Peace and War is many things. Americana set within the culture of war that has existed in the America since WWII. Comic, tragic, dark, light, funny and serious, it's about family, fishing, friendship, baseball, celebrity, academia, the natural world, life and death. It chronicles where America has been and wonders where she may be going.

Peace and War

American Stories

by Thomas Miller

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PEACE AND WAR

AMERICAN STORIES

BY

THOMAS MILLER

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I have tried to recreate events, locations and conversations from my memories of them. In order to maintain their anonymity in some instances I have changed the names of people and places, and I may have changed some identifying characteristics and details such as physical properties, occupations and places of residence.

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Table of Contents

War Baby

Accident of birth, handmaiden of fate, favors our wayfarer.

He is born "baby Frank" to good parents, though adrift in the machinery of war and in Texas, a place of low repute and prospects lower still. His father, Phil, is an engineer working here designing bombers to help defeat Nazi Germany and win the war in Europe. He has chosen this work because he reckons it will allow him to make his most valuable contribution to the war and to live beyond it to raise the family he very much wants to have.

This choice will pursue him far beyond war's end.

The land on which they live was, not so long ago, province of the Comanche, Stone Age savages and perhaps the best horse warriors in the history of the world. But they were decimated by the White man's diseases, then finally defeated by the Walker Colt revolver and the Texas Rangers, latter day savages nearly as primitive as their foes. Sodbusters replaced the Comanche. Climate kept the land much the same, a

dry, sandy plain of palmetto, sagebrush and spiny grasses, home to armadillos, jackrabbits, rattlesnakes, scorpions and spiders.

Now all but the sodbusters live under jerrybuilt shanties in makeshift towns of war workers like the one in which these three find themselves. The native flora that once flourished in these places has been replaced by scrawny, dusty yards. The wind which Jessie, Frank's mother, says never quits, carries a glut of flies and mosquitos.

There's no "here" here, and Frank's parents speak constant of returning to their home in the heartland.

Frank's father's family despise Roosevelt. They say they hate him because they believe that no one should "live off the government" and, during the Great Depression, his welfare programs made it possible for many Americans to get by doing just that. But they really hate him because he's a patrician and they're plebeians, blue collar folk who want to improve their station in life, something the president never had to worry about. They say he "talks down" to them during his "Fireside Chats."

Phil sends them a telegram in jest, announcing the birth of Franklin Delano Mullen. It arrives on a Friday but won't be read till the family is gathered together for

their weekly Sunday dinner at Grandmother Mullen's. When all have finished their pie and coffee, the eldest of the four brothers, Harold, does the reading. Brother Basil is smoking a cigar. He pauses a moment to digest what he has heard, exhales smoke, rises from the table and throws the cigar in a glowing arc across the room. It ricochets off a wall, sparking, rattles Grandmother Mullen's birdcage and falls to the floor. Mary Mullen scolds her son severely. Not for throwing the cigar, since any action against the vile Roosevelt is justified, but for scaring her lovebirds.

The war ends. The little family returns home. Here Phil is shunned by old friends who see cowardice in his choice of civilian service during the war. He walks down Main Street, sees former high school classmates approach then cross the street to avoid him. This troubles then amuses him, for none of these shunners ever fought. They worked in typing pools and supply depots far behind the front lines. Those who did fight bear him no ill will. They know how terrible war is and long to forget it……but cannot.

Years pass. Time, the weaver, works at her loom. The shunning and the gossip disappear into the warp and weft of postwar materialism.

Phil's detractors press their sons and daughters to show bravery and patriotism by serving in Vietnam. When their children come home in body bags for no purpose other than increased arms sales, they come to understand that not every war is so good as the big one they lived through.

This enlightenment lasts a generation. Then America is at war again in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Frank's father, now an old man, tells his son that this is as it has always been and will ever be. He says that each time a new crop of cannon fodder emerges from the belly of the nation, they're too young to remember the horrors of the last war or to know that their real enemies aren't on some foreign shore but amongst them--greedy, murderous old men bent on power and profit, luring the young to war with patriotic slogans staler and more spent than the old men themselves.

The Blue Heaven

Once home, Phil and Jessie begin planning, then building, a house that Phil says will be their "Blue Heaven." He's referring to the song, "My Blue Heaven." It was written in the 1920s when it topped the charts for weeks and has, several times since, been on those same charts. It describes a "love nest" where:

When whippoorwill calls

And evening is nigh

I hurry to my blue heaven

I turn to the right

A little white light

Will lead you to my blue heaven

A smiling face, a fireplace, a cozy room

A little nest that's nestled where the roses bloom

Just Molly and me

And baby makes three

We're happy in my blue heaven……

When this song was written, it might've been possible to forge such a paradise away from the woes of the world. But now that Truman has dropped the bomb, there's no place to hide.

Their house is sited on a hill that overlooks a lake that lies south of the town. This hill they'll share with Phil's brothers and their wives, three older couples whose children are grown and have moved away.

Jessie and Phil provide all the materials and most of the labor to build the house, hiring out only specialized skills like plastering. They're most proud of a Japanese rock garden they design and build on its south side. Building this seems to have been very hard work, because when it's finished, Jessie, who is not yet 30, says that she'll never build another.

The house is small. A bathroom, two bedrooms, a sitting room cathedral-ceilinged with a fireplace, a small kitchen and a bow-windowed dining room with a view of the lake. Soon after they move in, daughter Becky is born. Long, dark, cold winter evenings the family sits before a fire, listening to a big radio housed in a large wooden cabinet. Short, dark, cold winter days before he starts school, young Frank sits at the dining room table, drawing and talking with his mother as she works in the

kitchen and cleans the house. Long, bright, hot summer days he swims or fishes in the lake with his father. Jessie prescribes afternoon naps, a hedge against polio, that mysterious malevolence that has killed, crippled and confounded humankind since time began.

Long summer evenings they sit far into the night on the top of the hill, a gathering of family and friends numbering from as few as three or four to as many as 15 or 20. Some of Frank's favorite nights here are those when his Uncle Harold holds forth that the Indians, not the White man, are correct when they say that the Earth is our mother and cannot be "owned." On his more eloquent evenings, Harold elaborates upon other facets of the White man's stupidity. But the boy's best nights are the clear ones, when all in attendance are quiet, awed to silence by the great star wheel turning slowly overhead.

Winter mornings Frank awakes to the raucous cackle of crowcall. He is lonely. Sister Becky is too young to be his playmate, and they're the only children on the hill. When he goes to school, he has chums there, but none after school, for all live in the country and far apart and cars are reserved for higher purpose than ferrying children to and fro for play. When he's not in school, his only mates are reading, writing and drawing. Sundays

are the worst. On these days his loneliness lies at the bottom of his stomach and has a faint metallic taste.

His school is a two-story brick cube two miles east of their house. It has three classrooms and six grades. Each of the three teachers teaches two grades. Their technique is to give one grade an assignment, then lecture the other, then reverse the process. There's a short recess midmorning and midafternoon when the children are free to play. A yellow bus takes him to school each morning and home every evening.

Midday they have lunch in the school cafeteria. Students are required to clean their plates. His first day at school, the fare is a Depression-era favorite, a stew of bread and tomatoes, plus a serving of spinach, a lukewarm, sodden mass of dark green leaf and stem straight from the can. He eats the stew but can't get the spinach down. His teacher insists he eat it. He forces it down then throws it up on the long wooden table they share with the second graders. He's never asked to clean his plate again.

Summer brings him relief from his isolation. During the Great Depression, his uncles built a scatter of cottages amongst their own houses. These they rent to townsfolk wanting to spend a summer on the lake. These people's children are Frank's playmates each summer. Fourth of July there's a fish fry, and all day

and half the night they shoot fireworks from a big box shipped to the family from Ohio.

Labor Day the family hosts another fish fry. Both these communal feasts feature fish that Phil and his brothers have caught, plus a flood of food brought by everyone else on the hill. Fried chicken, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, gravy, casseroles, Jell-O salads and green vegetables boiled to pulp. All enjoy these events, but they're hardly bacchanals, for Grandmother Mullen is always present and tolerates no tippling.

Sharp, snowy, winter weekends Frank walks in nearby woods with Phil. They stay out longer than he can bear. Back at the house, he sits before the fire, warming cold from his hands and feet. When warmth comes, he goes to sleep. One particularly cold Saturday morning his father takes him out longer than usual. The tips of his toes are frostbitten. As they thaw before the fire, he feels pain beyond any he's ever experienced or imagined.

Snowbound one day, they mourn the death of Uncle Fred.

He's Jessie's younger sister's husband and a favorite of them all. Frank asks his mother how he died. She says the Chinese killed him.

"Where?"

"Korea."

"How?"

"A sniper."

"What's a sniper?"

"A soldier who shoots people from far away."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

A black telephone with a rotary dial sits on their kitchen table. By this device they're connected to the outside world through a "party line" that they share with seven other households, composed mostly of elderly people. Most days, it's silent. But when Jessie makes or receives a call, she often hears a telltale click announcing an unwanted listener is on the line. This annoys the hell out of her.

Their second spring in the house, a tornado passes a few miles to the east and plows through a small farm town. Phil calls it a "twister." On the rainy Saturday morning that follows, he drives them out to see the aftermath. Where once was a town now there are only piles of bricks resting on the same earth from which

they were formed. Rising from one of these is the only evidence that there ever was a town, a stretch of brick wall stiffened by a corner.

Set in this wall is a wooden door hanging from its frame by a single hinge. Driven into its face like nails are half a dozen lengths of straw.

Winters Frank is often sick and absent from school, coughing and wheezing through bouts of asthma and bronchitis. The family doctor, Wilson, makes house calls to see him in all weather. Most dramatic of these are on snowy days, when his long, black Packard noses its way up the long, dead-end drive that connects them to a two-lane highway to the west. All else is white till the car stops before the house and the doctor emerges. He too is clad in black, homburg hat, long woolen winter coat, high boots and medical kit. The only thing white about him is his face.

Years later, in the white-faced specter of death in Ingmar Bergman's film, *The Seventh Seal*, he'll once again see Wilson in winter. Despite the intrusion of this dark imagery, his most salient memory of the man will remain Wilson's response to the worst of his asthma attacks, when he couldn't breathe and thought he was dying.

The good doctor simply knelt by his bedside, held his hand, and talked him out of it.

Wilson is either dead or a very old man when, returning to the town to visit his sister, Frank hears a story about him. Seems he was nearing retirement when, leaving his office one night, a mugger assaulted him in the alley where he'd parked his car. The man demanded that he give up his wallet. The doctor offered up nothing. Rather, he backed himself into a corner from which he put up stiff resistance with a long, sharp-tipped umbrella, drawing considerable blood before his assailant was persuaded to flee the alley in search of more pliant prey.

One Doctor Payne is their family dentist. He's elderly, paunchy, jowled, and ashen-complexioned. His office is downtown in the same building as Wilson's. It's the town's tallest building, eight-stories of lackluster art deco clad in marble of a pallor reminiscent of the dentist's own.

Payne was Jessie's family's dentist when she was a child, so when her children turn three, he becomes theirs. Pain killers have been readily available since the century turned, information that has mysteriously eluded him, for he uses none. When the children have cavities in their milk teeth, he drills them out and fills them with silver amalgam. This procedure serves no

purpose, since these teeth will soon fall out. Both have lots of cavities in these "baby" teeth, and neither ever forgets the pain of them being filled. One rainy Friday, Frank spends four hours in the dentist's chair. Before he begins drilling, Payne says, "Son, if this hurts, just tap me on the arm and I'll stop." What follows is an afternoon of raging pain with taps too frequent and pauses too short. Neither brother nor sister have any clue that this dentist's practices are abnormal and, oddly, neither does their mother seem to.

When the dentist's methods are finally exposed, Phil quips that had Josef Mengele needed an assistant at Auschwitz, Payne might've been the man for the job.

Long dead is Payne. Frank waits in another dentist's office, when the old man enters his mind in a brief return to the world of the living. His dentist is taking her patients' blood pressures that day to determine which of them may have problems taking anesthesia. When she takes Frank's, usually normal at 120/80, it's 180/120.

A rainy spring day. They've lived on the hill for seven years. Phil comes home from work to find an immaculately rendered drawing propped up on the kitchen table. It's a view of what Jessie sees each day from the kitchen window and is static absolute. No sense of time or motion, no sun, no clouds, no birds in

the sky. She has titled it "My Day." The years she's spent in her husband's "blue heaven" have been too blue for her.

She cannot go to town because he uses the car six days a week for his work and there's no public transport. Sundays the four of them spend together at home. Her friends live in the town. To speak with them on the telephone is to face eavesdrop from the gossips with whom she shares her only link to the outer world.

Summer comes. They move to town.

Charlie, Mary and Nois

Frank's grandfather, Charlie, and his grandmother, Mary, are the father and mother of Phil and his three brothers, Harold, Sam and Basil with whom they live on the hill.

Charlie was born at the beginning of the American Civil War. He says he saw Lincoln's long black funeral train moving slowly across the land, a plain of black dirt in which prairie grass taller than a tall man was rooted. As a young man he lived on this prairie, building houses and hunting prairie chickens and quail on horseback to feed his growing family, a family that began soon after he met Mary in the town of Vienna, a little burg named by its first mayor and called "Viannah" by townsfolk and those in nearby towns.

The old man tells his grandson stories of his own boyhood, spent in the landscape of tall corn that surrounds them when it was a sea of tall grass stretching, as does the corn, to the horizon. "The people in this town don't believe a word I say," Charlie says. "But I saw passenger pigeons cross the land in clouds so dense they blotted out the sun. They were

best viewed from under a good roof, because of the shit storms that fell from those clouds. On the ground they were an abomination, so greedy that, after stuffing themselves, if they saw something better, they would vomit up their first meal and eat another. Once airborne though, they flew with such speed and grace that we called them "blue meteors."

"We thought they'd be with us forever," he continues. "Then we hunted them till there were none left."

Charlie and Mary move off the prairie into town with their children at the end of World War I. Frank's father, "baby Phil," is the youngest by twenty years.

Mary is short, stocky and of great religious conviction. When Phil and Jessie take Frank and his baby sister to visit her in town, she gives him warm, moist hugs and wet, slobbery kisses. These are accompanied by a subtext about Jesus, a mysterious spirit being who separates the two of them more effectively than could any wall. Frank is afraid of her. Phil says she's a good woman who lives by the Golden Rule but doesn't have much fun. Mary believes that all who sample demon rum are destined for alcoholism.

Down the street from Mary and Charlie's house is a petrol station, known in the argot of this time and place as a "filling station." Its owner, Mr. Meyers, is a friend

of Charlie. Sunday afternoons Charlie visits his friend for several hours, during which he steps across the street to the neighborhood tavern for a beer or two. If Mary phones Meyers to speak with her husband, he makes an excuse for Charlie and fetches him from the tavern. Some in the family believe Mary has strong suspicions that she doesn't want to confirm. Others think she hasn't a clue. Like many stories in this family, the truth of it will never be known.

Mary's eldest sister is named for the state in which they live, Illinois. The family calls her "Nois." She's nearly a hundred and often present at family dinners. When she's present, much to the amusement of all at the table, Frank cannot take his eyes off her. Her eyes are a faded, rheumy blue. Her hair is thin and pure white. Her skin resembles a fine parchment, translucent and finely wrinkled. White hairs sprout from her chin. She seldom speaks but seems to hear all that's said.

Rarely is one of these dinners complete without Nois and Mary arguing about what's the most painful, giving birth to five children as Mary has done or having a hysterectomy on the kitchen table of a log cabin on the prairie with nothing to kill the pain but a water glass full of whiskey as the childless Nois has done. Never does one of these contests end without Charlie saying that

he believes the smart money would be on the hysterectomy.

Charlie dies in winter a few years after the end of the war.

The next day Frank's father stays home from work. The boy asks his mother why. She tells him that his grandfather has died. He asks her where he is.

"In heaven."

"Where's heaven?"

"In the sky."

That afternoon his mother dresses him in his best clothes and his father drives them to town. They stop in front of an old brick building, clamber out of the car, climb a few steps and walk toward the entrance. It's cold. Inside, they're met by his uncles and their wives, women he has been told are his aunties. All speak in quiet voices. Someone says Charlie "looks nice." They enter a large room filled with people sitting in chairs. They also sit. All of the adults are dressed in black. Most of them he doesn't know. He can see his grandfather lying in a long wooden box at the front of the room. One by one, those around him stand and walk there, pause beside the box and look at Charlie. His parents do the same, but when his father goes, his

mother stays with him and, when his mother goes, his father stays. He asks why he can't go to the front to look at Charlie but receives no answer.

After what seems a long time, a man in a dark suit stands at the front of the room and says something Frank can't understand. The crowd rises as one, leaves the room, then the building, then get into their cars and drive in a long line out into the countryside. All park outside a small white church, then climb a hill bristling with polished stones. These are inscribed with words the boy cannot read. The ground is grizzled white with frost and the trees are black, bare and filmed with ice. He's cold inside and out. His breath burns coming in, fogs going out. At the top of the hill they gather around a long, deep hole cut through the frost. He sees his father, his uncles and two other men he doesn't know following them up the hill, carrying the box. It now has a lid. Ropes have been laid across the hole. When they reach it, they set the box on these, then leave it and join the crowd. Other men use the ropes to lower the box into the hole.

As they stand together, his grandmother Mary, his aunties and a few other women are crying. A man his mother has told him is a "preacher" speaks words he can't understand. Among the last of these he hears "ashes" and "dust."

When the preacher is quiet, his Uncle Harold lifts a spade full of earth and throws it onto the top of the box. Then they all walk down the hill, get in their cars and drive away. When they reach home, his three uncles and aunties are there. His mother pours small glasses of clear brown liquid for all but him, gives him a glass of milk and sends him into the sitting room to listen to his favorite radio programs. Later she brings him his dinner and later still takes him to bed and tucks him in. He asks her what has happened to his grandfather. She says that he has died and been buried in the ground. He asks how he can be in the ground and in the sky at the same time. She says that his body is dead and buried, but that his soul is alive in heaven. He asks if he'll ever see Charlie again. "In heaven," she says.

The boy cries the night through, devastated that he has lost his main ally in the family and will no longer hear stories of the world Charlie knew when he was a boy. He worries he won't be able to find Charlie in heaven.

Mary's sons build her a cottage amongst them on the hill, so she won't have to spend her summers without family in the town. Both Phil and Jessie enjoy a cold beer on hot summer evenings, but always out of sight of Mary's cottage that sits but a stone's throw south of them.

Sometimes, when Frank has ridden with his father into town for one thing or another, they stop at a liquor store on the edge of town so his dad can buy what he calls a "six-pack" of beer. Behind the store is a very small white frame house where an old man lives with a parrot. He's rumored to be a retired sea captain and the big red and green parrot is said to have come with him from the south seas. The boy never hears anyone ask why a person would leave the south seas to retire in central Illinois. In warm weather, the parrot sits on a perch on the front porch of the house. He loves to watch it from the car as he waits for his father to return with his beer.

One hot, humid, summer morning, his mother sends him to visit his grandmother in her cottage. The old woman meets him at the door, smothers him with her unpleasant kisses and leads him inside where she makes him a glass of chocolate milk. She asks what he's been doing. He tells her about the parrot.

"Where did you see this parrot?"

"He lives with an old sea captain in the white house behind the store where daddy buys beer."

Silence begets silence. When he finishes his milk, she says she's tired, and he'd best go home so she can rest.

That evening at dinnertime Mary Mullen storms the house, using the front door, rather than the rear one through the kitchen, as suits the gravity of the occasion. Her son answers the door and is verbally assaulted, first for his sin of alcoholism, then for introducing her grandson to this sin by taking him to a liquor store. Her attack is long and bitter. She lapses but soon recovers. Full and final blame she lays on Jessie for corrupting her "baby."

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