

Frederick Busch

Patrols

He kept his eyes closed because if he opened them he would see Murphy's mad, bright stare. Since Marty Mason had been there, the bunched, gleaming black dog had left his owner's bedroom late each night to patrol the hallway outside the guest room and then the room itself, his claws ticking on the wooden floors while he investigated corners and spaces under furniture, his snuffling inspection punctuated by soft panting, as if he breathed in whispered tones on account of the hour. Then he would settle beside Mason's bed and, head erect or laid on top of his extended paws, he would watch. He was ready, Mason knew, to slap his tail concussively against the bedroom floor if his owner's guest should meet his devoted glare. Closing the guest bedroom door meant only that Murphy would scratch for admittance, whining softly until Mason opened the door so that the dog could check the room, then settle down to watch the guest.

After tonight's long period of stillness, Mason lay between waking and sleep. He'd begun to think of himself as buoyed, like kelp or driftwood or a boat of shallow draft, on top of the waters of the cove. Now, at dawn, the radios of the lobster boats broke the rhythmic night noises—the regular panting of the dog interrupted by its small, strangled squirts of body gas, the rising tide and the slap of ocean on stone, the winds off the sea washing hard against the house—that had carried him out of nighttime and into the day.

He wasn't surprised that he thought he could feel the greasy grit of sand on his fingertips and in the corners of his eyes, over his teeth. He wanted to get to the bathroom and drink from the tap to wash his sandy mouth out, but the dog farted and winked in the brightening room, so he played dead. He thought, of course, about the dead Marines and the dead *hajis*, as the live Marines called them, and the one Iranian, a bearded man in western clothes, driving north and west over the Iranian border in a white Toyota long-bed truck into Checkpoint Eight One, established and commanded by Captain Jerome Goldsworthy with whose Alpha Platoon, five light-armored reconnaissance vehicles, Mason traveled as journalistic baggage because Major Harvey Fathers, commanding Fox Company, had told

Goldsworthy to carry him along for the sake of public relations.

Captain Goldsworthy was a slight, slender man who struck Mason as being made entirely of hard leather. His South Carolina accent was musical, Mason wrote in his notes, and he never raised his voice, even if he swore with conviction. He never chided Mason or complained about having him in tow. In fact, he never addressed him. He referred to Mason exclusively as *he* or *him*, as when, standing before Mason, looking sourly at his Orvis-catalogue traveler's vest and L.L. Bean khakis, he told one of the rifleman scouts to make certain *he* knew how to fasten the rear scout compartment hatches of the captain's vehicle when they needed to swing the turret cannon to the rear. Mason rode in that small scout compartment with three Marine infantry, sweating and sucking warm water from plastic bottles and banging against the walls. "Make sure *he* stays inside the pig until you know for certain we're in a safe environment," the captain told his scouts.

Now, before dawn, at Checkpoint Eight One, Goldsworthy had opened his turret hatch and positioned the vehicles, establishing his firing lanes. Mason heard the hatch go up forward of the turret just after a short, thick PFC, William Pontelecorno, from Rahway, New Jersey, had pushed their hatch, behind the turret, up and out. About a half an hour later, they heard the driver of the truck gear down, either because he meant to, or to feign stopping. It was apparently a feint, because he began to go up through the gears, gathering speed, and they pinned him with the lights.

The captain said, "This is irksome."

Mason heard the driver say, "Sir."

In his soft, low voice, the captain said, "There's a cure for irksome." He said, "Button the forward hatch." He said, "Gunner. Battle sight. Truck in the open."

The gunner called back, "Identified."

Pontelecorno said, "He armed with the HE."

The captain gently said, "Fire."

"On the way, sir," the gunner said.

The 25-mm turret cannon fired three times. Mason was deafened at once. Pontelecorno must have been right about the high explosive shells, Mason thought, because although their hatches faced away from the action, he saw the air of the nighttime desert go whiter than their lights had made it, and then he saw bright fragments, blown vertically, raining down around them. He heard voices as if from a distance, and

he couldn't hear the fragments strike the ground. When Pontelecorto permitted him to leave the vehicle, Mason stood with some of the platoon a few dozen yards from the burning truck. The Marines edged closer, he noted, and then closer, as if to prove that they were unafraid of secondary explosions. Then they moved even closer, flinching from the heat but needing the risk, and he joined them because he was afraid to stay behind and seem to be afraid. What was left of the driver lay part way between the truck and the Marines: some beard on some of the cooked face with one wide eye in it, strips of burned gristle, a section of clean, white ribcage, the halved corpse sprinkled with powdered windshield glass that caught their lights and reminded Mason—he faced away from the Marines to write it shakily in his notebook—of ice droplets in the air on a very cold night in St. Paul.

As he thought of the roasted, torn face and its eye, Mason thought of Murphy's ecstatic glare. He remembered the sand in their mouths, and how the night winds carried grit to them as it filled the hairy nostrils of what was left of the driver. Mason raised his fingers to rub at his gums, as if he were still there, watching the corpse's nose fill up. The dog slammed his tail and Mason set his arms down, trying to breathe like someone asleep.

The lobster boats were coming in, some with small outboard motors and some on throbbing, big diesels. He had seen them over the last several days as they drove at a buoy, the lobsterman somehow knowing, out of all those hundreds of bright, bobbing markers, which were his. Then, alongside, he cut his engine and while the boat wallowed on the tide he hauled his trap by hand or by machine, withdrew a lobster if he found one, baited with the chum that drew the prowling gulls to circle the boats, dropped the trap overboard, and took off full-bore for the next nearby buoy. Some of the boats broadcast ship-to-shore CB chatter, while most of them played country music on their radios, nasal complaints about death and passion and diminished prospects.

The cooperatives made money by shipping the lobster downstate to the resort restaurants and into Boston and New York. The lobstermen, after they bought fuel and paid for repairs, made little profit, he imagined. And he suspected that it was all they knew to do. He wondered if they depended on federal food subsidies during the winter if they couldn't find work repairing vacation houses or salting roads for the highway department. He wondered how many silent, angry

children, how many battered wives, that life produced. He wanted Ada Shields, his editor, to tell him about this coast, about saltwater fogs and who ran the lighthouses and how you knew which pound to buy the lobsters from and what the lobstermen's families ate—frozen Salisbury steak, he'd have bet, and artificial gravy on packaged mashed potatoes, all of it washed down with pop poured from plastic two-liter jugs. He knew himself to be a free-lance hack with a need to dodge steady work and the habit of asking questions in order to deflect attention from himself. Ada's purpose, which he was coming to regret, was to prod him into studying the self he had tried to omit from what, together, they were working on. She had inherited the house from her parents, and it was where she hid out, she said. According to her assistant, Mason ought to be flattered to be invited for a working week. He knew, as he played dead for Ada's ardent dog, that he wanted their conversations to be local and not about his time with Alpha Platoon because then, he thought, he might not lie under the winking stare of Murphy, unable to sleep because he was selling out, as if by the pound, the Marines live and dead with whom he had patrolled the southeastern deserts of Iraq in order to compile the book he'd once believed it was important to write.

It had begun well enough. The first chapter opened with a character called Mason, who was mostly not him—a vehicle, as he thought, for conveying the strategies of the old men who made this war, and the courage of the young ones taking fire for them—who was on his way, after his time over there, back to the States. This Mason sat in a dark, icy Frankfurt bar, drinking too much and therefore talking too much to Leon Rosenthal, an Israeli businessman who was, of course, not in business. Mason didn't know whether he was a civilian, but he was certainly in some aspect of intelligence. It could have been as high-powered as vetting for assassinations—he was that secret, and that rock-hard confident—or he might have conducted random harvests of raw data from big-mouthed sources, Mason thought, like himself. Rosenthal was a small, muscular man with gold-rimmed glasses that rode over big, dark, angry eyes under a high forehead. He wore a blue blazer with three horn buttons that he kept fastened over an open-necked shirt. He sat straight on his bar stool as if a child at school. Mason had recited some of his adventures although he was embarrassed, even as he spoke, because he believed that the little man knew more than enough about wars on his own. In the book,

uncleverly exchanging one brand of dinnerware for another, he called the little man Spode.

Mason was telling about Captain Goldsworthy's outrage when his orders were reversed. In Badrah, Major Harvey Fathers had spent a night organizing checkpoints and patrols and Captain Goldsworthy and his Alpha Platoon had run Checkpoint Eight One, Mason in the compartment of the pig, feeling like a child in grownups' clothing under the heavy flak jacket and the oversized, chin-strapped battle helmet. At 0400 they had killed the driver and blown up his truck. The captain had reported the kill, and Major Fathers had instructed them to patrol to the north for two hours at a leisurely pace, then descend at high speed back to the Eight One Checkpoint and see if their departure had lulled some bombers, posing as religious pilgrims, into trying to cross over.

At 0530 new signals came in from the major. Division had instructed Battalion to instruct Fox that priorities were reversed. Standing outside their vehicles they listened to Captain Goldsworthy say, "The situation is now officially a clusterfuck. You will *not* be looking to capture or kill. We *will* interrogate all incoming personnel. Those that we have no choice except to deem true pilgrims, we will respect their faith and permit them to cross over from Iran"—he said it *Eye-ran*—"in hope that the message will go out that U.S. guys are good guys. We will permit the pilgrims to find whatever it is they are looking for. Salvation, I believe. Salvation is all right, and they are welcome to try and find it. You will not fire unless you are fired upon or deem yourselves in peril. In which case, you will kill with efficiency. You will try to check with me on any peril factor. But you will stay smart and therefore *live* Marines. And *he* fucking well had better not be putting any salty language in my mouth when he writes his tale of Alpha's derring-do."

At that point, watched by the platoon, Mason stowed his notebook away. The captain consulted his own notebook and then he pulled down on the hem of his flak jacket as Mason had seen him do a couple of dozen times a day. He made himself remember the gesture to record when he could.

"All right," the captain said. "We will carry out the mission. No questions? No answers? Let's get back to the goat rodeo."

Rosenthal, now named Spode, said, "My friend, you enjoy the colorful captain, and he is doubtless a brave man and a bold leader. Goat rodeo: colorful American vernacular. With the occasional fucking this or that. Of course: American. But what you *should* be remembering is

the real importance of that particular moment. In two or three years from now, and probably less, you will think of the goats and the fucking and our chance encounter, yours and mine.” He poured more Pilsner. “You will know, because I am lecturing you about it, that the captain’s address marks the moment when the cancer cells began to grow. And not only inside of the goats. This is the gospel according to Rosenthal, commercial traveler, you ran into him in the Getrunken Pferdchen saloon in Frankfurt in the benign, well-ordered German republic. You’ll remember, yes? That they brought the money in, those so-called pilgrims your patrols suddenly permitted to cross. They purchased the information and assistance and of course the weapons that will punch the bloody holes in your soldiers, who will be pinned in place in Iraq, dead Hussein or live Hussein, for a decade. This is minimum, I’m talking about. Boys will grow up expecting that part of their young manhood must be wasted in Iraq. They will become sullen and probably brutal, like our children serving in Palestine in what is finally an occupation, not a war. Those pilgrims from Iran who your President forgot to fight, they assembled the resistance cells, they organized the terrorists. And Iran”—he made a show of pulling back his sleeve to check his watch—“Iran as of this moment has won your little off-the-cuff war.”

Thinking of the bottles of Czech beer they drank, and of all the water that Alpha Platoon consumed under orders to hydrate themselves, Mason knew that he would have to dare the dog and get to the bathroom.

“Murphy,” he said, “I give up.”

The dog’s tail banged on the bedroom floor as if a dedicated child were slamming a hunk of hawser rope down, again and again.

The house remained silent. Murphy banged another volley, and Ada, from her upstairs bedroom, called, “Oh, Murphy, you goofy boy.” The squat Labrador froze and then, with his nails scabbling on the slippery floor, he ran out of the bedroom, past the bathroom down the hall, and then up the steps as Mason walked into the shower. He turned his face to receive the warm water on his open mouth. After the early days with Alpha of Fox, when materiel convoys bypassed them in order to get to Baghdad and north of it and there wasn’t enough water for showers, when the heat swung between 125 and 135 Fahrenheit, he had vowed never to be ungrateful for water, whether it came in the form of ocean, thunderstorm, or droplets from a leaky pipe. He still felt the grit that

had caked the inside of his lips and that sat on his teeth no matter how often he drank to rinse it off.

He had forced himself to make entries in his journal as Alpha fought, patrolled, and bounced between contradictory directives from Battalion. He'd written paragraphs to later be stitched onto what narratives he could generate on his word processor. And he had managed to file several stories, one dictated over a military phone in Badrah to an intern at the magazine who patted his every word into a word processor, making him feel as important as one of the real war correspondents. This was the material that he and Ada Shields were turning into a book, she assured him. "It's all here," she said several times a day. "You wrote it. This is just one of those wine racks or bookcases or children's toys you order from a catalogue. 'Some Assembly Required'? I'm the Some-Assembly person. Though I do not know boo about the children's toys part of it."

She was taller than he, very slender, very pale, a little stoop-shouldered, and long of arm and leg. She wore scuffed brown penny loafers over bare feet and usually denim shorts and a work shirt. Twenty times a day, for three days, she had opened the barrette that held her thick, dark hair behind her neck and gathered handfuls to fasten again. The intimacy—the bareness of the back of her bent neck, the opportunity to stare at her unseen because she closed her eyes to fix her hair—had compelled him and embarrassed him. And he had wakened this morning to think not only of the heat, the sand, the eye of the torn, burnt truck driver, and the lunatic eyes of the dog, but also of the tall, slouching editor who read herself to sleep at night by going over what he had said to himself in the intimacies of fright, discomfort, and even despair during six weeks of Operation Enduring Freedom.

They sat now in her breakfast room in the old house that smelled of mildew and salt and resin. A few lobstermen worked their traps farther out, but the gulls had given up on them, stalking instead the broad, flat granite sheets between the back of the house and the sea, while crows made the noises of argument in the evergreens around them. Mason had heard a half of the phone call while he was drying himself after his shower. He hadn't been able to discern her words, but he had listened to her tones, which began sulkily enough and quickly declined into bitter single syllables.

While they chewed English muffins in silence, Ada stood to bring more coffee to the table and, pouring, announced, "I believe that I am starting to smoke again. Would you like to file any objections?"

"It sounds like you'd slug me if I did."

"I might."

"No, then, I think. No objections."

"No, tell me straight. Never mind, don't bother. I know it's stupid and suicidal and obnoxious. But I mean, *aside* from the usual arguments."

"Strikes me as a terrific plan."

"I'll stop again. You aren't, I don't know, allergic to it or something?"

"Just to the cancer part."

She said, "Well, I'll stop again. Before you leave, I'll stop smoking."

"Is it time for me to go?"

"Is this a tolerable process for you? Doing work like this?"

He nodded.

"It is not time for you to go. We almost have the shape. Structure is the concern for us, because you know how to tell stories. It's—it's like your dead Iranian. He's all over the book. It's like the book's his body. He's all blown up, so how would you put him back together? Same for us with the book. We're reassembling a body of experience. It's going to be different from what happened outside you, in the desert and while they were driving all over, but we have to find the shape it took *inside*. What your memories made it, what your emotions—well, you understand. You know what we're doing. And you know we aren't done."

"You paid me a pretty good penny," he said.

"One hell of a lot more than a penny."

"It doesn't seem entirely fair that I get the more-than-a-penny, and you still have to do all this work."

"That's what I do," she said. "I buy broken, and I fix."

"But meanwhile," he said, "I can't help noticing you've got stuff going on. . . ."

"Stuff."

"Stuff in your life. Private stuff." She left the table to open and close drawers in the pantry. Then she was back, sitting opposite him, looking unhappily at him over the cigarette she lit, sighing. He waited, as if he were the one who drew in the smoke. "It makes you sad," he said. "It makes you smoke."

"Thank you," she said, "but don't worry. The private stuff is just one more—what did your Marine Corps rifleman call it? 'One more

shit storm in paradise’?”

Murphy took the half of buttered English muffin she handed down to him, and he fastened his thick black muzzle carefully around it, as if the muffin were alive, and then he carried it off to the doorway of the breakfast room with his head up. He lay and licked it, watching them, then closed his mouth around it, raised his head, and worked at the bread while the butter and crumbs leaked down from his leathery lips.

“So I should mind my own business,” Mason said.

“I appreciate the attentiveness,” she said. “You’re a man who has feelings. That’s a nice part of the book—your honesty about being afraid, your sweetness about the younger men in combat, and the children you observed in the villages. And—listen. Listen, this is just the killing each other part you’re overhearing when I’m on the phone. It’s natural, it’s part of the cycle, and when you go looking to be happy, if that’s what this is about, then you have to do it. There’s the smiling part—first shy, then plain damned glad, then the way people smile right after they finish sexing each other tired. There’s the happy habit part—you know, how you get to understand each other’s arriving early or arriving late, ordering drinks for each other because you know what the other one likes, all of that. Then there’s the no longer working smoothly part, and that runs into the let’s just shoot each other part. I more or less happen to be in that particular aspect of the human misery sometimes called a relationship. I’ve been there before. As a matter of fact, it’s one of my specialties. Look,” she said, “I’m already chain-smoking. See how fast it all comes back? So could you tell me what that was about the Spanish Gate?”

The dog banged his tail against the floorboards and made a sound that was half growl and half yap. Mason knew by now that it signaled his desire to go outside. Ada went to the back porch door and held it for him. She stood at the door, her cigarette in her mouth, while she bent, blinking her eyes against the smoke, and loosened her barrette to gather her hair and fasten it again. Then she held the cigarette and looked out through the screen.

“Do you remember?” she asked.

“Where did that come from?”

“One of your notebooks. Some day in September, October. Just before you went over to Kuwait to join up with the Marines. I could find it. You wrote something about mussels in white wine with brown bread.”

“Oh,” he said. “I did? I don’t remember doing that. But it has to be about Galway, and this little restaurant near the Spanish Gate. We were—I was—There was somebody with me, and we were drinking a lot of white wine and eating mussels, and these thick slices of coarse brown bread. We got pretty drunk, as a matter of fact, and very fast.”

“So it wasn’t just the wine that did it,” Ada said, sitting again now that Murphy had returned.

“It wasn’t, no. I was with a friend, as I said.”

“A man or a woman? Can I ask? Has to be a woman.”

“Woman, yes,” he said. “Her name is Marianne Neal. We were in the smiling part of it, according to your breakdown.”

“Excellent word,” she said, “breakdown.”

“I was thinking that something terrific might possibly happen. And of course, a few days later it did. Just, it was terrifically unhappy. We were drinking and eating, we’d just come from some antiquarian fair in a great hall someplace in the city. Terrific city, Galway. Being there made me happy. I’d bought a brass jam pot for her that she thought was beautiful. Marianne’s a poet,” he said.

“Oh, now never even approach the outskirts of a poet,” Ada said. “Didn’t you know that by then in your life? They *love* pain. For you if it can’t be helped, but for *them* if they have any say in it. They specialize in the five stages of misery. First, get some love going. Second, find a way to want to kill yourself because of it. Third, polish it and polish it. Fourth, insert it in a vital organ. Anyone else gets snuffed, it’s a shame. If the poet, however—this is Number Five—if the poet manages to sustain a dreadful, agonizing, not quite totally fatal wound, then there you have it: a long cycle of poems at the least, and quite possibly a book of them. Never go *near* a poet. Of course, you know that now, don’t you?”

They went to work. Each of them took notes, and Ada managed the papers, arranging pages and renumbering them. She indicated with glued memorandum slips where he would have to provide new material or insert old. She asked him, over and over, to tell her the meaning of what he had thought were clear, simple sentences. It was a history of unworthiness, he believed, the story of a man without courage who traveled with young men and their officers who went only toward trouble, whereas he constantly wanted to run away.

“I was always making believe,” he told Ada during their lunch break. They ate chicken salad sandwiches and drank rosé under the

steady stare of Murphy, whose panting, Mason found, established the rhythm to which he chewed. “I was scared. I was ashamed of being so scared. I made noises like somebody who hadn’t ever *heard* of being scared. I kept wishing they would just, goddamn it, turn *around*, go back.”

“You suggest it plenty,” she said, “but maybe you want to talk about it directly. Give examples—what they did automatically, compared to what you wanted to do or would have done if nobody else was watching. Fear’s a great topic. Everybody wants to hear about it. You know: how to fail.”

“I’m waiting for you to give me the eleven stages of fearfulness. You have this wonderful habit—”

“Yeah. I know. I break everything down into sequences. I could number the stages of bleeding to death while I was bleeding to death. I’m a comedienne, of course, right?” She drank off her rosé and licked her lips. “Pure amateur.”

He said, around the chicken salad, “I find it a little exciting, to tell you the truth.”

She moved her head slowly while elongating her neck, and it was as if she were peering down at him from a significant height. “Why would that be?”

“I’ve always wished I could be chipper and bitter and tough like that, maybe. I don’t know. It attracts me.”

“I attract you?”

“Yes. It does, and you do.”

She nibbled at a piece of chicken protruding from the edge of her sandwich. She poured them more wine. She shook her head. “Well,” she said. “And I’m sitting here, telling you how compelling I find your being so scared. Aren’t we just a meant-to-be couple? As in, who needs sex when you can have failure?”

He thought that if he said something about sex *and* failure, they might end up in bed. But he was afraid to talk about failure and sex, because then—he was certain—the sex would fail. He wished he could tell her, because it would be a fine joke about his fear, which she seemed to find so valuable.

“Well, well,” she said, feeding a piece of sandwich to the dog. She leaned back, removed the barrette, leaned forward to gather her hair, then fastened the clip again. Mason pretended not to watch. “I’m running errands, in town,” she said, “mail, and dental floss at the IGA.

You take a nap so we can do a session of work before the low tide. All right?”

“Why low tide?”

“Because of your pleasure in mussels,” she told him. Then she and Murphy left.

Obediently, he took off his shoes and socks, he opened his bedroom window, and he lay under the powerful light off the sea and the winds that waxed and waned as if they were a tide. He sensed a giant shadow passing, but opened his eyes to see nothing except fir trees and the ocean off the rocks below the house. He wondered if a condor or an eagle had flown over. After a while, when he'd closed his eyes again, he saw different structures of rock and in different colors. He knew at once: the strand off the bay in County Sligo. He and Marianne Neal were walking on the coarse tan sand after their time in Galway, where they'd seemed to him so easy with each other. Outside of Sligo town, in Marianne's little stucco house that was several miles northeast of the crowded road to Donegal, he'd felt her grow watchful, as if she had begun to worry about his fragility. And her care made him know that he ought to expect misfortune.

She had driven them in her small, apple-green, misfiring second-hand Ford to a little sandy track that went down to the beach. She pulled up the handbrake and sat, looking out the windshield at other parked cars and the gleam of water farther down. Her lips looked tattered, and he had seen her biting them. When she worried, she nibbled at herself—edges of her lips, her cuticles, a wisp of her frizzy, light hair. His stomach bucked, and he was certain now of unhappiness ahead. There were few people about, perhaps because cool winds had come up. He and Marianne had walked, saying little, along the curve of the bay. A small, white-hulled boat with an orange sail was turning into the wind.

“Can you see her?” Marianne asked.

He shook his head.

“She's got ahold of a rope, she's standing at the mast there.”

“Is it a nun?”

“It is, Martin. A nun in her blue robe on a sailboat. She's grand, I think. Martin, there's a man I'm going to see again that I wanted you to know about?”

“Ah.”

“Ah. Poor man. What else could you say, then? I'm so sorry. He's

the father of my dead child. The infant boy born dead. He's asked to return again to my life. I don't know. I don't. But I don't think I can sustain the two sets of emotions at once. And here you are, off to the deserts over there, and I'm giving you something like the shove."

"This is the shove?"

"I wouldn't feel it inappropriate if you gave expression to some *anger*, Martin."

He knew her powerful poems about the baby. He wanted to say that he would rather cry, just then.

He remembered that he gave her no reply. He looked away from her, at the nun standing against the background of the orange sail on Sligo Bay, and he put his arm around her. She tensed. Then she very slowly relaxed against him for the space of a breath or two. All this time, he thought, and what you carry out of it for certain is how she fought an embrace and then gave in. She would probably write something about that instant of fighting, he thought. Marianne was a revelation about inventing ways to use words, unlike him with his timid notations on how others behaved. He remembered the citrus scent that she wore, and the smell, like crushed ferns, of the Sligo sand that the afternoon's sunlight had warmed before the winds came up—the smell so different from the animal rankness of the tawny sand patrolled by Alpha in its reconnaissance vehicles—and he remembered that her skin was cool to the touch, at the strand at Sligo and in their bed at the Galway Great Southern, or anyplace else. His skin cooked while hers grew cold, and she produced sorrowful poems, and he grew sentimental over mussels steamed with shallots in white wine.

When Ada woke him, she seemed to be wearing sneakers and a long denim shirt and nothing else.

"You slept all afternoon," she said.

"I was just running away from work. It's a great tradition of the trade."

"We can work tonight," she said, "or tomorrow. We're doing all right. Listen. Wear some shorts, or a bathing suit if you brought it. I can't lend you one, I'm afraid, unless you're comfortable in a red maillot. And you'd best wear something on your feet."

Ada left, but Murphy stayed, to pant and fart and wink as Mason put on a pair of shorts he wore when he played basketball with his friends, and then tennis shoes and a t-shirt. Murphy went to stand before the back door, his blunt, spade-shaped head leaning on the jamb.

Mason let him out and then walked down the narrow path of dark, mossy soil along which Murphy had already run out of sight, past wind-stunted evergreens, then driftwood crushed against the huge rocks lying on top of the great stone sheets that radiated black and pink-gray layers into the sea. Ada was there, halfway down to the turning of the cove. She carried two plastic buckets, one of which she handed him.

“Your hands will probably get sore,” she said. “The more you try and hang onto the rocks, the more you’ll get those very pale knees and shins chopped up on the barnacles and all. But it’s worth it, because they’re so sweet here. It’s pretty much a secret place, so far.”

“What’s the secret about? Did you say?”

“Mussels, for goodness sakes. That’s what I’ve been telling you. This place, when the tide is low, is a gorgeous mussel bed.”

She and Murphy went farther out, climbing over or around immense glacial rocks that lay on top of the pink and gray stone sheets. At low tide, which was now, he imagined, you must be able to reach ten feet or more below the level of the high tide of six hours before. She had disappeared over the edge, and so had Murphy, and he went to find her. She was in ocean to her waist and thighs, and Murphy was swimming away from her, threading his slow, powerful way through the bright plastic buoys of the lobster traps, his head low on the water, breathing in groans that were carried back on the wind.

The rocks seemed steep to Mason, and slippery, and he sensed that, trying to climb down, he would slide along them into the sea, striking his head and shoulders and spine against the sharp white barnacles and—he watched her pry one loose—the hundreds of long black mussels that she faced. The water had painted her shirt against her stomach and groin, and he could see the shadow of a bathing suit beneath the shirt and the movement of her stomach muscles under the suit as she pulled and twisted until a mussel she was harvesting came loose, to be dropped into the white plastic bucket that she held in her other hand.

She looked up with a concentration that struck him as ferocious. Then a pleasure seemed to come over her, and she said, “Come on, all right? Come here.”

He held a finger up. It was supposed to say that he would be there soon, though from a different direction. She looked away, as if disappointed, and then she returned to plucking. Mason headed back twenty yards or more, then climbed down a more gradual decline of

rocks nearer the house. He made his way along low stone outcroppings that gradually circled toward the curve of the point, where he thought she would be.

He couldn't hear Murphy now. Mason held onto the rock, chopping his fingers on bright white little shells that adhered to it, prodding for the beard hairs of mussels. The pail he held was floating on the tide, and the icy water was soon above his knees as he foraged where the rocks declined. He had worked two small mussels loose, with great effort, and tossed them into the bucket. Now the freezing sea was at his waist. He came around the point to see Ada, tall, spread-legged, and at her ease, with one hand through the wire handle of her pail to hold the rock face, and the other hand working to her right, tearing mussels loose and dumping them. When she saw him, she gave him a look of inspection and then smiled as if all at once, after a time of confusion, she understood him.

He held onto the rock against the bucking of the sea. He was watching the small Labrador attack one of the foam plastic buoys painted white on top and red on the bottom and fastened to a lobster trap that held to the floor of the sea.

Ada cocked her head as dogs do when they're puzzled. "Murphy!" she called. "Murph! Come here!"

The dog made as if to swim to her, but then he stayed where he was, with his jaws clamped around the buoy. He made paddling motions but didn't come away.

"Get his ass shot up by a pissed-off lobsterman or the conservation patrol," she said, "and nobody would question it. Murphy, damn it!"

"Ada," Mason said.

"Murph!"

"Ada, he's struck. Isn't he? He can't get his teeth out of it."

"He can't? Oh, he *can't*. Murphy!"

They started at the same time. Ada let go her bucket and pushed off from the rock face to swim a long-stroked crawl. Mason tried to think of himself as doing the same, though he knew that what he really did was make a little yipping noise, push his head down into the water and, spitting ocean out, set forward with the only stroke he could swim—if, he thought, you could really call this swimming—a despairing sidestroke that sent him in slants not quite straight at what he alleged to be heading for. He stroked, looked about, corrected his direction, then stroked some more. He had no real breathing rhythm, but he did

have strong arms and legs, so he swam in the sea the way a crab scuttles on sand, and he made a little headway. Ada, meanwhile, was almost there. Mason found himself thinking about the great distance that lay between the dark green surface, chopped into patches of white by the wind, and the slithery, teeming ocean floor.

She was trying to support the dog's belly, it appeared, when Mason reached them. The whites of Murphy's eyes seemed enormous. As if to demonstrate his situation, his lips were drawn back so that the pink and black gums and yellow-white teeth were visible, the fangs clamped deep into the soft plastic of the buoy. Murphy twisted his head to release himself, but the teeth were firmly stuck.

"I've got you, little Murph," Ada said, breathing harshly. "I've got his tail and his gut, a little bit," she told Mason. "Can you—"

He tried to say, "Piece of cake." It came out as a wet warble. He did what he considered the treading of water, really a flailing kick—the bottom seemed *so* far below—that shook his torso and head. He didn't try to speak again. He worked his fingers into Murphy's mouth and made the noises, though not the shaped words themselves, of Here we go, boy. Here we go, boy. Here we go. His own head slid beneath the surface several times, but he worked at the teeth and then had them unfastened. He surfaced just as Murphy, in the jaws of panic, clamped his own jaws down again, this time on Mason's left hand. Mason howled shrilly, and Murphy, with Mason's fingers in his mouth, turned with great interest toward the noise. Using his right hand, he persuaded the muzzle open and removed his fingers. Ada pushed Murphy off toward shore, and the dog swam eagerly. Mason tried to shift from his flailing into his crooked sidestroke, but he was down to the single hand that would cup against water and he merely rolled a little before his head went under.

He felt her hand in his hair, tugging, and then he was on his back. He tried to protest, but water poured into his mouth, and he could only gurgle. Her hand cupped his chin, pulling back, so that now the ocean stayed out of his mouth and he could breathe whenever he wished. What gifts to give a man, he thought: the fruits of her watchfulness, as well as a choice of when to breathe. She towed him as if he were a blunt, unseaworthy barge and she a gallant tug. She swam what he knew was an actual and very effective sidestroke that resembled his sideways jerk only in the way you said its name.

Although he was kept the length of a bent arm away from her, he

was intimately aware of her body. He heard her breath go out on the water. He felt the strength of her fingers as they held his throat and chin. Sometimes her legs, when they scissored, brushed his buttock or the small of his back. His arms trailed, and he sensed that if he moved them up a little he might touch her, and he wanted to, though he kept them at his sides. His eyes were closed. The day had begun that way, he remembered: him on his back with his eyes forced shut. She surged, then relaxed, surged and then relaxed, and he could feel her purpose, the power of her long muscles, and none of the sorrow that bowed her shoulders when she stood on the shore.

Something brushed his trailing forearm, and he squinted to his right to see one of the mussel buckets, right-side up and slowly spinning out toward open sea. He shut his eyes again and thought it possible that, half drowning, his mangled hand had a pulse that beat in syncopation to the rhythm of the progress of her stroke, he might actually fall asleep in the waters of this cold Atlantic cove. But she halted them. He could feel her tread water with a different kind of strength from that of her sidestroke. Then she swam him a little farther, paused again, and then began to walk with him still floating on his back, towing him through the shallows. Murphy had made it back, and he lay on a tilted, vast, refrigerator-shaped stone, looking down toward them while he panted at a ferocious pace, his tongue exhaustedly stiffened and stuck straight out. It was time to stand up, Mason knew, and he reluctantly climbed to his feet by holding with his unbitten hand onto Ada, who stood above him with the ocean pouring between her thighs.

“You’re all right,” she said, “aren’t you?” She’d begun to shake.

He let go of her hand and stood before her on his own. He trembled, partly because of the cold. “Thank you,” he said.

“No, that was a great rescue,” she said. “Thank you from Murphy and thank you from me.”

“And you,” he said, breathing as fast as if he had pulled someone large through the ocean against currents, gravity, dog bite, and fear. “You saved my *life*, Ada.”

“But we won’t have mussels for dinner tonight. And I’m sorry. It would have been fun to give you that.” He watched her head droop a little as her shoulders bent toward the sea.

Murphy shifted his demented glare from one of them to the other as he panted from above. Mason wanted to examine his hand to see

whether the dog had only torn his fingers apart or had also broken a few, but he held it at his side with what he hoped was nonchalance.

“Another night,” he said, “please.”

“All right,” she said. “Yes. But we’re freezing here.”

“We are,” he said. But he was thinking of the nighttime heat in which they gathered at Checkpoint Eight One, the smell of the driver rising through the chemical stink of the rubber and plastic of the burning truck. His legs and loins roasted in the cab while the upper segment lay before them. The driver’s remaining eye was wide as if in speculation about these Americans who shuffled closer and closer to the torn torso and its blistered, wrecked head.

“I’m building a fire in the fireplace,” Ada said. “I’m making tea to pour brandy in. We’ll deal with your hand, which looks a little lousy, I’m afraid. And I’m smoking plenty of cigarettes.”

She turned from Mason to get herself past pitted, bleached-out boards and hanks of snapped rope that lay among the stones she climbed toward the house. Murphy went slowly ahead of her. Holding his beating right hand in his left, and knowing that he risked a fall on the slippery, yellow-green rockweed and the slimy bottoms of tidal pools, Mason followed them up.