

ABUNDANCE

Balancing a silver tray under one arm, Polly leant into the window shelf and began to arrange her display. The line-up was always the same: cinnamon and raisin buns at the back, jam doughnuts on the shelf below, followed by fruit tarts, chocolate cookies, and finally two rows of fairy cupcakes. Delicately planted in crisp, floral cases, a selection of plump pink, blue and yellow circles decorated with sculpted rose-heart icing took centre stage. Polly liked to call these cakes her princesses much to the annoyance of the other treats who disliked favouritism.

“There,” said Polly dusting off sugary hands on her apron. “My little princesses all nice and neat for another day. Don’t you worry, it won’t be long before your handsome princes come and find you.”

Polly’s Pantry opened on the dot of eight o’clock every day except Sunday and Monday. These days were reserved for shopping, cooking, cleaning and de-crumbing, aided by her dumpy aunt, a spinster by choice, Ms Borridge, both a failed baker and ballerina, who quite frankly wasn’t much fun to be around despite her desire to be as famous and admired as Polly.

Anyway, that was by-the-by.

On Tuesday to Saturday everyone in the village of Fondue knew that at precisely four-thirty, Polly would draw down the blinds, smartly switch over the shop sign from ‘open’ to ‘closed’ and begin preparations for the morrow. Gratefully she’d survey the empty shelves, roll up her sleeves and start all over again. It was marvellous, she mused, how her customers welcomed the individual names she gave her treats. A brilliant marketing ploy thanks to her publisher. Such a shame he’d decided to give it all up

and become a hermit. Her cookery books had sold well far and wide across the world. Every day she'd lovingly platter up fresh bakes from the moulds and trays, incredulous to observe how identically they emerged from the oven without a single distinguishing fault. A Posh Pansy on Tuesday had exactly the same shape as Saturday's bake, like replicas from a robot factory, except that in the pastry world it was practically impossible. Polly believed in magic and miracles and had always left it at that without question. "My perfect princesses," she sighed fondly, remembering the first time she'd created Pansy. Something dynamic and proud about the perfect roundness of the cut had inspired her to keep on going and that's how the bakery and books were born.

Today was Tuesday. Polly loved Tuesdays more than any other day. It was as if she sensed her customers had been salivating at home for two days, anxiously waiting for her shop to re-open. She was never disappointed. How her heart swelled with the clang of the bell, the creak of the iron handle as the first shoppers of the day entered on the dot of eight to usher a cheery 'Good Morning!' From therein, a steady stream would gleefully make their way through her door. Polly relished the queue of eager faces craving warm dough and sweet treats, their sugar addiction quashed in a hue of mild embarrassment and general patter, all the while desperate to be served as fast as possible and get their fix. Polly silently observed (with secret alacrity) that a certain frisson would overcome the pantry as her buyers subconsciously lifted dilated nostrils skywards like baby deer and exhaled, scattering fumes of desire. The contagion was quite incredible, almost like a sniffing trail that magically swept down the queue. If Jonny Lambkins bought one bun and a loaf then Mrs Millomush would buy two cakes, two loaves and a little something for 'right away.' And so on and so forth. No-one wanted to be left out! Polly revelled in her role, beadily observing their expressions glaze over, positions shuffle, pennies clink, decisions hum, as she'd wait tongs poised, carton at the

ready, feeding into weakened willpower as her buyers became flushed and panicked, trapped in that succulent moment of choosing. She would never ask ‘Will that be all?’ because that would be foolish! She knew the exact timing of a finger point, where it would begin, how long it would linger and the precise ending poise.

Throughout it all, Polly never stopped smiling. Her business ran like clockwork. Some gossipers might suggest her mannerisms were a little robotic but they weren’t complaining and neither was Polly.

And the money rolled in,

Thus everyone was content until one day, Polly tripped on a slide of kitchen grease and hurt her ankle. That was the day Ms Borridge stepped in.

At the grand old age of eighty, ex-ballerina Ms Borridge had taken it upon herself to don a battered tutu to perform clumsy pirouette after pirouette whilst serving Polly’s customers. As one of Fondue’s childhood stars, she thought it opportune to steal the excuse to grab centre stage and relive her youth. It was not a particularly pleasant sight, however, given the old green cardigan haphazardly buttoned over a too-tight leotard, stomach at the ready and bandy legs in pink fishnets, nor one that Polly would have supported given her meticulous operational standards. Ms Borridge cared little for the suffocated titters of those waiting in line, allowing imagination to carry her beyond her duties. Up and down and round and round she’d stumble, tongs and carton in hand, often struggling to politely bring her legs together should she have over-stretched. A peculiar drift would accompany her endeavours but she didn’t notice. She was having the time of her life! No-one needed Polly! She was in charge now and brilliant at it!

But the treats didn't think so at all! The tarts were the first to grumble.

"Borridge doesn't know how to handle us," they moaned. "We're fragile. Look at Apricot's crust! She's all crumbled up! No-one wants to buy a broken tart!"

The others nodded in sympathy. "Poor Apricot! But look at us! We're all dried out without our jammy insides and hardly sprinkled with any sugar at all!" It was Dou-Dou, one of the doughnuts. "Who will want us looking like boring pancakes?"

"And she doesn't wear gloves," complained Ray from the buns. "If we get a disease and go mouldy, then what? Polly's Pantry will close down and that will be the end of us!"

He shuddered at the thought and a general murmur of discontent resonated all round.

"Tell us about it," piped up Fortune indignantly. "Sometimes we come out of the oven and us cookies aren't even ready! Poor old Chip was soggy in the middle and that old witch tried to throw him away!"

This information invoked a tragic gasp of horror. To be thrown away meant going in...THE BIN! The most hideous condemnation for any sweet treat!

So far the pretty princesses hadn't said a word. At the end of the row, Betty appeared quite forlorn, her little dollop of icing skew-whiff. She daren't open her mouth until Posh Pansy spoke. That was the deal. Posh

Pansy was leader of the princesses and every other cupcake fell in line. She had no reason to distinguish herself as Queen, as all the treats had individual names written on card in bold capitals, yet stronger characters like Pansy always wore the crown. But only Betty could see through Pansy's thin veneer. Having an attitude and ego didn't make sense. Surely they were all on the same shelf, on sale, there for a reason, to help Polly market her business and be a part of her sweet success! Betty had a nasty feeling Pansy may revolt. Her instincts weren't off track.

At first it was amusing for Polly's regulars to be so unusually entertained! But once at home, any affectionate thoughts towards the quirky old woman quickly soured. For Ms Borridge did not have the magic touch! No, not at all. The princesses lacked crisp, sugar coating, the cookies were half-baked, the doughnuts were jam-less, the tarts were missing their creamy innards and cherry tops and the buns held no bounce. It was perfectly clear to the treats that despite a spike in giggling tourists, the regulars were dropping off, one by one.

A counsel was held one week later, surprisingly organised by Posh Pansy.

“I declare we have a vote. Who wants Ms Borridge to go?”

The treats sorrowfully looked over at one another, not wishing to betray Polly's aunt. Ray held up a defeated hand, followed by Zun, Chip, Betty, Fortune and slowly the rest of the gang. Cinna, Dou-Dou and Mon had all been scraped into the dreaded BIN only yesterday. It was a crime! Three down in a day! The others had watched from the shelf, helpless to stop Ms Borridge bin leftovers, aghast at such callous treatment of Polly's precious creations. Didn't she know any leftovers were popped into paper

bags and donated to homeless Horace on the cobblestone corner of Polly's street?

Gossip spread through Fondue like wasps to honey: Polly wouldn't be back until the beginning of August, a whole two weeks away. How could business survive if everyone stopped coming?

Ray had already made up his mind. He'd been thinking about what best to do. Clearing his throat at close that afternoon, he bravely called for attention.

"Horace," he said bluntly, not one for words. "I'll fetch Horace for help."

The news was met with blank stares and worried frowns. But no-one had a better solution. Finally, Zun nodded.

"He's right! Horace will be a terrific help. He's a man and doesn't wear a tutu!"

So it was agreed. Ray clambered down from the shelf and half an hour before Ms. Borridge shut shop for the day, sneaked out. The streets were busy with rushing commuter feet and children being dragged into shops. He took a deep breath and plunged in. All the while he thought of how proud Polly would be. He might even get a gold star to go in his tummy! Or at least some reward to set him apart for his efforts. This spurred him on along, his dainty feet finding it awkward not to crumble off in between cobbles. Soon enough he looked up, grateful to see Horace slumped against a lamppost. On his lap lay a paper bag. Perhaps someone else gave him leftovers too, wondered Ray and finding a little more strength now he'd arrived, tiptoed over.

“Please Horace, I’m Ray from the ...” But before he could utter another syllable, Horace had whipped him up from the pavement, squeezed his yeasty insides together and dangled the tip of his body over his crusty mouth. “Wait!” cried Ray. “Stop! I’m not a leftover! I’m a real whole bun and we need your help!”

“Huh?” Horace looked flabbergasted. Red-veined eyes met Ray’s currants. “A talking bun? Don’t be so daft. I must be going bonkers!”

“No! You’re totally wonderful,” gasped Ray, inches from being gobbled up. “And you are needed and wanted and beautiful!” He splurged out lines he’d been rehearsing over and over again should he ever get the chance to chat Betty up. “Can you come with me now, to the shop?”

Horace grunted, stuffed Ray into a pocket and emitting peculiar guttural noises shuffled himself to standing. “Come on then,” he said, making a vague flapping adjustment to his overcoat. “Let’s be sorting all this nonsense out.”

Ms. Borridge was non too pleased. A tramp on the streets to be fed was one thing, but taking up precious floor space in her niece’s panty was quite another altogether. And he was so dirty!

“Out! Get out, you filthy specimen. These premises aren’t for the likes of hairy madmen like you! Now leave immediately before I ring the police!”

But all Horace saw was a barmy old woman dressed in a ballerina’s outfit trying to push him outside with a broom. He guffawed and stood his ground. Ray peeked out of his pocket and without anyone noticing crept

back up onto the shelf to watch the action. If they weren't sold in the next half an hour, they'd be popped in a bag and handed over as leftovers. Except Horace was here and not out there on the corner!

“Me? Mad?” teased Horace. “Have you looked in the mirror recently? I'll grant you hairy though. Nothing a shave won't fix. You've got a light covering yourself I see, right there.” He pointed with a gesture to her mouth to show her what he meant. “Nothing wrong with that. So what's the problem around here then? One of your currant buns has roped me in. Seemed it was urgent.”

Ms Borridge went pink and hurried a hand over her face fuzzi. “Don't be absurd,” she burred. “My buns aren't traitors! Now be on your way. You're stinking the place out. No-one will want to buy treats reeking of street peat!”

Horace shook his head, bemused. Here was a feisty dame with spirit, moustache or not. They could make quite a team. “Tell you what,” he suggested. “Why don't I clean up in the back and help you finish off for the day. Looks like you could use a little assistance. I've been watching this place from across the street and it's pretty clear that business is, how shall we say, a little less busy than usual. But with an extra pair of hands in the kitchen, we could turn this around. What do you say?”

About to violently disagree, Ms Borridge stopped in her tracks. The tramp had a glint in his eye, an honesty to his speech. She thought all tramps were the same, homeless, grimy and incapable. But standing in front of her now was an offer she was heavily considering. He could sterilise all the trays and swab the floor, leaving her time to rest and enjoy a cup of tea, or perhaps sneak a swig of sherry kept hidden under the kitchen sink.

“Soap’s in the dish in the outside loo,” she said briskly, without catching his eye. “And be sure to wash those nails to the quick!”

Ray hugged Zun in glee! The plan hadn’t got rid of Ms Borridge but perhaps she wouldn’t be so clumsy with them now. Just then, a customer’s finger hovered, a carton rustled, tongs gripped and snapped the two buns into a paper grave.

The following day, a great change appeared at Polly’s Pantry. For a start, there was singing from the kitchen, not just a pottering hum but full-blown operatic bass booming vocals! Secondly, the stuck top windows above the front door were pushed open, allowing air and energy to flow in to what otherwise had been quite a stuffy bakery, especially as Fondue was having a muggy summer. Thirdly, Horace had scrubbed up; his tramp clothes replaced by a pair of baggy pyjamas mostly covered up by Polly’s professional blue and white apron knotted around his waist. Not only that he’d topped off the lot with a disused ladies hairnet, salvaged from the back of a dusty shelf in the outside loo, that pinged over his ears when he smiled. Even Ms Borridge couldn’t help but soften at his presence and felt a surge of excitement, suddenly feeling quite silly in her moth-bitten tutu.

Now of course, no-one knew anything about Horace’s background but what were the chances of him being an excellent pastry chef? Zero most would say. Where Ms Borridge failed, he pulled weight; the ovens were heated to the right temperature, fairy cakes, buns and cookies were baked to the required consistency, fruits were elegantly sliced, tarts and doughnuts were filled and sugar-sprinkled, and all the treats were then carefully placed in the named slots in the window. All the while Horace grinned and sung and baked, his secret safe inside.

Posh Pansy was the first to show her displeasure. She didn't like being handled by Ms Borridge *or* Horace's chunky fingers. "Don't think this tramp will ever replace Polly," she pouted. Her cupcake team pouted in quick succession. Betty tried but glancing up at Ray, blushed and stared at her toes instead.

"Don't be such a stick in the icing! At least we're cooked again and not coming out half-baked!" It was Chip! He looked deliriously happy. "I'm delicious again! So is Apricot, and Mon and Ray and Zun and Fortune and Cinna! All of us! And Pansy you look good enough to eat!"

Pansy ruffled her shoulders and faced the window. She didn't engage with low-life cookies and refused to be drawn in. As for all that bolshy opera singing, she could hardly hear herself think let alone feel pretty. This was a disaster and she had to do something. Ray clocked her silent feedback and panicked. Pansy had power. She was Polly's favourite. He'd be blamed of introducing Horace, maybe even thrown in THE BIN! He shuddered and dreaded what she might do.

Pansy's idea was carried out early the next morning. Whilst Horace lustily sung and stirred in the contents of the next batch of identical princesses, Pansy took her chance. It wasn't easy because she was still of a sludgy consistency but as soon as his back was turned, try as she might she just couldn't manage to slip in extra sugar, butter, flour and and vanilla essence and even half the contents from a strange brown bottle. There just wasn't enough time! Furious to fail she slunk back down into the mixture as Horace switched back. All that mattered to her was that this batch turned out bad. Really bad. That way Ms Borridge and Horace would be dismissed and Polly would *have* to return and bring her princesses back to their perfect, safe world on the window shelf. She prayed Horace would do something wrong.

Horace, however, despite not having washed properly for a decade until last week, owned a particularly sensitive nose. As the fairy cakes rose and browned and cooled he sniffed then sniffed again. The princesses smelt completely different! He'd followed Polly's recipe to the pin drop, well, maybe not quite, he admitted! Perhaps he had added a little extra of this and that and had poured more than a few drops in from a brown bottle labelled 'magic.' Scraping off a morsel from the cooling rack he placed it in his mouth. Expecting the usual flavour, he surprised himself with a smile that grew so wide it blew huge billows into his cheeks and turned them pink. My! That tasted outrageously good! Better than before, much better!

In no time at all, he had arranged the fairy cakes into their floral cases, siphoned on colourful icing and placed each one by their name tags in the window ready to begin trading on the dot of eight. In his excitement, however, he committed a huge error. Where Posh Pansy should have sat now wriggled Betty, uncomfortable to be centre stage. But it was too late. The first customer was already approaching, the shadow of a finger, Pansy's name spoken, and before Betty could call out, she was tonged and boxed. Meanwhile, stuck out on the corner, Pansy fumed, unable to control her princesses who tittered like teenagers, desperately trying to handle the situation without finding it funny.

“Actually,” said the young customer. “I don't need a box. I'm going to eat it now. If I may?”

Pardon? The princesses itched to turn round. What on earth was going on? Stood in the middle of the pantry a slender girl wearing glasses opened the box and lifted Betty out of the paper casing. Dropping a pair of jaws that seemed to simply fold in and close over she neatly encased the

whole cake in one. So intense were her sighs of enjoyment that the other shoppers stopped bustling amongst themselves and nearer to watch, curious to know more. Oblivious to the circle of onlookers the girl barely seemed to chew or swallow yet instead drifted away, her eyes closed in rapture.

“Oh my! That is exquisite! The most delicious cake I’ve ever tasted! Can I have another one please? Or maybe two?”

The princesses recoiled in horror, Pansy in particular. Then, before Ms Borridge or Horace knew what was happening, there was total chaos! An outburst of clamouring. Everyone wanted to buy the princesses. Within seconds the whole two rows had sold out. Pansy’s plan had gone kicks up and she hadn’t done a thing! Horace’s improvement to the recipe wasn’t dastardly, it was heavenly! If customers couldn’t have the fairy cakes, then anything would do. They just had to experience the same feeling as the girl in the glasses!

Horace was thrilled but kept his counsel in the kitchen and chuckled. It was possible he was more of a magus than he’d ever credited himself for. But by golly, what a tremendous day! By midday they’d completely sold out so decided to shut the shop early. Surely a celebration was in order. Grabbing Ms Borridge around the waist he proceeded to dance an odd sort of waltz. ‘La dolce vita,’ he sung as he spun her across on the chequered floor and whipped her close every time she skidded over. It was most enjoyable. Ms Borridge rested her head against his shoulder feeling the young girl again. Suddenly Horace stopped, his eyes ablaze.

“I’ve got an idea! Trust me?”

Ms Borridge was well beyond trust. She’d fallen in love.

They didn't wait to clear up. With Ms Borridge panting at his heels Horace dashed back into the kitchen and began pulling all manner of pots and packets into line. At his side she girlishly clapped her hands, excited by so much fun! This would never have happened on Polly's shift and they still had the rest of the day to enjoy without customers.

Three hours later, having instructed Ms Borridge to sweep and clean the store then put her feet up, Horace appeared with a tea-towel slung over his shoulder and led her into the kitchen.

“May I present... the Pink Princes!”

Ms Borridge was agog! For laid out in front of her were thirty or so enormous muffins, built so puffy and high that to eat one would require some expert mouth manoeuvres. “Ran out of blue icing sugar,” winked Horace. “So pink hats it is. What do you think, ballet-star? Want to try one before I tuck them into a plastic box for the night?”

A tasting session, another ridiculous dance and a tippie or five of sherry topped off the afternoon. Goodness, what on earth would Polly have thought? Such was their hilarity and commotion, neither heard Polly tap on the glass. On her way back from the hospital she had decided to pass by her shop only to find the blinds down and the door bolted.

She rapped again and tugged at the door handle several times before Ms Borridge's wizened face appeared at the window. She gaped in horror, her mouth a crumbly wee hole. Polly gasped in astonishment! The two ladies locked looks. What on earth was happening?

Polly slowly hobbled in. The easy-going robotic smile was replaced by an unreadable gaze. Ms Borridge muttered something about nothing and meekly tiptoed behind her employer, mortified to be caught wearing her tutu. There was no time to warn Horace. Polly ignored the outfit and made the rounds casting a blank eye over the pantry. The shelves were empty and the floor was speckled with crumbs but as for the kitchen, Lord forbid! Floury scales and greasy pans lay unwashed on the sideboard, a bottle of half empty liquor sat by the cooker, packets of produce were scattered about the place unopened, pats of butter were slowly melting on the stove, the bin was overflowing with rubbish and suddenly the flushing of the outdoor loo sounded followed by a colossal male voice booming ‘O Solo Mio,’ as powerfully as an erupted volcano! Ms Borridge almost collapsed in fear as Horace spotted them and casually strolled in and down the narrow corridor, wiping his hands dry on Polly’s apron, grinning from ear to ear in a schoolboy unabashed way, then casually introduced himself with a princely flourish, all without batting an eyelash.

“Polly of Polly’s Pantry, this is an honour,” he said taking her hand. “I am Horace, the Tramp. At your service.”

Polly snapped her hand free, too appalled for courtesies, but before she could utter a single furious syllable Horace had stood and was guiding her back into the pantry.

“Please allow me to explain. For in your absence, Ms Borridge and I have been dutiful to your business and hope you will be satisfied with all we have undertaken. You see, not only have we discovered a new recipe we have also created...”

At this point he slowed his pitch, raised an eyebrow and nudged his head with a knowing glare towards Ms Borridge who wide-eyed and

wondrous seemed to understand and scampered into the kitchen to return with a large, plastic box. Taking off the lid Horace declared,

“...the Princes! To match the Princesses! Meet Charming, Aladdin, Florian. What do you say? Shall I go on?”

So far Polly had said nothing. But all at once her eyes welled up.

“Upon my word,” she said, patting down damp soft cheeks. “These are what I told my Pansy I’d make all along but never got round to it. A Prince for a Princess. What a strange surprise. Thank you, Horace, although I do believe I know who you really are.”

For a long moment they stared at one another, then burst into laughter.

“You just look so different with that beard and no suit!” exclaimed Polly. “But your voice has never changed.”

Horace held up his hands in apology. “So much for my disguise! But may I say it’s a pleasure, a treat to be of service, if you’ll excuse the pun!”

“Oh, you are a one!” Polly hushed him quiet with a flap of her tissue, on the verge of an emotional wave. “I don’t know what to say,” she sighed gazing at the princes. “You always were a big fan of my treats but I had no idea you baked as well! I suppose it makes sense really. You knew my recipes by heart, better than anyone, even me! One day my publisher, the next a runaway tramp seeking the meaning of life away from the city and now look at you, all cheffed-up in my apron and running the place with my dotty aunt! Goodness me, what a to-do.” Polly smiled shaking her head. “You know, it’s funny; I’ve always believed in magic but now I believe in

abundance too! And all this has given me marvellous ideas for a brand new cook book. I think I'd like to get started straight away!"

Polly was as good as her word. Whilst Horace and Ms Borridge prepared for the morrow, which was a Saturday, she wrote all evening and into the morning, bursting with ideas and unique recipes. She had grand visions of opening a café run by Horace and Ms Borridge which would sell not only her buns and treats but home-made jams and pickles, perhaps even Cornish pasties!

It didn't take long for Aladdin to court Pansy. Mollified and matured she recognised the selfish errors of her way and started behaving like a much kinder Queen. As for Ray and Betty...well, therein lies another happy journey.

In due course, Polly's second book, 'A Bun Dance' was born alongside the opening of a bustling little tea shop nearby. But no-one ever questioned the ingredients in the old brown bottle as her magic still extends far beyond the humble village of Fondue.

