

*Lyn Aldred*



**Neptune's  
Fingers**

# NEPTUNE'S FINGERS

by Lyn Aldred



Eloquent Books  
New York, New York

Copyright 2008

All rights reserved – Lyn Aldred

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system, without the permission, in writing, from the publisher.

Eloquent Books

An imprint of AEG Publishing Group

845 Third Avenue, 6th Floor – 6016

New York, NY 10022

[www.eloquentbooks.com](http://www.eloquentbooks.com)

ISBN 978-1-61204-915-1 1-60693-183-0

Printed in the United States of America

Book Design: Linda W. Rigsbee

# DEDICATION

In memory of my mother,  
whose reminiscences of childhood inspired this story.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                  |     |
|------------------|-----|
| Chapter 1 .....  | 7   |
| Chapter 2 .....  | 19  |
| Chapter 3 .....  | 29  |
| Chapter 4 .....  | 37  |
| Chapter 5 .....  | 43  |
| Chapter 6 .....  | 55  |
| Chapter 7 .....  | 61  |
| Chapter 8 .....  | 73  |
| Chapter 9 .....  | 79  |
| Chapter 10 ..... | 85  |
| Chapter 11 ..... | 95  |
| Chapter 12 ..... | 107 |
| Chapter 13 ..... | 119 |
| Chapter 14 ..... | 125 |
| Chapter 15 ..... | 131 |
| Chapter 16 ..... | 137 |
| Chapter 17 ..... | 147 |



# CHAPTER I

Jack knew he had to hurry if he was going to beat high tide. He had lingered with his friend, Bill Tarrant, long after school finished and that was a fatal mistake. It was desolate here at False Bay, the stretch of beach that became a bay only at low tide when a sparkling spit of sand joined his island home the locals called Narrowgut, to the mainland of the east coast of Australia. His father was the lighthouse keeper and home was a stone cottage close to that white beacon on the ocean side of the island.

It was a small island. He could walk around it in half an hour. Less if he hurried, but hurrying felt indecent on the beautiful rocky outlet. Life had its demands but it was never hurried here. He watched the hungry waves swallow more and more of the sandy spit, consuming it before his eyes. He knew it only took one decent wave and the temporary bridge would be submerged, and that would be that. Too many people had drowned here. The sea must be respected. Careless people beware! There was not much time left.

His day had been like most others. School was on the mainland and accommodated an assortment of kids from the surrounding countryside. It was a good hike from False Bay to the town of Guthrie's Bay where the school squatted on the hill among the gum trees. The buildings shimmered in the heat of day. A mirage, thought Jack. How he wished it was! The last two

days of school before the Christmas holidays seemed to drag, especially since this was the last term he would be at school ever. There was something unnatural about being closed up in a classroom on a summer's day like this, he thought. Dust in the summer heat, kicked up by the games of the children, added to the surreal effect as the wooden classrooms blurred under its cover. All day long he and the other children disappeared in its dusty smog, like vanishing to another planet, emerging when classes were done to make the return trek home.

Each day was different. The tides followed the moon's wishes, not his. So some days he had plenty of time to get home while others dictated he hurry or have a long wait. There were days when he couldn't get to school at all because high tide occupied the morning and afternoon, with low tide in the middle of the day. On those days, Jack helped his father cleaning the salt spray from the lighthouse windows or learning about the mechanics of the rotating beacon. On rare occasions, his father took him across in the launch.

Today there was time, though. He and Bill Tarrant ambled along the dirt road skirting Guthrie's Bay until it disappeared into the bush in a short cut towards the south headland at the entrance to the harbor.

"Tide's just turned, I reckon," said Bill.

"Yeah. It's pretty low. Might have a bit of time to go swimming," said Jack. "Bit of a luxury on weekdays, eh?" Once home at the lighthouse Jack had chores. There was always something to do and his father made sure he learnt the job that one day would be his. "Mid tide's 'bout 5:30 or so. We need a bit more water than this to swim in though. Have to wade out for miles to get wet now."

True enough. It was high summer, Christmas time in the southern half of the world. Christmas tides either vanished way

down the sandy beaches or gobbled up the whole lot, lapping at the grass beside the track.

“Feast or famine my mum reckons. Big king tides come over the road sometimes.” This was a concern to Bill’s family. His house squatted close to the shoreline at Sandy Beach, the sparkling blue bay just inside the headland. Deep water raced up the steep beach with the incoming tide, its dark blue defining the safe channel allowing fishing trawlers to pass, missing the rocks round the point. A cluster of ramshackle huts and tents littered the edge of the beach, testimony to hard times. Wood, gray for want of a lick of paint, cracked and splintered in the harsh environment. As long as the rain kept out, no one seemed to care. Putting food on the table was more of a worry. The Great Depression was tearing the heart out of the country – out of the world some said – and jobs vanished as though a magician had waved his wand.

They left Guthrie’s Bay behind them and headed through the bush, along the narrow track meandering towards to coast. The yellow beach of Sandy Bay gleamed like gold in the sun. The water was deeper this end, too. You never had to go in search of it.

“Dump your bag here,” said Bill, when they reached the edge of the beach. “Dad reckons it’s not safe to swim here but the water’s too shallow up near the house. He worries too much.” He worried a lot, as it happened, as Bill never saw the danger until it was too late.

Both boys were strong swimmers. Jack could not remember learning to swim. It seemed to his vague recollection he was born a swimmer. Perhaps he was. Bill was the same. Anyone living here would end up in strife if he could not swim; far too dangerous. Swimming was the primary pastime of all the youngsters. Just

about everything they did involved water one way or another.

“Race you!” shouted Jack, alive, now the dust was behind them. The beach looked clean and new. It always did on sunny days and this summer had more than its fair share of them. He hurled his school bag onto the sand, threw off his clothes and hurtled down the beach, Bill close at his heels. No one here wore bathers. Both boys wore their homemade underpants, the brand name, ‘Sydney Flour’, emblazoned across the back, as old flour bags were not wasted, but recycled. “Waste not, want not,” Mrs. Tarrant said. Bill swore it was her favorite expression. There was not a soul in sight as far as the eye could see. The cluster of shanties was at the other end of the beach. Few people spared a second glance for two boys going for a swim. Anyway, neither of them owned such a thing as bathers.

The water was cold against their hot skins. It sizzled deliciously, cooling them. It was deep at this end of the beach. They swam along, not far out from shore. The deep channels were a feeding ground for sharks especially now the water was warm. It paid to be careful. Both boys knew the dangers but in the logic of the young, convinced themselves they would not be long so it would be OK. Jack dove under like a dolphin and resurfaced a little further along the beach. Bill followed suit and the two frolicked about, shouting and shrieking in delight. They were absorbed in their game, mindless of the passing time, when a voice broke through their skylarking.

“Get outta there you pair of fools!” Wal Waters’ gravelly voice swiped over the waves like a scythe through a wheat field. He was an oyster leaser who lived at Sandy Beach and was in a small launch that chugged along, its outboard motor putt-putting a monotonous drone. They started and gasped. Neither boy realized how far from the shore they had drifted. No doubt about

it. They were a pair of fools. Aghast at their carelessness, they headed for the beach as fast as they could.

“Now I’ll be in for it when I got home! Wal’ll tell mum and all hell’ll break loose,” muttered Bill to Jack.

“And stay out! I don’t want to be fishing you out for your mum to identify the bits.”

That was a bit much! Bill hated being shown for a fool. The folly of their swim had dawned on the pair without Wal’s help and they were feeling a bit silly.

“He carries on, doesn’t he? Grown-ups love putting the fear of God into you,” was Bill’s sheepish comment when they reached the shore. Somehow, he felt better having the last word.

“He’s right, I suppose,” said Jack, clambering out behind him. “There were a few sharks about last week.” He swung his arms in windmills, shedding the water running down them.

“Last week? They’re here all the time, I reckon,” said Bill. “Outside, anyway. Went up Beacon Head yesterday. There was a pack of ’em out looking for a picnic.” Beacon Head was the south headland and overlooked the whole of Neptune’s Fingers and much of the convoluted expanse of the harbor.

“You’d be a goon deciding to go in, wouldn’t you?” said Jack. Bill took it personally.

“Didn’t have to twist your arm, did I?” he retorted, stung by Jack’s disloyalty.

“No. Suppose not.” said Jack. “Sorry.”

Minor squabbles punctuated the friendship of the two boys. It spiced it up, in a peculiar sort of way. Nothing was serious enough to cause permanent damage though. They were soon laughing and running around on the sand to dry out. Wet clothes felt horrible. The heat of the sun was still like a furnace so they would not be obliged to go home wet. They forgot Wal, and the threat

of Mrs. Tarrant's ire seemed a long way away. Jack had further to go than Bill by quite a distance and remembered wearing wet clothes before, arriving home chafed and sore. The memory remained vivid so he took his time drying off before putting his sandy clothes back on.

The sand along the track was a dirty gray, stark contrast to the golden beach. Both boys wore sandals so their feet were filthy from the day at school and the trip there and back. Now the water had purified them to a wrinkled tan so they felt good about putting their shoes back on after a swim. Swims, in Bill's case, anyway, often took the place of a bath. There was no laid-on water at Sandy Bay. Water was collected, when it rained, in any handy container. Some of the houses had cleverly rigged funnels, salvaged from one abandoned house or another, channeling the rainwater from the roof into drums below. It was silly to waste water. At least it was free, though. A hand-wash took care of the important parts of their bodies and the sea took care of the rest. Drinking water was of greater priority.

"A bit of dirt never hurt anyone," Mrs. Tarrant would say. Bill said this was her second favorite saying and 'amen' to that! Mrs. Tarrant was wise enough to know arguing with an active boy like Bill over the virtues of a wash was a waste of time. There were much better things to argue about.

"You've got a great mum," said Jack. He was slightly jealous of Bill. Jack's own mother died last winter. The gales had come in and stayed like an unwelcome relative, making everything difficult. Cold, along with constantly being wet, brought on a cough that settled in her lungs where it stubbornly remained. The colder the weather, the sicker she became, until the doctor, who came on the weekly steamer from the city, pronounced she had pneumonia. Stoically she went about helping her husband in his duties until she could cope no more. The end had been

sudden and spitefully swift. One minute he had a beautiful laughing mother and the next, she was gone.

Bill felt strangely uncomfortable when his mother was mentioned. He felt guilty as he still had her. She was a strong workhorse, that mother of his. It would take a pretty powerful bug to kill her. Maybe all the dirt made her stronger, he reasoned. "Yeah." Was all he could think of to say.

The bush was alive. Insects complained and whined in the heat like an oppressive chorus, sung without end. They swatted flies away with a bit of wood from the bush as they passed. A few leaves on the end worked like fingers and fended off the pesky things. It didn't matter where you went, the flies got there first.

"They're bad today," muttered Jack.

"Yeah," said Bill. "And when they go to sleep, there's the mozzies. What a place, eh?" Mosquitoes and sandflies large enough to carry you off were a way of life when there was beach and bush.

Eventually their steps led them to the settlement at the far end of the beach, nestled at the foot of the headland. A tiny strip of land held its grip on the tall peak preventing it from giving up and becoming an island. There were lots of fingers of land at the mouth of the harbor, ending in high hills that rolled down into the sea. It was easy to see all of it when standing high up on Beacon Head. Spiny fingers of land with arthritic knobs on the end reached out into the ocean. Bit by bit, the sea reclaimed most of the low land, leaving narrow bridges to the hill on the end of each finger of land. They were called Neptune's Fingers because it looked like a giant hand grasping at the ocean. Narrowgut was one such finger, but only a sand spit separated it from the mainland now and it continued with the daily tug-o-war with the tides that claimed it and gave it back twice a day.

It was quiet around the makeshift settlement. There were a few ramshackle houses; shanties really. The rest were a collection of tents belonging to a motley group of people the economy forgot. All they possessed lay in these gray canvas homes. They had little to do and no money to spend. Most of the men were out fishing. It was a strange place. Poverty had every family in its clutches. Money was in short supply, but no one ever looked like starving. The fish were unaware a Depression gripped the land. They were still around with plenty for everyone.

That was part of the problem. The markets were glutted with fish from trawlers and their owners had enough trouble getting a fair price for them in the stiff competition. No one could afford high prices anyway. The fellow with a dinghy and a few lines could never make money out of what he caught. He could feed his family though. Comrades in misfortune, each family traded with the other, in kind. In a time of supreme hardship, the people of Sandy Bay ate like kings.

“Can’t stay long,” said Jack when they reached Bill’s home. “Tide’s coming in. About half an hour’ll give me enough time to get to the spit.”

“Fair enough,” said Bill. Every spare minute he could glean of Jack’s company was a bonus.

“You took your time,” an accusing voice said. Ginny, Bill’s sister, would have loved to be with her big brother. He did fun things. She was a few years younger and because she was a girl was watched like a hawk. Anyone would think she couldn’t look after herself. “Mum’s been looking for you.”

“Oh, great. Sounds like Wal’s been here already. You’d think in a place as sparse as Sandy Bay you could go for a swim without the world knowing.”

Jack shrugged and grinned. He’d heard Mrs. Tarrant before.

She flew at Bill but somehow she never sounded as cross as she meant to. She was the village ‘mum’. Everyone loved her. Bill’s place was the place to be. She looked after them like a mother hen and squarked as often. She was harmless.

“There you are! I’ll need you to take these over to the Graham’s,” she said, breathless, holding up some clothes in a bundle. She was a neat seamstress and the proud owner of a Singer sewing machine. She did mending for folks who lacked the means to do their own. Clothes lasted as long as it was possible to make them these days. She traded her skill for vegetables or some other commodity she was unable to provide and had no money to buy. “You been in that channel again?” It wasn’t really a question as she gave Bill no time to answer. You too?” looking at Jack. “Lord, I don’t know. I think the Good Lord gave boys a self-destruct button. Virginia, get that other bundle will you?”

Crikey, thought Bill with admiration, the woman never drew breath!

“Take this one to Mrs. Hill.” Ella Tarrant ran out of words, at last.

Ginny gritted her teeth. No one called her Virginia. It was too grand for this place and a little overwhelming for her. ‘Ginny’ felt more lived in.

“Your face will stay like that if the wind changes,” laughed her mother. “All right. Ginny! That better, Miss?”

Ginny subsided. She only wanted to be noticed when all was said and done. Some of her facial expressions were legendary. People noticed, all right!

“You doing her sewing too mum? I thought she did her own.” Bill wanted to change the subject. Anything was better than Ginny moaning and whingeing.

“Broke her finger, poor thing,” said Mrs. Tarrant. “Can’t sew a stitch.”

“Can it wait till Jack goes? He won’t be here long.” It was a reasonable request. No one lived by timetables unless the tide was involved.

“Fair enough. There’s some lemonade in the jug. Thirsty?” She dumped the bundles on the table where Bill and Ginny could not miss them.

“Sure are,” said Bill. He poured three glasses, including one for his sister who took it silently, mollified for the moment.

“Thanks, Mrs. Tarrant,” grinned Jack.

She crossed to the ice chest, a marvelous cabinet housing a huge chunk of ice that slowly melted as the day progressed. A tray underneath caught the drips. She reached in and took out a huge lobster. It was cooked, Jack was relieved to see. He hated the way lobsters were cooked. To see them in boiling water till they stopped kicking gave him the horrors. “Soft!” Bill called him.

Mrs. Tarrant frowned. She looked at the lobster as though it had done something wrong and said, exasperated:

“What am I going to do with this thing to make it taste different?” In another place and another time it would have raised a few eyebrows or caused a few bemused smiles, but the lobster pots were always full and around here the fleshy creatures were standard fare. It broke up the monotony of fish. She had even curried one last week.

“Dunno, mum. You’ll think of something.” Bill downed his drink in a few large gulps. “You want to see my billy cart?” he said to Jack. Mrs. Tarrant shrugged and left the boys to themselves, the dilemma over the lobster hers alone.

Jack had no real toys on the island. His father had a full-time job and had little time to spare making gadgets to entertain Jack.

He would have liked to do more father-son things but his responsibilities ate away at his time.

Jack's eyes lit up. A billy cart! Would he ever? The two boys raced outside where this marvel in engineering lay waiting. It had three wheels, two at the back and one at the front at the end of a long shaft. It pivoted at the urging of two ropes that allowed it to go right or left. Mister Tarrant was a mechanic by trade and he and Bill produced a contraption to be envied. The old crate that formed the seat, still labeled 'Granny Smith Apples', was a discard from the general store in Guthrie's Bay. Boxes like this one graced most of the shanties and tents, masquerading as seats, cupboards, clothes chests and the like. Bill was going to spruce it up a bit when the holidays started. Right now, it was in its raw state, just waiting for finishing off.

"Wow! What a beauty! Is it fast?" Jack was envious. "Can I have a go?"

"Sure! We'll take it up the track a bit. There's a bit of a slope. Best we can do around here, I'm afraid." Bill wanted to take it to Bridle Hill where the old horse trails led up from the coast. It was too far to go today, with the tide already on the turn. The two boys dragged the cart by the ropes until they found an incline that was reasonable, and took turns, feeling the bumpy track bouncing them wonderfully as they careered downwards. The iron wheels rumbled along, grinding the stones and sand beneath them, making a satisfying sound.

Time is an enemy of busy boys. It races away like a demon and before you know it, an age has passed. With a gasp of dismay, Jack skidded the cart to a stop and yelled, "The time! I forgot the time. Oh, hell. Sorry Bill. I've gotta go."

He leapt out of the cart and ran as fast as he could to the shanty and snatched up his schoolbag, Bill skeltering after him with the billy cart in tow.

“See you, Mrs. Tarrant,” he called, without stopping.

“You still here? Oh Jack. Quickly! You’ll have to run. Unless you want to share this monster,” she said pointing to the huge plate where the lobster sprawled, legs hanging over the edge. “Lobster a la Tarrant.” Bill raised his eyes to the heavens. He’d heard all this before. The contents of the dish would remain a mystery until he sank his teeth into it.

Jack flew out and along the track leading to False Bay, Mrs. Tarrant’s voice losing pitch in a Doppler effect as he ran. The bush was tinder dry and sharp spikes snatched at him as he passed. He did not notice them. The only thing on his mind was getting to the sand spit before the tide swallowed it up.

Buy the B&N ePub version at:-

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/neptunes-fingers-lyn-a-ldred/1014425654?ean=2940013174276>

Buy the Kindle version at:-

<http://www.amazon.com/Neptunes-Fingers-ebook/dp/B005GVJQN0/ref>