

25 July 2011

First up shall probably be the announcement that young Megan has a birthday today, yes, A birthday, her birthday in fact, which is handy because if people were in the habit of celebrating other people's it would make for a mess with the presents. Now I'm naughty enough not to know how old she is, but I remembered the big day at least, although I imagine as yet the card has not arrived. Mark's didn't get there on time, unfortunately.

So Happy Birthday, Megan!

I have toothache. It's a strange recurring toothache I would say I get every two or so years, in the same tooth, and probably for the same reason. Dentists back in the UK had a field day trying to fathom out what was up with it and neither x-rays nor implement led inspection could throw any light on it. We can rule out tooth decay for sure, not only on their say so, but also because tooth decay toothache does not come and go over a decade. My own view is strange, but I stand by it. I only seem to get this problem in July, when I am exhausted and ready for a rest. On brief occasions at other times when I have felt the odd numbness in the same place, it has been when I have been a bit run down and a good night's sleep has seen it right. This time, the pain is tolerable, as always bar once, and I have no desire to trek to any more clueless dentists, but it might be trying to back up my theory, dental tiredness alarm.

How one tooth can single itself out to act as some kind of warning that I'm running on a bit empty is beyond me, I imagine the theory has amused some of you already, but I am rather well placed to put two and two together, and sitting here with the same problem at about the same time of year is making me wonder yet again.

The only connected plausible theory put by a professional is that the accumulated tiredness (or stress, as she put it) is causing me to grind my teeth at night thus putting pressure on the root/nerves. I can hold with that, but I won't back down that this problem always always parallels my level of vitality otherwise.

Why are the leaves turning? Most of the trees here are in full summer foliage, and with so many lining the streets here it makes the town a nicer place to be. But many of them are displaying autumn shades, and many more have already fallen. I won't say it's a serious concern, but it does make you think. Few doubt the existence of climate change now and few doubt that it is a here and now thing, rather than a possible risk for the future. It throws into imbalance the very noticeable Kazakhstan trait of having four distinct seasons, rather than one constant season as in England with 'samples' of what the four should be. But this year, winter waited until almost spring to show up and now autumn is gently sidling in. We still sit very firmly in a mostly beautiful summer, with flora as good as probably ever before, but the edges are frayed, and the transition to the season of withdrawal could yet come ahead of schedule.

I looked at dishwashers today. I wanted a smaller model which would sit on the worktop and drain into the sink. But the prices are so Almaty, I mean a UK bought machine would cost about \$220 at best, meaning about 35,000 Tenge. The cheapest I could find today was 67,000, way out of reasonable price range, and this would be before delivery and fitting costs. So I won't bother, but the miniscule sink I have available is scarcely bigger than my pressure cooker, although not prohibitively so, and I can still wash up comfortably. But it's boring.

In any case, I could use that dosh to make the forthcoming holiday more worthwhile. I haven't booked yet, but from what she was saying it would be easy enough, and thanks to

Facebook voters I have made a final decision as to where to go. It wasn't a foregone conclusion, but in the end a clear winner tallied with my own preference. Thanks also to the same Facebook (much as I still basically hate it) I have contact with people from the very place I am going to, following introduction from other friends.

I have decided to learn the language before I go. Not ALL of it, I have enough on my plate with the Kazakh and Russian studies I never get round to, but as you know me well enough by now, you will not be surprised to learn how uncomfortable I will be with the idea of going there and getting by only in English. I am yet to receive advice as to which of Serbo-Croat or Montenegrin will be more useful, but whatever the case, I will learn a stack of basic stuff and then do my best to improve it while I'm there. I do not intend to come back fluent, but plan to do myself justice nonetheless. I suppose with my neurotic desire to avoid seeming like an ignorant mono-lingual English tourist, anything less than fluent may become an excuse to feel bad about myself, but that will be by accident and not by design.

I wonder what the cafes per head of population index shows, because I'd love to see it. Almaty is turning into one big cafe at the moment with dozens of them springing up weekly. Some outlet closes down, or some building is reclaimed, and the next thing you know is that there are menus outside. I've tried a few, not bad, but I only ever drink green tea, so in some ways they're all much of a muchness. Still, nice to see them come, even though the chances of being able to try them all would prove a very stiff challenge.

I think it was Professor Gumby who made some trite comment about his brain hurting. My tooth is doing a fine imitation, as we speak I am about to apply a little clove oil to it, a remedy which served me well in previous bouts of the same. I bought it in the famous central chemist's which like an English pub is used to give directions. But I was impressed with some of the range of alternative remedies there. Not quite Holland and Brat, but a place maybe worth checking out. Holland and Brat doesn't do it for me, incidentally, I find it a huge vitamin pill showroom with a few bags of two-for-the-price-of-one nuts and seeds which come ready shelled (I have over the years in former Soviet countries come to really like the de-shelling process and wish to buy my seeds in the original packaging, thankee very much). Call me naive, but I really don't understand how vitamin pills can do any good. It just doesn't fit my way of thinking.

Using pubs to give directions reminds me of a game played by boy scouts and ardent cricket obsessives in England when travelling across country by road... Pub cricket. The idea is to score runs by seeing pubs en route. Two people play, and the name of each pub determines the run rate etc. A pub called the something Arms is worth two runs because people have two arms. Trouble is, I don't remember the other scoring. I'll need to check it out sometime. Not that it matters, Almaty has cafes and bars aplenteeeee, but anybody attempting to play pub cricket here might get more ducks than on the River Dee at Chester at feeding time. But I remember playing it one time, and winning, somehow, against one of the best cricketers in the school. He took it badly, as if the pubs we passed, whose names we had no control over, was some kind of reflection of his ability in the actual game.

Cricket has its own customs and culture which you simply don't learn, partly explaining why so few non-commonwealth people understand the game, even many of those who have lived in England for many years. Women, by and large, dislike the game for its lack of excitement, but surely also for its unclarity. It's difficult to appreciate something that confuses you. Cricket, and the appreciation thereof, is in-bred. If you are a Kazakhstani 18 year old about to fly out to England for the degree course generously funded by your government, you might be interested to see a cricket match on some village green somewhere. It adds to the side of England which boasts a monopoly on the adjective

'quintessential', the peaceful thud of cork on willow accompanied by patchy applause idling around in the afternoon breeze, helped around with real ale and for those of such mind, steak too. I can recommend a sunny afternoon watching a game of village cricket to anybody who wants a taste of rural England.

But don't expect to understand what's going on. Ever.

Tennis is another sport with its own culture. Only this time I'm not going to rave about it. Little annoys me more than the Wimbledon vernacular, the way they describe tennis and tennis players has such an (unintentional) high and mighty ring to it, that champagne bubble rah chatter that fills the airwaves between points and games about how some rich tennis superstar is in fact a normal person and goes to the supermarket. Ooooh, but when they turn out on the court with their sweat bands they are the very antithesis of their off-court self becoming really raaather competitive and almost aggressive. Then there are those moments when a pigeon lands on the court and the commentators blether on about how the players are keeping their composure under pressure. Pressure? A pigeon?

Everything that ever happens at Wimbledon, however dour, is taken to be some kind of magic moment, it is the most self-satisfied gathering of people to be found anywhere outside Ascot, and every syllable that is uttered, or broadcast from, there has that impenetrable sneer to it that can only come from mouths fed with silver spoons for countless generations. I have nothing against them, but do not wish to tune in to watch them eat strawberries and applaud 130 mph serves.

I've had a great and original idea for a novel. It's about a 16 year old girl whose artist father abandons her and moves to France with a baguette maker (that's a person, not a machine), and an unsavoury mother who stops no short of ripping off her parents by stealing all their DVDs, selling them on the cheap, and then disappears to her council estate complete with rough boyfriend. The girl, whose name is Tilly, is left with her grandparents, the Swinghams, to help them run their small out of town factory, help they desperately need as they get older and begin showing signs of Alzheimer's disease. Tilly is a keen volleyball player, perhaps national standard, but otherwise wants to live a normal life with her cat, Tiggy, and would do so but for the snags she encounters along the way.

To my mind this is a fantastic new idea, influenced by nobody and nothing, and I look forward to writing the first episode which I have decided will be called 'Supernerd'.

Hey! Wait just a minute...

21 July 2011

I really couldn't decide. I very rarely know what I want when dealing with things that last more than an hour, and with the world offering a host of holliday destinations both near and far, the indecision just got too much.

So I offered my choice of holliday destination for vote, on Facebook, and with some of my classes. I have a secret preference for one place but won't say where it is yet as I am determined to go to the place accruing most suffrage (unless there are booking or visa complications) and I am sure, needing a holliday as much as I do, that I will enjoy the rest in pretty much any of them.

The options were Turkey (cheap lazing by the beach and golf), Montenegro (wild beauty), Mongolia (wild), Issyk Kul (supposedly one of the world's foremost energy centres), England and Wales (family), Armenia and Georgia (tour of nice places Russian can be of some use in) and maybe one other but I forget now.

Topping the table so far is the wild beauty of Montenegro and with two days of voting to go its position looks, although not assured, relatively stable in top spot, so I have done some investigation. Wow! Nice. Between you and me, I've also looked at the International House school there, which seems quite a good little place for possible work in future. Not yet, anyway.

So it could be off to the Adriatic for a few weeks in August.

Meanwhile, back in Kazakhstan, the strain has suddenly hit me, you know, the strain of being a teacher (with only a few weeks annual leave entitlement) and it being July, and I am utterly exhausted with very little spare energy for anything other than to get through the final two weeks of work. Teachers may not work harder than many other people but the nature of our work, you know, dozens of people feeding off our energy for eleven months, means that such reserves come in very handy over the year and when the summer holls are upon us, we tend to spend the first week of them fast asleep. What with my week off last week to get my visa, I think my body decided it was time to conk out. Getting back to work and getting classroom energy moving has taken quite some effort.

Also falling by the wayside have been the dombra and the running, as this last ten days I've just not had the strength. When you get going it's OK but the act of starting suffers from motivation being swamped by the need to regenerate. It makes you feel for local teachers who work an education system in which schools are shared by two groups of pupils, morning and evening ones. School therefore operates from 0800 to 1900 every day, across two parallel rotating intakes, and the same teachers.

I often work from 1000 to 2100, but not solidly, these guys do.

I blocked a person on Facebook today. I've never done it before and I was overjoyed to adjust the settings to 'bugger off' just for this one guy I haven't even seen for 5 years. Not likely he's contact me, but the blanking mechanism is well and truly in place. But it's so hypocritical, not least given how annoyed I am with certain people for doing the same to me. I should try to be more specific simply because the last time I ranted on about it, a load of people started making very sure to reply to everything (when in fact it was nothing to do with them) but I can't be. I'm not saying that EVERY SMS should receive a reply, and I know that at some point an exchange of correspondence has to come to an end, but why do so many people have the opinion that this can be after the first message? It's obvious sometimes when something needs or merits a reply, even a simple yes or no, but so often people can't even be bothered to send it.

I heard recently that the British people rejected a change of voting system. I was surprised, but then not. What they are rejecting is something that won't ultimately change anything. If there were a referendum about becoming a dictatorship then the turnout would be 100% and the vote margin pretty close to it in defiant refusal. So people know what's what. And so they know that a superficial change in the way they cast votes won't result in more than a superficial change in the people who poll the largest number of them.

But I wonder how far the unpopularity of the Lib Dems swung the vote, given that they would be the main beneficiaries of any change. I bet that if the referendum had been held a month after the last General Election a vote for reform might have been carried, in that in those days Lib Dems were well thought of and people would gladly have had more of them at Westminster. Not so now.

Too tired to write any more :(

15 July 2011

The party is in full swing, my fourth Republic of Kazakhstan visa begins today, and I celebrated with a trek across the border from Kyrgyzstan where I applied for and collected it. You can't beat the light blue glow and the silver hologram with the all important validity period stamped top middle. For obvious reasons, I won't publish a scan here, but take it from me, it radiates!

Bishkek was OK, again, but seemed run down and the holes in the roads are getting deeper. I remember the place well through having lived and worked there but as I said before this was the first time I really pushed the boat out and went there on a whim and for an adventure. In the guise of a returning traveller, there for diplomatic reasons, you do see it through different eyes, and I have to say, for the second time in three months, I was pleased not to be there for a full year.

I suppose a full year might work, I seem to get by in my strange hybrid of Kazakh/Kyrgyz and there are plenty of things to do, even if it's not the most aesthetically pleasing place there is.

My summer plans are stalling and falling foul of my perennial dual weaknesses, not knowing what I want and then changing my mind about it when I think I have decided. I have little desire to go back to England but the temptation of a month relaxing is quite strong, so some kind of holiday might be in the offing. A few options do present, Turkey for the cheap lazing by the sea, Mongolia, for no apparent reason, Lake Issyk Kul for the cheap lazing by the lake, some kind of touring round Armenia and Georgia, possibly in combination with the Turkey trip. Turkey itself does not really appeal, but I can go there from Almaty for two weeks cheaply without a visa. Italy will be investigated but I don't think a cheap holiday there will be possible without hostels and Ryanair.

I would also consider Egypt but I need fresh air and I would inevitably end up in Cairo for the koshary (best food in the world) where there is very little of it (where it = fresh air).

The previous option was always the only one I really considered, staying with my grandma for a few weeks. But with her passing it is no longer viable.

Two weeks left on my contract, plenty of work to do, I guess I have a little time to decide.

4 July 2011

I never found that John Cleese joke about Her Majesty the Queen revoking American independence particularly funny, but as it's the Fourth of July, we may as well run with it

I have a love hate relationship with the idea of English patriotism, only stooping to it when it suits me, you know, the hypocrisy of hating the England football team until they get to a final at which point I support them wholeheartedly. Er, well, I would if it ever happened.

I've never had any trouble being patriotic anywhere else and am not ashamed to say I prefer the Italian national football team to any other, and then would probably want Egypt or Kazakhstan to beat England unless it were a semi or a final and I were in England itself. For reasons not unrelated to this scenario, I was absolutely delighted that David Haye, the British heavyweight boxer, was un-literally taken apart by the truest of gentlemen in the ring the other day, Vladimir Klitschko.

But surely I'm letting my homeland down, rooting for a Ukrainian to beat a Brit?

Well, no. Let me explain. Klitschko is a special case for a boxer, a quinti-lingual (what, only five?) articulate and courteous fighter with a PhD who does far more than just jab but is involved with humanitarian work and represents his country with grace and dignity. He was also born in Kazakhstan.

David Haye doesn't mean any harm, but is responsible for one of the most reprehensible comments ever to come from a public figure. I won't even go there. For me, patriotism on Saturday night was wanting him to lose, wanting him to retire and stop embarrassing England to the world. Thanks to one of the few boxers you would want to be a role model for your ten year old son (not to fight, but how to be a man), David Haye is now no longer a credible force be this in the ring, and most certainly out of it. I am glad he lost.

What strange weather we've been having. Scorching hot sun and then, every day for weeks, a very brief thunderstorm with driving rain and gale force winds, to become sunny again before you can get your broolly out. Branches have been torn from trees, billboard canvas has been torn from its frames and scattered along the street. But before you can ask yourself what ad there was there, it's almost too hot to think again. Bizarre.

I am setting up a new page, soon to be the best on the site, with quality dombra music played by a friend of mine, if she agrees to it. It's not finished, but check it out and imagine the pixels that lay eagerly in wait.

2 July 2011

I got the date wrong. I thought it was 2011 but on closer inspection I find it to be 1985. My phone display deceived me as I sat updating the blogge, reality has me know otherwise. It must be the dour fashions, the plethora of identical meaningless songs, the Conservative government that only really got in because Labour are crap, the strikes, the utter dearth of anything truly original, creative, inspiring around.

Well, that goes for England at least. There are no strikes in Kazakhstan.

I discovered politics and just chose a political party because the opposition leader annoyed me. He still does! I didn't really understand it all, but I managed to find enough tame justification to sustain my habit and did in fact join that party for a brief spell. Without naming them, although I stress that they are mainstream, it amazes me today to think that I could have gone along with such a pathetic whim. Let's get one thing clear, it is not that today I sit here supporting the other lot, far from it, I find them ALL a bunch of, but none more so than the brigade I claimed to believe in as a teenager.

The party in power today have some difficult decisions to make, we all know that, and only the most irrational would hold that austerity in some form is an unnecessary measure. But as Bill Clinton said, and as I've quoted before, you can't sell austerity without hope. The measures that I read and hear about seem to be aimed at the very people who do fundamental and essential good in this world, the types that most people claim should be earning what footballers get, (ooh such a cliché) you know, teachers, nurses, doctors...

Many of them might accept a modest reduction in their pensions or an increase in contributions, who am I to say, but on the BBC website today one or two were saying that. Such people are public servants, givers, and essentially ask little in return. But there is one thing they are deprived of and that is fairness. The innocent many are being punished for the deeds of a few. Ever remember when teachers caused a recession and brought the country to its knees? No, neither do I?

I'm no bleeding hearted socialist and often have little or no sympathy for strikes. You see, very often strikes happen for selfish reasons. But when a devoted teacher of 30 years, or a nurse, finds that their already meagre pension will now be worth yet less, or that they will have to wait longer to get it, or pay more for it, this is an insult, and to simply not go to work for one day is quite some distance from selfish, rather, it is an act of heroism. Somebody somewhere needs to send the message that the decent people of that somewhere are not to be conned out of their life savings by the few who've already got more than enough.

There's nothing wrong with having more than enough. I think Lionel Messi should earn £500,000 a week for his contribution to a multi-million dollar entertainment industry nobody is forced to follow. If he didn't get his share, it'd only go to the men in suits. I also think bankers should earn bonuses. But it has to be fair, a banker should earn a bonus for making their bank profitable, not for bringing it down, however much later this happens. When it does happen, and half the country goes with it, the solution has to be aimed at the problem.

It is not being.

Part of me doesn't care, I work as hard as those teachers for a quarter their salary and I have no pension at all. But then, I teach in Kazakhstan where most teenagers are respectful, educated, bubbly and highly intelligent, for the most part very motivated young adults. Many British teenagers are psychos.

The most common reason for teacher strikes over the last ten years has probably been staff refusing to teach unruly pupils, to be honest. For those reading in black and white, unruly in UK inner city comprehensives does not mean they fail to stand up when a teacher enters the room. It does not mean they throw paper rolled into a ball across the room towards, and sometimes into, the bin. Nah. It means they punch and kick teachers and other students, spit, swear, bring knives to school, threaten violence, wilfully destroy classroom equipment, set fire to their desks, scratch teachers' cars with screwdrivers.

Don't get me wrong, most English school kids are fine, leave school well educated and turn out to be decent and successful adults. Others, aren't, and don't.

I met one of the finest end products of the Kazakhstan education system today, a friend of a friend who is preparing for university in an English speaking country and has offered dombra lessons in return. Trilingual, charming and very talented. I don't really need another dombra teacher because I have a good one now, and loyalty is important to me, but the extra tips may be useful, and this girl is a recording artist, so that one step past being just goooooood. Not sure where we can have the lessons as I don't really think a cafe is so useful. The case continues.

Here are five things I like:

Tomato and onion doorstep sandwiches

Running in the hills to house music

Chinese massage

Zaman Ai (Kazakh melody)

Waking up at 6:30 and knowing I don't have to get up until 10.

And five things I don't:

Kinder Eggs and their contents

People who tell me I don't listen when they know full well I'm not listening

Danny Baker's vanity

Jock itch

Little Brother, a short story by some bloke called Bruce.