

Read@Short-Story.Me

Making Amends

Written by Matias Travieso-Diaz Hits: 16 Star ActiveStar ActiveStar ActiveStar
ActiveStar Active

Vote 5

The beginning of atonement is the sense of its necessity.

Lord Byron

If only I had Maybe I should What can I do? ... Theo's thoughts drifted aimlessly, like a lotus floating on a pond, switching from regrets about past errors to misgivings about his impending demise. It was his eightieth birthday and, at an age where most people have already sat down to await the inevitable, he still debated whether the circle of his existence was already closed or if there was still an opportunity for him to accomplish more.

Theo finally realized that the most important thing he had left to do was make amends for his misdeeds. But amends to whom? And for what? The question appeared hopelessly broad, but after some consideration the field narrowed considerably. His wife was dead. His children, long gone, were certain to have overcome whatever damage he had inflicted on them. He was no longer a member of any churches or social clubs and considered himself politically inert. Having retired fifteen years before, he had no pending ties to his corporate employer, and all his former superiors had bitten the dust years before. That only left the people who had been his work subordinates; but many of those were also gone. So, who was left?

His recollection, assisted with work records he had retained after retirement, yielded only three potential candidates: a woman Theo had fired after she

returned from maternity leave on the pretext that she was too preoccupied with her new family to properly discharge the duties of her job (he was actually trying to replace her with a pretty new hire); his immediate boss, whom Theo had framed for the failure of a major deal (while, in reality, he had deliberately failed to make a required filing while making it appear that it had been his superior's oversight) and Jesús González (a Honduran green card holder, generally referred to as "Gonzo," whom he had disliked on sight, and ultimately had gotten fired upon a broad allegation of incompetence.)

The woman had died shortly after her dismissal from late arising complications from her pregnancy. Theo's boss was in an assisted living facility, suffering from dementia and requiring around-the-clock care. Gonzo had disappeared shortly after being fired, twenty-odd years before, and his whereabouts were unknown.

In the absence of others to whom he could provide restitution Theo felt a sudden need to find the missing Gonzo. If he was still alive, Theo would render Gonzo as much assistance as he could. He discounted searching for him in Honduras, because Gonzo had repeatedly expressed his determination never to return to his country of origin, which he claimed was racked by poverty, run by a dictator, and beset by gangs that terrorized the general population. He was also less likely to have moved to the northernmost states where people of similar background and skin color were scarce. Still, this left a lot of territory to cover.

Theo could not undertake a thorough search for Gonzo by himself, so he hired a private detective named Ralph Osgood and provided him with all the information about his former employee that he had: Full name, approximate date and place of birth, last known address, occupation, schools attended, names of close friends or associates, and immigration history. As of the time he knew him, Gonzo had no siblings, spouse, or children in this country, but might have living relatives in Honduras.

It was a difficult task, but Osgood was an experienced investigator and took on the assignment after receiving a generous retainer.

Four weeks later, Osgood had a preliminary report. Two years after being dismissed from Theo's firm, Gonzo had moved to the Miami area, where he took several low-paying jobs over the years. The last one of these had been as assistant manager at a supermarket rumored to have connections with the notorious Barrio 18 gang. The FBI had raided the supermarket and arrested its manager and several employees on charges of drug trafficking. Gonzo, who at the time was known as Chuy or Chuyito, was not among those arrested and apparently had quit his job shortly before the FBI raid.

The trail had grown cold after that, but Osgood had rediscovered more recent references to a Chuy González among the residents of a Honduran neighborhood of Los Angeles. Chuy operated an office that specialized in handling cash remittances from U.S. residents to parties in Central America, mainly Honduras and El Salvador. Osgood suspected that Chuy was connected with the notorious MS-13 gang and was servicing the transfers of cash in support of drug trafficking from Central America to California.

"If my hunch is correct, your ex-employee is involved in illicit activities and any effort on your part to see or speak with him could be dangerous to you. I recommend that you cease looking for Gonzo" counseled Osgood.

"Are you sure this is the same Chuy González who used to live in Miami?"

"Pretty much so, particularly since a couple of his Miami associates also seem to have relocated to LA. But again, where he lives is a high crime area and the people he associates with are probably hardened criminals, so you should stay clear of him."

"You are probably right," replied Theo. "But in any case, could you get me his contact information?"

Osgood frowned at Theo's request but obliged.

Theo placed a call to the number Osgood had given him. A heavily accented voice he instantly recognized replied: "Envíos Avalón. How can I help you?" After a moment, Theo answered hesitantly: "Gonzo! Is that you?"

There was silence and then a response: "Theo?"

The conversation that followed was strained. Theo explained that he was planning to go to Los Angeles in a few days and was wondering if Gonzo would like to get together with him for dinner or drinks during his stay. Gonzo was silent for another long instant and then replied: "Sure. Give me a call when you get into town and we'll think of something."

Theo's doctor counseled against taking such a long trip, particularly alone, but Theo persisted. "I'm still strong enough to take a cross-country vacation. Plus, I have never been to California."

"I consider it a form of pilgrimage" he said to himself. He would have to take a chance.

A week later, Theo took the five-hour flight, picked up a rental car, and proceeded to the Best Western hotel where he had made reservations. After checking in, he called Gonzo and announced his arrival and whereabouts. His former associate answered expansively: "There is a fine Honduran restaurant four miles away from your hotel. It is also around the corner from my shop. If you are not too tired, we can get together at five-thirty."

"That's fine, I will take a short nap."

Theo was not familiar with Central American food and found the Flor de Caña rum that Gonzo ordered a bit overwhelming but a good match for the caramelized grilled beef of the main dish. They were on the third glass of rum when Gonzo suddenly asked: “But now, Theo, tell me: why are you really here?”

Theo did a double take, gasped, and replied in a somewhat slurred voice: “I came to make amends. I feel I owe you for the way in which you were let go from our firm many years ago.”

Gonzo looked suspiciously at his inebriated former boss. “And why seek me out now?”

“I want to settle all my debts while I can still do it. In two or three years I may be dead or incapacitated.”

“I see,” noted Gonzo. “Well, let’s finish this bottle and take a walk to my office. I want to show you something.”

Gonzo’s office was in a room behind the front counter where business transactions were carried out. Gonzo pointed to the armchair across from his desk and invited: “Please sit down.”

Gonzo cleared his throat as if to speak, but the door behind Theo opened and strong arms held him while someone placed over Theo’s nose a wet handkerchief soaked in a nauseating liquid. Theo gagged, recognizing the cloying smell of chloroform, and passed out.

Theo woke up shivering. His shirt had been removed, and his bare arms had been tied to the arms of his chair. Gonzo was standing next to him holding a clamp/pliers-like tool. His expression, and the threatening look of the instrument he was holding, awoke Theo and sobered him up immediately.

“At dinner you spoke about making amends for the ills you caused me. Proper atonement requires some form of compensation to the victim; but at this point I have plenty of money and you can provide no financial outlay that will make up for the suffering you caused; no words of regret can erase my years of pain. After you unjustly fired me, I could not get a job in our industry and I had to move far away, to Miami where nobody knew me. There, I went through a series of menial jobs and ended up working at a front for a drug cartel and became a criminal. I was barely able to escape from the law and fled to the other end of this country, where I ended up resuming my drug dealing career. I no longer regret what I did, but do not forgive you either. I want retribution. I want payback.

He advanced towards Theo and ordered: “Show me your left hand and let me see your fingernails. We’ll start there.”

Theo started to tremble as someone held his hand firmly and Gonzo brought the tool against the top of his thumb. The pain that followed was so intense that he fainted.

Water was thrown on his face, waking him up among indescribable pain and fear. Gonzo was getting ready to work on the index finger.

Theo had a heart attack between his middle and ring fingers, and died without regaining consciousness. Gonzo turned to his assistants and ordered: “I was

considering letting him go after finishing with his left hand, but he had to spoil the fun and die. Take the body to the warehouse. He won't be missed."

When Theo did not return to his room, the management of the Best Western notified the police, who conducted a search of his luggage and found a piece of paper with Gonzo's name and address written on it and a deed to Theo's vacation home in Myrtle Beach, which Theo was transferring to Gonzo in an effort to make amends. These items elicited an investigation that led to the discovery of Theo's cadaver and resulted in Gonzo's manslaughter conviction.

Gonzo served a full prison term and was deported to Honduras as an undesirable. He never returned to the States.

THE END

Bio:

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. Over two hundred and eighty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books, and podcasts. One of his four novels, an autobiography entitled "Cuban Transplant," and four anthologies of his stories have also been published.