

The Blue Fence

Because she habitually needed the things she loved most, Miriam Spencer was a poor candidate for motherhood. Nevertheless, a mid-afternoon incident in the front passenger seat of a Plymouth Reliant resulted as she graduated from high school in a ten pound baby girl, who grew into adolescence among incessant remarks from her single mom to the effect that her hair was too straight, her fingernails ragged, her manner of speech indelicate, her mind too overpowering of her. The daughter's name, inherited from an actress, was Lana, and she had early adapted to her mother by turning passively inward, where she discovered as much as she invented the core personality of the celebrity after whom she was named. With a volley of insults from her mother as a reliable catalyst, Lana could appear on the spot lit stage of her imagination and live up to every expectation she perceived from her audience. There, she learned to walk so that a book could be read by telescope upon her steady head. When facing that dim crowd through the glare of the spotlight, she could curtsy and smile whenever socially appropriate rather than losing the thread of every adult care to come her way. She was even able to sound convincing when she spoke, which power departed most of all from the reality of her domestic life. In a word, she was happy. By means of her imagination, she made something more like her life at school of her life with her mother.

Then her mother appeared at school during an advanced rehearsal of a musical in which Lana was the lead. Miriam did not announce herself, as was her custom when berating Lana in her bedroom or the bathroom, but rather pushed a rear door of the large auditorium open very slowly and quietly and selected a distant seat beneath the opaque shadow of the overhanging mezzanine. There she became engrossed in the show's familiar plot to the point

of quietly murmuring certain of Lana's lines out loud like a feeble echo. It was her crying that betrayed her. At a moment when the stage directions sprung an unexpected silence—or was it only the immaturity of the production on that date?—stifled tears dropped from Miriam's eyes like heavy coins from her purse. For the cast, the effect was that of gathering rainfall as it squeaked its reluctance before slipping from the storm cloud cast by the balcony. Lana knew the sound at once and froze on the spot. She was due to deliver a line, but behaved as if at home.

"Your love means everything to me," encouraged Miriam, sheepishly projecting her voice. "I have waited all these years for you to recognize my devotion."

The next morning, Lana did not turn up for breakfast and her eggs slowly released all their heat beneath the hotter crosscurrent of Miriam's isolated narration of the tragedy. As it happened, Lana was headed for another breakfast altogether.

That morning, before Miriam's alarm clicked into its devoted AM talk show for middle-aged women with financial griefs to litigate, Lana pulled her eyes open, as if from the inside, to end a dream in which she was locked in the house scrambling madly for a cooperative window to dart through. That cue from her unconscious congealed her scattered plans of the night before and she slid quietly from the bed into street clothes, careful to exit her room without disturbing Miriam's sleep in the adjacent room. From practice, Lana's stealth allowed not only her departure, but the deliberated gathering of her three favorite outfits into her red polka-dot gym bag, which was also a favorite.

Outside the house, she pulled the back door shut very gently, nudging the latch over the lip of its brass housing like the tongue in a delicate French kiss.

For fear of the noise, she abandoned her Nissan Sentra where it waited at the end of the driveway, counting on her early start to get her somewhere strategic before the rush to reach school. On the corner three blocks from her house, Lana turned into the driveway of a long, Ranch-style house. Creeping along the hedges to the window set furthest from the driveway, she collected some occasional pebbles and jostled them in her hand like mute coins. At the window, she plinked them one by one against the leftmost, bottom pane, which she knew to be closest to an ear she could trust. In six rocks, it appeared behind Lana's target, supporting a long strand of purple hair that highlighted its purple folds. The window went up and an amused, groggy face received the seventh malicious pebble.

"Very funny, dork," said the face. It belonged to Mary Beth Mulligan, whose preferred name was Crapper. She had extremely long eyelashes that determined all first impressions she ever made despite a high-throttle attempt these last years to overpower them with gleaming additions to the rest of her face. Of these, the most formidable opponent was a thin metal spike the width of her head via the tight flesh between her nostrils. Still, the eyelashes won, and the girl blamed their suggestion of the spindly legs of an insect, which frightened traditionally.

"You sleep in that thing?" asked Lana, staring at the spike as if its unexpected presence not only dumbfounded, but also confirmed all her hopes regarding Crapper.

"I'm no wussy," she answered.

"Then whip out that radioactive helmet of yours and meet me by the blue fence, on the Strike Bike."

"Roger, Lana-blonde." The face retracted from the window-frame like an old-fashioned, accordion camera lens, momentarily exposing the recessed

picture of a wall with two posters for the bands Fetal Alcoholics and At. Two pale wrists blotted them in an approximation of over-exposure and the window slid down slowly to the base. Afterwards, Lana saw only the strong reflection of the sunrise and the outlines of trees. She shared with herself an implosive burst of strategic triumph before retracing her soft steps along the lawn. In the street, she reached into her bag and pillaged the worn pockets of her jeans until she found a pack of Camel lights. She unwound the golden band that fastened the plastic packaging, scanned the surrounding earth for a place to litter, and eventually pushed the crinkling wrappers back into her bag. She lit a fresh cigarette and leaned against the blue fence beneath the shade of an overhanging sycamore, wet with dew.

When Crapper lurched up, Lana tied her bag to the back rack with a neon bungee cord and dropped her cigarette butt to the pavement using only her lips. As soon as her hands were free, her driver swung a violent, green helmet against her stomach like an over-inflated football. It arrived with a thud, and Lana fielded it accordingly, configuring her forearms into two parallel, exterior lines. She tilted it forward, and inserted her head as if bobbing for an apple. Climbing onto the bike, she realized her hair completely obstructed her vision, which she decided to turn inward, where her actress personality strut backstage on long, loping legs, pulling a jumble of animated directors and producers behind her as if in a net. They waved their arms and periodically rapped their knuckles against scripts folded open on themselves to pivotal scenes. The actress flicked her hand beside her ear. The movement of her lips suggested an exercise in creating smoke rings, but she wasn't smoking anything. From the chugging of the engine arose the rhythmic repetition of the word "no..." When the 50 cc Honda Razz reached the diner, Crapper quickly cut the scene and the girls wandered in, remembering the bag.

They sat a corner booth in the smoking section, the waitress for which was a heavysset woman in her late thirties whose drooping eyes had the effect of neglected eggs over-easy, the yolks succumbing to gravity and condensation. She dropped two menus and waddled away without saying a word as to when she might return. Lana left her menu facedown on the processed tabletop, leaning an elbow upon her paper placemat.

"Your lashes are everywhere," she said.

"Thank you, dork." Crapper reclined into the booth so that her face sank beneath the top edge of her menu, which was propped upon between her lap and the table.

"You didn't say anything to your folks?" Lana questioned.

"I never say anything, wussy."

"It's important they don't know or they'll ride you like a camel, until you wear out."

"You got one?" asked Crapper, closing her menu. Lana reached into her bag and extracted a rumpled pair of black panties, waving them like a flag of ironic surrender. The girls laughed comfortably, exchanging a malevolent look.

"That smokes all on its own," said Crapper. Giggling, Lana stuffed the fistful back into the bag, returning her hand with the real smokes, which she slid onto the table.

"I feel like ditchin' that play," she said as Crapper pumped a fresh cigarette into the pack in a simulation of sex.

"Right on, dork," she remarked. During a silence, the girls exchanged expressions of extreme anticipation, as if both were neglecting some contribution crucial to the moment.

"Don't you want me to explain?" pressed Lana.

"Yes," Crapper said, "why aren't you giving me the matches about now?" Lana leaned sideward and wriggled her hand into her pocket, taking hold of the matchbook. As she handed it to Crapper, the waitress plodded over from a nearby table holding a turbulent pot of coffee. She filled Crapper's cup in response to her cue of turning it over among a first exhalation of smoke. Lana flipped her cup too, lighting a cigarette as the brown liquid splashed toward the rim.

"Ready to order?" asked the waitress, actively chewing the green gum. Like saddlebags, her jowls forked around her mouth as if they were topping a trotting horse. The girls placed their orders and she scratched them mindlessly into a pad, not even finished with Lana's instructions before hollering some indecipherable jargon about young ones across three empty tables and a fourth containing a pair of men before it arrived at the kitchen, where it dissolved among the a constant sizzling. Seconds later, she rocked away to work the register in front of the kitchen.

"That bitch ratted us," said Crapper, releasing a slow stream of smoke.

"You're paranoid."

"And you're stupid. Check your watch, dork."

"Seven twenty," reported Lana, studying the transparent background and black gears beneath the red arms of the Swatch. The timepiece was seldom reliable and she failed altogether to follow the logic of Crapper's accusation.

"Assume the usual ten minutes retardation of that thing and we're due during the crumpets for a visit from coach Kojak. He'll probably bust in wearing those blue, laced shorts."

"And bust out!" exclaimed Lana.

"Gross me, dork."

"Haven't you noticed he's huge?"

"No, I was busy killing myself first."

"I like uniforms," said Lana. "It's a costume thing."

"Yet you're quitting the play?"

"Looks that way. Doesn't it, dork?"

"Hey!"

"Here comes the grub. Eat fast and we'll take this party elsewhere.

Wherever you say." They twisted their smokes into the ashtray and inhaled two full meals. After the bill came, Crapper wiped her mouth with it, returned it to the table, and set off for the restroom. Lana took the bill to the register and waited for the waitress, who lingered by the pasty showcase as if entranced by a childhood carousel. During a third revolution, she noticed Lana in the mirrors that paneled the interior axis, and broke the spell with a powerful blink.

"Be right there," she called, plodding forward.

"No reason to hurry," Lana soothed. The woman squeezed through the entrance of the counter, smacking the register twice with the flat of her chubby head to bring the last jammed transaction to a close. The register clicked in rapid succession and three large zeroes printed on white chits appeared within its rectangular window. Lana handed her the bill, exposing the fresh grease stain.

"Why do you go around with that trash?" asked the waitress, directing her eyes from Lana to the grease stain to the bathrooms, where Crapper stood beside the door, zipping her fly. "A beauty like you? I bet you could get a hundred boys to wait in line if you did your make-up a little smarter."

"You do?"

"Certainly." She took Lana's money and concentrated intently on the task of making change at two dollars and ten cents. Without resuming eye-contact, she handed this sum to her customer. As Lana folded one single and stuffed it into her pocket, Crapper swaggered up wiping her hands on her jeans.

"All settled?"

"All settled," mumbled Lana. Her eyes wore a glaze as thick as that on the countertop donuts. Her head tilted slightly to the side, suspending a shimmering curtain of dangling hair. Somewhere defiant of introductory physics, a similar face returned the same posture from an illuminated cosmetics mirror. An image from Lana's internal theatrics, that face possessed a glow around the cheeks that transmitted radiant beauty. The nose wore no freckles, but sat next to a tiny black birthmark. The lips hinted at a permanent pout. Lana's gaze meandered to the pastry showcase and she came around with a start. Not acknowledging Crapper's hand against her arm, she stuffed the second sprawling dollar into the waitress' chest pocket and strode briskly out the door. The dime dropped to the counter and rolled until it collided with a water glass, causing a plink.

Crapper cut the engine and coasted the Strike Bike to an empty bike rack, where she locked the steering wheel and pulled the key from the ignition. She waited for Lana to get up from their shared seat. Also standing, Crapper unlocked the seat and lifted it forward on its front mounted hinge. Beneath, the gas cap shined a light shade of copper. Crapper removed it, lowering her head above the opening.

"Over half," she said, sniffing.

"Is that good?" asked Lana.

"Yeah, I do it all the time." Crapper's sarcasm was thicker than chilled gravy.

"So soon after breakfast?" Lana quipped, hand on her immature hip. "I meant good over half."

"That too," Crapper said. When she finished replacing the cap and seat, she walked briskly for the door of the Bowling Alley to which she had driven the girls.

"Hurry up!" she called from the door. Lana lingered at the Bike, examining the fuel gauge, which read below a quarter of a tank. She scratched her head. Without the helmet, it felt puny and dull.

"Does this thing work?" she shouted, tapping her finger against the fiberglass housing.

"Before it rains, dork!" yelled Crapper. Lana peered upward, surveying in every direction a perfectly cloudless blue sky, within which sat a small, glowing sun like a single knot in an immense sheet of wood. She wondered how raindrops could ever form under such a dome, but shrugged the thought off. Redirecting her gaze, she ran excitedly inside.

"They look like planks," Lana said, pointing at the rows of empty lanes, none of them active.

"They are planks," said Crapper.

"No," Lana corrected herself, "I meant they look big planks."

"And these look like bowling balls," said Crapper, "but you brought your own." She grabbed Lana's head.

"Lemme go!"

"Gimme a quarter!"

"Quit pullin' my hair!"

"Gimme a quarter!" sang Crapper, whose feet led the girls to the nearest lane, where several pensive remarks about averages gave Lana to believe that the pins awaited her incoming face. Avoiding disaster, she reached delicately into her pocket and found a small handful of change containing two quarters.

"You can go first," she invited, extending the handful, which Crapper took and counted to herself quietly.

"Planks," she repeated after finishing.

"You're welcome," Lana said. Together, they walked past the central counter for shoe exchange and entered the glowing arcade. Random eruptions of electronic warfare drowned their giggling like last gasps for breath.

After a first game of Dig Dug, from which Crapper quickly ejected Lana by repeatedly dislodging boulders on her head, Lana returned to the counter for shoe exchange to break a dollar. The man who took it from her was overweight and his shirt concealed only the top half of his belly. The rest inched over the flat surface of the counter as he leaned there for support. He turned the dollar over several times before handing it back.

"There's a machine for change right there," he said, pointing. He stared over Lana as though her were speaking to a customer a foot taller than her, a step back.

"Where?" Lana asked.

"There," repeated the man, pointing.

"That way?"

"Right there." The man pointed once more and wiped his long forehead with his hand. He returned the hand to his side. Behind his empty chair, a small transistor radio played the AM version of a new song by Cyprus Hill.

"Mister, what station is that?" asked Lena.

"I'm no DJ, little lady."

"Can you sing good?"

"What did you ask me?"

"I bet this bowling alley makes a great place for singing. I'm right, aren't I?"

The man looked directly at her. "How many quarters did you say?" he asked after a few seconds of silence.

"There's no one here," Lana said, slowly advancing into song, which grew louder and louder until the man shook his head in amazed resignation and clicked off the radio.

At first, Lana faced him, making it clear that he was her audience and the show would go on even if he left his station to chase her. When he did not, Lana spun around theatrically and belted her song to the empty lanes, dashing purposefully in the direction of the one she chose by whim. There, she kicked off her shoes and slid to several gliding stops before the pins, almost hitting them. But she never quite reached. As she collected her footwear and walked back to the counter, the man applauded perhaps excessively.

"Bravo," he remarked upon Lana's return. "What do you call that bit of music?"

"I'm no DJ," she said.

"Yeah?" said the man. "Well don't be a jukebox either." Without collecting her dollar, the man dropped four quarters an actorly six inches to Lana's awaiting palm. She folded her fingers over the coins and stuffed them into her pocket.

"I learned it in school," Lana said. "It's the third song in this play I once did."

"About bowling?" asked the man.

"About bowling," affirmed Lana. She reached down and slipped into her shoes. The radio came on. Lana stood up, nodded to her audience of one, and walked quickly to the arcade, where Crapper stood with arms folded across her chest. On her face was an expression of incredulity and approval, strangely

similar to the counterman's. The spike in Crapper's nose glistened with the light moisture of a recent sneeze.

"You are crazy," she said enthusiastically.

"No, a dork," Lana corrected. She shuffled Crapper into the recesses of the arcade, hunting quarters. When the time came to leave, Lana dashed ostentatiously for the door closest to the arcade, and blasted through it.

As Lana and Crapper finished their cups of frozen yogurt, the door of the restaurant swung inward for a third and fourth customer, one of whom pushed the other in a baby carriage. The mother wore an expression of distress. Her hair stuck to her forehead in two asymmetrical clumps. Concentrating on the widths of the carriage and the door, she snagged the rear wheels several times before accomplishing her entry. Inside, she immediately sat down, blowing a sigh. Her cheeks were flushed and right away her fingers drummed an impatient rhythm on the table. From the next table over, Lana watched the woman as one might watch flies during a long period of solitude. She decided the woman was thinking, and wondered what could be so urgent in a store dedicated to low-fat frozen deserts and high-calorie toppings.

"The blueberry is very good," Lana said, nodding her head as an introduction. With her eyes, she encouraged the woman to accept a raised spoonful of yogurt, dipped in chocolate chips. Crapper took the opportunity to test Lana's claim for herself, burying her spoon in the resting cup and twisting free a vibrant gob, which she also raised in a gesture of greeting.

"What?" said the woman, turning.

"Blueberry," munched Crapper. A stray chocolate chip stuck by its flat end to her animate lower lip.

"I liked blueberries once," recalled the woman from some dark recess of her mind. Her hand rolled the carriage back and forth beside her chair.

"Have mine," said Lana, transferring the cup. Crapper wore a sour expression at the generosity.

"You're not eating it?" asked the woman.

"Huge breakfast," Lana explained. The woman lifted the cup and spoon and furiously ate the remainder. When she finished, she returned her hand to the handle of the carriage.

"I forget to eat," she remarked, embarrassed slightly at her attack of the yogurt. There was a long silence, during which Crapper looked around, as if seeking new flies to observe during a period of solitude.

"How old is your baby?" asked Lana.

"Three months."

"Can I see her?" The woman's mouth broadened into a smile before she assented. When she did, Lana stood up and walked the long way around the carriage, noting to herself how its head sagged beneath the weight of a toy license plate reading "Howard." She asked was that the baby's name.

"How," the woman partly confirmed. With a delicate gesture, she fixed the blanket beneath her son's moist chin. From the fragile land of sleep, the boy produced a click with his moist tongue and lips. Lana hummed over him softly. She tilted her head to the side, gazing.

Probably, Howard traveled frequently in the carriage because on the inside it looked like a fully outfitted playpen on wheels only accidentally. In the darker corners beyond Howard's pillow was a scattered library of chunky books, two empty bottles, a collection of pacifiers on two large plastic shower rings like key chains, and a Danielle Steele paperback, as if to satisfy his readerly tastes as anticipated into the future, say next month. A foam sponge in the shape of a

pink duck with bulging green eyes swam the regions by Howard's feet among a stuffed, sketchy globe of the Earth and three taller dolls that Lana recognized as the Power Rangers, who owned one of her cousin's minds. Howard himself was a bluish baby whose body, at this early stage, continued to appear a mere outgrowth of his head, like the unwanted roots of a household potato. Equally spindly, a small mobile of plastic fighter planes bobbed and circled above Howard's head. Lana noticed the amateur quality of the knot fastening the mobile to the carriage's inner roof.

"Howard," she cooed.

"He prefers How," said the woman. But Lana did not switch to the nickname. Instead, she offered her finger to the baby for exercise of its grasping reflex. As he squeezed, an abrupt and prolonged chirping sounded within the carriage, hustling Howard into voluble tears.

"That's my phone," said the woman, jumping from her seat and pushing Lana out of the way so that until her finger slipped from Howard's admirable grip, the baby dragged like a fallen waterskiier still holding the rope. And there where he formerly lay among blankets lay a compact, black, cellular phone. Its antenna wore a jury-rigged nipple, and sat in the down most position. The woman grabbed it in her clenching fist, allowing the trailing weight of the phone to pull it to full extension as she lifted the entire unit from the carriage. She pushed a flashing button near the top, ending the sequence of ringing.

"Yes," said the woman over Howard's continued cry. "I'll be right there anyway," she answered, and pushed the disengage button. Pensively, she scratched under her chin with the speared nipple, which lightly squeaked.

"Is everything all right?" Lana asked.

"I may have a job," spoke the woman, amazed. She replaced the phone, the baby, the blankets, and departed the store in a mood of deep inward contemplation, imperturbable.

"What a nut!" Crapper commented as the woman nudged the carriage through the door and past the store's front window of plate glass and swirling logo.

"And how!" agreed Lana. The girls looked at each other and began laughing until they hurt from it.

"I'm tired of going places," said Crapper, who lay on a slight gradient of lawn, motionless. The lawn bordered a ritzy marina, in which the hulls of colorful sailboats served as drum skins for the bay's incessant rippling. Various birds squawked and chirped overhead. Still further, the sun glowed like a tiny wood knot in an otherwise perfect and enormous sky. A few men and women in rain hats and skipper's hats and drab windbreakers ordered by catalogue strolled along the docks. From one group arose a booming voice that belonged to a central and tallest figure. Occasionally the voice caught correctly in the breeze to arrive comprehensibly to the ears of Lana and Crapper.

"That why we came here," said Lana, "because we're tired of going places."

"This isn't a place, dork?"

"Yes and no. I like to come here to think."

"A mast like a crucifix," the man's voiced arrived faintly, crossing the reserved spots in the parking lot.

"About what?" ventured Crapper, turning her head toward Lana, who lay adjacently, also motionless.

"My life," she said, as if vocalizing a shrug.

"What about it?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm thinking."

"You're thinking now?"

"No. I'm wondering why that fart won't shut up." The breeze crossed Lana's face, causing two thin wisps of hair to flutter momentarily outward.

"In the days of the steam engine," the man was saying. The rest flew elsewhere like a restless bird. The man's party stood beside the marina's largest vessel, which bore upon its stern the calligraphied name "Hot Air 1."

Lana sniffled. "Have you ever wondered," she asked, "if the things you do really mean anything? I mean, you end up on the other side of your actions however they go, right? I just don't see the difference between which way you choose." Crapper's face wore an expression of intellectual satisfaction.

"You're talking about the play," she said.

"Maybe," Lana reflected.

"Maybe?" Crapper rebelled. She sat up and turned her body toward Lana, looming there so that a shadow covered Lana's face. "You quit the play and now you want to run back to it like a motherless baby. No difference! Ha."

"Of course the ocean," said the man.

"What the fuck do you know about the ocean!" shouted Crapper, standing, animated. Her body contorted into a posture reminiscent of wild animals defending threatened territory. The old man glanced at her and returned his untroubled attention to his party, which followed him as he continued to stroll along the floating sidewalks and boats. His voice did not arrive again.

"I think we should go," said Lana, but she did not move a muscle. Periodically, the breeze flapped her shirt where it was free of her pants.