

Touching Candy Taylor

by Marcy Dermansky

This *would* happen to me.

I've been on *Palm Beach* since before I could talk. I learned to read and perform simple arithmetic on the set between takes. I was flown to Hawaii for my sweet sixteen, which was aired live, prime time. I've slept with every good-looking male on the cast and crew. I've done drugs with the producer. I've given my glorious youth, years and years of service, and *Palm Beach* recognized my tremendous contribution to the show. The writers gave me a gorgeous death scene. I get to make all of my lovers cry. "Candy," they said. "You can't leave us. You can't leave the show."

The producers wanted to leave my death open to speculation. If they had their way, Ian César, the older man who had loved me steady for the last decade, who had waited for me to come of age to make me his wife, would leave my seemingly lifeless body in the woods. Me, Candy Taylor, in a skimpy but poetic white dress, not breathing, in a meadow of wild flowers. I could come back years later, after college, in between flicks. Whenever I wanted. Soap stars are always coming back from the dead.

But you know what? You give yourself a fall back plan, you fall back. Not me. I am shooting for the stars and rising high. Next week, I start filming my first feature film. I get to play Tommy Lee Jones' sexy little stepdaughter. Me and Tommy are going to do it in the attic; we're going to do it in an airplane. It is a fantastic script.

So after fifteen fantastic years on Palm "Beach," I am leaving.

The surgery on my lung tumor was successful. My final scene. My loving family is gathered round my hospital bed. Ian César is clasping my hand. It is my twenty-first birthday; I had beaten the cancer.

"Would you marry me?" Ian says. He takes the diamond ring from his pocket; he bends down on his knee.

My soap opera mother weeps: tears of joy, tears of sadness.

My soap opera father -- I lost my virginity to him when I was twelve, a fantastic way to learn about sex, doing it with the Dad -- clenches his hand into an angry fist.

Me? I beam. I had beaten the cancer. I would defy my parents, marry the man I had loved all my life. My mascara is perfect. The cancer doctors and nurses smile, so very happy, and then, then the green light on my monitor starts blinking and beeping. My heartbeat is racing. Racing.

"Much too high, much too high," the handsome doctor says, rushing for a needle. My kind nurse wraps her arm around my shoulders.

"Hold on," she says. "Hold on."

"What is happening?" I gasp. My face goes pale with fear. My eyes open wide, big and blue. Ian César grips my hand. "What is happening to me?" I say.

My eyes close. I blink. I focus.

"I love you all," I say. "I've loved every minute of my life. Thank you all."

And then I close my eyes. Take my last breath. The room is absolutely silent.

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You don't get to see any of this.

* * *

Because white supremacist killer teenagers had to open fire in a public high school. On my day. Automatic weapons galore. Homemade bombs. They shoot twenty something kids. Mainly black kids. A couple Hispanics, too. The pictures look really bad. I have to turn away from the screen, cover my face with my hair. There's a girl screaming hysterically, while the ambulance people guide her to a stretcher on the front lawn. Her uniform -- white shirt, plaid skirt -- splattered with blood. Lots of blood. More kids are running from the school, climbing out windows. Mothers and fathers holding each other, sobbing. The real stuff: ugly, splotchy, heaving tears.

Reporters and fans often ask me if I feel like I missed out not going to high school like regular kids.

Are you kidding me?

High school in America.

All those poor, underprivileged black kids lay there dead in that school. Police officers swarm the building. They mumble into walkie-talkies. The ABC reporter looks appropriately concerned, but he has nothing to say. No lines. He interviews a shaking football player. "How did you feel when you saw the guns?" he asks.

It's a standoff. Maybe the shooters are dead, and maybe the building is filled with explosives. Everyone watching TV has to wait, watching what you know you can't even bear to see. Precious minutes of *Palm Beach* are ticking by.

"This is when César proposes," I say, looking at my watch.

Jake Stevens, my older brother on the show, holds me tight.

There are no adequate words for this moment.

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My mother didn't want me to have a last show party. I had bought 1000 bucks worth of sushi. A case of French champagne in my refrigerator. Pills. Powders. Herbs. Name your pleasure.

I couldn't have a party without my mother. She had got me on *Palm Beach*, got me off it and into the movies. She picked my haircuts.

"I can't watch you die," is what she said.

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Instead there is Jake Stevens.

Jake downs his flute of champagne in one long sip. He pours another and drinks it just as fast. "I can't fucking believe it," he says. "Your big death scene."

My older brother is the most gorgeous member of the cast. My soap opera Mom had given him up for adoption when she was a girl, and twenty-five years later, the writers made the lost son appear, a drifter in our small beach community. I was crazy for him when he first showed up in Palm Beach, before we knew we were siblings and

all. My guy, Ian César, exposed Jake's true identity before things had gone too far.

Me and Jake.

I'd slept with Jake a bunch of times. He's a sweetie, Jake, a farm boy from Oklahoma; he had gotten his first big break posing for Hanes underwear commercials. Every time we do it, he has to say: "I can't believe I'm sleeping with Candy Taylor. Candy Taylor." His fiancée is a junior at Oklahoma State. A sorority girl. I sent her an autographed picture.

Jake grabs the remote control. All the major stations show the carnage. Every channel, they show that same bleeding girl. The sobbing parents. The graphics get better. *Killing on Campus*. Soaps always get pre-empted. Which is stupid, because the news can always wait. You want the news, you watch the news. Our shows are only aired once. One time.

I look at my watch. I've been dead for minutes now. Jake has turned off the sound, but the bleeding girl still bleeds. The cameras won't go away.

"It's unfair," Jake says. He drinks more champagne.

I want Jake to be quiet. I take the bottle of champagne from him and hold it between my legs. I have to think. I can think. I think all the time.

* * *

I'd wanted more lines. Before I died. My character deserved a speech.

The producer, Jack Petty, laughed.

"Have you read *Madame Bovary*, kid?" he said. He slapped my butt. The jerk knew I hadn't read it. Soap actors don't read books. We don't have the time.

"Emma Bovary poisons herself," he said, grinning at me. "She thinks she's ready to die, but when it actually happens, black bile pours from her mouth."

"What are you saying?" I said.

"You're a beautiful girl, Candy." Jack Petty shook his head at me and I gave him the middle finger. Jack used to love me. You should

know that. He used to invite me to family weekends in the Hamptons. Whenever I was feeling worn out, he'd take me into his private office. He'd give me as much coke as I wanted, that and long back massages. It all stopped when I developed breasts. "You'll go far in movies," he said. "But keep the mouth closed. You'll go even further."

That hurt.

Truth? I am a little scared I didn't die all that well.

Look at that bleeding girl. Watch how her eyes close.

* * *

A thousand dollars worth of sushi.

Six enormous plates of beautiful fish spread out on the glass-topped table.

Jake Stevens will only eat the California rolls. I stuff myself on fresh salmon and tuna. You can't know how fantastic it is to eat piece after piece of fresh salmon in the comfort of your own Malibu condominium. No waiters filling your water glass when there's a really big piece in your mouth and you can't stop chewing. No sushi hog to claim your last piece of yellow tail. Better still, no bidding your time until the next piece. Just you and your sushi. As much as you can eat. In between every bite, a swig of champagne, a taste of ginger.

"Candy," Jake says, his hand traveling up my short skirt and into my undies while I reach for another tuna. "My delicious baby. Let me make you feel good."

My mother couldn't watch me die. But I bet you she's glued to the TV now; she's watching those sobbing parents out in the cold parking lot, waiting. She's watching those kids running from the school, screaming in fear. They do it again and again. Slow motion. Instant replay. From a variety of angles. Misery for consumption. Everyone likes a good cry. This is the biggest shooting in a high school in the history of high school shootings. I can see the hint of tears in Jake Steven's baby blues.

"I'm touching Candy Taylor's silky thigh," he says.

I wonder, what is the difference, really, between my death and hers? That bleeding girl. That poor bleeding dead girl. And I wonder, is her mother watching? What does she do? If she can't watch? I touch the smooth, pale skin on the inside of my wrist. I am perfect; I am gagging. The tuna gets stuck going down my throat. I cough it up onto the glass-topped table, raw and pink and jagged.

"Hands out of my pants, big brother," I tell Jake.

