

MAGDALENE



WHEN WAS

Written By Valerie Goodwin

The Magdalen Whitewash

By Valerie Goodwin

One Act Edit

April 2019

cene 1 **A Cafe**

As audience are settling music such as ‘This Woman’s work’, Kate Bush, from ‘The sensual world’ (1989) are played.

(Spring 1946. Lights fade up to two women drinking tea in a café, suggested by a table and two chairs.

‘Chapel of love’ is being sung and fades into sounds of clinking cups offstage. Both women in nondescript shapeless coats, could be from any era. Both are nervous. Mary is about 28, the girl is about 16.)

Mary Well, well, this is nice isn’t it?

Girl *(Pause. She watches Mary stirring and stirring her tea)* Have you enough sugar?
(Mary puts 3 more sugars in. Girl is amazed at how much sugar she is heaping in. Mary giggles and looks around guiltily.)

Mary Don’t tell- don’t tell them how many I’ve had! *(she giggles, and slurps and laughs delightedly. Then she looks around furtively)* You won’t tell will you? Will you ... what’s your name again?

Girl Nancy.

Mary Oh, aye, Nancy. You told me. You’re a very pretty girl. Your hair is so long. And your clothes ... they’re very pretty. You’d need to be careful when you wash them, or they’d go out of shape, and then you’d catch it ... like the lace things ... from the Big House ...

Nancy *(with tears in her eyes)* You shall have all the silk and lace you want. I’ll get you whatever you want. And you’ll never wash anything ever again.

Mary *(laughs)* Oh get along with you; what would I be doing in clothes like that, sure they’d never let me. Anyway I’m not at the washing any more, they let me do the mending ; it’s a holiday for me nowadays, though I do miss all the chat round the washboards.

Nancy Would you like another scone?

Mary Oh I would, I would, it was lovely, but hadn’t I better get back? Sure it’s nearly time for Mass.

I'd a big pile of mending to do, and tonight is hot pot night. I love those dumplings, Pauline says they're even better than her Mammy's.

Nancy Now listen, listen ... I don't know what to call you.

Mary Mary is my name, pretty miss.

Nancy (*struggles*) Now listen. Its like I told you before, in there. You don't have to go back there. I've come for you. You're coming home, with me.

Mary Home? I remember home. The sound of the gulls, and the wind. The wind blew the dust in. It was hard keeping the floor clean. We had curtains with little checks, little green checks - that's gingham. Its not hard to wash, you can boil it. Sometimes the colour runs - and that's bad.

Nancy Listen. Listen M .. Mary. I've come such a long way, such a long way to see you. I wrote you a letter - did they give you the letter?

Mary The letter? From Boston. I kept the stamp. Such a lovely smell on the paper! Wasn't it lavender?
(*Nancy reaches out to touch her hand, MARY stares down at the hand*) Oh look at your soft , soft hands, so smooth and smelling of lavender! Angela loves lavender best, but Pauline says she loves violets. I like roses, the pink roses smell ...
(*Bells ring, Mary jumps up, and her cup tips over*).

Mary Oh by all the saints- now I'm going to be late, I'm late, (*the tea is spilt, Mary tries to mop it up and starts crying*)

Nancy Don't worry - leave it, it doesn't matter (*they are both talking at once and Mary tries to break free but Nancy won't let her go*)

Nancy You're not late, you're not going back!

Mary Look, you! Nancy, or whoever you are! Let go of me, let go! I shall be in trouble, I don't want to be told off, they'll make me miss breakfast!

Nancy (*crying*) You won't miss breakfast, or wash, or mend, or iron. And no one shall tell you off for being late ever again. You've had 16 years of hell, but its over now. You're coming home with me.

Mary I won't get told off?

Nancy That's right. I told them, they know, it's OK.

Mary They said I could go back after Mass?

Nancy Sit down, sit down. I 've sorted it all out with Mother Superior.

Mary But Sister Gabriel ...-

Nancy I told Sister Gabriel, it's all settled. Sister Gabriel, with the moustache, right?

Mary *(laughs)* We call her Clark Gable. *(hurriedly)* Don't tell .

Nancy Now come on, relax. How about an éclair,..

Mary Oh I don't know, I don't know what to choose, what's a milkshake? It says 'milkshake' up there on the sign, doesn't it? Martha taught me to read - in the evenings, at recreation time. We read the life of Joan of Arc. I like that one. I miss Martha.

Nancy What happened to her? Did her daughter come and fetch her home? Or her son?

Mary *(shivers)* No. No one fetched her. No one. . I'll have a strawberry milkshake please. Nancy.

Nancy Sure thing. *(she signals to unseen waitress.)*

Mary *(giggles)* You talk funny. Where are you from?

Nancy Boston. *(Mary is none the wiser)* In America.

Mary America is it? But that's away away, over the sea. That's a great big land isn't it? How did you get here? On a big ship?

Nancy I flew, on a plane.

Mary Get along, you're kidding me. I've heard of planes, though, Bernadette, she's seen one she said. Right up close. But what was your mother thinking, letting you come all this way by yourself?

Nancy My ... adoptive mother. She's happy for me to come here, she knew it was real important for me, to find my real birth mother.

(There is a long silence and Mary seems to have a glimmer of comprehension. The waitress comes over)

Waitress Oh will you look, it's one of those Maggies! Now then, you. Out of it! What'll the nuns say if they catch you in here?

(Mary has bolted before the waitress has finished speaking.)

Nancy Come back! Wait. Come back ... *(she gathers together her things, but Mary has gone)*

(She turns and glares at the waitress)

Nancy How dare you, how can you be so cruel?

Waitress Ah well miss, it's plain to see you're not from these parts, or you'd know better than to associate with the likes of them; they're a bad lot don't you know, and their own priests and families had them locked away so as not to contaminate decent folks like ourselves.

Nancy Well if that's the attitude of you people it's a damn good job I'm taking her home.

Waitress Is that right? To Amerikky is it? Sure and that's just as well, best place for her, I'm thinking. And she's your cousin, I suppose?

Nancy *(defiantly)* She's my mother. *(She storms out, leaving waitress staring after).*

Scene 2 A Hallway

(It is sixteen years earlier. Young Mary is scrubbing the floor, singing "Jesus wants me for a sunbeam" or "What a friend we have in Jesus". She seems content and in a dream.)

Voice off Mary?

(Mary stiffens, begins scrubbing furiously, guiltily. Enter Sister Ignatia).

Ignatia Have you not finished that floor yet Mary?

Mary Ah ... not quite Sister, I'm afraid not.

Ignatia Well ... it'll be time for supper very soon; if you've not finished there'll be no morsel left by the time you get yourself down there.

Mary Could I not finish it after supper Sister?

Ignatia Now Mary, Mary, what have we told you? All the day's tasks must be done before we ask the Lord's blessing at the meal. You know that by now surely.

Mary When can I go home Sister?

Ignatia Your family will come for you when they're ready. If that time comes ... best not to think of that. This is your home now, Mary. Now get on with that scrubbing. Cleanliness is next to Godliness, remember. It's a pity you didn't remember that before.

(Ignatia exits. Mary stares after her in open-mouthed amazement).

Mary What did she mean by that? I was always the cleanest one, always on my knees at home, always washing the clothes there too ... I wish I knew why they have brought me to this place.

(Mary stands, and as she does we see she is pregnant. She wanders off. Her bucket clanking.)

Song: Mamma he's making eyes at me

Scene 3 The Refectory

(A procession of girls, some more pregnant than others cross the stage to set up the meal table; ie the set change is part of the action.

They mutter and greet one another etcetera, voices hushed, and looking guiltily around for the nuns, they lay the table for the meal).

Bernadette Now where d'you s'pose the penguins are?

Martha Have you not heard? The ould wan has up and died, or about to ... and the others are all rushed to be at her bedside when she pops off.

Assumpta Well what about the supper? I'm about ready to faint, me stomach thinks me throats been cut! That babby of mine takes some feeding, I'm starving! Sure I'll be glad when someone comes and buys him off the nuns and I can get some peace.

Angela Oh now Assumpta you cannot mean that now, sure he's a darling little babby with the bluest eyes I've ever seen.

Assumpta Oh those eyes! When I see them looking up at me, it's his father all over again; some other poor girls'll be brought here on account of those eyes, and that's no lie.

Martha Did you love him Assumpta?

Assumpta Ah now, love; that's the word isn't it?

Bernadette Aye, it's the word that got us all in this mess, for they use that word to unlock our hearts and make us forget our Mother's warnings ...

Mary *(coming in late)* Is supper over? Have I missed it?

Angela Ah don't fret yourself me darling, we're all waiting ourselves. We'll maybe have to say Grace ourselves tonight.