

# S·TOWN

## CHAPTER I TRANSCRIPT

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**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 Jesus, 'cause Jesus 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 covering 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 townspeople after townspeople 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 Nicholases 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 Nicholises, 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 Mississippi.

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.

Music for the show is composed by Daniel Hart, Trey Pollard, Helado Negro, Nick Thorburn, and Matt McGinley. Music supervision by Damien Graef. Special thanks to Tracey Chan and Khoi Uong at Studio Rodrigo, Rich Orris, Jack Hitt, Anaheed Alani, Sarah Dockery, Jordan Ficklin, Da Deng, Anthony Roman, and Valero Doval, who did the incredible art and illustrations for our website, [stownpodcast.org](http://stownpodcast.org). That's [stownpodcast.org](http://stownpodcast.org).

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.