

Morgan E. Sullivan
morgansvarn@gmail.com

4,200 words

Atonement
by
Morgan E. Sullivan

Her delicate fingers traced a line down her throat, stopping at her chest. She spread her fingers flat and let her palm rest there. She leaned forward, pressing her nose against the glass, contemplating the horrific weather outside. She impatiently tapped a finger against the cold pane, still agitated from the telephone conversation with her mother. She knew it was futile to argue with the woman, but every year, she searched for any excuse to abandon Yom Kippur services. She thought she had escaped this year, for sure. She lived more than an hour away and wouldn't have driven up tomorrow because of her evening college classes. Yet, her mother had not asked, but rather declared, that she would drive down and retrieve her wayward Jewish daughter for services. She had tried to explain that her throat had been sore for a couple of days now, and felt certain that, in three days, she would be altogether too sick to sit in synagogue for ten plus hours, but to no avail. Her mother had made the decision, and nothing short of death would change her mind.

She took a step back and flung open the back door. With one impulsive move, she leapt forward, gliding over the three steps from the back porch, and landed hard. She raised an eyebrow to the soaked ground which had humored her weight. She studied the mud that traced up her black, knee high shit-kickers and smiled. One hand mindlessly reached above her to remove the clip from her head, and her long, strawberry-blond hair fell down her back. She tossed the clip to the side and looked up, exposing her face to the pouring rain, which traced Alice Cooper mascara tears down her cheeks. She laughed defiantly at the thought of what she now intended to do. She was not sure if, in fact, it was true that you would get sick from playing in the rain. What she was sure of was that her throat hurt now, and that playing in the rain would not make it any better. She was not going to services this year, not for love nor money. She would be lying in bed, sick and coughing, too sick for starving from fasting, and enduring

migraines from lack of coffee, or for hours of repenting sins from the previous year; too sick for nicotine withdrawals and wondering if she was the worst sinner in the room, and what sins others had committed; too sick for lack of electricity and sheer boredom and wishing she was anywhere but here.

She unzipped her oversized black hoodie to expose her Disk Man and touched the play button. Bulls on Parade, her favorite Rage Against the Machine song, blared through the headphones, masking the sounds of thunder. She began to dance, first with little girl pirouettes, then wildly stomping through the rain-saturated grass. The September wind blew hard against her body, and she peeled off her wet hoodie, tossing it to the brick patio with an audible splat heard just as the song ended. Goose bumps erupted over her skin, and she danced harder to keep warm. This year, she would most definitely escape the Yom Kippur service, and the yolk of her overbearing, stereotypically Jewish mother.

She looked up to the sky, dark and gloomy, not unlike the services she would be escaping. The moon was not yet apparent.

*

He rolled over in bed, glancing out of the window momentarily to register that the sun was on its way into the sky. He was not going to school today. This wasn't a conscious decision made in the moment, but more of a trend that he lived in. He hadn't done homework in years and did not intend to start anytime soon. No, this day would be filled with laziness: friends coming over to chat about everything and nothing, his guitar, and his ganja. This day would not begin now. He wanted to sleep more. He pulled his pillow over his head and slipped back into sweet slumber.

*

She stood at the stairs leading to the back door. She was absolutely soaked to the bone, and a shiver ran up her spine, working its way through her nerves. She peeled off her shirt and undid the clasp to her skirt. She dropped her clothes in a wet pile until she had nothing more than her leather boots on. She unlaced them and pulled hard, wiggling her prunish feet from their hold. They were deathly white from sitting in their hold for so long, and she marveled at the lack of feeling in her toes. She pulled the door open and walked straight back to her room, glancing at the time on the microwave. Had she really been outside in the rain for five whole hours? She laid her naked, tired body on the bed, face down, and reached over to the nightstand to grasp a hair tie, which she deftly wound around her long tresses. She uttered a low sigh, which was followed by a weak, raspy cough. As she pulled the covers onto her body, she smiled. No Yom Kippur this year.

*

He sat in the chair in his back yard. He breathed in the mountain air, clean and crisp, and was stunned by the beauty of the morning. He flicked the lighter, listening for the crackle of fire to paper. Inhaling the harsh smoke deep into his lungs, he waited for the familiar high feeling to take effect. He stifled a cough and breathed out slowly, letting the smoke dance off of his tongue. Maybe he would take a walk through town today. He had no plans, and never sought to make any. He was free. He stopped mid-thought to register the event that would occur in three days. He winced with the acknowledgement of Yom Kippur, just on the horizon. He dragged more smoke into his lungs, but with purpose this time.

The air that was light and fresh now, would soon be heavy and dull with the lament of a year's sins. The fucking Arabs would drive through the town, honking at the Jews, taunting them with thoughtless, cruel words. Sometimes these Arabs might find themselves upside-down in the

car, being pulled out through the window by young men's hands to be taught a lesson in observance on this holy day.

Heavenly Carmiel was a small Jewish mountain town, beset on all sides by Arab villages and other satellite mountains. The roads through the city traced curving hills on Carmiel's ground, so there was never any flat plain in the entire village. The streets were lined with identical brick houses and storefronts, with front and back yards frequently filled with visitors and neighbors, drinking coffee, eating, and laughing. The village was small enough to pass rumors from one end to the other in only a matter of hours. Every corner blossomed with flowers of all colors, and the streets were always uncluttered with debris. The parks boasted soft, green grass, and even in this time of war, Carmiel's beauty was a testament to normal life.

His friends arrived, and he passed the perfectly rolled joint to them. They began talking about music and all sorts of random tidbits of life. This kind of afternoon was what he lived for, and in the cradle of Carmiel, it wasn't euphoria, but normality that the young Jewish man craved. He picked up his guitar and gently ran his calloused fingers along the strings, noting the hard bump of the frets underhand. He felt at peace with the universe, and thought no more about the ensuing holiday, only of music and friends and laughter.

*

She woke in the darkest part of night, wheezing and coughing. She felt feverish and shaky. She reached to turn on the bedside lamp but found that the slightest movement caused a surge of pain through her neck. Lying as still as possible through the tremors in her body, she did an assessment of the actual damage. Pain, fiery and harsh sat inside of her chest, centered in her lungs. Lying on her stomach seemed more comfortable than her back, but turning to either side sent her nerves into spasms of discomfort. She drifted back into restless sleep, safe in the fact

that she would feel better in no longer than a week.

Her mind loomed back into consciousness, and she gasped shallow, painful breaths. What was that strange noise that seemed to swell in and out, staggered with the powerful throbbing of her cranium? Listening carefully, she matched all of the noises with a memory of something familiar: chattering of teeth, pounding of head, and...ringing of phone. She reached over and grasped the headpiece, carefully meeting it to her ear. She spoke not, but listened for who could be calling at this moment. A loud, resounding sigh on the other end told her what she needed to know. "Mom?" No answer. "Mom, I am so sick, really, if you are calling to talk about services, it's not going to happen." This was followed by a coughing fit that lasted several minutes, causing her to drop the receiver, and ending with her exhausted body, sweating hard, pressed against the pillows on the bed. She heard the dial tone and decided to leave the receiver resting on the soft carpet. No phone.

She needed water and medicine. She stood, but tipped to one side, and sat back down on the bed. She lay back, trying to grasp exactly what action she planned next. Sliding off the edge of the bed, she dropped to her knees, and slowly crawled to the kitchen. She grabbed the gallon jug of water from the fridge and leaned her wasted body against the cold door. She reached up to the drawer next to the oven, and searched with fingers for anything that might feel like pills. The crinkly sound of tinfoil alerted her to success, and she pulled out the shiny package. Nyquil. Wonderful. She made her way back through the house, stopping only for another onslaught of coughing.

She inched back into her soft haven and stared at the ceiling, which was moving in a caterpillar sort of way. She could be content to hallucinate and shiver her way through the day, and probably the next night. In a week, she trusted that her immune system would have done its

job, and she would be righty-tighty again. She had achieved her goal of skipping the dreaded Yom Kippur service and another horrible visit with Mom. Although it was true that this battle was far from over, she dreamed slow, comatose, Nyquil-induced dreams of anarchy and chaos; gentle soundless ballets of war and strife were conducted along her brainwaves.

*

The sun was slipping below the horizon, which branded the beginning of this retched holiday. He smiled to himself for the pain his little brother would be experiencing on his birthday. What an awful curse his Ima had granted, to bear a child on this day of all the days in the year. There was no electricity, and although he had just eaten, his stomach growled with the knowledge that soon, its hunger would not be satiated. Candlelight traced gloomy shadows against the walls of the room, and he sat, bored and frustrated in the silence of his home. What was that strange noise? Maybe he was imagining things; the residue of too much ganja earlier in the day could do that to you. Ah, but no, this was a foreign sound, rhythmic and distant: the sound of marching, of a thousand feet against Carmiel's gentle, rolling roads.

There was a quick, urgent knocking, and his friends called to him. "Do you know what is happening in town?" they questioned him in energetic Hebrew. "There is a riot! They are destroying the Arab businesses! After everything with Palestine, it is our turn to get them back!" The brothers rushed to put on their shoes, caught up in the moment.

The air outside was electric with anger. This was quite a different atmosphere than all other Yom Kippur Eves. This was powerful and kinetic. They ran fast, hurrying to join in the chaos. Suddenly, they were enveloped in the sound of shouting; angry voices resounded in the night and shattered storefront glass sparkled in the air, like crystal shards. Rocks flew all around them, stopping short when they encountered their target.

He felt the hatred rise inside of him, boiling over until it seeped from his pores, mixed with salty sweat. All of the years he had been taunted by these people, all of the funerals of close friends, all of the restrictions placed upon him seemed to crack and break away, like the property he joyfully damaged. This hate was inborn, yet, years of growing up in a land ravaged with war had embedded these feelings in his heart. The lawlessness here was beautiful and liberating. He had never felt so alive, so real, so free.

The Israeli police watched, helpless to do anything against the growing mass, enjoying inside themselves what they could not participate in, but surely longed to. Later, they would be forced to take names and make arrests. They would be cornered into making an example of some of these residents, but for now, they watched with greedy eyes the destruction of the Arab property.

For hours the mob, seemingly the entirety of Carmiel, moved from store to store to car, bringing with them a wave of destruction. Smoke from a nearby Arab village curled in the distance, darkening the sky. As the crowd of angry Jews traveled, the trail of devastation they left behind stood still and quiet, as if never touched. His brother and his friends had stood on the bridge, looking at the highway below, dropping huge boulders onto passing cars, laughing deliriously at the sheer damage they had created. He traveled along, savoring the purity of this moment of revenge.

The police had finally been coerced into making arrests, and the brothers watched on as their friends and neighbors were taken into custody; this moment was just too real to abandon. Finally, they made their way home, a feeling of accomplishment and victory at having given the Palestinians a true sense of atonement. They arrived at the house to their environment of quiet and solitude. He collapsed into bed, the sweat on his bare body glistening in the candlelight. He

smiled as he traced through memories of the night, tasting each wonderful moment again and again. This would be a Yom Kippur worth remembering and sharing with friends for years to come.

The excitement of this night was multiplied exponentially as they watched the news broadcast on the following day; this had been the occurrence in city after city throughout the land, as if some unknown force had whispered in the ears of every Israeli to create havoc and anarchy. For months following, the Jews boycotted the Arab businesses, to add insult to injury. They had made their point, and he had been a living part of it. He had relished true liberation and would for years following, smile at this remembrance.

*

The hacking cough lasted more than a week, not as she had expected, more than two weeks, more than a month. For six months, without relief, she rasped and spat and convulsed through every action and thought. By the end of her illness, her voice had dropped half of an octave, never to return to normal. This blues tone which she had earned would pay her bills in years to come, as she belted out lines to Ella and Etta and Janis in dark night clubs around town.

*

She opened the door to her car and placed one foot on the ground. She stopped uncertainly, wincing at the aftermath of the argument they'd had just days before. She hated these uneasy recompenses and the slow awkward embraces. She regretted everything, but could not repair the past, and was now stuck in the uncomfortable position of grasping forgiveness from his heart. She stepped outside of the car and smoothed her pinstriped skirt as she glanced up at the window to his apartment.

Yesterday had been harder, she thought, and sighed, shaking off the stress from her day.

She walked slowly up the stairs and tapped on his door. He called from inside for her to enter. He had been sick for days, sneezing and sweating his way into the night, all of his time bleeding together in a Nyquil haze. She was kind to bring him medicine, but he doubted it would cure him. He liked to see her, but was troubled with events past and the uncomfortable silence between them, words never to be spoken. He glanced up from his computer as she opened the door. He looked her up from delicate feet to long slim legs, to tiny waist, to smiling face. “Morgan! You look beautiful!” he called her. “Hello, love.” she replied.

This was a sign to them both that the uneasiness had broken, and he embraced her. They talked about everything and nothing, clones and sex and Yom Kippur’s rapid approach. Wrapped up on the couch, fingers laced together, he told her the story of the Yom Kippur riot in his beloved Carmiel. She smiled as he went into detail about his emotions, passionately illustrating the events, like a moving portrait. She shared the origin of her deep, seductive voice, laughing at her childish act of playing in the rain. They looked at each other knowingly, as they spoke simultaneously, “Yom Kippur--Fucking hate it.”

He told her that he would stay home and read for the holiday. She lamented that she would be at the synagogue, suffering. He asked her where she had observed the year prior, and she replied that she had done the same as always: endured the service, migraine and nicotine fit and starvation included. He denied her, for he had also been in attendance the previous year. Perhaps the partition, meant to keep them from distraction, had separated them for yet another year. Had they really been less than ten feet from the other and not known?

*

The alarm cut clean through her dreams, severing what beauty lay in rest. She opened her eyes. No coffee, no morning cigarette, no more slumber. She oozed out of the bed, balancing on

the edge, hands pressed to her face, as if to block out the reality of today. She stood, picking up her neatly laid out clothes, and made her way to the bathroom. Without her normal routine of coffee and cigarette, she felt as though she was swimming through mud. Every movement seemed a struggle, and every time she had to repeat herself to her son grated on her nerves more and more. She should have sent him off with his father, who was fortunate enough to be a gentile. This would be more torturous than she had anticipated. Through gritted teeth she explained that she was most definitely NOT in the mood to argue with him, and she just wanted him to get dressed so that this day could be over with.

When she had trudged in last night from the evening service, she had maintained some slippery grasp on calm, at least for the most part, but this morning of restrictions had her head swimming. She finally managed to motivate everyone out of the house. She opened the trunk of her car to retrieve the stroller and was shocked by its absence. She had left it with her father. Shit! They would all have to walk. She shuffled down the road, urging her daughter to hurry and snapping at her son to stay out of the road. The walk seemed like an eternity, and the day had just begun. When they arrived at the synagogue, the Rabbi met her with a siddur, conveniently opened to the page to which they were davening. Her son ran off somewhere, and her daughter sat on her lap, flipping restlessly through the pages. This day would be miserable.

*

He rolled over in bed. Morning had arrived, and no amount of prayer could repel the sun from his window. He wanted coffee and his cigarette. Knowing that he couldn't have either only served to heighten his frustration further. This was his battle every year, shared with his Ima. He was not in her house this morning, however, and he thought about how she sometimes had failed at abstaining from the bitter taste of her cigarettes. He was always in awe of his Abba's fortitude,

for, although he was an atheist, his father managed to be more observant than most religious Jews. He rolled over with the intention to sleep further, but could not manage to command rest. He lay there, miserable and frustrated, wondering what book he might choose to read.

*

The hours lagged forward with unheard of lethargy. She had moved past the point of struggling to stay awake and cataloguing the clothing worn by every female in her line of vision. She was well into the skull-splitting headache stage that made her feel emotional and desperate. She wanted to cry, or rip her clothes, or dash away to the safety of her porch, where she would shakily light a cigarette, inhaling the smoke as deeply as her lungs would allow. She wanted to drown in coffee and eat pastries. She was truly sorry for every transgression committed over the past year and would have done anything to take them back. Inside her throbbing head, she begged God's forgiveness and pleaded for him to speed time. She could not stand sitting through the service anymore, but sat still and quiet, waiting for the end.

*

Chaos erupted in his skull as the hours dragged on. He was nearly counting the seconds until sundown. He lay on the couch, struggling through the book he had chosen to read. He was not in her position, trapped in public, safe from her own desires. He could walk outside and grab a cigarette whenever he pleased. He could set the kettle on to boil and wait for the delicious steam to rise so that he could make coffee. He could reach into the refrigerator and grab whatever was edible and fresh; yet, he focused his eyes back to the book and labored further. It would not be long now...only forever more.

*

When the final lines of the service were read, excitement welled inside her chest, raising

her blood pressure and heart rate. It was over. She had made it through another horrible Yom Kippur. She felt a small sense of pride for her resolve to stay to the very end. She smiled and flipped open her phone. She quickly dialed her brother's number and asked him for a ride home, reminding him to pick up the car seat on his way. When she arrived, she rushed the children inside, instructing them to do whatever they liked until she joined them. She sat on the cold brick of her porch and flicked the lighter, waiting for the slow burn to enter her mouth. She dragged deeply, holding on to the puff for as long as she could manage. This was the best cigarette she had ever smoked.

When her brother stepped outside to ask about dinner, she was just finishing up, smashing the butt into the concrete, leaving a black mark of finality. She smiled and answered, "Wherever you want to eat is fine with me."

*

The sun had finally found a place to hide behind the horizon. This day had come to an end. He would not have to experience this for a whole year to come, and felt relief beyond comprehension. He lit a cigarette on his way down the stairs, yelling in Hebrew for his brother to hurry. They would drive to his Ima and Abba's house for dinner, to sit in the comfort of his home away from precious Carmiel. Ima would feed their starved bellies and smoke endlessly with him. He would call his girlfriend and tease her for having the fortitude to sit through the services, while her children's voices echoed in the background of the restaurant at which her family had chosen to dine. He was free of restriction again and the moonlit sky was beautiful to behold. "Yom Kippur," he texted her, "I fucking hate it."

###