

AN UNREDACTED MEDITATION ON FRAUD

“Have you read *Yellowface*?” I like to ask that question a lot. For those who have read it, I think that your opinion on the novel says a lot about you. Like, do you like June? Wait—forget that. Do you *hate her*?

I do. I hate her like I hate the sounds that come out of my mouth, I hate her like I hate the contortions of my brows on stage, I hate her like I hate the pounding of my fingers on my keyboard. I hate her because she’s a fraud, and if you haven’t read *Yellowface*, just know that that’s essentially the whole plot: June Hayward, turned Juniper Song, and her damn fraudulence. I hate June because I *hate* frauds—but God do I love being one. I mean, am I crazy?

Because here’s what they don’t tell you: it’s so *fucking easy*. I’m sitting in my English class—it’s about Asian American literature, yada yada, whatever, you get the gist—and let me tell you now, I didn’t do the reading today. So I didn’t do the reading, and I have no clue what I’m talking about, except *Yeah, I’m applying as a comparative literature major, English is kind of my thing*, so I’m *supposed* to know what I’m talking about, and this guilty roiling knot is tightening in my stomach and it makes my head want to faint and my gut want to shit and my mouth want to scream because *Why is it so fucking hot?*

And *God*, the *relief* that floods my body when the teacher says that today’s in-class essay has been moved? It untangles the knot in my stomach so fast that I’m shooting up to get out of that awful classroom (it’s on the second floor, it’s eighty-five degrees, the heat particles are trapped in a stasis that pulps your brain to mush if you try to move through it) and go to the bathroom, where I can let that stupid knot flow out of my body. Disgusting.

But let me get back to what I was saying. Bullshitting is so easy. When you’re smooth with your words and you can read what a person’s back-angle-brow-furrow combo means, you can get away with pretty much anything. So listen, right? It’s like I said: I’m an aspiring CompLit major and English is kind of my thing. If there’s one place I feel confident walking into, it’s an English classroom. The building where our English classrooms are housed is called Bulfinch, so let me tell you about my base of operations: Bulfinch.

Freshman year, I was what they call a sweat. I suppose I still am, but back then, there was a part of me that refused to own my fraudulence as part of my identity. This was partly because my fraudulence outperformed most people’s authenticity, so why bother to call it fraud? I *know*, I know, you must hate me. Fret not—I do too. But in Bulfinch, it’s every man for himself.

Now, we like to imagine that bastions of learning are equitable and just, that in an English classroom in particular, there is no wrong answer. But seventeen years of sharking in them has taught me otherwise—I mean, not everyone can be brilliant. That’s why we grade A to F (and no, in a place like Bulfinch, you don’t get top marks for being earnest). More than the grade, though, I’m all about the game. Hearing the *cha-ching* when I score is eargasmic and I can’t get enough.

*Class? A **game**? Walk with me.*

“Stopping isn’t an option...It is a physical urge, a craving, like breathing, like eating; when it’s going well, it’s better than sex, and when it’s not, I can’t take pleasure in anything else.”

~ June Hayward, Yellowface

*Friday morning, drink of choice in hand, ascend the side path. Long strides, scan in. When the door swings open, your breath does **not** stutter at the sparkling checker foyer, your eyes do **not** bulge at the snobby little frames of Super Important Literature Stuff on lemon walls, your legs do **not** toe towards the gap in the austere oak double-door where you catch a glimpse of the eclectic faculty lounge, and—watch it. **Don’t** stumble on the door sill. Act like you belong here. God.*

Take a left here and remember: chin up, hips sashay. There’s only three steps left until you pivot and enter the classroom, so put that poker face on. One. Two. Three. Now be prepared: an ostensibly ordinary ceiling will warp into something vaulted and chandeliered, the oblong table will grow and shrink dynamically (like the yawns in my chest, its size fluctuates with the quality of conversation), and, waiting for the croupier, the hunched shadows in the room will natter sotto voce while their owners calculate what they will do with their bodies. Still with me? Then watch.

For now, I’m watching the money flow up, down, around the circle of players. The sleeve of the current speaker’s t-shirt is riding up with how much they keep gesturing. I can’t deal with the swish and flick, it’s just the unclassy way to play, but I keep it neutral in the face. In their right forearm, there’s a thick vein that keeps contracting in and out, variably blue, then bulging green. *Eyes on the cash, baby.* Their fly trap finally snaps shut, the vein settles on flexed. The easiest victim is the one who likes to flaunt their green.

“That’s a fair point, but I can’t say I fully agree.” My head’s spinning a little—someone’s over-applied cologne, another leg’s brush up against my ankle—and I know where this cocktail of delicate sensation is leading. *“I mean, what if they aren’t mutually exclusive?”* I feel the pads of my lips frictioning against each other but I don’t hear the rest of what I’m saying because I’m relishing in the sight of it all: a brow arcing here, a mouth dropping into a slight O there, a venerated incline towards me signalling the scam is secured, and *bang*. The money’s been wired.

At this point, I’m bleeding straight gold from the eyes. I should be generous.

“But yeah, ultimately, the text definitely resonates with both those motifs you pointed out. I just don’t think it necessarily faces them in opposition to one another. They’re in conversation in a way that I think is supposed to leave grey space for the reader to find their own footing.”

I savour a glance over to my victim. Their shirt sleeve has wiggled itself down to a shameful, palm-covering length; I assume I’ve drained all the green. Pity. It’s all I can do to tamp down the corner of my mouth, keep the giggle bubbling in my—

“Well...what sort of conversation do you think they’re in, then?”

Pardon? Fuck—I have to answer.

“Harmonious. I mean, wait, sorry, could you repeat that?” Stupid, stupid girl.

“I just mean that if you think they’re not in opposition to each other, but they’re themes that aren’t alike, what’s the ‘grey space’ you think it leaves?”

I’m astounded. I may like to scam but I’m not *stupid*—we’re dancing in tongues. This bitch is seizing the Monopoly money I finessed into the ante and tossing it right back in my face. *Fraud*, her eyes taunt. *Fraud, fraud, fraud*. My face is smoldering; only birds of a feather recognise one another, so *who* does she *think* she is?

*“I just mean that I don’t really think we need to be looking to **contrast** themes all the time, sometimes it’s all up for interpretation and everything is just, like, is what it is!”* Oh, big mistake. I seal my worsening fate with a hollow half-giggle, try to play it off as part of my usual dry wit, but it comes out sounding phonier than I could ever imagine. I’m aware that some nerve in my brow is twitching, that that Fraudulent Bitch has set my fucking seat on fire, that even the shadows are curious and their muffled side chatter is getting louder, that I’m losing, I’m in debt, I’m in big, big trouble.

Generally speaking, fraud is a common crime. It can be a petty one, even, at certain levels. Most scammers do it out of necessity. They reap what they can, take the grade they can get, stay aware of their shallow existence. But there is a class of cons, white collar thieves, whose sophistication ostensibly subtilises their criminal status. Their fraud comes from gluttony. It is my job to redress this; intellect is currency, underhanding its value requires repentance.

“I just mean that if you think they’re not in opposition to each other, but they’re themes that aren’t alike, what’s the ‘grey space’ you think it leaves?”

I’m not interested in her response. It is enough to watch her shimmy in the seat she bilked her way into, track her darting pupils around the circle of players. They center back on me, irreverent. I can deal. Let her retort, laugh it off, fail. She is facing a fall out of grace. And when this happens, when they are groundless and plummeting further still, the child in them always tries to teeth its way out before it suffers a premature demise. I see it in her, something embryonic. Fisting itself in her stomach and gagging that ever-gorging mouth. She is shifty, sick in the face, scraping out of her chair, absconding from the room before we can witness her keel at the altar.

“I’ve entertained, occasionally, the question of what literary redemption might look like. What if I begged my haters for forgiveness? What if, instead of holding the line, I admitted everything and made an attempt at reparations?”

~ June Hayward, Yellowface

Okay, consider this. A fraud, for the most part, is a liar. You do the math: what am I? Right. But I’m sick of being a fraud. It’s bad for the body. Frauds like me are just suits of facelifted skin smothering disfigured little girls, and I imagine it’s about time I free them. So let me be honest: everything I just told you was a lie, but it was also the truth. I am a fraud but I am nothing if not real, I hate June Hayward but I love June Hayward, I’m an aspiring CompLit major and English is kind of my thing but *who the fuck* told you I said that? I mean, are you crazy?