

Dinner with Schmucks

Have you ever looked out of an airplane window at high altitudes and thought, “look at all those people down below; they look like insignificant ants”? Some people’s whole lives are lived in an airplane, so to speak, occasionally looking at us little peons below, busy with our day-to-day lives, while they fly miles above us. I’ve known people who were wealthy and even famous. I have also known people who were on welfare and homeless. But never have I felt worlds apart from someone else until one fateful night at a dinner party in New York.

At the time I had three small children. My husband and I lived in Texas but were there on an IBM project that would last about a year. Our neighbors downstairs, Jim and Pat, were also from Texas, and were there on an IBM project as well. Jim was a consultant heading up a very important project, but he also happened to be a large cattle rancher back in Texas. He didn’t have to work but did it for the fun of taking part in cutting edge technologies. Their kids were grown so I thought it was nice that they spent time with our young family. One day Jim and Pat invited us to go into the city with them. On the train there, we met an older woman, named Mary, who was very energetic and friendly. We discovered her husband had done business in Texas and even had part ownership in a Texas major league sports team at one point. We talked a lot about Texas and she soon invited us to dinner at her place for the following week.

Mary lived in a very large home on an estate that had been in her family for generations. It was a chilly night as we pulled up to the house. The air was crisp, clean, and smelled of old money. We would learn that this was one of many homes she lived in across the country. She had us drive around back to her barn. Or what used to be a barn. She had it renovated so that the stalls were bedrooms for her visiting children and their friends. She had a kitchen installed too.

Her kids had apparently wanted a place to relax outside of the main house. Not only had she transformed this already large barn, but she had a great room added at one point that had in it the longest table I had ever seen. Very large couches and comfortable chairs occupied the other half of the great room complete with tall ceilings and a grand chimney. This was a place for large gatherings. I could just imagine the room full of her children and grandchildren, laughing and playing. It was such a warm, loving room. I decided I wanted a room just like this when I became a grandma.

Mary was a very kind and accommodating hostess. The “barn” was full of the aromas from her cooking, and we soon got to eat the tasty meal she had prepared. Pat and I both decided we just had to have the recipe for the very flavorful, spinach salad. The conversation was lively, the kids were playing underfoot, and we were enjoying ourselves. Her husband was at a ballgame that evening, so he came in after the meal. He had been with some very influential people of New York. I immediately started to feel very small and insignificant as he talked of the projects he was involved with. He even showed a model of a power plant he had built in Texas. My biggest concerns were orchestrating activities for our small community. He talked of all the politicians and important business people he worked with across the country. As he spoke, I thought of all the other stay at home moms I interacted with. I was feeling smaller and smaller by the second. I was shrinking into a nobody, as my day-to-day concerns seemed so little compared to his dealings. Jim, a very sweet and humble man, was attempting to keep up with the conversation. Then my husband shared the story of how we sold all our stuff and rented out our house in order to come to New York. At that point, Mary’s husband abruptly turned to his wife. He asked “Mary, where did you find these people?” As if we were her usual strays she brought home. She sputtered her response “on the train, remember I told you they were coming tonight.”

Poor Mary, it was instantly quiet and very awkward. We quickly ended the evening and went home.

We never did talk about that night with Jim and Pat. But I learned something, that there are some people, by virtue of the power they hold within governments and business, who will never be able to relate to me. I think this kind of power is one way of separating people into social classes, the ruling or owning class from the middle class. A person's perspective in life can be different depending on their social class. It can be likened to people on the ground versus people above in an airplane. Imagine standing in your front yard trying to explain what you see to someone in an airplane many miles above, and vice-versa. Depending on their social class, a person might have totally different ideas on such seemingly simple concepts as food, home, vacation, school, or work. These differences in perspective can cause communication breakdowns. Therefore, I believe it is important to always take into account where someone is standing in life, to better understand what they are trying to convey.