



THE INDIAN
IN THE CUPBOARD

Lynne Reid Banks

Illustrations by Brock Cole

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The Missing Key

Omri's brothers were already sitting at the tea table when the two boys rushed in.

"Hi! What's for tea?" Omri asked automatically.

Gillon and Adiel didn't answer. Adiel had a funny smirk on his face. Omri hardly noticed.

"Let's make a sandwich and eat it upstairs," he suggested to Patrick.

They slapped some peanut butter on bread, poured mugs of milk, and hurried up the stairs to Omri's room, whispering all the way.

"How long does it take?"

"Only a few minutes."

"Can I see her?"

"Wait till we get upstairs!"

Omri opened the door—and stopped dead.

The white medicine cupboard was gone.

"Wh-where is it?" gasped Patrick.

Omri didn't say a word. He turned and rushed downstairs again, with Patrick behind him.

"Okay, where've you hidden it?" he shouted as soon as he burst into the kitchen.

"I don't know what you're referring to," said Adiel loftily.

"Yes you do! You've taken my cupboard!"

"And supposing I did. It was only to teach you a lesson. You're always taking my things and hiding them. Now you'll see how funny it *isn't*."

"When did I last take anything of yours? Tell me one thing in the last *month!*"

"My football shorts," said Adiel promptly.

"I never touched your stupid shorts, I already swore I hadn't!"

"I had to miss games again today because I didn't have them, *and* I got a detention for it, so you can be grateful I'm only punishing you tit for tat and not bashing you in," said Adiel with maddening calm.

Omri felt so furious he even wondered, for a moment, whether it was worth bashing *Adiel* in. But Adiel was enormous and it was hopeless. So after gazing at him for another moment with hate-filled eyes, Omri turned and dashed upstairs again, almost falling over Patrick on the way.

"What'll you do?"

"Look for it, of course!"

He was turning Adiel's room upside down like a madman when Adiel, slowly mounting the stairs in the direction of his homework, heard the racket and came running.

He stood in the doorway looking at the shambles of pulled-out drawers, degutted cupboards, and furniture pulled awry.

"You LITTLE SWINE!" he howled, and dived at Omri. Omri fell to the ground with Adiel on top.

"I'll tear everything—you've got to pieces—till you give it back to me!" Omri shouted in jerks as Adiel shook and pummeled him.

"Then cough up my shorts!"

"I HAVEN'T GOT YOUR STINKING SHORTS!" screamed Omri.

"Are these them?" asked a small voice in the background.

Adiel and Omri stopped fighting, and Adiel, sitting astride, twisted his neck to see. Patrick was just lifting a crumpled navy-blue object from behind a radiator.

Omri felt the anger go out of Adiel.

"Oh ... yes. It is, as a matter of fact. How did they get there ...?" But Omri knew perfectly well how: Adiel had hung them there to dry and they'd dropped off backward.

Adiel scrambled up looking distinctly sheepish. He even helped Omri to his feet.

"Well, but you have hidden things in the past," he mumbled. "How was I to know?"

"Can I have my cupboard now?"

"Yeah, it's up in the attic. I piled a whole lot of stuff on it."

Omri and Patrick took the stairs to the attic two at a time.

They found the cupboard quite quickly, under a heap of bits and pieces. But Omri had carried it down to his room again before he made the fatal discovery.

"The key!"

The little twisted key with its red satin ribbon was missing.

Once again Omri ran into Adiel's room, to find Adiel uncomplainingly putting things straight.

"What happened to the key?"

"What key?"

"There was a key in the cupboard door—with a red ribbon!"

"I didn't notice."

They went out and closed the door. Omri was now feeling desperate.

"We've got to find it. It doesn't work without the key."

They searched the attic till suppertime. Never had Omri so clearly seen the point of all his mother's urgings to keep everything in its proper place. The attic was just a sort of

glory hole, where they could play and leave a total mess, and that was what they always did, only clearing spaces when they needed them for a new layout or for some special game. And their way of clearing was just to shove things aside into ever more chaotic heaps.

Underneath the heaps were all the myriad little oddments that were small enough to filter through the bigger things—marbles, wheels of Matchbox cars, bits of Lego, small tools, parachute men, cards, and so on and so on, plus all sorts of fragments that could have been almost anything. At first they just raked through everything. But after a while Omri realized that they would have to clear up systematically. Otherwise it was like the old saying about looking for a needle in a haystack.

He found some boxes and they began sorting things into them—Lego here, parts of games there, water pistols, tricks and novelties in another. Bigger things they stacked neatly onto what his father rather bitterly called “the shelves provided,” which normally stood empty since everything was on the floor.

In an amazingly short time the floor was clear except for a few odd things they hadn’t found homes for, and a great deal of mud, dust, and sand.

“Where did all this come from?” asked Patrick.

“Oh, Gillon brought up boxes of it from the garden to make a desert scene,” said Omri. “Months ago. We might as well sweep it up.” He looked around. Despite his anxiety about the key, he felt a certain pride. The room looked entirely different—there was real playing space now.

He went downstairs and fetched a broom, a dustpan, and a soft brush.

“We’ll have to do this carefully,” he said. “It’d be terrible if we threw it away with the sand.”

“We could sieve it,” suggested Patrick.

“That’s a good idea! In the garden.”

They carried the sand out in a cardboard box and Omri borrowed his father’s large garden sieve. Omri held it and Patrick spooned in the sand and earth with a trowel. Several small treasures came to light, such as a ten pence piece. But no key.

Omri was in despair. He and Patrick sat down on the lawn under a tree, and Omri took the two little men out of his pocket.

“Where woman?” Little Bear asked instantly.

“Never mind the wimmin, whur’s the vittles?” asked the ever-hungry Boone grumpily.

Omri and Patrick fed them some more chocolate and, with a deep sense of misery, Omri produced the plastic Indian woman from his pocket. Little Bear stopped chewing his chocolate the moment he saw her and gazed in rapture. It was obvious he was half in love with her already. He reached out a hand and tenderly touched her plastic hair.

“Make real! Now!” he breathed.

“I can’t,” said Omri.

“Why can’t?” asked Little Bear sharply.

“The magic’s gone.”

Now Boone stopped eating too, and he and Little Bear exchanged a frightened look.

“Ya mean—ya cain’t send us back?” asked Boone in an awe-stricken whisper. “Never? We got to live in a giants’ world *forever*?”

It was clear that Little Bear had been explaining matters.

“Don’t you like being with us?” asked Patrick.

“Wal ... Ah wouldn’t want to hurt yer feelin’s none,” said Boone, “but jest think how you’d feel if Ah wuz as big to you as you are to me!”

“Little Bear?” asked Omri.

Little Bear dragged his eyes away from the plastic figure and fixed them—like little bright crumbs of black glass—on Omri.

“Omri good,” he pronounced at last. “But Little Bear Indian brave—Indian *chief*. How be brave, how be chief with no other Indians?”

Omri opened his mouth. If he had not lost the key, he might have rashly offered to bring to life an entire tribe of Indians, simply to keep Little Bear contented. Through his mind flashed the knowledge of what this meant. It wasn’t the fun, the novelty, the magic that mattered anymore. What mattered was that Little Bear should be happy. For that, he would take on almost anything.

They all sat quietly on the lawn. There seemed nothing more to say.

A movement near the back of the house caught Omri’s eye. It was his mother, coming out to hang up some wet clothes. He thought she moved as if she were tired and fed up. She stood for a moment on the back balcony, looking at the sky. Then she sighed and began pegging the clothes to the line.

On impulse Omri got up and went over to her.

“You—you haven’t found anything of mine, have you?” he asked.

“No—I don’t think so. What have you lost?”

But Omri was too ashamed to admit he’d lost the key she’d told him to be so careful of. “Oh nothing much,” he said.

He went back to Patrick, who was showing the men an ant. Boone was trying to pat his head, but it wasn’t very responsive.

“Well,” Omri said, “we might as well make the best of things. Why not bring the horses out and give the fellows a ride?”

This cheered everyone up and Omri ran up and brought the two horses down carefully in an empty box. Next Patrick stamped about two square feet of the lawn hard to give the horses a really good gallop. Quite a large black beetle alighted on the flattened part, and Little Bear shot it dead with an arrow. This cheered him up a bit more (though not much). While the horses grazed the fresh grass, he kept giving great lovesick sighs and

Omri knew he was thinking of the woman.

“Maybe you’d rather not stay the night now,” Omri said to Patrick.

“I want to,” said Patrick. “If you don’t mind.”

Omri felt too upset to care one way or the other. When they were called in to supper he noticed that Adiel was trying to be friendly, but Omri wouldn’t speak to him. Afterward Adiel took him aside.

“What’s up with you now? I’m trying to be nice. You got your silly old cupboard back.”

“It’s no good without the key.”

“Well, I’m sorry! It must have dropped out on the way up to the attic.”

On the way *up* to the attic! Omri hadn’t thought of that. “Will you help me find it?” he asked eagerly. “Please! It’s terribly important!”

“Oh ... all right then.”

The four of them hunted for half an hour. They didn’t find it.

After that, Gillon and Adiel had to go out to some function at school, so Patrick and Omri had the television to themselves. They took out the two men and explained this new magic, and then they all watched together. First came a film about animals, which absolutely transfixed both the little men. Then a Western came on. Omri thought they ought to switch it off, but Boone, in particular, set up such a hullabaloo that eventually Omri said, “Oh—all right. Just for ten minutes, then.”

Little Bear was seated cross-legged on Omri’s knee, while Boone, who had somehow gravitated back to Patrick, preferred to stand in his breast pocket, leaning his elbows along the pocket top with his hat on the back of his head, chewing a lump of tobacco he had had on him. Patrick, who’d heard something of cowboys’ habits, said, “Don’t you dare spit! There are no spittoons here, you know.”

“Lemme listen to ’em talkin’, willya?” said Boone. “Ah jest cain’t git over how they *talk!*”

Before the ten minutes was up, the Indians in the film started getting the worst of it. It was the usual sequence in which the pioneers’ wagons are drawn into a circle and the Indians are galloping around them while the outnumbered men of the wagon train fire muzzle-loading guns at them through the wagon wheels. Omri could sense Little Bear was getting restive and tense. As brave after brave bit the dust, he suddenly leaped to his feet.

“No good pictures!” he shouted.

“Watcha talkin’ about, Injun?” Boone yelled tauntingly across the chasm dividing him from Little Bear. “That’s how it was! Mah maw and paw wuz in a fight like thet ’n’ mah paw tole me he done shot near ’nuff fifteen-twenny of them dirty savages!”



“White men move onto land! Use water! Kill animals!”

“So what? Let the best man win! And we won! Yippee!” he added as another television Indian went down with his horse on top of him.

Omri was looking at the screen when it happened. In a lull on the soundtrack he heard a thin faint whistling sound, and heard Boone grunt. He looked back at Boone swiftly, and his blood froze. The cowboy had an arrow sticking out of his chest.

For a couple of seconds he remained upright in Patrick’s breast pocket. Then, quite slowly, he fell forward.

Omri had often marveled at the way people in films, particularly girls and women, were given to letting out loud screams at dramatic or awful moments. Now he felt one rise in his own throat, and would have let it out if Little Bear had not cried out first.

Patrick, who had not noticed anything amiss till now, looked at Little Bear, saw where his bow arm was still pointing, and looked down at his own pocket. Over the top of it Boone hung, head down, as limp as a piece of knotted string.

“Boone! Boone!”

“No!” snapped Omri. “Don’t touch him!”

Ignoring Little Bear, who tumbled down his trouser leg to the floor as he moved, Omri very carefully lifted Boone clear between finger and thumb, and laid him across the palm of his hand. The cowboy lay face up with the arrow still sticking out of his chest.

“Is he—dead?” whispered Patrick in horror.

“I don’t know.”

“Shouldn’t we take the arrow out?”

“We can’t. Little Bear must.”

With infinite care and slowness, Omri laid his hand on the carpet. Boone lay perfectly still. With such a tiny body it was impossible to be sure whether the arrow was stuck in where his heart was, or a little higher up toward his shoulder—the arrow shaft was so fine you could only make it out by the minute cluster of feathers.

“Little Bear. Come here.”

Omri’s voice was steely, a voice Mr. Johnson himself might have envied—it commanded obedience.

Little Bear, scrambling to his feet after his fall, walked unsteadily to Omri’s hand.

“Get up there and see if you’ve killed him.”

Without a word, Little Bear climbed onto the edge of Omri’s hand and knelt down beside the prostrate Boone. He laid his ear against his chest just below the arrow. He listened, then straightened up, but without looking at either of the boys.

“Not killed,” he said sullenly.

Omri felt his breath go out in relief.

“Take the arrow out. Carefully. If he dies now, it’ll be doubly your fault.”

Little Bear put one hand on Boone’s chest with his fingers on either side of the arrow, and with the other took hold of the shaft where it went into Boone’s body.

“Blood come. Need stop up hole.”

Omri’s mother kept boxes of tissues in every room, mainly so nobody would have an excuse to sit sniffing. Patrick jumped up and brought this, tearing off a tiny corner and rolling it into a wad no bigger than a pinhead.

“Now it’s got germs on it from your hand,” said Omri.

“Where’s the disinfectant?”

“In the bathroom cupboard. Don’t let my mum see you!”

While Patrick was gone, Omri sat motionless and silent, his eyes fixed on Little Bear, still poised to pull out the arrow.

After a very long minute, the Indian muttered something. Omri bent his head low. “What?”

“Little Bear sorry.”

Omri straightened up, his heart cold and untouched.

“You’ll be a lot sorrier if you don’t save him,” was all he said.

Patrick raced back with the bottle of Listerine. He poured a drop into the lid and dipped the little ball of tissue into it. Then he held the cap close to Little Bear.

“Go on,” Omri ordered. “Pull it out.”

Little Bear seemed to brace himself. Then he began to tremble.

“Little Bear not do. Little Bear not doctor. Get doctor back. He know make wound good.”

“We can’t,” said Omri shortly. “The magic’s gone. You must do it. Do it now. Now, Little Bear!”

Again the Indian stiffened, closing his hand tightly around the arrow. Slowly and steadily he drew it out, and threw it aside. Then, as the blood welled out over Boone’s checked shirt, Little Bear swiftly squeezed the liquid out of the ball of tissue and pressed it against the wound.

“Use your knife now. Cut the dirty shirt away.”

Without hesitating, Little Bear obeyed. Boone lay still. His face under its tan had turned ashy gray.

“We need a bandage,” said Patrick.

“There’s nothing we could use, and we can’t move him to wrap it around him. We’ll have to use a tiny bit of Band-Aid.”

Again Patrick went to the bathroom. Again Omri, Little Bear, and Boone were left alone. Little Bear knelt now with his hands loose on his thighs, his head down. His shoulders rose and fell once. Was he sobbing? With shame, or fear? Or—could it be—sorrow?

Patrick returned with the box of Band-Aids and a pair of nail scissors. He cut out a square big enough to cover the whole of Boone’s chest, and Little Bear stuck it on with great care and even, Omri thought, tenderness.

“Now,” said Omri, “take off your chief’s cloak and cover him up warmly.”

This, too, Little Bear did uncomplainingly.

“We’ll take him upstairs and put him to bed,” said Omri. “Oh God, I wish we had that key and I could get that doctor back!”

As they walked slowly upstairs, he told Patrick about the First World War soldier he had brought to life to tend Little Bear’s leg wound.

“We’ve got to find that key!” said Patrick. “We’ve just got to!”

Little Bear, still at Boone’s side on Omri’s hand, said nothing.

In Omri’s room, Patrick made a bed for the cowboy from a folded handkerchief and

another woolen square cut from Omri's sweater. Omri slipped a bit of thin stiff card between Boone and his own hand, and on this he transferred the wounded man without too much disturbance, which might have started the bleeding again. He was still unconscious. Little Bear silently stood by. Suddenly he moved. Reaching up, he snatched off his chief's headdress and threw it violently onto the ground. Before Omri could stop him, he began jumping on it, and in a second or two all the beautiful tall turkey feathers were bent and broken.

Leaving it lying there, Little Bear took off across the carpet, running as hard as he could over the deep woolen tufts, stumbling sometimes but running always in the direction of the seed box and his home. Patrick moved, but Omri said quietly, "Let him alone."