

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.

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.