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John D. MacDonald

Bestselling author of A LONELY SILVER RAIN

Pale Gray for Guilt

A TRAVIS MCGEE NOVEL



**JOHN D.
MACDONALD**

Pale Gray for Guilt

"Perhaps no one can be really a good appreciating pagan who has not once been a bad puritan."

—BOURNE

A Fawcett Gold Medal Book
Published by Ballantine Books

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THE LONELY SILVER RAIN

THE OFFICIAL TRAVIS McGEE
QUIZBOOK

One

THE NEXT to the last time I saw Tush Bannon alive was the very same day I had that new little boat running the way I wanted it to run, after about six weeks of futzing around with it.

So on the test run I demonstrated one of our contemporary maladies: You can't just go out and ride around in car, boat, or airplane—you have to have a destination. Then you feel purposeful.

So in the early morn on a flat, calm, overcast day I stocked the ice chest on the little *Muñequita* from my ship's stores on *The Busted Flush*, locked up the *Flush*, dropped down into my new playtoy, and, as what faint breeze there was seemed to be coming out of the southwest, I stuck my nose out of the pass to see if I could run north outside. The long, slow gray-green lift and fall of the ground swell was all of a towering five inches high, so I took it a mile off the beaches and fooled with the rpm and the fuel flowmeter, until she was riding right and sounded right and just a hair under 3,000 on each of the OMC 120-horse stern-drive units. I then turned the steering over to the little Calmec autopilot, took a bearing on the Lauderdale Municipal Casino and noted the time.

That, of course, is one of the fussy little enchantments of a new boat—new being either brand-new or second-hand new. What you are hunting for is the optimum relationship between fuel consumption and distance. You tell yourself that maybe someday you are going to get caught very short, and you are going to have to squeak back into port with no more than half a cup of fuel left, with luck, and it would be very nice to know what rpm leaves you the least chance of running dry.

But like the exercise of caution in almost every human activity, the fusspots who make it their business to know are the ones least likely to ever have that ticklish problem. It's the ones who never check it out who keep the Coast Guard choppers busy.

The little boat was aimed back up the Florida east coast toward Broward Beach, where I had picked her up on an estate sale from a law firm. She'd belonged to a Texan named Kayd whose luck had run out somewhere in the Bahamas.

It's a funny thing about boat names. She had that *Muñequita* across the stern in four-inch white letters against that nice shade of Gulf Stream blue when I brought her on back to Bahia Mar. Spanish for "little doll." One night Meyer and Irv Deibert and Johnny Dow and I sat around trying to dream up a name that would match *The Busted Flush*. Little Flush? Inside Straight? Hole Card? The Ante? And I forget which one we decided was best because when I got around to changing it, I looked at the name it had and I decided that trying to match it to the name on the mother ship was a case of the quaints and the cutes, and I liked the name just fine. It was a little doll and had begun to acquire in my mind a personality that could very well resent being called anything else, and would sulk and wallow.

I switched the FM-UHF marine radio to the commercial frequencies and tried to find something that didn't sound like somebody trying to break up a dogfight in a sorority house by banging drums and cymbals. Not that I want to say it isn't music. Of course it is music, styled to accompany teen-age fertility rites, and thus is as far out of my range as "Rockabye Baby." FM radio was a great product when it was servicing a fringe area of the great American market. But it has turned into a commercial success, so they have denigrated the sound, and they have mickey-moused the stereo, and you have to really search that dial to find something that isn't either folk hoke, rickyticky rock, or the saccharine they pump into elevators, bus stations and Howard Johnsons.

As I was about to give up I found some pleasant eccentric, or somebody who'd grabbed the wrong record, playing Brubeck doing Cole Porter, and I caught it just as he opened up "Love for Sale" in a fine and gentle

manner, and then handed it delicately over to Desmond, who set up a witty dialogue with Joe Morello.

After telling myself that ten of eight in the morning is beer time only for the lowest types, I cracked a bottle of Carta Blanca and stood in the forward well, leaning through the center opening where I'd laid the hinged windshield over to port, out of the way, forearms on the smoke-blue foredeck shell.

Well, I was on my way to see old Tush after too long, and I had wind in my face like a happy dog leaning out a car window. The wake was straight. The engines ran sweetly in sync. I could feel the slow rise and fall in the imperceptible ground swell. The overcast was starting to burn off, the sea starting to glint. I could see pigmy figures over on the beach by Sea Ranch. Even with the investment in the playtoy, I still had a comforting wad of currency back in the cache aboard *The Busted Flush* at Slip F-18, Bahia Mar.

It had been a fine long hot lazy summer, a drifting time of good fish, old friends, new girls, of talk and laughter.

Cold beer, good music and a place to go.

That's the way They do you. That's the way They set you up for it. There ought to be a warning bell on the happymeter, so that every time it creeps high enough, you get that dang-dang alert. Duck, boy. That glow makes you too visible. One of Them is out there in the boonies, adjusting the windage, getting you lined up in the cross hairs of the scope. When it happens so often, wouldn't you think I'd be more ready for it?

I took my right-angle sight on a water tower just beyond Ocean Ridge, one that measures almost exactly thirty miles north of the Municipal Casino, and my elapsed time was sixty-two minutes. I wrote that down, along with fuel consumption, so I could do the math later, breaking it down in the way that to me is easiest to remember, statute miles per gallon at x rpm.

The wind was freshening and quartering into the south, and though I was still comfortable, I decided it wasn't going to last very long, so I went through Boynton Inlet into Lake Worth. The OMC's were still green enough so that too much constant speed wasn't the best thing in the world, so as soon as I had a nice open straightaway

up the Waterway without traffic, I pushed it up to 4,200 rpm, estimating it at about 45 miles an hour. I estimated I had fifty if I ever needed it, and hoped I'd never get in a bind where I needed it. I held her there for five or six minutes, then dropped it way back, getting it to that minimum rpm that, depending on gross weight at the time, would just hold it on the plane. It wasn't a rig I was about to take out and see if I could get to Nassau ahead of Wynne and Bertram and those people, taking those thirty-foot leaps and turning your spine into a concertina every time you smash back into the sea, pulping your kidneys and chomping your jaw into the foam rubber tooth guard. The little *Muñequita* would have had to be turned into a racing machine, with a hundred more horses in each mill, special wheels, a lot more bracing and reinforcement to keep the engines in her, and then she would not be much good for anything else.

Besides, I had been talked into trying it once. I think you could maybe argue the point that it is a little more fun than a hungover, carbuncled cowboy might have while trying to stay aboard a longhorn in a dusty rodeo, but it would be a close decision.

When I reached the bay north of Broward Beach, I had to look at the chart to see at which marker I should leave the Waterway to hit the mouth of the Shawana River. So it was ten thirty of that Tuesday morning, or a little later, when I eased up to one of the finger piers at Bannon's Boatel, put a line on a piling and cut the engines off.

I stepped high onto the pier decking and looked around. He had a dozen outboards tied up, and maybe half as many inboard-outboard rigs, two smallish cruisers, and, neatly aligned in their slips, the dozen rental houseboats, outboard rigged, fiberglass, white with orange trim. I saw that he'd put up the in-and-out storage he had told me about the last time I'd seen him, over a year and a half ago. Fifteen racks wide and three high. The forklift could tuck forty-five boats in there on monthly storage, but only the bottom row was full, and the middle layer half full.

Up the river from his place and on the other side, where it had all been marshland the last time I was there, I could see, maybe a mile away and more, some squat,

pale, technical-looking buildings and a glinting of cars in the industrial parking lot next to them.

There didn't seem to be anyone around the little marina building, or around the white cement-block motel with the red tile roof that sat parallel to the river and parallel to State Road 80D, and about a hundred feet from each of them. I remember Tush talking about how he was going to expand the motel from ten units to twenty.

"Now that there's the three kids, me and Janine are taking up two units, and having just eight rentals, I couldn't tell you the times we've had to turn folks away, Trav."

The slab had been poured for the extra ten units, and the block had been laid up to shoulder-high on about three of them, but some kind of a coarse green vine had taken hold and had crawled along fifteen feet of the wall, spilling tendrils down.

Some of the dock pilings sagged. The pennons on the marina building were bleached gray, wind-ripped and tattered.

"Hey!" yelled Tush. "Hey, now! Hey, McGeel!" He had come around the corner of the motel and came toward me in a kind of Percheron canter. A big man. Almost as high as I am, and half again as big around.

Long ago and far away we'd been on the same ball team. Brantley Breckenridge Bannon, second string offensive fullback. First string if he could have gotten into his stride quicker, because he was hard to stop when he was in gear. The nickname had started as BeeBee and had been shortened to Beeb, and it was that season it suddenly turned into Tush. He was a man totally incapable of profanity. The most we ever heard from him, even in the most hideous, unlucky and painful circumstances, was a mumbled "Durn!"

Then in one game we tried running a play that was designed to make up for his slow start. They set him out to the right, and on the snap he had to run to his left, go behind the quarterback who had taken some quick steps back and who had faked a handoff to a wingback slanting right, and who would then spin and stuff the ball into Bannon's belly on a half cut and an off-tackle slant left.

The first time we ran it, and I was offensive left end at the time, a linebacker thought he smelled a pass,

blitzed through, saw what was happening, and rolled his shoulders right into Bannon's ankles. The second time we ran it, he had a good head of steam but there was absolutely no hole at all, and as he tried to spin along the line and find one they tore him down. The third time we tried it, we were fourth and two at their eleven, so late in the game that we had to go for six points, being four points behind. He got a fine start. We got a good jump and cleared him a big hole. But as he went through the hole he was juggling that ball, hand to chin to chest to forearm to hand, too busy to keep from getting hit, and was hit from the side and the ball floated into the hands of their squatty defensive center, who after a considerable pause to realize he actually had a football right there in his hands, took off in a lumpy little grinning gallop out to their forty before he got pulled down from behind. Bannon, on his knees, ripped off his helmet, whammed it against the sod, stared skyward and yelled, "Oh . . . TUSH!"

When things went badly for him on one play in the next game, about four of us yelled, "Tush!" And Tush it became, then and forever.

After he was converted to a tackle, he stayed with an AFL team four years, during two of which, being married to Janine, he saved his money. A pinched nerve in his neck turned him into an insurance salesman and he did well but got sick of it, and then he sold houseboats, and then he bought the ten acres on the Shawana River on which to act out and work out the American Dream.

So after the obligatory thumping upon each other, our words of greeting were drowned out by an oncoming roar, deep and grinding, and three big orange Euclids went by on their six-foot tires of solid rubber, loaded high with yards of wet marl, kicking up a powdery dust that drifted north, across the palmetto and scrub pine flats on the other side of the state road. I saw then that the blacktop was gone, and the right of way widened.

"We're being improved around here," he said in sour explanation. "Everything is going to be first-class. By and by." He stared west, after the fading roar of the big earth movers. "Worries me the way they bucket through here. Janine should be on her way back from town by now, and there's some bad places where she could meet

up with them. She does more than her share of driving now that the school bus can't come down here."

"Why can't it?"

"They can't use roads that are officially closed, that's why." He looked toward his waterfront. "What'd you come in. You can't get the *Flush* upriver in this tide."

"Wasn't there a good deep channel?"

"Until they did a lot of dredge and fill upriver. Now the first half mile from the bay up toward me is pretty bad. They say they're going to scour it out, but they won't say when."

We walked out and I showed him the *Muñequita*. He knew that good honest T-Craft hull, the semi-V that Rodney Thompson makes in Titusville. When people from the Kansas flats get the marine fever, it is a dreadful addiction, and Tush had a bad case. He looked over the custom installation of the two dual-carb OMC's and listened to my explanation of why I'd pulled the Chrysler-Volvos the original owner installed. He was intrigued by the special engineering of the Teleflex panel and control system.

I heard myself talking too much. Things were going well for me. And the world was a little sour for my friend Tush Bannon. In repose his broad, heavy, freckly face sagged. So when it happens like that, you talk too much. The small breeze stopped, and the October forenoon heat leaned hard, in that 95°-95 humidity that makes the sweat pop out.

So we went up to the motel and sat in the kitchen alcove under the rackety-clatter of an overworked little window air-conditioner, drank beer while he said Janine was fine, the boys were fine, and we talked about who we'd heard from and who we hadn't, and who was doing what. I stood by the window with the cold can in my hand and said, "What's all the big industry over there, up river?"

"TTA," he said with a tangible bitterness. "Tech-Tex Applications. A nice clean industry, except every now and then any fool fish that comes up the Shawana turns belly-up and floats back down. And sometimes there's a funny little smell, sort of like ammonia, and the tears run down your face. But they employ four hundred people, Trav. Big tax base. They gave 'em the keys to the county to move in here."

"But I thought this county had pretty fair zoning and pollution control and all that. I mean Broward Beach is a——."

"Don't you know where you are, boy?" he asked. "You're a good mile west of that county line. You are in Shawana County, Mister McGee. A garden spot. Go right over to Sunnydale, to the County Courthouse, and ever' one of those happy, smiling five commissioners will tell you a man couldn't pick a better spot to live and raise his kids and grow with the county." He astonished me. I had never thought of Tush as being capable of irony. He was a big, amiable, beefy man, with mild blue eyes and stubbly pale lashes and brows, and a pink, peeling, permanent case of sunburn.

I heard a car drive in. He went to the window on the road side and looked out and said, "Oh . . . *no!*"

I followed him out. Janine had gotten out of the car, a very dusty pale blue sedan about two years old. At twenty paces she still had the gawky, leggy look and stance of a teen-ager. She stood in an attitude at once defiant and disconsolate, staring at the left rear corner of the car, which squatted expensively low. Their youngest, about two and a half, stood nearby, scowling, giving the intermittent snuffle of tears not long ended. Janine wore bleached khaki walking shorts and a yellow halter in a coarse fabric. The shorts were darkened with perspiration around her narrow waist. She had cropped her black hair very short. With her deep tan, and the length and strength and slender delicacy of her face, her dark eyes, she looked like a young man, Mediterranean, ready to guide you to the Roman ruins, pick your pocket, sell you fake heirlooms, send you out in a leaky gondola with his thieving cousin.

But the shape of the ears was girl, and the corners of the mouth, and the elegance of the throat, and from there on down no doubt at all, even were she clad in a loose-fitting mattress cover, no doubt whatsoever. And I knew her maiden name was Sorrensens, and she was Wisconsin Swede, and she birthed towheaded Swede kids, and so she was one of the improbabilities of genetic mathematics, of maybe one of the Scandinavian raiders who brought home from a far country a swarthy boy to be a kitchen slave.

Tush got down behind the car and rolled onto his back and wormed his way under it. She said, "It was just a half mile this side of the hard top. I guess the rains dug it out and then the dust drifted into it, and I swear, honey, nobody could have seen it."

He slid out. "Spring shackle."

"She *hit* me!" the little kid said. "She hit me awful hard, Pop."

"Were you going fast, Jan?" he asked her.

She stared at him. She raised a helpless arm and let it flap down. "Oh, good Christ, I was making better time than Phil Hill, laughing and singing because the world is so sweet, and I was probably all boozed up, and I was trying to break the goddamn whatever it is!"

She spun and went by me, giving me a sudden and startled glance of recognition, but too trapped then in the compulsions of the quarrel to deviate from the planned exit.

He shouted after her. "You can say hello to my friend! The least you can do is say hello to my friend!"

She walked ten more strides, shoulders rigid, and then turned at the motel doorstep and, with no expression on her face or in her voice, said, "Hello. Hello. Hello. Come on, Jimmy. Come with mother."

The kid went plodding after her. The door closed. Tush looked at me and shook his head and tried to smile. "Sorry, boy."

"For what? There are good days, medium days and bad days."

"We seem to be getting a long run of one kind."

"So, for starters let's fix it."

He ran it down to the marina shed, where the tools were. We used the forklift to raise the back end. It took two gallons of sweat apiece to punch the busted pieces out, hacksaw some bar stock, clumsy it into place and peen the ends over. We set it down and it sat level, no longer looking like a spavined duck. I stepped on the rear bumper and it didn't come back up as it should. It oscillated, good proof the shocks were nearly gone, and from the way he sighed I was sorry I'd done it.

I got fresh clothes off the boat, and Tush gave me a motel unit to shower and change in. I was just buttoning the clean shirt when Janine knocked at the door. I let her

in. She carried a clinking pitcher of iced tea, and her apologetic pride. She wore a little pink cotton shift and a pale pink lipstick.

She put the pitcher down, put her hand out. "Hello the right way, Travis. Like welcome. Excuse the bad scene." Her hand was long and brown and slender, and her grip surprisingly strong. She poured the two tall glasses of tea and gave me one and took hers over and sat on the bed. I counted back and realized that this would be the fifth time I had seen her. And, as before, the chemistry was slightly off, as it so often is with the friend who knew the husband before the husband met the wife. It can be a kind of jealousy, I guess, because it is a reminder of years she didn't share, and of an acceptance of the husband's friendship, which was in no way her decision. She seemed to relate to me with a flavor of challenge. Prove yourself to me, McGee. But you can't, McGee, because you aren't house-broken. Your life isn't real. You drift around and you have your fun and games. You make my husband feel wistful about the debts he has and the girls he hasn't. When you come near my nest, just by being here, you remind my man of the gaudy grasshopper years, and somehow you turn me into some kind of guard, or attendant, or burden.

With some of the wives of old friends I have been able to quench that initial antagonism. They soon find out that I am aware of what every single unwed person knows—that the world is always a little out of focus when there is no one who gives the final total damn about whether you live or die. It is the price you pay for being a rambler, and if you don't read the price tag, you are a dull one indeed.

Jan had obvious warmth. She seemed to have the empathy to realize that I meant her well. But the antagonism wouldn't melt. She could hide it pretty well. But it was there.

I toasted her with tea, saying, "That was a mere snit, Janine. One of the tizzies you get during the hot months."

"Thanks," she said, and smiled. "Tush gobbled and ran. He took over the child taxi service. Come on over in about ten minutes and I'll have a sort of a lunch."

She finished the glass of tea, then poured herself another to take with her. As she moved toward the door she shook her head slowly and sadly. "You know, I think it

was guilt mostly. Poor ~~odd~~ little Jimmy kid. What's wrong, Mom? What busted, Mom? Will it run, Mom? So I swatted him a dandy. Much too hard, without thinking. Taking it out on him." Beyond the wry smile her eyes looked wet. "I don't know what's happening to me lately. Oh, how I hate that goddamn car. That goddamn stinking car. How I hate it!"

Two

AS I WAITED, sitting in the full huff of the air-conditioner, gulping down the tea, I thought of the little dreamworld called Detroit, fifteen years behind the rest of America, as usual.

Janine had nailed it. People hate their cars. Daddy doesn't come proudly home with the new one any more, and the family doesn't come racing out, yelling WOW, and the neighbors don't come over to admire it. They all look alike, for one thing. So you have to wedge a piece of bright trash atop the aerial to find your own. They may be named after predators, or primitive emotions, or astronomical objects, but in essence they are a big shiny sink down which the money swirls—in insurance, car payments, tags, tolls, tires, repairs. They give you a chance to sit in helpless rage, beating on the steering wheel in a blare of horns while, a mile away, your flight leaves the airport. They give you a good chance of dying quick, and a better chance of months of agony of torn flesh, smashed guts and splintered bones. Take it to your kindly dealer, and the service people look right through you until you grab one by the arm, and then he says: Come back a week from Tuesday. Make an appointment. Their billions of tons of excreted pollutants wither the leaves on the trees and sicken the livestock. We hate our cars, Detroit. Those of us who can possibly get along without them do so very happily. For those who can't, if there were an alternate choice, they'd grab it in a minute. We buy them reluctantly and try to make them last, and they are not friendly machines anymore. They are expensive, murderous junk, and they manage to look glassily contemptuous of the people who own them. A car is something that

makes you whomp your youngest kid too hard and then feel ashamed of yourself.

I had just been through the bit. My elderly Rolls pick-up, *Miss Agnes*, was as agile as ever, which meant about 40 seconds from a dead stop to sixty miles an hour. And she had the same reluctance to come to a stop once she was humming along. So she and I were slowly becoming a highway hazard, the narrow shaves getting narrower. So I had gone shopping, test driving, and found they all had fantastic acceleration, and they'd all stop on dimes, and they all bored me to hell.

So I went looking for a boat I could use as a car. I would keep *Miss Agnes* for back roads and the *Flush* for open waters, and use the *Muñequita* for errands, and if I had to have a car, there was Mr. Hertz trying hard, and Mr. Avis trying harder, and Mr. National hoping they'd run each other into the ground. Anything in Lauderdale that I wanted to buy, and I could lift, if I couldn't buy it right at Bahia Mar, I could go off in the *Muñequita* and buy it. And it was nice to poot along an urban waterway and hear the distant clashing of fenders, gnashing of bumpers, and the song of the ambulances.

Janine and I ate ham and cheese sandwiches at the breakfast bar, and every time Jimmy came stomping by, he got a couple of loving pats from his mother. I had forgotten the names of the older two boys and had to pick them up out of her conversation. Johnny and Joey. Joey was the big kid. Six. Johnny was four and a half.

I realized I hadn't seen Tyler around, the Negro who had been working for them the other times I'd been there, a tall, stringy, cheerful, ageless man, dark saffron in color, and with a scholarly face, plus an uncanny knack of diagnosing the ailments of marine engines. I asked her if it was his day off.

"Oh, Tyler quit us . . . it must be eight months ago. Tush was very upset about it. You know how good he was around here. But now . . . it's just as well, I guess, because we couldn't afford to pay him anyway, the way things are."

"On account of the road?"

"And a lot of other things."

"Such as?"