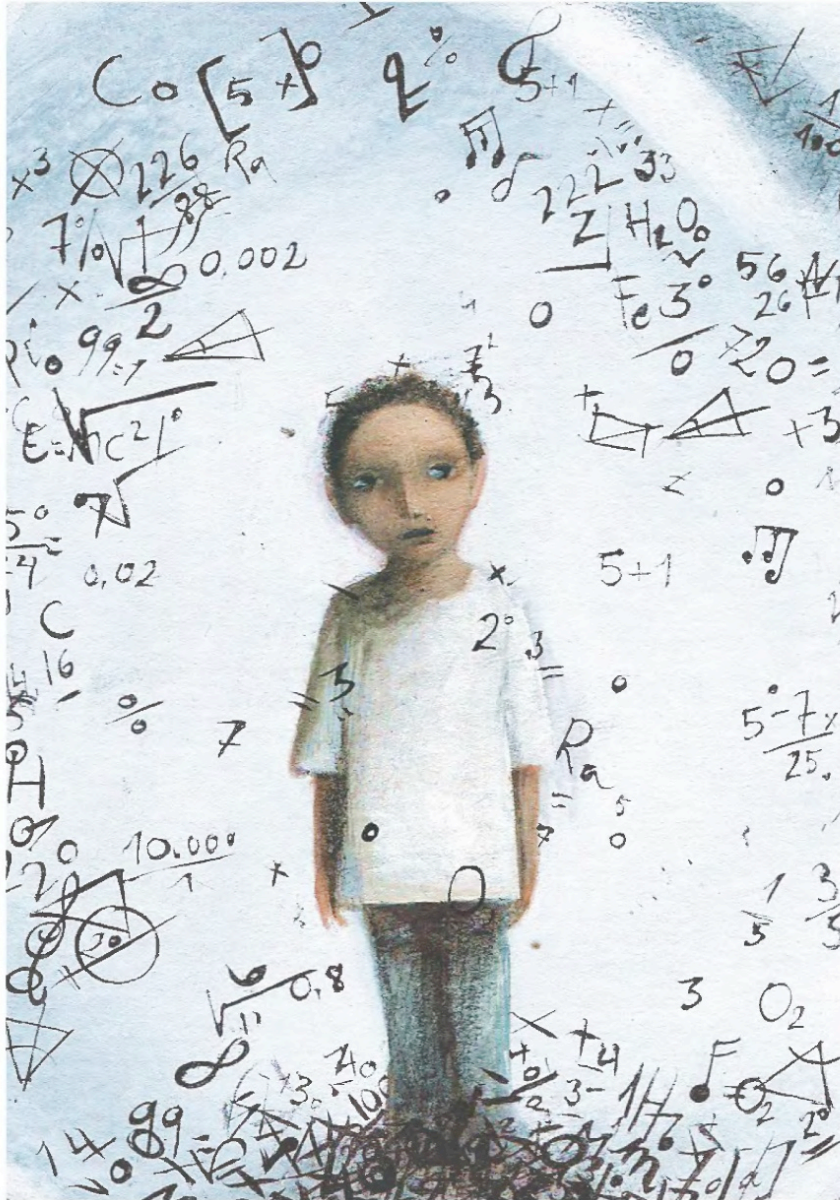


LETTER FROM NEBRASKA

PRAIRIE FIRE

The life and death of a prodigy.

BY ERIC KONIGSBERG



Last May, Patti and Martin Bremmer promised each other that they would get through the second Sunday of the month without mentioning that it was Mother's Day. Brandenn, their son, had committed suicide in March, at the age of fourteen, and Patti was intent on treating the day like any other. To the Bremmers, who live on a farm in western Nebraska, in the village of Venango (population a hundred and sixty-five), and who have earned money over the years by raising organic grain and by breeding dogs, this meant getting up at five-thirty to feed the animals and pitch tumbleweed—the very chores, they could not help but be reminded, that Brandenn used to do.

"We're having a real hard time right now, because we didn't have any routines that didn't involve Brandenn," Martin said. It was a little before noon, and they were sitting down to eat. Their dining room has lavender walls and a large picture window overlooking the front porch. In the distance, they could see a cluster of outbuildings on their property: an old horse barn, a bunkhouse, a washhouse (where Martin's ancestors made soap and did their laundry), a kennel building, and a quonset hut they had long ago converted into a storage shed for grain and tractors. Patti had prepared a freshly killed chicken, baked potatoes, and a salad with red-orange Dorothy Lynch dressing. For dessert, there was a store-bought cherry pie. With Brandenn gone, she didn't have the energy for baking.

Their son had killed himself with a single shot to the head from a .22-calibre rifle. It was his own varmint gun, which he'd been using on intrusive skunks since he was ten years old. He had been shooting since he was six, an early age at which to become acquainted with a firearm, but almost from the time of his birth the Bremmers had known that he was exceptionally precocious. "He was born an adult, basically," Patti said. "He chose when he would wean himself. I wanted to nurse for a full year, but at eleven months he crawled into the kitchen and motioned for a cup." Though Brandenn didn't talk until fifteen months, Patti said, "he started right off speaking in complete

sentences." He potty-trained himself at eighteen months and memorized an entire book of "Mother Goose" nursery rhymes when he was two and a half. At the age of four, he drove a tractor that had a hand-controlled throttle and gearshift, and once, when he was eight, he sat on his father's lap and drove the family car home from town.

Brandenn was known as a child prodigy by almost everybody in this part of Nebraska. When he was a little boy, his I.Q. was scored at 178, and his parents decided to make sure that he was adequately engaged and challenged. They homeschooled him, and when he was six years old they enrolled him in high school through a distance-learning course at the University of Nebraska. He was ten when he finished, in 2001, the youngest graduate in the history of the program.

"We never pushed him," said Patti, whose own experience with higher education, like her husband's, went only as far as some commuter-college credits. "All of his motivation came from within. We never could explain why it was, but one day when he was nine and a half he just decided to finish up, and we didn't want to stand in his way. So he did the last two years' worth of classes in seven months, going at it twelve hours a day, six days a week."

Brandenn went on to take piano lessons through Colorado State University, in Fort Collins, two hundred and fifty miles away. In 2004, he recorded and released a CD of his own compositions, New Age-style washes of chords and arpeggios, entitled "Elements." In January, 2005, he enrolled in an introductory biology class at Mid-Plains Community College, in North Platte, Nebraska, the first step on an intended path to medical school. He was planning to become an anesthesiologist.

Brandenn was handsome and gangly, with blue eyes and curly auburn hair that in the final year of his life he had allowed to grow past his shoulders. He liked the musician Yanni, medieval history, making jewelry, baking cheesecake, lifting weights, playing video games (especially SimCity, SimFarm, and the Command and Conquer series), and "Late Night with Conan

O'Brien." He was also interested in animals, gross-out humor, and science experiments that he devised at home.

Late in the afternoon on Mother's Day, Martin and Patti took me upstairs to Brandenn's bedroom. In opposite corners of the room, each of them curled up in the same position: arms around legs, knees to chin—a child's pose. Martin, who is tall and lean and sharp-featured, sat on the bed with his back against the wall. Patti—small and fair-skinned, with a Friesian mane of hair—was on the floor. For a while after the suicide, Martin stopped by Brandenn's room almost every day. "Now I don't come up," he said. His eyes were filled with tears.

Brandenn and his father had remodelled the room in a Middle Ages theme, gluing floor tiles resembling rough-cut stone to the walls and festooning them with brocaded tapestries. There were swords and shields that Brandenn had ordered from a theatrical-supply Web site, a carved chest full of his piano trophies, wrought-iron candle holders, figurines of dragons, colored crystals. Patti pointed out five perfume bottles that were for Brandenn's ashes; they were made of red glass and had pewter screw tops. "Brandenn always liked expensive," she said.

His suicide was a mystery to them. They had searched the house for clues, and found nothing. He had left no note, and they hadn't seen any warning signs. "Brandenn wasn't depressed," Patti said. "He was a happy, upbeat person. There weren't sudden changes in his behavior." Neither recalled him being particularly upset about anything in the preceding months. He hadn't suffered a breakup, or endured a personal rejection. He hadn't been giving away prized possessions. In fact, Patti said, he'd just added to what he called his "unfinished list": he was selling some old Nintendo games on eBay in order to buy a PlayStation 2 console. And they'd ruled out the possibility of an accident. "Brandenn knew way too much about guns for that," Martin said.

Patti led the way down to the basement so that we could watch videotapes of Brandenn on TV. "We didn't want him to feel like he had to hide his gifts," Patti explained. "But we were very care-

"It was kind of like the Biosphere Project," Martin Bremmer said of the farm where his son grew up. "He had everything he needed."

ful to protect him from doing too much media." When he was four, he appeared on "Real Life," a nationally syndicated show ("Meet the next Doogie Howser"). The segment depicted him adding four-digit numbers, and then, with another child prodigy, playing pool and fencing with a plastic sword.

"See? He was normal," Patti said. "He got along with everybody."

"It was almost like he was amphibious," Martin said. "He was good on water and he was good on land. Adults took to him and children took to him." Brandenn's personality seemed to invite such metaphors. "He was like a therapy dog at a nursing home, making people feel better just by being himself," Patti said. "He calmed a whole roomful of children as soon as he started playing the piano."

A segment on "Leeza" showed Brandenn at the age of five, wearing a thrift-store suit. The Bremmers had been flown to California for the taping. "Martin and Brandenn had never seen the ocean," Patti said. "The waves knocked Brandenn down and took his breath away."

Watching Brandenn on the tapes was difficult but enchanting. He had freckles and long, giraffe-like eyelashes, and when he opened his mouth he really did sound like a little man. He spoke fast and in complete sentences. He had strident elocution and charm-school intonation. We watched as, at the age of eight, he told a local reporter about his high-school correspondence work. "I thought it would be neat if I graduated from high school in the year 2000," he said with convincing modesty, "but if I don't—well, what the heck?"

"That was Brandenn's attitude," Martin said. "No pressure." Then he held his head in his hands. "The three of us ate and lived and worked together every single day," he said. "Each of us

knew what the other two were feeling at all times. We would have known if something was wrong."

Martin's maternal forebears came to Nebraska from Illinois by covered wagon in the eighteen-eighties, and received free land from the government near Venango, in Perkins County, on the condition that they stay for five

knew I wanted to be farming," he says. "I came to my grandparents' place for a summer and never went back."

He met Patti in 1989, when she asked him to audition for a bit part in a production of "Grease" that she was directing for a local community-theatre troupe. After two failed marriages, Patti was living with her daughters, aged eight and thirteen, in a small house on

the Colorado border, next door to the dairy where Martin worked. "The first time I visited Martin's family's farm, this feeling came over me: I'm going to live here," Patti recalled. Six months later, she and Martin were married.

Like Martin, Patti was an expatriate from city life. She'd come to Perkins County from Omaha, three hundred miles to the east, a dozen years earlier, with her first husband, a horse trainer. Patti had been marked as gifted in elementary school, and was put on an accelerated schedule that allowed her to skip seventh grade (although she ended up repeating eighth grade). She attended a vocational

college in Omaha, but dropped out and worked as an accountant. As a single mother, she had a business raising greyhounds and selling them to racetracks.

Martin's grandparents were happy to keep the land in the family, and sold him the house. Brandenn (he added the extra "n" on a computer when he was two years old) arrived within a year of Patti and Martin's marriage. His sisters' time at home did not coincide much with his childhood; both moved out and married young, and Brandenn later said that in many ways he felt like an only child.

"He was definitely the focus of my mom's attention," said Patti's younger daughter, Dawn, who dropped out of high school after ninth grade, home-schooled herself, earned her diploma, and now lives in California with her three children. "When she puts her attention to a project, she expects it to get



Brandenn Bremmer, age seven, at home with his parents.

years. (About half of the people who came to Nebraska under the Homestead Act managed to stick it out.) The high plains of western Nebraska were particularly rough country, and, to hold on to what was theirs, Martin's ancestors survived a drought in 1892, a plague of grasshoppers in 1904, and a prairie fire in 1905. Eventually, the family prospered. The descendants in Martin's line still own some four hundred acres, half their original portion of the land.

Martin was born in 1966 and grew up in Denver, where his mother had moved as an adult. In junior high school, he was briefly placed in a pilot gifted program, but he didn't take to it or to the other children, and he was a C student through high school. He took classes in agronomy and business at a local college, but didn't get a degree. "I

her noticed. She's always working on a masterpiece."

In the past few years, Patti has tried her hand at writing mysteries, and set up a vanity press to publish four of them. She says that she decided early on not to seek a commercial publisher. "I don't want an editor telling me how to change what I write," she told me. "I don't follow all the conventions of mystery writing." Once, when she was thinking about turning one of her books into a screenplay, she asked a friend's advice. "He told me, 'You've got too many characters, and you don't have enough action at first.' Well, I *like* to let it build slowly." Patti also likes having control over the books' covers, which feature photographs by Brandenn or, more recently, Martin, who then does the layout on his computer. In 2004, for the cover of her third novel, "Death Foreshadowed," Martin took a picture of Brandenn outside on a foggy morning, dressed as the Grim Reaper, with a hooded cloak and a scythe.

Even before Brandenn was born, Patti had definite ideas about her child. She and Martin knew that this was the one child they would have together—he had a vasectomy as soon as she gave birth—and Patti wanted a boy. She consulted the book "How to Choose the Sex of Your Baby," which says that intercourse within twelve hours of ovulation is more likely to result in a male. "So we timed it," she recalled. As a baby, Brandenn was colicky and in constant need of stimulation. When books and pictures were held in front of him, he looked as if he were already reading or comprehending them. When he wasn't being challenged or engaged, he squaled.

One day when Brandenn was eighteen months old, the Bremmers say, he clamored vigorously for his mother's attention while she was doing some book-keeping. Brandenn had been playing with a set of magnetized plastic letters, and she absent-mindedly tried to keep him occupied by telling him to bring her an "A." When she looked up, a few moments later, Brandenn was holding up the letter "A." When she asked for a "B," he retrieved a "B." And on he went through nearly the entire alphabet.

"I ran outside and told Martin," Patti

said. "Martin wanted to see. So Brandenn did it again."

At the age of two, the Bremmers say, Brandenn read aloud all the Dr. Seuss books they could order from a book club. "It gave me goose bumps," Martin said. "His muscles were still working to verbalize the words, but he knew all of them, and what they meant. He never had to sound them out." By the time Brandenn was three, he had read everything in the curriculum for first-grade students at the public school in Grant, a nearby town, so his parents asked the kindergarten teacher to enroll him a year early. The teacher told them that this was a bad idea. "She said, 'Just take everything away from him and slow him down,'" Patti recalled. "She wanted us to let the other kids his age catch up to him for a couple of years."

Patti and Martin were outraged, but Brandenn was perfectly happy to spend his days around his parents. "The kids were so below him intellectually that he had no desire to be with them," Patti said. "The teacher was giving them paper cups with seeds in them to teach science." Brandenn's sister Jennifer says, "He preferred adults." He once told his mother that he wouldn't mind going to school if the teachers were there and all the kids stayed home. If the Bremmers had another family over for dinner, he insisted on sitting at the adults' table. "It was almost a phobia he had about doing things associated with children," Patti said. He comported himself as if he were a grownup, clipping on a necktie to leave the house and telling women at the grocery store, "Excuse me, Madam, but you're looking exceptionally lovely today."

In November, 1994, just before Brandenn turned four, the Bremmers drove to Denver to meet with Linda Silverman, a psychologist with a practice devoted almost entirely to gifted children and their families. They'd got her name from Brandenn's pediatrician. On the parent questionnaire that Patti had filled out in advance, she described their son as "very strong willed" and "exhausting." She also wrote, "He questions authority on a regular basis and is quick to pick up on how serious the situation is and how far he can push. He doesn't like to be asked questions. He often responds with 'Why don't I ask you a question?'"

He was given an I.Q. test consisting of

verbal, mathematical, and pictorial questions and problem sets that began at a level deemed answerable by a typical child slightly older than Brandenn. Each correct response increased his "mental age" score, and was followed by a more difficult question. Since Brandenn was three years and eleven months, his mental age went up by one month for each correct answer to questions appropriate for children aged between four and five. For every correctly answered question aimed at children between six and eight years old, he received two months' credit.

Brandenn's omeriness made a precise I.Q. score difficult to ascertain. He scoffed at age-appropriate questions (when a tester asked him what eyes were for, he said, "To bug out"), and tried to leave the room whenever he didn't know the answer to a question. Although Brandenn, according to the evaluation form, grew "bored" and refused to answer enough questions for the tester to complete the assessment, he got as far as answering questions at the level of a nine-year-old. Using a scale that compares a child's mental age with his chronological age, Silverman's office recorded Brandenn's I.Q. as 146.

At Silverman's recommendation, the Bremmers had Brandenn retested a year later. This time, although his attitude toward the test-taking was playful—he answered math questions in Spanish, which he'd been learning from a computer program—his I.Q. was scored at 178.

The scale that Silverman used on Brandenn classifies people who score between 130 and 144 as "moderately gifted" (the range for average intelligence is from 85 to 115), those who score between 145 and 159 as "highly gifted," between 160 and 174 as "exceptionally gifted," and above 174 as "profoundly gifted." The probability of someone's having an I.Q. above 176, according to standard I.Q.-distribution theory, is roughly one in a million, which means that at any given time there ought to be fewer than three hundred people in the United States with an I.Q. as high as Brandenn's.

Since 1979, Silverman's testing facility Sand practice, the Gifted Development Center, has given nine hundred and eleven children I.Q. scores of 160 or above, including sixty-four in the 200s.

Unless almost every young genius in the country is coming through her office, then, she is recording a far higher incidence of profoundly gifted children than the statistical distribution of I.Q. results should allow. The particular I.Q. test that Silverman, almost alone among her peers, relies on may have something to do with this. Although she begins each assessment with one of the more widely employed I.Q. tests, when a child scores extremely high Silverman goes to the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, Form L-M.

The Stanford-Binet was first developed in 1916, and enjoyed the status of the most widely accepted I.Q. test through three iterations, up to and including the Form L-M. The Form L-M (after the first names of its authors, Lewis Terman and Maud Merrill) came out in 1960, was updated in 1972, and then was replaced in 1986, by the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, Fourth Edition. The update was never well liked by psychometricians, and several more recently developed tests, such as the Stanford-Binet Fifth Edition and the current Woodcock-Johnson exam, are considered more comprehensive and reliable. Silverman uses the Form L-M because it's the only version that officially calculates scores above 160. "There's nothing else to use with kids this gifted," she told me. But some critics of the test say that it not only assesses higher scores; it tends to produce them. "The Form L-M uses children from several decades ago as its comparison group, so of course the scores are going to skew much higher if it's used on today's kids—every generation of children is more academically and environmentally advanced than the previous generation," Susan Assouline, the associate dean of the gifted-education program at the University of Iowa, said.

"It's not a useful test in this day and age." Modern-day I.Q. tests were designed primarily to assess learning difficulties—to find the children in a typical classroom who might be lagging behind and in need of remedial attention. "These tests are most reliable at scoring average children or determining whether a child falls somewhere outside of average, but they're not intended to assess various levels of ex-

treme giftedness," Sidney Moon, a gifted-psychology expert at Purdue, said. And a number of Silverman's colleagues say that there's no practical reason for an I.Q. test to measure high levels of intelligence. "Many of us who are lifers in the field agree that there are the gifted, and then there are the rare few who are really superstars among the stars," said Tracy Cross, a professor of gifted studies at Ball State University, in Indiana, and the editor of the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*. "It's hard to argue that those superstars don't exist." But, Cross said, "I don't believe there's much difference between a person with an I.Q. of 160 and one with 170, or 180."

Silverman disagrees strenuously. When I visited her at her house, an A-frame high in the hills above Golden, Colorado, she bristled at her peers' lack of interest in these distinctions—and at the standard public-school practice of placing exceptionally and profoundly gifted children in classes designed for merely advanced students. She described an effort, in the nineties, to eliminate gifted programs in public schools as "a form of discrimination that makes me think of Nazi Germany."

Silverman is a slight woman in her sixties, with dark, stiff hair set in a grand-motherly pouf, and a manner of severe, white-knuckled resolve. She and her husband, Hilton, have reared two children of their own and have taken care of sixteen foster children. Their house was decorated with Jewish- and Christian-themed art, and dozens of photographs of gifted children. "The gifted are my passion," she said, noting that her own children "didn't come out technically gifted."

Even her adversaries in the field of gifted education say that they have yet to encounter a more ardent advocate for children than Silverman, and speak of her intimate and youthful manner around prodigies and their parents. But there was nothing about her that seemed the slightest bit playful, except perhaps the leopard-print blouse and costume jewelry she wore. When a telephone call came and went unanswered, and the woman on the other end introduced herself to the answering machine, Silverman cautioned Hilton not to pick it up, explaining to me that

it was one of their foster children. "She's trying to sell us insurance," she said.

Silverman arrived in Boulder in 1972, after receiving a Ph.D. in educational psychology and special education from the University of Southern California, and taught at the University of Colorado. When her contract was not renewed after the first year, her family struggled for a time (they briefly went on food stamps). Meanwhile, she independently pursued her interest in gifted children, and her husband opened a day-care center in their house and a group home for wayward or abused kids. Over the years, she has published numerous books, including a widely used textbook, "Counselling the Gifted and Talented," and she was a research consultant for the Stanford-Binet Fifth Edition. Though she has held college teaching posts since she left the University of Colorado, her work, unlike that of most of her gifted-education colleagues, isn't funded by a university.

Her reputation was damaged in 2001, after an eight-year-old boy whose I.Q. she had scored at "298-plus" (she said that he was "way beyond genius" and "probably unique in the world") threatened suicide and was later found to have been heavily coached on the Stanford-Binet test by his mother, who had obtained a copy in advance. The *Rocky Mountain News* revealed that Silverman had allowed the boy to take the test while sitting on his mother's lap, because he had an auditory-processing problem that sometimes made it difficult to understand his answers if his mother wasn't there to translate. Silverman appeared to be heavily invested in her appraisal of the boy's genius; he and his mother moved to Colorado from New York State, and she secured sponsors for them—they had been living in subsidized housing—and helped him enroll at a school for the gifted near Boulder. Even after his mother admitted that she had also forged his S.A.T. scores (800 math, 650 verbal), Silverman continued to insist that he was a prodigy: "Just memorizing the hardest I.Q. test would take an I.Q. of around 200!" she wrote in an e-mail to an acquaintance.

Silverman felt that the boy suffered from a culture that treats extremely bright children as freaks—that he was pressured not to achieve but to be average. "You would have appreciation for the



difficulty for the parents of a seventeen-year-old trapped with a nine-year-old's mind," she told me. "But what about a seventeen-year-old trapped in a nine-year-old's body?" It can make for a miserable childhood, she said. "These are the children who are often told by educators and even parents that they're too much—too driven, too perfectionist. It's the gifted kids who are beaten up in school. It's not safe to be gifted."

After a second meeting with Silverman, Patti and Martin gave some thought to moving to the Denver area, which had eight or ten very strong gifted schools and programs, and where Brandenn had grandparents and cousins. But Silverman encouraged them to homeschool their son. They were initially skeptical. "We had always considered homeschooling something for religious freaks, and both of us were hard-core anti-organized religion," Martin said. "But Dr. Silverman told us that, even in the gifted programs, out of twenty kids maybe three would be able to keep up with Brandenn."

"All of these schools have had mixed success up in Brandenn's range," Silverman told me. "Their programs are aimed at the 130-ish kids—that's three standard deviations from him." On an I.Q. distribution chart, she counted three standard deviations down from 100, the average I.Q., and landed at 55. "Putting Brandenn with them would be like putting an average kid in school with the 55-I.Q. kids. A kid who has an I.Q. of 55, do you know how developmentally delayed that kid is?"

Besides, moving to Denver would have meant giving up the farm in Venango. "Martin's family had had the land for generations," Silverman, who once spent a weekend at the Bremmers' house, told me. "They had an idyllic life style and the most beautiful family relationship. Brandenn had trees to climb and animals to be around. It meant so much to his parents that he was on that farm."

When Brandenn was four, his parents started him on the Perkins County elementary-school coursework, and within two years he'd finished the fourth-grade curriculum. Their routine varied from day to day. Typically, Brandenn was in charge. "We'd say, 'O.K., it's nine o'clock. What do you want to learn



about?" Patti recalled. "If he was passionate about reading that month, we'd do that. If he said, 'I want to learn about a dairy,' we talked about how cows work, making milk, all that. His goldfish died one day, so we dissected the fish under the microscope."

"It was kind of like the Biosphere Project," Martin said. "He had everything he needed: a greenhouse, books, land. It was like the ultimate school. He got to see birth, death, to see seasons in their entirety."

Along the way, the Bremmers became advocates for other parents in their situation. When they had started out, the state of Nebraska allowed homeschooling only on the ground of "sincerely held religious beliefs," but they persuaded a state senator to get a bill passed that broadened the exemption. They also started a charitable organization that raised and disbursed money to help needy parents of gifted children pay for tutors and tuition. For their part, the Bremmers realized that they were spending thousands of dollars a year on school materials that were typically free, and because Brandenn was absorbing information so rapidly anyway they decided to save money by skipping grades five through eight and going straight to the high-

school curriculum. "Dr. Silverman said he was ready; we just had to follow his lead," Patti said. "She told us he was having every stage of a normal childhood—he just did it faster. He'd done the terrible twos in a few weeks."

The high-school correspondence program run by the University of Nebraska was designed for children who live far from the nearest school. Although it has a self-paced format that makes it a popular option for parents of gifted children, the program is more commonly used as a supplemental measure—for those who, according to a school catalogue, "find themselves short a few credits close to graduation" and still want to graduate on time, as well as for N.C.A.A. aspirants looking to boost their grade-point averages and students who want to take courses that may not be offered in small rural high schools.

There was no homework and few papers to write. Exams were administered in town and monitored by a neighbor who was registered with the program as a proctor. At first, the Bremmers limited Brandenn to two classes per year. "We were dragging it out, because we didn't know what else to do when he got through it all," Martin said. Eventually, Brandenn went on his tear.



"I'm thinking of waxing my back."

His transcript for the final two months looked like this:

4.03.2001: Personal Finance, B+
 4.04.2001: World Geography 1, A
 4.04.2001: Multicult Literature, B
 4.10.2001: Small Engine Repair, B+
 4.10.2001: Career Planning, A
 4.19.2001: General Math 2, B+
 4.19.2001: World Geography 2, A
 5.15.2001: American Government, B+
 5.18.2001: Ninth Grade English 1, B
 5.19.2001: First Year Spanish, A
 5.29.2001: American History 1, A
 5.31.2001: American History 2, A
 5.31.2001: Health Sciences 1, A
 5.31.2001: Ninth Grade English 2, B+

He took only one year of a foreign language and no advanced math, and had his fair share of gut classes—nutrition, career planning, personal finance, and driver ed (which he completed when he was nine years old). And it was strange that Brandenn, who intended to go to college, followed the curriculum that, according to the catalogue, was recommended for “students whose immediate after-graduation plans include vocation or technical school, a job, or other noncollege situation.”

Still, Silverman assured the Bremmers that what he studied was irrelevant. “He was so smart he didn’t need to follow anybody’s curriculum,” Silverman told me. “It didn’t even matter if he read books or not. He could already read at an adult level at the age of six.” When it came time for college, she said, he would be able to adapt.

As Brandenn was finishing his last round of courses, Patti and Martin asked him if there was anything he wanted to do to celebrate. They offered to have a set of “senior pictures” taken, and Brandenn was delighted. He was photographed in a coat and tie, and then in a Harry Potter costume. He’d always liked the idea of graduating in a traditional cap-and-gown ceremony, so he persuaded the principal of the program to hold one, for the first time in the program’s history. Only five other kids, all of them seventeen or eighteen years old, took part, out of a hundred and ninety students in Brandenn’s class. (Among the qualifying graduates was Britney Spears, though she has no connection to the state of Nebraska.) Local news reporters were invited to film Brandenn at the event. From a lectern he could scarcely see over, he gave a very brief address—a stock commencement speech that he had found on the Internet, he said—and then ran through the auditorium playing tag with his nieces and nephews.

For the next three years, Brandenn focussed on the piano. With his parents’ encouragement, he travelled across Nebraska for Lions’ Club competitions—“He always took first place,” Martin said—and put out his first CD. (“All music on this CD is original and composed by Brandenn Bremmer,” the album cover says. “Produced by Brandenn Bremmer: Age—13.”)

Beverly Dismukes, a kindly woman in North Platte who taught Brandenn music theory and gave him piano lessons for two years, said that, despite what his parents thought, she didn’t consider him one of her musical prodigies. “But you could play something once, and he would play it back to you—that’s unusual,” she said. “He was gifted in that he could do that.” On a “fact sheet” that Patti and Martin had printed and distributed to the media, they listed, along with Brandenn’s high-school grade-point average of 3.8, the items “His music has made it to Japan”; “Writes a song sometimes in less than an hour”; and “He holds all of his music in his head, never writes it out.”

“He was what they call globally gifted: intellectually, physically, emotionally, musically,” Martin said. “Mozart had his mathematicalness going, and Brandenn’s talent was more on the emotional, spiritual side of the music.” He said he had always assumed that when Brandenn was in his twenties and thirties someone might “write a little biographical book and look back at when he was fourteen and see that this was when he was learning the groundwork for what was going to make him famous in music.”

Every corner of the Bremmers’ house reveals the extent to which their lives were built on his: a microphone dangling from the ceiling of the den, which served as his recording studio; a life-size plastic skeleton, for the study of anatomy, in the dining room; a grand piano on which Patti and Martin still have another year and a half of payments to make. For a time, Martin kept above his computer a black-and-white photograph of a smooth-faced woman in a Mission rocker, her hair pinned up in a Willa Cather bun. The woman, Leta Stetter Hollingworth, is known to many today as the godmother of gifted education: she was a founder of the first public school for the gifted, in New York City, and, while on the faculty at Columbia’s Teachers College, she started the world’s first long-term study of the extraordinarily gifted. Hollingworth became particularly interested in children with an I.Q. above 180, and from 1916 until her death, in 1939, she found only twelve of them. In a landmark, posthumously published work, “Children Above 180

IQ (Stanford-Binet): Origin and Development," she presented case studies of these children, vast accumulations of detail pertaining to family histories ("A's great-grandfather... a tailor, devised and patented a union suit, said to have been the first union suit"), head circumferences, grip measurements, and prepubescent doodles.

Hollingworth's enduring legacy stems from the emphasis that she placed on understanding the social and emotional difficulties endemic to extreme giftedness. By studying peer relationships among children of differing levels of giftedness, she came to define the I.Q. range of 125 to 155 as socially "optimal," because those children were most likely to be outgoing and confident—not so smart that they couldn't win over their peers. But children with an I.Q. above 170, she said, were so unlikely to find mates of like ability that they were demoralized. "To have the intelligence of an adult and the emotions of a child combined in a childish body is to encounter certain difficulties," she wrote.

Her findings about this profoundly gifted minority contradicted the work of the Stanford psychologist Lewis Terman, her contemporary, who, in his famous longitudinal study tracking some fifteen hundred high-I.Q. children, asserted that his subjects were as socially well adjusted as anyone else, and that as adults they tended to be more emotionally stable than average. Hollingworth brought her personal history to the issue as well. She had grown up, like Brandenn Bremmer a century later, on a pioneer farmstead in the western-most part of Nebraska, and she spent most of her childhood in self-imposed solitude. According to her biographer, Ann G. Klein, the ten-year-old Letta, beset by a string of family tragedies, willed herself to become an adult overnight. As Hollingworth later described the moment in a letter to her future husband, "I decided to grow up then and there, solemnly renouncing the rest of childhood."

Hollingworth's work fell into obscurity after her death, and was rediscovered only decades later. In 1980, a seventeen-year-old prodigy named Dallas Egbert III committed suicide. Egbert was from Dayton, Ohio, and had entered college at fifteen. "Before his death, almost no-

body had thought to look at the social or emotional components for these kids," Elizabeth Meckstroth, who is now a consultant for families of gifted children, told me. The next year, she was moved to help start a support group for parents of gifted children, and later she wrote, with James Webb and Stephanie Tolan, "Guiding the Gifted Child." "The National Association for Gifted Children conference until then had been all about finding tutoring, improving the math curriculum at schools, and so on," she said. "But Dallas Egbert's suicide was a call to arms."

Many articles have been published during the past two decades on the subject of suicide among gifted children, and, although there is no good evidence for it, some people think that their rate of suicide may be higher than average. Among the factors cited, besides the risks of social and intellectual isolation, are the attendant pressures of perfectionism (described by one psychologist as "an emotional need to develop themselves and master the world") and the possibility that the gifted have heightened sensitivity: even if they treat success and failure as equals, they take them both hard.

"The way these kids' minds work has to do with more than just being quick and right," said Meckstroth, who got to know the Bremmers over the years at various functions for gifted children and their

families. "It's an ability to make connections between all kinds of things and sense meaning in the abstract: everything matters to them." If an average child's mind is like a pair of rabbit ears that picks up four basic TV channels, Meckstroth said, the minds of profoundly gifted children are like satellite dishes, receiving hundreds of signals at once. "It can be overwhelming," she said. "An ordinary four-year-old might dig a hole in the ground for the pleasure of digging the hole. And one of these children might be digging and thinking of all the animals he'll encounter underground, and the children in China he could help."

Linda Silverman believes that there is a higher incidence of a compassionate streak among gifted children, and told me of several ten-year-old peace activists she has encountered. "A lot of gifted kids are angels who are on this earth with responsibilities to help others," she said. "There's no other way to explain it."

Between homeschooling and the self-containment of a rural existence that didn't involve much dependence on, or obligation to, fellow-townpeople, Brandenn was seldom in the company of children his age. A major exception was the week or two each year that he and his parents spent at retreats and conferences for the highly gifted. The first gathering they went to, when Brandenn was



"I won't be in tomorrow. I'm taking a personal snow day."



eight, was the Davidson Institute's inaugural Young Scholars program, at Lake Tahoe. The program was filled with activities, like a public-speaking workshop, in which participants designed advertisements, and a class for future archeologists, in which participants dissected owl pellets.

"Brandenn and I became good friends right away," a boy from Long Island who met him at the Lake Tahoe retreat said. "I think we both figured anybody who'd been willing to go this far was willing to make the best of it. The whole thing was fun—a group of kids like me, you know? Although I had some friends back home who were pretty bright, this was different. Everybody was just very engaged."

The boy, who has asked that I call him Duncan, was about Brandenn's age, and the two stayed in touch over the years. When I met him this summer, at his home, he told me that he was helping a physics professor in a study of fluid dynamics and organizing a Wiffle-ball league with his friends. He and Brandenn shared a goofy sense of humor. In the summer of 2004, he visited Brandenn, and they made a short documentary film about Venango. It began with a shot of the single block that constitutes downtown, and then the camera rested on a street sign that said, "Slow Children," as Duncan walked in front of it and, in slow motion, pretended to trip and fall. They filmed a vending machine outside the laundromat and made note of the bullet holes in its coin-operating mechanism. "We can safely say that this vending machine is past its prime," Duncan said. "Let us have a moment of silence for this vending machine." Then Duncan lowered his head, and Brandenn, who was holding the video camera, followed, tilting the lens down and filming his own feet.

Patti and Martin drove Brandenn to Denver that summer for a four-day retreat hosted by the Gifted Development Center, Linda Silverman's organization. Brandenn hit it off immediately with K., a pretty girl from the West Coast. They were together constantly that week, K. said, and added that she and Brandenn weren't quite boyfriend and girlfriend, though she wasn't sure how to characterize the relationship. "What would you call someone who makes you a ring and a necklace on Valentine's Day, and a brace-

J.J. SEWÉ

let on your birthday?" she asked. "And the person who, when you decide to make him a scarf for Christmas, you spend three hours picking out the wool?"

In Denver, Brandenn, Duncan, K., and a few other kids spent most of the time together in their hotel, watching movies on TV ("Groundhog Day," "Spaceballs") and sitting around talking. "The thing about being gifted is the way you can be totally consumed by passionate interests," said K., who, at fourteen, is enrolled full time as a college student, plays three musical instruments, competes on a high-school gymnastics team, and cantors at her synagogue. "Lots of normal thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds find us off-putting. By 'normal,' I mean kids who are basically able to move from school to hobbies to their social lives, from subject to subject, without having to get obsessed about things. So for four days it was nice to pretend we were normal teen-agers."

K. described Brandenn as "a true gentleman." One night, there was a dinner dance to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Gifted Development Center, and Brandenn performed "Spirit's Dream," a piano piece that he'd named for Silverman's Doberman pinscher. Later that night, he asked K. to dance, but she told him that she would have to take a rain check. She found Brandenn formidable, she recalled, which made her nervous around him: "He wasn't just a musician—he was a performer." A few days later, as the kids prepared to depart, they made plans to stay in touch and reconvene at the next summer's retreat. K. helped Brandenn carry his bags to his parents' car and told him, "You owe me a dance."

Patti and Martin enjoyed meeting other parents on the summer gifted circuit—who often refer to themselves as POGOs, for "parents of gifted offspring"—but say that a high I.Q. was the only thing that Brandenn had in common with many of the kids. "A lot of them were the stereotypical gifted kids, with emotional deficiencies, manipulating their parents like a trainer would be leading a horse," Martin told me. "Some of the kids had real frailties—they wouldn't let different foods on a plate touch each other. One kid had a rat tail hanging down his back—hair that was ten years old. He said to cut it would be like cutting off a part

of him." It frustrated Brandenn to be around kids like these, Martin recalled. "Brandenn wasn't a geek, he wasn't overweight, he wasn't pimply-faced."

"Which is why his suicide rocked their world," Patti said. "Many of these kids across the country are in counselling now because of Brandenn." She smiled a wistful smile. I thought Patti was referring to K., but when I mentioned her the Bremmers were dismissive.

"All the girls were madly in love with him," Patti said. "They were all planning to marry him. None of them knew about each other."

His parents were in no hurry for Brandenn to start dating. "I went all the way through high school without doing the girlfriend thing," Martin said. "The temporary girlfriend—what a waste of time."

Even though the Bremmers seemed to want to protect Brandenn from an immature adolescence, their description of the kind of mate and marriage he hoped to find someday sounded a lot like a young boy's idea of adulthood.

"He wanted someone who would share his interest in computer games and in music," Martin said. "Someone who liked to cook, who was good with raising kids, who wasn't dependent on him to make decisions for her. He wanted a house in Lincoln and one in Omaha for medical school"—the two cities are only forty-five minutes apart. "He wanted to trade in his old Ford Escort for a stylish new car. And then he would pursue a relationship." When he met the right girl, he would buy her an engagement ring that should probably, he figured, cost three hundred thousand dollars, because that was what he'd heard doctors earned in a year.

In the fall of 2004, Brandenn settled back into his routine at home, which included a piano tutorial he'd been taking for a year with David Wohl, a member of the music department at Colorado State. When Brandenn first performed for Wohl, he played a New Age piece he had written—"a lot of pedal, a lot of floating textures," Wohl told me. "It's like water music, basically. It doesn't require tremendous technique. I said, 'I'll take you on, but you're going to learn how to read music and you are going to learn the "Moonlight" Sonata and Bach.'" In return, Wohl taught Brandenn how

to improvise more thoughtfully, manipulating harmony and using different chord spacings. Brandenn abruptly terminated his lessons in December, although he continued to compose and work in his music studio on his own. "It was odd," Wohl recalled. "I thought, Why stop now, just as he's getting into it? He'd been making a lot of progress, especially toward the end." Brandenn explained to Wohl that he was quitting lessons because he wanted to become a doctor, and after the holidays he was going to begin taking premed classes. "I guess I'm not going to make a career in music," he said.

"He had it all stepped out," Patti recalled. Brandenn planned to start with a couple of classes at Mid-Plains Community College, in North Platte, ninety miles from Venango. When he turned fifteen, he would get the rest of his premeds out of the way at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, where his oldest sister, Jennifer, is a surgical nurse. When he turned sixteen, he would start medical school.

"He liked the challenge and he liked the income," Martin said, referring to Brandenn's talk of becoming an anesthesiologist. "I think he also liked the idea of not having to see patients all day long. He didn't want to be dealing with a lot of hypochondriacs coming in."

"He wanted to ease people's pain," Patti said.

He began in January, with an introductory college biology course. "He was a quiet boy who seemed at ease for the most part," his instructor, Sara Morris, told me. "The other students didn't know how young he was. One time during lunch break, his parents came and brought him a sandwich. Sometimes he ate in the cafeteria with the other kids."

There were a lot of new academic challenges. "He was kind of feeling his way along," Morris said. "I'd assigned a term paper on natural history. I knew from talking to him that he'd never done anything like that, and of course he had to learn how to do the citations. And he was nervous. We talked about doing some typing of his notes and how that might help him. It was an adjustment for him, but he was going to do just fine."

Brandenn spoke frequently on the phone with Duncan. "His biology course—he said he wasn't trying all that



"Have you given much thought to what kind of job you want after you retire?"

hard at it," Duncan recalled. "He just was never excited about it. He said, 'Basically, O.K., there's this living stuff and we call it organisms.' He found it incredibly abstract." It wasn't such a big deal to be disenchanted with a class, Duncan understood, but he was surprised to hear Brandenn sounding so listless. "He always went with such rapid fire at stuff he liked. But, with the bio, he was kind of detached from it."

At the time of his suicide, Brandenn had been graded on only a single exam, the course midterm. "It was either a B-minus or a C-plus, I can't remember," Patti said. "But it was scaled, so he was carrying a high B. He wasn't happy with it. But he always finished all his classes super. He sometimes got a C on a test in high school, and he'd always bring it up. It was like burning a piece of toast: 'I'll just put in another one.'"

Brandenn's sister Dawn didn't come home for Christmas in 2004, but she called from California. He was making cookies, he told her, and he was bored.

"Well, that sucks," Dawn said.

"Yeah, it does," Brandenn said.

Dawn wasn't speaking to Patti at the

time. "My mom and I have fought my whole life," she told me. "I was the complicated sibling. I moved out when I was young." As Dawn saw it, her mother and Martin had created a life for their family that cut them off from the rest of the world. "They liked being that isolated, that whole all-we-need-is-each-other thing," she said. "I always called it Bremmer Island."

Brandenn talked with K. in intermittent bursts through the fall and winter. "There was probably a month when he called me every night," she said. "It always sounded like he was hiding, going outside the house to make calls, or only calling when his parents weren't there. He'd say, 'Oh, I gotta go—my mom's home from the grocery store.'"

He told her that he hoped to move to New York for medical school. "I want to go to school where there are people," he said. They talked about how much they missed each other, and began counting the days until Silverman's summer retreat in Denver. "He said he wanted to be there, but his parents might have something else for him this year," she said.

K.'s mother wrote Patti an e-mail in December. "I said our kids have created

this nice relationship, albeit long distance," she recalled. "I just wanted to let her know how much Brandenn meant to my daughter. Patti wrote back that Brandenn had mentioned her, but his private world was all his own. She said she wasn't sure he was going to go to the POGO retreat, because of summer school."

Something else was going to change for Brandenn. Because the commute to the Mid-Plains campus was so long, Patti and Martin had made arrangements for Brandenn to start boarding in North Platte during the week, at the home of a Venango neighbor's grandmother. "He wasn't worried about being lonely, because he was happy with himself," Patti said. "He didn't need to have someone around all the time. He thought about it for a couple of days and then he said, 'No, I want to make the move.' We let him know he didn't have to. We kept telling him he could stay home and wait until he was in his twenties."

Over the holidays, K. received a text message from Brandenn. His mother had taken him to the library in Ogallala, where she was signing copies of her latest novel, "Victim Wanted," and at the moment he had little interest in being there. "Save me," he wrote, and later, in an e-mail, "IT'S HER FAULT I WAS BORED OUT OF MY MIND." He had complained in the fall that Patti had put him up to delivering a speech to a group of children at the library, and wrote, "I'm still kind of mad at my mom, since I wasn't asked for my opinion on doing this thing at all, it was just a 'Hey Brandenn, your going to give a talk at the end of the month to a bunch of kids.'" Still, he had said he wasn't that upset: "It was alright, and we ate at a Subway that day, so hey you can't go wrong with that (I'm a healthy eater so Subway is my favorite place to eat out). So yeah, I'm content with my life right now."

K. wrote to ask how Brandenn's Christmas had been. She said that she and her parents had spent the day at the movies. A couple of hours later, Brandenn responded that, aside from watching "Shrek 2," the Bremmers had done "nothing, as a family anyway." He explained in another e-mail, "Yeah, that's kind of what it's like here, I mean, we're a close family. . . . we just don't spend much. . . . time. . . . being. . . . that. . . . way. . . . Yeah."

In the middle of their exchange, a gift for Brandenn arrived in the Bremmers' mailbox. It was the scarf that K. had knitted, in marled gray alpaca, with suède fringes. He wrote to thank her:

Your timing couldn't have been better, for the past week or so I've been depressed beyond all reason, so this was just what I needed, thank you very much.

She wrote back:

Now, what's this about you being depressed all week? Talk to me, I want to hear about it. Because trust me, I've been there, done that and all I got was this lame t-shirt. :) Just let me know okay? I want to help if I can, and it's really important to me that you're happy and all that jazz.

Brandenn replied:

Thanks . . . I'm glad there's someone who cares. I don't know why I'm so depressed, before it was just every now and then, and you know, it was just "bummed out" depressed. But now it's constant and it's just, "What's the point of living anymore?" I don't know, maybe I just don't spend enough time around good friends like you. But like I can. Not out there in the middle of nowhere. At least there's this family kind of near by that aren't "Cowboys," or else just plain idiots, that I can spend time with. But even still, that's only like once every other week at the most. Oh well. Well I should probably go, thanks for being such a good friend.

Brandenn phoned K. that night. "He just said he was feeling down about everything," she recalled. "What teen-ager doesn't go through unhappiness, you know? I told him to talk to his parents. He said, 'Yeah, I'll think about it,' but he never mentioned them again." The two of them fell out of correspondence for a while, "not for any good reason," K. said. "We were both probably just too busy." On Sunday night, March 13th, Brandenn called her to say hello, but she was out.

Two days later, on March 15th, Brandenn finished recording a second CD of piano music, which he planned to call "Dimensions." He listened to it with his parents at around noon, then went upstairs to sew up a hole in one of his favorite shirts. Martin came up to discuss Brandenn's design for the CD cover; it was an Escher-like tableau of three-dimensional geometric shapes assembled in a desert before a reflecting pool. A bit later, Patti and Martin drove to the town of Grant, thirty minutes away, to run errands. They stopped first at the public library to pick up a stack of unsold copies of Patti's novel, and then bought groceries.

At five-forty-five, when they pulled up to the house, Patti heard what sounded like choking noises coming from inside. She ran upstairs to Brandenn's room and saw his body crumpled on the floor. He had shot himself in the head. He was unconscious but breathing shallowly. She screamed for Martin.

"I knew right away what had happened," Martin said. "Seeing him like that was like stepping into a room and none of your five senses work. It was like seeing the snow falling upward."

Martin carried Brandenn in his arms to the car, called 911, and began driving him toward town until they were met by an ambulance. The hospital doctors in Grant tried unsuccessfully to revive Brandenn, and told them that he was not going to make it. A hospital employee asked the Bremmers whether they were willing to allow their son's vital organs to be harvested. They immediately said yes. Back in December, when Brandenn turned fourteen, when Brandenn turned fourteen and obtained a rural student's driving permit, he had checked off the organ-donor box. The subject came up at supper that night, and Brandenn had told his parents that he was all for it.

While a helicopter airlifted Brandenn's body from Grant to Children's Hospital, in Denver, Patti and Martin drove through the night in order to get there. A neurologist performed a CT scan and a radiograph and rushed Brandenn to the I.C.U., again in vain. Martin cut a lock of his son's hair to save,

and gently removed the stud earring that Brandenn wore. He got his own ear pierced right away, so that he could wear the earring himself.

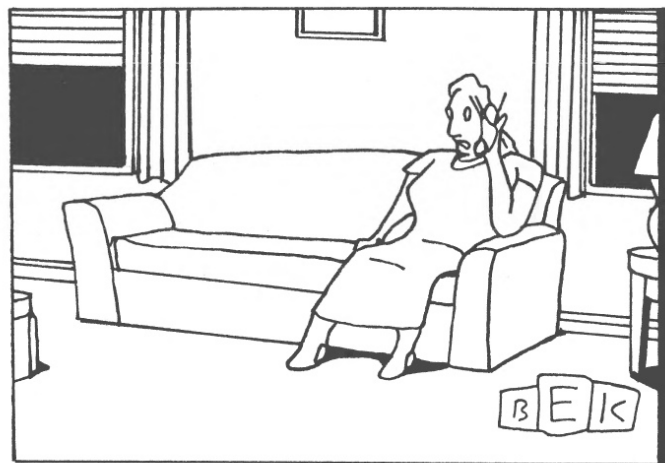
The harvesting of Brandenn's organs took place over the next two and a half days. Despite extensive damage to his brain, the rest of his body was functioning. "They used everything—organs, veins, arteries," Patti said. "The hospital said his epidermal tissues will help fifty people. They said they were fortunate to get a body in such good shape."

The next afternoon, Patti sent an e-mail to more than seventy people, including friends, family, reporters, and POGOs:

The latest from the hospital a few minutes ago was that Brandenn's kidneys were a "Perfect Match" there were only 6 perfect matches in the US and the chances of those 6 getting kidneys were almost impossible. Once again Brandenn did the impossible. His liver went to a 22 month old baby that would have . . . died within days without it. His heart is now beating in the chest of an 11 year old boy who was down to hours. He was flown to Children's as a last ditch effort in a holding pattern counting the minutes for someone in the United States to find a match. His heart was on a man-made machine to keep him alive until they could find a donor. . . . Brandenn was in the next operating room they thought what are the chances and he was a perfect match....

I am trembling and crying as I write this but I want to share with you and the rest of the world that knows him.

The Bremmers had no health insurance, and to pay the local hospital and



"I feel that if I wait here long enough Oprah will give me something."

ambulance bills they sold the CDs that Brandenn had recorded and the Bernese-mountain-dog puppies he'd raised. After the suicide sank in, Patti says, she became taken with the idea that perhaps he'd actually killed himself so that his organs could be put to use in those who needed them.

"Brandenn was so spiritually aware that if he sensed that people needed his help he would have helped," she told me once.

"So you're saying he had the ability to sense that people needed something from him and that's why he did what he did?" Martin put in, elaborating on the thought.

"Yes," Patti said. "I'm ambivalent about Christianity, but a lot of people have said he reminded them of Jesus. You know: 'He came, he taught, he left.'"

Patti told me that she thought Brandenn might have been an "Indigo Child," a concept that she learned about after his death, and that was described in a book by the New Age authors Lee Carroll and Jan Tober. "The Indigo Children: The New Kids Have Arrived" includes essays by psychologists and doctors, and suggests that a new breed of children born in recent decades possess not only great cognitive ability but supernatural insight. While these children are often misdiagnosed as having attention-deficit or hyperactivity disorder, they may actually be old souls reincarnated. Linda Silverman told Patti she believed that Brandenn was spiritually gifted, and that his mission to assist others in this lifetime may have been fulfilled by his death.

The idea that gifted children have supernatural abilities has gained some currency in the past few years. They have some origin in observation: intelligent children often pick up what's going on around them so well that they're able to intuit others' emotions; they can be extremely aware of themselves and their environment. "It's not so much of a leap to see that if all kids sense their mother or father's bad mood, a more intelligent kid can sense his mother's bad mood with less data," Sal Mendaglio, a psychologist and professor at the University of Calgary, told me. "And a child who sees more is more likely to experience anxiety himself when his mother is anxious. So that child's ability for greater empathy, his interest in doing altruistic

things, then, is not so mysterious, either." Some people like to interpret this behavior, Mendaglio explained, as evidence of psychic ability or a divine mission.

"It wouldn't surprise me, the way he was, if he was so connected that he knew his organs were needed," Silverman told me. "There was always something otherworldly about Brandenn. He had a kind of ancient wisdom that was beyond anybody I'd ever seen."

During one of my visits to Silverman's house, just after she invited me to stay for lunch, she said, "Patti and Martin had contacts with him after he'd left his body. There was none for forty-eight hours. Martin cried the entire time. But then they both felt a sense of peacefulness. And he took the memory away from them of finding him." In effect, she said, Brandenn was healing his parents.

"With a suicide, especially of a child, the assumption we make in this society is that somebody is to blame for it," she went on. "I was extremely undone the night I found out that Brandenn had been lost. You couldn't help but examine the possibility of something going wrong. I asked him for guidance, because I could have missed something." And when she woke up the next morning, she said, "I had this overwhelming sense of peace, and just the feeling that he'd gone home."

Hilton Silverman, who had been in the kitchen, brought a platter of Reuben sandwiches to the table. Hilton has a gray beard, a wrestler's posture, and a heavily lined forehead. He wore fleece pants, a zippered skiing turtleneck, and flip-flops with socks.

"Well, I can tell you what the spirits are saying," he said. "He was an angel."

Silverman turned to face me. "I'm not sure how much you know about my husband. Hilton is a psychic and a healer. He has cured people of cancer."

"It kind of runs in my family: my grandfather was a kabbalist rabbi in

Brooklyn, and my father used to heal sick babies with kosher salt," Hilton said. "Brandenn was an angel who came down to experience the physical realm for a short period of time."

I asked Hilton how he knew this. He paused, and for a moment I wondered if he was pulling my leg and trying to think up something even more outlandish to say next. "I'm talking to him right now," he said. "He's become a teacher. He says right now he's actually being taught how to help these people who experience suicides for much messier reasons. Before Brandenn was born, this was planned. And he did it the way he did so that others would have use for his body. Everything worked out in the end."

"I'll tell you who else is an angel," Linda Silverman said. "I think Martin's an angel."

"Oh, Martin, for sure," Hilton said. "He has a positive spiritual alignment. He and Brandenn meet a lot when he's asleep."

Linda looked at me helpfully. "You see, we don't know how to explain these kids—not scientifically."

"Scientifically!" Hilton scoffed.

Silverman seemed to hold fast to her interpretation of events, even after she saw the unhappy e-mail messages that Brandenn had written. She doubted they were representative, and suspected that they'd been taken out of context, or even manipulated.

At first, K. struggled to make sense of the e-mails. She worried that perhaps she ought to have prevented Brandenn's suicide. "I think I'm cycling through all stages of grief at once," she told her parents. They brought her to Vancouver to see a psychologist, and had her talk on the phone with another. K.'s mother shared the e-mails with Duncan and his family, and—through a coincidence of mutual acquaintanceship in Dawn's home town—ended up sharing them with Dawn, too.

All of them found something like relief in the e-mails. At the very least, the suicide appeared now to be something they had the vocabulary to understand. Brandenn hadn't been under a strange influence that told him he'd be doing something good for others by killing himself; it didn't seem that there was some awful secret behind his death. His friends



and his sister agreed that he had probably felt alone or sad or frustrated or some combination of those things, and was momentarily helpless to find a way out. And, unfortunately, he had been in a position to act on a suicidal impulse. Perhaps if the gun hadn't been in his room just then, he wouldn't have gone through with it.

When Dawn tried to discuss the e-mails with her mother, she says, Patti dismissed them immediately, saying, "Depressed" is a word we use all the time around here. It's just a figure of speech. It meant he was having a bad day." K.'s mother, she added, "is probably just into doom and gloom."

Patti told me that she thought it was K. who might have been unhappy. "Maybe Brandenn wanted her to feel better, so he wrote that he was miserable, too," she said. "That was Brandenn: if one of his sisters was struggling in school and said, 'I'm so dumb,' he'd say, 'Well, I'm *really* dumb.' He never sent any e-mails like that to anyone else."

Brandenn's sisters doubted that if he was feeling low he would ever have shared it with his parents. "He wasn't the sort of kid who'd have ever complained to us," Jennifer said. Dawn said, "I still feel a lot of guilt, like I should have done something to help—talk to him or let him know that life gets better when you're older. I'm sure my mom and Martin feel guilty, too. But with Brandenn it really would have been hard to see it coming."

One afternoon when I was with the Bremmers, the sky darkened over their front porch. It had been hot and dry for weeks, and finally a severe thunderstorm was rolling in from central Kansas. "We used to watch how Brandenn walked from the sidewalk to his biology class," Patti said. "In the past year, he became such a graceful young man."

"He glided," Martin told me earlier. "Until then, he walked like any other kid does, like Shaggy from 'Scooby-Doo,' you know? Like he has no bones in his body." Patti had added, "Oh, and he had a six-pack. His stomach was rock hard. I'd punch his stomach and make a joke about how it hurt my hand."

On the porch, Martin took off his glasses and wiped them with his undershirt. "It's hard to convince yourself right now that we were good par-



ents," he said. He felt embarrassed that, all these years, he and Patti had offered their services as advisers to parents of gifted children. "What right did I have to tell them how to raise their kid if this is my track record? I thought I had it all figured out, and then he kills himself. Now I think I must be a total failure as a person, because the one thing I devoted my life to was raising Brandenn."

"We did everything right," Patti said, wrapping her arms around her husband.

Martin said, "I see moms who smoked all through gestation, or moms who yell at their kids at the grocery store, and I look at the kids and they're just so beaten down. Then I think, Why is that family getting by?"

It started raining, gently for perhaps a minute, and then hard and fast. The Bremmers' Bernese mountain dogs—two mothers and a litter of new puppies—scampered from their pen into the kennel, a converted milk barn.

When Brandenn was thirteen and taking time off from music class, Patti recalled, Martin had taught him construction. They'd gutted the barn, put in insulation and sheeting, and reinforced the walls with two-by-sixes. Over a single weekend, Brandenn learned woodworking and how to pour concrete, and he put up most of the aluminum siding himself.

This memory brought to mind a horticulture project that Brandenn had done when he was eight, in which he developed a sprinkling method—one that actually worked in their yard. "It's too windy here, and our pool sprinkler sprayed so hard it wasted a lot of seeds," Martin said. Brandenn found a misting hose and kept it going lightly twenty-four hours a day. The land remained soaked, even on ninety-five-degree days, and the grass seed finally took. "He changed all the rules," Martin said. "It was the first year we had a real lawn." ♦