

Some Dreams Are Small

March 1st, 2009

My town isn't too far out in the boondocks. There are a decent amount of people who have met another foreigner. Or at least have been to Almaty or Tashkent, the biggest cities in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, respectively. But still, as a volunteer here, I basically am America to most of the people I meet. That means that no matter how much I try to blend in and adapt to the local culture, I am inherently interesting just because of where I come from. This gives me all kinds of unfair advantages compared to my colleagues. The administrators at the college who routinely yell at every other teacher just love me (this may have something to do with them not understanding me, don't know). When my students practice teaching at local schools for a month, if I visit their classes and answer questions in Kazakh or Uzbek from their kids for ten minutes, it doubles the standing of my student with the other, older school teachers who oversee them. I routinely turn down offers to visit various schools in the area. Many offer to send a taxi and English teacher escort, to arrive when I say, and to bring me home whenever I need (this part often doesn't pan out). Many times, the taxi shows up even if I turned down the invitation. I try very hard to do as many small favors as possible for other teachers, for my students, for my sisters. A lot of the local people have to hustle really hard to make a living, so I'm not too concerned that other people put money above all else. (Most teachers give private lessons because their salary isn't enough, for example.) Since Peace Corps gives me a decent salary, it's my job to help people for free. Having said that, it often gets tiring dealing with the same people who keep asking for more and more until I have to say no. There are many times when I feel like I'm the only one around who's doing things because it's the right thing to do. Not because I want money or because someone ordered me to do it.

Keep all that in mind. I work at a college in an old factory office building on the third of four floors. It's nice and Soviet and concrete, everything echoes, there's not a heck of a lot of character to the place. I get a lot of visitors here. It's almost become a place of pilgrimage. Local English teachers, university students from the city, school students, brothers of my students, children of other teachers, friends of my counterpart, or some dude who heard about me from his sister. At least someone from one of these categories shows up every other day while I'm at work. Some want private English tutoring (I don't do that, not my job), some want help with lessons or other teaching stuff (I try to help, within reason), and some just want to talk (I try to do that, time permitting). But in the end I get pretty good at giving excuses or putting things off.

So keep that in mind too. Last week as I was walking in to teach a class, a local school teacher with student in tow showed up. As I said, this happens all the time. I told them I had a class, and if they would like to wait for an hour and twenty minutes, I could talk with them when my class finished. So I taught my class, forgot about them, walked out of the class, remembered them, and sat down in the next room to see what they wanted. I'm always a little wary of offering to do too much, mostly because it's physically not possible to help everyone with everything. I recognized the teacher, though I didn't (and

still don't) know her name. She comes to most of our teacher training seminars that we have every month. She's probably in her forties, a little quiet, but obviously interested in improving her English. She brought with her a girl who was obviously her best student. The girl was in the 9th grade, had freckles, thick bottle cap-like glasses, and the posture that shy bookworms around the world have. The girl (whom I hadn't met before) was obviously terrified of me, but that's just because she'd never met me. This may surprise you, but I'm not that intimidating once you start talking to me. The girl had prepared a list of questions for me in her notebook, from which she read, being too nervous not to look at the paper. As this progressed, I realized that the teacher had brought her best student here just to talk with me, not to ask me to do anything. (Don't laugh, that doesn't happen very often.) I answered all the questions and asked the girl a bunch of my own about herself, cutting off the teacher when she tried to put words in the girl's mouth. (I'm notorious around here for that. Teachers here are judged by the quality of their students; a bad student means a bad teacher. So whenever I visit schools, the teachers go to absurd lengths to plant answers in their student's mouths. When I ask a student a question, I give the teacher a few warnings, then snap at them when they open their mouths. The student needs to force out their own answer.) I probably talked to the student and the teacher for a total of fifteen minutes. They seemed beyond satisfied, not at all caring that they had to wait an hour and a half for me, plus the journey to and from their home village (probably 30 minutes each way) just to talk for 15 minutes.

In my year and a half here, I've found that when local people speak English, their small vocabularies often limit the way they can express something. Every day, I hear a hundred different sentences that mean one thing, though if the speaker had the proper vocabulary, they would say it in a different way. Sometimes this can be hilarious ("Eric, you are a well-bred boy" / "Mr. Eric, I feel myself bad") sometimes I don't know what the hell the person's trying to say. This was definitely not one of those times. The teacher wasn't the best at English, but if she had known every word in Webster's, she still would have said the same thing. As they got up to leave, she looked me in the eye, put her hand on my skinny arm and said:

"Thank you Eric. This was her dream."