

# **Daughters of**

By Kat Meads

## CHARACTERS

HISTORY: Male. Wears top hat, slogan t-shirt that reads in red capital letters: HISTORY. Shorts, flip-flops.

LAURA MARX: The elder of Karl Marx's daughters. She is dressed primly, "properly," in late Victorian-era dress.

ELEANOR "TUSSY" MARX: Laura's younger sister. She wears a nude-colored shapeless shift. Barefoot.

## SETTING

A folding beach chair and wooden bench on an otherwise empty stage.

*(Lights up on HISTORY, snoozing in his beach chair, a stack of “messy” files on the floor beside him. Enter LAURA and ELEANOR MARX, Laura supporting ELEANOR. HISTORY continues to snooze. With difficulty LAURA helps ELEANOR sit on the bench. LAURA takes up a standing position behind the bench very close to ELEANOR. HISTORY continues to snooze. For a beat, both sisters stare at the sleeping man.)*

LAURA

Sir? *(louder)* Sir? We have arrived. For our interview.

*(HISTORY awakens, yawns, leans over, grabs a fistful of files, rummages through the pile.)*

HISTORY

*(indifferently)* And you are...?

LAURA

*(slightly offended)* I am Laura Marx Lafargue and this is my sister, Eleanor.

ELEANOR/TUSSY

*(sheepishly)* But you may call me Tussy, if you like. *(LAURA stiffens)* My family calls me Tussy. *(pause)* Called me.

*(TUSSY looks nervously over her shoulder at LAURA, who, despite disapproving of her sister’s invitation to be called by her nickname, touches TUSSY’s shoulder to soothe and reassure.)*

LAURA

It’s all right. I’m here with you. And we made an appointment.

HISTORY

So you did, so you did. The daughters Marx. Karl’s spawn. *(tosses files)*

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LAURA

*(alarmed)* Sir! You will need the files. We came to correct the files.

HISTORY

Um...well...no promises. We'll see how it goes. First, the ground rules. *(looks specifically at TUSSY, who seems already to be fading)* I ask the questions, you answer. Agreed?

TUSSY

*(confused, looking at LAURA for guidance)* I...

LAURA

Yes, we agree. My sister and I both agree.

HISTORY

*(going through the motions)* Also state, please, that you've come of your own volition.

LAURA

We came of our own volition. *(to Tussy)* Say you are here of your own volition, dear.

TUSSY

*(lost)* If Laura's says I am...

HISTORY

Without coercion from any source or quarter.

LAURA

*(becoming irritated)* You are repeating yourself, sir. We have already stated as much. By answering your previous question.

*(Sensing he may have more fun than usual with this pair, HISTORY sits up straighter, smiles craftily.)*

## HISTORY

Excellent! Then let's get to it. First to you, Tussy. That morning in March when you sent the maid to the chemist for chloroform and prussic acid, took a bath, dressed yourself in white and lay on the bed to die before noon, age 43.

*(TUSSY looks stricken, falls back against LAURA who reaches down to clasp her hand during the "ordeal.")*

## LAURA

*(whispering encouragement)* Remember, this is your chance to speak, dear. To tell it your way.

*(TUSSY continues to hesitate. HISTORY quickly loses what interest he had, waiting for TUSSY's response. He begins to glance about, bored.)*

## TUSSY

*(with great effort)* My taste and Edward's were much the same. We agreed on socialism. We loved the theater. We staged Ibsen. I translated *Madame Bovary*...

## HISTORY

*(smirking)* Ah yes, Edward Aveling, the parasite who lived off you for 15 years. The louse who quit the house and left you to your bath and meds on that inauspicious spring day, who shed not a tear over your grave or any hour thereafter. The man George Bernard Shaw compared unfavorably to a lizard. But you, Tussy? You found such a brute...attractive?

## LAURA

He was her *husband*, sir.

## HISTORY

Ah, but that's not quite true, is it, Tussy? The husband claim?

## TUSSY

When Edward and I met, we could not *legally* become man and wife.

## HISTORY

Because *legally* Edward already had a wife.

TUSSY

*(frantically)* But ours was the *true* marriage that set aside all false, bourgeois conventions. Our fellow socialists approved. They applauded our happiness.

HISTORY

Did they? I'm afraid I'll need more than *your* word on that...

TUSSY

*(uncertainly)* I'm certain they did. *(pause)* Didn't they, Laura?

LAURA

Of course, of course. Don't upset yourself, dear.

TUSSY

*(mournful)* If only couples didn't have to live in houses and bake and clean and scrub and scour...

HISTORY

*(to LAURA)* Translate, please. Is your sister reminiscing about her home with Edward or your parents' swine pit of broken chairs, cracked tea cups and filth?

LAURA

I do not care...

HISTORY

What's that, Laura?

LAURA

I say I do not *care* for your *tone*, sir.

HISTORY

*(ignoring LAURA's reprimand, to TUSSY)* Or perhaps, Tussy, you are replaying your role as doll-house Nora? For *(quoting)* "there can be no freedom or beauty about a home life that depends on borrowing or debt."

TUSSY

*(sighing)* It's true. We had so many money troubles. I would feel completely desperate and Edward so unconcerned...

*(As if exhausted, TUSSY lies back on the bench, closes her eyes. One arm dangles limply toward the floor. LAURA attempts to position her sister more comfortably.)*

HISTORY

*(bemused)* That's it for Tussy, then? We're on to the Laura and Paul Lafargue saga?

LAURA

*(haughty)* Ours was not a *saga*, sir. It was a working partnership, a true marriage of minds.

HISTORY

Indeed. Congratulations! Unlike poor Tussy, you were able to claim a husband in both the conventional and Marxist sense. And did that make Daddy proud?

LAURA

*(provoked, defensive)* My father had the utmost respect for my husband, for his translations of my father's writings, for his political work in France and Spain. For his commitment to—

HISTORY

Yes, yes, I've heard the accomplishments list. But, since you're here, why not clear up a point of contention?

LAURA

Gladly.

HISTORY

*(nods toward the out-of-it Tussy)* Your sister offered herself, solo. You followed your husband's lead.

LAURA

*(bristling)* My husband and I decided together. We were in agreement.

HISTORY

*(skeptically)* Decided exactly at once? How extraordinary!

LAURA

*(fiercely)* Yes.

HISTORY

*(reaches down, pulls out a sheet of paper, flaps it)* You're aware that his suicide note...survives? *(reads from page)* "Healthy of body and spirit, I give myself death..." I, I, I, I, I. Not a "we" to be found in Mr. Lafargue's fare-the-well.

*(LAURA stares stonily, holding her ground. A staring match commences, continues for a beat. When the "conversation" resumes, HISTORY is serious, focused, "grilling" LAURA as if he is truly seeking the truth.)*

HISTORY

One syringe of cyanide for the both of you.

LAURA

Yes.

HISTORY

He 69. You 65.

LAURA

Yes.

HISTORY

*(a beat, losing patience)* I remind you, Mrs. Marx Lafargue, as you reminded your sister. This is an opportunity to tell it your way, to set the record straight.



LAURA

On this point the record is not in error. My husband and I died together. By choice. We had outlived our usefulness.

HISTORY

Your *husband's* words.

LAURA

And mine. We had become too feeble to carry on the struggle.

HISTORY

(*mocking*) The daughter of Karl Marx too *feeble*? This is what you wish to *add* to the historical record?

(*TUSSY rouses herself as if from a dream, sits up.*)

TUSSY

Father once wrote to Engels: "Such a lousy life is not worth living."

LAURA

(*irritated for other cause*) He wrote that after mother's smallpox, Tussy. After it left her deaf and scarred. After she gave birth to our stillborn brother.

HISTORY

(*consults another file*) Up, up, correction! Scholarly records indicate your father expressed that sentiment while suffering a case of the boils. Quote/unquote: "A truly proletarian disease."

TUSSY

We had a brother who lived. (*pause*) Freddy. The maid's son. (*pause*) Laura, tell about Freddy. How mother didn't mind. (*pause*) He became a machinist, Freddy did.

HISTORY

Paterfamilial infidelities! I'm all ears! Do share the in-house low-down!

LAURA

Again, sir, I do not approve of your tone.

HISTORY

*(done with LAURA)* Approve or disapprove. It means nothing to history.

LAURA

*(frustrated)* But we came here, two women—

HISTORY

And talked only of men. *(counting off on fingers)* Edward. Paul. The bastard brother Freddy.

LAURA

Have you no respect for complication, sir? The surrounding circumstance?

HISTORY

Have you none for my time? For the hordes clamoring to “amend” and “fill in” and “reinterpret” what came before? Why bother me at all? Your place is secure. You made the cut. History noticed. The legitimate daughters of Karl Marx.

TUSSY

*(woefully)* They always came for Father, didn’t they, Laura? Never because of us. For years we thought no one would marry me.

LAURA

*(distracted by TUSSY’s whining)* Tussy! No one thought such a thing.

TUSSY

*(sighing)* I’m quite sure we did. I’m quite sure we all quite rightly despaired.

HISTORY

*(laughs)* You have my sympathy, Tussy. Such *lousy* taste in men. But who could live up to Daddy, eh?

TUSSY

Yes (*quoting*), “it is perfectly true, Torvald. When I was at home with papa, he told me his opinion about everything, and so I had the same opinions; and if I differed I concealed the fact because he would not have liked it...and when I came to live with you”—

LAURA

(*“collecting” her limp sister*) Come along, Tussy. We gain nothing here.

HISTORY

(*mocking*) And that’s the thanks I get! After interrupting my nap to accommodate!

(*HISTORY leans back in chair, pulls hat over his face, crosses his arms, resumes his snooze as LAURA delicately leads TUSSY offstage.*)

TUSSY

(*confused, voice growing fainter and fainter*) I don’t understand. We’re done? So soon? Did I say everything I should? Did I say something I shouldn’t? Did I make a mistake, Laura? Will Father be angry? *Is* he angry? Will we return? Later? To try again? Laura? Will we?

(*Stage dark.*)

**Kat Meads**'s short plays have been staged in New York, California, Oregon, Arizona, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri, Maryland and elsewhere. *Daughters of* was produced in April as a winner of Theatre du Mississippi's Original Shorts competition.