



ALAN SPECTOR

BODY NOT RECOVERED

A Vietnam War/Protest Movement Novel



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CHAPTER 1

DISTANT, SAD, AND LOST

June 3, 1964

University City, Missouri

JR Spears hesitated outside the double doorway longer than usual. After watching exuberant schoolmates rush headlong into the heart of the midday chaos that was the University City High School cafeteria, he reluctantly entered and sidled along the periphery of the large room, until he settled into his usual chair at his usual table in the farthest corner.

“Where’s your lunch,” asked Mouse.

“Don’t feel like eating,” JR mumbled.

“You need to put some meat on those bones,” Mouse said, mockingly waving his finger and sporting a phony scowl.

JR smiled, but it faded quickly, “That’s what my mom used to say.”

Although never comfortable where throngs of students congregated in the school, JR felt even more claustrophobic in the oppressive humidity and lack of air movement in the lunchroom that was located in the basement of the neoclassical three-story brick building that had opened in 1930.

The lunchroom clamor had been growing for weeks. Not only were students, especially seniors, excitedly anticipating the end of the school year, but heated discussions about America’s growing military involvement in Vietnam were becoming the norm. Many a conversation began, “Did you see Walter Cronkite last night?”

There were regular nightly news reports of U.S. combat casualties. Two American carriers had been positioned off the coast to provide air support to South Vietnamese ground forces. And the words “Agent Orange,” “napalm,” and “escalation” were being used more frequently.

For senior boys, the prospect of going to Vietnam loomed in their future. JR and many others had already registered for the military draft as required by law when they turned 18.

On this day, talk of Vietnam played a smaller role in the incessant din. Seniors had become increasingly animated about their impending graduation only seven days away. Most had shut down business as usual—grades had been well established, many teachers had given the seniors a reprieve by cancelling final exams, college choices had been made, and summer jobs had been secured. But the greatest reason for the racket was the distribution of high school yearbooks.

Students darted from table to table amidst the aroma of hamburgers and tater tots to ask classmates to write something profound in their books. Occasionally, a student or two or three would take the time to exit the single door behind JR’s table to catch a smoke in the blacktopped courtyard that was tightly bounded by three stories of brick building before returning to the fray.

No one knew most of the 600 with whom they would graduate, and few had more than a handful of close friends whose words of wisdom they really cared about. Yet the annual and frenetic ritual of getting as many signatures as possible was underway.

With head down, eyes closed, elbows on the table, and hands covering his ears, JR tried desperately but unsuccessfully to ignore it all. “This is bullshit. I could care less about this yearbook, this class, or this graduation,” he blurted out.

“Come on, JR,” implored Mouse. Larry Hegel was JR’s best friend. His protruding ears and weak jaw had earned him the nickname that would probably stick with him for eternity. “You never thought you’d get this far. That should count for something.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m surprised I’m still in school. Since my folks’ car wreck, school and life have been really screwed up. In fact, things weren’t so hot even before the accident.”

Early in his sophomore year, JR was out late on a Friday night. Despite trying to be as rebellious as any teenager, he had always made the effort either to be home on time or to let his parents know where he would be. That night, he lost track of time.

As they frequently did, JR and his friends had stopped at Hamburger Heaven to get a late-night burger and fries with tangy “H Sauce.” After devouring their food while standing outside the hut-like takeout joint and avoiding being hit by cars in the cramped parking lot, they walked across the street to the large city park, where they started a game of two-on-two touch football on the lighted and abandoned tennis courts. The cool fall air and the freedom they felt on the illuminated oasis in the otherwise dark and silent park kept the game going.

When it was well past his time to be home and they had not heard from him and being less angry than concerned, JR’s parents walked to the turquoise 1957 Nash Rambler station wagon in their driveway. Knowing where he normally hung out and with whom, they headed toward Hamburger Heaven.

The Spears drove steadily down Olive Boulevard, which was wide open in the late-night lack of traffic. They cruised through the green light at the Hanley Road intersection as they had done a thousand times before and never saw the car that ran the red light and drove their Rambler into the stone and black wrought-iron fence that surrounded the cemetery on the southwest corner of Olive and Hanley. Neither the Spears nor high school senior, Jules Cooper, who had run the light, survived.

The sound of the crash and the emergency vehicles traveled through the otherwise quiet section of the city. JR had heard the screeching metal-on-metal noise but would not know until later what had happened. Although he could only speculate, he would never know for sure why his parents were out that night.

An only child, JR moved in with his aunt Jane, his mom’s single sister, with whom he had not been close. She made arrangements for JR to live with her in her small two-bedroom bungalow and set aside the small amount in his parents’ estate for him. Although he knew she was being kind, the relationship was and always would be remote. Even though he continued at the high school and had his few friends, JR felt alone.

“JR, would you sign my yearbook?”

“Are you sure you want me to, Barb,” JR asked, as he was overcome by her Shalimar perfume.

“You bet. We had World History together. That makes us lifelong buds,” Barb twittered as she hovered over JR, shoved the book in front of him, and held out her pen.

JR opened the black matte-finished faux-leather bound book with the gold-colored silhouette of the head of the school’s mascot, the Indian, embossed on the front cover. Having leafed through the pages to find his senior photo, JR accepted the pen from the perky brunette varsity cheerleader. As he bent over the book to write something, he paused and studied the surrounding photos of his classmates, who smiled broadly in stark contrast to his distant, sad, and lost expression.

Others had long lists of school activities to accompany their photos; Junior Varsity Water Polo, School Newspaper Editor, Intramural Sports, Senior Cabinet Social Chairman, Pep Club Board Member, National Merit Finalist, Fencing Club, Student Government, Future Teachers of America, Varsity Football, and on and on.

Each senior photo was accompanied by a personalized quotation called a “quip” that had been chosen to reflect an admirable trait. JR had no activities listed, and his quip that someone had decided suited him read, “There is no man but may make his own paradise.”

“What the hell does that mean?” JR thought.

After staring at the empty space that would have held his list of high school activities and recognizing that Barb was getting anxious to move on, JR wrote the most profound thing he could think of, “Barb, great year in World History—good luck. JR”

Barb gave him a superficial hug, pushed the book in front of Mouse and then Lenny, and was off into the frenzy.

“OK, we’ve been friends forever, we’re about to graduate high school, and you’ve been holding out all of these years. It’s time you told us what JR stands for.” It was Lenny, who was the only one of the group of friends who was in any way connected to the broader high school experience, because he was six-two, had a sweet jump shot, and was second-team all-conference.

“I’ve been telling you for years, that’s my name. The other day, my aunt showed me a box of pictures and papers. There were photos of my folks from when they were growing up and when they were married. There were even a few of me with them.”

It took a few moments for JR to continue, as his face maintained its faraway stare, “There was also a copy of my birth certificate. My name is JR. That’s all it says. It doesn’t stand for anything. It’s just JR. I asked my aunt about it, and she didn’t know why my parents chose it.”

“OK, just JR,” Lenny said with an exaggerated grimace of unresolved disbelief, “we’ll take your word for it.”

After another round of classmates pestered them for signatures and left, Mouse said, “So, JR, are you still considering enlisting? I can’t believe you’ve even been thinking about it. Who wants to go half way around the world to get shot?”

“Great question,” JR responded. “Sometimes that’s exactly how I feel and sometimes I think the army would be the best thing for me. Anyway, I might work for awhile before going in—if I don’t get drafted first, that is. I’m really not sure. The more I hear about Vietnam, the more it all seems wrong to me. And besides, I’ve never been in a fight of any kind in my life.”

“Remember, the offer is always open. My dad’s a United Steelworkers labor organizer. He says he’s pretty sure he can get you into the union and find you a job right away.”

“Yeah, Mouse, that might be the plan. Tell your dad thanks.”

Lenny chimed in, “My brother is thinking about enlisting. He says we need to win this war or the next thing we know, we’ll all be Communists and speaking Russian.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it,” Mouse said.

JR opened his own yearbook, stared again at his picture, feeling as blank inside as his face showed outside, and said, “You know, I’m not sure it matters whether the war is right or wrong. I’m not sure it matters whether I enlist, get drafted, go, don’t go, work, whatever. I just don’t know and I’m not sure I really care.”

Before anyone could respond, a tall classmate with a flattop came over to the table with yearbook in hand. John Muccelli, paying absolutely no attention to anyone but Lenny, put his yearbook in front of his varsity basketball teammate. “Lenny, sign this.”

JR looked up from his yearbook at the figure looming over their table and felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck.

“Sure, Mooch, be glad to. Sign mine too,” Lenny responded.

When signatures had been swapped and Muccelli had left, Lenny said, “He’s the only one I know who’s already dead certain what he’s going to do with his life. Look,” shoving his book in front of JR and Mouse, “he signed my book, ‘FBI Agent John ‘Mooch’ Muccelli.’”

CHAPTER 2
THE SHED

July 17, 1964

St. Louis, Missouri

“Yeah, Mouse, your dad was great,” JR said, speaking into the telephone in the living room of his newly-rented apartment. “It feels great being in my own place, and I’m sure my aunt was happy when I moved out. It’s not much, but you’ll need to come by to see it. By then I’ll have a fan—it’s hotter than hell in here. And wait till you’re riding in my ’55 two-tone Chevy Bel Air.”

Mouse’s dad had delivered on his promise. The day after high school graduation, Bob Hegel began pulling strings to expedite JR’s union membership and even got him on the most prestigious job in town, the construction of the St. Louis Gateway Arch. Although he was just a base laborer doing the most menial tasks, he was employed and making reasonable money.

“That’s great, but slow down,” Mouse chuckled, “You’ve only been on the job for a week.”

“I just needed to make it as much a life of my own as I could.”

“Hey, man, I’m excited for you. How’s the job going?”

Before he could answer, JR heard a click, some deep breaths, and another click.

“Sorry, that was someone on my party line. Job’s good, but I’m only a rookie trying to find my way. No surprise—I think everyone else has been working there since excavation began in early ‘61, and they’re longtime union brothers. Nobody pays much attention to me, unless they need me to do something, but that’s fine with me. I need some time to get used to all of this anyway.”

“Keep me posted, JR, and I’ll definitely come by to see your place.”

Uncertain how things worked, on his first work day, JR had wandered around a bit before finding an isolated area not far from the carpenters’ tool shed to eat lunch. From his solitary lunchtime perch on a concrete retaining wall, JR would soon learn that he was not the only outsider working on the site.

Each day, three Negro workmen walked by JR on their way to a wooden, flat-roofed shed, laid a piece of plywood across two sawhorses, and used crates as chairs to eat on the shady, downwind side. Combined with the wind-blown dust of the construction site, the heat and humidity of the St. Louis summer made shade and shelter a valuable commodity. The trio and JR were in sight of each other, but although he could hear the rumbles of their constant conversation, JR could not make out what they were saying.

On JR’s second Friday, an early-morning rain teased the construction workers with a brief respite, but when it passed, the sun and humidity combined to make it as though a hot wet blanket covered the worksite. At lunchtime, JR settled gingerly on the hot concrete of the retaining wall and laid a wet cold washrag around his neck, having learned to wrap the rag around ice cubes in his insulated lunchbox.

When the three Negroes walked past him on their way to the shed, JR heard reference to Reverend King, Freedom Riders, and Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney. He knew these names and their implications, because he had begun paying attention to the nightly news, something he had not done much of since his parents died. Most evenings, he watched his 13-inch black-and-white Zenith television as he ate dinner on a TV tray placed in front of his threadbare couch and relished the breeze from his Emerson Electric rotating fan; the TV, couch, set of TV trays, and fan having been garnered from Goodwill. He found himself increasingly interested in the war in Vietnam and the civil rights movement, both issues brought to life by CBS news anchors Walter Cronkite nationally and Max Roby locally.

Being curious, but not wanting to be obvious, JR only occasionally looked up from his lunch to follow the three as they sauntered toward him. When they were several steps past, he kept his eyes on them the rest of the way. It was then he noticed one of the Negroes, despite having his hands full carrying his lunchbox, tool belt, and a bottle of Coke, had managed to reach into his back pocket, pull out and open his wallet, and unfold a newspaper clipping. As the man tried to maneuver the wallet back into his work overalls while showing the clipping to his friends, he missed his pocket. The wallet fell to the ground, as the men walked on.

JR waited to see if the man would notice and return. He did not. He and his workmates continued to their usual spot behind the shed. Leaving his lunchbox on the wall, JR left his perch, retrieved the wallet, and followed the normally dusty path that had been dampened by the morning rain. As the three men saw JR approach, their high-energy conversation came to an abrupt halt.

“Excuse me. You dropped this.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“No problem.”

As JR relinquished the wallet and turned to get back to his lunch, he heard, “Hey, my name is Walter. Walter Rawlings. Would you like to join us?”

Walter’s companions gave him a look that was somewhere between, “What do you think you’re doing?” and “Have you lost your mind?”

Turning back to face the men, he hesitantly said, “I’m JR. JR Spears. Are you sure?”

Walter looked at each of his friends, then back to JR. “Sure, grab your lunch. We’ve got room for an extra crate.”

Returning with his lunch, JR found a crate in the shed and sat at the open side of the makeshift plywood table.

“This is Oliver Davis or ‘OD,’ and this is Mitch Wise—we call him ‘Not So,’” Walter declared with a broad smile on his face.

Mitch glared at Walter, nodded a short-of-polite greeting to JR, and settled into a stretch of not-quite-comfortable silence, which Walter finally broke, “What’s JR stand for? Junior?”

“No, it’s just JR. That’s what my birth certificate says.”

Hoping to get a clue about what to say or at least to get his bearings, JR looked from face to face. He had never been this close to Negroes where he was expected to know what to say or how to act. All three men were much older than he. Each had gray hair sprinkled throughout their moderately-cropped afros, with Walter’s gray clearly on its way to winning a 50-50 battle. The men were clean-shaven, bright-eyed, and seemingly as curious about him as he was about them.

Again Walter broke the silence, “You just started here, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I graduated high school just a few weeks ago and got the job.”

“Must have pulled some strings. There’s a waiting list at the union hall to get on this job. And they stopped hiring our boys again after we got on,” Mitch griped, taking advantage of the opportunity to make a fervent point as was his habit.

“Young man, did you know that Negroes have only been accepted into the local unions since ‘58 as part of an out-of-court settlement of a discrimination lawsuit?”

“No sir, I didn’t know that,” JR said, avoiding any comments that might get Mr. Hegel into trouble.

“One of these days,” Oliver said, “we’ll have a better chance of getting good jobs. If Martin had his way, we’d all live the dream. But it’s going to take some head knocking.”

“OD, we’ve got to keep it peaceful like Martin says, or we’ll lose what support we do have,” Walter said with conviction.

“Oh, I know the party line, but that didn’t stop the KKK from killing Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney.”

Mitch jumped in, “Killing those young men, especially with two of them being white, was a big mistake. They’ll be martyrs.”

“Not So, you see if the guys around here give a shit about those killings. I doubt it. They’d as soon it been us that got lynched,” Oliver said, sitting up straight and glaring at Mitch to emphasize his point.

It was clear to JR that his presence had not prevented the three from settling into the heated topic of conversation that he assumed they had every day. Every so often, JR noticed Walter staring at him and a couple of times detected the beginning of a smile on Walter’s lips.

Mitch checked his watch. “Time to get back on the job, or they’ll have our black asses. Only thing that keeps things on an even keel is that we’re good at what we do. Damn, we spent a lot of time doing our work before the unions were forced to let us in, and now they found ways to limit how many of us they hire.”

They packed up their lunch waste, returned the plywood, sawhorses, and crates to the shed, and began to walk back toward the arch. “Join us for lunch Monday, JR?”

“I don’t know, Walter. It’s not that I don’t want to, but do you think it’s OK?”

“JR, the only thing that’s right is what you have in your heart to do.”

This would not be the last nugget of insight that Walter would impart to JR over the next 15 months, nor would it be the last time he shared this particular bit of wisdom.

“Then I’ll see you on Monday. Thanks.”

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