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### **"Bossy"**

I was awakened suddenly by the insistent ringing of the phone. My wife reached over and slurred a groggy greeting, then I felt her jab me in the small of the back with the stiff plastic antenna of the cordless handset.

"It's for you," she said. "It's the cow again."

I sighed and grabbed the handset.

"What?" I demanded. Yes, as I suspected, it was the usual complaint. "I know the barn is cold. That's because you always leave the door open. What...were you born in a barn?"

I then got an earful.

"It was a rhetorical question," I rejoined. "Put on a sweater if you're cold.

"Or a leather jacket," I heard my wife mumble.

I hung up abruptly and went back to sleep.

Let me explain. It was only a couple of years ago. I had been working on Wall Street as an investment banker and, not to brag, but I had made rather a killing and, it being one of your more stressful jobs, decided to get out before

it killed me. Helen and I drove around upstate at random one spring afternoon and found an old dairy farm for sale. I knew then that I had to have it.

"Honey," my wife reminded me, "you have never been on a farm in your life. You don't know anything about farming."

"Mankind has been farming for millennia. How hard could it be?"

This tended to be my attitude going into any new endeavor and it had always stood me in good stead. Call it the power of positive thinking, if you're into that kind of thing, but I've always found that you really can accomplish anything if you set your mind to it and do enough research.

So within a month, we had left New York City and were ensconced in a pleasant rural paradise only a few hundred feet away from a half dozen cows.

"Have you ever milked a cow?" my wife asked me over our first dinner in the new farm. It wasn't a beef dish, I hasten to add.

"Of course not." I said. "But I've seen it done and About.com describes the process fairly clearly."

"Oh, this is going to go well."

"Besides, I'm sure the cows will tell me if I'm doing it wrong."

She looked at me oddly. She was used to my blithely ignoring whatever obstacles may exist in whatever path I was set down, but this seemed to flummox even her.

"What do you mean, 'the cows will tell you'? Are you Dr. Dolittle all of a sudden?"

"Well, I don't mean in English. I imagine they'll moo a bit."

She shrugged and focused intently on her lamb chop.

The next morning, I awoke, if not with the chickens, then certainly with the cows, who were waiting for me. I had my archetypal wooden stool and galvanized bucket, and sat myself down and grabbed a handful of udder. I had seen some videos online of how this was done and thought I was doing it correctly. The only fly in the ointment was that no milk was coming out.

"What do you think you're doing?" came a voice from above me.

I looked around, and there was no one there. There was just the cow, which animal was indeed the source of the voice. She was looking at me with a bemused expression.

"Honestly, you city folk," she said.

"What am I doing wrong?" I asked.

She then talked me through the process very carefully and clearly and in a short while had dispensed a decent quantity of milk.

"Thank you," I said. "I am much obliged."

"Can I go out now? I'm starving and the grass smells good this morning."

"Hum," I said. "Don't you all usually amble out together once I've milked everyone?"

"Oh, why be a slave to routine?" she said. "Let's live dangerously."

I thought, then shrugged. "That's a fair point." So I opened the door and let her out.

Thanks to my bovine friend's hands-on tutorial (as it were), I was able to make short work of the rest of the milking.

And thus began my initial foray into dairy farming. I should stress that I had no intention of making a business out of it. With the small herd we had, I was able to supply fresh milk for ourselves, our son and his family, and a few of our friends. That was perfectly fine with me.

The morning milking ritual resulted in my bonding, after a fashion, with the cow who was kind enough to instruct me on my maiden voyage. Her name was Camilla, as it turned

out, and while she was of a cynical and sarcastic temperament, she eventually began to warm to me, and we began to converse in the most pleasant manner each morning. Curiously, she was the only one of the herd to speak to me, the others I guess being of a more timid disposition.

One morning, my wife came out to the barn while I was in the process of milking, and I felt I had to introduce her to Camilla. I had yet to tell my wife about our budding friendship.

I felt it only polite to formally introduce them. "Camilla, this is my wife Helen. Helen, this is Camilla. The cow."

What I heard Camilla say was "Nice to meet you." What I later found out was that Helen had merely heard "Moo." Which could explain why Helen simply stared at me with that expression she so often gives me that seems to suggest "I'll draw up the commitment papers."

"Don't forget we have that appointment with Alan Chambers at noon.

"I won't."

She then left, a tad more briskly than I seem to recall her moving normally.

"She's not very sociable, is she?" asked Camilla.

"It takes her a while to warm up to people," I said unthinkingly. "Oh, and cows, too, I would imagine."

"Damn rude if you ask me."

Over the next several months, my relationship with Camilla began to change—and not in a particularly good way. Camilla had always been somewhat demanding—disgruntled about this, that, or the other thing—and early in my tenure I accepted it as part of the dairy farming process. But as I gradually began to settle into a routine and develop a higher level of competence and confidence, I began to resent being what amounted to a slave to this cow. I had made the mistake early on of acceding to her demands to have her own cellphone, the result being that I was on call day and night. Unfortunately, this also began to gnaw at my wife who was getting tired of the phone ringing in the middle of the night.

It was early January when things came to a head. We had been down to the city at a party hosted by a friend of ours and had returned rather late. My wife was, shall we say, in her cups, and was eager to sleep. As soon as the lights went out, the phone rang. (The phone had since been moved to my side of the bed.) I quickly answered it before Helen could be overly aggrieved by the ringing. (Too late, as I

heard her unleash a string of lurid profanity and references to beef.)

"Where have you been all night?" Camilla insisted.

"The Caravellis threw the most excellent party down in the City. You should have come." I rarely look for a fight and was trying to be amiable.

"Oh, that would have gone over well," the cow replied.

"You may have a point," I said after a moment's consideration.

At that point, my wife rolled over with the speed and force of industrial machinery and grabbed the phone from my hand. She paused for a moment, then said in the sweetest voice she could muster, "Camilla, this is Helen. I think we need to have a long talk to work out some issues. We would love to have you for dinner tomorrow evening—say, six?"

There was apparently some form of reply.

"I'll take that as a 'yes.' I'll see you then."

Helen then hung up.

I won't dwell on what happened next. I suppose I should have been more upset, or perhaps have interpreted my wife's invitation to Camilla more carefully. When I came home from running errands, dinner was just coming out of the oven, but there was no sign of Camilla. Or so I thought.

While it's true that Camilla had worn out her welcome, she was actually quite tasty.

The following summer, I decided to build my own henhouse and buy a couple of chickens for the purpose of supplementing my fresh milk with fresh eggs. One morning, a few days after acquitting our poultry stock, as I was walking past the henhouse, I heard a voice call out, "A little help in here!"

Don't tell my wife.