

Cinnamon Buns and Ghosts

Gabby Park

“Even my bags have bags, Jesus. I thought I’d have adjusted to this by now.” Anna swept her brown, curly hair into a loose bun and pulled her face away from the mirror. She trudged out of the bathroom, hitting the light switch with the back of her hand. She walked to the window and shut the blinds, trying to keep the growing daylight out of her room. A groan escaped her as she flopped onto her bed and threw the green quilt over her head.

Anna closed her eyes, fighting off thoughts that threatened to keep her awake: how much her feet ached, what time it was, who she would help tomorrow, and why she decided to open a food truck with the inheritance from her grandma. The bed creaked as she tossed and turned. Her mind wandered to the quilt: how soft it felt, how it was the perfect shade of emerald, and how happy her grandma was when Anna opened the present and hugged the gift. The pillow under her head dampened as the tears rolled off her cheeks. She used the quilt’s edge to dry her eyes and took a deep breath.

After a moment, everything started to slip away and sink into black as sleep finally came. Suddenly, metal crashed outside her door. Anna jolted awake and sat up. Through the crack below the door, a soft pale light seeped in—possibly the kitchen light. The one Anna had turned off before heading to bed, like every night.

She slid out of bed, crept up to the door, and paused, with her hand on the doorknob. The air smelled of cinnamon and sugar, warm and sweet like it did when she and her grandma would make cinnamon rolls every Sunday morning. Anna's breath hitched and she shoved open her door, running past the stacks of unopened boxes lining the hallway. Her eyes flitted across the room, desperate for something—any kind of sign. She reached the kitchen only to find it empty and dark: no light, no smells, no Grandma. She had thought maybe tonight would be different. Instead, only a large baking pan laid on the floor, dented on the corner due to its fall from the wall rack where Anna kept the pots and pans. Another gift from Grandma.

She remembered when they would bake her famous cinnamon rolls in the pan, topped with the most perfect cream cheese frosting Anna had ever tasted. The thought made her mouth water. Anna picked the pan up off the floor and held it close to her chest. She sat in the silence of her empty apartment, staring at the boxes she couldn't bring herself to unpack yet. Boxes that were filled with *her* belongings and dusty photo albums. After an hour had passed, she finally picked herself up and headed back to her bedroom, leaving the pan on the floor. This time, when she laid down, she immediately fell asleep.

"Hey, Tammi, how are we on the new red velvet cupcakes?" Anna called over her shoulder. The day had passed quickly, and it was time to get back in the truck for another night shift.

Tammi pulled the tray out of the fridge, checking each one, and replied, "All set! The cakes look great."

Anna sighed, "Thank God," and opened the window attached to the side of the bakery-on-wheels. The baby-blue food truck was perfectly refitted as a bakery, able to be moved to any street in the city. It just so happened that it had, so far, only been parked on one.

Anna had stumbled upon the food truck, one that was selling for the same amount as what she was left in the will, a few months ago. The guy selling it just wanted it to go to someone else as fast as possible. She bought it before she even realized what she was doing. The next day, she called Tammi—who, miraculously, just got fired—and they fixed it up together. They spent a week just adding the glass display case for the sweets and fixing the white-and-blue-striped awning. After the truck was fully cleaned, painted, and licensed, they had a fully functioning

bakery to take on the town.

As the two finished their prep for the night, a middle-aged woman walked up to the order window. She was dressed in a large, flowy, purple shirt with a blue scarf; wore a ring with different gemstones on each finger; and had her frizzy, curly hair piled high on her head in a messy updo. She was holding a bag that read: *Medium, Not Psychic, There's A Difference.*

Anna grinned, "Welcome back, Mrs. Calatti. Want to try out our new cupcakes? We just made some red velvet."

Mrs. Calatti gave a nod and said, "You know I can't say no to you girls, although, why you decide to operate at night, I'll never understand."

Anna looked out the window at the setting sun dipping behind the trees nestled in the park across the street, "It might seem weird but, trust me, we get a crowd."

The woman shook her head. "If you say so, Anna. By the way, how are you holding up, kiddo?"

Anna felt a sharp pain in her chest and fought to keep her smile. "I'm doing okay Mrs. Calatti. It still feels weird though, like I'll turn a corner and see her there, laughing."

Mrs. Calatti gave a soft smile and nodded. "I miss visiting her and chatting, never knew anyone who could warm up a room like her. And those cookies, I mean, my God . . . I think she'd be proud of you, Anna, and what you're doing here."

"I . . . Thank you, Mrs. Calatti." Anna felt the tears gathering in her eyes and focused on her hands handing over the regular order box of cupcakes and cookies. Mrs. Calatti grabbed the box from Anna's hand and smiled.

She started to walk away as she said thank you, but stopped and yelled, "By the way, Anna, if you ever need me to do a seance for your grandmother, give me a call! My gifts have been strong lately: I can feel the spirits are strong tonight."

Anna replied, "I'll keep that in mind!" and then, after a moment, softly said to herself, "You're more right than you know, Mrs. Calatti." Anna looked out at the street and park. A woman stood in the middle of the road holding her child, both of them looked pale and gaunt and were dressed in clothes right out of the eighties. Behind them, a man held his left arm—which had been cut off in some kind of accident—and

had leaves and dirt matted on his clothes. All three had a faint glow around them and their bodies were a bit transparent. A few more ghosts like them walked along the street. With a sigh, Anna said, "Tammi, it's going to be a busy night."

Tammi nodded, "There's some pretty gruesome ghosts today, huh?"

Anna replied, "Yep. Let's give 'em something sweet."

The night went quickly: Anna worked the order window while Tammi put together the orders. Anna would call out to the ghosts who were drawn to the sweet smell of cupcakes, cookies, and their special cinnamon buns. Neither of them could figure out why their sweets attracted the dead, or even how they were able to eat the delicious deserts, but it did, and they could. Anna remembered the first day the two of them opened their truck. A man in a ruffled suit came up to the window and asked for a chocolate chip cookie. Everything seemed normal, but, when he went to pay, Anna saw a branch sticking out from his chest. She screamed and Tammi joined in when she saw it too. The man looked surprised at the girls and joked, "Never seen a dead man before?"

Since then, the girls figured out that the truck granted them the ability to see ghosts, even when they were away from it. After that first week, they decided to name their bakery Midnight Morsels, and opened after the sun went down to quietly serve their peculiar clientele. They noticed, over time, that the sweets they sold seemed to help the trapped souls move on, or at least to find some solace in their Limbo.

Tonight, they received a few particularly notable ghosts. One was a woman who had walked dogs for a living and died when a car ran a red light. After her death, she looked after dogs who got lost in the park. She ordered a few of Midnight Morsels' pupcookies as a special treat. Another customer was a nonbinary person who ordered a batch of cupcakes to share with their friends to celebrate the anniversary of their choir group's death due to a rollercoaster mishap at a nearby amusement park. Each customer brought a personal story to Anna, who listened, empathized, and tried to help each person find the perfect treat to ease their journey in the afterlife.

Around 3 a.m., an elderly man in a knitted, green sweater and smooth khakis walked up to the counter; he looked alive, but the faint haze gave

away his real state. Anna greeted him with a smile and asked, "What can I get for you? I have a fresh batch of cinnamon buns coming out of the oven that smell pretty delicious."

The man nodded, "Thank you, that sounds perfect. I was in my home when I smelled something so delicious: just like the buns my wife used to make."

"That's a high compliment, sir. The recipe was inspired by my grandmother: she taught me how to bake these when I was a kid."

"You're lucky to have those memories," he smiled. "My grandson lives right there," he said, pointing at a nearby high-rise apartment. "He's seven now. He grew so fast. I passed before he was born. Now, I sit and watch them tell stories about me as he points at photos of me on the mantle. I decided to stick around so I could watch him grow. I want to have some memories of us together, even if he doesn't know I'm there."

"He's lucky, I was . . . hoping my grandma would be here watching over me."

"Hmmm . . . I don't think I'll wait around too much longer. I've realized something."

"What?"

"My family would be sad to see me like this: stumbling around from room to room, clinging to them as their lives continue, knowing that I waste away while waiting for the day they die to see them again, even though there's a perfectly good afterlife next door. There's an unease, a restlessness, in this Limbo, like a door is slowly closing the longer I wait. Anyway . . . What do I know?" He held Anna's hand for a moment, then grabbed his box of cinnamon buns.

She stayed silent as the man walked away.

Around 4 a.m., Tammi suggested closing up for the night.

"Please, Tammi, one more hour?"

Tammi shook her head and asked, "Are you waiting for someone? It feels like every night you keep us out later and later, as if you're expecting somebody."

Anna was caught off guard and quickly said, "No, no, I think there's just a few more customers. Who would I be waiting for?"

Tammi looked at Anna with suspicion and raised an eyebrow. Anna opened her mouth to respond to the look when she saw something out

of the corner of her eye: a motorcycle revving down the street, bringing a fog and chill in the air with it. The bike was painted with a white horse, flames spouting from its hooves. Its rider wore all-black leather and a black, shiny helmet. Slowly, they walked up to the counter, like all those before. They had no haze. Somehow, though, both the girls knew deep in their bones that this person was not alive.

Tammi spoke first, in a hoarse whisper, "How can we help you?"

"MmmmM . . . MM . . . "

"What?"

The rider held up their hand and flipped up their visor. The girls peered into the helmet, which covered a skull—just a skull—with blood red eyes.

Anna stopped breathing.

"So sorry about that! Yeah, I forget that people can't hear me with this thing down. I don't usually wear the helmet, but when in the mortal world, you do as the mortals do. Or, I guess, don't, considering how many people I greet that go without one. In any case, I am going to need a couple of assorted boxes from you ladies if that's alright. I hope I'm not too late, I had meetings all night, but tomorrow's the employee-of-the-year party: you know how it is. You'd think the reaping business would get easier over time, but, nope, just more bureaucracy. Well, I promised my employees desserts, and I have not stopped hearing about you guys all month! So, I figured, hell, I'm in the neighborhood—why not stop by? I'm a big fan of your work, you two."

The two girls, dumbfounded by meeting Death and at the revelation that Death was a chatterbox, just stood.

"Hello? Sorry—you can hear me, right? Don't usually talk to the living."

"Y-yes. Yes. Sorry," Anna replied. Tammi snapped out of it and started moving again, putting together the assorted boxes they had for large orders. Anna tried to smile, "We, uh, we're awestruck. Usually, people meet you after they die, not before."

"Yes, well, this truck gives you guys a sort of special privilege, you might say! I remember when I was tricked into making it. That guy . . . little trickster. 'Just one small favor, Death, just one little thing.'"

Tammi almost dropped the box she was holding and choked out, "You made this truck?"

"Yeahhhhh . . . I got in a lot of trouble for it. A man helped me

out—gave me a holiday for a day—and asked for a food truck in return so he could see his family: they passed away in a car accident. Of course, I warned him, but he didn't listen."

"What happened?"

"They were happily reunited, but his loved ones were forced to suffer in this place for longer than they should have. He tried to revive them, force them into the mortal world where they didn't belong. Their spirits were torn asunder, and they lost everything. No longer able to move on, not able to return. They wander, trapped here forever."

A silence settled over the truck.

"How awful . . ." Tammi whispered as she handed Death the finished boxes.

"People always want what they shouldn't, though, am I right, Anna?"

Anna looked confused. "What are . . . Are you talking about my grandma? Wait, please! Can you tell me if she's still here?"

Death just winked at her. And, in a blink, they, their bike, and their boxes disappeared.

The two closed up the food truck as Tammi ran through their closing checklist. Afterwards, Anna left, deciding to walk around the park trying to chase away her daily disappointment. In the distance, an old woman sat on a park bench, with some sort of blanket on her lap. She was feeding the birds and humming a tune familiar to Anna.

Immediately, Anna dashed towards the woman, ignoring Tammi's calls to head home. Anna stopped right in front of the woman—who had a faint haze covering her form—hoping to see the same familiar wrinkles or soft hands. To see that glowing smile. She was disappointed again. The woman looked to be a few years younger than Anna's grandma was. She had a similar, short bob and wore a track suit similar to the one her grandma loved. She was quilting, like her grandma used to, and she was sitting on the same bench as her too. Like her grandmother, she was dead.

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The woman looked at Anna, surprised, and asked, "Are you alright?"

Anna looked embarrassed and said, "I'm sorry to startle you, ma'am, I thought you were, uh, someone else."

"Who did you think I was?"

Anna replied, "My grandma. She used to sit and knit here too."

The old woman smiled and said, "Ah, then I understand the confusion. Do you own that food truck over there? It's a weird time of night to be open so late."

Anna rubbed the back of her neck, saying, "Yes, ma'am, it is. I'm hoping to meet someone. We used to chat here."

The old lady asked, "Your grandma?"

Anna nodded, "She passed a few months ago, and I miss her so much. I still can't touch her belongings that I have stored in my apartment. I'd give anything to see her one last time."

The old lady looked thoughtful for a moment and finally said, "When my Ernest died, I hoped that I would see him in mirrors and things: to know he was still there looking after me." She motioned for Anna to sit next to her.

Anna complied. After a pause, she whispered, "I keep thinking, 'Why can I see other people everywhere but not the one person I need to see so badly. I can see ghosts everywhere except for hers.'"

"I know the feeling. I thought that, when I died, I would be able to finally see him. But, after I opened my eyes in this great beyond, he was nowhere to be found. I remember being angry. So angry that he didn't wait for me, didn't want to stay behind and watch over me. I thought he gave up on me."

"Exactly! Why . . . why didn't she stay so we could make more memories, make more bread, or chat during backgammon? Did she not care? I would have stayed for her." Anna's nails dug into her hand as she balled up her fists, trying to fight back the tears in her eyes.

"Darling . . . I'm glad now that I can't see Ernest."

"What?"

The old woman gently picked up Anna's hand and said, "I think it's

better we don't see them. If we did, what would it mean?"

" . . . "

"It would mean that they had something left to do or were stuck here, unable to move on to that next place where they could feel at peace. This place, it's not meant for lingering. When you're at peace, it's time to let go and trust in your loved ones to be okay."

Anna sank into the bench and held the old woman's hand, thinking about all the ghosts she had met over the last few weeks. Their stories and their lives in Limbo, the in-between they were trapped to wander in. And then, she thought of her grandma, and remembered herself at the funeral, telling her grandmother that she would be alright and not to worry about her. Giving her permission to feel at peace before Anna realized that they would have the ability to be reunited.

"Thank you, Grandma. Thank you for believing in me, thank you for loving me." Anna closed her eyes and could, for just a moment, feel the soft warmth of her grandmother's quilt and smell the familiar cinnamon and sugar. Tears streamed down Anna's face as she smiled. "Maybe it was a good thing I didn't have the truck yet when you had passed. I don't think I could have let you go."

When she opened her eyes again, Tammi was walking up to her. "Are you okay, Anna? I was calling you; we need to head home." She looked to the bench's other occupant and said, "Hi."

Anna wiped her sleeves over her face and replied, "Sorry, Tammi, I saw this woman sitting here and I thought she was my grandma."

The old woman waved at Tammi, "Hi, I'm the almost-Grandma."

Tammi looked at the knitting woman and then at Anna, concerned, "Oh, geez. Sorry about all of this."

"It's fine, we had a nice chat," said the old woman, patting Anna's hand.

Anna rose from the bench, "Thank you for the chat, if you ever want any desserts, you should stop by."

"I might just do that."

Anna and Tammi walked back, Tammi holding Anna.

"Are you doing okay, Anna?"

"I think I am. Or, at least, one day I will be."

"Mrs. Calatti said it best, Anna, your grandma would be proud to see all this." She gestured to the truck parked at the street in the distance. Tammi stopped and pulled Anna into a hug, "It'll be okay."

The two of them packed up the truck, finally done for the night, and drove off back to Anna's apartment. Tammi gave her another hug and waved as she walked down the street into the rising dawn. Anna pulled out her keys and walked into her home. She took off her shoes, walked into the hallway, and opened the first box.

Gabby Park is a senior at UND working on her bachelor's in English, with a certificate in creative writing and a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing. She is currently vice president of the Adelphi Literary Society. Gabby loves books and is enjoying the hard work of filling her many bookshelves. She enjoys making things or doing anything creative; currently, she is creating a video game of her own with her friends. She is excited to soon graduate and join the world of editing and publishing.