

New Nonfiction from Teresa Fazio: “Light My Fire”

The following excerpt is from Teresa Fazio’s [Fidelis: A Memoir](#), reprinted with permission from Potomac Books.

A week before leaving Iraq, I shuffled through my post-deployment health assessment, a quiz to divine if we were crazy or sick or prone to shooting our loved ones. I gave the pasty Navy doc the answers he wanted: *Yeah, I’m fine. No, I haven’t seen anyone killed—lifting that transport case doesn’t count. Yes, of course I was exposed to sand. No, no nightmares, not lately. Shit blows up, whatever. No anxiety, just stress. I’m an officer; I can handle it. Let me go.*

I was impatient with anyone who hadn’t also been in Iraq for seven months, laying cable like my wire platoon. Our replacements’ questions—where did this cable lead, when was chow, was there really a shot-up mural of Saddam Hussein—disrupted my precious workaholic routine, the one for which Marla, another female lieutenant, had nicknamed me Rain Man. With the new troops swelling our numbers, we spent the next several weeks laying as much cable as possible. The Marines bore down, digging what trenches they could with a motorized Ditch Witch, then pickaxing the more sensitive areas bordered by concertina wire. They laid cables straight into sandy trenches, zip-tying them every few feet and burying them under fine grains. Their knees shone white, and they washed grit from their hands and necks before meals. It sucked, but it was celebratory for the Marines leaving country: a last hurrah, the old guys willing to do anything to get out of there, the new guys excited to do anything at all. Even if it meant pulling cable hand over hand, fingers pruning with sweat in canvas gloves. As they tipped blue strands of Ethernet, bits of plastic tumbled to the ground, until everything was wired in. I watched Marla help dig, her slim figure bent at

the waist, forearms dirty, red bun over delicate features. Though half the company comprised new troops, I didn't overhear anyone hit on her.

Fortunately, a squared-away comm-school classmate named Torres took over my wire platoon. Major Davis tossed me the keys to our battalion's SUV, so Torres and I could inspect the cable line. Airfield to the left, headquarters to the right, the rest of Camp Taqaddum a desert plateau. The Euphrates winked below us if we craned our necks just right. Though I hadn't driven in seven months, the potholed roads felt familiar. Torres' clean uniform stood out against dusty upholstery.

I pulled over within sight of some junked Soviet planes, where I'd once gone on a long run with Jack and one of his sergeants.

Torres asked if mortars hit around TQ a lot. I told him that in the past month, most of the danger had stayed outside the wire. Except down that road—I pointed toward the gate where insurgents had crashed a vehicle full of explosives. And, I continued, when the mortars got close to regiment, peppered that empty tent—that was bad. Cut our fiber optics. Fucked up like a football bat. I climbed out of the car and kicked a toe in the sand, unearthing zombie cable. Torres didn't ask any more questions.

A few afternoons later, hopped up on caffeine with nothing to do, I called Jack from the Systems Control hut. He couldn't hang out; he had an angel coming in, he said, a mortar victim from Fallujah. All of the other times I'd been in his room, he'd shooed me away when the calls had come. This time, I asked to watch him work. I wanted to finally witness the cause of his sleepless nights.

"Major Davis would crucify me if I let you see this without him knowing," Jack said. But when I asked the major if I could watch Jack work, he just braced a hand on the two-by-four door

frame and said, "Yup."

In his bunker, Jack pressed play on James Taylor's Greatest Hits. It calmed him, he said. Two Marines lay a stretcher on sawhorses and unzipped a body bag: an ashen Navy Seabee with a fresh haircut. Blood sluiced to the sawdusted floor. One Marine held the clipboard; several more circled the body. They marked the locations of wounds and tattoos, crossing the Seabee's stiff arms over his chest for balance. Jack donned nitrile gloves and pulled a brand-new pack of Camels from the Seabee's pocket. A fist-sized hole bled where a heart had once beaten. *Fire and Rain* kept time.

I shifted from foot to foot as Jack counted dog tags, ID card, wallet, and photographs into a manila envelope. He motioned me back with an outstretched arm and a frown.

The whole process took only fifteen minutes. Soon the chaplain thumbed a cross on the Seabee's brow. The Marines put him in a fresh body bag, strapped it into a flag-draped transport case, and tied it tight with twine.

After, Jack wadded his nitrile gloves into the trash and led me to his room. We shut the door, no matter his Marines cleaning up in the outer bay. He pulled me in, kneading my back; I pressed my nose into his T-shirt and inhaled. Together, we breathed.

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The next night, there were no casualties. I stayed long enough after midnight to hear Jack say my name and "I love it when you touch me" and his son's name and "I love you." He saw the dead when he slept. He thought of them constantly, he said, except when he was with me. We dozed an hour. Then I pressed my lips to his forehead, found my glasses, and slipped away. Six more days left in Iraq.

The next morning, on my walk to stand watch, I ran into

Sanchez exiting the chow hall. I teased him about the samurai pads snapped to his flak vest: floppy hip guards, shoulder pads, a flat, triangular groin protector. Each piece sported a different pattern: digital desert, analog woodlands, Desert Storm chocolate chips. He was a Marine Corps fashion nightmare.

When I got to work, I found out the reason for all that gear. A vehicle-borne IED had hit a convoy northwest of Fallujah, killing seven Marines and wounding six. A “mass casualty” event. Jack, Sanchez, and others rode out on a convoy to recover the bodies.

I couldn’t sit still, so I walked into the TechCon van. Maybe the sergeants could offer distraction, whether with work, or with *Nip/Tuck*, their latest binge-watching addiction featuring plastic surgeons in compromising relationships. We watched for three hours, until we hit an episode where the plot revolved around infidelity.

I remembered that Jack was on the convoy.



This “other woman” had terminal cancer. Her adulterous lover helped her commit suicide before the cancer took her. The woman penned letters and sipped milk to coat her stomach while swallowing handfuls of pills. As she watched a lakeside sunset and the soundtrack played Elton John’s Rocketman, I felt a wash of fear.

Jack was still on a convoy.

While watching the show, I wondered, Will that be my punishment, too? I’d become increasingly anxious about our imminent return to the States. Even more than getting caught, I feared losing what I thought was my only chance at love. Jack’s wife in California loomed far larger than any bomb threat. A thick sludge of guilt coated my powdered-egg breakfast. I controlled my breathing.

He was still on a convoy.

After the episode ended, I stumbled out of TechCon into

sunlight, blinking back lethargy from hours of TV. I had to do something good, something officer-like: inspect the cable. Check on my troops. I controlled my breathing and swallowed the lump in my throat.

At the far end of the flight line, my Marines were deepening a trench in a spot plagued by heavy truck traffic. I walked the fiber optic lines along the airfield's edge, checking them for bald spots, kinks, and cuts. The air reeked of diesel. Helicopter rotor blades blended into a buttery hum. Sparrows flitted along eight-foot-tall Hesco barriers. After fifty yards or so, I stopped and peered down the flight line. Maybe a hundred yards left. Hot, boring work. I figured I could get to my Marines more quickly on the other side of the barriers, where there was a concrete path. I ducked behind them at the next opportunity.

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WHUMP. Seconds later, a mortar landed on the airfield. I felt the blast wave in my chest and teeth. I took a few steps forward, thinking of my troops digging near the flight line entrance.

WHUMP. Another mortar round, a little farther away. A small rock kicked up by the blast flew over my head, or was it shrapnel? I had the urge to reach for it, to catch it, but I did not. Instead I turned around to head back to our company's headquarters. As my Marines fast-walked past me, carrying ammo cans full of tools, I thought only of counting their heads.

In the following months and years, I would wish I had been on the exposed airfield side of the Hesco barriers when the mortars hit, that I had sprinted full-tilt toward my Marines digging that trench, instead of taking a few steps forward before retreating. I would even wish I'd been hit by shrapnel, like a vigilant lieutenant. Was that the most fitting consequence of what I'd been doing with Jack? If he returned

from his convoy to find me lifeless, would caring for my body have made him love me, made him stay?

In any case, he returned. Late that night, I lingered outside Comm Company's compound under a hard pearl moon. A hundred yards away, Jack's Marines unloaded one, two, three, four, five, six, seven body bags from their refrigerated truck. Then they hefted still more.

Under the floodlights, I made out Hoss's lanky silhouette, spotted Mullins's round shoulders and rolling gait, almost heard his Southern drawl. Two more darted around the truck, its tailgate the height of their heads, shepherding paperwork. Sanchez stood straight and musclebound, lifting tirelessly. Sergeant Jonas barked orders.

Soon they all moved inside; they must have been grabbing clipboards and unzipping body bags. I stared at the bunker doors, wishing I could enter. If I had tried, Jack would have shouted me away, and Mullins and Jonas would have shaken their heads. I would like to say decorum held me back from going over there. Really, it was shame. The most honorable thing I could do was stay away. Wait to go home.

*Fazio, Teresa. **Fidelis: A Memoir** (Potomac Books, September 2020).*

**New Op Ed from Teresa Fazio:
This Memorial Day, Let's**

Honor Essential Workers

In the first weeks of lockdown, I paced my two-room Harlem apartment, feeling trapped while an unpredictable threat loomed. After a few days, it clicked— the collective need for vigilance and protective gear had stoked memories of my deployment to Iraq as a Marine Corps officer. There, rocket and mortar attacks had punctuated long periods of boring routine for my communications company colleagues and I. In the early evenings, our company's evening brief provided solace and companionship.

In the midst of the pandemic, that version of nightly comfort became the Twitter feed of Columbia's Department of Surgery—a daily summary of pragmatic encouragement, written by its eloquent chair, Dr. Craig Smith. He used familiar military jargon of staff [“redeployments”](#) and [“battlefield promotions”](#) for emerging medical leaders. He wrote about colleagues [infected with COVID](#), and [one who committed suicide](#).

This Memorial Day, as Dr. Smith and other first responders lose colleagues on a scale not seen since 9/11, and supply chain personnel from meatpackers to grocery clerks risk infection to keep America fed, we should extend honors to all of the essential workers who've given their lives. Doing so would help unify the nation and bridge the military-civilian divide.



Healthcare workers watch U.S. Air Force C-130s from Little Rock Air Force Base fly over Arkansas, May 8, 2020.

Only about 1% of US workers currently serve in the military, but according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), an equal number serve as firefighters and law enforcement. A whopping ten times that number— more than ten million people— work in healthcare professions as doctors, nurses, EMTs, and hospital personnel. Transportation and delivery workers— warehousemen and truckers who transport everything from asparagus to zucchini— make up another 10% of American workforce. And that's not even counting agricultural, food, and maintenance workers. A mid-April CDC report listed at least [27 US healthcare workers dead](#) of COVID, a number that has undoubtedly grown, and the Washington Post reported [over 40 grocery store worker fatalities](#) in the same time frame. As of early May, [about 30 firefighters nationwide](#) have died of the virus, too. The NYPD alone lost over 30 personnel to the pandemic, and national police casualties count [dozens more](#). Like troops in a war zone, those essential healthcare, public

safety, and logistics workers now face a wily, invisible enemy every day. Paying respects to their fallen just as we veterans honor our own would mean acknowledging that it takes **everyone's** service to help us get through this crisis.

Coronavirus is forcing businesses and governments to acknowledge the dignity of the blue-collar and service-industry workers who make our vast supply chain possible, similar to the physical work we honor in common servicemembers. In April, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) issued a [joint statement](#) with Stop and Shop calling on the government to classify grocery workers as “extended first responders” or “emergency personnel.” Moreover, in Passaic, New Jersey, a [firefighter's coronavirus death](#) prompted a mayor to ask for state legislation to classify it as a death in the line of duty, which would entitle his family to additional benefits. We can't bring these workers back, but we can honor them by helping their families recover, and funding their children's educations—just as we do for fallen service members. If, as Fed chair Jerome Powell said, we are facing an economic downturn “[without modern precedent](#),” one piece of recovery will be financial remuneration for those who have sacrificed in the name of keeping the country running.

Emotional support is necessary, as well. Medical professionals who triage an avalanche of patients decide who lives and who dies. We don't yet know how many of them will suffer PTSD or moral injury from scenes like overflowing emergency rooms. In the past month, New York Presbyterian emergency room physician [Dr. Lorna Breen](#) and FDNY EMT [John Mondello](#) committed suicide in the wake of treating an overwhelming number of coronavirus patients. Military veterans who have rendered first aid at the scene of IED blasts, rocket attacks, and similar catastrophic mass casualties know these emotional scenarios all too well. Losing colleagues with whom one has served side by side— and perhaps blaming oneself for failing to protect the sick and

wounded, even in an impossible situation—are experiences many troops know intimately.

Whenever well-meaning civilians called me or former comrades heroes, we often told them, “The heroes are the ones who didn’t come back.” I suspect some of the medical professionals I now call heroes would say the same thing. Which is why we must honor the fallen without putting all those who serve on a holy pedestal. Veneration of the dead without practical follow-up care for the living only alienates trauma survivors; it doesn’t help them reintegrate into society. Military veterans have learned this the hard way; recent Memorial Days have included remembrances for troops who have died by suicide. So in addition to honoring essential workers who have died from coronavirus, we must treat the burnout and PTSD from those who survive, especially in the medical professions, so we are not remembering them as tragic statistics in future years.

Columbia’s Dr. Smith wrote a total of 59 nightly missives, each offering comfort and guidance to my anxious-veteran mind. In the meantime, the United States has lost over 83,000 people to coronavirus. In memory of them— 83,000 parents, first responders, warehouse workers, delivery persons, doctors, nurses and counting— let’s expand this Memorial Day to honor essential personnel, with the aim of creating a more united America.

Editor’s note: Teresa Fazio’s memoir, [FIDELIS](#), is forthcoming in September 2020 from Potomac Books.

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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Photo Credit: [U.S. Pacific Fleet](#)