

Miss Bessie's COW

by Vicki Snyder



If Miss Bessie had known what would happen that day, she would have gotten up earlier than usual. Then again, maybe she wouldn't have. A day so out of the ordinary required a full night's sleep.

The alarm clock rang within 15 seconds of 5:30 a.m. She checked as she pushed in the switch. She didn't need to set the alarm, because she always woke at the same time. But one never knew. Old habits could betray a person, even one who had arisen each morning before the prairie sun switched on the light.

Miss Bessie walked from the nightstand to the closet and looked inside. She took out the hanger holding her Tuesday dress, a blue-flowered print with white background. She frowned at her Thursday dress, a green and white print with matching belt.

The Thursday dress was her Beading Club dress. She liked discussing books, but she didn't like the social time that followed. That was when other members pulled out pictures of their grandchildren, all angels of course. Miss Bessie knew better; she'd taught enough of them.

Miss Bessie walked downstairs and opened the front door. The morning paper lay in the dew-coated lawn without a plastic cover. She shook her head. You'd think after six months on the route Timmy Addison would toss the paper so it landed on the porch. Timmy had been one of Miss Bessie's third-grade students in the class she taught before retiring two years ago. She knew she'd taught her students to be more responsible.

She walked back inside, carrying the damp newspaper. Eliza, her calico cat, sauntered toward her.

"Good morning, young lady."

Although Eliza was 10 years old, Miss Bessie still called her a young lady. She had named Eliza after Eliza Doolittle in "My Fair Lady." Unlike many of her past students, Eliza took to instruction with a minimum of complaint.

Miss Bessie read the paper while she drank her herb tea. She would have preferred to wait until the paper dried, but waiting would have interfered with her schedule. She only read in the mornings on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

She sipped the last of her tea at the same time she finished reading. Then she picked up the newspaper, cup and saucer, and set them on the sink.

"Well, young lady, I'm going outside to weed the garden. Are you coming?"

Eliza looked up from her bowl, then turned back to finish her breakfast. If she changed her mind, Miss Bessie would hear her meow and open the door.

Miss Bessie pulled on her newly-washed gloves and surveyed the garden. The still damp soil would make pulling the tiny weeds an easy chore. She might as well start with the row of green beans. She tucked her dress behind her legs and stopped to destroy the intruders.

Tag, the Smiths dog, barked. Miss Bessie frowned. Tag barked again. Miss Bessie looked up. She saw movement in the empty lot next to her house. She turned. The huge dark eyes of an Angus cow stared at her from the other side of the fence.

"Bossy." That's the first thought that

came to Miss Bessie's mind. But she knew it couldn't be. Bossy, Miss Bessie's only pet cow during her childhood, had been served years ago on the dining room table in the form of hamburgers, steaks and ribs.

Miss Bessie took off her gloves and laid them on the ground before walking toward the cow. She reached over the fence to pet its coal-colored face.

"You escaped, didn't you girl?" The cow's somber eyes met Miss Bessie's pale blue ones.

"Purebred, just like Bossy. And such a docile creature, too. You look enough like her to be one of her descendants."

"Miss Bessie, you've got to help me and Bossy! Please, Miss Bessie!"

Miss Bessie's hand jerked. No, she knew she'd heard right. There was nothing wrong with her hearing. She watched Timmy Addison dart across the vacant lot like a younger version of Ichabod Crane being chased by his own headless horseman. Tag barked louder.

Timmy swiped at the damp red hair hanging over his forehead. Sweat highlighted his freckles.

"Bossy ran away from the auction barn," Timmy said. He leaned against the fence and took several deep breaths. "Dad can't sell her, Miss Bessie. I've known Bossy all my life. She's the first cow I ever saw born, and she's been my pet ever since."

Miss Bessie's mouth formed into a grim, straight line, one her former students knew well.

"Why is Jonathan selling your cow, Timmy?"

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"He says we can't afford to keep her. Will you help us, Miss Bessie?" Timmy wrapped his arms around the cow, hiding his face against her side so Miss Bessie wouldn't see his tears.

She looked across the road toward the auction barn and pursed her lips. Jonathan Addison was walking toward them. Miss Bessie saw that he still walked like he did when he was a boy, arms bent at the elbows and hands clenched into fists. She wouldn't be surprised if at least one of those fists held a frog.

Miss Bessie reached down and laid her hand on Timmy's shoulder. "Your father's coming, Timmy. When he gets here, don't say a word. I'll handle this."

Miss Bessie drew her head back, standing straighter than a yardstick from Gabe Hansen's hardware store.

Jonathan walked up to them. He pulled off his cap and grinned.

"Good morning, Miss Bessie," he said. "I see you found my cow." He looked at his son. Timmy kept his face hidden against Bossy's side.

Jonathan ruffled Timmy's hair. "Let's go, son. We've got to get this cow back to the barn."

"Jonathan, open the gate. I want to have a few words with you by the garden."

Jonathan started to protest, but one look at Miss Bessie made him change his mind. She looked as formidable as she always had when she'd caught him in one of his pranks. Although more than 20 years had passed since he'd sat in her classroom, she still made him feel like the clumsy eight-year-old he'd once been. He forced himself not to squirm.

Jonathan looked at his son. "Well, just for a minute, Miss Bessie," he said. "We really do need to be heading back." He unlatched the gate and followed her.

As soon as they reached the garden, Miss Bessie turned.

"See here, Jonathan Addison," she said. "You always were a contrary boy, but it's time you changed. Past time, in fact. I'm telling you right now that you're not going to sell that boy's cow."

Jonathan's mouth opened wide enough to swallow a 40-ounce steak whole.



"Dad can't sell her. I've known Bossy all my life. She's the first cow I ever saw born, and she's been my pet ever since."

"Miss Bessie," he said, "with all due respect, ma'am, I've got to sell her. Prices are good right now, better than they've been for years."

"Jonathan." Miss Bessie stepped toward him, shaking her finger within inches of his face. "I'll repeat what I just said. You never listened when you were my student, but you're going to listen now."

"Since you haven't noticed, I'm going to tell you. Your son's heart is broken. You're not going to sell that cow. You'll make enough on the cattle you sell so it won't hurt to keep one cow." She lowered her hand, but her glare dared him to disagree.

Jonathan pulled on the brim of his cap. "What do you mean, Miss Bessie? Any cow I don't have to feed makes a difference."

"Well, you won't have to worry about feeding Bossy. I'm going to pay for her feed."

"But..."

"Don't interrupt. I'll pay for her feed, but I want Timmy to work for it. I was going to hire a boy to help me mow and do some other projects, and it might as well be Timmy."

Jonathan shook his head. "You haven't changed a bit, Miss Bessie." "Neither have you, Jonathan."

Still shaking his head, Jonathan turned and walked toward the gate. He almost reached it when he heard Miss Bessie call.

"Just a minute, Jonathan." His stomach tightened as he turned to face her. "There's one more thing."

Miss Bessie ran into the house. She nearly tripped over

Eliza, curled against the back door. Miss Bessie knew what she was looking for; it was on the second shelf in her bedroom closet. Her feet tapped against the hardwood floors as she returned. Eliza heard her coming, stretched and moved out of the way.

"Open that gate, Jonathan, and let Timmy and Bossy into the yard. All of you line up against that fence. No, Jonathan, you're too far away; move closer to Bossy. That's it. Now smile. One more. Fine. You can go now."

Father and son edged away from the fence, Bossy between them. Miss Bessie watched them leave the yard and Jonathan fasten the gate before she walked into the kitchen.

She smiled. She'd had only two pictures left on that roll of film. She'd walk up to Fred's Drugstore this afternoon and ask for one-day developing.

Miss Bessie looked at her watch. She was behind schedule, but no matter; the results would be worth the loss of a few minutes.

She couldn't wait until Thursday. She'd put on her green and white print dress with matching belt. Then she'd take the shortcut through the alley to Myrna Davenport's house.

After the club members discussed Charles Dickens and his writing of "Oliver Twist," Myrna would serve pound cake and ice cream. That's when the ladies would open their purses and take out pictures of their grandchildren. And that's when Miss Bessie would make her move. She would open her purse, too.

She'd have a couple pictures of her own to show.