after John's funeral, he tells me—and Uncle Jimmy confirms—that he and John had recently reached a kind of understanding, where he wasn't going to charge him anymore for general upkeep of John's property, cutting the grass, pruning the maze.

**TYLER:**

Because it's kind of like my responsibility, like it was going to be mine one day or something.

**JIMMY:**

Yeah.

**TYLER:**

He told us he won't leave us a no bunch of damn cash, because he said we wouldn't appreciate it. So he's going to leave us gold and shit like that and the property. He's got 140 acres out there.

**JIMMY:**

Beaucoups and beaucoups of stuff. Beaucoups and beaucoups of stuff.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler tells me there's no way he's giving into the cousins so easily. He's already begun fighting back. He's been going over to John's place, retrieving things he doesn't think John would have wanted his cousins to have. Stuff that, as Tyler puts it, didn't need to get into the wrong hands. The police have threatened him with trespassing, but he hasn't let that stop him.

The cousin put a padlock on the front door, but what they don't know, he says, is that he also has keys to the back. He says he took John's laptop, and then he gathered up every stitch of paperwork he could find in the entire house, down to birth certificates and deeds, and John's grandfather's old railroad stock papers. He also took John's two vehicles. Right now, Tyler's holding it all here at his grandmother's house to protect it from the cousins. He's also meeting with a lawyer. He's going to try and fight the cousins the official way, through the courts. But if that doesn't work, he'll take matters into his own hands.

[MUSIC - THE ZOMBIES, "A ROSE FOR EMILY]

*S-Town* is produced by Julie Snyder and me, with editing from Ira Glass, Sarah Koenig, and Neil Drumming. Whitney Dangerfield is our digital editor. Starlee Kine is a story consultant. Fact-checking and research by Ben Phelan. Seth Lind is our director of operations, Lyra Smith mixes the show, and Matt Tierney is our technical director. The *S-Town* staff includes Emily Condon, Elise Bergerson, Julie Whitaker, and Kimberly Henderson. Music for the show is composed by Daniel Hart, Helado Negro, Trey Pollard, and Matt McGinley. Music supervision by Damien Graef. Our website is stownpodcast.org. I love our website.

Special thanks to Andrea Morales and Sandy Honig. [AD]

S-Town is a production of Serial and This American Life.

**Chapter IV Transcript**

**SARAH KOENIG:**

Chapter IV.

**BRIAN REED:**

My first visit to Alabama, John's bedroom, when he was still alive.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Go, go, go, go, get into climate change now. Go, go, go, go.

**BRIAN REED:**

Standing in front of John's computer, which sits eye-level atop a large professional grade sound system, his prolific collections of CDs and unopened Furbies on the shelves behind us. John's scrolling through, showing me a manifesto he's written.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Go, go, go.

**BRIAN REED:**

How many pages is this?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I have no fucking idea. Go, go, go.

**BRIAN REED:**

It's 53. The document is filled with charts, graphs, images of violence, and pornography, of Westboro Baptist Church protesters, and of Lady Gaga getting vomited upon by a so-called vomit artist, as well as paragraph after paragraph, all laying out a McLemorian unified theory of economic, environmental, and societal decline. And, oh, at one point as he's showing me this material, John quickly and casually pulls up this document.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Oh yeah, I have this on file at all times in case it's necessary. You never know.

**BRIAN REED:**

Your suicide note?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

We weren't gonna call it out loud, but you did.

**BRIAN REED:**

Well, we're looking at it. It's right here.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I keep it on file. Yeah, we didn't have a camera, big mouth.

**BRIAN REED:**

He doesn't linger on the suicide note long enough for me to read it. He claims he doesn't want to talk about it.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

You shouldn't of said that. Fuck it.

**BRIAN REED:**

But he's the one that brought it up. And as the day goes on and he continues to tool around on his computer moving on to other topics, he keeps mentioning it. I'm not sure why, what exactly John is trying to tell me. But after a while I tell him what I think.

**BRIAN REED:**

I would like it if you wouldn't kill yourself.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Oh, well, it's not going to happen this afternoon. I'm in a pretty good mood today.

**BRIAN REED:**

This is what it was like to talk about suicide with John. He was so cavalier about it. He'd dismiss your concern, laugh it off, and try to change the subject.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I found a better video that describes the entire history of the fossil fuel industry in about 17 seconds.

**BRIAN REED:**

But wait a minute, I want to go back to this, because you're dumping a lot on me here. Why do you have to kill yourself? Turn away from the computer because you're getting distracted. I want you to seriously think about this.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Doesn't everyone? OK, this is not distracting, this is another reason. FDIC BOE resolving systemically—

**BRIAN REED:**

I don't want—forget that. You're changing the subject.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

There was a very good chance of me not being alive at the time you got out here.

**BRIAN REED:**

Why?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Tired in a way that I can't put into words. Tired. Tired.

**BRIAN REED:**

I wasn't the only one John showed his suicide note to, apparently.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I also emailed it to town hall and my lawyer over there to keep on file.

**BRIAN REED:**

You emailed your suicide note to town hall and your lawyer?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Mhm. Yeah, I actually mailed an email to the town of, uh—

**BRIAN REED:**

He pulls it up, the email, and reads the information he sent them.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

How many dogs I had and the way to identify them and the vet, a list of people to contact in case I decide to blow my damn head off. Where some of the money is hiding, but not all of it.

**BRIAN REED:**

That is, where some—but not all—of John's money is hiding. He did not disclose those details to me.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

There's things I won't discuss with that thing turned on now, but I'm unbanked. And you can make as much as you want to make of that.

**BRIAN REED:**

John did tell me that if he died that afternoon, $100,000 would go to PETA. He also said this—

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I've often thought that I can continue to live and burn up my saved money, or I could donate it to someone that might need it more that's younger, whose life is ahead of them.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler and Jake?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Mm hm. I want to leave them kids a shitpot full of money instead of me burning it up and staying alive.

**BRIAN REED:**

From *Serial* and *This* *American* *Life,* I'm Brian Reed. This is *Shittown.*

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I gotta take these dogs to the vet. John's little dog, that one right yonder, Pipsqueak. That's Madeline.

**BRIAN REED:**

It's been more than two weeks since John died, and in the absence of a will, PETA was not bequeathed $100,000. And Tyler Goodson was not bequeathed a shitpot full of money. In fact, there's not even money for John's own dogs. Tyler's taking care of a couple of them here at the tiny trailer he's living in with his girlfriend and two of his daughters. And he's had to scrounge together cash to cover their vet appointment this morning.

But the more important appointment Tyler's preparing for today is at the Bibb County Probate Court, the court that handles matters involving estates of the deceased.

[WHISTLING]

At 10 a.m., John's cousins from Florida have a hearing scheduled to request permanent guardianship over John's mother, Mary Grace, which, because John didn't have a will, would mean the cousins would get control over the property and all of Mary Grace's and John's belongings and assets. So Tyler's going to go as well to petition the probate judge to intervene and try to get what's his.

He says he has a bunch of things over at John's that belong to him, and the cousins won't let him on the property to get them. They've even put a gate across John's driveway with "no trespassing" signs around it. Tyler estimates the total value for all of his stuff conservatively at more than $25,000. He's typed up a list with the description, location, and value of each item that's very thorough.

**BRIAN REED:**

So you've got a case of black spray paint, large glass jugs—

**BRIAN REED:**

Extension cords, a copper teapot, toys Tyler tells me John bought for his kids. Even the swing set is on there. Plus there are a lot of tools, which Tyler says is a particular problem for him right now because he's had a falling out with his partner in the tattoo parlor. So he no longer has that business. He doesn't have John anymore to employ him, and now he can't even drum up odd jobs, he says, because he can't get to his tools—his lawnmower, and his welder, and his masonry stuff.

For a lot of these items, Tyler doesn't have proof of ownership, though for a few of the big ticket ones he does. He shows me a couple of short receipts handwritten on notebook paper and signed by the sellers.

**BRIAN REED:**

This is the bill of sale for—

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Bill of sales for them school buses and stuff down there on the slab—two buses, an 18-wheeler trailer.

**BRIAN REED:**

Are those yours?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

John showed me these buses when he took me around his property. One's yellow and one's blue. There's also a big 18-wheeler trailer. It's all really old. The buses don't run anymore, but they're chock full of wood and building materials, and antique appliances. John didn't mention that stuff was Tyler's.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

You see, me and John been planning on building something out there for a while now, and we've just been accumulating old bricks and the lumber and stuff like that. I got just about everything down there to build a house with. I'm about to lose it all if something don't get done. But hopefully this little bit of proof will help me.

**BRIAN REED:**

The probate court sits on the town square of Centreville, the Bibb county seat, in a drab annex building across from the main courthouse. It's not even a traditional courtroom. It's mostly just a waiting area and reception desk, like a DMV. As people come inside, they go under a sign hanging over the front entrance that says, in elaborate font, "Through these doors pass the most important people on Earth, the citizens of Bibb County."

When I arrive, Tyler's sitting off to the side, stoically, his tattoos peeking down his wrists. I followed him here and let him go in on his own because I have my own reason for coming to court today. I want to introduce myself to John's cousins and ask if they'll do an interview with me. And I don't want them to get the wrong idea, think I'm working for Tyler or something.

The cousins are standing there, not far from Tyler, the middle-aged couple I remember from the funeral. I've learned that their names are Reta and Charlie Lawrence. They're huddled with two other people I don't recognize. Reta, like Tyler, is holding some papers. She has glasses and short, graying hair. I walk over to her.

Excuse me, ma'am, I say. Are you Reta? Yes, she says. I'm Brian Reed. Nice to meet you. I tell her I'm sorry for her loss, that I'm very sad about what happened with John. I explain who I am, where I work, how John got in touch with our radio show, and then I started investigating some local goings-on with him. She seems both surprised and confused by me, which is completely understandable. Your cousin drinks cyanide and then a reporter shows up at court afterwards saying he'd been investigating potential crimes and corruption and wrongdoing with him for more than a year. It's not the most normal sequence of events.

So where do you live, she asks? New York, I tell her. Are you serious, she says? You come down here from New York for this? I ask Reta if she'll meet with me. I want to tell her more about the story I've been doing with John. I want to ask her about him, his family history, and find out what's going on with his affairs. She seems OK with it and says, sure, after the hearing we can go somewhere and talk. And then we stand there, awkwardly, waiting for the judge to call them back to his chambers. We make small talk. Which hotel are you staying at? How long are you in town? At that, suddenly Reta leans in very close to me and whispers, "We're leaving tomorrow."

"Why are you whispering," I ask her.

"Do you know that guy there?" she asks, still under her breath, twitching her eyes towards Tyler, who's right behind me.

"Tyler," I say.

"Yeah," she says. Her voice gets even quieter. "We're leaving tomorrow, but I don't want him to know that we're leaving. He's been causing nothing but trouble."

Soon, Judge Jerry Pow will summon Reta and her husband Charlie, as well as the two others they're here with, and John's lawyer, Boozer Downs, into his chambers to have a private meeting. And Tyler will go in with them, to make his final plea. Despite John having said that he wanted to leave money and gold to Tyler, despite John texting Tyler minutes before he died that he could have anything in his house that he wanted, all Tyler will ask the judge for today is the stuff that he says was his to begin with, that he's documented neatly on his list.

Tyler does not like going to court. He feels the courts and cops and lawyers have done nothing but victimize him since he became a teenager. But here he will suck it up and make this one last effort to do things the proper way, within the system. And the system will not be sympathetic. Judge Pow will explain to Tyler that this hearing isn't about his stuff, it's about signing guardianship over to Reta. He's about to do that, he'll say, and once he does, she'll have control over the McLemore property and everything on it. Tyler will have to work things out directly with Reta, or take the matter across the street to civil court.

Tyler will try to protest. But Reta will sell everything before I have a chance to bring a suit, he'll say. And Judge Pow will tell them that if someone gives you something, he advises that you take it home with you. And that will be the end of it. Dejected, Tyler will walk out of the chambers to his car, underneath the sign reminding him that he's one of the most important people on Earth.

I wait for Reta in the reception area, and as she and her husband leave, I asked where she would like to go so we can have our conversation. But now she says she can't. They have too much to get done before they head back to Florida the next day.

We chat for a bit, though. And before she goes out the door, she does ask me a question about John. Quote, "Did he tell you where his money was hid?" unquote.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

They done good at the damn place.

**BRIAN REED:**

Really?

**BRIAN REED:**

Less than a week after the cousins gained control of the McLemore property, Tyler tells me they've gutted the damn place. And even though he's not supposed to, he's been going over to the property.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Well, I snuck down there, you know. I always go down there checking on my stuff and everything. And John's shop's gone. All the tool boxes and everything, they done had somebody come down there and probably bought it all. There was different clocks that was on the wall and all of my shit—my welder and all that stuff—gone. The place is pretty cleaned out.

**BRIAN REED:**

When you've been over there, have you've been poking around for the buried treasure, for the gold or the cash or whatever there is?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Well, hell, yes.

[LAUGHTER]

I need to get it before it gets scraped off. We got to find it, Brian.

**BRIAN REED:**

Reta suspects that John had money or gold hidden somewhere. But Tyler's all but certain of it. He says when they would make purchases around town, John used to say, well, got to go dig up some more money. And Tyler says he knows for a fact John was buying $30,000 worth of gold at a clip. John even showed him some of it once, a small box out of which John pulled a single tiny gold bar, though it was clear the box was filled with others, Tyler says. And John strongly implied that there was much more gold where that came from.

So where have you looked? Do you mind telling me?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I mean, it could be in the graveyard. It could be in the maze. It could be anywhere. But I think it's under the damn dog house or something.

**BRIAN REED:**

Here's Tyler's theory about where the hidden treasure might be. The dog house is near the human house, and you can see it from the kitchen window where John spent a lot of time talking on the phone, brewing highly caffeinated tea, pissing in the sink. Tyler thinks John would have stashed a treasure in a spot where he could always see it from the kitchen.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

And plus, I think all them mutt dogs protected it.

**BRIAN REED:**

So have you have you poked around on that yet? On the dog house?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I've went out and I've looked in the dog house and seen if there's any type of compartments built up under it or whatnot. And I've been up under the house and I'm been out in flower beds and shit like that. But, hell, Brian, up under John B's house, he had me weld up these little metal doorways.

**BRIAN REED:**

These are the gates Tyler once told me about, that he built for the dungeon-like tunnels in John's basement.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

But, I've done been up under there. I've done been all up under there all them fucking spiderwebs and rats and snakes, and I ain't seen the first sign of anything. You know, we've done so many projects around there that it's got to be somewhere in one of them projects that we've done, you know. Somewhere that if anybody could find it, it would be me. And you know he's probably left me some type of clue.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler's phone cuts out for a second, but he was saying John probably left him some type of clue.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Yeah, I'm sure he's left me some type of clue. And I just ain't thinking of it.

**BRIAN REED:**

In one of our phone conversations, John did say this to me.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

A wise man has his money where he can sleep best at night. A wise man does not have a lot of paper money in a wood frame house. A wise man has some hard assets. Hard assets mean different things to different people. To some people it may mean silver and gold. A wise man may have some of them out in the fucking woods.

**BRIAN REED:**

I didn't mention this to Tyler, partly because I didn't feel like it was my place to encourage treasure hunting on John's property, but also because I have no idea if John meant this literally or was just saying stuff. Plus, there are like 100 acres of woods anyway, something that Tyler's very aware of.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

It is on that fucking property, Brian. I'm thinking I'm going to have to get a metal detector and go over the back yard.

**BRIAN REED:**

The next time I see Tyler, he tells me he has procured the metal detector and has been using it to scour John's place every night for two weeks straight. He uses a police scanner app on his phone to keep an ear out for cops while he's there.

One of his most promising clues were these pages he found of coordinates John had written down—latitudes and longitudes for the town of Woodstock, or Shittown as it was labeled on the document, along with coordinates for K3 Lumber, the trailer park Tyler lives in, as well as, naturally, the nuclear reactor in Chernobyl.

Among those were coordinates on John's property. One set was for John's house, and another set when Tyler typed them into Google brought him to the maze, though just a little bit to the side of the maze, which seemed promising. In that spot he saw an old plastic tub upside down on the grass. He kicked it over and waved the metal detector over the ground it had been covering. It started going off, beeping. Tyler dug and he found—a bunch of bottles. Just a bunch of old glass bottles. He asked me if I've ever seen the movie, *Holes,* because that's what it looks like over there after all his digging.

The hunt continues in a minute.

[AD]

When Tyler cleared out all that paperwork from John's house in the days right after he died, he did find something else that was curious. It's a list John wrote on a sheet of yellow notebook paper titled at the top "people to contact." Tyler sent me a photo of it. And Faye Gamble, the town clerk, told me that John sent a copy to her as part of his instructions before he drank cyanide. There are 15 names and phone numbers on the list. Tyler's name is not one of them. A handful of the people are local to Bibb County, including John's lawyer, whom I've talked to, the number for Woodstock town hall, his vet. His cousin from Florida, Reta Lawrence is on there. But there's this whole group of names at the top who are all from out of town, and in a number of cases out of state or country. And each of those names is a mystery to me.

In my very first phone conversation with John, he had told me that all of his friends had died off. He used that word, "all." Yet here's this list. And the strange thing about it is that not one of these people, these first seven names at the top, not one of them showed up at John's funeral. So this list, maybe it's a clue?

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

To you it probably looks like a bomb went off in here. But believe it or not, we know where everything is. This is our clock shop.

**BRIAN REED:**

On an early Saturday afternoon, I meet a man named Allen Bearden and at his clock repair shop in the back of an antique mall near the interstate in Pell City, Alabama. He's the first of these names off John's list that I contact. Pell City's about an hour east of Woodstock, on the other side of Birmingham, and the vibe here is different than Bibb County. It's situated on the Coosa River, which has all these switchbacks and detours that make it look more like a smattering of lakes than a river. The place feels livelier than Bibb. There's a big rodeo going on, boats on the water, families vacationing.

Allen's in his 40s, an athletic, outdoorsy guy who makes time for me after a fly fishing lesson he gave in the morning. He's a clock restorer like John was, though he says he works in the, quote, "horological field," which is a term I've never heard until talking to Allen—horology.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

Horology is the study of time.

**BRIAN REED:**

That makes Allen and John horologists—or more precisely because they fix old clocks, antiquarian horologists.

Allen tells me horology experienced a kind of heyday in the 90s, particularly as antique collectors took to eBay. But that boom has been over for a while, and especially with time so easily accessible now on our appliances and cell phones, it's definitely a dying trade. John saw that coming, Allen says. And by the time he met him around 2012, John had largely gotten out of horology, except for the odd job here or there.

They met because Allen was having a problem with an Elliott Grandfather Clock he was trying to fix.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

That was a very important piece. It was a—it wasn't a clock that you'd seen every day. This clock had actually come out of a jewelry store in London off Shafford Square.

**BRIAN REED:**

How much was it worth?

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

Estimatedly, it could have been $100-something-thousand clock back in the 90s.

**BRIAN REED:**

Wow.

**BRIAN REED:**

The clock was driving Allen nuts. He couldn't figure out a proper fix for it. He asked a horologist friend of his for advice, and his friend said, you should call this guy John B. McLemore.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

I remember I called him up one day in this shop right here. When I got him on the phone, it was like, oh, my gosh.

**BRIAN REED:**

Allen heard a cacophony of dogs barking on the other end of the line, and a man shouting obscenities at them.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

And I'd been warned. You know, John's not the average person, expect a lot of profanity, expect a lot of strong and bold statements.

**BRIAN REED:**

Allen explained to John that he was having trouble with a rare clock and John said, well, bring it by.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

Which I'd never heard of Woodstock, Alabama, in my life. It was very hard to find his place. I had a physical address, but my GPS kept carrying me two or three miles down the road.

**BRIAN REED:**

I've been there.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

Yeah. You know, when I pulled up there it was like I went back in time.

**BRIAN REED:**

It's a weird sensation. This man I've just met seems to be describing to me an experience that I once had.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

He came out and met me in the driveway and he was immediately, well, if we're gonna get it fixed, drive your truck around here. And it wasn't really any really kind of welcome or anything. It was like, you know, he had known me. And I'm carefully unloading this clock into his shop. And he's like, well what do you got here? And I said, you know, I was telling him it's an Elliott. And he said, yeah, that looks about right. And then he said, we'll let's get it set up here.

So we set it up on his rack and I just thought he was just going to meticulously start looking over it. The first thing he did, he got a pair of pliers and some screwdrivers and stuff and he immediately just started yanking stuff off the clock. We don't need this. We don't need that. We don't need this. And he was throwing—and these pieces were coming off the clock and flying over to the table. And he was just like tossing them. And I—I mean, I was just thinking to myself, oh, my god, I have made a horrible mistake. This guy is absolutely certifiable crazy.

He's just running off at the mouth about this and that, about the clock and how horrible the clock had been treated. You know, pliers must have been on this. Any competent clockmaker who owned it—I mean, he wasn't particularly talking about me, but—

**BRIAN REED:**

John was referring to the other horologists over the last 100 years who, judging from the witness marks he was observing—holes and impressions and discolorations—had subjected the clock to sloppy workmanship over the course of its life.

Allen knew what the problem with the clock was. That he'd been able to diagnose on his own. It was an issue with a piece called the gathering pallet. He says he probably could have machined a replacement that would have made the clock run, but that would have been a quick fix, not a restoration. The the kind of horologist Allen is and John was—they aren't trying to simply make the clock work again. Their goal is to preserve and reconstruct the original craftsmanship as much as possible.

But Allen had never restored an Elliott clock before, so he'd never seen this type of gathering pallet in working order. And when he looked for diagrams of it, he couldn't find any.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

John knew, right off the top of his head what that gathering pallet actually looked like, just from his years of experience.

**BRIAN REED:**

What it should have looked like.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

What it should of looked like. And what he did was he took a piece of steel and he hand-filed that thing up by hand and got it fixed and got it put it on there.

**BRIAN REED:**

He did that in front of you that day?

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

He did it that day. It took him almost about three and 1/2 hours but he sat there and had filed that out. And after I saw that, I was just totally amazed, just to file something blankly out of the top of your head with some needle files and not having any kind of diagram or anything like that. I mean, he just filed it out and started fitting it to the clock.

**BRIAN REED:**

What were you thinking when you watched it?

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

That this is a master.

**BRIAN REED:**

That, Allen says, was the beginning of his and John's friendship. They emailed often, talked every few days. About once a month Allen would go visit and they'd troubleshoot a clock together, wander around John's yard, get lunch at the local grocery store. Allen tried to get John to come to this neck of the woods. He wanted to take him out boating on the lake. But John never came. He said he couldn't leave his mom for that long.

Allen told me something I hadn't known about John. John had an impressive reputation for working on world-class high-end timepieces, some of the finest clocks in the world.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

And he was just an absolute genius. I mean, if you wanted to know something or had a problem with clocks you need to go see John McLemore.

**BRIAN REED:**

Really? That's like—that was known throughout—

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

Oh, it was known. It was actually known, probably, I know on the eastern seaboard. He would have people coming down from Massachusetts, driving their car to Woodstock, Alabama, to get their bracket clocks fixed and stuff like that.

**BRIAN REED:**

Because he was the closest and best they could find?

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

Well, not the—I wouldn't say the closest. Probably the best.

**BRIAN REED:**

In his earlier years, John used to travel to England, where he visited with fellow horologists. He wrote about horology, consulted on horology books, and he was known for doing elements of restoration that very few people still do, such as an ancient process for making things gold known as fire gilding that is very dangerous and illegal in some places, because it requires burning mercury.

And another thing Allen tells me that I wanted to find out—John made good money.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

John, probably, in the 90s could of sat on his butt and worked two or three days a week and made $150,000 a year, easy. It's no telling how much money he made in the clock trade. And John just probably packed that money away.

**BRIAN REED:**

I mean, who knows, but that sounds to me like the type of money that could potentially amass to a bountiful hidden treasure.

There comes a point in our conversation when Allen has a question for me.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

But as far as John's—you said you found out through Tyler?

**BRIAN REED:**

His sister-in-law.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

His sister-in-law?

**BRIAN REED:**

Yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

That is, as far as John's suicide, though Allen doesn't speak the word.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

I guess that was how long—how long ago?

**BRIAN REED:**

I was able—I went to the funeral. I was able to go to funeral. It was right before.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

You were? Well, you were better off than I was. I didn't find out until maybe a week and a half later. You know, I didn't really have a chance to say goodbye to him.

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm sorry.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

Yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

Allen have been out of town for a watch and clock convention shortly before John died, and hadn't talked to him for a while. When he got back, he and John emailed a bit. The day John would go on to kill himself, Allen wrote him, telling him he wanted to come visit that week.

That night, while Allen was teaching vacation bible school, he saw a call come in from John. He silenced it and then called him back when he got home. No answer. He called him the next day. No answer. As the week went on, it was the same. Allen got in touch with a mutual friend of his and John's, a mechanic in Birmingham who was also on John's contact list, and asked him if he'd heard from John. He hadn't.

Allen wanted to drive to John's place to check on him, but his wife was pregnant and sick. He decided to give it one more day, and if neither he nor the other friend heard from John, he was going to call the Bibb County Sheriff's Department. He knew John hated cops and authority and might not forgive him for it, but he also knew John had talked about suicide. So he was ready to risk it.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

You know, sometimes I had to weigh that out in my head—was it worth losing him as a friend to see him get help. And I tried to get John help. And I tried—I was like, John, you know, let me carry you to a doctor or something. Let's get you on some medicine or something, you know. I said, we're not going to no psychiatrist or nothing like that. I said, we can just go see a regular practice doctor and see if we can get you on some kind of antidepressants, some kind of mood stabilizer.

And he was like, oh no, I ain't taking no medicine, man. I'm not doing this. I'm not doing that. I even went to the bookstore and got a herbal book of more holistic healing stuff that would help with depression and mood swings and carried that to him. I said, here, read this right here and see if you can get something. I said, you probably have this in your yard. And I thought he would take on that since, you know, he liked horticulture, well, maybe he could—

**BRIAN REED:**

That's a good idea.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

Could help or heal himself holistically. And that book just sat there. It's probably sitting there to this day in his shop.

**BRIAN REED:**

Wow. I had no sense talking to him that he had people in his life like you who were trying to help him this way.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

I don't think John realized how many people cared for him. And I just think it's really sad, because I actually think he died thinking he was lonely.

**BRIAN REED:**

Though I'm not sure there's much of a difference between being lonely and thinking you are. Allen never got to the point of asking the sheriff to check on John, because the night before he was planning to do that, he was driving home from church with his family and got a call from Faye Gamble, the town clerk who John had called as he drank cyanide, and to whom he'd given his final instructions and contact list.

Allen says as soon as she told him she was with Woodstock Town Hall, he knew. He immediately pulled over to the side of the road. He was devastated. His whole body was shaking. But then Faye told him when John had actually died, and to the sorrow were added some other emotions.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

When I found out when it happened, I was kind of irate. I didn't find out till after John had done been buried.

**BRIAN REED:**

John had been in the ground for more than a week and Faye was just now calling him. Allen says he pressed Faye on it, asked her why she was notifying him after the funeral. And he said she acted kind of weird about it.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

She tried to say that she tried to call me. But I looked back through my phone. There was no call, no message or anything. I've got nothing. And that just seems like a pretty weak excuse, somebody calling and say, well, I tried you and I couldn't get you on the phone and not leave a message or anything like that.

**BRIAN REED:**

And it's not like she had to dig up his information or something. John sent it to her.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

I mean, I'm like fourth on the list right there. This would be like, this is who you need to call and contact. I mean, I find that kind of—that kind of disturbed me.

**BRIAN REED:**

It disturbed Allen, not only because it caused him to miss his friend's funeral, but because it's pushing his mind to some unpleasant places.

The day before I met with Allen, he actually spoke with Tyler for a while and got the whole lowdown on the cousins. Reta, the cousin, is listed halfway down on John's contact list. Allen finds it questionable that Faye or someone else managed to reach her, yet he and these other names are all at the top of the sheet and somehow he was skipped over.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

It'd be really interesting to know, you know, the other people, when were they actually called. Was it just me? Was it the top people on his contact list? Because I think they knew that—these people knew John best. And I think they're probably out there trying to keep us away from the situation for some reason or something.

**BRIAN REED:**

Really?

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

Yeah. I mean, from talking to Tyler, the way stuff's played out in this, it's a little fishy.

**BRIAN REED:**

Allen continues in this mode, tiptoeing toward something.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

I'm just trying to figure, you know, what would it benefit a person not to try to contact a person? I didn't know if they just didn't people down there until a situation was under control the way they wanted it to be. Maybe somebody's trying to take control of something. Because they would've known that—John's close, close friends would know what I'm talking about.

**BRIAN REED:**

I can tell Allen is being purposely vague here. I think maybe he's not sure what I know already or else maybe he knows I know, so he knows he doesn't have to say it out loud. But I'm not actually sure I do know what he's talking about, though maybe I do know. Anyway, he is now making weird eyes at me.

**BRIAN REED:**

Yeah, you're looking at me in like a coded way.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

You, know I could tell you my theory on something but I'm not going to do on the air.

**BRIAN REED:**

Do you think I should call the other people on the list?

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

I think it would be a good idea, I mean, to further investigate. And just for the simple fact, they could possibly not even know. I mean, you'd be doing John a favor, because surely he would want them people to know or they wouldn't be on the list.

[PHONE RINGING]

**BRIAN REED:**

And for the second time, I find myself embarking on an investigation at the behest of an Alabamian horologist.

[PHONE RINGING]

**BILL MAIER:**

Hello?

**BRIAN REED:**

Hi, is this Bill Maier?

**BILL MAIER:**

Yes.

**BRIAN REED:**

Hi, Bill, were you a friend of John McLemore's?

**BILL MAIER:**

Yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm calling some sad news that maybe you're aware of, but he passed away earlier this summer.

**BILL MAIER:**

Who did?

**BRIAN REED:**

John B. McLemore. Yeah.

**BILL MAIER:**

Oh, I didn't know that. I've been writing email to him and he hasn't responded. And I called him, I think—what did he die from?

**BRIAN REED:**

He actually committed suicide, I'm sorry to say.

**BILL MAIER:**

Oh, for god's sake. What happened to his mother?

**BRIAN REED:**

Bill Maier, number seven on John's list. Clearly he wasn't called. Bill was a friend and clock customer of John's for decades. He lived in Utah, in a house he describes as being more like a museum than a house. He'd drive from Utah to Alabama sometimes to visit John.

**BILL MAIER:**

John seems to have made a insurmountable challenge out of living. It's so sad to hear that he finally did it. It just, uh—it just makes me so incredibly sad.

**MAN:**

Hello, you have reached micros and the escapement maker.

**BRIAN REED:**

This is the answering machine of a horologist friend of John's in the small town in the Pacific Northwest who asked that I not use his name because he's very private. He picked up as I was leaving a message. He says Faye did tell him John had died, but only after the funeral.

**MAN:**

John meant a hell of a lot to me. He meant a hell of a lot to me.

**BRIAN REED:**

And then another Brit from the list, Duncan Greig.

**DUNCAN GREIG:**

At the had a moment I've, in front of me got a whole load of letters and photographs that John sent me over the years.

**BRIAN REED:**

A respected clock restorer from Tonbridge, England, who never met John in person, but over more than a decade spent many late night hours developing a friendship with him on the phone and via letters. I was the one who informed Duncan of John's death.

**DUNCAN GREIG:**

Yeah, as you can probably tell, I'm very sad about it. I think he should have gone on to have been a curmudgeonly old gentleman that survived the ravages of time.

**TOM MOORE:**

The enigma that John McLemore was—

**BRIAN REED:**

And Tom Moore, John's chemistry professor in college, now a university chancellor who went on to become a lifelong friend.

**TOM MOORE:**

One of the most—I'm going to start crying. I can't help it.

**BRIAN REED:**

It's OK.

**TOM MOORE:**

One of the most incredible people I've ever known.

**BRIAN REED:**

Like with others, Tom says the town clerk, Faye, did call him about John suicide, but only after he'd been buried. After talking to the seven people at the top of John's list, I learned that none of them were at John's funeral because none of them were contacted in time, and some not at all. It was interesting. Most of these men didn't know each other, beyond maybe having interacted once or twice in horological circles over the years.

The men talked to me for hours, without batting an eye, even I'd just called them cold and informed them that their friend had committed suicide. Which at first I thought was pretty remarkable, but then it occurred to me that they were all friends of John B. McLemore's, which means you are predisposed to having long, rambling conversations on the phone.

Of these friends, the one who knew John the longest—since he was a teenager—was Tom Moore, John's college professor. John showed up in Tom's general chemistry course as a freshman at Birmingham Southern College in the early '80s.

**TOM MOORE:**

Walk into a class of 85 to 95 students and look around and, boy, what's that kid doing here?

**BRIAN REED:**

Birmingham Southern is a small private liberal arts college that's been around since the 1800s. Tom says at the time when John was there, the student body was made up largely of children of professionals, doctors and lawyers. They were preppy. John was not.

**TOM MOORE:**

Bushy red hair, unkempt, clothing from a different socio-economic background. He was clearly different.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tom says John didn't make any friends at Birmingham Southern and he didn't live there. Every night he drove back to his parents' house, back to his childhood bedroom, back to Bibb County. And Tom could tell that as much as John didn't fit in at college, he didn't fit in back home either. Tom got the sense that John had been picked on a lot over the years, growing up.

**TOM MOORE:**

He would do things as a college student to bring ridicule on himself. I want to say he would wear a red wig or a green wig to class.

**BRIAN REED:**

Sure enough, Tom says, the other kids would laugh at him, and that was the point.

**TOM MOORE:**

I took it to be out of this history that I'm going to be made fun of. And I can't stand being made fun of just by being who I am, so I'll do some things that enable me to understand why people are making fun of me, and it's not just me being me. It's pretty tragic. I saw that in him, and that's part of why I reached out to him.

**BRIAN REED:**

John B. McLemore's education is the source of some gossip in Woodstock. I have heard that he held multiple degrees in chemistry and biology. I've heard that he quit school because he was smarter than the professors. I've heard that he had to leave after blowing up a laboratory. The reality was less dramatic.

**TOM MOORE:**

He was bad at school.

**BRIAN REED:**

John was a college dropout. He left Birmingham Southern after three years. According to Tom, if John was studying a topic he was interested in, he would learn it exhaustively. Tom spent many afternoons watching John scribble on the blackboard in his office, obscure calculations and theories that were beyond even Tom's comprehension.

But when it came to stuff the professors wanted him to focus on, John was almost allergic to it. Tom thinks John got a D or maybe a C in his chemistry class. But John spent hours in the lab on his own outside of class, figuring out techniques he could use in his clock restorations. Tom risked getting in trouble and let John access the lab when he wanted.

Remember this?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

There you go. There you go.

**BRIAN REED:**

When John gold-plated a dime for me in his workshop one afternoon.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I may be dead and gone one day, but you'll have a souvenir from Shittown, Alabama.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

A golden penny.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

A gold dime! A motherfucking gold-plated dime! Shit.

**BRIAN REED:**

I do still have the dime, by the way. That electroplating process—John worked it out as a student at Birmingham Southern as a way to gild clock pieces that doesn't require burning dangerous amounts of mercury. It uses potassium cyanide instead.

Sometimes in college, when John came into Tom's office in the afternoon for one of their Blackboard sessions, Tom says John would seem depressed to the point where Tom thought he might be trying to say goodbye for good. Tom says he recommended John to a school counselor, and John saw her for a bit, even went on medication. But, according to Tom, John didn't like the way the medicine altered his personality, and he chose not to seek any more treatment.

Tom figured out that if he asked John to tell him about a clock he was working on, or some other topic he was studying, he could get John excited and redirect his attitude, so that by the end of the session he'd seemed lifted out of his despair. But this could take hours. Tom says he can vividly remember sitting in his office with John on a fall day, glancing at the sun while it set outside his window, watching the sky turn colors over campus, as he thought about his wife waiting for him at home, but looking back at John and thinking—

**TOM MOORE:**

I'm not sure John's ready to go yet.

**BRIAN REED:**

Then listening to John go on, as outside the sky turned dark.

I really enjoyed my conversations with the guys on John's list. I learned a lot about John, but also about the people John kept as friends. I learned about lathes and dividing engines and double helical gears and tolerances and sidereal time, and also what an escapement is—the mechanism inside a clock or a watch that actually does the ticking.

Many of these horologist and clock collectors told me how they had become fascinated with clocks as children, and how even at age 57 or 80, that fascination hadn't dwindled. One man told me the story of the clock that cemented his and John's friendship, a clock the man retrieved himself from a crypt near Greiling, Germany, where it had been hurriedly disassembled by someone during World War II and hidden amongst the bones and remains.

One friend told me about a clock that was so complicated no one else could restore it, and it took John seven years, and another about a job that was so difficult that John started crying as he was hunched over in his shop and said, I can't do this anymore. One man remembered the time he started telling John about a weird story he loved by Edgar Allen Poe, called *Berenice,* about a man who becomes obsessed with his wife's teeth, eventually digging them up from her grave, and how as he was describing the story to John, John suddenly began reciting passages from the story back to him from memory.

One friend told me how his coworkers would tell him not to talk to John so much because he was a weirdo. And another told me, people think I'm weird, like John B.

As for the question of John's assets, his friends had gotten different bits of information over the years. John had told some of them he'd been running down his savings after retiring from the clock trade, a decade or so ago. Some thought maybe he'd suffered some losses on his investments during the 2008 crash.

But others got the impression that he did have a lot of money. He'd mentioned having pulled it out of the bank, having converted some to gold, having hidden it. He also talked clearly about putting together a will. So it was shocking to friends to learn that apparently there wasn't one. That, coupled with the fact that they were all kept in the dark about his death for a while—a number of them did find that suspect.

**MAN 1:**

Where there's a lot of money. He had it. He hid it.

**BRIAN REED:**

I met with two of John's friends in a restaurant one night and they posited theories to each other. Maybe it's the cousins who were up to no good, one says.

**MAN 1:**

And if, you know, you talk about some relatives in Florida.

**MAN 2:**

All of a sudden they show up.

**MAN 1:**

Well here we got a piece of land.

**BRIAN REED:**

But the other says, maybe it's the Goodsons, Tyler and his brother Jake.

**MAN 2:**

I'm wondering if they got the money.

**BRIAN REED:**

That the Goodsons did?

**MAN 2:**

Yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

They haven't told me that they have.

**MAN 2:**

Do you think they would?

**MAN 1:**

The only thing I can come up with is—if the Goodsons were involved in any of this, maybe they didn't want you or I—

**MAN 2:**

To even know.

**MAN 1:**

To know about any of this.

**MAN 2:**

That's probably true.

**BRIAN REED:**

It's not like John's friends think they are owed anything from John's will or want the gold for themselves, at least that's not what they say to me. They just all share the feeling that someone might be taking advantage of the situation, that someone is getting away with something they shouldn't. But who is the someone? And what is the something? It seems like I should be able to figure that out.

If you ask Tyler who's getting away with something they shouldn't, he says it's clear—John's cousin's, Reta and Charlie. As the weeks go on, he keeps the updates coming, about the steps they're taking to get them out of the picture. Reta and Charlie recently tried to get his girlfriend arrested for theft for picking up a package at the post office that was addressed to John, though nothing ever came of it.

Also, John's lawyer Boozer Downs attempted to hold an informal mediation session between Tyler and John's cousins, but it fell apart when Tyler tried to tell John's mother, Mama as he calls her, how much he missed her, and she looked at him coldly and said,

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Don't call me Mama no more.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler's convinced that the cousins, Reta and Charlie, have brainwashed her against him. He says they've gone to new lows to secure all of John's assets.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

And them cousins trying to take the damn titty rings out, thinking that it's gold or something.

**BRIAN REED:**

Wait, what—that happened?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I thought I told you about that.

**BRIAN REED:**

Um, no, I have not heard anything about titty ring removal. Apparently this information came to Tyler from Boozer, John's lawyer.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Boozer said, is them rings in John's titties gold or something? They was trying to take them out.

**BRIAN REED:**

Somehow I doubt that's a verbatim quote from Woodstock town attorney Boozer Downs, but I'll let Tyler paraphrase.

The cousins were physically trying to do it or they were trying to get the mortician to do it?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I don't know. I mean, he told me that the cousins was trying to take his titty rings out at the morgue or something, thinking they was gold. I said, fuck no, they're brass—silver-plated brass. He said, they was thinking they was gold, trying to take them out. I'm like, god-fucking-damn.

**BRIAN REED:**

Is this possibly true? I do not know. And one day Tyler texts me and says, I'm repo'ing the buses and 18-wheeler trailer today.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Hey, come on up with it.

**BRIAN REED:**

He calls me while he's doing it, hangs his phone on his belt so I can hear. He tells me he wanted to get this stuff, which he says is his, before the cousins had a chance to sell it, like he says they did with his lawnmower and some other things.

The buses and trailer don't run, so he's hired a crew of guys with big trucks to tow them out, around the side of John's house and down his 910-foot driveway. The buses are filled with lumber and there's a clawfoot tub and a wood-burning stove, stuff that Tyler says he was going to use to build a small house with on John's property. Now he wants to use it to build a house on his grandmother's property, for him and his daughters.

The cousins were home in Florida while Tyler did this, but they must have gotten wind of it, because the next day he tells me a warrant has been issued for his arrest for trespassing. Eventually a grand jury will charge him with multiple counts of felony theft.

It's not long before I realize, follow any finger that is being pointed in the aftermath of John's suicide, and there will be another set of fingers on the other end, not only pointing right back, but in a bunch of other directions, too. Everyone is pointing at everyone.

One afternoon at my Best Western along the highway, I'm walking to the elevator to go up to my room when, who should pop out of the stairwell but John's cousin, Reta. By the time it registers in my brain that it's her, we've already moved past each other, and it's too late and awkward to turn back and say something. This is weeks after I'd met Reta at probate court, and she declined to do an interview, a whole separate trip. I had no idea she'd be in town, and now I'm afraid she might think I'm stalking her.

So I asked the front desk which room she and her husband are in—four rooms down from mine—and write her a note, which I slip under her door, explaining that I didn't know she would be here, but since we both are, would you be open to meeting with me? And by the way, sorry for creepily leaving a note under your door.

The next afternoon we all sit around a table in the hotel common area. It's Reta and two other women who introduce themselves as cousins of John's, as well as Reta's husband Charlie. They don't allow me to record. They are livid with Tyler. They're saying he's the person who's getting away with something, taking all sorts of stuff from John's house that they say is not his—the buses and trailer, but much more too. They call him a con man. They show me Google Maps satellite images of John's yard with the buses and trailer in them, dated from 2010, which means they were in his yard at least three years before the dates that are on Tyler's bills of sale, which are dated 2013.

This is proof, they say, that Tyler's documents are bogus. And I have to say, it is suspicious, though Tyler's not the only target of their suspicion. There's Faye Gamble, the town clerk. Reta asks me if I've spoken to her. I tell her yes. "That's interesting," she says, kind of to herself. "She says she didn't talk to you." Reta and Charlie say Faye hasn't passed along any instructions to them from John. They've heard she has a list of people to contact, but she hasn't given them that either.

Then there's Boozer Downs, John's lawyer. They tell me he was supposed to take a written statement from Faye of what John told her the night he killed himself, but it's been more than a month now and curiously, he still isn't done that.

And then there's me. Charlie clearly thinks this meeting is a terrible idea. He keeps getting up from the table and pacing, speaking to me sharply, saying, I just want them to get in a, quote, "pissing match with Tyler." At one point I asked, I thought harmlessly, where Mary Grace is living now, and Reta thinks on it for a moment and then tells me, "I'd rather not say."

I also asked about the text message Tyler showed me from John which said that Tyler could have anything he wanted in the house. Reta thinks Tyler fabricated it. She tells me it's strange that it was sent from John's computer and not a cell phone. I tell her I don't think that's all that strange. And one of the other women cuts me off. "Of course, you don't."

"What do you mean by that?" I ask.

"We know you're like friends with him," she says.

On and on the accusations fly. It's head-spinning. One day Tyler suggests to me that Boozer Downs, John's attorney, might be in cahoots with the cousins, and that he might have suppressed John's will so they could split the assets. Meanwhile, Boozer sends me an email asking if he can retract an interview the did with me because the cousins suspect him of being in cahoots with Tyler. It got ugly in hearing, he writes. I am concerned that I should not have spoken to you on the recording. Boozer says he did not hide John's will, because there was no will to hide.

I also get an email from one of John's friends who I met in the restaurant. He's certain there must be a reason he wasn't contacted about John's death. He includes the words "maybe I knew too much." Then I call back the first guy I met with, John's fellow horologist, Allen Bearden, and tell him I've done what he suggested—contacted the other friends on the top of John's list—and indeed none of them was called in time for the funeral, and a few not at all.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

Well, don't you find that very strange, Brian?

**BRIAN REED:**

And then Allen clarifies his theory for me. He thinks all the weirdness surrounding John's death—the fact that he and other people on John's list weren't contacted is because someone has taken John's gold. He's not exactly sure who, but what he suspects is that there is a potentially large conspiracy taking place within the local Woodstock town government and police to cover it up.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:**

If the gold was there, I think, you know, somebody came and got that gold. I mean, and probably stepped over John's body and took care of that before they even did John. Now who did that, I don't know. But I think it's somebody to do with inside that city hall. The whole thing, it just—it's very suspicious. Very, very, very suspicious. Somebody has that gold.

**BRIAN REED:**

Finally, I make a second visit to the Woodstock town clerk, Faye Gamble, who, after seeming not to have done a very thorough job contacting the people on John's list, has been the subject of much of the suspicion. And after some inscrutable responses to my questions—

**BRIAN REED:**

Did you call everyone on the list?

**FAYE GAMBLE:**

Everyone that I could get in touch with, yes.

**BRIAN REED:**

Faye insists she called everyone.

**FAYE GAMBLE:**

I promise you I did.

**BRIAN REED:**

Were they called before the funeral?

**FAYE GAMBLE:**

Oh yeah. Yeah, they were called from a town hall phone. Yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

Faye says most of the people she didn't reach at first, but she claims she left messages. I tell her that according to everyone I've spoken to, that doesn't appear to be the case.

What I'd personally thought had happened was that maybe Faye was so traumatized by John killing himself while on the phone with her it's possible she just couldn't bring herself to make these calls, which would made complete sense to me, and I think most people would understand. But I asked Faye if that's what happened, and she says, no, she called everybody in the first few days after John died. She also says she's since given the list to John's cousins. And contrary to what Reta told me, Faye says she never claimed to them that she hadn't spoken to me.

Then I bring up the subject of the gold. Faye was the last person to talk to John, and I know he'd given her instructions about his assets in the moments before he died. Did he tell her if there was gold? If so, did he say where it was? The first time I'd interviewed Faye she'd been cryptic about all that. But this time—

**BRIAN REED:**

I mean, can you tell me where he said it was? I understand if you don't want to, but if you feel comfortable.

**FAYE GAMBLE:**

He said he wrapped it in a towel in the freezer.

**BRIAN REED:**

So gold bars, wrapped in a towel in the freezer.

**FAYE GAMBLE:**

Mm hm.

**BRIAN REED:**

Did he say how much worth of gold?

**FAYE GAMBLE:**

Uh-uh. Just gold bars.

**BRIAN REED:**

And were there any other spots, like outside or anything like that?

**FAYE GAMBLE:**

Uh uh.

**BRIAN REED:**

After John's phone call, Faye rushed over to his house, along with the Woodstock police. But she says she didn't look in the freezer. She told the police officers that John had said there was gold there, but she doesn't know if they looked either, and she doesn't believe the cops would have taken it.

What Faye does happen to know, she says, is that when John's cousin Reta got into his house three days later and looked in the freezer, there was no gold there.

**BRIAN REED:**

So what do you think was going on? Do you think there was gold and someone got to it? Do you think that there wasn't gold?

**FAYE GAMBLE:**

I think they either have not found it or that somebody had went right in here.

**BRIAN REED:**

But who? I mean, like, how much time passed between you being on the phone with John and arriving with the police?

**FAYE GAMBLE:**

Well, I know that when Reta came up that she went into the house and there was things that she could not find—things that were totally gone from over there.

**BRIAN REED:**

What she's saying is that someone was in the house before Reta got in there, and could have raided the freezer, because she knows for sure some other things had disappeared by then—things...

**BRIAN REED:**

That were there when you were there. I see. Like what?

**BRIAN REED:**

Faye starts moving her mouth, without letting actual sound out. Eventually she'll reveal that when Reta got into John's house, she couldn't find John's mother's purse or a checkbook or John's laptop, which, I know who has that. But when I asked Faye who she thinks took that stuff, Faye is purposely vague. I think maybe she's not sure what I know already, or else maybe she knows I know so she knows she doesn't have to say it out loud, et cetera, et cetera. Anyway, now she's making weird eyes at me.

**BRIAN REED:**

You got a little grin on your face and a knowing like, eye roll here. I know probably who you think it is. So, like, do you think like—is the running theory that it was Tyler? Do you want to talk about that or no? No. OK.

**FAYE GAMBLE:**

Because I know things I can't talk about.

**BRIAN REED:**

You know things you can't talk about.

**BRIAN REED:**

I did eventually read John's 53-page manifesto. John emailed it, saying it was the most important thing he'd ever send me. It was his fifth revision, and he'd titled it *Critical* *Issues* *for* *the* *Future.*

And if I had to distill its message it would be this—as we run out of affordable fossil fuels, as climate change renders the places that we live more difficult to inhabit, do not expect a great coming together. Instead, John writes, prepare for the US to crumble into a bunch of competing autonomous regions. A few of them may become cohesive societies, says John, but expect many of them to descend into carnage, to, quote, "enter a new dark ages, a sort of new feudalism ruled by theocratic dictators."

He goes on, quote, "expect public mutilations, executions, and torture to make a comeback in this region, flogging, boiling, burning, hand-cutting, hanging, evisceration, honor killings, gang rape. Due process will perish," he writes, "and confederates will betray each other for minuscule gains. That gain may be as mundane as a morsel of food or a drink of water. Goodbye to civil liberties and minority rights also. That was another byproduct of the cheap oil economy. Civil rights are not a consideration of the under-nourished."

I remember reading this in 2014 and thinking, wow, John does not have a high opinion of modern humanity's ability to solve problems. I also remember thinking, that's not really going to happen, at least not anytime soon. Which is the same thing I thought when John told me he was going to commit suicide.

[MUSIC - THE ZOMBIES, "A ROSE FOR EMILY]

*S-Town* is produced by Julie Snyder and me, with editing from Ira Glass, Sarah Koenig, and Neil Drumming. Whitney Dangerfield is our digital editor. Starlee Kine is a story consultant. Fact checking and research by Ben Pheland. Seth Lind is our director of operations. Lyra Smith mixes the show. Matt Tierney is our technical director.

The *S-Town* staff includes Emily Condon, Elise Bergerson, Julie Whitaker, and Kimberly Henderson. Music for the show is composed by Daniel Hart, Trey Pollard, Helado Negro, and Matt McGinley. Music supervision by Damian Graff. Our website is stownpodcast.org. Special thanks to David Rafael, Stephanie Kimmer, Ashley Cleek, and to all of John's friends from over the years who were so generous and thoughtful talking to me, and who taught me a lot about horology, too.

We're of course on Facebook, and we're on Twitter, and also follow us on Instagram, @stownpodcast, where we'll be putting some photos of some weird, cool clocks John worked on over the years.

[AD]

*S-Town* is a production of *Serial* and *This* *American* *Life.*

**Chapter V Transcript**

**SARAH KOENIG:**

Chapter V.

**BRIAN REED:**

On a Sunday evening in 2015, with Christmas less than a week away, I log into Facebook at home and notice I have an urgent-seeming message from Tyler's mother, Maya. FYI, she writes, Tyler will probably be in jail Monday. There's a warrant out for him, theft in the first, grand jury. John's still haunting us. I think he's giving up, she tells me of Tyler, with a frown emoji. Then she writes, he won't last a day in prison. I think he'll pull a John.

**IRENE HICKS:**

Hello?

**BRIAN REED:**

Hi, Ms. Hicks, this is Brian Reed, the radio reporter.

**BRIAN REED:**

I quickly call Maya from my cell phone, hence the lower quality recording. But her mother, Tyler's grandmother, Ms. Irene Hicks picks up and says, Maya's not feeling up to talking. So instead, Ms. Hicks explains to me what's happening with Tyler.

**IRENE HICKS:**

They got nine felony charges against him right now.

**BRIAN REED:**

Nine felony charges?

**IRENE HICKS:**

Yes. He's saying, Granny, cook me some supper cause I might not get nothing but jail food for the next couple of months.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler's grandmother, Ms. Hicks, says she doesn't know all the details of the charges against her grandson. They're not publicly filed yet. But Tyler's mom, Maya, heard from a family friend who works in local law enforcement that a grand jury had indicted Tyler on a felony count for theft of the 48-foot trailer he took from John's property, along with the buses filled with lumber and antiques. Tyler's had misdemeanors before but never a felony.

And to exacerbate things, it turns out, about a month ago around Thanksgiving, in an incident unrelated to John, Tyler was also arrested for armed burglary. He went to pick up his youngest daughter, who lives with him, from her mother's place, and according to Tyler, her mom wouldn't let him in and he was concerned for his daughter's safety. So he busted down the door and pulled his daughter out and the mom called the cops, who charged him with armed burglary, because he had a gun, which he says was in his car, but which the mom said he had on him.

Tyler has a court date tomorrow for the burglary charge, and his mother and grandmother are worried that the judge is going to toss him in jail when he sees the new theft count for the trailer from John's. This all couldn't be happening at a worse time, because Tyler recently found out he has a fourth baby on the way with his current girlfriend.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh, man, what a mess.

**IRENE HICKS:**

Tell me about it.

**BRIAN REED:**

As we're talking, Ms. Hicks does this thing I've heard so many people do, not only in Bibb County, but everywhere—talking about what she sees as one injustice that's happening to someone close to her, her grandson, suddenly gets her thinking about another injustice a little further removed, and then another further removed from that, and then another further removed from that.

We're on the phone for 45 minutes and she ends up giving me this whole litany. She's complaining about sexual abuse by police officers, about the cop in Chicago who shot a black teenager 16 times, the atrocious candidates for president, and her quote, "sorry governor," Robert Bentley.

**IRENE HICKS:**

Holy mackerel, it's just a whole bunch of mess.

**BRIAN REED:**

Ms. Hicks, you sound like John B. McLemore.

**IRENE HICKS:**

Do I? [LAUGHTER] Well, I mean, right now it is very precarious.

**BRIAN REED:**

Right now, it's very precarious, Ms. Hicks says.

**IRENE HICKS:**

I tell you. The whole system is bad.

**BRIAN REED:**

Ms. Hicks' life has felt precarious for a long time now. Tyler's ordeal is only the most recent trouble to wedge itself into her days. Ms. Hicks still cares for her son, Jimmy, Tyler's uncle Jimmy, even though he's 58 years old because he's severely incapacitated by the bullet lodged in his brain. She also supports her 45-year-old daughter, Maya, Tyler's mother, who lives with Ms. Hicks too and who, despite being really smart and having a college degree, finds it hard to hold a job because of depression and other health problems.

There was also an extended family member living with Ms. Hicks for seven years after he got out of prison for a sex offense. He just moved out and no sooner did his room clear than in moved a granddaughter. Meanwhile, someone's left a dog behind who's about to have a litter of puppies, and Tyler and his kids and pregnant girlfriend are living in a half-finished house Tyler's been building in Ms. Hicks' yard.

**IRENE HICKS:**

If you find a solution for my condition here, I would appreciate it. For any idea you have, it'd be welcome. Kick them out and shoot them or do something. [LAUGHTER]

Woo. I don't know whether I'm coming or going. If I had a different disposition, I'd probably would go stark-raving crazy. I just take my medicine and take my Bocelli. And if you hear me play Bocelli, then you know I'm sad.

**BRIAN REED:**

Andrea Bocelli. Ms. Hicks is an opera lover.

**IRENE HICKS:**

Oh, yeah. I like all operas. Yeah. Verdi is my favorite but—

**BRIAN REED:**

Bocelli is for when you're feeling depressed?

**IRENE HICKS:**

If they hear me play Bocelli out here, they say, uh-oh, Granny's upset about something. Don't bother her right now.

[LAUGHTER]

**BRIAN REED:**

Have you been playing it lately?

**IRENE HICKS:**

Oh, I play it all the time.

**BRIAN REED:**

So you've been feeling sad?

**IRENE HICKS:**

I've been feeling sad—well, and upset about things that I can't alter. I mean, misery loves company, so Maya and I begin to sit together. You see tears welling in our eyes when he hear of a sad story. I said, uh-oh, Maya, don't start your crying. I said, it gonna make me cry now. But when she talks about Tyler she always cries. She says she don't have no tears left.

I'm just like that middle-man, you know, because I feel sorry. I mean, I love Tyler more than anything, but the idiot just won't do right, you know. He's doing some dumb things. I can't make up my mind whether to scold him or love him or something.

[MUSIC - "RIGOLETTO LA DONNE E MOBILE" BY ANDREA BOCELLI]

**BRIAN REED:**

Whether to scold Tyler Goodson or whether to love him—a conundrum that has driven its fair share of people—mother, grandmother, girlfriends, buddies, John, a radio reporter from New York—driven all of us at one time or another to salve our exasperation with our own personal versions of Bocelli.

[MUSIC - "RIGOLETTO LA DONNE E MOBILE" BY ANDREA BOCELLI]

**IRENE HICKS:**

Oh, that man's got a voice like an angel.

**BRIAN REED:**

From *Serial* and *This* *American* *Life,* I'm Brian Reed. This is *Shittown.*

[MUSIC - ANDREA BOCELLI, "RIGOLETTO LA DONNA E MOBILE"]

Let's back up. A month and a half before my Sunday night phone call with Tyler's grandmother, before the news of the grand jury and felony charges, to Woodstock town hall. It's four months after John died, four months into this battle between Tyler and John's cousins, and another of Tyler's court hearings has just ended, this one for a misdemeanor trespassing, with which he was charged after going on to John's property and taking the trailer and buses.

John's cousin Reta and her husband Charlie are here from Florida, a special prosecutor was called in from out of town, and Tyler's lawyer came in from Bessemer. The only person who wasn't present for Tyler's hearing was Tyler because he got a temporary job at a factory in Georgia and says he didn't want to lose a day's work to come back to Woodstock so he sent his lawyer in his place

Reta and Charlie, John's cousins, drove 10 hours from Florida, all to watch as the judge slapped Tyler with a new offense, failure to appear, and in the course of two and 1/2 minutes adjourned court.

The last time I saw Reta was our meeting after I discovered that we were staying at the same hotel and left a note under her door, though she didn't want to talk on tape. But now, as we're lingering in the town hall parking lot, with the sun setting, we start chatting and she says it's OK if I record. She seems frustrated with Tyler.

**RETA:**

I'm upset because of the whole situation with him taking advantage of an 89 year old that can't take care of herself.

**BRIAN REED:**

Reta says they found just one bank account for John that he used for his mother's expenses. It had $98 in it. All the items that Tyler has taken from the McLemore property, in his eyes to keep from falling into the nefarious hands of the cousins—the buses full of lumber, the trailer, the vehicles—Reta sees as Tyler stealing from John's mother, his legal heir, Mary Grace.

**RETA:**

And she has no money. And you know, you just see her whole life. It just wasn't meant to be this way, you know. It just breaks my heart that there's people like that in the world, you know, that can take advantage of good people. And I personally think there was something more than this.

**BRIAN REED:**

What do you mean?

**RETA:**

I don't think John would have ever taken his life and left his mother in the shape that he did. Yes, he probably would have ended up killing himself, but I think it came prematurely.

**BRIAN REED:**

Evidently, this is how dark this feud has become.

**RETA:**

I think he drank cyanide, but I think he was forced to drink cyanide. I think he was probably intoxicated and someone just cheered him on, and it was something he wanted to do eventually anyway, and he just did it prematurely.

**BRIAN REED:**

I mean, someone—do you think it was Tyler?

**RETA:**

Hm-hmm. I do. I've told the police. I think they dropped the ball on this one. I really do.

I think John and Tyler had an argument. I think he probably got fed up with John. And—

**CHARLIE:**

You're speculating now. Just don't do that.

**RETA:**

I am speculating and I told him I'm speculating.

**BRIAN REED:**

Charlie, Reta's husband, is hanging around, not exactly thrilled that Reta is talking to me. And he's right. Reta is absolutely speculating. There's just no evidence at all to back this suspicion up. There's nothing noted in the police incident report for John's suicide. John was texting Tyler minutes before he downed the cyanide, and Faye Gamble was on the phone with John as he did it and reported nothing about hearing another person in the background egging him on or anything like it. She says all she heard were dogs.

Reta acknowledges this—that there's no evidence whatsoever. Still she says—

**RETA:**

It's just—I believe it.

**BRIAN REED:**

You do?

**RETA:**

Yeah. I certainly do.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler's a thief, Reta tells me, who's trespassed repeatedly onto the property of a dead man and his infirm mother, ransacked it looking for gold, and taken valuable things that weren't his. Why wouldn't he be capable of offing John?

**RETA:**

We'll never know, but nobody will change my mind about it.

**BRIAN REED:**

At one point, Charlie starts making a cut it gesture across his neck.

Charles wants you to stop.

[LAUGHTER]

**CHARLIE:**

Come on, let's go.

**BRIAN REED:**

But somehow they don't go. And before we know it, we've been talking for more than an hour. Reta tells me all the ways she's tried to track John's gold. She's called the mint, the U.S. treasury, but she's had no success. She also pulls out a baby book that Mary Grace kept for John and shows it to me. It has family pictures and class photos and report cards and John's birth certificate. She offers to make me copies of it.

I ask how Mary Grace is doing.

**RETA:**

Oh my gosh. She's just got back from Gatlinburg.

**BRIAN REED:**

What was there?

**RETA:**

She went just up to see the leaves change.

**BRIAN REED:**

And that's a surprise to me, because when I met Mary Grace while she was living with John, I did not get the impression that she was healthy enough to travel. But now Charlie and Reta have her staying with family friends. And they say, except for the moments she gets emotional about John, she's doing quite well.

She has a TV to help her pass the time, which she didn't have living with John. Charlie says she's gotten sharper and become more aware of current events. She used to be a librarian and cared about that kind of stuff. Her caregivers bring her out to eat a lot. She's gained 18 pounds in the last three months.

**CHARLIE:**

She went to the river. They carried her on a boat ride to the river here not long ago.

**BRIAN REED:**

Really?

**CHARLIE:**

Yeah.

**RETA:**

She just went on the boat.

**CHARLIE:**

So she's really doing good.

**BRIAN REED:**

Hearing about all this, it occurs to me, for kind of the first time, that John probably wasn't providing the best life for Mary Grace. I don't like to judge the way people live, and so I hadn't the few days I was there with Mary Grace and John. But Reta says before John died, Mary Grace probably hadn't been on a trip in 30 years. She didn't have new clothes. There were fleas all over the house when they got in there. The windows in Mary Grace's bedroom, John had boarded up.

Reta says he told her he'd had trouble keeping Mary Grace in the house. Reta says Mary Grace's nurses told her living in a dark room like that can cause a dementia patient to lose track of time. In Mary Grace's case, Reta believes she lost 10 years, because she knew when her birthday was, but said she was 78 turning 79, instead of 88 turning 89, which is the age she actually was.

Reta and Charlie have lived in Florida for 30 years, but they both grew up here in Woodstock. They still own property here, and they've kept in touch with John and Mary Grace over the years and visited them on trips back to Alabama. So Reta says she feels embarrassed and mad at herself that she didn't put together what was going on and intervene sooner.

I'm glad to hear Mary Grace is doing better, I tell her. By now the sun is set. Reta and Charlie and I are standing in a dark, empty parking lot. This whole time the door to their SUV has been open, right next to us, and I kept feeling like they could get in and speed away from me at any minute. And now, finally, they do.

**RETA:**

OK.

**BRIAN REED:**

Have a good night.

**CHARLIE:**

Enjoy your stay.

**BRIAN REED:**

Enjoy your stay.

**BRIAN REED:**

Two months later, I get an email. Hey, Brian, I know you are a busy, busy man, so when you have time, please call me. Thanks, Reta. Sitting at my kitchen table, I call.

**BRIAN REED:**

OK, I think we're recording now.

**BRIAN REED:**

Reta says it's OK for me to tape on my cell phone. She's at home in Florida. Charlie is out of town, which makes for an opportune time to call me, because she knows he might not approve. Reta tells me there's something she wants to ask me about.

**BRIAN REED:**

So what's up?

**RETA:**

OK. I am trying to get some information. Obviously you know more about what is going on with the Woodstock police and Bibb county, blah, blah, blah. You don't have to tell me what you know, but I'm not really sure who I can trust and who I cannot trust.

**BRIAN REED:**

Reta goes on for a bit, and I can't figure out what she's trying to ask me. She's talking about the Woodstock police officers. There are four of them full-time, and how she suspects they're working against her. John was skeptical of the cops, too, she says.

**RETA:**

You know, he called—excuse the expression, but he called Woodstock a shittown. He hated it.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh, I'm well aware of that.

**BRIAN REED:**

Isn't that what John first got in touch with me about to investigate, she says, corruption in the local police?

**RETA:**

Was John telling you not to trust the Woodstock—that Woodstock police could not be trusted? Was there one certain guy?

**BRIAN REED:**

I tell her, John called me down here to investigate a murder that in the end never actually happened. Yes, he hated the police and town government but in a completely unbiased and all-encompassing way. He wasn't ratting on one specific person. It's still confusing to me why exactly Reta's asking about this, until she tells me this next part about Tyler.

She's discovered something she believes he's done, something more serious than taking the trailer or buses, and this time she has actual evidence. Reta knew that after John's suicide, one of the things Tyler had taken was John's pickup truck. So one day she called the state motor vehicle office to order a copy of the title. And when she told them the circumstances, that John B. McLemore was deceased, the woman on the phone was surprised. John B. McLemore died in June? That was strange, because someone signed his name on the truck's title in July and sold it.

Oh, OK, Reta said. She got the name of the guy who bought the truck and tracked him down, not far from the Mississippi state line.

**BRIAN REED:**

What did the guy say? Did he get it directly from Tyler? He bought the truck—

**RETA:**

He got it directly from Tyler. Tyler had posted it on Facebook. And he went over to Tyler's house and met Tyler and paid $3,300 for the truck. And Tyler told him that he had bought the truck from his step-dad, John McLemore.

**BRIAN REED:**

Meanwhile, Tyler told me once that the truck was John's. The state revoked the title. Reta got the guy to write out what happened in a statement, and he gave her the truck, saying he'd eat the $3,300 bucks he'd paid for it if it meant avoiding trouble with the law. Reta also just discovered that Tyler allegedly pulled off the same shebang with John's Mercedes. That he sold for $900.

**RETA:**

And I do not want anyone to know this because I just don't know what they're feeding Tyler.

**BRIAN REED:**

Which brings us to why Reta was plumbing me for intel on the Woodstock police. She doesn't want to tell them about her investigation because she believes they're protecting Tyler. She says she asked the cops to look into these vehicles months ago, but that they came back and told her everything was fine, that they belong to Tyler.

And there have been other issues she's reported since John died where Reta feels they've chosen not to investigate or arrest Tyler. Take the saga that started one day, back during the summer, when Reta and Charlie were home in Florida and sent their niece, who lives in Woodstock, to check on the McLemore property. Reta says her niece arrived and saw that John's workshop had been broken into, so she called the cops.

**RETA:**

Well, she got Lightsey.

**BRIAN REED:**

That's officer Jerry Lightsey, a veteran Woodstock cop in his 60s.

**RETA:**

And Lightsey says, where is Mary Grace? The homeowner should be calling.

**BRIAN REED:**

Jerry Lightsey was familiar with the situation. He had to have known that Mary Grace would not be handling something like this. Where's Reta, he asked? In Florida, Reta's niece told him.

**RETA:**

And he told her, we don't have time to come over there. I'm not going to file a report. And then the very next day is when Tyler took the buses.

**BRIAN REED:**

A friend of Reta's in town called her when that happened to say she'd just seen Tyler riding in front of a giant tow truck with one of John's buses. So Reta and Charlie quickly packed and booked it first thing in the morning to Bibb County. They went to Tyler's grandmother, Ms. Hicks' house, and drove slowly by, snapping photos of the buses and the large trailer Tyler had also taken from John's, which were all sitting in plain view in the yard.

Soon after, Reta says, the person who was watching their house back home in Florida picked up the phone there, and someone who identified himself as Tyler said—

**RETA:**

If you don't quit driving by my house and harassing me, I am going to fill your ass with buckshot.

**BRIAN REED:**

Reta wasn't intimidated by this threat. Let me say this, she told me, we carry a gun when we're in Woodstock. But she was pissed. She went in person to the Woodstock police station to report it. And who should be there but Jerry Lightsey.

**RETA:**

And when I walk in, Jerry just hits me with—with all barrels, saying, you have got to quit riding by Tyler's house. You have got to quit harassing him or I'm going to have to arrest you. And I'm like, you have got to be kidding me!

Do you mean to tell me I can't drive down a public road, but he can go over at Mary Grace's and steal all of her stuff? Which I didn't really say stuff, because I was mad. And then, you know, he's like, lady, you got to back off. And I thought, wow, I think he's on Tyler's side.

I don't know. I swear, I just—I don't trust—trust Lightsey. And I'd tell him that to his face. I'm not talking behind his back.

**BRIAN REED:**

I tried asking Officer Lightsey about all this to his face. After a few phone calls I approached him one morning in the Woodstock Town Hall parking lot. But he declined to speak to me. The Woodstock Police Chief, Len Price, didn't respond directly to Reta's claims that the department's been on Tyler's side, but he told me that he and his officers made clear to Tyler that he could not take anything from the house until matters were settled in probate court. He also told me that the cops found no money or gold in John's house. And he made a point of mentioning that the town had to pay for the cleanup of the suicide scene.

All that said, I do have some insight into what's going on with Tyler and Jerry Lightsey.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Hell, he comes over here pretty often.

**BRIAN REED:**

Jerry's a family friend. Tyler says he's especially close with his sister and her husband and Tyler's mom, who's told me herself that Jerry's a pal.

Not long after Reta vented her worries to me about Lightsey covering for Tyler, Tyler tells me that Lightsey swung by his grandmother's recently. Tyler's been constructing his house there out of the old lumber that was in the buses he took. I've been observing Tyler's progress on the house myself every time I visit, and it is truly remarkable.

As the heart of the house, he's used the white trailer from John's place, outfitting it with a kitchen, and then assembled this giant fascinating two-story structure all around it, kind of like a non-treehouse version of the *Swiss* *Family* *Robinson,* making use of the bus lumber, but also all sorts of other materials he's scavenged—bits of driftwood, wisteria vines, telephone poles he was able to buy off a guy, an old deck he took apart, pieces of fence, a horse's watering trough he's turning into a shower. There's a huge workshop with a pool table and bedrooms for all his girls, and a second floor porch that looks out over a pond in the forest. I come from a family of homebuilders, and I've never seen anything like it. Anyway, Officer Lightsey came by not long ago and Tyler gave him a tour.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

He walked in the house and even walked around and looked at the backside of the addition area and everything.

**BRIAN REED:**

So you gave him a tour of the house that you're building with the stuff that's disputed that his office technically arrested you for and is going through the courts?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Yep.

I told him, I said, yeah, it's going to be nice if I can ever get done with it, and if I stay out of prison. And he said, yeah, you better hope they don't want this damn thing back, talking about the trailer. And I said, this thing ain't going nowhere, Jerry. He said, oh, this ain't the same one is it? I said, no. He said, oh, OK. And then we just carried on another conversation.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler said it was like Jerry was winking at him, being his buddy. Tyler's mom told me Jerry stressed over Tyler's legal issues, given that he's their friend, and that he's, quote, "eagerly waiting for his retirement date next year." Tyler says Jerry's told him he's tired of having to choose between his friends and his job.

There's more, right after this.

[AD]

**BRIAN REED:**

Can I tell you what Tyler's view of you guys is? Would you mind if I told you that?

**RETA:**

No.

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm just curious to hear what you say.

**BRIAN REED:**

On the phone with Reta I realize there's this whole version of her that I've gotten from Tyler that casts her and Charlie as heartless, money-grubbing carpetbaggers, swooping in conveniently after John's death to wrest control of the property and assets from Tyler without a thought for Mary Grace.

But then there's the other version of Reta and Charlie that I'm getting from them of high school sweethearts who've been married 41 years, who seem to have a nice relationship, who make each other laugh and don't appear to get on each other's nerves, even after a 10-hour drive from Florida to Woodstock.

Almost every time I've seen Reta and Charlie, at probate court, at our Best Western hotel meeting, at John's funeral, Charlie has been wearing some kind of Hawaiian shirt, as if he's trying to will these unpleasant settings into the fun-filled retirement he'd imagined. They both stopped working about seven years ago. And they tell me they've been trying to enjoy it, except for the fact that for months now they've been having to drive back and forth between Charlie's father, who recently had surgery and moved in with them in Florida, and this whole mess in Bibb County—John's suicide, and Mary Grace needing care, and no money to be found, and this never-ending fight with Tyler on top of it all.

I know that for Tyler, whenever I've brought up the possibility that this could all be a misunderstanding that snowballed, that both sides could have meant well and maybe if they just hashed it out, bygones could become bygones, what he always returns to, what he can't seem to get over was that very first interaction he had with Reta and Charlie in John's driveway.

Over the months he has repeated that story to me, how Reta and Charlie passed the hospital where Mary Grace had been admitted after John's suicide to go straight to her and John's house, trying to get in, how Tyler called Mary Grace on his way to meet them there with the keys, and she instructed him not to let them in the house. The whole thing rubbed him the wrong way.

**BRIAN REED:**

He didn't like the fact that you went to the house before the hospital.

**RETA:**

Yeah, and he said that to me that day. He said, I can't believe—well, first of all he's like, well, Mama this. And I'm like, who in the heck's Mama? I didn't even know who he was talking about.

**BRIAN REED:**

Mama, you might remember, is what Tyler called John's mother, Mary Grace. Reta says the only reason they went to the house first was to pick up some essentials for Mary Grace—clean clothes and her purse. And she says actually they didn't pass the hospital to get there, because they came through Montgomery not Birmingham, like Tyler assumed.

When they arrived in Woodstock, the police chief escorted them to John's house, but they found that the door had been padlocked. The chief told them Tyler Goodson had probably put it there, and that was the first time Reta had heard his name.

Tyler's told me some stories about Reta and Charlie, especially about that first day when they met in John's driveway. He told me it escalated into an all out fight really quickly, which I wasn't sure how fully to believe. It was hard to picture these harmless seeming retirees getting in a row like that, especially in front of the police chief. Tyler says Reta and Charlie were screaming at him in the driveway, telling him off. Reta says—

**RETA:**

Absolutely.

**BRIAN REED:**

According to Tyler, Charlie cussed at him. According to Reta—

**RETA:**

Charlie said, I don't really give a F what you think.

**BRIAN REED:**

As she goes through her side of the story, it's like nearly every little thing that Tyler said happened, Reta confirms, only the opposite, if that makes sense. Like she's the lost roll of negatives to Tyler's developed photographs.

**RETA:**

And then when we got to the hospital—we got to the hospital, he had basically turned Mary Grace against me.

**BRIAN REED:**

What happened after the driveway quarrel, if you recall, is that Tyler refused to unlock the house for Reta and Charlie, and they all went to the hospital to see Mary Grace.

**RETA:**

You know, we get to the hospital, and he's sitting about as close as you can get to Mary Grace without being in her lap. And I walk in the door and I said, Mary Grace, I am just so sorry. And she said, you never had kids. You've never lost any kids. You don't know how I feel. I said, Mary Grace, do you know who this is? She says, yeah, I know who you are, Reta.

So I went up to the nurse's station to ask them what was going on. They said, she's upset because he told her you were taking her to Florida.

**BRIAN REED:**

Which wasn't the case. They barely even knew what was going on, Reta says. There were no plans yet.

**RETA:**

And the nurses were saying, who is this guy? What connection is he to her? Is he her adopted son? He told them he was her adopted son! And so I'd go back in there and, you know, I said, Mary Grace, now I'm here to see, is there anything that I can do to help you or whatever?

And Tyler, he's like, well, I'm going to get—I'm going to get Mama home. And oh, me and Mama sit out on the porch and we talk about old times. And, Mama, I'm going to get you some new shoes, and, Mama, my kids are going to pick you fresh flowers every day. And I walked out and I told Charlie, I said, Charlie, if I hear him call her Mama one more time, I'm going to go ballistic.

**BRIAN REED:**

Before we move on, can I tell you, the way you're describing Tyler at the hospital as putting on a show for you guys—that's how he describes you at the hospital, as putting on a show.

**RETA:**

[LAUGHS]

**BRIAN REED:**

Saying that you guys were crying over Mary Grace and were like all boo hoo hoo or so.

**RETA:**

No! No! I went in and I did say, Mary Grace, I am so sorry. I'm not saying I wasn't crying. I probably did cry. I mean, my God, I knew John Brooks. It wasn't like he was a stranger. He's family. But I wasn't, oh, Mary Grace, I'm so sorry. You know.

**BRIAN REED:**

At that point, Reta says she really wasn't sure what to make of the situation. Mary Grace was saying that she wanted to go back to her house and her dogs and have Tyler take care of her. Reta hadn't seen Mary Grace for a while and says she didn't yet realize the extent of her dementia. So after a while, Reta turned to Tyler.

**RETA:**

I just told him, I said, look, if Mary Grace wants you to move in and take care of her and you want to do that, so power be it. I'm going home. I'll stay after the funeral, and then I'm going home to Florida. I don't need this. Good luck to you.

**BRIAN REED:**

Wait, were you actually willing to let Mary Grace go with Tyler? Like, would that—or you were just calling his bluff or, like—

**RETA:**

No! No, I was serious. She said it was OK. She liked him. He liked her. I'm like, fine. And then the social worker called me at my hotel and said, we're not turning Mary Grace over to him.

**BRIAN REED:**

Part of the reason was that Tyler isn't kin to Mary Grace. But Reta says, in addition to that, the hospital staff had doubts about what Tyler was claiming.

**RETA:**

He sat over there and said, well, I've been taking care of Mary Grace for years. I take her to the doctor. I do this, and I do that. Well, what's the doctor's name? Uh, uh, uh, uh, I don't know.

Who's the health care? Well, uh, uh, uh, I don't know. Well, does she take any medications? No, she don't take anything but vitamins. Well, they knew that was a lie cause they had her medical records. So he just dug himself a ditch.

**BRIAN REED:**

One thing Reta has in common with her cousin John—she too is a fastidious record-keeper. She'll eventually give me a copy of a daily journal she's been keeping of what's occurred since John's death in impressive detail. She lists each little interaction with authorities in there, lunches, visits to the pharmacy.

When we're done talking tonight, Reta will enter this—our very phone call into the journal. Quote, "talked to Brian Reed, reporter, for over three hours." I'm also in there on day 18 at probate court, described as being with America Radio, and that I showed up and quote, "seemed to know a lot of information," which I find flattering.

On this day, according to Reta's journal, after the social worker declined to release Mary Grace to Tyler, Reta got a call from a friend.

**RETA:**

...saying that Tyler was over at the house with two trailers and two trucks.

**BRIAN REED:**

At John's house, there to load up stuff, allegedly.

**RETA:**

So I got in the car and went down there and the police had already run him off. And the police is the one that told me, you might want to go ahead and try to get custody of Mary Grace.

**BRIAN REED:**

In her journal she wrote, quote, "that is when I realized that Tyler was a gold-digger, and I decided to fight him for Mary Grace's sake." And the days become immediately busy. The journal documents an urgent and successful effort, involving Faye Gamble, the town clerk, and Boozer Downs, the town and John's attorney, to get Reta temporary guardianship over Mary Grace.

It documents a trip to Lowe's to purchase locks to secure Mary Grace's house; a trip to the post office, where Reta says she learned that Tyler's girlfriend had picked up a package addressed to John's P.O. Box; a trip to the police station to report that, and choose Tyler's girlfriend out of a lineup, which never led to any charges; a trip to the nail salon for Mary Grace to get a pedicure; leftovers for lunch on Tuesday; the trip to Boozer Down's office, where they met with Tyler and kind of sort of tried to talk things out, but that went south when Mary Grace said to him—

**RETA:**

Don't call me Mama. I'm not your Mama.

**BRIAN REED:**

Which Reta says Mary Grace uttered of her own volition. She also says she didn't break up Tyler and Mary Grace's conversation at the funeral like Tyler told me, that she's not brainwashing Mary Grace against him. There's a trip documented in the journal to Walmart to get John some burial clothes, a trip to the funeral home and to the florist, to the cemetery to point out where to dig John's grave.

**RETA:**

And let me tell you another funny story—well, it's not funny. But the undertaker came out and told me, he says, now, you know John's got some real big gold nipple rings. And I says, really? Well, didn't know that.

**BRIAN REED:**

When I said Reta corroborated nearly everything Tyler told me, well, here you go. Reta told the undertaker—

**RETA:**

I want those nipple rings. I just want them.

**BRIAN REED:**

Sure, the undertaker said, no problem. But then as Reta and Charlie were leaving the cemetery, they realized he hadn't given them to them.

**RETA:**

So I went and asked the undertaker, where were they? And he said, oh, we couldn't get them off. Something about how they were screwed on and all this stuff. And, you know, I really wish I had pursued that now that I think back. I really don't think the nipple rings were on him. I think the undertaker got them. Because you're telling me that you got a guy there that y'all have done an autopsy on, and you cut him from neck to privates and you can't get a nipple ring off? Cut his nipple off. He's dead.

**BRIAN REED:**

Ugh.

Wait, why would you want those?

**RETA:**

Well, you know what? The main thing I got to thinking about is I didn't know if it was just something that I would have of his that maybe I could pass on to Mary Grace or something. Or just something to keep of his, you know what I mean?

**BRIAN REED:**

But wait, you would have given the nipple rings to Mary Grace? But she didn't know he had nipple rings, did she?

**RETA:**

Well, I wouldn't have. But I mean, it was just something of his I guess that—I didn't have anything of his.

**BRIAN REED:**

Reta says part of the reason is that she's had a lot of deaths in her family and doesn't trust funeral homes. But still—

**BRIAN REED:**

Ugh, I'm sorry. I'm just reeling from you saying they should cut his nipples off.

**RETA:**

I'm just saying, don't tell me that you can get those nipple rings off.

**BRIAN REED:**

Reta is now going after Tyler on multiple fronts. She's pressed charges for trespassing. She's pressing charges for theft of the trailer and buses, both of which the Woodstock police chief pointed out to me they did arrest Tyler on. She will soon bring the district attorney's office the evidence she's gathered that Tyler faked John's signature on the titles for John's cars, and a grand jury will also indict him on multiple counts of forgery. The assistant district attorney told me he's impressed by how industrious Reta's been, investigating these matters completely on her on.

Reta tells me she thinks Tyler should do time for what he's done.

**RETA:**

To me, anyone that goes over and takes other people's possessions is a criminal.

**BRIAN REED:**

Charlie told me he's not necessarily mad at Tyler. Tyler's just doing what he knows. He's a criminal. That's what Tyler's been reduced to in their eyes. But this is what conflicts like this do to the participants—reduce them.

Half a year into the fight, Reta says she feels minimized by it, too, like the fight has turned her into someone meaner and cruder than she is.

**RETA:**

I'm serious. I mean, as a Christian I even have trouble with this because you know you're supposed to love everybody. [LAUGHTER] And I don't want him to think that this is the kind of person I am. I'm not a bad person. I'm not—I'm not that type of person.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

You'd think I was some kind of a drug addict or a thief or a god-damned some kind of criminal with all this mess I'm in. But I don't know, I don't consider myself a damn criminal. I mean, hell, I don't do nothing but work and take care of kids.

**BRIAN REED:**

The feud is wearing on Tyler, too. That Sunday night when I spoke to his grandmother on the phone, the night she and Tyler's mother were freaking out that the judge might throw him in jail the next day—well, that didn't happen. Tyler paid his $1,000 bond and remained free.

Right now his forgery and theft case is scheduled to go to trial in early summer. He says he sees nothing wrong with the measures he's taken. Yes, he took the trailer and buses, but would a criminal have bills of sales for those things? Which Tyler has, even though Reta and Charlie claim they must be fake based on the dates.

And would a criminal have asked the Woodstock police, after telling them about the bill of sale, if he was allowed to go on John's property and repossess the trailer and buses? Because according to Tyler, that's what he did, and the police said it was OK. And would a criminal say this when he got wind that he was being investigated for possibly forging John's name on a document—

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I don't see how in the hell they could prove that. You know.

**BRIAN REED:**

Is there something to prove?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I don't know. I mean, I don't know what they're trying to prove.

**BRIAN REED:**

When Tyler and I talk about this, he doesn't yet know what the forgery allegations are about exactly. The county hasn't yet filed the charges against Tyler, claiming he's forged John's signature on the titles for John's truck and Mercedes. They'll file those soon. But at the moment when we're talking, he's simply heard word that someone has been going around asking questions about him, about a forgery, and he thinks it maybe has to do with the bills of sale for the buses. Either way, I ask him broadly—

**BRIAN REED:**

But is there a forgery that happened, Tyler?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Oh. I don't know.

**BRIAN REED:**

OK.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Not on my part.

**BRIAN REED:**

Not on my part, he says. For a year, Tyler and I have talked regularly, on the phone and when I come to Alabama. He's told me all sorts of stories, some about John, but even more just about his life—about the abuse his father Rodney inflicted upon him and his family when he was a kid. Abuse Tyler's mother and grandmother have told me about, too. Rodney, by the way, said to me that he was not abusive. He used a different word. He said he whooped his family.

Tyler's told me about what it was like just as he was entering high school to have Rodney get convicted for sexually abusing a child. To have to suddenly cram with his family into his grandmother's house and have everybody at school know what was going on. About what it's like to have your license suspended for failing to pay a fine, one time, for a minor traffic offense, and to keep getting pulled over again and again, because you have no other way to get to work in rural Alabama, so you're driving without the license. And the fines keep mounting, what John called, fine slavery. And so much of the money you do manage to make, you have to shovel right back over to the courts or lawyers. About what all that does to your worldview.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I know I've got some bad luck, I'll tell you that. Like, I just expect the worst to happen everywhere I go and just hope I get a surprise that it don't.

**BRIAN REED:**

Getting Rodney as a dad, that is a bad hand. A cashier refusing to sell you beer at Walmart because you happen not to have a valid ID with you, not so much. But Tyler complains about that kind of thing all the same, bouncing between his many grievances, between big injustices he's experienced and petty ones.

He and I have had long, sometimes frustrating talks about this, where I've tried to understand his justification for some of the choices he makes. Like earlier on when the legal battle was just starting to get more serious with Reta and Charlie, and I suggested he might have an opportunity to prevent it from escalating.

**BRIAN REED:**

Have you considered giving the buses back just to avoid the trouble?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Fuck no.

**BRIAN REED:**

He told me it tickled him. That was his word, tickled, to see Reta and Charlie struggle. And then there's this story, which gave me a vivid sense of how Tyler sees things. He recently hired a guy to do some electrical work on the house he's building, and according to Tyler, the guy stole two of his grandfather's old guns out of Tyler's home. So Tyler came up with a whole plan—he contacted the guy and acted like he hadn't noticed, told him there was more work to be done, and tricked the guy into coming back over to his house, where he was waiting for him with a rifle in hand, and walked him over to his shed.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I had a chair sitting out there in that shed and some damn snips, hedge clipper snips propped up beside it, waiting. And I was going to cut a finger or two off. I mean, I was going to snip fingers until he had my guns delivered back here.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler, really?

**BRIAN REED:**

Yes, really. At first I thought maybe Tyler was just saying something ridiculous, embellishing. But I ask him about it, and he's clear with me. He was serious about this, and going into that shed had every intention of following through. He says he did have a change of heart once he got the guy into the shed, and ended up instead whipping the guy across the face with the gun and beating him silly, rather than dismembering him.

But he hasn't had a change of heart about the appropriateness of his plan. As we discuss it in retrospect, he still thinks it would be a completely acceptable thing to do, given the situation, which I find unsettling.

**BRIAN REED:**

You thought it would be OK to cut his fingers off?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Buddy, if he thought it was OK to come in here and steal my granddaddy's gun that is irreplaceable, then yeah, I was going to fix a thief. I believe it would've took one finger and them guns would have been found. If one finger had of went. It wouldn't have took two or three, I guarantee you.

**BRIAN REED:**

I kept questioning Tyler, trying to understand why he thought this was OK, but nothing he said did quite make me understand. And I realized it was probably going to stay that way. Eventually, as I'm saying goodbye, about to hang up the phone, Tyler asks me this.

**BRIAN REED:**

All right, man, I'm going to let you go. Can you just do one favor for me?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

You don't see me being a bad person at all, do you? Do you see me being a bad person?

**BRIAN REED:**

Do I?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

No, man, I see you as a complicated, normal person. You know, I disagree with some of your decisions. But you also—you've had a very different life experience than I've had.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

Why? Do you feel like a bad person sometimes?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

No, it's just—I just want to know what people think of me, because, I mean, hell, I'd do anything for anybody. I'd help somebody a goddamn any way I could. And I ain't out to rob nobody or steal from nobody or nothing like that. I don't—people make me out to be this—they treat me like Rodney is what it is. That's the way it's been my whole life, basically.

**BRIAN REED:**

To Tyler, Rodney, his dad—that's a criminal. And that's how Tyler measures if he's being a good person. Is he acting like Rodney?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I mean, yeah, I have a temper. But I don't beat on my kids or my wife or my mama or my sister. He does. I have made some mistakes for damn sure. But damn, I wish I had a little bit better guidance.

**BRIAN REED:**

John had a phrase for the M.O. Tyler would often employ when faced with an affront. Quote, "the whoopass now solution." John cared for Tyler, but he was also perpetually frustrated by him and was fixated on the possibility that if Tyler didn't get his life in order soon, he could end up becoming an irredeemable fuck-up.

When Tyler did something John didn't approve of, like party too much at the tattoo parlor, or get into a nasty screaming match with one of his ex's, or get locked up in jail and ask John to bail him out, it would annoy John.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I told Tyler, I've never seen the inside of a jail my entire life until I met you.

**BRIAN REED:**

And I would hear about it.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

That's what he can't do. He can't keep his fucking ass out of trouble. Am I expecting too much? Did you know he was raised a fucking child molester? Maybe I'm expecting too much.

**BRIAN REED:**

And just like with Tyler's grandmother, talking about Tyler's tribulations could quickly get John riled up about tribulations the world over, which I know we've all heard John deliver this kind of harangue before, but I share this only so you can see how riled up Tyler can make John. He really inspired some of John's most virtuosic work. Here, I'll save you all the wind up about Tyler and go straight to the money.

[MUSIC - "RIGOLETTO LA DONNE E MOBILE" BY ANDREA BOCELLI]

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

We ain't nothing but a nation of goddamn, chicken-shit, horse-shit, tattletale, pissy-ass, whiny, fat, flabby, out of shape Facebook looking damn twerp-fest, peaking out the windows and slipping around, listening in on the cell phones and spying in the peephole and peeping in the crack of the goddamned door, and listening in the fucking sheet rock. You know, Mr. Putin, please, show some fucking mercy. I mean, come on, drop a fucking bomb, won't you?

[SIGH] I gotta have me some tea.

**BRIAN REED:**

Still, John really stuck with Tyler, despite the irritations. He gave him more and more work, helped him out with more and more money, kept track of his court appointments on a calendar, hired him a lawyer, accompanied him to court, gave him lectures and advice, though it could sometimes feel to John like a one-way street.

On the phone one time, I asked John a lame question about him and Tyler, but the way he responded stayed with me.

**BRIAN REED:**

Do you think your guy's relationship is more of a friendship or more of a paternal relationship?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

What you wanted to say but you didn't come out and say it is, is your guy's relationship more of a friendship or more of a usership? That's what you wanted to say!

**BRIAN REED:**

No, it actually wasn't what I wanted to say. It's what you wanted to say apparently. Why do you say that?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

You do say that when you're pissed off at 2:00 in the damn morning. And you know, he's off so damn drunk. See, this isn't the first time I pulled this stunt. I could keep you on this phone for hours with another case by the name of Michael Fuller.

**BRIAN REED:**

John brings up this name, Michael Fuller, in the last conversation he and I ever have, a little more than a week before he killed himself. He doesn't reveal a ton about him, just that Michael was a 20-something guy John had also kind of taken under his wing years ago, when he was much younger himself. Unlike Tyler, John says Michael came from a family of professionals, a quote, "good family," but was rebellious, didn't hang with the best of influences.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

You know, he was going to be out with that wild crowd, partying, hanging out at Señor Frog's and the Quest and all these damn discos and doing all this damn dope. He just made a career out of going to jail. He would be about 45 now. And the last time I heard from him he was living up there in your neck of the woods, paying some like $1,800 a month to live in some scruffy apartment that didn't even have a damn bathroom. And he was sacked up with some damn little Argentinean girl that was bringing up high-powered pot. So, yeah, I've seen this shit before.

**BRIAN REED:**

John felt like he failed with Michael, and he worried he was about to fail with Tyler, too.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Not setting a very good track record for me, is it?

**BRIAN REED:**

After John died, I found Michael Fuller in New York City, called him to set up a time to visit. And what I walked into is this bleak scene.

**CHILD:**

So yeah, I wanted to take a selfie but nobody has space on their phone.

**BRIAN REED:**

Michael Fuller does live in an apartment in New York, and he may be paying $1,800 a month in rent. I don't know. But I believe that would be under market for his lovely apartment in upper Manhattan, which not only has a bathroom but three bedrooms.

Michael's a waiter. He likes his job. And he is shacked up with a woman, though she's Brazilian, not Argentinean as John had said, and she does not happen to be a smuggler of high-powered South American marijuana, but rather a sweet Montessori teacher, who is also Michael's wife. They have a smart and precocious seven-year-old who speaks Portuguese and English and cheers for Alabama football from afar. Michael tells me he got to know John in his early 20s while he was living down the road from him in Woodstock.

**MICHAEL FULLER:**

I was over there a lot, kind of just a safe place to be.

**BRIAN REED:**

You thought of John's as a safe place to be?

**MICHAEL FULLER:**

Yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

Michael uses a version of that word several times to describe John's—a safe place, a safety harbor, a place of safetyness. He was partying a lot then, he says, over in Birmingham, dancing as a scantily clad cowboy in a traveling male revue, doing a lot of drugs, drinking. And John's was somewhere he could go to sober up or escape the scene for a while, and he always felt welcome there, because John would be eager for the company, and would usually be up in the middle of the night after Michael was done clubbing, working on clocks. Michael says once he even hid out at John's for days, from the police, when he had a warrant out for skipping a court appearance.

Meeting Michael, I realize John couldn't have been more wrong when he said his project had failed. Michael says without John as a refuge, a voice telling him to slow it down, to drink less, he might have ended up dead some night from drunk driving or in jail more than he did already. And it was John's place that Michael went to when he was about to hit the bottom of his addiction. From there he headed back to his family and on to rehab.

**BRIAN REED:**

So you really think John had that much influence?

**MICHAEL FULLER:**

Oh, yeah. The drinking got bad. And he was a good person to be there for me at that time. He helped a lot.

**BRIAN REED:**

It's interesting, like, one of the reasons I wanted to come talk to you—are you familiar with the Goodsons? Does that name ring a bell at all?

**MICHAEL FULLER:**

No. The Goodsons? No.

**BRIAN REED:**

I explained to Michael the context in which John had told me about him, how John mentioned him because we'd been talking about this other guy, Tyler Goodson, who John had also recently been trying to shepherd through a rough period. And while I'm telling Michael about this, about the things John was doing for Tyler, he interrupts.

**MICHAEL FULLER:**

That sounds like John. Yeah. Caring and helping and that's John.

**BRIAN REED:**

You're smiling, like with recognition.

**MICHAEL FULLER:**

Yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

I asked Michael if it sounds, from what I've described, like Tyler is a later iteration of him. And he says it's weird, but, yeah, that does seem about right. John would let him stay at his house as long as he wanted, Michael says. Then he says, and that's how he was with Tyler, I guess. A thought seems to be occurring to him about John's suicide.

**MICHAEL FULLER:**

And something probably happened with Tyler. I don't know. Maybe—I don't know if—I think John was gay, which has nothing to do. It doesn't bother me at all. But—

**BRIAN REED:**

What do you think? Do you think something happened with Tyler?

**MICHAEL FULLER:**

Like, he could of stopped coming around, he could have found a girlfriend, something like that. Is that what happened?

**BRIAN REED:**

Yeah, like right before the end.

**BRIAN REED:**

Not long before John killed himself, Tyler had started getting serious with his current girlfriend, Cami, and they had recently moved in together. And when Michael said Tyler could have stopped coming around, all I could think of is the weekend leading up to John committing suicide, the weekend of Father's Day, when Tyler had been avoiding John and not speaking to him, because John had made an insulting comment about his daughter on the swing set. Michael says this is something he'd always sensed about John all those years ago.

**MICHAEL FULLER:**

He kind of wanted you by himself.

**BRIAN REED:**

He didn't want to share you, especially not with a woman.

**MICHAEL FULLER:**

I'm just saying when I took a girl over there, you could tell he would—let them go, you stay.

**BRIAN REED:**

How could you tell?

**MICHAEL FULLER:**

You could just see it. You can tell. It was always with girls. It was—they're nasty. He was never really talking nice about women.

**BRIAN REED:**

This is true. John could be scathing about lots of people. So when he was alive, this didn't necessarily jump out at me. But in retrospect, I have noticed that John can be particularly mean about women. He often used the word whore, as well as some more vulgar and inventive language to talk about women. And it sometimes seemed like he reserved a bit of extra vitriol just for them.

On the other hand, John also expressed interest in feminism, bemoaned the fact that women in his area were more educated than men but didn't seem to get the same opportunities, talked about reading Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, and was a fan of Audre Lorde. And he was enraged by sexual abuse. So, as usual with John, it was complicated. But since he died, quite a few people have told me, like Michael, that he was a woman-hater.

Michael has now formulated a theory in front of me, a speculation to be sure, but one that he's compelled by nonetheless. That Tyler, retreating from John that weekend, and then the night he killed himself Tyler choosing to stay home with his girlfriend and kids rather than heeding John's pleas and going back to his place—Michael thinks that's what led to John's suicide.

**MICHAEL FULLER:**

I'm just thinking that that's what pushed him over the edge. He's afraid he's fixing to lose Tyler.

**BRIAN REED:**

I asked Michael something I've wondered often about John, if he ever knew him to be in a relationship. I have no idea, Michael says, I don't think so. I know not with a woman, and I have no idea about a man, but he never mentioned it to me.

**BRIAN REED:**

Do you think John's relationship with you, and then now Tyler, having heard about it, was the closest thing he had to a romantic relationship?

**MICHAEL FULLER:**

I would think so. Yeah. Yeah. I would think so.

**BRIAN REED:**

Is that sad or not sad?

**MICHAEL FULLER:**

It's sad, because we're both straight.

**BRIAN REED:**

It is sad. But as I'd learned, Michael and Tyler being the closest thing John had to a romantic relationship—that's also not true.

[MUSIC - "A ROSE FOR EMILY" BY THE ZOMBIES"]

*S-Town* is produced by Julie Snyder and me, with editing from Ira Glass, Sarah Koenig, and Neil Drumming. Whitney Dangerfield is our digital editor. Starlee Kine is a story consultant. Fact checking and research by Ben Phelan. Seth Lind is our director of operations. Lyra Smith mixes the show, and Matt Tierney is our technical director.

The *S-Town* staff includes Emily Condon, Elise Bergerson, Julie Whitaker, and Kimberly Henderson. Music for the show is composed by Daniel Hart, Trey Pollard, Helado Negro, and Matt McGinley. Music supervision by Damien Graef.

Our website is stownpodcast.org. That's stownpodcast.org.

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[AD]

*S-Town* is a production of *Serial* and *This* *American* *Life.*

**Chapter VI Transcript**

**SARAH KOENIG:**

Chapter VI.

**BRIAN REED:**

From *Serial* and *This* *American* *Life,* I'm Brian Reed. This is *Shittown.*

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Phew. Stinking old car. Aw, man. Time to get another one.

**BRIAN REED:**

After a long day running around Bibb County together, to the courthouse and the library, and past the Burt family compound just to have a look at it, John and I are driving in his beat-up Mercedes back to his place.

It's my last night here. I'm flying home tomorrow. John wants to swing by the Little Caesars to pick up a pizza for his mother. It's getting dark.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

OK. We're going to take the shortcut through here, since the sun's diminishing arc is passing beneath the horizon. As the sun's diminishing arc passed beneath the horizon.

**BRIAN REED:**

A rare moment of quiet with John, in the dusk.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Phew. I'm gonna miss ya. I hate to tell you that.

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm going to miss you, too.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Shoot.

**BRIAN REED:**

Hopefully I can get back down here.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

At least come down here once every now and then for a lecture on climate change and energy.

**BRIAN REED:**

[LAUGHING]

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

And the impossibility of paying our debts.

[DOOR CHIMING]

**MAN:**

I'm low on deep dish!

**BRIAN REED:**

John grabs a pepperoni pizza from the Little Caesars to bring home to Mary Grace. And as we're climbing back into the car in the parking lot, a very minor confrontation occurs. A manager emerges from the pizza place and says to me, were you recording in my store? I tell him, yeah, I was recording John. He says, there's no recording allowed. That's all right, I say. We're leaving anyway.

**BRIAN REED:**

We won't come back. Sorry.

**MAN:**

That's all right. It's just so you know.

**BRIAN REED:**

That's it. The guy was fine to me. This was not a big deal. But as we drive away, John will not let it go.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

My store, my store, oh, I love it. Oh, my store. That motherfucker. He doesn't own a pot to piss in or a litter to sling it at. He probably lives over at South Forty.

**BRIAN REED:**

South Forty trailer park, where Tyler lived at one point, across the street from John.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

He thinks he's a top dog. He runs the Little Caesars in Buttfucksville, Alabama. In my store—is you recording anything in my store? (LAUGHING)

**BRIAN REED:**

Like, I'm over this. But then John busts out this lovely word.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

He's probably a fag, too. They always overcompensate. You know, I've been on both sides of the fence, so I know the psychology of heterosexual and homosexual. That's probably the type that likes to overcompensate. They call themselves tops. You know, they shout down the bottom. That's usually how that type of relationship works.

**BRIAN REED:**

John talking like this—it did make me wonder.

**BRIAN REED:**

This is going to sound like a ridiculous question, but is there a gay scene down here?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Oh, my god. There's no telling how many closet cases are in this town. You turn that off, and I'll tell you something.

**BRIAN REED:**

OK.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Hit the kill button for a second.

**BRIAN REED:**

This is one of the few times John ever asked me to turn my recorder off. What that usually means is that I wouldn't tell you what he said without getting his permission to describe it. But there are a few reasons I am going to give you an overview of what he told me in the car that day.

First, since John died, two other people who knew him well have told me the same information on the record. Also, John was very clear that he did not believe in God or an afterlife. So John, in his own view, is worm dirt now, unaffected by this. And lastly, what John disclosed, and where it led me after he died, helped me understand him so much more. And I think trying to understand another person is a worthwhile thing to do.

So what he told me was about a local man with whom he'd had a sexual relationship not all that long ago. I'm not going to say exactly who the man was, because that's the part John wanted secret. It wasn't the fact that he had been with men that he didn't want recorded, but that he had been with this particular guy. Because John had talked to me about this guy already, multiple times, and told me that he was not a good person.

The guy worked on John's yard over the years. And for a while, they'd been close. After John committed suicide, I went to meet with the man. We did an interview on the record, but I'm not going to use the recording. He's friendly when I arrive and open to talking. We sit, and periodically as we speak, his wife wanders by and eavesdrops.

He says his relationship with John was close but a working one. John would pay him to do projects on the house and yard, which John did with lots of people. And the man says that over time John became overly attached to him. John didn't like for the man to leave or when he had other commitments. At a moment when his wife isn't around, I ask the guy if his and John's relationship was romantic, if it was sexual.

I think that's what he wanted, the man says. I think he just wanted a partner. Not so much sex, I guess. I hope not. Had me scared, though. And so it wasn't ever sexual with you guys, I ask. Mm-mm, he says. 'Cause he said otherwise, I tell him. The man snaps his head towards me with big eyes. Mm, he says. I tell him he doesn't need to talk about it if he doesn't want, but because John told me about it, I felt compelled to ask. Mm, he says again. He pauses. Mm-mm.

And that is all that is said on the matter, though there is one moment later in the conversation when the man is telling me about the reason he and John started spending less time together. The man had started dating a woman, and John would say harsh things about her. He says he knew what John was trying to do—he was trying to get the man to be with him instead. But that ain't what I wanted, the man tells me. I don't want no boyfriend. I want a girlfriend. I'm straight and gonna stay that way, too.

I left my visit with that man, more than a year after John killed himself, feeling lots of things, but mostly feeling like, ugh, is that what passed for love in John's life? This guy maybe who has a wife and doesn't acknowledge their relationship, and who John thinks is an asshole, anyway? John did have Tyler, I guess, and Michael Fuller, years back, both of whom he clearly cared about, but both of whom were in very unstable situations and, oh yeah, were also straight.

Tyler says he and John would tell each other, I love you, man, of course with the requisite caveat that they weren't trying to get up each other's butts. But that's not love, like love love, the kind of love I hear about all the time on the country music stations as I'm driving around west Alabama.

[MUSIC - "LOVE YOU LIKE THAT" BY CANAAN SMITH]

Did John ever have love in his life? Not "I really feel something for this kid Tyler" love, but Mississippi River love, fifth of whiskey love, muscadine wine, Tom Petty track, all night till the sun come back love. Or even a quieter, steadier, maybe even longer love. Did John ever have a relationship resembling any of that, or did he spend the entirety of a lifetime without it?

One night in October 2015, as I was getting married, actually, an email showed up in my inbox. No, I was not checking my email during my wedding. I noticed it the following week. Hello, sir, it began. My name is Olin Long and I was a friend of John B McLemore for 12 years. I recently learned of his death. Olin Long. I'd never heard that name before, and it was not on John's contact list that he left behind after his suicide.

Olin goes on to explain in his email that he had corresponded with a friend of John's who was on the list, whom I'd spoken to, and that man told Olin about me, that I was doing a story about John. Can you let me know when this segment will air, Olin writes, I would very much like to listen. Also, I need to know the radio station number, AM or FM. Thank you.

I write back and tell Olin it's nice to hear from him, albeit under unfortunate circumstances. I've been talking to all sorts of friends of John's, I explain, learning about him. Would he be open to speaking to me sometime? He agrees. He tells me he lives in Birmingham about 40 miles from John's place in Woodstock. He prefers not to meet at his house, so a few months later I rent a motel room and set it up as a makeshift recording studio.

Waiting in the lobby, I see a man walk in, peering around. He's fit, but not skinny, neatly dressed in a well-fitting red sweatshirt and jeans. It's Olin. We shake hands and head into the room.

**BRIAN REED:**

Welcome to the digs.

**OLIN LONG:**

The recording studio.

**BRIAN REED:**

Yeah.

**OLIN LONG:**

All right.

**BRIAN REED:**

Later, when we get to know each other, Olin will ask me how old I think he is, and I will guess John's age, about 50, maybe even younger. But he tells me he's about to turn 60. The years haven't shown in him the way they do in others.

He sits with good posture. Military posture, I learn, when I ask him to talk about himself so I can check the levels of the mic.

**BRIAN REED:**

Let me get a quick level on your voice.

**BRIAN REED:**

He was a linguist in the Air Force, with top-secret security clearance, specializing in German and Russian.

**OLIN LONG:**

What I did was just listen to Russian pilots talk and send it to the National Security Agency.

**BRIAN REED:**

These days, he's a registered nurse at a nearby hospital.

**OLIN LONG:**

I work in the Surgical Intensive Care Unit there.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh, really?

**OLIN LONG:**

Yeah. Are you getting a good reading here?

**BRIAN REED:**

It sounds great. And also, I'm learning about you, which is helpful, because I have no idea who you are. (LAUGHING)

**OLIN LONG:**

Oh, gosh.

**BRIAN REED:**

So we're rolling.

**OLIN LONG:**

How did you know John? I figure you must have met him.

**BRIAN REED:**

I begin to explain how John wrote to our radio show, how he and I spoke on the phone for months before I ever went down there. And before I can get into much more of the story, Olin takes over the conversation. He seems eager to talk.

**OLIN LONG:**

That's very similar. When I met John, we talked on the phone for 15 months very regularly before we ever met in person. I'm going to tell you, we met on a singles line for men. The only good thing that came out of that singles line experience was a friendship with John. I met John on the line, and I called him back at the number, and within just a few minutes, I knew that I was talking to someone brilliant.

I learned of John's death on the condolence website. I had not heard from John in probably a year. So I got curious.

**BRIAN REED:**

Olin doesn't tell me why he hadn't heard from John in a year. Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself, he says.

One day, after all that time not speaking, Olin says he wondered about John, and finally called him, but his phone number was disconnected, which Olin thought was strange, because John's family had had that phone line since the 1960s. So during some downtime at work, he typed John B. McLemore obituary into Google, and there it was.

**OLIN LONG:**

And that's all I had to go on. Because in all the years I knew John, we had no friends in common. I had no one who knew him. So there was no one I could call.

**BRIAN REED:**

Olin says in the more than six months since that happened, he's been grieving alone. He has one friend at work he's told about John. He's been writing about John in his journal. And one afternoon, he visited his grave. And he corresponded with another commenter who left a message on the condolence website, who's the friend of John's who told Olin about me.

**OLIN LONG:**

And it said contact me, so I clicked—

**BRIAN REED:**

Olin and I will end up sitting in this motel room for five hours tonight, and more than six hours tomorrow, talking about John. He tells me that it feels exhilarating to finally talk about his relationship with John, to try to make sense of it, now that John's gone, with someone else who knew him, too.

The singles line Olin and John met on was called MegaPhone. This was in 2003, before online dating became ubiquitous. It was essentially Grindr for your landline. You'd dial into the service, listen to short messages people had recorded describing themselves. If you liked them, you'd beep them, as it was called. And then if they were intrigued, they could pay to be connected with you on the phone. That's what happened with Olin and John. John beeped Olin, and Olin called him back.

**OLIN LONG:**

One of the first things he said to me was that he lived with his parents, and he lived in a small town. And he said, I hope that's not a problem. We just started talking.

**BRIAN REED:**

And that talking went on for months—15 months, as Olin said—before they met in person, usually talking in the middle of the night, because Olin keeps night shift hours even on his days off, and John would just be finishing up his work in the clock shop, which he did in the evening because it was cooler.

**OLIN LONG:**

And I just remember enjoying talking at night, maybe even sitting in the dark with no lights on, and just talking on the phone with John.

**BRIAN REED:**

They found a lot to discuss. Books they were reading. Olin gravitated more to fiction, John to science. They talked about music, things going on in the world, about growing up, and a lot about being gay men in Alabama. Olin didn't still live in his hometown like John, but was born and raised in Alabama, too, and had lived much of his life there.

I have to say, Olin has such a ridiculous recall for the details of these conversations, he could be John's official biographer, like what he remembers about John's father.

**OLIN LONG:**

Tom McLemore had one eye that was straight, and the other one was a little off-center.

**BRIAN REED:**

Who Olin recalls only from a photograph he saw hanging on John's wall. He never met the man. Or John's mother—

**OLIN LONG:**

Mary Grace's birthday is November the 29th or November the 30th, 1926.

**BRIAN REED:**

Who remembers that about their friend's mother?

**OLIN LONG:**

She got married in 1951.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh, yeah. Of course. What about cousin Jimmy on John's father's side?

**OLIN LONG:**

Jimmy was born—and I'll never forget it—4/4/44. April the 4th, 1944.

**BRIAN REED:**

Of course, as Olin and John were chatting, they were feeling each other out. At one point, before they'd met, John sent Olin a photo of himself standing on a chair alongside a very tall grandfather clock at his house, with the ostensible reason of showing Olin how large the clock was. Olin looked at the clock, then looked at the man standing next to it. He noticed John's red hair, his lack of freckles, and thought, he's not bad-looking. When finally Olin visited John in Woodstock, he did so with curiosity.

**OLIN LONG:**

I was trying to decide if I was attracted to him. Because I'm going to be honest with you, when I would go down there and visit him, the few times I'd go down there, it was to take a second look.

**BRIAN REED:**

Though if they were trying to impress each other, John didn't necessarily put in a ton of effort.

**OLIN LONG:**

I mean, I went over there dressed like this one time, and he said, I only dress that way to go talk to the lawyer.

**BRIAN REED:**

I mean, Olin was dressed in that he was wearing jeans and a shirt.

**OLIN LONG:**

The difference is mine were clean and untattered. He was wearing a t-shirt with holes in it, paint stains all over it. And the trousers he had on, very much the same.

And then, of course, I was down there one evening in his bedroom, and he had a pile of handkerchiefs there on the floor. And I suspected they were used handkerchiefs. And surely enough, he had to blow his nose, and he went over there and he picked up a used, wadded-up handkerchief and blew it, and then threw it back down there in the pile. And I didn't say anything, but I thought, I don't do that.

**BRIAN REED:**

So that gave Olin pause. But still, night after night, he and John found themselves talking for hours on the phone. They were getting close.

**OLIN LONG:**

We got on well. He was somebody that I could—there was intimacy there. And I'm going to tell you the definition of intimacy that was given to me by a counselor. Intimacy is the feeling that I can tell another person my thoughts and my behaviors without fear of judgment. If I can tell them the things that I've done, even things that I'm not proud of, and they're still going to answer the phone and say hey, Olin, how are you getting along. That's how John would do—say, how are you getting along? So we did have a close friendship there.

**BRIAN REED:**

As Olin and John got to know each other, they did what you do—talk about past relationships. And there they had a lot in common. They'd both dealt with a lot of secrecy and repression.

**OLIN LONG:**

He told me that he'd had a relationship at one point with an older man. He called him William.

**BRIAN REED:**

This was John's first relationship, according to Olin. He says John was probably 21 when he met this man he called William, which would have been in the late '80s. John told him it was a hot summer's day.

**OLIN LONG:**

And there was a road crew working on the highway right out there in front of John's house. And John said he went out there with some water, kind of like the water boy at a football game. And William was one of the guys out there working on that road crew. And as John said later, William said, the first time I saw you, I knew you were hiding something, that you needed help.

**BRIAN REED:**

Help coming out of the closet, if not to the world, then at least to one other person in the world, which, as far as Olin knows, at that point John had never done. Olin also had an older, more experienced, but still not publicly out man coax him out of the closet and teach him the ropes of gay life as he knew it. His was a professor at his college, a married professor. John's was a tattooed road crew worker in Bibb County.

**OLIN LONG:**

According to John, I don't think anyone else down there knew. William was not obviously gay, no effeminate mannerisms at all. I also know that he was not very literate. It was like a symbiotic relationship. He had something to offer to John, something to help John come out of his isolation. But at the same time, if he got letters in the mail that looked official, and he couldn't read them well, John would interpret those things for him. John might write his checks for him.

**BRIAN REED:**

And in exchange, William imparted on John knowledge he had. Olin refers to them as lessons about sex. I notice that Olin is rather forthright when talking about sex, but he uses somewhat clinical words to do it. Gay people are homosexual, being gay is your sexual orientation, people sleeping together is—

**OLIN LONG:**

Sexual activity.

**BRIAN REED:**

Or physical contact, or, once in a while, when he lets his hair down a little bit, a sexual interlude. Olin believes John and William were together, engaging in sexual activity in utter secret for at least two years before William moved away, a two-year apprenticeship that William provided to John.

**BRIAN REED:**

Did you get the sense that he taught him at all about how to be a gay person in that area?

**OLIN LONG:**

I'm glad you asked that. No. I didn't get that impression. I didn't get that impression at all. I think it was mostly sex. I don't know that there was any how do we feel about each other, any discussion of the relationship. I got the impression that William's experience with gay life, even though it may have been extensive, was mostly centered around sexual connections, not relationships.

**BRIAN REED:**

And Olin could relate to that, because his experience with his professor was very similar. At 19, Olin admired the man and was grateful to him. But the man was also cheating on his wife and instead of teaching Olin how to have a healthy, open relationship, gave him lessons on how to cruise for sex in parks at nighttime and in public bathrooms.

Another thing Olin and John could relate on—they both came out to their families and weren't accepted. Olin told his mother when he was 26. And after that, he says she never mentioned it again, of her own volition. He's about to turn 60. He has never brought home a partner. Olin says when John tried to come out to his mother years ago, she simply left the room. And they never spoke of it again, either, although Olin says he never heard John use the word gay to describe himself. He always used queer, and told Olin he was, quote, "only 60% to 70% that way."

John and Olin both kept their sexuality hidden for much of their lives. John talked to Olin and to me about how you had to be very careful about that where he lived. And it seems there were only a handful of people in his life he was out to. Olin says John had a refrain he'd use to describe his life in Bibb County. You just learn to live without, he would say, without sex, love, romance, support, companionship, the touch of another person, a partner. You learn to live without.

**OLIN LONG:**

I'll tell you one of the similarities between me and John is that we can be celibate for long periods of time. And I'll just be honest with you. I didn't mean to get into all of this, but I don't mind telling you. It will soon be six years.

**BRIAN REED:**

And when they had tried to find a relationship, it had often been disappointing. By the time John and Olin met on the singles line, MegaPhone, they were both pretty disillusioned with it. They'd each joined naively, Olin now realizes, in the hopes of actually dating people. Sitting down, getting to know someone, maybe, who knows, some romance.

Living in Birmingham, Olin says at least he had places to go on a date, places where he could sit with another man in public and get a coffee or a drink. But John had nothing like that. There's not a single bar in all of Bibb County. And even if there was, it's hard to imagine two men feeling comfortable or safe going on a date there. So instead, according to Olin, John would invite guys from the line to his house, which seemed to set a certain expectation. Or else he'd come up with some other rendezvous point in Bibb County.

John told Olin about meeting a guy from the line in the parking lot of a Church of Christ near his house on a weekday afternoon. The guy called John once he was there, and John freshened up from doing work on the yard, changed his shirt. But John told Olin, when he got to the church and saw the guy, he found him repulsive-looking, a chain smoker with tobacco-stained teeth.

The guy promptly made some lewd comments to John. And as John put it, the next thing he knew, the man had grabbed him and shoved his tongue down John's throat. So John pulled away, and left, and refused to swallow the whole ride home, terrified that he might catch some disease lurking in the guy's saliva, until he got into his bathroom and scrubbed his teeth frantically, and gargled, and took a bath.

Another time, Olin says, at John's house—

**OLIN LONG:**

He had one guy come over. And John had invited him in, and they were in the kitchen. Now, of course, Mary Grace's bedroom is nearby, and so she's in her room asleep. And John asked the gentleman, would you like a glass of water? And he said, sure.

So he got him a glass of water. And as he was holding the glass under the faucet running the water, he felt someone come up behind him and start trying to pull his pants down. But John said he gently stopped that, and they ended up out on the porch. And the guy had to expend that sexual energy, so he masturbated on the front porch. And John said he masturbated into whatever that flower bush was there. And then he left.

**BRIAN REED:**

So much for romance.

There was one time Olin knows about when John did fall in love. About two years into their knowing each other, Olin says there was a period where he stopped hearing from John as often as usual.

**OLIN LONG:**

And I called him one night. And it wasn't long before I could tell that there was something on his mind. And the next thing I knew, he went into tears.

**BRIAN REED:**

John told Olin that he'd recently become friends with a guy in town, and they'd started sleeping with each other and spending a lot of time together. The guy had told John he'd had his eye on him for a while. He had some college, and he seemed to have ambition in his career, which John liked.

John was head over heels for the guy. He said to Olin that he'd told the guy he loved him, but that the guy didn't seem to reciprocate it. And now John hadn't seen him in a while, and he was leaving him messages saying I love you, call me sometime, and not getting any calls back.

**OLIN LONG:**

He told me what was going on. And then he burst into tears, and he sobbed. This wasn't just a few tears. It was sobbing. He was in the kitchen. He only had a phone in the kitchen. So he was sobbing in there.

**BRIAN REED:**

Had you ever seen him cry?

**OLIN LONG:**

I had never heard him cry, never heard him—mostly what I heard from John was humor, disgruntlement, disgruntlement turned into humor, a little anger. And I didn't know that he would cry. I knew I could, but I didn't know he would cry. And I just listened, and I consoled him. I said, that's hard, John. I've been there. I've been there. I think I said, if you need to cry, go ahead. Finish. Get it all out. When we were on the phone, there was never any hurry. There was never any hurry to get off.

He was desperate. He said, I'm desperate to have that kind of a relationship. You know, a one-on-one partnership kind of relationship. I want it desperately. He only said that one time.

And I heard the word desperate.

**BRIAN REED:**

More in a minute.

[AD]

**OLIN LONG:**

And we were sitting there, and he had made a comment—

**BRIAN REED:**

Olin and I are sitting with each other the first night we've met, and he's telling me all these memories of John. And it takes hours before I understand for sure whether he and John were ever a couple, if they ever actually tried. I don't ever ask Olin outright, but I don't need to. Because it gradually becomes clear that it never happened for them, and that for Olin his relationship with John still feels unresolved.

He's telling me stories, remembering things. And in the course of this, his mind drifts now and again to a few tiny moments way in the past that stayed with him, because in them he and John seemed to acknowledge something that they found very difficult to speak about. Like one time when they were riding in the car together through Bibb County, and John had made some remark about Olin that Olin thought was unfair. And Olin told John as much.

**OLIN LONG:**

And when I finished, he smiled and he laughed. He said, you and I could never live together. He said, I just piss you off too much. And I didn't know what to think of that. We weren't talking about living together.

**BRIAN REED:**

Or another time on the phone, when—

**OLIN LONG:**

He asked me, as long as we've been talking on the phone, do you still consider yourself searching for a partner?

**BRIAN REED:**

And Olin thought for a moment and then said, not really, John. He wasn't really talking to anyone else.

**OLIN LONG:**

And there was some silence there, and I said, why do you ask? (FALTERING) I—I—I don't know. I don't know. I think he was trying to express an interest. I think it's—I didn't know—I didn't—I didn't delve any deeper. I didn't delve any deeper.

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm trying to figure out how you feel about this. Like, is this something that you feel is a missed opportunity?

**OLIN LONG:**

(SIGHING) I'm not really sure. I think we had talked so much, and I wasn't comfortable enough with what I was feeling. I couldn't identify it.

**BRIAN REED:**

Because what was so...?

**OLIN LONG:**

There were certain things that I was—that I found it hard to get past, some of his profanity and some of his anger. I was somewhat afraid of his anger. Even though I was wondering what it would be like, I wasn't certain that it was really a good place for me to be. Does that make sense?

**BRIAN REED:**

Olin and John could get on each other's nerves. If you were feeling sensitive or emotional, John was not necessarily the greatest guy to talk to, and Olin felt he could sometimes just be thoughtless or mean. They once had a huge fight that was actually over Olin's favorite movie.

**OLIN LONG:**

I got very angry with him when the movie *Brokeback* *Mountain* came out.

**BRIAN REED:**

*Brokeback* *Mountain,* of course, with Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger playing two cowboys who fall in love one summer on a mountain in 1960s Wyoming. When I say this is Olin's favorite movie, he loves this movie. I've noticed during our conversation that a couple times Olin dates life events as being before or after this movie's release.

**OLIN LONG:**

It was 2005, because it would have been before *Brokeback* *Mountain* came out.

**BRIAN REED:**

And he knows a ton about it.

**OLIN LONG:**

The movie was filmed—they wrapped up shooting in August of 2004. It wasn't released until December of 2005. So we've got a year-and-a-half post-production.

**BRIAN REED:**

Olin, how many times have you seen this movie?

**OLIN LONG:**

I would venture to say probably 50 or more times. When it first came out, I couldn't get enough of it. I watched it about every day.

**BRIAN REED:**

This movie meant so much to Olin. His favorite part is the first 45 minutes, when the cowboys are falling in love, alone together on *Brokeback* *Mountain,* without the world there to judge, or threaten, or intrude. To see a love story about two men like that, it moved him.

After he saw the movie the first time, he purchased a 52-inch TV specifically so that he could have a better repeat viewing experience in his home. He asked a local cinema to present a special screening of the film once it had left theaters. He devoured the short story the movie was based on and pored over all the behind-the-scenes features.

**OLIN LONG:**

And I got so excited about it, I got on the phone, and I was telling John about it, about the movie. And he was listening and listening, and he wasn't saying very much. And then he started talking and telling me I was making too big of an issue out of this, you're getting too much into it.

And one thing I really dislike is when I get excited about something, something that I find important, and I'm trying to make a point, and it gets discounted. So I got really irritated, so we got off the phone. I think I went outside. I know what I did.

**BRIAN REED:**

He went into his backyard and pounded the ground to let out his frustration with John. Olin saw parts of himself in both the movie's characters, Heath Ledger's character's fear of the world knowing he was gay, but also the way Jake Gyllenhaal's character could feel so hurt by that fear. And he really thought John would get a lot from it, too.

**OLIN LONG:**

I wanted him to relate to that. I wanted him to relate to it, and he didn't at first. But then, over time, we talked again. And I talked about it more, and I talked about it more. And then he began to be interested in hearing more of it. So I said, what is your address?

**BRIAN REED:**

John didn't have a TV or go to the movies, so Olin ordered him a copy of the original short story.

**OLIN LONG:**

I did. I ordered a copy, and I had it sent to John. That was the second time I heard John cry, because he read it. He read *Brokeback* *Mountain.*

**BRIAN REED:**

He read about Jack Twist and Ennis Delmar, their secret trysts after falling for each other on the mountain with their wives and children at home. And how despite Jack's pleas to Ennis to just get a ranch with him and have a real relationship—never do that. Because Ennis insists, I'm stuck with what I got, caught in my own loop, can't get out of it. And who go on like that for years—Jack desperate to break out of the loop and Ennis too afraid. Until one day Ennis sends Jack a postcard, and it comes back with a stamp saying deceased.

**OLIN LONG:**

We were on the phone, and he was crying about it. He had read it. And after that, he always referred to it as the grief manual. He said, I took down the grief manual and read it again tonight.

**BRIAN REED:**

And so this is what Olin and John's relationship eventually settled into. They were confidants and close friends, supporting each other through this experience they were both living, of being middle-aged and gay in Alabama, and alone, John giving once in a while hints that maybe he wanted their relationship to be something more.

**OLIN LONG:**

I want to ask you a question if I may.

**BRIAN REED:**

Please.

**OLIN LONG:**

How did he take his life, and what were the circumstances?

**BRIAN REED:**

I tell Olin how John did it. He had assumed, based on conversations with John, that it was a gunshot to the head.

**OLIN LONG:**

He drank cyanide.

**BRIAN REED:**

He drank cyanide.

**OLIN LONG:**

Um. OK. Yeah. Well, that's surprising that it was cyanide.

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm sorry.

**OLIN LONG:**

Poor—no, that's all right.

**BRIAN REED:**

I'm sorry.

**OLIN LONG:**

That's all right. That's all right. I was thinking that, you know, this—I just need to know. And I'll work through this. This is poor John. John.

**BRIAN REED:**

Yeah.

**OLIN LONG:**

John.

**BRIAN REED:**

What led to John and Olin's not speaking during the last couple of years of John's life was a growing preoccupation with several subjects that Olin says John would not stop ranting to him about.

**OLIN LONG:**

I heard a lot about climate change.

**BRIAN REED:**

Also the economy. Olin was a good friend. He would listen to John and actually engage with him on these topics. John would refer to certain books a lot, and Olin actually went and read several of them—*Going* *Dark* and *Walking* *Away* *from* *Empire* by Guy McPherson, and Al Gore's book, *An* *Inconvenient* *Truth.*

He told John, I believe in climate change. I think it's an issue. I try to do my part. I switched over to energy-saving light bulbs. I don't know what else we can do besides have everybody do their part.

**OLIN LONG:**

Then there was mostly Shittown. That was mostly it.

**BRIAN REED:**

And these tirades bothered Olin the most, because Olin felt, compared to climate change and oil and the economy, this was something John could actually do something about. John would go on and on about the miseries of Shittown, and Olin would tell him again and again, if it's really that bad, you can leave. You have the means. You can leave. And John would say, I know. I want to leave. And then the next time, on the phone from his kitchen, he'd be howling about Shittown again.

**OLIN LONG:**

And I just couldn't hear any more of it. I couldn't hear Shittown, Shittown. I couldn't hear it anymore. If you're not going—if you don't like it, leave it. You can leave it. You can leave it.

**BRIAN REED:**

After one such conversation in September 2013, having heard it for the umpteenth time, Olin hung up the phone.

**OLIN LONG:**

And he sent me an email within a couple of days that was extremely profane.

**BRIAN REED:**

John had witnessed an incident at the Green Pond Grocery near his house that had set him off. Olin thinks it had something to do with how a father had disciplined his young son there in public, but Olin says John also made some indirect jabs at things Olin had expressed in their previous conversation. It wasn't a humorous message, he says. It was angry. And Olin felt at the end of his rope. So he responded and wrote simply, John, please don't send me any more of these profane emails. And John replied with another profane email back.

**OLIN LONG:**

It was not as scathing as the first one, but it sounded like—sounded like an ending. Relationships, friendships come to an end. And I thought, well, maybe this one has run its course. So I took a few deep breaths and I thought, I'm going to send him one back. But mine's going to be honest.

So I sent him an email back, a lengthy one. I told him everything that I had ever appreciated in him as a friend. I thanked him for being a friend. But I didn't put an end to it, I just said then, I said, but I just simply cannot hear any more of these complaints, particularly about Bibb County.

So I sent it back to him. And this is the email I got back. It was much, much calmer. And he said this to me—he said, I always got the impression that you thought that I was crude, vulgar, and beneath you. And that is why I knew that you and I could never be an item. But call me sometime. I never called him again.

**BRIAN REED:**

Olin wasn't the only one who went through this with John. What I learned talking to lots of John's friends is that while they say John had been a tormented person for as long as they knew him, climate change and the collapse of society and Shittown only became fixations for him in more recent years. One clock collector who'd been close friends with John for more than two decades, who lives in Alabama not far away and used to spend entire nights hanging out with John as he worked in the shop, told me he got to the point where he just couldn't talk about climate change and the dissipation of cheap energy anymore.

He said he realized that John's negativity was contagious, and he'd leave there feeling depressed himself. So he had to begin psyching himself up for their visits, reassuring himself that he wasn't going to come away in a gloomy mood, and that everything was OK. Until he just slowly started spending less time with John, going from talking to him two or three times a week to once a week, to a couple times a month, to having not talked to John for several months before he died, and not having visited him in about a year.

As best I can tell, this retreat by Olin and some of the other people who were close to John started happening in the last few years before he died, which also happens to be right around the time John wrote an email to a radio show saying John B. McLemore lives in Shittown, Alabama. It sounds like the John I knew was different than the one his friends had known for years. I got to know John, it seems, at the beginning of the end, just as he was driving some of the closest people in his life, like Olin, away, which ended up leaving him even more isolated there—in Shittown.

Olin not calling John after that final email exchange, he says he wasn't thinking of that as I'm never going to call John again. He just needed a break. And then, in the midst of that break, his time with John ran out. And now, he doesn't exactly regret that they never got together, but it's hard sometimes not to wonder what it would have been like if some days had gone differently.

Like this one day, Olin says, about 10 years ago, during a short time when John was running a small nursery in Woodstock, and Olin had ordered some azaleas, and met John in the parking lot of a Birmingham doctor's office to pick them up, and sat with him there in the front of his truck talking, cracking jokes about the dating line they'd met on, the azaleas sitting in the sun, while John's mother had an appointment inside, John waiting for the doctor to call him in.

**OLIN LONG:**

—the doctor. And that may have been why he put on a clean, navy blue shirt, which I thought really enhanced that red hair. And he was wearing a pair of pants. I don't know if they were jeans, made out of denim jean material, but they hugged his thighs and such and his belly. And I just remember I just wanted to lean over there and do some stuff, because I'm sitting there in a truck with John B. McLemore outside a doctor's office picking up my azaleas, I knew exactly what I wanted to do.

I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to reach over there. I wanted to pull his shirt up, expose his belly, and just kiss all over his belly around that red hair, just to that extent. And I wanted to do it slowly and sensuously. That's what I wanted to do and see what he thought about it. He's doing nothing but sitting there under the steering wheel of an F-150 pickup truck. But it was just the whole aura. It was the hair, the skin, the intelligence, the—he was in a jolly mood that day.

**BRIAN REED:**

And yet, instead of doing anything—

**OLIN LONG:**

I kept those feelings to myself. I think now, if I could go back, if I could get in a time machine and go back there and relive that moment, I would at least speak up and tell him what I was thinking. I'd probably look over there and say, John, I don't know how you're going to feel about this, but I really want to kiss you right now. There. I've put it out there. That's what I want.

**BRIAN REED:**

F-150 pickup truck love, denim hugging on your thighs love, azalea love, doctor's parking lot love, kissing on your belly and all around your red hair love. Too bad that didn't actually happen, because that's something you could write a country song about.

[MUSIC - "A ROSE FOR EMILY" BY THE ZOMBIES]

*S-Town* is produced by Julie Snyder and me, with editing from Ira Glass, Sarah Koenig, and Neil Drumming. Whitney Dangerfield is our digital editor. Starlee Kine is a story consultant. Fact-checking and research by Ben Phalen. Seth Lind is our director of operations. Lyra Smith mixes the show. Matt Tierney is our technical director.

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[AD]

*S-Town* is a production of *Serial* and *This* *American* *Life.*

**Chapter VII Transcript**

Note: *S-Town* is produced for the ear and designed to be heard, not read. We strongly encourage you to [listen to the audio](https://stownpodcast.org/chapter/7), which includes emotion and emphasis that's not on the page. Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers, and may contain errors. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.

**SARAH KOENIG:**

Chapter VII.

**BRIAN REED:**

Before I got to know an antiquarian horologist and he committed suicide, I'd never thought of clocks as anything special. To me, they were just like appliances that tell time. And an antique clock, I didn't think of that as any different from, say, an antique chair. But then I went to John's friend Bill's house. He asked that I not use his last name.

**BRIAN REED:**

Hi, sir. Nice to see ya. How are you?

**BILL:**

Good to see you.

**BRIAN REED:**

Thanks for having us.

**BRIAN REED:**

Bill's a longtime customer of John's, and his house is just a normal looking suburban house on a cul-de-sac. Not far from Bibb County. Until the moment I step inside, and suddenly I feel like I'm in a museum. There are rare antique clocks everywhere—in the dining room, in the living room, in the kitchen, in the bedroom, on the ceiling. Close to 100 or so. Bill tells me John restored all of them.

**BILL:**

He's worked on this one, that one, that one, that one. This is his life's work.

**BRIAN REED:**

Being in Bill's house, I realize that these clocks are not appliances. The clocks he collects and that John worked on are strange and beautiful. They're works of art and feats of engineering. Bill says he likes to collect clocks that make you think.

There's a clock with a turtle that bobs in water in a dish, and the turtle floats from hour to hour to tell the time. There's a clock with a woman pulling a sheet over the face of it, covering day with night time. There's one small clock encrusted in super detailed silver and gold and green-gold, which I've never even heard of—that's shaped like the kind of chair servants used to carry royalty in ancient parades. Except instead of an emperor in the seat, there's a tiny intricate clock movement.

There's an original mystery clock—that's what it's called—made by the famous French magician Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin with an hour hand floating in the middle of a glass dial, not visibly connected to any gears or clockworks, and yet, somehow it still moves like a normal clock hand. No hint as to how.

**BRIAN REED:**

Um, this is amazing. I mean it's—I want to remember all this.

**BRIAN REED:**

John worked on all parts of these clocks, inside and out. He'd fix the complex innerworkings, sometimes with hundreds of tiny little pieces and gears or floating turtles. And he refinished the exteriors, gilding them with gold or silver or other elements, using methods from the period the clock was made.

And then, maybe even more impressive, John built his own time pieces from scratch.

**TOM MOORE:**

—and the joy comes from—

**BRIAN REED:**

I was visiting John's old college chemistry professor, Tom Moore, at his office in South Carolina, where at the time he was chancellor of a state university. He and I were talking about the astrolabe John made when he was a teenager that he'd showed me in his mother's bedroom. And I'm telling Tom how I don't even think I'd ever heard of an astrolabe before meeting John, and I was trying to grasp what it was exactly when he was showing me this complicated medieval instrument hanging on John's wall. And Tom's nodding and he says—

**TOM MOORE:**

We're at a point where I need to show you something that personifies John. I'm going to bring it over here.

**BRIAN REED:**

OK, sure.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tom gets up and comes back with something in his hands that he's holding delicately.

**TOM MOORE:**

This is one of my prized possessions. This is a sundial.

**BRIAN REED:**

Though on first glance, it doesn't look like a sundial to me. It's a small, brown, circular, wooden case.

**TOM MOORE:**

Sometime when John was a student of mine, he told me he was going to make me a sundial for my birthday. And this was 1984 or '85 I'm guessing. He mailed it to me. He called me and told me that he'd finished it and he was mailing it to me for my birthday. I think I got it in 2012.

**BRIAN REED:**

Wait. You just said that he started mentioning this '85—

**TOM MOORE:**

'84 or '85.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tom holds up a piece of paper in front of the wooden case to block my view of it. He's opening it to get something out and he doesn't want me to see inside yet. Then he puts the lid back on, removes the paper, and I see he's pulled out two very small, precise instruments—a compass and a plumb bob level that John machined himself in brass.

Tom uses them in conjunction with this tiny little point on the top of the case to make sure the case is facing the proper direction and that it's sitting level on the table. And then finally, he starts to lift off the cover.

**TOM MOORE:**

I can't wait to see your reaction when you see the inside of this thing. Are you ready?

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh, my god.

[LAUGHTER]

**TOM MOORE:**

Can you believe that?

**BRIAN REED:**

With the lid off, you see an intricate floral pattern that John cut from a sheet of brass as if it were a paper stencil, and laid atop purple felt, the color of the Mexican petunias in his yard. In the middle there's a tiny button which flips up the gnomon—that's the centerpiece of the sundial, the one the casts the sun's shadow. Gnomon means 'the one who knows.' This gnomon has Tom Moore's initials in it. And the sundial is designed specifically for the latitude and longitude of Tom's home.

**BRIAN REED:**

It's really arresting, all with the precision of it being able to tell time based on the sun's shadow.

**TOM MOORE:**

It's unbelievable to me what it took in knowledge and skill to be able to make this. Off the charts! [EMOTIONAL] What's more valuable to me than this? I think you get that.

**BRIAN REED:**

When John's friend Bill was showing me his clock collection in his house, he cried too. I'd asked Bill what the allure of clocks was for him and he started telling me about the first clock he was entranced by—a cheap kitchen clock in his grandparent's house. He'd watch his grandfather pick it up and wind it every Sunday when he was a young boy. He was mesmerized by how this object suddenly became alive, ticking, hands turning. And he began crying as he told me.

Is it that clock, I asked him, that was emotional for him? It's not any one personal clock, he said. It was just the measure of time had something to do with me. I didn't totally know what Bill meant by this—the measure of time had something to do with me. But I think he was saying that even as a kid the clock captured this feeling of time going by, going by, and never coming back.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

If someone says the name John B. McLemore 25 years in the future, you'll remember exactly who that is.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh my god, John, I'm never going to forget you. Come on.

**BRIAN REED:**

John once sent me an essay he wrote called "Worthwhile Life Defined" in which he breaks down exactly how much meaningful time there is in one life. He begins, quote, "When one considers that the undistinguished life of an industrialized man in an industrialized nation consists of about 25,000 days, and that about 33% to 38% of those days are spent in slumber."

And then he runs through a bunch of calculations, shaving off time for sleep, to come up with the total number of waking hour days. Then shaving off time at work, time commuting, time spent on family commitments, time spent convalescing when you get older. In the end he concludes, "The average industrialized man with 25,000 days on this planet may easily secure only about 4,500 waking hour days of beneficial life. That's a quarter of your life, if you're lucky," John says. "A quarter of your life during which the average person can pursue matters that are meaningful to them."

When I first read the title of this essay, "Worthwhile Life Defined," I figured John would lay out a vision of what such a life would look like—what you needed to do and accomplish to make your life worthwhile. But he doesn't do that here. Instead of defining a worthwhile life, he defines the amount of time one has in which to achieve a worthwhile life.

His calculation is based on the assumption that we will live to 68 years old. John, of course, cut his own life far short of that. He allocated himself even less time. So did he do it? Did John live a worthwhile life as he defined it? He doesn't give an answer in this essay, but by the time he reached the last of his waking hour days, John had formed an opinion on it. John did have an answer to that question at the end.

From *Serial* and *This* *American* *Life,* I'm Brian Reed. This is *Shittown.*

John B. McLemore lived in Shittown, Alabama. But there was a time, believe it or not, when he seemed to be happy there. It was during the town's beginning when Woodstock was incorporating as an official municipality, starting in 1996 when John was in his early 30s. It was a time when you could ask someone at town hall what John B. McLemore was like, and they might say something like—

**DAPHNE BROOKS:**

Never complained. I don't remember him complaining.

**BRIAN REED:**

Daphne Brooks was one of the early members of the town council.

**DAPHNE BROOKS:**

I mean he was—in talking to me—more idealistic.

**BRIAN REED:**

Are you sure we're talking about the same John B. McLemore? Red hair, clock restorer, says stuff like this about government officials?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

These mother fuckers would have five guys to jack their damn dick off. One to put the condom on, and one to rub the Vaseline on, and four more to file the fucking papers, and the environmentalists would clean up the damn contamination, and analyze all the byproducts, and declare the jack-off site to be a super fund place.

**BRIAN REED:**

Apparently we are.

**CHERYL DODSON:**

I mean if I was stuffing envelopes, I don't see that John wouldn't have sat there stuffing envelopes with me. Whether it would be a parade notice or a business license renewal, I mean I could definitely see—

**BRIAN REED:**

This is Cheryl Dodson. She was the town clerk for Woodstock shortly after the town was founded. She was the clerk before Faye Gamble took over.

**CHERYL DODSON:**

—planning the Christmas parade, planning the open house. He always helped me with that.

**BRIAN REED:**

He helped you with the Christmas parade?

**BRIAN REED:**

There was a stretch in those early years when Woodstock wasn't even officially called Woodstock yet. When it first incorporated, it was the town of North Bibb, which apparently lots of North Bibbians thought was a lame name because they voted to change it to Woodstock a few years in. Cheryl says there was a lot going on during those early days, and John was always around and involved, hanging out at the town hall. His mother, too, Mary Grace.

**CHERYL DODSON:**

She was funny.

**BRIAN REED:**

This was before Mary Grace's dementia had set in. And Cheryl says she had a Pippi Longstocking vibe about her. She'd go around town in a red skirt and green sweater and purple hat and socks that clashed with her shoes and the kind of bright red hair that you get out of a bottle.

**CHERYL DODSON:**

She'd come to the town hall, is there any scandal? Any unplanned pregnancies? Any children out of wedlock? Which you know, John would say, she's the scandal! He would point at me. You know, I was the one getting a divorce or something like that, you know. So he'd say, she ain't gonna tell you about the scandal. She's the scandal! And I'd be like, hush, John.

**BRIAN REED:**

John came around so much, he and Cheryl started spending a lot of time together. One of the main things Woodstock was doing during this period was annexing property into the town, lot by lot, to make it bigger. As town clerk at the time, Cheryl Dodson worked on these annexations, which meant she was often making drives to the probate court to pull deeds. And John, who had nothing better to do, took to going with her.

She says he was helpful, dealing with records of the court. He was giving her a hand with real work, not getting paid. He attended town council meetings regularly with his mother, and they annexed their own land into the town which had a significant impact on its borders because their property is so large. Cheryl says John got a kick out of contributing to Woodstock.

**BRIAN REED:**

So he seemed engaged, as like, he was like a good citizen.

**CHERYL DODSON:**

Yeah. He voiced his input into things, but yeah, he was a part of it.

**BRIAN REED:**

I have to say it is so at odds with the John I knew. He was like close to obsessed with just how terrible this place was.

**CHERYL DODSON:**

Really? He might have complained about taxes or something like that, but I mean we were building a town when I was there. It was exciting for us. The town was new.

**BRIAN REED:**

John and Cheryl ended up becoming close friends. On one of their drives to probate court, John happened to notice Cheryl's fingernail polish. It was red, though Cheryl told him the actual name of the color—

**CHERYL DODSON:**

—was I'm Not Really A Waitress, and he thought that was hilarious that fingernail polishes had names like that.

**BRIAN REED:**

When they got to the probate court, Cheryl says there was an older, heavyset lady behind the counter. She didn't want to lift the heavy deed book for Cheryl and John and asked someone else to do it for her.

**CHERYL DODSON:**

When they brought it to her, she said, you're so good, my legs so tired. And he thought that was hilarious. He said, that would make a great nail polish color.

**BRIAN REED:**

The next week, a bouquet of flowers was delivered to Cheryl at work at the town hall from John.

**CHERYL DODSON:**

And when I opened the card it said, you're so good, my legs so tired. So it definitely looked like a different meaning than what—you know. It definitely looked different from a nail polish color.

**BRIAN REED:**

Looking back, Cheryl thinks those years when they were still building Woodstock may have also been some of the best years of John's life. And thinking about it more, it makes sense. John liked a good project. For him, creating something new or restoring something was a worthwhile way to spend one's time. Before he had the maze or Tyler, he had the new town of Woodstock.

In 2005, Cheryl and John went on to open a small business together for a season, a tiny nursery next to Cheryl's house, Woodstock Garden Center, which John threw himself into, sourcing plants and flowers from different parts of the state. So John was at Cheryl's place a lot. She and her husband Jeff seemed to have the type of home anyway where the door is always unlocked and all sorts of people come and go as they please. They have five kids, plus they were often taking in foster kids or exchange students.

It was always sunshine and flowers at their house, Cheryl says. Tearing open a pack of hot dogs for the children or pulling them around in a wagon. And she says John fit right in with all of that.

**CHERYL DODSON:**

Oh, yeah. I mean in there on that door there's his height. I mean he got measured with the kids. We have a door that we always measure the kids' heights on, and I'll show you. There's John B.

**BRIAN REED:**

Cheryl does show me. It's a brown-stained door that she and her husband have moved from room to room over the years. These days it's on display in the center of their living room. There's a child's painting of their house on the bottom, a rainbow and heart and sun overhead. And then above that, it's just covered with the name and age of kid after kid after kid, each name slowly moving up the door—the door its own kind of timekeeper.

And there in the center at six feet, between 14-year-old Scott and 18-year-old Colby, is John B. McLemore, 38 years old.

**BRIAN REED:**

It seems like John was kind of, I mean, I don't know, part of the family for a little while, like you guys were tight.

**CHERYL DODSON:**

We were family.

**BRIAN REED:**

So what happened?

**CHERYL DODSON:**

Um.

**BRIAN REED:**

What happened is Cheryl got married to her husband Jeff, and John didn't like Jeff. It was the same scenario that had played out for John over and over in his life. He'd gotten close to someone, and then she'd gotten closer to someone else. The three of them were also running the flower shop together, and that's where everything came to a head.

After staying open for just eight weeks, they started fighting and ended the business acrimoniously. Cheryl and Jeff felt John wasn't a good businessman. They say he was more interested in the flower itself than selling the flower, that he spent too much money, and that he stocked weird plants that normal customers didn't want.

John, on the other hand, claimed that Cheryl and Jeff hadn't pulled their weight and that they owed him money. Boozer Downs, the Woodstock town attorney, says he witnessed one of their arguments, and that Jeff, who's a boxer, was pacing angrily around John as John spouted the Latin names of plants at him as a way to piss him off.

After that, Cheryl says—

**CHERYL DODSON:**

He grandstanded and embarrassed me at a council meeting. He come into the town hall and hollered, the town clerk owes me $10,000.

**BRIAN REED:**

Cheryl says she did not owe him $10,000.

**CHERYL DODSON:**

—and I walked over to him and I said, John, what are you talking about? This is my job. You can't come in here and say I owe you $10,000.

**BRIAN REED:**

Were you embarrassed?

**CHERYL DODSON:**

Yeah. I mean it was my—but now that being said, they knew him, too. I mean it's not like John was a stranger.

Then, like I said, we went to court.

**BRIAN REED:**

John sued Cheryl and Jeff. The complaint he submitted to the court is really something. There's a table of contents and more than 50 pages of narrative and exhibits. John also tells the judge that he has a small pocket notebook diary containing the full account, including times of day. Quote, "This diary is available for His Honor if he wishes, but it must be observed that it was written under duress, and thus, is true to life with no opprobrious words omitted," end quote.

All this to try and get back some money John felt was owed him mostly for potting soil, $2,792.

**CHERYL DODSON:**

I don't know. I kind of felt like that was more of John's just way to see me again. I mean John—

**BRIAN REED:**

Really?

**CHERYL DODSON:**

Well, I mean—

**JEFF DODSON:**

Really.

**BRIAN REED:**

Really?

**JEFF DODSON:**

I thought so.

**BRIAN REED:**

That's Cheryl's husband Jeff agreeing, saying I thought so.

**JEFF DODSON:**

He's not wanting to sue you, he's not wanting to—he just don't know how to get back in. How do I get back into a relationship that I liked or enjoyed or whatever? Maybe you can pressure him into friending me again or something. I don't know.

**BRIAN REED:**

Cheryl says she met John at court and they agreed she would pay him $100 a month for 10 months. She thinks if she had brought her monthly checks to John in person, rather than mailing them like she did, he probably wouldn't have taken them. It would have just been an excuse to see her again.

She did bump into John now and then after all that, but there was no coming back for their friendship.

**CHERYL DODSON:**

I just saw him in the store a few times, and he would say, you should come by the house. Come by the house. I'm thinking John, you sued me. I'm not going to hang out with you, buddy. Ah, yeah. It's sad.

**JEFF DODSON:**

Yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

John's depression and the fact that he attributed it to his home, Woodstock, this town he helped at least somewhat to build, it troubled Cheryl because she loves this place so dearly. Like John, she too has lived her whole life here. And it's interesting for me to talk to her because I haven't hung out with that many Woodstock boosters, but she is definitely one.

She loved raising her children here knowing all their teachers because she grew up with them, knowing before her kids got home from school where the party in the woods was going to be later that night. When Cheryl's brother died some years back—he drowned—another family anonymously paid for his funeral.

Jeff, her husband, just ran for mayor of Woodstock last year and won, unseating the 13-year incumbent. Now everyone's calling her the first lady. She's got hopes to spruce up the town hall with antiques and flowers. She loves the Christmas parade, trick or treating on Main Street for Halloween, homecoming.

**CHERYL DODSON:**

It was wonderful at homecoming to go to the turnip green supper, and there's a bonfire, and everybody you went to school with, and everybody brings a dish. I'm sure you know that Miss Laylor's made the turnip greens, and you know to, oh, try her coconut pie, Miss Daily's banana pudding, you know to get their Tupperware back to them.

**BRIAN REED:**

I don't know when exactly John turned on the town, but at some point the town of Woodstock began to do what governments tend to do—disappoint him. There was a scandal involving the water board and the resignation of the police chief, which I know bothered him. He was also upset when a town council member was put in federal prison for embezzling nearly $1 million from the company she worked for. And he hated when the South Forty trailer park was built across the street from him.

Though Cheryl says John's wrong about this place. She says poverty isn't that bad in Woodstock. There's some crime, some corruption, but no worse than other places. And she says the schools are actually quite good.

But John's depression became so intertwined with his loathing of his home, the two fed each other. And Cheryl thinks John got to a point where he just began ignoring the positive stuff.

**CHERYL DODSON:**

There's a beauty in this area that John probably just didn't see. But I don't know that he interacted with people to see things like that. That's, I guess, what's sad about depression and things like that, the very things you need you draw away from. When you got depression, and you want the blinds down, and you want the dark room—and you need the sunshine.

**BRIAN REED:**

John was depressed, for sure, but still, he didn't do what Cheryl's saying. He didn't hole up in a dark room with the blinds down. He may not have gone to the turnip green suppers, but he created his own place that was filled with sunshine.

His 124 acres, which he designed to be incredible, bursting with beautiful flowers, and an orchard, and an old preserved house, and a historic graveyard that he maintained, and a custom swing set, and, of course, a spectacular giant hedge maze with 64 permutations of the solution and one null set. And then John did share that with people. He didn't host big community events, but he made a point of inviting people over, giving them the tour he gave me, spending quality time with neighbors there.

There was a soft spoken tree removal guy who was in tears as he and I talked about John. John hired him once and then they became good friends because they liked to walk around his property together admiring the trees. A quiet middle-aged mechanic I talked to told me how he'd sat with John in the yard one night as John pointed to the sky and taught him the names of the stars and constellations—things he'd never learned before that he really enjoyed.

John was actually quite good at appreciating the time he had. That wasn't his problem. His problem was a proleptic one. He saw nothing but darkness in the future. Shittown, for John, was not believing that anything good would last. That we would inevitably mess it up. Relationships that are meaningful, the Earth as a place that can adequately support human life, even John's remarkable maze.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

You know, that was one of the most fun projects I ever did in my life. And you know what, it was also one of the most foolish.

**BRIAN REED:**

Why?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Because at my death, this place out here only has one destination—to be paved over with a Walmart or scraped off.

**BRIAN REED:**

Oh.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

That's why we don't have mazes in Shittown.

**BRIAN REED:**

And with that prediction at least, John was right, because guess who owns John's property now?

**BRIAN REED:**

Can you just introduce yourself?

**KENDALL BURT:**

Kendall Burt.

**BRIAN REED:**

Kendall Burt. That's Kabram Burt's father, the owner, with his brothers, of K3 Lumber, the family that inspired John to contact me in the first place, who he asked me to expose.

**KENDALL BURT:**

I bought John McLemore's place when he committed suicide and left his mother here alone. A very selfish act.

**BRIAN REED:**

Kendall bought it through John's cousin, Reta. He buys up land in the area as investments, and so his company can harvest it for timber. I did get a chance to ask Kendall about the name of his company, by the way, K3. Is there any double entendre there with a certain white supremacy group?

**KENDALL BURT:**

I'm assuming you're one of these left-wingers that we upset in the election. [LAUGH]

**BRIAN REED:**

He says he doesn't have a problem with the name K3. Does he have any plans for John's place, I ask him.

**BRIAN REED:**

It's a beautiful property.

**KENDALL BURT:**

No.

**BRIAN REED:**

How about the maze?

**KENDALL BURT:**

Well, I would like to see the maze reach maturity, but I probably will not put forth the effort or the money to do so. But it's a real neat concept.

**BRIAN REED:**

I have one other question for Kendall since he now owns John's land, and I assume anything buried within it.

**BRIAN REED:**

Have you heard these rumors flying around about the gold on the property or hidden treasure or things like that?

**KENDALL BURT:**

Yeah. I also heard about the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but I'm not chasing rainbows. I think John threw away every penny he could get his hands on before he died.

**BRIAN REED:**

Kendall's not the only one who thinks that. John's cousin Reta says judging from the accounts and records she knows of, he was broke. But it's just weird, because I know that John was still spending money at the end. He actually went on a buying spree, stocking up on a bunch of antique toys and these glass chickens he was obsessed with, and all the materials for the swing set. And of course, he talked to so many people about having cash and gold hidden somewhere.

Speaking of that, for a while I was checking in with Tyler to see how his hunt for the treasure was going. I obviously wanted to know if he'd found anything, but it also felt like what I was asking, if the answer was yes, could potentially be incriminating. So one night relatively early on, long before all the felony theft charges and the impending trial, he and I were talking about a search for the gold and how he'd been slapped with a trespassing charge for going onto the McLemore property. And I told Tyler, just to make sure he understood—

**BRIAN REED:**

Well, listen, I clearly want to know if you ever do find it. But you should think about it before you tell me, if you ever do, because it's going to then be public.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Yeah, I know. That's what I'm scared of now.

**BRIAN REED:**

Well, as far as just talking about this stuff?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Yeah, kind of.

**BRIAN REED:**

I mean you already got the trespassing charge.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

But I would worry if you found a million dollars of gold or if you found like a bunch of gold. Just consider it before you ever tell me, all right?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Turn that thing off for a minute.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler asked me to turn my tape recorder off, and then we sat on the porch of his trailer and had a discussion off the record. Lately, Tyler and I haven't been talking very much at the request of his lawyer because of his upcoming trial this summer where he's due to stand charges of theft for taking the buses and trailer from John's property, of criminal trespassing, and of forgery for allegedly signing John's signature after he died in order to sell two of his vehicles.

More right after this.

[AD]

One day, I'm talking on the phone to one of John's old friends, a clock customer of his in Utah named Bill Maier, and he starts describing this thing he would watch John do when he used to visit John's property in Woodstock.

**BILL MAIER:**

We'd go out in the woods, and he had a tree stump out there. And he could take a Bernzomatic torch and have a pot with mercury.

**BRIAN REED:**

Silvery, dense, fluid mercury. Bill would watch John heat the mercury into a slurry. John would take gold and melt the gold into the mercury, mixing the pot out there in the woods like a witch stirring ingredients in her cauldron. And then Bill says John would take a brush and spread the gold and mercury amalgam onto a clock and then hold the torch flame to it, vaporizing the mercury, and leaving behind a rich, textured layer of gold.

It's an ancient process that appears to have originated around 300 BC or so in China called fire guilding that almost no one does anymore. Bill's a prolific lifelong clock collector and he says John is the only person he ever found in the United States who would do it. No one does it because inhaling mercury vapor is so ridiculously dangerous.

**BILL MAIER:**

You ever heard the expression mad as a hatter?

**BRIAN REED:**

Yeah, I tell Bill, but I don't really know where it comes from. He explains that for centuries in Europe, milliners—people who made hats—would turn furs into felt for hats by vaporizing mercury, and as a result—

**BILL MAIER:**

They'd go mad, they'd go crazy. That was the outcome of breathing mercury vapor is it does permanent brain damage.

**BRIAN REED:**

Three days later, I'm talking to another of John's clock customers, another Bill, actually—the one who showed me his clock collection at his house. And he tells me—

**BILL:**

He did it to one of my clocks.

**BRIAN REED:**

Fire guilded it. This Bill says when John did the guilding—

**BILL:**

My first inclination was to leave, because I didn't want to breathe in those mercury toxic fumes. But at the same time, it was an eye-opening experience, and so I stayed.

**BRIAN REED:**

And he just did it out in the woods?

**BILL:**

He did it in his shop.

**BRIAN REED:**

Inside the shop he did it?

**BILL:**

Inside the shop.

**BRIAN REED:**

John wore no safety mask and had no special precautions for ventilation.

**BILL:**

And we were both breathing in those fumes, and I don't know if his chest hurt the next day but mine sure did. You know, people that fire guild back in the 1800s, you know what? They didn't last too long, because they breathed so much mercury they just went crazy and died.

**BRIAN REED:**

When I sat down after these conversations to Google mad hatter's disease, which is what people have called mercury poisoning over the years, I saw this list of symptoms—anxiety, irritability, insomnia, emotional instability, depression, suicidal thoughts.

I found studies, mostly from years ago since it's become a much rarer condition these days, where researchers observed and interviewed people who worked in industries where they were exposed to mercury. And they describe, as one 19th century medical textbook called them, a multitude of evils—racing thoughts, fearful feelings, feelings of persecution, feelings of worthlessness, a symptom called anhedonia, which is an inability to feel pleasure, loss of self-control, and of joy in life.

One German scientist from the 1920s who studied the effects of mercury, and then ended up getting poisoned himself, wrote that he began experiencing, quote, "depression and a vexing inner restlessness, which later also caused restless sleep. By nature, companionable and loving life, I withdrew moodily into myself, shied away from the public, stayed away from people and social activity, and unlearned the joy in art and nature. Humor became rusty. Obstacles, which formerly I would have overlooked smilingly, seemed insurmountable. It was not nice to be aware of these shortcomings, not to know their cause, not to know a way to their elimination, and to have to fear further deterioration."

I do not have a definitive answer as to whether or not John had mercury poisoning, and if that could have been a force behind some of his behavior, his personality, and even his suicide. John's autopsy didn't test for mercury. And even digging up his remains, which I can't and won't do, wouldn't tell us at this point, because mercury becomes relatively untestable pretty quickly. The best way to get an indication would be to test his property, and in particular, his workshop to see what the mercury levels are there.

But I wrote Kendall Burt, the owner of the property now, after he and I met, asking if he'd let me pay for a mercury analysis, and he never responded to my emails or calls about it. What I do know is this—it seems that John did fire guilding throughout his life. John's chemistry professor, Tom Moore, says he knows John was fire guilding when he arrived at college as a 17-year-old. Tom says he couldn't convince him to stop, and it seemed like he was doing it fairly regularly.

Tom's a chemist, and he says he'd be surprised if John hadn't suffered some poisoning. He had to ingest a lot of mercury, Tom told me. And John's clock friends have memories of him doing the guilding over the decades, long after college, up to as recently as two years before he died. One friend said, at one point John told him he was doing it dozens of times a year.

And John also had physical symptoms consistent with mercury poisoning, as well as behavioral ones. He warned me on a couple of occasions that he was wont to spontaneously vomit now and again. Thankfully, it never happened in front of me, but not being able to keep food down is something that can show up in people with mercury poisoning.

Other consistent symptoms are an enlarged brain and congestion in the lungs, both of which were noted on John's autopsy. And John did say to some of his friends over the years that he thought he might be experiencing health problems due to fire guilding or other chemical exposure in his shop. Doctors and scientists who are experienced in dealing with mercury, when my researcher or I have described Johns fire guilding practices, they say judging from that alone, it's almost inconceivable that he wouldn't have some level of mercury poisoning.

Then when they hear about John's symptoms, the physical ones, plus the anxiety, the depression, the paranoia, the fact that he committed suicide, that all makes them even more confident that he was suffering mercury poisoning. One expert said, you'd almost have to prove that he didn't have it.

But all that said, there are symptoms of mercury poisoning that I don't know if John had. One is gingivitis. And another big one is tremors, though, sometimes it's a unique kind of tremor that's only visible when you're trying to hold a pose. So it's possible I or others didn't really notice it. But I haven't heard anyone talk about him having this.

And while John was irritable and anxious and suicidal, those personality traits are found all the time in people who do not have elemental mercury in their brains. John showed signs of depression as far back as when he was a teenager. And plus, John had a lot of normal depressing life shit happen to him in his last decade or so.

His falling out with the town clerk, Cheryl Dodson, happened in 2005. At that point, Woodstock was nearly 10 years old and the exciting days of its youth were over. Not long before his feud with Cheryl, John's father, Tom McLemore, had fallen in the driveway and died in the hospital afterwards. Also, it was right around this time that the man John fell in love with over a summer, the one Olin Long told me about, stopped returning his phone calls and broke his heart.

Meanwhile, the clock trade had been dwindling, and by this point John had mostly shuttered his business. So John found himself entering his 40s with no real job, alone, in the house he'd grown up in with his mother, whose dementia was creeping up on her. One day in the year and a half before he died, John called the other town clerk, Faye Gamble, who John would eventually call as he killed himself. Faye picked up.

**FAYE GAMBLE:**

And he was very depressed, crying, and said he was so ashamed.

**BRIAN REED:**

I've done something, John told Faye. I've done something terrible.

**FAYE GAMBLE:**

I thought he had killed somebody the way he had talked. I mean seriously, I thought he had done something really, really bad. So I was like, what have you done? He didn't want to tell me what he had done. And finally, we just kept talking, and I just drug it out of him, and he says, I'm so ashamed. I've got this horrible tattoo.

**BRIAN REED:**

Faye was like, that's it?

**FAYE GAMBLE:**

That was the first time he'd ever said he was ashamed of anything he'd ever done. But he was just so upset about getting that tattoo. And I said, John, really, how bad could this be? And I said, well, do not do any more. Just let that be. And I did not really realize that he had done more till his death.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

He got enough tattoos in one year that somebody could get in a lifetime—

**UNCLE JIMMY:**

Yes, sir.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

All at once.

**UNCLE JIMMY:**

Once. Yup.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

He got addicted fast.

**UNCLE JIMMY:**

Yes.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tattooing became a big part of John's life near the end, and Tyler had a firsthand view of it. That's Tyler's Uncle Jimmy, by the way, giving affirmations in the background.

Tyler's partner in the tattoo parlor, Bubba, told me John's motivation for getting so many tattoos was to help Tyler, to give him money and keep his business afloat. He told me that John had sacrificed his skin for this cause.

But Tyler says there was a lot more to the tattooing than that. Tattooing had become part of a ritual he and John concocted in the few months before he killed himself.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

We called it church.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler will go on to explain all about church to me. But before Tyler does that, I'm going to let John describe it, because John told me about church, too, shortly before he died. And he painted it pretty differently than Tyler does.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Well, lately, we've been having church together. We call it church, which means we just get in the back room of the shop and get drunk as hell.

**BRIAN REED:**

Wild Turkey?

**BRIAN REED:**

The shop is John's clock shop, of course—the shop that I now know is possibly riddled with mercury—and is where I first met Tyler, actually, on my very first visit to Bibb County when he was sharpening a chainsaw and John was swigging Wild Turkey from the bottle.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Yeah, and I've been letting him tattoo on me a little bit more, because I ain't no good-looking man. I ain't gonna win no beauty prize. You know, I ain't gonna be hanging out there naked showing my damned ass. So I've been giving him a little bit of practice material. But it's like—we call that church. Wild Turkey is the holy water. The little filthy-ass room is the sanctuary. I'm trying to remember all the other names. The tattoo needles are the reliquaries.

**BRIAN REED:**

A reliquary is a container that holds a holy relic, like the bones or ashes of a saint. To hear John describe church, it was a bonding time for him and Tyler, a nighttime meeting of the minds.

**BRIAN REED:**

What do you guys talk about?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Yeah, when you get two drunk guys together that have such a disparity in ages, the wisest thing for the old one to do is to keep his mouth shut and listen to the thoughts that weigh heavy on the head of the younger one. The other night when we had church, he asked me some of my damn thoughts about life and death, and, you know, whether or not I think there's anything when you die. I probably rattled on and prattled on about a bunch of damn bullshit that makes sense when you're drunk but probably doesn't when you're sober. So—

**BRIAN REED:**

What was the gist of it?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Oh, the gist would be impossible to say. I mean I went all the way down to quarks.

**BRIAN REED:**

Quarks, the subatomic particle.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

I mean I was discussing the fact, you know, that in, for example, P&D orbitals, an electron can be in two places at the same time but not in the middle. And I have used that as an analogy to how it is now theorized that quasars, which could appear light years distances across universes, can be fed by matter entering a spiraling black hole.

**BRIAN REED:**

I didn't understand most of that either. Don't worry.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

You know, I was explaining Einstein's theory of time dilation a little bit, as simply as I could.

**BRIAN REED:**

The theory as to why time passes more quickly or slowly due to one's trajectory in space time.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

So yeah, sometimes it gets deep.

**BRIAN REED:**

And other nights, John said, he and Tyler would just shut up and sit there together, passing the bourbon back and forth in silence in the shop's back room.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Mostly turned off the damn light and listened to the sound of the tweeting birds, and the frogs, and the crickets through the open back window. Something he don't get enough of in his life is god-damned quiet.

**UNCLE JIMMY:**

Lord, help me, yup.

**BRIAN REED:**

I never talked to Tyler about church before John died. It sounded wholesome enough to me, not that different than Tyler and John spending their afternoons building a big swing set together. But when Tyler fills me in on the ritual, it becomes clear that it was not like that.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

It started off with me coming over to tattoo on him, $100 an hour to tattoo on him.

**BRIAN REED:**

And that was OK, Tyler says. But then instead of normal tattooing, John started asking him to simply tattoo over his existing tattoos again and again. And then there was another request from John.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

He had me pierce his nipple just to pierce it.

**BRIAN REED:**

John's nipples were already pierced, but he wanted Tyler to re-pierce them anyway.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Before each tattoo, I'd have to pierce his nipples. He'd get like an endorphin high off of it, just a pain fix.

**BRIAN REED:**

John once tried to describe to me what it felt like to be inside his mind. He said, you know what it's like to get a song stuck in your head where it's just playing over and over and you just can't get it out of there, even if it's a terrible song? That's what happened to him every day. He'd replay the eventualities of climate change, and resource depletion, and economic collapse. He couldn't get them out of his head.

So church, according to Tyler, morphed into what was essentially an elaborate form of cutting that helped John to relieve his mental anguish.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

It might not even be the pain or the piercing itself, it's just the thought, just the excitement, the thought of it, and it clears his mind of everything, all of his worries. If I'm piercing him or tattooing on him, his mind's completely blank where he's not just sitting there thinking about shit, and my company, too. So our church sessions is helping all sorts of things, I guess.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler starts to pull up a video on his phone to show me.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

This is when he first got into the tattooing on the nipple.

**BRIAN REED:**

It's not just him and John. A couple of his friends are in the video, too. They're tattooing on John's nipple. Tyler says they were using an empty needle. There was no point to this tattoo, except for the pain of it. Tyler tells me, to an extent he understands John's desire for this because he got into tattoos partially because they gave him a similar kind of distraction from his own tortured thoughts. And he was the one who recommended it as therapy to John.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

He said I got him into it because I told him how I could kick back and enjoy a tattoo, you know, like a stress reliever. And that's what he—

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

[GROAN]

**TYLER GOODSON:**

That's what he done. It was his stress reliever, and buddy, it—

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Oh, lord.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

—kept—

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

Jeez-o-peet.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

You see, I kept getting used to the things. It was getting worse, but I was getting so used to it that I wasn't seeing it, you know?

**BRIAN REED:**

What's "it"? What was getting worse?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

The crazy shit he was having me do to him.

**BRIAN REED:**

Of course, the internet and the world are filled with cell phone videos of dudes laughing and groaning as they inflict inventive forms of pain on each other's bodies. There are entire communities and subcultures that exist for this purpose. Tyler knows that scene. He goes to biker and tattoo rallies, towing a mobile tattoo parlor he built inside a trailer.

But Tyler says even for him, what John wanted him to do went way beyond what he was used to.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I got a picture right here—

**UNCLE JIMMY:**

Yeah.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

—where John B's working on my Harley. And he hates motorcycles. He says anybody that has a motorcycle is failure, trash. He hates motorcycles.

**UNCLE JIMMY:**

Yeah.

**BRIAN REED:**

Same thing you say about tattoos.

**UNCLE JIMMY:**

Yes, sir.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Yeah, he used to say that. But this is him working on my Harley with a shirt off.

**UNCLE JIMMY:**

God, yes.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

That's a bullwhip tattooed around his neck—

**BRIAN REED:**

Wow.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

—drapin' across his shoulders, and bloody whips—

**UNCLE JIMMY:**

Whips.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

—across his entire back all the way down to his ass crack.

**UNCLE JIMMY:**

God-damn right.

**BRIAN REED:**

This picture is really disturbing. It's John's back, which when I visited John was not tattooed. Like Tyler said, there's a whip that looks as if it's laying across his shoulders and neck, apparently attached to the handle on the other side of him. And that all across his back, top to bottom, are dozens of red lash marks, like in a famous historic photo that John included in a collage in the 53-page manifesto he sent me documenting society's moral decline.

A photo of a slave named Gordon who has believed to have escaped from a plantation in Louisiana, and whose back was photographed and distributed by abolitionists as visual proof of the terrors of slavery.

**BRIAN REED:**

His whole back is just like criss-cross, red, bloody.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Blood, whips.

**UNCLE JIMMY:**

Yup, god-damn right.

**BRIAN REED:**

Tyler tells me that in order to create this tattoo, John went into the woods, hand-picked a tree branch, and asked Tyler and his friends to whip him with it, and then had them tattoo over the welts.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

It was like he wanted to know the feeling of—wanting to know what folks went through back in that time.

**BRIAN REED:**

He would say that?

**TYLER GOODSON:**

Yeah.

**UNCLE JIMMY:**

Yup.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

He just wanted to experience the pain, I guess.

**BRIAN REED:**

Which that's a twisted explanation to give for doing something like this. John had a complicated and contradictory relationship to race. Like with women and gay people, he'd express outrage when he heard examples of discrimination. He'd express empathy, and also an understanding for the systemic ways our society is built, to be unfair and harmful to these groups of people.

But then sometimes John would say racist things in front of me. He'd acknowledged that he shouldn't use the n-word and then use the n-word. People who've known him for a long time have told me that, especially years ago, John was quite racist, but that over the years he had changed for the better. Granted, these are white people telling me this.

Woodstock is about 95% white, which, of course, is not an accident. It's the result of many decades of laws and violence and day-to-day racism. Bibb County was the last county in Alabama to comply with a school desegregation order in 1967, long after *Brown* *v.* *Board* *of* *Education.* It's a place that voted for George Wallace four to one. And then in the '50s, had a sign appear on Main Street in one of the towns saying, "The Klan people of Bibb County welcome you."

So much of the stuff John said he hated about Shittown—Harleys, tattoos, misogyny and hobophobia, racism, he said he despised it. But that stuff was part of him, too.

Church played a big role in John and Tyler's relationship by the end. It was one of the main ways they were spending their time. On the front of his body, one of John's tattoos is of a sundial, and John included a sundial motto there on his chest. The one he chose is omnes vulnerant, ultima necat—each wounds, the last kills. It refers to time, as in each minute wounds, the last minute kills. Time's a gift. It's also a punishment.

Tyler says the brutality of what John wanted Tyler to do to him kept intensifying, far beyond tattooing with an empty needle, or repeated nipple piercings, or being lashed with a tree branch. And sometimes Tyler was uncomfortable.

**TYLER GOODSON:**

He fucking was addicted to that shit. He wanted me to come over every fucking day. Because I mean we'd be over workin' in the shop—hey, bud, you think we can have a church session real quick? Like a damn dope fiend or something wanting me to pierce his nipples. But it was just gettin' so ridiculous I couldn't keep up with it.

**BRIAN REED:**

There's a story that's taken hold among some locals and people surrounding John's cousin Reta, and also some of John's close friends, of what led to John's demise. That John was desperate for company and influenceable, and that he started hanging out with unsavory people, and drinking—which according to most people, he hadn't done for much of his life—and getting tattoos. As one man told me, you lay with dogs, you get fleas. And the dog he was talking about was Tyler.

In the year and a half since John's death, I've watched as that story has slowly ossified into a matter of fact that people now tell each other. But I think this is a more accurate story. If John wanted these things done to his body, as it appears from the videos I've seen that he did, or if he needed them, then where else would he have sought them out besides church? Who else in his life in Bibb County would he feel comfortable enough to go to with these requests and not feel inconsolably ashamed or judged, not worry that they might gasp in his face?

Tyler was 24 during all this, with so much going on in his life already. He didn't know when he started church that it would go as far as it went. And he was wary of doing some of the things John was asking him to do. And yet still he did them for John.

He did try at one point to stop some of it. He told John that was it for now. No more piercing. And Tyler says he held to that for a couple of weeks, but it threw John into a depression, and he wouldn't take no for an answer. And eventually, Tyler ended up just doing it again.

In fact—

**TYLER GOODSON:**

I pierced his nipples the night he killed himself.

**BRIAN REED:**

After their day together splashing around the river and spray painting their names under the bridge, their Father's Day, as they called it, Tyler brought John home and John pressured him into doing that. Just give me a pain fix before you leave, he told Tyler. And Tyler reluctantly did.

And then he went home and was pissed at John about it. And he says that was part of the reason when John was begging him to come back over and saying he was going to commit suicide that Tyler just said, fuck it, and went to bed instead.

On my last day, on my last trip to Alabama, I had some time to kill so I decided to go down to the Cahaba River. It's a stunning river, a National Wildlife Refuge, that many people in Bibb County consider their local treasure. As I was standing on the bank, I saw a bridge in the distance. I thought to myself, hmm, I wonder if that's the bridge Tyler and John tagged their names under that day, that last day of John's life.

So I drove to the end of it and crawled underneath. There was graffiti everywhere, marks of the people who'd been there—Jason, and Misty, and Jerry Conway, and Ranger Rick, and Snake, and Tina who loves Danny. There was also a fuck you and racial epithets, and an upsetting number of KKKs. No John or Tyler, though. For a second, I wondered if maybe Tyler had made up the fact that they'd done this.

But then I found another bridge over a small tributary of the river at a spot called Bulldog Bend, and walked underneath past a bunch of garbage, past a torn-up couch, and a pool lining, and a rotting deer carcass, and weirdly, the half burnt medical records of an infant. And there, past all that, on the other side of the giant support of the bridge in a serene spot looking out over the bend in the river, there they were. Tyler's initials on one side, with an "Established 1991." John's on the other, "Established 1966."

There were no nasty words here. A couple of beer cans and cigarette boxes, but other than that, not too much trash. Together, Tyler and John found a place that was just a little bit cleaner.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:**

The last time you talked to me I told you that I go through these suicidal stages and all that shit and that kind of worried you. But when I think about the end of my own existence, I take the biggest possible picture. I don't just look at myself as a 49-year-old semi-homosexual atheist living in a Shittown full of Baptists in Buttfucksville, Alabama. I look at myself as a citizen of the world. I try to look at the biggest picture possible.

**BRIAN REED:**

What did John B. McLemore make of his life at the end? Did he live a worthwhile life defined? "Ruminations on my life," John writes, in his suicide note, which he left on his computer. "I have not lived a spectacular life. But within my four dozen plus years, I've had many more hours to pursue that which I chose, instead of moiling over that which I detested."

John's suicide note is long. It includes versions of the different essays he sent me before, "Worthwhile Life Defined," and his apocalyptic manifesto, and a bit called Asspower versus Gaspower. But the last several pages I've never seen before, and what's striking about them is that they're the part about John's life, and what he describes in them is a life of happiness and contentment.

He describes the life of a man who, for the vast majority of his days, rarely went further than a handful of miles from the spot he was born and yet still managed to become a citizen of the world. From this one tiny spot in the forest, whose latitude and longitude he memorized, he found ways to embrace the world—its history, its beauty, its most thrilling and challenging ideas.

"I have coaxed many infirm clocks back to mellifluous life," he writes. "Studied projective geometry and built astrolabes, sundials, taught myself 19th century electroplating, bronzing, patination, micro machining, horology, learned piano, read Poe, de Maupassant, Boccaccio, O'Connor, Welty, Hugo, Balzac, Kafka, Bataille, Gibran, as well as modern works by Mortimer, Hawking, Kunstler, Klein, Jacoby, Heinberg, Hedges, Hitchings, and Rhodes."

But the other thing that's striking about John's note is the appreciation he shows for his home. "But the best times of my life," John goes on, "I realize were the times I spent in the forest and field. I've walked in solitude, beside my own babbling creek, and wondered at the undulations, meanderings, and tiny attles that were occasionally swept into its midst.

I've spent time in idle palaver, with violets, lyer leaf sage, heliopsis, and monkshood, and marveled at the mystery of monotropa uniflora. I have audited the discourse of the hickories, oaks, and pines, even when no wind was present. I have peregrinated the woods in winter under the watchful guard of vigilant dogs, and spent hours entranced by the exquisiteness and delicacy of tiny mosses and molds, entire forests, within a few square inches. I have also ran thrashing and flailing from yellow jackets.

Before I could commence this discourse, I spent a few hours out under the night sky, reacquainting myself with the constellations like old friends. Sometimes I just spent hours playing my records. Sometimes I took my record players and CD players apart just to peek inside and admire the engineering of their incongruous entrails. Sometimes I watched *Laverne* *&* *Shirley* or old movies or *Star* *Trek.* Sometimes I sat in the dark and listened to the creaking of the old house.

I have lived on this blue orb now for about 17,600 days, and when I look around me and see the leaden dispiritedness that envelops so many persons, both young and old, I know that if I die tonight, my life has been inestimably better than that of most of my compatriots. Additionally, my absence makes room and leave some resources for others who deserve no less than I have enjoyed."

And then he ends it, "I would hope that all persons reading this can enjoy some of the aspects of life that I have enjoyed, as well as those aspects that I never will, and will take cognizance of the number of waking days he has remaining, and use them prudently. To all that have given so much, much love and respect, John B. McLemore."

Bibb County, Alabama came into its own as a thriving coal county in the late 1800s. Though the boom times wouldn't last long, in the 1890s with the population on the rise, the citizens of Bibb started taking advantage of each other, stealing from each other, murdering each other, burning each other's houses down. It got so bad, a newspaper called the county Bloody Bibb, and the name stuck. Bloody Bibb, the 1890s version of Shittown.

In 1891, one of the main perpetrators of this chaos, the most notorious gangster in the county, Jesse Miller, who extorted lots of land for himself and stole his neighbor's cattle and cotton, and whose gang killed people who knew too much, was finally locked in jail but then escaped and fled Bibb County for good, signing over control of all his land in the county to his son, Brooks.

Years later, Brooks took 124 acre parcel of the family land and transferred ownership of it to his daughter, Mary Grace. Years after that in 1965, Mary Grace, pregnant, began a ritual of sitting on that land and rubbing her stomach and pleading to God saying, please, Lord, give me a genius. Lord, please, just make my child a genius.

On March 15, 1966 she had a red-haired boy, gave him a middle name after her father Brooks, and brought him home to the 124 acres to an old house with three chimneys in the middle of the woods.

[MUSIC - "A ROSE FOR EMILY," BY THE ZOMBIES"]

S-Town is produced by Julie Snyder and me, with all-star editing from Ira Glass, Sarah Koenig, and Neil Drumming. We have the best podcast staff in the world. Whitney Dangerfield is our digital editor. Starlee Kine is a story consultant. Fact checking and research by Ben Phelan. Seth Lind is our director of operations. Lyra Smith mixes the show. Matt Tierney is our technical director.

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[AD]

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