

DANCING WITH THE OCTOPUS

The Telling of a True Crime

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This memoir is a work of non-fiction. However, the names of certain individuals have been changed to protect their privacy, and dialogue has been reconstructed to the best of the Author's recollection. With respect to Charles Goodwin, please see a statement at the end of this book.

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In Which the Clock Starts Ticking

Lincoln, 2003—The truth began to emerge when I saw Charles Goodwin sitting at a white Formica table in a Nebraska prison canteen, waiting for his parole hearing. I wasn't expecting to recognize him in a crowd, but when I observed his dark brown eyes scanning the room, I felt the pulse of memory kick in, and when it did, a passage of history, a quarter of a century, all but disappeared.

It wasn't the first occasion I'd struggled with a disproportionate sense of time. I certainly didn't expect that when I learned to read a clock, it would turn into an exercise of such great profundity or that this would be my first major concession to there being a science and order to our universe. One has to learn to add multiples of 5 all the way to 60, often at an age when you are barely able to count to 10. Then you have to learn that 60 minutes equal 1 hour, 24 hours equal 1 day, 7 days make up 1 week, and 365 days make up a year, which is the time it takes the earth to orbit the sun, with the exception being the fourth year, when we leap ahead by a day.

For the earth to orbit the sun twenty-five times seems an enormous distance to travel. But for me, time often operates with rules disconnected from the workings of the universe—randomly bending with an emotional weight of metric tonnage proportion before disappearing into one black hole.

In Which I Study the Object of My Attention

Lincoln, 2003—Charles Goodwin had spent twenty-five years in Nebraska state prisons. He appeared to be in his element, not overly anxious. His hands, folded, rested on a thick hardback book whose title was *Revelation: A Book of Judgment*. Perched on top were a spiral notebook and pen.

His looks were pleasant enough, his hair closely shaven. He was wearing a plain white T-shirt, baggy jeans, and neutral-colored sneakers. There was nothing in him of the aggressive body language that was common in this environment. He appeared fit, no doubt from hours spent in the prison gym, but he hadn't acquired that machismo bodybuilder look.

About fifty prisoners sat or stood around, waiting their turn to appear in front of the parole board. None lacked for company—parents, a wife, friends, a few even had kids to broaden the audience, so the energy of the room had the backstage buzz of a school Christmas pageant.

But my offender, and it would be correct to call him “my”—though every ounce of me recoiled at the idea that he might consider me “his”—sat alone, displaying a casual but respectful patience, wearing a look of friendly approachability, as if he were waiting there just for me in the same way he'd been that afternoon, twenty-five years ago, when our paths happened to cross.

But before I go further, let me explain how we first met.

In Which a Portent Arrives

Omaha, 1978—When you're struggling to make your way up a long hill, in sleet driven by twenty-mile-an-hour winds, and you can't close your jacket because the zipper won't work, and you have no hat or gloves, it's easy to become thoroughly pissed off.

It was the day before Thanksgiving. Classes at my school, Lewis and Clark Junior High, had been dismissed an hour early due to the severity of an ice storm warning issued by the National Weather Service. The roads were filling quickly with cars, families eager to beat the storm to their destinations before the start of the nation's four-day holiday.

I decided against taking the school bus home, after hearing the district wrestling tournament was going ahead. Not because I was a sports fan, but because I assumed if the tournament wasn't canceled, then my youth church choir practice wouldn't be either, particularly as it was the last rehearsal before Thanksgiving, the most popular service of the year. Our church sat across the parking lot from my school, a convenience that made the decision all the easier.

With two hours to spend before choir practice, I stopped by to see my favorite science teacher, Kent Friesen, hoping that our weekly math tutorial was still on. When I arrived in his classroom, I found a bag of popcorn

waiting on his desk with an apology note saying he had been asked last minute to serve as a referee for the tournament. After munching down the treat, I headed back to my locker, where I bumped into a friend who said he was going to J. C. Penney to buy tickets to an upcoming Kiss concert. I decided I'd tag along with him. The Crossroads Shopping Mall sat only five minutes away at the bottom of the hill and I could spend the next hour looking for ideas for Christmas presents. The sky was hideous, the color of a deep purple bruise, when we emerged from the doors of our school, but I had yet to realize the speed with which Mother Nature could move.

Only an hour later, as I was returning, the sleet was freezing nearly as fast as it hit the ground, and the landscape was turning glacial. It would be safe to say, because I had never been exposed to the difficulties imposed on navigation in such a storm, I grossly underestimated its challenge. In addition to my eagerness to make it to choir rehearsal, I was undeniably swayed to persevere by the mindset I had inherited from my father—if you let a winter storm in Nebraska stop you, you'd never walk out the door.

Unfortunately, I wasn't the only one thinking that way.

In Which Charles Goes for Retail Therapy

Omaha, 1978—Charles Goodwin, seventeen years old and ten days free from the Kearney Youth Development Center, turned sideways in front of the department store's full-length mirror, assessing a pair of new Levi's. At first, he wasn't convinced about the brown stitching down the legs and back pockets, but now he thought the trim lent a nice tailored look.

He moved closer to the mirror, checking out what he thought was his best asset—his smile; at least it had been before that guy broke his jaw. Now every time he looked at his reflection, he was trying to correct the once-perfect symmetry of his face.

Next on the shopping list was proper outdoor gear. He found himself some tan steel-toed work boots with good traction on the sole and a light-brown hooded parka with large pockets. And then to finish the look, he wanted a balaclava. He tried a black one, but it had no character; instead, he settled on one that was red with black embroidered around the eyes.

Last but not least, he needed a knife. The Montgomery Ward sports department would have a wide selection. After surveying a few in the glass display case, he went for a fishing fillet knife with a wooden handle. It would cost a bit more, but it balanced nicely in his grip.

With his purchase list complete, Charles walked back through the mall and pushed his way out the glass doors at the back of the Brandeis department store. That's when he spotted a van sitting by the loading dock. The engine was idling, with no driver in sight. In fact, there wasn't a soul to be seen. His eyes went back to the van. He couldn't believe what an easy pickup it would be, like it had been planted there just for him.

So, being the seasoned carjacker he was, he looked around one last time, walked up to the van door, jumped in, and put the stick in reverse. As he backed out, he felt that sweet relief of an addict surrendering to his poison.

In Which I Contemplate Prairie Weather

Omaha, 1978—At fourteen years old, I was entering the plateau of what might be called real adolescence, but there were days when I still felt like a kid, and for a kid in the Midwest, a winter storm was the herald of good things to come: school cancellations, playing in the streets, and the opportunity to earn vast amounts of cash. But most glorious was a world blanketed in white, brilliant snow.

Within hours of a storm's end, forts sprung up, caves were hollowed out with underground tunnels to connect them, snowmen were built, stockpiles of snowballs were stacked—and all this created with the knowledge that if lucky, these sculptured creations would last for a week. Out of all the benefits, the most splendid by far was the sledding. After a snowfall, the best place to be if you lived in Omaha was Memorial Park, which offered panoramic views of the city.

But it wasn't snow I was navigating that afternoon—this was an ice storm, and as I headed toward my church, keeping my balance was becoming increasingly difficult. The air was heavy, its weight dampening the noise of traffic, and the cars on the road weren't having an easier time moving through the frigid muck. I watched as one became stuck, its wheels spinning furiously. The driver reversed and tried again, this time a little faster. Another car fishtailed its way through the deepening slush.

After much effort, I finally managed to get up the hill to the church parking lot. When I reached the side entrance of the choir annex, I found a note tacked to the door, flapping in the wind, runny with red ink. *Choir practice canceled due to bad weather.* How unfortunate.

I wore a cross fixed on a necklace, which I'd reach for if I needed a little emotional buoying, like I did at that moment. The storm was growing worse by the minute. As I slid my cross along its chain, I caught sight of the line of yellow school buses across the parking lot. The wrestling tournament was still under way, which meant the building would be open and I could find a way to get myself home.

So I headed in that direction.

In Which Charles Lands His Dream Job

Omaha, 1978—Later, Charles was driving and leaned over the steering wheel to check out the sky. It had this color to it, like nothing he had ever seen. And the weather outside couldn't make up its mind. One minute it was raining, the next squalling with snow. He hadn't been sure how the van was going to handle on the road, but he felt a sort of manly pride as he steered it through traffic.

He was heading back over to 5025 Castelar Street to take care of some unfinished business. The new knife sat on the seat next to him. He wanted to pay his respects to the punk who attacked him at school. He had gone by the house earlier, one of those ranchers, even knocked on the door. The kid's mother answered. Said he wasn't home. Charles noticed she was pretty. Even thought for a split second it would serve that kid right if he took his revenge by slicing her face; actually, he thought about doing more than that. He assured her he'd be by again.

As Charles approached the boy's neighborhood, the rain turned to sleet. Left turn, right turn. Just as he was about to pull into the driveway, he spotted a police car sitting there. Damn, she must have made a call. Or was he just being paranoid? That was the second time he'd gotten himself all jacked up for nothing. He steered himself accordingly, right on by. Might as well head

over to Lewis and Clark Junior High a little earlier, to surprise his cousin. She was a cheerleader, and there was a district wrestling tournament.

The drive only took fifteen minutes, but during that time the roads had turned into almost solid ice. He pulled in around back near the school buses, so he could catch his cousin Crystal coming out of the gym. But she sure was taking a long time. Drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, he noticed the needle indicating the gas tank was near empty. He checked his pockets—two dollars and a few loose coins. Not good. He wasn't seeing a paycheck until Friday, from his new job at Godfather's Pizza. It was one of the conditions that his father, a minister at the local Baptist church, had given him if he was going to move back home. When Charles asked him what he expected him to do in the meanwhile for cash, the Reverend told him to figure it out.

That's when the movie sprang to mind, the one that he and his brother had gone to see last year. These guys kidnap a banker's daughter and hold her for ransom. He tried to remember the name—maybe *60 Seconds*? The guys had names like Dirty Larry and Mo. He needed money like that. His next thought was why not, why not do the same thing? He didn't need a banker, just a family man with money in his account, plus a kid. And if he got enough, he could split, go to California like he'd always wanted to.

And then, like the universe had had the same idea, he spotted a girl off in the distance, walking away from the church. He turned the engine on, revved her up, and said something to the effect of, "She looks good enough to me."