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*Dramatic Publishing*

# THE CAIRN STONES

A Play in Two Acts  
by  
ANNE V. MCGRAVIE



**Dramatic Publishing**

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(THE CAIRN STONES)

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For Anne Gallagher and her daughter,  
Bridget Gallagher-McGravie,  
for Bridget's daughter, Jo,  
for Jo's daughter, Anne V.,  
for Anne V.'s daughter, Alicia,  
and for Warwick.

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# THE CAIRN STONES

A Play in Two Acts  
For 2 Men and 5 Women

## CHARACTERS

- BRIGHID . . . . . Irish, islander, 68  
MICHAEL . . . . . her half-brother, islander, 67  
SHELAGH . . . a former islander who has lived in Chicago  
for 50 years, once engaged to Michael, now a widow, 67  
YOUNG BRIGHID . . . . . from past, 18  
YOUNG MICHAEL . . . . . from past, 17  
YOUNG SHELAGH . . . . . from past, 17  
SISTER PATRICIUS . from past, Irish, a teaching nun, 35-40

## PLACE:

A small island off the coast of Donegal, Ireland.

## TIME:

The past (1930s) and present (1980s).

NOTE FOR DIRECTOR: Scenes in past occur in Brighid's memory, so only she can see and hear the nun and young characters. In the present, Y. Brighid is aware of and can communicate with only Brighid.

**SETTING:** The kitchen and a small adjoining bedroom of Brigid and Michael's island home and an outside area that variously represents the shore and a convent garden. The kitchen requires the following: a fireplace with hanging crane for kettle, a hearth, a rocking chair, a recessed window and tall oil lamp, wood table and three chairs, fire-side basket of turf, a loudly ticking mantel clock, two brass candlesticks on mantel, a dresser (hutch) with dishes and lower cupboard (to hold tinned foods), a small hearth stool. There are two doors, one leading to Brigid's room (seen behind scrim) and the other to Michael's room (not seen). A step leads from pantry (not seen) to kitchen. A staircase leads from kitchen to loft (not seen). Brigid's room, seen through scrim, requires a small bed, a chair and a St. Brigid's cross hanging on wall. Outside area is bare. Add stern of rotting boat for strand (shore); add a small bench for convent garden.

## THE CAIRN STONES

BEFORE LIGHTS RISE: *The sounds of the island: gulls crying, the wind, the sea, intermingling with music, all creating a sense of loneliness and isolation. Sounds and music fade.*

AT RISE: *A September dusk in the past. The convent garden of St. Malachy's School for Girls, where YOUNG BRIGHID in school uniform stands on a small bench, her arms upraised.*

Y. BRIGHID (*softly*). You know m' dada. You know all the things he is. (*Intensity building.*) I don't have to lay it out for you. God. Listen to me. Do this one thing, and I'll never ask another favor in my whole life. Ten thousand of your worst devils. To torture him beyond endurance. Then carry him off, still living and in desperate agony, to the red-hot fires of hell!

(*SISTER PATRICIUS enters.*)

SISTER PATRICIUS. Well isn't that a pretty prayer for a young Catholic girl to be sending. To the wrong person, I might add. Sit down, Brighid. No argument, please.

(*Y. BRIGHID sits, defiant.*)



Y. BRIGHID. I hate my dada!

SISTER. You've made that abundantly clear.

Y. BRIGHID. He hates me.

SISTER. And you such a lovable girl too.

Y. BRIGHID. He hates me...Blaming me. It wasn't me to blame.

SISTER. God's will, your poor brave mother dying in order to give you life.

Y. BRIGHID. So hate God!

SISTER. Blasphemy, now? Listen to me, child—

Y. BRIGHID. Too sanctimonious to blame God.

SISTER. I'm here at Sister Superior's direct orders. To speak severely to you—No, no. No interruptions, please. To instruct you in the ways of peace and tranquility. To beseech you to curb the violence that caused you to throw your book across the classroom today, reducing poor, gentle Sister Lawrence to tears.

Y. BRIGHID. Calls herself an island girl but says she hates the sea.

SISTER. Amn't I an island girl too? And don't I know the sea and its terrible moods?

Y. BRIGHID. True islanders—

SISTER. My own Uncle Seamus—and he the father of six children under seven—drowned with three others one stormy morning at the fishing.

Y. BRIGHID. True islanders—

SISTER. Maggie Rua and her eldest daughter drowned—

Y. BRIGHID. True islanders—

SISTER. Drowned coming from confession one blowy evening. Nothing wrong with a good healthy fear of the sea. But—

Y. BRIGHID. Only mainlanders drown. True islanders go home to the sea. You said so yourself, Sister. You said so.

SISTER. Well if I did, I did. *But* getting back to why I'm here.

Y. BRIGHID. My island is the most beautiful place in the whole world. Set in the most beautiful bay on the most beautiful sea in the whole world.

SISTER. Which brings us back to poor distraught Sister Lawrence.

Y. BRIGHID. Teaching geography and she hates the sea. "I hate the sea!" she says, her tight, wee mouth drawn up to a bit of string.

SISTER. Sister Superior wants to send you home. (*Y. BRIGHID smiles triumphantly.*) But count on it: she won't.

Y. BRIGHID. Hate her, then.

SISTER. Brighid, child! If there were gold in hating, you'd be rich as Croesus.

Y. BRIGHID. All Dada wants is be rid of me. Sending me to convent schools, thinking I'll end up a nun.

SISTER. Our convent is not a haven for wayward girls! You lack the basic qualities to be a nun.

Y. BRIGHID. I'm-going-home. No one can stop me. Not God. Not the devil can stop me.

SISTER. Passion's a wonderful thing. In moderation.

Y. BRIGHID. Sister Superior can tie me to the bedpost—

SISTER. See, she's promised your kind—and most generous—father to keep you the school year, send you home with your certificate. That she will do.

Y. BRIGHID. Thinks his money can buy anything.

SISTER. It buys you things most island girls daren't dream of. The morning I said goodbye forever to my island, I turned round in the boat for one last look. But my tears smudged the picture. Now in memory all I see is that tear-shrouded isle. (*Briskly.*) But we're in good company, you and I. (*Smiling.*) Call it a kind of minor trinity, with the Holy Brighid the third leaf of the shamrock.

Y. BRIGHID (*awed*). St. Brighid was an islander?

SISTER. So little is known of the ancient saint. And then, times like these, facts can be so confining to the creative mind. In the play I wrote about her...

Y. BRIGHID (*amazed*). You wrote a play about St. Brighid?

SISTER. In my play...I have her poor loving mother—a slave, don't you know—putting the babe Brighid in a basket of rushes and sending it out on the sea with a supplicating prayer:

“May the Gods of the Gaels command the wayward winds  
to carry my only sweet child to an island,  
a place of safety and freedom.”

Y. BRIGHID. Lovely.

SISTER. Here's what I'm thinking. Since you're named for the saint—and given your terrible love for your own island—I'll put on the play. Cast you in the lead.

Y. BRIGHID (*awed*). Me? Play the saint?

SISTER. But what am I saying? At supper, you wrapped bread and a bit of cheese in your napkin. No doubt hid it under your pillow—and only God knows what Sister Laundress will have to say about that. Hid it, preparing for a midnight escape. But while Sister Gatekeeper is a good, saintly woman, she wasn't born yesterday. Come,

Brighid, we'll rummage in the trunks in the cellar, see what costumes we can come up with. Now, Brighid.

*(They exit. Lights down on garden. Meanwhile, lights have risen on kitchen in the play's present [the 1980s], a September morning, very early. The fire burns brightly, a teapot sits on the hearth, a boiling kettle hangs on crane. BRIGHID is asleep in her room. MICHAEL, wearing dark suit, white shirt, and tie, and carrying his shoes and raincoat, enters from his room [not seen]. He sets down shoes and raincoat, then goes to hearth, where he lifts the teapot, thinks better of it, and returns it to hearth. Then he looks at his wristwatch, is annoyed, and begins to set the clock and wind it. Noise of clock ticking.)*

MICHAEL. Brighid. Brighid? I'm running late, thanks to you turning off the clock again. You need to get up now. Do you hear me, Bid?

*(BRIGHID, in warm nightdress, wakes, throws off quilts, pushes her feet into shoes, wraps herself in her shawl, and stands facing the cross, her arms extended in prayer.)*

MICHAEL (*cont'd*). Last call, Bid.

*(She crosses herself, then enters kitchen and sits on her stool. MICHAEL will put on his shoes and his raincoat during the following.)*

MICHAEL (*cont'd*). At least the fire will warm the place for you. Make tea. There's cereal in the pantry, but no milk. I'll bring a couple of bottles home with me this evening from the Cope.

BRIGHID. Dreaming of the long ago, when the grocery boats came, Michael? Three times a week. Bringing the messages to our door. Now what's got you started on that, I wonder...

MICHAEL. Things were a damn sight easier then. Not that you'd notice either way.

BRIGHID (*goes to dresser for a small bowl and brings it to hearth*). Oh, true enough, Michael, dear. When did I ever milk a cow? Or bring water from the spring well? Or cut the turf and stack it outside for the fires? Or make bread? A meal, for that matter?

MICHAEL. Or, God forbid, step off this island to go anywhere, see anyone. (*As she pours tea from teapot into bowl.*) What are you doing? That tea's what I left for you last night before I went to bed.

BRIGHID. Well it's still tea.

MICHAEL. How would you survive without me.

BRIGHID. Michael, dear. Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow.

MICHAEL. I needs be off if I'm to catch the tide. Eat something today. Stay off the rocks. Come inside when it rains. And leave the damn clock alone.

BRIGHID. Tides are the only clocks we need here. That contraption (*indicating clock on mantel*) is for mainlanders— And once-upon-a-time islanders on whatever distant mainland they may reside.

MICHAEL. You've had fair warning. I'll be bringing her back from the wake tonight.

BRIGHID. Manus's wake.

MICHAEL. I miss him too. But he was old.

BRIGHID. There was a time on this island when age was respected, not thrown out to be eaten by the gulls.

MICHAEL (*wearily*). That man was too sick to remain here. His sister Ellen took him to the mainland to give him a last bit of comfort.

BRIGHID (*repeating the last phrase with him*). A last bit of comfort. Comfort, he says. What would Ellen, his dried cod of a sister, know about comfort? Sitting in her nutshell of a house with wee electric fires, and cars and lorries racing past the door. Peace and comfort, indeed.

MICHAEL. You've never seen her house. A fine brick bungalow, where Manus had his own room, and bath besides— But I'm losin' the tide, and things to do before I go to the wake.

BRIGHID. Poor Manus, rest his soul. Now there's only the two of us left here, on an island that once housed thirty good families.

MICHAEL. I expect you to be civil to Shelagh.

BRIGHID. Manus leaving his good house to that one.

MICHAEL. She'll only be here till she sells it. Given the foreigners and people from the North who are lookin' to buy here, it won't take her long.

BRIGHID. Leaving Manus with no home to return to.

MICHAEL. Don't be scarin' Shelagh tonight with your stories of the dead islanders returning. She's been fifty years livin' in Chicago. (*As he dips his fingers in the holy-water font, hanging on wall by entrance to porch, and blesses himself.*) For once, turn up the lamp at night-fall and keep the fire burning. Fond hope.

BRIGHID. There'll be no welcoming lamp for that one.

MICHAEL. Ah, Bid. It would be a comfort some night to see a light in that window as I'm nearing the island. Come out of the cold and the dark to a warm kitchen.

BRIGHID. The way it was when Shelagh worked here for Da, you mean. If you must mention me at the wake, say your sister Brighid's still mad as a hatter, tied to the bedpost most of the time. Can't tell day from night. To quote the poet, "mad as the mist and snow." (*As MICHAEL looks at clock.*) Off with you, then. (*Calling after him as he exits.*) Take heart, Michael. We're islanders. Islands like ours are the last fortresses of civilization.

*(As BRIGHID is about to stop the clock, Y. BRIGHID, in summer print dress and sandals, enters and dances around kitchen. It's a soft May evening in the play's past. The clock still ticks.)*

Y. BRIGHID (*as she stops dancing*). Well!

BRIGHID. Well?

Y. BRIGHID. The night of the May dance? Here in the school. Do I go or not?

BRIGHID. You go.

Y. BRIGHID (*dancing again*). I go and!

BRIGHID. You meet a handsome prince who finds the sandal you conveniently leave on the school step.

Y. BRIGHID (*pausing in the dance*). The truth!

BRIGHID. You go—

Y. BRIGHID (*dancing*). I go and I dance with my darling Joe.

BRIGHID. So long, long ago.

Y. BRIGHID. Some day soon we'll marry, king and queen of the island, and build a tall house with a hundred rooms, the windows looking in all directions, and have twelve girls and twelve boys, the girls with hair as white as the milk from a white cow, the boys with hair black as an island night. And I'll weave them each a crown of rushes, and on soft May evenings like this they'll turn into swans and sleep on the water...

BRIGHID. Lovely dream...

*(Y. BRIGHID stops dancing and turns on her.)*

Y. BRIGHID. More than a dream.

BRIGHID. More than a dream.

Y. BRIGHID. Just a dream. Joe prefers that hateful Shelagh.

BRIGHID. And she prefers your brother, Michael.

Y. BRIGHID. And he prefers the hateful Shelagh. So who's for me? The island girls make fun of me.

BRIGHID. Ach, what do they know. Jealous of all your chances.

Y. BRIGHID. Always with their eyes looking off in every other direction. I'm the true islander.

BRIGHID. You are. And you outlast them all here.

Y. BRIGHID. It'll happen. Joe and me, living happily ever after on our island. *(She dances again, then stops and, despairingly, throws herself in rocking chair.)*

BRIGHID. Go to the dance. Enjoy yourself in spite of them all. Tomorrow, Dada lowers the boom on you again.

Y. BRIGHID. Another school? Never! I'll jump in the fire first. He can yell till his tongue swells up and chokes him.



BRIGHID. Off you go now and let me drink my tea in peace.

(*Y. BRIGHID stands looking at her, defiant.*)

BRIGHID (*cont'd*). I'll lay it out for you. Letters have been exchanged, promises signed in ink and blotted. Sister Superior of St. Malachy's School for Girls has agreed—with some persuasion and in the hope of drastically cutting her time in Purgatory—to take you for a year.

Y. BRIGHID. A *whole year*? Never.

BRIGHID. A school year, after which time you return here never to leave again. Could be worse. The plan: finally to accept you as a novice. Though even Sister Superior meets her Waterloo in you. A year, then home for good. Added consolation: you meet Sister Patricius—

Y. MICHAEL (*offstage*). Bid!

BRIGHID. But now I'm getting ahead of myself.

(*YOUNG MICHAEL and YOUNG SHELAGH run in to kitchen.*)

Y. MICHAEL. Bid. Why're you not at the dance?

Y. SHELAGH. Michael thought maybe something terrible happened to you.

Y. BRIGHID (*while BRIGHID makes a motion to warn Y. BRIGHID not to engage Y. SHELAGH*). And what terrible thing would that be, Shelagh?

Y. SHELAGH. Let's see now. Maybe a merman risin' up and beckonin' and you goin' back into the sea with him, willingly.

Y. MICHAEL. Are you comin', Bid?

Y. BRIGHID. But you said it was something terrible, Shelagh?

Y. MICHAEL. So are you, Bid!

Y. BRIGHID. Isn't Joe's taking me to the dance?

*(Y. SHELAGH turns to Y. MICHAEL and smiles. Y. MICHAEL looks away.)*

Y. SHELAGH. See, Brighid, Joe's at the dance already. Not that Joe ever dances, but he's there, leanin' on the school wall, smokin', and dreamin' in the smoke.

Y. BRIGHID. He'll come.

*(Y. SHELAGH laughs and tries to pull Y. MICHAEL offstage. When he resists, she runs offstage, still laughing.)*

Y. BRIGHID *(cont'd)*. What're you waiting for!

Y. MICHAEL. See, Bid. Joe... *(An explosion.)* Why do you have to be—! Why can't you see—! Joe's soft on Shelagh. Now that's the truth, Bid. He talks to you. He likes you. Because you're the way he is—about the island an' all. But it's Shelagh he's after, even though Shelagh and me... well, you know how it is with Shelagh and me.

Y. BRIGHID. Don't miss the dance on my account. Michael Mick. *(She brings candlesticks from mantel, takes a handkerchief from the pocket of her dress, and begins to polish them with an angry energy.)*

BRIGHID. I could say, Go down to the strand instead. For that's where Joe ends up when he gets bored with the dance, when Shelagh's doing all her dancing with Michael... But try to tell you anything.

Y. MICHAEL (*an attempt at lightness*). Give over before you wear them candlesticks down to nothin'.

Y. BRIGHID (*returning candlesticks to mantel*). Joe's on his way. If I leave now I'll meet him on the road.

(*As she exits, Y. SHELAGH runs in.*)

Y. SHELAGH (*to Y. MICHAEL*). So are you coming!

Y. MICHAEL (*without moving*). I am. I am.

Y. SHELAGH (*grabbing him and pulling him into a dance*). Is it here you want to dance then?

Y. MICHAEL (*breaking away and sitting at table*). Da's upstairs, asleep. If he hears ya he'll raise hell with me for goin' to the dance.

Y. SHELAGH. Da is it! Thinks you and Brighid too good for the rest of us.

Y. MICHAEL (*drumming his fingers on table; a habit*). Won't always be dependent on him or what he thinks.

Y. SHELAGH (*grabbing his hand from table*). Joe's not afraid of his da.

Y. MICHAEL. Joe stands to get nothing from his da. Me now. Someday it'll all be mine. The whole bloody lot.

Y. SHELAGH & Y. MICHAEL (*together*). The land and the animals, the house and the boat.

Y. MICHAEL. We'll be living well when it's all mine.

Y. SHELAGH. If he's not spending it all on Brighid and her convent schools.

Y. MICHAEL. Why're you castin' up Joe? What does Joe have to do with us.

Y. SHELAGH. Will your da ever let us marry?

Y. MICHAEL. When I'm ready, he'll have nothin' to say about it.