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The Birthing House

Christopher Ransom

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Extract

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Death borders upon our birth, and our cradle stands in the grave.

Joseph Hall, English bishop and satirist

1

Conrad Harrison found the last home he would ever know by driving the wrong way out of Chicago with a ghost in his car. When he crossed the Wisconsin line he was lost, too tired to care, and what traveled with him remained invisible and unknown. The wide green medians and fields of plowed fertile soil were relaxing. The road was black and smooth, free of those brain-jarring seams found on concrete highways. The spring thunder and rain moved over him from the side, pummeling the rented gray Dodge in bursts as brief and intense as a car wash. He could have gone on this way until he reached Canada, but an hour or two later there was some traffic and the sign for the Perkins in Janesville, so he exited.

He might have been tired and lost, but he was suddenly hungry, ravenous. Filled with the kind of animal appetite that shuts out all else and goes to work like it needs to prove something. He ordered the country fried steak with three over easy, and when the girl came to take the plate away he said, You know what? Let's do it again.

In between dinners, he picked up the paper the last

guest had left in the booth. He liked to read the classifieds, to see what scraps people were offering, what hope they sought. He fell into the local real estate listings. The photo was black and white, all grainy and pixelated newsprint.

> 140 yr old Victorian in Black Earth. 4 bdr, 2 bath on 1 acre. 3500 sq. feet. Front parlor, library, orig. woodwork, maple floors, fireplace. Cornish stone foundation. Det 2-car garage. Historic turn-of-the-century birthing house restored to mint. Perfect for family! $225,000. Seller motivated. Call Roddy @ 608-574-8911.

Now lightheaded from all the hash browns and gravy, he swallowed the last of his third cup of coffee and carried his meal ticket to the front counter. He paid with cash and left the girl a twenty for no real reason other than he felt, for the first time in his life, burdened by money. He juggled the page he'd torn from the *Wisconsin State Journal* and powered up his mobile. There were no messages, or maybe they had not come through the regional carrier's towers yet. Or maybe Jo was too busy to call.

The man who answered was polite. Sure, he could show the house as early as nine o'clock tomorrow morning. And did he know how to get to Black Earth?

Conrad said he was pretty sure he'd remember the directions, all the while thinking, What a name for a town. Don't worry, Dad. I'm not far behind.

So maybe he knew there was a ghost traveling with him after all.

2

From the front it appeared modest, a simple vanilla bean Victorian on a street of pleasant others. But later, when he would find himself walking the long slope of backyard alone at night, Conrad Harrison would come to see that its humble if charming façade masked ingenious depths and a height that seemed to grow at night, like Jack's beanstalk. The needle-helmeted dormers, covered front porch, chocolate pillars and squat front door brought to mind a fairy-tale house made for trolls or elves, not city people.

It was not love at first sight, but she made his heart beat faster.

Conrad tried to mask his excitement, if only because that was what you were supposed to do when considering a major purchase. He tried for a moment to imagine Jo's reaction if she were standing here beside him. It looked like the kind of house she was always talking about. Something old, something to redecorate when she was ready to settle down. But she wasn't here beside him now and the realization that he didn't much care what she thought gave him a deviant thrill. The house was

like another woman in that way. Looking was just looking, and there was no harm in looking unless looking turned to touching. Or buying.

'Got kids?' Roderick 'call me Roddy' Tabor said, smiling like a man in a milk commercial. Instead of a dairy moustache, Roddy had a badass seventies cop 'stache and wooly sideburns, sans irony. The realtor was tall, very slim and balding. The brown suit and wide, brown tie were priceless. Conrad liked the realtor the minute he'd spotted him behind the desk at the crummy, wood-paneled real estate office down on Decatur Street. Roddy had grown up in Chicago, and they'd talked about city life vs country life for all of the ten or fifteen minutes it took to walk from 'downtown' Black Earth up the broken sidewalk hill to 818 Heritage Street. 'Perfect place to raise some kids. Property taxes are steep, but the schools here are top-notch.'

Conrad cleared his throat. 'No. No kids. Just the two dogs. Both rescues from a shelter in Los Angeles. But they're like our children.' Conrad thought about mentioning the other pets he liked to keep from time to time, the animals that weren't really pets at all, but didn't. You never knew how people were going to react.

'Sure. Young couple. What's the hurry, right?' Roddy turned the key. 'Oh, door's unlocked. Pretty common 'round here.'

Conrad stepped past the realtor and laid his eyes on the first of several living rooms. Actually, he knew they weren't all living rooms. In these Victorians it was

parlor-this and sitting room-that. Whatever you called them, they amounted to a lot of space to spread out, play cards, eat, watch TV and entertain friends. They would need new friends.

'I don't go for the song and dance myself,' Roddy said, dropping the keys on the ceramic tile and oak mantle. 'Figure adults know what they like when they see it. Holler if you have any questions.'

'Will do.'

Roddy ambled into the kitchen, helped himself to a glass of water, and stepped out back for a smoke.

Conrad found himself in the dining room, paced off the long maple floorboards, ran his fingers over the pin-striped wallpaper. Not a crack in the plaster walls or a splintering window sill in sight. The doorframes were straight. In the kitchen, the original wooden shelves and pantry drawers were nicked black in many places, aged smooth and full of character. The trim was a clean, buttery shade of toffee. The lines of the house were immaculate. The house felt solid.

But confusing.

Conrad started in the front parlor, then exited through the French doors that opened into the main foyer, making a U-turn back into the dining room and living room. From there he backtracked and took a left into the family room and deeper into the kitchen. Once inside the kitchen, he forgot where the living room was, even though it was just on the other side of the wall. He went up the rear stairs from the kitchen, over one landing, through the library, and down the front stairs (which,

despite the beauty of the black maple banister, seemed somehow formal and forbidding, though he couldn't say why), winding through the main floor clueless as to what he had already seen and what was new.

'You'll get used to it,' Roddy said, startling him. 'Ever seen a house with servants' stairs?'

'No, not really.' Conrad followed Roddy through the family room.

Roddy pointed to the faded hinge patterns on the doorframe at the base of the stairs and mouth of the kitchen. 'See that?'

'There was a door.'

'Yep. And another one here.' Roddy tapped the doorframe at the kitchen's front entrance. 'This way, you have two doors here, the help stays in the kitchen, out of sight from the proper company while you're warming your feet by the fire. When dinner has been served and the good doctor is sipping his brandy, the maidens duck up the servants' stairs here—'

Before Conrad could pursue the doctor reference, Roddy dashed up the servants' stairs. Conrad followed at a less eager pace. When he hit the landing, Roddy made a sweeping gesture into the smallest bedroom.

'Goodnight, you princes of Maine, you kings of New England,' Roddy said. 'And *voilà*. Servants are out of sight for the night. Let the party continue.'

'*Cider House Rules*. Nice.'

'That's right,' Roddy beamed. 'You're a movie guy.'

'Not really.' Conrad had mentioned Los Angeles and the screenwriting thing, as if that still mattered to him or

ever had. 'I was in sales. Did some consulting from home. We had friends in the business. The writing was just something to do.'

'Oh? You cash in your chips?'

'Ha, yeah, no.' He'd never admit as much in Los Angeles, but out here, standing next to this stranger, Conrad decided to skip the embellishment for a change. 'A guy I knew used to hire me for cheap rewrites, but I never sold any material. Nothing original. I was laid off from a software firm. Been working in a bookstore until my wife gets another promotion. I don't really know what I'm doing, actually.'

Was Conrad imagining it, or did Roddy's smile slacken a bit on that one? Maybe not too smart, mentioning the layoff – probably just raised a red flag on the financing.

'Uh-huh, and what does your wife do?'

Conrad hesitated. 'You know, Roddy, I don't know what she does any more. I mean, I know she works for a company that sells pharmaceuticals, or consults with pharmaceutical companies. Or medical supplies. I think she's something between a sales manager and a project manager. She travels a lot, that I do know.'

'Sounds promising.' The realtor seemed sorry he'd asked.

The bedroom was perhaps eight feet by six, with two small windows. Small enough for a child's twin bed and a trunk full of clothes, no more. It seemed cruel.

Conrad nodded. 'Where's the master?'

They continued through the library and around the black maple banister in a sort of zigzagging shuffle that

led into a T-shaped hall branching to three bedrooms. The master was just a regular bedroom, not much larger than the other two spare rooms, but three times the size of Tiny Tim's room in the back.

'This is the master,' Conrad said, failing to conceal his disappointment.

'Old houses, my friend,' Roddy said. 'Back then people didn't use their bedroom for a whole lot. Not like now where you got your flat screen, your Jacuzzi, your orbital whattya call it, one of them gerbil wheels.'

'Not very LA,' Conrad offered.

'Bingo.'

'Besides,' Conrad said, taking over the pitch. 'We have a library. What do we need a TV for?'

'There you go. I'll give you some time up here, then we should grab some lunch before the saloon closes.'

'No problem. I'll be down in a few.'

'We're gonna feed you some fine Wisconsin cuisine, Mr Harrison.' Roddy clomped down the front stairs.

Conrad poked his nose into the first of the remaining two bedrooms. Unremarkable, but a perfect size for Jo's office, with a small window overlooking the rolling backyard.

He turned to the bedroom nearest the master. The knob wiggled loosely but he had to knee the wooden door from the frame to pop it free. Before it could swing all the way in, a short girl-woman with white hair scurried out, bumping his shoulder as she slipped by. Before he could get a bead on her, she swooped around the banister and trotted down the front stairs.

'Whoa, hey.' Conrad tasted a wash of adrenaline like a nine-volt battery pressed to his tongue.

'Sorry 'bout that,' she said in a flat, nasal tone, her face lowered even as she hit the foyer and exited through the front door.

White jeans or painter's pants. A blue pocket tee over a pudgy midriff. Small feet shod with chunky black skate shoes bearing a single pink stripe. Didn't get a look at her face, but her arm skin was white with white hairs standing up in a line to her wrist – he'd noticed that much. The scent of vanilla filled his nostrils, reminded him of a birthday cake shaped and decorated as a snowman, the one his mother had baked for his third birthday.

'It's okay,' he said to the empty foyer.

Another buyer? A lingering daughter sent to pick up the rest of her things after the move? But she hadn't been carrying anything on the way out, had she? No box of sweaters. No lamp or framed art left behind by the movers. Huh. Must be just one of those chance encounters made possible by a house between occupants.

He turned back to the bedroom she'd just exited. It was decent size, maybe fourteen by sixteen. Two windows with bright red shades and black beaded tassels like something out of a western whorehouse. Deep pile the color of moist moss, didn't match. No furniture. But the same scent of vanilla was here, stronger, with something herbal hanging beneath it. From the girl, or just the smell of the house? He felt a pang of regret like walking in on someone in the bathroom. Like if he'd

been here a minute earlier he would have caught her in the middle of . . . what?

Conrad backed out of the room and left the door open. He wondered if Roddy had seen her go. He'd ask about her later, after he'd studied the library.

The library. The house had a library.

'Hell, yeah,' he said, entering a patch of sun pouring through a street-facing picture window. But even while he ran his fingers over the ornately carved fronts of the pine shelves, his mind returned to the girl. She reminded him of someone, but he couldn't put his finger on whom. That didn't make sense, though, did it? He hadn't really seen her face. Maybe the shape of her body, something about the way she'd trotted down the stairs. Like a girl trying to get out before her parents could call her back and remind her of her curfew.

The house was nice, if somewhat anti-climactic. What makes this house a birthing house? What makes any house a birthing house, besides the fact that probably a lot of babies had been born under her roof? It didn't feel like some sort of makeshift hospital ward or shelter where you'd have one large room with a bunch of beds, their occupants coughing on top of each other. It was just a house. So what if a doctor used to live here. Birth was life, life was good. Right?

Children. The relentless question childless married couples are bombarded with pretty much non-stop after age thirty.

Is that what this was about? The way Roddy looked at you when he realized you were eyeballing a four-

bedroom house with nothing but a wife and a couple of pound mutts in tow. If not to start a family, what exactly are you hoping to do here? Do you really want to move to the middle of nowhere? Sure, Los Angeles is crowded, traffic makes you homicidal, the air is a fucking smokestack, you never use the ocean, and Jo's job is shit. But at least there's stuff to do there. Movies, hiking, gallery parties, the best tacos in the world. Women. Ungodly women everywhere you turned. Enough to make you groan just walking down the street. A city was a space to live tightly, then stretch out your career, your lunches. A place to play around, get involved with strangers, make deals behind your employer's back, hide.

It was killing them, the City of Angels. He knew it was only a matter of time. It was too easy to watch five years of your life go by. People thirty, forty years old still living in apartments and driving leased BMWs, trying to hit something big. Too many casual friendships, too much need. Maybe just too many choices.

Jo's parents were retired – mom in Phoenix, the old man splitting time between Roxbury and London. She wasn't any closer to them emotionally than geographically. Flying back to Connecticut for Christmas every year had become every other year, and then every third or fourth. Jo was a Wi-Fi wife, always working from home, hotels, airports. She was too busy for family. What did she care where they lived?

Conrad's family was Jo and the dogs. Simpler now.

This was doable.

The house was warm. The smell was in him. Conrad's

blood churned and his pulse escalated. The library seemed somehow familiar and foreign, a place he'd come back to after a decade of forgetting. A draft brought the clean, wild scents of nettle and lavender, overpowering the vanilla scent from the girl – *forget about the girl, there was no girl* – and he was not aware of the erection forming under his black Lucky Brand dungarees, only of the titillating possibility of a new environment, of new hope. Maybe even a whole new life.

Call Jo, talk things over. Stay a few days, kick around the town.

He dialed her mobile, got only silence. He looked at his phone. There were no signal bars. Maybe the house or the big tree out front. Or maybe the whole town was a black spot.

Didn't matter. That was just fear trying to slow him down. And there was another, deeper voice drowning out the fear. He did not recognize it, and it did not have a name, though in time both of those things would change. It came from the house as much as it came from his head or his heart. It was buried beneath years of stone, and it had been buried on purpose.

This is a new beginning, it said. *This is your only hope. To save the family. It is our birthing house, and we deserve to be born.*

He had no idea what the words meant, but they felt true.

When he turned, Roddy was standing at the library's rear entrance.

Conrad nodded. 'We'll take it.'

'You wanna call your wife, talk it over?'

'She trusts me,' he said. 'And this feels like home.'

'Boy, I guess she must. You have some financing arranged? I can throw you a name if you want someone local. Real honest guy down at Farmer's—'

'Not necessary.' Conrad pulled out his wallet, removed and unfolded the little slip of paper. 'No loans, Roddy. Just point me to a bank, give me a couple days to clear this.'

Conrad held the check out, displaying the insurance company's logo in some sort of hope that he wouldn't have to explain the rest.

Roddy took a step closer and frowned. 'Jesus, son. That's a big check.'

'Is it?' Conrad guessed five hundred thousand dollars was a lot. Not specific, though. Not a sum calculated by tables and software. This was the kind of round figure that suggested payoff. Considering the source it seemed insignificant.

'Your last house burn down or something?'

Conrad looked at Roddy. He hadn't told anybody since he'd gotten the call a week ago. Jo had been in Atlanta. He told her what had happened, of course, but he hadn't known how it would end. She offered to go with him, cancel her trip. He said no, he'd be fine. The man from Builder's Trust Nationwide had been there at St Anthony's, anxious to close the matter and avoid litigation, which Conrad had no interest in pursuing. He hadn't even recognized the man in the bed until the very end, when it was like watching the man fall asleep the

way he had more than twenty years ago. Even recognizing that didn't change anything.

'Construction accident,' Conrad said.

Roddy reared back and looked Conrad over as if he'd missed something obvious, perhaps a limp or a facial tic that would bespeak brain trauma.

'My father was an electrician.'

'Oh. Oh, jeez.' Roddy was nodding. Then he stopped and ran one palm over his mouth. Conrad could see him putting it together. Living in Los Angeles. Insurance money. Got lost on the way back from Chicago. Erratic behavior, jumping into a new deal. When he spoke again, the realtor's voice was quiet. 'Was it . . . recent?'

'Seven days ago.'

Roddy visibly twitched at that. 'I'm very sorry, Conrad. You must be—'

'Don't worry about it.' Conrad crossed the room and patted Roddy on the shoulder as he went by, suddenly wishing to be out of the library, out of town, back on the road.

Roddy caught his arm and held him back. The big realtor's grip was gentle, but it stopped Conrad and made him look up.

'Hey. Nothing would make me happier than to sell you a house today. But I wouldn't be doing my job unless I asked. I can sit on the property. You want to maybe take some time on this?'

'I appreciate that.' Conrad looked out the picture window facing the street and the enormous tree blocking the view. 'Dad traveled a lot for work. Sometimes out of

state. Then one time he didn't come back. Haven't seen him since I was six.' He turned back to Roddy. 'Hey, what say we just pretend I won the lottery or something, huh?'

Roddy did not respond.

The moment stretched out and Conrad imagined Roddy suddenly grabbing him by the arm and paddling him over one knee. He burst into uneasy titters. That seemed to help. Roddy grinned and offered his hand. Conrad shook it and held it longer than usual.

'This is a fine town full of nice people, Conrad. You and your wife are gonna make a good life here.'

'Thanks, Roddy. Thank you for your help.' Shit. Now Conrad did feel like crying, but that was just gratitude, not grief. He swallowed it down.

'You hungry?'

'Starving. You?'

Roddy slapped his belly. 'My man, I love to eat.'

They went to a lunch of the locally renowned Cornish pasty stuffed with cubed beef, potatoes, onions, and rutabaga. The miners' dish was hard and salty, even with the cocktail sauce you were supposed to splash all over it. But Conrad was so hungry after knocking back the first three bottles of Spotted Cow he gobbled his lunch down and forgot to ask Roddy about the doctor, the girl or any other player concerning the history of the birthing house.