

Five Characters in Search of an Exit

By Rod Serling

Based on the short story "The Depository" by Marvin Petal

Act I

NARRATOR'S VOICE. There is a fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area which we call the Twilight Zone.

In darkness we hear a slight THUDDING NOISE and then the CLANGING of a bell. There is a frantic stirring of movement and then it goes quiet. A beam of light comes up on an Army Major, who is sitting with his back to a wall. His eyes are closed. He is disheveled and his uniform is soiled. His eyes flicker open and for a moment he's motionless, obviously questioning where he is, like a man waking up in a strange place. He slowly looks around and above him.

He rises with his back against the wall. He is totally confused as he continues to try and figure out where he is. He looks up at the only opening in the cylindrical room, and moves forward cupping his hands to his mouth.

MAJOR. (shouting) Hey. Hey – anyone hear me? (waits for a response) Hey? Anybody up there? Anybody hear me?

Again there is no response. His head turns sharply, thinking he hears something in the darkness, but he sees nothing. As paranoia creeps in, the Major looks from side to side as he moves backwards, and bumps into the wall behind him. An odd feeling comes over him and he starts to feel his face and features as if he were a foreign object to himself. He is definitely freaked out. In a burst of nervous energy he starts to survey the wall, hurriedly moving around the curved room, feeling around the wall, obviously searching for an exit. In the process of moving around the wall, the Major suddenly comes face to face with a clown, who appears out of the darkness. The Major recoils, momentarily frightened, and stares at this strange character.

CLOWN. The fleet's in. No. No. It isn't the fleet, is it? It's the army. The army's in. Hooray for the army. Get the troops out of the hot sun. Ta ra ra boom de ay. (he snaps to an exaggerated position of attention and salutes the Major) Your orders, Colonel? General? Whatever you are.

MAJOR. I'm a Major.

CLOWN. Don't fret. Advancement comes quickly even in a peacetime army. Today a Major – tomorrow a brigadier.

MAJOR. Major to Brigadier. That's not bad. You're generous, old sport. You're certainly gen -- (he stops abruptly – confused)

CLOWN. Problem?

MAJOR. Problem? No...no...no problem. It's just that --

CLOWN. Just that what?

MAJOR. A coupla very small items seem to have eluded me for the moment. Like...like who I am.

CLOWN. You're a Major, aren't you? (then winking) Or are you impersonating an officer? That's a very serious charge – impersonating an officer.

MAJOR. No, I am a Major. I know I'm a Major. (bewildered) I know I'm a Major. I must have been wounded or something – because – because I can't remember my name. I have no idea who I am. I don't remember my outfit...or the action.

CLOWN. The action? What action?

MAJOR. The action. The engagement. Wherever – however it was I got hit.

CLOWN. Who says you got hit?

MAJOR. Something must have happened to me. (Stops, and take a long close look at the clown) Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Who are you? What are you doing here? Is there a circus around here someplace?

CLOWN. A circus? (cackles without any mirth) Of course. There must be a circus. A clown – a circus. An officer – a war. That's logic, isn't it? But it doesn't figure at all. Not at all.

MAJOR. Why not?

CLOWN. Because there isn't any circus and there isn't any war. You're just like the rest of us.

MAJOR. The rest of us?

The clown nods and motions with his head across the room. We hear BAGPIPE MUSIC, and three more characters walk into the light. A Scottish bagpiper, a beautiful ballet dancer and a tramp move center stage and circle around the Major.

MAJOR. What's going on here? Where are we? What are we? Who are we?
WHAT ARE WE?

DANCER. None of us know, Major. We don't know who we are. We don't know where we are. Each of us...each of us just woke up one moment and here we were in the darkness.

MAJOR. That's...that's incredible. How could that happen?

DANCER. That's the same question we asked ourselves. A question with no answer, Major. A question with no answer. We're nameless things with no memory.

No knowledge of what went before. No knowledge of what will come.

MAJOR. How long...how long have you been here?

BAGPIPER. That's part of the mystery, too. We just don't know.

TRAMP. Have you any idea?

MAJOR. No. No ideas at all. How long will we be here?

CLOWN. That's a very good question. That's the best question of all. But none of us know the answer.

The narrator appears out of the darkness.

NARRATOR. A collection of question marks. Five improbable entities stuck together into a pit of darkness. No logic. No reason. No explanation. Just a prolonged nightmare in which fear, loneliness and the unexplainable walk hand in hand through the shadows. In a moment we'll start collecting clues as to the why's, the what's and the where's. We will not end the nightmare...we'll only explain it. Because this is...The Twilight Zone. (narrator walks back into the darkness)

The Major has continued to explore his prison. He pounds on the wall, checks the floor, etc.

CLOWN. Active fellow. Very active fellow. Gotta function. Compulsive worker.

MAJOR. You a big time psychologist, huh?

CLOWN. I'm a clown. Which is neither here, there, nor anyplace. I could be a certified public accountant, or a financier. A left-handed pitcher who throws only curves. What difference does it make? We're here because we're here because we're here. You know you're wasting your time, don't you? You're an idiot. An energetic idiot – but an idiot.

MAJOR. I want out of here. I'm not satisfied to sit here and heave deep sighs. I want out of here.

CLOWN. You've got no monopoly on that, Major. We all want out of here.

TRAMP. Seconded.

BAGPIPER. But you're wasting your time. Each of us have gone around like a bloodhound nose to wall, nose to floor. We can give you the dimensions of the room even.

TRAMP. Thirty-nine feet circular.

MAJOR. And the height?

TRAMP. We figure about forty feet to the top.

MAJOR. What's out there?

CLOWN. You name it. Sky – artificial light -- an illuminated microscope. You name it. One guess is as good as the other.

DANCER. Maybe we're on another planet – or maybe we're on a space ship going to another planet. Maybe we're all insane and this is just a mirage...an illusion.

TRAMP. We're dead and this is limbo.

BAGPIPER. We don't really exist – we're dream figures from somebody else's existence.

CLOWN. Or we're each of us having a dream, and everyone else is part of the other's dream. You call it – you can have it. That's the one thing we have an abundance of. Possibilities. An infinite number of possibilities.

MAJOR. What about getting out of here? How about examining that possibility?

BAGPIPER. That's a solid wall. No crevices or ledges.

TRAMP. We're trapped down here. There's no way out.

MAJOR. This is a nightmare. It must be a nightmare.

CLOWN. It is indeed. But whose? Yours? Mine? The Scotsman's -- the tramp's -- the ballet dancer's? Just whose nightmare is it?

MAJOR. But someone knows we're here.

DANCER. How so?

MAJOR. They have to. You've all been here a while -- possibly a long while. Someone must feed you. Someone must give you water.

No one says anything.

MAJOR. Well? Someone must bring food down.

DANCER. There's been no food – or water.

MAJOR. But we'll starve to death – or die of thirst.

DANCER. But that's the oddest thing of all. Don't you understand?

MAJOR. No. No, I don't understand.

DANCER. Do you feel hungry, Major? Or thirsty? Or heat or cold? Or fatigue or discomfort?

CLOWN. Or anything? Do you feel anything, Major?

MAJOR. No. No, I don't feel anything. But that doesn't prove anything. It's understandable that I don't feel thirsty or hungry. This is shock – or the aftermath of shock.

DANCER. None of us have felt thirst or hunger or anything else since we've been here. And we've been here for an endless time, Major.

BAGPIPER. For as long as we can remember.

MAJOR. This is incredible. This is really incredible. Have you shouted?

CLOWN. Endlessly.

MAJOR. Well, have you pounded on the walls? I mean loud? I mean...take off your shoes and pounded on the walls – have you done that?

DANCER. Often.

MAJOR. Well...well...have you...have you looked all around? Have you felt of the walls? Maybe there's a...there's a button...or a lever. Or maybe there's a panel of some kind – a control button.

TRAMP. For a while...for a long while...that's all we did. Hunted and searched and peered and looked and felt. And we discovered that this was the universe right here. For our purposes – this is the universe. This little room.

All five characters stand motionless and silent in utter hopelessness. At this moment there is a tremendous REVERBERATING CLANG of a large bell. The sound is so deafening, the Major clamps his hands over his ears to shut it out. The sound STOPS.

MAJOR. What was that? What was that noise?

DANCER. A giant bell or something. That's what it sounds like.

MAJOR. This is a madhouse. That's what it is. It's a madhouse.
(shouting) Hey. Hey up there. Let us out. Let us out of here.

Again we HEAR the giant, clangorous sound of the bell, but this time it goes on longer and vibrates the room. The occupants clasp their hands to their ears as they stumble about and are finally thrown to the ground. The SOUND tapers off, then stops and echoes into silence. The Major is terrified, and looks as if he could crack. The dancer reaches out to him.

DANCER. Don't be afraid, Major. Please don't be afraid. It's hard in the beginning, but after a while – (she leaves it unsaid)

MAJOR. There must be...there must be a way...something we can do. There has to be. This sort of thing...this sort of thing just doesn't happen.

BAGPIPER. (examining his bagpipes) A few more like that – it'll wreck my bagpipes.

TRAMP. Girl, why don't you dance for us? That makes the time pass.

BAGPIPER. I'll play for you.

CLOWN. The Major's never seen you dance.

The dancer rises, and as the bagpiper plays she starts to dance around the Major.

MAJOR. The Major doesn't want to see her dance. The Major's not interested. All the Major wants to do is get out of here. (he goes to the wall, and starts to feel it again, and begins to speak more to himself than to the others)
It's smooth. Absolutely smooth. Unbroken – and high – too high.
Through the wall. Did you ever think of that? A hole through the wall?

CLOWN. That's very bright. Terribly ingenious. Highly imaginative. Incredibly inventive. (cackles) With what? With our hands? With our fingernails?

The Major's eyes dart about, and he spots the bagpipers saber hanging from his scabbard.

MAJOR. With this. (he whips the sword out of the scabbard) With this.

He rushes to the wall and takes one furious thrust at it. There is a CRACK as the sword breaks and the tip falls, CLANGING to the ground. He leans against the wall, defeated, and drops the sword to the ground with a CLUNK. He buries his face against the wall and starts to sob.

DANCER. Major? Please, Major...after a while...after a while it becomes easier.
Perhaps...there are a lot of dungeons like this. Maybe we've just never heard of them before. Perhaps they're for the unloved. Perhaps that's who we are.
The unloved.

MAJOR. We must have names. We're people...and that means we belong somewhere.
There are others who care about us. Somewhere...somehow...we've got to have a life that's been cut away from us, and we've got to get it back. Each one of us.
A tunnel. That's what we'll do. We'll dig a tunnel. Smash a hole in the floor and tunnel out.

TRAMP. But we don't know how thick it is.

MAJOR. Then find out. Find out. Try. Don't just...don't just sit there like...like lumps...
like mindless, soulless idiots.

He picks up the remnant of the sword and plunges it into the floor. The METALLIC CLANK of metal against metal testifies to the fruitless effort. He stops. There is a moment of silence before the LOUD CLANGING is heard again. They all cover up their ears in defense of the loud noise. The SOUND STOPS and dies away. The Major gets up and stares upward.

MAJOR. I know where we are. It suddenly occurs to me.

DANCER. Where? Where are we?

MAJOR. Why my dear young lady. How unobservant – how insensitive – when the whole thing all fits together.

DANCER. Please tell me where we are.

MAJOR. Ladies and gentlemen...it seems quite apparent. It seems quite unequivocal. We...all of us...we are in Hell. God help us...we are in Hell.

SLOW FADE TO BLACK

ACT II

In darkness we hear the CLANGING of METAL on METAL. LIGHTS UP. The Major is hitting the sword against the wall, then starts running his hands over every inch of it.

CLOWN. Never say die, that one.

BAGPIPER. He'll come to it eventually just as we all did.

TRAMP. Let him be. Let him have his fun.

CLOWN. Some fun.

DANCER. At least he's trying.

CLOWN. He is indeed. He's been "trying" for several hours now.

MAJOR. It's metal.

CLOWN. Brilliant.

MAJOR. Circular, smooth, and no place to climb.

CLOWN. All of which we could have told you hours ago.

MAJOR. (finally stops) Well, we'll have to think of something else.

CLOWN. Oh do...do. Maybe we could pretend we're acrobats. Alley oop – and over the top. (they all respond to this joke in different ways)

DANCER. Wait a minute –

CLOWN. Oh come now – this is becoming a little ridiculous.

DANCER. Why not?

CLOWN. Why not what?

DANCER. What you said. Acrobatics.

CLOWN. A figure of speech, my dear, not meant to be taken seriously. I will grant you that we have somehow forfeited some of our human dignity, but we are nonetheless governed by human frailties, not the least of which is gravity. You may know some acrobatics that I am quite unaware of.

MAJOR. Don't you see what she's getting at? Don't any of you see? One on top of the other standing on each other's shoulders. Isn't that the way it's done in the circus?

CLOWN. I'll ask him when he comes in. I can assure you that although I wear the costume of a clown, I have no recollection whatsoever of having been one. It's true we don't feel hunger or thirst, but pain is quite another thing – and a drop from twenty - thirty feet up, down to this hard floor – well that is a sensation I would as well do without.

DANCER. But it's a chance.

CLOWN. Beg your pardon, ma'am, but no thank you.

MAJOR. Now, come on. She's right. It is a chance. Come on. The weight'll go on the first person, so I'll be on the bottom. The clown on my shoulders, then the tramp, then the bagpiper, then the girl. Now, how about it?

BAGPIPER. (looking up) We'd never reach it.

TRAMP. We could try. Who's to say we wouldn't reach it? We're not sure how high it is.

CLOWN. That's the point. We'd be exerting ourselves for nothing. Why don't we all just sit down and have some entertainment?

MAJOR. Come on, let's try it. Come on clown – on my shoulders.

The clown shakes his head and gets up.

CLOWN. Observation: things were far more simple before you arrived. However, I go with the majority.

LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK.

MUSIC begins in darkness. When the lights come up, the Major, then the clown, then the tramp, then the bagpipe player are standing on each others shoulders, laying at an angle across the floor, face up. The dancer is just beginning her ascent up the human chain of men.

BAGPIPER. All right, miss. It's up to you.

DANCER. Can you see the top. Is there a ledge or anything?

BAGPIPER. There's several more feet to the top.

The Major is struggling with all the weight he is bearing on top of him as the dancer climbs.

MAJOR. Come on. Go very carefully. You can make it.

The dancer crawls up the bodies – from waist to shoulder to waist to shoulder. The human pole starts to quake under the strain, as they continuously adjust and steady themselves. The dancer

gets to the top of the bagpipers shoulders and reaches up, trying to grasp the ledge. (which is the edge of the stage) Her fingers inch their way up, but she is just short of reaching it.

DANCER. I can't reach it. It's just a little above me.

MAJOR. Try. Stretch a little. All of us. We've got to try. Try.

They all stretch and strain, as the dancer extends her arm to the absolute fullest. She loses her balance and SCREAMS.

BLACK OUT. We HEAR the sounds of the characters as they plummet and hit the ground.

LIGHTS UP. All five people are scattered about on the floor where they've fallen. They are out of breath and unable to move. The Major looks over at the dancer, who is rubbing her ankle.

MAJOR. How's your leg?

DANCER. I think I've strained it – but I'll be all right.

MAJOR. How much more would it have taken.

DANCER. I could almost feel it.

MAJOR. You were almost there.

TRAMP. A miss is as good as a mile.

MAJOR. Not in this case. A miss by about two or three inches...that's hardly a mile. (the Major looks around the room and picks up the remains of the sword) Here's what we do next. Same thing – without the girl. The clown on the bottom, then the tramp, the bagpiper and then I'll climb to the top. I'll tie a rope to the haft of the sword, fling it over the top and let it hook on the ledge.

CLOWN. Ingenious – but hadn't one of us better run to the hardware store and pick up some rope?

TRAMP. He's right. We have no rope.

MAJOR. We don't need much. Any strips of cloth. Part of what we're wearing. Here. (the Major tears some rope trim off the clowns costume)

CLOWN. Six feet of excellent material – courtesy of Pagliaci – or whoever I am.

MAJOR. (he ties the rope to the sword) This time we make it. The rope tied to the haft of this sword, then hook it over the ledge -- I'm up and over.

CLOWN. Then what?

MAJOR. We'll worry about that when it happens. Somehow I'll get you out of here -- but nobody gets out until one of us gets out. Now that is a logic you can live with.

FADE TO BLACK.

The same MUSIC begins in darkness.

LIGHTS UP

There is another human ladder laid out across the floor. This time the clown is on the bottom, then the tramp, and then the bagpipe player. The Major is all ready half way up. The dancer is sitting off to the side, looking up.

BAGPIPER. Let's go.

CLOWN. Indeed. Leave us go. I can't take this much longer.

Everyone is shaking under the strain. The bagpiper reaches down and helps the Major up. Finally getting on top of the bagpiper's shoulders, the Major unties the sword from his side and Lobs it up toward the ledge. It takes him a few tries, but he finally hooks it on the edge.

BAGPIPER. Hurry, man. I can't take much more of this.

MAJOR. I've hooked it. (he tests the rope, and then starts to drag himself up, hand over hand, towards the ledge. He finally grabs the ledge and starts to pull himself up. He hooks one leg over the lip, and peers over the side.

CLOWN. Well? What's there?

TRAMP. What do you see?

DANCER. Major – where are we?

BLACK OUT. We hear the Major scream.

SLOW FADE UP. The remaining four of the group stare up, silently, toward the opening.

CLOWN. A brave man – but not a very bright one.

DANCER. He'll come back for us. I know he will.

CLOWN. He may be back...but it won't be to get us. He may have been right at that. He may have been very right. This may be Hell.

The LIGHT FADES on the four, and a LIGHT COMES UP on a corner of the stage. A woman in a Salvation Army type uniform and carrying a large hand bell, stands beside a barrel with a sign on it, which reads "View Park Girl's Home Christmas Doll Drive". A man has just walked up and sees something on the ground. He picks it up.

MAN. I found this on the ground. Someone must have dropped it.

WOMAN. Oh, thank you. Just drop it in the barrel, would you?

The man throws the doll in the barrel and looks inside.

MAN. You don't have very many, do you?

WOMAN. No. Not nearly enough. They're for the orphans, you know. But it's early, and we just started. (the man smiles and walks off. The woman begins to ring the hand bell) Dolls for Christmas...dolls for Christmas. Open your hearts, and give us your old dolls for the children. Dolls for Christmas...dolls for Christmas.

The LIGHTS FADE on her and COME UP inside the cylinder. Now we hear the LOUDER CLANGING of the hand bell. The tramp, clown, bagpiper, ballet dancer, and Major are heaped together, motionless. Their arms and legs are all akimbo and their faces are like frozen masks. Their eyes stare out blankly. The narrator enters.

NARRATOR. Just a barrel...a dark depository where are kept the counterfeit, make believe pieces of plastic and cloth – wrought in the distorted image of human life. But this added hopeful note...perhaps they are unloved only for the moment. In the arms of children...there can be nothing but love. A clown, a tramp, a bagpipe player, a ballet dancer and a Major. Tonight's cast of players... on the odd stage known as...The Twilight Zone.

SLOW FADE TO BLACK