

**THE 12 DAYS OF  
CHRISTMAS  
NOVELLA**

By THOM BIERDZ

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# WHY I WROTE THIS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*<https://thombierdz.com>*



Partridge In A Pear Tree



Two Turtle Doves



Three French Hens



Four Calling Birds



Five Golden Rings



Six Geese A Laying





Seven Swans A Swimming



Eight Maids A Milking



Nine Ladies Dancing



Ten Lords A Leaping



Eleven Pipers Piping



Twelve Drummers Drumming

# BIO

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

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

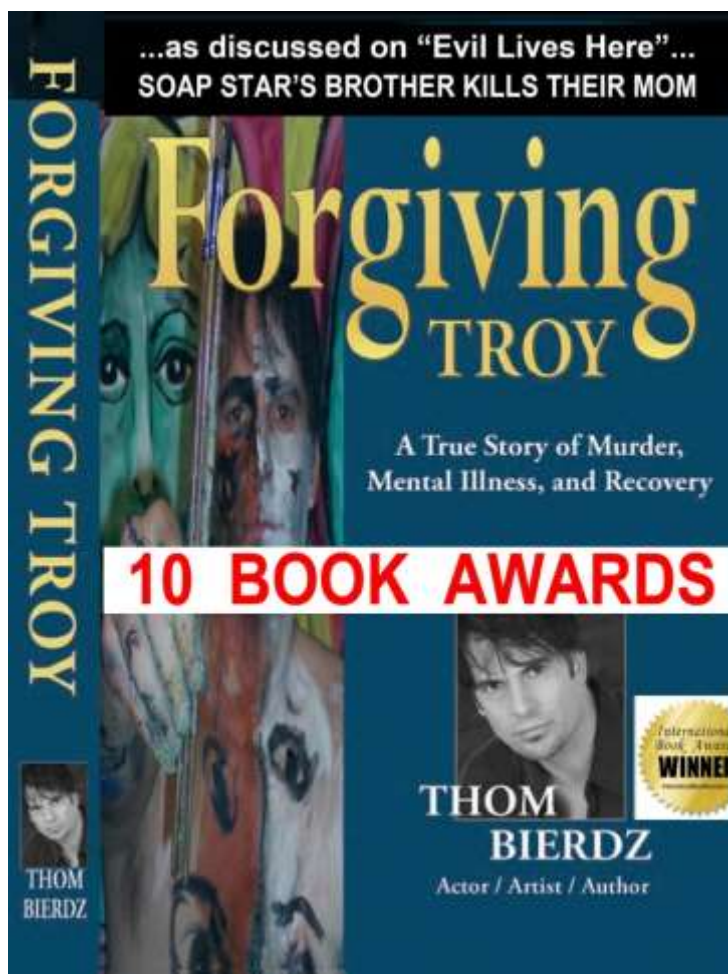
In 1997, young filmmaker Bierdz's first art film, *Heart Of The Oak*, won Best Experimental Film at Philadelphia International Film Festival and Best Experimental Film at University of California Davis snagging the coveted Golden Calf Award.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

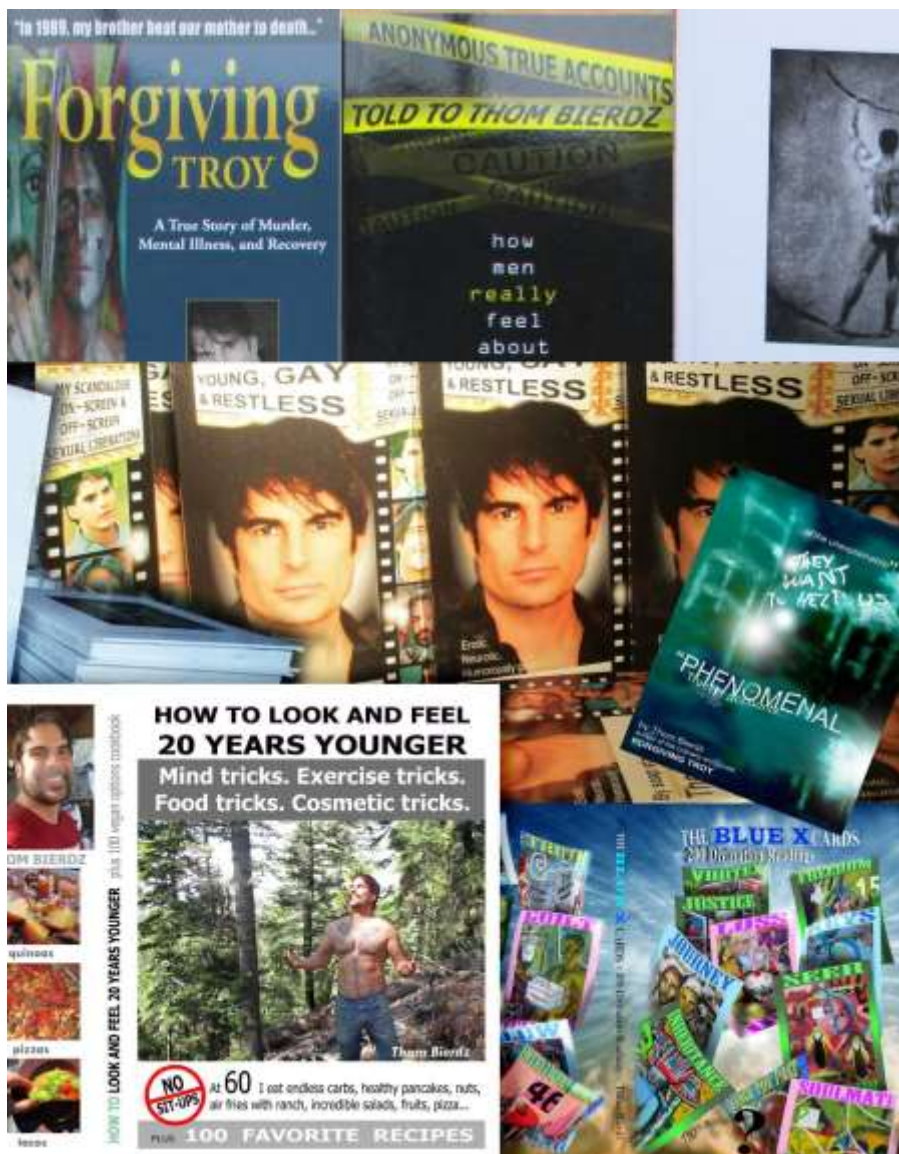
Being the first openly gay legacy soap actor, he was honored by the Human Rights Campaign in Minnesota, 2009.

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

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







# THE 1<sup>ST</sup> DAY OF CHRISTMAS



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She laughed, “Oh no you didn’t.”

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

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

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



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

Dan asked, "Or was it the vaccine?"

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

"Neither did your cooking," Brick joked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brick smiled, "We love you, Georgia."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No." Maria looked helpless.

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

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

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

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

Maria replied with only one finger: the middle one!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Forty minutes later, a sober Maria walked back into the

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

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

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

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

“What do they eat?” Maria asked.

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

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

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



## THE 2<sup>ND</sup> DAY OF CHRISTMAS



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maria rose to look.

Jo pointed, "Do you see the doves?"

"Doves?" Georgia asked.

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

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

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

"They like Gary," Sharon said.

"Are those your doves?" Gary asked Jo.

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

Georgia started, "Are you new to Lake Lure?"

"Yeah," Jo said, "Moved in after Thanksgiving. I'm Jo. J. O."

"No E?" asked Sharon.

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

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

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

"Not yet."

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Coldwell Banker,” Sharon said.

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

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

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

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

“How did you get turtledoves?” Georgia laughed.

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

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

Sharon asked, “Who is giving people birds?”



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

"Yes! In my pear tree..."

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

"How does the song go?" asked Gary.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No thank you," replied Jo.

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

"Which god?" quipped Jo.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not me," said Jo.

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

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

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

"I couldn't hunt," Georgia said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

# THE 3<sup>RD</sup> DAY OF CHRISTMAS



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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dan said, “You’ll need a rooster.”

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

“I’m hungry already,” Dan said.

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

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

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

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

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

Georgia asked, "Where you from?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Like any of these girls?” Gary asked.

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

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

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

“What you looking for?” Kyle asked.

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

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

“Kyle. Yours?”

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

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

“Oh he’s dying? I’m so sorry.”

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

“I don’t believe that, do you?”

“Maybe, why not?”

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

“I’m an optimist.”

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

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Get the heck out,” Dan told her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How?"

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

"I'll try to explain that."

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

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



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

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

"What are you doing here?!"

"We had a date."

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

"Yes."

Neither said anything. There was nothing to say.

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

"No."

"Then what?"

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

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

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

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

“Nah, you’re a ten.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“A nine.”

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

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

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

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

“I’ll call you later,” he said.

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

# THE 4<sup>TH</sup> DAY OF CHRISTMAS



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

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

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

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





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

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

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

"Doubtfully," he replied.

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

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

Jo replied, "I am always a woman."

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

"I am a woman inside."

"You look like a man."

Jo socked Dan, surprising everyone.

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

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

Jo looked away.

Dan vented, "God only made two genders."

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

Jo hissed, "But Dan started it."

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

"Speech is violence," Jo whined.

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

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

"I'm sorry," Jo said, "That you judge me."

"Same," Dan huffed.

Georgia gave Dan back the gun.



# THE 5<sup>TH</sup> DAY OF CHRISTMAS



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

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

“Hardly. Checking messages on Facebook.”

“So, what’s new on Facebook?”

“Same old bullying games. Dems will do anything to demean Trump. Their new attack is-”

“You like Trump??” she screamed.

“He’s got balls to call out the corruption in Washington-”



“He IS the corruption-”

“Let me guess. You watch CNN.”

“So what if I do?”

“That’s all the info I need to know. Now I know exactly 100% of your beliefs programmed onto you.”

“You watch FAUX NEWS?”

“I have. So you supported Black Lives Matter groups burning up cities and killing people, but you think January 6<sup>th</sup> was unforgiveable.”

“It was unforgiveable! What gives citizens the right to overthrow the government?!”

“A stolen election? It’s a constitutional duty to overthrow the government in the case of a stolen election. Or do you excuse stealing?”

Furious, she pushed him off the bed.

He chuckled, “No, I wasn’t referring to YOU stealing two days ago.”

“I couldn’t marry a Trumptard Republican.”

“One, I did not say I was a Republican. Two, I didn’t ask to marry you.”

“Why don’t you marry Ivanka Trump!”

“She’s taken, but she’s totally hot.”

“Ewww!!” Jenny, nude, stomped out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, putting on the coffee pot.

Kyle laughed loudly, “I prefer fiery street urchins like you!”

She giggled, and he yelled more, “Boring guys like me need dramatic chicks.”

She screamed to give him drama. They both laughed. Her piercing blue eyes went to the oak trees outside. Squinting, she tried to make out what on the tree branches was reflecting the morning sun.

“So your sweet ancient old uncle is also a racist, homophobic, machine-gun wielding rich Trumptard Republicidiot?!”

“You’re parroting TV narratives. None of that was correct except the Republican part, my uncle is that.”

“Republicans hate blacks! They hate abortions! They hate Mexicans! They hate gays!”

“No they don’t. He IS gay!!”

“Your ancient old uncle is a dicklicker?”

“Probably not as good as you!” With that he flew out of the bedroom with a sheet to catch her. She shrieked in delight, being chased inside and outside. He caught her and wrapped her in the sheet like a mummy and kissed her softly. She beamed, glowed – almost as much as the rings on the tree branches.

Five rings. Five golden rings. Aligned on long tree branches. With a yellow note.

Not noticing, they made love on the crumpled forest leaves, the tight sheet barely concealing their genitals.

After orgasms, they lay looking up toward the sky, and noticed the rings, and Dan looking on from the street. Embarrassed, they arose, awkward, tightly together, sharing the sheet as cover.

“Dan?!” Kyle asked. “What are you doing here?!”

Dan said, “The five golden rings! I was inching toward the note when I heard Jenny scream.”

Jenny was confused, “You put five golden rings in my yard?!”

“Not from me,” Dan said. “But maybe I know who’s doing it.”

Kyle grabbed the yellow note and handed it to Jenny, who read, *“Five Golden Rings. We’ve been together so long, now you must send us on our separate journeys.”*

Kyle looked confused, “What does that mean?”

Dan stepped closer, removing the rings, studying them, giving them to Jenny, “These are real gold.”

Jenny stuttered, “Real gold?”

Kyle surmised, “Looks maybe 14karat, a diamond in one, with gold about a thousand bucks an ounce, my guess is you just got about ten thousand dollars, give or take.”

“Who would give these to me?” she covered her small face in her trembling hands, wiping tears, “Everyone in town knows I tried to steal a ring two days ago... who would GIVE me these?? ME?? Oh my god.”

Kyle shrugged and Dan shifted uncomfortably.

Jenny stammered to Dan, “I’m so sorry what I did the other day. It was stupid. I am an absolute stupid worthless zero.”

Kyle said, “A few more zeroes have been added, darlin.”

“I’m rich!” she whispered, then held Dan’s lapel, “You have to get everyone together. I need to apologize and show them these

rings... we need to go see Georgia, and the drag queen who hates me, and all the others..."





Dan reached for his phone, "Okay, I'll start calling them."

Jenny pleaded, "Tell them I am a no-good psycho trailer witch trashy nasty two-faced lying thief zero who wants to apologize."

Georgia insisted she would host again for all who wanted to witness Jenny's apology. About 6PM that night, eight or more cars were parked on the gravel road by Georgia's beautiful home front.

Sharon and Delilah again helped Georgia serve drinks and food to the gathered townsfolk. Jenny sat wearing large dark sunglasses, her trembling hand holding Kyle's. Next to him was his uncle, taking a pill with a glass of wine. Across the room was Dan talking to Qi and Li Xong about hunting. Maria checked her Christian Singles profile on her phone. Brick arrived with his studious red-headed wife, Bridget. Jo entered, in orange wig and red gown, heavily adorned with cosmetic jewelry.

He announced, "I was not going to be upstaged by five golden rings, so I'm wearing ten. The broach is from Britain. Costume jewelry but who can tell?"

"Ooh la la," Dan said.

"Jo, have a seat," Georgia said, "And let's hear Jenny's apology."

Kyle removed Jenny's sunglasses. They were hiding swollen eyes. She wiped a tear, "You all know I got the Five Golden Rings, which is the most embarrassing gift because you also all know I tried to steal a ring from here two days ago."

Many shifted, anxious.

Jenny continued, "Who would do that?" She looked around, no one confessed.

Dan read from his phone aloud, "*The five golden rings represent the first five books of the Old Testament, which describe man's fall into sin and the great love of God in sending a Savior.*"

Georgia pinched Dan's neck, "Here is the savior. Dan!"

"It's not me," Dan said. "Have you ever known me to give away ten thousand dollars to make a point?"

Georgia agreed, "Dan never bought me a muffin in 23 years."

Maria added, "Me neither."

Sharon asked, "Who has got so much money or jewelry to throw away? Does the jewelry have any clues?"

Jenny revealed the rings. "This one with the diamond says 'We have eternity' and this wide one says 'Secret Love' and the other ones don't have any writing." She passed them to Kyle, who looked, passed to Gary, who looked, passed to Maria, etc..

Jenny stood up, "I want to give these away."

Kyle said, "No!"

Gary said, "Let her speak."

Jenny cried, "I never gave anything big away to anyone, but I want to, I feel I ought to. Georgia, would you like them all?"

Georgia was stunned, "Honey I don't need more jewelry. I don't need anything. What's an old woman gonna do with more jewelry? Someone gave them to YOU." Then, "The ring you tried to steal was my husband's. I do not want it for value, I want it because it's part of Roy, a memory, what I can hold onto."

Jenny said, "Someone gave these five rings to the no good psycho spaz thief, me, and maybe it was to embarrass me further?"

Long silence as that thought was shared by many.

She continued, "Or maybe it was to make up for the embarrassment, I don't know. But I applied at two restaurants today so I'll be a waitress soon, I just know it, so I don't need hand-outs."

Kyle said, "But your rent is due. Sell at least one ring to pay your rent."

"Keep them all," Maria said. "I would."

The Asian man, Li Xong, spoke, "I feel better around you if you keep these. If you have money, you no steal from me."

People laughed, Jenny blushed, put back on her glasses, sunk in her chair, "I don't know what to do. Is there a charity that needs money?"

Georgia said softly, "Yes, there is. You are the charity, honey. We all go through that stage needing charity. You need. You got. Feel relieved, wherever it came from."

Dan smiled, "It came from God."



# THE 6<sup>TH</sup> DAY OF CHRISTMAS



December 30. The next morning, Kyle and Jenny found a jewelry store that offered \$8,500 for the five rings, so Jenny took it, grateful. Coincidentally, the mink-wearing governor's wife was in the same store, shopping.

Shopping for clothes afterwards, and having lunch, Jenny's demeanor had changed. She was no longer a victim, at the effect of circumstances, she was empowered, creating circumstances. A call came in that confirmed she scored one of the waitress jobs.

"This is the luckiest week of my entire life," she told Kyle.

He kissed her, "I am glad I could be a part of it."

He joined her at a salon where she got full make-up and movie star blonde hair. She looked like a ten.

Sharon had already been to Brick's and brought to her house Georgia, Maria and Dan before Delilah woke-up. Sleepy Delilah sauntered outside to see the four adults standing, looking down on six geese.

Sharon pulled Delilah in, "We got the six geese! On the 6<sup>th</sup> Day Of Christmas my true love gave to me, six geese a-laying!"

"Who is doing this??" Delilah giggled. "What are we going to do with six geese?"

"They roast well with potatoes," offered Dan.

Georgia spanked Dan, "Which one, you meanie? Which one you going to pluck and kill and tear part and cook? Look at them, how adorable."

Dan blushed, did not speak.

"Well," Sharon decided, "They are free to roam, of course, they're not indoor pets." Out of her pocket she withdrew the yellow note, *"Six Geese A-laying. Adopted by Sharon and Delilah, but we'll roam Lake Lure at our leisure."*

"Should I get them a blanket or something?" Delilah asked, petting one.

"They're not wild," Dan explained. "I shot many in my day. Wild ones won't come near humans. These were somebody's pets."

Georgia wondered, "Maybe from those Indians who are starting the petting zoo?"



"Why would Native Americans be giving away their pets?" Sharon asked.

Maria added, "For publicity? To advertise their upcoming petting zoo?"

Georgia exclaimed, "That's it! Brilliant."

Dan read his phone aloud, "*The six geese a-laying stand for the six days of creation.*"

Delilah read, enthralled, "*For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.*"

"Delilah is born again," Sharon explained, stoic.

"Four months ago," Delilah beamed.

Sharon asked, "How does the spiritual meaning apply to me and Delilah? I don't know what we are supposed to get from this?"

Delilah admitted, "I'd honestly rather have the gold rings."

They all laughed and excitedly exchanged ideas about who could be behind the mystery, while petting the geese. Sharon suspected the Governor's wife but didn't have a reason why.

"Brick knows to send folks here to see the geese," Sharon said, "Delilah, get dressed and put on make-up in case that dreamy Kyle comes over."

Delilah sighed, "He likes that hippy girl. She got him AND the five golden rings. I got geese."

Just then the sound of a car caught their attention. It was Jo, in jeans and a T-shirt, no wig.

Delilah whispered, "It's that drag queen guy."

Sharon welcomed him with her waving, "How's your turtledoves doing?"

"In and out," he yelled, "Just like the note said. Madge chirps and chirps and Moe just sleeps and eats. How are the hens?"

Georgia beamed, "Two eggs this morning, and sure they cluck and make a mess – in part of the kitchen, but it's nice to have them." Georgia rubbed Jo's back as he approached.

They looked to Maria, who hadn't said a word, so she admitted, "William the partridge is sick I think."

"What's wrong with the partridge?" Georgia asked.

"I don't know," Maria replied, "He's not eating and he's losing feathers."

Delilah ran inside to put on make-up when she saw a vehicle being parked by Kyle and Jenny.

Sharon walked to meet Kyle and Jenny, "Maria says the partridge is sick."

Kyle looked concerned, gulped.

"Did you come to see the six geese?," asked Sharon, "Come pet them. They're people-friendly, so we figured out they did not come from the wild."

Dan shook Kyle's hand, "Do you know anything about partridges?"

“My uncle might,” Kyle said, “He has a farm, with a pond, cows...”

Maria pepped up, “Can he come see the partridge?”

Kyle answered, “Probably best for you to bring it to him. It’s hard for my uncle to even walk anymore.”

Kyle, Jenny, Maria, holding a sad-looking William the partridge, walked to Gary, who was milking a cow on his farm.

“Damn it,” Gary cursed, “My prehistoric fingers are too brittle, but the cows need to be milked. But I can’t do it.” He sighed, exasperated that his body would no longer do what he commanded it.

Gary smiled as Maria revealed the partridge, who squawked and flew to him. Gary petted him, “What is wrong with William?”

Maria explained, “He’s restless and squawks and doesn’t eat anything I give him.”

Gary said, “Truth is partridges are not good pets, Maria, they are wild and want to roam.” With that he let the partridge walk off to investigate the farm. “He’s probably lonely.”

Maria said, “I’m there with him on the couch watching Hallmark movies when I’m not at work.”

“I meant William might be lonely for other birds,” Gary said.

Jenny asked, “Do you have other birds here?”

“No,” Kyle said.

Gary disagreed, “There might be some swans at the pond today. Let’s go look.”

Gary, slowly, with a cane, followed excited William through the barn and outside to a beautiful pond where indeed a group of swans bathed. Kyle, Jenny and Maria joined a few seconds later.

Maria asked, “Do I need to find another partridge or something so William won’t be lonely? Am I being a bad mother again?”

Gary offered, “Maybe leave him here overnight. Look at him, he’s squawking and playing with the swans. They’re not afraid of him. He’s too small to be a threat.”

Maria looked concerned.

Jenny watched the birds, then her eyes widened. She mouthed to Kyle and held up seven fingers, “Seven? Seven swans?”

“Shhhh,” Kyle winked.

# THE 7<sup>TH</sup> DAY OF CHRISTMAS



Jenny's assumption proved correct, as the next day, December 31, Maria woke up to William and seven swans enjoying the stream by her front door. She cuddled William then found the yellow note pinned to her door, *"Seven swans a swimming. In these cold months, make sure there is a warm shelter where we can retreat. We swans living on fresh water will eat pondweed, stonewort and wigeon grass, tadpoles and insects."*

"These are from Gary's farm!" Maria pulled out her phone and pressed a button and spoke loudly, "Gary, now you get over here and explain these swans."

Overwhelmed, as she waited, she reached for the gin bottle five times, but resisted the strong urge to drink.



Half an hour later, Kyle, Jenny and wobbly Gary walked the stone path to Maria's front door. She opened it holding William, revealing wet swans flying and completely messing her modest furniture, "So you're the mystery Santa, Gary Richards?"

Gary smiled, "Before I die I needed to find my animals homes. You can give my swans so much, Maria."

Jenny looked confused, "The five golden rings? You gave them to me??"

Gary nodded, "Who better? Where I'm going I can't take jewelry."

Jenny asked, "You could have sold them and kept the money."

"I wanted to give them," Gary said, reaching for a chair to sit. He pointed to his heart, "Do you know how good it feels to give?"

Kyle spoke, "He was hoping no one would ever find out he was behind this, because none of you ever really knew who he was. He's a very private man, said he watched you all from the outside, and wanted to help you – and find his beloved farm animals homes."

Jenny, "But the rings?"

Gary blushed, then explained, "No one knows I am a..." Suddenly in pain, as if he had a heart attack, he continued to disclose, "...homosexual. Forty years ago a carpenter named Tony and I had a private ceremony, a gay pretend wedding in front of our farm animals, and when he died, I tried it again with Jim Hollister the postman with frosted hair, anyway, then I also had my mother's ring. I either give the five rings away or leave them to Kyle, who is not a farm man and will sell the farm anyway."

Maria placed William down and stared, hands on her hips, "Silly old fool. We don't care if you're gay."

Gary struggled to explain, wiping tears, "It was a crime in my youth. Gays were sentenced, convicted, tortured, killed. My parents disowned me for it in 1967 and never talked to me again."

Maria hugged weeping Gary, "They were horrible parents."

Jenny asked, "So on Christmas day, Kyle snuck a partridge in a pear tree?"

Kyle explained, "Yes, Maria was the only one with a pear tree."

Jenny continued, "Then you brought the drag queen two turtle doves?"

Gary explained, "I saw Jo's pain of not fitting in. He needed company. Animals are the best company. They don't judge. They love."

Jenny asked, "Then Kyle sneaks three French hens into Georgia's fancy house?"

Kyle said, "Outside her door. She was also alone and my uncle wanted her to have company."

Jenny asked, "The four calling birds?"

Gary explained, "It didn't matter where they went because they would fly away and finally be free. I had them in an enormous barn cage for years."

Maria asked, "Wait – how did you just so happen to have seven swans, six geese, four calling birds, three hens, two turtledoves and a partridge?"

Gary wheezed, "Three years ago I bought them all, in these numbers, for myself, at Christmas. Thought it was cute and funny."

I never told anyone, cuz they'd think me a disturbed pitiful old man."



“Uhuh, it’s adorable. You’re adorable.” Jenny massaged his shoulder, “And after I stole a ring, you figured you’d teach me a lesson and give me five rings?”

Gary coughed, “Not a lesson, no. You had a victim tantrum and I felt your unbalance. I used to be you. You yelled at how life was unfair, so to help you, I tried to get you in a place where you felt empowered, winning – so you would then have a different energy to attract better things to you.”

Kyle agreed, “Her energy has changed indeed.”

Jenny asked, “Yesterday, Kyle, you snuck six geese to Sharon’s?”

Kyle explained, “That was not easy – driving in the middle of the night with six geese in a car! Dan knows I’m doing it. His car has been following me for a couple days. His car was also on my tail this morning with the swans, so I brought them to another lakeside house, just hoping to throw him off, so when he drove home I gathered them again and brought them here. You have no idea how hard it is to gather up and carpool seven swans.”

Gary explained, “Sharon’s a wonderful mom. I want my six geese to have a wonderful mom. Geese are fantastic pets. Intelligent, affectionate, loyal.”

Maria asked, “And today you give me Seven Swans A-Swimming because William needs company?”

Gary, fighting a chest pain, “The swans love William. Yes, and you have a wonderful nature paradise pond and stream. Swans need a lot of space and a lot of food. They’ll eat grains, even vegetables and potatoes.”

Maria asked, “What if they fly away?”

Gary said, "They are pinioned so cannot fly away. Amputated wing parts. That's how they came when I bought them."

Maria said, "I thought Dan was behind this, so he could preach the Bible."

"What would Dan say now?," Kyle searched his phone, *"Seven swans a-swimming represent the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit---Prophecy, Serving, Teaching, Exhortation, Contribution, Leadership, and Mercy."*

Maria looked overwhelmed, "Well, that's heavy stuff, heavy wonderful spiritual stuff which doesn't hurt anyone--"

Gary said, "I believe in the afterlife, but not a god that punishes people for being gay."

"Agree," Maria said, "But, so, even though we found spiritual symbolism for the 12 Days gifts online, WE found that, meaning YOU never really intended any spiritual message behind these 12 Days Of Christmas gifts that you gave out?"

"Well, consciously, I did not have any spiritual subtext," Gary replied, "But how can any of us know what spiritual messages are behind what we do? Behind, or above? I do believe in spirits."

Jenny asked, "Explain that please."

Gary said, "As a spiritual seeker all my life, after Catholicism sentenced me to Hell for being a homosexual, I explored many, many other religions, options, theories... read a thousand books, because I knew a loving god would not hate a loving me, when I could not help my attraction to men. The two wonderful romances I had in my life never hurt a soul. Right now, as far as my god thoughts, I have arrived at believing more of a Law Of Attraction intelligent design to the universe. We souls are consciousnesses plugged into this electrical manifestation grid we call Earth, and the

Unified Field Of Potentiality has no choice but to vibrate back to us whatever we vibrate.”

“Law of attraction,” Kyle added, “So the universe, or a god, does not karma punish us or have any destiny in store, rather it can only give us what we vibrate, our energy, beliefs, actions?”

Jenny computed, “Like if I am a whiny abused victim, the universe, or god, can only give me circumstances where I am a victim, abused?”

Gary pointed to the sky, “The universe is only a mirror to consciousnesses. Energy is. Energy always was and always is – and energy mutates, attracted to similar energy. But consciousnesses can form energy into things.”

Kyle said, “Uncle Gary believes that we are so powerful as consciousnesses, that we alone decide, subconsciously, what comes to us. We are so powerful the universe cannot override our energies. Uncle Gary says governments do not want citizens to know how powerful they are as individuals, so they tell them otherwise, even creating some religions to keep them small and limited.”

Jenny asked, “And if I feel and act like a winner, I attract good things?”

Gary nodded, “Pretty much.”

Kyle asked his uncle, “But you are convinced there is a wonderful afterlife. How can that be if you don’t believe in God?”

Gary coughed, then slowly explained, “I did not say I do not believe in a god. I believe in all 4300 gods, all 4300 religions. I believe in a million gods. Everyone can have the god they believe in. Everything exists. We ourselves, our souls’ consciousnesses, decide what is real to us, so whether there is a god or not in my

afterlife, I DO expect to see Jesus, because I believe in him, as a role model... and angels, because why not... and my past loves will be there I hope. You can understand why I just don't believe in a Bible god who kills people or sends gays to Hell, a God who decides Grammy's and football winners and orchestrates eight billion human lives at once, as well as endless trillions of animals' fates, too. I just can't conceive of one mind controlling trillions of lives and events at once. I don't think there's a god mind doing that. An intelligent design makes more sense to me."

Maria asked, "But you believe in Jesus and spirits? I do."

Gary explained, "I believe anything that we believe becomes reality, so, yes, I choose to believe in such a sweet miracle worker like Jesus was said to be, and yes, it is believable to me that souls who are not in human costume can flutter around us and interact, angel like, maybe help us a few times."

Kyle figured, "So maybe our actions are guided at times?" He touched Jenny, "Two weeks ago out of the blue my uncle begs me to come here, and, for the first time in my life I was not working, so boom I have time, and he gives me his entire world..."

Jenny hugged him, "It was a strange turn of events that brought you to me. Was it guided? I don't know."

Gary said, "The Lake Lure mystery is now over and solved. Kyle, will you take me home to my bed, and you can tell Brick and the others the mystery is solved?"

"Wait," Maria edged, "I was hoping we could keep this going to eventually see Dan's wife."

"How?" Jenny played along.

Maria replied, "Tomorrow would be Eight Maids A Milking and Gary said he needed his 5 cows milked."

Jenny said, "But only five."

Maria said, "We can do two to a cow for three cows, then one on each – that would be eight maids a milking."

Gary said, "I could use the help." He tugged her shirt, "Find someone who can take the cows permanently."

"Nine Ladies Dancing in two days." Maria paced. "Can we show up at Dan's for Nine Ladies Dancing? Then we can see his wife."

Gary shrugged, "That seems deceitful."

Maria giggled, "Dan deserves it. Perfect. I'll figure out the details..."

Kyle asked, "Maria, you making the moves on Dan?"

"Not if he's really married. I've never seen his wife."

Kyle shook his head, "Look, Dan already knows it was me dropping off birds. He followed my car. He kept the secret for me. I don't want to lie to him."

Maria snapped her finger, "It's what you've been doing! To all of us."

Kyle laughed, "Uncle Gary made me. I was his legs and arms."

They looked to Gary, now asleep in a chair. Kyle lifted him, carrying him to the car, as Gary awoke and waved good-bye to the swans.



That night, New Year's Eve, Kyle and Jenny showed up at Sharon's home for game night. Delilah was adorned and dressed to the max, trying to get Kyle's attention. Georgia played poker with Brick, Brick's wife Bridget, the Xongs, Dan - and Jo, in drag. Dan was loud and boisterous about figuring out Gary was the gift giver before anyone else did. He explained he followed a few cars and eventually struck gold following Kyle.

Maria wondered around the porch, smoking a cigarette while petting the affectionate geese.

Kyle gulped his beer then cleared his throat, "I came tonight because I needed to speak to you all. Truth is none of us knew my uncle very well, not even me, but he's dying and pouring out his soul at the end of his life, and he gave us his beloved partridge, William, Madge and Moe the turtle doves, Diane..."

"Dinah and Debbie, my gorgeous French hens," Georgia said.

Kyle continued, "He freed the four calling birds, I don't remember their names..."

Jenny spoke, "Gave me his cherished five golden rings, which I sold like the complete fraudulent cuckoo heartless psycho loser ho that I am."

Georgia took her hand, "Shush now, girl, you needed money more than rings. No shame in that. You made good with them." Then added, pointedly, "Honestly."

Li Xong kidded, "But the bedroom door is locked tonight so no more stealing."

They laughed as Georgia admitted, "Well no one needs to go in there."

Kyle continued, "My uncle gave his beloved geese to Sharon..."

Sharon pointed, "Look how affectionate they are. They just adore Delilah."

Delilah sped off their six names, proudly, "Harry, Lewis, Phyllis, Cory, Max and Ferdinand Jones."

All laughed in good nature, all the while playing poker.

Kyle continued, "And his adored seven swans he gave to Maria..."

Maria also proudly recited their names, "Now William is finally eating again, thanks to Roger, Micehawk, PineTop, Wauwatosia, Jolene, Nathaniel Guttenberg Otterham and Saucy Sue."

Brick revealed, "And now I'm making a fortune selling bird food."

Kyle continued, "My uncle not only gave us his birds, which was his family, he was a lonely man, a closeted gay, and these birds were his family, but he carefully decided which of us needed his family members most..."

Maria said, "None to Dan because Dan would eat them."

Dan shrugged, lighting his pipe.

Kyle continued, "You didn't know my uncle because he was too afraid to let people know him these past decades, but he knew you, and he tried to help you in his own weird way."

"Always a nice guy to me and Roy," Georgia affirmed.

The group all agreed as Kyle went on, "And we were all lifted in our hearts this past week feeling there was a magical mystery that included us. The 12 Days Of Christmas secret Santa adventure.

As I got to know you, you all seemed to get even closer with each other. Maybe friendlier than normal.”

Looking Jo in the eye, Dan reached his hand across the table to shake Jo’s, saying, “I don’t care what you are. I like your poker playing.”

“Same,” Jo said.

Kyle went on, “Uncle Gary did a huge thing for Jenny.”

Jenny wiped her eyes, “He changed my life. I can’t believe you guys welcome me here. I have over seven thousand dollars in the bank! I never even had two thousand at one time.”

Kyle touched her styled blonde hair, “Tomorrow we as a group can do two things. One of those is to help my uncle in return.”

Georgia asked, “How?”

Dan asked, “What’s the other thing? I ain’t giving him a blowjob,” then, to make the joke funnier, “Again.”

Laughter erupted.

Kyle explained, “We can keep the magic going a few more days, right? Let’s do all 12 Days Of Christmas. Today is the seventh day of Christmas, and we found out he was behind it. Tomorrow is the eighth day of Christmas and the song-“

“Eight Maids A-Milking,” the group sang.

Kyle continued, “Let’s make eight maids a milking real, and the weird coincidence is his cows do need milking and his frail hands can’t do it.”

“Never milked a cow but count me in,” Georgia agreed.

"I'm in," Delilah said, and others also offered their participation.

Dan asked, "Sure, get someone to milk his cows but come on, we don't need eight maids to do it."

"It's fun," Jenny said. Sharon agreed.

"I don't get why," Dan rubbed his forehead.

"I'm not sure why," Kyle confessed, "I just think what our energies did so far in this 12 Days game produced very positive results and it seems we should continue it to the end to allow any more positive stuff to happen. Keep this mutual, shared high vibration going. I'm not a spiritual guy but I can't explain that something is telling me it's important to finish the full 12 days. I think we are supposed to."

Jo did The Twilight Zone music, bringing a big laugh from others, helping him feel included and accepted even more.

# THE 8<sup>TH</sup> DAY OF CHRISTMAS



On January 1<sup>st</sup>, the 8th Day Of Christmas, the barn doorbell rang. As Jenny looked over sleeping Gary, Kyle tiptoed to the barn door, and shushed Sharon and Georgia as they entered.

Kyle, "Gary's still asleep."

Sharon whispered, "Kyle, can you help Delilah carry in the beer?"

Kyle walked to the car, where Delilah greeted him, seductively, "How's Jenny?"

Kyle said, "Fine. Let me grab that heavy box of beer."

She batted her eyelashes, "You like girls who destroy their skin with tattoos?"

Before he could answer, she continued, "I just don't get her appeal, I mean, she's a thief and said she was a prostitute at 14 and just miscarried. Someone like me saves themselves for the right man."

Kyle smiled, "She's, I don't know, authentic."

Delilah moved in for a kiss, "I'm authentic."

Jenny arrived, suspicious, "Need help carrying the beer?"

Delilah lied, "We were just talking about how pretty you are."

Kyle butt in, pointedly, "Authentic. Few people are as authentic."

Kyle, Jenny and Delilah, embarrassed, entered Gary's house, then bedroom. Georgia and Sharon were holding Gary's hands. Jenny played her acoustic guitar and sung, competitively, with Delilah, "On the 8<sup>th</sup> Day Of Christmas, my true love gave to me, eight maids a milking!"

All four ladies removed scarves from their pockets and tied them on their heads to be maids.

Georgia couldn't resist the racist insinuation and found humor in it, "Master Gary, I got to please my massa!"

They laughed at her joke, knowing no racism was in the room. Gary was also relieved there was no homophobia in the room, and when Jo entered, in maid's outfit, there was also no transphobia in the room.

"Are you gay or straight?" Jenny asked Jo.

Jo replied, "I am a woman trapped in a man's body, and I am attracted to men."

"You are such a fine looking man," Sharon said.

"I hate that," Jo said, "The same as you would if I told you that you were a fine looking man."

Sharon digested that, "Ok, I hear ya, but your triggers are not my responsibility. If my well-intentioned compliment insults you, that's on you I think, not me. Does that make sense? If my intent was sweet, how can I be faulted?"

Jo asked, "You're saying I can't tell you what are my correct pronouns?"

Sharon relied, "You can say anything you want, sunshine, but it's not my job to speak what you want said. In America we have free speech. I think you should put the effort on how you hear things."

Georgia clarified, "When I was a girl, in the 1950's, they called me the N-word. It hurt. You can say I was triggered. Now if someone calls me that, I am not triggered at all because of the meaning I apply to the word. It is mean-spirited and from fear, so if anyone dare call me it, I know to avoid that person, and I hear their fear and drama in it, which I want no part of. As a child I believed that word meant I was dirty and disgusting, not quite human, and it hurt because I believed I must be that. I stopped believing I was less than white people, oh about 50 years ago. Jo, how do you feel if someone calls you a fag?"

Jo laughed, "My friends do."

Georgia continued, "See? It's what we hear in the word that matters. It is not my job to silence any other human from using their mouths to form any consonants or vowels they want. It's a

ridiculous idea to think I could control peoples' mouths and stop them from making consonants and vowels together, and it would only lead to repression, which grows frustration. I am in power when I allow them all their consonants and vowels. My power is hearing, listening, and deciding how best to avert drama and nonsense. I am all for free speech. If anyone wants to use the N-word, I say go ahead, so I know who to avoid. Everyone has a right to say any word and believe anything they want to. I have a right to the same."

"You keep your vibration high?" Jenny asked.

Georgia winked, "She's got it."

Gary spoke to Jo, "There's a Latin guy that cleans out the barn tomorrow who might like you. He thinks I'm too old for him."

Georgia joked, "Honey, you too old for the Egyptian pyramids."

Jo snickered, "Fix us up. Now we got cows to milk. Walk this way, girls--"

And with that, they strutted outrageous comical dance choreography out the door, to the old man's laughter.

Georgia stopped them, pointing to a framed photo on the wall, "That's my husband, Roy." Calling to Gary she asked, "Why do you have a photo of my husband on your wall?! If you tell me he was a secret gay I'll drop my bleeding heart right here and STAIN YOUR FLOOR."

Gary joked back, "Roy and I rooted for the same baseball teams every year. You're in the photos, too. Keep looking."

Jenny pointed, "Here, this is you."

"Oh my lord, that's our wedding photo!"



Gary yelled, "Cut from the newspaper. Brick and Bridget's newspaper photo announcing their second son is there, too."

Georgia found and read the newspaper headline, "*Grocery Owner & Wife Have 2<sup>nd</sup> Son*," showing happy Brick and Bridget holding a one year-old and newborn.

Jenny whispered, "Gary was so lonely. Look, here's Dan and Maria--"

Maria said, "We look like a couple. From Brick's birthday party. His 45<sup>th</sup> I think?"

Delilah shrieked, "Here's me in like 4<sup>th</sup> grade!"

Sharon inspected it, "When you won the Spelling Bee."

Georgia traced her fingers over the dozens of wall framed photos, "The whole town is here. Everyone from the neighborhood, since I have been here. I am seeing a lot of people who have passed on, too."

Jo did his Twilight Zone melody.

Jenny stared into a composite, "This must be Kyle growing up. And probably Kyle's dad who died long ago, Gary's brother."

"Maybe this is Gary's parents?" Sharon studied a 1940's photo of a very stern woman wearing a cross and a man holding a Bible and a baby, "They sure don't look friendly."

"I hate them," Jenny said.

"Gays!" Jo exclaimed, finding the photos of Gary and his deceased lovers, secret husbands. "And I thought I invented gay."

“You perfected it,” Sharon said, touching his back. He kissed her cheek, held her hand and pulled the women outside.



Later, Kyle carried Gary to an outside chair, where they bonded more as they laughed at those five milking the five cows. Eventually they were joined by Maria, Bridget and the Qi Xong to make eight maids a-milking. Kyle snapped photos.

Dan and Brick entered, admiring the farmhouse and land, drinking beers, smoking pipes. Dan read from his phone aloud, “The eight maids a-milking symbolize the eight beatitudes.”

Kyle asked, “What are beatitudes?”

Dan explained, “The Beatitudes are sayings attributed to Jesus, eight blessings recounted by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew.”

Kyle asked, "Read them to us?"

Dan read, proudly, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*"

Kyle said, "Could've been Jenny last week."

Dan read, "*Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*"

Gary wheezed, "Georgia. Maria. Grieving long and deep for their husbands. Me, too."

Dan read, "*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.*"

Gary touched Kyle, "My grand nephew."

"Me? I am meek?" Kyle seemed confused.

"You're meek. You go along, sweet as can be. Never fuss, never angry, never bossy," Gary explained.

Dan read, "*Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*"

Gary, coughing, could not speak, but gestured towards Brick. Kyle summated, "Brick feeds us all, and Brick's store is like a church, a gathering place."

Dan added, "Brick is a righteous man."

Brick blushed, wiping a tear, "Can a non-religious man be righteous?"

Dan read, *"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."*

Kyle guessed, "Jo? Vegan? He is merciful to all animals and look, we gave him our mercy."

Dan added, "I mean, where else on Earth would he be included like this?"

"A lot of places, Dan," Kyle rolled his eyes, "You're out of touch with how the world is changing."

"Oh I cringe when I see the liberal news," Dan rolled his eyes, "Drag queen story time in schools? High school boys winning girls sports? Boys in girl's bathrooms? Banning Bibles from schools? Taking down American flags to put up rainbow flags? Sanctuary cities?"

Brick debated, "Sanctuary cities seem pretty Jesus if you ask me."

Dan read, *"Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God."*

Kyle pointed to his sleeping uncle. Brick nodded.

Dan read on, *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God."*

Brick said, "That's me a bit, in my own gruff way, and Georgia, usually."

Dan added, "Maria when she's sober," then continued, reading, *"Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

“Hm,” Brick wondered, “Persecuted? Jo has been. Dan persecuted him, in the name of righteousness, and Dan persecuted Maria as a drunk many times.”

“Because she is,” Dan insisted. “Look, I have been persecuted for being Republican and Christian, and Jo persecutes me for eating meat. Everyone’s persecuted at some time.”

Kyle said, “Well, what I get from the eight beatitudes is that everybody gets into the kingdom of heaven. Right?”

“Except sinners who don’t repent,” Dan said.

Kyle and Brick rolled their eyes.

Dan asked, “What birds do I hear?”

Kyle explained, “Oh he’s just got the eleven sandpipers left. In a cage half the size of the barn. And these five cows. Brick, who around here will take the cows?”

Brick answered, “Let me ask my wife. If she looked after them, we could take them for our yard, and sell fresh milk, if they’re not too expensive to keep.”

Dan said, “I’ll take one or two.”

Kyle whispered, “These are his friends, he doesn’t want them butchered.”

Dan waved his hand, showing no more interest, and puffed on his pipe.

Jenny walked over, laughing, her face covered with milk, “I didn’t get the hang of it.”

Kyle kissed her, tasting the milk.

Brick asked, "You can't stay here and take over the farm, Kyle?"

Jenny looked on excitedly, awaiting his response.

Kyle whispered, "No offense to any of you, but I need the city. The big city. I'd die of boredom here."

"I don't understand how dangerous Chicago is better than this," Jenny's continued, "How is Gary doing?"

Kyle whispered, "He almost died last night. When I checked on him he wasn't even breathing. I shook him to life. Took five minutes. Exhaled into his mouth and pounded his brittle chest, I thought I broke his bones."

Dan offered, "He's ready to go on."

"He hates that his body failed him like this," Kyle explained.

Dan said, "It won't fail him in heaven."

Kyle asked, "So you're okay with gays going to heaven?"

"Well not all of them, not pedophiles or gay politicians or porn stars or Anderson Cooper or Ted Haggard or Jeffrey Dahmer," Dan huffed, "But Gary has a heart of gold. His kindness and love will be rewarded forty fold."

Kyle asked Brick, "What do you think about an afterlife?"

Brick exhaled, "Nah, I don't think about it. I'm too busy."

# THE 9<sup>TH</sup> DAY OF CHRISTMAS



January 2. Six cars parked alongside scenic Crop Drive, bordering the Lake Lure coastline. Everyone exiting their cars wore a Santa hat, price-tags still on from Brick's store. The seven women, and Jo, wore red dresses. Maria tiptoed through endless tall white wildflowers toward the white gabled house, shushing those who followed: Georgia, Jenny with guitar, Kyle, Sharon, Delilah, Qi Xong, Bridget and Jo.

Before they could knock on Dan's door, a little freckled pig-tailed girl opened it. Dan pushed her behind him, and stepped outside, closing the door.

Maria said, "Today is Nine Ladies Dancing. Ta da!"

Georgia hugged Dan, "Your house is magnificent! Why haven't you had us here before?"

Jenny looked in the windows and saw something which made her smile drop into a frown.

Dan looked petrified, "Not here. Not today. Or let's do it up the road a bit."

Maria pushed, "We got eight. Your wife will make nine! I brought her a Santa dress."

Dan pulled Maria away from his front door, "My wife won't do that."

Maria quipped, "Is she too good for it?"

"Ask her!" Georgia ordered, then knocked on the door.

Dan pulled Georgia away, but the child answered the door.

"Close the door, Amy," Dan told his daughter.

Amy stood frozen, confused at the red dresses and Santa hats, "Christmas was last week," she laughed.

Maria scrunched in front of Amy, "This is the 9<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, didn't your dad tell you what is going on?"

"No," she said.

Maria continued, "Like the song."

The group sang, "On the ninth day of Christmas, my true love sent to me Nine ladies dancing, Eight maids a-milking, Seven swans a-swimming, Six geese a-laying..."



The more Dan resisted, the more determined was Maria to see his wife. She maneuvered around Amy and stepped into the house. Before Dan could stop her, Maria saw Dan's wife.

In a wheelchair, Mrs. Wendy Peters, 45, natural blonde, deep-set blue eyes, was painting a picture of a flower, a paintbrush in her mouth. She was an obvious quadriplegic with no use of her arms or legs.

She spoke, the brush to the side of her mouth, "You must be pretty Maria."

"Hi," Maria pretended to be chipper, "You must be Dan's wife."

Wendy Peters nodded, "I'm Wendy. Come on in. I can finally see Dan's friends. Call them all in."

Dan interrupted, "They were just leaving--"

Wendy looked crushed, "Let me see your friends."

Maria locked eyes with Dan, teary and blushed. He shrugged. Awkwardly Maria invited everyone in. Dan fussed around Wendy, wiping drool from her chin. No one was comfortable. Wendy was embarrassed that everyone was embarrassed and caught off-guard to see her like this.

She stammered, "Dan didn't tell you about the hunting accident?"

The discomfort level increased considerably. No one knew what to say. Fortunately little Amy took the attention away, "Want to see the new dolls I got for Christmas? I have sixty-one dolls now."

"Sixty-one!?" exclaimed Georgia, "Oh I have never seen sixty-one dolls. Where can we see these dolls of yours?"

Amy gestured to her room, where Georgia immediately followed, as did everyone else, leaving only Dan and Maria by Wendy.

Maria nervously looked around, "You have a beautiful home."

Wendy said, "Dan does everything, of course."

Maria looked down, "Does he make gin and tonics?"

Wendy giggled, "Actually, I'd like one as well, Dan."

Dan grumbled, "We're out of liquor today," and pushed Wendy's wheelchair into Amy's room.

Amy proudly revealed all 61 of her dolls, to a fidgeting crowd. After what seemed like an hour of silence besides Amy's monotone explaining her dolls' outfits, Wendy said, "I only count seven dancing girls."

Jo, who was dressing Amy's doll, said, "I'm eight, Miss Thang."

"Oh," Wendy giggled. "Well, seems you came here for Nine Ladies Dancing – was I suppose to be number nine? Sorry, I only dance at strip joints on Fridays," she joked, "Maybe Amy can be number nine?"

Amy looked excited.

Several minutes later Maria had wheeled Wendy to the porch to see Kyle photographing the ladies outside, waiting for Amy, who was being dressed in a red dress and Santa hat - by Jo. When Dan noticed Jo touching his half naked daughter, he became enraged and yelled, "No grown man touches my daughter!"

Unable to contain his rage, Dan tackled Jo, throwing him against a wall. Jo hit back, hard, and Dan reached for his gun, and

held it to Jo's head. Amy screamed and got between the men, until Dan allowed Jo to walk away.

Furious, Dan then continued to dress his daughter, then bring her outside to the ladies' kick line.



As they did simple choreographed kicks and jazz hands, each one sung the lyric solo for one of the 12 Days Of Christmas. When they were finished, Dan and Wendy applauded. As the dancing ladies took their bows, Dan smiled politely and wheeled Wendy inside, saying good-bye and thanking the group. He pulled in Amy then closed the door firmly, released Amy's arm inside and wheeled Wendy to her painting area.

Wendy spoke first, "They seem like nice people."

"They're the best. They did not tell me they were coming today."

"Obviously. I probably pooped and peed a gallon. Did you hear me fart? Do I stink?"

"No," he said, wheeling her into the bathroom, where he carefully lifted her, lowered her skirt and changed her dirty diaper.

There was a long silence before Wendy said, "I like Maria."

Dan shrugged.

Wendy clarified, "I like her for you."

Dan looked down.

Wendy said, "People with working bodies have bodily needs. Mine doesn't work. Yours works."

"Don't," he said.

"I would understand if Maria could satisfy you in ways I used to."

He kissed her, smiled, "I married you. We took vows. In the name of God, I, Dan, take you, Wendy, to be my wife, to have and

to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until parted by death.”

“Yada yada yada,” she said, “I’d understand, I’m just saying. It would be okay with me if you had a sexual relationship with Maria.”

Dan said, “It would not be okay with God.”

Wendy thought deeply, then said, “I don’t think God really cares.”

Later, Dan sat in a chair, smoking a pipe, his big blue eyes darting all over, in deep introspection, as Wendy painted and Amy played with her dolls. Dan sat in front of a computer screen, and searched, and the text came up: *Nine ladies dancing meant the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit: Charity, Joy, Peace, Patience, Goodness, Mildness, Modesty, Modesty, Fidelity, Continency / Chastity.*

Dan, sober, nodded to the screen.

Bridget hung up the grocery store phone and whined to Brick, “Our house is not zoned for cows. The boys are gonna be upset.”

Maria, feeling horribly guilty for invading Dan’s home, paced by the potato chips, then ripped open a bag and devoured chips, “Did Dan come in this afternoon?”

Brick shook his head, boxing up the priced Santa hats for next year, "Dan always comes in in the morning."

"Okay, I hope Dan does tomorrow."

"Dan always has."

"I hope Dan does." She put money on the counter. "For three bags of chips."

She chose two more varieties, opened all three bags, and left, nervously shoving food in her mouth.

A moment later, the black-bearded man entered that was in the jeep following Maria on Christmas who almost hit Jenny, whispered to Brick, "Was that Maria Flores?"

Brick, protective, looked him and his fancy suit up and down, didn't answer.

"Was that Maria Flores?" the strange man repeated.

Brick said, "Who are you?"

"Let's just say I am an old friend of Maria's." He walked out.

Bridget said, "Call her and warn her."

Brick grabbed the phone, "I'm on it."

That evening, Jenny, in pink pajamas, jumped around excitedly, "I get to sleep on a farm. I get to sleep on a farm."

Kyle picked her up and kissed her.

An African-American pizza delivery girl rung the farm doorbell. Jenny excitedly ran for it. Kyle reached in his wallet to pay but Jenny was quicker, handing the girl a couple twenties and said, "Keep it. I'm rich."

The girl was overwhelmed with the large tip.

Gary chuckled from a chair. Kyle scooped him up and sat him at the oak dinner table as Jenny put out three plates and silverware and drinks.

Gary said, pained, "Thank you for staying here instead of Jenny's cabin tonight."

"Of course," Jenny said. "We're gonna put flannel blankets over the hay where the hens were, is that okay?"

Gary nodded. Between bites, Kyle showed his uncle the photos of the dancing ladies at Dan's. Gary pointed to one photo of Wendy in a wheelchair.

Kyle explained, "Quadriplegic. It seems Dan accidentally shot her while they were hunting. She can talk, has a good sense of humor."

"Paints well," Jenny added, "But the paintbrush has to be put in Wendy's mouth!"

Gary put his hand to his chest, sympathetic for Wendy. He mumbled, "Dan so nice."

"If you like Republitards," Jenny joked.

Kyle said, "But even though Dan is a Christian Republican, he does feel you, gay, will go to Heaven. I asked him."

Gary put his thumbs up, smiled.

Jenny quipped, "Bible says tattoos are sins. Does Dan think I will go to Hell? Does he know the Bible says to stone wives if they are not virgins? Maybe that's what happened to Wendy? Maybe he stoned her to paralysis?"

Kyle chuckled, "Cut it out, you hater."

Jenny sneered, "Well, I don't know of any women who were virgins when they got married. Not one."

A few miles away, Bridget entered their beautiful brick home, and handed her car keys to her two sons, Brad and Brian, "You dad's waiting. Tell him to bring home a cranberry bread. I forgot."

Brad and Brian, teenagers growing mustaches, argued about who was to drive, and Brad asked, "Are we getting the cows?"

"No," Bridget sighed, "This land is not zoned for cows."

Brian asked, "Can we move?"

"Move?" she asked.

Brad said, "To a place that allows cows. I was all excited that my career would be farming since I keep flunking school."

Bridget shrugged, "Tell that to your dad."

They excitedly left and got in the car and drove past the idyllic North Carolina forest and beach scenery to Brick's store, where



they unloaded, put on work aprons, and told their dad to bring a cranberry bread home.

A few miles away, Georgia kneeled by her bed, sipped wine and prayed, "Oh Roy, did you see me today? Mortified to crash in on that poor cripple? Bless her heart. I miss you Roy. It's been so long since you've gone, I wish you'd spend just an hour with me, one hour. Just an hour! ROY, ONE HOUR!"

Back at the farmhouse, Kyle put his uncle to bed, kissed his forehead and tiptoed out the room to the barn. Jenny was excitedly laying out blankets and pillows over the hay. She said, "Doesn't smell bad."

"I hosed the barn down earlier," he said.

"What are those birds?" she asked, pointing to a bunch of whitish birds with brown and gray feathers in areas, living in an enormous cage that also went outside over the pond.

"The last of his birds. Sandpipers."

"Eleven pipers piping?"

"Yup. So, if we keep on schedule, in two days those have to find a new place."

"You don't think it would be cool to live here forever?"

"Nah. Do you?"

"Yes!"

He laughed, "Oh Jenny I'm not a farmer. It's just not me."

"I know."

"And you really don't strike me as a farmer either."

"I don't know," she debated.

As Kyle slowly made love to Jenny, the pipers began to sing, an otherworldly beautiful whistling symphony, thus the name "pipers" from their pipe-like bills. It was an unforgettable ethereal experience, evening, fantasy. After sex, Kyle stroked Jenny's fancy blonde hair.

"The pipers are saying," he said, pretending to interpret their words, "We don't make such good pets. We are wild. We fly low because we eat crustaceans, insects, worms. We stand on one leg to reduce half the amount of heat lost through our unfeathered limbs."

"Did your uncle tell you that?"

"No, they did. Just now. Can't you understand birds? They say you are pretty and dramatic and original and interesting and the best sex ever and that people like you because you're so authentic."

"Yes, I speak bird. Listen. They say they think you and I are a great match because we're so different and opposites attract. Oh, and that even though you lied to us all somehow you come across with great integrity, which is weird. They say they want you to live wherever you want to, except Chicago, and to ask me to join you. If you want."

Their revelations of love brought the new lovers to tears, as they held each other tight.

# THE 10<sup>TH</sup> DAY OF CHRISTMAS



January 3. On the 10<sup>th</sup> Day Of Christmas, Kyle and Jenny streaked naked on the farm before the sun rose.

Later, Gary awoke to bacon and eggs in bed being served by Jenny. He asked if Kyle was around. She explained he was at Brick's.

Kyle parked his car across from Brick's store as Dan entered. Maria, drunk and slurring, Sharon, Georgia, the Xongs and Brick were waiting with anticipation for Dan's reaction to the surprise invasion at his home the day before. Maria answered a question from Brick, "Bearded guy? No, I really don't know any bearded guy who would ask for me."

The red bell above the pine door rang and they breathed relieved seeing Dan, but everyone's smile was forced.

"I'm a fool," Maria said, "I'm so so so sorry we invaded your home."

Li Xong said, "She was a fool."

Qi Xong added, "Because Maria has a crush on Dan. No harm was meant."

"Now you know," Dan wiped his brow, "Wendy is wonderful."

There was silence as he poured himself coffee and settled into his regular seat.

"She's wonderful," Georgia rubbed his arm, "Bless her heart."

Maria kept repeating, "Bless her heart."

Qi Xong said, "Wendy's very pretty."

"Now you know why I also need to get out of the house in the morning," Dan explained.

Brick added levity, "It's not for my coffee and muffins?"

Kyle entered, and smiled, greeting everyone, and poured himself a coffee. They asked him about Jenny and his uncle, and he explained she was feeding him breakfast in bed, but Kyle wanted to come here to organize 10 Lords A-Leaping.

Dan sighed, "We still doing that?"

Kyle responded, "I totally understand it backfired on us yesterday, but just 3 more days. Today, we need 10 guys to leap – how easy is that? Tomorrow – nobody needs to do anything, I'll set

the 11 sandpipers free. 11 Pipers Piping, and then in two days we all bang a drum. Then done.”

Sharon said, “I don’t get it. This is to fool your Uncle Gary?”

“No, he won’t be fooled. It’s just to complete what we started. To keep our synchronized high vibrations going. Keep the engine running.”

No one but Kyle was enthused.

“What YOU started,” Brick said.

Sharon spoke, “I don’t see the point, though, of ten guys leaping.”

“I do if they wear gray sweatpants,” Georgia joked.

Kyle smiled, “Like yesterday, nine ladies dancing. How much fun was that?”

From the looks of all, no one thought it was fun.

Maria slurred, “That was all my fault!”

Dan shared, “Amy had a good time, and Wendy was grateful to finally meet all of you.”

Qi repeated her patronizing compliment, “Wendy so pretty.”

Maria, Georgia and Brick smiled in pity.

Kyle beamed, “See? How great is that that Wendy got to meet Dan’s buddies?”

Dan continued, “Don’t feel like leaping today.”

Brick shook his head, "Me either."

Brick's son Brian, stacking groceries, spoke, "Dad, I don't have to leap, do I?"

Brick answered, "No, Brian, no one has to leap. Kyle, you'll just have to find nine other men besides yourself to leap today."

Maria stammered, "Brian has drums!"

Brian said, "My bass drum is ripped."

"You have drums?" Kyle asked.

Brick frowned, "Brian and Brad are both drummers in the band. Can you just imagine how much practice that took at home? How much loud drum banging?"

Kyle said, "I think I can. Brian, I'll pay you and your brother to drum in a couple days."

Brian, "How much?"

Kyle said, "Contingent on you getting 12 drummers total."

Brick explained to Brian, "Contingent means for you to get paid you need to get 12 drummers total."

Kyle said, "How is \$50 each. For all 12. For half an hour?"

Brian looked to his dad. His dad nodded. Brian said, "Absofockinutley!"

Brick warned, "Hey!"

Brian corrected himself, "I mean absolutely, thank you, sir. Pay up front?"

Kyle dug out his wallet, "Here's three hundred. Three hundred more after the job."

"Sweeeeet!," Brian grinned, "Where are we drumming?"

Kyle shrugged, "You know what? It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter one bit. Just swear to me that on January 5<sup>th</sup>, you 12 drummers will drum together. Swear on it."

"I swear," Brian said.

Driving to the farm, Kyle pulled his car up to a group of six young men walking with fishing poles. He got out of the car and followed them, then said, "I know this sounds ridiculous, but I'll pay you each \$50 if you leap for like twenty minutes."

"Leap?," a brawny youth asked.

Kyle smiled, and leaped as if he was in a ballet.

Half the men sped up to get away, half stopped in their tracks in disbelief.

Kyle continued leaping, "Fifty bucks each. Just to leap a bit."

One man patronized him with half a leap, then said sarcastically, "Gosh, I just can't leap."

Kyle said, "Maybe your jeans are too tight?"

The youth baited, "Maybe we can just leap in our underwear?"

Kyle said, "Sure, and I'll join the six of you, and we'll get three more guys."

He pushed Kyle to the ground, but his friends pulled him off him before he punched him.

"Pervert," the youth yelled.

"Stay away from boys," harassed another, "I'm calling the cops."

They ran, then some leaped away, laughing, calling the police.

Kyle got back in his car, frustrated. As he drove, he prayed aloud, "God, or Jesus, or angels or ghosts or whatever, please help this 10 Lords A-Leaping day. I feel my Uncle Gary really needs this day. I don't know why. 10 Lords A-Leaping they say symbolizes The Ten Commandments?"

When Kyle got to the farm, Jenny was hysterical next to Gary's bed, performing CPR on what appeared to be a lifeless Gary. Gary's old body, in pajamas, was losing color fast and showed no sign of life.

Kyle and Jenny's repeated calls for "Gary" blended into another strange voice calling "Gary."

Gary's soul leaped out of its body and floated toward the ceiling corner. As he heard his name being called, he was now in



spirit form, looking down on frantic Kyle and Jenny. Gary realized he was dead and they could not see his ghost. Suddenly, he knew Jenny's thoughts. She was worried Kyle would think Gary died because Jenny was negligent in watching him, but she was not. Gary could perfectly read her memory, and saw her point of view many times earlier in the day when she peeked in on him to make sure he was okay. At those times Gary was okay, either sleeping or reading.

At the same time, somehow Gary also knew all of Kyle's thoughts. Kyle was thinking that Gary wanted to die and said he was looking forward to it, and would definitely die soon anyway, so should they try to keep him alive or not? Kyle also felt a love for Gary like Gary were a pet. It was a similar love Kyle had for a dog in Chicago, that he had never mentioned. The dog was an Irish Setter staying with a neighbor.

Gary somehow was transported into the apartment of Kyle's neighbor who was watching the dog. Gary knew the neighbor was named Kitty, and she was a part time nurse, single with a teenage son, and heavy because she was molested by her father when she was four and five and since then added weight to block her sexual appeal to keep safe.

Suddenly Gary was in her five year-old body as she was being raped, and experienced the sounds, sights, odors, stress – from both people at the same time. Gary also experienced Kitty's mother's reality in a nearby room, knowing her daughter was being raped but making a decision that it would be better than being beat up and kicked out on the street where she and her child could starve.

Gary felt the horrific abuse and pain and was surprised that it was very easy to escape; all he had to do was divorce the situation and instead focus on something pleasurable.

Gary spontaneously arrived at his own childhood when he was about five and his mother was singing Happy Birthday and cutting him a piece of fresh-baked apple pie. His rigid father appeared with ice cream to top off Gary's pie and the way his parents looked adoring at him may have made this the best memory of his life.

Gary flew to above the argument he had in his childhood home's backyard garden when his parents disowned him. He was almost thirty then and was already familiar with his thoughts, scared and ashamed to admit that he decided not to propose to Dorothy Klein because he was homosexual and did not want to lie and mislead her. But now, suddenly Gary could read the mind of his mom as well. His mother was furious because she felt her ill-parenting caused his homosexuality, though she never said anything of the sort. She also felt it was okay if he was gay as long as no one outside the family knew, but she always let her husband rule the home so that would never be an option.

A see-through body of Gary's father appeared and revealed that he had ordered Gary out of the garden and house because he himself had homosexual yearnings and refused them, so assumed his son could and should avoid them as well. Gary's bisexual father's brain of the past revealed he only had one guilt-ridden gay experience when he was forty, assumed Gary was bi and not gay, and that Gary was lazy and disrespectful and dirty to acquiesce to homosexual urges.

Gary heard his name called and tried to go to the caller. He flew away from this scene into a dark wasteland. Nothing was around him. In truth, his fear prevented him from more revelations, and he realized this. He knew he could stay as long as he wanted in nothingness. He stayed for what felt like hours. When he became less afraid and curious, a tunnel opening passed above him, and Gary reached into the tunnel opening and climbed into what seemed like a friendly tornado, where a few smears of light passed him. Eventually Gary realized these smears of light were souls like he was. He realized he must also be appearing as a smear of light

now, and looked down, but did not see light. He did not see any body though either.

Quickly, the tunnel stopped and a growing light stopped Gary and everything around him. Gary could only focus on this one light, and he knew it was his deceased father, who was not expressing apology or sadness or memory. His father's light leaped into Gary's heart, expressing love and pride for all that Gary was. It was as if his father only realized his own best qualities and everything negative had vanished. Gary felt he and his father had human bodies and he felt them embracing as Gary's father said, "I could not be prouder of all that you became."

Gary thought about his mother and suddenly he was above her as she died in 1980, looking down on her bloated, diseased body. Gary read her mind and knew her biggest regret was disowning him. He knew her guilt actually caused the illness that would eventually kill her.

Gary was suddenly with her back when she died and she started to float above her body. She felt instantly freed of the heavy burdens in her physical life, just as Gary was feeling now. In a meadow of sunflowers their spirits met, and it was as if the best of them, their highest love and energies, melded together in a long, warm embrace. Unlike his father, his mother still carried regret and guilt, but it was in Gary's control to relieve her of it. He knew this. He knew all he had to do was forgive her and allow her inside his mind and heart, which he did. He felt her warm tears on his face as he continued to hug her. Reading her mind, he saw her entire life, and experienced every emotion she had as a human. He experienced her love and hobby to take care of animals when she was three years-old, and he realized that is where he picked up the same delight. He experienced that she felt her animals never let her down, but that all humans did. He knew she felt let down by her husband, who needed control at all times, let down by her other son, who died early and let down by Gary, who somehow could exist fine without her. He saw when she secretly tracked his

whereabouts and when she saw him happy that she felt a bit betrayed, because he could do fine without her.

Gary heard his name being called and still hadn't arrived to see who it was. Flying back through the tunnel with light smear beings, four light smears magnetically pushed him to the side to bring him to the caller, then they disappeared. It was handsome Mexican Tony, his first and greatest love. Gary saw that even though they were both deceased humans, only conscious souls, that for this scenario they were back in their young human bodies, looking and feeling their best. They remembered the true and secret love they shared, how it began at a neighborhood barbecue and how it ended in an automobile accident. Tony explained that a Jesus figure gave him the choice to die after the accident or continue living, without a leg, and Tony chose to die because it was freeing and exhilarating and he felt loved more than it was possible to feel loved on Earth. Tony showed, with thoughts, that he had been, and still was, around Gary in spirit form all these past years. Tony thanked Gary for the lessons he taught him, which were patience, gratitude and reciprocation. These were lessons he was assigned to learn in his Earth life and would have happened through Gary or another. Gary saw and experienced, relived, Tony's entire life through Tony's reality and now understood everything he had not understood when Tony was alive. In Earth life, Tony was extremely impatient and nagged because as a boy he felt his father left because he was lazy. Tony loved farming because it taught him order and dependability, empowering his ability to care for himself and not rely on others. Gary understood that was why Tony was unable to trust and depend on Gary; because he was in the process of learning to trust himself.

Gary's mind asked Tony to go back to see their past together, to jump back into 1987 when they bought the farm. They held hands but their hands broke apart when Tony leaped into their past farm life and Gary stood still, watching Tony leap... watching Tony leap...

Gary had a thought that he had leaped into the afterlife and his father leaped into his heart and Tony leaped into their past farm life - and that made three leaps - and his Earth body was in the 10<sup>th</sup> Day Of Christmas, expecting Ten Lords A-Leaping.

Suddenly Gary was sucked painfully back into his dying 90 year-old body and he choked out the biggest breath in his life.

Jenny screamed, "Gary!! Gary!!!"

Kyle ran back into the room, "How did you do it??" Kyle smiled, seeing Gary alive in Jenny's embrace.

"For the past hour I just kept playing guitar and singing about him, singing his name, singing he was loved," Jenny said, elated.

Gary opened his eyes and grinned, "It's incredible."

"What is?" they asked.

"The afterlife. I was dead, I flew. Everywhere. I saw mom and pop and Tony. Oh, and I saw your Irish Setter and Kitty."

Jenny asked, "Kyle, you have a cat?"

Kyle was shocked, "No, there's a woman named Kitty taking care of my Irish Setter!"

Gary explained, "She's tall and heavy, wearing a tan top with fake pearl necklace in an apartment three doors down from Kyle's. Kyle has lime walls in most the apartment but blue walls in the bathroom. Beige carpeting in his living and bedroom with framed posters of New York. Kitty has all white walls and gray appliances

and checkered black and white curtains and dark gray carpets and a rooster cookie jar for dog treats.”

Kyle confirmed it in awe. There was no way Gary could know this, unless his soul actually left his body and somehow lived another life.

There was life after death guaranteed.

This would be the greatest gift the old man could ever give these young people; that they would live the rest of their long lives with a relief that after death there would eventually come a wonderful *afterlife*.

About the same time, Jo, in drag, literally leaped to Dan’s door and pounded on it. He had notes in his back pocket. Amy answered.

She asked, “Did you want to see the doll’s evening gowns for tonight’s beauty pageant?”

“Maybe later,” Jo said. “Is your dad home?”

“They’re in the bathroom,” Amy said, then whispered, “Brushing mom’s teeth.”

Jo closed the door saying, “Just tell your dad I am on the porch when he is available.”

A minute later, wiping his wet hands on his jeans, Dan came outside, making sure to close the door behind him.

“You and I have ice-skating practice,” Jo joked.

Dan rolled his eyes, “You’re a piece of work.”

“Look, I realize that in the news there are gays bringing kids into drag bars, and I wanted you to know I would never do that. Drag bars are adult, and sexual, and inappropriate for kids. I wanted to tell you I understand why you got upset when I was helping Amy dress. I get it. I look like a grown man.”

“You ARE a grown man.”

“I feel like a woman and I am attracted to men, not little girls, but I was proud that I could understand your upset and wanted to tell you I get it and I will never help Amy or another little girl dress, because I know what it looks like, innocent or not.”

“Thank you.”

“Okay, well, I still feel awkward coming here.”

“You liberals push crazy stuff, what you’re teaching kids in school is so darn perverse. You think Amy’s teacher should ask her if she wants to be a girl or a boy and what her asinine pronouns are??”

“I don’t know. If I was asked that when I was her age my life would have been easier.”

“The pharma-sponsored media is just looking for ways to make your kids lifetime pharma customers! Just stay away from kids, Jo. Unless their parents are in the room. Look, let’s go somewhere else and talk. I don’t want Wendy or Amy disturbed by any of this.”

“I know a bar-”

“I am not walking into any bar with you.”

Fifteen minutes later, Jo and Dan continued their conversation at Brick’s store, in the window chairs. Brick was behind the counter and Maria was in the background, shopping.

Jo said, "You Christians push crazy stuff too, though."

"Like what? The Ark?"

"Well, yeah, duh. What about all the people living way above sea level in mountain areas? They wouldn't have been killed by a flood. But also like *Deuteronomy 25:11-12. When Fighting Another Man, Chop Off His Wife's Hand If She Grabs Your Genitals.*"

"She shouldn't be grabbing another man's genitals."

Jo read from his notes, "*Leviticus 19:19. Don't Wear Clothes Made of Both Linen And Wool.*"

"It says that?" Dan asked.

"Yeah, and *Leviticus 10:6. Don't Tear Your Clothes.*"

"That's, well, stupid."

"Should it send you to Hell? *Leviticus, Don't Sit Where A Menstruating Woman Has Sat.*"

"Unless the chair is clean. Duh."

"It doesn't say that. It says ever. *Book of Numbers says Women Suspected of Adultery Have To Drink Dirty Water.*"

Dan leaned in, "I'd be okay with that."

Jo laughed, "*Exodus, If Your Slave Refuses Freedom, Pierce Their Ear.*"

"These were written for a different time."

"Exactly! A very uneducated time where rulers lied to keep their citizens scared and needy. Sound familiar??"



“Some things don’t change.”

*“Exodus 22:2-3, You Can't Kill A Burglar During The Day. Just informing you in case you forgot. Leviticus 19:19, Don't Plant More Than One Kind of Seed In A Field.”*

“That’s stupid. Some of these sins we just have to ignore as they don’t make sense in today’s world.”

“Some? Not ALL?” Jo pointed to Dan’s belly, “Don't Eat Fat. *Leviticus 3:17 It shall be a perpetual statute for your generations throughout all your dwellings, that ye eat neither fat nor blood.* I’m going to interpret that as vegan is more holy than killing innocent animals and eating them.”

“You’re a gatherer. I’m a hunter,” Dan insisted, showing his gun for a second.

*“Leviticus 5:2 If a soul touch any unclean thing, whether it be a carcass of an unclean beast, or a carcass of unclean cattle, or the carcass of unclean creeping things, and if it be hidden from him; he also shall be unclean and guilty – also - You Can't Leave Open Pits Around For Animals To Fall Into. Exodus 21:33-34. And Leviticus 19:10: You Have To Leave Fallen Grapes On The Ground For The Poor To Eat.”*

“What’s wrong with that?”

“The HAVE TO part, Dan,” Jo smiled, “The HAVE TO part is not okay. I got a dentist appointment. Say hi to Wendy and Amy, ok?”

Dan shook his hand, smiled, nodded good-bye and lit up a pipe, “Thanks for saying you were wrong about Amy.”

“I didn’t say I was wrong. I was not wrong. I said I understood why you thought I was wrong, and to be nice to you, I would not do that again,” Jo continued, fired up, *“Leviticus 19:27 Do not cut the*

*hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard – and I know this may be too close to home for you, but Leviticus 21:18-21 No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; no man with a crippled foot or hand, or who is a hunchback or dwarf, or who has an eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has any defect is to come near to present the food offerings to the Lord. He has a defect; he must not come near to offer the food of his God."*

Dan knew this indicated Wendy, but was speechless. Jo handed his notes to Dan, then left.

Brick yelled to Dan, "Who else lets you smoke a pipe in their business?"

Dan winked, "Just you, Baldy. And I love you for letting me break the rules."

Brick said, "Rules are meant to be broken."

"Hey, number one rule breaker here," Maria yelled, paying for her bags of groceries, then looking at Dan as she exited.

"Wait,' Dan called, "What's your hurry?"

She smiled, reentered and approached him, sitting, crossing her legs, removing her jacket.

"You look great. Even eye-shadow on your beautiful dark eyes? Got a date?"

"Nope."

"Did anyone figure out who's the bearded guy asking about you? Your ex?"

She shrugged, "Probably more like the IRS, or a subpoena, or handsome serial killer - with a wife."

They were both caught off guard at Dan's obvious attraction to her, his mouth lowering in awe, his eyes misty and pupils enlarging. She smiled, breathed deeply, flattered.

He looked to make sure no one was watching and whispered, "Wendy said she'd be okay if you and I had sex."

Maria laughed, "She did not."

"I swear on a Bible she did. Her exact words."

As Dan smoked his pipe, there was a long uncomfortable silence. Maria pretended to focus on a young hetero couple crossing the street. The couple entered, obviously in love, they couldn't keep their hands off each other as they bought sandwiches. The woman traced circles on the man's back. Maria traced circles on her leg, to make fun. Dan snickered, then he also traced circles on Maria's leg - then he left his hand there.

Neither looked at each other for a long time, until the couple left and Brick started humming a song as he swept.

"Wanna come over?" Maria asked Dan.

Dan pulled his hand back, "No, really?"

"To see the swans and the partridge," she said.

He nodded. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

She gathered her jacket and bags and left.

Ten minutes later Maria opened her door and Dan leaped inside. For the next hour, he trailed her as she fiddled with her candlelit manger nativity set and fed the swans and partridge. Their small talk stopped when she suggested cocktails and reached for the gin bottle. He removed it from her hand and poured it down the sink.

At first she was furious, then she became ashamed. Feeling raw and vulnerable she felt she had nothing more to lose by asking, "So are we going to have sex?"

He kissed her, then pulled back, "Do you want to?"

She nodded, shrugged, "I haven't had sex in two years."

"Three for me. Besides whacking, thinking about you."

She kissed him and said, "Give me five minutes to shower."

He dialed the phone. When Amy picked up, he asked her to hold it to her mother's face.

"I'm at Maria's and she asked me to fix her TV," Dan said, in code, so Amy would not understand.

"Okay," Wendy breathed deep, "Okay. That is fine. Thank you for letting me know."

"Of course. I have always told you everything."

"I know. And me, you."

"Are you really okay with me fixing her TV?"

"I told you before. Yes. She has a lovely TV. I want you to fix it."

"This feels wrong. I love you."

“She has those swans, right? I want you to enjoy her swans.”

“If you told me to come home right now I would.”

“No. Really. I would feel better if you fixed her TV and played with her swans.”

“That’s all it would be. Just fixing what’s broken and playing. Nothing emotional. I love YOU.”

“Amy can take care of me tonight. A broken TV may take all night to fix and that is okay with us. Fix her TV until it works perfectly and play with her swans until they are happy and come back in the morning.”

“I’ll come home if you want right now.”

“I really want you to fix her TV and play with her swans. For me. Do it for me. That would take pressure off me.”

“Okay then. For you I will fix her TV.”

“We’ll see you in the morning. Hang up the phone, Amy.”

The phone hung up. After a beat, eyes misty, Dan sauntered to Maria’s room, undressing.

Brick, Bridget and their teenage sons knocked on the farm door. Jenny ran to open it and waved them in, exclaiming, “Gary died and came back to life. He’s telling us all about the other side!”

The atheist Evans family surrounded Gary's bed as he enthusiastically shared more about his Near Death Experience. Everyone got goosebumps, including the mustached teens.

After awhile, Brick's eyes drifted outside to the cows and down the hall and to the barn.

Gary pointed to Brick, "I can read your mind. You want to switch houses. You want your family here to start teaching your boys farming and you wanted to ask if Kyle will take your gorgeous property in trade since it's about the same value."

Bridget and the wide-eyed boys, Brad and Brian, affirmed that is exactly what Brick came to ask. All were astonished Gary could now read minds. He looked at Bridget, who screamed and left the room, "Don't read my mind!"

They all laughed, and Gary said, "A wall's not going to stop me. You have four thousand dollars in a plant pot. Your sister has a name that sounds like June or Joan and she will visit you when she passes by next month. She has a secret to tell you."

"Oh my god!" Jenny exclaimed, "How can you do that?"

Gary paused, then pointed above, "Briefly. I am half dead and half alive for a very short while – that was just whispered in my ear. I can exhibit some abilities which seem extraordinary, but get this, the voice said they're really not that extraordinary as much as the Earth patterns have dampened, subdued them."

Kyle shook his head in disbelief, "Wow."

Gary channeled more psychic info, "Brick made a leap today to change his whole family plan. Jo made a leap today, surrendering his pride to Dan, and Dan also made a leap today," Gary's eyes widened, "And I can see exactly what he is doing but it should remain private."

Jenny asked, "Should we be recording you or something?" she pulled out her phone to record him.

Gary pointed to Brian and said, "I owe you a thank you for something you will do," then Gary collapsed, as if he died. Kyle shook him awake. Gary spoke, out of breath, "I saw all 10 Lords A-Leaping. I shared six. Me into afterlife, my father who disowned me, his spirit leaping into my heart, my beautiful Tony's reunion and leaping to our past, Brick's family plans, Jo's ego and Dan's whatever. These four ladies will benefit from the last four leaps which will happen before midnight: Jenny, Georgia, Maria and Wendy. It's incredible," Gary said, seeing the future, and, "Thank you for letting me love you," then collapsed as if he died.

Gary's spirit once again levitated out of his body, in joy. He looked down and could see Brick and Kyle trying to revive him. Gary floated through the ceiling and through the attic and up into the sky.

As he enjoyed frolicking through clouds overlooking gorgeous Lake Lure, below him he saw Sharon and Delilah playing with the affectionate geese outside their pier home. Gary swooped down and hugged each goose, one by one. They could see him, but Sharon and Delilah only saw a bewildering wind seemingly cause the geese to jump around excitedly. Gary jumped into Delilah and reviled in her innocence, then he merged his spirit body into Sharon and experienced her entire life review. During that, Sharon looked as if she was in a trance.

Gary flew over more lake homes and saw Georgia's, so he dived down to find her petting Dinah the French hen while reading a book on prominent black scientist George Washington Carver. Gary twisted and became a light and a spinning light and he concentrated very hard to pull his old friend, Roy, Georgia's husband, down into her room.

The light smear that was Roy spun like a top and in Gary's sight, Roy's light leaped from the stars and assembled into his old human body, which was unfortunately invisible to Georgia.

"Roy's in the room," Gary said, and Georgia heard him perfectly, but frightened of a bodyless voice she jumped, confused. After she settled down, she asked, "Roy, is that you?"

Roy said yes, but she could not hear him, so Gary said, "He's here."

"Old Gary??" Georgia asked.

"No, YOUNG Gary. I just died and Roy is with you, and always has been, and always will be, he says."

Georgia cried like a baby, hugging the hen, "Oh Roy, I love you so much."

Gary said, "You asked for an hour. He will be here, in this room, for one hour. He will be able to move things a tiny bit to prove to you he is here."

For that hour, Gary stayed there silently using his waning Earthly vibrational abilities to help Roy use his to move some playing cards to Georgia's astonishment.

Afterwards, Gary flew up and up into the sky, then quickly dove into Wendy's house, floating around her as little Amy used all her might to transfer Wendy from the wheelchair into the bed.

"Does this woman need to be paralyzed?!" Gary yelled to the spirit world, which Wendy could hear, but Amy could not.

"Why are you paralyzed, Wendy?" Gary asked her.

Her mind answered, "My husband shot me."



“Do you take any accountability for your medical condition and diagnosis?”

She thought, “What can I do about it?”

“Do you take accountability?” he repeated.

She answered in thought, “No, it was Dan’s fault. I told him a hundred times to get rid of his disgusting guns.”

“If you take accountability, you can start to heal.”

She thought, “But I didn’t shoot me. You mean like a car accident where insurance says anyone is ten percent at fault being there?”

“No.”

As Amy left, Wendy thought harder, drooling, “It wasn’t my doing.”

“It wasn’t?”

“No! No!!”

“Join me, if you want, reviewing and reexperiencing your entire life. Here we go.”

With that, Gary began to see her entire life, from birth to present. She started to also watch and feel her life review; when she was a pretty cheerleader in school, but lost attention to prettier girls. She re-experienced the nausea and discomfort all felt when her mother nagged her father, and punished him when he did not do as she instructed. Gary left the review at that point and floated up over the scenic bay and mountains, then into the Earth’s orbit and above the planet, marveling at the energy of the trillions of working consciousnesses expressing love and other emotions on the spinning planet.

As Dan made love to Maria, her doorbell rang, and rang again every few seconds. Finally, she grabbed her cotton robe and maneuvered through swans to open it. The handsome black-bearded man was there, asking, “Maria?”

“Do I know you?”

“Christian Singles. Kevin. We chatted a few times.”

“Oh, right. You live around Chimney Rock. The photo with the jeep and a white pit-bull.”

“Sweetest dog ever. Am I seeing swans in your living room?”

“Nothing wrong with your eyes. Kevin, uh, what are you doing here?”

“Am I a crazy stalker?” he laughed, “Oh I hope not. I just pursue and investigate, which is why I am so successful at buying and selling I guess. I liked you online but usually the women don’t look as good in person and it’s so awkward when we meet, so I spy a bit before I meet the women just to see if they really are what they present, and not using 10 year-old photos. I just try to avoid hurt feelings. I look like my photo and so do you.”

“Oh.”

“Beautiful.” He said, “Your eyes are like a mysterious work of art. But you deleted your profile so I couldn’t message you.”

Long awkward silence. Dan tiptoed to a place where he could eavesdrop and listen. He recognized Kevin from the jeep incident on Christmas day, grew jealous and angry.

Kevin continued, "So, anyway, uh, here is my card. Call me when I can take you to the best dinner of your life."

"Okay. Thanks, Kevin," she smiled as she tried to close the door-

"Forgive me for surprising you like this. When I see something I like, I leap for it, put myself out there. Relationship material. Looking to settle down, monogamous, you know, no drugs, no drink, great income and job. My relatives and are even functional."

"Ok, thanks. This is a lot to take in."

He bowed, kissed her hand, smiled, handed her a rose from behind his back and walked away, leaping from stone to stone over her creeks.

Kyle and Jenny somberly watched the paramedics wheel away the deceased body of Gary Richards. After an emotional pause, Jenny and Kyle walked back into the paneled farmhouse. Jenny said, "This place is so empty without him."

"I know, right?"

"It totally feels deserted. Wow."

"Totally." Kyle agreed. "Eerie. Little guy was such a big energy."

"He loved this place."

"And he gave it all to me."

"Are you going to trade it with Brick's?"

"I've never seen Brick's house. Let's check it out tomorrow."

"Okay."

"And Jenny, will you marry me?"

"Oh my god what has gotten into you?"

"This is my leap. I know it doesn't make sense. My Chicago life made complete sense, but the joy level was about 3 there. Since I've met you, my joy level is always 10."

She pulled him into a kiss then wrapped his big arms around her slight body, "No. Of course I'm not going to marry any guy after knowing him a week, even if he seems like Prince Charming. That's absolutely zonkers, but thank you for leaping anyway. I mean, I might say yes in the future but not after one week, you spaz."

He laughed with her and picked her up, carrying her through the farmhouse, to the back. The sandpipers sung. Jenny picked up her guitar and sung along with them with her pretty soft voice.

Jenny said, "Maybe Brick, if he takes over, wants to keep the pipers?"

"It doesn't matter. They have to be released. I just feel it's part of the 12 day thing that has to happen. Tomorrow they will be free of all cages."

# THE 11<sup>TH</sup> DAY OF CHRISTMAS



January 4. Maria lay awake listening to her phone play a podcast arranging a January 6<sup>th</sup> election protest, making the point that after every presidential election there is indeed always a protest, from either side. Snoring Dan's arms were around her. She enjoyed the physical closeness because it had been years since she had it, but he wasn't Prince Charming, he was very real, very flawed Dan, and his body and the sex weren't as great as she had expected. In his defense, he could not have been more stressed thinking his wife knew he was having sex with another woman.

Dan farted and Maria quickly got out of bed and into the kitchen, where she relieved herself with farts. Later, Maria sat on her doorstep, watching the swans and peacock play. After a

minute, she had a cup of coffee, then boxed up her Christmas lights and manger nativity set.

Dan entered the living room in his pants and socks and pulled on his shirt and shoes. When they caught eyes, they smiled, but had nothing to say.

“January 6<sup>th</sup> protest is gaining steam,” she said.

“I can’t leave Wendy,” he said. “I’ve got to get home.”

“Sure. Have a good day.”

“Will you be going to Brick’s for coffee?” he asked.

“No, I had some here today.”

He pulled her into a deep embrace, not sexual, but of gratitude, then kissed her cheek and left.

Driving home, Dan talked to God, “I did it for Wendy. She asked me to, so it doesn’t count as a sin. I couldn’t even get totally hard, because I was right with you, Lord. So, I wasn’t even inside her vagina fully erect, so, it was not intercourse by definition. I was limp inside her, not hard, thinking about you, Lord, and my vows.”

Dan entered his house, guilt-ridden. Amy jumped into his arms. He kissed her, “Where’s your mommy?”

“She’s still in bed. It was too difficult to get her there so we waited for you to get her back in her chair.”

“Hey honey!” Dan said, inching to Wendy’s bed.

“Good morning. How was your night?”

“Not great,” he admitted, “How was yours?”

“Pretty great.”

“Really?” he asked, “Why is that?”

“Look.”

His eyes met hers.

“My fingers,” she explained.

Dan looked and saw the slightest movement in her fingers. He screamed in excitement, “Holy Moly! What happened??”

“Babe, it was out of this world. Literally, like a spirit came and we had a talk and he asked me if I was accountable in any way for my paralysis, and I said no, it was your fault.”

He nodded, held her limp hands together.

She continued, emotional, “And he kept asking and I kept repeating it was your fault and then he took me to my childhood where I saw how Mom punished Dad and, well, part of me liked being paralyzed because it punished you for having guns when I told you not to.”

He was perplexed, and played with her fingers, and one moved, “You can move your finger!!”

“I felt a tingling in it a couple hours ago, and now I can move it. I feel a tingling near my right toe now. Maybe in an hour I can move it?”

They looked at her toe and nothing seemed unusual. What they could not see was Gary's spirit vibrating around it, and her leg.

Dan hugged her, "Oh honey I love you so much."

"I know you do, Dan, and I love you, too, and I'm through punishing you and making you wrong. We both suffered enough. Damn, if I just get one finger back I'll be thrilled. Who knows if I'll get more back? I just have to think positive and keep my vibration high and stop making you wrong."

"I'm so sorry what I did to you."

"Last night??"

"No, the shooting accident."

"It doesn't matter anymore. I don't care anymore if you're sorry. I am no longer a victim. And it feels better."

He wiped her drool and kissed her tenderly.

He said, "I was wrong last night."

"You certainly were not. I sincerely wanted that for you, because I love you and want your happiness."

"She doesn't make me happy. You make me happy."

She scoffed, "He said while changing his wife's diarrhea diaper."

"If Dan's not coming this morning, I'm taking his chair," Georgia said, sitting in the big chair in Brick's grocery window, "Supposed to snow tonight, Baldy."



Broom in hand, Brick stepped over to her, “Did you hear Gary died?”

Just arriving and overhearing, Sharon rushed over, “Gary died?”

Brick said, “Yesterday in his bed, but he was happy to go, and just got back from a Near Death Experience and was telling us all about the superpowers he had. Now you know I think all that spiritual mumbo jumbo is hogwash, but he literally read our minds like Long Island Medium and said he was flying on other dimensions with his dead dad and mom until he just went splat, D-E-A-D.”

Georgia showed her goosebumps, “He came to me, yesterday, I did not know he was dead but I recognized his voice OUT OF THIN AIR and I said, old Gary? And he said, no, YOUNG Gary!”

Sharon was astonished, taking off her coat, sitting, spilling her coffee.

So the shoppers would not hear, Georgia whispered, “He told me Roy would be with me one hour because somehow he knew I begged Roy to just come for one hour – and Roy did and Roy even moved my Jack Of Clubs closer to my Queen Of Hearts just when the lights flickered and I know the hens saw him because they kept looking to my left.”

Sharon hugged Georgia, “I’m so glad Roy came.”

Georgia flooded with years, “My Roy came back.”

Brick hugged her, teary-eyed, “Tell Roy to come to me sometime.”

Georgia screamed for the world to hear, “ROY CAME FOR AN HOUR!!!”

A couple shoppers smiled to be polite but moved away because they thought she was a sex lunatic.

Georgia screamed, "My Roy CAAAAAME for an HOOOOUUR!!!!"

Kyle followed Brick as he investigated every square inch of the large farm property, "It goes this far?"

"To the fence there, and all the way to the other fence there where that cow is."

Brick was impressed, "Well, I'm telling you, Kyle, my sons are not too bright nor do they work well with others or have any drive, and they keep losing jobs because they show up late or not at all, so I need to find them occupations, so this farm might do that for them. Your property is so much larger than I expected, so much larger than mine, but mine is appraised about the same value because of my location."

Kyle smiled, "Let's go take a look."

Brick nodded, "And no pressure."

"No pressure."

An hour later, Jenny was hanging on Kyle as they approached the Evans brick home. Their jaws dropped because it really was the most beautiful home they had ever seen. Acres of long, lush lawns and flower beds and bushes led to the stately 3 bedroom brick

house perfectly placed on the narrow part of the lake with views of Chimney Rock State Park evergreens. No other homes were in sight.

Inside was fine, but the plot was really made for a large mansion. In any event, the sandy waterside of the property was even more enchanting and magical.

Kyle said to Brick, "Look, if they appraise similar, sure, we can switch, because I know I do not want the farm life. This is a lot prettier than the farm, better views, but I also think I'd get bored here so far from a city."

Jenny said, "Less than 45 minutes to Hendersonville or Asheville or Greenville or Spartanburg or Shelby, and only an hour to Charlotte."

Kyle said, "Let's get an appraiser on it."

Jenny asked, "Can we sleep here tonight?"

Brick nodded, "Sure thing, we have a pull-out couch."

Kyle chuckled, "Nah, that's not what she meant."

After a beat, Brick said, "Oh, Alone?? Oh, well, sure, the Evans family can sleep at the farm tonight, in fact, that's probably a smart idea so we can feel it out before we make such a drastic change. My boys would love to sleep at the farm."

Later that night, as a few snowflakes fell, handsome Kyle and beautiful Jenny looked and felt like movie-stars outside Brick's perfect estate, on the private beach area.



Jenny strummed soft melody on her guitar and said, “Unbelievable. Like how did neurotic zero trailer queen get here in the perfect house on the perfect property with the perfect man?”

Kyle looked up toward the dramatic snow clouds, “Uncle Gary had a lot to do with it.”

“We know he’s alive somewhere. We know that. He proved it.”

“I’m so happy for him.”

“He’s so happy for you, too, I just know it.”

“Let’s free the birds for him,” he said. “Eleven Pipers Piping. They say the spiritual significance is for the eleven faithful apostles.”

Jenny followed Kyle into the house, where the agitated birds were in a cage.

He opened the cage door and a couple flew around the room, confused. Kyle and Jenny, using her guitar, tried to wave them out the door, but instead they kept flying into inside windows and injuring themselves. The young lovers tried to catch them but were unable. Eventually one sandpiper flew into the chimney, and up it.

“Oh no,” Kyle said, “What if he gets stuck in there?”

All eleven birds flapped their wings wildly and although they went in circles for ten minutes, eventually all flew up the chimney and out of it, into the sky. Once free, they piped a symphony of joyful music.

Kyle smiled, “They’re playing our song.”

Things did not go so smoothly at the farm house.

“Dad, it’s snowing hard!” Brian said, shivering, unable to close the back door, “I hate snow.”

Brick was unable to get a fire or any heat going and Bridget burned a casserole. Somehow a cow got inside and broke a lamp and then knocked all the picture frames off the hall walls, except the framed newspaper clipping of Brick and Bridget holding their one-year old Brad and newborn Brian.

Brian tried to push the cow out the front door but kept slipping under it.

# THE 12<sup>TH</sup> DAY OF CHRISTMAS



January 5. Kyle and Jenny drove through very dangerous snow-plowed roads and arrived at the farm house, carrying in the boys' drums and band uniforms. They remarked how cold it was inside and Bridget explained they could not turn on the heat. Kyle did turn it on, and when he saw Brian, smiled and pointed to the drums.

"Not today," Brian coughed, "It's snowing and I got a cold."

Before Kyle could speak, Brick spoke firmly, "You made a promise and you took this man's three hundred dollars."

Brian whined, "I'll give it back."

Brick said, "You will not give it back! You will keep your promise."

Brian whined and looked to Brad, who shook his head no, then Brian looked down, saying, "We can't drum in the snow. We'll slip."

Bridget crossed her arms, "Do you think farming is going to allow you to stay out of bad weather?"

Brian shrugged. Brad left the room.

Brick yelled, "You get back here, Brad. You and your brother are going to get ten more drummers drumming today. Do you understand?"

Kyle said, "I'll raise it to \$1,000."

Brick refused, "No, Brian made a deal for \$600 and took 50% down. My son BRIAN WILL FULFILL HIS COMMITMENT AND PROMISE!"

Brian shook his head and angrily grabbed his phone and started calling his contacts.

Brian whined, "But it doesn't make any sense!"

Brick explained, "A man's word is all he has."

Bridget held Brick's hand, "Does your father ever break his word?"

Brian shook his head no.

Bridget went on, "If the grocery customers saw Brick breaking his word, what would happen?"

Brian reasoned, "They'd shop at Walmart."



Brick said, "Exactly. My small business thrives because when I tell a customer I will do something, I do it. I am careful with my words, Brian. Very careful because I know if I lie once, I lose a customer forever."

Brian said, "But Kyle is paying us to drum for a man that DIED."

The ridiculousness of that was absorbed by all, and after a long while, Kyle said, "Yes. I am. And you promised to."

Brian argued, "But he was alive when I promised."

Brick looked his son in the eye, "When a man always speaks the truth, he can control his whole life. His words have that much power because words become things."

Kyle said, "The man that died, who you saw full of superpowers as he was dying, said that we are consciousnesses plugged into an electrical manifestation grid we call Earth, and that as consciousnesses we create our lives – our bodies and circumstances - by our vibrations, words, actions, energies. Let me ask you this, if you do as you promised and drum half an hour today, how will your night be after that? Proud, wealthy? Happy? Jazzed. Confident. Clean, with proud parents. If you do not do as you promised, how will your night be? Awkward, shamed? Embarrassed? Low vibration? Guilty? Punished? Nightmares? And think how a man's year is, that always keeps his words. Then think about how a man's year is, that lies everyday."

Brian thought long and hard, then shouted, "Brad, come on! Let's do the drumming and get it over with!"

Brick breathed relieved. He winked at Kyle, who was grateful.

Three hours later, Brick was ringing up customers in his grocery store. Sitting by the window drinking coffee or hot chocolate, enjoying the snow flurries and sharing muffins were Kyle, Jenny, Dan, Georgia, Maria and Sharon.

In the distance, they could hear twelve drummers drumming.

Kyle searched his phone and read aloud, *"The twelve drummers drumming symbolizes the twelve points of belief in The Apostles' Creed."*

"What the heck are those?" Jenny asked.

Kyle searched his phone, then read aloud, skeptical, *"1. I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth."*

Dan nodded, *"Praise God. And number 2 is I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord. To which I say, Praise Jesus."*

Maria echoed, *"Praise Jesus."*

Dan said, *"Number 3. Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, Born of the Virgin Mary."*

Jenny rolled her eyes, *"I just don't think virgins give birth."*

Sharon read aloud from her phone. *"Number 4. Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried."*

Kyle just shrugged to Jenny, like *"who knows?"*

Sharon continued reading, *"5. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again."*

Jenny asked, *"Jesus went to Hell? Why did Jesus go to Hell?"*

Kyle shrugged.

Maria said, "Hell may be symbolic, like meaning a bad place."

Kyle said, "I think everything in the Bible is symbolic. None of it is literal if you ask me."

Sharon read aloud, "*He ascended into heaven; He is seated at the right hand of the Father.*"

Georgia said, "With my Roy. My Roy is there."

Kyle asked, "Do you know Roy is alive, existing in the after life or do you know he is in a literal Heaven? - because I think there's a difference."

Georgia shrugged, "Well he didn't text me any photos today, Mr. Sherlock Holmes."

Sharon read on, "*7. And He will come to judge the living and the dead.*"

Maria looked at Dan, then guiltily said, "But he also died for our sins."

Kyle said, "Which makes no sense to me. A God came to Earth as his son and let him die a horrific tortuous death on a cross so that no human ever would ever be accountable for their negative actions?"

Jenny agreed, "Yeah, that doesn't make sense to me either."

Sharon continued reading "*8. I believe in the Holy Spirit.*"

Kyle said, "Spirits! Yes! Holy might mean higher consciousness beings, more enlightened spirits, yes."

Jenny nodded, "Gary showed us that is real, that the after life is real."

The drums sped up, got louder.

Sharon continued, “9. *The holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints.*”

Georgia admitted, “Politics these days though, I think politics ruined the credibility of the church.”

Maria shrugged, “And who gets canonized? Right? Politics probably influence who gets made a saint, too. I just don’t trust the church anymore since they forced auto-tithing.”

Jenny asked what that was, and Maria explained, “The church is a business and asks your bank account info so they can withdraw a certain percentage every week whether you go to church or not.”

Georgia shook her head in disapproval.

Sharon read, “10. *The forgiveness of sins.*”

Dan said, “Praise Jesus.”

Jenny added, “I bet I’ve sinned more than any of you and I think we need to forgive ourselves. I don’t think it would matter whether Jesus forgave me or not.”

Sharon read, “11. *The resurrection of the body.*”

Jenny yelled, “We saw it! Gary showed us!”

Kyle said, “What a gift he gave us.”

They nodded, beamed.

Georgia added, “I heard Gary’s voice when he was resurrected. That showed me someday I will also be YOUNG again. Unless I find a plastic surgeon first.”

Sharon finished reading, *"12. And the life everlasting. Amen."*

"Amen!" Kyle said enthusiastically. "You guys, how many people get to know there is life after death, like we know because Uncle Gary showed us??"

"Amen!" Dan echoed.

Georgia stood up and raised her hands high, "Amen," just as a loud drum roll ended with a cymbal crash.

Maria, with praying hands, smiled and bowed her head, "Thank you Gary." Her deep and wide dark eyes looked haunting.

Just as Brick said, "Amen," the drums got louder and out the window all could see confident, smiling Brian leading his young drummer friends toward the store – but also participating in drumming, adding enthusiastic energy if not talent, was Delilah, Jo and the Xongs.

A group of birds flew above them.

Jenny patted Kyle's hand, "Look, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven. It's the pipers."

Kyle winked to Jenny, "They're playing our song."

For a long while the eleven sandpipers flew above the drums, attracted to them. Brian and his enthusiastic band also attracted many onlookers, stepping out from their cars or homes. The slow hypnotic beat also pulled to it squirrels and barking dogs. Then, suddenly, more birds chirped excitedly joining the pipers.

"Thirteen I count," Dan said.

Georgia corrected, "Fifteen."



Dan stared, “The two orange birds and the one yellow and one blue bird. I saw those before. Four Calling Birds. At the flooded Tudor house last week.”

Kyle clapped, “They found each other! This beat, this rhythm, this resonance somehow summoned the eleven pipers my Uncle Gary had, and also it called the four calling birds that he had in the same huge cage in his barn!”

Jenny sunk into Kyle’s arms, “Maybe that’s why you felt you needed to do all 12 days. This was the only way to bring them together. Now they’re together again.”

The four calling birds chirped and the eleven sandpipers piped, and together they flew in and around the drummers, then flew into the grocery store, and out again, and up to the sky, and disappeared.

The drums miles away matched Wendy’s loud, intense heartbeat.

Wendy sat in her wheelchair in her living room, looking shocked.

Amy asked, “What’s wrong, Mom?”

“Nothing at all. Nothing is wrong, honey,” Wendy said, trembling.

Mother and daughter both stared at mother's hands which had come to life, gripping her wheelchair sides. They could not see ghostly swirling fog around them.

Wendy directed, "I want you to get all the pillows in the house and put them all around me."

The entire five minutes it took Amy to do this, Wendy was concentrating hard to lift herself up, gripping the wheelchair sides. Amy watched intensely as Wendy's lifeless feet began clenching.

Wendy stated, "It's time for Mommy to stand up."

Amy asked, "Should I call Dad?"

"No, just use all your strength to hold me if I get weak and fall."

Daughter concentrated as hard as mother as mother, sweating, pushed through excruciating pain to teeter her upper body off the chair - and balancing over her unsteady legs. With her hands still gripping the heavy chair, Wendy screamed as she forced her butt and stomach and chest to rise.

Both her and her daughter beamed in astonishment as Wendy had miraculously regained the use of her body, at least temporarily, standing very weakly, gripping the chair, as drum beats sounded louder and louder...

While alive, Gary felt alone and useless, but now in the afterlife, he could see how the gifts he had given his neighbors would be blessings to them, especially in the future:



Brick, Bridget, Brad and Brian would treat the cows well and enjoy farming, thus giving the teens the perfect vocation for many years to come.

Although the seven swans were a lot to deal with, when Maria married Kevin, the happy couple, with friendly pit-bull, easily managed.

The affectionate six geese would be great comfort to Sharon and Delilah, who would further explore the Bible's subtext.

When Kyle walked Jenny down the aisle and placed a ring on her finger, all friends recalled the five golden rings Gary gave to her.

The four calling birds and eleven sandpipers remained one flock, freely roaming the entirety of Lake Lure.

The three hens were great company to Georgia, and great conversational topics, when she had guests over for meals, like when Dan brought over Wendy, who would walk again.

Jo and the Latin farmhand (who worked for Gary) would date and snuggle like their two turtledoves.

And when William the Partridge needed a break from Maria, Kevin, their three children, the pit-bull, a cat and seven swans, he could hide peacefully in the pear tree.

[www.ThomBierdz.com](http://www.ThomBierdz.com) has info on Bierdz's books, which of these paintings are available (originals and prints), commissions, more –

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