

*I step into the subway car with my coffee and lesson plans, a little bleary-eyed at 7:00am. I reminisce a little about how I became a typical, American commuter after two years of a life that was anything but typical . . .*

“Running. Ugh,” I think, as I pull myself out of bed on an August weekday morning. All I want to do is stay under the covers, but my water turns off in two hours and I have to finish my run and take a shower before it does. My rural town in Western Ukraine is on a water schedule. We only have water from 6:00 to 11:00 in the morning and from 6:00 to 11:00 in the evening. I groan and look longingly at the coffee machine as I pull on my t-shirt. “Gotta do it. No gym here.” I try to motivate myself. I pad into the hallway to put on my sneakers, caked with mud from my last run on the unpaved roads. As I lock my door, one of my neighbors stares me up and down and shakes her head. “Crazy Amerikanka.”

As I head down the street I pass chickens, mean geese that start to chase me because I’ve gotten too close, horses grazing, and goats napping in gullies. There are the old *babucyi* (grandmothers) who look like they’ve stepped out of another time, wearing galoshes and wool tights no matter the weather, their kerchiefs wrapped around their heads, with wrinkled faces staring out and wondering why that *Amerikanka* isn’t wearing a hat. I grumble some more as a man yells “Sportsman?” at me and laughs hysterically at his joke. I pass School No. 5, my school, where I’m not just the weird *Amerikanka* who has strange habits, but where I’m their *Amerikanka*, oddities and all. I smile. I miss teaching. I miss my students. I miss hearing my fifth formers ask me, every day, in turn, “Miss Overbagh, bingo today?” and having my sixth formers cheer when I give them a word search. I miss the funny way my Ukrainian counterpart says “Oh, that is very interesting,” when she’s not completely convinced about a new teaching technique I’ve used, but that she will without fail introduce in her classes the next week. I wonder if the

German teacher has had her baby, or if Susanna, a recent graduate has been accepted into the translation department at the university like she dreams. I laugh to myself, garnering some more strange looks, as I think about all the times I've been pulled out of class, or called into school from my apartment to explain to a group of visitors how we received our new computer and internet lab, what the Peace Corps is, and the most pressing concern, how exactly an unmarried twenty-four year old girl can live by herself.

I start running towards the town proper, my least favorite part of the route. The more people around, the more I'll get scrutinized. Things look more similar to America here: there are cars and buses, stores, and public buildings, shoppers, and children. But at second glance, everything is old, withered, in disrepair. There are soviet style apartment blocks, tiny stores in the town square, horses pulling carts to and from the bazaar, people in BMWs as well as ancient Ladas, and women who dress like prostitutes to go work at the bank, the post office, the town administration.

My mind starts to wander as I run out of the town center again. I turn right, following the paved part of the road towards the town's revered fortress. When the Ukrainian president came to its one-thousandth birthday celebration, the road was paved in his honor, but only to the fortress. An old thatched roof was also replaced on a house nearby, and a new fence erected. I shake my head at the absurdity of it: a president not permitted to see how poor his people really are. Suddenly, the fortress is in view. Even now, almost two years since I first saw it, it still takes my breath away. The massive fortress walls surrounding the castle overlook the Dnister River, just as when they stood fast before the Turks and the Russians centuries ago. I reflect a bit and then turn around, remembering how lucky I am to live here. I think about the huge tourism project my students and I did, which culminated in them leading English Language tours

around the fortress. My students were so enthusiastic, so proud of themselves. They were so surprised to see Americans excited about their little town, having assumed that nothing in Ukraine could top anything in America. They were overjoyed at the ease with which they were able to understand these visitors. They made me proud to be their teacher.

I'm heading back into the town, passing some stray dogs and more people, trying to ignore them scoffing at my red face and my sweaty pony-tail. I smile at some kids I don't know, who say "Hi" to me. I walk around the back of my building, ducking my neighbors' drying laundry and head up the dark stairwell, thinking about how different my life will be in just a few months time when I'm back in the U.S. It'll be strange, exciting, and scary all at the same time. But I'm ready. It's time to head on to new and different things, to bring my experiences as a teacher in a developing country back to teaching English as a Second Language in urban schools in the U.S. that likely need as much help as my school in Ukraine.

As I unlock my door, my outlook is completely different from when I left. I'm awake. I'm ready for the next adventure. I open the door and my apartment sounds eerily quiet. What's missing? The familiar gurgle of my somewhat dysfunctional toilet. The water is off. Early. Ugh. Now I'll have to boil water for a bucket-bath. Typical Ukraine.

*I'm suddenly jolted back to reality when a group of posturing high school students gets on my car. Looking at these slightly older kids, I remember how much my fourth graders need me to help them tackle the intricacies of the English Language and navigate through this unfamiliar culture. They need my support much in the same manner as I did when I lived in Ukraine. I know that now, nearly four years into my adventure as an urban elementary school teacher, I rely on the wisdom I gained during my experiences in Ukraine nearly everyday.*