

RARE ENCOUNTER

A War Novel

J.K. Hall



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MINNEAPOLIS

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To Lou Ann

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*A candle in a night of storms,
Blown back and choked with rain,
Holds longer than the mounting forms
That ride time's hurricane. ...*

— Maxwell Anderson, 1888-1959

Part II

THE VOYAGE

*Who, constructing the house of himself or herself, not for a day
but for all
time, sees races, eras, dates, generations,
The past, the future, dwelling there, like space, inseparable
together.*

—Walt Whitman, 1819-1892

Chapter 1

THE CAPTAINS

The current issue of the *New York Herald Tribune*, dated Jan. 5, 1965, under the arm of a lone figure, flapped in the wind. The newspaper carried reports of the death of T.S. Eliot on page one and a brief report on page eleven of a Viet Cong military offensive in South Vietnam. According to the four-inch article, the battle inflicted heavy casualties in the town of Binh Gia. The figure, hunched and wearing a coffee-colored beret, inched forward against the blowing snow. To prevent the winter's gale from breaching his dark, boiled-wool overcoat, he gripped its collar in a near stranglehold around his neck. Having decamped at 6:41 A.M. from the bus at West 120th St and Amsterdam Avenue in Manhattan's Morningside Heights neighborhood, he continued his journey, straining toward an edifice that echoed the transcendent gothic structures of France and England. Its imposing exterior dwarfed him. In his left hand the man gripped a worn leather satchel of a dusty chestnut brown that held his personal files from the Second World War, the day's lecture notes, and a small tortoise-shell plastic comb.

A gust caught him head on. Quicker now, he marched through the campus of Columbia University, crossed Broadway and veered toward a sign that read "Union Theological Seminary" where he left the blizzard and entered the building, appearing to be the first on site. Inside the rotunda he paused to wipe his raw nose and slippery upper lip with a handkerchief.

He pressed his palms against frigid ears, removed his overcoat and a tawny scarf, which he stuffed into a coat sleeve. This trim fellow of medium stature was in his late 40s. His dark brown suit, horn-rimmed glasses and thinning hair, oiled so it lay close to his scalp, contributed to a look of bland resoluteness. From a distance, Roger Lincoln Shinn, professor of philosophy and religion, could have been mistaken for a Manhattan insurance actuary or a Madison Avenue comptroller tracking margins on breakfast food advertising for a top national brand.

Before opening the door to a suite of small offices on the seminary's second floor, the professor punctured the tranquility by stomping the last of the snow from his rubber boots, the sound like a low faraway cannon, which echoed through the building's august granite and limestone cavity. He picked up the boots and entered.

"You're here early, professor!" A disembodied voice jumped out from behind a desk lit by a solitary lamp. It carried an edge not unlike the wind he just left.

Looking up, he saw Eve Spektor, his academic secretary of ten years. She was deep into scheduling for midterm exams. There was a cake doughnut beside her, mostly gone. "Any hot tea?" he pleaded with feigned anxiety. "And good morning, Eve! Yes, uh, I am altering my plan for spring term, so I have a lot of work to do."

Holding in one hand a cup of orange pekoe black tea that Eve gave him, and his overcoat in the other, the shivering academic undertook to turn the doorknob to his office. Lettered on the door window, in formal black typography, "Roger Lincoln Shinn" above, in smaller letters, "Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics." His hand slipped off the brass doorknob dumping the hot liquid onto his shoes. "Damn!"

"What is your research on, professor, 'Vulgarity in Mid-Century Academia'?" Eve chided as if the word poisoned her ears.

"No, in the original scriptures," Shinn deadpanned as he backed into the office using his body to push open the door.

Eve stared at him. "In the Gnostic Gospels, no doubt," she answered, returning to her doughnut and test scheduling.

"War is the topic, Eve. War, the curse of Cain, 'the maker of men.' I am about to loose the dogs of war. On my class!"

He ended his theatrical flourish murmuring, "Once more into the breach..." The professor closed the door.

"What the hell does he know about war?" Eve whispered under her breath.

Roger Shinn, who earned his Ph.D. at Columbia University just a block from his office, sat down at his desk in an unlit room. He pulled the cord on a desk lamp with an emerald glass shade. Then he removed his shoes and socks, drew another folded cotton handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped dry his bare feet. Still amused at Eve's mild rebuke and his display of clumsiness, he tossed the wet socks onto the radiator. They sizzled, and he took a sip of tea. "Ugh, too weak," he mumbled. "Angel piss as our GIs would say."

Taking a deep breath the professor pulled a ratty olive-drab accordion folder from his satchel. He paused and stared at it before loosening the string that had held its musty contents from the world for so many years. As he began to open the flap he halted, again. Maybe it is too soon, Shinn thought. Without looking inside he gently laid the folder back on his desk as he would a creature he feared to wake. He put his feet on the desk and closed his eyes. A minute or two had passed when Shinn's office door opened with a jolt.

Emeritus Professor of Philosophy Eberhard Dagg, senescent, rheumatic, owly, early eighties, looking as if his wife had fed him a stone for breakfast, began, "Professor Shhhh..." When his one good eye caught Shinn's pale white feet propped on the desk he stopped. "I'll come back when you're dressed," Dagg sniffed.

Without giving his colleague a thought, Shinn reached for the folder and slowly removed its contents, laying it all out before him. Military maps, yellowed rosters, reports, copies of orders, letters, two diaries and a collection of black and white photos. The professor had begun his exhumation of his time, his being, his ordeal in battle as an officer in the Second World War.

He held two creased photographs up to the early morning light. Though looking as if little more than wisps of smoke, they drew him into a past he had long avoided. Feared, even, to remember. One of the photos was of himself. Dressed in a crisp Army uniform, he stood on the shore of the English Channel looking with delight into the camera. With him was another officer. The second photo he took himself. It was of the same officer balancing precariously on a high cliff bordering Luxembourg and Germany.

The dawn gathered in Shinn's office like flares in a gem and the cold-violet interior warmed to ochre and orange. "Time that you address my class, Captain Hall, from wherever you are," he whispered.

The professor opened a brown folder marked with a "War Department" imprimatur. His left index finger ran down a list of names mimeographed in black onto sheets of thick newsprint now brittle as winter leaves. Carefully, he touched each name as if trying to memorize grains of sand without disturbing them. Eve opened the door.

"Would you like another cup, Roger?"

Shinn did not hear.

"How about a glazed doughnut up your nose?"

No response. She left.

Deep in concentration the professor reviewed twenty-year-old battalion morning reports from the war. Now, years later, they were speaking to him again: the day's manpower numbers, action in battle, casualties including those from his unit, Company C, 60th Armored Infantry Battalion, 9th Armored Division. He picked up one of his war diaries. Oblivious to the sigh that escaped his throat, he set the journal aside. Like it was Pandora's mythical box. Or a reliquary.

Notes Shinn scribbled frantically after the war while in a field hospital in Brandenburg an der Havel and later at the Convalescent Hospital in London were now before him: recollections of action in the Ardennes Forest and elsewhere which he sharpened, adding detail, on his return trip home. He felt a compulsion to get his thoughts down for he feared time would blunt and

distort recall. Or his conscious being would partition his memory, making the actuality of experience irretrievable, even if he wanted to resurrect it.

“I had to get it all down,” he remembered. “I could not leave anything to reminiscence.”

The former Army officer rose from his chair, stretched and leaned on the thick stone sill below a tall, reticulated gothic window that swooped up to its apex as if pointing all eyes away from earth. Snow and a winter gale attacked the panes. It sounded to him like the crack of electricity. Shinn expelled the present from his lungs. His breathing came forward and the war charged through his mind like a wild boar. At first, the crispness of his recall shook his equilibrium. Then a strange insistence overcame him and he was ready to allow the serenity and the tempest from decades past to inform the present.

From out of his office window the balding professor gazed through the membrane of time. Images flashed and shimmered like clips scissored from a 16-millimeter home movie. A dropped fly ball, his lost dog. Bees in hollyhocks. A broken pitcher. His triumphant role as Laertes in college. His correspondence with Albert Einstein. Reinhold Niebuhr’s Windsor knots. Turgenev’s novel left on the staircase. Chalkboard scratchings on the nature of existence. His courtship of Katharine Cole. And finally a field of brass casings.

Outside, the snow and ice storm worsened.

Beyond where trees lined the panoramic Columbia University commons, a few dark forms appeared. Then hundreds. Then thousands dashed toward his keep. On their heads steel helmets, German Stahlhelms with their distinctive coal-scuttle contour, which provoked in him a cellular fear. In the invaders’ arms were Walther combat rifles superior to the carbine he carried.

The mass moved closer. Revenants. Silent. Virgin snow exploded from under their bootfalls almost erasing their forms. In this boreal wildness behind the stampeding Volksgrenadier infantrymen, Nazi Panzers, the lethal German tank, crawled from the woods, iron beasts seeking alien hearts. The reckoning force spread and surrounded him; this colossal Teutonic drama, fearless and flanking, seemed beyond mortal conception. Above it all the

professor heard a single gunshot from another time and place, and he flinched. A stripling, mid-teens in farm clothes lay motionless on the campus green below him. A summer sun emerged from above lead-colored hills. Gnats and stoneflies raked the boy's face, which was flushed by heat and veined with perspiration. A man knelt beside him.

The inert boy moved.

Removal of the Springfield rifle from its weld on his cheek was unrushed. The youth peered into a pocked military telescope carried at the Battle of the Argonne by a lost relative who watched the quick become acquainted with the dead. Only then did the kid release his breath.

The round had cut the wind with thunder and whistle and burrowed into the intimate space of two other black holes, like tiny bruises that marked the white paper target. A Winged Liberty silver dime, had he owned one, would have covered all the punctures. The man beside the boy stood up. He was in uniform. And he clapped.

The teenage shooter peeked up at the standing figure and grinned.

From his window perch the professor whispered, "Good shooting, Captain Hall."

Chapter 2

GORDIAN KNOT

Prof. Shinn heard a knock on his office door and turned. “Hi, Roger. You okay, old thing?” came a voice from a head peeking in the entrance. “Eve says you’re damn near catatonic and refused a doughnut. That’s not like you. So I thought I’d see if I should call an ambulance or the coroner.”

“Come on in, Phil. Need a cup? Who you callin’ old?”

“Eve poured me one, thanks,” he replied.

Professor of Biblical Languages, Philip Sekou Chikelu, late thirties, stood in the doorway. The crown of his head was less than six inches from the top of the seven-foot threshold. He wore, as he often did, a body shirt made in southern Nigeria, this one black with native fauna and flying birds in yellow and blue.

“So to what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from our university’s esteemed authority on ancient Aramaic semi-colons?”

His colleague laughed at the tease.

“Something of the highest importance, Roger, I assure you. Or I wouldn’t bother you,” Sekou Chikelu grinned, his face as dark and luminous as a black opal. “Saw your light was on, so I thought I would stop in before class. Just curious if our trip to Walden Pond is still on for this summer. It’s gonna be loaded with small-mouth bass!”

“I am looking forward to it, Phil, even though I’m not much of a fish-

erman. Been rough inside these walls and out. And my next few months probably won't be any better."

Shinn waxed eloquent on the serenity of nature. And catching "smallies."

"Speaking of rough going, are you aware that the Imperious One is out for blood? Your blood," Phil interjected.

"Dr. Dagg popped in earlier this morning. Just said he wanted to talk sometime and left."

"Not sure if it warrants your concern, but His Eminence is upset with your off-duty witchcraft, you know, advising conscientious objectors, going to anti-war rallies, and, uh, maybe not coming to work fully dressed."

Shinn giggled. "Three strikes, it looks like."

"I think he considers COs and rabble-rousers all self-absorbed cowards."

"Time for him to crush dissent," Shinn sighed. "You know all about that, Phil. Same ol' story. Test the tensile properties of liberal acquiescence and hope it doesn't snap into doing something."

"He's rattling the cages of Union donors and alumni." His friend had a troubled frown. He took a sip of coffee and pulled up a chair. A lot of Dagg's umbrage "is bouncing around Union's hallowed hallways," he informed his friend.

"Beneath it, I think he's concerned about positions you've taken on the global rights of women, or their lack thereof," Sekou Chikelu continued, "and your work with the UN. But on the surface, the old boy is challenging your patriotism, Roger."

"I'm nowhere in the vicinity of worrying about him, my friend. Eb has been pedaling backwards for some time."

Shinn handed Sekou Chikelu his folder from the Second World War. Phil pulled out black and white images of Shinn and the soldiers in his unit.

"I'm tackling some heady stuff this term. But I'll meet with him, if he has the vapors," Shinn said, breaking the gravity of the conversation with the slight and a grin.

"'Heady stuff,' indeed," the biblical scholar murmured. He reviewed an

image of a burning American tank.

”World War Two. Humanity and ethics. Relating actual battle experiences and my capture by the Nazis to the conundrum of moral decision-making versus accomplishing a mission. That’s code for ‘how the hell can we take part in war and not lose our minds. And our innermost self?’”

Sekou Chikelu looked up from the photograph with a start. “Whoa! You have always been reluctant to talk about your past, Roger. Not even your friends, me included, know what the hell went on over there. Why now? And with your students?”

“For a long time I wanted my war years to be my gone years.” But the once infantry captain had contemplated for months talking about his former life with students of social ethics. “I feel the moment has come.” Shinn looked out on the gathering daylight. “It’s like Thomas Wolfe’s charge to open the window of time.”

Phil stroked his chin. “Sounds like you are stepping into historian’s shoes.”

“Nah,” the professor scoffed. “I’m no historian. Nor am I interested in a historical reconstruction of the Second World War. I will present a story. A personal experience. It may allow my students to better grip the sweep of it all, of war, the interior and exterior of...”

“How the past stirs the present,” Sekou Chikelu interjected.

The fastidious reader of newspapers, journals, playwrights’ scripts, books, and matchbook covers set his cup on the windowsill. “Young American men aren’t the only ones facing today’s killing fields, are they?” Shinn mused looking out at the campus and recalling an earlier discussion. “You said the Igbo people are facing it in Africa. Biafra, you said, will go to war for independence.”

Sekou Chikelu nodded slowly. “Killing humans may be simple for some, but the moral geometry is complicated,” he muttered with unfocused eyes.

“As a Gordian Knot,” Shinn replied.

The African shifted in his chair. “I assume soldiers must consider their actions every time they fix bayonets or post a blockade or activate a missile?”

A smirk popped from Shinn's throat. "In war death quickly becomes routine. Most GIs do not struggle to unravel the Gordian Knot of morality," the former soldier laughed. "We just teach them 'kill or be killed.' Victory above all else. Yes, simple."

"Then it sounds to me less like a Gordian Knot and more like the Schwarzschild Radius..."

"Ha!" Shinn interrupted. "You mean the cosmological threshold from which nothing escapes and nothing returns? I had forgotten you were a quantum physics guy before you became a language guy. But..."

Surprised his colleague knew the term, Sekou Chikelu briefly interrupted with an unreserved roar.

"... maybe a better definition is, 'from whose bourn no traveler returns,'" Shinn, the old thespian, quoted from *Hamlet*.

Sekou Chikelu's repartee with this esteemed and unassuming philosopher of ethics in his sanctuary of coffee, tea and books was always pleasure, even in argument.

"I guess I can understand the 'kill or be killed' thing, Roger," Sekou Chikelu lamented. "Though I won't cheer for it." His expression skewed and facial lines emerged like invisible ink under a candle. "What I cannot comprehend is the public, and why it commits its sons and daughters to such savagery with so little hesitation."

Shinn nodded and shifted the conversation as he prepared his satchel. "My focus will be on another captain. An unorthodox soldier and the headquarters company commander in my battalion."

Removing now-dry socks from the radiator, Shinn slipped them on with routine precision. Their warmth revived his chilled feet. "Normal contours of battle didn't seem to interfere with what he had to do." The professor tied his shoes. "Some looked up to him. Others thought he should have been court-martialed. A few considered him an outright traitor."

"How do you know enough about this man to recount his story, Roger?"

"Got to know him on the ship taking us to the European front. Then I

was with him at the beginning of Battle of the Bulge. Until I was captured.”

Sekou Chikelu’s eyes widen.

“And I chatted with soldiers in our unit after the war.” Shinn talked as he collected his material for class. “On the troopship returning us to the states. About the fabled Capt. Hall.”

Phil made a face, took the last sip of coffee, and lighted his pipe. “You’re right, Roger. Come summer you will need a lot of pond time.” He closed the door quietly and left.

Chapter 3

AND WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT WAR?

The professor posed a question to his class. “Can we as human beings be lethal *and* ethical? If our destinies are no one’s responsibility but our own, are we able to take lives and keep possession of our self-worth? Our integrity? Our personal identity?”

Shinn was reputed to be a hard grader and rigorous questioner. When he announced cutting much of the reading list from the semester’s syllabus and focusing on a personal story from what “military historians have called the greatest single battle” the U.S. Army ever fought, the students were slack-jawed. They had expected a mountain of reading.

He took out his notes and cleared his throat.

“We will discuss the moral implications of the Ardennes Forest Campaign in the Second World War. You probably know it as the ‘Battle of the Bulge,’ named by someone with an alliteration fetish.” Shinn winked at the class but got no response. Outlining the German offensive that began without warning on December 16, 1944, and in the space of days left eighty thousand American dead and wounded in its wake, the professor set the scene.

“Within hours of the German attack, which most never dreamed possible and launched after five years of war, the American Army was in chaos,” he admitted. “As late as the day before the onslaught, American generals

thought Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich were finished. Forty-eight hours later the same people feared the war would go in the wrong direction.”

Shinn scanned a few faces. He saw a uniform look of quandary. This pleased him. Inchoate dilemma is where he preferred to begin.

“I would like to bring you into battle as a witness. And use this experience for our exploration of ethics...”

Ariel Jeffers, a history major from Mill Valley, California, addressed the slightly built academic as if he were a trespasser. “Doctor Shinn, please, what do you know about war?” She removed her glasses and glared at the professor. “My father fought in one. And he...he gave his life at Luzon.” Expressions of shock filled the room. Jeffers’ face flushed. The professor didn’t respond to her missile but finished his opening thought.

“By the end of term I want you all to appreciate that the phenomenon of human warfare—its majesty, its ridiculousness, its carnage, its insufferable longevity, its monumentality, its vacantness—will challenge you to the edge of your comprehension.”

A brassy student returned to the thread. “I too wonder about Jeffers’s point. What does an Ivy-League professor know about the killing fields of war? Nothing! Though I am not sure trusting a military man to talk about ethics is a good move either, Ariel,” Brooklyner Robert Newman stated bluntly, asserting that “third-hand accounts,” “nationalist doggerel and patriotic bon mots” from old generals would “lard the class with nonsense.”

As the two rested on their promontories, the professor deferred to others.

Another student stated she was wary of prejudging the class or the professor. Mia Rivera peered down at the desk where her fingers surveyed its surface before turning to Jeffers and Newman with a contemptuous glare. “Nor do I believe any of us want our time interrupted every two sentences with commentary.”

Her rebuke brought loud condemnations from Jeffers and Newman and other students joined in the fray with their opinions. All spoke at once and the class broke into a frenzy.

After getting the students to calm down, the professor squeezed in four more sentences. “You are about to get a view of war, through my eyes and those of a captain I knew. A farm kid who had joined the Oklahoma National Guard. After the Japanese attacked Pearl, he put in for Army Officer Candidate School. The man was a committed soldier, but wayward, one might say.” As the students exited the room, the uproar arose again.

