

Anhedonia (excerpt 2)

by Laura Preble

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Married. Dr. Denture. Edward. Married.

The same words keep ping-ponging through a dark field of emptiness, neon streaks that you pass on a freeway when your bus drives really fast through barren nighttime desert. I try to ignore them, close my eyes, hum, curl up on the sweat-infested sofa, but I still see, eyes open or closed, the words streaking by as if speeding toward the inevitable end of the world.

Petra clomps up the stairs again; presumably Sugarbucket is either subdued or deceased. "Anna?" she calls as she raps her pig-sausage knuckles on the door.

If I don't answer, she will not go away as most people would. Petra and I share a bond, despite our polar opposite habits regarding hygiene and wild animals: we were both clients of Edward Denture. Because of this, she feels the need to protect me and I feel the need to try and avoid her as much as possible. This, I believe, is one of God's roguish jokes: pair an obese, codependent woman blithely unaware of infectious disease with a thin, reclusive germophobe cursed with an obsessive-compulsive desire to be left alone. God probably works for cable television.

"Anna, I know you're still in there," she wheezes. "It's hot as blazes out here. Don't make me go downstairs and come back up. I might have a stroke." She's also a hypochondriac.

Might as well unlock the door and let her in. In my careless freak out, I only locked one of the twenty bolts on my door, so it's a snap to grant entry to my leech-like neighbor. I allow the door to swing open and retreat to the sofa.

She sits next to me, breathing all the nearby oxygen. "Honey," she says gently as she attempts to pat my hand. I bury the hand between couch cushions. "Let's talk about this."

I shake my head.

"Here." She pries the wrinkled invitation from my left hand; I hadn't realized I was still clutching it. "Now. I know this must be a bit of a shock, hmm?"

I nod.

"When was the last time you talked to him?"

When was it? Suddenly, I feel hot and dry, scratchy and unbearably dirty. "I need to take a shower."

Petra, who is somewhat used to my idiosyncrasies, sighs heavily and pulls a fashion magazine from the ponderous, pet-hair festooned bag she carries everywhere, which is now shedding on my clean floor. "I'll wait."

In the bathroom mirror, my reflection seems older than I am. Ah, the wig. It's so wonderful when it comes off and I can pass it off to Annabelle, my wig head. She's shiny porcelain, decorated in a pattern of mosaic colors and shapes, like someone on an LSD trip threw up hippie rainbows. He bought it for me, as a present. He named her, too, I remember, when we were sitting at a picnic in Collier Park.

"Open it." He shoved a big box wrapped in blue-green-gold striped paper toward me. The gold satin bow waved in the breeze at me, looking like a willowy naiad or dryad from Greek mythology. A Bowiad, I guess, a Greek goddess of bows.

Spring. I had been his client for a year, nearly, and he knew how much I hated being outdoors. Too unpredictable and full of contagion, but he had made me do it because it was my birthday.

"Could we just go inside?" I squeaked, eyeing the nearby homeless man scratching at the living creatures in his beard-condo. Ants crawled in the dirt at my feet, and despite the fact that I had worn a black hypoallergenic leotard and leggings, and neoprene boots (germs do not like neoprene, just so you know), I felt uneasy.

"Just relax and breathe," Edward said, leaning against the rotted bark and probable termite detritus of an old oak tree. I stifled a scream. It *was* my birthday, after all. "Come sit by me."

Shuddering inside, but excited about sitting next to him, I moved incrementally closer, scanning our plastic picnic blanket for dirt or, especially, animal feces. Oh, what the hell, I thought to myself. It's worth it. I snuggled close, and his long, dampish arm draped across my shoulder, releasing an invisible scent cloud of Aqua di Gio, glycerin soap, and burnt matches. The scratch of the pink oxford broadcloth of his shirt, the feel of his chin resting on my wig, our hips nearly touching. It was as if a bubble of wonderful enveloped me, and I was blissfully able to just forget. To forget the world, the germs, the tree, the ants, the homeless beard-condo and its residents. Well, I couldn't totally forget, but enough that I could simply feel pleasure.

Pleasure. As I thought about it, it rolled through my mind, down to my tongue like a delicious cold fruit, a frozen cherry, foreign and exotic. I felt good.

"Open your present," he insisted.

"I don't want to move."

I heard him laugh, I felt it, a wave of sound from his chest to my body. "I'll do it, then." He started to untie the Bowiad, and I stopped him.

"Oh, leave that. It's beautiful."

"The bow?"

I nodded. He laughed again, the rumble running through my body like a rolling earthquake, shaking things. The Bowiad came off, carefully, and he handed her to me. I clutched her to my chest. He very slowly and carefully slipped his finger through the shining lines of tape that held the wrapping together, careful not to rip it. When it was done, there was a sage-colored box with a square lid.

"There. Now open it," he said.

I lifted the lid and saw the top of a glassy sphere, riotous with color. "What is it?"

He lifted it from the box and turned it so I could see the blank features. "It's a head. For your wig."

I didn't know what to say. I slept in my wig. I never took it off, except to shower, and he knew that. "Why would you get me that?"

He smiled gently, put the head back in the box. "This is Annabelle," he said. "She's your relief pitcher."

"Hmm?"

"You know baseball?"

"I've heard of it." I unconsciously stroked the top of the glassy, colored head. Smooth.

"Okay, so in baseball, when the pitcher gets tired, he gets a reliever. So, Annabelle is your reliever."

"What does she relieve?" I took the head from him and brought it closer, just slightly, so I could see the face...a nose, mouth shape, indentations for eyes, but no eyes painted there, just more of the amorphous paisley shapes of turquoise, amber, deep blue, copper, forest green. I noticed patterns in the colors: a spiral swirl, a Celtic knot, a star, a crescent. "What are all these things?"

"Ah. Sacred symbols, from bunches of religions. I know you're not religious," he said immediately before I could protest. "This isn't about religion. These are all...like, lucky charms."

"Magically delicious."

"Exactly."

I lifted Annabelle from the box. Now that I really looked at her, I saw the range of colors, and they were all my colors. And smooth, so smooth.

"Do you like it?" He grinned expectantly at me. I turned to look into his eyes, those sapphire eyes I could never really look into for any length of time.

"I do."

He sighed, contented. I felt something. I just stroked Annabelle's head until it went away.

"Anna!" Petra pounds on the bathroom door as I sit on the toilet, staring at my wig perched on Annabelle.

"What?"

"You've got to come out of there." She shifts her weight; my floorboards groan. "It's not that bad. Can we talk about it? Anna?"

I open the door.

Petra hovers like a fat fish, gasping for air. "Your hair." A statement, fact, said with astonished admiration. "*Your hair.*"

Mmmm. The fuzzy baby duck near-baldness of my ravaged scalp catches the breeze from the hall fan. "You've seen it before."

"No," Petra says, shaking her head, still staring as if she expects to see a special message from Yahweh spelled out in dying follicles. "Can I touch it?"

"No." I brush past her, into the hall and to the kitchen, my scalp still breathing delicious freedom. "I need to eat something."

"Oh." Petra's latent Jewish mother tendencies roll right over her need to feel my hair. "Sure, honey, if you need to eat. Got anything chocolate?"

She follows me into the kitchen, which is, as usual, immaculate. As if she's my personal Martha Stewart, she opens the fridge and starts rooting around for yummys. "Got any of the Nutella? I love that stuff." All I see is her massive haunches sticking out of my refrigerator, as if an unlucky beast had collided head-on with a shiny white semi. Removing herself and closing the door, she says, "What are you having?"

"I think I'll have this." I pull a large tin of Belgian-chocolate-covered cookies from my alphabetized pantry (the cookies are between Baking Chocolate and Bisquick) and pry off the green-gold lid to reveal a pristine landscape of un-nibbled butter cookies drizzled with milk chocolate. Petra hums in delight, picks out a striped delicacy, and extending one red-nailed pinkie, she takes a chomp, then spits it out.

"How old are these?" She discreetly takes the piece of cookie to my trash can and shoves it in.

Looking at the bottom of the can, it appears that they are a bit past the best-buy date. "They were made in 1988."

"Well, sweeties, that's not edible." She grabs the tin and purposefully sets in on the counter. "You could get some kind of disease from that!"

"Like what?"

"I don't know!" she burbles. "Like worms, or something."

"You can't get worms from cookies." I grab the tin and pitch it neatly into the trash receptacle, and Petra gasps as if I've committed a heinous sin even though she refused to eat the ancient goodies.

"Well, what else have you got? Want a drink?" She opens the cupboard over my stove as if she's hunting. "You must have some cognac."

I stalk over to the pantry and part the gray curtains in front of my alphabetized foods. "I don't drink."

"Why not, for god's sake?"

"I don't know." A box of water crackers. I think if they're sealed they're still okay. I hand them to her.

"Sweeties, listen." She pulls my arm until the rest of me follows, and she plants me in one of my chairs. She sits in the other, and it groans in protest. "This just can't derail all your progress."

"What progress?" I take the box of crackers from her, rip the end off the package savagely, and extricate the plastic-covered wafers from their coffin. Ripping it with my teeth, I ease a handful of crispies from the sleeve.

"Don't use your teeth!" Petra screeches.

"Why not?"

"You could break them!" She grabs two crackers and starts to munch noisily, dropping crumbs like snow onto my clean floor.

"What progress?" I ask again.

Her large brown eyes (one with a severely drooping eyelid) focus on me sadly. "You were just getting over him."

"No." I shake my head. My bald head.

"Yes, you were." Petra touches my hand and I instinctively jerk it away. "After he left...I was kind of worried, to be honest." She leans forward, the parasail shirt flapping open to reveal the upper slope of her Alpine breasts. I'd hate to have to carry around anything that big, especially without some kind of mechanical support, a winch and pulley system or something. She's still talking. "Now, maybe you should just forget all about this. Forget about the wedding. I don't even know why on earth he sent you an invitation."

"Because we were friends." I'm still staring at the crinkles and

wrinkles and fine lines traversing Petra's chest. It's almost like photos of Mars I've seen, the dusty red soil crisscrossed with dessicated river valleys, the ancient memories of liquid and the flow of life. "We *were* friends." I'm trying to convince myself.

She pats my hand. "Sure you were, honey. But why torture yourself? Even people who aren't crazy don't do that."

Crazy. I really hate when people use that word.

