

I came across this article in a magazine and decided it would make a perfect ESL lesson. Read it together, one paragraph at a time. Ask about any expression or vocabulary you don't know. Afterwards, discuss your experiences with "nice people making small talk".

**So Where You From?--Why must a foreign accent always invite an inquisition?
by Iva R. Skoch**

Americans are so nice. It's a shame, really. It wouldn't be so bad if nice people didn't like small talk so much, but they seem to love it. If you're an immigrant with an accent, as I am, your days will be filled with conversations with nice people.

It goes like this: I utter a simple "thank you" to a grocery store cashier, prompting an immediate "Where you from?". "Czech Republic" I say. "Really? My aunt went to Russia last year," she responds. What do I say to that? Do I go with the pointless, "That's nice" and beat a hasty retreat? Or do I say what I'm actually thinking: "What does that have to do with anything?" But that's rude. I try not to be rude--partly because I am an immigrant here (and there are few things more insufferable than ungrateful immigrants) and partly because being nice is contagious. I usually opt for the pointless.

Don't get me wrong, I haven't quite become a nice person. I often long for the rude anonymity of Europe. Back in 2000, when I was "fresh off the boat," as the not so nice folks say, I worked on the 24th floor of an office building in Seattle. How I dreaded those long 9 AM elevator rides. They were filled with the nicest people you'll ever meet. To make matters worse, they had all just spent an hour cooped up alone in their cars and were just dying to talk. "Could you press 24 for me, please?" I asked an elderly man. "Do I detect an accent?" he asks, all proud of himself. "Where are you from?"

Here we go. "Czech Republic," I say. "Ah, Czechoslovakia" he says. "It's actually the Czech Republic now," I explain politely. "The country split up in 1993." Undeterred he continues, "My friend's grandfather was from Czechoslovakia." "That's nice, I say and watch the elevator stop on the fifth and sixth floors. Please, I beg quietly, don't let him ask any more questions.

"So what brings you here?" he, of course, asks. "My husband is American," I say, knowing what's coming next. "What does your husband do?" "He is a lawyer. Don't hold it against me," I say, trying to soften the blow, since even nice people love to hate lawyers. It also buys time. He chuckles for a floor or two.

“How long have you been here?” he asks. “Just a year,” I respond. “Well, your English is fantastic,” he says. And this, I must admit, is very nice to hear. “Thank you,” I say—but what I’m thinking is: “Clearly it isn’t fantastic enough to allow me to be anonymous.”

He gets out on the 18th floor. Now it’s only me and three other people, with six floors still to go. “Where do you live in Seattle?” a young woman asks. “Belltown,” I say. “No way! Me too,” she exclaims. “What building?”

I’ve just told a group of complete strangers where I am from, what got me here, how long I’ve been here, my husband’s occupation and where I live. Now they want me to reveal my address. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I don’t feel comfortable telling you that.” “I didn’t mean to offend you,” she says, stiffly. “You didn’t,” I assure her. Finally, there is silence. But it isn’t the anonymous silence I grew up with in Europe. Why do nice people have to ruin everything?