

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.