

## WHERE'S THE SOURCE?



*What are you doing now dear?* Joan called from the lounge to Matthew in the dining room. Matthew's reply was a typical male response - that soft sigh cum grunt which would shame a grown pig yet fill a human teenager's pride  
*Did you hear me Matthew?* Joan called louder, above the raised volume of her afternoon television quiz show. *I asked you what you're doing. Perhaps you'd like to make a cup of tea?*

Joan and Matthew used to talk of ageing. Now it had arrived and neither of them was ready to acknowledge it.

*'Our mature years,'* Joan declared them but Matthew thought *'our ripening years'* was more hopeful, and better suited to how he felt. That was until he overheard Joan in all seriousness telling their neighbour that Matthew thought he was over-ripe! They no longer talked of ageing. They simply got on with living it - and almost simultaneously - as though the associated conditions were contagious. It was inevitable after so many years of sharing everything.

Joan was first to be aware of hearing loss, closely followed by Matthew and with equal frustration at being misunderstood. Conversation became a constant succession of *eh? what? who? how's that?* and sometimes the more respectful *pardon?* accompanied of course, with the more occasional *Do speak up dear. You do mumble so these days!*

Then came the blurred vision. Two pair of eyes peering at papers and price labels, both reading different words in different ways according to what each thought the words ought to say.

And the forgetfulness. *There's nothing wrong with my memory. I've just got a lot on my mind!* But there was no escaping Joan's half finished conversations into which Matthew dropped half expressed ideas. Only yesterday Joan had said, *I was thinking of visiting Jennie,* and after a short pause Matthew added, *I think we'll go on the lawnmower this afternoon.* Totally confused they would retreat back into their own thoughts with the blinds half down as though neither had said a word in the first place. Of course, there was a host of other shared infirmities from pain in the hip to decreasing bladder capacity, but through it all there remained one significant difference between them - Matthew still remembered when he was hungry!

Although Joan and Matthew had shared their lives intimately for so many years they retained personal interests which actually made each other's irrelevant interruptions even more irritating. Joan's hands were in much better condition than her feet and she was still a keen needlewoman, though cross-stitch of the finer kind was out of the question and the clicking of knitting needles was noticeably losing momentum. Most days when those increasing household chores which ate into more and more hours were done, she would relax in front of the television with the exhausted content of a retired school dinner-lady. Matthew on the other hand, could be found most fine days pottering in the garden. It was literally pottering. The small garden comprised pots in the main which demanded a lot of attention. Otherwise, on not so fine days there was the shed-retreat where time and everything else with it, stood still. He claimed he thought and prayed better alone in his shed.

*I'm trying to find the source,* Matthew eventually replied, following Joan's third time of asking what he was doing. His attention was directed to his atlas. *I've traced it quite a way north from the Plate.* Joan waited to hear the answer to the next quiz question. *Nineteen eighty-three* she shouted, eager to get in first, followed by *Oh. I was sure it was eighty-three.* Then, back on course, she continued. *Don't worry about a Plate Matthew - a mug will do!* Somehow the communication about a cup of tea had not got through. Matthew was too pre-occupied. Today he was absorbed in his life-time hobby of philately. He combed his fingers through lanky white hair. *It's not stamp-collecting.* he would still remind Joan. *It's a whole world of things - it's art, geography, history....*

This morning he had been engrossed in his collection of stamps from Uruguay. Album, maps, catalogues and an old school atlas were spread across the dining table. Matthew was lost in the far north of Uruguay close to the border into Brazil. He loved maps. His slender fingers traced the rivers as cautiously and gently as they had picked over soft fruit in his greengrocer days.

*What are you doing?* Joan stirred at the sudden sound of gun-shot from the television. She had dozed through a change of programme, but remembered she had just asked Matthew a question.

Matthew gripped his beard. *I'm trying to find the source of the River Paranya. It runs into the River Plate between Uruguay and Argentina.*

Joan had not fully awakened. *What do you want with a plate? It's not dinner time yet is it? I thought you were going to make a mug of tea.* She pushed aside her knitting bag and started her well rehearsed programme to ease herself from between the arms of the chair. They held her as tightly as Matthew had in days gone by. *I'll have to start thinking about dinner dear. What would do you fancy? I thought I would make some of those fish cakes you like. I bought a lovely piece of cod from Tesco. Miriam gave me a new spicy recipe I'd like to try. They'd be fine on that plate you're talking about.*

*It's not a plate. It's a river called Plate. The fish are in it though,* Matthew replied sardonically. His response was a mild mix of humour and irritation but Joan missed the point. *Of course there are fish in it. They wouldn't be fish-cakes otherwise would they?*

Matthew ignored her, repeating *I wish I could find the source.* to which Joan replied. *I don't suppose anyone has moved it.*

*It doesn't move.* Matthew's irritation was becoming visible. *But I can't find it. It's not clearly marked on the map.*

*What's it doing on the mat?*

*There's a brown patch on the map where I think it should be.*

*Well, you'll have to clean it up.*

*I want to find it first!*

*If you say it's on the plate it can't be far away.*

A long low sigh from Matthew was followed by, *Of course it's a long way away. I've already followed it for about three thousand miles. It comes down through Fray Bentos ..*

At last Joan had a point of contact. *Corned Beef!* she exclaimed in recognition of past tasty Fray Bentos corned beef meals. *Would you like corned beef potato cakes, instead of fish-cakes? Oh, but we don't have any corned beef.*

Matthew had turned deaf to all that. *I went on to the town of Panorama.... But that's on Monday evenings. There's some good programmes. But you won't know. You mostly sleep through them.*

Matthew persisted. *I've got as far as Uberlandia in Brazil. I think the source must be in the Mata da Corda mountains. I'll have to look it up on the internet.*

*Yes, and while you're on the computer put corned beef on the next Tesco order, though I'm sure we don't need it. What did you say you want it for?*

*I want to find the source of the Paraná and then follow it all the way back to the Plate.*

*Well when you do get to the plates, put two of them on the radiator to warm for dinner. There's a dear. I must start those fish-cakes. We'll need the table then.*

Matthew sighed a longer, more exasperated sigh. *I've got to find the source before I clear away for dinner.*

Joan bustled through into the dining room and leaning over Matthew's shoulder peered intently at his map. *I'll find it for you, dear. It will be where it always is - on the shelf with the pickle. But what do you want it for? You never have sauce with fish-cakes.*