

A LIFE IN 5 BISCUITS

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

1: Empire Biscuits

I owe my existence to Empire biscuits. Also known as a Belgian biscuit, an Empire biscuit is made of two biscuit rounds, sandwiched together with jam. The top is covered with a circle of white icing and crowned with a glace cherry.

My parents meet when my mother is 16, my father 17. She works at Peacock's Bakery and when my father goes in at lunchtime and orders an Empire biscuit, they make eyes at each other. Three Empire biscuits later, he plucks up the courage to ask her to go dancing at the Dennistoun Palais. She says, yes. The Palais has a sprung floor and, with a capacity of 1800, is Glasgow's biggest dance hall. One hundred and forty Empire biscuits after that, they are married. My mother does a lot of home baking. I love an Empire biscuit and always ask her to make them, but she says they make her too sad. Although she laughs when she says it, I can't tell if she's joking.

2: Farley's Rusks

I'm four years old, gnawing at a dry Farley's Rusk while my mother feeds another to my sister. My sister's rusk is soaked in milk, so that the resulting mush can be spoon fed to her. My memory is textural: the sensation of scraping my teeth against hard dry biscuit, filling my mouth with sweet sawdust. My sister was born in December, this memory is from 1969, the year she turns one. The accompanying aroma is the punchy smell of a new wooden jigsaw, a Christmas gift. Dry, fresh wood, dry rusk, sawdust melting on my tongue.

3: Garibaldi Biscuits

With its hard, dry skin and tough dried fruit guts, the Garibaldi biscuit is more punishment than pleasure, but when I visit my granny and grandad, I'll take whatever sweet treat is on offer. The advantage of the Garibaldi is its resilience, which means I can make it last a long time while adult conversation floats over my head.

Garibaldi biscuits smell of the gas boiler in my grandparent's tenement flat, the baked dough casing as shiny and hard as their cold linoleum floor. A penance of a biscuit, suitable fare for a home furnished with bare lightbulbs and coats piled on the bed for warmth. A poor man's biscuit, though I don't notice the poverty, not then. I see only my granny's dimples when she laughs and the twinkle in my grandad's eyes when we amuse each other by impersonating Bela Lugosi's Dracula.

4: The Highlander

It's the late 1990s, a time of optimism. I'm an adult with a cool job. I wear stylish trouser suits with Doc Marten boots and speak with confidence in meetings because, for the first time in my life, I think I know what I'm doing. My boss sends me to a conference at the University. I watch a presentation about international drug smuggling and find it interesting even although I don't understand why I'm there.

At the morning break, I pick up a cup of coffee in the crowded side-room and can't resist taking a Highlander to go with it. Highlanders are thick, round, shortbread biscuits, made of buttery loveliness that crumbles with the texture of sweet sand on your tongue.

Carrying a bag in one hand and my coffee in the other, I balance the Highlander on my saucer while searching for a quiet corner to eat it in peace. I'm making my way through the

throng when it falls. The biscuit lands on its edge and rolls along the floor. I immediately think of the song about the meatball that rolls off of the table and onto the floor, then out the front door.

People catch the movement. They turn and watch, parting in the Highlander's path as though the biscuit is Moses and they are the Red Sea. As the shortbread wheels by, they look from whence it came and find me in the biscuit's wake, dressed in my stylish trouser suit and Doctor Marten boots. The funniest thing of all is that none of them laugh.

5: Melting Moments

I'm mother to two grown daughters and by this time I know enough to know that I don't have a clue what I'm doing. My older daughter has been working in local cafes since she was 13 and in the bit between leaving school and deciding what she wants to do with herself, she bakes in the local deli. She bakes scones 10cm high and Empire biscuits that bring a smile to your face, but mostly she bakes Melting Moments: two biscuits light as air sandwiched together with a cloud of butter icing. People queue out of the door to buy her melt-in-the-mouth sweet treats.

She bakes with love and is in love with baking. After work and on her days off, she bakes at home, clouding the kitchen with dredges of icing sugar, leaving buttery fingerprints on the fridge door, filling the sink with whisks and bowls and pink silicone spatulas. She bakes boxes of cakes for friends who feel low, uses a surplus of blackening bananas to make a banana loaf for the family to enjoy. The chewy, caramel result is the best I've ever tasted but it's never to be repeated because she made the recipe up as she went along and didn't write it down.

She bakes her way through the vagaries of life, thanking me for teaching her how to sift and fold when she was little and for allowing her to make a mess and never worrying that she might (oh horror!) drop an egg on the floor (there are worse things to drop than an egg). And then, after fantasies about cake shops and buttercream dreams, she decides what it is she really wants to do and off she goes, happy in her quest, leaving behind sweet memories of monumental kitchen messes and mounds of magical Melting Moments.

LG Thomson lives in Ullapool. Her writing has appeared in a wide range of literary publications including Wyldblood Magazine, Epoch Press, and the Urban Pigs “Hunger” Anthology. Her latest books, Modernist Dreams Brutalist Nightmares and Bitter Fruit are darkly funny memoirs about growing up in Scotland in the 1970s and 1980s.