

## The American Pepper

"Mummy! Mummy!" shouted little Murna racing from the front door through to the kitchen. "There's a parcel. The postman's brought a parcel!"

Her mother, Savni, looked at her in surprise. She had no idea who could have sent them a parcel. Maybe it was a mistake. She hurried to the door to find out. Sure enough, the postman was there, holding a parcel about the size of a small brick.

"From America, madam," he said. "See! American stamps."

It was true. In the top right-hand corner of the brown paper parcel were three strange-looking stamps, showing a man's head. The package was addressed to Savni, in big, clear black letters.

"Well, I suppose it must be from Great-Aunt Pasni," said Savni to herself, as the postman went on his way down the street, whistling. "Although it must be twenty years since we heard anything from her. I thought she would have been dead by now."

Savni's husband Jornas and her son Arinas were just coming in from the garden, where Murna had run to tell them about the parcel. "Well, open it then!" said Arinas impatiently. "Let's see what's inside!"

Setting the parcel down in the middle of the table, Savni carefully began to tear open the paper. Inside, there was a large silver container with a hinged lid, which was taped shut. There was also a letter.

"What is it? What is it?" demanded Murna impatiently. "Is it a present?"

"I have no idea," said Savni in confusion. "I think it must be from Great-Aunt Pasni. She went to America almost thirty years ago now. But we haven't heard from her in twenty years. Perhaps the letter will tell us." She opened the folded page cautiously, then looked up in dismay. "Well, this is no help!" she said in annoyance. "It's written in English! How does she expect us to read English? We're poor people, we have no education. Maybe Pasni has forgotten her native language, after thirty years in America."

"Well, open the pot, anyway," said Jornas. "Let's see what's inside."

Cautiously, Savni pulled the tape from the neck of the silver pot, and opened the lid. Four heads touched over the top of the container, as their owners stared down inside.

"Strange," said Arinas. "All I see is powder." The pot was about one-third full of a kind of light-grey powder.

"What is it?" asked Murna, mystified.

"We don't know, darling," said Savni, stroking her daughter's hair. "What do you think?" Murna stared again into the pot.

"I think it's coffee," she announced, finally. "American coffee."

"It's the wrong colour for coffee, darling," said Jornas thoughtfully. "But maybe she's on the right track. It must be some kind of food." Murna, by now, had her nose right down into the pot. Suddenly, she lifted her head and sneezed loudly.

"Id god ub by doze," she explained.

"That's it!" said Arinas. "It must be pepper! Let me try some." Dipping a finger into the powder, he licked it. "Yes," he said, "it's pepper all right. Mild, but quite tasty. It's American pepper."

"All right," said Savni, "we'll try it on the stew tonight. We'll

have American-style stew!"

That evening, the whole family agreed that the American pepper had added a special extra taste to their usual evening stew. They were delighted with it. By the end of the week, there was only a teaspoonful of the grey powder left in the silver container. Then Savni called a halt.

"We're saving the last bit for Sunday. Dr. Haret is coming to dinner, and we'll let him have some as a special treat. Then it will be finished."

The following Sunday, the whole family put on their best clothes, ready for dinner with Dr. Haret. He was the local doctor, and he had become a friend of the family many years before, when he had saved Arinas's life after an accident. Once every couple of months, Savni invited the doctor for dinner, and they all looked forward to his entertaining stories of his youth at the university in the capital.

During dinner, Savni explained to the doctor about the mysterious American pepper, the last of which she had put in the stew they were eating, and the letter they could not read.

"Well, give it to me, give it to me!" said the doctor briskly. "I speak English! I can translate it for you."

Savni brought the letter, and the family waited, fascinated, as the doctor began to translate.

"Dear Savni: you don't know me, but I am the son of your old Great-Aunt Pasni. She never talked much to us about the old country, but in her final illness earlier this year, she told us that after her death, she wanted her ashes to be sent back home to you, so that you could scatter them on the hills of the country where she was born. My mother died two weeks ago, and her funeral and cremation took place last week. I am sending her ashes to you in a silver casket. Please do as she asked, and spread them over the ground near where she was born. Your cousin, George Leary."

## Multiple-Choice Questions

*Click on the answer you think is correct.*

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- 1. Where does this story take place?** [a\)](#) America  
[b\)](#) Arinas  
[c\)](#) India  
[d\)](#) The text doesn't say

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- 2. How was the parcel wrapped?** [a\)](#) in brown paper  
[b\)](#) in silver paper  
[c\)](#) in grey paper  
[d\)](#) in tape
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**3. Who was Savni?**

- a) a little girl
  - b) the Great-Aunt
  - c) the mother of the family
  - d) the son of the family
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**4. Why don't the family read the letter?**

- a) They are too impatient to look in the container.
  - b) It is addressed to the doctor.
  - c) It is in English.
  - d) It is missing.
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**5. What does Murna think is in the pot?**

- a) dust
  - b) ashes
  - c) coffee
  - d) pepper
- 

**6. Why does Arinas think that the powder is pepper?**

- a) It tastes very hot.
  - b) It makes Murna sneeze.
  - c) It is written on the pot.
  - d) The letter says so.
- 

**7. What does the family do with the powder?**

- a) They keep it to give to the doctor.
  - b) They send it back to America.
  - c) They make drinks with it.
  - d) They put it on their food.
- 

**8. Why does Savni save the last bit of the powder?**

- a) as a souvenir
  - b) for Dr. Haret
  - c) to analyse it
  - d) to spread it on the hills
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**9. How does Dr. Haret solve the mystery?**

- a) He analyses the powder.
- b) He recognizes the powder.
- c) He is a friend of Pasni.

d) He translates the letter.

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10. What was really in the pot?

a) coffee

b) Great-Aunt Pasni

c) dust

d) special American pepper

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## The Carpet Fitter

Eddie was a carpet fitter, and he hated it. For ten years he had spent his days sitting, squatting, kneeling or crawling on floors, in houses, offices, shops, factories and restaurants. Ten years of his life, cutting and fitting carpets for other people to walk on, without even seeing them. When his work was done, no-one ever appreciated it. No-one ever said "Oh, that's a beautiful job, the carpet fits so neatly." They just walked all over it. Eddie was sick of it.

He was especially sick of it on this hot, humid day in August, as he worked to put the finishing touches to today's job. He was just cutting and fixing the last edge on a huge red carpet which he had fitted in the living room of Mrs. Vanbrugh's house. Rich Mrs. Vanbrugh, who changed her carpets every year, and always bought the best. Rich Mrs. Vanbrugh, who had never even given him a cup of tea all day, and who made him go outside when he wanted to smoke. Ah well, it was four o'clock and he had nearly finished. At least he would be able to get home early today. He began to day-dream about the weekend, about the Saturday football game he always played for the local team, where he was known as "Ed the Head" for his skill in heading goals from corner kicks.

Eddie sat back and sighed. The job was done, and it was time for a last cigarette. He began tapping the pockets of his overalls, looking for the new packet of Marlboro he had bought that morning. They were not there.

It was as he swung around to look in his toolbox for the cigarettes that Eddie saw the lump. Right in the middle of the brand new bright red carpet, there was a lump. A very visible lump. A lump the size of -- the size of a packet of cigarettes.

"Blast!" said Eddie angrily. "I've done it again! I've left the cigarettes under the blasted carpet!"

He had done this once before, and taking up and refitting the carpet had taken him two hours. Eddie was determined that he was not going to spend another two hours in this house. He decided to get rid of the lump another way. It would mean wasting a good packet of cigarettes, nearly full, but anything was better than taking up the whole carpet and fitting it again. He turned to his toolbox for a large hammer.

Holding the hammer, Eddie approached the lump in the carpet. He didn't want to damage the carpet itself, so he took a block of wood and placed it on top of the lump. Then he began to beat the block of wood as hard as he could. He kept beating, hoping

Mrs. Vanbrugh wouldn't hear the noise and come to see what he was doing. It would be difficult to explain why he was hammering the middle of her beautiful new carpet.

After three or four minutes, the lump was beginning to flatten out. Eddie imagined the cigarette box breaking up, and the crushed cigarettes spreading out under the carpet. Soon, he judged that the lump was almost invisible. Clearing up his tools, he began to move the furniture back into the living room, and he was careful to place one of the coffee tables over the place where the lump had been, just to make sure that no-one would see the spot where his cigarettes had been lost. Finally, the job was finished, and he called Mrs. Vanbrugh from the dining room to inspect his work.

"Yes, dear, very nice," said the lady, peering around the room briefly. "You'll be sending me a bill, then?"

"Yes madam, as soon as I report to the office tomorrow that the job is done." Eddie picked up his tools, and began to walk out to the van. Mrs. Vanbrugh accompanied him. She seemed a little worried about something.

"Young man," she began, as he climbed into the cab of his van, laying his toolbox on the passenger seat beside him, "while you were working today, you didn't by any chance see any sign of Armand, did you? Armand is my parakeet. A beautiful bird, just beautiful, such colors in his feathers... I let him out of his cage, you see, this morning, and he's disappeared. He likes to walk around the house, and he's so good, he usually just comes back to his cage after an hour or so and gets right in. Only today he didn't come back. He's never done such a thing before, it's most peculiar..."

"No, madam, I haven't seen him anywhere," said Eddie, as he reached to start the van.

And saw his packet of Marlboro cigarettes on the dashboard, where he had left it at lunchtime....

And remembered the lump in the carpet....

And realised what the lump was....

And remembered the hammering....

And began to feel rather sick....

## Multiple-Choice Questions

*Click on the answer you think is correct.*

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**1. Why did Eddie hate being a carpet-fitter?**

- [a\)](#) The pay was too low.
  - [b\)](#) He didn't like working alone.
  - [c\)](#) No-one appreciated his work.
  - [d\)](#) He couldn't smoke on the job.
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**2. What did Eddie think of Mrs. Vanbrugh?**

- a) She was a kind, thoughtful lady.
  - b) She was rich and selfish.
  - c) She was always losing things.
  - d) She had good taste in furniture.
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**3. Why was Eddie called "Ed the Head" by his friends?**

- a) Because he was such an intelligent carpet-fitter.
  - b) Because he had a large head.
  - c) Because he was very proud and self-important.
  - d) Because of his footballing skills.
- 

**4. What did Eddie want to do when he had finished fitting the carpet?**

- a) have a cigarette
  - b) hammer the carpet flat
  - c) look for Mrs. Vanbrugh's lost bird
  - d) start work in the dining room
- 

**5. Why didn't Eddie remove the carpet to take out the thing that was causing the lump?**

- a) He couldn't take the carpet up once he had fitted it.
  - b) He didn't need the cigarettes because he had some more in the van.
  - c) It would take too long to remove the carpet and re-fit it.
  - d) He intended to come back and remove the lump the next day.
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**6. What did Eddie do with the hammer?**

- a) hammered nails into the lump
- b) fixed the coffee table
- c) left it under the carpet

d) flattened the carpet

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**7. What was Mrs. Vanbrugh worried about?**

- a) Her bird was missing.
- b) She thought the carpet was going to be too expensive.
- c) She thought Eddie had been smoking in the house.
- d) She couldn't find her husband Armand.

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**8. What was really under the carpet?**

- a) the cigarettes
- b) Eddie's toolbox
- c) nothing
- d) the missing bird

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**9. "Eddie was determined...." means that he:**

- a) had no idea
- b) decided for sure
- c) felt very angry
- d) couldn't decide

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**10. "Peculiar" in the sentence "He's never done such a thing before, it's most peculiar..." means:**

- a) normal
  - b) like a bird
  - c) difficult
  - d) strange
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## The Choking Dog

"Come on, come on, move it, idiot!"

Joanne beat impatiently on the steering wheel of her Mercedes sports car. How stupid to get caught up in the rush hour! She had planned to leave work early this afternoon, at three o'clock, to give herself a chance to relax and have a bath before going out to a meeting of her local tennis club. But just at ten to three a client had arrived, and it was two hours before she had finished dealing with the man. When she came out of her office, all the other staff in the Highlight Advertising Agency had already left. Now she was stuck in a traffic jam in central Birmingham at 5:30, and at 6:30 she was expected to be chairing a meeting of the tennis club. There would be no time for any hot bath.

Ahead of her, the traffic was moving at last, and she swung quickly out into the centre lane to turn right, and raced the last half-mile through the quiet suburban streets to her

house. Pulling up on the driveway, she leapt out of the car and ran for the house. As she opened the door, she nearly tripped over Sheba, who was standing behind it.

"Hey, Sheba, hello," she said, bending down to stroke the large alsatian dog's head, "I've got no time for you now, but I'll take you out as soon as I get back from the tennis club."

It was then that she noticed something worrying about the dog. Sheba seemed to be coughing or choking, her stomach pumping repeatedly as if she was trying to vomit something up. She was obviously in real discomfort and could hardly breathe; her sad eyes gazed up at Joanne helplessly.

"Oh damn, this is all I need now," said Joanne to herself, dropping her briefcase and bending down to take a closer look, "a sick dog, today of all days!" On closer examination, Sheba did look very sick, and Joanne realised she would have to take her down to the vet immediately. Luckily, the vet's surgery was only a few streets away, and Joanne quickly loaded the dog, still coughing and choking, into her car for the short drive.

When she got there, the surgery was just about to close for the day. Luckily, Dr. Sterne had not left yet, and when he saw the state of Sheba, he brought her quickly into his office.

"It looks like something is stuck in her throat," said Dr. Sterne. "It shouldn't take me too long to get it out."

"Listen, doctor, I'm really in a rush to get to a meeting -- can I leave her with you, and go and get changed? I'll be back in ten minutes to pick her up, then I'll take her on to the meeting with me. Is that OK?"

"Sure," said the doctor. "You get going. I'll see you in ten minutes."

Joanne jumped back into her car again, and made the quick trip round to her house in a couple of minutes. As she was once more entering the hallway, the phone on the table by the door began to ring. She picked it up, annoyed by this additional interruption to her plans.

"This is Dr. Sterne," said an anxious voice. "Is that you, Joanne?"

"Of course it's me," said Joanne, surprised at the sound of his voice, "no-one else lives here."

"I want you to get right out of that house immediately," said the doctor's voice. "Right now. I'm coming round right away, and the police will be there any time now. Wait outside for us." The phone went dead. Joanne stared at it. She was confused, but she was also a little frightened by the obvious fear in the voice of the doctor. She replaced the receiver, then quickly backed out of the door and ran into the street.

At that moment, a police car with its lights flashing swung round the corner and screeched to a stop outside the house. Two policemen got out. After briefly checking that she was the owner of the house, they ran into the house through the still open door, without explaining anything. Joanne was by now completely confused and very frightened. Then the doctor arrived.

"Where's Sheba? Is she OK?" shouted Joanne, running over to his car.

"She's fine, Joanne. I extracted the thing which was choking her, and she's OK now."

"Well what's this all about? Why are the police in my house?"

Just then, the two policemen reappeared from the house, half-carrying a white-faced figure, a man in a dark grey sweater and jeans, who, it seemed, could hardly walk. There

was blood all over him.

"My God," said Joanne, "how did he get in there? And how did you know he was there?"

"I think he must be a burglar," said the doctor. "I knew he was there because when I finally removed what was stuck in Sheba's throat, it turned out to be three human fingers. I don't think he's a very happy burglar."

## Multiple-Choice Questions

*Click on the answer you think is correct.*

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**1. Where did Joanne work?**

- [a\)](#) an advertising agency
- [b\)](#) a vet's surgery
- [c\)](#) a Mercedes dealer's office
- [d\)](#) the text does not say

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**2. Why was she angry at the beginning of the story?**

- [a\)](#) She was lost.
- [b\)](#) She had lost a client at work.
- [c\)](#) She was stuck in a traffic jam.
- [d\)](#) Her dog was sick.

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**3. Why did she take the dog to Dr. Sterne's surgery?**

- [a\)](#) It was time for Sheba's checkup.
- [b\)](#) The dog couldn't breathe properly.
- [c\)](#) She wanted to get her out of the house.
- [d\)](#) The doctor had asked to see her.

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**4. Why did she leave the dog at the surgery and drive home again?**

- [a\)](#) She wanted to catch a burglar.
- [b\)](#) The dog was too sick to come home.
- [c\)](#) The doctor wanted to keep her.
- [d\)](#) Joanne wanted to change her clothes.

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**5. How long did it take Joanne to drive home from the surgery?**

- [a\)](#) two minutes
- [b\)](#) ten minutes
- [c\)](#) an hour

d) the text does not say

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**6. What happened as she arrived home for the second time?**

- a) The police arrived.
  - b) The phone rang.
  - c) The dog died.
  - d) A burglar was just escaping.
- 

**7. Why did the doctor tell her to get out of the house?**

- a) There was a dangerous dog in there.
  - b) It was on fire.
  - c) He knew there was a burglar inside.
  - d) He wanted to meet her outside.
- 

**8. Why did the burglar look very sick?**

- a) The police had caught him, and he would probably have to go to prison.
  - b) He had caught a disease from the dog.
  - c) He hadn't found any valuable things to steal.
  - d) The dog had bitten off his fingers.
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**9. The story says that the dog "gazed up at Joanne helplessly". "Gazed" means**

- a) stared
  - b) cried
  - c) barked
  - d) laughed
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**10. A "vet's surgery" is probably**

- a) a serious operation
  - b) a minor operation
  - c) an animal doctor's office
  - d) a police station
-