

CROSSWORD

A One Act Play

By

Grace Cancro

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Grace.cancro21@kzoo.edu

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CAST:

MONICA, a 23-year-old aspiring journalist who has been living at home since graduating college

ELLIOT, a 17-year-old boy, works as Henry's caretaker

HENRY McALLISTER, a 77-year-old man, former screenwriter who moved back to his hometown and disappeared from Hollywood 7 years ago

TIME:

Now

PLACE:

Somewhere in the Midwest, USA

SCENE 1

Lights up on a cozy but dated living room. Projection behind stage reads 6:23pm. HENRY is sitting in a lazy boy chair watching TV on an old, boxy TV set. There are several Oscar awards lined up on top of the TV. There is a large bookcase behind the TV. MONICA is sitting on a couch next to HENRY'S chair, with a notebook and pencil in her lap. She is nervously tapping her pencil on the notebook. ELLIOT is sitting at a table behind the couch, working on homework. Awkward silence except for the tapping of MONICA's pencil, the rustling of the pages of ELLIOT'S textbook, the quiet drone of PBS on the TV, and the sound of wind, rain, and thunder outside. Suddenly, the TV turns off. Lights flicker then shut off. Complete darkness and silence.

ELLIOT
Shit.

MONICA
What happened? *(She stands up and walks over to window, opening curtains slightly to let in dim light, just enough for the audience to see what is happening on stage.)*

HENRY
Power went out. Does this sometimes. I'll go down to the basement and check the fuse box. *(He starts to slowly stand up out of his chair.)*

ELLIOT
(Jumps up out of his chair.) Woah, Mr. McAllister, I don't think that's the best idea. I'll go down and check it, you stay here.

HENRY
(visibly annoyed) I'm fine, son. You've never been in the basement, you don't have a clue where the fuse box is, I—

MONICA
I don't think the fuse box is going to make much of a difference. There are wires down all along the street. It looks like all of your neighbors are out of power as well.

HENRY
Humph. Well, if someone could turn this damn TV on, I could see what the news says about all this nonsense.

ELLIOT
(calmly) The TV isn't working, Mr. McAllister, because the power's out. I'll check my phone and see what the news says on there.

HENRY
(muttering to himself) Ah, kids and their damn phones. If only they put them down to read a newspaper or listen to a good radio show once in a while—

ELLIOT

(starts walking towards HENRY with his phone held out so that HENRY can see what's on it) Okay, I've got it.

NEWSCASTER ON PHONE

Don't you just love a good dog-saves-baby story, Mike? I know I do.

HENRY

(talking over broadcaster) This isn't what I wanted to hear, I want to hear when the damn power is gonna be back on!

ELLIOT

Shh, Mr. McAllister, its right here.

NEWSCASTER ON PHONE

Now, moving onto our top story tonight: the storm this evening has become more intense than originally expected, and has caused electrical wires to be down all across Maize County, but specifically in the cities of Ashland, Belmont, and Moorvale. We are currently experiencing a historical power outage because of this. If you see wires down in front of or near your home, authorities are strongly advising you to stay inside. We are also hearing that some streets have been closed because of downed wires, many of which are still live, so we encourage you to stay where you are until the wires are taken care of. No word yet on when power will be restored. Back to you, Mike.

(At this point, ELLIOT is standing next to HENRY in his chair holding the phone up so he can see, and MONICA is standing behind HENRY's chair so that she can also see the phone screen. Moment as all three realize what this means.)

HENRY

So, no power for a while.

ELLIOT

Yeah.

HENRY

We'll have to keep the fridge closed so the food doesn't go bad. I guess it's Ritz Crackers and peanut butter for dinner.

ELLIOT

Aw, I'm sure we can find something else in the pantry. I can always bike home and –

HENRY

Oh, no, you're not going anywhere, young man. I will not have my caretaker at risk of running over a live wire and burning up. I need ya kid. Who else will help me get up when I fall getting off the john? *(slight chuckle)*

ELLIOT
(*cringes*)

HENRY
Believe me kid, that was plenty embarrassing for both of us. (*He laughs more genuinely, and ELLIOT slightly joins in, as if laughing at how terrible that experience truly was.*)

MONICA
Well, um—

HENRY
(*laughter suddenly stops*) You're still here.

MONICA
Yeah, well, I mean, I know this hasn't been the best meeting but—

HENRY
You're right. It's been bad.

MONICA
Yeah. I mean, I know. I mean, (*sighs*) look this isn't great for me either.
I would really like to get home tonight.

HENRY
Goodbye.

MONICA
But there are too many wires crossing the street, it's impossible for me to get out of here
without risking getting electrocuted.

HENRY
Oh well.

ELLIOT
Come on, Mr. McAllister.

HENRY
Humph.

ELLIOT
I don't like her either. I think she's insanely annoying and pushy too—

MONICA
Hey!

ELLIOT

—but, we can't just leave her outside with the wires and rain. And I know she'll leave right when the wires are fixed. Right?

MONICA

Yes of course, I'll leave first thing when the wires are fixed. I really don't want to be here any longer than I have to.

(Silence as they stare at HENRY.)

HENRY

Fine. Fine. But only if I don't know you're here. You barged into my house demanding an interview and now I'm stuck with you here. The least you can do is be quiet.

MONICA

(more to herself) I didn't completely barge in. I tried to call first. *(directed at HENRY)* But fine, yes, I'll be quiet.

HENRY

(grunts) Good. *(pause)* Now I can go back to my program.
(Moment as he clicks the remote and realizes again that the power is out, so no TV.)
Dammit.

ELLIOT

It's fine, we can find something to do. *(awkward silence)* Hey, Mr. McAllister, do you have any candles?

HENRY

What for?

ELLIOT

Light. So, we can see better.

HENRY

Kitchen. Cabinet to the right of the sink. Top shelf.

ELLIOT

Thanks, be right back.

(ELLIOT exits down stage left. Awkward silence for a few moments as HENRY stares at the black TV screen and MONICA sits on the far end of the couch. She has started anxiously tapping her pencil on her notebook again.)

HENRY

Stop that.

(Tapping stops. Lights go down.)

SCENE 2

Small projection on screen behind the living room set up reads 7:32pm. The stage is better lit now, with candles in various places. HENRY still sits in his chair, but now appears to be doing a crossword puzzle. ELLIOT is on the couch next to HENRY helping him out. MONICA is still on the far end of the couch, staring at the bookshelf across from the couch and twiddling her thumbs. She eventually stands up and begins examining books in the bookshelf. She picks up a few books and photo albums from the bookshelf and brings them back to the couch to start looking through them.

HENRY

An animal related to giraffes. 5 letters. Zebra? What do you think, kid?

ELLIOT

Okapi.

HENRY

Gesundheit.

ELLIOT

No, it's a real animal, I swear. It's related to giraffes, but it lives in the forest or something in Central Africa. *(Pulls out his phone and looks up a picture, showing HENRY.)* See?

HENRY

Huh.

ELLIOT

Yeah, my sister had a phase when she was really into them.

HENRY

Violet?

ELLIOT

No, no, she's the one who's into ballet. Isabelle is the animal obsessed one.

HENRY

And Maia wants to be a doctor?

ELLIOT

Yep, you got it.

HENRY

Gee, you know I remember when each of those girls was born.

ELLIOT

You do? But you only moved back here when Isabelle was a baby.

HENRY

Yes, but Christy kept me updated on the happenings of my hometown while I was still away in California. She always called to tell me about the crazy family around the block with the adorable little girls. And their troublemaker of an older brother.

ELLIOT

Hey!

MONICA

Who's Christy?

HENRY

(Grumpily) You're still here. I told you I'm not giving an interview.

MONICA

Its, its not an interview I was just asking a question.

ELLIOT

Christy is Mr. McAllister's niece. She used to babysit me and my sisters sometimes when we were younger, and then more once my dad left like 5 years ago.

MONICA

Oh. I'm sorry about your dad.

ELLIOT

Thanks.

(Awkward beat.)

HENRY

(directed at MONICA) What are you doing?

(MONICA has picked a photo album and is carrying it back to the couch, where she sits in her usual spot.)

MONICA

Well, I was just a little bored so I thought maybe I could look at a book, but then I found this, and look! *(Holds out photo album, pointing to a picture.)*

HENRY

Yes, I know. That is a picture of ME, in MY photo album, in MY house, which YOU barged into and are now stuck in.

MONICA

I maintain that I didn't barge in. But this isn't just you, it's a picture of you and Dustin Hoffman! It looks like it was around the time that *The Graduate* was made too, which would be what, 1968, '69?

(ELLIOT snorts and MONICA glares at him.)

HENRY

The Graduate was released in 1967. That picture of me and Dustin was taken during '69.

ELLIOT

Nice.

(HENRY gives ELLIOT a look.)

ELLIOT

Sorry.

HENRY

(directed at MONICA) Listen, young lady—

MONICA

My name is Monica.

HENRY

I don't care. You barged into my house—

MONICA

I didn't barge!

HENRY

You barged! Kid, didn't she barge?!

ELLIOT

She barged.

MONICA

No, I didn't! I tried to call, but you never picked up. So, I knocked.

(Lights fade out.)

SCENE 3

Lights up, appears to be early evening. Projection behind set reads 6:13pm. The same living room is set up, minus the candles and only HENRY and ELLIOT are on stage.

ELLIOT is back at the table doing homework. HENRY is sitting in his chair watching TV. The sounds of a storm are coming from outside. The doorbell rings.

ELLIOT
I'll get it.

(ELLIOT stands up and walks to up-stage right. Hear a squeaking door opening, but don't see anyone yet.)

MONICA
(from offstage) Hi, is this the Henry McAllister residence?

(ELLIOT glances at HENRY, but HENRY seems too engrossed in his show to notice.)

ELLIOT
Uh, yeah. Can I, uh, help you or something?

MONICA
Yes, you can! Wait who are you?

ELLIOT
Uh, I'm Elliot. Mr. McAllister's caretaker.

MONICA
Ah, I see. That's great actually, it'll add so much more to the story. Could I interview you too?

ELLIOT
Wait what?

MONICA
(starts walking into the house, onstage from offstage. Overly perky, a bit forward. Actually, very forward.) I'm Monica Williamson, I tried calling Mr. McAllister a few times and emailed him as well but never got a response. I heard recently that he lives here in Moorvale, I live over in Ashland, and I am just such a big fan. Well, actually, I'm trying to get my start in journalism, just graduated with my degree from Yale. Go Bulldogs! And anyways I was hoping to get an interview so I—

HENRY
I'm gonna stop you right there. Did you not think there was a reason for me not answering your calls?

MONICA
(Thrown off-guard. She was expecting a warmer welcome for some reason.) Well, I thought that—

HENRY

You thought what? That I was too busy?

MONICA

Yes, I guess, I mean—

HENRY

Do I look busy? I'm retired. I spend my days watching PBS documentaries and eating Jell-O. I didn't answer your calls because I chose not to. And I never check my email. I only made one to get those free promotions when I online shop.

MONICA

Oh. *(pause)* Well, since I'm here, maybe I could get an interview? I am such a big fan of yours, I mean you've written so many iconic films, you've won Oscars, and then you just disappeared from Hollywood. So many people are wondering why and want to know more about your life, and if I could get this interview, it would just be amazing. Life changing, honestly.

HENRY

(staring intently at the TV) No.

MONICA

But, Henry, (can I call you Henry?)—

HENRY

(interrupting but MONICA keeps talking over him) Don't call me Henry.

MONICA

--this would be such a huge interview! You would still have your privacy of course—

HENRY

(aside) I wish I still had privacy right now.

MONICA

But I know that the world would want to hear from you. Hearing your story straight from you, it would be so inspirational; how you went from your simple, Midwestern, upbringing to becoming one of the most famous screenwriters of our time. Maybe I could get your perspective on winning Oscars, and the state of the Academy now? *(That's good, I should write that down.)* It would just be such a good piece.

HENRY

Then write it.

MONICA

So, you'll give me an interview?

HENRY

No. But it seems that you already know everything there is to know about me from what appears to be years of stalking so, go, get on with it. You can write the story without an interview.

MONICA

No, sir, I didn't stalk you. I just love research, and— well actually I wrote a critical research paper on you two years ago for one of my classes. I had been a fan before then, but after I learned more I just, I admire you so much, and I would love to use my current knowledge to ask the most meaningful questions so that I can get the best interview possible. I promise that the piece I write will be the most accurate, best tribute to you and your incredible work.

HENRY

What, did you steal that line from one of your textbooks? Excuse me, one of your (*does an exaggerated posh accent*) Yale textbooks.

MONICA

(*Definitely annoyed now. Her peppy disposition starts to falter.*) No, I did not. I just care a lot about this interview.

HENRY

Look, I'm sure you're used to getting what you want and getting your interviews just by namedropping that goddamn Ivy you went to, but it won't work with me. I don't do interviews. Haven't done one in seven years and I don't plan on starting now. So kindly, get out of my house.

MONICA

Oh. Ok. Sorry to have bothered you. (*starts to walk towards the door*) Maybe I could come back another time, when you're feeling more up to it.

HENRY

Jesus Christ.

MONICA

Ooh, here I'll leave my number and my email if you change your mind.

HENRY

I won't.

MONICA

Well, in case you do.

(*MONICA walks back towards HENRY'S chair with a small scrap of paper that has her information on it. Suddenly there is a large, very dramatic, clap of thunder. MONICA drops off the paper, which HENRY promptly throws in the trash and Elliot*

curiously takes out of the trash, and she walks over to the window pulling back the curtains.)

MONICA

Wow, it is really coming down out there.

HENRY

Yep.

MONICA

Do you think, maybe, I mean, would it be possible for me to stay here for just a few minutes until the rain lets up. The weather app says it should end in (*checks phone*) 15 minutes, so not too long.

HENRY

(*exaggerated sigh*) Fine. Stay 15 minutes as long as you are gone when the rain lets up. Not stops, lets up, understand.

MONICA

Oh, yes absolutely.

HENRY

Good.

(*MONICA walks over to the couch and sits on the far end. She takes a notebook and pencil out of her bag and sets it on her lap.*)

MONICA

Just in case.

(*HENRY groans and goes back to watching TV. Lights go out.*)

SCENE 4

Back to living room of scene 2. Projection behind set reads 7:47pm. MONICA and ELLIOT are still sitting on their respective sides of the couch. MONICA now has a large stack of photo albums next to her and is looking through one of them. HENRY is still in his chair and has resumed his crossword puzzle and ELLIOT is working on homework.

HENRY

Uh oh.

ELLIOT

(*worried*) What? What happened?

HENRY

No, nothing happened. It's the clue for the next word. "Uh oh."

ELLIOT

Oh. That's a tough one.

HENRY

You've got that right, kid.

ELLIOT

How many letters?

HENRY

Four.

ELLIOT

Hmm.

HENRY

Hmm.

MONICA

Hey, Henry?

HENRY

(sighs in a very melodramatic way) Yes?

MONICA

Well, I'm just looking through these photo albums—

HENRY

(to ELLIOT) That she stole from MY bookshelf.

MONICA

(ignoring HENRY) And anyways, I noticed that there aren't any pictures after *(checks photo album)* seven years ago.

HENRY

And?

MONICA

Well, that was when you made *Lost Identity*.

HENRY

(seems to be getting frustrated) Yes, and?

MONICA

And that's the same year you disappeared from Hollywood. You didn't even go to the Oscars and that film was nominated for like 3 different categories.

HENRY

So?

MONICA

You have albums for every film you made and basically every year up until seven years ago. And you don't have an album for *Lost Identity*. I'm just confused, I guess, and I'm wondering what happened.

HENRY

I don't do interviews.

MONICA

I know. But this would be completely off the record. It would just be us talking.

HENRY

(Grunts as if to say, yeah right.)

MONICA

Look, I'm going to be here for God knows how much longer, we might as well have a conversation instead of just sitting here awkwardly.

HENRY

I'm not sitting awkwardly. I'm doing my crossword puzzle.

MONICA

God, Henry, you're like a freaking crossword puzzle! I have all these tiny clues and all I want to do is learn more about you. But here I am in the house of Henry McAllister and I'm just sitting here in silence. Please, Henry, I just want to talk.

HENRY

NO! I told you, goddamnit: I am not doing an interview, I am not answering your damn questions, I am not telling you what happened seven years ago!

MONICA

Why not?! I'm here, I'm stuck here. I get that it's your business but *(sighs)* I don't know. I thought that maybe since I'm stuck here it would be like some *(embarrassed)* like some movie or something where the two characters become unlikely friends or something. I don't know.

ELLIOT

Two characters?

MONICA

Three. Whatever.

HENRY

Look, (*mockingly*) Monica. Life is not a movie, okay? In life you don't just float along with everything going as planned. Maybe your life is like that but mine sure as hell isn't. Real life is hard, so goddamn hard that you work and you work and you work, trying to live your dream and make the most incredible person in the world happy until it's all over in an instant. And everything you worked for doesn't matter anymore and she's gone and you're stuck sitting in a damn chair and the only thing you look forward to is a kid that keeps you company on weekends, and nothing is left of your old life but fucking photographs and awards that don't matter. That's real life. You and your Ivy League ass wouldn't understand that.

MONICA

(*begins to tear up*) Just because I went to a good school doesn't mean I don't get what real life is like.

HENRY

Oh really? What's so bad about your life then? Did you miss the Harvard-Yale game? Did your philosophy professor give you a B? Maybe you spilled \$200 wine on your \$1000 purse.

MONICA

My dad died! Junior year of high school. And my "Ivy League ass" worked insanely hard to get into Yale. Insanely hard. The only reason I could even go was because of my dad's life insurance money. (*pause*) Why do you think I look up to you so much? *Looked* up to you so much. I only knew about your movies from my dad. He was the one that loved them first. And then he died and the only thing I had left of him were your stupid movies, so I watched all of them to feel closer to him and learned more about you and got so inspired and now—now all of that is gone and wasted and it's over. So fine. Maybe I did "barge" into your house. Maybe I did learn too much about you and your history. Call me crazy or a stalker or whatever you want to but never say that I don't understand what real life is like. Because I do. (*at this point MONICA is crying hard. She turns to walk into the kitchen.*) Excuse me. (*MONICA exits.*)

HENRY

(*He feels bad. Really bad.*) Dammit.

(*Lights go dark.*)

SCENE 5

Lights go up. Stage is still lit by candles. Projection behind set reads 9:00pm. HENRY sits in his chair, he looks slightly distraught, but not too much. ELLIOT sits on the couch next to HENRY. MONICA is not in the room.

ELLIOT

So, that was intense.

HENRY
Yeah.

ELLIOT
You were pretty hard on her, Mr. McAllister. She's obviously been through a lot.

HENRY
(defensive) Yeah but how was I supposed to know that?

ELLIOT
You weren't. But I think the least you can do now is apologize. She's been in the kitchen for like an hour already. I feel bad for her.

HENRY
But she was the one who started it! She barged in—

ELLIOT
Mr. McAllister! We get it! She barged in! But you kind of made her cry. I think you should apologize.

HENRY
She's pissing me off.

ELLIOT
I know but...

HENRY
(pause and long sigh) Fine. *(pause)* Monica?
(MONICA slowly walks back on stage. Her eyes are red and it is obvious that she has been crying but she is trying to hold herself together.)

HENRY
I *(sighs)* I'm sorry. I didn't know and—

MONICA
It's fine. I get why you were, are mad. I'm sorry too. For barging in and everything.

HENRY
Ah. Honestly, I might have done the same when I was your age looking for an idea. I wouldn't have been so pushy about it but...

(MONICA chuckles slightly, so does HENRY)

HENRY
So, about seven years ago.

MONICA

Oh, Henry you don't need to tell me. I get it. It's off limits. I'll just stay quiet until the power's back on.

HENRY

No. I want to tell you. You've been waiting and, well, you've lost someone too. You might understand.

MONICA

Oh, okay. And this is all off the record, promise.

HENRY

Okay. Well, it started around the time that *Lost Identity* came out. It was a success. Everyone seemed to love it. I had a bad few years, made a few flops, but with this movie it felt like I got my mojo back, you know. We got the Oscar nominations and everything was going great. Then, (*his voice catches slightly*) Anne. My wife. The day after the Oscar nominations were revealed, we went to the doctor. Cancer. They said she had a few months. (*pause*) She never much liked Hollywood. We met here and fell in love here. I thought it would be better for her if it ended here too. She lasted one month and 28 days. The doctors said the drugs kept her from feeling too much pain. She was smiling until the end. Died right here, in this chair. (*Pause.*) As for the photo albums, well those were Anne's domain. She stayed out of the spotlight, never wanted to go to awards shows or premiers with me, but she took pictures of everything. Every reading, rehearsal, shooting day, she was there with her camera. She loved it. She put the albums together, one for every film and some that were just for fun. I never got around to putting together the album for *Lost Identity*, just couldn't bring myself to do it.

MONICA

Henry, I, I'm so sorry. I didn't know.

HENRY

No one does. I like to keep my private life private.

MONICA

So, you've lived here ever since? You never went back to Hollywood?

HENRY

Nope. Couldn't do it. Too many regrets in that city, too many memories. I've been here ever since.

MONICA

What about kids, do you have any?

HENRY

Yeah, I do. A daughter. Sara. She still lives out in California, never could understand why I stayed here. Doesn't understand why I prefer a less flashy lifestyle to the one I could have, used to have. She did something right by hiring this kid to hang out with me

though. She thought I needed a caretaker, and Christy, my niece, recommended Elliot here. I fought it at first but I guess Sara was right.

ELLIOT

She was. I don't know how you'd live without me, Mr. McAllister. Who would help you with your crosswords?

HENRY

I tell ya, kid they make those more and more confusing. I swear, the goddamn New York Times keeps making that crossword harder just to confuse geezers like me. (*Beat.*) Well, there ya have it. The reason why I'm here.

MONICA

Henry, I am so sorry. (*pause*) Thank you. For telling me.

(Long pause. Then, lights flicker. And turn back on. TV has a faint glow to the screen, indicating that it also has power again. A digital clock on the bookcase flashes 12:00, indicating that it also just turned on.)

ELLIOT

Finally!

HENRY

Power's back on.

MONICA

Yeah.

(HENRY clicks on the TV, flips channels until getting to the news.)

NEWSCASTER ON TV

Breaking news: We have just heard from the power company that power has been restored across Maize, County and the downed wires have also been repaired. Remember to look outside to make sure the roads are clear before traveling anywhere.

MONICA

Well, I guess I should go.

ELLIOT

Me too. My mom's going to want me home soon.

HENRY

Yeah, I guess you're both right.

(MONICA grabs her jacket and bag, double checks that she has her keys, phone, wallet, etc. ELLIOT packs his things into his backpack. They both start to walk towards the front door.)

HENRY
Hey, Monica?

MONICA
Yes?

HENRY
How about that interview?

MONICA
Are you serious? Really? I mean, are you sure?

HENRY
I've got nothing else to do tonight. And it isn't too late yet.

MONICA
On the record and everything?

HENRY
On the record.

MONICA
Wow, ok. Thank you, Henry, thank you so much.

(MONICA hurries to the couch, takes her coat off, takes her notebook and pencil out of her bag, also sets up her phone to record the interview.)

ELLIOT
It's not too late, it wouldn't hurt for me to stay too. I'll tell Mom it's educational.

HENRY
I'm ready when you are.

MONICA
(fussing with her phone to get the recording started)
Ok, ready?

HENRY
Ready. But before we start, I have one question for you. What was your dad's favorite movie?

(MONICA and HENRY start silently having a conversation as lights dim.)

End of play.