

The needle and the pin.: by Miall James

It was a few years ago now. A group of us, all in our final year were arguing, no discussing, in a corner of the Sunderland University Students Union where we'd like to go after Uni, before we started work. That was those of us who weren't going to a job already, of course, like Priti who was reading pharmacy and had to work for a year in, I think, a hospital before she could call herself a pharmacist. So Priti wasn't really in the discussion, any more than Simon, who'd already got something lined up in London, thanks to his Uncle Nigel who was, in the old phrase, "something in the City", so had fixed Simon up with something. Not quite sure what it was Simon was going to do, but it seemed to involve quite a lot of money. Or would do very soon. Simon was a bit evasive about it, come the think of it.

You' had to have that sort of connection even at the time of which I write. Dad and Mum talked about the days when whatever you read at Uni, you could pretty well walk into na job afterwards, but it's not like that now. It wouldn't be so bad if you didn't owe the Government a shed load of money as a result of going to Uni. One or two people on our course dropped out after a year or so, not because they couldn't do it, but because they'd decided the debts would be too big. There was a chap, Jack, who'd been a good friend, who gave up early in the second year and started an apprenticeship as an electrician. Tutor tried to talk him out of it, said he'd easily get a good degree but Jack went. Saw him the other day, smartly overalled in a new looking van. Must be doing OK.

Anyway, we were all talking about a year off, going travelling and so on and then the question arose of where. Thailand was a popular suggestion of course, closely followed by Australia, assuming one could get a work visa, or had relatives there who could help. The girls in particular tended to think, understandably, of going wherever in pairs but I wanted to travel on my own.

The trouble was, to where? I'd been to SE Asia, which is where several of the gang wanted to go. I quite fancied South America, but I'd also heard that Central and East Asia were very interesting. Eventually one of the lads, Phil, who had signed up for a summer camp in the States, came up with an idea; he'd got an atlas, a book of maps; something no-one uses nowadays of course, it's all on line, and he suggested I pick a page at random, and then, blindfold, stick a

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pin in the page and that would be my destination. So we wrote the page numbers of the general areas which I fancied on bits of paper, put them in a dry beer glass and I pulled one out. Turned out to be a page which covered such places as Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Western China. As planned, they blindfolded me, whizzed me round and round until I was dizzy, then I stick the pin into the map. By chance I was more or less in the middle of the map, in Eastern Kazakhstan and when we tried Google Maps I discovered that my pin seemed to be close to a town called Ulken Narin, not far from the Russian and Chinese borders, and on the shores of what seemed to be a big lake or maybe river.

So OK, that was where I would head for, once the final exams were over. We all agreed we'd meet up again, at the Star, the pub across the road from the Students Union, on August 1st next year, a Saturday, at 6pm, to see how we'd all got on. Or, if we couldn't make it we'd email Priti who would have just finished at the hospital, and would be thinking about her next step.

So that was that; the pin had decided so a few more drinks and the like and we all went off to final revision and that was that. I finished my exams..... did Ok, thanks for asking,loaded up the credit card and bought a supply of US dollars which I stored in a money belt next to my skin. Oh and found a few backpacker sites which gave useful advice sand contacts, and chased around obscure Embassies to arrange visas

However, all the legalities, I thought, surmounted, I was at Waterloo station, waiting for the train to Lille, to start my trip, with Mum and Dad, when my grandfather, who'd also come to see me off, pressed something into my hand. "Here" he'd said "You'll need this!"

I looked at what he'd given me. I was a small round metal object, about the size of an old-fashioned pocket watch, and when I pressed the button at the top it sprang open; a compass. I looked at Grandpa "What do I need this for; I've got my iPad and phone?"

"Belt and braces" he replied. "You never know what might happen!a." I laughed; "OK, I'll put in a different pocket!"

The original plan had been to go across Russia, but there could, we were told be problems there so that was out, and Mum had been really worried at the thought of me trying to cross Iran; she was convinced I'd be arrested, so my

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plan was to cross Europe to Turkey, then across to the Caucasus and get some sort of a boat across the Caspian Sea probably initially to Turkmenistan and make my way somehow to my destination. Over the past few months, since my finals, I'd tried to learn a bit of Turkish and Russian, since it seemed from what I could find on the web that they were the most useful languages once I got east of the Bosphorus. Anyway I hitched and walked steadily across Europe, picking up the odd days work fruit picking or whatever, which boosted my savings. I didn't, though expect to be able to earn much once I'd crossed the border into Turkey, but to my surprise the little bit of Turkish I'd learned, and the experience I'd gained working in a bar during vacations helped me to get a few lira to help me get ever eastward, into first Georgia and then Azerbaijan. From where I managed to get on the ferry to Aktau, Kazakstan. Turned out my original thought, Turkmenistan is, or at least was then, somewhat picky about to whom it gave visas. And when.

I'd thought that I was Ok now but then, in a rather dodgy hotel my iPad was stolen, plus my guidebook to Kazakstan and one or two other bits. Fortunately my phone was in a different place so I could contact the insurance company but the map on the phone wasn't much use so all of a sudden I was glad of Grandpa's compass. Especially because, sadly the weather was cloudy, so as I walked, scrounged lifts or caught buses I always ensured that the North pointing needle was more or less pointing towards my left. Kazakstan is a big, empty country; there aren't a lot of towns or even villages, but people are kind and welcoming to strangers so lifts were possible and buses cheap.

And so, eventually, I reached my goal. Wasn't a very prepossessing town but it was where the pin had landed, and where the compass needle had ensured I reached. I took even more photos; my phone was absolutely full of them. And, while I was in the hotel there the insurance company came through to say they were allowing my claim for my stolen iPad; I didn't want to buy one on my travels though; when I looked what was about they were largely Russian made. So I thought I'd wait until I got home. Which I did, almost at the end of July so after a couple of days I headed for Sunderland, and the Star, to tell my tale and hear everyone else's.

And Ulken Narin, when I got to it, was on a big, wide river. Not a lake,