

The American Pepper, a common urban legend

"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 color 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."