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Myles: The Blue Dress

WINNER

THE BLUE DRESS

Lynda Myles

When I was twelve and living in the old neighborhood in Brooklyn in a three room bunker with my stupid mother and tyrant father, I was, among other things, a penny-ante shoplifter and a liar. In all modesty, I have to say I was a natural at both.

I never got caught either—if you don't count the time I stole my first and only big ticket item, a party dress.

Up until then, I'd lifted trinkets that sold anywhere from a quarter to a dollar—this was the 1950s—charm bracelets with ballerina shoes, dogs, horses and dice dangling off them; necklaces studded with colored glass; snake rings that climbed up to my knuckle; and earrings, my favorite being a pair of gold birdcages with a tiny gold bird on a perch swinging in each one. I still have them in the bottom of my jewelry box. When my mother came across any of these things during one of her search-and-destroy missions, I'd tell her I traded it with a friend for one of my comic books.

The only people I lied to on a regular basis were my parents, even though—or because—my father always made a big deal about never, ever telling him a lie. But once when I was little, like four, I got in trouble for being honest. He came home from work one day complaining that his mother, my Grandma Emiline, told him that I'd told her that Daddy and Mommy fight all the time. Without losing a beat, my mother jumped in with: "And she told my sister, Ivy, that you can't stand Lewis" (her husband). Both of them glared at me in a rare moment of togetherness. Never mind that Grandma Emiline, who didn't think my mother was good enough for her sonny boy—I'm not sure how I knew that then, but I did—had taken me aside during our regular Sunday visit and *asked* me in her wheedling way: "Tell me, sweetheart, do Mommy and Daddy fight a lot?"

I didn't have the vocabulary, verbal or emotional, at four to

explain to the prying old bat that “fight” was a limp euphemism for what went on in that apartment in Flatbush. If I did, I’d have told her that I lived in a combat zone where her son’s short fuse exploded regularly with the force of a land mine that my feckless mother kept tripping over and setting off.

Aunt Ivy, on the other hand, hadn’t asked me for my father’s opinion of Uncle Lewis. I’d volunteered it all on my own, having heard it expressed so often around the house, mostly in the form of a firebomb hurled at my mother, as in, “Your jerk of a sister and her moron husband!” I didn’t mention to my aunt that my father couldn’t stand *her*, either, but nobody gave me credit for that. The lesson I learned that day was, if you know something bad about somebody, don’t tell his mother or his wife. That’s useful information, even for a four-year-old. Another thing I learned was to stay out of my parents’ line of fire. That was never easy to do, but it got easier as I got older.

At twelve I had systems in place for escaping them. At home, I used the books I loved that were my real family. On the outside, it was sex. Above-the-waist and on-top-of-the-clothes, but still sex. My best friend Dotty and I would go to the movies on Saturday afternoons to pick up cute guys and make out with them during the serials and features. I’d only recently started to comb my hair daily and scrub the embedded grime off my neck and forearms; only recently stopped challenging boys to fistfights behind the school and started seeing them as possible objects of desire, whose cleft chins and tight butts suddenly made my pulse gallop, whose cigarette-scented mouths I longed to have glommed onto mine, and whose stubby hands I wanted to roam over my new breasts (outside the blouse).

I spotted Johnny Bruno a few rows down in the balcony of the RKO Keith’s at the same time he spotted me, and within a couple of minutes, we were sitting close, faces touching, his arm around my shoulder. (Dotty was down the row with his buddy, similarly engaged.) Whenever the screen got bright, I caught glimpses of Johnny’s thick, chestnut-colored hair, liquid brown eyes, white teeth, and smooth olive skin. His lips were soft, so

soft and sweet on my lips, on my throat, as his free hand gently massaged my starter brassiere. I was in a state of romantic lust. When the lights came up, he invited me to a party at his cousin's house the next weekend, and I said sure, figuring I'd find a way somehow to get out and meet him. But I needed a pretty dress to wear and I didn't have one.

I hated asking my father for money. Not only because he hardly had any during most of my childhood; I hated asking him later on, too, after he'd made a pile in business. I didn't want him to have more control over me than he already had. The man scared me, even though I knew he had a soft spot in his heart for his little girl. I knew it, but I didn't like it. It's not that he hit me or yelled at me; he didn't. What he did was mess around in my life, read my mail from friends, forbid me to hang out with this one or that one. But mostly I hated and feared him because of the way he treated my mother, like scum, like a piece of garbage. I was the silent witness to it, guilty and angry, but grateful it wasn't me.

Only once did I do something. He was kicking her chair into the wall while she was sitting in it. She looked so frightened, I couldn't stand it. I jumped up and hollered, "Stop it, you son of a bitch!" Then I stood still, barely breathing, in shock. He looked shocked, too, like his best friend in the world had betrayed him. He packed up a bag and left. I told my mother not to let him come back, but after a while she did, and he did, and the battle went on.

Not that there was any love lost between me and my mother. She had no soft spot for me and would never dream of telling me to go out and buy myself something nice, so I felt justified in bullying her into giving me some cash. Of course, I only got fresh-mouthed with her when my father wasn't around. I sounded a lot like him with her, but I'd get in trouble for it if he heard me. Two days after Johnny Bruno's invitation, I came home from school and confronted her.

Me: Marion Spiry is having a party on Saturday night, and I need a new dress.

Her: What about that lovely pink one?

Me: It's a hand-me-down! It's ugly.

Her: It was expensive. Your cousin wore it to her graduation party.

Me: I hate it. It's horrible. I need to buy a new dress.

Her: The pink one looks beautiful on you.

Me: How do you know? You've never seen me in it!

Her: I can tell.

Me: No, you can't! You just don't want to give me any money.

Her: I'm short this week.

Me: You always say that, I don't believe you.

Her: You're very fresh. Ask your father.

Me: I won't! And you'd better not tell him! Just give me some money. . . .

And so on. All I could get out of her was five dollars. That night, the night before I went shopping for my new dress, we had supper as usual around the table in the kitchen dinette. My father, in his undershirt, was reading the newspaper as he ate. He loved the columns of Max Lerner and Eleanor Roosevelt in the *New York Post*, back when it wasn't a tabloid sheet. I was devouring *Wuthering Heights* for the tenth time, while picking at my mother's cardboard meatloaf and canned green beans. She was busy pretending she wasn't being ignored.

Her: Why can't we have a nice family dinner and just talk to each other?

My father glanced up for a second, amused, but didn't bother answering.

Her: Well, I just think it would be nice.

I kept my nose buried in my book, reading Mrs. Dean, the housekeeper's description of Cathy: *A wild, wicked slip she was—but, she had the bonniest eye, the sweetest smile, and the lightest foot in the parish; and, after all, I believe she meant no harm. . . .*

After a couple of minutes of silence, my father looked up again at my mother.

Him: Did you take the brown suit in to the cleaners?

Her: I didn't have time today. I'll do it tomorrow.

Him: I told you I need it for Friday, Camille.

Her: It'll be ready.

Him: How do you know?

Her: I'll tell them to rush it. Harry likes me.

Him: Harry? Who the hell is Harry?

Her: You know. At Kwik Klean.

Him: Kwik Klean stinks. I said to use Prosperity.

Her: They've gotten better, even Marjorie Tender says so.

Him: Marjorie Tender doesn't know her ass from her elbow.

Her: She happens to be a very smart woman, Ed.

Him: I asked you to do one simple thing for me and you can't even do that. What the hell do you do around here all day?

Her: I resent your tone.

Him: You resent my tone, Ca-meele? (He made her name sound like it tasted bad.) I resent your stupid face.

I burrowed deeper into my book: *She was much too fond of Heathcliff. The greatest punishment we could invent for her was to keep her separate from him. . . . Johnny Bruno . . . Johnny Bruno . . . Johnny Bruno. . . . My nerve-endings tingled, remembering his touch.*

Her: For your information, everybody in the neighborhood thinks Kwik Klean is the best.

Him: They stink, they stink, they stink! Can't you get that through your thick skull?

Cathy's father was a jerk, but she wasn't afraid of him. I admired her for that. Cathy was: *doing just what her father hated most—showing how her pretended insolence . . . had more power over Heathcliff than his kindness. . . .*

Her: You show me some respect, Ed, if you know what's good for you!

Him: Sure I'll show you respect. Here's what I think of you. . . .

He swiped a pitcher full of daisies off the table. Broken glass and water went all over the floor. She jumped up, shrieking, grabbed a towel and started mopping up.

Her: You're crazy! There's something wrong with you, Ed!
I'm going to call the police. I'm going to call your sister Harriet and tell her the way you're acting!

Him: You miserable bitch, you can't do one single thing right! . . .

I was getting so wound up I thought I'd explode into pieces like the glass, so I marked my place in the book with a napkin and got out of the dinette, which was also my bedroom, since I slept on a folding cot under the window. I went into the bathroom, locked the door, and ran all the faucets in the sink and bathtub to drown out their miserable rotten voices. Then I sat on the closed toilet and kept reading: *'Why canst thou not always be a good lass, Cathy?'* And she turned her face up to his, and laughed, and answered, *'Why cannot you always be a good man, father?'* Ha, ha, served the old bastard right. Outside the bathroom door, I could still hear them yelling.

My father never struck my mother with anything but curses and decibels, I'll give him that much. He raged, broke stuff, and like I said, kicked chairs with her in them, but not her. Believe it or not, he charmed most people. He was handsome, smart, could be generous, and loved a good laugh. When I was little, he'd make up adventure stories about a boy named Arthur that left me giggling so hard I'd pee my pants. During one of their fights, my mother actually did call the police, instead of just his sister, Harriet. From behind a car across the street, where I hid after I ran from the apartment, I saw him come out of our building with two cops, a hand on the shoulder of each of them. He was smiling, and as I watched, he said something that made them laugh.



With my five dollars in my purse, which was a little leather box with a shoulder strap that I got from an army-navy surplus store—soldiers supposedly used them in World War II to carry bullets—I got on a bus the next day after school and rode to Miller & Krause's department store on Nostrand Avenue. In the Junior Miss department there were some dresses for \$5.00 and under, but I didn't like any of them. My eye landed on a dark blue satiny number that seemed to shine out from the dull stuff around it. When I got closer I saw that the blue fabric had silvery highlights. The dress had long sleeves, a formfitting top with a scoop neck, a tight waist, and a skirt that flared out. It was beautiful and it was my size. The price tag said \$13.99.

I looked around. There was one saleslady behind a checkout counter in the next department, but there was nobody visible in Junior Miss. I took the satiny dress and two of the cheap ones over to the fitting room. No salesperson was there either and no customers, so I let myself into a cubicle, whipped off my cardigan, blouse, and skirt and stepped into the blue dress. I pulled it up and zipped it. It fit perfectly. It actually made me look like I had a real figure with hips that were bigger than my waist and real knobs on top, instead of a couple of chest buds.

I stared at myself in the mirror, picturing dressy Cuban heels and nylon stockings in place of the white droopy cotton socks and scuffed old penny loafers I was wearing. I saw myself walking up to Johnny Bruno in front of Castelleneta's Pizzeria where we'd arranged to meet to go to the party, my hair fluffy from the pin curls I'd slept on all night, my lips bright pink from the lipstick I'd pocketed at the five-and-ten.

"Do you need any help in there?"

The woman's voice outside the door made me jump out of my skin.

"No, thanks," I called back, my voice squeaking from nervousness. "I'm just trying on some dresses."

"I was in the restroom for a minute. How many did you take in with you?"

"Two," I said quickly. "Do you need to see them?" I held my breath.

"No, that's okay. Just call if you need help. I'm Roberta."

"I will. Thanks, Roberta."

I didn't even bother to try on the other two dresses. I just slipped my blouse on over the one I was wearing, barely managing to button it over the top. My blouse sleeves didn't cover the dress sleeves, but my cardigan did, and I buttoned it all the way up, too. I put my feet into my straight skirt, slid it up, and tried to stuff the dress skirt down into it, but ended up with bulges and lumps around my middle, so I took off my skirt, lowered it over my head, and slowly worked it down over the shiny blue-silver folds of the dress. I couldn't get my side zipper all the way up, but the sweater covered the gap. Roberta, the saleslady, didn't know what I looked like, so she wouldn't notice that I suddenly got chubby. I turned around slowly to check in the mirror and make sure the dress didn't stick out from under the hem of my skirt. It didn't. But my tightly-packed bottom and legs made me walk funny.

Taking hold of the two dresses and the one empty hanger, I slipped out of the cubicle, dropped the empty hanger quietly in a trash can and left the fitting room. Roberta was straightening a rack around the corner. I tried to look and sound normal and more mature than twelve.

"These don't look good on me. Where should I leave them?"

"Here, I'll take them. You want to look for something else?"

"I didn't see anything else I liked." I felt a button pop open over my knobs. I forced myself not to look down to draw attention to it. Roberta didn't seem to notice. When I casually ran a hand over the front of my sweater, I realized that the popped button was on the blouse underneath, hidden.

"We get new things in all the time," she said, going back to her rack.

I waddled slowly toward the exit, stopping to examine

merchandise here and there. I felt like a Chinese lady with bound feet or a Japanese geisha with a tightly-wrapped robe. But no one paid any attention to me. Outside the store I walked slowly, carefully, to my bus stop. No one came after me.

At home, I called out that I had to go to the bathroom and ran past the kitchen where my mother was making supper (I think it was her special sawdust casserole that night). It was too early for my father to be there. In the bathroom I got out of my clothes and the dress, put the clothes back on, and took the price tag off the dress. I had a plan for getting out on Saturday night. I'd tell them I was invited over to my friend Leonora's for dinner and that her folks would walk me home. They didn't know Leonora well, but they knew she was quiet, dumpy, and unattractive, so she didn't arouse my father's suspicions the way Dotty did with her smooth light brown hair and developed figure. A month before, my father had caught Dotty and me standing on a street corner *just talking* to a bunch of boys, but when we got home he told me I couldn't hang out with her anymore because she was "a bad influence" on me (like listening to him call his wife a miserable bitch a few times a day was an edifying experience). Not that it stopped me from seeing Dotty, or anyone else. Not that anything he ever did ever stopped me from doing what I needed to do. I just went on my merry way, which wasn't all that merry, but it was mine.

On party night, I planned to put on my garter belt and stockings under my dungarees, pack the dress and shoes into my schoolbag, and say goodbye. But instead of going to the lobby, I'd ride the elevator to the basement, switch clothes in the boiler room, and leave my school bag behind a pipe. Later on, I'd do the whole thing in reverse.

I folded up my new dress and went out of the bathroom. My mother kept shopping bags in the closet next to it, behind the carpet sweeper. Sure enough, there were a couple from Miller & Krause's. I put the dress in one and went in to show her what a terrific deal I got for her stinking five dollars.

After supper, my father stayed at the table in his undershirt

reading Max and Eleanor. I was lying on my cot deep in one of my favorite chapters of *Black Beauty*, where Ginger tells the story of two of her owners, a brutal son and his kind father: *seeing the clots of blood on my side he seemed very vexed . . . then he quietly took the rein and led me to the stable; just at the door stood Samson. I laid my ears back and snapped at him. 'Stand back,' said the master, 'and keep out of her way; you've done a bad day's work for this filly.' He growled out something about a vicious brute. 'Hark ye,' said the father, 'a bad-tempered man will never make a good-tempered horse.'*

My mother came to the kitchen door and spoke in that coy voice she used when she was trying to suck up to my father.

"Ed, may I speak to you for a minute, please?"

"What is it?" he asked.

"I just need to speak to you privately for a minute."

He got up and went into the hallway. I tried to concentrate on the book, but I could see her showing him something and whispering. When she glanced over, I knew it was about me. She was one of those prisoners who identifies with her captor, so if you said to her, "You have a really lousy marriage," she'd say, "I don't know what you're talking about, I love my husband." It made me crazy that she never admitted anything, even if the proof was right in front of her stupid eyes. One of the ways she tried to get on his good side was to rat me out whenever she got the chance. Funny thing was, I always took her side (in my head) when they fought, even though I hated her. But when he cursed and hollered and called her names, I hated him more.

I'd started out loving her like all kids love their mommies, but once when I was six or seven, she was sitting on the edge of the bed in the dark, crying after one of their fights. I went up to her to hug her. She pushed me away without saying anything, just pushed me away, the dumb jerk. She never knew who her friends were. When someone does that to you, you stop caring—like Cathy did when her father pushed her away and wouldn't forgive her. She cried at first, but then she got tougher and laughed at him.

When my father came back into the kitchen, I could see he was holding the blue dress. I got so scared, I thought I'd pass out, but I pretended to keep reading. He pulled a chair away from the table and sat down.

Him: Erica, come here, please.

Reluctantly, I got up and moved closer to him. He held up a price tag, and I realized with horror I'd left it in the bathroom, where of course she'd find it and turn me in.

Him: Is this the tag for the dress you bought today?

I looked at it, frowning. My mind was flying off in a million directions; my heart kept trying to leap up into my throat. I stammered.

Me: I . . . guess so.

Him: Your mother says you only had five dollars. This is for \$13.99.

I looked at the stupid thing, pretending to be puzzled. My plan for getting to the party Saturday night popped into my head—dinner at Leonora's.

Me: I went with my friend, Leonora, to Miller & Krause's after school, and then we went to her house to try on the dresses we got. I guess I must've taken her tag home instead of mine, 'cause her dress cost a lot more than mine.

Him: Leonora is the heavyset girl with the dark hair? . . .

Me: Uh huh. We do homework together a lot.

Him: And she bought a dress that cost this much?

Me: Uh huh. But I got mine on sale for \$4.99.

Him: What does her dress look like?

Me: It's red, with lots of ruffles. We could go over to her house if you want to, so she could tell you herself. (Dear God, he wouldn't really take me up on that, would he?)

My father stared at the tag, pondering, one hand gripping his jaw, covering his mouth. I could see the traitor standing in the doorway, trying not to show how excited and happy she was not to be his target for once, to see her rival on the hot

seat. She actually used to say to me: "You're coming between my husband and me!"

I stood there in front of my father, watching him study the tag, wishing I could be anywhere else in the world—at the movies with Johnny Bruno; in the stall washing down Black Beauty and feeding him linseed mush; on the moors, running wild with Heathcliff; in Mr. Rochester's arms; in Avonlea, with my best friend, Anne; in the garret with Jo, writing wild tales. . . .

It was unbearable, so unbearable, watching him, waiting, waiting for my fate to be decided. It was a good story I had given him, believable, especially for one I'd made up in two seconds. But he still had his doubts. Why didn't he believe me? Finally, finally, he spoke:

Him: All right, we'll go.



Leonora lived about eight blocks from me, near our public school. Her father was the super of the building, and the family lived in a basement apartment. I'd been there once or twice. It was still light when we came out of our apartment house and started walking. We didn't talk. I was silently composing a fast, clear script for Leonora, if I had any time alone with her. If he came to her door with me, I could still try to alert her to the situation: Hi there, I'd say, when we went shopping at Miller & Krause's this afternoon? And then came back here to try on our dresses? We must've got the price tags mixed up, because I came home with a tag for \$13.99, which is what your dress cost, right? Instead of my tag which was only \$4.99. Do you still have the \$4.99 tag so I can show my Dad? No? Oh, gosh. But you do remember how much yours cost, \$13.99, right? And maybe poor old Leonora would just nod and say yes and no in the right places, and that would be it. Oh God. Please just let this be over.

When we got to her building, I took him to the basement entrance. He stopped there.

Him: Go and ask her to come out for a minute. I'll wait here.

I rang the doorbell. Maybe nobody would be home. Leonora opened the door, I launched right in.

Me: Hi, I need a big favor. My dad's outside and he wants to talk to you. They found a price tag for \$13.99 for a dress I bought today. I took the money out of my bank account and I wasn't supposed to, so I told them I went shopping at Miller & Krause's with you, and you bought a dress for \$13.99 and I bought this really pretty blue one on sale for only \$4.99. But we came back here afterwards and tried on the dresses and I took your tag home with me by mistake. And that's the one they found. But it's for your dress. And you can say you already threw out the \$4.99 tag, okay?

She looked dazed, but nodded okay, that dear lump of a girl. She followed me to the entrance. My father spoke gently.

Him: Thank you for coming out, Leonora.

Her: You're welcome.

Him: Do you mind if I ask you a few questions? (She shook her head no, looking terrified.) Erica says the two of you went shopping today. (She nodded.) Where did you go?

Her: (With a nervous look at me), Miller & Krause's?

Him: And what did you buy there?

Her: A dress? (With another look at me), Two dresses. One for Erica and one for me.

Him: How much did your dress cost?

Her: Um . . . mine cost, I think (eyes on me) about fourteen dollars.

Him: And what color is it? (Had I told her the dress was red? Oh God, oh God, I couldn't remember.)

Her: It's um . . . (with a panicked look at me, blinking fast), it's um . . . sort of blue, I guess?

Him: Okay, thanks, Leonora. I'm sorry we bothered you.



Daylight was gone when we walked home. I was too miserable to speak. My father didn't say anything for a while. When he did, he sounded sad instead of angry.

Him: You know, when you went in to get her, I thought to myself, if you were telling the truth, I'd go out tomorrow and buy you a puppy. But it was obvious that poor girl was lying for you. I'm very disappointed in you, Erica. Did you steal that dress?

Me: No, I swear.

Him: Then where did you get the money to buy it? I want the truth.

Me: I borrowed it from Leonora. I'm supposed to pay her back a little each week.

Him: You borrowed it from her? Why didn't you say that in the first place?

Me: I thought you'd be mad at me. (I began to cry.)

Him: Now don't start crying.

Me: I'm sorry. (I began to sob.)

Him: You have to take the dress back and get a refund and give it to Leonora.

Me: Okay, I'll take it back tomorrow.



I did try to return the dress. I took the bus to Miller & Krause's again, went to the return department, showed it to a woman behind the counter, along with the price tag, which I'd cut part of off at a slant in a pathetic attempt to make it look like the dress had actually been purchased. I was afraid I'd run into Roberta and the jig would be up. But I didn't see her. The woman eyed the tag, the dress, and me. She asked if I had a sales receipt. I told her I'd lost it. She said they couldn't give a refund without a sales receipt, and she reluctantly handed the dress back to me,

her eyes narrow with what I knew to be suspicion. I was afraid she'd call security and have me arrested, but once again, nobody stopped me as I left the store with my stolen dress.

I reported the truth to my father, that they wouldn't return the dress without a sales receipt. I embellished and told him I'd looked everywhere for it, but I must've lost it. My father gave me ten dollars to pay Leonora back right away, which of course, I didn't have to do. I still had the five I started with, so that gave me fifteen dollars that no one knew I had—plus the blue dress.

I didn't get to wear it to Johnny Bruno's cousin's party that Saturday night after all. It turned out Johnny had a steady girlfriend, and when she found out he'd invited another girl to the party, she threatened to come after me. He got word to me through his friend who told Doty to tell me it was off. I saw him in the balcony at RKO Keith's again another time, and he waved to me, but he didn't come over.

I consoled myself with the fortune that had suddenly fallen into my lap. I went horseback riding in Prospect Park for two dollars an hour, and afterwards, I went with friends for hamburgers and chocolate egg creams in our favorite diner, and I went to movies and bought all the popcorn and candy I could eat.