

# S·TOWN

## CHAPTER IV TRANSCRIPT

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**SARAH KOENIG:** Chapter IV.

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

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** Go, go, go, go, get into climate change now. Go, go, go, go.

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

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** Go, go, go.

**BRIAN REED:** How many pages is this?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** I have no fucking idea. Go, go, go.

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** Your suicide note?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** We weren't gonna call it out loud, but you did.

**BRIAN REED:** Well, we're looking at it. It's right here.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** I keep it on file. Yeah, we didn't have a camera, big mouth.

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

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** You shouldn't of said that. Fuck it.

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

**BRIAN REED:** I would like it if you wouldn't kill yourself.

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

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

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** I found a better video that describes the entire history of the fossil fuel industry in about 17 seconds.

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

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** Doesn't everyone? OK, this is not distracting, this is another reason. FDIC BOE resolving systemically—

**BRIAN REED:** I don't want—forget that. You're changing the subject.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** There was a very good chance of me not being alive at the time you got out here.

**BRIAN REED:** Why?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** Tired in a way that I can't put into words. Tired. Tired.

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

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** I also emailed it to town hall and my lawyer over there to keep on file.

**BRIAN REED:** You emailed your suicide note to town hall and your lawyer?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** Mhm. Yeah, I actually mailed an email to the town of, uh—

**BRIAN REED:** He pulls it up, the email, and reads the information he sent them.

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

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

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

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** Tyler and Jake?

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

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

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

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

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

[WHISTLING]

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

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

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

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** This is the bill of sale for—

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

**BRIAN REED:** Are those yours?

**TYLER GOODSON:** Yeah.

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

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

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

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

The cousins are standing there, not far from Tyler, the middle-aged couple I remember

from the funeral. I've learned that their names are Reta and Charlie Lawrence. They're huddled with two other people I don't recognize. Reta, like Tyler, is holding some papers. She has glasses and short, graying hair. I walk over to her.

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

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

"Why are you whispering," I ask her.

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

"Tyler," I say.

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

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

neatly on his list.

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

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

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

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

**TYLER GOODSON:** They done good at the damn place.

**BRIAN REED:** Really?

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

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

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

**TYLER GOODSON:** Well, hell, yes.

[LAUGHTER]

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

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

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

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

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

**TYLER GOODSON:** And plus, I think all them mutt dogs protected it.

**BRIAN REED:** So have you have you poked around on that yet? On the dog house?

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



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

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

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** In one of our phone conversations, John did say this to me.

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

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

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

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

One of his most promising clues were these pages he found of coordinates John had written down—latitudes and longitudes for the town of Woodstock, or Shittown as it was

labeled on the document, along with coordinates for K3 Lumber, the trailer park Tyler lives in, as well as, naturally, the nuclear reactor in Chernobyl.

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

The hunt continues in a minute.

[AD]

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

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** On an early Saturday afternoon, I meet a man named Allen Bearden and at his clock repair shop in the back of an antique mall near the interstate in Pell City, Alabama. He's the first of these names off John's list that I contact. Pell City's about an hour east of Woodstock, on the other side of Birmingham, and the vibe here is different

than Bibb County. It's situated on the Coosa River, which has all these switchbacks and detours that make it look more like a smattering of lakes than a river. The place feels livelier than Bibb. There's a big rodeo going on, boats on the water, families vacationing.

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

**ALLEN BEARDEN:** Horology is the study of time.

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

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

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** How much was it worth?

**ALLEN BEARDEN:** Estimatedly, it could have been \$100-something-thousand clock back in the 90s.

**BRIAN REED:** Wow.

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

**ALLEN BEARDEN:** I remember I called him up one day in this shop right here.

When I got him on the phone, it was like, oh, my gosh.

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

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

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** I've been there.

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

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

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

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

He's just running off at the mouth about this and that, about the clock and how

horrible the clock had been treated. You know, pliers must have been on this. Any competent clockmaker who owned it—I mean, he wasn't particularly talking about me, but—

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

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

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** What it should have looked like.

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

**BRIAN REED:** He did that in front of you that day?

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

**BRIAN REED:** What were you thinking when you watched it?

**ALLEN BEARDEN:** That this is a master.

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

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** Really? That’s like—that was known throughout—

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

**BRIAN REED:** Because he was the closest and best they could find?

**ALLEN BEARDEN:** Well, not the—I wouldn’t say the closest. Probably the best.

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

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

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** There comes a point in our conversation when Allen has a question for me.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:** But as far as John's—you said you found out through Tyler?

**BRIAN REED:** His sister-in-law.

**ALLEN BEARDEN:** His sister-in-law?

**BRIAN REED:** Yeah.

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

**ALLEN BEARDEN:** I guess that was how long—how long ago?

**BRIAN REED:** I was able—I went to the funeral. I was able to go to funeral. It was right before.

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

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

**ALLEN BEARDEN:** Yeah.

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

That night, while Allen was teaching vacation bible school, he saw a call come in from John. He silenced it and then called him back when he got home. No answer. He called him the next day. No answer. As the week went on, it was the same. Allen got in touch with a mutual friend of his and John's, a mechanic in Birmingham who was also on John's contact

list, and asked him if he'd heard from John. He hadn't.

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

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** That's a good idea.

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

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** Though I'm not sure there's much of a difference between being lonely and thinking you are. Allen never got to the point of asking the sheriff to check on John, because the night before he was planning to do that, he was driving home from church



with his family and got a call from Faye Gamble, the town clerk who John had called as he drank cyanide, and to whom he'd given his final instructions and contact list.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**ALLEN BEARDEN:** It'd be really interesting to know, you know, the other people, when were they actually called. Was it just me? Was it the top people on

his contact list? Because I think they knew that—these people knew John best. And I think they're probably out there trying to keep us away from the situation for some reason or something.

**BRIAN REED:** Really?

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

**BRIAN REED:** Allen continues in this mode, tiptoeing toward something.

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** Yeah, you're looking at me in like a coded way.

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

**BRIAN REED:** Do you think I should call the other people on the list?

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

[PHONE RINGING]

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

[PHONE RINGING]

**BILL MAIER:** Hello?

**BRIAN REED:** Hi, is this Bill Maier?

**BILL MAIER:** Yes.

**BRIAN REED:** Hi, Bill, were you a friend of John McLemore's?

**BILL MAIER:** Yeah.

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

**BILL MAIER:** Who did?

**BRIAN REED:** John B. McLemore. Yeah.

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

**BRIAN REED:** He actually committed suicide, I'm sorry to say.

**BILL MAIER:** Oh, for god's sake. What happened to his mother?

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

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

**MAN:** Hello, you have reached micros and the escapement maker.

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

but only after the funeral.

**MAN:** John meant a hell of a lot to me. He meant a hell of a lot to me.

**BRIAN REED:** And then another Brit from the list, Duncan Greig.

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

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

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

**TOM MOORE:** The enigma that John McLemore was—

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** It's OK.

**TOM MOORE:** One of the most incredible people I've ever known.

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

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

which means you are predisposed to having long, rambling conversations on the phone.

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

**TOM MOORE:** Walk into a class of 85 to 95 students and look around and, boy, what’s that kid doing here?

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

**TOM MOORE:** Bushy red hair, unkempt, clothing from a different socioeconomic background. He was clearly different.

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

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

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** John B. McLemore’s education is the source of some gossip in Woodstock. I have heard that he held multiple degrees in chemistry and biology. I’ve heard that he quit school because he was smarter than the professors. I’ve heard that he

had to leave after blowing up a laboratory. The reality was less dramatic.

**TOM MOORE:** He was bad at school.

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

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

Remember this?

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** There you go. There you go.

**BRIAN REED:** When John gold-plated a dime for me in his workshop one afternoon.

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

**TYLER GOODSON:** A golden penny.

**JOHN B. McLEMORE:** A gold dime! A motherfucking gold-plated dime! Shit.

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

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

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

**TOM MOORE:** I'm not sure John's ready to go yet.

**BRIAN REED:** Then listening to John go on, as outside the sky turned dark.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**MAN 1:** Where there's a lot of money. He had it. He hid it.

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

**MAN 1:** And if, you know, you talk about some relatives in Florida.

**MAN 2:** All of a sudden they show up.

**MAN 1:** Well here we got a piece of land.

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

**MAN 2:** I'm wondering if they got the money.

**BRIAN REED:** That the Goodsons did?

**MAN 2:** Yeah.

**BRIAN REED:** They haven't told me that they have.

**MAN 2:** Do you think they would?

**MAN 1:** The only thing I can come up with is—if the Goodsons were involved in any of this, maybe they didn't want you or I—

**MAN 2:** To even know.

**MAN 1:** To know about any of this.

**MAN 2:** That's probably true.



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

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

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

**TYLER GOODSON:** Don't call me Mama no more.

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** Wait, what—that happened?

**TYLER GOODSON:** I thought I told you about that.

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

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** The cousins were physically trying to do it or they were trying to

get the mortician to do it?

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

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

**TYLER GOODSON:** Hey, come on up with it.

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

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

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

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

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

So I asked the front desk which room she and her husband are in—four rooms down from

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We know you’re like friends with him,” she says.

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

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

**ALLEN BEARDEN:** Well, don’t you find that very strange, Brian?

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

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** Did you call everyone on the list?

**FAYE GAMBLE:** Everyone that I could get in touch with, yes.

**BRIAN REED:** Faye insists she called everyone.

**FAYE GAMBLE:** I promise you I did.

**BRIAN REED:** Were they called before the funeral?

**FAYE GAMBLE:** Oh yeah. Yeah, they were called from a town hall phone. Yeah.

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

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

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

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

**FAYE GAMBLE:** He said he wrapped it in a towel in the freezer.

**BRIAN REED:** So gold bars, wrapped in a towel in the freezer.

**FAYE GAMBLE:** Mm hm.

**BRIAN REED:** Did he say how much worth of gold?

**FAYE GAMBLE:** Uh-uh. Just gold bars.

**BRIAN REED:** And were there any other spots, like outside or anything like that?

**FAYE GAMBLE:** Uh uh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**BRIAN REED:** That were there when you were there. I see. Like what?

**BRIAN REED:** Faye starts moving her mouth, without letting actual sound out. Eventually she'll reveal that when Reta got into John's house, she couldn't find John's mother's purse or a checkbook or John's laptop, which, I know who has that. But when I asked Faye who she thinks took that stuff, Faye is purposely vague. I think maybe she's not sure what I know already, or else maybe she knows I know so she knows she doesn't

have to say it out loud, et cetera, et cetera. Anyway, now she's making weird eyes at me.

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

**FAYE GAMBLE:** Because I know things I can't talk about.

**BRIAN REED:** You know things you can't talk about.

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

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

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

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

[MUSIC - THE ZOMBIES, “A ROSE FOR EMILY”]

S-Town is produced by Julie Snyder and me, with editing from Ira Glass, Sarah Koenig, and Neil Drumming. Whitney Dangerfield is our digital editor. Starlee Kine is a story

consultant. Fact checking and research by Ben Pheland. Seth Lind is our director of operations. Lyra Smith mixes the show. Matt Tierney is our technical director.

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

We're of course on Facebook, and we're on Twitter, and also follow us on Instagram, [@stownpodcast](https://www.instagram.com/stownpodcast), where we'll be putting some photos of some weird, cool clocks John worked on over the years.

[AD]

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