

S·TOWN

CHAPTER II TRANSCRIPT

Note: *S-Town* is produced for the ear and designed to be heard, not read. We strongly encourage you to listen to the audio, which includes emotion and emphasis that's not on the page. Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers, and may contain errors. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.

SARAH KOENIG: Chapter II.

BRIAN REED: In one of my first phone conversations with John, before we'd met, I asked him if he thought it was possible that maybe Kabrahm Burt hadn't killed anybody, if it was possible that the murder he'd contacted me about was actually just a rumor, a fiction. No, John said, there was little doubt in his mind that it was true. And then, by way of explanation, he launched into this parable.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: Let me tell you something I saw one time.

BRIAN REED: I should admit that at the time, this story was completely lost on me.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: Me and Roger Price had went up to the truck stop together to get a little dinner. We came back by, and was passing by the South Forty trailer park. So Roger's one of these dudes, he's a darn transmission mechanic. He's not really talkative. He's a good dude, but he just—you know, he only has one tooth. And it's really amusing to see how he can balance a cigarette on that one tooth. And the whole time he's talking—

[LAUGHTER]

—this cigarette is just bouncing around all over that one tooth, and he never loses that son of a bitch. So we're coming by this "Welcome to South Forty" sign, and there's this girl out there walking around in front of the damn sign holding a cell phone, and she's got on a pink top and nothing else—no fucking panties, no goddamn socks, barefoot. And I remark that to Roger. I don't remember what I said. I probably said, "my God, look at her," or something like that. And Roger's sage advice was, usually when you see jokers that look like that, they done something to get like that.

BRIAN REED: That's the lesson?

JOHN B. McLEMORE: That went just straight through you.

BRIAN REED: Like so many things having to do with John, it took me a long time to understand the meaning of this story—years. But I think I finally get it now.

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

My second night in Alabama, I finally get to talk to Jake Goodson. Jake's the guy who'd originally told John that Kabrahm Burt had bragged to him outside the Little Caesars about beating a guy to death. I sit with Jake in John's kitchen, asking him to rack his brain for any extra details that could help me solve this. It was a while ago, he says. His memories are fuzzy. But he makes a suggestion that, I don't know, seems crazy to me.

JAKE GOODSON: I don't know. I mean, I could get him and ask him, and he'll be able to tell me. He'd probably come up here and talk to you about it.

BRIAN REED: Who?

JAKE GOODSON: Kabrahm.

BRIAN REED: Kabrahm lives right nearby. Why not just get it from the horse's mouth?

BRIAN REED: No.

JAKE GOODSON: Probably so.

BRIAN REED: That makes no sense. I would stick a microphone in his face and he would tell me about a guy he killed?

JAKE GOODSON: Probably. He's burnt up. He wouldn't know no better. He'd probably just laugh about it with you.

BRIAN REED: I told Jake no thanks, at least not now. I do not feel like I'm armed with enough information to confront Kabrahm yet. Aside from seeming far-fetched, the idea also just sounded potentially dangerous, for John, for Jake, and for me. But then the next night, a bunch of other people proposed the exact same thing.

MAN 1: He'll talk to you, dude.

MAN 2: I mean, he's burnt out.

MAN 1: He's arrogant, dude. He don't give a fuck.

BRIAN REED: He would talk to me about it?

MAN 3: I know he would. I'm pretty sure he would.

MAN 1: He'd probably tell you truth.

BRIAN REED: I'm chatting with a few guys in a tattoo parlor, all of whom have heard about the murder. Some are pretty sure they heard it from Kabrahm himself.

MAN 4: You want me to call him and ask him?

BRIAN REED: No, don't do that.

MAN 4: Why? I'm not a puss, dude. I don't give a fuck.

BRIAN REED: Apparently I'm the puss, because I do not want the dudes I'm talking to to call Kabrahm right now. Already, this tattoo shop does not feel like the safest place to walk into alone at night, trying to dig up info about a covered-up murder by a guy everyone seems to know, all of which are things I've just done. The last thing I want right now is for the alleged murderer to show up.

I was invited here by Tyler Goodson, Jake's brother, whom I met in John's workshop while he was filing that chainsaw. He's one of the owners. Tyler knows Kabrahm. They're both in their early 20s, and I thought maybe some of Tyler's friends who hang out here might have more information about the possible murder. John didn't feel like coming with me because he doesn't like driving at night.

When I walk in, at first it seems like a pretty small place, just a couple of tattooing stations and a little waiting area. But if you push the back wall of the shop, it swings open. It's a secret door, which leads into a hidden clubhouse in the back. There's a bar with some people around it, a pool table, a small stage with motorcycles parked there, and a brass stripper pole that's currently vacant.

The shop is called Black Sheep Ink, and I'll learn that the guys who hang out here take the name to heart. They see themselves as a collection of misfits, of self-proclaimed criminals and runaways and hillbillies. And Tyler has built this place as a haven for them, a place to swap their tales of getting jerked around by cops and judges and clerks and bosses, and to cultivate a sense of pride in their status as the outcasts of their world.

There's this gentleman, whose name I never do catch, who tells me, quote, "I'm so fucking fat, I don't care no more," and lifts up his shirt to show me the giant words he has tattooed on his stomach—"Feed Me."

MAN 4: Tell him. Tell him. Give him a picture. I'm a 6-foot, 350-pound bearded man in a John Deere hat with "Feed Me" on my belly, just so y'all get a clear picture here.

BRIAN REED: There's a guy who's been wearing the same trucker hat for seven years.

MAN 5: Seven years, same hat.

BRIAN REED: Then there's this guy.

[JACKHAMMER NOISE]

People call him Razor.

RAZOR: Beep, beep. Back it up. I was parked on the side of the road. I looked down there. I said, son of a bitch. He wakes up. You have Willard come by, see him laying in the yard, thought he died. Ambulance is there. They already called the ambulance, man. Bastard's laying out there in the yard, got an ounce of pot laying beside him, six beers. He's just shit-faced.

BRIAN REED: I believe he's telling a story about his friend Willard, who is impervious to death.

RAZOR: You know, I run over him three times in one fucking night. Three times, dude, one night. The bastard won't die.

BRIAN REED: And then there's Tyler, who's been sleeping at the tattoo parlor lately because he can't afford anywhere else to spend the night, who's 23 years old and has three daughters with three different women, and who's been haunted his whole life by

people assuming he's just like his father—his father who abused him and his siblings and his mother, and who is a convicted sex offender for having sex with a minor. One day, Tyler will tell me that he often wakes up in the morning in a puddle of sweat, having dreamt during the night of killing his dad.

Tyler's friendly to me when I arrive, welcoming, but as I'm getting out my recording equipment, I hear murmurs from other people wondering who I am, wondering if I might be a cop. People are asking me questions, feeling me out. A few guys ask if I'll smoke a bowl with them out of some deer antlers. I don't want to be stoned, but I also don't want to seem like a narc, so I pretend to take a puff.

I pretend to do a number of things that make me feel very uncomfortable in order to keep as low a profile as possible, such as act like I'm not shocked or upset or scared when someone says this to me, a radio producer with a microphone, in the first few minutes that we're talking. At the risk of ruining any surprise, the statement is racist and nonsensical, replete with multiple uses of a terrible word.

BUBBA: You know, we had a tax-free labor. It didn't have nothing to do with a bunch of niggers picking cotton. And we worked our ass off, and we got—we earned everything we got.

BRIAN REED: This is a tattoo artist who goes by Bubba.

BUBBA: So now we have no—if you got a taxpaying job, you got to take care of some nigger's wife that's in jail because she's drawing a child support check—

BRIAN REED: Later, Bubba will display a rather fluent knowledge of the differences between various white supremacy groups. Mind you, we're in a majority-black city right now, Bessemer, about 20 minutes from Bibb County, heading towards Birmingham. But everyone in here is white, including me. Someone mentions offhand that the small tattoo area in front is about as much shop as you want here in Bessemer. Otherwise, the place will be filled with black people who'll piss you off and won't pay anything—hence the secret door.

Before I left for Alabama, my girlfriend, Solange—now my wife—who is black and whose family is from the South, had insisted I make my Facebook and Instagram accounts private, because they're filled with pictures of us together. I told her she was being silly, overly paranoid. Now I'm grateful I decided at the last minute to follow her advice.

When someone asked me what the women looked like up in New York, I tell them they're all shapes, sizes, and colors. When someone asks what my ethnicity is, I tell them about the Italian part without mentioning the Russian Jew part. But there's no hiding the fact that I'm a Yankee.

BRIAN REED: What's that?

BUBBA: Y'all just as racist as we are.

BRIAN REED: It's quieter.

BUBBA: Y'all left them the fuck down here.

[LAUGHTER]

BRIAN REED: In an effort to change the subject, I turn the conversation to one of the few things I know I have in common with these guys—

BRIAN REED: So you guys know John?

BRIAN REED: —our mutual acquaintance, John B. McLemore.

MAN 6: Oh, yeah.

MAN 1: He's a character.

MAN 5: I ain't never met nobody else like him.

MAN 6: Nobody. Nobody. Nobody like him.

MAN 7: —nobody else like that folk.

MAN 6: He been bugging the piss out of you?

BRIAN REED: What's that?

MAN 6: Has he been bugging the piss out of you?

BRIAN REED: I'm not there yet, but it's exhausting to hang out with him for a long day.

MAN 6: Damn right.

WOMAN: (AMUSED) Who says “exhausting?”

MAN 2: He’s exhausted after all day.

BRIAN REED: Well, it’s—

MAN 6: He needs to slow the fuck down is what you want to tell him. Slow down.

BRIAN REED: They tell me John comes around the tattoo parlor pretty often, and likes to lecture them and give them a hard time. He’ll argue with them about their views on the South, on politics, on race. Bubba says he’ll submit them to tirades about the coming climate and energy apocalypses.

BUBBA: About how we was running out of fossil fuels and the world was going to come to a fucking end, and—

BRIAN REED: John tells off their customers for talking about what he sees as inane shit, tells these guys that their lives are amounting to nothing, that they’re examples in the flesh of what’s wrong with this place.

JOEL: He thinks everybody’s a failure. Everything that’s going on is a failure.

BRIAN REED: This is another tattoo artist, Joel.

BRIAN REED: He calls you guys failures?

JOEL: Fuck yeah, he calls us failures, you know what I mean?

BRIAN REED: Like jokingly, or—

JOEL: No. Everybody’s a failure. Like in his brain, everybody’s a failure. For all I know, you could be a failure. You know, sometimes I wish he’d kind of fail—

BRIAN REED: These guys dish it out, too. They tease John for his many peculiarities, like how he’ll devour whatever leftover food is around, no matter how old or rock-hard it is, his inability to buy new shoes to alleviate his athlete’s foot, which he’s allegedly had for

three years, his extemporaneous solving of math problems, his utter aversion to being in a room with more than two or three people at a time, his living with his mom his whole life, his being a loner.

It's friendly, though. They like John. After all, John is the granddaddy of all black sheep, so this crew gets him. They truly seem to accept him, though that doesn't stop them from wondering—

MAN 4: Love to know what he's worth.

BRIAN REED: "I'd love to know what he's worth," the "Feed Me" guy says.

MAN 4: Just not because I give a fuck, but just to know why does he live like that, you know what I mean?

TYLER GOODSON: —poor as a church mouse.

BRIAN REED: That's Tyler saying he lives like he's poor as a church mouse. And Tyler would know. He and John are close. He's the only reason all these guys know John.

Tyler helped build John's maze. He's done all sorts of different odd jobs for him. He's over there all the time. And as far as the church mouse, I did notice that John's refrigerator is pretty bare. His mom invited me to stay for dinner one night so long as I didn't mind eating like po' folks, she told me, in a way where I couldn't tell if she was joking. They live without air conditioning, without TV.

It's mysterious to me, too, because at the same time, John has all these dogs he feeds and brings to the vet, this elaborate yard that requires constant upkeep. He mentioned to me that he spent more than \$60,000 on the maze alone. "Feed Me" guy says to Tyler—

MAN 4: I don't understand why, if he's as loaded as you say—

TYLER GOODSON: Oh, he's worth millions.

BRIAN REED: Millions?

MAN 4: Have you not done any research on John?

BRIAN REED: Tyler explains that John's family comes from money. He says that one of his grandpas was a judge, and that John got an inheritance, played the stock market with it, and made even more money. Plus, aside from all that, Tyler says John made good bank restoring old clocks. All of that sounds like it could be true enough. But then Tyler and his friends start listing off John's assets, and I can't tell if any of that is real, or if they're just letting their imaginations fill in the blanks about their local Boo Radley.

They claim John has \$400,000 in cash, 100-some-odd thousand worth of tools in the workshop, all the antiques around his house. You're going to get \$150,000 if you sell that old-ass shit, Bubba says. Rare books in the basement, a single clock worth \$10,000 that's just sitting on the floor in a plastic storage bin. Not to mention, says Tyler—

TYLER GOODSON: Gold that his granddaddy—his granddaddy's gold, his daddy's gold.

BRIAN REED: Tyler's up on the counter of the bar, crouching. He has a brown briefcase he carries around with him. He calls it his minister's case. It has a sticker that says minister slapped on the outside, and it's filled with his tattoo machines and a gun and his welder's cap and some nipple jewelry, and his Black Sheep Ink business cards, and also his minister's license, which he got online because he wanted to found a non-denominational church, where people of all backgrounds could come together and talk it out.

This clubhouse is meant to be a version of that. He says it's his church. Tyler stares down at us from the corner of the bar, like he's about to divulge a secret. When it comes to John, he says, there's no telling—

TYLER GOODSON: What he's got, because there's a lot of shit that I'm sure I don't know about, because I've been finding stuff out slowly over the years. And there's secret little dungeons and shit under his damn house, man. I ain't playing. I've built gates for them. I've built gates for these secret dungeons.

BRIAN REED: I've built gates for the dungeons, Tyler's telling me—dungeons in John's basement. He soon clarifies they're actually old crawlspaces, but the way John had him rig them up, Tyler says, with tiny doors and these locking iron gates inside, dividing them into sections—what was the purpose of all that? It was creepy. But Tyler digs creepy stuff, so he also thought it was cool.

That guy Bubba, the one who's especially outspoken about his racist views, as the night goes on, I put together that he's the one who gave John all his tattoos, the tattoos that John showed me abruptly at his workshop that cover his whole chest. Bubba, he explains that being a tattoo artist is a lot like being a therapist. People sit in his chair for hours on end, and each person he works on is getting that tattoo for some specific reason.

It's his job, as he sees it, to uncover that reason. Maybe it's a meditation, a milestone, an excuse to get out of the house, a new girlfriend, a death. John's motivation was especially bewildering to Bubba, because John had made it clear almost every time he came in the shop how deeply he despised tattoos.

BUBBA: If you got a tattoo on you, he'd tell you you wasn't shit. You're a low life. You shouldn't have that on you.

BRIAN REED: So as shocking as it was to me when John lifted up his shirt to show me all his tattoos, it was far more shocking to Bubba when John strolled in one day at the age of 47 and asked him to start putting them there.

BUBBA: I thought he was going to commit suicide. You know, that's what I thought in my mind.

BRIAN REED: Why?

BUBBA: This is something you're completely against. You think fucking failures have tattoos, you know what I'm saying? Why in the fuck would you just start tattooing your whole upper body like that, you know what I mean? And around your neck—pistons. Tattooing pistons on him, you know? Redneck-ass tattoos, you know?

So I mean, first thought, I thought he was going to kill himself. I thought he was going to get tatted the fuck up and blow his brains out or something. Fuck, I don't know. And then the more I got to doing it, you know, I realized, you know, we're in a rut. You know, we need some money and he helped us out. I mean, he helped a lot.

BRIAN REED: Bubba and Tyler co-own Black Sheep Ink together. And Bubba started noticing, they'd have a bill about to come due for the business, they'd be wondering how they were going to pay it, and then conveniently, John would come in and hand over \$300

or \$400 and ask for another tattoo on his chest. Bubba says people around here don't throw down money like that. But John would, just in the nick of time, and then schedule another appointment for soon after.

BUBBA: He might not have said I'm helping you out, but when you sit down and pay me \$2,000, \$3,000 in a couple week span, you just helped me out. You know, you just got all my bills caught up. You just got everything back to where it needed to be, you know?

BRIAN REED: You think that's why he did it?

BUBBA: Now I do. He keeps a book, man. He writes down everything. So he knows when we're having a bad time. He'd ask certain things, like what's the rent, you know, what's your power bill, when's it due? And he already knows this shit, because he writes shit down. And he just planned his tattoo out to where it pretty much paid everything up in increments.

BRIAN REED: Wait, it was like that exact almost?

BUBBA: Yeah. If it wasn't for John, we'd be shut the fuck down.

BRIAN REED: If it wasn't for John?

BUBBA: Yeah. If it weren't for John, I'd be tattooing at my kitchen table right now. And I think he sacrificed his skin to help us out.

BRIAN REED: Bubba says John is an emotional guy, and sure, a lot of that emotion is disgust, but there's also sympathy, in particular for Tyler. If he's helping the tattoo parlor, he's only doing it because of Tyler and his brother, Jake.

BUBBA: He's just watched them boys, man, and he knows how his daddy was. I mean, the kid was laying block at 5 years old.

BRIAN REED: Tyler, that is.

BUBBA: You know, on the job site working. Not going to school—working. Go to school two days a week, work five days a week, you know what I mean? So he just seen it and he knows it wasn't right, sees what—how Tyler's been programmed to be the way he is by his raising and his upbringing, you know, and

feels sorry for him, I guess. I don't know. Or knows that he's smarter than what he's letting on. I mean, I don't know.

BRIAN REED: That Tyler is?

BUBBA: Yeah.

BRIAN REED: When John hires Tyler to chop down trees in his yard or build iron gates in his crawlspaces, he doesn't really need that stuff done, Bubba says. He's just trying to find an excuse to put money in Tyler's pocket. When Tyler gets caught driving with a suspended license and ends up in jail, something that happens now and again, Bubba knows John's the one to call because he'll bail him out.

BUBBA: He loves Tyler. I mean, Tyler's his boy. I mean, that's his boy. Tyler's brother, he cares about Tyler's little brother Jake, you know. John can say anything he wants to, but he loves Tyler probably just as much as you would your own son, your own flesh and blood. And I ain't figured it out.

BRIAN REED: We're standing in the backyard as we're talking, behind the tattoo shop. A train whistle starts to blow in the distance. Eventually, someone comes out and tells me I might be interested to know that Kabrahm's sister, Kashion Burt, is here, like right inside, 15 feet away from me. Why don't we just go ask her about the murder?

This town. I go to the bar, leave \$6 for my beer, and, careful to avoid Kabrahm's sister, head out the secret door, not knowing what I eventually will know months and months from now—that Kabrahm Burt didn't murder anybody, but also that before this is all over, someone will end up dead.

BUBBA: You coming up here when you get off?

BRIAN REED: More in a minute.

[AD]

BRIAN REED: Kabrahm? Hey, I'm Brian Reed.

KABRAHM BURT: Nice to meet you, Brian.

BRIAN REED: So I'm doing a radio story. I'm a reporter. I'm here from New York. Is there somewhere quiet we could sit?

BRIAN REED: It's a year later, and I'm pulling into K3 Lumber on a Friday morning, nervously asking if Kabrahm's around. I feel comfortable doing this only because I have finally determined that the incident John contacted me about, where Kabrahm allegedly got into a fight and beat a guy to death, although it did, in fact, go down almost exactly as John and Jake and Skyler and others told me, was wrong in one relatively important detail—the "to death" part. The guy Kabrahm beat up did not die. They just thought he did for a while. That's what I eventually gathered from talking to people more.

Once I heard that, I started contacting law enforcement to find out what did exactly happen. It turns out the incident in question actually took place in adjacent Tuscaloosa County. A chief at the sheriff's department there read to me from a detailed case file showing that the police had investigated the fight thoroughly, that no one had been killed, and that they had closed the case not because they were paid off or anything, but because none of the guys involved wanted to press charges. And so here I am at K3 Lumber to ask Kabrahm why he would go around bragging to people that he had killed a guy he had not killed. He's with some coworkers in the lumber yard in a plaid shirt, green trucker hat, and dark sunglasses.

BRIAN REED: Kabrahm? Hey, I'm Brian Reed.

KABRAHM BURT: Nice to meet you, Brian.

BRIAN REED: There's a particular philosophy I've encountered down here, and will continue to encounter. That is the fuck-it philosophy, a belief that there's no sense in worrying or thinking too much about any given decision, because life is going to be difficult and unfair regardless of what you do. It's more than a belief, really. It's a way of moving moment to moment through the world. And from the get-go, Kabrahm seems to be a subscriber. I show up with a microphone and ask if I can talk to him on the record about a matter I've yet to name, and he's immediately game. Fuck it. And we walk over behind some stacks of lumber to be alone.

KABRAHM BURT: What you want to talk about, Bud?

BRIAN REED: So basically, were you at one point going around telling people that you'd killed someone?

KABRAHM BURT: No. A boy cut my buddy's neck right here with a knife. But no. Like, I beat the piss out of him. What happened was—

BRIAN REED: What happened was, Kabrahm says, they were at a party, and he doesn't know how the fight started because he and almost everyone else were zonked out of their minds.

KABRAHM BURT: Drinking and doing everything else under the sun.

BRIAN REED: Like substance-wise?

KABRAHM BURT: Like taking Xanax, and mixing speed with it and stuff.

BRIAN REED: According to the police report, it was a clear, moonlit night, about 4:00, 4:30 in the morning, on August 4, 2012, just a few days outside the time window John had discerned from his records. Kabrahm says all he remembers is they were in the middle of the woods, chilling around a fire. A fight broke out, and then suddenly, this dude Dylan—not Dylan Nichols, as John had told me—he was not involved—but another Dylan with a different last name, came up from behind with a knife and cut Kabrahm's buddy, Tim, in the neck. So Kabrahm went after him, held Dylan's head down, punched him, hit him with a beer bottle.

Tim got involved. He might have bit the guy in the cheek. Dylan kept swinging his knife the whole time. He stabbed Kabrahm, too

KABRAHM BURT: Right up here.

BRIAN REED: Up in your thigh, there.

KABRAHM BURT: Yeah, like almost cut my gooch meat.

[LAUGHTER]

BRIAN REED: And then it was over. Kabrahm thinks the whole thing lasted maybe 15 seconds. It wasn't some beautiful, drawn-out movie fight, he says. It was a real-life fight, which means it was scrappy, awkward, and quick, and left his friend Tim clutching a four-inch gash on his neck that was gushing blood.

BRIAN REED: Did you think, like, Tim might be—like, it might be life-threatening?

KABRAHM BURT: Yes. That is the craziest shit I've ever seen in my life.

BRIAN REED: Kabrahm looked around and saw almost everyone at the party, maybe 30, 40 people, scattering. Tim was in a bad way, so someone had called 911, and now people were driving away or hiding in the woods before the police got there. The ambulance came, carted Kabrahm and Tim to the hospital, and after getting a few stitches near the meat of his gooch, Kabrahm went outside to smoke a cigarette and bumped into a group of random girls from the party.

KABRAHM BURT: Telling me all kinds of crazy shit, like somebody had died. Like, oh, that boy you got in a fight with died.

BRIAN REED: What did you think?

KABRAHM BURT: I was thinking, I don't think that boy died. I said, you wouldn't think so. Hell, the fight didn't last that long.

BRIAN REED: But still, you had, like, this part of your brain that was like, maybe.

KABRAHM BURT: Well, yeah. I started coming down off them Xanaxes, you know, and you get to thinking like, oh God, I hope I didn't do something stupid. I don't think nobody died, but if they did, I ain't gonna hang around to find out.

BRIAN REED: Kabrahm says he was kind of wiggling out wondering if he killed someone. He called a buddy of his to come pick him up at the hospital. That buddy was in a motel room full of methheads in Bessemer, Kabrahm says, and judging from police records and other sources, it seems possible the rumor that Dylan had been killed started in that motel room, and then spread from there.

Kabrahm says by the time he got to work on Monday, it had already taken hold. People were coming up to him at the lumberyard and other places around town asking if he killed a guy.

BRIAN REED: And so you never—I just want to ask you this again—you never maybe were drunk one time and saying, yeah, I beat that guy to death to anyone? Because I heard that you were bragging about it from multiple people.

KABRAHM BURT: Number one, that wouldn't even be something to brag about. It ain't like a deer or something, you know?

BRIAN REED: I'm glad to hear that. I'm glad to hear you say that, I got to say. So where would people get that from?

KABRAHM BURT: Just a damn small town, man. Shit gets fucking twisted.

BRIAN REED: But saying that you told them directly to their face?

KABRAHM BURT: Hell, I don't know, buddy.

BRIAN REED: I don't know either. I can't tell if what Kabrahm is saying to my face right now is true or not. I spoke to Kabrahm's father, too, Kendall Burt, and told him that John said he'd overheard him on the phone here at K3 one day saying something about how his son was guilty as hell, and he knew it. And Kendall told me he doesn't know what John heard him say, or if he heard him say anything, but that he's a tough-love kind of guy, and that if his son had done something like killed a person, he would never cover that up.

According to Kabrahm, there is a moral to this story. He shares it with me after I wonder aloud to him about something one of the police officers told me. Why did his buddy Tim, rather than pressing charges against the man that almost killed him with a knife, decide instead to shove his middle finger in the face of the cops when they came to talk to him in his hospital bed?

KABRAHM BURT: I mean, nobody wants to be a tattletale.

BRIAN REED: I mean, dude almost died. He got stabbed in the neck.

BRIAN REED: Kabrahm takes a drag of his cigarette.

BRIAN REED: You're shrugging your shoulders.

KABRAHM BURT: If he gonna live like white trash and shit, then hell, you might as well not tell on nobody, because, you know, if that's the life you're trying

to live, you can't be mad when, you know—low-down, dirty shit like that happens when you hang out with low-down, dirty people.

BRIAN REED: You there?

JOHN B. McLEMORE: I'm here.

BRIAN REED: Cool.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: I'm waiting on tea to boil.

BRIAN REED: Do you have time to talk? I have some stuff I'd love to talk to you about.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: I'm sitting here—

BRIAN REED: Are you busy?

JOHN B. McLEMORE: —right now at 2:25 with my orange pants on, waiting for Tyler to get his ass back over here. I figured you was calling to lower the boom or some damn stuff—go to town.

BRIAN REED: Yeah, it's my turn to talk a lot. I have a lot to catch you up on, actually.

BRIAN REED: I'm excited to tell John what I figured out, finally, after all this time. I now narrate the story of the real crime back to him, almost a year and a half after he first told me about it, with details colored in and facts illuminated, including the rather germane one that Kabrahm did not kill anybody. After I'm done, John summarizes my findings.

JOHN B. McLEMORE:

A bunch of fussing and fighting, snaggletooth, stolen trucks, meth labs, stabbing, hooping, hollering, and going to jail? I can't believe how much you've worked on this son of a bitch, and at the same time—

[SIGH]

My God.

BRIAN REED: What? Why the sigh?

JOHN B. McLEMORE: I'm sitting here looking out the window at the clouds going by, just in loathing disgust at the town that I live in and the fact that I didn't pack my bags and get the hell out of here decades ago. I think it's the part about hiding in the woods that did it. That's just so classic Bibb County. I don't know how many times I've heard that expression in my life—"hiding in the woods." I think hiding in the woods in Bibb County is like having your afternoon tea in London.

BRIAN REED: You know, there is another way John could have responded to all this news. I dare call it the normal way. That sigh he let out, rather than being one of despair, could have been one of relief—relief that a young man has not been killed, that local officials have not been bought off by a powerful, rich family, and that, in fact, law enforcement has done what appears to be a competent job responding to this incident. Shittown, at least in this case, doesn't look so, so terrible to me.

BRIAN REED: I don't know. Progress, right?

[LAUGHTER]

BRIAN REED: But no. I've learned that sometimes you catch John in a spell of depression, sometimes you catch him in a bout of mania, and sometimes, like today, I think, you catch him in an alchemy of the two.

[SIGH]

JOHN B. McLEMORE: I'm trying to think of a snappy comeback to that.

BRIAN REED: Because what is it, if not progress?

[LAUGHTER]

JOHN B. McLEMORE: Oh my God. Oh, Lord, it's just a clusterfuck of sorrow, isn't it?

BRIAN REED: A clusterfuck of sorrow.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: It's kind of like progress as in ISIS is making progress. You know, it's that type of progress.

[LAUGHTER]

It's like ISIS, is all I can come up with. Oh, shit.

[LAUGHTER]

BRIAN REED: Damn, man. I'm over here busting my ass off. When you contacted me, you wanted to know what actually happened. So it's progress in that sense, right?

JOHN B. McLEMORE: It's progress in that sense.

BRIAN REED: I am not saving the world over here. Climate change is—

JOHN B. McLEMORE: You are definitely not saving the world.

BRIAN REED: No. Climate change—

JOHN B. McLEMORE: Not by a long shot.

BRIAN REED: Climate change is not ending. I am not bringing jobs and sustainable employment to Alabama and lifting people out of poverty. But you asked me to try and figure out what happened here. On that front, I've made progress.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: I think you've done pretty goddamn good.

BRIAN REED: Well, thank you.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: I guess if I sound like I'm disinterested today, it's firstly because I'm tired and wore-ass out. And secondly because, you know, I just—I'm not the most cheerful person. You know, I spend most spare time now either studying energy or climate change, and it's not looking good. So yes, sometimes it's hard for me to get focused back on something when the whole goddamned Arctic summer sea ice is going to be gone by 2017. And we're fixing to

have heat waves in Siberia this year, and sometimes I feel like a total idiot because I'm worried about a goddamn crackhead out here in fucking Shittown, Alabama.

So yeah, that's just a personality disorder of mine. You know, sometimes when you call me, I'm kind of in an upbeat mood. And sometimes, like today, you caught me in one of these tired, somber, you know, reflective moods, where I've been, you know, sitting there mulling over climate change for about the past 10 damned hours. Oh, I mean, my God—

BRIAN REED: When John says he's been mulling over climate change for the past 10 hours, what I think he means is that he's been mulling over climate change for the past 10 hours. I don't think he's exaggerating. It's like work for him, like he's made it his job.

We've now been talking to each other for a year and a half, and while some of that time we've discussed the murder, there's been so much other stuff John wants to chat about. It's interesting stuff, but it's all over the place. Even if I haven't talked to him in a while, nearly every day he sends me emails about all sorts of global calamities that he continues to keep up with, even though they've fallen out of the news.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: How many people are still concerned today about the Philippines?

BRIAN REED: He's referring to Typhoon Haiyan from 2013. Or how about the tsunami in Sri Lanka in 2004, John says, or the terrible flood in Pakistan the year before last?

JOHN B. McLEMORE: Not hearing a lot about that, are you?

BRIAN REED: How about the fallout from the Ebola outbreak, or the nuclear disaster in Fukushima, or—a deeper cut—Chernobyl? The list goes on and on. And it's not just catastrophe. John also gives me lectures and sends reports on the systemic problems he sees leading to complete breakdown of the social contract—problems in our food production chain, our health care industry, our monetary policy.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: —all the fucking hedonic regression, geometric weighting.

BRIAN REED: He also shares a variety of disturbing stories that he manages to dig up from all corners of the country, about the son of a US senator suffocating 21 dogs, or a KKK branch giving out bags of candy to children as a recruitment effort in South Carolina, or a guy down the street from John trying to kill his wife by running her over with a Bobcat.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: I was on Homefacts last night. The city of West Blocton has outdone Vance as being the child molester per capita capital of Alabama.

BRIAN REED: This is another data point John likes to send me now and again—the number of sex offenders per capita in his area. Vance and West Blocton are both towns in Bibb County.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: Vance is now one child molester for every 192 citizens. West Blocton is for about over 63 or 4.

BRIAN REED: Why do you check that statistic so often?

JOHN B. McLEMORE: Why do I check crude oil plus lease condensate production so often, or why do I go pore over the tables from the IPCC so often?

BRIAN REED: The IPCC being the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: —and I've tied down a couple other people—

BRIAN REED: For the longest time, I thought the only connection between all of John's random interests was that it was all shitty. But the connection is deeper than that. He's distressed by the lack of outrage compared to the amount of shittiness in the world. To him, that ratio is totally out of whack.

That's why he was still upset about the Kabrahm rumor, even after I told him it wasn't true. Even though the murder and the cover-up weren't real, everyone sure did believe they were, and still they did nothing. That part, the inaction—that's more disturbing to John than the idea of the murder itself.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: You know, I really hate that these kids know all the things that they know, and they just accept them as normal.

BRIAN REED: I know. That seems to really bother you, huh?

JOHN B. McLEMORE: Accept it as something you can't do nothing about.

BRIAN REED: The shitty misfortunes John fixates on, they're not a bunch of disparate things. They're all the same thing. His Shittown is part of Bibb County, which is part of Alabama, which is part of the United States, which is part of Earth, which is experiencing climate change, which no one is doing anything about. It maddens John. The whole world is giving a collective shrug of its shoulders and saying fuck it.

What I admire about John is that in his own misanthropic way, he's crusading against one of the most powerful, insidious forces we face—resignation, the numb acceptance that we can't change things. He's trying to shake people out of their stupor, trying to convince them that it is possible to make their world a better place.

Yes, that lady over there, she's barefoot and she's pantsless, but we can lend her shoes. We can give her some pants. Instead of just putting our heads down and speeding past her and muttering that she must have done something to get like that, we can ask her if she's in trouble, and we can offer her help. There is a different way.

That's why John rants and raves at the tattoo parlor. That's why John adopts dozens of stray dogs. That's why he devotes night after night to studying and writing about climate change. That's why he contacted a national radio show and asked me to come investigate. And that's why I now see John is devoting so much energy to what is arguably his most ambitious project of all—radically altering the life of Tyler Goodson.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: Tyler almost embodies everything I hate about this Shittown in one convenient package. Have you ever thought of it that way? I bet you haven't dared.

BRIAN REED: As the months have gone by since my trip to Alabama, I've heard more and more about Tyler. I've learned all about his tough childhood, the petty legal troubles that continue to dog him, his persistent financial problems, his struggle to support his three daughters, whom he had by the age of 21, and whom he loves dearly.

John has devoted his life to restoring old clocks. Methodically and thoroughly, he sorts through the busted parts of these timepieces, trying to revive a sense of beauty and order. And in a way, that's what he's attempting to do with Tyler. Every time John picks up the

phone and I ask what he's up to, Tyler's either there or he was just there, or he's waiting for him to get there. It seems like he's giving him consistent work.

John's also been accompanying Tyler to court and hiring him a lawyer to help him clear up some misdemeanor charges and get his driver's license back. And Tyler's recently moved to the trailer park across the street from John, so now he can easily walk to John's place. John's even talking about writing Tyler and his brother Jake into his will.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: I don't want these two bastards to know this, but when I fall over dead, each one is going to get 20 ounces of gold each.

BRIAN REED: I'll keep that secret.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: That's assuming the goddamn cops don't come in and steal it.

BRIAN REED: But John's relationship with Tyler is not just as a benefactor. I can tell that they get something more from one another. John will mention a walk he and Tyler took through the woods, or an expedition they made to the junkyard to search for treasures, or he'll recount some bit of their conversation. They like to spend time together.

One day, John was on the phone with me, and he looked out his window and started listing off the flowers that were in bloom in his yard, and the ones that were dying. He sighed and said,

JOHN B. McLEMORE: It's tedious and brief. That's a sundial motto—
tedious and brief.

BRIAN REED: Before we had clocks, we had sundials, and I never thought about this until I started talking to John, but watching a sundial, which could be as simple as a stick in the ground, as the shadow crept along, you were actually witnessing the rotation of the Earth. It's so much less abstracted than a clock, a level closer to time itself. Anyway, John told me sundials often have mottos engraved on them. John says "tedious and brief" is one.

BRIAN REED: What do you mean, "tedious and brief?"

JOHN B. McLEMORE: Your life is tedious and brief. All sundial mottos are sad like that.

BRIAN REED: There are hundreds of these mottos. "Life passes like this shadow." "Make haste, but slowly." "Use the hours, don't count them." "Even as you watch, I'm fleeing." "Soon comes night."

These little reminders are out there, hidden in crannies around the world. I recently happened upon a sundial in the cemetery of an old Catholic mission next to a grave. Because of John, I knew to look for the motto. It read, "Nil boni hodie. Diem perdidit." "I did nothing good today. I have lost a day."

JOHN B. McLEMORE: You know, I told you, I used to make sundials, but I made them for the mathematical exercise. You know, I would pick difficult dials to do as a test of my abilities of geometry and trigonometry. And these are things I wish Tyler and Jake could experience. There's a real excitement in geometry and trigonometry that's just, you know—I think when we was building the swing—you know, I built a swing for Tyler—

BRIAN REED: This is one of the ways John and Tyler have been passing the hours together lately. They've been constructing an adult swingset, a giant rectangular frame, to the side of John's house, not far from the apple trees, with a single John Deere tractor seat hanging from it. It has a 20-foot arc of action, John says, which I understand to mean it's a pretty gnarly swing. When John first told me about it, he'd said he was building it for himself. But now he amends that.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: I think I built a swing for Tyler, actually. I found out that an old man of 50, when he swings in a swing for about 20 minutes, his back hurts and his knees hurt, so I didn't build it for me after all. I done found that out. So I think I built it for Tyler. Fuck it.

Oh, and I built him a pull-up bar, because he wants to be strong. I told him, well, it's nice to be physically strong, but you need to be strong between the ears, because physical strength goes away. You know, you need to have strong neurons. And I told him, you need to have a little bit of general algebra. You should always have some trigonometry and you should have some geometry.

BRIAN REED: What did he say?

JOHN B. McLEMORE: He never—I remember this conversation. He said he never saw how it is that had anything you could do much with.

BRIAN REED: I like imagining this odd pair, a polymathic, middle-aged clock restorer and a tatted-up kid in his 20s with a Harley and a revolver in his briefcase, out in John's yard on a summer's day, staking swingset poles into the ground, the dogs circling around them, maybe a butterfly fluttering by. I like imagining John interrupting their work for a minute to give Tyler a math lesson, feeling gratified that he has someone to give a math lesson to, and Tyler perhaps taking something from it, but at the very least humoring John, because he's grateful that John's helping him get his life together. I like knowing that this is how two people have chosen to spend an afternoon together in Bibb County, Alabama. "Take the gifts of this hour," one sundial says. Another, "It's later than you think."

JOHN B. McLEMORE: And I point out the diagonal chain that was going to shore up the upright—

BRIAN REED: Of the swing set?

JOHN B. McLEMORE: Yeah. I told him that the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the square of the two sides. He hadn't used Pythagoras' theorem. So we could calculate the length of the chain without climbing up on the goddamn top of the pole and pulling it in diagonal with the tape measure. That was my answer.

BRIAN REED: And what did he say?

JOHN B. McLEMORE: "Mm," or something like that.

BRIAN REED: Mm.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: Yeah. He has a lot of his daddy's mannerisms. "Mm" is often heard when there's not a significant answer. Hold on, hold on. I'm gonna piss in the sink. I hope that's politically incorrect. That's something that flips Tyler out. Yes, I just pissed in the kitchen sink, because—

BRIAN REED: I can't—

JOHN B. McLEMORE: If the phone had enough signal, I would just go out there and piss near one of the gardenias or the azaleas or the camellias or the crepe myrtles because, you know they like acid.

[BLOWING NOSE]

But I didn't think the phone had enough signal, so instead of wasting three or four gallons to flush the commode, I just peed here in the kitchen sink and used about 1 cupful of water to flush the sink. And I got a little short dick, but I got a pretty good aim, so I can usually aim right for the center of that damn thing without splashing everywhere.

[LAUGHTER]

BRIAN REED: Oh, man.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: But in any event—what was the question? I forgot.

BRIAN REED: I forgot too.

[PHONE RINGING]

SKYLER: Hello?

BRIAN REED: Hey, is Jake around? Is this Skyler?

BRIAN REED: It's been a couple weeks since I last spoke to John, and I just got a text from Jake, Tyler's brother, asking me to call him when I get a chance.

SKYLER: Yeah, this is Skyler. I was the one that called you. Jake texted you for me.

BRIAN REED: Oh, hey.

SKYLER: Has any—hold on just one second. Has anybody called you?

BRIAN REED: No, not that I know of. I have a few missed calls, but I don't think they're from anybody down there.

SKYLER: Oh.

BRIAN REED: Why?

SKYLER: Well, we have some bad news to tell you.

BRIAN REED: OK.

SKYLER: John B. killed himself Monday night.

[MUSIC - THE ZOMBIES, "A ROSE FOR EMILY"]

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

The *S-Town* staff includes Emily Condon, Elise Bergerson, Julie Whitaker, and Kimberly Henderson. Music for the show is composed by Daniel Hart, Trey Pollard, Helado Negro, and Matt McGinley. Music supervision by Damien Graef. Our website—Stownpodcast.org.

Special thanks to Bennett Epstein, Ted Scheinman, and Evan Smith.

[AD]

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