

rimmed glasses sat at a corner table drinking draft beer and playing gin. A tall hollow-chested bartender with a gay-nineties mustache and hairstyle was polishing stemware and inserting it upside down into the overhead racks.

I slid onto a padded bar stool and said, "Mishy Burns around?"

"She comes on at four," he said.

"Draft beer, please."

He served it with a nice head. He said, "When she does come on, she's working. She has to set up the tables. When she comes on, she's not on her own time."

"Are you trying to be unpleasant?"

"I'm just telling you the way it is, friend. What she does on her own time is her business."

"You own this place?"

"I'm one of the owners."

I was getting very tired of contentious attitudes. I smiled at him. I said, "I've always wondered about places like this."

"Wondered what?"

"Suppose, just for the hell of it, you took a list of all the regulatory agencies that have any kind of authority over the way you do business here. County, city, state, federal. You know, the food-handling ordinances, and the tax people and the liquor people. Then suppose you went through this place and made a list of every single violation of every law, ordinance, and regulation."

"We run a good clean place here. We don't violate anything!"

"Nonsense, good buddy. There is no way to avoid being in violation of something. The rules are contradictory. You know it and I know it. Right now you are subject to fines, suspension of licenses, civil suits. That's the way the establishment keeps you in line. If you get feisty, they come and look you over and tell you you have to build a whole new kitchen, or replace all your wiring, or put in ten more parking spaces."

"Who the hell *are* you?"

"I am the fellow who came in here a little while ago, very quietly, and sat right here and asked you if Mishy Burns was around, and got a big discussion of her working hours and who pays her. We can start over again. Okay? Mishy Burns around?"

"She comes on at four," he said.

"Draft beer, please," I said, and he took the empty and refilled it and moved down the bar and left me alone, which was exactly what I wanted.

Michele came in ten minutes later. I had been building a mental picture of her, and so I was totally unprepared for a twenty-two-year-old Doris Day. She came a-dancing and bubbling in, full of warmth and life and high spirits. She brightened the place up. The salesman knew her and the gin players knew her. The bartender motioned to me and she came over and put her hand out and said, beaming, "Hello! I'm Mishy Burns."

"Travis McGee. The man says you're on his time and you can't talk to me."

"About what, love?"

"I've been talking to Licia about your cruise."

She made a face. "Oh, God. That again!"

She was in constant motion, constant changes of expression, posture, tossing her hair back, rocking from heel to toe, so much so that one wanted to clamp firm hands on her shoulders and settle her down, position her, quiet her. I realized that all the animation gave the impression of prettiness, and that perhaps in repose her face would look quite plain.

"Harley gets itchy, don't you, Harley? Look, love, let me go put on the house garments and brush up the dining room a little and then we can talk, because things will be dead as a snake until five past five and all the car doors start chunking shut out there in the lot."

I saw her in a little while, trotting back and forth in the dining room, wearing a crotch-length tennis dress with a sailor collar and a little white yachtsman's cap. Another waitress had joined her. A couple of construction workers—off at four—came

"But I want to know what this is all about!"

"Please forget I said anything to you. I violated a confidence. And for God's sake, don't say anything to anyone else, because if it was leaked out and got back to the Supervisor, there's no way in the *world* you could avoid a subpoena."

"I must insist—"

"Do you want to ruin everything for yourself? Have you got some kind of economic death wish?"

I chomped the good Canadian bacon. I beamed and winked and nodded at him. His choice was clear. Either I was certifiable as a maniac, or he and the Resort were in violation of the rules, somehow. In serious violation. I could guess his thoughts from his expression. It has all become regulation by blackmail, of course. Every small businessman lives with the knowledge that he is always in violation of some of the rules. Safety regulations, consumer protection laws, wage and hour laws, pure food and drug statutes, IRS regulations—and on top of all these are the interwoven, supplementary, conflicting regulations of the state, county, and city.

He fills out the forms and sends them in because he knows that, if the forms do not come back in, the computer flags him. He fills the blanks with lies because it would take more hours than there are in the week to fill in the forms arriving each week. He knows all these lies go on record somewhere, and that at any time a field inspector can happen along and check out the old lies and apply pressure. So all he can do is contribute to both political parties, support local, state, and national candidates, and hope for the best.

It was easier for him to believe he was in some kind of trouble than that I had lost my wits.

He got up and said, "Uh . . . thank you, Mr. McGee."

"Believe me, I was glad to do it."

"Uh . . . enjoy your breakfast," he said, and walked away. He turned in the archway, stopped, and stared back at me, his expression troubled, eyes clouded. He shrugged and walked on, out of sight.

It was a small and childish pleasure. I ate with appetite. Great eggs. Days of misty rain are fine. Jack the Manager would leave us alone. He would do a lot of wondering, but he would keep his mouth shut and stay out of the way. And we would refrain from chousing anyone out into traffic. And we would duck away from all shotgun blasts to avoid messing up the parking area.

Gretel was alive in this rain-mist day, in the same dimension, time sector, and hemisphere. She fitted in with any recitation of one of my lists of good words: pound sweet apples, song by Eydie, pine forests, spring water, old wool shirts, night silence, fresh Golden Bantam, first run of a hooked permit, Canadian geese, coral reefs, good leather, thunderstorms, wooden beams, beach walking, Gretel. We all have the lists. Different lists for different times of day and of life. Our little barometers of excellence, recording inner climate.

The first chore after breakfast was another call to the hospital to get the word on the old party we had restored to momentary life. They said that Whittaker Davis was in serious condition, but no longer in critical condition. I asked if his condition could be considered grave. She said they didn't use that word any more because people got it confused with being buried. She said if they did use it, Mr. Davis would be a little bit better than grave, that it sort of would come between critical and serious, but don't count on it.

Meyer points out that fewer and fewer people in this country speak English any more, and that the trend is toward the guttural grunt. As a case in point, he quotes the earnest newscaster he heard one time over WTVT Channel 2 in Utica, New York, speaking of an emergency operation performed upon the wife of one of the nation's most important citizens. With expression of concern he read from his script that she was being operated on because they had "found a noodle on her breast." The song lyrics, Meyer says, presage the future shape of the language.

I was glad the old party was hanging in there. At least we had provided time for the Davis clan to gather at the bedside, if