

Lily Dodge

Cozy Mystery | 1st person | Present Tense | 1.7k words

“Morning, lovey!”

My grandmother Harriet greets me with a kiss on the cheek as I clock in for work. Just like every day since I was a kid, she grabs my bright pink apron, embroidered with my name in a white, curlicue font: ELLA JANE. Smiling, she lifts it over my head before spinning me around to tie a perfect bow in the back.

“You know, Nana, I’ve been working here my whole life - I can tie my own apron on.” I tell her this nearly every morning, but I know she’ll never stop. It’s our little tradition, and I don’t actually mind.

“You do so much around here,” Nana says, puttering off to mix some icing. “Best to let your Nana help out.”

She’s right, I suppose - I do mostly everything these days.

As a kid, I helped out around the shop, folding the pink boxes and rinsing out the cupcake tins. Now, I help Nana run the place, managing our small staff, taking big orders from local restaurants, and keeping track of our inventory.

Nana is still the brains of the operation, though. She designs all our unique cupcakes, using local flavors and creative icing decorations.

“What’s our special today?” I ask Nana as I make my way to the cash register and start booting it up for the day. When Nana first started the little cupcake shop *Just A Sprinkle* decades ago, she only sold her famous miniature king cakes during Mardi Gras. Everyone loved her creative bakes so much that now we have dozens of cupcake flavors and styles in rotation, and Nana is always coming up with new ones.

“Chicory Crunch,” Nana says, not looking up from her frosting-covered fingers as she rolls a thin sheet of fondant out on the marble countertop.

“Ooh, yum.” I love the Chicory Crunch cupcakes - they’re one of our more popular New Orleans themed cupcakes. First, Nana bakes chicory coffee cupcakes, rich and spicy, then slathers them with chocolate ganache frosting, topped with twice-fried beignet bits for a cinnamon and sugar crunch. Nana only makes them on days after we get a box of day-old beignets from the shop around the corner to make the toppings with, so they’re a special treat.

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The hot pink clock on the wall chimes for 9am, so I unlock the door and switch our neon sign to OPEN. Mornings are a bit slow around here, but things pick up around lunch.

Nana continues to roll and prod her fondant, and I can't wait to see what she's designing. Last week, we had cupcakes shaped like ladybugs, with chocolate chip spots and licorice antennae. The smell of lavender fills the shop, and I wonder if she's working on something floral.

The bells over the shop door jingle and I look up to see our first customer of the day.

"Hey, James," I say, waving. James is a lead artist at one of the studios that builds the massive Mardi Gras floats New Orleans is known for. According to him, artists are fueled by sugar, so he frequently stops in to pick up a box of cupcakes on his way into work.

"What've you got for me today?" James asks, leaning over the glass display case to check out our neat rows of freshly baked cupcakes.

"Chicory Crunch," I offer, pointing to the section reserved for the daily special.

James wrinkles his nose, which I notice has a smear of dried paint across it. "Not sweet enough."

"More for me, then," I say, and James grins at me. "How about some cotton candy and vanilla?"

They're the sweetest things we offer - creamy white vanilla cupcakes topped with pink and blue cotton candy icing with big puffs of real cotton candy resting on top.

"Oooh," James says, tapping on the glass. "Half a dozen of those, please, and round out the rest with whatever you think my artists will like."

"Sure thing." I grab a pink box and start packing it with cupcakes for James and his artists. Mardi Gras isn't for another few months, but I know when I see one of the floats James worked on, I'll be able to point it out and know that Nana and I helped contribute to the wild energy and inspiration behind it.

"Is that James?" Nana shouts from her place in the kitchen. "Tell him we've got leftover beignet crunches if he wants them."

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I see James's eyes light up. He loves the crispy, sugar-coated bits of beignets we sometimes use as cupcake toppings, but since they're on top of the chicory coffee cupcakes today, he won't get any.

"I put some triple-chocolates in there for you," I say, handing over the box. "They'll go great with some extra beignet crunch. One second."

I duck into the kitchen, where Nana points me to a small plastic container full of crushed up double-fried beignet crunch. After finding a lid for the container, I carry it out to James, who thanks me profusely.

"What a gift to the arts you are, dear Harriet!" James shouts. "We shall utter sweet breath today!" James raises the cupcake box over his head and dances his way out of the shop, humming his own jaunty tune.

It's quiet for a few more minutes, so I take the time to wipe down the tables inside and tidy up the rows of cupcakes I've just disturbed. Soon, I hear the bell tinkle again, and a group of older men and women files in. I haven't seen them before, but they don't seem like tourists.

I take my place behind the glass display cases and put on my friendliest voice. "Hello, and welcome to Just A Sprinkle!"

"What flavor is that?" An old lady - younger than Nana Harriet, but not by much - points to a cupcake with green and orange swirls.

"That's our Satsuma Citrus cake," I say. Satsuma is a beloved New Orleans fruit, with a flavor like sweet orange, and Nana combines it with lime and a little bit of coconut.

"Ooh, I'll try that," the woman says. I pull out one of the cupcakes and hand it over to her on one of our signature pink napkins.

"Do you have anything with lots of chocolate?" A bald man with glasses is squinting into the display case as if he's searching for something.

"Absolutely. If it's chocolate you're looking for, our Triple Chocolate cupcake is perfect."

He orders two, one to eat right now and one to go, so I start boxing up his single cupcake while the rest of the small crowd forms a scattered line behind my cash register.

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I take my time folding the box, because I'm trying to figure out where all these people have come from. They all seem to know each other, and it's obvious that they're from around here, which rules out a tour group. I wonder if it's some kind of book club, but it seems strange for one to be meeting at a cupcake shop around ten in the morning.

I finish up with the man's order and go to hand it to him, thinking I might just go ahead and ask what brings them all here.

But before I can get any words out, I'm interrupted by a strangled yell from one of the men still waiting in line. I look toward the noise and see him collapsing against the display case before falling to the ground.

The crowd all gasps, stepping back and murmuring amongst themselves. I drop the cupcake box on the counter and rush around to the man, kneeling beside him.

"Someone call an ambulance!" I shout, but when I look up, I see that the shop has cleared out - everyone who was previously lined up at the counter has gone outside to cluster on the sidewalk.

"Nana! Nana, call an ambulance!"

Hoping that she heard me, I lean over the body of the man now motionless on the pink and white tile floor. He doesn't seem to be breathing. I tell myself not to panic and try to think back to the first aid class I took at the local pool several years ago.

"Sir? Sir, can you hear me?"

I wave my hand over his eyes, but get no reaction.

"I'm going to start CPR," I say loudly, then position myself over his chest the way I learned. With one hand on top of the other, I start pumping up and down, but nothing seems to happen. I don't feel any sort of heartbeat.

"What's happened?" Nana appears in the front of the shop, her voice sounding concerned.

"I don't know!" I'm trying to stay calm, but it's getting harder and harder. "Did you call someone?"

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“Yes, yes, they’re on their way.”

After a few more minutes of CPR, I sit back on my heels, breathless. As much as I don’t want to admit it, it’s obvious that this man is dead - he likely died before I even made it to his side.

Outside, all of his companions, whoever these people are, seem to be standing in tight little groups of two or three, talking in low voices amongst themselves. Occasionally, one glances in through the windows to look at me and the man on the floor, but they turn away as soon as I notice them.

I hear ambulances coming down the street and realize I don’t know what I’ll even say to the medics and police when they arrive. Who is this man? Why did he suddenly die on the floor of my Nana’s cupcake shop?

He’s wearing a light jacket, so I reach into one of the pockets for a wallet. There’s no wallet like you’d expect, not one with credit cards and an ID card - just a slim silver box the size of a business card, with a tiny latch.

I open it up to find a small stack of identical cards, all on jet black paper with gold foil lettering, reading:

✻
MASON F. GUNNASON
PURVEYOR OF FINE ODDITIES
LEFT SEVENTH STREET, NEW ORLEANS
✻ “THE BONES NEVER LIE.” ✻

I slip one into my pocket just as the police burst through the door.