

As Robert Byron walked through the jungle, he was sweating unbearably. He was being attacked by what seemed like an endless army of horseflies. The odors, sweet sour rotten putrid, he hated. Somehow he'd gotten separated from the other men in his platoon, and after days in the jungle, he was half crazy. They must think I'm dead, he thought, or somebody would have found me by now. He wasn't hungry, even though he was so weak from lack of food he could barely walk. And even though his stomach was empty, he felt like vomiting. Intense pain he felt from being bitten by fire ants for days. He was walking on a trail, but he really had no idea where it led anymore. He thought he might have heard a helicopter far off in the distance but knew he could have dreamed it, that it could have been an echo from a thousand helicopters he had heard since he got to Vietnam. He felt completely detached from the entire life he had known and lived until a few days ago. His might as well have been on an alien planet. His memories of people seemed more like ghosts than real as he walked, terrified that he would step on a mine or that Vietcong would come out of jungle from nowhere and obliterate him with bullets or machetes. Whatever courage he'd had was long gone. He hated feeling like a coward because he'd had it drilled into his head from the time he was three years old to hate cowards. He'd seen how they were laughed at and despised. He wondered how much farther he could go before he collapsed into certain death.

He'd been a great athlete in high school, maybe the best his town had ever had, but now he had a hard time even walking. Then suddenly he came near a clearing and saw a peasant in a rice field with a water buffalo, and for a moment the scene seemed peaceful and wonderful. Except for some soft white clouds, the sky was blue. He moved around the clearing, slowly, quietly, still terrified, doubting again if he would ever get back home alive. Images of his mother and father and his sister Sarah came into his mind. Maybe they think I'm dead like the thousands of other guys here they'll never find, he thought. Time seemed to stop as he stared almost catatonic at the peasant with the buffalo in the rice paddy and thought how even in the most terrible war, everyday life goes on. Survival. He must survive. He must live and go home again.

He remembered a story his grandfather had told him that his grandfather told him about being in a camp in the Civil War and Grant coming into the camp, everything in chaos, Grant barking out orders and how in a short time everything calmed down, everything became organized. Maybe, maybe back then war had a purpose and was heroic, not like this nightmare of jungle and fire ants and blood and death, fighting for people who hate you.

Finally he started walking again, just far enough from the clearing so no one could have seen him, thirstier than life itself because the water in his canteen had run out a long time ago and it hadn't rained in days, and he hadn't come to any rivers or streams. He thought about getting water from the rice field and his thirst blinded him, made him so he could think of nothing else but water and overcame his fear. He drank from it, without, he thought, being seen. He walked slowly around the field and came near a hamlet. On one side of it he saw a woman and an old man by a bamboo shack, and a girl and a boy playing in the dust, so near he could hear them speaking the Vietnamese that he'd heard endlessly for months but still hardly understood a word of. He felt around the wood barrel and steel of his M-16 rifle. He wondered what the odds were that the family would be friendly and considered his chances. In any case, he knew he couldn't go on much longer. He was

dazed and completely disoriented. Half in illusion, half because of some kind of twisted intuition, he went out of the jungle toward the family with his gun pointed toward them. He could see the shock on their face, the same shock and fear he felt himself perhaps. They were about 10 yards away. The boy, about 10 years old perhaps, pulled something out of his worn frayed gown with a half smile half frown. They must have seen me drinking water, Robert thought. He was sure the boy had a grenade in his hand and would kill him. He leveled his rifle, pulled the trigger, and watched as the boy lurched back and was blown to the ground and blood poured out of him. Robert smelled the smoke of the gun and the stink of the jungle and felt a sickness that would never go away.

Chapter 1

When Robert Byron came home to Blue Spring, Michigan, from Vietnam, he received about as warm a welcome as anyone could have asked for. His parents threw a big dinner party for him with dozens of friends and relatives present, a big write-up about him appeared in the *Blue Spring Gazette*, his home town newspaper, chronicling heroic deeds he had never performed, and dozens of townsfolk welcomed him home during his first days back. The American Legion post even proposed that a parade be held in his honor. This was just before people had come to hate the war and everything it stood for, before it had divided the country like nothing had since the Civil War. Few people knew yet about the horror of the war. But Robert was cool and laconic at the dinner party, read the newspaper story with disdain, and received the welcomes home ungraciously and sometimes as if he were even annoyed by them. When he heard about the parade idea, he laughed. He created bad feeling toward himself all over town. Some people grumbled that he acted more as if he had just arrived in Vietnam than as if he had just returned.

In keeping with his misanthropy, Robert soon moved out of his parents' home to a house in an isolated area of the countryside outside Blue Spring. The house had last been rented by a man who had wanted to move out to the country because he thought he'd love being close to nature—but who had got so lonely there that he had moved out after only a few months. Weatherworn and shabby, the house didn't at all seem like an appropriate place for a young man to live who wanted to get back into the mainstream of life after a hitch in the army.

He spent most of the winter there. He didn't look for a job and hardly ever went out of the house, except occasionally to go into town to buy food or other necessities or, rarely, at night to go to one of the town bars. Sometimes his old friends would come to visit, but mostly he just stayed alone, reading, writing short stories and poems that he rarely finished, or just looking out his front window at the woods and meadow there. One story he particularly liked was "Soldier's Home" by Ernest Hemingway. He read it over and over again. His father and mother went to see him often at first and lectured him on how he should try to get a fresh start. But they learned soon that all their words were in vain.

"It's not normal," the older people in town said. Some younger people tried to explain to them that Robert had probably been traumatized by the war and said solemnly that he would probably never be the same again, but what Robert's actual state of mind was no one was really sure. The men in town who'd fought in World War II were contemptuous: They'd fought in a real war, and when they'd come home, they'd gone on with their lives without moping around about it. As the winter passed, both the old people and the young wondered when the money Robert had saved while he was in the army would run out, and he would have to return to work. Blue Spring is a small town and Robert was one of the first young men from it to go to Vietnam, so people were naturally interested about his experience there. Also, the people in town had always been especially

interested in Robert, and somehow expected more from him when they should have expected less. People were fascinated by him but many were also a bit afraid of him: They'd seen what a terrible temper he had at times. When spring arrived, Robert's money did run out, so he withdrew from his solitude somewhat and began doing construction work. He was a good carpenter and a pretty fair painter, because of which, and because it was spring, he easily acquired all the work he cared to handle. He worked alone mostly and did quite well.

One of Robert's first jobs when he went back to work was on a country house that was being rented by Jean Summers, a woman of 23 who had come to Blue Spring the past fall to teach English at Blue Spring High School. Now, it would have made much more sense if instead of moving into an isolated and somewhat rundown country house, she had moved into one of the new apartment houses in town, or at least into a house there. It would have been much easier and probably cheaper. And certainly, a place in town would have provided a better atmosphere for making new friends. But she loved the countryside and had a streak of the romantic in her that often caused her to do things that were neither practical nor economical. Also, she'd made a friend, Susan O'Malley, who felt the same way about living in the country, so she had someone to provide her with company and share expenses. Jean's landlord had promised them to have certain repairs done and to have the house repainted when spring came, and to do this work he had hired Robert.

When Jean was told by her landlord who would be working on her house, however, she frowned in disgust. She had heard plenty of stories about the rash, irresponsible actions in Robert's past and about his love affairs, as well as the talk about him when he had returned from Vietnam and the speculation about him during his isolation. Frankly, she couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. To her, it sounded as if he were simply a prima donna. She'd grown up near Chicago herself and thought it was typical of a small town like Blue Spring to be so easily impressed. She certainly didn't expect to be impressed by Robert, nor in any way to let him think she was. Besides, she had virtually no sympathy for people who felt sorry for themselves, and that's certainly how she pictured Robert. She'd be polite to him, she thought, and that's all. And he'd be lucky to get even that if he came in trying to impress her.

Having been told by her landlord that Robert would start work on a certain Saturday, Jean got up early that day. Someone had to be up to let Robert in and show him what work was to be done, and Susan was gone for the weekend. He was supposed to arrive at eight o'clock, but by nine-thirty he still had not. She was starting to get pretty irritated with waiting. She had not particularly wanted to get up early, and when she had, there were things she had wanted to go out and do. Sitting in the kitchen reading the morning newspaper and drinking coffee, she decided she would really give Robert a piece of her mind for being late when he arrived, thinking that doing so would be especially enjoyable if he swaggered in expecting to bowl her over with his charm. About ten o'clock Jean heard Robert's pick-up truck coming up her driveway. Having never seen him before despite hearing so many stories about him, she was interested despite herself about what he looked like. She went to her kitchen window and saw him just as he was getting out of his truck. She watched attentively as he went to the back of his truck and got out a couple of gallons of paint and some painting gear. She saw he was wearing a sweat shirt beneath a leather jacket, blue jeans, and

paint-spattered work boots and that he had sunglasses on, and she thought she could discern in his face self-confidence and a touch of arrogance. She was ready to light right into him. A moment later, Robert knocked at her door and she went to answer it.

“Hi, there,” he said, taking off his sunglasses and smiling affably. “My name is Robert Byron, and I’m here to do a few repairs on your house. Ralph Warren said you’d be expecting me.” Jean thought Robert was extremely handsome, especially his eyes, and for a moment she thought her anger might drain right out of her. But somehow she managed to keep it at a high pitch.

“Yes, I expected you at eight, as a matter of fact,” acidly. “I’ve been up waiting since then.” She opened the door wider as she said this, and Robert stepped inside.

“Sorry I’m late. I accidentally overslept this morning.”

“I wish I had. To tell the truth, I didn’t particularly feel like getting up early this morning. I already have to get up very early five days a week!”

Jean looked at Robert angrily but thought he looked at her as if he were subtly making fun of her. He seemed to her completely unperturbed by her anger.

“To make up for being late,” Robert said, “I’ll do such a good job here that you’ll stop to wonder if you haven’t moved into a new house. And if you don’t stop to wonder that, you can come to me and say that I broke my promise and demand whatever damages you’d like.”

Jean smiled a little despite herself.

“No such lavish promise is called for. I’ll be perfectly content if you simply do a competent job and be on time from now on. Now, if you don’t mind, I’ll show you where to get started.”

Jean showed Robert to a bedroom that he was to paint, telling him that she had to leave the house but would return before lunch time. Then she went out of the room, and shortly thereafter, left the house to run errands. As she drove into town and went to the post office and to different stores to accomplish her errands, she thought about Robert and was quite unhappy with herself for the way she had acted toward him. She had succeeded in showing him that she wasn’t impressed by him, all right, but in doing so she thought she had acted somewhat bitchy. As it had turned out, Robert had acted quite differently than she had expected him to, and she realized that she had prejudged him unfairly. She wasn’t sure yet what he was really like, of course, but she had seen enough to know that she had been wrong to be so hostile to him. She felt even worse when she remembered that Robert had returned from Vietnam only recently and that he might have suffered psychic wounds there that she in her vanity might have helped deepen, when she might in a small way have helped to mend them. Of course, none of these thoughts had anything to do with how good looking Robert was. Thus, she thought, the only solution was to go back to Robert with a completely new attitude. Not to apologize for anything, mind you, but at least to be polite and friendly. When she had that settled, she brought an image of Robert into her mind. In her imagination, she looked into his brown eyes and decided that she liked them—even though they did indeed show that he was somewhat arrogant—and she fancied that she saw in them some tragedy from long ago hidden deep inside him. Then she took a step back and looked at his whole face, his softly handsome features and brown hair that hung about half way down his forehead and especially his smile, which was mostly charming but was just slightly insolent. Taking yet another

step back, she considered Robert's body and the way he walked, judging that, though he was muscular, she couldn't be absolutely sure that he didn't swagger just a little. Despite her misgivings, however, she managed to paint quite a romantic picture of Robert and seemed to have completely forgotten the resolution she began the day with.

She wondered also what Robert thought of her, concluding that he probably thought she was either a bitch or a fool. But she'd change that. She thought she could be pretty charming when she wanted to. She was sure she could have him thinking she was quite nice before the day was over. Actually, Robert was quite taken with Jean and thought she was gorgeous—having guessed that her anger was really only skin deep—but she never would have suspected it at this point. By the time Jean had got all this thinking done, she had completed her errands and had arrived home again. She went into her house and put away the groceries and other things she had bought, and then, after putting herself in just the right frame of mind, went into the room where Robert was painting. She didn't speak at first, but simply walked around the room with her hands behind her back, as if inspecting his work very carefully. All the furnishings in the room were covered with drop cloths and the smell of paint was heavy in the air. Robert stopped painting and looked at Jean, as if amused by her close inspection of the job.

"You're doing a very good job here," Jean said, turning to face Robert.

"Thank you," he replied. "From the way you've been inspecting the job, I'd say you probably have pretty high standards."

"Not really. But I do know good work when I see it."

Silence came between them for a moment as Jean searched for something interesting to say.

"Do you enjoy this sort of work?" she asked, thinking as soon as it had popped out of her mouth that it was a dumb thing to ask. "I hope you don't mind me asking."

"No, I don't mind. The fact is, I don't really dislike it, but then I'm not all that crazy about it either. It's a good kind of work for me, though, because I'm not very good at following rules, and on this job, I don't have many to worry about. Also, I'm not very good at working for a boss, and on this job I'm my own boss. Except for my customers, of course."

"Yes," smiling. "I'm not very good at working for a boss either. That's why I like being a teacher. I'm on my own doing that, at least most of the time."

"I imagine it's pretty interesting being a teacher, isn't it?" not believing that it was.

"Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't. Mostly I like it, though. I think I'm pretty good at it, too."

"I'll bet you are."

"Hey, would you like me to get a radio so you can listen to music while you work? There's only about one good station around here, but it'll help you from getting too bored."

"Sure, I'd appreciate that. Thanks for asking."

"OK. I'll get one for you in just a minute. I should go now and let you get back to work. If you get hungry for lunch later, tell me. I'd be glad to make you something."

Robert smiled. "Good enough."

Jean left the room feeling much better. She was sure she'd made a good impression on Robert.

She decided that he was a nice person, and, sorry that she had prejudged him, resolved that she wouldn't believe any more stories she heard about him or about anyone else in Blue Spring she didn't know personally. The stories she'd heard about she came to think were probably all exaggerations or simply made up out of whole cloth, anyway.

Jean brought Robert a radio, and later, made some sandwiches, and she and Robert had lunch together. Robert told her some funny stories, and they laughed together and got along very well, although Jean found when she asked Robert anything about his past, he quickly changed the subject. When Robert left later in the afternoon, she watched out her front window as he got in his truck, and she waved to him just before he drove away, thinking how differently her meeting Robert had turned out than she had thought it would. She was happy. The day had turned out to be enjoyable, and she had made an interesting new friend.

A couple of evenings later, Robert went to the Blue Spring Carnival. It was held every year in late April, and people came to it from several counties. He could remember having gone to it many times when he was growing up. He was sure he wasn't going this year for sentimental reasons, though—he said to himself that since he didn't have anything else interesting to do that night, he might as well go. And besides, he knew they'd have a beer tent set up there he could go to. Nevertheless, as he walked from his car to the carnival grounds, the sights and sounds and smells of the carnival brought back memories. From where he parked he could see the gaudy red, blue, and yellow bulbs that lit up the rides he'd ridden so many times as a boy. When he got closer he heard numberless sounds as they fell away from the carnival and faded into the night. Through the fairgrounds past thrill rides, side shows, a penny arcade, and shooting galleries and other games he walked, listening to people talk and the game vendors calling out for customers, seeing young lovers hold hands and whisper to each other and sometimes sneak kisses in the dark, seeing older people, who seemed amused by it all but who didn't seem so much a part of the carnival excitement anymore—surely, he thought, things hadn't changed much in the years he'd been gone. He also saw many people whom he knew.

“Hello, Bob. Good to see you again,” they would say, the hard feelings he had caused in Blue Spring having faded during the winter. Some stopped to talk to him and ask him what he had been doing lately or compared with him this carnival with carnivals past. Sometime after Robert had arrived at the fair, he saw Jean Summers watching a game in which people threw baseballs at pins for stuffed animal prizes. She had planned to meet some friends at the carnival that evening, and, having arrived a bit early, had decided to walk around a little before going to the place they were supposed to meet. Three sets of ten pins there were in the game, each set arranged like bowling pins. Without her noticing, Robert stood behind Jean for a moment and watched the game. Then he said hello, which startled her and caused her to turn around quickly.

“Robert!” she said, bringing a hand up over her chest, smiling. “You scared me. I had no idea there was anyone behind me.”

“I'm sorry,” Robert said, not sounding sorry. “I was just wondering something. You know, I'll bet you'd be good at a game like this.”

“Oh? And just what makes you think so?”

“I just have a feeling you would. I’ll tell you what. See that big tent over there?” Robert pointed to a circus tent and Jean nodded that she saw it. “They have a band playing in there and they serve beer and wine. I’m going to bet you that you can win a prize at this game. Go ahead and play it, and if you don’t win anything, I’ll take you over to that tent and buy you a drink. And not only that. I’ll play myself, and if I win a prize you can keep it.”

“May I ask what you expect to gain from this bet?”

“The satisfaction of knowing I’m right.”

“I accept your bet. I’d have to be pretty dumb to turn down an offer like that. I don’t know why you think I’d be good at throwing a baseball, though. I guess I’ll just have to show you.”

At the moment, no one was playing the game, so the vendor of it, a fat man with a gray stubble beard and a robust voice, was trying to talk Robert into playing.

“Step right up, young man,” he said, “and win a prize for your lady friend. Knock down one set of pins and win a small prize, knock down three sets and win a big prize. Only 50 cents.”

“I’ll play,” Jean said, pushing two quarters toward the vendor.

“Good thinking,” the vendor said, putting the quarters in a pouch he had attached to his belt with his fat paw. “Good luck to you.”

Jean took a softball in her hands, studied the pins with great concentration for a moment, then threw the softball. It hit the left side of one set of pins and knocked down several of them.

“Pretty good, eh?” Jean said to Robert.

“I’d say so.” She was already winding up for a second throw, which hit the right side of the same set of pins and knocked down all but two of them.

“How do you like that, Robert?”

“I told you you’d be good at it, didn’t I?”

Jean threw the third, and last, softball, and it flew just over the tops of the two remaining pins. Looking disappointed, she turned to Robert.

“Well, I did the best I could and didn’t win anything. Now let’s see you try it.”

“OK,” putting his quarters down in front of the vendor.

Robert looked at the pins carefully for a moment as he moved a baseball around in his hands to get the proper grip on it. Then he proceeded in three nearly perfect throws to knock down all three sets of pins.

“Robert!” Jean exclaimed when the last pins had fallen. “That’s fantastic!”

“Another big prize-winner!” the vendor called out, looking somewhat astonished, speaking louder than usual so as to let passersby know that a person really could win prizes at the game. “Take your pick from any prize you see here, young man,” turning as he spoke and holding his arm out before the prizes.

“Go ahead, Jean,” Robert said. “It’s your choice.”

“I’m really a bit too old for stuffed animals,” she replied, looking the prizes over. She chose an enormous panda bear. After Robert had promised to take turns carrying it with her, they began walking through the crowded carnival grounds toward the large tent to which Robert had promised

to take Jean. On the way, she found the friends she was supposed to meet at the carnival and told them where she was going, saying she would probably see them at the beer tent a while later. They were more than a little surprised and curious and amused to see her with Robert.

“Tell me, Robert,” Jean said when they had left her friends, “how did you ever get so good at throwing a baseball?”

“I’ve played a lot of baseball. I was a pitcher on my college baseball team at Michigan State, and the summer after I quit school, I played with a minor league team down in North Carolina.”

“That must have been very interesting. But then you don’t like to talk about the past, do you? I thought that when we were talking at lunch the other day.”

“Sometimes I do,” as if he really meant no. “It all depends on the mood I’m in.”

Soon they arrived at the big tent and went inside. It was crowded and noisy. A band was playing, and the rowdy voices of drunk old men seemed to be everywhere. Cigarette smoke drifted up from the tables, and Robert and Jean heard lots of loud conversation and laughter. They were lucky to find a table in a corner a little away from the noise. They sat down and put the stuffed panda in a seat.

“My, Robert, this is a madhouse in here,” Jean said.

“If you think this is bad, just wait until later. It will get much wilder as the evening rolls on.”

“That may be a little too wild for my taste. “

Robert went to the bar and got glasses of wine for Jean and returned to her. She thanked him, and they sat watching the crowd.

“You know, Robert, that old man was really astonished when you knocked all those pins down,” Jean said. “You really shocked him. I’ll bet he didn’t think anyone could do it.”

“I don’t think it happens very often. I happen to know he’s been using the same stuffed animals for the last ten years.”

“Don’t say that, Robert!” laughing. “This panda is liable to come apart on me right here.”

“Don’t be surprised if it does.”

“Promise me if it does, you’ll go back with me and win all the stuffed animals for me to make up for it.”

“I can’t promise that. Once I start drinking, I’m not nearly as accurate. I’ll tell you what I will do, though: I’ll buy you a bottle of whiskey so you can console yourself.”

Jean laughed. “I’d appreciate that.”

“Would you like to dance?” Robert asked, a little later.

“I sure would. I happen to like dancing very much.”

“We’ve certainly come to the right place then.”

Robert and Jean found the dance floor chaotic, to say the least. Surrounded by a couple of dozen other couples, including clumsy old farmers and sexy young women with good rhythm and young teenagers just learning to dance, Robert and Jean danced to polka music and tamed up rock ‘n’ roll songs and almost forgotten songs from the 1930’s and 40’s. In the moments between songs they talked and laughed, and during the slow songs, they held each other close. And when they had had enough dancing, they went back to their table and drank some more. Robert told Jean

stories about certain people who were there, and she told him something of her past and how she had come to Blue Spring. Then the band began playing “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” and the crowd clapped, and Robert and Jean went to dance again.

“I’ve decided it’s not so bad here after all,” Jean said, looking up at Robert. “Everyone seems very civilized.”

“They’re not any more civilized. You’ve just become as uncivilized as they are.”

Jean looked at Robert in mock anger.

“You’d better watch it, Robert. Or I’ll tell everyone you did a terrible job on my house, and you’ll never get another job around here again.”

“They won’t believe you. They all know I do outstanding work. And anyway, I’ll bet you’re much too nice to do something like that.”

“I am not! I’ll have you know I can be very tough when I want to be.”

“In that case, I’ll be very careful how I deal with you from now on.”

Jean smiled back at Robert and put her head on his shoulder. They held each other tight, and when the song ended, for a moment they remained in a hug. Then they looked into each other’s eyes, and they both knew a special feeling was developing between them.

It was almost midnight when Robert and Jean left the carnival. As they walked to the parking lot, the music and the laughter and the voices faded behind them, and they were all alone in cool darkness, with the wind rattling dry branches, and a golden moon. They stopped at Jean’s ear and sat the stuffed panda on the hood of the car, then put their arms around each other and kissed.

“Robert, I can’t remember the last time I had as much fun as I’ve had tonight,” Jean said, looking up at Robert happily.

“I can’t either. I’m sure glad I happened to run into you tonight.”

“Me, too. By the way, when you come to my house to work again, make sure you come when I’m home. I want to make sure I know just what kind of repairs are going into that house.”

“I’ll do that. But you’ll have to promise you won’t be too critical. My feelings get hurt kind of easily,” smiling.

“I promise.” They kissed again, longer this time, and held each other close for a while.

Then Jean said, “Well, Robert, I have to go now. I’ll see you later. Have a nice day tomorrow.”

“You, too. Good-by, Jean.”

Jean got into her car, and Robert put the panda in with her, and she drove away. Afterward, Robert stood there, looking out at the darkness and the stars, listening to the wind, watching the last people leave the carnival. He thought about all that had happened that evening, about the laughter and holding Jean close and conversation colored by wine. He asked a question and looked to the darkness for an answer. He became sentimental, and was happy in a dream. Then he returned to his more habitual state of mind. *What in the hell am I getting myself into now?* he thought. *If there’s one thing I don’t need right now is to fall in love...Jean Summers...summer blonde.* Strangely, he felt both happy and cynical. He shook his head. And for the first time, he realized he was glad to be home again and felt as if he really belonged there.