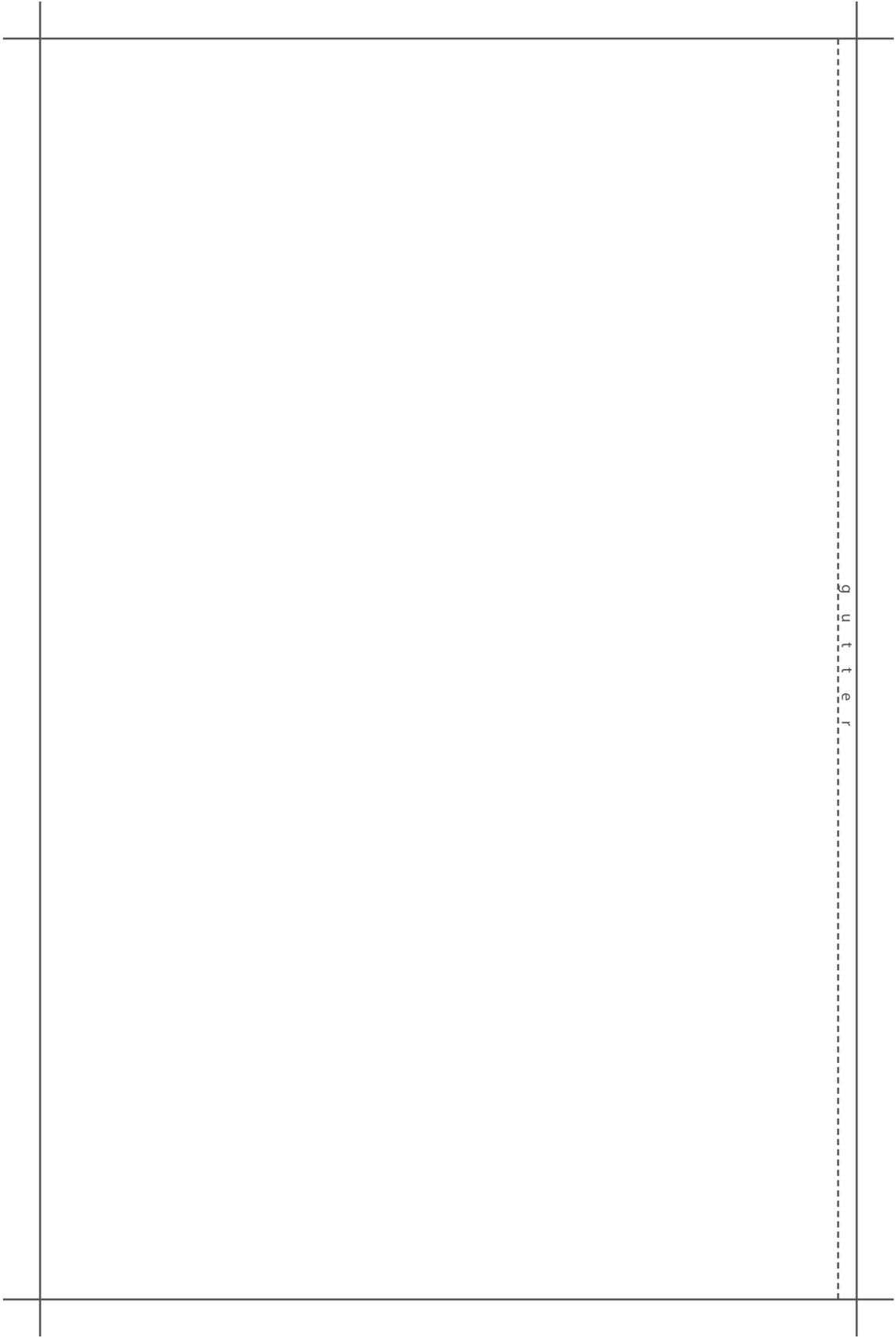


Part I

Beloved child, who ran
joyfully into the night,
Neither death, nor darkness
shall diminish your light

—Inscription on Brian's headstone



g u t t e r

Chapter 1

Brian's Story

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL spring day in the Blue Ridge Mountains of central Virginia when nine-year-old Brian Korbon dashed across home plate, scoring the first run of his Little League career. He ran to the dugout beaming with joy, flashed his father a thumbs-up, and gave high fives to his coach and teammates, and then—he collapsed. The next day, the wire services carried the story across the country: “Boy Dies Playing Little League.” The local newspapers reported some of the details surrounding his death. One headline read, “Final Day of Young Life Spent in Triumph over Fears.” The Rev. Jesse Jackson read the article and called the parents to comfort and pray with them. Paul Harvey also called and then gave some of the account on his radio program. Most of the story, however, was never told. That boy was my son, and I would like to share his story—a story that has brought comfort and wonder to all of us who knew and loved Brian.

BRIAN'S CRAZY BIRTHDAY

Brian was our first child, and the pregnancy had been perfectly normal. So my wife, Kathryn, and I were totally unprepared for the nightmare that was to come. We were both in our early thirties and had been married for two years. Both of us were excited about the arrival of our first child, and I, having grown up as an only child, wanted a big family with lots of kids to play with. I was an anesthesiologist at the university hospital, but we decided to deliver our baby at the community hospital because we thought it would be quieter and more comfortable.

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We had chosen a female obstetrician who was well recommended, and Kathryn wanted an epidural to relieve the pain. Epidurals are my specialty. I wrote books and gave lectures about them, but since I did not have medical privileges at this hospital, one of the anesthesiologists on the staff would do the epidural when the time came. Compulsive to a fault, I had planned everything as well as I could. But my plans would not be enough to protect us from what was to come.

Our problems began when Kathryn went into labor in early January. When we arrived at the hospital, we discovered that our obstetrician was out of town. We had not met the doctor who was covering for her, but he seemed pleasant enough when he came to our hospital room. Only as the day wore on did we realize that something was wrong. The obstetrician, Dr. X I will call him, promised Kathryn the epidural but kept coming up with excuses, so she never got it. Kathryn was in great pain for many hours, asking for the epidural. Every time I spoke with Dr. X, he said that he would order it, but he never did. It took me most of the day to realize that Dr. X was lying to me. He was behaving strangely in other ways as well, saying one thing at one visit and something completely different the next time we saw him. Only later did we learn that Dr. X was insane with schizophrenia; he would lose his medical practice in the following weeks. While his mental illness was common knowledge to the doctors and nurses on the obstetrics floor, no one mentioned anything about it to us.

Despite this craziness, the labor itself seemed to be going well, and then, finally, it was Kathryn's time to push. *Thank God*, I thought, *at least now I can relax a little*. But this was not to be either. Kathryn pushed Brian out, and Dr. X held him up for us to see. Then he gave baby Brian to one of the nurses who put him in a bassinette, and then they all turned away to help Kathryn. So I was the only one who noticed when a few seconds later, Brian stopped breathing. My secret fear during the pregnancy was that I would have to resuscitate my own child, and that was what happened.

With alarm, I called for help and placed the oxygen mask over my baby's tiny face and ventilated his lungs, fighting back my shock and fear. *This isn't supposed to happen*, I thought. *Fathers shouldn't have to do this*. But I had no choice. After a few minutes of resuscitation, Brian's heart rate returned to normal, and he began breathing again. But he never turned pink like he was supposed to; he remained blue. I felt a

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sick, sinking feeling in my stomach as I realized that something else was terribly wrong.

Kathryn and I wept when they took Brian away for transport to the university hospital's neonatal intensive care unit. The next morning, the cardiologist put a balloon-tipped catheter into his heart and tore a hole between the upper chambers, giving him enough oxygen to continue living. She told us Brian had "transposition of the great arteries," a condition caused when the two arteries carrying blood out of the heart are connected backward. Brian could live like this for a few months until he grew big enough to have corrective open-heart surgery. Meanwhile, we had to wait and deal with the constant fear that we might lose him.

Three days later, still numb from the trauma, we took our little blue baby home. His oxygen level was barely enough to sustain him (a normal blood oxygen pressure is 95, while Brian's was 24), and he was a pitiful sight. The hair had been shaved from half of his head so the doctors could find more veins to stick. He had bruises all over his body from the needle punctures, and his right leg was black because of blood vessel damage from the heart catheterization. Still, we felt grateful to have him. If he had been born twenty years earlier, we learned, Brian would have had a slow and awful death.

Although he was a beautiful baby, over the next few weeks, we kept discovering other things wrong with Brian. He had slight defects of his left ear and thumb. Later, we would learn that he was deaf in his left ear and hard of hearing in his right. Much more troubling, however, the breathing passages in his nose had not developed properly. (A baby can only breathe through its nose.) Brian would struggle for every breath, especially while he was sleeping. The ear, nose, and throat specialist we consulted could not risk the corrective operations until after Brian's heart surgery. How ironic that to be a good anesthesiologist, I make sure my patients are breathing normally before I leave them in the recovery room. Yet, every night at home, I watched my own tiny blue infant fighting for every breath, and I was powerless to help him.

Our pediatricians told us to keep Brian from crying as much as possible because that would lower his oxygen level even further. But Brian developed colic, screaming in pain for hours every day and turning purple. And then the ear infections started, one every week or two—causing fever, pain, and more crying. Kathryn, who had always

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needed nine hours of sleep, was getting only two or three and spending days every week in doctors' offices with a screaming, scary-blue baby.

At five months, Brian became lethargic because he was no longer getting enough oxygen to his brain. It was time for his heart surgery. So Kathryn, Brian, and I flew to Boston Children's Hospital where we entered into a whirlwind of activity as we admitted Brian to the hospital, met the medical team, and checked into a nearby hotel. Early the next morning, we took Brian to the operating room and handed him over to the anesthesiologist for his surgery. A nurse took us to the waiting room where we spent four anxious hours waiting for news. (We knew the operation carried a 5 percent mortality rate.) Meanwhile, in the operating room, the surgeons cooled Brian's body down to sixty degrees and reconstructed his heart (thirty-two minutes of suspended animation with no blood flow at all).

Finally, the surgeon, Dr. Castaneda, appeared and told us that everything had gone perfectly. Then, an hour later, we saw Brian in the intensive care unit, and he was *pink*. We rejoiced. Kathryn and I had been so frightened, and now, for the first time, we allowed ourselves to celebrate our son's future. He would live! The surgeon told us that Brian might get tired more easily than other children, but, otherwise, he should have a normal life.

Other parents in the hospital told us that it takes two years after surgery to get over your fear, and it was true. This was a busy time as our daughter, Lyn, was born, and after a few weeks, she also developed bad colic—screaming almost every waking moment for nine months. Then, when she was one and still not able to roll over by herself, we learned that she had cerebral palsy. Kathryn and I were devastated. It all seemed so unfair. Why were such terrible things happening to our children? I felt empty and completely out of luck.

Lyn needed lots of special attention: trips to the rehabilitation center, physical therapy, speech therapy, and more. Meanwhile, Brian needed other operations, ten in all before he was five. More difficult than all the surgeries were the countless needle sticks, hours spent in waiting rooms, and bad-tasting medicines. Brian was a brave little boy through it all and did his best to cooperate, even when the procedures hurt him.

During this time, we were concerned with his development. He was slow to walk and talk and seemed clumsy. Had Brian's brain been

damaged by his five months of low oxygen or the thirty-two minutes without any blood flow during heart surgery? We were always looking for clues. What else was wrong? we wondered.

OUR LITTLE BOY GROWS

One encouraging sign throughout all our troubles was the brightness in Brian's eyes. They would twinkle and dance—filling us with delight. His bright, hazel eyes and broad smile would catch your eye. They could captivate a room full of people and often did. Brian's handsome face had delicate features and was framed by light brown hair. He was of average height and so skinny that you could count all of his ribs.

One early hint that Brian had special gifts was his excellent memory. When he was two and a half, he recognized a picture of a distant cousin he had met once when he was only twelve months old. "That's Mike," he said, surprising us all. He memorized his storybooks and could recite them word for word, doing all the voices with great expression—making me laugh as he did.

Brian was always entertaining us with jokes and stories and was quite a "ham." He had a splendid imagination and could make up tall tales that would fool just about anyone. Brian's poor first-grade teacher never knew which of his stories to believe. One time, his best friend's mother called to ask if it was true that I had just been arrested for having overdue library books. Another time, when Brian was five, Kathryn took him to the country store. He stayed outside to talk with a group of teenage boys while she shopped. When Kathryn returned a few minutes later, Brian had the teenagers spellbound. One of them approached her very respectfully. "I'm sorry to hear about his cousin Kim," the teenager said.

"His cousin Kim?" Kathryn asked suspiciously.

"Yes, the one who fell off the dock in Alaska and drowned."

"Oh, thank you," she replied, "but I'm afraid Brian's been telling you a tale. He doesn't *have* a cousin Kim."

Brian got this mischievous look on his face. It was hard to get angry at him when he was giving us such great entertainment.

Besides being a first-rate joke teller and yarn spinner, Brian was also an accomplished entrepreneur. He was always thinking up projects to do with his best friend, Ben. They would build a space go-cart, a racetrack,

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or a pollution detector. Once they built a high-tech mousetrap, and Brian begged us to let him stay up all night so he could witness the capture. He had a lemonade stand and produced a vaudeville show for the neighborhood kids—charging a small admission, of course. Brian organized pollution patrols at school and a neighborhood C.R.O.P. Walk to combat world hunger. Something was always happening when Brian was around.

He loved speaking in front of a crowd and often surprised me with how well he did. Brian had “stage presence” and a strong voice that carried clearly to the back rows. One summer when I was a camp doctor at a girls’ summer camp, Brian decided to enter the talent contest. Later that evening, Kathryn and I sat in the audience, waiting for his turn. Brian went on stage and gave a short talk about karate (he had been taking lessons for nine months) and then started improvising a karate form. Something extraordinary happened as we watched him move around the stage, punching and kicking at imaginary foes, creating a dance that captivated us in its beauty. Kathryn and I looked at each other. “Wow!” we both said. Brian finished and took his bow, and the girls began clapping wildly. Then they started clapping and chanting in unison, “Bri-an, Bri-an, Bri-an!” This went on for several minutes. It was one of those magical moments.

Brian loved the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes* and memorized all of our book collections. Sometimes, instead of telling a funny story, Brian would just recite the name of the book and the page number from memory, and we would look up the joke that Brian wanted us to read. Like Calvin, Brian had a “parents poll,” and every few weeks, he would rate us on how we were doing. Sometimes I would be up (like when I helped Brian win the Cub Scout model car race) and Kathryn would be down, or vice versa. But, usually, we were somewhere in the middle. Brian and Calvin were so much alike, either entertaining us with their joy for life or struggling with its great mysteries.

Brian was a sweet, sensitive child. He was especially kind and loving to his sister, Lyn. Because of her handicaps, she had few friends. So Brian would play with her at school and protect her on the playground. When they were little, they loved sleeping together, and we would often find them in bed with their arms curled around each other. Brian had a special place in his heart for bigger girls, too. As he got older, he had

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a girlfriend named Jaimie, a bright and pretty little girl he had known since kindergarten.

When he was six, Brian started writing poetry. One of his first poems was a Japanese haiku written for his karate instructor, who mounted it on the wall of the gym. He wrote one of my favorites for a school assignment when he was seven:

Snake

Snake slides, snake slithers
like wind over grass.
Safe from my tree
I watch him pass.

Every now and then, he would say or write something that would make me stop what I was doing. “Wow, that is *good!*” I would say. “I wish I could do that.”

Our good friend, Clover, the mother of Brian’s best friend, Ben, describes some of Brian’s other special qualities.

Brian was an original, a little fireball who brought his own special brand of joy into the lives of all of us. He was gifted, witty, and wise beyond his years. What I most remember and treasure about Brian was the spontaneous, boundless, cosmic joy that he expressed so readily and awakened within me whenever he was around—a joy I had forgotten, or buried under the restrained customs of adulthood. Given the slightest provocation, this undiluted *joy* could come unstoppered in Brian with the power of a champagne cork. His supple little body would boogie down, and he would raise his voice that was at least twice the size and strength of his body in a cheer or a song of celebration, a song he had invented, a song that he flung from the bottom of his being to the highest heaven. Had I ever before heard a joy like that? No matter how seemingly heavy my cares and concerns, I couldn’t help but be gay around Brian Korbon! He made us all laugh with his goofy jokes, his tall tales, his antics, and his plans.

“What would a bar be if it sold candy? ... A candy bar of course!”

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“What do you get when you cross hot water and rabbits? . . .
Hot cross bunnies!”

Brian was a dreamer, an idealist, and perhaps it is lucky that he never had to confront the pain of growing up. Yet, the magic about him was that he was not your typical innocent child, unaware of the world’s evils. He seemed to have garnered all the wisdom of disillusionment during his nine short years of life, and yet in spite of that, he still could know and share that joy I was telling you about.

Brian seemed to see and feel things more keenly than the rest of us, and much of what he felt was painful. Because he was skinny and could not run very fast, he was easy prey for the bullies at school. Though they would often beat him up, Brian would not cower from them. Instead, he made jokes and showed their weaknesses using his quick tongue, saying things like: “His train of thought is waiting at the station” (a quote from *Calvin and Hobbes*). Needless to say, it cost him. (He still had bruises on his back from them when he died.) One time when he was hurt and angry, he asked me, “Why do the strong hurt the weak instead of helping them?”

Brian asked *all* the difficult questions, especially at bedtime. Kathryn, a minister and pastoral counselor, tried her best to answer them. But her answers always seemed to fall short, so she would hold him, tell him how much she loved him, and help him say his prayers. This comforted him enough to sleep. One day, we saw the movie *Ghost*, and afterward, we talked about what might happen after death. That night, as Kathryn was putting him to bed, Brian told her about the four places you can go when you die. She only remembers two of them: you can walk the earth or go to heaven. Looking back, she wishes that she had paid more attention to what he was telling her.

BRIAN BECOMES AFRAID

As Brian approached his ninth birthday, he became obsessed by thoughts of death and kept insisting that he would not make it to “double digits” (ten years old). He refused to celebrate his birthday, saying it would bring his death closer. We reassured him that there was no reason for him to worry about dying, but he became increasingly upset and depressed. Brian talked about death at bedtime and was afraid

to sleep, becoming tired and despondent. We became so concerned that we took him to a child psychologist. Though we never discovered any new issues to deal with, Brian seemed to appreciate “Dr. Dan,” and they both enjoyed their sessions together. Over the following months, they developed a warm friendship and slowly, with the help of teachers and friends, Brian became less fearful and had less trouble sleeping.

His ninth birthday, January 12, 1993, came, and—as Brian requested—we did not have a party to celebrate. It was a somber time, cheered up by Brian’s unexpected appearance on national television. Months earlier, Brian learned that the TV show *America’s Funniest People* was having tryouts at the local mall and insisted that we take him. We arrived at the mall and helped him register, along with hundreds of other people, and waited for his turn in front of the camera. They called Brian’s name, and when he told his joke (“What do you call a Tyrannosaurus that is really scared? ... A nervous Rex.”), the camera crew started laughing. They had him retape it five times.

The receptionist told us that perhaps one or two people from our area would appear on TV, and they would contact us if Brian made it. We never heard anything, so it was a surprise when Brian saw himself on Saturday morning’s *America’s Funniest Kids*, a spin-off of *America’s Funniest People*. He came running into our bedroom, yelling, “Mom and Dad, I’m on TV!” It was good to see him happy.

The local newspaper and radio station did stories about his TV appearance, and then the following day, Brian was selected to be the guest ball boy at a University of Virginia basketball game. He got to meet all the players and was introduced to a sellout crowd, becoming a local celebrity. Brian always loved entertaining people, and now he was getting a chance to do it in a big way. “All it takes is a few lines in the paper and everyone wants your autograph!” he quipped.

A few months later, Brian’s school principal sent a letter home telling us that Brian had been nominated for the gifted program. This came as a surprise since his grades were only average, and we never thought of him as academically gifted. But when the school gave us their questionnaire, it changed our understanding of Brian. It described him better than we could have. Humor, perfectionism, a strong sense of justice and spirituality, strong-willed, difficulty conforming—it was all pure Brian! Now we understood why he had such a hard time fitting in at school.

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A few weeks before his death, Brian began to talk about taking a long trip—one day to Montana, another day to Wisconsin. He wrote to his grandparents, something that he had been meaning to do for a long time. Brian chose Kathryn's Mother's Day present weeks in advance, which he had never done before. Even more unusual, he insisted that Kathryn buy my Father's Day gift, though the holiday was months away. He even made peace with his bullies, the boys who were hard on him at school.

Then Lyn began drawing butterflies everywhere, and when she was not drawing them, she was asking us to write the word "butterfly" with her. Brian bought a box of glass butterflies at a toy store and painted them in beautiful, bright colors. Then, one day in late April, Brian decided that he would like to have a belated birthday celebration. He wanted a simple party with only a few friends and no presents. It would be a "Happy Spring Party," he announced. Brian invited his girlfriend, Jaimie; his best friend, Ben; and Cammie, a boy who had wanted to be friends with Brian. About this time, we noticed that our latest photograph of Brian was beginning to fade.

Two days before the party, Kathryn came home to find Brian sitting alongside the driveway with his covered wagon full of teddy bears, trying to build a fire. He told Kathryn that it was time for him to go on his trip. "I have to go. I have to go away," he said. Kathryn sat on the ground and then put Brian on her lap.

"But I'll miss you terribly if you go," she said.

"But I can't be afraid. I can't be a wimp. I have to go!" he answered.

Since the party was only two days away, she explained, it would be better if he delayed his trip, at least until after the party. She suggested another idea.

"Why don't we pitch the tent tomorrow and you can sleep out by yourself? That can be your trip for tomorrow," she offered.

This seemed like a great idea to him. So the next day, Brian, his teddy bears, and our dog, Sasha, camped out in the field next to our house—his first night alone in the dark. The next morning, he returned so proud of himself for staying out all night. We talked about his adventure over breakfast, and then we got the house ready for his party.

Brian's three guests arrived on the most beautiful spring morning you could imagine. The air was cool and sweet with the smell of honeysuckle. The clear blue sky was dotted with a few round, white clouds. We had a cake with candles, and Ben sang a song he had written for Brian ("Friends Forever, Always Together"). Cammie thanked Brian for inviting him, and in a quiet moment, Jaimie stole Brian away and gave him a secret kiss. They all played happily until their parents came to pick them up a few hours later. Brian said good-bye to his friends and went to his room to write some letters before his baseball game. Then, an hour later, I drove him to his game.

We stopped at the mailbox, and Brian put in two letters he had written but had not put stamps on. I said, "Brian, you know those won't get mailed without stamps."

But he looked me in the eye in his typical, determined fashion and said, "You don't understand; they *will* get there."

Rather than argue, I left the letters in the box, and we drove off to the baseball field. We talked about the upcoming game, and Brian told me how disappointed he was that he had not scored a run during his last game (he was left on third base and never got home). Today, he wanted to make it all the way home more than anything, he said.

We arrived at the field, and Brian bounded out of the car. I had never seen him so enthusiastic. He was the littlest kid on the team and not very good at baseball. He had always been afraid of the hardball—but not today! He begged Coach Parson to put him at second base instead of his usual position in right field, and during the warm-up, he charged after the ball without any fear. It was wonderful to see.

The game started, and I was cheering in the stands as Brian came up to bat. Being so little, he was walked to first base. The next batter hit a triple, and Brian tore around the bases, crossing home. Our eyes met as he trotted toward the sidelines, and he gave me a thumbs-up sign. He was beautiful. His eyes were shining—he was the happiest boy. We all cheered him as he ran by, giving high fives to everyone he passed, and then Brian disappeared into the dugout.

Later, they said that he just lay down on the bench and closed his eyes. "Yo! Brian!" they laughed. "Get up! Quit kidding around!" Then Brian rolled onto the ground, and they realized something was wrong. A few seconds later, Coach Parson carried Brian's limp body out of the dugout, and my happiness turned to horror. I ran to him and, fighting

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back my tears, started to resuscitate Brian. *His heart must have had a rhythm problem*, I thought. *We should be able to get him back*. But as I looked at his little blue face, something told me that Brian was not coming back. I have helped bring many people back from the edge of death, but I could sense that Brian's life was gone.

The rescue attempt went perfectly. The ambulance arrived in less than five minutes. Everyone did all the right things, but Brian's heart would not restart. I could not bring him back this time. We put Brian on a stretcher and continued to work on him in the ambulance during the short trip to the university hospital. The driver radioed ahead, and a medical team met us and whisked Brian into the emergency room. I followed and helped the anesthesiologist put a breathing tube into Brian's windpipe. Then, realizing I was not needed anymore, I quietly walked out into the hall and collapsed into a chair, weeping. I was no longer a physician—just a father grieving his dead son. I felt sick and empty and began to get weak.

In a few moments, I heard footsteps and looked up through my tears to see the distorted image of a nurse.

"Dr. Korbon, your wife is on the phone," she said.

"Oh ... yes," I responded, trying to pull myself together. I rose and followed the nurse to the desk where I was handed a phone. Putting it to my ear, I heard Kathryn's voice.

"Gregg, what is happening? Is Brian okay?"

She was calling from her car on the way to the hospital. Kathryn and Lyn had come to meet us at the ball field, and one of the boys told them that Brian had been taken away in an ambulance. The boy said that Brian was sitting up, so Kathryn was not prepared for what I was about to tell her.

"Kath, I think Brian is gone." And as I heard myself say it, I began to sob again. Kathryn made a gasping sound.

"What?" she cried in anguish. "What?"

"His heart stopped beating, and I think we have lost him," I said through my sobs.

"I'm coming!" she answered. A few minutes later, Kathryn arrived, saying that a friend had taken Lyn to our home. A nurse took us into a little room where we waited for the next forty-five minutes as the medical team tried everything to save Brian. But it was futile, and we knew it.

Then another nurse led us into another room where we saw Brian's dead body lying on a table. Though I tried to brace myself, the sight of him sent shock waves of alarm throughout my body. *This can't be Brian*, I thought. *He is too pale and too still. Something is very wrong here!* But as I sat down next to him and felt the coldness of his skin, the reality of his death began to seep into me. Kathryn came closer, and then we took Brian's cold, limp hands in ours and wept as we told him how much we loved him. I had never felt so completely present as I did in that moment. Any thoughts I had of the past or future lay dead on the table with Brian's body. Minutes passed, and then our minister and several friends arrived and gave us support. After a while, our tears ran their course ... we hugged Brian's body and gently kissed him good-bye.

OUR STRUGGLE TO UNDERSTAND

One of my friends from the hospital, Doug, drove me back to the baseball field so I could pick up my car. For some reason, it seemed important for me not to leave it alone overnight. We arrived at the field, and I got out of Doug's car. Even in my pain and grief, I realized that it was the most beautiful spring day I had ever seen. Cheers from a Little League game blended with the sounds of a nearby square dance. A cool breeze carried the smell of barbecue mixed with honeysuckle.

I reached up to wipe a tear from my eye, and the sour smell of Brian's vomit on my hands blended with the sweet smell of the honeysuckle. At that moment, my vision became clear and the colors, sounds, and smells became stronger and brighter than I had ever experienced—and I knew that I was at the center of life. The worst thing that I could imagine had just happened, and yet, I felt at peace. Everything was as it should be. Brian had died a happy boy. He had conquered his fears, which is more than most of us do. In my heart, I knew that if I could bring him back, it would be for me—not for him. Brian had finished his work here.

After a few minutes, Doug drove to my home with me following behind, barely able to drive. Many of our friends had already heard about Brian's death and were waiting for us by the time we arrived. As we went inside, the first things we saw were Brian's parent polls that he had left for us to find. Today, for the first time, he had given us his highest rating, a perfect two thousand.

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More friends came throughout the day and night to help and comfort us, and we were grateful because we were in shock. Kathryn and I felt sick to our stomachs, weak, and like we were in a dream. It was good to have friends and family around to help us stay grounded. Lyn was also having trouble understanding that Brian would never be coming home again. So, later that night as I tucked her into bed, I cuddled up with her, and I tried to explain what death meant. "Brian is in heaven and won't be coming back to us," I said.

"He take airplane?" she asked.

"No," I answered, "when you go to heaven, you leave your body like a butterfly leaves its cocoon, and then you can fly without an airplane."

"Oh," she replied sadly. "Brian gone. I sad. It dark." She gazed up toward the ceiling, and then her eyes focused and looked into mine. Her expression was serene and confident. "Brian see light!" she said.

I looked at her in wonder. We had never talked of such things. What could she see? Then I felt a humming sensation in my back and "saw" a powerful, rippling river of luminous energy waves that were carrying us along. Somehow, I knew that they had always been there, but I just could not see them before. A great force was at work, and I sensed that Brian was still part of it. I was stunned by the wonder of it and felt that my life was changing, though I could not have imagined the strange and magical journey that was in store for me.

The next day was Mother's Day. I gave Kathryn the presents Brian had gotten for her: a trophy that said "Superstar Mom" and the card Brian had made for her. On it, he had written a special Mother's Day poem:

Kathy
Loving, caring, daring
Married
Mother of Brian
Lover of the color pink
Who feels the guinea pig will pee
Who needs me
Who fears mad dogs
Who gives love
Who would like to see volcanoes

Resident of my house
Korbon
Love,
Brian

Kathryn was touched and appreciated how thoughtful Brian had been on this difficult Mother's Day.

Several months earlier, I had scheduled this week as a vacation to spend time with my family—the first time in my life I had ever done this. *A strange coincidence*, I thought. During this time, I learned how someone could die from despair. Kathryn and I could not eat or sleep, and I lost six pounds in two days—mostly tears. We needed the support of our family and friends to keep us going.

The next day, hundreds of people came to the funeral home to share our loss with us. They formed a long line, and when they hugged me, I could see Brian's body in his casket over their shoulder. He was dressed in his Cub Scout uniform that always made him feel so proud. I knew that he was not living there anymore, but I silently spoke to him anyway. "So, this is your gift to me, Brian. All of my life I've been afraid to let people get close to me. Now your loss is so great that I cannot bear it alone. Look at me, Brian. I am learning to love all these people like I loved you. Aren't you proud of me, Son?"

I learned a lot about hugging in those days. I could close my eyes and tell who my doctor friends were by their hugs. They would put their arms around my shoulders, but they always held their bellies back, even if they were crying with me. I realized that I had always done that, too. I had always held myself away. The best hugs were when someone would put their belly right up against mine and we would sob together, our bellies jiggling up against each other's.

The morning of the funeral, I received another shock as I read the letter Kathryn had just written to read at the funeral service later that afternoon. It read:

Dear Brian,

I always loved watching your mind work—the great games you used to imagine and the way you remembered all the names and dates I used to forget. I loved the great compassion you felt for all things living. How you cried the night I killed

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the moth because it had a right to live, too. The great tenderness you showed to things small and weak.

I loved watching you play with Lyn. Your hugs and gentleness warmed my heart. As painful as it was, I loved the way you would struggle with life.

“Why would people pollute the earth?”

“How can people hate each other enough to fight wars and kill?”

And your struggle with God: “Why does God let children suffer?”

You journeyed through life with the heart of a poet. It was not always easy to stay with you, as you struggled on your rocky path. But somehow, through the pain and the anger, I was usually able to find you, and hold you, and love you. And I have given you all the hugs and kisses that could fit into nine years.

After your death, I came home and found a sign that you had just written and taped on your bedroom door. It said, “Brian is on a trip. Do not worry about me.”

And though my heart feels as if it will break, I will not worry, because I know that you are at home and that you are with God. One night you promised me that if you died first, you would wait for me in heaven. As much as I would like to, I cannot hurry the day I will be with you, but I long for it, because I love you still.

Love,
Mom

I ran downstairs to Brian’s room and saw the sign that Kathryn had described: “Brian is on a trip. Do not worry about me.” Brian often had some sort of sign up: “Keep Out—Brian’s Room” or something of the sort. But this one was different. I stared in wonder. “He knew ... he really knew he was leaving us,” I said out loud. There was so much that I did not understand.

Later, at Brian’s funeral, the congregation gasped when Kathryn read about his sign. She inspired all of us with her strength and love. Many of Brian’s friends had come with their parents. Brian’s baseball team was there, and the Cub Scouts brought their color guard. Kathryn

and her minister friends created a beautiful children's service with stories and songs that were as comforting for the grown-ups as they were for the kids. It was a celebration of Brian's life, sad but wonderful. Our friend, Clover, expressed many of our feelings.

Instead of feeling cheated that Brian was taken away from us too soon, let us be grateful that we had the gift that was Brian for as long as we did. No one can ever replace Brian in our hearts—but his place is not empty. My prayer is that Brian's spirit—a spirit of joy, wild and indomitable enough to combat and defeat the most insidious evil—will shine on in each of us, and that we will remember to express that joy whenever the opportunity arises. There isn't enough of it. And whenever I see that highest, farthest star twinkling merrily down on us, I think that's probably Brian, still laughing!

At the end of the service, in a dramatic display that Brian would have loved, lightning and thunder shook the church. And later, just as Brian had foretold in the car, we delivered his two letters to his friends—though they had no stamps. More than I had ever experienced, everything was coming together: Brian's foretelling of his death, his belated birthday party that was really a going-away party, his final "parents poll," the gifts, the letters, and the sign he left for us. He was telling us that he loved us and that we did not need to worry about him. There was a wonderful harmony to Brian's passage.

It took a while for me to appreciate all that Brian had done. He struggled with the hardest things I know: pain, fear, and even the knowledge of his own death—and accepted them. The day he celebrated his birthday and celebrated being alive was the day he died. Brian's last day on earth was the most life-affirming day I could imagine.

Time passed as Kathryn, Lyn, and I tried to put our lives back together and cope with the emptiness in our hearts. Summer changed to fall as our old apple trees—which had never borne fruit—gave us the sweetest, most delicious red apples. The colors of the fall leaves were especially beautiful and vibrant. They reminded me of some words Brian had written:

Gregg Korbon

The orange leaves always catch my eye as they wave along with the red leaves. Their sparkling shines out to the world. Then it is fall I know.

I miss so many things about him: playing catch, holding him, laughing at his jokes—but especially, I miss his words. They reveal a beauty all around us that Brian saw more clearly than I. There were so many things that I still had to teach him, I thought. They all seem unimportant now, compared to what he taught me: that death, like all of life here on earth, can be embraced fully—without fear. No father could be more proud of his son.

And when my own time comes and my death draws near, I will think of Brian and the boundless joy in his eyes as he ran home on that beautiful spring day. I will reach out for him and for all that lies beyond. I will think of Brian ... and I will not be afraid.

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