

Back to the Homeland

Watching the three girls disappear into the open woodlands, Mrs. Flanagan said loudly to herself, “Those girls are too young to be wandering around in the bush. They’ll perish for sure. They don’t know this part of the country. And the three of them with just dresses on. It’s a wonder they didn’t catch colds or worse, pneumonia. I’ll have to report this to Mr. Neal for their own good before they get lost and die in the bush,” she said. “It’s my duty.” Eh, she told herself, those three girls from the north-west would fare no better than the other runaways. Once they reached the railway line they would decide to sit and wait for the train, then they would be handed over to the police at the next railway siding or station. They always get caught.

A kilometer away, the three sisters agreed that from that point onwards they would follow a routine. Whenever they arrived at a farmhouse or station homestead, Daisy and Gracie would enter the yard and ask for food while Molly waited a safe distance away, out of sight, where she could watch them. Thankfully, food was never refused. These handouts sustained the girls during their long trek home.

Molly decided to continue in the same direction for a couple of hours at least — just to foil their would-be captors whom the lady at the farmhouse may have contacted. “We go that way,” she said, pointing north-east. “Not kukarda. That **midgerji** (white lady) know which way we’re going now.”

“You know, we shouldn’t have told her where we were heading,” Molly said regrettably. “They might have someone waiting for us along the rabbit-proof fence. Never mind. We’ll go this way for now.”

So they walked quickly, wearing their wheat bag capes and military coats that protected them from the rain. They had enough food for a day or two, so if they quickened their pace they would

reach somewhere safe before dark and make a warm, dry shelter for the night.

“Here!” said Molly as she broke off a thick heath bush. “This is a good place to make our camp. Come on, hurry up and break more bushes.”

In a few minutes they had erected a cozy, firm little shelter under the bushes, then they rushed around and collected dry twigs and leaves to make a fire. This warmed them while they enjoyed their supper of cold **mutton**, bread, fruit cake and sweet, black tea. The fire and food made them feel more relaxed and helped them to talk and laugh together — a ritual that had been sadly missing during the past few days. Soon the heat made them drowsy, so they settled into their shelter and in no time at all, they were fast asleep.

The next morning the skies were clear. There was no rain, only raindrops drip dripping from the leaves of the trees and shrubs onto the sand and dead leaves beneath. Patches of grass were still wet and were dropping heavily with water. Just looking out made the girls shiver. None of them wanted to leave their cozy shelter.

Gracie and Daisy waited until their big sister got up and made a fire, then crawled out to join her.

Contented and with full stomachs, the trio trudged on until darkness fell and they made a shelter for the night.

Since their escape, Molly, Daisy and Gracie had cut down their sleeping hours from sunset to first light or **piccaninny** dawn; a pattern they intended to use all the way home.

That night, Molly shivered as she lay on the ground pondering on the day’s events.

Rising at dawn the next day, the three girls ate their breakfast on the move. They had gone several kilometers when they came upon a large, dead marri gum burning fiercely. They walked around it quickly and disappeared into the shrubs.

.....

Within the week, the scratches on their legs had become festering sores. The three girls had been on the run for over a month.

“My legs are sore, Dgudu,” cried Gracie. “I can’t walk.”

“My legs hurt too,” chimed in Daisy.

“Mine are sore, too,” said Molly. “But we can’t hang around here all day, we gotta walk on further.” “I’ll carry Daisy first. Have a rest, then it will be your turn, Gracie,” said Molly.

“Alright,” both agreed.

The progress was slow and laborious but they persisted. When Molly’s turn came to have a break from carrying them, the younger sisters took turns piggy-backing each other.

To fool possible informants, they would approach a farmhouse or a station homestead from one direction and pretend to go off in the opposite way. *Then* they would do a full circle, making sure that no one was following them, and double back when all was clear and continue along their usual route. But they never ventured too close to any towns throughout the Upper Murchinson district.

One day about midday, when the sun was high in the **azure** sky, Daisy and Gracie heard an excited shriek from Molly who, as usual, was walking ahead of them. “Here it is. I’ve found it. Come and look,” she yelled as she laughed and waved her arms.

“What is it?” asked Gracie. “What are you shouting for?”

“I’ve found the rabbit-proof fence. See,” she said, pointing to the fence. “This will take us all the way home to Jigalong.”

“But how do you know that’s the rabbit-proof fence, **Dgudu**?” asked Daisy, with a puzzled look on her face.

She didn’t notice anything special about this fence.

“This fence is straight, see,” Molly explained. “And it’s clear on each side of the fence.”

She should know, after all her father was the inspector of the fence and he told her all about it. Now the fence would help her and

her sisters find their way home. There was much excitement when the girls at last reached the rabbit-proof fence.

From when she was young, Molly had learned that the fence was an important landmark for the **Mardudjara** people of the Western Desert who migrated south from the remote regions. They knew that once they reached Billanooka Station, it was simply a matter of following the rabbit-proof fence to their final destination, the **Jigalong** government depot; the desert outpost of the white man. The fence cut through the country from south to north. It was a typical response by the white people to a problem of their own making. Building a fence to keep the rabbits out proved to be a futile attempt by the government of the day. But for the three runaways, the fence was a symbol of love, home and security.

“We’re nearly home,” said Molly without realizing that they had merely reached the halfway mark, they had almost eight hundred kilometers still to go. “We found the fence now. It gunna be easy,” she told her younger sisters. They were glad to hear that because each morning when they awoke they were never sure whether they would survive another day.

Molly was determined to reach Jigalong and *nothing* was going to stop her. She renewed her vow as she greeted the fence like a long-lost friend, touching and gripping the cold wire. “We gunna walk alongside it all the way to Jigalong,” Molly said confidently. It would stand out like a beacon that would lead them out of the rugged wilderness, across a strange country to their homeland.

.....

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. It was too risky even to stop to light a fire to cook their murrandu (lizard meat).

The girls had been on the run for five weeks and were surviving on bush tucker and water. They would sleep for only a few hours under bushes as they were aware that they could be caught following

their contact with Don Willocks. They purposely avoided station homesteads and despite the cold nights no fire was lit.

“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** (half black, half white) 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.

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** (cooking pot), 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 (the Mardu language), telling him exactly what to do with himself. Then she bent down and 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.

The sun was setting the following evening when they entered the main gate to Munda Mindi, several kilometers to the left of the rabbit-proof fence and made a camp. 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 giridi-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 girls walked slowly towards their mothers' camps where their family sat awaiting their arrival. It 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.

.....

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."

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."

.....

Molly speaks of her Odyssey today — a half century later:

"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.

The End

