

The Painter



Mark Malmkar

THE PAINTER

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Chapter 1

Coffee and Doughnuts

Pete Wozniak didn't notice the tall, clean-cut man sitting in the midst of the group of a dozen men seated to the left side of the bakery as he entered. Pale yellow walls surrounded the five tables and a variety of straight wooden and metal folding chairs. As Pete walked up to the counter in the middle of the bakery he wasn't the least self-conscious about the striped, paint splattered bib overalls he wore. The baker's wife, Miriam smiled at him from behind the counter. She paid no mind to what any of the men wore. He simply got his coffee from the carafe, selected an apple fritter from the tray of pastries, and sat down next to Paul Francis, as usual. He had been dating Paul's daughter, Angela, for a few months. Pete met her at the bowling alley.

Pete took a bite from the fritter and wiped the escaping crumbs from his beard. His beard was dark and short but extended from ear to ear around his chin. His moustache blended into the beard on both sides, and the hairs on his face closely matched the color of the hair on his head. His hair was on the long side, like the Beatles, and he stood five foot eight inches in his bib overalls.

"Do you bowl tonight," asked Paul Francis, a local farmer whose place was eleven miles northeast of town.

"No, Friday night," answered Pete before he took the first sip of coffee.

"Angie bowls on Friday nights."

"Yeah. I usually see her there."

"What did you bowl last week?" Paul asked with his

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mouth full of cream filled Long John.

"241."

"What did Angie do?"

"218."

"You still painting the bank?" asked Carroll Whitman, owner of the hardware store up the street.

"Yup," Pete answered, taking another bite of fritter. Pete became the foreman of Neal Vavricek's paint crews when Neal had semi-retired the previous year. Neal still owned the painting company but did only paperwork, leaving the day-to-day physical labor to Pete and the two three-man crews. Everyone figured Pete would inherit the business some day.

"When are you going to get started on the bleachers at the football field?" queried the high school principal. "Football season starts in two weeks!" It was early August 1968.

"The bank should be done by Friday," Pete answered. "I'll get both crews over there Monday."

"What's wrong with Saturday?"

"Neal quoted you half-price out of civic duty," Pete responded. "I'm not paying my guys overtime on a half-price job."

"Tightwad!" said the principal with a smile. Pete ignored the remark and stood up to go get a second apple fritter from the tray on the counter.

About a dozen men from the community met in the downtown bakery in Limon, Colorado every morning of the week between five and eight in the morning to solve the world's problems. Well, at least to discuss them and cuss them. The group was generally the same men on weekdays with a couple of new guys only on Saturday, and a few less men on Sunday. Besides the principal, there were a couple of farmers, the newspaper editor, several businessmen, an occasional lawyer, and a few retired military guys. After eight only the retired guys remained to relive the battles of years gone by.

Neal Vavrichek was present most mornings in the coffee club, but not this morning. He encouraged Pete to join the group shortly after he began working for his older Czech employer over five years earlier. The camaraderie of the other men grew on the thirty-six year-old.

As Pete sat down on the metal folding chair next to a table of four other guys, he noticed the discussion at the next table had shifted to war stories and the pros and cons of the war in Vietnam. Most of the guys in the room had been in the service, and most of the time their service came up in the daily discussion.

Jack Cook, the manager of the Conoco gas station was relating one of his Navy stories. "I was a coxswain. I drove General MacArthur's landing craft when he landed in the Philippines. I put the ramp down on the sand and all the photographers and reporters jumped out and didn't even get their feet wet. MacArthur could have walked out without getting his feet wet, but no. I was ordered to back the landing craft about sixty feet out into the water so MacArthur could wade ashore for his famous pictures. That stupid move almost swamped my boat."

"Johnson should send the entire Eighth Air Force over there and bomb the hell out of them," one of the men commented from a nearby table. "Hell, the Viet Cong blasted Saigon last January. Khe Sahn, Hue and Tan San Nhut all got clobbered. What the hell is he waiting for? Eisenhower wouldn't have waited seven months to retaliate!"

"The North Vietnamese are back to the table for peace talks. That's a good sign."

Another table had their own discussion going. "Bobby Kennedy getting killed screwed up the country's chances of winning this war. He'd have gotten us out, by God. Both Kennedy's would have gotten us out, but the bastards shot 'em."

"The hippies are screwing up this world, I tell you," came a comment from someone to Pete's left.

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Carl Harvick called over to Pete, "I'd like you to meet my son Rodney." Carl, in his early sixties, the manager of the grain elevator, reached out and clasped the shoulder of the clean-cut man with a flattop haircut. The man was wearing dark slacks and a striped button-down shirt with the dumb little loop behind the collar. He was clean-shaven, light haired, had pearly white teeth when he smiled, and had a rugged look some would say was handsome. But he still looked like a government bureaucrat.

"He's from Denver," Carl continued, "hasn't been home to Momma and me for at least five years."

Pete smiled, said he was glad to meet him, and waved his apple fritter in a weak hello. *I'm beginning to recognize that guy*, Pete thought.

Carl beamed with pride. "He's an FBI agent. I'm proud of him."

Pete caught his breath. He quickly looked away. Then in a quick motion stuffed more fritter into his mouth and concentrated on chewing it. *I wonder if he knows who I really am*. Trying to appear unconcerned, he smiled at the FBI man, Rodney Harvick.

"Call me Rod," the FBI agent smiled back and turned to other men in the group to continue their discussion.

"Did I ever tell you I met General Eisenhower before we bailed out over Normandy?" asked Gene Spradlin, one of the men gathered there who ranched just five miles south of town. "I even got his autograph on a dollar bill. Then I lost my wallet somewhere that first morning. Hell, I landed in a canal. My 'F'ing parachute damned near drowned me."

The war stories continued, only broken up when Miriam came from around the counters filled with doughnuts, cakes and bread, to see if the men needed anything. They really only needed a pretty young lass to tease, but she, being middle aged and married, would have to suffice. Some mornings they teased her unmercifully. But there was mutual trust between the men and the bakery. When the men began dispersing

between six and eight A.M., they would honestly recount the number of doughnuts and fritters they ate, add the price of the first cup of coffee and pay their tab to Miriam, who manned the cash register. Coffee refills were on the house.

Pete finished his coffee and fritters and thought about leaving immediately. But it was only ten 'til six, and he usually stayed around until six-fifteen and listened to the old war-horses recount their GI adventures. *Would it be noticeable if I left early?* Surely, someone would ask where he was going in such a hurry. They were used to him listening intently to their war stories, asking questions, even though he emphatically maintained that he'd never served in the military. He couldn't use the paint crews as an excuse to leave – the bank was just a block away.

He snuck a peek at Rod Harvick.

Harvick was talking with another man, the newspaper reporter, who was also in his mid-thirties like Pete.

"Were you in the military?" the reporter was asking.

"Yes," Harvick nodded, "Thirty-second Regiment, First Battalion, Able Company."

Pete's eyes snapped to Rod Harvick's face. Thirty-second Regiment, First Battalion, Able Company was Pete's unit!

"Where did you serve?"

"Thirteen months in Korea. I was at Triangle Hill."

Recognition stabbed Pete in the brain. He reflexively looked away. Lieutenant Rod Harvick! "*Oh, Shit!*" Pete's mind snapped halfway around the world and flopped down in a frozen trench lined with frozen sandbags.

He was sitting in the bottom, clutching his M1918A2 Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) with thick mittens that barely kept out the cold that January day. He shivered uncontrollably, sitting there at dusk, in his green winter coat with a parka wrapped around him. With his coat, bullet resistant vest and two layers of shirts, he felt like a whale. He

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was supposed to be looking out over the sandbags watching for any Chinks that might be sneaking up through the minefield they'd planted two weeks before. He was sure if he looked, the wind would freeze his eyeballs.

A noise in the dirt above him caught his attention. A dark green form in a poncho emerged from friendly territory behind him and slid over the top and down into the trench beside him. Lieutenant Harvick flopped down onto the frozen muck between he and Private Jensen, the next man in the line. The BAR man held the end of the line at the end of the trench.

"Here's some more mags, corporal." Harvick handed him a satchel full of loaded BAR 20-round magazines. "You'll need them. The captain thinks this side will get hit the hardest. He sees movement across the valley." Their third platoon of Able Company anchored the left flank of a low hill between two towering hills. First platoon was in the center, and second platoon on the right flank. If the enemy wanted to cut up the valley, they'd have to overrun their position. Since the battle for Triangle Hill ended a month earlier, the war in their part of Korea had pretty much stalemated.

He thanked the lieutenant and flopped the BAR into the notch in the sandbags arranged so he could see out but his helmet wouldn't stick up too far. The wind was very convincing about his eyes freezing over. Tears trickled out of the corners, and seemed to freeze on his cheeks, salt and all.

The first explosion in the minefield startled him. Son of a Bitch! A second explosion blasted dirt into his eyes from thirty feet in front of him. The chinks began pounding the minefield and hill with artillery. Explosions rocked the hillside behind him and chunks of earth rained down. The lieutenant was right. It looked like they intended to attack the left side of our line. *They are attacking my platoon! I know those bastards will follow the artillery right across the minefield. They'll even blow up some of their own guys.*

It's 1968, and Pete Wozniak
has been hiding for six years.

He's made a new life for himself in Limon, Colorado: he has a girlfriend, a sporty car, and a steady job as a housepainter. But one August morning, during a routine stop at the town bakery, his past life suddenly explodes into the present. An old acquaintance, his former lieutenant from his Army days, recognizes him, threatening the peaceful existence Pete has made for himself.

Can he still hang on to his innocuous life? Or has his dark past finally caught up with him for good?

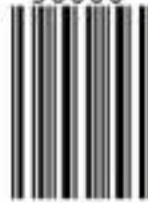


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