

## Expiration Date

Charles sits on the bench, watching the bakery. He is not hungry at all. As a 70-year-old man, he has encountered many difficulties through these years, including hunger. What he cares is the old lady busy behind the counter. The bakery is called "Charlie, je t'aime," Charles' favorite store in his entire life. He comes to buy cherry breads once a week, and he only appears on Tuesdays, the day he left Julia. Julia has her own family now, and she is running a bakery. Every time he finishes purchasing, he will definitely sit on the bench right across from the street, looking at her in the store busy dealing with the customers. Today is the 44th years since he joined the army and left her. Charles sits there for the whole afternoon, and he does not notice that the bakery is after business hours since he has totally infused himself in the old memory.

"Julia, if I can do something for our country, my parents, especially my dad, must be very glad!" The young Charles said in high voice. His girlfriend Julia looked totally different.

"Yes, I know... but how about us?" Charles felt her unease, and he hugged her hard.

"I want to do something 'big' at least once in my life. You know my father was a General, he was the conductor in World War 1, and I was born in the same year. I am always eager to be like my father! I think it's time!" Charles did not let go Julia, but Julia stepped backward a little.

"I understand, but I also understand what will a war bring to a soldier!" she started to lose her temper, staring at this young man in animus. "Your father, he did not come back, and your mom had numerous nightmares while sleeping, causing herself sick and eventually died. I know he is a hero not only to you, but also to the whole country. Charlie, I can't lose you," she yelled with dropping tears. She knew

Charles was the man who regarded her as the most precious treasure in the world, and he must have struggled whether to tell her or not for a long time.

"Hey, no need to cry, babe. We are British, and we belong to the side of just. God must be at the same side as we are, so do not worry about me. You always tell me to grow up, to be a man, and now I am going to get through this process. I will come back safe and sound, and also become a real man." He stepped forward using his hand to wipe off the tears on her cheek. He smiled to her, a cute, smooth, and gentle one, which was the same as the first time they met. She totally lost herself. She loved Charles, and his ambition, too. Knowing that there was no way to stop this young man, she nodded. Charles kissed her, and the kiss was too heavy for Julia to take. Her tears could not stop.

"No matter how the future will be, I must see you at your place after the triumph." This was the last sentence showed up in old Charles' mind.

"Hello, why are you sitting here alone? It's the beautiful Tuesday," a woman's voice is heard, making Charles wakes up from his old memories.

"Hey, you are the lady in the bakery. Good evening!" Charles responds, and he tries hard to cover his anxious. He never talks to her when purchasing breads because he is afraid that Julia might recognize him. Although his looking is ruined, and his voice sounds older these years, he still wants to prevent being recognized. Two blocks is the nice distance, not twenty inches. It will be too rude and obvious to leave right away, and he knows he does not want to, either. It is 1984 now, he has already left Julia for 44 years, and he has not talked to her for nearly 50 years!

"Thank you for supporting my small bakery! I noticed that you come to buy breads every week," she smiles like sunshine. He wants to escape and disappear immediately since he is going to cry.

"Yes, the breads are really good; especially the cherry ones." Dose she remember?

Cherry is his favorite fruit.

"I know. You always buy the cherry one though not many people like this flavor."

When saying this sentence, her smile becomes weaker and even with a bit sorrow.

Charles is curious, and he asks, "Then why not stop making this bread?"

"Many customers asked me the question before. I cannot lose again."

"Lose? You are betting with someone?" Julia is never a gambler.

"No, not that kind of lose. I once lost someone who is really important to me."

These words, like thunder, hit right on his head.

"I do lose someone and something as well," he whispers.

"He is a handsome and passionate man, and he loves me so much." Her smile fades, and she turns her face, looking down on the ground. "He left because he needed to fulfill his dream, and another reason was because of me. He wanted to become mature enough to marry me."

The words shock Charles. How does she know he will definitely marry her after he came back? How does she know he joined the army, as he wanted to be stronger to protect her? He never told anyone..., except for writing in his diary. Right! He did not go back to his house after he decided to disappear from her life. The diary was filled with his feelings to Julia, and the words he could not tell her in person. However, everything is meaningless now. At the time he hid himself two blocks from her, he broke all the promises.

"I have been talking about my story since I sat down, how about you? Tell me about you." Julia laughs. Her voice is like an angel; just like she used to be.

"Me? I am no one but a poor old man." It is his turn to look up on the sky, and he squeezes a bitter smile.

"Are you willing to share the stories about how you got injured? The wound seems serious." He sees regards in her eyes and soul that care him a lot.

"I...I was the soldier in the War. I joined for the glory of the Great England, and I think the guy you described had the same ambition. Well, I was in Germany, the enemies used lots of grenades to stop us advancing to their forts. A friend I knew during the War was seriously injured, and I supported him forward to the first-aid station. One of the grenades was thrown next to us and... bumped!" Even 40 years had passed, he still could not forget the picture. His friend was torn apart into pieces next to him. Thanks to his friend and God, he only lost his left leg, his hearing, and his face.

"My friend totally became pieces, but he saved my life. I am now living because he was on my left." Charles sobs, and he tries to lower his volume.

"I am sorry, I did not mean to." Julia taps his back tenderly; her eyes are filled with tears.

"I did not tell anyone about this; even after the War, I met his family. His beautiful wife and cute children were so eager to see their beloved husband and dad, but I did not protect him!" Charles shouts. He has been feeling so guilty since then.

"Hey, it was not your fault! If there were someone who needed to sacrifice, I bet your friend would have made the choice to save you. Please, let it go. Don't torture yourself anymore, and put a period right here. Pass was passed." That is the reason she hates wars. Wars take away numerous lives, tearing apart families and those who love each other so deep.

"My sorrow was caused by the War, too. He never comes back, and I still don't understand."

"Maybe he was dead, in the War." Charles replies in a low voice. Letting her think that he died was the best way to help her forget him.

"You know why I am running a bakery and named it 'Charlie, je t'amie?'" Julia looks a little bit angry.

"Let me make a guess. Your husband is called Charlie?" How cruel, of course he knows why; however he can express nothing.

"The guy I told you is Charles, and his nickname is Charlie. Besides, he loves breads and cherries so much, so I came up an idea to create the combination--the cherry bread." It is all for him! Both the store and the product. Charles looks through her beautiful eyes. He silences for seconds and speaks again.

"You said he did not come back, right? In other words, what you have done are all meaningless! You are waiting for a dead guy who abandoned you, and you still do so many dumb things for him?" He cannot bear anymore. He was so mean to her. All he wants is her to be happy and forget him.

"You are wrong, Mister. I know he must be alive, and he is definitely nearby. He is protecting me by his own way, and I just want to know why he is such a coward? Why doesn't he show up? I am an old and lonely lady now. I used to have many chances to get a good husband, but I rejected once and once. I believe he will keep his words. I will keep waiting until he shows up." Julia looks straightly at him. He knows what this means. Every time when she found that he wanted to tell lies, she would give him this look.

"The reason for running the bakery is not to remember him; instead, I want to let him know that Julia is right here waiting for him!" She continues.

As Charles hears her words, he begins to struggle in his heart. It seems that Julia has known his identity already, and he is the one who is lying to himself.

"Have you ever thought that once your man comes back just like me? He is a disable, and he has no ability to give you a better life, or he will even make your life worse." This is the deepest fear in his mind. He has no working ability, and he is ugly. He is another person to her; the Charles she knew is gone.

"If he thinks like this, I can only blame him 'selfish!' I haven't had a chance to

say anything before he hid himself." Julia stands up slowly, giving him an unbelievable look.

"Won't you blame him on abandoning you?" Charles asks agitatedly.

"He didn't 'abandon' me. He is just leaving me, and I believe he will be back. He never leaves me alone." Julia smiles; at the same time, Charles also stands up. He stares at her. Her trust to him is far more than himself, and he cannot stay foolish anymore. Relationship is about two people, and he has no reason to escape or conceal because he knows that she already identifies him maybe since the first time he bought breads in her bakery. "You are really a stupid girl, Julie." Charles puts down his cane, and Julia hugs him tightly. "You are such a jerk! Every time I see you come in, I want to call your name and hug you like this. 44 years! I keep waiting for you to talk to me, but you never say a word except 'how much?'" She hits him on his chest, and she cannot hold her tears. "Hey, it's all my fault. I am satisfied to see you have a happy family and successful business. You are really a professional baker. Did I tell you that before?" He uses his palm to shed her tears like the old days.

"I can't bare myself to forgive you so easily. I have been wondering how this injury came for 44 years, and finally you let me know." She leans on Charles, and she does not want to let go. She has waited for this man for 44 years, and she still remembers the first time he stepped in the bakery. She could not say a word, and she expected he would talk to her immediately. He did not, and so did the following weeks, months and years. She was extremely upset; nevertheless, she knew he did so for certain reasons, although she did not figure them out.

"Julie, I think your husband will be angry if you keep leaning on me." He does not want to push her away, but he has to. He loves her, and he does not want to spoil Julia's happy family, either.

"I don't have husband, ok?" Julia rolls her eyes, and the facial expression is the same

as young Julia.

"Wait a minute, but I have seen your three children, of course they are not kids now. How come?"

"You are such an old fashion guy. Is there any law saying that I must have a husband before I can have children? I adopted the three cute kids." She rolls her eyes again, making Charles laugh loudly. The sentence makes him relieved; what he wants to do is thank God and kiss her. "So, what's next?" asks Charles.

"Are you out of your mind? Of course 'we' go home right now, and you must make up for the next 44 years!" She helps him pick up his cane and supports him with the hands.