

On Clarion

by

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Characters.

Curtie Larson, a boy

Margaret Ward

Ray Berman

Vivien Swanson

Bill Swanson

Becky Roberts

Dave Roberts

Margaret, Vivien and Bill are in their thirties. Ray, in his forties. Becky and Dave are in their early twenties.

Setting.

1954. Early September through December 21st. A suburban tract house, planted precariously somewhere on the planet earth in a sea of stars and planets. This is Margaret Ward's home. A kitchen, a living room, a back yard including the wall and roof of a garage and a section of the roof of the house.

I am indebted to the sociologists Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter for the true story upon which 'On Clarion' is very loosely based.

Author's note. The author envisions a fantastic stylized 1950's world in which images of squeaky clean American television wholeness are banged up against the images of catastrophe. Pretty and clean 50's people who look and act like they have stepped off of an advertising poster or out of a television set are feeling and thinking and doing rather odd things in this play—other-worldly things, while engaged in the mundane—now reproduced as nostalgia--pursuits of people of that era—baking cakes, selling things door-to-door, etc. The dark humor strived for in the play comes from this odd juxtaposition. The tragedy and hope in the play, from their yearning for an escape.

Scene One

Before the lights come up, a popular tune of the day is heard, “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” as performed by Frankie Lane, for example. And then, suddenly, the sound of an atomic explosion. Lights up on Margaret Ward’s kitchen, mid-afternoon. Margaret is making a cake. Curtie Larson sits at the table. Margaret Ward is an intense and intensely charismatic woman who also happens to be a knock-out. Curtie is a boy of around nine.

CURTIE

Tell me again about the visitors, Margaret.

MARGARET

They’ll be here soon.

CURTIE

(imitating an expression he has heard from Margaret) Any time!

MARGARET

That’s right, Curtie. They’re on their way. The visitors’ll be here any time!

(A long pause. Margaret busies herself with her cake preparations. Curtie eats his snack, but seems preoccupied.)

CURTIE

Do they want to hurt us?

MARGARET

(stopping) God, no. Who said so?

CURTIE

Kids.

MARGARET

They want to save us, hon.

CURTIE

What from?

MARGARET

From ourselves.

(a pause, she continues her work)

(casually) And the catastrophe, of course.

CURTIE

Tell me about the catastrophe again!

MARGARET

It's something big and bad. I told you that.

(She holds up a beater covered in cake batter)

Who gets to lick the beater?

CURTIE

I do, I do!

(Margaret hands the beater to Curtie. He licks it through the following.)

Is it scary?

MARGARET

Very.

CURTIE

Will people die?

MARGARET

Oh, many. But it won't hurt you. They told me so.

CURTIE

Why do they talk to you, Margaret?

MARGARET

I don't know. Maybe because I like to talk.

CURTIE

I like to talk, too.

MARGARET

I know you do.

(They laugh.)

And because I listen. Most people don't listen.

CURTIE

Why not? Why don't they listen?

MARGARET

They're not ready.

CURTIE

I'm ready!

MARGARET

I know you are. They're not ready to hear.

CURTIE

Have you seen one?

MARGARET

Not in person. Well, I mean, they're everywhere. But they don't identify themselves as such.

(a pause, she stops)

But I'm sure they'll pay us a visit.

CURTIE

Are they afraid, Margaret?

MARGARET

I think they're waiting, hon.

CURTIE

What for?

MARGARET

For orders. Just like us. Plus. They're shy.

CURTIE

I'm shy.

MARGARET

Are you, Curtie? Not with me.

(They laugh. There is a pause.)

(seriously) They'll come to inform us when we're leaving.

CURTIE

Tell me again, what it's like on the ship.

(Margaret comes and sits with him at the table. She clearly relishes this part.)

MARGARET

Well, it looks simple on the outside. Just flat and white.

CURTIE

And big?

MARGARET

Big?! Inside it's as infinite as space, and there's nothing like time.

(CURTIE knows this part.)

CURTIE

'No watches. No clocks.'

MARGARET

The air is thick like the sea and turquoise blue. But weightless, so you float and somersault.

(CURTIE gets up and somersaults across the kitchen floor.)

CURTIE

Like this?!

MARGARET

Like that.

CURTIE

And how long does the journey take?

MARGARET

As soon as you think it, you're already there. Was it a month, an hour, a year? Was it your whole life? See thinking stops and speeds up all at once. You are passing through forever. In the blink of an eye.

(more to herself, now, than to him)

It's strange on the ship. But you feel as safe as in your mother's arms. The light is dusk and dawn rolled into one.

CURTIE

What can you see out the windows, Margaret?

MARGARET

(a little annoyed) There are no windows, Curtie. I told you that. The landscape lies behind your eyes.

(more to herself again)

There are shimmering planets spinning like dancers and stars bursting forth like fireworks and forests of roses as tall as skyscrapers and mountain ranges covered in marigolds and astral butterflies.

CURTIE

Are there horses?

MARGARET

(a pause) Sure, hon.

You can't sleep. It's all too beautiful. And yet, you are completely rested. You have passed through the barriers of sorrow and fear.

End of scene.

Scene Two

One Week Later. The living room. Margaret sits and listens while Ray Berman, the vacuum cleaner salesman, makes his pitch. There is something, well, a little different about him.

RAY

You're asking *me* why you need a new vacuum cleaner? 'Why not?' as the rabbi said to the preacher's daughter. You need reasons. Reasons she needs! I'll give you reasons. I've got every size reason. I've got conclusions, insights, reckonings and revelations. I've got orders from above!

MARGARET

(sitting up) Orders from above . . . ?

RAY

That's right. But seriously, why this vacuum cleaner? Now? And no other?

(He pauses and awaits her answer with dramatic effect. She shrugs, unable to answer.)

Because. It sucks. It sucks up everything in sight. It sucks its own path. It sucks up particles and minerals. Tubular roots and carpuscles. And it doesn't stop there. It sucks up evil thoughts, resistant sticks of goodge and holtis-pulter. It sucks the too-good, too-bad, the Chicago blues right out of you.

It starts humming and then its buzzing, blurting, wailing its way up your armchairs, and down your downstairs, back roads, closets, broken fences.

If it moves, it sucks it; if it jimmies, it sucks it; if it lays low, quiet as a mouse, it finds it and it sucks it. Trackles it with six foot razors into a pulsing mish-mash of uranium and hydrogen. Don't you think to get in its way. It won't stop. It can never stop. It can never never never. Don't think you can turn it off. It's on now. It's on before the switch. Before the first cry of the first wolf.

It sucks and slices and churns and spews. And chucks the world onto a silver platter in front of you. But it doesn't stop there. Oh, no. It doesn't stop until it is satisfied. And by then, nothing is left. *Nothing.*

And now it is time for a demonstration.

(filling two cups with sand and handing one to Margaret)

Dump it.

RAY (cont.)

(She hesitates.)

Go on! Dump it!

MARGARET

Alright.

(She sprinkles a bit, tentatively in one spot. He joins her, strewing piles of sand all over the living room, decisively, and then turning to her.)

RAY

Ready?

MARGARET

I guess.

(RAY switches on the “Constellation” model Hoover which resembles nothing so much as a spaceship and begins to vacuum. Very quickly it begins to whiz, wheeze, wail, spark, flicker, and then, with a little explosion, to die. Ray studies it, sighs, shakes his head.)

Don't worry, I'll fetch my Electrolux.

(Margaret fetches her sleek Electrolux XXX from the cupboard and proceeds to switch it on and easily begins to vacuum. Far from being disappointed by this turn of events, Ray observes her with interest and pleasure of a carnal nature. She stops, looking around.)

RAY

You missed a spot! There, under the cupboard!

(She turns her back on him, vacuuming under the cupboard with some difficulty—bending and twisting. She turns toward him again for approval, and again, appearing to survey the situation seriously, he gestures her to another place behind her.)

Over there ...?

(She turns from him and finishes the job as he watches her in motion from behind with great pleasure. Eventually, she stops. Straightens up, sighs, holds her back, and turns off the machine.)

MARGARET

(studying him) You don't know a lot about vacuum cleaning. For a vacuum cleaner salesman.

(A pause. He shrugs goodnatureedly.)

You dumped too much.

RAY

My hand was shaking.

MARGARET

Would you like a coffee?

RAY

Have you got a beer?

MARGARET

Sure, I've got a beer.

(She moves into the kitchen and gets him a beer, coming back with it, and sitting across from him.)

My husband drank beer.

RAY

(perking up) *Drank . . .* beer?

MARGARET

That's right.

MARGARET (cont.)

(studying him)

You never learned how to use a vacuum cleaner?

RAY

(taking his first sip) Thanks for this. (He takes a long chug.) The problem is, it's a new model.

(She observes him awhile while he drinks, seemingly confirming something in her mind.)

MARGARET

Maybe you were sent here for some other reason.

RAY

(charmed and charming) Possibly.

MARGARET

You're not from around here?

RAY

Just paying a visit.

MARGARET

A visit . . . ?

RAY

That's what I do.

MARGARET

A visitor. From somewhere else . . .

RAY

Honestly, I'm not from anywhere. Not anymore . . .

MARGARET

Have we met before?

RAY

I don't think so. I would have remembered *you*, that's for sure.

MARGARET

(shrugs) Maybe I dreamed it.

RAY

Was it a nightmare?

MARGARET

It's only a feeling . . .

RAY

A feeling?

MARGARET

That we've met.

RAY

Well, we could meet again . . .!

MARGARET

(quickly) Do you believe in the end of the world?

RAY

Why, sure. Doesn't everyone?

MARGARET

Well, some are skeptical.

RAY

We've gone and built the H-bomb. Why else but to get the job done? In one big bang.

MARGARET

People just don't understand what's in store for them.

RAY

They must not read the papers.

MARGARET

They think the world's a safe place to curl up in.

RAY

Put their feet up and stay awhile . . .

MARGARET

. . . in front of their new television.

(pause)

They think we're at peace now.

RAY

The good life! Brought to you by TV Guide!

MARGARET

While our so-called leaders lead a war against the planet.

RAY

You said it.

MARGARET

(meaningfully) The planet earth is sending out a *clarion* call. Can you hear it?

RAY

(unsure) Sure, I can.

MARGARET

I thought so. And some of us sincerely believe we know . . .

RAY

Right . . .

MARGARET

. . . our time here is ending. We just don't know when yet.

(She seems to be waiting for a response but he offers none.)

We're waiting to hear.

(She waits, no response.)

It's just a matter of time. We've been forewarned. Alerted. To be open. And ready. For orders.

(She looks at him.)

End of scene.

Scene Three

The next day. Margaret and Vivien Swanson are having coffee and cake at the kitchen table. Vivien may be a bleached blonde ala Marilyn Monroe, and share her dizzy warm-hearted persona, but like her, she has untapped inner strengths.

VIVIEN

Bill chose blue.

MARGARET

What shade?

VIVIEN

Sky. Sky blue.

MARGARET

And what do you think?

VIVIEN

. . . I don't know.

(a pause. She waits for Margaret, but Margaret says nothing.)

What do *you* think?

MARGARET

What do *you* think? I'm asking *you*.

(a pause. Vivien sighs, shrugs.)

VIVIEN

We were standing with the salesman at the paint store counter. And the two of them. They were talking shop. And I was just about to say, 'I like lemon . . . '

(Vivien waits for a reaction from Margaret, receiving none she continues.)

VIVIEN

But I didn't. I let them decide. They talked so fast and . . .

(no response)

then I wasn't sure--

MARGARET

Lemon?

VIVIEN

Lemon yellow.

MARGARET

For the bedroom?

VIVIEN

You're right.

MARGARET

I'm right?

VIVIEN

Lemon . . . for the bedroom . . . I don't know.

(pause)

(desperately) What do *you* think?

MARGARET

(solemnly, putting down her fork.) Vivien. Is there anything about which you have an opinion?

MARGARET (cont.)

(She waits. Vivien says nothing.)

You have to look at those walls. Day in. Day out.

VIVIEN

What's the use? Bill will be Bill.

MARGARET

That's it in a nutshell. In particular and general. Bills will be Bills. And humans will be human.

(Vivien doesn't answer. Instead she eats her cake.)

And that's why we're doomed. There's been no evolution.

(a pause. Margaret waits.)

VIVIEN

You're a demanding woman.

MARGARET

I'm just hopeful. That somewhere else. They have reached the next level. Or the next one hundred levels.

VIVIEN

It would just kill me if you found a new secretary.

(Margaret shakes her head and observes Vivien with something like fond exasperation.)

MARGARET

I'm hopeful for us *all*.

And besides. I've had a visitor.

A visitor!

VIVEN

Time's short. It's running out.

MARGARET

(desperate) Cake's scrumptious.

VIVIEN

I think it's dry.

MARGARET

Well, it could be a little moister.

VIVIEN

You know, when they come.

MARGARET

Yeah?

VIVIEN

They won't take dummies.

MARGARET

They won't?

VIVIEN

There's no room on the ship. They'll want opinions. They'll need ideas.

MARGARET

VIVIEN

Maybe I don't have any, Margaret.

MARGARET

Of course, you do. It just takes practice.

Opinions and thoughts don't form just so. First off, you have to be prepared for them. Prepare your mind to receive them. Your mind's, well, dusty. And cluttered. And grimey. And greasy. And spotted. And smudged. And—

VIVIEN

--smudged?!

MARGARET

Well, it needs a good housecleaning. And only then, can you begin to use your inner knowing.

VIVIEN

My inner knowing . . . ?

MARGARET

(thinks a moment)

Get up.

(Margaret takes Vivien's hand and leads her to the kitchen door)

(demonstrates the following) You enter the kitchen. You stop. You take it in. You see what's there and what needs to be done. You grab a Brillo pad. (Vivien grabs a Brillo pad.) You scrub that counter clean. (Vivien scrubs the counter clean.) You take the trash out. --

VIVIEN

Bill takes the trash out.

MARGARET

Alright, alright. But you see what I mean. The trash gets taken out. But all of this inside your head. You understand?

VIVIEN

(shaking her head, yes) Sort of.

MARGARET

You enter a conversation like you enter your kitchen. You enter a problem like you enter your kitchen. You enter. You look around. You scrub clean. And *then* your mind is ready to think.

VIVIEN

You enter. You look around. You scrub clean. And *then* you think.

MARGARET

You don't give up before you start. You don't ask anyone else for help. And you never, never ever say 'I don't know.'

VIVEN

You never, never ever say 'I don't know.'

MARGARET

You . . .

TOGETHER

Enter, look around, scrub clean, and then you think.

MARGARET

And then your mind begins to work! And sometimes quickly, sometimes more slowly, a knowing emerges.

VIVIEN

A 'knowing'.

MARGARET

Sometimes it comes as an answer, sometimes as a picture, sometimes as a question. It's fun, hon.

(Suddenly, Margaret seems as if a little tremor has gone through her. Her head falls back. Her eyes drift up in her head.)

VIVIEN

Margaret? Margaret? What is it? Are you . . .? Are they . . .? Shall I take it down?

(Margaret nods her head, yes. Vivien rushes to a typewriter.)

Okay, got it. Just a sec. Just a sec . . .

(She fumbles nervously, getting the paper in. She waits, holding her breath with the enormity of her task. Margaret takes in a deep sudden breath of air and lets out a deep gasp.)

MARGARET

(speaking in a hushed rushed deep other-worldly voice)

“Your atomic bombs have broken the barrier and now we can enter . . .”

(The typewriter's “ding” is heard, punctuating the last word of the phrase. A pause. Margaret draws a startled breath. Then her head lulls back and her eyes drift up and she speaks again in the deep rushed voice.)

“though there are millions of years difference between our cultures. . . .”

(Typewriter ding. Again she returns temporarily to herself, even looking at Vivien for reassurance, but very soon, her head flies back as if blown by a strong wind and she speaks again in the voice.)

“Yours is the only planet left with war and hatred, but you are coming to the end of the age of darkness.”

(Typewriter ding. A pause, she is struggling, and then more comes flowing out)

“The scientists have already blown up the planet, Loris, causing disturbances in every universe. (ding) While the forces of light retreated to Clarion. (ding) And the cycle repeats itself today with your construction of even greater weapons (ding) The earth is still in lethargy. (ding) It does not want to awaken. (ding) It cannot prevent the coming destruction.

(Typewriter ding. A pause, she struggles)

Instructors from Clarion have been sent to prepare you . . .

(Typewriter ding. A pause, again she is struggling, and then more comes flowing out)

“This is Sananda.—“

VIVIEN

(repeating, in an awed whisper) *Sananda* . . . !

MARGARET

“Yes, it is I who speak through you. (typewriter ding) Be patient. Do not let yourself be misunderstood. (ding) You can’t explain the prophecy to those who are not ready. (ding) But share all with those are sent to your house. (ding) Orders will follow any day . . . “

(Margaret’s head jerks back and then forward and then swings from side to side, she crumples forward in her chair. The typewriter produces one last “ding”. Vivien waits.)

End of scene.

Scene Four

The following week. Ray and Margaret sit together in the living room. Ray is wearing a new suit. A beer sits on the coffee table in front of Bill.

MARGARET

Why did you become a drinker, Ray?

RAY

No one's ever asked me that before. (thinking) Nothing I wanted ever came my way.

MARGARET

Like what?

RAY

Oh, like . . . success! A Cadillac Convertible. Kids and wife safe at home. A home. Happy faces 'round a dinner table. A fat stuffed turkey with the trimmings in the middle. So I quit. Like a big old baby.

MARGARET

Quit what?

RAY

Believing. Pretending. I quit believing. And then, after a while, I quit pretending to believe.

MARGARET

What's it like to take that first sip of beer?

RAY

It's . . . clarifying.

MARGARET

Like a knowing . . .

RAY

You've got something.

MARGARET

Despite everything?

RAY

That's it.

MARGARET

It must be a wonderful thing. To be a drinker.

RAY

(suddenly made proud, somehow) Well, everyone has something.

MARGARET

Do they, Ray?

RAY

That makes them feel good.

MARGARET

And without the beer, what's it like then?

RAY

Then, I'm not human.

MARGARET

You feel alien?

RAY

Then my mind begins to torment me and I wonder why, why don't I feel the things I'm supposed to?

MARGARET

Which things?

RAY

Oh, alive. In the thick of it. Part and parcel of it.

(a pause)

Attached . . .

MARGARET

To the world?

RAY

I feel like another species entirely. Like I'm from another planet.

MARGARET

I see . . .

RAY

But if I were, I guess I would know it.

MARGARET

You haven't drunk your beer yet.

RAY

No.

MARGARET

You're not thirsty?

RAY

I guess I was feeling good just now. Without it.

MARGARET

Now why would that be?

RAY

This is a beautiful planet. Because someone like you lives on it.

(a pause)

MARGARET

Have you ever thought, Ray, how some things just don't sit right?

RAY

Where?

MARGARET

Here. On earth.

RAY

I keep my distance from thoughts like that. I try to forget I'm even here.

MARGARET

But that's because you're different from the rest.

RAY

I may be worse than most. In that I once thought of being a writer. What kind of a human wants to be a thing like that? Otherwise, I'm like every other loser on the planet.

MARGARET

There, you hit the nail on the head. It just doesn't sit right. Winners and losers. Take a look at the so-called winners. Just look at the harm they've done. Such a beautiful planet and the winners have lost it for us. You're not a loser, Ray.

(a pause)

Do you remember the day you were born?

RAY

No, Margaret, I don't. Why?

MARGARET

How far do you remember back?

RAY

I hardly remember what I did yesterday.

(pause)

I have a very shaky memory. Margaret—

MARGARET

Maybe you weren't born here at all.

(Margaret crosses to the front door. She locks it deliberately. She turns and faces Ray.)

(pause)

I feel safe with you.

RAY

You wouldn't happen to feel anything else would you?

MARGARET

Sure.

Safe and *sure*. You say you're not human. You say you don't belong. That's right. You don't. I know that. Looking down from there. You view it all so differently.

(pause)

Why did you come?

RAY

Come . . . ?

MARGARET

Why did you come here, Ray? Why were you sent?

RAY

Sent?

MARGARET

You needn't hide it from me.

RAY

(wanting to get it right) Sent?

MARGARET

From Clarion.

RAY

Clarion

MARGARET

Aren't you a visitor? From upstairs? I know the ship is waiting at the port.

Ray?

RAY

If you were right—

MARGARET

If I *were* right (she winks at him). What then?

RAY

Then...

MARGARET

--I know. You're not allowed to say.

RAY

(feeling his way) No . . .

MARGARET

But isn't it time?

RAY

(searching) Time?

MARGARET

For orders! Ray?

RAY

Well

MARGARET

Or not quite yet?

RAY

I—

MARGARET

I know. You couldn't say.

RAY

I—

MARGARET

(serenely) We just have to be patient.

(She opens the door.)

I won't see you again.

(Ray stands, takes a full glass of beer and drains it.)

until . . . *then*.

(Ray crosses to the door. He stops.)

RAY

I am not from another planet. I've never heard of Clarion. I'm not a spaceman. I'm an earthman. As human as they come. I've been violent. Robbed people. Done my time for it. Destroyed my home. Hurt my wife. My child. And now the violence is spent. That's all you're seeing. I'm a spent weapon. And a failure and a drinker. And I'm lonely as hell. I sell vacuum cleaners to frustrated housewives and yes, occasionally, we have ended up in bed. Which is where I spread my peacock feathers. There may be another planet with intelligence on it. Margaret. But if so, I know nothing about it. I believe in the power of beer. And the almighty dollar. I hate life and all it stands for.

(She studies him, smiles)

MARGARET

'Til then.

End of scene.

TO READ THE WHOLE PLAY AND FOR ANY OTHER INQUIRES,
PLEASE CONTACT info@lydiastryk.com

