

This Enchanted World

People are gathered on a balcony, looking down.

Lucy I'm going to give it a go.
Harold It's not safe. It's full of queers and pervs ...
Jackson ... and gang fights, the mafia pushing drugs ...
Lesley Don't forget wars. I can count three, and that's in a quarter of the globe!
Lucy You think I'm spending eternity up here?
Trudy It's safe. There's never been a war up here.
Neville There's never been anything up here. We should go down.
Lucy That makes two of us. Anyone else? Come on now ...
Russell We could send an advance party. They'd report back before we made up our minds.
Jackson That's a good idea.
Mal (counting) There's ten of us. Who's willing to go?

The group shuffles awkwardly away from the steps leading down, though Lucy remains firm.

Nance I'd like to know more about it.
Beth Oh Nance, we've been looking down for years!
Nance So?
Beth Can't you make up your mind?
Nance I can.
Beth And what did you decide?

Nance I think it's a good idea to send a party down.
Russell Those who go, come back and tell the rest what it's like.
Lucy We already know ...
Trudy ... don't we?
Harold My answer's no. I'm staying where I am.
Lucy Well, I'm going down, right now! Neville? Mal? (These two move reluctantly towards her.) These steps go straight down.
Beth (restraining the two men) Don't do it! You'll pass through the memory loss zone. You'll forget who you are.
Mal That's a risk we've got to take.
Neville We'll pass through it on the way up. We'll know you next time we see you.
Nance That's what they all say! We don't want to lose you but you're tearing yourselves away.
Lucy I'm not sticking around to listen. I'm off. World, here I come!
Mal (to Neville) Keep back a bit. Let her go on ahead.
Neville Only too willing. What was that?
Lucy (as if shocked) Aaaaaaaahhh!
Beth (calling down) Lucy! Lucy? She doesn't know who she is any more.
Lucy (far below, and vaguely) Aaaaaaaahhh ...

Trudy She's lost her mind.
Neville It'll come back to her when she gets up here again.
Jackson She won't be able to find the way. That'll be the
 problem.
Neville (to Mal) What do you say? Are you ready to go on?
Mal Ready as I'll ever be. Down we go.

The two of them clatter down the steps. Those remaining look from the balcony to follow the movements of the three making their way down.

Beth I feel a bit guilty about not going with them.

There is a pause, and then we hear sobbing cries from Mal & Neville as they pass through the memory-loss zone.

M & N Oooooohhh ... oooooh ... oooh ...
Nance I told you we should stay here.
Lucy (also sobbing, and sounding rather mad)
 Oooooooooohhh ...
Nance See what I mean.
Jackson How long till we hear from them? It could be years.
Russell Let's play cards.

The remaining seven seat themselves at a table and cards are dealt. The game goes on quietly for a few moments, then we hear a burst of machine gun fire.

Harold Just the usual. Nothing to do with our friends.
Trudy They've got mobile phones down there these days.
 They might be able to get a message to us.

Lesley We mightn't understand.
Trudy We might understand only too well.

The card playing goes on.

Nance Will they stick together, or will they split up? Lucy's
 such an individualist. Has to do things on her own!

Beth So?

Nance It's dangerous down there! She'll need the men to
 protect her.

Trudy Oh Nance! Don't be so old-fashioned.

Nance You don't get a choice about where you're born, you
 know. The gates open and there you are.

Jackson Black, white, brindle. Rich or poor. Eskimo or New
 Yorker ...

Russell If that was my choice, I'd go for being an Eskimo.
 After nine eleven!

Lesley You don't get a choice. That's why we're worried.

There is a terrible scream, as if someone is having his throat cut. The group rush to the railings and look down. They can see nothing. Their eyes turn to each other.

Harold I know it's silly, but it did sound like ...

Russell It did ...

Lesley It was ...

All Mal!

They digest this horrible thought.

Beth They'll send him back here.

Nance He won't know what happened.
 Jackson He'll sit there with a blank look on his face ...
 Trudy ... not saying a thing.
 Harold Do you think we should go down ... to see?
 Nance Perhaps we should.
 Beth We didn't go before, but ...
 Jackson If only we could get down and back without losing our memory.
 Russell I wondered if you knew. There's another set of stairs.
 Others What?
 Russell Never used except by management. Over there, behind that cloud. Nothing grand. Longer and slower, but safe ...
 Nance What are we waiting for?
 Russell Follow me!

And they do. The seven who didn't go to earth the first time go down the stairs hidden by cloud. We hear the clattering of their feet, then silence, apart from intermittent explosions, upheavals and gunfire. After a few moments we see Mal stagger up the front stairs, heavily bandaged, the bandages stained with blood. He sits at the card table, moaning quietly.

Mal Oooooooooohhh ...

Lesley returns.

Lesley I chickened out. (seeing the wounded Mal) Mal, it was you.

Mal Oooooooooohhh ...
 Lesley What happened? (He says nothing.) Someone else? (We hear Commendatore-style steps coming back up the stairs, then we see Neville, carrying his head.) Put it back on, Neville. You can't walk around like that.

Neville puts his head back on.

Neville Mmmmmmmmm ...

Lesley What happened to you? Quick, before you forget everything. Quick!

Neville I was born in Rwanda. My mother had me lying on the grass. Then a truck drove up, full of men waving guns. And machetes. Men, or so they think. Then ... I forget ...

Lesley Quick! Before you lose it. What happened?

Neville This big buck grabbed me. He held me out with his left arm and with his right he swung his machete. Next thing I knew, I was coming back. Probably a record ...

Lesley ... for the shortest stay ever! Not to mention the nastiest. Did they kill your mother?

Neville They were raping her when I left.

Lesley Sit down. I'll get you a drink.

Neville I don't want anything.

He too sits at the table and goes into a trance, murmuring occasionally but saying nothing. Memory loss is mercifully affecting him.

Lesley (thinking) That was the screaming we heard. What about the shots? (We hear more footsteps coming back up to the balcony.) Who is it this time? (Beth appears. She stands in a self-dramatising pose, by the rail, looking down.)

Beth That's the last time I ever go down there.

Lesley Was it bad?

Beth It's not fair. Nobody gets a chance.

Lesley What happened? What did you see?

Beth The whole system's rigged. Unless you get a good start, you haven't got a chance.

Lesley Did you see any of the others? The ones that left when you left?

Beth My mother died in the street. Her sisters picked me up. The men said to leave me, sons were better, but someone carried me home. I lasted a year or two, then I died of starvation.

Lesley Can you remember ...

Beth I don't want to remember. The memory loss isn't working properly.

Lesley It takes a while to cut in, sometimes. Quick, before you lose it, tell me more.

Beth My mother's sister took me to a doctor and he shouted at her for wasting his time. Give her food, you fool, not medicine. There was no food anywhere. I'm getting weak ...

She staggers; Lesley sits her at the table between Max and Neville.

Lesley There. (She pats Beth on the shoulder and looks at the wrecked people at the table.) Three of them. We'll be back playing cards at this rate. (Then she listens, hearing sounds of someone else returning.) Who's this going to be?

Jackson appears from the back staircase, and walks to the table.

Jackson (sitting) Don't look too good, do they.

Lesley Three disasters so far. What about you?

Jackson Born to wealth. Everything went my way till the kids grew up. Mixed with the wrong crowd, couldn't be restrained. They told me I was laughable. I paid their debts, I paid out millions in legal fees to keep them out of jail, so what did they do? They started to suicide on me. My son! My daughter! I had to bury them, and pay to do it! Pay! I ask you? Is that why we're put on earth?

Lesley Nobody knows why we're put on earth. I didn't go, if you noticed.

Jackson The only one with any sense. How come I know all this? Why isn't the memory loss working?

Lesley You came up the other stairs. If you want to forget, you'll have to go down and come up again. Remember?

Jackson I remember. (vehemently) Bugger it, I remember, and I don't want to!

Lesley If you do as I say, you can be like your mates at the table. Clueless.

Jackson (glancing around) No idea what happened to them.
Lesley How do you feel about that?
Jackson Zombies. I'd rather be ...
Lesley ... dead. That's the choice. Dead in the brain, or dead dead dead. (She thinks.) I'd settle for a few more options.

They listen, and we see Trudy coming up the stairs of forgetfulness. Lesley leads her to the table.

Lesley Sit down and tell us all about it. What happened to you, down there?
Trudy (vaguely) I've been here before. I've got a feeling I know these people, and yes, this table, I do!
Jackson Tell us your story, Trudy. That was your name, as I recall.
Trudy Trudy? Yes, it was. Fancy someone remembering. My story? I left it down there, at the bottom of those stairs. I wanted to tell everyone up here, but it seemed to slip through my fingers. At the bottom of the staircase, I knew it all, but I took a step, and it was as if the life of me was flowing through my feet. I took another step and I could feel all my memories flowing into the fabric I was wearing, and into the steps. I looked at my feet and it was as if I was walking away from my life. I took another step and my mind was blank. Just a few scraps of memory, nothing that mattered, then one more step and it was all gone. Gone gone gone!

Jackson So you're not Trudy any more. Just the memory of Trudy, except she hasn't got any memory. We can call you She Who Was Trudy. One of the has-beens about the place.

Lesley We're all going to be has-beens one day.

Jackson Going to be? My dear, we *are* has-beens! We're the very embodiment of those words. We have been, and we are never going to be again!

Lesley It's not as bad as that.

Jackson No? Well, listen. (He refers to more steps coming up the stairs of forgetfulness. Russell appears.) Introduce yourself.

Russell smiles, and pulls out a cigar.

Russell This is who I am. Share my identity. Go on, have a puff. I did well, no reason why you shouldn't have a bit with me. (He looks at the people seated at the table.) Not everybody had it so good.

Jackson Some of them had it rather worse.

Russell Maybe next time, for them. Luck's never been equally allocated, you know.

Lesley That's the pain of it, isn't it.

Russell No, you're wrong about that. There's plenty of pain in the world, and it's good to be back ... (He looks vaguely about him, as if he doesn't quite understand what he said.) Nobody gets luck handed to them, in a nicely wrapped parcel. Luck has to be made. If you want a fortune, you have to locate it first, then get

your hands on it, which means getting other people's hands off. Can be struggles. And let me tell you something about those struggles. That's where many people think they've won, and then they discover that they've lost. Lost! Because in the struggle they lose the ability to enjoy whatever it is they're fighting for. Winning is in the mind, and the last part of winning is winning the win, if you see what I mean? I mean you have to still feel good about what you've done, even when your opponent's on the floor and you're picking up the things he was after. Here, I'm talking too much. (He sits at the table.) How's the service these days? Or do I have to get up and pour for myself?

Lesley (giving him a whiskey) Let me do that for you. Russell.

Russell That name sounds familiar. Maybe it was mine. I'm forgetting. My head's been funny since I started back. I scrambled up, quick as I could, because I knew it was affecting me, but maybe I lost a bit of my mind down there, I can't be sure ...

He becomes vague and does little more thereafter but sip his drink.

Jackson (looking around in disgust) Talkative lot!

Lesley We're stuck with them.

Jackson What happened to Lucy, I wonder.

Lesley First to go, last to come back, that's what I'm betting.

Jackson (listening to footsteps) Who's this? (Nance appears on the stairs of forgetfulness.) Oh oh, she's come up through the zone. Mind's a blank.

Lesley We might get a bit out of her. It takes a while, sometimes.

Jackson What happened, Nance? Tell us all about it.

Nance I wrote poems, but they've slipped away. I spent a lot of time in the forest, but I forget where it was. I made love with a lot of men but I don't remember who they were.

Lesley Was that part of your plan when you went down?

Nance Huh?

Lesley To sleep with lots of men?

Nance No. I was never like that before. I won't be like it again. But when I got to earth, they were all singing ... I remember, 'The times they are a'changing.' That's what everyone was singing, and they lived by it. At the start of the night you'd go to one bed, and in the morning, you'd get out of another.

Jackson Any one better than any other, that you recall?

Nance Don't look at me like that. It's most unlike me to carry on that way!

Lesley He wasn't being unkind, darling, only curious.

Nance I've forgotten so much, I don't really know what I did.

Jackson You're a candidate for a good strong drink!
 Nance (sitting at the table) No, I had too much of that. Water's pure. That's the only drink for me. (Lesley puts a glass of water in front of her.)
 Jackson Purified on earth, she drinks water in heaven! That's how it's meant to be!
 Lesley Here's Harold.
 Harold returns, decisively enough, and again, coming up the steps of forgetfulness.
 Jackson (probably bored) Spill the story, Harold!
 Harold There's nothing to tell.
 Jackson Well, tell it quickly before you forget.
 Harold Forget what?
 Jackson Oh Jeezus! Before you forget what happened. Down there! On earth, where it's all supposed to happen.
 Harold Why are you looking at me? Am I supposed to tell you a story, or something?
 Lesley Nobody knows how many times we've been on earth. Every time we go down, the previous time slips out of our minds. We only know the little bits we can remember when we get back up again. And that's not much. They wipe it out of us. There's a special zone where everything fades.
 Harold That reminds me. On the stairs, there was a smiling man. He looked into my eyes and I could feel my memory going. I tried to hang on, but I knew I was losing it. I knew I had to stop him, because he was

stealing whatever I had in my mind. So I kicked him in the ankle, and rushed past. Trouble was, he'd already got everything ...

Jackson Oh, God.
 Harold ... except one little thing. One tiny scrap stuck in my brain, like a fragment of coral.
 Lesley What was that?
 Harold Wait a minute. Let me think.
 Jackson He's going to forget. He's fallen into a trap.
 Lesley What's the trap this time?
 Jackson The trap is to think there's a key to the mystery. There's a secret jewel of knowledge and once you uncover it, you understand everything. The universe is yours. Bullshit! There's no such thing.
 Lesley I don't agree, and I'm going to put your ideas to the test. Harold!
 Harold Yes ... ah ...
 Lesley Lesley.
 Harold Lovely name. A new one too. I don't remember meeting any Lesleys, down below.
 Lesley There must have been a few, but I didn't go down.
 Harold Everything keeping well, up here?
 Jackson See what I mean? Not a thought between the ears.
 Lesley You were talking about a fragment of coral.
 Harold Funny stuff. Dead, it's as dull as dishwater. Dreary. But sometimes it's full of life and colour ... the fish,

you have no idea ... they took us for a trip in a glass-bottomed boat ... hey, I remember now!

Jackson Dreary man!

Lesley (to Harold) No no no. You said a *thought* stuck in your mind *like* a piece of coral. A thought. An idea. There was a smiling man and you kicked him in the ankle, and you rushed past him, and there was something in your mind that he couldn't take away from you. A thought! An idea!

Harold (enfeebled) He yelled when I kicked him, I can tell you. Oh he wasn't very pleased at all. No sir! But I rushed up here and he didn't follow, so I got home, safe and sound.

Jackson walks around, twirling his hands around his head, to indicate that Harold is quite vacuous.

Lesley (glumly) That's something we're never going to know.

Jackson The human estate. A flicker of consciousness, and confusion all around.

Lesley What isn't confused is forgotten.

Jackson We never learn.

Lesley What was that? Ah!

Jackson Ah!

Lucy enters via the other staircase, behind the cloud. She takes a quick look at the scene.

Lucy There were ten of us. Seven have been knocked out, I see.

Lesley You could say eight. I'm no wiser than I was before.

Jackson And I'm in a filthy mood because none of us learns a thing.

Lucy And I'm not sure what I feel.

Jackson Well you came up the back way so you might have something in the grey matter.

Lucy Too much, that's the trouble.

Lesley Let's hear what you've got to say.

Lucy (after some thought) I went down the front stairs and everything went blank. A delightful state of mind. Everything's new. But it dawns on you that you've been through things before. Or you recognise what people are saying about their experiences. You say, hey, that happened to me. Or I think it did, once upon a time ...

Jackson Fairy tales! Is that all you can give us now?

Lucy Every little thing contains a clue. Our brains are built to lock things out, and hang onto the little things they can understand. We have to train ourselves, and make ourselves better. (with a sudden flash of fury) We've got to use those back stairs! Every way we can keep in touch with what's happening down there ... we've got to use it. It's our only hope!

Lesley There's hope for us, then? Is that how you feel?

Jackson Tell us, Lucy. You seem to have survived.

Lucy I went to a revivalist meeting. All singing like crazy. The Lord God's gonna take us up to heaven, they were singing. Everything's gonna be okay. I thought, this is bullshit, but they flung themselves on their knees, screaming. Jeezus, Lord have mercy. Some of them had guns and they rushed into the street, looking for Muslims, and the Muslims, they were out there looking for us. My mob went mad, and I hid on the back of a truck. I never lifted the canvas till I reckoned we were in another state. When the truck stopped, I slipped away. Good people took me in. They listened to my story, then they told me to forget it. Don't bother yourself with that no more. I tried to do what they told me, but my brain wouldn't let me forget. It's experience, I told myself, and I've got to learn.

Jackson Any plans?

Lesley Any ideas for the future?

Lucy Only one. Don't forget. Hang onto everything in our heads, and be sure to learn. That's our only hope.

Jackson Anything else?

Lucy Oooooooooohhh ...

Jackson So there is.

Lesley Tell us, Lucy. We're listening.

Lucy (looking at the other seven) Listening? Like hell they are.

Jackson Don't bother about them. They're always there. It's like living in a house near a swamp. There's a bad smell but you can't do much about it.

Lesley There's a lot you can do about it. For instance, you can work out what's causing the smell.

Jackson (as if talking to an idiot) We are! We're the smell! It's us! It's not the snakes or the crocodiles, or the flies or the maggots! It's us. Who the hell do you think makes all the problems down there? And for that matter, why are these people so dopey when they get back? Because they've found out all over again, for the five hundred and fifty-fifth time that they can't do any better than the messes they've made already. Heaven? It's just a boring place away from the stinks that humans produce because they can't train themselves to do any better!

Lesley All right, Jackson, you've got history on your side. If we look at the past, you win every time, but I'm an optimist ...

Jackson You! You didn't even go down again. You stayed up here. No point in looking for a way out, you decided, so you sat around and what are you doing now? Waiting for someone to bring you a reason, any old reason at all, why you should be able to hope!

Lesley Lucy? Why did you groan, before? Was there something you saw down there you want to share?

Lucy I did see something, and I didn't like it. But it's made me tough and I think it's made me brave. I used to be tolerant ... (Jackson coughs, from amusement.) ... I used to think that if I listened to everybody and understood how they saw things, then maybe what I did would be useful. Crap! On earth, there's lots of problems. There's floods and fires and droughts and tidal waves, there's bad seasons and no food, there's wild animals to frighten hell out of you, but there's one problem that stands over all the others, and it's us. Human-bloody-kind! We're our own worst problem. All the other problems bring out the best in us. When people are fighting a fire, they're brave, and they're generous to others. Same with everything else. People are in a bad way, other people are good. Miserable rotten bastards with nothing but selfishness in their guts will surprise you. They can, and they do! You're forced to admit, over and over again, that you misjudged them. But! But, but, but! Mostly, we're beaten by ourselves. This mob at the table ... look at them! Not a thought in their heads. All they want to do is forget. They don't want to take responsibility for themselves, or for anybody else, for that matter. They give me the shits and they always have ...

Lesley Shut up Jackson, she's always been over the top!

Jackson It does me good to hear her. It's about the only thing that makes life worth living!

Lesley What is?

Jackson Life's only worth living if we think we can do better. That means going down the stairs ...

Lucy The back stairs! It's too dangerous to forget. You spend a lifetime trying to remember what you used to know!

Jackson Are you ready for another go? Lesley, what about you?

There is a pause.

Lucy Lesley? Jackson's talking to you.

Lesley He's putting me on the spot, the bastard. What about you, Jackson, are you ready for another go? You've only just got back.

Jackson I'm not as fresh as I might be, but hell, what am I going to think of myself if I sit up here and listen to this mob talking about playing golf ...

Lucy (to Lesley) Are you going to take him up on it?

Lesley I chickened out last time. This time, I will.

Lucy Which means it's up to me. I could do with a break, but it looks like I don't get one, this time around. Okay, back stairs. Just the three of us? Anybody else ready for another try at the great game?

She looks at the table but nobody there feels ready for the challenge.

Jackson Forget them. Look forward. Look down, down,
down!

Lesley I never thought I'd see myself do this. I'm feeling
inspired, Lucy, inspired, because of you!

Lucy Don't think about me. Think about yourself. Back
stairs, don't forget. Down and up the same way.
We've got to keep our memories intact. Ready?

Jackson Ready as we're ever going to be!

Lesley Terribly afraid, but ... ready, yes, ready!

Lucy Off we go. Follow me!

She plunges out of sight behind the cloud, and then we hear her footsteps on the stairs where memory isn't obliterated. Jackson and Lesley follow her, their footsteps resounding too, for a time, until they fade, and all is silence except for a few murmurs from the seven left at the card table.