

PEG JOB

You'll have to read the story



Be kind

Susie Edmonds asks Peg about love, life and Braidwood.

I was born in a little country town called Bingara in Northern NSW in the lower Nandewar Ranges, off a big cattle and sheep station called Keera. Dad was the teacher at the one teacher school on this large property and Mum the daughter of the head stockman. So I come from rural stock.

SE: *Is there anything from your childhood that helped shape who you are now?*

PJ: Yes. Living in little country towns to which I actively wanted to return and grow old in — and the travel bug, to travel within Australia. I travelled a lot overseas when younger. Those two and I think, a bit of obsession with taking on 'causes'. My father wrote to the *Sydney Morning Herald* all through his life protesting about something or other. He questioned what government was doing, and why. He wasn't conscious of himself as a radical person; he just thought a citizen had the responsibility to express his concerns.

Did this shape your political views at all?

Not the nature of the views but certainly the need to protest. I've given up active protesting, except with words. I want to focus more inwards now.

I was intrigued to hear you went to Cuba. Can you tell me how that came about?

I wanted to travel overseas. My partner Jonathan, who became my husband, wanted to go to Africa and I wanted to go to Asia. So we compromised on Latin America. What we wanted to do was go somewhere that was trying to do interesting things politically and socially.

Some Cubans came to Queensland where we lived at the time to discuss their sugar cane industry. In Cuba they were experimenting in many ways after their revolution in 1959 — literacy and numeracy were being taught throughout the country by teenage school/university kids, for instance — and we were very impressed with Che Guevara's writings and speeches about the 'new man'. Now I'd object and say the 'new person' but the new man was to be someone who was not like the 'capitalist' man. Che Guevara's writings about this are still worth reading.

So we negotiated with them and agreed that we would travel to Cuba to live and work. It took nearly another full year to put the trip in train, but finally in 1971, off we went across the Pacific Ocean on an unstabilised ship, crewed by Italians (great food), in a tiny four-berth cabin. I was twenty-five and Jonno was twenty-eight and we had two little children aged three and five, from his first marriage.

I was probably rather more idealistic and left wing than Jonno, but he was always up for any adventure, the crazier the better. He was a chemical engineer and the Cubans wanted him to work on sugarcane bagasse, which is what's left over after removing the sugar, and turning it into pulp and paper.

I worked in the geography department at the University of Havana. Jonno's research for this led to the UN putting a pilot processing plant in Cuba and I've been told by a number of people that a plaque has been placed in honour of this contribution in Lenin Park which, curiously, I helped build in my voluntary work. Every worker in Cuba is encouraged to do voluntary work as well and I chose to work on the land (every Sunday morning 6-12), and one of my assignments was moving rocks aside to make a large park on the outskirts of Havana, named for Lenin.

What was your time there like?

It was all very confronting, and we both grew up fast. They put us in a hotel because our sponsor was overseas at the time and they had to wait until his return to allocate us the promised apartment. We met some of the people who

JONNO, FREYA AND SEBASTIAN AT PRADO, LA HABANA, CARNIVAL 1972.



hijacked planes out of the U.S. or Canada who were also housed in hotels, since the Cubans really didn't know what to do with them.

Our four months at Spanish language classes in Australia were, of course, inadequate; it might as well have been Japanese, because the Cubans swallow all the consonants. We muddled along and wrote long lists of new words each day, comparing notes at night.

The food was pretty plain in Cuba. Beans and rice were basics and all else was luck or excess from export needs. Everything was rationed. Once a week you could collect your greens — what ever was in that day was what you got for the week. That might be a bag of avocados and that's all. We didn't starve at all; I just don't think I was a good enough cook to do a lot with this — the lack of herbs and spices, onions and garlic, even tomatoes much of the time. The children got milk every day as every child under seven was entitled to a litre of milk a day, and each of us had a modest ration of meat I can't remember now. It was an intensely interesting twenty months, living there. Superb rum was cheap of course, wine was Chilean and had to be paid for in dollars, so we didn't buy it.

We were each paid the standard rate for professionals, 250 pesos per month. Rent for everyone was ten percent of one's salary. All medical treatment was free, as was education in 1970, even in one of the poorer countries in the world. (It still is, I believe.) They have developed their social system internationally into something quite magnificent. They are usually the first to send in medical personnel after an emergency anywhere, as after the tsunami in Indonesia for example. They have already trained 800 medical personnel in Cuba for Timor l'Este since independence; doctors, nurses and paramedics.

I have a great admiration for Cuba, but it isn't perfect and naturally, it made lots of mistakes. This was not helped by a total embargo (from 1961) on all imports from the USA or anything else that contained components made in the USA. So Cuba re-invented almost everything, even mimicked Coke to go with their wonderful rum (Bacardi was Cuban, and the family left the country with the revolution in 1959). Personally, I think Fidel Castro was one of the giants of the twentieth century as a political and social thinker, and for putting into action ideas to help the people in his country.

Where did life take you then?

We went off to England — London first and then a little village called Woodhouse Eaves in the Midlands, where friends from Brisbane lived — for nearly a year, and the novel I started in Cuba I finished in England. It was very bad. With my high school French and my Spanish I worked as an inspector of European tourist resorts for UK's *Which?* magazine. (*Choice* is modelled on this.)

While I was doing that, Jonno had a friend at the London School of Economics, who gave him access to a computer. Jonno was a polymath, constantly inventing projects and schemes. On this occasion it was towing icebergs from the Antarctic to provide fresh water to arid regions, and we came back to Australia so he could pursue this research in Adelaide with a bunch of other wonderful, like-minded creative people (maybe nutters to you?).

I was invited to be a tutor in geography at the University of Adelaide. In the Adelaide hills we bought 10 acres, built a home of jarrah timber and, full of hope and excitement,



PEG AND FREYA AT BACURANAO BEACH, NEAR LA HABANA 1972.

had our son in 1978. Six weeks after our son was born, Jonno was overcome with pain and months later, finally diagnosed with stomach cancer, which had by then spread everywhere. We then moved lock, stock and barrel to his parents' home on the outskirts of Brisbane and he died about six weeks later, in my arms.

How was it being a single mum at that time, after losing the love of your life?

I think I was a bit of everything at once. But there was no possibility of not going on and coping because I had a baby of 8 months old I was breastfeeding and two traumatised children who'd now lost both their birth parents. I enlarged the strength I'd found coping with Jonno's dying and then the resilience to go on just surfaced I guess, because it had been pretty thoroughly tested.

So this idealistic young woman had become very grown up I gather?

I think I became grown up in Cuba. But I didn't lose my idealism. That was a big growing up experience because although not easy, it was wonderful. So exciting, you can't imagine. All cultural or sporting events cost \$1 (peso) to see: movies, theatre, ballet, opera, puppets, soccer, you name it!

You went back to university to study, didn't you?

Yes. After a while we (the three kids and I) moved to Sydney to share a house with old friends. I worked part-time for ACOSS and at the same time I started going to the University of NSW to study Spanish to bring my language skills back into play.

Then I got hooked into the Australia-Cuba Friendship Society and the Resource and Action Committee for Latin America, ready to get back into causes. Sydney had a strong network in the Latin American community and I knew lots of refugees.

That's why I can't bear what is happening now in Australia, because I know what refugees go through. I kept studying and came out of University with a PhD in Latin American Literature. This was a study of Mexican women writers, which meant I had to spend time in Mexico meeting them, reading their work and absorbing their lives. I arrived in Mexico with my 9-year-old son just after the horrific earthquake of 1985 which killed probably 45,000