

WOMEN ONLY

A one-act play for two women

**By
David Tristram**

Follow the playwright on social media:

Facebook.com@TristramComedy
Twitter.com/TristramComedy
Instagram.com@TristramComedy

Or visit the website:
www.davidtristram.uk

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COFFEE BREAK**

by DAVID TRISTRAM

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**United Kingdom and World
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020-7054-7200**

**United States and Canada
info@concordtheatricals.com
1-866-979-0447**

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WOMEN ONLY

The Characters:

Laura

(Age range: early thirties to mid-forties)

Ruth

(Laura's mother. A feisty 'older lady' in a wheelchair)

Setting:

A simple minimalist room-set, suggestive of a holiday chalet or similar.

WOMEN ONLY

The stage is a minimalistic room-set, designed to suggest a holiday chalet or similar. Laura enters the dimly-lit room, pushing Ruth in a wheelchair.

Laura: Hang on, I'll find the lights. There.

The room lights up. A slightly disappointed look creeps across both their faces.

Ruth: It's smaller than it looked in the brochure.

Laura: Well, these places are always smaller than they look in the photos, mother. They use a wide angle lens, like Estate Agents.

Ruth: What's a wide angle lens?

Laura: Just a camera trick. It makes a small toilet look like the Hollywood Bowl. Seems clean enough, though.

Ruth: Check it.

Laura: What?

Ruth: Check the toilet.

Laura: (*heading for the exit*) Well, let me get the bags in first, before someone runs off with them. (*She returns struggling with two suitcases, while her mother just looks on, frowning*) It's okay, mother, I can manage.

Ruth: (*pointing to something on the floor*) What's that?

Laura: What's what?

Ruth: That little black blob under the chair.

Laura: (*sighing and bending to look*) Where?

Ruth: By the left leg.

Laura: (*picking something up and squinting at it*) What are you, mother – a kestrel?

Ruth: It looks like a spider.

Laura: Don't be daft, it's just a little...dead thing.

Ruth: Dead what?

Laura: Spider, I think.

Ruth: Told you.

Laura: It's tiny.

Ruth: Get rid of it.

Laura: I sometimes wish you'd never had that cataract operation. You were so much less trouble when you were visually impaired.

Ruth: And check the toilet.

Laura: Yes, mother! I'm going. I need a wee anyway. Why don't you just relax there and enjoy your holiday – leave all the running around to me.

Laura exits to the toilet. Ruth looks around, wheels herself a little nearer to the entrance door. She reaches into her bag, takes out a packet of cigarettes, then stands and exits. There's a toilet flush. Laura enters.

Laura: Clean as a whistle...mother? (*She sees the empty wheelchair*) Mother? Have you been kidnapped? (*Under her breath*) Please tell me you've been kidnapped.

Ruth enters and walks slowly back to the wheelchair.

Laura: What were you doing out there?

Ruth: I needed some air.

Laura: Did you.

Ruth: Yes.

Laura: There's air in here, you know. It's not a sealed container.

Ruth: It's stuffy.

Laura: Mmm. That could be because one of us smells of smoke.

Ruth: I think somebody's having a bonfire outside.

Laura: (*unconvinced - heading out to take a look*) Really? Who?

Ruth: How should I know?

Laura exits briefly. Ruth pulls the cigarettes from her cardigan pocket and puts them back in her bag. Laura re-enters.

Laura: No bonfire.

Ruth: Oh.

Laura: But there was a half-smoked cigarette butt smouldering on the step.

Ruth: I told you - the place is filthy.

Laura: It wasn't there when we arrived.

Ruth: How would you know? You can't even see spiders.

Laura: You lied to me about giving up.

Ruth: I didn't lie. I did give up.

Laura: No, mother - giving up means stopping.

Ruth: I stopped.

Laura: And then you started again.

Ruth: What's your point?

Laura: My point is that if you start again, you haven't actually stopped have you?

Ruth: Course I have. If I hadn't actually stopped, how could I have started again?

Laura: Look, mother, I know that giving up smoking is very hard...

Ruth: It's not. I've done it loads of times.

Laura: But let me just remind you of something – it was smoking that put you in that wheelchair.

Ruth: Yes, and it was the lure of a cigarette that just got me out of it.

Laura: I give up.

Ruth: Good.

Laura: I just wish you could too.

Ruth: I will. But not this week. I'm on my holidays.

Laura: Whatever. Look – I don't want us to fight. We've both had a very rough few months. We needed this break, and we desperately need to get on together. So, just for this week, I propose a truce.

Ruth: What sort of truce?

Laura: I promise I won't nag you about the smoking.

Ruth: Agreed. And in return, I won't nag you about the gin and tonics.

Laura: What gin and tonics?

Ruth: The ones you're about to pour us.

Laura: Good idea. After all, we are on holiday.

Ruth: Yes indeed. Let's just enjoy some much-needed quality time together.

Laura grabs some bottles from the plastic bag by her luggage, finds some glasses and pours two large drinks, handing one to Ruth.

Laura: Cheers.

Ruth: What shall we toast?

Laura: How about...to dad.

Ruth: Yes. Rest in peace, Gerry.

Laura: A lovely man.

Ruth: Yes. Could be.

Laura: What do you mean, could be?

Ruth: Well, you know...

Laura: No, I don't know.

Ruth: Just occasionally, he could also be...well, a bit of an arse.

Laura: Mother!

Ruth: It's true.

Laura: I don't want to hear it.

Ruth: Good, because I don't want to talk about it.

Laura: Talk about what?

Ruth: How can I answer that without talking about it?

Laura: All right. Just...just give me a hint. No details.

Ruth: No details.

Laura: No. Just a broad headline.

Ruth: Very well. There are things about your father that...I never told you.

A long, dry pause.

Laura: That's it?

Ruth: Yes.

Laura: That's the headline? There are things you never told me?

Ruth: Yes.

Laura: What things?

Ruth: You just said you don't want details.

Laura: I don't.

Ruth: Good. That's an end to it then.

Another uneasy pause.

Laura: Okay, come on.

Ruth: Come on what?

Laura: Well you can't just leave it like that. You've got to tell me now. Tell me the things you've never told me.

Ruth: Very well. But I'll need a top up.

Laura: Oh...right.

Laura pours them both another drink.

Ruth: Right. Well, you know what men can be like.

Laura: No, actually I don't.

Ruth: Course you do. Why are you here?

Laura: You know why I'm here, mother. I'm here because I lost a father, and you lost a husband, and we both needed a break.

Ruth: Well actually, we both lost a husband, remember?

Laura: It's not the same.

Ruth: No, not quite – mine died, yours just ran off with another woman. But the nett result's the same. We both lost our men-folk. Yours was just a bit more undignified about it, that's all.

Laura: What do you mean, undignified?

Ruth: Well, shagging his secretary like that.

Laura: Like what?

Ruth: And I bet she wasn't the first.

Laura: Mother, please...

Ruth: In fact, I know she wasn't.

Laura: You know no such thing!

Ruth: Oh, the village gossips are rarely wrong about these things, Laura.

Laura: And just who are these village gossips, mother? Let me guess. You and your poisonous sister.

Ruth: You can say what you like about your aunty Mary...

Laura: Good. I will – she’s a spiteful old cow.

Ruth: Yes, but she’s never far from the truth, is she? She had your Edward weighed up right from the off.

Laura: Oh, charming.

Ruth: She said it’d never last the year. And she was right.

Laura: And no doubt you agreed with her?

Ruth: Well why wouldn’t I? You know I hated Edward.

Laura: Oh, yes – you never made any real secret of that, did you.

Ruth: And I know that he hated me.

Laura: He didn’t hate you.

Ruth: Of course he did. I was his mother-in-law.

Laura: This isn’t some sort of Les Dawson sketch, mother. Some men do actually like their mother-in-law.

Ruth: I doubt that very much. Men always get jealous because mothers have such a special bond with their daughters.

Laura: Do they?

Ruth: Well, not us, obviously. But as a rule...

Laura: Anyway – stop changing the subject.

Ruth: What subject?

Laura: You were telling me something – about dad.

Ruth: Oh, that. Are you sure you want to know?

Laura: Probably not.

Ruth: Good.

Laura: But I have to now, don’t I.

Ruth: No.

Laura: Just tell me.

Ruth: Very well. Your father...it seems...didn’t always play with a straight bat.

Laura: What the hell’s that supposed to mean?

Ruth: It’s a cricketing expression.

Laura: Well I don’t play cricket, mother. Speak English.

Ruth: Very well. On one occasion – after we’d been married for about three weeks or so - I got back from the shops just a little earlier than usual, and I found your father, in the bedroom...

Laura: Oh, no...

Ruth: ...wearing one of my dresses.

A momentary stunned silence.

Laura: What?

Ruth: You heard.

Laura: Dad?

Ruth: Yes.

Laura: In one of your dresses?

Ruth: Yes.

Laura: Which one?

Ruth: (*bemused*) Does it matter?

Laura: Er...no. I suppose not.

Ruth: Actually, from memory, it was a two-piece midi dress. Light green, with a three-quarter length sleeve, round neck and floral print. Looked very nice on him.

Laura: What did he say?

Ruth: Nothing.

Laura: What did you say?

Ruth: Nothing. I went downstairs and made some tea.

Laura: And then what?

Ruth: We drank tea. Nothing was ever said about it again.

Laura: Wow. That's...that's so...Victorian.

Ruth: That's just how it was in those days.

Laura: Perhaps he was just, you know – trying it on.

Ruth: That's undoubtedly what he was doing.

Laura: But why?

Ruth: Possibly to see if he could still fit into a size 12. As I say, we didn't really discuss it.

Laura: Didn't it...bother you?

Ruth: No. Why should it?

Laura: Well, I don't know – I mean, you were quite harsh earlier about Edward...

Ruth: Laura, your husband was caught trying to get into his secretary's knickers. My husband, on the other hand, was merely caught trying to get into his own wife's dress. There's a big difference. Consequently, my marriage lasted more than thirty years, yours lasted six months.

Laura: So you genuinely weren't bothered?

Ruth: Nope.

Laura: That's very modern of you.

Ruth: A few seconds ago you were saying I was Victorian.

Laura: So...if it didn't bother you, why did you say he was sometimes a bit of an arse?

Ruth: Ah, well that's quite another story. One which deserves another gin and tonic.

Laura: Oh, right.

Laura pours them another two large drinks.

Ruth: Right. I'm going to tell you something now that I've never told another living soul.

Laura: I'm not sure I'm ready for this.

Ruth: You need to be. You see, your father and I, for reasons perhaps hinted at earlier, with the floral dress, and other similar indiscretions too numerous to mention, we never really...well, we never really sang from the same hymn sheet, if you see what I mean, in the bedroom department. I say hymn sheet, but with us, it was more of a Him sheet and a Her sheet. But never the twain shall meet...on the bed sheet.

Laura: (*a long pause as she grapples with the cryptic response*) What?

Ruth: Don't get me wrong, we had a wonderful marriage, in so many ways, Laura. But your father and I never really connected. Physically. If you follow me.

Laura: I think so. But when you say never really connected, I mean, you did though, didn't you – connect, I mean - at first, anyway.

Ruth: I'm afraid not.

Laura: No, but I mean...you did. You must have. At least once. (*Nervous babble*) Obviously. Because, well, here I am.

Ruth: (*deadpan and serious*) Yes. There you are.

Laura: Mother?

Ruth: Laura.

Laura: Speak to me.

Ruth: I am speaking to you.

Laura: What are you saying?

Ruth: Pour me another gin.

Ruth hands over her empty glass. Laura realises she hasn't touched her drink so far, but she knocks it back in one and quickly pours two more large ones.

Laura: Are you trying to tell me...what I think you're trying to tell me?

Ruth: I don't know. What do you think I'm trying to tell you?

Laura: That...my father...wasn't really my father?

Ruth: Oh, no – don't be silly, child – nothing like that.

Laura: Thank God for that – you were freaking me out just now.

Ruth: No, what I'm trying to tell you, is that your mother, isn't really your mother.

Laura: What?

Ruth: And, however belatedly, I thought you ought to know. Any questions?

Laura: (*incredulous, exasperated*) What?? You thought I ought to...Yes! Yes, I have questions! I have lots of questions.

Ruth: Fire away.

Laura: (*babbling furiously*) Well, let's start with, I don't know...I mean...what the hell are you talking about? Who do you mean?

Ruth: What?

Laura: Well – who are we talking about?

Ruth: Sorry, I'm not following this...

Laura: You just said my mother wasn't my mother.

Ruth: Yes.

Laura: Well - you're my mother.

Ruth: No, dear – you don't seem to be paying attention. I just stated that I'm not.
Not in the strict literal sense anyway.

Laura: Strict literal sense? What other sense is there?

Ruth: Well, you can still be maternal, can't you, without being...you know...

Laura: No, I don't know! Without being what?

Ruth: Well...biological.

Laura: You mean...there was some sort of...sperm donor involved?

Ruth: No, dear. You're not grasping the nettle.

Laura: Well stop speaking in riddles!

Ruth: Very well. The day you were born, I was not in attendance. I can't put it any plainer than that. You've gone very pale, dear. Do you need another drink?

Laura: (*stunned*) Are you saying...that you didn't actually give birth to me?

Ruth: Yes. But don't worry...

Laura: Don't worry??

Ruth: Because I know who did.

Laura: Oh, excellent – that's all right then!

Ruth: You seem a little dismayed.

Laura: What, me? No! No, what better way to get over a messy divorce and the loss of my father, than to...than to book a week away with some...some random, alcoholic, crafty fag-smoking bag lady that for the past 30 years I actually thought was my mother!

Ruth: I'm not a random alcoholic crafty fag-smoking bag lady, thank you Laura. And I'm still your mother.

Laura: Are you?

Ruth: Yes. Just not...literally.

Laura: So who is my mother...literally? Come on, we might as well get it all out in one session. It'll cut down the psychiatry bills. Who is my mother, mother? And if you say it's my father I'm out of here because this...this is all getting far too modern for me.

Ruth: What are you babbling about, child? How can your father be your mother?

Laura: Never mind. You don't want to know. Just don't ever say that on Twitter. They'd crucify you. Anyway, come on - you said you knew who my mother was, so spill the beans. I'm all ears.

Ruth: Shall we have another drink first?

Laura: Oh, why the hell not. I'm so much happier when I'm unconscious. (*She quickly and angrily prepares the drinks and hands one over*) Okay – go.

Ruth: Well, do you remember how I said that your father and I never really connected...

Laura: It seems like a lifetime ago, but yes, I still remember that particular bombshell.

Ruth: Well, I was still keen to have a family. We both were. Well, him less so. Perhaps not at all. But anyway, I was.

Laura: Get to the point, mother. Oh, sorry - if you don't mind, I may still accidentally call you mother while I think up a suitable alternative. Old habits die hard.

Ruth: Well, I was very keen to know if our particular problem was...down to me, or a wider issue. So I employed a young lady to help me find out the truth of it.

Laura: What sort of young lady?

Ruth: Elsie, her name was. Pretty young thing. But she'd fallen on hard times, and she had become – what's the expression – a lady of the night.

Laura: A vampire?

Ruth: No, a professional gentleman's escort.

Laura: A prostitute.

Ruth: If you must. Anyway, it was your father's birthday, so I booked him in.

Laura: Booked him in?

Ruth: Yes. To spend a night with Elsie.

Laura: Wow. That's some Red Letter Day gift, mother.

Ruth: Well, it was important. I needed to check...well, I think we both did...

Laura: Check what?

Ruth: We needed to know if our marriage was a lost cause, or whether Gerald could be encouraged to show a little more interest in the...well, female form, as it were. So, I introduced him to Elsie.

Laura: And?

Ruth: And he got her pregnant.

Laura: Bingo. First time lucky, eh?

Ruth: It would appear so. Elsie was such a talent.

Laura: That must have knocked your confidence.

Ruth: Not really. Because your father later said that even though he was grateful for the experience, it had finally persuaded him that his natural preferences did indeed lie elsewhere. In other words, as far as he was concerned, you...were a one-off.

Laura: Me? So...I was that pregnancy?

Ruth: Yes. I persuaded Elsie to put her career on hold, to have the baby, and put it in my care. She needed the money, and...well, anyway. She agreed. And before you ask, no – you can't meet her. I'm afraid Elsie is no longer with us.

Laura: She died?

Ruth: In childbirth.

Laura: Shit!

Ruth: I know. Believe me, I've wrestled with the guilt for many years.

Laura: I killed my own mother!

Ruth: Well, that's being a bit hard on yourself. You were only young at the time.

Laura: I need another drink.

Ruth: Good idea.

Laura tops up the glasses again.

Laura: So...when dad found out - how did he react...to me I mean?

Ruth: Oh, he was thrilled – upset about Elsie of course – but you know he always loved you to bits. In fact, it was his idea to take you on in the first place. He adored the idea of being a father. It gave him a new sense of purpose.

Laura: So, you and dad - were you...happy?

Ruth: Happy's not a word we bandied around. But I'd say we were content. And we had a family. To be honest, if you hadn't come along, I think we may have eventually gone our separate ways. As it was, we mostly led our own private lives, but in public we remained a solid unit.

Laura: Private lives. Forgive me. I'm still trying to process this.

Ruth: Process away.

Laura: So did dad...you know - did he have any...male companions, or...?

Ruth: Oh, yes. You remember your uncle Charlie.

Laura: My uncle??

Ruth: Oh, he wasn't your real uncle. We just called him that.

Laura: You told me he was dad's brother!

Ruth: Well, that was just an easy way to explain away their...closeness.

Laura: In fact – you told everyone he was dad's brother.

Ruth: No, not everyone. We didn't tell Brian.

Laura: Who's Brian?

Ruth: Your dad's brother.

Laura: So he DOES have a brother?

Ruth: Yes. But he lives in Australia, so that wasn't an issue.

Laura: Brian from Australia. The one you said was dad's cousin?

Ruth: That's the one.

Laura: Why does it suddenly feel like my whole family tree has just been attacked by a...bloody...axe-wielding psychopathic lumberjack?

Ruth: Just keeping you up to date with all the gossip.

Laura: So. To re-cap. My dad's cousin isn't really my dad's cousin.

Ruth: Correct.

Laura: My uncle isn't really my uncle...

Ruth: Bingo.

Laura: My mother isn't really my mother...

Ruth: Spot on.

Laura: But my dad is really my dad...

Ruth: (*slightly unconvincingly*) Er...Yes.

Laura: Definitely?

Ruth: Well...

Laura: No! Stop it! What do you mean, “Well...”?

Ruth: Well, obviously I had to take Elsie’s word for it. Hard to be a hundred percent certain when you’re dealing with a prostitute.

Laura: What are you trying to do to me??

Ruth: She was a very busy lady, so I’m guessing there would have been no shortage of potential candidates for the father. Though in truth, none quite so wealthy, so I suppose...

Laura: But what about...DNA tests or something?

Ruth: Don’t be ridiculous, child. This is England, not California. Besides – who would you take the samples from? Your father? Elsie? I’m the only one who’s still alive and I know I wasn’t involved. Drink?

Laura: (*snatching the empty glass from her and pouring another*) If your aim is to get me to pass out so I remember none of this in the morning...I’m all for it.

Ruth: That’s my girl.

Laura: Yes, that’s your girl, but apparently not your daughter.

Ruth: Ooh, bitchy.

Laura: Doesn’t this bother you?

Ruth: What?

Laura: What?? This whole...not being my mother all of a sudden.

Ruth: There’s nothing sudden about it, dear. I’ve not been your mother from the very beginning.

Laura: Exactly. And you choose now to tell me.

Ruth: When was I supposed to choose?

Laura: I’m 35 years old!

Ruth: So?

Laura: So...I don’t know...how about...earlier!

Ruth: How much earlier? The day you got married?

Laura: What?

Ruth: Before you got married, then? Your college days? The day you started school? In fact, perhaps I should have taken you to aside on your very first birthday party, just after you blew out the candle, and made it perfectly clear, there and then, that you were an unwanted baby orphan.

Laura: All right...you’ve made your point.

Ruth: There’s no good time for bad news, Laura.

Laura: So okay, okay – let’s flip the question. Why now? You’ve got this far without telling me. Why not just leave me in blissful ignorance?

Ruth: When you get to my age, Laura, you’ll understand.

Laura: I want to understand now.

Ruth: There comes a point in your life where you want to just...clear your conscience. Make peace with the world. Get your affairs in order, before you depart.

Laura: Don't be morbid.

Ruth: It's not morbid. It's a fact.

Laura: You do realise, this is just day one of our holiday.

Ruth: Yes. It's going to be fun isn't it.