She was the girl who lost it all – the father, the husband, the farm and the love of her life – but won it back by writing about it. KAREN BLIXEN chose not to take her own life and against all odds she survived the syphilis she got from her husband – but died from undernourishment. Marianne Juhl tells the spectacular story of the Danish author who became world famous for her novel *Out of Africa.*
n April 10, 1931, Karen Blixen sat down at the desk on her farm in the Ngong Hills in Kenya to write the most important letter of her life. It was one week before her 40th birthday and 17 years after she first came to the country and the people whom she had grown to love with all her heart. Now, however, her coffee plantation was bankrupt and had been sold. Karen had spent the past six months toiling to gather in the final harvest and trying to secure the prospects for her African helpers. Her own future was a black hole.

“Dear Tommy,” she wrote to her brother, “to me it would seem the most natural thing to disappear with my world here.

The only tiny ray of hope was to finish the book she had been working on for some time. Would her brother support her financially until it was completed? If he was unable to do so, she assured him it was of little consequence and concluded her letter with the words, “I know that I can die happily, and if you are in doubt, let me do that.”

If you look at the first chapters of the story of Blixen’s life, it is easy to understand why the sense of loss crops up time and time again in her work.

When she was just 10 years old, she lost her beloved father. He committed suicide. We don’t know why — only that it came as a terrible shock to everyone in the family.

When, at the age of 29, she married the Swedish baron Bror von Blixen-Finecke and settled with him in British East Africa (which a few years later would become Kenya), it would not be long before her doctor in Nairobi broke the next shocking news. The illness that had been tormenting her was not some unknown tropical disease: it was syphilis.

When Karen Christentze Dinesen was born in 1885 at Rungstedlund, a country house on the shores of the Øresund Sound just north of Copenhagen. Her father, Wilhelm Dinesen, came from a land-owning family, was commissioned as an officer and fought in several wars. For a time, he lived as a hunter among Native Americans in Wisconsin before returning to Denmark in 1881 to marry and settle down as a country squire.

On her mother’s side, Blixen came from a line of well-to-do merchants, and her maternal grandfather, Richard H. Fechenhals, served as Denmark’s Minister of Finance in his latter years. When Blixen’s father hanged himself in 1895, he left behind a wife and five children aged one to 14. Blixen was the second-oldest child, 10 years old and completely devoted to her father, who had already begun to take her with him on his hunting trips. From now on, however, the children would be brought up by their mother, grandmother, maiden aunt, nanny and governess. As an adult, Blixen would often refer disparagingly to his fiercely religious and rigidly Victorian hero of women who presided over her childhood as the “Rungstedlund Ladies’ Regiment.”

“Before the girls grew up,” her brother Thomas Dinesen recalled in his memoirs, “it was extremely rare to hear any mention of a boy by name at Rungstedlund — except, of course, for those in the immediate family.

Even as a young girl, Blixen exhibited a strong need to create her own world in this straitlaced female environment. She began to write and illustrate her own poems, plays and stories at an early age.

In 1912, shortly before her 28th birthday, Blixen fulfilled what was the only requirement made of a woman in the upper-class society of the day: she became engaged. The lucky man was her second cousin, Bror von Blixen-Finecke, a Swede and the third son in an aristocratic family from the southernmost Swedish province of Skåne. As Bror was neither the oldest son nor the first in line to inherit the family estate, Count Mogens Friis, uncle to both Karen and Bror, suggested they try their luck in British East Africa. There they could buy a farm and Bror could make use of the years he had spent — albeit with limited success — studying agriculture.

Young Bror was a less than avid scholar. He had a much greater affinity for hunting and horse-racing, parties and female company than he ever demonstrated for the school bench. After Karen’s family had provided the necessary capital, Bror left for Africa and bought the farm in 1913. Karen followed a few months later, and in January 1914, they were married in Mombasa.

Karen was forced to bid farewell to her beloved Africa, the African people and her own free Bohemian lifestyle. In the US for the first time in 1939, Blixen enjoyed breakfast with playwright Arthur Miller, actress Marilyn Monroe, and author Carson McCullers in the latter’s home in Nyack, New York. She died a plane crash in 1939.
morning and thought: Here I am, where I ought to be,” she wrote in the first pages of her memoirs Out of Africa.

It came as no surprise, therefore, when she later confessed in a letter to her sister that she would always choose the life of the Greek goddess Diana over that of Venus. In another of her youthful poems, she had already eulogized the short-skirted goddess of hunting and her unfettered existence – the same life that she herself could now live in Africa, far away from bourgeois Denmark and its blinkered perceptions of a woman’s role and her place in society.

Of course, it was a less comfortable life than she would have enjoyed if she had chosen to be lady of the manor in Denmark. Very much so. It was backbreaking work, especially when War World I spread to Africa and made everything in the country much more complicated.

But Blixen didn’t have a life of leisure. She had no desire to sit staring at the four walls of her home, experiencing life second-hand through the achievements of her husband. She wanted to play an active part in life and achieve something herself.

I t was in 1926 that the first rumblings of discontent were heard from the family investors. After several more years of poor coffee harvests, Blixen was finally forced to resign the farm for which she had been solely responsible since her divorce from Bror Blixen in 1925.

This was the catalyst for the three longest letters she ever wrote from Africa to her brother and confidant, Thomas. The letters were a relentless diatribe against the contemporary role of women in general and Rungstedlund’s strict stewardship of it in particular.

“Isn’t it frightful that honorable people can allow some-one to grow up – merely because they belong to the female sex – without learning anything at all?” she asked her brother, himself a trained engineer. Blixen could not and would not live on love alone, even if she described her affection for Hatton as “an indescribable happiness.”

“...I must be myself,” she continued, “be something in myself, which otherwise had so often struck Karen Blixen with unpredictable and undeserved misfortune. A trinity of glory and love, a happy marriage. Mary Westenholz had an American friend, the writer Doro-the Canfield. The two knew one another through the Unitarian Church to which the Westenholz family belonged and which was a major movement in the USA at the time.

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T his last words show a self-insight that those who became acquainted with Blixen later in her life could readily confirm. She possessed tremendous strength of will and power of endurance – not only because of the frightful physical pains that wracked her for 20 years, as the large doses of mercury that were used at the time to treat syphilis-all but destroyed her body. And she had courage, too; she was not easily intimidated. As she herself wrote elsewhere on the way women react to adversity, “they don’t bend, they break.”

And she was close to the breaking point when the farm was sold in 1931. She toyed with the idea of suicide on more than one occasion during this time. She had already mentioned the prospect to Thomas in 1926 but finished her letter by confessing, “I want so terribly to live, I want so terribly not to die.”

Nevertheless, in 1931, she wrote to a Danish friend to say that she would give herself six months. If she couldn’t make a go of anything within that time, she would put an end to her life.

After returning home to Denmark, however, she followed her loyal brother’s earnest entreaties to complete the stories she had given her something to write about. As she wrote in English, the language that had become her new mother tongue in Africa, she contacted publishers in Britain and the USA but was met by one refusal after the other.

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F ortunately, however, Canfield’s publisher, Binkley and Howells, took a chance on publishing the stories of this unknown Danish author.

O n April 9, 1934, Seven Gothic Tales was published under the pseudonym that Blixen herself had chosen, Isak Dinesen. Now it was no longer good fortune that came to the aid of the almost 50-year-old author: it was the reviews from the big American newspapers. In New York Herald Tribune Books, a relieved Karen Blixen could read, “Seven Gothic Tales is a literary phenomenon: a masterpiece of English prose... it has the air of happy accident that marks a work of genius.”

It was still a long journey to the worldwide fame that Blixen’s writing enjoys today. But the youthful dream of achieving something that is mine and is me, in order to be able to live at all... Ah, do you think, do you think, Tommy, that I can become something, and that I have not thrown away all the chances life has offered me?... I think I can work longer and get less tired than most people... and I really believe that I have developed an unusual degree of fearlessness.”

T he coffee plantation is sold by receiver of the court after several years of financial collapse. Denys Finch Hatton dies in a plane crash, aged 47. Karen Blixen sells fra Mombasa to Marseilles, where she meets her brother Thomas Dinesen, who is sailing back home to Denmark.

Aunt Mary asked Canfield to put in a good word for Karen Blixen’s stories with her own publisher, Robert K. Haas, at the highly regarded Random House company. At first he was unsympathetic, but after renewing her appeal, Canfield persuaded him to take a chance on publishing the stories of this unknown Danish author.

She confessed to her sister that she would always choose the life of the Greek goddess Diana over that of Venus.

“...something that is mine and is me” had taken the first step toward becoming reality. Her literary debut proved she had a talent for writing. Years of youthful depression, intoxicating experiences in Africa, the roller-coaster emotions of romance and the loss of the farm had given her something to write about. As she wrote in B and Adelaide, the story of the downcast Adelaide who, when rejected by her beloved B, makes her way to the cemetery to cry lest anyone should see her weeping in the street: “She sat on the grave for a long time, resting in the one kind of happiness still possible to her: avowing to the whole world that she was a human being who had lost all.”

Karen Blixen hit it big in 1937, when her memoir Out of Africa was published in England and one year later, in the US. She died peacefully in 1962, in her home at Rungstedlund in Denmark.

Diana’s Revenge: Two Lines in Isak Dinesen’s Authorship (1995), and provides the content for the Karen Blixen Museum web site: karenblixenmuseum.dk

MARianne JUHL is a Danish scholar and journalist living in Copenhagen. She is the author of several books, including Diana’s Revenge: Two Lines in Isak Dinesen’s Authorship (1995), and provides the content for the Karen Blixen Museum web site: karenblixenmuseum.dk

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Karen Blixen, 77, dies at home in September 7. She is buried in the park at Rung- stedlund, which today houses the Karen Blixen Museum.

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