

**The  
Rabbit Proof Fence**

<b>One</b>	<b>Rabbit Proof Fence</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Two</b>	<b>Moore River Settlement</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Three</b>	<b>Escape</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Four</b>	<b>Alone in the Outback</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Five</b>	<b>Mrs. Flanagin</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>Six</b>	<b>The Chase</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Seven</b>	<b>Almost Caught</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Eight</b>	<b>Home</b>	<b>85</b>

# The Rabbit Proof Fence

When the white men came to Australia, they brought many new things, things that amazed and frightened the people who lived in that sun baked land. They brought new tools, new metals, new clothes, new foods, and new weapons. They even brought new animals. But not everything the white men brought was good for the country. The new weapons killed many who resisted the whites. New diseases killed many more. And the new animals of the white man spread rapidly over the continent, killing the native beasts. The white man's sheep ate the grasses of the open lands, turning the fields to dust. Their dogs killed the kangaroos of the wild bush country. Even their rabbits were deadly: the creatures multiplied even more rapidly than the white people, and they soon numbered in the billions, causing an incredible tide of destruction by stealing the food other animals needed.

But the white men also brought new ideas to Australia. Big ideas. They would build a great fence across the entire country that would keep the hundred billion rabbits of the open deserts from spreading to the valuable sheep grazing lands of Western Australia. This great fence exceeded all the dimensions that anyone had ever imagined. They called it the Rabbit Proof Fence, and it stretched fully

1500 kilometers from the burning hot northwest to the cool and rainy south of the great continent.



It was a monument to folly of man, for the rabbits soon managed to dig beneath the Rabbit Proof Fence and spread to the sheep lands, where they ate the grass that fed the animals that fed the men.

As the new men built the great fences of Australia, they overpowered the aboriginal people, and put them behind new fences in new reservations. The Mardu people of Jigalong, in northwestern Australian comprise one of the nations of natives overwhelmed by these masters. They were forced to adapt to the European idea of how the world works. The Jigalong people began wearing clothes, learning

English, and working the lower jobs of the white nation. The Mardu of Jigalong came to depend on their new rulers. The young men looked to the white men for jobs; the young women looked to the white men for favors. The white were willing to bestow jobs and favors, but they wanted things in return. From the men they wanted work and obedience; from the women they wanted work - and more.

One woman of the Mardu once gave a white supervisor of the Rabbit Proof Fence what he wanted, and the two produced a mixed-race child. Australian whites called such children “half-castes”; the natives call such children “muda-mudas”. Everyone – white and native – looked upon these children as “others.” Within this strange and temporary marriage, the father was Thomas Craig; the mother, like most aborigines, had just one name – Maude. The child they produced was named Molly. After making the baby, Mr. Craig left the child-rearing to Maude, forgetting the promises he had made to her. But no matter – Maud loved her child and raised the girl to believe that her fate was to be a special one.

When Molly was almost six weeks old, Maude took her up to show Mr. Keeling, the Superintendent. The child was wrapped in a piece of calico and was sound asleep in her mother’s arms. Mr. Keeling said all the nice things about the babe and wished them good health and issued Maude with her own ration order, which included a few yards of unbleached calico to make clothes for the baby. He later recorded in his files that he had just seen the first half-caste child to be born amongst the Jigalong people.

Molly grew into a pretty little girl. Her mother was very proud of her and her father brought her gifts of clothing and pretty colored

ribbons. The other members of the family received parcels of brightly colored material and tobacco. These gifts were shared amongst family members and the community, and were proudly displayed and shown-off to the people at the depot.

As she grew older, Molly often wished that she didn't have light skin, so that she didn't have to play by herself. Most of the time she would sit alone, playing in the red dusty flats or in the riverbed, depending where her family had set up camp. The dust-covered child stood out amongst her darker playmates. The Mardu children insulted her and said hurtful things about her. Some told her that because she was neither Mardu (black) or wudgebulla (white), she was like a mongrel dog. She reacted in the only way she knew. She grabbed handfuls of sand or stones and threw them at her tormentors, and sometimes she chased them with a stick. After a while she became used to the insults, and although they still hurt she didn't show it. One morning, when Molly was about four years old, her mother told her some exciting news: two of her aunties had babies, little girls, and they were both muda-mudas (*racially mixed*) like her.

The first question Molly asked was, "When are they coming to Jigalong?" She was very happy. Now she had two sisters.

First came Daisy, who was born at Mad Donkey Well, southwest of Jigalong towards Mundiwindi Station. She was followed by Gracie, who was born at Walgun Station northwest of the depot.

As they grew older, Gracie and Molly became inseparable and they supported each other when other children teased them. They also saw Daisy quite frequently when her family moved closer to work on Murra Munda Station.

Mr. Keeling had been taking a great deal of interest in Molly and Gracie. One day while he was observing the children at play, he noticed that the attitude of the Mardu children towards the two girls was unfair. He wrote to the Department of Native Affairs in Perth advising them that the girls would be better off if they were removed from Jigalong. In his report, he mentioned that the girls, “were not getting a fair chance as the blacks consider the H/ Cs [half-castes] inferior to them...” (Department of Native Affairs file no. 173/ 30.)

Thousands of miles south, politicians and other officials were planning the destinies of children like Molly, Gracie and Daisy. Official concern shifted from the decreasing numbers of traditional or full-blood Aborigines to the half-castes and part-aboriginal children who were being born all over the country. The common belief at the time was that part-aboriginal children were more intelligent than their darker relations, and should be isolated and trained to be domestic servants and laborers. Policies were introduced by the government in an effort to improve the welfare and educational needs of these children. Molly, Gracie and Daisy were completely unaware that they were to be included in the schemes designed for children who were fathered by white men. Their mothers were accused of being promiscuous. A few critics were honest, however, when they said many white men satisfied their lustful desires with the native women until they were able to return to white society.

Eventually the Western Australian government decided to establish two institutions for Aboriginal children with white fathers: one at Carralup Settlement near Katanning in the south-west, and the Moore River Native Settlement, north of Perth and thirteen kilometers

west of Mogumber. Although the births of these children were not registered, they were still noted by the station owners in their journals, so it was easy for the authorities to locate them. Also, movement between stations throughout the Pilbara was not quite as frequent then as it is today because the travel was mostly by foot. This helped the government officials to track down a family group.

Patrol officers travelled far and wide, removing part-Aboriginal children from their families and transported them hundreds of kilometers down south. Every mother of a part-Aboriginal child was aware that their offspring could be taken away from them at any time, and they were powerless to stop the abductors. That is why many women preferred to give birth in the bush rather than in a hospital where they believed their babies would be taken from them soon after birth.

The years passed by, and the seasons came and went. Except for a couple of years of severe drought when no rain was recorded in the district, nothing extraordinary happened — life and the cycle of nature proceeded. Molly, Gracie and Daisy had outgrown the insults and the teasings. Once the other children accepted their differences, their lives became quite normal. Nevertheless, the trio stood out from the main community at the depot.

No matter where the three girls went, there was always someone watching them very closely and recording their behavior just as Mrs. Chellow from Murra Munda Station did on 9 December 1930, when she wrote to the Commissioner of Native Affairs.

Murra Munda 9th December 1930

To Mr. Neville Chief Protector of Aborigines,

PERTH:

There are two half-caste girls at Jigalong — Molly 15 years, Crissy [also called Gracie] 11 years. In my opinion I think you should see about them as they are running wild with the whites.

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The girls were very fortunate to be part of a loving, caring family who tried to compensate for all the nasty insults and abuse by spoiling and indulging them at home. Their grandfather even went as far as to take them on walkabouts in the bush where he ground black charcoal into fine powder and rubbed it into their bodies, covering them from their faces right down to their toes. This powder, he promised, would solve all their problems. It would darken their light skins and end all the teasings and tauntings, but most importantly, it would protect them and prevent them from being taken away from their families. The trio was joined by ever-increasing numbers of half-caste or part-Aboriginal children in the East Pilbara region. However, the birth rate there was insignificant compared to the rate in the south-west of the state.

In July 1930, the rainy season was exceptionally good. For the Mardu people throughout the Western Desert this was the season for

taking long walks in the bush, foraging for bush tucker and feasting on the day's catch. Every Mardu welcomes the glorious warm weather, when the azure skies are even bluer against the grey-green mulga trees and the red dusty earth. Grass grows under the small shrubs and between the sandy patches around the rocky ledges and even the spinifex is fresh and green. Alas, like everything that is revived and resurrected by the winter rains, their beauty and brilliance is shortlived. They seem to fade and die so quickly.

Molly and Gracie spent a lovely weekend with their families digging for kulgu yams and collecting bunches of yellow flowers from the desert oaks, which they brought home to share with those who had stayed behind to take care of the old people and the dogs. They soaked the bunches of flowers in a bucket of water to make a sweet, refreshing drink. The other bush foods, such as the girdi girdi (*kangaroos*), murrandus (*lizards*), and bush turkeys, were shared amongst the community. After supper the weary girls curled up in their swags and in no time at all, they were fast asleep.

Early next morning, Molly's step-father Galli rose at dawn and lit the fire. He made a billy (*a little pot*) of tea and sat under the shade of a large river gum, drinking a mug of warm tea. He glanced over to the sleeping forms of his two wives, and called out, "Come on, get up." The women began to stir. Between them they prepared breakfast for the whole family, which included three big dampers cooked in the hot ashes of the fire and the girdi girdi — leftover from the hunting trip in the bush. They all agreed that it had been a successful and enjoyable day.

Molly and Daisy finished their breakfast and decided to take all their dirty clothes and wash them in the soak further down the river. They returned to the camp looking clean and refreshed and joined the rest of the family in the shade for lunch of tinned corned beef, damper and tea. The family had just finished eating when all the camp dogs began barking, making a terrible din.

“Shut up,” yelled their owners, throwing stones at them. The dogs whined and skulked away.

Then all eyes turned to the cause of the commotion. A tall, rugged white man stood on the bank above them. He could easily have been mistaken for a pastoralist or a grazier with his tanned complexion except that he was wearing khaki clothing. Fear and anxiety swept over them when they realized that the fateful day they had been dreading had come at last. They always knew that it would only be a matter of time before the government would track them down. When Constable Riggs, Protector of Aborigines, finally spoke, his voice was full of authority and purpose. They knew without a doubt that *he* was the one who took their children in broad daylight — not like the evil spirits who came into their camps in the night.

“I’ve come to take Molly, Gracie and Daisy, the three half-caste girls, with me to go to school at the Moore River Native Settlement,” he informed the family.

The old man nodded to show that he understood what Riggs was saying. The rest of the family just hung their heads refusing to face the man who was taking their daughters away from them. Silent tears welled in their eyes and trickled down their cheeks.

“Come on, you girls,” he ordered. “Don’t worry about taking anything. We’ll pick up what you need later.” When the two girls stood up, he noticed that the third girl was missing. “Where’s the other one, Daisy?” he asked anxiously.

“She’s with her mummy and daddy at Murra Munda Station,” the old man informed him.

“She’s not at Murra Munda or at Jimbalbar goldfields. I called into those places before I came here,” said the constable. “Hurry up then, I want to get started. We’ve got a long way to go yet. You girls can ride this horse back to the depot,” he said, handing the reins over to Molly. Riggs was annoyed that he had to go miles out of his way to find these girls.

Molly and Gracie sat silently on the horse, tears streaming down their cheeks as Constable Riggs turned the big bay stallion and led the way back to the depot. A high-pitched wail broke out. The cries of agonized mothers and the women, and the deep sobs of grandfathers, uncles and cousins filled the air. Molly and Gracie looked back just once before they disappeared through the river gums. Behind them, those remaining in the camp found strong sharp objects and gashed themselves and inflicted wounds to their heads and bodies as an expression of their sorrow.

The two frightened and miserable girls began to cry, silently at first, then uncontrollably — their grief made worse by the lamentations of their loved ones and the visions of them sitting on the ground in their camp letting their tears mix with the red blood that flowed from the cuts on their heads. This reaction to their children’s abduction showed that the family were now in mourning. They were

grieving for their abducted children and their relief would come only when the tears ceased to fall, and that will be a long time yet.

At the depot, Molly and Gracie slid down from the horse and followed Constable Riggs to the car. Gracie, you had better sit in front with me, and you Molly, can sit in the back with Mimi-Ali,” said Riggs as he cranked the car.



Half an hour later he was greeted by Matthews. “Ah, you have a load this time, Constable Riggs,” he said as the officer got out of the car.

“Yes, I know. It can’t be helped. “I’d better get moving,” said Constable Riggs. “I have to search around for Daisy. I’ll call in next time I’m on patrol in the district.”

The patrol officer drew up in front of the Walgun Homestead gate and was greeted by Mr and Mrs Cartwright, managers of the station. “Hello,” said Don Cartwright as he shook hands with the visitor. “Come inside and have a cup of tea,” said his wife warmly, pointing towards the door.

“Thank you, but not just yet. I must find the half-caste girl, Daisy,” he said. “She’s somewhere between here and Murra Munda Station, near the soak. I already have the other two, Molly and Gracie

in the car with Mimi-Ali from Jigalong and Nellie, the cook from Watch-tower Station who are in need of medical attention.”

“But where are you taking those half-caste girls?” asked Mrs. Cartwright.

“They’re going south to the Moore River Native Settlement, where we hope they will grow up with a better outlook on life than back at their camp,” he answered with great satisfaction. “I’ll leave the car here, but first I’ll drop the women off at the native workers’ camp. I’ll take Molly and Gracie with me, though,” he said. “I don’t want them to clear out.”

Constable Riggs drove slowly down to the camp, followed closely by Tommy with his horse and sulky. Soon, he and Tommy were heading across the flats, over the spinifex grass and through the mulga trees in search of Daisy, who was with her family at the camp. Finding her had proved more difficult than the Constable expected. He had searched the Jimbalbar and Murra Munda area on horseback covering sixty kilometers, and a further thirty kilometers in the dry, rough country between Murra Munda and Walgun stations before he finally found her. The search was so tiring that he decided to spend the night at Walgun Station. His passengers stayed at the camp with Gracie’s mother Lilly, her grandmother, Frinda, and some other relatives.

At 3.30 in the morning, on the 16 July, the Constable noticed that rain was threatening. The roads were bad enough as it was, but when wet they were even more hazardous, so he decided to make a start. “I don’t want to be marooned on the road with these natives,” Constable Riggs explained to the Cartwrights.

“We understand,” said Mrs. Cartwright, “we’ll see you when you’re in the district. Have a safe trip home.”

“Thank you. I’d better get going,” he said. “The women must have finished their breakfast by now, so I’ll go down and pick them up. Thanks again for your hospitality.”

Grace’s mother, old Granny Frinda and other relations in the camp began to wail and cry. “Worrah, Worrah! He take ’em way, my grannies [granddaughters], wailed the old lady, as she bent down with great difficulty and picked up a billy can (*cookingpot*) and brought it down heavily on her head. She and the rest of the women began to wail louder, their hearts now burdened with sadness of the girls’ departure and the uncertainty of ever seeing them again. The girls were also weeping. The wailing grew louder as the vehicle that was taking them away headed towards the gate. Each girl felt the pain of being torn from their mothers’ and grandmothers’ arms.”

As the car disappeared down the road, old Granny Frinda lay crumpled on the red dirt calling for her granddaughters and cursing the people responsible for their abduction. In their grief the women asked why their children should be taken from them. Their anguished cries echoed across the flats, carried by the wind. But no one listened to them, no one heard them.

A couple of hours after the three girls had been driven away, Gracie’s mother, distraught and angry, was still sitting on the ground rocking back and forth. Maude and her brother-in-law had ridden over in a horse and cart to discuss the distressing news and stayed to comfort and support each other. Some time later, she calmed down enough to hurl a mouth full of abuse at Alf Fields, Gracie’s white

father, who was standing silently near the galvanized iron tank. She screamed at him in Aboriginal English and Mardu wangku (*language*), and beat his chest with her small fists.

“Why didn’t you stop them?” she cried out in anger and frustration.

“I couldn’t stop them taking my daughter — yes, she is my daughter too,” he said sadly. He was so proud of his beautiful black-haired daughter whom he had named after his idol, English singer Gracie Fields. He tried to explain to her mother that the patrol officer was a government representative and an officer of the Crown. Had he interfered or tried to stop the man he would have been arrested and put in jail and charged with obstructing the course of justice.

Gracie’s mother didn’t listen. “You are a white man too; they will listen to you. Go and talk to them,” she pleaded softly.

“I am sorry but I can’t do anything to stop them taking our daughter away from us,” he said finally.

She couldn’t accept his excuse or forgive him for just standing by and doing nothing to prevent their daughter from being taken away from them. She packed up and moved to Wiluna.

The three girls were not used to rising before dawn, so they settled down in the car and fell asleep. When they opened their eyes, they realized that they had slept longer than they expected. They had passed through Ethel Creek and Roy Hill stations and were on the main road to Nullagine, which was an unsealed dirt track, full of pot holes and fine red bull dust that seemed to fill the car. They were so exhausted they couldn’t cry anymore and they spoke only in whispers and sign language.

Except for a curt, “You girls awright back there!” the policeman didn’t speak to them or tell the girls where he was taking them. All they knew was that they were going to the settlement to go to school.

After five days of sailing down the coast of Western Australia, they arrived at the Port of Fremantle. 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.

# TWO

## The Moore River Native Settlement

*Molly, Daisy, and Gracie were taken from their homes and families and set on their way to an orphanage a thousand kilometers away. This institution would be their home for several years, where they would be educated in European ways.*

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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 rolling 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.” (*to Australians, a rug is a blanket*)

“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. “Eh, 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 concern-ing 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.

The rest of the morning was spent in the dormitory sharing information and stories.

After lunch, the weather had fined up but there were strong gusts of wind blowing across the compound and it was beginning to feel quite cold. Martha Jones suggested they go for their walk. She stood up, gave a cursory glance around the dorm, then called to her friend Polly Martin who came from Onslow on the north coast.

“You coming with us,” she asked her.

“Where are you going?”

When Martha explained that she wanted to take the new girls for a walk around the place, Polly joined the small group.

“Yeah, that’s better than sitting just looking at each other,” she said.

They decided to go behind the dormitory, then follow the trail along the cliffs overlooking the brown, foaming river. The path on the cliff edge was covered with loose, fine pale sand. The slopes were rough, dotted here and there with small, thick shrubs. Loose stones on the slopes made them difficult and hazardous to climb. Behind the girls was the “Big House” - the superintendent’s residence.

“Do you want to go down and have a closer look at the river?” Martha asked, looking at each one in turn.

“Yes,” they responded with enthusiasm. As they were about to pass by the milking sheds, they heard a lot of shouting, yelling and laughter, which seemed to be coming from the flat on their left.

“Hey Martha and Polly, come down and have a game of rounders with us!” a group of girls called.

“You girls want to have a game?” asked Martha. The newcomers shook their heads.

“Well, that’s alright; we’ll go down this way, you’ll be able to get a closer look at the floods.”

Polly waved to the crowd at the football oval and shouted loudly, “We’re taking the girls for a walk while it’s fine.”

“Alright, we’ll see you later.”

The river and the flats on either side were full to overflowing. To the girls from the East Pilbara region, this chocolate-colored river was a new and exciting spectacle, quite different from the normal pinky colored salt lakes, creeks and rivers back home. This sight only

made Molly more aware that she was a stranger in this part of the country, as were all the others in this small group.

*We are all cut off from our families*, she thought and was overcome with a deep longing for the dry, rugged, red landscape of the Pilbara. Still, sighed Molly, you couldn't help being fascinated by the swirling currents and the frothy white foam that clung to the trunks of the paperbark trees and the tall river gums.

Polly and Martha decided that this was as far as they were going this afternoon. They stood admiring the pleasant view from the bottom of the hill which was covered with the golden blooms of acacia shrubs and occasional bushes of bright pink flowers.

"I don't feel like climbing the hill," said Martha. "But if you do, I suppose I'll have to come too."

Nobody wanted to clamber up the stony cliffs so they retraced their footsteps to where they had started.

The group were passing the spot where Edna Green's girls had made their crossing when a shrill whistle filled the air and echoed through the trees. It startled them as each one was deep in her own thoughts. They all followed the sound that came from high above them.

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 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 have 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 a 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.

# Three

## The Escape

The conditions were so degrading and inhumane in the early years of the settlement that a staff member from that period later pronounced that anyone living there, children or staff, were doomed. Perhaps a huge sign warning of the perils that lay within should have been erected at the entrance gate. However, that sign would have had no effect on the boys and girls who were abducted with government approval from their traditional homelands, because they were illiterate. But Molly, Daisy and Gracie were going to be taught to read and write, this was to be their first day at school.

It was still dark, wet and cold on that morning in August 1931 when the girls were awakened at 5:30. The little ones protested loudly and strongly at being forced to rise at that ungodly hour to leave their warm beds. Molly got up reluctantly and walked out onto the verandah, peeped through the lattice and smiled secretly to herself. Gracie and Daisy joined her but they didn't care for the grey, dismal day and said so in no uncertain terms.

The girls waited for Martha and the others to join them, then they made their way through the slushy mud near the stone wall of the staff quarters to the dining room. After a breakfast of weevily porridge, bread and tea, they returned to the dormitory to wait for the school bell.

Molly had decided the night before that she and her two sisters were not staying here. She had no desire to live in this strange place amongst people she didn't know. Anyway, she was too big to go to school, they had no right to bring her here. She was a durn-durn, (*a young girl who had reached puberty*), she thought, touching her small budding breasts. These government people didn't know that she had been allocated a husband. But the man — Burungu — had passed her over for another Millungga sister and they had a four-year-old son. So, reasoned Molly, if she was old enough to be a co-wife she should be working on a station somewhere. Mr. Johnson, manager of Ethel Creek Station, thought so too when he sent a telegram requesting permission to employ her and Gracie. The application was refused.

It was too early for school, so most of the smaller girls slipped back into bed. Molly, Gracie and Daisy did the same thing but they squashed into the one bed with two girls at the head and Molly at the end.

Molly finished combing her light brown hair and lay watching the movements of the others around her. At the other end of the bed, Daisy and Gracie were whispering quietly to each other. Daisy, aged nine, had the same colored hair and texture as her eldest sister, while

Gracie had straight, black hair that hung down to her shoulders. It was very apparent that the three girls had inherited features from their white fathers. The only obvious Aboriginal characteristics were their dark brown eyes and their ability to control their facial expressions, so that when they reached maturity they would develop the look of a quiet, dignified Aboriginal woman from the Pilbara region.

The other girls were now getting ready for school, and the three watched quietly amidst all the activity. Bossing and bullying was everywhere around them and there were cries and squeals of, "Don't, you're hurting my head," as the tangled knots were combed out with tiny, fragile combs.

"Oh, Mummy, Daddy, Mummy, Daddy, my head," yelled a young girl, who stamped her feet and tried to pull away from her torturer - an older, well-built girl who seemed to have adopted the girl as her baby sister. They performed this ritual together every morning before school.

"Come on, you girls," ordered Martha Jones as she passed by their bed. "The school bell's gone. Don't be late on your first day."

"Alright, we're coming as soon as we empty the toilet bucket," answered Molly softly.

"I'll wait for you then," said Martha.

"No, don't wait we'll follow you, we know where the school is."

"Alright then, we'll go along. Come on, Rosie," she said as she rushed out of the door into the cold, drizzly morning.

As soon as the other girls left the dormitory, Molly beckoned her two sisters to come closer to her, then she whispered urgently,

“We’re not going to school, so grab your bags. We’re not staying here.” Daisy and Gracie were stunned and stood staring at her.

“What did you say?” asked Gracie.

“I said, we’re not staying here at the settlement, because we’re going home to Jigalong.”

Gracie and Daisy weren’t sure whether they were hearing correctly or not.

“Move quickly,” Molly ordered her sisters. She wanted to be miles away before their absence was discovered. Time was of the essence.

Her two young sisters faced each other, both looking very scared and confused. Daisy turned to Molly and said nervously, “We’re frightened, Dgudu (*big sister*). How are we going to find our way back home to Jigalong? It’s a long way from home.”

Molly leaned against the wall and said confidently, “I know. It’s a long way to go, but it’s easy. We’ll find the rabbit-proof fence and follow that all the way home.”

“We gunna walk all the way?” asked Daisy.

“Yeah,” replied Molly, getting really impatient now. “So don’t waste time.”

The task of finding the rabbit-proof fence seemed like a simple solution for a teenager whose father was an inspector who travelled up and down the fences, and whose grandfather had worked with him. Thomas Craig told her often enough that the fence stretched from coast to coast, south to north across the country. It was just a matter of locating a stretch of it then following it to Jigalong. The two youngsters trusted their big sister because she was not only the eldest

but she had always been the bossy one who made all the decisions at home; so they did the normal thing and said, “Alright, Dgudu, we’ll run away with you.”

They snatched up their meager possessions and put them into calico bags and pulled the long drawstrings and slung them around their necks. Each one put on two dresses, two pairs of calico bloomers and a coat.

Gracie and Daisy were about to leave when Molly told them to, “Wait. Take those coats off. Leave them here.”

“Why?” asked Gracie.

“Because they’re too heavy to carry.”

The three sisters checked to make sure they hadn’t missed anything. Then, when they were absolutely satisfied, Molly grabbed the galvanized bucket and ordered Gracie to get hold of the other side and walk quickly trying not to spill the contents as they made their way to the lavatories. Daisy waited under the large pine tree near the stables. She reached up and broke a small twig that was hanging down low and was examining it closely when the other two joined her.

“Look, Dgudu, like grass indi?” asked Daisy, passing the twig to Molly to feel.

“Youay (*yes*),” she said, as she gave it to Gracie who crushed the green pine needles into her small hands and sniffed them. She liked the smell, and was about to give her opinion when Molly reminded them that they didn’t have time to stand around examining pine needles.

“Come on, run, you two,” she said sharply as she started to run towards the river.

On they went, dashing down the sandy slope of the cliffs, dodging the small shrubs on the way and following the narrow path to the flooded river. They slowed down only when they reached the bottom. Molly paused briefly, glancing at the pumping shed on their right where they had been the day before. Turning towards it, she said to Gracie and Daisy, "This way." She ran for about twenty-five meters, crashing into the thick paperbark trees and the branches of the river gums that blocked their path.

Molly strode on as best as she could along the muddy banks, pausing only to urge her young sisters to hurry up and try to keep up with her. She kept up that pace until she saw what she thought to be a likely spot to cross the swift flowing river. The three girls watched the swirling currents and the white and brown frothy foam that clung to the trunks of the young river gums and clumps of tea-trees.

"The river is too deep and fast here; let's try up further," Molly said, leading the way through the thick young suckers and washed-up logs. They continued along the bank making slow progress through the obstacles that nature had left in their path. At last they came to a section in the river that seemed narrow enough to cross.

"We'll try here," said Molly as she bent down to pick up a long stick. She slid down the bank into the river and began measuring its depth just as she had seen Edna Green do the previous afternoon, while Daisy and Gracie watched patiently on the bank.

"Nah, too deep," Molly said in disgust. "Not here."

"Gulu, Dgudu (*Wait, older sister!*)," cried the youngsters as they ran to follow her through the wet foliage.

The three girls walked along the muddy banks for another twenty-five meters when they came to a clearing, devoid of any shrubs or young suckers, where the floods had receded.

Molly decided to follow the paths made by the cattle. Another attempt was made to cross the river but once again proved unsuccessful. She walked on angrily, pushing the thick growth of eucalyptus suckers roughly aside, at the same time urging Daisy and Gracie to walk faster. But they decided that it was much safer at a distance and they followed her muddy footprints in silence without any questions, trusting her leadership totally.

They were still fighting their way through the tea-trees for almost an hour when they heard Molly call out to them somewhere down the track. “Yardini! Bukala! Bukala!” (*Come here in a hurry!*)

Daisy and Gracie ran as fast as they could along the muddy path until they reached her. Molly was standing near a large river gum tree. As they stood gasping for wind she said, “We gunna cross here.”

As three pairs of eager eyes examined it closely, they knew that they had found the perfect place to cross the flooded river. A tree leaned over the water, creating a natural bridge for them to cross safely to the other side.



The girls scraped mud from their feet then climbed onto the trunk and walked cautiously to the end, then swung down off the limb onto the slippery, muddy bank on the other side. They sloshed through the wet, chocolate-colored banks for at least another two hours, then decided to rest amongst the thick reeds behind the tall river gums.

A few minutes later, Molly stood up and told her young sisters to get up. “We go kyalie (*north*) now all the way.” They obeyed without any protests. Ducking under the hanging branches of the paperbark trees they hurried as best they could, stomping on the reeds and bull rushes that covered the banks of the fast-flowing river. The only sounds that could be heard were the startled birds fluttering above as they left their nests in fright, and the slish, slosh of the girls’ feet as they trampled over the bull rushes.

Now the question is, how does anyone keep travelling in a northerly direction on a dismal, grey day without a map or compass? It would be difficult for an adult without the most thorough knowledge of bush-craft not to become disoriented and lost in a strange part of the country where the landscape is filled with thick undergrowth and without the sun to guide the way. Well, Molly, this fourteen-year-old girl, had no fear, because the wilderness was her kin. It always provided shelter, food and sustenance. She had learned and developed bush-craft skills and survival techniques from an expert, her step-father, a former nomad from the desert. She memorized the direction in which they had travelled: it was north by car from Perth to Mogumber siding, then west to the settlement. Also, she had caught a glimpse of the sun when it appeared from behind the rain clouds at various intervals during their tour of the place on their

first day. That enabled her to determine that she was moving in the right direction.

Once they had left the flooded river area, the three were able to speed up their progress as they stomped over the wet grass on the flats and passed through an open land scape and under giant marri gums with thick trunks covered with grey to brownish-grey flaky bark. Stepping around the prickly, dense undergrowth and over the ground cover onto patches of white sand, the girls continued at their steady pace, pausing only to climb through boundary fences.



Molly, Daisy and Gracie tried not to look at the dark blue hills in the distance on their right. They were content to keep walking north at an easy pace that suited them well. Their sights were fixed on what lay before them.

They were almost past the clumps of banksia trees when they heard heavy foot falls. It sounded like someone or something was heading their way. At that moment, it began to sprinkle but they could still hear those footsteps. They were coming closer. There was another

flash of lightning and in the distance they heard a rumble of thunder. The footsteps were even closer.

“Quick,” whispered Molly and all three dived head first into the thicket and slid on their stomachs as flat and low as they could, not daring to breathe. They kept very still, frozen with fear as they lay under the cover of the tangled scrub and waited for whatever it was to appear. Molly had no intention of being caught, only to be sent back to the settlement to be punished by the authorities.

The footsteps were so close now that the ground was vibrating and they could feel every step it took. Then they saw it. The frightened girls couldn't believe their eyes, and they couldn't move if they wanted to. They could only lie there staring at the “thing” that was emerging from behind the banksia trees.

Gracie started to say something in a low whisper but the words came out as an inaudible stutter. She tried once again, but the result was the same, so she gave up and shut her eyes tightly and began to swallow deeply, trying desperately to control her fear. For several minutes after the “thing” had gone by, its footsteps still thundering along, the girls remained on the prickly leaves, pondering whether or not it was safe to move. Their young hearts were thumping right up into their ears. They lay shivering with fear.

# Four

## Alone in the Outback

Molly, Daisy and Gracie tried not to look at the dark blue hills in the distance on their right. They were content to keep walking north at an easy pace that suited them well. Their sights were fixed on what lay before them. They had covered a lot of ground since crossing the main branch of the Moore River, over hills and sand dunes, and across the white sand plains. Yes, they were making very good progress through the open banksia forests and they had covered a wide area of coastal, sandy heaths and had the pleasure to see a variety of flowers.

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It was another few seconds before they regained their composure and their fear subsided. Only then could they rise and stand firmly on their feet without shaking, to continue their trek homewards.

"That was a marbu, indi Dgudu?" said Daisy, still obviously shaken by what she had seen.

"Youay, it was a marbu alright," Molly agreed. "A proper marbu," she added shivering as she remembered the frightening image.

Yes, the thing fitted the description of a marbu, a sharp-toothed, flesh-eating evil spirit that has been around since the Dreamtime. The old people always told children to be careful and to watch out for them and now the three girls had finally seen one.

“That marbu had a funny head and long hair. He was a big one alright,” said Daisy.

There seems to be only one logical explanation to that phenomenon, and that was the so-called marbu may have been a particularly large, hairy Aboriginal man with prominent facial features who was running to beat the storm that was brewing and the fast approaching nightfall. The man’s giant-like stature may have played upon the girls’ imaginations and their belief in a mythical being of the Dreamtime stories. But to these children from the Western Desert it was genuine, and no one could tell them otherwise.

“Quickly,” urged Molly. “Let us get away from this place.” The sight of the marbu had unnerved her so she was also very scared.

“There might be others around here. We gotta go away from this bad place,” she added urgently with a slight tremble in her voice. “It’s getting dark. We have to find a good, safe place to make a camp for the night.”

Molly scanned the surrounding countryside swiftly, then paused and pointed to a small range of sand dunes not far from the forest of banksia trees.

The two younger sisters nodded. They could see the shallow valley of deep sand and the sand dunes on the left, and began making their way towards them.

“See that,” said Molly when they reached the sand dunes, pointing to the rabbit warrens. “We’ll just dig one. We have to make it big enough for three of us to fit into.”

“We gunna sleep in the bunna (*a dirthole*) like rabbits too, Dgudu?” asked Grace.

“Youay, nobody gunna look in a rabbit burrow for us, indi,” replied Molly confidently.

“That’s true, no one will find us in there,” said Daisy as she joined them.

So, crouching on their knees, they dug furiously with their elbows almost touching each other’s. Very soon they managed to widen and deepen a deserted burrow to make a slightly cramped but warm, dry shelter. This was their first night out in the bush since leaving their homes in the East Pilbara.

Before the three sisters settled down to sleep they ate some of the dry crusts of bread and drank the cool, clear water from the pools at the bottom of the valley. They had nibbled on some of the bread while they walked during the afternoon.

Molly had chosen a rabbit burrow that faced east because she had noticed that the rain came from the west over the coast.

They would be well protected from the wet and cold while they slept.



Crawling in one at a time, they cuddled up together in the rabbit burrow, wriggling and twisting around until they were comfortable. Soon, with the warmth of their young bodies and weariness, Daisy and Gracie drifted off to sleep. With their heads resting on their calico bags at the entrance and their feet touching the sandy wall at the back of the burrow, they felt safe and warm.

While her two sisters were sleeping, Molly lay quietly, listening to the rain falling steadily on the sand outside. She was too tense and had too much on her mind to relax and go to sleep just yet. But despite that, she felt safe inside the rabbit burrow. *Tomorrow*, she told herself, *I will find the rabbit-proof fence and it will take us all the way home to Jigalong*. The thought raised her hopes and a few minutes later she too drifted off into sleep.

Suddenly Molly and Daisy were awakened by the frightened cries of Gracie, “Dgudu, Dgudu, where are you?”

“I am here, right next to you. What’s wrong?” Molly asked.

“Dgudu, that marbu, he came back and pulled me by the hair. He tried to drag me outside,” she said shivering and sobbing loudly.

“Shush, don’t cry,” said Molly as she put her arm around her. “It was just a bad dream. Go back to sleep. I won’t let anything bad happen to you,” she promised. Molly managed to calm Gracie and soon they all fell asleep once again.

The next morning, very early, the three girls were awakened by the thump, thumping of rabbits from adjoining burrows.

“It’s not worth trying to catch any rabbits this time,” said Molly disappointedly.

“Why can’t we catch any rabbits, Dgudu?” queried Gracie, brushing the pale yellow sand off her legs, while trying rather feebly not to think of the aroma and taste of a freshly cooked rabbit.

At that moment Gracie spied one, and gave chase - caught and killed it.

“What did you do that for?” asked Molly angrily, “I told you, we got no matches to make a fire to cook it.”

Gracie replied, “Well, I’m hungry,” as she searched around for a sharp object with which she could gut the rabbit. Finding none, she swore loudly, then threw it hard on the ground, and stomped off over the thick prickly undergrowth. So instead of rabbit roasted over the coals for breakfast, there was plenty of fresh water from the pools at the bottom of the valley and stale crusts from the settlement. This was their second meal on the run.

“Dgudu,” said Gracie, “we should go back to the settlement. We might die. Come on, we go back,” she pleaded. She was still shaken by the sight of a real marbu. There might be more lurking in the woodlands.

“You want to go back to the settlement,” retorted Molly angrily. “You heard what they’ll do to us. They’ll shave our heads bald and give us a big hiding and lock us up in the little jail,” she said shaking her finger, while Daisy stood by silently watching and listening.

“You want to go back? You’re mad! We three came down together, and we will go home together. We’re not going to die in the bush,” she assured her. “So let’s move,” she added finally as she strode off into the acacia thickets.

Gracie became stubborn and refused to move. “I’m hungry Dgudu. I want some mundu (*meat*) not just bread and water.”

Molly stopped and turned to face her young sister. “I know that. We are all hungry for meat,” she reminded her. But most of all they were missing their mothers and wished that they were back home with them.

Molly walked back to the dejected younger sister and put her arm around her shoulder and told her gently, “Don’t worry, we will find something to eat, you’ll see. This country’s different from ours, so we gotta learn to find their bush tucker, that’s all. Come on, let’s go along now.”

Molly managed to coax Gracie out of her stubbornness and they walked briskly to where Daisy sat playing with some dry banksia nuts. She stood up when she saw them coming and the three of them walked northwards.

The weather remained unchanged. The skies were grey and a cold wind was blowing across the bushland. It looked like more rain was coming their way. Gracie and Daisy missed their warm gabardine coats and they longed for a meal of meat, hot damper and sweet tea. They continued north, through the wet countryside, never knowing what was waiting for them over the next hill.

The three were pacing in good style, covering the miles in an easy manner. Soon they found that they were entering a landscape dominated by clumps of grass trees. Interspersed amongst them were zamia palms and scattered here and there were a few marri, wandoo and mallee gums (*Australian trees*). The girls descended a hill into a stand of tall flooded river gums and paperbarks and reached the edge

of a river and stared at the flowing water. They had come to a branch of the Moore River.



“How are we going to get across the river, Dgudu?” asked Daisy.

“I don’t know yet,” she replied as she began to search along the banks until she found a suitable place to cross.

“Up here,” she called out to her sisters. “We will cross over on this fence. Come on,” encouraged Molly as she tucked her dress into the waist of her bloomers. With her calico bag slung around her neck, she clung to the top strand of fence wire, while her feet were planted firmly on the bottom strand. “See, it’s strong enough to hold us,” she assured them. “Watch me and follow, come on.”

Slowly and gingerly they stepped onto the fence wire, not daring to look down at the brown flooded river below. The water swirled and splashed against their feet. They tried to shut out the sounds and sights of the gushing water and instead they concentrated on reaching the muddy bank on the other side. They were worried about their precious bags that contained all their worldly goods, which wasn’t much at all, just an extra pair of bloomers, a frock and their

small mirrors, combs and a cake of *Lifeboy* soap. However, they made it safely.

On their second day they came into a section of bushland that had been ravished by fire. All the trees and the grass under them was burnt black. In a few weeks' time, however, this charcoal landscape would be revived by the rain. It would come alive and be a green wilderness again, full of beautiful flowers and animals that are wonderfully and uniquely Australian. The three girls walked in silence over the next hill where they saw a most unexpected but very welcome sight indeed. Coming towards them were two Mardu men on their way home from a hunting trip. Gracie and Daisy were so pleased to see them that they almost ran to meet them, but Molly held the girls back and whispered softly, "Wait."

So the three girls waited for the men to come closer. When they saw the men's catch, they drooled— a cooked kangaroo and two murrandus (*big lizards*). The girls were more interested in the bush tucker than in the two hunters who introduced themselves and told the girls that they were from Marble Bar.

"Where are you girls going?" asked one of the men.

"We are running away back home to Jigalong," replied Molly

"Well, you girls want to be careful, this country different from ours, you know," advised the old man with white hair and a bushy white beard.



“They got that Mardu policeman, a proper cheeky fella. He flog ’em young gals runaway gals like you three,” he added very concerned for them as they were from the Pilbara too.

“Youay,” said Molly. “We heard about him at the settlement.”

“He follow runaway gals and take ’em back to the settlement. He’s a good tracker, that Mardu,” the old man told them.

“We know that; the girl from Port Hedland already told us about him,” replied Molly who was very confident that the black tracker would not be able to follow their path because all their footprints would have been washed away by the rain.

The men gave them a kangaroo tail and one of the goannas. They shook hands with the girls and turned to walk away when the younger man remembered something.

“Here, you will need these,” he said as he held up a box of matches. Then he emptied another box and filled it with salt.

The girls thanked them and said goodbye.

“Don’t forget now, go quickly. That Kimberley bloke will be looking for you right now, this time now.”

It was highly unlikely that an attempt to track them down in this weather would even be considered but Molly wasn’t taking any chances. They would only stop when she was satisfied that it was safe to rest.

The miles they had covered should have been adequate according to Daisy and Gracie but no, their elder sister made them trudge along until dusk. Then the three young girls set about preparing a wuungku (a shelter) made from branches of trees and shrubs. They

searched under the thick bushes and gathered up handfuls of dry twigs and enough leaves to start a small fire. There was no shortage of trees and bushes around their shelter as they grew in abundance; quite different from the sparse landscape of the Western Desert. Each girl carried armfuls of wood and dropped them on the ground near the fire to dry, as they had decided that it was safe enough to keep the fire burning all night. They made the fire in a hole in the ground in the center of the shelter.

After a supper of kangaroo tail, goanna, and the last crust of bread, washed down with rain water, they loaded more wood on the fire and slept warm and snug in the rough bush shelter around the fire.

The next morning, the girls were awakened by the sounds of birds fluttering and chirping all around them. For breakfast they ate what was left over from supper with a refreshing drink of water. When they had finished they quickly removed the firewood that was still burning and covered it with wet sand and moved on. Molly looked up at the sky and said confidently, "More rain coming," pointing to the west where the white, fluffy clouds were now being pushed aside by grey rain clouds.

"Never mind," she said. "It's good because that Mardu policeman can't follow us now. We lose all our tracks anyhow. The rain will wash them all away." She and her sisters were safe from capture for the time being.

"Come on, walk faster, the rain is a long way off yet," she told them, hoping her estimation was accurate, because she wanted to be a long way away by nightfall. In this weather and in this sand plain country the girls had been covering twenty-four to thirty kilometers a

day. They each realized that they must push on further into the wilderness, steadily covering as much ground as they could during the daylight hours. By midday, the girls were hit with pangs of hunger. Gracie was feeling very irritable and began to stamp her feet in protest and dawdled along. Suddenly she got caught in the dense, tangled scarlet runner creepers, she overbalanced and fell onto the wet ground with a thud. She lay there moaning and groaning softly to herself.

“We gunna die. We got nothing to eat.”



“Oh shut up and stop whining,” ordered Molly as she helped her up on her feet. “We gotta hurry up.”

Molly was losing patience with her younger sister. At that moment the most important thing on her mind was distance; the more land they covered in this weather, the less chance they had of being captured. Getting lost or walking around in circles may have signaled the end of their escape but Molly kept reminding them to be brave and to conquer their fears. There was little danger in this part of the country, as there were no poisonous snakes lurking about at this time of year.

Gracie withdrew into herself, refusing to talk. She just followed Molly and Daisy in a trance, eyes straight ahead, looking neither right or left, silent and sullen. Suddenly Molly shouted excitedly, “Look over there.” Shaken out of her grey mood, Gracie was interested in what her big sister had seen.

“What is it, Dgudu?” Daisy wanted to know.

Daisy and Gracie looked up to see the rabbit burrows in the sand dunes.

“We’re not sleeping in the bunna (*dirt hole*) again, eh Dgudu?” asked Gracie.

“No,” replied Molly. “We gunna catch them to eat

# Five

## Mrs. Flanagan

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“No,” replied Molly. “We gunna catch them to eat.”

The girls hadn't eaten since the morning and it was now very late in the afternoon. Stumbling on another rabbit warren was indeed an exciting find. They were starving, and the prospect of a feed of meat spurred them on.

“We will block all the burrows except that one in the middle, alright?” suggested Molly. So the three set about blocking all the entrances, leaving only one open. Then they sat down quietly behind some acacia bushes and waited.

After what seemed like ages, out came the rabbits. First one, then two, four, then more.

“Now,” ordered Molly. “Go.” She leaped up and chased the rabbits and the others joined in. Molly and Gracie were excellent runners, they caught a rabbit each, while their knock-kneed youngest sister missed them. She could not catch even the slowest in the group.

It was past dusk when they found a suitable place to make a shelter and camp for the night. The girls were in good spirits as they made a huge fire in a hole in the ground and cooked the rabbits in the ashes, after gutting them roughly by using a sharp point of a green stick. They ate one of them for supper that evening with water from a soak they found in the limestone rocks near the camp site. The other rabbit was saved for breakfast.

Molly rose early the next morning to stoke up the dying fire, the other two were content to lie there in their cozy shelter for a couple of hours more, they got an hour at least. Molly sat warming herself by the fire, listening to the sounds of the heathland. Thoughts of home

reminded her of the distance they had to cover and as quickly as possible.

“Come on, get up,” ordered Molly. “We can’t stay here all day. We got a long way to go yet,” she added impatiently as she broke the rabbit in three portions.

There was no response so she called again for them to get up. “Move, come on,” she urged.

“Oh, alright, we’re coming,” said Daisy as she shook the sleeping Gracie.

When her sisters joined her for breakfast, Molly said, “Don’t eat it all, save some for later.”

They nodded in agreement as they bit into the tough flesh of the cold cooked rabbit. Once breakfast was over, they drank the soak water and washed their hands and faces, drying them with the calico bags, then they continued onwards, over the sand hills and through the banksia woodlands, with their acacia thickets and thick clumps of heath. Molly was pleased that there was no shortage of trees and shrubs to hide under. They grew in abundance, quite different from the sparse landscape of the north-west.

The morning was pleasant; everything was quiet and peaceful. The sun was shining through the clouds and the raindrops on the leaves and spiders’ webs sparkled like diamonds. Below them was an open grassland of lush green pastures that would soon become a field of bright yellow dandelions. By their manner one could have thought that the girls were taking a leisurely stroll in the bush. They appeared very relaxed as they walked along together. Then all of a sudden they

stopped and gasped, all three of them looked then dropped behind the shrubs and peeped around cautiously to watch from this safe distance.

In the clearing in the far end of the paddock were two of the biggest and blackest kangaroos they had ever seen.



“Look at them, they’re standing up and fighting like men,” whispered Molly. “But they can’t see us up here.”

“I’m frightened, Dgudu,” Gracie whispered.

“Me too, Dgudu,” said Daisy moving closer to her older sister.

The sight of these big boomers (*kangaroos*) had unnerved the younger sisters and Molly wasn’t feeling brave herself. The fear of venturing into unknown territory had resurfaced and she didn’t want that to happen.

“Come on, let’s get away from here. We’ll walk around them. They won’t see us if we crawl behind these bushes,” Molly whispered. “And keep your eyes on them all the way to the end of the paddock.”

“Ready, come on,” she ordered. Molly began to crawl on her hands and knees with great discomfort as the ground was covered

with prickles and dry twigs and leaves. She tried to make a clear path for her two sisters to follow.

The two smaller girls felt threatened by the size of the big boomers so they were glad to be out of sight. They didn't want to be attacked by kangaroos, and they were very relieved when they had climbed the boundary fence. It was only then that they could feel safe again. The three girls sat on a fallen log, trying to recover from the shocking sight of the fighting animals.

“Those boomers are bigger than the ones we got at home, indi Dgudu (isn't it sister?),” said Gracie fearfully, “and cheeky fellows too.”

Daisy and Molly both answered together. “Youay (yes!).”

The trio sat quietly on the dead log. The silence was broken suddenly by an alarmed Molly, who pulled Gracie up roughly by the arms.

“Run under that big tree over there,” she yelled, pointing to a large banksia tree. “Climb up and hide there. You too Daisy. Come on.”

When she saw that they had difficulty getting up, she ran over to help them. She pushed her two young sisters up into the branches and told them not to move unless she said so.

Although the two youngsters could not see any danger, they obeyed without question, they trusted her with their lives. After all, hadn't their big sister proved herself to be a worthy leader. Her self-control and courage had never faltered throughout the trek.

So there they lay, stretched out on the rough branches not daring to move, just silently waiting and listening. At last they heard

it. It was a plane, a search plane sent out to look for them, these runaway girls. Sitting very still, the girls listened while the plane circled above them, then it gave up and returned home. Several minutes passed before Molly decided it was safe to climb down from their hiding places in the trees. Once they were on the ground they quickened their pace, keeping close to the trees in case they needed to hide again. They walked in silence, concentrating on movement, distance and safety. No one took any notice of the change in the weather until they were caught in the showers. It was only then that they realized that the sun and blue sky had disappeared. There was nothing but dark rain clouds. It seemed hopeless to try to find shelter; they were drenched and their hair hung limp and dripping with water. Just when they were overcome with gloom and despair, they heard the most welcomed sounds with which they were each familiar. At that moment they realized just how much they had missed them and they were overcome with depression.

It was noon, and these were the sounds of fowls, squeaky windmills and barking dogs that reminded them of Jigalong, Walgun and Murra Munda stations, but most of all these sounds brought back memories of their loved ones who remained there. Pangs of hunger overcame their nostalgia. As they approached the farmhouse, Molly gently urged the two sisters forward.

“Go in there and ask the missus for some food to eat. Hurry up. I’ll wait here,” she said as she settled down behind the thick trunk of a marri gum.

Daisy and Gracie went willingly because they were feeling very hungry and here was the chance to find something more substantial

than what they had been forced to live on so far. The last remaining pieces of rabbit leftover from breakfast had all gone.

Approaching the farmhouse slowly, they looked about them. Glancing at the barking dogs they saw that both were chained near their kennels but they still gave the girls a scare as they tried to rush past them. Fortunately, the strong chains held. The girls opened the wooden gate and were greeted by a little four-year-old girl who was playing with her toys on the large verandah.

“Come inside,” she said warmly as she opened the door. “My name is Susan,” she added as she rushed inside.

“Mummy,” she yelled, “there’s two girls outside and they’re all wet.”

Daisy and Gracie didn’t accept the child’s invitation to go inside, but stood politely on the verandah, letting the water trickle to the hems of their dresses then onto the timbered verandah.

Little Susan’s mother came to the door and asked them, “Are you the runaways from the settlement?”

“Yes,” they replied shyly.

“Where’s the other one?” she asked.

“She’s outside near the big tree, on the other side of the fence,” Gracie informed her.

“Go and tell her to come inside and dry herself while I make something to eat,” the woman said.

When she saw their reluctance, she smiled and said, “It’s alright, you won’t be reported.” So Gracie dashed out in the rain to bring Molly inside the warm kitchen.

The woman, whose name was Mrs. Flanagan, had received a phone call from Superintendent Neal on Tuesday afternoon asking her to watch out for three absconders and to report to him if she saw them. Mrs. Flanagan asked the girls a lot of questions, especially about their ultimate destination.

“We are going to find the rabbit-proof fence and follow it all the way home to Jigalong,” Molly said.

“Well, I’m afraid you’re going the wrong way. The rabbit-proof fence is not north. You must go east towards Ayres Find and Wubin. If you keep going north, you will come to the coastal towns of either Dongara or Geraldton.”

Mrs. Flanagan made thick mutton and tomato chutney sandwiches, which the girls stared at as if mesmerized. The aroma was overpowering; they could almost taste the cold mutton and crusty bread. Then they devoured them greedily, like the starving youngsters they were. These were followed by generous pieces of fruit cake and a cup of sweet, milky tea. A feeling of contentment prevailed in the comfortable, warm, dry farmhouse kitchen. Soon they became quite drowsy.

The girls watched as Mrs. Flanagan filled a couple of brown paper bags with tea leaves, sugar, flour and salt and half a leg of mutton and a chunk of fruit cake and bread. She took three large empty fruit tins and said, “You will need these to boil your tea in. It may be easier to carry them in your bags. Have you all had enough to eat?”

“Yes, thank you,” they said. They almost added, “missus” but managed to stop quickly.

“Right then, come with me and I’ll give you some dry clothes to change into, and warm coats,” she said as she led the way outside to a large shed opposite the house where there was a small storeroom. Inside was stored farm machinery, implements and grain. Mrs. Flanagan pulled out some old army uniforms — a greatcoat for Molly and jackets for Gracie and Daisy.

“Here, you’d better take these too,” she said, handing them some wheat bags. “Use them as capes to protect you from the rain and cold winds.” Mrs. Flanagan demonstrated how to make a cape by pushing one corner into the other. With their army coats and bag capes they were warm and dry.

Watching the three girls disappear into the open woodlands, she 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.”

When she had made her decision, she went inside and lifted the earpiece of the telephone, turned the handle and listened, then she spoke into the mouthpiece.

“Good afternoon, Christine,” she greeted the girl at the exchange. “Has Kath Watson had her baby yet?”

“No, not yet,” the girl replied. “It’s due any day now.”

After a few minutes, Mrs. Flanagan had learned all the news of the local townspeople. “Christine,” she said, “can you send a telegram

to Mr. Neal, the Superintendent of the Moore River Native Settlement, please.”

“Yes. Just hold the line for one moment.”

Mrs. Flanagan made a fresh pot of tea, satisfied that she had done the right thing. “Anyway, 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.”

# Six

## The Chase

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.

The girls were still in the coastal heathlands among scattered tall shrubs and low trees, having passed through the tall trees and open grasslands of the marri woodlands. Molly, Daisy and Gracie had grown used to the landscape of the coastal plains. They liked the Geraldton wax flowers and the dainty, white tea-tree flowers.

This drier, more northerly section of the heathlands, with its pure white and grey sandy soils, put the girls at a disadvantage. There were no tall trees with dense foliage under which they could hide from search parties.

Darkness and the drizzling rain forced them to find a spot to make camp 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.

“There’s enough water in my fruit tin to make tea,” Molly said.

Gracie watched her older sister break the meat, bread and cake as fairly as she could with her hands. They had no knife to cut the food evenly and to stir the sugar in their tea they simply broke a strong eucalyptus twig.

While the three runaways were having a quiet breakfast in the bush, news of their escape was spreading across the country. Mrs. Flanagan was not the only person who knew or guessed their whereabouts; the whole state was told about them when this item appeared in the West Australian newspaper on 11 August 1931:

#### MISSING NATIVE GIRLS

The Chief Protector of Aborigines, Mr. A.O. Neville, is concerned about three native girls, ranging from eight to 15 years of age, who a week ago, ran away from the Moore River Native Settlement, Mogumber. They came in from the Nullagine district recently, Mr O’Neville said yesterday, and, being very timid, were scared by their new quarters, apparently, and fled in the hope of getting back home. Some people saw them passing New Norcia, when they seemed to be

heading northeast. The children would probably keep away from habitations and he would be grateful if any person who saw them would notify him promptly. “We have been searching high and low for the children for a week past,” added Mr. O’Neville, “and all the trace we found of them was a dead rabbit which they had been trying to eat. We are very anxious that no harm may come to them in the bush.”



“We go kukarda (toward the east),” said Molly as she picked up her fruit tin and emptied the contents on the patch of grass outside their shelter. “But we’ll fill our tins first.” Molly noticed that a few meters along the track was a pool of murky brown water trapped in the clay soil. It looked alright but was it drinkable, she wanted to know. She dipped her hands in and sipped the water. Yes, despite its color, it was all right.

Leaving the bushlands, they entered the cleared farmlands of the northern wheat-belt. Another farmhouse was in sight. Soon they were approaching the house very cautiously, and using the same

routine as before, the girls were supplied with enough food to last them for a few more days.

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 evening, the runaways chattered quietly around the fire before snuggling into their bush shelter to sleep. They talked about the countryside through which they had passed, from the woodlands of the majestic marri and wandoo to the banksia trees of the coastal sand plains. They had seen the chocolate-colored river, they had slopped through the wet swamp lands and dipped their hands into clear pools filled with black tadpoles.

The girls were very interested in the way the water seemed to change colors with the soil. It was milky white in the clay pans and pink or beige in the more coarse graveled land. But the memories that were to remain in their minds forever were of the “funny trees” that grew around the settlement and the grass trees with their rough black trunks and the tufts of green, rush-like leaves that sprang out from the top of the plant.

That night, Molly shivered as she lay on the ground pondering on the day’s events. She realized that they still had a long, long way to go through an unknown part of the country.

The next day, as they skirted the green wheat fields using the fire break as a path, they were able to pass through the paddocks fairly

quickly. In one paddock, flocks of sheep and a herd of cows grazed contentedly.

“Oh look, Dgudu,” said Gracie excitedly as she pointed to the white lambs in the flock.

The two younger ones oohed and aahed over these beautiful lambs. The girls were delighted by them and they reacted in the same way as little girls everywhere— they wanted to cuddle and fondle the little lambs. Sadly though, they had a big task ahead of them, with miles to go and lots of ground to cover yet.

Daisy and Gracie looked back once more before they descended into another valley, through the wheat fields and uncleared strips of land then towards the red-colored breakaways in the distance.

Everything was peaceful, the birds were singing and the sun was shining through the fluffy white clouds once more. The rain had ceased and the girls now had plenty of food, but they were experiencing another problem. The scratches on their legs from the prickly bushes had become infected and sore, causing them great discomfort.

They tried not to think about the pain as they climbed into their cozy shelter that night amongst the mallee gum trees, acacia shrubs and York gums, and quietly listened to the sounds of the bush. The temperature had dropped considerably and a roaring fire would have been most welcome.

As they drifted off to sleep, they heard the barking of a lone fox, followed by the bleating of lambs. After a pause came the deep baas of the ewes, comforting and protecting their young ones from the terrorizing fox.

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.

Three days after the article was published in the West Australian newspaper:

#### Missing Half-Caste Girls

Constable H.W. Rowbottom of the Dalwallinu police station reported that, "relative to Escape of three Native girls from Moore River Settlement", he had received a telephone message from Mr D.L. Lyons, farmer of East Damboring who stated that, "he had just noticed in the West Australian newspaper that three native girls had escaped during the previous week. These children had called at his farm on Saturday and he had given them food, after which they had travelled across his paddocks going east towards Burakin. He questioned them and asked them where they had come from, but they would not tell him. The eldest one was dressed in what appeared to be a khaki military overcoat, and the others had khaki military jackets on."

The Eastern District Police Inspector Crawe was notified immediately. Later that afternoon an urgent telegram was received by Constable Rowbottom, from Mr Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines, Perth, authorizing him to "incur the expenditure to effect their capture". The constable left immediately by car to East Damboring, calling in at all farms along the road to Burakin.

One farmer, Mr Roche junior of Burakin, noticed a fire at the south end of his boundary and wondered what it was. When he investigated the next day, he found that a dead tree had been set on fire, and the tracks of bare feet were visible.

“It was useless to attempt to do any tracking as it rained all Monday night, and the tracks were obliterated,” reported Constable Rowbottom.

No one had seen the runaways at the town of Burakin. It was estimated that they had passed by, travelling due east towards the rabbit-proof fence near Ballidu. No fires were reported in the area. The dead tree fire could have been caused by lightning because Molly, Daisy and Grace had been very careful not to let their fires be seen. That is why they lit them in a hole in the middle of their shelters and covered the ashes over before they left.

Within days of the announcement, responses came in from all around. Telegrams and reports were exchanged back and forth. But the girls continued trekking on, unaware of the search parties that were being assembled by the police. They didn't know that they were just a few days ahead of the searchers and their would-be captors.

Within the week, the scratches on their legs had become festering sores. The three girls had been on the run for over a month. They had left the landscape of red loam, mallee gums, acacia trees and green fields and found themselves in a very different countryside; one of red soil, tall, thick mulgas, gidgies and the beautiful, bright green kurrajong trees that stood out against the grey-green colours of the other vegetation. Underneath the shrubs and trees was a green carpet

of everlasting flowers in bud ready to bloom in a couple of weeks' time. The green would then be transformed into a blaze of pink, white and yellow papery flowers.

Molly, Daisy and Gracie were very much at home in this part of the country. They evaded capture by practicing survival skills inherited from their nomadic ancestors.

“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 late afternoon, the girls were enjoying the mild winter day, with the sun shining on their backs. It was the kind of day when you felt happy to be alive. The absconders gleaned all the positive energy from the environment, from everything that lived and breathed around them. It would have been perfect if only their legs hadn't been so painful and they had something to eat. Molly was out in front of the

other two when she crouched down suddenly amongst some thick prickly kurrara trees and picked up a small stone and threw it at Daisy and Gracie. They had stopped to dig a hole under a large mulga tree. When they looked up, she signaled to them to come to her and sit down.

“Look over there, a station out-camp,” whispered Molly. “Go in there and look for some food.”

# Seven

## Almost Caught

The two youngsters were used to this kind of request. When it came to obtaining food, they never sneaked or crept up to the places — the frontal direct approach was their method. Molly watched them from the safety of the trees and shrubs, as they walked up to the shed. Daisy peeped through a crack in the wooden door and saw the shed was unoccupied.

“Come on,” she called to Gracie. “There’s nobody in there,” she added as she unbolted the door and entered.

Inside the camp, which was merely a tin shed with a bough shelter in front of it, were two camp beds, a table and empty four-gallon tins scattered about in an untidy mess. Daisy and Gracie quickly searched the shelves and the table and found some matches, flour, salt and three large Sunshine milk tins.

Removing the lids with a butcher’s knife, which they had found on a rough bench, they were immediately overcome by the appetizing aroma of dgingi (fat), the tins were filled with dripping. They couldn’t remember when they had smelt this last. They hadn’t eaten since

breakfast and they were very hungry, so they dipped both hands into the tin and scooped up as much fat as they could and ate it.

“This tastes really good,” said Daisy, as she dipped in once again.

“We gotta hurry up,” Gracie reminded her sister as she snatched up some of the precious finds.

“Come on,” she urged and she rushed out through the door. Daisy spied a billy can underneath the table. She grabbed it and the remaining items and joined the other two outside.

They got as far as the kurrara trees where Molly was waiting for them, when both girls simply doubled over and vomited. When Molly heard what they had done she said, “You silly beggars, you shouldn’t eat that dgingi (fat) by itself. See you both get sick now.” She waited impatiently for the two little girls to finish emptying the dripping from their stomachs.

“Are you alright?” she asked them. They nodded in reply. “Well, come on. Let’s move along.”

Daisy and Gracie recovered enough to straighten up and take their position behind their older sister who was striding on towards the rabbit-proof fence.

That evening they supped on hot damper, which was made on a clean spare rock, and sweet black tea, then they slept in a dry gully. Their simple meals were just like the ones they ate at home—especially when they managed to find birds, birds’ eggs, rabbits and lizards to supplement their meagre diet. But their festering sores were still aching and they could find no relief. Despite the pain they pressed

on using the same procedure as before; taking it in turns to carry each other— except Molly who was heavier and bigger than the other two.

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.

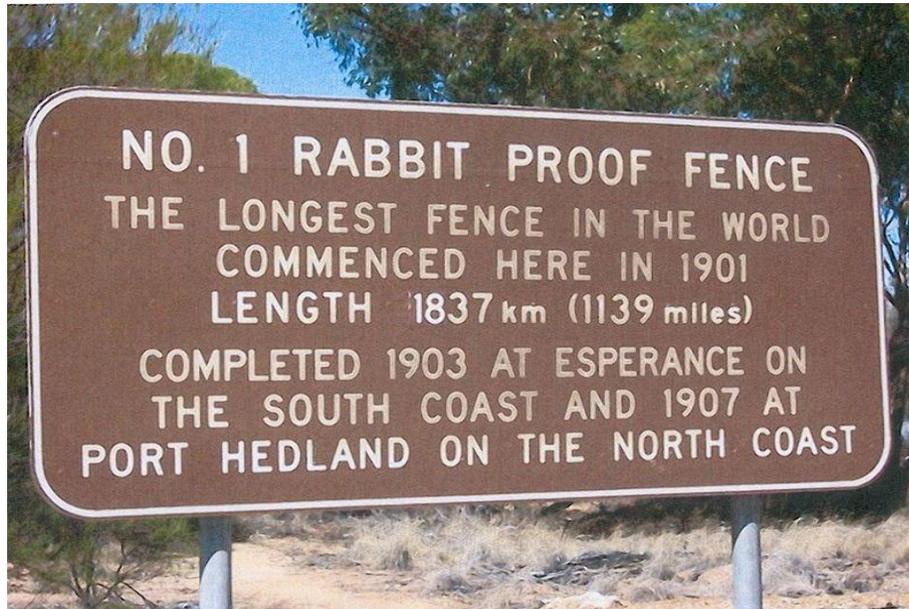
For the three runaways, the fence was a symbol of love, home and security.

“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.



“They must have had plenty of rain around this country,” said Molly as they tramped through the tall green grass. It was difficult to imagine that within a few weeks this landscape would be transformed into a mass of color and beauty as pink, white and yellow everlasting flowers bloomed. These would cover the red earth and delight any travelers who passed through. But the three girls would not have that pleasure as they would be miles away by then, out of the Murchinson and into the Pilbara region.

By mid-afternoon, they entered a clearing amongst the mulga and gidgi trees and found some murrandu holes that appeared promising. But at that very moment, they heard a man yelling out to them. “Hey, you girls. Wait.” The voice came from down the track along the fence.

They saw an Aboriginal man riding a bike. The three dashed into the bush forgetting the pain of the sores on their legs.

“Don’t run away. I want to talk to you,” he shouted. Peeping out from the thick acacia bushes they saw that he was holding

something in one hand as he pedaled with great difficulty. “Look, I’ve got some food to give you. See,” he said. “Come on, don’t be frightened.”

Their need and desire for food overcame fear and caution. The man’s name was Don and he explained that he worked on Pindathuna Station. He shared his lunch of tinned meat and bread with them and gave them a box of matches.

“Where are you going?” he asked them.

“We gunna follow the railway line to Wiluna,” said Molly. Stockman Don Willocks reported the incident to his boss. Mr A.H. Gillam telephoned Constable Robert Larsen at the Yalgoo police station who reported that:

One of his stockmen, Don Willocks, had reported to him that he had seen tracks in one of the Pindathuna paddocks which appeared to have been made by two females. He followed the tracks on 4/ 9/ 31 and came up with three female half-castes who were travelling north along the rabbit-proof fence. He then ascertained that ... one was about 8 years of age and the other two older. They were all dressed in khaki dresses and dark overcoats and were carrying a bundle and a billycan. Original Police No. 5979/ 31 Reg. No. 1163

Don Willocks had noticed signs of the girls three days earlier in one of the Pindathuna paddocks, but he saw only two sets of tracks which indicated that, “they were in a bad way, as in places they appeared to be dragging their feet and that he thought inquiries should be made”.

However, when he caught up with them, he was pleased to notice, “that there was nothing wrong with them”. He found that there were three of them and that two were carrying one girl between them.

Constable Robert Larsen of the Yalgoo police station, had led an earlier search party for the girls and so he was keen to follow up these reported sightings. At last he would be able to inform Inspector Simpson at the Geraldton police station that some contact had been made with the girls.

A tracker named Ben from Noongal Station was brought into the search and he and Larsen travelled to Pindathuna to pick up Willocks on 5 September 1931. It was impossible for the men to find the tracks because heavy rains the night before had washed them away. Nevertheless, the search party proceeded along the rabbit-proof fence for a few kilometers, searching for tracks as they went. Finding none they continued parallel with the fence until dark then made a camp. At dawn the next morning they continued their search and came upon fresh tracks. Finally, however, Larsen recorded that the tracking

“was discontinued “owing to the tracker having sore feet, myself having to attend the Police Court on Monday 7/ 9/ 31. I decided to return to Yalgoo”.

Constable Larsen, Don Willocks and Ben, the Aboriginal tracker, left the tracks about 28 kilometers north of Dalgaranga Station. What they didn't know was that the three runaways had climbed over the rabbit-proof fence and doubled back to pick up some bush tucker and return the same way.

In his report to Inspector Simpson, Larsen wrote:

Apparently these girls are following the fence going to Nullagine, and could probably be picked up at the next junction. No doubt seeing Willocks on the Pindathuna run frightened the girls, thinking that he would probably report the matter. I am of the opinion that they will settle down when they get further up the fence, as it would be impossible for them to keep travelling at the same pace on the 5th and 6th inst. having travelled about 40 miles in two days. (Original Police No. 5979/ 31 Reg. No. 1163.)

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).

By early September, the police were increasing their efforts to find the girls and any information they collected was passed on to other officers stationed further north. Constable Summers, for example, notified Constable Fanning by railway phone on 8 September that the girls were following the fence and would probably be going near Nannine and Gumtree Creek.

Constable Larsen kept Inspector Louis Simpson informed about the search. "The Tracker Ben is of the opinion that if these girls come in contact with the Sandstone blacks they will be done away with as they will not stand any other natives in their country, as they are a very treacherous tribe."

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.

Report:

Unless these girls are intercepted I am afraid that they are in for a very bad time after they pass Gum Creek on the old Nannine – Wiluna Road. I feel sure that the girls will stick to the No. 8 rabbit-proof fence until it junctions with No. 1 rabbit-proof fence going towards Nullagine. Water and native game should be abundant at this time of the year, but as the girls get further to the north I fear for their safety.

Thus reported Louis D. Simpson, Inspector of Police, Geraldton on 10 September 1931.

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.

# Eight

## Home

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. 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.

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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*) 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 (*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.

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.

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. “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 things. 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. They were passing through country that was familiar to Daisy, so she took great delight and pleasure showing her big sister all the places where her family had camped and where bush tucker was plentiful.

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 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 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,

Constable Riggs

The reply was as follows:

The Chief Protector of Aborigines has informed the Commissioner of Police that he did not desire any further action in re: half-caste Molly because she has been a costly woman to the Department. Very heavy expenditure was incurred in securing her, and when she decamped a lot of undesirable publicity took place. Molly had made it.

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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.