

Sister George's Eulogy

By Peter Martin

Sister George was driving through the Dandenong Ranges with George Harrison in a red MG convertible, a pink and red striped scarf replacing the standard black veil of her habit. The Beatle's hair was perfect, unaffected by the breeze. Between mouthfuls of champagne and chocolate-dipped strawberries, he was sadly telling her how he felt his marriage to Pattie was over, while somehow maintaining his perfect smile. As they pulled up at the Olinda Tea House for scones, Harrison leaned over to Sister George and half said, half sang "There's something in the way you move / Attracts me like no other lover".

"Sister George."

"Sister George!"

"Sister George, Mother Domitilla wants to see you in her office. Now!"

George sat up, startled, as the spectral Sister Esther reversed out of the tiny cubicle and resumed her prowling of the convent corridors.

George dressed quickly, her hastily applied veil not quite concealing a few stray strands of blonde hair. She scurried across the cloistered square of the convent in the dawn light, splattering through puddles left by the overnight rain. At the anteroom to Mother Domitilla's office she calmed herself and gave as nonchalant a knock on the door as she could muster.

A summons to the boss's office at any time was never good. George wracked her memory for any recent misdemeanours but drew a blank. Nobody could possibly know that it was her who finally snapped and took both of the convent's Val Doonican records from the common room.

“Come.”

Mother Domitilla’s office had been designed by an expert in power dynamics. The boss sat judge-like behind her imposing oak desk, slightly raised above floor level. On the wall above and behind her, an almost life-sized Jesus looked down in agony from his crucifix, horrifying all but the most impervious visitors. Facing the desk were three particularly uncomfortable wooden chairs, positioned to make any visitor’s eye contact with the tortured Christ unavoidable. Cushions were added on the occasion of important guests visiting. Today the chairs were bare.

It was 6:00 am. As always, the inscrutable Mother Superior appeared to be halfway through her day’s work. Not just getting started, not tired after a long night, simply doing the next thing on her list.

“Good Morning Mother,” said George, genuflecting and crossing herself before choosing the seat that required the least engagement with the blood-curdling Christ.

“Good Morning Sister George.” Mother Domitilla’s facial expression and tone of voice, as always, gave nothing away. Facing her you might be in for a compliment, a tongue-lashing or anything in between. There was no way of knowing until the words were spoken.

“I’m afraid I’m the bearer of bad news,” the boss continued. “We’ve received a telegram from your mother. Shall I read it to you?”

George knew the question was rhetorical but before she could even begin to sift through the possibilities, Mother Domitilla continued on.

“DEAR LISA STOP.” The boss fixed George with a raised eyebrow.

Thanks Mum, thought Sister George, that’s going to get me extra floor scrubbing duties.

Mother Domitilla disliked acknowledging the pre-ordination names of her nuns. She believed that once you were in the uniform, your past life ceased to exist. Mother Domitilla’s raised eyebrows always came with consequences.

“DAD IS DEAD STOP MASSIVE HEART ATTACK AT DINNER TABLE STOP SMASHED THE SOUP TUREEN STOP FUNERAL NEXT TUESDAY STOP BRING A PLATE STOP.”

George let out an involuntary laugh, which she immediately stifled. “Love you too Mum,” she said, not quite under her breath.

“Sister George,” Mother Domitilla dialled up an expression landing somewhere between stern and sympathetic. “Please accept my deepest condolences. Your father was a stout servant of Our Lord.”

“Indeed he was,” replied George. “Very stout.”

“Naturally,” continued Mother Domitilla, “we will grant you a half day of compassionate leave to attend his funeral. Sister Scholastica will escort you.”

Sister Scholastica, George smiled to herself. Perfect.

Lisa was driving through the Dandenong Ranges with George Harrison in a red MG convertible. He was sporting the Mongolian lamb fur coat he wore to his wedding with Pattie Boyd, while Lisa was in Pattie’s wedding outfit: a short silk Mary Quant dress of pink and red, cream stockings and pointy red shoes, topped with a red fox fur coat and a bright pink bow in her perfectly coiffed hair. Even though it was January in Melbourne, Lisa and George were immune to the weather; there wasn’t a bead of sweat on either, and their smiles were as perfect as their conversation. As they laughed in the summer breeze and drank champagne, George pulled into the Belgrave station car park for their private ride on Puffing Billy. He leaned over to Lisa and half said, half sang “I’ll make love to you / If you want me to.”

“Oh, yes please George,” said Lisa.

“What do you mean ‘Yes please George?’ What are you on about Lisa? Are you having another one of your disgusting George Harrison sex dreams?”

Lisa opened her eyes to the sight of Mandy, her 14 year old sister, reaching down and pulling at Lisa’s George Harrison doll, which she was kissing in her sleep again.

“Let go Mandy!,” cried Lisa. “Get out of my room you pimply freak.”

Mandy stood back and smirked with the face of a sibling who knew she wasn’t the one in trouble.

“Mum and Dad want you,” Mandy purred. Holding back the good part.

“In the lou-oung. Now!”

Lisa paused. The Turners’ formal lounge was invitation only. It was where school reports were dissected, piano recitals were performed to naphthalene scented great aunts, and interrogations into unladylike behaviour were conducted.

“Alright, alright,” groaned Lisa, sliding out of bed. Mandy’s job was done and she should have been on her way but she stayed put, grinning at Lisa.

“What are you staring at Freak?” snarled Lisa. Mandy was bursting; the icing was about to be put on the cake.

“There are two priests there with them,” Mandy was excited now. “Father Freddo and an older one. They’re here to see *you* Lisa.”

“Shit.”

Mission accomplished, Mandy skipped back to her room. Once the lounge room conversation started, she’d position herself a bit closer.

Lisa knew she’d have to be presentable for the priests. She slipped on her church dress, quickly brushed her hair, put a headband on and shuffled to the lounge. Her mother’s glare when she entered the room told her she should have worn tights and shoes, but it was early in the morning and she’d only been awake for five minutes.

“Lisa, come in and sit down,” said her father. The two priests had been allocated the Good Couch and Lisa’s parents had each taken one of the Good Chairs, which just left the chaise lounge or her Pop’s old desk chair for Lisa. She briefly considered the comedic possibilities of draping herself on the chaise but decided the post visit belting she’d get for sitting there wasn’t worth it.

Arthur Turner had his formal voice on. “You know Father Fredericks of course, and this is *Monsignor* Lemon, who is kindly visiting us from the archdiocese.”

Lisa did a ridiculous curtsy to the visitors. “Good Morning Father Freddo ... Fredericks.” She was off to a rough start but it was about to get worse. “Pleased to meet you Monsignor Lennon,” she smiled.

“It’s *Lemon*,” hissed her father, “like the fruit.”

“Not to worry,” said the monsignor shooting Arthur Turner a look. “Happens all the time.” He turned his attention to Lisa, who had forgotten to sit down and in her half-asleep state was wondering whether there was a Monsignor McCartney as well.

“Lisa, I’m here today to congratulate you for answering Christ’s call and to welcome you to the Sisters of Mercy.”

Lisa dissociated. She flopped onto the chaise lounge, her arms and legs suddenly operating independently.

“How’s that, Monsignor?” was all she could eventually say.

“*I beg your pardon Monsignor*,” chided her mother, breaking her silence. Marion Turner knew her place, but good manners were important.

Lisa’s rational brain had left the lounge. “What?” She looked at her mother. “Oh, right, sorry. *I beg your pardon Monsignor*.”

“Well Lisa,” continued the monsignor, who was reading the room and starting to feel a little uneasy. “Your father tells us that you’ve decided to become a postulant. As Acting Senior Executive Vocations Officer, Eastern Region, for the diocese, I’m here to welcome you and to get the ball rolling, so to speak.”

If Monsignor Lemon was a bit uncomfortable, Father Fredericks looked like he was having bamboo inserted under his finger nails. He thought back to a conversation he’d had with Arthur Turner over a few too many beers at the presbytery a couple of weeks earlier.

Arthur had been moaning about his oldest daughter’s obsession with the Devil’s music, particularly with those long-haired English louts, The Beatles. In the next breath he was complaining about being shown up by his three brothers and two sisters, who had each sent a child to the religious vocations.

“I think I might have a solution for you Arthur,” the tipsy priest had said. He fumbled through his desk and fished out one of Monsignor Lemon’s business cards. “Give this bloke a call, he’s always trying to get his numbers up.”

But now, on a sober Saturday morning, Father Fredericks saw his treachery laid bare in Lisa's face.

"You'll have to excuse me please," Lisa said, sliding off the chaise and staggering towards the door. "I need to use the toilet."

Although the bathroom was at the other end of the hallway, everyone in the lounge heard Lisa's prolonged vomiting, sobbing and ultimately, keening. After 15 of the most awkward minutes he'd ever experienced, Father Fredericks rose to his feet.

"Should somebody check on her?" he asked.

Marion grabbed the opportunity. She wasn't going to move until she was allowed to. For the whole of Lisa's ordeal she had been digging her fingernails into her arms to the point where she was starting to draw blood.

But as Lisa's mother sprang to her feet, Arthur calmly said, "No. She'll be alright." He took in the fresh scratches on his wife's arms and purred, "Sit down Dear." And Marion sat.

"Well, I think we'll be on our way," said Father Fredericks. "We can continue this conversation when Lisa's feeling better."

As the priests walked down the driveway, Monsignor Lemon said "We've still got her, right?".

"Shut up Lemon," replied Lisa's ex-friend and confidante.

The weather on the day of Arthur Turner's funeral was appropriately oppressive and threatening.

Mandy Turner, now 21, was given the job of driving her father's most treasured possession, his Glade Green 1962 R Series Valiant, to the church.

Mandy had only had her licence for a few weeks and had never driven the Valiant without Arthur sitting on the bench seat next to her but as the only living member of the household with a licence, the job was hers by default. By birthright Arthur's surviving brother, Stan, was the natural choice for this honour. But despite being a pillar of his community, lately Stan had run into a few too many pillars in his community, especially after closing

time. The local police had decided enough was enough and quietly took away Stan's licence.

Sister George, holding a plate of lamingtons made by the Grade 6 girls, stood with Sister Scholastica and watched from the portico as Mandy bunny-hopped to a stop in the convent's circular driveway. George and Mandy hadn't seen each other for over a year but had been speaking on the phone in the days since their father's death. They'd grown closer during George's time in the convent, as it dawned on Mandy that it was only by good fortune that she wasn't born first and that her sister had taken a very big one for the team.

When Mandy got out of the car to hug George, Sister Scholastica slipped into the driver's seat.

"Huh?" said Mandy, looking at her sister.

"Scholly's a rev head," said George casually. "I promised her she could have a drive. Did you bring my stuff?"

"It's in the bag in the back," said Mandy.

"Well that's where you'll find me then. You can sit up front and chat to Scholly. If she likes you she'll show you her stigmata."

George slid into the back seat and positioned herself directly behind Sister Scholastica, who was suddenly wearing sunglasses and adjusting what appeared to be a pair of leather driving gloves. Mandy did as she was told and climbed in the front passenger side.

Mandy had estimated the trip from the Rosanna Convent to St Clair's in Belgrave would take about an hour; Sister Scholastica did it in 45 minutes. As the nun handbraked her way through the hairpin turns of the Mt Dandenong Tourist Road, the plate of lamingtons progressively deconstructed. By the time they pulled up at St Clair's, Arthur's meticulously maintained Ruby Red rear seat looked like a snow dome.

"Woo-hoo! That was grouse," shouted Sister Scholastica. "Thanks so much George."

"No worries, Scholly. I'm not sure who's going to be driving this baby in the cortege, so maybe just leave the keys under the seat."

Marion Turner was stationed outside the church door, dressed in black from head to toe. George went to give her a hug but at the critical moment Marion turned and pretended to be waving to someone.

“Hi Mum. How are you doing?”

“I’m overcome with grief Lisa,” replied Marion, trying out one of the lines she’d been rehearsing all morning. “I’m not quite sure how I’ll go on.”

You’re free you silly woman! thought George. *For the first time in 25 years you can think, say and do whatever you like.*

“Well, chin up,” said George. “Today’s the first day of the rest of your life.”

Marion surveyed her daughter. “You look like you’ve put on weight Lisa. The food must be good at the convent.”

George tried not to react, quickly checking her clothing to make sure it was all as it should be. “Oh, you know these habits Mum – not very flattering.”

After sitting through Father Fredericks’ boilerplate homily about “this great servant of our Lord who has now been called to his well-earned final reward” and enduring the amateur theatrics of her mother’s mourning, it was time for Sister George to deliver her father’s eulogy.

Seven years in the convent, six of them working as a primary school teacher, had given George the ability to quietly command the attention of those she faced. She calmly waited for Marion to stop her snivelling and for Father Fredericks to look at her.

“We’re here today to honour the memory of my father, Arthur Winston Turner. Great man, staunch Catholic, etcetera etcetera. Today, I’m going to tell you a little story that, I think, sums him up pretty well.

“Seven years ago, in June 1964, I had the best and worst week of my life. On Tuesday the 16th, my friend Karen and I went to The Beatles concert at Festival Hall. We sang, laughed, cried and screamed and at the end of it all I knew my life would never be the same.

“The next day I was working my after school job washing dishes at the Olinda Tea House. From the kitchen I could hear a commotion at the front of the café. I stuck my head out for a look and there, standing at the

counter of the café, looking over the cake display was none other than George Harrison. I couldn't help it, I screamed. George looked in my direction and gave me a smile that I can still see right this minute.

"A pretty good week thus far."

George looked at her mother, whose fingernails were itching.

"Three days after that, on Saturday the 20th, my Mum and Dad signed me over to the Sisters of Mercy.

"That day," George continued, "that great man, that stout Knight of the Southern Cross sold his first born out, to keep up appearances with his awful, awful family."

Marion Turner groaned and collapsed onto Mandy, who had known Lisa was up to something but wasn't expecting it to be this good.

"Well folks - dearly beloved - today you're going to get two for one. We're not just celebrating the tureen-smashing death of Big Artie Turner, it's also the final day of Sister Mary George's life."

As the stunned congregation watched, George began to disrobe. She carefully removed her veil, along with the hairpins that held her curly blonde hair in place.

As she struggled with the wimple clasp that secured her coif, George said, "But with the death of Sister Mary George comes the rebirth of Lisa Turner."

George, now almost Lisa again, jumped when she felt a hand on the back of her neck.

"Let me help," murmured Father Fredericks, as he undid the troublesome clasp.

"Thanks, but I think you've done enough Freddo," said Lisa, stepping forward and lifting her black tunic over her head. Arthur Turner was the only person in the church not to inhale sharply as Lisa shed her cocoon to reveal a short pink and red striped dress.

"Well, I'll be off now," Lisa said into the microphone. "A bit of catching up to do."

As she stepped off the altar and started down the aisle, Lisa passed her folded habit to her stupefied mother.

“Black suits you Mum. You should think about signing up.”

Lisa skipped down the remainder of the aisle. To Sister Scholastica, whose open mouth made her look like a sideshow clown waiting for a ping pong ball, Lisa chortled “Thanks Scholly, give Mother Domitilla my best.”

Once outside, Lisa dashed to Arthur’s Valiant, grabbed the keys from under the seat, gunned the engine and roared out of the St Clair’s car park.

And she never once looked back.