

Sixty to Zero in Just One Shot

Gweneth walked silently through the house, breathing in its early morning scent, drawing little comfort from its warmth. She had no direction in mind, no room, no purpose, just aimless wandering. At some point, she found herself in Timothy's room, preserved eternally since she lost him. She sat on his bed and took in all that remained of her son – snowboarding posters took up what wall space the Blink 182 posters didn't. She had made his bed the morning he left this world, silently cursing him for his messiness – now she wished she hadn't. On his desk in the corner was a stack of books – Advanced Algebra, U.S. History, Modern Rhetoric, Physics, Grapes of Wrath, Advanced Guitar, and Intro to Sports Medicine. Next to his schoolbooks was a mess of staff paper, filled with music he would never again play. She looked to the other corner, where his bass guitar and cello sat, gathering the dust of instruments serving more as a memorial shrine than a source of joy – once outlets for teen angst, now just as hollow as their sound holes.

As she took it all in, the life that would not be, she waited for the tears to come. She knew they would and she knew she would not recover quickly. Gweneth had lost people. Timothy wasn't the first. Grandparents, dad, uncle, friends – all trivial in contrast to the deep wrenching pain that shreds the heart at the loss of a child. The first tear began to well up, then they were all falling – floodgates. She lay down and heaved big ugly sobs. No amount of time healed this wound. Five years had passed and she still hurt – no, she hurt more. Each birthday he didn't get. Graduation. College. Marriage. Children. Love. Heartbreak. Career. Life. All gone. With one bullet. All gone. And it hurt more and more each day.

She must have fallen asleep at some point because the shadows had grown long in the room and the air was cold and still. She sat up, smoothed out her dress, wiped her tear-streaked face with her hands, and left Timothy's room empty, hollow, and seeking to numb the ever-present ache. Rob was downstairs. He hadn't even come up to check on her – she supposed she didn't blame him. She didn't complete this ritual daily anymore, perhaps once a month now, and she tried to only lose herself while Rob was at work so as not to send the knife deeper into his soul. He lost a child too, as he loved to remind her when her pain became too much for him to bear. He meant well. She knew it. But he couldn't understand – refused to maybe. Another way women are stronger than men, she thought. Not strong enough to bring them into the world and certainly not strong enough to face the pain of them leaving this world, but had she really bore this pain any better?

"I don't give a damn, John. Get it fixed and get them back to the table." Gweneth was once again dealing with the aftermath of some arrogant, young, and overly ambitious intern

thinking he would be better suited to handle the multi-million-dollar account she had worked for months to land. It was all down to one meeting that was a formality more than it was a signing. But little Johnny decided to go rogue and discuss the fine points at length with the CEO of Tamasaki Industries. This, of course, spooked him and led him to reconsider because little Johnny came off like the arrogant, inexperienced prick he was and this CEO did not appreciate being talked down to by a nobody intern.

“Gwen- I mean Ms. D’adario – I didn’t mean to –” John stumbled.

“Really, John? That is what you’re going with? That’s why Mr. Tamasaki saw right through your bluster and got cold feet. The first lesson in this business is that you always mean to – even when it’s wrong. That is why you failed in your attempt to usurp this client.” She hated that he had become so comfortable as to think he could call her by her first name. It was her fault for giving him the leniency. He had just reminded her so much of Timothy – driven, excited, and stubborn.

“But, I didn’t ... well I did, but I wasn’t trying to- ” John was digging his hole deeper with every word and he knew it.

“Just stop. Fix it. I’ll decide what to do with you later.” She cut him off.

She dismissed him with a wave of her hand. This kid would never learn, and she would likely need to let him go. She rarely took on young men as interns for this exact reason. Even the best of them get to thinking they are superior once they learn a thing or two. They are all wrong in the end. Backstabbing and clawing to get to the top was the nature of what she did for a living, but she thought John was different somehow – stupid mistake.

As she shuffled through her contacts to find Mr. Tamasaki’s number, the phone on her receptionist’s desk rang incessantly. How was she going to turn this around? John had used an old draft of the internal memo on the deal to try to strong arm Tamasaki into a point that Gweneth’s boss had really been disappointed to see removed in the final deal points. What John wasn’t privy to was the conversation Gweneth had with Clint Overstreet, owner and CEO of Greenline Financial Brokers, detailing the ways that deal point would have been detrimental to the firm if left as is. John was an ill-informed intern and had no idea that Clint, Tamasaki, and Gweneth were ecstatic that a solution was found to be more beneficial to all the parties – a solution Gweneth poured over the financials to put together in those grueling 72 hours after her meeting with Clint. So, it was no surprise Tamasaki got spooked when hot shot John decided to try to needle him into the original clause. Idiot. John nearly tanked the entire deal, which would cost the firm millions if she couldn’t talk Tamasaki off the ledge.

Where was that contact card? Damn it, why had she been so stubborn in keeping a paper rolodex? Half of the intern staff thought it was a piece of art on her desk. Misty had encouraged her to digitize her contacts list, but Gweneth was old school, coming up in this man's industry, having to fight tooth and nail to get each and every one of those contacts. She was not about to just put them into a database that any idiot could access and try to poach. She knew her skills and knew none of her clients could be easily stolen, but with enough misplaced arrogance and blustering, those clients could be burned. Where in the ever-loving hell was Tamasaki's number?

"Misty, can you get me the contact info for Tamasaki, please?" Gweneth asked over the intercom.

No answer.

"Misty! Are you there?" she asked again over the intercom.

No answer. And that incessant phone kept on its persistent ringing. Where the fuck was Misty? After a couple more attempts to raise her, Gweneth finally just got up and walked out to the receptionist's desk.

It was a beautiful office suite. Gweneth had been an integral part of the design of the offices, reaching back to her early years post-bachelor, when she had no money and a big dream to design interiors. Long story short, she ended up in finance when she finally realized the interior design gig wasn't going to pan out for her. But she never lost her passion for it, and she got to spread her creative wings on this building. Each partner had their own suite, complete with a waiting area and dedicated reception, touting floor to ceiling, one-inch glass walls with push button obscuring capability. Transparency with the ability to privatize. Gweneth's office was simple, modern, with two leather wingback chairs facing a glass and metal desk housing a single laptop. The shelf behind her desk was piled high with paperwork, current and past deal files, and littered with a smattering of family photos, which were mostly shoved to one corner to make room for the veritable trees' worth of paper.

Timothy and Rob's smiling faces gazed out from one frame – an 8-year-old Timothy holding up his first catch on the father-son fishing trip they took to Tahoe. From another frame, the three of them smiled broadly in the obligatory Sears family portraits when Timothy was 13 and going through his punk phase. Needless to say, she was less than thrilled when Timothy had shown up to breakfast that morning with a neon pink mohawk and EMO-style eyeliner smeared around his bright green eyes. Rob had laughed, but Gweneth was furious. She demanded he march right back upstairs and shave the mohawk off. After a shouting match and several murmured curse words, Timothy went upstairs in a huff and shaved his

head...with a Bic razor. Last year when Timothy came to see her on Mother's Day – she was working the weekend on one of the biggest deals of her career and missed the holiday, but he insisted she still feel loved on her day – he begged her to take the photo down or replace it.

“No way, bud. Your shiny head will forever adorn my desk as a reminder of your teen angst. A landmark to all 13-year-old punks to beware the ‘mohawk before pictures’ peril.” She had told him.

“Come on, mom. It's awful! I look like a cue ball!” he begged.

“Nope. No room for negotiation on that one.” She laughed.

She wished she could say she never worked another Mother's Day – never worked any other holidays – but work always had a way of demanding her presence and she missed a lot of Timothy's teen years.

“Misty! What is going on with you? I need – ” She stopped short when she saw the look on Misty's face. Misty had the phone to one ear, and a news report was playing on her laptop. She was sitting in her office chair – a rarity, as her standing desk was almost always in the standing position – her deep mahogany eyes red and tears rolling down her face.

“What's going on?” Gweneth asked, genuinely concerned. She really was fond of Misty, who had been with her since her early years as a junior analyst at the firm. She hoped everything was ok – Misty's dad was getting on in years and had been struggling with the early effects of dementia. Gweneth sent a silent prayer up for Misty's dad and asked again, “Misty, what's up? Is everything ok?”

Misty just looked at her – was it guilt on her face? Was it pity? Gweneth couldn't get a read on her.

“I, I...Oh, Gweneth, I am so sorry.” And with that Misty burst into tears. “You need to get to the school, right away...there's been...”

“What? What school? What are you talking about? Is it a deal? Is it Tamasaki? I don't understand.” Gweneth said, mildly annoyed at Misty's theatrics.

“It's Timothy, Gweneth. There was a shooting at the school. You need to get there.” Misty said. “I will clear your day – go. Now.”

Gweneth didn't comprehend the words. She heard them. She understood them. She did not comprehend. She was whirling. Her heart hammered in her chest, threatening to escape. Her legs became wobbly, dangerously close to spilling her all over the plush, teal carpet – the only real bit of color in the office. So many thoughts flew through her mind.

He's fine. He's ok, he has to be. Those words became her mantra. Those words got her to the school somehow. They kept her upright as she weaved through traffic in a dangerously wild panic. She had really made it in this world. She had the high-power career, the family, the car, the house, the vacations – well, she could afford the vacations, she just never vacay-ed on the vacations. The career was what got all the other stuff, and she was hooked on the other stuff, thus she was hooked on work. But what did it all mean if...she couldn't even finish the thought.

After several close calls and a likely pileup caused by her erratic driving, she finally pulled up as close to the school as she could get. It was the best school in the district – the city – hell, the state. Some opined that the Covey Hills Preparatory High School was the best school in the nation for the children of anyone who was someone to continue their parents' legacies and maintain the family influence. Its red brick exterior and mosaic tile entry stood stark in the residential neighborhood. A beacon of hope, education, and futures. It currently looked more akin to a crack house with all the police, ambulance, and fire vehicles surrounding it, yellow caution tape wrapped around the hundreds-year-old oaks standing majestically, ensconcing the brick behemoth of a school with pops of green, red, yellow, and orange as the trees began to shed their leaves. She noticed several front windows were shot out as she put the car into park in damn near the middle of the road and exited without her keys, purse, or anything but a sense of impending doom wrapping around her.

Her eyes stung mildly from what could be pepper spray or tear gas in the air. Absolute chaos hit her hard all at once as the cacophony of smells, screams, wails, and mad, panicked faces met her behind the yellow tape. A police officer was manning the tape and a few more were assisting with crowd control as more and more parents joined the mass of bewildered, unbelieving, terrified onlookers.

"Ma'am, you can't go in there." Gweneth vaguely heard the police officer say as she collided with him and all the others, attempting to breach the perimeter.

"Fuck you! My son is in there!" she retorted, but couldn't get past him. He looked at her with pitying eyes but would not let her past. She hadn't even been to the school since Timothy's freshman year. Rob usually did all that stuff. Timothy was a senior now. Where had the time gone? She heard someone shout her name – Timothy? She whirled around to see Rob. He grabbed her and pulled her into a bear hug. He was taller and broader than she was, safe. He was always her safe place. She buried her head into his chest.

"Rob, where is Timothy? He is ok, right. He has to be ok." She hated how weak – how small she sounded.

“Gweneth, oh, baby. He...He’s gone.” Rob began to sob softly, his chest heaving as he held Gweneth.

She pushed him hard against his chest.

“What?! Why would you say that. No! NO! YOU’RE WRONG! NOOOOO!” without knowing really why, she began smashing her fists against his chest, screaming. Screaming with what felt like no end. “I refuse to believe this. You are lying. Why would you lie to me like that?!” She pushed him one more time, but when she looked into his bright green eyes – Timothy’s eyes – she knew. She crumpled to the ground, screaming? Maybe. Wailing? Maybe. She didn’t remember much after that. Flashes of the morgue. Snippets of the story – Timothy saved his whole class – sacrificed himself. He was a hero – took out the gunman with an utterly selfless act of bravery – she should be proud. But fuck that. She didn’t want to be “proud” she wanted her son. And he was gone. Forever. In an instant.

Now she descended the stairs in their home. Their quiet home. No more arguments about hair, about grades. No more lectures about the importance of higher learning. No more hours of cello practices with all the squeaks and screeches that eventually gave way to beautiful melodies when the music finally clicked. Just a slightly too-loud T.V. and a shell of a husband who just works, drinks, sleeps, repeats. Just her and her thoughts – she couldn’t go back to work. She had tried, but the passion was gone. Now it was just her and her regrets – worked too much, didn’t spend enough time with Timothy, missed that recital, that band performance, that snowboard competition, that breakfast where Timothy finally got the concept of long division. She would never meet his first wife, his first child, never know his pride in success. She would only have this. This meaningless life of waking, wandering the house after Rob left for work, and drowning in grief. This was her hell. She lost the most important thing in her life after failing to grasp just how important it was. She failed and now she lived in this perpetual loop of sadness. Everything gone in just one shot.

** Submitted to Reedsy #1 Inaugural Literary Contest - "Write a story that includes change or transformation."