

1. A Letter from Pig-iron Bob

Dear sir,

It is my duty to advise you that under article 2/56 of the National Service Act of 1962, that you are required to report for a medical examination at the time indicated on the attached form. This examination is for the purpose of assisting to determine your eligibility for compulsory military service in accordance with the further requirements of the above act. It will be conducted by a qualified medical practitioner appointed by the Department of the Army. Failure to attend is liable to a fine of not more than £2000 or two year's imprisonment, or both...

On the evening when he found this letter—perched vulturelike on the empty cup and saucer and looming over his dinner setting on the kitchen table—Griffin had just completed another unendurable day at the offices of the insurance company where he worked in the city. Nightly he would join the legions of commuters marching resolutely to Flinders Street Station where he would catch the 5.17 from platform 10 east, express to Moolanong, whereon he undertook his nightly battle with the crossword puzzle, and usually lost. From there he would catch the rattling red bus that ran down Merrijig Road, reading the evening news as he went. It wasn't entirely for this reason that his view of current events was always somewhat shaky.

He would enter the house at five past 6, which, since it was a workingclass family, was one hour and five minutes after dinnertime. On such evenings the house would at first appear to be deserted—the lights dimmed, a somnolent stillness in the air. But no, if your hearing was up to it you would have perceived a babble of voices from the left where lay the lounge room, thoroughly sealed from draughts and the outside world.

He would sneak down to the kitchen and there find the table set for one person, with no indication whatsoever that the rest of the family had eaten an hour before. Office hours differed from those of factory workers and, since long before he existed, his father's dinner had been placed before him the moment he walked in at five o'clock. Thus for the last three years Griffin had arrived home late for dinner with precisely the same regularity that his father did not, and at no time was it contemplated that there be some change to the natural order of things.

From the next room, muffled sounds that would have been clear to anyone were emitted, even without the occasional eruptions of gunfire and galloping horses, punctuating music and overly dramatic voices.

He would call. "Hullo. I'm home."

To which his mother would reply either. "Hello dear. Your dinner is in the oven." or. "Hello dear. Your dinner is on the stove." Her voice came reassuringly through the door, only a little louder than the video mumble. In three years it had never occurred that his dinner was neither in the oven nor on the stove.

On the particular evening of the letter from the *Department of Labour and National Service*, his dinner was on the stove. He peeked—Irish stew, so it must have been a Tuesday, which also meant that dessert would be rice pudding and cream, awaiting his pleasure in the refrigerator. Before doing anything to rescue his dinner, he opened the letter and read those fateful words. It was a mistake—he didn't feel much like dinner after that.

Into his mind sprang an idea that went back to the games he played in his childhood—cowboys and indians, space invaders, pirates and explorers, cops and robbers—all of which had led to appropriate ambitions for his dubious future. When he grew up, he wanted to be at various times a spaceman, a test pilot, a policeman, a US marshal, a buccaneer, quite in the mould of certain individuals—Ned Kelly, Captain Cook, Phillip Marlowe, The Durango Kid. Perfectly healthy stuff for any boy, but there was always one game he never wanted to play which was the game of *War*, and always one sort of hero he never wanted to be, and that was a soldier—not even Audie Murphy.

Now a more serious view needed to be taken. He realised immediately that it was the work of Pig-iron Bob. Just before the Second World War, Robert Menzies, Prime Minister of Australia, incurred considerable profits by selling local pig-iron to the Japanese. Now it probably was *not* the same iron that composed the bombs that the Japanese were soon to drop on Darwin—the Japanese don't have that sort of sense of humour—but Australians do and so everyone said it was. However, Australians also have short memories. Although they called him Pig-iron Bob forever after, they also continued to re-elect him, and he had been Prime Minister for all of Griffin's lifetime, until he recently retired, shortly after deciding that Australian troops should be sent to assist the Americans with a little problem they were

having in a place called Vietnam. Conscription was to be re-introduced to aid the nation's flagging military strength. All this seemed very unimportant at the time—after all, Pig-iron Bob was the person that everyone blamed for everything.

You could not go more than for a few hours into any given day before someone seemed to find cause to mutter 'Bloody Menzies!' or 'Pig-iron bastard!'. There didn't seem to be anything he could not be blamed for—the state of the world, the rural decline, the economy, droughts, late trains, motor accidents, influenza, cups that lost their handles in the washing up water, his father's snoring... Pig-iron Bob, it appeared, kept the nation alert and unified by inventing new things for the populous to complain about, and this business of conscription and *Vietwherever* seemed merely his latest creation. No one realised that this would be his masterstroke, the final gesture before stepping down, to provide his people with something they could complain about more vociferously and determinedly than ever before, for long after he was gone.

But Griffin could stand and brood these things no longer, and so, letter in hand and leaving the Irish stew to its bubbling fate for a moment longer, he crossed to the sliding door that divided kitchen from lounge room and opened it just enough to poke his head through. In the flickering grey-blur of the video, he saw his mother on the couch, pillows propping her troublesome back and her knitting on her lap; his plump housecoated sister and pyjama-ed brother on their chairs to the right; his bald and weary father still in his overalls in the chair that no one else was ever allowed to sit in.

But the dominant presence was the television, so completely did it root their attention. There, lantern-jawed Chuck Connors was mouthing platitudes of truth, charity and justice to his extraordinarily well-behaved son, as a humane pause between those times when he ruthlessly mowed down owlhoots with his modified rapidfire rifle.

"Is something wrong with dinner dear?" his mother asked as quietly as she could, if not quietly enough for his brother and sister who immediately hissed like a pair of startled snakes.

"No. No," he murmured, incurring further sibling sibilation and he hastily retracted his head as if in fear of some more dangerous form of venom.

Left alone then to share his unfathomable fate with the Irish stew and rice pudding. And unfathomable it was. His father had been had been in the war—he went to Singapore to help the British try to stem the Japanese advance until the defences cracked, whereby he was imprisoned in Changi until the end of the war when he came home to immediately set Griffin's life in motion. But his father, like his uncles and certain other men about the neighbourhood, could never be persuaded to talk about it in any sort of explanatory detail. He would often attempt interrogation. Once a week throughout his boyhood, his father would take the kids to the movies and sometimes combat films would be the fare, but as they walked home after seeing such excellent examples as 'Bridge on the River Kwai', or 'To Hell and Back', he would turn to his father with wide-eyed boyish excitement and ask anxiously. "Was that what it was like, Daddy?"

His father would answer. "No."

That was all.

Just a flat 'no'.

Griffin was left in the dark amongst eyewitnesses. He had only the heroisms of John Wayne and Richard Attenborough to guide his imagination. And even then, he did not like the way it went.

He tried to remember what he knew about this Vietnam place but the truth was that for all his newspaper reading, the matter had not been at all expanded upon since he read about *Insurgents in Indo-China*, at school, which he at first supposed translated as *Laundry Habits in the Himalayas*. Apparently, the evil designs of Chairman Ho and his hooligans continued unabated, all these years later. Mostly, he was a little bit surprised to realise that he knew that much about it. Maybe his knowledge of the world was not as slight as he had previously thought.

But he found himself to be dallying—the flurry of gunfire from the loungeroom suggested the demise of *The Rifleman's* adversary of the evening and paved the way for his own entry to the scene. He gulped down the rest of his meal and then rushed about, washing his dishes, shaking the crumbs from the tablecloth outside, and so was able to creep into the lounge room at the usual time, which was the moment that the solemn fanfare announced the advent of the six-thirty news.

He took up his seat, on the couch beside his mother, just as the newsreader began an account of the day's events. There was a major strike in the motor industry, cyclonic storms in North Queensland, and Pig-iron Bob's successor, Harold Holt, was in America and gleefully

declaring that Australia would go 'All the way with LBJ'. With that as a claim to posterity, it was probably for the best that Holt was soon to drown himself at Portsea beach, but such things were not to be seen with any such clarity at the time.

These three items justified an advertisement break, and there then appeared on the screen a flurry of baby's bottoms—the only sort of people permitted to possess such things on television in those days—all of which lead to an extolling of the virtues of *Sorbent Toilet Tissues*. And his mother, once the matter concerned tissues rather than tots, took the opportunity to look up from her knitting and ask. "Did you get your letter, dear?"

"Yes," he said softly.

He didn't know how to continue and there was a long pause. *Sorbent Supersofts* were superseded by the equestrian heroes of *Marlboro Country*, wherever that was.

"Looked important," his mother said.

Under such pressure, secret information could be suppressed no longer.

"Yes. It was from the Department of Labour and National Service. They want me to..."

But he was robbed. When three advertisements were customary, there were only two, and the persuasive professionalism of the newsreader easily sliced through his stumbling sentence with vital information of the arrival in Melbourne of an American Film Actress.

There followed a number of local items but he was in such a state of verbal strangulation that he could not take them in. Somehow he feared the matter might be complicated by some report concerning Vietnam. Sometimes there were pictures of US troops and helicopters, and there had been much publicity when a noted Test Cricketer had been called up and then, adding insult to injury, a successful pop singer right after him. But the cricketer never left Australia and somehow his leave time co-incided with all important cricket fixtures, while the Top 40 fared no worse for a hero singing songs of war in military green. But no such matter occurred that night—Vietnam had been going on long enough to be a stale story, in the view of news producers at least.

At last the newsreader announced another break, and *Wilkinson Sword Double-edged Razors* slid over a disembodied Adam's Apple while it felt like a hundred blunt ones where scratching Griffin's entire body.

"What did you say they wanted?" his mother asked.

"I have to go for a medical examination."

"Oh? Is something wrong with you, dear?"

"No. It's just routine apparently..." And tried to look as calm and healthy as he could.

But he saw to that the eyes of his father had been wrench away from the video and planted their gaze upon him with no less fascination—plainly the significance of all this had not escaped him in the manner that it had his wife.

"Bloody Menzies," he muttered in disgust.

Younger brother Michael, who spent the greater part of his life seeking ways into adult conversations, saw a chance now. "It ain't Menzies. It's Holt."

Wally Griffin, as usual, saw no reason to make any response to this whatsoever.

He looked at his mother and saw a hoard of questions were brewing in her weary brain, but time was running out for her. *Reg Hunt Motors* was being promoted by just that sort of salesman who would one day be immortalised by Richard Nixon posters, and then psychedelic surfers in glorious monochrome were skimming down speckled waves to a frantic rock beat only seconds away from female accompanied gulps of *Coca-cola*.

"I don't see why you need to go to a doctor if there isn't anything wrong with you," his mother said plaintively, and rattled her number three needles in disapproval.

He had to wait again until the gap between the sports report and the weather, and then, speaking as rapidly as he could, eventually managed to convey to his mother the general implications of the letter.

"Oh," she gasped. "So it means that you've been drafted."

"Cos it does, yer silly old moo," Wally grumped.

"It depends on the result of the medical examination," Griffin explained.

"Oh, well," his mother decided. "I s'pose you better go then."

"Mum, he don't have any choice," Narelle cried impatiently.

"Oh, well, he s'pose you better had, then. What do you think, Wally?"

Wally Griffin did not trouble to turn in his chair. In a voice as flat as the television screen, he said, "Bloody Menzies."

The final word had thus been spoken, and with that they were able to settle down and watch the rest of the evening's television programs in relative peace.