In Praise of Bobs—and Franks and Georges.

In the thin light of morning, the gravelled streets washed with greyness, the streetlamps fading as the sun stretches its arms, yawns and pokes its reddening fingers through a roadline of bright tipped trees, the hollow sound of horse steps clip-clopped and clop-clipped and clopped out the gloom.

A rustly snuffle and a moistly horses fart punctuated the deadening nothingness–in the waking quiet before the day came bright.

Every lightening morn— in wetness, or hot, dry weather or not, out of the mizzle to our creakening gate the milko, at an athlete’s sprint dashed from his cart to the Billy just inside the fence, just inside the gate. Mum’s copper gave the order and the milko splashed the milk – a pint a scoop– into the galvanised tin with its looping wire handle and tight fighting ‘Billy Lid’.

That was fresh milk from a can, from the back of an open cart, just a meter away from a horses bum, ladelled out with a tin scoop by a man’s hands and dashed into an open tin which had just had some coins taken from the pocket of a human being , whose coins had no doubt passed through hundreds of pockets before it hit the bottom of mum’s can and now they were in the milko’s hands, transferred to the leather pouch strung around his waist before he picked up his ladle again and headed for the Billy next door.

Us ‘Billy-Lids’ didn’t get sick, we weren’t all chronic asthmatics, or allergic to the smell of open air, or needed bottled water or sanitised, homogenised, hermetically sealed, resealable, made from local and imported ingredients and may contain traces of peanuts with child-proof lids in recyclable plastic containers which we must dispose of thoughtfully. Mum put the milk in the jug, whacked it in the ice-chest, washed the billy, threw in a handful of coins and put it out behind the gate again – until tomorrow.

The Bendigo Magazine has moved its offices into what I know as Sim’s shop on the corner of Barnard and Forest Street. My best mate through art school was Brendon Sims, his father Frank, and mother Joan, ran a grocer’s shop there from the late fifties until Frank went to the great grocery run in the sky. Frank, a doppelganger for Clark Gable, elegant Joan behind the counter, he took out his little van and delivered the orders door-to-door. There must have been a special training school for grocers: learning how to put the pencil behind your ear, licking it before you began to write down the orders, whistling classes, carrying weighted boxes on one shoulder and learning line after line of charming chat.

For most housewives, stuck at home, in the days long before supermarket, shopping was a local affair. The weekly visits by these gentlemen of trade were looked forward to, they broke up the day of cleaning, cooking, mending and gossiping amongst women. The men of trade had a style all of their own: cheeky, friendly and flirtatious, they were at times confessors, confidantes, counsellors– their visits brought the world to the back door, they watched the neighbourhood long before that concept was formalised, they knew who the kids were, whose kids they were and whether they needed a clip over the ear, or an ear to listen to.

There seemed to be a corner shop within five minutes walk of every home. Grocers, butchers, bakers and even greengrocers delivered weekly orders to your door, kids did the urgent shopping–went messages–whipping around the corner for some butter, cut from a slab, if mum was baking, it was Saturday afternoon and three days away from the ‘Grocers’; a bottle of drink if an unexpected guest had arrived, an ice-cream if you were lucky, a bag of broken biscuits if you weren’t. We went on our own, on our bikes. (To set the scene I grew up in Chum Street) I hated having to go up to Gills on Marong Road, it was uphill all the way up Booth Street, but a great ride back again. I liked going around to ‘Ma Beatties’ half way down to the ‘square’, an easy pedal both ways and she always snuck you a lolly for your trouble.

Bob Johnson, who had his shop near the old hospital, was a little grocer bloke. He whistled his way from his van to your door and back again. The cheeriest little chappie you could ever hope to meet. With the grocer’s standard pencil behind his ear, he licked it and asked your mum ‘What will we be needing this week Mrs … (insert Mum’s name)’ and then he went on, he asked about the family? how were the kids? the husband at work? any plans for a holiday? and then some gossip. He was conduit of information from one house to the next. He must have had a little book in his van with everybody’s personal details in it to look up before he came up your path because he never forgot anybody or anything. He took your order, wrote it down, in pencil, in his little pad with the deep-blue Bushells Tea logo across the top (with a little cup of tea drawn within it), worked out the price and whistled himself away. One week later he was back again with a box balanced on his shoulder whistling his way back up the path.

Bob Henry, the butcher in his Peugot butchering van did the same from door-to-door. He is the only man I know who has ever admitted to eating human flesh. As a soldier in New Guinea during the Second War he was taken to a feast in a jungle village where some native bearers feted the Aussie boys to a hearty meal. When they had finished eating Bob said to one of the natives ‘That was delicious Pork’. The native rolled about laughing and replied in Pidgin: ‘That no Pork, that Jap’. Bob delivered lamb, beef and sausage but I don’t recall a lot of pork.

The Raggatt’s van carried its payload of bread. Another little bloke (Bob?) with a white apron and a cane basket covered with a tea-towel over his arm, walked along the street his horse pulling the high-wheeled van along apace. He sold uncovered, un-wrapped, beautiful fresh bread and warm: high-tin, vienna loaf, square block sandwich loaves, exotic French-sticks and buns–wholemealed, poppie-seeded, wheat flour dusted, and white bread with the texture of clouds. He whistled. We jumped on the back of the cart, jumped up into the seat alongside and pretended we were riding the coach into town, our imaginary pistols aimed at every redskin who dared attack the bread coach of destiny.

Mr Darooge (now I know he was de Arouge) had an open-sided, canvas covered cart and brought his fresh-fruit and vegetables around every weekend (well that was Chum-street anyway). He was probably the first migrant person we had ever encountered and I am sure his name wasn’t Bob.

Nowadays, ‘going a message’ means a drive to the supermarket just for a litre of milk, or an over-fluorescent-lit ‘convenience store’ with all the charm of hospital dissecting room where no one whistles, or knows your name, or who your kids are: who repeats after you swipe your plastic in the black-buttoned swiping-thing the mantra “Have a nice day’ or even worse ‘Any plans for this evening?’ – Like I’m going to tell you, we haven’t even been introduced – is your name Bob?

Footnote: My wife and I spent the first few weeks of our married life in the dwelling at the back of Sim’s shop. Joan had gone to life in Flora Hill and the shop was empty and we had a couple of weeks before we moved up to Wangaratta for a yearwhere ‘Ma’ Beatties son Jim was to be my boss. Soon after Frank Barr moved in with his screen-printing business. Years later his son Colin began Digitype upstairs. Lloyd and Sue Nuttall renovated it and had their antiques shop in Joan’s grocery for a while, then a flower shop and now the magazine—for almost half-a-century I have been going in and out of that front-door, I might start whistling.