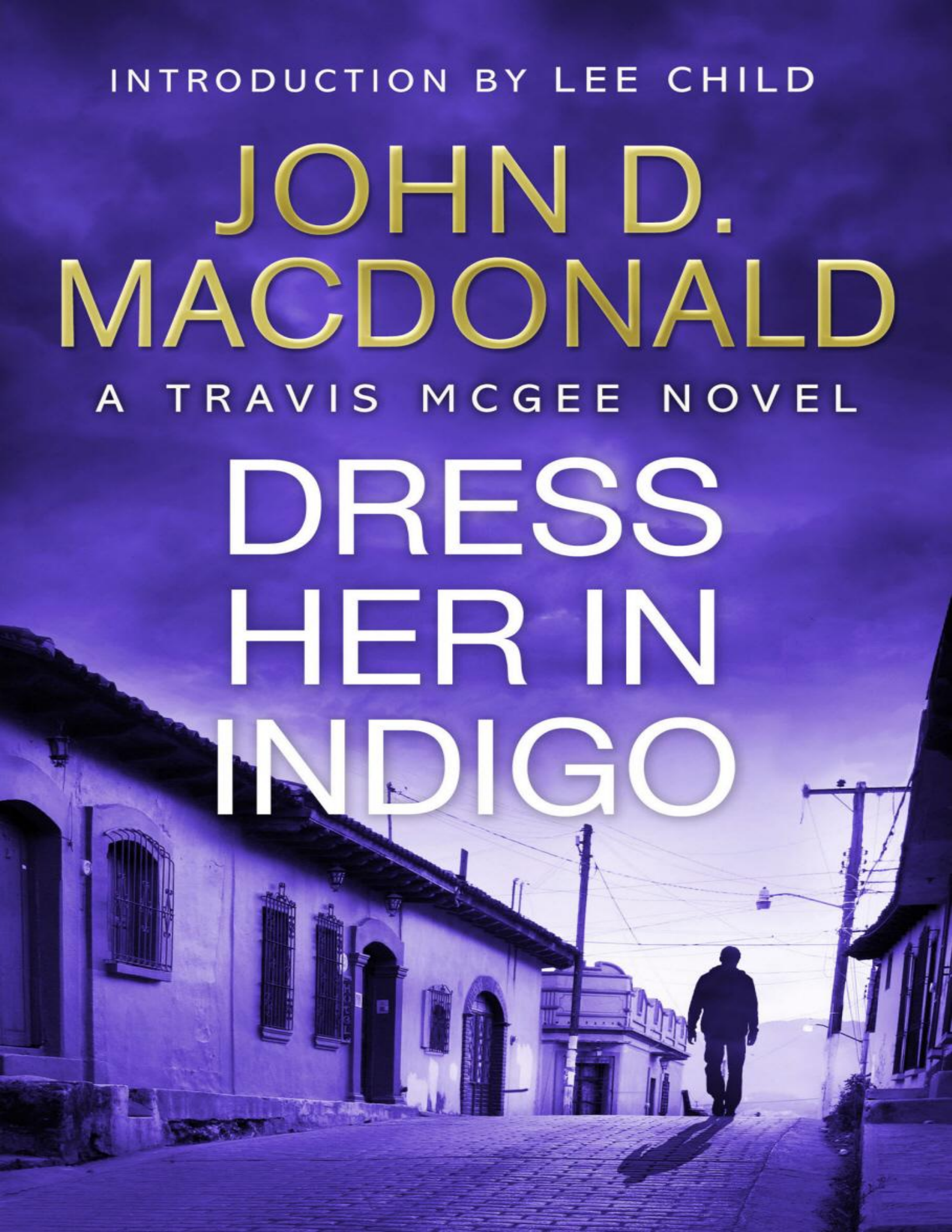
INTRODUCTION BY LEE CHILD

JOHN D. MACDONALD

A TRAVIS MCGEE NOVEL

DRESS HER IN INDIGO



About the Book

Travis McGee isn't your typical knight in shining armour. He only works when his cash runs out, and his rule is simple: He'll help you find whatever was taken from you, as long as he can keep half.

Travis McGee could never deny his old friend Meyer anything. So before he can even say please, Travis has agreed to accompany him to Mexico to look into the mysterious last months of the daughter of a rich friend.

Expecting to find out that the young woman had fallen in with the usual misfits and rebels, what they actually discover is stranger, and far more deadly. The deeper Travis digs, the less accidental the death starts to seem . . .

First published in 1969, *Dress Her in Indigo* features an introduction by Lee Child

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John D. MacDonald

DRESS HER IN INDIGO

Introduction

Lee Child

Suspense fiction trades on surprising and unexpected twists. Like this one: A boy named John Dann 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 on 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, westerns, 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 of 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 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, predated 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 twin poles are the theme of the sensationally good Travis McGee series, which is a canon equaled for enduring quality and maturity by very little else. McGee is a quiet man, internally bewildered by and raging at what passes for modern progress, externally happy merely to be varnishing the decks of his houseboat and polishing its brass, but always ready to saddle up and ride off in the service of those who need and deserve his help. Again, not the product of the privileged youth enjoyed by the salaried executive's son.

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

Lee Child

New York

2012

He that leaveth nothing to chance will do few things ill, but he will do very few things.

—GEORGE SAVILE, MARQUIS OF HALIFAX

One

On that early afternoon in late August, Meyer and I walked through the canvas tunnel at Miami International and boarded a big bird belonging to Aeronaves de Mexico for the straight shot to Mexico City. We were going first class because it was all a private and personal and saddening mission at the behest of a very sick and fairly rich man.

We had the bulkhead seats on the port side because I am enough inches beyond six feet to cherish the extra knee room.

Tourist cards in order, cash in the moneybelts, under-seat luggage only. And the unfamiliarly sedate wardrobes of the airborne businessman because there is a constant flow of them back and forth, the systems analysts and the plant location experts, the engineers and the salesmen, importers and exporters, con men and investment specialists.

The Mexican peso is rock solid, the economy roaring, and the population zooming past fifty million. So it is protective coloration to join the flock, as most trips combine business and pleasure, and the pure tourist is fair game for every hustle in the book.

But in one respect we were not entirely plausible. We'd spent the last few weeks aboard my houseboat, *The Busted Flush*, puttering around Florida Bay and the Keys with a small, convivial, and very active group of old and new friends aboard. When you get your clock adjusted to the routines of anchoring off shore, you keep the same hours as the sea birds, and the long hot bright days of summer had been full of fishing and swimming, walking the empty beaches of the off-shore keys, exploring in the dinghy rigged for sail, diving the reefs. So we were both baked to the deep red-bronze that comes from the new deep burn atop the years of deep-water tan, hair

baked pale on my skull, salt-dried and wind-parched, the skin sea-toughened. Even Meyer's heavy black pelt had been bleached a little and now looked slightly red when the light hit it the right way.

So if we were of the business breed, it was something to do with engineering and the out-of-doors, like pipelines and irrigation projects.

He had the window seat. We sat in the sweltering heat of the tin bird until finally they unsnapped the umbilical tunnel, swung the door shut, and taxied us out toward takeoff. Then the warm air that had been rushing out of the overhead vents turned to cool, and white shirts began to come unstuck.

Meyer shrugged and smiled in a weary way and said, "That poor, sad son of a bitch."

No need to draw a picture. The memory of my short visit with Mr. T. Harlan Bowie was recent and vivid. Maybe any complex and demanding life in our highly structured culture is like that old juggling routine in which a line of flexible wands as long as pool cues is fastened to a long narrow table and the juggler-clown goes down the line, starting a big white dinner plate spinning atop each one, accelerating the spin by waggling the wand. By the time he gets the last one spinning, the first one has slowed to a dangerous, sloppy wobble, and so he races back and waggles the wand frantically and gets it up to speed. Then the third one needs attention, then the second, the fifth, the eighth, and the little man runs back and forth staring up in horrid anxiety, keeping them all going, and always on the verge of progressive disaster.

So Mr. Bowie's white spinning plates had been labeled Vice President and Trust Officer of a large Miami bank, Homeowner, Pillar of the Community, Husband of Liz, Director of This and That, Board Member of The Other, Father of Beatrice known as Bix, the lovely daughter and only child.

He kept the plates spinning nicely, and I imagine he expected to eventually take them off the wands and put them down, with each deletion simplifying the task that remained, until maybe there would be just one plate called Sunset Years, placidly spinning.

But somehow life is arranged so that if one plate wobbles too much and slips off the wand tip and smashes, the rest of them start to go also, as if the sudden clumsiness were a contagion.

One morning Liz had asked him if he had time for another cup of candy. She became furious when he couldn't seem to understand what she meant, and she got the steaming pot and poured another cup and said, "Candy!" She hesitated, frowning, and said, "Coffee? Of course it's coffee! What did I call it?"

By the time she was scheduled for all the neurological tests at the Baltimore clinic, she had lost the differentiation between genders, using he and she so interchangeably she had a fifty percent chance of being right at any given time, and she had admitted to having had sudden and severe headaches for several months, but had paid as little attention to them as possible, because she had never believed in babying herself. They took the top of her skull off like a lid and got some of it but knew they could not get all, and stuck a cobalt bead in there for luck, even knowing she had no luck left. She kept talking for half the time it took to die, but the words didn't go together in any pattern anyone could translate. It took five months to kill her, if you start counting the morning she poured her beloved husband a cup of candy. It was hideously expensive and, to Harl Bowie, hideously incomprehensible. She died on Columbus Day. Daughter Bix had spent the summer at home and had stayed on, of course, rather than going back in September for her senior year at Wellesley. After Liz died, Bix told her daddy she would probably go back at mid-term.

He was not paying much attention, not only because he was stunned by the loss of his wife, but also because there had been a merger of certain banks, and there was a new imperative computer system for the handling of trust account investments, and Harl Bowie had to keep running up to Atlanta for a week at a time to try to find out what the hell the quiet young men who had been posted in the trust department were talking about.

But he paid a lot of attention when she told him right after Christmas that she had decided not to go back. She had decided to go to Mexico for a while "with some kids I know." He had tried

every bit of leverage he could think of, and he couldn't move her an inch. He couldn't even get any display of emotion out of her. She reminded him gently that she would become twenty-two in another month, and there was the twenty thousand left her by her mother, and said it would be nice if he could stop being so manic about it because she was going, with or without approval.

So she went, and he got some infrequent postcards, and in April he was driving through thunder to the airport for another bout with the systems analysis people in Atlanta, and a big semi coming the other way got a big blast of wind and lost it, and came piling and jackknifing across the medial strip into heavy oncoming traffic. They said it was a miracle half a dozen or more people weren't killed, instead of just one man seriously injured, a local bank executive.

T. Harlan Bowie had to be prybarred and torch-cut out of his squashed Buick, and there was so much blood the rescue people were in a big hurry. As it turned out, they would have done a lot better taking it slow and easy rather than turning him and twisting him and working him in muscular style out of the metal carapace. Nobody could prove anything afterward. The lacerations were superficial. But there was a fracture of the spine, and between the second and third lumbar vertebrae the unprotected cord had been pinched, ground, bruised, torn, and all but severed. Nobody could ever say whether the accident had done it, or the rescue efforts.

And it killed him—from the fracture point on down to his toes. Meanwhile the fates were laughing dirtily in the wings at another aspect of the treatment they were giving the poor, sad, sorry son of a bitch. T. Harlan Bowie had always been both shrewd and lucky with what Liz used to call "Harlie's funny little stocks." He liked to put his eggs in a couple of baskets and watch the baskets like an eagle. The day they told him they wanted to take the top of Liz's skull off, he stopped watching the baskets. They were a couple of little technology companies. He had about an eighty thousand investment in them, evenly split. It was not savings, because bank officers don't make enough to save money like that after taxes. It

was the pyramided gains of a dozen years of those funny little stocks.

His personal broker would call once in a while and try to report what was going on, but Harl didn't want to talk about it or hear about it or even know about it. After Liz died, he was too upset about being so damned alone, and about Bix, to have even the slightest stir of curiosity about his two little dog stocks. Then, of course, there were the weeks in the hospital, and by early July they moved him from the hospital to an elegant place that was a combination rest home and therapy center. When he found out that the tab was running seventy-five a day plus extras, it stimulated the money-nerve and he began to check things out. An old and good friend had emptied out the house on Cricket Bayou, the redwood and coquina stone house Liz had loved so, had stored Harl's personal stuff, and had gotten a very good price for the house the day after it was listed. The personal accident and disability and major disaster insurance was paying off handsomely. His attorney had negotiated a surprisingly fat settlement from the company which handled the trucker's liability insurance. The premature retirement benefit and the bank insurance disability income clause were spewing more money diligently.

So he called his broker finally and heard the awed, hushed and respectful tone, and finally comprehended that the two funny little technology stocks had both come out with a couple of earnings quarters of a fantastic richness, that they had valuable patents in areas Harl had never even heard of, that one was listed on the big board and the other one had applied, and the stock of both of them had been generously split a couple of times. So in one of them, what had cost him six dollars was worth two hundred and fifty, and the laggard had gone only from eight dollars to a hundred and twenty. So there was upwards of two million two, or an aftertax one million six.

He laughed after he found that out; he laughed himself sick. He had his broker arrange a negotiated sale through the floor specialists, and he put the tax money aside in treasury bills, and he stuffed the rest of it into tax-free municipals, and there he was all of

a sudden with a tax-free income coming in on the basis of like two hundred and forty dollars a day forever, and it was money he didn't have to touch because what was coming in from all other sources was more than sufficient to his needs, even in Garden Suite Number Five in Tropicana Grove Retreat.

His lawyers had been trying to locate Bix in Mexico to tell her that daddy had been badly injured. But the last plate had to smash and did so when a man with a polite and careful voice tracked T. Harlan Bowie down by long distance from the State Department to tell him that Miss Beatrice Tracy Bowie had been killed near Oaxaca when the vehicle in which she had been riding had gone off a mountain road, and the Mexican authorities wanted to know where the body was to be shipped and who would arrange and pay for the shipment.

Poor sick sorry rich and sad son of a bitch.

All you can say is: Well, that's the way it goes sometimes. It goes very had sometimes because they give you the bad in great big indigestible wads. As if they want to write you off in a hurry. As if the idea is to tear down your whole scene and sow the area with salt and acid, and be off looking for the next fellow who happens to be standing and smiling and thinking that life is pretty good lately.

So only-daughter was airfreighted back to eternal rest beside mother Liz in one of those happy-vale places were the markers are flush with the ground level, the walks and gates have names, and stereotaped organ music comes wafting out of the pole-mounted guaranteed weatherproof high-compliance speaker systems.

Nobody knew whether she had enjoyed Mexico.

So three days ago T. Harlan Bowie got Meyer on the phone and they had a long talk, and then Meyer said I should accompany him to Miami and talk to a friend of his. I said I did not want to talk to anybody about anything, because it had been a very nice cruise and I wanted to slob around and savor it in full measure.

Meyer then reminded me that I had met Bix Bowie, and that last year, a week or so after her mother's funeral, he had brought her around and we had gone with her and some other people on the *Flush* up the waterway, and the girl had seemed to have a good

time, but it was hard to tell. He explained that he had been a sort of unofficial godfather to the girl when she was smaller, before she had gone away to school.

It stirred my memory, but I could not get a clear image of the girl herself. The world seems overful of quiet pretty blondes lately, and the trouble is that when they are silent and withdrawn one no longer knows whether it is shyness, total disinterest, or a concealed and contemptuous churlishness.

But I could see that it had racked my friend Meyer, and that if I continued to drag my feet, he was going to say please, and then I would be unable to help myself, so I agreed before he had a chance to say the magic word friends should not have to use on one another.

On the way down he talked a little about how Liz used to ask him to show up at school when there had been some kind of bring-a-parent situation and Harlan Bowie was too tied up to make it. He thought Bix was glad he would show, but he could never be certain. He had never been able to reach through to her. She had extraordinary composure and control. He and Liz had attended her high school graduation together, because Harl had an appointment in Tallahassee that day.

I said I thought a father should be able to manage at least a graduation for an only child and only daughter. And Meyer said it had often seemed so to him, too.

So we drove on down to Tropicana Grove Retreat, and Meyer was so troubled, I found myself getting emotionally hung on this blonde I couldn't remember. By God, anybody who cruises with McGee deserves better treatment than the fates, or her father, had apparently given her.

The establishment was in a quiet area in Coral Gables, with low buildings, a lot of very handsome old banyans, lots of plantings, summer birdsongs, and old parties being wheel-chaired along curved walks. They made a phone call from the office. A stocky woman in a gray and white uniform appeared and introduced herself as Mrs. Kreiger and smiled in pleasant recognition at Meyer, and led us back through garden walks to Garden Suite Five. T.

Harlan Bowie sat in a wheelchair in the air-conditioned, carpeted living room, watching a cable television picture of the changing prices on a brokerage house board, while a man was talking about the rails confirming the Dow. He turned it off with the remote control.

Tall thin frail man. His handshake was fragile and tentative. His eyes had that look. It is not so much a haunted look or a hollow-eyed look. It is a look of constant and thoughtful appraisal that keeps going on and on in spite of all conversations, all diversions. Any man who outgrows the myths of childhood is ninety-nine percent aware and convinced of his own mortality. But then comes the chilly breath on the nape of the neck, a stirring of the air by the wings of the bleak angel. When a man becomes one hundred percent certain of his inevitable death, he gets The Look.

He had a long face, high forehead, the fine-bodied white hair of the erstwhile blond. Mrs. Kreiger told him she would be back in an hour to take him to therapy. She had broad pale lips, lovely eyes, a tidy muscularity in the way she moved. She told us happily, in a little more than a trace of German accent, that Mr. Bowie had moved the toes on his right foot.

He flushed. Part irritation. Part Aw shucks, it was nothin', guys.

He looked at the door she closed behind her and said, "Und soon, Herr Bowie, ve vill haff you running races, nein?" He asked us to sit. He said to Meyer, "Did you tell Mr. McGee what we discussed?"

"Some of the background, Harl. Not what you want done."

He turned the chair slightly to face me more directly. "Mr. McGee, I know damned little about what my daughter, Bix, felt and thought and believed. I've had a lot of time to think. And a lot of the thinking has been painful. Appraisal of myself as a father—very, very poor. I know that when she was a toddler we were close. She adored me. That was the good part of it. Our only chick. Liz had had a bad time. Couldn't have more. You know. Bix never went through any ugly period at all. Beautiful baby, lovely little girl, handsome teenager. No acne, no braces, no gawky period. Liz and I were too aware of her being an only child, I guess. And awed by how damned pretty she was, and upset at all the admiration she got. So we were

too harsh with her. Two against one. United front. She had to strain like hell to get our approval, and we were too chinchy about giving it out. We made her obedient and docile and sweet, and we probably made her unsure of herself. But how can you tell? How many chances do you get to raise a child? I was very, very busy. So I wasn't paying attention, not to Bix as a person. She was an object. Beautiful child.

"Then when Liz … got sick, Bix came down. She stayed with her mother right through it. And it wasn't pretty. Bix was a rock. I took her for granted. I took her strength for granted. God only knows how badly it tore her up. She never let me know. Without Liz I was a zombie. I went through the motions. It should have been the two of us then. Father and daughter. But each of us was alone in a private way. I had my own hell. I don't know where she was spending her time. She was just … around."

He gave me a despairing look, and made an empty gesture with his hands. "I'm dithering. I'm not saying it. Look. I don't even know how she lived when she was here with me in Miami. I'd find her in the house with friends. Pretty oddball-looking kids. I'd go through and they'd stare at me as if I came from Mars, as if my house were a bus station and I were some strange type in transit. Empty eyes, loud music. She went to Mexico in early January this year. Seven months later she was dead. I want to know … what it was like. I want to know—Oh God help me—I just want to know if she was having a good time." His voice broke and he put his hand across his eyes.

Meyer said, "Harl had an agency do a little investigating. But the reports are facts without any flavor. He'd follow the back trail himself, if he could. He tried to think of somebody who could get away, somebody without a regular job or a family and he thought of me. When we talked about it, I said you were the man for the job. He wants us both to go. All expenses. Take our time and do it right and come back and tell him how it was for her."

"And find out," Bowie said, "what kind of people she was running around with—find out if they could have played … some kind of cruel game."

I questioned him, and he explained. After he had had word of his daughter's fatal accident, he had received a letter that had been written and mailed at least a week before she had died, but had been sent to the house that had been sold and had taken a long time in transit. He took it out of the drawer and handed it to me.

Ordinary mail. Sent from Oaxaca in July, with a date stamp so blurred it could have been the 23rd or the 28th. Cheap envelope, cheap paper. Blue ballpoint. It was small untidy writing, half script, half printed, with no clue to the sex of whoever wrote it. No salutation or date or signature.

You want Bix to come back ever, or ever want to come back even, you better come after her or send somebody pretty quick because she doesn't have any idea what's happening to her lately.

"My daughter always knew exactly what was happening," Bowie said. "Somebody was trying to create a problem for her. I don't know why. A cruel little game of some kind. The part about her not wanting to come back certainly means that this note has no relationship to the accident."

So we had talked a little longer, but by then I knew it was for no other reason than to have us report on the end of the short and happy life of Miss Bowie. But he did not look as if he really wanted to hear anything too ugly.

Maybe it wasn't very pretty for Bix Bowie.

Maybe it was a dingy way to die.

So we had the brief reports from the investigation agency, and we had the translation of the Mexican police report of the death, and we had some duplicate prints made from a negative Harlan Bowie had given us. The picture did not restore my memory of her. Full face, half a smile. A flash picture taken the last Christmas the family was intact. Home from school. Without a schoolgirl look. Mature woman. Long creamy spill and fall of thick, ivory-blond hair. Watchful eyes. Meyer told me they were dark, dark blue. Mouth curved with secrets untold. The expression was contradictory. She looked bland and reserved, almost content. But the slant of the flashbulb light picked up a little bulge at the corner of the jaw, a

little knot of muscle, a look of tension held under the clench of teeth, under iron control.

The tin bird whoofed down the runway and lifted sharply, while everybody played the habitual game of total indifference which hides the shallow breathing and contracted sphincters of the Air Age.

I looked across the blue bay at the fantasy known as Miami Beach. Cubes of maple sugar. Candy minarets. Special low summer rates. We were off to start at the end of her life and work back.

Two

The two Mexican stewardesses in first class were tidy, handsome, efficient, and very polite. It was restful to find they had apparently not been programmed to smile constantly. The drink cart was well stocked, and it stopped as often as you wanted it to. Lunch was late, fairly heavy, and though no gourmet feast, was served in a manner which had more of the illusion of permanence than is created by the disposable plastics of the domestic airlines in the states.

The plates were heavy cream-colored china with a gold band. Tablecloth and napkins were thick linen. The cutlery was massive silver plate, and the cream, sugar, salt, and pepper came in chunky, permanent, cut-glass containers.

Meyer found the whole thing pleasantly inconsistent. “The jet aircraft is a limited life-support system. It hangs up here, above the thunderheads, heated, pressurized, ventilated, with food and water and waste disposal. The duration of the system depends on the fuel supply. So, if one comes down at the wrong place at the wrong speed for the wrong reasons, the logical debris should be of disposable items. Travis, the mind boggles at visions of a wooded hill littered with broken pieces of dinner plates, cups, saucers and silver tableware. As if a dining room fell out of the sky. Those horrid little plastic compartmented plates and cardboard shotglasses for the cream and salad dressing are more apt for scenes of disaster. So the whole bit is an affirmation that it can’t possibly fall out of the sky. Subtle and interesting. Now if they could cover these jukebox plastic bulkheads with a very thin layer of teak or library oak …”

“Mighty guru, take your bulging brain off the psychology of air travel and put it on your old buddy, T. Harlan Bowie. He did not ring loud and clear. There is a crack in the bell somewhere.”

Meyer shrugged. “Sure.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“He rings true enough, as what he is. What you sense is that his concern seems a little faked. It isn’t. It’s limited by his own limitations. He’s using us to buy a kind of emotional respectability. He’s using us to pat his image back into shape. Oh, he adored her when she was a toddler. Tiny girls are cute and huggable, like puppies and kittens. Lots of people adore kittens, and when they get to be cats they take them for a nice ride and dump them out in the country somewhere and imagine them living in a nice barn, catching mice. McGee, the world is full of reasonably nice guys like Harl. They go through all the motions of home and family, but there is no genuine love or emotion involved. There is an imitation kind. They are unconscious practicing hypocrites. They’re stunted in a way they don’t and can’t recognize. If I had to nail it down, I’d say that people like Harl go around with the unspoken, unrealized conviction that nobody else in the world exists, really, except as … bits of stage dressing in the life role that they are playing. So wife and child and job and home are part of the image, and he kept it burnished and tidy, but without any deep involvement with anybody but T. Harlan Bowie. Now he’s studying his way into his new role. Tragic, crippled figure. So the dramatics are off key, just a little. And the tears are not quite real. Our mission is part of the new image. But don’t fault him. He believes he is really in the midst of life and always has been. He doesn’t know any better, because he’s never known anything else. What a limited man believes is emotional reality is indeed *his* emotional reality.”

“Doesn’t everybody fake a little in their own way?”

“Sure. And you’re aware of it when you do, aren’t you?”

“Uncomfortably.”

“But he isn’t. And that’s the difference.”

I thought it over. “Question answered, Meyer. What was his wife like?”

“A nice woman. Comfortable. Adjusted.”

“Would Bix have been able to understand what you’ve told me about him?”

“She would have known it existed. Whether or not she understood it is something else. Maybe she thought it is what people mean when they talk these days about the generation gap. I imagine it would have given her the feeling that no matter how hard she tried, she could never really please him. She would believe, maybe, that there was some well of warmth and understanding and love that she couldn’t ever reach, without realizing that she couldn’t reach it because it wasn’t there, not for her, not for anybody.”

I retrieved the investigation reports from the inside pocket of my jacket and studied them carefully, looking for any lead I might have missed the other times I had gone over them.

The group had left Miami on January third, five of them traveling in a blue heavy-duty Chevrolet pick-up truck, two years old, Florida license, registered in the name of Walter Rockland, who, up until Christmas, had been a swimming pool attendant at the Sultana Hotel on Miami Beach. A few days before Christmas Miss Beatrice Bowie had withdrawn eight thousand dollars from her savings account, leaving a balance of thirteen thousand two hundred and eleven dollars and sixty cents, twelve thousand of which had been part of the twenty thousand from her mother’s estate. She had purchased a new camper body for the truck, and the group had purchased a great deal of camping equipment and supplies—sleeping bags, a shelter tent, hatchets, camp stove, netting, gasoline lanterns, flashlights, first-aid kits.

They had shown up on January 10th in the public records at Brownsville, Texas, where they had applied for and received tourist cards good for six months. The other three members of the group were Minda McLeen, age twenty, occupation student, address Box 80, Coral Gables, Florida; Carl Sessions, age twenty-two, occupation musician, listed at the same address as Miss McLeen; and Jerome Nesta, age twenty-six, occupation sculptor, home address Box 2130, Key West, Florida.

The agency had come up with only a few additional facts about the quintet. Miss McLeen had stopped going to classes at the University of Miami in May of the previous year. Walter Rockland had been fired by the Sultana Hotel, and though the personnel

manager would not state why, there was reason to believe that the hotel management thought he was implicated in some way in a series of robberies of the winter guests at the hotel. Jerome Nesta had been arrested three and a half years previously at Marathon, Florida, in a narcotics raid, had been charged with and had pleaded not guilty to possession of marijuana. When the case came to trial, there was insufficient proof that the marked and tagged container presented in court was in fact the same container taken from him when he was taken into custody, and a defense motion to dismiss was granted by the judge.

And that, of course, is the tragic flaw in the narcotics laws—that possession of marijuana is a felony. Regardless of whether it is as harmless as some believe, or as evil and vicious as others believe, savage and uncompromising law is bad law, and the good and humane judge will jump at any technicality that will keep him from imposing a penalty so barbaric and so cruel. The self-righteous pillars of church and society demand that "the drug traffic be stamped out" and think that making possession a felony will do the trick. Their ignorance of the roots of the drug traffic is as extensive as their ignorance of the law.

Let's say a kid in Florida, a college kid eighteen years old, is picked up with a couple of joints on him. He is convicted of possession, which is an automatic felony, and given a suspended sentence. What has he lost? The judge who imposes sentence knows the kid has lost the right to vote, the right to own a gun, the right to run for public office. He can never become a doctor, dentist, C.P.A., engineer, lawyer, architect, realtor, osteopath, physical therapist, private detective, pharmacist, school teacher, barber, funeral director, masseur, or stock broker. He can never get any job where he has to be bonded or licensed. He can't work for the city, county, or federal governments. He can't get into West Point, Annapolis, or the Air Force Academy. He can enlist in the military, but will be denied his choice of service, and probably be assigned to a labor battalion.

It is too rough. It slams too many doors. It effectively destroys the kid's life. It is too harsh a penalty for a little faddist

experimentation. The judge knows it. So he looks for any out, and then nothing at all happens to the kid. Too many times harsh law ends up being, in effect, no law at all. All automatic felony laws are, without exception, bad law, from the Sullivan Act in New York State, to the hit and run in California. They destroy the wisdom and discretion of the Court, and defeat the purposes they are meant to serve.

I wondered if Jerry Nesta, sculptor, knew how close he had come to the edge. I wondered if it had marked him in any way. And I wondered if I'd ever get a chance to ask him.

So they had crossed over into Matamoros, Mexico, on January 10th, and some seven months later, on August third, a Sunday, according to the translation of the police report, Miss Beatrice Bowie, twenty-two years old, American tourist, had been driving at dusk down State Highway 175, heading southwest toward Oaxaca. At a steep and dangerous part of the highway, the vehicle left the road at a spot fifteen miles from the city. A bus driver on a switchback on the opposite side of a valley saw the bloom of flame and reported it when he reached the bus station in Oaxaca. As night had fallen, the police were unable to locate the automobile until the following morning. She had been alone. The car was a British Ford with State of Oaxaca plates, owned by a resident American named Bruce Bundy, age 44, of 81 Calle las Artes, Oaxaca.

He stated that on Saturday afternoon he had loaned his car to a young man, an American tourist, known to him only as George. He did not know why there was a girl alone in the car, or why she had been on that road. Police could find no identification. On Monday afternoon a woman came to the funeral parlor and made a positive identification of the body as that of Beatrice Bowie. She made a statement to the effect that Miss Bowie and Miss McLeen had been staying in the guest apartment at her winter home on Avenida de las Mariposas in the section known as La Colonia. The woman, a French national, Madame Eva Vitrier, told the police that several days earlier her guests had evidently quarreled, and Miss McLeen had left for Mexico City. She said that Miss Bowie had seemed upset and depressed. When she did not return to the guest apartment on

Sunday night, and when on Monday she heard of the recovery of the body of the unidentified woman, she had thought it might be Miss Bowie, and discovered that indeed it was. She knew Mr. Bundy, but did not believe that Miss Bowie knew him. The name George did not mean anything to her. But it was probable that Miss Bowie knew him. All the young American tourists seemed to become known to one another.

The police had returned to Mrs. Vitrier's home with her and had there picked up Miss Bowie's personal effects, including her purse and her tourist card which, on the day of her death, was almost a month overdue for renewal. Their search for the young man known only as George had been unsuccessful.

As I put the papers away again, Meyer said, "Anything new?"

"Just more questions. When did she send for that bank draft to clean out her account?"

"Harl said it was in late March."

I had the address where they had sent it. She had been at Los Tres Rios Trailer Park at Culiacán, over in the State of Sinaloa, on the Gulf of California, and it had been made out to her, payable at the Culiacán branch of the Banco Nacional.

"My question right now, Meyer, has something to do with it being one hell of a trip from Brownsville to Culiacán, and another hell of a trip from Culiacán down to Oaxaca. And did they all go, and did they go in that camper, and where and when and how did they split up? And the Mexicans are very touchy about people getting their vehicles back to the border in six months. You can renew and go back in again, but don't get cute about overstaying your tourist card deadline. Why did she want the money, all of it, and why did she overstay her permit?"

"Shut up," said Meyer, "and look out at the nice volcano, McGee. I mean at the three nice volcanos. No, by God, there are four of them."

"Citlaltepetl, Malinche, Ixtaccihuatl and Popocatépetl."

"Travis, do you have something caught in your throat?"

"If you want to cheat a little, you can call that one over there Orizaba instead of Citlaltepetl."