

The Perfect Gift
By Mac Dunlop



This morning my father said he was trying to find a mortar and pestle. He'd been searching the shops in Truro for a green stone one, like the one we had back home in Syria. Yesterday he had found a whole shelf of them in Malletts. There were wooden ones, ceramic ones, and even white marble ones that had come all the way from China. "Fancy sending heavy stones like that half way round the world!" father had said, chuckling at the thought of it. I poured coffee while he carried on describing his search. As he was about to leave the shop, father had spotted a poster of a green mortar and pestle made of Serpentine which looked exactly like the one we'd had back in Syria! Even better, it had a 50% off label stuck to the sign! (Father loved a bargain) So he searched the shelves, and then searched them again, but there were no green mortar and pestles to be seen. Father then tried to ask one of the shop clerks about it, a tall man at the counter who was wearing glasses, but he simply couldn't understand what my father wanted. You see, my father doesn't speak any English as he has lived all his life in Syria. He can speak Arabic of course, and Aramaic too, he picked up French at school, along with a bit of Greek, some Ukrainian and even a smidgen of Russian – from going to the Orthodox Church every Sunday - but he finds speaking English difficult and just couldn't get his message across in the shop.

Tomorrow is my parent's 40th wedding anniversary, so finding the right gift is quite important. My parents had come for a visit three years ago when I started working as an eye surgeon at Trelisk Hospital. They had flown over from Damascus the capital of Syria just as the fighting there had begun. We soon realized that it wasn't safe for them to go back home. We waited, and waited, but no one thought the war would last as long as this.

Anyway, I told my father not to worry, and that I would go down to the shop and make some inquiries at lunchtime. I took the bus to Victoria Square, went into Mallett's and soon spotted the tall man with glasses in the gift department. "Excuse me" I said, and as he looked up he seemed to recognize me. He took my hand and shook it vigorously. "Doctor Shamizen, isn't it? You operated on my daughter last year – glaucoma - oh I can't thank you enough, she's doing ever so well at school - says she wants to be an optometrist when she grows up! Hah!" Then he scratched his head and said "Do you know, only yesterday there was an older gent in here, I couldn't make out what he was after but for some reason he got me thinking of you."

Now I recognized the tall man's voice, "You're Tom aren't you?" I said
"That's right Doc! That's me!" he replied shaking my hand again.

“I’m glad your daughter is well, and funnily enough the fellow who came in yesterday is my father. Unfortunately he doesn’t speak any English but he saw your sign for the serpentine mortar and pestles, and wanted to get one for my mother.”

“So that’s what the old fellow was after!” Tom said scratching his head, “Well now, I was just on the Skype with my own Mother the night before last - she’s in New Zealand visiting Morgane - that’s my sister - and Mother was asking if I could send her the same sort of mortar and pestle to remind our Morgane of back home here! Why, I just put one back behind the counter yesterday!” He scratched his head again “Your father can have that one!” He leant behind the counter and pulled up a box.

“But Tom” I said, “I can’t possibly take a gift meant for your sister!”

“Don’t worry” he said “we’ve a load coming up from the Lizard on Monday – I can send my sister one of those.” Then as he put the box in a bag with the receipt, he chuckled “Mind you, it’s a bit mad sending heavy stones like this half way round the world isn’t it!”

Which was just what my father had said this morning - even though he doesn’t speak any English.

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