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Troubled Peace, A EPB
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A Troubled Peace by L. M. Elliott - Author Note

As a longtime journalist, I hesitate to discuss how my own life seeps into my fiction. But the truth is that fact, personal history, and imagination do intertwine while writing a novel. That's part of the inexplicable magic of inspiration.

Under a War-Torn Sky was inspired by stories my father told of his and his friends' experiences with the French Resistance during WWII and by his heart-stopping surprise homecoming. After being missing in action for months and presumed dead, my father appeared in the driveway of his family's farm five days before Christmas 1944. WWII is full of such poignant anecdotes. Henry Forester's odyssey is culled from the experiences of thousands of American aircrew who bailed out over Nazi-held territory and survived because of the extraordinary courage of ordinary French citizens. But my father's resilient, kind nature does permeate Henry's personality.

I've written this sequel, *A Troubled Peace*, because readers kept asking what happened next to Henry, to Pierre, whether Henry and Patsy married. So I'll answer right now a question I know they'll have: No, my father never returned to seek out those who had helped him in France. The sequel's events are completely made up, directed by the unfinished business of *Under a War-Torn Sky* and research into postwar France.

But once again my father's personality tints Henry's. And it's in such a way that Henry becomes symbolic of veterans, lending *A Troubled Peace* a thematic timeliness given Afghanistan and Iraq that I hadn't anticipated when I began writing.

These are my two earliest memories of my father: I grew up in a lush part of Virginia, on what had once been my great-grandfather's dairy farm, with cool, shady pine groves and wildflower fields alive with butterflies. It was a place to be outdoors. I was four years old. I don't recall what game we were playing, but my older sister and cousin had tied me to a pine tree. They were much older than I, so I was thrilled they included me. I happily backed myself against the sticky, gnarly bark to be trussed up.

But I wasn't so happy about what happened next. They were jumping in a large pile of fallen pine needles my father had raked together to tuck around the base of his roses to protect them for the winter. A thick carpet of pine needles creates a wonderfully slick surface. They were skating and sliding, making a real mess of the once-neat heap.

Suddenly, there was a quicksilver rustling. A snake slithered out, shaking needles off itself. Annoyed at the destruction of what it thought would be a happy place to sleep out the coming cold, the snake coiled itself a few feet from me, poised to strike. Shrieking, my sister and cousin ran to the house.

They left me tied.

I stared at the snake. It stared back. It was black with a white diamond on its neck. Even at that very young age having grown up with a creek out back and a father who'd been a Tidewater child I knew the marking might make the snake a poisonous water moccasin.

From the front yard, I heard shouting. 'Don't move!' came my father's voice.

As if I could.

I looked up the hill and saw my father running. A real sprinter even then, Daddy closed the acre distance in seconds and jumped on top of that snake, stomping it to death. He wore loafers.

With a final grind to the snake's head, he looked at me and grinned. 'That's my girl.' He untied me, took my hand, and led me into the house. He enjoyed his usual acid-strong cup of coffee while I relished an unusual morning treat of ice cream.

Around the same time, my father cautioned my sister and me never to wake him while he slept by touching his arm. 'Always call my name first.'

My father was gentle and attentive when we were sick. (He had wanted to be a doctor before the war interrupted his schooling.) As a young child, I tended to throw up violently even with milder ailments. Daddy was the one to hold my head over the toilet. He'd just joke that my stomach was put 3 in upside down and would right itself as I grew. Typically, these episodes happened in the middle of the night. So his warning about waking him worried me. I asked why.

He answered that there had been a time he had to be on alert, even when asleep. 'I might hurt you, darling.'

Remembering how he stomped the snake, the next time a stomachache woke me, I stood by the door of my parents' bedroom and bellowed for him loud enough, he teased me, to wake the dead.

I recognize that my childhood was a bit unique! But these two stories are emblematic of my father and his WWII contemporaries. Daddy was not a warrior by nature or education, nor a decorated hero. But he was a protector. To safeguard me, he jumped on a poisonous snake with no hesitation. As young men, he and his peers enlisted to stop Hitler and imperial Japan. I don't think they much questioned the need to do so. Just as they pushed through the Depression, with one-foot-in-front-of-the-other doggedness, they gritted their teeth and hurled themselves into horrifying battles.

But just because they did so with seemingly matter-of-fact commitment does not mean they came home 'if they survived' unscathed. Or that they didn't feel fear, regret, disgust, guilt. They saw far too much of humanity's ugliness at too young an age. Fifteen years after VE Day, my father was clearly still troubled enough by memories and knee-jerk battle readiness that he felt the need to warn his young children not to startle him.

Remembering Daddy's cautioning of me and the story that immediately after his homecoming he'd walk the lane of his farm not to wake his mother with nightmare screams, I write Henry to suffer symptoms of what we now know as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Because of his new quick-flash anger, Henry unnerves Patsy. She recognizes that he is not ready to settle down. Haunted by what might have happened to the French Resistance boy who saved him from the Nazis, Henry returns to France to find Pierre and, in many ways, to reclaim himself. I was not prepared for what I would learn in my research: the devastation, the infighting, the starvation and illness that ravaged France after liberation. I read memoirs that made me weep. I marveled at the ingenuity and the tenacity of French civilians trying to piece their lives back together, particularly the survivors of concentration camps, who were shipped home by the thousands each day during the spring of 4 1945. Broken, emaciated, and ill, their appearance so shocked France that a murderous wave of vigilante violence erupted against suspected collaborators.

Somewhere, in the midst of all that upheaval, Henry must find one lost boy.

That odyssey is the story of *A Troubled Peace*, a story that I hope celebrates the ability of people to find their way out of the rubble and cruelty of war by stubbornly keeping faith in mankind's potential for good. It also sheds light on our own times. The backdrop of France's struggle to feed its people, rebuild its broken buildings and bridges, replace hatred with cooperation, and redefine its politics and underlying values echoes many of the challenges facing the people of Afghanistan and Iraq today. Henry's struggles to tame his memories and recalibrate himself to civilian life are the same internal battles awaiting many of our veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq.

I am often asked if Daddy saw the publication of *Under a War-Torn Sky*. Sadly, no. He died a few months before. I did give him the manuscript to read when he was losing his war against cancer. I am sorry I did. He recognized bits and pieces of himself, but not the overall circumstances or plot, because they were made up. It confused and upset him, hurling him into some pretty awful hallucinations in which I was one of his gunners.

My father was far from perfect. He made his share of mistakes and could retreat to the flyboy bravado that many of his contemporaries used to mask painful memories or difficulties assimilating into peacetime life. But this will tell you all you really need to know about Daddy, and perhaps much of his generation. In the midst of one of these horrific flashbacks, when he and I were flying a very bad mission in his mind, my father suddenly 'like a snap of his fingers' came back to me. The battle cleared from those blue eyes of his and he said, 'Isn't it time for you to pick up the children?' I turned and looked at the hospice's clock. It was 2:20. He was exactly right: it was time for me to go get his grandchildren from school.

Troubled but devoted protectors.