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The Travelling Tea Shop

Written by Belinda Jones

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BELINDA JONES

The Travelling Tea Shop



HODDER

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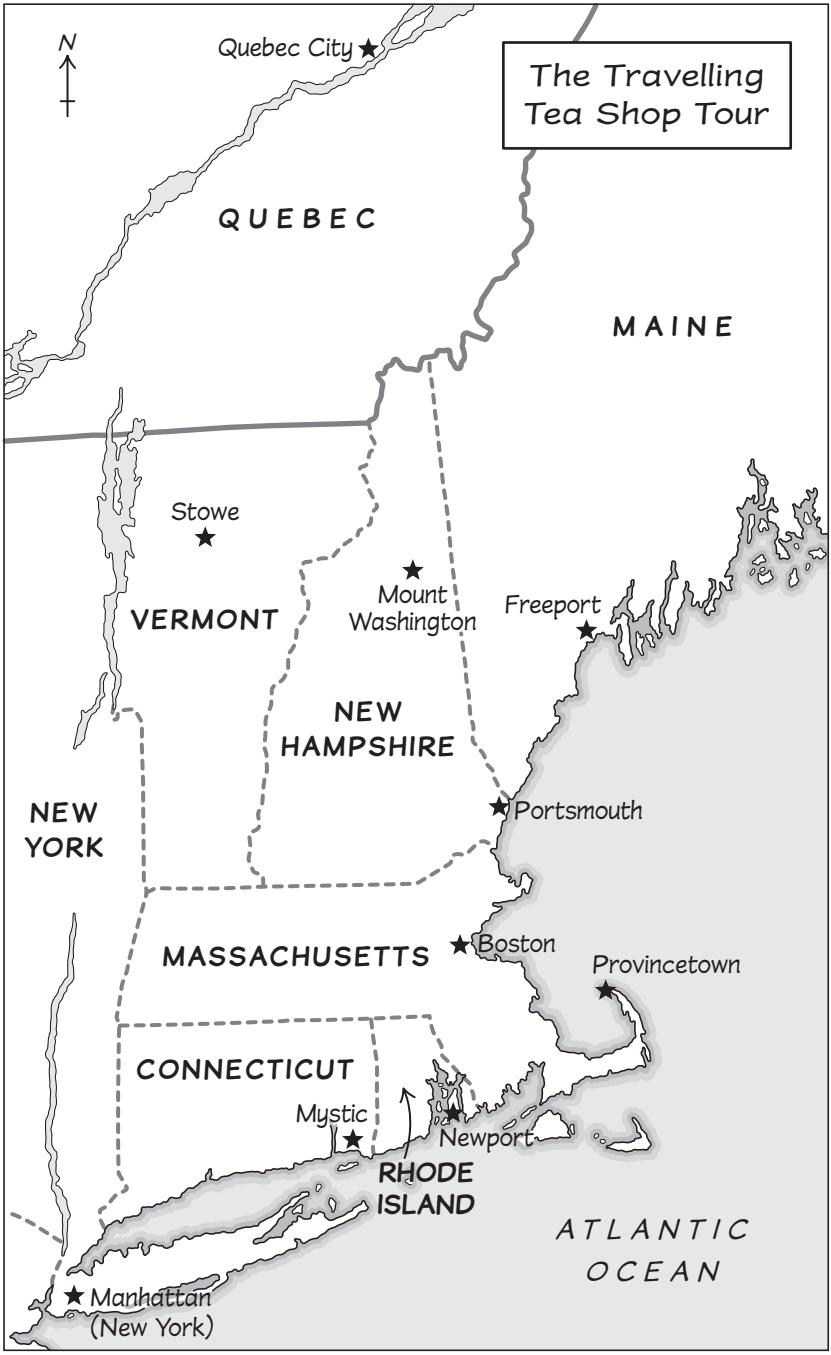
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~ I ~



I look up at my clock. 1.30 p.m. My stomach flips like a pancake. Or should I say PamCake?

In just ninety minutes I am meeting England's most beloved baker, Pamela Lambert-Leigh. Can you believe it's nearly twenty years since Babycakes made her a household name? Those mini fairy cakes were so whisper-light that I used to think of them as dandelion clocks – one puff and you'd send a flurry of vanilla sponge crumbs out into the ether. Her daughter's cherubic face gave the packaging such an innocent, Shirley Temple vibe. Forget those sticky-sickly treats that made you groan and go cross-eyed, a Babycake was just a little kiss on your button nose, a butterfly in your tummy . . .

You could eat six and barely even feel sick.

I know because my mum once spelled out my name – LAURIE – one letter per cake on my birthday. I was rather miffed when she did the same three months later for my sister Jessica, especially since her name garnered an extra cake.

I was wondering about telling Pamela this story, possibly leaving out the fact that my sister and I were teenagers by this point, but I don't want to come off as overly fan-ish. Besides, what if she made a casual enquiry about my nearest and dearest? My response would only make her uncomfortable – 'Both women are gone now,' I would say. 'One to heaven and one to hell.'

But no dwelling on that today. I mentally will the avalanche of emotion to retreat and hold off a while longer. I'll get to you

soon enough; for now I need to keep things bright and peppy and focus on the interview . . .

Perhaps I'll just make a joke about having a sweet tooth: 'The amount of sugar I consumed as a child, it's a miracle I have any teeth left at all!'

Hmmm. That sounds a bit off-putting.

What about, 'We used to say that instead of blood running through my veins I had syrup, like a mini maple tree. With legs.'

I tut myself. I'm not auditioning for a stand-up show.

I just want to prove to her that I'm Cake's Biggest Fan. Not some pretender who'll toy with the slim end of the wedge, leaving a great bookend of frosting on the plate.

Which reminds me, I'm sure I've got a childhood picture here of me taking a bite out of a cake that's twice the size of my head. I could snap it and have it neatly to hand on my phone.

I rifle through my desk drawer, I saw it just the other day . . .

I hesitate as I locate it. My hair in pigtails, white Peter Pan collar on my red dress. I must have been about seven. Gosh. Thirty-one years ago.

I didn't know about calories then.

I knew the truth about Father Christmas. I knew about divorce and that I couldn't bear to see my mother crying – it would just scrunch me up inside and make me want to cry too – but I didn't know any of those threatening phrases like:

'A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips.'

Or 'You can never be too rich, or too thin!'

Or, the most insidious of all, 'Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels.'

Whoever said that has clearly never been to Magnolia Bakery.

Drrrrrinnnng!

My phone ring startles me. But I smile when I see my best friend's name on the display. I wouldn't pick up for anyone else right now.

'Krista!' I squeak.

'I don't want to hold you up, just wanted to wish you good luck!'

'Oh thank you,' I pip. 'I don't know what to do with myself – this feels almost too good to be true!'

'There is no one better suited to this job than you, Laurie. It's like your greatest passions colliding!'

It really is. Cake and travel.

The travel aspect is my *actual* line of expertise. Before I met Krista, I was one of those all-but-extinct breeds: a travel agent. (RIP Lunn Poly, Marble Arch.) She's a former magazine journalist and together we launched a girlie travel-planning website called Va-Va-Vacation!, custom-designing itineraries and offering bonus features such as 'What I Packed versus What I Actually Wore' and the popular 'Man of the World' eye candy section.

We both firmly believe that life is too short and travel too expensive to waste a single coffee-stop in a strip-lit chain when you could be basking in a secret courtyard with a waiter who's going to slip you a complimentary macaroon. I'm even picky about which airports I schedule a stopover in, because a cool bar with an innovative menu and a docking station at every table beats the congealed orange chicken and plastic forks at Panda Express every time.

I remember Krista saying that if her magazine hadn't just cut their travel section in favour of running more weight-loss stories, she would have written a column with all our tried-and-tested tips. I said perhaps she should start her own blog. She said she'd love to create an online travel magazine and she knew a designer who could make it really eye-popping, but she couldn't figure out how to earn a living from it. Which is when we decided to combine our skills.

We've done some pretty fun themes to our custom itineraries over the years – dance-themed, family tree, a Starbucks-free coffee tour of Seattle; I even created an entire schedule from Ryan Gosling movie locations for one superfan. (And who can blame her fixation?)

I think one of the reasons the set-up works so well is that we have clearly defined roles: I'm mostly in charge of logistics and wangling the discounts that give us a competitive edge. (I began with my personal travel contacts – 'Go on, Yiorgos, give us an extra twenty per cent off and we'll give you the best October occupancy the Elounda Blue has ever had!' – and still today we favour privately owned boutique properties over the big chains.) Danielle the designer holds down the fort in London, where Va-Va-Vacation! was founded, and she does all the beach resort reports (even rating the flirtiness of the local bartenders), whereas Krista, our main writer, travels all over – Tahiti, Costa Rica, Argentina . . . She's currently based in Quebec in Canada – she went there to research their epic Winter Carnival and in between ice-skating and snow-sculpting she fell madly in love with a husky-eyed dog-sledder named Jacques. (The guy has a French accent, 112 canine children and can seemingly summon the Northern Lights at will, so she really didn't stand a chance.)

Around the same time, I got the opportunity to relocate from Maida Vale to Manhattan, and oddly that has worked out really well for our friendship since we are now only a ninety-minute flight apart, as opposed to eight-plus hours had either of us stayed in London.

Not that anything could have persuaded me to miss out on a chance to live in New York; I have been coming here every couple of months for years, on a mission to keep our Va-Va-Vacation! city guide current and comprehensive. I may not have Krista's pro writing skills, but I pride myself on knowing (and loving) the Big Apple pips, core and all.

Which is why Pamela Lambert-Leigh has come to me. Well, technically her agent set up the meeting. And I'm not the only 'travel professional' she is meeting with today. I have rivals. Which is why I am so ultra-keen to prove that no one loves cake as much as me.

'So have you made your final selection for the Cheesecake Challenge?' Krista wants to know.

That's our big test – each of us has been charged with presenting Pamela with The Ultimate New York Cheesecake Experience. The winner will get the job. But we won't know exactly what that job entails unless we are the winner. All the more reason to be the best.

I've been really torn over my choice. Junior's gets the popular vote and has all the right credentials: founded in 1950, now with a hub in Times Square offering at least twenty flavours (including Sugar-Free Low Carb!) but the design is a bit orange lino diner and it would mean subjecting her to the tourist crush, so I'm not sure it would be a good fit.

I was fleetingly considering taking Pamela over to Brooklyn for a *Moonstruck* moment but the Cammareri Brothers bakery has since closed and its affiliate F. Monteleone (a bijoux box of old school treats) has seating as limited as Pamela's time.

So that narrowed it down to two . . .

'Remember Veniero's Pasticceria in the East Village?' I prompt Krista. 'The one where we took a snap under the vintage neon sign?'

'Est 1894! It's up on my board here!' she cheers, recalling the ceilings of pressed copper and stained glass. (Personally I was most struck by the never-ending parade of cannolis.)

I had it in my head to wow Pamela with both their traditional New York Cheesecake and the crumblier, less sweet, Sicilian version, which is made using ricotta and looks a bit like a soufflé nestled in a deep-dish pie-crust.

'Double whammy!' Krista enthuses. 'And it's just twenty minutes' walk from your place.'

'The only thing is . . .' I pause as I call up today's online news stories. 'I saw this paparazzi shot of Pamela at the airport . . .'

I press send.

'Oh gosh!' Krista gasps as she opens the image at her end. 'I don't know that I would have recognised her.'

I had the same reaction. The Pamela we know and love from her *Tea-time with Pamela* TV show has always had a

delightfully mellow look to her, as if she has just emerged from a stroll in her English rose garden, complete with a freshly plucked flower wound into her soft, wavy blonde hair. In fact her whole product line – the cookbooks, the packaged cake ranges, the signature bakeware – makes you feel connected to a more wholesome time, when life was sweet and simple and you might find yourself spending the afternoon reading in an apple orchard, as opposed to sitting in a technology daze in some office cubicle. Though Pamela typically wears crumpled linens or palest, washed-out denim, she always has a lipstick that precisely matches the design on her pinny and nails to match that, even though she'll soon be up to her cuticles in flour and pastry. But this snapshot gives the impression that she ran out of the house in the middle of the night and is still trying to figure out where the hell she is going in such a hurry.

'She looks totally frazzled.'

'I know. And it's sweltering here today and you know how stingy most places are with their air-conditioning.'

'God yes,' Krista cringes. 'Remember when we were at The Boat House and they didn't even have their ceiling fan on the fastest rotation?'

'I know, the passing waiters were generating more of a breeze.'

'So what are you thinking?'

'Lady M.'

'Lady M?' she queries.

'We haven't been. I only discovered it two weeks ago but everything about the place is cool and pristine and upmarket zen.'

'Really?'

I nod into the phone. 'Five minutes in there and I swear your hair starts to de-frizz. The walls are white, the tables, the chairs, the plates – everything is so clean!'

'Sounds like a lab!'

I chuckle. 'You know, they actually call it a cake boutique!'

'How very swish!'

I click on the website just to check for the hundredth time that I have the correct address – 41 East 78th, Upper East Side.

'You're not worried it'll be too posh?'

I know what Krista means, Pamela is more naturally sun-kissed than lacquered sheen.

'I was,' I confess. 'But then I tasted the cheesecake . . .'

'Ooooh. Say no more.'

'Plus she's staying at the Mandarin Oriental,' I add. 'So it's just across the park.'

'For her; you're all the way down in Little Italy! Shouldn't you be leaving?'

'I'm getting a cab in five minutes. No subway today. I've booked a table and I'm just going to sit there and be all serene and accommodating of her every whim.'

I don't think I could be any better prepared. My laptop is primed with multiple open browsers and a list of Favourites linking to everything New York and cake-related. Yesterday I bought a small pink leather-bound notebook and a gold pen. I have a pack of hand-wipes should Pamela want to clean up without trekking to the bathroom, and two small tubes of Fresh's brown sugar hand cream – one to offer her a squeeze and one to give as a gift if she likes the scent as much as I do. I've printed out a pocket-size list of What's Hot in New York Today, should she perhaps have an hour or two free, and attached my business card: LAURIE DAVIS *Travel In Style.* I've even packed a second pair of shoes and a shirt-dress in case I fall down a manhole or get knocked over by a bolting horse and carriage on the way.

I have to have every eventuality covered because, if they've come to me, my guess is that Pamela needs help planning a detailed itinerary – cramming as much into a few days as is physically and logistically possible, while still maintaining a seemingly effortless flow. And that's what I do best.

If she'll just give me the chance to prove myself.

'Trust me, this is your moment!' Krista encourages.

I take a breath. 'I really hope so.'
I don't know when I last wanted anything this much.
Actually I do.
I felt the same way about moving to Manhattan . . .

~ 2 ~



Little-Laurie-Worry, my mum used to call me.

But not here. Not in New York City.

One inhalation of yellow cab fumes – mingling with pepperoni pizza, hot trash and Tom Ford's Café Rose – and I find myself in an Empire state of mind . . .

That's what I love most about Manhattan: *it brings out a sassy side to me.*

In the concrete jungle it's sink or swim: you can't be timid or tentative; you have to forge through, make your mark, enter the fray!

Last week I stepped off the kerb and nearly got run over by some smoke-windowed Chrysler, and my instinctive reaction was to bang on the boot and cry, 'Hey! Watch where you're going!'

I'd seen some cool urban chick do it once and now I'd joined the Pedestrians Fight-Back Club. I was on a high for the rest of the day.

Krista was horrified. She finds the whole place too in-yer-face. 'Who knew walking down the street had become a contact sport?'

She's right, of course. It's crazy. But I love that feeling.

I remember the first time I came here, I returned to my hotel room after a day's sightseeing exhausted, feet throbbing, calves tweaking, head thumping, and I collapsed on the bed for a few minutes and then I thought: I want more! I want another fix! So I stepped back into the insanity, weaving my way through the

crush on Fifth Avenue, standing amid all the tourists ogling Bergdorf Goodman and Harry Winston, raising their cameras to try and ensnare the jutting angles of skyscrapers. I felt simultaneously charged and exhausted all over again.

It was just what I needed.

Krista finds peace mushing huskies across plains of pure glistening white, but I need the chaos, the distraction of overstimulation. Back in London, I'd gone through a phase of reading way too many self-help books, gazing deeper and deeper into my navel . . . Sometimes I'd come to a complete halt in the street, questioning my next move – my motives, intentions and every possible consequence. Was it in the best interest of my Higher Self? In NYC you have to keep moving forward, stride with purpose. As you do so your attention is pulled every which way, away from yourself. And, for me at least, that is a source of great relief.

I know I'm not the only British person to feel this way. I see the faces of my fellow countrymen transform in this city. I see their amazement and fascination mingling with a surprising sense of belonging. The most unlikely places can feel like home here. There's this place, the Brooklyn Diner on West 57th, to be precise, and the first time I went there it was tipping down with rain, but they were playing Tony Bennett and had matching Tony Bennett French Toast (thick-cut cinnamon raisin and pecan), and so I sat there, drinking filter coffee from one of those squat cream-coloured mugs that hold next to nothing but come with endless refills, observing the mostly older clientele and some bulky Sopranos-looking family, and I felt so *cosy* there. Maybe it's because you feel like you're in a movie half the time you're in New York. Maybe it's because things are happening all around you and, just by standing in the middle of it, you feel like something is happening *to* you. I don't know. And maybe the reasons don't matter. It just feels good.

'Taxi!' I step out into the street, instinctively rising up onto my tippy-toes as if I'm in Carrie-esque stilettos.

Appropriate that I should be heading to the Upper East Side!

Sliding across the collapsed, cracked black leather, I issue the address and then glance back at my redbrick building.

That's the only time I have a little wobble, when I put the key in the lock and I know it's just me and the apartment for the rest of the night. I still have the impulse to call my mum and tell her how my day went. I feel so hollow in that moment, so echoingly, despairingly alone. And then comes the rage, as I think of my sister.

'I don't want you here!' I say it out loud sometimes, trying to banish her from my head. But she's always lurking.

We stall at the lights beside one of the granite-thighed pedicabbers. Do you know they actually have credit card machines on board? They need to; they're actually more expensive than regular cabs now. I look beyond the cyclist's khaki shorts and focus on charting our route through Gramercy Park and the Flatiron district, checking off each cross street along the way – 23rd becomes 34th and then 42nd, making us level with Times Square, just a few blocks from the Rockefeller Center. I take a breath, unable to decide whether to quell my butterflies or embrace them. Talk about the American Dream! Just knowing that my cake-loving tummy is going to be seated across from Pamela Lambert-Leigh within the hour seems fantastical.

'Central Park!' the driver motions to his left.

I smile. That vast expanse of greenery always has an appropriately 'centering' effect on me. I wonder if Pamela has had the time to look out over the treetops from the Lobby Lounge at the Mandarin Oriental? Thirty-five floors up with panoramic windows, it's one of the best views in the city, utterly justifying the $7 price tag dangling from your tea bag.

Of course the park is pretty nice at ground level too. Even if half the NewYorkers fit the overachiever profile. Here the word 'relax' becomes an active verb – running, cycling, rollerblading, skating, basketballing, boating, bowling, dog-jogging, tai-chi-ing . . .

I generally go there to sit down. Perhaps wiggle my toes in the grass, maybe blink up at the leaf-dappled sunlight. My regular spot is beside a bronze husky called Balto – ears pricked, chest proud, tail curled, he's a beauty. He was part of the relay team of sled dogs that battled the elements to bring life-saving vaccines to a remote Alaskan village, inaccessible by any other means. Now he stands immortalised on a rock in one of the more picturesque nooks of the park. Just being around him makes me feel connected to Krista, which is always reassuring. If tinged with some new emotions these days . . .

I wasn't expecting to feel the way I did when she moved in with Jacques. It's strange how something that makes you so happy – to see your best friend embarking on a wonderful new life with a good man – can also make you so sad. Prior to their romance we were in it together – the relationship bafflement fog. It was oddly comforting – if someone as lovely as Krista couldn't find love, then it proved it wasn't just my shortcomings keeping the right man at bay. We just weren't destined to get lucky in that way. Better we fill up our hearts with other pursuits. As far as I was concerned, Manhattan was all the man I needed! But now . . . Now she has gone and proved that true love does exist, the pressure is back on again.

Even from Krista. She has started having expectations for me whereas before there was just an acceptance that we had such awful taste in men we were best off out of it.

I remember the first day we met – at a mutual friend's wedding reception. I was under one of the dinner tables eating a second slice of the wedding cake, not wanting my enjoyment of the pink champagne icing to be tainted by my boyfriend's look of disapproval. (He had this conspiracy theory that I had hooked him with my feminine wiles, all with a dastardly plan to eat my way to enormity, purely to spite him and shame him in front of his friends. I wasn't even plump then. But just the sight of me eyeing the desert trolley would give him the heebie-jeebies.)

Anyway, there I was, prom dress all fanned out on the carpet, feeling like I was five years old, having a lovely time shoulder-popping along to 'Crazy in Love' when an arguing couple plonked themselves down beside me. Her foot was bleeding from being skewered by a stiletto on the dance floor, and his main gripe seemed to be that she should have been wearing high heels too.

'Why can't you just be like everyone else?'

And then he'd stormed off, telling her she could find her own damn plaster.

That was the point at which I revealed myself and offered to make a little bandage using a torn napkin and a cocktail stick. She told me her big toe now looked like one of those pigs-in-blankets hors d'oeuvres, and her giggle gave me such hope, even when I learned she was married to this guy.

We talked for a while (mostly about that soul-destroying shift when your man switches from admiring to admonishing), but Krista said the moment she knew we were going to be bonded forever was when Andrew (her then husband) returned and I drove my steel-tipped vintage heel into *his* foot. Accidentally, of course. I just lost my balance as I was climbing out from under the table . . .

That seems like a lifetime ago now. By the next time I saw her, I was single. And I've been that way ever since. On purpose.

I was very clear by that point that I couldn't risk hooking up with another controlling calorie-counter (always my calories, not theirs!), because I honestly didn't feel like I had any more escape acts in me.

And my boyfriends have always been so easy to leave, on paper at least. They gave me so many reasons, but I always stayed way too long. Krista thinks it's because my working life is so geared to finding solutions, making the best of any situation, streamlining, honing – I have to try everything in my repertoire before I'll throw in the towel, and by then I've got myself into some kind of habitual behaviour that has nothing to do with any genuine feeling towards the other person, but keeps me held

there until they ditch me. Urgh! Even thinking about this raises my blood pressure. Switch that thought!

'Do you know there are nine thousand benches in Central Park and if you placed them end to end they would stretch for seven miles?'

The cab driver glances back at me, seemingly deliberating whether or not to let on that he speaks English.

'Oh! This is it – Lady M!' I scooch up in my seat and point ahead.

He peers with curiosity at the jarringly modern, glass-fronted white box tucked into the otherwise historic *grande dame* neighbourhood.

'Cakes,' he grumps.

'Yes,' I cheer as I step onto the pavement.

I pause before I enter, looking around me and wondering what Pamela's impression will be.

A 1920s matriarch out walking her short-legged pooch would not be out of place. But then neither would the *Sex and the City* girls. If they were coming for tea they would all be in jewel-coloured dresses and glinting metallic heels. I shift the dragging laptop bag on my shoulder, straighten my cotton frock and reach for the chrome door handle.

Instant cool. I love the frisk of air conditioning on a sauna day.

'May I help you?' A gamine server with a black head-kerchief greets me.

'Hello, I'm Laurie – I called earlier?'

My heart is palpitating as I go through the arrangements.

With everything in order, I slide onto one of the moulded plastic chairs and try to convince myself that this isn't a big deal. Even though it is.

I just pray I've made the right choice. This place definitely has a snoot factor. And I'd forgotten how bijou the tables are. I hope Pamela doesn't come with a lot of paperwork or anything that needs fanning out.

'Would you like anything while you are waiting?'

'No, no, thank you, I'm fine.'

I could actually do with a glass of water but I don't want a half-drunk glass with a lipstick smudge ruining the pristine setting, so instead I focus on my posture and forming an open, welcoming expression. Every now and again my heart loops as a figure passes the window, but so far each person who has entered has been male. And Chinese. I look at my watch. Any minute now . . .

At 3 p.m. I expect a siren to go off and balloons and streamers to drop from the ceiling. But nothing happens. Life goes on as normal. Without Pamela.

A further five minutes pass.

Anticipation turns to anticlimax.

What if she doesn't show? What if she's having such a great time with one of the other itinerary experts she's decided she doesn't need to take any more meetings? I check my messages, no polite let-down from the agent. Just an invitation to try out the new ramen burger craze.

I'm starting to get fidgety. I could catch up on my Words with Friends games but I don't want to look like one of those people always zoned in on their phone, letting the world pass them by. Besides, there are far prettier things to gaze upon in here . . .

'I'm just going to have a little look,' I tell the server as I approach the counter.

I feel a mix of serenity and awe as I contemplate their pristine cake selection. It's just so unique. Take the Gâteau aux Marrons – it looks as if a pan of spaghetti has been heaped atop the almond flour cake, when in fact the strands are lavish pipings of chestnut-infused cream, dusted with snow sugar.

Snow sugar!

I'm telling you, this place is in a league of its own. You never saw a glossier ganache finish. The only item I'm not sure about is the Green Tea Mousse Cake on account of its lurid chartreuse colouring. Then again—

'These are the ones I saw in Oprah magazine!' a voice bustles in beside me.

She's pointing to Lady M's Mille Crêpes – twenty paper-thin handmade crêpes layered with light pastry cream to form their signature cake. You can even keep 'tiering up' until you create a wedding cake.

'Aren't they incredible?' A quieter, more reverent voice enquires. 'Like the most delicate of petticoat layers.'

I look up to smile in confirmation and find myself face-to-face with the legendary Pamela Lambert-Leigh.