

A GIRL CALLED PETER



I was born on the 2nd May 1947, the second child, and first-born daughter of John and Mary Rebbechi at the Three Springs Hospital in Western Australia. I was christened Barbara Mary Peter Rebbechi; however, I was only ever called “Peter”. My parents were strict Catholics and I think they named me after St Peter.

I never asked them why I was called Peter, and not Barbara, or why my name was always spelt, ‘Peter’.

Why I never asked, I do not know, but would ask now if I had the chance ever again.

I had an older brother- whose name was Joseph, born on 28th November 1945 - deceased 11th June 1958. He was my soulmate and we were often mistaken for twins. I had two younger sisters, Marion born 1st January 1950 (deceased September 16th 2016), and Marie, 5th February 1955.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DAYS –Pre school

My dear brother, Joe, was eighteen months older than I and I adored him, following him everywhere. We were like a pair of Siamese twins. After Marion was born in 1950, Joe and I were at an

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age, where we had discovered a world outside the confines of the house. We were always outside playing, during the day.

When she was a baby, Marion was struck down with the polio virus that had broken out in Perth in the 1950's. She spent a great deal of her early childhood in hospital, and as a consequence, we never really bonded the way Joe and I did.

Marie, my other sister, was eight years younger and the age gap as children seemed rather marked. So, it was Joe and I who were best friends and played together most of the time.

My earliest memories are from 1949-50, when my parents lived in a little school house in a small community called Arrino, in the then Three Springs District. My dad was the headmaster of the Arrino school.

I can remember I used to play under the house which was elevated on stilts. Joe and I would spend hours beneath the house playing with unseen friends. If Joe wasn't with me, I used to be there playing on my own alone with my 'friends' who were very real to me.

If I mentioned these 'friends' of mine in front of elders, they would admonish me. My mother recalled many years later that I would chatter away to my invisible friends; but when I was told they were not real, I would be furious and insist that they truly were real. I was forbidden from mentioning them when I was with my family

TREESVILLE



Dad was transferred at the end of 1950 to another school; this time to a small timber mill town in the South of WA. Dad was the headmaster of the school in Treesville (circa 1922-1956). Treesville was located on the banks of the Harris River in the South-west of Western Australia. Today, its remnants lie within the Lane Poole Conservation Reserve. Collie is the nearest town. The last photos of the town I saw were hanging in the Yarloop museum in 2014, which was destroyed completely by the Big Fire that burnt the town to cinders in 2016.

Mum had a little car, a 'Mayflower'. It was cream and we would all pile in to go swimming in the little creeks and rivers on the weekends before Marion became very ill with polio. The virus had affected her legs when she was only eleven months old so she ended up spending six months separated from the family in Princess Margaret Hospital. Family members were not allowed to stay with their sick relatives in those days.

I remember going up to Perth with my mother to see her a couple of times. During that time, we used to go by train from Harvey to Perth and then catch a tram up Hay Street to the hospital. When she finally came home, Mum looked after her and managed her rehabili-

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tation. I remember a great celebration when she could finally walk without the splints on her little legs.

Mum and Dad, being war veterans loved to smoke cigarettes. I think they were mainly brands like Players, Craven A and Woodbine. In those days, cigarettes were pure tobacco and it seemed like 98% of the population enjoyed a cigarette.

Of course, as curious kids, Joe and I were very keen to try one; but we were never allowed to touch the packet. One day, an opportunity arose for us to pinch one and take a box of matches up to the trees at the back of our house. We found a spot where we thought we could not be seen from the house, sat down and Joe lit our first cigarette and took a puff. He immediately started to cough and handed it to me. I had a puff and thought I was going to die, so I threw it to the ground and the next minute the grass started crackling.

Scared, we ran into the house as fast as our little legs could carry us. Dad came out when he saw the fire through the kitchen window. He managed to extinguish it in minutes; but the fate that awaited us after the drama was over, came in the form of the strap.

Over Dad's knee we were both put, Joe first and then me, and were given three smacks across our little bottoms with a strap. We had never had this happen to us before, so as you can imagine we were in shock. We were given stern warnings from my father never ever to play with matches, or smoke cigarettes ever again. We were both very upset at having had such a spanking. From that time on, we stayed outside whenever we could, especially if Dad was in a bad mood, which fortunately, was not very often.

I started school in Treesville. It was a two-teacher school and I had

a lovely young tutor who made school fun. I was introduced to reading all about Dick and Dora. Joe and I would make up Dick and Dora games and try and teach our dogs to play these games with us. There was no such thing as homework, no television, no radio, just fun. Dad used to read lots of stories and poems to us before bed - especially Banjo Patterson's books¹. Our imaginations ran riot. Dad would sing songs from the war years and we loved those special times.

Mum was busy and would spend most of her time being a mum.

She loved cleaning, cooking, sewing and attending to the needs of her family while also looking after the special needs of our little sister, Marion, when she returned home from Princess Margaret Hospital. Christmas was a fun time for all. The school organising committee would have a pantomime on the last day of school. When Father Christmas came, we all sat on his knee. I happened to pull his beard down once and lo and behold, I got such a shock to see, underneath the beard, was my dad.

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