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JOHN D. MACDONALD

A *Travis McGee* NOVEL

THE LONELY SILVER RAIN



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Praise for the Travis McGee series

“There’s only one thing as good as reading a John D. MacDonald novel: reading it again. As a writer way ahead of his time, his Travis McGee books are as entertaining, insightful, and suspenseful today as the moment I first read them. He is the all-time master of the American mystery novel.”

—JOHN SA

“One of the great sagas in American fiction.”

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“In McGee mysteries and other novels as well, MacDonald’s voice was one of a social historian.”

—Los Angeles Tim

THE LONELY SILVER RAIN

A Travis McGee NOVEL

John D. MacDonald



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The Lonely Silver Rain is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright

Introduction

Epigraph

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-one

Dedication

Other Books by This Author

About the Author

Introduction

Lee Child

Suspense fiction trades on surprising and unexpected twists. Like this one: A boy named John D. MacDonald was born in 1916 in Sharon, Pennsylvania, into the kind of quiet and comfortable middle-class prosperity that became common in America forty or fifty years later, but which was still relatively rare early in the century. Sharon was a satellite town near Pittsburgh, dominated by precision metal-working, and John's father was a mild-mannered and upstanding citizen with secure and prestigious salaried employment as a senior financial executive with a local manufacturer. Young John was called Jack as a child, and wore sailor suits, and grew up in a substantial suburban house on a tree-lined block. He read books, played with his dog, and teased his little sister and his cousin. When he was eighteen, his father funded a long European grand tour for him, advising him by letter "to make the best of it ... to eat and function regularly ... to be sure and attend a religious service at least once each Sunday ... to keep a record of your expenditures as a training for your college days."

Safely returned, young Jack went on to two decent East Coast schools, and married a fellow student, and went to Harvard for an MBA, and volunteered for the army in 1940, and finished World War II as a lieutenant colonel, after thoroughly satisfactory service as a serious, earnest, bespectacled, rear-echelon staff officer.

So what does such a fellow do next? Does he join General Motors? IBM? Work for the Pentagon?

In John D. MacDonald's case, he becomes an impoverished writer of pulp fiction.

During his first four postwar months, he lost twenty pounds by sitting at a table and hammering out 800,000 unsold words. Then in his fifth month he sold a story for twenty-five bucks. Then another for forty bucks, and eventually more than five hundred. Sometimes entire issues of pulp magazines were all his own work, disguised under dozens of different pen names. Then in 1950 he watched the contemporary boom in paperback novels and jumped in with his first full-length work, which was followed by sixty-six more, including some really seminal crime fiction and one of history's greatest suspense series.

Why? Why did a middle-class Harvard MBA with extensive corporate connections and a gold-plated recommendation from the army turn his back on everything apparently predestined, to sit at a battered table and type, with an anxious wife at his side? No one knows. He never explained. It's a mystery.

But we can speculate. Perhaps he never wanted a quiet and comfortable middle-class life. Perhaps, after finding himself amid the chaos of war, he felt able to liberate himself from the crushing filial expectations he had previously followed so obediently. As an eighteen-year-old it's hard to say no to the father who just paid for a trip to Europe. Eleven years later, as a lieutenant colonel, it's easier.

And we know from what he wrote that he felt he had something to say to the world. His early stuff was whatever put food on that battered table—detective stories, western adventure stories, sports stories, and even some science fiction—but soon enough his lon-

form fiction began to develop some enduring and intertwined themes. From *A Deadly Shade Gold*, a Travis McGee title: “The only thing in the world worth a damn is the strange, touching, pathetic, awesome nobility of the individual human spirit.” From the stand-alone thriller *Where Is Janice Gantry?*: “Somebody has to be tireless, or the fast-buck operator would asphalt the entire coast, fill every bay, and slay every living thing incapable of carrying a wallet.”

These two angles show up everywhere in his novels: the need to—maybe reluctantly, possibly even grumpily—stand up and be counted on behalf of the weak, helpless, and downtrodden, which included people, animals, and what we now call *the environment*—which was in itself a very early and very prescient concern: *Janice Gantry*, for instance, predates Rachel Carson’s groundbreaking *Silent Spring* by a whole year.

But the good knight’s armor was always tarnished and rusted. The fight was never easy and, one feels, never actually winnable. But it had to be waged. This strange, weary blend of nobility and cynicism is MacDonald’s signature emotion. Where did it come from? Not, presumably, the leafy block where he was raised in quiet and comfort. The war must have changed him, like it changed a generation and the world.

Probably the best of his nonseries novels is *The Executioners*, which became *Cape Fear* as a movie (twice). It’s an acute psychological study of base instinct, terror, mistakes, and raw emotion. It’s about a man—possibly a man like MacDonald’s father, or like MacDonald himself—who moves out of his quiet and comfort into more primeval terrain. And those two poles are the theme of the sensationally good Travis McGee series, which is a canon equalled for enduring quality and maturity by very little else. McGee is a quiet man, internally bewildered by and raging at what passes for modern progress, externally happy merely to be varnishing the decks of his houseboat and polishing its brass, but always ready to saddle up and ride off in the service of those who need and deserve his help. Again, not the product of the privileged youth enjoyed by the salaried executive’s son.

So where did McGee and MacDonald’s other heroes come from? Why Florida? Why the jaundiced concerns? We will never know. But maybe we can work it out, by mining the millions of words written with such haste and urgency and passion between 1945 and 1986.

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Every extreme attitude is a flight from the self—the passionate state of mind is an expression of inner dissatisfaction.

—ERIC HOFFER

Without a family, man, alone in the world, trembles with the cold.

—ANDRÉ MAUROIS

Once upon a time I was very lucky and located a sixty-five-foot hijacked motor sailer in a matter of days, after the authorities had been looking for months. When I heard through the grapevine that Billy Ingraham wanted to see me, it was easy to guess he hoped I could work the same miracle with his stolen *Sundowner*, a custom cruiser he'd had built in a Jacksonville yard. It had been missing for three months.

When I heard he was looking for me, I phoned him and he said he would appreciate it if I could come right over. Billy had come down to the lower east coast early and put himself deeply in hock to buy hundreds of acres of flatland too sorry to even run beef on. After he put up the first shopping mall, he went even deeper into hock. He and Sadie were living aboard a junker with a trawler hull at Bahia Mar, living small while he made his big gamble. He was betting that the inland would have to build up to support the big beach population and he kept right on pyramiding his bet until all of a sudden it turned around, and he became F. William Ingraham, owner of shopping malls, automobile agencies, marinas, a yacht brokerage agency, and a director of one of the banks which had been tightening the screws on him a few years earlier.

He bought waterfront residential land and one day when the house they had planned together, he and Sadie, was half built, she was there one morning looking at tile samples for the master bathrooms when she gave the young subcontractor a strange look, dropped the tile she was looking at and toppled into the framed area where the shower was going to be. She was two and a half weeks in intensive care before everything finally stopped.

They'd been married twenty-eight years and had no kids. He sank into guilt, telling anybody who'd listen that if he hadn't been so greedy he could have cashed in earlier and smaller, with more than enough to last them the rest of their lives, and she would have had a few years in the house she wanted so badly. Everybody who knew him tried to help, but we couldn't do much. He went into that kind of decline which meant he was going to follow her to wherever she had gone as soon as he was able.

But a woman half his age named Millis Hoover pulled him out of it. It took her the better part of a year. She had been working for him. Sadie's house had been finished and sold. And he had sold off everything else, paid his debts and resigned from all boards and committees and put the money into insured municipal bond funds. He lost all interest in making money in wheeling, dealing and guessing the future.

It was Millis who worked him around to buying a penthouse duplex in the new Dias del Sol condo, three twenty-story towers about eight miles north of Fort Lauderdale. It has indoor and outdoor pools, health clubs, a beach, boat slips on the Waterway, a security staff, a good restaurant, room service, maid service and a concierge to help with special problems. It cost him one point two five million to buy it and, with Millis' help, to furnish it. One room was set up as a small office, because it was more efficient to have her working there. Then she

moved in, because that was more convenient too. She nagged him into using the bodybuilding equipment, into sunning himself, into doing laps in the pool every day, into eating sensibly, and even into giving up his smuggled Cuban cigars and his half bottle of bourbon a day.

After he began to take pride in how he looked and how he felt, he began to take more of an interest in how Millis looked and, in time, how Millis felt. And that did not surprise anyone who had been following the woman's reconstruction of Billy Ingraham.

Anyway, I was given the expected security check in the small lobby of Tower Alpha at Diabol del Sol at a little after ten in the morning on October 3, a Wednesday, and after Mr. Ingraham had confirmed to them that I was indeed expected, they aimed me toward the elevator at the end of the row.

Billy let me in. He has a big head, big thick features, a white brush cut and little brown eyes. He is instantly likable. In that sense, he has always reminded me of Meyer. Both of them treat you as if you are one of the high points of their day. Both of them listen. Both of them seem genuinely concerned about you.

"Hey, Trav! You look like you been adrift on a raft. You look damn near scrawny. What's going on? Where were you?"

"Bringing that old sloop of Hubie Harris' back from Marigot Bay at St. Lucia."

"Hope nothing happened to Hube."

"Nothing permanent. He fell and broke up his knee. Those two kids of his, twelve and thirteen, wanted to try to bring it back by themselves, but he didn't want them to try. I'm not much for sloops, or any kind of sailing, so the kids were useful. What took so long was dodging here and there, trying to stay away from a tropical storm that was trying to be a hurricane but couldn't decide which way to travel. Got in and they told me you wanted to talk."

"Come on upstairs and we'll have some coffee."

We went up an open iron circular staircase and through a doorway that opened onto a wide patio garden overlooking the sea. The view was spectacular. I could see the deeper blue of the Stream way out. A tanker, deeply laden, was riding the Stream north, and closer, this side of the Stream, a pair of container ships were working south. Small boats danced in the glare and dazzle of the morning sun.

Millis was grubbing at a flower bed. She wore a wide straw hat, a black string bikini and red sandals. She was sitting on her heels. She turned and stood up and dropped her cotton gloves and grubbing tool by the flowers and came toward us, cool and elegant and removed inside her coffee-cream tan, her slenderness, looking out at us through the guarded green lenses of her tilted eyes, smiling a three-millimeter smile.

"Travis, you know my wife, Millis? You know we got married last June?"

"William darling, Mr. McGee was at the wedding!"

"Oh, hell. Sure. I'm sorry. I wasn't tracking real good that day."

We sat on white iron chairs at a round white table and Millis brought us coffee and went back to her flower chores. "I guess you heard about our new boat getting stole."

"I heard it was taken, but I didn't hear any details."

He got up and went away and came back in a few minutes with some eight-by-ten color shots of the *Sundowner*, some of them taken from a helicopter.

"Very pretty," I said, studying them.

“A real gem. Fifty-four feet. Big diesels. Solid as a rock. What scalds me, Trav, was the timing of it. We wanted to take our honeymoon trip in it right after the wedding, but there been a delay in getting it outfitted just the way we wanted it. Well, sir, by the fourth of July I had it all equipped and provisioned, and ready for a test run. We went north up the coast with me running it fast and running it slow, checking out the radar, Loran, recording fathometer, digital log, ship-to-shore, Hewlett-Packard 41-C with the Nav-Pac for this area. We checked out the stereo system, television reception, AC and DC, the generators, autopilot, battery feed, navigational lights, cold locker, stove, every damn thing. It all worked fine, but you know me, Trav. I’ve owned enough boats for enough years to know that when you really go cruising, the things you need most are the things that quit first. She was also provisioned too, even to two cases of that Perrier champagne Millis likes.

“The sea held calm and a little after noon I came to a little inlet I’ve been through before but the chart showed just enough water for me to ease through on a high tide and we were a couple of hours shy of the high, so I moved around to the lee of a big sandbar island, worked in close, threw the hook and let it slide on back to deeper water. We were planning to take our trip up the Waterway to New England, and start in a day or two, and I felt we had the right boat for it and I felt good about making that trip. I’d always wanted to do that. We had lunch and some of that good wine out in the hot sunshine and the summer breeze. I dropped off and when I woke up Millis had swum and waded over to the sandbar island.”

He stopped and looked to see where she was. She was over at the far corner of the back terrace, working the flower beds. The breeze was from the sea, so his chance of being overheard was very slight. But he lowered his voice so that I had to lean toward him to hear. “After the way Sadie was,” he said, “I have one hell of a time getting used to Millis’ way. She was over there shelling, naked as an egg. She’s big on nature things, Trav. Jogging and roughage and workouts and so on. The few houses I could see were far away and there were a couple of boats way out, so I climbed down to the rear platform there and eased into the water in my trunks and went ashore to where she was shelling, knowing she would have something to say about people being too modest for their own good. But damn it, Trav, being outdoors naked makes me walk kind of hunched over. I keep waiting for a wasp to come along, or an airgun pellet or a thorn bush. And I don’t like being naked in the water either. Crabs, stingrays, jellyfish.

“She showed me the stuff she’d been picking up. She had some little purple shells and she wanted me to help find her enough more so she could string a necklace. So all of a sudden I heard the *Sundowner* kick over. She caught right away. The way I figured it, the damn bastards had come out of that inlet in an outboard skiff, seen us hunting shells, seen my cruiser, then circled out around so they could come up on it on the blind side, where they boarded her, snuck forward and cut the anchor line, then started her up. They didn’t start her from the fly bridge where I could have seen them, but from the pilothouse. All I ever saw was the beat-up old aluminum boat they had in tow, with the motor tilted up. It had a milk-drunk look the way old aluminum gets in salt water. He took off, swinging way out and heading north, keeping it slow and steady so as not to swamp his skiff. Know what the insurance son of a bitch said to me? He said leaving the keys in the panel was contributory negligence. My God, it was sitting there in front of us! What kind of idiot would have locked it up?”

Billy and Millis swam to the beach on the narrow spit that lies east of the Waterway. F

parked her in some scraggly brush, walked down to where some people were picnicking, to his sad story and traded his gold seal ring for a red and white poolside cover-up for Millis. Her gold bracelet guaranteed the taxi ride back to the Dias del Sol, where the residence manager let them into their penthouse.

"I'm still damned mad," Billy said. "Millis and me, we put a lot of thought and love into that boat, getting it just like we wanted it. Shit, I can afford more boats, but it won't be the same. And I was humiliated, standing there watching some young punk go grinning off with the boat, cash, wine, food, credit cards, car keys and boat keys and house keys, and some of the finest boat rods made. Nobody has done a damn thing. And I've been told you can do things when the law gives up."

"I've been known to strike out."

"You want to take a shot at it? You get thirty big ones cash in hand the day I set foot on her again."

"Lots of pleasure boats have been disappearing these last few years, Billy. And very few have ever been recovered. I don't work on a fee basis. Anything I can recover, I keep half, or half the value."

His thick gray eyebrows went halfway up his red forehead. "Isn't that a little heavy on McGee? I put seven hundred and twenty into that sucker."

"It isn't heavy because I'm talking about the value of what I recover. That sucker isn't a seven-hundred-and-twenty-thousand-dollar boat anymore, not after three months. Also, stolen cruisers usually end up in the drug business, where people don't play pat ball. Also, I swallow my own expenses, win or lose. And it gives me a lot of incentive to look for something that's half mine. I find it in fair shape and it will pay for another piece of the retirement I keep taking now and then. Or, look at it this way. Let's say the odds against any recovery are about five hundred to one. A flat fee would start me out pretty listless."

"If you get it back, how do we put a value on it?"

"Get it surveyed as is by a licensed marine appraiser."

He frowned, and then stuck his beefy paw out. We shook hands and he said, "Done. Tell you a secret. I'd almost give you full value just to get one back at the scum that took it away and left me nothing but a hundred-and-ninety-dollar Danforth anchor and ten feet of rubber-coated chain."

Millis had finished gardening. She hosed off her tools and shut them up in a little blue locker and then came and sat with us. "Billy told me you did find a boat for someone, McGee."

"Years ago," I told her. "Five at least. It belonged to one of the Cuban buddies of Batista who got out just before Castro removed his head. And he bought a house, a motor sailer and the good life with money he'd squirreled away in Chase Manhattan while he was still a Cuban politico. Those particular immigrants aren't my favorite people. Anyway, he used a Cuban crew, and the wrong batch of Cubans took it right out of its slip at a Miami yacht club and sailed it away. There was joy and rejoicing in the Cuban community."

"How did you get it back?" she asked.

The question was mild, but it had a contentious sound. Just a little too much emphasis on the "you." How could *you* do anything so difficult? And a faint expression of disdain, challenge in her flat stare. New wife in the long, dogged process of detaching her husband

from all prior friendships.

“Somebody told me where I could find the *Aliciente*. She’d been renamed the *Priscilla*. Two months after Calderone got her back, she blew up one night twenty miles off Key West with him aboard.”

“Somebody just happened to tell you where to find it?” She wore an expression of vivid disbelief. “Why would anyone do that?”

“If you’ve got about a day and a half to spare, Millis, we could sit around and I could try to explain what I’ve learned about Cuban refugee politics in Miami.”

“I’m sure you have better things to do.”

“I’d guess we both do.”

“What’s with you two?” Billy asked angrily. “How’d you both get off on the wrong foot so fast?”

She stood up. “Sorry, Billy. I guess I’m just fascinated by people who can accomplish impossible things.” She headed for the doorway into the apartment and turned and said, “What does *Aliciente* mean, Mr. McGee?”

“Temptation,” I told her. She nodded, without surprise, as if she had known the meaning of the name and wondered if I did. I saw something in the back of her eyes, something that moved and challenged, creating awareness. We were in a silent communication inaccessible to the husband sitting heavily beside me.

When she was gone, Billy said, “Sorry about that. She always tries to keep me from being taken by some con artist. She thinks I’m too trusting. Hell, I’ve followed my instinct all my life and it hasn’t hurt me more than three or four times. You’re giving me a proposition where I can’t lose. I pay you nothing, or I buy my boat back for half its market value.”

On that Wednesday afternoon I drove on up to where the cruiser had been stolen. The town was inside the inlet and on the far side of the bridge over the Waterway was named Citrina. New condos and malls were being built at all four corners of it, and parking was a serious problem. The police chief was a happy fat man with several fingers missing from each hand.

I gave him one of my Casualty-Indemnity cards and said it looked as if we were going to have to pay off on the *Sundowner* that got stolen out there at the inlet last fourth of July, and I didn't want to take up his time but just needed to find out if they'd made any progress at all since we last checked with him. Because if there was any progress at all that meant a chance of recovery, and—winking at him—the longer we hold the money, the more money the money makes.

He beamed and told me I was in a rotten line of work, and he lumbered over and got the folder and brought it back.

“Nothing to add,” he said. “We got the same two missing persons as before, with no way of knowing if they'd anything to do with it. They were going together and they could have just run off elsewhere.” He laid the two glossies in front of me. Even in black and white I could tell that the boy was a buck-tooth redhead. He had a long neck, a prominent Adam's apple, and a squint. The girl was cuddly blonde, with an imitation show biz smirk and some acne pits. They were posed pictures.

“High school yearbook,” he said, “from two years back. Howard Cannon and Karen McBride. He's a bad kid, comes from trashy stock—drunks and wife beaters. Lots of trouble with the law. She's a dentist's daughter. Her people tried hard to break it up. Too hard. Sometimes you let it go on, and it wears itself out. They sent her off to an aunt in Wisconsin and she hitched all the way back. I've distributed copies to all the interested parties. Got some extras here if you want a set. Physical description and history on the back of each one. Nobody has heard from either of them. Friends or families. Got everybody alerted to get in touch first thing if they hear anything.”

“Is it likely they could have done it?”

“Possible. Howie did fool things on impulse. He was with the McBride girl that day. His truck skiff is missing. They had the feeling the whole world was against them. Howie's spent most of his life on the water. He worked at Tyler Marina and she wouldn't let them send her off to school, and she worked at the K-Mart. Maybe he just swung around close to look at that new boat. Climbed aboard and found it was empty. Saw the keys, checked the fuel, talked her into it. Tied the skiff off, cut the anchor line and left. Could have been that way. Could just as easily been some other way too.”

“They probably went right on over to the islands,” I said. “Safer for dockage and fuel over there.”

“Owner left over nine hundred dollars aboard, and it was all provisioned for a long cruise.”

Nice honeymoon for those kids. Find themselves some little cove down in the Exumas. A fine until the day you have to pay for your fun.”

Meyer came over to my houseboat, the *Busted Flush*, that warm October evening to find out how things had gone with old Billy. We sat in the lounge and I told him, and spread the photographs of the boat and the suspects out on the tabletop.

“I think I was working my way around to changing my mind and telling Billy it would be a waste of time, but that bride of his rubbed me the wrong way. So I am stuck with taking some kind of a shot at it. Chances vary from very slim to none. Where *did* he find the Millis?”

“She was working for him.”

“I know that. She went to work for him, what was it, two years or three years before Sadie died.”

“From what you say about the way he looks and acts, Travis, she’s good for him. So what care about her prior activities?”

“Something just a little out of focus there, Meyer. She’s a beautiful woman. She’s living well. But she has her guard up.”

He examined the color shots of the *Sundowner*. “Distinctive. Certainly no mistaking it for a production boat. Beamy. Lots of range. Displacement hull?”

“Yes. Twelve knots top cruising. Fifteen-hundred-mile range.”

“Probably been repainted by now. Not too useful for the drug trade. Too small to la around offshore as a mother ship, and too slow to make night runs to the beaches. All in all, little too conspicuous to be useful.”

I opened a pair of beers and took them back to the table.

“Humpf!” said Meyer.

It is his declaration of surprise and satisfaction. It is what he would have said were he to have discovered the theory of relativity.

“What’s with the humpf?”

“I was looking for a recognition factor which would probably remain the same. Take a look.”

He held up the photo taken from about two hundred feet above the vessel, running at cruising speed across a calm blue sea. He held it so the bow was at the top of the picture, the wake at the bottom.

For a moment I didn’t see it, and then it jumped out at me. The bow made a pointed ha The life rings on the aft corners of the super-structure made the eyes. The half circle o padded bench around the aft of the cockpit made the clownish grin. “A face!” I said. “damned face!”

“Which can be looked for from the air.”

Which was worth a humpf from Meyer. His little blue eyes were bright with satisfaction. Meager as it was, it was still more of a starting point than I’d had before. The profile of a boat can be easily altered by someone intending to deceive. But that someone would not be thinking about how it looks from directly overhead.

So I locked away the photography, and we went out to eat. Meyer waited while I locke

my old houseboat and activated my inconspicuous little security devices which would let me know when I returned if there was a stranger aboard, or if a stranger had been aboard while I was gone. In the old days Meyer seemed mildly amused by all this caution. But in recent years he has seen things in a different light, and now uses similar precautions, even though the chance of harm coming to that hairy economist is considerably less than of it coming to me.

Once you have made enough people sufficiently unhappy with your activities and the effect on their lives and fortunes, it is wise to live as though there is a small deadly snake in every shower stall, cyanide in the tastiest cookie. You can solve the problem by becoming a drifter, changing your base at random intervals. But my home is aboard the *Busted Flush* at Slip F-1, Bahia Mar Marina in Fort Lauderdale, and there I intend to stay until finally no one is able to either drink the water or breathe the air.

It was a pleasant night, so we walked the long mile to Benjamin's and had the good Irish stew at a table in the back. As we were finishing, two of Meyer's newest friends moved in on us. Denise and Frieda, visitors from England. He had met them on the beach that morning when one of them had asked him to identify something horrid which had washed up on the sand. Meyer is always being asked questions by strangers. He looks reliable. It was a sea slug. Both women were celebrating simultaneous divorces, and it was easy to see they would look splendid in beachwear. I managed to detach myself, and walked back to the marina alone.

When I opened the little panel in the port bulk-head outside the lounge, the fail-safe bulbs were all glowing, telling me everything was secure. I turned the system off and reactivated it once I was inside. I got out the photographs and sat and studied them.

It struck me that the young man and woman in the pictures—Cannon and McBride—looked dead. When you look at pictures of people you know are dead, there is something different about the eyes. As if they anticipated their particular fate. It is a visceral recognition. The two young lovers had that look. I told myself I was getting too fanciful, and went to bed.

It had been an oddly aimless year for me. Old friends had died in faraway places. In the spring of the year there had been some weeks shared with a lonely woman. We liked each other. We laughed at the same things. The sex was good. Nothing electric. More like cozy. Lois came down to manage a new health spa, one of a chain. What we tried to do, out of mutual loneliness, was make more out of the relationship than it could support. Then it becomes pretend, and you are both saying things cribbed from half-forgotten books and plays. So the structure slowly topples over, like vanilla ice cream piled too high. At the end of it there was an obscure impulse to shake hands.

So I had a few thousand stashed in my bulkhead bank forward, and the only recent expense of any moment was when I pulled out all the old music equipment, the tuner, amplifier, tap deck, turntable and speakers, and replaced it all with mostly Pioneer and Sony. The state of the art had left me far behind, and last summer I kept myself busy putting the best parts of the record collection onto cassettes, and the best parts of the reel-to-reel tapes onto cassettes as well. I set up a filing system. I was like a combination accountant, librarian and music director. I kept the editing function going for sixteen hours a day, and when everything was all neatened up and labeled, I found myself so sick of the sound of music I didn't want to hear any at all, even from a boat moored three slips away. I knew I would get back into it later, carefully. After I'd given the records and the reel-to-reel tapes away to the local junk

appreciation society, along with the equipment I'd discarded, I had twice the fidelity in the space, very clean sound, crisp as bread sticks. And tired ears.

The only other expense was another Syd Solomon painting. I drove up to a gallery in Boca Raton where he was having a show and picked out a strong little one, twelve inches by sixteen inches, all storm fury and tidal race. He'd put a lot of energy into a small painting. If you want to screw paintings to the bulkheads of boats, you have to pick little ones.

I couldn't think of anything else I wanted to buy. The *Flush* was running well. My old blue Rolls pickup, Miss Agnes, was docile and obedient. And there was still a few thousand dollars below in the waterproof box.

The search for the *Sundowner* didn't promise to elevate anyone's blood pressure. Except maybe Millis'. I knew that if the vessel was in the hands of the drug smugglers, I wanted no part of trying to yank it away from them. Maybe it could have been done six or seven years ago when there was still an innocence about it and the big money item was cannabis. That was when preppies and dropouts and commercial fishermen were going into business in direct competition with unaffiliated batches of Jamaicans, Colombianos, Cubans and poachers from the Everglades. It was a wild time, often turning ugly, but then the professionals came in and organized it. Those who wanted to stay in business for themselves were dropped into the Atlantic and the Caribbean wearing anchor chain, or they were given to the customs agents and Coast Guard as free gifts, along with their boats and gear. Once the import business was organized, the shoreside distribution was revised, along with the cash flow. The big money product became cocaine. Pot was too bulky. They pushed cocaine nationwide, and controlled the supply to keep the price up. A lot of it could be brought in by mules who could pass customs looking innocent. The Navy, Coast Guard and special agents made the small boat runs too risky for amateurs. The fun lads went under, and the business fell into the hands of fellows from the several Mafia families who, having always tried to keep Miami as a neutral zone, teamed up to run the money machine smartly and efficiently, corrupting and paying off enough customs agents of the DEA to reduce losses to an acceptable percentage.

Bringing Hubie's sloop back from Marigot Bay had been a good interlude for me. When we were pounding along on a good reach in hot sunshine, I spent a lot of hours working with the set of exercises Lois had taught me. She said that when you drive along the streets of Beijing in the morning, you see a lot of Chinese standing all alone, doing the same stretching exercises. It is called Tai Chi Chuan, and looks like a kind of imitation combat in slow motion, with no opponent. At first I felt like an idiot. "At your age," Lois said, "it is very important to stay flexible and limber. Each time you make the same move, you force yourself to bend a little further, reach further."

"At my age?" I had said.

"When there is a tendency to accept constricted movements of the joints."

"And how many push-ups can you do?"

"The question is irrelevant."

And so the post-Lois, post-sailing McGee was down very close to two hundred pounds, with a new layer of deep-water tan, and a match in slow-motion combat for any hundred-and-twelve-pound Chinese person.

On Thursday morning I found the Mick in his office in the back corner of a leased hangar at the public-use airport at Southdale. He waved me into a ratty old wicker chair while he

continued to poke two fingers at the keyboard of an Apple 11e computer, copying data from a yellow pad, grunting with annoyance whenever he made a mistake and had to correct it on the screen. He put the data on disk and then printed it and checked the printout against his yellow sheet. He then activated his modem and sent the data out over the phone. He leaned back in his squeaky chair, waiting. He punched a couple of the keys. Suddenly the printer chattered into life, ran off what looked like a full page of information and stopped.

He sighed, tore it off and studied it and flipped it aside. "Dad bang business is getting more frigging complicated all the time."

"What was that all about?"

"It's a couple of programs called DataPlan and OpsPlan. I got three birds I can get into the air and I have to file plans and routes for the next three days, charter work and package delivery. Key West to Marco to Fernandina Beach to Venice to Georgetown to Abaco to Great Exuma to Clearwater to Staniel Cay ... to hell and gone, Trav. And you miss filing or changing a flight plan without enough notice or run an hour early or late and they are all over you like bug worms, laying on the damn fines and penalties, and taking every removable panel off the aircraft, poking around for Lady Caine. Anyway, this gadget makes it easier than it was last year to run my little operation, but I had to pay a little old gal to set in here with me for a couple of weeks teaching me how to run it. I'd like to sell out. There's two different sets of people after me to do just that. But what the hell would I do with my time? Set on a porch? I hate golf and I hate TV and sunshine gives me the brown spots. What do you want from me this time?"

"You still do the aerial photography?"

"Indeed I do. And I still use that little old Aeronca Champ to do it."

"That old rag-wing still able to get it up?"

"And it'll keep on long after both of us are gone, if somebody loves her enough to get the parts made when they fail."

"Here's what I'm looking for. Confidentially." I slid the photograph across the desk, positioned so he would make out the face Meyer had found.

He stared at me, jaw sagging. "McGee, am I hearing you?"

"You are looking for a damn boat? In Florida?"

"And wherever else you can fly that thing."

"You want to pay for a special mission?"

"Not if I can help it. There's no client picking up the tab. It's all me. I'd like you to work in with your other business. Just take pictures whenever you come to a big bunch of boats at a club or marina on city docks or wherever. And when you see the lone cruiser running the water-way or outside, see if it has a face."

"Face? Oh hell yes! I see it. But do you have any idea at all how many boats I fly over, me and my pilots, every day?"

"Just mail me the film. Here's mailers all stamped and addressed. I'll get prints made. Black and white. Fine grain."

"I'll work with wide angle, covers a bigger area. So get enlargements like maybe eight by ten. I got a Nikon C3 with a motor drive rigged to shoot straight down through a hole in the floor, with a long cord on the trigger. But I don't take the Champ to the islands. You said confidential, and I don't make that one by myself often. If I can get away, I like to use the

Champ, low and slow. Now I'm ready to ask the big question."

"Thought you might be. What if you find it?" I asked.

"Like finding the head of a pin in seven haystacks. But what if I do?"

"Your piece of the action could be twenty to thirty thousand."

"What if I don't find it?"

"You're out a little film and a little air time, and we'll sit around and cry a little."

"Remind me never to ask you what you do for a living, McGee."

"It strikes me that all marinas look a lot alike from the air, so if ..."

"I am a professional, friend. I list every shot in order and the list will be in with the exposed film every time."

A thin woman in a red and white jogging suit came into the office, clipboard in hand. "Everything is ready, Mick, except no passengers yet."

He cursed and then looked at the wall clock. "Give them another ten minutes, Carleen, then go ahead and take off. The other stuff had to be in Key West by eleven-thirty. Carleen, this is a friend of mine named Travis McGee. Trav, this is Carleen Hooper, my best pilot aside from me of course."

"Of course," she said, smiling as we shook hands. She went on out to wait for the passengers. Mick said she was a fool for work, and had three little kids to support. "She used to do aerobatics in a Mooney 231 with her husband in a twin version. He bought the farm and she doesn't want to do high-risk flying while her kids are little."

I hung around a little while to give him the usual chance to grouse about how too many regulations are ruining flying for the little guys, and too little regulation is ruining the cash flow for the big guys.

Three

On Tuesday, the ninth of October, I got three rolls of film from the Mick. I took them to a commercial lab and had over ninety eight-by-ten glossy prints in hand by five o'clock when they closed.

As soon as I was back aboard the *Flush*, by referring to the exposure notes Mick had enclosed, I was able to write the location where each picture had been taken on the back of the picture. The dimensions of the task became evident. The big marinas looked like so much uncooked rice scattered across a black maze. Under the magnifying glass the rice became the shiny toys of the yachtsmen, chrome and brass, varnish and plastic, cleats and davits, and aerials, canvas and teak.

It was going to take too much of the rest of my life to peer at each craft looking for the smiling face. Florida was too full of boats. I locked up and took the glass and the sheaf of prints down to Meyer's boat, the *Thorstein Veblen*. It is bigger and roomier, brighter and more open than the stuffy little cruiser he had before, the *John Maynard Keynes*. But already the hairy economist was beginning to wall himself in with books, pamphlets, charts, research papers and water glasses filled with sharp pencils.

He organized the search. It involved a screen, a plane projector and a drink while we waited for darkness. Each print required four projections, as the device could handle only a four-by-five area of the print comfortably. For each print he devised a template. Once we had identified a production boat we knew was fifty-four feet long, Meyer would then cut a U-shaped piece of cardboard to size. It was quick and easy work matching the template to the few fifty-four-footers in each segment of each print. Because the pictures had been taken at varying altitudes, from three hundred to five hundred feet, the template had to be recut for each print. As Meyer remarked, had we been searching for anything in the twenty-two-to-forty-two-foot range, we would have been wedged far up the creek. There were just too many of them. As we got used to looking, the templates became less necessary. Our eyes had adjusted to the relative sizes of the usual mix of pleasure boats, and we could immediately spot the marina areas where the larger ones were docked.

We came across several which could have been the *Sundowner*, but each close comparison with the color shot showed some basic structural differences unlikely to have been altered. We became instant experts at looking down on boats from aloft. We looked at them in marinas, in flotillas, in single-file parade on the waterways, tied up to backyard docks and out trolling the deeps.

It was a little after midnight when we finished the last print. Meyer turned off the projector. My eyes felt sandy and tired. Earlier on, Meyer had set out a package of his notorious chili to thaw. We divided it and I went sleepily back to the *Flush* to take a precautionary pair of antacid tablets before climbing into my lonely acre of bed in the master stateroom.

On Saturday I got four more rolls, too late to get them developed and printed before Monday, the fifteenth. The Monday-night session went a lot faster. Recognition of the right size and shape was more instantaneous. But it was dull work. I began to have the impression we were looking at the same half dozen prints over and over. We yawned a lot. The thought of jackpot can keep the adrenaline flowing, but when it seems indefinitely delayed, the brain sags.

And so, one week later, on the twenty-second, when the jackpot showed up in the second print of some seventy we were prepared to examine, it jolted us. "Hey!" we said. "How about that!" we said. "What do you know!" we said. It had all begun to seem so highly improbable our elation was inappropriately large and lasting. I had scribbled the information from Mick's record on the back of the print. It said "west end Big Pine Key Sunday Oct 14." Meyer adjusted the focus to the sharpest image we could get. There were twenty-two boats in what seemed to be a shaggy little commercial marina on the Florida Bay side, not far from the south bridge. Several with outriggers looked like charter fishermen. The *Sundowner* was the biggest moored there. It smiled up at us.

I couldn't take my information to Billy because all we knew was that it had been there eight days ago.

On Tuesday morning at first light I was heading down toward the Keys, driving a battered old white Chevy pickup with big noisy beach-buggy tires and a Florida tag so old you could just about make out the green number on white from three feet away. But the sticker was up to date. I wore old khakis bleached by sun and salt, a faded red baseball cap which said above the visor, Bay City Bandits. I wore an old pair of ratty gray New Balance running shoes, without socks. I wore aviator-style sunglasses. I wore a fishing knife in a sheath on my right hip. I wore a yellow wind-breaker against the morning chill, and peeled it off as the sun came up.

I had borrowed the pickup from Sam Dandie. He lives aboard the *Merla S.* at Bahia Mar with one or another of his nieces. They like to come visit, he says solemnly, nodding. He invented the Dandie Flotation Gauge when he was thirty-eight, and hasn't worked since. He gives generously to his nieces. Borrowing his pickup is a trade-off. He enjoys driving Mercedes Agnes. He keeps trying to buy her. No way. I loan it to him and he takes a niece off to Disney World for a couple of days of fun and frolic. He takes one of those bungalows where you have everything sent in, if you wish. He has yet to see Epcot.

I reviewed my preparations as I drove. I had a grungy old cooler with ice and two six-packs of Bud. I had my old plug-casting bass rod, and my good spinner, heavy-duty graphite loaded with ten-pound test. I had the big black tackle box full of plugs, spinning lures, lead material, swivels, hooks and miscellany. And down in the bottom of it, under the last tray lay the flat and deadly 9mm automatic pistol with the staggered box magazine holding fourteen rounds, wrapped in a piece of oily flannel. No extra rounds. If fourteen won't do it then it can't be done.

Except for the weapon, I could see no reason in the world why if I said I worked in construction I wouldn't get instant belief.

It took a little while at Big Pine to orient myself. Things look different from on high. It turned out to be called the Starfish Marina. Beer, bait, boats, slips for rent, charter service, guides. The parking area was beside the marina building, a cement-block structure. I could

see the slip where the *Sundowner* had been. It was gone, as I had expected. Luck come floating by a morsel at a time.

The interior was cleaner and brighter than I expected. There were floor racks of fish oriented merchandise, a display case of reels, a wall rack of rods, a couple of coolers and along one wall a line of bait bins with a constant flow of running water through them. A heavy man in a stained canvas apron was skimming off some dead bait fish which floated on top of the water in one of the middle bins, using a small dip net, and dropping them in a bucket.

"Make good chum," I said.

He turned and eyed me. "That's what they generally get used for."

"I meant that there kind, with the big eyes. They seem to cut up greasier than the others."

He finished and dropped the dip net into the bucket and stood up. "What can I do for you?"

"Has a fella name of Al been here looking for me?"

"Who are you?"

"My name is McGee."

"Far as I know nobody has been looking for you."

"He'll probably turn up. We would want to rent a boat. If he shows up. A green skiff like one of those out there would be fine. And twenty horse with a spare tank. Nothing fancy."

"Do you want to rent one or don't you?"

"Only if he shows up. Last time we were here we did good."

"I don't remember you being here."

"We didn't start right from this marina last time. It was one down the line. But we worked our way up this direction. Got some nice trouts off the grass out there."

"If he shows up, how long do you want the boat for?"

"We'd come in right at dusk. What would that be worth?"

"If you start in the next half hour, call it thirty dollars plus the gas."

"Little heavy, isn't it?"

"Going rate. Leave your car here, you don't have to make a deposit."

"It's the white pickup next to the power pole out there."

He glanced out the window and nodded. He went over to the cash register to get his cigarettes. As he lit one I said, "You own this place?"

"Me and the bank."

"You got the kind of work I'd like to do."

"What do you do, McGee?"

"Construction. But it isn't like it used to be. Nobody gives a shit anymore. Slap it together and sell it off and hope the sucker don't fall down before you get paid off."

"True, friend. True. I got a shipment of six reels in a couple weeks ago. Priced to sell for thirty-nine ninety-five each. Four of them defective. So I pay UPS to ship them back and I wait maybe two, three months for replacements or money back. I call up, I get to talk to the machine."

"Well, there's still some damn good merchandise being made in this world."

"Like what?"

"When me and Al went fishing last time, let me see, that would be on Sunday, a week ago last Sunday, when we went by here a couple times I noticed you had a big custom cruiser

here. Looked rich and sassy and really put together. I'd guess at least fifty feet, maybe more. Right out there it was, at that last slip."

"Good boat, but she wasn't kept up."

"Shame to let something like that go downhill. What was the name of it?"

"*Lazidays*. Registered out of Biloxi. Come across from Yucatan. A smart-ass redhead kept running it. Couple of girls aboard." He opened a blue notebook. "Kid's name was John Rogers. Came in Saturday night, took off Monday early. It was fifty-four feet. And it was a hog pen. When I saw how they were keeping her, I made them pay cash in advance."

"They came across from where?"

"Mexico, Yucatan. The redhead didn't tell me that. One of the girls, the blonde one, told me. She came in to buy beer and wanted to know if I'd take pesos. I said maybe, because my youngest, she likes coins. So I bought four different coins for a dollar. She kept scratching her legs and she said the bugs were terrible in Chetumal and I said where's that, and she waved west and said over in Yucatan there."

"I guess these days they check those boats out pretty good, the ones coming in from the west or the southwest."

He shrugged. "Sometimes yes, sometimes no. They're spread thin. Those from around here got into it, some are in the U.S. prison and some can't stop smiling. I wouldn't have the nerve for it. They even use satellites. So these days it's by airplane or real fast boats running at night. And it's none of my business if a boat I rent dock space to got checked or not."

"Mine either," I said. "What you get for this here Mirralure?"

"Four and quarter plus tax."

"Guess I'll take it. Big snook up in Chokoloskee Bay chewed mine raggedy."

"Hard to make them hit a plug."

"I put a little strip of white fish belly on the back-end gang hook and then work it like a wounded minnow. The ones that take it seem to usually be the big ones. Permit take this?"

"Permit'll hit anything at all or nothing at all, depending."

"Never have fastened on to one of those."

"You do, it's something to remember. Best to get a guide for them."

"Too rich for my blood, friend." I walked over and looked out the door. "Wish Al would show up."

"Want to use the phone, see what time he left?"

It seemed reasonable, so I telephoned Meyer collect aboard the *Veblen* and when he answered, I said, "Al! Al, what the hell are you doing home? I've been waiting here at the Starfish Marina for you. You forget?"

"No, I didn't forget, McGee. I tried to get hold of you before you left but you'd already gone. I've got the flu."

"Couldn't you have phoned here?"

"I forgot the name of it. I remember where it is, but I couldn't remember the name."

"Thanks a lot, old buddy!" I said, and hung up on him.

I explained. The proprietor commiserated with me. I thanked him for his help, started out and turned back and said, "Did that *Lazidays* boat head back to Mexico?"

"I don't know and don't care. Why should you, McGee?"

He had the frosty look of sudden suspicion. I'd mentioned it once too often. I shrugged and

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