**First Place: Numbers**

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The shoes William wore were polished too excessively. It irked him; it irked him that every time he looked downwards to his feet, a glistening, tidy reflection would stare back at him.

This was all Nick’s doing, of course, the immaculately-tailored suit and all. The white shirt, waistcoat and jacket wrapped themselves immaculately around William’s thin waist. Unlike all his other clothes, these were pressed and uncreased too perfectly that it made William feel odd. The suit, kudos to his fiancé’s excellent colour coordination, was a mixture of different degrees of grey, to match the ribbons in the wedding hall, they insisted that the tie should be purple, or as they keep correcting him ‘*mulberry*'. His curly brown locks, with the help of various hair gels and products, sat tamely on his head, with no odd bits sticking out.

Even though he was slightly worried it might attract bumblebees, the boutonniere on the left side of his chest, a pale violet garden rose, calmed him down. The garden rose reminded him of Katherine because they’d picked it out together when they were making the flower arrangements, the flower was pinned right on his heart, were Katherine had always been. Even though it sounded disgusting to say aloud, the thought of that simmered his irritation a bit.

William felt a slight rush of asphyxiation at the thought of Katherine and decided to loosen his tie.

It was all too much, the wedding. Months of meticulous planning, of making sure the ribbons of the hall chairs matched the ones on the invitation cards, making sure the undertones of the bridesmaids’ dresses matched the shoelaces of the groomsmen’s boat shoes, making sure every single detail was perfect, otherwise, Katherine’s friends and family would grow to hate him for all eternity. It had to be as damn near perfect as possible.

The mulberry neck-tie felt like it was suddenly strangling him, so he loosened it and took a long airy breath, leaning against the large arched window of his brother’s manor house, gazing out at the viridescent courtyard. Right then, he had a sudden urge to do it, even though Nick had warned him not to. He couldn’t help it. He reached into the inside pocket of his waistcoat and pulled out his emergency cigarette packet, for extreme nicotine-longing. This seemed like an emergency to Will. He took one of the white sticks out and lit the tip of it hot with a lighter he kept concealed in one of his other pockets, he pulled the cigarette to his lips and took a long draw, trapping the smoke inside for a few moments, feeling as though his lungs were being embraced in a coat of warm smoke, and then he puffed it out in a plume of grey smoke. A relieved sensation came over him. But before he had the chance to take another draw, a steady hand grasped his shoulder from behind him. Without even turning, Will knew it was Nick.

“William, we agreed, *not* today” Nick looked at the cigar between his brother’s fingers, snatched it from him, threw it on the polished timber floor and then stepped on it with the heel of his shoe, probably assuming one of the maids would pick it up later or something.

William straightened up and peered at his brother.

Nicholas and William Bernard, sons of Anthony Bernard, the Bernard twins.

*“You are both my boys, I do not favour one over the other,”* was what their father kept repeating every time they had a quarrel as kids. Well, until William was diagnosed, of course. After refusing to eat his school dinner because the carrots and the peas were mixed together into one disarranged mess of green and orange, and after he kept repeating the same sentence multiple times for no apparent reason, and when he was constantly tapping something with his left finger because he could never sit still; after all the meltdowns, he was diagnosed. Things took a 180-degree turn after Will was diagnosed with an irregular mental state. Nick automatically appeared more handsome and more well-mannered next to William. Nick was seen as the gentlemanly son of Anthony Bernard, Nick who rode horses and fenced and talked to people, all that while Will was treated like an inconvenience because he preferred sketching or reading alone in his room when the rest of the family went to the boat show, or because every time their father made them play rugby, Will used to curl up into a ball in the middle of the field and scream with his palms clapped over his ears. His father treated him like vermin. He treated him as though he chose to be born with this mental state.

But being born with multiple psychological differences wasn’t the only thing that made Will abnormal. Apart from having attention deficit, obsessive compulsive and aspic outbursts, there was something else that was odd about Will.

It was simple but complicated all the same. He saw numbers. He saw small, translucent numbers hovering over people’s heads. Whenever or however he looked at you, there would always be a digit levitating above your head in Will’s point of view. The numbers were just there; they were always there. Most of the time, all he saw were **zeros**, just a round circle on people’s heads, but with some people and particularly infrequent situations, he saw some ‘**1**’s and ‘**2**’s, maybe more.

The sour truth was, he still had no clear concept of what the numbers meant. Although during his twenty-three years on this earth, he has made a couple of strange hypotheses on what these numbers actually meant, even after spending countless nights at the Grangetown pub, where he sat with his eyes glued to the door, eyeing everyone who walked in-and-out, trying to deduce why the numbers differed. W*hy did some men have a nothing above their head while other men had numbers up to five?* He never quite figured it out. Living under the fear of being called schizophrenic or something, Will didn’t tell anyone but Nick about the numbers. That was very long ago.

All of the people Will knew especially well had the number zero above their heads- all except Katherine Edwards. Katherine Edwards, his exquisite fiancé, the art-student who plucked him out of the crowd at university, had the bold number ’**37**’ airborne above her petite head. Will didn’t know why and frankly, he didn’t care.

The thing is, Will could’ve ever imagined someone like Katherine would have ever even stepped foot near someone like him. Firstly, Kath was a historical art student. Will studied quantum physics, practically completely parallel universes. Secondly, Katherine definitely gave the impression of bossy and prissy behaviour when you first met her, the type of girls who would opt for a muscular, straight-jawed and well-spoken man, Will was too tall, too lanky and says ‘err’ way too many times in one sentence. But Will likes to think of it as fate. They accepted each other. He was marrying her. Today.

“Ready?” Nick flashed his white teeth, smiling excitedly at his brother.

William smiled back genuinely, took a breath and replied, “Ready.”

They both walked out to the circular driveway, where a matte black Mercedes was parked. Of course, Nick drove because the sunken nervous feeling in William's throat prevented him from arguing today. He kept drifting back to Katherine.

Will rested his temple on the glass window of his brother’s car, watching as they drove out of the street and into the main road. The weather wasn’t as bad as the forecast said it would be, the sky wasn’t speckled with a single cloud and the sun was warm, how typical Brits hope June is like. Will thought it was weird that Nick hadn’t tried to make conversation until now, usually, he’d never shut up. He’d talk to him about Amanda or Janet or whatever girl he was seeing at the moment, or golf and other things Will found deeply uninteresting. He didn’t lecture him either. Will presumed he’d say something about smiling or not making awkward poses in the pictures, but he didn’t; he just left Will to his thoughts.

The blurry city flashed before Will’s eyes. People walking about their normal day, while everything Will was doing didn’t seem normal at all. Marriage isn’t normal, is it? They took an odd turn at the central library, an odd narrow street with crumbling pavement and dainty-looking, old houses. The street was deserted. There was a corner shop open at the side but other than that, there was no one there. Will found that strange but still presumed not to pay attention and think about the upcoming hours ahead- all until it happened.

Nick was driving at an abnormally slow pace as they passed by two men who were crammed in the alleyway just beside the car. One man was a small, scrawny man with stained clothes, he looked hollow and frightened as another man towered over him, large, brawny and wearing an impulsively aggressive look on his face. They seem to be in a heated inaudible argument, the raincoat man was practically smashing the other man’s head on the brick wall by the neck of his shirt. Nick turned towards them and started slowing the car down.

“What’s happening over there?” He said slowly, squinting to get a better look at them. He always did this, nosing into people’s business in good nature.

“I don’t know, seems to be some sort of fight” Will said quickly, trying to usher Nick to keep driving.

Nick stopped the car. The two men were at each other’s throats, the thin one was practically sprawled out on the floor as the other man hung over him. Nick got out of the car and walked cautiously over to them. The weak man’s bloodshot eyes kept darting from Nick to his attacker, as if asking someone to succour him, to help him. The raincoat man might have been drunk; he definitely didn’t think that Nick’s presence made a difference. From the car, William could see Nick waving his hands towards the floor in a seemingly calming motion, maybe asking them to calm down.

That’s when it happened, suddenly, Nick’s hands were in the air and a gun appeared in the hands of the big man. William bolted out of the car, jogging over to the alleyway were his brother and the two strangers were.

“Let’s just calm down now, shall we?” Nick said, slowly walking towards the armed man, his voice an edgy whisper.

“Take one step and I’ll decorate this wall with the insides of this man’s ‘ead” The big man said through clenched teeth as the other one whimpered beneath him.

William felt like he was walking on coal, like any step could be a big mistake. The men were only two meters away from them and Nick showed no sign of backing away.

But it was too late to do anything, without a warning, a loud, cacophonous sound broke the silence of the quiet street and the gunshot sound echoed and rang through William’s ears. Without consent, his hands flew over his ears and he clasped them shut. The bullet shot from the silver barrel and into the small man’s skull, he collapsed and a pool of crimson red liquid started pouring out of him like a waterfall as the light left his eyes.

A deafening white noise rushed through his brain. It was as though a part of him had died, something inside him was plummeting into a pit-less pit. Nick was shouting something but William couldn’t hear him. William was choking, out of breath, moribund, he was petrified- not because the sight of murder frightened him, but because of the numbers. Because the number on the killer’s head suddenly changed from ‘0’ to ‘1’

Katherine…37…