

'Talk about your childhood wishes'

Candy Man - Sammy Davis Jnr.

I should have listened to the warnings! I was born on the Ides of March, the 15th, the same day Julius Caesar was stabbed repeatedly only a few years before my arrival. Well, it certainly feels as if I've been alive forever. But on that day, in 1970 at the beautiful Calvary Hospital in leafy North Adelaide, there were no threatening blades in sight. Well, not to me anyway. Mum thought the contractions would never come because two weeks after the arrival date seemed an eternity. I, however, was comfortable, content and secure. In her desperation, mum finally waddled down the beach to spark her labour while dad celebrated with a bottle of West End Draught at the drive-through as the onset of her contractions accelerated.

Simon and Garfunkel's *Bridge Over Troubled Waters* was dominating the charts and over the years I have taken great comfort from the lyrics of a song that could so easily have been written for me. But all that was in an unpredictable future. I happily made my way home to a beautiful place full of extraordinary happiness. There was mum Pam, dad Bill, sister Joanne and now me. Everything was just perfect.

As I grew I knew my life would be different. Of course, I didn't know how because being so young, my aspirations were never that grand. I had an inbuilt feeling that it would lead me to places other than the paths I could see as a child. I just didn't know in which direction.

My individuality began with the not-so-surprising, left handedness to the webbed second and third toes on my right foot. Years later I believed these toes were a direct result of me being born under the sign of the fish – Pisces! I had a large, brown birthmark on my lower right leg, was a vivid colour dreamer and my ability to curl and vibrate my tongue was simply an added bonus, I thought.

Imaginative and spiritual were two adjectives that were applied to me from an early age and were descriptions I wore with pride. I recognised early my ability to “read” people and absorb their thoughts and feelings as if I were a sponge. I was insatiably curious and aware of my surroundings with a sense of intuition and perception that astounds me to this day. But people are not usually attuned to what lives in a child's heart and instead, focus on the external. My dead-straight, long and glossy brown hair and the ability to twist and turn my incredibly flexible body into unbelievable positions were what captured people's attention. I would have been a wonderful performer of *Circ Du Soleil*! I was full of energy, fit, healthy and carefree and had a decided touch of the wild, rebellious and fearless bubbling within.

I was a daredevil with a determined and extremist nature (fuelled by and likened to Evil Knievel) and would throw myself into any situation with a passion. Something my poor mum will never forget was when I enthusiastically jumped into the deep end of a friend's pool, unaided by floaties or even the slightest idea of how to swim. Mum unexpectedly played life guard that day and without a thought, followed me in – clothes, hat, sunglasses, drink and all! I was an uninhibited, free spirited sprite who took the pleasure and freedom to wee in the bush at any chance I could get and hated the restrictions that clothing impinged on my lithe, little body.

My long hair made me easy to identify on the jungle bar at school recess as mum drove past on her way to the local shops. There I was, hanging upside down, hair flowing in the breeze, skirt around my head and knickers for all to see.

Later, I reveled in the thrill and excitement of dangerous showground rides...the bigger and scarier the better. I thrived on the exhilaration at being thrown around upside down and inside out which

sent my heart and adrenalin racing making me feel so alive. I didn't know it at the time but I was filling up on what I was to be denied.

My love of music must have begun in-utero. How else can I explain my near photographic memory for music of all eras, genres and lyrics? All I had to do was hear them once and they stayed with me forever. I can even remember listening and enjoying opera and classical music on the transistor radio when I was five. What fed my love was mum and dad's vast collection of 45 RPM vinyl records of artists from Shirley Bassey to the Bee Gees with a touch of Alice Cooper thrown in. Sunday morning gigs were the best when mum was at work. Music was heard throughout the neighbourhood as Jo and I sang and danced in the lounge room or did cartwheels on the freshly cut lawn.

I have always loved animals – particularly dogs. My first pet was Chiquie who was a white Fox Terrier cross Chihuahua with black spots. I dressed her in restrictive dolls clothes and pushed her around the back yard in a pram wrapped in a blanket or I peddled my three-wheeler bike with her perched nervously in the basket. Chiquie took it well and knowing – as all dogs seem to – that when a little girl picks you up awkwardly, smothers you with kisses, squeezes you with suffocating cuddles and puts you in a bonnet...it means she loves you. Being a chocoholic, which was an inherited trait, I even used to 'share' Chiquie's dog-choc treats. I'm sure they were full of vitamins and she didn't seem to mind. But there was less luck with animals bought on impulse. I was not overly fond of the various galahs we tried to tame. Apart from resisting all attempts to teach them to talk, they had the annoying habit of attacking at every opportunity. I think they enjoyed the taste of blood and were superb escape artists despite having clipped wings. I also had a black rabbit called Licorice who used to growl...and bite. He was so vicious we released him in the nearby park which probably wasn't such a good thing to do. I am sure he began the outbreak of the deadly Calicivirus! I also desperately wanted to grow my own colony of sea monkeys and spent a great deal of time attempting to do so. I believed they would turn out like the pictures displayed on the back of comics. Cute family of aliens that funnily enough, didn't look anything at all like monkeys! I dutifully cut out the coupons and sent them away. After several attempts and moving the water bowl around every window sill in the house chasing the sun, I decided their fragile little lives were probably lost during the lengthy postal delivery from America. I desperately wanted a horse and took up lessons where I used to fearlessly ride an ex-racehorse called Mac or formally named, McInnans Gold. Mum and dad used to watch me white knuckled for a half an hour while I galloped around in the dust.

I was so proud of my pretty pink bedroom covered with large pink hibiscus flowered wallpaper. I was neat, organised and would spring clean no matter what the season. I spent endless hours rearranging the few items of pink painted furniture I had. I would empty the room into the hallway and never seemed to finish completely by the time dad got home from work or golf. He was forced to clamber over the clutter to get past, but I didn't like to be rushed and on a few occasions it remained there overnight. It had to be just so. I lived by the motto: *If you're going to do something, do it well or not at all!!*. I spent hours cataloguing my worldly possessions, carefully arranging my Little Golden Books into alphabetical order and coding them under the Dewey Decimal System – complete with their own library cards. If ever someone from the neighbourhood found themselves with a burning desire to borrow *The Saggy-Baggy Elephant* – I was prepared. However, it was a mystery to me that no-one ever was. I also had a vast selection of stuffed toys strategically placed on shelves or my bed and they all had individual names. My favorites were the very much loved and faded Teddy Edward and Pipsqueak the pink mouse who still share my bedroom today.

My next home away from home was my cubby house lovingly built by dad, complete with a ladder to transport me to my lofty haven. There were many carefree and innocent hours spent outside setting up secret affiliations combined with intricate initiation rituals such as Mickey Mouse and

Magic clubs consisting of a limited group comprising Jo and me and, at times, an unsuspecting friend who had come over to play or a highly persuaded neighbor. This fed my creative and imaginary outlet. I loved colouring in, and hated going outside the lines, and was able to express myself by writing 'love' notes to mum and dad. I also painted the cubby house, made curtains for it, spring cleaned it many a times and slept in it on the odd summer night. I enjoyed gardening too. I was allocated a small strip of land that I happily tended and where I planted all sorts of flowers, seedlings and strawberries. Although, I was wary of the Snapdragons and avoided them when they were in bloom because I thought my ankles would be under threat if I went too close! It was such a shame because they looked so colourful and pretty. Fortunately, there was no one to criticise my odd actions and I was never laughed at for being so eccentric at such a young age.

A born entrepreneur, I tried to invent and concoct all sorts of weird and wonderful ways to accumulate wealth. I set up a lolly shop outside my bedroom window for which mum would dutifully buy my stock, then I would package it up into convenient and affordable packs. Now, my window was behind a gate at the side of the house and there was a deli across the road but that didn't deter me and my sill was set up, money tin in place ready for the customers to start flowing. Within a short time, it worked. Amazing!! I didn't realise mum was drumming up business by giving money to neighbours or anyone getting off at the bus stop and sending them around to buy my sweets. At the time, however, I was convinced it was my marketing strategy and determination that carried the day and guaranteed my success. School holidays were highly profitable. I happily carried out various chores: washing cars, windows and venetian blinds, dishes, oiling wood work, dusting skirting boards and cleaning out cupboards. Being small, I could easily fit into tight corners and inbetween shelves. I always did a meticulous job and was proud of my achievements when I received my handful of coins, including 1c and 2c coins. I was well on my way to making my first million, all from the comfort of my own home.

Dad, otherwise known as Bill was a Port Adelaide man by birth and by choice and followed in his father's footsteps by playing football in his younger day. He also loved his golf and his beer. A hard worker and a generous provider, he loved to entertain. Dinner parties in the 1970s weren't complete without Tom Jones or Neil Diamond bellowing in the background and a whole lot of food, drink and entertainment, consisting of practical jokes or party tricks. Being a sole child, he was also well known as a proud father and his constant adoration of his daughters. Dad gave great *rockets* before bedtime when he would pick his girls up, one at a time, and whizz our little bodies around, zooming as he went and pretending to crash into doorways, cupboards and the fridge as we reacted with squeals of delight. I was dad's little helper and swept up the grass clippings as he mowed the lawn, cleaned up around him while he tinkered on a project in the shed or provided spit for the nails that were hammered in, here there and everywhere. This fun dad was also the disciplinarian and had an uncanny ability to freeze his children with raised eyebrows and a pointed finger. We soon learned his stern façade was an act and became adept at melting his resolve.

My mother, Pam was a full-time mum and part-time pharmacy assistant. If dad could freeze with a look, mum could thaw with a smile. She was the carer, the organizer, the one we turned to when we needed a hug or an overabundance of TLC. Being such a healthy youngster, sickness was a rare event and often needed to be faked for sympathy. Some of my fondest memories involve mum fussing over me when I was ill. She would set me up on the brown corduroy living room couch, complete with ample pillows, soft blankets and a nearby coffee table holding tissues, a drink and whatever delicacy my ailing health required. Mum would enjoy tea breaks with me while I watched Mike Walsh or Ray Martin's Midday Show followed by Days of Our Lives in between doing her housework. She was so houseproud. If mum had to run errands on my "sick" day, I could always expect a Balfours's Chocolate Donut or Frog Cake (an old Adelaidian standard) on her return. If this wasn't enough, I could always muster a pitiful cough from under the blankets and know there was a packet of SOS aniseed lollies or Butter Menthols coming my way. Mum loved us kids being

on holidays. She began a baby book for Jo and me that included every detail of our progressing lives: our first haircut, tooth, day at school even when we were married! Yes, cutting the umbilical cord is still a work in progress!!

My sister, Joanne is 3 years, 9 months my senior. Always the social extrovert, she was more popular and outgoing than me and, as all sisters tend to be at a young age, both the bane of my existence and my best friend. We had a wonderful childhood and shared many happy memories. Playing tennis tournaments up against the front wall of the house, making up concerts to entertain family guests, rollerskating in the carport pretending we were Olivia Newton John in the movie, *Xanadu* or Cliff Richard in his video hit single at the time *Wired for Sound*, spending countless hours shooting a flat netball into a wobbly freestanding goal post, emulating dance moves on the back wall while singing into the end of the Hills hoist to our favourite songs from Sherbet and Abba, cooking potatoes wrapped in foil in the Besser-block incinerator on Sundays, climbing the mammoth Claret Ash tree in the front yard and carving the name of our current love into its thick trunk. We were always active, loved being outdoors and creating whatever our imagination and doting parents let us. I loved and idolised Jo and as we grew I thought I could never be as good or successful as her. Being the eldest she dominated conversations, always had more interesting things to talk about, was the social butterfly and experienced life quicker than me. It was often difficult establishing my identity separate from her as I was constantly painted as Jo's little sister, Jo's shadow, or the dreaded, Jo's apprentice which only fueled my jealousy at all the success she enjoyed.

Dad was an only child and both his parents died at a relatively young age in the same year when I was one, so unfortunately, I never got to know my paternal grandparents. However, mum's parents, Nana and Pupa were frequently visited and instilled fond memories during my upbringing. Jo and I slept at their house on occasions and upon arrival we were welcomed by the distinct aroma of freshly baked bread, scones or sausage rolls filling the house. We loved to construct makeshift cubby houses under the kitchen table, help Nana with the laundry by putting clothes through the mangle or being taken for a walk down the beach. Nana would stop at all of her friends houses along the way to show off her granddaughters. Pupa would be found either sitting at the kitchen table with the incredibly loud and constant hum of the horse races over the radio while doing a crossword or watching footy on the black and white TV. He also would light the gas heater when we needed to shower and fetched water from the tank which had one of Nana's old stockings wrapped around the tap to catch the wriggles. He always smelt of Old Spice aftershave. Before bed, we enjoyed a hearty piece of toast with Vegemite with a cup of tea together and were encouraged to use the ornate china chamber pot underneath the bed if needed overnight to save going outside to the cold, scary and web infested toilet.

We were a very occasion oriented family and loved to celebrate birthdays, Christmas and Easters with gusto. I looked forward to them so much that this was mostly how I learned about time and the calendar year. How many sleeps 'till...? Preparation began well in advance as each and every invitation was hand written and decorated. Birthday parties were always at home or the local park where we indulged in food and group participation games. Fairy bread, chocolate crackles and honey joys were the all-time favorites. Our family rule was to allow the birthday person to have the day off from chores while everyone else would be their slave.

Although we were not strictly religious, the magic of Christmas filled me with delight. The Pageant, visiting the Magic cave, decorating the tree, walking around the neighbourhood looking at trees in windows, writing wish lists to Father Christmas, leaving grass, carrots and a bowl of water outside for the reindeers and sitting on the front porch on deck chairs just basking in the warm summer nights watching the sunset while listening to the carols of Jose Feliciano, Bing Crosby and Bony M. A fitful sleep on Christmas Eve was always to be expected and I rose early to see the display of

gifts left under the tree. After a frenzy of unwrapping presents there were bonbons, hot lunches, visiting relatives (being showered in kisses mostly by people you didn't know or only saw once a year), food, food and more food! There was just an indescribable feeling about the day that was so exciting.

The lead up to Christmas and Easter weren't complete without a nightly reading from the Bible. Easter weekend was always a little confusing and handled with mixed emotions. I felt incredible compassion and hope regarding the stories and attend Sunday school at the local Christian Church. However, I lived for the big Easter egg hunt and feared being struck down if I ate meat or gorged myself with chocolate. Either way, I always ended up vomiting, even while asleep, all over the sheets and crusting and stinking up my long beautiful hair!!

Despite these occasional outbursts, I was always encouraged to be well mannered, respectful and considerate. Mum and dad did not discourage kneeling beside the bed to give thanks in prayer or say grace at mealtime. We enjoyed regular meals at the dining table together and talked and if we didn't eat our vegetables, we had to sit alone, sometimes in the dark and without desert while the rest of the family watched TV. On Sunday nights, our special treat was to share a block of Cadbury Snack chocolate between the four of us. Mum would carefully divide the segments of chocolate and put the rest away for another day. Was this a lesson of constraint and discipline or was there some ulterior motive? With teachings such as this, I believe I have learned and formed some virtuous morals, beliefs and values.

We rarely had any family arguments that I was aware of as Jo and I were protected from adult conversation and the nasties of worldly realities. We lived a very secure and comfortable life and I was almost always happy.

My youth was filled with many happy adventures. As a family, we loved making the most of every occasion, big or small. There were many exciting early-morning-rise driving holidays to various beach shacks or visits interstate. We had many fun-filled visits to the beach, zoo, on trains and had picnics at every national park, where we bushwalked and caught tadpoles in seemingly every pond. If the memories of my childhood are coloured, they are not colours I want to fade.

I was an energetic and enthusiastic netball, hockey, squash player and roller-skater and also loved gymnastics, tap and jazz ballet. I dazzled on stage at the end of the year concert usually in a home-sewn sequined costume. I felt so special. Mum, Jo and I kept fit in the lounge room listening to *Nutbush City Limits* or following the instructions of the Richard Simmons exercise record. We sang along to Olivia Newton John's *Physical*, and were so inspired by the movies *Flashdance* and *Dirty Dancing*. They were what you might call, classic female bonding session.

Life was something to be enjoyed and I consumed it with the greed of a naturally happy and healthy young girl. I only had a handful of close friends and did very well at school but I couldn't wait to grow up. I imagined myself living on a farm with a devoted, hard working husband, surrounded by acres of pasture, fruit trees, animals and many active, healthy children running wild. I also desperately wanted to be a nurse so I could live a scene from *A Country Practice*. On my 10th birthday I had my ears pierced and felt I was on my way to being an adult complete with a fashionable cream buckle bag and multiple collectable key chains dangling from it to match. My first music concert was in 1983. I saw Duran Duran, which was my favourite band, at Memorial Drive and later in the year Midnight Oil at Thebarton Theatre. Dusk 'till dawn roller skating sessions were the rage and held occasionally at the local rink without the attendance of parents. It was the emergence of Punks, Rockers and Skinheads. I chose the latter fashion and thought I looked pretty cool decked out in my red vest, jeans, black Harrington jacket and red socks skating along to the tunes of *Baggy Trousers* and *House of Fun* by the band, Madness.

During my early teenage years I was grounded quite regularly for smoking (something that was experimented and trialed in the cubby), wagging school or staying at the park across the road after dark. I didn't mind being grounded as it gave me a lot of time to think, gain money doing extra chores and gave me a purpose other than that of a self-destructive nature. Although I may have appeared confident, I sought constant approval and reassurance from others. I wanted to please, be recognised as an individual and to prove myself to be an intelligent and capable person. I was a follower not a leader and was treated accordingly. Ever the contradiction, I would get physically sick from home sickness when forced to go on a camp, yet I never wanted to return home once the camp was over.

Television was an integral part of my childhood and I learned to love just about everything that was shown. My Saturday morning ritual was to get in my sleeping bag in the lounge room and watch cartoons all morning. Jo and I made spiders (lemonade and ice cream) when *Spiderman* was on and when the clock struck 12, we watched Elvis or Gidget movies. My very favourites were *The Muppet Show* and *Countdown* at 6 o'clock sharp on a Sunday. Another rare treat was to try to stay awake to watch the Christmas Appeal that went all night. This was special as it was the only show that was transmitted all night and on any other day past midnight was test pattern time.

As I got a little older my tastes varied from musicals such as *Wizard of Oz*, *Grease*, *Village People*, and later *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Phantom of the Opera* to horror movies to the scream of *Friday the 13th* and *Halloween*. If *Jaws* hadn't scared everyone out of the water, *Star Wars* provided us humans another place to discover. The beginning of the *Rocky* series was just awesome. Blow after punishing blow. I loved the sheer guts and determination of Rocky Balboa and how he fought for what he believed in and against the odds, he succeeded. Years later I read about how Sylvester Stallone, who played Rocky, wrote the script that was based on a true story. It was an epic 15 round battle fought by an unknown white boxer named Chuck Wepner against the then heavyweight champion of the world, Muhammed Ali. The producers liked it and offered Stallone a million dollars to the then usher and budding writer but he refused because he wanted to play the lead role. They gave him a chance and the rest, as they say, is history. A true inspirational story.

Even though I didn't understand nor see the purpose of Royalty, I thoroughly enjoyed watching the Diana and Charles Wedding on 29th July 1981. I was in awe of the spectacle and admired Diana immensely. I had no idea just how much of an impact she would have on me later in life. I also followed with interest and hope, Fiona Coote who was so young, brave and admirable and was the second person in Australia to receive a heart transplant, which she did in 1984.