

# Barren Landscape

By Steve Gold

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Guest editor Peter J. Stavros writes...*

*The opening line of Barren Landscape, "I think I ... I think I have a problem," sets the tone for this heartbreaking yet sweet (and oftentimes witty) story of a daughter tending to her mother who is suffering from the early stages of Alzheimer's. Depicting two episodes in the characters' life together, the playwright is able to expose the audience to the depth of their relationship. The time jump is particularly effective in establishing the relentless nature of this disease, with which both mother and daughter (and perhaps the daughter more so) struggle to come to terms. This is brilliantly revealed in the following exchange (with Susan the daughter, and Lucinda the mother):*

Susan:                   It's just that sometimes I forget ...

Lucinda:    Forget what?

Susan:                   Forget how you are.

Lucinda:    I forget too.

Susan:                   Not the way I do.

*With pacing that is deliberate, and dialogue that is minimal (the characters rarely speak more than one sentence at a time to each other), Barren Landscape shows the toll that long-term illness can have on not only the patient, but also the caretaker, as the daughter rather poignantly comments to her mother that she is in solitary confinement with no escape. Yet the final stage direction, after the mother is able to remember her daughter's name and asks for a pencil and paper to write it down, ends the play on a hopeful note. (Spacing and font size are playwright's own. Eds.)*

## Barren Landscape

### Cast of Characters

Susan Thaxter.....Unidentified

Lucinda Thaxter.....Susan's mother

Time: The present

Place: New York City

## Act I

(THE DOWN STAGE CENTER PORTION OF THE STAGE IS LIT, THE REST IS DARK. THE SETTING IS A MANHATTAN TOWN HOUSE, REPRESENTED BY A STAGE RIGHT WOODEN CHAIR. TWO ARISTOCRATIC-LOOKING WOMEN ENTER UP STAGE RIGHT: ONE OF THE WOMEN IS SIXTYISH IN AGE, THE OTHER IN HER FORTIES. THE YOUNGER WOMAN LEADS THE OLDER ONE TO THE WOODEN CHAIR AND SITS HER. THE YOUNGER WOMAN IS NAMED SUSAN THAXTER, THE OLDER WOMAN IS HER MOTHER LUCINDA. BOTH ARE DRESSED CASUALLY AND STYLISHLY IN AN UPPER-CLASS SORT OF WAY. THE OLDER WOMAN SEEMS BEFUDDLED AND PUZZLED BY HER SURROUNDINGS, WITH A PERMANENT, FAR-AWAY EXPRESSION.

A SUBTLE SENSE OF DISPAIR PUNCTUATES THE ENTIRE SCENE, EMPHASIZED BY DIM LIGHTING)

Susan

Mother?

(PAUSE)

Mother?

Huh?	Lucinda
It's me, Mother.	Susan
...You?	Lucinda
How... are you?	Lucinda
I'm fine.	Susan
I'm glad.	Lucinda
Are you hungry?	Susan
What?	Lucinda
Are you <i>hungry</i> ?	Susan
I...I don't think so.	Lucinda
Don't you know for sure?	Susan
Do I...have to eat?	Lucinda
You don't have to do anything.	Susan
Promise?	Lucinda
Have I ever forced you to do anything?	Susan

...I don't remember.

Lucinda

Well, I haven't.

Susan

That's nice.

Lucinda

Do you think you're in prison?

Susan

Have I ever been there?

Lucinda

Certainly not.

Susan

Have you?

Lucinda

I'm in prison now.

Susan  
(WISTFUL)

Are you?

Lucinda

Yes.

Susan

Escape.

Lucinda

...There's no escape for me..

Susan  
(DEJECTED)

That's a pity.

Lucinda

I'm not complaining.

Susan

Lucinda

You should—you'll feel better

Susan

...I've no right to complain.

Lucinda

Why not?

Susan

Because you're my mother.

Lucinda

Go ahead. Complain—I don't mind.

Susan

People like us never complain...it's bad form.

Lucinda

If *that's* how you feel, the good-bye.

(STANDS, TAKES SEVERAL STEPS TOWARD THE UP STAGE RIGHT EXIT  
UNTIL SUSAN STOPS HER)

Susan

Where are you going?

Lucinda

Home.

Susan

You *are* home.

Lucinda

I...I am?

Susan

Yes.

Lucinda

I *knew* it looked familiar.

(SUSAN LEADS LUCINDA BACK TO THE CHAIR, SITS HER)

Susan

I should hope so.

Lucinda

(GLANCES ABOUT THE PLACE)

It looks very nice.

Susan

Yes, it is.

Lucinda

I like the furniture.

Susan

You picked it out.

Lucinda  
(AMAZED)

*I did?*

Susan

Every piece.

Lucinda

I have good taste.

Susan

Indeed.

Lucinda

How long have I lived here?

Susan  
(CROSSES TO STAGE LEFT)

Fifty-odd years.

Lucinda

That's a long time.

Susan

...I grew up in this house.

Lucinda

Were you happy?

Susan

...I was never happier.

Lucinda

That's good.

Susan

I should never have left. ...I should've stayed a child...like Peter Pan.

Lucinda

Why did you leave?

Susan

(IRRITATED)

I got *married*, Mother.

(PAUSE)

Lucinda

Are you mad at me?

Susan

I'm not mad.

Lucinda

You sound mad.

Susan

I'm not. ...It's just that sometimes I forget how you are.

Lucinda

I forget too.

Susan

Not the way I do.

Lucinda

(MEEKLY)

You're not mad at me?

Susan

No.

(PAUSE)

Lucinda

(PROUDLY BLURTING OUT HER WORDS)

I used to be a good tennis player.

(PAUSE)

Susan  
(INTRIGUED)

What made you say that?

Lucinda

It came to me...all of a sudden.

Susan  
(CURIOUS)

You remember playing tennis?

Lucinda

Yes.

Susan

But you don't recognize this house.

Lucinda

Not right now.

(SHY CHUCKLE)

...Isn't that funny?

(PAUSE)

Susan  
(TO STAGE CENTER)

Do you ever remember me as a girl?

Lucinda

Sometimes.

Susan

Now?

Lucinda

...Bit and pieces.

Susan

What do you remember?

Lucinda

Are you interested?

Susan

Yes.

Lucinda

I remember nursing you.

(PAUSE)

Susan

(QUIETLY TAKEN ABACK)

You do?

Lucinda

(SLOWLY, DREAMILY)

..It brought me great pleasure...the way your mouth fastened on to my breast...a tingling feeling. ...I never felt so happy...so alive...I can still see it...see it in my mind...I wish it could last forever...isn't that the damndest thing?

(PAUSE)

Susan

It took until now for you to tell me this?

Lucinda

I never did before?

Susan

Never.

Lucinda

I should have...

(HER VOICE TRAILING OFF)

...How foolish of me.

Susan

...That's alright, Mother.

Lucinda

(WORRIED)

You're...not mad at me now?

Susan

Why do you keep asking me?

Lucinda

Because I didn't tell you until now.

Susan

...I could never be mad at you.

Lucinda  
(FEEBLY)  
Promise?

Susan  
You're all I have, Mother.  
(FORLORN)  
There's no one left anymore.

(LONG PAUSE)

Lucinda  
(FRUSTRATED)  
(STANDS; MOVES TO STAGE CENTER)  
I know I've lived a life. I'm sure I have....But I can't remember...sometimes I remember parts of it, but mostly...mostly it's a dark room.

Susan  
(QUIETLY)  
...Getting darker.

Lucinda  
There's something the matter with me, isn't there?

Susan  
There is.

Lucinda  
(MOURNFUL)  
I'm terribly sorry.

Susan  
For what?

Lucinda  
For being a burden.

Susan  
I never said that.

Lucinda  
I feel like I am.

Susan

You could never be a burden to me. You're all I have.

Lucinda

Don't you have children?

(PAUSE)

Susan  
(TIGHT-JAWED)

I had a son...Spencer.

Lucinda

Where is he?

(PAUSE)

Susan

...He died...six months after Father.

(PAUSE)

Lucinda

It's terrible to lose a child.

Susan  
(DISTANTLY)

So they say.

(PAUSE)

Lucinda

Are you lonely?

Susan  
(A FEW STEPS DOWN STAGE)

...Yes.

Lucinda

...Is it because of me?

Susan

No.

Lucinda

...I'm lonely.

Susan  
(QUIETLY MOVED)

...I wish I...I could do something. Maybe this new doctor can help us.

Lucinda

What new doctor?

Susan

The one we saw yesterday.

Lucinda

Was he nice?

Susan

I suppose so—what difference does it make?

Lucinda

Maybe I'm not sick after all.

Susan

You just said there's something the matter with you.

Lucinda

But maybe I'm wrong.

Susan

Mother, what's my name?

Lucinda

Your name?

Susan

Yes.

Lucinda

Let me see. It's...it's...I don't...quite....

Susan

It's Susan.

Lucinda

Susan.

Susan

You picked it out yourself.

Lucinda  
Did I?

Susan  
Yes.

Lucinda  
(ASHEN FACE)  
I must...I must write it down...could you bring me a pencil and paper?

(LONG PAUSE)

(SUSAN SLOWLY CROSSES TO LUCINDA AT STAGE CENTER, HUGS HER,  
THEN GENTLY KISSES HER ON THE CHEEK)

(SLOW FADE TO BLACK)

End

**THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:** *With this play, I wanted to show how the loss of memory, of self-awareness, is as much of a death as anything else. My main influence for this particular play is Samuel Becket.*

**AUTHOR'S BIO:** Steve Gold is a New York City-based playwright and the author of the full-length plays *Women and Guns* and *Smash the State*. For several years he reviewed plays for John Chatteron's *Off Off Broadway Review* (OOBR).

**EDITOR'S BIO:** Peter J. Stavros is a writer in Louisville, Kentucky. "Room 310," and "Ten Something in the Morning" from Volume 2 of *Fleas on the Dog*, are from his forthcoming chapbook, *Three in the Morning and You Don't Smoke Anymore*, which will be released this May by Etchings Press (<http://etchings.uindy.edu>). Peter is also a playwright who has had plays produced across the country. More can be found at [www.peterjstavros.com](http://www.peterjstavros.com) and follow on Twitter @PeterJStavros. His play **Three Sides** was published in Issue 6.