



Letter 4: Conscription

Our fourth letter comes from the hand of Brian Carter, the village Blacksmith. The Carters' Forge has been keeping Alton Haypun moving for decades —shoeing horses, repairing tools, and mending what has worn thin through use. Brian is a practical man, rooted in work that matters quietly rather than loudly.

Brian's letter is dated 6th September 1939, three days after Britain entered the war. While the announcement itself weighs heavily on him, his greatest concern is closer to home.

Three days earlier, the government announced that men aged eighteen to forty-one would be conscripted for service. Brian's son, Joe, is twenty-two. Ordinarily, that would place him firmly within the call-up but Joe doesn't have to go off to war.

This should bring relief to Brian but things are not that simple and he has good reason to be concerned Joe may choose to leave Alton Haypun and join the armed forces.

Brian's letter is not about battles or strategy. It is about a father standing in his forge, listening to the world change, and wondering whether keeping his son safe might mean letting him go.

He is writing to his brother Tom in Lincoln.

Brian writes,

Dear Tom,

I hope this letter finds you well despite Mr Chamberlain's news.

I felt the need to write to you tonight as I've spent the better part of the evening in the workshop pretending to tidy up, though really, I've just been walking in circles, thinking and worrying in equal measure. As I can't speak to you on the telephone, I wanted to write because I need someone to hear the thoughts rattling around in my head. It's the only way I feel I can steady myself at the moment.

This morning, when the wireless carried the Prime Minister's words, I felt them thump in my chest the same way I feel it when a horse kicks at the forge door. You know the feeling—sharp, sudden, leaving your ears ringing and your breath caught somewhere behind your ribs. But as heavy as the news itself was, something else has been weighing on me even more.

You'll remember, of course, that Joe is twenty-two now, full of strength and impatience and that restless sense that a young man ought to be doing something more important. He stood with me and Ruth in the kitchen as the Prime Minister spoke. Ruth was baking at the time but on hearing those words, she wore her apron like armour, clutching it in both hands as though she could wring comfort out of the cloth itself. Joe, on the other hand, stood with his arms folded and his jaw set in that way he does when he's trying to look braver than he feels.

You'll no doubt also have heard, the government have declared that all men aged 18 to 41 would be called up for service. Under normal circumstances, that would include Joe.

But a Blacksmith is a reserved occupation. Our work is essential. We're needed to keep horses shod, tools repaired and equipment serviceable. The way things are now, we're going to be needed more than ever. So, the call to arms does not include Joe.

On paper, that should bring relief. I should be thankful, shouldn't I? A father spared from sending his only son into the teeth of war. But I'm not relieved. Because Joe might volunteer anyway and that thought sits in me like iron that refuses to take the heat.

Part of the trouble is that Joe's best friend, John (from the farm), has already gone. He came by the forge after supper on Sunday, hands in his pockets, shoulders squared in that earnest way of his. He said he couldn't stand by while others went in his place. Joe tried to argue, and I could see in his eyes that half of him admired John and the other half wished he'd kept his mouth shut. There are moments when young men aren't so different from colts—they see another one bolt, and suddenly they're sure they ought to be running too.

But it's not just John that's played on Joe's mind. After the church service on Sunday afternoon, we bumped into old Mr. Rudge. He said he's already lived through one lot of this and he'd hoped he'd never hear the word "war" spoken in his lifetime again. Peter, his grandson, was with him. He turned nineteen last week and looked like someone had lit a fuse in him. Some lads, Tom, are ready to run before they even know where they're running to.

The forge has been busier than usual. People have suddenly decided to bring in tools they've neglected all summer, as though the simple act of repairing something might restore a sense of order in a world tipping toward chaos.

I worked through it, but all the while I watched Joe out of the corner of my eye.

John's decision has hit him harder than he'll admit. They've been thick as thieves since school, and where one goes, the other has always tended to follow.

Ruth and I had a talk with Joe on Monday and told him his place is here at the forge and that he's needed here to help me and the war effort.

But he only stared down at his hands, the same hands that have learned every rhythm of the forge, every weight and angle of the hammer, every glow of the metal. I could see the doubt in his face at what we had told him, as though shoeing horses and mending ploughs were suddenly too small for the times.

You and I know better, of course. War is fought on the fields and in the factories long before it ever reaches the front lines. But try telling that to a young man who thinks courage only counts when your life is in the balance.

I wish I could tell you I'm not frightened but I am. Not because I think Joe would be cowardly in uniform—quite the contrary. My fear is that he would be too brave, too willing to prove himself, too eager to match John stride for stride.

And yes, I know the arguments. Everyone must do their bit, the country needs its young men, we can't expect others to defend freedoms we take for granted if we're not prepared to do it ourselves. But I also know this, if all the smiths leave their forges, the wheels that carry the nation will stop turning and where will that leave the war effort?

Still, the logic of it doesn't comfort me when I imagine Joe's face alight with the idea of 'doing something real.' Ruth says we must trust him to make his own choices. But she doesn't see the way he looks out over the fields towards the farmhouse.

On Sunday, after the church bells called the village together for a special service, Joe stood beside me in the church. While Reverend Pearson spoke about courage and community, I found myself praying, not for Joe to be kept home, and not for him to enlist, but that he chooses wisely and with a clear mind. I feel I can't ask for more than that.

Tonight, I've lingered in the workshop long after dark, pretending to finish up the day's work. The smell of coal and iron has always calmed me, but this evening it's only stirred up my thoughts.

I watched Joe through the window earlier, sitting on the edge of his bed, elbows on knees, staring at the floor. Ruth was sat beside him talking. I don't know what she was saying, but his shoulders eased a little, which is something.

I keep hoping he'll look at the village, at Rosie (John's sister) and the other farmers who rely on him, the horses that need his skill, the tools that keep the land working, and he might see that service takes many forms.

But tomorrow morning he may think differently. He may wake and decide he must follow John. If he does, I don't know what I'll say. I don't know whether I'll be proud or simply broken. Perhaps both.

The lamplight's fading and the forge's last embers are cooling. I'll close this letter before I start going in circles again.

Whatever comes, I know as a village we'll all face it together. We always have. I'll do everything I can to keep Alton Haypun's wheels turning—literally and otherwise—but I'd give anything, Tom, truly anything, to keep Joe safely beside me in that effort.

Write back when you can.

Love to you and Anne,

Brian

Brian Carter's letter reminds us that war does not only ask who must go but also who must stay.

For some families, the fear lay in a postal delivery and a form marked "National Service (Armed Forces) Act 1939." For others, it lived in the quiet moments - the glances toward the road, the unspoken decisions forming in young men's minds, and the knowledge that doing one's duty did not always mean wearing a uniform.

In villages like Alton Haypun, the war reached into workshops and kitchens just as surely as it reached into recruitment offices.