

OUTBACK ODYSSEY

A sample from the historical novel
by Paul Rushworth-Brown

Some journeys change where you live.
Others change how you see the world.

Seventeen-year-old Yorkshireman Jimmy Brown has travelled to Australia under the Big Brother Movement in search of a new beginning. Now, travelling into rural Victoria, he is about to encounter the people and the country that will challenge everything he thinks he knows.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN **Secrets of the Station**

The steam engine roared, sending clouds of grey smoke billowing into the blue sky. Jimmy found a wooden seat in the second-class carriage, which creaked beneath him. The locomotive's rhythmic chugging soon lulled him into a contemplative silence. Outside the window, Melbourne's urban sprawl gave way to rolling pastures and gum-dotted landscapes. Farmhouses punctuated the green fields, and Jimmy caught glimpses of sheep. As the train rattled out of the Melbourne cityscape, the countryside unfurled before him in a patchwork of pastoral fields, native bushland, and forest. Eucalyptus trees, their silver-grey trunks twisted and gnarled, stood like guards of nature along the tracks. Their narrow leaves shimmering in the dappled sunlight. In the distance, he could see the blue-green slopes of the Dandenong Ranges. The train passed through small towns and villages, each with a weatherboard station house and neatly tended gardens. "The Land is so different here," Jimmy thought as the train rattled through Victoria's countryside. The golden plains and farm acreage stretched endlessly, interrupted only by clusters of eucalyptus trees.

In the distance, Jimmy watched sheep grazing in paddocks bordered by wooden posts and wire fences. Grazing kangaroos sat up, resting on their tails, watching the train approaching, then bouncing away to quieter pastures.

Pink Galahs clustered on fence posts and pecked at the ground for seeds, occasionally taking to the sky in a flurry of wings when startled by the sound of the train's steam whistle.

Jimmy's thoughts turned to the Big Brother Movement, the organisation that had made his journey possible. They had cut him loose from the chains of his past, enabling him to find a way forward. He felt a brief nostalgia about Mr Olsen and the part he had played in his journey. Whatever lay ahead, I'm going to make it count.

The fields began to change from fields to bushland. Gum trees lined both sides of the track. The occasional level crossing would bring a brief halt, the guard's whistle and the clanging of the gates a reminder of the world outside. The train stopped at small stations along the way, where women in headscarves and men in R.M. William boots waited to board.

He took out the map, a symbol of guidance and a reminder of Mr Olsen. He glanced around, but the other passengers were lost in their own worlds or preoccupied with poorly behaved children. No one was watching him, but it felt like something or someone was. There was no reason for the unease, but he couldn't shake the feeling that the map was a key to something, and time was running out.

The steam engine's whistle announced their arrival in Traralgon, and Jimmy prepared to disembark. He scanned the small crowd, feeling something impending, nervous energy, he thought. He could have sworn he felt eyes on him, though no one was staring when he turned. Among the unfamiliar faces was Dhirrari, an Aboriginal man. He stood with quiet authority, his dark eyes scanning the passengers until they settled on Jimmy.

Dhirrari approached him, nodding with acknowledgement. He was a tall, wiry Aboriginal. His long, jet-black hair cascaded to his shoulders in untamed waves beneath his Akubra hat. His skin was as black as black can be. His nose was large and flat, his cheeks chubby, and jaw firm, the very embodiment of his people. His eyes were brown, deep, observant, and calm. His movements were deliberate, and his gait was slow and measured.

Another figure watched the train come in; Derek was on the platform, his presence starkly contrasting with the calm surrounding him. He lit a match, enjoying the comfort of a roll-your-own cigarette, the nicotine rush erasing the anxiety. He leaned against a post, watching Dhirrari as he greeted the stranger.

Derek snorted and spat on the dusty ground. Something was different; his chest tightened. For the first time in a long while, he felt the weight of it all: his addiction, the pain he'd buried, the lies he'd told himself. The news of his older brother did not faze him, but he knew the reason why he returned to Holland and that piqued

his interest. Could this be what I need: A break to get what rightfully belongs to me?

He had never learned how to deal with the disappointment of his father's decision. The anger, the overwhelming sense of being trapped in a cycle that only led back to the same dark places. There were so many ways to numb it, so many ways to avoid the truth. He thought about his last relapse, the hollow way he had convinced himself that this time would be different. It had been easier to pretend everything was fine than to face the jagged edges of the pain and anger still festering.

He pushed his hands deeper into his pockets, battling the flood of memories trying to overwhelm him. It would be a fight he was willing to face. For the first time, he could feel hope and strength with unwavering resolve.

Dhirrari greeted Jimmy with a knowing frown, noticing Derek in the background. Jimmy put out his hand to shake. Dhirrari didn't make eye contact, picked up the port and grumbled, "Follow me." Together, they walked down the wooden platform. Then, just as they were to step off, Derek, appeared from nowhere. "Goodday, Dhirrari, me old mate. Long time no see. Still, keepin' watch over me bitch of a niece? Who's this, then, mate? Looks like a pommie bastard! She's scraping the bottom a' the barrel now, ain't she? No matter, she won't 'ave the station for much longer."

They continued walking to the ute as Derek walked the other way and stepped in front of Jimmy, stopping his progress. He put his face close to Jimmy's, staring him in the eyes and looking him up and down.

Derek's face was unshaven, and he smelled of body odour, garlic, and whiskey. Jimmy felt offended and clenched his jaw as his father had taught him, ready for the onslaught. The tension in his shoulders tightened.

Dharrari glimpsed sideways at Jimmy. "Ignore 'im." Clutching Jimmy's arm, "Come, let's go!" he said.

"Yeah, keep walking, you black bastard. Your day will come when I take over the bloody station. So will yer mob when I kick 'em off. Yer a bunch a' fuckin' heathens!" Derek watched them go, fuckin' bastards will get theres! He turned and walked away.

Dhirrari's quiet dignity was something Jimmy hadn't expected, something that felt like an unspoken invitation to stand beside him and say, "This isn't right."

Is this how they treat each other out here? Jimmy's heart began to thud in his chest. I've been on the receiving end of that: bitterness, crude jibes, disrespect. This stranger had thrown it all at

him, yet he didn't react or flinch. He let the words wash over him like they were nothing but wind. There was a stillness in him, a quiet power that Jimmy couldn't quite explain, but it was there.

The dust and remoteness were evident away from the station.

Dhirrari threw Jimmy's port into the back of the ute, and Jimmy climbed into the passenger seat. If that's typical of the locals around here, I'm in for a hard time; I can feel it. "Who was that?" he asked. Dhirrari remained silent.

Jimmy came to Australia for a fresh start, a chance to leave behind the memories of his past. But now, as he sat in the dusty ute, surrounded by unfamiliarity, he wondered if this place would ever feel like home.

Dhirrari reached down and turned the key; the car laboured, so he turned it again and pumped the accelerator to revive the old engine. Come on, girl, you can do it! The vehicle blew black smoke out of the exhaust and then chugged along in second gear. "There ya go, ya little beauty."

Dhirrari didn't speak, which allowed Jimmy to look out the window, taking in all he could: dry creek beds, kangaroos, and trees so different from what he was used to. There were dead and decaying bullocks and a pungent aroma that made him frown. The bumpy dirt road rattled his nerves. The more he saw, the more he realised that fitting into this world wouldn't be as easy as he had hoped.

A small group of young Aboriginal men eagerly stepped into the middle of the road to get a lift. Dhirrari pulled over, and they all jumped into the back, laughing and giggling as they did. One of them tapped on the roof an hour later, and Dhirrari pulled over. They all jumped out, one calling out, "Yama Dhirrari Thanks Dhirrari."

"Who were they?" Jimmy asked, watching them disappear into the bush."

Dhirrari pulled out and continued driving, "Just kids, ey?

Making their way home. Their parents work with us."

"How much longer until we get to the farm?"

Dhirrari smiled, "We call it a 'station', and we arrived an hour ago. One more hour to go."

Dhirrari looked in his rearview mirror. A massive truck came thundering behind them, its engine rumbling angrily. The driver flashed his high beams twice, which meant 'get out of the bloody way'. Its headlights cut through the dust. Dhirrari moved to the left as far as he could. The truck thundered past, disappearing into a cloud of dust; the ute rocked on its axles, the tyres spinning on loose gravel at the side of the road.

Jimmy sat frozen for a moment, one hand clutching the handle above the door and the other the front of the cracked dashboard, his heart pounding. Dhirrari chuckled, gripping the wheel so tight his fingers ached.

“Bloody hell, that came out of nowhere,” Jimmy muttered.

Dhirrari shook his head, a chuckle escaping his lips. “You get used to it; musterin’ time truck takes sheep to market.”

Dhirrari sat at the wheel of the old ute with patience and calm even when a big red bounded across the road, causing him to swerve out of the way. Jimmy, shocked, “He was huge.”

Dhirrari shook his head, “Bloody ‘ell mate, that was a close one, six feet, two hundred pounds of muscle, I reckon.”

The occasional bump in the road made Jimmy tense, but Dhirrari didn’t flinch. Instead, he navigated each one with ease. Jimmy liked how he carried himself, which reminded him that a man didn’t need to say a word to demonstrate strength.

As the ute bounded up the last stretch of dusty road, the sprawling expanse of the station house was visible. But just as Jimmy was about to appreciate the magnitude of the place, a person walked off the veranda. She stood still and looked at him. He didn’t know it yet, but that moment would be the beginning of loyalty, conflict, and unspoken truths.

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