

April 2025 Issue

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IDEAS

# TURTLEBOY WILL NOT BE STOPPED

A profane blogger believes an innocent woman is being framed for murder. He'll do anything to prove he's right—and terrorize anyone who says he's wrong.

By Chris Heath

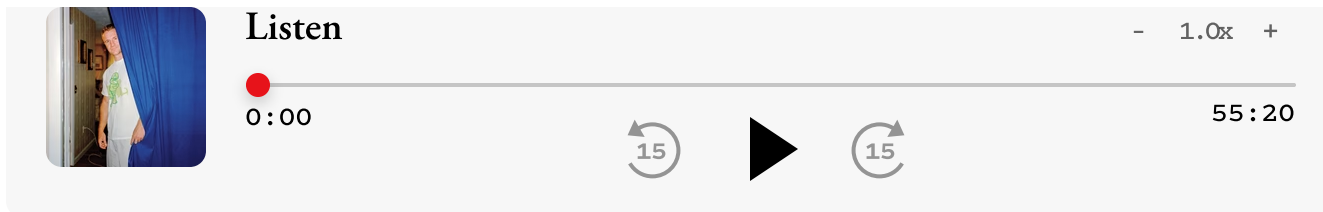
Photographs by Lila Barth



MARCH 10, 2025, 8 AM ET

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**O**N OVERPASSES and by roadsides they gather, holding banners and placards. In the early days, only a few people showed up, congregating at chosen times and scattered locations around Boston. But their cause has grown and their numbers have swelled. For Labor Day 2024, plans were made for “standouts,” as the organizers called them, in more than 70 places—all over Massachusetts, yes, but also in Ohio, Kansas, Florida, California, and elsewhere.

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These assemblies are the most visible manifestation of what is usually referred to as the Free Karen Read movement. If in the fullness of time it will seem strange that such unity and passion should have been mustered in defense of a 45-year-old Massachusetts financial analyst and adjunct college professor accused of killing her police-officer boyfriend by backing into him with her car ... well, not to these people gathered today. Young and old, and nearly always dressed in something pink, they joyfully express their shared belief to passing motorists through slogan: most often just FREE KAREN READ, though sometimes the signs convey more grandiose sentiments—LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL, STOP THE CORRUPTION, INJUSTICE THRIVES IN SILENCE. And some are impenetrable to anyone not already following the case’s legal intricacies and surrounding hoopla: BUTT-DIALS GALORE, COLIN WAS IN THE HOUSE, WHERE’S CHLOE?

In most assessments, a large part of the credit for how all of this has come to be—or, according to the haters and detractors (and there are plenty), the blame for it—belongs to a man named Aidan Kearney. I met Kearney early one May morning last year outside the Norfolk County Superior Court in Dedham, just southwest of Boston, a month into Read’s trial for, among other things, second-degree murder. It was raining, so we sought shelter on the steps of the Registry of Deeds, across the road. A gaggle of Free Karen Read protesters were already beginning to congregate a block or so away, though they were required to keep themselves outside a judge-ordained 200-foot buffer zone. Because of the pink dress code among FKR supporters, the effect is as if, at a seemingly random point on a Dedham street, a color filter kicks in.



Aidan Kearney poses with Turtleboy fans outside the courthouse. (Jessica Rinaldi / *The Boston Globe* / Getty)

Kearney isn't one for small talk, and he was soon in full flow. "It's so obvious that she's innocent," he told me. "The critics will say 'Oh, he's like a cult leader—he's brainwashing these people.' I assure you, I am not that charming. These are educated people that are getting into this story because they're not stupid. And they look at all the facts of this case, and they're like, 'It's undeniable that this is a cover-up.'" He gestured toward the gradually swelling cohort in the distance. "These people are out here every day. Rain or shine, it doesn't matter."

As we spoke, a woman standing nearby interjected.

“Sorry, I’m not eavesdropping, but I’m eavesdropping,” she said, then asked us: “So are you with them?”

“I’m the leader,” Kearney said evenly.

“You’re the leader?” she said.

“Yeah,” he replied. “I’m Turtleboy.”

**O**N THE MORNING of January 29, 2022, not long after 6 a.m., the body of a 46-year-old man was found in the snow outside a house in the Boston suburb of Canton. His name was John O’Keefe, and he was an officer with the Boston Police Department. Three days later, an explanation was offered for how he had come to die there. It was reported that O’Keefe had been drinking early the night before with his girlfriend, Karen Read, and that, not long after midnight, she had driven him to a gathering at the home of another police officer, Brian Albert. Read said she’d dropped O’Keefe off in front of the house and driven away. But prosecutors were now implying that she had backed into him with her car. To Kearney, reading the news reports at the time, the story seemed clear enough. “I remember I was like, *That’s sad for her,*” he said. “And him. Because it was framed in the media as an accident—this horrible accident.”

Kearney is from Worcester, about an hour’s drive from Canton, and for the first 11 years of his adult life, he was a history teacher; he still rhapsodizes about how much he liked teaching lessons on World War II and the civil-rights movement. Eventually he would marry

## RECOMMENDED READING



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another teacher, and have two children.

But he also became a kind of citizen-blogger, in the beginning mostly concentrating on Boston sports and matters around Worcester, at AidanFromWorcester.com. He wasn't afraid to rub people the wrong way, specializing in calling out perceived hypocrisies, and gleefully relishing any chance to cut against political correctness.



### The Tragic Success of Global Putinism

MICHAEL MCFAUL



### The FAA's Troubles Are More Serious Than You Know

ISAAC STANLEY-BECKER



As his audience and his reputation grew, these two roles, teacher and internet provocateur, proved incompatible. In an attempt to make his blogging anonymous, he adopted the name Turtleboy, but when the secret didn't hold, his choice was made: He would be a full-time blogger.

As Turtleboy, Kearney made enemies aplenty, but he also gathered a lot of followers who liked what he was saying and doing, and the unfiltered way in which he did it. Before too long, he was making a healthy living via digital advertising and merchandise sales, as well as donations and subscriptions. When he first read about Read and the death of O'Keefe in early 2022, he sized up its possibilities as a story. Kearney is instinctively pro-police—"I'm a 'Back the blue' guy"—and the death of a police officer seemed like a subject with Turtleboy potential. "But I didn't write about it, because I'm like, *Well, I don't really have a strong opinion on this,*" he recalls. "It's like: *What a tragedy. This guy gets killed. I couldn't imagine living with the guilt of accidentally running your boyfriend over and then not knowing it.* And then I totally forgot about the story."

In the summer of 2022, while Kearney wasn't paying attention, the charges against Read were upgraded from manslaughter to second-degree murder. Evidence had emerged suggesting that the couple's relationship had been fraught, and that Read and O'Keefe had been arguing; Read was now accused of knowingly hitting O'Keefe, with an intent to kill him. Kearney still didn't take notice in April 2023, when the defense filing laid out a detailed counternarrative, arguing that Read was being framed, and that O'Keefe had actually been murdered by those in the house he was visiting.

By that point, the story had more or less vanished from public consciousness: I couldn't find a single mainstream-media mention of Read and O'Keefe in the six months leading up to the April 2023 filing. Even these new defense assertions generated only a smattering of stories in Massachusetts newspapers.

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“Karen Read is a completely innocent woman, wrongly charged by corrupt cops who would see her rot in prison in order to cover up a murder of a fellow officer.”

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That week, Kearney was preoccupied with what, back then, was fairly typical Turtleboy fare. He'd faced down what he called “An Antifa Child Drag Queen Mob”; he'd interposed himself in a dispute involving parents who had claimed that their child was facing racist abuse at a cheer gym; he'd set up the latest installment of his



annual Turtleboy Ratchet Madness competition, in which his followers would vote, round by round, to name the worst of the “ratchets”—hypocrites, spongers, and other miscreants—his blog had identified in the previous year; and he had documented, or intervened in, sundry other disputes, while also describing how he had been swatted twice that week, with the police arriving at his home to follow up on bogus reports from Turtleboy haters that Kearney was suicidal.

That was what Kearney’s life was like. More than two years earlier, after some personal turbulence had prompted him to reassess his approach, he’d announced a wish to change gears. “I still love the ratchet stuff and always will,” he’d said. “But at the end of the day I’m more interested in exposing people who actually matter, rather than going the Jerry Springer route ... I don’t want [my kids] to grow up and think their father pays the bills by writing a vulgar, smut-filled blog. I feel like it’s possible to make the same points I’ve always made while avoiding usage of *jizz donkeys* and *spunk guzzlers*. Plus, my favorite stories are the ones that expose corrupt systems in power.” He had gone on to write some stories in that genre, but so far the adjustment appeared to have been modest. Now another chance presented itself.

At lunchtime on April 17, 2023, a retired police officer named Brian Johnson sent Kearney the following message on Facebook:

Hi, not sure if you're following the case of Boston police officer, John O'Keefe death but here is a recent motion. John was a great guy. Started his career in Duxbury. His sister passed away and he adopted his niece and nephew. My sources tell me that Brian Albert, a Boston police K9 officer, is a loose cannon. His dog mysteriously disappeared and he's since sold his house. It looks to me like the girlfriend was set up. Something's not right.

Johnson attached a PDF of the defense motion, then followed up with: "Oops, I left out that John was found with bite marks."

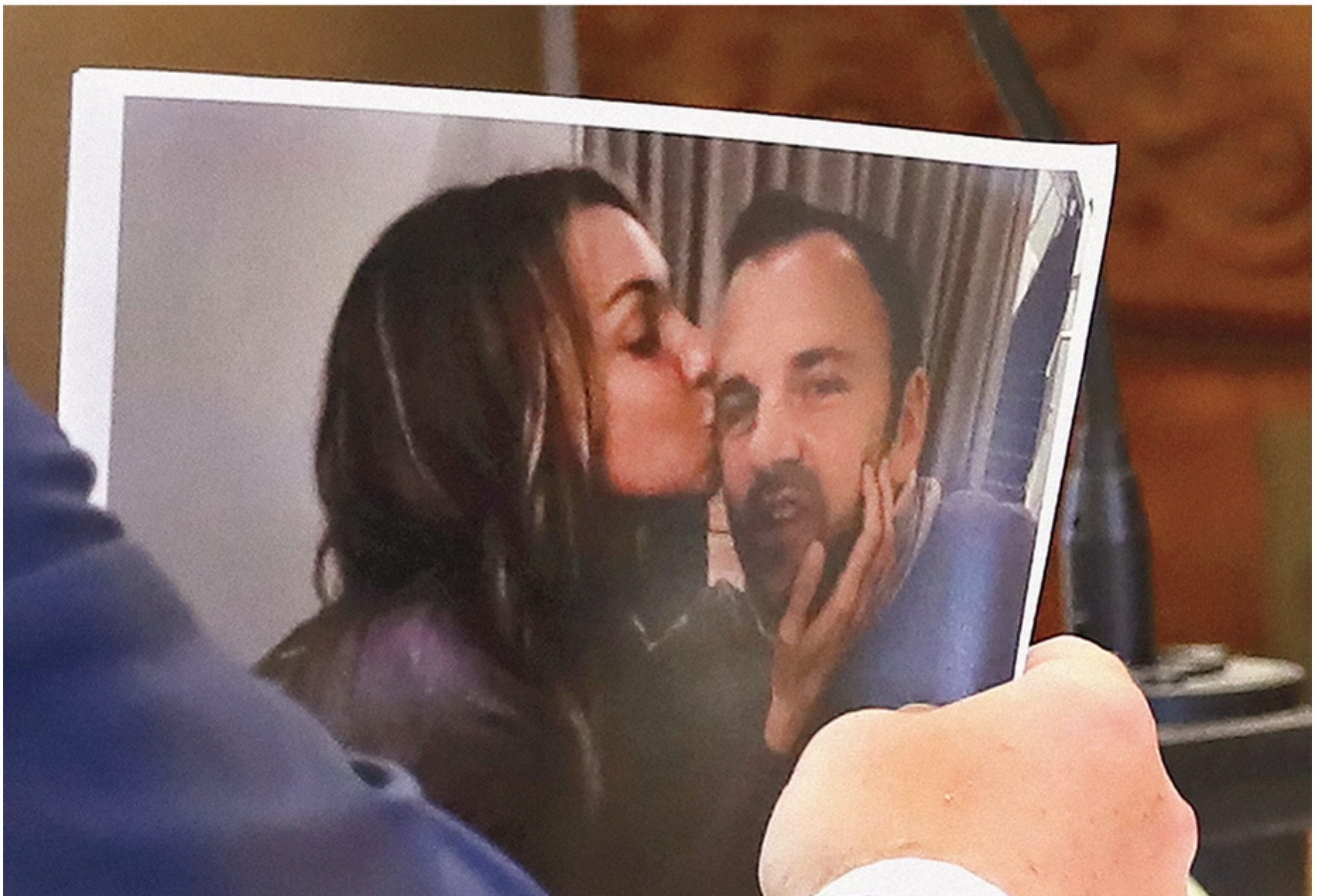
Kearney says that his reaction to reading the defense filing was: "Holy shit, this is story-of-the-century stuff." Early that evening, as he worked on an article about the Read case for the Turtleboy blog, he posted on social media, as a preview, the first words he would write about it:

I am currently working on perhaps the craziest story I've ever written, involving a Boston cop possibly being involved in murdering another cop, followed by an elaborate coverup designed to frame the murdered cop's girlfriend ... My jaw is currently on the floor.

He tweeted that he hoped to have the story out that night.

A follower immediately contacted him. She explained that she'd been in touch with a confidant of Read's named Natalie Berschneider Wiweke, and she connected them via Facebook. Throughout the evening, as Kearney continued to write, he bombarded Wiweke with questions and requests, and Wiweke, who seemed supremely well informed on the minutiae of the case, provided him with material.

A few hours later, Kearney published his post, several thousand words long: "Canton Cover-Up Part 1: Corrupt State Trooper Helps Boston Cop Coverup Murder of Fellow Officer, Frame Innocent Girlfriend." (Two of the many ways that Kearney's work practices deviate from conventional journalism are his speed to certainty, and his full-throated advocacy.) From this first outpouring, he was all in: "Karen Read is a completely innocent woman, wrongly charged by corrupt cops who would see her rot in prison in order to cover up a murder of a fellow officer."



*Top:* Karen Read listens to testimony during her murder trial, May 13, 2024. *Bottom:* A photo of Read and the man she is accused of killing, the Boston police officer John O'Keefe, which the defense presented at

trial. (Pat Greenhouse / *The Boston Globe* / Getty; John Tlumacki / *The Boston Globe* / Getty)

Going forward, there would now be two completely different and competing versions of Read's story. The narrative conveyed in the prosecution's public filings ran along these lines: After an evening of heavy drinking, Read set off in her car with O'Keefe, whom she had been dating for about two years, heading for an after-party. They were texted the address of their destination, 34 Fairview Road, by a woman named Jennifer McCabe, whose brother-in-law Brian Albert, a Boston police officer, lived there. Sometime after midnight, McCabe saw what she believed to be Read's Lexus pull up outside the house, then, sometime later, pull away. Just before five in the morning, McCabe received a call from Read, distraught and hysterical, saying she was looking for O'Keefe. Read and McCabe soon met up at McCabe's house, and headed out to search for O'Keefe. Along the way, Read asked McCabe, "Could I have hit him?" and mentioned that her car had a cracked taillight. Approaching 34 Fairview Road, Read spotted a body even though McCabe couldn't immediately see it in the snow. She screamed and ran over, then began CPR; she also twice yelled at McCabe to Google *How long do you have to be left outside to die of hypothermia?* (Searches to this effect were found on McCabe's phone.) One of the firefighters who responded to the emergency call spoke with Read at the scene and reported her saying, "I hit him, I hit him, I hit him." O'Keefe's autopsy determined that his death had been caused by a combination of blunt-force trauma to the head and hypothermia. Pieces of broken taillight subsequently found at the scene matched the missing pieces from Read's Lexus.

O’Keefe’s teenage niece, who lived at O’Keefe’s home, where Read often slept over, reported overhearing O’Keefe tell Read a week earlier that their relationship was unhealthy and had run its course. Text messages between the couple that week further documented this strain. After Read left 34 Fairview Road that night, she had called and texted O’Keefe multiple times. In one voice message, she screamed that she hated him.

The prosecution’s implied narrative was clear: After an argument outside 34 Fairview Road, Read had drunkenly reversed her Lexus into O’Keefe, who had been sufficiently incapacitated that he didn’t move, and subsequently died of hypothermia. Her actions in the hours that followed were a combination of self-incrimination (“I hit him”) and cover-up.

Diving deep into the defense’s recent filing, complemented by his own supplementary research, Kearney laid out a very different narrative. He poured scorn upon the notion that O’Keefe’s stated injuries—“six bloodied lacerations varying in length on O’Keefe’s right arm ... from his forearm to his bicep”; “cut to the right eyelid of the victim”; “two swollen black eyes”; “cut to left side of nose”; “approximately two inch laceration to the back of the head”; “multiple skull fractures”—were consistent with the impact from a reversing car. He also focused on what would become a talisman for those convinced of Read’s innocence: According to the defense expert called to do a forensic analysis of McCabe’s phone, McCabe had initially Googled the phrase *hos [sic] long to die in cold* at 2:27 a.m., several hours *before* she and Read returned to 34 Fairview and discovered O’Keefe’s body, and then had taken steps to delete this and other incriminating information from her phone. If true, this seemed impossible to square with the prosecution’s version of what had happened.

Presented as similarly complicating for the prosecution's narrative was O'Keefe's iPhone data from that night. According to the defense, the Apple Health app showed O'Keefe in the vicinity of 34 Fairview Road between 12:21 and 12:24, taking 80 steps and climbing the equivalent of three floors. (The Albert residence has three floors.) Between 12:31 and 12:32, O'Keefe apparently took 36 more steps. This also fits poorly with the notion that he was hit by Read's car and never entered the house.

Kearney, drawing on the defense's assertions, proposed an alternative version of events: Read had dropped O'Keefe off at 34 Fairview Road, then watched him enter the house from her car; when he didn't answer her calls once inside, she left. By Kearney's reckoning, there were 11 people already in the house. One of them was Brian Albert's then-18-year-old nephew, Colin—a “notorious hothead” and “out of control meathead,” according to Kearney; Colin had appeared on social media after O'Keefe's death with visible abrasions on his knuckles. Kearney suggested that soon after entering the house, O'Keefe got into a physical confrontation with Colin Albert, and that his uncle Brian, a trained mixed-martial-arts fighter, joined in. The altercation riled up the family's German shepherd, Chloe, who in Kearney's telling caused the injuries to O'Keefe's arm. (The implication, which Kearney hadn't yet spelled out, was that a fatally injured O'Keefe was then dumped outside on the lawn.)

All 11 people in the house, Kearney argued, must have either witnessed or been aware of the murder of John O’Keefe. It was McCabe, Kearney asserted, who suggested to Read that she might have hit O’Keefe, and falsely suggested that Read appeared to spot O’Keefe’s body before she could have realistically seen it. Echoing the defense’s case, Kearney argued that McCabe connivingly repeated the *hos long to die in cold* search on her phone so that she could pretend that this had been at Read’s request in the moment, all in an attempt to disguise the fact that McCabe herself had made that same search hours earlier, before Read even knew that O’Keefe’s body was lying in the snow.

Kearney also detailed the preexisting relationship between the lead investigator on the case, Michael Proctor, and the McCabe and Albert families; the defense’s evidence that the initial crime report was changed; and the fact that crucial pieces of taillight were recovered from the crime scene not on the morning of O’Keefe’s death but much later, after Read’s car was in police possession. He argued that the taillight was actually broken in an incident captured on O’Keefe’s Ring camera when Read, heading out to search for him in the morning, clipped O’Keefe’s car as she backed out. Kearney also noted that the Alberts had gotten rid of their dog, Chloe, four months after O’Keefe’s death and had then sold the house—“yet additional evidence of consciousness of guilt,” in the words of the defense. At the end of his article, Kearney recommended that “Trooper Proctor, Brian Albert, Colin Albert, and Jennifer McCabe should all spend [a] significant amount of time in jail, and two of them should be charged with murder.”



Those Kearney implicated would later dispute almost everything he suggested. During the trial, both Colin and Brian would deny that O’Keefe had ever entered the house that night or that they fought him. Brian Albert would testify that getting rid of Chloe and selling his home had nothing to do with O’Keefe’s death. Jennifer McCabe would deny deleting any calls or searches on her phone and any involvement in a cover-up, and would tell the court that she “never would have left John O’Keefe out in the cold to die.” For his part, Michael Proctor admitted to having a personal relationship with Brian Albert’s brother and his wife, but he denied that this influenced the investigation in any way.

Still, plenty of people found Kearney’s narrative compelling. “I published it,” Kearney told me, “and it, like, broke the website. I had to upgrade my servers.” His YouTube broadcast the next evening, in which he again went through this material, drew far more viewers than ever before. He had titled the initial article “Part 1” because he realized that this was one of those stories that might require more than a single dive; occasionally in the past, his blog had returned to an interesting story four or five times. But this story just kept going: As of this writing, his series about Read has nearly 500 installments, complemented by hundreds of lengthy YouTube broadcasts. “I rarely have time for anything else now,” he told me when we first met. “Every day, I’d wake up and I wouldn’t know what I was going to write about. Now I do. I’m going to write about Karen Read.”

As Kearney's audience grew, he relentlessly seeded the idea that a great injustice was taking place, and Read was its victim. Kearney is not shy about taking credit for the effect he's had. During Read's trial, he would declare, "You never would have heard of this trial without me."

Kearney's detractors—there were many even before he started writing about Read, and they have grown in number and fervor since—point out that he was not the first person to write about the story, suggesting that he is taking credit for causing something when all he did was sail in its slipstream. Maybe. But there's a solid argument that the whole public discourse around the trial—not just the heightened interest in it but the galvanizing of a small movement of people committed to defending Read against what they believed was an imminent injustice—was catalyzed mainly by his interventions.

**K**EARNEY LIKES TO SAY that he is three things at once—a journalist, an activist, and an entertainer. Here are two particularly vivid examples of his rather unorthodox approach to covering the Read case.

First: On June 5, 2023, he turned up unannounced in the bleachers at a high-school lacrosse game where Jennifer McCabe and her family were watching their daughter play. "Why did you Google *How long to die in cold*, Jen?" Kearney asked, as he filmed everything. "I'm just curious." McCabe sat there, a pained smile on her face, head turned toward the game, as Kearney repeated this question seven times. Told that he was bothering people, he retorted: "Well, they killed a cop. She's a cop killer! These are cop killers! You know they're cop killers, right?" When I asked Kearney what he was thinking as he filmed this, he replied, "*This is great content. And also, I'm glad somebody's saying something to her.*"

Second: On July 22, 2023, he convened a “Rolling Rally,” in which he led a convoy of supporters on a tour of the Canton area, stopping at the crime scene, the police station, the courthouse, and the homes of those he claimed were implicated in John O’Keefe’s death, livestreaming all the while, and reciting the facts as he believed them through a bullhorn outside each property. Several dozen enthusiastic supporters can be seen on the video; Kearney has claimed that as many as 300 participated across the day. From the video footage, this Rolling Rally’s apparent atmosphere was less that of a vengeful mob than of a lively campaigners’ day out, though I imagine that distinction might seem moot to its targets. The first stop was the house Brian Albert had moved into after selling 34 Fairview Road. Standing outside, Kearney proclaimed through the bullhorn, “I do kind of feel bad for the neighbors. But, sorry, murderers moved in, so it’s unfortunate.”

Putting aside questions about the legality of these actions, it’s times like these when Turtleboy’s certainty is most striking. Especially when you consider just how deeply horrible these actions would be if he’s wrong.

The first time I met Kearney, we had the following conversation:

*You’d agree that if Karen Read didn’t do this, then this is a horrendous thing that she’s been put through.*

“Yeah. Definitely. Yeah, I mean, it goes without saying.”

*But conversely, do you agree that if the people you're pointing your finger at didn't do it, then they're being put through a pretty horrendous experience?*

“Yeah, but there's no way they didn't do it. If there was any way possible that he was not killed inside 34 Fairview Road, I would not be taking the position I am. If I thought there was a 1 percent chance that he was not killed inside that house, I would not be taking the position I am. I'm 100 percent that he was killed inside that house.”

*But to say that there's a zero percent chance of the state's narrative being true, or some version of it being true, is a pretty hard-core determination.*

“I think it's the most logical determination.”

*What if it isn't?*

“I can't answer that question, because it's impossible for it not to be true. If I say, ‘Well, then I'd feel bad,’ then it makes the reader believe that I think this is a possibility. I don't. I've never been so sure of anything in my whole life. I would literally bet everything I've ever owned on the fact that he was inside that house and beaten up.”

**K**EARNEY SEEMS TO HAVE a traditional reporter's dogged obsessiveness in search of evidence, sources, and telling details. But from the start, he has also frequently seemed to have the best information on the Read case, particularly about details that strengthened the defense's argument.

In the second half of 2023, as the case drew more coverage and as Kearney's role in both popularizing it and turning public opinion in Read's favor gained notice, he was sometimes asked whether he was colluding with Read or her defense team. He would deny any direct dealings with Read. That denial was, Kearney now acknowledges, a lie. Not long after he was connected via Facebook to Read's friend Natalie Berschneider Wiweke, in April 2023, he became aware that his source was more than simply well informed: She was channeling messages from Read—in fact, Kearney said Wiweke was “nothing but a copy-and-paste for Karen.” A few weeks after his first article, Kearney and Read began to communicate directly. Just how often they did so was revealed when Read's phone was seized by state police in January 2024. Over seven and a half months, from May 7 to December 21, 2023, 189 calls, cumulatively lasting more than 40 hours, were logged between Kearney and Read. Beyond that were all the text messages and some calls they had exchanged on Signal.

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It is a peculiar irony that while Read has thus far spent only a single night in jail, Kearney, the loudest

supporter of the Free Karen Read movement, has served 60 days behind bars during the unfolding of the case.

“Yeah, I denied it,” Kearney told me. “Because I didn’t have her permission. She was an anonymous source.” He sees nothing to apologize for. “I’m a journalist writing a story,” he argued. “This is the subject of the story. She’s allowed to talk to me.” What this was, he maintained, was just him doing his job well. “I had the best source of information. She could give me information that no other journalist could get ahold of. And none of it was illegal.”

Yet even if everything Kearney has done is legal, many of his critics have suggested that he’s either knowingly or unknowingly being exploited by a murderer to sway public opinion and bolster her defense—that, as Kearney put it, “the dastardly Karen Read was like the grand puppet master of this whole thing.” Or maybe even, in a more nuanced way, that Read had managed to find a patsy smart and motivated enough—but also credulous enough—to carry her water farther than she could have ever dreamed possible. All she’d needed to do was sketch out a plausible framework within which she might be innocent; with his unstoppable drive, Kearney had filled in the gaps.

Kearney dismisses all such possibilities. He is adamant that he has neither accepted anything Read has told him uncritically, nor allowed himself to be steered into writing what she wanted him to write. “If anyone can show any evidence that Karen Read has been dishonest with me or is somehow hiding something, I will blast her,” he told me. “I would just rip Karen to shreds. But she always brings evidence to back up everything she’s saying.” (Read and her attorneys did not respond to requests to comment for this story.)

When I first met him, Kearney brought up, unbidden, a related accusation. “This is the car they think Karen Read’s brother bought for me,” he said as we approached a 2023 Lexus RX 350, parked among the pink FKR battalion outside the courthouse. Read’s brother works for a Lexus dealership. Kearney said that his bank records were pulled to investigate, but that nothing was found, because there was nothing to find. (Kearney also tweeted a copy of his \$59,186.56 purchase contract.) The reality, he said, is more prosaic: “I am making more money than I used to. But I’m not being paid by Karen Read. I’m being paid by people like you’re seeing there”—he gestured at the pink-clad crowd—“that buy T-shirts and donate and buy subscriptions and everything like that. I’m doing something and I’m doing it well, and it’s paying off.”

**K**EARNEY COULDN’T HAVE IMAGINED all the repercussions this story would have for his own life. It is a peculiar irony that while Read has thus far spent only a single night in jail—on the night of her arrest, February 1, 2022, three

days after O’Keefe’s death—Kearney, the loudest supporter of the Free Karen Read movement, has served 60 days behind bars during the unfolding of the case.

Exactly how that happened—well, that takes a little explaining.

Toward the end of August 2023, the Norfolk County district attorney, Michael Morrissey, issued a lengthy video statement that appeared to be a direct response to Kearney’s activities. “The harassment of witnesses in the murder prosecution of Karen Read is absolutely baseless,” he said. “It should be an outrage to any decent person—and it needs to stop.”

Kearney, predictably, was far from impressed. He livestreamed a response from his car as he watched Morrissey’s video. “No, it doesn’t need to stop—it needs to accelerate, baby ... It’s not gonna stop; it’s gonna go a million times harder than it did before. Woo!” Before signing off, Kearney added: “You are my enemy, Michael Morrissey—just know that. I will not rest until you are completely destroyed.”

Only later did Kearney come to see Morrissey’s video in a somewhat different light. “That was my one and only warning to cut the shit or else I was going to jail,” he told me. “That video was for me.”

On the morning of Wednesday, October 11, 2023, Kearney had just seen his two children onto the school bus when he was arrested, brought to court in handcuffs,



and then released on bail. He would be charged with a list of crimes—most significantly, eight felony counts of witness intimidation, each carrying a potential 10-year sentence. (More charges were subsequently added.) Among the many episodes referred to in the charges were the lacrosse game and the Rolling Rally.

“It sounds very serious on paper,” Kearney told me. “But my attorney is just not the least bit worried.” In legal filings, his primary lawyer characterized Kearney’s work as “peaceful investigative journalism, satire, and political hyperbole.”

Kearney argued that these charges have been deliberately engineered to discredit him, “because my reporting has been so effective in galvanizing public support for Karen Read.” He elaborated: “The reason they charged me with witness intimidation isn’t to convict me. They know everything I’ve done is legal and free speech and protected. The reason is so that they can just point to me and say, ‘You believe that guy? He’s charged with 16 felonies. He’s a bad person.’”

The conventional legal advice, if you’ve been charged with something, is not to repeat or compound or talk about the alleged offenses, at least until the matter is resolved. This is not the Turtleboy way. Each time a new prosecution document has spelled out his supposedly criminal words and deeds, Kearney has gone through it on one of his live broadcasts, paragraph by paragraph, justifying everything. Partly this is business pragmatism—“I’m paid to talk, so I have to”—but he says it’s a matter of principle,

too. The way Kearney sees it, when he confronts those who were at Brian Albert's house that night, he is facing down those who abuse their power. "These people are all thugs and bullies and mean girls. And somebody, for once, is standing up to them."

Kearney's own case has been moving slowly through the courts; any resolution is not expected until later this year. This might quite reasonably leave one wondering how, then, Kearney has already spent 60 days in jail. The explanation requires a detour into Kearney's sometimes messy personal life. His current career sat poorly with his wife, Julie. "She married a teacher," he told me. Turtleboy "is not what she signed up for, and I get it." Kearney was reluctant to clarify too much, but various stories he's told about his life in recent years seem to involve relationships with other women. He has referred to "sneaking around, living this double life I shouldn't have been living."

Toward the end of 2023, Kearney was in a relationship with a woman named Lindsey Gaetani. Then they split up. The exact details of what took place between them are contested in court filings, and are also poisonously debated on social media to this day. (There is a fecund online ecosystem devoted to poring over Kearney's perceived evils—the "anti-Turtleboy industrial complex," he calls it. He says one of his lawyers told him, "I thought Alex Jones was the most hated client I ever had until I had you.")

What is undisputed is that, some weeks after their relationship had notionally ended, Kearney visited Gaetani's home. Each would offer a very different account of who

initiated this meeting, and of what took place during it. Kearney says that she asked him over to discuss a summons she had received relating to the Read case, and believes he has evidence that suggests she was deliberately colluding with the police to entrap him; Gaetani alleges that he assaulted her. Kearney strongly denies this. Problem is, if you are already on bail when you face an accusation like this, your bail may be revoked, and that's what happened.

On December 26, his 42nd birthday, Kearney was taken to Norfolk County Jail. Against his wishes, he was placed in isolation—"because of my high profile," he told me. Kearney has been on Adderall for nearing 20 years, and now he had to do without; that adjustment was difficult: "I couldn't stay awake during the day. And because of that, I couldn't sleep at night." He missed his son's first basketball game. He missed his daughter's cheer competitions. (He told his kids that he was away for work. "In a way, I was.")

But Kearney says prison was not so bad. He ran five or more miles a day, and he read: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which he hadn't liked in high school but did now; *The Happiest Man on Earth*, about a centenarian Holocaust survivor; then *1984*. He also began to build a relationship with a Read supporter named Meredith O'Neil, who'd sent him supportive messages. By the time he was released, they were a couple. Soon afterward, the assault-and-battery charge that had triggered his bail revocation was dropped. (It could still be refiled, but has not been as of this writing.)

“You put me in jail for 60 fucking days—big deal,” he declared on one of his broadcasts after he was released. “I lost 10 pounds ... I got close to my parents. I built new relationships. I met a much better girl. Like, life is so much better now. It’s, like, one of the best things that ever happened to me. All I do is win. I hope they know that. Putting me in jail turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me. So thank you, motherfucker.” And he raised two middle fingers.

That’s the face Kearney seems most comfortable presenting to the world. Still, his first night out of jail, when he went to bed on his wife’s couch for probably the final time (they have since divorced), and he couldn’t sleep, and he kept looking at his kids’ photos on the wall, and thinking about how he would never leave them again, he reconsidered everything. For the first time, he found himself wondering: Should he stop writing about Read? “Because look at what’s at risk right there,” he told me. “Like, I could lose them. Nothing’s worth that, you know? Should I just stop?”

**H**E DIDN’T STOP. The incessant episodes about the Canton “cover-up” and YouTube live broadcasts soon resumed. On Thursday evenings, Kearney does a private broadcast for members of his Turtle Club. (Cheapest membership level: \$15 a month.)

Being Turtleboy has been very profitable for Kearney. *Boston* magazine recently estimated that he earns \$45,000 to \$50,000 a month. He doesn’t explicitly dispute

this, but notes that he has operating expenses, as well as a quarter-million dollars in legal fees. To explain how *Boston* came up with those numbers, he told me the writer simply estimated a figure based on his roughly 2,000 paying subscribers. When I pointed out that he had other revenue streams too—his website advertising and a wide range of merchandise (you can get a Free Karen Read pet hoodie in a range of sizes and colors, and a pink Free Karen Read baby onesie), as well as potential movie and book deals—he said that he had no clear sense of what he was earning. “I’m not a money guy,” he said. “I’m a content guy.”

One evening last June, I joined Kearney as he prepared to deliver his Turtle Club broadcast from his girlfriend’s Boston apartment. Seconds before going live, he took his seat, slipped a Turtleboy cap on his head, and started streaming.

After more than an hour of monologuing, he started reading out what he calls Turtlechats: People send him money—typically \$5 to \$20, though sometimes more—and in return, Kearney reads out their questions or comments. There’s apparently an understood etiquette here, one best not to fall afoul of. Seeing one message, he said sternly to the camera: “You can’t send a dollar. If you send a dollar, I ain’t reading your shit. It’s insulting.”

In response, a message soon came through from someone named Ben taking exception to this, informing Kearney, “You lost me bro.” What happened next reflects

something fundamental about Kearney. Instead of brushing off Ben's message, Kearney escalated dramatically.

“Let me be very clear, Ben. I couldn't be happier to lose you. I hope you never come back and watch any of my shows again. I actually fucking hate you with every ounce of my being, and I'd be proud to have you unsubscribe to the channel.”

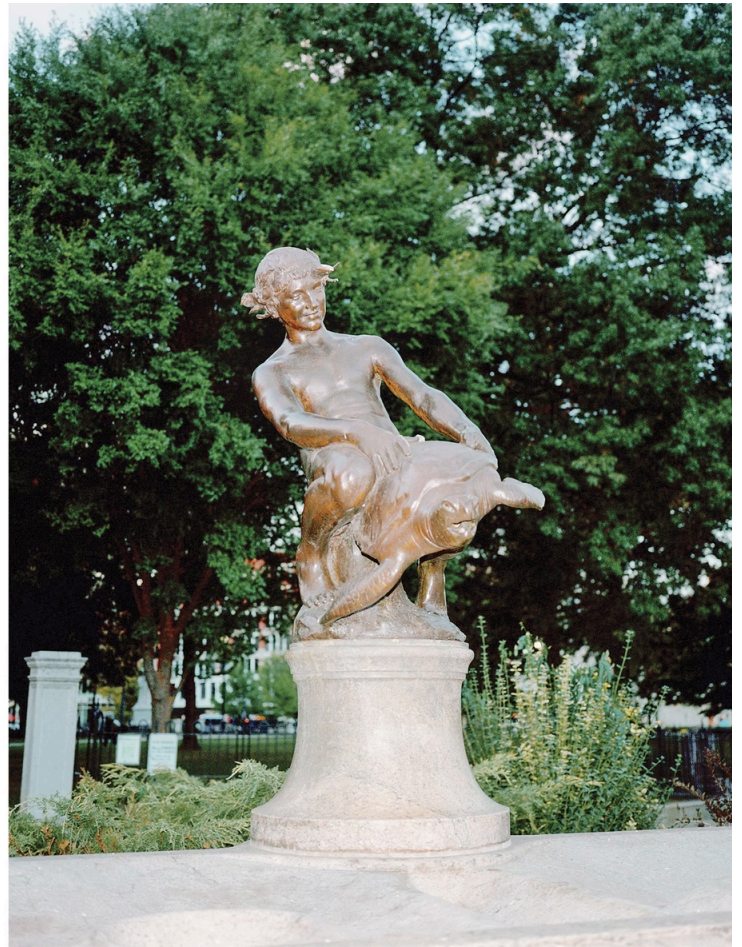
Kearney has brought the same hyper-incendiary instincts to his coverage of the trial. When I visited him last May, he had just been banned from YouTube for a week because of an online poll he'd posted asking his followers a question about the trial's most recent two witnesses: “Who is the bigger piece of shit?” He told me he is just using his platform to say out loud what regular people watching the trial stream are thinking. “It's guy-on-the-street talk,” he said, adding: “I'm rough around the edges, certainly. I have a potty mouth. My mother is always telling me to tone it down, and I'd like to. It's something I'm working on.” Perhaps not that hard, though. Here's a brief excerpt—not even the worst part—from his livestreamed commentary about the testimony of a witness named Julie Nagel:

This is a goddamn murder trial. There's an innocent woman whose life is on the line. And all these townie fucking whores can do is get up on the stand and lie their fucking asses off. I hope you burn in eternal hell because that's where you fucking belong, you stupid fat cow. You deserve to be fat and disgusting, because you disgust me.

But even as he's delivering crude, derogatory commentary like this, he's also providing cogent, detailed, and deeply knowledgeable analysis of the trial. This is a man who, on and off camera, can pivot in an instant from saying things like “townie fucking whores” to offering a deconstruction of subtle contradictions in testimony, or explaining how the last famous and controversial trial at the Norfolk courthouse was of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, the Italian anarchists convicted of murder and executed in the 1920s. “Sacco and Vanzetti didn't have Karen Read's lawyers,” he says.

As the prosecution presented its case at trial, Kearney appeared to grow even more confident that Read would be found not guilty. It was not hard to see things his way. Day after day, witnesses for the prosecution seemed to be brought to the stand less for purposes of showing how and why Read was responsible for O’Keefe’s death than to undermine the defense’s alternative theory that O’Keefe was killed inside 34 Fairview Road. I told Kearney that I assumed there must be some careful but as-yet-unveiled prosecutory plan at work, but Kearney was skeptical, never wavering from what he told me the day we met: “This is going to be the quickest acquittal you’ve ever seen.”

**K**EARNEY’S NOM DE BLOG comes from an infamous statue in the center of his hometown, one with its own messy history. The Burnside Fountain, now found on the southeast corner of Worcester Common, was built in the early 20th century, and features a bronze statue that the sculptor who was commissioned to construct it, Charles Harvey, named *Boy With a Turtle*. His design depicted a naked boy holding a hawksbill sea turtle. As he undertook the work in his New York studio, Harvey apparently heard voices, sometimes said to have come from the unfinished statue itself, telling him to kill himself. Heeding them, he went to the bank of the Bronx River and slit his throat. Another artist completed the statue.



*Left:* Free Turtleboy hats are among the abundant trial-related merchandise for sale. *Right:* The statue that inspired Kearney's pseudonym, on Worcester Common, in Massachusetts. (Lila Barth for *The Atlantic*)

But that is not why Harvey's final work became famous. It's not entirely clear whether Harvey's intention was to depict a boy riding a turtle upon the seas or to capture the moment of releasing a turtle into the wild. But one scenario easily comes to mind for many observers. As Kearney succinctly put it: "The statue obviously looks like a boy having sex with a turtle."



The idea to use the name Turtleboy was not Kearney's own. Inviting suggestions for what to call a new iteration of his blog in 2013, which at the time he intended to be anonymous, he considered "Word From the Woo" (*Woo* being a local term for "Worcester") and "Jogger Blogger." Then a follower proposed "Turtleboy Sports." Kearney knew immediately that it was right—"What better name for a Worcester guy? Turtleboy!"

His followers soon became known by the name they have to this day: Turtle Riders. When I asked Kearney why, he said, "Well, it's better than Turtle Fuckers."

One day in the first week of June, a trial half day, Kearney and I arranged to talk at lunchtime while he drove back to Worcester to see his kids after school. But when he emerged from the courtroom, he asked whether I minded if we made a detour. Some Turtle Riders were gathering for lunch.

At first I couldn't understand why they'd chosen a restaurant nearly half an hour's drive from the courthouse. Then it became clear: The Turtle Riders' chosen meeting place was the Waterfall Bar and Grille in Canton, the final place where Karen Read and John O'Keefe drank together on January 28, 2022. It's where they mingled with Brian Albert and several others who would soon head to Albert's home.

But that's not all I would see on our drive.

"By the way," Kearney said as we neared Canton, "do you want to see 34 Fairview Road?"

He took a left turn, and soon we arrived. "They say she was parked right here," he said, "and that John just stood back there by the flagpole, and that she gunned it in reverse and hit him."

Kearney is fond of experiments and reenactments, both for his own edification and to create content for his viewers. In September 2023, he had come here in his Lexus and tried to duplicate what the prosecution said Read did based on its interpretation of data from her fancier 2021 Lexus LX 570: abruptly reverse 62 feet and reach a speed of 24 miles an hour. Kearney said that despite multiple tries, his best "pedal to the metal" attempt couldn't get him above 19 miles an hour. He pointed to a spot some distance from the curb. "That's where John's body was found."

As we talked through various scenarios, a car pulled up in the middle of the street, right next to us.

"Oh my God!" screamed one of the two women in the car.

“Shut up!” screamed the other. “We were just fucking talking about you!”

They couldn't believe what they'd chanced upon: Turtleboy, in the flesh, at the geographic epicenter of their obsession.

“Nice to meet you,” he said, in a way that seemed both friendly and designed to chill the temperature a little. When they asked for a photo, he got out of the car and posed with them.

At the Waterfall, he knew most of the people joining for lunch—maybe a couple dozen Turtle Riders who seemed to be part of some informal inner circle—and he didn't grandstand at all. Instead, Kearney sat at the edge of the room, talking quietly with whoever came by but making no pronouncements. This wasn't bullhorn Turtleboy.

On the next morning's “bus-stop live,” he told the Turtle Riders about me and what I'd gotten to see while hanging out with him and his crowd: “He got a taste of Turtle World.” He said I'd seen “how cool these people are. And, the lies that have been spread about who we are and what we do—and that we're dangerous and bloodthirsty, and, you know, intimidating witnesses. We're not about that, man. We've never been about that.”

**J**UNE 10, 2024—day 22 of testimony in the Read trial—began with Kearney tweeting photos of the gathered FKR protesters at dawn, with this message: “Sometimes I can’t believe I created this movement, but I’m really glad I did.” Early in the day’s proceedings, taking exception to the latest ruling by Judge Beverly Cannone—who, in Turtleboy world, is only ever referred to as “Auntie Bev”—he tweeted, “Auntie Bev is being extra cunty today.” One darkly comic measure of how much influence Kearney has had on this trial is that this affection for giving offensive nicknames to people he doesn’t like leached out of the sideshow and into the official trial record. One of the police investigators, Yuri Bukhenik, had been mischievously rechristened by Kearney as “Bukkake,” the term for a very specific multiperson sexual act; on the stand, a witness named Julie Albert, Brian Albert’s sister-in-law, referred to Bukhenik from the witness box as “Trooper Bukkake.” “Everybody in the courthouse looked at me,” Kearney said afterward. “It was so satisfying, because I’m like, ‘Oh, she listens to my show.’”

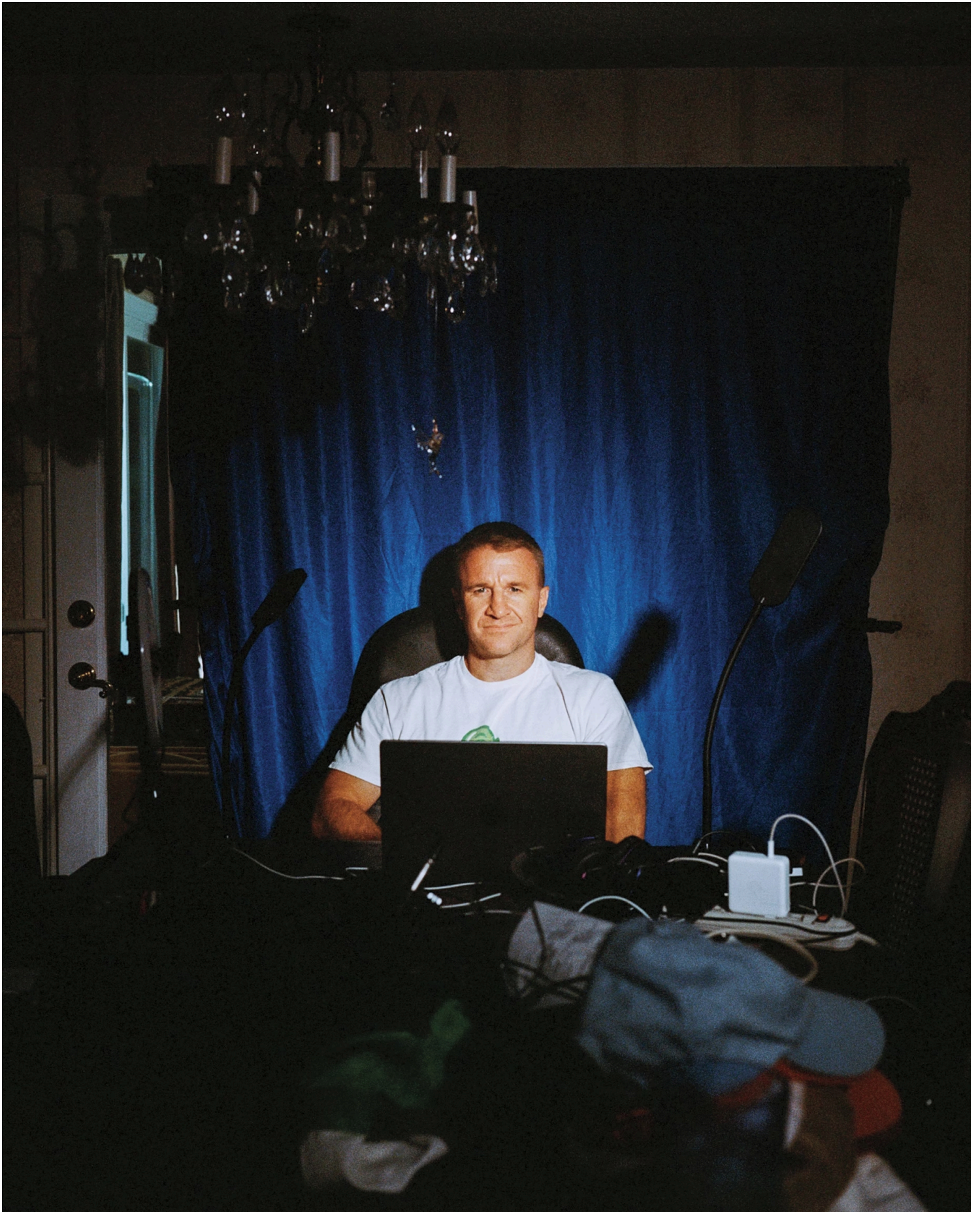
Kearney’s intemperate Auntie Bev comment was soon forgotten, because the time had come for the lead police investigator in the case, Michael Proctor, to take the stand. Another complexity in this case was that, unbeknownst to the jury, there had been a federal grand-jury investigation into the Read investigation—a step toward justice, if you’re a Read supporter, or a misguided fishing expedition that the Read side somehow manipulated into existence, if you’re not. And although no charges have been filed as a result of this grand jury, it unearthed material that consequently became available in Read’s trial—including some deeply problematic private text messages sent by the lead investigator.

After inviting Proctor to share the details of the police investigation, the state's attorney led him through much of this problematic material. It was a remarkable spectacle—the prosecution guiding its own witness toward such unhelpful testimony—but presumably the attorney had calculated that all of this would have been even more devastating if first presented by the defense. Still, the effect of this material was incendiary: In a volley of texts to friends, family, and colleagues, Proctor had referred to Read as, among other things, “a whack job cunt,” “a nutbag,” and “retarded”; he'd also joked about looking for nudes of her on her phone, and mocked her medical history. “She's got a leaky balloon knot,” he texted, presumably in reference to her Crohn's disease. “Leaks poo.” Most of the crudest texts didn't speak directly to Read's guilt or innocence, but when combined with other unprofessional asides—“Nope, home owner is a Boston cop,” he'd texted to a friend, in a way that could be read as implying that Brian Albert was consequently beyond investigation—they appeared corrosive to the prosecution's case.

Kearney certainly thought so. “You can't truly appreciate how OVER this trial is,” he tweeted from the courtroom, “unless you see the faces of the jurors while Proctor reads these text messages.”

Media coverage of the trial grew and grew, in tandem with a teeming online scrum in which Read's innocence or guilt was incessantly debated. It was apparently easy to survey the same morass of evidence and then with fierce assurance come to completely different conclusions. Almost everyone seemed to be sure of the truth, and to think that anyone who didn't agree with them was a fool.

As the trial neared its end, Kearney retained complete confidence that Read would be fully acquitted. But he was also clearly exhausted. “I’m kind of looking forward to it being over,” he had told me earlier. “I’m Karen Read–ed out. I enjoy the professional success I’ve had from it, but I don’t enjoy the stress that I’ve gotten from all these charges.”



Aidan Kearney at home outside Worcester, Massachusetts, where he blogs and livestreams on his various Turtleboy platforms about the Karen Read

murder trial, October 2, 2024. (Lila Barth for *The Atlantic*)

Arguably the most significant testimony came in the trial's final days. The prosecution's vehicular-crash expert argued that O'Keefe's injuries were consistent with impact from a reversing car (though his explanation of exactly how O'Keefe had been hit, and how his body had ended up where it was found, seemed murky), and its digital-forensics experts argued that the 2:27 time stamp associated with the words *hos long to die in cold* on Jennifer McCabe's phone was actually tied to when the tab was first opened (to search for basketball scores), not when the potentially incriminating phrase was typed; they also testified that there was no evidence of deliberate data deletion. The defense pushed back hard.

On June 21, day 29 of testimony, just before 11 a.m., the defense began to present its case. Read's attorneys called a snowplow driver who said that when he drove by 34 Fairview at about 2:45 in the morning, he saw nothing on the lawn where O'Keefe's body was later found, suggesting that the body had been placed there afterward; a doctor who argued that the marks on O'Keefe's arm were dog bites; a digital-forensics expert who maintained that the *hos long ...* search did indeed occur around 2:27 a.m.; a forensic pathologist who testified that O'Keefe's injuries were not consistent with being hit by a car at 24 miles an hour; and two accident-reconstruction experts who testified that the damage both to the car and to O'Keefe didn't tally with the kind of



collision proposed by the prosecution. Scarcely a day after it started, the defense rested.

Kearney, who had been studying the jury members' reactions over the past few weeks, told me he thought there was a 70 percent chance that they would issue the inevitable not-guilty verdict after less than a day's deliberation. There was just a 30 percent chance that they would need a second day, he said. No other outcome seemed conceivable to him.

But the first day passed, and then the second, and then the third. Now it was the weekend. And before the jury reconvened, two things happened. First, on Saturday, Kearney's mother, who had pancreatic cancer, died. The second event, Kearney learned about only as jury deliberations resumed on Monday morning. A person contacted Kearney via Facebook to say that the police were at Kearney's parents' house in Worcester. Kearney called his father, who told him why: At 8:30 that morning, one of Kearney's brothers had stepped out of the house and found a large turtle hanging by its neck on a rope from the porch railing. Dead. The turtle had "what appeared to be a gun shot wound on the back of the shell," according to the police report, "and an exit wound ... near its belly." Kearney's father, the police report went on to say, "explained that his son, Aidan Kearney, is Turtle Boy; a popular article writer. Mr. Kearney also mentioned that he and his family have been the victims of harassment for some time now due to his son's occupation, but nothing to the extent of today's incident."

Kearney's father sent him a photo. He immediately began speculating about who was responsible, throwing out different public accusations. "There's no shortage of people who I think would do this," Kearney told me. As of this writing, the dead-turtle investigation remains unsolved.

**O**N MONDAY, after the jury had sent several notes suggesting that it was at an impasse, the judge declared a mistrial. Kearney was deflated. Though one can make a strong argument that, absent Kearney's involvement, Karen Read would have been much more likely to have been found guilty, he took little succor in that.

A new trial was scheduled for this past January, then deferred until April. But in the weeks following the trial, an extraordinary thing happened. Read had been facing three separate charges. A number of jurors came forward to say that they had unanimously agreed to acquit Read on the most serious charge—second-degree murder—as well as the charge of leaving the scene of a crime; they had reached an impasse only on the lesser manslaughter charge (where a majority of them favored a guilty verdict). But during the court proceedings, no one had asked them if they'd reached unanimity on any of the individual charges. Read's legal team argued that she could not be fairly tried again on these charges, as this would be double jeopardy; the prosecution argued that as no such verdicts had been officially recorded, double jeopardy did not apply. The issue is working its way through the courts.

After recovering from his initial dismay at the mistrial, Kearney carried on undeterred. He conducted new field experiments, explored new angles, and covered every new development. He got a juror to speak on the record about the deliberations. According to this juror, those who believed Read guilty of manslaughter focused on how drunk she'd been, and on the acceleration data from the car; those who believed her not guilty did not buy that O'Keefe's injuries could have been caused by a collision with a reversing car. Many of the issues Kearney considered most important—the alleged 2:27 a.m. Google search, the Apple Health data suggesting that O'Keefe had gone into the house, Officer Proctor's prior relationship with the Albert family—were apparently not central to their deliberations. “I'm in this world where I consume Karen Read content every day, and we all know it like the back of our hand,” he told me. “But the people deciding the case didn't really seem to know it that well, if that makes sense.”

On a livestream shortly after speaking with the juror, Kearney let rip. Yes, the jury had unanimously taken murder off the table, but how could any sentient juror have believed what he now knew some of them did? If you were to question any of the jurors who voted guilty on the manslaughter charge about whether they would have staked their children's lives on that verdict being correct, he asked rhetorically, what would they say? “Would you bet your children's lives on that fact, that Karen Read's guilty? Would you? Would you? Because I would bet anyone's—like, literally anyone's—life that Karen Read is not guilty and not think twice about it ... I'm that fucking positive.” He couldn't understand how the jurors who'd considered Read guilty of anything could think otherwise. “I hope they burn in hell, to be perfectly honest with you, those people. I really do. They're fucking terrible people.”

**K**EARNEY AND READ had stopped talking just before he was imprisoned, in December 2023, and some trial commentators had speculated that she was done with him. But on June 6 of last year, when I met him after court, he told me, “I actually talked to Karen for the first time in six months today,” and explained how he’d asked her a question outside court about footage of her car’s taillight, and she’d answered him with a big smile.

Kearney told me that he and Read resumed private contact a few days after that conversation in the street. The ice broke on June 10, the day of Michael Proctor’s catastrophic testimony. “I sent her a message on Signal, and I just said, ‘Good day. Now the whole world knows what an asshole he is.’” Read replied, concurring. “That reinvigorated conversation between the two of us,” he said. Now they’re back in more regular communication. “We just discuss various things about the trial and our thoughts on it,” he said. “My thoughts on it, basically.”

When Kearney sometimes talks about the cause of defending Read’s innocence as a kind of calling, he can sound jarringly grandiose. If he were to allow his arrest on “trumped-up, ridiculous charges” to cause him to back off, he told me one day, “I feel like I would be almost disrespecting everything our Founding Fathers believed in and risked their lives for. Our Founding Fathers were rich, all of them. And so they had the most to lose. People like Benjamin Franklin, John Adams. They could have just gotten along under British rule. They would have been fine. But ... principles mattered with these people. And when they signed the Declaration of Independence, they knew that it was probably a 90 percent chance they had just signed their own death warrant. But it was worth it. It was worth it to abolitionists. To people like Martin Luther King. The great people in American history are the people who risked

their own well-being for something bigger than themselves. I'm not comparing myself to them ...”

*People listening to that are going to say, “So you’re saying there’s a lineage: Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Martin Luther King ... Turtleboy?”*

“Yeah, well, I think what’s happening with Karen Read is along those lines ... Obviously this is a smaller scale. I’m not George Washington. But I just feel like you have to speak up about this.”

And so on he goes—fighting his own witness-intimidation charges while chronicling, with renewed intensity, each twist in the Karen Read saga. “I’m going to ride this out as long as I can,” he told me, “because it’s my thing.”

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Chris Heath**

 Follow

Chris Heath is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*. He is the author of *No Road Leading Back—An Improbable Escape From the Nazis and the Tangled Way We Tell the Story of the Holocaust*.