

S·TOWN

CHAPTER III TRANSCRIPT

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SARAH KOENIG: Chapter III.

SKYLER GOODSON: Has anybody called you?

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

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

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

BRIAN REED: OK.

SKYLER GOODSON: John B. killed himself Monday night.

BRIAN REED: Are you kidding me?

SKYLER GOODSON: No.

BRIAN REED: Oh my gosh.

SKYLER GOODSON: With everything that happened, we wasn't able to call yesterday. His body was found yesterday morning, and it happened yesterday morning. It happened between last Monday night and Tuesday morning.

BRIAN REED: Oh my God.

SKYLER GOODSON: Yeah. So right now, his mother is OK.

BRIAN REED: Oh, Skyler.

SKYLER GOODSON: Now we're just trying to get her taken care of and make sure she don't go to a nursing home.

BRIAN REED: Oh my gosh.

SKYLER GOODSON: And the way he killed himself is he drank cyanide.

BRIAN REED: Oh my God. Oh, I'm so sorry. I—

SKYLER GOODSON: I mean, we're just—it hurts, but we're just trying to focus on his mom right now. They took her to the hospital for evaluations to make sure that John hadn't tried to give her any of it. But her system was clear. She's been healthy and everything. She knows what's going on. She understands to a certain point, and she just basically wants to go home. And you know—

BRIAN REED: I'm sorry, I'm still trying to take all this in. I'm trying to follow what you're saying, but it's just so shocking. I'm hearing you, but it's not all registering. He emailed me the other night.

SKYLER GOODSON: Hold on one second. I'm walking outside right quick.

[INAUDIBLE].

BRIAN REED: John. Sitting in the studio in a daze on the phone with Skyler, I searched my inbox for the last message from Hiruit Nguyse, the pseudonym John used for his email address.

BRIAN REED: I mean, the last thing he wrote me—I mean, I didn't even get a chance to totally read all this.

BRIAN REED: He sent it on Sunday, Father's Day, 8:55 PM.

SKYLER GOODSON: And it happened Monday.

BRIAN REED: It's Wednesday now, early evening. Just three days ago, John was alive, standing at the computer in his bedroom, emailing me, thinking of me, sending me a graph of the increasing gold reserves of the Russian central bank, saying, what do the Russkies know that we don't? I don't know why we do this

when we're told that someone has died. Hold up our last interaction with them and point to the nearness of it in time to explain our disbelief, as if time gives a shit.

SKYLER GOODSON: And I bet you're feeling the same thing that I'm feeling. You probably didn't message back. You were busy.

BRIAN REED: I just wrote back today, like a couple of hours ago.

SKYLER GOODSON: I understand how you're feeling. We're all feeling it. I talked to him Friday night. Me and John sat on the phone for four hours, no lie. You know how you can get to talk to him and not stop. We stayed on the phone for four hours, and he was fine. I knew he had issues, but he was fine.

He talked about how bad this world was. Like the main thing we talked about the other night was how bad this world was, and what it's coming to and everything, and how me and Jake shouldn't bring anymore kids and nobody else should bring anymore kids into this world because of how bad it's going to end up getting. But I mean, he was fine. It was just a casual conversation about it.

BRIAN REED: It was a John conversation.

BRIAN REED: John talked about committing suicide. He talked about it to me, and I knew that he talked about it to others. He never called me on the verge of it or anything like that. When it came up, it was usually very matter-of-fact. Like, of course. This is my plan. I'm going to do this someday. The way someone might talk about their plans to retire or move.

John actually wrote me several emails that Sunday, Father's Day, the night before he committed suicide. The one about the Russian gold reserves was the very last, but there was a string of messages just before that. I'd recently sent John a series I produced for *This American Life* about the frayed relationship between cops and African Americans. While I was working on it months ago, I hadn't been so good about keeping in touch with John. So when it was finished, I wanted to share it with him so we could hear what had kept me so busy.

On Sunday night, he wrote me as he was listening, telling me how disgusted he was with the police abuses I was reporting about, how our country wasn't worth defending, how he would let his mother lay over and die before he called his local police. And then he sent me

an email titled “Collapse List,” which is the email that I saw come in, but didn’t get a chance to fully read, because it was very long. John prefaced it by saying that he was inspired to send it after listening to our cop episodes.

And then the bullet points start. 99% of rhinos gone since 1914. 90% of big ocean fish gone since 1950. 50% of Great Barrier Reef gone since 1985. Ocean plankton declines of 1% per year means 50% gone in 70 years. Ocean acidification doubles by 2050, triples by 2100. One million humans net are added to the Earth every 4 and 1/2 days. We must produce more food in the next 50 years than we have in the past 10,000 years combined. Earth has only 60 years of farming left at current world soil degradation rates.

On and on it goes like this, like his ledger of expenses. And that’s after a disclaimer from John, saying note that I do not include energy or economic issues with this list. It’s numbing. I found out later that John didn’t actually write this list. It’s made its way around apocalyptic websites and comment threads, so you’d expect this kind of thing to be wildly inaccurate. But after checking some of the statistics, it doesn’t seem to be.

When I look at this right now in the shadow of John’s suicide, I guess it’s clear this was a fixation of a person in a deeply depressed mental state. When I read it just three days before, I didn’t see that. Hell, I didn’t see it as I was looking at it again today, just a few hours before Skyler called, when I finally sat down to reply to it and told him, quote, “This is fascinating.” I just saw it as the normal, cynical John B. McLemore I become used to. I saw it as a glass full of piss. All the world was a shit town to John, and he bore every disgrace of that world in his heart.

Skyler tells me that as we speak, Tyler, her brother-in-law, is at the hospital with John’s mom, working to get power of attorney so they can bring her home and care for her in her own house. Skyler says John called and messaged several people the night he killed himself, and that Tyler was one of them. It also appears that Tyler was the last person besides John’s mother to see him alive.

I ask if there will be a funeral. They’re working on that, Skylar says, but yes, there will likely be a service in a few days. Skylar says it’ll probably be small, just the Goodson family and John’s mom.

BRIAN REED: I mean, I want to—I would like to come down and see you guys. I don’t know. I don’t know what’s appropriate, I mean, I was slowly doing a story that involved John. And I got to know him and care about him, and know you guys.

And I'm not sure where that leaves me. Like, who am I to this situation? You know?

SKYLER GOODSON: If you wasn't anything to this, I wouldn't have called.

BRIAN REED: Before John and I ever spoke, he warned me in an email, quote, "I must tell you, it will take a long time for me to just impress on you what a crud-fuck town and county this is." When John was alive, I had trouble seeing the shittown that John was seeing. I saw parts of it, but not the full and glorious relief in which he saw it.

But in the aftermath of his death, a whole other story unfurled in front of me piece by piece. A story I could picture John laying out for me with outrage and humor and sadness, maybe even written by one of his favorite short story writers. I could see John handing it to the next visitor he coaxed down to Bibb County as their bedtime reading, saying, read this, it'll help you understand this place I've lived nearly every one of my days. It'll help you understand me.

John brought me to Bibb County to search for a body of the man he believed wrongly had been killed by Kabrahm Burt. John hoped if we could expose that murder, uncover the body, so to speak, finally everyone would see shittown for what it was. But that dude in the fight with Kabrahm, his wasn't the body that would expose shittown. John's was.

The day after I learned of John's suicide, I called Tyler to give my condolences, and also because he was seemingly the last person to be with John besides John's mother, to see if something had happened that prompted John to do this now. I tell him I'm sorry, ask him how he's holding up, and immediately he starts telling me the story of the days and moments leading up to the suicide. I called him from my own phone, but I interrupt and ask if he'd mind me calling him back from the studio.

TYLER GOODSON: Hey.

BRIAN REED: Hey, man. All right, so I'm recording, just so you know.

TYLER GOODSON: OK. Well, I'm going to start from the beginning, then, from Father's Day. Because he wanted to spend Father's Day with me, and we done planned something. Because you know, I ain't ever had no daddy worth a damn. He's just about the only daddy I've got.

BRIAN REED: They'd planned to spend Father's Day together, but in the end they didn't, because John went and did something a couple of days before that made Tyler mad.

TYLER GOODSON: I was pissed off at him because I brought one of my young ones over there to swing in the swing. And John just had me give him a haircut. He wanted me to skin his head, and I did. And my little girl was kind of poking at him, said John, you got a haircut like my daddy's, ha, ha, ha. And he said, well, you'll have it soon enough at Julia Tutwiler. That's a women's prison. And that pissed me off. My little girl didn't understand that, but I did. And buddy, that pissed me the fuck off.

BRIAN REED: Why did he say that?

TYLER GOODSON: I don't know. And I calmly said, Noelle, go get in the truck, baby. We're going to go on over to the house. And I calmly eased out of there. But that shit he said pissed me off. And I didn't show up the next morning and didn't talk to him all day. Come Saturday night, he called me. And I'd kind of been ignoring him.

But I finally answered him that evening. And hell, I about broke down crying whenever I was telling him, because he was like, what's wrong? I said John B., I just don't understand why you say the shit you do. I said, the shit that you say in front of me I can kind of handle. But when you say this shit in front of my girls, I said, I just don't know how to take it, buddy. I said, I just figured you was trying to run me off. And he said, no, that's the last thing I want to do is run you off. He said, what in the hell did I say to make you mad? He didn't have not one clue what he said that pissed me off.

BRIAN REED: Oh, really. I'm sure he meant it as a joke that went wrong, you know?

TYLER GOODSON: I guess. I don't know.

BRIAN REED: That's all I could think of.

TYLER GOODSON: Well yeah, it's like I don't discipline my kids enough. So he's thinking that they wind up in fucking prison. I don't know.

BRIAN REED: So did he say he was sorry? Or what did he say when you told him?

TYLER GOODSON: Oh, yeah. I mean, we was all right. He about started boo-hooing on the phone, and I did too. And he told me he loved me, and I told him I loved him. I think that might have been Sunday, because the next morning I went over there and—

BRIAN REED: This was Monday, June 22, 2015, the day John died. Tyler says they called it their Father's Day.

TYLER GOODSON: I was supposed to do yard work or something, and we decided that we was going go fishing down there at the Cahaba River. I lied to everybody and told everybody that I was over there cutting his grass. But we was really out fishing. And then that day, we had a great day. We had a great day, except for the few little spells he had.

BRIAN REED: Tyler says he bought John a small bottle of whiskey, and John was sipping it as they drove to the Cahaba River. John was getting nostalgic and blue as they rolled along old backroads where he used to drive with his dad, who died years ago. They went by his aunt Gertrude's old house, his old girlfriend's house. Everybody's dead and gone, John told Tyler.

TYLER GOODSON: And he kind of got upset on the ride down there. But once we got to the river, he was fine. We had a good time.

BRIAN REED: And what did you guys talk about?

TYLER GOODSON: He said, Tyler, you've just got to learn to just stop and take some time for yourself, and try to enjoy life. And he said, this is the most important day of your life, talking about being out there on that river. And hell, John can't swim. I mean, hell, we wasn't in no deeper water than about waist deep, and he wouldn't go nowhere without me holding his damn hand like a kid. We waded up and down the river and stuff, and I was slipping over rocks finding some crawfish and hellgrammites and stuff, showing him. And he never done stuff like that before, so it was new to him.

BRIAN REED: Did it seem like he was saying goodbye?

TYLER GOODSON: I don't know. Hell, we spray painted our damn names up there on the damn bridge.

BRIAN REED: Really?

TYLER GOODSON: Hell yeah.

BRIAN REED: Oh, Tyler, I'm really sorry, man. I'm really sorry. That's really hard.

TYLER GOODSON: It damn surely is.

BRIAN REED: At the end of the day, Tyler dropped John off at his house.

TYLER GOODSON: When I brought him home, he was just about lit. He had a pint of Wild Turkey 101 in him. A pint of Wild Turkey would have anybody gobbling. I mean, I shouldn't have left him that drunk, but I done got tired from being out all day, and I had to get back home to my kids. But he was begging me to come back over there.

BRIAN REED: Back at his trailer with his girlfriend and two of his young daughters, Tyler kept getting messages from John. He says John was imploring him to come back, come back, put your kids to bed and come back. And he also started threatening to kill himself.

TYLER GOODSON: He texted me a couple times to tell me. He said—I got all the messages on my phone. He said, it's all I can do to keep him blowing my fucking brains out right here in the driveway. You know, I paced the hallways in my place just worried about him. I was pretty damn concerned.

But you know, he's done said this stuff so many times. And my old lady was sitting here on the porch with me, because I'm like, look, I'm about to just go over there. And she said, Tyler, if you keep running over there every time he says he's going to kill himself, you're going to go crazy from this shit. He just keeps on telling you that to keep getting you to come down there, and you can't just live your whole life around John. Because that's the way it's gotten.

He's just gotten so—he don't want me to leave. You know, I've been down there all day. He wants me to stay down there all night. And I've got clothes down there,

and I've got a bed in the dining room. So I mean, I'm just pretty much residing there anyways. Because I take care of Mama, take care of him, I'm taking care of the dogs, the yard, everything. It's like they depend on me. So I said, yeah, you're probably right. And I went there and laid my ass down and went to sleep.

BRIAN REED: The next morning, Tyler says, when he got the news, he went to John's immediately. There was police tape up. It was a crime scene. John's body had already been taken away, but Tyler noticed something on the porch floor and stooped to look. There were John's glasses, twisted up, with some kind of blood or vomit on the lenses. That's where John died, on the porch.

TYLER GOODSON: I don't know, man. I hadn't been able to sleep. I hadn't been able to eat. Shit has got my fucking brains so damn fucked up, Brian.

BRIAN REED: What's that?

TYLER GOODSON: Got my damn mind so damn fucked up thinking about this shit.

BRIAN REED: I felt for Tyler. Not only was John, as John put it himself, a kind of ersatz father for Tyler, he was the person Tyler spent almost every day with. He was also his employer, his source of income and of stability. Tyler told me about something else that happened right after John died. The next day with the house empty, he made sure all the dogs were fed, locked up all the doors—

TYLER GOODSON: And I went straight to the hospital looking for Mama.

BRIAN REED: He means John's mother, Mary Grace.

TYLER GOODSON: I call her Mama, so. Well, on my way up to the hospital, I got a phone call.

BRIAN REED: It was from a married couple Tyler didn't know. The woman was John's cousin. She and her husband said they'd just driven in from Florida where they live, and that they were at John's place right now with a local police officer trying to get into the house, which was locked. The police officer had told them Tyler probably had the keys, and the cousins wanted him to come back and let them in.

TYLER GOODSON: I said well, I'm trying to go check on Mama at the hospital. I said, y'all hadn't been to the hospital yet? They said no, we was trying to get some clothes out of the house. And you know, it sounded crazy from the start.

BRIAN REED: Had you ever heard about them before?

TYLER GOODSON: No, never. John always told me that he had some distant cousins or kin, and he said they weren't nothing but trash and drunks and wasn't no good for nothing. Well, I turned around and went to the house. We went back to John's house. And while I was coming down the driveway, I called the hospital room, and I got Mama on the phone—you know, John's mama.

I told her, I said Mama, your cousins are down from Florida. I said, have they been by there to see you? She said, well lord, no. I said well, they're at your house trying to get in. I said, what do you want me to do? She said, do not let them in my house. She said, if they ain't even come up here to see me yet, they ain't going in my house. She said, do not let them in. I said, yes, ma'am.

BRIAN REED: When he reached the end of the long driveway, Tyler saw a Woodstock cop he knows and a middle-aged couple waiting for him in front of the house.

TYLER GOODSON: So I walked out there just as polite as can be. I said, I'm sorry, you all don't know me. But Mama told me herself to not let anybody in her house. She said for you all to come to the hospital. And buddy, they blew up. They started cussing me. The fella that was with her said, "I don't give a fuck," right in my face. I mean, they was furious that I wouldn't let them in the house.

BRIAN REED: Tyler was angry, but he says he tried to stay calm.

TYLER GOODSON: I said, y'all haven't even went up there to check on that poor lady. I said, y'all don't give a damn about her, it looks like. And then the woman was just—she was cussing me. She said, she will not come back to this house. And then 30 minutes later, they was at the hospital in front of me in there pretending to cry.

BRIAN REED: Tyler had not let the cousins in the house. Instead, they were now all at Mary Grace's bedside, and Tyler says the cousins were going on about how heartbroken

they were about John Brooks, how glad they were to see Mary Grace. They started naming relatives they had in common, talking about other family members who died over the years.

TYLER GOODSON: I swear to God, they was in there trying to squeeze a tear out. “Oh, I miss you, Mary Grace. I’m so sorry.” They was just putting on an act, and you could tell it, buddy.

BRIAN REED: Tyler says Mary Grace explained to the cousins who he was, that John loved him to death, and that he’d been helping take care of her and the house for several years. He says she told them she wanted to go home and have Tyler keep taking care of her and the dogs, that she was planning to go with him to the family lawyer’s office tomorrow and get the legal stuff in order to make that happen. And Tyler says he and Mary Grace also had plans to make funeral arrangements for John. The cousin protested a bit, but Mary Grace insisted, and eventually the cousin gave in. She said, OK, if that’s what you both want. And they left Tyler and Mary Grace together.

But the next day, Tyler says, when he went to take Mary Grace home, the hospital wouldn’t release her. John had said Mary Grace had Alzheimer’s. I’ve since learned she doesn’t, but she does have significant dementia and memory loss. So even though she was demanding that they let her leave with Tyler, a case worker said she couldn’t, because they deemed her mentally unfit to make decisions for herself. And Tyler isn’t next of kin, the cousins are.

TYLER GOODSON: These damn Florida folks, they ain’t no good for nothing, man. It’s got me so damn mad.

BRIAN REED: Tyler is sure the only reason they’re here is to cash in on John’s estate.

TYLER GOODSON: I’m telling you, man. His mama has got pearls and diamonds, and then, I know he’s got gold. I mean, he’s showed me the gold. I don’t know where it’s at now. I mean, I know John’s worth millions. But I’m worried about Mama and them puppies and that property. I ain’t even studying the damn gold.

BRIAN REED: According to Tyler, right now as he and I speak, Mary Grace has technically been released from the hospital. But she’s still stuck there, because her cousin hasn’t come to take her out. She’s pacing the hallways, he says, frustrated, confused,

crying, missing her puppies, asking Tyler why John abandoned them like this, asking him questions he's also asking himself. More after this.

[AD]

I'd been told by Skyler that John's funeral would be small, probably just the Goodson family and his mother, Mary Grace. But when I arrive at Green Pond Presbyterian Church on this sweltering Monday morning, a week after John died, June 29, 2015, far more people have showed up than I expected. There are 30, maybe 40 people here, and I know who very few of them are. We're gathered in the cemetery behind the church, where a small tent and some chairs are set up for a graveside service.

John's coffin is suspended above an open grave, next to the headstone for his father, Tom McLemore. There is no headstone for John. People flitter among small clusters, shaking their heads, talking loudly, muttering certain words that I overhear again and again. In particular, the words "so smart" and "genius." Tyler is wearing a black t-shirt for the occasion, along with dark jeans and boots.

He's carrying a framed picture of John as a boy to give to John's mother, and one of John's old children's books from when he was a kid that Tyler says he'd recently been reading to his daughters. I came to the funeral with the Goodson family. Tyler led our procession here on his motorcycle. But it's clear now that we've arrived that they are not the ones running this event. A Cadillac pulls up close to the cemetery gate, and out of the back seat climbs Mary Grace with her cane, escorted by a middle-aged couple that I assume to be the cousins. Everyone hushes as they walk Mary Grace to a chair directly in front of the coffin. We all move in closer to the grave.

BROTHER BEN: We are gathered today for the rights of John Brooks McLemore.

BRIAN REED: An older man introduced as Brother Ben, who's in a wheelchair with a fedora in his lap, begins to speak. I record on my cell phone.

BROTHER BEN: Let's pray at this time. Our father God, we can say with the sombrest of odes, I have fainted. I have been overwhelmed. Unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

BRIAN REED: Immediately we're praying, and immediately I'm disoriented, because John was an atheist. And not a casual atheist or an atheist by default. He was as fervent a critic of religion as the most zealous evangelists for it. From the very first time I talked to John, he made it clear how hypocritical he thought religion was, how vacuous and damaging. He could be straight up mean about it. He created video mash-ups of footage of worshipers speaking in tongues, dancing around, and rolling on the ground, set to songs like this.

[MUSIC – “ROLLIN” BY LIMP BIZKIT]

He once mentioned to me in passing that his favorite bible verse was Ezekiel 23:20. He didn't recite the verse, but I've since read it. The choicest line is, quote, “There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys, and whose emission was like that of horses.” Watch their jaw drop when they read that sweet little bit of information, John had told me.

BROTHER BEN: Can I get a witness right there?

BRIAN REED: In his 20-minute service, Brother Ben only talks briefly about John himself. One thing I knew about John, he says, and all of you will probably echo this—

BROTHER BEN: He just was very, very smart, and very intelligent.

BRIAN REED: Brother Ben says there's a story someone told him the other day from when John was a boy. Mary Grace went to a local garage and asked if they had any extra motors her son could tinker with.

BROTHER BEN: John got that motor and tinkered with it, all right. He took it down and put it back together just perfectly.

BRIAN REED: He put it back together just perfectly, he says. And that's the story. John had a brilliant mind, Brother Ben says. Mechanics would call in for help with pesky motors, and then we're back to scripture. To me, it was sad to see the life of someone with such personality remembered with so little, to see John honored with a service so utterly devoid of him. But for the person here who matters most, Mary Grace, it does seem to serve its purpose. Near the end, as Brother Ben is beginning the final prayer, she thanks him for helping lay her son to rest.

MARY GRACE: Makes me feel good that you thought so much of him.

BRIAN REED: “It makes me feel good that you thought so much of him,” she says. Enough to put him at peace.

MARY GRACE: At peace. I’m sure he’s at peace now.

BRIAN REED: Mary Grace begins weeping. Tyler’s mother, whom I met for the first time right before the funeral, is standing next to me. She has tears in her eyes. And as Mary Grace speaks, Tyler’s mom clutches my arm. “He’ll always be with me in my heart and my mind,” Mary Grace cries. “I just cannot bear the thought of not having him.” The cousin puts her hand on Mary Grace. “Brother Ben is going to say a prayer now,” she tells her.

BROTHER BEN: Father God, thank you again for the mind that he had.

BRIAN REED: When the service is over, there’s some milling about. People give their condolences to Mary Grace, then the cousins help her toward the car. Tyler is there, and for a few moments, I see him and Mary Grace talking. Then I see the female cousin intervene and guide Mary Grace away from him. Later, Tyler will tell me that he was just telling Mary Grace that he loves her, that he hopes he gets to see her again, and that she thanked him for being by her side and said he was welcome to go back to her house anytime he wanted.

And then, according to Tyler, the cousin jumped in and said, “No, Mary Grace, that would be trespassing.” Even without being able to fully hear this interaction myself, I can still sense that it’s a tense moment. And as the cousins walk Mary Grace to the car, I can hear Tyler’s mother half shout to them, “I hope you do the right thing.” Then Mary Grace gets in the Cadillac and is driven away.

One scripture Brother Ben referenced at John’s funeral was Luke 12:15. Brother Ben told us, “Take heed. Beware of covetousness. For a man, a person’s life consists not in the abundance of things which we possess.”

“Life is not stuff,” Brother Ben told us. Death, though? Death can leave a lot of stuff behind. It can go very quickly from the spiritual to the material.

The way Tyler understood it, John wanted to leave him and his brother something when he died, which was my understanding too. John told me as much on several occasions. And minutes before he committed suicide, John texted Tyler saying, quote, “Anything you want in this house you can have,” unquote. Obviously those communications don’t mean much legally without a will, and that seems to be the situation. Tyler and Skyler told me after John died they heard that he didn’t have a will, which was shocking to them.

Seeing what’s happening to Tyler, watching the cousins squeeze him out of John’s affairs, it doesn’t seem like what John would have wanted. In fact, it strikes me as exactly the kind of scenario that would have tormented him, someone who’s vulnerable like Tyler trying to stand up and take responsibility for making things better, and still getting screwed. Tyler’s been a consistent part of John’s life in recent years. Meanwhile, Tyler says, the cousins haven’t been around for decades. I don’t think this was the clockmaker’s intention.

I find it hard to believe that John would have taken his life without having a will. This is the same guy who kept detailed track of every expenditure he made, who logged every shot his dogs got. For him to leave none of his affairs in order, no arrangements for his mother’s care, it’s weird. But I visit his lawyer, the memorably named Boozer Downs, and he confirms it.

BOOZER DOWNS: He didn’t do anything that would help the situation, really.

BRIAN REED: No will. John never finished it, he says.

BOOZER DOWNS: But that’d been going on for years, trying to get stuff in order. And he just wouldn’t. Just wouldn’t. We talked about it, but he never would do anything.

BRIAN REED: Boozer says John discussed suicide with him too, and besides discouraging him from doing it, he at least tried to get him to make proper arrangements. For instance, he suggested they find some nonprofit or other organization to take care of the property and the maze and the dogs.

BOOZER DOWNS: I said, we can find somebody. We can get a historic trust. There are lots of things. And he didn’t have any faith in that. He said, oh, those son-of-bitches will just go sell it. And nobody’s going to take care of it anyway. And I’ve spent too much money, and they’ll just sell it out. As smart and

as thoughtful as he was about so many things, why didn't he tell us what he really wanted?

BRIAN REED: At one point, I ask Boozer what we're actually talking about here when it comes to John's estate. What assets are there? And it's when we get to that that Boozer becomes kind of cryptic.

BOOZER DOWNS: That is one thing he asked me not to mention to people. He had an idea of what he wanted to do with his assets. And whether he really did it, I don't know.

BRIAN REED: So he told you he had plans for his assets that he wanted you to keep secret?

BOOZER DOWNS: Yes, yes, yes. But he didn't tell me where it was and how he was going to do this. He just told me the form it was going—what he was going to convert to, so.

BRIAN REED: Did he talk to you about being unbanked?

BOOZER DOWNS: Yes.

BRIAN REED: This is something John mentioned to me once or twice that I didn't pay much attention to at the time, but now that he's dead, suddenly feels significant. He said that he was unbanked. That, intriguingly, he kept his money in assets somewhere other than a traditional bank account. John, it's probably no surprise, was not a fan of financial institutions.

BRIAN REED: What happens in the case of someone being unbanked?

BOOZER DOWNS: I've never had that before, so I don't know. But I guess if you think somebody has some valuable asset they've hidden in the walls or in the mattress or something, you go looking.

BRIAN REED: It's literally a treasure hunt?

BOOZER DOWNS: I've never had that before. I would guess so. That's my best guess.

BRIAN REED: While I'm at Boozer's office, he invites someone over to meet me that he thinks I should talk to. Her name is Faye Gamble. She's Woodstock's town clerk. And in fact, Faye, not Tyler, was the last person to speak to John before he committed suicide. She and I go back to her office at Town Hall just down the road from Boozer's.

It's a small building with the mayor's office in it and the Woodstock police station, and a common room that retirees play cards in the mornings, some game called Skip-Bo. But on one Tuesday a month, it becomes the municipal courtroom. Faye tells me she met John when she first started as clerk 10 years ago. He'd been friends with the woman who'd been town clerk before her, and once Faye took over, he came into her office one day and introduced himself.

FAYE GAMBLE: It was funny how he introduced himself, because his introduction was, I guess you know who I am. And I said, no sir. And he said, oh, I'm John B. McLemore. And from that day on, I've always known him as John B.

BRIAN REED: John would swing by Town Hall and shoot the breeze with Faye. They'd compare how their plum trees were doing. He'd chat about Socrates and Kant with the town building inspector. Faye had visited John's maze and admired his flowers. But John would also complain, Faye says, about the way the town was run, the economy, the state of the area. He used Town Hall the same way he used Tyler's tattoo parlor.

Faye says she and the building inspector tried to get John to put his intellect to productive use, to pick a project that would help the town, and work on it. The inspector even gave him his first computer, an old one they had lying around, to encourage him to do research about local environmental issues for them. But that never ended up happening. And in the meantime, John had started calling Faye, talking about suicide. Once in the last year, he even called her at night sounding as if he was about to go through with it. She'd always been able to talk him down until last week.

FAYE GAMBLE: I was eating dinner after a funeral visitation. And he called me on the phone and told me—do you want this?

BRIAN REED: Are you comfortable talking about it?

FAYE GAMBLE: Yes.

My phone rang at 9:15, and it was all again just like he always answered. He wanted to know if it was Faye Gamble, and I told him yes. And he said, this is John B. McLemore, which I knew who it was. And he said, I just want you to listen to me. I'm going to commit suicide tonight, and I just want you—do not call the police, because if you do, I will shoot them. He was very hyped up. And I was just saying John, John, please just listen to me. Listen to me. And he was like, this is not going to work tonight. You're not going to talk me out of this. You just listen to me.

BRIAN REED: John gave Faye instructions. He told her to euthanize his dogs. He told her where to find an envelope with cash to pay for that.

FAYE GAMBLE: And he was telling me about what he was going to do it with. And he was telling me step by step about... he was actually mixing something, getting something out of the refrigerator, and he was going to drink this.

And he told me what it was, the potassium cyanide, and that it would be quick. So I listened and I said, John, you do not want to do this. And he says, I'm doing it right now. I am getting it out of the refrigerator. And then he started drinking the mixture. And then he was screaming at me, telling me how it burned, and how he hurt, how horrible it was, the pain. And then I heard the screen door, and then it just went totally silent, except for dogs barking.

BRIAN REED: Faye, I had no idea that that's how it happened. That's horrible.

FAYE GAMBLE: Every night it's a replay. I'm still just—there's not a night that I don't think about him, that I don't wake up and dreaming about it, or thinking about him. Not a night.

BRIAN REED: Faye tells me she understands that to someone hearing about this, it could sound like what John did to her was cruel, like he must have been angry at her to submit her to such a terrifying, traumatic phone call. But she said it wasn't like that. She didn't get the feeling that he was taking something out on her. Faye doesn't know why John chose to contact her.

Maybe he just wanted to talk to someone he trusted. Maybe he thought she could handle it. She says he did give her other instructions besides to euthanize the dogs, but she's vague with me about what some of them were. She says he told her where to find quote,

“certain things,” unquote, that, quote, “He wanted me to know where certain things were.”

What those certain things are she leaves to the imagination. Faye says John also told her that a bunch of Tyler’s belongings would be in the workshop. And while Faye says John didn’t mention anything that night about a will or leaving assets to Tyler and his brother, she says he had told her previously that he wanted to do that, just like he told me.

Right after the funeral, there’s a luncheon at the house of someone who works at the local bank. But Tyler and the rest of the Goodsons don’t feel welcome there, so they go to Tyler’s grandmother’s place instead. This is their family headquarters. Pretty much all day and into the night, you can go to Granny’s and expect to find some combination of Tyler’s family hanging out around the little concrete table under the tree in back, which is where they are now, having their own post-funeral gathering.

People wander in and out, seeming a little out of it, saying the things you say in a day like this. Things like, “this all feels like a bad dream,” and “I keep thinking I can just pick up the phone and call him.” The gathering includes Tyler’s uncle Jimmy, his mom’s brother, who, one methed-up night in 1993, was beating on the door of somebody’s trailer and got shot in the head as a result. And because it was too risky to take the bullet out, it’s still lodged in his brain 22 years later. Anyway, it affects the way Jimmy communicates. He understands what’s going on around him.

JIMMY HICKS: Death. Death. Oh, death.

BRIAN REED: But his vocabulary is limited. So as Tyler tells me how hurt he is that the cousins stopped him from talking to John’s mother after the service, Jimmy kind of just chimes in affirmatively in the background.

TYLER GOODSON: I don’t know what folks think of me when they look at me, but they don’t have a fucking clue.

JIMMY HICKSON: Yes, huh.

TYLER GOODSON: They look at me, tattoos and scruffy face, I guess. I don’t know, they just judge. I mean, I’m sitting out there at that funeral thinking, none of these folks even knows me, really. And they have no idea that I paid for the fucking tip on that old woman’s cane out there.

JIMMY HICKS: Yes, huh.

TYLER GOODSON: You know what I mean? Simple shit like that, it don't mean a hill of beans, but it's just, none of them have a clue what I might mean to that little old woman.

JIMMY HICKS: No. Money, money.

TYLER GOODSON: Yeah, that's all they care about.

JIMMY HICKS: Goddamn right. Money!

BRIAN REED: Maybe Tyler's naive to think that he could add an 88-year-old woman with dementia to the roster of people he's responsible for taking care of. But it's sort of sweet that he wants to. It would be nice if at least he could stay involved in her life and keep some connection to John's life. Maybe take care of his dogs, maintain the maze, take part in his funeral. He didn't get to speak at John's service. I asked him if he had words in mind that he wished he could have shared in remembrance of his friend.

BRIAN REED: Is there something you would have wanted to say? You can say it now. What would you have wanted to say there?

TYLER GOODSON: Well, John B., I mean, he had to know that I cared about his ass. You know, because I mean, whenever I left from there, he'd say, "I love you, man," every time. And I said, "I love you too, John B." And sometimes he'd say, "just because I say I love you don't mean I'm trying to get up your butt or nothin.'" I said, "I know, John B. God damn." Because he knew. I mean, he might have had a little sugar in his tank. But he knew, he didn't ever try anything with me like that, you know what I mean?

BRIAN REED: That's what you would have said?

TYLER GOODSON: Yeah.

BRIAN REED: When John introduced himself to me via email, he began, quote, "Me, I am 47, unmarried, sort of, ahem, like ahem—let's just say I might be a fan of David Sedaris, or in other words, I might know who Audre Lorde and Ann Bannon is, if you get the idea. Of course, that could get you killed around here." I took that to mean John was gay, though when we talked about it after, he told me that he'd gone both ways in his life.

And whenever it came up, he never called himself just gay. It was always semi-homosexual or a semi-practicing homosexual, or celibate homosexual.

I haven't been sure if other people around here knew this about John, if Tyler knew. But apparently he does, and he's fine with it. Which is not nothing in Bibb County, where at this same moment in the summer of 2015, it is one of the handful of places in the country defying the Supreme Court decision declaring same-sex marriage a constitutional right by refusing to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. "I ain't got a queer bone in my body," Tyler says he used to tell John. "But if you do, that's your business." I can imagine John appreciated that about Tyler.

Tyler will be the one who makes John's tombstone. It'll be a couple of months before he does it. But as time goes on, no one else will get John one. John loved old cemeteries and gravestones, and it'll start nagging at Tyler that John's in the ground, decomposing into worm dirt, without so much as a marker. Tyler won't have any money for it, so he'll find an old piece of gray concrete—actually a leg off one of the benches at the table in back of his granny's house—and he'll paint it a rich brown so that it looks like a carved piece of oak, or cherry, almost.

The cement is curvy, with a design in it like two base clefs. The whole thing once it's painted will look like the flourish on a fancy pillar. When he's finished it, Tyler will haul the heavy stone into the cemetery and place it at the head of John's grave. It's shorter and squatter than most tombstones, and will look like nothing else in the whole cemetery.

On top of the stone, Tyler will inlay a pretty piece of stained wood into which he's burned John B. McLemore, 1966 to 2015, with his favorite photo of John sealed into it with polyurethane. A picture of John leaning back in a chair, outside, feet up on a table, shirt off, his chest of tattoos and nipple piercings in its full glory. It's a version of John that was hidden from the everyday world, a version that most of the people at his funeral surely did not know. But Tyler did.

BRIAN REED: What's the name of the book that you brought to his funeral?

TYLER GOODSON: *Just Only John*. I got it in there. I read it to the girls last night. And it was everything I could do to finish it. And I gave the girls a hug and tried to get out the room as fast as I could, because I just fucking crying my eyes out over that damn book. But It's just a kid book, and it's a kid, he wanted to

be a fucking dog or a tiger or something like that. And some witch put a spell on him, and if said he was this, he would be that.

But he wouldn't know how to act being that. So everything he wanted to be, he's just John. And yeah, it just broke me up trying to read it to them. And the babies knows it's his book. And they'll talk and tell me all the time, "I know you miss John, Daddy, and we miss him too. And we're not going to color in John's books, Daddy." And stuff like that. I miss that old fucker.

BRIAN REED: John once said to me, "Tyler embodies everything I hate about this shittown in one convenient package." What he meant was that Tyler was the product of everything he hated, of violence, abuse, injustice, hopelessness, and John was trying to counteract all that by helping Tyler. As Tyler and I are talking after John's funeral, he tells me—and Uncle Jimmy confirms—that he and John had recently reached a kind of understanding, where he wasn't going to charge him anymore for general upkeep of John's property, cutting the grass, pruning the maze.

TYLER GOODSON: Because it's kind of like my responsibility, like it was going to be mine one day or something.

JIMMY HICKS: Yeah.

TYLER GOODSON: He told us he won't leave us a no bunch of damn cash, because he said we wouldn't appreciate it. So he's going to leave us gold and shit like that and the property. He's got 140 acres out there.

JIMMY HICKS: Beaucoups and beaucoups of stuff. Beaucoups and beaucoups of stuff.

BRIAN REED: Tyler tells me there's no way he's giving into the cousins so easily. He's already begun fighting back. He's been going over to John's place, retrieving things he doesn't think John would have wanted his cousins to have. Stuff that, as Tyler puts it, didn't need to get into the wrong hands. The police have threatened him with trespassing, but he hasn't let that stop him.

The cousin put a padlock on the front door, but what they don't know, he says, is that he also has keys to the back. He says he took John's laptop, and then he gathered up every stitch of paperwork he could find in the entire house, down to birth certificates and deeds,

and John's grandfather's old railroad stock papers. He also took John's two vehicles. Right now, Tyler's holding it all here at his grandmother's house to protect it from the cousins. He's also meeting with a lawyer. He's going to try and fight the cousins the official way, through the courts. But if that doesn't work, he'll take matters into his own hands.

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

S-Town is produced by Julie Snyder and me, with editing from Ira Glass, Sarah Koenig, and Neil Drumming. Whitney Dangerfield is our digital editor. Starlee Kine is a story consultant. Fact-checking and research by Ben Phelan. Seth Lind is our director of operations, Lyra Smith mixes the show, and Matt Tierney is our technical director. The *S-Town* staff includes Emily Condon, Elise Bergerson, Julie Whitaker, and Kimberly Henderson. Music for the show is composed by Daniel Hart, Helado Negro, Trey Pollard, and Matt McGinley. Music supervision by Damien Graef. Our website is stownpodcast.org. I love our website.

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