

# S·TOWN

## CHAPTER VI TRANSCRIPT

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**SARAH KOENIG:** Chapter VI.

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

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** Phew. Stinking old car. Aw, man. Time to get another one.

**BRIAN REED:** After a long day running around Bibb County together, to the courthouse and the library, and past the Burt family compound just to have a look at it, John and I are driving in his beat-up Mercedes back to his place. It's my last night here. I'm flying home tomorrow. John wants to swing by the Little Caesars to pick up a pizza for his mother. It's getting dark.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** OK. We're going to take the shortcut through here, since the sun's diminishing arc is passing beneath the horizon. As the sun's diminishing arc passed beneath the horizon.

**BRIAN REED:** A rare moment of quiet with John, in the dusk.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** Phew. I'm gonna miss ya. I hate to tell you that.

**BRIAN REED:** I'm going to miss you, too.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** Shoot.

**BRIAN REED:** Hopefully I can get back down here.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** At least come down here once every now and then for a lecture on climate change and energy.

**BRIAN REED:** [LAUGHING]

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** And the impossibility of paying our debts.

[DOOR CHIMING]

**MAN:** I'm low on deep dish!

**BRIAN REED:** John grabs a pepperoni pizza from the Little Caesars to bring home to Mary Grace. And as we're climbing back into the car in the parking lot, a very minor confrontation occurs. A manager emerges from the pizza place and says to me, were you recording in my store? I tell him, yeah, I was recording John. He says, there's no recording allowed. That's all right, I say. We're leaving anyway.

**BRIAN REED:** We won't come back. Sorry.

**MAN:** That's all right. It's just so you know.

**BRIAN REED:** That's it. The guy was fine to me. This was not a big deal. But as we drive away, John will not let it go.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** My store, my store, oh, I love it. Oh, my store. That motherfucker. He doesn't own a pot to piss in or a litter to sling it at. He probably lives over at South Forty.

**BRIAN REED:** South Forty trailer park, where Tyler lived at one point, across the street from John.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** He thinks he's a top dog. He runs the Little Caesars in Buttfucksville, Alabama. In my store—is you recording anything in my store? (LAUGHING)

**BRIAN REED:** Like, I'm over this. But then John busts out this lovely word.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** He's probably a fag, too. They always overcompensate. You know, I've been on both sides of the fence, so I know the psychology of heterosexual and homosexual. That's probably the type that likes to overcompensate. They call themselves tops. You know, they shout down the bottom. That's usually how that type of relationship works.

**BRIAN REED:** John talking like this—it did make me wonder.

**BRIAN REED:** This is going to sound like a ridiculous question, but is there a gay scene down here?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** Oh, my god. There's no telling how many closet cases are in this town. You turn that off, and I'll tell you something.

**BRIAN REED:** OK.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** Hit the kill button for a second.

**BRIAN REED:** This is one of the few times John ever asked me to turn my recorder off. What that usually means is that I wouldn't tell you what he said without getting his permission to describe it. But there are a few reasons I am going to give you an overview of what he told me in the car that day.

First, since John died, two other people who knew him well have told me the same information on the record. Also, John was very clear that he did not believe in God or an afterlife. So John, in his own view, is worm dirt now, unaffected by this. And lastly, what John disclosed, and where it led me after he died, helped me understand him so much more. And I think trying to understand another person is a worthwhile thing to do.

So what he told me was about a local man with whom he'd had a sexual relationship not all that long ago. I'm not going to say exactly who the man was, because that's the part John wanted secret. It wasn't the fact that he had been with men that he didn't want recorded, but that he had been with this particular guy. Because John had talked to me about this guy already, multiple times, and told me that he was not a good person.

The guy worked on John's yard over the years. And for a while, they'd been close. After John committed suicide, I went to meet with the man. We did an interview on the record,

but I'm not going to use the recording. He's friendly when I arrive and open to talking. We sit, and periodically as we speak, his wife wanders by and eavesdrops.

He says his relationship with John was close but a working one. John would pay him to do projects on the house and yard, which John did with lots of people. And the man says that over time John became overly attached to him. John didn't like for the man to leave or when he had other commitments. At a moment when his wife isn't around, I ask the guy if his and John's relationship was romantic, if it was sexual.

I think that's what he wanted, the man says. I think he just wanted a partner. Not so much sex, I guess. I hope not. Had me scared, though. And so it wasn't ever sexual with you guys, I ask. "Mm-mm," he says. "Cause he said otherwise," I tell him. The man snaps his head towards me with big eyes. "Mm," he says. I tell him he doesn't need to talk about it if he doesn't want, but because John told me about it, I felt compelled to ask. "Mm," he says again. He pauses. "Mm-mm."

And that is all that is said on the matter, though there is one moment later in the conversation when the man is telling me about the reason he and John started spending less time together. The man had started dating a woman, and John would say harsh things about her. He says he knew what John was trying to do—he was trying to get the man to be with him instead. "But that ain't what I wanted," the man tells me. "I don't want no boyfriend. I want a girlfriend. I'm straight and gonna stay that way, too."

I left my visit with that man, more than a year after John killed himself, feeling lots of things, but mostly feeling like, ugh, is that what passed for love in John's life? This guy maybe who has a wife and doesn't acknowledge their relationship, and who John thinks is an asshole, anyway? John did have Tyler, I guess, and Michael Fuller, years back, both of whom he clearly cared about, but both of whom were in very unstable situations and, oh yeah, were also straight.

Tyler says he and John would tell each other, I love you, man, of course with the requisite caveat that they weren't trying to get up each other's butts. But that's not love, like love love, the kind of love I hear about all the time on the country music stations as I'm driving around west Alabama.

[MUSIC – "LOVE YOU LIKE THAT" BY CANAAN SMITH]

Did John ever have love in his life? Not "I really feel something for this kid Tyler" love, but Mississippi River love, fifth of whiskey love, muscadine wine, Tom Petty track, all night till the sun come back love. Or even a quieter, steadier, maybe even longer love. Did John

ever have a relationship resembling any of that, or did he spend the entirety of a lifetime without it?

One night in October 2015, as I was getting married, actually, an email showed up in my inbox. No, I was not checking my email during my wedding. I noticed it the following week. Hello, sir, it began. My name is Olin Long and I was a friend of John B. McLemore for 12 years. I recently learned of his death. Olin Long. I'd never heard that name before, and it was not on John's contact list that he left behind after his suicide.

Olin goes on to explain in his email that he had corresponded with a friend of John's who was on the list, whom I'd spoken to, and that man told Olin about me, that I was doing a story about John. Can you let me know when this segment will air, Olin writes, I would very much like to listen. Also, I need to know the radio station number, AM or FM. Thank you.

I write back and tell Olin it's nice to hear from him, albeit under unfortunate circumstances. I've been talking to all sorts of friends of John's, I explain, learning about him. Would he be open to speaking to me sometime? He agrees. He tells me he lives in Birmingham about 40 miles from John's place in Woodstock. He prefers not to meet at his house, so a few months later I rent a motel room and set it up as a makeshift recording studio.

Waiting in the lobby, I see a man walk in, peering around. He's fit, but not skinny, neatly dressed in a well-fitting red sweatshirt and jeans. It's Olin. We shake hands and head into the room.

**BRIAN REED:** Welcome to the digs.

**OLIN LONG:** The recording studio.

**BRIAN REED:** Yeah.

**OLIN LONG:** All right.

**BRIAN REED:** Later, when we get to know each other, Olin will ask me how old I think he is, and I will guess John's age, about 50, maybe even younger. But he tells me he's about to turn 60. The years haven't shown in him the way they do in others. He sits with good posture. Military posture, I learn, when I ask him to talk about himself so I can check the levels of the mic.

**BRIAN REED:** Let me get a quick level on your voice.

**BRIAN REED:** He was a linguist in the Air Force, with top-secret security clearance, specializing in German and Russian.

**OLIN LONG:** What I did was just listen to Russian pilots talk and send it to the National Security Agency.

**BRIAN REED:** These days, he's a registered nurse at a nearby hospital.

**OLIN LONG:** I work in the Surgical Intensive Care Unit there.

**BRIAN REED:** Oh, really?

**OLIN LONG:** Yeah. Are you getting a good reading here?

**BRIAN REED:** It sounds great. And also, I'm learning about you, which is helpful, because I have no idea who you are. (LAUGHING)

**OLIN LONG:** Oh, gosh.

**BRIAN REED:** So we're rolling.

**OLIN LONG:** How did you know John? I figure you must have met him.

**BRIAN REED:** I begin to explain how John wrote to our radio show, how he and I spoke on the phone for months before I ever went down there. And before I can get into much more of the story, Olin takes over the conversation. He seems eager to talk.

**OLIN LONG:** That's very similar. When I met John, we talked on the phone for 15 months very regularly before we ever met in person. I'm going to tell you, we met on a singles line for men. The only good thing that came out of that singles line experience was a friendship with John. I met John on the line, and I called him back at the number, and within just a few minutes, I knew that I was talking to someone brilliant.

I learned of John's death on the condolence website. I had not heard from John in probably a year. So I got curious.

**BRIAN REED:** Olin doesn't tell me why he hadn't heard from John in a year. Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself, he says.

One day, after all that time not speaking, Olin says he wondered about John, and finally called him, but his phone number was disconnected, which Olin thought was strange, because John's family had had that phone line since the 1960s. So during some downtime at work, he typed John B. McLemore obituary into Google, and there it was.

**OLIN LONG:** And that's all I had to go on. Because in all the years I knew John, we had no friends in common. I had no one who knew him. So there was no one I could call.

**BRIAN REED:** Olin says in the more than six months since that happened, he's been grieving alone. He has one friend at work he's told about John. He's been writing about John in his journal. And one afternoon, he visited his grave. And he corresponded with another commenter who left a message on the condolence website, who's the friend of John's who told Olin about me.

**OLIN LONG:** And it said contact me, so I clicked—

**BRIAN REED:** Olin and I will end up sitting in this motel room for five hours tonight, and more than six hours tomorrow, talking about John. He tells me that it feels exhilarating to finally talk about his relationship with John, to try to make sense of it, now that John's gone, with someone else who knew him, too.

The singles line Olin and John met on was called MegaPhone. This was in 2003, before online dating became ubiquitous. It was essentially Grindr for your landline. You'd dial into the service, listen to short messages people had recorded describing themselves. If you liked them, you'd beep them, as it was called. And then if they were intrigued, they could pay to be connected with you on the phone. That's what happened with Olin and John. John beeped Olin, and Olin called him back.

**OLIN LONG:** One of the first things he said to me was that he lived with his parents, and he lived in a small town. And he said, I hope that's not a problem. We just started talking.

**BRIAN REED:** And that talking went on for months—15 months, as Olin said—before they met in person, usually talking in the middle of the night, because Olin keeps night shift hours even on his days off, and John would just be finishing up his work in the clock shop, which he did in the evening because it was cooler.

**OLIN LONG:** And I just remember enjoying talking at night, maybe even sitting in the dark with no lights on, and just talking on the phone with John.

**BRIAN REED:** They found a lot to discuss. Books they were reading. Olin gravitated more to fiction, John to science. They talked about music, things going on in the world, about growing up, and a lot about being gay men in Alabama. Olin didn't still live in his hometown like John, but was born and raised in Alabama, too, and had lived much of his life there.

I have to say, Olin has such a ridiculous recall for the details of these conversations, he could be John's official biographer, like what he remembers about John's father.

**OLIN LONG:** Tom McLemore had one eye that was straight, and the other one was a little off-center.

**BRIAN REED:** Who Olin recalls only from a photograph he saw hanging on John's wall. He never met the man. Or John's mother—

**OLIN LONG:** Mary Grace's birthday is November the 29th or November the 30th, 1926.

**BRIAN REED:** Who remembers that about their friend's mother?

**OLIN LONG:** She got married in 1951.

**BRIAN REED:** Oh, yeah. Of course. What about cousin Jimmy on John's father's side?

**OLIN LONG:** Jimmy was born—and I'll never forget it—4/4/44. April the 4th, 1944.



**BRIAN REED:** Of course, as Olin and John were chatting, they were feeling each other out. At one point, before they'd met, John sent Olin a photo of himself standing on a chair alongside a very tall grandfather clock at his house, with the ostensible reason of showing Olin how large the clock was. Olin looked at the clock, then looked at the man standing next to it. He noticed John's red hair, his lack of freckles, and thought, he's not bad-looking. When finally Olin visited John in Woodstock, he did so with curiosity.

**OLIN LONG:** I was trying to decide if I was attracted to him. Because I'm going to be honest with you, when I would go down there and visit him, the few times I'd go down there, it was to take a second look.

**BRIAN REED:** Though if they were trying to impress each other, John didn't necessarily put in a ton of effort.

**OLIN LONG:** I mean, I went over there dressed like this one time, and he said, I only dress that way to go talk to the lawyer.

**BRIAN REED:** I mean, Olin was dressed in that he was wearing jeans and a shirt.

**OLIN LONG:** The difference is mine were clean and untattered. He was wearing a t-shirt with holes in it, paint stains all over it. And the trousers he had on, very much the same.

And then, of course, I was down there one evening in his bedroom, and he had a pile of handkerchiefs there on the floor. And I suspected they were used handkerchiefs. And surely enough, he had to blow his nose, and he went over there and he picked up a used, wadded-up handkerchief and blew it, and then threw it back down there in the pile. And I didn't say anything, but I thought, I don't do that.

**BRIAN REED:** So that gave Olin pause. But still, night after night, he and John found themselves talking for hours on the phone. They were getting close.

**OLIN LONG:** We got on well. He was somebody that I could—there was intimacy there. And I'm going to tell you the definition of intimacy that was given to me by a counselor. Intimacy is the feeling that I can tell another person my thoughts and my behaviors without fear of judgment. If I can tell them the things

that I've done, even things that I'm not proud of, and they're still going to answer the phone and say hey, Olin, how are you getting along. That's how John would do—say, how are you getting along? So we did have a close friendship there.

**BRIAN REED:** As Olin and John got to know each other, they did what you do—talk about past relationships. And there they had a lot in common. They'd both dealt with a lot of secrecy and repression.

**OLIN LONG:** He told me that he'd had a relationship at one point with an older man. He called him William.

**BRIAN REED:** This was John's first relationship, according to Olin. He says John was probably 21 when he met this man he called William, which would have been in the late '80s. John told him it was a hot summer's day.

**OLIN LONG:** And there was a road crew working on the highway right out there in front of John's house. And John said he went out there with some water, kind of like the water boy at a football game. And William was one of the guys out there working on that road crew. And as John said later, William said, the first time I saw you, I knew you were hiding something, that you needed help.

**BRIAN REED:** Help coming out of the closet, if not to the world, then at least to one other person in the world, which, as far as Olin knows, at that point John had never done. Olin also had an older, more experienced, but still not publicly out man coax him out of the closet and teach him the ropes of gay life as he knew it. His was a professor at his college, a married professor. John's was a tattooed road crew worker in Bibb County.

**OLIN LONG:** According to John, I don't think anyone else down there knew. William was not obviously gay, no effeminate mannerisms at all. I also know that he was not very literate. It was like a symbiotic relationship. He had something to offer to John, something to help John come out of his isolation. But at the same time, if he got letters in the mail that looked official, and he couldn't read them well, John would interpret those things for him. John might write his checks for him.

**BRIAN REED:** And in exchange, William imparted on John knowledge he had. Olin refers to them as lessons about sex. I notice that Olin is rather forthright when talking about sex, but he uses somewhat clinical words to do it. Gay people are homosexual, being gay is your sexual orientation, people sleeping together is—

**OLIN LONG:** Sexual activity.

**BRIAN REED:** Or physical contact, or, once in a while, when he lets his hair down a little bit, a sexual interlude. Olin believes John and William were together, engaging in sexual activity in utter secret for at least two years before William moved away, a two-year apprenticeship that William provided to John.

**BRIAN REED:** Did you get the sense that he taught him at all about how to be a gay person in that area?

**OLIN LONG:** I'm glad you asked that. No. I didn't get that impression. I didn't get that impression at all. I think it was mostly sex. I don't know that there was any how do we feel about each other, any discussion of the relationship. I got the impression that William's experience with gay life, even though it may have been extensive, was mostly centered around sexual connections, not relationships.

**BRIAN REED:** And Olin could relate to that, because his experience with his professor was very similar. At 19, Olin admired the man and was grateful to him. But the man was also cheating on his wife and instead of teaching Olin how to have a healthy, open relationship, gave him lessons on how to cruise for sex in parks at nighttime and in public bathrooms.

Another thing Olin and John could relate on—they both came out to their families and weren't accepted. Olin told his mother when he was 26. And after that, he says she never mentioned it again, of her own volition. He's about to turn 60. He has never brought home a partner. Olin says when John tried to come out to his mother years ago, she simply left the room. And they never spoke of it again, either, although Olin says he never heard John use the word gay to describe himself. He always used queer, and told Olin he was, quote, "only 60% to 70% that way."

John and Olin both kept their sexuality hidden for much of their lives. John talked to Olin and to me about how you had to be very careful about that where he lived. And it seems there were only a handful of people in his life he was out to. Olin says John had a refrain

he'd use to describe his life in Bibb County. You just learn to live without, he would say, without sex, love, romance, support, companionship, the touch of another person, a partner. You learn to live without.

**OLIN LONG:** I'll tell you one of the similarities between me and John is that we can be celibate for long periods of time. And I'll just be honest with you. I didn't mean to get into all of this, but I don't mind telling you. It will soon be six years.

**BRIAN REED:** And when they had tried to find a relationship, it had often been disappointing. By the time John and Olin met on the singles line, MegaPhone, they were both pretty disillusioned with it. They'd each joined naively, Olin now realizes, in the hopes of actually dating people. Sitting down, getting to know someone, maybe, who knows, some romance.

Living in Birmingham, Olin says at least he had places to go on a date, places where he could sit with another man in public and get a coffee or a drink. But John had nothing like that. There's not a single bar in all of Bibb County. And even if there was, it's hard to imagine two men feeling comfortable or safe going on a date there. So instead, according to Olin, John would invite guys from the line to his house, which seemed to set a certain expectation. Or else he'd come up with some other rendezvous point in Bibb County. John told Olin about meeting a guy from the line in the parking lot of a Church of Christ near his house on a weekday afternoon. The guy called John once he was there, and John freshened up from doing work on the yard, changed his shirt. But John told Olin, when he got to the church and saw the guy, he found him repulsive-looking, a chain smoker with tobacco-stained teeth.

The guy promptly made some lewd comments to John. And as John put it, the next thing he knew, the man had grabbed him and shoved his tongue down John's throat. So John pulled away, and left, and refused to swallow the whole ride home, terrified that he might catch some disease lurking in the guy's saliva, until he got into his bathroom and scrubbed his teeth frantically, and gargled, and took a bath.

Another time, Olin says, at John's house—

**OLIN LONG:** He had one guy come over. And John had invited him in, and they were in the kitchen. Now, of course, Mary Grace's bedroom is nearby, and so she's in her room asleep. And John asked the gentleman, would you like a glass of water? And he said, sure.

So he got him a glass of water. And as he was holding the glass under the faucet running the water, he felt someone come up behind him and start trying to pull his pants down. But John said he gently stopped that, and they ended up out on the porch. And the guy had to expend that sexual energy, so he masturbated on the front porch. And John said he masturbated into whatever that flower bush was there. And then he left.

**BRIAN REED:** So much for romance.

There was one time Olin knows about when John did fall in love. About two years into their knowing each other, Olin says there was a period where he stopped hearing from John as often as usual.

**OLIN LONG:** And I called him one night. And it wasn't long before I could tell that there was something on his mind. And the next thing I knew, he went into tears.

**BRIAN REED:** John told Olin that he'd recently become friends with a guy in town, and they'd started sleeping with each other and spending a lot of time together. The guy had told John he'd had his eye on him for a while. He had some college, and he seemed to have ambition in his career, which John liked.

John was head over heels for the guy. He said to Olin that he'd told the guy he loved him, but that the guy didn't seem to reciprocate it. And now John hadn't seen him in a while, and he was leaving him messages saying I love you, call me sometime, and not getting any calls back.

**OLIN LONG:** He told me what was going on. And then he burst into tears, and he sobbed. This wasn't just a few tears. It was sobbing. He was in the kitchen. He only had a phone in the kitchen. So he was sobbing in there.

**BRIAN REED:** Had you ever seen him cry?

**OLIN LONG:** I had never heard him cry, never heard him—mostly what I heard from John was humor, disgruntlement, disgruntlement turned into humor, a little anger. And I didn't know that he would cry. I knew I could, but I didn't know he would cry. And I just listened, and I consoled him. I said, that's hard, John. I've been there. I've been there. I think I said, if you need to cry, go ahead. Finish. Get

it all out. When we were on the phone, there was never any hurry. There was never any hurry to get off.

He was desperate. He said, I'm desperate to have that kind of a relationship. You know, a one-on-one partnership kind of relationship. I want it desperately. He only said that one time.

And I heard the word desperate.

**BRIAN REED:** More in a minute.

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**OLIN LONG:** And we were sitting there, and he had made a comment—

**BRIAN REED:** Olin and I are sitting with each other the first night we've met, and he's telling me all these memories of John. And it takes hours before I understand for sure whether he and John were ever a couple, if they ever actually tried. I don't ever ask Olin outright, but I don't need to. Because it gradually becomes clear that it never happened for them, and that for Olin his relationship with John still feels unresolved.

He's telling me stories, remembering things. And in the course of this, his mind drifts now and again to a few tiny moments way in the past that stayed with him, because in them he and John seemed to acknowledge something that they found very difficult to speak about. Like one time when they were riding in the car together through Bibb County, and John had made some remark about Olin that Olin thought was unfair. And Olin told John as much.

**OLIN LONG:** And when I finished, he smiled and he laughed. He said, you and I could never live together. He said, I just piss you off too much. And I didn't know what to think of that. We weren't talking about living together.

**BRIAN REED:** Or another time on the phone, when—

**OLIN LONG:** He asked me, as long as we've been talking on the phone, do you still consider yourself searching for a partner?

**BRIAN REED:** And Olin thought for a moment and then said, not really, John. He wasn't really talking to anyone else.

**OLIN LONG:** And there was some silence there, and I said, why do you ask? (FALTERING) I—I—I don't know. I don't know. I think he was trying to express an interest. I think it's—I didn't know—I didn't—I didn't delve any deeper. I didn't delve any deeper.

**BRIAN REED:** I'm trying to figure out how you feel about this. Like, is this something that you feel is a missed opportunity?

**OLIN LONG:** (SIGHING) I'm not really sure. I think we had talked so much, and I wasn't comfortable enough with what I was feeling. I couldn't identify it.

**BRIAN REED:** Because what was so...?

**OLIN LONG:** There were certain things that I was—that I found it hard to get past, some of his profanity and some of his anger. I was somewhat afraid of his anger. Even though I was wondering what it would be like, I wasn't certain that it was really a good place for me to be. Does that make sense?

**BRIAN REED:** Olin and John could get on each other's nerves. If you were feeling sensitive or emotional, John was not necessarily the greatest guy to talk to, and Olin felt he could sometimes just be thoughtless or mean. They once had a huge fight that was actually over Olin's favorite movie.

**OLIN LONG:** I got very angry with him when the movie *Brokeback Mountain* came out.

**BRIAN REED:** *Brokeback Mountain*, of course, with Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger playing two cowboys who fall in love one summer on a mountain in 1960s Wyoming. When I say this is Olin's favorite movie, he loves this movie. I've noticed during our conversation that a couple times Olin dates life events as being before or after this movie's release.

**OLIN LONG:** It was 2005, because it would have been before *Brokeback Mountain* came out.

**BRIAN REED:** And he knows a ton about it.

**OLIN LONG:** The movie was filmed—they wrapped up shooting in August of 2004. It wasn't released until December of 2005. So we've got a year-and-a-half post-production.

**BRIAN REED:** Olin, how many times have you seen this movie?

**OLIN LONG:** I would venture to say probably 50 or more times. When it first came out, I couldn't get enough of it. I watched it about every day.

**BRIAN REED:** This movie meant so much to Olin. His favorite part is the first 45 minutes, when the cowboys are falling in love, alone together on *Brokeback Mountain*, without the world there to judge, or threaten, or intrude. To see a love story about two men like that, it moved him.

After he saw the movie the first time, he purchased a 52-inch TV specifically so that he could have a better repeat viewing experience in his home. He asked a local cinema to present a special screening of the film once it had left theaters. He devoured the short story the movie was based on and pored over all the behind-the-scenes features.

**OLIN LONG:** And I got so excited about it, I got on the phone, and I was telling John about it, about the movie. And he was listening and listening, and he wasn't saying very much. And then he started talking and telling me I was making too big of an issue out of this, you're getting too much into it.

And one thing I really dislike is when I get excited about something, something that I find important, and I'm trying to make a point, and it gets discounted. So I got really irritated, so we got off the phone. I think I went outside. I know what I did.

**BRIAN REED:** He went into his backyard and pounded the ground to let out his frustration with John. Olin saw parts of himself in both the movie's characters, Heath Ledger's character's fear of the world knowing he was gay, but also the way Jake Gyllenhaal's character could feel so hurt by that fear. And he really thought John would get a lot from it, too.



**OLIN LONG:** I wanted him to relate to that. I wanted him to relate to it, and he didn't at first. But then, over time, we talked again. And I talked about it more, and I talked about it more. And then he began to be interested in hearing more of it. So I said, what is your address?

**BRIAN REED:** John didn't have a TV or go to the movies, so Olin ordered him a copy of the original short story.

**OLIN LONG:** I did. I ordered a copy, and I had it sent to John. That was the second time I heard John cry, because he read it. He read *Brokeback Mountain*.

**BRIAN REED:** He read about Jack Twist and Ennis Delmar, their secret trysts after falling for each other on the mountain with their wives and children at home. And how despite Jack's pleas to Ennis to just get a ranch with him and have a real relationship—never do that. Because Ennis insists, I'm stuck with what I got, caught in my own loop, can't get out of it. And who go on like that for years—Jack desperate to break out of the loop and Ennis too afraid. Until one day Ennis sends Jack a postcard, and it comes back with a stamp saying deceased.

**OLIN LONG:** We were on the phone, and he was crying about it. He had read it. And after that, he always referred to it as the grief manual. He said, I took down the grief manual and read it again tonight.

**BRIAN REED:** And so this is what Olin and John's relationship eventually settled into. They were confidants and close friends, supporting each other through this experience they were both living, of being middle-aged and gay in Alabama, and alone, John giving once in a while hints that maybe he wanted their relationship to be something more.

**OLIN LONG:** I want to ask you a question if I may.

**BRIAN REED:** Please.

**OLIN LONG:** How did he take his life, and what were the circumstances?

**BRIAN REED:** I tell Olin how John did it. He had assumed, based on conversations with John, that it was a gunshot to the head.

**OLIN LONG:** He drank cyanide.

**BRIAN REED:** He drank cyanide.

**OLIN LONG:** Um. OK. Yeah. Well, that's surprising that it was cyanide.

**BRIAN REED:** I'm sorry.

**OLIN LONG:** Poor—no, that's all right.

**BRIAN REED:** I'm sorry.

**OLIN LONG:** That's all right. That's all right. I was thinking that, you know, this—I just need to know. And I'll work through this. This is poor John. John.

**BRIAN REED:** Yeah.

**OLIN LONG:** John.

**BRIAN REED:** What led to John and Olin's not speaking during the last couple of years of John's life was a growing preoccupation with several subjects that Olin says John would not stop ranting to him about.

**OLIN LONG:** I heard a lot about climate change.

**BRIAN REED:** Also the economy. Olin was a good friend. He would listen to John and actually engage with him on these topics. John would refer to certain books a lot, and Olin actually went and read several of them — *Going Dark* and *Walking Away from Empire* by Guy McPherson, and Al Gore's book, *An Inconvenient Truth*. He told John, I believe in climate change. I think it's an issue. I try to do my part. I switched over to energy-saving light bulbs. I don't know what else we can do besides have everybody do their part.

**OLIN LONG:** Then there was mostly Shittown. That was mostly it.

**BRIAN REED:** And these tirades bothered Olin the most, because Olin felt, compared to climate change and oil and the economy, this was something John could actually do something about. John would go on and on about the miseries of Shittown, and Olin would tell him again and again, if it's really that bad, you can leave. You have the means. You can leave. And John would say, I know. I want to leave. And then the next time, on the phone from his kitchen, he'd be howling about Shittown again.

**OLIN LONG:** And I just couldn't hear any more of it. I couldn't hear Shittown, Shittown. I couldn't hear it anymore. If you're not going—if you don't like it, leave it. You can leave it. You can leave it.

**BRIAN REED:** After one such conversation in September 2013, having heard it for the umpteenth time, Olin hung up the phone.

**OLIN LONG:** And he sent me an email within a couple of days that was extremely profane.

**BRIAN REED:** John had witnessed an incident at the Green Pond Grocery near his house that had set him off. Olin thinks it had something to do with how a father had disciplined his young son there in public, but Olin says John also made some indirect jabs at things Olin had expressed in their previous conversation. It wasn't a humorous message, he says. It was angry. And Olin felt at the end of his rope. So he responded and wrote simply, John, please don't send me any more of these profane emails. And John replied with another profane email back.

**OLIN LONG:** It was not as scathing as the first one, but it sounded like—sounded like an ending. Relationships, friendships come to an end. And I thought, well, maybe this one has run its course. So I took a few deep breaths and I thought, I'm going to send him one back. But mine's going to be honest. So I sent him an email back, a lengthy one. I told him everything that I had ever appreciated in him as a friend. I thanked him for being a friend. But I didn't put an end to it, I just said then, I said, but I just simply cannot hear any more of these complaints, particularly about Bibb County.

So I sent it back to him. And this is the email I got back. It was much, much calmer. And he said this to me—he said, I always got the impression that you thought that I was crude, vulgar, and beneath you. And that is why I knew that you and I could never be an item. But call me sometime. I never called him again.

**BRIAN REED:** Olin wasn't the only one who went through this with John. What I learned talking to lots of John's friends is that while they say John had been a tormented person for as long as they knew him, climate change and the collapse of society and Shittown only became fixations for him in more recent years. One clock collector who'd been close friends with John for more than two decades, who lives in Alabama not far away and used to spend entire nights hanging out with John as he worked in the shop, told me he got to the point where he just couldn't talk about climate change and the dissipation of cheap energy anymore.

He said he realized that John's negativity was contagious, and he'd leave there feeling depressed himself. So he had to begin psyching himself up for their visits, reassuring himself that he wasn't going to come away in a gloomy mood, and that everything was OK. Until he just slowly started spending less time with John, going from talking to him two or three times a week to once a week, to a couple times a month, to having not talked to John for several months before he died, and not having visited him in about a year. As best I can tell, this retreat by Olin and some of the other people who were close to John started happening in the last few years before he died, which also happens to be right around the time John wrote an email to a radio show saying John B. McLemore lives in Shittown, Alabama. It sounds like the John I knew was different than the one his friends had known for years. I got to know John, it seems, at the beginning of the end, just as he was driving some of the closest people in his life, like Olin, away, which ended up leaving him even more isolated there—in Shittown.

Olin not calling John after that final email exchange, he says he wasn't thinking of that as I'm never going to call John again. He just needed a break. And then, in the midst of that break, his time with John ran out. And now, he doesn't exactly regret that they never got together, but it's hard sometimes not to wonder what it would have been like if some days had gone differently.

Like this one day, Olin says, about 10 years ago, during a short time when John was running a small nursery in Woodstock, and Olin had ordered some azaleas, and met John in the parking lot of a Birmingham doctor's office to pick them up, and sat with him there in the front of his truck talking, cracking jokes about the dating line they'd met on, the

azaleas sitting in the sun, while John’s mother had an appointment inside, John waiting for the doctor to call him in.

**OLIN LONG:** —the doctor. And that may have been why he put on a clean, navy blue shirt, which I thought really enhanced that red hair. And he was wearing a pair of pants. I don’t know if they were jeans, made out of denim jean material, but they hugged his thighs and such and his belly. And I just remember I just wanted to lean over there and do some stuff, because I’m sitting there in a truck with John B. McLemore outside a doctor’s office picking up my azaleas, I knew exactly what I wanted to do.

I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to reach over there. I wanted to pull his shirt up, expose his belly, and just kiss all over his belly around that red hair, just to that extent. And I wanted to do it slowly and sensuously. That’s what I wanted to do and see what he thought about it. He’s doing nothing but sitting there under the steering wheel of an F-150 pickup truck. But it was just the whole aura. It was the hair, the skin, the intelligence, the—he was in a jolly mood that day.

**BRIAN REED:** And yet, instead of doing anything—

**OLIN LONG:** I kept those feelings to myself. I think now, if I could go back, if I could get in a time machine and go back there and relive that moment, I would at least speak up and tell him what I was thinking. I’d probably look over there and say, John, I don’t know how you’re going to feel about this, but I really want to kiss you right now. There. I’ve put it out there. That’s what I want.

**BRIAN REED:** F-150 pickup truck love, denim hugging on your thighs love, azalea love, doctor’s parking lot love, kissing on your belly and all around your red hair love. Too bad that didn’t actually happen, because that’s something you could write a country song about.

[MUSIC – “A ROSE FOR EMILY” BY THE ZOMBIES]

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

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[AD]

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