

BABETTE'S FEAST: A STORY



Karen Blixen, Danish by birth, married a baron and spent the years 1914–31 managing a coffee plantation in British East Africa (her *Out of Africa* tells of these years). After a divorce she returned to Denmark and began writing in English under the pseudonym Isak Dinesen. One of her stories, “Babette’s Feast,” became a cult classic after being made into a movie in the 1980s.

Dinesen set her story in Norway, but the Danish filmmakers changed the location to an impoverished fishing village on the coast of Denmark, a town of muddy streets and thatched-roof hovels. In this grim setting, a white-bearded Dean led a group of worshipers in an austere Lutheran sect.

What few worldly pleasures could tempt a peasant in Norre Vosburg, this sect renounced. All wore black. Their diet consisted of boiled cod and a gruel made from boiling bread in water fortified with a splash of ale. On the Sabbath, the group met together and sang songs about “Jerusalem, my happy home, name ever dear to me.” They had fixed their compasses on the New Jerusalem, with life on earth tolerated as a way to get there.

The old Dean, a widower, had two teenage daughters: Martine, named for Martin Luther, and Philippa, named for

Luther's disciple Philip Melanchthon. Villagers used to attend the church just to feast their eyes on these two, whose radiant beauty could not be suppressed despite the sisters' best efforts.

Martine caught the eye of a dashing young cavalry officer. When she successfully resisted his advances—after all, who would care for her aging father?—he rode away to marry instead a lady-in-waiting to Queen Sophia.

Philippa possessed not only beauty but also the voice of a nightingale. When she sang about Jerusalem, shimmering visions of the heavenly city seemed to appear. And so it happened that Philippa made the acquaintance of the most famous operatic singer of the day, the Frenchman Achille Papin, who was spending some time on the coast for his health. As he walked the dirt paths of a backwater town, Papin heard to his astonishment a voice worthy of the Grand Opera of Paris.

Allow me to teach you to sing properly, he urged Philippa, and all of France will fall at your feet. Royalty will line up to meet you, and you will ride in a horse-drawn carriage to dine at the magnificent Café Anglais. Flattered, Philippa consented to a few lessons, but only a few. Singing about love made her nervous, the flutterings she felt inside troubled her further, and when an aria from *Don Giovanni* ended with her being held in Papin's embrace, his lips brushing hers, she knew beyond doubt that these new pleasures must be renounced. Her father wrote a note declining all future lessons, and Achille Papin returned to Paris, as disconsolate as if he'd misplaced a winning lottery ticket.

Fifteen years passed, and much changed in the village. The two sisters, now middle-aged spinsters, had attempted to carry on the mission of their deceased father, but without his stern leadership the sect splintered badly. One Brother bore a grudge against another concerning some business matter. Rumors

spread about a thirty-year-old sexual affair involving two of the members. A pair of old ladies had not spoken to each other for a decade. Although the sect still met on the Sabbath and sang the old hymns, only a handful bothered to attend, and the music had lost its luster. Despite all these problems, the Dean's two daughters remained faithful, organizing the services and boiling bread for the toothless elders of the village.

One night, a night too rainy for anyone to venture on the muddy streets, the sisters heard a heavy thump at the door. When they opened it, a woman collapsed in a swoon. They revived her only to find she spoke no Danish. She handed them a letter from Achille Papin. At the sight of his name Philippa's face flushed, and her hand trembled as she read the letter of introduction. The woman's name was Babette, and she had lost her husband and son during the civil war in France. Her life in danger, she had to flee, and Papin had found her passage on a ship in hopes that this village might show her mercy. "Babette can cook," the letter read.

The sisters had no money to pay Babette and felt dubious about employing a maid in the first place. They distrusted her cooking—didn't the French eat horses and frogs? But through gestures and pleading, Babette softened their hearts. She would do any chores in exchange for room and board.

For the next twelve years Babette worked for the sisters. The first time Martine showed her how to split a cod and cook the gruel, Babette's eyebrow shot upward and her nose wrinkled a little, but she never once questioned her assignments. She fed the poor people of the town and took over all housekeeping chores. She even helped with Sabbath services. Everyone had to agree that Babette brought new life to the stagnant community.

Since Babette never referred to her past life in France, it came as a great surprise to Martine and Philippa when one day,

after twelve years, she received her very first letter. Babette read it, looked up to see the sisters staring at her, and announced matter-of-factly that a wonderful thing had happened to her. Each year a friend in Paris had renewed Babette's number in the French lottery. This year, her ticket had won. Ten thousand francs!

The sisters pressed Babette's hands in congratulations, but inwardly their hearts sank. They knew that soon Babette would be leaving.

As it happened, Babette's winning the lottery coincided with the very time the sisters were discussing a celebration to honor the hundredth anniversary of their father's birth. Babette came to them with a request. In twelve years I have asked nothing of you, she began. They nodded. But now I have a request: I would like to prepare the meal for the anniversary service. I would like to cook you a real French dinner.

Although the sisters had grave misgivings about this plan, Babette was certainly right that she had asked no favors in twelve years. What choice had they but to agree?

When the money arrived from France, Babette went away briefly to make arrangements for the dinner. Over the next few weeks after her return, the residents of Norre Vosburg were treated to one amazing sight after another as boats docked to unload provisions for Babette's kitchen. Workmen pushed wheelbarrows loaded with crates of small birds. Cases of champagne—*champagne!*—and wine soon followed. The entire head of a cow, fresh vegetables, truffles, pheasants, ham, strange creatures that lived in the sea, a huge tortoise still alive and moving his snakelike head from side to side—all these ended up in the sisters' kitchen now firmly ruled by Babette.

Martine and Philippa, alarmed over this apparent witch's brew, explained their predicament to the members of the sect, now old and gray and only eleven in number. Everyone clucked in sympathy. After some discussion they agreed to eat the French meal, withholding comment about it lest Babette get the wrong idea. Tongues were meant for praise and thanksgiving, not for indulging in exotic tastes.

It snowed on December 15, the day of the dinner, brightening the dull village with a gloss of white. The sisters were pleased to learn that an unexpected guest would join them: ninety-year-old Miss Loewenhielm would be escorted by her nephew, the cavalry officer who had courted Martine long ago, now a general serving in the royal palace.

Babette had somehow scrounged enough china and crystal, and had decorated the room with candles and evergreens. Her table looked lovely. When the meal began all the villagers remembered their agreement and sat mute, like turtles around a pond. Only the general remarked on the food and drink. "Amontillado!" he exclaimed when he raised the first glass. "And the finest Amontillado that I have ever tasted." When he sipped the first spoonful of soup, the general could have sworn it was turtle soup, but how could such a thing be found on the coast of Jutland?

"Incredible!" said the general when he tasted the next course. "It is Blinis Demidoff!" All the other guests, their faces puckered with deep wrinkles, were eating the same rare delicacy without expression or comment. When the general rhapsodized about the champagne, a Veuve Cliquot 1860, Babette ordered her kitchen boy to keep the general's glass filled at all times. He alone seemed to appreciate what was set before him.

Although no one else spoke of the food or drink, gradually the banquet worked a magical effect on the churlish villagers. Their blood warmed. Their tongues loosened. They spoke of

the old days when the Dean was alive and of Christmas the year the bay froze. The Brother who had cheated another on a business deal finally confessed, and the two women who had feuded found themselves conversing. A woman burped, and the Brother next to her said without thinking, "Hallelujah!"

The general, though, could speak of nothing but the meal. When the kitchen boy brought out the *coup de grâce* (that word, again), baby quail prepared *en Sarcophage*, the general exclaimed that he had seen such a dish in only one place in Europe, the famous Café Anglais in Paris, the restaurant once renowned for its woman chef.

Heady with wine, his senses sated, unable to contain himself, the general rose to make a speech. "Mercy and truth, my friends, have met together," he began. "Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another." And then the general had to pause, "for he was in the habit of forming his speeches with care, conscious of his purpose, but here, in the midst of the Dean's simple congregation, it was as if the whole figure of General Loewenhielm, his breast covered with decorations, were but a mouthpiece for a message which meant to be brought forth." The general's message was grace.

Although the Brothers and Sisters of the sect did not fully comprehend the general's speech, at that moment "the vain illusions of this earth had dissolved before their eyes like smoke, and they had seen the universe as it really is." The little company broke up and went outside into a town coated with glistening snow under a sky ablaze with stars.

"Babette's Feast" ends with two scenes. Outside, the old-timers join hands around the fountain and lustily sing the old songs of faith. It is a communion scene: Babette's feast opened the gate and grace stole in. They felt, adds Isak Dinesen, "as if they had indeed had their sins washed white as wool, and in this regained innocent attire were gamboling like little lambs."

The final scene takes place inside, in the wreck of a kitchen piled high with unwashed dishes, greasy pots, shells, carapaces, gristly bones, broken crates, vegetable trimmings, and empty bottles. Babette sits amid the mess, looking as wasted as the night she arrived twelve years before. Suddenly the sisters realize that, in accordance with the vow, no one has spoken to Babette of the dinner.

"It was quite a nice dinner, Babette," Martine says tentatively.

Babette seems far away. After a time she says to them, "I was once cook at the Café Anglais."

"We will all remember this evening when you have gone back to Paris, Babette," Martine adds, as if not hearing her.

Babette tells them that she will not be going back to Paris. All her friends and relatives there have been killed or imprisoned. And, of course, it would be expensive to return to Paris.

"But what about the ten thousand francs?" the sisters ask.

Then Babette drops the bombshell. She has spent her winnings, every last franc of the ten thousand she won, on the feast they have just devoured. Don't be shocked, she tells them. That is what a proper dinner for twelve costs at the Café Anglais.

In the general's speech, Isak Dinesen leaves no doubt that she wrote "Babette's Feast" not simply as a story of a fine meal but as a parable of grace: a gift that costs everything for the giver and nothing for the recipient. This is what General Loewenhielm told the grim-faced parishioners gathered around him at Babette's table:

We have all of us been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness

and shortsightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite. . . . But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude.

Twelve years before, Babette had landed among the graceless ones. Followers of Luther, they heard sermons on grace nearly every Sunday and the rest of the week tried to earn God's favor with their pieties and renunciations. Grace came to them in the form of a feast, Babette's feast, a meal of a lifetime lavished on those who had in no way earned it, who barely possessed the faculties to receive it. Grace came to Norre Vosburg as it always comes: free of charge, no strings attached, on the house.