

**"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*



## *Preface*

**O**n 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

**T**hat 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.

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

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.

**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...

Thom 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?

**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.