

Mas, Mas!

written by Guest Contributor | October 13, 2016



Mastavlebeli means teacher. My students raise their hands and shout “mas, mas!” to try and get my attention. I took Spanish in school, however, so I hear “more, more!” My students can’t get enough of my teaching. For some reason I never hear the unaccented Spanish *mas*, meaning *but*. Perhaps because I do not want to hear my students saying “but, but!” I prefer that they cheer me on. It takes several months before I begin hearing the word *teacher*.

I’m teaching at a public school in Tbilisi, Georgia, through a program started by the Georgian government. There are many of us, droves of native English speakers. I’m in Group 13, which means exactly what it sounds like; we are the 13th group to try this out. Most of us are not teachers. We are young, in our early twenties. The majority of us have traveled before and many but not all of us have lived abroad. I have traveled before, but I have not lived abroad. I’d guess a shamefully high percentage of us would put “love to travel” as a way to describe ourselves on a dating site.

For the first several months in Tbilisi I am living with a host family on the outskirts of the city, which means I must take a marshrutka to class. A marshrutka is essentially a minibus that, in summertime, smells like the amalgamation of every body odor in the land.

On my first day of teaching, I get lost on the marshrutka. I despise being late. I’m not a person who is typically late, but I am a high-anxiety perfectionist. I get off the marshrutka and call my host sister, who laughs when she realizes how far away from the school I’ve traveled. “Are you trying to get back to the U.S.?” she teases. I’m trying to pretend I’m not crying. She tells me to take a taxi, so I do. I pay more for the taxi to my class than I will make in teaching that day. This is fine, of course. We’re not here for the money.

For the most part I do not teach alone. This is good, because I am not a teacher and I have never taught before. I have three co-teachers, Georgian women who teach alongside me. They are lovely ladies; privately, I think of them as Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather from *Sleeping Beauty*. I will never stop taking pleasure in thinking of them this way.

For the most part, I enjoy teaching. There are just a few moments in class

when I feel uncomfortable. For instance, one day we are giving a lesson on superlatives when my co-teacher calls three students to the front of the class. One of these students happens to be overweight. She points to him. "Fattest," she says. And the class repeats it. *Fattest, fattest.* The student is blushing. I am standing quietly, not moving or speaking. I am frozen as though I believe if I do not move I will disappear. As though I believe this has anything to do with me. The fat student is not standing still but is rocking back and forth, gently, like a metronome.

Over time, I become more comfortable in class. Sometimes when my co-teacher is lecturing I journey to the back of the classroom, to where the "troubled" students sit. I ask them questions about the lesson and force them to speak English to me. They stare at me, or they look away shyly. Many of them have never been called on before. Their books are open to the wrong page, or they are not open at all. At the end of these classes my co-teacher says, "Don't waste your time with those ones."

I keep wasting my time with those ones. I'm never sure if what I'm doing is right. I'm never sure if I should be listening to my co-teacher or to myself. This is their life, their city, and their school. I am an untoward visitor, hailing from the land of participation medals. What do I know? I know so little. I continue to question myself at every turn. This is an education. For the most part, I am not a good teacher. I'm ineffective. I don't know how to discipline my class. "Work on your loud voice," my friend says. One day, I yell at my students and they stare at me like I've stripped naked and challenged them to a duel. I have another friend who teaches in a village and I learn that he often stays after class to play soccer with his students. I am not a good teacher in this way either. I look out the window of my school and watch my students playing soccer and then I walk home very quickly, so as not to be seen.

I do try. One day, I come up with a detailed lesson for my students to write and perform their own songs in English. Within ten minutes of this lesson, however, my class has somehow convinced me that I should rap. Giorgi furiously scribbles the lyrics, working harder than I've ever seen him work. "But who will beat box?" someone asks. I'm surprised to discover that they know the phrase "beat box." Dato volunteers, and it's happening—I'm rapping, or trying to. I'm a much better teacher than I am rapper. This is some consolation.

One day, my students ask me to explain American football to them. In America, I have pretended many times to understand American football while watching football—*go team!*—but I have never truly understood American football. I have no idea how to explain this to them. I draw a picture on the chalkboard of an awkward-looking football and two thin goal posts. My students are disappointed in me. If not for football, what is America?

I am a writer and a native English speaker, and I often fear that I will forget what a past participle is or how to conjugate a verb. I often fear that I will forget this in front of my class, and that my co-teacher will stare at me like I have half a head and a tenuous grasp of my own language, which may be true.

Out of all my classes I love my eleventh grade class the most. Some of my students in this class speak English very well. In this class, we discuss ideas instead of alphabet. We talk philosophy, music, poetry. My students ask me about where I'm from and I tell them only two important people come from my state. Bill Gates and me. They love Bill Gates. They seem to tolerate me. They want me to tell them all about Bill and his success. How did he become successful? At night, I research Bill Gates. My students can never remember where I'm from. They express intense disappointment that I've never been to New York City. I still remember that Bill Gates scored 1590 out of 1600 on his SAT.

I find it alarmingly difficult to talk to strangers. I have many reasons that I have traveled and many reasons that I have come here, but my secret reason is that I am forcing myself to overcome what I see as this weakness of mine. I liken it to someone afraid of heights forcing themselves to go skydiving. I will skydive again and again if it means I can be normal. I do not tell anyone this secret. I do carry it with me like the weight of everything in the world is bunched up in my stomach, which is one of the ways anxiety can feel. *Be normal*, I whisper to myself, which feels like the least normal thing one can do.

By the way, it won't work. I will come home and still, for instance, get unreasonably anxious to make a phone call to the bank when I need to update my debit card.

I spend an inordinate amount of time in Tbilisi trying to be normal. I find beauty and comfort in the language barrier. I do not fear, as I do at home, that a passerby will stop and have a conversation with me. I walk the streets as a free woman, unencumbered by social niceties. Most of the time I put my headphones in anyway. For some reason, I am listening to a lot of Kanye West. I smile mischievously whenever I hear the line "make a nun cum" because I know no one could possibly guess what the American teacher is hearing in her ear buds and also because I like the lyrical similarity between "nun" and "cum" as well as the absolute difference in the meanings of the two words.

One day, my host family takes me to Betania Monastery. They bring me there because Betania sounds similar to my name, so they imagine this will be exciting for me. We walk around the monastery, observing the sheep and the cows, when my host family asks if I could picture myself living here in Betania. They laugh as they ask this because they are city-dwellers who cannot imagine living here. I say yes, that I could, and resist the urge to ask them to please leave me there.

And it's true. I would make a wonderful monk were it not for my lack of faith and my propensity toward vulgar music. I'm so good at being alone, so very quiet and unobtrusive. I believe I would be a normal monk.

Increasingly, I know that I am failing. I am failing to learn the Georgian language and I am failing to communicate with my students. I am spending too much time with my native English-speaking friends, and I am spending an increasingly worrisome amount of time at the Tbilisi McDonalds. The longer I am in Georgia the worse I am at being in Georgia. I am creating my own small America within this city. I am creating my own small world within my head, as I have done since I was a child.

We begin to question it—my English-speaking friends and I. What are we doing here? Are we doing anything aside from drinking and complaining? What's the point of our being here? Are we actually making things worse instead of better?

We don't have answers. Sometimes, oftentimes, we are too drunk, or sick, or busy complaining to ask these questions. Sometimes we go dancing, and we dance so furiously I lose track of all coordinates. In these moments, I am so lost I can almost believe I am home.

I develop close relationships with some of the other native English-speakers. It's almost embarrassing how much I value them, how deeply I begin to cherish their friendships. I don't want to admit that they have become one of my favorite parts of Georgia because admitting this would mean some undeserved allegiance to the familiar—to my familiar language, customs, and culture. I have come here to experience new and unfamiliar territory, and I am learning that I cannot hang.

I develop a friendship with my host sister Nata. She is twelve-years old. I am twenty-five. But she likes to laugh and so do I. One day she tries communicating something about an onion to me. I don't understand what she's trying to say. She speaks in broken English. I speak in broken-er Georgian. We speak in fluent hand gestures. Soon we are standing, acting out an entire drama about an onion. We are laughing and laughing. And this, perhaps, is my favorite moment of all the moments.

To this day I do not know what Nata wanted to tell me about the onion.

Somehow, the months pass. They are strange months, wherein I am drunk more often than homesick and physically sick more often than almost anything else except drunk. I've developed a hacking cough, a UTI, and I have fallen for more than one of my fellow native English-speakers.

It's been close to a year in Georgia and a cold winter chill is descending upon the city again. One day, I walk outside and a harsh gust of wind lifts me off the ground, causing me to float nearly an inch above the city street. I am so afraid it is going to carry me off. So relieved when it does not.

Finally, it is time for me to go home to America. On my last day of teaching, the day carries on as if any other. It is not until the final ten minutes of my last class that a student named Dato abruptly stands. I watch as he walks to the chalkboard and proceeds to draw an enormous, misshapen heart. My co-teacher, the one who is Merryweather, is smiling like she knows. One by one, my students come up to my desk, presenting me with their gifts—homemade cards with hand-drawn pictures, words written in English (words they claim I've taught them). "My favorite teacher" the cards say. Or, "Please don't go." One girl begins crying, begging me not to leave. She tells me I'm her favorite teacher. She says she wants to be like me.

As the final bell rings, my students rise and form a human tunnel for me to walk through. I run through it the way I imagine a football player might, my hands out, high-fiving. My students are clapping and shouting as I walk out of the classroom and into the hallway. They follow me. Soon other students are spilling out of other rooms, the entire school walking behind me, cheering and chanting. I am the unintentional leader of an intentional parade.

I am in the entryway of the school when I look down at my hands. I'm holding flowers, balloons, and at least fifty homemade cards. I have nothing to give to my students. I have already given them so little. I did not prepare anything special for my classes, and now my classes are over. I do not have cards for them. I have not played soccer with them. I smile and wave, like Miss America.

Outside, on the steps of the school, the principal comes out to say goodbye. We hug. Or, I am hugging her and she is letting me. I do not think that I will cry but as I pull away from her I find that I am, in fact, already crying. I look to see that one of my co-teachers is crying too, and it is in this moment that I realize this has all meant more to me than I'd ever understood.

It's too late, of course, to realize this. That I'd like to rewind time. That if I could I would go back, try it again, be braver this time around. I'd work harder. I'd be a better teacher, one who plays soccer and creates exciting lesson plans. I'd learn Georgian and eat less McDonalds. I would be not the anxious person that I am but the adventurous person that I aim to be. I would be better than I am, for the sake of my students and myself. I would be more. *Mas*. Their teacher. But I cannot be. It's too late—I've already been whatever it was I was going to be here. I sail down the steps of the school, walking faster and faster, turning my music on as I round the corner, drifting back again into my own private world.



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