Agnes of God

AUDITION PART 1

(The lights softly rise on DOCTOR MARTHA LIVINGSTONE.)

DOCTOR. I remember when I was a child I went to see Garbo's *Camille*, oh, at least five or six times. And each time I sincerely believed she would *not* die of consumption. I sat in the theater breathless with expectation and hope, and each time I was disappointed, and each time I promised to return, in search of a happy ending. Because I believed in the existence of an alternate last reel. Locked away in some forgotten vault in Hollywood, Greta Garbo survives consumption, oncoming trains, and firing squads. Every time. I still want to believe in alternate reels. I still want to believe that somewhere, somehow, there is a happy ending for *every* story. It all depends on how thoroughly you look for it. And how deeply you need it. (*silence*) The baby was discovered in a wastepaper basket with the umbilical cord knotted around its neck. The mother was found unconscious by
the door to her room, suffering from excessive loss of blood. She was indicted for manslaughter and brought to trial. Her case was assigned to me, Doctor Martha Livingstone, as court psychiatrist, to determine whether she was legally sane. I wanted to help . . . (this young woman, believe me.)

ACT ONE

SCENE 2

MOTHER. Doctor Livingstone, I presume? (MOTHER laughs at her own joke.) I'm Mother Miriam Ruth, in charge of the convent where Sister Agnes is living.

DOCTOR. How do you do.

MOTHER. You needn't call me Mother, if you don't wish.

DOCTOR. Thank you.

MOTHER. Most people find it uncomfortable.

DOCTOR. Well . . .

MOTHER. I'm afraid the word brings up the most unpleasant connotations in this day and age . . .

DOCTOR. Yes.

MOTHER . . . or it forces a familiarity that most are not willing to accept, right off the bat.

DOCTOR. I see.

MOTHER. So you may call me Sister. I've brought Sister Agnes for her appointment. They're allowing her to stay at the convent until the trial.

DOCTOR. Yes, I . . . (know.)

MOTHER. And I wanted to offer my help.

DOCTOR. Well, thank you, Sister, but I haven't even met Sister Agnes yet. If there's anything unclear after I speak to her, I'd . . . (be happy to talk to you.)

MOTHER. You must have tons of questions.
DOCTOR. I do, but I'd like to ask them of Agnes.
MOTHER. She can't help you there.
DOCTOR. What do you mean?
MOTHER. She's blocked it out, forgotten it. I'm the only one who can answer those questions.
DOCTOR. How well do you know her?
MOTHER. Oh, I know Sister Agnes very well. You see, we're a contemplative order, not a teaching one. Our ranks are quite small. I was chosen to be Mother Superior about four years ago, just prior to her coming to us. So I think I'm more than qualified to answer any questions you might have. Would you mind not smoking?
DOCTOR. Yes, I'm sorry, I should have asked if it bothered you. (The DOCTOR does not put out the cigarette, but waves the smoke in another direction.)
MOTHER. Never offer an alcoholic a drink, isn't that what they say?
DOCTOR. You were a smoker?
MOTHER. Two packs a day.
DOCTOR. Oh, I can beat that, Sister.
MOTHER. Lucky Strikes. (The DOCTOR laughs.) My sister used to say that one of the few things to believe in in this crazy world is the honesty of unfiltered cigarette smokers.
DOCTOR. You have a smart sister.
MOTHER. And you have questions. Fire away. (silence)
DOCTOR. Who knew about Agnes' pregnancy?
MOTHER. No one.
DOCTOR. How did she hide it from the other nuns?
MOTHER. She undressed alone, she bathed alone.
DOCTOR. Is that normal?
MOTHER. Yes.
DOCTOR. How did she hide it during the day?
MOTHER. (shaking her habit) She could have hidden a machine gun in here if she wanted.

DOCTOR. And she had no physical examination during this time?

MOTHER. We're examined once a year. Her pregnancy fell in between our doctor's visits.

DOCTOR. Who found the baby?

MOTHER. I did. I'd given Sister Agnes permission to retire early that night. She wasn't feeling very well. I went to her room a short while later . . .

DOCTOR. The nuns have separate rooms?

MOTHER. Yes. And I found her unconscious by the door. I tried to revive her. When I couldn't I had one of the other sisters call for an ambulance. It was then that I found . . . the wastepaper basket.

DOCTOR. Found?

MOTHER. It was hidden. Against the wall, under the bed.

DOCTOR. Why did you think to look there?

MOTHER. I was cleaning. There was a lot of blood.

DOCTOR. Were you alone when you found it?

MOTHER. No. Another sister, Sister Margaret, was with me. It was she who called the police.

DOCTOR. Did you find a diary, letters?

MOTHER. I don't understand.

DOCTOR. Something to clue you in on the identity of the father.

MOTHER. Oh I see. No, I found nothing.

DOCTOR. Who could it have been?

MOTHER. I haven't a clue.

DOCTOR. What men had access to her?

MOTHER. None, as far as I know.

DOCTOR. Was there a doctor?

MOTHER. Yes.

DOCTOR. A man?
AGNES. Hello.

DOCTOR. Hello. I'm Doctor Livingstone. I've been asked to talk to you. May I?

AGNES. Yes.

DOCTOR. You have a lovely voice.

AGNES. No I don't.

DOCTOR. I just heard you.

AGNES. That wasn't me.

DOCTOR. Was it my receptionist? You saw her, didn't you? The tall woman with the purple hair who looks like an ostrich? (AGNES smiles.) That's not very nice to say, but she does, doesn't she?

AGNES. Yes.

DOCTOR. She wasn't singing now, was she? I remem-ber one day she sang and broke a patient's eyeglasses. (AGNES laughs.) You're very pretty, Agnes.

AGNES. No I'm not.

DOCTOR. Hasn't anyone ever told you that before?

AGNES. I don't know.

DOCTOR. Then I'm telling you now. You're very pretty. And you have a lovely voice.

AGNES. Let's talk about something else.

DOCTOR. What would you like to talk about?

AGNES. I don't know.

DOCTOR. Anything. First thing comes to your mind.
AGNES. God. But there's nothing to say about God.
DOCTOR. Second thing comes to your mind.
AGNES. Love.
DOCTOR. Why love?
AGNES. I don't know. (silence)
DOCTOR. Have you ever loved someone, Agnes?
AGNES. God.
DOCTOR. I mean have you ever loved another human?
AGNES. Oh, yes.
DOCTOR. Who is that?
AGNES. Everyone.
DOCTOR. Who in particular?
AGNES. Right now?
DOCTOR. Yes.
AGNES. I love you. (silence)
DOCTOR. But have you ever loved a man? Other than Jesus Christ.
AGNES. Yes.
DOCTOR. Who?
AGNES. Oh, there are so many.
DOCTOR. Well, do you love Father Marshall?
AGNES. Oh, yes.
DOCTOR. Do you think he loves you?
AGNES. Oh, I know he does.
DOCTOR. He told you that?
AGNES. No, but when I look into his eyes I can see.
DOCTOR. You've been alone together.
AGNES. Oh, yes.
DOCTOR. Often?
AGNES. At least once a week.
DOCTOR. (sharing AGNES' joy) Did you like that?
AGNES. Oh, yes.
DOCTOR. Where do you meet?
AGNES. In the confessional. (a beat)