



“Cynthia” (Photo: Pinterest)

There she was, now wearing a blue dress cut well above the knees
with a top that barely concealed how well-endowed
the good Lord had made her.

Cynthia

“Hold up! Hold the door!”
“Hold up! Hold the door!” I had barely locked my car on the 2nd level of the parking garage when I saw the elevator doors closing.

Someone—I know not who—punched the “Open” button, revealing a conveyance already bursting at the seams.

“Room for one more?” I asked, not waiting for an answer. I backed into the elevator, holding my briefcase in front of me.

With a little jostling, using baby steps to move their bodies side-to-side and to the rear, the tightly packed group parted the way around my intruding backside until the elevator doors—alternately opening and partially closing—fully closed, but not before the car buzzed one final, angry warning.

The elevator proceeded up to the 1st parking level. There, the doors opened, but with the car full, they closed after a moment’s hesitancy, and the car proceeded up, to deliver its passengers to their destinations.

“Floor?” a young man dressed in a black, three-piece pinstripe suit asked, looking at me.

“Oh, it’s already punched. The 25th,” I said; “a way to go yet.”

“Right,” he replied, and returned his gaze upward, to the ceiling, to where everyone else was staring. I kept my gaze forward.

Then, I felt arms around me, totally encircling my chest. “I was the one who pressed our floor, Mr. Lawrence,” a voice cooed into my left ear.

It was Cynthia Palmer, my secretary and a flirt by any definition of the word. Just 20, this transplant from the hills of West Virginia to the halls of one of the most prestigious criminal and civil law firms in all of Northern Virginia could, at once, be both the most sophisticated woman to grace the corporate suite and, on the other hand, the most beguiling example of *femme fatale* known to man.

“Hmmm . . . is that Jovan Musk you’re wearing this morning?” she asked, taking a deep breath. “I love that scent. It drives me *absolutely* wild!”

The women on either side of her edged away, obviously embarrassed by her brash behavior.

I rolled my eyes. This was par for the course, something I had come to expect from Cynthia in moments such as this. It was a game with her, to see how far she could push the envelope before I’d break out laughing. We both knew nothing would come of it. The first time she had propositioned me in my office, I picked up my telephone handset and said I thought it was a great idea, but I’d have to get my wife’s permission first. At that point, we became the best of friends.

The youngest of six children—her sister, Kathleen, preceded her by a year while four boys had been born earlier—Cynthia saw her brothers, one by one, take jobs in Little Fork’s coal mines even before they had finished high school. *Marching off to their deaths, they are*, she thought each morning as she saw them leave the house where her mother dutifully had packed their lunch buckets the night before. She was certain it was only a matter of time before they, like their father before them, would die of black lung disease. Even now, 10 years after his death, she still could “hear” her father’s labored breathing, his shortness of breath and chronic cough, and his inability to breathe lying flat. For him, death could not have come too soon.

Guilty though she felt for leaving her widowed mother as she did, it was more than she could bear to watch her brothers follow in her father’s footsteps. She knew they—and any future husband she might have—almost

certainly would meet the same fate. Convincing her sister their only salvation was to leave Little Fork or end up like their mother, mourning the deaths of poor, down-on-their-luck miners who, like those in that old Tennessee Ernie Ford song “Sixteen Tons” would die owing their souls to the company store, the pair moved to Northern Virginia. Cynthia immediately set about taking secretarial courses at a local community college while Kathleen—with whom she lived and who supported the pair—tended bar at The Twisted Moose, a tavern on the Potomac River waterfront in Old Town Alexandria. Here, Kathleen met Brian, a handsome musician who regularly provided entertainment in the tavern on weekends. Within six months they were married, taking up residence in Del Ray, to where Cynthia moved as well. Six months later, Kathleen and Brian were “expecting.”

Following the completion of two semesters’ classes, Cynthia—or Cyn, as she was known to her friends—armed with her newly acquired secretarial skills and dressed in a skimpy red dress, succeeded on her first interview in securing a job as a legal secretary at my employer, the firm of Borchert, Simpson, and Overly, Attorneys at Law. What she knew about the law you could put in a thimble; however, the interviewer, a young man just out of college himself, could have cared less. I posit he had barely looked into Cynthia’s eyes, much less at her face, during her entire interview.

Just my luck, I thought when he brought her down the hall on her first day, introduced us, showed her to a desk outside my and two other lawyers’ offices, and, winking at her, returned to his office on the floor beneath ours. There she was, now wearing a blue dress cut well above the knees with a top that barely concealed how well-endowed the good Lord had made her. Frankly, she looked more like someone who was about to step out on a date than report for her first day of work at a major law firm. *Where does Human Resources come up with these people?! I thought. Can she even type?*

It was an hour before I heard a soft knock on the door.

“Come in.”

It was Cynthia.

“Do you need something typed, Mr. Marshall?”

“No, not at this time, Miss Palmer. But you might want to familiarize yourself with the style we use for filing papers with the various courts in the area when we’re defending clients on various cases.”

I swiveled my chair around and, opening the file cabinet behind me, pulled a recent case file from the lowest drawer: United States v. Caufield, 1976.

“Here,” I said, handing her the thick file. “Why don’t you go through these papers and get a feeling for the types of pleadings we have to submit. This one is for a case we won two years ago in federal court over in Alexandria.

She took the file from my outstretched hand, thanked me, shut the door, and returned to her desk. I didn’t hear from her the rest of the morning. When I left for lunch, I saw she had court papers and briefs spread over her entire desk. When I returned, she was still there, apparently not having eaten. I left for county court at 2 p.m. She still was going through the various documents.

When I returned early the next morning, her desk was clear. On my desk I found a note, indicating she had returned the file to the proper drawer in my cabinet and appreciated the opportunity to review the material.

Cynthia arrived for work that morning around 8:00 a.m. She knocked on my door, asked if I wanted a cup of coffee—I already had a cup—and wondered if I had a minute.

“Sure, c’mon in,” I said, getting up and moving to the small conference center in my office near the panoramic window overlooking the Iwo Jima Memorial and the southern entrance to the Nation’s Capital. Our building was at the eastern end of Rosslyn, just south of the Orange Line’s Metro Station. The view was incredible.

“Whadja wanna talk about?” I asked, carefully sipping the steaming cup of black coffee I had poured moments earlier.

“That criminal case you gave me to look at yesterday . . . I’m curious. Howja come up with using the Fourth Amendment as your defense?”

Her question took me by surprise. For someone who had no legal training and, frankly, was expected only to take my scribblings and turn them into draft court filings for the other partners to review and mark up, her interest in the law startled me.

“Well,” I began, “it was simply a matter of following the evidence trail. I mean, the police had no business searching our client’s home without a warrant . . . that they even were in his home was a travesty. It was a clear case of unreasonable search and seizure. And we proved it! The fact is, it took the jury all of twenty minutes to return a verdict of Not Guilty. I’m surprised the judge didn’t throw the prosecutors out of his courtroom after we finished questioning the arresting officer!”

She laughed, took a sip of her coffee, and rose. “Do ya mind if I read through some of the other cases in my spare time, Mr. Marshall?”

“Call me Bill, and the answer is: ‘No, I don’t mind.’ You’re welcome to review any of the files, but as you know, they must remain in the office at all times.”

“That won’t be a problem.”

She turned and walked to her desk, where she began her day’s work.

Talk about typing. Man, that woman could type, often beating out my documents at speeds in excess of 120 words per minute on her IBM Selectric. And when it came time to produce correspondence to the courts or clients, she wasn’t satisfied until my letters—and the letters she prepared for the two other lawyers for whom she worked—were error-free! No Wite-Out or correction tape for her! The letters had to be typed *error-free*, or she started all over again with a fresh sheet of linen stationery.

Not that Cyn was without her faults. Mondays could be particularly difficult, given her tendency to—shall we say—overdo it on the weekends. Her relationships were characterized by a steady stream of lovers. “This guy’s the one, Bill,” she’d say after arriving late from time to time on a Monday morning, describing someone she had met—and, most likely, slept with—that weekend, only to dump him within a month or two, if he even lasted that long.

But she never let her love life and the turmoil it brought interfere with her work . . . until that one fateful Friday in the middle of June, 1979, when she failed to show up for work.

None of the women with whom she chatted at the office had heard from her. Nor did she leave a message on my phone.

By mid-morning I was worried. A call to her sister’s apartment only brought forth the answering machine. To avoid raising concerns, I left an innocuous message, something to the effect “Miss Palmer, this is Mr. Marshall. I’m calling from the courthouse to remind you, as you requested, to bring that file you took home back to the office. Thanks.”

By late morning, I was *really* worried.

Then, just before noon, my phone rang.

“Bill, please come to Alexander’s Three. You know, the penthouse restaurant. It’s just up Wilson Boulevard. Can you be here in 10 minutes? It’s important.”

“Sure. Are you all right?”

“Not really. I’ll tell you when you get here.”

I dropped everything and hastily made my way to the parking garage, got in my car, and drove up the hill to the restaurant. Within a few minutes I had parked, taken the elevator to the penthouse, and joined Cynthia at the bar. I signaled the bartender for my usual—a Black Russian—and sat next to her.

At first, she said nothing, staring straight ahead at her image in the huge mirror in front of us.

The bartender set my drink down and left. “Cheers,” I said, lifting my glass before taking a sip. “Now, what’s this all about?”

She inhaled deeply on her cigarette, and then, looking up and closing her eyes, slowly blew the smoke out from between her lips.

“I’m pregnant.”

The words hung in the air with the smoke from her cigarette.

I was stunned. Yes, I always knew Cyn walked on the wild side, but I figured, if she wasn’t “on the pill,” at least she made sure her dates took precautions.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I didn’t even *want* to believe what I was hearing.

“Okay,” I said in a measured tone, “do you know who the father is?”

She ashed her cigarette with studied deliberation into a nearby black porcelain ashtray. Then, looking down, she murmured, “It’s Kathleen’s husband, Brian.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, yes. It happened a little over a month ago, on a Saturday night. Kathleen had off, so she and some of her girlfriends went into Washington to paint the town. I ditched my date around midnight, returned to the apartment we share, and paid their babysitter. Brian got home around one in the morning. We had more to drink than we should have, and one thing led to another—”

I didn’t respond.

“Well, aren’t you going to say something?” she demanded. “Like, how I disappointed you? Or, look at the mess I’ve made of things? They have a baby, for Christ’s sake!”

“I’m not going to judge you, Cyn. I’m sure you’ll be harder on yourself than anyone else ever could.”

She took another cigarette from her pack, pounded it on her wrist, and putting the filtered end between her lips, ignited her butane lighter, and lit up. Then, after inhaling deeply, she slowly pushed the smoke out of her mouth with her tongue while inhaling through her nose.

“I can’t keep the baby, you know. I can’t let anyone else even know I’m pregnant. It would destroy my family, Bill. What am I going to do?”

“Do you want me to set up an appointment for you with my doctor? I’m sure he’ll see you and help make whatever ‘arrangements’ you might want to make.”

“I can’t keep the baby,” she repeated, as if she hadn’t heard me. “I don’t know what to do. I’m so sorry I got you involved.”

She became flustered, stubbed her cigarette in the ashtray, and ran from the bar.

I paid the check and dashed after her, but by the time I reached the elevators, she had vanished. I couldn’t call her sister’s apartment, so at this point, there was nothing I could do but wait until Monday morning and continue our conversation at work.

But Cyn didn’t show up for work on Monday morning. However, waiting for me when I arrived from court around 11 a.m. was a man who identified himself as Detective Masters.”

“Mr. Lawrence? Mr. Bill Lawrence?”

“Yes, can I help you?”

“I’m Detective Wayne Masters of the Arlington County Police Department. I’m afraid I have some bad news, sir. Your secretary, Miss Palmer—”

“Yes?”

“She’s dead.”

“Cynthia? Dead?”

“Yes, sir. She apparently committed suicide last night. It looks like she jumped from the top of Alexander’s Three restaurant in Rosslyn. We found your business card in her purse.”

“Did she leave a note, Detective?”

“No, sir. Her sister and brother-in-law are at a total loss to explain what happened. We were hoping you, perhaps, might be able to share some thoughts regarding her state of mind.”

“Beats the heck outta me, Detective. I haven’t the slightest idea why the poor woman took her life.”