

The Mexican Pepper

"Mummy! Mummy!" shouted little Katie racing from the front door through to the kitchen. "There's a parcel. The postman's brought a parcel!" Her mother, Susan, 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 Mexico, madam," he said. "See! Mexican stamps."

It was true. In the top right-hand corner of the brown paper parcel were three strange-looking stamps. The package was addressed to Susan, in big, clear black letters. "Well, I suppose it must be from Great-Aunt Maria," said Susan 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."

Susan's husband Simon and her son Tom were just coming in from the garden, where Katie had run to tell them about the parcel. "Well, open it then!" said Tom impatiently. "Let's see what's inside!" Setting the parcel down in the middle of the table, Susan carefully began to tear open the paper. Inside, there was a large silver pot with a lid. There was also a letter.

"What is it? What is it?" demanded Katie impatiently. "Is it a present?" "I have no idea," said Susan in confusion. "I think it must be from Great-Aunt Maria. She went to Mexico 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 Spanish! How does she expect us to read Spanish? Nobody in this family speaks a foreign language.

Aunt Maria must have forgotten her English, after thirty years in Mexico." "Well, open the pot, anyway," said Simon. "Let's see what's inside." Cautiously, Susan pulled the tape from the neck of the silver pot, and opened the lid. Everybody stared down inside. "Strange," said Tom. "All I see is powder." The pot was about one-third full of a kind of light-grey powder.

"What is it?" asked Katie, mystified. "We don't know, darling," said Susan, stroking her daughter's hair. "What do you think?" Katie stared again into the pot. "I think it's coffee," she announced, finally. "Mexican coffee." "It's the wrong colour for coffee, darling," said Simon thoughtfully. "But maybe she's on the right track. It must be some kind of food." Katie, by now, had her nose right down into the pot. Suddenly, she lifted her head and sneezed loudly.

"That's it!" said Tom. "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 Mexican pepper." "All right," said Susan, "we'll try it on the stew tonight. We'll have Mexican-style stew!"

That evening, the whole family agreed that the Mexican 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 Susan called a halt. "We're saving

the last bit for Sunday. Dr. Harrison 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. Harrison. He was the local doctor, and he had become a friend of the family many years before, when he had saved Tom's life after an accident. Once every couple of months, Susan 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, Susan explained to the doctor about the mysterious Mexican 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 Spanish! I can translate it for you." Susan brought the letter, and the family waited, fascinated, as the doctor began to translate:

"Dear Susan: you don't know me, but I am the son of your old Great-Aunt Maria. 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.

Thank you.

Your cousin, George Leary."

Questions

1. Who was the parcel from?
2. Who thought that the powder was coffee?
3. How did Tom decide that it was pepper?
4. The family made stew with the "pepper". What is "stew"?
5. How did the family discover what the powder really was?