

Papaya Red

The doctor's name was Sayoko. She liked for me to call her "Dr. Hiigen," but once I heard the name Sayoko, I couldn't stop. Such a pretty name. Three syllables that fall off the tongue as freshly picked cherries.

She clicked her spring-loaded pen. Little tooth marks striated all along the little plastic tube. She flipped through her yellow notepad. She crossed and uncrossed her legs. Fidgeting. One perfect square of sunlight crossed the left half of her face, highlighting the glitter in her makeup. That little square, dodging off the left green eye, and illuminating the rich darkness of her skin. The rest was submerged in dusty shadows. She was wearing the burnt-sienna lipstick that day. It was definitely burnt-sienna. Mark said it was burnt-sienna with a throaty *harrumph* when I said it was brown.

Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor

I could never do brown lipstick.

She clicked her spring-loaded pen. Fumbled with her tongue between her teeth. Silence. I gazed down at my lap. These were my least favorite scrubs. They were the off-green. Mark would say, *mint*. He'd give me the exasperated side-eye. Mint.

She cleared her throat. "Mr. Baker. How are we doing today?"

"You're nervous," I said. I fidgeted, too. "Because of what happened last week."

"No, Mr.—Max. Not nervous. I'm concerned."

Concerned. She was *concerned*. Semantics. I bit my tongue.

“Max, you gotta help me out here. We need to get your story straight. And I mean the *truth* this time.” She positioned her pen, tip down, on the yellow notepad. Poised, ready to strike.

“The truth?” I repeated. I balled my trousers up into my fist, lifting the hem off my ankles. “People paid good money for that.”

“Are you speaking in metaphor again, Max? I need you to be clear with me.”

“I’m a salesman,” I said. “I sold people the truth. Before I got here. Sorry if I’m glib about it.”

“Max,” she said, adjusting her skirt. She dodged out of the perfect square of sunlight for a second, submerging herself in the stuffiness. Then she sat back up, righting herself once more. “I think we’re at a point here where we both know that isn’t quite right.”

“My truth,” I said. “I sold them *my* truth. Do you want *my* truth?”

“I want *the* truth, Max.” She sighed. “Mr. Singh is in very bad condition. Does that make you feel anything?”

“I don’t know who that is,” I said.

* * *

I was admitted to Shyrock Mental Hospital in Wildhammer, Oregon in April 2014.

Something to do with my head injury. How I acted after I came out of the operating room, blue

and purple and drooling with what was probably a crazy glint in my eye. I seduced one of the nurses. Maybe that's why. Maybe the idea that the ring on his finger didn't matter when I grabbed him by the seat of his pants. Did I ruin his marriage? He probably felt sorry for me. He probably let me blow him in the bathroom out of pity. That gets a lot of plays. Gets a lot of cash. The sympathy card.

I'm tired and bruised and sore and my left eye is swollen shut. Show me your dick.

Mark was admitted with me. We did crossword puzzles together. He was way better at them than me, but he also couldn't write anymore. So we made a team. For the first few months that was all I had. The food sucked, and the pills sucked more. They were dry and chalky, and came in all sorts of deceptively fun colors. I hated the red and yellow pill the most. It had a sticky film on it, and it'd latch on to the back of my throat. Mark laughed at me, and my inability to take pills.

Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor

"You can swallow a cock," he'd say. "But you can't do *this*." He would pop a fistful of medication into his mouth. Gulp it all down without a drop of water. A dry bite of the pharmacy down the hall, separated by wrought-iron bars, a locked door, and a security guard with big arms. I shuddered every time.

We had been together for what must've been close to a year. Mark never told me why he got admitted, too. Maybe he made something up or did something just to be with me. I like to think of it that way. "Girl, Interrupted"-level romantic. Either way, it was good to have him. When the sky blue walls got too long for the narrow, high-painted ceiling structures, he was there. When rooms of wet chagrin got loud and forceful like someone stuffing cotton into my

ears, he was there. When the pills made me gag, made me throw up, and the charges called me names and made me clean it up with toilet paper, he was there.

When I found him, skull-busted, hemorrhaging, eyes and legs twitching with cerebral tremors, I thought to myself: he isn't here.

* * *

Sayoko reminded me of myself a little bit. I think that what you're really paying for in therapy are those fragments of consciousness from the analyst that latch onto your own. That is to say, those little, flowery bits of the doctor's own persona that come off through their body language or the techniques they use to control the discourse. Uncontrollable bats of the eyelashes. A conscious decision to lower the pen. I found them delicious. I'd let them sit on my tongue and dissolve into my bloodstream. They charged me like amphetamine. That's what I liked about therapy.

She'd switch between the burnt-sienna (which matched the skin of her face but didn't do anything for the lips themselves, which for me is the whole point of lipstick), and what Mark called a "papaya red." I told him that papayas aren't red, and he spat in my coffee.

The day I found Mark in the garden, she was wearing the papaya. Hours after I'd fully absorbed the visage of his leg twitch sporadically into the grass, she called me in.

She said, "how are you feeling?" She was wide-eyed. She had that headlights stare, the one a therapist should never have.

"Is he dead?" I asked. I was quiet. Still.

“No, Mr. Baker. He’s not in good shape, but they say he’s fairly stable.”

“Oh, good,” I said.

“Fairly,” she stressed. “Does that make you feel better?”

“Not really. You’re scared,” I said. I bit my lower lip—not seductively, just in response to the tension. You could touch, fondle the air between us. I must’ve looked like a guilty child.

“I am,” she admitted. “A little bit. But we’re going to talk about you, not me. Do you know why you have the restraints on?”

I moved against the tight belt across my breast and the cuffs that held my arms in place.

“No,” I said. “I’m not like Tim, or Martha. I don’t scratch myself or throw shit. Can you untie me?” I asked, nicely. I wanted to be breathy, polite. I think I came off as confused, or crazier than normal, because the headlights stare became the headlights.

“No.” She nearly grunted the word. “This is for safety, Max. You know, I don’t talk to many others with the restraints on.”

“No?” I asked.

“Most people around here can behave when they talk,” said Sayoko. “I’m afraid I don’t know if you can, Max. Do you know why that is?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Is it because of the nurse at the hospital?”

“A little bit,” she said. “It’s also about Vishal Singh. Max, do you know why you’re in here? At the facility?”

Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor

“It’s because of the nurse at the hospital. I blew him in the bathroom and he tried to pin sexual assault on me,” I said. Plaintive. Calm, I thought.

“Max, you know that isn’t what happened, right?”

“No, it is. But it’s his word against mine. He’s married and sane. I’m gay and crazy. Who’s a jury going to believe?”

Sayoko swallowed loudly, adjusting herself. She scribbled on the notepad. The end of the pen caught the little dash of light behind the shades. I was transfixed. A snapshot: the woman in the tight, gunmetal business skirt with her hair tied up, chewing on her lip, eyes sunken behind the glasses. It was easy to see her then, sharp and focused, always with the clear goal of getting me to say what she was looking for. Manipulation, really. That’s all it is. But like a fish to food on the top of the water, I flicked those shards of her consciousness against my teeth, hungry.

She switched gears. Her posture became less frizzy. It was in that moment I think I lost sight of her. She became blurry, and started to deny me the little fish food flakes of her mind.

“Tell me about March 2014, Max.”

This was where I began to fade. I hated the words. March 2014. They made my stomach flip, which was especially unpleasant when said stomach was chock-full of anti-psychotics.

“I don’t want to talk about that. It would be disrespectful to Mark.”

“Mark’s privacy is very important to you, isn’t it?” she asked.

"Yes. And mine is to him," I said. If loonies could get married in the bin, we'd have made rings out of construction paper or garden hose clamps already.

"Do you really think that, Max?" she asked. The way she used my name, like she was at the pearly gates and dropping the M-bomb would get St. Peter to crank the fucking things open. I ate it up.

"Yeah," I said. I do.

* * *

He wasn't *there*. Not for this one. Not in any meaningful way. You can't do anything when you're in a body bag. He looked like an insect in that shiny plastic thing. It looked wet the way it caught in the moist morning. A pupa, a chrysalis, the soul of my lover ready to emerge as a colorful spatter of wings and legs. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say he'd be some grotesque thing, a Kafka amalgamation of slimy exoskeleton. He never was a cheerful one. He had those bug eyes that looked for problems in everything.

The morning was wet. The ground was dark, and the green in the trees was so saturated it gave off its own smell. The doctors talked about him as if he were a soldier. That he gave "quite a good fight," but "succumbed in the end." They used a name I wasn't familiar with. They huddled together in their white coats under a gray sky and said sad things so they could move on with their day. Lucky them.

Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor

Everyone said ridiculous things about me. I heard the whispers. Edges of paper cups pressed against quick lips, who breathed the words into lukewarm water. *Murderer. Psycho. Rapist.* Extra special attention gets paid to those the patients of a mental asylum call “psycho.”

When they tugged at my handcuffs, the chafing got worse. I asked what kind of trickery this was. I asked them where Mark was. They didn’t answer me. They didn’t have to, I suppose.

I started to cry when they shoved me inside the cruiser, rough palm flat against my head, pushing down.

People paid good money for this, once.

* * *

I thought doctors were tidy people. I don’t know why I thought that. Maybe it was the **Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor** pretense of sterility. Maybe it was just Hollywood. I used to imagine therapist’s offices as relaxingly lit, modern-style. Open floors with big windows and a magazine-worthy façade. Maybe they hired someone to fluff pillows in between visits or vacuum the little bits of dandruff people left behind.

Sayoko had books piled on books, corners jutting out at odd ends that made them lean cautiously outward off the edges of desks. She had papers spilling out of manila envelopes, some coated with layers of dust. Some had little fingerprints, as if she left them on her L-shaped desk long ago and only picked them up recently.

I zeroed in on them, separating them from everything else. A habit formed of the anti-psychotics. They make everything in my periphery look like a backdrop. Like nothing is real except the thing I'm looking at. As if every moment up to this was a dream.

"Sometimes, we have to talk about things that we don't like. For the sake of self-improvement. You want that, don't you, Max?"

No. I didn't think so. I didn't think there was such a thing. I said, "sure."

"I'll make it easy. How about a little further back than March? What kind of things were you up to last Christmas?" Sayoko seemed goading then, teeth showing, tapping her pen against the page. She'd changed her whole posture with her shoulders framed at me and her notebook balanced on her knee, at rest. Friendly, non-confrontational. She had the papaya again. Papayas are not red but it felt wrong to disjoin the fruit from the color. It seemed liken to spitting on his grave.

"I worked Lollipop's. Christmas is a big day," I said.

"You were paying for school by working at Lollipop's."

I started to get fuzzy again. I lost track of her, she became a blur. Everything she did seemed asynchronous, isolated. Maybe she was writing, or just looking down at her notepad. The green eyes were not looking at me. The restraints got tighter. "I was good at it."

"I don't doubt that. How did you meet Mark?"

I wished it were anatomically possible to swallow my tongue at will. "He was a regular."

"He was a regular... with you?"

Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor

“I knew he was going to die when I found him,” I said through a shaky breath. “Even I didn’t look that bad.”

“When you ‘found’ Vishal?” asked Sayoko. Terror struck her eyes here. They shined. Luminescent pearls.

“You still haven’t told me who that is.”

Sayoko was visibly frustrated. To me. Maybe to someone else she’d just stopped writing and adjusted her glasses. To me, those little things, where she put down her notebook or uncrossed her legs. They were little ways to get the fury out. Little tiny screams, little tiny backhands or rumbling fists. She wished she could just throw me into a wood chipper. I ate that, too.

Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor

“Let’s try to stay on topic. Lollipop’s.”

“I was a salesman,” I murmured.

“We don’t have to talk about that part. I want to know how you met Mark.”

“I don’t remember.”

Sayoko sighed. “I know you can do better than this, Max. You have to be honest with me. You know this has no bearing on your case. You know I’m not going to judge you.”

“No, I don’t,” I said. Pushing my tongue against my teeth. She was soft, a little chubby. Kind of like me. I thought maybe if she had worked at Lollipop’s and done the stuff I’d done to get here, maybe I would’ve gotten a degree in psychology. Maybe I’d be sitting in front of her, trying desperately to hide my disdain for her with little strokes of the pen or adjusting my

weight in the seat. Rebuttoning my blazer. Why did she hate me so much? I had been nothing but honest with her. "It's not your fault. You can't help it. Shrinks aren't robots, you know. You don't have little gears in your head like Martha Robbins thinks. You do judge me. You judge me for my job, and you judge me for what the nurse at the hospital said. You judge me because I'm not interested in finding Mark's killer."

"Nobody killed Mark, Max," said Sayoko.

"Yes, they did. I saw him in his body bag." My face was wet. I remembered when my face was wet in Sayoko's office because she clicked her tongue every time. The involuntary sympathy muscle. "They let me see him, you know?"

* * *

Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor

Dreadful as it is, sometimes I go back to that place. Sometimes I find myself inhaling the scent of car exhaust mixed with cigarettes mixed with dusted denim mixed with tequila and glitter and hot lights and the neon sign and the moldy dollars and the asphalt. The dumpster that leaned down on the left, sad, because it had somehow been twisted. A malformed receptacle for stained booty shorts and cold chicken bones.

The way the dumpster appeared to just glitch into the ground fascinated me. I remember staring at it when my cheek was being pressed against the cold asphalt. When the thunder shook my ribs and broke my skin.

There were so many colors downtown. The blue and red of police cars, which I found unbearably nauseating. The way the streetlights were a low yellow, dim and usually flickering in

time with the muddled beat from inside Lollipop's. The orange of the collected, stagnant water spattering the road just ahead. A Grand Am flashed red, like fire in the yellow light, down that road.

The blue flesh closing around my eye. The copper skin of the fist that sunk itself into my ribs. Again. Again. Punctuated by the word, "faggot," breathless like a soft whisper into the ear.

So many colors. The indigo of a night sky detached from a swath of light pollution. Only the brightest stars get through.

The dumpster became funny to me, at some point, and I remember feeling the disjointed shards of rib vibrating in the hollow of my midsection. A phantom laugh. One that starts deep below, and never escapes taut lips. I look up, up from the dumpster. It's still dripping a little bit, the rain. The clouds have gone. It must be the wind.

Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor

Heels into pelvis, rough hand pressing my face into the asphalt. Color. Bright, shimmering, hanging like a curtain and slick with moisture. A veil, pressing itself into my vision. I knew it wasn't there. I wasn't going to fuck with myself like that. I wasn't going to say I saw a light at the end of the tunnel. A godsend: just in front of the wavering lights, his face. The bug eyes. Trying to find a problem with me. He'd say my face was maybe the color of a blueberry smoothie. I'm not good at naming colors. Maybe he'd say my face was an oil slick. Either way, he'd correct me.

And he had. I fell asleep.

* * *

Mark visited me the night after the restraints.

Solitary confinement wasn't that bad. I got the same food, the same treatment from the orderlies, the same surreptitious gazes that marked my every step. Sure, the room was boring, but so was everywhere else at Shyrock. You had to decorate it with your mind. I spent hours focusing on the off-white of the walls, turning it cream, bronze, magenta, red, crimson. Alone, with my thoughts, it was nice.

He was in the corner when I woke up in the middle of the night. Naturally I said, "what the fuck?" I panicked. You don't see a ghost every day. He wasn't pale, though. He didn't hover unnaturally just off the surface of the ground, or rattle chains, or look like he did when I found him in the garden. He was clean-skinned, that wonderful olive color. He had the bug eyes, offset from his face, wide, and always alert. He had the rough patches of hair on his arms. He had the infuriating little soul-patch. He looked fine. As my alarm subsided, the affection returned.

He didn't say anything, at first. He just stared.

"Are you a ghost?" I asked. I gathered my flimsy sheet and set my knees against the papery bedding.

"No, *you* are," he said, flashing a menacing little half-grin. That look he gave me outside Lollipop's. That look he gave me. "Don't talk to me like you know me."

“I wanted to marry you,” I said quickly. I didn’t know what else to say. I panicked. That look. It put my nerves through a food processor.

“Don’t talk to me like you know me. I never been in there,” he said. I noticed he was damp. He was wearing those clothes. The leather jacket. The white wife-beater, and the jeans that gathered at his ankles.

“I wish I could’ve saved you,” I said, wet, fumbling with my own tongue.

“I *never* been in there, you got it?” He cracked his knuckles. The light that bounced off his shoulders—it was red. Neon. “Keep looking my way, *faggot*, and I’ll make sure you get it, yeah?”

“Stop,” I said.

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He started to approach me.

“Please, stop,” I repeated. I shrunk against the corner of the padded walls. He left watery stains on the floor when he walked. His boots made *squish* noises. He licked his lips.

“I’ll make sure you get it.”

* * *

Sayoko and I had one last session before the police carted me off. I told her about Mark, and how he visited me, and how he left more bruises on my ribs. I told her I’d lift my shirt to show her if she’d just *fucking* untie me.

“Max.” It was a call-to-action. She didn’t have a notebook that day. She didn’t have an L-shaped desk, either. Or papers scattered about. She didn’t have a steaming mug of tea, or a clicky spring-loaded pen. She didn’t have makeup, or a pantsuit, or a tight skirt. She had jeans and a t-shirt, and boxes surrounded her comfy-looking chair. “You know Mark wasn’t here. He’s in jail, Max. You know all this.”

“No,” I said. I felt my breath against the restraints. It was heavy, sporadic, like a failing heartbeat. “No, I found him in the garden, and he died. Somebody...”

“What? Somebody what? Did to him what he did to you? Do you know how that sounds?”

Those bits are not appetizing to me. I see them on a dinner plate, and I excuse myself to my room. She’s not invested anymore, so neither am I. Her name is not cherries. The square of light doesn’t check anything off. Those little bits, her nervousness, how *afraid* of me she is, they are not delicious anymore. They turn to dust between my teeth.

“That lipstick doesn’t match your eyes,” I said.

Sayoko flared her nostrils. She made some breathy sigh and a wafty gesture with her hands, as if she was ridding herself of this. She stood, walked over to an errant box lying just a few feet away from her chair, and began to leaf through its contents. We both remained silent for what must’ve been a solid few minutes, because I remember feeling that pressure you get in your ears when your mother isn’t speaking to you.

She sat back down, placing a newspaper on my lap. "I wanted you to be able to discern this by yourself, Max. But I guess that's not happening."

Eyes on my lap. I didn't really read the words on the page, I was more interested in the monochrome photo of Shyrock, sitting in its little depression in the mountain. That sprawling road, the weird, eclectic architecture. Somehow it looked idyllic, like this photo wasn't a depiction of where I was, but where I should've gone. I remembered thinking it looked like a nice place when the transport pulled up for the first time. Maybe it was nostalgia.

Finally I absorbed the words. A couple of them, anyway. "Murder." What newspaper doesn't have a murder in it? Then I saw my name. Max Baker, 23, the body-finder. No. What? That wasn't what that said.

"Max?" Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor

I didn't understand these words. I blame the medication. They jittered on the page. I saw another name, besides mine. It was accompanied by a heinous sound. The incessant chiming of Sayoko's voice as she hesitated to say his name. Vishal Singh, 31, the victim. What victim? Victim of what?

"Do you remember what you did, Max?"

It was like a feather. It rested against the tip of her nose. The little bird. The little black thing. The room was suddenly full of them. Black, churning, chaotic, and effervescent. And also hilarious, somehow. So funny. So anachronistically humorous. I began to laugh, honestly. If I'm being true. The sounds of their feathers squabbling together, the friction of tiny filaments

rubbing against one another, thousand-fold. Just a black mass of beady eyes. Bug eyes. Finding problems in Sayoko, telling me about the restraints and how they're made in China.

The one thing she did still have. The lipstick.

"I think I'm ready," I said.

"Ready for what, Max?" Tired. I could barely hear her over the birds.

"For you to tell me who Vishal is."

Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor