

Chapter Seven

Molly, Daisy, and Gracie realized that, although they were in familiar territory, they were not safe from the authorities. The girls knew that they could be captured at any time of the day or night, and be sent all the way back to the settlement. The girls had been on the run for five weeks, and were surviving on bush tucker and water.

One day in a clearing close to the fence, the girls spied an emu and a family of six tiny black and white striped chicks strolling along behind him. While Daisy stood perfectly still behind some trees, Molly and Gracie chased and captured a chick each. The old man emu turned on them, but gave up when he remembered that the other four chicks were unprotected.

The three girls waited in the seclusion of the small acacia bushes to see if anyone would come to investigate the commotion, but no one appeared, so they plucked and cooked the emu chicks for supper, accompanied by damper and washed down with black bitter tea; there was no sugar left.

After supper, they slept under some thick shrubs. That night Molly dreamed that she and her younger sisters were being pursued by a policeman and a black tracker on a horse. She could see them riding beside the fence on magnificent grey stallions, coming towards them from the north. They were coming closer, and closer— at that critical moment she woke up shaking with fear and covered in sweat. Then she heard them. It wasn't a dream after all. It was real. Clop, clop, clopping of the horses came.

Molly shook the other two awake. “Keep still and don’t make a noise,” she whispered, shivering slightly. “It might be a policeman and that Mardu tracker.”

They lay on their stomachs, not daring to move and watched sleepily as the riders passed slowly by them.

Molly sat up and sighed with relief and said, “They’re only station yowadas, (horses) not policemen.”

It was still dark with the first rays of dawn only just appearing in the eastern sky. The birds began twittering and fluttering through the trees and bushes around them.

“We’ll eat on the run,” said Molly, and they headed towards Meekatharra.

Soon they were on the outskirts of the town where they could hear the sounds of people going about their business, the shunting of the goods train, and other noises unfamiliar to these girls from the desert area.

“Dgudu, let us go into Meekatharra and ask somebody to give us midka (*food*) for the road,” Gracie suggested. “That old lady Minnie, you know the one who used to be on Ethel Creek Station, the one married to that old man from Nullagine. She will help us,” she added hopefully.

“No,” snapped Molly. “There’re policemen in that town. They will pick us up and send us to Moore River,” she reminded Gracie. “No, we go around Meekatharra.”

Daisy said nothing, she was used to them bickering and squabbling, so she didn’t let any of it bother her at all.

The girls’ spirits soared as they realized that home was drawing nearer and nearer each day. They had reached the railway siding near Mt Russel Station quite unexpectedly several days after passing near the

town of Meekatharra. It was here that Gracie decided that she had had enough of trekking in the wilderness and living off bush tucker. She'd had her fill of this arduous venture.

"I'm going to the station to see those people working over there," a determined Gracie told her sisters. Fifteen minutes later, she returned to announce her decision. "That woman, the muda-muda one working here told me that my mummy left Walgun Station and is living in Wiluna," she said excitedly. "I am going with her when the train comes."

Gracie was just plain tired and weary of walking; her bare feet were very sore. Looking at the endless posts and wire that made up the rabbit-proof fence became too much for her. She flatly refused to go any further.

"I don't want to die," she said finally as she turned her back to walk away from them. "I'm going to my mummy in Wiluna."

The pleadings and beggings of her sisters fell on deaf ears. For Gracie it was easier to hop on a train than to trudge on further to Jigalong.

Molly and Daisy lingered for as long as they dared before they accepted Gracie's parting. Then they continued north on their incredible journey to reach their goal, that lonely isolated outpost on the edge of the desert.

Molly found Gracie's decision very hard to accept, but she agreed with her younger sister in the end that it was closer to Wiluna than it was to Jigalong.

By noon on the day they parted, the temperature had risen, and it was the hottest day since their abscondment. The military coat and jackets were discarded and Molly and Daisy decided to rest beside a creek-bed. There wasn't much water in it, but there was enough to quench their thirst and to fill their billy-can, so that they would have a

supply of drinking water until they came across a windmill or one of the wells along the Canning Stock Route.

Molly was exhausted, not only from the trekking and the lack of sleep, but the argument with Gracie had left her emotionally drained. So she found a soft spot near the creek, clear of rocks and stones, and making herself comfortable she dozed off to sleep.

Daisy had discovered a bird's nest in a river gum on the bank. It was a pink and white cockatoo's nest with four young squawking chicks in it. While her older sister slept, Daisy climbed up and grabbed three of the chicks, one by one, and killed them by wringing their scrawny necks, then dropped them onto the ground. As she was reaching for the last chick, she slipped and grazed her knee. It was very painful, so she rubbed it to soothe the stinging. There was no relief, so she became quite angry and swore loudly to herself, which didn't stop the pain but it made her feel better.

Suddenly she was disturbed by a man's voice. "Hey, where's your big sister?"

"What?" answered Daisy as she turned around to the speaker, a young man, a muda-muda dressed in station workers clothes, standing on the rocky outcrop near a larger river gum.

"I said, Where's your big sister?" he yelled. "Tell her to come here to me. I want her. I heard about you girls: you ran away from the settlement. Yeah, Moore River," he added as he swaggered towards her.

Daisy was still smarting from the knee injury and let out a string of abuse, swearing in both English and Mardu wangka, telling him exactly what to do with himself. Then she bent down and picked up some big stones and pelted him with them.

He ran, ducking and weaving, to avoid the missiles that were being hurled at him. As the young stockman mounted his horse, he yelled back angrily, “Awright, you bitch, you wait. I gunna report you to the police.”

Molly came running, awakened by the shouting and swearing. “What’s wrong?” she asked. “Who are you swearing at?” When Daisy had finished explaining what had occurred, Molly cursed. “The mongrel bastard,” she said, feeling very threatened. A man who had been spurned and attacked by a small girl might just carry out his threat. “Come on, we’d better move along,” urged Molly.

So they picked up the chicks and plucked them as they walked over the stony surface of the rugged red plains. The girls didn’t stop until nightfall, when the shadows were long, and they felt it was safe to make a fire to cook the birds.

Since the confrontation with the station hand, the two sisters became even more cautious. They were taking no chances at this stage of the trek — as they were so close to home.

With the change of climate, the girls were able to take advantage of the longer hours of daylight. They were able to rise early and cover a good distance before nightfall. They were now in their own land, and they knew exactly where they were heading.

Just south of Station 594, along the Canning Stock Route, they discovered a burrow with fresh tracks leading to it. They realized that it wasn’t made by rabbits, but by a cat, a feral cat. Molly grabbed a thick stick and began digging while Daisy stood by to clobber it with her stick.

The fat cat spat and scratched Molly’s arms and neck but that didn’t deter her. That evening they had feral cat for supper, and some for breakfast the next morning.

Molly and Daisy were relieved when they climbed through the southern boundary fence of Station 594, or as it was known by the local people — 94. It was a cattle station along the Canning Stock Route, south of Jigalong. By this time, all the flour, tea and water had been used so they forced themselves to walk faster and make an effort to reach the windmill south of the station.

That night they had no supper, but they filled up with water until they were bloated and very uncomfortable. As they couldn't sleep, the girls decided to continue walking towards the station while the moon was full and shining brightly. Eventually, weariness forced them to stop and they made themselves as comfortable as they could on the rough sand of a creek-bed and fell asleep immediately.

Molly and Daisy woke at piccaninny dawn and were driven by pangs of hunger to Station 594. When they saw the camp site they almost ran but they didn't have the energy. They knew exactly where to find their aunt's camp as they had both been there before. Their aunt, Molly's step-father's sister, greeted them in the traditional manner by crying with them and for those who had passed away since their last meeting.

“Where did you girls come from? Where have you been?” she asked. Their aunt and other relations couldn't believe what the girls told them. They were amazed and intrigued by their story. “You poor silly girls, you could have died in the bush somewhere and no one would have known.” She began to cry loudly.

The two sisters sank gratefully into the warm bath their aunt prepared for them - their first since leaving the East Perth Girls Home. They had grown used to washing themselves at the windmills and pools along the way. The supper of beef stew, home-made bread and tea revived them. Their aunt heaped their plates with stew but Molly and Daisy found that they could only manage small quantities of food as their stomachs had shrunk during their trek.

“Don’t worry about that,” said their aunt warmly. “You’ll soon be fixed when you get back to your mummies. They will fatten you up again. You’re too skinny.”

After supper, they all sat around the fire, sharing some of their experiences with their relations late into the night. Then both stretched out on comfortable beds and fell sound asleep.

The two sisters awoke the next day feeling refreshed and rested after the good night’s sleep. In fact, they felt that they could complete the last leg of their journey without the constant fear of capture or starvation.

“Not far to go, Dgudu,” said Daisy.

“No, not far now. We’ll be home soon,” replied Molly.

They would have reached their goal within the next three or four days. These two girls had overcome their fears and proved that they could survive. It took a strong will and a purpose; they had both.

For the first time in seven weeks the sisters didn’t have to rush or eat on the run. They found it very pleasant to have breakfast later instead of rising at first light, and they took their time to enjoy the small pieces of juicy pan-fried steaks, hot damper and tea sweetened with Nestles milk that their aunt had prepared for them.

When they had almost finished breakfast, their cousin Joey came over and joined them and accepted a mug of tea.

“We’re going back to Jigalong this morning as soon as the boss finishes his breakfast,” he said.

Molly and Daisy were ready in a few minutes and sat waiting for Joey’s signal. They didn’t have to wait long. Picking up their calico bags, which were now the same color as the red earth, they walked purposely towards Joey and his boss. They turned and waved goodbye to

their aunt and cousin, the others were still asleep, and joined the maintenance workers of the rabbit-proof fence.

“You two girls can take it in turns riding this camel back to Jigalong,” said Ron Clarkson, the contract worker, as he patted the animal. The camel raised its head, looking around everywhere and chewing without pausing. Ron returned to the other camel that he normally rode.

Daisy nudged her older sister and pointing to the camel, whispered, “Is this a man or woman one, Dgudu?”

“I don’t know yet. I can’t tell while it’s lying down. Wait till it stands up, then I’ll tell you.”

The girls had seen the cheeky, spitting, biting camels at the depot and didn’t like them one bit.

“You go first, I’ll walk and we’ll change over when I get tired, alright,” said Molly as she helped Daisy onto the camel’s back.

“Yeah, alright then,” said Daisy, giving the animal the correct commands as instructed by Ron Clarkson. “It’s a woman camel,” Molly informed her. Both were relieved that they weren’t given a nasty, bad tempered, spitting bull camel. “Ready to move along?” asked the boss.

“Yes,” they replied, and followed him slowly out through the station gates and across the stone covered plains, scattered with spinifex grass, acacia bushes and spindly mulga trees, towards the rabbit-proof fence.

Daisy enjoyed the ride, and welcomed the chance at last to watch the passing scenery from above ground level.

The sun was setting the following evening when they entered the main gate to Munda Mindi, several kilometres to the left of the rabbit-proof fence and made a camp.

“You three stay here. I’ll be back soon,” Ron Clarkson told them, as he tied his camel to the fence.

Joey, Molly and Daisy set about gathering wood for a fire and sat down and listened while Joey brought them up to date with the latest news and family gossip. Half an hour later, Joey’s boss returned carrying a cardboard box of homemade bread, boiled cold potatoes, tins of corn beef and a canvas bag of water.

After their meal, they sat around the blazing fire and yarned until they grew weary and settled down to a peaceful sleep near the fire, sharing a blanket between them. Soon they would be reunited with their mothers, just as their sister Gracie had been. That night they slept a dreamless sleep.

For breakfast the following morning they ate bread and jam, salted beef and sweet, black tea, which they thoroughly enjoyed. Molly took her turn to ride while Daisy walked beside her.

Molly, Daisy, Joey and Ron Clarkson lunched and rested on the banks of Savory Creek, quite near where Molly was born, then facing north they made tracks for home. It felt wonderful.

One late afternoon in October 1931, the four travelled silently across the plains along the rabbit-proof fence, each one deep in their own thoughts. The late afternoon was pleasantly warm, though the nights were still rather cool. Now it was Molly’s turn to point out special places to Daisy. It was a quick trip down memory’s landscape. They passed close to the claypan where Molly was born. A feeling of nostalgia brought tears to her eyes as memories of her childhood flashed before her.

As they drew closer, nervous excitement was building up inside them. Both girls took in the familiar landscape of the red earth, the dry spinifex grass and grey-green mulga trees. There was nothing to

compare with the beauty of these plains that stretched out in all directions.

They could see the black hills in the distance where their families hunted for girdi-girdis and murrandus. They were approaching the camp site now, the dogs were barking and people were shouting to each other and pointing in their direction. Some were sitting in the creek bed, wailing quietly. But all eyes were focused on the four weary travelers. Unbeknown to them, their Uncle Freddie had ridden on ahead to tell the old people that Molly and Daisy were returning home to them.

The four travelers parted company on the banks of the Jigalong Creek, close to the mud-brick huts of the depot, and made their way to their homes. The girls walked slowly towards their mothers' camps where their family sat awaiting their arrival.

The wailing began softly at first then grew louder as more people joined the group.

The maintenance boss called out just before he disappeared behind the huts. "Come down to the store and get some rations, alright."

"Yeah, alright," they replied shyly. But neither of the girls accepted that offer because at daybreak the next morning, their families moved away from the depot and had no intention of returning until they were absolutely certain that the girls were safe from government officers and policemen.

Molly and Daisy did not relish the idea of being sent back to the Moore River Native Settlement. The trek had been no easy feat. It had taken the girls months to complete and nothing or nobody could take this moment of happiness and satisfaction from them. They had finally reached their destination and were reunited with their families. They had taken a great risk. Inmates absconding from the settlement were considered to be a serious problem. If they had been caught, the girls

would have had their heads shaved or made to wear sacks and other more serious punishments.

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The task of apprehending Molly and Daisy was handed back to Constable M.J. Riggs of the Nullagine police station. This was the policeman, who in his role as a Protection Officer, had removed the three girls from Jigalong and escorted them to Marble Bar. Now he was informing the Commission of Police that:

“From inquiries made I am of the opinion that the girls will not return to Jigalong for a while, but that they will stay around Lake Naboroo with the natives in the vicinity...”

(4/ 12/ 1931. Police File No. 5979/ 31.)

The correspondence concerning the girls continued.

I heard from the Constable in charge at Nullagine that the three half-caste girls have not yet been recovered. I am afraid you will never get them now as by this time they will be back in their own country and well and truly camouflaged; even if you did fluke them now, I do not think you would ever keep them unless you separated them all or locked them up, but of course that latter course would be worse than their being in the bush I guess.

Yours faithfully Arthur T. Hungerford

Arthur T. Hungerford

Protector of Aborigines Jigalong Depot 11/ 10/ 31

To Mr A.O. Neville The Chief Protector of Aborigines

Dear Sir, Re: 173/ 30

The half-castes Molly and Daisy are back in this locality now and seem none the worse for their most wonderful "trek". "I expect they did walk in record time considering they had to most of the time provide their own food..."

Yours,

Arthur T. Hungerford

Jigalong

To the Chief Protector of Aborigines, Nullagine.

Molly, one of the half-caste girls who decamped from Moore River Native Settlement has been seen in this locality. Do you want her sent back down south?

Sincerely,

M.J. Riggs

Constable Riggs

To Constable Riggs:

The Chief Protector of Aborigines (Mr. Neville) has informed the Commissioner of Police that he did not desire any further action in regard to half-caste Molly because she has been a costly woman to the Department. Very heavy expenditure was incurred in securing her, and when she escaped a lot of undesirable publicity took place.

The Commissioner of Aboriginal Affairs

To Mr A.O. Neville Chief Protector of Aborigines:

Dear Sir, Constable Riggs told me you were not bothering about the half-caste Molly, does the same apply to Daisy? I hear they are back somewhere in their own country though goodness knows where.

Yours faithfully

Arthur T. Hungerford

Jigalong 5/ 11/ 31

To Mr. Hungerford Jigalong:

I would like the child to be recovered if no great expense is to be incurred; otherwise the prestige of the Department is likely to suffer.

Yours Truly

A.O. Neville

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“We followed that fence, the rabbit-proof fence, all the way home from the settlement to Jigalong. Long way, alright. We stay in the bush hiding there for a long time,” remembers Molly, who is in her late seventies. When she was only fourteen years old she decided that she wanted to have a part in planning her own destiny.

“Long way” sums up rather understatedly what was, without a doubt, one of the longest walks in the history of the Australian outback. While other parts of this vast country of ours have been crossed on horses or camels, these three girls did their exploring on their bare feet. An incredible achievement in anyone’s language. The vastness and the

diversity of the Western Australian landscape would always be respected and appreciated by them— they trekked across it and conquered. This historic trek had taken almost nine weeks.

Several months later a small group of people were relaxing around a fire in the lounge room of a boarding house in the south-west town of Margaret River. They were listening with great interest while some young women were relating a tragic incident where three Aboriginal girls were either drowned in the raging floods or perished in the wilderness, but their bodies were never found.

“Where did this happen?” asked a lady named Mrs Mary Dunnet, who was holidaying with her sister— the proprietor of the boarding house.

“At the Moore River Native Settlement near Mogumber north of Perth,” was the reply. The women recounting the story were employed as nurses there at the time the incident occurred.

“Well, I am pleased to tell you that those girls didn’t drown, they returned home safe and sound to Jigalong and Wiluna,” said Mrs Dunnet.

Incidentally, she later took Molly in as a trainee house maid on her cattle station, the Balfour Downs Station, about 40 kilometres north-east of the present site of the Jigalong community.