

THE BIRTHING HOUSE

an excerpt

They were in the house a week before it came for him.

Joanna Harrison was dozing on the couch in the TV room while her husband stood on the deck, breathing through a sweet clove cigarette that burned his throat and floated a candy cloud above his empty thoughts. The cigarette was the kind found on the back covers of men's magazines, the smoke of wannabes. What Conrad wanted to be this night was content, and, for a few more minutes of this vanishing sunset hour, he was.

Content equally with himself and his lot: a full acre of sloping lawn, century-old maple and black walnut trees, and a garden as large as a swimming pool, its aged gray gate roped with grape vines. Raspberry and clover grew thick in the shade of the shaggy pines still moist with the day's sweet rain.

He heard running water and looked through the window into the kitchen. Her blurry, sleepy-slouched shape hovered for a moment, probably filling a glass to take to bed. He waved to her. She either did not see him or was too tired to wave back. She turned away and faded back into the house.

He wanted to follow her, but he waited. Let her brush and floss, finish with a shot of the orange Listerine before she turned back the freshly laundered Egyptian cotton. You can't rush these things. These are delicate times. Eyes closed, he could almost see her stretched out in one of her tankinis and cotton boy-cut underwear, a big girl-woman reading another marketing book he always said were made for people on planes. She must be happy here. Otherwise, she would be cleaning and planning and avoiding bedtime.

Summer had arrived early. The house was muggy. He wondered if she would be warm enough to go without covers, but cool enough to allow his touch.

He had been shocked to discover that he wanted her more now. He was still madder than hell about the entire stupid scene with That Fucker Jake and all its implications, its mysteries. But he knew the balance of things and how he'd not been holding up his share of them was half the problem. Maybe more than half. She'd almost slipped away. Even before that nasty little homecoming it had been months, and since the fresh start (that was how he thought of it, but never named it as such, not aloud) he'd been watching for signs. If Luther and Alice were in their crates, that was one sign. If she had showered that was yet another, though never a binding one. None of the signs were binding, which added suspense to the marriage and kept his hopes in a perpetual swing from boyish curiosity on one side to blood-stewing resentment on the other.

He walked up the deck steps to the wooden walkway, into the mudroom. He climbed stairs (the servants' stairs off the kitchen, not the front stairs with the black maple banister, which for some reason he had been avoiding since the move) and felt the weight of the day in his bones.

By the time he finished brushing his teeth he was tired the way only people who have unpacked ninety percent of their possessions in a single day can be tired. His mind was empty, his muscles what his mom said his father used to call labor-fucked, the old man's way of suggesting that work is its own reward.

I'm sorry, Dad-

Work. He knew his hands still worked for her. He thought she liked his hands better than just about every other part of him. He no longer relied on his appearance as the catalyst, didn't know many men married more than a few years who did. He knew he wasn't a Jake. At thirty he was what divorced female bartenders had from time to time called cute, no longer handsome, if he ever was. He felt remarkably average. He had acquired a belly, but the move had already burned that down from a 36 to a 34. With the yard work he'd be down to a 32—his high school Levi's size—by the end of June. Jo always said she liked his laugh lines, the spokes radiating from what his mother used to call his wily eyes. Wily

used to be enough, but now he was just grateful for a second chance. He could live with average—so long as he could still seduce her.

Conrad wound his way through the back hall, making the S-turn through the library, into the front hallway. The creaking floorboards were a new sound, allowing him to birth one final clear thought for the day.

This is a healing place. This is home.

Conrad waded into the moonlight pooling on the new queen-sized bed—another purchase, this one more deserved—he'd made without her input. The ceiling fan was whirring, the dogs were curled into their crates on the floor, and Jo was waiting for him on top of the new sheets. She was without a top, wearing only loose fitting boxers (his), which were somehow better than if she were naked. That she had gone halfway without prematurely forfeiting the under garment was a gesture that made him feel understood. The arc of her hips rose off the bed like the fender of a street rod and his blood awakened.

With his blood, his hopes.

No longer content, Conrad stretched out, not caring what funny tent shape his penis made as it unfolded like a miniature welcome banner. He rolled to one side, facing her. She smelled of earth and lavender and something otherwise herbal—new scents for her in this new place. Her belly was nearly flat except for the smallest of rolls just above the waistband, and he loved this, too. He called it her little *chile relleno* and she would slap him, but it didn't bother her, not really. Her hips were womanly wide, but with her height she remained sleek, especially when prone, like now. She stood a little over six feet to his five-nine. His fingers grazed her fine brown navel hairs. Her eyes gleamed under heavy lids, glassy and black as mountain ponds at midnight.

It was a beginning, and he was a man who loved beginnings more than middles or endings.

“Come,” Jo said. Or maybe *Con*, half of his name.

“Hm?”

“. . . not ready.”

“Not what?” His hand found the elastic rim of her waistband, then moved into the open front of his boxer shorts on her.

“. . . about behbee,” she murmured.

“What, Baby?”

Not baby. Uppercase, Baby. A nickname he used.

“. . . owin me the behbee...be-ah-eye,” she mumbled, which sounded like *was going to be all right*.

“Of course,” he said, like it was his idea too. He had no idea.

“. . . bee woul’ go a father.”

We should go farther.

He pushed one, then two fingers lower to her mound, but her legs were crossed and he swerved off course, touching only her thigh. Just her thigh, but soft was soft and his excitement ratcheted up another notch.

“-not ready,” she squeaked, rolling away.

Shit. Might not have been sleeping before, but was now. Snoring too. Weird, he thought. Had she done this before? With the eyes open and the talking?

Should he let her sleep or try one more time?

Yes . . . no. He kissed her goodnight and rolled to his back, allowing the fan to push warm summer air over his fading, obedient hard-on. His mind dropped into that lower gear, the one that is not yet sleep but somehow dreaming already.

In the half-dream he was in the house, beside her, finding the wetness and sliding in not for the first time but as if they had been moving this way for minutes or an hour. He was all corded muscle and arched away, feeling her soak him in her own undulations. The movement was soothing, almost non-sexual, like being rocked in a crib.

Her grip on him strengthened and clenched, pushing back with legs and ass, drawing his ejaculate out in a sudden burst that ended too quickly, leaving him weak and sleepy all over again.

Drifting . . .

Until the dream, the same one or some new post-coital version, was split by the sound of crying. His body twitched itself awake, and he knew these were not Jo’s tears. This was the noise a newborn makes after sucking in its first

violent breath as it enters this violent world. It was a sound that had skipped mewling and launched straight into wailing, and it was coming from behind a wall or far away.

Faintly, under the baby's hacking shriek, there arose another sound. This one *did* sound like a woman, and he imagined the infant's mother, or the midwife, perhaps. This older cry in the dark was a trailing scream, as if something was pulling her away from her child and down a long corridor that narrowed to nothing.

Panicked, he rolled over to shake Jo—*why hasn't she woken up and grabbed me?*—and felt the cool stirring of air as she lifted off the bed. He could see only blackness, and with the drone of the fan he could not hear her feet padding on the wood floor. A flash of her silhouette in the doorway left a retinal echo, but the room was too dark to grasp any details. If he saw her at all, she was gone now.

To the bathroom, he thought. There she goes, carrying my seed. The semi-sleep-molestation and abrupt ending made him wince with guilt, but he did not seek her out in the ensuing silence. Exhausted from the day of unpacking (and tossed dream sex), Conrad decided the crying was but a fragment of the dream, a lingering scene planted by her words.

“. . . the behbee, the behbee . . .”

The crying returned once, quieter and farther away, until like a passing thunderstorm it faded to nothing.

He hovered on the edge of sleep.

Something's wrong.

He sat up and rubbed his eyes. She had not returned.

“Jo?”

She did not answer.

“Jo,” he said, louder. “Baby, you okay?”

His eyes adjusted to the dark. The dogs were standing at the master bedroom door facing the hall, whining, tails stiff like the hairs on their shoulders. Conrad flattened his body and counted to ten. It's rational, he told himself. When something so unexplainable and real (the dogs made it real) as a crying

baby in your childless home wakes you, it is normal to ignore it and go back to sleep. So back he went, as deep as a man can go, until he forgot the all about the crying sounds and her cold departure, her absolute absence.

Even when, in the morning, waking to a half-empty bed, he padded downstairs and found her where he'd left her before he stepped out for a smoke at dusk, sleeping on the sofa.

Alone.

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