

# Barren Landscape

Synopsis: A woman struggles with her mother's Alzheimer's disease

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## 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. AN ELEGANTLY DRESSED SIXTYISH WOMAN SITS IN THE CHAIR AND LOOKING TROUBLED. SEVERAL MOMENTS FOLLOW. SHE STANDS, CROSSES TO CENTER STAGE AND GLANCES ABOUT THE ROOM. HER NAME IS LUCINDA THAXTER)

Lucinda

(TO NO ONE IN PARTICULAR)

I think I...I think I have a problem.

(RETURNS TO THE CHAIR AND SITS)

(A SECOND WOMAN ENTERS UP STAGE RIGHT: LUCINDA'S DAUGHTER SUSAN. IN HER FORTIES, STYLISH DRESSED LIKE HER MOTHER AND WITH THE NON-CHALANT SELF-CONFIDENCE OF AN ARISTOCRAT, AS BEFITS HER PEDIGREE.

UPON ENTERING, SUSAN PROCEEDS TO CENTER STAGE)

Susan

Mother, are you ready?

Lucinda

Ready? For what?

Susan

(FLIPPANTLY)

Are you serious? The Monet exhibition at the Met.

Lucinda

I thought that was Thursday.

Susan

Today *is* Thursday.

Lucinda

Yes, of course.

Susan

Come on, get ready.

Lucinda

(HALTINGLY)

Before we leave...can I...speak to you?

Susan  
About what?

Lucinda  
About...a number of things.

Susan  
Such as....

(PAUSE; LUCINDA STANDS, MOVES TO STAGE LEFT)

Lucinda  
I was in my office this afternoon...I was proofreading a brief I had written and....

Susan  
And what?

Lucinda  
And...I forgot where I was.

Susan  
What do you mean?

Lucinda  
Just what I said: I forgot where I was.

Susan  
(GLIBLY)  
*Really, Mother.*

Lucinda  
I tell you, it happened to me

Susan  
How can one forget where they are?

Lucinda  
I sat there, and everything went blank...I could see perfectly well...but I didn't recognize what I was looking at.

Susan  
It doesn't make any sense—

Lucinda  
(HEARTFELT)  
Don't you believe me?

Susan

I believe you—I'm sorry, Mother. So you went blank. What of it? I'm absent-minded myself.

Lucinda

This is different.

Susan

I don't think so—

Lucinda

I do. It's not the first time it's happened, either.

Susan

It isn't?

Lucinda

No, it isn't.

(TO STAGE RIGHT)

I was in court...a week ago, making my summation before the jury...and it happened.

Susan

In the court room?

Lucinda

In front of everybody. ...I didn't know where I was, or who I was.

(PAUSE)

Susan

Did anyone notice?

Lucinda

The judge did.

Susan

What did you do?

Lucinda

At first I couldn't do anything. Everyone staring at me. ...The judge asked me if I was alright.

(PAUSE)

Susan

What did you do?

Nothing. Lucinda

You just stood there? Susan

Luciinda  
What else could I do? But then it passed quickly...I knew who I was again, and I got through the summation....

Did the judge speak to you afterwards? Susan

No. Lucinda

Did ever this happen before last week? Susan

(PAUSE)

It may have. Lucinda

It *may* have? Susan

Lucinda  
(EMBARRASSED)  
Maybe it did...once or twice. ...I was scared to tell you.

Why should you be scared. Susan

Wouldn't you be? Lucinda

...Perhaps. Susan

(UNEASILY)  
I...don't think it's anything to worry about.

You don't? Lucinda

Susan  
You're too young to have those sorts of problems.

Lucinda  
What sorts?

Susan  
Dementia...senility.

Lucinda  
Yes...they happen to older people...eighties or nineties. I'm not that old.

Susan  
So don't worry.

Lucinda  
Perhaps I should see a doctor anyway.

(PAUSE)

Susan  
Do you real feel it's necessary?

Lucinda  
I'm not sure.

Susan  
I don't *think* it's serious.  
(UNCERTAIN)  
But I'm not a doctor.

Lucinda  
I realize that.

Susan  
You're clearly concerned about this, aren't you?

Lucinda  
...I can't help but *be* concerned.

Susan  
Well, then, to set your mind at rest, we'll go see the doctor.

Lucinda  
Yes...I'll go

I'll make an appointment.

Susan

Thank you.

Lucinda

Don't be concerned, Mother.

Susan

Easier said than done.

Lucinda

It's nothing, Mother.

Susan

That's right...nothing at all.

Lucinda  
(UNCONVINCED)

(LIGHTS DOWN. A MOMENT PASSES. LIGHTS UP, SAME SET, TWO YEARS LATER. SUSAN AND LUCINDA ENTER UP STAGE RIGHT. SUSAN LEADS LUCINDA TO THE WOODEN CHAIR AND SITS HER. BOTH ARE DRESSED AS BEFORE. LUCINDA IS NOW SLACK-JAWED AND LOOKS MORE CONFUSED THAN WHEN LAST SEEN.

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

Mother?

Susan

Mother?

(PAUSE)

Huh?

Lucinda

It's me, Mother.

Susan

...You?

Lucinda

Yes.

Susan

How... are you?  
Lucinda  
(SWEETLY)

I'm fine, Mother.  
Susan

I'm glad.  
Lucinda

Are you hungry?  
Susan

What?  
Lucinda

Are you *hungry*?  
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

You're not in prison, you know.	Susan
Have I ever been there?	Lucinda
Certainly not.	Susan
Have you?	Lucinda
	(PAUSE)
I'm in prison now.	Susan (WISTFUL)
Are you?	Lucinda
Solitary confinement.	Susan
Escape.	Lucinda
...No escape for me..	Susan
That's a pity.	Lucinda
I'm not complaining.	Susan
You should—you'll feel better	Lucinda
...I've no right to complain.	Susan
Why?	Lucinda

Susan  
You're my mother, that's why.

Lucinda  
That's no reason.

Susan  
It's enough for me.

Lucinda  
Go ahead. Complain—I don't mind.

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

Lucinda  
(BREEZILY)  
If *that's* how you feel, then 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))

Susan  
I should hope so.  
(SITS LUCINDA IN THE CHAIR)

Lucinda  
(GLANCES ABOUT THE PLACE)

It looks very nice.

Susan

The room?

Lucinda

Yes.

Susan

It *is* nice.

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

I live here?

Susan

Yes.

Lucinda

How long?

Susan  
(CROSSES TO STAGE LEFT)

Fifty-odd years.

That's a long time. Lucinda

I grew up in this house. Susan

Were you happy? Lucinda

I was never happier. Susan

I'm glad. Lucinda

I should never have left. Susan

No? Lucinda

Susan  
(WISTFUL SIGH)  
...I should've stayed a child...like Peter Pan.

Why did you leave? Lucinda

I got *married*, Mother. Susan  
(SHARPLY)

Are you mad at me? (PAUSE) Lucinda

I'm not mad. Susan

You sound mad. Lucinda

I'm not. ...It's just that sometimes I forget.... Susan

Forget what? Lucinda

Forget how you are. Susan

I forget too. Lucinda

Not the way I do. Susan

You're not mad at me? Lucinda  
(MEEKLY)

No. Susan  
(PAUSE)

I used to be a good tennis player. Lucinda  
(PROUDLY BLURTING OUT HER WORDS)

(PAUSE)

What made you say that? Susan  
(INTRIGUED)

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

You remember playing tennis? Susan  
(CURIOUS)

Yes. Lucinda

But you don't recognize this house. Susan

Lucinda  
Not right now.  
(SHY CHUCKLE)  
...Isn't that funny?

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...

(DISTANTLY)  
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.

Lucinda  
No one at all?

Susan  
No one.

Aren't you married? Lucinda

(PAUSE)

Not anymore. Susan  
(STONE-FACED)

Do you wear makeup? Lucinda

What does *that* have to do with it? Susan

That's why you're not married anymore. Lucinda

Because I don't wear makeup? Susan

That's it—that's why you never married. Lucinda

But I *was* married.. Susan

Oh, how nice. Lucinda  
(SWEETLY)

I just *told* you—you don't remember? Susan

No. Lucinda

You remembered last year. Susan

I don't this year. Lucinda

We divorced. Susan

Lucinda  
You must be a very difficult person.

Susan  
*You* live with me—am I difficult?

Lucinda  
I'm not sure.

Susan  
(SLIGHTLY MIFFED; CROSSES TO LUCINDA)  
What do you mean you're not sure?

Lucinda  
I'm not sure of anything.

(PAUSE)

Susan  
(WORN OUT)  
...I'm not sure of anything either.  
(TO STAGE LEFT)  
I wonder what father would say about all this.

Lucinda  
Whose father?

Susan  
*My* father—your husband. ...I wonder what he would make of it.

Lucinda  
Make of what?

Susan  
Seeing you this way.

Lucinda  
Where is he?

Susan  
...He's dead.

(PAUSE)

Lucinda  
Oh, dear.

Susan  
(GALLOWS HUMOR)

That's right: Oh dear.

Lucinda

When's the funeral?

Susan

Six years go.

Lucinda

How time flies.

Susan

Now more than ever.

Lucinda

Did you love your father?

Susan

...Very much so.

Lucinda

He was nice?

Susan

Yes.

Lucinda

Did he love me?

Susan

A great deal.

Lucinda

...Was he handsome?

Susan

I thought so. ...Everyone did.

Lucinda

I would never marry an ugly man.

Susan

Don't worry: You didn't.

Lucinda  
What was his name?

Susan  
William James Thaxter.

Lucinda  
(SAVORING HER WORDS)  
William...James...Thaxter.

Susan  
He was named after the philosopher William James.

Lucinda  
Was he a good philosopher?

Susan  
Quite good.

Lucinda  
I would hate to be named after a bad philosopher.

Susan  
Heaven forbid.

(LONG PAUSE)

Lucinda  
(FRUSTRATED)  
I...try to remember things...I really do.

Susan  
I can see that.

Lucinda  
(STANDS; MOVES TO STAGE CENTER)  
I know I've lived a life. I'm sure I have....

Susan  
You have indeed—

Lucinda  
But I can't remember...sometimes I remember parts of it, but mostly...mostly it's a dark room.

Susan  
(QUIETLY)

...Getting darker.

(PAUSE)

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

Susan  
There is.

Lucinda  
(SOFTLY)  
I can tell...I'm not that far gone....not yet.

(PAUSE)

Susan  
I'm doing what I can.

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 my mother. ...You gave me life.

Lucinda  
Do 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  
(VAGUELY)

...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?

The one we saw yesterday. Susan

Was he nice? Lucinda

I suppose so—what does it matter if he's nice or not? Susan

Maybe I'm not sick after all. Lucinda

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

But maybe I'm wrong. Lucinda

Think so? Susan

Yes. Lucinda

(PAUSE)

Mother, what's my name? Susan

Your name? Lucinda

Yes. Susan

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

It's Susan. Susan

Susan. Lucinda

You chose it yourself. Susan

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