

# THE OFFICIAL BIOGRAPHY

by

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**New Play Exchange:** <https://newplayexchange.org/users/13964/kurt-mcginnis-brown>

**Advanced critique of *The Official Biography*:**

We must assume control over the narrators of this class of tale by letting them know that their descriptions are untrue and will harm our future warriors.

—Plato, *The Republic*

## CHARACTERS

Xan Smith                    40 at the start of the play

Henry Percival            78 at the start of the play

## SETTING

Henry Percival's rural house. We see a portion of it stage right. Stage left on paving stones is a blackened barrel for bonfires. Downstage is a wrought-iron table with matching chair and an incongruous, comfortably worn armchair.

Stage right, barely visible, a mailbox. Offstage left is a grove of trees we will begin to imagine. The sun sets here, which orients any talk of the disappearing sun. As the sun sets, light is filtered through the trees and onto the stage.

## TIME

### **Act 1**

Scene 1: afternoon, early fall.

Scene 2: midday, spring, the following year.

Scene 3: dusk, that same day.

Scene 4: a few minutes later, as dusk disappears into evening.

### **Act 2**

Scene 1: late morning, late winter, the following year.

Scene 2: late afternoon, late summer, the same year.

Scene 3: fall, the same year.

## NOTE

Paragraph breaks in dialogue are for pacing and indicate interruptions or shifts in the flow of a character's thoughts. Actors choose whether these last one beat or several.

**ACT I****Scene 1: Afternoon, early fall.**

On the table towers a thousand-page manuscript, on top of which are several pens of different colored ink. A stone keeps pages from fluttering away. HENRY wanders from the table to stand stage left, looking for inspiration or probably distraction at trees and sky.

Up to ten seconds pass: HENRY's utter loneliness.

A phone somewhere in the armchair makes its noise. XAN appears stage right. HENRY hustles as much as he is able to reach the phone.

HENRY

Hold on, hold ...  
... patience ...  
....  
Where's the goddamn—

He digs the phone out of cushions and answers.

one se[cond] ...  
... get my [breath] ...

XAN

Hello?

HENRY

Hen—  
Henry Percival.

XAN

Yes, hello, hi, this is Xan Smith. Your publisher told you about me?

HENRY

No, don't think so.

XAN  
 Actually she did.  
 Said she did anyway.  
 Didn't she?

HENRY  
 mmmmm ...

XAN  
 Told you I'd like to come talk to you?

HENRY  
 vaguely...

XAN  
 I'm a writer see and—

HENRY  
 Stop there. No. Absolutely not. Sorry to be so but.

He disconnects.

XAN  
 umm ...

Realizing he had more to say, HENRY fumbles to find the number on his phone and calls back.

Mr. Percival, this isn't meant to be antagonistic—

HENRY  
 Wannabe novelist a lifetime younger than me looking for a break.

XAN  
 (overlapping)  
 No—

HENRY  
 Let me save you the awkwardness, the effort, the sucking up and the pleading. I got *no* advice for young writers, kay? Simple as that.

XAN

(overlapping)

That's not what—

HENRY

No insider contacts, no tricks to hook an agent, no magic mantra to keep yourself writing every day. You're on your own, every writer is. *Tough!* Get used to it! And so I'm—politely this time—hanging up.

XAN

But it's not advice I—

HENRY

No come to think of it, yes I *do* have advice for young writers: Don't do it! Gigantic mistake. Why the anguish? Life is for living, something novelists only pretend to do. And then the shocking discovery that you're old and it's too late.

XAN

I—

HENRY

Life: living.

XAN

Got it. Thanks. Listen, the reason I—

HENRY

Wish someone'd stuffed that simple wisdom into my stubborn self half a century ago. You publish your latest novel: big whoop. Couple months of fuss and recognition. And for that you pay out years of pain and loneliness? That's plain idiotic. I wasted my life, don't throw yours away.

Kay?

Kay, nice talking to you.

XAN

But wait—

HENRY

And—seriously—best of luck with your novel.

XAN

You misunderstand, sorry, I'm not a wannabe novelist.

HENRY

What'd say?

XAN

Novels are pointless.

Sorry, that was.... What I mean is we can't fool around anymore with fiction, the world is too serious, too dangerous. Nonfiction. Expose the truth. That's me, what I do. Essayist, blogger, cultural critic.

Are you there?

HENRY

Barely.

XAN

Bad start, do this over: Your publisher said, she told me she ran this project by you.

HENRY

News to me. *Project?*

XAN

She commissioned me to write what we're calling a cultural-critical essay about your most famous novel, *We Need to Talk*.

HENRY

You wanna *bore* people? That novel was nearly fifty years ago and I have not one, not a single interesting thing to say about it. Ancient history, everyone's dead, especially my characters.

XAN

That's why you should talk to me. A project that benefits both of us.

HENRY

I never do interviews. I say something stupid trying to sound intelligent. Always do.

XAN

Maybe you should accept that you're stupid— No, *not* what I meant. What I mean is most people think they're more intelligent than they really are— No, sorry, what I *mean* is—

HENRY

You scare me.

XAN

I'm an asshole but I don't mean to be.

HENRY

Don't apologize. Being scared is good for my heart.  
The country roads up here are confusing. You have one of those things tells you  
how to find my place?

XAN

I have one of those things, and if my car starts I'll be out of the city in an hour and  
there in three.

HENRY

At the end of my lane you'll see weeks of mail bursting from the mailbox. Could  
you maybe...?

During the following, HENRY peeks at a few  
pages of the manuscript. Painful. He crumples  
and tosses these toward the barrel.

XAN

I have to say umm ... fear. Yes, now that you ask, fear is the first word comes to  
mind. I was. I was *afraid* driving up there. Not of him, though those who knew him  
best swear he could be a load—that famous incident in the midtown restaurant after  
his best-known novel was published; his public quarrels with wives; and of course  
the unexplained death of that woman in the Eighties. We've all wondered about that,  
right? One of his oldest friends recently speculated that Henry became a virtual  
recluse to keep the torture found inside any writer from ever again exploding and  
damaging others. So okay, so maybe yes, maybe ha, maybe a little nervous about  
meeting *The Hammer*,

HENRY plops into the armchair.

HENRY

(overlapping)

Aahhh....

XAN

but no, to answer your question, what terrified me going up there that day was what  
he represented: success at an early age, then decades of decreasing interest in his  
work, and finally obscurity. A writer's living death. I mean, until my essay it was  
what? decades since anyone took him seriously. *That's* my fear because what if

that's my fate? No matter how well received your work might be—and every one of you writers out there knows this—you constantly worry you're a fraud.

She turns toward him and pantomimes slamming her car door. We hear a wonky, metallic *wreeek*-thunk. HENRY rouses himself.

HENRY  
You that non-fiction writer person? Surprised you actually came all this way.

XAN  
The drive here this time of year is magical. The *trees*.

HENRY  
Yep, we have trees.

XAN  
The leaves, the colors, the damp dead fall aroma. And this *house*. Just how we picture a writer's cozy life in the country.

HENRY  
Mail?

XAN  
Oh, right.

She pulls out the accumulation of mail then approaches. He extends his hand.

HENRY  
Henry Percival, cozy novelist.

XAN  
Xan Smith, non-fiction writer person.

HENRY  
Admit it, when you talked to my publisher you didn't even know I was still alive.

He dumps the mail into the barrel.

XAN  
You don't even open it?



HENRY  
Junk.

XAN  
Then why have me bring it to you?

HENRY  
The mail lady yells at me. And that manuscript on the table—bring it over too.

XAN  
Is this a new novel? *Past a Lifetime*, by Henry Percival.

HENRY  
Have to accept I'll never finish it. Dump everything in and we'll burn it. Junk mail, novels—it's all the same to the barrel.

XAN  
I'm not going to let you burn this.

HENRY  
You hate novels. Pointless, you said.

XAN  
Sure, but. I mean. What I mean is even though fiction is becoming a waste of time, the effort you must have put into this.

HENRY  
Thousand pages and not even close to done. Should have known not to start anything ambitious at my age.

XAN  
Insertions, changes, corrections, whole new pages—all in longhand. What I'm holding is way more valuable than the file on your computer. You have to keep it. Posterity.

HENRY  
Nah, bring it over. Better off burning it.

XAN  
There are scholars starting out who could make a career out of studying a draft like this, unfinished or not. Destroying it is selfish.

HENRY

Maybe I could take one last shot at finishing it. Winter's coming, my best time for working.

XAN

Yes, do, keep going—and don't even think about destroying this.

HENRY

Sure, I'll call 911 if I feel I'm gonna do something drastic to that pile of paper.

XAN

The Hammer. Isn't that what they call you?

HENRY

Used to. Henry's fine. What's your first name again?

XAN

X-A-N, pronounced Zan, as in *Alexzandria*. That's where my mother was born. In Egypt.

HENRY

I know where it is. Spent several gray unhappy winters there in the Eighties.

XAN

What were you doing in Alexandria several gray winters in the Eighties?

HENRY

Writing. All I've ever done.

Thought we'd start out here. If it gets too cold we can move inside. Have seat, have seat.

Why the face?

Is it the bird shit?

It is, isn't it?

With licked fingertips he rubs away the spots on the armchair.

XAN

It's okay. No, really.

HENRY

Sure?

XAN

I'm fine on this hard  
cold  
metal chair.

They sit: she perches; he drowns delightedly.

HENRY

Ahhhh, the old bones.  
Wife and I'd wrestle this monster outside when it looks like the good weather will hold. Took us longer every year. Managed it alone this time because she met someone. Embarrassing to divorce at our age but I'm happy she's happy. They travel a lot.  
[*Surprised*] They seem to like each other.

She puts her phone between them.

XAN

Don't pay attention to that.

HENRY

Recording this?

XAN

Scrupulous documentable accuracy is what I'm after.

HENRY

Everything I say?

XAN

Best to just ignore the phone.  
So I'd like to start with a little back and forth about your work. The novel you're having trouble finishing—thoughts on that.

HENRY

A failure. Years of total waste. Don't want to talk about it.

XAN

Okay, then....  
Your wife, you were saying about your wife.

HENRY

Right. Used to we'd manage to haul the chair all the way to the gazebo over there. I'd get a fire going in the firepit, one hemisphere of my body toasty, a mortal chill on the other. And there I'd sit, through the minor purple of daily dusk, staring at the sky, first star winking at me while I dream up the next book. I write my first drafts in longhand. I use these colored—sorry, is that offensive?

XAN

Offensive how?

HENRY

If you didn't notice, never mind—pens: different character, different color. The protagonist in that manuscript towering before you started out green, but draft after draft, years upon years, he turned yellow. As for the chair—I'm just blabbering, that phone has me nervous—here's as far as I got with it this year. Pens of color? Is that better?

XAN

Race comes up already?

HENRY

With you sitting there it sounded bad.

XAN

All right, let's get to it. My skin color *is* pertinent to why I'm here. My essay is a confrontation.

HENRY

I knew it.

XAN

It'll appear next spring in a new online journal that's already shaking trees, exposing the rotten fruit of this country. The war on drugs was a pretext for exterminating Black communities, white people are their own paranoid invention—that kind of thing. No poetry, no fiction. The journal takes only creative nonfiction.

HENRY

Nonsense term.

XAN

You'd say that. Of course. Being a novelist of course you say that, but my essay posits that fiction is no longer relevant in a society that sanctions killing people like me. Fiction only births delusions and dangerous lies. Creative nonfiction turns hard

statistics into story, cruel facts into art. More immediate, more relevant, more vital than making shit up.

HENRY

My whole life.

XAN

Oh boo hoo. The reality is fiction is a distraction. The real work of writing today is political, is about forcing change, is about—I'll say it, brace yourself—is about erasing your oppressive white male voice.

HENRY

Why not just ignore me?

XAN

Need to put you in historical context.

HENRY

Bury me, you mean.

XAN

Sure. Why not?

HENRY

And the whole racial thing?

XAN

How many people like me show up in your books? In *We Need to Talk* there's only one character of color and she's murdered. But as the white man's voice gets hoarse and weakens, it becomes of historical interest. We peer one last time into your cruel, fucked-up world before dismissing you.

HENRY

Gee.

XAN

My essay is a woman of color's response to the ethos of the dead white male novelist.

HENRY

I think we can agree that I'm not dead.

XAN  
I assumed you must be.

HENRY  
Surprise!

XAN  
Essentially, though.

HENRY  
I swear, you do scare me. I love it.  
So from what I can tell so far, non-fiction is about cruelty.

XAN  
If you think science is cruel.

HENRY  
Okay, think we've gone as far as we can. Thanks so much for coming.

XAN  
My people aren't usually welcomed in places like this, way out here in beautiful nowhere. That slanting late light pushing through those ... whatever trees.

HENRY  
The giant gnarly one is an oak—you know that at least.

XAN  
Nope.

HENRY  
One of my few remaining friends. Very loyal. Seeing it from my bedroom window each morning is when I'm sure that once again I woke up alive.

XAN  
We have trees in the city of course, but they're just trees.

HENRY  
Over there's a birch—that stone-colored bark and ridges that look like eyes? And crowding up behind both of them in that long elegant line, those are aspens. Their trembling leaves in the breeze calms the jumble of trouble in your brain.

XAN  
Why were you unhappy?

HENRY  
Was I?

XAN  
In Alexandria. You said you were unhappy there.

HENRY  
Oh, that. *Decades* ago.

XAN  
Didn't you go there shortly after your fiancée was found dead—

HENRY  
(overlapping)  
Here we go.

XAN  
and all the publicity that followed?

HENRY  
And you conclude what?

XAN  
Don't conclude, wonder. In the novel she was Black. Was she in real life? I mean, everyone assumes your novel is autobiographical.

He unbuttons his shirt.

HENRY  
Get used to it. I don't give a fuck about offending anybody anymore. Likely stone dead in a year or three. Already had two bypasses, the last a quintuple. Scars like zippers. I like letting the sun blaze on them. To feel what I'll soon be missing.

XAN  
Regarding you leaving the country, I could—I could see being innocent but escaping to avoid the bothersome attention. I could also see running because I'm guilty.

HENRY  
Can this possibly still be interesting to anybody anymore anywhere?

XAN

Novelists are the privileged among the privileged. You exist in dreams. People are always interested in the raw facts behind the dream worlds you create.

HENRY

How did the stars align so that you who must have been barely born when *We Need to Talk* was published is decades later writing about it?

XAN

Envision the typical literary party.

HENRY

Okay.

XAN

The kind I was sent to cover last month. Launch of yet another self-absorbed precious pointless novel.

HENRY

Got it.

XAN

Breathing throughout the room are other fiction writers, bewildered by the exaggerated importance given to a writer they *know* isn't very good and yet, shit, she gets *published*? And the heavy bass line of jealousy informing the wit and gab, the shambling parade up to the lucky novelist and, "I just *love* your work...."

HENRY

Yep, been to this party.

XAN

Then you see what I see: the man with bony wrists downing drink after drink wondering how much longer he can call himself a novelist if he's never actually in danger of finishing one, the woman whose launch party was the year before feigning indifference that tonight her novel is mentioned by absolutely no one. I'm in the corner finishing a blog post about the utter failure of fiction and itching to get out of there. But there was this cute man—

HENRY

Stop: paint the picture, let me see him.



XAN

What are you looking for, like how he was dressed? Slate gray sports jacket, black tee shirt, tattoo on his neck right about here.... That kind of thing?

HENRY

Black? White? So I can picture him.

XAN

Maybe he was Native American. Or Asian.

HENRY

I admit it's a failing of mine needing skin color for my imagination. Fine. I'll picture him as Native American. Go on.

XAN

He's gawking at the bookshelves of perfectly arranged, dusty American classics, and I let him know how much I *hated* novels like this one—fingered it from the shelf over his shoulder—and had no intention of ever reading it because it was by one of those white male novelists whose voices crowded out the rest of us for centuries.

HENRY

Me?

XAN

How'd you guess? And the cute man actually starts to say, "Don't judge a book by its cover," but I told him I had no problem judging your book without reading it because it wasn't what it *looked* like but what it *smelled* like: *Stank* of privilege and oppression.

HENRY

Good lord you did, you came here to destroy me.

XAN

I've protected myself by being intellectual about your racism: condemning it by logic instead of passion. But with that party I let go, and I *love* it. Fuck all you privileged pointless white novelists!

HENRY

Good for you if you actually said that out loud.

XAN

The *shit* that goes on in this country! the genocide! And you sit there under your pretty trees and worry about your art, your little fake stories built up into books,

while the country continues to murder people like me. How do you justify your life, hiding away in fiction?!

HENRY

Your anger is very impressive but you're overselling it. You can't be as angry as you want me to believe. The passion's all up in your head where non-fiction lives, not in your heart, which is my territory: fiction.

Let me hear more about the man at the party you were trying to impress.

XAN

Turns out to be the editor of that online journal you've never heard of and while I was making the point that I'd never read your novel he instantly had the rather cruel idea of commissioning me to not only read it but to visit you and write about my encounter with the author of an autobiographical novel in which the only Black character is killed by the narrator. But I'm like, "Isn't he *dead*?"

HENRY

And the cute, possibly Native American editor answered?

XAN

Physically, no. Artistically, yes. Canonically, essentially.

HENRY buttons his shirt.

HENRY

September up here when the sun fades chills you to the bone. Might just trundle up to the house to get a sweater.

She switches off the recorder. He goes into the house.

XAN

Exactly right—you've hit on *the* interesting question. Why that first meeting was I hesitant to umm really *push* him about his involvement in the woman's death? I think, and tell me if this makes sense to you all, I think my essay *needed* that uncertainty, a question without an answer. Did he or didn't he? So the reason I didn't umm press him is because, well because I didn't think he'd be honest anyway, and I didn't want to be coerced by a novelist's suspect version of the quote truth.

He returns wearing a sweater and holding another for her.

HENRY  
Just in case.

XAN  
Kind of you.

HENRY  
You don't know how kind—that one doesn't stink. Not like this old friend hugging my shoulders. Tatty sleeves, drooping ripped pockets like abandoned birds' nests, and the odor of my winter workroom. Mmmm: cats and candles. Smell.

XAN  
I get cat. Candles not so much.

HENRY  
This essay of yours ...

She switches on the recorder.

XAN  
Will get your books back into print, gain new readers, restore your legacy. *We Need to Talk* was a phenomenon, the novel everyone was discussing back then because they wanted to believe it was based on real life, on the—let's call it what the police called it—"suspicious death" of that woman.

Silence.

HENRY  
Is there a question?

XAN  
You know the question.

HENRY  
What happened that night?

XAN  
If you're willing to give us the truth.

HENRY  
Meaning you'll believe me only if I admit I killed her.

**Scene 2: Midday, spring, the following year.**

The comfortable chair and towering manuscript are missing. Sitting at the table HENRY scribbles on a pad of paper, lipping the words to test them, then crumpling and tossing that page toward the burn barrel and starting on another sheet of paper. Several crumpled pieces of paper surround him.

XAN, on the phone, becomes visible offstage.

XAN

Baby, I *know* you think it's too early to mention the biography because *yes* he's going to be pissed now that he's read the essay but we *agreed* I have to do this soon, the man's nearly eighty years old and ... and he spotted my car. Wish me luck.

....

Baby, *of course* I'll be diplomatic.

The pantomime car door: *wreeek*-thunk!

Hammer!

She pulls mail out of the stuffed mailbox before proceeding to the stage.

HENRY

Astonishing.  
You.

XAN

Yep, me.

HENRY

Showing your face.

XAN

So of course you're upset....

HENRY

You're lucky I'm the only one in this rural county without a shotgun.

XAN

And because I'm so lucky I'll stay.

She gives him the mail.

Aren't gonna burn it?

HENRY

Because of your essay, hordes of stalkers're making the trek up here now.

XAN

Hordes?

HENRY

Four down there on the lane this morning to gawk at my evil.

XAN

Four does not make a horde.

HENRY

When they're staring at you and won't leave it does.

XAN

Come on, Henry, such a minor annoyance considering the benefits. Your name is literary currency again.

HENRY

"He got away with it." That's how you end the essay.

XAN

What I actually wrote—

HENRY

That recorder of yours never once heard me say I killed her!

XAN

*actually* wrote—

HENRY

Go ahead say whatever.

XAN

"*IF* he got away with it." IF—IF—IF—

HENRY

(while she brings up the essay on her phone)

You know damn well we crave the more dramatic story, true or not. Choose A: He wrote a cool novel about a murder, or B: He wrote a novel about a cool murder *he committed*. Who doesn't choose B?

XAN

(reading)

“*If* he got away with it, perhaps he compensated in some way for his crime by giving us a riveting novel that tries over its five hundred-plus pages to make sense of a world with people like him in it. Murderers. They stroll among us. You probably know one without realizing it. Let's be grateful any time they perform an act of social restitution, as when using the shiver of escape from punishment to spur a creative burst that results in an enduring work of art.”

HENRY

Exactly what I said you said: He did it.

XAN

“*But—*”

HENRY

And there's no statute of limitation for murder. I'm surprised the sheriff's car didn't growl up the lane behind you. “Let's go, Henry, this lady here says you're guilty.”

XAN

“*But*” my essay concludes “it's equally possible that Henry Percival is simply a genius at making up stories, at fully, frighteningly imagining himself into the head of a killer and delivering that vision in a prose masterpiece.” *That's* how I ended the essay. Nowhere did I ever—

HENRY

Oh, come on, Xan, who's gonna—

XAN

no, Henry, not ever, conclude that you did it.

HENRY

But anyone—

XAN

I *couldn't*. I have no proof.

HENRY

But *everyone* reading that thing gets the implication!

XAN

No, implication. I left it open. Had to. Because when I was here last September you wouldn't say anything one way or the other about her death.

HENRY

Like if I'd said outright, "No, Xan, I did not murder that woman," there wouldn't always be—admit it; in your heart—always be the suspicion that maybe....

XAN

So—*exactly*—so that's why my essay presents both possibilities. If I was a fiction writer, sure, I'd assume the authority to invent and make that the quote truth about that night. But real life's unconditional. Facts are everywhere but the truth about someone else is impossible. The point of my *nonfiction* essay was to explore how the truth of that night can never be known except by one person, whether that's you or the unknown stalker the police cited when suspending the case.

HENRY

You talk to people. What do people you talk to think?

XAN

That you did it.

HENRY

My point.

XAN

But the novel you wrote is so powerful the facts have been made insignificant. Instead of anyone in the real world, the narrator's been guilty of the crime all these years.

HENRY

And yet a real woman died. A woman I loved.

Pause.

XAN

I mean if you're ready to talk about it....

HENRY

First, got a project you can help me with. Up at the house.

XAN follows him. He bumps open the front door against something heavy.

Got it to the door but gave up. Take that other side.  
Careful.

She crawls over the object impeding the door.

What d'ya think?

XAN

(off)

I guess.

HENRY

On three. Ready? One ... two ... *lift!*

He lifts the object and backs away. She stumbles into view, trying to keep up while holding up one side of his big armchair.

XAN

What happened to three?

HENRY

My age you look for ways to save time.

XAN

My god, it's heavy.

HENRY

Down.

Rest.

Solid maple and fifty years living with me. You get older, memories heavier. All that weight's got to settle somewhere.

Go again, ready?

XAN

I'll count this time. One ... three!



Not ready, he stumbles catching up.

All the way to that whatever tree?

HENRY

*Oak.* We'd die if we tried. Table's far enough. Right here and careful down.

She beats him to the chair.

XAN

Yeah, cozy. Got anything to drink?

HENRY

In the basement some bottles of beer from the last party here, oh, years ago. Guess I could see if they're any good.

He goes into the house.

XAN

Great question: why after so long did he open up to me? Well, here's what I think about that. What I think is that it's, there's umm times—and I'm sure you all have experienced this—times you're haunted so long by something that to confront it, to actually talk about it, to bring it up to your *teeth* ready to burst out can be, well no *is*, terrifying. And I think because umm, maybe because he and I were so different, you know? But really no I do, I admire his courage. To finally be able to well umm talk honestly about how she died.

He returns with two opened beer bottles.

XAN

Stop! Perfect! Don't move: A novelist in a yard littered with paper. Smile.

She takes a picture and examines the result.

Yikes! Scary.

HENRY

Scary's what people want from me now your essay's out.

XAN

Come on, big sweet Hammer smile.

HENRY

Forget it. One grumpy photo is all you get.  
Your beer. And do you mind getting out of my chair?

XAN

Oh ... of course!

She gets up. He sits.

HENRY

Ahhh....

She picks up the crumpled pages while he regards each piece of junk mail for a nanosecond before spinning it toward the barrel. Meanwhile a sip of beer.

HENRY

Gaak, that's nasty!  
Sure you don't want yours?

XAN

"*Language Lessons*, by Henry Percival." Is this a new title for the novel you were working on when I met you?

HENRY

Nah, I burned that.

XAN

You promised you wouldn't!

HENRY

Did I?

XAN

Looking through that draft would have been invaluable for my new project.

HENRY

What new project?

XAN

Damn you for destroying that manuscript. All that material in longhand is much richer, more revealing than whatever files are on your computer. No, seriously, I'd like to argue that you had no right to burn it.

HENRY

Ooops.

XAN

So what are these pages?

HENRY

The start of my autobiography. Thought I'd try the superior form of creative nonfiction.

XAN

"By conventional reckoning the end of my life is long overdue, and the men in my family never last long anyway. Heart disease, every one of them. Unfortunately for me heart trouble didn't strike only in the form of disease. Living until dying would have been easy if all I had to worry about were sclerosis, thrombosis and angina."

Another page.

"*Language Lessons*, by Henry Percival. For those keeping score, the end of my life is long overdue. The men in my family dropped dead from heart problems by age sixty-five, every one of them...."

HENRY

Need to get the opening exactly right. Thanks to you my life's interesting again.

XAN

"*Language Lessons*, by Henry Percival. I wish heart trouble meant only worrying about sclerosis, thrombosis and angina. But over and over, for me, the most devastating problems of the heart couldn't be fixed by surgeons."  
Cannot believe I show up the day you start a new book.

HENRY

Nope: Last September after I burned the novel.

XAN

Fantastic! Where's the rest of it?

HENRY

Those three false starts and a few more in the yard—that's it.

XAN

You're still only on the first paragraph?!

HENRY

Telling the truth ain't easy.

She takes a picture of each sheet of paper.

I hope you're not putting those pictures on Insta-Embarrassment, or whatever it's called.

XAN

If you give me permission.

HENRY

Then no. That autobiography's going nowhere. The sad truth is that I express myself authentically only when spinning a story. Real life?—situation like you and me here talking?—I'm never able to say what I'm feeling. Caused me no end of trouble.

XAN

Like with that woman?

One piece of mail isn't junk. He opens it.

HENRY

*Jayzus!* My agent. Take a look at this!

XAN

Looks like a royalty statement.... Six dollars and forty cents?

HENRY

Last year's earnings. But read the sticky note.

XAN

*profs (2) say book in class fall*

HENRY

My novel's gonna be back in classrooms!

XAN  
Is that what this means?

HENRY  
Isn't it?

XAN  
*Is* it?

HENRY  
Gotta call her.

He finds his phone among the cushions.

XAN  
You think my essay...?

HENRY  
Of course your essay. Hell, *yes*, your essay. For decades, thousands of college kids read *Talk* every semester, but that income dried up years ago— [*into phone*] Yes, hello, this is Henry Percival. Mimi in?

....

That's right, the killer. She in?

....

No, no message, but have her call me soon as she's out of the meeting, thanks.

He disconnects.

I'm almost happy.

XAN  
Then now's a good time to tell you. There's talk.

HENRY  
Kind of talk?

XAN  
My project. Why I came to see you. There's interest.

HENRY  
Yeah?

XAN  
My husband's a publisher and—

HENRY  
You have a husband?! What about the cute color-ambiguous editor?

XAN  
What about him?

HENRY  
I thought you two were in love!

XAN  
What are you talking about?

HENRY  
Nothing. My imagination. I need plausible plots to feed on. Keeps me entertained. Never mind.

XAN  
Anyway. My husband's a publisher and he's interested.

HENRY  
In what?

XAN  
A biography of you for his Short Lives series.

HENRY  
Short lives? I'm eighty next birthday.

XAN  
The *books* are short. Forty thousand words is the limit so they can be written quickly to capitalize on current interest. A dozen in the series so far. As your biographer I'll need full access.

HENRY  
*You're* writing it?

XAN  
It'll be good for you, it'll be good for me. Most Short Lives sell just enough to warrant the eight thousand dollar advance. My husband thinks, he says—well come

on, Henry, I mean it's obvious, right? *If*. If a certain horrible aspect of your story is true, yours will be the series' first bestseller.

His phone makes its noise.

HENRY

Mimi, thanks for calling back. That note you added to my royalty statement—does it mean what I hope it means?

....

[*He flaps excitedly at XAN*] Yeah?

....

[*More vigorous flapping*] That's fantastic! And, Mimi, there's talk. They're doing a biography.

....

Of me!

....

I know!

....

Kay, right, we'll discuss, but could make you a lot of money. Tell me you love me all over again.

....

Mm-bye, talk to you later, bye.

Phone call over.

HENRY

Now I really am nearly happy.

XAN

What's she say?

HENRY

A professor at Alabama and another at Oregon asked for desk copies because they intend to put *Talk* on their fall syllabi. It used to be solely lit departments, but the woman at Oregon is in Sociology. Your essay positioned the narrator and, by extension me the author, as a moral monster worthy of study.

XAN

Get used to the fuss, Hammer. You're a name again.

HENRY

*Sociology* students. There could be entire podcasts devoted to me.

XAN

This is real life. Better than literature.

HENRY

Speaking of life, I have another pointless doctor's appointment. While I'm gone, feel free to comb through the house for material. Drafts of past novels are in filing cabinets in the basement. Notebooks for projects I'll never now get to are scattered on the floor around my desk. Letters—yes, we wrote letters—are in boxes in the hall closet. As for my email, the password is 123HENRY all caps question mark. Contact them all—wives, friends, enemies. Especially the enemies.

XAN

And in the letters, the notebooks, talking to your wives, friends and enemies—am I going to find the answer to the question my essay raised? Because this biography could be huge.

HENRY

If.

XAN

That's right.

HENRY

When I get back....

She watches him drive off. The quiet is at first exciting, then loneliness creeps in. She approaches the house, pauses before intruding, then goes inside.



**Scene 3: Dusk, that same day.**

On the table are piles of notebooks, folders, and another towering manuscript. XAN is on the phone.

XAN

But baby I *can't* leave, it's happening, he's given me access to everything—and you wouldn't believe the tons, I mean *tons* of paper, including the notebooks for *We Need to Talk* and the original draft— What?

....

Of course I remember, babe, but can't we just choose another day, does it really umm make a difference which day because—

....

I know we planned it for tonight ...

She waves ironically to two unseen people gawking at her from the lane.

and I was looking forward to it too and if you really want me to drive back right now, but I mean all this paper. And there must be a clue in all this that'll—and letters, the *letters*. Everybody wrote to him. Ralph Ellison, Norman Mailer, Nadine Gordimer— What?

HENRY appears yelling at the two gawkers.

HENRY

Getting my shotgun!

XAN

Baby, what I mean is can't we declare umm *tomorrow* our special day?...

HENRY approaches carrying a grocery sack.  
XAN waves.

I'm disappointed it's not the exact date too, I am, but it can't really, I mean does it really, well, matter?

....

Come on, babe, you're being—

....

Okay, gotta go, he's back, we'll talk.

....

Yep, me too, bye.

HENRY

Were those two trying to get up to the house?

XAN

They sort of crept around down there taking pictures, then seeing me froze, then seeing you got scared.

HENRY

I don't want to move, I'm too old to move.

XAN

Two people, Henry. Two timid fans.

HENRY

When your biography comes out it'll be wall-to-wall creeps on the lane wanting to get a look at me. How long do I have before it's published?

XAN

Slow down.

HENRY

Ballpark.

XAN

I still have to write it.

HENRY

Of course you're going to write it.

XAN

Only if I'm convinced it'll draw interest.

HENRY

And say you do, say you discover what you want to discover in order to write it.

XAN

*Did you [kill her]?*

HENRY

I'm saying what if?

XAN

Oh, I'd cruise through the writing, there's be so much there. Finish by end of the year, publication in spring.

HENRY

One year of relative peace before the gawkers and stalkers run me out of here. Sad to have to leave this house.

He stands over her.

XAN

I know, I know. You want your chair.

HENRY

Ahhh....  
You can have this chair when I leave here.

XAN

How did it go with the doctor?

HENRY

Eh. My heart's a ratty mess, arteries blocked with pancakes of plaque. They'll keep cutting me open if that's what I want but the chance of a third surgery doing any good is slender.... Is how it went.

XAN

So what do you do?

HENRY

Keep hoping to see that oak tree every morning.

XAN

I started digging through all this paper. Interesting to a lit professor but not sure there's enough here for a life.

HENRY

And yet somehow I lived one.

XAN

A life people want to read about. Just saying there has to be more than he sat at his desk and made shit up.

I started emailing people who seem to know you best. Two emailed back immediately. Jackson Beck?

He hates me. HENRY

Sally Broomgard? XAN

Sally loves me! HENRY

XAN  
Well, the hater and the lover both say, with respect to the *incident*—let's designate it that for now—that you're incapable of hurting someone. If that means I'm just writing about a novelist growing old churning out stacks of paper, then the book's appeal is real limited.

HENRY  
Maybe Jack and Sally don't know me as well as they think.

XAN  
Then tell me what happened that night.

HENRY  
(stalling)  
So you're getting this chair. And my crammed filing cabinets and stacks of notebooks and drafts of novels. And you can have my computer with all the files.... Maybe easiest if you just buy the house and everything in it. You could write my biography right here where my forty years haunt the place. Sure it's lonely, but what do you expect?—you're a writer....  
Was that your husband on the phone just now? Didn't sound good.

XAN  
At this point we're basically two apartment keys and a joint debit card.

HENRY  
How long you been with this loser?

XAN  
Hey: loser?

HENRY  
You obviously don't love him anymore.

XAN

He's great and probably I don't deserve him, it's just.... I mean, ten years already and what are we doing?

HENRY

So leave him.

XAN

Easy, right?

We were supposed to have our special dinner tonight. Anniversary of our first date. We haven't had sex in a while, so it's a focused effort. Sex went from every day to once a week to monthly to quarterly, while fights went in reverse, and now we fight every day and we know that means we're splitting up but we're scared about the logistics involved: who gets the apartment? all our crap? do we have to divvy up our friends too? and what about lonely holidays? kinda thing.

HENRY

As far as a place to live—remember, you're buying this house. I'll give you a great deal.

XAN

Gee, Henry, the opportunity to be single and lonely and the only Black woman in a hundred mile radius? So enticing. Anyway I have no money. When he and I split up, not only will I not be able to buy this or any other house, I'll be scrambling to find a real job just to make rent and there goes my writing career.

HENRY

But we have a bestseller you said.

XAN

That's what the Short Lives people think.

HENRY

Movie maybe?

XAN

Possibility.

HENRY

Then plenty of money pouring in for both of us. I can escape to the Caribbean and you can do whatever you want.

XAN

If, remember? The book's got to be interesting.

HENRY

Sure.

Let's celebrate. I don't know what you like, so....

He digs into the grocery sack.

Beer?

XAN

Nah.

HENRY

Wine? Don't know if it's any good....

XAN

Meh.

HENRY

Scotch.

XAN

That's it!

HENRY

Gotta love a woman who drinks whiskey! I'll get glasses.

He goes into the house.

XAN

I think you've hit it *exactly* right: something about our age difference, our vastly alien backgrounds, and maybe his doctor scaring the crap out of him explains why he confessed to me. When he told me the story of that night I was, I felt sick: he'd gotten away with it and for nearly fifty years lived a life of freedom he didn't deserve. Sick and *angry*. But mostly?—being totally honest here—mostly I was thrilled.

He returns.

HENRY

You better pour. I drop things.

She cranks opens the scotch and splashes a bit,  
then a bit more, into both glasses.

XAN

Here's to.... Whatever.

HENRY

To getting rich off my life.

XAN

That.

They wince and gag from the burn.

More?

HENRY

Of course.

She pours, they drink.

You actually like this stuff?

XAN

No.

She drains what's in her cup.

HENRY

Me neither.

He drains his too.

XAN

So are we celebrating because you have something interesting to tell me? Or just cuz? I mean if you aren't going to give me the story, I better be going. Big night at home. Sex, I guess.

HENRY

I get the sense that sex today is more gymnastic than it used to be but not as spiritually overwhelming. Am I on to something?

XAN

Not the best person to ask.

HENRY

Give me a hand with all this paper you brought out. It's going to the barrel.

XAN

But I need the drafts and notebooks for *Talk*. And the letters. We can't burn the letters.

HENRY

Everything. I'm done as a writer and best to leave nothing but the published books behind.

He begins dumping paper into the barrel.

XAN

There's one letter. Where is it?... Here, yes, I particularly like this one. [*Reads*] "I know the struggle you're going through. Because no one begs us to write, we panic at our presumption—who are we to bother others with our prickly lambent disgusted dancing loving painful ecstatic *overwhelming* vision of the world? It takes a special arrogance to lay bare your joy and pain on paper and expect others to eagerly turn the pages."

Remember who that's from?

HENRY

mmmm ...

XAN

Saul Bellow, when you were struggling with *We Need to Talk* and on the verge of burning it. And back then burning your manuscript was terminal. Bellow talked you out of it.

HENRY

No, he didn't.

XAN

You've said many times in interviews—

HENRY

I never intended to burn the manuscript of that book. I *threatened* to burn it to anyone who'd listen as a way to prevent myself from actually doing so.



Almost everything is in the barrel.

XAN

But not really everything—

HENRY

(taking the last items from her)

Be strong.

XAN

But you're letting me have the files on your computer.

HENRY

Sure.

Help me scatter the pages. Tear them. A scramble of paper is better for inducing flames.

XAN

This must be emotional.

HENRY

Not really. Writers are wrestlers. The muscles needed to shape sentences into a coherent book have gone slack in me. That last novel grew gigantic and impossible till I knew I was no longer a writer, just a guy putting words one after the other. I'm done. Relief finally. No more struggle.

XAN

I guess I'm happy for you, then.

HENRY

And I'm happy you're here to witness the ceremony.

XAN

Let me get a picture.

HENRY

Only of my best side.

XAN

Which is...?

HENRY

Either.

He acts out poses: fake-striking a match, fake holding it to the paper....

XAN

Good.  
Another.  
Nice....  
Wanna see?

HENRY

That's me, all right.  
Now for real. With this gesture my writing career is over. I'm at peace.

He sets the paper on fire.

XAN

Whoosh.

HENRY

Shocked you didn't put up more of a fight to stop me.

XAN

It's all on your computer.

HENRY

Hitting delete is nowhere near as dramatic as a bonfire but just as satisfying.

XAN

*What?*

HENRY

Yep.

XAN

All the files?

HENRY

I thought it'd be more painful than it was, but just ... tap.

XAN

Then I need your flash drives.

HENRY

I never understood what those were for.

XAN

Oh, god!

She tries to pull out a bundle of burning paper.

Shit, Henry!

HENRY

You don't need all this paper for your book. You got me and I got time: it's still a ways off before I turn into this same fiery glow and combustion. This morning I wrote to my daughters to instruct them to cremate me. They'll be happy to do that for me, at least.

XAN

(watching the fire)

All those years of work, all that you accomplished.

HENRY

I used to look down on people who weren't writers. Anybody can just live a life. That's easy. And so I opted out and instead hid in my workroom with an addiction to stories that shouldn't be any more socially acceptable than being a heroin addict. And for what?

For paper.

Well, that's ash now and I owe you the story.

Fade to a twilight sky, with the fire giving localized light.

**Scene 4: A few minutes later, as dusk disappears into evening.**

The scene builds out of the previous scene's end in twilight. The actors handle the transition by stringing colorful lights around the table and chairs. HENRY plugs in the cord.

HENRY

Ta-da.

Used to be every spring we'd put up these lights.

XAN

Fair warning, Henry: whatever you tell me I'll use.

He sits.

HENRY

Ahhh....

Here we are, neck deep in dusk. Sun below the horizon, trees clinging to the last bits of fuzzy yellow tossed their way, turning blue, then gray.... This time of day still has its charm, though my age I panic when the light leaves and I conjure the day after I'm ashes and everything but me continuing, indifferent, while for the first time I fail the world by not being here to appreciate all this.

Throughout the scene, twilight turns to night until only the colorful lights illuminate the two of them.

XAN

I'm going to record this. Do we call it a confession?

HENRY

Why the hell not.

She puts her phone on the table.

XAN

Take your time.

HENRY

I've always wondered if I'd ever tell this story. Now I wonder if I'll tell it well.

XAN

Don't worry about style.

HENRY

No, of course. Just the truth. No adornment.

XAN

Just the truth.

HENRY

It's these moments when something is *about* to happen that life is most beautiful. That thrill of pausing on the brink before everything changes.

Pause.

XAN

Not meaning to rush you but ...

HENRY

So.

Let's see.

I must have been ... twenty-eight? I don't know. Anyway, still a young guy, had published several stories and my first novel is coming out. Figure I'm hot shit. This will be my life: write every morning, nap afternoons so I can party at night and still enough sleep to be back at the desk in the morning. Discipline is all it takes to be great.

Pause.

XAN

Remember this is voluntary. If you choose to tell me what happened I'll have to write it.

HENRY

It was summer. August. And I was madly in love:  
with literature  
and my place in it  
with the library call letters assigned to my first novel  
and dreams of future titles.

But *not* with the woman I was engaged to. The night I told her I wanted to break it off, she got drunk.

I'm just going to say that, even though it sounds like I'm shifting blame. But she was drunk. Fact. And she was never a good drunk. Aggressive. Another fact.

We were housesitting for her parents, who were in Hawaii or someplace they thought beautiful.

XAN

You don't remember?

HENRY

I'm trying to tell this.

XAN

Right. We can go back later to fill in details. Please keep going.

HENRY

We were in the  
on the  
they had this glassed-in porch and we were on the porch and I'm convinced something terrible is going to happen because she's raging about all she'd *invested* in our relationship and what a *bastard* I am, and I'm getting angry trying to tell her that sure I love you but that doesn't mean I owe you my *life*, and marriage interferes with the only thing I ever wanted, which is to be a great writer—and I can't let YOU or anybody or anything RUIN THAT!

XAN

I'm right here, Henry. You're talking to me, not her, no need to shout.

HENRY

I know it doesn't make me look good but if there's one truth in my life it's that the desire to be a great writer trumps *everything*: love, marriage, family.

XAN

Clear.

HENRY

And so  
and well  
and so she sort of punched at me  
like this  
calling me all kind of names  
and I'm not taking that and so  
and then  
well, yes, I did, I punched back.

Pause.

XAN

What happened then?  
Henry?  
Then what happened?

HENRY

And then  
well then she fell back onto the daybed and I did  
what I wrote in the novel, I did  
it happened.

XAN

A knife?

HENRY

I  
oh, yes, I grabbed a knife  
I  
I grabbed the knife and jabbed at her again  
like another punch.  
I don't know, I think  
I think yes, I think I did, I think I *meant* to kill her because all that rage in me, but the  
tip of the knife met this surprising resistance  
from her blouse  
her skin  
a rib.  
And it's like at that moment I have a chance to pull back from the dreadful  
consequences but then the bone shunts the knifepoint aside just a millimeter,  
allowing all my anger forced onto her to go deeper and I kid you not the blood.  
And the look on her face.  
And did I just *do* that?!

XAN

Did you call an ambulance?

HENRY

Sorry?

XAN

I know I would have, anyone would, because you must have panicked, remorse, and  
called someone—police, ambulance. Heat of the moment kind of thing you tell  
them.

HENRY

It's my story. Don't layer in what you want to hear.

XAN

But was she still alive?

HENRY

What?

XAN

Could you have saved her?

HENRY

I think so.

Maybe.

Yes, probably could have. She must have been, as you say, still alive.

Even then, even at that moment what I most wanted was to describe the blood. In my head, words.

Always writing.

Even now always searching for the best  
the right

the *exact* way to present it.

Thick and sticky.

And the iron whiff jabbing your nostrils.

And this amazing visible curvature at the boundary of the spread of blood where it pools up gently but doesn't yet spill over....

And then does, leaving purple-red fingerlike smears over the floorboards.

In the novel later I was able to use that.

XAN

What did you do? She must have been begging you to call for help.

HENRY

I heard her say something. This tiny clotted voice from the floor.

XAN

Yes, and then?

HENRY

I

then I



XAN

What did you do, Henry?

HENRY

what I did was

was I turned on all the lights.

Again that groaning voice from the floor.

And then I shut the door behind me, broke the plate of glass over the knob, threw the door open again, and ran.

No, wait, first I pulled the driver's seat of her parents' car forward, as if she'd been driving. We'd been out earlier and I wanted it to seem as if she'd come home alone. Then.

*Then* I ran.

Stayed off main roads as soft neighborhoods turned to gritty downtown streets. Got back to my place forty minutes later and the next hour practiced my dumbfounded reaction for when the police came.

XAN

The narrator in the novel, he didn't try to cover up the crime, didn't run. He took responsibility.

HENRY

You want people to like your main character.

XAN

You're saying, let me be clear what you're saying to me: you left her to die.

HENRY

Left her, yes.

To die, yes.

XAN

Why did you turn on all the lights?

HENRY

That's what they wondered.

XAN

The police?

HENRY

"Hey, Sam, you telling us *all* the lights?" They kept obsessing about that while I'm in the station telling my story. To me the lights were normalcy to indicate she'd

been alone, no intimate evening with her fiancé. But I overdid it. “*All the lights?*” they kept saying. But neither Sam nor anybody else linked that odd detail to the guy sitting there in from of them.

XAN

In the novel the narrator didn’t intend to kill her, that’s very clear.

HENRY

This isn’t the novel.

XAN

Then it wasn’t, there’s no way to call it an accident.

HENRY

No, I don’t think that’s an accurate label for what happened.

XAN

And you never paid for what you did.

HENRY

Oh, I paid for it. Oh yeah I paid. Payment was a lonely, unlived life at a desk making shit up.

XAN

So you are, you did, I mean you did, you *murdered* her.

HENRY

The last real thing I ever did. After that life’s been make believe.

Silence. The colorful lights go dark.

## ACT II

**Scene 1: Late morning, late winter, the following year.**

The large chair has been dragged downstage, and the iron table and chair knocked over.

HENRY

(off)

*Idiot!* My ass denting the cushion of this chair for forty years doesn't make it worth *stealing!*  
If I had a

Winded he runs out of the breath needed to conclude with an exclamation point.

a shotgun....

He comes on stage. Rarely ever out of the house these days, he wears sweatpants, a sweatshirt underneath his old sweater, and slippers. Medical tape and gauze are on his forehead.

Think I'll just  
yeah just  
sit  
down.

XAN arrives. She pantomimes closing the door and we hear a pleasing fwoomp.

XAN

Like the new car?!

She approaches.

How'd the chair get down here? Why's the table...? What *happened?*

HENRY

Another fan of yours. Every one of your posts hinting at the explosive truth behind the biography brings out the freaky literary types. The quaint ones collect leaves

from those trees. When winter blanketed the yard they picked stones out of the snow. Okay, fine, I can share leaves and a few rocks. Idiot today though tried to steal the chair.

XAN

That was him driving off in the Prius?

HENRY

Yep.

XAN

That chair's as big as his car. What an idiot!

HENRY

Idiot: we agree. I'm in the house and see this guy, this *idiot*, creeping into the yard. I bang on the window. He pays no attention. Is he deaf? So I come outside and this far from the back of his head—you and me—I yell: "I'm calling the cops!" He leaps like a kangaroo. He can hear, all right. But he continues yanking the chair toward the lane while keeping an eye on me. Gets to the edge of the yard, looks at his car, looks at the chair, back at the car.... As the practicalities of size finally hit him he forgets about me and I spook him again—"Yaaarh!"—and he scurries off like a little book lover.

XAN

Shouldn't confront the fanatics. They can turn dangerous.

HENRY

I'm more dangerous. I got *I-don't-give-a-shit* on my side. Old man's trump card.

XAN

Still, be careful. The buzz for the book is loud. Short Lives is promoting the hell out of this one, which means more interest. Which means consequences. For you. Not all of them good. Some of them pretty bad. The essay hinted at what many people suspected. Book comes out and everyone finds out you escaped justice, the self-styled vigilantes will come around to make you pay.

HENRY

Meantime they *steal* from me?

XAN

Maybe they think you deserve pain. I mean, let's be honest about what you did.

HENRY

It's gonna be sad to have to leave here.

XAN

What happened to your...?

HENRY

I fell.

XAN

Did you see the doctor?

HENRY

Hell no. After my doomsday visit, I'd feel a fool asking her to treat a bump on the head. I taped it up myself.

XAN

I see that.

HENRY

Mainly to remind me to not keep scratching at it. Alone I have no one to prevent me from being stupid.  
Help me get things back where they belong.

They drag the chair to its place and set the other chair and table upright.

Because I can no longer move the chair, I covered it and left it outside. But the plastic blew away on New Year's and cushion's got a layer of winter filth etched into it. See that tarp over there? Bring it over. We can use it to cover the cushion so you can sit in the good chair.

XAN

Maybe just go inside?

HENRY

Middle of March and sixty degrees—we're lucky to be able to be outside, and I feel happier when I'm in the sun.

XAN

Snow by the weekend, they say.

HENRY

Gotta depress me?

XAN

Sorry, don't know why I said that. Stupid seven-day forecasts.

HENRY

Sit. Go on, you deserve the good chair. You had to work extra hard because of me.

XAN

Finding out she wasn't Black caused me a lot of trouble.

HENRY

I know and I'm sorry.

XAN

Why'd you lie about that?

HENRY

I've lived in fictional worlds so long I can't tell a *completely* true story. I need a little leeway with facts or I suffocate. And I made her black in the novel, so....

XAN

So you thought that was good enough for real life? You realize how embarrassed I was when I went to interview her sister and discovered that the family was white?

HENRY

It was Ralph who suggested it. Ralph Ellison. It was the Eighties and he thought it culturally appropriate that a white author murder the only black character in his book. Sure, I said, why not?

XAN

It cost me weeks to revise that falseness out of the biography. It's not just a matter of changing Black to white. I lost one of my major themes, my chance to explore how the murdering imagination of white America runs deep, all the way into readers' wish fulfillment to harm people of color. A white guy murders his Black fiancé, writes a barely veiled autobiographical novel about it, millions buy his book and he becomes famous. And yet that one vital detail, the very reason I was interested in writing the damn book, wasn't true.

HENRY

Said I was sorry.

XAN

Huge problem you caused me. Puts publication back a few months. But the best part of the big reveal is still valid and will drive sales. I'll deliver the revised final manuscript next month. Galleys by summer and publication in October. Interviews for you, a book tour for me.

HENRY

And otherwise? Everything good? I don't mean the book, I mean life.

XAN

Oh, you know.

HENRY

The husband?

XAN

That.

HENRY

Doesn't sound good.

XAN

The living room in the apartment looks like the parting of the Red Sea. His stuff on that side, mine on this side, and a path down the middle.

HENRY

I hope it's not because of you obsessing over the book.

XAN

Just made the inevitable happen sooner. I was coming up here a lot, and when I was home I wasn't really there because I was absorbed with the writing. *And* there's an editor at Short Lives he's always liked. Put those together—me not present and the other woman too present—and you get the Red Sea. Problem is we have to stay together till fall when the book comes out and I can afford my own place. And we have only the one bed. My shoulders are sore from struggling to stay on my side of the mattress.

HENRY

Books mess up people's lives.

XAN

Bad with the good, though, right? For both of us. I really need the money and if this thing's a bestseller....

And you get talked about again. How about the Sociology professor who flew you out to Eugene to talk to her class?

HENRY

Best I've eaten in years.

XAN

Business is the one thing my husband and I can talk about. Yesterday he told me—ready?—the *Library of America* is reissuing three of your novels in one volume.

HENRY

The *Library of America*?!

XAN

That's what he heard.

HENRY

Those books survive on the shelf for hundreds of years. The binding never breaks, the paper never yellows.

XAN

So a few people stare at you from the lane, an idiot tries to steal your chair, somebody spraypaints that whatever-that-is on your house. The benefits will last way longer than the irritation. You'll have literary immortality and I'll be able to afford the divorce.

September just before the launch you'll be doing interviews. You okay with that, you ready? They'll be throwing pretty harsh questions at you.

HENRY

I've been practicing. But I don't like being the bad guy. In the draft you sent me to read, I'm the bad guy.

XAN

Of course you are. You're a murderer.

HENRY

Do I have to be?

XAN

Are you pretending to be demented? I can't change what you did.

HENRY

What if you don't include what I told you last summer?



XAN

The *murder*?!

HENRY

That sounds so judgmental.

XAN

Of course it's judgmental! And we love that! Short Lives never had a first printing of more than eight thousand copies, but my husband plans twenty thousand for this book. Readers adore their writers and their killers. They never expect to get both in one person.

HENRY

People emailing me nasty things. I didn't realize how much people would hate me.

XAN

Of course we hate you. That's why we're interested. Hold it...

She taps out a text, sends, then makes a call.

I know this can't be easy— [*into phone*] It's me. Check the message I sent you and send back what I need.

HENRY

It's my life. I can say no to the book being published, cause the Short Lives people no end of legal trouble.

XAN

Don't do this. Seriously, don't. This is not a good move on your part.

A text arrives.

XAN

Look familiar?

HENRY

mmmm ...

XAN

Remember me explaining this over the phone?

sorta ...

HENRY

XAN

Well, I did, I sent it to you. They call it a collaboration agreement.

HENRY

oh, yeah, that thing you made me sign.

XAN

And how that thing you signed is standard protection against the subject stopping the book. Read it.

He squints at her phone screen.

I'll make the print larger.

HENRY

Take me forever to read this.

XAN

I've got time.

During the silence accompanying his slow reading, she drops in occasional comments.

See?

....

Clear now?

....

Because Short Lives needs a guarantee that I have the right to use the information you confessed to me, to quote from it, that's why we have this agreement.

What part are you on?

HENRY

"Should the ..."

XAN

Read that part aloud.

HENRY

"subject unilaterally ..."  
"terminate the ..."

XAN

That's why this agreement. In case the subject—you—acts rashly.

HENRY

Probably I signed this. Was I supposed to read it?

XAN

Should have. Keep going.

Silence while he reads, then:

HENRY

Twenty thousand dollars?!

XAN

They call it a kill fee.

HENRY

I have to give you twenty thousand dollars if I don't allow publication?!

XAN

You knew what would happen when you confessed to me. You *knew* this.

HENRY

Don't you care about my concerns?!

XAN

Your concerns. Yes, of course, your concerns. Let's talk about your concerns.

HENRY

Now you're being facetious.

XAN

Not at all. I want to hear your concerns.

HENRY

I'll tell you.

XAN

Please do. Please tell me why you're doing this.

HENRY

I'm going to.

And why *now*? XAN

If you'd just.... HENRY

Yes, please explain it to me. XAN

If you'd shut up! HENRY

....  
 Kay.  
 Kay so.  
 Kay so I'm asking, as a *friend*, that you cut out the part about my fiancée. Or use the explanation the police accepted, that an unknown assailant was responsible.  
 ....  
 Would you consider that?  
 ....  
 As a friend.  
 ....  
 Can you hear me?

I can talk now? XAN

Don't be like that. HENRY

So I guess my first question is, what I really wonder is: What makes you think we're friends? XAN

Seriously? All this time we've spent together? HENRY

You're my subject. Nothing more. XAN

Fine. Your subject demands that you make cuts. HENRY

XAN

I assume you're referring to the crucial chapter about the murder.

HENRY

See?—*murder*. Your book is so moralistic.

XAN

Not that you deserve literary immortality but that's what my book *as written* gives you. You're welcome!

HENRY

Immortality for my books but months of misery for me as stalkers surround the house and eventually the police come knocking on that door. No thanks. Forget about making cuts, I demand you kill the whole book!

XAN

Do you have twenty thousand dollars?!

HENRY

Take the house, what do I care?!

XAN

Give me the keys!

HENRY

Fine. There. Everything's yours!

XAN

Then get off my property!

HENRY

I will!

XAN

So go ahead!

HENRY

I'm going!

XAN

Then go already!

Pause.

HENRY

(sheepish)

You have my car keys.

That starts a cool down.

XAN

I put in so much hard work, Henry.

HENRY

I know you did.

XAN

People'll discuss your most famous book for decades.

HENRY

No, you're right.

XAN

Some may even read your other books.

HENRY

Just that it'd be nice if I didn't end my life in a prison hospital.

XAN

You're nervous. That's understandable. In summer I'll bring the galleys up here. We'll go through them together.

HENRY

I'd like that.

XAN

Maybe there are places I can soften.

HENRY

Sure.

XAN

But seriously, Henry, no way I can ignore the truth of what you did. I know you understand that.

HENRY

Why don't instead I drive down to visit you? I'd like to see the city again.

XAN

Great idea. Let's plan on it. The Short Lives people could send a car.

HENRY

I've got a car. They don't need to waste money squiring me there and back.

XAN

I worry about you driving all that way.

HENRY

What's the worst that could happen? I drive off the road and die? I need an exit strategy anyway, a way to go out sharp and quick before miserable final months crowded with people and pain and probably prison.

XAN

Hate to be blunt but I don't care if *you* die. But you're old and erratic and might kill somebody else.

HENRY

People in America die in car accidents all the time. It's not like I'd be a murderer....

He's amused by that more than he should be.

You got to admit, that's pretty funny.

XAN

If you say so.

**Scene 2: Late afternoon, late summer, the same year.**

HENRY is in the big chair and wears his ratty sweater despite the summer day. Surrounding him are a video camera on a tripod, two light boxes on stands, and sound equipment.

XAN appears and pantomimes closing her car door: fwoomp. She waves to HENRY and points to the phone at her ear.

XAN

(on phone)

That's the message the publisher gave me.

....

Well, *ex*-husband, but yeah. He said to be here an hour ahead. So okay, so I'm here, so where are you two?

HENRY

Is that the camera guys?

XAN

(into phone)

Right, yes, I see the set up. And you're coming back when?

HENRY

They asked me to watch their equipment while they went for something to eat.

XAN

(into phone)

Kay, so at five-thirty we do practices takes and we're live just after six?

HENRY

Don't let it walk away, they said. I laughed as though I found that genuinely funny. Why not? Now that I'm dead as a writer I have no jealousies, there's no competition. I'm willing even to laugh at tired jokes if that makes people happy.

XAN

(into phone)

Good, great, I'll make sure he's ready.



HENRY

I think I've become sentimental.

XAN

(into phone)

So just to confirm, so they cut to us at six-oh-four and he gets two minutes?

HENRY

So serious, so driven, so *literary* I was. Never accepted simple joy. But this moment, this now, and what we pulled off—every little thing makes me happy. These socks, for example.

XAN

(into phone)

Good, we'll see you soon.

(off phone)

This! So exciting!

HENRY

Now that you're here, watch the equipment for me. Don't let it walk away.

HENRY escapes the grip of the chair with difficulty while tapping and kneading his chest.

XAN

Are you all right?

He waves off concern and heads to the house.

They'll be back soon!

HENRY

Five-thirty you said.

XAN

Don't go inside. I brought something to show you.... Before you disappear.... Henry!...

But he goes inside. She phones him.

It's me. I brought you the review copy of *Writer as Murderer*. Want you to see it before they come back.... No, you don't have time for a nap, get back out here.... And put on a nicer shirt.

She opens the review copy—soft and floppy, no cover art—and reads aloud, as if to impart the story of the man who lives here back to the house, surrounding trees and stones.

“Chapter one. The benefit of growing old, as Henry Percival put it in an abandoned attempt at autobiography, is that you no longer give a shit. Approaching eighty, sitting in front of his rural home, a slightly skewed, weather-worn clapboard house, he finally was willing to confess the repressed truth that animated his work even while it cemented the essential loneliness of his life.”

She gets a text and then phones HENRY.

It’s me. They’re paying the bill and heading back!...  
I don’t know: blue. I think they say blue is best....  
Kay, hurry.

She disconnects and reads more from the book.

“Because he no longer had the strength to keep wrestling it back into the dark, that truth is now revealed and provides his life with its unforgiving central story.”

She phones him again.

It’s me. I just want you to know, it’s, I do, I owe you a lot, Henry, your life—it restored my voice, gave me a chance to be known and not pigeonholed as a woman of color writing about “my” issues. We’re up to fourteen cities for the reading tour, did I tell you? Terrible to say, gotta get it off my chest, but I’m glad it was a white woman you killed. Yep. I still hate you for what you did, but I hate you a little less, and it won’t reduce interest in the book. So what I want to say is, is, I don’t know how to put it because you’re my subject and I need to maintain that distance when it comes to the book launch and all the questions I’ll be asked about you and there’ll be things I say, like I did just now, that won’t be kind but I want you to know before all that starts that I owe you a lot. Just so you know, you know? So, okay, that’s what I wanted to say, so, yep, I’ll shut up—

HENRY comes out the front door.

I just left you a voicemail.

Like the shirt?  
HENRY

I said blue.  
XAN

I have only so many clean shirts.  
HENRY

None of them blue?  
XAN

Blue *and* clean?  
Show me the book.  
HENRY

First, let's get you into your favorite chair.  
XAN

She takes his elbow.

What are you doing?  
HENRY

Go slow. You get a chance, listen to my voicemail. I got you.  
XAN

I don't need help.  
HENRY

I'm not helping. Seriously, I can't express what all this has meant to me. Little further.  
XAN

Would ya? Don't need you to fuss.  
HENRY

A few more steps. I feel like the book launch is just the start, I mean my life right now is shit, but the success of this book makes up for that. Okay now, let's get you turned around.  
XAN

HENRY

I know how to sit.

XAN

There, your leg, get your leg there. And I have to say, what I was trying to tell you on the phone, is just that I'm so grateful. Raise your butt higher, it's going to hit the armrest.

HENRY

I can sit! *I mean* it!

XAN

Fine.

HENRY

Why'd you let go?!

XAN

You said.

HENRY

No harm done, I guess. Couple new bruises won't make a difference.

XAN

Then let's hear it.

HENRY

Hear what?

XAN

That satisfied ahhh when you sit in your favorite chair in your beautiful yard.

HENRY

(not convincing)

Ahh.

XAN

You need to start taking better care of yourself. Going to be a crazy several months. Have you been eating? Taking your meds?

HENRY

Not as such. The old advice when you have trouble ending a book is to cut out the last several lines till you find the ending that's been there all along. This is like that. I don't want to drag it out and ruin the remarkable way life is ending for me.

XAN

You're not a book. You don't need a memorable ending.

HENRY

Don't worry, I'm not killing myself, just stopping routine maintenance.

XAN

What does your doctor say?

HENRY

Doesn't *say* anything. Nothing *to say*. Be realistic and enjoy what time you have left is probably what she's saying though I'm not listening.

XAN

Henry.

HENRY

You don't have to pretend to care. You made it clear I'm your subject, that's all. We made a deal: my life, your book. I'm satisfied with that. Is that it, the book?

XAN

It's the review copy so no cover art yet. Same as the draft I brought you a few weeks ago, except I changed the opening and added a kind of coda that I think's pretty fantastic. Read the first line.

HENRY

"The benefit of growing old, as Henry Percival put it in an abandoned attempt at autobiography, is that you no longer give a shit." Great first line. Did I really write that?

XAN

One of those crumpled pieces of paper we burned.

HENRY

It's clever to start the book with me sitting here in front of my house telling you that story. And what a damn great story. My best ever. I fretted about my legacy. It's why I was frantic trying to write an autobiography. Once I was assured you were

writing my story for me, it was pure relief to burn my attempt because, face it, my life wasn't good enough.

XAN

The bonfire's how I end the book. Read the ending.

HENRY

"I left him there, the flames chewing at both his massive, unfinished last novel and his aborted attempt at telling his life story. I stood rooted next to my car, reluctant to lurch into that looming uncertainty facing any writer who has just finished a book. The sun disappeared and the summer evening grew cool. The gravel in the long lane to his house released the heat of the day. A year of my life had been tied to this man. A moment's calm in the stillness, and then: I was free. I waved goodbye as I got into my car to head back to the city, but he didn't see. He was busy warming his hands above the fire created by his never-to-be finished work." So that's it, that's my life: a beginning and an end.

XAN

The Short Lives people love it. Their first bestseller.

HENRY

The problem with biographies is the most thrilling days are when you're young, which means a life doesn't end with a climax, like in a novel.

XAN

Let me show you what the cover art will look like.

It's on her phone.

HENRY

*No.*

XAN

I like it.

HENRY

Blood oozing out of the nib of a pen?

XAN

It's the selling point. Make the image bigger and you can see who wrote the candy.

She points to the blurb.

HENRY

*Her?* Did I ever mention that she and I were lovers?

XAN

Don't tell me that now! I could've put it in the book! Wasn't much I could do with your love life—pretty substandard.

HENRY

She and I didn't raise the standards much. It was just one night at a PEN conference. She never said a word about it afterwards. Nor, assuming it was as wretched for her as it was for me, did I. In later years I wondered if she even knew it happened. In fact, I kinda wonder myself. After all, we're both fiction writers.

XAN

Read what she says.

HENRY

“This sensitive biography reveals the secret behind a flawed but nearly important life.” *Nearly* important?! Why'd you think that was praise?

XAN

It doesn't matter what other writers say about you, as long as they say something.

She checks the time on her phone.

When those two get here and they cut in for the interview, remember: not a word about the incident—killing, murder, whatever. Your part in it, I mean. The interviewer will ask, but you just say, “Read the book when it's out next month.” Not until the book launch do we reveal the extent of your involvement. Keep them guessing.

HENRY

I get that.

XAN

You understand we want to build suspense.

HENRY

*I said.*

XAN

Great, good, just checking.

Before they get back we need to celebrate. We did it, Henry!

HENRY  
Yes we did.

XAN  
Any of that scotch left?

HENRY  
The bottle's on the desk in my workroom.

XAN  
Dangerous to leave it next to where you're trying to write.

HENRY  
I never go near my desk anymore.

XAN  
But whatever you write now will be snapped up by publishers.

HENRY  
Told you, I'm okay saying this is the end.  
You go for the scotch while I practice not saying the wrong thing during the interview.

She disappears into the house. HENRY  
pretends he's being interviewed.

I'm not here to talk about that. Of course I knew you'd ask me. You have to. I understand. But that doesn't mean I have to answer. The biography's out next month. I promise it contains everything you want to know about my fiancée's murder. Yes, *murder*. Can't say anything more. Wait for the book. No. Nope. Forget it. Nothing to add except one thing: I love Xan Smith. She gave me immortality.

She returns.

Think I'm ready for the interview.

XAN  
None of your glasses are clean.

HENRY  
Cleaning hasn't been a priority.



She pours.

Little more....

He raises his glass for a toast.

Here's to reality.

They drink.

XAN

How about this for reality: the Short Lives people told me to retain a lawyer. You should too.

HENRY

What are they worried about?

XAN

Are you kidding? With the book launch people'll ask why I didn't go to the police with new information about the killing, murder, whatever. Eventually the police will come around pressuring me about that. They'll have to reopen the case.

HENRY

They won't contact you.

XAN

It was a long time ago, but they can't ignore the book's revelation. They'll want to talk with you too.

HENRY

The police know.

XAN

What do you mean they know? That you did it?

HENRY

Another.

She pours.

XAN

Henry, what do the police know?

HENRY

What you and I know. Here's to us. Because yes we did, we fooled 'em.

XAN

(she acts as though she knows what he means)

yeah ...

ha ...

HENRY

To the truth.

XAN

The truth.

HENRY

That the most wonderful lies sell books.

That my whole life was based on that.

That novelists the world over cheat gloomy reality, lie in the face of facts, and people go along with it. Willingly. Happily.

It's the most goddamn, *fantastic* life.

He drinks; she doesn't.

XAN

What wonderful lie?

HENRY

What have we been talking about?

XAN

I'm not sure.

HENRY

It's just you and me and the chair. No need to play innocent. Believe me, I approve of how you orchestrated this.

XAN

*I* did?

HENRY

The murder?

Yes. XAN

Me? HENRY

Yes. XAN

Your book? HENRY

*Tell me!* XAN

Couldn't be more plain. HENRY

Yes, Henry, it sure could be. XAN

HENRY  
Come on, you're proud to be a non-fiction writer, obligated to actuality. Not a slack dreamer like this worn-out novelist. Didn't you wonder about the knife?

XAN  
The knife.

HENRY  
You said the Short Lives people asked for the police report. Did they get it?

XAN  
No. If it even exists after all this time. But your fiancée's sister verified that Marcy died the way you said. At first she couldn't or didn't want to remember how she died, but finally she did, finally she agreed that Marcy was stabbed.

HENRY  
Because you told her.

XAN  
I told her what you told me—except I had the anonymous intruder take your place. We agreed we wouldn't reveal the truth until the book's release.

HENRY

But how did the knife happen to be there? Just at the right moment.

XAN

Houses have knives.

HENRY

I put it there.

Pause of one beat.

XAN

So ...

Two beats.

so what you're saying ...

Three beats.

so you're saying killing her was *premeditated*?

HENRY

It was art.

XAN

Shit, Henry, if you're confessing to being an even worse person than you made yourself out to be, that you *planned* to kill her, I need to know that now. Short Lives will hate me, but I could ask for another set of galleys to make changes.

HENRY

You showing up here desperate for a book to make your mark, that's what made me guilty. I gave you the knife because it's what readers want, most of all it's what *you* want—a story that's better than the dreary non-fiction world you'd been content to live in.

XAN

*Gave* me the knife?

HENRY

Handed it to you in loving service to the story.

XAN

You keep saying story.

HENRY

You got the *facts* right. Ninety-five percent of the latest draft you sent me is accurate. “True” you might call it, if you’re impressed by that word. Just the tiniest fraction of what you wrote is not factual. But thank god because otherwise it would be a dull book matching a dull life. But—“facts?”—Marcy wasn’t stabbed.

XAN

What are you saying, like, what, like  
like  
I don’t know, like  
you *lied*? About *that*?

HENRY

Well, lied. Don’t we like to maintain that art tells a greater truth?

XAN

This is a joke, right? Next *month*, Henry! The book’s being published *next month*!  
Why would you lie about how you killed her?!

HENRY

I didn’t kill Marcy.

XAN

Jesus!

HENRY

Wasn’t even there.

XAN

Fuck. *Fuck*!

HENRY

Some freaked out stranger broke in and battered her to death, who knows why? It wasn’t until my novel came out a few years later that there was all the chatter hinting that I killed her, mainly bile from jealous critics and ex-friends, until eventually it became a literary legend. Henry Percival? Oh, yeah, the guy who killed his fiancée and used it in a book—it’s why he became a recluse.

XAN

There’s no knife? There’s no *you* in the room? My book’s a lie?!

HENRY

Of course you knew it wasn't true. Not really. But you loved the fiction because it gives you a bestseller. My last story and you turned it into the truth for however many readers your book'll have and for the innumerable others who'll never actually read it but'll nonetheless freely offer opinions about me in their podcasts.

XAN

Jesus, fuck, Henry, the book! Such as it is, such as it was. Is *ruined*. I'd have to tear out its guts. It'll be just another poor-selling, forgotten Short Lives biography.

HENRY

Nobody has to know. Let me be a killer. You get a bestseller and my novels reclaim a few inches of immortality on the bookshelf.

XAN

You don't get to do this, you do not get to benefit from a crime you *didn't* commit just so people read your pointless books again.

HENRY

Who's harmed? Someone killed Marcy. Why not the man who once loved her? That's a story people can make sense of, not like the stupid random truth of some stranger never caught bashing the life out of her for no knowable reason.

XAN

Seriously? You seriously don't understand how wrong this is?

HENRY

I'm a novelist. It's what I do: tell tales to impress the gullible starved rest of you that life might be more ravishing than it really is.

She sees a car approaching up the lane.

XAN

They're here, we have to do the interview, and PLEASE TELL ME YOU KILLED HER!

HENRY

No one can prove it didn't happen the way I said.

XAN

Goddamnit!

HENRY

The police ruled me out as a suspect but that was fifty years ago. They have no interest anymore in that long dead case, that long gone poor dead woman. No one today will contradict the biography. And if it generates such interest that the police *do* get involved, then dealing with that is easy: I'll confess.

XAN

Stop talking! Don't say anything else, not another fucking thing! I've got to figure this out—

Oh, damn you to hell, I needed this!

Two car doors slamming offstage.

XAN

Give us one second, guys, kay?!

HENRY

I won't give away our secret.

XAN

There's no secret! I don't want there to be a secret! You're not doing me a favor by continuing the lie. The truth ruins me but I can't, I won't, I swear, Henry, I won't let your story become real.

HENRY

Sure, that's the ethical thing to do. Yes, I see why someone might think that way. We would all love to be celebrated for doing what's right.

XAN

I have to! I have to tell the truth to the Short Lives people, the lawyers, the press, the police, those two coming up the lane—everybody!

HENRY

Truth only disappoints people.

They face each other as the scene evolves into the next.

**Scene 3: The same year.**

XAN exits while the interview equipment is removed from around HENRY, alone in his chair.

HENRY

Aahhhhh....

Time passes. It is now fall.

Dressed smartly, XAN reappears with a book heavily feathered with sticky notes. She has finished a reading and is coming to the end of the Q&A.

XAN

Time for one or two more. Yes, there in the back.

XAN wanders thoughtfully as she listens to the question. If possible, an audience member has been asked beforehand to call it out: “You said you came to actually like Henry. Doesn’t that mean your book can’t be objective?” (This and below can instead be done as a dumbshow, with silence during what would be the audience member’s lines.)

Mmm good, mm-hmm yes, a very good question. Let’s see if I’m half as good in answering.

Did everyone hear?! She asked was I maybe too close to my subject to be objective? So, yes, as you point out—what’s your name?...

The audience member calls out her name.

Molly [*or whatever her name is*]. As Molly rightly points out, Henry and I became friends. But, no, I cannot agree with those who say that umm caused me to lose the proper distance a writer needs from her subject. I mean, read my book. I pull no punches about the sociopathic devotion Henry had to his world of fiction at the expense of real life.

HENRY stands. Is old.



As most of you know, Henry died just weeks after my book came out.

He retreats to his house and disappears inside.

A troubled man. A brilliant man. You aren't required to like or admire him, and yet. And yet.

And yet a fascinating man, and yes I was his friend. I don't apologize for that. I didn't ask to be the person to whom he confessed the gruesome details of that night so many decades before and the umm horror of what he did. But I was there, and so it was up to me to record the truth. If my biography does nothing else, I think it leaves us wondering—I certainly did during the time I spent with him—if in some debased way he didn't murder his fiancée precisely because it gave him material for *We Need to Talk*, that runaway bestseller from the Eighties that I heard just today is finally being made into a movie....

She looks inquiringly offstage.

Ohh-kay, I'm getting the signal that we have to wrap it up. I hope I answered your question, and I want to thank everyone for coming! I have to say the response from audiences around the country reinforces my belief that this biography of art and morality and murder is an important one to tell.

I'm able to stick around to sign copies of *Writer As Murderer*, so please come up and say hi.

**End of play**