

# *Losing Ground*

*A One-Act Play by* **John Mavin**

## Losing Ground

Copyright © 2009 John Mavin.

Losing Ground was first published in *The Prairie Journal*.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License. In short, this means you are free to share (to copy, distribute and transmit the work) and remix (to adapt the work) under the following conditions: you must attribute the work to me—but not in any way suggesting I’m endorsing you, you may not use this work for commercial purposes, and if you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you distribute the resulting work only under the same or similar license to this one. To view a copy of this license, visit

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

or send a letter to

Creative Commons,  
444 Castro Street, Suite 900,  
Mountain View, California, 94041,  
USA.

*- Cast of Characters -*

*DAVID*

*David Fisher-Green, late thirties, caterer in a small town.*

*MICHAEL*

*Michael Fisher-Green, early forties, dying of cancer, David's husband.*

*MRS. REISSNER*

*Gladys Reissner, mid-sixties, small town society matron. (Voice only.)*

*JENNIFER*

*Jennifer Hallman, mid-fifties, palliative care nurse.*

*- Scene -*

A stylish bedroom with an unmade bed, an answering machine, a dresser with an empty phone cradle, and a nightstand covered with pill bottles. A blue shoe box is visible under the bed. A door (stage left) leads to an en suite and another door (stage right) leads to the kitchen and the rest of the house.

*- Time -*

Present day.

*John Marvin*

*THE LIGHTS COME UP on the empty bedroom. The door to the lighted en suite is open.  
Michael is in the en suite, David is in the offstage kitchen.*

*MICHAEL (offstage).* David.

*DAVID (offstage).* In a minute.

*MICHAEL (offstage).* David!

*DAVID (offstage).* I'm cooking.

*MICHAEL (offstage).* My zipper is stuck.

*DAVID (offstage).* Can you wait a moment?

*MICHAEL (offstage).* I'm going to pee my pants.

*DAVID (offstage).* Fine, I'll be right there.

*MICHAEL (offstage).* Hurry!

*David, wearing a chef's apron, enters from the kitchen and runs across the stage.*

*DAVID.* I'm coming!

*David exits to the en suite.*

*DAVID (offstage, cont'd).* I'm here.

*MICHAEL (offstage).* It's all twisted.

*DAVID (offstage).* Just pull it, like this.

*A telephone rings.*

*MICHAEL (offstage, urinates in the toilet).* Ah.

*DAVID (offstage).* I've got to get that.

*MICHAEL (offstage).* Let the machine pick it up.

*DAVID (offstage).* It's probably Mrs. Reissner. Again.

*MICHAEL (offstage).* She can leave a message. Again.

*The answering machine clicks on.*

*DAVID'S RECORDED VOICE (offstage).* Hello, you've reached Crumbles Catering. I can't come to the phone right now, so please leave a message.

*MRS. REISSNER (offstage).* David? Pick up. It's Gladys Reissner.

*Losing Ground*

DAVID (offstage). Her party is this afternoon.

*David enters and runs to the dresser.*

MRS. REISSNER (offstage). I know we've already agreed on a Greek theme, but Norm wants something different. Could you make your famous cheese ball for us?

MICHAEL (offstage). Of course.

*David can't find the phone handset – it's not in its cradle on the dresser.*

MRS. REISSNER (offstage). It was absolutely fantastic when you made it for Barbara Winship last week.

DAVID. I'll be right back.

*David searches the bedroom frantically for the phone.*

MRS. REISSNER (offstage). I'm at the hairdresser's. Call me on my cell when you get the message. You know the number. Bye.

*The answering machine clicks off as David finds the phone in the bed sheets and answers it.*

DAVID. Hello? Mrs. Reissner? Crap. (to Michael) I've got to call her back.

MICHAEL (offstage). Help me with my pants first.

*The toilet flushes.*

DAVID. Fine.

*David exits to the en suite. After a beat, David and Michael enter. Michael, who is wearing a baggy sweater and loose jeans, is dying of cancer. He is bald and has lost a lot of weight. Michael leans on David, who leads him to the bed. As David props Michael's pillows, an offstage oven buzzer sounds.*

DAVID. The oven.

*David accidentally knocks a pillow to the floor as he exits.*

MICHAEL. David!

*David opens an offstage oven and removes a tray. Michael tries but can't reach the pillow. After repeated attempts and mounting frustration, Michael sits back, resigned.*

*John Marvin*

*MICHAEL (cont'd).* David.

*DAVID (offstage).* I'll be right there.

*MICHAEL.* I need your help.

*DAVID (offstage).* I'm on my way.

*David enters wearing oven mitts and sees the pillow on the floor. David tucks it behind Michael's head.*

*DAVID.* Better?

*David starts to exit to the kitchen.*

*MICHAEL.* It's got to be today.

*David stops and turns to face Michael.*

*DAVID.* What?

*An offstage knock on the front door.*

*DAVID (cont'd).* Can we talk about this later?

*Another knock. A door opens.*

*JENNIFER (offstage, muffled—as if from far away).* David? Michael?

*DAVID.* Jennifer is here.

*Jennifer enters, wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. She carries a medical bag.*

*DAVID (cont'd).* I'm glad to see you.

*JENNIFER.* Relax and do what you need to.

*DAVID.* Thank you. Coffee?

*JENNIFER.* Please.

*David exits.*

*JENNIFER (cont'd).* Hello, Michael. How are you feeling today?

*Jennifer sets her bag on the dresser.*

*JENNIFER (cont'd).* How did you sleep?

*Losing Ground*

*MICHAEL.* I don't need a nurse today.

*JENNIFER.* What's that?

*MICHAEL.* You can go.

*David enters with coffee for Jennifer.*

*JENNIFER (to David).* Can I talk to you?

*Jennifer leads David away from the bed.*

*DAVID.* How is he?

*MICHAEL.* Good-bye, Jennifer!

*DAVID (to Jennifer).* I'll take care of this. (*approaches Michael*) What are you doing?

*MICHAEL.* Tell Jennifer she can go.

*DAVID.* She's here to look after you.

*MICHAEL.* I don't need her anymore.

*DAVID (goes to the phone).* Look, Michael, I don't have time for this. I've still got to call Mrs.

Reissner back (*picks up the phone and starts to dial*).

*MICHAEL.* Don't ignore me.

*DAVID (holds phone against his chest).* I've got less than two hours, and now I've got to make a  
cheese ball. (*completes dialling, on phone*) Hello, Mrs. Reissner?

*JENNIFER (to Michael).* Is everything okay?

*MICHAEL.* Would you please go home?

*DAVID (on phone).* Does Norm like walnuts? (*to Michael*) No, she stays.

*MICHAEL (to David).* You promised to help me.

*JENNIFER (to Michael).* If you're sure you don't need me.

*DAVID (to Jennifer).* No, you're his nurse. (*to Mrs. Reissner on the phone*) What about almonds?

*MICHAEL (gets to his feet).* David.

*DAVID (to Michael).* What?

*MICHAEL.* Now.

*DAVID (to Michael).* You selfish bastard! (*to Mrs. Reissner on the phone*) Can I call you back?  
(*hangs up*)

*JENNIFER.* David?

*MICHAEL.* Before it's too late.

*DAVID.* I've got too much to do today.

*MICHAEL.* You never want to talk about this.

*DAVID.* Of course I don't.

*MICHAEL.* David, I can't even unzip my own pants anymore.

*DAVID.* That's not a reason to kill yourself.

*JENNIFER.* Oh no.

*MICHAEL.* Or pick up a stupid pillow.

*Michael collapses. David and Jennifer rush over.*

*DAVID.* Michael!

*JENNIFER.* We've got you.

*MICHAEL.* I'm out of time.

*DAVID.* Don't say that.

*JENNIFER.* If you take care of yourself, you could still have another six months.

*DAVID.* I'm doing the best I can. Remission is still a possibility.

*MICHAEL.* Bullshit. Every treatment has failed.

*JENNIFER.* Michael –

*MICHAEL.* This cancer is terminal and aggressive and we all damn well know it.

*JENNIFER.* You're right.

*DAVID.* What?

*JENNIFER.* I'm sorry.

*DAVID.* I can't deal with this.

*JENNIFER.* David, you're going to have to.

*DAVID.* What?

*JENNIFER.* Michael needs you.

*DAVID.* I've got to call Mrs. Reissner. Jennifer will take care of you.

*JENNIFER.* David.

*DAVID.* What?



*Losing Ground*

*JENNIFER.* I have to respect Michael's wishes. He wants me to go.

*DAVID.* You're supposed to save lives.

*JENNIFER.* Michael has the right to refuse care.

*DAVID.* I don't believe this.

*JENNIFER.* He also has the right to die in comfort.

*DAVID.* Fine, you're fired.

*MICHAEL.* No, maybe she should stay.

*JENNIFER.* Let me help.

*DAVID (to Jennifer).* Get out.

*MICHAEL.* Stay.

*DAVID (throws Jennifer's bag to her).* You heard me.

*JENNIFER.* Look, Michael is my patient.

*DAVID.* He's my husband.

*MICHAEL (motions Jennifer to approach him).* I want her here. *(to David)* I know this is hard.

*DAVID.* Yes. It is.

*MICHAEL.* I need you to listen to me.

*Jennifer sits next to Michael.*

*DAVID.* Why are you giving up so early?

*MICHAEL.* I've told you before.

*David turns to leave.*

*MICHAEL (cont'd).* Please, don't walk away again.

*DAVID.* Fine, I'm listening.

*MICHAEL.* I don't want to die like my mother did.

*DAVID (turns to face Michael).* So what if you have to have a catheter?

*MICHAEL.* That's not the point.

*DAVID.* I don't care about dignity.

*MICHAEL.* David.

*DAVID.* I care about you.

*MICHAEL.* I couldn't care less if I wet my pants on national television.

*DAVID.* What is the point, then?

*MICHAEL.* I'm scared to die.

*DAVID.* You want to kill yourself because you're scared to die?

*MICHAEL.* Yes.

*DAVID.* You're not making sense. (*starts to walk away*) I've got a cheese ball to make.

*MICHAEL.* Do you remember how my mother died?

*DAVID* (*stops and turns to face Michael*). In the hospital. We were all there, you, me, your Uncle Robert.

*MICHAEL.* How did she die? Exactly?

*DAVID.* She had cancer.

*MICHAEL.* You're not quite getting this.

*DAVID.* No fucking kidding. I don't get any of this.

*MICHAEL.* Do you remember what she was like at the end?

*DAVID.* We saw her every day.

*MICHAEL.* Her body, what was her physical condition?

*DAVID.* She was bed-ridden.

*MICHAEL.* Be precise.

*DAVID.* She was dying.

*MICHAEL.* How did she die?

*DAVID.* You don't look anything like her.

*MICHAEL.* She couldn't talk. She couldn't move.

*DAVID.* Michael.

*MICHAEL.* She looked like a garden rake. There was this smell –

*DAVID.* Stop!

*MICHAEL.* She died of thirst and starvation.

*DAVID* (*shakes head*). She died of cancer.

*MICHAEL.* That's going to be me.

*DAVID* (*starts to cry*). Why are you doing this?

*Losing Ground*

MICHAEL. Come here.

*David returns to Michael's side. Michael embraces him.*

MICHAEL (cont'd). Would you just listen to me?

*David pulls back.*

MICHAEL (cont'd). Please?

DAVID. Fine.

MICHAEL. Near the end, I remember giving her water on the end of this little padded stick. The nurses told me to wet her mouth with it. When that wet stick touched her lips, she moaned. She knew exactly what was happening to her.

*David holds back for a moment.*

DAVID. Oh my God.

*David hugs Michael tightly.*

MICHAEL. That's what I'm afraid of.

DAVID. I understand. Now.

JENNIFER. You can't know for certain if your mother was fully cognisant.

MICHAEL. She was.

DAVID. I don't want that to happen to Michael.

JENNIFER. I understand.

DAVID. What do you want us to do?

MICHAEL. I'd like help into bed. Please.

*Jennifer and David help Michael into bed.*

MICHAEL (cont'd, takes David's hand). This doesn't mean I don't love you.

DAVID (holds back tears). I know.

MICHAEL. I don't want you to feel guilty. This is my decision. I'm the coward, not you.

DAVID. Don't say that.

MICHAEL. Why not? It's the truth. I'm too chicken shit to die naturally.

JENNIFER. How do you want to do this?

*John Marvin*

*MICHAEL (reaches for his pillow).* I've got a plan, but I can't do it alone.

*JENNIFER (fixes the pillow behind Michael's head).* I can make you comfortable but I can't actively participate.

*DAVID.* Oh God, I won't smother you. I can't hold a pillow over your face.

*MICHAEL (shudders).* That's not what I had in mind.

*DAVID.* Do you have a gun? I've never fired a gun before.

*MICHAEL.* I don't have a gun.

*DAVID.* A rope?

*Michael shakes his head and laughs.*

*DAVID (cont'd).* Stop laughing at me. I've never killed someone before.

*MICHAEL.* And you won't be killing someone now. This is a suicide. *(beat)* Look under the bed.

*David looks and retrieves the blue box.*

*DAVID (gives the box to Michael).* Is this what you want?

*Michael nods and opens the box.*

*JENNIFER.* Gravel?

*MICHAEL.* Eight packages enough?

*JENNIFER (mentally calculates).* Should be.

*DAVID.* You're going to take them all?

*MICHAEL.* That's the plan.

*David removes a folded piece of paper from the box.*

*DAVID.* What's this?

*MICHAEL.* A note. I think it's customary.

*DAVID.* When did you write a note?

*MICHAEL.* It's so you won't be arrested. Or Jennifer, either.

*JENNIFER.* Don't worry about me.

*DAVID (beat).* So, do you want a glass of water?

*MICHAEL.* I can't take that many pills. Mix them in something.

*Losing Ground*

DAVID. Like what?

MICHAEL. I don't know.

JENNIFER. Something easy to swallow. Milk?

MICHAEL. Ick.

DAVID. A smoothie?

MICHAEL. You're the caterer. Be creative.

*David squeezes Michael's hand. The phone rings again and the answering machine picks up the call.*

DAVID'S RECORDED VOICE (offstage). Hello, you've reached Crumbles Catering. I can't come to the phone right now, so please leave a message.

MRS. REISSNER (offstage). David? Gladys Reissner again. Is everything okay? About that cheese ball –

*David gets up from the bed, unplugs the phone, and exits. Offstage, David opens the fridge, pours some juice and opens a champagne bottle. Michael flinches when he hears the champagne open. Jennifer holds Michael close.*

JENNIFER. Hold on.

MICHAEL. I just can't die like that.

JENNIFER. I understand.

MICHAEL. I can't.

*Offstage, David fills the rest of the glass with champagne. David enters carrying a mimosa on a tray. Tears stream down his cheeks but he tries to hold them back for Michael's sake. He does not sit down, nor does he hand the mimosa to Michael.*

MICHAEL (cont'd). A mimosa. I've always liked mimosas. Sit down.

*David sits.*

MICHAEL. It's okay.

DAVID. No it's not. Not really.

*Michael gives David an exasperated look.*

*John Marin*

*DAVID (cont'd).* I can't believe I'm letting you do this.

*MICHAEL.* David –

*DAVID.* But I am. (*kisses Michael*) I love you.

*MICHAEL.* I love you, too.

*David gives Michael the mimosa. Michael drinks half and coughs. David and Jennifer lean forward. Michael waves them away and drinks the rest. Jennifer takes the glass. David holds Michael's head.*

*JENNIFER.* This should be painless. Like falling asleep.

*DAVID.* What do you want us to do now?

*MICHAEL.* Just sit with me.

*Michael closes his eyes. David holds Michael close and weeps.*

*Blackout.*

*End of play.*

*- Notes -*

Losing Ground was first produced for the Walking Fish Festival in Vancouver in 2008 with the following cast and crew:

*DAVID.* Arpad Barough

*MICHAEL.* J.C. Roy

*MRS. REISSNER.* Erin Vandenberg

*JENNIFER.* Elizabeth Kirkland

*Director.* Todd Thomson

*Assistant Director.* Chris Baker

*Stage Manager.* Maria Denholme.

# *About the Playwright*



John Mavin has taught creative writing at Capilano University, Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia, with New Shoots (through the Vancouver School Board), and at the Learning Exchange in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. He is a graduate of SFU's The Writer's Studio and also holds an MFA in Creative Writing from UBC. A past nominee for both the Aurora Award and the Journey Prize, his short fiction has been translated, studied, and published internationally. If you'd like to learn more, he invites you to visit [www.johnmavin.com](http://www.johnmavin.com).

