

# The Baker's Just Desserts

## A Fairy Tale about Writing

Long ago, in a country village nestled in the far-off hills, there lived a Baker who was destined to cook for royalty. Unfortunately, the strangest problem plagued his village: no one could taste food, and no one could smell it, either. They could not tell the difference between soup and soap. What was the Baker to do? That is the telling of this story, and I intend to tell it.

This village had a curse put on them by a fairy fifty years previously. Arriving uninvited to a midsummer's eve feast, this fairy, in disguise as a gypsy beggar-woman, had decided to test the village's reputation for hospitality. When the beggar-woman asked to be seated, the manager of the feast refused to escort her inside the banquet hall, an exclusive area for the mayor and his invited guests. Instead, he directed her through the village's main square, past the tables of merchants and townspeople, to the "stranger's table," a shabby row of stacked-together crates on the most poorly lit area of the square. He sat her across from a drunken fool and gave her a bowl of unsalted corn-mush. She made pleasant conversation with her table-mates as spoonful after spoonful of the dry, bland, and slightly spoiled stuff went into her beggarly mouth.

When she had finished eating, the fairy excused herself from the table, threw off her shanty-town rags and stormed into the banquet hall with a cold fury – her white riding cloak and boots shimmering, silvery hair flying, eyes gleaming slate-grey, and a delicate, elegant finger pointing blame at the mayor. She thanked him for the meal and assured him that it was the only thing keeping her from drying up their crops and burning the village to the ground. They had not given her the treatment she had expected, so she wove an intricate spell: "From this day forward," she proclaimed, "no villager shall ever go hungry, but the food and drink shall become nothing to you. This spell shall only be broken if everyone in this village learns to be hospitable, as you once were, that everyone deserves a seat at your tables and a fine dinner instead of a bowl of mush that fills the stomach but not the heart. Until this changes, neither you, nor your children, nor your children's children shall ever taste or smell food again!" In a flash of light and thunder, she vanished, and the air shimmered with a pale mist of rosewater.

From that fateful night onward, the villagers could not enjoy food as we do. Eating became a chore, a solitary event spent in silent moments. Families and friends met together less often, and everyone from the chefs to the blacksmiths and scullery maids forgot how to cook. For a few years following the event, the villagers continued to hold a midsummer's eve feast, inviting everyone to participate, dressing up the main square, and promising to undo the curse. However, people being who they are, the mayor's table still received meat and the stranger's table, mush. The fairy never returned to remove her spell, and after a short while, the banquet hall was abandoned altogether. Because the mush tasted the same as the meat to them, it was impossible to feel abundance, or even to maintain order at the tables with all the visual, audible, and touchable promises of amazing food but none of the taste and none of the smell.

Over the years, the countryside around the village became sparsely inhabited because rumors said the "tongue blight" was contagious. After some time, the village became a dot on the map that few people visited for any reason. What's surprising though, even after the feasts stopped and hospitality dried up, none of the villagers felt like leaving for a better place. Not only was their taste for food gone, but even their taste for fashion, the arts, and design. Visiting the wide world became pointless, as everything seemed pretty much the same as their own boring life at home. Whereas before, holidays had brought traditional celebrations of culture and creativity, now only apathy and melancholy remained. Although the first generation of villagers told its children about the fairy's story, the joy of tasting and smelling food, and the need to be hospitable to strangers, by the second and third generation, few villagers believed this to be true, calling taste an old wife's tale and hospitality a dangerous, uncertain thing.

In this most unlikely of places, our hero the Baker rose to prominence. Having no master to guide him, he learned to bake exceptionally well because he could not rely on taste to guide his decisions. He used all of his other senses, such as feeling the texture of the dough, watching the delicate mixing of flour and milk, and listening to the sizzles as his concoctions baked. He wanted the villagers to experience this too, so he set up shop on the main square, in the long-deserted feast-hall. He converted the enclosed space into a warm, inviting area, expanding the kitchen to flow seamlessly into the bakery's bins of baked goods, shelves of preserves, and tables filled with loaves, rolls, and baguettes. Villagers walking by could see the pastries, and would come inside to see the interesting shapes, textures, and presentation of his bread. He would even let them take fresh hot cross buns right from the oven, feeling a gentle warmth on their noses where a smell should have been.

Although the Baker had plenty of company in his store, he often felt alone because he had no apprentice to follow him. One early morning, when the sun was still behind the mountain and the village was still asleep, he was making food sculptures out of dough. These would become loaves of bread in the shapes of birds, flowers, and even faces. The last dough-face he made was so lifelike that, in spite of himself, he talked to her in the pan. He gazed into the glazed dark anise eyes and whispered into her left ear, hoping aloud that he would someday be able to taste the orange-rosehip frosting with which he had lovingly created her mouth. As an afterthought, he mused, "Why not everything else in the bakery, too?" But he had already spoken his wish, so he let it be. When he took the bread-face from the hot oven, the refined caramel eyebrows had raised, the full lips had become a laughing smile, and there was a gleam in the eyes that he did not expect. He put the bread-face in the window, and passersby were astonished at its beauty.

You might wonder how this Baker could go on like this, with so much work and so little reward. He found satisfaction in small victories – a young girl enjoyed a tart, an old man commissioned an anniversary bread pudding. This was only possible because the Baker felt it was his calling to be great and he believed what many other villagers could not, that taste was there for the finding, if he and his fellow villagers could become sensitive enough to it. The Bakery soon began filling with customers hoping for something that they did not even know they were missing. The oldest inhabitants of the village began to believe that they could taste pie again,

but others said it was old-timer's foolishness. Unfortunately, no one in the village could spread the word about the Baker's food, because they were so isolated, and because no one in the next county over cared what a tasteless person thought of anything. The village swarmed with gossip about the great creations coming from the Baker's oven, all revolving around the experience of his food through other senses. But something was missing, because after all of the presentation, the final test of a fruity tart is the taste, and nothing else.

Few travelers to this remote village stayed long enough to discover what the fuss was about, assuming that it was the Baker's cookies and muffins that caused the dreaded "tongue-disease" to begin with. But one day a Captain of the king's guard stumbled into the village, disoriented from hunger, dazed, and bedraggled from a long journey. The Baker's shop on the main square smelled wonderful, so he sat himself down to a complementary lunch, which tasted amazing. Even more astounding were the wonderful slices of pie, and he ate as much apple, peach, blackberry, custard, and current pie as he could bear, loosening his belt towards the end of his feast. The villagers stared at the stranger through the open windows as he ate. The Captain felt much more like himself again by the end of the meal. A young boy approached and asked if everyone on the outside got so hungry. He seemed confused when the Captain exclaimed that the flavor was astonishingly good, better than any the King's own baker had ever made.

Overhearing this comment, which the Captain in his authoritative, booming voice had intended everyone to hear, the Baker came to his table and said, "If I could bake for the king, I would be the happiest man on earth. However, even that would be nothing to me, if I could only taste what you taste." The Captain offered him a slice of his current pie immediately, but then he realized that the Baker did not want a taste of *his* pie, but to taste *any* pie. "This is incredible!" said the Captain. "You mean to tell me that you bake these things with absolutely no sense of taste? That would be like riding into a battle backwards! A disaster!" The Captain knew what he was talking about, and he perhaps had said too much. The reason he was in the village in the first place was because he had been showing off in front of his men. Because of a foolish wager, he had been riding his horse backwards when his whole squad of soldiers was ambushed by bandits. By the time the Captain had gotten the horse turned around so that he could see the fight, it was mostly over. He drew his shining broadsword and shouted, "Huzzah!" spurring his stallion to charge the enemy. The horse had run in the direction it was pointed, away from the battle and right into a nearby stand of trees. The Captain was knocked off the horse by a thick, low-hanging branch and his steed ran frightened into the woods. The thieves took everything, leaving him for dead. When he finally recovered, he started walking back towards the palace, barefoot, uniform torn, filthy, and stripped of rank, his face covered in mud and bruises. As he followed the dusty road, his one repeating thought was how to explain himself to the king.

So the Captain saw the Baker as a perfect opportunity to get back in the king's good graces. He had wanted, you see, to marry the king's daughter for his own. He immediately returned to the castle and explained the situation to the king and his court. The next day, a dispatched rider arrived in the village with a response from the throne, which he read in the village square: "Because you have been so long hidden in these green hills, you need a proper ceremony to

bring you back into the kingdom! In order to rectify this situation, the king invites you all to a party in one week. The midsummer's eve feast will not be held at the king's court, but rather at this village, in this square. Here are cooks, tables, servants, and feast-masters for you to begin making preparations. We have heard that your Baker is especially good. Do be sure to make food fit for royalty. Don't Disappoint Me, His Royal Majesty, the King." The villagers were astounded. "A feast again after so long a break?" said one. "Eating together? How weird is that!" said another. "I don't think we can do this," said a third. "Be calm," said the Baker. "I've got plans for this feast already laid out, and I'll show you how it's done."

The village turned into a hive of activity as the main square was repainted, plastered, repaired, and prepared for the coming of the King. In short, the rest of the square began to look much as the Bakery looked, with cheerful visage, bright flowers, ornaments, and the shop's wares prominently displayed. The Captain returned with a full complement of soldiers, and he began making a security perimeter, coordinating with the local sheriff. He generally tried to seem in charge, his injured pride at work. The cobblestone streets were leveled and the fountains were buffed and polished. A tent was erected over the square, stretching from the tops of the roofs to the refurbished streets. At the center was the bakery, with the king's table before it, and other massive oak tables running in parallel aisles from one side of the square to the other. A podium was set up for the master of ceremonies, which to the Captain's chagrin, was the Baker.

Finally, the big day arrived - it was midsummer's eve and no one in the village could remember having such a party. Everyone for miles around was invited, big, small, fat, tall, happy, sad, good, and bad. With the king's procession and entourage, the village square and the party tent was filled with laughter, good times, and jubilant feelings. Although only some of the people at the party could taste the food, it certainly looked delicious. Everyone enjoyed the festivities, the colors, and the excitement. The players played, the harpers harped, the pipers piped, the singers sang, the buglers bugled, and the Baker baked. He baked until the very beginning of the party, and during breaks, he pulled loaves from the stove to put on the tables. Hundreds of people, friends and strangers alike came together under the big tent to celebrate the rediscovery of this little village and welcome it back in style. Gone were the corners filled with stacked-together crates where the beggars once ate. According to the Baker's orders, everyone received meat, not mush, from the mayor down to the stranger, even though few of villagers ate their whole portions because they were so unused to enjoying their food.

After the meal was mostly finished, the Baker took the stand to say a few words:

"Many of you now know the trouble that our village has been in. We eat but we have no joy in eating. We have learned that eating can become something new for us again, but we must begin tonight. Some of you may remember the story of the fairy who cursed our village." There were groans from audience members. The Baker waved for silence, then continued, "Well, I think it is the only possible explanation for the predicament we are in today and it's foolishness not to try to appease her. So now in the presence of the king, let me tell you all what I have learned about hospitality and the taste, yes I said the taste of a warm meal, pleasantly served."

"Many of you cannot taste the pies I make, and so it seems strange to you that I would celebrate a pie that I also cannot taste. Let me tell you how I have learned to dream of tasting while never knowing the richness of food, and never smelling anything, either. It is appreciating the sight, the sounds, and the feel of food that makes me able to know what I may be missing. I know these things but I believe in the smell and taste of my food, and because I continue to do this, my creations are good. Whenever a person comes along that can actually taste and smell my pies, I have hope that I will too, one day."

"I find that when I see a well-proportioned table or rack full of baked goods, I have a sense of accomplishment and pride. I see patterns and personalities in each loaf of bread and every slice of pie. My bread sculptures are familiar to many of you, and I make them following an inner vision. So it is the inner eye that guides my thoughts, and the external eye that guides my choices when I put these creations together. I make landscapes, forests, mountains, skylines, oceans, and fields in the patterns of my bread, but in this whole world, I made a face not long ago that is especially precious to me."

With that, he pulled from the podium his masterpiece, a loaf of bread that looked exactly like the face of a beautiful young woman. It was the bread he had spoken his wish to several days previously, and it was just as fresh as the day he baked it. The king was astonished beyond measure, exclaiming, "For this, you will become my royal baker!" The villagers smiled at this creation, knowing that he had made many other treats to look like loved ones, for special occasions. The princess seated beside the king unveiled her face, and the Baker, who had previously never seen her, had captured her likeness perfectly, down to the full, slightly smiling lips, the amused brow, and the gleam in her eyes. The king asked the Baker to proceed.

"Next, let me tell you of the sounds of my baking. For those who are not bakers, I cannot fully explain why I enjoy these sounds so much. I hear the wooden spoon scrape against the bowl as I mix the dough, listen to the music of the milk or water as it trickles, splashes, and swirls into the pan, and hear the fruit hiss and sputter as it cooks inside the pie. When the pies are in the oven, I hear the crackling of the fire behind it, the opening and shutting of the grate to check the progress, and the sliding slap of the pie tins on the wooden cooling racks as I pop the pies out of the oven. I find myself singing and humming as I work, because I am filling my environment with sound, just as the food is surely filling the air with aromas that I cannot smell."

With these words, the audience broke into applause. One of them shouted, "Here, here, Baker!" Another bellowed, "Well said, my good man!" The villagers began to sense the earnestness of the Baker's feelings. It began to make sense to them why, during the hustle of the day, they would be so drawn to the bakery, where some of them paused daily simply to listen to the happy noises of the kitchen and the singing of the Baker. The king said, "My royal Baker, the princess would now like to sing for such a lover of sound, and I doubt you have heard anything in your bakery to rival her voice." The princess stood and sang a sweet song of morning dew on lilacs, of swans on a still lake, and of a love that lays waiting for its heart's mate. There were no dry eyes in the tent that evening, and the princess intoned, "Please continue, my dear Baker."

"Though some of you have five senses and think us villagers strange, to be sure there is only one sense left that can make the experience of food worthwhile. It is the sense of touch. While many of you are able to avoid touching your food, using knives and other silverware, it is part of my joy in life to hold and mold food in my two hands, knowing that the shapes and patterns I give it will be pleasing. The textures of baked goods are so varied, from an almost gravel-like consistency in my harshest, heaviest dark rye breads, to the creamy texture of a delicate pastry. The consistencies of the batters are likewise many, from thin liquids to dough so thick it must be wrestled with in order to be baked. I enjoy the feeling of the hot oven on my hands, the smooth wood on the counters, and the cooling breezes from the windows. They are all feelings, and I feel very connected to the food I make when I revel in the sense of touch."

With this, there was a great rushing noise, as the sound of many winds and waters, and a turbulent mist filled the tent. All in the audience went silent, the king and his attendants, soldiers, and followers vanished, and a fog obscured everything except the Baker and the princess. She threw off her veil and mantle, and standing before him was the silver fairy of so long ago, with slate-grey eyes, flying hair, and elegant features. The fairy spoke: "You passed the test, my dear Baker. You brought the village together in harmony with your creations, and you made them believe not only that food was worth experiencing fully, but that life was, as well. This has re-awakened their hospitality, and you have been an example to them. The old and young are reconciled, the poor are no longer enslaved to the rich, and the forces of apathy and depression have been overcome by joyful experiences. I now lift my spell against this town, removing from it the barriers and bondage of selfishness. I reawaken it to the world, and invite it to grow and prosper in peace. As for you, my dearest Baker, I have need of you in my faraway kingdom." With that, she grabbed the Baker in her arms and swept him up in a flowing, rushing train of silken, gossamer threads and vanished. Nothing remained but a fine mist, smelling strongly of roses, with a light scent of flour and the taste of orange-rosehip frosting.

### **Epilogue:**

The villagers awoke from their momentary slumbers to see the tables, revelers, and party accoutrements disappear slowly in the mist. They found themselves seated on the cobblestones of a transformed, beautiful square even better than their preparations for the king had made it. The bakery now had crystal panes of glass and porcelain colored walls. Inside, the oven doors lay open, with a host of pies inside, waiting to be eaten. An inquisitive lad approached the first pie, and he laughed aloud, "I can smell it!" He plunged his two fingers into the warm center and put a gob of blackberry filling into his mouth. "I can taste it!" he yelled. "I can taste it!" The other villagers found their own pies and began eating them with their fingers. Before the meal turned into a feeding frenzy, the curious boy picked up the Baker's prized rolling pin and shouted, "I'm the new baker now! Take your pies and get out of my store!" He then proceeded to chase the other villagers down the street. Even to this day, the midsummer's eve feast is celebrated with unusual fervor and laughter in this village, in a place called Bakerstown.