

The Indian in the Cupboard Trilogy



Lynne Reid Banks

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Banks L. R.

The Indian in the Cupboard Trilogy / L. R. Banks —
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Three bestselling stories about Omri, and his friend Patrick, who turns his plastic Red Indian, Little Bull, into a real miniature person. The Indian in the Cupboard Who'd want a boring little plastic Red Indian as a birthday present? Omri doesn't – until his brother gives him a very special cupboard which can make the Indian come alive... Return of the Indian Omri is unexpectedly reminded of his beloved Red Indian, and can't resist making sure he's still all right. But when he opens the cupboard door Little Bull is wounded, nearly dead, and Omri must find help. The Secret of the Indian Omri's friend Patrick goes back in time to the Wild West, and keeping the secret safe becomes even more difficult for Omri...

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LYNNE REID BANKS
THE INDIAN IN THE CUPBOARD
TRILOGY
THE INDIAN IN THE CUPBOARD
RETURN
OF THE INDIAN
SECRET OF THE INDIAN

HarperCollinsChildren'sBooks

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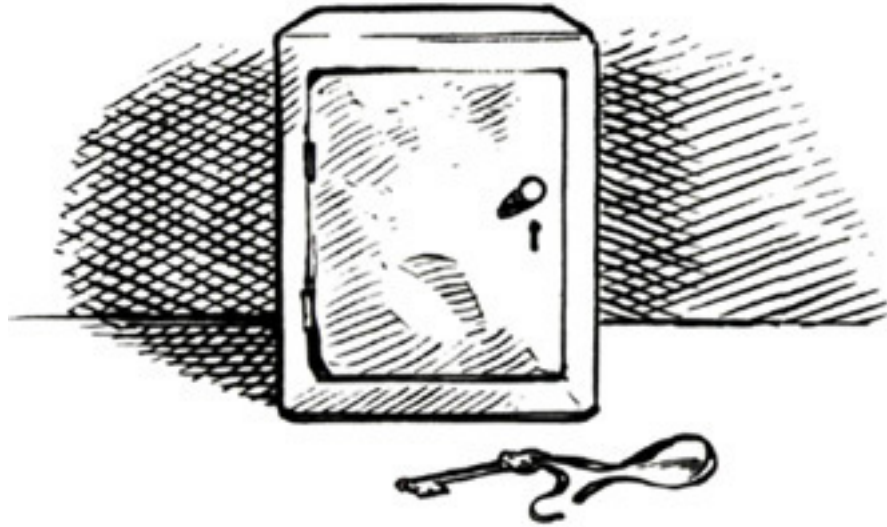
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The Indian in the Cupboard

Dedication

For Omri – Who else?



1 *Birthday Presents*

It was not that Omri didn't appreciate Patrick's birthday present to him. Far from it. He was really very grateful – sort of. It was, without a doubt, *very* kind of Patrick to give Omri anything at all, let alone a secondhand plastic Red Indian which he himself had finished with.

The trouble was, though, that Omri was getting a little fed up with small plastic figures, of which he had loads. Biscuit-tinsful, probably three or four if they were all put away at the same time, which they never were because most of the time they were scattered about in the bathroom, the loft, the kitchen, the breakfast-room, not to mention Omri's bedroom and the garden. The compost heap was full of soldiers which, over several autumns, had been raked up with the leaves by Omri's mother, who was rather careless about such things.

Omri and Patrick had spent many hours together playing with their joint collections of plastic toys. But now they'd had about enough of them, at least for the moment, and that was why, when Patrick brought his present to school on Omri's birthday, Omri was disappointed. He tried not to show it, but he was.

“Do you really like him?” asked Patrick as Omri stood silently with the Indian in his hand.

“Yes, he's fantastic,” said Omri in only a slightly flattish voice. “I haven't got an Indian.”

“I know.”

“I haven't got any cowboys either.”

“Nor have I. That's why I couldn't play anything with him.”

Omri opened his mouth to say, “I won't be able to either,” but, thinking that might hurt Patrick's feelings, he said nothing, put the Indian in his pocket and forgot about it.

After school there was a family tea, and all the excitement of his presents from his parents and his two older brothers. He was given his dearest wish – a skateboard complete with kick-board and cryptonic wheels from his mum and dad, and from his eldest brother, Adiel, a helmet. Gillon, his other brother, hadn't bought him anything because he had no money (his pocket-money had been stopped some time ago in connection with a very unfortunate accident involving their father's bicycle). So when Gillon's turn came to give Omri a present, Omri was very surprised when a large parcel was put before him, untidily wrapped in brown paper and string.

“What is it?”

“Have a look. I found it in the alley.”

The alley was a narrow passage that ran along the bottom of the garden where the dustbins stood. The three boys used to play there sometimes, and occasionally found treasures that other – perhaps richer – neighbours had thrown away. So Omri was quite excited as he tore off the paper.

Inside was a small white metal cupboard with a mirror in the door, the kind you see over the basin in old-fashioned bathrooms.

You might suppose Omri would once again be disappointed, because the cupboard was fairly plain and, except for a shelf, completely empty, but oddly enough he was very pleased with it. He loved cupboards of any sort because of the fun of keeping things in them. He was not a very tidy boy in general, but he did like arranging things in cupboards and drawers and then opening them later and finding them just as he'd left them.

“I do wish it locked,” he said.

“You might say thank you before you start complaining,” said Gillon.

“It's got a keyhole,” said their mother. “And I've got a whole boxful of keys. Why don't you try the smaller ones and see if any of them fit?”

Most of the keys were much too big, but there were half a dozen that were about the right size. All but one of these were very ordinary. The un-ordinary one was the most interesting key in

the whole collection, small with a complicated lock-part and a fancy top. A narrow strip of red satin ribbon was looped through one of its curly openings. Omri saved that key for last.

None of the others fitted, and at last he picked up the curly-topped key and carefully put it in the keyhole on the cupboard door, just below the knob. He did hope very much that it would turn, and regretted wasting his birthday-cake-cutting wish on something so silly (or rather, unlikely) as that he might pass his spelling test the next day, which would take real magic to bring about as he hadn't even looked at the words since they'd been given out four days ago. Now he closed his eyes and unwished the test-pass and wished instead that this little twisty key would turn Gillon's present into a secret cupboard.

The key turned smoothly in the lock. The door wouldn't open.

"Hey! Mum! I've found one!"

"Have you, darling? Which one?" His mother came to look. "Oh, *that* one! How very odd. That was the key to my grandmother's jewel-box, that she got from Florence. It was made of red leather and it fell to bits at last, but she kept the key and gave it to me. She was most terribly poor when she died, poor old sweetie, and kept crying because she had nothing to leave me, so in the end I said I'd rather have this little key than all the jewels in the world. I threaded it on that bit of ribbon – it was much longer then – and hung it round my neck and told her I'd always wear it and remember her. And I did for a long time. But then the ribbon broke and I nearly lost it."

"You could have got a chain for it," said Omri.

She looked at him. "You're right," she said. "I should have done just that. But I didn't. And now it's your cupboard key. Please don't lose it, Omri, will you."

Omri put the cupboard on his bedside table, and opening it, looked inside thoughtfully. What would he put in it?

"It's supposed to be for medicines," said Gillon. "You could keep your nose-drops in it."

"No! That's just wasting it. Besides, I haven't any other medicines."

"Why don't you pop this in?" his mother suggested, and opened her hand. In it was Patrick's Red Indian. "I found it when I was putting your trousers in the washing-machine."

Omri carefully stood the Indian on the shelf.

"Are you going to shut the door?" asked his mother.

"Yes. And lock it."

He did this and then kissed his mother and she turned the light out and he lay down on his side looking at the cupboard. He felt very content. Just as he was dropping off to sleep his eyes snapped open. He had thought he heard a little noise ... but no. All was quiet. His eyes closed again.

In the morning there was no doubt about it. The noise actually woke him.

He lay perfectly still in the dawn light staring at the cupboard, from which was now coming a most extraordinary series of sounds. A pattering; a tapping; a scrabbling; and – surely? – a high-pitched noise like – well, almost like a tiny voice.

To be truthful, Omri was petrified. Who wouldn't be? Undoubtedly there was something alive in that cupboard. At last, he put out his hand and touched it. He pulled very carefully, the door was tight shut. But as he pulled the cupboard moved, just slightly. The noise from inside instantly stopped.

He lay still for a long time, wondering. Had he imagined it? The noise did not start again. At last he cautiously turned the key and opened the cupboard door.

The Indian was gone.

Omri sat up sharply in bed and peered into the dark corners. Suddenly he saw him. But he wasn't on the shelf any more, he was in the bottom of the cupboard. And he wasn't standing upright. He was crouching in the darkest corner, half hidden by the front of the cupboard. And he was alive.

Omri knew that immediately. To begin with, though the Indian was trying to keep perfectly still – as still as Omri had kept, lying in bed a moment ago – he was breathing heavily. His bare, bronze shoulders rose and fell, and were shiny with sweat. The single feather sticking out of the back

of his headband quivered, as if the Indian were trembling. And as Omri peered closer, and his breath fell on the tiny huddled figure, he saw it jump to its feet; its minute hand made a sudden, darting movement towards its belt and came to rest clutching the handle of a knife smaller than the shaft of a drawing-pin.

Neither Omri nor the Indian moved for perhaps a minute and a half. They hardly breathed either. They just stared at each other. The Indian's eyes were black and fierce and frightened. His lower lip was drawn down from shining white teeth, so small you could scarcely see them except when they caught the light. He stood pressed against the inside wall of the cupboard, clutching his knife, rigid with terror, but defiant.

The first coherent thought that came into Omri's mind as he began to get over the shock was, "I must call the others!" – meaning his parents and brothers. But something (he wasn't sure what) stopped him. Maybe he was afraid that if he took his eyes off the Indian for even a moment, he would vanish, or become plastic again, and then when the others came running they would all laugh and accuse Omri of making things up. And who could blame anyone for not believing *this* unless they saw it with their own eyes?

Another reason Omri didn't call anyone was that, if he was not dreaming and the Indian had really come alive, it was certainly the most marvellous thing that had ever happened to Omri in his life and he wanted to keep it to himself, at least at first.

His next thought was that he must somehow get the Indian in his hand. He didn't want to frighten him any further, but he *had* to touch him. He simply had to. He reached his hand slowly into the cupboard.

The Indian gave a fantastic leap into the air. His black pigtail flew and the air ballooned out his loose-fitting leggings. His knife, raised above his head, flashed. He gave a shout which, even though it was a tiny shout to match his body, was nevertheless loud enough to make Omri jump. But not so much as he jumped when the little knife pierced his finger deeply enough to draw a drop of blood.

Omri stuck his finger in his mouth and sucked it and thought how gigantic he must look to the tiny Indian and how fantastically brave he had been to stab him. The Indian stood there, his feet, in moccasins, planted apart on the white-painted metal floor, his chest heaving, his knife held ready and his black eyes wild. Omri thought he was magnificent.

"I won't hurt you," he said. "I only want to pick you up."

The Indian opened his mouth and a stream of words, spoken in that loud-tiny voice, came out, not one of which Omri could understand. But he noticed that the Indian's strange grimace never changed – he could speak without closing his lips.

"Don't you speak English?" asked Omri. All the Indians in films spoke a sort of English; it would be terrible if his Indian couldn't. How would they talk to each other?

The Indian lowered his knife a fraction.

"I speak," he grunted.

Omri breathed deeply in relief. "Oh, good! Listen, I don't know how it happened that you came to life, but it must be something to do with this cupboard, or perhaps the key – anyway, here you are, and I think you're great, I don't mind that you stabbed me, only please can I pick you up? After all, you are my Indian," he finished in a very reasonable tone.

He said all this very quickly while the Indian stared at him. The knife-point went down a little further, but he didn't answer.

"Well? Can I? Say something!" urged Omri impatiently.

"I speak *slowly*," grunted the miniature Indian at last.

"Oh." Omri thought, and then said, very slowly, "Let – me – pick – you – up."

The knife came up again in an instant, and the Indian's knees bent into a crouch.

"No."

"Oh, *please*."

“You touch – I kill!” the Indian growled ferociously.

You might have expected Omri to laugh at this absurd threat from a tiny creature scarcely bigger than his middle finger, armed with only a pin-point. But Omri didn’t laugh. He didn’t even feel like laughing. This Indian – *his* Indian – was behaving in every way like a real live Red Indian brave, and despite the vast difference in their sizes and strengths, Omri respected him and even, odd as it sounds, feared him at that moment.

“Oh, okay, I won’t then. But there’s no need to get angry. I don’t want to hurt you.” Then, as the Indian looked baffled, he said, in what he supposed was Indian-English, “Me – no – hurt – you.”

“You come near, I hurt *you*,” said the Indian swiftly.

Omri had been half lying in bed all this time. Now, cautiously and slowly, he got up. His heart was thundering in his chest. He couldn’t be sure why he was being cautious. Was it so as not to frighten the Indian, or because he was frightened himself? He wished one of his brothers would come in, or better still, his father ... But no one came.

Standing in his bare feet he took the cupboard by its top corners and turned it till it faced the window. He did this very carefully but nevertheless the Indian was jolted, and, having nothing to hold on to, he fell down. But he was on his feet again in a second, and he had not let go of his knife.

“Sorry,” said Omri.

The Indian responded with a noise like a snarl.

There was no more conversation for the next few minutes. Omri looked at the Indian in the early sunlight. He was a splendid sight. He was about seven centimetres tall. His blue-black hair, done in a plait and pressed to his head by a coloured headband, gleamed in the sun. So did the minuscule muscles of his tiny naked torso, and the reddish skin of his arms. His legs were covered with buckskin trousers which had some decoration on them too small to see properly, and his belt was a thick hide thong twisted into a knot in front. Best of all, somehow, were his moccasins. Omri found himself wondering (not for the first time recently) where his magnifying glass was. It was the only way he would ever be able to see and appreciate the intricate embroidery, or beadwork, or whatever it was which encrusted the Indian’s shoes and clothes.

Omri looked as closely as he dared at the Indian’s face. He expected to see paint on it, war-paint, but there was none. The turkey-feather which had been stuck in the headband had come out when the Indian fell and was now lying on the floor of the cupboard. It was about as big as the spike on a conker, but it was a real feather. Omri suddenly asked:

“Were you always this small?”

“I no small! You, big!” the Indian shouted angrily.

“No—” began Omri, but then he stopped.

He heard his mother beginning to move about next door.

The Indian heard it too. He froze. The door of the next room opened. Omri knew that at any moment his mother would come in to wake him for school. In a flash he had bent down and whispered, “Don’t worry! I’ll be back.” And he closed and locked the cupboard door and jumped back into bed.

“Come on, Omri. Time to get up.”

She bent down and kissed him, paying no attention to the cupboard, and went out again, leaving the door wide open.



2

The Door is Shut

Omri got dressed in a state of such high excitement that he could scarcely control his fumbling fingers enough to do up buttons and tie his shoe-laces. He'd thought he was excited yesterday, on his birthday, but it was nothing compared to how he felt now.

He was dying to open the cupboard door and have another look, but the landing outside his bedroom door was like a railway station at this hour of the morning – parents and brothers passing continually, and if he were to close his door for a moment's privacy somebody would be sure to burst in. He'd nip up after breakfast and have a quick look when he was supposed to be cleaning his teeth ...

However, it didn't work out. There was a stupid row at the breakfast table because Adiel took the last of the Rice Krispies, and although there were plenty of cornflakes, not to mention Weetabix, the other two fairly set upon Adiel and made such an awful fuss that their mother lost her temper, and the end of it was nobody got to clean their teeth at all.

They were all bundled out of the house at the last minute – Omri even forgot to take his swimming things although it was Thursday, the day his class went to the pool. He was an excellent swimmer and he was so annoyed when he remembered (halfway to school, too late to go back) that he turned on Adiel and shouted, "You made me forget my swimming stuff!" and bashed him. That naturally led to them all being late for school, and furthermore, arriving in a very grubby condition.

All this actually pushed the Indian right out of Omri's mind. But the minute he set eyes on Patrick, he remembered. And not for one single second for the rest of the day was that Indian out of Omri's thoughts.

You may imagine the temptation to tell Patrick what had happened. Several times Omri very nearly did tell him, and he couldn't help dropping a number of tantalizing hints.

"Your present was the best thing I got."

Patrick looked rather astonished. "I thought you got a skateboard!"

"Ye-es ... But I like yours better."

"Better than a skateboard? Are you having me on?"

"Yours turned out to be more exciting."

Patrick just stared at him. "Are you being sarcastic?"

"No."

Later, after they'd had the spelling test and Omri had been marked three right out of ten, Patrick joked, "I bet the plastic Indian could have done better."

Unwarily, Omri replied, "Oh, I don't think he can *write* English, he can only just speak—"

He stopped himself quickly, but Patrick was giving him a very odd look. "What?"

"Nothing."

"No, what did you say about him speaking?"

Omri wrestled with himself. He wanted to keep his secret; in any case Patrick wouldn't believe him. Yet the need to talk about it was very strong. "He can speak," he said slowly at last.

"Beard," said Patrick, which was their school slang for 'I don't believe you.'

Instead of insisting, Omri said nothing more, and that led Patrick to ask, "Why did you say that, about him speaking?"

"He does."

"*Itchy* beard." (Which of course means the same only more so.)

Omri refused to get involved in an argument. He was somehow scared that if he talked about the Indian, something bad would happen. In fact, as the day went on and he longed more and more to get home, he began to feel certain that the whole incredible happening – well, not that it hadn't happened, but that something would go wrong. All his thoughts, all his dreams were centred on the

miraculous, endless possibilities opened up by a real, live miniature Indian of his very own. It would be too terrible if the whole thing turned out to be some sort of mistake.

After school Patrick wanted him to stay in the school grounds and skateboard. For *weeks* Omri had longed to do this, but had never had his own skateboard till now. So it was quite beyond Patrick's understanding when Omri said, "I can't, I have to get home. Anyway, I didn't bring it."

"Why not? Are you crazy? Why do you have to get home, anyway?"

"I want to play with the Indian."

Patrick's eyes narrowed in disbelief. "Can I come?"

Omri hesitated. But no, it wouldn't do. He must get to know the Indian himself before he thought of introducing him to anyone else, even Patrick.

Besides, the most awful thought had come to him during the last lesson which had made it almost impossible for him to sit still. If the Indian *were* real, and not just – well, moving plastic, as Pinocchio had been moving wood, then he would need food, and other things. And Omri had left him shut up in the dark all day with nothing. Perhaps – what if there were not enough air for him in that cupboard? The door fitted very tight ... How much air would such a very small creature need? What if – what if the Indian were – what if he'd *died*, shut up there? What if Omri had killed him?

At the very best, the Indian must have passed a horrible day in that dark prison. Omri was dismayed at the thought of it. Why had he allowed himself to be drawn into that silly row at breakfast instead of slipping away and making sure the Indian was all right? The mere thought that he might be dead was frightening Omri sick. He ran all the way home, burst through the back door, and raced up the stairs without even saying hello to his mother.

He shut the door of his bedroom and fell on his knees beside the bedside table. With a hand that shook, he turned the key in the lock and opened the cupboard door.

The Indian lay there on the floor of the cupboard, stiff and stark. Too stiff! That was not a dead body. Omri picked it up. It was an 'it', not a 'he', any more.

The Indian was made of plastic again.

Omri knelt there, appalled – too appalled to move. He *had* killed his Indian, or done something awful to him. At the same time he had killed his dream – all the wonderful, exciting, secret games that had filled his imagination all day. But that was not the main horror. His Indian had been real – not a mere toy, but a person. And now here he lay in Omri's hand – cold, stiff, lifeless. Somehow through Omri's own fault.

How had it happened?

It never occurred to Omri now that he had imagined the whole incredible episode this morning. The Indian was in a completely different position from the one he had been in when Patrick gave him to Omri. *Then* he had been standing on one leg, as if doing a war-dance – knees bent, one moccasined foot raised, both elbows bent too and with one fist (with the knife in it) in the air. Now he lay flat, legs apart, arms at his sides. His eyes were closed. The knife was no longer a part of him. It lay separately on the floor of the cupboard.

Omri picked it up. The easiest way to do this, he found, was to wet his finger and press it down on the tiny knife, which stuck to it. It, too, was plastic, and could no more have pierced human skin than a twist of paper. Yet it had pierced Omri's finger this morning – the little mark was still there. But this morning it had been a real knife.

Omri stroked the Indian with his finger. He felt a painful thickness in the back of his throat. The pain of sadness, disappointment, and a strange sort of guilt, burnt inside him as if he had swallowed a very hot potato which wouldn't cool down. He let the tears come, and just knelt there and cried for about ten minutes.

Then he put the Indian back in the cupboard and locked the door because he couldn't bear to look at him any longer.

That night at supper he couldn't eat anything, and he couldn't talk. His father touched his face and said it felt very hot. His mother took him upstairs and put him to bed and oddly enough he didn't object. He didn't know if he was ill or not, but he felt so bad he was quite glad to be made a fuss of. Not that that improved the basic situation, but it was some comfort.

"What is it, Omri? Tell me," coaxed his mother. She stroked his hair and looked at him tenderly and questioningly, and he nearly told her everything, but then he suddenly rolled over on his face.

"Nothing. Really."

She sighed, kissed him, and left the room, closing the door softly after her.

As soon as she had gone, he heard something. A scratching – a muttering – a definitely *alive* sound. Coming from the cupboard.

Omri snapped his bedside light on and stared wide-eyed at his own face in the mirror on the cupboard door. He stared at the key with its twisted ribbon. He listened to the sounds, now perfectly clear.

Trembling, he turned the key and there was the Indian, on the shelf this time, almost exactly level with Omri's face. Alive again!

Again they stared at each other. Then Omri asked falteringly, "What happened to you?"

"Happen? Good sleep happen. Cold ground. Need blanket. Food. Fire."

Omri gaped. Was the little man giving him orders? Undoubtedly he was! Because he waved his knife, now back in his hand, in an unmistakable way.

Omri was so happy he could scarcely speak.

"Okay – you stay there – I'll get food – don't worry," he gasped as he scrambled out of bed.

He hurried downstairs, excited but thoughtful. What could it all mean? It was puzzling, but he didn't bother worrying about it too much. His main concern was to get downstairs without his parents hearing him, get to the kitchen, find some food that would suit the Indian, and bring it back without anyone asking questions.

Fortunately his parents were in the living-room watching television, so he was able to tiptoe to the kitchen along the dark passage. Once there, he dared not turn on a light; but there was the fridge light and that was enough.

He surveyed the inside of the fridge. What did Indians eat? Meat, chiefly, he supposed – buffalo meat, rabbits, the sort of animals they could shoot on their prairies. Needless to say there was nothing like that.

Biscuits, jam, peanut butter, that kind of thing was no problem, but somehow Omri felt sure these were not Indian foods. Suddenly his searching eyes fell on an open tin of sweetcorn. He found a paper plate in the drawer where the picnic stuff lived, and took a good teaspoon of corn. Then he broke off a crusty corner of bread. Then he thought of some cheese. And what about a drink? Milk? Surely, Indian braves did not drink milk? They usually drank something called 'fire-water' in films, which was presumably a hot drink, and Omri dared not heat anything. Ordinary non-fire water would have to do, unless ... What about some Coke? That was an American drink. Luckily there was a bit in a big bottle left over from the birthday party, so he took that. He did wish there were some cold meat, but there just wasn't.

Clutching the Coke bottle by the neck in one hand and the paper plate in the other, Omri sneaked back upstairs with a fast-beating heart. All was just as he had left it, except that the Indian was sitting on the edge of the shelf dangling his legs and trying to sharpen his knife on the metal. He jumped up as soon as he saw Omri.

"Food?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, but I don't know if it's what you like."

"I like. Give, quick!"

But Omri wanted to arrange things a little. He took a pair of scissors and cut a small circle out of the paper plate. On this he put a crumb of bread, another of cheese, and one kernel of the

sweetcorn. He handed this offering to the Indian, who backed off, looking at the food with hungry eyes but trying to keep watch on Omri at the same time.

“Not touch! You touch, use knife!” he warned.

“All right, I promise not to. Now you can eat.”

Very cautiously the Indian sat down, this time cross-legged on the shelf. At first he tried to eat with his left hand keeping the knife at the ready in his right, but he was so hungry he soon abandoned this effort, laid the knife close at his side and, grabbing the bread in one hand and the little crumb of cheese in the other, he began to tear at them ravenously.

When these two apparently familiar foods had taken the edge off his appetite, he turned his attention to the single kernel of corn.

“What?” he asked suspiciously.

“Corn. Like you have—” Omri hesitated. “Where you come from,” he said.

It was a shot in the dark. He didn’t know if the Indian ‘came from’ anywhere, but he meant to find out. The Indian grunted, turning the corn about in both hands, for it was half as big as his head. He smelt it. A great grin spread over his face. He nibbled it. The grin grew wider. But then he held it away and looked again, and the grin vanished.

“Too big,” he said. “Like you,” he added accusingly.

“Eat it. It’s the same stuff.”

The Indian took a bite. He still looked very suspicious, but he ate and ate. He couldn’t finish it, but he evidently liked it.

“Give meat,” he said finally.

“I’m sorry, I can’t find any tonight, but I’ll get you some tomorrow,” said Omri.

After another grunt, the Indian said, “Drink!”

Omri had been waiting for this. From the box where he kept his Action Man things he had brought a plastic mug. It was much too big for the Indian but it was the best he could do. Into it, with extreme care, he now poured a minute amount of Coke from the huge bottle.

He handed it to the Indian, who had to hold it with both hands and still almost dropped it.

“What?” he barked, after smelling it.

“Coca-Cola,” said Omri, enthusiastically pouring some for himself into a toothmug.

“Fire-water?”

“No, it’s cold. But you’ll like it.”

The Indian sipped, swallowed, gulped. Gulped again. Grinned.

“Good?” asked Omri.

“Good!” said the Indian.

“Cheers!” said Omri, raising his toothmug as he’d seen his parents do when they were having a drink together.

“What cheers?”

“I don’t know!” said Omri, feeling excessively happy, and drank. His Indian – eating and drinking! He *was* real, a real, flesh-and-blood person! It was too marvellous. Omri felt he might die of delight.

“Do you feel better now?” he asked.

“I better. You not better,” said the Indian. “You still big. You stop eat. Get right size.”

Omri laughed aloud, then stopped himself hastily.

“It’s time to sleep,” he said.

“Not now. Big light. Sleep when light go.”

“I can make the light go,” said Omri, and switched out his bedside lamp.

In the darkness came a thin cry of astonishment and fear. Omri switched it on again.

The Indian was now gazing at him with something more than respect – a sort of awe.

“You spirit?” he asked in a whisper.

“No,” said Omri. “And this isn’t the sun. It’s a lamp. Don’t you have lamps?”

The Indian peered where he was pointing. “That lamp?” he asked unbelievably. “Much big lamp. Need much oil.”

“But this isn’t an oil lamp. It works by electricity.”

“Magic?”

“No, electricity. But speaking of magic – how did you get here?”

The Indian looked at him steadily out of his black eyes.

“You not know?”

“No, I don’t. You were a toy. Then I put you in the cupboard and locked the door. When I opened it, you were real. Then I locked it again, and you went back to being plastic. Then—”

He stopped sharply. Wait! What if – he thought furiously. It was possible! In which case ...

“Listen,” he said excitedly. “I want you to come out of there. I’ll find you a much more comfortable place. You said you were cold. I’ll make you a proper tepee—”

“Tepee!” the Indian shouted. “I not live tepee! I live longhouse!”

Omri was so eager to test his theory about the cupboard that he was impatient. “You’ll have to make do with a tepee tonight,” he said. Hastily he opened a drawer and took out a biscuit tin full of little plastic people. Somewhere in here was a plastic tepee ... “Ah, here!” He pounced on it – a small, pinkish, cone-shaped object with designs rather badly painted on its plastic sides. “Will this do?”

He put it on the shelf beside the Indian, who looked at it with the utmost scorn.

“*This* – tepee?” he said. He touched its plastic side and made a face. He pushed it with both hands – it slid along the shelf. He bent and peered in through the triangular opening. Then he actually spat on the ground, or rather, on the shelf.

“Oh,” said Omri, rather crestfallen. “You mean it’s not good enough.”

“Not want toy,” said the Indian, and turned his back, folding both arms across his chest with an air of finality.

Omri saw his chance. With one quick movement he had picked up the Indian by the waist between his thumb and forefinger. In doing this he pinned the knife, which was in the Indian’s belt, firmly to his side. The dangling Indian twisted, writhed, kicked, made a number of ferocious and hideous faces – but beyond that he was helpless and he evidently knew it, for after a few moments he decided it was more dignified to stop struggling. Instead, he folded his tiny arms across his chest once again, put his head back, and stared with proud defiance at Omri’s face, which was now level with his own.

For Omri, the feeling of holding this little creature in his fingers was very strange and wonderful. If he had had any doubts that the Indian was truly alive, the sensation he had now would have put them to rest. His body was heavier now, warm and firm and full of life – through Omri’s thumb, on the Indian’s left side, he could feel his heart beating wildly, like a bird’s.

Although the Indian felt strong, Omri could sense how fragile he was, how easily an extra squeeze could injure him. He would have liked to feel him all over, his tiny arms and legs, his hair, his ears, almost too small to see – yet when he saw how the Indian, who was altogether in his power, faced him boldly and hid his fear, he lost all desire to handle him; he felt it was cruel, and insulting to the Indian, who was no longer his plaything but a person who had to be respected.

Omri put him down gently on the chest-of-drawers where the cupboard stood. Then he crouched down till his face was again level with the Indian’s.

“Sorry I did that,” he said.

The Indian, breathing heavily and with his arms still folded, said nothing, but stared haughtily at him, as if nothing he did could affect him in any way.

“What’s your name?” asked Omri.

“Little Bull,” said the Indian, pointing proudly to himself. “Iroquois brave. Son of Chief. You son of Chief?” he shot at Omri fiercely.

“No,” said Omri humbly.

“Hm!” snorted Little Bull with a superior look. “Name?”

Omri told him. “Now we must find you another place to sleep – outside the cupboard. Surely you sleep in tepees sometimes?”

“Never,” said Little Bull firmly.

“I’ve never heard of an Indian who didn’t,” said Omri with equal firmness. “You’ll have to tonight, anyway.”

“Not this,” said the Indian. “This no good. And fire. I want fire.”

“I can’t light a real fire in here. But I’ll make you a tepee. It won’t be very good, but I promise you a better one tomorrow.”

He looked round. It was good, he thought, that he never put anything away. Now everything he needed was strewn about the floor and on tables and shelves, ready to hand.

Starting with some pick-up-sticks and a bit of string, he made a sort of cone-shape, tied at the top. Around this he draped, first a handkerchief, and then, when that didn’t seem firm enough, a bit of old felt from a hat that had been in the dressing-up crate. It was fawn coloured, fortunately, and looked rather like animal hide. In fact, when it was pinned together at the back with a couple of safety-pins and a slit cut for an entrance, the whole thing looked pretty good, especially with the poles sticking up through a hole in the top.

Omri stood it up carefully on the chest-of-drawers and anxiously awaited Little Bull’s verdict. The Indian walked round it four times slowly, went down on hands and knees and crawled in through the flap, came out again after a minute, tugged at the felt, stood back to look at the poles, and finally gave a fairly satisfied grunt. However, he wasn’t going to pass it without any criticism at all.

“No pictures,” he growled. “If *tepee*, then need pictures.”

“I don’t know how to do them,” said Omri.

“I know. You give colours. I make.”

“Tomorrow,” said Omri, who, despite himself, was beginning to feel very sleepy.

“Blanket?”

Omri fished out one of the Action Man’s sleeping-rolls.

“No good. No keep out wind.”

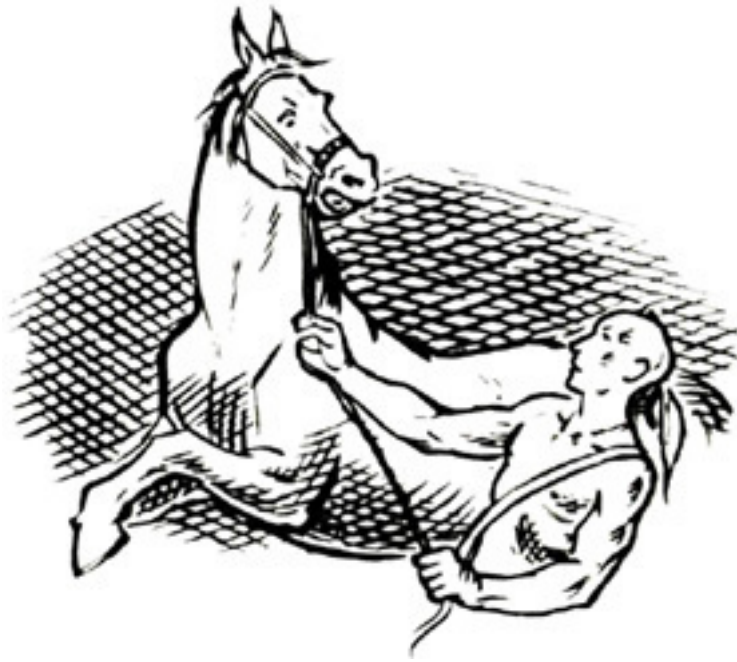
Omri started to object that there was no wind in his bedroom, but then he decided it was easier to cut up a square out of one of his old sweaters, so he did that. It was a red one with a stripe round the bottom and even Little Bull couldn’t hide his approval as he held it up, then wrapped it round himself.

“Good. Warm. I sleep now.”

He dropped on his knees and crawled into the tent. After a moment he stuck his head out.

“Tomorrow talk. You give Little Bull meat – fire – paint – much things.” He scowled fiercely up at Omri. “Good?”

“Good,” said Omri, and indeed nothing in his life had ever seemed so full of promise.



3

Thirty Scalps

Within a few minutes, loud snores – well, not loud, but loud for the Indian – began to come out of the tepee, but Omri, sleepy as he was himself, was not quite ready for bed. He had an experiment to do.

As far as he had figured it out so far, the cupboard, or the key, or both together, brought plastic things to life, *or if they were already alive, turned them into plastic*. There were a lot of questions to be answered, though. Did it only work with plastic? Would, say, wooden or metal figures also come to life if shut up in the cupboard? How long did they have to stay in there for the magic to work? Overnight? Or did it happen straight away?

And another thing – what about objects? The Indian's clothes, his feather, his knife, all had become real. Was this just because they were part of the original plastic figure? If he put – well, anything you like, the despised plastic tepee for instance, into the cupboard and locked the door, would that be real in the morning? And what would happen to a real object, if he put that in?

He decided to make a double trial.

He stood the plastic Indian tent on the shelf of the cupboard. Beside it he put a Matchbox car. Then he closed the cupboard door. He didn't lock it. He counted slowly to ten.

Then he opened the door.

Nothing had happened.

He closed the door again, and this time locked it with his great-grandmother's key. He decided to give it a bit longer this time, and while he was waiting he lay down in bed. He began counting to ten slowly. He got roughly as far as five before he fell asleep.

He was woken at dawn by Little Bull bawling at him.

The Indian was standing outside the felt tepee on the edge of the table, his hands cupped to his mouth as if shouting across a measureless canyon. As soon as Omri's eyes opened, the Indian shouted: "Day come! Why you still sleep? Time eat – hunt – fight – make painting!"

Omri leapt up. He cried, "Wait" – and almost wrenched the cupboard open.

There on the shelf stood a small tepee made of real leather. Even the stitches on it were real. The poles were twigs, tied together with a strip of hide. The designs were real Indian symbols, put on with bright dyes.

The car was still a toy car made of metal, no more real than it had ever been.

"It works," breathed Omri. And then he caught his breath. "Little Bull!" he shouted. "It works, it works! I can make any plastic toy I like come alive, come real! It's real magic, don't you understand? Magic!"

The Indian stood calmly with folded arms, evidently disapproving of this display of excitement.

"So? Magic. The spirits work much magic. No need wake dead with howls like coyote."

Omri hastily pulled himself together. Never mind the dead, it was his parents he must take care not to wake. He picked up the new tepee and set it down beside the one he had made the night before.

"Here's the good one I promised you," he said.

Little Bull examined it carefully. "No good," he said at last.

"What? Why not?"

"Good tepee, but no good Iroquois brave. See?" He pointed to the painted symbols. "Not Iroquois signs. Algonquin. Enemy. Little Bull sleep there, Iroquois spirits angry."

"Oh," said Omri, disappointed.

"Little Bull like Omri tepee. Need paint. Make strong pictures – Iroquois signs. Please spirits of ancestors."

Omri's disappointment melted into intense pride. He had made a tepee which satisfied his Indian! "It's not finished," he said. "I'll take it to school and finish it in my handicrafts lesson. I'll take out the pins and sew it up properly. Then when I come home I'll give you posterpaints and you can paint your symbols."

"I paint. But must have longhouse. Tepee no good for Iroquois."

"Just for now?"

Little Bull scowled. "Yes," he said. "But very short. Now eat."

"Er ... Yes. What do you like to eat in the mornings?"

"Meat," said the Indian immediately.

"Wouldn't you like some bread and cheese?"

"Meat."

"Or corn? Or some egg?"

The Indian folded his arms uncompromisingly across his chest.

"Meat," said Omri with a sigh. "Yes. Well, I'll have to see what I can do. In the meantime, I think I'd better put you down on the ground."

"Not on ground now?"

"No. You're high above the ground. Go to the edge and look – but don't fall!"

The Indian took no chances. Lying on his stomach he crawled, commando-fashion, to the edge of the chest-of-drawers and peered over.

"Big mountain," he commented at last.

"Well ... " But it seemed too difficult to explain. "May I lift you down?"

Little Bull stood up and looked at Omri measuringly. "Not hold tight?" he asked.

"No. I won't hold you at all. You can ride in my hand."

He laid his hand palm up next to Little Bull, who, after only a moment's hesitation, stepped on to it and, for greater stability, sat down cross-legged. Omri gently transported him to the floor. The Indian rose lithely to his feet and jumped off on to the grey carpet.

At once he began looking about with suspicion. He dropped to his knees, felt the carpet and smelt it.

"Not ground," he said. "Blanket."

"Little Bull, look up."

He obeyed, narrowing his eyes and peering.

"Do you see the sky? Or the sun?"

The Indian shook his head, puzzled.

"That's because we're not outdoors. We're in a room, in a house. A house big enough for people my size. You're not even in America. You're in England."

The Indian's face lit up. "English good! Iroquois fight with English against French!"

"Really?" asked Omri, wishing he had read more. "Did *you* fight?"

"Fight? Little Bull fight like mountain lion! Take many scalps."

Scalps? Omri swallowed. "How many?"

Little Bull proudly held up all ten fingers. Then he closed his fists, opening them again with another lot of ten, and another.

"I don't believe you killed so many people!" said Omri, shocked.

"Little Bull not lie. Great hunter. Great fighter. How show him son of Chief without many scalps?"

"Any white ones?" Omri ventured to ask.

"Some. French. Not take English scalps. Englishmen friends to Iroquois. Help Indian fight Algonquin enemy."

Omri stared at him. He suddenly wanted to get away. "I'll go and get you some – meat," he said in a choking voice.

He went out of his room, closing the bedroom door behind him.

For a moment he did not move, but leant back against the door. He was sweating slightly. This was a bit more than he had bargained for!

Not only was his Indian no mere toy come to life; he was a real person, somehow magicked out of the past of over two hundred years ago. He was also a savage. It occurred to Omri for the first time that his idea of Red Indians, taken entirely from Western films, had been somehow false. After all, those had all been actors playing Indians, and afterwards wiping their war-paint off and going home for their dinners, not in tepees but in houses like his. Civilized men, pretending to be primitive, pretending to be cruel ...

Little Bull was no actor. Omri swallowed hard. Thirty scalps ... phew! Of course things were different in those days. Those tribes were always making war on each other, and come to that the English and French (whatever they thought they were doing, fighting in America) were probably no better, killing each other like mad as often as they could ...

Come to *that*, weren't soldiers of today doing the same thing? Weren't there wars and battles and terrorism going on all over the place? You couldn't switch on television without seeing news about people killing and being killed ... Was thirty scalps, even including some French ones, taken hundreds of years ago, so very bad after all?

Still, when he tried to imagine Little Bull, full size, bent over some French soldier, holding his hair in one hand and running the point of his scalping-knife ... Yuk!

Omri pushed away from the door and walked rather unsteadily downstairs. No wonder he had felt, from the first, slightly afraid of his Indian. He asked himself, swallowing repeatedly and feeling that just the same he might be sick, whether he wouldn't do better to put Little Bull back in the cupboard, lock the door and turn him back into plastic, knife and all.

Down in the kitchen he ransacked his mother's store-cupboard for a tin of meat. He found some corned beef at last and opened it with the tin-opener on the wall. He dug a chunk out with a teaspoon, put it absently into his own mouth and stood there chewing it.

The Indian hadn't seemed very surprised about being in a giant house in England. He had shown that he was very superstitious, believing in magic and good and evil spirits. Perhaps he thought of Omri as – well, some kind of genie, or whatever Indians believed in instead. The wonder was that he wasn't more frightened of him then, for genies, or giants, or Great Spirits, or whatever, were always supposed to be very powerful and often wicked. Omri supposed that if one happened to be the son of an Indian Chief, one simply didn't get scared as easily as ordinary people. Especially, perhaps, if one had taken thirty scalps ...

Maybe Omri ought to tell someone about Little Bull.

The trouble was that although grown-ups usually knew what to do, *what* they did was very seldom what children wanted to be done. What if he took the Indian to – say, some scientists, or – whoever knew about strange things like that, to question him and examine him and probably keep him in a laboratory or something of that sort? They would certainly want to take the cupboard away too, and then Omri wouldn't be able to have any more fun with it at all.

Just when his mind was seething with ideas, such as putting in plastic bows and arrows, and horses, and maybe even other little people – well, no, probably that was too risky, who knew what sort you might land up with? They might start fighting each other! But still, he knew for certain he didn't want to give up his secret, not yet, no matter how many Frenchmen had been scalped.

Having made his decision, for the moment anyway, Omri turned to go upstairs, discovering only halfway up that the tin of corned beef was practically empty. Still, there was a fair-sized bit left in the bottom. It ought to do.

Little Bull was nowhere to be seen, but when Omri called him softly he ran out from under the bed, and stood waving both arms up at Omri.

“Bring meat?”

“Yes.” Omri put it on the miniature plate he’d cut the night before and placed it before the Indian, who seized it in both hands and began to gnaw on it.

“Very good! Soft! Your wife cook this?”

Omri laughed. “I haven’t got a wife.”

The Indian stopped and looked at him. “Omri not got wife? Who grow corn, grind, cook, make clothes, keep arrows sharp?”

“My mother,” said Omri, grinning at the idea of her sharpening arrows. “Have you got a wife then?”

The Indian looked away. After a moment he said, “No.”

“Why not?”

“Dead,” said Little Bull shortly.

“Oh.”

The Indian finished eating in silence and then stood up, wiping his greasy hands on his hair. “Now. Do magic. Make things for Little Bull.”

“What do you want?”

“Gun,” he answered promptly. “White man’s gun. Like English soldier.”

Omri’s brain raced. If a tiny knife could stab, a tiny gun could shoot. Maybe it couldn’t do much harm, but then again, maybe it could.

“No, no gun. But I can make you a bow and arrows. I’ll have to buy plastic ones, though. What else? A horse?”

“Horse!” Little Bull seemed surprised.

“Don’t you ride? I thought all Indians rode.”

Little Bull shook his head.

“English ride. Indians walk.”

“But wouldn’t you like to ride, like the English soldiers?”

Little Bull stood quite still, frowning, wrestling with this novel idea. At last he said, “Maybe. Yes. Maybe. Show horse. Then I see.”

“Okay.”

Again Omri rummaged in the biscuit tin. There were a number of horses here. Big heavy ones for carrying armoured knights. Smaller ones for pulling gun-carriages in the Napoleonic wars. Several cavalry horses – those might be the best. Omri ranged five or six of various sizes and colours before Little Bull, whose black eyes began to shine.

“I have,” he said promptly.

“You mean all of them?”

Little Bull nodded hungrily.

“No, that’s too much. I can’t have herds of horses galloping all over my room. You can choose one.”

“One?” said Little Bull sadly.

“One.”

Little Bull then made a very thorough examination of every horse, feeling their legs, running his hands over their rumps, looking straight into their plastic faces. At last he selected a smallish, brown horse with two white feet which had originally (as far as Omri could remember) carried an Arab, brandishing a curved sword at a platoon of French Foreign Legionnaires.

“Like English horse,” grunted Little Bull.

“And he’s got a saddle and bridle, which will become real too,” gloated Omri.

“Little Bull not want. Ride with rope, bare-back. Not like white soldier,” he added contemptuously, having another spit. “When?”

“I still don’t know how long it takes. We can start now.”

Omri lifted the cupboard onto the floor, shut the horse in and turned the key. Almost at once they could hear the clatter of tiny hooves on metal. They looked at each other with joyful faces.

“Open! Open door!” commanded Little Bull.

Omri lost no time in doing so. There, prancing and pawing the white paint, was a lovely, shiny-coated little brown Arab pony. As the door swung open he shied nervously, turning his face and pricking his ears so far forward they almost met over his forelock. His tiny nostrils flared, and his black tail plumed over his haunches as he gave a high, shrill neigh.

Little Bull cried out in delight.

In a moment he had vaulted over the bottom edge of the cupboard and, as the pony reared in fright, jumped into the air under its flying hooves and grasped the leather reins. The pony fought to free its head, but Little Bull hung on with both hands. Even as the pony plunged and bucked, the Indian had moved from the front to the side. Grasping the high pommel of the saddle he swung himself into it. He ignored the swinging stirrups, holding on by gripping with his knees.

The pony flung himself back on his haunches, then threw himself forward in a mighty buck, head low, heels flying. To Omri’s dismay, Little Bull, instead of clinging on somehow, came loose and flew through the air in a curve, landing on the carpet just beyond the edge of the cupboard.

Omri thought his neck must be broken, but he had landed in a sort of somersault, and was instantly on his feet again. The face he turned to Omri was shining with happiness.

“Crazy horse!” he cried with fierce delight.

The crazy horse was meanwhile standing quite still, reins hanging loose, looking watchfully at the Indian through wild, wide-apart eyes.

This time Little Bull made no sudden moves. He stood quite still for a long time, just looking back at the pony. Then, so slowly you could scarcely notice, he edged towards him, making strange hissing sounds between his clenched teeth which almost seemed to hypnotize the pony. Step by step he moved, softly, cautiously, until he and the pony stood almost nose to nose. Then, quite calmly, Little Bull reached up and laid his hand on the pony’s neck.

That was all. He did not hold the reins. The pony could have jumped away, but he didn’t. He raised his nose a little, so that he and the Indian seemed to be breathing into each other’s nostrils. Then, in a quiet voice, Little Bull said, “Now horse mine. Crazy horse mine.”

Still moving slowly, though not as slowly as before, he took the reins and moved alongside the pony. After a certain amount of fiddling he found out how to unbuckle the straps which held the Arabian saddle, and lifted it off, laying it on the floor. The pony snorted and tossed his head, but did not move. Hissing gently now, the Indian first leant his weight against the pony’s side, then lifted himself up by his arms until he was astride. Letting the reins hang loose on the pony’s neck, he squeezed with his legs. The pony moved forward, as tame and obedient as you please, and the pair rode once round the inside of the cupboard as if it had been a circus arena.

Suddenly Little Bull caught up the reins and pulled them to one side, turning the pony’s head. At the same time Little Bull kicked him sharply. The pony wheeled, and bounded forward towards the edge of the cupboard.

This metal rim, about two centimetres high, was up to the pony’s chest – like a five-barred gate to a full-sized horse. There was no room to ride straight at it, from the back of the cupboard to the front, so Little Bull rode diagonally – a very difficult angle, yet the pony cleared it in a flying leap.

Omri realized at once that the carpet was too soft for him – his feet simply sank into it like soft sand.

“Need ground. Not blanket,” said Little Bull sternly. “Blanket no good for ride.”

Omri looked at his clock. It was still only a little after six in the morning – at least another hour before anyone else would be up.

“I could take you outside,” he said hesitantly.

“Good!” said Little Bull. “But not touch pony. You touch, much fear.”

Omri quickly found a small cardboard box which had held a Matchbox lorry. It even had a sort of window through which he could see what was happening inside. He laid that on the carpet with the end flaps open.

Little Bull rode the pony into the box, and Omri carefully shut the end up and even more carefully lifted it. Then, in his bare feet, he carried the box slowly down the stairs and let himself out through the back door.

It was a lovely fresh summer morning. Omri stood on the back steps with the box in his hands, looking round for a suitable spot. The lawn wasn't much good – the grass would be over the Indian's head in most places. The terrace at the foot of the steps was no use at all, with its hard uneven bricks and the cracks between them. But the path was beaten earth and small stones – real riding-ground if they were careful. Omri walked to the path and laid the Matchbox carton down.

For a moment he hesitated. Could the Indian run away? How fast could such a small pony run? As fast as, say, a mouse? If so, and they wanted to escape, Omri wouldn't be able to catch them. A cat, on the other hand, would. Omri knelt on the path in his pyjamas and put his face to the cellophane 'window'. The Indian stood inside holding the pony's head.

"Little Bull," he said clearly, "we're outdoors now. I'm going to let you out to ride. But remember – you're not on your prairie now. There are mountain lions here, but they're big enough to swallow you whole and the pony too. Don't run away, you wouldn't survive. Do you understand?"

Little Bull looked at him steadily and nodded. Omri opened the flap and Indian and pony stepped out into the morning sunlight.



4

The Great Outdoors

Both horse and man seemed to sniff the air, tasting its freshness and testing it for danger at the same time. The pony was still making circles with his nose when Little Bull sprang onto his back.

The pony, startled, reared slightly, but this time Little Bull clung on to his long mane. The pony's front feet had no sooner touched the path than he was galloping. Omri leapt to his feet and gave chase.

The pony's speed was remarkable, but Omri found that by running along the lawn beside the path he could keep up quite easily. The ground was dry and as Indian and pony raced along, a most satisfying cloud of dust rose behind them so that Omri could easily imagine that they were galloping across some wild, unbroken territory ...

More and more, he found, he was able to see things from the Indians point of view. The little stones on the path became huge boulders which had to be dodged, weeds became trees, the lawn's edge an escarpment twice the height of a man ... As for living things, an ant, scuttling across the pony's path, made him shy wildly. The shadow of a passing bird falling on him brought him to a dead stop, crouching and cowering as a full-sized pony might if some huge bird of prey swooped at him. Once again, Omri marvelled at the courage of Little Bull, faced with all these terrors.

But it was not the courage of recklessness. Little Bull clearly recognized his peril and, when he had had his gallop, turned the pony's head and came trotting back to Omri, who crouched down to hear what he said.

"Danger," said the Indian. "Much. I need bow, arrows, club. Maybe gun?" he asked pleadingly. Omri shook his head. "Then Indian weapons."

"Yes," said Omri. "You need those. I'll find them today. In the meantime we'd better go back in the house."

"Not go shut-in place! Stay here. You stay, drive off wild animals."

"I can't. I've got to go to school."

"What school?"

"A place where you learn."

"Ah! Learn. Good," said Little Bull approvingly. "Learn law of tribe, honour for ancestors, ways of the spirits?"

"Well ... something like that."

Little Bull was clearly reluctant to return to the house, but he had the sense to realize he couldn't cope outside by himself. He galloped back along the path, with Omri running alongside, and dismounting, re-entered the carton.

Omri was just carrying it up the back steps when the back door suddenly opened and there was his father.

"Omri! What on earth are you doing out here in your pyjamas? And nothing on your feet, you naughty boy! What are you up to?"

Omri clutched the box to him so hard in his fright that he felt the sides bend and quickly released his hold. He felt himself break into a sweat.

"Nothing – I – couldn't sleep. I wanted to go out."

"What's wrong with putting on your slippers, at least?"

"Sorry. I forgot."

"Well, hurry up and get dressed now."

Omri rushed upstairs and, panting, laid the box on the floor. He opened the flap. The pony rushed out alone, and stood under the table, whinnying and trembling – he had had a rough ride.

Full of foreboding, Omri bent down and peered into the box. Little Bull was sitting in a corner of it, hugging his leg, which Omri saw, to his horror, was bleeding right through his buckskin leggings.

“Box jump. Pony get fear. Kick Little Bull,” said the Indian, who, though calm, was clearly in pain.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” cried Omri. “Can you come out? I’ll see what I can do.”

Little Bull stood up and walked out of the box. He did not let himself limp.

“Take off your leggings – let me see the cut,” said Omri.

The Indian obeyed him and stood in his breech-cloth. On his tiny leg was a wound from the pony’s hoof, streaming blood onto the carpet. Omri didn’t know what to do, but Little Bull did.

“Water,” he ordered. “Cloths.”

Omri, through his panic, forced himself to think clearly. He had water in a toothmug by his bed, but that would not be clean enough to wash a wound. His mother had some Listerine in her medicine cupboard; when any of the boys had a cut she would add a few drops to some warm water and that was a disinfectant.

Omri dashed to the bathroom, and with trembling hands did what he had seen his mother do. He took a small piece of cotton-wool. What could be used as a bandage he had no idea at all. But he hurried back with the water, and poured some into the Action Man’s mess-tin. The Indian tore off a minute wisp of cotton-wool and dipped it into the liquid and applied it to his leg.

The Indian’s eyes opened wide though he did not wince. “This not water! This fire!”

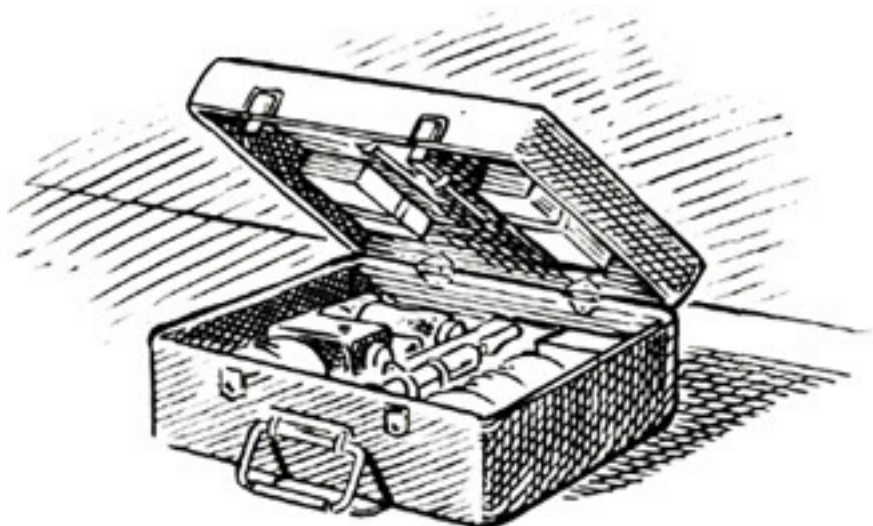
“It’s better than water.”

“Now tie,” said the Indian next. “Hold in blood.”

Omri looked round desperately. A bandage small enough for a wound like that! Suddenly his eyes lighted on the biscuit tin. There, lying on top, was a First World War soldier with the red armband of a medical orderly. In his hand was a doctor’s bag with a red cross on it. What might that contain if Omri could make it real?

Not stopping to think too far ahead, he snatched the figure up and thrust it into the cupboard, shutting the door and turning the key.

A moment later a thin English voice from inside called: “Here! Where am I? Come back you blokes – don’t leave a chap alone in the dark!”



5 *Tommy*

Omri felt himself grow weak. What an idiot he'd been! Not to have realized that the man and not just the medical bag would be changed! Or had he? After all, what did he need more just then than a bandage of the right size for the Indian? *Someone* of the right size to put it on! And, unless he was sadly mistaken, that was just what was waiting inside the magic cupboard.

He unlocked the door.

Yes, there he was – pink cheeked, tousle-headed under his army cap, his uniform creased and mud-spattered and blood-stained, looking angry, frightened and bewildered.

He rubbed his eyes with his free hand.

“Praise be for a bit of daylight, anyway,” he said. “What the—”

Then he opened his eyes and saw Omri.

Omri actually saw him go white, and his knees gave way under him. He uttered a few sounds, half curses and half just noises. He dropped the bag and hid his face for a moment. Omri said hastily:

“Please don't be afraid. It's all right. I—” Then he had an absolute inspiration! “I'm a dream you're having. I won't hurt you, I just want you to do something for me, and then you'll wake up.”

Slowly the little man lowered his hands and looked up again.

“A dream, is it? Well ... I should've guessed. Yes, of course. It would be. The whole rotten war's nightmare enough, though, without giants and – and—” He stared round Omri's room. “Still and all, perhaps it's a change for the better. At least it's quiet here.”

“Can you bring your bag and climb out? I need your help.”

The soldier now managed a rather sickly smile and tipped his cap in a sort of salute. “Right you are! With you in a tick,” he said, and picking up the bag, clambered over the edge of the cupboard.

“Stand on my hand,” Omri commanded.

The soldier did not hesitate a moment, but swung himself up by hooking his free arm round Omri's little finger. “Bit of a lark, this,” he remarked. “I won't half enjoy telling the fellows about this dream of mine in the trenches tomorrow!”

Omri carried him to the spot where Little Bull sat on the carpet holding his leg which was still bleeding. The soldier stepped down and stood, knee-deep in carpet-pile, staring.

“Well, I'll be jiggered!” he breathed. “A bloomin' redskin! This is a rum dream and no mistake! And wounded, too. Well, I suppose that's my job, is it – to patch him up?”

“Yes, please,” said Omri.

Without more ado, the soldier put the bag on the floor and snapped open its all-but-invisible catches. Omri leant over to see. Now he really did need a magnifying glass, and so badly did he want to see the details of that miniature doctor's bag that he risked sneaking into Gillon's room (Gillon always slept late, and anyway it wasn't seven o'clock yet) and pinching his from his secret drawer.

By the time he got back to his own room, the soldier was kneeling at Little Bull's feet, applying a neat tourniquet to the top of his leg. Omri peered through the magnifying glass into the open bag. It was amazing – everything was there, bottles, pill-boxes, ointments, some steel instruments including a tiny hypodermic needle, and as many rolls of bandages as you could want.

Omri then ventured to look at the wound. Yes, it was quite deep – the pony must have given him a terrific kick.

That reminded him – where was the pony? He looked round in a fright. But he soon saw it, trying forlornly to eat the carpet. “I must get it some grass,” thought Omri, meanwhile offering it a small piece of stale bread which it ate gratefully, and then some water in a tin lid. It was odd how the pony was not frightened of him. Perhaps it couldn't see him very well.

“There now, he'll do,” said the soldier, getting up.

Omri looked at the Indian's leg through his magnifying glass. The wound was bandaged beautifully. Even Little Bull was examining it with obvious approval.

"Thank you very much," said Omri. "Would you like to wake up now?"

"Might as well, I suppose. Not that there's much to look forward to except mud and rats and German shells coming over ... Still. Got to win the war, haven't we? Can't desert, even into a dream, not for long that is – duty calls and all that, eh?"

Omri gently picked him up and put him into the cupboard.

"Goodbye," he said. "Perhaps, some time, you could dream me again."

"A pleasure," said the soldier cheerfully. "Tommy Atkins, at your service. Any night, except when there's an attack on – none of us gets any sleep to speak of then." And he gave Omri a smart salute.

Regretfully Omri shut and locked the door. He was tempted to keep the soldier, but it was too complicated just now. Anyway he could always bring him back to life again if he liked ... A moment or two later he opened the door again to check. There was the orderly, bag in hand, standing just as Omri had last seen him, at the salute. Only now he was plastic again.

Little Bull was calmly pulling on his blood-stained leggings.

"Good magic," he remarked. "Leg better."

"Little Bull, what will you do all day while I'm at school?"

"You bring bark of tree. Little Bull make longhouse."

"What's that?"

"Iroquois house. Need earth, stick posts in."

"*Earth? Posts?*"

"Earth. Posts. Bark. Not forget food. Weapons. Tools. Pots. Water. Fire—"

There were no quarrels at breakfast that morning. Omri gulped down his egg and ran. In the greenhouse he found a seed-tray already full of soil, well pressed down. He carried that secretly upstairs and laid it on the floor behind the dressing-up crate, which he was pretty sure his mother wouldn't shift even if it was her cleaning day. Then he took his penknife and went out again.

Fortunately one of the trees in the garden had the sort of bark which came off easily – a silvery, flaky kind. He cut off a biggish strip, and then another to make sure (how long *was* a longhouse?). He pulled some grass for the pony. He cut a bundle of thin, strong, straight twigs and stripped off their leaves. Then he went back to his room and laid all these offerings beside Little Bull, who was seated cross-legged outside his tepee, arms folded, eyes closed, apparently saying his prayers.

"Omri!" came his mother's call from downstairs. "Time to go!"

Omri took out of his pocket the corner of toast he'd saved from breakfast and cleaned out the last of the corned beef from the tin. There was some corn left as well, though it was getting rather dry by now. He filled up the Action Man's beaker with water from the bathroom, pouring a little into the pony's drinking-lid. The pony was munching the fresh grass with every sign of enjoyment. Omri noticed its bridle had been replaced with a halter, cleverly made of a length of thread.

"Omri!"

"Just coming!"

"The others have gone! Hurry up, you'll be late!"

One last thing! Little Bull couldn't make a longhouse without some sort of tool beside his knife. He'd need an axe. Frantically Omri rummaged in the biscuit tin. Ah! A knight, wielding a fearsome-looking battle axe. It wasn't right, but it was better than nothing and would have to do. In a second the knight was locked in the cupboard.

"*Omri!*"

"One second!"

"What are you *doing?*"

Crash! The axe was being used on the inside of the cupboard door!

Omri wrenched it open, snatched the axe from the startled hands of the knight, who had just time for one horrified look before he was reduced to plastic again by the slamming of the door. Never mind! He had looked most unpleasant, just as knights must have looked when they were murdering the poor Saracens in Palestine. Omri had very little time for knights.

The axe was a beauty, though. Shining steel, with a sharp edge on both sides of the head, and a long heavy steel handle. Omri laid it at Little Bull's side.

“Little Bull—”

But he was still in a trance – communicating with his ancestors, Omri supposed. Well, he would find everything when he came to. There was quite a trail of spilt earth leading behind the crate. Omri flashed down the stairs, grabbed his anorak and his lunch-money and was gone.



6

The Chief is Dead, Long Live the Chief

He got to school early by running all the way. The first thing he did was to head for the upper school library shelves. He felt that a Ladybird book on Indian tribes would not meet the situation; he wanted a much more grown-up book. And to his joy, he soon found one, under the section labelled 'Peoples of the World' – a book called *On the Trail of the Iroquois*.

He couldn't take it out because there was nobody there to write him down for it; but he sat down then and there on a bench and began to read it.

Omri was not what you'd call a great reader. He couldn't get into books, somehow, unless he knew them already. And how, as his teacher never tired of asking, was he ever going to get to know any more books until he read them for the first time?

And this *On the Trail of the Iroquois* was not exactly a comic. Tiny print, hardly any pictures, and no fewer than three hundred pages 'Getting into' it was obviously out of the question, so Omri just dipped.

He managed to find out one or two fairly interesting things straight away. Iroquois Indians were sometimes called 'The Five Nations'. One of the five were the Mohawks, a tribe Omri had heard of. They had indeed lived in longhouses, not wigwams, and their main foods had been maize and squash (whatever they were) and beans. These vegetables had, for some strange reason, been called 'The Three Sisters'.

There were many mentions of the Algonquins as the Iroquois' enemies, and Omri confirmed that the Iroquois had fought beside the English while the Algonquins fought for the French some time in the 1700s, and that both sides had scalped like mad.

At this point he began to get really interested. The book, in its terribly grown-up way, was trying to tell him something about *why* the Indians had done such a lot of scalping. Omri had always thought it was just an Indian custom, but the book seemed to say that it wasn't at all, at least not till the White Man came. The White Man seemed to have made the Iroquois and the Algonquin keen on scalping each other, not to mention scalping White Men, French or English as the case might be, by offering them money and whisky, and guns ... Omri was deep in the book, frowning heavily, several minutes after the bell had rung. Someone had to tap him on the shoulder and tell him to hurry in to Assembly.

The morning lasted forever. Three times his teacher had cause to tell Omri to wake up. At last Patrick leant over and whispered, "You're even dreamier than usual today. What's up?"

"I'm thinking about your Indian."

"Listen," hissed Patrick. "I think you're having me on about that Indian. It was nothing so marvellous. You can buy them for a few pence in Yapp's." (Yapp's was their local newsagent and toyshop.)

"I know, and all the equipment for them! I'm going shopping at lunchbreak; are you coming?"

"We're not allowed out of school at lunch unless we eat at home, you know that!"

"I'm going anyway. I've got to."

"Go after school."

"No, I've got to go home after school."

"What? Aren't you staying to skateboard?"

"*Omri and Patrick!* Will you kindly stop chattering?"

They stopped.

At long last lunchtime came.

"I'm going. Are you coming?"

"No. There'll only be trouble."

"I can't help that."

“You’re a twit.”

Twit or not, Omri sneaked out, ran across the playground, through a hole in the fence (the front gate was locked to keep the infants from going in the road) and in five minutes, by running all the way, had reached Yapp’s.

The selection of plastic figures there was good. There was one whole box of mixed cowboys and Indians. Omri searched till he found a Chief wearing a cloak and a full feather headdress, with a bow in his hand and a quiverful of arrows slung across his back. Omri bought it with part of his lunch money and rushed back to school before he could be missed.

He showed the Chief to Patrick.

“Why get another Indian?”

“Only for the bow and arrows.”

Patrick was now looking at him as if he’d gone completely screwy.

In the afternoon, mercifully, they had two periods of handicrafts.

Omri had completely forgotten to bring the tent he’d made, but there were plenty of scraps of felt, sticks, needles and thread lying about the handicrafts room and he’d soon made another one, much better than the first. Sewing had always bored him rigid, but now he sat for half an hour stitching away without even looking up. He was trying to achieve the patched look of a real tepee made of odd-shaped pieces of hide, and he also found a way of bracing the sticks so that they didn’t fold up every time they were nudged.

“Very good, Omri!” remarked his teacher several times. “What patience all of a sudden!” Omri, who usually liked praise as much as anyone, hardly heard her, he was concentrating so hard.

After a long time he became aware that Patrick was standing over him, breathing through his nose rather noisily to attract his attention.

“Is that for my Indian?”

“My Indian. Yes.”

“Why are you doing it in bits like that?”

“To be like a real one.”

“Real ones have designs on.”

“So will this. He’s going to paint proper Iroquois ones.”

“Who is?”

“Little Bull. That’s his name.”

“Why not call him Running Nose?” asked Patrick with a grin.

Omri looked up at him blankly. “Because his name’s Little Bull,” he said. Patrick stopped grinning. He frowned.

“I wish you’d stop this stupid business,” he said peevishly. “Going on as if it weren’t a joke.”

Omri went on looking at him for a moment and then went back to his bracing. Each pair of sticks had to have another, short stick glued between them with Airfix glue. It was quite tricky. Patrick stood a minute and then said, “Can I come home with you *today*?”

“No. I’m sorry.”

“Why not?”

“Mum’s having guests,” Omri mumbled. He didn’t tell lies very well, and Patrick knew at once it was a lie and was hurt.

“Oh, all right then, be like that,” he said, and stalked off furiously.

The afternoon ended at last. Omri accomplished the walk home, which with normal dawdling took half an hour, in a little over ten minutes. He arrived sorely out of breath and greeted his surprised mother (“Have you developed a jetengine, or have you been expelled?”) with a lot of gasping and a request to eat tea in his room.

“What have you been up to, up there? There’s an awful mess on the floor – looks like bits of grass and bark. And where *did* you get that beautiful little Indian tepee? I think it’s made of real leather.”

Omri looked at her, speechless. “I—” he began at last. Telling lies to Patrick was one thing. Lying to his mother was quite something else and he never did it unless the emergency was dire. But mercifully the phone rang just then, so he was spared – for the moment. He dashed upstairs.

There was indeed a fair old mess, though no worse than he often left himself when he’d been working on something. Little Bull and the pony were nowhere to be seen, but Omri guessed where to look – behind the dressing-up crate.

A wonderful sight met his eyes. A longhouse – not quite finished, but no less interesting and beautiful for that – stood on the seed-box, whose smooth surface was now much trampled over. There were hoof- as well as moccasin-prints. Omri saw that a ramp, made of part of the bark, had been laid against the wooden side of the box, up which the pony had been led – to Omri’s delight (odd as it may seem) a tiny pile of horse-manure lay on the ramp as proof of the pony’s passing. And there he was, tied by a thread to an upright twig hammered (presumably) into the ground, munching a small pile of grass which the Indian had carried up for him.

Little Bull himself was still working, so intently that he did not even notice he was not alone. Omri watched him in utter fascination. The longhouse was about half finished. The twigs, which had been pliant ones taken from the weeping-willow on the lawn, had been stripped of their bark, leaving them shining white. Each one had then been bent into an arch, the ends thrust into the earth, and cross-pieces lashed to the sides with thread. More and more twigs (which were stout poles to the Indian) had been added, with never a nail or a screw needed, to strengthen the structure, and now Little Bull had begun to fix flakes of bark like tiny tiles, on to the cross-pieces.

He was seated on the roof itself, his feet locked round the main roof-pole which ran the length of the house hanging these bark-tiles, each of which he would first carefully shape with his knife. The knight’s battle-axe lay on the ground beside an unused pile of twigs. It had clearly been used to chop and strip them and had been made to serve Little Bull’s purpose very well.

At last Omri saw him straighten up, stretch his arm towards the ceiling, and open his mouth in a tremendous noisy yawn.

“Tired?” he asked him.

Little Bull got such a fright he almost fell off the longhouse roof, and the pony neighed and tugged at his rope. But then Little Bull looked up and saw Omri hanging over the crate far above him, and grinned.

“Little Bull tired. Work many hour. Look! Make longhouse. Work for many braves. I make alone. Also not good tools. Axe Omri give heavy. Why no tomahawk?”

Omri was getting used to his Indian’s ungrateful ways and was not offended. He showed him the tepee he’d made. “I suppose you won’t want this, now you’ve got your longhouse,” he said rather sadly.

“Want! Want!” He seemed to have decided tepees had their uses after all. He circled it. “Good! Give paints. Make pictures.”

Omri unearthed his poster paints. When he came back with them, he found Little Bull sitting cross-legged on the earth, facing the figure of the Chief which Omri had put next to the tepee. Little Bull was clearly puzzled.

“Totem?” he asked.

“No! It’s plastic.”

“Plass-tick?”

“Yes. I bought it in a shop.”

Little Bull stared at the figure with its big feather headdress.

“You make magic, get bow and arrows from plass-tick?”

“Yes.”

“Also make feathers real?” he asked, with a gleam in his eye.

“You like that headdress?”

“Little Bull like. But that for Chief. Little Bull not Chief till father die. Little Bull wear feathers of Chief now, spirits angry.”

“But you could just try it on?”

Little Bull looked doubtful but he nodded.

“Make real. Then see.”

Omri shut the Indian Chief into the cupboard. Before he turned the key, he leant down to where Little Bull was examining the (to him) enormous pots of paint.

“Little Bull, are you lonely?”

“Huh?”

“Would you like a – friend?”

“Got friend,” said the Indian, jerking his head towards the pony.

“I meant, another Indian.”

Little Bull looked up swiftly, his hands still. There was a long silence.

“Wife?” he asked at last.

“No, it’s a man,” said Omri. “The – Chief.”

“Not want,” said Little Bull immediately, and went back to his work with a bent head.

Omri was disappointed. He had thought it might be fun to have two Indians. But somehow he couldn’t do anything Little Bull didn’t want. He would have to treat this Chief as he had treated the knight – grab the weapons and turn him back into plastic again at once.

Only this time it wasn’t quite so easy.

When he opened the cupboard, the Chief was sitting on the shelf, looking about him in bewilderment, blinking as the light struck his eyes. Omri saw at once that he was a very old man, covered in wrinkles. He took the bow out of his hands quite easily. But the quiverful of arrows was hung round him on a leather thong, and as for actually lifting the feathered headdress off his grey old head, Omri found he just couldn’t bring himself to do it. It seemed so rude.

The old man gazed up at him, blankly at first, and then with dawning terror. But he didn’t get up and he didn’t speak, though Omri saw his lips moving and noticed he had hardly any teeth.

Omri somehow felt he should offer the old Chief some friendly word to reassure him. So he held up one hand, as white men sometimes did in films when they were treating Indian Chiefs with politeness, and said, “How.”

The old Indian lifted a trembling hand, and then suddenly he slumped on to his side.

“Little Bull! Little Bull! Quick, get on to my hand!”

Omri reached down and Little Bull climbed on to his hand from the longhouse roof.

“What?”

“The old Indian – I think he’s fainted!”

He carried Little Bull to the cupboard and Little Bull stepped off on to the shelf. He stooped beside the crumpled figure. Taking the single feather out of the back of his own headband he held it in front of the old man’s mouth. Then he shook his head.

“Dead,” he said. “No breath. Heart stop. Old man. Gone to ancestors, very happy.” Without more ado, he began to strip the body, taking the headdress, the arrows, and the big, richly-decorated cloak for good measure.

Omri was shocked.

“Little Bull, stop. Surely you shouldn’t—”

“Chief dead; I only other Indian here. No one else to be Chief. Little Bull Chief now,” he said, whirling the cloak about his own bare shoulders and clapping the splendid circle of feathers on to his head with a flourish. He picked up the quiver.

“Omri give bow!” he commanded. And it was a command. Omri obeyed it without thinking. “Now! You make magic. Deer for Little Bull hunt. Fire for cook. Good meat!” He folded his arms, scowling up at Omri.

Omri was quite taken aback by all this. While giving Little Bull every respect as a person, he was not about to be turned into his slave. He began to wonder if giving him those weapons, let alone letting him make himself into a Chief, was such a good idea.

“Now look here, Little Bull—” he began, in a teacherish tone.

“OMRI!”

It was his father’s voice, fairly roaring at him from the foot of the stairs. Omri jumped, bumping the cupboard. Little Bull fell over backwards, considerably spoiling his dignity.

“Yes?”

“COME DOWN HERE THIS INSTANT!”

Omri had no time for courtesies. He snatched Little Bull up, set him down near his half-finished longhouse, shut and locked the cupboard and ran downstairs.

His father was waiting for him.

“Omri, have you been in the greenhouse lately?”

“Er—”

“And did you, while you were there, remove a seed-tray planted out with marrow seeds, *may I ask?*”

“Well, I—”

“Yes or no.”

“Well, yes, but—”

“And is it possible that in addition you have been hacking at the trunk of the birch and torn off strips of bark?”

“But Dad, it was only—”

“Don’t you know trees can *die* if you strip too much of their bark off? It’s like their skin! As for the seed-tray, that is *mine*. You’ve no business taking things from the greenhouse and you know it. Now I want it back, and you’d better not have disturbed the seeds or heaven help you!”

Omri swallowed hard. He and his father stared at each other.

“I can’t give it back,” he said at last. “But I’ll buy you another tray and some more seeds. I’ve got enough money. *Please.*”

Omri’s father had a quick temper, especially about anything concerning the garden, but he was not unreasonable, and above all he was not the sort to pry into his children’s secrets. He realized at once that his seed-tray, as a seed-tray, was lost to him forever and that it was no use hectoring Omri about it.

“All right,” he said. “You can go to the hardware shop and buy them, but I want them today.”

Omri’s face fell.

“Today? But it’s nearly five o’clock now.”

“Precisely. Be off.”



7

Uninvited Brothers

Omri was not allowed to ride his bicycle in the road, but then he wasn't supposed to ride it on the pavement either, not fast at any rate, so he compromised. He rode it slowly on the pavement as far as the corner, then bumped down off the curb and went like the wind.

The hardware shop was still open. He bought the seed-tray and the seeds and was just paying for them when he noticed something. On the seed packet, under the word 'Marrow' was written another word in brackets: 'Squash'.

So one of the 'Three Sisters' was marrow! On impulse he asked the shopkeeper, "Do you know what maize is?"

"Maize, son? That's sweetcorn, isn't it?"

"Have you some seeds of that?"

Outside, standing by Omri's bike, was Patrick.

"Hi."

"Hi. I saw you going in. What did you get?"

Omri showed him.

"More presents for the Indian?" Patrick asked sarcastically.

"Well, sort of. If—"

"If what?"

"If I can keep him long enough. Till they grow."

Patrick stared at him and Omri stared back.

"I've been to Yapp's," said Patrick. "I bought you something."

"Yeah? What?" asked Omri, hopefully.

Slowly Patrick took his hand out of his pocket, held it in front of him and opened the fingers. In his palm lay a cowboy on a horse, with a pistol in one hand pointing upward, or what would have been upward if it hadn't been lying on its side.

Omri looked at it silently. Then he shook his head.

"I'm sorry. I don't want it."

"Why not? Now you can play a proper game with the Indian."

"They'd fight."

"Isn't that the whole idea?"

"They might hurt each other."

There was a pause, and then Patrick leant forward and asked, very slowly and loudly, "*How can they hurt each other? They are made of plastic!*"

"Listen," said Omri, and then stopped, and then started again. "The Indian isn't plastic. He's real."

Patrick heaved a deep, deep sigh and put the cowboy back in his pocket. He'd been friends with Omri for years, ever since they'd started school. They knew each other very well. Just as Patrick knew when Omri was lying, he also knew when he wasn't. The only trouble was that this was a non-lie he couldn't believe.

"I want to see him," he said.

Omri debated with himself. He somehow felt that if he didn't share his secret with Patrick, their friendship would be over. He didn't want that. And besides, the thrill of showing his Indian to someone else was something he could not do without for much longer.

"Okay. Come on."

Going home they broke the law even more, riding on the road *and* with Patrick on the crossbar. They went round the back way by the alley in case anyone happened to be looking out of a window.

Omri said, “He wants a fire. I suppose we can’t make one indoors.”

“You could, on a tin plate, like for indoor fireworks,” said Patrick.

Omri looked at him.

“Let’s collect some twigs.”

Patrick picked up a twig about a foot long. Omri laughed.

“That’s no good! They’ve got to be tiny twigs. Like this.” And he picked some slivers off the privet hedge.

“Does he want the fire to cook on?” asked Patrick slowly.

“Yes.”

“Then that’s no use. A fire made of those would burn out in a couple of seconds.”

Omri hadn’t thought of that.

“What you need,” said Patrick, “is a little ball of tar. That burns for ages. And you could put the twigs on top to look like a real campfire.”

“That’s a brilliant idea!”

“I know where they’ve been tarring a road, too,” said Patrick.

“Come on, let’s go.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t believe in him yet. I want to see.”

“All right. But first I have to give this stuff to my dad.”

There was a further delay when his father at first insisted on Omri filling the seed-tray with compost and planting the seeds in it then and there. But when Omri gave him the corn seed as a present he said, “Well! Thanks. Oh, all right, I can see you’re bursting to get away. You can do the planting tomorrow before school.”

Omri and Patrick rushed upstairs. At the top Omri stopped, cold. His bedroom door, which he always shut automatically, was wide open. And just inside, crouching side by side with their backs to him, were his brothers.

They were so absolutely still that Omri knew they were watching something. He couldn’t bear it. They had come into his room without his permission, and they had seen his Indian. Now they would tell everybody! His secret, his precious secret, his alone to keep or share, was a secret no more. Something broke inside him and he heard himself scream: “Get out of my room! Get out of my room!”

Both boys spun round.

“Shut up, you’ll frighten him,” said Adiel at once. “Gillon came in to look for his rat and he found it, and then he saw this absolutely fabulous little house you’ve made and he called me in to look at it.”

Omri looked at the floor. The seed-tray, with the longhouse now nearly finished, had been moved into the centre of the room. It was *that* they had been looking at. A quick glance all round showed no sign of Indian or pony, but Gillon’s tame white rat was on his shoulder.

“I can’t get over it,” Adiel went on. “How on earth did you do it, without using any Airfix glue or anything? It’s all done with tiny little threads, and pegs, and – look, Gillon! It’s all made of real twigs and bark. It’s absolutely *terrific*,” he said with such awe-struck admiration in his voice that Omri felt ashamed.

“I didn’t—” he began. But Patrick, who had been gaping at the longhouse in amazement, gave him a heavy nudge which nearly knocked him over.

“Yes,” said Omri. “Well. Would you mind pushing off now? And take the rat. You’re not to let him in here! This *is* my room, you know.”

“And this *is* my magnifying glass, you know,” echoed Gillon, but he was obviously too overcome with admiration to be angry with Omri for pinching it. He was using it now to examine the fine details

of the building. “I knew you were good at making things,” he said. “But this is amazing. You must have fingers like a fairy to tie those *witchy* little knots. What’s that?” he asked suddenly.

They’d all heard it – a high, faint whinny coming from under the bed.

Omri was galvanized into action. At all costs he must prevent their finding out now! He flung himself on his knees and pretended to grope under the bed. “It’s nothing, only that little clockwork dolphin I got in my Christmas stocking,” he burred. “I must have wound it up and it suddenly started clicking, you know how they do, it’s quite creepy sometimes when they suddenly start – clicking—”

By this time he’d leapt up again and was almost pushing the two older boys out of the room.

“Why are you in such a hurry to get rid of us?” asked Gillon suspiciously.

“Just *go*, you know you have to get out of my room when I ask you—” He could hear the pony whinnying again and it didn’t sound a bit like a dolphin.

“That sounds just like a pony,” said Adiel.

“Oh, *beard* it’s a pony, a tiny witchy pony under my bed!” said Omri mockingly.

At last they went, not without glancing back suspiciously several times, and Omri slammed the door, bolted it, and leant against it with closed eyes.

“*Is* it a pony?” whispered Patrick, agog.

Omri nodded. Then he opened his eyes, lay down again, and peered under the bed.

“Give me that torch from the chest-of-drawers.”

Patrick gave it to him and lay beside him. They peered together as the torch-beam probed the darkness.

“Crumbs!” breathed Patrick reverently. “It’s true!”

The pony was standing, seemingly alone, whinnying. When the torchlight hit him he stopped and turned his head. Omri could see a pair of leggings behind him.

“It’s all right, Little Bull, it’s me!” said Omri.

Slowly a crest of feathers, then the top of a black head, then a pair of eyes appeared over the pony’s back.

“Who they others?” he asked.

“My brothers. It’s okay, they didn’t see you.”

“Little Bull hear coming. Take pony, run, hide.”

“Good. Come on out and meet my friend Patrick.”

Little Bull jumped astride the pony and rode proudly out, wearing his new cloak and headdress. He gazed up imperiously at Patrick, who gazed back in wonder.

“Say something to him,” whispered Omri. “Say ‘How’. That’s what he’s used to.”

Patrick tried several times to say ‘How’ but his voice just came out as a squeak. Little Bull solemnly raised an arm in salute.

“Omri’s friend, Little Bull’s friend,” he said magnanimously.

Patrick swallowed. His eyes seemed in danger of popping right out of his head.

Little Bull waited politely, but when Patrick didn’t speak he rode over to the seed-tray. The boys had brought it out from behind the crate; they’d been careful, but the ramp had got moved. Omri hurried to put it back, and Little Bull rode the pony up it, dismounted and tied it by its halter to the post he had driven into the compost. Then he went calmly on with his work on his longhouse, hanging the last few tiles.

Patrick licked his lips, swallowed twice more, and croaked out, “He’s real. He’s a real live Indian.”

“I told you.”

“How did it happen?”

“Don’t ask me. Something to do with this cupboard, or maybe it’s the key – it’s very old. You lock plastic people inside, and they come alive.”

Patrick goggled at him. “You mean – it’s not only him? You can do it with any toy?”

“Only plastic ones.”

An incredulous grin spread over Patrick’s face.

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s bring loads of things to life! Whole armies—”

And he sprang towards the biscuit tins. Omri grabbed him.

“No, wait! It’s not so simple.”

Patrick, his hands already full of soldiers, was making for the cupboard. “Why not?”

“Because they’d all – don’t you see – they’d be *real*.”

“Real? What do you mean?”

“Little Bull isn’t a toy. He’s a real man. He really lived. Maybe he’s still – I don’t know – he’s in the middle of his life – somewhere in America in seventeen-something-or-other. He’s from the *past*,” Omri struggled to explain as Patrick looked blank.

“I don’t get it.”

“Listen. Little Bull has told me about his life. He’s fought in wars, and scalped people, and grown stuff to eat like marrows and stuff, and had a wife. She died. He doesn’t know how he got here but he thinks it’s magic and he accepts magic, he believes in it, he thinks I’m some kind of spirit or something. What I mean,” Omri persisted, as Patrick’s eyes strayed longingly to the cupboard, “is that if you put all those men in there, when they came to life they’d be real men with real lives of their own, from their own times and countries, talking their own languages. You couldn’t just – set them up and make them do what you wanted them to. They’d do what *they* wanted to, or they might get terrified and run away or – well, one I tried it with, an old Indian, actually died of – of fright. When he saw me. Look, if you don’t believe me!” And Omri opened the cupboard.

There lay the body of the old Chief, now made of plastic, but still unmistakably dead, and not dead the way some plastic soldiers are made to look dead but the way real people look – crumpled up, empty.

Patrick picked it up, turning it in his hand. He’d put the soldiers down by now.

“This isn’t the one you bought at lunchtime?”

“Yes.”

“Crumbs.”

“You see?”

“Where’s his headdress?”

“Little Bull took it. He says he’s a Chief now. It’s made him even more bossy and – *difficult* than before,” said Omri, using a word his mother often used when he was insisting on having his own way.

Patrick put the dead Indian down hurriedly and wiped his hand on the seat of his jeans.

“Maybe this isn’t such fun as I thought.”

Omri considered for a moment.

“No,” he agreed soberly. “It’s not *fun*.”

They stared at Little Bull. He had finished the shell of the longhouse now. Taking off his headdress he tucked it under his arm, stooped, and entered through the low doorway at one end. After a moment he came out and looked up at Omri.

“Little Bull hungry,” he said. “You get deer? Bear? Moose?”

“No.”

He scowled. “I say get. Why you not get?”

“The shops are shut. Besides,” added Omri, thinking he sounded rather feeble, especially in front of Patrick, “I’m not sure I like the idea of having bears shambling about my room, *or* of having them killed. I’ll give you meat and a fire and you can cook it and that’ll have to do.”

Little Bull looked baffled for a moment. Then he swiftly put on the headdress, and drew himself to his full height of seven centimetres (nearly eight with the feathers). He folded his arms and glared at Omri.

“Little Bull Chief now. Chief hunts. Kills own meat. Not take meat others kill. If not hunt, lose skill with bow. For today, you give meat. Tomorrow, go shop, get bear, plass-tick. Make real. I hunt. Not here,” he added, looking up scornfully at the distant ceiling. “Out. Under sky. Now fire.”

Patrick, who had been crouching, stood up. He, too, seemed to be under Little Bull’s spell.

“I’ll go and get the tar,” he said.

“No wait a minute,” said Omri. “I’ve got another idea.”

He ran downstairs. Fortunately the living-room was empty. In the coal-scuttle beside the open fireplace was a packet of firelighters. He broke a fairly large bit off one and wrapped it in a scrap of newspaper. Then he went to the kitchen. His mother was standing at the sink peeling apples.

Omri hesitated, then went to the fridge.

“Don’t eat now, Omri, it’s nearly suppertime.”

“Just a tiny bit,” he said.

There was a lovely chunk of raw meat on a plate. Omri sniffed his fingers, wiped them hard on his sweater to get the stink of the firelighter off them, then took a big carving-knife from the drawer and, with an anxious glance at his mother’s back, began sawing a corner off the meat.

Luckily it was steak and cut easily. Even so he nearly had the whole plate off the fridge shelf and onto the floor before he’d cut his corner off.

His mother swung round just as he closed the fridge door.

“A tiny bit of what?” she asked. She often reacted late to things he said.

“Nothing,” he said, hiding the raw bit of meat in his hand. “Mum, could I borrow a tin plate?”

“I haven’t got such a thing.”

“Yes you have, the one you bought Adiel to go camping.”

“That’s in Adiel’s room somewhere, I haven’t got it. A tiny bit of *what?*”

But Omri was already on his way upstairs. Adiel was in his room (he would be) doing his homework.

“What do *you* want?” he asked the second Omri crept in.

“That plate – you know – your camping one.”

“Oh, that!” said Adiel, going back to his French.

“Well, can I have it?”

“Yeah, I suppose so. It’s over there somewhere.”

Omri found it eventually in an old knapsack, covered with disgusting bits of baked beans, dry and hard as cement. He hurried across to his own room. Whenever he’d been away from it for even a few minutes, he felt his heart beating in panic as he opened the door for fear of what he might find (or not find). The burden of constant worry was beginning to wear him out.

But all was as he had left it this time. Patrick was crouching near the seed-tray Little Bull was directing him to take the tops off several of the jars of poster paint while he himself fashioned something almost too small to see.

“It’s a paintbrush,” whispered Patrick. “He cut a bit of his own hair and he’s tying it to a scrap of wood he found about the size of a big splinter.”

“Pour a bit of paint into the lids so he can reach to dip,” said Omri.

Meanwhile he was scraping the dry beans off the plate with his nails. He took the fragment of firelighter and the privet-twigs out of his pocket and arranged them in the centre of the plate. He washed the bit of meat in his bedside water glass. He’d had a wonderful idea for a spit to cook it on. From a flat box in which his first Meccano set had once been neatly laid out, but which was not in chaos, he took a rod, ready bent into a handle shape, and pushed this through the meat. Then, from small bits of Meccano, he quickly made a sort of stand for it to rest on, with legs each side of the fire so that the meat hung over the middle of it.

“Let’s light it now!” said Patrick, who was getting very excited again.

“Little Bull – come and see your fire,” said Omri.

Little Bull looked up from his paints and then ran down the ramp, across the carpet and vaulted onto the edge of the plate. Omri struck a match and lit the firelighter, which flared up at once with a bluish flame, engulfing the twigs and the meat at once. The twigs gave off a gratifying crackle while they lasted, but the firelighter gave off a very ungratifying stench which made Little Bull wrinkle up his nose.

“Stink!” he cried. “Spoil meat!”

“No it won’t!” Omri said. “Turn the handle of the spit, Little Bull.”

Evidently he wasn’t much used to spits, but he soon got the hang of it. The chunk of steak turned and turned in the flame, and soon lost its raw red look and began to go grey and then brown. The good juicy smell of roasting beef began to compete with the reek of the firelighter.

“Mmm!” said Little Bull appreciatively, turning the handle till the sweat ran off his face. “Meat!” He had thrown off his Chief’s cloak and his chest shone red. Patrick couldn’t take his eyes off him.

“Please Omri,” he whispered, “couldn’t I have one? Couldn’t I choose just one – a soldier, or anything I liked – and make him come to life in your cupboard?”



8 *Cowboy!*

Omri gaped at him. He hadn't thought of this, but of course now that he did it was obvious – no boy who knew the secret could possibly rest until he had a little live person of his own.

“Patrick – it's not like you think – just something to play with—”

“Of course not, you've explained all about it, now just let me put—”

“But you have to think about it first. No, no, stop, you can't yet! And anyway I don't agree to you using one of mine!” Omri didn't know why he was so reluctant. It wasn't that he was mean. He just knew, somehow, that something awful would happen if he let Patrick have his own way. But it wasn't easy to stop him. Omri had grabbed him, but he wrenched free.

“I've got to—” he panted. “I've got to—”

He stretched out his hand towards the pile of soldiers again. They struggled. Patrick seemed to have gone a bit crazy. Suddenly Omri felt the rim of the tin plate under his shifting feet.

He shoved Patrick out of the way and they both stared downward. The plate had tipped, the fire slipped on to the carpet. Little Bull, with a yell, had leapt clear, and was now waving his arms and shouting horrible things at them. His roast meat had disappeared under Omri's foot, which instinctively stamped down on the fire to put it out. Omri felt the Meccano crunching under his school shoe, and a squishy feeling ...

“Now look! We've spoiled the meat!” he shouted at Patrick. “If all you can do is fight, I wish I'd never brought you!”

Patrick looked mulish. “It was your fault. You should have let me put something in the cupboard.”

Omri lifted his shoe. Underneath was a nasty mess of burnt stuff, squashed meat and bent Meccano. Little Bull let out a wail.

“You no great spirit! Only stupid boy! Fight, spoil good meal! You feel shame!”

“Maybe we can rescue it—”

He crouched down and disentangled the meat from the mess, burning his fingers. He tried to brush it clean but it was no use – it was all mixed up with the smelly stuff of the firelighter, and stuck with bits of carpet hairs.

“I'm terribly sorry, Little Bull,” he mumbled.

“No good sorry! Little Bull hungry, work all day, cook meat – now what eat? I chop you down like tree!” And to Omri's horror he saw Little Bull run to where the battleaxe was lying, pick it up and advance towards his leg, swinging it in great circles as he came.

Patrick fairly danced with excitement. “Isn't he fantastically brave, though! Much more than David with Goliath!”

Omri felt the whole thing was going too far. He removed his leg from harm's way. “Little Bull! Calm down,” he said. “I've said I'm sorry.”

Little Bull looked at him, blazing-eyed. Then he rushed over to the chair Omri used at his table and began chopping wedges out of the leg of it.

“Stop! Stop! Or I'll put you back in the cupboard!”

Little Bull stopped abruptly and dropped the axe. He stood with his back to them, his shoulders heaving.

“I'll get you something to eat – right now – something delicious. Go and paint. It'll make you feel better. I won't be long.” To Patrick he said, “Hang on. I can smell supper cooking, I'll go and get a bit of whatever we're having,” and he rushed downstairs without stopping to think.

His mother was dishing up a nice hot stew.

“Can I have a tiny bit of that, Mum? Just a little bit, in a spoon. It's for a game we're playing.”

His mother obligingly gave him a big spoonful. “Don’t let it drip,” she said. “Does Patrick want to stay for supper?”

“I don’t know – I’ll ask,” said Omri.

“Were you two fighting up there? I heard thumps.”

“No-o – not really. It was just that he wanted to do something that I—”

Omri stopped dead, as if frozen to the ground. He might have been frozen, his face went so cold. Patrick was up there – with the cupboard – and two biscuit-tinsful of little plastic figures – alone!

He ran. He usually won the egg-and-spoon race at the school sports, which was just as well – it’s hard enough to carry an egg in a spoon running along a flat field; it’s a great deal harder to carry a tablespoonful of boiling hot stew steady while you rush up a flight of stairs. If most of it was still there when he got to the top it was more by good luck than skill because he was hardly noticing the spoon at all – all he could think of was what might be – no, *must* be happening in his room, and how much more of it would happen if he didn’t hurry.

He burst in through the door and saw exactly what he’d dreaded – Patrick, bent over the cupboard, just turning the key to open it.

“What—” Omri gasped out between panting breaths, but he had no need to go on. Patrick, without turning round, opened the cupboard and reached in. Then he did turn. He was gazing into his cupped hands with eyes like huge marbles. He slowly extended his hands towards Omri, and whispered, “Look!”

Omri, stepping forward, had just time to feel intensely glad that at least Patrick had not put a whole handful of figures in but had only changed one. But which? He leant over, then drew back with a gasp.

It was the cowboy. And his horse.

The horse was in an absolute panic. It was scrambling about wildly in the cup of Patrick’s hand, snorting and pawing, up one minute and down on its side the next, stirrups and reins flying. It was a beautiful horse, snow-white with a long mane and tail, and the sight of it acting so frightened gave Omri heart-pains.

As for the cowboy, he was too busy dodging the horse’s flying feet and jumping out of the way when he fell to notice much about his surroundings. He probably thought he was caught in an earthquake. Omri and Patrick watched, spellbound, as the little man in his plaid shirt, buckskin trousers, high-heeled leather boots and big hat, scrambled frantically up the side of Patrick’s right hand and, dodging through the space between his index finger and thumb, swung himself clear of the horse – only to look down and find he was dangling over empty space.

His hat came off and fell, slowly like a leaf, down, down, down to the floor so infinitely far below. The cowboy gave a yell, and scrambled with his feet against the back of Patrick’s hand, hanging on for dear life to the ridge beside his thumbnail.

“Hold your hands still!” Omri commanded Patrick, who in his excitement was jerking them nervously about. There was a moment of stillness. The horse stood up, trembling all over, prancing about with terror. Beside his hooves was some tiny black thing. Omri peered closer. It was the pistol.

The cowboy had now recovered a little. He scrambled back through the finger-gap and said something to the horse which sounded like “Whoaback, steady, fella.” Then he slid down and grabbed the reins, holding them just below the horse’s nose. He patted its face. That seemed to calm it. Then, looking round swiftly but not apparently noticing the enormous faces hanging over him, he reached cautiously down and picked the pistol up from between the horse’s hooves.

“Whoa there! Stand—”

Omri watched like a person hypnotized. He wanted to cry out to Patrick that it was a real gun, but somehow he couldn’t. He could only think that the sound of his voice would throw the horse once more into a panic and the horse or man would get hurt. Instead he watched while the cowboy pointed the gun in various directions warily. Then he lowered it.

Still holding the reins he moved until he could press his hand against Patrick's skin. Then he let his eyes move upward towards the curved fingers just level with the top of his head.

"What the dawggone heck—" he said. "It sure looks like a great big – Aw, what'm Ah talkin' about? It cain't be. Hell, it just ain't possible!" But the more he looked, the more certain he must have become that he was, indeed, in a pair of cupped hands. And finally, after scratching his gingery head for a moment, he ventured to look right up past the fingers, and then of course he saw Patrick's face looking at him.

There was a petrified moment when he couldn't move. Then he raised his pistol in a flash.

"Patrick! Shut your eyes!"

Bang!

It was only a little bang, but it was a real bang, and a puff of real, gun-smelling smoke appeared. Patrick shouted with pain and surprise and would have dropped the pair if Omri hadn't thrust his hand underneath to catch them. Patrick's own hand had clapped itself to his cheek.

"Ow! Ow! He's shot me!" Patrick screamed.

Omri was not much bothered about Patrick at that moment. He was furious with him, and very anxious about the little man and his horse. Quickly he put them down on the bed, saying, like the cowboy himself, "Steady! Whoa! I won't hurt you! It's okay!"

"Ow!" Patrick kept yelling. "It hurts! Ow!"

"Serve you right, I warned you," said Omri. Then he felt sorry and said, "Let's have a look."

Gingerly Patrick took his hand down. A drop of blood had been smeared on his cheek, and by peering very close Omri could see something very like a bee's sting embedded in his skin.

"Hang on! I see it – I'll squeeze it out—"

"OW!"

A quick squeeze between his thumbnails and the almost invisible speck of black metal, which had only just penetrated the skin, popped out.

"He – shot me!" Patrick got out again in a shocked voice.

"I *told* you. My Indian stuck a knife in me," said Omri, not to be outdone. "I think we ought to put him back – your cowboy I mean, of course, not my Indian."

"Put him back where?"

Omri explained how the cupboard could change him back to plastic again, but Patrick wasn't having any of that.

"Oh no! I want him! He's terrific. Look at him now—"

Patrick feasted his eyes admiringly on the little cowboy. Ignoring the 'giants', whom he clearly thought he must have imagined, he was doggedly dragging his horse across Omri's quilt as if he were wading through the dunes of some infinite pale-blue desert.

Omri reached for him determinedly, but Patrick stepped into his path.

"Don't you touch him! I bought him, I changed him – he's mine!"

"You bought him for me!"

"You said you didn't want him."

"Well, but the cupboard's mine, and I told you not to use it."

"And so what if I did? Anyway, it's done, he's alive now and I'm keeping him. I'll bash you right in if you try to take him. Wouldn't you bash me if I took your Indian?"

Omri was silent. That reminded him! Where was Little Bull? He looked round. He soon spotted him at the other side of the room, busy with his paints. Some beautiful minute designs, showing turtles and herons and beavers, mainly in red and yellow, had appeared on the side of the tepee Omri had made. As Omri crouched beside him to admire them, Little Bull, without looking at him, said "You bring food? I very soon die if not eat."

Omri looked around. What had he done with the spoonful of stew? But he soon saw that he'd put it down on the table without thinking. There it sat, tilting slightly and spilling a few drops of gravy,

but still steaming. He hurried to get Little Bull's – or rather the Action Man's – mess-tin (the paper plate had got all soggy) and carefully filled it with the hot savoury stuff.

“Here you are.”

Little Bull stopped work, laid down his paintbrush, and sniffed eagerly.

“Ah! Good!” He sat down cross-legged among the paint lids to eat, dipping some of yesterday's stale bread in as a spoon. “Your wife cook? Ah. No. Little Bull forgot. Omri not got wife.” He ate ravenously for a few moments and then said, “Not want?”

“I'm having mine downstairs in a minute,” Omri said.

“Mean, Omri not want wife,” said Little Bull, who was now in a much better mood.

“I'm not old enough.”

Little Bull looked at him for a moment. “No. I see. Boy.” He grinned. “Big boy, but boy.” He went on eating. “Little Bull want,” he said finally, not looking up.

“Another wife?”

“Chief needs wife. Beautiful. Good cook. Act as told.” He put his face into the mess-tin and licked it clean. Then he looked up.

“With Iroquois, mother find wife for son. But Little Bull's mother not here. Omri be mother and find.”

Omri couldn't quite see himself as Little Bull's mother, but he said, “I might try. I think there were some Indian women in Yapp's. But what if I get one and make her real and then you don't fancy her?”

“Fancy?”

“Like her.”

“I like. Young. Beautiful. Act as told. I like. So you get.”

“Tomorrow.”

Little Bull grinned at him happily, his face smeared with gravy.

Patrick had come up behind him.

“Let's put them together and see what they do!”

Omri jumped up quickly.

“No!”

“Why *not*?”

“You idiot, because yours has got a gun and mine's got a bow and arrow and one of them's sure to kill the other!”

Patrick considered this. “Well, we could take their weapons away from them. Come on, I'm going to!” And he reached towards the bed.

Just at that moment there was the sound of steps on the stairs. They froze. Then Omri swiftly moved the dressing-up crate enough to hide Little Bull, and Patrick sat down on the end of the bed, masking the poor cowboy who was still toiling along over the lumps in the quilt.

Just in time! Omri's mother opened the door next second and said, “Patrick, that was your mum on the phone. She wants you to come home right away. And Omri – it's supper.” And she went.

Omri opened his mouth to protest, but Patrick at once said, “Oh, okay.” With one quick movement he had scooped up cowboy and horse in his left hand and thrust them into his blazer pocket. Omri winced – he could easily imagine the horse's legs being injured by such rough treatment, not to mention the matter of fright. But Patrick was already halfway out of the door.

Omri jumped up and grabbed his arm.

“Patrick!” he whispered. “You must be careful! Treat them carefully! They're *people* – I mean they're alive – what will you do with them? How will you hide them from your family?”

“I won't, I'll show them to my brother anyway, he'll go out of his mind.”

Omri began to think he might go out of his. He shook Patrick's arm. "*Will you think?* How are you going to explain? What will happen? If you say you got him from me I'll do worse than bash you – you'll ruin everything – they'll take the cupboard away—"

That got through to Patrick at last. He put his hand slowly back into his pocket.

"Listen then. You can look after them. But remember – they're mine. If you put them back in the cupboard, I'll tell everyone. I'm warning you. I will. Bring them to school tomorrow."

"To school!" cried Omri aghast. "I'm not bringing Little Bull to school!"

"You can do what you like about Little Bull, he's yours. The cowboy's mine, and I want him at school tomorrow, otherwise I'll tell."

Omri let go of his arm and for a moment they looked at each other as if they'd been strangers. But they weren't strangers; they were friends. That counts for a lot in this life. Omri gave in.

"All right," he said, "I'll bring them. Now give them to me. *Gently.*" And Patrick brought man and horse out of his pocket and tipped them very carefully into Omri's waiting hand.



9 *Shooting Match*

Omri put the cowboy and horse in his shirt drawer while he had the quickest supper on record. Then he raced upstairs again, stopping only to pinch a few grains of Gillon's rat feed for the two horses.

Shut up in his room, he took stock. A room this size was like a sort of indoor national park to the cowboy and the Indian. It should be easy enough to keep them apart for one night. Omri thought first of putting the new pair straight back in the cupboard, and then bringing them back to life next morning in time for school, but he had promised Patrick not to. So he decided to empty out the dressing-up crate and put the cowboy and his horse in there for the night.

The crate was a metre square, made of planks. There was certainly no visible way out of it for the cowboy. Omri put him carefully down into it. Looking at him, he felt curious – about his name, where he came from and so on; but he decided it was better not to talk to him. The cowboy had clearly decided that Omri was not really there at all. When his big hands reached down, carrying some cold stew, grain for the pony, some fragments of apple for them both and, later, some cotton-wool and scraps of material for bedding, the cowboy deliberately covered his eyes by pulling down his big hat brim. It was only when Omri reached in one final time to give him a drink of water in a minute green glass bottle that he had found in the bathroom cupboard, that the cowboy spoke a word.

"Take that filthy stuff outa here!" he suddenly shouted, in his strong Texas accent. "Ah ain't aimin' to drink no more o' that as lawng as Ah live!" And he heaved the bottle (which was almost as big as himself) up by its base and tipped its contents out onto the boards at the bottom of the crate.

"It's only water," Omri ventured to say.

"You shet yer mouth!" shouted the little man. "Ah won't take no lip from no gol-darned hallucination, no sir! Mebbe Ah do drink too much, mebbe Ah cain't hold m'likker like some o' them real tough guys do. But if'n Ah'm gittin' the dee-lirium tremens, and startin' in to see things, why couldn't Ah see pink elly-fants and dancin' rats and all them purty things other fellas see when they gits far gone? It ain't fair fer me to see giants and blue deserts and git put in boxes the size of the Grand Canyon with no one but m'little hoss for comp'ny!" He sat down on the pile of hay, took the horse's nose in his arms, put his face against it and began to sob.

Omri was shattered. A cowboy – crying! He didn't know what to do. When his mother cried, as she did sometimes when things got too much, she only asked to be left alone till she felt better. Maybe all grown-ups were like that. Omri turned away and got slowly into his pyjamas, and then went to see how Little Bull was getting along on the far side of the crate.

He'd finished the painting. The tepee looked really good. Little Bull was now in the longhouse, arranging his blanket for the night. The pony was tethered to his post on a long rope. Omri took out the rat food and gave it to him. Then he called Little Bull out.

"Are you okay? Anything you need?"

He should have known better than to ask.

"Plenty! Want fire in longhouse, keep warm, keep wild animals away. Want tomahawk—"

"So you can chop bits out of my leg?"

"Little Bull angry when say that. Sorry now. Use tomahawk cut down trees, chop firewood, kill bird—"

"What bird?"

Little Bull replied with a very good imitation of a cock crowing. Then he did a mime of catching it, putting its neck on to a block, and, with a whirl of his arm, chopping off its head with gleeful relish.

"I don't know about that!"

"You get. Tomorrow. Birds from plass-tick. Good tools. But fire – now. Chief Little Bull say!"

Omri sighed. He went to the waste paper basket and picked out the remains of the other fire that he'd thrown away in there. There was quite a lot of the firelighter left. He gathered up some of the bits of willow-bark and twigs from where Little Bull had been working.

"You're not having it inside, though – far too dangerous!"

He arranged the fire on the packed earth of the seed-tray, about fifteen centimetres from the entrance to the longhouse, first moving the tepee to safety. Then he struck a match and soon there was a cosy blaze.

Little Bull crouched beside it, his red skin glowing and his eyes bright with pleasure.

"Little Bull, can you dance?"

"Yes. War dance, wedding dance, many kind."

"Would you do one now so I can see?"

He hesitated, then he shook his head once.

"Why not, though?"

"No make war, no make wedding. No reason dance."

"Maybe if I got you a wife—"

The Indian looked up eagerly. "You get? Give word?"

"I only said I'd try."

"Then Little Bull dance. Then do best dance – love dance."

Omri turned off his light and drew back from the scene. It looked amazingly real, with the fire making shadows, the little horse munching his grain and the Indian sitting on his heels warming himself, wearing his colourful headdress and the Chief's cloak. Omri wished he himself were small enough to join Little Bull by the fire.

"Om-ri! Are you in bed? I'm coming up in five minutes to kiss you goodnight!"

Omri felt panicky. But it was all right. The fire was going out. Already Little Bull was standing up, yawning and stretching. He peered up through the darkness.

"Hey, Omri! Paintings good?"

"Great!"

"You sleep now?"

"Yes."

"Peace of great spirits be on you."

"Thanks, same to you."

Omri peered quickly into the crate. The poor cowboy had crawled away into his makeshift bed and was snoring loudly. He hadn't eaten a thing. Omri sighed. He hoped Patrick was making plans and arrangements. After all, if Omri could keep his Indian secret, Patrick might be able to do the same. All might yet be well. But Omri certainly wasn't going to try the experiment again. It was all just too much worry.

He climbed into bed, feeling unusually tired. His mother came in and kissed him, and the door was shut. He felt himself drifting off almost right away.

When suddenly, a piercing whinny sounded. And was answered by another.

The horses had smelt each other!

They were not so far apart – and the cowboy's wasn't tied up. Omri could hear his little hooves clattering on the bare boards of the crate, and then the whinnies began again, high, shrill – almost questioning. Omri thought of putting on his light, but he was awfully tired – besides, what could he do? They couldn't possibly reach each other through the planks of the crate wall. Let them whinny their heads off, they'd soon get fed up.

Omri rolled over and fell asleep.

He was woken just after dawn by shots.

He was out of bed in about one-fifth of a second. One glance into the crate showed him all too clearly that the cowboy and his horse had escaped. The second glance showed how – a knot in the

wood had been pushed out (or perhaps kicked out by the horse) leaving an oval-shaped hole like an arched doorway, just big enough to let horse and rider through.

Omri looked round wildly. At first he could see nothing. He dropped to his knees beside the seed-tray and peered into the longhouse. Little Bull was not there – nor was his pony.

Suddenly some tiny thing whizzed past Omri's ear and struck the crate beside him with a ping! Twisting his head, Omri saw it – a feathered arrow the size of a pin, still quivering from its flight.

Was Little Bull shooting at *him*?

“Little Bull! Where are you?”

No answer. But suddenly, a movement, like that of a mouse, caught the corner of his eye. It was the cowboy. Dragging his horse behind him, he was running, half bent over, from behind one chair-leg to another. He had his revolver in his hand, his hat on his head. Another arrow flew, missing the crate this time and burying itself in the carpet – just ahead of the running cowboy, who stopped dead, jumped backwards till his horse hid him, and then fired another two shots from behind the horse's shoulder.

Omri, following his aim, spotted Little Bull at once. He and his pony were behind a small heap of cloth which was like a snow-covered hill to them but was actually Omri's vest, dropped carelessly on the floor the night before. Little Bull, safe in the shelter of this cotton mountain, was just preparing to shoot another arrow at the cowboy, one which could hardly fail to hit its mark. The poor fellow was now scrambling desperately on to his pony to try and ride away and was in full sight of the Indian as he drew back his bowstring.

“Little Bull! Stop!”

Omri's voice rang out frenziedly Little Bull did not stop; but his surprise spoiled his aim, and the arrow sped over the cowboy, doing no worse than sweep away his big hat and pin it to the skirting-board behind the chair.

This infuriated the little man, who, forgetting his fear, stood up in his stirrups and shouted, “Tarnation take ya, ya red varmint! Wait'll Ah ketch ya. Ah'll have yer stinkin' red hide for a sleepin' bag!”

With that he rode straight towards the vest-hill at full gallop, shouting out strange cowboy-like war cries and waving his gun, which, by Omri's count, still had two bullets in it.

Little Bull had not expected this, but he was only outfaced for a moment. Then he coolly drew another arrow from his quiver and fitted it to his bow.

“Little Bull, if you shoot I'll pick you up and *squeeze* you!” Omri cried.

Little Bull kept his arrow pointing towards the oncoming horseman.

“What you do if he shoot?” he asked.

“He won't shoot! Look at him.”

Sure enough, the carpet was too soft for much galloping, and even as Omri spoke the cowboy's horse stumbled and fell, pitching its rider over its head.

Little Bull lowered his bow and laughed. Then, to Omri's horror, he laid down the bow among the folds of the vest, reached for his knife, and began to advance on the prostrate cowboy.

“Little Bull, you are not to touch him, do you hear?”

Little Bull stopped. “He try to shoot Little Bull. White enemy. Try take Indian's land. Why not kill? Better dead. I act quick, he not feel, you see!” And he began to move forward again.

When he was nearly up to the cowboy Omri swooped on him. He didn't squeeze him of course, but he did lift him high and fast enough to give him a fright.

“Listen to me now. That cowboy isn't after your land. He's got nothing to do with you. He's Patrick's cowboy, like you're my Indian. I'm taking him to school with me today, so you won't be bothered by him any more. Now you take your pony and get back to your longhouse and leave him to me.”

Little Bull, sitting cross-legged in the palm of his hand, gave him a sly look.

“You take him to school? Place you learn about ancestors?”

“That’s what I said.”

He folded his arms offendedly. “Why you not take Little Bull?”

Omri was startled into silence.

“If white fool with coward’s face good enough, Indian Chief good enough.”

“You wouldn’t enjoy it—”

“If him enjoy, I enjoy.”

“I’m not taking you. It’s too risky.”

“Risky! Fire-water?”

“Not *whisky* – risky. Dangerous.”

He shouldn’t have said that. Little Bull’s eyes lit up.

“Like danger! Here too quiet. No hunting, no enemy, only *him*,” he said scornfully, peering over the edge of Omri’s hand at the cowboy, who, despite the softness of his landing-place, was only just scrambling to his feet. “Look! Him no use for fight. Little Bull soon kill, take scalp, finish. Very good scalp,” he added generously. “Fine colour, look good on belt.”

Omri looked across at the cowboy. He was leaning his ginger head against his saddle. It looked as if he might be crying again. Omri felt very sorry for him.

“You’re not going to hurt him,” he said to the Indian, “because I won’t let you. If he’s such a coward, it wouldn’t do your honour any good anyway.”

Little Bull’s face fell, then grew mulish. “No tell from scalp on belt if belong to coward or brave man,” he said slyly. “Let me kill and I do dance round campfire,” he coaxed.

“No—” Omri began. Then he changed his tactics. “All right, you kill him. But then I won’t bring you a wife.”

The Indian looked at him a long time. Then he slowly put his knife away.

“No touch. Give word. Now you give word. Take Little Bull to school. Take to plass-tick. Let Little Bull choose own woman.”

Omri considered. He could keep Little Bull in his pocket all day. No need to take any chances. If he were tempted to show the other children, well, he must resist temptation, that was all.

And after school he could take him to Yapp’s. The boxes with the plastic figures in them were in a corner behind a high stand. Provided there weren’t too many other kids in the shop, he might be able to give Little Bull a quick look at the Indian women before he bought one, which would be a very good thing. Otherwise he might pick an old or ugly one without realizing it. It was so hard to see from their tiny plastic faces what they would be like when they came to life.

“Okay then, I’ll take you. But you must do as I tell you and not make any noise.”

He put him down on the seed-tray and gently shooed the pony up the ramp. Little Bull tied it to its post and Omri gave it some more rat food. Then he crawled on hands and knees over to where the cowboy was now sitting dolefully on the carpet, his horse’s rein looped round his arm, looking too miserable to move.

“What’s the matter?” Omri asked him.

The little man didn’t look up. “Lost muh hat,” he mumbled.

“Oh, is that all?” Omri reached over to the skirting-board and pulled the pin-like arrow out of the wide brim of the hat. “Here it is,” he said kindly, laying it in the cowboy’s lap.

The cowboy looked at it, looked up at Omri, then stood up and put the hat on. “You shore ain’t no reg’lar hallucination,” he said. “I’m obliged to ya.” Suddenly he laughed. “Jest imagine, thankin’ a piece o’ yor dee-lirium tremens fer givin’ you yer hat back! Ah jest cain’t figger out what’s goin’ on around here. Say! Are you real, or was that Injun real? ’Cause in case you ain’t noticed, you’re a danged sight bigger’n he is. You cain’t both be real.”

“I don’t think you ought to worry about it. What’s your name?”

The cowboy seemed embarrassed and hung his head. “M’name’s Boone. But the fellas all call me Boohoo. That’s on account of Ah cry so easy. It’s m’soft heart. Show me some’n sad, or scare me just a little, and the tears jest come to mah eyes. Ah cain’t help it.”

Omri, who had been somewhat of a cry-baby himself until very recently, was not inclined to be scornful about this, and said, “That’s okay. Only you needn’t be scared of me. And as for the Indian, he’s my friend and he won’t hurt you, he’s promised. Now I’d like you and your horse to go back into that big crate. I’ll stick the knot back in the wood, you’ll feel safer. Then I’ll get you some breakfast.” Boone brightened visibly at this. “What would you like?”

“Aw shucks, Ah ain’t that hungry. Coupla bits o’ steak and three or four eggs, sittin’ on a small heap o’beans and washed down with a jug o’ cawfee’ll suit me just dandy.”

“You’ll be lucky,” thought Omri.



10 *Breakfast Truce*

He crept downstairs. The house was still asleep. He decided to cook breakfast for himself and his cowboy and Indian. He was quite a good cook, but he'd mostly done sweet stuff before; however, any fool, he felt sure, could fry an egg. The steaks were out of the question, but beans were no problem. Omri put frying-pan over gas and margarine in pan. The fat began to smoke. Omri broke an egg into it, or tried to, but the shell, instead of coming cleanly apart, crumpled up somehow in his hand and landed in the hot fat mixed up with the egg.

Hm. Not as easy as he'd thought. Leaving the mess to cook, shell and all, he got a tin of beans out of the cupboard and opened it without trouble. Then he got a saucepan and began pouring the beans in. Some of them got into the egg-pan somehow and seemed to explode. The egg was beginning to curl and the pan was still smoking. Alarmed, he turned off the gas. The centre of the egg still wasn't cooked and the beans in the pan were stone cold but the smell in the kitchen was beginning to worry him – he didn't want his mother coming down. He tipped the whole lot into a bowl, hacked a lopsided slice off the loaf, and tiptoed up the stairs again.

Little Bull was standing outside his longhouse with hands on hips, waiting for him.

"You bring food?" he asked in his usual bossy way.

"Yes."

"First, Little Bull want ride."

"First, you must eat while it's hot, I've been to a lot of trouble to cook it for you," Omri said, sounding like his mother.

Little Bull didn't know how to take this, so he burst into a rather forced laugh and pointed at him scornfully. "Omri cook – Omri woman!" he teased. But Omri wasn't bothered.

"All the best cooks are men," he retorted. "Come on, you're going to eat with Boone."

Little Bull's laughter died instantly.

"Who Boone?"

"You know who he is. The cowboy."

The Indian's hands came off his hips and one of them went for his knife.

"Oh, knock it off, Little Bull! Have a truce for breakfast, otherwise you won't get any."

Leaving him with that thought to chew over, Omri crossed to the crate, in which Boone was grooming his white horse with a wisp of cloth he'd found clinging to a splinter. He'd taken off the little saddle, but the bridle was still on.

"Boone! I've brought something to eat," said Omri.

"Yup. Ah thought Ah smelt some'n good," said Boone. "Let's git to it."

Omri put his hand down. "Climb on."

"Ah, shucks – where'm Ah goin'? Why cain't Ah eat in mah box, where it's safe?" whined Boone. But he clambered up into Omri's palm and sat grumpily with his back against his middle finger.

"You're going to eat with the Indian," said Omri.

Boone leapt up so suddenly he nearly fell off, and had to grab hold of a thumb to steady himself.

"Hell, no, Ah ain't!" he yelled. "You just put me down, son, ya hear? I ain't sharin' m'vittles with no lousy scalp-snafflin' Injun and that's m'last word!" It was, as it happened, his last word before being set down within a few centimetres of his enemy on the seed-tray.

They both bent their legs into crouches, as if uncertain whether to leap at each other's throats or turn and flee. Omri hurriedly spooned up some egg and beans and held it between them.

"Smell that!" he ordered them. "Now you eat together or you don't get any at all, so make up your minds to it. You can start fighting again afterwards if you must."

He took a bit of clean paper and laid it, like a table cloth, under the spoon. Then he broke off some crumbs of bread crust and pushed a little into each of their hands. Still with their eyes fixed on each other's faces, Indian and cowboy sidled towards the big, steaming 'bowl' of food from opposite sides. Little Bull, after hesitating, was first to shoot his arm out and dip the bread into the egg. The sudden movement startled Boone so much he let out a yell and tried to run, but Omri's hand was blocking the way.

"Don't be silly, Boone," he said firmly.

"Ah ain't bein' silly! Them Injuns ain't jest ornery and savage. Them's *dirty*. And Ah ain't eatin' from the same bowl as no—"

"Boone," said Omri quietly. "Little Bull is no dirtier than you. You should see your own face."

"Is that mah fault? What kinda hallucy-nation are ya, anyways, tellin' me Ah'm dirty when ya didn't bring me no washin' water?"

This was a fair complaint, but Omri wasn't about to lose the argument on a side issue.

"You can have some after breakfast. But if you don't agree to eat with my Indian, I'm going to tell him your nickname."

The cowboy's face fell. "Now that ain't fair. That plumb ain't no ways fair," he muttered. But hunger was getting the better of him anyway, so, grumbling and swearing under his breath, he turned back and marched to his side of the spoon. By this time Little Bull was seated cross-legged on the piece of paper, a hunk of bean in one hand and a mess of egg in the other, eating heartily. Seeing this, Boone lost no time in tucking in, eyeing the Indian, who ignored him.

"Whur's muh cawfee?" he complained after he'd eaten a few bites. "Ah cain't start the day till Ah've had muh jug o' cawfee!"

Omri had completely forgotten about coffee, but he was beginning to be pretty well fed up with being bossed around by ungrateful little men, so he settled down to eat the remains of the food and simply said, "Well, you'll have to start this one without any."

Little Bull finished his breakfast and stood up.

"Now we fight," he announced, and reached for his knife.

Omri expected Boone to leap up and run, but he didn't. He just sat there munching bread and beans.

"Ah ain't finished yit," he said. "Ain't gonna fight till Ah'm plumb full o'vittles. So you kin jest sit down and wait, Redskin."

Omri laughed. "Good for you, Boone! Take it easy, Little Bull. Don't forget your promise."

Little Bull scowled. But he sat down again.

Boone ate and ate. It was hard not to suspect, after a while, that he was eating as much and as slowly as possible, to put off the moment when he would have to fight.

At last, very reluctantly, he scraped the last bit of egg from the spoon, wiped his hands on the side of his trousers, and stood up. Little Bull was on his feet instantly. Omri stood ready to part them.

"Looka here, Injun," said Boone. "If we're gonna fight, we're gonna fight fair. Probably ain't even a word for 'fair' in your language, but Ah'm here to tell ya, with me it's fight fair or don't fight a-tall."

"Little Bull fight fair, kill fair, scalp fair."

"You ain't gonna scalp nobody. Less'n ya take it off with yer teeth."

For answer, Little Bull raised his knife, which flashed in the morning light. Omri, his hands on his knees, waited.

"Yeah, Ah see it. But you ain't gonna have it much longer. And why ainsa? Because Ah ain't got one. Ah only got m'gun, and m'gun's run plumb outa bullets. What Ah got, and all Ah got, is m'fists. Oh – and one other thing. Ah got mah hallucy-nation here." He waved a hand at Omri without taking his eyes off Little Bull for a second. "And Ah know he don't want to see this here purty red scalp o'mine hangin' from no stinkin' redskin's belt. So if Ah fight, it's gonna be fist to fist, face

to face – man to man, Injun! D’ja hear me? No weapons! Jest us two, and let’s see if a white man cain’t lick a red man in a fair fight. Less’n mebbe – jest mebbe – you ain’t red a-tall, but yellor?” And Boone stepped round the bowl of the spoon, threw his empty gun on the ground, and put up his fists like a boxer.

Little Bull was nonplussed. He lowered his knife and stared at Boone. Whether Little Bull had completely understood the cowboy’s strange speech was doubtful, but he couldn’t mistake the gesture of throwing the gun away. As Boone began to dance round him, fists up, making little mock jabs towards his face, Little Bull was getting madder and madder. He made a sudden swipe at him with his knife. Boone jumped back.

“Oh, you naughty Injun! Ah see Ah’ll have to set mah hallucy-nation on to you!”

But Omri didn’t have to do anything. Little Bull had got the message. Throwing down the knife in a fury, he hurled himself on to Boone.

What followed was not a fist fight, or a wrestling match, or anything so well organized. It was just an all-in, no-holds-barred two-man war. They rolled on the ground pummelling, kicking and butting with their heads. At one point Omri thought he saw Boone trying to bite. Maybe he succeeded, because Little Bull suddenly let him go and Boone rolled away swift as a barrel down a slope and on to his legs and then, with a spring, like a bow-legged panther on to the Indian again. Feet first.

Little Bull let out a noise like ‘OOOF!’ – caught Boone by both ankles, and heaved him off. Little Bull picked up a clod of compost and flung it after him, catching him full in the face. Then Little Bull got up and ran at him, holding both fists together and swinging them as he had swung the battle-axe. They caught the cowboy a heavy whack on the ear which sent him flying to one side. But as he flew, he caught Little Bull a blow in the chest with one boot. That left them both on the ground.

The next moment each of the men found himself pinned down by a giant finger.

“All right, boys. That’s enough,” said Omri, in his father’s firm end-of-the-fight voice. “It’s a draw. Now you must get cleaned up for school.”



11 School

He brought them a low type of egg-cup full of hot water and a corner of soap cut off a big cake, to wash with. They stood one on each side of it. Little Bull, already naked to the waist, lost no time in plunging his arms in and began energetically rubbing the whole of the top part of his body with his wet hands, throwing water everywhere. He made a lot of noise about it and seemed to be enjoying himself, though he ignored the soap.

Boone was a different matter. Omri had already noticed that Boone was none too fussy about being clean, and in fact didn't look as if he'd washed or shaved for weeks. Now he approached the hot water gingerly, eyeing Omri as if to see how little washing he could actually get away with.

"Come on, Boone! Off with that shirt, you can't wash your neck with a shirt on," said Omri briskly, echoing his mother.

With extreme reluctance, shivering theatrically, Boone dragged off his plaid shirt, keeping his hat on.

"I should think your hair could do with a wash too," said Omri.

Boone stared at him.

"Wash mah *hair*?" he asked incredulously. "Washin' hair's fur *wimmin*, 'tain't fer men!" But he did consent to rub his hands lightly over the piece of soap, although grimacing hideously as if it were some slimy dead thing. Then he rinsed them hastily, smeared some water on his face, and reached for his shirt without even drying himself.

"Boone!" said Omri sternly. "Just look at Little Bull! You called him dirty, but at least he's washing himself thoroughly! Now you just do something about your neck and – well, under your arms."

Boone's look was now one of stark horror.

"Under mah arms!"

"*And* your chest I should think. I'm not taking you to school all sweaty."

"Hell! Don't you go runnin' down sweat! It's sweat that keeps a man clean!"

After a lot of bullying, Omri managed to get him to wash at least a few more bits of himself.

"You'll have to wash your clothes some time, too," he said.

But this was too much for Boone.

"Ain't nobody gonna touch muh duds, and that's final," he said. "Ain't bin washed since ah bought 'em. Water takes all the stuffin' outa good cloth. Without all the dust 'n' sweat they don't keep ya warm no more."

At last they were ready, and Omri pocketed them and ran down to breakfast. He felt tense with excitement. He'd never carried them around the house before. It was risky, but not so risky as taking them to school – he felt that having family breakfast with them secretly in his pocket was like a training for taking them to school.

Breakfast in his house was often a dicey meal anyway, with everybody more or less bad-tempered. Today, for instance, Adiel had lost his football shorts and was blaming everybody in turn, and their mother had just discovered that Gillon, contrary to his assurances the night before when he had wanted to watch television, had not finished his homework. Their father was grumpy because he had wanted to do some gardening and it was raining yet again.

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