

Setting

Act I, Scene 2 (A) — Two years later

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Barbara's garden party birthday is going to be difficult this year. Tensions are running high, and her marriage to Charles has been going through a rocky time.

Barbara and Charles Gardener have been married for nearly two years now. There have been many ups and downs: periods of fiery passion, followed by periods of heated arguments, distance and tearful making up. Right now they are in one of the hard times. They still love each other deeply, but they have been fighting, mostly about trivial things: where to go to dinner, whether to have friends over on a given night, how often to see Barbara's mother Virginia, or Charles's brother William. Sometimes the fights have been more serious: money and Charles's spendthrift habits, whether or not they are ready for a child.

When they are fighting, Charles frequently disappears: usually for the evening, occasionally for the night, once for almost a week. Barbara fears that he is cheating on her, but he denies it, and she has found no evidence. With Charles gone, Barbara has been spending more time with her brother-in-law, William. William has been offering her comfort and reassurances, while worrying about the degradation of the marriage. At the same time, some of the old spark has kindled between William and Barbara. Seeing the problems in her relationship with Charles, Barbara has begun to wonder if she would have been better off with the reliable William.

Meanwhile, Virginia has been watching Charles and Barbara's deteriorating relationship with great concern. While her marriage had its problems, she believes in the sanctity of marriage, and wants her daughter to try to resolve her own marital issues. At the same time, she is very worried that Charles might be off with another woman. If things must come to a head, she wants it to happen before children are involved.

Barbara Gardener

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There can't be another fight tonight. There just can't be. You married Charles for the passion the two of you share, but that alone doesn't make a marriage. You understand that now.

The past two years have been hard, and it keeps getting harder. With every fight, your tolerance for Charles diminishes. So does his willingness to actually engage with you on the issues. He'd rather run away than deal with the things that need to be dealt with, be it how tight money is, his increasingly heavy drinking, or whether or not to have a child.

Charles works at the local high school teaching English, but his commitment to his job is wavering. He spends as many evenings off at the local theater as not. He's even talked about quitting his job to throw all of his time into theater. It is just another escape hatch for Charles, another way to run away from his responsibilities.

You barely make up after the fights any more. He'd have to be at home to make up. Instead, he's out drinking and playing cards, losing money that you desperately need to get by. Last summer he disappeared for almost a week. You couldn't prove it, but you're more than half convinced that he was with someone else.

William, somehow, for some unknown reason, has been there for you through all of it. Despite what you put him through, leaving him for his brother, he supports you. When Charles has gone off on another tear drinking, or comes home after having lost another paycheck gambling, you'll call up William and he'll listen. William always knew how unreliable Charles could be, a fact that you had tried to convince yourself might change after the marriage.

Lately, even the passion with Charles has been muted. Charles has been more distant than usual, more willing to just give up and less willing to engage. You couldn't prove it, but the only thing that makes sense is that there is another woman. She's probably one of the pretty ones from the theater.

You can't stand the thought of Charles cheating on you, but at the same time, you know that more is going on between you and William than is right. The thought has crossed your mind more than a few times that you married the wrong brother, or at least that if Charles is off with another woman, you should have what you want as well. It isn't right, but sometimes it is so hard when William is always right there supporting you and Charles is gone again, who knows where.

There better not be another fight tonight. If there is and Charles vanishes again, you don't know what you'll do.

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Charles Gardener

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Tonight is the two year anniversary of the party at which you asked Barbara to marry you. It should be a happy night, you should be celebrating her birthday and your relationship, but you just can't stop thinking about Karen. You met Karen a few months ago, when you were both in a production of *The Tempest* for your local community Shakespeare group. She played Miranda and you played Ferdinand. As your romance played out on stage, something blossomed between the two of you as well. You never quite crossed the line with Karen, but you dreamed of her many a night after that show.

You know it's wrong, and, since the play, you have tried so hard to avoid Karen. She was recently hired as a secretary at the high school where you teach English, so it hasn't been easy. You're terrified that Barbara will find out. You love Barbara desperately, and couldn't stand to have her leave you, but with Karen, everything is so easy.

You and Barbara have been fighting a lot recently. Mostly over stupid stuff. Money is tight. You've been talking about trying to break into a career in theater. Barbara wants you to keep the job you already have. You desperately want a child, but Barbara isn't sure she's ready. You know that if you had a child to care for it would make everything better. That's what you really need, a child to bring your relationship closer.

It's so hard to be around when you and Barbara are fighting. You can't stand to see her mad at you, but you can't give up on how you feel. When things get too bad, you storm out. Usually you just go to a bar for a few hours and drink and play cards. A few times, you've just gotten in the car and driven all night. Once, last summer, you just took off and drove until you couldn't drive any further, and slept in the car. You did that for three days before you were ready to turn around. But, so far, there's one thing you haven't done. You haven't turned to Karen.

Even if things get better, even if you have a child, could that really let you forget about Karen? That beautiful long, blond hair. Those perfect lips. Those dark blue eyes. She's so beautiful, and you see her at school every day. How long can you really hold out, especially when you and Barbara are fighting like this?

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William Gardener

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Sometimes you think you could almost kill your brother Charles. The past two years have been terrible for Barbara and Charles, and your brother is to blame for all of it. While it still hurts you that she chose your brother over you, it hurts you even more that he's utterly destroying every chance Barbara has for happiness.

While you have finished up at law school, the two of them have been struggling in every sense: emotionally, financially, romantically... You hear about all of it from Barbara when she calls you in tears after Charles has vanished again. It used to be only a few times a month, then once a week. Now it is a couple of times a week. You can't stand how much he is hurting her and you wish there was something, anything, for you to do about it.

While you're starting to make some real money in your career, Charles can barely hold down a job as an English teacher at a high school. He wants to quit even that to gamble on a job in theater. He drinks. He gambles. He vanished for a week last summer. And the worst of it is that you're convinced there is another woman.

You saw the two of them together last week, just talking. But you've seen that look in your brother's eyes before. He used to look at Barbara that way. The woman apparently both works at the high school and is involved in the theater with Charles. That he would do this to Barbara is the worst blow imaginable.

You plan to confront Charles about it tonight, quietly if you can. He needs to shape up and treat Barbara the way she needs to be treated. She needs someone who actually loves her enough to be there for her and put her needs before his own. And if he won't deal with it, you'll take what you've seen right to Barbara. She has a right to know.

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Virginia Vela

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You have been very concerned lately about Barbara and Charles. They've been fighting too often, and you're afraid of where it's headed. This summer, Barbara ended up at your house in tears after Charles disappeared. He didn't come back for almost a week. She's afraid there's another woman, although she doesn't know who.

What's really important here is their marriage. You know that Barbara and Charles still love each other. There must be a solution here. Marriage is sacred, and the marriage vows are not to be broken lightly. It is still possible for them to reconcile. They have their problems, but they still have the basis of a good marriage.

Maybe what they really need is a child. Barbara has been worried about having children because money is tight and things are unstable, but Charles really wants kids. Maybe if they had a child, that would be enough to hold him there and keep things stable. You've seen it work for some of your friends.

On the other hand, you remember what happened to your marriage after Barbara was born. Things were going well before, but while you were so focused on your daughter, your relationship with Frederick fell apart. If Charles has been seeing someone else, this could drive him further into her arms. You don't believe in divorce, but if this marriage is not going to survive, it would be better if it ends before children are involved.

If there are issues, they need to be resolved. If Charles is seeing someone else, it doesn't have to be the end. Forgiveness is important in a marriage, and both Charles and Barbara need to remember that. However, if there is someone else, Barbara needs to know, and it needs to end, so their relationship can heal.