

MARLIS BURDON

LETTERS TO MY GRANDCHILDREN — NEPTUNE ISLAND

It's nine am, Sunday, August 1995, and I have finished my first three weather observations which start at three am, fed my six hens and one rooster, made some of my Sunday phone calls and am now ready to describe what I am doing on this remote but beautiful island.

The Neptunes are made up of four main islands and are inhabited by 14,000 New Zealand fur seals and hundreds of Australian sea lions, myself, my chooks and many birds and not much else. One of the last remaining wilderness areas in Australia. On my island, the main South Neptune Island, there will be about 13,000 shearwaters in September when they start their breeding cycle. This island, mainly big, black smooth and regular shaped, huge stone blocks, is only 40 hectares. The swell from the west throws massive amounts of water onto the island which is more often than not hazy with salt spray. My positions are weather observer, which actually pays quite well, coastguard and caretaker. I do seven observations, one every three hours, except 12 o'clock midnight when I actually am allowed to sleep. There is an automatic light house and three buildings constructed of granite and built rather well to withstand the many bad storms. There used to be up to three families here but now I rattle around alone. The high swells usually make it impossible for visitors or supplies to land.

I have been here since the mid July and have had five visitors (fisherman) and two people who flew in with a light plane which was exciting as the airstrip is short and the wind difficult. What frightened me most were the generators and their maintenance, the electrical circuits and radios I needed to maintain contact with the fishing fleet and with the coastguard of Port Lincoln. I do have solar powered telephone, too, though without which I would be really lonely. As it is I phone the boys every day. They are managing quite well, learning to be independent for Uni next year. Paying all the bills has been an eye opener for them.

The island was badly run by the Department of Parks and Wildlife, neglected and dirty. It's taken weeks to pick up, burn or bag up the rubbish and to tidy and clean the houses and sheds. It really is near enough to paradise though. The outside imperfect world hardly touches me and there are no men! But because it is such a romantic idea and setting I have not escaped the greatest

evil. There are about four men openly chasing me, one hopelessly 'in love' and many offers to share this with me. Not my fault! A very big problem surfaces when things go wrong on the mainland and I really can not get there and help.

LETTERS

28th August 1995

Hello Deborah, Finn, Bianca and Richard,

I guess this third story will have to be for Finn and Deborah mainly as they have birthdays coming up soon! Don't take any notice of the gap. I am including that in case I can't send this except with my broken fax machine. Now where did the second part of the story end? I remember!

Nanny had been looking for the sails all morning and had almost given up when she heard a radio message, looked outside and discovered the yacht, *Free Spirit*, already in the bay and approaching the jetty quite quickly. It looked beautiful. But it took them a long time to get organized and Nanny had plenty of time to do the nine o'clock weather observations. It was of course, again too rough for a dinghy to land on the beach, so the men on the yacht decided to tie the supplies to a rope with a weight at the end of it and to throw it to Nanny on the end of the jetty. Everything was protected with many layers of plastic. The men were in an inflatable and not too happy about coming too close to the jetty in case the dinghy was pierced by rough bits on the pylons which were rusty and old.

Nervously Nanny waited until the men had maneuvered the dinghy into the right position which seemed to take a long time and much going around in big circles to escape the swells. Then the old man got onto his feet shakily, swung the rope around his head and let go in her direction. It worked the second time but she nearly lost the parcel when a swell wrapped around a pylon and it started ripping. The men screamed, "Don't pull!" And then she waited until the second swell untangled it again before she heaved with all her might and finally pulled it onto the jetty where she untied the parcel and tied her own mail to the rope before throwing it back to the men. She had included a fruit cake for the men as a 'thank-you'! They threw one more load up, some oil for the generator, and then motored off to have some lunch. Around 12 o'clock they had a message for her on the radio: "We forgot to give you the rye bread and

the book, Marlis". Quickly Nanny replied "Don't worry". It's just too difficult and not worth all the trouble". "No trouble!" the men said, "We will just pitch it into the swell and it will be carried onto the beach." "No!" Nanny said, "It will be carried out to sea. Please, don't bother!" But they refused to listen to her and again came to the jetty, dangerously close she thought, and after a while threw a package into the water. Nanny ran to the boat-shed to grab a hook and then waited for ages for the parcel to stop bobbing up and on the same spot and come closer to her. No luck! She gave up and walked to the house. The men had already turned for home.

When she got to the house she called them on the radio again and said, "Bad Luck, but thanks for trying and good-bye". Again they said that it would get washed up on the beach but she did not believe them and went back to her bread-making only sometimes glancing through the window towards the jetty. Suddenly she saw the parcel being lifted onto a big swell and carried quite a way towards the beach. She dropped her tea-towel and ran as fast as she could to the jetty, getting there just in time to pick the parcel up before the next wave battered it some more. When she unwrapped the package, she found the books a little wet but the bread dry and delicious.

The next few days were not quite as exciting as she went back to her weather observations, the housework and the table she was trying to make out of thick boards of driftwood. And then the day came when a friend rang up and said that he would try and fly his plane to Neptune Island. Nanny said "when?" and he said "probably today as we are working on Thistle Island and want to come and see you at the end of the day, stay a night and go back home tomorrow, if the wind comes from the right direction". Well, you can imagine how excited Nanny was and how eagerly she watched the weather. There was practically no wind! And at five o'clock she heard the plane above the noise of the swell breaking on the rocks. And then the plane circled and finally came down low enough to land uphill on the short runway, scattering dozens of terrified Cape Barren Geese. Nanny ran to say "Hello" and watched the plane turn on the soft ground. She was so pleased to see the visitors that she gave both of them a big hug, and then they turned the plane out of harm's way of the North wind and tied one wing down on the grader.

The woman had bought Nanny a big bunch of wild flowers, newspapers, oranges and some mutton chops, the first meat Nanny had seen for six weeks. It was fun to have visitors and when they left early in the morning, because a thunder-storm appeared out of nowhere, Nanny was quite sad. The plane looked small and fragile as it flew low underneath the dark clouds and the rain.

The days seemed a bit longer after that and Nanny got into the habit of going

for walks. One day she wandered down to the jetty and decided to try some fishing when she found fishing line and some small lures. It was too rough to look for bait on the rocks. She really did not expect to catch anything when she threw the lure into the water at the end of the rocking jetty. But she had hardly steadied herself and moved the lure up and down a bit when something silver snatched at it and made her try harder. Suddenly something very strong took the lure and nearly Nanny as well. It was a matter of the fish catching Nanny and not Nanny catching the fish like it was supposed to happen.

Continued next time!

Lots of Love to you all,
Hope you are all as alive and happy as I am,
Nanny

Thursday 9th October 1995

Dear Bianca and Finn,

As you can see I am really good at drawing seals! But I wish you could see them. They are such friendly, playful and cute animals. I go for a walk each day to say hello to them.

At the moment I am sitting inside at my big table looking at the two glass jars full of all the little treasures I have collected for you on my small beach near the jetty and near the seals. I hope that you will like looking at them as much as I have enjoyed finding them for you.

Nobody knows who will be here when I have to leave at the end of the month to look after Michael and Mark who are very busy studying. Leaving the island without anybody here worries me. Who will look after the chooks and who will do the weather observations and look after the houses and the garden? The men who are responsible for the island are not doing a good job.

Nearly one month ago, on a Friday, three helicopters three television crews and one boat-load of people came to look at the Island and six people tried to decide whether they would like to live here and turn the Island into a holiday place for rich tourists. Since then nothing has happened and no decisions have been made. One group of people have a helicopter and a big boat. These

people are based on Kangaroo Island, closer to Adelaide. They have asked me to help them but I am getting tired of waiting for people to make up their minds.

There are a lot of things I need to do now and one of them is, of course to see you. And maybe I will even live in Adelaide for a while in the small flat in Davey St. who knows? When Michael and Mark finish their school this year and after shearing on the station, they will probably end up in Adelaide, too.

But one thing is certain this has been a great adventure. Three days ago somebody tried to land a small plane on the short and difficult runway. I don't know who it could have been. Nobody rang me before or after the event. Well, they tried to land the wrong way downhill and when they were about two or three meters above the runway and maybe 100 metres to the end and the sea they realised that they were not going to make it and roared away as fast and as quickly as they could. It was very nearly a disaster and Nanny was mentally preparing herself to fish the stupid people out of the sea.

Michael and Mark visited me at the beginning of the holidays. They came in a yacht and left in a small plane. When they came it was very windy again and they got quite seasick. They landed in a small dingy with their gear and some more food. It was very rough and I worried that they and everything else would fall into the sea. But they made it. They stayed for about four days, fishing and exploring the island until the weather deteriorated again and we made the quick decision to ask a friend to come and fly them out, because I did not want them to miss their tutorials in Adelaide. They barely made it. The plane was nearly overloaded and the wind as in the wrong direction. I was so relieved when the plane finally lifted over the water, I forgot to cry when they left. They circled the island twice and told me later that it was a fantastic flight with a round rainbow and hundreds of islands below them (maybe not quite hundreds of islands but certainly quite a few and a good view from above.)

And after that I really did not want to be here anymore. Now it's more or less just a job. I see the beauty of it still but I want to be back, I want to be back with my friends and family and look after the houses, the flats, the gardens and the shack. I have been away long enough.

As I am writing this letter the wind is howling outside again. The clouds are low and it looks like rain. I wonder whether you can image what it is like here all alone with the sea visible all around, no shops, no people, no trees, no schools, no cars, no dogs, no cats, no paddocks and no outboard motor for my small boat. It certainly is a strange feeling living here and without my telephone it would certainly be much more difficult to remain sane. But everyone rings me

up to say Hello which is really good and every time I do a weather observation I earn about \$10. And, of course, there are many, many things I have learnt here, had to learn to survive.

13 Days to go!!

Who will post this letter from me?
Much Love
Nanni



JOSH HOROWITZ

BEACHED

every beach has a memory
I am still there on that beach
when the light of the moon hits the still wet shore
I am standing there in other sands
you are there in the momentary silver reflection
the ocean recedes again
we are always there in-between the in-between the land and the
ocean
where the waves caress and dance against the slope
the sand hardens and darkens
phases and stages
come and go
there we are
always
between
in and out

Inspired after reading Greg Denning's
Beach Crossings, June 23, 2009.