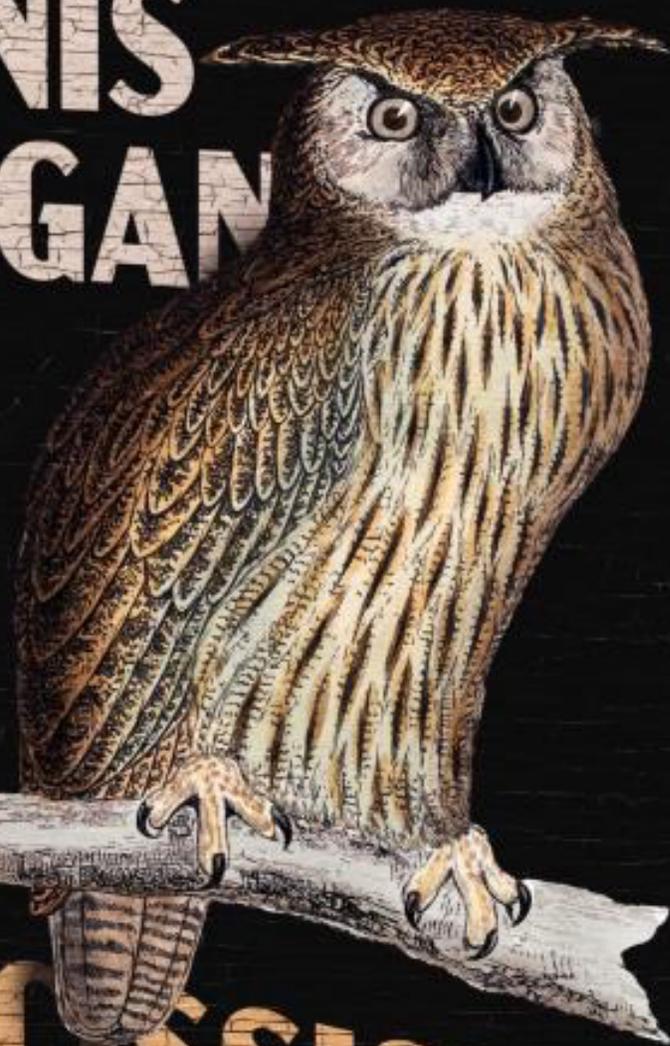


DENNIS
DORGAN



THE
NARCISSISM
OF SMALL
DIFFERENCES

A Noir Detective Novel



The Narcissism of Small Differences

Dennis Dorgan

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THE NARCISSISM OF SMALL DIFFERENCES

The narcissism of small differences: it is precisely the little dissimilarities in persons who are otherwise alike that arouse feelings of strangeness and enmity between them.

Sigmund Freud

Light is the left hand of darkness
and darkness the right hand of light.

Ursula La Guin

All differences in this world are of degree, and not of kind, because oneness is the secret of everything.

Swami Vivekananda

. . . ineluctable duality of the indivisible.

Dante Connacht

Prologue

He came into the doublewide like a bear ambling into its winter cave. “Grandmother, I heard Henri’s back. Is he here?”

“No, Eli, he’s still with the Winnebago family in St. Paul. They will send him back when they clear up this confusion. You just gotta be patient.”

“I’m doin’ that, but it’s hard, Grandmother. Who is this kid?” He sat heavily in the chair across the kitchen table from me. “He ain’t Ojibwe, so what’s he doin’ here?”

Grandmother Raven set a mug of coffee in front of him. “He’s ten years old, same as Henri. The state people will say they made a mistake, got them mixed up, but I think Manitou brought him here.”

Eli studied my face without looking into my eyes. I knew he must be, like the old woman, an American Indian – high, hard cheekbones, a long, single braid, dark complexion and piercing dark eyes. I wondered if he would scalp me. I didn’t care one way or the other, I just wondered.

“His face, it looks like an owl and them big grey eyes, they got mysteries in ‘em, don’t they? But what’s wrong with him?” he finally asked.

“Something scared him, scared him real bad. He has not said nothing since he came here two days ago. He just sits and stares at Gichi-Gami with those big owl eyes. I don’t know his story yet.”

“What you gonna do, Grandmother?” Eli asked. “Shouldn’t you send him back?”

“I told you, Manitou brought him here. Why do you think he is here?”

He looked at me again and, after a brief moment, said, “You a lucky kid, Owl Eyes, Grandmother Raven is a Midewikwe with great powers.” He stood and turned to Grandmother

Raven. *“If you gonna conduct a sweat for this kid you want me to build the lodge?” He paused and frowned. “That’s why I came here, isn’t it?”*

Grandmother Raven raised one eyebrow and nodded toward the door.

As he left, she shifted her gaze to me. Sitting where Eli Bouchard had been only seconds before, she regarded me intently, staring fixedly, until all I could see were her deep brown eyes framed by a profound darkness, nothing else, not even her face. I heard her voice, strong and clear, saying, “I must learn your story. When I ask a question and your answer is ‘yes’, you will blink once. OK?”

I felt my eyelids, without my conscious consent, blink. Once.

“If your answer is ‘no’ you will blink twice. Go ahead, do that.” And my eyelids, despite my resistance, once again bent to her will. She then ordered me to blink three times if the answer were something other than yes or no; like ‘maybe’ or ‘I don’t know.’

We sat like that for what could have been two or three hours, or days, or just minutes; I don’t know. Time became elusive, like a shadow in twilight. She quickly asked question after question, with my eyes blinking rapid-fire responses. I don’t remember the questions or much of anything else other than those eyes. With them she drew out the memories of my young life and began pulling me back from the beckoning abyss of despair.

My story: I was born as a craniopagus twin, conjoined at the skull with my brother Cody. Surgeons separated Cody and me in our tenth year. I survived the procedure, he did not. Or so it seemed.

The car bomb that killed my parents exploded just four months after that procedure. It left me in a state of wild, manic fear, intensified by soul numbing grief.

My mother was a Belfast attorney who acted as a mediator during the Irish troubles of the '70s. We were in Minnesota to have the operation at Mayo clinic. She also had speaking engagements and meetings with the Irish community in St. Paul.

There were fanatics on both sides of that endless Irish civil war who wanted her dead. Her success at getting Protestant and Catholic women to talk with each other posed too great a threat to some ideal future of Ireland, so they turned to their dark side, as zealots must.

The three of us stopped at Mancini's Restaurant in St. Paul on the way to the airport for our return flight to Belfast. That's when the bomb was planted.

I learned later that a cop plucked me from the burning wreckage of the rental car and rushed me to Phelan Hospital. A week later a bureaucratic snafu kept Henri Bouchard in a foster home in St. Paul and delivered me to Grand Portage Indian Reservation and Grandmother Raven.

I felt my brother's death even more keenly than that of my parents. Known only to the two of us, our physical condition led to our two streams of consciousness becoming intertwined. As a result, we knew each other's every thought and even watched each other's dreams. In the years we were bound together we also never felt what I came to know as the quintessential human experiences of loneliness and alienation. Later in life I sometimes wondered if we were the only human beings to ever have escaped those conditions.

When Cody died, followed so quickly by the violent death of our parents, my universe shattered. Now I knew loneliness, and alienation virtually defined my mental state.

It may have been days, but it seemed like only a few minutes after Grandmother Raven finished her interrogation, that Eli Bouchard returned to announce the readiness of the sweat lodge. It was now dark and a hard wind full of snow and cold was howling across the big lake

and shaking the doublewide trailer. Grandmother Raven glanced at Eli and nodded to the doorway.

As he left she moved to the center of the kitchen. She closed her eyes and slowly raised her hands. The wind howled louder; the trailer convulsed and trembled. As she lowered her arms, three wizened old Indian men marched in and stood on each side and behind me. We seemed to glide out of the shuddering trailer and were met by four other old men. We were encased in an invisible wind and snow-free bubble. The eight of us slid smoothly into the sweat lodge. It was far larger inside than out and seemed immune to the wind raging outside. When we sat at the base of the circular lodge, I saw there were about a dozen others waiting for us. Near the entrance three men were beating on a circular drum and chanting in a strange language. The heat generated by the steam boiling off a mound of hot rocks in the center of the lodge was almost unbearable. Sweat immediately began seeping from every pore in my body.

Beside the drummers, there were two elderly women who shook some kind of rattles that had black bird wings attached to them. They rattled these intermittently, sometimes directly in someone's face.

Every so often a man or woman in the group would stand and speak, always in that strange tongue. They would go on for, what seemed to me, a long time, but I didn't mind. Time and place were no longer important to me. Then Grandmother Raven appeared.

Now covered with black feathers, she was bobbing and nodding with the rhythm of the drums. She and the drummers abruptly stopped on the same beat. With her eyes closed, she opened her feathery arms and issued a piercing, high-pitched kee that descended into a pulsating discordant canticle. Despite the heat, a shiver dashed up my spine.

The drummers soon began again and joined in her song, as a large open window appeared on one side of the sweat lodge. Through it I could see the naked back of a boy seated cross-legged on a sunny patch of grass. The old men who had escorted me into the lodge then stood and, one by one stepped through the window to speak to the boy. The first one laid a small fur parcel in front of him as he spoke: "I give you this gift – Wisdom. May you use it to guide all you do and use it to benefit all people."

The second man did as the first had done, and said, "I give you this gift – Love. May you be devoted to all creation and share your love for it with all humankind."

The third: "I give you this gift – Respect. May you treat all humanity with reverence and respect all who cross your path."

The fourth: "I give you this gift – Courage. May you be brave enough to do good things even in the most difficult times."

The fifth:, "I give you this gift – Honesty. May you be a person of integrity and truly honest in every deed and way."

The sixth: "I give you this gift – Humility. From it may you know that you are not greater than, nor lesser than, but equal with everyone else."

The seventh: "I give you this gift – Truth. May you always value authenticity, speak the truth and be true in all that you do."

After each grandfather had presented his gift he returned to be seated near me. After all seven had returned, Grandmother Raven's refrain intensified, the drumming grew louder and the light from the window grew brighter. The boy turned to look around the lodge and finally caught my eye.

Cody.

His window went black, then everything else did.

“Ms. Raven,” I muttered as I looked around for her. It was morning and I was back at the kitchen table. The hard sunlight glancing off the Lake Superior ice caused me to finally look around Grandmother Raven’s home.

“Now you may call me Grandmother, Conor.” she replied. She was at the stove, frying eggs. She smiled when she said, “And maybe I will call you Owl Eyes. Do you know why you got them eyes?”

“No.”

“With them, you can see into the dark. You see as easily in the dark places as you do in the light. That is a great gift, but one you will not always like.”

“Why not?” Hearing no reply, I asked, “Where is Cody?”

“Your brother? Where do you think he is?”

“I don’t know. I thought he was dead.”

“How many eggs?”

“Is he here somewhere?”

Her eyes bored into mine once again. I could hear her voice, although her lips were not moving, “He is your other soul. He lives where the second souls of all people dwell, in another universe, a universe of dreams. It is similar to ours, but it has different laws. He sleeps when you are awake and when you sleep he awakens and travels in his world. He will show you stories of those who inhabit that place and speak to you through them. They are sometimes hard to understand. The dream souls speak in a way we do not always readily grasp, but you must always respect them and work to understand the meaning and importance of what your brother brings to you.”

When I was older and adept at hypnosis myself, I questioned whether it was Cody I was communicating with, or my own subconscious. I finally decided it didn't matter. Given how close we were, they could well be the same thing.

Her eyes released mine and she said, "I'm giving you two eggs. All this talk of yours needs nourishment."

She set a plate of two eggs and two pieces of toast in front of me. I was surprised at how hungry I felt and how quickly I polished it off. Grandmother Raven sat across from me again. "Somebody from the State is bringing Henri Bouchard here today and taking you back to St. Paul."

"Can't I stay here?"

"Your destiny lies elsewhere. But I have something for you." She set a small bundle of fur in front of me.

"Is this a gift like the ones Cody got?"

"No, you already have those. We all do. They are given to us at birth and they are ours to nurture or squander. This gift is different. It has medicine that you will need one day. You will know when you need it, and you should not open it before that time. This is otter skin and is precious to you. Take care of it and do not let it be taken from you. You understand?"

"I think so. Thank you, Grandmother Raven."

"I'm going to fix you two more eggs. You can eat them, can't you?"

For the first time in weeks, I smiled. "Yes, yes I can."

It wasn't long after that that the driver from the State showed up, along with Henri Bouchard. Henri looked like a darker and taller version of Cody. After greeting Grandmother

Raven, he came over to me. "You Conor? They told me about you and them owl eyes you got. Did Grandmother Raven heal you?"

"Maybe. I mean, I think so."

The driver cleared his throat. It was the signal for me to leave. I said thank you to Grandmother Raven and followed the driver out to the car. I saw Eli Bouchard lumbering toward Grandmother's trailer as we were pulling away. He smiled broadly and waved to me.

We drove down highway 61 and as we left the Reservation I spotted a large black bird on the low branch of a white pine. It cawed at the car and flew back into Grand Portage. That was the last time I saw Grandmother Raven, until many years later.

MONDAY

Cities are murky places--hatching grounds for monsters.

John Geddes

All cities are mad: but the madness is gallant. All cities are beautiful, but the beauty is grim.

Christopher Morley

Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.”

Italo Calvino

St. Paul is a stupefyingly boring city.

Vladimir Nabokov

1

Mostly Nothing

“What do you mean?”

“I mean their throats were ripped out and an apple shoved in there, sort of where their Adam’s apple would be. Here, have a look.” He spread the pictures on the table.

Conor Delaney glanced at them and swallowed back something black and foul. “You should warn someone before tossing those things around.”

Detective Roland Gadsen, Big Gad, sighed and said quietly, “I tried, but there really isn’t a way to get somebody ready for this, is there?”

Delaney stared at him in mild reproach and turned back to the photos. He felt vaguely guilty that he was fascinated by the idea of the creature now loose in his city.

“We were hoping you could help us find whoever did this.”

“You’ve already ruled out the possibility it might have been an animal?”

“We don’t think an animal would have left an apple.”

Delaney smiled briefly and continued to gaze at the slaughter. Two men and one woman. Ragged scoops of flesh torn from the throats of the first two. Traces of windpipe, esophagus, muscle, arteries and veins dangling in the cavities and a small green apple set neatly in the midst of the butchery. Delaney’s conjecture: some savagely sharp claw had ripped and torn out their throats, before an apple was delicately placed, just so. A psychopath.

The third victim, a husky male with his face and neck torn and shredded, exposing a cheek bone, teeth, gums and the sinews along the jaw line. An apple grasped in his right hand, a bite taken out of it.

Delaney turned the pictures over and asked, “What have you got so far?”

Big Gad's voice became tense. "Not much, not much at all. They were found on a path at Riverrun Park, down by the river. They were all within about fifty feet of each other. It's an area where gay guys go to hook-up after dark. Maybe you remember that politician that got shot there about fifteen years ago? Same area. They were all killed late at night. The first vic was killed on April 18, the second on April 30 and the last one two nights ago, on May 2. He was Danny Fortuno, a cop until about two, three years ago, my former partner. "

"Your partner?"

Big Gad's voice slid into an edgier tone. "He left the force to set up his own security and private eye firm. After the woman was killed he called and said he might have a lead for me on her killer. We were going to meet up yesterday, but that didn't work out. Obviously."

"He didn't tell you anything over the phone? Just said he wanted to meet?"

"He said he had a couple of leads he still wanted to follow up and he'd have more solid information when we met. He sort of indicated he knew who the killer was and just needed a little time to put it all together. He seemed pretty confident about it."

Delaney, about to ask another question, paused, staring at Gadsen, who looked down at the file lying in front of him before he mumbled, "I was hoping we'd have more in this file than the pictures and the Med Ex reports. We really have nothing on these cases."

Delaney knew he was lying, knew it with a certainty born of years spent studying kinesics – the art of reading the eighty-five percent of human communication that is non-verbal. He would say that a close analysis of someone's standing and sitting posture, body, arm, hand, facial and eye movements, would communicate more than an individual's spoken words.

Delaney was still an adolescent when ideas about non-verbal communication first grabbed his attention. He read voraciously on the subject and spent an incalculable number of hours watching people in all kinds of circumstances and situations. It was how he sharpened his skill.

He never told anyone that he was, in effect, a human lie detector. Like his equally guarded, secret talent for hypnosis, he used his kinesics' skill instinctively. It was now a part of him, a measure of who he was.

Staring at Gadsen's eyes for a millisecond longer than was socially acceptable, he said, "Fortuno really told you nothing at all?"

"Fuck's sake, do I have to repeat everything for you?" Gadsen's voice was on the rise. "I told you he just said he wanted to meet up. Nothing, no goddamn nothing else at all." That's when he broke down, huge sobs wracking the six-foot, three-inch, two-hundred-thirty-pound frame of the Big Gad.

This was a first for Delaney, watching a cop break down. That it was a veteran of the size and reputation of the Big Gad made it almost unnerving. That, and the room. A police interrogation room is purposefully claustrophobic. The pale green walls, the two-way mirror, the metal table and chairs taking up most of the space, the way sound caroms off the walls; it creates a mood, a real shitty mood. For a suspect being grilled, it feels like the world is closing in. But Roland Gadsen wasn't a suspect. The room was just the only space available for their early morning meeting.

It was in keeping with the rest of Delaney's morning. He had nicked himself while shaving and later had to adjust his tie three times before it finally hung as it should from its full Windsor knot, descending just far enough to cover his belt buckle. The gloomy room and sad, recalcitrant cop added to the sense that this was a particularly lousy Monday. Now his cell phone was vibrating with an incoming call. He was sure the voice mail would convey some kind of bad news. The

universe was that much against him this morning. He wondered if, in a parallel universe, his counterpart was having a better day.

Nearly thirty seconds passed before Big Gad breathed deeply and, with eyes red and glistening, in a hoarse voice, said, “Danny was my ex-partner and we were close friends, so I’m off the case. I have to brief you and whoever takes over for me. I hope we can nail the animal that did this.”

Delaney felt a surge of pity for the big man. His grief was genuine. “You don’t have to do this now. I need to ask you some more questions, but they can wait.”

Gadsen looked away before saying, “Thanks, but I can do it now. I gotta do something.”

“Then tell me about your partner. What was he like?”

Gadsen snorted. “He was a character. His nickname was ‘Dollar Danny’ because he was always coming up with some crazy money-making scheme. Like he wanted a bunch of us cops to incorporate as a security firm to, you know, provide bouncers to restaurants and bars. He said we’d corner the market with ‘Professional Police Protection.’ He had lots of ideas like that, but no one in the department took any of it seriously. He was a good detective though, and had the highest case-closure rate in the department. He got pissed and left when he didn’t get chief of detectives. That, and he thought he had a winner with his latest business scheme.”

“What did you find at the crime scenes besides the bodies?”

Big Gad was more relaxed now, his voice more even: “Nothing. And I do mean nothing. The lab guys are thorough, and they found nothing more than we did, at least not at the scene. It’s a walking path, so there can be a fair amount of traffic some days, but there was nothing unusual. No extraordinary tracks, no real disturbance of the vegetation around the scenes. I mean there was absolutely nothing.”

Delaney constrained himself. Hadn't Gadsen heard? There can be no nothing. It's an existential impossibility. Instead, he said, "Blood? Flesh?"

"Blood, yes, but no meat. Just the vics' blood."

"What did the medical examiner say?"

"He doesn't know anything either, at least not yet. Him and the lab guys have come up with squat. Talk to them. You'll see."

"The scenes are taped off?"

"Just the last two. The other one was a couple weeks old and we didn't know there'd be more."

"What's the plan now?"

"The chief wants to do a big sweep of the area, using dogs, uniforms and auxiliary. He's bringing you in to consult on these cases, assigning two new detectives and making these cases the department's top priority. He put your buddy Thorogood in charge."

"Anything else?"

"Not that I know, but I'm out of it now. Personally, I think we're looking at one of these guys hears voices in his head, know what I mean?"

"I guess so. So, what do you think we need to do?"

"Fuck all if I know. The sweep could turn up something. I heard you were good. You closed the cases on that crazy woman and the carney barker. Maybe you'll figure something out."

"I'm only doing some preliminary research. I won't be working on the case beyond that. But let me ask again, what do you think? I want to look at the files on any cops tagged for excessive violence, on or off the job, including domestics."

Gadsen flinched, "I never thought, do you think . . ."

“No, I don’t. I’m just covering the bases. Fortuno, he must have pissed off some guys in the department, created some enemies?”

“Sure he did, but I don’t think enough for any of them to kill a brother cop. Especially since Danny’s been out of the force for so long.”

“I’m going to ask someone to comb the files for all the murders in this and adjoining states where the throats were stabbed or slit, over the last ten years or so. That sound right to you?”

“You think it’s somebody internal, don’t you?”

“Detective, I don’t think anything at this point. But we have to, as a practical matter, look here, too. If we find out anything, anything at all that in any way implicates somebody internal, we need to know it before the press does. And by the way, the media has been frantic on these killings. What has actually been released to the press?”

“If you’re looking internal, you’re looking at me, aren’t you?”

“Wouldn’t you look at you if you were me?” The Gad nodded with a resigned sigh. “Now, what about the press, what do they know and not know?”

“Only that three bodies were found, with the necks mutilated. Nothing about the apples in the official reports, yet. We might not be able to keep that detail out much longer. The media think it’s probably some anti-gay freak. And they are going to freak if the apple detail does come out.”

“You don’t think it’s an anti-gay nut?”

“It could be, but those types usually let you know why they’re killing ‘em, don’t they? And the woman? Danny? Doesn’t add up to any kind of gay-hater I know.”

“I think I’m going to need to talk with you some more later. Can you help me out on an on-call basis?”

“Anything you need, just whistle. I want this bastard bad. Christ, I haven’t slept since I saw those first two bodies and Danny’s only made it worse. Know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I do.” And Delaney did. It wasn’t the bloody, gutted throats or the apples jammed into them. It was the faces. They were calm, peaceful, even serene, like a trio of westernized Buddhas.