

The Rabbit Proof Fence

TWO

The Moore River Native Settlement, 1931

The Molly, Daisy and Gracie were taken from their homes and families to be raised as orphans. After five days of sailing down the coast of Western Australia, they arrived at the Port of Fremantle in Southwestern Australia. The next stop would be their final destination— the Moore River Native Settlement— the place that the three girls from Jigalong had travelled hundreds of kilometers to reach. It was intended that this would be their home for several years, and where they would be educated in European ways. It was here that they met Matron Campbell, one of the women in charge of housing and educating aboriginal girls at the school.

The road out to the settlement was almost totally underwater. This made the trip laborious and stressful. The engine strained as the car swayed from side to side and the wheels slid over the muddy road.

“There have been scattered showers all day,” Matron Campbell told the girls as they peered anxiously through the windows. “You’d better pull the blankets over your legs,” she said, glancing at the thunder clouds rollings over in the west. “It’s going to pour down with rain soon.” She was worried - but there were enough of them to push the car if it got bogged in the soft, clay road.

The trip had taken longer than usual and it was almost dark when they arrived at the settlement. The place was shrouded in fine misty rain and lit only by lights in the center of the compound. Miss Campbell parked near the staff quarters and the girls waited in the car while she went inside.

“Where’s everybody?” whispered Gracie, as she leant closer to the window.

“I don’t know,” replied Molly softly, glancing curiously around her.

She expected to see at least some of the residents but there was no one about, the whole place seemed to be deserted. Miss Campbell emerged from the stone and lattice staff quarters with another woman.

“These three,” she said, pointing to Molly, Daisy and Gracie, “came all the way from Nullagine.”

The three looked at each other silently. They wanted to tell these midgerji (white women) that their home is Jigalong not Nullagine.

“The other one, Rosie, comes from Moora,” Miss Campbell said as she handed over to the woman. Then she disappeared behind the trellised building.

“Come with me,” said Miss Evans. “I’ll take you to your dormitory. This way.”

They followed her through the slushy compound to a wooden building. As they approached, they noticed that the door was locked with chains and padlocks. Molly saw that the uninviting weatherboard and latticed dormitory had bars on the windows as well. *Just like a jail*, she thought, and she didn’t like it one bit. The four girls stood around in the cold, their arms folded across their chests trying desperately to control the shivering. They were glad when Miss Evans undid the padlocks, opened the door, and invited them to

follow her into the already overcrowded dormitory. There were beds everywhere.

“These are your beds, you can choose whichever one you’d like to sleep in. You can please yourself, alright,” she said as she turned to leave. She paused, then added, “Eh, I nearly forgot to tell you about the lavatory. Use one of those buckets in the bathroom,” she said. “See over there.”

Four heads turned in the direction at which the woman was pointing, but she didn’t wait for confirmation, she was anxious to return to her comfortable room next door, behind the white-washed stone wall.

Molly, Daisy, and Gracie selected the three beds nearest to them while Rosie took the one at the other end. The girls found it very difficult to sleep on the hard mattress. They lay feeling cold and lonely, listening to the rain falling on the tin roof. Gracie could stand it no longer; she sneaked quietly to Molly’s bed. “Dgudu, (older sister) I can’t sleep,” she whispered. “I’m cold. I’ve only got one rug.”

“I am cold too, so bring your rug over here and sleep in my bed,” Molly told her shivering young sister.

As Gracie snatched up her rugs Daisy sat up and whispered, “I’m cold too, Dgudu.”

“You can sleep jina side,” Molly told Daisy, who was already throwing her blanket across the bed.

So, for the rest of the night the three of them cuddled up in the single bed. Very early the next morning, they were awakened with a start by a strange voice yelling loudly, “Come on, girls, wakey! wakey! Rise and shine.”

The woman went to the first bed and pulled the blankets off the child’s head and shook her vigorously; then moved on to the next bed and repeated the performance. The new girls were surprised to see the same small, slim woman who had escorted them last night, rushing around peeling the warm rugs from the sleeping children, who mumbled angrily as they were forced to stumble out onto the cold wooden floor. This was a ritual that Miss Evans, the staff member in charge of the dormitories, conducted every morning without fail.

When she came to Molly’s bed she stared at the three girls who were now sitting on top of the bed. “Ah, yes, you

are the new arrivals. There are four of you, isn't there? All right, you all make your beds, then go up and have some breakfast at the dining hall. One of the others will show you where it is."

Molly, Daisy and Gracie were able to observe their surroundings and dorm mates more closely in the morning light. They saw that the other girls were just as curious as they were.

"Where are you lot from?" they wanted to know.

"We come from Jigalong," Molly answered without hesitation.

"Where's that?" asked someone from the other end of the dorm.

"Up north," said Molly quietly. She didn't want to say too much to these strangers. She was glad when one of them came over to tell them that she would take them and show them around later.

“But you’d better make your beds first,” she said. This was easy, you just straightened the blanket over the mattress. There were no sheets on the beds. They were stored away to be issued only on special occasions to impress special visitors.

“I am Martha Jones. I’m from Port Hedland,” said this friendly girl who had volunteered to be their guide. “I’ve been here for one year now. I came from a station to go to school; then the government gunna send me back to my family to work for the station,” she said proudly.

She must have been about fifteen, but there was no way of verifying that because, like so many others at the settlement, her birth wasn’t registered. The trio from Jigalong liked her instantly. She was a treasure, full of information about everything concerning the settlement and what they could expect while they lived there.

“It’s not bad once you get used to things here,” Martha told them. The four girls had their doubts about *that*, but said nothing.

The sound of the dining room bell cut short any further conversation. Everyone stood up, patted their beds smooth then headed for the narrow wooden door.

“Come on, we’d better hurry up or we’ll end up with cold breakfast,” said Martha, leading the way outside. In single file they trailed behind her into the wet, drizzly morning to have their first meal in confined conditions.

Opposite the girls’ dormitory, the boys were teeming out of their own quarters and were making their way over the slushy compound to join the girls for breakfast. This was usually a plate of weevily porridge, bread and dripping washed down by a mug or a tin of lukewarm, sweet, milky tea. All inmates of the compound had their meals in the communal dining room. Like breakfast, the other meals were the most unappealing fare ever served to any human being. Offal (garbage) collected from the slaughterhouse and taken down to be cleaned and cooked on the coals of a big fire lit on the banks of the river, was more tasty than what was provided by the cook and staff at the kitchen.

After breakfast, Martha Jones escorted them outside. “Eh look, it might fine up later,” she said with cheerful

optimism as they descended the wooden stairs onto the wet graveled path that led back to the dormitory. Just as Martha was about to open the door, one of the older boys called out to her. “That’s my cousin-brother Bill,” she explained. “Our mothers are sisters.” The girls from Jigalong understood, as they were also daughters of sisters.

“Go inside and wait for me,” she told the four nervous new girls. They weren’t sure whether to go inside or wait for her outside. They watched as she started to run but stopped suddenly because she found that the ground was not only slushy, but very slippery. Her bare feet made a squelching noise as the mud seeped between her toes. The two cousins met in the middle of the compound and stood, talking softly for a few minutes, then parted. While they were waiting for Martha to come in, Molly, Daisy and Gracie whispered in Mardu wangka, their own language.

“I don’t like this place,” whispered Molly. “It’s like a jail. They lock you up at night time and come and open the door in the morning.” They had all noticed the bars across the windows and were really scared of them.

Martha returned to the dormitory and sat on one of the beds near the girls. They were able to have a really good look at their new friend. She was a very pretty girl with short cropped, straight black hair and hazel eyes, but best of all she had a beautiful sparkling smile that made you feel good.

“Bill just wanted to know who you all were and where you came from,” Martha said. “He will pass the information on to the rest of them.” New arrivals always created great interest, but most importantly hope. Hope of news about relations back home.

As they were talking, they were interrupted by someone shouting loudly from a nearby building.

“Hey, who’s out there?” inquired a pathetic voice from inside.

“It’s me, Martha Jones and Polly Martin and four new girls.”

“Can you tell my sister to bring me some meat and damper, and some tea too?” the girl asked. Her voice sounded so alone and unhappy.

“Yeah, I’ll tell her,” promised Polly. Molly, Gracie, Daisy and Rosie looked hard at the grey square building.

“What is that place?” asked Rosie, doing the talking for the other three.

“That’s the ‘boob: they lock anyone in there for punishment,” Martha explained.

“What did that girl do?” asked Rosie.

“Who? Violet Williams? She’s locked up for swearing at Miss Morgan, the teacher. She’s lucky, she’s only in there for two days,” Martha told them about the others who had been incarcerated in the “boob”.

“You should’ve seen the other ones who were locked up for running away,” she said. “They all got seven days punishment with just bread and water. Mr. Johnson shaved their heads bald and made them parade around the compound so that everyone could see them. They got the strap too.”

“Oh, poor things,” said Rosie.

“Everybody felt sorry for them, those three from Carnarvon,” Martha said.

“Did they get far?” asked Rosie.

“No. They only got as far as Jump Up Hill, along the railway line between Gillingarra and Mogumber. They knew that the train that goes through to Geraldton slowed down there. So they waited there, ready to jump into one of the goods vans. The black tracker found them there. The girls pleaded with him to let them go, but he wouldn’t listen; he just whipped them with his stock whip,” Martha said, with anger in her voice. “He made them walk all the way back, without a break, while he rode his grey stallion like a white policeman.”

“Anybody get away properly — without being caught?” enquired Rosie.

“No, lots of girls have tried to run away back to their homes but that black tracker has always caught them and brought them here again to be flogged and locked up in the ‘boob’,” replied Martha.

The “boob” was a place of detention once described as a small, detached concrete room with a sandy floor, with only a gleam of light and little ventilation coming through a narrow, barred opening in the north wall. Every inmate of the settlement dreaded being incarcerated in this place. Some children were forced to spend up to fourteen days in that horrible place.

Polly and Martha led the girls past the boys’ dormitory, the sewing room and the front of the “Big House”, down the graveled road, through the pine plantation along the kindergarten fence to the hospital.

“That road goes down to the camps where the married couples live,” said Martha, “and this one,” pointing to the one on which they stood, “takes us back to the compound.”

“And where does this one go?” asked Rosie, facing east and nodding in that direction.

“That’s the road to Mogumber, the only one in and out of the settlement,” Martha told her. “And there’s a fence right around this place.”

They returned to the dormitory to rest and talk. One thing on which they could all agree was that this place was certainly different from what they envisaged. When the sons and daughters of the landed gentry and businessmen and professionals such as doctors, lawyers and politicians, were sent away to boarding schools to be educated, they were likely to be given pleasant rooms that would be theirs for the duration of their schooling. Instead of a residential school, the Aboriginal children were placed in an overcrowded dormitory. The inmates, not students, slept on cyclone beds with government-issue blankets. There were no sheets or pillow slips except on special occasions when there was an inspection by prominent officials. Then they were removed as soon as the visitors left the settlement and stored away until the next visit. On the windows there were no colorful curtains, just wire screens and iron bars. It looked more like a concentration camp than a residential school for Aboriginal children.

Back at the dormitory, the girls were trying to snuggle down in their cold, uninviting beds. Molly, Daisy and Gracie began to talk normally amongst themselves, not whispering but speaking in their own relaxed manner.

“You girls can’t talk blackfulla language here, you know,” came the warning from the other side of the dorm. “You gotta forget it and talk English all the time.”

The girls were dumbfounded; they couldn’t say anything but stare at the speaker.

“That’s true,” said Martha in support. “I had to do the same.

They tell everybody that when they come here and go to school for the first time.”

Molly couldn’t believe what they had just heard. “We can’t talk our old wangka (language),” she whispered. “That’s awful.”

“We all know it’s awful,” Martha told them. “But we got over that,” she added calmly.

Molly lay staring at the ceiling, pondering their fate and the kind of lifestyle they could expect at this strange place, and she didn’t like it one bit. After a while, she and the rest of the girls dozed off to sleep.

Some time later they were awakened abruptly by a loud voice telling them that the bell had gone. “Come on, get up, tea time everybody,” the voice told them.

Throughout the dormitory, sleeping forms began to rise from their narrow beds. Once again, Martha took charge and led the four newcomers to the dining hall for a meal of watery stew, almost the repeat of what they had for dinner, except they also had bread and treacle. When no one was looking, Molly put all the unwanted crusts in her calico bag, and nudged her young sisters sitting either side of her to do the same.

“For later,” whispered Molly.

“Well, everybody finished now?” asked Martha politely.

“Yes,” said the girls softly.

“We’d better hurry; it’s going to rain again.” They stood briefly on the verandah to watch the thunderclouds rumbling in the west. There was a flash of lightning,

followed by another. “Quick, run,” urged Martha. “It’s going to pour down soon.”

They reached the dormitory just in time, many of the other boys and girls were running quickly to beat the rain. It began to fall lightly at first, then, as darkness approached, the wind blew strong and cold. All the inmates returned to their dormitories. The younger ones lay quietly in their beds listening to the older ones sharing with each other stories, anecdotes and hopes for the future.

After roll call and lights out, Molly listened to the slide of the bolt and the rattle of the padlock, then silence. It was at that moment this free-spirited girl knew that she and her sisters must escape from this place.