

# Crumble

*By Tobin Moore*

THE FIRST IMPACT was at the top of my head. It was just a tiny chink then, somewhere to the right of my scalp. As the hand on the state-issued clock ticked by, the crevice grew and I felt my brain separate slightly, the existing fissures forming vast valleys. It cut across my face like a battle wound, wrapping around the back of my neck. For a long time that afternoon its slow constriction stopped just above my heart, each pounding beat daring the crack to move closer.

Despite my rapidly fragmenting frame, I couldn't sit still. Pacing around the room, I counted my steps. I caressed the fingernail scratches on the table, trying to comfort those who had put them there. I counted how many stuffed animals had fewer than two eyeballs, and I made constellations of the dots in the ceiling tile. I counted my steps again. I tallied the dusty puzzle boxes with likely fewer than their advertised quantity of pieces. I wondered to myself if pictures with missing pieces lost their value completely or only proportionally to the amount of absent space. I counted my steps once more.

On step fourteen the first cop came back into the room. She asked once again if I was hungry. I said no, surprised she didn't notice my stomach would soon be overtaken. As she guided me out into the hall, she explained that my sister would tell me what was happening. The conversation that followed is one that I still dream about regularly. I've lost my perception of the true story, accepting the concoction produced by time and reflection. In my head the story both fades and develops detail at the same rate. It's the only memory I have that breathes and swells, whose impact seeps into my everyday.

Life moved forward awkwardly as the shards of my life grew thinner. My mother and sister leaned on alcohol, my little siblings leaned on the ignorance of youth, and I figured out quickly that nothing around was stable enough to hold me up.

The giant crack down my whole body began to splinter and expand across my entire being. Silently, I crumbled and rebuilt myself each day. Every

morning I piled my limbs in front of the mirror and arranged them until they looked whole. I stuffed my skeleton into clothes that barely fit and anxiously adjusted and affixed the bits that threatened to fall right off. I confidently carried my mangled body down the hallways at school, so no one would think to look for fractures in my skin. I even went to a party, once.

"I feel like I haven't seen you here before."

I looked up from the solo cup I was clinging to and into the smirking face of a large man in a Wizards jersey. He was framed by multicolored Christmas lights and Greek-letter-laden banners, leering at me in a haze of smoke.

Despite clearly hearing what he said, I furrowed my eyebrows and put on a strained face.

"What?" I mouthed. I gestured at my ear, then at the massive bass speakers only a few feet from us. It was not by accident that I stood in the loudest spot in the house. Up until then, the deafening music had provided an excellent shield from frat bro small talk.

He leaned in to my ear, the pubescent stubble on his face scratching my cheek as his mouth formed the words he practically screamed.

"Come up to my room with me; it's quieter up there," he bellowed.

He lost his balance and swayed slightly, a clue to his intoxication still secondary to the stench of cheap beer coming off him in waves, and his body pressed into mine as his hand hit the wall next to my head.

My heart sped and pounded, an alarm in my chest I wished he could hear.

He leaned back upright, chuckling and shrugging, and held up his beer can as a cop-out white flag.

I'm not sure what set me off that night. It might have been the Top 40 Hits on repeat or the shots

of tequila in my cup. It may have been the moment I noticed everyone in the room was so drunk they weren't even making eye contact. But, realizing I was panicking, I began to count.

I counted the ping-pong balls on the floor and the flags in the room. I counted the dozens of empty, crushed cans on the tables. I squeezed out from in front of the man and began counting my steps. At step twenty-one, he reappeared. Blocking the doorway, he flashed me a silver dollar smile. I mirrored his grin and then firmly gripped the bottom left-hand corner of my mouth, cleanly tearing the placation off my face. I placed it in his hand and turned away.

I felt him take hold of my wrist. Without looking back at him, I let that arm crumble off.



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