

B. J. Epstein

Bonsai

Her last lover had had purple hair, purple as violets. It had been dyed, of course, but Clara liked the fact that it was so easy to change nature. You simply rubbed some cream into your hair and let it sit for thirty minutes, or you put colored contacts over your eyes, or slipped on different clothes, made up your face, even went in for plastic surgery – and then you had a new you. As though it were nothing.

When she'd been together with Wendy, one of Clara's favorite things had been to pet that purple hair, her fingers twisting the thick, nearly spiky strands, and she'd rub her nose into it, trying to sniff out a hint of the chemicals that had colored it so vibrantly. Wendy thought it was strange, and she told her so. "I'm not a natural purplette," she joked. "Why not touch me where I'm real?"

Clara couldn't explain that it was just that unrealness that she was attracted to. She'd seen Wendy's body, she'd tasted her from the inside out, she'd felt the rough soles of her feet and the chubby upper arms and even the pale sideburn-like down on her cheeks. Clara was tired of the imperfect reality of Wendy, tired of her breath that always smelled of overcooked shrimp, tired of the layers of faded,

oversized sweatsuits she wore, tired of the long, convoluted stories she told about the employees at the grocery store she managed. But that shiny purple fringe on her head made her different; it added a clean, fake freshness, and when Clara pressed her fingers and her face into Wendy's hair, she felt overcome by a surge of almost violent affection and need for Wendy. Wendy wasn't just any woman anymore; she was Purple Wendy, Wendy Who Dared to be Different, Wendy Who Was Worthy of Clara.

It was foolish, Clara knew. A glimmer of dyed hair was all that kept them together, like one living bloom on an otherwise dead flower. But Wendy didn't quite understand that. What she did understand was that Clara was distant, wasn't talkative, went through the motions as they undressed and groped and got into position (and got into position is the right way to describe it, because Clara had found Wendy's sour, sea-salty breath so repulsive that she had pretended that she was only able to enjoy mutual oral sex, just so she could escape kissing her lover).

So it was a three-month relationship defined by hair dye. Well, there'd been worse. And at least it petered out naturally, for which Clara was grateful. She was tempted to give Wendy a farewell gift of a bottle of mouthwash or a new toothbrush, but she controlled the nastiness that often struck her when an affair was ending. There had been the time when she'd ripped out bunches of random pages from an ex's favorite novel, and another time when she'd left what must have been a revelatory message for the husband of the woman she'd been screwing (it had definitely not been just oral sex in that relationship), and Clara cringed to remember how she'd once sped her car up and, yes, nearly hit the poor woman who had left her so gracelessly and was bicycling away. She had this urge, almost a compulsion

really, to completely destroy whatever was left of a finished affair, and sometimes she wondered, as she sat on a first or second date with someone new, what damage she might do to that person later.

Just a week after she kept herself from handing Wendy a full bottle of sparkling blue Listerine, Clara dressed carefully before going on a blind date, shaving her legs and enjoying their smoothness against the velour slacks, styling her hair, putting in her contacts instead of using the glasses she wore to work at the botanical gardens. She'd been set up by a colleague of hers, Tim, who was in charge of the Rose Garden, the most popular attraction there, and was a married man with a bunch of shy, runny-nosed kids, and he'd told her that he thought she was a nice girl and ought to settle down and get married, too. "Happiness is being a parent," he liked to say, opening his wallet to show anyone nearby the latest pictures of his offspring. Still, when he found out she'd broken up with Marie, the girlfriend before Wendy, he'd not-so-subtly mentioned a cousin of his who, he said, liked the kinds of things Clara did, and he'd offered to introduce them. Clara had refused then, assuming that Tim just meant that what she and his cousin had in common was that they both liked women, but now she felt lonely after the Wendy affair, and Tim offered again, so she'd asked what color hair his cousin had, and when he frowned and said it wasn't her natural shade, Clara had smiled and said yes, why not, what the hell.

Tim had recommended that the women meet up at a bar not too far from the gardens. At first, he'd wanted it to be a double date, saying that he and his wife could come along and find a babysitter for the kids, but it seemed that both his cousin and his wife thought that was a bad idea. So Clara waited outside the bar alone, sitting

on one of the splintery benches on the patio, tapping her fingers lightly on the plastic picnic table in time with the loud pop music rattling against the bar's high and narrow windows. The front door of the bar was partway open, so a triangular chunk of overly yellow light and several plumes of cigarette smoke slipped out to the patio, combining unpleasantly to give Clara a headache, so she stared up at the dark, starless sky, hoping it would soothe her eyes.

At the gardens, she was one of the team of revolving assistants, so on any given day she might weed or trim thorns in the English Garden, and another day plant seeds or dig up new potatoes in the Root Vegetable Garden, and still another day help give a tour to a school group. The best days for her were when she got to work in the Japanese Garden. There, the job focused on trimming and shaping and training the bushes and shrubs to be something they weren't meant to be. A couple of years back, Clara and her colleagues had attended a seminar on bonsai run by an elderly Japanese man with a dry, wrinkly forehead and thick fingers covered with small cuts, suggesting he didn't wear gloves when he worked with his plants. "Bonsai," he said sharply, "is pruning and restricting. Remember always that you are in charge, you tell the bushes what to do. Pruning and restricting! Pruning and restricting!" The Japanese Garden had a section with dwarf bushes pruned with bonsai techniques, and Clara so enjoyed working on them – controlling them, really – that she had even bought some bonsai plants for her own apartment, but even the larger shrubs in the garden were shaped in specific ways, and Clara liked to think of herself as a beautician, pruning and restricting, snipping away the unsightly branches, cleaning up unwanted leaves, pressuring the plants from the roots on up to change and become more aesthetic. She would also gently sweep the smooth pebbles around the small koi pond, forcing them into a calming pattern, and she'd

brush dirt off the little wooden bridge that led to the Japanese tea house. She found the Japanese Garden satisfying in a way the other gardens weren't, and every morning her stomach tensed into a tight hardness until she found out what her assignment for the day was to be. Anything other than the Japanese Garden and a cloud of disappointment descended over her, even though she worked hard and enthusiastically wherever she was at the botanical gardens.

A slender woman walked up to the patio and stopped by the bench. "Are you Clara?" she asked, her voice deepish and relaxed. Clara nodded. The woman hesitated. "Tim said you had glasses."

"Contacts," Clara explained, pointing at her eyes, and breathing in the woman's sweet perfume. She didn't admit that the contacts were colored, making her dark brown eyes seem blue-green.

"Ah." She sat down across from Clara, adjusting her tight, fuzzy red turtleneck, and seemed to sigh faintly. "I'm Louise." She had brassy blonde hair, with wavy bangs almost down to her dark eyebrows. When Clara had imagined her, she had hoped for a really outrageous hair color, maybe green, or orange.

"Nice to meet you," Clara said politely, extending her hand. They shook. Louise's skin was soft, the way you'd want a mother's comforting hand to be if you were sick, and Clara almost didn't want let it go. After an awkward moment, Louise pulled away, and Clara offered to go in to the bar and order a couple of beers. Louise fluttered her hand dismissively and said she didn't drink. "So why did Tim have us meet here?"

Louise shrugged. "He probably forgot."

“Should we go somewhere else?”

Louise paused. “Nah, this is fine.”

“Okay, then,” Clara said, trying to make her voice light.

“So Tim said he knows you from work,” Louise said.

“Yeah, we both work at the gardens.”

“How did you get into that?” Louise asked, not sounding too interested.

Clara smiled anyway. “My mother is kind of crazy about plants, so I grew up with it.” She still remembered the first summer she had grown vegetables, when she was just six, and how her mother had praised the glossy tomatoes and stumpy cucumbers she had produced, and even the sparse patch of chives that looked like a bad toupee. Clara hadn’t cared so much about the vegetables themselves and how they tasted, but she loved the scent and the color of them, and the way they grew out of nothing and brightened the backyard, all because of her. She had planted them, and watered them, and weeded the garden, and nurtured those seeds until they blossomed and became something. “It’s so calming to garden, and you really feel it’s an accomplishment when it goes well. I just like making things beautiful, I guess.” She gave a sort of half-laugh, half-snort, thinking her words silly.

“Yeah, Tim, too. Except it was his dad who was into gardening.”

“Right, he told me,” Clara said, hoping they weren’t just going to talk about Tim.

There was a short silence.

“Tim always makes fun of me for not being able to even keep a little plant alive. I just forget to water them.” Louise examined her hands, as though wondering how they could be so forgetful, so unable to pick up a glass and fill it with water and nourish her poor plants. In the triangle of light from the bar, Clara saw that Louise’s nails were neatly manicured and painted a pearly pink, like shells on a tropical beach.

“Good thing you’re not a parent,” Clara said, not unkindly. “Oops, I forgot to feed the baby!” She giggled, even as she also felt angry at this woman’s lack of concern. She would bet that Louise was one of those visitors to the gardens who scarcely noticed the smell of newly turned-over dirt, or the fragile, bright petals of flowers that were just unfurling in the dewy, dawning sunlight, or the sound of the wind as it pushed over the creaking bridge to the teahouse, but who might thoughtlessly snap a flower from its roots, capturing its momentary beauty while condemning it to an early death.

Louise frowned, her thin eyebrows coming together. “Yeah, I guess so.” She rolled her dark eyes and fidgeted with her fuzzy top again.

“So, um, what do you do?” Clara asked, embarrassed.

“Teach,” Louise said sourly, barely opening her mouth. “Fourth graders.”

“Oh.” Clara couldn’t think of anything else to say. She tried to imagine what, if this date had started out in a better way, would have happened when she and Louise broke up. Would she have stolen all of Louise’s dying plants so they didn’t have to suffer her carelessness anymore? Or shown up at the grammar school and argued with Louise in front of her young students? She shuddered, ashamed of herself.

A few minutes ticked by, and they each looked around the empty patio, cleared their throats, pretended to wipe some dust off their pants, checked their watches. Clara listened to the music and the noisy crowd inside the bar, and the contrast made their own silence more oppressive.

“So,” she muttered.

“Yeah,” Louise replied.

Finally, Clara coughed a little and said, “You know, I think it’s too soon. I’m not ready to be out dating again.”

“Oh?” Louise said, her voice relieved. “Don’t worry. I understand completely.”

“Oh, well, thanks.” Clara knew that her lie helped them both, but she couldn’t help feeling somewhat annoyed with how easily Louise “understood.” She almost wished for a touch of Wendy’s denseness, so Louise would try to argue with her, try to convince her that they could become something together.

Louise stood up, and the light from the bar shone on her slackly open mouth, revealing a streak of deep red lipstick on her front teeth. Clara regretted the whole evening. She wished she could pop the failed date out of her memory like a diseased bud, as a way of saving the rest of the plant.

“Take care,” Louise said. “Say hi to Tim at work.”

Clara made herself nod and respond, but she looked away as Louise left the patio. She waited a few minutes, rubbing her temples, and then went home, where she watered her plants and cleaned up a few dry leaves from where they had fallen.

On Monday in the Rose Garden, as they clipped off thorns that unknowing visitors could cut themselves on, Tim asked how the date had gone. Clara shrugged and said it hadn't worked out.

"Too bad," he said. "I really thought you two would like each other."

"Why?" Clara asked, removing one of the thick, too-warm gloves she wore to protect her hands. She squeezed her tired hand into a fist, then stretched the fingers out.

"Well, because she's also interested in bonsai," Tim said. He made a savage snipping motion with two gloved fingers and smiled; he disliked bonsai techniques because they seemed extreme to him and he wouldn't allow anything like that in his garden.

"She is?"

"Yeah, her whole apartment is filled with bonsai plants, like yours is."

Clara shook her head. "I thought she said she wasn't good at taking care of plants."

Tim gave her a strange look. "You must have misheard her. She's great with plants. Yeah, she's been into bonsai since we were kids. I used to try to get her to come work here, but, you know, she loves teaching too much. I had to give up on her."

Clara put the glove back on and moved a short distance away from him, continuing the pruning. She heard the Japanese man say, "Pruning and restricting,

pruning and restricting,” and a hard soreness ached through her fingers as she snipped.

At lunchtime, she took her tuna salad sandwich to the Japanese Garden and sat on the grass near an intricately shaped shrub that she'd always felt a special affection for. One of the lower branches was sagging, ruining the effect and the style, though only someone sitting right in front of the bush, as she was, would have noticed. Clara wished she had her tools with her, so she could fix it and get the shrub back into shape. But as she kept looking at it, taking overly large bites of her sandwich and not chewing enough before swallowing, ignoring the way the food lumped down her throat, she started to like how the drooping little branch made the shrub slightly unbalanced, slightly imperfect, more real. It almost made the artistry even more beautiful.

Clara wiped some mayonnaise off her fingers onto the grass, and then reached for the branch. She pressed down on it, forcing it more out of position. She kept applying pressure, until suddenly the branch snapped, falling to the neatly raked dirt below the shrub.

She hadn't meant to push it that hard and she quickly glanced around her, worrying who might have seen her treating a plant so roughly. But there was no one in sight. Clara stood up and took a few steps back, studying the fancy shrub, and she thought that very few people would ever realize that it was missing one of its branches.

Author Bio

B.J. Epstein is a lecturer in literature and translation at the University of East Anglia in England and a writer, editor, and Swedish-to-English translator. B.J. has published academic research and personal essays on LGBTQ issues, and has short stories forthcoming in *The Reader* and *SoundZine*.

Citation: Epstein, B.J. 2010. 'Bonsai'. *Polari Journal*, 2 (October 2010), www.polarijournal.com/resources/Epstein-Bonsai.pdf (accessed <insert date>).