

Expatriate Etiquette

By: Robin Pascoe

"Have we met before?" one expatriate woman asked another, a cocktail glass in her hand.

"Only on about seventeen other occasions," answered the second woman, trying hard not to throw the contents of her own glass in the woman's face.

"Really?" said the first woman, nonplussed. "I can't seem to remember your name."

Before the second woman could supply the information that seemed so difficult to commit to memory, the first woman spotted someone whose name was obviously worth remembering and moved on. Feeling abandoned, the woman of no apparent importance gulped down her drink and went looking for another. She found one, as well as her husband, who was standing conveniently next to the bar.

He was chatting amicably with another man, so she chose to just stand self-consciously beside him like a fountain, albeit one with liquid pouring in rather than out, and watch the expatriate community swirl around her. It was like a ballet, she thought. Everyone knows their moves. They stake out their territory to ensure no interlopers cross the invisible lines. Oh what they hey, have another drink she told herself.

"You look so deep in thought, dear," said her husband, finally turning to her. "This is a cocktail party. Deep thoughts are left at the door. Here, let me introduce you to this man I have been chatting with. I haven't a clue what his name is, so you will have to help me discover it."

Conveniently, the man was fishing in his pocket for a business card and presented one to her husband just as he was about to make introductions. It turned out he was the husband of the woman who couldn't remember her name.

"Nice to meet you," said the woman, not meaning a word of it, although he seemed quite pleasant. Why he was married to such a pill she wasn't able to tell after only thirty seconds. She needed at least a full minute to make a complete character assessment.

Just then, the pill in question ambled over. Her husband said, "Have you met.....?"

"Oh yes," said the woman who had cut her dead not ten minutes earlier. Now highly animated and clearly a woman hosting split personalities she added, "We see each other all the time at the club. How are you settling in now?"

"Considering we have been here about two years, I would say we are quite settled!" said the husband. His wife started to laugh hysterically, but quickly switched to insincere small talk to fill the moment. Everyone smiled and carried on a safe non-conversation about traffic.

When the other couple had moved on, the man turned to his wife and asked her what could possibly have been so hilarious about his earlier comment.

"Nothing in particular. I'm just enjoying myself."

"You never enjoy yourself at these parties," he said suspiciously, leaving her to talk business with a man he caught sight of across the room.

Now what? she thought, looking at her watch, only to discover they had been there for less than thirty minutes. A waiter buzzed by her with a plate of food so she grabbed a few crackers and stood nibbling and wondering if there was somewhere she could hide out for the duration of the party. Before she could look for such a safe room, her eyes connected across the room with a woman she particularly loathed.

She sighed in relief as the woman across the room had immediately looked the other way in total denial of her existence. She was safe from hypocritical small talk for now.

"Why hello there!" came another woman's voice, accompanied by kisses on both her cheeks. Oops. She wasn't out of the woods yet.

"Hello yourself," she said to a woman she barely knew who had just kissed her, even though the last time they met she had walked straight past her.

"I haven't seen you around in ages!" said the woman.

"Oh, you know me. I like to stay invisible."

"Well, what do you do all day? I never see you anywhere."

"Mostly, I work. I find that...."

"That's nice. Great seeing you again. Keep in touch. We must have lunch. Call me when you get a minute. Maybe you can help us out by volunteering...."

She had to find a safe room or soon the car would be the only option. Fortunately, she had the keys. Her husband could find his own way home. He would figure out she had run away. It wouldn't be the first time.

Before she could bolt, she knew it would be impolite not to find the hostess and say thank you. Frantically, she searched around the room for her. Finally finding her, she fought her way across the crowded room and waited patiently for the group around her to finish talking so she could say her thanks and be away.

The conversation around the hostess suddenly stopped. She was aware that the bubble of people were looking at her and wondering why she was standing there.

"Oh, excuse me," she muttered. "I have to leave and I just thought I would say good night and thank you for inviting me."

The hostess looked at her in an odd way.

"Have we met before?"

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