

A Life Dismembered

6. Bournemouth 1973

In January 1973 I returned from Hamburg to the family home – faced again with the question of what to do with the rest of my life. And more pressingly, with how to earn some money. The main employers in Bournemouth were language schools and funeral parlours, as this seaside town is populated by foreign students and British pensioners. As a would-be hippie I refused to wear a suit, so I opted for becoming a TEFL teacher (Teacher of English as a Foreign Language), and was given a six-month probation at ACSE, the largest school.

Running a TEFL lesson is quite a challenge. You are constantly interacting with the students, encouraging each one to take part. You must be able to produce, on the spur of the moment, a half-dozen examples to demonstrate a grammatical point. For example, the uses of ‘use’ in “I used to use his flat; he soon got used to it.” Ideally, examples which entertain: “I have to have a drink, though I haven’t deserved it.” Not to mention the myriad meanings of ‘got’+preposition: got up, got over, got by, got through, ...

My favourite lesson involved playing cassette tapes of Alan Bennett reading ‘*Winnie the Pooh*’. Then I would rehearse and analyse the speeches – especially those of the depressive donkey Eeyore (a forerunner of Marvin the paranoid android in *Hitchhiker*). That taught me a lot about my own mindset.

I also got to play tapes when we covered stress and intonation, for which Paul McCartney’s songs are perfect examples: “*Eleanor Rigby*, picked up the *rice* in the *church* where the *wedding* had *been*.”

In other lessons I had to moderate discussions on chosen topics. I remember one class where we were meant to discuss the motion: ‘I would be willing to die for my country’. With the Vietnam War raging, everyone opposed the idea, so I couldn’t get any debate started. Finally, in frustration I burst out, ‘Isn’t *anyone* patriotic??’ Whereupon a middle-aged German, sitting apart from the cosmopolitan *jeunesse dorée*, stood up and stormed out. He later apologised, and I realised that he had probably been trapped in the Hitler Youth as the Third Reich crumbled around him, just thirty years earlier.

My usual class was a group of Moroccan air traffic controller trainees. Their only motivation for learning English was to meet local girls in Bournemouth’s night-clubs. Which was also the only topic of conversation they would engage in. I ploughed on, trying to instil some technical vocabulary alongside the chat-up lines, and feel vindicated by the absence of any aeronautical disaster occurring in the Maghreb in subsequent years.

Occasionally I was allowed to take the Advanced class, which contained two very different student groups. One was of Colombian girls, who’d been sent to Europe by their parents to get them away from the clutches of the local youths. The other was a huge coup for ACSE: a dozen students from the People’s Republic of China. This was 1973: the height of the Cultural Revolution, when the only young Chinese allowed to travel to the West were national table tennis teams: so-called ping-pong diplomacy.

TEFL classrooms are arranged with seats in a square. The mini-skirted Colombians sat along the left wall, and the Mao-suited Chinese along the right, each group trying to ignore the other in mutual disdain. Every question I asked fell on deaf ears: the Latinas were too busy chewing gum and whispering among themselves (if mobile phones had been invented they'd have been checking them), while the Red Guards looked to their Commissar to provide the official response on behalf of the whole group. My only other memory of the Chinese is the ear-splitting expectorations the men made in the school toilets. But I used their robotic demeanour in depicting the English Red Guards in *Events*.

It was June and my probation was drawing to an end. I had learned a lot of presentation skills – which I put to good use in delivering maths lectures and tutorials later on – but I was told my contract would not be renewed. No reason was given. Perhaps it was those lessons I gave one afternoon after spending the lunch hour drinking pints of Guinness with an old university friend who was visiting the town? I remember mercifully little of them. Or the School disco when I took the encouragement to mix socially with the students a little too far?

But on my final day at the School the office phone rang.

“Do you remember that a year ago you applied for a lecturer position at UBLS?”

“Did I? UBLS?”

“The University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. We were hoping that you might still be interested. We need someone to go out to Lesotho to teach maths straight away.”

At home I told my parents the good news, then took out my school atlas and turned to the map of Southern Africa...