His Right To Die

Dick Remer*
AS SOON as I had slammed the gate behind the last steer, I walked over to where my Uncle Henry was standing and leaned against the board fence. The rays from the rising sun flattered the herefords and blacks, making their coats give off a deep luster. It had rained a day or so ago, and spots in the cattle yard were still muddy.

The way Uncle Henry stooped, you could tell he was all of seventy-two. But he had to leave all this now. Only a few more days could he rise as he'd done for fifty years and watch that sun coming up over his windmill. But the sun would still come up. It would still shine into his window if he went to the nursing home. I couldn't help thinking it would be different, though.

His farmstead, nestled on a side hill, formed a circle—the house at the upper edge, the cattle yard at the lower, the out-buildings clustered around. In the center stood the windmill. In early morning, or at noon when we were just in from the hay fields, or late in the evening when the rays of the harvest moon filtered through its ever-turning fans, it would always pump. Its rhythmic throb knitted the farm and pumped not only water, but life.

Yes, the windmill still pumped. It still said, "Here is
home.” But no longer did the small ears of children hear it. No longer did they run beneath it or stop on a lazy summer morning to climb its metal ladder—but then jump off when the sun-hot rungs became too much for their small hands and bare feet.

And no longer did the mother of these happy children hear the sound she had loved for so long. Or maybe she still heard it, but that was up to God now. She had been buried four months ago. Henry’s ears were the only ones remaining to absorb the message of the windmill. Weeds grew around it. One morning glory still clung to the first cross-bar, but the fall air would soon clip it off.

“Spose you’ll send out most o’ the young stock then?” I said, trying to sound as if the cattle shipping scheduled for this morning were his idea.

“Yeah, an’ those three dry cows and some stockers too,” he replied. He had blurted out the “Yeah,” but the rest of the sentence came as almost one word. I had to listen carefully to catch all he said. We didn’t say anything more right then, just stood leaning on the gray-board fence and looking at his cattle and his valley beyond.

About a year and a half ago, he’d had a stroke. It was winter and, luckily, he’d fallen in the barn. But just three days ago, he’d fallen again and lain senseless for over an hour on a pile of corn. With a stiff wind blowing and him sweating all the time, virus pneumonia had set in. The doctor said he’d throw it off, though, with plenty of rest. I had bathed him and stayed with him all that night.

He hunched over a little now—just as if he were having trouble to stand. It was chilly this morning and I suppose he felt it more than I did.

A lined denim jacket, an old work cap, work-shoes, and overalls—this was the uniform he took pride in wearing. His hair, all white and getting thin, was mostly covered by his cap. His blue eyes seemed a bit more cloudy now than years ago when I had worked pretty regularly for him.

When I used to work for him—yes—I remember that. There wasn’t a time he’d ever got angry at me, and he had that way of making you want to work to just please him. He’d given me a horse when I was real young—I suppose
about ten. I was the proudest kid you could ever hope to know.

Henry spoke now, bringing his gaze away from the cattle and the valley and fixing it on me.

"Larry says I got'a move off the place." It came out quick and all together. His face tightened with the last word. The stroke had made his mouth draw up on one side and had paralyzed some nerves. When he talked, he often drooled a little. He couldn't eat well either.

"Yeah," I said slowly, trying to think of a way to make his leaving the place sound good. I couldn't, so I lamely tossed off something about the better care he would be getting at the home.

"But what's good care compared to this?" I thought, looking around. "Aw hell, the whole damn thing's none of my business anyway, so I guess I'd just better not meddle."

I asked Henry something about his two litters of pigs. He even laughed a bit when I tossed a corn-cob, making a new calf jump with a startled bawl and head for its mama.

Henry was the kind of fellow who'd rather cut all the weeds along an obstinate neighbor's share of the fence line than cause trouble. He had even been good-natured when Larry had told him he would have to leave the farm and move to the nursing home. He hadn't liked it, but he didn't complain. Of course, he had such trouble talking, maybe he couldn't.

A station wagon was coming down the drive. We turned.

"Here's Larry now," said Henry. I thought his words suggested more than just casual observation.

Larry was his son-in-law. Henry's daughter had died two years before, leaving Larry alone with their eight children. And since Dad had died, Larry was the only relative living close enough to watch out for Henry. Henry's only other child, a daughter, lived some eight hundred miles away, so Larry had gradually taken charge of Henry's affairs. Someone had to, I guess, though Henry still got around enough to do his chores and farm twenty acres with his tractor. He still drove his car, too, but poorly.

Larry climbed out, giving the door a hard shove behind
him. He was only about five-foot ten, but you've never seen a guy so packed with muscle. His dark hair was cropped short, and actually, at thirty-eight, he was a handsome man. He looked anything but a farmer. But no wonder, he'd spent all but the last ten years in the service — and even part of that, too. Its effects still lingered, right down to the way he acted.

"Fine morning, isn't it? See you got the cattle penned."

"Yeah," I answered smiling. "Hell, we had that done by five-thirty. 'Bout time you're getting here!"

With a twinkle in his eye, Henry, not to be left out, chipped in, too.

"Larry, you slept too late!"

It was good to hear and see him joke. He used to do it a lot. "Must be hard, though," I thought.

We walked towards the cattle yard — the trucks would be here soon. After Henry's fall the other day, Larry had made the arrangements to send him to the nursing home. After this, he had decided what stock needed to be sold. A neighbor would be watching over the farm but couldn't be bothered with a lot of chores.

I had asked him if he didn't think he was acting a bit quickly. He'd just shrugged his shoulders and asked if I wanted the old man to fall again, only next time maybe in the pig-lot. I knew what he meant. Hogs would eat a downed man alive.

I had wondered if perhaps the hogs couldn't be sold. Maybe Henry could keep just a few calves and some chickens. These wouldn't hurt him. Then, if there could be a housekeeper — but Larry said this wouldn't work.

We were just about to the cattle yard when Henry mentioned the calf that had gone through the pasture fence earlier that morning.

"You two boys want to fix that wire for me? Hammer's in the tool shed, some staples in the box on the wall."

"Might as well," I said, "got time."

Larry followed along. He never was anxious to do much off his own place. We left Henry as he was starting to pitch some hay into the rack. I was glad Larry and I were alone. I wanted to talk to him.
“You sure it’s the right thing to do, Larry — moving Henry off, I mean?” We stopped, looking over the hog-lot fence at an old sow nursing her litter.

“It’s the only thing to do. Why, he can no more take care of himself than the man in the moon. Look at him now, trying to pitch hay — he can hardly lift half a fork full.”

“Well, he’ll still get the rack full.” That was about all I could say. Henry was having quite a time.

“And the way he drives,” Larry continued, “sure as anything he’s gonna be on the wrong side of the road one of these times and — bang — maybe five kids’ll be dead.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re right there, Larry.” — I had to agree — “but how’s a person gonna get him to stop driving without hurting his pride?”

Larry huffed and answered quickly.

“I don’t really think much of one old man’s pride when it might be my family he’d crash into.”

“But what I’ve done, though,” he continued more slowly, his voice becoming more serious, “is to ask the Highway Patrol to call him in for a drivers test. And if he passes — well, ok — but you know his chances.”

“Yeah — I know his chances,” I said as we started across the pasture, “but perhaps it’s for the better though.”

I was thinking. “Drivers license taken away. By damn, that’d be a good first step towards a statement of incompetency. And Larry’s farm’s pretty small for supporting eight kids — aw, the hell,” I cussed myself out, “Larry wouldn’t stoop to that. He means well — it’s just that his methods are so damn crude.”

I was stretching the wire. Larry was nailing.

“No, Henry’s over the hill — he’s seen his better days. We’ll all get there sometime, I suppose. But Henry’s just kidding himself anymore, thinking he can farm.”

Larry was the kind of fellow who was always right. You couldn’t argue with him. But usually his ideas were pretty decent, so I’d just let him have his way.

“Just look at those weeds,” he said, pointing to the lower end of the pasture. “Thistles, button weed, just about anything you can name. Should’ve been sprayed or cut a month ago.”

“Well,” I replied slowly, “they aren’t really hurting any-
thing. Frost'll get 'em before they seed out anyway, won't it?"

"It's still a poor way to farm. Land shouldn't be treated like that."

Silently I remembered the rusty pile of wire I knew was lying in the middle of Larry's back forty. It had been there for ten years, ever since Larry had moved onto the place.

I bounced my hammer on the barb. "That ought'a do it. Looks like it's got enough tension to hold for a little while anyway." We turned and started back towards the farm yard.

"Damnit, fellow," I said slowly, looking at him as we walked along, "it sure seems like you've got a hell of a big economic interest in this place. That as far as your interest in Henry goes, too?"

"You know better than that," he said, "you can see for yourself what's happening to the farm. You're enough of a farmer for that."

I cooled off a bit. He was probably right, only it just seemed wrong to be worrying about the land while Henry was the important thing. Larry nodded towards the barn.

"Just look at those buildings, falling apart. Henry can't keep them in the shape they ought to be in. The way it's going now, they'll be ruined in a couple of years."

I stopped short. "My God, man, he built 'em, didn't he? He nailed each board up — seems to me he damn well's got the right to let 'em fall apart if he wants to."

Larry didn't say any more and neither did I. The trucks were pulling in just as we climbed over the cattle-yard fence. We put the hammer and staples down and walked to the barn. It was big and fixed so you could drive cattle in one end and load out of the other. We worked it by driving a bunch into the barn, then sorting and loading in one operation. We'd turn what we didn't want back into the pasture through a side door.

We had loaded two trucks. Just one left. There was plenty of help — three truck drivers, their two extra men, Larry and myself. Henry had wanted to help, too, but Larry was running the show and wouldn't let him. But now the gate of the last truck was raised. One of the drivers was directing it back to the chute. I stepped into the barn.
There was Henry, standing right in the middle of the cattle, prodding one now and then with a short pole. It was a dangerous place for him.

"Seeing which ones are yet to go, Henry?" I questioned rather matter-of-factly. Several cows shoved. Henry was pushed to one side, then back — tight between two big ones. A little roughing like that wouldn't have bothered me, but was dangerous to someone not quick on his feet. Still, he was in there and hadn't fallen yet. I wanted to tell him to come out, but didn't quite know how, so I jumped the rail and pushed through to him. I pointed to a black.

"What'll that one weigh, Henry?"
"Bout four-fifty. What'a you think?"
"Yeah, I 'spect that's about . . ." Larry's command cut me short.

"Henry, get out of there." His voice came sharp and hard. "You're an old man. First thing you know you'll fall an' be trampled to pieces."

The impact of the order soaked in slowly. Henry wasn't too quick to comprehend. Then the corners of his mouth pulled down. His face twisted. I thought of how once as kids we had poked an old bull-frog again and again to make him jump. Finally he just sat there. No matter how hard we poked, he just sat. So we put him back in his bucket with a little water and grass. Next morning he was dead. I hoped Henry wasn't going to break. Two truckers were watching. They'd hauled his cattle for years.

I took Henry's elbow. He prodded a couple of cows to clear our path to the gate.

"Larry means well," I said quietly, "though I guess he seems a little rough sometimes, doesn't he?"

Henry pushed the words through lips that wouldn't move. "He sure does." His voice was high. Once out of the pen, he stood alone in the alleyway.

By now the truck was backed into position. The chute door was hauled up. We started cutting and driving — old stockers and the feeders over four hundred pounds into the truck, the rest back to the pasture. I was working near Larry.

"You didn't have to be so hard on him, did you?"
Larry didn't so much as even turn — just mumbled some-
thing about old men and little children and how they had to be treated alike.

I glanced over my shoulder. Henry was still in the alleyway, his face still contorted, just like a little kid's before he bursts into tears.

"Five of us," I thought, "all twice as strong as he — driving his cows into a truck." I grabbed the tail of a balky heifer and twisted hard. She jumped. But all the satisfaction I got was manure on the sleeve of my levi jacket.

"Hell, just what's deserved," I thought. But I laughed with the rest of them. Even Henry laughed — but only for a moment. His face sobered right up again.

We ran four more up the chute. I was giving all my attention to the job. I heard Henry's voice, but didn't catch what he was driving at right away.

"Hold back that one." I turned. He was pointing to a placid-looking stock cow.

"Don't listen to him. He's just an old man." It was Larry speaking, but he didn't look up or anything, just kept right on working.

"What's he want her for, Larry?" I heard one of the truckers ask.

"How should I know? Just keep loading. Don't pay any attention to him."

Henry heard him but still stood there pointing. He tried to talk. His mouth would open, then close. Then he'd swallow. I saw he couldn't get the words out. Two of the truckers, like myself, just stood still. Larry cracked the behind of the cow that Henry's outstretched arm still indicated. The other trucker headed her off, then she was loaded.

All at once it hit me.

"Hold on! Hold it a minute," I shouted. "Stop loading. Let's find out just what the hell's going on here."

"Just keep loading," I heard Larry say quietly to the trucker next to him. But he had no followers this time.

"Henry, you want that cow saved back?" I said looking squarely at Larry. From over my shoulder I finally heard the "yes," only this time his voice had a little more fire to it.

"She got a calf sucking her or something?" I was still watching Larry. It sounded like Henry was having trouble
answering. In my mind I could see Henry's face contracting as he would try to force the words.

"Two weeks old," was all I heard.

"Bucket the damn thing," yelled Larry.

"And just who's going to bucket it? Henry?"

"I will!" Larry shouted it. That was all I needed.

"Why, you son-of-a-bitch," I said slowly. I turned. "A free calf," I thought. The cow had worked her way to the front of the truck, but I got to her. Larry tried to stop her when she came down the chute. But I'd thought of that and had given her tail a good crank. He didn't stop her. One of the other fellows had opened the side door that led to the pasture. She went through.

Five more head up the chute, and the truck was full. Larry had to sign the shipping bills but not much was said other than needed. I walked over to Henry.

"You'd really like to stay here on the farm, wouldn't you, Henry?"

"Yeah." His face again contracted showing the feelings behind what he had said.

"You know, though, you might have an accident or something, don't you, Henry?"

He looked at me. This time his words came easier. "I've got the right to die the way I want, don't I?" He said it without conviction, just hope.

"Yeah," I answered, nodding my head and smiling as I looked into his moist eyes, "I guess you do."

I turned and walked to the house. It took just a few minutes to place the telephone call. Then, from eight hundred miles away, I heard Henry's daughter answer. We talked for about five minutes.

"Yes, I'll be there in the morning then. There's a plane leaving here around midnight," she said. She was a forceful woman.

Later, when I walked from the house, the first thing my eyes caught was the turning windmill. The sun was shining through its cross-bars. I heard its pumping too. The trucks were gone and so was Larry. Henry was standing beside the backyard gate near the old lilac bush, where his wife had
picked bouquets for many years. He was looking at the windmill, too.

I walked up sort of easy like, rested my arms on the fence, and looked over the farm yard. I waited awhile, then spoke slowly.

"Guess you'll be seeing that sun rise over your windmill for as long as you like, Henry."

---

**Ame Damnee**

_by R. L. Reid_

And now my soul is crucified upon a stone
my heart and hands burned through by tears,
I leave with your last kiss dwelling like a prayer
upon my lips
With your laughter lasting
in my brain
your tinkling laughter
And the dream of the promise in your smile
the lingering promise
dancing on my eyes.
Like a vision painted
dancing on my eyes
your image
dancing

( . . . We kissed in the cool green shadows,
twin phantoms in the twilight,
and smiled while the crystal river
ran laughing to tell the sea . . . )