

War and Peace

retired when I was twenty--eight years old, but ran out of money the same afternoon, so I caught a bus to the dole office. My feeling about unemployment was: *Someone's gotta do it. Why not me?* The pay was lousy, but I'd heard the hours were good.

I had been working for the past sixteen years – driving buses, washing dishes, picking grapes, packing boxes, building exhibitions and, once, digging the same trench for three days before someone told me I was digging in the wrong direction. (Subconsciously, I think, I'd started digging for home.) I was fed up with the whole racket.

At the Centrelink office I learnt that it was no longer called 'the dole'. Some overpaid marketing agency had rebranded it 'Newstart'. The walls were covered with inspirational posters ('When opportunity knocks, open the door!') alongside more practical advice, telling us not to drink alcohol before job interviews. Fake nails clacked away at keyboards. Someone called my name, and I followed him into a small room. I hadn't even sat down before he started trying to sign me up for forklift--driving jobs on the other side of town.

'Whoa,' I said. 'This isn't the kind of Newstart I had in mind at *all*.'

I had only just moved to Melbourne. It was a place filled with magic and possibility. I wanted to meet interesting people at rooftop bars. I wanted to read Russian novels. What I didn't want was a pesky job, but try telling that to your dole officer.

'Listen,' I said, 'our economy seems to rely on a 5 per cent unemployment rate. Can't I just be one of those 5 per cent for a while?'

The long answer was no.

People, I've found, want you to be busy. They don't require you to contribute anything meaningful, otherwise how do you explain professions like 'consulting'? They just want you to be busy. Genghis Khan could move into your street and people would say, 'Well, at least he's *working*.'

My dole officer changed tack. He straightened his tie and wafted some cologne in my direction.

'What about truck driving?' he said. 'I've got some great truck--driving jobs.'

I'd spent the previous three years driving tour buses in the outback. One morning it had been so hot that I'd woken up with a lisp. I had a crooked back and still harboured some latent racism (mostly against the Swiss) that I was trying to deal with. I was sick of driving. But you can't just come out and say that.

'What sort of loads would I be carrying? I'm allergic to peanuts.'

'Furniture,' he said, eyeing me suspiciously. 'No peanuts.'

I held in my lap my talismanic copy of *War and Peace*. I had vowed not to get a job until I finished reading it. But the dole officer had obviously sworn some oath of his own. He was so dogged, I was amazed he hadn't risen through the ranks yet.

'Is it far away?' I asked, eventually.

'Just around the corner.'

'Oh. That could make things difficult.'

'Difficult how?'

'Well, I was thinking of moving.'

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What followed was a series of long and glorious autumn days. I wandered through parks, winked at old ladies and had long boozy dinners in friends' backyards.

My uncle was in town one day, and I explained that, what with the demands of *War and Peace* and everything else going on, I scarcely had time for a job.

'Well, it's a question of priorities, Robbie,' he said.

We looked at each other and I hit the table with my fist. 'Exactly.'

When my second appointment came around, the dole officer asked me how I was getting on, and I told him about the projects I was working on. He made a few notes.

'So, you're writing a book?'

'I'm *reading* a book.'

He became businesslike. He said that, per regulations, I was to start filling out a job diary and applying for twenty jobs a fortnight. Twenty!

It was even more odious than having a job. It sounded like I would be doing a lot of extra work, so I asked if I'd be getting a corresponding pay rise.

His answer was long and wearisome, like your primary school teacher going on and on about not eating pencil shavings. Eventually I pointed at the job diary and said, 'But. But what's the point of it?'

The point was 'How dare you!' The point was 'We the taxpayers!' etc.

Andy, my friend and housemate, had little sympathy. 'They pay you \$230 a week for doing nothing.'

'I don't get the money,' I said. 'Our landlord gets it.'

'Oh, not this again.'

'Well, I work just as hard as he does.'

'Not today you didn't.'

'It's a Saturday, Andy. Jesus.'

'Not yesterday, either. You spent all morning trying to glue your boot back together.'

'Okay, so we happen to have a particularly hardworking landlord. But morally . . .'