

# **A Mother's Son**

**by**

**R. Nicholas Håaj**

**From the collection -**

***Come Back, Sit Down: Twelve and One Stories***

**Word Count: 3,362**

**April 2009**

**961 E. California Blvd. #327**

**Pasadena, CA 91106**

**[nicholas@r-nicholas-haaj.com](mailto:nicholas@r-nicholas-haaj.com)**

**[www.r-nicholas-haaj.com](http://www.r-nicholas-haaj.com)**

**626.676.4142**

## A Mother's Son

It was the ninety fourth straight day of sunshine. The sun beat down on the Los Angeles basin, hot, but not oppressive. Mrs. Elsa Glavine was in her yard, behind a mid-century Hancock Park bungalow with two years worth of mortgage left. Twenty four more payments, mostly equity now. She wanted to be in fine spirits in her summer linens, the garden was looking good, great, actually, the walk had been weeded, ready for another summer, a summer that was proving to be nearly indistinguishable from the spring just passed. The lemon trees smelled forth like nectar, the flowering hedges along the walls framing the yard abuzz with honey bees working in a pulsating unison, heaving and breathing as if constituting external lungs. The geraniums had been clipped, their chalky detritus in neat piles at their base. The lilacs, succulents, gardenias ... tended-to and in bloom. The jacarandas swayed minutely overhead, not completely succeeding, but not failing entirely in keeping Mrs. Glavine cool and contented. She knelt on a soft bed of grass, shortly cut, but lush and comfortable against the knees. She worked the herbs, her hands covered in flecks of her dirt, her earth, alternating snips with sniffs of her worn yellow gloves – of parsley, thyme, cilantro, mint. She worked in silence, not even her thoughts loud or beyond her immediate line-of-sight, her head bent beneath an ancient straw hat given her by her child when he was, in fact, a child, back when she and the mortgage were younger, when time was faster, and the garden not as beautiful.

It had been a good life, and Mrs. Glavine was glad of it.

By mid-afternoon, Mrs. Glavine was reclined along the length of a wooden chaise lounge, not asleep, not tired, resting, eyes open skyward. The iron gate by the azaleas creaked open and a sunny older woman entered. Mrs. Ruthann Snowden. Careful to bring the gate back to rest with thoughtful ease, she strolled the walkway, looking about the familiar grounds, walking towards her friend.

“Beautiful day, beautiful day.”

Mrs. Glavine nodded slowly, a vagueness attached.

Ruthann Snowden slid into the Adirondack beside the chaise lounge and removed her cotton gloves. She reached for the pitcher of vodka and lemonade waiting on the table, and poured into a tall glass. Remnants of floating ice tolled their last. She drank slowly, the vodka

stronger than usual. Her eyes watered as they wandered the garden in the lazy delight of admiration.

“A wonderfully beautiful day.”

The two women prepared as if for a mid-afternoon sojourn. Mrs. Ruthann Snowden brought her hat lower on her brow. She took another sip of her drink, a smaller one, still refreshing. Mrs. Glavine's eyes remained closed until she spoke, then she opened them onto the garden:

“Roy died last week.”

A pause to absorb such words, extended to allow Ruthann Snowden to recollect who Roy may be.

“How do you mean?”

“Car accident. He was ... forty four.”

“Oh, Elsa ...”

Then no more.

“Forty two. Dead at forty two.”

Mrs. Glavine wasn't speaking to her friend, not in that voice she wasn't, that secret voice of thought, struggling as she was through tangles of vagueness, memories distant but returning, unsure as to their meeting point, far too many of them to allow for monolithic thought. Her dead son Roy was in there somewhere, the hard hidden truth of it the son untended to in fact and in memory of a fluid life. Compulsion's magnetic qualities had had their effects on Mrs. Glavine, too tormenting to deny, too intoxicating to ration, the inconvenience of introspection a perfectly repellent charge.

She peered into her tilted glass with a distinct pause laden with expectations and conditions, an implied *quid pro quo* with only one reliable, but forgiving counterparty. Mrs. Glavine was procrastinating, wishing time away, her friend watching her reluctantly, unsure of what to say about a son she'd heard about intermittently, seen a few times maybe, them having never met.

Mrs. Glavine drank.

“I feel I should say something, tell someone something.”

Ruthann Snowden nodded, absently, almost obediently.

“About Roy. Say something about him.”

Mrs. Glavine despised her tenuous position, the nexus between a mother's innateness and the appropriateness of eulogistic redemption. She didn't want to have to talk about this, a conviction she felt in the spasms of an angry hand, the hardness of pressed lips. It didn't seem just, seemingly a random event, this death, this taking away. Something wanted out from Elsa Glavine, and Ruthann Snowden, bless her heart, was a good listener. She'd listen to anything. For a long time. They'd become good friends, after all.

"This one's his fault."

Words will come out like that.

"No, I don't mean it like that. Not like that at all."

Mrs. Glavine tilted the glass again.

"We'd had our misunderstandings. In the past. Things were very different. I at times may not have been the best of mothers to him. But understand, you know, Richard left me all those years ago, with that girl. Left me alone with Roy in that miserable desert town. It just wasn't right."

Mrs. Glavine unclenched her hand.

"Oh, look at me, I'm not composed."

Ruthann Snowden shook her head, in deep patient commiseration, willing her friend onward through silence. Mrs. Glavine had long-grown comfortable with taking her time.

The garden she burned with her gaze finally brought the modicum of calm she sought.

"We only had each other. Roy and me. For a long time before I said enough is enough. We packed it up and left. Just drove out of there one afternoon. It was a Wednesday. And hot, hot. I drove as far as I could. I drove until Saturday."

Mrs. Glavine was quiet for a moment. Then:

"Roy was so helpful. Helped me pack. Load-up the car. There wasn't much worth anything in that place. Believe me. A few boxes. A few things. And so quiet in the car. No fussing at all. I can't remember him even asking for the bathroom. It's funny what you remember."

Ruthann Snowden smiled faintly.

"But we made it to Los Angeles. We made it. That's as far as I could drive. I didn't know what we'd do, where we'd go next. But here we were."

Mrs. Glavine was looking at her lemon tree.

“And it wasn't too much after that Bud Long offered me that job, the one ... Just dumb luck, really. Met him in that bar ... it's gone now. So strange ... and ...

Ruthann Snowden leaned forward in the chair.

“... he ... well, we all had to do whatever it took back then. Bud helped me save a little to buy this house. Put something down. Roy would get his own room. You should have seen how happy he was up there in that room of his, baseball cards, radio. And some while after, Bud moved in with us. It seemed to be the best thing for Roy, give him something – someone – to look up to. Something more than just the two of us. And they were fun times, oh my.”

Mrs. Glavine adjusted her hat, taking a sip of the drink, noticing the melting ice cubes, taking a longer one.

“That was the first time Roy left the house. Just slipped out. Not a word. Bud brought him back for me. He found him over there at Union Station. Maybe an hour or two later. He didn't have a ticket. He was just there, on a bench with his bag, looking at his cards. Just a little boy's silliness, really, where was he going? He and Bud never learned to get along. I knew that. Very different, those two. It's too bad. Life's quick. It'll pass you. Bud had some good qualities about him. Generous. Hard working. We had our differences. Bud and me. It could have been something. Then Bud himself up and left. Just gone one day. Probably for the best. I'd grown used to these things. Roy was grown by then. Almost out of school, seventeen maybe. Working over at Millard's, the butchers. Remember them?”

Ruthann Snowden did.

“Oh, he'd come home a piece. Ohhh! I can't tell you how foul ... that smell was. His room always had that smell, that ... sweet metal smell of blood. Poor Roy. I could tell he wasn't too happy there. It was just something to do before something else.”

Mrs. Glavine's eyes narrowed.

“That must have been around the time I met Bobby Stempinato. That Bobby Stempinato ... Funny, his name wasn't even Bobby. It was something different, I think Angelo. Bobby, he thought it gave him more of an American-sounding name. He was a charmer. It was like living in a cliché, the wine and dance, like something from a different time. We were out almost every night, anyplace you could think of, in that car of his. He was loud. I'll tell you, it would be two in the morning, and he'd be carrying-on as if it were noon. You know the type. Full of love for living. Roy ... He left the house again and moved to a hotel near work. The rental ones. He was older. He could do what he wanted to do. It gave him more freedom, more time to his own.

That's what he wanted, he told me. I don't know what he did. After work, I mean. He needed his space. I understood. I stopped by once."

Mrs. Glavine's face brightened.

"It's funny, I can still see that place of his clearly, him in that small room. You know how that can be. The memories."

Ruthann Snowden nodded again. She herself had three grown and gone children.

The sun blazed in its way, closer because of the season. Mrs. Glavine's thoughts remained motionless and silent in the tiny rented room with her son. Was it summer? Were the windows open? Why had she gone? Had she been there before? What did they say to one another? She removed a shirt draped over the back of chair, folded it neatly against her chest, and replaced it on the seat. And left. That was what she could remember on sudden notice.

"I sometimes wish I hadn't let him go to that place so easily. A boy should be with his mother. I don't know if I was holding on very tightly at the time." It was that voice again.

Silence. All the time in the world. And a refocusing.

"Bobby and I didn't last, in spite the good times. We could've. But we didn't. And I'm not ashamed to say that there were other men after Bobby. There were. I still thought we needed a good man around the house, a father for him, a husband for me. A family to come back to. And Roy didn't approve. He wouldn't. Of any of them. And there's only so much a mother can do. But it was too late by then, anyway. Roy was already living out there on his own, and maybe he had his friends, and we went about our business. Los Angeles is a big city, you don't just chance across each other in a big city like this. It has to be intentional. And there was a period of time, there, when I may not have seen Roy for a stretch. A good long time. I'm not going to keep this from you Ruthie, there were a great many distractions. It's just what we did, how it played out. It was too much ... too much of a good many things. My money got took, taken, I had an accident, took a fall. I lost my job, and ... Roy was grown now, had finished his college term, and I had no one else to ask. He came back home. Instead of paying his rent he paid the mortgage. It made more sense."

Mrs. Glavine waved her hand in a wide arc in the direction of the garden and the house. "Part of this is his."

Then more silence.

"He took good care of me. He surely did. Bobby and I got reacquainted, he came back to the house, but briefly. And Roy left again. I'd found another job by then. I didn't want Roy to

leave. I asked him to stay, I did, but he and Bobby ... He left without saying a word. Just one afternoon, we woke up and he was gone. And gone he stayed. A few years at least. A whirl and a blur. Everything racing at once. The oddest time, believe me Ruthie when I tell you ...”

Ruthann Snowden nodded her head again, physical punctuation validating sentiment.

“... long nights that melted with the days. As did the job. Or jobs. In Las Vegas, before it gets hot out there, I married Carl. This was some time after Bobby had left again. This time for good. And in Memphis, on our way to Atlantic City, Carl and I divorced. Or I think we did. He left me someplace off Beale Street. You can't know shame until something like that happens. I had to borrow the money to call the operator in Los Angeles to connect me to Roy. And he was asleep, it must have been four in the morning. He couldn't understand me at first through the tears and shortness of breath. *'Slow down, Ma. Slow down,'* he kept saying. I can still hear his voice. We spoke on the telephone a long while. He just listened and listened. He wired what he could for food and the motel, and six days later I met his bus at the station. I don't know why he came all the way out there. I told him I'd make it back on my own. But he came on out anyway. We rode back mostly quietly, sleeping against his arm for mile after mile, wanting to say something but shame getting the better part of me, all the while Roy watching the road passing under the window. I watched him. Six days of this. Six sober days.

“We stepped off the bus in downtown to a blinding glare. It actually hurt, like God wanting to tell me something urgently and directly. I remember that well. I looked over at Roy to see if his eyes were having the same ... revelation to the light as mine. But I didn't see anything different. He had the same undisturbed eyes, my bags filling his hands, leading me to the cab stand. We were going home.”

Home.

“It was going to be different. I promised myself.”

The women were quiet for a moment before Ruthann Snowden spoke.

“Elsa. All these years ...”

“That was before our time.

“Yes ...”

“We were home again. And it felt like a home, just the two of us for as long as Roy could stay. Just the both of us. And I wanted him to stay, the way a mother wants her son to stay. But living gets in the way – it just does, Ruthie. He took a place in Long Beach,” and Mrs. Glavine waved her hand before her face, dismissively. “He knew I didn't have a car anymore.”

She looked at her hands, then placed them carefully in her lap, an elegant woman of manners. In a whisper, finally looking at Ruthann Snowden, she said: "I asked him, before he left that one time, why he keeps doing what he does for me. I didn't want him to think I didn't know. But he couldn't say just then. He was in a hurry. A letter arrived in the mail sometime later, after he'd left."

Mrs. Glavine removed a folded envelope from her hip pocket, removing its single sheet content, white and creased. "I read it again this morning."

She unfolded the letter and read Roy's words aloud: "*The Mother is the soil. At her cruelest, she can be barren and the taker of life, but she gave original life and hope keeps us rooted to her.* How's that, Ma? I know how much you've come to love your garden. We give what we may have and take what is given. That's all there could ever be. I guess we have no right to expect anything more. I hope this answers your question."

Mrs. Glavine refolded the paper, replacing it in its envelope, and let it drop into the folds of her dress that formed in her lap.

"That's how he'd become, good with his words. He'd never written me a letter before." There was neither pride, nor hurt, nor resignation in her latest words. Only words-as-narrative, a woman with a story to be tell. "Nothing came of it. There was nothing to change. We still spent our time apart. An occasional visit like before. He found his way up into Santa Barbara. A nice little house up in the hills. His son had come. And better weather besides. I understood."

Ruthann Snowden nodded again.

"There's always things to be done, always a next thing ..."

"Always the next thing," Ruthann Snowden said in rumination.

"But Ruthie, I didn't think it would be like this. I never would have imagined an ending, if it were up to me. A mother shouldn't have to let go of her son."

Ruthann Snowden wanted to stand, wanted to take her friend's hand in hers, wanted to act. She didn't stir.

"No, she shouldn't."

A silence became two, one for each.

Then:

"We let go of each other to live in two different worlds. He came back to mine many more times than I went to his. I know this. It's how we were. That's the people we were. I

imagine him as that little boy, out there becoming the man, I imagine him out on that road alone ... “

A fattening tear gestated delicately where the eye's softness ends and the high cheekbone begins. Ruthann Snowden watched it, almost holding her breath, waiting for it to cascade. It glistened in place instead.

“Why are we the people we are, Ruthie? How does it come out this way? How come we don't have no say in it, like we're just along for the ride? I've come to want to know. It only seems right to want to know.”

Mrs. Glavine picked up the glass, the ice melted, the liquid tepid, useless to her, returning it.

“I don't know how to end it. I don't know what to do. I'm no one's mother now. Who does that make me? Who do I become, Ruthie?”

Ruthann Snowden couldn't know.

Mrs. Glavine stood with a shocking quickness, taking steps away, all as if one movement. She walked down her weeded path, stopping suddenly, returning. She stood above her friend.

“I imagine him out on that road alone, up in those hills at night. Don't think I don't. That long way he had to come and go back. I'd asked him to come back here, to come get me, to go see that little boy of his, my grandson. He said he'd come. But I couldn't go. Something came up at the very last minute. There was no way for me to reach him. I left him a note on the door. I left the backdoor unlocked. Food in the fridge. Told him I'd be back as soon as I could. I thought he'd wait. I said I was sorry. But he left, went back away.”

Mrs. Glavine turned back down the path, fondling the leaves of a wilting flowering bush that lined the walk. “You know, Ruthie, I wish it would rain in this *goddamned* place once in a while. It would save me some time watering these things.”

She crossed the lawn and knelt at a newly planted hydrangea. She dug at the earth around it, pouring water from a plastic jug, patting at the roots. Ruthann Snowden looked out after her, before leaning forward to retrieve the fallen envelope from the ground. She placed it on the table, and started to rise to excuse herself.

**The End**