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Dramatic Publishing

Conspiracy of Silence: The Magdalene Laundries

By

ANNE V. MCGRAVIE



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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Printed in the United States of America
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(CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE: THE MAGDALENE LAUNDRIES)

ISBN: 978-1-58342-648-8

For Anne V. McGravie-Wright,
my niece and namesake,
invaluable colleague and critic.

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Out of the Depths I have cried to Thee,
Lord, Lord, hear my prayer,
Let Thine ears be attentive to the voice
of my supplication...

From DeProfundis,
Penitential psalm

Conspiracy of Silence: The Magdalene Laundries

PRIMARY CHARACTERS:

ROSEMARIE HEALEY, 16

CHRISSIE HEALEY, Rosemarie's sister, 14

MAM (Mrs Healey), early 40s

DA (Mr. Healey), early 40s

CATH, Rosemarie's friend and workmate, 19

BROGIE, in charge of the laundry, 25

SECONDARY CHARACTERS:

HEATHER, Chrissie's schoolfriend, 14 (Can be played by one of GIRLS)

MOLLY, CASSIE, PATRICIA, MARY ELLEN, 16. Girls at party (Can be played by four of GIRLS)

PAULIE, 15, FRANCES, MAIRE, COLLEEN, 17-20s, four of the girls in laundry

NUN (a shadow only)

WOMAN WITH CART, 40 (Can be played by MAM)

GIRLS, workers in laundry, 15-30s; guests at party, 16

TIME: The early 1980s.

PLACE: A town and a city in the Republic of Ireland.

SETTINGS: On a unit set: a living room and a bedroom in the Healey house; in the convent; a dormitory; a basement laundry and a cellar.

See end of play for playwright's notes.

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES

The term *GIRLS* refers to all the young women in the play. Number of *GIRLS* can be increased or decreased according to desired size of cast.

I suggest a unit set to accommodate the following:

a commercial laundry, where machinery is imaginary and *GIRLS* are choreographed to perform their tasks almost robotically;

a convent dormitory with barred window (suggested by shadow bars) where *GIRLS* may just lie on floor to sleep;

the living room and two bedrooms in Healey home, with, possibly, cubes to serve as furniture;

cellar of convent, played in blackout, except when door is opened to outside—may show portion of outside wall beyond door.

Party decorations and such might be shown in full or simply suggested.

GIRLS' clothing—brown sacking dresses, short-sleeved, knee-length, basic design. Shoes are worn down and ill-fitting. *GIRLS* are unkempt, ill-fed, their hair uncombed, short, and badly cut. *BROGIE* wears a clean sack dress, good shoes, is reasonably well groomed, though her hair is

short and badly cut. She carries a short, sturdy stick that she uses to “discipline” GIRLS.

There is a rule of silence. BROGIE speaks aloud. When GIRLS speak, it is in whispers, except—and only—when addressing BROGIE.

This play is fiction, all its characters fiction, but uses as its inspiration the true story of the Magdalene Sisters, an Irish order of nuns whose highly successful laundries used “bad girls,” young women brought to the nuns by fathers who wanted no part of these “unruly” daughters and the scandals their behavior might cause their families. The girls were used as slave labor, beaten and otherwise abused, held as prisoners, many for years, until they died.

Conspiracy of Silence: The Magdalene Laundries

Scene 1

(The Healey living room. Decorations indicate a celebration. Irish music, a jig, is playing. A group of GIRLS is gathered in a tight circle, whispering excitedly. ROSEMARIE, slightly drunk, enters, closely followed by a very nervous CHRISSIE.)

ROSEMARIE. Will you leave me alone? And don't keep sayin'—

CHRISSIE. Has Da seen you yet? You're in the worst trouble when he does... *(They have reached the group.)*

MOLLY. Did you—?

CASSIE *(overlapping)*. You actually took them up on it?

ROSEMARIE *(giggling)*. They said they'd help me celebrate my birthday, and they did.

PATRICIA. God, Rosie. You took an awful chance.

MARY ELLEN. Those boys are wild.

ROSEMARIE. You heard them say after mass Sunday, they'd be in the park this evening.

CASSIE. By the statue of Parnell.

ROSEMARIE. And so they were, with a pint of whiskey—

MOLLY. Big spenders—

ROSEMARIE. So I said, "That's hardly enough for me, let alone the three of you." I was kiddin', of course. Anyways, Alistair takes a long swig of it, then Martin takes

a long swig of it, and Sean does the same. Then they hand it to me, and I drain the bottle. What's left in it.

(Silence as DA enters and stares at ROSEMARIE.)

DA *(deceptively calm)*. Your guests have been here a while. *(Waits for an explanation.)* You've been drinking, I see.

CHRISSIE. No, Dada, she hasn't.

DA. So drunk she can't speak for herself.

ROSEMARIE *(bitterly)*. Yes, Da. Drunk as usual, Da.

DA. Have the goodness to greet your guests. Try to act like you've had some upbringing, instead of the—the—

ROSEMARIE *(deceptively sweet)*. The word you're seeking, Da. Does it begin with "wh"?

(DA is outraged. MAM hurries in.)

MAM. Why aren't you girls dancing? The Haymakers. Come on, now. You all must know this one.

(ROSEMARIE is exiting room.)

DA. Come back here. I'm not finished with you.

(ROSEMARIE pauses.)

MAM. Oh, come now. It's a party! *(Reaching for MOLLY's hand to begin dancing.)*

DA. What the hell are you doing? Can you not see what's right before your eyes!

(MAM is embarrassed. GIRLS at party begin to withdraw, slowly, until all have exited, while quarrel continues.)

ROSEMARIE. Apologize for being stupid, Mam. Beg his forgiveness on bended knee.

DA *(to ROSEMARIE)*. You're the one should be down on her knees to me. For the sacrifices I've made to give you a fine life. And how do you show your gratitude to me?

ROSEMARIE *(intoning in whisper)*.

My da's a martyr,
wears a martyr's crown—

DA *(to MAM)*. Are you going to stand there and let your daughter mock her own father?

MAM *(simultaneously. To ROSEMARIE)*. Don't! Stop!

ROSEMARIE *(still whispering)*. God's own lovely darlin'—

MAM. Oh, please stop.

ROSEMARIE. It's all right, Mam. Haven't got a last line yet. So... Sendin' me to the nuns, Da?

CHRISSIE. No, Rosie.

ROSEMARIE. Finish my high-school education at a convent finishing school? *(She laughs.)*

MAM. Please, be nice to your father.

(DA and ROSEMARIE speak simultaneously to MAM.)

DA. For heaven's sake, enough, woman!

ROSEMARIE. Oh, bollix, Mam!

DA. You dare to speak to your mother—!

ROSEMARIE. Bollix, Dada, dear. Treat her like dirt yourself.

DA. That's it. Oh, that's it. Drastic measures are called for.

ROSEMARIE. Do your damndest, Dada, dear!

MAM & CHRISSIE (*speaking together*). No!

DA. Chrissie, go to bed. (*Head down, CHRISSIE exits. Silence. DA coughs. It signals he is making a decision.*)

ROSEMARIE (*suddenly afraid*). I know I shouldn't have gone out. I thought for just a few minutes. It was stupid, but—

(During next exchanges, lights change and the shadow of NUN duplicates its later appearances in dorm.)

DA. Out where!

ROSEMARIE. Just to the park. The Geary brothers and Sean Doyle said they'd celebrate—

DA. The Christian brothers suspended the Geary twins for two weeks last year—

MAM. That was a misunderstanding, cleared up later.

DA. Suspended for two weeks. If Sean Doyle's hanging about with them, then that says all that needs to be said.

So you were drinking in the park—a park any one of our neighbors or friends could have been walking in—

ROSEMARIE. Oh, right, Da. The whole parish was havin' a picnic, and we were in plain sight... Come on, Da. The place was deserted, except for us.

DA. The Carmichaels walk their dog there. Mrs. McGuire walks her child there. A hundred people I could name—

MAM. Claire McGuire only goes there in the afternoon.

DA. Excuses! Making excuses for her when you should be asking yourself where you went wrong! She has no re-

spect for me or herself. This isn't the first time she's come home drunk. Not the first time disreputable boys have been involved. I think we know what comes next.

(ROSEMARIE mimes holding baby. Flash of light captures them as in family snapshot. DA, icy calm now, exits. NUN shadow disappears. MAM hurries after DA and exits. Silence. CHRISSIE enters.)

CHRISSIE. I heard Dada cough. Is everything all right?

ROSEMARIE. Rotten old tyrant. My party, and he's stickin' his nose in everything. As usual. My music was playin' before I left the party. *He* changes it to hundred-year-old stuff. Then! Then he scares all the girls into leavin'... Just going to the park. Did it for a lark, is all. Thought I'd be back before he was through with the parish meetin'. Wouldn't you know. Stop lookin' at me like I'm about to die a tragic death.

CHRISSIE. He could send you to the nuns.

ROSEMARIE. Not sendin' me anywhere. Anyways, I love the nuns. Every nun in school, can twist them round my little finger.

CHRISSIE. Heather says some girl in her Mam's old parish was sent to the nuns. Not like our nuns, cruel and mean ones that work them and beat them and starve them.

ROSEMARIE. Nuns might be a bit over-fond of the strap, but they don't beat us and starve us... This is your friend Heather who told you this? Heather who told you she met a ghost on the old beach road on All Hallow's Eve—?

CHRISSIE. when she was sleepwalking. And so she did.

But Heather heard her mam tellin' her da about a girl from her old parish and how she was sent to the nuns and never came back, and if you asked the girl's father how was she, he would act like he didn't know who you were talkin' about.

ROSEMARIE. Well I'll say an extra prayer tonight for the poor girl sent to the nuns. Now. Don't you have homework or something to occupy yourself with?

CHRISSIE. Rosie? Why do you make a joke of everything?

ROSEMARIE. Ah guess ahm jest a fun-lovin' gal.

(CHRISSIE shakes her head disapprovingly. As she exits, MAM enters. CHRISSIE kisses her goodnight and exits. ROSEMARIE and MAM are alone onstage amid the decorations. Silence.)

ROSEMARIE. Look. I know I was in the wrong tonight, but why does he act like every time I speak, toads jump out of my mouth?

MAM. Always provoking him. You must have known he'd be upset. What gets into you?

ROSEMARIE. He never lets up on me.

MAM. You used to get along so well. Then you turn fifteen—

ROSEMARIE. Sixteen.

MAM. At fifteen you started actin' wild. A whole year of this.

ROSEMARIE. God, Ma, wild to Da means wearin' a blouse that doesn't have a collar to my chin and sleeves down to my fingernails.

MAM. But cutting your hair short? He took such pride in your lovely long hair.

ROSEMARIE. He belongs in the Dark Ages. Telling me what to wear and how to act, like I'm his Barbie doll. Callin' me a—

MAM. Don't say it! Don't say that terrible word, Deirdre.

ROSEMARIE. It's all right, Mammy... It's just that, well he needs to get with it. My sixteenth birthday party, and all Da allows is lemonade and sandwiches and Irish music. Nobody wants to dance jigs or listen to that stuff anymore. And lemonade? And when did eating pizza become a mortal sin?

MAM. Your friends don't drink.

ROSEMARIE. Mam? Grow up. We all drink at parties and the like. No harm done.

MAM (*speaking over ROSEMARIE's words*). Your father signed the pledge when he was young and he's never gone back on it. And I didn't have a drink even on our wedding day. So you can't blame him if he's throwing up his hands—

ROSEMARIE (*sudden panic*). God, Mam, don't be taking his side. I'll stay out of his sight for a few days, till it blows over. I'll try not to "provoke" him—which means sewing my mouth shut and humming "Mother Macree" whenever he's near. Anything to please. (*Silence.*)

MAM. The night you were born. There was a full moon, pure and lovely, moving gracefully among the clouds.

ROSEMARIE. Mammy. Don't start in with that.

MAM. As I walked into the hospital, I spoke to you still inside me. I said, "Deidre, my darlin'"—I wanted to name you Deidre—

ROSEMARIE. But Da had promised his mother's best friend—I know, Mammy. Time for bed. (*She rises. MAM remains sitting.*)

MAM. But your father had promised his mother to call you after her best friend, Rosemarie. Rosemarie Coyne. I said a prayer for you at your christening, a quiet prayer, and called you Deirdre in it, because in my heart you'll always be my Deirdre.

ROSEMARIE. Right. Deirdre of the Sorrows— Ma, don't disappear on me. Don't go off into your own little world, where we can't reach you. (*There begins the sound of BROGIE's stick as she beats it on her hand.*)

MAM. On the night of your birth I said, "Darlin', Deirdre, the moon in all her wonders is welcoming you into the world."

ROSEMARIE. Ma? This time...this time, Da might do somethin' stupid. He keeps threatening to send me away to school. Away from all my friends. You've got to talk up for me. Mam?...Mam.

MAM. You heard my words, because you stirred in me like you were wakening. I thought I heard the beating of wings, your guardian angel, waiting for you.

ROSEMARIE. I know, Mam, I know you love me, but please listen. You need to listen to me now. You need to talk to Da, explain to him how sorry I am, how I don't mean to cross him... Mammy?

MAM. Deirdre? Did you not hear me say your guardian angel was right there, at your birth? Sure, what harm could possibly come to you then?

ROSEMARIE. Oh, Mammy... Time for bed.

(The sound of the stick ends. Lights to dim as MAM and ROSEMARIE exit; then fade to black.)

Scene 2

(Lights rise on ROSEMARIE in her bedroom, next morning. CHRISSIE enters. Both wear school uniform.)

CHRISSIE. He's acting like saint and martyr. Said you were to get no breakfast at all. Ravin' on about all the sacrifices he's made for his family and how we don't appreciate, and so on and so on. Made Mammy cry... Rosie? Did you finish the verse you made up?

“My da's a martyr,
wears a martyr's crown.”

ROSEMARIE. “Thinks he's God's own darlin'”... As far as I've got.

CHRISSIE (*giggling*). Well, hurry up and finish it!

ROSEMARIE. Look. I was stupid to make Dada angry last night. Now shut up.

CHRISSIE. I told you to not go out when your party was about to start. I told you.

ROSEMARIE. Yes, my sainted little sister, you did. But as I was saying...I made him angry. Something I'm very good at. So he's mad at me. And Mam's no help. But tonight I'll prostrate myself before him, beg his forgiveness, promise to never sin again, Amen. Another year and I'll be off to university and freedom. Free at last! (*Crossing herself quickly.*) Thanks be to God.

CHRISSIE (*suddenly tearful*). See? You're always making fun of things... Rosie? I have something to tell you. But I don't want you to get mad at me, so just listen—

ROSEMARIE. Spit it out, Chrissie.

CHRISSIE. I heard him this morning. Phoning. Mam's cryin' and he's phoning. A convent, because he's calling the other person "Reverent Mother"—

ROSEMARIE. Oh, dear God. What was he saying?... Chrissie? What did he say!

CHRISSIE. You never shoulda talked back to him and recited the verse, even if it isn't finished. You never shoulda been drunk in the first place.

ROSEMARIE. What-did-he-say?

CHRISSIE. He said, "Will you take her?" And "How soon can I bring her?" Oh, Rosie!

ROSEMARIE (*stunned for a moment, then galvanized into action*). Did he leave for the office yet? I have to talk to him. (*She heads for exit.*)

(*DA enters. Sound of stick returns and continues to end of scene.*)

DA. Chrissie, off you go.

CHRISSIE. I'm waitin' for Rosie, Dada.

DA. Do as you're told. Now. (*CHRISSIE exits.*)

ROSEMARIE. Da, I'm sorry, truly sorry— (*She sits, eyes downcast, as DA delivers his familiar monologue.*)

DA. Always sorry after the fact. Something has to be done about your behavior. One year left before university, and how can I, in all conscience, send you off when you act like some—some streetwalker. Drinking, going with boys—wild boys, out till all hours, dressing like—like

no decent girl would dress. Where it all ends is all too obvious. What our neighbors think of it all can only be guessed at. And don't tell me all your friends do it, because I know their families, and their families would not tolerate it. If you had a mother that was always in command of her senses, you wouldn't be doing any of it either. As your father I try to control you, but I'm a burdened man, what with my responsibilities as chief accountant at the firm and helping in my own small way Father McCall with parish matters. The truth is I can no longer carry the burden you lay on me. *(He pauses, coughs. ROSEMARIE raises her head, suddenly afraid.)*

ROSEMARIE. I promise I'll change. As of this minute—

DA *(overlapping)*. Yesterday evening was the final straw.

How can I in all conscience hold my head up in the parish when I see you hastening towards a life of dissolution. As a father I must save you, not only for the good of your own eternal soul but before your bad example affects your young sister.

ROSEMARIE. Da, you used to say I was the image of your sister Anne Dehlia, and she would have become a nun if she hadn't died young.

DA. I'll not have you link your sinful behavior with my dear dead sister. No. The decision is made. You're going away.

ROSEMARIE. Please, Dada, please—

DA. A boarding school where you'll be educated under the nuns' strict tutelage.

ROSEMARIE. Away from my friends? From you and Mam and Chrissie? A whole year?

DA. Go help your mother pack your things. We leave in an hour.

ROSEMARIE. Today? Today! I need to tell my teachers,
my friends—

DA. The sooner you're gone, the sooner you'll return. (*She
tries to touch him; he moves away.*) Go!

ROSEMARIE. How can you? I'm your daughter. You
can't do that!

*(DA coughs. He exits, then ROSEMARIE. Sounds of
stick stop. Blackout.)*