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JOHN D. MACDONALD

A *Travis McGee* NOVEL

THE GIRL IN THE PLAIN BROWN WRAPPER



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THE GIRL IN THE PLAIN BROWN WRAPPER

A *Travis McGee* NOVEL

John D. MacDonald



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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 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
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It is one of the sorry human habits to play the game of: What was I doing when it happened?

After I heard that Helena Pearson had died on Thursday, the third day of October, I had no trouble reconstructing the immediate past.

That Thursday had been the fourth and final day of a legitimate little job of marine salvage. Meyer made a lot of small jokes about Travis McGee, salvage expert, actually doing some straight-arrow salvage. He kept saying it almost made my cover story believable. But he did not say such things for any ears but mine own.

Actually it was not my ball game. Meyer gets himself involved in strange little projects. Somewhere, somehow he had gotten interested in the ideas of a refugee Cuban chemist named Joe Palacio. So he had talked a mutual friend of ours, Bobby Guthrie, a damned good man with pumps and pressures and hydraulics, into listening to Joe's ideas and going to Joe's rooming house in Miami where Joe had set up a miniaturized demonstration in an old bathtub he had scrounged somewhere.

When Bobby got high enough on the idea to quit his regular job, Meyer put in the money and they formed a little partnership and named it Floatation Associates.

Then Meyer, in one of his mother hen moods, sweet-talked me into donating my services plus my houseboat, *The Busted Flush*, plus my swift little *Muñequita* boat to the first actual salvage operation. So I had to take the *Flush* down to a Miami yard where they winched her aboard a big ugly diesel pump with special attachments rigged by Bobby Guthrie, some great lengths of what appeared to be reinforced fire hose, and several fifty-five-gallon drums of special gunk mixed up by Joe Palacio, plus scuba tanks, air compressor, tools, torches, and so on. Once I had topped off the water and fuel tanks and laid aboard the provisions and booze, the old *Flush* was as low in the water as I cared to see her. Even with all her beam, and the big old barge-type hull, she had to react to what Bobby estimated as seven thousand pounds of extra cargo. She seemed a little discouraged about it.

"If she founders," Meyer said pleasantly, "we'll see if we can raise her with Palacio's magic gunk."

So we took off down Biscayne Bay with the *Muñequita* in tow, heading for the lower Keys. We got an early start and kept waddling along, and by last light we were far enough down the Big Spanish Channel to edge cautiously over into the shallows off Annette Key, in the lee of the southwest breeze, and drop a couple of hooks.

The immediate forecast was good, but there was an area of suspicion over near the Leeward Islands, and there was an official half month of the whirly-girl season left. Also the girls are known to come screaming up through hurricane alley after the season is over.

Later I learned that Helena Pearson had written the letter to me that same Saturday, September 28th, the day after she guessed she wasn't going to make it, the letter the attorney mailed, still sealed, with his cover letter. And with the certified check.

That evening at anchor aboard *The Busted Flush* the three Floatation associates were edged. For Meyer it was simple empathy. He knew the risks they were taking. Joe Palacio had a chance to make a new career in his adopted land. Bobby Guthrie had a wife and five kids to worry about. The three of them had periods of contagious enthusiasm, and then they would

get the doubts and the glooms and the hollow laughter. If it worked on a very small scale the scavenged bathtub, that didn't mean it was going to work out in Hawk Channel, in the Straits of Florida, in seventy-five feet of ocean.

In the morning we went south down Big Spanish, past No Name Key, and under the fixed bridge between Bahia Honda Key and Spanish Harbor Key. Then the overladen *Flush* was out in the deeps, and we had a nine-mile run at about 220 degrees to lonely little Looe Key across a slow heave of greasy swell. Soon I was able to pick up the red marker on Looe with the glasses. On the way, while on automatic pilot, I had figured out the quickest and best way to run if things blew up too suddenly. I would pour on all the coal and run just a shade east of magnetic north, perhaps 8 degrees, and if I could manage to make eight knots, I could tuck the *Flush* into Newfound Harbor Channel in maybe forty minutes, and find a protected pocket depending on the wind, maybe in Coupon Bight or close offshore by Little Torch Key.

Bobby Guthrie had the coordinates on the sunken pleasure boat. She lay a half mile southwest of Looe Key. She'd been down there for two months. She was the 'Bama Gal owned by a Tampa hotelman, about ninety thousand dollars' worth of cabin cruiser, only six months old. Forty-six feet, fiberglass hull, twin diesels. The hotelman and his wife and another couple had been out fishing and the hotelman had keeled over with a heart attack while fighting a billfish. Nobody else aboard knew how to run the ship-to-shore radio. The hotelman barely knew how to run the boat. There was a tug with a tow of three barges about a half mile farther out, so they figured that the tug would have a radio they could use to call the Coast Guard helicopter and get the man to a hospital. The guest ran the boat over toward the tug and cut the engines and they all started waving their arms. Maybe they thought that tugs and barges have some kind of braking system. The tug captain tried evasive tactics, but man and momentum were too much. The forward port corner of the lead barge put a big ugly hole in the cruiser, but the crew launched a skiff and got the people off in good order before she went down. By the time the Coast Guard arrived, the owner was as dead as the other fish they had caught, which had gone down with the cruiser.

The insurance company had paid off on the cruiser, and Meyer had gotten a release from them, so any recovery was going to be profit—if we could bring it up, tow it in, and find something worth money.

So on that Sunday I worked the *Flush* into the most protected water that Looe provides. The bay is shaped like a backward "J" that has fallen onto its back, and I put the hooks out in shoal water, as close as I could get without risking being hard aground at low tide. We took the *Muñequita* out and located the 'Bama Gal after about forty minutes of skin diving and looking. We made a bright red buoy fast to her, and then I ran the *Muñequita* up-current, put the anchor down in about seventy feet, and let her come back to the buoy before snubbing her down, almost at the end of my four hundred feet of anchor line. Not enough scope to be sure of holding.

We had just the two sets of tanks aboard the *Muñequita*, so I went down with Joe Palacios to get a good look at what condition she was in. She lay on a little slope, bow higher than the stern, and she was on about a fifteen-degree list to port, making the hole in the starboard side, a little aft of amidships, easy to see. She was picking up new grass and weed and green slime, but it wasn't too bad yet. We had expected to find her picked clean of everything the skin-diver kids could lift, but by some freak of chance they hadn't found her. The big rock

with their Finor reels were still in the rod holders. Binoculars, booze, cameras, tackle boxes, rifle, sunglasses—all the toys and gear and gadgets that people take to sea were either stowed or lay on the cockpit, cabin, or fly-bridge decking. While Joe busied himself with studying the hatches and the interior layout, and measuring interior spaces, I kept assembling bundles of goodies and, with a couple of pulls on the dangling line, sending them up into the sunlight.

When we went up, I found that all the stuff had looked better down in the depths, green and shadowy, than up on the deck of my runabout, all sodden, leaking, and corroded.

Monday we took the *Flush* out and anchored her over the wreck and worked all day, in shifts, beefing up those places where Palacio thought the floatation might come busting out and also cutting through some interior bulkheads to make a free flow of water through all the belowdecks areas, and fastening some plywood against the inside of the hull where the big hole was. Whenever we came across anything we could tie a line to and lift to the surface, we did so.

The weather held on Tuesday and by noon Joe was satisfied that we were ready to try. We took the reinforced hose down and clamped it securely in place, leading it through the hole we'd cut into the damaged side above the waterline. We had made no attempt to make her watertight. That was the last thing Palacio wanted.

Bobby Guthrie got his funny-looking pump going. It throbbed, smoked, and stank, but it pulled water up through the intake hose dangling over the side and pumped it down and into the wreck and out through dozens of small openings here and there. Palacio was very nervous. His hands shook as he clamped the small hoses that led from three drums of separate kinds of gunk to the brass nipples on a fitting on the big hose that led down to the wreck. He had flow gauges and hand pumps on each drum. As Meyer had explained it to me, Gunk One reacted with the water, raising its temperature. Then Gunk Two and Gunk Three interacted with the heated water as they went swirling down, and when they were released inside the hull down below, they separated into big blobs and, in the cooler water, solidified into a very lightweight plastic full of millions of little bubbles full of the gases released through their interaction on each other and the heated water. Palacio had the three of us manning the hand pumps and he hopped back and forth from one flow gauge to the other, speeding one man up, slowing another down. There was, after about ten minutes, a sudden eruption about forty feet down-current, and a batch of irregular yellow-white chunks the size of cantaloupe appeared and, floating very high on the water, went moving swiftly away in the slight breeze.

Palacio stopped us and cut the flow. Guthrie turned off the big pump. We went down and found that the ventilator on the forward deck had blown out. By the time it was secure, it was time to quit. All day Wednesday there was pump trouble of one kind or another. We thought Palacio would break down and start sobbing.

By midday Thursday everything seemed to be working well for about forty minutes. My arm began to feel leaden. Palacio was gnawing his knuckles. Suddenly Guthrie gave a roar of surprise. The hose began to stand up out of the water like a snake and a moment later the big cruiser came porpoising up, so fast and so close that it threw a big wave aboard, drenching us and killing the pump. She rocked back and forth, streaming water, riding high and handsome. We stomped and yelled and laughed like idiots. She was packed full of those lightweight brittle blobs of foam, and I tried not to think of how damned foolish I had been to never even

think of what could have happened if she had come up that fast and directly under the *Flush*.

We wasted no time rigging for towing. We were getting more swell and I did not like the feel of the wind. Between periods of dead calm there would come a hot, moist huff, like a gigantic exhalation. I set it up with short towlines, the *Flush* in the lead, of course, the salvaged 'Bama Gal in the middle, and Bobby Guthrie aboard the *Muñequita* in the rear. I broke out the pair of walkie-talkies because the bulk of the 'Bama Gal made hand signals for Bobby back there impossible. The system was for him to keep the *Muñequita's* pair of OM 120's idling in neutral, and if our tow started to swing, he could give the engines a little touch of reverse and pull it back into line. I knew the inboard-outboards could idle all day without overheating. Also, when I had to stop the *Flush* down for traffic, Bobby could keep it from riding up on our stern.

It was early Saturday afternoon before we got her to Merrill-Stevens at Dinner Key, and we had to work her in during a flat squall, in a hard gray driving rain, the wind gusting and whistling. I'd phoned a friend via the Miami marine operator earlier in the day, so they were waiting for us. We shoved the 'Bama Gal into the slings and they picked her out of the water and put her on a cradle and ran her along the rails and into one of the big sheds. Palacio wore a permanent, broad, dreaming grin.

The dockmaster assigned me a slip for the *Flush* and space in the small boat area for the *Muñequita*. By the time we were properly moored, hooked into shoreside power, and had showered and shaved and changed, heavy rain was drumming down, and it was very snug in the lounge aboard *The Busted Flush*, lights on, music on, ice in the glasses, Meyer threatening to make his famous beef stew with chili, beans, and eggs, never the same way twice running. Guthrie had phoned his wife and she was going to drive down from Lauderdale to pick him up Sunday morning. They were tapping the Wild Turkey bourbon we'd found aboard the *Go* and I was sticking to Plymouth on ice. Meyer kept everybody from going too far overboard in estimating profit. He kept demanding we come up with "the minimum expectation, gentlemen."

So we kept going over what would probably have to be done and came up with a maximum of fifteen thousand to put her in shape, and a minimum forty-five thousand return after brokerage commission.

That is the best kind of argument, trying to figure out how much you've made. It is good to hear the thunder of tropic rain, to feel the muscle soreness of hard manual labor when you move, to have a chill glass in your hand, know the beginnings of ravenous hunger, realize that in a few hours even a bunk made of cobblestones would feel deep and soft and inviting.

They wanted me to come into the fledgling partnership, with twenty-five percent of the action. But struggling ventures should not be cut too many ways. Nor did I want the responsibility, that ever-present awareness of people depending on me permanently to make something work. They were too proud—Guthrie and Palacio—to accept my efforts as a straight donation, so after some inverted haggling we agreed that I would take two thousand in the form of a note at six percent, payable in six months. They wanted to put their talk back into improved equipment and go after a steel barge sunk in about fifty feet of water just outside Boca Grande Pass.

I was sprawled and daydreaming, no longer hearing their words as they talked excitedly of plans and projects, hearing only the blur of their voices through the music.

“Didn’t we make it that time in an hour and a half? Hey! Trav!”

Meyer was snapping his fingers at me. “Make what?” I asked.

“That run from Lauderdale to Bimini.”

They had stopped talking business. I could remember that ride all too well. “Just under an hour and a half from the sea buoy at Lauderdale to the first channel marker at Bimini.”

“In what?” Guthrie asked.

I told him what it had been, a Bertram 25 rigged for ocean racing with a pair of big hairpins, three hundreds in it, and enough chop in the Stream so that I had to work the throttles and the wheel every moment, so that when she went off a crest and was airborne, she would come down flat. Time it wrong and hit wrong, and you can trip them over.

“What was the rush?” Bobby asked.

“We were meeting a plane,” Meyer said.

And I knew at that moment he too was thinking of Helena Pearson and a very quick and dirty salvage job of several years back. We were both thinking of her, with no way of knowing she had been dead two days, no way of knowing her letter was at Bahia Mar waiting for me.

Even without the knowledge of her death, Helena was a disturbing memory ...

Five years ago? Yes. In a winter month, in a cold winter for Florida, Mick Pearson, with his wife, Helena, and his two daughters, aged twenty and seventeen, crewing for him, had brought his handsome Dutch motor sailer into Bahia Mar, all the way from Bordeaux. The *Likely Lady*. A wiry, seamed, sun-freckled, talkative man in his fifties, visibly older than his slender gray-blond wife.

He gave the impression of somebody who had made it early, had retired, and was having the sweet life. He circulated quickly and readily and got to know all the regulars. He gave the impression of talking a lot about himself, not in any bragging or self-important way, but in an amusing incident. People found it easy to talk to him.

Finally I began to get the impression that he was focusing on me, as if he had been engaged in some process of selection and I was his best candidate. I realized how very little I knew about him, how little he had actually said. Once we began prying away at each other the showdown was inevitable. I remember how cold his eyes were when he stopped being friendly sociable harmless Mick Pearson.

He wanted a confidential errand done, for a fat fee. He said he had been involved in a little deal abroad. He said it involved options on some old oil tankers, and some surplus, obsolete Turkish military vehicles, and all I needed to know about it was that it was legal, and he wasn't wanted, at least officially, by any government anywhere.

Some other sharpshooters had been trying to make the same deal, he said. They refused to make it a joint effort, as he had suggested, and tried to swing it alone. But Pearson beat them to it and they were very annoyed at his methods. "So they know I've got this bank draft payable to the bearer, for two hundred thirty thousand English pounds, payable *only* at the main branch of the Bank of Nova Scotia in the Bahamas, at Nassau, which is the way I wanted it because I've got a protected account there. I didn't want them to find out how I was going to handle it, but they did. It's enough money so they can put some very professional people to work to take it away from me. Long, long ago I might have taken a shot at slipping by them. But now I've got my three gals to think of, and how thin their future would be if I didn't make it. So I have to have somebody they don't know take it to the bank with my letter of instructions. Then they'll give up."

I asked him what made him so sure I wouldn't just set up my own account and stuff the six hundred and forty thousand into it.

His was a very tough grin. "Because it would screw you all up, McGee. It would bitch you out of your big romance with your own image of yourself. I couldn't do that to anybody. Neither could you. That's what makes us incurably small-time."

"That kind of money isn't exactly small-time."

"Compared to what it could have been by now, it is small, believe me." So he offered me five thousand to be errand boy, and I agreed. Payable in advance, he said. And after he had given me the documents, he would take off in the *Likely Lady* as a kind of decoy, and I was to start the day after he did. He said he would head for the Bahamas but then swing south and go down around the Keys and up the west coast of Florida to the home he and his gals had never seen for over a year and missed so badly, a raunchy sun-weathered old cypress house on

pilings on the north end of Casey Key.

That was on a Friday. He was going to give me the documents on Sunday and take the *Likely Lady* out to sea on Monday. At about noon on Saturday, while Helena and her daughters were over on the beach, they came aboard and cracked his skull and peeled the stateroom safe open. It would have been perfect had not Mick Pearson wired his air horns relay with a contact on the safe door, activated by a concealed switch he could turn off when he wanted to open it himself. So too many people saw the pair leaving the *Likely Lady* to hastily. It took me almost two hours to get a line on them, to make certain they hadn't left by air. They had left their rental car over at Pier 66 and had gone off at one o'clock on a chartered boat for some Bahamas fishing. I knew the boat, the *Betty Bee*, a thirty-eight-foot Merritt, well-kept, Captain Roxy Howard and usually one or the other of his skinny nephews crewing for him.

I phoned Roxy's wife and she said they were going to Bimini and work out from there trolling the far side of the Stream, starting Sunday. At that time, as I later learned, the neurosurgeons were plucking bone splinters out of Mick Pearson's brain.

I knew that the *Betty Bee* would take four hours to get across, so that would put her in Bimini at five o'clock or later. There was a feeder flight from there to Nassau leaving at seven fifteen. A boat is a very inconspicuous way to leave the country. Both Florida and the Bahamas have such a case of hots for the tourist dollar that petty officialdom must crowd themselves to sleep thinking about all the missing red tape.

It was two thirty before, in consultation with Meyer, I figured out how to handle it. If I chartered a flight over, it was going to be a sticky problem coping with the pair on Bahamian soil. Meyer remembered that Hollis Gandy's muscular Bertram, the *Baby Beef*, was in racing trim, and that Hollis, as usual, had a bad case of the shorts, brought on by having too many ex-wives with good lawyers.

So it was three when we banged past the sea buoy outside Lauderdale, Bimini-bound. Meyer could not hold the glasses on anything of promising size we spotted, any more than a rodeo contestant could thread a needle while riding a steer. And if I altered course to take closer looks, I stood the risk of wasting too much time or alerting a couple of nervous people.

We got to the marker west of the Bimini bar at four thirty, and after a quick check inside to make certain the *Betty Bee* hadn't made better than estimated time, we went out and lay in wait five miles offshore. I faked dead engines, got aboard, alerted Roxy Howard, and we took them very quickly. Roxy was easily alerted as he had become increasingly suspicious of the pair. An Englishman and a Greek. It was useful to do it quickly, as the Greek was snake-faced and armed. We trussed them up and I told Roxy what they'd been up to as I went through their luggage and searched their persons. The envelope with the bearer bank draft was in the Greek's suitcase and with it was the signed letter to the bank identifying me, authorizing me to act for Mick Pearson, with a space for my signature, and another space for me to sign again, probably in the presence of a bank officer. The Greek had two thousand dollars in his wallet, and the Englishman about five hundred. The Englishman had an additional eleven thousand plus in a sweaty money belt. It seemed reasonable to assume that that money had come out of Mick's stateroom safe. As far as I knew, Mick had taken a good thump on his hard skull and certainly had no interest in bringing in any kind of law. Roxy was not interested in tangling with the Bahamian police authorities. And I did not think the

Englishman or the Greek would lodge any complaints. And it was obvious that trying to get a word out of either of them would call for some very messy encouragement, something I have no stomach for. Theirs was a hard, competent, professional silence.

So I gave five hundred to Roxy. He said it was too much, but he didn't argue the point. We off-loaded them into the *Baby Beef*, and Roxy turned the *Betty Bee* and headed for home port. I ran on down to Barnett Harbour, about halfway between South Bimini and Cat Cay, and put them aboard the old concrete ship that has been sitting awash there since 1926, the old *Sapona* that used to be a floating liquor warehouse during prohibition. I knew they'd have a rough night of it, but they would be picked off the next day by the inevitable fishermen or skin divers. They had their gear, their identification papers, and over twenty-five hundred dollars. And they would think of some explanation that wouldn't draw attention to themselves. They had that look.

I ran back outside and into Bimini Harbor and found a place to tie up, where the boat would be safe. We caught the feeder flight to Nassau, and I called old friends at Lyford Cay. They refused to let us go into the city, and as they had what they called a "medium basket" going, they sent one of their cars to bring us over from the airport. We spent most of Sunday sprawling around the pool and telling lies.

Monday morning I borrowed a car and went into the city to the main offices at Bay Street at Rawson Square. The size of the transaction made it something to be handled in a panel office in the rear. I was given a receipt that gave the date and hour and minute of the deposit, gave the identification number of the bearer draft rather than the amount, and gave the number of the account maintained by Pearson rather than his name. The receipt was embossed with a heavy and ornate seal, and the bank officer scrawled indecipherable initials across it. I did not know then how good my timing had been.

Meyer and I caught a feeder flight back to Bimini in the early afternoon. The day was clear, bright, and cool. The Stream had flattened out, but even so, a two-and-a-half-hour trip was more comfortable than trying to match our time heading over.

The *Likely Lady* was all buttoned up when I walked around to D-109 to give Mick the receipt. The young couple aboard the big ketch parked next door said they had talked to Maureen, the elder daughter, at noon, and she had said that her father's condition was critical.

I told Meyer and went over to the hospital. When finally I had a chance to talk to Helena, I could see that there was no point in trying to give her the bank receipt or talking about the money. The receipt would have meant as much to her at that moment as an old laundry list. She said with a white-lipped, trembling, ghastly smile that Mick was "holding his own."

I remember that I found a nurse I knew and I remember waiting while she went around and checked his condition out with the floor nurses and the specials. I remember her little shrug and the way she said, "He's breathing, but he's dead, Trav. I found out they've got the room assigned already to somebody coming in tomorrow for a spinal fusion."

I remember helping Helena with the deadly details, so cumbersome at best, but complicated by dying in an alien place. He died at five minutes past one on Tuesday morning. Had he died, officially, seventy minutes sooner, the whole bank thing would have been almost impossible to ever get straightened out. I remember the gentle persistence of the city police. But she told them repeatedly that the safe had been empty, that she could not imagine

who had come aboard and given her husband the fatal blow on the head.

She and the girls packed their belongings, and I assured Helena that I would see to the boat, get the perishables off her, keep an eye on her. I offered to drive them across the state but she said she could manage. She was keeping herself under rigid and obvious control. When I gave her the cash and the bank receipt, she thanked me politely. They left to go to the funeral home and, from there, follow the hearse across to Sarasota County. A very small caravan. Prim, forlorn, and quite brave.

Yes, I knew that Meyer was remembering her too. I knew he had probably guessed the rest of it, perhaps wondered about it, but would never ask.

The rain came down and Meyer cooked his famous specialty, never-twice-alike. We ate like weary contented wolves, and the yawning began early. Yet once I was in the big bed in the master stateroom, the other memories of Helena became so vivid they held me for a long time at the edge of sleep, unable to let go ...

... There had been heavy rains drumming on the overhead deck of the *Likely Lady* in August of that year in that lonely and protected anchorage we found at Shroud Cay in the Exumas and under the sound of the rain I had made love to the Widow Pearson in that broad, deep bunk she had shared with the man who, by that August, had been almost six months at rest on Florida soil.

She had come back to Lauderdale in July. She had dropped me a note in June asking me to have someone put the *Likely Lady* in shape. I'd had her hauled, bottom scraped and repainted, all lines and rigging checked, power winches greased, blocks freed, both suits of sail checked, auxiliary generator and twin Swedish diesels tuned. She was less a motor sailer in the class sense than she was a roomy, beamy powerboat rigged to carry a large sail area, so large in fact that she had a drop centerboard operated by a toggle switch on the control panel, and a husky electric motor geared way, way down. There was maybe two tons of lead on the centerboard, so shaped that when, according to the dial next to the toggle switch, the centerboard was all the way up, sliding up into the divider partition in the belowdecks area the lead fitted snugly into the hull shape. Mick had showed me all her gadgetry one day, from the automatic winching that made sail handling painless, to the surprising capacity of the fuel and water tanks, to the capacity of the air-conditioning system.

I wonder who has her now. I wonder what she's called. Helena came over on a hot July day. She was of that particular breed which has always made me feel inadequate. Tallish, slender as to be almost, but not quite, gaunt. The bones that happen after a few centuries of careful breeding. Blond-gray hair, sun-streaked, casual, dry-textured, like the face, throat and backs of the hands, by the sun and wind of the games they play. Theirs is not the kind of composure that is an artifice, designed as a challenge. It is natural, impenetrable, and terribly polite. They move well in their simple, unassuming little two-hundred-dollar cotton dresses, because long ago at Miss Somebody's Country Day School they were so thoroughly taught that their grace is automatic and ineradicable. There are no girl-tricks with eyes and mouth. They are merely there, looking out at you, totally composed, in almost exactly the way they look out of the newspaper pictures of social events.

I asked about her daughters, and she told me that they had gone off on a two-month student tour of Italy, Greece and the Greek Islands, conducted by old friends on the faculty of Wellesley.

"Travis, I never thanked you properly for all the help you gave us. It was ... a most difficult time."

"I'm glad I could help."

"It was more than just ... helping with the details. Mick told me he had asked you to ... do a special favor. He told me he thought you had a talent for discretion. I wanted those people ... caught and punished. But I kept remembering that Mick would not have wanted that kind of international incident and notoriety. To him it was all some kind of ... gigantic casino. When you won or you lost, it wasn't ... a personal thing. So I am grateful that you didn't ... that you had the instinct to keep from ... making yourself important by giving out any statements about what happened."

"I had to tell you I'd caught up with them, Helena. I was afraid you'd want me to blow the whistle. If you had, I was going to try to talk you out of it. The day I get my name and face all over the newspapers and newscasts, I'd better look for some other line of work."

She made a sour mouth and said, "My people were so certain that Michael Pearson was some kind of romantic infatuation, we had to go away together to be married. He was too old for me, they said. He was an adventurer. He had no roots. I was too young to know my own mind. The usual thing. They wanted to save me for some nice earnest young man in investment banking." She looked more directly at me, her eyes narrow and bright with anger. "And one of them, after Mick was dead, had the damned blind arrogant gall to try to say: 'I told you so! After twenty-one years and a bit with Mick! After having our two girls, who loved him so. After sharing a life that ...'"

She stopped herself and said, with a wan smile, "Sorry. I got off the track. I wanted to say thank you and I want to apologize for being stupid about something, Travis. I never asked you before I left, what sort of ... arrangement you had with Mick. I know he had the habit of paying well for special favors. Had he paid you?"

"No."

"Was an amount agreed upon?"

"For what I had thought I was going to do. Yes."

"Then did you take it out of the cash before you gave me the rest of it, the cash that had been in the safe?"

"No. I took out five hundred for a special expense and two hundred and fifty for a rental on a boat and some incidental expenses."

"What was the agreed amount?"

"Five thousand."

"But you did much much more than what he ... asked you to do. I am going to give you twenty thousand, and tell you that it isn't as much as it should be."

"No. I did what I did because I wanted to do it. I won't even take the five."

She studied me in silence and finally said, "We are *not* going to have one of those silly squabbles, like over a restaurant check. You *will* take the five because it is a matter of personal honor to me to take on any obligation Mick made to anyone. I do not think that your appreciation of yourself as terribly sentimental and generous about widows and orphans should take priority over my sense of obligation."

"When you put it that way—"

"You will take the five thousand."

"And close the account without any ... squabbling."

She smiled. "And I planned it so carefully."

"Planned what?"

"You would take the twenty thousand and then I would feel perfectly free to ask you a favor. You see, I have to go to that bank in Nassau. On the transfer of those special accounts there has to be an actual appearance in person, with special identification, as prearranged by the owner of the account. I was going to fly over and see them and fly back, and find someone to help me take the *Likely Lady* around to Naples, Florida. A man wants her, and the price is right, and he would pick her up here, but ... I can't bear to part with her without ... some kind of a sentimental journey. So I thought after you took the money,

could ask you, as a favor, to crew for me while we take her over to the Bahamas. Mick and I planned every inch of her. We watched her take shape. She ... seems to know. And she wouldn't understand if I just turned my back on her. Do you find that grotesque?"

"Not at all."

"Would—?"

"Of course."

So we provisioned the *Likely Lady* and took off in the heat of early July. I had the stateroom Maureen and Bridget had used. We fell into an equitable division of the chores without having to make lists. I made the navigation checks, kept the charts and the log, took responsibility for fuel, engines, radio and electronic gear, minor repairs and maintenance, topside cleaning, booze, anchoring. She took care of the proper set of the sails, meals, laundry, belowdecks housekeeping, ice, water supply, and we shared the helmsman chores equally.

There was enough room aboard to make personal privacy easy to sustain. We decided that because we were on no schedule and had no deadlines, the most agreeable procedure was to move during the daylight hours and lie at anchor at night. If it was going to take too long to find the next decent anchorage, we would settle for an early stop and then take off at first light.

There were several kinds of silence between us. Sometimes it was the comfortable silence of starlight, a night breeze, swinging slowly at anchor, a mutual tasting of a summer night. Sometimes it was that kind of an awkward silence when I knew she was quite bitterly alone and saying good-bye to the boat and to the husband and to the plans and promises that would not be filled.

We were a man and a woman alone among the sea and the islands, interdependent, sharing the homely chores of cruising and living, and on that basis there had to be a physical awareness of each other, of maleness and femaleness. But there was a gratuitous triteness about the unconventional association that easily stifled any intensification of awareness.

It was five years back, and she was that inevitable cliché, an older woman, a widow, who had invited the husky younger male to voyage alone with her. I knew she had married young but I did not know how young. I could guess that she was eleven years older than I, give or take two years. At the start her body was pale, too gaunted, and softened by the lethargy of months of mourning. But as the days passed, the sun darkened her, the exertion firmed the slackened muscles, and as she ate with increasing hunger, she began to gain weight. And, as a result of her increasing feeling of physical well-being, I began to hear her humming to herself as she did her chores.

I suspect that it was precisely because any outsider, given the situation and the two actors on the stage, would have assumed that McGee was dutifully and diligently servicing the widow's physical hungers during the anchored nights that any such relationship became impossible. Not once, by word, gesture, or expression, did she even indicate that she had expected to have to fend me off. She moved youthfully, kept herself tidy and attractive, spent just enough time on her hair so that I knew she was perfectly aware of being a handsome woman and did certainly not require any hard breathing on my part to confirm her opinion. Nor did she play any of those half-innocent, half-contrived games of flirtation that invite misinterpretation.

We had a lot of silences, but we did a lot of talking too. General talk, spiced with incident, about the shape of the world, the shape of the human heart, good places we had been, good and bad things we had done or had not quite done. We went up around Grand Bahama, down the eastern shore of Abaco, over to the Berry Islands, down to Andros, and last, after fourteen days, over to New Providence, where we tied up at the Nassau Harbor Club.

She went alone to the bank and when she came back, she was very subdued and thoughtful. When I asked her if anything had gone wrong, she said that it had been quite a good deal more money than she had expected. She said that changed a few things and she would have to think about the future in a different way. We went out to dinner and when I got up the next morning, she was already up, drinking coffee and looking at the *Yachtsman's Guide to the Bahamas*.

She closed the book. "I suppose we should think about heading back," she said. "I hate to."

"Do you have a date to keep?"

"Not really. Somebody I have to see, eventually. A decision to make."

"I'm in no hurry. Let's look at some more places. Exumas. Ragged Islands too, maybe."

I explained to her how I take my retirement in small installments, whenever I can afford it, and if it was late August or early September when we got back, I wouldn't mind at all. She was overjoyed.

So we sailed to Spanish Wells, then down the western shore of Eleuthera, and then began to work our way very slowly down the lovely empty chain of the Exumas, staying overnight wherever we wanted to explore the beaches and the technicolor reefs. We did a lot of swimming and walking. I was suddenly aware that her mood was changing. She seemed remote for a few days, lost in thought, almost morose.

The day she suddenly cheered up I realized that she had begun to deliberately heighten my awareness of her. I had the feeling that it was a very conscious decision, something that she had made up her mind to do during those days when she seemed lost in her own thoughts and memories. As she was a tasteful, mature, elegant, and sensitive woman, she was not obvious about it. She merely seemed to focus her physical self at me, enhancing my awareness through her increased awareness of me. Inevitably it would be the male who would make the overt pass. It baffled me. I could not believe she was childish enough or shallow enough to set about enticing a younger man merely to prove that she could. There was more substance to her than that. She had begun something that would have to be finished in bed, because she did not think she would begin it without having recognized its inevitable destination. It was all so unlikely and so deliberate that I had to assume she had some compulsion to prove something or to disprove something. Or maybe it was merely a hunger that came from deprivation. So I stopped worrying myself with wondering about her. She was a desirable and exciting woman.

So when she provided the opportunity, I made the expected pass. Her mouth was eager. When she murmured, "We shouldn't," it meant, "We shall." Her trembling was not faked. She was overly nervous about it, for reasons I could not know until later.

The first time was just at dusk in her big wide double bunk in the master stateroom. Her body was lovely in the fading light, her eyes huge, her flesh still hot with the sun-heat of the long beach day, her shoulder tasting of the salt of the sea and the salt of perspiration. Because

she was tense and anxious, I took a long gentling time with her, and then when finally, in full darkness, she was readied, I took her, in that ever-new, ever-the-same, long, sliding, startling moment of penetration and joining, which changes, at once and forever, the relationship of two people. Just as it was happening she pushed with all her might at my chest and tried to writhe away from me, calling out, "No! Oh, please! No!" in a harsh, ugly, gasping voice. But she had been a moment late and it was done. She wrenched her head to the side and lay under me, slack and lifeless.

I could guess what had happened to her. She had arrived at her decision to bring this about through some purely intellectual exercise, some kind of rationalization that had seemed to her to be perfectly sane and sound. But a coupling cannot be carried out in some kind of abstract form. I could guess from knowing her that she had never been unfaithful to Mick Pearson. All pretty little rationalizations and games of conjecture can be wiped out in an instant by the total and immediate and irrevocable fleshy reality. The ultimate intimacy exists on a different plane than do little testings and tryings. When she made a small whimpering sigh, I began to move apart from her, but she quickly caught at me and kept me with her.

Five years ago, but I had the memories in full textural detail of how often and how desperately Helena struggled to achieve climax. She wore herself into exhaustion. It was ritualistic and ridiculous. It was like some kind of idiotic health club: Orgasm is good for you. It was like some dogged kind of therapy. It was completely obvious that she was a healthy, sexually accomplished, passionate woman. But she was so concentrated on what she thought was some sort of severe necessity that she choked up. She would manage to get herself right out to the last grinding panting edge of it and get hung up there and then slowly, slowly fall back and away. And apologize, hopelessly, and plead with me to please be patient with her.

Four or five days later, wooden with fatigue, she confessed what had led her into this grotesque dilemma. Her voice was drab, her sentences short and without color. A man wanted to marry her. A very dear man, she said. The sex part of her marriage to Mick had been very very wonderful, always. During the months since his death, she had felt as if that part of her had died along with him. She did not want to cheat the man who wanted to marry her. She liked him very much. She liked me equally well. So it had seemed reasonable to assume that if she found she could enjoy sex with me, then she could enjoy it with him. So she had used me in such a cynical way. But she had to make up her mind whether or not to marry him. That was one of the factors. Sorry it had turned into such a dismal trying thing. Sorry to be such a dull mess. Sorry. Sorry.

It is no good telling somebody they're trying too hard. It is very much like ordering a child to go stand in a corner for a half hour and never once think about elephants.

So when she said there was no point in going on with such a stupid performance, I agreed. Let one day, one night, and one day pass. She was embarrassed and depressed. That night she began howling and roaring and thrashing at about one in the morning. She came hurrying and I made it quite an effort for her to shake me awake. I had made certain that it had been such a physical day that she would be weary.

Woke up. Sagged back, deliberately trembling. Said it was an old nightmare that happened once or twice a year, based upon an exceptionally ugly event I could not ever tell anyone, not ever.

Up until then I had been all too competent. Big, knuckly, pale-eyed, trustworthy McGe who had taken care of things, first for Mick and then for her. Could handle boats, navigation, emergencies. So I had presented her with a flaw. And a built-in way to help. She told me I had to tell someone and then it would stop haunting me. In a tragic tone I said I couldn't. She came into my narrower bunk, all sympathy and gentle comfort, motherly arms to cradle the trembling sufferer. "There is nothing you can't tell me. Please let me help. You've been so good to me, so understanding and patient. Please let me help you."

Five years ago, and back then the scar tissue was still thin and tender over the memories of the lady named Lois. There was enough ugliness in what had happened to her to be suitably persuasive. The world had dimmed a little when she was gone, as if there were a rheostat of the sun and somebody had turned it down, just one notch.

I pretended reluctance and then, with a cynical emotionalism, told her about Lois. It was a cheap way to use an old and lasting grief. I was not very pleased with myself for selecting Lois. It seemed a kind of betrayal. And with one of those ironic and unexpected quirks of the emotions, I suddenly realized that I did not have to pretend to be moved by the telling of it. My voice husked and my eyes burned, and though I tried to control myself, my voice broke. I never *had* told anyone about it. But where does contrivance end and reality begin? I knew she was greatly moved by the story. And out of her full heart and her concern, and her woman's need to hold and to mend, she fumbled with her short robe and laid it open around me with gentle kisses and little tugs, with caresses and murmurings, brought us sweetly together and began a slow, long, deep surging, earth-warm and simple, then murmured, "Just for you, darling. Don't think about me. Don't think about anything. Just let me make it good for you."

And it happened, because she was taking a warm, dreamy, pleasurable satisfaction in soothing my nightmared nerves, salving the wound of loss, focusing her woman-self, her softnesses and pungencies and opened-taking on me, believing that she had been too wearied by the energies of the day to even think of her own gratification but unaware of the extent to which she had been sexually stimulated by all the times when she had tried so doggedly and failed. So in her deep sleepy hypnotic giving it built without her being especially aware of herself, built until suddenly she groaned, tautened, became swollen, and then came across the edge and into the great blind and lasting part of it, building and bursting, building and bursting, peak and then diminuendo until it had all been spent and she lay slack as butter, breath whistling, heart cantering, secretions a bitter fragrance in the new stillness of the bed.

I remember how she became, for the whole ten days we remained at anchor in the cove of Shroud Cay, like a kid beginning vacation. A drifting guilt, a sadness about Mick—these made her pleasure the sweeter. There was no cloying kittenishness about her, as that was a style that would not have suited her—or me. She was proud of herself and as bold, jaunty, direct and demanding as a bawdy young boy, chuckling her pleasures, full of a sweet wildness in the afternoon bunk with the heavy rain roaring on the decks over us, so totally unselfconscious about trying this and that and the other, first this way and that way and the other way, so frankly and uncomplicatedly greedy for joy that in arrangements that could easily have made another woman look vulgarly grotesque she never lost her flavor of grace and elegance.

For that brief time we were totally, compulsively involved with the flesh, pagans whose only clock was that of our revived desires, learning each other so completely that, in consort we could direct ourselves, joined or unjoined, as though we were a single octopoidal creature.

with four eyes, twenty fingers, and three famished mouths. When we raised anchor and moved on, the tempo diminished, and the affair became a more sedate and comfortable and cozy arrangement, with ritual supplanting invention, with morning kisses that could be affection without any overtone of demand, with waking in the broad bunk to feel the heated length of her asleep, spoon style, against my back, and be content she was there, and be content to drowse off again.

The last day of August was our last day in the islands and we spent the night anchored within of the Cat Cay channel, and would cross the Stream the next day. She was solemn and thoughtful at dinner. We made love most gently and tenderly, and afterward when I held her in my arms, both of us on the edge of sleep, she said, "You understood that it was our last time, dear?"

"A way to say good-bye. A good way."

She sighed. "I had twenty-one years with Mick. I'll never be ... a whole person without him. But you did some mending, Travis. I know that ... I can stumble through the rest of my life and accept what I've got left, live with less. Make do. I wish I could be in love with you. I would never let you go. I would be your old, old wife. I think I would dye your hair gray and have my face lifted and lie about my age. I'd never let you get away, you know."

I began to tell her a lot of things, very significant and important and memorable things, and when I stopped, waiting for applause, I discovered she was asleep.

When the *Likely Lady* was back in a slip at Bahia Mar, she took one wistful walk around the deck and made a sour little smile and said, "Good-bye to this too. I'll let the man who wants her pick her up here. Will you show him through her and explain everything?"

"Sure. Send him to me."

When I had put her luggage in the trunk of the rental car, and kissed her good-bye, and she had gotten behind the wheel, she looked out at me, frowning, and said, "If you *ever* need *anything*, darling, anything I can give you, even if I have to steal to get it ..."

"And if you start coming unglued, lady ..."

"Let's keep in touch," she said, blinked her eyes very rapidly, grinned, gunned the engine and scratched off with a reckless shriek of rubber, lady in total command of the car, hands high on the wheel, chin up, and I never saw her again.

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