

Setting

Act II, Scene 4 (AHINP) — Fifteen years later

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Stephanie and Zach Bloom are doing well. They have two children: Jessica, age 10 and Michael, age 7. Stephanie has recently gone back to work as an accountant. With her help, Zach bought the garage where he works, and the business has been fairly successful. He has even hired a couple new people to help out.

Things have not been going as well for Charles and Barbara. A few years back, Barbara was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. This year she had to quit her job, and caring for her has been taking more and more of Charles' time. Money has been very tight since Barbara stopped working, and Barbara and Charles are fighting about money yet again. Things are made even worse by the fact that Charles can't leave: Barbara can't make do without him, even for a few days.

Since Charles and Barbara refused to accept Zach twelve years ago, Stephanie's relationship with her parents has been very strained. Last year, Barbara reached out to her daughter. With her failing health, she wanted to mend fences. Since then, Stephanie has been talking more with her parents, and she and Barbara have begun to rebuild their relationship.

Stephanie and Zach have been discussing whether or not to help out Charles and Barbara, and if so, how to do so. Stephanie is still very angry at her parents for their rejection of Zach, but Zach worries that if she doesn't help, and her parents continue to suffer, Stephanie will regret it. If Zach and Stephanie do decide to help out, they have the money to make a difference. They could pay for someone to come in and help out Barbara a few days a week, but that won't mend the wounds the way personal care would. After watching her grandmother languish alone in a nursing home, Stephanie feels like she should be the one to care for her mother. Just providing money won't heal their relationship. At the same time, with two children, Stephanie's work, and Zach's business, time is limited.

Will Stephanie and Zach help at all? If so, will Stephanie devote time to caring for her mother, or will she simply pay for help and be done with it? Can Barbara and Stephanie mend their broken relationship this late in the game?

Barbara Gardener

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It seems like every week there is something else you can't do for yourself as the MS continues in its relentless course. Almost worse than what it is doing to you is what it is doing to your family. Increasingly, you lay awake at night wondering whether it wouldn't just be better for everyone if you were dead.

Charles... what this has done to Charles is almost unthinkable. The passion he's carried throughout his life seems to at last be ground down by something, and it is terrible to see. He's trying so hard to be careful and considerate around you, reining in all that he's feeling and trying to be a stable force. As terrible as it is, sometimes you find yourself going out of your way to pick fights with him just to see his passion flare again.

You know how badly he wants to run away at times, and you don't blame him for it at all. Sometimes you think it would be better if he would, even though it would really leave you alone. You don't have many more years at this point, but what those years will do to him... you don't want to think about. Yet, a prisoner in your own body, you have little else to think about.

You're so proud of your daughter, Stephanie, and what she's made of her life. Despite all of your concerns, Zach turned out to be a good husband for Stephanie and a wonderful father as well. You also love your two grandchildren. Seeing them is one of the greatest joys in your life. Reaching out over the past few years to try to reconcile with Stephanie has been one of the hardest, but most rewarding things you've ever done.

You know that everyone has been talking about whether or not to put you in a nursing home or to dedicate more personal time with you. You remember all those years ago when you and Charles made the decision to put your mother, Virginia, into a nursing home. She was miserable, but now you understand better how willing she was to just let go at the end and not be a burden anymore. As much as it terrifies you, it may be best if you begin the process of separation from your family soon as well. You love them all, and it is precisely for that reason that you would rather they remember you in better health than personally doing everything for you while you slowly fade away.

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Charles Gardener

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You're really glad that Barbara finally reached out to Stephanie and Zach. It's so good to see them and your grandchildren more often. You felt terrible about what happened when they announced their engagement. It's been so hard seeing your grandchildren so rarely. You're happy to play with children again and hear about how their lives are going. There has been so little joy in your life lately.

The last few years have been very hard on you. You never realized how much you relied on Barbara until she got sick. All the little things she used to do around the house, all the cooking and cleaning, keeping up with the garden. The two of you have been fighting constantly. You fight about finances, about how you do what used to be her chores, about everything. You know she's in pain, and you know it's hard on her, but you don't know how long you can cope with this. Since she had to give up her job, everything has gotten harder. She's around all the time, and there's not enough money coming in.

The worst part is, you can't even get away from it. You can't leave Barbara alone. Even when you're gone for work it's hard on her. She has trouble doing basic things for herself, especially when she's having a bad day. In the past when the two of you were fighting, you could always leave for a day or two. Now the best you can do is go to a bar for a few hours, and you still feel guilty about doing that.

If you had the money, you could hire someone to take some of the load off, but getting by is hard enough right now. The money you got from William's inheritance has mostly gone to pay medical bills, and Barbara's disability doesn't go very far.

You just don't know how much longer you can deal with this.

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Zachary Bloom

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Your life with Stephanie has been a complex, but wonderful one. The two of you have both wrestled with so much in your past, but have found strength together. You now have two amazing children, stable employment, and a comfortable home. Yes, it has been a struggle, but you've made it here together.

Your own parents both died when you were younger and you've never had the chance to be close to Barbara and Charles. The two of them pushed you and Stephanie away when your engagement was announced and have only tried to build a real relationship in the past couple of years when things started going downhill for themselves.

These days, your primary concern has to be your own family: Stephanie and your two children. While things are going relatively well for you at present, it isn't as though either of you have a lot of time or money. If Stephanie really wants to help out, you'll make some accommodations, but you think it would be best if they were as minimal as possible.

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Stephanie Bloom

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You're worried about your parents. You're so grateful that your mother finally reached out, but you still haven't entirely forgiven her. At the same time, no matter how angry you still are, it's painful to see her suffering. Your mother's MS has been getting steadily worse, and she had to quit her job this year. Your father isn't coping well at all. You're almost surprised he's still there.

You and Zach are doing alright financially. You've thought about helping out. Maybe you could hire someone to come in and provide care a few days a week. It isn't much, but it might make the difference. On the other hand, is that really what you want to do? If you want to rebuild a relationship, is buying someone else's time the right way to do it? You feel you should help out more yourself, but you have a full time job and two young children to care for. You can't spare much time. Besides, are you really ready to spend that much time around your mother after all these years?

On yet another side, you remember what it was like watching your grandmother dying in a nursing home. She was so angry, being cared for by strangers. No matter how often you and your mother visited, she always felt alone. That sort of care should really be provided by someone the patient knows and loves. You just don't know what to do. You want to help out, but you still resent her rejection of you and Zach. You feel so lost.