

earthlydelights

KERRY GREENWOOD


ALLEN & UNWIN

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First published in 2004

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National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Greenwood, Kerry.
Earthly delights.

ISBN 978 1 74114 236 5

1. Bakers and bakeries – Fiction. I. Title.

A823.3

Set in 11.5/14pt Adobe Garamond by Asset Typesetting Pty Ltd
Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

10 9



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The paper in this book is FSC certified.
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This book is for the remarkable Sarah-Jane Reeh.

With thanks to Jeannie, Alan, Dafydd, Dennis, Jaye Francis, Henry Nissen, Richard Tregear, Richard Revill, John Landau, Kellie Flanagan, Ed Jarrett, Michael Warby, Atli, Belladonna and Ashe. And to all who care for the lost, stolen and strayed.

In loving memory of Sister Connie Peck FM, who even now is giving God a hard time about his negligent care of the widow and the fatherless.

This book is a work of fiction. No character in this book is meant to represent a real person. The City of Melbourne is also an artefact of my imagination.

CHAPTER ONE

Four am. Who invented four am?

I dragged myself out of bed, slapped at the alarm, thrust bare feet into slipper-wards, stood on what felt like a furry rope and was rewarded with a yowl.

Oh shit. Horatio was waiting politely at my bedside to deliver his morning greeting and I had just begun the day with a bad deed. Meroe would frown at the effect on my karma.

Of course, if Horatio didn't insist on sitting in my slippers it might cut down the number of times this happened, and the consequent karmic debt. I'll probably come back as a mouse, and that would be on my good days.

Suppressing an unworthy thought that he carefully positioned his tail so that I would stand on it and then spend ten minutes apologising to him, I spent ten minutes apologising to him—poor kitty! Did the big fat woman stomp on his innocent stripy tail? I would see if a little milk would assuage his sense of insult.

It did. While Horatio was giving the milk his reverent, devoted attention, I had time to flick on the heater, put on the

coffee (without which no baker ever commences the day), survey the squalor of my small stone-flagged kitchen, shiver a bit and drag on some clothes. I tend to dress in the kitchen because there is no heating in my bedroom until the ovens come on automatically at four. I had heard the fans cut in as I shut off the alarm clock.

Not a pretty sight on a cold dark morning, a baker. Long mousy hair tied back ruthlessly. Face entirely devoid of make-up, eyes dark-ringed as a result of waking when all others are sleeping. Thin faces look skeletal at this hour, fat faces like an illustration in a textbook on forensic pathology under the heading 'adipocere'. I'm fat, so it's the adipocere for me. I grin at my reflection, finish washing my face, put on two layers of tracksuit, and toast some gourmet date and walnut bread for breakfast.

Not bad at all. Possibly a little undersweetened. I made a note to add more honey next time I baked it.

I got into baking because I wanted to become an accountant. Bear with me—it makes sense. I was looking for a job which allowed me to attend all my lectures and the local Italian bakers gave me a job as a general hand, hours from four am to nine am, which got me to my economics lecture almost on time, though a little floury.

As the years went on numbers became drier and baking more fascinating. It's almost an alchemical process. You combine flour, water and the plant yeast and at the end of the process you get something shiny, crunchy, aerated and delicious.

Four in the morning is a time when the mind has a tendency to run loose. Where was I? Ah, yes. I can pin down the moment when it happened. I was in the middle of a meeting about a takeover and the CEO was talking about currency fluctuations, I should have been fascinated, but all of a sudden

there was a click in my mind. I didn't care. There was our client with more troubles than the Jam Tin (aka the Telstra Dome) on a bad grass day and I didn't care. Bastard had too much money anyway.

You can't be an accountant—no, you can't stay an accountant—with that sort of attitude. I left a note about cashing in my superannuation payments on my boss's desk, went home, levered off my uncomfortable shoes, tore off my bloody ridiculous suit with the padded shoulders, dragged on a track-suit and vowed that whatever I had to do to make a living for me and Horatio, it would never involve wearing a kitten heel again. I joined the bakery full time, completing my apprenticeship. When I left Pagliacci's, Papa Toni gave me a lump of his own pasta douro dough.

It was still with me, growing happily in its bucket, fed with sugar and kept at the optimum temperature. Yeast must be nurtured. Mama Pagliacci used to talk to her yeasts. Before Horatio arrived, so did I. Now I talk to him and I hope the yeast doesn't feel slighted.

I set up this bakery, Earthly Delights (anyone heard of Hieronymus Bosch? Look at the picture on the wall next to the glass case. It can keep a queue amused for, oh, minutes), in Calico Alley in the middle of the city. I like cities. Even at four am something is always stirring, though around here it is likely to be up to no good. We have a lot of junkies at this end of the city. They are the reason why my bakery has extremely expensive triple locks, bolts and stainless steel security doors. I can't afford the health risk if they break in. I'd lose a whole batch of bread if someone dropped a syringe in my mixing tub.

Yesterday's mail caught my eye, piled on the table. Mostly bills addressed to Corinna Chapman, baker. One was a strange religious tract which appeared to be accusing me of being the

Scarlet Woman. Done on a computer—any madman can make a respectable looking tract in these IT days. ‘The Wages of Sin Is Death’ it proclaimed. Weird.

Horatio, one paw politely on my knee, was intimating that breakfast might be acceptable. I shelved the tract for later consideration. Cities breed madmen. I shook some of the dried kitty food—why do they mould it into little shapes, like fish and hearts? It can’t be to amuse the cat. Horatio would eat alphabet cat food that spelled POISON as long as he felt peckish. And he’d eat it out of anything. There is no need for a special bowl with CAT on the side. Who else is going to eat amusingly shaped fish-flavoured biscuits with added vitamins and minerals out of a dish on the floor? Since I’ve grown up, I haven’t any friends who would do that.

I had bread to make. I took my second cup of coffee with me down the stone stairs to the bakery. I could feel the hot air rising. Horatio would join me when he had finished breakfast. He is a gentlemanly cat and considers it impolite to hurry his food. Besides, he needs to remove every crumb from his whiskers before he steps down to meet the Mouse Police, a rough but pleasant pair, far removed from him in elegance.

Horatio is an aristocat. I occasionally feel that I am unable to meet his stringent requirements for suitable conduct in a Lady.

I walked down into the bakery and the lights flicked on, blinding me momentarily. The Mouse Police collided solidly with my ankles in their eagerness to demonstrate that they had been working hard all night and deserved extra servings of Kitty Dins.

As I counted corpses—seven mice and (erk!) eight rats, one almost as big as a kitten—I congratulated them on their excellent patrolling and laid out the food in their bowls.

Allow me to introduce them. Rodent Control Officer Heckle, on the right, a black and white ex-tom of battered appearance, a little light on as to ears and with a curious kink in his tail. A notorious street fighter in his prime, now retired. And on the left, Rodent Control Officer Jekyll, a strong young black and white ex-female who had her litter under the mixing tub and now has no further interest in matrimony. She delivered the best right jab I had ever seen to Heckle when he swaggered too close to her kittens, and thereafter they have a relationship based less on mutual respect than on a balance of terror. I have, however, observed Heckle allowing Jekyll to lick his ears, and I once caught Heckle grooming Jekyll. When they saw me watching they both looked embarrassed. As far as I'm concerned it's meant to be old diggers together.

I got on with the mixing of the first batch of the day to the pleasant crunching of Kitty Dins and appreciative whuffling. Rye flour, sugar, sourdough yeast, water, a measure of white to make it a little lighter, on with the dough hooks and switch on the machine. My rye bread yeast is derived from a certain wild yeast, which is sour. I can sell all the rye bread I make to Eastern European restaurants.

I've got an order for Health Loaf, guaranteed free of fat. I haven't told the buyer that unless it's a special or sweet bread there isn't any fat in bread. I don't believe that the Trade Practices Act obliges me to do so. Health Loaf is also free of gluten, which means that I need to use baking powder to get it to rise. Gluten is essential in making bread and provides much of the nutritional value as well as the taste. But there it is. The customer, as some capitalist observed, is always right. It's a reasonable deal, I suppose. They get something better than the average sawdust, and I get paid. There's really no satisfaction in making Health Loaf. Without binding elements

it's crumbly and without salt, sugar or spices it's flavourless. I think the eaters would get as much kick out of a handful of unprocessed bran and it would be cheaper too.

I remember delivering a tray of this bread to some healthy function and catching myself muttering, 'Eat sawdust and die, yuppie scum.' I probably didn't really mean it. Right, Health Loaf mixed and into tins and into the oven. Baking powder is a chemical reaction and starts as soon as the liquid is added. Speed is essential. I stacked the tins onto a slide, into the oven, timer on.

Now for the French sticks while the sawdust bricks are cooking. Pasta douro yeast, white flour, a little oil, warm water. Go, yeast. Muffins go in as soon as the sawdust comes out, another chemical reaction. I felt like apple today. Haul out the tin of apple pie filling (yes, yes, I know, but do you know how much peeling I have to do for the potato bread tomorrow?) and reach for the tin opener.

No tin opener. My hand falls confidently onto its place on the shelf and comes back empty.

Damn. I must have taken it up to my own kitchen. I clatter up the stairs in my Doc Martens (good solid shoes are essential if you are on your feet all day, and at least they never come with a kitten heel), find the bloody thing, clatter down again, remove top layer of tracksuit, open tin.

It's really getting hot now. The ovens are into their stride. Time to open the door and greet the new dawn.

The Mouse Police rush outside with cries of relief, as though they had been trapped for days in a lift with Philip Ruddock talking about border protection. A gust of cold air rushes in. I turn off one mixer and set the rye bread on 'rise'. I prepare the muffin mix, except the milk, and pause to look out at the dawn and stretch my back.

Then Heckle leaps inside as though he had been stung. Something is stuck in his foot, he is shaking his paw frantically and mewling loudly. I grab him and extract a syringe from his paw.

Heckle immediately settles down to allow Jekyll to lick his injury and I stalk out, shaking with fury.

Junkies! Irresponsible bloody junkies. Never mind finding a sharps bin, just drop the syringe in the alley, a waiting trap for an innocent cat. I kick at the wall with a furious foot, a waste of effort, for when they built this building they built it to survive anything short of an exploding volcano. I swear into the chill grey pre-dawn light. Then I see a figure slumped on my ventilation grate. No wonder it got so hot in the kitchen with some vagrant lying on my grate! I stomp over, reach out and grab for the offending shoulder, meaning to give it a good shake and send it on its way.

It collapses bonelessly out of my grasp and falls, flat on its back. A girl, with long matted hair shifting away from her blue face. Not just a delicate azure either, but dark blue like my slate floor.

Not breathing. I run back inside, grab the mobile and call 000, get a bored voice which promises instant attention and instructs me to start CPR. Oh, Jesus Mary and Joseph. My skin tries to crawl off me and find a more compassionate human. This girl is probably riddled with diseases, AIDS, hepatitis A to Z. And she's just wounded one of my cats with her careless syringe. What a bitch life is. It's a punishment for stepping on Horatio's tail.

I still have plastic gloves on and I can use cling wrap on her mouth. I'm shuddering with revulsion as I lay her out on the cold cobbles. I punch a hole in my cling wrap, clear the airway and puff breath into her mouth. I can feel no heartbeat but

I don't know where to check. I learned this at school, come on, Corinna, it's push here and then breathe, count, then push again, breathe again. There are soft lips under the plastic. She feels like a child, all bones, high rib cage, stinks like a sewer. Breathe, count, push, breathe again.

I'm dizzy. I don't know how long I can do this or whether it's working. Breathe, thump, breathe, thump. Both cats are watching me from the doorstep. Horatio joins them, looking quizzical. I see his point. I don't know why I'm doing this either. She's dead. There's not the faintest response to all my shoving and I'm using bruising force.

I can smell singeing. If I don't get those Health Loaves out of the oven in five minutes they'll catch fire. But somehow I can't leave this filthy, childlike corpse, because what would I do if I stopped? Go inside and shut the door?

Hands are on my shoulders. Someone is lifting me to my feet. I stagger up and see, blessings upon them, a pair of ambulance officers who look like they know just what they are doing.

So I drag in a deep breath—I get to keep this one—go inside and haul the loaves out of the oven. They are slightly more crisp than usual but I'm sure the taste-challenged won't notice. I find my cold coffee and drink it and the red mist recedes from my eyes. At school no one told me that CPR required Olympic levels of fitness.

Then I go outside to see what has happened. I don't want to. I just do.

The paramedics have attached an oxygen mask to the girl's face and are injecting her with something. I ask what.

'Narcan,' says one. 'You did a good job, but it might be too late. The respiratory system shuts down, see, and starves the brain of oxygen. We get a lot of brain damage. But narcan

cancels out the effect of opiates. Works fast. Right. Back away, lady. They usually wake up cross. Here we go, Jules.'

Julie, his mate, had the girl by both arms, a constabulary come-along-o'-me grip which immobilises quite well. She needed it. The girl came up from her deathly trance screaming and bucking like a frightened beast. It was astounding. One minute she had been utterly still, pulseless and breathless, and the next she was struggling like a fish on a hook. Colour flushed her face. Pink, for a girl, not blue, for a corpse.

'Cunts!' she shrieked in an accent which I'd always heard associated with the best schools. 'You narcanned me! I only had one hit! Gimme back my hit!'

'Could have been your last hit,' said Julie, holding her tightly. 'You took too much. Take a breath, now.'

'They're always like that,' observed the ambulance man, who must have seen how shocked I was. 'You did good there. M'names Thommo. Nice to meet yer.' We shook plastic gloves. He lit a cigarette. I suppose we all have our drug of choice. I took one of his smokes, though I stopped smoking three years ago. It tasted divine. Thommo continued my education. 'Druggies mostly react like this. Don't let it worry yer. From her point of view, we robbed her. Now she's got to go and hustle for another hit. Lucky we're not in the job for the gratitude,' he added. 'You want to come into casualty,' he advised the girl. 'Get a doctor to look at you.'

'Yes, come on,' urged Julie. 'You were pretty close to the edge, you know. Can you tell me your name?'

'Fuck off, cunt,' said the patient.

'Come on,' said Thommo. 'We haven't got all day.'

'No!' screamed the girl, struggling so hard that she broke Julie's grip. She staggered to her feet, unbalanced on one broken stiletto.

‘Working girl,’ said Julie. ‘They don’t want to miss out on a paying client by going to hospital.’

‘I’m not,’ shrieked the patient, hands out, fingers curved into claws.

‘Hey, Suze,’ said a deep, rich voice, as casually as if he had met her in the street at lunch hour, instead of confronting a screaming hysterical dervish in a back alley at five in the morning. ‘What’s happening?’

A man had strolled into Calico Alley, walking over the hard damp cobbles without making a sound. He was tall, with close-cropped dark hair, a scar across his forehead, and the most penetrating, bright and beautiful eyes I had ever seen. He was dressed in jeans, boots and a leather jacket lined with fleece.

‘These cunts want to send me to hospital!’ Suze replied, moderating her tone. I wondered how many of my exceptionally respectable neighbours were even now listening fascinated from their bedroom windows above. Usually the only noise in Calico Alley at that hour was the muted hum of my machines and the occasional squeak as the Mouse Police made another arrest.

‘Chill,’ advised the man. ‘These kind people saved your life, and even if you don’t, I think it’s worth saving. Now say thank you nicely and come on. The bus stops at Flagstaff tonight, remember?’

To my amazement, Suze turned to us and said, ‘Thank you,’ in the carefully enunciated voice of a well-behaved little girl who has taken elocution lessons, and followed the tall man out of Calico Alley.

‘Who was that masked man?’ I gasped, leaning back against the jamb and fanning myself.

‘That’s Daniel,’ said Julie, similarly affected. ‘He’s the

heavy on the Soup Run. You're a baker, aren't you? Then he'll be back.'

'Oh, good,' I said faintly. 'Why?'

'Cos he's on the Soup Run,' said Thommo, nettled. 'Gotta go,' he added, listening to his radio. 'Fry-up on the ring road. Come on, Jules.'

Julie stuffed her equipment into her bag and prepared to follow her partner.

'What's a fry-up?' I asked as she walked away.

'A burning car,' she said. 'Nice work. You saved that girl's life. 'Bye,' she said.

I went into the bakery, made my muffins and my French bread, threw in a few twists with the leftover dough, all the time trying not to think. The terrible colour of the girl's face. The feel of her bones under my hands. And the cruel ungrateful strength of her reaction, which had not surprised the ambulance officers at all.

It was only when I observed Horatio examining Heckle's foot that I was recalled to my own duty of care to my dependants.

Heckle, uncharacteristically, allowed me to feel over the injured foot. I could see a small puncture in the hard pad of his weathered paw. It had been bleeding freely, which, in view of what might have been in the syringe, was good. I bagged the syringe and put it in my drawer, meaning to take it with Heckle to the vet. Could cats catch AIDS? There was a feline version called ... what was it called? God, I was so tired, and so cold ...

Heckle, who is basically an old softie, was purring rustily under my absent-minded caresses when there was a knock at the open door and the rich voice asked, 'Can I come in?'

'Why not?' I asked, feeling weak.

He drew the door closed behind him. Horatio, contrary to his usual practice, walked towards him, tail straight as a taper, uttering a polite greeting. Daniel of the Soup Run dropped to one knee, holding out a hand. Horatio was graciously pleased to allow his ears to be stroked and his whiskers smoothed.

‘What’s your name, ketschele?’ he asked.

I found my voice. ‘He’s Horatio. This is Jekyll and this is Heckle, and I’m Corinna.’

‘Delighted,’ he said to all of us. ‘I came to thank you,’ he added, taking the other chair. Jekyll planted herself firmly on his foot. She is a cat who makes her intentions plain.

‘It was nothing,’ I murmured. ‘It bloody nearly was nothing, too. If those ambulance people hadn’t turned up ... she was as blue as this floor ...’

I hadn’t realised how upset I was. Daniel dislodged Jekyll gently, took off his coat, wrapped it around me, and ferreted around in the stockroom. He came back bearing a bottle of brandy which I used for making fruit loaves, poured me half a glass and put it in my hands.

‘Nothing like that ever happened to you before, did it?’ he asked quietly. ‘Do you want water in your brandy? It’s all right. You’re shocked. You’ll get used to it.’

‘I hope not,’ I said, sipping. I don’t drink a lot of neat spirits and I choked a little. Daniel patted me on the back. He was so blatantly, physically attractive that even without the shock I doubted if my knees would have held me up. He had the same lithe, graceful movements as Horatio. No wonder they approved of each other. His jacket bore his scent, a clean male smell with a hint of sweet spice; cinnamon, maybe. He also had eyes one could happily drown in. And that wreck of a girl had been transformed into a good child under his influence. A magician. Meroe, the witch next door, would say

he had great mana. He seemed to be considering my answer, which didn't deserve any great consideration.

'True. One should never get used to human suffering. But it is inevitable if you do this kind of work.'

'What kind of work?'

'I'm on the Soup Run,' he said simply, as though this explained everything.

'What's the Soup Run?'

His eyes widened into trout pools. I had amazed him.

'But you live in the city. You must have seen us. The pink and green bus? We stop at four locations in the city. I'm on the late shift, ten pm until four am. I've just finished.'

'Of course. You're a social worker.' I had certainly seen the bus, and remembered the shrieks of outrage from Keep Melbourne Clean when they used to stop outside a McDonald's near the station. The pink and green bus attracted the homeless and the junkies like bees to Solomon Islands honey. I found it hard to imagine this cat-like spunk as a social worker. He saw what I was thinking and smiled.

'Not really. I'm not trained in social work. The Soup Run has to deal with the wounded ones, the ones like Suze, as well as the hungry and the cold and the lost. Sometimes the clients can be physically threatening. We've got a nurse on board, you know, and they always think she's got drugs. So the Soup Run always has one heavy, to deal with any physical trouble.'

'And that's you,' I said lamely.

'That's me. Daniel Cohen, at your service. Being on the Soup Run is a mitzvah, a blessing,' he said. 'And grandfather always said that the reward for a mitzvah is another mitzvah.'

He grinned. I was warm enough now to give him back his coat and drag on my discarded tracksuit top. Brandy danced in my veins. My tired brain finally made the connection

between my profession and the Soup Run. What goes with soup? What always goes with soup?

‘Tell me, Daniel,’ I said, ‘does your Soup Run need some bread?’