

## **CHARACTERS**

WIFE

CHILDREN, A DAUGHTER AND SON

HUSBAND

THE NEIGHBOR'S WIFE

VACUUM CLEANER

CHORUS OF APPLIANCES

# Vacuum Cleaner

An Opera in One Act

by

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**SCENE:** *The living-dining area of a cheap two-bedroom brick bungalow in a development forty minutes from a metropolis. The entry is at left wing. There is a great slightly crooked "picture-window" upstage center which looks out upon a row of identical cheap two-bedroom brick bungalows with identical great slightly crooked "picture-windows" looking out upon identical...etc., etc., ad nauseum. Within the windows may be seen "frozen" pantomime scenes mimicking those that take place on stage. The furnishings are American "Colonial"; they clash with the modern dress of the husband and his wife. On the wall, a crocheted portrait of the American flag, and other oddities. The place is in dreadful taste, but the couple raising their family there are trying.*

*There is an oversize TV set in constant operation, its image visible, even oppressive, to the audience; but it emits no sound. The room is however, awash with sounds coming from a chorus composed of the AIR-CONDITIONER, the AUTOMATIC DISHWASHER, the AUTOMATIC WASHER-DRYER COMBINATION, the AUTOMATIC SINK DISPOSAL, the combination REFRIGERATOR-FREEZER, and*

*the leader of the chorus, the TANK-TYPE VACUUM CLEANER: these intermittently grind, humm, swish, tumble, buzz, bang, shift gears, roar, gurgle sigh, moan and groan -- at moments as though trying to obscure the human sounds that the characters make. The characters' sweet docility might best be accounted for by their final submission to the transcendent aural vitality of these mechanical "helpmate" devices.*

*As the scene opens the room is vacant; the TV image is seen delivering an inane but soundless one-minute long commercial for a teenage toothpaste called "SMILE", demonstrated by a teenage girl wearing braces on her front teeth, who never stops smiling or brushing. After the commercial comes to an end, it repeats itself without interruption fifteen or so times during the fifteen minutes performance.*

*When the CHILDREN enter, the TV image will CONTINUE TO SHOW THE "SMILE" commercial but it is now accompanied by a soundtrack of a soft-voiced woman reading almost inaudibly from the book AUSCHWITZ or from LETTERS FROM VIETNAM, a reading that will continue for the duration of the play, and for a moment or two after the DIM OUT.*

*When the HUSBAND enters, he might be very tall and thin, with a mustache; neatly dressed in a gray flannel suit, etc. The WIFE will enter with a rush, from the Kitchen (OFF). She might wear ballet*

*slippers, tapered slacks, a frilly tea-apron, a ladies-model man's shirt, no make-up, and hair-curlers under a kerchief. A cigarette might dangle from her lip. She will wear her ANXIETY mask, as from an impossible number of household chores to be done by an impending deadline. The living-dining room, however, is immaculate.*

*The **WIFE** is the first to enter, and when she does the commercial starts to repeat itself while all the **APPLIANCE** sounds come on, without her involvement, one after another. She moves to the **VACUUM CLEANER**, takes its neck or handle in her hand, doesn't switch on the power, stands and looks at the TV screen. Her body, rigid at first, relaxes slowly. She goes rigid once more, then relaxes, still watching the TV. As the "SMILE" commercial starts to repeat for the second time she turns on the power but does not push the machine. The **VACUUM CLEANER'S** sound grows and subsides, huskily, as though it is observing the **WIFE** and has a life of its own. As the tooth-brushing activity reaches a frenzied climax on its second go-round, the **WIFE** body grows tenser, and tenser, and the Vacuum Cleaner has an orgasm in the **WIFE** hand. The **WIFE** body then sort of sags. The **VACUUM CLEANER'S** sound subsides after a final shout, cry, groan or whistle. The other mechanical sounds grow remote and smooth out, one after another. Total silence.*

*The **CHILDREN** enter the house. They are twins, boy and girl, aged 5. They carry schoolbooks underarm. When they enter, they stand stiffly side by side, like wooden toys, just over the threshold.*

The **WIFE** springs to life, cuts off the **VACUUM CLEANER**, darts to and around the **CHILDREN**, and all around the room. Her mask of **ANXIETY** flickers with lights of **JOY**. She returns to her original position, facing them at the door, lays her hand familiarly upon the **VACUUM CLEANER'S** handle or neck, and speaks: (*singing*), while the **VACUUM CLEANER** hums in accompaniment.

**WIFE:** (*singing*) Watch what you are doing!

Don't make a mess of things!

Where have you been all day?

Go to your room and play!

The **CHILDREN** remain immobile. The boy, makes a momentary faint move with hand or mouth, as though he might speak; This propels the **WIFE** once more into agitated motion, a kind of bizarre dance around the room, around them, and back again as before.

**WIFE:** (*singing*) Do you want something to eat?

The **CHILDREN** lick their lips and she springs **OFF** into the kitchen.

**WIFE:** (*OFF*) (*singing*) All right! I'm coming! All right!

All right! All right! All right!

I'm coming! All right!

(*Enters with cookie jar*) All right!

**WIFE** stuffs cookie after cookie into their mouths, boy, girl, boy, girl, etc. They swallow as fast as they can. She gets an extra cookie into the boy as the girl's swallowing falls behind....

**WIFE:** (*singing*) All right! All right! I'm coming! All right!

(*pause*) All...right....

*WIFE* watches them swallow the last cookies and, as their faces suffuse with dumb contentment, her mask changes from ANXIETY to JOY.

The *CHILDREN* wipe the crumbs from their faces and hands and continue to smile contentedly, still holding their school books. The *WIFE* leaps and dances around them and the room, joyfully, returning to her first position.

*WIFE:* (*singing*) All right! [Silence as *CHILDREN'S* smiles flicker but do not fade.]

Then watch! But I have so many things to do.

Please stay out of my way!

Here!

*She* takes them up by their coat collars, as a cat her kittens, and deposits each on a hook of a coat rack standing in a corner of the room. They dangle there, school books still in hands, their smiles of contentment marred a bit by the strangeness of their physical predicament.

*WIFE* returns to her vacuum cleaner, switches it back on, then as it and the other household sounds mount once more to a raging ocean of sound,

*WIFE:* (*sings*) Busy day!

Busy day!

Every one is such a busy day!

Busy day!

Busy day!

Every one is just a busy day....

*WIFE* runs a down to immobility, looking at the TV screen. The *VACUUM CLEANER'S* sounds subside too; but all the other sounds of the *APPLIANCES* grow in power and variety and run rampant through the room. A LONG TIME passes, quickly.

The light outside the "picture-window" fades.

The door opens again.

The *HUSBAND* enters carrying a briefcase and a mask of *FATIGUE*. *WIFE* springs to life. The other mechanical sounds subside to buzzes and a humm. The *VACUUM CLEANER* returns to life with a welcoming roar and a fresh surge of power, which drown out the few sentences *HUSBAND* has to say upon entering.

*WIFE* darts to him, pecks his cheek, closes the door, darts around the room, back to him, pecks his other cheek, takes his briefcase, *EXITS* with it into bedroom, enters without it, darts to bar, makes *GIANT MARTINI*, darts with it to him, takes his nose in her fingertips, opens his mouth, pours *GIANT MARTINI* into him, watches him swallow and go glassy-eyed. She looks at him lovingly.

**WIFE:** (sings) Darling, you can use a drink.

When you come home from work.

You can always use a drink.

To unwind...to unwind...to unwind...to unwind...

*WIFE* returns to bar, makes another *GIANT MARTINI*, returns to him, feeds him it in the same manner as before, watches lovingly as he turns even more glassy-eyed than before.

**WIFE:** (sings) There! There!

There!

*That's better, dear?*

*Isn't it? Better, dear?*

*There! There?*

*There!*

*WIFE studies him, remembers something, moves up to him, loosens his tie, unbuttons his shirt collar, removes his hat, smooths down his hair, caresses his shoulder, singing:*

*There...?*

*There...?*

*There...?*

**WIFE** rubs against him.

**HUSBAND:** *(responding)* Unng!

**WIFE:** *There...? (pause)* Stop! *(SHE looks around the room)*

*Not before the children...Don't forget our children! Think about... the children (looking around, unable to locate the children who, however, are as before.)*

**HUSBAND:** UNGHHhhh...

**WIFE:** Besides! Wouldn't you like another ....?

*(SHE goes swiftly to bar, pours another GIANT MARTINI, returns, feeds it to him in the same manner as before.)*

*There!*

**HUSBAND:** *(wobbling, caving, straightening, caving)*

*Enhhhh.....*

**WIFE:** *(Helping him to sofa)*

*Hard day. You've had a hard day.*

Hard day. You've had a hard day.

All work and no play means

Mommy's man has had another hard day.

*SHE sits him down on the sofa, he caves, she sits him up, he caves,  
she props him up with pillows*

It's all right! All right! It's all right!

There!

*WIFE looks around, spies the CHILDREN who are staring at them,  
dashes to them*

*(singing)* All right? Is everything all right?

*SHE darts out and returns with more cookies*

*(singing)* If you'd rather not go and play in your room

You may stay and watch.....

*WIFE stuffs more cookies into their mouths.*

But please don't spoil your appetite!

*WIFE goes to the HUSBAND, takes GIANT MARTINI glass from  
him, smiles.*

*You mustn't spoil your appetite either!*

*WIFE exits with glass, returns to VACUUM CLEANER, begins to  
sweep rug. The VACUUM CLEANER and all the other appliances  
roar back to life.*

**WIFE:** *(singing madly above the turbulent ocean of sound)*

Happy day! Happy day!

Every one is such a happy day!

Happy day!

Happy day!

Every one is just.....a happy....day.....

*The WIFE slows ("runs") down, into immobility. The VACUUM CLEANER subsides. The other APPLIANCES rock and roll victoriously about the room.*

*The NEIGHBOR'S WIFE enters.*

*The WIFE snaps back to life, darts to her, then around the room, leaving the VACUUM CLEANER standing, dusting with an oversize feather-duster all the furniture, the walls, doors, window, etc. then returning to original position.*

**WIFE:** Won't you come in!?

Come in!

How very nice to see you.

You're almost like a stranger.

Come in! Won't you come in!

It's been so very long. Let's see.....

**N.W.:** (*drily*) Before lunch. I dropped in before lunch.

**WIFE:** Let me see ....

**N.W.:** To borrow some sugar. We talked 'til.....

**WIFE:** Let me see ....

**N.W.:**... o'clock. Three or four. O'clock.

**WIFE:** How could it have been three ....or four o'clock. You're mixing up today with yesterday... o'clock. O'Clock.

**N.W.:** (*drily*) Yesterday, I dropped in after breakfast.

To try out your electric blender.

We talked 'til five or six...(looking around)

That was yesterday.

**WIFE:** (*flitting around room, dusting, etc.*) Ha! ha!

Oh dear! Ha! ha! Well ....

**N.W.:** Whenever I drop in

We talk 'til three or four.

Or Five

Or six....(*looking around*) o'clock ....o'clock

**WIFE:** What?

**N.W.:** O'Clock. What would my husband say?

**WIFE:** What?

**N.W.:** Yes. What would your husband say? O'Clock.

**WIFE:** I wonder.

**N.W.:** I wonder, too.

**WIFE:** I wonder.

**N.W.:** I wonder .... too.

Two ...O'clock.

Toooo ....(*she stares at HUSBAND, glassy-eyed on the couch*)

O'clock!

**WIFE:** (*following her eyes*)

What in the world did you drop in at this time for,  
Nicole? It's

so

very ....late ....

**N.W.:** (*Staring at HUSBAND*)

I know.

**WIFE:** You know how much I love to stop

And hear you talk.

You shouldn't stay too long, ... Nicole?

**N.W.:** *(staring at HUSBAND)*

I know.

**WIFE:** This time. O'Clock.

**N.W.:** *(as before)*

I know.

**WIFE:** Please don't misunderstand my meaning ...

**N.W.:** *(rising to go, seeing the children, pop-eyed on the coat-rack)*

No. O'clock.

**WIFE:** They're so dear to me. I want to be prepared.

**N.W.:** *(staring at the children) The children! ..... The children!....*

**WIFE:** And don't forget my husband. He'll be home too, soon.  
He'll....be home...soon, too. O'clock. I have to be prepared. *(She starts the VACUUM CLEANER and the other APPLIANCES begin also to come on)*

The children come first

But my husband comes, too.

You see?

Don't you see?

I want to be prepared.

*(stopping abruptly) (leaving the appliances on)*

I wonder where they can be?!

They're home so late from school.

Maybe they're outside playing.

neck)

Excuse me? Excuse me! (*exiting*) But I'd better go out and see.... (*door slams shut of its own will*) (Silence)

**N.W.:** (Staring at the closed door, looking around the room, listening to the appliances, noticing the **VACUUM CLEANER**)

(*to audience*) She must be crazy! (*rising, moving, to sofa*) O'clock.

(*sitting down beside HUSBAND who, as before, smiles glassy-eyed at all and nothing*)

HELLO....

I think your wife must be crazy. O'clock. O'clock.

Running out on you this way. O'clock.

I think your wife must be crazy....

Hello....(*He doesn't change countenance: she seizes his shoulders, tips him towards her, and kisses his lips, passionately*).

I know how long you've been waiting to do that, to me  
How long. Too long. I saw how you were watching me  
...so long.

Through my window. For so long. (Silence)

She can't satisfy you, can she? (*seizing and kissing him again, more frequently and passionately*) (Pause)

You're not like all the other men, here, around here.

All the other men around here ...aren't men at all.

They all look exactly the same, no matter what's their

name.

Horn-rimmed glasses and a gray-flannel suit.

Smily-mouth and glassy-eyed, too.

You're...different! (*she kisses him again and removes his coat and shirt*) (*The **VACUUM CLEANER** revs up.*)

What's different about you is ...brains...(kisses him)

I like a man who can ....think and see.....(*she unbuckles his belt*).... and starts to remove his trousers) (*the **VACUUM CLEANER** is running amuck*)

I like a man ....who's a MAN....(*she pulls down his trousers so that he sits wearing only underwear and shoes and gartered socks*)....

(*The **CHILDREN'S** eyes pop out unbelievably*)

With a big DICK...for me.....oh! (*she has found his tiny dick*)

*The **VACUUM CLEANER** subsides with an uncharacteristic whistle, but the other **APPLIANCES** run and grind and whirl and tumble and girate and scream raucously, as the **WIFE** re-enters:*

**WIFE:** Dear, oh dear! Dear, oh dear!

Where in the world can the children be?!

(*spotting children*) Oh!

(*Rushing to them kissing their faces*)

There you both are! I almost forgot!

**N.W.:** (*swiftly re-making her face: new lipstick, powder, eyebrow pencil, mascara*) Excuse me... Excuse me ....I didn't look....

I didn't.....see

**WIFE:** *(to the children)* How you were!

What love was all about!

*She hugs them lovingly and the CHILDREN start to scream, hideously, piteously, as if all the horror that they have seen was only now felt. Their screams encourage further heroic efforts from the APPLIANCES; and the VACUUM CLEANER starts to huff and puff. The screams subside.*

*The NEIGHBOR's WIFE rises from the sofa, straightens her clothes, straightens up the HUSBAND, on the sofa, kicking his outer clothes underneath the sofa and starts to leave.*

**N.W.:** So nice to see you!

Too bad. Too bad.

Maybe they are hungry.!

*I think he could use some sleep. (exits) (off)*

*Too bad. I'll drop in again soon. Too bad.*

*I'll be seeing ... or hearing .... from you...soon...*

**WIFE:** *(taking the CHILDREN down from their hooks, carrying them, whimpering OFF into a BEDROOM)*

*(Off)* Don't cry, my darlings!

Brave children don't cry

Please don't cry my darlings

Tomorrow brings a brighter day....

*The APPLIANCES quiet down. the HUSBAND remains as before, seated in his underwear, glassy-eyed, his face now smeared with red. There is a long silence. Then the WIFE enters, very slowly, stops,*

*look at her HUSBAND.*

**WIFE:** Hello.

I almost didn't see...you.

Hello.

*The HUSBAND topples over onto the floor*

**WIFE:** You've been drinking again, haven't you.

Oh Tom, you've been drinking so much again,

Haven't you!

Trying to unwind.

We know you're only trying to unwind...but.....

*SHE takes him by the feet and draws him gently OFF into the other bedroom.*

**WIFE:** (Off) Silly day.

Silly day

Every day is just a silly day.

Silly day.

Silly ....day ....

DIM OUT