

Soon after she left, the Connolly brothers walked in, needing paint. The two brothers, Ned and Billy, have been in the painting business for as long as I've known them, which is ever since I worked with them during summers in high school. They are older than me by nine or ten years. Billy, the older brother, is a towering man with a big face and a red nose in the middle of it. He likes to keep his hair crew-cut short and flat enough on top to balance any brimming stemware. He carries a big chest of good nature and speaks with a small, friendly roar. He always refers to me as "Tommy me boy," revealing his second generation closeness to the Potato Famine, and is as well meaning as he is large. Ned, born eleven months after Billy, has hair that was once red and a voice that has been shredded by cigarettes and whisky, making his words come out with more air than meaning. He is a paler, thinner version of his older brother but clearly the head of the business.

Both men are World War II veterans and always eager to swap war adventures. Ned, a cook on a troop carrier in the Pacific, never tires of telling me how revolting it was to watch Marines eat, and I've lost count of the number of times Billy has showed me the scar on his neck from when he was literally clothes-lined chasing Germans through the backyards of some tiny, nameless village in Sicily. Billy always ends one of his stories with, "But

heck, war is hell, ain't it, Tommy me boy?" waiting for me to reciprocate with a harrowing exploit of my own.

I never do.

"Two gallons of your finest Linen White exterior paint, Tommy me boy," Billy said, sounding like thunder one county over.

"Comin' up. You guys still working outside? Gettin' a little cold out there, isn't it?"

"A wee bit. But I'm sure it's nothin' like the cold Korea was, eh Tommy?" He opened up a grin on his rugged face, revealing the big gap between his two front teeth, and stood there like he had just hollered into the Grand Canyon and was waiting for his echo. He would have been delighted if I had told him of one of the moments that has been frozen into my memory since one frosty morning of December 1950 when I was on a squad-sized patrol walking point and the blankness of the snow-filled woods got to me and I became disoriented. The whiteness was all around, three feet deep on the ground, a white sunless sky above, tree branches bent over coated in ice, and the air all around me was filled with big, falling white flakes. I couldn't tell north from south, east from west. And if it hadn't been for the black tree trunks running perpendicular, I wouldn't have known up from down. The only thing heavier than the snow was the silence. The only sounds that came through to me were my own breathing and my footsteps crunching through the snow, which fortunately did not announce my coming, when I found myself twenty yards behind a machine-gun nest with three commie residents. I had stumbled behind enemy lines. *Now what?*

I finally started hearing something in the distance some hundred yards beyond the nest. I could make out the green forms of my squad approaching the kill zone of the Koreans' machine gun. The enemy saw my guys and went into action; the gunner slowly and as quietly as he could

pulled back the cocking handle and chambered the first round. The feeder held the belt gently at the ready, and the third man took aim with his rifle on one of my buddies.

I got to a tree and like moss found the side to stay alive on as I drew a bead on the rifleman; I figured I would kill him first, then the belt man and then the gunner. And I had to do it all quickly, before my Marines mistakenly returned fire on me. I took a deep breath. The first two men were dead before I exhaled. When I squeezed one off for the gunner my rifle jammed. The gunner had turned and stood up by then and had his pistol out of his holster. I made a dash for him, the snow keeping my run in slow motion. Two steps from him he was fumbling taking the safety off his pistol. I took my jammed M-1 by the muzzle like a baseball bat and swung at the gun, sending it like a rip down the third base line for extra bases. He then came at me with a bayonet before I could get to mine. Fortunately he was a little squirt and I could hold him off by grabbing his weapon hand while I somehow got out my bayonet with frozen fingers. By then incoming rounds from my squad were snapping into the sandbags of the nest. I got the little guy to the ground for my own cover, and that's when it all turned quiet and personal. The little bastard tried to hold my wrist but I was stronger, hungrier for blood and had 172 years of US Marine Corps behind me. I was on top of him inches from his face; his pupils were the size of quarters, black with terror, and I could see straight through them to his very soul and beyond. As the tip of my bayonet touched his throat, the pleading in his eyes was deafening. He got out one or two foreign words before his part in the war came to an end, and my misery began.

"Yeah," I said to Billy, "it was cold all right."