

Tomorrow Ever After: A Kinder Future

Here on *Wrath-Bearing Tree* we write a lot about ways in which things are imperfect—culturally, politically, institutionally. We often point out examples of things that go wrong. People who lie or use faulty logic to advance unethical or selfish agendas. We focus on negativity in part because we're combat veterans, and have seen bad consequences of lazy thinking and decision-making. The other thing that unites us, if anything, is that we share a basic conviction that things could be better. Especially when it comes to media, and entertainment.

It's not easy to create *ethical* and entertaining drama that uplifts at the same time that it provides laughter. Without resort to conflict—usually in the form of sex or violence—stories fall flat. Why consume an account of someone's perfect day? Few movies manage to leave a majority of their audiences feeling *better* (rather than exhausted), because it's very difficult to accomplish this. Recent examples include [Hot Tub Time Machine](#) and [Safety Not Guaranteed](#), both of which manage to deliver without relying much on violence or sex.

Violence and sex from the male perspective are hallmarks of most mainstream films. In the fourth week of April, I watched or re-watched four movies: *Star Wars: Rogue One*, *LA Confidential*, *American Beauty*, and the upcoming [Tomorrow Ever After](#). The first three movies are violent fantasies that appear to hate women and poor people, and maybe people in general. Characters in the film earn their punishments in a variety of ways, but those ways all come down to the alienation wrought by dissatisfaction with a society built on sexual exploitation and the urge to destroy. They offer dark visions of human nature, and are at heart nihilistic visions of the past, present, and future.

Tomorrow Ever After is different. In it, the principle conflicts that unfold within and between characters are existential, based on questions about their purpose—they are not transactional or punitive. Conflicts unfold within characters as they grapple with the constraints of living within a patriarchal, capitalist system. In this system (that of our present time—the movie is set in 2015) women are systematically oppressed by men, who are systematically oppressed by a system in which housing is not guaranteed, jobs are difficult to come by, and money is the mechanism by which people and items are valued. In *Tomorrow Ever After*, this period of human history is referred to as “The Great Despair.”

One of the film’s most impressive accomplishments is its ability to represent the problems posed by money in a realistic, relatable way, while simultaneously making it clear that this situation is unnecessary—ridiculous, even. The film’s satirical touch is so light that it’s almost unseen, but it guides everything, and fills *Tomorrow Ever After* with humor and optimism. A film about the evils of sexist patriarchy and capitalism sounds like it would be annoying or boring, but this is not the case with *Tomorrow Ever After*. I suspect that this is because it spends so little time moralizing, and because the director and actors are so good. There are no cynical or clichéd moments where a character pauses to deliver some memorable line, no posturing, no *bullshit*. Given the conceit about time travel, this is nothing short of extraordinary.



In *Tomorrow Ever After*, the difficulty of providing empathy or compassion to strangers without resorting to sex or the threat of violence generates much of the positive motion in the

plot and between the characters—successfully so

The pacing is wonderful. There isn't a single moment in the film where someone watching is lost or displaced, save for the very beginning (this is to be expected in a movie about time travel). Contrast this with *Rogue One*, or *LA Confidential*, or even *American Beauty*, all of which make themselves known only through repeated screenings, or by reading secondary material. *Tomorrow Ever After* is not interested in spectacle, nor is it particularly interested in rendering judgment—it is a parable about all of us, and how we live, and so there are no bad characters to murder, no suffering characters that do not themselves possess the means of their own redemption.

The most impressive accomplishment of *Tomorrow Ever After*, however, is that its characters are believably written, and the actors capably bring them to life. Because the conflicts encountered by many characters are all basic and comprehensible, one finds oneself empathizing with *everyone* in the film. This accomplishment confirms what appears to be *Tomorrow Ever After's* chief hypothesis: that when we view each other with empathy, and treat each other with kindness, life becomes much more enjoyable and pleasant. In this way, *Tomorrow Ever After* functions not only as a morale parable, but also as evidence that its hypotheses are true. After all, if it's possible to make a film that engages, inspires, and entertains without laser battles, sex, violence used as a vehicle for redemption, or murder—*Tomorrow Ever After* promises none of these elements—maybe, just maybe, it's possible to make a better world, too.

Resistance Dispatches: Foreign and Domestic



Every American soldier takes an oath to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies. Since I left the service, I wondered who those enemies truly were. Once, I thought they were those disciples of God in the mountains of Afghanistan. When we went to war, the newsreaders told us that the Taliban buried women up to their necks and crushed their skulls with stone. It was a war on American ideals, because it was a war on women. They locked them away like prisoners, forced them into marriage, scarred their faces with acid. Though I cannot say what this had to do with airplanes pitched into our monuments of commerce and battle, I went to war to fight in the name of women whom I never saw. The closest I ever came was when we killed the men and heard the mothers, sisters, and wives wailing behind the *qalat* walls. The saccharine thrill of combat turned to lye in my mouth. Only after years of contemplation can I ask myself if I was just another man waging war on women, simply on another front.

When we elected the 45th President, I felt as if the war had followed me home. It seemed like everyone was looking for an enemy. For those who won the election, the enemy occupied the space of the foreign—the sexually aberrant, culturally diverse, economically anathematic to the so-called American Dream. My enemy, on the other hand, was domestic—that man elected President and the bigots he enabled with hate speech.

I welcomed a fight. It was a respite from my self-imposed exile from the people around me. Sharing the beauty, pain, and trials of my time in Afghanistan was like speaking an alien tongue. Gone was the collective purpose that I took for granted in the Army, but now the threat of that man in the

high castle galvanized people into action. I also must admit that there was comfort in the tumult and panic—the pain of others seemed to lessen my own—helplessness and isolation were now part of the emotional vernacular. So when the call went out to march on the Capitol, I volunteered. Many of the protesters drew from a well of deep moral wounds, structural oppression, or strength to march. If I am honest, in that moment I approached the Women’s March as a soldier, and this was simply another battle to fight.



Ksenia V. CPT, USAF (sep.)

I traveled with my friend Ksenia, a former Air Force Captain. We planned to march with Common Defense, an organization of progressive veterans opposed to the new president. On the drive south, she told me that many of the people with whom she served opposed her politics. Many of them cut ties with her when she made public her intention to march. I watched the nude trees outside my window, passing too fast to distinguish branches. So many of my former comrades and fellow veterans also spoke against the protestors. I found people I love on the other side of this new conflict. Would I have to count them among my enemies as well?

Give war a chance, one of them wrote on Facebook.

OPEN YOUR small minds, you whining losers, wipe away your tears, and open your malicious hearts, AND JOIN IN GIVING GOVERNMENT BACK TO THE PEOPLE! wrote another.

At the time, I did not realize that I would have to carry their reputation with me—that others would see me as the same as these angry veterans. I buried my phone in my pocket for the rest of the ride. At rest stops, I watched the nursing mothers in pink hats and elder matriarchs with their signs in windows. These were the people my one-time comrades railed against? I cried in front of my soldiers, fought beside them,

triumphed because of them. Would they see my decision to march as a betrayal?



Abuse of power comes as no surprise

I muffled my doubts. When we arrived, I reunited with old friends. We smoked and drank too much, dancing the way the young do because they do not yet understand they will die. To celebrate with people I loved felt novel, like learning how to whistle, and for the first time in years I thought I might name something happiness. Voices too loud from liquor, hands fluttering, and wide eyed, we looked forward to a march, organized by women of color, Muslims, and queer women. It appeared that the organizers had made good on their claims to place intersectionality at the fore.

In the morning, I pinned my medals to my jacket, took up my sign. *VETS VS HATE*, it read. Demonstrators inundated the subway platforms. Trains passed, one after another, bringing more people. The station choked with bodies, it was almost impossible to move. Cheers coursed through the crowd, amplified by the arched concrete enclosure and I worried if the huddled voices might rattle the station walls apart and bury us alive. There were so many people underground, it was difficult to breathe. Above-ground carried the same sense of unease, the overflowing streets patrolled by national guardsman and police, yet as people gathered, even they were hemmed in and immobilized. I grew up in Alexandria just across the river, and I never saw the streets so full. The place I planned to meet Ksenia and the other veteran protesters was too crowded when I arrived. I looked for her, but I couldn't move more than a few feet, wriggling through the assemblage. I thought, if we all wanted to, we could take control of the city.

Demonstrators wore the near-ubiquitous cat-eared pink hats,

held their signs—their political convictions aloft for the world to see. I too performed my identity, but as a veteran of the War in Afghanistan. Some of the demonstrators looked at me the way I once had looked at Afghans—*friend or foe?* There were many men there—fleece-clad fathers pushing strollers, boyfriends and husbands clinging to lovers or spouses, waving rainbow flags, but I was the only one who trespassed into the territory of threatening. Being a veteran may have evoked images of violent American Legionnaires at rallies during the election. *Man, soldier, medals*—symbols of masculinity, patriarchy.

Yes, I'm a veteran, I told them, *yes I'm here in solidarity.* I could not choose between removing my hat and my medals, or shouting at the top of my lungs *I'm one of you.* I told myself that it was important to show that those that served were not props for hate. I told myself that this day was never about me. Yet there was something else. Most of the faces around me were white. There was a group of Muslim students, a smattering of people of color, but each of us—all of us, were surrounded. I made calculations—was I using the right speech pattern? Was my posture sufficiently unthreatening? Did my expression say *I don't want any trouble?* I've been told that I'm too self-conscious, that I should *just relax,* but anyone who said that never had to live a life of color. I remember one childhood summer in Philadelphia, fleeing from a white teenager brandishing a baseball bat. In Louisiana, I lived on a block where I let all my white neighbors know that I owned guns because they spoke as if blacks still belonged under the lash. They only spoke to my white wife, as if I wasn't there to hear them—that I served on active duty seemed to make no difference to them.

Yet I was still a man among hundreds of thousands of women. They came to the Capitol because of a misogynist and bigot. Where the sense of urgency brought my friends and me together, at the march, my anxieties might have played off those of the

other protesters, creating distance. White or not, that we all feared for our bodies should have been enough. We were all there together, after all.

The rally started—a mixture of cheers, punctuated by bouts of silence from a crowd that appeared uncertain of what to do next. Demonstrators shouted their adoration for celebrity speakers like Gloria Steinem, Michael Moore, and Ashley Judd. Though situated among vital voices from marginalized groups, the biggest voices were white ones. An hour passed, then another. More speakers, musical interludes. Those in attendance looked at their watches, waiting. I looked up at the signs, held aloft like pikes. *It's not Feminism if it's not Intersectional*, one read. I did not know whether this was lip service or a rallying call.

By the third hour, many of those assembled chanted, *Let us march, let us march*. I too was tired, my back ached from tensing against the shifting crowd. National Guard and paramedics ferried the ill through the throng, parting it for ambulances that crept forward like giant flashing snails. In the shuffle, I found Ksenia. We had been so close the whole time, but could not see one another because of the mob around us. *Let us march*. The words nearly drowned out the speakers.

Tamika Mallory, one of the national co-chairs took the podium.

“To those of you who have for the first time felt the pain that my people have felt since they were born here with chains shackled on our legs—today I say to you, welcome to my world,” she said.

Moved though I was, those words did not seem to sit well with many around me.

They began again, *let us march*. I too wanted to move, but the urgency of the narratives told on the stage held me there. Yet another hour passed. Though I am young, years of carrying half my body-weight in body armor and ammunition had ravaged my

joints, which started to ache. I cannot imagine the pain of the elderly among us. Impatient voices became angry. Louder they said, *let us march*. Many did not carry the chant, yet it only took everyone else's silence for a few to reenact the silencing of people of color, Muslims, and the LGBTQ community. What had they done to earn such ill treatment? It was imperative to stay and listen, yet I am ashamed that I wanted to leave and take to the streets. The anxious current infecting the thousands around me took a hold of me too. The women telling their stories asked of us a mere four hours of our time. The marginalized wait all their lives to be heard, and so many never live to have the chance.

ution will not be televised

Some booed as the organizers announced each subsequent performer and speaker. They booed before Alicia Keyes arrived on stage, but they cheered when they heard her name. When Janelle Monet performed with the mothers of Eric Garner, Mohamed Bah, and Dontre Hamilton, everyone knew better than to chant or jeer, but it did not stop them from complaining, as if they were waiting too long for a cup of coffee rather than paying tribute to the women on stage. No one booed or chanted when Amy Schumer and Madonna took the stage. Some even yelled for people to lower their signs so they could see the performance. Madonna said she thought about blowing up the White House, but only a white person had the luxury of saying that without repercussion. I thought of what Tamika Mallory said.

"This is not a concert."

Ksenia and I broke away to find our group. As everyone set off on the slow walk around the Mall, we left the rally like the recently concussed. I could not reconcile the words I heard on stage with the behavior of the throng. As we made our way to

the rendezvous we passed through the crowds. I tried to chant, to rouse the crowd, but few followed my lead. A few demonstrators plugged their ears. Ksenia mused that she was not yet ready to be out as a veteran. Despite everything she suffered, everything she achieved, she felt she could not show the rest of the world who she was. I thought of the entitlement I had to wear my medals. To be a male veteran is acceptable. To be a woman veteran is transgressive. I wondered if blending in was a matter of survival for her, like my own habit of dialect hopping.

Ascending the low hill at the Washington Monument, I saw the immensity of the movement below us. The great swathes of humanity streaming through the Capitol's marble canyons resembled the masses fleeing strife across Africa and Asia for the unwelcoming shores of the West. Who would dare oppose such a force? Then, if the right wing vilified the biggest humanitarian crisis since World War Two, of course they would also vilify us. The light retreated from the day. Ksenia and I stood there, watched. An immigrant from the Soviet Union. A son of Vietnamese refugees. Vestiges of the last long struggle watching the embers of the next.

We found our group, after everything ended. We spent the night celebrating, commiserating, mourning. The fatigue of the day softened with the comfort of old friends and new comrades. The veterans of Common Defense spoke in practical terms—lessons learned, future collaborations, the long road ahead. Among that small group, I saw the vision for the march that felt so elusive during the rally. Women leading a movement, men in solidarity. People of the First Nations, people of color, Muslims, queer folks, alongside whites—united.

“Veterans issues are women’s issues,” one of the organizers said to me. “When we talk about [Military Sexual Trauma], when we talk about the repeal of [Don’t Ask Don’t Tell], when we talk about women in combat, these are women’s issues. These are veterans issues.”

When I heard this, I felt so short sighted. I understood then, that whatever this movement becomes, we are no longer siloed into labels like *Anti-War*, *Racial Justice*, or even *White Feminism*. The old guard of activism must give way to this generation, a large interconnected spectrum all concerned with justice. We parted ways, and for the first time all day I felt hopeful that we would overcome.

I crossed the city to meet my college friends again. The drive took us across the city. Demonstrators continued marching in ragged informal lines. Trashcans brimmed with discarded signs. I met my friends at Comet, an establishment made famous by a fantastic scandal that began with wild speculation and ended with a deluded man armed with a weapon bent on violence. When I first heard of the so-called Pizza Gate scandal, I could not fathom why so many subscribed to such a spurious narrative. That folly felt little more than a fever dream that night. Protest signs leaned against every wall. Among the patrons, staff, my friends, I felt the relief of taking the first small steps down a long difficult path. Eyes ringed by fatigue from the march, everyone in our party welcomed sleep.

As we departed, the flashing lights of police cars and the garish banners of the Westboro Baptist church greeted us—*HOMO SEX IS SIN, Got AIDS Yet?* The police scrambled to get between the zealots and the Women's Marchers. Men yelled, by bullhorn, over the bullhorns. I thought to defy my old habits of resorting to anger. In Afghanistan, anger sustained me, protected me even. A policeman between us, I spoke to one of the men on the picket line. I asked to talk, to tell me why he was doing it on his terms. I told him that we were not so different, both Americans. I served for him to have freedom of speech, I said.

He called me crazy. Someone filmed the exchange, draping us in harsh white light. Another man screamed over my shoulder.

“That guy didn't ever do shit for his country. He never had to

give anything up." He pointed at the evangelist, "Fuck you buddy."

"Why am I crazy?" I said.

The man behind me pointed to a black church member.

"There's some real self-hate going on there."

The man behind me was white.



Westboro protesters at Comet Pizza

The evangelist ignored the commotion, gaze fixed on me. I remembered—these people protested soldiers' funerals. Dead soldiers. These wild-eyed men with their long beards activated an old familiar heat in my chest. I moved through the crowd. Music played, and my friends dancing. Beat and rhythm carried through the revelers like the sway of wind through water. Protest signs held aloft like boughs overhead. Rainbow flags like falling leaves. The man with the bullhorn singled people out, women he deemed un-weddable, men he called sexual deviants. They flipped him off, or cursed at him, but they kept their smiles, bodies still moving.

When it came my turn, the bullhorn man jabbed a finger at me.

"You, I know your kind. You're doomed to hell. Hell waits for you."

"I've been to hell," I told him. "We had a name for people like you in Afghanistan—*munafiqeen*." The false pious.

"Hell," he went on, "hell for your kind." I wanted to reach past the policemen, tear the beard from his face. After everything I gave, this is what I defended?

"You motherfucking Taliban." I screamed back.

A woman chided me.

My anger broke. Present, but not blinding. Cooler now. Around me, that moment of rage did nothing to dampen the mood. Two women kissed. Children cavorted atop patio tables. This was what I hoped to return to after my war ended, yet in that moment I watched as if I never came home.

I drew back into the crowd, tried to unfold the seams of that brief glimpse back into my past. Against what did I swear to defend? Once, it was enemies from without, students of God hiding in the mountains. Yet, the Taliban never sought to destroy America. I learned over there that even the worst of them believed that they were simply defending against invaders. No, America's real foes were always at home. The bigots, kleptocrats, and the new President among them. We must disabuse ourselves of biases, entitlement, alienation. The road ahead needs cooperation, joy, and compassion. If I am to be ready for the future, I must defend against enemies domestic—at home in my cities and fields. Home in my heart of hearts.

Photo Credit: Drew Pham

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."

~

At the bar, the boys' eyes were boozed, 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.”

~

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.

Float was originally published in [Consequence Magazine](#) on March 28th, 2017

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

Dispatch: Istanbul, Spring 2017

I found myself in Istanbul late March on a 17-hour layover; my ultimate destination being a small island off the coast of Venezuela. I figured that while I was in the “Gate of Felicity” I had some obligation not only to explore the city, but to give you a brief snapshot of it as it is in 2017.

I’m not Anthony Bourdain and I don’t work for the Travel Channel. I do not need to tell you “Istanbul is an old city”, you know it is an old city. Nor do I need to tell you that Istanbul used to be Constantinople, as I’m sure you have gathered that as well from any number of documentaries devoted to the place. I need not tell you of my feelings of awe as I gazed at the Hagia Sophia in the following hours, nor do I need to extrapolate on my feelings of warmth— physical and emotional— as I sat in the oldest bathhouse in Turkey (Çimberlitaş Hamam, 1584 C.E.). I also do not need to subject you to my dumbstruck wonder as I stood looking at the giant dome of the Blue Mosque. You can hear about all of these very same places watching Rick Steves or typing “Istanbul” into YouTube’s search bar.

What I do need to tell you is that Istanbul is in trouble— and it finds itself in peril alongside the rest of the country. Nearly three months ago I wrote for *Areo Magazine* about Erdogan’s “quiet cleansing” of military personnel suspected of disloyalty, and how this purge resulted in the suicide of a

Turkish officer on the base where I resided. Since then, I'm afraid to say, the situation in Turkey has not improved.

To be clear, Istanbul still does an excellent job of projecting the facade of modernity. Western visitors—like me—frequent night clubs, hotel bars, and raves to our leisure. We freely enjoy the historical sites. We walk on the cobblestone streets undisturbed, where, it seems, every other business is a coffeeshop that plays smooth Jazz and has wacky furniture. But behind the curtain and through the smoke, one will find signs of the regime's Islamist authoritarian influence creeping in, "soft" though it may currently be.

Take for example what is happening to Istanbul's red light district in Karaköy. Like the city of Amsterdam, Istanbul used to be known in part for its legalized prostitution. As far back as the Ottoman empire sex workers in the region enjoyed relative freedom, and it's been no secret that the beautiful "window women" of the Beyoğlu section are major drivers of male visitors to the city. But under the Erdogan regime's political blend of nationalism and religious conservatism, state-run brothels are finding that their licenses to operate are not being renewed, and sex workers fear that once they are out on the street they will face violence and harassment.

A second example occurred when my taxi driver was giving me a driving tour through the city. I began to look at the apartments, shops, ancient walls, hospitals, and skyscrapers, and found that what they all had in common were large hanging banners displaying the face of President Erdogan—often in a triumphant pose looking off into the distance. Ubiquitous iconography celebrating "the leader" is a feature common to all burgeoning or well-established dictatorships. In Saddam's Iraq, for example, a mural or statue of the tyrant was practically on every street. The same was the case in Cuba under Fidel Castro. In North Korea it is still this way. The self-appointed gods demand their tributes and public worship, and it appears that a year after the attempted coups Erdogan

is walking this particular well-worn path.



Many citizens of Istanbul and Turkey love their leader so perfectly that they spontaneously hang giant banners of him from their window. It is considered a great honor

I ask my driver what Turkish news is available to an English reader, and he points me in the direction of the state-owned newspaper Yeni Safak. I suppose this is one of the few sources of news he can point me to, seeing as how the regime has forcefully closed down all other dissenting publications. As I begin to scroll through the English version of Yeni Safak's website, it doesn't take long for me to find worrisome anti-Western sentiments. One piece floats the accusation that Germany supports terror attacks on Turkey. Another preaches to its readers that Erdogan "thinks only of Turkey's present and future, not of himself", and that the reality for Turkey without Erdogan as president would be the Qur'an and hijab banned.

Beyond the crackdown on sex worker freedom and freedom of the press, there is also a rise in antisemitism in Turkey. The regime regularly treats its Jewish population with suspicion, accusing them of having more loyalty to Israel than to the country in which they reside. Lest you think that this anti-Jewish fervor lies only with the regime and its citizen loyalists, think again. It has become a part of the culture as well. Famous Turkish pop singer Yildiz Tilbe made headlines three years ago when she tweeted "God bless Hitler" and "If God allows, it will again be Muslims who will bring the end of those Jews." To which the mayor of Turkey's capital Ankara replied "I applaud you." According to a 2015 poll conducted by

the Anti-Defamation League, 71% of Turks harbor antisemitic feelings.



Mein Kampf has an enthusiastic following in the former Ottoman Empire. It's been a bestseller for many years

It turned out I didn't need any of this foreknowledge of rising antisemitism in Turkey to get a clue, during my brief stay, that it was happening. When I returned to the airport at the end of my layover (a bit more sober than when I left it), I found that every single media shop was selling Mein Kampf on their front shelves beside recent releases. Since seeing a book by Adolf Hitler sandwiched between new Clive Cussler and Lisa Gardner novels isn't a normal sight (especially when these stores only possessed about 15-20 books in total), I asked one of the managers about why it was there. It turns out the infamous work has been a consistent bestseller in Turkey since its publication in the Turkish language in 2005. That's twelve years as a bestseller.

Again I should stress that this so far is a rather "soft" form of authoritarianism when compared to past dictatorships like Stalin, Saddam, Mao, etc. A tourist may notice Mein Kampf in the airports and see Erdogan's face everywhere they turn, but overall they could go through their entire stay in Istanbul without feeling any "dark clouds overhead". At least for now. My time in the city resembled nothing like, say, Hitchens in Iraq or in Bosnia.

But this is because Turkey is only in the beginning stages of its totalitarian hell ride. The situation will get worse. Much worse. If I were still a gambling man, I would put all my money on it. In mid-March, Erdogan made a statement that

“Europeans will not walk on the streets safely” if the attitude of European governments toward the regime does not change; a threat that further isolates his nation from the international community. Human rights activists and journalists should not take their eyes off of this part of the world for a second.

Poetry: “Departure” & “Respite” by Justice Castaneda



Departure

Once upon a time, I know I had a plan.

Going to come back, finish the conversation.

Keep all of the promises,

About how it all connected and why

There was so much there

To dream.

Overwhelming really, even takes the breath away,
Freefalling, I let it subside, and the memories fade;
Lake and Oceanside conversations,
Moments to say
I would never forget or let go.
And I knew I would never come back
So I pretend that I never want to leave.
But I do.

And the coast disappears
And you did as well.
Hidden underneath the fog,
Hiding everything;
The mist came in and set us
Right, and put us all
To sleep.

The trains roll,
And the sirens roar,
Through the morning city;
Urban rooster, setting everything to
Go, and it's a

Long day ahead.

Relaxed, just

Concentrating on breath.

I leave, I know.

This is what I do.

No permanence,

Or stake to claim or defend.

Just life and the road,

And everyone in between it.

Falling in love in the great cities.

But not all.

Not yet.

Respite

Once I drank

One thousand dollars

In a month.

Bit of beer

And lots of whiskey.

Just to talk myself

to sleep

At night.

And if you've been awake

As long as I have

I think you would've spent

One thousand-

One.

Photo Credit: [Abdul Rahman](#)