

RUNNING FROM GRIEF

BY
JACOB VOELKER

CHARACTERS :

RYAN, a seventeen-year old student at Lincoln High who has athletic scholarship offers to various colleges across the country due to his success in cross-country, and has his eye on Oregon. Ryan is impatient at times, and can be a bit self-absorbed when chatter comes around to his running times.

HENRY, an eighty-five-year-old man who has retired and resigned himself to a retirement home. He had a stunning cross-country high school and college career, and worked as an electrician for much of his life. He now has trouble with his eyes, uses a walker, and often requests help with the simplest things. He is rather impatient.

DAD, a forty-two-year-old real-estate agent who is very interested in Ryan's cross-country career, and often acts as his coach. He can be very harsh about it at times.

MARGARET, a woman in her late-thirties who has a very clever and helpful personality. She recently has been very worried about Henry, ever since his wife died. She does what she can to make sure he is okay.

SETTING: This play takes place in an urban neighborhood in Seattle. The two settings are RYAN's kitchen, and the room in Sunrise Acres.

SCENE ONE

The kitchen in Ryan's house. RYAN and DAD are eating breakfast.

DAD

Ryan, could you pass the milk?

RYAN

Yeah, sure.

He passes the milk carton.

Hey, did you hear that senior, Paul, from the team got a scholarship to Penn State?

DAD

For cross-country?

RYAN

Yeah, I think he's gonna take it.

DAD

That's great, good for him. After all, he is *second* best on the team, right after my big boy Ryan over here!

RYAN

Daaaddddd!

DAD

It's true kid. You're something else. Like your mother always said...

So how is your application coming?

RYAN

It's going fine, I'm almost done with the essay and I have most of the recommendations.

DAD

How many hours of community service are you putting in?

RYAN

Umm...

DAD

You never did any community service? Ryan, how many times do I have to keep telling you to get started on that?

RYAN

I know, I know. But I *hate* community service!

DAD

Ryan, you've never signed up for an hour of community service in your life, so I don't know how you can say that.

RYAN

Well then I know I'm going to hate it. Do I seriously have to do this?

DAD

Yes! We've gotta get you set up somewhere. Oregon's going to look right over your application if they see you don't have any community service hours. When I was applying for all the big football colleges, I must've racked up twenty, thirty hours!

RYAN

Fine, Dad. Whatever.

(Pause.)

But then what about running?

DAD

Sorry to break it to you, but if you don't get this community service in, all that running might go to waste. It's time you start taking responsibility for *your* acceptance into Oregon. If everything goes well and they accept you, I won't be there to help you pass your classes, to be your schedule-keeper.

RYAN

I know, Dad.

DAD

I'm not trying to come down on you, Ryan, I just need you to understand the importance of this. If you are lazy with

this volunteering like you have been, Oregon will move on.
You hear?

RYAN

Yeah, loud and clear.

DAD

Good. So what are you going to do?

RYAN

Volunteer somewhere.

DAD

Good boy. Now let's see, there's street-sweeping, there's soup kitchen, my personal favorite in high school was the animal shelter.

RYAN

Umm, any others?

DAD

I suppose you could work at a retirement home. Not the most "exciting" job, but I think you'd be fine there. There's one two blocks from your school. Sunrise Acres, I believe, is the name.

RYAN

Alright. I guess I'll try that.

DAD

Why don't you give a call before you head to school, see if they'll take you? I'm sure they'll have room. It's not the most popular of volunteering jobs.

RYAN

I'll give them a call on my way to school. Their number should be on the website, right?

DAD

I'm sure. See if you can start as early as today after school. You can't get enough hours in!

RYAN

(Standing and walking towards the door)

Will do, Dad.

DAD

And try to get something out of it. Maybe it won't be as bad as you think.

RYAN

I don't know about that.

He exits.

SCENE TWO

Sunrise Acres. RYAN approaches MARGARET at the front desk.

RYAN

Hey, Margaret?

MARGARET

Ryan! I'm glad to see you. Come in, come in. I've already assigned you to a man. His name's Henry, and lately he's been kind of down. I've been looking for way to cheer him up. Think you can do the trick?

RYAN

I dunno, maybe.

MARGARET

I'm sure you'll do great, hon. This way please.

RYAN

Alright.

RYAN and MARGARET start to walk towards HENRY who has a walker next to him and is trying to read an article with bad eyesight.

MARGARET

Henry, this is Ryan. He's going to be helping you out with some things for the next couple weeks.

RYAN

Hi.

HENRY

Hello, Ryan.

RYAN

So, do you, like, need anything?

HENRY

Could you get me a glass of water? My throat's kind of dry.
The sink is over there, in the kitchen.

He points to kitchen.

RYAN

Yeah, sure.

RYAN exits.

HENRY

Why would you bring me that boy? You know I want to be alone!

MARGARET

Henry, I thought you needed someone. Ever since Sarah... passed, you've been a mess!

HENRY

You don't need to sugarcoat it. Besides, that was months ago, and you're still babying me like you did then.

MARGARET

Henry, it's my *job* to baby you. And come on, give him a chance. He seems like a nice kid.

HENRY

But--

MARGARET

But nothing. You are going to let this kid help you, I don't care how against it you are.

RYAN reenters.

RYAN

Here's your water.

RYAN sets the glass down on the table next to him.

HENRY

Thanks, Ryan. Hey, could you, uh, find me my glasses.

RYAN

Where are they?

HENRY

Son, excuse me if I'm wrong, but I'm pretty sure part of *finding* my glasses is *finding* them.

RYAN

Fine, whatever.

MARGARET goes behind Ryan's back, gives a thumbs up and mouths, "Good luck" to Henry, before exiting.

RYAN

Where did you last have them?

HENRY

I think I had them over there.

He gestures towards the couch across from them.

RYAN

What's with old people and forgetting stuff?

HENRY

What did you just say?

RYAN

Nothing.

HENRY

You can just quit now, kid. I don't need your attitude or your help.

RYAN

No, I'll find your glasses.

HENRY

Thank you. And after you're done with that, could you help me put my shoes on, maybe take me out for a walk on the path just outside? It's getting a bit stuffy in here.

RYAN

Your shoes?

HENRY

Yes, my shoes.

RYAN

Why can't you put on your own shoes?

HENRY

You know what, just forget it. I didn't even want to go outside that badly anyways.
Can you go grab me that deck of cards over there? Maybe we could play a game instead.

RYAN

Alright.

RYAN walks over and grabs the deck of cards. On his way back, he spills them all over HENRY.

HENRY

Oh, dear!

RYAN

What the heck, old man! Who doesn't close their cards?

HENRY

I'm sorry, Ryan. I had no idea that-

RYAN

Just stop! I'm so done with this. Ugh!

RYAN storms offstage.

MARGARET enters holding a glass of water.

MARGARET

Henry, what did I tell you about sending the kid off?

HENRY

He ran off himself! I didn't tell him to, he just got upset and left.

MARGARET

And what was it that made him do that, huh?

HENRY

All I asked him to do was find my glasses, put my shoes on, and take me for a walk!

MARGARET

He's not used to this environment, give him a chance. He seems nice.

HENRY

He is an impatient weasel!

MARGARET

Henry, I just need you to try with him. He really needs this.

HENRY

How am I doing wrong? He's the one who ran out!

MARGARET

Don't lie, you and I both know if you wanted him here you wouldn't have asked him to help you with *any* job that involved your feet.

HENRY

Well, I needed my shoes on, and my back isn't going to be responding anytime soon. And it's his job to do what I ask!

MARGARET

Henry...

HENRY

Fine, I'll try harder.

MARGARET

And what happened with these cards all over the floor?

HENRY

He spilled them and blamed it on me.

MARGARET

Oh, jeez.

She picks up the cards.

HENRY

Please let me be done with him, Margaret. I can't deal with this kid.

MARGARET

Couldn't you give him another chance?

HENRY

Why does he deserve one? He's an arrogant, disrespectful teen who only cares about himself! Can you honestly tell me he deserves another chance?

MARGARET

Yes, I can. He's a runner like you, Henry.

HENRY

He is?

MARGARET

Yeah, he is.

She looks at her watch.

MARGARET

I've gotta go take care of Mrs. Willis. Please, think about it.

SCENE THREE

Sunrise Acres.

RYAN

Hey, look, I'm sorry about yesterday.

HENRY

It's fine. Don't worry about it.

RYAN

Alright.

HENRY

As long as you're here.

RYAN

Well I am here, aren't I? What more do you need?

HENRY

Well, while I have you, do you mind reading me this article? It's a bit old, and my eyes just aren't what they used to be, as they say. But it helps me.

RYAN

Why can't you just read your own-

HENRY

Just... read it.

RYAN

Alright, alright. *If I must.*

HENRY

Second one, please.

RYAN

(Ruffling the paper dramatically)

Cane does it again! Not only has this young athlete broken the all-time high school record for the 5,000-meter race, but he's gone and done it again! Just one year ago a high school graduate, varsity runner at University of Oregon Henry Cane has already won the collegiate 5,000-meter national competition and has earned himself the chance to compete in the Olympic trials for a spot on the National team! Cane flies past other runners as he crosses the finish line with a time of 14:19, which is, once again, a record breaking time at the collegiate level. This...This was you?

HENRY

Yeah, before all of this-

He gestures to room around him.

I had records in the high-school and college 5,000 meter.

RYAN

What was your high-school time?

HENRY

14:46.

RYAN

You were the one with 14:46? I broke that record in the finals this season!

HENRY

You did?

RYAN

Yeah! I'd been chasing that time for years now! I can't believe you're the one who's behind it!

HENRY

Well, good job kid. You finally did it.

RYAN

Sorry about your record though.

HENRY

No, it's quite alright. It's been too long for a record to stand anyway, I can't believe it didn't get broken earlier.

RYAN

Yeah. And you went to Oregon?

HENRY

Full scholarship.

RYAN

You're kidding. That's why I'm here! I'm trying to make my application as strong as it can possibly be for Oregon.

HENRY

That's great. It's a really good school for runners.

RYAN

The article said you went to the Olympics?

HENRY

I unfortunately didn't make the cut. Three seconds off a place on the team.

RYAN

Oh, that's rough. I'm sorry.

HENRY

It's all well and good. Maybe it's for the best.

RYAN

How could it be the best?

HENRY

After the trials, I worked at a restaurant, "The Golden Angels." That's where I met Sarah, my, uh, wife.

RYAN

Oh, that's awesome. Can I meet her?

HENRY

I'm afraid not, Ryan. She's not with us anymore.

RYAN

Oh, I'm so sorry. That's awful.

HENRY

Yeah, it is.

RYAN

If it makes you feel any better, my mom died last month.

HENRY

No such thing could make me feel better, Ryan. I'm sorry for your loss, as I'm sure you have heard a million times.

RYAN

Yeah, I get that a lot. People don't know if what they want to say will make me cry or hate them forever, so they just go with the default phrase.

HENRY

That's an interesting way to put it. Nonetheless, that doesn't make it any less true.

RYAN

I'm sorry for your loss as well.

HENRY

Thank you. It means a lot.

RYAN

(Hesitates)

Does it get any better?

HENRY

Does what get any better?

RYAN

The pain. Does it stop?

HENRY

I can't say it stops. It begins to become easier to cope with.

RYAN

But *when*? It's been a month and half since she died, and I haven't even started to move on.

HENRY

Kid, there'd be something wrong with you if you did. It takes time, I promise you.

RYAN

Okay, thank you. I'm sorry, I don't mean to drag you into all of-

HENRY

No, stop. It's no bother, I know what it's like.

Pause.

Can you talk to anyone about it? Your father?

RYAN

We never talk about her. We've just focused on everything else going on. It's been hard on him.

HENRY

I'm sorry to hear, Ryan. Anytime you need to talk about it you can come to me. I'll always be available, if you couldn't tell by my current state.

RYAN

Thank you, Henry. You don't know how good it is to get all this off my chest.

HENRY

I wish I didn't.

RYAN

Well, if there's anything I can do to help, apparently that's my job now.

HENRY

(Chuckling)

Thanks, Ryan. I'll be sure to let you know.

SCENE FOUR

The kitchen in Ryan's house.

DAD

So, Ryan. You've been so busy lately, you never got to tell me how the community service is working for you? You've been volunteering for two weeks. Is it still as terrible as expected?

RYAN

Actually, it's not as bad as I thought.

DAD

It isn't?

RYAN

No, not at all. I'm helping this old guy, Henry. He was a runner too.

DAD

He was?

RYAN

Yeah, and you're not going to believe it, but he was the one with the record. The one that I broke in the finals this season!

DAD

The 14:46?

RYAN

Yes, the 14:46!

DAD

Wow, he must've been some runner.

RYAN

Oh, he was. He got a full scholarship to Oregon, and he was just three seconds off of a place on the Olympic team. Three seconds!

DAD

Hm. This guy seems like quite the character.

RYAN

Yeah, he's a pretty cool dude.

DAD

I'm sure he is, Ry.

(He pauses)

Well, I hope you're not having too much fun, because pretty soon you're going to be done with him.

RYAN

What do you mean?

DAD

You only need a certain amount of community service hours to look good to colleges! What have you done already, five? Six?

RYAN

Ten.

DAD

Exactly. You've only got a little bit longer, and then it's back to training every day.

RYAN

But I thought you said you couldn't have enough community service hours.

DAD

Oh, I'm sure you'll have gotten enough soon to please Oregon. And what's most important isn't the hours. It's the time you get in the finals next season.

RYAN

(He hesitates)

Oh, well... That's good, then.

DAD

Don't worry kid, it'll be over before you know it. A couple more days and we'll get you outta that retirement home taking care of some fossil, and back to hitting the pavement running!

RYAN

He's not-

(He hesitates)

Yeah, yeah you're right.

DAD

Well, I'm off to work! I'll see you later Ry. And remember... Only a little bit longer!

RYAN

Yep.

DAD exits.

RYAN

Only a little bit longer.

SCENE FIVE

Sunrise Acres.

RYAN enters.

RYAN

Hey, Henry.

HENRY

(Looking up, startled)

Oh, Ryan, hi.

RYAN

What's that?

HENRY

This is your recommendation letter for Oregon.

RYAN

Really? But I thought someone like Margaret had to do it?

HENRY

Oh, she did. She wrote almost everything, but thought words coming from me about the two weeks you've been coming here would be more sincere. Here, take a look before it's put in the application envelope.

HENRY holds it out for RYAN.

RYAN

Wow, this is just...

HENRY

You're more than welcome. And I didn't make up a single word of it.

RYAN

Oregon will love this! Oh, Henry, thank you so much!

MARGARET enters.

MARGARET

What, I don't get any thanks?

RYAN

Margaret! Ah, thank you. This is amazing!

MARGARET

No problem, Ry. Thanks for taking such good care of Henry over here.

She pats HENRY on the back.

HENRY

Yeah, the times with you were the best I've had in months.

RYAN

Mine too, old man.

MARGARET

Well. I'm glad to say, Ryan, you have finished your hours. This is your last day.

RYAN

Oh, um, that's great. But I'm gonna miss coming here every day.

HENRY

No, no. If what I'm hearing is right, you've gotten yourself into prime position to go to the best running school in the country. You've got to train!

MARGARET

He's right Ryan. You've done everything to get a spot on this team. As much as it hurts to say, don't mess it up now.

RYAN

Yeah, I guess so. I should probably get going then.

HENRY

All right, Ryan. It was fun, I can't wait to read about you in the newspapers again. This time though, it better be national.

RYAN

Will do.

RYAN Begins to walk out the front door, then hesitates and turns.

RYAN

Hey, Henry. Would you want to come over for dinner tonight with me and my dad?

HENRY

I'm sorry Ryan, I can't. It's against the Sunrise Acres rules. No resident can leave the premises without--

MARGARET

-Someone signing you out? Don't worry, I'm sure I can find a way to solve that problem.

HENRY

You'd do that?

MARGARET

Well, it generally should be a family member that signs residents out, but I think I can bend some rules. And I'm assuming you need a ride?

HENRY

Oh, Margaret. Thank you so much.

He hugs MARGARET.

RYAN

Can you come over at 6:00 tonight?

HENRY

I'll be there, don't you worry.

RYAN

Margaret, would you like to come?

MARGARET

No, I'll leave you guys and your father be. I have some grocery shopping to do anyway.

RYAN

Great! I'll see you then.

He makes way to exit.

Bye, guys!

HENRY

Man, I'm happy for that kid.

MARGARET

I'm gonna miss having him around here, though.

HENRY

But he deserves to be where he's at.

MARGARET

He certainly does.

SCENE SIX

RYAN walks Henry in.

RYAN

Henry, hey! Come in, take a seat.

DAD enters and sees Ryan helping
Henry into a chair.

DAD

Hi, I'm Tim, Ryan's dad. I'm glad to finally meet you,
Ryan's been really enjoying these hours after school with
you. Ry, could you go check on the steak?

RYAN

Yeah, sure.

RYAN exits.

HENRY

Well, I'm glad to hear Ryan had such a good time. He makes
pretty good company as well. He's a good kid, you've got
there.

DAD

Yeah, for sure. Ryan tells me you're big into running?

HENRY

Used to be. Obviously I'm not in the shape anymore, as you
can tell.

HENRY chuckles.

DAD

Yeah, I'm sure.

(Pause.)

You went to Oregon?

HENRY

I did, yes. Ryan tells me he's hoping to do the same?

DAD

I guess you could say that. It's not 'hope' as much as 'plan,' especially now that he has all that free time after school back.

HENRY

Oh, well, that's great. I've read about him in the papers. He's some runner.

DAD

You guys have a lot in common apparently!

HENRY is quiet for a couple seconds.

HENRY

Yeah, we do.

RYAN enters.

RYAN

Steaks will be ready in a few minutes.

He takes seat.

DAD

Alrighty, sounds good. I hope you like steak, Henry.

HENRY

Oh, it's been a while. Not much of that over at Sunrise Acres!

DAD

I'm sure. Probably pretty easy to get bored of things over there.

No one speaks for a couple seconds.

RYAN

Okay, Henry, Dad. I've been doing some thinking, and I've decided to keep going after school. That's why I asked you to come have dinner with us, Henry.

DAD and HENRY

What?

RYAN

Yeah, I think I'm going to keep volunteering with you.

HENRY

You are?

DAD

But Ryan, you need to be training. This is going to impact your schedule a lot, won't it?

RYAN

Well, I guess so. But I'll find time. It just might not be *as much*.

HENRY

Oh, Ryan, no. You can't--

DAD

No you're not.

RYAN

What?

DAD

I said, no, you're not. You're not about to put your running career into jeopardy by not training just to listen to old stories and go get juice for people!

RYAN

It's not his stories, Dad!

He hesitates.

He just lost his wife.

DAD

And how are you helping him with that?

RYAN

I'm not. He's helping me.

DAD

Excuse me.

RYAN

I told him about Mom. We talk about it. He understands what it's like to...

DAD

Ryan, those are personal family matters. They don't leave this house. I can't believe you told this random stranger you just met at a retirement home about it!

RYAN

Well at least he talks to me about them.

DAD

Excuse me?

HENRY

(Standing)

I think I'm going to-

RYAN

No, Henry. Don't leave, please.

DAD

Ryan, stop with this! It's over.

HENRY grabs his coat and leaves.

SCENE SEVEN

Sunrise Acres.

HENRY is sitting at a chair reading the news. MARGARET enters.

MARGARET

Hey, Henry. Still hanging on?

HENRY

I am, Margaret. Don't worry about me!

MARGARET

Miss him already?

HENRY

No, no, I-

He pauses.

I do. A lot.

MARGARET

I'm sorry about the other night.

HENRY

It's alright. His father's right. The kid has to be running. He's chasing a scholarship.

(Pause.)

It's good to know he, uh... Would have liked to stay with me.

MARGARET

I don't know if this is going to make things better or worse, but the time that Ryan was here is the happiest I've seen you since Sarah passed. Can I read you the article? I should be going to help Ms. Jennings, but I think she can hold off for a couple minutes.

HENRY

Thanks, Marge.

MARGARET

All right then.

She takes the paper from HENRY.

MARGARET

Cane does it again! Not only has this young athlete broken the all-time high school record for the 5,000-meter race, but he's-

Enter RYAN.

RYAN

Gone and done it again! I can take it from here, Margaret.

MARGARET

Ryan!

RYAN

Hey, guys. If you don't mind, I think I'm going to keep volunteering.

HENRY

You can't. You have college coming up. You need to train, study too. And your Dad said-

RYAN

Look, I don't care what my dad said. I figured a running schedule out. I can run a little bit later every weekday, and really early on weekends. And I can find some time to study after I run.

HENRY

Really, Ryan, you don't need to do this. I've got Margaret to help out around here, I'm fine.

RYAN

I know you're fine, it was never about that. I *want* to do this. I've figured everything out with college.

MARGARET

Well, I can't deny a person a volunteering job unless I feel they're unfit. Have you committed any felonies in the last twenty-four hours?

RYAN

Not that I'm aware of. So, can I keep volunteering?

MARGARET

Let me think about it. In the meantime, look after this one for me. I'm sure you two will get along.

Exit MARGARET.

HENRY

Are you sure you want to keep coming?

RYAN

Yeah, jeez! You'd think you're trying to get me away.

HENRY

You have to promise me that I will be coming second to your training. I don't want to see you mess up your career.

RYAN

I don't really consider the collegiate level of a sport a career.

HENRY

I'm talking about after. I've seen your times in the paper. You're going somewhere, and I don't want helping an old man to be one of your detours.

RYAN

It's not a detour. More of a, uh, pit stop. Sorry, that doesn't really make sense-

HENRY

No, I got it. As terrible as the metaphor was, it conveyed the message rather well.

RYAN

I'm glad you think so.

(Pause)

So, can I pick up on the article?

HENRY

Only if you plan on beating it.

DAD enters, and stands at the door.

RYAN

Dad?

DAD

Henry, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said what I did yesterday. It was wrong.

HENRY

It's quite alright. I know, with these times comes great stress. I was like that too.

DAD

I'm sorry about the way I acted. And I'm sorry for your loss.

HENRY

It's alright. Thank you though.

DAD

Henry, I hate to ask this of you, but could Ryan and I have a moment?

HENRY

Oh, certainly! All the time you need!

HENRY exits.

DAD

Ryan, I'm sorry I haven't been there for you lately. It's been so hard to deal with, and not talking just makes it easier.

RYAN

I know. But it's hard for me too. But I really do need to talk about it with you. It's so hard to keep everything inside for so long.

DAD

I know, I'm sorry Ryan.

RYAN

It's fine.

DAD

Well, can we talk about it now?

RYAN

I guess, yeah.

DAD

Alright.

Long pause.

RYAN

I miss her.

DAD

I do too, buddy. I miss her so much.

(Pause)

She'd be so proud of you, kid.

RYAN

I know. She always told me I could get into Oregon.

DAD

That's not what I mean, Ry. She would be proud of the effort that you put into helping this man. Henry told me what a great kid you were, and I don't think he meant running times.

RYAN

No, Dad. He was the one who helped me. He talked to me about her. He knew how to help me.

DAD

Then I'm glad he was there for you when I wasn't. And I promise, Ry. I'm always here for you now.

RYAN

Thank you, Dad. But I'm here for you, too.

They hug.

HENRY peeks his head in.

HENRY

Can I come in?

DAD

Yeah, I think we're good here. Thank you, Henry.

HENRY

Thank you? Thank you for what?

DAD

For taking care of my son.

RYAN

Yeah, thank you so much. You made things so much better.

HENRY

But Ryan, I need to say the same to you. I haven't had a bigger smile on my face in months. It was a hard time, for me. I needed someone like you. But I do understand if you can't visit anymore.

RYAN

Old man, there's no way I'd rather be spending my afternoons.

HENRY

As long as it's okay with you?

DAD

Henry, there's no other way I'd want my son to be spending his afternoons.

DAD extends his hand to HENRY, who shakes it.

End of Play.