Cobwebs & bar corners

A girl was sitting in the corner of a small-town bar, waiting for a boy in a lovely summer dress, neatly pinned-up hair and a smile on her face.

As soon as he entered and her eyes fell on him, she stood up and opened her arms. ''Oh, babe, you're here! I've been waiting for quite some time now, what took you so long?"

His eyebrows furrowed in what seemed like painful sorrow and his eyes refused to meet hers in shame. She either pretended she couldn't see his pain or time rendered her oblivious - he couldn't bare to guess.

''I'm— I'm here, yeah." He reluctantly pressed himself into her arms, and sat down across from her.

''I'll have a coffee with three sugars," she smiled at the waiter as he turned to him.

''Coffee. No sugar."

''What?" The girl chuckled. ''You've never liked coffee!"

''Things change." He sighed and played with the napkin in front of him, anything not to look at the innoncent ignorance dancing on her features. A fleeting thought marred his brain for a second, a silent, dangerous wish he had stayed in the corner of the bar with her, untouched by time and consequence.

But, if he had stayed, they wouldn't have to be sitting in this bar, and it wouldn't have to be this hard for him to leave the past and her behind.

''What's wrong?" She prompted quietly, as if a part of her already knew.

Like a broken record, he closed his eyes and uttered the sentence he had been repeating for two years, in the very same corner of the bar. ''You have to let me go, Liv."

A beat of silence.

''What are you talking about? Let you go? Are you—

''Yes, God, I'm—I'm breaking up with you, I've *been* breaking up with you for two goddamn years! I can't do it anymore!" He shouted, not caring if anyone's heads turned. There was so much pain and suffering in his strained voice, and then he looked up at her for the first time.

Cobwebs and dust collected on her pinned-up hair, her clothes were fading as time went on, but her face remained unchanged. The past was pulling her in and she embraced it, clung to it, as if the future wasn't waiting for her out there - just outside of the bar. She was wearing her red summer dress with daisies on it, and it made his heart ache because the winter was raging outside of the bar doors. But, she couldn't hear the wind howling mercilessly, inviting her to step outside into the real world, and she couldn't see the snowflakes outside the window, promising to kiss the tears on her cheeks when she faced irrefutable verity.

He had no idea why he was coming back. He could've left her to fend for herself in the limbo between the past and the future, but they had that one thing in common - they both couldn't let go of the past.

''We—We broke up two years ago, in this corner, in this bar," he continued, forcing himself to maintain eye contact, ''you didn't take it well, you couldn't accept it, so you didn't. You stayed here just as you were that day, in this dress, with your hair like that and completely unaware of anything."

She didn't reply, so he went on, ignoring the tears of confusion welling up in her eyes.

''I've been here countless times after that. Some days I've tried talking to you like this, break up with you over and over again, and some days it would— it would just be a normal date with ice cream and laughter. I can't do it anymore, Olivia. It's,'' he inhaled sharply, keeping his tears at bay, ''it's tearing me apart."

''You're lying." That was the first thing that came out of her mouth, an attempt in denial which she was so well-versed in. Her words could've fooled him if he hadn't looked at her face, her eyes red from the tears and her cheeks puffed. ''You would never leave me."

He pinched his nose and sighed shakily. ''You can't keep doing this. It's destroying you just as much at it is me."

The waiter interrupted their conversation, carrying a single coffee on his tray and he set it in front of him.

''Uh, excuse me, sir, where's my coffee?" She questioned, but the waiter just muttered a 'Here you go, sir' to the boy and left.

''Every time we ordered anything here since... that day, you never got yours. You've tried with coffees, lemonades and ice creams, but the waiter only brings my order." He explained, but she was still looking at him with confusion in her eyes and furrowed eyebrows.

''You're the only thing here in the past, Olivia. Everybody and everything else moved on, but you and this corner stayed behind."

''You didn't."

''What?"

''Move on. You wouldn't be coming back here if you did."

That made him silent for a moment, made him think that he had finally made a breakthrough - because she hadn't ever gotten close to confessing her situation in the past two years as she did with that sentence. Then, it made him think of how he maybe never wanted her to come to terms with everything. Olivia was his memory come to life, the one thing in the past he could always come back to. If she made an effort to understand and to move on, where would that leave him?

*Did he move on?*

''What will you do if I never leave?" A question rolled off her lips that he wasn't quite prepared for. ''Will you keep coming back? Will you ever be able to forget me, knowing I'm still waiting for you, every single day?"

He stared at her wordlessly, not sure if he knew the answers to her many questions.

''We could've had it so good,'' she continued, a lone tear falling on her cheek, ''you could've chosen happiness with me, instead of... whatever this is. This is all your fault."

''My fault? How the— how is it *my* fault that you can't grasp simple truths!?" He shouted. ''How am I to blame for a situation I never saw coming?"

''I'm frozen here because of you—

''You're *frozen here* because you want to live in a world two years ago, where nothing happened and it's summer, and you're waiting for me here for the first time.'' He pointed at the table in an emphasising gesture, his voice and eyes slowly giving away the desparation that ate away at his heart.

His mind went to pick at that memory, the first time two years ago, when his palms were sweating and he approached the bar with heavy steps. The day he broke her heart, seemingly irreparably.

*Two years ago*

*''I'll have a coffee with three sugars, please and thank you!" She smiled at the waiter, and looked at the boy expectantly.*

*''I'll have... uh, nothing."*

*The waiter nodded and Olivia stared at the boy in confusion.*

*''I'm, uh," he stuttered as he scrambled to find an excuse for her, ''I'm not thirsty."*

*''Alright... So, what did you want to talk about that's so serious?"*

*He blinked a few times and he was positive he would leave a sweat-stained palmprint on the table with how anxious he was. Just because he couldn't see himself with her anymore didn't mean he stopped caring for her.*

*''Liv- I don't really... I don't know how to say this." He huffed and ran a nervous hand through his hair. ''I'm just-- God, I... I can't do this anymore. Us. I can't."*

*He almost wanted to close his eyes and brace for impact, but he had to face the moment and look her in the eye, because anything else would be betrayal for something they once had. He expected shouting and broken glass, a scene that screamed heartbreak like they do in the movies, but it never came.*

*She sat there, looking at the table in stunned silence.*

*''Please say something."*

*''Is there anything I can do to make you stay?" She asked desperately, tears clinging to her eyes and he almost couldn't bear to look at her.*

*''I—*

*''If there is, by any— any chance, that this could work..."*

*''—I don't think there is. I just— I don't love you like that anymore."*

*The look she gave him in that moment, it could break a thousand hearts and then some.*

*It was the look of a person, a lover so desperate to clutch for something that is so far gone. She looked as if she could break apart at any given moment, or scream at him until her vocal chords gave up from exhaustion. She looked so broken, and he prayed she would find another who would fix her up for good. Perhaps even...*

*''Forever." She whispered. ''We said forever, you remember, don't you? Under that... that willow tree and the stars..."*

*''I'm so, so, so sorry, Olivia. I—*

*''You never call me that."*

*''What? Alright, Liv... I'm so sorry I couldn't give you forever, but you'll find—*

*''Is there someone else?" Her voice trembled and at his prolonged silence, she could come to a conclusion that she hopelessly refused.*

*He sighed and put his head in his hands, deciding he couldn't stay because that would be just about the cruelest thing to do in that moment.*

*''I'll wait for you. For the entirety of that forever you'd promised." She muttered, crossing her legs as tightly as she could. She leaned her head against the window and ...*

Stories like these, of the past, that are plagued with heartbreak and anguish are supposed to end only one way, with a sentence like, ''*and they never saw each other again*'', perhaps a melancholic epilogue about the characters' lives without one another, to drive home the loveless truth to the audience.

But this wasn't like any of the stories that sit on the bookshelves with the number one bestseller title. These are the books that reside quietly in the nooks and crannies of forgotten corners with no conclusion, waiting for someone to dust them off and write an ending.

Rarely anyone ever does.

He forced himself out of his head, out of the flashback tugging at his heartstrings and clenched his fists.

''I *am* sorry. I don't know how many times I can—

''How is this fair?" She whispered, her tone desperately wanting to mimic agitation. ''How is it fair that you've had your two years worth of goodbyes, happy and sad, and I'm just... stuck here?''

He sniffed, standing up. ''You had one proper one, I've had hundreds of '*I'll see you later*''s when I know, each time, that I shouldn't come back."

Their whole conversation felt off, as if the repetition of their meetings had worn off on them, even though she didn't remember a single one. Their conversation had become a shell of the previous ones, because all the words had already been said, the hearts had already been broken and sometimes mended, every single outcome that could've been of him entering the bar and leaving it had already been done.

For him, the first few visits were heartbreak in its truest form, and the rest, a harrowing addiction.

Perhaps he craved the feeling of being so needed and loved by another that they are still waiting for him in the past. A sane person would argue that instead of love, that's most certainly delusion; but there are no sane people in this scenario if one of them is stuck in the past by their own choices, and the other keeps coming back for them only to leave them once more, over and over again.

Recognizing the silence as a final one, he shook his head and put his hands in his pockets, heading for the door. ''I, uh, goodb...'' He cut himself off and chuckled with no mirth behind the action. ''I'll see you later."

''Could you—could you stay? Just for a few more minutes?" She pleaded with big blue eyes that simultaneously resembled the moon and the oceans, how could he say no?

''I really don't believe that's a good— good idea...''

''I just want to talk, *please*."

She was so small and fragile, crouched up in her corner, her own little pity party of cobwebbed heartbreak. She looked uncertain of everything except the fact she wanted him to stay, and he told himself a little white lie— *just this once*.

And if once translated to hundreds of times, then he would have no problem.

He sat back down across from her, and relief washed over her face as she reluctantly asked her next question. ''Will you tell me... what happened when you first saw me here?"

''The day we broke up?" He questioned confusedly. ''I thought you remember that."

''No, no, not that. I mean when— when you saw me first. After."

He shut his eyes, remembering the day and the fresh smell of her perfume which had faded considerably and he instantly wished it would just blend in with all the other days, not stick out like a sore thumb. That first day and the few following after were the worst.

''Are you sure—

''Yes."

He hung his head low, but nodded. ''I don't know why I came back that day. I suppose I wanted to prove myself I don't care, that I could sit in this corner and drink my beer and just get on with my life."

She refused to meet his eyes, so he picked up the napkin he had fiddled with previously and twirled it between his fingers.

''When I got inside and I saw you sitting there... I completely lost it, Liv."

*The second first time, two years ago*

*''What are you doing here?" He furrowed his eyebrows and stomped over to her table.*

*She chuckled. ''I'm... here for our date, you dork?"*

*''What?" The boy almost screamed out of disbelief. ''This is... Jesus, what are you talking about?" His chest was rising and falling rapidly and he was positive that he could hear subtle ringing in his ears.*

*''Babe, are you alright? Sit down, do you need some water—*

*''I don't need to sit down, Olivia! What in the hell is going on!?" He shouted at her once more. ''Please tell me you're not going to be one of those creepy stalker ex-girlfriends, God, I thought we were good—*

*''Ex-girlfriends? What are you talking about?" She tilted her head and looked at him as if he had sprouted three heads on the spot.*

*He clapped his hands in an utter state of incredulity, running his hands through his hair. Approaching her slowly, he looked into both her eyes and was closely examining the rest of her features.*

*''Are you suffering from a stroke, Liv? Smile for me and stand on one leg, please,'' he gestured for her to stand up.*

*''No, but I'm beginning to suspect you are,'' she replied slowly, ''what is going on here?"*

*''I--We broke up yesterday, Olivia? That's what's— what's going on here.'' The fact he had said the first statement as a question made it clear he was questioning his own sanity as well as hers.*

*The girl laughed. ''What?Are you actually insane?"*

He decided to stop reliving in his retelling of the painful event abruptly, and she eyed him carefully, like he was the one falling apart and not her.

''What happened then?" She prompted, trying her best to conceal her glossed-over eyes from his ones.

''You didn't believe that we weren't together anymore, so I did what I knew best."

She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes as to ask him to finish the sentiment.

''I left."

''How did you leave?"

''Uh, through the door, I guess?'' He eyed her questioningly.

He could tell she would've giggled if the situation hadn't been devastating. ''No,'' she paused, ''what did you tell me when you were leaving? Was it more of a... see you later than a goodbye?"

''That was the last time I told you goodbye."

Her eyes were cast on the ashtray on the table, and just as the silence became too unbearable for him, she spoke up.

''So," she licked her lips, ''the whole point of all this is... me having to let you go.''

''I would say so, yes.''

She straightened her back and shook her head at him. ''I don't think you really have a firm grasp on what's going on here.''

''What do you mean?" A glimmer of what seemed like disappointment flashed across her features at his clueless question.

''You just—just stop coming back here and focus on the one you left me behind for.'' She fiddled with the hem of her dress grazing her knees, and all of a sudden she visibly shuddered. The hair on the back of her neck stood up, and she wrapped her arms around herself. She looked so frail and weak trembling in her small dress.   
Finally, the infinite summers were coming to a halt and for the first time, she felt the winter caressing her with its sharp fingertips.

He hung his head low in humiliation and defeat, a couple hundred of existential questions haunting his thoughts. ''I—I'm sor—

''Current apologies for an unchangeable past are almost always futile. Save your breath.''

He slowly nodded his head and put his hands in his pockets. In moments like those, when their final moments would play out over the past two years, he always came to the same conclusion. It would have been so easy, if life always played out like the movies people secretly loved to indulge in - where everything is black and white, good and bad, and it's so easy to reach for the happiest of endings. It would have been so easy, if loving and caring for a person were one and the same, and if you could never care without loving.   
And it would have been the easiest, if one day he just looked over at her in that bar corner, and realized he still loved her. If he had just picked her up and walked off into sunset with her in his arms.

But life never works that way, and that is precisely the reason for all those movies. To make us live vicariously through the characters with perfect happy endings so we temporarily satisfy ourselves by living in denial.

The saddest thing he realized over the two years sitting across from her was that he couldn't change the fact he didn't love her anymore no matter how hard he tried, or how many times he came back.

Ultimately, that led to the realization he wasn't coming back for her, but for himself.

''Goodbye.'' He half-smiled at her, trying to avoid the glaring pain echoing in his voice as he uttered that word for the first time in a very, very long time.

Just as he was at the door, she spoke. ''Is she the one?"

The second saddest thing was that only one party would think about the answer, and it's the same person who asked the question. ''Yes.''

''Forever?"

''I—I asked her to marry me last night, Liv.'' He dragged the words out and almost squeezed his eyes shut as to avoid the pained expression on her features. ''That's why I'm here.''

''Oh.'' She tried her best to mask the tremor in her voice. ''Congratulations.''

For a brief second, he regretted making that their final meeting, but in the same moment, he tried to imagine how awfully tragic would a different outcome be. Him with a little more wrinkles on his forehead and crow's feet pulling at his eyes; a loving wife, kids and warm Christmas waiting for him at a place he could call home, and her, across from him, with the same dress with an unrecognizable colour and the cobwebs almost mummifying her.   
No one waiting for her, only her waiting for him, and the corner of the bar still being the place she called home.

''Goodbye, James.''

He took her in one last time, and she no longer looked like heartbreak in its truest form, like someone who was forever cemented in delusions of the past she created for herself.  
She looked like someone who was tired of waiting and content with taking a first step into mending her broken heart. She was acceptance in its truest form.

Before exiting the bar, he took his jacket off and hung it on the hanger beside the door.

''It's freezing outside.'' And with that, he pushed the bar doors with all the strength he could muster, and disappeared into the freezing night.

*Ten years later.*

''Darling!" A woman's soft voice echoed through the hallways of the house. ''You forgot your keys.'' She said as she caught up to her husband, just about to exit the house.

Taking it from her hand, he chuckled at himself and kissed her on her forehead. ''Just what would I do without you?"

''Well,'' she smiled as she straightened his jacket, ''you wouldn't have anyone to fetch you your keys fifty thousand times a week.''

He put a stray strand of her blonde locks behind her ear and pressed a chaste kiss on her lips.

''We're going to have to unpack these moving boxes soon, you know?''

''Yeah, yeah, but first, you're going on a tour of the town tomorrow. Then we'll talk about unpacking. Love you!'' He winked at her and she shook her head, letting him get out of the house.

Once he parked out of the driveway, he smiled to himself and silently thanked the lucky stars for gifting him a life wrapped up in the prettiest of bows, a beautiful family and a home that calmed his soul. If soulmates were truly real, a legitimate creation of the universe where every single person has someone tailor-made waiting to be found, he was positive he was married to his.

He had been living with his wife in his apartment for a few years, and when she gave birth to their gorgeous little girl, he decided to move them to his hometown and raise his daughter there.

Absentmindedly, he took a turn into a far too familiar street, the one with all the memories and the past.

Quickly realizing where he was heading to, he debated turning around and pretending he didn't remember a thing, but you can't always avoid your past. And even if he tried, it would be waiting for him, and he would have to pass the street sooner or later.  
He opted for the sooner version, and as he was approaching the place where the bar was, he realized that it was no longer there.

A sign was lit up in the front of the building that read *'Books'n'Coffee'*, and for some odd reason, he was compelled to park his car and go inside.

The feeling that resided in his chest was impossible to transform into coherent words, it wasn't sadness, and it wasn't nostalgia, but there *was* something there, perhaps even if it was microscopic, a quiet wish that the bar was still standing.

He parked his car and stood in front of the bookstore, remembering his last day standing on the exact same spot ten years ago. With an overwhelming desire taking over him, he pushed inside, wanting to know what had happened to the bar.

The bookstore was quaint and small, with a lot of pretty flowers and other plants interwoven in the bookshelves. A lingering smell of sweetness mixed in with the alluring scent of the beautiful flowers; he immediately knew he had to show his wife the place.   
  
In all his awe, he almost forgot to ask about the bar, and as soon as he snapped out of his reverie, he noticed a woman behind the reception desk, with her back turned.

He approached slowly, still looking around and taking all the beauty in.

''Excuse me, miss,'' he gently called out for her, not wanting her to get scared of his sudden appearance.

''Just a moment!" She cheerfully exclaimed as she put some books aside on different piles, and turned around. ''How can I help you, sir?"

It took him a few seconds for it to register, for him to make the connection and conclusion, but there was no doubt about it - it was her.

After all these years, it was her standing before him in the name of all things sealed in the past, and perhaps fate.

He thoughtlessly watched as she furrowed her eyebrows, him supposing it was her trying to connect the dots because it has been so long. He witnessed her cheerful expression turning into a perplexed one, then a head tilt of curiosity and finally the look of recognition in her eyes. His features were mirroring hers, he was sure of it.

She noticed that no words were about to pour out of his mouth, so she chuckled nervously, putting her hands up in a way that old friends do when they haven't seen you in a while.

''James! What— what a lovely surprise!'' She smiled, and he made sure to analyze the sincerity of it, trying to see if there was any hostility dancing in her irises or a twitch in her lips as a sign of her holding back unsaid words.

Instead, he came up empty handed and realized there was no malicious tone in her voice and she looked genuinely happy to see him.

If he was completely honest, a part of him assumed she was still in the bar, and he was half-expecting to walk in and see her as she was ten years ago, but there were smile lines, longer hair cascading down her shoulders and there was the face of a matured woman.  
Not to mention, she wasn't in her red dress with daisies on it that would have lost all colour by now, there weren't cobwebs tangling in her hair and fingers - she was herself.

He wished to tell her a thousand different things at once; how truly happy he is for her, how alive she looks, how this was everything he desired for her... But none of it would stick to his tongue and come out of his mouth.

''James? Is everything alright?"

He blinked once, twice, and it came to his attention that he should speak to her, for the first time in two years. ''Yeah, yes, of course. God, I just— we just— yeah. It's good to see you too."

''Wow, we haven't seen each other in what, like twelve years exactly?" She remarked and crossed her arms, a thoughtful look on her face. ''God, I feel too old!"

Just as he was about to respond nonchalantly and probably make small talk about the weather and nostalgia, her words ricocheted in his brain and he stopped himself before he could utter a single word.

Twelve years? Yes, it was twelve years since their actual break-up, but ten since they last saw each other... Did she not remember?

Choosing to ignore that, he forced himself to fuel the conversation. ''So, what did you do, uh, after the... yeah.''

Not the best execution, but who could blame him.

''Oh, after the break-up? Well, as any teenager would, I impulsively packed my bags and spent the rest of my summer in a cute, little town in Northern Italy. When it came to coping with things, running away was my forte, I guess.'' She chuckled lightly and shrugged her shoulders.

That just wasn't possible.

Was she lying to him, or better yet, lying to herself? What was going on?

*''You're the only thing here in the past, Olivia. Everybody and everything else moved on, but you and this corner stayed behind."*

*''You didn't."*

*''What?"*

***''Move on. You wouldn't be coming back here if you did."***

Memories of her words when they last spoke flooded into his head, and he could do nothing to stop them.

*''I don't think you really have a firm grasp on what's going on here.''* She said to him then, and perhaps he really didn't.

The sole purpose of him coming back to the bar for those two years had been to get her to let go, but how was she supposed to do that if he was still holding her tight?

Maybe he was the one that kept her frozen in the past because that was the only way for him to leave her and keep a part of her at the same time.

''You—You spent a summer in Italy, huh? Did it... help?" He replied weakly, his head pounding from all of the sudden realizations crashing on him.

She smiled, showing off the gleaming diamond on her ring finger. ''Found a boyfriend there. We're getting married soon, so I'd say it most definitely did!"

''That's a-amazing. I've got a ring of my own, as well,'' he tried his best at a half-laugh and showed her his wedding band.

She let out an unintentional small gasp that he barely heard.

He looked up at her and she still held her polite smile, her face looking truly delighted at all the new information. ''So, who's the lucky lady?"

''Oh, her name is Charlotte. We got married three years ago, and--and we have our wonderful girl Rosie... I'd say I'm a lucky man.'' He sincerely grinned, but his elated expression deflated once his eyes met hers. There was an emotion marring her features that he just couldn't pinpoint.

After a few beats of silence, he reminded himself of the question he had meant to ask when he first stepped foot inside the bookstore.

''God, I totally forgot to ask you,'' he facepalmed, ''what happened to the bar?"

Something shifted in the atmosphere.

''They tore it down years ago.''

The tone of her voice seemed somewhat nostalgic, and he understood - it was the bar where they spent most of their teenage years.

''Is this your bookstore?"

''Yeah! I discovered the love for books sometime ago, so...'' She trailed off, and that shift in the atmosphere made him realize that it was time for him to leave.

He clapped his hands and clasped them together, looking at his watch.

''Well," he looked towards the door, ''the wife expects me home soon, so...''

''Oh, right! I guess *I'll see you later*, then. I'm so glad we could catch up after all this time.''

He was right at the door when he caught the mild emphasis on the usually common phrase, and it made him turn around.

Oh, how he wished he didn't.

The new clothes, the long hair and the big, shiny diamond all disintegrated into thin air, and her face morphed back into a nineteen-year-old. He clenched his eyes shut and opened them again, blinking hopelessly, trying to convince himself he was hallucinating.

''What..."

''I told you I'd wait *forever*.''