Special Fiction Section

A Painful Goodbye

By Jay Jaigon Yoon

"What's wrong?" Julia broke the awkward silence after a short but noticeable breath. Normally she is vivacious, but now her voice sounded serene and thin. She immediately took a sip of her warm coffee, as if she noticed that she was nervous, and added, "You don't seem okay."

Julia and Chris had been just sitting in the cafe for an hour, and it had become so quiet that Chris was able to hear her voice trembling. It took huge courage for Julia to ask. She had noticed that Chris had been a little different and was worried about him.

They had always enjoyed stopping by and relaxing at this café, even though it was located little away from the downtown. They liked to sit on its dusty, faded sofa under the string of blinking lights around the curtain. Julia's favorite drink was a hot latte with whole milk and two pumps of hazelnut syrup. The barista would always draw an astonishing latte art on Julia's drink with steaming hot milk, and the delicate redolence of coffee would permeate the cozy room full of warm white lights and antique ornaments.

Everything in the café felt the same, but Julia sensed that something was different between Chris and her. An hour ago, they walked into the café, and ordered their drinks. Since taking seats on the sofa, Chris had been just looking in his phone. Julia knew that he did not have any urgent businesses or important messages, but he kept web-browsing and checking his SNS, not paying any attention to Julia. Julia had broken that awkward silence.

Chris felt quite surprised that Julia directly asked him the question. She was introverted, shy, and quiet so that she often would not be able to say things in a straightforward manner. Before putting anything into words, Julia would always ponder over it several times. Many times, she would not even mention things due to her introverted personality. It was really unexpected for Julia to ask Chris directly about the situation.
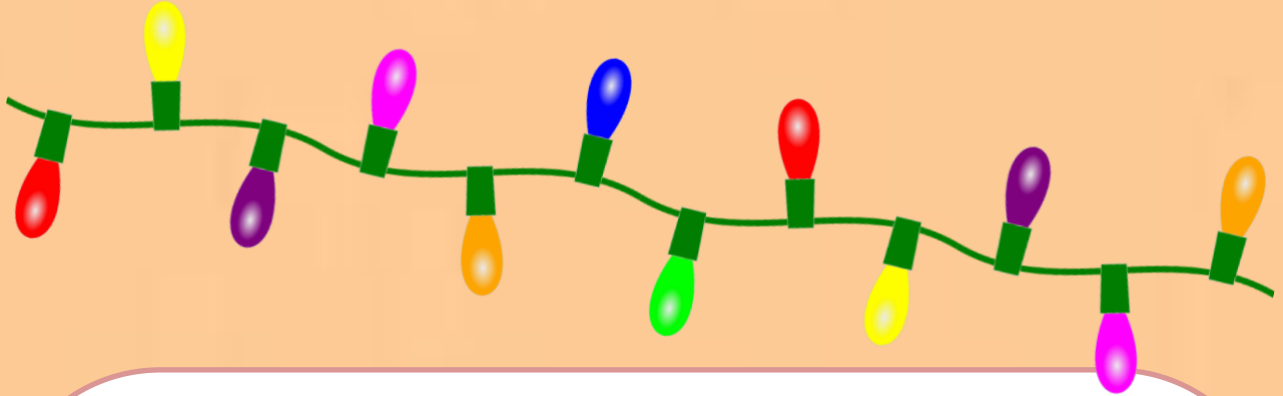
Even though Chris and Julia had already been dating for a year and a half, there had been no huge arguments or conflicts. Julia had been a perfect match for Chris; they were both very taciturn and introverted. Just like all other couples, as they spent more time together, the heart-pounding moments and romantic excitements had naturally decreased, but instead, they built intimacy and trust in their relationship. At first, Chris loved how there was a person who could always understand him and be on his side. However, as the relationship had gradually turned into companionship and support, he could not deny that he was feeling different.

Chris started to become confused whether he was dating Julia anymore. She was definitely the person who would always be there for him, but he felt as if he wanted something different, from his girlfriend. When they first started dating, he was so certain that she was the one who he would be spending his future with. He even believed that his sincere feelings would never change. It was hard for Chris to accept that closer he got to Julia, the more distant his heart began to feel.

He lazily looked down and stared at her watch. The reflection from curtain lights made the scratches on the glass more apparent. The leather band was tattered and no longer tinged with a smooth brown color of a new watch. It was the first gift he bought for her last Christmas. As a student, Chris could not afford the most luxurious watch, but Julia seemed the happiest person in the world when he gave it to her.

He raised his eyes and looked at her silver necklace around her neck which each of them had bought one at a small kiosk in a mall. Its simple Christian cross design was very appealing. Even though it was cheap jewelry, they felt intimate and connected while they were wearing their necklaces at the same time. But Chris had stopped wearing it about a week ago. Unlike the first time they had bought them, the necklace had scratches and stains here and there.

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Chris looked into Julia's eyes, the deep brown eyes that Chris had always loved. They would always glow with freshness and excitement. Even though Chris and Julia would not consistently talk to each other while they are together, Chris would always be able to read Julia's thoughts and emotions through her eyes. This time, Chris saw the worry and concern in her eyes. Slightly red and about to tear up, her eyes were waiting for him to say something.

Chris knew that he could no longer simply avoid the truth. He decided to face it. He still could not understand what exactly he was feeling. He still liked her and appreciated all the time that he spent with her, but there was no more excitement. He did not look forward to going on dates with her anymore; the mid-day café trips had become mediocre; he started to care less about the necklace that connected them. His time spending with Julia had turned into a regular schedule rather than something he would be desperately waiting for.

Just like the watch and the necklace, his feelings had changed. Without the romantic excitement in the relationship, he was slowly and gradually becoming bored of Julia. He desperately did not want to accept his feelings. He also knew better than anyone that he would never be able to find someone like Julia. He fought inside his head whether he should fake his feelings and just maintain the relationship, but he knew that holding her without truly loving her would be his selfishness. He had to let go.

He felt a deathly pain in his heart. "I don't feel the same anymore," Chris answered hesitantly. A drop of tear immediately fell down Julia's cheeks. Chris continued, "I'm really sorry but I think we should end this here."

Even before Chris could explain more, Julia stood up and walked out of the café, as if she knew this would happen. Chris could not chase after her and just had to watch her crying outside the café. He was still not sure whether he made a good decision, but he really hoped that both of them would be happy.

He slowly took a sip of his coffee that had become so cold.