

Cracked

The night's a little colder than you thought it'd be.

You had stumbled out the front door, rejecting his offer to borrow a jacket - you wouldn't need it, you said. It's not that cold, he slurred.

And now you're walking back down the street, fingertips frozen and shoved deep in your pockets as you wonder to yourself, how can one's insides feel so damn hot and muddled while their outsides are numb with cold?

You tried to promise Ma you wouldn't do it anymore. The drinking, the late nights, the drinking late on school nights. But that was before the summer ended. Before the essays arrived, and the decisions, and the Goddamn expectations. Was a drink - or six - every now and then, so bad, in comparison?

You trip over your own foot then, thinking quietly, fleetingly, *maybe a little*.

Despite the bite, you inhale, deep and long until your weak drunk self feels just a little more grounded than you thought possible. As the cold grows and the darkness intensifies, you have no trouble slowing your pace to avoid the inevitable. You were in no rush to get back to the way things would be when the sun rose in a few hours.

Lazily, with a bit more force than usual, you tune back in to your surroundings. The houses were more spread out now, further apart from each other and pushed back from the road, high up on the hills. The kinds of people that lived there, so close to your part of town but so, so far up on that hill, above all the fear and the worries and the insecurities. Must be nice, you

figured. To know that you made a good decision, that you're not going to spend the rest of your life paying for a mistake you made when you were just a kid.

God, your mind was in a million directions. Even your own spinning self was able to sort that much. Did you care? Hardly. The next breath you take shakes, hard, then harder still as your insides tighten and the familiar burn in the back of your throat appears. *Hardly*, you repeat to yourself. How did it get like this? *When* did it get like this? Your parents weren't to blame. Not your brothers either. They did just fine, you figured, as families go. So what happened? When did things turn so horribly wrong, and when did you become so inexplicably unhappy?

You pull out your phone to check the time then, but your eyes aren't focusing and the numbers are swimming so you shove it back in your pocket. Your hand fumbles, and the phone drops to the ground with a smack you know you'll regret in the morning. You feel guilty, almost, for letting your emotions get the better of you, because of what happens next.

You were raised Catholic. Regardless of the usual issues, you and God were on fairly good terms. Hell, your first tattoo was a crucifix. But here's the thing about God: despite the unconditional love, and the healing and the protection and all that shit, there was more. Underneath it all, He could be a real dick.

Later they would tell you that he backed out of his driveway going sixty. They would say that, like you, he had been drinking, but that, unlike you, he would lose his license for a year and spend the next four months in prison. That he blew twice the legal limit and that he's lucky that it's not any longer. They would also tell you that he was just eighteen.

But you didn't know any of that just yet. All you knew, as you bent to the pavement to pick up your phone, was how cracked the screen was going to be when you finally got the nerve

to turn it over. It hardly mattered, you soon learned, because that was when the impact of the fender first hit, followed by the screech of tires soon after.

You felt your body go up. For a split second you were airborne. An explosion of glass sounded, sending your ears ringing so hard that suddenly you weren't sure if this was real life or just some wild, alcohol-induced haze. You were rolling - and then, abruptly, you weren't. The car sped forward with enough oomph that you were spat back out through the rear windshield like the tar you and buds chewed on the bench during games.

You weren't sure if what you made contact with afterward was pavement or not. It felt a lot like fire. Your face burned. Your entire body howled. There was so much noise, so much screaming, that there was no telling as to whether or not it was all in your head.

With the tearing of skin and explosion of nerves, you skid to a stop. There was no sense of direction - no up, no down, no right side, no strong side. You felt damp. The pavement, the very air around you, was wet. Had it rained earlier? Was it raining now? You weren't sure if that incessant thumping in your ears was the patter of rainfall or the thud of your pulse.

Your blood felt like sludge in your veins. Your mind slowed. There was no correspondence. Hands and feet and toes and fingers - nothing. Your head lolled. There was a metallic tang in your mouth, an insistent dribble at the edge of your lip that tickled as it made its way south. You could feel that, at least.

Dear God, you think fleetingly. You hope mom doesn't see you like this. You couldn't peg exactly why, but you figured she wouldn't be too happy. And that hardly seemed fair. This hadn't been your fault. Had it?

A tough question to answer, considering you could barely identify what *this* was.

You were lying on something hard. A bed? No. A prison cell floor? The specificity of the thought's enough to jolt some fear into you. No, you didn't think that was it either. Then what were you doing here?

The how of it all was lost to you.

You were left to wait, cold and damp and feeling a million different things and yet nothing at all. Your conscious swam - hard and fast and slow and sleepy all at once. It offered a nice distraction from the burning. You tried to place what you were doing, how you got here, but couldn't. Was there a before? Everything felt shrouded. You couldn't focus long enough to think further back than the last second that ticked by, a second that felt a lot more like an hour.

Years later, the sky lights up in shades of blue and red so vivid you have to shut your eyes. It takes you a moment before you realize that the sirens are no longer inside your head - they're on the outside now.

That's odd, you figure. Sirens were usually there when something bad had happened. Had something bad happened? You want to turn your head and look, but you can't.

Suddenly there's voices. A lot of them. And, like the sirens, you think they're mostly on the outside now. There's too many to hear, too many overlapping that you're only able to catch pieces.

"This way, bring it-"

"We've got a 23151-"

A face appears over your own. A man, middle-aged and unfamiliar. He shines a light in your eye so bright you cringe and reach to slap it away - *just kidding*, says your body.

"10-45, B or C?"

“Hard to tell. Get him in the ambulance, stat.”

“Son? Can you hear me?” You blink at him. “I’m going to need to you to stay awake, okay? Don’t fall asleep on me, you hear?”

You try your best, but sleep was an offer you didn’t want to refuse. The next time you open your eyes, the sky is gone and so’s the man. A woman hovers over you, a shifting white ceiling above her. *Pretty*, you think. An angel?

“You’re gonna be okay,” she says, slowly. “You’re very lucky.”

Lucky. Right. That was a new one.

And then reality hits you. And with the sinking realization of your current situation comes the sour, bitter tang of being cheated.

“Don’t worry,” she adds, as if reading your mind. “We got the guy who hit you. He’ll get what’s coming to him,”

Without warning, it’s not anger you feel, but doubt. Guilt, almost. You’re struck with the sudden discernment that, with whatever number of hours you and your body will now spend paying for your actions, this guy will pay more and suffer longer; albeit differently than you.

And that, you figure, in some sort of twisted, pain-induced train of thought, was perhaps something to be grateful that you weren’t on the other end for.