

"In 1989, my brother beat our mother to death..."



Forgiving TROY

A True Story of Murder,
Mental Illness, and Recovery



**THOM
BIERDZ**

Actor / Artist / Author

“Millions of viewers fell in love with Thom Bierdz on *The Young & The Restless* unaware that his real life was more dramatic than any soap opera. This book proves he is not just another pretty face – but an artist of substance, power and talent.”

- **Daniel R. Coleridge, TVGUIDE.COM**

“An epic, raw and overwhelming story of tragedy, chaos, humanity, and ultimately compassion. A rare book that dives, unapologetically and uncensored, into the workings of an American family torn apart by matricide and mental illness. Highly recommended!”

- **Jeffrey Keen, USABOOKNEWS.COM**

“Shakespearean in its tragic underpinnings, *Forgiving Troy* fearlessly tackles a litany of societal ills that ostensibly seem insurmountable, yet the book reverberates with the clear ring of redemption. Author – artist – activist Thom Bierdz has dysfunction running through his veins, but just like a junkie in the process of hardcore rehabilitation, he wages a war against his demons.”

- **Michael Kearns, IN MAGAZINE**

SAMPLES OF READERS' EMAILS

“...your book is stunning...I’ve been consumed by it all week, either reading it or thinking about it constantly - you have not helped my chronic insomnia any this week. I like to think I’m fairly articulate, especially since I write for a living,... but I’m at a loss for words. Your honesty so raw, your personal journey so haunting, I’m in a mixed state of being pained, empathetic, overwhelmed, exhilarated and incredibly inspired....”

“I have never ever read such a brutally honest and well written autobiography...I finished reading it last night and said WOW, I really could not believe one person could go through so much and still be sane...it really is life-changing, mate. I really believe the book can show people that anything is possible.”

“I felt like I was intruding into your soul. Honest, I thought...I shouldn’t be here. This is private.”

“Your own personal life force literally flows off the pages...”

“Have you ever read any of the books by Richard Bach by any chance? *Jonathon Livingston Seagull*? *Illusions*? Been pondering ad nauseum the last time I was affected quite this way by another book and it suddenly dawned on me...”

“...you may well have written the most self-analytical biography since Brian Wilson’s book *Wouldn’t It Be Nice*...Congratulations Thom, you’re not just another Hollywood bimbo...”

Forgiving TROY

A True Story of Murder,
Mental Illness, and Recovery

Thom Bierdz

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To Mothers

our source of unconditional love

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Preface

On July 14, 1989, my youngest brother beat our mother to death with a baseball bat.

This book is a record in words and images of my need to understand why she was killed. The search was debilitating and caused me to doubt my own sanity. It was also exhilarating and, I believe, miraculous.



Me, Mom, and Troy (a month before Troy killed Mom)

All events in this book are true.

Some names have been changed to protect identities.

Cages

July 15, 1989

That Saturday afternoon, when the phone rang with news that would change the rest of my life, I was in a monkey cage.

I had built the cage for a little Rhesus monkey named Abu. I wanted him to have as much room as possible to swing on his toy tire, so the cage extended from my bedroom window a few yards to the driveway. It was a good thing I had this extra space because when I was inside this cage, washing monkey feces off the wood slats, and stepped too close to my pet, he would back into a corner and scream. This monkey seemed to fear me from the day we met. Abu rejected most attempts to love him, and his hostility tested my affection for him daily.

The phone rang again then the machine answered.

“Tommy?” It was Hope, my 28-year-old sister.

Although I was a year younger than Hope, I felt older because I’d escaped our little midwestern town years ago. I was flying high in Hollywood, banking on my fame as a daytime TV star to propel me to my ultimate dream of movie-stardom. I might not look like Tom Cruise with my hands dripping soap scum and monkey shit, but people told me I resembled him. My look and determination landed me a big part on the country’s #1 soap opera, *The Young and the Restless*. As far as I was concerned, there was nothing to stop me from becoming the next big box-office star in 1990 or soon after.

Forgiving Troy

Hope's soft voice cracked, "Something's happened here. We have to talk."

Surprised by her tone, I quickly climbed through the window into my bedroom, dried my hands, and picked up the phone. "What's wrong?"

"He did it," Hope said. "Troy killed her."

"What?"

"Mom's dead."

"Troy killed her?"

"He killed her," she confirmed.

"Now wait a minute," I took a breath, letting it sink in. "Mom's dead?"

"He killed her." She stopped breathing.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm okay. He beat Mom's head."

Her usually cheerful husband sounded frantic as he got on the phone. "Hey, Thom, it's Sam."

"Tell Thom how," Hope quietly said in the background.

Mentally disassociating from what I was hearing, I became hypersensitive to the phone in my hand. The receiver suddenly seemed heavier, and I discovered tiny holes I'd never before noticed.

My distraction suddenly ended as Sam said, "Your brother beat her with a baseball bat. Your grandpa and cousin John found your mom this morning in her kitchen." He paused before adding, "Her head wasn't even in one piece."

My sister took the phone back. "The police say he's coming to California to get you. He wants to kill you. So you'd better get away from your house right now," she ordered. "I mean it."

Damn Angel

July 15, 1989

I hung up the phone and sat on the bed. Outside the window, I could see my dark-haired lover of about a year, Rod Meyers, stop sweeping the driveway so he could play with Abu through the bars of his cage. Rod must not have heard Hope's message. I caught Rod's sensitive brown eyes, but did not cry out for him, so his attention returned to the monkey. As much as Abu loathed me, he adored Rod.

I began hunting for a message saved on the machine.

"It's just me," said Mom's voice from a few days earlier, trying to sound happier than she was. "You owe me quite a few phone calls. I want to talk to you."

What was it she wanted to talk about?

Mom's voice said, "I love you, you know," then hung up.

Was that the last message I would ever receive from my mother?

Would it be possible for my dead mother to ever get another message to me?

Could someone that was dead ever make contact again with someone alive?

Dazed, I got off the bed and walked into the bathroom. I studied my reflection in the mirror as I washed my hands. I looked different. Something was different. Something was "off." My eyes were "off."

But what about Mom's eyes? What was she looking at? Instead of

Forgiving Troy

watching over me from Wisconsin, I hoped she was now watching over me from somewhere else – from another dimension.

But was she farther away from me? Or closer?

I went out the bedroom's French doors into the yard and stood near Rod. His short beard and sideburns curled in the summer humidity.

"Troy killed Mom," I said matter-of-factly.

"You're kidding."

"No."

"What?!"

"Hope just called."

"No way."

"The cops say he might be coming to kill me next."

"This is a bad joke."

"Troy is probably coming after me. Or maybe he's coming after Hope or Gregg or maybe even going to try to kill Dad in Texas? Do you think he hates Dad?"

"I don't know."

"He's probably coming here. That's what Hope and the police think. He used to live here! We should warn the neighbors," I said. "They might see him climbing over our fence."

Realizing I was serious, Rod opened his arms to me. Feeling numb inside and out, I didn't want to be touched. He stared after me as I headed down the driveway. I tripped over a shingle from the roof. "Damn it! Why the fuck do these shingles fall off? Damn it!" I cursed it.

Damn angel, too.

When we began remodeling my old house, I had wired a stone angel to the chimney. My intention was for the angel to protect the house and everything in it. The angel had not done so. It hadn't even protected the roof. The twisting, thorny branches of the climbing bougainvillea plant seemed to go out of their way to dismantle any cable or antennae in their path. This insatiable plant seemed to be unusually cruel to the old and lazy sun-damaged shingles in its way, piercing and ripping them indiscriminately. Every day I encountered a new pile of dead shingles in the path of

my front door. Half the time I'd curse at the dead shingle itself, belittling it for not holding on longer, harder, like I imagined I would have. Then I'd toss it back up on the roof to aggravate its predator. Or if I were in a better mood, I'd laugh off the mess at my front door, pocketing the shingles until I found a garbage can. Walking around Hollywood with pieces of my roof in my back pocket, proved to be, at the very least, interesting. More interesting, however, was the fact that my home, as bright and sweet and angelic as it seemed, was coming apart at the seams.

After this outburst, my preternatural calm returned as I informed the neighbors about my mother's murder, and my brother's threat. Their expressions told me that they were unnerved by my lack of emotion.

"I never believed that human beings just die. Mom's alive somewhere else now," I said; unaware how far in denial I sounded. "I wanted you to know because Troy used to say he wanted to go out in a blood bath, so if you hear or see something, call the cops."

When I returned to my house, Rod was out front petting Abu. Rod followed me inside. I called a few friends, all of whom had met my mother and liked her. I explained that she was dead and Troy was coming for me. One friend immediately came over with a gun. I had never held a gun and didn't want one in my home. I told him to take it away. He insisted I get a bodyguard for my mother's funeral in Wisconsin. He had a friend who would do it as a favor. I stopped asking questions and agreed. I could use a bodyguard in Wisconsin; my whole family could use one as a matter of fact. I could've used one in L.A. too, fearing Troy might be outside hiding in the bushes aiming a gun - like the one I didn't want - right at me.

That night I figured Rod and I would be easy targets for Troy's attack if we were lying in our bed, so we climbed into the bedroom loft, armed with an ax. There was a fright in Rod's eyes that I had never before seen. I used to feel safe next to him, but at that moment he didn't have any way to comfort me. I lay awake absolutely still, terrified, my mind flashing on the previous year when one of Troy's psychiatrists called to warn me that I was the person Troy most often fantasized about killing.

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Dean Carbian, ACSW Clinical Coordinator, Community Support Program

Troy...described how he would kill Thom slowly over about four days, torturing him. He stated he would hang him from his hands, burn him with cigarettes, pound nails into his kneecaps, use a car battery to give him electrical shocks...

Thorn Bierdz



"SELF-PORTRAIT IN FEAR AND LOSS"

On The Run

July 16 to July 18, 1989

Troy was still on the loose the next morning. The police called, urging me to leave my house immediately. The night of my mother's murder, her car was seen on the highway speeding out of Kenosha. The driver stopped, picked up a hitchhiker, and then took off again, dumping the contents of Mom's purse out the window.

My mother's credit card was traced to a Kmart near Chicago, where Troy bought spray-paint, probably to disguise our mother's car. We would later learn that Troy and the hitchhiker also switched license plates with another car in the store's parking lot.

A couple of hours further south in Illinois, Troy stopped at a phone booth and called 911. He said, "This is Thom Bierdz, the soap opera star, and I just killed my mother and raped my little brother Troy."

Troy's threats and violence had escalated for years, and I never took any of them seriously - but this manipulative behavior was something I'd never before seen from him. His attempt to frame me proved he was determined to hurt me in any way possible. When my sister told me about Troy's call, I was stunned by his audacity, and his stupidity, in thinking people would believe him.

Growing up, I rarely touched Troy. I certainly never touched him in a sexual way, and I wondered if his charge might reveal his own repressed homosexual feelings - of which I had absolutely no evidence.

Rod and I took cover at several friends' homes, including that of Jeanne Cooper, star of *The Young and the Restless*. She played Katherine

Chancellor, the widow of my character's father. Jeanne was maternal to me both onscreen and off, and she had met Troy a couple of times when I'd taken him to the CBS set. She couldn't believe he killed Mom, who many times had relaxed between scenes in Jeanne's dressing room with me.

I didn't want to endanger any of our friends by staying in one place too long, so Rod and I kept moving. Our next stop was the home of comedy actor Jim J. Bullock, who played Monroe on *Too Close for Comfort*, where my best friend Bruce Dent, also an actor and comedian, was renting a room.

From there I called Hope, anxious for news of Troy's whereabouts. She did have news, but not the kind I wanted. My head began to ache as she told me the murder was on the front page of the *Kenosha News*. This wasn't the type of fame I wanted, but it might have been just the notoriety that Troy craved.

As Hope read the news story to me, I focused on her surprisingly calm voice instead of the words. Hope had always seemed fragile to me, and although she stood two inches higher than our five-foot-tall mother, she lacked Mom's fiery spirit. My sister's small, unblemished face was as pretty as a porcelain doll, but not a doll that would be the center of attention. Her eyes were hazel brown instead of deep green, like our brother Gregg's. Her hair was also brown and usually cut at her neck. Her straight bangs occasionally touched her faint eyebrows. Her mouth was small and, like Mom, she never wore lipstick or any other make-up. There was nothing showy about her clothes. Though Hope was a natural beauty, nothing about her face was unusual, except how pink her cheeks became when she laughed – as if she was embarrassed to laugh – like she didn't have the right. As the oldest child and only girl, my sister was raised not to have fun, but to be polite, care for others, and never cause any problems. Just like the old-fashioned doll she resembled, Hope was content to exist on a shelf and watch life from a safe distance.

But how does a doll not crack into pieces when her shelf crashes to the floor? And when someone like Hope cracked into pieces, how was I supposed to put her back together?

Forgiving Troy

KENOSHA NEWS:

Phyllis Bierdz, 49, was found dead in her home Saturday, apparently bludgeoned in the head by what is believed to be a blunt instrument...

Police are looking for Bierdz's youngest son, Troy, 19, for questioning. Neighbors saw him with his mother at the home Friday evening.

Bierdz's two other sons, Thom, 27, and Gregg, 25, live in California...

Bierdz's 1980 two-door tan Buick Regal is missing and a nationwide alert has been put out for the car...

[Phyllis] Bierdz had worked third shift at The Public Safety Building. She worked in the Joint Services records department, which serves the Police and Sheriff's departments...

Raymond Gramm, director of Joint Services, said she was "an excellent worker. Everybody liked her. She was a genuinely nice person."

Kenosha Police Lt. Robert F. Reschke said Phyllis Bierdz "was very bubbly. You would never know she had problems. She always put on a happy face. All this trouble the kid gave her, she always stood by him."

My sister urged Rod and me into a motel for the night. We figured Troy might be smart enough to find us at a place near my home, so we drove a few miles east on Sunset Boulevard to find a less trackable hide-away.

In the humid hotel room, Rod pulled the curtains closed, and sat in the dark playing with Abu. Rod offered to embrace me, as it was obvious that in those minutes I craved warmth. But I didn't crave his warmth; I craved my mother's warmth. Instead I took a bath, submerging myself in hot water. Keeping the scalding water dripping steadily intensified the heat in my artificial womb.

I heard a noise outside the room and froze in fear. A child giggled, then I heard her running down the hall, laughing loudly. I relaxed.

Rod sat next to the tub.

We talked about death.

Then we talked about siblings, as Rod did not get along with any of his.

Rod said, “The mother is the glue that holds the family together. If my mom doesn’t make us get together, we don’t. When the glue is removed, the family falls completely apart.”

I wondered if that were true.

I wondered about charismatic, extroverted Gregg, who had his own apartment in Los Angeles, and shy, old-fashioned Hope – and our forecast as siblings. It’s not like we’d have much in common without our mother pulling us together for the holidays. Would we even make the effort to see each other or talk? And would I even care if we became estranged? No one had ever accused me of being a “family man.”

As it was, Gregg and I had nothing to say to each other since Hope had phoned each of us about Mom’s death. He and I talked on the phone only to set up flights. I inquired as to his state of mind, and he wouldn’t share his honest feelings of loss with me. All he said was that he wanted to kill Troy with his own hands. My mom was killed too, but I didn’t want to physically kill or even hurt Troy. More violence seemed like more insanity. Gregg and I felt and thought very differently about many subjects. My handsome, heterosexual, Hollywood-networking brother and I didn’t have much in common – besides the Hollywood part.

Rod, fearing Troy would ambush the funeral, said he didn’t want to fly back to Kenosha with me. I told him I needed him there, and he eventually agreed to go.

On our flight to Wisconsin, I sat by the window, Rod in the middle, and Gregg, looking devastated, by the aisle.

In The Clouds

July 18, 1989

It was about to be the quietest plane ride of my life. Rod was desperately trying to get some sleep, and I was desperately trying to say to Gregg whatever a big brother says to his younger brother when their mother is murdered. But nothing came to mind, other than telling him that I knew Mom loved him very much.

I also loved my brother Gregg, and usually I wanted to be him. He projected confidence and freedom – qualities that seemed alien to me. It was like we were from different planets. I never felt the magnetic, united bond of brethren toward Gregg that I had imagined since I was a young boy that I should feel. And I know he didn't feel it toward me.

Gregg didn't understand my choices, my lifestyle, my artistic nature, my honesty, my anxiety, and my over-sharing. He didn't appreciate my advice. We didn't even look alike, the way Troy and I did.

As Gregg sat next to me on the plane, I didn't know his thoughts about our mother. But I saw Gregg's frown deepen and his masculine profile increase in age by ten years. His green eyes searched the plane, noticing pretty women, but that day only out of habit. Gregg appeared to be hurting badly. Mom's tragic death was probably the beginning of Gregg's alopecia: a stress disease that caused chunks of his hair to fall out.

Did Gregg fear the rumor we'd heard that Troy planned to greet us with a machine gun as we landed? Was Gregg wondering, as I was, whom Troy would shoot first?

And why?

Gregg and Troy never got along, but Troy didn't get along with anyone in the family. Still, to my knowledge, Troy had never singled out wanting to kill Gregg as he had me.

Did Troy hate Gregg less because they were both straight?

Did Troy hate me more because I was gay?

Or did Troy hate me more because I was "famous?" I had some evidence he might. The year before this flight, Troy was committed to a psychiatric hospital in Kenosha. An acquaintance and his brother visited Troy at the hospital. The police questioned this acquaintance after Troy escaped by assaulting a nurse.

10/20/88 POLICE STATEMENT:

"Troy was in the lounge area, Troy was telling my brother Steve how he (Troy) was going to break out of the hospital and kill his brother the actor. I told Troy quit talking to my brother like that because he's only 14-years-old."

A Kenosha Miracle

1960 to 1970

On the five-hour flight to Wisconsin, I had time to dwell upon the thoughts I'd been distracted from the past few days. Until we landed, I was temporarily safe from Troy's threats. I began reviewing my life, and what I knew of Troy's, trying to figure out why he did the unspeakable to our mother. As the hours passed, my mind moved back in time to before Troy's birth and my birth – to the things I only knew from other people's memories.

• • •

Northern Europeans were the first Caucasian settlers of this lush territory, shipping off to reservations by any means necessary the indigenous Native Americans. Kenosha began primarily as dairy farms and scenic ports on Lake Michigan. The town, just over the state line from Illinois, seemed destined to become an industrial suburb of Chicago. When the Italians, Jews, and African-Americans arrived in Kenosha, the original white farmers could not get rid of them as easily as the Indians. In 1940, this was the world my olive-skinned Italian mother was born into. My fair-skinned Polish father, on the other hand, did not suffer any prejudice. However, his parents, friendly Polish stock, were not thrilled when he took an Italian as a bride.

In the 1950s, long stretches of cattle fences gave way to factories like American Motors: makers of Javelins, Hornets, Ramblers, and Gremlins.

Thom Bierdz

At the end of their long shifts, most assembly workers, earning minimum wage, flooded into corner taverns for a stein of Old Milwaukee beer. Instead, both my grandfathers always went straight home to their wives; a cold beer wasn't worth a hot fight.

By the 1980s, the suburbs of Chicago and Milwaukee were severely encroaching on Kenosha. Hundreds of condos, a marina, and a spacious outdoor mall were added near the lake. The I-94 freeway, bordering the west side of Kenosha, sported a new greyhound racetrack, more condos, and an adult bookstore. These "improvements" looked out of place between red barns, silver silos, and tourist traps selling cheese.



“KENOSHA OF LORE”

(In the collection of Adrienne Kessler)

Forgiving Troy

Mom was born Philomena Rachel DiLetti, but called Phyllis, and grew up to be a dark-eyed, tiny beauty. Her short black hair covered a head so small she had to wear children's hats. When people remarked about her stature, she would smile and say, "Big things come in small packages."

My father, Thomas Alexander Bierdz, Sr., also had dark hair, but his soft hazel eyes were as passive as Mom's dark ones were engaging. Their eyes perfectly summed up their differing temperaments; he observed and commented from a distance, while she loved, laughed, held, argued, and cried in your face.

My introverted father dreamed of becoming an actor. He rarely told people that in 1960 he was accepted at the renowned Pasadena Playhouse in California, because he had chickened-out of going there. Raised by an over-protective mother, who never even let him spend an evening out with relatives, he lacked confidence to venture out on his own. So the 21-year-old tossed his dream out the window and did the expected: he married his passionate 19-year-old girlfriend who gave birth to my sister the following year. Part of me wondered if I, born the next year in 1962, had crawled outside that window and gotten my hands on his discarded Hollywood dream.

Regretting not pursuing his showbiz dream, Dad was determined to be a success in another vocation. He eventually studied psychotherapy and earned a master's degree.

Mom made big sacrifices to support him while he attended a Chicago university. The only apartment they could afford in a very dangerous neighborhood. For our safety, Mom was advised to lock us in the basement with her when doing laundry. She took in people's ironing to help pay bills. Her mother taught her how to make meatballs taste expensive to satisfy Dad's college friends when they came over. Mom felt left out, like all of her husband's buddies and their wives were advancing their educations and social lives, while she was imprisoned in a rough building, without any friends, and nurturing two small children. When Dad's peers weren't over for supper, Mom cooked discounted ground beef with

noodles. She finally grew so sick of it, that once we left that apartment she would never again eat hamburger.

I don't remember those first two years of my life in Chicago, but I remember when Dad got his master's degree and we moved back to Kenosha. Both sets of my grandparents visited our little house and spoiled us with what they could afford. Though the Bierdzes loved us and made Sunday lunches after we went to St. Mark's Church, the DiLettis were more generous with physical affection and daily help. Grandma DiLetti, with dyed-red hair, spent all day playing Match Box cars with us on the rug, while my mother waitressed and my father worked as a social worker. On weekends, short Grandpa DiLetti, with a round head and little hook-nose like an owl, helped my father fix up our basement. My mother called her parents "saints." I understood this to mean that the harder someone worked, the closer they were to God. The Almighty obviously wanted people to work.

With the work it took to sew her own clothes and ours, I imagined my mother was in very good standing with God. I often fell asleep to the comforting sound of her foot-pump sewing machine whirring at top speed. She'd put out her Pall Mall cigarette and carry me to bed.

In 1964, I had a baby brother named Gregg and a Pekinese-poodle named Sassy. I would pet Sassy for hours, even though I had allergies to all pets; allergies that would worsen as I aged, requiring me to use an inhaler. When Sassy lay on her side, I liked to hold her paws. I suppose the texture and heat of her paw pads felt more human than her fluffy sandy-colored hair. We watched *Lost in Space* together. Sassy knew how much I wanted to be boy astronaut Will Robinson, who flew to planets with his family and a robot. I felt a great connection with Sassy, like we communicated without words.

As a small boy, I needed an animal confidant because I did not trust people. I thought everyone was a robot and that they were out to kill me. I was unsure about why they wanted to kill me, but I reasoned that if I were polite and perfect and caused them no trouble they might let me live. I remained on my best behavior - reserved and on guard - never letting anyone get too close.

Forgiving Troy

I don't know if I was born paranoid, or if I was subconsciously influenced by the spooky movies and TV shows my mother loved watching. Doting Mom was the one human I believed wasn't a robot, maybe because she "clued" me into the conspiracy with episodes of *The Twilight Zone* and *Outer Limits*. My sister was the only other person I didn't fear; although she might have been a robot, I was sure she couldn't outsmart me.

Sassy's and my silent, soulful conversations and confessions increased as I turned three, then four, then five. Since robots were watching and listening all the time, I couldn't risk whispering the truth to Mom. Without me telling her, she seemed to understand how important I was, that the whole world was focused on me. Occasionally, I would forget about this omnipotent attention, and could laugh and play almost like a "normal" kid. At these times, however, the paranoia was only buried, not extinguished, and would show itself in my nightmares.



"PARANOID IN RED AND BLUE"

This fear remained with me until I was six or seven, when I realized that if everyone *were* a robot, they already would have “gotten” me. I never told anyone but Sassy about this paranoia. As an adult, I would wonder how this psychosis played into me being a “performer.” Why did I feel compelled, obligated even, to be watched?

By the late 1960s, raising three kids and a dog had strained my parents’ marriage and destroyed their youthful romance. My father was now a respected psychotherapist and too distracted by raising his patients’ consciousness to be much help raising his own children. As he successfully counseled these patients along the path to inner peace and freedom, he may have inadvertently followed them.

Mom and Dad separated twice by the time I was eight. Both times my happy mother disappeared and was replaced by one whose constant focus on her children bordered on obsessive. I felt especially singled out for her attention. As she fussed with my hair and my exaggerated shirt collars, I would smell the ivory soap on her face and stare into her disappointed eyes. Standing so close to her I could tell exactly what shade of brown her eyes were: sepia-brown. And I had the crayon to prove it in my treasured box of sixty-four Crayola crayons. I attempted to absorb the pain and disillusionment in my mother’s sepia-brown eyes, just like Sassy absorbed my hurt. Sassy could absolve my troubles without being affected, but I never learned that trick. Instead I took on Mom’s heartache, becoming more withdrawn and frustrated each time Dad left.

Our parents’ separations also changed my sister Hope, as she lost confidence and her spirit appeared to me to be forever broken. Like me, Hope went to great lengths to ease our mother’s sadness by concealing her own suffering. She developed the lifelong habit of crying secretly, alone in the bathroom or her bedroom. Only our younger brother Gregg appeared unaffected; his sunny disposition unaltered.

A few weeks after leaving, our father would once again do what he was expected to do - what he was told to do - and return. Just as he followed Grandma Bierdz’s urging to give up his acting dream, settle in Kenosha, marry, and raise a family, he listened to Grandma’s lectures that

Forgiving Troy

a marriage vow was sacred and must be upheld. “No ifs, ands or buts.” “Family comes first.”

Each time Dad came back to us, Mom’s loving devotion to him would return. She would stop nagging him, and he offered to do more around the house. Our family operated better with Dad home, but there was a problem: he wasn’t in love with her anymore.

A second problem was Mom wanted another baby, possibly to tie my father down more permanently. Dad knew a fourth child was a bad idea, but he also believed she couldn’t get pregnant again because her doctor said she had a tipped uterus. Due to this condition, Dad did not insist on using birth control, even though he didn’t want any more children.

I don’t know if Mom prayed to God, Jesus, the Holy Mother, or any of the many Catholic saints to give her a baby, but based upon the strength of her religious beliefs, I would not be surprised if she lit a candle. If she did ask for divine intervention, her prayers were answered in late 1969; she was miraculously pregnant.

That winter, her belly was huge against her small body. She could barely squeeze between the kitchen counters when she made fresh-buttered popcorn for my brother, sister, and me as we played cards. She was all smiles again.

Troy was born on April 15, 1970. Mom called him her miracle baby.

Thorn Bierdz



"MADONNA AND CHILD"

Penance To Be Perfect

EVILINSEASON

Evil in season

Taste the blood

Churn the knife

Start the flood

Kill the pigs

Slaughter them all

Stack them up

Stack them tall

A quest for me?

We soon shall see.

—TROY BIERDZ (at 17)

1970 to 1975

I didn't think Troy was a miracle. I thought he was a pest. Playing alone in the basement as a boy, I loved to create cities built from Legos and Lincoln Logs with Hot Wheels track streets and highways traveled by my treasured Match Box cars. Troy would try to play with my toys, but would inadvertently crash onto them like some baby Godzilla monster, trampling to bits my carefully constructed fantasy city.

This little miracle was usually clinging to our mother's legs, or annoyingly following around one of us siblings. When I was petting Sassy, and telling her that I wanted to run away to Hollywood to be a TV star like Mike Connors of *Mannix*, Troy would be right in my face wanting to pet Sassy, too.

So, I would have to move outside to the patio where my other pet was.

I was enamored with the little guinea pig in the pet store and Mom bought him for me as a birthday gift. We didn't have a cage, only a large cardboard box without a top. I don't remember his name, as we had him so briefly. I loved holding him, and was surprised to learn guinea pigs sang. He sang a very high note, when I held him in my hands. The pitch varied depending on where he was being touched – or squeezed. Apparently I was holding him too tightly, and his “songs” were actually cries of pain. I misinterpreted his crying as singing.

I kept squeezing him.

And he kept hitting higher notes.

Then, one day, the singing stopped. His lifeless body felt like a beanbag in my trembling, little hands.

I had killed my new pet.

I had killed without warning, in a split second, when I thought I was doing something good.

Everything in his sparky personality had, in fact, disappeared. All I was left with was deadness in my hands, and the hideous new information that I was a killer.

When I could not bring him back to life, I entered the house and walked to where my parents talked over the dirty supper plates. My stomach was in knots as I held my pet in my hands; he wasn't breathing, but there was no blood. I explained exactly what happened, and announced that I knew I was going to Hell. I hugged my mother delicately, as I did not want my evilness to smear or infect her. I said I didn't want to go to Hell, and that I was sorry. As she hugged me, it occurred to me why I did not want to go to Hell – because she was too good to ever go to Hell. At that point, I could not imagine ever separating from her.

• • •

Forgiving Troy

That memory vanished instantly when I realized I was sitting on a plane because I had, in fact, separated from her. She was dead. Troy had killed her.

Looking out the window of the plane, seeing the hills and valleys of the United States and highways that looked like white threads, I wondered what highway, what white thread, Troy was on. I didn't know then that the hitchhiker was still riding with Troy. The day after picking the hitchhiker up, Troy told him that his older brother, named Thom Bierdz, had killed his mother.

The hitchhiker's response was, "Are you sure?"

Troy said yes.

The next day, Troy admitted to the hitchhiker that he was the one who killed our mother.

The hitchhiker had the same response, "Are you sure?"

Troy said yes.

On one of those highways below that looked like white thread, the hitchhiker continued riding with Troy.

Why?

Where were they going?

How does someone stay in the car with a murderer?

Why does somebody murder?

When did Troy first begin to think about murdering Mom?

When did he begin to think about murdering me?

When did he begin to think about murdering?

• • •

I would later learn that when Troy was 12-years-old he wrote an essay on assassinating the president of the United States. The thought of killing had been in his head constantly after that. In his own words: "For the publicity or in a manner of gaining manhood."

I couldn't relate to Troy's adolescent aggression. I was a very mild-

mannered, polite, robot-fearing boy. When I was 12, my idea of manhood was my father, and I wanted to be him in every way.

It was when I was 12 that Dad took me into my parents' bedroom to explain divorce. He said he was leaving because my mother was overly controlling, and he felt like he was suffocating. Apparently, he didn't remember that when he went to college, he asked his inexperienced, petite, teenage bride to raise small kids in a dangerous Chicago neighborhood, and needed her to be in control. And he needed her to be in control when they had two more kids. And he had needed her to be in control of all their household responsibilities each day when he was at work, attaining his financial success, admiration, and even adulation from patients.

As unfair as it was, my angel of a mother had been deserted, because my father "needed space."

My mother made me choose sides, and I chose hers. She became my new father.

She was my father, my mother, and my martyr.

I learned a new feeling: loneliness. Her loneliness. It ached inside my ribcage. Was as heavy as a bowling ball. I learned what it was like to be abandoned. As a 12-year-old boy, I learned *dire* frustration. I was frustrated there was the same likelihood of bringing my father back home as there was of restoring my guinea pig to life.

I had to settle for seeing my father every other Saturday. If he took us to an upscale restaurant like the Midtown Bar and Grill, we were coaxed to split an expensive meatball sandwich because we could rarely finish the whole thing alone. But we would make fun of his frugality afterward to Mom, and we'd ridicule his suit pants that were several inches too short. Mom would boastingly take us to the Midtown another time, and order us each whole meatball bombers. Because she had to roll pennies to pay the check, she was a "saint." Our father, consequently, was a "sinner," a "bad guy," an "irresponsible father" with high-waters for pants, and, if we believed our mother, a "hypocrite" to be a family therapist.

My overburdened mother waitressed part-time at The Ranch restaurant and, in addition, clerked part-time at the Kenosha Safety Building.

Forgiving Troy

Dad's child-support checks were often late because he was behind on his own expenses. Though she needed more money, my mother was most assuredly a fighter and her pride stopped her from pressing the court to ask Dad to send her alimony. I learned from Mom that the more someone struggles, and the poorer they were, the *better* they were as people. Her behavior taught me that rich people shouldn't be trusted. And people trying to get rich, or acting like they had money, were just plain suspicious.

Two jobs and raising four kids – alone – was too much for her. I felt it. I saw it in her eyes.

SATAN

His name is only whispered
his number seldom found.

I find his soul within me,
hes learking all around.

He's in us all,
we live his life.

We see his feats of SACRIFICE!!

We must dream on,
we must see through
To find his everlasting clue.

He is our creator,
our master in a way.

EVIL &
DESTRUCTION
SORCERY & PAIN –
– TROY BIERDZ (at 18)

I figured it was time for me to be a “man” – or a martyr – and struggle with a job too, so I became a paperboy for the Sunday *Milwaukee Journal*.

Mom helped me deliver these heavy papers when she could. Afterwards we would go to church. St. Mark's Church was enormous and

modern, round with orange carpeting. The stained glass windows were fifty-feet-high.

I hated that my mother put money in the offertory basket each week. It was then I first suspected St. Mark's wasn't in good communication with the real God, because I figured the real God knew she needed the money more than the church needed it. It's not like *we* had brand new orange carpeting at home. We didn't have orange anything. And if anyone noticed colors, it was me – thanks to the regular use of my deluxe box of sixty-four Crayola crayons.

Ours was an ordinary kitchen with the then-popular copper spray-painted refrigerator with black spray-painted border and matching stove. She had chosen gold wallpaper with crimson horse drawn carriages for the walls. It was ironic that the wallpaper suggested so much movement when my mother seemed fated to be stuck at that home.

I learned many things in that kitchen at 12-years-old. I learned to chew my Cap'n Crunch cereal as quietly as possible. The Cap'n did not design his cereal to bother mothers who needed a “moment of silence, kiddo.”

Gregg, then 10-years-old, crunched loudly. He was as beautiful as a blond kid on a suntan commercial. I learned I was envious of Gregg's green eyes. More specifically – thanks to my box of crayons – I envied his pine green eyes. I learned I was jealous of his happy-go-lucky spirit. I envied Gregg for playing Little League Baseball, because we had tried out together, and I, the older brother, failed to make the team.

So, I excelled in areas my siblings couldn't, like getting straight A's in school. It wasn't easy; I had to challenge my concentration skills in all my classes to achieve that, except one – art class. Amazingly, when I had a paintbrush in my hand, I did the opposite of concentrate; I stopped thinking altogether. Strangely enough, my teacher encouraged this lack of thought. He taped my paintings to the walls every week, as an example for other students to emulate, remarking that I had an innate sense of composition that couldn't be taught (not that I had any idea what he was talking about). He also told the class, he wanted to acknowledge me

Forgiving Troy

for painting so quickly and with such “faith.” He hoped the other students would learn to trust their instincts more, instead of second-guessing their brushstrokes.

My parents’ friends also praised me for my artwork that Mom posted on our refrigerator, as much as they praised Gregg for sports. I was even awarded with a special art school vacation by the entire board of teachers for my work as Captain of Patrol. My job was to walk, usually in the snow, the six blocks of street corners surrounding the elementary school, making sure the other crossing guards showed up for duty.

I was very serious about being the best little robot I could be.

Too serious.

The Wisconsin Dairy Board, promoting healthy diets, asked students to fill out breakfast questionnaires. We were encouraged to have balanced meals made up of the four food groups: meat, fruits and vegetables, grains and cereals, and, most importantly in cattle country, dairy. The questionnaire stated that we should put a check in the box next to the name of the food that we had eaten that morning. Choices included oatmeal, cream of wheat, assorted cold cereals, waffles, pancakes, toast, French toast, Pop Tarts, eggs, bacon, sausage, ham, hamburger patty, melon, grapefruit, bananas, orange juice, grapefruit juice, tomato juice, milk, chocolate milk, skim milk, yogurt, sour cream, butter, whipped cream, potatoes, tomatoes, onions, peppers, mushrooms, etc.

I checked the box next to cereal for Cap’n Crunch. Then, mistaking this form to be a test one could fail, and I did not want to fail any test – I wanted to be perfect – adored – trouble-free – I checked everything else. I checked that I had eaten *over thirty items that morning*.

After school, the teacher, Mrs. Gallo, sat down next to me and asked if I understood the questionnaire. Stammering guiltily, I insisted I ate everything on the list that morning. And if I had the chance to turn the clock back, I would have eaten everything to save face. I hated lying. It was a horrible feeling. Like motion sickness with a headache.

I wouldn’t have lied if I knew we would be getting the same questionnaire the next day. I felt obligated to check all the boxes again, as the

other students' eyes watched in what I believed was awe. I was too embarrassed to change my story on the second day. Or the third. Or the fourth. Or the fourth week. Or the fourth month.

Being a good kid was work. A lot of work. A lot of manipulation.

I was too busy appearing perfect to the entire school body to have any real friends at recess. So, I settled for friends at home. Mom was my friend. Sassy was my friend.

But that wasn't enough.

Neighbor Buddy Klopstein would have been great, as I was in love with the blond Little-Leaguer, but he preferred to hang out with Gregg.

How could Gregg and I be "friends?" Gregg knew I didn't want to play catch with him in the backyard, and he didn't want to do Paint-By-Numbers with me on the kitchen table.

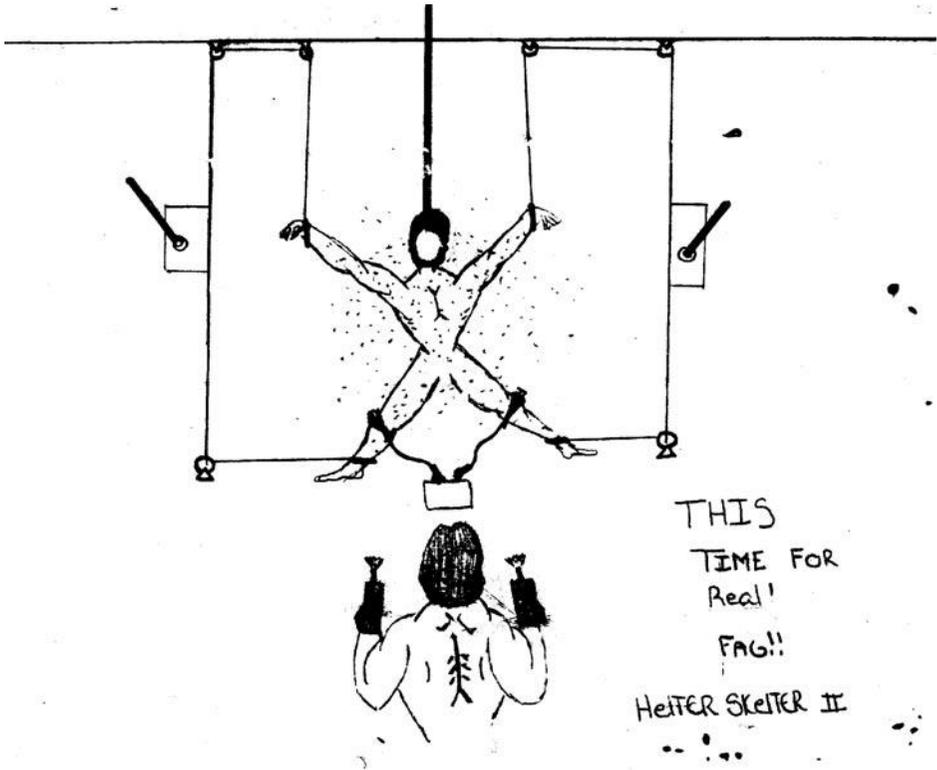
Hope and I were very polite kids, and "good kids," but that wasn't enough to make her my friend, per se. It's not like we could talk about how cute Buddy Klopstein was. She would squeal on me.

And Troy was just too young to be my friend. He was eight years younger than me; the "miracle" was now an erratic, screaming, manic 4-year-old.

Mom had no experience coping with a child so out-of-control. Hope, Gregg, and I rarely even misbehaved, and Mom swiftly corrected us if we did. When none of her usual methods of discipline worked on Troy, she had no choice but to bring him to the family doctor, who told Mom nothing was wrong with Troy; he was just hyperactive. Instead of medication, the doctor said all Troy needed was more attention.

This inadequate diagnosis and prescription for Troy to receive "more attention" from our recently-divorced, over-worked mother, would one day seem like a cruel, and deadly, joke.

Forgiving Troy



The torture drawing Troy sent to me when he was 18.

Racing To Racine

1975 to 1979

If round-the-clock, daily doses of our mother's attention were what 5-year-old Troy required, then his "hyperactivity" should have been cured. She watched over him – and me – constantly.

At 12, I craved Mom's attention, but at 17, I preferred to be alone with a nudie/muscle magazine. One of the "loose" divorcees in Mom's Parents-Without-Partners group insisted Mom keep a *Playgirl* in her bedroom dresser. When Mom wasn't working it was impossible for me to sneak peeks at it, because she knew what was happening with each of us kids in every room all the time. I was beginning to understand why my father said he was "suffocating" before he left. My beautiful, giving, generous, adoring, doting "Super-Mom" had transformed into "Controlling Mom." I could no longer breathe under her constant protective gaze, and there wasn't an inhaler big enough to cure this condition.

That winter, Mom tried to "ground" me because I was questioning authority – hers and society's – at every opportunity. The truth was I secretly doubted I even belonged in society, as homosexuals were considered jokes, deviant, or invisible. But I didn't tell anyone I was gay at that point, not even Mom. I couldn't bear to have her say to me that homosexuals were condemned to Hell, as my well-meaning, religious grandparents believed.

Mom clutched and shook me by my elbows, trying to hold me in place and force me to listen to her "rules." I looked down into her disapproving face, and realized for the first time how much I had outgrown her.

Forgiving Troy

Suddenly, and maybe too forcefully, I took hold of her tiny forearms and freed myself from her grasp.

The phone rang. It was Grandma DiLetti with her daily soap opera recap. Regaining her composure, Mom told Grandma, “Tommy hit me.” She must have believed that. But I didn’t hit her. I just pushed Mom off of me, as she unwittingly personified every restriction and limitation and judgment I felt from the church and society. I was also transferring to her my anger at radio stations. I liked to listen to love songs late at night while fantasizing about adult romances, but there was not one love song on the radio without heterosexual-themed lyrics. Not one.

Confused and angry, I slipped down to my basement bedroom. I put some clothes into a duffel bag, along with the sketchpad in which daily I drew faces. Serious faces. Cowboy faces. Waitress faces. Mom’s many faces. I opened the bedroom door to leave and found my mother waiting on the other side. I ran up the stairs. She chased after me and slipped. I didn’t turn around.

I escaped outside into the freezing back yard and inhaled the icy wind that was rattling the chains of our rusty swing set. I wondered why our mother left it up. We weren’t kids anymore. Shy 18-year-old Hope would leave soon for college. Gregg was only 15, but he was always out of the house with a girl. Even 9-year-old Troy didn’t use the swing set. I wished then that Mom would forget about me completely and just concentrate on Troy, who still hung onto her at every opportunity.

If I didn’t break the co-dependence I had with my mother when I did at 17, perhaps I would have hit her one day. I don’t know. Was there a chance I would have even beaten her? I couldn’t imagine it, but I had already been accused of having, like my mother, an “Italian temper.”

My father said that at one point he wanted to kill Mom because he couldn’t get away from her. He said he left because he “needed space.”

I also left my mother because I “needed space.”

• • •

This memory made me feel so uncomfortable and guilty that I had to shift in my seat on the plane. Rod was sound asleep; his head bobbing above his crossed arms. Gregg put down the pink piece of paper he'd been scribbling on, and turned to read an Anthony Robbins motivational book. I leaned into the window and tried to see a picture in the clouds. Nothing came to me, which was bizarre because I normally saw so many pictures, faces, buildings in clouds. My mind was typically overactive, trained for some reason, to take in something like random clouds and find a face in them. Consciously, or subconsciously, I was always trying to make sense of what didn't make sense; trying to organize things that couldn't be organized; trying to make reason out of something unreasonable, something chaotic; and searching for a purpose in things that maybe had no purpose.

Like murder.

When the clouds dissolved, I stared at the cities below, fascinated at the crisscrossing of the white threads of highways.

Wherever Troy was, he was getting "space," driving on one of those white threads.

And it seemed so damn unfair.

• • •

At 17, I needed the space that I felt I would get from living with my bachelor father in his Racine apartment, half an hour north of Kenosha.

I enjoyed the freedom Dad's passivity gave me, but I resented the freedom he had in his own life, and still hated him for deserting Mom. I was old enough to sympathize with Dad needing to be unencumbered, but that didn't bring me the sense of peace I was missing as a teen. It had been easier to believe there was only one side to every issue – my mother's. But, almost an adult, I knew more, and it bothered me that life was getting complicated, and consequently there appeared to be no absolute "right" or "wrong."

On the plane ride to my mother's funeral, I decided Dad gave me

Forgiving Troy

more space as a teenager because he just didn't love me to the extreme Mom did. It bothered me that my ambivalent father didn't smile at me like Mom would. I didn't see his unconditional love for me in his eyes. Did he see his son in front of him, or just another patient to analyze? I didn't bond with him then like I had hoped, which is probably the reason I very much looked forward to spending weekends with my mother.

At 17, I was too embarrassed to tell either of my parents I was gay. For a few months I even dated a sweet girl named Sandy. I was not aroused when she wanted to experiment sexually. Without explaining why, I broke up with her, breaking her heart more than I realized. Though I didn't tell Sandy, Mom, or Dad I was gay, I told them my other secret: that I was going to be a movie-star.

Mom accepted it as fact, but was disappointed I would not be a priest as she felt that was my natural calling. Dad was more practical, and said I was "not tall or good-looking enough to be a movie-star." Maybe he said this out of fatherly concern to protect me, or maybe he said it out of jealousy and his own forfeited acting dream.

In any event, he underestimated my drive, or more, my need to over-compensate and be loved.

Cowboy Gary

1980 to 1983

When I lived at my Dad's apartment, I had plenty of alone time after school. I masturbated to pornography I stole from a neighbor's storage unit. When my guilt grew greater than the pleasure, I returned the magazines, with a note of apology.

Later, upon discovery of Troy's writings, I learned we had sexual self-hatred in common. But whereas his fantasies included *Charlie's Angels*, I had opted for *Starsky and Hutch*.

From Troy's Diary:

THYSHALLNOTCOVENITETHYNEIGHBORSWIFE

I have had evil thoughts and have masterbated to these thought, and thoughts of these womans: Missy (greggs girlfriend), Stephanie Kramer (TV STAR), lisa Graff (sisters friend), Sheron (sisters friend)

Bev, Daught (Jenny) and Bevs sister. Julie Szarafinski (school mate), nurses, porno phone sex (I called a mumeris amount of times) Cheril Lad, Kate Jackson, Fahara Fawcite, (TV STARS)

Hiding my sexuality was becoming more difficult every day. After completing high school and quickly dropping out of college, I got a job washing dishes at Mr. Steak. Due to the many derogatory comments about homosexuals from co-workers, I only came out to Gene, another gay dishwasher.

On my 18th birthday, I wrote a very anguished letter to God formally

Forgiving Troy

telling him I was gay – and I was planning to be a famous man in the future. I wanted God to be okay with me being famous *and* gay because I didn't want to “sin,” and I didn't want to potentially influence others to sin. I hoped my grandiose future plans were all right in His book. I had a suspicion “His book” would understand love between any two people. I figured God knew how irresistible men were – didn't He make them? How could He hate me for loving what he did, and did so well?

As a declaration of my spiritual devotion, I took a new name, “TJ.” People assumed it was for “Tom Junior.” It secretly meant “To Jesus” – and was a daily reminder that my life should be dedicated to the highest principles.

And my life *was* dedicated to those high principles. That is, between my shifts working at Milwaukee's gay disco bars.

When I moved to Milwaukee at 19, I fell in love with Gary Scheuerman, a bearded bartender at a disco called Club 219. Gary was a tall, muscular cowboy, about fifteen years older than me, with receding blond hair that enhanced his masculinity. He looked German, and only the inner peace radiating from his Nordic blue eyes hinted that he was also half Cherokee. His Native-American past was rich with “shamans” and “spirit-walkers.” I was at first skeptical, and later fascinated, to discover Gary had inherited some of his ancestor's clairvoyant abilities.

Gary lived north of Milwaukee, on a beautiful, small lake surrounded by evergreens. We would take his speedboat out on the crystal water, and it seemed like there was only the two of us in the world. Still, I was afraid to show physical displays of affection to him outdoors. Afraid someone might see.

Gary's love and confidence made me feel like a “real man” for the first time in my life. My mother, on the other hand, was determined to keep me her “little boy,” even if that meant coming face to face with the realization that I was her “gay little boy.”

When I first asked Mom to meet Gary she seemed hesitant. I may have hoped introducing them at Club 219, instead of some neutral location, would intimidate my tiny mother, but she marched up to my towering, hairy-chested cowboy as the disco hit *It's Raining Men* bellowed, ordered

Thorn Bierdz



"INDIAN SPIRIT GUIDE"

Forgiving Troy

a drink, then ordered him to take good care of me. Gary promised he would, and in time Mom gave us her blessing.

Gary did take good care of me. He helped me get a job bartending at a gay bar named Your Place, and also at Club 219.

From the time I was 19 until my 21st birthday, customers knew me as “TJ” in the tan cowboy hat, strutting behind the bar to disco hits like *Funky Town*. It was bizarre how quickly I transformed into this new, freer, more-confident personality. Where had this persona come from? Was he buried inside me all this time? Or was he invented; in essence, my first recurring acting role?

I tried growing something like a mustache and wore tight T-shirts to expose the biceps I developed at a gym. When my muscles didn’t grow as quickly as I wanted, I bought tighter T-shirts. Every night I’d be complimented, and propositioned. I must have appeared conceited because one customer whispered that I “needed to learn humility.”

“TJ” may have been my new personality, but robot-fearing “Tommy” reappeared after about three hours with all his insecurities and neurosis in check. To escape “Tommy,” I needed more than the compliments and propositions – I needed shots of Peppermint Schnapps.

Gary and I, both popular bartenders, shared a happy and committed relationship until I turned 21 and left for Hollywood. That had been my plan, and five-thousand-dollars in tips from admiring customers gave me just enough money to follow it.

As I was leaving, Gary said, “You came to Milwaukee and made a name for yourself. You’ll do the same thing in Hollywood, Teej. I know you will.”

“I have to go for it,” I said, adjusting his cowboy hat.

He smiled and straightened *my* cowboy hat, “You will do more than ‘go for it.’ You will do it. You’ll get work as an actor. I can see it. Really. Like you’re on screen already.”

Besides my mother, Gary was the only other person to share my dream, who believed I would really achieve it, and as he watched me fly away, he was still keeping his promise to take good care of me.

Troy Reaches Puberty

1983 to 1985

After arriving in Hollywood, I found a very cheap apartment in neighboring Silverlake. Coming from Wisconsin, I had never seen a chain-link fence encircling a reservoir of water. This small excuse for a “lake” looked imprisoned and unattractive to me, but the Californians loved it so much they built million-dollar homes around it.

While working as a restaurant busboy, I was “discovered” and introduced to Tim Wood, Rob Lowe’s manager. Tim took me on as a client, arranged my headshots and acting classes, and changed my name from “TJ Bierdz” or “Tom Bierdz, Jr.” to “Thom Bierdz.” Thanks to his help, I landed my first commercial audition and got the part. I was a principle in a Dr. Pepper spot that was filmed across from Paramount Studios at Raleigh Studios. A few other small roles came my way over the next year but I still had to wait tables until my “big break.”

Back in Wisconsin, Mom was still working two jobs and barely making ends meet. By 1984, my 23-year-old sister Hope had finally moved out and into an apartment by Parkside College. She was a devoted student studying business administration, and she appreciated our mother’s financial help for tuition. I too welcomed the small checks my mother sent for acting classes. Gregg, 20, was living in upstate Wisconsin at the University of Eau Claire. I imagine my carefree blond brother was not only living, but also “living it up.” The money our Mother sent to Gregg for tuition went for pizza and beer. And Troy was always expensive to raise.

Emotionally expensive.

Forgiving Troy

The onset of puberty, and new raging hormones, had turned Mom's clingy little boy into someone withdrawn, awkward, offbeat, secretly aggressive, secretly paranoid, and, of course, secretly going to Hell for masturbating.

From Troy's Diary:

THYSHALLNOTCOVENITETHYNEIGHBORSWIFE

I have had evil thoughts and have masterbated to these thought, and thoughts of these womans: woman I have seen on the streets, Vanessa (classmate), CANDY (ex-girlfriend), Lonie Anderson (TV STAR), Eva Torrez, posters of woman...Tracy Heison, Belinda Carliel, Just about every woman I saw.

14-year-old Troy didn't socialize with the girls – or boys – at Lincoln Junior High School. And some for good reason, as racial tensions divided the whites and blacks into gangs. Longhaired Troy avoided gangs of any sort, and hid his insecurity and fear of groups behind a rough exterior, a scowling face to mask his good looks, and an intimidating walk overcompensating for his thin body type.

He kept to himself and engaged friends one at a time. People assumed he was spacing out in a corner of the back row as he stared at insects on the floor for minutes at a time, as though trying to extract some communication from the bug itself. And one might think Troy squashed the bugs slowly, methodically, because he wasn't satisfied with the communication. But he had another agenda.

As the class spied on my brother pulling the legs off insects, he was spying on the class, searching specifically for a reaction of mild indifference. The faces registering disgust and squeamishness, he kept at a distance. These kids would not make good followers. They wouldn't understand him. They'd question him. Troy didn't want to be questioned.

The loud rebels who applauded and grinned at Troy's insect squashing were useless to him as well. These dissidents could look him in the eye. And though their stares were supportive, they might later turn against

him. Anybody who could lock eyes with him contained some measure of guts; he didn't want to deal with anybody else's guts.

Only the weak indifferent smirkers were allowed closer, one at a time, to this quiet anarchist. Maybe this was because Troy needed just one follower at a time. Or maybe it was because exposing himself was an excruciating ordeal. There was only one ordeal more excruciating – being completely alone.

When he was alone he had to deal with his destructive fantasies. He engaged them half the time, and resisted them as often.

So my brother, the quiet bug crusher, remained out of bounds to everyone, but the brain-dead. Possibly, if he had been secure enough to allow into his space someone with a working mind, he could've been steered out of his pattern to crush. I do not know. For his own reasons, Troy felt separated. He was a loner.

From Troy's Diary:

I pulled a knife on Richard Heckel – I was prejudist (I spray painted on the back of checkers) I have made weaponds, such as nunchucks, tenfas. I have carried knives intending to do harm to myself as well as others. I have made bats and pounded nails threw them, intending to do harm to others in gangfights. Evil thoughts of Joining cults!

Shortly before turning 15, Troy was informed he would not be allowed on the wrestling team, because he had been suspended from school too many times. Retaliating, he kicked in several of the school's glass doors.

Later that night, Troy stole our mother's Buick and picked up his current follower of choice, Kevin Patterson, a lanky redheaded burnout. They circled the high school, pumping the accelerator, spinning, and making as big a scene as possible.

Phone in hand, our mother paced her kitchen wondering what to do. Troy had never taken the car before. She didn't even know he could drive. For his safety, she called the police department.

Forgiving Troy

Troy returned forty-five minutes later, before the police arrived. Mom didn't file charges.

Since Troy's first suspension six months earlier, she had taken him to a series of counselors. However, this therapy didn't seem to be reducing his aggression.

With Gregg away at college, and our father out of the picture, our mother thought Troy needed a stabilizing, masculine presence in his life. Partly for his benefit, she began dating Chip Nagel, an easygoing guy with corny jokes who liked kids. Chip was also an unemployed, divorced man who loved spending his days golfing, and afternoons in taverns.

When Mom wasn't needling Chip to get a job, she enjoyed sunny Sundays with him on the putting green. For the first time since her divorce a decade before, she was enjoying chemistry with a man. She was allowing herself to fall in love. But she didn't tell Chip yet. She wouldn't tell him until she knew for certain that he would be a good influence on Troy.

Because of the damage Troy caused to the school's doors, the education board filed charges for criminal damage and truancy. Against our mother's wishes, Troy was sentenced to live for nine months at Shelter Care, a supervised citywide organization for the placement of troubled teens.

On June 1, Troy kicked another resident in the stomach during an argument over the remote control. Shelter Care forced him out – for good.

The Department of Health and Social Services pressed my mother to ask my father to take Troy because "Troy has found it difficult to accept directions and limitations from his mother and has attempted to put himself in equal states with her."

Succumbing to the pressure, my mother tried to convince my father to take Troy. Recently remarried with a house full of stepchildren in a neighboring city, our father didn't want to rock the boat by having delinquent Troy live with him. Dad took Troy for a few weeks, and then returned him. Dad didn't want to deal with Troy's anger, and Troy wanted to be back with Mom.

Before Troy was born, when our parents lived in Chicago with only Hope and me, Dad advised Mom against her strict disciplinarian techniques. He warned that if she didn't follow his more laid-back parenting approach at *that* time, he wasn't going to come to her rescue later. And he didn't.

Mom's relief having her miracle baby back home was apparent in her smile, and by the Neil Diamond songs she hummed. Making up for lost time, she bought Troy an electric guitar the minute he asked for one, and she treated herself to earplugs.

To save gas money, Mom bought a moped to ride to work; Troy wanted it. She declared he could only ride it with her permission. Instead he took it whenever he wished.

Though she was nine inches shorter than Troy, she once tried unsuccessfully to wrestle the bike out of his grasp. When Chip intervened, Troy unleashed all his rage onto him, beating his face until it was bloody. Mom jumped on Troy's back, attempting to pull him off of Chip. She was little more than an annoyance to the teen volcano. Furious about what Troy did to Chip, she called the police to teach him a lesson.

Troy admitted to a petition charging him with two counts of battery. The authorities did not have a place to house or rehabilitate Troy. They merely threatened him with "supervision" for one year, and suggested that our mother call in to authorities regularly. Troy had nowhere to go, but Mom's house.

Mom told Hope later that what bothered her most was that Troy did not appear remorseful.

Troy's verbal abuse of Mom intensified. Mom did not tell me. She didn't want to worry me; she figured I had enough to worry about being in Hollywood and going on auditions.

Her only defense against Troy's profanity was her look of disapproval. Seeing her haunted eyes lowered broke my heart, and usually made me alter my behavior according to her wishes. Even as an adult, I was affected by that look when she visited my Hollywood apartment. It was

Forgiving Troy

this look that stopped me from putting my shoe-clad feet up on my own beanbag chairs.

This look, however, only worked on a conscience capable of guilt. Maybe Troy built up immunity to that look, or maybe, as our father was beginning to suspect, he just did not have a conscience.

Teenage Batterer

1986

I was back in Wisconsin visiting my family in early April of 1986. My mother tried to act chipper when she invited all the relatives over for Troy's 16th birthday, but Troy seemed detached and kept disappearing into his room to make notes about something. Finally, Troy appeared with our dog Sassy.

My mother met him with her disapproving look, "Everyone's gone and you didn't even say thank you."

Gregg, who was home during spring break and smelling up the house with Polo cologne, suggested that Troy read the book he was then reading – *How To Win Friends And Influence People* – probably recommended by his latest girlfriend's father, a wealthy entrepreneur who had naturally taken a liking to Gregg.

With on-again, off-again Chip spending the night, my mother had a full house – something which made her feel worthwhile.

The following day, excited about a possible acting job, I flew back to Hollywood. Tim Wood had already gotten me one line in *St. Elmo's Fire* (it was cut) and in *Back To The Future* (it was also cut). He had also talked me up to Bill and Lee Bell, the married couple who produced *The Young and the Restless*. They trusted Tim's vision enough to audition me. After my fifth callback on tape for the soap opera, I attended a party with my friend Bruce.

I liked to hang around Bruce because he was so animated and extroverted at social gatherings that he took the focus off of my extremely

Forgiving Troy

self-conscious self. My manager phoned the party to tell me I had won the part and a three-year contract.

The first person I called was my Grandma DiLetti, who adored the show, but she had no surprise or lilt in her voice, so I don't think she believed me. My mother was ecstatic, but worried. Hope was skeptical. Gregg was jealous. Troy was quiet.

A couple of days later, Troy asked my mother to use her car.

"Why do you need my car?" she asked suspiciously.

"To go to the park."

She thought about letting him go. Troy had just turned 16, though he didn't have his license yet. Mom wondered if it would be less trouble if she just let him take the car for ten minutes.

"Which park?" she asked.

"Hollywood," he said.

At that point, she began hiding her car keys.

The next night while everyone was sleeping, Troy, with California dreams of his own, stole Gregg's wallet and Mom's keys. He picked up his friend Kevin, and freewheeled all the way through Illinois. Drunk on beer and driving in a thunderstorm, Troy skidded into a tree. The car was totaled but Troy and Kevin, both unhurt, managed to abandon the vehicle.

In days, they were apprehended and put on an armored bus back to Wisconsin, a bus from which they easily escaped. Two weeks later, they were caught, put under juvenile arrest, and bussed back to Wisconsin. Troy was placed in the Racine Detention Facility, half an hour north of Kenosha.

Troy was there for less than a week before he convinced two other juveniles to help him escape by attacking the workers. Four staff members, including three women, were injured in this attempt. Though my mother asked the court to forgive him, the court pressed charges.

For the car and wallet thefts, and escape attempt, Troy was sentenced that June to nine months at Wales, a maximum-security home for juveniles one hour north of Kenosha.

The Young And The Restless

1986

I was now Phillip Chancellor III on *The Young and the Restless*. Though I was 24, I had a lot in common with my 17-year-old character. Phillip was sensitive and brooding, having been ignored by his mother and put in boarding school all his life. I pictured my father in the “Why did you desert me?” emotional scenes. Phillip was fought over by the maternal characters of Katharine Chancellor and Jill Abbott, played by Jeanne Cooper and Brenda Dickson (Jess Walton later), experienced professionals who were extremely supportive to this rookie.

Walking into the CBS Artist’s Entrance, I would be handed a pass to pin onto my clothes. After the guard cleared me, I walked the long, white hallway, awestruck at the poster-sized photos of some of the shows that were filmed in this studio over the years: *Let’s Make A Deal*, *I Love Lucy*, *The Jeffersons*, *Sonny and Cher*, *The Carol Burnett Show*, *The Price Is Right*, *Capitol*, and *The Young and the Restless*.

At the end of this corridor was a dark stairwell where I would catch my breath, and try to calm my nerves before striding up a flight of steps to the stages. I would’ve loved shots of Peppermint Schnapps from my bartending days to relax me, but I knew drinking alcohol would get me in trouble if someone smelled it.

My character, Phillip, did not have the will power to resist alcohol. Philip sneaked swigs of booze, became an alcoholic, and would eventually “die” from driving drunk when his shiny red Corvette plunged over a cliff.

Forgiving Troy

My introverted nature was challenged facing the thirty crew members required to watch every scene: make-up, hair, props, wardrobe, lighting, cameras, sound, grips, etc. But I felt “bigger” and “better” each day.

My love interest on the show was the producers’ daughter, 16-year-old Lauralee Bell.

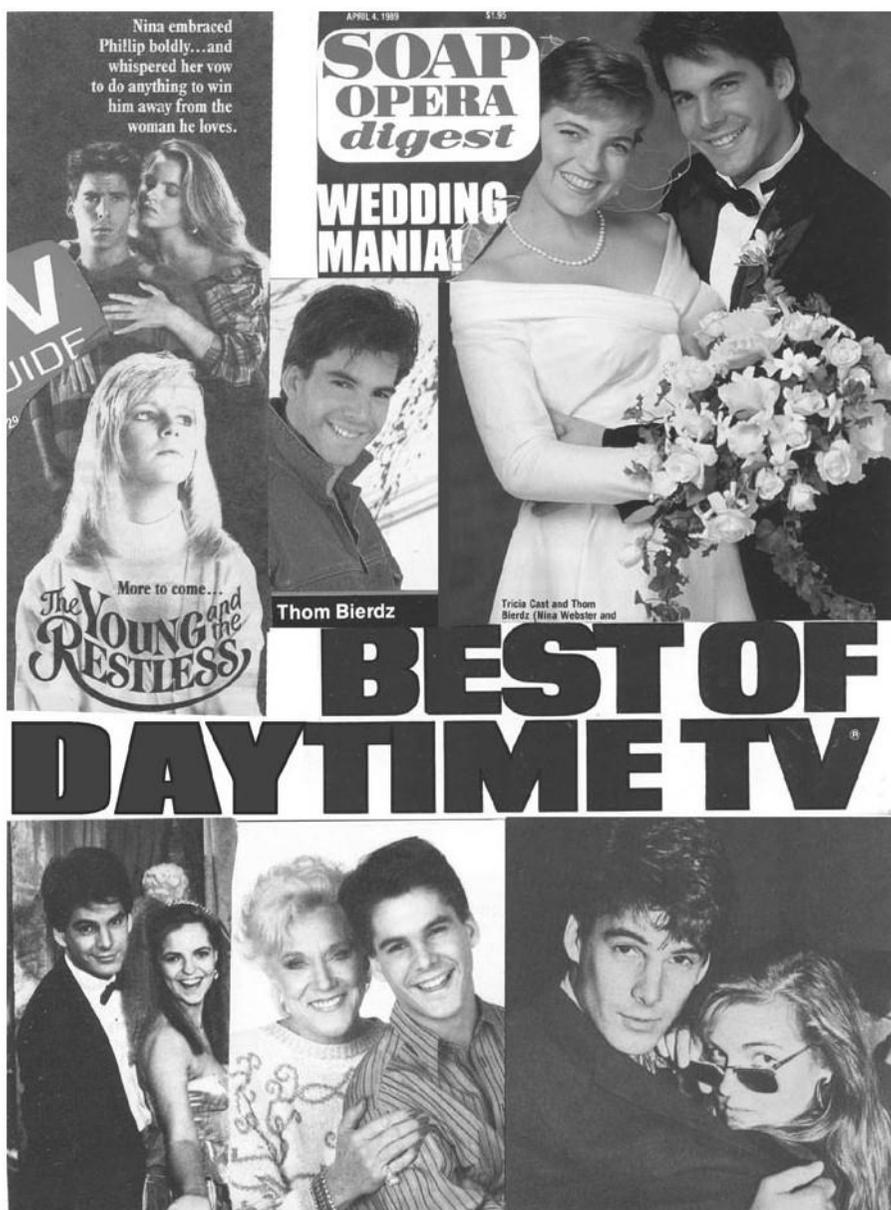
Although it might not have appeared so, Lauralee and I were similar. We were both inexperienced and both from Wisconsin, where her family had an estate on picturesque Lake Geneva. I was a working class, closeted, gay guy in his 20s, while she was a naïve, sheltered, teenage, Hollywood heiress. Perhaps we were both in our adolescence, as I was just starting to have fun, since my childhood had been so serious. I made her laugh, especially on the road when we did personal appearances. On the way to our hotel rooms, I would knock on strangers’ doors, then race away before they answered. She’d never had a friend who made her sprint on high-heels through hotel hallways. I’d never spent this much time alone with a girl.

A part of me was very attracted to Lauralee, but unlike some other closeted actors, I would not use her for publicity or as an experiment, like I had used Sandy. Besides, I was naturally drawn to men, and I wanted a boyfriend.

I secretly fell in love with the show’s florist, Danny Ellis, after he asked me out by leaving an orchid with his phone number attached in my dressing room. Danny had the face of a young Paul Newman.

Very quickly, I understood what my father meant about my mother being smothering, because Danny would allow me no space at all. He gave me an ultimatum in the first few months we were together: if the house I was shopping for wasn’t in both our names, he was history. Against my better judgment, I consented to his pressure. Six months later, I fell out of love with Danny and begged him to sign the house back over to me. He resisted, and became very vengeful. Our secret relationship was discovered when I showed up at work one day with a black eye; Danny boasted about giving it to me.

Thorn Bierdz



A collage of magazine photos with co-stars Tricia Cast, Lauralee Bell, and Jeanne Cooper.

Juvenile Prison

1987

In January, I returned to freezing Wisconsin, where my mother and I visited Troy. The barbed wire covering the tall chain-link fences made Wales seem like a federal prison even though it only housed troubled teenagers.

Troy met us at an icy picnic table under a dead oak tree. He looked strong and healthy, but his face seemed crooked, asymmetrical.

He stared defensively. My mother sat back, subserviently. She lit a Pall Mall cigarette, and when Troy asked for one, she gave it to him, complaining it was a bad habit.

He told me he watched me on TV, and he got special attention because of my celebrity.

“It’s so easy,” I said, “the answer to your anger. All you have to do is close your eyes, breathe deep, and visualize a green rectangle the size of a breadbox inside your heart. I learned it in acting class.”

He looked at me like I was a stranger. And he was a stranger to me too; this crooked-faced boy, with a cigarette dangling from his lips, sitting across the table from me.

Remembering my adolescence, I said, “I know you’re going through the roughest period of your life, Troy. Being a teenager is rough. No one understands.”

“I’m not a homo,” he declared.

My mother looked up at the winter sky.

I continued, "Close your eyes, breathe deep, visualize...a forest green box inside your heart."

I pointed to my chest. I felt full, complete.

I reached to touch his chest.

"You're fuckin' with me!" he shouted.

"Fuck you then," I said.

"I don't like that word," my mother said, with that look of disappointment on her face.

On the drive home, my mother seemed to be breathing oddly. I figured she was trying to feel the peaceful green forest inside her.

"You should try to feel a hundred evergreens inside your body," I said, "Anyone can, but it helps to close your eyes, so I don't think you should do it driving."

"Will you show me later?"

"Sure," I agreed, feeling grateful that she could see me as an adult now – an adult with his own mind and his own life experiences apart from hers. "I'm learning all kinds of things."

She remarked that she was thrilled I was, but her tone said she was suspicious.

"Mom, it's my life."

"I know. You have a good head on your shoulders. Hard as rock."

I sat with that for a long while, then I whispered, "I got it from you." By the time I finished my sentence, a tear had fallen from her eye to her chin to her hand on the wheel.

She looked at me, "You're my Tommy through and through, you know." Then added, in case I hadn't caught her subtext, "You take after me. Not your father."

I gave her the smile and nod that she expected. I asked about Chip. She explained they still had an on-again, off-again romance.

At her house, I got sidetracked with phone calls and forgot to teach her how to feel the forest inside her. I didn't have time to make sure she gained by my mental exercises. I had my career to take care of. I was a soap star.

Forgiving Troy

Ironically, with every new magazine cover, my world was getting smaller. Soon there was room in it for no one, but me. Though Mom, Hope, and even my jealous brothers praised me for my celebrity, my family was of little use to me. My obligatory annual visits to Kenosha became frustrating because they were starting to resemble my weekend personal appearances at malls around the country. Frustrating because as Mom paraded me around her workplace, I didn't feel as special as she, and the crowd, was carrying on that I was. It was embarrassing not knowing if some policeman really wanted my autograph, or if he was taking it because Mom wanted him to. Embarrassing because these hearty, robust Scandinavian Kenoshans who worked with Mom were twice the size of me, and made comments about how much bigger I looked on TV. Mom assured them, "Big things come in small packages."

I wanted to be taller.

I also wanted to be honest that I was gay. I wanted to say, "Big things come in gay packages." Instead I put on an act at every personal appearance, including Kenosha. At malls, I had started to pretend to be one of the straight soap stars. I studied their stage personalities when I traveled with them, and was learning how to act like them – how to stand, how to smile, how to shake hands. I did it in front of Mom and her co-workers too. I thought it was all worth it when I watched her eyes glow. She filled with pride, giving the impression, and maybe even believing, that a single mother *could* raise successful and well-adjusted children.

Schizophrenic Is What Schizophrenic Does

1987

Troy was experiencing depression at Wales. My method acting exercises might've slightly raised his spirits if he would've tried them, but he refused.

When he expressed interest in astrology and numerology, I got his chart from renowned Kate Diamond. But he didn't care what his rising sign was, or if Jupiter was squaring Saturn.

Troy was released in March of 1987. He continued to skip school, so the school board forced my mother to sign him out of school permanently.

Though it was against her better judgment, Mom also consented to Troy taking karate lessons. The instructor convinced my mother the class would serve as an outlet for Troy's aggression. And for a while it seemed to. At least he wasn't air-kicking an inch from her, or Sassy's face, anymore.

Then one morning Troy strutted through the kitchen with a tattoo on his bicep. Under it was cigarette burns. He said they didn't hurt, and that he no longer felt pain.

Further testing his pain threshold that April, Troy sliced his forearms with razor blades. Mom took him to Kenosha Memorial Hospital and pleaded they keep him there. They agreed.

Troy told the psychiatrist that he was increasingly suspicious of people and groups. He admitted to trying all kinds of recreational drugs to combat the paranoia.

Forgiving Troy



"HAUNTS"

(In the collection Of John Riggi & David Wendebnan)

Psychiatric Evaluation:

MENTAL STATUS: ...{Troy says}...this is his last life; he has had ten other lives. This life will not be spent making money and [instead] inflicting pain on himself, trying to experience every type of pleasure or possible thing in life, and eventually to either kill himself, or be shot trying to save someone. He does not expect to live too much longer. He says the depression gets so bad that he likes to inflict pain; sometimes he is afraid that this may lead to suicide. This date he was oriented, he laughed whenever I referred to his other lives and seemed to be aware of attitudes, and of abstract thinking. He has almost a mildly euphoric happy attitude, [laughing] somewhat inappropriately and motor activity was full and comfortable.

Other psychological testing indicated "...evidence of early thinking disorder, depression, probable adolescent schizophrenia..."

• • •

Our mother discovered a book on paranoid schizophrenia as she was vacuuming crumbs from under Troy's bed. She formed a question then that wouldn't be answered for nearly a decade: Is my son a schizophrenic, concerned for his mental balance, or is he using this textbook to manipulate all of us by faking schizophrenia?

The Kenosha Memorial Hospital prescribed an antipsychotic medication called Navane for Troy. He refused to take the pills, claiming they gave him lockjaw. Heedless to Mom's protests that Troy needed further psychiatric care, the hospital released him after only four days.

Troy wasn't happy returning to our mother's house; he demanded his own apartment and expected her to pay for it. When she refused, he began

Forgiving Troy

“accidentally” dropping Sassy. Mom never told me, that soon after this, she found Sassy crippled. I was only told, due to Sassy’s advanced age, she had to be put to sleep.

Mom and Troy went to outpatient counseling a few more times. He refused to continue. Showing up alone humiliated Mom, and she withdrew.

Hope got in touch with me weekly, often from her office where she worked as a computer programmer. During one call, she, upset, recounted the previous night. It was a cousin’s wedding and there was access to alcohol. 17-year-old Troy got drunk and threatened Mom. Hope was concerned and didn’t want them living together, but she did not have space at her apartment for Troy.

I returned to Wisconsin, insisting on taking Troy to California and finding him a job that would encourage a work ethic and his independence. My mother resisted me, and she whispered that she was worried about what could happen to me.

I didn’t care. At that point, I wasn’t afraid of Troy.

• • •

The pilot’s voice announcing that the plane was about to make its descent startled me out of my reverie. The prospect of landing left me feeling hollow, cold, uneasy, afraid, perturbed, angry, claustrophobic, cornered, and overloaded with dread of what was to come. Rod stirred from his nap. Gregg was once again scribbling on his mysterious piece of pink paper.

It was true that I was not afraid of Troy in the slightest when I asked him to move into my house in California, the year before he killed Mom.

But how could I not have been afraid?

I wondered if I had heard, but ignored his petty crimes and threats, or if I was just so involved with myself that I never even heard the threats against my mother.

I did remember a threat he made against me in Hollywood. He said

that he'd learned in Tae Kwon Do class how to point his knuckles like a knife, and stab them through my lungs, so he could rip out my heart in six seconds, and show it to me before I died.

Angry with me and pumped with adrenaline, he quickly demonstrated it in the air, very near my chest.

As I remembered this incident on the plane, and felt sick inside, I had no idea I would come into contact with Troy again. And at that time, when utter madness would be present in his eyes, nothing could prevent him from delivering this threat. If he still wanted to kill me, he would have the chance.

I didn't know then that my worst nightmare would, in fact, come true.

In the future, when I least expected it, Troy and I would meet again.
Face to face.

Three Bierdz Brothers In Hollywood

1988

The roof of my sunny Hollywood house was not yet taken over completely by the pretty-and-innocent-looking bougainvillea plant sporting fuchsia blossoms and winding into my front yard palms. My house, a woodsy oasis on Stanley Street, in the quaint Spaulding Square district of Hollywood, seemed to have begun to lean. The white picket fence out front was graying from traffic, and the birds of paradise on my curb went untended, their dead blossoms turning acid brown.

Gregg had moved in with me a few months earlier at the end of 1987, having graduated from college with a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration and a minor in Psychology. After having DJ-ed the college radio show and hosting a fraternity version of *Family Feud*, Gregg wanted to become an actor. The least I could do was introduce him to photographers, agents, managers, and publicists. The most I could do was get him on *Hollywood Squares* with me. Everybody loved Gregg, but I was irritated he offered no help around the house. Still, I gave him my spare bedroom.

Gregg was not thrilled to share a room with Troy. But there simply was no other place for Troy.

That February, soon after arriving in Los Angeles, Troy decided to join the Army, but the military didn't want him because of his criminal record. In spite of his past delinquencies, I managed to get him a security

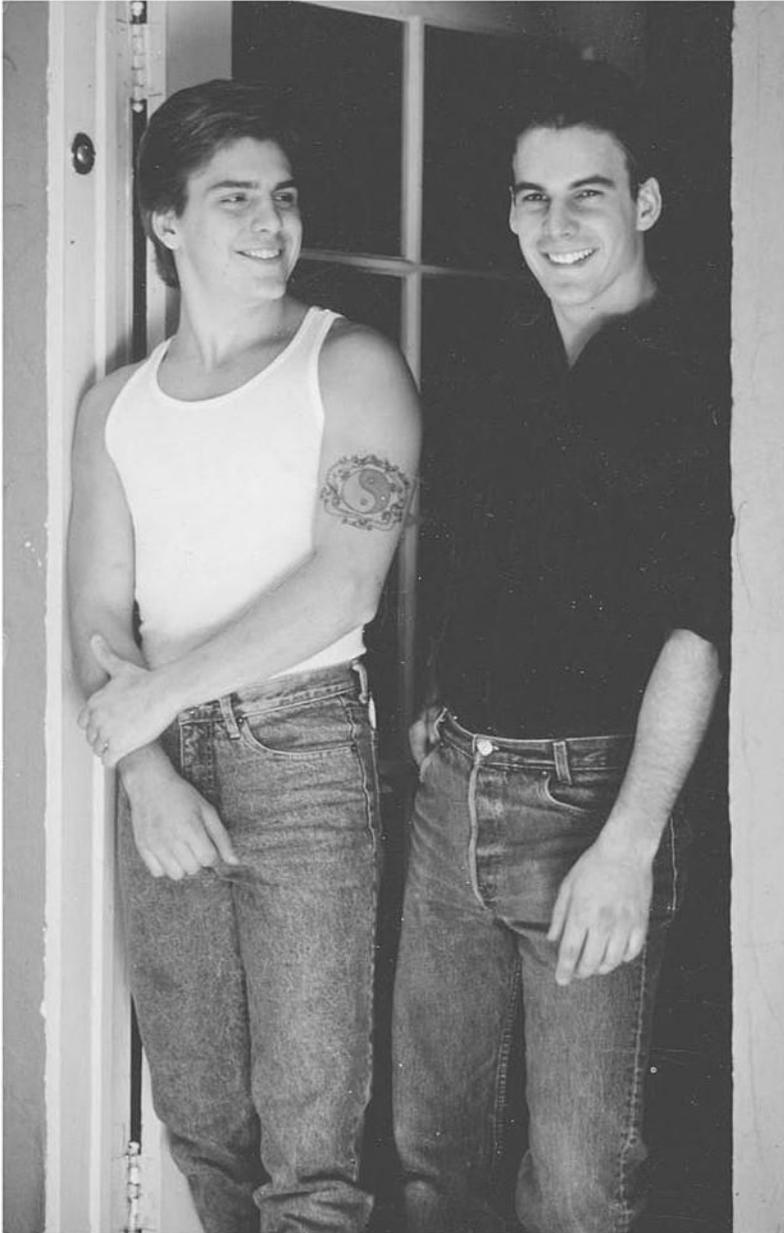
Thom Bierdz

job. Troy proudly put on the uniform, asked to borrow Gregg's Polo cologne, then posed for a picture we would send Mom as proof of his transformation. But Troy never reported for duty. I didn't know why. I assumed he was lazy and irresponsible, but later I would surmise that paranoia inhibited him. Determined he was not going to just lie around my house all day, I demanded he at least do yard work.



Troy in his security uniform

Forgiving Troy



Troy (left) and me in my L.A. doorway (1988)

I was too busy at CBS to do all the fix-ups an old house required, and my lover Rod was a busy salesman.

Rod did not seem trustworthy to my brothers, but I'd fallen head-over-heels in love the instant we met in a West Hollywood grocery store. I suspect he knew I was on TV before I told him, because I later discovered his ex had also been on a TV series.

Rod asked to move into my home immediately, and I let him. I learned years later that he didn't have a place to live because his ex was throwing him out for cheating. He decided very early in his troubled upbringing to only look at people's mouths, and not their eyes, when they spoke. That way he believed he could tell if they were lying. I was passionate about Rod. He was a genius; a certified Mensa member who could write music with a speed and talent I thought impossible. Sweat would pour from his forehead, as he sat frozen on a bench for hours, mastering various instrument sounds on his synthesizer. My brothers and I were in awe of his talents.

I encouraged Troy to play music and even bought him an acoustic guitar. He fiddled with it for a few weeks, and because of it, he was actually starting to smile and relax. He hummed a few lyrics of Mom's classic Neil Diamond songs when he helped me build furniture. With my friend Bruce's help, we made Adirondack chairs for the back yard. Nothing made Troy laugh like Bruce acting silly or girly. But when Bruce was not around, I was surprised to discover Troy still had a good sense of humor – dry, like mine.

One week, Troy helped me make a giant bed frame out of vertical wooden slats that unwittingly resembled prison bars. I told Troy he was an excellent carpenter, and suggested he get an apprenticeship somewhere. But he didn't want to leave the house.

I tried to get him to do other artistic projects with me.

I loved everything about art: buying oil and acrylic paints, thinning or thickening them, mixing pigments, creating colors, and building up textures. The idea of creating three-dimensions out of a flat two-dimensional

Forgiving Troy



"MICHIGAN TREE MANSION"
(In the collection of Craig Hines)

canvas was spellbinding, as was learning by trial and error about vanishing points and underlining geometry, and atmospheric perspective like da Vinci utilized in the *Mona Lisa*, where the atmosphere's effect is seen in the representation of distant objects.

Impressed with the shimmering immediacy projected from the landscape oils of Monet and Renoir, I experimented with sunlight and impressionism, but loved that in a stroke of pigment I could change the subtle, sinuous landscape into something more sensuous, or with a bold stroke of color something erotic – and with more strokes from a specialty brush something asymmetrical, like a pre-modern Picasso piece. I would lose track of time, immersed for hours into a canvas, completely trusting my brush as the painting emerged into something from my subconscious.

Even the process of hunting down frames in thrift shops gave me the excited stomach most people get from roller coasters.

I hoped Troy would take an interest, and with training maybe find some career in the arts. But he wasn't interested.

Rod shared tales of his many travels with Troy, hoping to excite Troy with a potential career in some aspect of the travel industry. To no avail.

Rod had traveled the Amazon and was familiar with Rhesus monkeys. We ordered one from Monkeys Unlimited in Cincinnati, Ohio. Fifteen-hundred-dollars seemed like a steal for a primate who could have the intelligence of a four-year-old child. Rod went to the airport with me to pick up Abu, and he bonded more quickly with the terrified pet. To my chagrin, I learned some Rhesus monkeys only bond with one person. Unfortunately for me, Abu chose Rod.

They became remarkably devoted. Abu would sit on Rod's shoulder and instinctively search for bugs in Rod's hair and beard. Rod returned this affection by mimicking Abu and pretending to groom his monkey hair. Then Abu would purr and lower his eyelids in complete satisfaction. I fantasized about Abu looking for bugs in my hair. But much like a colicky baby, he usually screamed when I approached. It was a nonstop, shrill shriek, and the panic in his screams bothered me more than the decibel level.

Forgiving Troy

Having four men and a monkey living under the same roof was often chaotic, often noisy, but just as often silent. Gregg was usually gone – dating or networking or both. Troy preferred to watch TV in his room. Rod and I loved to challenge our word knowledge by playing Scrabble.

Diapered Abu would sit on Rod’s shoulder preening his hair, as Rod spent minutes staring at his wooden letter pieces, trying to come up with seven-letter words. I was incensed that Rod could beat me so easily, and I accused him of needing to win everything. Rod argued that I was the one who needed to win everything. I regretted telling him about my grade school dairy questionnaire.

He said, “The rest of the kids hated you for having to outscore them on a stupid dairy test. It was a subconscious effort of yours to get them to keep their distance. Then they couldn’t figure out your secret of being gay. Because that was not perfect. You were the lonely schoolboy who lied about his breakfast to impress people. Isn’t it weird, or ironic, that you grew up to be a perfect-looking soap opera hunk still lying to impress his fans in shopping malls?”

“I don’t lie.”

“Thom, I’ve been there at the personal appearances when the girls ask, ‘Do you have a girlfriend?’”

“I said no. I wasn’t lying. I was throwing them off. You know that no casting director will cast an openly gay actor. There are no gay songs on the radio. No gay shows on TV. You know what my publicist said...”

Soap Opera Digest had contacted my publicist after a jealous old friend attempted to “out” me, and potentially get me fired from *The Young and the Restless*, by sending the magazine my old pay stubs from the Milwaukee gay bars. Luckily, the magazine, with a reputation of integrity, was happy to disregard them.

Rod asked, “At the malls, didn’t you tell them you had a girl- friend?”

“No, that would be lying. I told them I was single, and they cheered that.”

“But that was a lie.”

If I'd felt more secure about myself, and more secure about my relationship with Rod, I could have fought back. I could have reminded him how he lied every day at his job selling memberships for a heterosexual dating service. Rod regularly told prospective clients he was straight, and that he'd met his true love through the service.

Wasn't that a lie, too?

Was our whole relationship made up of lies?

I was certainly lying as much as he was. When *Soap Opera Digest* did its first cover story on me, I avoided pronouns when asked about a love relationship. It was hard in the beginning to suggest a lie by avoidance, but it got easier. My managers and agents also advised me to "be discreet."

When I took Troy to the set, he wanted me to be discreet too. He was even more embarrassed about my sexuality than I was. Gregg was also embarrassed, but not too ashamed to accept my free room and acting connections.

At my house, however, with the help of Bruce's quick wit and cartoon gestures, my being gay was something my brothers and I joked about. No offense taken. I wanted us to talk about it. So we could get past it.

My brothers and I lifted weights in my garage. Since it was too small for my pick-up truck, we transformed it into a gym with a mirror and a Solo-Flex machine. Even though Troy was the youngest, he had the most muscular definition. Gregg didn't seem to care what we thought about his body; he was only interested in what the ladies thought. The ladies loved his slighter frame with muscular legs from his sports-play. But I was jealous of Troy's physique. He looked more like a soap opera hunk than I did.

But I didn't kick Troy out because I was jealous of him. I eventually kicked him out after he disobeyed me too many times.

Troy's final disrespectful act was to urinate on my front porch. Gregg was using the house's only bathroom, and if Troy couldn't wait he could've peed in the bushes. Instead he chose my front door, and I did not have a sense of humor about that. So I locked him out.

Forgiving Troy

That night Gregg told our mother what happened. She swiftly flew to Los Angeles to rescue and take back home her “miracle baby.” At the last minute, I offered to get Troy his own apartment in Hollywood, but she insisted on taking him with her. Surprisingly, after being apart from her for six months, Troy treated her with respect.

They acted loving and appreciative with each other. No one, least of all me, knew the full extent of their dramatic past, or their future. I still did not understand he was a real threat.

Out of sight, out of mind.

I was pleased to not have to put any more energy into helping Troy, and Gregg was grateful to have his own room back.

Troy had only been back in Kenosha for a week before he sent me a diagram of his intended revenge on me. It was a sketch of a man hung from ceiling rafters and hooked up to electrical cables. I dismissed it as an empty threat – another ploy for attention.

But apparently it was more than that. My mother knew it was. That’s why she kept her car keys hidden from Troy.

Infuriated that he could not use her car, he grabbed a butcher knife from the kitchen counter, and stated he “would kill everybody and himself” – then slashed his wrist.

He was still bleeding as the police department arrived. Eventually they got him to trade the knife for a pack of cigarettes.

Troy confessed to ingesting a gram of cocaine the previous day. After being examined at the psychiatric hospital, which would not admit Troy because of his history of aggressive behavior, it was determined he had a “conduct disorder or antisocial personality.”

The doctor wrote, “I believe this young man requires relatively long-term, highly-structured treatment. I believe that if Troy is not treated at this time, he will soon be untreatable and end up in and out of jail and the court system for various crimes for most of the remainder of his life.”

During this time, I was asked to use my celebrity as part of a U.C.L.A. telethon for mentally challenged children. Concerned about Troy, I re-

Thom Bierdz

ferred to the kids as “troubled,” and was corrected on-air. I couldn’t stop thinking about Troy and, succumbing to tears, I shared on camera he had attempted suicide.

For someone like me, who thought he knew everything, who at least seemed to find “success,” it was frustrating not knowing how to fix my little brother. The fact that I did seem to fix him, for a couple months, and that I stopped fixing him because of my “Italian temper” and kicked him out, increased my frustration.

Troy Chases Love

RHONDA

I see visions of you
 through my eyes,
 Reminding me of the
 Brightest skys.
 The times we use to
 Walk along remind me
 Of a song.
 The song begins...
 Yet, never ends...
 – TROY BIERDZ

1988

In Kenosha, Troy's friend Kevin introduced him to Rhonda Lister. Troy dated her for a few months before she moved hundreds of miles north to River Falls, Wisconsin.

Troy apparently took this relationship more seriously than Rhonda did. After he found out that she quickly acquired a new upstate boyfriend, Troy told Kevin it was time to pay her a visit. On a rainy summer day, Troy and Kevin stole my mother's car and sped north.

In the parking lot of a bowling alley, just outside of River Falls, they chugged beer. A while later they pulled up to an empty police car. It was unlocked. Laughing, Troy reached in and stole the radar detector.

They needed gas and hoped to fill the car and leave without paying. When the clerk insisted they pay first, Troy decided to steal the money by

breaking into a soda machine. The police caught them, and they were arrested for possession of the radar detector.

Troy never saw Rhonda again. He was temporarily placed in a holding cell, but when he tried to cut his wrist he was transferred to another psychiatric hospital in Kenosha.

Karen K. Cesenhofer, MSW
Director, Community Support Program

Therapist's Notes:

Troy expressed a great deal of anger toward his mother. He stated he thinks constantly of killing people. He described his thoughts of walking down the street, shooting a stranger and walking on like nothing's happened. He stated he would like to experience the excitement of killing someone.

Troy also reported that he thinks about killing his family, but he cannot do that until he decides whether to kill his mother first or last. He described at length the pros and cons of having his mother watch the rest of the family die or for her to know she would be killed without being able to help the family.

...I encouraged Dr. Carbian to notify the family of what appears to be a potentially dangerous and serious threat to the family in general, but Mrs. Bierdz and brother, Thom, in particular.

Despite the psychiatric evaluation warnings, the hospital discharged Troy after he burned a fellow patient's lip with a cigarette. They released him into the care of our mother, knowing she was at risk.

A few weeks later, Mom wrote a plea for help.

Forgiving Troy

1988 Police Statement By Phyllis Bierdz:

On Friday, September 23rd, in the late afternoon, Troy told me he wanted to go bow and arrow hunting with a friend. He has never gone hunting before. Because I was afraid he would go to River Falls where he has harassed a former girlfriend's family, I said "no." He told me, "I want to kill something. I would enjoy killing something." Later that night, I noticed a large butcher knife in his room. He told me, "I'm gonna need it." The knife has an 8" blade.

On Thursday, September 29th, I had the day off. I was out doing errands. When I came home, Troy told me not to go into his bedroom and I noticed that his door was shut. Later, I went into the room and he had taken some concrete blocks and made a shelf with a board. On the shelf, he had several candles and a globe set out. He had a wicker basket filled with potpourri on the shelf. He had removed everything off the walls of the room and hung up an upside down cross and drawings he had made of devil signs. I made him take the upside down cross down from the wall.

On Friday, September 30th, at about 8:45 PM I was getting ready for work and standing in front of the dresser in my bedroom. Troy came up behind me and took a sock and put it around my neck. He kept pulling it tighter and tighter saying things about how small my neck is and how it wouldn't take much to snap it. I looked into the mirror and could see a terrible look in his eyes and I was very frightened. He kept saying things about my neck and breaking it. This lasted at least a minute. I was afraid and felt a sense of urgency, since he could easily snap my neck, but I couldn't let Troy know how scared I was. I think he would lose perspective and hurt me if

he knew how much he was frightening me and I can't protect myself. So, I tried to keep things toned down.

About a month ago, Troy began to get worse and dozens of times he has said to me, "Don't get me mad, Mom. You know what I can do." He has also started taking Karate kicks at my head, just inches from my face. He doesn't say anything, just kicks. He works out all the time and he has had Karate lessons in the past.

On Thursday, October 6th, I came home about 4:20 PM and Troy came into the kitchen while I put away groceries. He told me he didn't want to eat, but then began complaining about losing weight and muscle and how out of shape he is. He hasn't been eating properly lately. He kept watching me and was pacing around. I had the impression he was waiting for something or someone. He tried to help me a little when I hung up a blind. He was complaining about how he was stinking, going on about it for awhile. He finally went to change his underwear, although I couldn't smell anything. He was agitated and pacing around and making phone calls from the kitchen. I had the impression that something he had planned wasn't going to happen and he seemed to become more upset.

At one point while he was on the phone he grabbed me by the shoulder and said, "Don't rile me. You know what I can do; don't make me hurt you." This scared me because he is very strong. He then went into his bedroom and took out a briefcase. Inside there was a case with sharp instruments inside. They were silver. He said something about "cutting instruments". He packed a suitcase very quickly, I think with clothes. His voice was very high and he kept saying something about being at his peak. I bent down and found the cross he had hung on the wall

Forgiving Troy

last week and his Spuds MacKenzie doll stuffed under the shelf he had made. The Spuds doll had a vest on and the vest was cut open and Troy said that was an animal sacrifice.

At about 7:10 PM I called the Kenosha police dispatch to notify them that there could be some problems with Troy. I did this because I felt that something was very wrong. Troy kept going in and out of the house each time saying he would be back in ten minutes. He left the house once more and I knew I had to get help. I ran to my bedroom to phone the police, but the cord was cut. This was about fifteen or twenty minutes after my call to the dispatch. I ran to the back door, but couldn't get it open. I ran to the front door, but couldn't get out that way, either. I then saw Troy drive away in my car. I finally got out of the back door and went to the neighbors to call the police. The doors to the house had been tied shut and I found handwritten notes by Troy in the briefcase in his bedroom. These I gave to the police. I could not find the sharp instruments. About six hours later, Troy was found and taken to the hospital for cuts he had made to his arm. I went over to the hospital and when I got my car back I found a number of items Troy had taken with him last night. They were all packed in a blue backpack and placed in the car.

- wedding band and diamond engagement ring belonging to me
- one 2" paint brush
- one metal pulley, 4 1/2" x 2 1/2"
- fifteen metal screws, 2 1/2"
- one nutcracker
- two metal skewers, 18" long
- one can insect repellent

Thom Bierdz

- one screwdriver
- one pair scissors
- one plastic syringe of liquid steel, 11.8 mg
- two small hand saws with hacksaw blades
- one 7 1/2" saw blade
- one 3" saw blade with 8" handle
- one 40" shoelace
- one 12" wooden handle
- one dissecting kit containing probe, scissors, tweezers, pointed metal probe with an empty space for another instrument

Signed by Phyllis Bierdz 10/07/88

Mom was terrified for my safety, as the objects Troy listed matched his diagram of torture for me.

As I sat next to Rod and Gregg waiting for the plane to land, Troy's threat repeated in my mind a hundred times.

Dean Carbian, ACSW Clinical Coordinator Community Support Program

Troy...described how he would kill Thom slowly over about four days, torturing him. He stated he would hang him from his hands, burn him with cigarettes, pound nails into his kneecaps, use a car battery to give him electrical shocks...

Four days.

Torturing me.

Four days. Torturing *me*.

Was Troy waiting, watching our landing?

Forgiving Troy



"ANGER"

God Is Dead

1988

Travelers slowly unloaded from the plane, and since we were seated in the rear, we had a few more minutes to wait. And sweat.

I watched Gregg look down into his cupped, flexed hands. Nothing was there. I couldn't tell if he was almost praying, or almost strangling Troy.

Was Troy outside waiting for us?

Was Troy totally crazed?

After the police ignored Mom's written plea for help, she managed to convince Troy to commit himself to Kenosha Memorial Hospital's psychiatric ward in October 1988. He was medicated for six days. His mood went from euphoric to paranoid, and back again. Troy was suffering the influence of these mood swings when his friend Michael visited with his 14-year-old brother Steve. Michael's police report repeated in my head, over and over: "Troy was in the lounge area, Troy was telling my brother Steve how he (Troy) was going to break out of the hospital and kill his brother the actor."

Was Troy's real motivation to kill me because of my "fame," and not that I had kicked him out of Los Angeles?

Was Troy now waiting for us to descend from the plane – and did he intend to only kill me because I was "famous?" Would he kill Rod and Gregg too? If he did kill them, was it because a multiple murder would make Troy more "famous?" As we sat on the plane, we heard disturbing

Forgiving Troy

news about young actress Rebecca Schaefer from the TV show *My Sister Sam*. That very day, she was murdered on her Hollywood doorstep by a schizophrenic fan.

Was this why I was starting, at least subconsciously, to regret the fame I had achieved? Was this partially the reason my fame would soon disappear? Did I hold my fame partly accountable for my brother's jealous agenda to kill and empower himself? Would Troy want to kill me if I were not "famous?"

But Troy didn't want to kill Mom with the sole intent to be "famous."

Why did Troy want to kill Mom? Was it because they were co-dependent? Was it because he hated her personally? Or was it what she represented? And what did she represent?

• • •

At the Kenosha Psychiatric Hospital where Mom had taken Troy, he choked a nurse who looked like Mom, but stopped short of actually killing her. He fought off three more staff members, and then escaped. His whereabouts were unknown for nine days. This is when I was warned for my safety by his psychiatrist. But Troy did not kill me then, show up at my home, or even phone me.

Troy called our mother instead. Lovingly, she manipulated him into returning for psychiatric evaluation. He was kept in leather restraints and screamed his resistance to them, battling the haunted voices in his head.

I believe Troy intentionally revealed different parts of his personality to different doctors over the years. Most diagnosed him as merely antisocial. Some warned of danger and schizophrenia. Others believed he was faking.

As long as Troy kept them all guessing, he remained in control.

A few more doctors examined Troy on the state's behalf, to help with his sentencing in the River Falls incident. They also disagreed on his di-

agnosis. One believed Troy was mentally sick; the other insisted Troy was faking everything.

The court said that if Troy believed himself to be mentally ill, he could avoid a prison sentence and voluntarily commit himself.

He did.

• • •

Refused by all the Kenosha psychiatric hospitals, Troy was admitted to one in Racine. He was removed for threatening the staff, and put into a holding cell at the Kenosha Safety Building, the jailhouse where our mother worked.

At home, Mom paged through the book on paranoid schizophrenia that Troy kept in his room, sick to her stomach and terrified, unsure if he was faking or not.

Mom confided in others, but not me, about this book, just like she never told me the full extent of Troy's menacing and abusive behavior toward her. I suppose in her mind she was protecting me. During this difficult time, Mom did confess to me that she was beginning to doubt if her prayers were heard. Since Troy's birth, she certainly had little proof God was listening. My soap stardom proved to me that prayers were answered, and I was not troubled when Mom, or friends, shared personal misgivings about the existence of a god. My faith had not been shaken – yet.

• • •

As Rod, Gregg, and I prepared to leave the airplane, our last guaranteed safe haven for who knew how long, I couldn't stop picturing my mother holding Troy's schizophrenia book, kneeling by her bed in front of her ceramic statue of The Virgin Mary, praying, "*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee. Blessed art Thou amongst women and blessed is Thy fruit of Thy womb.*"

How many times did she say that prayer?

Forgiving Troy

When did she realize The Virgin Mary wasn't listening to Phyllis Bierdz?

What evidence did she have The Virgin Mary ever listened to her?

What evidence did she have there was even a God looking out for her?

It certainly seemed unlikely.

God no longer cared.

God was dead.

• • •

On December 22, Mom went shopping for Christmas presents with Hope and Grandma DiLetti. When she returned home, she learned Troy had tried to kill himself by slicing open his wrist in the holding cell.

The next day, he tried to hang himself with bed sheets.

The day after that, he swallowed a spoon, and had to be taken to the hospital to have it removed. He attempted suicide a total of six times until he was harnessed into a straitjacket, yelling profanity at the top of his lungs.

The police tried to have Troy removed from his holding cell to an institution, but because of his history of harassing hospital attendants, no psychiatrist in Kenosha or Racine would admit him back into a hospital.

Throughout that winter and spring, Mom raced around, desperate to find a place that would help Troy.

The Last Visit

1989

The flight attendant stopped me before I exited the plane. She said she was sad that I was dead. She had watched my character on *The Young and the Restless* die just a month before in June.

I explained to her the TV aired episodes which we taped several weeks in advance, and that I had actually left when my three-year contract expired in May.

• • •

Rod backed my decision to leave the soap opera and audition for feature films, but family members, especially my parents, were nervous I was giving up my once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Though I was very attached to many of the actors on the show – as attached as someone hiding his sexuality could be – I left without saying goodbye to them. It was my pattern to disappear quietly, just like the way I'd skipped my high school graduation.

Another actress on the show, who was not in my storyline, and whom I seldom saw, was also leaving that day. Neither of us showed up on Stage 33, following the last shot of the day, for the farewell party given in our honor. I later learned the producers made a special trip to the stage to present gold watches to this actress and me. They waited half an hour for us to appear before they, confused, ate the cake and went home to their families. I don't know why the actress did not show up, but I didn't show

up because I dreaded everyone looking at me all at once, expecting a speech.

What would I say?

Or more importantly, what did they want me to say?

My friend Bruce once made the mistake of throwing me a surprise party. A deer-caught-in-the-headlights look would not leave my face. My panic made the guests uncomfortable and, to my relief, they departed quickly. So, instead of subjecting the cast, the crew, and myself to a similar experience, I opted to end my three years on *Y&R* by sneaking out of CBS's back exit.

A few weeks later in June, just a month before I gave the flight attendant my autograph then exited the plane returning me home for my mother's funeral, Rod, Abu, and I took a cross-country road trip to Wisconsin.

Mom had gone through all her leads on establishments to rehabilitate Troy in Kenosha, Racine, and half of the prospects in Milwaukee before she found what she hoped was a "safe" place for Troy – the Exlogry House. When Rod and I visited Troy in the big city that smelled like breweries, we found no indication he was suicidal at that time in the least. No one else was evident in the structure where he was residing, which looked like a dilapidated house. We questioned the existence of the chaperones that Mom was promised would monitor Troy. If Exlogry House had rules, Troy appeared to be free to violate them daily.

Troy showed us a painting he'd done with the brushes I'd sent him – red figures holding weapons.

We took Troy to lunch. He stared at me over the table, trying to be intimidating. But I wasn't intimidated. I didn't ask him about the diagrams of torture he sent me. I'd never given those a second thought. In his eyes, I only saw a vulnerable, lost boy.

I suggested he save money and move out to L.A. again. He was very quiet.

Later that week, Rod, Abu, Gregg, and I, along with Hope and her husband Sam, and all the DiLetti relatives celebrated my grandparents'

50th wedding anniversary. Troy also attended; dressed in a suit jacket our mother bought him for the occasion. There was evident love between them.

Maybe the time apart was improving their relationship?



Me, Gregg, and Troy at our grandparent's 50th anniversary party a month before Mom's murder.

• • •

Forgiving Troy

The next day as Rod and I loaded the van for California, Mom held onto me, refusing to let me go. She was sobbing.

I thought I understood what she was thinking, so I smiled at her concern, looked into her sepia-brown eyes, and reassured her, “You probably think I’ll be hurt in some car accident, but we’ll drive carefully. I promise! Mom, stop crying! You’re going to see me again!”

But I couldn’t pry her off of me.

It was like she knew she would never see me again.

By the time Rod and I were back in Hollywood on July 6, Troy went to court for his previous charges of assaulting hospital personnel, stealing my mother’s car, and taking the police radar detector. Troy pled “no contest” and received a four-year sentence.

Amazingly, this could have been exactly what my mother wanted. At last, an institution would be forced to house Troy, treat him, and try to rehabilitate him!

Mistakenly, the court thought it best that Troy serve the first year of his sentence at the Exlogry House, a place with no supervision or rehabilitation!

What would it take to get Troy the treatment he needed?!

My aunt later told me how pale and unhappy my mother looked in that courtroom. Mom readjusted Troy’s tie, and asked him to come down the following week from the Exlogry House, with the supervisor’s permission of course.

On July 14, he did visit.

He brought along his baseball bat...

Several hundred more pages...