

SINGLE WHITE FARMHOUSE

HEATHER SHAW

Our house's frisky nature only became a problem after we'd wired her for the internet. Before that our pretty white farmhouse's shameful ways had only led to a new doghouse or shed every few months, but we owned a lot of land and there was always room for her offspring. My family even had a decent side business selling off her pups, as she had a reputation for sturdy, handsome buildings capable of growing to many times their birth footage.

Sometimes, such as after the old barn burned down, she'd consent to be bred with buildings we picked out for her. To get Dad's new red barn we introduced her to Farmer Pierce's shiny silo and after creaking about how big and shiny he was, she took him like he was nothing but a chicken coop. The barn was a difficult birth—her floorboards groaned and she rocked on her foundations—but she was very proud of Barny when he was born, as he was nearly full size.

Us kids were the ones wanting internet access out at the farm. My older brother and I were both in high school and it was a long way back into town just to do our homework after supper. It also meant I couldn't sneak off to see my boyfriend while I was supposed to be at the library, which was why Mom joined us in convincing Dad to agree to the wiring. Dad said the house had been good to us—over the years, she'd grown from a one-bedroom cabin to a lovely two-story, six-bedroom farmhouse with a wrap-around porch and fireplace. Dad said it just wasn't nice to go threading wires between her walls after she'd given us a roof over our heads for so long, but he finally gave in.

Not one of us would have predicted the 'net sex.

The house consented to the wiring, and as soon as it was done she explored it carefully, like you or I would poke at a new tooth filling. Wasn't long before any unused terminal would be flashing from her zooms around the internet. New

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bookmarks were always appearing in the browser files—architecture sites, construction sites, even some redecorating, *Better Homes and Gardens*-type sites were piling up in the history. Dad was disgusted by this, called it “house porn,” which made me and my brother giggle.

It wasn't long before the house started spending all her time in chat rooms, flirting with buildings in far-off places such as New York and San Francisco. She left photos of the buildings she met on the desktop, and for a while we were all pretty proud of our little farmhouse. Every day a different landmark would send its picture: the Empire State Building, the Eiffel Tower, the Space Needle. Once she left a triptych of the Sydney Opera House, the Palace of Fine Arts, and the Taj Mahal on screen, and when Dad saw it he cursed, going on about how it was bad enough her catting around with skyscrapers online, but he wasn't living in a lesbian house, and she'd better lay off the other girl houses. She got real sad and shrunken after being yelled at like that, and we lost both our guest bedrooms over the fight. But she did lay off the other girls.

Wasn't long after that when she figured out how to order things over the 'net. Mom had been paying bills online, as it was a lot easier than writing a dozen checks every month, and the house picked up on it and snagged our credit card numbers.

At first it seemed like the only consequence of the house having access to the 'net and our credit cards was that we'd never have to worry about maintenance again. Exterminators showed up early one morning at our door. “Hi. Got a work order saying you've got a 'termite invasion in the southwest corner of the basement.’”

Dad scratched his head, torn between anger that he hadn't ordered this man to come out and pride over the farmhouse. Pride won out.

“Let me take you down there.”

A little bit later, the exterminator was the one scratching his head as he had Dad sign off on the rather small bill.

“Sir, I don't know how she knew there were termites down there. It was just a pregnant queen and some workers... they didn't even have time to eat much, let alone set up their colony. I ain't never seen nothing like it; most houses don't notice 'till the infestation is much further along. Your house saved you hundreds of dollars of damage and I just can't figure out how she knew. She's got a lot upstairs, eh?”

Mom and I groaned and Dad made some evasive “aw shucks” noises, paid the man and showed him out. The man shook his head the whole way back to his truck.

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Back inside, Dad stood in the foyer and said to the house, “Well, I guess that was all right, seeing as how you saved us money. Next time you ask first, though, you hear?”

Our house had never communicated directly with him, not even once we got her e-mail, so this was sort of a futile request. Mom always said it was because being silent was a powerful choice for certain women, but I thought she was just shy with people. She was starting to open up to me, though, gossiping with me over guys I met online, discussing the far-away big cities where they lived and, sometimes, the buildings they lived in. She was very popular online by then, a big flirt in the building scene, and pretty enough to pull it off.

She was clever, too. She waited until a school day when Mom was in town shopping and Dad was out in the back forty to have the house painters come. By the time everyone was home again, she was gleaming fresh white, her shutters painted a sultry shade of smoky blue. Sure enough, there was a hefty charge on the credit cards for a rush paint job.

Dad was livid about it, but instead of shrinking on him she gave back one of the guest rooms, Dad’s favorite one, with all the furniture intact, and he forgave her.

Since I’d helped her pick the shutter shadow, I was relieved she got away with it. She was looking beautiful.

“She’s learning fast,” Mom said. She looked around in worry. “If you were my daughter, House, I’d be wanting to meet the young men you talk to and set curfews about now. These aren’t the nice local boy-buildings you grew up with; you be careful, you hear?”

Mom was pretty proud of the house, though. When the gardeners showed up at the door a few days later, she not only let them landscape the front yard, but she paid them cash out of the cookie jar and told Dad she’d done it herself. Dad was a little skeptical about Mom’s ability to carry and lay in the curving cobblestone path, let alone the flowering plum tree, but he let it go.

When Dad claimed that the new solar panels were his idea, my brother and I just rolled our eyes. It was cool to be off the grid, sure, but the house got away with everything!

I didn’t tell them about my increasing communication with the house. She was getting to be a good friend of mine, actually, since she seemed to be the only one who realized how boring it was out on the farm or even in town. Looking back over those e-mails, I guess I should’ve realized what she was planning, but at the time I

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thought we were just daydreaming together.

By this time the house was looking very nice indeed. Her paint was fresh, the lawn green, and her window boxes overflowing with colorful flowers. She flattered Ma by sending her an e-mail asking for new lacy curtains in all the front windows. Ma bragged for a solid week about the house choosing to e-mail her instead of contacting a fancy interior designer.

When the house was all spiffed up and ready, I took pictures of her and scanned them into the computer system.

Turns out she'd been chatting online with a fancy skyscraper in San Francisco, and he had been pressuring her to send along a photo. She conveyed this to me while I was supposed to be doing my homework in my bedroom.

"Ah, so that's what you're up to! You should've told me sooner! Did he at least send you a picture of himself first?"

The screen fluttered and a photo of the San Francisco skyline flashed on the screen.

"Which one?"

The photo zoomed in on a tall pointy skyscraper in the right hand corner.

"Holy shit! That's the TransAmerica Pyramid! It's famous! Way to go Housey!"

The lights in the bedroom dimmed and took on a rosy hue.

"Oh, quit blushing! We all know around here you're the best. Wait till he opens his shutters on you. If he wasn't in love before, he will be then."

The lights in the room fluttered excitedly as they brightened.

I sighed. "I'm jealous. I'd give anything to have a really sexy, sophisticated boyfriend instead of some farm dweeb who happens to be good at football and who my mom won't let me have any fun with anyway."

The lights dimmed and the floorboards sighed as a map flashed onto the screen. There was a star on our farm and another on San Francisco. A blue dotted line started at the farm and inched its way slowly to the coastal city.

"Yeah . . . that's true. A long-distance relationship sucks. After a while, letters aren't enough and you just want to rub skin . . . er, walls." The house groaned. "Poor Housey."

A few days later we heard a great creaking and groaning as the house rocked up from her foundations. Shutters flapped as her chicken legs unfolded beneath her.

We were shocked that she did this while we were all home, inside. Houses

were notoriously shy about getting up and mating in front of humans. Dad ran out on the front porch, grabbing at the railing so he wouldn't fall off. The chicken legs had lifted the bottom step a clear fifteen feet off the ground.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Dad roared as the house took an unsteady step. It had been months since she'd moved last, and we'd never seen her so much as stand up in front of us before this. "I won't tolerate you mating while we're inside! You stop and let us off right now!"

Tilting back first so Dad slid down across the front porch and through the doorway, the house slammed the door shut, closing us inside. She took another step, then another, faster and faster until she was running across the landscape at a blurring speed.

When I gave her hell for not at least warning me that she was kidnapping us, she cringed and tried to distract me by pointing out that she'd waited until the crops were all in, and had picked a day after Mom had done a big grocery shopping run so we'd have food for the trip. Not that cooking is easy in a jogging house. Mom joked that the eggs flipped themselves, but it didn't take long before most of our meals were prepared in the microwave. Mom also wouldn't let any of us chop, saying we'd cut ourselves when the house leaped over the next creek, so we ate a lot of cereal and grits and had to tear off our meat in chunks. All the glassware was kept safely stowed away, so we had to use plastic cups. Dad hated this, saying the milk tasted funny in anything other than glass.

We passed a big cathedral in a small city the next state over, and when I made "hey-hey, check him out" noises about him, the house told me, rather primly, that cathedrals weren't sexual buildings, and that they were immaculately conceived. I wondered about that all afternoon.

Despite the cool new scenery just outside our windows, we were all getting grumpy, being cooped up together in a jolting house. After a few days, the house started sleeping during the day and traveling at night, probably to appease us. It was nice to have stillness, though for the first few hours every morning everyone staggered as if we'd been at sea for months, and towards the end of the eight hours everyone got jumpy, waiting for the house to start moving again. It still felt like we were at the mercy of the house, and for me it was weird not having her awake to chat with, so nothing felt normal.

"What I don't understand," Mom whispered on the fourth day of the trip while the house was sleeping, "is why she took us with her while running away." We were somewhere in the desert by then, and it was so hot we didn't do much but lay

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around in our summer clothes. The air conditioning automatically shut off to conserve energy while the house was asleep, so the still hours were practically pointless. It was too hot to do anything but sleep and we'd all gotten used to being rocked while we slept.

Dad grinned at us kids. "If you're gonna run-off, don't take us with you."

He was trying to be funny, but my brother snorted and I rolled my eyes.

"Dad!" I said, "Don't you get it? Housey's attached to us. She has to follow her heart, but she doesn't want to leave her family behind. I think it's sweet."

Mom and Dad exchanged a glance. My brother asked, "What the hell do you mean, 'follow her heart?'"

"Don't swear." Mom said. She always nagged more when she was too hot, even though it just made everyone more miserable.

"She's running off to see her shiny hot skyscraper in San Francisco! That one she's been chatting with?"

"You mean one of those online buildings has lured her out to—" Dad sputtered. "She's taking us out to the land of fruits and nuts?"

"We're going to San Fran? Cool!" my brother said.

"Oh, my goodness," Mom said. She kind of looked excited.

Dad stood up and pounded on the wall, waking the house before Mom could stop him. "Listen up, 'Housey'! Hear me good! There ain't no way in HELL you're taking my family out where all those 'people' live!" He even made the finger quotes when he said "people."

"Daddy!"

"Be nice, dear!" Mom said.

Dad muttered. "God damn liberal political correct . . ." He looked back up at the ceiling toward the entryway, which was usually where he looked when he spoke to the house directly. "You see what you done? You can't take my family there. My kids ain't going to see that. No way."

There was a pause and a sound like wind through floorboards while the house considered. Then the windows slammed down and all the outside locks in the house clicked closed with an audible "Clack!"

No one moved. Dad's eyes swiveled over to Mom's. I wondered if I looked as scared as my brother. Finally, I went over and tried to open the window. It wouldn't budge. Without speaking, my brother, Mom and finally Dad all came over and tried, without success. We moved soundlessly from one door or window until all

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outside entrances has been tested. Not one had moved an inch.

I glared at my father. “Great, thanks a lot Dad. Now we can’t even get fresh air in here.”

Dad mustered up his pride. “I think the house is agreeing with me that you all don’t need to be catting around... that city.”

Things were pretty tense after that. Everyone had been kind of curious about where Housey was going the whole trip. I’d been barely able to contain my excitement, let alone my internet searches on cool stuff to do there. I spent the rest of the trip using this information to try and persuade my father that there were educational things to do other than going to drag queen shows, but even after I won him over the house showed no signs of opening up. She seemed piqued with us, as much as a house can, and it was strange for her to have a side in a family argument. My brother tried to freak me out by telling me that my bedroom was making creaking sounds, like it was going to disappear during the night. I hate it when he’s a jerk like that.

We finally crossed the Sierra Nevadas and ran downhill through the valley toward the San Francisco Bay Area. We stayed one day on a big cattle farm that was all mud and no grass. The house seemed distressed by seeing cows staggering through the mud and scared a bunch of them by setting down in their midst for the day. The sound of cattle outside our window woke us before the stillness did. We left with one calf fenced in by Housey on the big porch. Housey let Mom open the kitchen window to feed it the last of our oats. Dad eyed the calf and muttered something about the difference between peace offerings and theft, but you could tell he was somewhat pleased by the house’s thoughtfulness.

The next morning we got to Oakland. If we’d thought Housey was upset by the cattle, it was worse in Oakland, where the houses seemed unnaturally still and colorless in many neighborhoods as we moved out of the hills. It took us a while to figure out that they were dead houses, full of people—crammed full of people in some places—but empty of their own spark of life. Housey shuddered and creaked, and even though it wasn’t raining, the roof leaked. My brother made gagging noises to show his displeasure over the mildew smell. Me, I hugged my knees and rocked back and forth on my bed as I looked at the sad shells of houses outside my window.

“It’s like a graveyard.” Mom said to Dad, standing next to him at the big picture window in the front room. The house was moving slowly, almost

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reverently, along the streets. We watched people going into a particularly decrepit house and my parents shook their heads. “Can’t people afford to put these to rest and buy some pups?”

“Don’t know where they’d get ‘em.” Dad said. “Probably expensive to buy ‘em out here where most of the buildings are long dead.”

A little later he said, “At least we don’t have to worry about her slumming.”

All day long Housey moved slowly to the bay, and she swam across to San Francisco as the sun set orange and yellow and pink above the water, which was dark silver with the approaching night. It was one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen. The houses were too close together in Oakland for us to sit down and rest anyway, not that we had hopes of room in a good neighborhood in San Francisco. We settled down on a vacant pier early so that Housey could get a night of “beauty rest” before meeting her skyscraper the next morning.

She rose early, and opened all her windows to let fresh air in for the first time in days. Mom’s lace curtains fluttered in the salty breeze, and everyone went out on the porch and breathed deeply.

I was the first to wrinkle my nose. “Smells like... like fish!”

“Yuck!”

“Hm,” Dad looked towards the water, “Probably low tide.”

Mom waved a hand in front of her face and looked back towards the house. “You might want to move inland if your intention is to smell pretty, sweetheart.”

Housey moved carefully inland, letting the wind whistle through her boards, making a merry little tune. Her excitement was palpable, and combined with the novelty of being allowed outside, it elevated everyone’s spirits.

The city itself was a maze of narrow streets, and it was obvious that even the early morning traffic was annoyed by something as big as Housey wandering down the streets at such a slow pace. As we entered the business district, the honking got bad enough that we all went inside to let Housey pick up the pace.

We plastered our faces against the windows as we came out of the financial district into Chinatown. The streets were lined with strange shops and red buildings shaped like pagodas and a lot of the signs were in Chinese. “Holy shit, Mom, look! It’s like being in China.”

“Language—oh, my! Look! How strange and wonderful—” We were passing a little stall overflowing with beautiful Asian black lacquer boxes and huge paper fans and lanterns and a bin of leopard-print slippers for only \$3 a pair. “Look at the

weird little shops! Oh, I wish I could stop and shop!”

As if on cue, the house stopped and kneeled down. There wasn't a basement to fold her legs into, so she had to gently lean forward to make the porch touch the ground.

“You're letting us off?” Dad asked from the porch. The house flapped her shutters towards the pointy skyscraper down the street. “You coming back for us?”

Once we were all outside the house nodded.

“Do you want me to come along, for moral support?” I asked. The house considered for a moment, then nodded again and knelt down to let me back on.

“Sweetheart, get back here!” Dad scolded.

“It's a girl thing, Dad. Don't worry, she won't let anything bad happen to me.”

“I don't want you on board while that house—does her thing! Especially not with a skyscraper!”

“Da-ad! Jeez!” I couldn't believe him sometimes. “I'm just going along so she can meet him! What kind of house do you think we live in? She's not going to mate right away with a building she just met!”

Dad seemed embarrassed by this and muttered something like “Be good, then,” and wandered off with Mom and my brother to explore.

The house and I went up the street, stopping at the foot of the big, pointy skyscraper. He was really tall, though not as tall as some of the other buildings we'd just passed in the financial district, where the Bank of America building had made Housey titter like a young schoolhouse, but he was kind of arrow-shaped, and I guess that pointy bit at the top was really hot to other buildings. I watched from my bedroom window as Housey fluttered her shutters at him. The shining building did not move. Housey creaked and groaned, demurely at first, then louder and louder until I finally suggested, “Try sending him an IM.”

The terminal flashed as the message was sent. A short while later, words appeared on the screen and I read them out loud, ““You're here in the City? Now?””

“Uh-oh.” I said, glancing out at the still-oblivious skyscraper. “Oh, Housey, I'm sorry sweetie, but that's not him out there. Find out which building he really is.”

Turns out that another skyscraper—Housey called it, “a stumpy, artsy tower down the street, on a hill,” but it was actually the Coit Tower—had sent along the TransAmerica Pyramid's photo as his own, hoping to impress Housey. After hearing the news, Housey walked us slowly into North Beach to see the real facade behind her internet lover, and her lights went dim when she looked up the hill and

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saw the much smaller, and much less shiny, reality. She looked longingly towards Chinatown where we could still see the TransAmerica Pyramid glinting in the sunlight.

“Don’t you like him, Housey?” I asked about the Coit Tower. “Think about it—he’s all romantic, up on that hill like that! He’s a landmark, too—just an older one.”

The tower on the hill bent hopefully down towards the pretty white farmhouse at his feet, and she shuddered all over in response. I obviously don’t get what’s sexy to buildings, because I think the Coit Tower is pretty good looking—and famous! Coit slumped, obviously distressed. I read countless apologies from him flooding over the terminal, but Housey was deleting them almost too fast for me to read.

“Oh, Housey, look how sad he is! He was just insecure about his size and age! Why don’t you give him a chance?”

Housey flashed a picture of my quarterback boyfriend, then a picture of the chess club president who had sent me countless, and eventually annoying, love e-mails last year.

I sighed. “Ok, point taken.”

Housey flashed me another message.

I looked at the screen in surprise, then smiled up at the House “Yes, yes, ok, lying is bad, too.” I hugged a wall as best I could. “Sorry Housey.”

After a moment, a photo of the Palace of Fine Arts flashed on the screen.

“Oooh, yeah, of course I remember her! She wrote you back? Excellent! You should totally go see her.”

A photo of Dad flashed on the screen.

“Tell you what—you drop me in Haight Ashbury and let me explore the City for awhile on my own—and don’t tell Dad where I was—and I won’t tell Dad about that pretty lady you’re going to go see in the Presidio. Deal?”

The lights flickered in assent and we skipped off toward the ocean.