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MACDONALD

A *Travis McGee* NOVEL

THE GREEN RIPPER



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—JOHN SA

“One of the great sagas in American fiction.”

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—*Los Angeles Times*

THE GREEN RIPPER

A *Travis McGee* NOVEL

John D. MacDonald



RANDOM HOUSE TRADE PAPERBACKS
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The Green Ripper 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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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 long-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 strangest, 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 operators 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.

LEE CHILD
New York
2012

To Maxwell P. Wilkinson
Representative and Friend

Fanaticism is described as redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim.

—GEORGE SANTAYANA

Meyer came aboard the *Busted Flush* on a dark, wet, windy Friday afternoon in early December. I had not seen him in nearly two months. He looked worn and tired, and he had faded to an indoor pallor. He shucked his rain jacket and sat heavily in the biggest chair and said he wouldn't mind at all if I offered him maybe a little bourbon, one rock, a dollop of water.

"Where's Gretel?" he asked as I handed him his drink.

"Moved out," I said. He looked so dismayed I quickly added that she had found herself a job, finally, way the hell and gone over in the suburb of Tamarac, west of North Lauderdale and west of the Turnpike, out in the area of the shiny new developments and shopping plazas, near University Community Hospital and Timber Run Golf Club. "Couldn't get any farther away and still be in the same metropolitan area. It takes at least forty minutes to drive over there."

"Doing what?"

"The outfit is called, excuse the expression, Bonnie Brae. It is a combination fat farm, tennis club, and real estate development. She works in the office, lives in one of the modern houses, gives tennis lessons to the littlies, exercise classes for the fatties, and is becoming indispensable. She can tell you all about it. She'll be here about six or six thirty."

"I was afraid you two had split."

"No chance. I'm not going to let that one get away."

"Splendid judgment."

"It's a phase, Meyer. She did hard time in a bad marriage and says it stunted her. She has to make it on her own, she says, to become a complete person, and when she is, then we can think about what kind of arrangement we're going to have."

"Makes a certain amount of sense."

"Not to me."

"But you're not ... being derisive or patronizing?"

"Hell, no. I am being full of understanding, and all that."

I didn't want to try to tell him what a vacuum she left when she packed and moved out. The houseboat was dimly empty. When I woke up, if I wanted to hear clinking sounds from the galley, I had to go make them myself. The winter boats were beginning to come down, filling up the empty berths, spewing out their slender and elegant ladies to walk the area, shopping and smiling, providing what in times past had been like one of those commercial hatcheries where you pay a fee and catch your own trout and take it home to cook. But Gretel had made all the pretty ladies look brittle, bloodless, and tasteless, and made the time without her seem leaden and endless.

In another season there were the girls of summer, robust and playful in their sandy ways, and now here were the winter ones, with cool surmise in the tended eye, fragrant and speculative, strolling and shopping, sailing and tanning, then making their night music and night scent, searching for something they could not quite name, but would know once they found it.

“How did the conference go?” I asked.

He shook a weary head. “These are bad days for an economist, my friend. We have gone past the frontiers of theory. There is nothing left but one huge ugly fact.”

“Which is?”

“There is a debt of perhaps two trillion dollars out there, owed by governments to governments, by governments to banks, and there is not one chance in hell it can ever be paid back. There is not enough productive capacity in the world, plus enough raw materials to provide maintenance of plant plus enough overage even to keep up with the mounting interest.”

“What happens? It gets written off?”

He looked at me with a pitying expression. “All the major world currencies will collapse. Trade will cease. Without trade, without the mechanical-scientific apparatus running, the planet won’t support its four billion people, or perhaps even half that. Agribusiness feeds the world. Hydrocarbon utilization heats and houses and clothes the people. There will be fear, hate, anger, death. The new barbarism. There will be plague and poison. And then the new Dark Ages.”

“Should I pack?”

“Go ahead. Scoff. What the sane people and sane governments are trying to do is scuffle for a little more breathing space, a little more time, before the collapse.”

“How much time have we got?”

“If nobody pushes the wrong button or puts a bomb under the wrong castle, I would give us five more years at worst, twelve at best. What is triggering it is the crisis of reduced expectations. All over the world people are suddenly coming to realize that their children and grandchildren are going to have it worse than they did, that the trend line is down. So they want to blame somebody. They want to hoot and holler in the streets and burn something down.”

“Whose side are you on?”

“I’m one of the scufflers. Cut and paste. Fix the world with paper clips and rubber bands.”

“Are you *trying* to depress me, old buddy?”

“On Pearl Harbor Day?”

“So it is.”

“And with each passing year it is going to seem ever more quaint, the little tin airplanes bombing the sleepy iron giants.”

“There you go again.”

He yawned and I noticed again how worn he looked. The international conference had been held in Zurich. There had been high hopes—the newspapers said—for a solution to the currency problems, but as it went on and on and on, interest could not be sustained, no one could hope.

“How was the trip back, Meyer?”

“I was too sound asleep to notice.”

“Did you all just sit around and read papers to each other?”

“There was some of that. Yes. But most of it was workshop, computer analysis. Feed all the known, unchangeable factors into the program, and then add the ones that can be changed, predicating interdependence, making the variations according to a pattern, and analyzing the

shape of the world that emerges, each one a computer model. Very bright young specialists assisted. We came out all too close to the doom anticipated by the Club of Rome, no matter how we switched the data around. It comes down to this, Travis—there are too many mouths to feed. One million three hundred thousand more every week! And of all the people who have ever been alive on Earth, more than half are living right now. We are gnawing the planet bare, and technology can't keep pace with need."

I had never seen him more serious, or more depressed. I fixed him a fresh drink when Gretel arrived. I met her, and after the welcome kiss, she looked over my shoulder and gave a whoop of surprise and pleasure at seeing Meyer. She thrust me aside and ran into his delighted bear hug. Then she held him off at arm's length and tilted her head to give him her brown-eyed measuring stare.

"You look *awful!*" she said. "You look like you just got out of jail."

"Fairly good guess. And you look fantastic, Gretel."

"It goes with the job. I got sort of sloppy living on this barge, eating too much and drinking too much. Today I jogged with four sets of fatties. I must have done seven miles. I've got the greatest new job."

"Travis was telling me about it."

"You'll have to come out and let me show you around." Quite suddenly the enthusiasm had faded out of her voice. I couldn't imagine why. She gave me a quick look and looked away and went to the galley to fix herself one of her vegetable juice cocktails.

I followed her and said, "Is something wrong out there?"

"No. Of course not."

"Hey, Grets. This here is me. Asking."

"I hear you asking. I think I might fall right off the wagon right now. I'm down to where I can spare a few pounds. Straight Boodles and rocks, okay?"

"When you come down off it, you come down a way."

She leaned against a storage locker as I fixed her drink. I looked at her, a great little woman who, on tiptoe, could almost look me in the eye. Thick brown sun-streaked hair, dark-brown eyes, firm jaw, broad mouth, high-bridged imperious nose. A woman of passion, intensity, good humor, mocking grace, and a very irritating and compelling need for total—almost total—independence. During all the lazy weeks aboard the *Busted Flush* when, after the death of her brother in Timber Bay, I had brought her all the way around the peninsula to Fort Lauderdale, we had arrived at last at a relationship she had decided did not threaten her freedom. She was a hearty and sensuous woman, and for a long time she was suspicious and reluctant in lovemaking, apparently feeling that my increasing knowledge of her body and resources, its needs and rhythms and special stimuli, was somehow an exercise in ownership. But after she decided to accept completely, she became herself—forthright, evocative, and deliciously bawdy when the mood was upon her.

After she took a sip of her drink I put fingertips under her chin, tilted it up, kissed her gently on the lips, and then said, "Whatever it is, I would like to know. Okay? Like the management trying to slip up on your blind side?"

She grinned. "*That* I can handle, McGee. What makes you think there's a blind side?"

"If there isn't, what are you doing *here?*"

She frowned into her drink. "I think I'll tell both of you. I think I could use more than one

opinion.”

We went back in and she sat next to Meyer on the yellow davenport. “What it is,” she said, “I think something other than what is supposed to be going on out there, is going on out there.”

“Bonnie Brae is a front for something else?” I asked.

“Not really that,” she said. “I mean, it’s pretty big and elaborate. Mr. Ladwigg and Mr. Broffski borrowed a fantastic amount of money to buy the land. It’s twelve hundred and eighty acres. There was a big stone-and-cypress house on it, and outbuildings. It was called the Cattrell place and was empty for years while the estate was being settled. They put half-million dollars into renovating the house and some of the other buildings. And they put in roads and a sewage-treatment plant, water supply, and all that. And they fixed the airstrip near the barns. They are digging lakes, and building and selling houses, and selling building sites. We can accommodate twenty-four fatties in the main house at one time, feed them from the diet kitchen, and keep them busy. They pay twelve hundred a week, and there’s a waiting list. And there’s a waiting list for membership in the tennis club too. I mean without knowing all the financial details, I’d say it’s going very well. Mr. Ladwigg and Mr. Broffski have both built houses for themselves in the best part of the development, where the lots have to be two acres each, and Mr. Morse Slater, the manager, has a new house near theirs. There are twenty-five or thirty new houses occupied, and room for an awful lot more of course. There are some staff quarters in the back of the main house, because it is sort of like a small hotel, or hospital. There is a nice flavor. I mean it’s a good place to work. We have some laughs. People get along.” Her voice trailed off and she sipped and frowned.

“And now something doesn’t seem right?” Meyer asked, prompting her.

She smiled and leaned back. “Maybe I was lied to for too many years. Husband Billy was a world-champion-class liar. Brother John wasn’t exactly clumsy at it.”

“What’s my rating?” I asked.

“All the returns aren’t in. What I’m saying, maybe I get suspicious when there’s no real need.”

“We’ve got the whole evening, my dear,” Meyer said. “If we’re all patient, you’ll probably get to the point sooner or later.”

“I guess I’m dragging my feet because it sounds so weird I hate to mention it. Last week I had a batch of fatties down by the barns in the middle of the morning, making them do exercises, when a pretty little blue airplane landed on our strip. When I went back to the office, I asked Mr. Slater who had come in and he said that it was somebody to see Mr. Ladwigg, he didn’t know what about. I asked because sometimes a buyer flies in, and when they buy something, it means more paperwork for me. Now we come to the coincidence part. I woke up real early the next morning. It was brisk and clear. The model house I’m living in is about a half mile from the office. A couple of days before, I lost a pin I like very much while leading a group jogging. So I put on a heavy sweater and went out to retrace our route, thinking maybe I could find it in the grass. I was over by the airstrip, searching near a patch of palmetto, when I heard a motor. For a moment I thought it was a plane, and then I stepped out almost into the path of Herman Ladwigg’s Toyota, going cross-country. It’s like a Land Rover, tall and open, with winches and things, and huge tires. It’s white with red trim. Mr. Ladwigg was driving, and it startled him as much as it did me, I guess. I dodged back

and I was on the passenger side of it as it went by. So the face of the man riding with Meyer and Ladwigg was not more than a yard away from me. I saw him very very clearly. And I knew in that split second I had seen him before. He looked right at me, and I saw the flicker of his recognition. He knew me too. But I couldn't remember where or when. All I could remember was that it had been an unpleasant experience."

"You can describe him?"

"Oh, sure. Big, but not fat. Big-boned. About forty, maybe a little less. Kind of a round face, with all his features sort of small and centered in the middle of all that face. Wispy blond hair cut quite short. No visible eyebrows or eyelashes. Lots and lots of pits and craters in his cheeks, from terrible acne when he was young. Little mouth, little pale eyes, girlish little nose. He was wearing a khaki jacket over a white turtleneck. He was holding on to the side of the passenger door because of the rough ride. His hands are very big and ... well, brutal-looking."

Meyer said, "It doesn't sound as if there could be two like that. But it's possible, of course. Maybe his change of expression was not recognition, but surprise at seeing somebody pop up like that."

"No. He knew me. Because I remembered two nights ago, in the middle of the night, when I'd seen him. As soon as I remembered, I knew it was the same man. Five years ago Billy's sister, my kid sister-in-law, Mitsy, disappeared. The family was frantic. She'd been in school up near San Francisco. She had just taken her things and gone away. Billy got time off from work and went up to San Francisco and nosed around and found out she had been hanging around with some kids who were connected with a religion called ... damn! It will come to me."

"The Unification Church, the Moonies?" Meyer asked. She shook her head. "Hare Krishna? Scientology? Children of God? The Jesus People? The Church of Armageddon?"

She stopped him and said, "That's close, that last one. It's like Apocalypse. Wait a minute. Apocrypha! The Church of the Apocrypha."

"Very *interesting!*" Meyer said.

"What's an apocrypha?" I asked.

"It's plural," he said. "Fourteen books or chapters which are sort of an appendix to the Old Testament and are not acceptable to the establishment. Seldom printed. They are bloodthirsty, merciless, and, some say, divinely inspired. Authorship unsubstantiated. I suspect that any religion based upon them would be ... severe indeed."

"A postcard finally came from Mitsy," Gretel said. "It was mailed from Ukiah, California. It was addressed to her mother, father, her two brothers, and me. All it said was, 'Remember that I will always love you, but I will never see you again in this life.' You can imagine how that hit me. Mitsy was such a ... such a *merry* little gal. Pretty and bouncy and popular. Your standard cheerleader type. No steady boyfriend. She wanted to be a social worker and work with handicapped children."

"Anyway, her father hired an investigator, and he located an encampment of the Church of the Apocrypha about twenty miles southwest of Ukiah, off in the woods. He had tried to go in to find out if Mitsy was there, but he couldn't learn a thing. Just about that time, her father—my father-in-law—had a stroke, a severe one. His right side was totally paralyzed and he couldn't speak or understand what anyone said. He died of pneumonia about four

months later. Billy's younger brother was working in Iran. So when we could, Billy and I drove up to the encampment, using the map the investigator had marked.

"There were little winding roads, and finally we came to the private, no-trespassing sign he had told us about, and the wire gate across the road. A young boy came out of a lean-to. He wore a dirty white smock and he was trying to grow a beard. We said we wanted to visit Miriam Howard, Mitsy Howard. He nodded and walked away up the curving road beyond the wire gate, and out of sight. We waited and waited and waited. Billy got very angry. I had to keep talking him out of going over the gate. It was over an hour before that man came down the road. That *same man*. He was five years younger, of course. He wore a white tunic with a Chinese collar, and white trousers tucked into shiny black boots. He came right to the high fence and looked us over very carefully. He completely ignored the angry questions Billy was shouting at him.

"Finally he spoke to us. There was so little movement of his lips it was as if he were a ventriloquist. He had a soft little voice. 'I am Brother Titus. I am an elder of the Church of the Apocrypha. You are inquiring about someone we now know as Sister Aquila. She has asked me to tell you that she is quite happy here and she does not wish to see you or anyone from her previous life.'

"Billy demanded to see her. He swore at Titus. It had no effect. He said it wasn't possible now, not ever. She was happy in her new life, he said. Billy said he was going to see her sister Mitsy, and if it took a court order for a conservatorship, he would get it. He'd gotten that information from the investigator.

"Brother Titus thought for a little while and told us to wait. In twenty minutes a little crowd of them, about nine or ten, came down to the gate. We didn't see Brother Titus again. The people ranged in age from, I would guess, sixteen to twenty-five. Three or four girls, and the rest boys. At first we thought they had come without Mitsy, and then we recognized her. It was a shock. She had become such a worn, skinny, subdued little thing. She wore a dirty white smock and she had some kind of serious rash on her face and throat and arms. They all looked badly chapped. The smock was too big for her. All of them had exactly the same look. It's hard to describe. Sort of bland and smug and glassy.

"They stood very close to her as she stood at the gate. She said, 'Hello, Billy. Hello, Gretchen. I don't know how you found me, but I'm sorry you did.' Billy said, 'What have they *done* to you, Mitsy?' She said, 'My name is Sister Aquila now. They have made me very happy. I am full of peace and happiness and the love of God. Please don't ever try to find me again. Tell Mama and Papa I'm happy here, happier than I've ever been before.' Billy said, 'You better come home. Pop has had a very bad stroke. Things are in terrible shape. We all need you.' She didn't turn a hair. She looked at him with that contented half smile and said, 'All of that is in my previous life. It has nothing to do with me now. My life is here. Go away, please. God bless you.' They all turned and went up the hill together, so close together they made each other stumble from time to time. They all had exactly that same *look*. It took the heart right out of Billy."

"Did you make another try?" Meyer asked.

"Billy did. He went up there several weeks later, but they told him she was gone. They said she had been 'called' to another place in the service of the Lord. If it wasn't for the stroke, maybe the family would have taken some kind of action through the courts, but money was

scarce, and God knows Billy and I couldn't finance a court order and deprogramming her and all that. The brother came back from Iran about six months before Billy ran out on me. Can't remember his name is. He couldn't understand why we couldn't get her away from those people. He wasn't here. He couldn't know how it was. He lives in Houston now, at least he did the last I heard, and their mother lives with him and his wife."

"So you saw Brother Titus here, last week?" I said.

"Definitely. He was so ... so out of context, it took a while to remember where I'd seen him before. But I am positive. Trav, there's another thing that seems odd. After they went back to me, they headed for the airstrip, and a little later the blue plane took off. I saw it take off and head west. When Mr. Ladwigg drove back home, he drove on the road. Why did he take Brother Titus on such a roundabout way? Was it because Titus didn't want to be seen by anybody?"

"Maybe he was showing him some land. Maybe the Church wants to set up an encampment here," I said.

"Where there isn't any available? That piece was sold months ago."

"To whom?" Meyer asked.

"To some kind of foreign syndicate, headquartered in Brussels. I was told they plan to put up a hotel-club where members can come for holidays in the States. They took twenty undeveloped acres over on our western boundary near the airstrip."

"For foreign members of the Church of the Apocrypha?" Meyer asked with a sweet smile.

"Oh, no!" Gretel looked horrified. "Mr. Ladwigg and Mr. Broffski and Mr. Slater would not have fits. It can't be that, really. Could it, Travis? Could that creep ..."

"Not at the price they're probably getting out there."

"Two hundred and twenty-five thousand. It was a special price because of no roads and no water supply or sewer."

"Maybe Brother Titus left the Church," I suggested. "Maybe he's into real estate. That has the status of a religion in south Florida."

She didn't laugh. She was scowling. "I keep thinking of Mitsy. Her hands were grubby and her hair was caked with dirt. She had sores on her ankles. She looked exhausted. I am damn well going to find out exactly what that man is doing around there. And it can't be anything good."

"You two are well-matched," Meyer said. "You both have the same kind of compulsive curiosity. I will tell you what I tell Travis, my dear. Proceed with caution. The world is full of damp rocks, with some very strange creatures hiding under them."

"Herm Ladwigg is an old honey bear," she said. "He would not be involved in anything tricky or dirty. And if I can think of the right way to ask him, he'll tell me what's going on."

The next time we looked at Meyer, we found he had fallen asleep in the chair. He would bitterly resent our leaving him like that, so we stirred him awake. He said he was too tired to eat, and over Gretel's protests that she could stir up something in a hurry, he went clumping on back to his stubby old cabin cruiser moored just down the pier from my slip, the *John Maynard Keynes*, sighing in consternation at the state of all the money in the world.

We buttoned up the *Busted Flush*. Gretel kicked off her shoes and hung herself around my neck and grinned into my face and said, "Well ... will it be before or after the crabmeat feast? I am going to fix us?"

I gave it judicious thought. "How about a little of both?"

"How did I know you were going to say that?"

"Because I usually do."

"Shut up and deal," she whispered.

So the gusty winds of a Friday night in December came circling through the marina grinding and tilting all the play boats and work boats around us, creaking the hulls against the fenders, clanking fittings against masts. While in the big bed in the master stateroom her narrowed eyes glinted in faint reflected light, my hands found the well-known slopes and lifelines and hollows of her warmth and agility. We played the games of delay and anticipation, teasing and waiting, until we went past the boundaries of willed restraint and came in a mounting rush that seemed to seek an even greater closeness than the paired loins could provide. And then subsided, with the outdoor wind making breathing sounds against the superstructure of the old barge-type houseboat, and the faint swing and dip of the hull seeming to echo, in a slower pace, the lovemaking just ended. With neither of us knowing or guessing that it was the very last night. With neither of us able to endure that knowledge had we been told.

Because Gretel had too many jobs at Bonnie Brae, she went back out Saturday morning to catch up on her desk work, driving off in the little Honda Civic I had helped her find and buy. It had belonged to a hairdresser at Pier 66 who had decided to marry her friend and go live in Saudi Arabia. It was pink, with a special muffler.

She planned to come in again early Saturday evening and stay until Monday morning. It was a bright breezy day. My two best Finor reels were overdue for cleaning and oiling, and I had the first one all apart when Grets phoned me from work.

Her voice was hushed. "Darling, there is one hell of a mess out here. Herm is dead."

"Herm?"

"Ladwigg. Mr. Ladwigg. One of the owners."

"Heart attack?"

"They don't know yet. He's been bicycling early in the morning lately, for exercise, riding around the new roads they put in. And they found him in the middle of the road, facedown next to the bicycle. He either blacked out and the fall killed him ... they just don't know yet. He was forty-six. What I wanted to say, don't expect me tonight, huh? Catherine—Mr. Ladwigg—is in shock. They gave her a sedative. I'm here at the Ladwigg house trying to get in touch with their son and daughter. The son is a lawyer in Anchorage and the daughter works for the U.S. Embassy in Helsinki, and I haven't got through to either of them yet. When I do, I'm going to stay here until one or both of them get here. There's nobody else to do it. Stan Broffski's wife is a total loss in a situation like this."

"Want me to come out and help you wait around?"

"That's nice of you, but no, thanks."

"Let me know when you think you'll be free, when you have an idea of the time."

"Sure. Bye, dear."

So I went back to my fish reels. It was just ten o'clock, Saturday morning, December 1971. They were having their weekend in Helsinki and in Anchorage. No telling how long it would take to find either of them. In the meanwhile, poor Herm had succumbed to the age of the jock. The mystique of pushing yourself past your limits. The age of shin splints, sprung knees and new hernias. An office-softened body in its middle years needs a long, long time to come around. Until a man can walk seven miles in two hours without blowing like a porpoise without sweating gallons, without bumping his heart past 120, it is asinine to start jogging. Except for a few dreadful lapses which have not really gone on too long, I have stayed in shape all my life. Being in shape means knowing your body, how it feels, how it responds to this and to that, and when to stop. You develop a sixth sense about when to stop. It is not mysticism. It is brute labor, boring and demanding. Violent exercise is for children and knowledgeable jocks. Not for insurance adjustors and sales managers. They do not need to be in the shape they want to be, and could not sustain it if they could get there. Walking briskly for no less than six hours a week will do it for them. The McGee System for earnest office people. I can push myself considerably further because I sense when I'm getting too close to the place where something is going to pop, rip, or split.

Meyer stopped by a little while after I'd finished the reels. He said he had slept fourteen hours and still felt tired. I told him about the trouble out at Bonnie Brae, and he agreed with me that Ladwigg had probably pushed himself beyond his ability. A fall onto asphalt paving from a ten-speed bike going twenty miles an hour can easily be fatal, especially without a helmet. I doubted Ladwigg would wear a crash helmet while cruising his own development in the early hours.

Gretel phoned again at half-past noon to say she had located the son in Alaska and told him the news, and he expected to be able to get to Lauderdale late this same night.

"You sound a little beat," I said.

"Do I? The phone has been driving me crazy. But I do feel sort of blah. As if I'm coming down with a bug."

"Can you get somebody to take over?"

"I'm trying."

"I think I'll come on out."

"I ... I'll be glad to see you."

Meyer left. I locked up the *Flush*, went over to the parking area, and cranked up my ancient Rolls pickup, the electric-blue Miss Agnes. The replaced power plant yanked her along too fast for her tall antique dignity, like a dowager blown into an unwilling trot by a gale-force wind. I made a stop on Spangler and picked up a pair of quarter-pounders with cheese, on the assumption that Gretel wouldn't have had time for lunch either.

I went all the way over to the University Drive intersection and turned north past the new plazas and shopping centers, the caramel-colored condominiums, the undeveloped flatlands where the palmetto still grew, the clusters of wooden town houses with roofs cut into steep new architectural clichés to shed some unimaginable snow load. Bonnie Brae had marked their entrance with squat fat brick pillars on either side of their divided-lane driveway. I curved off to the right to the big parking area near the renovated Cattrell place now used as a clubhouse, fat farm, and administration building. When the gusty wind slowed, there was heat in the sun. I could see people bobbing and trotting about over on the tennis courts.

I went into the foyer of the building, hoping to find somebody who would direct me to Ladwigg's new house. A man came out of a room at my right and walked up to me, hand out.

"Mr. McGee?" He was a boyish thirty-something, with apple cheeks, a bushy blond mustache, thinning blond hair carefully adjusted to hide the thinning, bow tie, gray tweed jacket with leather elbows. When I nodded he shook my hand heartily and said, "I'm Morris Slater. Maybe Gretel has mentioned me."

"The manager, yes." He had a bumbling kind of effusiveness about him, a shoe-cleaning willingness to please, which was given the lie by the ice-blue eyes, intent, aware, measuring. I said, "What I want to know is how I find the—"

"Gretel told me to look out for you. I just took her up the Drive to the hospital. Got back minutes ago."

"What happened?"

"Some sort of bug, I think. She seemed to be in a half faint, and she felt so hot to the touch it frightened me. So I took her right to Emergency and signed her in. They took her temperature and checked her into the hospital and began tests. A Dr. Tower seemed to be the one giving the orders. We accepted financial responsibility, of course. All our people have

insurance which ... but you're not interested in that. Room one thirty-three."

I think he tried to say something else, but I was already on my way. The hospital was on the same side of University Drive, and a little more than a half mile away.

I managed to talk my way to the nurses' station and then down the corridor to the room where Gretel was. It was a two-bed room with an old woman asleep and snoring by the windows, with a curtain drawn between the two beds. I pulled a straight chair close beside Gretel and took her hand. It felt dry and hot.

"What's going on?" I asked her.

Her lips were swollen and cracked, and her brown hair was damp and matted. She moistened her lips and gave me a small wry smile. "It's one of those days," she said. "One day. Oh boy. I got up and busted my favorite coffee mug that you gave me. Herm Ladwigg died in the street. A bug gave me a hell of a sting in the back of the neck. Later on, when I began to feel dizzy, I fainted and fell and broke one of the big lamps in the Ladwigg house. And here I am. It's one of those days."

"What do they say is wrong?"

"They don't say. Fever of unknown origin. My ears are ringing so loud you should be able to hear them. I really feel weird."

"They're running tests, aren't they? They'll find out what you've got."

A little bit of a sallow blond nurse came hurrying in. She had a fifty-year-old face and a twenty-five-year-old body. She gave me a disapproving glance, took a temperature reading with an electronic gadget, then took blood pressure on the left arm, pursed her lips, came around and displaced me, and took the pressure on the other arm. She trotted out. I moved close. Gretel found my wrist with her hot dry hand and held tight. "Trav, I feel so hot. I'm burning up. I feel terrible, Trav. Terrible."

When I spoke to her again, she didn't answer. She seemed to be asleep, her eyes about one-third open, breathing so rapidly and shallowly through her mouth, it scared me.

I went plunging out to find somebody and ran into a couple of orderlies pushing a stretcher. I asked them what was going on, and they said they were taking a patient named Gretel Howard to Intensive Care. Other than that, they knew nothing.

I followed along, after they had raised the bed and pulled her across onto the stretcher. They tried to keep me from getting into the elevator with her, but it didn't work. But they did stop me at the door to the Intensive Care area. I told a very large white-haired nurse that if somebody didn't come and tell me within ten minutes what was going on, I was coming through that door.

The doctor who came out said his name was Tower. Vance Tower. He led me over to some rattan chairs near a window and we sat down and he said, "I need some background here."

"What's the matter with her?"

He had taken a little Pearlcarder out of his pocket and put it into dictation mode. "Name, address, and occupation, please," he said, and held it up between us. They make you play their game their way, and if you want a lot of delays, just refuse to go along. Travis McGehee, Slip F-18, Bahia Mar Marina. Salvage Consultant.

"Relationship to patient?"

I hesitated, then said, "Common-law husband." After all, she had lived aboard the houseboat with me for a lot of weeks.

He was a dumpy-looking man, soft and pale and too heavy, going bald, short of breath, looking out of tired little brown eyes at me, showing no reaction at all to my answers.

“How can we contact her close relatives?”

“There aren’t any. Parents and only brother are dead. She is divorced from her first husband. No children. I think there may be some distant kin, second cousins and so on, but I would have no idea how to reach them.”

“Where has she been lately? Geographically, that is.”

“Lately? Up until May she was living in Timber Bay over on the west coast. Then we came around to Lauderdale aboard my houseboat. We took our time. Got here in early August. She lived aboard and then moved to one of the model houses at Bonnie Brae to be closer to her work. A temporary arrangement.”

“Did she go out of the country at any time since last May?”

“No.”

“Has she been in swamp country?”

“No. Why?”

“Do you know if any of the people she has been associated with have been taken seriously ill, quite suddenly?”

“I don’t know if this is what you mean, but one of the owners of Bonnie Brae fell off his bicycle this morning and—”

“I know about that. I mean an illness like hers, characterized by extremely high temperatures, sporadic delirium, cardiac arrhythmia, and fading blood pressure.”

“I can’t think of anyone we know who’s been sick lately. What’s wrong with her?”

“I’ve ordered every lab test I can think of. I don’t approve of the shotgun approach of antibiotics, but I’m giving her a wide range of those. If we can’t knock that fever down another way, I’m going to try packing her in ice.” He sighed heavily. “The big problem with treating something when you don’t know what it is, you can make diagnosis all that more difficult.”

“Can I see her?”

He thought it over, then nodded. “They’ll be busy in there. You can see her five minutes out of every hour. I’ll approve that. It won’t be pleasant for you, and I doubt if she’ll know you’re there.”

A nurse came out and motioned to him, and he got up and plodded in, through the double doors. Man at work. A very tired man. But he was an empathetic man because, about ten minutes later, he beckoned to me and took me to her bedside. The rapid shallow breathing had eased. There was an I.V. rigged, dripping into the vein in her arm. Her cheeks seemed hollower than they had looked an hour before, in her room, her eyes more sunken.

He said in a low voice, “We knocked the fever down almost one degree. First sign of progress.”

We walked out together and he said, “I’m making a full report of all our findings to Disease Control in Atlanta. Do you know anything about the red welt on the back of her neck?”

“She told me she was bitten by a bug this morning. She said it stung her.”

“Symptoms bear no relation to anaphylactic shock. We’ve taken some tissue from the area. It’s being packed in dry ice and flown to Atlanta, along with blood samples and so forth. Got more sophisticated analysis systems available up there. Paper chromatography. Thin-layer

chromatology techniques.”

The hours blurred. I went in as often as I could. Night and day inside hospitals are too much alike. Saturday night. Sunday. Sunday night. She kept changing, little by little, going farther away from me. They did a tracheotomy, and from then on a machine was doing her breathing for her, pumping her chest up and down. When I bent close to her to touch my lips to her dank forehead, I could detect the faint sour smell of mortal illness. At one point, early in the vigil, I went out to the car and made the mistake of trying to eat one of the clammy hamburgers and was sick on the asphalt.

Meyer came out, bringing a change of clothes and my toilet kit. A nurse found me a towel and took me to a place where I could shower and scrape the pale stubble off my tired brow and jaws.

Somebody forgot to stop me and tell me. I went in a little after eleven on Monday night and she was gone. The bed was empty. The equipment had been moved away.

“Where is she?” I roared, and they came running toward me, hushing me, ushering me toward the door.

A big black nurse, big as a tight end, had been answering questions for me during other visits during that shift. She took hold of my shoulders and gave me a shake. “Easy now! Easy now!” she said in a husky whisper. “It’s better we lost her.”

“Better than what?”

“Hush now. You hush down. A temperature like that, for so long, it cooked her brain. She would have been a vegetable. Terrible thing, a strong young woman like that.” She had led me out into the corridor. “Who you got to come get you?”

“I’ll manage.” I tried to smile. The tears were running down my face. No sobs. No shudders. Just eyes running. “Where is she now?”

“They’re doing an autopsy.”

“Who said they could!”

“It’s a law, Mr. McGee. When the cause of death is unknown, they have to. There’s no way anybody can stop them, and that’s a good law. Whatever is killing people, we have to find out.”

“What finally happened? There was that machine ...”

She shrugged. “Total kidney failure, and then the heart gave out right about the same time.” She shook her head. Her eyes were shining with unshed tears. “I don’t know. We got so many old ones here. Not young strong women like her. Whatever it was, it came and worked her right down to nothing. It took the life right out of her. It ate her up, like it was some hungry thing.” She caught herself. “Sorry. I talk too much. Listen, if you’re the only one she had, what you’ve got to do now, you’ve got to make the arrangements. She’s got to have a burial.”

I walked on out of their hospital, snuffling from time to time, marveling that I could walk with so little thought and effort. Long strides, heels thudding against the tile floor, hands lifting without conscious command to flatten against the push plate on the big glass door. I pushed and let me out into the chill night, spangled with stars that were faint above the security lights of the parking area. I walked to the tall dark shape of Miss Agnes, my ancient Rolls-Royce and leaned against one of her high front fenders, my arms folded, ankles crossed, eyes running again.

Cessation. Ending. A stopping of her. I heard the night sounds of country and city. Yawk of a night bird nearby. Faraway eerie pulsing of siren. Whispering drone of light traffic on University Drive, lights in moving patterns. Grinding whine of trucks moving fast, a mile or so away. Random night wind clattering palm fronds. This was the world, bustling its way on through its allotted four billion more years of time, carrying its four billion souls gracelessly onward. A lot of them had stopped tonight, some in blood and terror. I tried to comprehend the enormity—the obscenity—of the fact that Gretel Howard had been one of them, just as dead as the teenagers who impacted a tree at a hundred and ten miles an hour near Tulsa, the flying dentist who didn't see the power lines, the Muslim children dead by fire in Bangladesh, the three hundred elderly in Florida who would not make it through the night in the nursing-home beds.

I could not fit my mind around the realization of finality. There seemed to be more time that would happen for the two of us, more of life to be consumed and completed. My body knew with a dreadful precision all the contours of her, the shapes and fittings, the sighs and turnings, gasps and pressures.

I sought refuge in a child's dreaming. They had spirited her away, mended her, and would soon spring the great surprise upon me. She would come running, laughing, half crying saying, "Darling, we were just fooling you a little. That's all. Did we scare you too much? I'm sorry, Trav, dear. So sorry. Take me home."

And on the way home she would explain to me how she had outwitted the green ripper. I had read once about a little kid who had overheard some adult conversation and afterward, in the night, had terrible nightmares. He kept telling his people he dreamed about the green ripper coming to get him. They finally figured out that he had heard talk about the green reaper. I had told Grets about it, and it had found its way into our personal language. It was not possible that the green ripper had gotten her.

Not possible.

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