

**THE 12 DAYS OF
CHRISTMAS
NOVELLA**

By THOM BIERDZ

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Contents

WHY I WROTE THIS	2
BIO	6
THE 1 ST DAY OF CHRISTMAS	10
THE 2ND DAY OF CHRISTMAS	18
THE 3RD DAY OF CHRISTMAS	28
THE 4TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS	39
THE 5TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS	44
THE 6TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS	53
THE 7TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS	60
THE 8TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS	73
THE 9TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS	83
THE 10TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS	95
THE 11TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS	121
THE 12TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS	131

WHY I WROTE THIS

I had probably done 1,000 paintings and even though I sold about 850, I lacked storage space, so decided from now on I would only paint what I would hang on my own secluded forest cottage walls, in case they don't sell.

I put off my usual portrait commissions from Facebook friends (you can see 400 pet/people paintings in BIERDZ ART, VOLUME 4) to do a group of pretty wilderness cottages because I simply love wilderness cottages (even live in one).

While planning about ten of these (scouting online for fairytale cabins), it occurred to me that not only could these sell individually but, since I often paint series, they could be linked together in some series idea. Having signed up for an art festival in a couple months in a nearby mountain town, it made sense that a Christmas theme would be appropriate, but the more subtle, the better, that way if a potential customer did not want a holiday painting, these did not necessarily look like holiday paintings.

The 12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS theme occurred to me because that could incorporate 12 paintings, and many animals, so I planned out each canvas, inspired by images of secluded fantastical cottages (many in Lake Arrowhead, California where I live), ideal backgrounds (from mountainous regions in Canada, etc.) and birds (partridges to swans).

I planned them to the last detail like I do my portraits, then painted. Only once they were finished and my thousands of Facebook friends liked them, did the idea of creating a book

around them emerge - because I loved to write - and had already self-published 11 books. THE 12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS NOVELLA would become my 12th book.

Now a complicated writer's puzzle evolved. Why would the 12 days of Christmas gifts *be at different homes?* – and *who would be giving them??* – ***and why?*** And *what one location could encompass these varied backgrounds?* You'll soon read how those hurdles were handled.

The writing is simple because I wanted this short - and the characters diverse, representing all sides to topical controversial issues, including scripture. I have been told that the contents are both inspired and inspiring. The miraculous events in the last chapters are based on true accounts, not mine, but lectures I have listened to many times.

Because the paintings were my focus and not the story, the original intent was to offer an 8.5x11 inch premium color book showing the images as large and bright as possible. However that turned out to be four times as expensive as a regular-sized paperback with black and white interior, which most people prefer, since the story soon overpowered the art.

However, since I wanted all readers to see the 12 original paintings that inspired this unusual story in their glory, those images were put on the front and back color covers.

You can see the 18x24 inch acrylic & oil paintings better at my web site, where there is an ongoing auction for the original paintings, and print versions available.

<https://thombierdz.com>



Partridge In A Pear Tree



Two Turtle Doves



Three French Hens



Four Calling Birds



Five Golden Rings



Six Geese A Laying



Seven Swans A Swimming



Eight Maids A Milking



Nine Ladies Dancing



Ten Lords A Leaping



Eleven Pipers Piping



Twelve Drummers Drumming

BIO

Born March 25, 1962 to a lower-middle-class family in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Thom Bierdz saved his bar tending tips and at 21 moved to Hollywood.

Bierdz is best known for his portrayal of legacy character Phillip Chancellor III on the daytime drama *The Young And The Restless*, recurring from 1986, last seen in 2011. He was a repeat guest star on *Melrose Place*, guest starred twice on *Murder She Wrote* and once on *Matlock* and *Robin's Hoods*. Other TV and movie roles include *Highway To Heaven*, *St. Elmo's Fire*, *The Last Place On Earth*, *The Gladiator*, *Warm Texas Rain*, *Hungry For Love*, *The Cavanaugh's*, *The Takedown*, *Win Lose Or Draw*, *The New Hollywood Squares* and *Old Dogs New Tricks*.

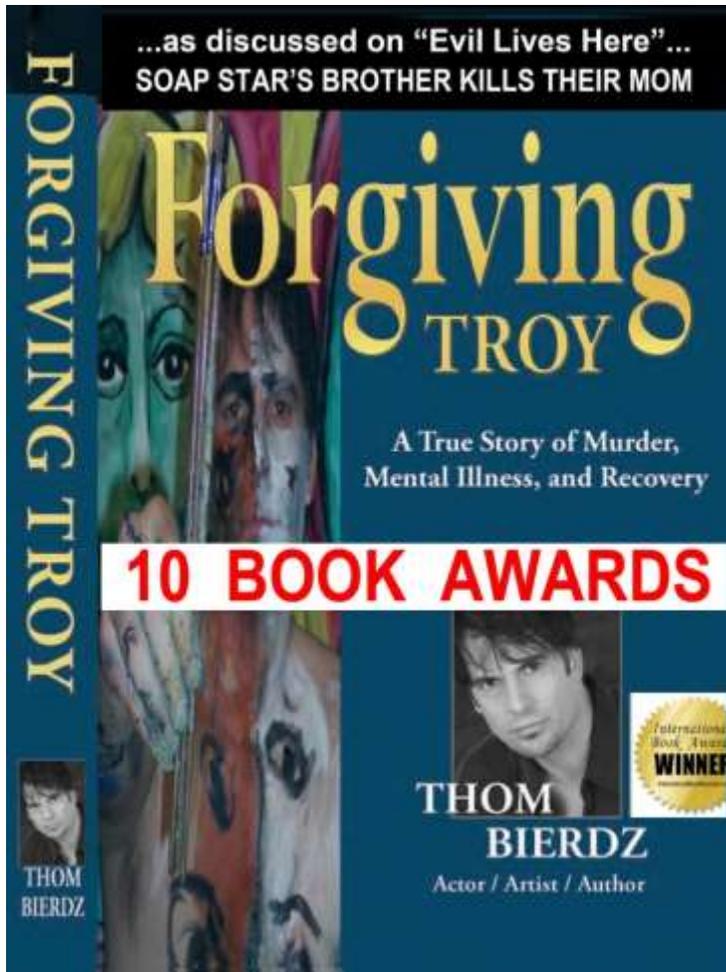
In 1997, young filmmaker Bierdz's first art film, *Heart Of The Oak*, won Best Experimental Film at Philadelphia International Film Festival and Best Experimental Film at University of California Davis snagging the coveted Golden Calf Award.

The art world embraced Bierdz in 2004 when Scarlett Johansson hosted his Soicher-Marin gallery show. In 2005 he won the *Out Magazine* Best Emerging Artist of Los Angeles and in 2006 was awarded the Key to the Light Award from The Thaliens for raising a great deal of money for charities.

["Bierdz is now one of Los Angeles' most successful and in-demand artists."](#) David Alexander Nahmod, *Express News*.

“On par with Picasso, Van Gogh, Matisse and Warhol,”
Tommy Lightfoot Garrett, *Highlight Hollywood*.

His first memoir, *Forgiving Troy*, recounting the murder of his mother by paranoid schizophrenic brother Troy, gained 10 book awards.



"Millions fell in love with Thom Bierdz on *The Young and the Restless* unaware that his real life was more dramatic than any soap opera." Daniel R. Coleridge, TVGuide.com

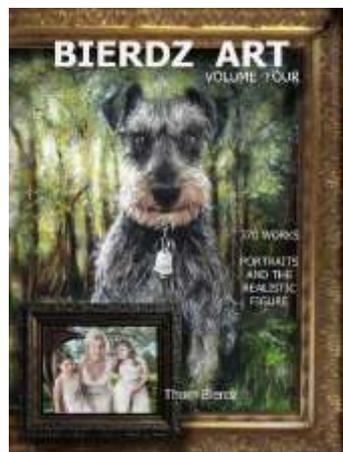
TV interviews on Forgiving Troy subject matter include Entertainment Tonight, CBS News, NBC News, FOX News, Soap Talk with Lisa Rinna, Brunch and Joan Quinn Profiles, many podcasts, and most recently Evil Lives Here: The Soap Star's Secret.

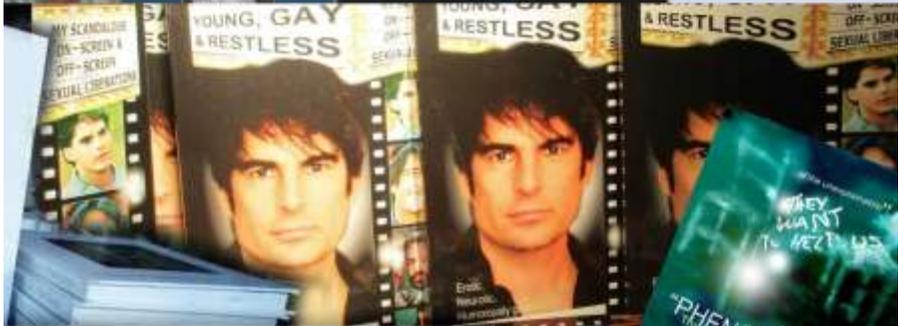
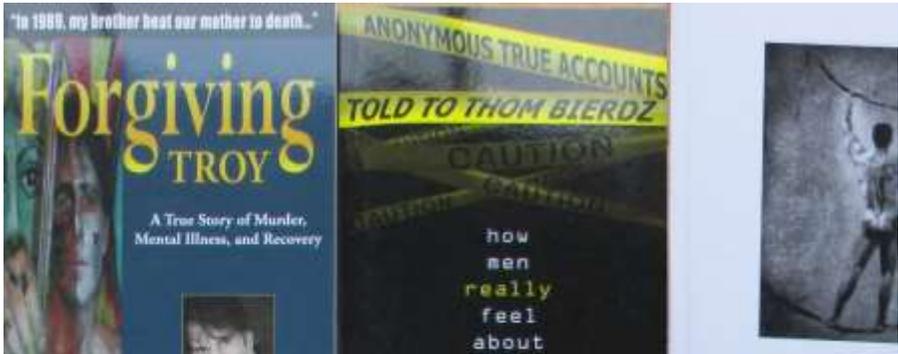
His Forgiving Troy book also spawned a documentary of the same name, directed by Warren Hohmann of KTLA News.

Being the first openly gay legacy soap actor, he was honored by the Human Rights Campaign in Minnesota, 2009.

Bierdz co-founded www.AmericanArtAwards.com in 2009. Every year the online fine art site honors the best 20 American galleries or museums, which in turn award breakthrough artists in over 60 countries.

For almost 12 years, the introverted artist has passionately painted commissioned portraits from a forest cottage in scenic Lake Arrowhead, California, while operating the online American Art Awards and hiking with his rescue dogs.





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THE 1ST DAY OF CHRISTMAS



717 acre Lake Lure sat in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, 27 miles west of Asheville. The epic man-made lake nestled in the Hickory Nut Gorge, surrounded by lush mountain tops and sheer granite cliffs. About 1,000 feet elevation meant only around 4 inches of snow annually, which residents liked, except at Christmas. To their chagrin, this year, like most, it didn't snow on Christmas.

Fighting the cold morning wind, tipsy Maria Flores, 42, tried to see through her long brown bangs and walk soberly as she approached Brick's small country grocery store. She hadn't noticed a brand new silver jeep going 3 miles an hour not far behind, a

handsome black-bearded man studying her – too closely – as he almost hit a small, thin brown-haired hippy chick with tattooed arms, Jenny Clark, 25, running across the street with a guitar.

Jenny screamed, “Watch where you’re going, you demented loser!!”

“Merry Christmas, punk!” he yelled, flipping her the bird.

Jenny kicked his front bumper and screamed more obscenities. The muscular man jumped out of his vehicle to stop her denting it, so little Jenny tried to hit him instead.

Maria, rattled, listened to Jenny and the man scream at each other, then entered Brick’s store, just as tall, wide-shouldered Dan Peters, 45, came out, pulling out a small gun from his waist. He pointed it at Kevin, saying, “Break it up.”

Kevin raised his hands, “Hey, no need for a gun, I was just trying to stop her from kicking my jeep.”

Jenny kicked Kevin’s bumper one more time, then backed away as Kevin, frightened, slowly got back in his jeep and drove away.

Dazed Maria entered the charming small mountain grocery store, followed by Dan. Large middle-aged bald man in an apron, Brick Evans, worked behind the counter and spoke, “Dan, I wish you wouldn’t even bring that gun in here.”

Dan shrugged, “North Carolina. Right to carry.”

It was morning, about 9, and the usual locals were seated in the shop window sipping coffee or leisurely collecting fresh baked breads for their respective Christmas feasts.

“Merry Christmas,” Maria expelled, naturally pretty, even without make-up. Never missing a day of exercise, her fit figure was evident even in her baggy brown sweatsuit. She untangled her long brown bangs and her warm Latin black eyes looked mesmerized at a row of priced Santa hats.

Dan sat in the big tufted suede chair nearest the curved stained glass window, snickering behind his oversized blonde mustache, “Maria honey, you look dazed. Forget what you came for?”

She just whisked her fingers at him from the doorway, tried to smile and smoothed the sweatsuit she had slept in. December 25 at these heights, she shivered, wishing she had worn her coat.

“Shoulda worn a coat, Maria,” Georgia Johnson, 70, huffed, refilling her coffee. “Hey Baldy, Georgia needs more milk!” Georgia shouted with humor to Brick.

Brick smiled wide, “Well, Georgia can get her big black butt to the refrigerator. Georgia, you know where the milk is.”

She laughed, “Oh no you didn’t.”

He laughed, his eyes twinkling, “I mean your big AFRICAN-AMERICAN butt.”

Dan kidded, “He means your PLUS-SIZE African-American DERRIERE.”

Grabbing the milk she walked back, swishing flamboyantly as if on a runway, and even at 70 with twenty extra pounds on her 5’8” frame, her appeal was as obvious as her heavy lemon perfume, “I’ll have you know men around the world coveted my deluxe espresso curves, and three proposed.”

Brick's large green eyes beneath his thick brows got misty, "You married the best of them. Still can't believe COVID killed Roy last year."

Dan asked, "Or was it the vaccine?"

Georgia looked glum, "Well, the four shots did not help him, we know that."

"Neither did your cooking," Brick joked.

"We come here for your abuse, Brick, even on Christmas morning," Dan smiled, "Until Amazon can start delivering inappropriate jokes at a cheaper price."

The little red bell above the old pine door rung as short, ancient Gary Richards stepped in, balancing on a cane, nodding to the others, exchanging Christmas greetings. Maria turned to him and lost her balance. He tried to help steady her, but being so weak, he fell to the floor, and her as well. Georgia and Dan, neither of them athletic, managed to help both Maria's and Gary's skinny bodies to stand.

"Gary, get yourself some hot coffee before Dan drinks it all," Brick said, smiling, "Was some lightning storm last night, eh? Too bad no white Christmas."

"White?!" Georgia kidded, stroking her weave, "Every year you want a WHITE Christmas. Never have you hoped for a BLACK Christmas."

Dan jumped in, "Everything's racist today."

Georgia shook her head, "The power is gone from that word now because people overused it. American kids today do not know

the real racism we experienced in my day. It wasn't until 1954 that blacks were allowed in white schools."

Brick smiled, "We love you, Georgia."

"And we love the thunder," old Gary said, fingers scratching his wide brown eyes. His small wrinkled face and dyed choppy brown hair barely visible behind his flannel scarf, flannel hat and thick glasses. "Did you all meet my handsome grand nephew yet?"

"I met Kyle," Brick said, "Looks like a movie star. Tall. Dark, handsome, chiseled jaw. Strong features, light hazel eyes, is he Arab or Israeli or Moroccan or Italian or Greek or Egyptian or from Turkey or what? Broad shoulders, slim. Not a blemish – looks cartoon handsome really. Stares you right in the eyes and listens to every word. He could be a politician. But let's hope he ends up being something less embarrassing - like a proctologist."

"That the one helping you at your farm?" Sharon Hinet, 47, asked, plopping her metal basket of boxed goods by the register. She flipped her dyed blonde hair, adjusted her crooked glasses and finger-patted her under-eye cream.

"Yep, my dead brother's daughter's son. My only kin," Gary stuttered, claiming the cushioned chair next to Dan.

"Look. Maria is lost," Dan rolled his huge blue eyes, pointing his pipe toward Maria, who stood frozen by the potato chips.

Maria waved him off with her hand, "Stop flirting. You're married."

Georgia whispered to her, "Honey, did you come in for gin?"

"No." Maria looked helpless.

“Someone’s telling a fib,” Georgia sneered.

“No,” Brick interceded, “She only buys that at closing. You come in for the Lucky Charms, Maria?”

“I just had some – don’t need it,” she said.

“Maybe cigarettes and a dirty magazine?” Dan asked, fingering his cleft chin.

Maria replied with only one finger: the middle one!

Georgia joked, “I was hoping Santa would put cigarettes and a dirty magazine in MY stocking. Only got coal. It’s like he’s not even listening.”

“Maria, if you have no Christmas plans, please join my daughter and I,” Sharon sneezed, then, “Georgia, of course you’re welcome, too. Gary, I have asked you a hundred times to game night these past ten years and you always refuse. None of us have ever met your family. Can you extend the invite to your grand nephew? My single daughter’s losing her looks as fast as a cut morning glory.”

“Sharon Hinet,” Georgia laughed. “Delilah is gorgeous.”

Sharon pointed to her own wrinkles and large butt, “Women have a window of beauty. She’s 28 and her window’s cracking. She ain’t no Disney princess anymore. Not like the crossdresser on Mile Road.”

“Did that tranny freak come in here yet?” Dan asked.

“Bird food!” Maria remembered. “Brick, you got bird food?”

“For chickens or for wild birds, Maria?” Brick asked.

‘It’s a pigeon or something,’ Maria explained. ‘Was in the front yard, in the tree this morning. There was a card that said please take care of me, my name is William.’

‘Maria’s seeing things!’ Dan laughed. ‘No one would ask you to take care of anything, seeing as how you took care of your husband and daughter...’

Maria snapped, ‘You’re one to talk, never letting your wife out of the house, Dan. She got monkey pox all these years or what? Maybe you married your sister and she looks too much like you because you both have the same mustache?’

‘Simmer it down, please. No one gets to be rude here, except me,’ Brick smiled.

Sharon chimed in, ‘Not Maria’s fault her husband took off with the kid.’

‘Was so,’ Dan stated, with his hand indicating drinking.

‘Was the bird tangled in a tree?’ Gary asked concerned.

‘Nope,’ Maria smiled, ‘It just sat on a branch. Now it just stays wherever I put it. It’s on the couch and refused to eat rye toast with orange marmalade or Lucky Charms, so I need to bring it actual bird food.’

‘Take a handful of chicken feed,’ Brick offered, ‘I won’t charge you, until we know what kind of bird it is and what it eats.’

Forty minutes later, a sober Maria walked back into the

grocery, and opened her denim coat to proudly reveal William the partridge. Georgia, Gary and Sharon seemed pleased. Brick and Dan were intrigued.

“It’s a partridge,” Dan said, petting it. “Bake it with honey and black pepper.”

“I’m not gonna cook it!” Maria cuddled it to her chest, “I am gonna care for it. Somebody sent it to me. Maybe God did.”

Georgia looked on, approvingly, “Might be a good idea. Might be good company for her. Maybe I need myself a partridge.”

“What do they eat?” Maria asked.

Her misty green eyes looked into Georgia’s, Brick’s, Dan’s, Gary’s – but no one seemed to know.

Sharon searched her iPhone and read, “Seeds from wheat, barley, oats, corn, sunflower, foxtail, ragweed, and Russian thistle.”

“I’m on it,” Brick smiled, assembling ingredients.



THE 2ND DAY OF CHRISTMAS



December 26. Handsome, Jo Ludden, 35, rose from his bed, kicking the orange wig and pink lingerie that were on the floor into his messy closet. As he peed, he shaved his beard stubble, hating what a testament to testosterone he was.

A few minutes later he brought his coffee cup to the window and pulled back the Lady Gaga curtains, surprised to see two grayish brown birds and a yellow paper on a tree branch. The birds flew around the yard, but always returned near the yellow paper. Muscular Jo went out in his pink robe to investigate. The birds relaxed to the point they let him touch them. The yellow note was stapled to the branch:

*We're turtle doves named Madge and Moe.
If you make us a wall hole, we're trained to come and go.*

A few minutes later, Jo in a leather jacket and jeans walked into Brick's grocery store, but held the door open, his deep concerned eyes on the outside turtledoves. A wealthy woman in a mink coat exited with grocery bags.

Brick whispered to everyone, "That was the governor's wife, staying in Lake Lure for the holidays. Don't know why."

Brick worked behind the counter as Dan and Georgia and Sharon and Maria talked over coffee by the window. The chemistry between Dan and Maria was obvious, but nothing new.

Dan said to Jo, "Buddy, close the door so the heat stays in."

Jo shot him a rugged confrontational look, "I was wondering if the doves would follow me inside."

Maria rose to look.

Jo pointed, "Do you see the doves?"

"Doves?" Georgia asked.

"Yes – they're now by the old man who's walking here slowly."

"Is it old Gary? He's got to be the oldest man ALIVE," Georgia surmised.

As Gary entered the store, he seemed filled with exhilaration that the turtledoves flew near him.

"They like Gary," Sharon said.

"Are those your doves?" Gary asked Jo.

“Got them this morning,” Jo gulped a bit, self-conscious, now being the center of attention in a brand new environment.

Georgia started, “Are you new to Lake Lure?”

“Yeah,” Jo said, “Moved in after Thanksgiving. I’m Jo. J. O.”

“No E?” asked Sharon.

“I outgrew the E. I bought the stucco home with the French doors-”

“Oh,” Sharon purred, “With the roof tiles. I always wanted to see the inside, and so has my vivacious beautiful lovely available single daughter 36-26-37, Delilah.”

Brick wiped his hands on his apron and shook Jo’s hand. “Welcome to Lake Lure. Did you see the view from Chimney Rock yet? The waterfalls at Hickory Nut Falls are the highest east of the Mississippi.”

“Not yet.”

“I got the maps. Two bucks. You’ll be seeing a lot of me and my wife Bridget and our teenage boys Brad and Brian cuz we own the only grocery for miles and miles. The soft-looking French and Swedish blonde always playing with her phone and glasses, is Sharon Hinet, she and her brunette daughter live in the yellow house on Market Pier. 400 year-old Gary here has a farm with cows just south of here. That finely aged ebony woman is Georgia Johnson, lives in the ivory house with the best bay view. Black-eyed Maria Flores lives in the gorgeous stone home with creeks all over it, and know-it-all Scandinavian Dan Peters and his wife who may be his sister with a mustache and their kid live somewhere off Crop Drive.”

Dan laughed, "I did not marry my sister."

"Nice to meet you all," Jo said. "Well, I've only been here two weeks, away from the big city and I love it so far. The new me."

Brick continued pricing cans, "You'll get along fine if you don't mind playful ribbing, as long as you don't talk politics. These days Dems and Repubs hate each other for no reason which is why none of you know what I am. Because I need your business. Special on canned kidney beans today, 25% off for Dems and 25% off for Repubs."

Dan spoke, "Most the DemonRATS stay in the city. Thank god."

Maria argued, "The RepubliTARDS always judge, like cowboy Dan here, who thinks he's better than the rest of us."

Dan continued, "I don't mind most brainless whiny Dems, but the new ones push it on our kids. I hear there's a tranny in the neighborhood, and, ick, but let's just agree to keep it away from kids."

Jo said, "Just because a person of one gender identifies as another gender has nothing to do with other people's kids--"

"Let's keep it that way," Dan said, untucking and waving his gun for a minute, then reholstering it.

Jo clarified, "I mean, a person's sexuality has nothing to do... I mean, transvestites are not pedophiles--"

"Of course not," Georgia insisted, "I've lived in big cities and knew a hundred drag queens. They don't lust for kids. They lust for Denzel Washington just like the rest of us."

Brick ushered, "No more drag queens or politic talk. Let's just

all agree big corporations are destroying mom and pop shops like this, and that all congresspeople do what they are bribed to do, and not what they promise us voters.”

Maria looked around, “Looks like we all can agree on the last point.”

Dan said, “But capitalism NEEDS big corporations, Brick. Thank you AT&T for 30 years of employment, and Sharon sells real estate for a big company, what is it?”

“Coldwell Banker,” Sharon said.

Dan added, “And Georgia’s husband worked for a huge company-”

Georgia explained, “Bio-Rad laboratories. Animal studies, testing. And Maria works as a loan officer for Bank Of America.”

Brick sighed, “Giant monopolies devouring us little guys.”

Jo peeked out the door to see the turtledoves flying, “I need turtledove food.”

“How did you get turtledoves?” Georgia laughed.

Jo pulled out the note. “It says they are Madge and Moe and trained and will reside with me I guess if I give them a way inside my house?”

Maria yelled, “Same yellow note paper that I got yesterday! With my partridge!”

Sharon asked, “Who is giving people birds?”



Dan said, "Pear tree. Partridge in a pear tree? Two turtle doves? Maria, was your partridge in a pear tree?"

"Yes! In my pear tree..."

Dan continued, "Two turtle doves. Like the song. This is weird."

"How does the song go?" asked Gary.

As Dan and Maria sang, "On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me..." Sharon fiddled with her iPhone and shared the info aloud, "*The 12 days of Christmas is the period in Christian theology that marks the span between the birth of Christ and the coming of the Magi, the three wise men. It begins on December 25, Christmas, and runs through January 6.*"

"Who anonymously gives people live birds??" Brick asked.

A Native American man entered with flyers, "Can I put up a notice somewhere?"

Brick pointed to a bulletin board, "What's it for?"

As he secured it to the board, he explained, "Native-American petting zoo is going to open in the Spring. We need publicity. Thanks, Brick," And then he left.

Sharon read aloud from her phone, "Here's more from the Catholic News Agency material. *12 Days Of Christmas is an English Christmas carol. From 1558 until 1829, Roman Catholics in England were not permitted to practice their faith openly. Someone during that era wrote this carol as a catechism song for young Catholics. It has two levels of meaning: the surface meaning plus a hidden meaning known only to members of the Church.*

"The 'True Love' one hears in the song is not a smitten boy or girlfriend but Jesus Christ, because truly Love was born on

Christmas Day. The partridge in the pear tree also represents Him because that bird is willing to sacrifice its life if necessary to protect its young by feigning injury to draw away predators."

"So I got the partridge because someone thinks I am Jesus? Jesus-like?" Maria laughed.

Everyone shook their head or said no. Maria was deflated.

"How fun," Jo said, "I'm in a small mountain town two weeks and already a mystery fit for a TV detective like *Murder She Wrote*..."

"Lord, let's hope it doesn't involve murder," Georgia breathed.

Dan looked fiery, "To avoid murder, keep the trannies away from our kids..."

Jo rolled his eyes and moved to Brick to ask about food for the birds, then later asked Sharon, "What does it say about the symbolism for the turtledoves?"

Sharon searched and read, "OK, let me find it. Ann Ball in her book, *HANDBOOK OF CATHOLIC SACRAMENTALS* says *the two turtle doves symbolize the Old and New Testaments.*"

"Sorry, not familiar with both testaments," Jo confessed.

"I'll bring you mine," Dan said.

"No thank you," replied Jo.

"Bible is the word of God," Dan insisted.

"Which god?" quipped Jo.

Brick added, "Dan, there are 4300 religions."

"I listened to 10 hours of the Bible on YouTube last year," Jo shared, "But that Bible god kept killing people, which made no sense to me."

"God has to kill evil," Dan declared. "He has to kill the Devil, devils..."

Sharon read from her phone, *"There are 160 separate killing sprees in the Bible for which God is to blame... includes every slaughter in the Old and New testaments, and also in Apocrypha, the contested books which are included in the Roman Catholic Bible... A total of 2,821,364 deaths are specifically enumerated in scripture as either directly orchestrated by God, or carried out with his assistance or approval. Satan, on the other hand, notches up only 10 kills."*

"Maybe the Bible is not the best advert for a loving god," Georgia said, "Dan, perhaps a better way to share your faith is to BE a loving, Jesus-like soul yourself."

Maria added, "To new neighbors, like this handsome Jo."

"God is supposed to be feared. I am a God-fearing man," Dan explained.

"Not me," said Jo.

Maria added, "I believe in a nice god, but not a mean god I would fear."

"Time to go hunting," Dan huffed, exiting quickly.

Jo whispered, "Killing innocent animals. Is that supposed to be godly, too?"

"I couldn't hunt," Georgia said.

Sharon shivered in disgust, then not realizing her hypocrisy, asked Brick, “You got fresh pork, Brick? Delilah’s been bugging me for my pulled pork.”

Georgia added, “You do make a wonderful pulled pork.”

Brick stared at Jo, “Oh no, you another vegan?”

“What right do I have to take another life??” Jo said.

“I don’t carry no vegan fake meat here, but just got in barrels of apples, corn, lettuce and celery. Tomatoes too.”

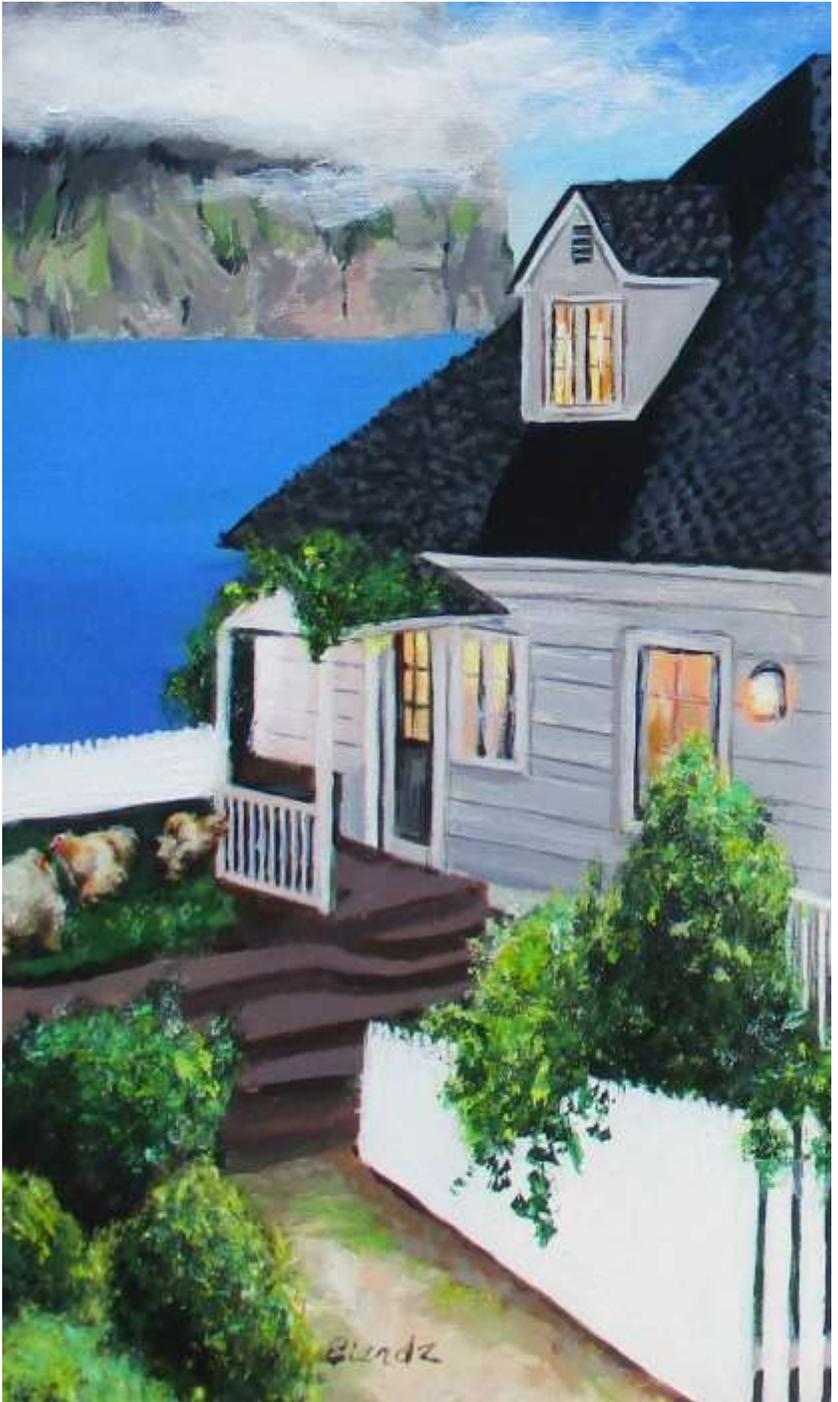
“Thanks,” Jo said, “I’ll come back later – want to get going so these birds don’t freeze. I’ll buy whatever you think they’ll eat.”

THE 3RD DAY OF CHRISTMAS



The next day, December 27, Brick was excitedly sharing with every customer that the mystery Santa had given Georgia three French hens. He encouraged them to see for themselves, sending them off with written directions. The mink-wearing governor's wife suspiciously watched Brick's activity from a distance, but did not go to Georgia's like the others did.

With the huge lake waves and tall cliffs and her impeccable stately home as a backdrop, the widowed Georgia was as delighted by the three French hens as she was by the dozen visitors, all buzzing with theories about who was behind the 12 Days Of Christmas mystery.



Dan announced, "They're fine to eat, like regular chickens. They look bigger but it's all feathers..."

"Nobody eats my babies!" Georgia held up the yellow note, "Please take care of Dinah, Diane and Debbie, who will need heat in these cold months."

Skinny hippy Jenny, 25, with light blue eyes, stringy mousy brown hair and floral arm tattoos, who kicked the jeep outside Brick's grocery store on Christmas morning, read nervously from her phone, "*When the Twelve Days rhyme was written, French hens were a prized table bird in both France and England. This breed originated in France in the late 16th century.*"

"I'm building them a pen and will put a heater in it," added Kyle, 36, every bit as handsome as Brick had described.

Gary was petting the hens, "I'm Gary and this is my grand nephew, Kyle."

"Oh we gotta make them a doggy door into the kitchen!," exclaimed Georgia with excitement.

A short wealthy Asian couple, Qi and Li Xong, 55, reiterated their concern that hens will defecate in the house, so Georgia happily conceded that they'd only be in part of the kitchen. For the first time since her husband died, Georgia's house was full of life.

Dan wondered aloud, "Maria got a partridge, and Maria's lonely. Georgia's lonely. Is the secret Santa giving pets to lonely folks?"

"I want a gift. What comes next?" pretty brunette Delilah shouted, as her mother Sharon followed behind from their parked car.

“Four Calling Birds tomorrow!” Dan yelled, “Then Five Golden Rings in two days. I hope I get the golden rings so I can hock them for a M16 rifle.”

“Oh, that’s were I’ve seen you,” Jenny stated, “You were the psycho waving the gun outside the little grocery store on Christmas.”

Dan retorted, “You were the psycho kicking a jeep?”

Georgia hit Dan playfully, “Nobody needs an M16,” then hugged him, “This mystery is so exciting, isn’t it?”

Sharon read from her phone, “*3 French Hens symbolize Faith, Hope and Charity, the Theological Virtues.*”

“It’s me to a T,” Georgia said as she pet the roaming hens. “Must be given to me by someone who knows me --- or – knows I NEED faith, hope and charity,” she laughed.

Delilah read aloud from her phone, “Georgia, this says: *French hens aren't terribly broody, but are good foragers and a nice, hardy breed. They are decent layers, producing 150-200 eggs per year on average.*”

Georgia shouted, “You are all coming back for many omelets! Many!”

Dan said, “You’ll need a rooster.”

Gary spoke up, “No, actually hens will lay eggs without a rooster, but the eggs won't develop into chicks.”

“I’m hungry already,” Dan said.

Georgia looked around, “Oh for heavens’ sake, y’all need to come inside and I’ll make up lunch. I am a prepper, stocked up in case of nuclear war, so I can easily whip up a great meal for... 14...

15... 16... all 17 of us! My husband Roy would turn over in his grave, me having all you white people, even strangers, inside our home. He never wanted people over. He did not trust the cable man or gas man.”

Georgia ushered her guests in one by one, but Jenny felt unwelcome and looked away to her car to leave.

“Now darling, I know we never met,” Georgia said, “But please join us inside.”

“Thanks so much,” she answered, “I’m Jenny and your house is soooo fantastic. I mean, wow, it’s like a dream. Never been in expensive places like this.”

Georgia asked, “Where you from?”

Jenny said, “I grew up in the trailer park with the slide off the I40 highway.”

“How lovely.” Georgia saw a muscular man walking over in an orange wig and pink dress, “Hello??”

“Is this the place that got three French hens?” Jo asked, his low bass voice at odds with his feminine adornments, “I got the two turtle doves.”

“Oh my goodness, you’re Jo. J. O. I did not recognize you as a... female impersonator. Please come inside and join the party and see my hens.”

It was the best afternoon Georgia had in years, proudly showing everyone her immaculate holiday tree and endless husband’s photos and historical books on African-American inventors. Sharon and Delilah worked alongside her to prepare and serve the neighborly guests a hearty meal while the French hens played inside and out.

Outside, Gary helped his grand nephew Kyle to build a pen.

“Like any of these girls?” Gary asked.

“Delilah is sexy, so is her mom in a way. Maria’s kind of interesting, and so is the little hippy chick.”

Later, Maria had a cocktail while flirting with Kyle who was building the pen, but when she disappeared saying she was going to bring him back a drink and sandwich, she never returned. She got distracted checking her Christian Singles messages on her phone. Kyle eventually went to find her, but saw her and Dan sharing a chair and did not want to interfere with what was or was not happening between them. Dan stared in disgust across the room at Jo in drag, and Jo returned the glare with equal disgust, pointing to Dan’s wedding ring and Maria.

Backing into the hall, Kyle watched the group from a distance, and his side view caught Jenny in Georgia’s bedroom, her hands feeling through a dresser drawer.

“What you looking for?” Kyle asked.

She got nervous and withdrew her hands, while twisting a ring onto her finger. A big ring. A man’s ring. Kyle wondered if she didn’t just steal it.

“Nothing, I just love antiques. What’s your name?” she asked.

“Kyle. Yours?”

“Jenny. I’m renting a log cabin between here and Chimney Rock.”

“I don’t know where that is. I’m new here, from Chicago. Here to help my uncle do a few things before he dies.”

“Oh he’s dying? I’m so sorry.”

“He’s not sorry. He’s ready, says in the afterlife he will be better off.”

“I don’t believe that, do you?”

“Maybe, why not?”

“Because we’re flesh and guts and intestines and organs and we can see plainly those do not get better off after death.”

“I’m an optimist.”

“Sure, anyone who looks like you would be.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

“When my hair is dolled up and my make-up on, and frilly sleeves over some of these tattoos, I can be kinda hot.”

“It’s a date. Dinner it is. We either eat at Brick’s tonight, or your place, or my uncle’s farm – plenty of room.”

“OK, I’m up to it. Come over. I even have a fireplace.”

As she recited the address, he typed it into his phone.

When she went into the bathroom, Kyle found his uncle in the kitchen petting the hens and pulled him outside.

“The hippy, Jenny, I think she stole a man’s ring from this lady’s dresser.”

Gary looked pained. “I have to tell Georgia.”

Later, Gary whispered the news to Georgia, whose happy demeanor quickly dissipated. She immediately made a scene, pointing to Jenny across the room, “What’s your name again, sweetie?!”

“Jenny. Hi everyone. I’m renting a log cabin on Oak Forest Road between here and Chimney Rock. It’s so much better than Travis Trailer Park. With the slide you can see from the highway?”

Georgia put out her hands and moved to her to embrace her, and as she did, roamed through her pockets – and pulled out the stolen ring.

Jenny was mortified, “That’s not mine. I don’t know how it got there.”

Georgia steamed, “My husband was right! Get out of here, you white trash! What kind of evil nerve possesses you, child?”

Jenny, blushing, acted like she had no idea about the ring, slinked toward the door to exit. Then suddenly she turned and had a tantrum, “You pompous elites. You lucky rich Republican vultures have so much money you get to buy these crazy expensive homes with Taylor Swift views like this! You get, get, get! Yeah I know I am trailer trash and dreamed of fitting into some Stepford community like this but you’re all boring and obnoxious! Nothing ever works out anyway for me! I whored on the street at 14 to crackpot boring vultures like you.”

Georgia spoke softly, “Honey, stop. You don’t fit in by stealing.”

“I needed money for rent because I got fired and miscarried. Screw you. Screw all of you, you lying predator hypocrites. In your fake sweet perfect Martha Stewart cottages! You are JOKES!”

“Shut up, trash,” Jo shouted at Jenny.

“Get the heck out,” Dan told her.

Jenny’s head was down hurrying to the car so did not catch Kyle’s apologetic eyes. Her Mustang clunker sped away.

A couple hours later, at Gary's farm, Kyle steadied his uncle's hands trying to take heart pills. Gary was drained of color, and looked regrettably from his wood farmhouse porch to the cows in the field, "What will you do with the five cows?"

"What do you want me to do with them?"

"Find them a loving home," Gary smiled, "I'll die this week. I can already feel a younger, healthier me on the other side. No more walking or breathing aches."

Moos and clucking sounds could be heard in the distance. After his uncle drank the water, Kyle put him in his bed and turned on the old phonograph, playing old country holiday music.

"I decided I'm still going to see Jenny tonight," Kyle stated.

Gary nodded, "Poor little Jenny. Can you help her?"

"How?"

"Her victim energy attracts victim circumstances. The only way she can start to attract the life, an easier life, is for her to emit an easier energy. She needs to switch from negative to positive."

"I'll try to explain that."

"She won't be able to understand, from where she is. She first needs to feel like a winner. Go make her feel like a winner."

Kyle kissed his uncle's forehead and left the room.

Kyle's car pulled up at Jenny's address, and he walked toward the log cabin door, not expecting Jenny to kick it open and come at him wagging a butcher knife.

"What the heck??" Kyle yelled, backing up.

"What are you doing here?!"

"We had a date."

She softened considerably, "I didn't think you'd still want it. YOU TOLD THAT LADY I STOLE HER HUSBAND'S RING!?"

"Yes."

Neither said anything. There was nothing to say.

"Are you going to bring me to the cops?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"Look, you made a huge embarrassing mistake but we all make embarrassing mistakes. We all need dinner, too. Can I come in?" he said, plucking her acoustic guitar on the porch.

Trembling, she didn't answer. He poorly played the guitar and sung to her until she relented and laughingly let him inside.

The interior was a very bare rental, wilderness décor, and she had nothing to clutter it with. He steadied her trembling hands, "You're trembling. Have you been drinking?"

"No" she said, laughing, "I've been crying at what a horrific good-for-nothing zero nutcase psycho I am."

“Nah, you’re a ten.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“A nine.”

She laughed and hurriedly put on make-up until she looked good, “A seven and a half. I’ve got a fireplace! I don’t know how they work but I always wanted a fireplace! Can you get it to work?”

He built a fire as she heated a can of soup and made salads. They talked about their very different upbringings, favorite songs and movies, past relationships and whether they would stay in Lake Lure or not. Neither figured they would, but agreed it really had exceptional views and nature and escape from city stresses.

The firelight and chemistry led to intense romance, and Jenny certainly did not play hard to get. They made love in front of the fireplace for hours, then when the fire died, he carried her to the bed, where they lay entwined until the sun rose.

“Oh, I got to get to my uncle’s!” Kyle exclaimed at dawn, dressing in a hurry, rubbing his light hazel eyes awake. She looked surprised, then loving, then jealous, then betrayed.

“I’ll call you later,” he said.

“A gorgeous guy like you doesn’t call a skank girl like me later,” she replied, rolling under the covers. He playfully spanked her, then left.

THE 4TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS



December 28. The yellow note was pinned to tree bark and read, *“Four calling birds. Now free. No cages, no owners.”* The birds chirped and flew around a beautiful Tudor home which was flooded and abandoned, too near Hickory Nut waterfalls.

Dan welcomed the many curious locals, saying, “Did Brick tell you I found the note? See the birds? They’re still near here. Did you hear them calling! Chirping? An orange one is in that tree – a blue one in that tree there – two orange ones, one yellow one...”

Georgia pinched his arm, “How in the world, with hundreds of homes in this area, did you happen to find a small yellow note on

the flooded Sawyer property? Maybe you're the Secret Santa, Dan??”





Dan laughed and excitedly pointed to the calling birds, then looked to Maria, Sharon, Delilah, Kyle, Gary, Jo (not in drag) and others who were approaching, "Someone please read the spiritual relevance of four calling birds."

Sharon adjusted her glasses and read aloud from her phone, "*The four calling birds symbolize the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.*"

Georgia slapped Dan's butt, "You ARE the culprit doing this, aren't you?"

"Doubtfully," he replied.

Maria edged in, "Maybe Dan's wife raises birds or something?"

"Maybe she doesn't," Dan kidded back, then, to Jo, "You're not a woman today?"

Jo replied, "I am always a woman."

"No, you're not, you're a man. God made two genders."

"I am a woman inside."

"You look like a man."

Jo socked Dan, surprising everyone.

Dan painfully annunciated, "You punch like a man," then reached for his gun.

Georgia took the gun away and said adamantly, "No violence in Lake Lure. Ever. This is not the city! Do you men, I mean people, understand?"

Jo looked away.

Dan vented, "God only made two genders."

Maria reiterated, “Jo, we don’t care what clothes you wear or what gender you want to be, but we care if you hit people. We don’t hit each other in this town.”

Jo hissed, “But Dan started it.”

“He did not,” Maria insisted. “He has free speech in America and so do you.”

“Speech is violence,” Jo whined.

“Bull!,” Maria rolled her eyes. “Speech is not violence! Speech is just words.”

“No hitting!” Georgia repeated. “Children hit. People missing brains hit. Gangs hit. Refined adults do not hit, now apologize to Dan.”

“I’m sorry,” Jo said, “That you judge me.”

“Same,” Dan huffed.

Georgia gave Dan back the gun.

THE 5TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS



December 29. Jenny appeared to be asleep, Kyle lay next to her in her bed, scrolling through his phone.

“Searching hot babes in the neighborhood?” Jenny asked.

“Hardly. Checking messages on Facebook.”

“So, what’s new on Facebook?”

About 100 more pages.