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## New House

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**M**y daughter Sara says it's a pretty house. She's on the phone from California. My ex-wife and her husband have just moved into this new place somewhere up the coast, in Oceanside, I think.

"When do you want me to come out?" I say. I get her for a month over the summer, and it's just about time. I've started to notice, each year she gets a little older.

"Anytime."

"Am I supposed to stay or something?" I say. Last year when I went out, Mary and Will asked me to stay the weekend with them in L.A. I just wanted to get Sara and go back to Texas. Now with their new house, I'm sure they'll ask me to spend some time there.

"Mom and Will thought you'd want to visit."

I grimace. "Mary is very modern. What do you think?"

"I'm sorta glad you're coming."

"What, is there trouble or something?" I think to myself that maybe Will is drinking again. When Mary first met him she'd call me from time to time like we were girlfriends and tell me about him.

"No. I've got my tan already. There's nothing else to do here."

I listen as she tells me about her friends back in L.A. and how she wishes she was sixteen so she could drive the new car back and forth and see them. She goes on a bit more about the house. She says it faces the ocean and that it's three stories. Mary and Will's bedroom is on the top floor, Sara's on the bottom. She says when she gets up in the morning she likes to walk out her patio door, go down to the water, and just stand there in the ocean. I want to ask her where I'll sleep when I'm there, but I decide not to.

Emily comes into the room while I'm still on the phone. She makes a waving motion to me, like she's going home. Emily thinks I'm in love with her. I think that maybe Emily is in love with me. I guess we're just trying things out right now.

"See you in a couple of days," I say to my daughter on the phone.

"Bye, Daddy," she says. Sara is fifteen.

Mary picks me up at the airport. I see her from the end of the concourse, and I'm glad to see her alone. Her hair seems to shimmer or glisten or something. It looks golden. She's wearing a loose white dress, belted at the middle with a red rope. She's wearing sandals.

"Hi, stranger," she says. She hugs me.

"Hi," I say.

I remember last year she and Will came and got me and she held my hand in the car on the drive home. She'd say something to me, squeeze my hand, lean over and kiss Will on the cheek and say something about Sara. I felt like she wanted to include us all.

"Where's Will?" I say.

"He had to do some sketches for a building so he stayed and worked."

"So you've got a new house," I say. We get my small bag off the baggage carousel and I follow her out into the parking lot. It's terrifically hot here. In Dallas it's humid, but it's not like this.

## New House

by W. T. Pfefferle

"Yeah, up the coast. Quick trip." she leads me to a charcoal colored sedan. It looks like a BMW, but it doesn't have any markings on it.

Mary drives out of the airport, and we get on the freeway heading north. We jerk around each time she shifts.

"Nice car," I say finally.

"Thanks."

For the longest time we don't say anything. I keep trying to look away from her. Out the side of the car for instance. Looking at nothing. There's only freeway out there and other cars driving.

"What are you thinking?" she says.

"It's really hot here," I say.

"Oh, Tommy," she says. "You're the same, aren't you." She reaches over and holds my hand. I'm not sure if it makes me feel better or worse. We drive in silence most of the way. She turns the radio on once after we haven't spoken for a while. I keep looking around the car for an insignia of some type, but the inside is clean. No markings on the dash, nothing on the glove box. Outside, no writing on the side or on the trunk. No hood ornament.

As we drive into Oceanside, we stop at a little dance studio. Sara is standing outside the place, sweating, talking to another girl her age. I get out of the car when we stop, and she sort of skips or runs over and we hug. She's starting to look like Mary. Her hair is long, and it's the same sort of color, gold. She wasn't kidding about her tan. It's great. It doesn't look phony or too orange. Last year we sat on my couch in Dallas and went through about forty magazines, her explaining to me which women had real tans and which ones got theirs from tanning machines. My daughter's got a real one.

"Let's go to Swen's tonight," Sara says when we're all in the car.

"I think Will was going to cook, Honey," Mary says, looking in the rear view mirror at her.

"I'm tired of that vegetable junk, really."

Mary doesn't say anything for a while, and I look out the window at the town. We drive about ten minutes, and then Mary pulls into a long driveway that slopes down from the highway, through a grove of short trees, and around a corner. That's when I see the house.

"Beautiful," I say.

"Thanks," Mary says.

"Will calls it Zanzibar," Sara says, reaching over the headrest and mussing my hair.

"Xanadu," Mary says.

"Hey," Will says. He comes out of the front door with his arms out like he's ready to hug us all.

"Hi, sweetie," Mary says and runs over to him. He cradles Mary in one arm and starts for me.

"Hey, sport," he says. "How's the publishing game?"

"Fine," I say. He thrusts out his hand and we shake.

"Are you cooking?" Sara says to Will, leaning her body up against mine. She seems taller again. Her head rests at a point just below my shoulder.

"I don't have to," he says, but I see him stiffen.

"Sara wants to go to Swen's," Mary says.

Will looks at me as if I'm supposed to break the tie. I don't say anything. I put my suitcase down for a second and then realize it's all sand down there. I pick it up again.

"Swen's is O.K. with me," Will says, releasing Mary and trying to reach for my bag.

"Let's go inside," Mary says.

It's a good place. Mary takes me to my room, Will puts my suitcase on the bed, and they leave, closing the door behind them. I sit on a little white wicker chair and look out at the ocean. It's about sixty feet to where the water is. I slip my shoes off and rest my feet on the sill of the window. Everything in the house is white. I haven't seen it all yet, but what I've seen has been white.

I see a phone on the nightstand, and I pick it up, listening for a dial tone before dialing Emily's house. She answers on the second ring, and I tell her I'm here. She makes a joke about divorced people meeting in the kitchen at 2 a.m., making sandwiches together.

"Probably not this time," I say.

Before we hang up, I tell Emily everything I can remember of what Sara said to me.

Will's not an architect, but he does something like that. I always thought he was an architect; in fact, Mary told me he was. But he has a different name: Consultant. It makes a difference to him. What I remember about last summer is that they weren't married yet. They got married over the summer while Sara was with me in Dallas. They had taken a cruise and on the way back, about fifty miles off the coast, they got married by the ship's captain. Will has told me the story twice. Once when I brought Sara back after the summer, and then once again on the phone this year when I called. He gets a real kick out of it.

"Hi."

I'm in the wicker chair again staring outside. When I hear Sara's voice I look around. "Come in," I say.

"What are you doing?"

"Just looking out here. Really nice."

"Yeah."

She sits on the bed, reaches for the remote control and puts the TV on.

She keeps the volume down, so it doesn't bother me, I suppose. I keep looking outside. The sun has been setting during the whole time I've been sitting here. It's taking forever, but now it looks to be about five feet off the water. It's been orange for a long time, but now it's getting red. When it's halfway down, I look over my shoulder. Sara's watching me.

"You've really gotten pretty," I say, and slap her on the leg.

"Hah," she says.

"What's Swen's?" I say.

"Steak place. Ribs. Prime Rib." She reaches down and picks at some dry skin on her leg.

I look back out the window, and the sun's almost gone. I hear her move around a bit, and then I feel her arms come around the chair, and she tries to hug me from behind. As we stay that way for a second, I think I hear Will saying something. It sounds like they're outside. Maybe they've been on their patio watching the sun go down. I don't know. I wonder for a second if maybe Sara's crying, and I hope she isn't.

"You ever watch this?" I say, pointing to the TV.

"Yeah," she says. "Pretty funny."

Sara and I sit in the back. Will drives and Mary sits sideways in front so she can talk to everybody. It's been dark for a couple of hours, and the highway back into town is deserted. Will drives very slowly, and it seems to take a very long time to get there. He starts down one street, but Sara tells him it's the wrong one. He answers her sharply, and Sara just sticks her tongue out at him, then punches me on the arm when I don't notice it. I feel bad for him in a funny way. Mary directs him down an alley, and we pull in front of this place that has a neon sign that says "Swen's," inside of a big, white, neon lasso.

I get out my side and Will is standing there, waiting for me to get out so he can power lock everything. He pushes the button, and all the doors lock simultaneously. He keeps looking at me until I smile.

"Nice car," I say.

"Thanks," he says and turns to go toward the door.

I'm glad I said something nice to him. He's an O.K. fellow, I suppose.

Sara is the first one in the door, and she tells the guy there's four of us. Our booth is near the back. I get in one side and wait for Sara to join me, but she walks past and gets in the other side. I look across at her, but she's looking past me.

"Mom, that's Edna over there," Sara says.

Mary looks across the room and then scampers over to a table with about five women at it.

"Mary's tennis friends," Will says, still standing in the aisle outside the booth.

"Take a load off," I say to Will, motioning to my side of the booth. He glances once over at Sara and then gets in next to me.

"Is it hot in here?" Sara says.

Mary comes back, and a waiter comes with menus. Mary says

something to him, and after a bit he comes back with a bottle of wine and some glasses.

Everything goes smoothly enough. Will and Mary eat spaghetti and Sara has the Sirloin. I get a T-bone with a potato. We're just drinking the last of our second bottle of wine when I catch Will looking over at me.

"That stuff will kill you," he says.

"The wine?" I say.

"Meat," he says.

I hear Sara emit a long sigh. I look over at Mary, and she looks back at me gravely.

"What do you mean?" I say.

"The meat. That red meat."

"Well, I like a steak every now and then," I say, hoping maybe this will stop it.

"Doesn't matter," he says. "You take in four ounces of that a week, and you might as well inhale the fumes from a burning tire."

"I had a Sirloin, Will," my daughter says, a bit mischievously.

"I know, Sara, but you're incorrigible; we know that already," Will says and puts his wine glass down pretty hard on the table.

"Sara, don't start in," Mary says, resting her hand on Sara's shoulder.

Will looks over at me. I have about half a cigarette in my hand. "You know, that's not any better," he says, waving his hand at me.

"I don't do it much," I say, and look over at Mary again. It dawns on me for the first time that we've been drinking wine with our meal. Mary had told me that Will had stopped it for good. It seems to me now, too, that I think about it, that he's been filling his glass a bit more than mine or Mary's.

"Smoking and drinking together increase the possibility of esophageal cancer by 150 percent," he says.

I haven't taken a puff of my cigarette since this started, and now I'm afraid to. I look at him more closely and decide that maybe he's a little bit drunk. "I don't smoke much," I say.

"You never smoked much," Mary says.

There's silence for a while. The waiter comes, and Sara orders a piece of banana pie. I've put my cigarette out, and Will has picked up the wine bottle twice, checking to see if there's anything left. His head is sort of hanging down toward the table.

I look across at Mary, but she's looking around the restaurant. One of her friends comes by, and she gets up and they walk to the bar. I reach for some of the french bread that's in the basket in the middle of the table and chew on it while Sara eats her pie.

"Want some?" she says to me.

"No," I say.

She finishes it, except for the crust, and gets up and goes over to a table where a family is sitting. Mother, father, a boy about six or seven, and a girl Sara's age. The father pulls a chair from an empty table, and Sara sits with them. They're all laughing about something that the mother is saying.

Will starts coughing. It's real deep coughing. It sounds like he's almost choking on something.

"You O.K.?" I say when he stops.

"Yeah. I'm going to get some air." He gets up and walks through the restaurant, out the door, and I see him sit on the hood of his car, his head cradled in his hands.

Mary comes back just as the waiter brings the bill. "I'll get it," she says, taking it from me. She looks at it, then around the restaurant. "Where's Will?" she says to me.

"Outside," I say. "He wasn't feeling too hot."

"I don't imagine he was." She puts the bill down and reaches for my pack of cigarettes. She puts one in her mouth, and then she lights it using the orange candle that's on the table. "How's Texas?" she says.

"Good," I say. "I'm going to move over the summer. I was hoping to have the new place before Sara comes out. It's pretty nice."

"Oh, yeah?" she says.

"Yeah. It's about fifteen miles north of the city. It's got a half-acre. Fence. I thought about getting a dog again."

"Really, like Roger?"

"I don't think there are any more dogs like Roger," I say. She smokes about half the cigarette and then stubs it out.

"Lease," I say. "I thought I'd try it out. I've been in condos and apartments for six years. I don't know if I can do the lawn anymore." I think that sounds a little funny.

Sara comes back over to the table and sits on my side of the booth. She puts her arm around my shoulder and smiles over at Mary. "He's a pretty good guy, my old man," Sara says.

I look over at Mary, and she smiles back. "Better check on Will. Haven't seen him take a drink in about two years. He'll be suffering for it." Mary looks out the window. I can tell she's trying to see through the restaurant, out to their unmarked car. See if he's upright or not. She gets up and goes.

I start thinking of stuff for us to do when we get back to Dallas. I think about Emily picking us up at the airport. The three of us will drive out to the new house together. They'll hit it off I imagine.

Sara picks up the check and looks at it sort of funny. I think that in the morning when I get up, I'll go with her. The two of us can just stand there in the ocean.

"They forgot my pie," she says, holding the bill up to my face.