

# Nuns & Roses

*By Aneeta Sundararaj*



**IMAGE CREDITS: Sister's House by <httpsmapio.net>**

‘kɒnvənt ɡɜ:l’

If you’re a Convent Girl, past or present, you must recognise these words, know what they mean and how they are pronounced. If you say “Don’t know”, my response is the familiar, “Don’t bluff! Phonetics? Remember?” If you do recognise the words, then you’re a credit to the Sisters (in my case, Sister Alphonse Coombs) who once taught us Phonetics.

The memory of all my lessons with Sister Alphonse pales in comparison with what happened one sunny day in 1980. It was just Sister Alphonse and me in the airy classroom next to the vast playing field of my alma mater St. Nicholas Convent, Alor Setar.

*Stop it, Sister. I can’t even look at you right now.*

I wanted to scream, but no sound came out. Mercifully, the bell rang. I gathered my books and escaped from this torture chamber.

“What did you learn today?” Mummy asked during our drive back home.

Wanting only to wipe out the memory of what had happened, I ignored her. It was some months before I shamefacedly admitted the real reason I refused to return to those one-to-one lessons with Sister Alphonse.

My dilemma at that time was, in hindsight, relatively simple.

*How could Sister Alphonse, who was the bestest of the best and the wonderfulest of the most wonderful of all the Sisters say this bad, bad word?*

*How could she?*

*Of all the people, to me.*

Pray tell, what was this God-awful word?

Sex.

In my defence, in 1980, I was all of seven years old and didn't know how to tell Mummy that Sister Alphonse had explained that to know if something was male or female, I needed to know its gender or sex. It was a lesson in English grammar, nothing sinister. Still, the thought of the word alone was too much for me. Saying it out loud would have cast me into a world of sin without absolution. Forget redemption. It was too much, I tell you.

After this, the time lapse between my commission of sins, in this home-away-from-home for eleven years, and confessing the said sins only increased. In one particular case, it was twenty-five years.

Imagine.

It was a dreary day in September 1981. At about 10:25 a.m., an announcement was made over the PA system. The unfriendly voice said, "Aneeta Sundararaj from Class 3 Green, go to Miss Sibert's office now." Classmates who dared to, looked at me as though they were commiserating with a death row inmate about to make her final journey to the gallows.

Five minutes later, I stood before our headmistress. On Miss Sibert's table, that horrible thing called the Report Card was open as she scanned my academic performance for the month. I swallowed the lump in my throat, aware that I couldn't plead for mercy on account of the fact that Mummy and Miss Millicent Sibert were once classmates in Light Street Convent, Penang.

*True or not that Miss Sibert eats naughty girls?*

*Will she eat me?*

*No lah.*

*How?*

*Maybe caning.*

*But no rotan.*

I hated that malleable bamboo stick that I am still convinced the school's gardener also used to kill snakes.

*Something not right.*

Miss Sibert looked up, pushed her straight hair behind her ears and said, "Aneeta, are you interested in learning Mandarin?"

*Huh?*

*Interested?*

*Mandarin?*

I stared at her and cocked my head to one side, puzzled.

*A question?*

*No scolding?*

She turned the Report Card over so it was the right way round for me to read. Pushing it closer, she pointed to the column marked 'Mandarin'. That month, I'd achieved a grand total of 10 marks out of 50. Previously, my average was 45 marks.

I cannot remember my response. In fact, I wonder if I said anything at all. Decades later, though, it was time to confess yet another sin.

“Miss Sibert,” the 30-year-old me said during a visit to her house in Penang, “I didn’t dare tell you then that the girl who used to sit next to me wasn’t there. She was sick and didn’t come to school that day. So, I had no one to copy from.”

Miss Sibert, now over seventy, looked at me with a benign smile and said, “Yes, I knew what you girls were doing all along. I just wanted to see what you would say.”

Mortified, I closed my eyes.

*All this time. And she knew what we were up to.*

Reflecting on all these stories reinforced my long-held belief that these women, though cloistered and unmarried, were not dumb, stupid or out of touch with reality. Street-wise, knowledgeable and quite business savvy, they were strict with us, but also incredibly kind.

In fact, Sister Alphonse comforted me whenever I was lonely because Mummy travelled outstation for work. Almost every day, my classmates and I, a group of precocious girls, each born into religions that were far removed from Catholicism, visited her at the Sisters’ House. She guided us to the Chapel where we dipped tiny fingers into a bowl of holy water, bent a knee at the altar, and made the sign of the Cross. She listened intently as we shared our grievance of the day, which was invariably something seemingly monumental like who used whose eraser without permission. On occasion, we would steal roses from our gardens and bring them to her to place at the altar for Jesus because Sister once told us that, “When you love someone, you shower them with gifts, like roses or flowers.”

The highlight of my school years was the celebration for the Golden Jubilee in 1984. One of them included a production of *The Sound of Music* at the Dato’ Syed Omar stadium in town. Although the entire school was involved in this, I recall that members of the larger Catholic community also gave of themselves to help make this a joyous occasion. For a few days in August 1984, members of the Kedah Royal Family and the public watched as we morphed into tiny, Malaysian Maria von Trapps. Singing our little hearts out, we serenaded everyone about the ‘hills being alive’, momentarily forgetting that Alor Setar was surrounded by flat paddy land.

In spite of these happy memories, many at the school bore witness to a brutal reality taking shape during the 1980s. For one, the large Cross hanging above the office building was pulled down by authorities for fear that the very sight of it might influence students to embrace Catholicism. New school badges were engraved with a forgettable motto to replace the one that Convent Girls the world over knew (and still know)—*Simple in Virtue. Steadfast in Duty*. The spirit of the Sisters of the Infant Jesus who served at our school was gradually whittled away until one day, fighting back tears, one of the nuns said, “We have to go. Our mission here is over.”

By the mid-1990s, the nuns left the home they’d known for more than fifty years and the Sisters’ House was razed to the ground soon after. Gradually, all the buildings in the school were also destroyed. Today, at the site of what was once the premier girls’ school in Alor Setar is a non-descript supermarket.

That said, no truer is a statement than this verse from the Holy Bible: *And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love* (1 Corinthians 13:13). I speak for the majority of former konvønt g3:ls of St. Nicholas Convent, Alor Setar when I say that we carry in our hearts an immense gratitude and love for these Catholic women who made it their mission unto God to shape the women we have become. I pray that the intangible values they inculcated in us will live on in future generations.

