

TERESA FAZIO

Ridgeline

First of the month means a paycheck, and Friday morning means a long run. So there's a bounce in my step as I walk to the squat brick warehouse for our eight-Marine section. Lance Corporal Dino's outside, sucking the last of his predawn cigarette. He grinds the cherry out under his sneaker and flicks it my way. The white blip arcs overhead.

"I'm not the one who's gonna be picking up trash this weekend," I say. His jaw tightens. He retrieves the butt and drops it into the sand-filled coffee can by the door.

"You're in charge, *Corporal* Hugo," he spits. He's still pissed about my promotion—two hundred bucks extra each month—but I'm not the one who told him to get a DUI last year.

I *am* the one, though, who wrote his name on the duty roster for Saturday morning, which I admit was kind of shitty.

The ma'am comes out in those silky green uniform shorts that no one looks good in. Friday mornings she runs us in the ridgeline—the hilly trails behind our building. The rest of the shop files out, circles up. The ma'am stands on one leg and pulls the opposite ankle; her pale quad shines. Dino cracks his knuckles when we lean down to stretch our hamstrings. We start the run easy enough. Sun breaks over yellowed scrub. Dew soaks our sneakers. Then the ma'am turns uphill.

“Blood makes the grass grow, kill kill kill!” Dino shouts with feigned motivation.

We should have been friends. We were both in the same class at electronics repair school. We competed to see who could make the most perfect fiber splice, who could puzzle out circuit problems faster. We stood in parallel lines at the Navy Fed, carving fifties from our biweekly checks to send back to our respective Mamís. We hit the fleet at the same time, in the same unit. He’d once been our fastest runner, but as he smoked more and I trained harder, we evened up. He was always a dick, but didn’t seem to hold it against me that I was female. Not until after his DUI. Last month, when I was promoted meritoriously and he was not, I could sense his frown in formation, his lips pressed together too hard.

The terrain turns gnarly; we huff and curse in low voices. The ma’am takes us up Radio Hill, towards the tower that blinks red atop it. It’s the steepest run we know; everyone hates it except our masochist lieutenant. My foot slips on scree, and I nearly lose my balance. Pebbles tumble behind me. Dino snickers, and though we all slow down, I begin imperceptibly to fall behind.

The ma’am is twenty yards ahead; her brown bob sways in rhythm with her steps. She must do this for fun on weekends. Maybe she grew up in the Rockies. Or maybe they supply drugs at Officer Candidates School. Creatine. Erythropoetin. My lungs scream.

“C’mon Hugo, where you at?” Dino says behind me, all quiet-psycho. “You slowin’ down?”

“Shut it, Dino,” I say, irritated.

“Ohhh, are we cranky? We on the rag this week, *Corporal?*” he says just loud enough so I can hear. The ma’am seems not to notice.

“Fuck off,” I say, and pump my legs. This hill is murder.

I hear Dino closing in. He pulls up alongside me, although the trail is narrow. Soon we’re in a full-on race to the top. He edges me out, kicking up small chunks of gravel. He says nothing, hands atop his head, broad joker mouth grinning. Motherfucker.

I stumble the last few steps up the hill, put my hands behind my head, tip my chin to the sky. The other Marines follow, strung out over a full minute’s run of scrub.

“Attaway, Corporal Hugo,” the ma’am says.

Dino looks me in the eye with his sarcastic smile. “Just a little run uphill, ain’t it, *Corporal!*” he says, breathing evenly.

“Fuckin’ a, *Lance Corporal!*” I say between gasps. And then, louder—“I’d order you to drive me back to the office, but I’m not sure you’ve got your car keys back.”

His eyes go slack, like a little boy’s. The hurt on his face makes even me wince. He looks at the ground, takes a breath. Then steps closer. “Got ‘em back last week, you—”

“Let’s go,” barks the ma’am. She waves a hand at Dino. “Speedy Gonzales, get in front here and lead us home.”

I admit it was a dick thing to say, but he had it coming.

That afternoon, the safety brief is the usual don’t-drink-and-drive-use-condoms. All of us can repeat the ma’am’s phrases word for word. You’d think we’d listen, but if we did, Dino would be a Corporal, and my roommate Maria wouldn’t have that stretch of months after her deployment she doesn’t talk about.

My roommates Maria and Benson work in admin. Most days Benson wears her blond hair in a French braid, but come Friday afternoon, she’s in front of the mirror, wielding a blow-dryer and slathering crap on her face. Maria calls me by my last name since we have the same first name. Sunday mornings, she comes home with stories. Meeting Jay-Z in an LA club. Hitching back to base when her car broke down at Coachella. We’re like the cast of *Girls* mashed with *Generation Kill*, and you can guess which ones like to party.

Every weekend my roommates try a new tactic to pry me from the barracks and get me hammered, so all summer I studied for the Corporal’s boards. I faked a headache two weeks ago and cramps last week.

I don’t like bars, especially not with other Marines around. How can you face troops Monday morning if they know how you look sloppy-drunk? Running—that I can do. Flailing on a dance floor? Nuh-uh. Besides, guys don’t hit on me, in my jeans and scuffed sandals. And if they did? In front of everyone? Word would get back to jackasses like Dino. So most Fridays, I hit the laundry, gym, maybe

a movie. It's lonely, but it's easier. And I guess it's worth it to get ahead. I mean—I picked up meritorious Corporal, didn't I?

But when I return to our room after the safety brief, I see the one dress from my wall locker laid out on my bed. "C'mon, you're an NCO now," Maria says, olive skin glowing, her dark hair curling around the iron. "You can have a little fun. You haven't even had a promotion party."

I'm tired from the morning's run, and still pissed at Dino. Fuck it. Just one drink.

"Fine," I say. "I need a beer. Clowns in my section get on my nerves."

"Yeah!" she says. "Sushi Samba?"

"Whatever."

Benson barges in, holding a no-shit grocery bag full of makeup. "Trick or treat!" she says, holding it out.

"I think that works the other way around," I say.

I let her flutter a mascara wand across my lashes. She lends me vanilla lip balm, which I know I'll scrape off with my teeth by the time we get to the car. It takes me two minutes to slide on my dress and Rainbow flip-flops. But tubes and crimpers occupy Maria and Benson the rest of the hour.

Their cackling sounds like the delinquent girls in my Catholic high school, primping and smoking at cracked porcelain sinks. Meanwhile, I scurried to class, mindful of wasting Mami's hard-earned dollars. The nuns clucked *make something of yourselves*, and we all did—within a year, those girls made babies. I made it through boot camp.

I'm resigned to reading *Us Weekly* when something soft and black lands in my lap.

"Put that on," Maria says.

"It's like half a sweater."

"It's called a bolero. It goes with your dress."

"Is this even clothing? It doesn't have pockets."

"Just put it on."

A tiny purse sails by my head. It's too small to fit my phone, but I take it anyway, drop my Samsung into my desk drawer for safekeeping.

By the time we leave, it's drizzling. I duck into the backseat of Maria's Jetta, slouched and self-conscious. As the car glides off base, I feel nervous. They do this every weekend, but I can't remember the last time I went out.

Parking's a bitch in downtown Oceanside. We find a lot a quarter-mile from the beachside sushi joint. The girls clip-clop in their heels, and my sandals flap. Sand and grit film my toes. The bar's packed; Benson marshals us through. Silver eye shadow rims her lids, and her tan legs are muscled beneath her short skirt. We order small plates of things we can eat standing up: California rolls and skewered teriyaki. It's too loud to talk.

The bartender's in a tight black t-shirt, like Simon Cowell. He hands me a canned Sapporo. Maria and Benson get frozen margaritas. They take dainty sips, scan the dance floor, shoot each other looks over my head. I stand awkwardly, gulping my beer. Maria angles her head to point out a hottie. Benson laughs.

"We're gonna go to the bathroom," they say. "You all right?" They've tried to include me—they really have—but they have rounds to make, a dance floor to prowl, boys to capture. They slip twenties under my plate and disappear.

I turn towards the bar, nurse my beer. I would play with my phone, but it's back in my desk drawer. The bartender pities me, pours a tequila and winks. "On me," he says. I down it and order a margarita, pushing aside my half-full beer. Maybe I can take small dainty sips.

When the bartender hands me the cup, I feel a shove from behind. Half my margarita sloshes out. An elbow swings away. Someone kicks my bare heel. I grimace and grab the bar, letting the pain subside.

"Watch the lady," a voice says from above, then asks, "You okay? Mind if I slide in?" I turn to a crisp white shirt over broad shoulders, shiny black hair. His half-sleeve tattoo is all red flowers, like a Hawaiian shirt. "Nice ink," I say into almond eyes.

"Thanks," he says, "grew up on the big island." I think, *well, aloha*, but you can't say that out loud without sounding like a tool.

I screw up my courage fast. “Can I buy you a drink?” I ask. He looks at me quizzically, bends closer, motions to his ear. He hasn’t heard me. I stand on tiptoe. “Can I buy you a drink?”

He gives me a bemused smile. “Sorry, I’m on a beer run myself,” he says. He jerks his head back. “Girlfriend and all.”

I look down at the bar. *Of course. I’m supposed to stand here and bat my eyelashes. I suck at this.* I add my twenty to the pile under my plate and turn to go.

“For a short chick, you’re cute, though,” he says as I step away. Nice of him. Still, doesn’t help.

Someone taps my back, and I jump. It’s a middle-aged lady, weaving a little, her lipstick smeared. Brownish roots peek from under her streaks of blond. “Honey, your tag’s out,” she says. She flips the bolero’s size tag back in, pats my back again.

I push through the crowd. This—*this*—is why I never go out. I glimpse Maria and Benson on the tiny dance floor. They sandwich some guy with an open shirt; he holds a Corona aloft. I cross the room to a sliding door; it opens to a low wooden deck, a few stairs to the beach. I shut the door behind me, the raucous bar silenced.

It’s cold out, but dry. The clouds have cleared; stars glitter over the water. I pull the bolero tight to my chest, fasten its one button. A shrimp tail’s stuck to the bottom of my sandal. I sit down on the top stair, take off my shoe, and scrape it against the deck. The ocean belches rubbery kelp onto the sand.

A couple walks across my field of view, silhouetted against the ocean, holding hands. Loneliness wells up and washes over me. Meritorious Corporal doesn’t mean much now. My throat closes, and my eyes spill over. I peel the damp cocktail napkin from my cup and press it to my eyelids. It does nothing to stanch the tears. One, two ugly sobs. I hate myself for crying.

I don’t know how long I sit with my face in my hands before I hear the commotion. The sliding door shrieks behind me. Men yell curses. Sounds like three against one. If I curl my head down further, maybe they won’t notice me. “No, fuck *you*,” one says. Still, I don’t look. Then a sting on my back, thud-thud *whap* as one of them trips over me and falls down two short steps, off the deck. He grunts as he

lands in the sand. Laughter from the three hulking voices. They leave the door open; out tumble rap beats and loud conversations.

Sweat plasters my bangs to my forehead. I raise my eyes to squint at the fallen man. He's on his back, struggling to sit up. High-and-tight haircut, cargo shorts, gold chain. His nose trickles blood.

"You all right?" I ask, though I don't really care. He pinches the bridge of his nose. Then he blinks and stares straight at me, gives me a weird smile.

Spooked, I get up with a quickness. The tiny purse flaps at my side as I turn away. I follow laughter across the bar. It sounds like Benson's, high and screechy. But in the corner from which it came, I can find neither her nor Maria. I should text them, but—no phone. I circle the bar once, twice. Check the bathroom—no sign. Maybe they're outside. They're not.

I retrace our steps to where I think Maria parked her car. The lot's near-empty. I see no Jettas, just a dressed-up couple making out in an SUV. The last thing I want to do is knock on their window to borrow a phone. At the edge of the lot, I claim a pool of light and wonder if cabs ever drive down this street. Expensive, even if they do.

A white Honda Del Sol cruises towards me, bass so loud it buzzes. The front bumper glows unpainted yellow. A rosary swings from the rearview. Marine Corps stickers. The driver slows to a crawl, rolls down his window, angles his head. I step forward, ashamed but relieved, and—this is stupid—tears well again. Through their blur, I could almost mistake the guy for Dino.

I open my mouth to ask for a ride, but before I can get out a word, he shifts to a higher gear and speeds away.

A cigarette butt flies out the car window. Orange sparks strike the pavement. I take a few steps in my flip-flops and choke down the lump in my throat.

I look up, wipe my raccoon eyes, and try to gauge the distance to base. It seems impossibly far, where the red dot on the radio tower blinks over the ridgeline.

TERESA FAZIO was a Marine Corps communications officer from 2002-2006, deploying once to Iraq. Her writing has been published in the *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *Task and Purpose*, and *Penthouse*, among other outlets. She has contributed to the anthologies *The Road Ahead*, *Retire the Colors*, and *It's My Country, Too*. Her memoir manuscript *Unbecoming* was a finalist in nonfiction contests from Autumn House Press and Dzanc Books. She lives, works, and writes in New York City.