Spring 1991

The Man Who Talked to Houses

Donley Watt
My name is Lyman Hendry. I'm sixty-one years old and my life has come down to realizing this: from the time a boy turns thirteen not a day passes that he doesn't think of sex, and when a man reaches sixty not a day passes that he doesn't think of death.

This is not a morbid preoccupation of mine; I don't turn to the obituaries first thing every morning, but I understand now why people do. It's not so much to see if anyone you know has kicked the bucket, or to gloat over outlasting some poor bastard who dropped over at fifty-two, or feeling off the hook when a Friday's average is eighty-seven and you figure that buys you twenty-six years more--it's not that at all, although honestly I've found myself playing out each of those games. No, it's just trying to figure what this death thing is all about, thinking maybe if you can figure that out then life won't be so damned much of a puzzle.

I live alone in a two bedroom house in the middle of a three block dead-end street near the downtown section of this city. Nothing about the house is out of the ordinary--in the twenties this was the suburbs--and for the most part the houses for blocks around are simple stucco cottages. Young couples move in all starry eyed and start pouring bucks into add-ons and slick kitchens and I ask them why bother, you could have a new house for the same money. But they just laugh. The rooms of the house are small, and in my house the tile on the kitchen counter is the same green and white as that on the bathroom floor. For me that's okay, but if you're young just think of all the choices. I've lived here on this street for two-and-a-half years now, not because I particularly like it, but because the rent is right and I've lost my reasons for moving. I have to live somewhere.

My neighbors have two big dogs, one a shepherd and one some shaggy north country mix breed who always looks hot and out of place. Through the chain link fence I see them scabbing the back yard, restless, digging here, rolling
roughly there, pulling and shaking apart anything unlucky enough to fall within reach. A plastic ball or a rag doll has no chance at all. Despite an occasional night of barking I can’t complain. I feel safe and don’t have to worry that my neighbors will frown about the way I neglect my yard.

I’m alone a lot, most people would think I’m lonely, but I come from a string of single child families so don’t mind. It is something I’m used to, although for a few years being married changed that. I am the only child of parents who also were only children and my life followed the same pattern, my daughter Jenny being all I have. At thirty-eight she is still not a mother and has changed husbands three times in an effort, I like to think, to correct this injustice. A grandson would be nice, but for Jenny time seems to be running out. And although I try not to give it a thought anymore, sometimes I’m sad to think of the Hendry’s tailing off this way.

For a lot of years Jenny and I lost contact. She was eight when her mama and I had our trouble. Doris, who was my first and only wife, took Jenny to New Orleans and they settled into a life I couldn’t know, and until Jenny reached her twenties we were lost to each other. Since then, we got together once a few years back for an awkward lunch, followed by a cycle of somewhat obligatory Christmas cards. Hers with notes looped in a rush of red ink. Mine with a new return address each year.

I stayed on the move, following real estate booms from place to place. Selling condos in San Diego and L.A., pushing developments in Aspen and Santa Fe, on to Denver during the oil boom. There, with times being good I put a crew together and Hendry Homes moved a few spec houses. The building I like, all of it; the design, the excitement when you pour the slab, the smell of tar paper and pine resin. The selling afterwards I’m good at, but find mostly a nuisance, wrangling over financing and carpet colors and garage door openers.

When the market dropped I slid out of Denver and across to Phoenix and ended up here in Tuscon. When I sold out in Phoenix I stuck my little chunk of cash in a long term CD and decided that was it. I always tried to shoot straight in
what can be a crooked business, and fell short a few times, I'll admit, but not enough to wake me nights. I can start pulling down a little social security check in a year, so I figure I've pretty well got it made if I watch my pennies.

Real estate's just another game and I got tired of playing. But still I'm drawn to the way houses go up. Some nights I drive out north into the foothills and park in the birth of a raw subdivision and wander the streets. If no one's around I talk to the houses, yellow skeletons in the night, waiting for tomorrow. I shake my head over shortcuts taken, encourage the slabs to be solid, the frames to be patient, remind them of years still to come. Time enough for all things, I say, embarrassed then by the words that come from somewhere deep, from my mother or some solemn pulpit I don't know. Then I say it again, this time a little softer, time enough for all things, and wonder for a while if saying it aloud makes it any less a lie.

Last year Jenny called from Houston and asked would I come for a visit. Right away I said sure—I had no reason not to—but the going was harder than the agreeing to go, and I found myself inventing excuses to stay here right up to the time I stepped on the plane.

Jenny showed me around Houston, trying to guess what I'd like. Most everything had changed, but we downed oysters at Captain Benny's and took in the Astro's for a double header. We talked some, mostly about this and that. I never asked about her mother, but right up front she said, "Mama's bitter and hard to be around." I didn't give a damn about Doris and hadn't for years, but Jenny went on in a fervent sort of confessional way, like she could mend things if they came out in the open. I told her what's past is history and might as well stay buried, but that didn't slow her. Jenny's big-boned, but graceful, moves like some English actress I once saw on TV. Jenny talked and paced the room and something came over me that was hard to place. At first I thought it was guilt over the divorce and the way I had at the time run out on some responsibilities. Then I saw it wasn't that at all, but in the way I was seeing Jenny for the first time as a woman no longer young. Little lines threaded around her mouth and at the corners of her eyes, and the
skin under her arms sagged just a little. I felt sad for her and for me too, I guess.

She smoked and paced and talked for hours, calling her latest ex-husband Mark the Shark, and saying, "No more, never again into the jaws of marriage." At that she laughed until she staggered from the room, and I heard her off and on in the bathroom for the next hour. Later she folded down the sofa for herself and gave me her bedroom. I tossed all night under lace-ruffled sheets.

On Sunday she took in church, which for her was unorthodox eastern of some strange kind. I went along. There were black men in white robes, from Ethiopia she said, but they looked fifth ward Houston to me. I sat at the back and watched my daughter moving at ease among brass bells and incense burners, as serious as the flat-faced saints who stared down from the walls. On the way out we filed by the Miracle of Blood, peering down through a glass case which held a miniature picture of Christ on the cross. A few weeks before, according to the local priest, a red resin-like substance had appeared, oozing from Christ's punctured side. Even the local papers had covered it for a day or two. Later, Jenny asked me what I thought of it. I said there are some things you just can't explain and she let it go at that. But I thought that any god who busied himself with stuff like that sure must have run out of tricks, and probably went in for macrame, too.

A few months later when Jenny called and invited herself out--just for two or three days, she said--it surprised me, but I said sure, come on, and in a week or so she did. For a couple of days we saw the sights, winding our way to the top of Mount Lemmon, wandering half a day through Nogales looking at junk and tossing down tequila at Elvira's. One evening we drove out west of town and caught a sunset.

The third day she says, "Daddy, don't try to entertain me. Just do what you always do and I'll tag along." She has a 9:07 flight back that night to Houston which gives us all day, so I say, "How about the dog races?" So we go for a couple of hours. I drink a few beers and lose my $10.00 limit and we leave. This is Sunday afternoon and on the way home she acts a little miffed, not talking much. When I ask what
the problem is she says something about missing church that day and feeling bad about it. I point out that it was her idea to go with me to the races, that she could have found some kind of church that would do, that Tucson is full of all kinds of churches. She says, "I know, I know." So we drop it.

She's restless all afternoon, like something is working on her. I figure she's anxious to get back. She flips through the Sunday paper once and then again, like she will come upon some answer she's looking for. I clear the table and wipe it down. I sit with my checkbook and spread out a handful of bills. I pay bills on Sunday.

Jenny tosses the paper aside and I can tell she's watching me, but I don't look up. Finally she comes over. I'm stamping envelopes. "Is this all you do?" she asks. "Go to the dog races and eat and pay bills? Don't you have any friends or read or go to movies?"

"What's wrong with that?" I ask. "At least I can pay my bills. And what's wrong with dog races?"

I don't know what's happening, why she's angry, but an old, almost forgotten pissed-off sensation creeps back in my gut, a hell-catching sort of feeling that takes me back to times with her mother. I feel myself begin to bluster up. "Yeah, Jenny," I say, sweeping my arm over the bills, giving them all a little flutter. "I'm afraid that what you see is pretty much the way life is. My life, at least, is a whole lot of will the water bill be $14.88 or $16.73 and will the phone bill be under $30.00. That's why I go to the dog races. I pay these bills to keep everything the same; I pay at the races hoping to make things different."

Then she starts in on the dog races like she'd been waiting for an opening. She's going on and I'm trying to follow her. She paces the room telling me how she's figured the races out, how the mechanical rabbit's out in front and how the lead dog chases it and how all the other dogs seem only to chase the lead dog, as if there isn't a front-runner rabbit there at all. Like it's all some big joke and the dogs know, and are muzzled, not to keep them from barking or biting, but to keep them from laughing at all the suckers leaning on the rail. "Just one big joke," she says, with a shake of her head. I watch her soft scrambled hair move
from side to side.

Then I look past her and find through the window a beam of light, all pink and purple, laced across a tiny piece of mountain way off in the distance, squeezed between a roof and a tree. Sometimes when I'm alone I sit and stare at that slice of mountain for hours. No music, the TV silent. Maybe a beer or two. Maybe more.

One minute she's staring out the window with her back to me, and then she turns and like a flash flood racing down a rocky gulch her words start flowing and they seem important, and I am quiet and still to hear what she is saying.

"Do you remember when I called you from New Orleans, when I was seventeen?"

I don't remember a thing, but dig around in the past trying to orient myself, where I was then, what I was doing.

"You were alone in San Diego," she says, "involved in some big project or something. I remember you sounded impatient, or important, maybe. Mama was on the extension and you made her hang up before you would talk."

"Okay," I say, "now it's coming back. More than twenty years ago, but yeah, it's coming back."

"What was happening?" she asks. "Tell me what you remember."

"You know," I say, "that was the past, it almost seems like another life, and you were young. A long time ago."

"Just tell me what you remember," she says. Jenny's pacing again and I want her to get still so I can think, but she doesn't.

"Well," I say, "it seems like you called. It was late, I think, and I could tell from the way the phone sounded you-know-who was on the extension. So I think I said, 'tell her to get off the line or I hang up.' I may have been angry, but I had my reasons, you know."

"That's okay," Jenny says. "I understand, but that's not the point."

"Well, what the hell is the point," I say. I go to the kitchen and get a beer and stand facing her across the room.

"Just tell me what happened, what you remember."

"Okay, I say, this is it--in a nutshell. You were in trouble."
"Pregnant," Jenny says. "I was pregnant."
"Okay. You were pregnant. It was some kid who worked summers on a shrimper or somewhere, a kid like you."
"He was twenty."
"That's still a kid in my book."
"Okay, whatever you say. Then what happened?"
"You asked me what you should do. You and your mama had had a big fight over it and you asked me what you should do."
"And what did you say?"
"I don't know. I can't remember exactly. I didn't want to take sides. I think you needed some money and I said I'd send it. Something like that."
"Something like that," Jenny says. "Yeah it was something like that. You want to know what you said? Do you?"
I drank deep from the beer. "Sure. What the hell did I say?"
"You said, Jenny, you're young, there's plenty of time for you to have babies."
"So, what else could I say? I'm not some great big daddy in the sky who knows it all. What did you want to hear?"
"What did I want to hear. Oh, my God, Daddy. Don't you know anything?" She waits a minute and I think she will cry, but she doesn't, and when she speaks the words are all even and spaced out like studs running down a long wall. "I wanted to hear you say, 'come to California and have your baby and it will be my grandchild and I will love you both and take care of you.' That's what I wanted to hear. That's all."
I started to say, "That's not fair," and all the excuses, the justifications come to mind. "Your mama had custody, it was your life, what about the boy's responsibility," and on and on. But I keep quiet.
Jenny turns back to the window and her shoulders shake and then she starts sobbing, softly, quietly at first, then from deep within her comes a moan and then another one, louder and louder. From across the yard my neighbor's dogs pick up the moans and begin to howl, and soon I hear other dogs.
from across the street and then from all up and down the block. Finally it seems the whole world is howling.

While Jenny's packing I almost call a cab for her. I could say my ulcer is acting up or that I can't drive at night or something. But I don't.

On the way to the airport Jenny acts like nothing at all happened. She explains low impact aerobics to me, how it can give you "body confidence." She chatters on, losing me when glycogen and fats start getting together with oxygen.

When I drop her off she gives me a peck on the cheek, and even in the harsh airport glare I can see her face has softened, the wrinkles vanished. She glows. Ten years have somehow slipped away. I watch while she disappears up an escalator.

I drive around a while then, glad to be alone and in a different part of the city. I circle the Night Owl Bar, checking it out, then stop back out front with the motor idling, trying to think. Finally, I pull through the drive-in window of George's Liquor next door for a pint of Old Fitz. I head north and then turn east on 22nd. The road is straight and wide and for a few minutes I feel an old exuberance, being alone like this on a strange road, not knowing where I'll end up.

I drive easy, letting the city thin out around me. Then up ahead I see two giant sahuaros blanketed with strands of blinking white Christmas lights. I slow when I see a sign: Sahuaro Estates East. At the entrance the two sahuaros flank a gleaming asphalt drive and I pull in. Loose gravel pings up under my car. A new subdivision, just getting off the ground. I know how that feels. On my right a model home glows yellow under a guard light. The subdivision is a series of cul-de-sacs that spur off the main drive, and in one I stop and turn off the engine, hoping to hear nothing, but faintly pick up the hum of I-10 in the background. I sit for a while. When the Old Fitz has smoothed the creases from the night, I decide to cruise around some more.

Back on the main drive a couple of slabs are poured, pvc sticking out of them like periscopes on a submarine. I stop and check them out. The slabs are much too close together,
I think, with all this land stretching forever around. I look back west and can't see the stars for the glow from the city, but to the east the sky is filled and bright. Jenny is up there somewhere, already over New Mexico. I stare at the sky and try to make out where the brightness ends and the dulness, the murkiness, begins, try to find some absolute line where things become clear. But I can't. "Goodbye, Jenny," I say, then look around to make sure I'm alone.

The slab is rough under my feet. I talk right to it. "You're solid, good and solid," I say, "with lots of re-bar. Last a long time. What will you do," I ask, "with all that time? with a new life? one just beginning? Is it enough to be strong? For sure you won't be running off here and there chasing god knows what all."

I laugh and take another shot of bourbon. "But there's always the possibility of a new freeway, maybe a loop, cutting right through you. Even an earthquake. Or a fire, or even a fickle owner. Who can say?"

My voice is bolder. I hear it carry out into the dark of the desert and no longer care. "Just a crazy old man," I say, and laugh again.

I'm quiet for a few minutes and then nothing seems funny anymore. I think about dying. What nothing might be like, a bright glow, like some people near death have said, or only darkness, or maybe no sense of anything at all. For a minute I regret I can't be young again and go back and fix at least a few things. And I picture it, being young again, twenty-eight or thirty, and the whole world stretching out before me. With a new car, maybe, and good looks, and highways leading anywhere and everywhere. Seattle this time, maybe, or Portland. A boom city anywhere, somewhere new.

To the north the Santa Catalinas rise above the desert, hovering like a bank of somber clouds. I wander away from the road, by the light of the moon picking my way through the mesquite and cactus, and stop when I find a little rise that overhangs a dry wash. With my heel I make a mark in the sand, then step off twenty paces as straight as I can. Then another mark and at a right angle measure fifteen
paces, then back and parallel to the first side twenty paces more
and mark the sand once again. "Plenty of room for a house," I
say. I could build one right here and build it right, so that it would
last. And if Jenny called I would know what to do and know
the right words to say.

"There's time enough for this, to build one more house,
 isn't there?" I hear my words tumble into the desert.

A car has stopped on the road near mine, its lights on. I
hear a door slam and see a beam cutting into the dark,
playing across my car then across the slabs. Security patrol.
I know I'll have to leave.

But first I slip down into the wash and gather an armful of
stones, as many as I can carry. Then I scramble back up to
bank and hurry, searching the sand for the marks I've made,
stacking stones for the corners of my house.