The Inimitable Doctor Lawson

I thought I had finally rid myself of Cindy Lawson, for better or for worse, when, in a most aberrant set of behaviors, she began dating someone who lived in the same town as we do. In this mobile day and age, a “girlfriend” or “boyfriend” is defined as anyone you have sexual relations with who, and this is the all important clause, lives more than fifty miles away. Cindy, whose sexual appetites were varied and avaricious by most standards, had fulfilled this omnipresent yet unstated clause with more panache than most. During the rather brief time that I knew her, there was a professor in London, a D.J. in New York, and a painter in Providence. She seemed to pride herself, in fact, on the range of occupations and social classes that she dated. The selection was so liberal as to approach insanity at times, especially when it included professional drifters, bloodletters, and fratboys. Anyway, the upshot of Cindy’s incestuous—and perhaps that was the appeal, too finally commit a form of incest after creating a sufficiently heterogamous precedent—romantic choice was that she quit calling me. Sure, it bruised my ego a bit at first, but I guess my unconscious knew that it was only a matter of time before another Miami mystery, dressed in clothes that were one-half neon and the other half nude, would descend out of the sky like an angelic paratrooper.

So, imagine my surprise when I received a phone call from Cindy who, after my inability to give a suitable answer to her question, “What are you doing?,” invited me to go run errands with her. I wish I could develop more agility with the “real-time” lingo produced by the omnipresence of mobile technologies. If I could, it would undoubtedly save me from many an unnecessary afternoon trip, since I have a
complete inability to say no to anyone and have only achieved anything in life due to the fact that few people have taken notice of me in the first place. For those who haven’t read my unpublished Time magazine article, written at the close of the last century, the logic of mobile phones is as follows. Those who first owned one, recognizing the powers of their newfound mobility, always called others when “doing” something, that is, moving about. The natural result of this medium, it seems, is to ask what people are doing at the very moment as opposed to the older questions such as “How are you doing,” “How have you been,” or “What have you been up to today.” Now here’s the catch. Those people who receive these calls at motion-challenged phones are usually disqualified from answering in any interesting way. For, unless you have the improvisational capabilities of a Victorian medium or a free-styling rap artist, you are not “doing” unless you are “moving.”

Going to Target is more interesting than signing the Magna Carta.

A few minutes later, Cindy drove by in her little green Acura (she insists on doing all the driving), dressed in a purple-based outfit that, as usual, was more alluring than her completely nude body, and proceeded to take me on a tour that expatriates of Miami repeated several times a week. Let me clarify when it comes to her outfit. I can say as little about it as I can about most everything she owns. The traditional categories one might begin with—skirt, blouse, dress, pants, etc.—are completely inadequate. Cindy does not so much dress herself as use a variety of sheer materials to wrap herself in a manner that ultimately resembles the early work of Frank Gehry, your friendly neighborhood “cheapskate architect.” Of course, in the case of both Cindy and Frank Gehry, looks can be deceiving. To paraphrase Dolly Parton, “It costs a lot of money to look that cheap.” But, while the droves of people who call Gehry the “architect of the new millennium”
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do a disservice to this millennium of which they speak, I do have some justification for stating that Cindy’s naked body pales in comparison to the sexual masterpiece of any given outfit she creates. For I have seen her naked, even if only in mediated fashion. In her house, there is an old videotape of Cindy buried amongst a box of sexual novelties (unopened multiple-pronged dildos and vibrators, Betty Page postcards, neckties with lesbian scenes on the reverse side, pornographic comic books from France, etc.) that is neither hidden nor on display. For three silent minutes, Cindy sits—completely naked except for a copper-colored wig—atop a four-foot high pile of socks, knitting yet another. I’ve watched the tape many times while dog-sitting for her, feeling a certain intimacy with Cindy that I’ve never felt with anyone else. But it’s the sort of intimacy Levi-Strauss had when living with South American cannibals. You see everything there is to see, but it is obtuse and mesmerizing, like a planet spinning on its axis. Her mesmerizing quality, which seemed to extend beyond my own responses to the phenomenological world at large, had got me in trouble on many occasions. Although Cindy almost never called me on weekends (when I was usually watching her dog and her videotape as she visited boyfriends), she almost invariably did so whenever my significant other happened to be in town. This almost always resulted in a bad row because a long time ago my girlfriend had tried to call Cindy about student union business, only to be informed that Cindy couldn’t talk right then because she had to go to aerobics. In female law, I suppose, such an event can lead to permanent enmity. It didn’t help that aerobics garb was probably the least provocative thing Cindy ever wore.

Whenever one of these telephonic convergences occurred, I would carefully go over the week’s conversations, only to find that I
had at no time mentioned the imminent arrival of my girlfriend. It was, if not a hard case of cause and effect, at least a strange attractor of some kind.

One weekend, a perfectly “innocent” phone message from Cindy resulted in me being thrown out of my own apartment. Drunk and exhausted, I knew there would not be a moment’s rest if I tried to reenter. So, I stumbled off to the nice part of town, hoping that I could sleep on a bench there and not get mugged. I woke up about an hour later to a duck nibbling on my toe and the scarlet burning of ant bites all over my extremities. After a brief St. Vitus dance, I stumbled through the darkness and arrived, somewhat to my surprise, across the street from Cindy’s house. The house is pink, of course, and quite shocking to see when suddenly revealed by a motion-detecting lamp. Luckily, her bedroom is armed with blackout shades, those icons of insomnia and illicit activity, which render the motion detector useless to anyone but those choosing to enter. If I was really quiet, I could make it inside and fall asleep on her couch without waking her.

I stood in front of the door, staring at an Ouija board propped up in a window across the street, waiting for the motion light to turn off. Finally, I stuck my key in the lock, thinking about the delicious sleep that awaited me on the custom-made couch that, although undoubtedly covered with all sorts of slick magazines, zebra-skinned dream journals, and spiked costume jewelry, was most likely completely free of insects. The idea was that, walking into her living room the next morning and seeing me asleep on her couch, Cindy would know that this was not a nightly occurrence but instead the last refuge of a most desperate situation. She wouldn’t scream, wouldn’t call the police, wouldn’t even ask me why I was there. Instead, she would feel some sort of vague sympathy for a situation she understood
as little as most observers understood her every waking move. At best, she would simply ignore my presence and go on about her day. At worst, she would forget her addiction to restaurants (over a year’s period, I must have spent half my life savings on “lunch”—and we always went Dutch) and try to cook me some breakfast.

That was assuming I made it to the custom-made couch, which I never did, not understanding the acoustics of old pink houses and the complementary auditory powers of bored canines with full bladders. If a 1970s newspaper headline seriously asked, in one of the earliest scientific investigations of spirituality and recording technology, “Does Rufus Hold the Key to the Voices of the Dead?,” I should have known that Cindy’s dog Ruby would rise from the dead at the sound of my key. It was as if, rather than turning the tumblers in Cindy’s lock, I was winding up the nails of Ruby, the wood-floor ballerina. If Cindy were to wake up to this, and she probably already had, the “desperate situation” explanation would be delivered verbally and would appear all the more a subterfuge for designs more perverted than probably even Cindy wanted to toy with.

So I turned around and decided to try my luck elsewhere, even though there was nowhere else, when the door swung open and Ruby rushed to greet me. Cindy was standing there in gigantic pajamas (and why should they be sexy, if there was no one to see her that night?), whiskey bottle in hand. She had figured that anyone awake at that hour would need a drink. She couldn’t have been more wrong. At first the conversation was innocent enough, about her latest battery of STD tests, the desire to tattoo an orchid on the side of her left breast. My evening reminded her of the time she was making out with her extremely drunk boyfriend in a pretty strait-laced Irish pub. She had to stop to use the bathroom, and when she returned her boyfriend was
making out with a German woman who had been leaning near by. Cindy was surprised that she was completely fine with it. She even enjoyed the perversity of taking turns with this other woman as a small crowd began first to gawk, and then to cheer.

But as the whiskey flowed, the conversation, or at least my take on it, began to get weird. She began to explain to me how the Bermuda Triangle wasn’t in Bermuda at all, that Bermuda is only one of the corners, while Miami is another. She couldn’t remember the third corner, but this fact explained why she always felt somewhat lost, drifting through life like a jellyfish until, by electrical attraction, enveloping another soul in her aura. She usually stayed with that person until an almost convulsionary panic attack would short-circuit everything, leaving her drifting once again. She had always wanted to legally change her last name to Valentine, to reflect the importance that romance held in her life. Rather than attempt to feign interest in such an absurd idea, I returned to the jellyfish metaphor, remarking how it sounded like a combination of Sylvia Plath and Jacques Derrida’s theories of dissemination. Well, Cindy immediately turned from Lilith Fair mystic to the Bill O’Reilly of philosophy. She told me that Derrida’s theories weren’t worth the paper they were written on, because he doesn’t believe, like Descartes who had been unfairly pooped on, that there has to be a point of truth, which is God, for there to be any reality at all. She was “constantly amazed” at how people seemed so awestruck by Derrida, since he was after all nothing more than the payment of a debt that existentialism owed to linguistics. And what was up with a Jew being so fascinated with Heidegger and his thoughts on “historical authenticity”? That was the very fuel of totalitarianism, a mechanical monster through the jaws of which Being
itself is destroyed, a machine that literally inscribes the law on the bodies of men who lie in its mouth and are processed for the sake of the “natural” order of the colony.

Although I remember many of the catch phrases now, if not their linkages, at the time all I could do was picture Derrida being kicked out of his own apartment, left to drift the streets like a jellyfish. Cindy didn’t seem to notice as I rose, or at least I didn’t hear any protests. I walked out the door and back onto the humid streets, vaguely in the direction of my home. But I was tired, and when a couple of blocks later I came to a couch someone had thrown out on the sidewalk, as if to please De Chirico himself, I stripped down to my boxers and stretched out upon it. Some time later—it was still dark—I woke up to the silent flashing of ambulance and police sirens. They asked me who the president of the United States was. I replied that it was G. W. Bush but that it should have been Al Gore. They drove me, clothes in lap, to the apartment on my driver’s license.

I thought about these things as I rode with Cindy, whenever we stopped talking so that she could listen to a couple of “measures” of House music that would give Charles Mingus a bad case of vertigo. After an afternoon of drinking coffees whose prices could be their own stimulant, looking at palm pilots that could prevent the sort of episodes I was thinking about, and paying overdue bills to gender ambiguous secretaries, we ended up at the University library. While Cindy photocopied articles deconstructing the false binaries between Sacher Masoch and the Marquis de Sade, I sat down to finish The Stranger, whose main character had interested me of late because he seemed so easygoing, so nonjudgmental. While old men were complaining about their dogs and pimps were asking him when it was proper to take revenge on their women, he demanded nothing of the world other than
it should produce events, subtle changes in the social atmosphere, for him to ponder.

But soon, by decree of the University Library, a sleepiness crept up on me. When I got up to clear my head with the water fountain, I ran into Cindy’s friend Jaimie, who has been calling me by the wrong name ever since she misheard it at a loud party. I thought it was sort of funny because Cindy had been telling me all afternoon that I should change my name, that it was hard to take me seriously with a name like mine. But then I was overcome by a sudden fear of the inevitable, that Jaimie would wander over into the sadomasochistic section of the library and say that she had just bumped into me. Then Cindy would tell her my real name, immediately after which Jaimie would seek me out to make a personal apology about having gotten my name wrong. I realized I couldn’t face that scene, mainly because I would have to feign gladness that Jaimie finally knew my real name and then produce a chuckle over the misunderstanding, so I went outside to wait for Cindy to finish. After a few more minutes of *The Stranger*, my (by then) ex-girlfriend tapped me on the shoulder. She was in town to do some research at the University Library. She was doing much better lately thanks to several sessions with her new psychiatrist, Dr. Lawson. Before I could finish searching her eyes for traces of irony, she went inside to get to work, saying she might give me a call that weekend. I decided it would be prudent for me to leave right then, not because I feared she would bump into Cindy, but because I was sure there was a reel of film, somewhere in the library, that was ready to combust.