



A. LYNN

# Specimen

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“The caterers should be here in a half an hour,” he said as he dropped his towel on the chair and walked to the closet with his penis swinging. He disappeared inside and she was glad not to have to look at him. His nakedness annoyed her. Time had touched him. Even he couldn’t escape the slight sag around his waist or happiness around his eyes. But he was beautiful. Golf tanned. Bleached teeth. Defined. But his nakedness, the pure act of comfort, annoyed her. The way he walked around uncaring of her opinion.

And his whistling. His damned whistling. He stopped when he reemerged and rambled about guests, an hour, more wine. “The guests will start arriving around six, so you have plenty of time to get ready. I have to run out for a few things. Your dress is hanging on the door. I picked it up from the dry cleaners yesterday. You’re still wearing the Dior, right?”

She pulled open the top drawer of her dresser that

hid her unmentionables and a dug out pack of cigarettes hidden in the back. She didn’t think twice as she lit one before returning the pack. With her first exhale, she watched the smoke roll from her lips.

“Jesus, when did you start smoking again?”

She sat in the upholstered chair by the window with her back to him.

“At least, go outside. I don’t want the house reeking of smoke.” He was timid kissing her cheek. “You really shouldn’t smoke. It causes wrinkles.”

She heard the whoosh of his suit coat sliding onto his arms as he made his way to the doorway. “I’ll introduce you at six thirty. Happy Birthday, Love.” There was a pause before the door opened and closed behind him. His footsteps trailed down the hallway, fading as he got further away, until he was gone.

She turned the cigarette between her fingers and watched the blue smoke dance up the heavy paisley drapes chosen by a decorator to match the heavy comforter. Lifting the cigarette to her lips, she let her mouth form around the filter and tried to feel where the wrinkles would be, but gave up and took a heavy drag.

She was sixty years old and didn’t care about wrinkles. She’d been avoiding them her whole life, ever since her father handed her over for her mother’s lessons to be-

come a lady at the second hand vanity with a hand sewn calico curtain hiding her mother's supplies.

"It's never too soon to start", her mother would say while the hot Georgia sun broke through the window panes and scolded the worn carpet. "Just a light moisturizer now, but when you get older..." She'd rub the cream into her sweat with soft strokes in short circles, like her mother.

Her beautiful mother. Sometimes, after school, she'd come home to find her flipping through the sticky pages of her album documenting her youth. The articles of beauty pageants. Miss Georgia, 1938. She'd squeeze beside her mother and stare at the black and white pictures of funny swim suits and ask, "How did you swim?"

"I didn't wear them to swim. It was for looking pretty."

It never made sense wearing a swim suit to look pretty. Especially those swim suits with a tiara. She'd think about it when her mom stood on her tiptoes to reach the box hidden high in her closet. She'd set it on the bed and open it with great ceremony. Then, she'd reach in, with manicured finger nails, to raise the tiara out of the box. "Hold your head very still." Her mother rested the crown in her tangled locks.

It didn't take long before she tired of being pretty

and worrying that the rhinestones would catch in her hair.

Mother hated her curls and would pull the brush through them until her scalp and ears burned from the curses. When it was too painful, she'd pull away only to earn a whack on the head with the hairbrush. "Hold still or I'll cut it all off. It's not easy to be beautiful. But it's worth it." She said the same thing when she taught her how to exfoliate and the scrub hurt her skin. "You'll thank me one day," she said, "when you live in a fine house and wear beautiful clothes."

"But you don't live in a fine house and you were beautiful."

Her mother shut up and she never had to point it out again.

She took another hard drag.

Her mother also taught her how to laugh without it ever touching her eyes. "Just open your mouth a little and let the sound out or else you'll look like her when you're old." She pointed to the old woman across the street sitting on her porch swing fanning her face with a piece of paper. When they carried her body on a stretcher to the ambulance beneath a smooth sheet, she figured it must have been the weight of her wrinkles and asked mother for her own bottle of moisturizer.

The clock behind her ticked and she turned to stare out the window at the manicured lawn still dripping from Miguel's care. Or was his name Marcel? She stopped trying to remember a long time ago. Now, he arrived in big pickups pulling trailers that carried riding mowers. He'd whirl around the yard in the steam of summer with water sloshing in old milk jugs that he lifted to his lips with thick arms that glistened with sweat.

Every once in a while, when she had a break from committees and teas and other such obligations, she'd pull on a big hat and kneel on a foam board to tend the roses beside Miguel. Or Marco. They'd pick off dead buds in silence.

The cigarette hung from her lips as she pushed the window open to peer at the rose bushes that guarded the foundation of the house. White and pink and red exploded from the depths of dark green. She insisted on roses after the house was built. Roses like her mother always tried to grow along the wooden planked staircase.

Roses that never grew.

But hers grew, thick and fragrant with blooms seen from the end of the long driveway that separated them from the rest of the world. Away from their neighbors in matching mansions with large yards manicured by Miguels. Or Manuels. Even the BMW's looked the same,

save a different curve to the hood or tint on the windows.

The only thing that set her house apart were the trees that stood along the driveway like soldiers, welcoming and guarding with a gentle salute in the breeze. She'd insisted on trees. Trees and roses.

A fat monarch plopped itself among the ruffled pink roses and spread its orange and black wings that stirred the humidity of July. She knew her butterflies. Her father taught her well in the deep swamps of the Georgia Reserve Parks where she spent evenings until the sun set pink.

She followed behind her sister and tried to imitate the way she raised her long skinny legs above the weeds with ballet poise and pointed toes that avoided the scratch against her legs. Her sister, who always seemed to walk on her toes. Her fingers gripped the pole of the net that bounced off her back in a pirouette with her straight blond hair swinging in the breeze.

She tried to be like her, but her toes hurt after too long and her legs never cleared the grass, so she'd clomp behind her, stopping every few minutes to scratch her legs or smack a fat mosquito sucking on her arm. Her sister looked over her shoulder with furrowed eyebrows and a shhh on her lips. Then, she'd return to following her father, lost in his own stalking ritual.

He moved different, like the feral cats she'd watched in the alley. His shoulders bent over as if he were trying to shrink beneath the wide-brimmed hat pulled low over his eyes. His fingers played with the net so that it twisted behind his back. When he stopped to look at them, his eyes, always tired, burned blue in the sunlight.

He wouldn't want the Monarch. "They're ordinary. Don't waste your time," he'd say when she spotted one hovering over the grass.

She knew better than arguing. It always caused a look in his eyes. His blue eyes. They served as their own warning.

Her sister got his blue eyes. She ended up with muddy, gray eyes, a truth that filled her mother's lamentation. Every Christmas, she received a card from Africa with her sister in front of a desert hut holding a laughing baby. Her sister laughed too, with deep wrinkles around her blue eyes. She always took after their father. Together, with their blue eyes, they didn't care. Her mother resigned to work with what she had. Curls and muddy, gray eyes.

And she'd learned her lessons well.

The caterers pulled down the driveway beneath the saluting trees. She took one last drag off her cigarette and dropped it in her cold cup of coffee, listening to the

hiss when it died. She liked the hiss. Not everything has the opportunity to announce its death with noise.

The clock behind her kept ticking and she rose to get ready. She was ready to make noise.

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At the vanity, she looked at her reflection. It'd been so long since she looked at herself. As she was. Without the future prediction of what she might be. Or should be. She didn't look long because reality stared back. Instead, she began the routine. Foundation first to hide the flaws, then powder for a finished look. Eyeliner, not too dark, with a slight lift at the edges. Mascara... just one coat to prevent clumping. And the right shade of blush. Pink for daytime. Darker pink for nights. Corals for the right outfit. But never red or brown. She swiped the brush along her cheekbone and watched as little flecks fell into her lap. Beauty is meant to highlight what's already there. She pressed harder until her cheeks shimmered with dark pink.

Then, she looked again. Really looked and tried to see the little girl she used to be with blond pigtails and a button nose. The one who tried to hide her developing chest with shirts two sizes too big, stolen from her sister.

But only she stared back. With shrinking eyes and pursed lips that made her look angry all the time. Maybe

she was.

She dug into the drawer, past the proper lip colors of light pink. Only light pink with her rosy complexion. Anything else would look trashy. Her fingers found the tube of dark red. Whore red. The color her husband asked her to wear on certain nights. The same nights when he requested lingerie from the collection she'd built of anniversary gifts that she hid beneath pretty pink nightgowns. It took a good girl to catch him, with pink cardigans and proper poise, but a slut to turn him on.

Mama never mentioned that. She failed to mention that one day she would walk down the aisle a lady and the next day, wake up a private whore.

She cranked the lipstick open and pressed the wax to her lips, spreading the color from one corner to the other before pressing her lips together to even out the color. Then, she kissed the air and giggled. He would be surprised as she walked down the staircase. Maybe, he wouldn't be able to control himself. Maybe they'd have to sneak away.

And she laughed. Like she'd laughed as a child watching Bugs Bunny pull his sneaky pranks. Like she'd laughed with her friends when Betsy Collins told her about tongues and French kissing. Or when her father would tickle her after a bedtime story. Before her

mother taught her the rules. She laughed as she walked to the closet with a bounce in her step and flung open the doors. The Christian Dior dress hung smothered in its dry cleaning plastic. The layers of black that whispered against her skin when she first tried it on in the dim lit dressing room while the attendant waited with clasped hands calculating her commission. *Beautiful*, she said. *Just beautiful. It was made for you.*

She walked past the dress for the back of the cavernous closet stuffed with silks and taffetas and brocades.

Her mother dreamt of an exotic luxury far removed from the overstuffed single bar and piles that she'd stored on the floor. She used to hide among those piles during hide-and-seek. The calico dresses, sewn at the dining room table late at night, scratched her skin with stiff starch sprayed on before ironing.

That was what she wanted. Not whispers against her skin. She didn't deserve it. So she reached into the back where the dress pressed against the wall. The white puff sleeves were flat and the blue checkered pinafore twisted with wrinkles. She shook it to remove the dust before diving back in for the shoes with a blind hand searching for sequence heels. As she found each one, she tossed them over her shoulder then straightened. With the dress in one hand and shoes in the other, she giggled.

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She waited at the top of the stairs and out of sight. In the shadows.

Perhaps that's where she belonged. Her mother taught her about black and white. Wrong and right. But she never taught her about the shades of gray in between, among the heavy blanket of shadows. She could hear her friends gathering and greeting downstairs, though she wasn't sure how many she could call real. Her husband's partners and their wives. Women from the club. Members of the historical board. If only they'd thought to invite Miguel, or Marcos, the guest list would have been complete.

"Friends and loved ones, thank you for coming tonight." He spoke from the bottom of the staircase while she waited in the hallway. "For tonight, we celebrate 60 years of a beautiful woman. And now, help me welcome the guest of honor. My wife."

She waited for the applause to start. Her red glitter heels shone against the tan carpet and a moment of nervous regret passed through her. In the mirror at the end of the hall, Dorothy of Oz stared back at her in a simple blue frock. An elderly Dorothy ready for the yellow brick road. Her heels clicked three times before her husband said it again.

"The guest of honor."

She heard the irritation through his smile. She stepped out of the hall and stood at the top of the stairs with a smile her mother never would have allowed. The dress swished against her knees while she clasped her hands before her. The excited applause turned stale but persevered as the guests exchanged uneasy glances. She pressed her fingers to her lips and threw kisses to the crowd. It was her night. Her husband had said so.

Her husband rushed up the stairs, turning every few steps to give the crowd a reassuring smile. She began the descent to meet him, the red heels clicking on the wood. They met in the middle and she accepted his extended hand that squeezed back too hard.

"What are you doing?" He whispered in her ear.

Her hand pulled free as she continued down the stairs toward the crowd of familiar faces stiff with effort to remain pleasant. She extended her hand to the first guest. "Thank you for coming," she said as she patted limp hands in hers.

"Thank you for coming, thank you for coming. Oh, it's so good to see you. Thank you for coming." She worked her way through the crowd that pulled away as she passed. But she meant it. "Thank you for coming." It was more than a birthday. More than cake and songs and

polite talk among friends.

She made her way through the crowd with a skip in her step until a face stared back from the corner. She knew the face. The half-smile. To prevent wrinkles. The smooth forehead. Hiding thoughts. The perfectly styled hair that twisted just right beside her ears to frame her face.

Her baby. The little girl who used to sit by the rose bushes and watch the butterflies. Before she knew the rules. She almost felt something for a moment. Guilt. Maybe loss. Of what, she couldn't be sure, but it swelled as Mary stepped forward to greet her with a polite hug.

The feeling went away when Mary whispered, "Why don't we get you fixed up?"

She pulled away and the feeling was gone. Mary. Who had sat at her dressing table to learn how to use mascara, cover sticks, and gentle sway of her hips. Mary who stood beside her perfect husband with sculpted hair and a bleached white smile.

Mary patted her arm and mouthed the word, "Mom?"

She heard them whisper behind her.

Her husband smoothed questions with on-the-spot lies. She wasn't worried about him. Those lies were his specialty. She left him to do his thing and worked through the crowd to the bar where she grabbed a bottle

of wine. The waiter offered her a glass. She lifted the bottle to her lips and declined.

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Her mother told her wine was for sipping. In moderation. Her mom didn't seem to know much. She sat the near-empty bottle with a red lipstick ring on the table when her husband beckoned her to his side. His eyes were tired and his hair had lost its shine. What was left of the guests gathered around to watch her open the present wrapped in gold paper with a lavender bow. She pulled it loose and stuck the bow into her hair before working her fingers into the seams.

He stood back and rubbed his face.

She ripped the paper. The last strip came free to reveal the orange and black wings. A beautiful painting from a fresh new artist exhibited three weeks ago.

"I saw you admiring it at the gallery opening," her husband said in a strained voice behind her. The quiet applause seemed to comfort him. "I bought it when you went to the ladies room."

It had indeed caught her eye and haunted her. The butterfly's wings stretched to reveal their beauty. Perfect against a chaotic background.

She looked into the faces waiting for her appreciation. Mary stood in the back. Mary who used to look like



her father with strong features and joyful eyes as she ran after butterflies in the garden with her arms outstretched. As if she could be one of them.

Now, makeup and rules hid her joy. Mary looked just like her.

She turned to look at her husband. He couldn't stand anymore and leaned against the wall with his hands in his pockets. The night had aged him. He'd been good to her. It'd be easier if he hadn't. Perhaps a few affairs, a couple smacks, too many drunken nights would make it easier. He didn't deserve this. He deserved to finish his life with her lies.

She picked up the knife still sticky with frosting. She turned it in her hands and noticed the chips in her nail polish. The crowd murmured and the air heightened with fear. Her daughters' lips mouthed words she couldn't hear. Her husband stood straight and stepped toward her.

She clutched the knife in both hands and held it high above her head as a gasp joined the evening breeze. Someone called out her name as she stabbed it through the heart of the butterfly.

She picked up the bottle of wine and walked to the kitchen. Her keys were still on the wall beneath the word LOVE. She grabbed them and disappeared into the ga-

rage where she locked the door behind her. Darkness surrounded her as she felt her way down the steps. At the bottom, she sat to raise the bottle to the darkness and took a drink.

Tomorrow, they would drag her to a hospital and lock her in a room and drug her into submission until she was a perfect specimen, fit for public.

Dead and perfect. Like her father's specimen. The one's he showed her that night when her mother sent her into the basement where her father worked with the radio to loud that it escaped through the vents. Her tennis shoes squeaked on the wood steps into the darkness lit by a single bulb. Her father stood beneath it, hunched over a workbench singing along with the Beach Boys about summer sun and love.

"It's dinner time." She spoke in a quiet voice competing with the Beach Boys.

He didn't look up as his hands moved slow and tedious. "I'll be there in a minute."

She strained to see what he was doing. The wood stairs turned to concrete and she walked toward the light of the single bulb. "What are you doing?"

His hands stopped moving as he looked over his shoulder. "Come over and see."

She slid beside him and froze. The workbench was

covered in butterflies on their backs with wings stretched wide. Pins pierced their bodies. Still. Dead. Perfect.

“This is the one you caught,” he said, pointing to a few pinned in the corner, “on Tuesday. And this...” He lifted a jar where her butterfly lay dead in the bottom with its legs praying to the sky in surrender.

She knew better than to cry.

He raised a bottle to her nose and the smell made her gag. “I soak a paper towel and put it in the bottom of the jar. It doesn’t take long. And when it’s done, you have a whole collection of beautiful butterflies to keep.”

She learned the lesson hard that day. Beauty was to be caught and cauterized. An asset. She never caught butterflies again. Instead, she learned to become one. Beautiful and perfect.

Tomorrow was a long way away. She raised the bottle to her lips and finished off the wine. Someone knocked on the garage door. She ignored it and smiled. Tonight, she would revel in the shades of grey, where she belonged.