

CHAPTER VII

You're beginning to figure it out now, aren't you?

Sarah Koenig

Support for S-Town comes from Blue Apron. Chapter seven.

Brian Reed

Before I got to know an antiquarian horologist and he committed suicide, I'd never thought of clocks as anything special. To me, they were just like appliances that tell time. And, an antique clock? I didn't think of that as any different from, say, an antique chair. But then I went to John's friend Bill's house. He asked that I not use his last name.

Brian Reed

Hey sir, nice to see you. How are you?

Alabama Bill

Good to see you

Brian Reed

Thanks for having us.

Brian Reed

Bill's a long-time customer of John's and his house is just a normal-looking suburban house on a cul-de-sac not far from Bibb County. Until the moment that I step inside and suddenly I feel like I'm in a museum. There are rare antique clocks everywhere: in the dining room, in the living room, in the kitchen, in the bedroom, on the ceiling. Close to a hundred or so. (Alabama) Bill tells me John restored all of them.

Alabama Bill

He's worked on this one, that one, that one, that one. This is his, his life's work.

Brian Reed

Being in (Alabama) Bill's house, I realize that these clocks are not appliances. The clocks he collects and that John worked on are strange and beautiful. They're works of art and feats of engineering. (Alabama) Bill says he likes to collect clocks that make you think. There's a clock with a turtle that bobs in water in a dish, and the turtle floats from hour to hour to tell the time. There's a clock with a woman pulling a sheet over the face of it, covering day with nighttime. There's one small clock encrusted in super detailed silver and gold and green gold, which I've never even heard of, that's shaped like the kind of chair servants used to carry royalty in ancient parades. Except instead of an emperor in the seat, there's a tiny intricate clock movement. There's an original mystery clock – that's what it's called – made by the famous French magician Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin, with an hour hand floating in the middle of a glass dial, not visibly connected to any gears or clockworks, and yet somehow it still moves like a normal clock hand; no hint as to how.

Brian Reed

This is amazing. I just, I mean, I want to remember all this.

Brian Reed

John worked on all parts of these clocks, inside and out. He'd fix the complex inner workings, sometimes with hundreds of tiny little pieces and gears or floating turtles. And he'd refinish the exteriors, gilding them with gold or silver or other elements, using methods from the period the clock was made. And then, maybe even more impressive, John built his own timepieces from scratch.

I was visiting John's old college chemistry professor, Tom Moore, at his office in South Carolina, where at the time he was chancellor of a state University. He and I were talking about the astrolabe John made when he was a teenager that he'd showed me in his mother's bedroom. And I'm telling Tom how I don't even think that I'd ever heard of an astrolabe before meeting John, and I was trying to grasp what it was exactly when he was showing me, this complicated medieval instrument hanging on John's wall. And Tom's nodding, and he says...

Tom Moore

We're at a point where I need to show you uh, something that personifies John. I'm gonna bring it over here.

Brian Reed

Okay. Sure.

Brian Reed

Tom gets up and comes back with something in his hands that he's holding delicately.

Tom Moore

This is one of my prized possessions. This, this is a sundial.

Brian Reed

Though on first glance it doesn't look like a sundial to me. It's a small brown circular wooden case.

Tom Moore

Sometime when John was a student of mine, he told me he was gonna make me a sundial for my birthday. And this was 1984 or '5 I'm guessing. Um, he mailed it to me. I got, he called me and told me that he'd finished it and he was mailing it to me for my birthday. I think I got it in 2012.

Brian Reed

Wait, you just said that he started mentioning this...

Tom Moore

'84 or 5

Brian Reed

Tom holds up a piece of paper in front of the wooden case, to block my view of it. He's opening it to get something out and he doesn't want me to see inside yet. Then he puts the lid back on, removes the paper, and I see he's pulled out two very small, precise instruments: a compass and a plum bob level that John machined himself in brass. Tom uses them in conjunction with this tiny little point on the top of the case to make sure the case is facing the proper direction, and that it's sitting level on the table. And then, finally, he starts to lift off the cover.

Tom Moore

I can't wait to see your reaction when you, when you see the inside of this thing. Are you ready?

Brian Reed

Oh my god. (Brian and Tom laugh)

Tom Moore

Can you believe that?

Brian Reed

With the lid off you see an intricate floral pattern that John cut from a sheet of brass, as if it were a paper stencil, and laid atop purple felt, the color of the Mexican petunias in his yard. In the middle there's a tiny button which flips up the gnomon. That's the centerpiece of the sundial, the one that casts the sun's shadow. Gnomon means "the one who knows." This gnomon has Tom Moore's initials in it. And the sundial is designed specifically for the latitude and longitude of Tom's home.

Brian Reed

It's really arresting. All with the precision of it being able to tell time based on the sun's shadow.

Tom Moore

It's unbelievable to me, what it took in knowledge and skill to be able to make this. Off the charts. (Starts crying) What's more valuable to me than this? I think you get that.

Brian Reed

When John's friend (Alabama) Bill was showing me his clock collection in his house, he cried too. I'd asked Bill what the allure of clocks was for him, and he'd started telling me about the first clock he was entranced by: a cheap kitchen clock in his grandparents' house. He'd watch his grandfather pick it up and wind it every Sunday when he was a young boy. He was mesmerized by how this object suddenly became alive, ticking, hands turning, and he began crying as he told me. "Is it that clock," I asked him, "that was emotional for him?" "It's not any one personal clock," he said. "It was just, the measure of time had something to do with me." I didn't totally know what Bill meant by this. 'The measure of time had something to do with me.' But I think he was saying that even as a kid, the clock captured this feeling of time going by, going by and never coming back.

John McLemore

If someone says the name John B. McLemore 25 years in the future you'll remember exactly who that is.

Brian Reed

Oh my god, John I'm never gonna forget you. Come on. (Laughs)

Brian Reed

John once sent me an essay he wrote called, "A Worthwhile Life Defined," in which he breaks down exactly how much meaningful time there is in one life. He begins, quote, "When one considers that the undistinguished life of an industrialized man, in an industrialized nation, consists of about 25,000 days, and that about 33 to 38% of those days are spent in slumber..." And then he runs through a bunch of calculations; shaving off time for sleep to come up with the total number of waking hour days, then shaving off time at work, time commuting, time spent on family commitments, time spent convalescing when you get older. In the end he concludes, the average industrialized man, with 25,000 days on this planet, may easily secure only about 4500 waking hour days of beneficial life. That's a quarter of your life if you're lucky, John says. A quarter of your life during which the average person can pursue matters that are meaningful to them.

When I first read the title of this essay, "A Worthwhile Life Defined," I figured John would lay out in it a vision of what such a life would look like. What you needed to do and accomplish to make your life worthwhile. But he doesn't do that here. Instead of defining a worthwhile life, he defines the amount of time one has in which to achieve a worthwhile life.

His calculation is based on the assumption that we will live to 68 years old. John, of course, cut his own life far short of that. He allocated himself even less time. So did he do it? Did John live a worthwhile life as he defined it? He doesn't give an answer in this essay, but by the time he reached the last of his waking hour days, John had formed an opinion on it. John did have an answer to that question, at the end.

From Serial, and This American Life, I'm Brian Reed. This is Shit-Town.

John B. McLemore lived in Shit-Town, Alabama. But there was a time, believe it or not, when he seemed to be happy there. It was during the town's beginning when Woodstock was incorporating as an official municipality, starting in 1996 when John was in his early 30s. It was a time when you could ask someone at town hall what John B. McLemore was like, and they might say something like...

Daphne Brooks

Never complained. I don't, I don't remember him complaining.

Brian Reed

Daphne Brooks was one of the early members of the town council.

Daphne Brooks

I mean he was, in talking to me, more, um, idealistic.

Brian Reed

Are you sure we're talking about the same John B. McLemore? Red hair? Clock restorer? Says stuff like this about government officials?

John McLemore

These motherfuckers would have five guys to jack their damn dick off. One to put the condom on, and one to rub the Vaseline on, and four more to file the fuckin' papers, and the environmentalist would clean up the damn contamination and analyze all the byproducts, and declare the jack-off site to be a superfund place.

Brian Reed

Apparently we are.

Cheryl Dodson

I mean if I was stuffing envelopes I don't, I don't see that John wouldn't have sat there stuffing envelopes with me. Whether it would be a parade notice, or a business license renewal, I mean I could definitely see...

Brian Reed

This is Cheryl Dodson. She was the town clerk for Woodstock shortly after the town was founded. She was clerk before Faye Gamble took over.

Cheryl Dodson

Planning the Christmas parade, planning the open house, and he, he always helped me with that.

Brian Reed

He helped you with the Christmas parade?

Brian Reed

There was a stretch, in those early years, when Woodstock wasn't even officially called Woodstock yet. When it first incorporated it was the town of North Bibb, which apparently lots of North

Bibbians thought was a lame name, because they voted to change it to Woodstock a few years in. Cheryl says there was a lot going on during those early days, and John was always around and involved, hanging out at the town hall. His mother too, Mary Grace.

Cheryl Dodson

She was funny.

Brian Reed

This was before Mary Grace's dementia had set in, and Cheryl said she had a Pippy Longstocking vibe about her. She'd go around town in a red skirt and green sweater and purple hat and socks that clashed with her shoes, and the kind of bright red hair that you get out of a bottle.

Cheryl Dodson

She'd come to the town hall, "Is there any scandal? Any unplanned pregnancies? Any children out of wedlock?" Which you know, John would say, "She's the scandal!" He would point at me, you know, I was the one getting a divorce or something like that, you know. He'd say, "She ain't gonna tell you about the scandal, she's the scandal!" And I'd be like, "Hush, John."

Brian Reed

John came around so much he and Cheryl started spending a lot of time together. One of the main things Woodstock was doing during this period was annexing property into the town, lot by lot, to make it bigger. As town clerk at the time, Cheryl Dodson worked on these annexations which meant she was often making drives to the probate court to pull deeds. And John, who had nothing better to do, took to going with her. She says he was helpful, dealing with records of the court. He was giving her a hand with real work, not getting paid. He attended town council meetings regularly with his mother, and they annexed their own land into the town, which had a significant impact on its borders because their property's so large. Cheryl says John got a kick out of contributing to Woodstock.

Brian Reed

So he seemed like, engaged, as like a, he was like a good citizen?

Cheryl Dodson

Well yeah, he voiced his input in things, but yeah, he was a part of it.

Brian Reed

I have to say, it is so at odds with the John I knew. He was like, close to obsessed with just how terrible this place was.

Cheryl Dodson

Really? He might have complained about taxes or something like that, but I mean. We were building a town when I was there. It was exciting for us. The town was new.

Brian Reed

John and Cheryl ended up becoming close friends. On one of their drives to probate court John happened to notice Cheryl's fingernail polish. It was red, though Cheryl told him the actual name of the color ...

Cheryl Dodson

Was, "I'm not really a waitress." And he thought that was hilarious, that fingernail polishes had names like that.

Brian Reed

When they got to the probate court, Cheryl said there was an older, heavysset lady behind the counter. She didn't want to lift the heavy deed book for Cheryl and John and asked someone else to do it for her.

Cheryl Dodson

When they brought it to her she said, "You so good, my legs so tired." And he thought that was hilarious. He said, "That would make a great nail polish color."

Brian Reed

The next week a bouquet of flowers was delivered to Cheryl at work, at the town hall, from John.

Cheryl Dodson

And when I opened the card it said, "You so good my legs so tired." So it definitely looked like a different meaning than what, you know, it definitely looked different from a nail polish color.

Brian Reed

Looking back, Cheryl thinks those years when they were still building Woodstock may also have been some of the best years of John's life. And thinking about it more, it makes sense. John liked a good project. For him creating something new, or restoring something, was a worthwhile way to spend one's time. Before he had the maze, or Tyler, he had the new town of Woodstock.

In 2005 Cheryl and John went on to open a small business together for a season, a tiny nursery next to Cheryl's house, Woodstock garden center, which John threw himself into sourcing plants and flowers from different parts of the state. So John was at Cheryl's place a lot. She and her husband Jeff seemed to have that type of home anyway, where the door was always unlocked and all sorts of people come and go as they please. They have five kids, plus they were often taking in foster kids or exchange students. It was always sunshine and flowers at their house, Cheryl says. Tearing open a pack of hot dogs for the children, or pulling them around in a wagon. And she says John fit right in with all of that.

Cheryl Dodson

Oh yeah, I mean, in there on that door there's his height. I mean, he got measured with the kids. We have a door that we always measure the kids' heights on and I'll show you. It's, there's John. B.

Brian Reed

Cheryl does show me. It's a brown, stained door that she and her husband have moved from room to room over the years. These days it's on display in the center of their living room. There's a child's painting of their house on the bottom, a rainbow and heart and sun overhead, and then, above that, it's just covered with the name and age of kid, after kid, after kid, each name slowly moving up the door, the door its own kind of timekeeper. And there, in the center at 6 feet, between 14-year-old Scott and 18-year-old Colby, is John B. McLemore, 38 years old.

Brian Reed

It seems like John was kind of, I mean I don't know, part of the family for a little while. That like...

Cheryl Dodson

Oh he was.

Brian Reed

You guys were tight?

Cheryl Dodson

We were family, um...

Brian Reed

So what happened?

Cheryl Dodson

Um...

Brian Reed

What happened is, Cheryl got married to her husband Jeff, and John didn't like Jeff. It was the same scenario that played out for John over and over in his life. He'd gotten close to someone, and then she'd gotten closer to someone else. The three of them were also running the flower shop together, and that's where everything came to a head. After staying open for just eight weeks, they started fighting and ended the business acrimoniously. Cheryl and Jeff felt that John wasn't a good businessman. They say he was more interested in the flower itself than selling the flower, that he spent too much money, and that he stocked weird plants that normal customers didn't want. John on the other hand claimed that Cheryl and Jeff hadn't pulled their weight, and that they owed him money. Boozer Downs, the Woodstock town attorney, says he witnessed one of their arguments, and that Jeff, who's a boxer, was pacing angrily around John as John spouted the Latin names of plants at him as a way to piss him off. After that, Cheryl says...

Cheryl Dodson

He grandstanded and embarrassed me at a council meeting. He come in to the town hall and hollered, "town clerk owes me \$10,000!"

Brian Reed

Cheryl says she did not owe him \$10,000.

Cheryl Dodson

And I walked over to him and I said, “John, what are you talking about? This is my job, you can’t, you can’t come in here and you know, say I owe you \$10,000, you know?”

Brian Reed

Were you embarrassed?

Cheryl Dodson

Yeah! I mean it was my, but, but now that being said, they knew him too, I mean, it’s not like John was a stranger. Then like I said we went to court.

Brian Reed

John sued Cheryl and Jeff. The complaint he submitted to the court is really something. There’s a table of contents and more than 50 pages of narrative and exhibits. John also tells the judge that he has a small pocket notebook diary containing the full account, including times of day. Quote, “this diary is available for his honor if he wishes, but it must be observed that it was written under duress and thus is true to life with no opprobrious words omitted.” End quote. All this to try and get back some money John felt was owed him, mostly for potting soil. \$2,792.

Cheryl Dodson

I don’t know, I kind of felt like that was more of John’s just, way to see me again. I mean you know, I mean John, I mean..

Brian Reed

Really?

Jeff Dodson

Really. I thought so.

Brian Reed

That’s Cheryl’s husband Jeff agreeing, saying I thought so.

Jeff Dodson

He's not wanting to sue you, he's not wanting to, he just don't know how to get you to get back in. How do I get back into a relationship that I liked or enjoyed or whatever? I mean you can pressure them into friending me again or something, I don't know.

Brian Reed

Cheryl says she met John at court, and they agreed she would pay him \$100 a month for 10 months. She thinks if she had brought her monthly checks to John in person, rather than mailing them like she did, he probably wouldn't have taken them. It would have just been an excuse to see her again. She did bump into John now and then after all that, but there was no coming back for their friendship.

Cheryl Dodson

I just saw him in the store a few times and he you know, he would say, "You should come by the house. Come by the house!" I'm thinking, John you sued me, you know, I'm not gonna hang out with you buddy. Yeah, I mean that's there, it's sad.

Brian Reed

John's depression and the fact that he attributed it to his home, Woodstock, this town he helped at least somewhat to build, it troubles Cheryl because she loves this place so dearly. Like John, she too has lived her whole life here. And it's interesting for me to talk to her because I haven't hung out with that many Woodstock boosters, but she is definitely one. She loved raising her children here, knowing all their teachers because she grew up with them. Knowing before her kids got home from school where the party in the woods was gonna be later than night. When Cheryl's brother died some years back, he drowned, another family anonymously paid for his funeral. Jeff, her husband, just ran for mayor of Woodstock last year and won, unseating the 13-year incumbent. Now everyone's calling her the first lady. She's got hopes to spruce up the town hall with antiques and flowers. She loves the Christmas parade, trick or treating on Main Street for Halloween, homecoming.

Cheryl Dodson

Oh it's wonderful at homecoming to go to the turnip green supper and there's a bonfire and everybody you went to school with, and everybody brings a dish, and I mean, I'm sure you know who made, you know that Miss Lela's made the turnip greens, and you know to oh, try her coconut pie, Miss Daily's banana pudding, you know to get their Tupperware back to them...

Brian Reed

I don't know when exactly John turned on the town, but at some point the town of Woodstock began to do what governments tend to do, disappoint him. There was a scandal involving the water board and the resignation of the police chief, which I know bothered him. He was also upset when a town council member was put in federal prison for embezzling nearly a million dollars from the company she worked for. And he hated when the South 40 trailer park was built across the street from him. Though Cheryl says John's wrong about this place. She says poverty isn't that bad in Woodstock. There's some crime, some corruption, but no worse than other places. And she says the schools are actually quite good. But John's depression became so intertwined with his loathing of his home, the two fed each other. And Cheryl thinks John got to a point where he just began ignoring the positive stuff.

Cheryl Dodson

There's a beauty in this area that John probably just didn't see. But I don't know that he interacted with people to see things like that. That's I guess what's sad about depression and things like that. The very things you need, you, you draw away from, you know, the you know, when you got depression and you want, you want the blinds down and you want the dark room and you need the sunshine.

Brian Reed

John was depressed for sure, but still he didn't do what Cheryl's saying. He didn't hole up in a dark room with the blinds down. He may not have gone to the turnip green suppers, but he created his own place that was filled with sunshine. His 124 acres, which he designed to be incredible: bursting with beautiful flowers and an orchard, and an old preserved house, and a historic graveyard that he maintained, and a custom swing set. And, of course, a spectacular giant hedge maze, with 64 permutations of the solution, and one null set. And then John did share that with people. He didn't host big community events, but he made a point of inviting people over, giving them the tour he gave me, spending quality time with neighbors there.

There was a soft-spoken tree-removal guy who was in tears as he and I talked about John. John hired him once and then they became good friends because they liked to walk around his property together, admiring the trees. A quiet, middle-aged mechanic I talked to told me how he'd sat with John in the yard one night as John pointed to the sky and taught him the names of the stars and constellations. Things he'd never learned before that he really enjoyed.

John was actually quite good at appreciating the time he had. That wasn't his problem. His problem was a proleptic one. He saw nothing but darkness in the future. Shit-Town, for John, was not believing that anything good would last. That we would inevitably mess it up. Relationships that are meaningful, the earth as a place that can adequately support human life, even John's remarkable maze.

John McLemore

You know, that was one of the most fun projects I ever did in my life. And you know what? It was also one of the most foolish.

Brian Reed

Why?

John McLemore

Because at my death this place out here only has one destination. It's to be paved over with a Wal-Mart or scraped off.

Brian Reed

Oh.

John McLemore

That's that's, that's why we don't have mazes in Shit-Town.

Brian Reed

And with that prediction at least, John was right. Because guess who owns John's property now?

Brian Reed

Can you just introduce yourself?

Kendall Burt

Kendall Burt.

Brian Reed

Kendall Burt. That's Kabrahm Burt's father, the owner, with his brothers, of K3 Lumber. The family that inspired John to contact me in the first place, who he asked me to expose.

Kendall Burt

I bought John McLemore's place when he committed suicide and left his mother here alone, a very selfish act.

Brian Reed

Kendall bought it through John's cousin, Reta. He buys up land in the area as investments, and so his company can harvest it for timber. I did get a chance to ask Kendall about the name of his company, by the way. K3. Is there any double entendre there with a certain white supremacy group?

Kendall Burt

I'm assuming you're one of these left-wingers, that we upset in the election? (Laughs)

Brian Reed

He says he doesn't have a problem with the name K3. "Does he have any plans for John's place?" I ask him.

Brian Reed

It's a beautiful property.

Kendall Burt

No.

Brian Reed

How about the maze?

Kendall Burt

Now I would like to see the maze reach maturity, but I probably will not put forth the effort or the money to do so. But it's a real neat concept.

Brian Reed

I have one other question for Kendall. Since he now owns John's land, and I assume anything buried within it...

Brian Reed

Have you heard these rumors flying around about the gold on the property, or hidden treasure, things like that?

Kendall Burt

Yeah. I also heard about the uh, pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but I'm not chasing rainbows. I think John threw away every penny he could get his hands on before he died.

Brian Reed

Kendall's not the only one who thinks that. John's cousin, Rita, says judging from the accounts and records she knows of, he was broke. But it's just weird, because I know that John was still spending money at the end. He actually went on a buying spree, stocking up on a bunch of antique toys and these glass chickens he was obsessed with, and all the materials for the swing set. And of course, he talked to so many people about having cash and gold hidden somewhere.

Speaking of that, for a while I was checking in with Tyler to see how his hunt for the treasure was going. I obviously wanted to know if he'd found anything, but it also felt like what I was asking, if the answer was yes, could potentially be incriminating. So one night, relatively early on, long before all the felony theft charges and the impending trial, he and I were talking about his search for the gold and how he'd been slapped with a trespassing charge for going onto the McLemore property, and I told Tyler, just to make sure he understood...

Brian Reed

Well listen, I clearly want to know if you ever do find it, but you should think about it before you tell me. If you ever do. Because its gonna then be public.

Tyler Goodson

Yeah, I know. That's what I'm scared of now.

Brian Reed

Well, as far as just talking about this stuff?

Tyler Goodson

Yeah, kinda.

Brian Reed

I mean you already got the trespassing charge.

Tyler Goodson

Yeah.

Brian Reed

But I would worry if you found a million dollars of gold, or if you found like a bunch of gold.

Tyler Goodson

(Sighs)

Brian Reed

Just consider it before you ever tell me, alright?

Tyler Goodson

Turn that thing off for a minute.

Brian Reed

Tyler asked me to turn my tape recorder off and then we sat on the porch of his trailer and had a discussion off the record.

Lately Tyler and I haven't been talking very much, at the request of his lawyer, because of his upcoming trial this summer where he's due to stand charges of theft for taking the buses and trailer from John's property, of criminal trespassing, and of forgery for allegedly signing John's signature after he died in order to sell two of his vehicles.

More, right after this.

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Brian Reed

One day I'm talking on the phone to one of John's old friends, a clock customer of his in Utah named Bill Maier, and he starts describing this thing he would watch John do when he'd use to visit John's property in Woodstock.

Bill Maier

We'd go out in the woods and he had a tree stump out there, and he could take a Bernzomatic torch and have a pot with mercury...

Brian Reed

Silvery, dense, fluid, mercury. Bill would watch John heat the mercury into a slurry. John would take gold and melt the gold into the mercury, mixing the pot out there in the woods, like a witch stirring ingredients in her cauldron. And then Bill says John would take a brush and spread the gold and mercury amalgam onto a clock, and then hold the torch flame to it, vaporizing the mercury, and leaving behind a rich, textured layer of gold. It's an ancient process that appears to have originated around 300 BC or so in China, called fire gilding, that almost no one does anymore. Bill's a prolific, lifelong clock collector and he says John is the only person he only found in the United States who would do it. No one does it because inhaling mercury vapor is so ridiculously dangerous.

Bill Maier

You've heard the expression, "Mad as a hatter?"

Brian Reed

Yeah, I tell Bill, but I don't really know where it comes from. He explains that for centuries in Europe milliners, people who made hats, would turn furs into felt for hats by vaporizing mercury, and as a result...

Bill Maier

They'd go mad. They'd go crazy. That was the outcome of breathing mercury vapor because it does permanent brain damage.

Brian Reed

Three days later I'm talking to another one of John's clock customers, another Bill actually, the (Alabama) one who showed me his clock collection at his house. And he tells me...

Alabama Bill

He did it to one of my clocks.

Brian Reed

Fire gilded it. This (Alabama) Bill says when John did the gilding...

Alabama Bill

My first inclination was to leave because I didn't want to breathe in those mercury toxic fumes.

Brian Reed

Um hum.

Alabama Bill

But at the same time it was an eye-opening experience and so I stayed.

Brian Reed

And he just did it out in the woods?

Alabama Bill

He did it in his shop.

Brian Reed

Inside the shop he did it?

Alabama Bill

Inside the shop.

Brian Reed

John wore no safety mask, and had no special precautions for ventilation.

Alabama Bill

And we were both breathing those fumes, and, and I don't know if his chest hurt the next day but mine sure did. You know, people that fire gild, back in the 1800s, you know what?

They didn't last too long. Cause they breathed so much mercury they just went crazy and died.

Brian Reed

When I sat down after these conversations to Google 'mad hatters disease,' which is what people have called mercury poisoning over the years, I saw this list of symptoms: anxiety, irritability, insomnia, emotional instability, depression, suicidal thoughts. I found studies, mostly from years ago since it's become a much rarer condition these days, where researchers observed and interviewed people who worked in industries where they were exposed to mercury, and they describe, as one 19th century medical textbook called them, "a multitude of evils." Racing thoughts. Fearful feelings. Feelings of persecution. Feelings of worthlessness. A symptom called anhedonia, which is an inability to feel pleasure. Loss of self-control, and of joy in life.

One German scientist from the 1920s who studied the effects of mercury and then ended up getting poisoned himself, wrote that he began experiencing, quote, "Depression and a vexing inner restless which later also caused restless sleep. By nature companionable and loving life, I withdrew moodily into myself, shied away from the public, stayed away from people and social activity, and unlearned the joy in art and nature. Humor became rusty. Obstacles which formerly I would have overlooked smilingly seemed insurmountable. It was not nice to be aware of these shortcomings, not to know their cause, not to know a way to their elimination, and to have to fear further deterioration."

I do not have a definitive answer as to whether or not John had mercury poisoning, and if that could have been a force behind some of his behavior, his personality, and even his suicide. John's autopsy didn't test for mercury, and even digging up his remains which I can't and won't do, wouldn't tell us as this point because mercury becomes relatively untestable pretty quickly. The best way to get an indication would be to test his property, and in particular his workshop, to see what the mercury levels are there. But I wrote Kendall Burt, the owner of the property now, after he and I met, asking if he'd let me pay for a mercury analysis, and he never responded to my emails or calls about it.

What I do know is this: it seems that John did fire gilding throughout his life. John's chemistry professor, Tom Moore, says he knows John was fire gilding when he arrived at college as a 17-year-old. Tom says he couldn't convince him to stop, and it seemed like he was doing it fairly regularly. Tom's a chemist, and he says he'd be surprised if John hadn't suffered some poisoning. He had to ingest a lot of mercury, Tom told me. And John's clock friends have memories of him doing the gilding over the decades, long after college, up to as recently as two years before he died. One friend said at one point John told him he was doing it dozens of times a year. And John also had physical symptoms consistent with mercury poisoning, as well as behavioral ones. He warned me on a couple occasions that he was want to spontaneously vomit now and again. Thankfully it never happened in front of me, but not being able to keep food down is something that can show up in people with mercury poisoning. Other consistent symptoms are an enlarged brain and congestion

in the lungs, both of which were noted on John's autopsy. And John did say to some of his friends over the years that he thought he might be experiencing health problems due to fire gilding or other chemical exposure in his shop. Doctors and scientists who are experienced in dealing with mercury, when my researcher or I have described John's fire gilding practices, they say judging from that alone it's almost inconceivable that he wouldn't have some level of mercury poisoning. Then when they hear about John's symptoms, the physical ones, plus the anxiety, the depression, the paranoia, the fact that he committed suicide, that all makes them even more confident that he was suffering mercury poisoning. One expert said, "You'd almost have to prove that he didn't have it."

But all that said, there are symptoms of mercury poisoning that I don't know if John had. One is gingivitis. And another big one is tremors, but sometimes it's a unique kind of tremor that's only visible when you're trying to hold a pose, so it's possible I or others didn't notice it, but I haven't heard anyone talk about him having this. And while John was irritable and anxious and suicidal, those personality traits are found all the time in people who do not have elemental mercury in their brains. John showed signs of depression as far back as when he was a teenager. And plus, John had a lot of normal depressing life shit happen to him in his last decade or so. His falling out with the town clerk, Cheryl Dodson, happened in 2005. At that point, Woodstock was nearly 10 years old, and the exciting days of its youth were over. Not long before his feud with Cheryl, John's father, Tom McLemore, had fallen in the driveway and died in the hospital afterwards. Also it was right around this time that the man John fell in love with over a summer, the one Olen Long told me about, stopped returning his phone calls and broke his heart. Meanwhile the clock trade had been dwindling and by this point John had mostly shuttered his business. So John found himself entering his 40s with no real job, alone, in the house he'd grown up in with his mother, whose dementia was creeping up on her.

One day in the year and half before he died, John called the other town clerk, Faye Gamble, who John would eventually call as he killed himself. Faye picked up.

Faye Gamble

And he was very depressed, crying, and said he was so ashamed.

Brian Reed

I've done something, John told Faye. I've done something terrible.

Faye Gamble

I thought he had killed somebody the way he had talked, I mean seriously, I thought he had done something really really bad, so I was like, "What have you done?" And he didn't want to tell me what he had done. It finally, we just kept talking and I just drug it out of him and he says, "I'm so ashamed, I've got this horrible tattoo."

Brian Reed

Faye was like, “that’s it?”

Faye Gamble

And that was the first time he’d ever said he was ashamed of anything he’d ever done, you know? But he was just so upset about getting that tattoo, and I said, “John, really, how bad could this be, you know?” And I said, “Well do not do any more, I mean you know, just, you know, let that be.” And I did not really realize that he had done more till his death.

Tyler Goodson

He got enough tattoos in one year that somebody could get in a lifetime.

Jimmy Hicks

Yep! Yes-sir!

Tyler Goodson

All at once, you know?

Jimmy Hicks

Once! Yep!

Tyler Goodson

He got addicted fast.

Jimmy Hicks

Yes!

Brian Reed

Tattooing became a big part of John’s life near the end, and Tyler had a firsthand view of it. That’s Tyler’s Uncle Jimmy, by the way, giving affirmations in the background. Tyler’s partner in the tattoo parlor, Bubba, told me John’s motivation for getting so many tattoos was to help Tyler, to give him money and keep his business afloat. He told me that John had sacrificed his skin for this

cause. But Tyler says there was a lot more to the tattooing than that. Tattooing had become part of a ritual he and John concocted in the few months before he killed himself.

Tyler Goodson

We called it church.

Brian Reed

Tyler will go on to explain all about church to me, but before Tyler does that I'm gonna let John describe it, because John told me about church too, shortly before he died, and he painted it pretty differently than Tyler does.

John McLemore

You know what, lately, we've been having church together. We call it church. Which means we just get in the back room of the shop and get drunk as hell. (Laughing a bit)

Brian Reed

Wild Turkey?

Brian Reed

The shop is John's clock shop, of course. The shop that I now know is possibly riddled with mercury, and is where I first met Tyler actually, on my very first visit to Bibb county, when he was sharpening a chainsaw and John was swigging Wild Turkey from the bottle.

John McLemore

Yeah, and I've been letting him tattoo on me a little bit more, cause I ain't no good-lookin' man, I ain't gonna win no beauty prize, you know. I ain't gonna be hangin' out there naked showing my damned ass, so I've been giving him a little bit of practice material, but uh that's like uh, we call that church. Wild Turkey is the holy water, the little filthy-ass room is the sanctuary, I'm trying to remember all the other names. The tattoo needles are the reliquaries.

Brian Reed

A reliquary is a container that holds a holy relic, like the bones or ashes of a saint. To hear John describe church, it was a bonding time for him and Tyler, a nighttime meeting of the minds.

Brian Reed

What do you guys talk about?

John McLemore

You know when you get two drunk guys together that have such a disparity in ages, the wisest thing for the old one to do is to keep his mouth shut and listen to the thoughts that weigh heavy on the head of the younger one. The other night when we had church he asked me some of my damn thoughts about life and death, and you know whether or not I think there's anything when you die, and you know I probably rattled on and prattled on about a bunch of damn bullshit that makes sense when you're drunk but probably doesn't when you're sober, so.

Brian Reed

What was the gist of it?

John McLemore

Oh the gist, it would be impossible to say, I mean I went all the way down to quarks.

Brian Reed

Quarks, the subatomic particle.

John McLemore

I mean I was discussing the fact that, you know, in for example P and D orbitals an electron can be in two places at the same time, but not in the middle, and I used that as an analogy to how it is now theorized that quasars which can appear, you know, light years distances across universes can be fed by matter entering a spiraling black hole.

Brian Reed

I didn't understand most of that either. Don't worry.

John McLemore

You know I was explaining Einstein's theory of time dilation a little bit, as simply as I could.

Brian Reed

The theory as to why time passes more quickly or slowly, due to one's trajectory in space-time.

John McLemore

So yeah, so sometimes it gets deep.

Brian Reed

And other nights, John said, he and Tyler would just shut up and just sit there together, passing the bourbon back and forth in silence in the shop's backroom.

John McLemore

Mostly turn off the damn light and listen to the sound of the tweeting birds and the frogs and the crickets through the open back window. Something he don't get enough of in his life is goddamned uh, quiet.

Jimmy Hicks

Lord help me! Yep.

Brian Reed

I never talked to Tyler about church before John died. It sounded wholesome enough to me, not that different than Tyler and John spending their afternoons building a big swing set together. But when Tyler fills me in on the ritual it becomes clear that it was not like that.

Tyler Goodson

It started off with me coming over and tattooing on him, \$100 a hour.

Jimmy Hicks

Yep!

Tyler Goodson

To tattoo on him.

Brian Reed

And that was OK, Tyler says. But then instead of normal tattooing, John started asking him to simply tattoo over his existing tattoos, again and again, and then there was another request from John.

Tyler Goodson

He'd have me pierce his nipple just to pierce it.

Brian Reed

John's nipples were already pierced, but he wanted Tyler to re-pierce them anyway.

Tyler Goodson

Before each tattoo I'd have to pierce his nipples. He'd get like an endorphin high off of it, you know, like just a pain fix.

Brian Reed

John once tried to describe to me what it felt like to be inside his mind. He said you know what it's like to get a song stuck in your head, where it's just playing over and over and you just can't get it out of there, even if it's a terrible song? That's what happened to him every day. He'd replay the eventualities of climate change and resource depletion and economic collapse. He couldn't get them out of his head. So church, according to Tyler, morphed into what was essentially an elaborate form of cutting that helped John to relieve his mental anguish.

Tyler Goodson

It might not even be the pain or the piercing itself, it's just the thought, you know, just the excitement, the thought of it, and it clears his mind of everything, all of his worries. If I'm piercing him or tattooing on him, his mind's completely blank where he's not just sitting there thinking about shit, and my company too, so our church sessions was helping all sorts of things, I guess.

Brian Reed

Tyler starts to pull up a video on his phone, to show me.

Tyler Goodson

This was when he first got into the tattooing on the nipple.

(Tattoo needle buzzing, deep breathing)

Brian Reed

It's not just him and John, a couple of his friends are in the video too. They're tattooing on John's nipple. Tyler says they were using an empty needle. There was no point to this tattoo except for the pain of it. Tyler tells me to an extent he understands John's desire for this, because he got into tattoos partially because they gave him a similar kind of distraction from his own tortured thoughts and he was the one who recommended it as therapy to John.

Tyler Goodson

He'd say I got him into it because I told him how I could kick back and enjoy a tattoo, you know, like a stress-reliever. And that's what he, that's what he done. It was his stress-reliever, and buddy it just kept...

(In background, tattoo needle buzzing, and John moaning, "Oh, Oh lord, oh Jesus," and deep breathing)

Tyler Goodson

You see I kept getting used to the things.

Jimmy Hicks

Yes, Yap!

Tyler Goodson

It was getting worse, but I was getting so used to it that I wasn't seeing it.

Brian Reed

What's it? What was getting worse?

Tyler Goodson

The, the crazy shit he was having me do to him.

Brian Reed

Of course the internet and the world are filled with cell phone videos of dudes laughing and groaning as they inflict inventive forms of pain on each other's bodies. There are entire communities and subcultures that exist for this purpose. Tyler knows that scene, he goes to biker and tattoo rallies, towing a mobile tattoo parlor he built inside a trailer. But Tyler says even for him, what John wanted him to do went way beyond what he was used to.

Tyler Goodson

I got a picture right here where John B. is working on my Harley, and he hates motorcycles, he says anybody that has a motorcycle is failure, trash –

Jimmy Hicks

Yeah.

Tyler Goodson

He hates motorcycles.

Brian Reed

Same thing he used to say about tattoos.

Jimmy Hicks

Yes-sir!

Tyler Goodson

Yeah same, yeah he used to say that.

Jimmy Hicks

Goddamn right.

Tyler Goodson

But this is him, working on my Harley with his shirt off.

Jimmy Hicks

God yes!

Tyler Goodson

That's a bullwhip tattooed around his neck,

Brian Reed

Wow.

Tyler Goodson

Draping across his shoulders, and bloody whips,

Jimmy Hicks

whips!

Tyler Goodson

Across his entire back all the way down to his ass crack.

Jimmy Hicks

Goddamn right.

Brian Reed

This picture is really disturbing. It's John's back, which when I visited John was not tattooed. Like Tyler says there's a whip that looks as if it's laying across his shoulders and neck, apparently attached at the handle on the other side of him. And then all across his back, top to bottom, are dozens of red lash marks, like in a famous historic photo that John included in a collage in the 53-page manifesto he sent me, documenting society's moral decline. A photo of a slave named Gordon who's believed to have escaped from a plantation in Louisiana and whose back was photographed and distributed by abolitionists as visual proof of the terrors of slavery.

Brian Reed

That's, his whole back is just like, crisscrossed red, bloody.

Tyler Goodson

Just blood, whips.

Jimmy Hicks

Yep. Goddamn right!

Brian Reed

Tyler tells me that in order to create this tattoo, John went into the woods, hand-picked a tree branch, and asked Tyler and his friends to whip him with it. And then had them tattoo over the welts.

Tyler Goodson

He acted like he wanted to know the feeling of wanting to know what folks went through back in that time.

Brian Reed

He would say that?

Tyler Goodson

Yeah, I mean, he just wanted to experience the pain I guess.

Brian Reed

Which, that's a twisted explanation to give, for doing something like this. John had a complicated and contradictory relationship to race. Like with women and gay people, he'd express outrage when he heard examples of discrimination, he'd express empathy, and also an understanding for the systemic ways our society is built to be unfair and harmful to these groups of people. But then, sometimes John would say racist things in front of me. He'd acknowledge that he shouldn't use the n-word, and then use the n-word. People who've known him for a long time have told me that, especially years ago, John was quite racist, but that over the years he had changed for the better. Granted these are white people telling me this. Woodstock is about 95% white. Which of course, is not an accident. It's the result of many decades of laws and violence and day-to-day racism. Bibb County was the last county in Alabama to comply with a school desegregation order in 1967, long after *Brown v. Board of Education*. It's the place that voted for George Wallace four to one, and then in the 50s had a sign appear on Main Street in one of the towns saying, "The Klan people of Bibb County welcome you." So much of the stuff John said he hated about Shit-Town: Harleys, tattoos, misogyny and homophobia, racism. He said he despised it. But that stuff was part of him too.

Church played a big role in John and Tyler's relationship by the end. It was one of the main ways they were spending their time. On the front of his body, one of John's tattoos is of a sundial, and John included a sundial motto there on his chest. The one he chose is, "Omnes vulnerant ultima necat." Each wounds, the last kills. It refers to time, as in, "each minute wounds. The last minute kills." Time's a gift. It's also a punishment. Tyler says the brutality of what John wanted Tyler to do to him kept intensifying, far beyond tattooing with an empty needle or repeated nipple piercings, or being lashed with a tree branch. And sometimes Tyler was uncomfortable.

Tyler Goodson

He fuckin', was addicted to that shit. He wanted me to come over there every fuckin' day. Cause I mean, we'd be over there workin' in the shop, he's be like, "You think we can have a church session real quick?" Like a damn dope fiend or something, wanting me to pierce his nipples! But it was just getting so ridiculous I couldn't keep up with it.

Brian Reed

There's a story that's taken hold among some locals and people surrounding John's cousin Reta, and also some of John's close friends, of what led to John's demise. That John was desperate for company, and influenceable, and that he started hanging out with unsavory people and drinking, which according to most people he hadn't done for much of his life, and getting tattoos. As one man told me, "you lay with dogs, you get fleas." And the dog he was talking about was Tyler.

In the year and a half since John's death, I've watched as that story has slowly ossified into a matter of fact that people now tell each other. But I think this is a more accurate story: if John wanted these things done to his body, as it appears from the videos I've seen that he did, or if he needed them, then where else would he have sought them out, besides church? Who else in his life in Bibb county would he feel comfortable enough to go to with these requests, and not feel inconsolably ashamed or judged? Not worry that they might gasp in his face? Tyler was 24 during all of this, with so much going on in his life already. He didn't know when he started church that it would go as far as it went, and he was wary of doing some of the things John was asking him to do. And yet still he did them. For John.

He did try at one point to stop some of it. He told John that was it for now, no more piercing, and Tyler says he held to that for a couple weeks, but it threw John into a depression and he wouldn't take no for an answer, and eventually Tyler ended up just doing it again. In fact...

Tyler Goodson

I pierced his nipples the night he killed hisself.

Brian Reed

After their day together splashing around the river and spray-painting their names under the bridge, their Father's Day, as they called it, Tyler brought John home and John pressured him into doing that. "Just give me a pain fix before you leave," he told Tyler, and Tyler reluctantly did. And then he went home and was pissed at John about it, and he says that was part of the reason, when John was begging him to come back over, and saying he was gonna commit suicide, that Tyler just said, "Fuck it," and went to bed instead.

On my last day on my last trip to Alabama, I had some time to kill so I decided to go down to the Cahaba River. It's a stunning river, a national wildlife refuge that many people in Bibb County consider their local treasure. As I was standing on the bank I saw a bridge in the distance. I thought to myself, "Hmm, I wonder if that's the bridge Tyler and John tagged their names under that day, the last day of John's life." So I drove to the end of it and crawled underneath. There was graffiti everywhere, marks of the people who'd been there. Jason and Misty and Jerry Conway and Ranger Rick and Snake and Tina who loves Danny. There was also a 'Fuck You,' and racial epithets, and an upsetting number of KKKs. No John or Tyler though. For a second I wondered if maybe Tyler had made up the fact that they'd done this. But then I found another bridge, over a small tributary of the river, at a spot called Bulldog Bend, and walked underneath past a bunch of garbage. Past a torn-up couch and a pool lining and a rotting deer carcass, and weirdly, the half-burnt medical records of an infant. And there, past all that, on the other side of the giant support of the bridge, in a serene spot, looking out over the bend in the river, there they were. Tyler's initials on one side, with an 'established 1991', John's initials on the other, 'established 1966.' There were no nasty words here. A couple beer cans and cigarette boxes, but other than that not too much trash. Together, Tyler and John found a place that was just a little bit cleaner.

John McLemore

The last time you talked to me, I told you I go through these suicidal stages and all that shit, and you know, that kind of worried you, but when I think about the end of my own existence I take the biggest possible picture. I don't just look at myself as a 49-year-old semi-homosexual atheist living in a Shit-Town full of Baptists in Buttfucksville, Alabama. I look at myself as a citizen of the world. I try to look at the biggest picture possible.

Brian Reed

What did John B. McLemore make of his life at the end? Did he live a worthwhile life, defined? "Ruminations on my life," John writes in his suicide note, which he left on his computer. "I have not lived a spectacular life, but within my four dozen plus years, I have had many more hours to pursue that which I chose, instead of moiling over that which I detested."

John's suicide note is long. It includes versions of the different essays he sent me before, "A Worthwhile Life Defined" and his apocalyptic manifesto, and a bit called "Ass Power versus Gas Power." But the last several pages, I've never seen before, and what's striking about them is that

they're the part about John's life. And what he describes in them is a life of happiness and contentment. He describes the life of a man who, for the vast majority of his days, rarely went further than a handful of miles from the spot he was born, and yet still managed to become a citizen of the world. From this one tiny spot in the forest, whose latitude and longitude he'd memorized, he found ways to embrace the world: its history, its beauty, its most thrilling and challenging ideas. "I have coaxed many infirm clocks back to mellifluous life," he writes. "Studied projective geometry and built astrolabes, sundials. Taught myself 19th century electroplating, bronzing, patination, micromachining, horology. Learned piano. Read Poe, de Maupassant, Boccaccio, O'Connor, Welty, Hugo, Balzac, Kafka, Bataille, Gabron. As well as modern works by Mortimer, Hawking, Kuntzler, Kline, Jacoby, Heinberg, Hedges, Hiddings, and Rhodes."

But the other thing that's striking about John's note is the appreciation he shows for his home. "But the best times of my life," John goes on, "I realize, were the times I spent in the forest and field. I have walked in solitude, beside my own babbling creek, and wondered at the undulations, meanderings, and tiny atolls that were occasionally swept into its midst. I have spent time in idle palaver with violets, lyre leaf sage, heliopsis, and monkshood, and marveled at the mystery of *monotropa uniflora*. I have audited the discourse of the hickories, oaks, and pines, even when no wind was present. I have peregrinated the woods in winter under the watchful guard of vigilant dogs, and spent hours entranced by the exquisiteness and delicacy of tiny mosses and molds, entire forests within a few square inches. I have also ran thrashing and flailing from yellow jackets. Before I could commence this discourse, I spent a few hours out under the night sky, reacquainting myself with the constellations like old friends. Sometimes I just spent hours playing my records. Sometimes I took my record players and CD players apart just to peek inside and admire the engineering of their incongruous entrails. Sometimes I watched *Laverne and Shirley*, or old movies, or *Star Trek*. Sometimes I sat in the dark and listened to the creaking of the old house. I have lived on this blue orb now for about 17,600 days. And when I look around me and see the leaden dispiritedness that envelops so many persons, both young and old, I know that if I die tonight my life has been inestimably better than that of most of my compatriots. Additionally, my absence makes room and leaves some resources for others who deserve no less than I have enjoyed."

And then he ends it. "I would hope that all persons reading this can enjoy some of the aspects of life that I have enjoyed, as well as those aspects that I never will, and will take cognizance of the number of waking days he has remaining, and use them prudently. To all that have given so much, much love and respect, John B. McLemore."

Bibb County, Alabama came into its own as a thriving coal county in the late 1800s. Though the boom times wouldn't last long, in the 1890s, with the population on the rise, the citizens of Bibb started taking advantage of each other: stealing from each other, murdering each other, burning each other's houses down. It got so bad a newspaper called the county "Bloody Bibb," and the name stuck. Bloody Bibb. The 1890s version of Shit-Town.

In 1891 one of the main perpetrators of this chaos, the most notorious gangster in the county, Jesse Miller, who extorted lots of land for himself and stole his neighbor's cattle and cotton, and whose

gang killed people who knew too much, was finally locked in jail but then escaped and fled Bibb county for good, signing over control of all his land in the county to his son, Brooks. Years later Brooks took 124-acre parcel of the family land and transferred ownership of it to his daughter, Mary Grace. Years after that, in 1965, Mary Grace, pregnant, began a ritual of sitting on that land and rubbing her stomach, and pleading to God, saying, “Please lord, give me a genius. Lord please, just make my child a genius.” On March 15th, 1966, she had a red-haired boy, gave him a middle name after her father, Brooks, and brought him home to the 124 acres. To an old house with three chimneys in the middle of the woods.

[End Song] “A Rose for Emily” - The Zombies

Brian Reed

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