

Us Once

The first time I saw him after everything, it was like seeing a ghost. Or maybe I was the ghost, lingering too long in places I wasn't supposed to be.

It was late, colder than it should've been for June. The coffee shop was closing, chairs flipped onto tables, lights dimmed to that warm glow that made everything feel softer than it really was. I was leaving when he walked in, and for a second, I thought I was imagining him.

Gray hoodie, hands in pockets. The same as before, but different, too. His hair was a little longer, shoulders set heavier, like he carried something he hadn't before.

Like I hadn't given him enough to carry already.

"Hey," he said. Just that. No shock, no hesitation. Just... "Hey."

It should've been nothing. Just a word. But it was the first time I'd heard his voice in months, and my chest felt like it was collapsing on itself.

"Hey." My voice was steadier than I expected.

A beat of silence. The weight of all the things we weren't saying stretched between us. The last time we spoke, it hadn't been like this. The last time we spoke, I was crying into my hands, and he was saying, I don't know how to fix this anymore.

And I was saying, Maybe we don't.

And then it was over.

But standing here now, it didn't feel over.

"Are you..." I started, but I didn't know what I was asking. Are you okay? Are you still angry?

Are we still broken?

He scratched the back of his neck, exhaled like he knew I wouldn't finish the sentence. "Do you wanna—" he gestured toward a booth in the corner, one the barista hadn't gotten to yet.

I hesitated. I should've said no. The logical part of me knew that. But logic had never really been part of us, had it?

So, I nodded.

We sat across from each other, the silence settling, stretching, pulling us toward something neither of us knew how to name.

"How've you been?" he asked.

I almost laughed. It was such a small question for something so huge. How do you sum up months of unraveling? How do you say, I've been fine and not fine at the same time? How do you admit that some days you forget the sound of his voice, and other days you hear it in every quiet space?

"I don't know," I admitted. "You?"

He nodded slowly, like he was thinking about his answer. "Same."

I traced the rim of my cup, eyes flickering up to his. He looked tired. Or maybe just older. Time has a way of doing that, making people look like different versions of themselves. And yet, he was still the same, too. Still the boy who memorized my coffee order. Still the boy I loved so deeply I thought it would kill me.

I swallowed. "Do you—do you ever think about us?"

I don't know why I asked. Maybe because I was tired of pretending I didn't. He looked at me then, really looked at me, like he could see right through all the things I wasn't saying.

"Every day," he said.

My heart lurched, but I kept my face even. "And?"

He let out a breath, shook his head slightly. “And I don’t know.”

I nodded. “Me neither.”

More silence. But this time, it didn’t feel so heavy. This time, it felt like something we could hold.

“I should go,” I said eventually, but I didn’t move. He nodded, but he didn’t move either. And maybe that was the problem with us. We were always leaving, always staying on the edge of something and waiting for the other to jump first.

Maybe that’s why we fell apart.

Or maybe it’s why we never really did.

I stood. He stayed sitting

“Goodnight,” I said, soft.

He looked up at me, and for a second, I thought he might say something. That he might ask me to stay. But instead, he just nodded.

“Goodnight.”

And I walked away.

And he let me.

And maybe that was us, now.

And maybe that was okay.