

Mustn't Tell

A One-Act Comedy

by Christopher Morse

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DEDICATION

For Susan

a cheerful gossip without an ounce of malice

STORY OF THE PLAY

About 1960 five women gather for tea in a sunny suburban living room. Hostess Bettie has sent friends Bonnie, Bunnie, and Bootie out to see her garden – a ploy which allows Bettie to share a juicy tidbit of gossip with the fifth woman, Darla. It seems that the “man-crazy” Bonnie once again disgraced herself at the bridal shower which all five recently attended. Darla listens obediently but is plainly reluctant to be made the keeper of secrets. The others return, and now Bonnie button-holes Darla and relates a similar tidbit concerning the “sweet but dumb” Bunnie. And so it goes, the women singly or in duos and trios compelling the long-suffering Darla to listen to tales of drunken faux pas. The ruses employed to get each other out of the room grow increasingly absurd (yet never fail); the instructions concerning whom Darla “mustn’t tell” grow increasingly elaborate:

“You can tell Bettie what I said about Bonnie, and Bunnie what I said about Bettie, but don’t tell Bonnie about Bunnie or Bettie, unless Bunnie first tells Bonnie about Bettie; and certainly don’t tell Bunnie about Bonnie, or Bettie about Bunnie, promise?”

In the end the “Four Bs” push Darla over the edge, cattily gossiping about her as she sits there aghast. But the unassuming Darla surprises us all with the boldness and precision of her triumphant retort.

“Mustn’t Tell” is a lively farce, full of movement and acrobatic language. It should not for one moment be taken seriously.

Running time: 20 to 25 minutes.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

There are five women, older than very young, younger than very old:

BETTIE: The snobbish one.

BONNIE: The man-crazy one.

BUNNIE: The sweet but dumb one.

BOOTIE: The tacky one.

DARLA: Their long-suffering victim.

SETTING

1960s. Bettie's tastefully appointed living room. A passage DSR leads to the backyard; a passage USR leads to the parlor and other rooms of the house; the front door on the SL wall, and a picture window next to it. The sofa is CS; chairs, small tables, lamps, a sideboard with telephone, wall hangings, etc. are arranged comfortably around the room.

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(AT RISE: Afternoon tea in Bettie's tastefully appointed living room. BETTIE is speaking through the passage DSR. DARLA waits for her near CS, fidgeting slightly.)

BETTIE: That's right, girls, just up the garden path. The primroses are simply stunning! *(SHE turns back into the room, a mischievous glint in her eye.)* Darla, darling, have I got a juicy tidbit for you!

DARLA: *(Uneasy.)* Oh, Bettie, is that why you asked me to stay behind?

BETTIE: Wait 'til you hear. Just when we thought that Bonnie's behavior couldn't be more scandalous!

DARLA: Bettie, please, not more gossip. You know how uncomfortable I feel, keeping secrets.

BETTIE: Darla, don't be a wet blanket. If you don't hear this from me, you're sure to hear it elsewhere – it's literally all over town. Only remember not to tell Bonnie I told you. Oh, and you oughtn't tell Bootie, either; she tells Bonnie everything.

DARLA: What about Bunnie?

BETTIE: Bunnie knows; she told *me*. Sit, sit. *(SHE draws the reluctant DARLA onto the sofa with her.)* Last Sunday, at Belinda's bridal shower? Oh, Darla, darling, what a fool you were to leave early, the party had only begun!

DARLA: I guess I have trouble knowing what to say when everybody—

BETTIE: You're aware that our Bonnie has never said "no" to a brandy. Any more than she's ever said "no" to a man! And who should show up, all smiles and charm, but that handsome Burt.

DARLA: Who?

BETTIE: Burt, darling, Belinda's second brother.

DARLA: Ah, yes...

BETTIE: It seems that no sooner was the innocent gentleman in the door, but our Bonnie practically *threw* herself into his arms.

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BETTIE: *(Cont'd.)* Bunnie observed the whole sorry spectacle: Bonnie, guzzling her *fifth* brandy and clinging to Burt's arm, whispering in his ear, cackling like a fool at his every utterance, leaning ever so close as if to – shall we say – emphasize an already plunging neckline?

DARLA: Oh dear!

BETTIE: And would you believe it, darling Darla, before evening's end Bonnie had dropped hints that Burt ought to jot down his telephone number!

DARLA: No!

BETTIE: A woman requesting a man's number, in this day and age! Bunnie says she'd wager Bonnie got Burt's number in the end and that the two have been meeting.

DARLA: *(Not knowing what else to say.)* My, my, my.

(VOICES are heard down the passageway.)

BETTIE: Now promise, you mustn't tell Bonnie I told you.

DARLA: Of course.

BETTIE: Or Bootie, lest she tell Bonnie.

DARLA: And Bunnie?

BETTIE: Bunnie *knows*.

(BONNIE, BUNNIE, and BOOTIE enter, chatting merrily all at once, no one listening.)

BONNIE: Bettie, your primroses *are* lovely.

BETTIE: Thank you, Bonnie.

BUNNIE: Such colors!

BETTIE: Thank you, Bunnie.

BOOTIE: I wish my garden was so pretty!

BETTIE: Thank you, Bootie.

BONNIE: Bettie has quite the green thumb.

BUNNIE: Where *do* you find the time?

(An awkward moment.)

BOOTIE: Well.

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(An awkward moment.)

BONNIE: Speaking of flowers, Bettie, have our girls seen the new painting?

BETTIE: *(Rises.)* Oh, yes: Bunnie, Bootie, you must see.

(BUNNIE and BOOTIE follow BETTIE to a rather awful still life hanging USL on the rear wall. DARLA starts after them, but BONNIE tugs her sleeve, gestures her to follow DSR. During the following the three Bs upstage admire and discuss the painting in low whispers, utterly oblivious of Bonnie and Darla.)

BONNIE: Darla, darling, did Bettie tell you about Bunnie at the bridal shower?

DARLA: Um, no, Bonnie.

BONNIE: *Wait* till you hear! You know that our Bunnie is not the “sharpest tack in the box,” but, my goodness, a glass or two of red wine and you’re dealing with an absolute child! Now, no one in town is unaware of the bride-to-be’s unfortunate “condition.” ... *(A discreet hand over her belly.)*

DARLA: *(Who is unaware.)* Oh -- really?

BONNIE: But silly Bunnie had nary a clue! “Belinda, haven’t you gained a little weight around the middle?” “Your bust seems fuller, are you worried about fitting into your gown?” And the groom’s mother standing by, utterly mortified! Darla, darling, you’d have died of embarrassment – or of laughter! *(SHE laughs, and DARLA tries to join in.)* Poor Bunnie, she’s sweet, but dumb. Now you mustn’t tell Bunnie I told you. I think Bettie knows. But don’t tell Bootie – unless Bettie has already told her.

DARLA: Ah... all right.

BONNIE: *(Calls to the OTHERS, who suspect nothing.)* Girls, let’s have our tea before it turns cold.

(DARLA sits on the sofa, sips her tea. Merry chatting-all-at-once as the OTHERS take their places, a cup or two is poured, a plate of cookies handed around. There follows an awkward pause.)

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