

The Crime of My Life

by Gregg Olsen, 1959–

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Book ideas are born in any number of ways. Some come to authors in a burst of happenstance and brilliance. Some come in the throes of a good dream. A few, I'm told, come from God. I have never been so lucky. My books have always been born of the truth. I am a writer of true crime, a much-maligned genre, but one in which I felt I could stake a claim for a career. Or something that resembled a career. It seemed that there were a million stories out there that given some shaping and research—could make for interesting reading.

The ideas come from television, prisoners who write me, fans who show up at book signings (though I can't say I have enough of those to provide much of a stockpile) and, of course, newspapers.

The Crime of My Life is different. This is a story hatched of my own experiences; my own life.

About a year ago my wife, Valerie, retrieved a carton from under our bed amid rolls of Christmas wrapping paper and white and brown tufts of dog hair. She set the box, with its ill-fitting, strapped-down lid, next to the computer where I did most of my writing. She smiled reluctantly and said only three words. „Honey, it’s time.”

I understood what she meant. I knew it even if she had said nothing. I had tried to avoid the idea of telling the story contained in the beat-up box. I had resisted it for all the right reasons, though deep down I knew it was beyond my ability to do so. Beyond my need. Beyond the necessity of supporting my family.

I had a dozen such boxes in various spots in my house. In the garage, too. Three that had been stacked and draped with a cheery chintz fabric passed as a bedside table in the guest room. The boxes were the remnants of the books I had written. Inside each were the unspeakable and the unbelievable. I had been writing true crime books for nearly a decade and the memorabilia I had collected was suitable for a murder museum, if such a place existed. I had letters from Betty Broderick; a signed page of sheet music from Charles Manson. I even had a sketch by John Wayne Gacy (he made a far better killer than an artist). Inside the box of source material I saved about a woman who had killed her husband for insurance money, was the killer’s video store card, her purse (a blue and white nautical shoulder bag), and love letters to the man she had conspired with to commit the murder. I even had the convicted woman’s shopping list and a brush entangled with her Clairol Frivolous Fawn-dyed hair.

Each was a Pandora’s box of sorts, a repository in which I was the keeper, the jailer of little murderous memories. All had been tagged with the name of the book that I had regarded as a potential bestseller.

The carton my wife put near my desk was labeled with the name of a story I had started to write, but had never seemed destined to complete. It read: *The Crime of My Life*.

I took an X-Acto knife from Val’s art bin and sliced the silver duct tape I had used to seal the box. Even the tape rekindled a recollection of a terrible night. The glint of silver. The flash of steel. A kind of coldness and fear I had rarely known seized me once more. Some things, I know all too well, are too powerful to forget.

I slid the lid aside and drank some coffee before looking further. The contents were remarkable, not only in their diversity, but in their very familiarity. The top was blanketed by a green leotard, a Halloween costume worn by one of my twin daughters. A small but unmistakable crescent of blood had stained the garment’s neckline.

I drank more coffee and pushed the green fabric aside. At first, I used a pencil to do so. Almost instantly, I felt clinical and foolish. Embarrassed. I was the little girl’s father. Her blood was mine. I had carried her and her twin from the delivery room like two peachy footballs; one in each arm. I was the daddy who saved her spit-up cloth because I knew that the smell would always remind me of my baby.

I gently folded the leotard and peered deeper inside. The contents had come so close to being the province of someone else’s collection; some other writer who made his or her living out of the anguish of others. It had been too damn close.

The interview tapes, the photos of the players in the drama, a photocopy of fingerprints done up like a black-and-white rendering of a row of Chinese lanterns. Everything was in there. Everything that had nearly cost me all I held precious in my life—the lives of every member of my family.

And so I agreed with Valerie, it was time. I fiddled with the yarn-covered pencil holder little Teddy Bundy had made for his mom for Mother's Day in 1964. (I purchased it along with other personal belongings from the Bundy family's garage sale after Ted was electrocuted in Florida for the murder of a schoolgirl.) I had reglued the uncoiling rainbow yarn twice before, as if keeping it intact somehow mattered. And I wondered.

I have always been fascinated by crime. I have always wondered what brings a child like Teddy to seek the dark side of murder. How a child, born seemingly perfect, is transformed into the embodiment of evil. Before the events took place in the book you are now holding, I pondered the why of a crime from a distance. A safe distance.

I'll never forget that summer day when the wheels of homicide had been set in motion, when my own story would become enmeshed and entangled and, ultimately, greater than Love, Lies and Murder—the crime I thought I was chronicling.

Once I opened the box, I knew that I had to see the perpetrator, face-to-face. Maybe through the smudged glass that separates the free from the trapped, held there like one of those hothouse flowers under a dome of turgid air? Maybe in a cafeteria-style visiting room? I wrote a letter addressed to the inmate and waited.

Two weeks later, word came that the perp would see me and I parked the only luxury I'd ever allowed myself, a white BMW, in the dusty lot of the prison. I'd ended up using the car almost as much for storage as for transportation. File folders, tapes, and the kind of ephemera that true crime writers collect without even trying: a high school annual that I needed to return; family photos that always looked like they'd been plucked from the nicest family in the world—that is, the nicest family that spawned a killer—and reams of MapQuest printouts that led me from trailer park to suburbia and back again.

I was processed with the other visitors. We all stood there—moms, dads, girlfriends, children—and blinked back the shame of having to come to visit someone in a place like this. I always acted a little smug, just because I could.

„Working on a book,” I'd say.

This morning I filed in with the others. I had a pencil and four sheets of notebook paper—ostensibly allowed for tallying Scrabble or some other time-filling game. The best games were always the ones that allowed for more concentration and less small talk. Gaps in conversation during a prison visit were always chilling. They allowed the visitor that moment of reflection that ultimately came in a burst: I'm in a fucking prison talking to my husband, brother, whatever. Games that commanded attention put the focus on a triple-word score, and not, say, a double homicide. In the prison visiting room, no lulls are welcome.

I saw him from across the room. Being a writer, I was never good at math sans calculator. Nevertheless, I computed the age he'd been when charged and the years that had passed since then. It made him about seventy. I realized at that

moment that I should know his age, birth date, and the simple info that create the framework of character.

I didn't extend my hand when he offered his. „You don't look like your picture,” I said, taking a seat on a bolted-down bench across the table.

„Neither do you,” he answered, puzzling me for a moment, before I remembered I'd actually sent him one of my books years ago. It came from my publisher directly because no author can send a book into a U.S. prison. Not since someone soaked pages in meth.

An inmate review came to mind: „An intoxicating read. It kept me turning the pages well into the night.”

I always thought of my books as kind of a business card, proof that I was a writer and I was going to tell a real, true story. Like it or not, here I come.

„A Coke?” I offered, knowing that buying an inmate a Coke—with ice—is like giving the incarcerated a whiff of what the freedom might taste like. Or rather, tasted like.

„Nice, thanks.” His blue eyes were enveloped by crinkly folds, but they sparkled at that moment. He still wanted to charm. He knew he had to.

I got up and put in a few of the quarters of the roll I'd been allowed to bring inside in the institution. The cup fell. Then the ice. I caught his eye and shrugged as the brown foam swelled to the edge of the cup and spilled over. He smiled, but it was forced, slightly unnatural. Like a mimic.

„So, you've finally decided to tell me your story.” I winced at my own opening line.

The smile, real or imitation, vanished. „So, you've finally decided to come and see me.”

He was being coy, so I returned the affect. „I'm interested in your story,” I said. „I always have been. You've been silent. Why now?”

He tilted the paper cup and poured the cola down his throat. I noticed he wore dentures. I wonder if that's why the smile seemed so false.

„I guess now's time. Obviously you're the right author.”

A baby from across the visiting room started to cry.

„I wish they didn't bring babies in here,” he said. „Doesn't seem right to me.”

I nodded, but couldn't resist taking a chance by giving the man a little jab. „I guess you know a lot about right and wrong.”

His stare was hard. The crinkly lines around his eyes looked like snakeskin, not the result of happier times. If he ever had any. That is, before he did what he did.

With the door ajar to allow him to speak, he started unloading. He wanted to make sure I wouldn't „screw” him over. I almost laugh out loud whenever a killer makes such a request. I've written about women who've tossed their kids off freeway overpasses; men who've raped the babysitter; or the occasional gold medalist of the true crime genre, a serial killer. Whether A-lister or D-lister in the annals of true crime, almost all seem worried about their image. They worry that someone like me—someone with a keyboard and a mouse—could actually screw them over.

„I'll write the truth,” I said, knowing those words always sound so pretentious, no matter how many times I've uttered them. The truth was, of course, my version of it. My Magic Bullet-machine with all the condiments of the crime set on high

speed and morphed into the pages of the book that I'm writing. „Always, the truth.”

But this one was different, and I knew that it was from the moment I'd finally had the courage to open the box after Valerie uttered:

„Honey, it's time.”

I peppered the man across the table with questions. This wasn't the real interview, of course. This was my way of gaining trust, scoping out what he might actually tell me.

„You don't deny that you did it?”

„It?”

It felt like a kind of stare down, but I didn't care. He had it coming.

„Killed her,” I said, not saying her name. Killers never like you to say the person's name.

He doesn't miss a beat. „No. But there was a reason for it. One no one knows. One you don't know.”

„Really? For instance?”

„I'm not ready for that.”

They think they are so smart, so cunning. What the killer never considers is that they are in prison and no one cares about them. Their power is only a blip, not a tsunami. You don't need them. They need you.

„Okay. Fair enough,” I said, a little too rotely. The meeting, the preinterview, was coming to its conclusion. The sizing-up was over.

He crunched the last of his ice. „Okay. I'll see you next week.”

He puts out his hand. I grabbed it in a quick surge that I wished transmitted all my mixed feelings.

The TV was playing an episode of *Law & Order* and I saw the blond heads of my daughters riveted to the screen. It passed through my mind that my girls were as fascinated by crime as I was. They grew up on *Judge Judy*, *L & O* in all its incarnations, and the work of their father.

„Hi, Daddy,” they chimed. „This is the episode about the man who kills his wife for insurance money.”

I kissed the tops of their heads; the scar on Melinda's neck has faded. She was so young when she'd got the injury that she almost never brings it up.

„That's like saying you're watching an episode of *Gilligan's Island* where they almost get off the island.”

They nodded, but they down get the reference. Sabrina, the serious twin, rolled her eyes, but actually gave me a hug before planting herself back on the couch.

I threw my jacket on a chair and found my wife standing in front of the kitchen sink. She is lovely and she always has been. I am reminded in that instance—Valerie, Melinda, Sabrina have made me a very lucky man. Valerie heard me come in and had a serious look on her face and I knew it wasn't about the dishes that she'd been transferring into the dishwasher, in that perfect, ordered way that I could never duplicate. Her eyes drank me in and I wanted to cry.

„How was your father? Did he talk about your mom? Did he talk about that night?”

„He will,” I said, falling into her arms. „When I'm ready.”
