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JOHN D. MACDONALD

A *Travis McGee* NOVEL

THE TURQUOISE LAMENT



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John D. MacDonald

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Praise for the Travis McGee series

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—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 TURQUOISE LAMENT

a Travis McGee NOVEL

John D. MacDonald



RANDOM HOUSE TRADE PAPERBACKS
NEW YORK

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2013 Random House Trade Paperback Edition

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Published in the United States by Random House Trade Paperbacks, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

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Originally published in paperback in the United States by Fawcett, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York in 1964.

eISBN: 978-0-307-82676-3

www.atrandom.com

Cover design: Joe Montgomery

Cover photograph: © Randy Olson/National Geographic/Getty Images

v3.1

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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 metalworking, 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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Revenge is the best way to get even.

—ARCHIE BUNKER

The place Pidge had borrowed was a studio apartment on the eleventh floor of the Kaiulani Towers on Hobron Lane, about a hundred yards to the left off Ala Moana Boulevard on the way toward downtown Honolulu.

Riding in from the airport, I had found out why taxis cost so much in Hawaii. When you want to know something, ask. "What happens," the driver said, "the companies bid for exclusive. Like the Ala Moana Shopping Center. I could drop you there, but I can't pick you up from there. You pay so much for exclusive, see; it's got to be passed on to the customer. You're first time here?"

"No. But I'm no regular visitor."

"Everything costs an ass and a half, sport, and it keeps going right on up."

It does, indeed it does, sport.

Even though I had phoned from the airport, and had used the low-fidelity speaker system in the cramped foyer, Pidge Brindle didn't undo the door until she had opened it a few inches to the end of the safety chain. A round eye, a segment of wide smile, a squeak of pleasure. She slammed the door, and I heard the clinking and clicking of chains and bolts, and then she swung it wide and pulled me in, saving the obligatory embrace until she had done up the door once more. Then she stood tiptoe tall, reaching up to hug with strength and enthusiasm, saying, "I can't believe it, Trav. I can't, I really can't believe you're here, you came."

"You called, didn't you?"

"I know. Yes. But it is a long way to come."

Five time zones is a long way. Here it wasn't yet time for lunch, and back at Lauderdale Bahia Mar was almost into the early dark of early December. I had me a case of jet lag. Turns your brain to putty and makes the edges of everything too bright and sharp.

But Pidge looked very good, very real, though far too pale. It had been a little more than a year since she and Howie Brindle, a few months married, had set off from Bahia Mar in the *Trepid* to take their sweet long time going around the world. There had been a few postcard photos. But there always are, when people leave. Marinas are transient places. They are big, elegant outdoor waiting rooms.

Then the phone call, small and meek and scared. "Please? Please?"

And as Meyer had pointed out, though it was not at all necessary so to do, if I had to make a list of the people to whom I owed a Big One, it would have to include one dead man named Ted Lewellen, whose only child, Linda, had come to be named Pidge because when very young she had learned to imitate the throaty warble and coo of a city pigeon perfectly. Meyer didn't have to remind me about Professor Ted because I had already said yes to the small faraway voice. I had told her to stay put and I would make it as soon as I could.

And so I phoned an airline, went through my checklist of things to do when leaving the houseboat for an indefinite time, packed, and took off, leaving Meyer to keep an eye on the

store and hang onto any mail which might come. Everything I needed went into a bag small enough to go under the seat. I carried extra funds. Her voice had overtones of the deep miseries. Most solutions are available in your local shopping center, at high prices. The call had caught me about one week into another segment of my retirement. I had made scores enough for a half year of it this time, so I had ample cash in the hidey-hole in the bow of the *Busted Flush*. I stocked the wallet handsomely and put the larger reserve supply in a safe place.

I learned about the safe place long ago from a man who had to carry four complete sets of identity papers in his line of work. You get hold of one of the longer Ace bandages for people with trick knees. I have one anyway, the left one. You divide the money into two equal stacks, fold each in half, wrap each stack in pliofilm, slip one under the bandage above the knee in front, one above the knee in back. No risk of losing. Nothing uncomfortable. Just a comfortable presence.

I bought my ticket amid the night people at the National counter at Miami. There are two ways to go—first and tourist. First is better. Everybody's life style is jam-packed with as many small arbitrary annoyances as the industrial-governmental bureaucracy can cram into it. So when you buy first class you buy lower blood pressure, because when it comes right down to nit and grit, they call more decisions your way if you have an F after your flight number. And for a man who's six four and a bit, with a 34-inch inseam, there is more sprawl room in F. I had a DC-10 to Los Angeles and found on arrival that, for reasons unknown, my connecting flight, originating in Chicago, had not yet left there. So I shopped the terminals at the first gray light of day and switched to Continental, to a 747, to the window seat in the rearward starboard corner of first class, leaving in an hour and a half. The bigger the bird, the more you feel like something being processed, and that feeling is enhanced if you sit forward in first on a long flight in the 747, because they will sure-God pull down the movie screen and then yank down the little slide that will cover your window. "But sir, it spoils the quality of the picture for the people watching the movie if your window lets any light in." And who is the crass person would spoil the movie for a small crowd of first-class clutzes thirty-seven thousand feet in the air?

Airplanes are empty three weeks before Christmas. There is a little lull in there. I think we had seven jolly girls flouncing about, servicing fifteen customers. After the unreality at the terminal of being served pineapple Kool-Aid by a couple of yawning ladies in plastic grass skirts, and the further unreality of the Inspection Before Boarding—a ceremony that any certified maniac could outwit—I caught a single tilted vista of Los Angeles in morning light, and the altitude and the sweep of the light gave it a strange appearance of total emptiness, a grid pattern of pale broken structures and rubble, long abandoned, a place of small dry vines and basking serpents. Moments later I got a second rearward look from a higher place, and there was no longer city, but stale pizza sprinkled heavily with chopped nutmeats.

As soon as they had unstrapped, the hearty girls set about getting us bombed on Mary and then nailed our feet to boards and crammed us chock-full of airline food, depending on the dual stupor of booze and food to drop us off to sleep. For the sleepless, the stereo high fidelity of the sterilized, repackaged headsets with a choice of umpty channels, or the sterilized, repackaged motion picture, would keep them from bothering the stewardess crew with any demands for service.

Halfway along, a great big stewardess, a king-size pretty, came back and stopped and looked at me in a troubled way. I wasn't eating, drinking, reading, listening to music, or watching the movie. I was sitting there with my eyes open. This was unthinkable! Would you like a drink? A magazine? A newspaper, maybe?

In A.D. 3174 the busy, jolly noseicles on the planet Squanta III will sever our spinal cords and put us into our bright little eternity wombs, deftly attach the blood tube, feeding tube, waste tube and monitor circuitry, remove the eyelids quickly and painlessly, and, with little chirps of cheer, strokes and pats of friendship and farewell, they will lower the lid and seal it, leaving us surrounded by a bright dimensional vista of desert, a smell of heat and sage, the sound of the oncoming hoofs on full gallop as, to the sound of a calvary bugle, John Wayne comes riding, riding, riding ...

"No, thanks," I said. "I'm just thinking."

Pursed lips. Vertical lines between the dark brows. "Thinking? Hey, I've got a friend who's totally freaked on the contemplation thing, you know, how a person can do brain waves. I thought a person had to be all quiet and alone. I didn't know you could do it on airplanes. What are you doing?"

"Yes. You can do it on big reliable airplanes."

"We're pretty steady this time on account of we're taking sixteen tons of plywood from Hawaii on account of some kind of strike."

"That would make it very steady."

"If I set you back by talking to you, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to mess up anything. You just go ... right ahead, huh?"

She went away happy. I wasn't idle at all. I was no longer a symbol of stewardess failure. But her farewell at Honolulu International was full of that special warmth which meant she was glad to be rid of me. Meyer says that not only are the New People incapable of being alone and idle without cracking; they feel compelled to turn all loners into group animals like themselves.

Anyway, before seeing Pidge again, I had a chance to think about her. Swift, bright images of Pidge. Color stills starting ten years back when she'd been fifteen. That's when she had appeared around Bahia Mar, the motherless daughter of Professor Ted Lewellen. Ted's wife had died suddenly, and out of impulse born of grief and shock, he had taken a long leave of absence from the midwest university where he had taught for years. The cover story was that he was taking off to write a book.

I would hate to have to estimate how many genuine, authentic, priceless treasure maps have been offered to me. Sunken treasure along the Florida keys, off Bahama reefs, near Yucatan. I think there must be a printing plant in Tampa which turns them out on a production basis, shredding the edges and boiling them in tea.

Ted Lewellen had taken a sabbatical year a couple of years before his wife died and had spent that year in the old vaults and dead-storage rooms of the ancient libraries of Lisbon, Madrid, Cartagena and Barcelona. Because his colloquial Spanish and Portuguese were almost without flaw and his credentials as linguist, scholar, historian were perhaps more honored there than here, and because his project appealed to national pride and honor—being the tracing of the lesser-known voyages and forgotten heroes of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries who had sailed from Western Europe—he was given full cooperation.

Long after he had decided he could trust me, he had told me about that year. Letters, ship logs, statements of account. Great masses of material never adequately researched. Stilted formal tales of gold and blood, piracy and disease, tempests and greed. So, along with his scholarly project, he had kept a personal account of treasure clues. He had called it the dream book. He and his wife had made jokes about it. Some day, baby, ahunting we will go.

The next year, during summer vacation, Ted and his wife had come to Florida, learned the rituals and precautions of scuba diving, visited the sites of a couple of the wrecks of the galleons which had sunk close to the Florida shore. He read the extravagant literature of the treasure hunters and, with a scholar's discipline, extracted the helpful facts and discarded the gaudy myths. From every available source, he compiled a master list of known or suspected treasure sites, and then he went through his dream book and wrote off those he had found on other lists, knowing that either they had been cleaned out long ago or they had eluded long and diligent search.

I met them, father and daughter, when they had first come down and were looking for a boat. Each trying to turn it into fun for the other one. Both trying to respond. They had heard I was selling a boat for a friend. I drove them up the Waterway to Oscar's Dock, where Matt Odell's *Whazzit* was quietly, politely moldering away. I remember I wondered at the time he was another treasure freak. But he didn't have the gleam in the eye, or the elaborate and misleading explanations about why he wanted a sturdy old scow like the *Whazzit*. He did not make the usual buyer's mistake of pretending to know a lot of things he didn't know. He answered his questions. He was on a close budget. He had an expert go over it. Then he made Matty's widow a first and final offer and she took it. I forgot about it until I was over at the gas dock one day about two months later and the Professor brought the scow in for fuel. It was now called *Lumpy*.

More than the name was changed; I could only guess at how many backbreaking hours Lewellen and his daughter had put into that tub. The Professor was leaned down to strings and sine waves and sun-dried cordovan hide. He asked me aboard, showed me the big rebuilt generators, the air compressor. I noted the oversized Danforths and the hawser-type anchor line. It was still a slow, ugly old scow, but now it was a *nice* old scow.

I asked him why he'd equipped it the way he had, and he said he had an underwater research project lined up. I asked him where Pidge was, and he said she was in school and adjusting well. He said she never had trouble making friends. I watched him take the *Lumpy* on out, handling it smartly in wind and tide.

A few months later I learned by accident that Lewellen had sold the *Lumpy* to a scuba club down near Marathon. I decided he had gone broke and gone home. Then I learned that somebody had bought the *Dutchess*. She'd been on the block for a long time at Dinner Key. Out of my reach, financially. A fantastic custom motor sailer with a semitrawler hull and a beam you wouldn't believe. She was about ten years old then. The hull had been made in Hong Kong. Mahogany and teak. The diesels and all the rest of the mechanical items had been installed in Amsterdam. Huge fuel capacity, desalinization, all navigational aids. She had been rigged with automatic winches and heavy-duty fittings so that one man could sail her alone.

The new owner was having a lot of work done on her. Then he brought her to Bahia Mar to a big empty slip. I walked over when she came in and found Ted Lewellen and Pidge crewing the *Trepid*, as he had renamed her. You could take that thing anywhere in the world.

and stay as long as you wanted.

It is very easy to tell yourself not to get involved. Too easy. I told myself that about once a day until finally I knew I *had* to get involved. I picked a morning when Pidge was in school. We had our long talk in the main cabin of the *Trepid*, the rain coming down in torrents on the deck, a gusty wind pushing at the bare pole and giving all those tons of boat a gentle motion.

I said it was perfectly obvious to me that he had gone out on his own and found something very rich on the bottom of the sea, and if I could add it up that way, a lot of other people in the area could add it up just as easily, and when they did, they were the type to come aboard, beat the top of his skull flat, and search every inch of his great boat.

He did it well. Shock, surprise, consternation, disbelief. He had a long story about wills and trusts and estates and executors, and how it had taken a long time for his wife's estate to go through probate and for the distribution to be made.

So I told him that even if that was the truth, the dumb and ugly ones could come swarming aboard, and the ones who were a little bit smarter might check the probate records up north and find out if there was enough money left him to buy this much boat and do all this extra work to it. He thought that over and thanked me for thinking about him and warning him and said he would take suitable precautions. When I realized he thought I was trying to cut a piece of his action, I explained just how my special little aspect of the salvage business worked. In case he might need my services. He didn't think he would.

Our relationship was one of guarded friendliness until, two years later, he decided he couldn't trust me. Pidge, at seventeen, had suddenly acquired one of the great crushes of the western world. And she was fixated on me. It is difficult to imagine oneself as being a romantic image to a teen-age girl. When she looked at me, her eyes would go round and then get heavy. She would blush, turn pale, blush again. She would stop in the middle of a sentence, forgetting where it was going. She tripped and blundered into things and followed me like a dog. Had she been a knob-jointed gawk with chipmunk teeth and a tilted squint, it would have been one thing. But a tawny, limber, lovely, blue-eyed girl in the first full burst of ripeness was another thing entire. A total humble adoration is discomfiting. It alarmed and irritated her father and made me a figure of fun around the marina. There goes McGee and his fan club.

Pigeon's mission was very clear, very simple. She wanted to be married to me right away and whatever she had to do to make that happen was perfectly okay with her, and she went out to prove she was a grown woman.

When it got so intense I began to wonder about her sanity, I provisioned the *Busted Flush* and took off down the Waterway. I made it halfway down Biscayne Bay below Miami when I chunked into something floating almost totally submerged. It thumped the hull and the boat managed to come back up and take a whack at the starboard wheel, getting to it in spite of the hull being heavily slogged. There was so much vibration I had to cut the engine off. The *Flush* is not exactly nimble even on both little diesels, and I had a tide set and a steady harbor breeze out of the west to fight. I crabbed along until I got sick of it, then looked at the chart and headed on across the bay to some no-name islands on the far side. At dusk I put down two hooks and got out the wheel puller and a spare wheel, all ready to make my repairs the morning. I was fixing a big drink when Pidge came floating to the galley door, eyes huge and misty, a tender little smile on her lips.

"Hello, my darling," she breathed. "Surprised?"

I was. We talked all night. The only thing I managed to convince her of was that I did not want any child bride, or any child mistress, or even any quick joyful romp that she promised she would never never mention to anyone ever, word of honor. She booed and hawed and was strangled until her face was a big red heartbroken bloat, and her voice a sickly rasp. I got a call through to her loving daddy at midnight and explained the situation. I sensed he could not make himself believe in the bent-wheel story. It was a hard one to sell. He said he had been on the verge of calling the cops. I gave him an estimate of when I'd be back. He said he would prefer it if I off-loaded her at Dinner Key. I said that was fine with me, which caused another fit of hawing, hiccuping and general leaky misery.

By dawn she was exhausted, spiritless, leaden. She made terrible coffee. I moved the *Flush* to sand shallows, went over the side, pulled the bent wheel and put the spare on. I ran the *Flush* from the fly bridge, and she went way forward and sat out there on the bow hatch. I was huddled small and miserable. Even her round little behind in her white sailcloth shorts looked humble and defeated. But there was something in the curve of hip into waist, and waist into back and shoulder, that made a little stir of lech and regret. It is always a tossup with me as to whether I am sorriest for my misdeeds or the deeds undone. In a world intent on defusing sex, I had failed to do my part. I'd let a classic get away.

We got to Dinner Key at ten o'clock and I saw Lewellen pacing back and forth over near the gas dock. I took it over there and sent Pidge forward with her little blue flight bag and waved off any help with lines. I had no intention of tying up. I held it steady and she stepped ashore and trotted to Daddy. A little cluster of boat bums watched her with appreciation. I guess she had been planning it all the way to Dinner Key. She wheeled away from his grasp and spun and pointed an accusing finger at me, and in a high, clear, artificial tone, she said, "Daddy, do you know what he did to me? Do you want to know what Travis did? All night long, all he did was sc ..."

By then Ted Lewellen had read the scene, detected the revenge wish of the maiden scorned, and understood how it was a perfect affirmation of my innocence. I was boiling back away from the dock, widening the gap. He clamped a hand gently over her mouth just a time, and she collapsed into his arms. He gave me a half-shy grin, a shrug, and led her away toward the parking lot.

Pretty soon she was eighteen and had gone away to school.

And here, years later, five time zones away, the lady and I embraced. Then she broke it up quickly and clumsily. Old restraints are a memory in the flesh. She had a faint blush, a half smile, and spoke quickly, "Just this bag? Is this all you have? Sure. I remember. You always feel oppressed by *things*. Hemmed in and all. I hope you didn't find a place to stay. But you couldn't have unless you made a reservation from California. Help me stop gibbering please."

"Hush up, Linda Lewellen Brindle, dear."

"Thanks."

"Want to talk later? Or now?"

"Now. Come over here."

She took me over to a window. She had me lean close to the glass. From there I could see a segment of the forest of spars in the Yacht Harbor. She showed me where to start counting. Six berths over. And there, eleven stories below us and a half mile away, was the distinctive

bulk of the *Trepid*.

“Where’s Howie?” I asked.

“Living aboard.”

“And you’re living here?”

“For a month so far,” she said. “It belongs to my best friend in school. She’s back on the mainland to be with her mother, who’s dying of cancer.”

“Let me guess. Am I here to save a marriage?”

She dropped onto an orange sofa and touched her throat. “Not exactly, Trav.”

“Then?”

“It’s narrowed down to just two things that could be happening to me. Just two things. I am losing my mind. Or Howie is going to kill me.”

It was a mind-boggling thought. “Howie? D. Howard Brindle, for chrissake!”

She looked at me most solemnly, and I saw the two simultaneous tears bulge large on her lower lids, then spill over and make shiny little snail tracks down her cheeks in an edge of light from the window.

“I keep trying to make it come out that it’s the first thing. I want to believe I’m losing my mind. But I can’t believe it. Then I say that people who are crazy can *never* believe they are, and that means I probably am. I just can’t ...” And then came the slow bow of the face into the hands, lowering of the hands, and head to the lady-knees, brown hair hanging long and gleaming with life.

She made a soft, snuffling sound. Okay, McGee, salvage expert, salvage the lady’s life. Give her a choice. Crazy or dead.

Howie *Brindle*? Howie?

Come *on*, Pidge. Now really.

I walked out to the Hawaii Yacht Club at the end of the long pier. A fellow looked at my membership card from the Royal Biscayne and straightened perceptibly. Yes, of course, any member of the Royal Biscayne has reciprocal privileges, sir.

I said I was just looking to see if any Florida friends were in port. He sent me to the dockmaster, who showed me the big map of the protected boat basin on the side wall of his office and told me to take a look. The tags for stateside boats were fastened to the cork board with pale blue pushpins.

Nobody I knew well. Three big boats I knew, and one I didn't. The large money has the full-time hired crew to go with the large boat, and the rich have the crew make the long run. They fly out later. Like old McKimber. Now dead. He used to keep a crew of six aboard the *Missy III*. One hundred and fifteen feet. Seven hundred thousand gleaming dollars afloat and a minimum hundred thousand a year wages and running expenses. He'd send it where he wanted to go. Portugal, the Riviera, the Greek Islands, Papeete, Acapulco. Then he would fly out and get aboard and stay for a time, accompanied by one of those big, blond, jolly ladies of his. But he never cruised in the *Missy III*. It made him too nervous. He didn't like to wake up in the night and hear all that creaking and crackling and sloshing.

So I made a sound of pleasure at spotting the *Trepid* and asked the dockmaster if the Brindles were aboard, and he said that as far as he knew it was just the mister staying aboard her. I thanked him and went to say hello to Good Old Howie.

The *Trepid* was well laced into her U-shaped slip, stern to the pier, with husky stern lines crossed to the big bollards, bow lines to the pilings, and a pair of spring lines to big cleats on the narrow dock on the starboard. A short gangplank had been rigged, and I went to the dock end of it and yelled, "Howie? You aboard?"

He rose up from the far side of the trunk cabin, where he had a deck chair centered under the shade of a tarp. He stared at me for an uncomprehending second, and then his big face broke into familiar groupings of grin-wrinkles, teeth white against tan hide, brown eyes looking misty with pleasure.

"McGee! Son of a gun! What are you doing out here, man? Come on aboard."

I had planned my explanation so that it was neither too elaborate nor too vague. An entirely plausible. Hand delivery of a legal document, and get the certified check before turning it over. A well-paid favor for a friend of a friend.

He got me a cold beer from below. We sat in the shade of the tarp, amid boat smells and marina sounds. He wore faded red swim trunks. I had forgotten the size of him. Almost eye to eye with my six four, but a McGee and a half wide. About two seventy, I would guess. Practically no body hair. A soft slack look to the smooth tanned hide. But do not be misled. There is a physical type which has a layer of smooth fat over very useful muscle. Hard rubbery fat. Big men, light on their feet, agile, and very tough. You find a lot of them in the

pro football ranks. Linemen and linebackers. I had played volleyball with Howie on Lauderdale beach. Set the net up in soft loose sand on a blazing day and some very good specimens crap out on you quickly. I fool with it only when I'm in top shape, which seems to happen less often these years. The regulars were glad to have a new fish in the game, and they tried to run him into the ground. But old Howie Brindle kept bounding tirelessly, sweating, laughing, yelping, making great saves and going high for the kill. He didn't even breathe hard.

Later, one night, the week before he married Pidge, he told me about his skimpy football career. Because of disciplinary problems, he had played in only three games out of nine his senior year at Gainesville. He was a defensive tackle. He wasn't anybody's draft choice, but the Dolphins gave him an invitation to camp.

There under the stars on the sun deck of the *Flush*, he said, "Those coaches kept chewing me, Trav. They kept saying what a shame it was, somebody with all my natural equipment and talent, I didn't have enough resolve. I wasn't hungry enough. What they want, you should keep getting up again and chasing that ball carrier even after you know you haven't a hope in hell of ever catching him. It just didn't make sense to me. Give me an angle and I could lay on them a heavy ton, like I fell off a roof on them. It doesn't make a lot of difference now, I guess. I'll say this. It all seemed pretty bush for a bunch of pros to want that kind of nonsense from somebody."

So now he asked about Meyer and the Alabama Tiger, Johnny Dow and Chookie and Arthur, and all the Bahia Mar regulars. And then I said, "Where's Pidge? Off shopping?" Pidge and I had decided I might get a better reading if he believed I had not yet talked to her.

He looked down at one of his big banana-fingered hands, made a slack fist of it, then inspected the nails. "She's not living aboard," he said at last.

"Trouble?" I asked.

I was given a quick, troubled, brown-eyed glance. "Lots," he said.

"It happens. Snits and tizzies. You two guys will straighten it out."

"I don't know. It isn't the kind of thing ... I mean ... I just really don't know *what* the hell to do, Trav. I don't know how to handle it. And I don't even want to talk about it, okay?"

"What do you mean, is it okay? If you want to talk, I'm here. If you want me to go talk to her, that's okay too. Is she on Oahu?"

He grimaced, lifted a big arm, and pointed. "She's on the eleventh floor of that place over there; about half of it sticks out to the side of that brown building. Kaiulani Tower Apartment eleven-twelve. Some girl friend from school, name of Alice Dorck. It's her place and she's away."

"What will I say to her?"

"I didn't say I wanted you to—"

He was interrupted by a hail from the dock. "Hey, Howie? I'm ready to unstep the ball stick. Your muscles still available?"

"Okay, Jer. Coming," he called in a cheerful voice. He stood up and said, "This'll take maybe twenty minutes. You in any kind of a rush?"

"I'll be here."

He grinned and went padding off on his big bare brown feet. His streaked blond-brown hair was shoved back and cropped off square, just below the nape of his neck. He had lost the

front third of his hair, all of it. It gave him a huge area of face, all of it a deepwater ta. Apparently he was a very obliging guy around the yacht harbor just as he had been around Bahia Mar. The muscles were always available.

I strolled the deck areas of the *Trepid*. I wanted the pleasure of a good, long, quiet look at her. It is so damned trite to say that they don't build them like that any more. They can still build them, if there's anybody left with money like that. The anticipated pleasure slowly faded and died. I did not enjoy looking at the *Trepid*. Let me explain about a boat person, or like me who is always a step behind or a step and a half behind the normal maintenance chores aboard the *Busted Flush*. The *Trepid* was sound and good, and she would have looked just great to a civilian.

Her lines are quite a lot like the forty-six-foot Rhodes Fiberglass Motorsailor, vintage 1970, but the *Trepid* has ten feet more length, six feet more beam, and in spite of a dead-weight tonnage nearly twice that of the Rhodes, actually draws a little less when that big beam centerboard is wound all the way up into its slot in the hull. She is a husky boat, built like a workboat, and if you want to use a small jib like a staysail and go on diesels, she can give you almost three thousand miles at eight or nine knots, depending on the condition of her hull at the time.

What I saw was dry, corroding running gear and blocks which looked as if they might be frozen by corrosion. I saw pitted metal, flaking paint, smudges and stains, milky cracking varnish, oily spots on the teak deck, and a speckly green on the sail cover which could be the beginning of a fatal case of mildew. Everywhere I looked I saw hundreds of hours of undone labor, and very dull labor it is. The sea has no mercy, and there is no such thing as "maintenance-free." All you get near the water is either more maintenance than you can handle, or so much that you can just about stay ahead of it. The fee I pay for living aboard the *Flush* is a minimum of two hours a day for exterior housework every day I am aboard.

The *Trepid* was like a large, healthy, handsome woman who had been forced to sleep in her clothes and go without comb, soap or makeup for a couple of weeks. She was still sound, but her morale had started to go sour.

Not like when she was Ted Lewellen's lady. Not the way she was treated when Meyer and I flew out and lived aboard the *Trepid* anchored in sheltered water in Pitchilingue Cove in the Bay of La Paz in Baja California. There were five of us aboard. Beside Ted, there was Joe Delladio, a Mexican electronics engineer, and Frank Hayes, a construction engineer and scuba expert.

Maybe Lewellen wouldn't have brought me into his action even then, but I guess that I was the only one he could think of when two of the minor partners in his venture decided they could no longer keep on pretending they were not afraid of sharks. And three men could not do all the work which had to be done before the good season changed. At my suggestion Meyer became the other replacement.

It was in the big salon of the *Trepid* the evening of the day we arrived that Ted told me about his past, about all the research and about the treasure clues he had found in the original documents, the ships' logs, officers' letters.

He explained what he was after this time. The information had come out of the archives in Madrid and in Amsterdam. Long ago a Dutch pirate ship had knocked off a series of Spanish galleons and had loaded herself down with more treasure than was prudent. She had been

intercepted by Cromwell, who was also a pirate at that time, in command of two English vessels. They caught the Dutchman north northeast of La Paz Bay, which is near the tip of Baja California, on the sheltered side.

The Dutchman had not surrendered very quietly and, in the fuss, was holed at the waterline. Cromwell took the dismasted hulk in tow and tried to make it to the shallows, but she sank well offshore. Some of the Hollanders escaped to shore, probably not more than a dozen, and two eventually made it back to their homeland. Professor Lewellen estimated that the pirate ship had been laden with about twelve million in gold and silver. He had used Spanish sources to get a reading. From English and Dutch accounts of the confrontation, he had prepared an overlay of a geodetic chart of the area, with the search area marked out.

He explained we weren't looking for some romantic old vessel resting on the bottom. Tides and currents would have shifted her and broken her up a long time ago. Somewhere in the shaded areas of the overlay, she would have burst herself open like a rotten sack and dumped the heavy metal. The area was silt and sand bottom, constantly shifting. We would be working at a depth range of seventy to a hundred and thirty feet.

"I believe the heavy metal would stay pretty well bunched, no matter what happened to the ship. I think that her cannon will be in the same area as the precious metals. All I'll say about the search method is that it involves exhausting, gut-busting labor. And we may never find anything. If you decide against it, I'll pay your fare back, no complaints, no questions, no pleading. If you decide for it, then the cut works this way. After we take the expenses off the top, fifty percent comes to me and the vessel. Of the remaining fifty percent, Joe and Frank get sixteen percent each, and you and Meyer get nine percent each. If we cashed in at two million net, that would be ninety thousand apiece for you. If we get nothing, you've been nonpaying guests, and manual labor."

I looked at Meyer. Meyer had pursed his lips, beetled his brow, and said, "How did you become owner of this fine vessel, Professor Ted?"

"Just lucky, I guess."

"Meyer's question is pertinent," I reminded Lewellen.

He stared directly at me, and I have a vivid memory of that look. He had seemed a mild and gentle fellow, professorial, meticulous and fussy. He looked out at me from under sun-whitened lashes and eyebrows. Once upon a time I rescued a great blue heron. Some cretinous subhuman had busted his wing with a small-caliber slug. After I had run him down and quelled him with my right arm wrapped around the surprising lightness of wings and body, my left hand holding that long lethal bill, he held still and looked at me, unblinking. It was the predator appraisal. How would I taste? Was I worth killing and eating? A pale, cold yellow stare, devoid of fear.

Lewellen shrugged and turned slightly, and the look was hidden, but in that few moments he had become quite another person to me.

"You have a right to ask for batting averages," he said. "There were three sites in the Bahamas. Pidge and I worked them, aboard the *Lumpy*. We were empty on one of them. We got sixteen hundred pounds of silver ingots from another. We took seven hundred pounds of gold coin minted in Mexico from the third. We stopped when some strangers began to take an interest—the new government in Nassau has a nasty habit of taking a hundred percent as its cut. I researched the clandestine market in numismatic rarities. It's of no moment to you

gentlemen how and when I can turn such finds into usable cash. All you need to know is that I can do it ... if we find anything. And I rather think we will. That gold, part of it, made possible to buy the *Trepid*.”

Meyer sighed and nodded. So we went to work. Joe Delladio had set up the cover story for marine geodetic research under a foundation grant. The *Trepid* stayed at anchor in the cove. The search area had been marked with buoys. We worked from a heavy-beamed old scow—an oversized skiff actually—which Delladio and Frank Hayes had overloaded with a high-pressure diesel pump and big diesel generator, as well as a gasoline compressor to refill the scuba tanks.

We had a dozen twenty-foot lengths of high-impact plastic pipe two inches in diameter, open at one end, closed and pointed at the other. The procedure was to clamp the hose nozzle to the pointed end of the pipe, then jet the pipe down through the sand and ooze until about a foot was left above the surface. Signal to stop pump. Call for electronic probe. Then slowly lower it down inside the pipe, down through the ancient shifting strata of sand and silt, while topside somebody monitored the dial, ready to give a tug on the signal cord if the need swung in any significant way.

We kept as close as we could to a square pattern, sinking the holes thirty feet apart. And we tried to keep from thinking about the simple mathematical fact that the three-square-mile search area would need a hundred and twenty thousand holes to complete it. Five men were the minimum possible. Meyer and I were more handicap than help until we learned how to handle the high-pressure hose. Then, after a week, we got to the point where we could stop thinking about every move, and production climbed up to the prior level, before the other two men had quit. Rotating the topside and sea-bottom jobs, the crew—allowing for mechanical delays—could average five holes an hour, but we could not push ourselves past eight hours, so it came out to forty a day. Meyer remarked that on a seven-day-week basis that was only eight years of work ahead.

We switched jobs every hour or every five holes, whichever ever came first. The weather helped. It was such brutal labor, there was a tendency to forget why we were doing it. Just before dusk we'd buoy the location of the last hole, and then we'd read and mark the bearings of the shale cliff north of us, a giant boulder offshore to the south, and the entrance to the cove where the *Trepid* was at anchor, just in case something happened to the buoy. We took a lot of pains about that, and we argued a lot about it. One hundred and twenty thousand holes was enough without sinking a single one of them twice. And then we would go droning back to the cove, shower the salt off, build a big drink, eat like ravenous monsters, and sit in a stuporous yawning daze for a half hour before tottering to a bunk, feeling as if all the strings and tendons and wires and muscles had come unfastened from the joints and sockets.

We tried not to think about what would happen if we got a reading. We would buoy the spot and bring the *Trepid* out and use four hooks to fasten her over the spot, and then go to work with the monster pump mounted in the bilge. It was, in effect, a small dredge, with a four-inch cutting head that would suck up the goop and then spill it over the side of the *Trepid* into a catch basin of heavy steel mesh.

The sharks came around. Shallow-water types. Nurse, sand, hammerhead. I could have felt uncomfortable if we'd had to work in murky water. But there was a good tide current across the work area at all times except right on the changes, and you could work upstream from

the hole you were sinking and be in clear water. I wouldn't want to spend too much time the same water with the tiger sharks and leopard sharks, because the averages might catch u with you. But they work a lot further offshore than we were in those waters.

The sharks were cruising their range, as is their habit. They would come upon us, put on the brakes, turn and make a big circle, watching us all the while, and then take off again. No wild creature, except perhaps the cockroach, is an experimental gourmet. Unless the food supply has disappeared, wild things want to eat what they have always eaten. Something that does not look, sound or move like anything that has ever been on their menu is not about to be tasted. It might taste incredibly nasty. Why take the risk?

Barracuda would come in quiet groups and hang almost without motion in the clear water, giving us the big eye for an hour at a time. Curiosity, not hunger. All wild creatures, especially well adapted to their environment have free time they do not have to use in searching for food and shelter, or in fleeing from their enemies. This free time develops the sense of curiosity and the sense of play. Porpoises play. Monkeys play. Otters play. Seals play. Young mammals play. Barracuda stand around and watch, like old men at a construction site, until the pang of hunger sends them darting off about their business.

The eerie savage predators of the deep have gotten a very bad press. I met a man who used to don an old-fashioned diving costume and go down into a tank in Hollywood and he was pursued by a horrid, deadly octopus with arms about nine feet long. Octopi are timid and gentle. Hank would sort of lean way back on his heels and put his hands up in front of him as if to ward off untidy death, and then would walk slowly toward the octopus and it would retreat just as slowly. Then they would run the film backwards.

When the good weather broke and began to make up in too threatening a way for us to risk the scow in offshore waters, even though they were semiprotected waters, we took a day off. There were provisions to pick up. Professor Ted, Joe Delladio and I were eager for a break from the routine. Meyer and Frank Hayes stayed aboard to nourish a chess feud. Meyer had discovered, to his dismay, that when Hayes played the black, he had worked out a variation of the Yugoslav sacrifice in the King's Indian defense which Meyer had not successfully countered in three tough tries.

We broke out the little Whaler, clamped the outboard onto it, and kept to the sheltered side of the cove and the bay, oddly eager to see strange faces and hear unfamiliar voices.

Joe Delladio knew the area. So we went to a place where he was known, a little fishing resort and hotel called Club de Pescadores. At the Club (pronounced Cloob) Joe was given a warm Mexican *abrazo* by most of the staff. It was a little before noon. He borrowed a pin-up Jeep with a canopy to go into town and get the supplies, saying that if we were along, they cost more. We set ourselves up, Ted Lewellen on my left, at a table near a little outdoor pavilion bar with a thatched roof, with canvas laced between the posts on two sides as a windscreen. There were wire chairs and a tin table, like in the faded photos of old drugstore. Gray scud went past at express speed, and the wind was hot and wet.

I drank tall ones with fruit juice and a local gin called Oso Negro, black bear. It is guaranteed to let you know you have been drinking. Touch a fingertip to the top of your skull the next morning and your head will fall open like a cleavered melon.

It was all very nice after having been prune-wrinkled by long immersion in the sea, then barbecued in the sun glare aboard our work boat. I enjoyed the bar, the drink, and even the

company, though Ted was not one to use three words when one would be enough.

I could not understand why I felt so very damned good and said so. It was a different kind of good feeling from what I get when I am in good shape. I wondered aloud.

“Heart,” Professor Ted said, and then explained that a man’s heart shares to a certain extent that trait of the whale heart and porpoise heart of slowing when they dive deeply, to give a maximum use of the oxygen in the blood, to make it last. “You develop a bigger, slower beat, Travis, so that topside you’re getting more nourishment to the cells of muscle and brain and gut.”

It made sense. I was wondering how to ask about our chances of getting rich when a small herd of sports fishermen from the States came trooping in. They were noisy. They were clad in the Real Thing—big game garments from Abercrombie, L. L. Bean, Herter’s, all properly sun-faded, salt-crusted, spotted with oil and fish blood. As there was absolutely no chance of any of the boats going out in that blow, the outfits looked too contrived.

They clotted around the bar and ordered booze in broken Mexican and tried to all talk once about old Charlie trying to harpoon that big sonofabitchofa leopard ray, and how the idiot boy, Pedro, had gaffed the striped marlin when it was too green and got a sprained wrist and some loosened teeth from the gaff handle, and how poor old Tom lost a three-hundred-dollar outfit to some big billfish nobody ever even got a good look at. And they whined and moaned and bitched about the weather that was taking a good hunk out of their expensive fishing trip.

They were aware of us sitting there and made their loud brags for our benefit, with the sidelong looks that tried to estimate us and figure out who we were, sitting so sedately in clean khaki slacks, boat shoes, T-shirts, wondering no doubt if we were of the great billfish brotherhood.

Finally, as could be expected, one of them came wandering over, smiling, glass in hand, and said, “Hi, you guys. Just get in? You must have come by boat. Nobody gets color like that except on the water. Come down from California?”

Professor Ted looked at him for a slow five-count and said, “No.”

Nine out of ten would have wandered off. I wish he had. But he was like a friendly dog in a friendly neighborhood. He smiled and sat in one of the vacant chairs at our table and said, “Mind? Honest to God, I’m the jinx of all time, and you better believe it. I’ve been counting on this for years. What is today? Thursday? I left Florida last Sunday, and we got out there bright and early Tuesday and in two full days you know what I got? Three strikes and I flubbed every one of them. Bunny Mills over there—he’s my boss—in charge of the southeastern district out of Atlanta—he got a blue that went two hundred and thirty. I’m the only one skunked so far, and I got to leave Saturday, and Manuel tells us this is a two or three-day blow. How about that? Say, my name is Don Benjamin.”

He held his hand out to me. What can you do? He was about thirty, slender, dark-haired, with a reddened and peeling nose and forehead. I took his hand and said, “McGee. Arthur Lewellen.”

“Glad to meet you. You been doing any good?”

I mentioned the fake survey and the fake foundation. Ted yawned. He signaled the bartender for a pair of refills. Don Benjamin sighed wistfully and said, “You know sitting here like this, it doesn’t seem possible that come Monday morning I’ll be right back there

Suncrest, right back in the old routine, peddling insurance.”

He looked expectant. One of the afflictions of a transient society is the do-you-know disease. I knew a few people in Suncrest. But I didn't want to play.

“Too bad,” I said.

So Bunny Mills came sauntering over. Don's boss. Don introduced him. Beef and belly, and a broad and meaningless grin. A type. The nasal, slurred, high-pitched back-country Southern whine of one of the “good old boys.” I could guess that he moved his insurance business in various political directions, had a piece of this and a piece of that, tiptoed on the outer edge of tax fraud, whacked judges on the back, and leaned hard on the serfs who worked for him. He came over to punish flagrant disloyalty. Don Benjamin had taken unauthorized leave in his absence from his role as junior ass kisser to consort with strangers—without permission.

Bunny Mills beamed at Professor Ted and at me and said, “This little ol' boy here come so close to winning this here trip on the company, I tooken pity and sprang for it outen my own pocket, and never did I see a boy so plain dumb fumble-handed around a boat and tackle. He's just plain in the way. He even damn near lost me my blue, right, Donnie?”

Don Benjamin was staring up at him, his expression strained. “Mr. Mills, the premiums and renewals and the new business put me in the upper—”

“Argue that with the home office, boy.” The grin was still there, with the small mean eyes looking out from behind it.

“But the printed list had me—”

“You got a sorry way of rubbing me wrong, Donnie boy. Best you shut your mouth and come back over to the bar.”

We hadn't wanted Don moving in on us in the first place. But I've never enjoyed watching the abuse of power. So, slumped deeply into the chair, I grinned up into Mills's grin and said, “Soon as we finish our private conversation, Fats, I'll ship him back over to you.”

There are men whose passports should be stamped NOT VALID OUTSIDE THE CONTINENTAL LIMITS OF THE USA. The further they get from home, the louder, cheaper, and tougher they get. And the more careless. They rove the world in honky style.

If I'd been wearing the right clothes for billfishing, I would have been a good old boy too. I made a serious mistake. I underestimated his capacity for violence, and I had not seen the weapon. I didn't see it until he pulled it free. It was a fish billy, with a thong through the hardwood handle, the thong having been suspended from one of those brass belt hooks so common to men who like to plod about jangling with the tools of play. Fourteen inches of club with a wide bracelet of metal encircling the fat end, said bracelet studded all the way around with little pyramids of steel about a half inch high and a half inch apart.

His face had clenched instantly into a red something that looked more like a fat boiled fish than a face. He planted his feet, snatched the club free, and made his whistling, grunting, earnest effort to cave in the whole middle of my face. Maybe he had never made a serious attempt to kill anyone before. God only knows what angers and frustrations had built him up into this abrupt deadliness. He was ready, and I was there. And he was far from home.

My reflexes were in fine shape. There was no time for any conscious thought. I caught a glimpse of the club flickering toward me, shoved hard with both feet and went over backward in the chair, not certain it would miss me until it had. I wanted to tuck and roll and come up onto my feet, but I gave my head a solid ringing crack against the flagstones, and

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