DAISY CORUNNA'S STORY

Sally Morgan

Sally Morgan's My Place was one of the most acclaimed novels of 1987. It was also an important act of reclamation of Australia's black history. Here we reproduce an extract.

Daisy Corunna told her story to her grand-daughter, Sally Morgan, not long before she died.

Daisy was taken from her mother in her early teens, to work as a virtual domestic slave for her white natural father, Howden Drake-Brockman, and his family. In the same way, her own daughter, Gladys, also fathered by a Drake-Brockman (possibly Howden again) was taken from her at the age of three and placed in a children's home. A previous child, whom she never saw again, had already been taken from her; and it was many years before Daisy and Gladys were able to be together again.

Fearing that Gladys' own children would be taken away in turn (particularly after the early death of their father), neither Gladys nor Daisy told them of their Aboriginal heritage.

The stories recounted in Sally Morgan's book are the result of her determination, after she became an adult, to seek out that heritage, and to publish what she had discovered.

My name is Daisy Corunna, I'm Arthur's sister.

My Aboriginal name is Talahue. I can't tell you when I was born, but I feel old. My mother had me on Corunna Downs Station, just out of Marble Bar. She said I was born under a big, old gum tree and the midwife was called Diana. Course, that must have been her whitefella name. All the natives had whitefella and tribal names. I don't know what her tribal name was. When I was comin' into the world, a big mob of kids stood round waitin' for to get a look at me. I bet they got a fright.

I was happy up North. I had my mother and there was Old Fanny, my grandmother. Gladdie 'minds me of Old Fanny, she's got the same crooked smile. They both got round faces like the moon, too. I 'member Old Fanny always wore a handkerchief on her head with little knots tied all the way around. Sometimes, my granddaughter Helen 'minds me of her, too. They both short and giggly
with skinny legs. Aah, she was good for a laugh, Old Fanny.

She loved panning for tin. All the old people panned for tin. You could see it lyin' in the dirt, heavy and dark, like black marbles. Old Fanny said I had good eyes, sometimes she took me with her for luck. We traded the tin for sugar or flour. They never gave us money.

Old Fanny went pink-eye* to Hillside one day. I never saw her again. They tell me she died on Hillside, maybe she knew she was going to die. She was a good old grandmother.

On the station, I went under the name of Daisy Brockman. It wasn't till I was older that I took the name Corunna. Now, some people say my father wasn't Howden Drake-Brockman, they say he was this man from Malta. What can I say? I never heard 'bout this man from Malta before. I think that's a big joke.

Aah, you see, that's the trouble with us blackfellas, we don't know who we belong to, no one'll own up. I got to be careful what I say. You can't put no lies in a book.

Course, I had another father, he wasn't my real father like, but he looked after us just the same. Chinaman was his name. He was very tall and strong. The people respected him. They were scared of him. He was Arthur's Aboriginal father, too. He was a powerful man.

My poor mother lost a lot of babies. I had two sisters that lived. Lily and Rosie. They were, what do they call it? Full blood, yes. I was the light one of the family, the little one with blonde hair. Of course, there was Arthur, but they took him away when I was just a baby.

I 'member Old Pompe, he was the old boy that looked after the vegetable garden, he told me my mother cried and cried when they took Arthur. She kept callin' to him like, Callin' to him to come back. The people thought Arthur was gettin' educated so he could run the station some day. They thought it'd be good to have a blackfella runnin' the station. They was all wrong. My poor old mother never saw him again.

Rosie and I was close. Lily was older than me. I spent a lot of time with Rosie. I was very sad when she died. She was only young. My mother nursed her, did everything for her, but we lost her. Good old Rosie, you know I been thinkin' 'bout her lately. She was what you call a good sport.

I'll tell you a story about our white man's names. My mother was in Hedland with the three of us when an English nursing sister saw her near the well. She said, "Have you got names for your three little girls?"

Mum said, "No."

She said, "Well, I'll give you names, real beautiful ones. We'll call this one Lily, this one Rosie and this little one Daisy." I was the short one of the family. We didn't mind being called that, we thought we were pretty flowers.

I haven't told you about my brother Albert, yet, He was light, too. He used to tease me. He'd chase me, then he'd hide behind a big bush and jump out and pretend he was the devil-devil. Oooh, he was naughty to me. They took Albert when they took Arthur, but Albert got sick and came back to the station. He was a good worker. He liked playing with me. He called me his little sister.

They was a good mob on Corunna. A real good mob. I been thinkin' 'bout all of them lately. There was Peter Linch, the well-sinker. I think he was German, he lived at the outcamp. He had Rosie, not my sister Rosie, another one. Then there was Fred Stream, by jingo, there was a few kids that belonged to him. He had Sarah, her children were really fair, white blackfellas, really.

Aah, that colour business is a funny thing. Our colour goes away. You mix us with the white man, and pretty soon, you got no blackfellas left. Some of these whitefellas you see walkin' around, they really black underneath. You see, you never can tell. I'm old now, and look at me, look at the skin on my arms and legs, just look! It's goin' white. I used to be a lot darker than I am now. I don't know what's happened. Maybe it's the white blood takin' over, or the medicine they gave me in hospital, I don't know.

The big house on Corunna was built by the natives. They all worked together, building this and building that. If it wasn't for the natives, nothing would get done. They made the station, Drake-Brockmans didn't do it on their own.

At the back of the homestead was a big, deep hole with whitewash in it. It was thick and greasy, you could cut it with a knife. Us kids used to mix the whitewash with water and make it like a paint. Then we'd put it all over us and play corroborees. Every Saturday afternoon, we played corroboree. We mixed the red sand with water and painted that on, too. By the time we finished, you didn't know what colour we were.

I 'member the kitchen on Corunna. There was a tiny little window where the blackfellas had to line up for tucker. My mother never liked doin' that. We got a bit of tea, flour and meat, that was all. They always rang a bell when they was ready for us to come. Why do white people like ringin' bells so much?

Every morning, they woke us up with a bell. It was only five o'clock, could have been earlier. We all slept down in the camp, a good way from the main house. Every morning, someone would light a lamp, walk down into the gully and ring a bell. When I was very little, I used to get frightened. I thought it was the devil-devil come to get me.

There was a tennis court on Corunna. Can you 'imagine that? I think they thought they were royalty, puttin' in a tennis court. That's an Englishman's game. They painted it with whitewash, but it didn't stay white for long. I can tell you. I had a go at hitting the ball, once. I gave up after that, it was a silly game.

I saw plenty of willy-willies up there and cyclones, too. By jingo, a cyclone is a terrible thing! When one

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* Pink-eye — term used by Aboriginal people of north-west Australia, similar to the more widely known term *walkabout*. A period of wandering as a nomad, often as undertaken by Aborigines who feel the need to leave the place where they are in contact with white society, and return for spiritual replenishment to their traditional way of life. Can also simply mean a holiday, usually without leave.
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was coming, my mother hid me. I wasn’t allowed to move. She was worried I might get killed. Get taken away by the wind. I was only small. I ‘member one time we hid in the kitchen, when my mother wasn’t looking, I sneaked up to the window and peeked out. You should have seen it! There was men’s hats, spinifex, empty tanks, everything blowin’ everywhere. It’s a funny thing, but those old tanks always ended up settlin’ on the tennis court.

There was a food store on Corunna. It had tin walls, tin roof and a tiny window near the top covered with flywire. You wouldn’t believe the food they had in there, sacks of apricots, potatoes, tobacco, everything. It makes my mouth water just thinkin’ about it. When it was siesta time, the other kids used to lift me up and poke me through the window. I’d drop down inside as quiet as a mouse when the cat’s after him. Then I’d pick up food and throw it out the window. If they heard someone coming, they’d cough, then run away. I’d hide behind the sacks of potatoes and wait for them to come back for me. I had a good feed on those days.

The people were really hungry sometimes, poor things. They didn’t get enough, you see. And they worked hard. You had to work hard, if you didn’t do it, then they call the police in to make you work hard. When things was like that, one of the men would put me through the window again. I suppose I should feel bad about stealin’ that food. Hunger is a terrible thing.

Aah, you see, the native is different to the white man. He wouldn’t let a dog go without his tea.

Of course, the men all wanted their tobacco as well. The white man called it Nigger Twist. It was a twist like licorice, only thicker. It’s terrible, when you think about it, callin’ something like that Nigger Twist. I mean, we all called it that because we thought that was its name.

Sometimes, we’d pinch the eggs the chooks lay in the hay shed. Aah, that old hay shed, it’s kept a lot of secrets. Now there was plenty of stockmen up North, then, and they all wanted girls. We’d be hearin’ all this noise in the hay shed, the hay’d be going’up and down, the hens’d be cluckin’, the roosters crowin’. Then, by and by, out would come a stockman and one of the girls. They’d be all covered in hay. “We just bin lookin’ for eggs,” they’d say.

There was a government ration we used to get now and then. It was a blanket, we all called it a flag blanket, it had the crown of Queen Victoria on it. Can you imagine that? We used to laugh about that. You see, we was wrappin’ ourselves in royalty.

Then there was a mirror and a comb, a cake of soap and a couple of big spotted handkerchiefs. Sometimes the men were lucky and got a shirt, the women never got anything.

I ‘member my mother showin’ me a picture of a white woman, she was all fancied up in a long, white dress. “Ooh, Daisy,” she said, “if only I could have a dress like that”. All the native women wanted to look like the white women, with fancy hairdos and fancy dresses.

Later, my mother learnt how to sew, she was very clever. She could draw anything, she loved drawing. She drew pictures in the sand for me all the time. Beautiful pictures. Maybe that’s where you get if from, Sally.

We were cunning when we were kids. There was a big water trough on Corunna, it was used for the animals, even the camels had a drink from it. Mrs Stone always warned us not to muck around in the trough. We’d wait till she was sleeping, then we’d sneak down to the garden and dive in the trough. It was slimy and there was a lot of goona* in the water, but we didn’t care. I ‘member holding my breath and swimming under the water. I looked up and I could see the faces of all the animals lookin’ down at me as if to say, “What are you doin’ in our water, child?”

They had a good cook on Corunna for a while, Mrs. Quigley. She was a white woman, a good woman. I think Nell and Mrs. Stone, the housekeeper, were a bit jealous of her. Nell was Howden’s first white wife. They were real fuddy-duddies and didn’t like her talkin’ to anyone.

The cook had a little girl called Queenie and it was my job to look out for her. We were ‘bout the same age, ooh, we had good times! We’d laugh and giggle at anything. We were giggling gerties, that’s what Queenie’s mother used to call us.

I taught Queenie all about the bush. We’d go out after a big rain. Sometimes, the rain was so heavy up North, it hurt when it hit you. That’s the kind of rain you get in the wet. One day, the place would be desert, the next day, green everywhere. Green and gold, beautiful, really. I’d take Queenie out into the bush and we’d watch a little seed grow. “Look now,” I’d say to Queenie, “it’s getting bigger”. By the time we finished lookin’, that seed’d be half an inch long.

In the evenings, I liked to sit and watch the kangaroos and other animals come down and drink at the trough. The crows ands the birds would have a drink, too, and do a bit of goona. I just liked to sit and watch them all. Course, you know, Corunna has blue hills all round it. They always looked soft that time of night. Sometimes, my mother would sit and watch, too. We knew how to count our blessings, then.

I was a hard worker on Corunna. I been a hard worker all my life. When I was little, I picked the grubs off the caulies and cabbages at the back of the garden. I got a boiled sweet for that. Now the blackfellas weren’t allowed to pick any vegetables from the garden. You got a whipping if you were caught. Old Pompe, he used to sneak us tomatoes. And so he should have, he was eatin’ them himself.

We all loved the orphan lambs. We were their mother and their father. We fed them with a bottle with a turkey feather stuck in it. There was one lamb I fed, dear little thing she was, she was blind. She kept bumpin’ into the fence and the other lambs. Poor thing. I was so upset I told cook about it and she told me this story.

“You know, Daisy, when I was a young child in Sydney, I had very bad eyesight. One day, an old lady came to visit us and she asked my mother if she could have a go at curing me. Mother said yes. They sat down

* goona — faeces.
and put a single grain of sugar in each eye. Ooh, it hurt! I cried and cried, but pretty soon, I could see. I’ll give you some sugar, you try that with your lamb.”

I did what she said, and pretty soon, that lamb’s eyes were watering all over the place. Next thing I knew, it was runnin’ around like all the other lambs, not bumpin’ into anything. She was a wise woman, that cook.

Aah, we played silly games when we were kids. I always played with Rosie and Topsy. That Topsy, she was one of a kind, I tell you. One day, Mrs. Stone gave her a cake of soap and told her to take a bath. You know what she did? She threw the soap back and said, “I’m not takin’ no bath!” Can you imagine cheekin’ a white woman like that? Aah, she was great fun, old Topsy.

There was a creek that cut across Corunna in the wet. We loved swimming in it and catching fish. They were like sardines, we threw them on the hot ashes and then gobbled them up. They were nice, but you had to be careful of the bones.

All sorts of wild fruit grew along the creek. There was a prickly tree with fruit like an orange, but with lots of big seeds in it. You could suck the seeds. Then there was another one shaped like a banana, that was full of seeds, too. You ate the flesh and spat out the seeds. There wasn’t much food in that one, just juice. There was another prickly tree that had yellow flowers like a wattle, wild beans grew off that tree. When they swelled up, we picked them and threw them in the ashes. They were good.

The best one of all was like a gooseberry bush. Aah, if you could find a patch of that, no one saw you, you just stayed there and ate. You could smell those ones a good way away, they smell like a ripe rockmelon. We’d sniff and say, “Aah, something ripe in there, somewhere”. We’d lift up the bushes looking for them, they were only tiny. When we found them, we’d say, “Hmmmm, mingimullas, good old mingimullas”. I never tasted fruit like those mingimullas. They had soft green leaves like a flannel, ooh, they were good to eat.
There was another tree we used to get gum from to chew — it grew on little white sticks. We'd collect it and keep it in a tin. It went hard, like boiled lollies. You know, jubes always ‘mind me of that gum. Perhaps that’s why I like jubes.

Rosie and I were naughty. We’d pinch wild ducks’ eggs and break up their nests. And we’d dig holes to get lizards’ eggs. We could tell where the lizards had covered up their eggs. We’d dig them all out, get the eggs and bust them. Those poor creatures. They never harmed us and there we were, breakin’ up their eggs. We’re all God’s creatures, after all.

Rosie and I used to catch birds, too. We’d get a bit of wire netting and make a cage, then we’d take it down the creek and throw wheat around. We kept the cage a little bit lifted up and we tied a long bit of string to the wood underneath.

You should have seen all the cockies, they loved wheat. When there was a big mob of them, we’d pull the string, down would come the cage and we would have them trapped. Trouble was, we couldn’t do anything with them, they kept biting us. In the end, we let them go. We did silly things in those days.

When I got older, my jobs on Corunna changed. They started me working at the main house, sweeping the verandahs, emptying the toilets, scrubbing the tables and pots and pans and the floor. In those days, you scrubbed everything. In the mornings, I had to clean the hurricane lamps, then help in the kitchen.

There were always poisonous snakes hiding in the dark corners of the kitchen. You couldn’t see them, but you could hear them. Sssss, sssss, sssss, they went. Just like that. We cornered them and killed them with sticks. There were a lot of snakes on Corunna.

Once I was working up the main house, I wasn’t allowed down in the camp. If I had’ve known that, I’d have stayed where I was. I couldn’t sleep with my mother now and I wasn’t allowed to play with all my old friends.

That was the worst thing about working at the main house, not seeing my mother every day. I knew she missed me. She would walk up from the camp and call, “Daisy, Daisy”, just like that. I couldn’t talk to her, I had too much work to do. It was hard for me, then. I had to sneak away just to see my own family and friends. They were camp natives, I was a house native.

Now, I had to sleep on the homestead verandah. Some nights, it was real cold, one blanket was too thin. On nights like that, the natives used to bring wool from the shearing shed and lay that beneath them.

I didn’t mind sleeping on the verandah in summer because I slept near the old cooler. It was as big as a fireplace, they kept butter and milk in it. I’d wait till everyone was asleep, then I’d sneak into the cooler and pinch some butter. I loved it, but I was never allowed to have any.

Seems like I was always getting into trouble over food. I’m like a lamb that’s never been fed. ‘Member once, Nell asked me to take an apple pie to the house further out on the station. Nell’s real name was Eleanor, but everyone called her Nell. Anyway, I kept walkin’ and walkin’ and smellin’ that pie. Ooh, it’s smelled so good. I couldn’t stand it any longer. I hid in a gully and dug out a bit of pie with my fingers. It was beautiful. I squashed the pie together and tried to make out like it was all there. Hmmmmmnnn, that was good tucker, I said to myself as I walked on.

When I gave the pie to Mrs. Stone, I had to give her a note that Nell had sent as well. If I had have known what was in that note, I’d have thrown it away. It said, if any part of this pie is missing, send the note back and I will punish her.

Mrs. Stone looked at the note, then she looked at the pie, then she said, “Give this note back when you go”. I did. And, sure enough, I got whipped with the bullocks cane again.

Nell was a cruel woman, she had a hard heart. When she wasn’t whippin’ us girls with the bullocks cane for not workin’ hard enough, she was hittin’ us over the head. She didn’t like natives. If one of us was in her way and we didn’t move real quick, she’d give us a real hard thump over the head, just like that. Ooh, it hurt! White people are great ones for thumpin’ you on the head, aren’t they? We was only kids.

Aah, but they were good old days, then. I never seen days like that ever again. When they took me from the station, I never seen days like that ever again.

They told my mother I was goin’ to get educated. They told all the people I was goin’ to school. I thought it’d be good, goin’ to school. I thought I’d be somebody real important. My mother wanted me to learn to read and write like white people. Then she wanted me to come back and teach her. There was a lot of the older people interested in learnin’ how to read and write, then.

Why did they tell my mother that lie? Why do white people tell so many lies? I got nothin’ out of their promises. My mother wouldn’t have let me go just to work. God will make them pay for their lies. He’s got people like that under the whip. They should have told the my mother the truth. She thought I was coming back.

When I left, I was cryin’, all the people were cryin’, my mother was cryin’ and beatin’ her head. Lily was cryin’. I called, “Mum, Mum, Mum!” She said, “Don’t forget me, Talahue!”

They all thought I was coming back. I thought I’d only be gone a little while. I could hear their wailing for miles and miles. “Talahue! Talahue!” They were singin’ out my name, over and over. I couldn’t stop cryin’. I kept callin’, “Mum! Mum!”

SALLY MORGAN is the author of My Place.