

# Camacho's Violet

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Beyond the blockade of old newspapers and reference books atop her desk, an African violet in full bloom commanded the windowsill. It was impossible not to stare: the plant, a voluptuous mound of dark, downy leaves bursting with vivid purple flowers anchored by tiny yellow knots, overflowed its twelve-inch clay plot, making the generic office furniture seem drabber, the old photos yellower, the travel souvenirs that much tackier.

Only one thing in that office outshone the violet: the woman it belonged to. Squat and steely with merry eyes and a flash of silver hair, she was closing in on eighty and couldn't have stood more than five feet tall. But she brandished a withering wit, a maniacal laugh, and an unparalleled memory for facts and figures, which proved handy in her position as *Newsweek International's* chief of research. Her job was to ensure the accuracy of every story in the magazine, a calling she answered with the kind of ferocious efficiency and peerless attention to detail that inspired fear in sloppy correspondents and relief in anxious editors. Between wheezy guffaws, she would bark into the phone in rapid-fire Spanish or French, doggedly pursuing a correct spelling, accurate date, or up-to-the-minute death toll. Her given name

was Mathilde and her nickname Dita, but most everyone called her Camacho.

The violet became my pretext for wandering into her office. I'd admire its prodigious flowers or touch the soil to see if it needed water.

But what I really wanted was for Camacho to cultivate my own budding career as a journalist. It was 1989—the Berlin wall was about to come down, the World Wide Web on the verge of inception—and I had just been hired as a New York-based writer for *Newsweek's* overseas editions. Fresh out of journalism school, I had no idea what I was doing and was surrounded by men who at least pretended they did. Lonely and intimidated by all the swagger, I instinctively turned to Camacho, the only other woman in the department working full-time.

She embodied the perfect blend of wise grandmother and trailblazing feminist. Back in the 1940s, she had been one of the first female foreign correspondents at *Life* magazine. She arrived at *Newsweek* in 1973, three years after a group of women employees successfully sued for equal opportunity as writers and editors. It wasn't until many years later, when I read Lynn Povich's stirring account of that episode, *The Good Girls Revolt*, that I realized how much I owed my career to them. But at the time, no one loomed larger in my mind than Camacho. I longed to absorb some of her confidence, her knowledge, her sense of adventure. I wanted to unleash her rapturous laugh.

We had gotten off to a rough start. Prospective hires had to undergo a writing tryout, and I was up against four young researchers on Camacho's staff—her “children,” she called them—for two empty slots. They had earned their opportunity for promotion through months—even years—of slavish fact-checking; I landed my tryout through the connections of a J-school professor. Worse, my previous work experience consisted primarily of writing greeting cards.

The four-week audition proved grueling. The job required distilling reams of reporting from foreign correspondents into compact, breezy stories for the magazine's international readership. My first assignment concerned sectarian violence in a market in Uzbekistan, a place I'd never heard of. “You let this one get away from you,” said Steve, the senior editor, returning my first draft with a few original phrases

floating like severed branches in a sea of green criticism. Luckily, Steve found it endlessly amusing that my resume included Mother's-Day-card writer and seemed inclined to cut me some slack.

I found Uzbekistan on a map; Steve talked me through the basic formula of a news-mag story: lede, billboard, money quote, supporting details, kicker. I stayed past midnight that first Friday—standard practice, I would soon learn—and returned with everyone else early Saturday to enter fixes, fit the copy to space, and write display type. “It all started with strawberries,” began my revision, and thus, my *Newsweek* career.

One of Camacho's beloved researchers got the other writer slot, and we settled into the now arcane rhythm of a weekly news magazine: saunter in late for Tuesday's story meeting, read newspapers Wednesday and Thursday, write frantically Friday—breaking only for a boozy, expense-account dinner—and stagger back Saturday morning to close the issue. I tried to project the perfect combination of competence and deference, hoping to overcome my reputation as a job-stealing jingle writer. Camacho and her researchers continued to eye me warily. When I had questions, I turned to Sam, a grizzled writer who wandered the halls in stocking feet, grumbling about shoddy correspondent files before turning them into impossibly elegant prose. He had started in *Newsweek's* Letters department—after a stint as a dairy farmer—and welcomed me without judgment.

But I was determined to earn Camacho's respect. My visits to her office to “check on” the violet became more frequent. Inevitably, we'd chat: about geopolitics, *Newsweek* style, office romances, her rich past.

She was born to a Colombian family, probably Jewish. Her parents always lit candles on Friday night, she said, but she didn't know why until she was older, when it dawned on her that they might have been marking the Sabbath. In addition to fluent Spanish, French, and English, she could speak at least a smattering of another half-dozen languages. As a correspondent, she had lived and traveled all over the world, forging friendships—or more—with a glamorous assortment of artists, writers, diplomats, even bullfighters. In New York, she lived in a

large apartment on Riverside Drive, high up, with views of the Hudson; gorgeous black-and-white photos of her adventures hung on the walls. Late in life, she had married a man she loved, an accomplished fencer named Alex Solomon, but he died long before I met her. They never had children. She channeled her mothering energies into coaching, cajoling, and sometimes castigating the rotating stable of young researchers in her charge.

I knew I had won her over by the spring of 1992, when she asked me to take care of her violet while she went on vacation to one of the rare destinations she'd not yet been—Bhutan, perhaps, or Burma. I carried it proudly to my office and thrilled to the task, gently plucking off withered flowers and moistening the soil each day. Though I didn't say so, I thought it looked even better when she returned than when she'd left.

I climbed further into her favor the following year, when it became public that I was moving to London with the magazine's newly appointed European economics editor, Bill Burger, whom Camacho had first hired as a researcher back in 1981. Oh, and we were getting married.

Near the end of our three-year stint in London, Camacho came to visit. I have a picture of her sitting on the couch in our Islington row house, holding our newborn daughter and beaming as if she'd just met her own progeny. We returned to New York soon thereafter, in mid-1995; Bill was leaving *Newsweek*—and journalism—for the uncharted digital frontier. I finished my maternity leave and returned to my old job, commuting into the city from our new house in New Jersey.

Our daughter had just turned one when Camacho told me she had stomach cancer. It was a Friday night, and she'd been out sick for a while. I wandered into her office to examine the violet and asked how she was feeling. She looked wan and subdued but delivered the news matter-of-factly. She was in pain, she said, but receiving excellent care.

That was the last time I saw her.



Camacho would insist I check my facts. So I Google her, wondering what she'd make of such a facile tool. Shockingly little surfaces. A search on ancestry.com reveals that she was born in 1912 in Paris—not in Colombia, as I thought. In a digitized reprint of the June 4, 1935, *New York Times*, I find “Mathilde Camacho” listed among the new graduates of Columbia University, having earned an MA from the Faculties of Political Science, Philosophy, and Pure Science. I unearth a few scholarly references to her doctoral dissertation, about the French writer Judith Gautier, published in Paris in 1939. And I see her listed repeatedly in the old mastheads of *Life* magazine: as a researcher in 1946, Mexico City correspondent in 1947, Paris correspondent in 1948. The closest I come to locating her actual stories, however, is in a catalogue of the contents of old *Time* magazines stored at Harvard's Houghton Library. “Camacho” is named as the author of two 1947 reports from Paris: one on Malraux, and one on a “pistol-packing priest.” But I can't call up the pieces themselves.

Hunting through the boxes in my home office, I find the photo of Camacho holding our daughter. On the back, I have taped two short obituaries, now yellowed—and neither attributed, I notice with chagrin—from mid-March 1996. I trace one to the *New York Times* and the warmer, more evocative one to Barnard's alumni magazine. “A prodigiously hard worker, a champion of the highest journalistic standards and a font of vitality and fun, she worked up to two weeks before her death at the age of 84,” it reads.



Before they come to clean out her office, I quietly take the African violet and a battered yellow watering can from her windowsill. My window faces the same way—south, overlooking Fifty Seventh Street—and the violet carries on as if nothing has changed. Taxi horns still shriek from fifteen stories below; the fluorescent overhead light flicks on whenever someone walks into my office, too. When the heat clanks on prematurely each October, I move it from the radiator to a book shelf nearby. When I go on vacation, I leave it with Sam,

who understands all that's embedded in that clay pot. His mother grew African violets, and he has inherited her green thumb. He loved Camacho, too.

The violet flowers on, impervious to tragedy. It greets me brightly on Labor Day weekend, 1997, when I—seven months pregnant—am called back to the office at 2:30 a.m. to help cover the death of Princess Diana. It blossoms through one grim news cycle after the next, untroubled by earthquakes, plane crashes, genocide, or civil war. On 9/12, I ride the train past the smoking hollow of lower Manhattan, weeping all the way to the office, relieved to find Camacho's violet still standing, robust as ever. It soothes and steadies me as duty kicks in and I lose myself in the familiar rituals of putting out a magazine.

Sometimes it seems as if *Newsweek* itself is cursed. A disproportionate number of colleagues, many much younger than Camacho, succumb to fatal illnesses. Others lose spouses, or children. Through one unbearable funeral after the next, Camacho's violet never stops blooming.

Before I go out on my third and final maternity leave in 2002, I carry the plant down to Sam's office for safe-keeping. When I return three months later, I don't bother to reclaim it. With three kids and a new position as senior editor, I'm too exhausted to care for one more living thing.



2005. Bill takes a new job in the Boston area. *Newsweek* agrees to let me continue my work remotely, as an independent contractor. We buy an old farmhouse in Andover and before we move, Sam gives me the best present imaginable: a plastic pot bearing a small but vibrant African violet that he grew from a cutting of Camacho's plant. The moving van rolls north, carrying everything we own except the baby's pink blanket and the violet, which rides beside me in the cup holder of the minivan.

It thrives on the windowsill in my tiny new home office, where I struggle to meet my deadlines. I hire a string of part-time

babysitters to manage the kids after school, but I still hear shrieks, squeaky instruments, and SpongeBob's cackles through the plywood door. Before conference calls, I hang a "DO NOT ENTER" sign on the doorknob. Sometimes, it works.

Every six weeks or so, a reprieve: I take the Acela down to New York to spend a few days in the office—which has recently moved from midtown to Hudson Street. My first time in the new building, a colleague has to fetch me from security because my ID no longer works. I stop by to see Sam, but Camacho's violet isn't there; he brought it home before the office move.

This arrangement continues for six years. I know it cannot last; the newsweeklies are foundering, in major denial about the threat from the internet's 24/7 news cycle. What once felt like a vital, secure career suddenly feels precarious and irrelevant—especially from my distant perch. I start teaching and taking on freelance work. Blissfully unaware, Camacho's violet continues to flourish, its mossy leaves spilling over the pot's edge. I email Sam pictures showing its dazzling clumps of flowers.

In 2011, my contract is canceled. It is well past time, I know, but still the rejection burns. I feel jilted, unmoored. Bill has left the job that brought us to the Boston area and winds up in the communications office of a local university, where he discovers that he really enjoys higher ed.

The violet pays no mind to such upheaval. I start a mommy blog, step up my teaching, take on assorted freelance projects. The work materializes; there is life after *Newsweek*. My colleagues, facing the same pressures, leave the magazine one by one, but we stay connected—through a Facebook group, emails, and occasional visits, even from far-flung correspondents. I am surprised and touched by how deep our roots go. We share news of job openings, book deals, awards, marriages, and births. We mourn together the passing of other colleagues.



At the beginning of 2013, Bill takes a job at Middlebury College. He spends the weeks in Vermont and the weekends back in Andover, where the kids and I remain to finish the school year. We put our house on the market, but it's a tough sell. Built in 1755 and last updated in the 1980s, it has none of the features modern home-buyers seek: a garage, central air conditioning, granite countertops, refurbished bathrooms.

With summer approaching, our realtor, a cloying strawberry blonde, decides to "stage" the house to lure buyers. When the kids go off to camp, we take an extended vacation, giving her free rein for the makeover. I ask her to look after the African violet, leaving a full watering can on the window sill. She promises she will.

When we return a few weeks later, the house no longer looks like ours. Most of our furnishings have been replaced with those that prospective buyers apparently find irresistible: a potted plastic plant, a flowery wing back chair, a wicker bassinet, and a glossy reproduction of Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. On the table in my old office, now reimagined as a craft or rec room, the realtor has set up a Monopoly board frozen mid-game. The kids are outraged: "She put a hotel on Reading Railroad!" my son observes. "Has she ever even *played* Monopoly?"

The violet is not on the windowsill. Maybe she moved it to a more central location, I think, glancing around. I turn on the light to the bathroom adjacent to my office, a dank, windowless space. There, sitting on top of the toilet, is the clay pot bearing what's left of Camacho's violet: a papery tangle of shriveled brown leaves, hanging limply from a broken stem.



We move to Middlebury a month later, the Andover house still unsold. Again I transport the violet, this time on life support, in the car. Water, light, and silent pleading have revived it slightly, but it appears traumatized, its long-term prospects bleak. In Vermont, it hovers between life and death, neither thriving nor withering away.



But I refuse to give up. I will not let a careless realtor destroy what time, tragedy, and multiple transitions could not. Following the advice on horticulture blogs, I cut a small stalk bearing the healthiest leaves I can find, mottled brown and green. I prop it on toothpicks over a mason jar of fertilizer-infused water, submerging just the stem, and place it on the desk under the window in my bright new home office.

No one is more concerned about the violet's welfare than Annie, my best friend and former running partner. We conquered countless miles on Andover's roads, telling each other stories, and the saga of Camacho's violet was just the kind she liked best: colorful, poignant, and worthy of enough embellishment to propel us up even the steepest hill. Every time we talk, she asks about it.

At first, I have no news to report. The leaves remain brown, burnt-looking. Then one day, I notice a few swollen bumps on the stalk. They grow more pronounced, eager buds straining toward the light. All at once, they burst forth, and I know for certain Camacho's violet will live. I send Annie a picture: a cascade of tender leaves springing from the wounds of neglect.

When I transfer the cutting to a pot of dirt, its DNA awakens and suddenly it remembers what to do. New leaves sprout daily, quickly covering the circumference of the pot. The soil grips the roots. Within weeks, I see the first flower stalks reaching up through the leaves, spindly arms slowly opening their round purple fists. Three months later, it requires repotting. Within six months, it has nearly regained its former lushness.

We hire a new realtor. After more than eighteen months on the market, the Andover house finally sells.



I scour the plant for the healthiest leaves, dark green and full, and carefully pluck two for propagation, leaving an inch of stem. I fill the bottom of an old cut-glass salt shaker with water, add a few drops of African violet fertilizer, and rest the leaves gently along its rim. For months, it sits in a prized spot on the kitchen windowsill, the leaves suspended in water, in time.

I am just about to give up when I notice translucent wisps dangling from the cut stems. Elated, I transfer each leaf to a small clay pot of specially formulated African violet soil and place them on the kitchen table in the shelter of their parent. Weeks pass. Then one day I detect faint green blades peeking from the shadow of each transplanted leaf. One by one, the blades unfurl into delicate leaves. When they reach critical mass, I give one plant to Annie during one of her frequent visits to Vermont. The other I fly in my carry-on across the country to my daughter—the one Camacho held as a baby—now in college in California.

That particular violet goes missing from her dorm the following summer. But no matter; I'll never stop growing them now. I take more cuttings, propping two, three, four leaves at a time in the salt shaker, coaxing roots to grow. Experimenting, I discover that sticking cut leaves directly in the dirt works just as well. At the hardware store, I buy an assortment of little pots, settling for plastic when they run out of clay. I promise my daughter I will grow her another when she is out of college and settled enough to care for it.

Not all of them take. Sometimes, for reasons I do not understand, the transplanted leaf shrivels and fades, curling in on itself. The roots find nothing to grasp.

But more sprout than don't. And each one that does I delight in giving away: to my mom, my oldest friend, Joanne, and Jean, the spunky octogenarian I deliver Meals on Wheels to each Tuesday, who reminds me of Camacho. Really, anyone who fawns over my sumptuous plant or expresses awe at its remarkable journey is a candidate. "That story gives me chills," said my friend Blair when I shared it with her, earning a seedling on her next birthday.

Now I stand in the kitchen over a tray of shallow pots, poking the soil surrounding each solitary leaf, impatient for the first pale shoots to pierce the surface. I see nothing, and begin to worry: why is it taking so long? Did I pick poor specimens? Have I over-watered? But when I tug gently on the leaves, they resist. Somewhere far below, a secret network of roots holds them secure. Soon enough, they will bear tiny, hopeful sprigs, and I will pass on to someone worthy another descendant of Camacho's violet.