

Matias Travieso-Diaz 32 minutes ago

Fiction: Atonement by Matias Travieso-Diaz

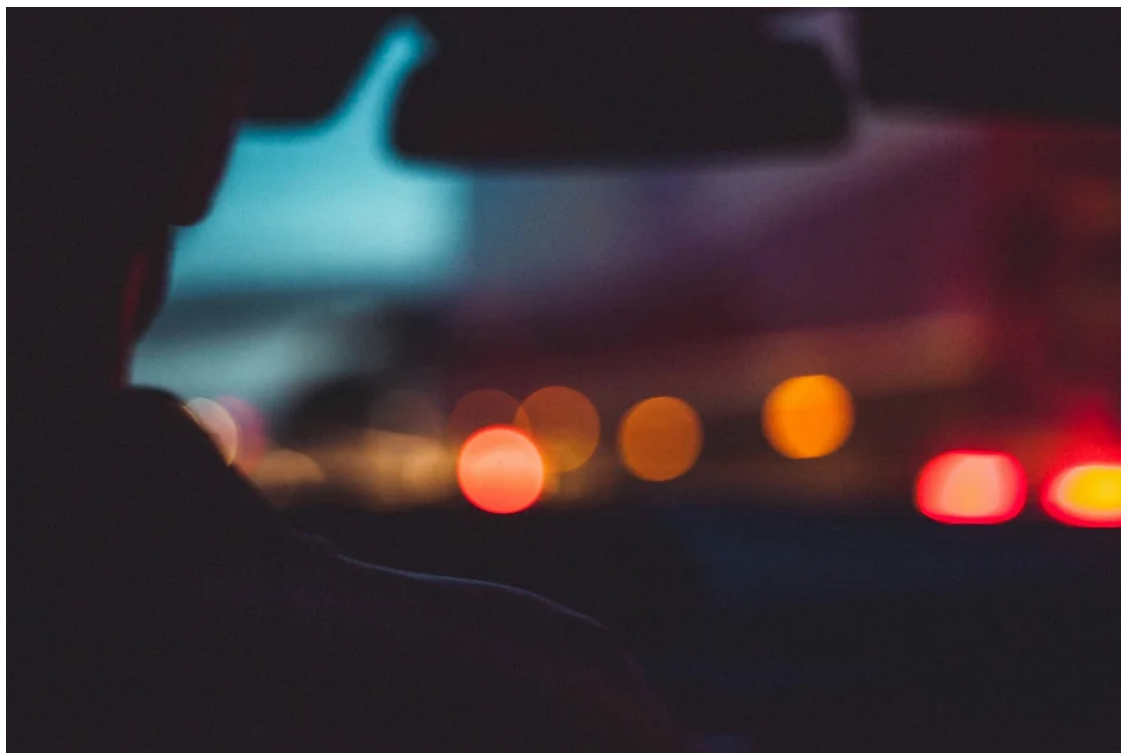


Photo Source: [Unsplash](#)

*The truth is you can never truly make amends for the hurt you cause;
you apologize, you try to atone, at best the scars lighten but they don't disappear.*

Justin A. Reynolds, [Early Departures](#).

What caused the accident? The night was dark, there was a rising fog, the country road was curvy, and Jeder was driving a bit too fast and perhaps had downed one cocktail too many at the party. Whether any or all these factors contributed, the GMC Sierra pickup truck left the pavement, broke through the surrounding shrubs and boulders, flew for some seconds through the air, and plunged with a crash into the muddy creek below. Jeder was dead on impact, crushed against the steering wheel, as he was wearing no seatbelt.

A resonance, like a voice emanating from the void, beckoned him: "Come, spirit, for you are to be assessed."

Jeder's spirit did not react well to the summons. "I can't go yet. I left things unfinished, matters that require my attention. I must go back."

There was no anger or irony in the response from the resonance: "Most say that. Death finds most humans unready. But the affairs of the living take care of themselves, despite the absence of the departed."

Jeder's spirit wrung its non-existing hands with distress. "Not in this case. There are important things that will not be resolved unless my living body takes care of them!"

"What things are these that cannot be dealt with by others in your absence?"

"I need my body back to remember them exactly. But I know they are crucial!" Jeder's spirit fragmented and reformed rapidly, mimicking the motions of a living man convulsing with anguish.

There was a long pause, as if the unseen presence was considering matters or consulting with another. At the end, the resonance sounded again: "Very well. Your distress is severe and must be tempered if your soul is to be properly assessed. You will be returned to life at a moment twenty-four hours ago. You will retain the urgency you now have of addressing those pending matters that are so important. Whether or not you resolve them, your spirit will return at this time and place once the day is over."

When Jeder woke up again, he took a long, hot shower, shaved and groomed carefully, and dressed in casual, if fashionable clothes: a Zegna cashmere coat, Zanella trousers, Louboutin loafers. By the time his toilette was complete, the sun had risen above the horizon and he felt hungry. He got in his truck and drove to a nearby café, where he picked up a copy of the Wall Street Journal and ordered his favorite breakfast: a lumberjack omelet, pancakes, juice, and coffee. He leisurely consumed the food, drank two cups of coffee, and skimmed through the news of the world through the paper's conservative filter.

Once breakfast was over, Jeder set to the task of planning his day. He had recently retired from work at age fifty-five, after a successful career as an investment banker had left him with more money than he could expect to spend, since he was divorced and his ex-wife and children were on their own. He had no pressing duties and had scrupulously avoided committing himself to the political engagements that often come to people of his status. He was free as a bird, without obligations or demands on his time or resources.

Jeder was in the process of deciding whether to go play some tennis when disquiet disrupted his planning. Was he not supposed to do something important today? Try as he might, however, nothing was coming to mind, even though the nagging feeling of urgency remained.

He placed a call and made an appointment with the tennis instructor at his country club for an hour hence. To kill some time, he went to the Barnes and Noble outlet in the shopping mall to see if the next thriller by his favorite mass-market author had arrived. The book was not in yet, so he ambled through the stalls looking for something not too demanding to read.

Finally, it was time for his tennis lesson. Jeder played absently, his mind elsewhere, and once the lesson was over, he sat in the members' lounge and tried to elicit from his slippery mind the task that continued to elude him. It was getting close to lunch time, and an idea occurred to him: he would call his one-time flame Carmela and invite her to break bread and perhaps spend some quality time together at her apartment. They had dated years before but their relationship had turned by mutual consent into a stream of casual encounters. She remained the equivalent of doing the crossword puzzle – something Jeder would do when more exciting alternatives were not available. She probably felt the same way about him.

They spent a languorous afternoon eating Japanese carryout, drinking cup after cup of sake, watching old episodes of Law and Order, and having sex between bursts of desultory conversation. When Jeder went to the bathroom to clean up after the last coupling, he noticed the sun was setting on yet another meaningless day. He said goodbye to Carmela and headed back unhurriedly towards home.

The thought finally broke to the surface, despite his unconscious attempts to avoid it. It had been many years since he had last visited Anna, another woman with whom he had an affair at the time he was still in college. Unlike Carmela's, Jeder's separation from Anna had been painful and not without consequences. He had gotten Anna pregnant and urged her to have an abortion, which she had declined to do. He then had abandoned her, claiming that as an unemployed student living on government loans he could not afford to raise an unwanted child.

Their child, a sickly and undernourished boy named Jack, was plagued by stunted growth and poor cognitive development. Anna had gone through a series of menial jobs and had been hungry and stressed while the unborn was growing in her womb, and attributed Jack's problems to the privations she had to endure during those nine months. She, of course, resented Jeder for his abandonment, and had filed a paternity suit against him. Ultimately, Jeder had been confirmed to be Jack's father and ordered to pay child support, which he reluctantly had done. He wanted to have nothing to do with either mother or child, and apart from sending out monthly checks he ignored the family he could have had.

His only contacts with Anna had been the few times in which she sought more help from him due to one of the many health crises that Jack experienced. Even though he had become more affluent following graduation, Jeder uniformly refused to help her and his child, for he felt the need to punish Anna for failing to agree to an abortion and saddling him with an unwanted son and an unnecessary expense.

It was only lately, three decades after the end of their affair, that Jeder had started feeling regret over the abandonment of his lover and child, dead at eleven after a few years of miserable existence. He had tried to see Anna and make peace, but she refused his attempts to contact her and had moved farther and farther away, to the outer suburbs of the city, and lived there, alone.

Jeder had tracked her down but was leery of the confrontation that would take place when they finally met. He dreaded the encounter, but he finally realized that the reason he had to see Anna was that today would have been Jack's thirtieth birthday, a milestone he would never reach. He had wronged the child and

his mother, and he must make amends. He had to pay his debts.

It was well into the evening when he arrived at her neighborhood, a scattering of wooden cottages at the edge of a forest. The light on the porch of her home was on, but the interior was dark and appeared uninhabited. He hesitated for a moment, but finally rapped on the door and called out: "Anna, please open. It's me, Jeder!"

There was no answer. He repeated his call once, and then again, more loudly each time. Jeder was about to turn around and leave when the noise of shuffling feet sounded not far from the entrance. A switch was flipped on and the door opened.

Jeder gasped. In front of him was a stranger. Anna was now fifty, but this woman looked much older and exhibited clear signs of decrepitude: bent body, a face that was a mess of wrinkles, head covered in scraggly white hair. Once beautiful, she now elicited compassion rather than desire.

Jeder thought he might have the wrong address and was starting to turn around, when the woman greeted him: "Jeder! What do you want?"

Recovering, he replied: "Hello, Anna. I need to talk to you. May I come in?"

"There is nothing for us to talk about" she replied in a disinterested tone, but stood aside, allowing him to enter.

The front room of the cottage was minimally furnished with a threadbare couch, a dining table with four metal chairs circling it, and a club chair that faced an old TV set on a stand. Jeder walked in the room and stood by the couch. "May I?" he asked in a thin voice. Anna gestured her acquiescence and he sat down heavily. She shuffled after him and sat across from him on the club chair.

"I've come to set things right between us" he began. Anna cut him off acidly: "How?"

"I've done wrong to you in many ways, for many years..." he started again. The woman again interrupted him: "You sure have. So what?"

Jeder could not find the words to express the regret he now felt. "I I thought that I could help you live better from now on ..."

"Better how?" she challenged.

"I thought you could move to a nicer place, stop working, maybe travel a bit..."

"You mean you came to offer me money??" she replied incredulously.

"Well, yes..." He tried to explain, but the words felt hollow on his mouth and he swallowed them.

“What would I do with your money ... now?”

“As I said, live better than you have during all these years.”

“How would your money help my life become better? My child died long ago. My youth is gone. I have heart trouble, diabetes, and severe pain in all my limbs. I got no education and have no friends...” She trailed off.

Jeder insisted: “I’ve done you wrong, I know. I can’t fix most of it, but let me at least make things a little better for you in the future!”

She uttered a thin laugh. “You mean, make things better for *yourself*. You want to buy my forgiveness. Make my resentment go away with cash, so you’ll feel less guilty.” Then, shaking her fist and raising her voice for the first time: “I’m not playing your game. Go away! I don’t want anything from you!”

She remained sitting, immobile, without uttering another word. Jeder got up slowly. He extracted the checkbook from the inside pocket of his jacket, and quickly wrote a check, tore it off, and dropped it on the dinner table. “You can cash it or throw it away. I hope you put it to good use. You need it.”

He let himself out of the cottage, not looking back at the still sitting woman.

As he drove off, the weight of his failure became intolerable. “It’s hard to atone for your sins when forgiveness is denied,” he told himself. “Perhaps I did not deserve to be granted a chance to atone.”

The night was dark, there was a rising fog, the road was curvy, he was driving a bit too fast, he had downed many cups of sake, and was upset about his failed attempt at setting things right. Soon he went off the road. As he did, a strange sense of *déjà vu*, an incurable hopelessness, seized him, lasting just until the truck slammed into the river bed.

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Well over a hundred of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in paying anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. (Three of his short stories, "Release," "Scheherazade's Last Tale," and "A Walk on David Lane," have been previously published by Twenty-Two Twenty-Eight). A collection of some of his stories, "The Satchel and

Other Terrors” is available on Amazon and other book outlets.