

Anhedonia (excerpt)

by Laura Preble

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Things have happened.

It's a given. What, are you crazy? Of course things have happened. It's the world, for Christ's sake. What, do you think it just turns in its orbit and hangs there like a big blue ball attached to some cosmic piece of fishing line, waiting for a bad-tempered cat to bat at it and hurl it into the sun?

That would be something happening, though. I mean, really. A massive, feline-fueled explosion of solar gas melting the Sonic shake shops, the Gap stores, the McDonald's play areas full of discarded dirty diapers, the urine-soaked street corners, and Tiffany jewelry store packing palettes full of identical, one-of-a-kind silver pendants *for her on her special day*.

I guess technically nobody could watch it, since we'd all be incinerated, but still, it would be *something*.

Things have happened. They *are* happening, all around.

I am consistently missing most, if not all, of them.

I am washing my dish.

It's blue, made of a smoked glass, and it's the only one I use anymore. I had wooden bowls, but the problem with those is that you know there are germs hiding in the rough pores of the wood. If I could get a tiny nano-microscope and go zooming into the pores, I am sure it would be like a horror movie, with saber-fanged creatures dripping ooze and infectious disease. So, I had to throw them out.

The blue glass bowl, though, appears to be safe. Germs cannot penetrate its smooth surface. They fear the blue, which, in mythology, is the color of purity and holiness. Also swimming pools. I

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know that germs prefer a wet medium but will often settle for a damp extra-large when they are desperate.

A letter is lying on the counter next to the sink. It's an invitation, actually; I haven't opened it. I haven't opened it for two weeks. It catches at the corner of my eye every morning, taunting me. It's cream and gold, and there is a stamp in the corner, with one edge partially folded up, that has a drawing of a duck on it. Why would anyone design postage stamps? Why do we need art on postage stamps in the first place? With economic times the way they are, it certainly seems that we could do away with something as unnecessary as waterfowl on our government documents. Stupid duck.

"Anna?" I hear the nasal whine from below my kitchen window. My downstairs neighbor, Petra, is waving to me from the alley where the trash cans lie in wait. I know that sounds paranoid, but seriously...they are full of dog hair and flea detritus and god knows how much fecal matter. Petra owns a grooming salon for pets, and the stuff she throws out in those tin cans should be categorized as hazardous waste. I am probably breathing a toxic mixture of dog doo and flea cancer every time I open the window, which I don't. Unless she yells at me, in which case I can't avoid it.

I slide the aluminum frame up, and hold my breath, waving.

"Anna!" she yells again, motioning for me to open the window wider. I shake my head, and she sighs loudly, exasperated. "I'm coming up."

Petra comes up to my apartment about twice a week, usually to complain about a client or a boyfriend. We're not exactly friends; I'd say that it's more a kidnapper-kidnappee relationship. I cannot escape. When she decides to bluster into my rooms, it's like a Macy's parade float escaped from its moorings and I just duck, hoping not to get run over.

I hear the inevitable galumph of her broad ass up the stairs, the click of the tiny patent flats she somehow wedges onto her hippopotamus feet.

"Anna?" she whines. I won't escape, I know, so I open the door and she hurricanes in, a sweep of spicy perfume, yards of red crepe flowing like a pirate flag from her massive chest. Tiny purple bows dot the neckline, nicely framing her turkey wattle. She tries to hug me, and I dodge it.

"My god, this day!" She throws herself onto my sofa, and tiny motes of anti-bacterial talcum powder rise up like dust devils from an arid polyester desert. "I think it's going to get up to 80, easy."

"It's summer," I mutter, backing into the corner by the fireplace. Petra's orange hair, straw-dry, could ignite at any moment.

"Of course it's summer," she says, nodding, using the ends of her red shirt to mop the fat lady sweat from her forehead. I imagine salty drops embedding themselves into the fabric of my couch cushions, and I shudder. "Everybody wants their poodles clipped, their cats de-clawed and such. I'm so busy I can't even take time to eat. Anyways, I came up to ask you: Are you going to Dr. Denture's wedding?"

Sound is sucked into the vacuum of crisis, crumbs of birdsong and motorcycle engines and ice cream truck jingle-jangle mixed together into a heady cocktail of nothing. A rush of thunder hits my ears, and the next thing I know, I'm flat on my back, looking up into the untended fields of Petra's nose hairs. "Ohmygod, Anna, are you with us? Darling, come on! What happened?" She's fanning me with the sweat-stained pirate flag shirt. Jesus! I'll be fully engulfed in infectious disease before mid morning!

"I'm fine," I mutter, waving away her swollen sausage fingers.

"You don't look fine. You look like you passed out."

"I did pass out."

"It might be the heat," she offers, motioning toward the window, the sun, the conspiracy of God and the Weather Channel.

"It's not the heat." I struggle to stand, and I still feel woozy. My wig is askew, I can feel it, so I try to tug at it without her seeing.

"Excuse me for a minute." Weave a path to the bathroom, close the door, turn on the bare bulb above the sink, and in the mirror there is a pale woman, 42, with a dark, straight bob of a wig perched on her

head sideways. Bad, bad, really bad. Dr. Denture's *wedding*. That's what the goddamned invitation was. Of course, I never would have guessed. Of all the things it could have been, I mean, an invitation to the inaugural ball of Howdy Doody would've been more predictable, but Dr. Denture's *wedding*?

Tap, tap, tap. "Anna?" From the other side of the door, Petra's whine fills my hallway. "Honey, are you okay?"

"Fine." I dab with a sterile cloth at my eyes, which are round dark spheres, planets lacking anything to orbit, rootbeer jawbreakers rolling around in the gumball machine of a head attached to my narrow shoulders. "Dr. Denture. Married." The statement rings through the bathroom, echoes off the scrubbed white tile, swipes silver off the mirror, and lands in the back of my throat, where it swells and threatens to choke me.

"I'll come back later," Petra says as she clip-clops away. "I hear my client's cockapoo having a panic attack. Hang on, Sugarbucket!" She's yelling support to the dog, not to me. At least, I *assume* I'm not 'Sugarbucket.' Plus, a dog panic attack is a much bigger deal to Petra than a neighbor panic attack since I'm unlikely to crap on her carpet. But then again, this has been an unusual day.

I don't go very many places due to the unusual demands of my trichotillomania. That's the uncontrollable urge to systematically yank every hair from your body. It's a very high maintenance disability, actually, and when you combine it with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, things can often become downright unmanageable. My problem with mental illness is that most people see it as something of a choice. Just think about the context of comments like "that's crazy!" or "that's nuts!" You just don't hear people saying things like "that's diabetes!" or "that's epileptic!" when something is cuckoo and considered weird.

Somatic psychologists like Dr. Denture would have you believe that mental illness is absolutely the equal of physical illness, that they are simply twins born of the same womb (that being the frailty of the human condition, otherwise known as that germ-ridden meat

bubble, the body.) Dr. Denture preaches that the body and its engine, the brain, are the physical manifestations of all of our flaws, psychic, spiritual, and dermatological. If there were some efficient way to Botox your brain the same way you can your wrinkles, probably everybody would feel better, and our collective cerebellums (cerebelli?) would look and feel younger.

That would be great, but so far, it's much easier to fix the paint job than the computer navigation system in the ol' soul sedan. Minds are a terrible thing to waste, but in order to make sure they work, we have to pump them full of pills and potions, and wear wigs, and stop biting our fingers, and cry about our mommies, and analyze our collective penises (Peni? Penne?) for obvious signs of cigar burn.

So, my point is, I don't go out much. You can probably see why. My version of small talk tends to frighten people, men especially.

Edward Denture was an exception. He was exceptional. Watching Petra wrestle an overstuffed chocolate Labrador retriever by the curb, I absently rub the blue glass dish, trying to wear the fingerprints off my thumb with uniform pressure and small, circular motions.

Counting the rough, uneven tan and gray stones in the wall opposite my apartment, I think of the time six months ago when Edward and I went shopping together. It was after our first real date, which had been at the laundromat. I know that's an unusual place for a date, of course; but we both had run out of underwear, so it seemed very practical, and Edward was nothing if not practical.

It had been a chance meeting, actually; the Fluffitorium was the closest washing place to my apartment, and, through special arrangement with the management, I had thoroughly cleaned the facility after hours with a potent mixture of Lysol and volcanic pumice. Some people with more sensitive noses complained that they lost consciousness, but in general, I think that had more to do with the proximity of the Whistle Stop bar and a certain absinthe Happy Hour special than with my cleaning solution.

Although I had cleaned thoroughly until two in the morning (the kind owner who lived above the shop had locked me in so I

could stay as late as I wanted), I had slept later than I intended, and since it took me nearly three hours to sort my clothes, I didn't get to the Fluffitorium until nearly one in the afternoon. Luckily, I had had the forethought to stripe yellow caution tape across the best washer and the best dryer before I left for the evening, just in case I wasn't the first one in, so I knew that, despite my lateness, I'd have a sparkling clean machine with which to launder my clothing. It took a lot of stress out of my day, I have to tell you. Washing at a laundromat is one of the most frightening things a germophobe can do. You'd think it would be fine, with all the soap and hot water...but you have to factor in the low socio-economic level of the launderers, and the fact that with that lower socio-economic status comes poor hygiene habits. You might be talking about full-on poopy pants spinning about, undersoaped, on a delicate cycle. With cold water. It's all just a wild card, and I'm not willing to gamble with my life.

So, I walked into the shop carrying my hypoallergenic Egyptian cotton washbag with super micro-hepa filtration, and there was Edward Denture, wantonly using the machines I had cordoned off with caution tape.

"Excuse me." I whispered, a nearly inaudible croak, to this tall, ridiculously handsome man who hovered like a folded preying mantis over my washer. He didn't hear me at first.

A rage, familiar only to those with a hair-trigger temper and a familiarity with psychotropic drugs mixed with premenstrual hormones, overtook me, and I closed in on him, coming within two feet of his massive shoulder. Stretched over it was one strap of a pair of suspenders patterned with a black-and-white negative print of Sigmund Freud's face.

The preying mantis man turned to me, and I stared up into a ferret face, a weasel idol carved of stubbly alabaster, studded with sapphire eyes wild-white at the edges. His eyes reminded me of the horses I frightened at my father's stables when I was a child; they expressed just a hint of panic edged with the desire to run like hell. "Yes?" he hissed.

"These are my machines." I said it sub-audibly. With my mind. He just stared at me.

"Did you say something?" He blinked.

I nodded. I felt my wig shift slightly. He noticed. *He noticed!* I felt flattered.

Again, he said, "Did you say something? I thought I saw your mouth move." He was looking *at my mouth*. That put me in such a state of excited fear that I nearly bolted out of the place despite the fact that my underwear was in desperate need of washing. Underwear. *He would see my underwear*. And that's when he touched my arm.

I felt like someone had lit a rocket under my wig.

I stared at his hand. You can tell a lot about a person from their hands, actually; whether they work outside, whether they're married, whether they wash properly. This man had the most perfectly manicured fingers of anyone I'd ever met. It made my heart leap with joy. No nasty germs under those fingernails, certainly. Curved on top, perfectly spatulate nails (a sign of intuitive insight), a healthy shell pink, crowning long, slender pianist fingers. The skin was smooth, white, almost doll-like in its perfect porcelain texture. Seemingly no pores. Perhaps he didn't even sweat.

"Could we sit for a moment?" His voice snapped me out of the hand-examination. When I focused on his face again, the wild look was gone. His eyes were calm, and slightly crinkled at the edges like the crust of an unbaked apple tart. I felt hungry suddenly. "Could we sit?" he repeated. I nodded.

He gently steered me by the elbow to a wooden bench trimmed with iron scrollwork. Before I could sit, he took a package of wet wipes from his pocket, efficiently plucked one from the pack, and he cleaned the seat and back before gesturing toward it. I sat, in ecstasy.

He didn't clean his side of the bench, but he did sit down next to me, keeping an appropriate distance. I clutched my bag of underwear nervously.

"My name is Edward," he said, smiling. He waited, and I guess I was supposed to introduce myself, which I did, sub-audibly. "Could you say your name aloud?"

"Could you tell that I said it in my head?" In my amazement, I forgot to be paralyzed with my fear of strangers.

He grinned, those beautiful blue eyes crinkling again. "I sort of thought you might have. But it would help if you said it out loud."

An awkward pause. So many remarks were swirling around in my head...but I couldn't say any of them. So, Edward spoke again. "Listen. I'm sorry about the machines. I came in and all the others were being used, and I was in kind of a hurry. I just started a wash cycle, though, if you'd like to put your things in with mine. As long as they're permanent press, of course."

He grinned congenially as my insides melted. The thought of my underwear co-mingling with his clothing nearly caused me to have a syncopic episode (that's fainting. I prefer the term syncopic episode because fainting sounds like something a Victorian lady does on a fancy couch, and I am far from Victorian, and I am far from being a lady.)

"Could you look at me?" he asked. I turned to face him. He smiled again. "You have very lovely eyes." I felt a hot blush rising from my neck to my face, and I stared down at the floor again. "You do. Well, anyway, I can see this is making you uncomfortable, so I'll just take my things and get out of your way." He rose and stretched, and when he did, my face was parallel with the snap of his khaki pants. I felt the blush intensify as I thought about the snap of his khaki pants.

He was going to go away if I didn't say something. I watched him walk to the washing machine, open the door, and scoop out a pile of wet oxford shirts in a rainbow of colors. He piled them into a white plastic basket, turned, and tossed me a casual wave before he scoped the laundromat for another open washer. There weren't any. The place was packed. He shrugged, turned to me again, and waved as he snugged the basket against his hip and started to walk toward the door.

"Wait!" I heard myself yell as I bolted straight up from the bench.

Edward turned, and standing in the doorway he was framed with a golden corona of pollution-filtered sunlight from behind. It was as if we were alone, as if everyone else faded into the dark shadow of a movie scene. Just as I took a step toward him, a 400-pound Samoan woman trailing a cloud of children muscled through the door, knocking Edward inward with the force of a brown-flesh tsunami.

And then she made a beeline for our washer and dryer.

This is how I knew it was love: I went right to his side. I paid no mind to the underwear, or the other people and their various germs. I knelt next to his prostrate form, fanned him with a circular from Pests-R-Us, and saw nothing but his injured body. "Are you alright?" I whispered. I nearly took his hand.

He sat up, shook his head, and blinked twice. "What happened?"

I gestured toward the brood of flip-flop wearing Samoans who were loading the washer with the efficiency of a surgical strike team. "I guess they needed to do their laundry."

And then he smiled at me. He looked into my eyes. "What's your name?"

I tried to tell him, but I couldn't. My own name stuck in my throat, a boulder of insecurity.

"Okay," he said, a slight grin tugging at the side of his mouth. "Want me to guess? How about Matilda?"

I shook my head. I felt my wig slip slightly. I couldn't do too many more of those shakes or I'd lose it all together.

"Cleo?"

"Anna." My voice sounded like a distant recording of a weak, wispy spirit trying to communicate across the divide between the worlds. Plus, it squeaked. I cleared my throat slightly, and tried again. "My name is Anna." Better that time. Clearer. Now I sounded like the wispy spirit of a large Samoan woman with many children.

"Anna. Nice name." He pointed to his suspenders. "That was the name of Freud's daughter, you know."

"Hmm."

"Anna." When he said my name, it sounded like music. I felt something stir, somewhere below my belly button, and it really disturbed me.

"I have to go," I muttered, gathering up my things to make a dash for the door, dirty underwear be damned.

"Wait." He blocked the door. With his height, it was easy to do. "Listen, if you ever want to talk, give me a call." He fished his business card from his wallet (Moroccan-red eel-skin) and handed it to me. My fingers brushed the skin of his hand; an invisible zing of electricity traveled up the length of my arm as if I'd been hit by lightning. I couldn't even look at the card. I tucked it under my wig and scampered out of the Fluffitorium, watching the dirty ground with every pace, monitoring the hurried steps of my immaculate canvas shoes.

"My name's Edward," he called after me. "Call me if you'd like to."

I didn't look back. My heart pounded, oxygen disappeared, colors ran in party-bright streaks as I followed my shoes back home. Not until my door, my good solid door, was shut behind me and my laundry was safely stowed in the antibacterial hamper did I pause for breath, pause to really look at his business card.

My pulse beating in my ears, I traced the edges of the card, and examined every molecule. Ivory, thick stock, with a sage trim (a wonderful color for mental illness: it denotes a non-threatening atmosphere as well as growth, as in plants.) His name was embossed in sans serif letters (very non-pretentious): *Dr. Edward Denture*. Beneath his name, in smaller type, it read *Psychiatrist/Life Coach*.

