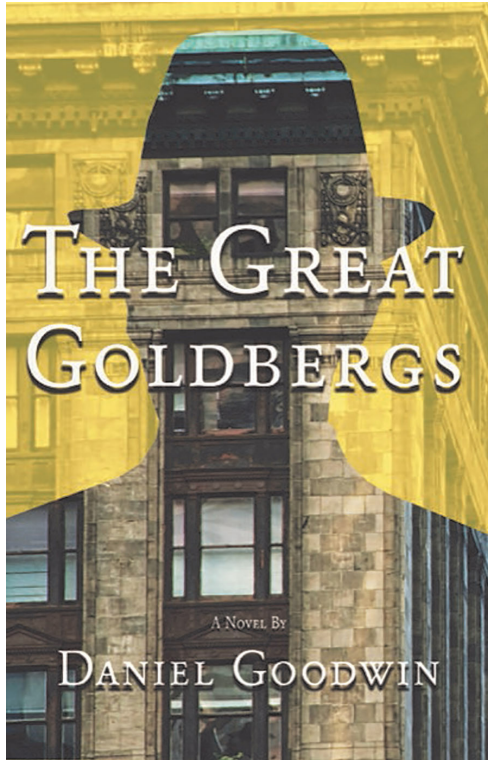


Excerpt from *The Great Goldbergs*

by Daniel Goodwin



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PART ONE

**Lower Canada College, Montréal
1977-1983**

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As a child, I never understood how concrete was actually made or what distinguished good concrete from bad. But my father was apparently something of a small legend in a city that relied on concrete to keep its two and a half million people housed and moving and safe, at least most of the time. Whenever there was a major job, the managing contractor sought him out, which was a rarity in his business, as far as I could tell.

Declan McFall was tall, over six feet, and broad. He'd left school when he was fifteen and started in construction; by the time he was in his early twenties, he had worked his way up to foreman in a subcontracting company, with as many as a hundred men under him. He often worked for the Italians, building expressways usually but sometimes skyscrapers and, when nothing else was going on, the odd parking garage.

The most I could gather during my childhood years, usually from my friends whose fathers worked with mine, was that Declan had a secret and celebrated way of mixing and curing cement and distinct ideas about the right temperatures and humidity levels in which the mixing should be done, and even the best time of day for it. If my father had possessed this talent alone, it wouldn't have been enough to get him more than steady work, and it certainly wouldn't have earned him a reputation that went beyond eccentric.

What I think Declan owed his success to, and what endeared him to his mostly Italian bosses, was that he wasn't only a deep thinker when it came to cement mixing and concrete making: he had a gift for determining the most economical way to manage the entire concrete supply chain. From specifying the raw materials to laying out the details of the mixing process, from purchasing

the fuel for the trucks to plotting their routes and organizing the labour, Declan was constantly coming up with suggestions to improve the margins of any company fortunate enough to have him on their project. It was almost mystical the way he approached his job — despite the fact that according to the standards of many people in white-collar jobs, Declan would have been working at the absolute lowest level of creativity and ingenuity.

Occasionally, my father would take me out to the job he was on if it was especially interesting or he was particularly proud of his contribution. In the early seventies, when I was still a child, Declan got to work on the biggest construction project Montréal ever saw: the Olympic Stadium. The massive concrete oval, resembling a giant spaceship, consumed three years of his life as he worked to complete Mayor Drapeau's twentieth-century monument to himself, athleticism, money, and Montréal.

Declan never spoke about the work “interruption” that lasted from the spring of 1975 until the fall when workers walked off the Olympic Stadium job, but the following spring, as everyone raced to finish in time for the 1976 Summer Olympics, he brought me to the construction site almost every month. Declan would introduce me to the other men on site, and once, he introduced me to the owner of the contracting company his smaller company was working for. This man was small and dark, with excellent manners. He bent down to shake my ten-year-old hand and said to my father, “What a handsome boy you have, Declan. With your brains and his looks, you'll have to watch out.”

Even at that young age, I thought it was a strange thing to say because my father was a handsome man. He was black Irish: jet-black hair, lightly tanned skin that never seemed to burn in the sun, and wide-apart eyes dark blue like the deep lake in the Laurentians we would sometimes go to for a week's vacation in the summer.

He was the kind of man who looked good in cement dust. It made him appear even bigger and stronger, not weak or tired. As for me, I always assumed I was completely nondescript: brown hair of a shade difficult to describe, unremarkable blue eyes. Even at that age, I knew I was smaller than the other boys in my class.

It wasn't until later that I read about the controversy surrounding the building of the stadium: owners reproving workers for deliberate slowdowns and actual sabotage, unions decrying equipment shortages and harsh working hours and conditions, the widespread presence on-site of alcohol and drugs. The Big Owe, as Montréalers soon came to call it with a mixture of civic pride and embarrassment, ended up ballooning to a billion dollars, which took Montréal taxpayers thirty years to pay off.

Declan never spoke about any of this, but as I grew older and asked him about his work — was it true what people said about construction in Montréal being run by the mafia, that it was all corrupt and building standards were second-rate — he didn't get angry. He smiled and said, "Sean, my work puts food on the table. I'm building this city, as right as any city councillor. Have a little pride in your father, will you?" He tousled my hair in a way that said the conversation was over, more powerfully than any words could have achieved.

My mother, Mary, was also Irish, but petite, at five foot two, and as luck would have it, it was she who passed down to me the genes for height, the same genes that led some of my elementary school classmates to unimaginatively rechristen me "Sean McSmall." It was also Mary who passed on to me her love of books. When I turned four, she taught me how to read. Each night before I went to sleep, she would lie down in bed beside me and we would read a Dr. Seuss book. I would have to read the first page, and then she would read the rest. The next night I had to read two pages,

and she would finish. This would go on for as many nights as there were pages. By the end of each evening's reading, I was ready for sleep and would close my eyes soon after my mother kissed me good night. My father would sometimes come to kiss my forehead while my mother and I were reading, but he would never say anything.

One night, after this bedtime ritual, as I was falling asleep with the scent of my mother's perfume on my pillow and my sheets, I overheard my parents in their bedroom, on the other side of the wall.

"How's his reading coming along, Mary?" My father worshipped my mother, and he always deferred to her when it came to my education.

"He's picking it up quickly. He'll be reading without me by the time he's four and a half."

"I'm glad you're the reader in the family, Mary. I wouldn't have the patience to teach him. And judging from his size, he's going to need book smarts."

I don't remember my mother's reply. I must have fallen asleep. But from the very beginning, I knew I wasn't cut out for my father's life. Everyone in construction was big and loud, always making jokes, only some of which I understood. They worked as hard and cheerfully as Clydesdales until all their heavy lifting and the grease in their homemade lunches caught up with them in their fifties. Either rheumatoid arthritis weakened once-strong arms and wrists, their backs went out one day when they were lifting bags of cement mix, or they collapsed of a heart attack in their small, invariably immaculate backyard gardens.

I was lucky that Mary was a reader. She always had a book beside her, and she read throughout the day, whenever she could catch a moment. It might have been while waiting for the potatoes

to boil or the wash to be done. At the time, I didn't think much about what she was reading, but later, in high school, I learned enough to recognize that her bookshelves were filled with literary classics. Victorians. Twentieth-century Americans. Nineteenth-century Europeans and Russians. Mary was the only mother, among those of my friends, who read Russian novelists.

When I was beginning grade six, it was Mary who encouraged me to apply to Lower Canada College, the prestigious private boys' school on Royal Avenue, only a few blocks away from where we lived in a small duplex on Westhill in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, just below Sherbrooke and just above the train tracks. She practically forced me to apply. Don't get me wrong; Mary was never able to intimidate physically. She got her way through sheer force of will, which is something that people with less physical stature often have to cultivate. Whenever she asked me to clear my plate or take out the garbage, there was something in her voice that led me to conclude there was no alternative. As a result, I never once tested her resolve. Not even when I was a teenager and I might have credibly blamed a moment of insane rebellion on rampant hormones. She had an almost hypnotic quality when she looked at me with her pale green eyes. I took it for granted as a child. It was only later, when I came to know the Goldbergs and began to work for them, and as Mary's influence over me began to wane in comparison, that I came to appreciate the rare nature of her almost supernatural ability to always have her way.