

Through the Ashes

A tragedy in two acts

by John Scavone

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Characters (in order of appearance)

Henry Meeker, mid 50's

Ava Meeker, Henry's second wife, late 30's

Frank Meeker, Henry's son, early 30's

Florence Meeker, Henry's daughter and Frank's twin

Danny Pinch, 30's

Jim Watson, 50's, a ghost

Setting: The burned out ruins of Henry's printing & sign-making business in what once was probably a warehouse. The larger part of the building was shop space in which we now see the last remains of work tables and equipment, various types and sizes of signs. Collapsing steel shelves contain the destroyed remnants of stock and supplies. There are also indications of what used to be office space and a bathroom, along with portions of a staircase. Large sections of the walls have burned away; the building is unsalvageable and unstable.

Time: The present.

Through the Ashes

Act I

At rise, Henry enters.

HENRY

Can still smell smoke, bitter as it mixes with the steam rising from all that water. I feel the heat still pricking my skin, hear the crackle ringing in my ears. It wasn't like anything I could've imagined, I'm glad I didn't try. Once decided, it was better to have it done without a second thought. All that's left is to make a simple goodbye. Then I can get some sleep.

Ava enters.

AVA

I knew you'd be here.

HENRY

Ava, you were supposed to wait for me at the house.

AVA

I did, until I realized it was after midnight. Then I decided to come and find you.

HENRY

It's gone, burned almost to the ground. Your guy did a good job.

AVA

Let's get out of here, it's dangerous.

Creaking sound from above.

HENRY

That's why the area's cordoned off. Go on home, the last thing I want is you getting hurt.

AVA

I meant it's dangerous for us to be spotted here, especially you. You'll ruin everything.

HENRY

Not anymore, it's over. The whole thing went off without a hitch. Go, I'll follow soon. I need another couple minutes.

AVA

What for?

HENRY

Because it wasn't only my life we torched tonight. It was my father's before me, and I once hoped I could make it my son's after me. Try to understand.

AVA

I do, but you have to understand how worried I've been. When you didn't come home or call, I knew you'd stayed to watch it, and I thought, what if he got caught in it somehow? I couldn't live with this if something had happened to you.

HENRY

Nothing did, and nothing will, I promise.

AVA

(hugging him)

Hold me, baby, hold me. You're not sorry, are you?

HENRY

No, I knew exactly what we were doing. It's just that watching it brought up a lot of emotions, memories. I didn't count on that.

AVA

Why did you stay? We agreed it was best to keep away. They'll most likely know it wasn't an accident, we need you to have an alibi.

HENRY

I was at my meeting in Westport by four o'clock like we planned. Afterwards I took them out for drinks and dinner. It was the least I could do for getting their contract. Ironic, isn't it? Our first new contract in six months, and it comes today. I was nowhere near the shop when the fire started.

AVA

Then how did you watch it? You mean on tv?

HENRY

I stayed at the restaurant bar awhile, then drove home like I was supposed to. I was two blocks away when I- I don't really remember doing it, it was like the car turned itself around and came back. I guess I just had to see it finished.

AVA

It was an awful chance to take.

HENRY

I kept far enough away, blended in with the crowd. Ever notice how a fire draws people? Even here, hardly anyone lives in this neighborhood. But something about a blaze fascinates them, like watching the firemen fight it is some kind of sporting event. Like they need to see a hell on earth and know they're not the ones caught in it. I swear some of them started cheering when they saw it was a lost cause.

AVA

Remember we did it for us, for a new life, a real life, the one we've wanted and you promised me we'd have. You do still want that, don't you?

HENRY

Now more than ever, or else this was all a waste. I've lived with my sins before and committed most of them on purpose.

AVA

Nobody gets hurt by this one. Collecting the insurance is just taking back money you've paid in for years and never would have seen again otherwise.

HENRY

A million bucks, that's an awful lot to have in our hands all at once. I could work another whole lifetime and not have nearly that much.

AVA

Think of what we can do with it, baby, the two of us together.

HENRY

Together.

AVA

We need to stay strong now. Doubt is the only thing we can't afford.

HENRY

After it was all over, when the fire trucks left and the crowd headed home, I sneaked in here—

AVA

You're sure nobody saw you?

HENRY

I waited 'til there wasn't a soul on the street but mine. I came in, and I'll admit at first I felt weak, like I might faint. But it passed, and any doubt I had went with it. Done is done.

AVA

(caressing him)

Yes, that's my baby, strong inside. You have the guts to stand by your decision, more than anyone else I know. You've taught me how, that's why I love you so much.

HENRY

I hope to hell you keep feeling that way, Ava.

AVA

Make love to me now, right here. Let's consummate our deed where it happened.

HENRY

Are you crazy?

AVA

With a power I've never felt before. We've taken life into our own hands, we can make it anything we want. I'll never forget what you've done for me. I'll make you the happiest man alive.

HENRY

Then it's all worth it.

AVA

I love you, baby. I'll always love you.

Ava exits.

HENRY

You didn't break up my first marriage, but if it hadn't already been on the rocks, you would have. From the first day you walked in here a dozen years ago looking for a job, I wanted to be with you. Everything about you set something off in me that was almost painful, I liked it so much. After awhile I started flirting, and couldn't believe it when you flirted back. Then later we found more, became more. You wanted to learn about the business, about me, and when I

told you, you listened. We used to talk for hours, until one day out of nowhere you up and kissed me. That's when everything was decided.

Frank enters.

FRANK

Holy hell, what happened?

HENRY

Frank, where did you come from?

FRANK

I got a call from a friend who saw it on the news. I rushed over here as fast as I could.

HENRY

I bet you did.

FRANK

Why wouldn't I?

HENRY

Because you were drinking, I can tell by the expression on your face.

FRANK

I had only one and a half beers. I did smoke some pot, too, so I guess it all evens out.

HENRY

Jesus, what am I going to do with you?

FRANK

What you're going to do about this is the real question.

HENRY

Move on. We have to move on, son.

FRANK

Where do I move on to?

HENRY

Show some guts, for Pete's sake, you're young yet.

FRANK

We're both getting older all the time.

HENRY

I still have a future. So do you, if you'd only clean up your act for good.

FRANK

Old habits are hard to break. Without them I couldn't be the chronic screw-up we know and love.

HENRY

You need to really make your mind up you're gonna change, that's all. If you could be even a little more like your sister.

FRANK

Florence is the good twin, but I'll keep trying, Dad. Any idea what caused this?

HENRY

You tell me. I was at my meeting in Westport, you were supposed to lock up. Everything was okay when you left?

FRANK

I thought it was.

HENRY

You thought?

FRANK

I'm sure of it. I checked around, there was nothing unusual.

HENRY

You're absolutely positive?

FRANK

Yes! I was the last one out, and everything— shit, I forgot all about that.

HENRY

Forgot what? Frank, what did you do?

FRANK

Nothing! Jim Watson came in at five minutes to six. He wanted to go over the books, he's getting ready to do our taxes. I had people to meet, he said I could go and leave the back door open, that he'd lock it behind him and set the alarm when he left.

HENRY

Damn it! I told him I couldn't be here, if he came any other night I would stay with him. I wish you hadn't let him in.

FRANK

I didn't think there was anything wrong with it, he's been here on his own plenty of times. You think he forgot the alarm? Maybe the smoke detectors didn't go off, and the fire got out of control before anyone could get here.

HENRY

The smoke detectors are always on, you should know that by now. They have to be disabled separately, they-

FRANK

They what?

HENRY

Nothing, never mind. Jesus, I hope he's- you didn't hear anything about anyone getting hurt, no one- you know.

FRANK

Dying? All I heard was that the shop was on fire.

HENRY

Jimmy wouldn't have been here that long, he probably picked up the books and left. That's what he usually does when I don't stay.

FRANK

Maybe you should call him.

HENRY

It's late now, I don't want to wake him up for nothing. I'll call in the morning.

FRANK

Suit yourself. Looks like maybe we should have put in that sprinkler system I suggested after all.

HENRY

We couldn't afford it. Ava researched what it would cost.

FRANK

Ava? I was going to take care of that.

HENRY

She's the general manager.

FRANK

I told you I know a guy, I could have gotten us a good price.

HENRY

She said it wasn't workable. Even with your guy, it probably would have cost over ten thousand, money I'd have had to borrow.

FRANK

What did losing everything cost you?

HENRY

I'm insured.

FRANK

For how much?

HENRY

I'll have to check.

FRANK

You don't know?

HENRY

I said I'll have to check! It'll be enough to cover my outstanding bills and keep the house for me 'til I figure out what's next.

FRANK

Yeah, okay. There's nothing we can do here. Why don't you go home, get some rest?

HENRY

Why don't you? Just leave me be.

FRANK

Fine, if that's how you feel about it, I'll get back to my other half a beer.

HENRY

Fine, go!

FRANK

Fine! Did you call your concubine yet?

HENRY

My what?

FRANK

Your general manager, she'll want to know about the fire.

HENRY

Get the hell out of here!

FRANK

By the way, I won't be in to work tomorrow. I mean later today.

HENRY

Scram!

Frank exits.

Always gotta be a smart ass, that's a lot of your trouble right there. Crap, I don't have the slightest idea what I should do with you now. Maybe this will be the best thing for you. I fired you hoping you'd take a lesson, grow up a little. Maybe it was a mistake taking you back, Ava told me I shouldn't. But you'd been in some real trouble then, I was your only chance, and you're my son. Ava didn't get that. All the same, she was probably right. She usually is when it comes to taking care of business.

Creaking sound as Ava enters.

AVA

Henry, are you coming up? I'm waiting for you, baby.

HENRY

I'm coming, another minute.

Ava exits.

I'd give you anything. What man wouldn't?

Florence enters.

FLORENCE

Dad? You shouldn't be here, it could be dangerous.

HENRY

What are you doing here?

FLORENCE

The fire's a news story. My station manager wants a report and some aftermath footage from the scene. I told her I'd quit if she didn't send me. What happened?

HENRY

Damned if I know. I was at a meeting in Westport. I left your brother to lock up.

FLORENCE

Frankie had something to do with it?

HENRY

I didn't say that. It was just some kind of accident, that's all, a terrible accident.

FLORENCE

Is that what the fire marshal thinks?

HENRY

There hasn't been any marshal here, far as I know.

FLORENCE

There will be. They always investigate something like this.

HENRY

What's to find? On purpose or not, how can they know who's behind it?

FLORENCE

You think it was set on purpose, that it was arson?

HENRY

Did I say arson? Don't go putting words in my mouth!

FLORENCE

My reporter's instinct, I thought that's what you meant. Are you alright? Was anybody hurt?

HENRY

No one, thank God. I'm alright. Just gotta make up my mind that I lost it all.

FLORENCE

I'm sorry, Dad. I know what this business meant to you.

HENRY

Tell you the truth, it wasn't really much anymore.

FLORENCE

Does Ava know yet?

HENRY

She knows.

FLORENCE

If you two need anything, you only have to ask.

HENRY

We'll make out, but thanks, I appreciate the offer.

FLORENCE

You should be with her.

HENRY

I was just leaving to go home. I can use some rest.

FLORENCE

I'm going to tape a short piece outside with my crew, then I have another assignment. That's the news business, I really can't stick around. I'll check in with you later, okay?

HENRY

Sure. I'm glad you came by.

FLORENCE

Just doing my job.

(kisses his cheek)

Hang in there, Dad.

Florence exits.

HENRY

How are twins so different? Your career is everything, you knew what you wanted as a teenager and worked hard to get it. Everyone in the city knows your face, people tune in especially for your stories. Makes me proud when they ask about my daughter. And here you are, asking about Ava and me, in the middle of working. Wait, Flo's working now? What the hell time is it?

AVA

(entering)

Henry, what are you doing?

HENRY

I'm coming.

AVA

You've been down here all night. It's lonely in bed.

HENRY

I doubt I'll sleep much, even though I really need it.

AVA

Sleep isn't all a bed is for.

HENRY

I wouldn't be any good at anything else right now, either.

AVA

Too bad, I have an itch that needs scratching. Can't you help me? Please?

HENRY

You're a naughty girl, aren't you?

AVA

That's what you like about me.

HENRY

You know me too well.

AVA

Baby, I know everything. Now that it's done, you're afraid to just let yourself go, enjoy what we have coming. You're starting to worry that you don't deserve it, but you do. I say you do.

HENRY

I can't help wondering if how we're getting it is—

AVA

Sh. Sin is in the eye of the beholder, all in your mind. If you don't believe you've sinned, you haven't. Give in to what you want.

Ava exits.

HENRY

I wanted you. And I wanted more, I wanted us to have everything we could, to share it together. How many years, how many chances to get it were left? If I died and hadn't done this, would I regret it? I didn't want to die that way. There's only one world, one life. I wanted to live it with you and live it to the fullest.

Creaking sound, louder.

FRANK

(entering)

You remember the stories he used to tell us?

HENRY

Frank, what are you doing back?

FRANK

About Grandpa, how he left the coal mines and came out here, started a little sign shop on a shoestring, had one guy he paid a few bucks a day working for him. Almost never had anything in his own pocket.

FLORENCE

(entering)

When Dad took over—

HENRY

Florence—

FLORENCE

—he hired more people so he could expand into making neon and electric signs for stores, and then added the print shop. Eventually he made enough to buy the property.

HENRY

And I still owe a mortgage on it.

FLORENCE

His big ambition was to be able to do fancy highway billboards someday.

HENRY

That day wasn't gonna come, not at my age. Those things are all digital displays now, stuff I wouldn't have the chance to learn about. Ours was a sinking business, we weren't getting the contracts like we used to. After paying salaries and taxes, plus my bills, I didn't bring home that damn much anymore. You kids wouldn't know.

FRANK

We might've been able to get into doing those billboards someday, if he'd let me try out some of my ideas. I wanted us to switch over the print and sign services to a hundred percent online, sub-contract the big installations, streamline the business so we'd have time to work on new things. But I was only labor to him, another set of hands.

HENRY

I wanted you to learn the whole business from the bottom up, same as I did. I wanted you to stop being a crazy kid and prove yourself.

FLORENCE

He gave you a second chance. You should be grateful to him.

FRANK

I am! I like to have fun outside of work. Is that so wrong?

FLORENCE

Your track record stinks. Two DUIs—

HENRY

I had to fire you after the second one, you couldn't drive for us anymore.

FLORENCE

—followed by receiving stolen property.

FRANK

I didn't know it was stolen! A friend said if I helped him sell some stuff he had, we'd split the profit. I'd been laid off that shitty grocery job, I had no other way of making money at the time.

FLORENCE

So you turned around and tried to sell two laptops and a smart tv to an undercover cop.

FRANK

I took my lumps and served my sentence. I've been out over six years now, and I'm still trying to put it behind me.

FLORENCE

Are you?

FRANK

I was. But the story of my life continues.

FLORENCE

Life is what you make it.

FRANK

Fuck you. Not everyone knows what they want right away. You did, you were lucky.

FLORENCE

I put in my time and work. Nothing was handed to me.

FRANK

To me, either. I had to beg Dad to take me back into the business when I got out of jail.

HENRY

Which I did, because I could see how scared you were.

FRANK

It should've have been mine all along, only I didn't take it and make it mine. I finally figured that out, and now the business is gone. I'm the reason the place burned down, not because of anything I did, just because I'm me. Fate, karma, whatever you want to call it, I don't get a break.

FLORENCE

You really believe that?

FRANK

Shouldn't I?

HENRY

No! You do like you were doing, accept your mistakes and go on from there.

FRANK

Without a job again, this time with a record. And Dad's in no position to pick me up.

HENRY

It can't always depend on me. I have my own life to live. I can't spend what's left of it worrying about you.

FLORENCE

Maybe I can find something at the station for you. It would be entry level, but better than nothing.

FRANK

I really don't want your help, Flo.

HENRY

Take it, you dope.

FLORENCE

Why not?

FRANK

Because, that's why. Because.

Frank exits.

HENRY

Try, anyway. If you really can offer him something, he'll come around.

FLORENCE

I feel so badly for you, Frankie.

Florence exits.

HENRY

Not your fault he's the way he is. If anyone's to blame, it must be me. There must have been something I did differently with the two of you. But what? You were always a pair, what one got the other got.

AVA

(entering)

Don't you think it's time your son moved into a place of his own?

HENRY

We're taking away his job. You want to take his home away, too?

AVA

I want us finally starting our new life together. We've been waiting for the chance.

HENRY

I know we have. A little while longer, it can't matter much.

AVA

A week turns into a month, turns into a year, and then another year and another, like when he first moved in with us. How long does it go on?

HENRY

I don't know, awhile.

AVA

You said you wanted to move out of this house, the one you shared with her. I believed you.

HENRY

I meant it!

AVA

Then act like you did. I want a place that's ours alone. I don't want to live in her shadow anymore.

HENRY

You're not in anyone's shadow. I never loved her like I love you. You know that's the truth.

AVA

I know I spend every day in her home. Your kids still look at me like I'm the one who got rid of her. I can't take it anymore, it hurts. Baby, it hurts.

HENRY

I'm sorry, I didn't realize. But the kids don't think that. Their mother and me were done before you came along. They were old enough to know it then, and they can see how happy I am with you now.

AVA

Are you? Do you believe I can make a home for you?

HENRY

Of course I do. And if the kids don't, it's their problem. You mean more to me than anything.

AVA

Show me. With just a small piece of the insurance money we can buy a house to be proud of. We'll sell this one at a profit and have even more to play with.

HENRY

But what's it got to do with Frank? We're talking about a bigger place, aren't we? Can't we find one with room for him?

AVA

He doesn't want to be around us any more than we want him. Neither of them do.

HENRY

Florence doesn't need us. Frank is another story.

AVA

They both hate me. Florence doesn't show it as much.

HENRY

They don't hate you, you're wrong about that. With Frank, you gotta understand the way he is. He seems like he hates everyone because he hates himself. I wish I could get him out of that somehow.

AVA

I don't care if you do or not. I'm tired of having to deal with him for your sake.

HENRY

What does he do to you, really?

AVA

He doesn't respect me, here or at work, and he shows his contempt every chance he gets. He calls me your concubine.

HENRY

That's gonna stop. You're my wife.

AVA

It isn't just that, that's nothing, I don't care what comes out of his mouth. He's jealous, that's the real problem. He never liked me being over him in the business, but baby, I earned it. I deserve to be your general manager.

HENRY

It won't make a difference anymore. There won't be a business for you to manage.

AVA

You still have to tell him he can't treat me that way. He can't keep living with us unless he starts showing me respect.

HENRY

If he does, though, if he starts, he can stay on with us? Not for long, until he gets on his feet.

AVA

He never will until you force him to.

HENRY

So I have to choose between you?

AVA

You always did.

Ava exits.

HENRY

How can I, how could anyone? Is that why we did all this?
No, that would be nuts. You know I love you.

Florence enters.

FLORENCE

Arson, he said it first, not me.

HENRY

I never said it was arson.

FLORENCE

Why would a thought like that just occur to him?

HENRY

It was a thought, one of those insane ideas that come over two people when they're lying in bed, fondling and feeling each other after the best sex of my life. I wish we were, and I wish we could, and wouldn't it be wonderful, and we could do something crazy, like... Then how and what if and do we dare? Then why shouldn't we, and suddenly the thought of evil is exciting, pulls us closer, and I swear I would to make her hold tighter, and she swears she would because she could be happy in hell as long as we're together like this. And it's a pact, and I can't go back on it or I'll lose her. Haven't you ever felt that way?

Frank enters.

FLORENCE

Thanks for coming.

FRANK

I really don't like being here, Flo. What do you want?

FLORENCE

Do you know anything about Dad's insurance on this place?

FRANK

No, he never let me get that deep into his business.

FLORENCE

I did some checking. A little over a year ago, he took out a second policy without cancelling the first.

FRANK

Nothing wrong with having extra protection, is there?

FLORENCE

He already had a policy for five hundred thousand. He took out another with a different company for five hundred thousand more. Doesn't that seem odd?

FRANK

What are you suggesting?

FLORENCE

I can't help being curious. What do you think this property and the business are really worth?

FRANK

How would I know? Including the land, maybe five hundred thousand is about right.

FLORENCE

My guess would be more like half of that.

HENRY

Leave it alone, Florence. You don't know what you're talking about.

FRANK

Are you accusing our father of something?

HENRY

Your own father who loves you.

FLORENCE

I'm thinking, that's all. News is impersonal, it has to be.

FRANK

This story is personal for both of us.

FLORENCE

That's why I want your take on it.

FRANK

My take is you want to find something ugly for some reason. What did he ever do to you?

FLORENCE

I don't want to find anything, but it's my job to look.