

28 November 2011

Knowing that I have this page



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On my site might leave you in no state of wonderment when I tell you I went off to see the Spielberg Tintin film last week.

Reviews had been mixed, perhaps mixed down the lines of Tintin lovers hating it and Tintin newbies loving it. Granted, the latter category has a strong case, it was a good film, full of great humour and for the most part very respectful to the boy reporter many of us know and love. But only for the most part, quite early in the film I had to conclude that this was not my Tintin, rather, a parallel character present in the narration of another story. I had to do that for the sake of my sanity, purely because his portrayal in the film distorted him to the extent that I had to protect the original character by removing him.

Tintin is not Rambo, although the Ramboid depiction of him in the film did not owe to any great changes of storyline, nor even to any great adjustment to his behaviour. It was something else, something I could not quite put my finger on. He was too falsely charming, too impetuous, too much. Haddock was less of a detour, IMHO, and the other characters, especially the pickpocket, Archimedes Silk (just like the book), were on very good form, but as for the lead character, he came across just a bit too action for me.

Some reviews said that Spielberg ruined Tintin. I disagree, there was some magic in this film. I hope they decide to make others, and I thank him for bringing him to the public's attention (even though I really really don't want to share him), but Herge, the original writer, was a greater genius, at least when it comes to picture stories.

I've decided to do a distance learning course. Not in teaching, but in journalism. I've kinda always fancied the idea somewhat, so when the idea hit me to go down this route I was pleased to find a very affordable course with the London School of Journalism. I know online courses are limited, but given that they'd be my only option, and also that I'm not using it as a way into work (that I know of), there can only be benefits. I have no real idea what the course entails, but the modules seem comprehensive and the programme organised well. I suppose there is a lot of freedom on the participants' part to work through the course at their own pace, but the notes detail it as a year of study. Not a weekend. Bodes well, or at least, weller.

Everybody's waiting for the skiing season, the snow came and people got excited, but the cable cars were being tested, and since then, several days of rain, with it being not quite cold enough on the slopes to get it as snow. Next week is the estimate, as was 15th November, the following day, the following etc. You get the message. The sooner the better, Almaty is not as nice in winter because of the ice and packed snow everywhere, and the smog, which seems to quadruple during the colder months when people start burning things to heat their houses and the water. But just outside town we have a modern and modernising ski resort at reasonably affordable prices. This does not mean cheap!

I finally have my own PC at work, which means no more taking up the PCs that teachers need for lesson planning, and it means better efficiency because a lot of the time recently I haven't been able to get things done. Perhaps no more excuses designing and creating the remainder of the excellent IELTS programme left us by a departing colleague, but overall, a big improvement. I used most of my internet allowance on the first day downloading useful software, Google Chrome, Google Desktop, Skype (which wouldn't install), PDF creator, whatever it's called.

Somebody I know posted something on Facebook about the greedy rich getting richer and how it's unfair etc. It has to be said, it's difficult to disagree with that.

But the more I think about it, the more I conclude that the only difference there is between the greedy rich and the greedy poor is the amount of success they've had at it. One wonders what kind of benevolent rich many of

the 99%, as they call themselves, would make if they found themselves rich and powerful all of a sudden. Surely the answer, if the proportions of so-called bad rich people and good poor people are really 99-1, lies not in trying to get the minority to change but by working something out inside ourselves. They do say that the first step in changing the world lies in changing ourselves, now's our chance. Granted, I don't really know how, but all the shouting is nonsensical, even though in actual fact it is really rather correct. I think that all the blaming right now is merely a way of avoiding admitting to ourselves what we've all become.

There are very rich people getting richer and the way some have gone about it has brought mass contempt very much on itself, but money is largely just a means of exchange, what really matters is inside, and there's no way that'll heal by bellowing at people who in essence have just been more successful than we have.

Besides, if you took every person in the world and took away all their money, every last bit, plus property and assets, and gave them all ten pounds each, within a month you'd have millionaires and beggars, another 99% and 1% just the way we do now. Think about it.

I am working on a lesson plan for the Fork Handles sketch. Something about homonyms. Pumps, plugs. Or minimal pairs. Four candles. Fork handles. It won't be easy.

17 November 2011

For a brief spell last week I considered ditching the job. I don't mean the whole job, because I am fairly settled and like most of what I do, but the step up the ladder to ADOS has involved taking on a lot of admin much of which is fairly low in grade and sadly, increasing in quantity. I know somebody with teaching and school experience has to do it, but basic clerical work is not the most enjoyable part of the day, and for a week or so it seemed no longer to be worth the nominal extra few dollars in the pay packet. Add to this that my examining workload has been capped because I need to be available in my school more, I may in fact earn less by staying in the higher position.

I came to the conclusion that I'm better off where I am, and while I am attracted by the idea of just being a teacher, teaching and nothing more, I think my best interests are served by carrying on. Besides which, this was only a fairly short term change of heart, and this week has reaffirmed the more positive messages I get from being in a position of responsibility.

One of the things I dislike about the job is presenting at the monthly teachers' meetings. This is not because I don't feel up to the job, but rather I don't think people are widely interested in the Saturday morning unpaid seminars and you do get those vibes in the classroom. Last week I gave a workshop on modal verbs, and to be honest don't want to do the same type of thing again as it wasn't a teaching methods or activities lesson, but actual teaching of a relatively ambiguous area of English, to a group of people whose knowledge thereof was by no means inferior to mine. I could have been better prepared, but by and large, I plan in future to train people to the creative side of teaching, those simple things that can make mundane grammar points seem really rather interesting.

A good source of alternative lesson approaches is fast becoming Youtube, what with the super new Youtube downloading PC. No more Two Ronnies, but a mass of IELTS videos for the many who need to take the exam in Almaty. A lot of them come in with scant hope of getting the results they need, and in some ways it serves them right, and it would be fair to say that many people don't give the exam the respect it deserves. The perception that prevails, at times, is that they can get from their level of English to university level in six weeks, when they are about Band 4 and they need Band 6.5, theoretically a study gap of two years. Although one time I had a student who needed 6.5 and was worried about it, but he was in fact probably good enough to get 8 or even 9 (top score) if he had a good day. I wonder if he ever did.

Another good thing about the meetings I mentioned before is that the centre is quite close to the Mega Shopping Centre which houses garment stores of the finest quality, only a couple of which I need to go in to restock my wardrobe some every two weeks or so. Zara is the best, although there are a few other outlets which are worth a browse, one such (name withheld) is quite amusing in that the only men's clothes on display are either black, grey, white or dark blue (with the token muted purple). Zara is a wash of colour, and I should add they are opening a second branch in Almaty soon, on Arbat. Check it out!

I also bought a book at Mega on Saturday, a collection of poems by the great Kazakh, Abai. I don't fully understand them, but certainly in part, and even so, they are very nice to read. It is frustrating that I can't fully relate to them, and even more frustrating that my Kazakh these days is going through a protracted disaster period, but it's a nice book, and I guess in some ways it will motivate me to improve, something I really really need to do right now.

And last up, I finally got round to going up to the supermarket called Interfodder (called that by me, I add) and was pleasantly surprised to find Alpro Soya desserts and sweet and sour sauce sachets, adding a few old pleasures to the fodders I have slowly but surely unearthed over a few years in Almaty. Although I still think the houmous is awful.

11 November 2011

A date of much significance, which on one hand remains very quantifiable in that it's my late dad's birthday, may he rest in peace.



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On the other hand, unquantifiable. Today is supposed to be some cosmic boom day, and although there don't seem to be any specific predictions, with all the wotnot going on in the world I think it would take a very determined sceptic to argue that Earth's energies are not changing somehow. It doesn't need to be observed from any religious stroke metaphysical perspective, just consider, the moon affects the tides. We are about 70% water, when the heavenly bodies move, surely they exert some kind of influence on our very selves? On a big scale, even though there are obvious proximate physical causes for all the anger awash the globe, the fact that things are coming to a head now, and they are, surely owes to factors beyond our comprehension.

No, hang on, it can't be true, it hasn't been scientifically proven, without which nothing ever could be, could it? I forgot, sorry.

I have mixed feelings about all this mess. It's sad that everyday people are suffering, and it concerns me that Italy could be about to float (if it's lucky) the full length of the Po and spill out into the Adriatic. But throughout history, whenever things have changed, I mean, big things, it has come about as a result of some shit hitting some fan somewhere. How can we spring clean the world without first displacing all the trash, just as we do when we clean the house? A very wise person once said to me that sometimes you have to go through the negative to get to the positive, to which I added 'certainly if you intend to clear away all that negative'.

We humans tend not to see too far ahead. Let's face it, if we had our hangovers before we got drunk, we'd be a nation of teetotallers. And many marriages fail because couples forget that after the bad spells usually come the good spells, principally because the very trauma they are going through could simply be some negative procreative power playing out, after which it no longer exists. Football managers feel the brunt of this oh so often too, sacked sometimes only weeks into a job. Fact is, circumstance is borne of the very matter that our minds create. After anger may come calm but not if it is hidden away inside somewhere. Surely the energy moving round and creating reality on planet Earth right now is to a certain extent the once latent anger felt by countless millions.

So whatever chances to happen today, try not to see it as a stand-alone event. It's all inter-connected somehow.

I was reminded by a friend recently of the erstwhile British comedy duo, The Two Ronnies who - although they occasionally produced some lame entertainment - were the backbone of British Saturday night family life for about 15 years. I downloaded a few videos from the internet, the best of which was definitely this one



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Although non-Brits might not get the jokes. I was really looking for videos I can use with the students and sadly have to report that most of the funny ones are slightly prohibitive for their fast speech and exclusive expressions. The one I did find that might do the trick is this one from Monty Python



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Which lends itself nicely to helping an advanced class practise the difference between used to and would for past habits and states. I don't know the lesson plan yet, perhaps they would watch with a script, discuss, talk about the past habits and states the men report and put them into categories, habits or states. Then they could watch again and match each to a grammar form.

Then, they'd be grumpy old men themselves and do the 'when I were a lad' whinge about their own fictional but very tough childhood.

It could be good news, I have bought a tin opener, from the Korean shop, which thus far has gone probably the longest any such device I've owned has ever gone without ceasing to work, breaking, or of course both, three days! I am thus far pretty amazed.

Yesterday I received a DVD. Not just any old DVD, you know, like a copy of some Hollywood so-called Blockbuster, but something far more important.

For several decades of the last century, the northern lands of Kazakhstan were home to what I think was the biggest nuclear test site in the world. Certainly one of the biggest. On taking independence in 1991, one of the first acts of the incoming executive was to voluntarily refuse the world's fourth largest nuclear arsenal, making it I believe the only country ever to do this. As a result, Kazakhstan, having witnessed first-hand the terrifying and tragic consequences of nuclear explosion, became a trailblazer in the push for a nuclear free world. This year, at the request of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the United Nations, a film was made about and dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the closure of the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site. Two versions were made, one Russian and one English.

I was the narrator for the English version, providing specifically voice over for those featured in the film, including none other than the President himself. I don't know who will see this film, but it is part of a very important message that this country wants the world to see. And when people do, they are going to hear me.

Between me and you, I think my voice is too flat and monotone and doesn't sound quiiiiite right, but who's to notice that? If you get chance, watch the 30 minute film entitled 'A Country Which has Chosen Life', and please, instead of listening to me, focus instead on what was a monumental contribution to world peace, and join me in wishing other nations would do the same.

7 November 2011

Exams took me north to Pavlodar late last week as I blogged sometime last week (and published four days later than that stated on the page – which is in fact illegal but thus far no jaunt down the nick) and it was a trip worth making, if only in some ways to remind me how lucky I am to live in Almaty. Pavlodar is a city of Kazakhstan, and for the most part seems to know its lines, but the overwhelmingly-in-evidence ethnic majority Russian group make it seem in some ways different from southern cities, even Almaty, which is Russian culturally and linguistically, almost to the core.

Pavlodar felt to me like being in Russia itself, in spite of never having been there to know for sure. This, I say, not for the people but really somehow for the atmosphere, the layout, the grandeur of some of the buildings, and the uniformity of many others. Soviet period architecture was designed to be functional rather than beautiful and in Pavlodar, as in old Almaty, the intention was purely and simply to get the job done.

The difference arises when the wave of modernisation taking more than just root begins to shape the skylines of two or three of the other major Kazakhstani settlements, the Almatys, Astanas and Atyraus of this fine land, leaving in its wake a blend of uniform pre-1991 residence blocks, and modern high rise shiny office complexes. (Please note that the word 'shiny' is intended to collocate with 'office complex' as a compound noun rather than just 'office' as a simple noun). Pavlodar hasn't changed that much since the old regimes waved their last farewells. This, right from its trams to its huge pipes carrying, I think, hot water into residential areas, still have the mark of a society in some not too distant places already gone very much by.

PICS REMOVED TO ALLOW UPLOAD

Granted, likening it to Russia in its entirety is a little blind and misdirected since Russia has modernised massively over the same periods we are talking and has in turn very impressive infrastructures in a number of places. I just got more of a sense last week of having been there, even though I never have.

I do mean to visit, although Dubai is also on the wish list, and the ever-present desire to eat koshary again, every day for at least a week.



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2 November 2011

Well the new PC has been thus far a mixed blessing, to a certain extent with a few things not quite right and a few things very right. The difference in the amount of options between this and my old one clearly demonstrate the progress made by developers of cheaper models over the last five years, and I've been fascinated by some of the functions alone for the week I've had it.

The drawbacks are not being able to change the operating language, which makes a few things slower, but I can handle it, and in any case it might improve my Russian. Compared to what I thought was wrong though, I would happily have accepted the Russian and not even asked to change it. You see, the other day on closing the PC it went into some odd mode which I translated to mean, renewal. The next day it was still on the same screen, which suggested something very wrong, so I took it back to the shop, to learn that the 'upgrade' was in fact totally normal and should not be altered. Why twelve hours though? Well, apparently it needs the internet to upgrade, absence of which means it can't run to completion in my house. The lad in the shoppe changed the settings meaning that I can do my own upgrades when I have access to Wi-Fi, problem solved.

The other problem is not having MS Office, because I don't have the product key from the installation on my old PC. I'm working on it.

One of the things I've added and find great is an update checking programme from File Hippo which automatically scans your PC for software and then scans the www to see if there are any free upgrades available for that program. I also now get free anti-virus updates from Avast, which seem to do the trick. And finally, top of the list, is a program which allows me to download promptly from youtube, meaning I have already added to a range of classroom related videos including some shorties by Johnny Grammar, and a couple of gym things, because of course I'm still very much into the old hauling round of iron.

Over the years, a lot of the significant purchases I have made have had to go back to the shops for some reason or other, and therefore it didn't surprise me that this new PC took in a trip to its former home on Sunday, albeit unnecessarily. We're talking things costing more than a hundred quid, not major dosh but what I'd call more than a routine buy. I can't explain why, perhaps something to do with sending out messages to the Universe about not deserving. Ah well, take it or leave it. Anyway, the peculiarity might be that I have some such similar curse when it comes to tin openers too. OK, I've often bought cheap, and hold my hands up on that one, but over the last four weeks I've bought three such utensils, plus one on holiday in Montenegro which broke when I got back to Kaz.

Then another broke after one use, a second lasted about three weeks and the one I bought last night, for a

sum approaching ten dollars, does not even breach the lid of the tin no matter how hard I squeeze the handles.

Most odd.

Exams trip to Pavlodar tomorrow, a northern Kazakhstani city nearer the Russian border, and I believe mostly populated by ethnic Russians. I am taking winter layers (not because there are Russian people there, but because it's near the Russian border. Minus 5 might be the worst of it early November, but minus 50 is commonplace in winter. Plus wind chill factor.

I expect to take some photos, and I suppose add the words TEXT COMING SOON to another page on the site, indicating just how much I prefer playing music these days.

And on that note, if you'll pardon the pun...