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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Art of Baking Blind**

Written by Sarah Vaughan

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THE ART OF  
BAKING BLIND

• ——— A NOVEL ——— •

*sarah vaughan*



**H**  
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STOUGHTON

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*For Ella, Jack and Phil.*

*With love.*

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world*

W.B. Yeats: 'The Second Coming'



*I truly believe that life is improved by cake.*

Dan Lepard: *Short & Sweet*

# *Prologue*



April 1964

*‘Imagine your perfect home: a gamekeeper’s lodge or rambling farmhouse, the walls wreathed in wisteria, brick warmed by the sun. Picture the garden: bees drunk on the nectar of hollyhocks, the air shimmering with summer. An apple tree rustles and drops early fruit.*

*‘Now imagine this house made of gingerbread, its sides gently golden; royal icing piped along the rooftop and studded with sweets. Plant sugar canes in the flower beds; drench with jelly tots; pave with smarties. Pause and admire this culinary doll’s house. Your ideal home and all-too-brief treat.’*

**K**athleen Eaden puts down her pen and chews her bottom lip in dissatisfaction. That wasn’t what she wanted to write.

She places her creation on the floor and stretches out in front of it, tweed skirt rucking up and long legs splayed like a child’s behind her. The Axminster carpet feels comforting and she wriggles deeper, slim waist pulled upwards, the thick pile snug against her pubic bone.

Propped up on her elbows, she peers at the house and breathes in the scent of Christmas: ginger; cinnamon; golden syrup; muscovado. Orange zest. A touch of cloves. The roof tiles are dusted with sugar and if she reaches, ever so carefully, she can adjust that heart-shaped knocker that’s slipped on its still-wet icing. There, that’s better. With one gentle tweak, the sweet shifts on its iced glue.

It’s still not perfect, though, this kitsch delight she has spent the past four hours constructing. The tiles are wonky

and the cut-away windows should be better aligned. She bends closer. Light slants through them and disappears into gingery darkness. Oh, schoolgirl error. She reaches for her pen: 'Use a ruler to position your windows.' Or perhaps they should be mullioned? Her lips move silently as she lays out instructions for the readers of *Home Magazine*. Her hand speeds so fast she ruffles the cream Basildon Bond but her writing remains immaculate: gracious loops that chase across the page in Quink of royal blue.

She re-reads what she has written. She's still not got it. Not captured the reason she loves making gingerbread houses even though doing so makes no earthly sense at all. She tries to clear her mind to stave off the anxiety of a deadline. The jangling chords of the Beatles' latest hit crowd her head, the melody upbeat and addictive. 'I don't care too much for money,' sing the Fab Four and though, at twenty-seven, she is too old to be swayed by mop-haired boys, she finds herself momentarily distracted by the jauntiness of the tune.

She must get on. Lowering herself, she squints through the gingerbread windows. Perhaps she is approaching this from the wrong angle? Why would Susan, her six-year-old niece, love this – and what appeals to the six-year-old in her?

A gingerbread house is more than the sum of its parts: more than sweeties and gingerbread soldered with royal icing, glossy with egg white and thick with sugar. There is something fantastical about this fairytale house . . .

And, suddenly, she has the answer.

Tears burn. She blinks hard. Not now. She hasn't the time for this. She must finish her column. Breathe deeply, she tells herself: in for two, out for five; in for two, out for five.

She sits back on her haunches then lifts the house to her



desk and busies herself with her papers. A cup of cooling Earl Grey rests on the top and she almost spills it as she reaches to take a sip. The self-pity is still there – a knot so hard she imagines it visible through her slight ribcage – and she tries to swallow it down with a bigger gulp. Still there? Yes, of course. Only ever a breath away: so close it can readily overwhelm her. But it can't do. She needs to get on top of this.

She picks at a spare dolly mixture and squishes it against the roof of her mouth. The sweetness seeps through her tongue and slips down her throat, insubstantial yet distracting. She takes another sip of tea. There, that's better.

'The doyenne of baking with the enviable figure' wouldn't behave like this, would she? The description – concocted by Harper's – usually provokes a sardonic smile. Now, though, she tries to accept the compliment at face value. Her hands flutter to her waist as she smooths down her skirt and tries to right herself; her thumbs rest in the shallows of her hip bones. Perhaps there are some benefits, after all.

She leans back and straightens the paper. Now, if she can just ignore the sadness that corrodes her stomach, she might be able to finish this column. She sniffs brightly and tries to re-read her last paragraph. The script wobbles and blurs.

Oh for goodness sake, Kathleen. She uncaps her fountain pen in a flurry and, determined to ignore the tears that prick, yet again, despite her best efforts, Kathleen Eaden begins to write.



*People often ask me the secret of my baking. Shall I tell you? There is none. Anyone can bake provided they master a few basic principles and, at least until accomplished, follow the recipe to the letter. Nowhere is this more important than in making cakes. A variation in the temperature of the oven or in the measurement of ingredients; a failure to sift or to fold in sufficient air can lead to the most dismal sponge. But get it right and the most ethereal of cakes is entirely possible.*

*So the rules: always use eggs at room temperature and fat, either butter or a margarine like Stork, that has softened. Use flour containing a raising agent, sieve it to introduce extra air, and fold in lightly to encompass more. Always prepare your tins before cooking and preheat your oven. Place the tins in the oven gently, and shut the door softly as though leaving a sleeping baby. And never check your sponges until at least two-thirds of the cooking time has elapsed.*

*Once your golden creations have been removed from the oven, leave them for a couple of minutes before you ease them from the tin. Then place on a wire rack so that air can circulate. When cooled, sandwich with the finest jam and dust with icing sugar. Serve with a pot of afternoon tea.*

*The perfect Victoria sandwich must be light, moist and scented with fresh eggs and vanilla. It should feel decadent but not excessively so. A slice of Victoria sponge, filled with raspberry jam or, in summer, whipped cream and freshly hulled strawberries, is a daily treat you can feel justified in indulging. Just take three eggs and six ounces each of sugar, fat and self-raising flour, and heaven in a cake tin can be yours.*

Kathleen Eaden: *The Art of Baking* (1966)

# I

January 2012

Vicki Marchant breathes on her chill French windows and carefully traces a heart. A fat tear of condensation slithers down and she stops it with her finger and writes an A for Alfie. The letter weeps and she wipes the pane gently, chasing moisture with crisp squares of kitchen roll.

I must be going mad, thinks Vicki. Either that or I'm just plain miserable. Outside, ball bearings of hail pound the frozen blades of grass.

Well, it's hard to feel cheerful in January. The joy of Christmas – a joy felt so wonderfully through three-year-old Alfie – has rudely ended; packed away along with the decorations: this year, golden pears and partridges; rococo cherubs; icicles and stars.

January – or bloody January as she tends to think of it – is all about abstinence, penitence and being sanctimonious, as friends embark on an alcohol-free, dairy-free, wheat-free month. No one wants to come to dinner in January – and if she can persuade a fellow mum to lunch it's a frugal affair: broccoli soup without the Stilton languishing from Christmas; all offers of home-made stollen, Florentines and mince pies laughed aside quite firmly. 'No, really, I couldn't,' her neighbour, Sophie, had insisted yesterday as Vicki pressed a full cake tin

on her, and had sounded quite panicky as if she were going to force-feed her.

Yet it's not the general abstinence that most frustrates her but the sense of limbo. The sub-zero temperatures mean Alfie can't race around the garden and there are only so many times a week she can go to a soft play barn. Without the gift of snow or sunshine 'the big freeze', as the media has dubbed it, has become one long grind of de-icing cars and salting paths, of finding sufficient layers and contending with Alfie's whingeing if, as invariably happens, she forgets his welly socks.

She gives a sigh, thick and laboured. Outside, the hail has stopped abruptly, the only evidence the icy marbles nestling in the grass. The grey sky is as unyielding as ever; the bare trees still; the ground quite barren. No sign of the snowdrops and tête-à-têtes she and little Alf planted in October. Her garden seems devoid of hope.

She turns on her coffee machine and measures out enough grains for a double espresso, hoping a burst of caffeine will reinvigorate her and improve her morning. For, if she is honest, and she always tries to be, her frustration has nothing to do with the weather at all.

My name is Vicki Marchant, she imagines announcing at yet another interminable playgroup, and I am a fraudulent stay-at-home mother. A mum-of-one with none of the demands of numerous offspring or any of the pressure of having to work. I have a beautiful, healthy boy who loves me. And I do adore him. But I'm still not sure I'm very good at or – whisper it – always *enjoy* motherhood. Oh, and here's the joke. I'm an 'outstanding' primary school teacher, according to Ofsted. Someone who's supposed to know what they're

doing. So why do I find it so hard looking after my own small child?

It wasn't meant to be this way, she thinks, as the machine groans then belches hot coffee grains at her. When Alfie was born, the plan had always been to give up work to immerse herself in her baby and subsequent children. Her Shaker kitchen would be covered in poster-paint masterpieces; her lengthy garden would boast hens, herbs and flowers; and each day would bring new adventures for her Petit Bateau-clad child. She hadn't counted on the drudgery of early parenthood with a child who refused to sleep and a husband who refused to get up; or on her rage when her boy decorated her Farrow & Ball walls with his handprints; or her impotence when a fox massacred the hens.

You would have thought a primary school teacher would have known that toddlers prefer church playgroups, with their interminable rich tea biscuits and weak instant coffee, to babyccinos in Starbucks; and that a trip into town would *always* lead to dramatic meltdowns, Alfie's body as taut as a board as he struggled against being put in a buggy, as powerful as a coiled spring as he wriggled free of her grasp.

She should have known that glitter would always be sprinkled all over the kitchen and that, at three, he could not hope to produce anything other than a sodden clump of papier mâché. Yet, somehow, she had forgotten, or been naively optimistic. She had thought she could conquer any problem with a calm voice and an endless supply of smiley stickers. No, motherhood isn't turning out quite as she'd envisaged, at all.

There's just one thing she feels she can do with Alfie, she reflects, as she wipes the coffee grains from the surface and

refills the machine, and that is baking. And so this is an activity in which they have started to excel. They began with cupcakes, over which she maintained overall artistic control. But they soon progressed from gingerbread men to tuiles; from pizza bases to sourdough; from jam tarts to tarte tatin.

Alfie, who quickly learned that he got a strong reaction if he slopped water on to the floor or glue on to the table when painting, has discovered he gets a better one if he cracks an egg correctly, the slippery white slopping into the mixing bowl 'without bits of shell'. Mummy sings when she bakes, and if her brow creases when he becomes over-exuberant with the sieving – and flour and cocoa sprinkle the floorboards – any irritation is momentary, dissipated by the heartening smell of sponge cooking and the sensual experience of licking the bowl.

For Vicki, baking with her boy is tangible evidence that she is a good mother.

'Did you make these yourself – and with Alfie?' her friend, Ali, had quizzed her only on Monday as she had handed her a vintage cake tin with a smile of dismissal.

She had felt a distinct glow of satisfaction at her friend praising not only the creations but the fact that she had made them with her child.

'God, how do you stand the mess?' Ali had continued. 'Must be the teacher in you! I never bake with Sam.'

As always, she had felt mild pity.

'He loves it.' She had shrugged, with typical self-deprecation. And, on cue, her tousle-haired boy had looked up and given her a quick grin, his hand slipping into hers as he offered Ali's three-year-old a home-made biscuit. 'And so do I.'

Today, however, that sense of satisfaction evades her.

*The Art of Baking Blind*

Irritation niggles as she takes in the sea of Lego, the washing wilting on the maiden, the socks wrenched off on a whim and discarded, one dangling from Alfie's ergonomically ideal chair, the other kicked under a toy box and curled like a stale croissant, waiting to be swooped up.

She sighs then forces herself to breathe more calmly, taking in the aroma of lemon, sugar and butter now flooding her kitchen, bathing her in a delicious citrus fug. A timer pings and she opens the oven, and brings out an exquisitely cooked tarte au citron. The viscous yellow glows against the crisp golden pastry, blind-baked to perfection. And Vicki smiles.