

BABETTE

by Nancy Baxter

I'M SO PLEASED you found our little lakeside stroll interesting, Ethyl. Harry and I often walk the entire lakefront after supper. Freshen Ethyl's drink, Harry; I shouldn't but, . . . yes, just an inch. I don't see how such a little bit of sour whiskey can have 375 calories in it.

You liked the fourth cottage we passed? Those Ionic pillars do add distinction. And that darling new oriental tea house belongs to Alex Somerstone. When he and Margie were divorced she got custody of the lake. Well of course he couldn't live without the lake so he and the new wife bought the property—two houses from Margie.

Oh, we've owned the cottage since 1935. Yes, we do enjoy the fun bunch of people here. It is a little tiring during the week when the boys go back to their offices; but we girls play bridge and canasta, and there's always "happy hour" at five o'clock each afternoon.

Now about the last house on the row, the one you asked about when we passed. I couldn't tell you while we were there, but it's really a strange story. It happened about ten years ago. Petosky was the family's name; they'd owned it twenty years, but they've moved to Ft. Lauderdale now. Oh yes, Ethyl, in the winter too. Can you imagine anyone wanting to be here when nobody was around except the farmers and a few ducks? The silence would deafen you. But he was a queer duck himself. Taught up at the Military Academy, English I think. Anyhow, of all the strange things, he wrote poetry. We, of course, never got too familiar with them. He was very standoffish.

None of us ever understood what she saw in him. She was a Trimble, the bank in Ft. Wayne, you know. They had met at a dance. He did look like Robert Taylor or Lord Byron (wasn't he that bad handsome poet during the time of Queen Victoria?) and she fell for his *Atlantic Monthly* talk. No, I don't either. Much too liberal. Well, at any rate, at that time he was the talk of the lake. He had a ghastly background: he was the son of Polish immigrants from Gary, or was it Chicago? His father had been killed in an automobile accident when the boy was small. Then he turned Catholic. I forget what your church is, Ethyl. Oh, good. Well, he was one of those real incense-drunk, candle-blinded converts. Even won a scholarship to Notre Dame. He was bright enough, I guess:

three years he went, then quit. To marry her. He knew a good thing. She had a trust fund of over \$15,000 a year.

She was such a bright young bird, with a shingle cut and fringed dresses. Attractive figure too. We had been friends in school. They were married at the St. whats-his-name Catholic Church in town; then there was a reception at the Academy. I remember I wore my green chiffon with dyed-to-match shoes. They flew in champagne from Chicago and there was a gold bell in ice. A queer thing, though—she and her parents were in the receiving line about nine o'clock and he came up with a dark look on his face and swept her away. I could tell she didn't want to go. Can you imagine anything so ungrateful? Walter Witherow made some very lewd remarks I recall.

Poor thing, I think she was bored to screaming those first months with him moodying around, but everything changed after that baby was born. Don't raise your eyebrows; I remember we counted nine and a half months.

Homely little thing the baby was, but the very apple of that man's eye. Maybe that's because she was as queer as he was. He called her Babette. He used to take that child, mind you only two or three years old, to the stable and hangouts in town. You could see them in the afternoon standing by the depot watching the train.

Babette was supposed to be precocious, but she was smart aleck if you ask me. It was the second daughter I really liked. She was pretty and quiet like her mother. Yes, she turned out quite well; she teaches psychology at Gothic Manor in Indianapolis. I think she married a patent lawyer.

I said Petosky was a Catholic, didn't I? Well, Harry and I never knew for sure, but we always figured that's what caused the trouble. The way we analyzed it, when they married, she promised to rear the children in the church. But she never did. Those two children went right to Carver City Grade School. Then the red haired one, Babette, went east to Swarthmore. Majored in French, in fact she won a scholarship somewhere. Well, that summer after college she met a man they disapproved of. No, they wouldn't say a word about it; but my Sandra saw them across the room in a restaurant in Chicago. From what she could tell, he was suspicious looking, swarthy and different you know. Undoubtedly a hood. But they said Babette loved him.

Well, it was the Fourth of July. The academy boat was cruising the lake with the band on the deck playing "The Stars and Stripes Forever." A storm began to come up; I remember the beach umbrella blew inside out. I was so cross at Harry for not taking it in. We didn't know it, but there must have been quite a scene down there. The Greens next door heard them yelling. Babette and this hood had come home, and I think Petosky was blaming his wife for

not having brought the children up within the church and letting Babette grow up without religion, a tramp. The Greens heard him screaming something about a "Godless life," so I suppose it must have meant that.

Anyhow Petosky ordered Babette and the hood from the house and the two of them drove away into the rain. And they were killed, yes, that very night in an accident. Right near here. I don't think he ever stopped blaming his wife. The girl's footprint was in the cement outside: Babette, "42" it said. Do you know he went out with a sledgehammer one morning not too long after and smashed it to bits. Funny how things work out. Just a teeny bit more, Harry. Yes, tomorrow, Ethyl, we'll go down and look at the smashed concrete. You can still see the "TE." It'll give us something to do while the boys play golf.

II

The subject of my thesis was "The Pygoscelid Penguins of the Falkland Islands." It was really a very interesting subject. The birds were numbered with rings pasted on their wings, then observed through binoculars engaged in patterns of personal-social behavior. The complex mating formulae and social patterns were recorded. Particularly interesting were the habitual behavior patterns. These penguins seemed bound by patterns of behavior formed when they were fledglings. Penguins who had been neglected by their mothers or picked on by the other birds seemed compelled to live their own full-grown lives in the same way. They repeated their early pattern, becoming indifferent mothers themselves and tormenting other birds.

I've always felt the penguin syndrome had a lot to do with our situation. Obviously, although my father never admitted it, he had a miserable childhood. After his father was run down by the postal truck, his mother spent the insurance money trying to collect damages and finally took a position as a live-in maid. He probably felt terribly inferior to the wealthy children in his neighborhood and compensated for these feelings with that gruff manner he affected. And of course he must have joined the Catholic Church for security and to develop some way of relating to his peers.

I suppose that job at the Military Academy and the marriage with a wealthy girl reassured him—immigrant boy makes good. I do know that he spent his life looking for security with someone or something. And we all suffered from it. At the moment of crisis his thin coating of veneer culture and security cracked and he behaved just like one of those penguins in an instinctual pattern.

I am grateful I chose the field I did; being able to understand the causes of behavior is invaluable. If we understood all, we would forgive all; and I understand what happened and do forgive.

I really think people have stopped talking about it. The other day at the Yacht Club I was able to meet several lake couples without having them try to conceal the pity in their eyes with those over-bright amenities. "We haven't seen you in TOO long. You must run up for a drink—" and then roll their eyes looking for an escape goat on the other side of the room. The worst thing about difficulties like these is the effect they have on other people. It's not that I mind so much for myself, but Kirk and the children have had to suffer humiliation. I just wonder how many of their playground friends whisper behind the backboards, "Do you know the queer thing that happened to their family?" Children are very knowing.

Of course, Babette wouldn't have planned it that way; but even if she had she couldn't have thought of a better way to crucify me and mine. And of course Mother, and I suppose Dad, although he never was at all sensitive. I do think now he regrets making such a fool of himself that they finally couldn't face anyone around the lake and fled to Florida.

And of course he misses Babette in his own insensitive way. He was unfeeling from the very beginning. One of the earliest memories I have was when I was about three, and I fell. He grabbed me up, then looked at me rather harshly and muttered something about looking in front of me instead of behind. Obviously he had no empathy, no depth of feeling, or ability to give. He was always looking for someone to supply the place of the mother who never had time or love enough for him, and Babette became that someone.

She was the only walnut on the tree as far as he was concerned. Thank heaven there never was any sibling rivalry on my part so that I can be really detached in analyzing her motivations. They were very complex, but basically she seemed dominated by the same sort of harsh insensitivity that marked Dad. They made life miserable for Mother, constantly reminding her of her lack of education without actually saying so by winking across the room at each other and quoting Omar Khayyam or somebody. I can recall how ridiculously angry it would make me when Father would shout down the pier, "The time has come the walrus said to talk of many things," and Babette would answer back something senseless about shoes and sealing wax and cabbages. Not that Father or Babette ever mistreated me; you can't mistreat someone you ignore.

Strangely enough though, Babette and I were beginning to approach something like a normal relationship the summer before she died. She wrote to me (she couldn't write to Father because his heart was too much tied up in her). She was working as a waitress in a camp operated by the Friends' Service Committee. In those days before the Peace Corps this was the liberals' answer to what could be done for the world. And Babette was becoming a liberal, a banner-carrying reformer of the world. She had met a man—Leo

was his name; he was directing a social center project which was based at the camp. They were to go to Chicago to paint peeling walls and install fencing and basketball courts in a slum neighborhood settlement house.

Babette quit her job and followed him to Chicago to help. He was talking of going to Indochina the next year on an International peace project, and she decided to go with him. It was ironic; a camp run by the Quaker church, she a baptized but drifted Catholic spending the weekend in Chicago with Leo Slater, the son of an Orthodox Jew.

Babette asked me to explain her love for Leo to our father. I didn't do it; I only told him Babette loved a Jew and didn't bother to tell him anything else. He wouldn't have been interested. They came home after the traditional boring Fourth of July picnic just as a heat storm was blowing across the town. She was going to marry him. They came in the front door, and Father's face was as black as the squall line moving across the lake. He didn't look at me, but sent Mother and me upstairs where the wind blew so fiercely I couldn't hear anything but a few shouted phrases. I heard Father shout something about "Godless life" and I guess he meant that she would disgrace him by marrying a Jew, probably some conventional vestige of his long-gone religious phase. They left; I suppose she was pregnant. They went to get married, but on the rainy road they didn't see a train coming. It ran them down. Father never got over the humiliation: her loving a Jew had brought out all the prejudice patterns he thought he had buried beneath his chosen coat of respectable professorhood. He went out several days later and smashed her name in the cement just as he smashed her right out of his life for shattering the superstructure of his conventionally planned life.

Sometimes I miss her terribly, and of course it was awful the way it happened, but there is this. I am in no way prejudiced, but it would have been difficult. For the children I mean, with different backgrounds. Studies have shown that the modern mixed Hebrew-Christian marriage has deep psychological and social problems. The "Hannukah Christmas Problem" they call it. So, awful as it was, it probably saved grief later. And eventually I'll quit having this recurring dream in which Babette drives the train toward me and I derail it screaming. Then I will have completely resolved the situation in my mind—without scars.

III

"The only university in Indiana with a golf course right on its grounds," they said, which impressed me although I had never seen a golf club. And looking up at that gold dome forever like the

Capitol in Washington and freshly painted, always freshly painted. I wonder who painted that thing; you never saw anybody on scaffolding. And I the scholarship winner and new convert from the Polish section in Chicago.

Question: Is there such a thing as an average, happy under-privileged immigrant childhood? I the living example, west Polish protestant in Catholic section but happy. Cabbage smells and greasy bricks in gutter streaming rain in summer and mother thin but warm, lilly of the valley, Kolaches and soft arms circling my shoulders. Varicose veins in legs from too much standing. Then, Mother in the library of the Grand Avenue house dusting Smollett, Hardy, and Horatio Alger. I kindly treated and free run of the library. Happy musty days devouring the shelves. Why never able to talk to family about these days? Too tender, too torn with memories of mother being eaten by pain of the dark world which swallowed her.

I wandering the streets and, finding the church, embraced treacherously and willingly the faith my ancestors died fighting in the seventeenth century. At college the apple-faced saint of the dormitories breathing new-convert sanctity, etherized with incense—and Yeats, and Synge, and O'Casey. "Oh sacred Heart o' Jesus, take away our hearts o' stone and give us hearts of flesh." Giants, riding to the sea and letting salt air Rosicrucianism sweep the towers of their mind. Why didn't it unify their sad land? Forces, always forces greater than the individual (Hardy, immanent Will). Why is my life one long literary parallel? Even then, stalking the instructors in their dens like some damn fox cub. Dank, musty Stevenson Hall. Dirt between the floor boards and Schopenhauer faintly traced through erasures on the blackboard. Had to know everything: who is the lady of Shakespeare's sonnets, how many times has Villon's "Where Are the Snows of Yesteryear" been used as a theme for poetry? . . . And then pages of crinkly Vulgate onionskin at night: St. Paul, "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof."

The lusts. Where did I first see her? Poto's parents' cottage east shore, cement man has since bought it. Hair cut like a boy's, shiny, sweet and soft like a baby's. Solemn eyes, pursed lips. Oh God, let her have a brain. Heart thudding, glands disoriented: modest, looking at straw matting on floor. Saying I hope to be a writer. Impressed. Telling of honors' thesis on metrical innovations of Bridges: "The Inexhaustible Satisfaction of Form." Her form, next to me trembling on the cold boat seats, the murk from the dark lake rising in wisps. Torment: hot, squirming heartburn. "He that looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed—"

Visiting Poto's parents every weekend. Roeking in the boat moony nights. Far and farther; hangover the next morning. Lust worse than booze. Very serious situation, but no brain. Don't think of it, ignore, or if not able, teach her. Read to her "Sonnets

From the Portuguese." "Very nice" (politely) under weeping willow tree (very symbolic).

"Let me count the ways," and her smiling lips counting kisses. Hopeless. I will awaken her intellect. Inexhaustible satisfaction of form. Hers. Bridges forgotten. Marry rather than burn. She not Catholic but has no objection to my ways. Never any objection to anything. Burning continuing through cocktail parties and according to God's Holy ordinance. None of my family, groom's side bare and drafty, candles blown horizontal in stone-pile church. All over in a candle flick. Lord Byron had Lady Byron on the couch by one o'clock of their wedding afternoon. Moore. Byron looking over my shoulder even then. All experience vicarious; even observing my own emotions for future writing. But springs dried up. Bridges thesis filed in cottage attic between tennis racket and coal stove. Religious fervor also cooled. Relation between sex and creativity? Beginning of long falling away from church. Only private school would want me, no requirements. Her father's cottage winterized, position at the Military Academy. Rich delinquents dressed like toy soldiers in Napoleonic Wars, only blue suits. I, diagramming sentences, grabbing boys by starched collars and looking into elusive faces—and haunted by the ghost in the attic.

She still no brain, but enormous fecund belly stretched on the divan through drizzly spring months. Pump, pump, blood rushing through that primeval road, that so basic thoroughfare, masked, mysterious as I listened. Then she wandering through the cottage white as a streak of lightning, "the baby is coming." Lake churned to froth; wires down; water scooped up from lake bed and poured down on roof and windows. "I tell you it is coming." No time to wash; blue, then red, all mouth yelping, girl, Yah, Yah, Yah, angry at being in the world. Beautiful, perfect, tears in my eyes. No poets ever my shoulder needed to tell me how to feel now. Pick up, soft, white, swansdown on tiny arms, and doctor finally here.

Oh God, wild with adoration; superb child bright beyond brilliant. Said "no-k" for no when one year old and I, foolish, father teacher had it put in school bulletin. Red hair, curling all over. She was a strange reincarnation of me not dead, my dried-up soul and diverted fountain flow somehow rechanneled through her chattering, rhyming baby brain. Mother again fecund, and I uninterested, fearful. This coldness omen, like Lord Byron again. God forbid. Dark eyed, image mother, placid child. Perplexity, aloofness, but never mind Babette walking, talking, poetizing. Coleridge and Hartley. Yeats and Anne in the cradle. No one must know; is military school, fondness foolish. Rough, spit and polish, toe-the-line. At home new baby growing also and falls and cuts herself and God be praised I do love her and am afraid to show it. Babette with me every free moment; the sky shines out through her eyes.

This village in the 1930's two horse town. Houses ornate with wood scroll like a setting from *Our Town*. Fat, frizzy-haired farm women and pale, bib-overalled farmers with shocks of black hair. Indian blood. Miami probably. Always standing around, waiting, waiting, for trains to bring in resorters to buy groceries and sand shovels. Trains. Special train to Elwood. That was the beginning. Ten cars, joined others in yards at Elwood, 35,000 people; hot, dusty children running and screaming like a circus parade. Here came the lion, handsome, hope of Republican party and country. Local boy, riding waving past high school; bells ringing from belfry, "International union and brotherhood of man. One World." Voice hoarse from too much speaking.

Couldn't buy, just couldn't buy. Age of beauty going, grace and manifest destiny. Really had been gone after War. Ladies on lawn, little literary magazines, Fourth of July rockets and fried chicken. Tears at the flag and "Star Spangled Banner." All going but there must be a stand somewhere. Stand with dignity in the road while coming age runs you over; Horatio at the bridge.

America the epitome of culture, the realization of liberty. Must not be polluted by inundations of Goths and Vandals. "What rough beast, its hour come round at last slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?" Paperhanger with mustache. So central vision of my life is militant defence of old ways even if dying in highways in pool of own blood. League of Nations, One World are Anti-Christ. Violent frustration when rejected as too old to protect ideals of the old way. Urge to fight, stand, defend with sinew, claws, heart.

Beautiful Babette of the agate green eyes. My hope, my future, my life. Ins. table mind; Valedictorian. Hours that summer varnishing boat talking or not talking. Try to touch with love of world's written heritage and need to defend old ways. Seems to understand. Mother proud; away to East and chosen for Sorbonne scholarship; but fear, a lurking shadow, clouds my eyes. Because of this and traumatic teen years communication wires blown down.

Summer job at Wisconsin resort. Strange aloofness, non-committal, fog between lines. In love? Tell me, share, but no. Seen by neighbor's daughter-of-a-bitch in bar in Chicago. Kaleidoscope of lights on beer bottles glinting on auburn hair? How like a serpent's tongue. . . . Psychological sister-prig ashamed. Jewish boy. Unpardonable sin to so-called enlightened sister. Not so to me; no church now. I warm no pews, bow no bows. No letters or word; I fear, I fear. She will get over it, mother says. Summer sweats on; classes at school but no joy, choking with apprehension. Time to come home for Sorbonne trip. Now all will be mended.

Horrible storm like day of birth; wind beating black waves into fighting crests, branches snapping, house shuddering. Babette arrives with him. Her face calm, shining, almost exalted. He cool and affected. Sit on porch all of us like statuary in a graveyard

looking over each other's heads. Think of something to talk about to keep from hating him. Discuss recent peace I say peace but no peace. Should drop bomb on Moscow and Peiping. Vicious chained dog now smiling soon tearing us limb from limb—Jew stiffening, grinding cigarette out grimly, lighting another. Babette saying coldly Leo is an active member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. A pacifist! Dam of red breaking inside of me; jumping to feet voice harsh like scratched knee. Little me standing like in cartoons watching with horror myself shouting; he on feet with mouth tight and small, thin chest heaving. Babette hanging onto his arm. I shouting—"In this Godless world only man remains in the path of the tides of destruction!"

Babette pale and angry with me. Words piercing angry hostile red fog. "I am going to marry him." Shock like when car ran into a tree. Impact, pain in stomach, silence. Sorbonne, Epipsyche dream, immortality going up in the smoke of the cigarette in his damned affected cigarette holder. I grab Babette by those white freckled shoulders. "I would rather see you dead than married to him." No resistance, like limp doll. Reaches up and thin hand takes mine off shoulder. Dignity. Woman. Cordelia. Head turned toward stormy black window pane. "We are already married."

"Pregnant. That must be it. You—" ran to pipsqueak, shook him, interrupted by spat words.

"I am not pregnant. I married him because his life is what I want. I am a pacifist too. It is what I have chosen."

Knocked out. Sat down. Weak but hatred for this supercilious seducer still dissolving into blood like poison capsule. Saying nothing. Looking out at wind snatching at leaves and limbs on trees, taking all before it. Thinking dully, there may be a tornado tonight as they pass me and the door slams.

Ladies must have been getting ready for bed in their Pullman berths. Sometimes in the rear cars you aren't even aware of the jolt. Just a little bump, like running over a ball in a toy wagon, then that screeching halt with the sparks flying. The door on the other side must have flown open but that didn't help him. I didn't even look at that scornful face. Why was she driving? Four hundred yards it carried her through corn fields I must have ridden through on my way to Notre Dame, up to a little sapling woods. But the rain had stopped, and black dyed cotton strings floated across the moon. And, Oh God, that beautiful bright face and form such a hopeless mess of . . . don't think about that, close that dark closet! And I remaining, trapped for years in a ring of hell, looking at the books she read and her footprint in the cement out there until I smashed it but couldn't smash myself. I so right and so wrong; she so alive and now so dead. Oh, Sacred heart o' Jesus, take away our hearts o' flesh and give us hearts o' stone.