

Setting

Act I, Scene 4 (AG) — Five and a half years later

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This year, as for the past four years, the garden party has been shifted from Barbara's birthday to that of her five-year old daughter Stephanie. After Charles and Barbara divorced, Barbara remarried William. While the relations between the brothers have been strained, Charles is very involved in Stephanie's life, and has tried hard to be a good father. Even through the divorce, fatherhood has brought some stability to his life, and he lives for his weekends with his daughter. He has dated a few other women, but none seriously.

Barbara and William are doing well. William has a good job at a law firm, and, while their marriage lacks the passion that Barbara's relationship with Charles had, it also lacks the tumult. William works long hours, but since Stephanie was born, Barbara has been relatively content to focus on her young daughter.

Recently, however, a new issue has come up. Barbara's mother, Virginia, has had a stroke, and can no longer manage on her own. Barbara and William need to decide whether to care for her themselves, or send her to a nursing home. They recently bought a new house, and the cost of a nursing home would be hard on them. However, Barbara is very busy chasing after Stephanie, and the extra work of caring for an ailing parent would be difficult. She has been considering going back to college to become a teacher once Stephanie is in school, and caring for Virginia would make that very difficult. At the same time, tuition might make the costs of a nursing home even more prohibitive.

Barbara Gardener

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Stephanie is a joy in your life, but also a headache. The antics of a five year old are both delightful and never-ending. With her entering school, you had been planning on going back to college yourself. You'd like to see if you could get the education you need to be a teacher; working with Stephanie has made it clear how much you enjoy teaching and working with young children.

However, a few months ago your mother Virginia had a stroke. After she got out of the hospital, she's come to live with you. William's salary lets you afford a rather large house and there was room to bring Virginia in due to the fact that she can't entirely manage on her own. Between struggling to help your mother in her limited capacity and taking care of a five-year old child though, you fear that your dream of being a teacher may not be reachable.

While you hope to be able to enjoy the garden party with the family, it is a good time to also talk about what is going to be done with Virginia. If she is put in a nursing home, she will almost certainly be able to get better care than you can provide. At the same time, it is both expensive and she won't be with family all of the time. You'd visit, probably daily as much as possible, but it still wouldn't be the same. And, it may enable you to go back to school after all for a teaching degree.

Even thinking about the last part makes you guilty though. Do you really want to stick your mother in a nursing home just so you can pursue your dream? Wouldn't it be better (and less expensive) to simply buckle down and care for her at home yourself? You aren't sure how many years she has left and with Stephanie soon to be in school, it would be manageable.