

Excerpt from: *A Possible Madness*

A Novel by Frank Macdonald, award-winning author of *A Forest for Calum*

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DAVID CAMERON SHOOK HIS HEAD SADLY, visited by the recurring regret that conversations like this were off the record. He'd had to unlearn several rules of journalism when he returned home to purchase the *Witness*, rules that had served him well with the *Toronto Star* but not in Shean, where being able to distinguish between the gossip at the Gulf of St. Lawrence Grill and the stories that could be printed in the *Witness* was a matter of life and near-death experiences. Facing the people he wrote about every morning at the Grill, he had the wisdom, some of it cultural understanding, some of it hard learned, to know what was a genuine news story and what was none of the paper's business. Writing a person's common nickname in the newspaper was one lesson he had learned the hard way.

David had printed a story about Johnny Petticoat donating his late mother's hospital bed to the Shean Manor. As it turned out, Johnny hadn't been donating it at all, as the picture in the newspaper proclaimed, he was returning it. David Cameron didn't find that out until the administrator of the manor phoned about the story in the *Witness*. The manor had loaned Johnny's mother the bed to make her last days at home easier on her and her family. Her last days lasted seven years. The editor and the nursing home administrator discussed the facts and decided to let Johnny Petticoat have his fifteen minutes of generosity. No correction was required.

It was the next phone call that brought a new understanding to David's journalism. Johnny Petticoat's baptismal record showed that he was christened John Alexander MacAdam, not Petticoat, which was a name he picked up in school when a picture of him as a one year old turned up in the classroom. In the picture he was wearing what looked like a girl's petticoat, and that constituted his second baptism. Although Johnny Petticoat had grown into his name, as comfortable as an old coat, he never expected for a second that the *Witness* would present him to the whole world in print as Johnny Petticoat and not as John MacAdam, Mr. John MacAdam, in fact. After all, he reminded David, donating a bed to the manor was no small thing. The *Witness* should have treated the story and him with more dignity. If it was the mayor making the donation, Johnny Petticoat demanded to know, would David have called him Donald MacNaughton or Donald the Bastard, the generational subtitle of that branch of the MacNaughton family tree? Familiar enough in Shean's kitchen talk, the mayor's nickname had never appeared in the pages of the *Witness*.

Following that experience, David banned the use of nicknames unless specifically cleared by the name's owner, prompting Tim Donovan to complain that the policy forced him to write an extra paragraph in order to explain to readers which of Shean's John MacDonalds he was talking about.

“Anyway, it’s going to be a big wake,” Ronald MacDonald noted. “Especially if Sandy dies just after the paper comes out and everybody finds out about the murder.”

“Everybody seems to know already,” David sighed.

“Not the same as reading it in the *Witness* though. That’s one paper people’ll be saving. They’ll want to go to the wake and look at a murderer.”

“If it wasn’t for Big Sandy killing Jim Muise, Mrs. Big Sandy woulda had to go to the Employment Office to hire pallbearers,” Don Alex said. “Now, of course, there’ll be lots of volunteers. If it wasn’t for my back....”

There were as many bad backs in Shean as there were bricklayers, men on the ‘burnt-out’ pensions. Don Alex had had trouble with the concept of work for as long as anyone could recall, but he’d had to put in his weeks, sometimes months, every year at the highway garage until, after several efforts, he managed to convince provincial doctors on the Workman’s Compensation Board that his back was so bad he could never be expected to work again. He was ‘burnt-out,’ so with the help of the MLA at the time, he qualified for a pension. Being ‘burnt-out,’ once an honourable profession in Shean, was, like nicknames, a vanishing reality. Government coffers were just too tightly controlled any more for younger men to make the case that they were too burnt-out to work. Don Alex was reminded of his back every time there was a danger he would be asked to use it. “At least it’s spring. They won’t have to put Sandy in that warehouse up there. They can put him straight in the ground.”

“The crypt, you mean?” Ronald asked, knowing what Don Alex meant. “You never had to dig a grave in winter or you won’t be so...”

“My back...” Don Alex began to explain.

“Your pension, you mean. Your back never seems to bother you if you have to dig your car out of the driveway to get to a game at the arena,” Ronald said.

“You don’t know....”

“I know I’ve seen you walk home with a two-four of Keith’s under each arm and one in each hand and never so much as wince.”

“What about the crypt?” David asked, interested in Ronald’s version of where bodies in coffins were stored from frost until thaw.

“Well the crypt’s a damned good thing. In the winter the priest holds all the services, even the graveside service, in the church and then the undertaker and the pallbearers bring the coffin to the crypt. In the spring, when there’s a thaw, they get the backhoe and dig as many graves as they need and bury everyone who died during the winter. The family can be there or not, depends on themselves, but the dead have already had a full burial service so there’s really no need for the family to be there, going

through it all again. It's a damned sight more civilized than making the family stand in the graveyard in the middle of winter listening to frozen clots of dirt falling on their loved one."

"Storage barns and backhoes!" snarled Don Alex. "That's civilized, is it, Mr. MacDonald? There was a time when the people who cared about the people who died dug their graves for them. Now they're contracted out to people who dig foundations for houses. Nothing's been the same around here since they opened that geezley funeral home. But you're right about one thing, Big Sandy is going to have the biggest wake in Shean since they turned the old high school into the funeral home."

David interrupted the argument by producing the newspaper and magnifying glass.

"I wonder if you gentlemen could help with me with something related to the story. This is the *Witness's* story the issue after the murder. Could you look through the crowd there and tell me if there's anyone you recognize?"

He passed the paper and glass to Ronald, who took them, arranging the glass for maximum effect, all the while apologizing, "My eyes aren't what they once were, David, so I probably won't recog...well look at the bastard! It's just like they say in the movies: the criminal always returns to the scene of the crime. Big Sandy right there," he said covering a face with his finger.

"Let me see, let me see," Don Alex insisted, nodding his concurrence immediately upon seeing Big Sandy's much younger face. With the two confirmations, David could go ahead and blow up the face in the picture, superimposing it over the crime scene photo, and perhaps if Big Sandy died before deadline, a photo of the funeral.

"I guess he couldn't live with what he had done any longer," David Cameron observed.

"Bullshit!" spat Ronald MacDonald. "If Big Sandy could live with that witch he's been married to for fifty years, he could live with anything. My guess is he couldn't wait to tell people that it was him who killed Jim Muise. He was a bully and a braggart. He just didn't want to suffer the consequences."