

Anecdote City

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Mia was stuck at a party in Anecdote City again. She responds, "Oh, that happened to me once, too," to the woman who has her trapped in the corner, and Mia is subjected to yet another story about the cat, the kids, a broken bone or stitches—the endless list of self-inflicted injuries. The ticket for running a red light or the dodging of the self-same ticket. The story about that teacher who ignored them in high school. Or it's the story about the fish that got away, which is actually not one Mia hears very often any more, due to her current geographic location living in the endless city. But more often than not, it is the one about how the dog looks when it gets left alone, or how the dog tore the carpet up, or it is someone's advice on how to keep the dog from getting lonely by turning on the radio when one is gone.

Mia thinks how the anecdote that becomes a piece of work or a real story has an art to the punch line. It means knowing when to stop telling the story, when to laugh at yourself instead of at what you are saying. It is the same as knowing how to tell a good joke. The teller has to know when to stop talking. When to stop. You cannot delight in the telling unless that is a part of your shtick, and here was Mia stuck in Anecdote City again with people who didn't know how to tell the truth or when to stop talking.

Mia did not want to know what these women used on their floors to get the wood clean or how much of the solution was mixed with water or how to use liquid detergent instead of dry because it gets out stains better. That was being stuck in Clean-House-Lady hell. Which was almost worse than Anecdote City. She wanted to know where a good bookstore was or a good wine store. But she was sick of people *discussing* good wine. For godsakes, she just wanted to drink it. Even though she knew there was an art to knowing good wines, she couldn't see the purpose in knowing it anymore. Stop talking about this wine and that wine. When was the last time anyone donated money to a cause or stopped to ask someone why they were crying?

Mia needed the antidote for an anecdote. She thought that was funny. She repeated it to herself and to her sister on the telephone while discussing the endless parties in Anecdote City. Or maybe her sister had said that line to Mia. Mia was always stealing her sister's best lines and claiming them as her own.

She said to her sister, "Angela's a nice person, but she can't tell a story to save her life."

And her sister said, "Yeah, she's got a story for everything. If you've been there, done that, so has she. She should try getting a job, that one."

This was on the phone. Mia called her sister every Sunday. They lived in different states. Once a year, they got together and partied without their husbands or their kids. The last time had been in Orlando, Florida. They had regrettably allowed their sister-in-law Angela to join up with them that time. Both of them wondered silently about how good their brother could possibly be in the sack.

Her sister said, "Did you hear when you told Angela the story about that girl who touched your breasts? I thought for sure that one would shut her up, but it didn't."

"Yeah, like she touched a girl's breasts in a bar once, too. Give me a break!" It wasn't that they didn't like Angela—they really did. It was something about her delivery.

Mia told her sister she was sick of being stuck in the endless party. Even the music seemed cliché and trite and tired and overdone, trying so hard to be multiculturally hip—it was Latin that sounded like elevator music or blues that had half beats to it or salsa, salsa for godsakes. Or if it wasn't the diverse music, it was always someone singing the folksy Beatles rendition, or some lone person singing Simon and Garfunkel, which is clearly a duet, or there were the smooth dulcet tones of James Taylor being belted out by some huge baritone with a big voice, a big chest, and a beard. When was there going to be something new? That man with the beard had sat really, really close to Mia at a party where her husband wasn't present because her husband had to work nights, and the man had put his hand on her knee and said, "Maybe you are in the wrong line of work." And then he had lifted Mia's hair off her neck and said, "Up maybe." What line of work did he think she should be in?

"Give me a break!" she laughed on the phone to her sister. "Is that flirting? Was he flirting with me?"

"Did he know you were married?" her sister asked.

"Of course!"

"Well, some people don't care," her sister told her.

Mia went to the local coffee shop hoping to find the bohemian writer, the intense political discussion, anything as obvious as that would have sufficed, even though she didn't like politics at all. However, she often found herself embroiled in politics not of her own making. She just wanted to listen. She knew she wasn't academic enough to participate, she just wanted to hear something different, hear someone who wasn't afraid to go out on a limb, break it down, say something non-sequitor and out of sync and not part of the natural rhythm of the conversation. Instead, she found the motherly swim-team mothers discussing fund raisers, and a team of Yuppie-Wanna-Be-Harley-Riders drinking lattes because the latte contained their daily supply of calcium as a bonus. They needed the calcium and caffeine to make their run across the desert to the annual Sturgis Harley Rally where they could all stand next to the scum-of-the-earth, original Harley riders with their Hogs and their Big Fat Mamas. The original Harley riders are no longer throw-your-bike-out-the-window kind of people any more, but are just laid-back pot smokers and beer drinkers that live right next door to me and you. Mia ran away from that coffee shop before she could be spotted by the Dead followers spouting their attire of peace and love and lost-in-the-sixties fashion, an attitude that was so cliché she could not even stand to comment. They were a fifteen-minute segment on Channel Four waiting to happen. Mia ran from

coffee-haven looking for any story besides the ordinary, the incidental, the anecdotal. The everyday.

Mia chose to go to another party in Anecdote City. It was an artist's party, at her friend Sergio's apartment, a place where artists went to talk about art and look at whoever owns the house and at the art in the house. The anecdotes there were not about family and dogs and kids, but were instead about things lacking in family and dogs and kids. The anecdotes were about a bar in the city that has a piano where you can sing along, or a restaurant in the Italian district that serves a great scallop and clam linguine, but get the red sauce, not the white because the white is too creamy and thick and heavy, but the red has a nice flavor and—add list of spices as follows. And there, there were people talking in hidden, pretentious, anecdotal paragraphs about Burning Man and how awesome that was, and one woman spoke of how she was not an artist but an artist groupie because her boyfriend, her ex-boyfriend, is an artist, so that is how she got hooked on art. Hooked on Art! What is that about? And there, everybody was trying to outnotbepretentious everyone else. If someone even wanted to be friends with someone else, they couldn't be because they had to wade across the labyrinth of discussion and time to get to a boat where friendship could exist. The explanation is—this person was invited to the party by that person—and all of those people had been friends for years, so why try to be friends with someone new. Mia's friend Sergio had been too preoccupied with people he already knew to have any thoughtful conversation with her, so, she left.

She told her sister on the phone, "I went to a party at Sergio's house."

"Uh-huh," her sister said. "How was that?" Her sister had a way of making it sound like Mia liked Sergio too much, just by the way her sister said, "Uh-huh." And then sounding envious of Mia's going to parties just by the way she said, "How was that?"

So Mia just said, "It was okay. No one wanted to be new friends with anyone there."

Her sister said, "I get that."

And that reminded Mia of another party she'd been to in Anecdote City only last month, and that was the I-graduated-from-the-University of Blank's party, where every guy and girl within a ten year graduation date of each other that went to University of Blank, must be friends with each other. No one outside that vicious, but so obviously warm, quick witted, cryptic, yet humane, and ergonomically correct, yet sometimes economically, mildly disadvantaged (at times, but not very often) group could participate—that group. But someone might invite you to our party so that you can see what a brilliant group of people we are. Mom and Dad grew up in the suburbs, and Mom was a teacher and/or Dad was a teacher—that group. Or they were the environmentally-aware and donate time to the humane society, or to a woman's support group, or _____ (insert word of choice) any kind of group that is associated to the University of Blank's vast network of close knit, close your doors to anyone who is not an "A" student with strong recommendation from at least three well-placed, well heeled, in-the-know kind of people in the community with jobs that are middle to upper class, deserving of the University of Blank's systems' beneficence.

Better not be:

- a) poor white trash without a clue
- b) someone with a chip on your shoulder
- c) someone from the politically incorrectly worded place called the ghetto, unless you had a teacher in the know enough to get your foot in the door for you, but stop telling people that's where you were from once you get a good job or people will expect you to go back there and help out your own
- d) a sometimes "C" student because you couldn't stand the system or you hated math, or you had a teacher who couldn't teach, but you tried to do your work with half an eye open anyway
- e) someone who sought out love before education
- f) someone who, god forbid, had a baby before going to college—forgot to do things in the right order, didn't you. Forget the fact that you started menstruating at age twelve and were biologically able to have a baby while you were supposed to be learning about Michelangelo and the American Revolution, learning the names for all of the angles in a triangle, the pre-algebra, pre-geometry, pre-driver's education words. While you were still learning how to pre-write a paragraph, for godsakes. Forget about the essay even yet.

How she got invited to that party Mia doesn't even know. She thinks it was a mistake because at the party someone said to her, "Oh, didn't you go to University of Blank with Zack? I thought that's how you knew him." It had been a dead giveaway that she didn't know or follow the Bears or whatever their mascot was.

On the phone, her sister said, "I know, I know," and Mia couldn't tell whether her sister really did understand or whether her sister just needed to get off the phone and study for her exams at the University of Blank in Alabama.

Mia swore she would never go to a party in Anecdote City again.

But then she got invited to an up-scale party by the Living-on-the-Beach-Overlooking-the-Ocean homeowner's association, and the premise was supposed to be that they would all taste different wines, and they would all discuss good books that they had all read, but when she got there, Mia found out it was a party only for women. Why get drunk, for godsakes, why can't men be around when you are feeling drunk and loose and have some kind of sexual tension rumbling around inside your body like a race car getting ready to race. What was wrong with these married women that they all wanted to drink wine with each other and talk about their books and their husbands, and what they were really saying to each other was, "Look at all the plastic surgery." Actually they were whispering this to each other, covertly, behind each other's backs, whenever their best friends weren't looking. But how could these whispering women even see with all the Botox and collagen clouding up the vision in their own eyes? Mia wondered who even needs plastic surgery anymore? The skin can be sustained with gel from a cow's hooves or with the

poison inside a bloated can of Campbell's Tomato Soup, but probably it wouldn't be tomato soup they used because tomato soup gets used up on things like goulash and just plain goes well with grilled cheese, so it would probably be better to say a can of Cream of Asparagus or something like that that never gets used, like an overly vegetabley soup—barley and corn soup maybe. And my god these women were so thin! Help! Mia wanted out of this party. She could hardly remember her own name.

And guess who was at this party. Miss Clean-House-Lady-From-Hell woman. She was the one who has a great house up in the mountains where the coyote still roam, but where no one can own an outdoor cat because of the coyotes, thank god because that would open up the "oh, my cat" anecdotes again that she heard at the other party, and to which she had even contributed a terrible anecdote about the time her cat was almost poisoned to death. But that was actually funny because her daughter had probably accidentally done the poisoning, but Mia didn't tell that part of the story, and she had contributed another anecdote about how her dog had fallen down the stairs, and only the people with half a sense of humor laughed at that. Other people clucked sympathetically about her dog falling down the stairs, while all the adult children of some kind of abuse or neglect victims had laughed uproariously at the humor in a dog falling down the stairs because he was too fat and walked kind of sideways because he had hip dysplasia, but Mia was not about to put him out of his misery for her own comfort and for the sake of saving money or even to get her daughter a smaller, easier to play with puppy.

The Clean-House-Lady-From-Hell told Mia the story about her Spanish tiles and how they needed to be swept every night, all fifteen hundred square feet of those pinkish-red Spanish tiles, and how she then washed them with a mop and scrub-brushed them once a week, both standing, and on her hands and knees, and how her husband thought she was crazy, but it was just a thing she had about her house, and the clean house lady's best friend was whispering covertly to the clean house lady's other best friend about how the clean house lady *was* fucking crazy, only these women don't ever use the word fucking. Only that weirdo Mia does that. Mia liked to keep her house clean, too, but she didn't like to talk about it. She looked at the women at this party, whose faces were preternaturally young, their breasts sitting youthfully on their chests, their clothes cleaving tightly to their flat, sewn-down abdominals, and she screamed, "I gotta get outa' here!" But she didn't scream it out loud because she was still freaking watching them, and she thought they might do something different besides dance to a band that was playing in the cleared living room, waiting for when the men got home from wherever the fuck they were.

Mia ran out of that hillside party as fast as her legs could carry her, and she went searching for the right party. She ran to find a story beyond the obvious. She went past the riding horse community, the ghetto-inner-city-gang-violence-or-maybe-we're-just-happy-to-be-Black or Hispanic or Asian or Filipino or Iranian community. She ran past the let's go to the high school football game every night community because we're all good parents, hurrah. She hurdled the fight for human and animal rights, civilly correct, and yet far left non-gated community. Pole vaulted the we have some money, not a lot, but enough to live in the hills away from your kind, which included those people who want to transfer out of the flatlands, unhappy to be Hispanic or Asian or Filipino or Iranian because that means we are immigrants and not true U.S. citizens according to your standards, so we are going to move up or left or right out of this vast desert of climbing apartments, so that we can be United States Citizens, but that means we are going to have to make some more money first. It was too sad and Mia couldn't find the heart in any of these stories, but still she had to go to one more party in Anecdote City.

She went to another of her friend Sergio the artist's party. This was a different party from the other party. It was Sergio's birthday, and Mia admits she loves Sergio, even though it is just a platonic love, with just a little edge of attraction to it. It isn't an attraction she'd act on or even feels very often. Sometimes it arises in the middle of a blue evening of sleeping. She dreams that she is eating with Sergio, who has dark hair, and that he is laughing at something she said. Mia is telling a joke and Sergio is listening, and he is always her friend in the dream. Sometimes she even laughs out loud when she is dreaming about Sergio. However, in real life, Mia is sometimes a little repelled by Sergio because he is so different from Mia and yet essentially he is so like her. He can get very sarcastic sometimes and can actually be quite mean, but he doesn't know when he is being mean, so Mia forgives him this character flaw because it is her flaw, too. Whenever Mia has emotional problems, she wants to talk to Sergio about them, but instead she calls her sister because Sergio always says, why can't people just be happy? Sergio doesn't like to hear about unhappiness, he likes to talk about his own, though.

At Sergio's party, a woman asked Mia to dance and Sergio played the music; he dj's his own party, and sometimes he runs around talking too much, but Mia knows she just thinks that because she selfishly wants Sergio all to herself to talk about movies and books, and his lack of television input, and his painting, and how his house is arranged. She's really glad he isn't seeing that girl Wendy any more because that girl was all tight and mean and wouldn't be friends with Mia for nothing. Mia caught glimpses of Sergio's relationship with her through his brief conversations. She would ask Sergio if he and Wendy would like to come over to have dinner with Mia and her husband, and Sergio would say, "Oh, Wendy is visiting her parents on the East Coast right now." And Mia would wonder why Sergio didn't go with Wendy to the East Coast when clearly he had vacation time from his day job.

At Sergio's party, Mia danced with a woman who was a display artist at a museum, and this woman was much warmer to Mia than any woman she had ever met at any of Sergio the artist's parties. The woman was very slender and small and had on glasses that made her look bookish and her face a little sharp, but the woman's face was pretty, and Mia watched her as she danced with Mia, and as she danced, the woman kind of just swiveled her hips, small and sexy. Mia leaned over and told the woman, whose name was Stacie, about a time she herself went out dancing with her sister, when her sister lived here in the city with her, that was a good time, and that time, a woman in a bar was dancing with Mia and suddenly the woman asked Mia if she would like to touch her breasts. They were all dancing on a crowded wooden board dance floor, someplace in the city.

Stacie said, "Did you? Touch them?"

And Mia laughed and said, "Yeah, I did," because she did. She remembered how the woman had on a pink bubbly knit shift, a dress that was short and loose, and the woman pulled her dress straight up, fast, on the dance floor. Then the woman had reached out with her other hand quick and had caught both Mia's hands up in her own and placed Mia's hands on her breasts, and Mia felt the woman's surprisingly braless breasts, and the woman had very large, round, warm breasts.

The woman whose breasts Mia touched told Mia, "They're real." They were so perfectly round and fell so perfectly right into Mia's hands that Mia did not think they really were real. But when she accidentally got a new cable channel on her TV set one week, she saw how a bunch of women's breasts, women who'd had implants, looked, and then later she thought that probably that woman on the dance floor's breasts were real.

At the time when it happened, Mia was dying laughing inside at the woman doing this because she herself was so naive that she didn't see the harm in it, but that time, it certainly at least wasn't like being stuck inside Anecdote City.

So then Mia told Stacie how the girl whose breasts she had touched was talking to her at the bar after they danced, and how then the girl's boyfriend came over, and then Mia finally figured out that what they wanted was a ménage a trois, which she thought was hilarious, so she politely said goodbye.

Mia told Stacie that anecdote on the dance floor while she and Stacie were dancing, and then Stacie laughed mildly but raised her eyebrow only a little, so Mia knew Stacie didn't think that story was that interesting. Mia made a point then to tell Stacie that she herself wasn't interested in any of that kind of thing, that it was just a story she told people at parties. Mia danced with Stacie practically all night because Mia's own husband would not dance with her. He told her later in the car that it was because he had a pimple on his chin that made him self-conscious, so that is one way Mia figured out that her husband really did have issues.

Then, later, her friend Sergio danced his way out with his cake. And they all shouted and shouted and laughed and laughed and the party wasn't about anecdotes any more. It was about moving the body and jumping around and singing and laughing and not getting old before you get old. It was about dancing one's self into the ground. It was a fun party. There was very little talking going on. They played every song that Mia and Sergio and Stacie could think of that was fun and that had no political point or even any musically redeeming quality to it. There was no jazzy riff to the music, no harsh yet real statement being made, no message of any kind. It was all pop and mindless and utterly senseless, the kind of senseless Mia liked to get lost in every so often.

That is when Mia tried to drag her husband on the dance floor, when she tried to get him to dance, but he wouldn't. He was talking to Stacie's husband about something—a recent wine he'd tried? Stock options? Horse trading? The whole time he had his finger hooked on his chin like he was in deep thought, so Mia left him to his talk with Stacie's husband, but when Stacie wanted to dance with her husband, her husband went and danced with her, and Mia had to dance with Sergio while her own husband stood in the corner of the garage that Sergio's friends had converted to a dance hall in honor of Sergio's fortieth birthday. Mia's husband stood watching from the corner of the garage with his hand on his chin and his expression was not forlorn or jealous or wishful. It was simply blank. Then Mia remembered again that her husband hadn't said he loved her for a long, long time.

The next day Sergio e-mailed Mia to ask, What did you think of the party?

And Mia only wrote back, It gave me an idea for a story.

Then she called her sister.