Bessie’s Last Stand

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THE AD appeared as Dorothy had requested — on the first page of the want ads in Monday's paper.
Household sale of Mrs. Elizabeth Frobisher.
Valuable family dishware,
Interesting household items.
Furniture to be sold at later date.

"Dorothy! Some daughter-in-law! No derned sense at all. Fine way to have ta sell a body's belongin's." Old Bess Frobisher tapped her cane disgustedly on the floor as she sat and, in her own way, tried to supervise that mad process of getting things set up for a sale.

Her neck was getting tired from watching the workmen go in and out, back and forth, around her. The furniture was moved out, boxes in. Boxes from the attic, the basement, the kitchen and even the bathroom. She poked one of the workmen in the arm with her cane, to his great surprise.

"You want somethin', ma'am?"
"Never knew I had so much stuff. Derned nuisance — this movin' business. Weren't no sense to it. Movin' in with them kids."
"No ma'am, no sense."
"Their house is too prissy — they're too prissy. Oh, Paul ain't so bad. He's ma son, ya know. But thet woman he married. She's makin' me sell all ma stuff here. Ain't good enough for thet new house a' hers!"
"Yes ma'am, that's too bad."

The workman made his escape, and left her sitting there among her boxes. She grunted a bit and tapped the floor with her cane. Leaning back in her chair she squinted and pursed her lips. Bess was thinking — "thinkin' like holy thunder," as her late husband used to say when she had moments like this.
She had wanted to take her belongings to Paul's, but Dorothy said "no." No, no, always no with that woman, and always excuses. There was no room, the children would break the things, this would happen, that would happen. She had asked to store her things in their basement, then the attic, finally the garage, but no, no, always no. Yet, she had until tomorrow. Maybe she could keep a few things, maybe she could keep them all. A short time, but a body can do a lot in twenty-four hours.

She looked about at what had already been unpacked and placed properly by Dorothy. The large dining room table was nearly covered with large plates, small plates, glassware, dishes, plain vases, flowered vases, pictures with dirty-brown frames, and various and sundry items — collections of a woman's lifetime. Dorothy had even spread out the old lace table cloth Bess had received on her wedding day. That had been a long time, but it was tucked away most of those years as one of those treasures too fine to use.

And there on the table was an old platter she had hand-painted as a girl. Fine piece of work for a five-year-old — all shellacked, too. There seemed to her no reason why she couldn't keep a few of these things. Her sharp old grey eyes caught each object and selected and rejected. The table cloth, and the platter were musts. And of course the blue china vase, and her father's mustache cup. She couldn't bear to give that up. Her pillow cover, embossed with "Chicago World's Fair." Oh, too many dear memories in that to give up. Her salt and pepper shaker collection by all means. It was kind of a shame to throw away that fine sweet potato vine, too. It was a good twenty-five feet, yet she could do without that if need be. And there was a picture she liked. An unknown man painted by someone in the family. Kind of a homely cuss, but the face got rather friendly and familiar as he hung in the living room all those years. But that could be left out too.

Bess tapped her cane anxiously on the floor. She had been pushed around by Dorothy too much — and Paul with no spine. He wouldn't stick up for her, so she'd fight them both.

She settled back in the chair with a somewhat more contented and assured feeling.
They came finally. Dorothy, slim-figured, tall, and deliberate in her spike heels — Paul behind her with an armful of folded drapery.

"Bessie, dear . . ."

"My name is Bess."

Dorothy smirked. "Bess, dear, I brought these drapes to hang for the sale. I think perhaps they would look . . . well . . . a little nicer since the public will be here."

Bess ignored her.

"Put 'em down, Paul — we'll be leavin' the old curtains where they are."

"But Bess, those . . . those green shades are a bit old and sort of . . . well . . . tacky. They should be covered."

"We'll be leavin' the curtains where they are." Bess pointed her cane at Paul and motioned for him to put down the curtains.

He looked questioningly at his wife. Dorothy pouted. She had gotten quite good at that.

"Oh forget it, Paul," she said sharply.

"I'm thinkin' ya oughta let me bring this one vase. I can't see one little vase hurtin' anything." She stomped her cane on the floor.

Paul turned meekly to Dorothy. "Perhaps we could keep this one out."

"But we . . . well, we just don't have the room."

Bess pounded the cane. "What ya mean by that, woman? Ya got a whole house! I kin put it under ma bed if yer ashamed ta have it showin'."

"It's not that dear. It might get broken. The children might . . ."

"Mother, what Dorothy means is . . ."

"It's all right, Paul. I suppose we can find a place — somewhere."

Dorothy sighed and old Bess sat back in her rocker — contented for a while.

Paul followed his wife about. They puttered and fussed. They tucked this under that and that under something else. They placed a set of dishes at the end of the table.

"Paul dear, please put that cracked plate down in the pile, and for goodness sake get rid of this cup with no handle."
Bess moved forward in her chair. "I'll take that cup. I'll keep one piece from my ma's dishes. Here gimme that."

Dorothy sighed. "But Bessie . . ."

"Ma name's Bess."

"Bess, you don't want that around. It's no good—you might cut yourself on the broken handle."

"Ah got more dermed horse sense then to do a thing like that. Give it to me, Paul."

"Mother, please. It's . . . it's dangerous. You don't want it around."

"Ah want it!"

Paul looked at Dorothy. Dorothy sighed. Bess got the cup. She put it on the floor beside her with the vase—contented again.

"I was thinkin' maybe I could keep some more a' these things."

Paul knew it was time to take his manly role. "Mother, please. We agreed to sell these things. You know we haven't room."

"Seems like I could keep some of it. You got a big house there with plenty of room."

"Well, it's . . . it's not all that . . . you don't want all that work of keeping it around . . ."

"It ain't no work. I wouldn't ask for too much—just ma lace table cloth there 'n' ma pa's old mustache cup, 'n' maybe that pillow cover. Your pa bought me that when he was courtin' me."

"Mother, please, don't you see . . ."

"And I'd like a few other little things, too. That platter there. I painted it myself—finest platter a body ever had, and my salt and pepper shaker collection."

"Bess, we can't . . ."

"Do you know I collected those since I was fifteen—fifteen. Wouldn't think that now, would ya. I been addin' to it fer years now."

Dorothy sighed and pouted. Paul played nervously with his lodge ring.

"Mother dear, we agreed . . ."

"I oughta bring my sweet potato vine 'stead of throwin' it out. Seems a shame to do that."
"Oh now really Bess, this is too absurd. Whatever would we do with that awful thing?"

"Why, set it right there in the livin' room a'course. Right where folks can see it!"

"Not that ugly thing in my living room. I just won't have it!"

"Then I thought that picture there is kinda nice. Don't know who he is, but he's got a kind face. We could hang 'im in the hallway. Wouldn't be in the way there."

"No, no, no," Dorothy's lips quivered. "Not in my house."

"Won't do no harm to your house. They'd be nice things to look at."

"I won't have them. We agreed to sell this worthless junk. I tell you I can't have it around."

"Yes, ya can."

"Mother, please understand. We've got lots of nice things for you to enjoy. You won't miss these things."

"They're ma things, and it seems I should get ta keep a few."

"I've had all I'm going to take. I won't have this trash in my house. I won't, I won't, I won't! That absurd picture!"

"If I don't keep the picture then it seems I could keep the rest. That oughta satisfy ya."

"No, no, no!"

"Yes, I'm gonna keep the rest."

"That wretched vine, weed, whatever it is. Please, please get rid of that and you can have the rest. At least the other junk can be hidden away." Dorothy turned and stomped out of the room. Yes, she had gotten very good at pouting.

Paul stammered. "I-ah-ah-better go help." He ran after his wife.

Bess sighed contentedly in her chair and tapped the floor with her cane. In another month or two they'd be selling the furniture. Yes, indeed, the furniture. That chair she was sittin' in—pretty comfortable for a body to sit in.