

## THE MOON LANDING

As the train rocked slowly westwards it seemed to Harry and Jimmy that their journey was taking forever: they had left subtropical Brisbane far behind. Their questions to other passengers brought vague responses, ‘Oh, it shouldn’t be too long now,’ but they had never been to Charleville either. The countryside sliding past the windows looked flat, dry and largely uninhabited – a vast and empty world.

Their heads were spinning with all the things that had happened since they left Kythera. Here in Australia everything was so different from the life they had known. There, nothing seemed to change from grandfather to father to son. They talked about one of the uncles who had a boat which he plied around the ports of the Mediterranean. Harry loved to tell Jim how their uncle would spread a blanket and throw down the money from the catch, all the paper and coin. Then the crew, in strict pecking order from the captain down would take turns to scoop into the pile using an Egyptian fez as a dipper. This life was fine for some but not for him. No, he had wanted more, much more. Jimmy knew this story by heart but he always nodded his agreement.

For the first time since they arrived in Australia, Harry had plenty of time to sit and think. His mind went back to his National Service on the mainland. It was there that he first thought about going somewhere else for a better life.

Australia had not been part of the plan and neither had Jim. However, fate had decided differently and now he was so glad to have his nephew's company and devotion. He looked across at him. Life without him was unimaginable.

He thought about Kythera. All around the island, green-clad hills rose from the curve of beaches. In tiny white-washed villages like his own, bougainvillea, oleander and geraniums flourished pink and purple in defiance of the dry, stony soil. They ate olives and almonds, which grew abundantly on the slopes above the villages, and the fruits of the surrounding sea. He could see the flocks of sheep and goats shading from the noonday sun under majestic platanos trees. Ah, he could almost taste his mother's arni sti souvla, lamb roasted on the spit with lemon and rosemary.

Now the scenery had changed again. They were travelling through mile upon mile of thick bushland, pale green in spite of a relentless sun beating down from a steely blue sky. He dozed fitfully and jolted awake to see a mob of strange creatures bounding through the trees. They had huge feet and a great long tail. 'Demetrius, Demetrius,' he tried to shake his nephew awake but too late, they were gone. Then the country opened up again and became red dirt broken occasionally by grey stunted trees. The train eased around a bend and the flat nothingness was broken by forests of prickly pear, stalking across the landscape like Frankenstein monsters. On and on the train went, rattling across bridges – but there was no water? The creek beds below them were muddy holes surrounded by lank grass. It was unlike anything they had ever seen.

Occasionally the carriage became so hot and stuffy they opened a window to let in some fresh air, but even the breeze was hot and they closed the window again to block out the smell of coal dust. Where was this town? It seemed as though the journey would never end.

When the weather-beaten sign for Charleville finally swung into view, they had been travelling for over 48 hours and had covered some 500 miles. Two dusty, weary passengers alighted from the Western Mail to survey their new surroundings. Sydney and Brisbane had been nothing like this. Charleville was not on the moon, but now they knew they really had come to the other side of the world. It was 1909.

In 1868 William Tully, a government surveyor, had named the town after Charleville in County Cork, Ireland, where he had spent his youth. He set it out in a grid pattern and named the two main streets after Alfred, the Duke of Edinburgh, and Wills, for the explorer of the same name. Now the dusty little town bustled with bullockies and their wagons, and rang with the cries of the Cobb & Co drivers cracking their whips over sweating horses. The sun was high overhead and a cloud of dust rose from a noisy mob of cattle being herded down the street in front of them. A sign read Wills Street.

It was almost noon and soon a clock was striking the hour. Jimmy's English was now very good and he politely asked a passer-by if he knew the cafe of Mr Comino. 'Straight down here from the station, then turn right into Alfred Street at the Hotel Charleville.' They walked down a street lined with white cedar trees; horses tethered to posts along the way kept up a steady swish of tails against the swarms of flies. Jimmy explained to his uncle that a

hanging sign advertised Certified Chemist and Druggist and underneath Teeth Carefully Extracted. Back in Frilinganika the barber could be called on to pull a rotten tooth with a pair of large pliers.

They passed the Norman hotel and Jimmy read the street sign. It was a strange word, Galatea. At the next corner a building bore the large legend Charleville Hotel - Depot for Cobb's Coaches. 'Ah, this is it.' They quickened their pace in anticipation.

As they turned into Alfred Street, their steps faltered. They clutched at one another in dismay and disappointment. A few doors down from the Hotel Charleville was Comino's cafe. Could this be the business the Freeleagues had paid good money for? It was nothing more than a roof over a couple of dirty tables. Had they come all this way for nothing? Harry sank down on his haunches in the dirt to take it all in.

For a moment, it all washed over him again, the fear and despair after being turned away at the American Legation in Naples. But he had managed that disaster and he would manage this one too. They had no choice. They were here and what was a bit of hard work? They had done plenty of that. There was only one thing to do: roll up their sleeves and begin.

The first white settler, Luis Janitsky, arrived in Charleville in 1865. Now less than 50 years later two young Greeks were making a start in a little cafe in Alfred Street. They opened around the clock.

There were no cabbage rolls served in that first cafe. That would bring in no customers. They had watched and learnt in Sydney and Brisbane, and they knew it had to be good, robust Aussie tucker: steak and eggs sunny-side up,

fish and chips, bread and butter; tea and coffee with plenty of milk and sugar. In America, early Greek restaurants catered to countrymen homesick for familiar food – kotopoulo lemonata and stifatho. Not here.

Charleville was the hub of a wheel with stock routes radiating out to four states and people soon got to know that these boys kept long hours. Business boomed. Eventually they put away the rolled mattresses and moved to a rented house, but it was a waste of money: they were hardly ever there. The business was so successful that within 12 months the young men were not only able to enter a new partnership with another Greek and move to new premises, but also had enough money to pay out the Freeleagues' loan. In later years, Harry relished telling and retelling the story of the superhuman effort he and Jimmy had made to be free of debt to their relatives. Jimmy learnt that one by heart too.

The new shop in Wills Street, opposite the old Norman hotel, was clean and attractive, and now they could afford to furnish it with good tables and chairs. Later it became the Bellevue cafe. They were becoming both respectable and respected, dressed always in spotless white aprons, Jimmy with a cheeky grin and a ready wit and Harry, older and more sedate, still fumbling to express himself in English.

It was 1912 and their world was about to turn again and again. It would be dizzying.