

S·TOWN

CHAPTER V TRANSCRIPT

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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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: You're speculating now. Just don't do that.

RETA LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: It's just—I believe it.

BRIAN REED: You do?

RETA LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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.

BRIAN REED: Charles wants you to stop.

[LAUGHTER]

CHARLIE LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: Oh my gosh. She's just got back from Gatlinburg.

BRIAN REED: What was there?

RETA LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: She went to the river. They carried her on a boat ride to the river here not long ago.

BRIAN REED: Really?

CHARLIE LAWRENCE: Yeah.

RETA LAWRENCE: She just went on the boat.

CHARLIE LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: OK.

BRIAN REED: Have a good night.

CHARLIE LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: Well, she got Lightsey.

BRIAN REED: That's officer Jerry Lightsey, a veteran Woodstock cop in his 60s.

RETA LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: Absolutely.

BRIAN REED: According to Tyler, Charlie cussed at him. According to Reta—

RETA LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: [LAUGHS]

BRIAN REED: Saying that you guys were crying over Mary Grace and were like all boo hoo hoo or so.

RETA LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: ...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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 own. Reta tells me she thinks Tyler should do time for what he's done.

RETA LAWRENCE: 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 LAWRENCE: 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 shackled 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 safety. 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. Special thanks to Elizabeth Aaron, Russell Yohannan, Carrie Lewis, and Scott Sinkler.

[AD]

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