

A NUMBER TELLS A STORY

by

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SLIVER

of polished metal, elegantly tapering into a ballpoint, hovering, held in a --

HAND

strong but uncalloused, masculine, but carefully manicured. Hygienic. Guides the pen down a page, revealing --

NUMBERS

handwritten by a variety of people in different colours of ink.

CARLO (V.O.)

What do you see when you look at a number? Some ink? A mark on a page? Just a couple of meaningless lines?

PAGE

the numbers are a column in a medical chart, dosages of serious medication. Grams, milligrams, micrograms. The numbers get bigger down the page.

CARLO (V.O.)

To me a number tells a story. That is why I'm the best at what I do. There is life in every microgram, and death in the slip of a pen.

ANGELA (O.S.)

(abruptly)

Aren't you going to say hello to your mother?

INT. WARD - DAY

all at once: tubes and cords entangle a crooked medical trolley, a blanket crumpled over the arm of a chair, and on the chair--

ANGELA, 50s and hiding it with foundation a little too thick, hair a little too stiff and a dress a little too tight. She applies bright pink lipstick, mirror in hand, purse in lap.

Then too --

CARLO, 20s clipboard and pen in hand, blue shirt tucked into gray pants. Clean, tidy, rigid.

CARLO

Hello Mother.

He keeps his eyes on the patient, and in one automatic movement his pen is in his pocket and the notes hang on the end of the bed. He walks past--

BREANNE, 30s, loose dress worn for comfort, plain eyes lost amidst pale skin and undyed hair. She has been asleep holding the patient's hand.

The rhythmic sound of breathing. Three respirations a second, almost.

BREANNE

Hey Carlo. When did you get here?

CARLO

How are you feeling today, Dad?

ERIK, 80s, yellow skin drawn highly around a bald head, nods, hands fumbling at the elastic straps of an oxygen mask.

CARLO'S HAND

adjusts a silver valve a few degrees.

ANGELA

Stop fiddling with that. Always playing at being the doctor.

BREANNE

It's just the oxygen, Mum. Nurses do it all the time.

Carlo guides Eric's hand away from the mask --

CARLO

You're breathing a little quickly.
Keep it on and catch your breath.

and with subtle movement is inconspicuously taking his father's pulse.

Angela snaps her purse shut, cigarette pack in hand.

ANGELA

Well, I'm not staying here while you two gang up on me.

NURSE JACQUI, fresh-faced, enters and reads the respirator.

CARLO

(to Nurse)

His breathing is still up. Why did you turn the oxygen down?

NURSE JACQUI

It wasn't me. It was Dr Huong.

Angela turns at the doorway.

ANGELA

It's his own fault. He can't breath
because he keeps trying to talk.
Going on and on about that bloody
Yamashita thing.

Angela leaves.

BREANNA

(to the nurse)

It's his memories. Old war yarns,
conspiracy theories, every
adventure story he has ever read,
all rolled into one.

NURSE JACQUI

Happens all the time. It's just the
medication talking.

BREANNE

It would be nice though, wouldn't
it?

CARLO

What's that?

BREANNE

The treasure. I could pay off my
loans. Get my leg fixed.

CARLO

Is that what you want?

Breanne looks at Carlo. Her eyes glisten.

BREANNE

I just want him.

She turns away from Carlo and stokes her father's forehead.

BREANNE (CONT'D)

Don't worry Dad, you'll be okay.

But it's herself she's reassuring.

EXT. HOSPITAL - LATER

Cars drive past Angela as she leans against a wall in the
sun. She takes a long, expert draw on a cigarette.

Carlo approaches and hands her a sandwich from the coffee
shop. She takes it.

CARLO

You can't smoke here.

She savours the smoke, then blows it in his face.

ANGELA

You're a lot like him you know. And not in a good way.

Carlo says nothing. He's heard it all before.

ANGELA (CONT'D)

Neither of you care about your family. He's going to leave us penniless. Spent all our money chasing pipe dreams. And you. You could have become a doctor, but you were too lazy. Or stupid. I don't know which.

CARLO

I'm the best at what I do.

ANGELA

Doctors save people from sickness. What do you do?

CARLO

I save people from doctors.

ANGELA

You're full of shit like your father.

She leaves, blowing smoke in his face.

EXT. COURTYARD - DAY

A bench, green plants, a water feature. Four glass walls that look into all levels of the east wing. Peace in the midst of bustle.

Carlo sits alone on the bench.

BREANNE (O.S.)

You getting away from Mum too?

CARLO

This is where I eat my lunch.

She hobbles over and sits next to her brother.

BREANNE

It's nice. Peaceful.

She takes it in for a moment.

BREANNE (CONT'D)

He's not going to make it, is he?

He hands her half his sandwich. He doesn't need to say the words.

She takes it and chews for a bit.

BREANNE (CONT'D)

Do you remember the story about dodging crocs behind enemy lines in Borneo? He said he'd found a piece of corrugated iron and nailed its ends together to make a canoe.

Breanne closes her eyes and basks in the sun.

BREANNE (CONT'D)

You're a man of fact, Carlo. Tell me; his stories, what are they? Exaggeration? Tales told to impress us? Manic delusion?

He puts his sandwich away.

CARLO

Either he is crazy or the truth is. How do you test that?

INT. BOOKSHOP - LATER

Carlo's hand runs along a row of hardcover spines, the first few letters of each title visible on each.

His hand travels past the numerals "21". Pauses. Then back. He pulls at the top of the spine and removes the book from the shelf.

Carlo turns the book over, feeling the crisp newness of the pages.

Flicks through the book, stopping at pages showing text and illustrations of pirates, cannibals, plane crashes in the jungle.

The cover: 1950s styled boy's own adventures, the title emblazoned in bold letters "21 Amazing Adventures for Boys."

INT. WARD - DUSK

Traffic noise outside is dying down. Afternoon sun angles through the window. Carlo stands silently in shadow next to the doorway.

From across the room Carlo watches Angela angrily whispering to Eric.

ANGELA
 You worthless old fool. Where is
 it? You're not making sense.

Carlo quietly pulls in Nurse Jacqui who happens to be walking
 past.

CARLO
 Jacqui, who's on tonight?

In the background, Angela is getting frustrated.

ANGELA
 (louder than she realises)
 I don't get what you're saying!

NURSE JACQUI
 Dr Huong.

CARLO
 He was on this morning.

NURSE JACQUI
 We're short, so he's doing back-to-
 back shifts. Why's that?

CARLO
 Dad seems a little over-medicated.

Jacqui nods toward Angela, who rattles the trolley with the
 oxygen tank as she stands.

ANGELA
 .. put up with you for thirty
 years, and this is how you repay
 me!

NURSE JACQUI
 Medication seems to be the least of
 your worries.

Now it's --

NIGHT

in the room and it's quiet and dark. Carlo sits by the bed
 watching his father sleep. Eric takes in a deep breath as he
 rouses, panicked from his slumber. He pulls at his oxygen
 mask.

CARLO
 Don't worry, Dad, it's an oxygen
 mask, it'll help you breath. Just
 keep it on. I'll tell you a story,
 would you like that?

His father calms down enough to nod his head.

CARLO (CONT'D)
 It's a story you told me. I could
 never tell it as good as you, but
 I'll try. Is that okay?

Eric's breathing calms ever-so slightly.

CARLO (CONT'D)
 Okay. You're descending into West
 Papua in a six-seater Cessna.
 Hanging on for dear life --

INT. CESSNA - DAY

S.A.S. MEN, not your average clean shaven troops, but fit,
 sharp. Heads bobbing in the turbulence. The high pitched
 drone of an ultra-light engine whirs.

CARLO (V.O.)
 -- everyone knee to knee, white
 knuckled --

A thud rattles through the plane, men exchange glances
 silently.

CARLO (V.O.)
 -- wide eyed.

Fingers grip around the handles of Parker Hale sniper rifles.

CARLO (V.O.)
 The the wing dips --

Close in on a pair of BLUE EYES.

CARLO (V.O.)
 -- and you see it, a glimpse of
 salvation, down there, out the
 window, below the turbulence --

Continue to push in as a ray of sunlight falls across his
 face, closer and closer, until we are lost in a sea of blue.

CARLO (V.O.)
 -- the answer to your prayers...

Back to the --

WARD

Carlo is lost in the story.

CARLO
 ... a beautiful emerald oasis in a
 sea of Arafuran blue.

Again to the --

CESSNA

Out the window is a tiny island. PILOT, in large pilot's helmet silhouetted against the cockpit windscreen.

PILOT

Hold on boys. It's going to get worse ...

They descend toward the island.

CARLO (V.O.)

It looms larger and larger, closer and closer -- until, wait, it's not getting any bigger.

Blue Eyes looks out the window and realises --

BLUE EYES

There's no airstrip. Where the bloody hell are we going to --

The world strikes with a soul-shaking shudder.

They land on small patch on a mountainside. Rocks and stalks of grass rush by.

CARLO (V.O.)

The flight was rocky, but the landing is rockier. There is no strip. And the blue expanse is the edge of the world and it lurches forward far too quickly.

Through the cockpit window, the plane is about to run off the mountainside.

FADE TO WHITE

The sound of rattly, laboured breathing. Slowing, calming.

FADE IN:

Eric on the hospital bed, looking at the ceiling.

Carlo, on the chair beside him, hand on his fathers's wrist.

CARLO

You spend the whole time praying for the journey to end, and now it's ending too soon.

One last time to --

EXT. ISLAND -- DAY

The Cessna, meters from the edge of the cliff. Military men step out onto the grass.

Back to --

THE WARD

Carlo has a tear in his eye. He finally lets his father remove the mask.

ERIC
(wheezing)
Solomon Islands.

Carlo leans closer.

ERIC (CONT'D)
It was the Solomons ... an
engineering trip.

CARLO
No. West Papua. A covert mission in
1975. You told me.

ERIC
In 1975 ... there ... was no West
Papua.

A flicker of a smile on Carlo's face.

Dr Huong enters and takes Eric's blood pressure. Carlo gets out the boy's adventure book. Hong picks up the clipboard at the end of the bed.

CARLO
You ever read this book?

Huong holds his pen above the medical chart.

HUONG
(not paying full
attention)
Which one?

CARLO
Twenty-one. Twenty-one Adventures
for Boys.

Huong writes on the chart and places it back on the end of the bed.

HUONG
I'm not much into stories.

Huong leaves.

Carlo leans in close, right up to Eric's ear.

CARLO
You fully understand what I'm
saying to you?

Eric nods.

CARLO (CONT'D)
You know what I want?

Eric takes a puff from the mask and removes it again. He
nods.

CARLO (CONT'D)
Then tell me. Yamashita. Tiger's
Gold. Where exactly?

Carlo leans in with his ear to his father's mouth. Eric
begins to whisper.

ERIC
(barely audible)
Cagayan de Oro ...

Carlo continues to listen as Eric whispers. The ward suddenly
seems small.

LATER

Eric is gasping for breath. More than three respirations per
second. The mask lies beside his hand, but he is too weak to
lift a finger.

Carlo stands, and looks down on his father. Exhausted.
Vulnerable.

CARLO
You know I can't let mother find
out about this.

Eric turns his head slightly, trying to make eye contact
between breaths.

CARLO (CONT'D)
The drugs the doctor is prescribing
you. They could make you say
anything. Lies ...

Carlo picks up the pillow on the chair. He turns it over in
his hands.

CARLO (CONT'D)
... the truth.

Eric closes his eyes, waiting for the inevitable.

Carlo gently puts the pillow down back on the chair. He walks over to the end of the bed, and picks up --

THE MEDICAL CHART

He runs the end of his ballpoint down the chart, stopping at numbers all with the same handwriting.

CARLO (V.O.)
I never miss a detail. That is why
I'm the best at what I do. There is
life in every microgram, and death
in the slip of a pen.

The numbers he stops at down the page all read 12.

CARLO (V.O.)
To me a number tells a story.

He stops at the last number, the one Dr Huong just wrote.

CARLO (V.O.)
And the number I read is 21.

CUT TO BLACK