

posing as a man gave teena
brandon what she couldn't get
as a woman—adoring girlfriends
and a fiancée.

it also got her killed

DEATH OF A DECEIVER

TRUE CRIME

By **ERIC KONIGSBERG**

TEENA RENEE Brandon's mystery was over the moment her body was discovered, facedown on a bed in a farmhouse in Humboldt, Nebraska. It was early in the morning on December 31, 1993, and lying dead with Teena were two others. Each of the three had been shot twice, execution style, with a .38 revolver. "Through and through" is how the coroner would classify their wounds, meaning the bullets had entered the victims' heads from one side and exited the other. In addition, Teena had been stabbed in the liver and her skull had been crushed. She was 21.

Word of the triple murder raced through Humboldt, a town of 1003. At a bar called Big Mike's, townspeople gathered around a police scanner awaiting identification of the victims, and by dark the news came: The first was a local woman, and the second a young man, a friend of hers. The name of the third fatality, the one whose skull had been crushed, was Teena Brandon.

"Brandon?" The locals were perplexed. The barmaid remembered a boy named Brandon living in that house. He had shown up in Humboldt a month or two before and hung out with kids from nearby Falls City. He told people he was from Lincoln, about two hours away. He was small, 5'5" or 5'6", but good-looking: blue eyes,



PAINTING BY PAT ANDREA



a wide mouth, heavy eyebrows, and sandy hair combed into a halfhearted ducktail. He wore Western shirts and looked so young they had carded him at the bar. "Brandon Ray Tenna," his ID had read. "Date of Birth: 12/10/72. Sex: M."

The folks at Big Mike's pieced together bits of news and speculation, and came to a bizarre conclusion: Brandon Tenna, the boy who had waltzed into Richardson County and charmed a local girl off her feet, was dead; and Brandon Tenna had actually been a woman.

Teena Brandon was killed, prosecutors now maintain, by John Lotter and Tom Nissen, jealous friends of a girl she'd been dating. She was killed, essentially, because she was too successful in passing herself off as a man. She underestimated her own attractiveness and the envy it wrought.

Teena Renee Brandon was born to 16-year-old JoAnn Brandon on December 10, 1972 in Lincoln, Nebraska. Teena's father, Patrick Brandon, was a housepainter who had died in a car accident eight months before her birth. She was named for her father's German shepherd, Tina Marie.

JoAnn is a Lincoln native, doe-eyed and slender, who at one time modeled children's clothing for department store ads. She raised Teena and her sister, Tammy, who was three years older, in a trailer park in northeast Lincoln. She was remarried once, from the time Teena was two until she was seven, to a man Teena didn't like. After that, JoAnn said, "it was Tammy and Teena and me against the world. We were the three musketeers."

Where Tammy was prissy and popular, Teena was awkward and impish, tattling to her mom when she caught Tammy kissing a boy. Even though JoAnn didn't have much money, she aspired to do good by her daughters and tried to teach them middle-class values. She bought them nice clothes and sent them to Catholic schools—St. Mary's Elementary and Pius X High School.

But Teena wasn't much of a student, and Pius' strict environment, coinciding as it did with her adolescence, made her feel out of place. She argued with her religion teacher, Father Fucinaro, whenever he lectured on the virtues of abstinence, and she rebelled against the dress code by wearing pants and a tie. She kept her hair short and told people she was allergic to makeup. She was into weight lifting. Teena's friends say she had crushes on a few boys, but she never dated. Her only

close friend at Pius was a girl named Sara Gapp, whom Teena cared for so much that when Sara became pregnant, Teena offered to get legal permission to raise the baby with her.

During the fall of 1990, her senior year, an Army recruiter visited Pius. Operation Desert Shield was under way and Teena thought she had found her calling. She planned to enlist and began parading around her mother's trailer in fatigues, but couldn't pass the written entrance exam.

"She was real upset," JoAnn said. "And other things in her life started happening. She started to change."

One day in late December 1990, not long after her 18th birthday, Teena was in her mother's living room, lying on the couch, watching TV. When the phone rang, she answered it. A girl had dialed the wrong number. Five minutes later, the phone rang again.

"Hello?" Teena said. It was another girl this time.

"My friend just told me a really hot-sounding guy lives here," the girl said.

"Oh," Teena deadpanned. She knew she had a husky voice.

"What's your name?" the girl said.

Teena drew a breath. "Billy Brinson," she answered, using her uncle's first name and a variation of her own surname. The two girls flirted on the phone for a few minutes. The caller was 13. They made plans to go roller-skating on New Year's Eve.

Teena arrived at Holiday Skate World accompanied by Sara Gapp and a few other friends. She had explained the date to them as a gag, a dare for herself. "We just wanted to see if she could get away with it," Sara said later.

Teena wore her usual clothes—Dockers, tennis shoes and a button-down shirt—and wrapped her breasts with an Ace bandage. She hooked up with the 13-year-old girl and made it through the evening undiscovered. She even took her hand for a couples' skate, grinning like a loon each time she passed Sara, who watched anxiously from rinkside.

Within a couple of weeks, Teena hit it off with one of the girl's friends, Heather Kuhfahl. Heather was a petite, blonde ninth-grader in the Lincoln public school. She was 14. The two of them began to date, Teena still posing as Billy. Heather was Teena's first kiss.

Thus began the double life of Teena Brandon: uneasy tomboy by day, cool lady-killer by night. As a girl, Teena had never received the kind of fawn-

ing she so comfortably unloaded on Heather. And it was reciprocated. Teena's former life seemed disconnected and thin. She became a glutton for attention and got into trouble trying to impress Heather. She took money from her mother's bank account and bought Heather clothes and a stereo. Together they hustled beer with Heather's mother's credit card and cruised O Street until four in the morning.

School had never been much fun; now it was a big joke. Here was the new Teena Brandon: class clown and queen of the senior pranks—locking pigeons in a classmate's car and removing the toilet seats from the girls' washroom. But she got carried away and stole another girl's leather jacket, and she was failing classes. Just a couple weeks before graduation, Teena was expelled from Pius.

With school out of her life, the evolution of her male persona lurched forward. Teena started shaving her face, stuffing socks down the front of her pants and using the men's room in public. She went through her mother's photo albums and tore up all the pictures of herself wearing dresses. She was absolutely certain that this was what she was meant to be. A boy.

But how convinced was Heather? At one point early in their relationship, she had seen Teena's driver's license and read the name, Teena Brandon.

"It's an Irish name, *Tenna*," Teena offered. "Most people just call me Brandon. I was only kidding when I said my name was Billy." Somehow, that was enough for Heather. "He was always joking around about things, making up stories," Heather recalled. Like almost everyone who knew Teena as a boy, she still refers to her with masculine pronouns. "I just figured it was like him to make up a name on the phone when he told my friend his name was Billy."

Heather was the type of person Teena would stray little from as she traveled on her path of seduction. She was younger than Teena, sexually inexperienced, naive and poor. And like Teena, Heather had been raised by her mother, who worked several jobs and was rarely at home. She was needy and had never had a boyfriend. In Teena's estimation Heather was a girl she could outsmart and win over, largely because Heather's longings were not that different from her own. "I depended on having Brandon in my life so much," Heather said. "No matter what sex he turned out to be, I wanted him."

The two had been dating only a few months when Teena moved in with
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Heather and her mother on Holdrege Street. Teena had a number of jobs—pumping gas, working at convenience stores—but couldn't keep one for more than a few months. Once, she was fired when a manager caught her making out with Heather behind the cash register.

JoAnn Brandon blamed Heather for what was happening to Teena—the dressing as a boy, the expulsion, the firings, the stealing. By now, JoAnn and her other daughter had started to follow Teena. They had seen her carrying on with Heather, but they insisted it was some kind of experimental phase that Teena could, with guidance, snap out of. "All I want is to have my daughter back," JoAnn cried to Teena's friend Sara. "Do something." So Sara paid Heather a visit. When she arrived, Heather was on the phone.

"Teena is really Teena," Sara said to Heather. "She's a girl. Look." She produced Teena's birth certificate.

Heather feigned surprise. "Oh, really?" she said distantly and went back to the telephone.

But if Heather already had some idea, her mother somehow hadn't. The next day, after Sara stopped by the bowling alley where Heather's mother worked and told her Heather was dating a girl, Mrs. Kuhfahl made Teena move out and insisted she leave Heather alone.

In January 1992, Sara Gapp, at the behest of JoAnn Brandon, tricked Teena into a car, telling her they were on their way to Hardee's. Instead, Teena was taken to Lincoln General Hospital, where the Brandons were waiting. After a consultation, a psychiatrist informed Teena that she was having a sexual identity crisis—as if she hadn't known—and dispatched her to the Lancaster County crisis center. She was released three days later, after doctors decided she wasn't a suicide threat.

JoAnn and Tammy persuaded Teena to attend the counseling sessions the doctors required, and sometimes they accompanied her. At first Teena refused to participate, sitting in her chair expressionless and cracking jokes. She was too embarrassed to discuss her sexuality with her family in the room.

JoAnn refused to give up. "I asked her point-blank, 'Hey, we can work through this. Are you a lesbian?'"

"That's disgusting," Teena replied. She had some gay male friends in Lincoln but refused to accompany them to parties where there would be lots of homosexuals. "I can't be with a woman that way. I love them the way a man does. It's like I'm really a man trapped inside this body."

Teena insisted she hadn't been physically involved with Heather. She leaned forward, elbow on table, hand to chin. "I'm going to be a virgin until the day I die," she announced.

They talked some more before Teena got to the subject she'd been blocking out for ten years. "Mom, I was raped," Teena said, choking on her tears. It had happened when she was a little girl, by a male relative who had also sexually abused Tammy. All three Brandons sobbed. Teena and her sister had never discussed it. Their mother was mortified by the revelation.

From that point on, it was virtually impossible to get Teena to talk to her psychiatrists. She preferred not to dredge up any more unhappy or complicated feelings, and no resolution was made about her identity or future. "They called her a compulsive liar," JoAnn recalled. "She stopped attending the sessions after two weeks. They said she didn't need any long-term care and let her go."

"After that," Tammy said, "we didn't know anything."

Transsexuality, a predisposition to identify physically with the opposite sex, is a largely uncharted phenomenon, though it is not uncommon. Roughly one in 50,000 people is diagnosed as transsexual, and recent reports indicate that it is almost as likely among women as it is among men. Although sex-change surgery has been performed in America and Europe since the Fifties, many people who consider themselves to be transsexual have chosen to live as homosexuals, and sometimes transvestites, and to hold on to the bodies they were born with.

Some people consider transsexuality to be nothing more than repressed homosexuality. Indeed, some gay men and lesbians say that when they first became aware of their sexuality, they felt trapped, held captive in a body of the wrong sex. Some were also revolted by homosexuality, much like Teena. It is difficult to know whether Teena was a transsexual or a young woman struggling to come to terms with being a lesbian in an unyielding environment—brought up Catholic in a conservative town, with a grandmother who once called her and a gay cousin "faggots."

Enjoying a popularity she had never known as a woman, the male Teena Brandon lived a peripatetic life. From the time that Teena met Heather to the end of 1993, Teena changed residences at least 19 times, moving in with new-found friends or, when she had to, bunking with family. "If he could stay somewhere one night, then turn it into two,

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or a week, he was happy," said one friend.

Constantly running from anything that grounded her to her old life, Teena's behavior grew increasingly troublesome. She continued to steal from people whenever she could. While living with Sara Gapp, she ran up an \$895 phone bill and stole Gapp's automatic teller machine card. Teena forged checks from the account of her grandmother, who was angry enough to press charges. Her grandmother wasn't the only one to report her. From March 1991 to the end of 1993, Teena was charged with 18 crimes, mostly for forgery or failure to appear in court. She served several short jail terms. Most of the time, Teena stole only to buy her girlfriends gifts. If she made them happy enough, she figured, they wouldn't leave her.

During those three years, there were perhaps a dozen girls who claimed Billy Brinson, Brandon Tenna, Tenna Brandon, Brandon Teena or Brandon Yale as their beau. "Most of them were high school age and would go out with him for, like, a week, until they found out," said 18-year-old Daphne Gugat, who dated Teena in the fall of 1993. "But even after that, he would totally convince you that he was a guy." In fact, there were a few girls who were easily convinced and stayed with Teena for months.

With only 200,000 people, Lincoln didn't allow Teena to run far from her past. Often, when she had found a new circle of friends, an old acquaintance (or even a jealous former girlfriend) would arrive on the scene and blurt out that she was a woman. Other times, she would bump into a former schoolmate who would greet her as Teena.

Teena usually extricated herself from the confusion by telling people she was a hermaphrodite. "It means I was born with both sexes, but deep down inside I am a man," she would say. She had learned the term in biology class, but it didn't serve her that well. Most girls, even if they believed her, were scared away by its sheer freakishness. Time and again, a paramour would profess never to have suspected anything abnormal about Teena; one even said she saw Teena urinate standing up, and two girls, at the same time, claimed to be pregnant with Teena's baby.

In any case, Teena didn't seem to have trouble finding new people to con, new women to woo—women who desperately wanted to be charmed by a man who understood their needs. Her relationships were with girls whose ideal of a man had never been realized until they met Teena, girls with mostly troubled relationships with the men in their lives. Teena was their savior, attentive and affectionate. She was less awkward at 19 or 20 than most of the 16-year-old boys who were her competition. She had

charisma. She wrote her girlfriends silly poetry, did their laundry and held their hands in public. •

But how did Teena satisfy their sexual needs? That was the trickiest part of the routine, requiring ingenuity on her end and perhaps some denial from her partners, most of whom were virgins. And there was the realistic plastic penis that she attached to herself.

Teena liked to begin sexual encounters with extended foreplay—lots of kissing and ear-nibbling, undressing her partners, sucking on their breasts. But she never allowed anyone to undress her. With all but a few girls, she kept her undershirt and boxer shorts on.

"One time I tried to go down on him," said one of the girls, "and he stopped me. I thought, Great, a guy who doesn't like it even more than I." But when Teena returned the attempted favor, it was glorious. For one of the first times in her life, the girl had an orgasm.

"After that, I don't think there was a time with him when I didn't come," the girl said. "Orally, going all the way, even dry humping." Teena's sex life depended on a population of girls who considered sex nothing more than something they did for their boyfriends. With Teena they began to understand what all the fuss was about.

"Brandon was my great awakening: Sex could be fun and natural," said a girl who had slept with only one boy before meeting Teena. It had been dull with her ex-boyfriend. She would spend a night at his parents' house every weekend and wait for it to be over, staring at the ceiling and looking at the *Star Wars* wallpaper, the *Star Wars* curtains.

Teena didn't rush girls into intercourse but instead asked them to let her know when they were ready. She told them she was a virgin. Most of the girls, meanwhile, were too inexperienced to realize that Teena was using a dildo and too shy to look at or touch what they thought was their boyfriend's penis. "I noticed that he could go a long time, and that he usually pulled out as soon as I had mine," recalled another girlfriend, one of the few girls to actually see Teena naked or discover the dildo. "But it wasn't until after he said he'd had a sex-change operation that I noticed it stayed hard afterward. When I asked him about it, he said it was because the only options after the surgery were for it to be hard all the time or for him to use a pump.

"Still, it was funny," she said. "Sometimes I'd feel through his pants and it'd be small, and sometimes it felt like he had a lot more." •

There were times when Teena hung around a cousin's dorm at the Lincoln School of Commerce looking for some-

thing to do. One day, in March 1993, Teena met Gina Bartu, a freckled 19-year-old secretarial student. It took Teena two days to ask her out, and in another three days, each had told the other "I love you." Soon, Teena had Gina's name tattooed on her arm. "You better not break up with me or I'm gonna have to date only Ginas," Teena would say.

What was it about Gina? Sometimes Teena sat up late at night with her buddies from work and talked about it: Heather had a killer body and knew how to have a good time. Some of the other girls were pretty cool if you told them what they wanted to hear. But Gina—well, she was shy and kind and had her act together. She was a farm girl from Crete, Nebraska, a college student, and she had a job. The kind of girl you could marry, Teena said.

And so one afternoon in late May, Teena sat on Gina's bed and waited for her to make her way back from class.

"I don't know how to say this," Teena said. "But will you marry me?"

"Yeah," Gina replied.

"He didn't have a ring yet," Gina recalled, "but he started planning our engagement party right away. He was a hopeless romantic."

The party was the biggest blowout Teena could manage. She rented three rooms at the Harvester Motel and wore a tuxedo. Only about 30 guests came, since Teena couldn't invite any friends from her past. But a few ex-girlfriends and a guy Gina had dated showed up. Teena ordered cigarettes and film from the front desk and snapped pictures all night. Pizzas were delivered, and a hot tub was filled with ice and beer.

Midway into the evening, Teena pulled Gina aside. "See, Gina, has anybody ever done anything like this for you before?" she said. She took Gina's hand and got down on bended knee: "Everybody, quiet." Teena delivered a formal proposal. "Brandon made a speech about how he was settling down," said Kendall Hawthorne, a friend Teena had met working at the state fair. "We all saw him as a ladies' man, but now he said it was time for him to stop looking. Gina was loving it."

They set May 28, 1994, one year from that night, as their wedding date. •

The truth is, Gina had some reservations about Teena. Two of Teena's ex-girlfriends had told her Teena was a girl and had even shown her a yearbook photo. She confronted Teena immediately, and Teena, flustered, dug her hands into her armpits and explained: She had been raised as a girl until the eighth grade, she said. Then she had had an operation in Omaha.

Soon after, Gina noticed Teena's small breasts. Teena said they would "take a

while to go away completely," and Gina remained credulous.

"Of course it bothered me, but I let it go," Gina said. "People believe what they want to when they're in love, you know? I mean, I just couldn't understand why a girl would trick you into that if she knew you liked the opposite sex."

Even more so than Heather, Gina clung to Teena, moving with her into a house shared by two gay men in their late 20s. Teena didn't have many belongings but always carried a faded photo of her father at the age of 18. "He loved to compare that picture to himself," Gina said. "They did look a lot alike."

Such pathos swelled in Teena's psyche, such fear of rejection, that she continued her life of petty crime. She forged checks to buy groceries rather than simply allow Gina to pay. When Teena was brought to court on one charge, Gina reluctantly posted the \$345 bail. Driving Teena home, Gina was livid. She had seen the arrest summons. What was with this "Teena Renee" business?

Teena confessed that she hadn't yet had the operation that would make her a full-fledged male. But, she insisted, she planned to, and some steps were already under way.

"He told me how all his other girlfriends had treated him like crap when they found out," Gina said, "and it made me really angry. I started thinking, What does it matter what a person is like physically? He was a man to me, and I'd never been happier in my life. I told him to get the operation if that's what he wanted to do. I said I'd stay with him."

Next month the mastectomy, Teena promised. When a month went by, Gina inquired about it. Teena responded, "I don't have the money." When she eventually confessed that she couldn't go through with it, Gina protested.

"All you care about is what society thinks," Teena said. "You think I have to fit society's definition of a man."

"If you aren't going to do it," Gina said, "then this has to end. It would just be too hard to deal with."

In late August, Gina got her own place and asked for some time to think. Teena grew desperate, stealing Gina's Montgomery Ward credit card and using it to buy her a diamond ring. When Gina got the bill, she confronted Teena, who denied the theft. They fought all over the house, upstairs, downstairs, in the bedroom, in the kitchen. It was their only real fight.

"We're not getting married, Brandon!" Gina screamed. "What were you thinking?"

"I always told you I'd come through with the ring," Teena said and smiled weakly. The two girls erupted in laughter. But it was too late.

Teena felt she had come so close to succeeding with Gina. It was like high school, the Army, old girlfriends all over again: She had come this close to what she wanted. She was devastated and began calling Gina and showing up at her apartment at all hours. Sometimes she would drop letters through Gina's mail slot. "I often think of what it would have been like if I had told you the truth from the beginning," one letter said. "Would you have stayed with me or gone away? I wanted to let you know how good I could treat you before you found out."

Gina didn't know what to do. She had been so enamored, but did this relationship make her a lesbian? She never answered Teena's letters.

It was in November, two months after Gina ended their relationship, that Teena fled Lincoln. She owed money to too many people, some of whom had threatened her physically. She didn't tell her family or Gina when she took up residence two hours away in tiny Humboldt, crashing at a farmhouse shared by two girls, friends of someone she had dated in Lincoln. The house rented for \$100 a month and stood on a modest hill, shedding gray paint and fronted by a wooden step porch.

Teena didn't stay single for long. In December she began dating Lana Tisdell, whom she had met at a party in Falls City. Lana was a 19-year-old strawberry blonde who was as easily won as Teena's previous conquests. "Other guys in this town don't give a girl flowers," Lana told her friends.

For more than a week the two were inseparable, sharing a couch at Lana's house every night, watching the country music television channel all day. Lana's mother was impressed by Teena's politeness, and Lana's friends—including her former boyfriend John Lotter, 22, and Tom Nissen, 21, whom she'd also dated—got on well with Teena also.

Even within economically anemic Falls City, families such as the Tisdells, Lotters and Nissens were outcasts. Lana's mother, Linda Gutierrez, supported a family of six with a \$346 disability check she received monthly as the result of a stabbing by a former husband. John Lotter lived with his mother, an older brother, two sisters and three of his sister's children in a small three-bedroom house. To their peers in Falls City, they were marginalized, unpopular dropouts and derelicts.

The pokey, backwoods character of Falls City blinded Teena to the narrow-mindedness she was up against there. For all their lack of sophistication, those in Teena's coterie in Lincoln were permissive people, and quite a number had had gay friends, black friends and other associations considered vagaries in parts

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of rural America. But Teena's friends in Falls City were a different sort entirely.

The beginning of the end came December 15, when Teena arrived at the courthouse for a hearing on a charge of alcohol possession. She handed over her fake ID, but when it was discovered that she had forged a friend's check, Teena was jailed—in a women's cell.

During Teena's eight days in jail, much of the town learned she was in a women's cell. Lana visited her several times and, naturally, received the hermaphrodite story.

Seeing Teena locked up and crying, Lana was distraught. Like the girls before her, she was confused by the issue of Teena's gender. She still cared for Teena and wanted to post her bail.

"Don't you dare," her mother said. "And don't get any ideas about letting him in this house ever again."

On December 23, Lana took a signed, blank check her father had given her for a perm and cashed it in order to post Teena's \$250 bail. Because Lana was under 21, she had to find somebody else to tender the money. She asked Tom Nissen, a gaunt fellow with a sparse mustache and light brown hair. "The agreement," Nissen told me from jail, "was that Brandon was going to show her what sex he was."

Indeed, Lana's friends and family were troubled by the way Lana was still drawn to Teena. Lana's mother suggested committing her daughter to a psychiatric unit for a month "so she could drill it into her own mind that Brandon is actually a she."

Although they were roughly the same age, John Lotter and Tom Nissen had met only recently, through Lana. Tom had lived with his father in Mississippi, but at 13 moved in with his mother, Sharon, near Falls City. He had run away from home several times, and his mother sent him to Blue Valley Mental Health Center. "I said, 'This child's not right. I don't know what it is.' If he'd done something wrong, or if you were mad at him, he'd just stand and let you scream at him.

"He was never violent, except to himself. He shot himself in the shoulder and blamed someone else. If you saw him with all his clothes off, you'd think he'd been in an accident—there are scars all over his body. Three years ago he cut his arm so bad with a butcher knife they had to take him to a plastic surgeon. It was like he'd tried to saw it off."

When he was 19, Tom married Kandi Gibson, a girl he had known in high school. In 1991 Kandi gave birth to a daughter they named Tiffany. The next year Tom went to jail for arson. He had burned down a neighboring house and garage.

Tom spent nine months in jail in Lin-

coln. He wrote often to his mother. "He did all right when he was there," she said. "He got his GED, he was working with computers, he got counseling. He said he was sorry." Tom went back to Falls City in May 1993. Although Kandi was pregnant with their second child, Tom soon started dating Missy Gutierrez, Lana Tisdell's 18-year-old aunt. Then he got involved with Lana. It was confusing, but Tom seemed happy with the arrangement.

More of a follower, Tom yearned for the acceptance of a rake like John Lotter. John was boorish, with beady eyes and a wild mane of dark hair. His kindergarten teacher remembers him biting children and calling them motherfuckers.

John was away from his family for most of his youth—in foster homes, Boys Town, even jail (for stealing a car). But in 1990, at 18, he returned to Falls City and dated Lana on and off.

Mostly it was John's temper that got him into trouble. He once ran seven guys out of Kwik Shop all by himself when they made fun of Lana's lisp. It had been years since he and Lana had gone out, but loyalty was his subscribed virtue. He told friends he would still do anything for her.

On Christmas Eve Teena was supposed to meet Lana at a party at Nissen's house, a white stucco box in the middle of Falls City. Although Teena had been out of jail for a day, Lotter and Nissen still didn't think Lana knew that Teena was a woman. Lana said they were intent on proving it to her. Nissen, in a phone interview that took place from jail nine months later, maintained that Lana should have known what was to come. Lana denied having any knowledge of what Tom and John were going to do.

At the party, Lana's eyes flitted around the living room. There were only about a dozen people there, some whiskey, some beer, a Christmas tree listing in the corner. Where the hell was Brandon? She wandered toward the bathroom and found Teena, Tom and John standing next to the tub, poised for a showdown.

"Has he shown you?" John asked Lana.

"Shown me what?" She pretended not to know.

"What's in his pants," John said.

"I don't care what's in his pants!" Lana said. "It doesn't matter to me what's in his pants!"

In a single motion, Tom grabbed Teena and pulled her arms behind her back. John tugged her jeans and boxer shorts down around her ankles. Lana covered her eyes.

"Look at him," John said between gritted teeth. "Look, or Tom is gonna keep holding him like that." Lana turned her head and peeked between her fingers.

John and Tom then marched Teena out of the bathroom and held her in front of the guests.

"Yep, it's a girl," Lotter announced.

"Ain't got no thing hanging down there," Nissen said.

Soon everyone, including John and Tom, filed out of the house and went to a bar called the Oasis. Lana walked with Teena to the nearby Stephenson Hotel, where Teena telephoned her roommates in Humboldt to come get her. John and Tom showed up at the hotel and told Lana that they had run into her mother, who wanted her home. Lana told Teena she'd be back in a second. "Don't leave me" was the last thing Teena said to Lana that night. John and Tom took Teena back to Tom's house. It was now Christmas Day.

According to sources in the Richardson County Attorney's office, the following events then took place: With John Lotter looking on, Tom Nissen beat Teena. He struck her in the face, kicked her in the ribs and stomped on her back. The chief of the Falls City police, Norman Hemmerling, would later testify that Teena had a welt shaped like the sole of a boot on her back. According to Lana's friends, the two boys had told Teena that they were angry that she ripped off their friends. Lana had used her father's money to bail Teena out of jail, they said, and now Lana was in big trouble with her parents.

John and Tom forced Teena into Lotter's Ford Crown Victoria. "All three of us were in the front seat," Nissen recalled. "Brandon was between me and John. We started riding around with her, and I think John said he was going to fuck her. Then Brandon said, 'Come on, guys, it doesn't have to be like this.' The car got stuck in a ditch off the road, and I just had on my windbreaker. And when Brandon got out to help me jack up the car, he kept offering me his jacket. I said 'No. You better keep it on.' Then me and Brandon went across the road to this building that must have been an old schoolhouse or something, looking for bricks to put under the tires to get some traction. I came back and told John I could see a yard with a light on, and I went to get this farmer to tow us out."

John Lotter concealed Teena in the backseat while Nissen and the farmer towed the car back onto the road. Nissen drove further, finally turning off behind a Hormel pig-buying station. After he cut the engine, the boys attacked Teena in the backseat of the car. She put up a struggle. "You can either have the shit beat out of you or not," Nissen told her, "and then have it happen anyway."

Then Lotter and Nissen raped Teena. "I went first," Nissen said. "Then John. I think it just sort of happened. I'd never done it before. I don't know that it

wasn't more of an ego thing. I felt like I'd been fucked. Me and Brandon had a long conversation that evening, in the bathroom. I told him, 'I don't have anything against you. If you had just been straight with me, I would have understood.' Brandon started to feed me another line how he was going to have a sex operation. John was really upset with the whole situation. Maybe he still wished he was going out with Lana."

Perhaps, for John Lotter and Tom Nissen, it was the only retribution they could exact for the embarrassment they felt in being duped by an ex-girlfriend's new boyfriend. After all, it was just before Lana met Teena that she had been sleeping with Tom. And John dated Lana for years.

At six A.M., Teena was at the Tisdels' door, barefoot and with no coat, out of breath and bleeding from her mouth. Her jeans were muddied up to the knees. Her hands were dirty. And her undershirt—she always wore an undershirt—was missing. An ambulance was called to take Teena to the hospital.

The phone rang in Tammy Brandon's apartment. She hoped it would be Teena. It was Christmas Day and she hadn't seen or heard from her sister in weeks. She didn't even know where to find her these days.

"Tammy?" Teena seemed to be hyperventilating.

"Calm down," Tammy said. "Where are you?"

Teena told Tammy about her exodus to Humboldt, about Lana, about being raped. In a way, it taxed her heart more to talk about it than to endure it.

"Do you hate me for what I am?" Teena asked. She was so ashamed, her reputation now shot to hell in the worst way she could imagine. She didn't know if she could tell her mother.

"Let me call Mom first," Tammy said.

"Tammy?"

"Yeah?"

"I didn't cry the whole time. I wasn't going to give them the satisfaction."

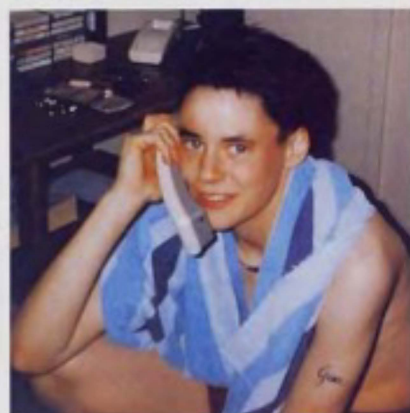
Charles Laux, Richardson County's sheriff, came on the case dogged by problems of his own. Laux was being investigated by the Nebraska attorney general for selling used cars without a dealer's license. A city clerk says the town had temporarily withheld two of his paychecks for inadequate service.

According to the Brandons, Laux was not much help to Teena. When he questioned Teena on the afternoon of Christmas Day, Laux reportedly asked her, "Why do you prefer females?" and "Why did you take your pants down for those boys?"

Although a report from the Falls City

hospital confirmed that Teena had been raped, Laux said he found inconsistencies in her statement: Initially, she claimed to have been raped once, then said twice. And she said both John and Tom had beaten her, but then said it was just Tom. Deputy Sheriff Tom Olberding, a friend of Lotter's, saw Teena that day, too. "There was no doubt in my mind it happened," he would say the following week, "but you have to get statements from the other side. You just can't go running around arresting people."

So Olberding and Laux didn't bring



Dying to be a man: Teena, with fiancée Gino's name tattooed on her arm, at the house they shared in Lincoln, Nebraska; below, a studio portrait that was taken in 1993.



John and Tom in for questioning until three days later, on December 28. The two men denied raping Teena. Tom admitted to Olberding that he had heard Teena say "Don't hurt me" when John got in the backseat of the car with her, and he conceded that "clothing was removed," according to Olberding's sworn statement. Still, no arrests were made.

JoAnn Brandon felt helpless when she heard about Teena's rape, just as she had when she learned that Teena had been molested as a child. But she also

felt some relief just to hear from Teena and know that her daughter would still come to her in a time of crisis. All that week Teena called home. She had a few things in Falls City to straighten out before she could come home—the alcohol and the forgery charges—and had a court hearing on the 31st. In the meantime, Teena said, she could be reached at the farmhouse in Humboldt.

Tammy phoned the State Patrol and, a few times, called Sheriff Laux, asking why no arrests had been made. Teena wasn't safe with those boys at large, Tammy pleaded. They had told Teena they were going to silence her permanently if she talked about the rape.

Back in Falls City, Lana Tisdel's sister had fought with her boyfriend, Phillip DeVine, who was visiting from out of town. Teena had seen Phillip in Falls City on Thursday, the 30th, and suggested that he stay in the farmhouse with her and one of her roommates, Lisa Lambert, whom Phillip also knew. It would be the three of them that night, plus Lisa's nine-month-old baby, Tanner.

By Thursday, Sheriff Laux' investigators decided that they had enough information on the rape case. They put reports calling for Nissen's and Lotter's arrests on the desk of County Attorney Douglas Merz. Merz said he was in court that afternoon and that the arrests would have to wait a day.

Sometime before one A.M. on Friday, John Lotter had shown up at the house of his friend Eddie Bennett. Eddie was sitting in the living room. John went inside and stayed for less than ten minutes. He knew Eddie kept a .38 revolver in his sock drawer. On New Year's Day, Eddie would report the gun missing.

Around one A.M., John and Tom Nissen arrived at Lana Tisdel's house, staggering and slurring their words. John was wearing gloves, which he didn't normally do. Tom asked Lana's mother where Teena was. "I think she's out in Humboldt," came the reply.

"I'm going to put a knife in my hand and kill somebody," he said to Lana's sister. Then he looked at Lana and added, "And you're next." Lana would later say that she didn't think Lotter was serious. It didn't occur to her to call the farmhouse in Humboldt and warn Teena, or to phone the cops.

Lotter and Nissen drove to Humboldt. "Basically, we said 'Let's go scare the shit out of them,'" Nissen said, describing the murders. "From the way events took place, I would say John probably had a plan. There wasn't much conversation." Nissen said the murders took him by surprise, that he and John had not discussed them beforehand. "This is the way it went, OK? John kicked in the door and we entered the

residence. I found a light in the living room and turned it on. We entered Lisa Lambert's bedroom. Lisa had picked up the phone and was trying to call someone. John took the phone out of her hand and hung it up.

"There was a waterbed in Lisa's bedroom. Brandon was on the floor at the end of the bed, covered by a blanket, hiding. I pulled Brandon off the floor and sat on the edge of the bed. Lisa said to me, 'Tom, don't let him hurt me,' because John had the gun. I was kind of surprised when she said my name. I'd never met her but she knew me, because she had seen me around, I guess.

"I don't recall even a whimper from Brandon. Brandon was shot then. Both times. I don't know how to put it in words, to be honest with you," Nissen said. "If I had known that they were going to be killed, I think I would have run the car off the road into a telephone pole on the way there, killed us instead. But I couldn't have just turned back. It was kind of a matter of pride."

When asked about the knife that had punctured Teena's liver, and her skull being crushed, Nissen replied: "The report that her skull was crushed, that was caused by a bullet entering her head," he said. "The stabbing, well, that was me. It just kind of happened all so fast. I couldn't tell [if she was already dead]. I honestly don't know. Were you ever caught up in a moment before?"

Nissen said that after Lotter fired the gun, Lisa's baby began to cry. "So I picked him up, trying to get him to calm down. And she said, 'Tom, will you give me my baby?' And I said, 'Yeah,' and gave it to her. Then the gun was fired again. At Lisa. It hit her between the stomach and the chest, and she bled a lot. Then I remember I looked at John, and I didn't feel drunk anymore. I didn't say anything to him. Then Lisa said to me, 'Take my baby. Promise he won't be hurt.' So I put him back in the baby bed, gave him a bottle. Then Lisa was hit in the eye.

"So then I left the room and found

Phillip in another bedroom, and he started to holler, 'I didn't see nothing. I won't tell nobody. Can't we work this out?' At that point it was obvious no one was going to walk out of there. And we went into the living room and Phillip sat down on the couch. Then the gun was fired, twice.

"I thought about my kids and my wife. I do believe that if I had to do it over again, I would have stood in front of Lisa and taken her bullet. Brandon didn't deserve to die either. But I don't feel real guilty about killing her. I think she probably would have been killed by someone anyway. I've met people in prison who knew her in Lincoln. She had people out to get her. People said they knew people that wanted to do that to her too. But when I think about stabbing her, it pretty much does me in. With Phillip, I'd say I'm sorry he's gone. I feel pretty bad about just being involved in it. My biggest problem is with Lisa. She was a mother. I think about her little boy growing up. Someday he will find out that somebody murdered his mom. I'd imagine it could cause quite a bit of anger, growing up without a mom. Anger will make a person do terrible things. He could take some of the same paths I did. And I'd hate to see someone end up like me because of something I took part in."

The three bodies were discovered several hours later, on the morning of December 31, by Lisa's mother, who had worried when she heard that Lisa had not shown up for work. It was three years to the day since Teena's sweet, nervous date at Holiday Skate World, her very first appearance as a boy.

At five P.M. on December 31, local police pulled up to Tom Nissen's house and found Tom and John Lotter in the front room, playing cards. Eddie Bennett's gun and a folding knife were found the next day on the frozen Nemaha River just off Highway 73. Ballistics tests proved that the bullets used in the murders came from the gun.

Lotter was charged with murder, kidnapping and sexual assault and Nissen was charged with murder, kidnapping and aiding and abetting the assault. Both men are awaiting trials in the early months of 1995. If found guilty, both could face the death penalty. The two were being held at the same prison in Lincoln, though they were not allowed to see or speak with each other. Both have pleaded not guilty in pretrial hearings. (Nissen's words here mark the first public statement about the case from either man; Lotter did not respond to requests for an interview.) Nissen said his lawyer is encouraging him to testify against Lotter and cop a plea. After Lotter was moved to a higher-security prison for tearing the plumbing from his cell wall, locals began to speculate that



GENERATION Y

he may try to get himself acquitted on some sort of insanity plea.

Although County Attorney Merz was initially slated to prosecute Lotter and Nissen, a judge has stepped in and appointed an independent prosecutor from Lincoln to help Merz. The Brandon family is in the process of filing a wrongful-death suit against Laux and Richardson County. They hope the state will determine whether Lana had any complicity in Teena's rape and murder. Even though Lana had helped her after the rape, Teena told her mother she was afraid of Lana. The Brandons were shocked to see Lana and her mother on *A Current Affair*. Michelle Lotter—John's sister and Lana's best friend—even accompanied the Tisdels on *The Maury Povich Show*. At the March arraignments for Lotter, the Tisdels talked and joked with him from the courtroom seats. For some time after his arrest, Tom Nissen continued his romantic involvement with Lana's aunt Missy.

Teena was buried in her favorite clothes—a black rugby shirt, matching cowboy hat and cowboy boots—beside her father, Patrick Brandon, at Lincoln Memorial Park Cemetery. At her funeral, mourners who knew her as Teena sat mostly on the left-hand side of the aisle. Those who knew her as a boy sat on the right. Today, dozens of girls who knew or dated Teena leave flowers and notes at her grave.

After the funeral, Teena's former fiancée, Gina Bartu, followed Lana Tisdel's car to a Long John Silver's. Something had been on her mind since she had learned of Teena's death.

"Did Brandon ever tell you about his friends in Lincoln?" Gina asked Lana.

"Not really," Lana said, "except for this one girl and how much that he still loved her."

Gina drove away feeling both better and worse than she ever had in her entire life. If only she had stayed with Teena, she thought, Teena wouldn't have gone to Humboldt and wouldn't have been raped and murdered.

Gina tried dating a man, but he balked when he learned about Teena. He said it made him "uncomfortable." Sometimes Gina fantasizes about moving away and starting over.

"I always hoped that if he'd work things out for himself," Gina said, "maybe someday we could still get married. The relationship was way too good

WHERE

&

HOW TO BUY

WIRED

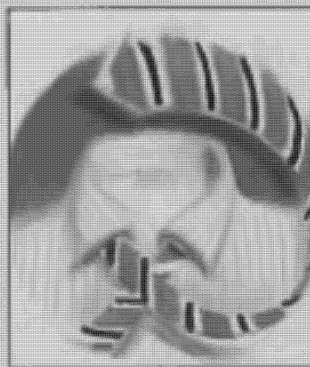
Page 26: "All in a Mall": Consumer information system by *Penguin Interactive Media*, 800-761-3463. "Digital Jeeves": Electronic organizer by *Apple Computer*, 800-708-7827. Software by *StarCore*, 800-708-7827. Electronic organizers: By *Smith Corona*, 800-669-3291. By *Sharp*, 800-237-4277. By *Day Runner*, 800-635-5544. "Wild Things": Message Watch by *Seiko*, 800-456-5600. Computer mouse pads by *Mad Mats*, 800-959-8198. Electronic sleep machine by *Radio Shack*, 800-843-7422.

STYLE

Page 28: "Two for the Show": Sports jackets: By *Barry Bricken*, at *Family Briches*, Greenwich, CT, 203-869-1326. By *Wilke-Rodriguez*, at *Bloomindale's*, NYC, 212-705-2000. By *Desna Karan*, at *Saks Fifth Avenue*. By *Vestimenta*, at *Ultimo*, Chicago, 312-767-0906. By *Hugo by Hugo Boss*, at *Ron Herman/Fred Segal Melrose*, Los Angeles, 213-651-3342. "Fancy Pants": Jeans: By *Matthew Botwinian*, at *Barneys New York*. By *Katharine Hammett*, at *Charivari 57*, NYC, 212-333-4040. By *Gaspar Saldaña*, at *Bloomindale's A.P.C.*, 212-966-9685. By *John Bartlett*, 212-647-9409. By *Architects*, at *Charivari 57*, NYC. "Clothes Line": Shirts by *Montel Williams for St. Remo*, at fine department stores. Jeans by *Armani*, 800-717-2929. T-shirts by *Calvin Klein*, at *Bloomindale's*, *Macy's* and *Saks Fifth Avenue*. Shoes by *Havana Joe*, 800-848-2774. "Old Money": Cuff links by *Bulgari*, at *Bulgari*, NYC, 212-315-9000. Watch by *Corus*, at *Tourneau*. Coin rings by *Elizabeth Locke*, at *Elizabeth Locke*, NYC, 212-744-7878. Lapel pins and cuff links by *Antique Jewel Box*, write: P.O. Box 203, Burke, VA 22015. Pendant by *Temple St. Claire Carr*, at *Barneys New York*.

THE SOFT SIDE OF DANNY GLOVER

Page 89: Sweater by *Ballantyne Cashmere*, at *Cashmere Cashmere*, NYC, 212-935-2522 or 212-968-5252, and Chicago, 312-337-6558. Tuxedo by *Bill Katzerman*, at *Allure*, Philadelphia, 215-561-4242; to order, 800-638-8170. Page 90: Sweater by *Calvin*



Klein, at *Bergdorf Men*, NYC. Jeans by *Joe Jonathon Rich* at *Mark Shbrook*, IL, 2686. Page 91 by *Belford M* apartment store *Desna Karan* stores. Sweater *Cashmere*, at *Cashmere*, se

ings. Sweatpants by *DKNY*.

ALL THAT GLITTERS

Pages 96-97: Highball glass Chicago, 312-642-6574. *Georg Jensen*, at *Georg Jensen*, 312-642-9160. Corkscrew *Cartier*, Chicago, 312-266- glass by *Baccarat*, at *Table* Chicago, 312-644-9004. *Georg Jensen*. Martini glass *Table of Contents*. Brandy coaster by *Cartier*, at *Cashaker* by *Alessi*, at *Table*. Champagne glass by *Sug* ments. Spoon by *Georg Jensen*.

VOICE RECOGNITION

Pages 116-118: Voice records: By *Voice Powered Techn* 2000. By *AT&T*, 800-325-7-800-888-8000. By *Sprint*, 800-255-3587. By *IBM*, 800-592-3675. By *Motorola*, By *Nokia*, 800-84-SCANA. By 3112. By *Clarion*, 800-6- *Amerigon, Inc.*, 818-932-120- *Corp.*, 800-426-9400. By 800-767-2775. By *Compaq*, By *Verbox Voice Systems*, 800- *IBM*, 800-TALK-2ME. By *IBM*, 800-825-5897. By *Articulate* 443-7077.

ON THE SCENE

Page 201: Money clips: *Elements*, Chicago, 312-64- *Creations*, Raleigh, NC, 919- *Gucci*, at *Gucci*, Chicago. By *Polo*, at *Polo/Ralph La* 312-280-1655. By *Pop Art*, a *erly Hills*, 800-567-6727.

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