

THE
UNTIMELY
RESURRECTION OF
JOHN ALEXANDER
MACNEIL

A NOVEL

LESLEY CHOYCE



Roseway Publishing
an imprint of Fernwood Publishing
Halifax & Winnipeg

Copyright © 2023 Lesley Choyce

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

Development editing: Fazeela Jiwa
Copyediting: Kristen Darch
Text design: Brenda Conroy
Cover design: Tania Craan
Printed and bound in Canada

Published by Roseway Publishing
an imprint of Fernwood Publishing
2970 Oxford Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3L 2W4
and 748 Broadway Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3G 0X3
www.fernwoodpublishing.ca/roseway

Fernwood Publishing Company Limited gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts. We acknowledge the Province of Manitoba for support through the Manitoba Publishers Marketing Assistance Program and the Book Publishing Tax Credit. We acknowledge the Nova Scotia Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage for support through the Publishers Assistance Fund.



Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: The untimely resurrection of John Alexander MacNeil: a novel
/ Lesley Choyce.

Names: Choyce, Lesley, 1951- author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20230461026 | Canadiana (ebook) 20230461042
| ISBN 9781773636399 (softcover) | ISBN 9781773636474 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS8555.H668 U58 2023 | DDC C813/.54—dc23

For Angela Parker-Brown (1972–2023)

Excerpt

PROLOGUE

IT PROBABLY WON'T SURPRISE YOU when I tell you that Death and I were sitting down at the kitchen table face to face for some time before one of us decided to speak. And it was he who spoke first.

"I suppose you are wondering why I'm here," Death said.

"Not in the slightest," I answered.

"I like to think timing is everything," he continued, ignoring my intended lack of interest.

"Well, I like to think you don't know a whit about timing. In fact, experience tells me you have a very poor sense of judgement when it comes to that area of expertise."

"And why would you say that?"

"Many years of watching good folks come to their final chapter just when the going gets good."

His mouth twisted into a crooked smile. "And when does the going get good?"

"Somewhere around eighty," I said. "Thereabouts."

"Thereabouts? Really?"

"Really."

It was an odd conversation, I'll grant you that. But the good news was my impertinence was enough to discourage the arrogant son of a bitch. He scraped his chair back and walked out the door into the harsh, windy morning, leaving the door to flap in the breeze.

CHAPTER 1

IT WAS IN THE MIDDLE of the dark night before that I stopped breathing. I was always a man with a loud snore according to my long-departed wife, Eva, and that particular night it must have ceased midsnore. Mick Gillis once told me that on a quiet night in the valley here, if the hoot owls were not too lively, he could hear me from all the way down at his place. I had even set up a digital recording machine that Sheila had bestowed upon me one dreary Christmas and digitally recorded more than an hour of my vocal activity while I slept. I turned the recording over to Angus Phylo, a young performance artist friend of Emily's from Halifax so that he could turn it into what he called sound poetry.

You see, the snoring is so loud and vigorous that it sometimes wakes me up. But waking up wasn't exactly on the agenda quite yet, you see. Death was.

So, to take you back to that frightening dark night, you should know that I was alone (as always), fast asleep with my snoring serenading the room when my breathing stopped. Since I was not at all awake, nor had I any intention of waking and dealing with the sad loneliness of the night, I lay there in a state of perplexity as to why my lungs had ceased to cooperate in the usual way.

And it was then that my heart stopped. I felt the final thud that sounded in my own skull like wet cement poured down on granite bedrock. And like many, I suppose, my somnambulant brain was in rebellion with the inevitable. *No. Not like this.*

Suffice it to say, I was at that point in my life, in many minds at least, beyond my expiry date. Well beyond it in fact, in so many of the petty minds and opinionated thoughts of our little town

of Inverary, here on the shores of the Gulf of St. Lawrence on the blessed island of Cape Breton.

But, as noted, I, like so many, was not ready for the inevitable conclusion of my life story. You must keep in mind that my heart had been keeping up a steady tattoo for ninety years. What could possibly stop it now? Perhaps we all say that. Perhaps. Despite all evidence to the contrary, deep down we all believe we will never die until we actually do.

In my mind's eye, I had opted for immortality. Such an ego, you might say. Here is some old fart living in a rundown farmhouse in Deepvale, Nowhere Cape Breton, out hither and yon beyond a burgh of even the slightest importance on the so-called world stage, purporting to be immortal. Don't get me wrong. It is only a myth to live by. We absorb into our mental pores so many half-truths, balderdash, bullshit baloney, codswallop, hokum, poppycock, twaddle, mumbo jumbo, mindless malarkey, rubbish and lies in a lifetime, so why not hang on to a few ridiculous myths of our own making?

It may come as a surprise to you that so much would go through an old man's head upon his death on a random night in what would turn out to be a very fretful year.

But there it is.

I am sure some quantum physics egghead at Dalhousie University would explain that time is this elastic band, a veritable eternity that we the living choose to parcel up into little tidy packages so that we can live our ordinary lives in what we think is the proper order. And if that is true, then once you give up on exercising your lungs and your heart stops, you may well look forward to having a universe of endlessness to ponder whatever it is you care to ponder.

But that would be a hell of a lot of pondering. At first, I myself was mostly just surprised at what was happening. And curious, of course. Most of us, I suppose, fight the inevitable for as long as we

can. Then, eventually, fatigue sets in and we drop into the river and float down into the sea.

But I've always been a fighter.

Why fight the inevitability of your own predestined death? you might ask. Hadn't an old cranky geezer like myself already lived longer than most any person in town? The only two I knew to be older were a couple of old women down at the Allan J. MacEachen Retirement Home. Florence Bonnie Halpern and Eleanor Pryde. Both over a hundred, sparring daily, and crabbing about the food and the hired help. Florence, or Flossie as I knew her, was her own version of a New Age (or Old Age, really) guru and Eleanor was a dyed-in-the-wool Bible thumper. Aside from those two beauties, I was the oldest. So that made me the oldest male in Inverary. Which, if you think about it, should have given me a privileged status. But that would never happen. To many, I'd always been a bit of a buffoon, heroic in my own buffoonery, but not an elder worthy of a second's thought.

Still, what was it in me that would deny death its dignified duties?

Sheer cussedness, as my own father would say, a phrase he often used in reference to an old mule that he kept for plowing up the field where he planted his beloved cucumber crop. Sheer cussedness, that would be me. Maybe that implacable mule was my real mentor when I was a child.

Let me return to the moment eternity came knocking. Tapped me on the chest and interrupted my breath, my beating heart.

Yes, there was a voice in my head. Because, if you must know, there is always a voice in my head. "That's the voice of the universe," Florence Bonnie would say. But Flossie was wrong. The voice was my own. Does that make me God? I doubt it. Does that make me the cooing voice of Mother Nature herself? Fat fool's chance of that.

No, it was just the cold clear voice of the cantankerous old man

up on the hill. Me. John Alexander MacNeil, son of Alexander James MacNeil who was the mean-spirited son of Alexander Robert MacNeil and so on and so forth.

And that voice was announcing to the greater forces of the known and unknown universe that, not only was I not ready to die and get stuffed into that godawful black suit Eva bought me half a century ago, but I was *not going* to die. It was as simple as that.

My body had been more or less good to me all these years and I provided it with as much pleasure (within reason) that it was requesting and now I had a damn prerogative to take my stationary heart and demand that it continue to beat.

Which it did after I screamed at it with all my inner silent strength and a considerable amount of ragged-ass determination. You have to realize it was my big showtime moment to rebel against the natural nature of things. So I gave it all my all.

I'm sure you would like me to report that there was a tunnel and light at the end where Eva and brother Lauchie and all those others stood beckoning me to join them in paradise. But, as far as I could see in my desperate straits, there was none of that horseshit.

Instead, there was the master of ceremonies himself, Death incarnate. I could not see him. Not then anywhere, but I could sense that he was there. I believe I could smell him. I'm sure he had been stalking me before but had considered me to be too much trouble to take on. Now, on this pivotal twenty-first century night, the darkest of the dark, he saw an old old man beneath several layers of blankets, his body weary to the bone, his mind weak and vulnerable, all alone and as helpless as a frail old geezer could be. *Why not just take him out now?*

But, as you can see, I refused to let it play out that way.

So I stared down deep into the abyss of darkness, reached down into my own chest with my mind and commanded my heart to pick up where it left off. To get off its lazy ass and go back to work.

Now an old man's heart is not really all that accustomed to

taking marching orders from the brain, if you catch my drift. I mean, it was working on its own for all those years, its own captain with no other body part really trying to boss it around. And now this.

My heart must have realized that the request was perfectly in line with its own desire, so it slammed back into action and pushed off the hands of death that had so callously squeezed it into submission.

My lungs immediately realized that the vacation was over. No retirement and pension yet. They joined in the battle and decided that the delivery of oxygen, nitrogen and a variety of inert gases to the old fart lying flat on his back in the bed was in order.

And with that I woke up.

And no, don't go telling me it was just a dream.

Because the evidence was clear. By the time the light filtered in through the window and I stumbled out of bed coughing and cursing, there was that bastard sitting all smug and unwanted at the kitchen table.

CHAPTER 2

WELL, THE UNWANTED VISITOR GOT up from the kitchen table and walked out the door, leaving it wide open to swing in the early morning breeze coming off the Gulf of St. Lawrence and prompting the old rooster I'd named Jack and two of the laying hens to prance into the kitchen and start pecking at scraps on the old linoleum floor.

I made myself a cup of tea and tried to pretend that the whole shebang — dying, then returning to life in the middle of the night and then rising from bed to find Mr. Death or whoever that bastard was, sitting right in my house — had been the product of that possibly dodgy fish supper I ate too close to bedtime.

I had to admit to the chickens that it threw me. I was clearly off my game and maybe off my rocker.

But at least I was not dead.

In fact, I was now convinced that I had truly died and come back. Lazarus of the Maritimes. And I wanted to know who or what had provided the round-trip ticket to hell and back. If there was going to be a genuine resurrection in my old house, I wanted a fair explanation. And this insult of being presented with a seemingly flesh and blood man claiming to be the mastermind of all human endings, well, that deserved some serious cogitation as well.

But sitting on me arse thinking about it wasn't going to work. I needed some good solid advice and maybe that's why Florence Bonnie Henderson had come to mind. She was one of the very few people around who was older than me and she'd always been smarter than any of us. If the old Ford truck was willing to start, I'd drive into Inverary and pump Flossie with a hundred questions.

Well, the damn battery was dead on the truck, and I admitted to the old beast that it was better *it* had the dead battery and not me. So I had to charge it up, shoo the chickens out of my kitchen and feed them, feeling proud of myself for staring down Death and watching him walk out my kitchen door. But this fleeting and foolish moment of glory was immediately followed by a bout of feeling sorry for myself — an old man living alone whose wife had died so long ago.

All that worrying and whining took up most of the morning while I had the truck battery charging with the old five-amp charger. By then it was time for another cup of tea.

At that point, the truck engine blessedly cranked over and something about the dashboard reminded me that I no longer had a driver's licence, but I'd been driving without one for so long that, like so many other things these days, it didn't seem to matter. Driving down the old rutted lane, I noticed how much the forest had encroached on the laneway with such little traffic. And I must say, I was feeling a little light-headed in a good way. What I mean is that I was in a fairly good mood and excellent frame of mind for a man who might have been labelled deceased by a medical examiner at one minute and revived the next. For some reason, the chicken salad sandwich had convinced me to stop feeling sorry for myself. Or maybe it was that second cup of tea.

Anyway you cracked it, for a ninety-year-old wanker, I reckoned I was in mighty good form. Or so I told myself. And looking forward to a visit to the Allan J. MacEachern Retirement Home on the Green Park Wellness Campus. Mind you, there was no green park anywhere near there and it was not really a campus like you'd see at a Halifax university. And to be honest, there weren't a lot of well people to be found there. The so-called "retirement home" was a goddamn nursing home for frig's sakes. A hellhole for the heaven bound, as Florence said about the place because of the overly religious, self-righteous pricks she had to put up with.

As I pulled into the parking lot, I congratulated myself on having remembered the route here and having negotiated every turn and having stopped at every stop sign — of which there were not many.

When I turned off the engine of the truck, it almost felt like the old Ford was thanking me. Battery charged, a trip to town — what could possibly make an old pickup happier than that? Only thing I could think of would be a bale or two of hay in the back and maybe some class A gravel for the driveway but that just wasn't on the agenda today.

Millie at the front desk knew me, of course. "Mr. MacNeil. Finally decided to give up the lonely life of a bachelor and join in some social fun here at Green Park?"

"Even if I won the 6/49, I wouldn't entertain the idea this millennium or the next," I replied.

"Pity you think so little of our community," she said, but smiled so sweetly I wanted to pinch her check. "What brings you to town then?"

"I was hoping to have a chinwag with Florence Bonnie if I might."

"She wants us all to call her Flossie."

"I know that. Flossie then. Where can I find her?"

"Flossie would be in the Big Room. Today's Wednesday and social hour so you are just in time for the festivities." Each Wednesday they had a themed social event. Florence — Flossie — had explained all that to me before. "And what might the theme be today, Millie?"

"You're in luck. This afternoon it's Siesta Fiesta."

"Sounds thrilling," I said. "Okay if I just pop in?"

"Please do."

The Big Room lived up to its name. Big. High ceilings, a view out over the dunes and the blue, blue waters of the Gulf. The old fools of Allan J. MacEachen at Green Park were in various

locations, some in wheelchairs, some reclining on sofas, some having a good afternoon nap in a row of La-Z-Boy chairs. The event was living up to its name. A few of the old wieners wore Mexican hats and everyone had a colourful shirt that looked like it had found its way to Frenchys from someplace tropical.

And everyone had a strange-looking drink in front of them. The sleepers as well as the socializers. I spotted Flossie on her lonesome by the big wall of windows. One of those drinks with a tiny umbrella in a funny-shaped glass was balanced on the arm of her chair.

I weaved my way as carefully as I could around the wheelchairs. "Florence, hello."

She smiled when she looked up from studying the cuticles of her nails. "John Alex. Damn."

"How are things?"

"Things? Well, according to the news, the world is going to hell in a hand job. Me, I'm as blissful as a baboon with a baby. And damn it, man, call me Flossie."

"Flossie then. When you were a teenager, you always wanted me to call you by your formal name. You wanted to be Florence Nightingale if I recall correctly."

"When I was a teenager, you were just what, a tiny thing? Still in diapers maybe. I could be wrong."

"Well, diapers no, I don't think so. But you were my babysitter."

"That I was. My God, I can still remember having to give you a bath. You must have really liked to be out rolling in the dirt. You'd get so dirty."

I actually recalled that I did like rolling around in the dirt when I was little. I don't exactly know why. It was so long ago, but vivid in my memory. And yet here I was reminiscing about childhood days with a woman who was ten years my senior.

"As I recall, your bath was a big galvanized tub and I had to light the cook stove and heat up the well water. Then set you in it.

A lot of work it was. But Florence Nightingale wanted to get the job done.”

“I’m embarrassed to remember it all.”

“You well should be. Allowing a girl like me to undress you and put you in the tub as you complained to high heaven. Jesus, John Alex, you had about the smallest penis I would ever see in this long lifetime.”

“Well, I was only little. That’s not fair.”

“It was about the size and shape of a champagne cork. Not that any of us had ever seen a real champagne cork back then.”

“Well, thanks for the memory.”

“Well that explains it then. Can I get you a drink?”

“What are you drinking?”

“They claim it’s a margarita. But I don’t know. Whatever it is, they’ve measured the alcohol into it with an eyedropper.”

“I’ll pass then.”

“Suit yourself.” She raised her plastic glass and someone in a white uniform appeared with a pitcher and poured her another modest dollop of the stuff.

“I’ve come to ask for your insight into what happened last night while I was asleep and then a follow-up event that happened this morning.”

Now I had her full attention. “I’m listening.”

So I explained about dying and coming back. And then I paused, uncertain if I should even tell her about the guest.

“Go on, John Alex. Don’t stop there.”

“Well, then this man, this person, this, I don’t know, apparition appeared at my breakfast table. He claimed — well, sort of claimed — to be Death.”

“Like Death — like a single entity, appearing to be a human being?”

“He seemed very much flesh and blood to me.”

“Go on. What did he look like?”

I wasn't exactly sure how to describe him. "Well, kind of like Mel Gibson and Russell Crowe mashed together."

"Russell Crowe and Mel Gibson. You mean like a gladiator rolled in with William Wallace."

"Somewhat. But dressed in modern clothes. Suit and tie kind of thing. A bit baggy but executive-looking. Or maybe looking like someone from the government."

"So let me get this straight. You say you died in your sleep, and it wasn't just a dream. You pulled yourself back from this so-called abyss, you woke up and had breakfast with this businessman who claimed to be the Grim Reaper?"

I nodded that she pretty much had it right.

So I guess I should explain why I was telling this to Florence Flossie Bonnie Henderson.

Two reasons, I guess. She was the oldest citizen in Inverary. I'd known her apparently since I was six with my minuscule penis and she was also the brightest and smartest of anyone on the island of Cape Breton. Flossie had grown up here and gone off to Montreal for her first degree at McGill, then moved on to Columbia University in New York City where she finished a PhD in Philosophy. She stayed on for decades to teach several generations of young Americans about ethics and the nature of reality.

"Then what exactly is your question, John Alex?"

"My question, I guess is, do you think these things are true? Or am I crazy as a loon?"

"John Alex, you've always been — well, not exactly crazy — but an independent thinker. Ever since you were that little boy rolling in the dirt. Why look for validation now?"

"But these two events seemed so real. You've studied these things — the nature of reality. So tell me what you think."

She took another sip of her drink and set it aside. "I think that you are not the first person to come back from death. Nor the first to encounter Death as a corporeal being. Literature is full of such

encounters. As are medieval paintings and Ingmar Bergman films.”

“But that was all art. Not real life.”

“Art is often more accurate than real life. Fiction is often more truthful than facts.”

I’d heard her speak like that before and it was a bit over my head.

“My roommate, Mrs. Pryde, would probably say you were visited by the devil but she believes any old thing it says in the Bible.”

“You don’t think it was the devil, do you?”

“Well, the devil is our own creation. If we believe in him, he exists. I doubt that your Russell Crowe-slash-Mel Gibson visitor was the devil. But there is corporeal evidence of demonic beings amongst us. Consider the American. They had been looking for a proper devil for many years and finally invented him in the form a Donald Trump whom they elected president and cheered on as he tried to destroy the nation.”

“My visitor did not look like the American president. Or any American president.”

“That’s comfort to my ears. Still, you had your visit. And rest assured that, in nearly every culture of the world, there is a personified version of death. If you had more Irish in you, it might have been a banshee who visited you. A female of course. She could have even seduced you.”

“I think I would be too old for that.”

“Never say never. If you were a Bible thumper like Eleanor Pryde, you might have been graced with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and then have to clean up after their damn horses tromped around your kitchen and shit all over the place. I could go on, but you get my point. You may not recall this, but I consider myself a student of phenomenology and we phenomenologists believe that direct awareness is the basis for truth.”

“Now you’re over my head again.”

“What you believe to be real is real ... or at least might as well

be real. So your Mr. Death was most certainly there. And just for the record, let me remind you that the appearance of Death as a corporeal being is not always negative. His job may well be to separate the body from the soul. According to eastern religions, that may be a good thing that we all would want. Assuming we have a soul. I myself am a skeptic.”

“I don’t know where I stand on that one but I’m pretty sure I don’t want my body to be separated from my soul.”

“Well,” Flossie said, “some days I wish I could do just that. I’m old, young man, and finally feeling my age. And I have also recently been delivered some discouraging information.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. What did you find out?”

“That new doctor came to see me and did some tests. Turns out I have ALS. Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. Deterioration of the muscles. I was gripping your hand as hard as I could. Eventually I’ll have a tough time swallowing or breathing. Can’t say how long. The doctor said that it’s bloody rare for anyone my age to come down with it. He says I might have cancer as well.”

“Jesus, Flossie, I’m sorry.”

She let go of my hand and waved it in the air, then used both hands to lift her drink. “Let’s not dwell on it. What am I going to do? Start complaining life is cruel to me ... at my age? Cheers.” She took a long gulp of her margarita.

Flossie seemed almost amused now. “Ah, John Alex, you’ve made this afternoon, the Siesta Fiesta, so much more interesting. How I miss discussing the nature of reality with my students back at Columbia. But tell me this. Eva used to visit you long after she died, did she not?”

“She did. And I continued to set a place for her at our table long after her body was put in the ground.”

“And why did you do that?”

I couldn’t bring myself to answer but I could tell from the look on Flossie’s face that I didn’t need to.

“The Scots and the Welsh used to see black dogs come to lead souls into the world’s beyond.”

“No black dogs. I didn’t see any black dogs. But the chickens came right into the house as soon as the unwanted guest had vacated.”

“Ah, chickens. Well, that means you will have good luck.”

But I knew she was only making that up.

“John Alex, I surmise you are not ready to die. Perhaps Death was just tempting you. I too have been tempted. Not quite like you but look around us here. Is this not one version of a living death? A purgatory, of sorts. I am probably more curious than the next person as to the adventure to come. Well, I use the word adventure. But the academic in me, the one wielding Occam’s razor, wants to say simply, this is it. When it’s done, it’s done.”

That really wasn’t what I wanted to hear.

“Don’t give me that look, John Alex. Remember, I used to give you a bath when your penis was only the size of a wine cork. I know you have lived a long and noble life and your life living alone is probably what brought dark company to your door. Should he appear again, perhaps you should listen to what he has to say.”

“He was a bit annoying to be honest. A sharp sarcastic bugger.”

“Why would you expect anything different? Be open to what might happen next. I fear we are about to embark on a much darker time in this plane of existence than what has come before. A kind of Dark Age, if you will. Maybe your visitor has made a courtesy call — selected you among the millions — to give fair warning. What was it Emily Dickinson wrote: ‘Because I could not stop for Death, he kindly stopped for me’?

“Or you think of it this way, as Epicurus did. He said something like, ‘If I am, then death is not. And if death is, then I am not.’ But I must say, I find that dualistic mode of thought does not well suit the age we live in.”

"You have my head swimming. Then why is it, Flossie, that you and I live on while so many others have passed on?"

"I hate to get all Socratic on you, but I can only answer with another question that has been troubling us philosophers since we've been able to reason. And that's this: why is there something instead of nothing?"

I looked around at the others in the room — the men asleep on the reclining chairs, the grey-haired women drooped over in wheelchairs. A few chatty old dolls sipping watered-down drinks. And Flossie, the fetching Florence Nightingale of my most youthful years, tending to my scrapes and bruises and even giving me a bath. The creases in her kind and wise face told a story of their own. Her mind was as sharp as ever, housed in the now-frail body of a century-old woman.

She had been of immense assistance to me with that conversation, even though I remained as curious and confused as ever.

A nurse walked in and rang a handheld bell, much like a schoolteacher in my distant youth who used it to call us in from the playground where we wrestled each other to the ground with regularity. "Siesta Fiesta is over folks," she announced. "Back to your rooms for a rest before dinnertime."