

Fiction: “Float” by Teresa Fazio



What I really want to say, Alma, is how Remy looked on the beach that first night, his teeth perfect in the glow of the phosphorescent kelp, but I can't tell him that right now, and maybe after this week, not ever.

This past spring, before him, I spent every Saturday morning running the ridgeline here on Camp Pendleton—rolling hills with the occasional ass-kicking peak. Mountain goat's paradise. Then afternoons at the beach in Del Mar or a coffee shop in Encinitas. Just reading and people-watching away from the barracks. Saturday nights, while everyone partied, I'd head back to base for the quiet. Didn't mess with anyone, and no one messed with me. There are enough female Marines around here that I don't stand out from the

rest of them.

But credit where it's due, I've got Maria to thank for finding me Remy. At first I never wanted to hang out with my admin-clerk roommate. She's from the air wing. Looked like a lipsticked barracks rat who inspired Porta-John graffiti. Weekends, she'd brush on her thick-paste mascara and call out from her flowered comforter, *you never go anywhere, Hugo, you wasting your life inside*. She only called me by my last name because our first names are the same. Each week, I told her I was exhausted—blamed it on my lieutenant, the hill sprints we ran Friday mornings, our twenty-five-mile hike. Whatever excuse worked.

I should mention now, Alma, that I'm in a different unit than when I first wrote you. A Marine Expeditionary Unit—a MEU. Maria's not on the MEU, but I am. I'll train for another few months, then get on an amphibious ship and go on float. That's where you plow around the world, doing exercises with the Navy, directing locals to on-the-spot dental clinics, setting up sandbags and radio networks after floods, handing out food. I didn't mind it 'til a couple weeks back.

Then came a sermon from our old-lady First Sergeant—the Almighty Senior Enlisted. I was showering after PT, and I heard her telling the ma'am gonna *snatch up my snatches*. The ma'am snorted her coffee, laughed halfway down the hall. Next thing I knew, all twelve of us females had to cram into the First Sergeant's office, see her crinkle-lined eyes, the gray wisps in her tousled bed-head. Snatch up her snatches. Her *chocha* probably hadn't been touched since Bush's daddy was in charge. Same fucking safety brief, six different ways. All the males ever get is a reminder to wrap their dicks, but oh no, get a bunch of women in front of the First Sergeant and it's the full thumping Ten Commandments. Watch your drink. Watch those males. Be careful.

You know I'm not stupid, Alma. I keep to myself. Got my

prescription refilled just last week, little blue pill every morning. But the way the First Sergeant talked to us—it pissed me off.

So that Friday, when Maria stank up our room with a cloud of hairspray and laid on again with the *you-should-come-out*, I said let me get ready, five minutes. If they're gonna treat us like criminals, I might as well have some fun. I threw on my one crisp white blouse and a pair of blue jeans—you know I clean up nice, though I don't do much makeup. I smoothed my bun.

"Nuh-uh," Maria said, waving a hair iron. "You gotta take that shit down."

"Ugh," I said, but I did it. This was her turf. I straightened my hair all Wednesday Addams, and she loaned me dangly earrings.

Muy guapa, she said. I shrugged. Let's go. She raised an eyebrow at my black Vans, but I was in her Civic before she could force me into a pair of her strappy heels.

We drove south of Pendleton and parked on a side street a few blocks from the Oceanside pier. Maria walked us down to a place that served fish tacos; its bar was bumping, and the bass hurt my ears but we moved past it quick. The tables were jammed with jarheads and shrieking women. Maria pointed out the grunts, their farmer tans all tatted up, Pacifico empties laid out like Godzilla'd been through. They hooted like the boys on our old block, Alma, the ones in your pictures: the same shaved heads, inked biceps, running mouths. Your boys had red rosaries, Rangers caps, bandanas. These ones, they wore Polo and board shorts. Didn't matter what they had on, though. They all thought they *papi chulo*.

That's when I spotted Remy. Blue seersucker shirt. That smile. He had high-and-tight hair like the rest of them, no tattoos that I could see. His snaggletoothed buddy looked at Maria,

and she was like, *um, no*. Then she caught Remy staring at me, and bless that girl, she sighed, *okay, maybe*. We walked over.

Remy's brown eyes shone friendly and open, like morning coffee. His boys looked sideways at us, but handed over their last two beers from a bucket of ice. "Who's coming with me for more?" said the broken-grinned guy as we sipped. One of his canines lapped over the other; he smiled at Maria like a disheveled wolf. She'd switched to full-on flirt mode, and she let him lead her away. Remy leaned into me close, asked was I okay here. I nodded, and he looked pleased as we bobbed our heads to the bass. After a half-hour, his restless pack stood up to drink and dance. Remy said, "Why don't we walk down the pier?" And the bar was loud and he was cute, and I figured I could handle myself. So I said, "Well, okay."

We walked down worn boards and passed the last fishermen packing their buckets. A country-pop song whistled through the outdoor speakers. You know the cheese restaurants play when they're trying to get you to have a moment. He asked where I was from and I just said, "South Texas," not giving anything away. He said he was from East LA, and I was like, "Nuh-uh. I don't mess with *cholos*." His face flashed hurt and he said, "C'mon, I'm not like that." I looked at the ocean. Then he took my fingers and twined them all cute, and we watched blue kelp light up the waves, and some knot inside of me slipped undone. After a couple of songs, I couldn't find Maria. I sent her five or six texts, and then Remy said it was cool, he'd drive me home. At first I didn't want to tell him where I lived, but we got to his truck and of course. DOD stickers. I should have known he was a Marine.

I said, "Listen, you can just bring me to the gate."

"No, I'm driving you to the barracks," he said, and the way he almost barked it, I knew he must be an NCO. I didn't want to ask his rank, though. Because then he'd ask me what mine was, and he didn't need to know that it'd still be a couple of

months 'til I pinned on Corporal. He let me off in the parking lot and I crawled into bed, still feeling his hand in mine.

Maria slipped in 0500 like normal for a Sunday morning, yawning, said, "Oh, you made it." Huge Budweiser t-shirt on that she didn't go out in. Turned out she was actually into that homie with the funky teeth. Remy was his roommate, she said. We should all hang out again. The next Saturday she clucked approval at my Wal-Mart sundress, made me take her flat sandals—again I was like, *no heels*—popped her stickshift into gear and *vamos* down the 5. We wound up at a pizza joint all the officers go to, thick-crust slices and fancy beers.

"How in hell you think I can afford this?" I said.

She pulled into a parking spot. "Don't worry, they'll cover us."

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At the bar, the boys' eyes were boozy, but Remy's lit up when he saw me. *Hey chiquita*, he said, little hug, kiss on the cheek, like he was more than my brother, but not by much yet. He smelled like orange-pine aftershave. Maria pounded two shots, holy shit, and her boy's fingers played at the hem of her skirt. The others raised their eyebrows and traded knowing laughs. When Remy jerked his head towards the door, I was glad to escape. We walked past the officers' Dockers and tans; their sticky children crawled the patio. Bar noises faded down the two blocks to the beach. Surfers dotted the waves. Sunset streaked like those Day-Glo necklaces we always got Fourth of July in Port Isabel. But Alma, the Pacific's not slick like the Gulf, just freezing and blue with the wind kicked up.

"I'm cold," I told Remy. "I'm a Texas-turned-California girl, you think we bring sweaters anyplace?"

He tugged his polo shirt striped red-white-blue, said, "Why don't you take this?" Literally, girl. Shirt off his back.

He turned away from me all modest-like to take it off.

It was then I saw his tattoos.

He had this moto one above his right shoulder blade: full-color eagle, globe and anchor. I got brave and reached out a finger, teasing, said, "Hey, whatcha got there, motivator? Drop and gimme twenty, devil."

He turned around and smiled, handed me his shirt.

And then I saw the other one. She stared straight at me from Remy's left pec. Young-ish lady, two dates in script. Did the math real quick: only forty.

He caught me staring.

"My mother," he said. "Cancer."

It's then I knew, Alma, I could be in deeper than I thought.

You remember my papi? The way he held my hands and let me dance on his toes? How he stopped by your house with beers and twenties for his sister, your mom? The bus he took across the border, to and from Reynosa every week?

You remember the year we were eleven? The porch in McAllen, me finding the doll the morning of Mami's birthday? I was too old for dolls, but Papi had sent it, and I didn't want to say nothing that'd make him feel bad about not seeing us for a while. Miguel ran around the block, overalls straining, searching for Papi's balding head. You rounded the corner with birthday balloons. One was shaped like the number three, the other a zero like a frosted donut. You tied them to our porch, your hot pink nails glinting. Your mami brought foil pans filled to bursting. Mountains of *arroz con pollo*. A huge heart-shaped cake. Soda poured out in Dixie cups.

Then the hysterical phone call, plastic utensils clattering to the floor. The factory workers saying the shootings broke out

and he was always *mi hermano, mi hombre*. Fistfuls of Mass cards in the mail. We were in middle school, thirsty for fights. Swearing revenge in bubble script.

And Mami, who after that death-day did some running away of her own. Worked more and more shifts at the grocery 'til Miguel and I barely saw her, our homework scrawled on milk crates behind the counter. I don't know why she moved us out to the edge of the county, insisted we switch to Catholic school. Grief does strange things.

But all I said to Remy was, "My father, too. Shot." I'd run so fast and so far, I hadn't spoken of it in a while.

"I'm sorry," he said, putting it all together, south Texas, shot. "That's some bad shit."

"He wasn't—" I said, trying to explain "—he was a factory worker."

"I get it," he said.

I say, "Looks like we both picked a different gang to run with."

Remy just shrugged. "Mami is over my heart," he said. "And my brothers have my back."

He let me put on his shirt before pulling me close. The wind picked up, and sand swirled at my calves. When I looked at him, he kissed me, and I was enveloped in citrus, warm.

I got back to the barracks late that night. Maria made fun of me in the morning, crowing, *oh, you're so in loooooove*. She was amused that I'd ditched her, I who have always been so conscientious. So I asked her to do me one favor: use her admin-clerk ninja skills to find Remy in the personnel database. Didn't want a surprise wife or kid on the books.

There were none—but there was a different surprise. Maria

untangled that Remy and I are in the same Marine Expeditionary Unit. We'll deploy together in a few months. For now, his battalion trains in San Clemente, in the hills on the north side of base. And I was right; he's an NCO. A Sergeant.

The following week felt too long. Up at 0345 every morning to qualify on the rifle range while Maria snored. Then back cleaning weapons into the afternoon. Friday morning came the gas chamber. I held my breath and lifted my mask, mashed it back down, blew hard to clear out the pepper. My eyes watered and my nose stung, and coming out of the hut, I coughed hard. Our section got off early to go clean up. By the time I got out of the shower, Remy had called. He and his boys were grilling at their apartment. Did I want to come over? I slipped the keys in my truck's ignition before his voicemail even ended. Didn't tell Maria.

By the time the afternoon traffic let me through, his roommates had headed out to the bars. Remy unwrapped a still-warm tray of drumsticks, poured hot sauce over the charred parts, and levered the caps off two Red Stripes.

We moved to the couch and sat leg to leg. I had to concentrate to keep my knee from jiggling. Coleslaw seeped through our paper plates, and he handed me extra napkins. I wiped my mouth before I spoke.

"I—I think we're going on the same float in a few months," I said.

"Are we?" he said, and laughed low and throaty. "Who're you with, anyway?"

"Electronics maintenance," I said, "what about you?" though I already knew.

"Fifth Marines," he said. "Up in San Clemente."

He sank lower into the couch 'til our shoulders touched. "Ha. Float," he said. "If you came along, it might not be so bad."

"What, sitting on bunks stacked three high, reeking of diesel?" I said. Being with him in the privacy of his apartment was one thing. But in a few months, aboard ship—if we were even on the same ship—everyone would trip over each other. All drama, no privacy. If Remy and I met up on liberty, we'd stand out, start rumors. It wasn't like California.

"It'd be like a cruise," he said, "our own little cruise. Seven whole months. Everything included. Rooms. Meals."

I snorted; he mistook it for a laugh. How would the other Marines view me in uniform, a thousand miles over the ocean, if they knew we were together? God forbid I had to fix his platoon's gear. Next would come graffiti. Smirks, nods, jokes. The way I used to talk about Maria. And she wouldn't be on this float to be the lightning rod for their attention.

Remy waved a drumstick under my nose. "Hello," he said. "Lady with the pretty eyes? You hungry?" I gave a short laugh and put on a smile. "Yeah. Fine. I was just thinking about—our cruise," I said.

He laughed and described the port calls. Thailand. Australia. Nothing like the gray-browns of the neighborhood. I imagined us snorkeling the Great Barrier Reef. Me in a two-piece and flippers beside his tan chest. His tattoos. His understanding. I tried to settle into the moment, leaned my head on his t-shirted shoulder. He turned and kissed my forehead.

"Hey, I almost forgot," he whispered, "you want the grand tour of the place?"

"Uh," I said. What was I supposed to say?

"Come on," he said, "I'll show you."

He took me by the hand; we walked down a short hall. I still held my Red Stripe. He pushed open the door to his room.

Crucifix over a brown plaid bedspread. His Navy Achievement Medal framed on the wall. I poked only my head in. He circled his fingertip on my shoulder, his other hand braced on the doorjamb. His dreamy smile, I saw now, belied a jaw shadowed and set.

I wondered what he'd told his boys. I couldn't shake thoughts of low-voiced leers, of words scrawled in Sharpie. I hadn't worked this hard to become the subject of the First Sergeant's next lecture.

"I, uh—I have to go," I lied. "I have duty in the morning." I patted my pocket for my keys, awkward as hell. Remy kept asking if something was wrong. "No, I'm sorry," I said. "I just have to go."

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So, Alma, that was last night. He called me at zero-six, but I didn't call back. Instead, I went for a run in the ridgeline while Maria slept. I wonder how she handles it all. I'm brave enough for float, but—dammit—not for this. Mist rose from tufts of grass, and I heard the coyotes bay as I dodged their dried shit. I heaved up the trail to the crest of a hill and stood, catching my breath. The Santa Anas blew their smoke as the morning broke hot and bright. I raised one hand to block the sun and scanned the hills for San Clemente.

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