

a novel

LEPER
TANGO

DAVID MacKINNON

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GUERNICA

TORONTO • BUFFALO • BERKELEY • LANCASTER (U.K.)

2012

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Guernica Editions Inc.

P.O. Box 117, Station P, Toronto (ON), Canada M5S 2S6

2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, N.Y. 14150-6000 U.S.A.

Distributors:

University of Toronto Press Distribution,

5201 Dufferin Street, Toronto (ON), Canada M3H 5T8

Gazelle Book Services, White Cross Mills, High Town,

Lancaster LA1 4XS U.K.

Small Press Distribution, 1341 Seventh St., Berkeley,

CA 94710-1409 U.S.A.

First edition.

Printed in Canada.

Legal Deposit — First Quarter

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2012932925

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

MacKinnon, David (David J.)

Leper tango / David MacKinnon.

(Essential prose series ; 95)

Issued also in electronic format.

ISBN 978-1-55071-367-1

I. Title. II. Series: Essential prose series ; 95.

PS8625.K5535L46 2012

C813'.6

C2012-901199-1

*To S, L & C
who make all things possible.*

**THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF
FRANCK HUDNER ROBINSON, ESQUIRE**

I, Franck Hudner Robinson, residing in *Hotel du Quai Voltaire*, Paris, France, being of sound and disposing mind and memory, do make, publish and declare this as and for my last will and testament, hereby revoking all letters or instruments of a testamentary character by me heretofore executed.

FIRST: Allahu Akhbar and praise the Lord, due to a dissolute life, I have virtually nothing to my name.

SECOND: I direct my Executor, Mr Hervé Bourque, Solicitor, to pay all of my just debts, funeral expenses and testamentary charges as soon after my death as can conveniently be done, and to dispose of my remains in the manner set forth hereafter in the event such procedure is not undertaken by Ms. Sheba Rosenstein, as more fully detailed at Section the FIFTH hereof.

THIRD: I direct that all succession, estate or inheritance taxes which may be levied against my estate and/or against any legacies and/or devises hereinafter set forth shall be paid out of my residuary estate.

FOURTH:

(a) I give and bequeath to Alena Poinconneuse, *whore*, should she survive me, the sum of \$10,000.00.

(b) I give and bequeath to MILLIE REIS, *whore*, should she survive me, the sum of \$10,000.00.

(c) I give and bequeath to Mr and Mrs Tranh Nguyen Thu, or to the survivor of them, or if Mr Nguyen Thu should predecease me, then to his

wife, Anastasia Nguyen Thu, the sum of \$5,000.00, it being my wish that such sum be used towards an all-expense weekend at the Krasnopolsky Hotel, Amsterdam prior to Ms Nguyen Thu's final treatment in the Amsterdam Zuid euthanasia clinic.

(d) I give and bequeath all of my personal effects and clothing to Sheba Rosenstein, or if she should predecease me, then my Executor hereinafter named, shall dispose thereof, in his sole discretion.

FIFTH: I hereby confirm that Ms. Sheba Rosenstein shall be sole beneficiary of my Lloyds of London Insurance Policy Number AG2099-6777, provided however that receipt of proceeds under the policy shall be subject to fulfilment of the following condition precedent, namely, that she shall personally amputate my penis and genitalia, and have the emasculated remains of my manhood crushed into powder. Furthermore, in order to receive the proceeds, half of the powder shall be dropped into the Canal St-Martin, Paris France, and the other half buried in Plot 17-E of the canine cemetery operated by the *Cimetière de l'Association pour l'Inhumation décente des Animaux*, Narbonne 66000.

SIXTH: I give and bequeath to my Trustee, hereinafter named, the sum of \$100,000.00, in Trust, for the following uses and purposes:

(a) To hold, manage, invest and reinvest the said property and to receive and collect the income therefrom.

(b) To pay the net income therefrom, together with such amounts of principal as shall be necessary to provide \$5,000.00 per annum, in equal quarterly installments, for the maintenance and support of Francine Bennaton, *whore*, during her lifetime.

(c) To pay the net income therefrom, together with such amounts of principal as shall be necessary to provide \$2,500.00 per annum, in equal quarterly installments, for the maintenance and support of Mme Claude Ducastin-Chanel, *retired whore*, during the remainder of her lifetime.

(d) Upon the death of the survivor between Millie Reis, Francine Bennaton, and Mme Claude Ducastin-Chanel, to pay over the principal remaining in the Trust, together with any accumulated income, to DR. EMILY GROENTZWIG, to be used towards research into deranged and demented lawyers.

SIXTH: All the rest, residue and remainder of my estate, both real and personal, of whatsoever nature and wheresoever situate, of which I shall die seized or possessed or to which I shall be in any way entitled, or over which I shall possess any power of appointment by Will at the time of my death, including any lapsed legacies, I give, devise and bequeath as follows:

(a) to Spike Nussbaum, one Canadian dollar, provided he can produce proper personal identification,

(b) To Margaret Tillman, Head of the Investigations Branch, *Barreau du Québec*, four dollars, and my law degrees.

(c) To Collette Mesrine, *the oldest whore in Paris*, the remainder of my estate, and a return travel package to Niagara Falls, Canada with the tour operator of her choice.

SEVENTH: I nominate, constitute and appoint Hervé Bourque, Executor and Trustee of this my Last Will and

Testament. In the event that he should die or fail to qualify, or resign or for any other reason be unable to act, I nominate, constitute and appoint Tranh Nguyen Thu in his place and stead.

—*Franck Robinson Esquire*

SIGNED, SEALED, PUBLISHED and DECLARED by Franck Robinson, the Testatrix above named, as and for his Last Will and Testament, in the City of Paris, France, in our presence and we, at his request and in his presence and in the presence of each other, have hereunto subscribed our names as witnesses this 14th day of January, One Thousand Nine Hundred Ninety Nine.

Laraine Sandusky, businesswoman, residing at 10 West 86th St. NYC

Hanna Van Trotta, executive secretary, residing at 709 E. 56 St., New York, NY

PART I

Hotel du Quai Voltaire — Chambre 52.

Dear Hervé,

A French prison is no place for a white man, Hervé. About the only thing in its favour, is that it gives you a little time to review matters, if you're so inclined. It's strange the thoughts you cling to in order to survive such places. There was an image that returned to me. I was seventeen years old and managed to find myself in Amsterdam, wandering through the Dam Square area, terrain you know only too well, my friend. Found myself in front of one of those store-front windows, staring at a middle-aged hooker. Her finger curled, as she observed me watching her through the looking glass, beckoning. I couldn't walk away, couldn't even move as a matter of fact. As if my whole future was contained in that finger drawing me towards the diseased of the world. I mark that moment as my passage into the decayed compromise of adulthood.

A brief *obiter dictum* on the sub-species to which I belong. The much despised, the deservedly despicable *john*. Oddly enough, we johns firmly cling to the ill-conceived myth that we are adventurous rogues defying the powers that be, prowling the streets to create a new saga with an unknown woman. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. The john craves repetition, then more repetition. Then he tries to repeat the experience. Somewhere in the seedy recesses of his mind, he is looking for the same piece of silky underwear, the same thwack of a bare hand on his ass, the same stretch of rope tying him to a bedpost. And not only does he hunt relentlessly for that same viral reminder of whatever he has on the brain, he knows he will never find it. And he doesn't care. Any whore worth her epsom salts understands this perfectly, and never really provides

the goods, while artfully implying that the unnamed, unspeakable pleasure is just around the corner. This approach is not in the least offensive to the john, who couldn't care less about *caveat emptor*. On the contrary, the risk of fraudulent misrepresentation even adds on value, as the diamond is contained within the promise itself. Fulfillment is nothing compared to the anticipation. Knowing you are in a room with someone, and here it doesn't really matter what she looks like, who understands that you must, in order to have meaning to your life, act out certain scenarios which appear absurd to the normal eye.

My fetish was Sheba. In conventional terms, I suppose one could argue that our lives were monuments of banality, but to us, nothing within the human realm could approach our own self-created drama. Just offhand, I recall a day, like any other, but somehow it remains embedded in the memory banks. Our morning agenda called for fucking, followed by Dunhill cigarettes and lazy conversation. We picked up and left off topics, locations and people with equal indifference. Not even money held our attention for long, other than to calculate ways of procuring it with the least possible effort. She had just emerged from the washroom where she had spent several hours preparing herself for the day's theatrics. Her skills in the art of makeup alone put my pedigree to shame. I only had a profession, a few diplomas and, at least for a while yet, cash to spare. I had read thousands of books. She had sucked thousands of cocks. I could recite Supreme Court obiter dicta *extempore*. She had a case load of her own: tales of her victims, a trail of broken men, now horizontal in hospitals, asylums and cemeteries. But we both trafficked in human disappointment and, for both of us, a deal wasn't a deal unless somebody got burned.

She wore a pearl-coloured brassiere and thong, panty hose, and a garter belt that artfully exposed her rust-col-

oured cunt hair. The cunt itself seemed to be propped up, as if on a storefront demo shelf, as her vertical posture was unnaturally accentuated by her stiletto heels. Pastel was the leitmotif of the day. It suited her well against the backdrop of sand being wind-swept across a dismal stretch of Rochelais beach and the Atlantic taupe-grey sky. Sheba was describing someone she truly admired, a madame who ran a number of bordellos in Paris back in the sixties.

“An extraordinary woman,” she pronounced, her glance half-withering, half-inquisitive, as she gauged the effect of each of her soliloquys. *Classe*, she summarized. Everything was *classe* with her. Or *nickel*. Or *clean*. Do you know, she added, pirouetting around me mockingly, “if you would only listen to me, you will never work another day in your life.”

She crouched onto the floor, arched her back like a panther and sprang at me, reaching for my cock, her mouth opening like a question mark or a vacant room. Looking back, an unequal contest, right from the start.

Why does one man cross the Atlantic, and another play *pétanque* and never move beyond the confines of his neighbourhood? These inclinations have far more to do with the pull of magnetic North than morality. All attraction and repulsion, Hervé. The laws that govern us are far more impersonal and terrifying than we dare admit. The clearest proof of this is what is called love. Two complementary voids or fields of emptiness, ions and protons matching each other, negative to positive. If the love is perfect, there is mutual extinguishment, and we call the phenomenon death. When in fact, it is nothing more than a form of chemical reaction.

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Early morning, *rue Montmartre*. A man insistently flogging a newsletter for the poor. C'mon, it's only ten francs. Ten francs too much, my friend. Spare change? No such thing. Cigarette? Get a job. No jobs left, *monsieur*. Fuck off. *Va te faire mettre*. Have a nice day, *monsieur*. A lime-green garbage truck rolled past. Two Africans behind, one spraying *rue Réaumur* sputum and debris into the gutters with a hose, the other whisking languidly at residual shit with a metal-pronged broom. Six thousand francs a month and free medical benefits. Heaven for an African. Hell for a white man. The echo of her laugh pulling me back from reality. I pulled out my cellphone and dialed.

“Allô?”

“Where the hell are you, Sheba?”

“I'm on my cellphone, Franck.”

Two forces boring in, sucking on the pituitary gland. Her voice, *ottava soprana*, ligating me to her wound.

“Where the fuck are you, Sheba?”

Her voice reverberating, twisting my loins.

“Do you remember the cemetery, Franck? Père Lachaise ...”

“Just tell me where you are.”

“I’m in the land of forgetting, Franck. The land of the distant past.”

The dismal spectre of St-Eustache church casting its shadow over the quarter. A Hindi man, wearing a shabby, pin-striped suit, standing at the South entrance door, his palm extended outwards. *Whatever you can spare, sir.* I pushed past him through the South exit doors. The church empty, but for a few geriatric penitents sitting in the pews before the main altar, lifeless as blow-up dolls. I moved past the crypt and a hemicycle of tombs and the remnants of immortalised ministers, harlequins, jugglers, slaughterhouse owners and whores.

A bald, gaunt Sulpician priest entered the confessional, his robes swirling behind him. A red light lit up over the confessional box. How many red lights up in Pigalle? *The Lucky Club. Bar Huit. Le Frou-Frou. Marye-love.* Couldn’t be any harder than sneaking into a bordello. I edged towards the box, slipped inside, waited in the dark for a second until my eyes adjusted, then knelt down. After a minute or so, a foot-square, sliding wooden apparatus opened, exposing a screen. Behind the screen, I could just make out the bald silhouette of the priest. I mentally rehearsed the lines I had retrieved from www.confessional.com.

“Bless me father, for I have sinned.”

“How long has it been since your last confession?”

“Are you Père Montagnard?”

“Yes.”

“A woman named Sheba comes by occasionally to confess. Have you heard from her lately?”

“*Pardon?*”

“Look, I know this is an unusual request, but this is an emergency. I have to get in touch with her.”

His head jolted forward slightly.

“I must ask you to leave. Immediately.”

“Listen, friend. I know a thing or two about privilege. I’m a solicitor. I don’t blame you for being a little uneasy. Tell you what. Just nod your head if she still lives in the quarter.”

He wasn’t saying anything much, so I tried another tack. More along the lines of betting on an inside straight.

“She told me about you. The altar boys. Your seminary adventures. Everything.”

“If you do not depart immediately, I shall contact the police!”

I exited the confessional, ambled past the crypt then out the same door I had entered. Same Indian beggar parked at the door. Same shabby pin-stripe suit. Same makeshift crutch. Same right eye bugged out in fierce entreaty.

“Sir, I can see you are a gentleman. I too was once a gentleman. Truly.”

That word. *Gentleman*. I stopped and examined him. He was middle-aged. Thick, wavy black hair, but for a white streak running incongruously down the centre of his cranium. As if he’d fallen into a pit unexpectedly. Boo!

“Once a gentleman, always a gentleman,” I uttered towards the remains of the sub-continent.

“No, sir, no, not at all, not at all, if you only knew how false this is. I was to be married; she was so lovely, you should see the girls of Bombay, they are remarkable. I was coming here for a weekend. A weekend, can you understand?! And then I threw everything away.

Everything! And it led me here. To this! No, I can tell you sir, you are only a gentleman if the world says you are a gentleman. Can you understand this, sir? Can you understand?"

I flipped him a few francs, returned to *rue Montorgueil*, and stopped in to purchase a local daily at a kiosk, entered a café. On the *faits divers* page, an article concerning a woman who poured acid over her husband's face while he slept. Nothing unusual in that. Not anymore. Or even the fact that he had been tied to the four bedposts. Page 17 material. Hell of a way to celebrate a honeymoon. Particularly in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel on the Place Vendôme. Not enough to conclude, but plenty enough to keep me reading. The accused's court records had disappeared into the ether. The *Tribunal de Grande Instance* suspected an inside job, but had no choice but to dismiss the case. What the French call a *non-lieu*. It had never taken place.

A couple of days after my return, I had answered a newspaper ad for a flat in the second *arrondissement*, *rue de Mulhouse*, a one block street in the Sentier textiles district which starts on *rue Cléry* at the *Société Parisienne de Boutons*, and ends seventy-eight metres up the road at a gutted out merguez palace on the *rue des jeuneurs*. The street of fasters. The location suited me well enough. *Rue Cléry* was a direct pipeline leading to Saint-Denis from the rear. During the day, the quarter resembled a Tamul rebel outpost, but the terrorists were armed with off-the-rack fall fashions.

The first two floors of Number 2 housed illegal textile operations. The police were never far. Just as many were on the take in the Sentier as in Saint-Denis, but the racket here was illegal immigrant workers. I had to climb six flights of hardwood stairs to reach my flat,

located just over the residence of Bazin, my landlord. Bazin was a pharmacist, and a homosexual of the old school. The kind who shined his oxfords twice a day, and showed up at the door in initialed terrytowel bathrobes at three in the afternoon. Next door was Lafontaine, the resident onanist, and across the way an old rack of a lady, who used the Turkish toilet as a multi-function unit to wash her clothes, urinate, brush her teeth. She also wore her bathrobe twenty hours out of the day. But hers wasn't the same brand as Bazin's, or, if it was, it was forty-five years older and had devolved into a ratty, lime-coloured shred of terrytowel. A mad, compulsive cheerfulness possessed her.

I had never seen her descend to the ground floor. Every night at seven sharp, a Vietnamese delivery man in his early sixties arrived on the sixth floor landing, carrying a plastic container with steamed rice and spring rolls. The only other person I saw regularly was De Vecchi, a heavy-set balding Italian who sluffed up and down from the third floor landing twice a day, dragging an arthritic german shepherd he refused to have put down. De Vecchi claimed he had boxed Jake La Motta before La Motta won the championship belt.

"I had him down for a count of eight. Lost on a split decision, but it was a fix from the start. Then, some of LaMotta's handlers visited me one night. Smashed every joint in my hands with a crowbar. Then a few over the head. Look."

He peeled back a few remaining strands of hair from his skull, baring a scar laterally traversing his cranium. As if a makeshift railway track had been hastily embedded into his skull.

"None of that matters. They're all dead. LaMotta. Sugar Ray Robinson. Tunney. Marciano. Cerdan. You

David MacKinnon is a lawyer by training, member of both the British Columbia and Quebec law societies. He has five university degrees, including two law degrees and two degrees from *Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne*. He studied history, law, languages and philosophy at the universities of British Columbia, Louvain (Belgium), Sorbonne (Paris), Laval (Québec) and Ottawa. He has worked in oilfields, factories and warehouses, morgues and operating rooms, lumberyards, shipyards, construction sites and in the courtroom as a trial lawyer. For the better part of twenty-five years, he lived and worked in France and Quebec. He has written eight novels.

About *Leper Tango*

Leper Tango recounts the lunar trajectory of Franck Robinson—a self-confessed member of “the despised and despicable sub-species of skirt-chaser known as the john.” During one of Franck’s regular free-falls into the Parisian night, he meets Sheba, who moves from being Franck’s favourite hooker to being Franck’s obsession. *Leper Tango* is a confession of an unrepentant man whose stated life aim is to screw an entire city. The author, presumably the alter ego of Franck, is also a jack-of-all-trades and vagabond spirit.

—*FNAC Book Review*

Franck Robinson, forty-something, chaser of skirts, usually the low-end sidewalk variety, combs the streets of Paris in search of Sheba, whom he imagines to be the ultimate Parisian whore. Franck drifts from bordello to bar, and ultimately finds himself trapped by his own demons of alcohol and a fatal attraction. With this hilarious novel, the Canadian MacKinnon showcases a talent for the absurd and a mastery of language reminiscent of Henry Miller.

—*Glamour Magazine*