

Truth at a Bonsai Booth

by Paula Ray

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While attending an Appalachian Apple Festival, perusing country arts and crafts and sipping cider, I admired artisan jewelry and stained-glass sun-catchers reflecting mid-morning light. There were wood-carvings and rustic pottery in abundance. After walking a few blocks, the merchandise began to look similar, nothing grabbed my attention, until I came upon a Redneck-Zen bonsai booth wedged between a home-made apple-butter stand (where a woman in old-fashioned attire churned butter) and a photography exhibit of local waterfalls.

A whittled hillbilly-style sign read: Emma's Bonsai by Clyde. Beneath a candy-striped canopy, Clyde tucked an afghan under Emma's chin. He then pulled his lawn-chair close to hers and took a seat. Emma's enormous eyes peered over the crocheted lavender angora like flying saucers—jittering in flight above a serene spring meadow. I wondered if her fuzzy ash-gray hair with an unnatural lavender tint would dissolve in rain like the cotton candy being sold on the corner. Clyde's bifocals made his eyes appear mechanical as they scanned the crowd and assessed customer potential—scrutinizing dress, walking speed, rate of eye-contact or lack of it. His chest inflated as he absorbed compliments from bonsai admirers. Emma didn't seem to notice; her expression resembled a bewildered infant.

The bonsai were formed from indigenous plants such as: azalea, juniper, and pine. Some were over forty years old, according to the posters. Many had bound limbs trained to look wind-blown; most required daily pruning. It was remarkable how small pine remained in confinement.

I envisioned bound feet of ancient Asian women who wore embroidered slippers that hid grotesque disfigurements. I felt myself wince at the thought of painful miniature steps taken on deformed dainty feet—a size so desirable, developing them was a process

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begun as a child, while bones were soft and pliable. Young girls were not given a choice before their parents decided to inflict this torture.

From a nearby park-bench, I spied on Clyde, who perched himself upon a tacky woven lawn chair from the 70's like it was a throne, as if *he* were an emperor. What of Emma, covered from nose down, silent? Was she his antique bound geisha? What does it say about a person's character to go against nature and force trees to live in tea-cups—drinking a thimble's worth of water a day?

I moved closer and hid behind the trunk of a giant oak tree (on my own writer's stake-out) observing the couple for several hours. He brought her water and gently placed a straw in her mouth. She sipped and stared as if she were lost in space. He fed her finger-pinchers from his turkey leg and wiped grease from her lips with the creased sleeve of his stiff white shirt. I kept hoping to see *her* hands, but they remained hidden. I wondered about Emma's feet. Could she walk? Was she able to move at all? Did she have arms and legs? There was something wild in her eyes, alien. Her dilated pupils jumped about as if the world was going by too fast for her to focus. It reminded me of being on a train—watching trees go by in a blur.

Eventually, I gave up on seeing any part of Emma beyond her chin. I stood, stretched, and yawned. When I turned to grab my purse, I glanced back at the bonsai booth. Emma established eye contact with me for a moment, but it seemed longer. I suddenly felt uncomfortable and acutely aware that I was *alone* on vacation. It was as if I was standing on a darkened stage and her stare was an intense spotlight capturing me, an inept actress pretending to know the ending to the ultimate mystery—unable to remember the script and too dumbfounded to improvise. I was embarrassed to be seen without a friend to chat with and no hand to hold while listening to the bluegrass band or walking along the busy sidewalk—window shopping. I had no lover to offer me his jacket as I shivered at sunset. No ears would hear me say, “That smells good! Let's split one!” It hurt to come to the realization: I was the alien at the festival, not Emma.

My roots knotted as she seared a hole through my cheap green Wal-Mart sweater with her big UFO eyes. I surprised myself by finding the courage to walk over and finally speak , “Hi, I love your afghan, did you make that yourself?” A lop-sided smile bloomed on her face as she nodded—yes.

I grabbed the smallest bonsai on the table and paid Clyde the \$15 asking price, without bartering for a deal. Before carefully packing my purchase in a gift box, he gave me detailed instructions on how to take care of it: lectured about being patient, nurturing, and devoted, warned me of diseases prone to the species I had selected, and promised my efforts and commitment would cause the plant to flourish for decades. I listened attentively with down-cast eyes, praying he had not detected the awful judgments I made prior to knowing him at all.

The wind blew Emma's afghan from her shoulders, but not far enough for me to see beyond the peter-pan collar and puff-sleeve of her pastel flannel gown with heart motif. The movement must have caught Clyde's attention, because he turned from me mid-sentence and tucked the blanket back under her chin. Emma looked up at him with an innocent trusting gaze of adoration. My own chin began to tremble too much to muster “thank you” as I scurried away pressing the freshly boxed bonsai to my bosom like a mother holds her baby, protecting it from cold. I tried to convince myself the crisp mountain air was stinging my eyes as I blinked again and again—my lashes became tiny windshield wipers smearing the residue from Emma's glass-heart gaze.

