

# BECOMING AMERICAN

by Lynn Nottage

*Place:* Accra, Ghana.

*(Dial tone.)*

**TAPE-RECORDED VOICE.** *(Heavy Texas drawl:) Hello, this is John Barksdale. I'm down here on vacation in the Florida Keys, and listen buddy I'm in a bit of a spot. It seems the wife left her bag with my wallet and our personal items on the beach unattended. We took a dip and some joker wandered off with our things. It's all gone, damn it, credit cards, cash, everything. Gone. We've been saving for this trip for two years, all I know is it's ruined.*

*(The INSTRUCTOR clicks the off button. The tape stops.)*

**INSTRUCTOR.** Why am I stopping? Anyone?

*(A moment.)*

The call comes in. It's John Barksdale from San Antonio. He needs your help people. You are his angel for the two-three minutes that it takes to guide him successfully through his problem. You are the 1-800 answer to his crisis. The operator.

*(Clicks the on button. Tape resumes.)*

**TAPE-RECORDED VOICE.** *(Heavy Texas drawl:) I'm in trouble here, ain't a thing I can do unless I sort this little thing out.*

*(Clicks button. Tape stops.)*

**INSTRUCTOR.** What can I do? You ask. I know that you're a thousand miles away in this office space in downtown Accra...Ghana. But it doesn't matter to John Barksdale From San Antonio, Texas, not while he's standing on one leg leaning against a pay phone wondering what he's going to do about his vacation. He doesn't need to know, nor does he want to know that you live across the Atlantic Ocean in some small city with a two-syllable name. Or that your name is Kwame, Kakuna, Hamid or Saidiya. No, he wants Brad or Tom, Julia or Meg Anderson from Des Moines.

*(Checks notes.)*

He wants you to be American. That's what it comes down to. It's why I've been brought here, today, to give you folks a few pointers on becoming American for the two to three minutes that it takes to solve John's problem. Don't get nervous, don't over think, over thinking is uniquely un-American. You know everything you need to know already. That's right.

*("America the Beautiful" plays.)*

So John Barksdale from San Antonio calls, a touch of panic in his rum-tinged voice, his desperation palpable, his hard work, a knot in his throat, anger rising. He's shouting!

*(Clicks button. Tape recording resumes.)*

**TAPE-RECORDED VOICE.** *(Texas drawl:) I've lost my credit card, buddy, I'm on vacation in the Florida Keys, listen I'm in a bit of spot!*

*(Tape stops. A moment.)*

**INSTRUCTOR.** Your moment has arrived. You speak.

"Hi John, I'm Meg don't worry we're going to take care of everything for you. Just a moment, while I check your account, John." Say his name. Americans like to hear their names spoken aloud, they like recognition, they respond to familiarity. "John, could I have your credit card numbers please." He'll give them to you, he'll give you anything as long as he believes you're sitting behind a desk at the corporate headquarters in Dallas. He'll give anything to Brad or Tom, Julia or Meg. Which brings us to your first step, selecting a name. Make it simple. I like movie stars, they've already put time and thought into their names. But don't be alarmed if John wants to know a little more about you, to put himself at ease, to feel connected to you, his savior.

**TAPE-RECORDED VOICE.** *(Texas drawl:) Where are you from Meg? I detect a little accent.*

*(Click. Tape stops.)*

**INSTRUCTOR.** Don't panic. Do you say I'm from Accra, Ghana to John from San Antonio? John who thinks Africa is a country and India a small reservation in New Mexico that he drove through