
Art and Accusation



MR. JOHNSON OPENED AND shut his mouth for several seconds without a sound coming out. At last he croaked: "Mrs. Hunt . . . I'm afraid I'm unwell. . . . I'm going home to bed. . . . Will you take charge of this child. . . ." His voice dropped to a mumble like an old man's. Omri just caught the words, ". . . back to their lessons . . ." Then Mr. Johnson let go of Patrick's arm, turned, walked most unsteadily to the door, and then put his hand on it and swayed as if he might fall over.

"Mr. Johnson!" said Mrs. Hunt in a shocked tone. "Shall I call a taxi. . . ?"

"No . . . no . . . I'll be all right. . . ." And the headmaster, without looking back, tottered out into the corridor.

"Well!" exclaimed Mrs. Hunt. "Whatever have you been doing to the poor man?"

Neither of them answered. Omri was staring at Patrick, or rather, at his pocket. Patrick's shoulders were heaving and he was not looking at anybody. Mrs. Hunt was obviously flummoxed.

"Well. You'd better go to the toilet and wash your faces, both of you, and then go back to your classroom as fast as you can toddle," she said in her funny old-fashioned way. "Run along!"

They needed no second telling. Neither of them said a word until they were in the boys' toilet. Patrick went straight to a basin and began running the cold water. He splashed some onto his face, getting his collar soaked. Omri stood watching him. Obviously he was as upset as Omri, if not more so. Once again Omri felt their friendship trembling on the edge of destruction. He drew a deep breath.

"You showed him," he said at last in a trembling voice.

Patrick said nothing. He dried his face on the roller towel. He was still gasping the way one does when one's been crying.

"Give them back to me. Both of them."

Patrick reached slowly into his pocket. He put his closed hand backward. Omri looked as his fingers slowly opened. Little Bear and Boone were sitting there, absolutely terrified. They were actually clinging on to each other.

Even Little Bear was hiding his face and they were both trembling.

With infinite slowness and care, so as not to frighten them more, Omri took them into his own hand. "It's all right," he whispered, bringing them near to his face. "Please. It's all right." Then he put them carefully in his pocket and said to Patrick in a low voice, "You stupid fool."

Patrick turned. His face gave Omri more of a jolt than Mr. Johnson's had. It was white-mottled-red, with swollen eyes.

"I had to!" he said. "I had to! He'd have phoned my dad! They'd have made me tell in the end. Anyhow, he didn't believe in them. He thought he was seeing things. He just stood there, gaping at them. He didn't even touch them. When they moved he gave a yell and then I thought he was going to fall over. He went white as a ghost. You saw. He didn't believe his eyes, Omri, honest! He'll think he dreamed it!" Omri went on looking at him stonily. "Can't I—can't I have Boone?" asked Patrick in a small voice.

"No."

"Please! I'm sorry I told—I *had* to!"

"They're not safe with you. You *use* them. They're people. You can't use people."

Patrick didn't ask again. He gave one more hiccuping sob and went out.

Omri took the little men out of his pocket again and

lifted them to his face. Boone was lying flat on his front, holding his big hat down over his ears as if trying to shut out the world. But Little Bear stood up.

"Big man shout. Give fear!" he said angrily. "Small ears—big noise—no good!"

"I know. I'm sorry," said Omri. "But it's okay now. I'm going to take you home."

"What about wife?"

His promise! Omri had forgotten all about that.

Another Indian! Another live little person to worry about . . . Omri had heard about people going gray-haired almost overnight if they had too much worry. He felt it might easily happen to him. He thought back to the time, only a few days ago, when this had all started, and he had fondly imagined it was all going to be the greatest fun anybody had ever had. Now he realized that it was more like a nightmare.

But Little Bear was looking at him challengingly. He *had* promised.

"Right after school," he said, "we'll go to the shop."

There was still another hour of lessons to be got through. Fortunately it was two periods of art. In the art room you could go away into a corner and even sit with your back turned to the teacher if you liked. Omri went to the farthest and darkest corner.

"Omri, don't try to draw there," said the art teacher.

"You're in your own light—it's bad for your eyes."

"I'm going to draw something huge anyway," said Omri.

All the others sat near the long windows. He was quite alone, and if the teacher approached him he would hear her feet on the bare floor. He suddenly felt he must—he simply *must* get a little fun out of this somehow. He cautiously fished Little Bear and Boone out of his pocket.

They stood on the sheet of white drawing paper as if on a stretch of snow, and looked about them.

"This school place?" asked Little Bear.

"Yes. Sshhh!"

"Sure don't look much like the school Ah went to!" exclaimed Boone. "Whur's the rows of desks? Whur's the slate 'n' bit o' chalk? Why ain't the teacher talkin'?"

"We're doing art. We can sit where we like. She doesn't talk much, she just lets us get on with it," replied Omri in the softest whisper he could possibly manage.

"Art, eh?" asked Boone, brightening up. "Say, that wuz mah best subject! Ah wuz allus top in art, on'y thing Ah wuz any good at! Still draw a mite when Ah gits a chance, if'n ain't nobody around t' laugh at me." He reached into the pocket of his own tiny jeans and fished out a stub of pencil almost too small to see. "Kin Ah draw a mite on yer paper?" he asked.

Omri nodded. Boone strode to the very center of the paper, looked all around at the white expanse stretching

away from him in every direction, and gave a deep sigh of satisfaction. Then he knelt down and began to draw.

Little Bear and Omri watched. From the microscopic point of Boone's pencil there developed a most amazing scene. It was a prairie landscape, with hills and cacti and a few tufts of sagebrush. Boone sketched in, with sure strokes, some wooden buildings such as Omri had often seen in cowboy films—a saloon with a swinging sign reading “Golden Dollar Saloon” in twirly writing; a post office and general store, a livery stable, and a stone house with a barred window and a sign saying “Jail.” Then, moving swiftly on his knees, as it were from one end of his “street” to another, Boone drew in the foreground—figures of men and women, wagons, horses, dogs, and all the trappings of a little town.

From Boone's point of view, he was drawing something quite large, making the best use of his vast piece of paper; but from Omri's, the drawing was minute, perfect in its detailing but smaller than any human hand could possibly have made it. He and Little Bear watched, fascinated.

“Boone, you're an artist!” Omri breathed at last, when Boone had even made the mud on the unpaved street look real. Little Bear grunted.

“But not like real place,” he said.

Boone didn't trouble to answer; in fact, he was so absorbed he probably didn't hear. But Omri frowned. Then



he understood. Of course! Boone's town was part of an America that was not thought of during Little Bear's time.

"Boone," he whispered, bending his head down, "what year is it—your town—your time?"

"Last time Ah saw a newspaper it was 1889," said Boone. "There! That's mah drawin'. Not bad, huh?"

"It's absolutely brilliant," said Omri, enthralled.

"Omri!"

Omri jumped. His two hands instantly cupped themselves over the two men.

From the other side of the room, the teacher said, "I see it's no use trying to stop you chattering. You even do it when you're alone! Bring me your picture."

For a moment Omri hesitated. But it was too marvelous to be passed up! He scooped the men into his pocket and picked up the sheet of paper. For once he wouldn't stop to think! He'd just enjoy himself.

He carried Boone's drawing to the teacher and put it innocently into her hand.

What happened then made up for a good deal of the worry and general upset the little men had caused him. First she just glanced. At a *glance*, the drawing in the middle of the paper just looked like a scribble or a smudge.

"I thought you said you were going to do something huge," she said with a laugh. "This isn't much more than a—"

And then she took a second, much closer, look.

She stared without speaking for about two minutes, while Omri felt inside him the beginnings of a huge, gleeful, uncontrollable laugh. Abruptly the teacher, who had been perched on a desk, stood up and went to a cupboard. Omri was not surprised to see a magnifying glass in her hand when she turned around.

She put the paper down on a table and bent over it, with the glass poised. She examined the drawing for several minutes more. Her face was something to see! Some of the nearest children had become aware that something unusual was going on, and were also craning to see what the teacher was looking at so attentively. Omri stood with the same innocent look on his face, waiting, the laugh slowly rising inside him. Fun? *This was fun, if you liked! This was what he'd been imagining!*

The teacher looked at him. Her face was not quite as stunned as Mr. Johnson's had been, but it was an absolute picture of bafflement.

"Omri," she said. "How in the name of all that's holy did you *do* this?"

"I like drawing small," said Omri quite truthfully.

"*Small!* This isn't small! It's tiny! It's infinitesimal! It's *microscopic!*" Her voice was rising higher with every word. Several of the other children had now stood up and were crowding around the paper, peering at it in absolute

stupefaction. Small gasps and exclamations of wonder were rising on all sides. Omri's held-in laugh threatened to explode.

The teacher's eyes were now narrow with astonishment—and doubt.

"Show me," she said, "the pencil you used."

This took Omri aback, but only for a second.

"I left it over there. I'll just go and get it," he said sweetly.

He walked back to his table, his hand in his pocket. With his back turned he bent over, apparently searching the top of the table. Then he turned around, smiling, holding something cupped in his hand. He walked back.

"Here it is," he said, and held out his hand.

Everyone bent forward. The art teacher took hold of his hand and pulled it toward her. "Are you putting me on, Omri? There's nothing there!"

"Yes there is."

She peered close until he could feel her warm breath on his hand.

"Don't breathe hard," said Omri, his laugh now trembling on his very lips. "You'll blow it away. Maybe you'd see it better through the magnifying glass," he added kindly.

Slowly she raised the glass into position. She looked through it.

"Can I see? Is it there? Can I look?" clamored the other

children. All except Patrick. He was sitting by himself, not paying attention to the crowd around Omri.

The art teacher lowered the glass. Her eyes were dazed.

"I don't believe it."

"It's there."

"How did you pick it up?"

"Ah. Well, that's a bit of a secret method I have."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, it must be. And you wouldn't feel like telling us?"

"No," said Omri in a trembly voice. His laugh was on the verge—it was going to burst out. "May I be excused?"

"Yes," she said in a dazed voice. "Go on."

He took the drawing back and tottered to the door. He managed to get outside before the laugh actually blew out. But it was so loud, so overpowering that he was obliged to go right out into the playground. There he sank onto a bench and laughed till he felt quite weak. Her face! He had never enjoyed anything so much in his whole life. It had been worth it.

The bell rang. School was over. Omri brought out the men and held them up.

"Guys," he said, "I enjoyed that. Thank you. Now we're going to the shop."

Omri ran all the way to Yapp's and got there before most other children had even got out of school. In ten minutes the place would be full of kids buying potato

chips and sweets and toys and comics. Just now he had it to himself, and he had to make the most of the few minutes he had.

He went directly to the corner where the boxes of plastic figures were kept, and stood with his back to the main counter. He was still holding Little Bear and Boone in his hand, and he put them down among the figures in the cowboys-and-Indians box. He hadn't reckoned on Boone's sensitive nature, however.

"Holy catfish! Lookit all them dead bodies!" he squeaked, hiding his eyes. "There musta bin a massacre!"

"Not dead," said Little Bear scornfully. "Plass-tick." He kicked a plastic cowboy aside. "Too many," he said to Omri. "You find women. I choose."

"You'll have to be quick," said Omri in a low voice. He was already rummaging through the box, picking out the Indian women. There were very few. Of the five he found, one was clearly old, and two had babies tied on their backs in parcels laced up like boots.

"You don't want one with a baby, I suppose?"

Little Bear gave him a look.

"No—I thought not," said Omri hastily. "Well, what about these?"

He stood the two other figures on the edge of the table. Little Bear jumped down and faced them. He looked carefully first at one, then at the other. They both looked the

same to Omri, except that one had a yellow dress on and the other a blue. Each had a black pigtail and a headband with a single feather, and moccasins on her feet.

Little Bear looked up. His face showed furious disappointment.

"No good," he said.

"But there aren't any others."

"Many, many plass-tick! You look good, find other!"

Omri rummaged frantically, right to the bottom of the box. Kids were beginning to come into the shop.

He had almost despaired when he saw her. She lay face down on the very bottom of the box, half hidden by two cowboys on horses. He pulled her out. She was the same as the others (apparently) except that she wore a red dress. They obviously all came out of the same mold, because they were all in the same position, as if walking. If the others were ugly, so would this one be.

Without much hope, he set her before Little Bear.

He stood staring at her. The shop was getting busy now. At any moment somebody would come up behind him, wanting to buy a plastic figure.

"Well?" asked Omri impatiently.

For another five seconds Little Bear stared. Then, without speaking a word, he nodded his head.

Omri didn't wait for him to change his mind. He scooped him and Boone back into his pocket and, picking

up the approved figure, made his way to the counter.

"Just this one, please," he said.

Mr. Yapp was looking at him. A very odd look.

"Are you sure you only want the one?" he asked.

"Yes."

Mr. Yapp took the plastic figure, dropped it into a bag, and gave it back to Omri.

"Ten pence."

Omri paid and left the shop. Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder. He spun around. It was Mr. Yapp. The look on his face was now not odd at all, but red and angry.

"Now you can hand over the two you stole."

Omri stood aghast. "I didn't steal any!"

"Don't add lying to your faults, my lad! I watched you put them in your pocket—a cowboy and an Indian."

Omri's mouth hung open. He thought he was going to be sick.

"I didn't—" he tried to say, but no words came out.

"Turn out your pockets."

"They're mine!" Omri managed to gasp.

"A likely story! And I suppose you brought them out to help you choose the new one?"

"Yes!"

"Ha, ha, ha," said Mr. Yapp heavily. "Come on, stop playing around. I lose hundreds of pounds' worth of stuff a year to you thieving kids. When I do catch one of you

red-handed, I'm not likely to let it pass—I know your sort—if I let you off, you'd be boasting to your pals at school how easy it is to get away with it, and most likely back you'd come tomorrow for another pocketful!"

Omri was now fighting back tears. Quite a crowd had collected, much like the crowd in the art room—some of the same people, even—but his feelings were no longer so pleasant. He wished he could die or disappear.

"It's no good trying to get around me by crying!" shouted Mr. Yapp. "Give me them back—right now, or I'll call the police!"

All at once Patrick was beside him.

"They're his," he said. "I know they're his because he showed them to me at school. A cowboy with a white hat and an Indian in a chief's headdress. He told me he was coming to buy a new one. Omri wouldn't steal."

Mr. Yapp let go of Omri and looked at Patrick. He knew Patrick quite well, because it happened that Patrick's brother had once been his paperboy.

"Will you vouch for him, then?"

"Course I will!" said Patrick staunchly. "I'm telling you, I saw 'em both this afternoon."

But still the shopkeeper wasn't absolutely convinced. "Let's see if they fit your description," he said.

Omri, who had been staring at Patrick as at some miraculous deliverer, felt his stomach drop into his shoes

once more. But then he had an idea.

He reached both hands into his pockets. Then he held out one hand slowly, still closed, and everyone looked at it, though it was actually empty. The other hand he lifted to his mouth as if to stifle a cough, and whispered into it, "Lie still! Don't move! *Plastic!*" Then he put both hands before him and opened them.

The men played along beautifully. There they lay, side by side, stiff and stark, as like lifeless plastic figures as could possibly be. In any case Omri was taking no chances. He gave Mr. Yapp just long enough to see that they were dressed as Patrick had said before closing his fingers again.

Mr. Yapp grunted.

"Those aren't from my shop anyhow," he said. "All my Indian chiefs are sitting down, and that sort of cowboy is always on a horse. Well, I'm sorry, lad. You'll have to excuse me, but you must admit, it did look suspicious."

Omri managed a sickly smile. The crowd was melting away. Mr. Yapp shuffled back into the shop. Omri and Patrick were left alone on the pavement.

"Thanks," said Omri. It came out as croaky as a frog.

"That's okay. Have a Toffo."

They had one each and walked along side by side. After a while they gave each other a quick grin.

"Let's give them some."

They stopped, took the men out, and gave them each

some bits of the chocolate.

"That's a reward," said Patrick, "for playing dead."

Little Bear then naturally demanded to know what it had all been about, and the boys explained as well as they could. Little Bear was quite intrigued.

"Man think Omri steal Little Bear?"

"Yes."

"And Boone?"

Omri nodded.

"Omri fool to steal Boone!" roared Little Bear, laughing. Boone, stuffing himself with chocolate, gave him a dirty look.

"Where woman?" Little Bear asked eagerly.

"I've got her."

"When make real?"

"Tonight."

Patrick gave him a look of pure longing. But he didn't say anything. They walked along again. They were getting near Omri's house.

Omri was thinking. After a while he said, "Patrick, what about you staying the night?"

Patrick's face lit up like a bulb.

"Could I? And see—"

"Yes."

"Wow! Thanks!"

They ran the rest of the way home.

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 back-ground.

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."

Underfloor Adventure



OMRI AND PATRICK DECIDED they must take it in turns to sit up all night with Boone. This was going to be tricky because of light showing under the door, but Omri unearthed the lopsided remains of a candle he had made himself from a candle-making kit.

“We can put it behind the dressing-up crate. Then the light won’t show.”

They got into their pajamas. Patrick was supposed to be sleeping on a folding bed, so they got it ready to avoid arousing suspicion.

When Omri’s mother came in to kiss them good night, they were both in bed, apparently reading. The fact that Omri was reading in semidarkness was nothing unusual;

she was always at him about it.

"Oh Omri! Why *won't* you switch your bedside light on? You'll ruin your eyes."

"It doesn't work," said Omri promptly.

"Yes it does. Daddy fixed it this morning. You know what was wrong with it?"

"What?" asked Omri impatiently, wishing, for once, that she would go.

"That wretched rat of Gillon's had made a nest under the floorboards and lined it with bits of insulation it gnawed off the wires. It's a wonder it didn't electrocute itself."

Omri sat up sharply.

"Do you mean it's got loose?"

His mother gave a lopsided smile. "Where have you been keeping yourself? It's been loose since last night—haven't you noticed Gillon frantically looking for it? It seems to have taken up residence under your bed."

"Under my bed!" Omri yelled, leaping out of it and dropping to his knees.

"It's no use looking for it. I mean right under—under the floor. Daddy caught a glimpse of it today when he had the boards up, but he couldn't catch it, of course. It's a matter of waiting till it comes out for food, and then—"

But Omri wasn't listening. A rat! That was all they needed.

"Mum, we've got to get it! We've got to!"

"Why? You're not scared of it, are you?"

"Me—scared of that stupid rat? Of course not! But we've got to catch it!" said Omri desperately. He felt wild and furious. How could Gillon have let the thing go? The perils that a rat presented to his little men simply turned his blood cold. And why, of all rooms in the house, should it have chosen his?

He was tearing frantically at the edge of the carpet, trying to pull it back, when his mother hiked him to his feet.

"Omri, that carpet and those floorboards have been taken up once today, they've been put back once and everything tidied up. Rat or no rat, I'm not going through it all again tonight. Now get into bed and go to sleep."

"But—"

"*In to bed*, I said. Now!"

When she used that tone, there was no arguing with her. Omri got into bed, was kissed, and watched the light go off and the door close. As soon as her footsteps had faded, he leaped up again and so did Patrick.

"Now we must definitely stay awake all night. We mustn't close our eyes for a moment," said Omri.

He was hunting through his ancient collection of book matches for one out of which his father had *not* cut the matches. At last he found one, and lit the candle. They very

gently moved Boone's bed out of hiding onto the bedside table, set the candle beside it, and sat one on each side, watching Boone's dreadfully ill-looking face. The pink square of Band-Aid moved fractionally up and down as he breathed—you could hardly see it. It was like watching the long hand of a clock moving—only the strongest concentration enabled them to detect the faint motion.

"Hadn't we better move the seed box up here too?" whispered Patrick.

In the moment when Little Bear had shot Boone, Omri had almost been angry enough to have *fed* him to the rat; but now his fury had cooled. He certainly didn't want anything awful to happen to him.

"Yes, let's."

Between them they cleared a place on the table and lifted the seed box, with its longhouse, fireplace, and hitching posts, up out of reach of the prowling rodent.

"Careful. Don't frighten the horses."

The horses, however, were getting used to being carried about, and hardly looked up from munching their little piles of grass cuttings. There was no sign of life from the longhouse.

There followed a timeless period of just sitting there silently, their eyes fixed on Boone's still figure in the flickering candlelight. Omri began to feel light-headed after a bit: The candle flame went fuzzy and Boone's body seemed

to vibrate as he stared at it. At the very back of his mind, something else was nagging, nagging. . . . He didn't ask himself what this was, because he had a superstitious feeling that if he let his mind wander from Boone, even for a minute, Boone would slip away into death. It was as if only Omri's will—and Patrick's—were keeping that tiny, fragile heart beating.

Suddenly, though, a thought—like a landscape lit up by lightning—flashed to the forefront of Omri's brain. He sat up, his eyes wide open and his breath held.

"Patrick!"

Patrick jumped. He'd been half asleep.

"What?"

"The key! I know where it is!"

"Where? Where?"

"*Right under my feet.* It must have dropped through the floorboards when Dad opened them. There's nowhere else it could be."

Patrick gazed at him in admiration, but also in dismay.

"How are we going to get it?" he whispered.

"We'll have to take up the carpet first. Maybe Dad didn't nail all the boards down."

Moving very quietly, they managed to lift one corner of Omri's bed and kick back the edge of carpet from underneath. Another bit was under the bedside table leg, and that was tricky, but they shifted it between them in the

end. Carefully they folded the corner of carpet back on itself, exposing the boards. Omri then stuck his fingers down the narrow crack at the ends of the boards, one after another, testing to see if they could be lifted. Only one of them could. The rest were nailed down to the joists underneath.

Making as little noise as possible—he hadn't heard his parents go to bed yet—Omri pried up the short end of board. A hole, about six inches by eighteen, gaped in the light of the candle Patrick was holding. Even when he put the candle down the hole, they couldn't see much.

"We'll have to risk the bedside light," Omri said.

They switched it on, and carried it on its cord down to the hole. Kneeling on the floor, they peered into the depths. They could make out the dusty lath and plaster about a foot down—the topside of the ceiling of the room below. The room where Omri's parents were now sitting . . .

"We'll have to be dead quiet or they'll hear us."

"Dead quiet doing what?" asked Patrick. "It's not there. You'd see it if it was."

"It must be under one of the nailed-down boards," said Omri despairingly.

At that moment they heard Little Bear calling them, and they stood up.

He was standing outside the longhouse, naked but for his breechcloth. His hair hung loose, his face and chest and

arms were smeared with ashes, his feet were bare.

"Little Bear! What are you doing?" asked Omri, aghast at his appearance.

"Want fire. Want make dance. Call spirits. Make Boone live."

Omri looked at him for a moment and felt an ache in his throat that reminded him painfully of his babyish days, when he used to cry all the time—days he thought he had left behind forever.

"Little Bear, dancing won't do any good. The spirits won't help. We need a doctor. To get the doctor we need the key. Would you help find it?"

Little Bear didn't move a muscle. "I help."

Gently Omri picked him up. He knelt on the floor and put his hand down in the hole. Patrick held the light. Omri opened his hand and Little Bear stood on it, looking around into the dusty dark tunnel stretching away under the floor.

"I think it's somewhere down there," Omri said quietly, "on the other side of that wooden wall. You'll have to find a way through, a hole or crack or something. We'll give you all the light we can, but it's bound to be awfully dark on the other side. Do you think you can do it?"

"I go," said Little Bear immediately.

"Right. Start looking for a way through."

Little Bear, a tiny, vulnerable figure, strode off through

the dust into the darkness under the floor.

Omri pulled the lampshade off the bedside lamp and thrust the bulb down into the hole. He couldn't get his head in to watch, and Little Bear went out of sight almost at once.

"Is there a way through?" he whispered down the tunnel.

"Yes," came Little Bear's voice. "Big hole. I go through. Omri give light."

Omri pushed the light down as far as he could, but the base of the lamp made it stick.

"Can you see anything?" he whispered as loudly as he dared.

There was no answer. He and Patrick knelt there for an age. There wasn't a sound. Then Patrick said suddenly, "Did he take his bow and arrows?"

"No. Why?"

"What if—Omri—what if he meets the rat?"

Omri had totally forgotten about the rat in the excitement of realizing what had happened to the key. Now he felt a strange jerk in his chest, as if his heart had hiccuped.

He bent his head till his face was in the hole. He could smell the dust. The bright bulb was between him and the place where Little Bear had presumably gone through a hole in the joist into the next section of the underfloor

space. A hole! What could make a hole right through a joist? What else but a rat, gnawing away all day? A rat at this moment out on his night prow, a hungry rat who hadn't eaten for twenty-four hours—a pink-eyed, needle-toothed, omnivorous, giant rat?

"Little Bear!" Omri called frantically into the blankness. "Come back! Come back!"

Utter silence. And then he heard something. But it wasn't Little Bear's voice. It was the scuttering sound of a rodent's hard little hairless feet on lath and plaster.

"Little Bear!"

"Omri!" It was a voice from the room below. "What are you doing up there?"

It was his mother. Then, quite distinctly, he heard his father's voice. "I can hear that blasted rat pattering about overhead. It's probably keeping the boys awake."

"I'd better go up," said his mother. A door closed below and they heard her coming up the stairs.

Even this dire prospect hardly had power to do more than push Omri's desperation one stage farther. He probably wouldn't have moved from his place on the floor if Patrick hadn't acted swiftly.

"Quick! Light off! Into bed!"

He pulled Omri up, snatched the lamp out of his hand, and switched it off. The candle was still down the hole. Patrick shoved the floorboard roughly back into position

and moved the carpet so that it more or less covered the boards if you didn't look closely. Then he pushed Omri into his bed, covered him up—the footsteps were nearly at the door—and had just flung himself down on the folding bed when the door opened.

Omri lay there with his eyes squeezed shut thinking, "Don't put the light on! Don't put the light on!" Light was coming into the room from the landing, but not enough to see anything much. His mother stood there for what seemed a hundred years. Finally she whispered, "Are you boys asleep?" Needless to say, she got no reply. "Omri?" she tried once more. Then, after another hundred years, during which Omri imagined Little Bear bitten in half by the rat right underneath where he was lying, the door closed again, leaving them in darkness.

"Wait—wait—" breathed Patrick.

It was torture to wait. The rat had stopped moving when all the scuffling and footsteps had started, that was something; but now it was quiet again, Omri imagined it creeping toward its prey, its pink nose twitching, its albino whiskers trembling hungrily. . . . Oh how, *how* could he have let Little Bear go down there? Boone's death would at least not have been his fault, but if Little Bear was killed, Omri knew he would never forgive himself.

At long, long last the living-room door closed and both boys stole out of bed again. Patrick reached the light first.

Omri grabbed it, but Patrick insisted on looking first to see if Boone was still breathing. He was. . . . They rolled back the carpet and lifted the board again, terrified that each movement would attract the grown-ups below. The home-made candle was burning away in the gloom, like a little torch in a disused mine, throwing its eerie light down the tunnel.

Omri lay down flat. He didn't dare raise his voice, but he called softly: "Little Bear! Are you there? Come back! You're in terrible danger!"

Silence.

"Oh God! Why doesn't he come?" Omri whispered frenziedly.

At that moment they did hear something. It was hard to identify the sound—it was the rat, all right, but what was it doing? There was no running sound, just a sort of tiny shock, as if it had made one short, sudden movement.

A pounce?

Omri's heart was in his mouth. Then there were other sounds. If he had not got used to straining his ears to catch the voices of the little men, he might not have heard it. But he did hear it, and hope nearly lifted him off the ground. It was a faint, light scrambling sound, the sound of a small body getting through a hole in a hurry.

Omri pulled the lamp back out of the hole and thrust

his arm in instead, his hand open. Almost at once, he felt Little Bear run into it. Omri closed his fingers just as something warm and furry brushed against their backs. He snatched his arm out, grazing his knuckles against the splintery wood.

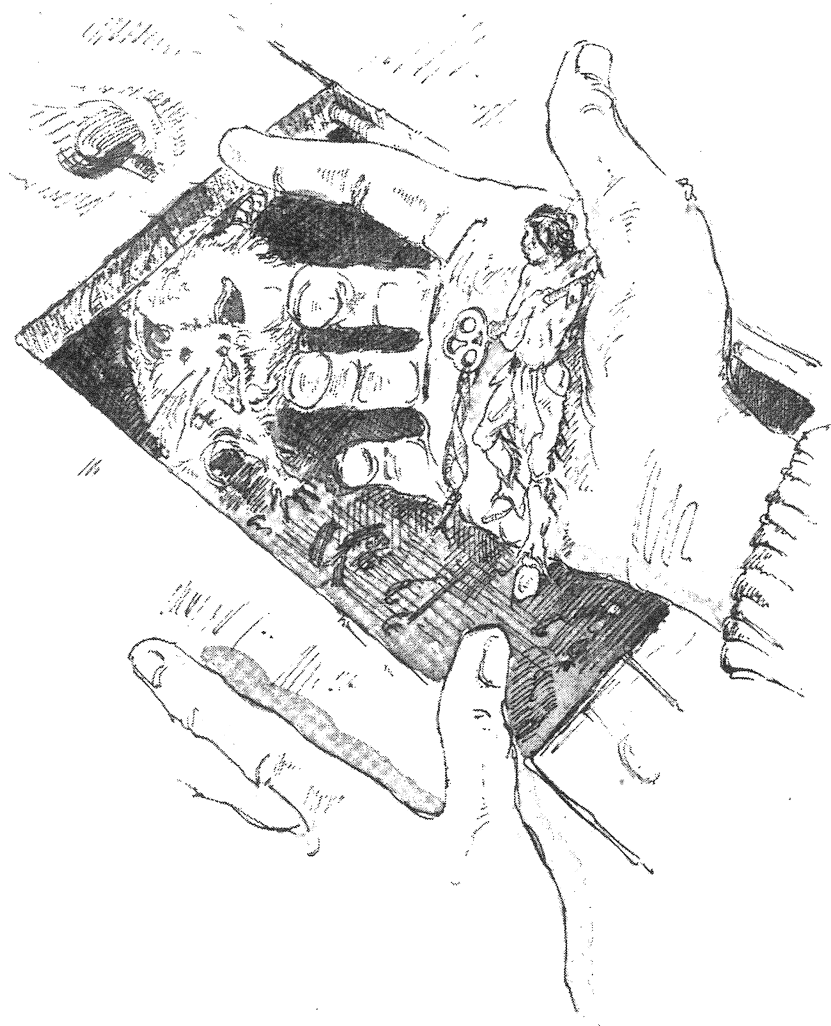
There was something else in his hand—something cold and knobbly, twice as heavy as Little Bear. He opened his fingers, and both boys leaned over to look.

Sitting on Omri's palm, filthy and bedraggled but triumphant, was Little Bear, and cradled in his arms, trailing cobwebs and a red satin ribbon, was the missing key.

"You've done it! Oh Little Bear—good for you! Now—quick—" said Omri. "Patrick, get the candle up and put the floor back. I'll find the Red Cross man."

Reckless now, they switched the top light on. Patrick, being as quiet as he could, replaced the floorboard and the carpet, while Omri looked through the figures jumbled up in the biscuit tin. Luckily the army medical orderly was right on top, still holding his precious doctor's bag. Little Bear, meanwhile, stood beside the pallet-bed on which Boone was lying, staring down at him, still clutching the key in his arms.

Omri took it from him, thrust the plastic man into the cupboard, and turned the key. He made himself count to ten while Patrick watched, popeyed and scarcely breathing. Then he opened the door.



There stood his old friend Tommy, his bag at his feet, rubbing his eyes and frowning around him.

His face cleared as he saw Omri.

"Well! If it ain't you again. I don't half pick my moments to drop off to sleep, I must say! Thundering great Minnie whining overhead—thought I was a gonner!"

"What's a Minnie?" asked Patrick in a croaky voice.

"What, another of you?" asked Tommy, gaping. "I must've eaten too much cheese for me dinner! Shouldn't give us cheese before a big attack . . . very hard on the stomach, specially when it's churned up anyway, with nerves. What's a Minnie? It's our name for a *Minnenwerfer*—that's one of them big German shells. Make an 'orrible row they do, even before they land, a sort of whistle that gets louder and louder, and then—KERBOOM! Then blokes with my job has to pick themselves up and run as quick as you like to where it fell, if it fell in a trench, to take care of the wounded."

"We've got a wounded man here we want you to take care of," said Omri quickly.

"Oh yes? The old redskin again, is it?"

"No, it's another one. Could you step onto my hand?"

Omri lifted him to where Boone lay, and Tommy at once knelt down beside him and began a professional examination.

"He's in a bad way," he said after a few moments.

"Could do with a blood transfusion really. I'll have to have this bandage off, and look at his wound. . . ." He was cutting it off with a minute pair of scissors as he spoke. As the bandage opened up, the anxious watchers saw that the tuft of tissue was now red with blood, but Tommy said, "Bleeding's stopped, that's one good thing. What was it, a bullet?"

"An arrow," said Omri, and Little Bear shivered all over.

"Oh yes—of course—I see that now. Well, I'm not much up on arrow wounds. Head's not still in there, I hope?"

"No, it was pulled out."

"Good, good. Lucky it missed his heart. Well, I'll see what I can do." He got the hypodermic out of his bag and fiddled with it for a moment, then plunged the needle into Boone's chest. After that he stitched up the wound, put a field dressing on it, and got Little Bear to help him peel off the rest of the old, blood-stained Band-Aid.

"You a pal of his, are you?" he asked the Indian.

Little Bear stared at him, but did not deny it.

"Then look here. When he wakes up, you keep giving him these here pills. They're iron, see? Build him up. And these as well, they're for the pain. What we have to hope is that there won't be no infection."

"We need penicillin for him," said Patrick, who had once had a bad cut on his foot that had turned septic.

Tommy looked at him blankly. "Penicillin? What's that?"

Omri nudged Patrick. "They hadn't discovered it in his time," he whispered.

"Best thing I can suggest is a drop of brandy," said Tommy, and, taking out a flask, poured something down Boone's throat. "Look there," he said cheerfully, "he's getting a better color already. He'll open his eyes soon, I wouldn't wonder. Keep him warm, that's the ticket. Now I must be getting back—waking up, I mean. If that there Minnie's landed, I'll be in demand, and no mistake!"

Omri carried him back to the cupboard.

"Tommy," he said, "what if—what if the Minnie had fallen on you?"

"Couldn't a done, could it? If it had've, I wouldn't be having this here dream, would I, I'd be singing with an 'eavenly choir! Cheeriby—hurry up and shut that door, I think I can hear 'em calling 'stretcher bearer' already!"

Omri smiled gratefully at him. He hated to send him back, but obviously he wanted to go.

"Good-by, Tommy—thanks. And good luck!" And he shut the door.

From the other end of the table, Little Bear suddenly called, "Omri come! Boone open eyes! Boone wake up!"

Omri and Patrick turned. Sure enough, there was Boone, staring up into Little Bear's face.

“What happened?” he got out in a faint, shaky voice.

Nobody liked to tell him, but at last Little Bear had to confess.

“I shoot,” he said.

“Watcha talkin’ about, ya crazy Injun? Ah asked ya, what happened in the *picture*? Did them settlers beat the redskins and git to whur they wuz aimin’ to git to? Or did the redskins carry off the wimmin and scalp all the men, the dirty low-down savages?”

Little Bear drew in his breath. His head, which had been hanging in shame, came up sharply, and to Omri’s horror he actually saw his hand go to his belt for his knife. Luckily it wasn’t there. But he jumped to his feet.

“Boone shut mouth! Not insult Indian braves, or Little Bear shoot again, this time kill good, take scalp, hang on pole—Boone scalp too dirty hang on belt of Indian chief!”

And he snatched his chief’s cloak off Boone’s body and swirled it proudly back around his own shoulders.

Omri was shocked, but Patrick was laughing so hard he could scarcely hold it in. But he controlled himself enough to wrap Boone up in the cut-out blanket to keep him warm.

Omri snatched Little Bear up between finger and thumb.

“Oh so you’re a chief again, are you?” he hissed furiously. “Chiefs ought to know how to keep their tempers!

Here.” He picked up the broken headdress off the floor and fitted it lopsidedly onto Little Bear’s head. “Now, ‘Chief’—have a good look at yourself!” And he held Little Bear up before a mirror. Little Bear took one look, and then hid his face in his hands. “Just you remember what you did—to your friend!”

“Not friend. Enemy,” muttered Little Bear. But the anger had gone out of him.

“Whatever he is, you’ve got a job to do. Where are those pills? You’re to see that he gets them. We can’t—we can’t even see them. So it’s up to you! And when Boone is better, do you know what you’re going to do? You’re going to make him your blood brother!”

Little Bear shot him a quick, startled look. “Blood brother?”

“You both make little cuts on your wrists and tie them together so the blood mingles, and after that you can’t be enemies ever again. It’s an old Indian custom.”

Little Bear looked baffled. “Not Indian custom.”

“I’m sure it is! It was in a film I saw.”

“White man idea. Not Indian.”

“Well, couldn’t you do it, just this once?”

Little Bear was silent for a moment, thinking. Then Omri saw that crafty look that he knew of old coming onto the Indian’s face.

“Good,” he said. “Little Bear give Boone medicine,

make him my brother when strong. And Omri put plass-tick in box, make real wife for Little Bear.”

“Not tonight,” said Omri firmly. “We’ve had enough excitement. Tonight you stand guard over Boone, give him his pills when he needs them, drinks of water, and all that. Tomorrow, if everything’s all right, I’ll bring your woman to life. That’s a promise.”

Brothers

OMRI HAD FULLY INTENDED TO go to sleep—Patrick did, almost immediately—but Omri couldn't, tired though he was.

Instead, he lay in the candlelight, his head turned toward the table where Boone lay, and Little Bear sat cross-legged next to him, erect and watchful. Sometimes Omri would close his eyes, but he did no more than doze; each time he opened them, he would meet Little Bear's unblinking stare.

It was partly the rat that kept Omri awake. It pattered around under the floor for hours, making Omri nervous, but it never came anywhere near the men. No, that wasn't the main thing. The main thing was Omri's thoughts.

What was he going to do?

He would bring Little Bear's woman to life as he had promised. But then what?

It had been hard enough with only one little being to feed, protect, and keep secret. Much harder after Boone came. Now there'd be three—and one a woman. Young as he was, Omri knew that one woman and two men spelled trouble. And what if there should be children . . . ?

For all Little Bear's unpredictable moods, his demands, his occasional cruelties, Omri liked him. He wanted to keep him. But he knew, now, that that was impossible. Whichever way he thought about it, the end was the same—disaster of some kind. Whatever magic had brought this strange adventure about must be put to use again, to send the little people back to their own place and time.

Having decided this, however sadly and reluctantly, Omri's stressful thoughts let go their hold on him. He drifted off to sleep. When he opened his eyes again, dawn was breaking; the morning chorus of birds was just beginning. The candle had burned itself out. The rat had gone to sleep. So had Little Bear, nodding over his bow. Omri peered closely at Boone. The yellow field dressing on his wound moved steadily up and down; his skin had lost that gray look. He was better. Of course, Little Bear shouldn't have gone to sleep, but just the same, he had done his

best. Omri slipped out of bed.

His blazer was hanging from a hook at the back of his door. He took the paper bag with the woman in it out of the pocket. Moving on tiptoe, he went to the cupboard, took out the plastic soldier, put in the plastic Indian girl, and locked the cupboard door again.

When he heard little movements, he unlocked the cupboard and opened the door a crack, so she wouldn't be frightened in the dark. Then he got back into bed, covered himself up all except his eyes, and stayed perfectly still to watch what would happen.

At first nothing did. Then, slowly, stealthily, the door was pushed a little farther open. Out crept a beautiful Indian girl. There was enough light in the room now for Omri to see the black of her hair, the chestnut brown of her skin, the bright red of her dress. He couldn't see her expression, but he guessed she was bewildered. She glanced all around, and at once spotted Boone lying on the ground and Little Bear dozing beside him.

She approached them cautiously. For a few moments she lingered behind Little Bear, clearly not sure whether she should touch and wake him or not. She decided against it, and, circling Boone's feet, sat herself cross-legged on his other side, facing Little Bear.

She sat staring at him. The three of them were so utterly still that they might still have been plastic. Then a

blackbird outside gave a particularly loud chirrup and Little Bear sat up sharply.

At once he saw her. His whole body gave a jolt. Omri felt a prickling up the back of his neck. The way they looked at each other! It went on a long time. Then, slowly and both together, they rose to their feet.

Little Bear spoke to her quietly in a strange language. She answered. He smiled. Standing there on either side of Boone, not touching, they talked for some minutes in low voices. Then he put out his hand and she put hers into it.

They stood silently. Then their hands dropped. Little Bear pointed at Boone and began talking again. The girl crouched down, touched Boone gently and expertly. She looked up at Little Bear and nodded. Then Little Bear looked around the room. He saw Omri.

Omri put his finger to his lips and shook his head, as if to say, "Don't tell her about me."

Little Bear nodded. He took the girl by the hand and led her to the seed box, up the ramp, and into the long-house. After a moment or two, he came out again. He ran the length of the table till he stood on its edge, as near to Omri as he could get.

"Do you like her?" Omri asked.

Little Bear put his hands to his belt and unfastened it. "I like. Fit wife for chief. I pay much for her." And he

handed Omri the belt, made of the shiny white beads. "Now Omri hear Little Bear. Woman say, Boone good. Not die. Little Bear pleased. Omri take Boone, put in long-house. Woman take care, give little medicines." He held up the pill boxes. "Omri get food. Make wedding feast."

"How can you have a wedding feast with only two Indians?"

"Yes . . . not good. Omri make more Indian, come to feast?" he asked hopefully. When Omri shook his head, Little Bear's face fell.

"Little Bear, wouldn't you rather have your wedding feast at home with your own tribe?"

Little Bear was no fool. He understood at once. He stood still, staring at Omri.

"Omri put in box. Send back," he said. His voice was very flat—Omri couldn't tell if he liked the idea or not.

"What do you think? Wouldn't it be better?"

Very slowly, the Indian nodded his head. "And Boone?"

"Boone too."

"Make him my brother first."

"Yes. Then I'll send you all back."

"When?"

"When Boone's well enough."

Once Omri had decided, every day that passed was important because it was one day nearer to the last.

Patrick was as sad as he was, but he didn't argue against Omri's decision.

"It's the only way, really," Patrick said. After that he didn't talk about it anymore, he just tried to be at Omri's house as much as possible.

He couldn't do things with Boone much, of course, even though, in a day or two, Boone was sitting up in the longhouse and demanding to talk to his horse (which was brought to the entrance for the purpose) and whining for all sorts of special food. And drink.

"Ah cain't be expected t' git mah strength back if ya won't gimme some o' the hard stuff," he nagged. He even pretended to have a relapse. Omri pinched a nosedropperful of whiskey from his parents' drinks cupboard and squeezed a large drop down Boone's throat before the Indian girl (whose name was Bright Stars, a reference to her shining eyes, Omri supposed) had succeeded in conveying the fact that Boone was perfectly all right and that his faint was faked.

Still, after he'd had his drink Boone seemed so much better that Omri and Patrick decided it wouldn't do him any harm ("He's used to it, after all!") and thereafter Boone got a liquor ration three times a day. And did very well on it.

"He'll be ready to go back tomorrow," said Omri on the fourth day, when Boone, having had a leg up from Little

Bear, managed to ride his horse around the seed box at a steady walk. "They'll probably look after him better than we can, in his own time."

A thought struck him, and he fished out of his pocket the drawing Boone had done.

"Boone, is this your hometown?"

"Shore is!"

Omri studied it closely under the magnifying glass. A way up the street he saw a little sign reading "Doctor."

"Is he a good doctor?"

"'Bout as good as any out West, Ah reckon. Fish a bullet out of a man's arm or cut his foot off fer snakebite as neat as kin be. I seen him bring a pal o' mine back from the dead, near enough, by puttin' a hot coal in his belly button. He never operates till a man's dead drunk, *and* he don't charge extry for the likker neither!"

Omri and Patrick looked at each other. "You'd feel that you were in good hands, with this—er—doctor looking after you?" Patrick asked worriedly.

"Shore would! Anyhow, don't need no sawbones now, m'wound's healin' up fine. S'long as Ah git mah whiskey, Ah'll be as good as new."

Boone bore not the slightest ill will toward Little Bear for having shot him.

"That there's a Injun's natural nature. Pore simple critter c'd no more help himself than Ah kin keep away from

mah horse and mah bottle!”

The night before Omri had decided to send them back, they held the brotherhood ceremony.

“I wish we could ask *our* brothers!” said Patrick to Omri at school that day. “Supposing we tell them one day about this—they’ll never believe us.”

“Sending them back,” said Omri slowly, “doesn’t mean the magic won’t work anymore. I’m going to put the key away somewhere so I won’t be tempted; but it will always be there.”

Patrick looked at him wonderingly. “I never thought of that,” he said slowly. “So there’d be nothing to stop us—months or even years from now—from bringing Boone and Little Bear back again. To visit.”

“I don’t know,” said Omri. “Maybe their time is different from ours. It would be awful if they were old, or—” But he couldn’t say, “dead.” Both Boone and Little Bear came from such dangerous times. Omri shivered and changed the subject.

“As for our brothers coming,” he said, “all I want of my brothers is to keep that rat in its cage.” The rat had been caught by Omri after a long, patient wait with cheese and a fishing net, and Omri had threatened Gillon with the worst fate imaginable if he let it get away again.

The two boys went to Yapp’s after school and bought feast food for the ceremony—salted nuts, chips, and chocolate.

Omri bought a quarter pound of the best meat at the butcher's for tiny hamburgers (a teaspoonful would have been enough, but the butcher wasn't interested in *that*). They got bread, biscuits, cake, and soda from Omri's mother, and Omri sneaked another dropperful of "the hard stuff," without which Boone would certainly not consider it a festive occasion at all.

Omri was rather surprised Boone had agreed to be brother to a "stinkin' redskin" at all, but Boone actually seemed rather to like the idea.

"T'ain't jest anyone gits t' be brother to an Injun chief, y'know," he said proudly, as he rolled up his sleeve and Bright Stars carefully swabbed his arm with soap and water. But when he saw Little Bear sharpening his knife on a pebble he turned pale.

"Heck! It'll hurt!" he muttered, but Patrick told him not to be a coward.

"It's only a little nick, it's nothing at all!"

"Easy fer you!" retorted Boone. "I ain't so sure this is sich a nice idee, after all. . . ."

But he cheered up when he saw the campfire being kindled, and smelled the meat Bright Stars was cooking on a pointed stick; and when Omri gave him a good swig from the dropper he swaggered up to Little Bear and offered his arm with a drunken flourish.

"Chop away, brother," he said loudly.

Little Bear went through a whole routine first, cleaning himself, offering up loud chanting prayers to the spirits, and performing a marvelous stomping dance around the fire. Then he nicked his own wrist with the point of his knife. The blood welled up. Boone took one look and burst into tears.

"Ah don't wanna! Ah changed m' mind!" he bawled. But it was too late for that. Little Bear seized his arm, and before Boone knew what was happening the deed was done.

Bright Stars bound their wrists together with a strip of hide torn from the hem of her red dress. Boone looked at it in a bemused way and said, "Gee whiz. We done it! I'm part Injun! Wal . . . Ah guess Ah cain't say nothin' 'gainst 'em in the future."

Then the two "brothers" sat on the ground and Bright Stars served them the cooked meat and all the rest of the feast. Patrick and Omri offered their congratulations and started in on their own food. They kept the campfire going with tiny bits of broken matchsticks and a bit of coal dust Omri had collected in the outside bunker, which, when sprinkled on the flame, made it spit minute sparks. Looking at it, and the three little figures around it, the boys gradually lost their sense of size altogether.

"I feel as if I were the same as them," murmured Patrick.

"Me too," said Omri.

"I wish we *were* all the same size, then there'd be no problems."

"Don't be funny! No problems, with two full-grown Indians and a six-foot crying cowboy?"

"I meant if we were small. If we could enter their world—sleep in the longhouse, ride the horses—"

"I wouldn't mind eating one of those hamburgers," said Omri.

Bright Stars was now crouched by the fire, tending it, singing softly. One of the horses whinnied. Boone seemed to have dropped off to sleep, leaning on Little Bear's shoulder. Little Bear alone was aware of the boys, watching them. He beckoned to Omri with his free hand.

When Omri bent to hear him, he said, "Now!"

"Now? You mean, to go back?"

"Good time. All happy. Not wait for morning."

Omri looked at Patrick. He nodded slowly.

"When you go into the cupboard," Omri said, "you must hold Bright Stars. Or she may not go back with you."

"Woman go back with Little Bear. Little Bear hold, not let go. And horse! Little Bear only Iroquois with horse!"

"But Boone must go separately. Don't drag *him* back to your time. Your people would kill him even if you are his new brother."

Little Bear looked at Boone, asleep at his side, and at

their joined wrists. Then he took his knife and cut the thong that bound them together. Patrick gently lifted Boone up.

"Don't forget his hat! He'd never forgive us if we let him leave that behind."

To be safe, they sat Boone on his horse. Cowboys often ride in their sleep, and he didn't stir as Little Bear led him down the ramp, across the table, and up another ramp that Omri stood against the rim of the cupboard. Then Little Bear went back to the seed box. Carefully he and Bright Stars put out the fire with earth. Little Bear took a last look at his longhouse. Then he put Bright Stars onto his horse's back and led them after Boone.

They stood all together in the bottom of the cupboard. Nobody spoke. Omri had his hand on the door when Patrick suddenly said, "I'm going to wake Boone up. I don't care, I've got to say good-by to him!"

Hearing his name, Boone woke up by himself, so suddenly he nearly fell off his horse and had to clutch the high pommel of his saddle.

"Watcha want, kid?" he asked Patrick, whose face was close to him.

"You're going home, Boone. I wanted to say good-by."

Boone stared at him and then his face slowly crumpled.

"Ah cain't stand sayin' good-by," he choked out as tears began to stream. He pulled a huge red grubby handkerchief

from his pocket. "Ah jest re-fuse t' say it, that's all! Ah'll only bust out cryin' if Ah do." And he blew a trumpet blast on his nose.

Omri and Little Bear were staring at each other. Something else was needed—some special farewell. It was Little Bear who thought of it.

"Omri give hand!"

Omri put his hand forward. The horse braced his legs but Little Bear held him steady. Little Bear took hold of Omri's little finger, drew his knife, and pricked it in the soft part. A drop of blood appeared. Then Little Bear solemnly pressed his own right wrist against the place and held it there.

"Brother," he said, looking up at Omri with his fierce black eyes for the last time.

Omri withdrew his hand. Little Bear jumped onto the back of his horse behind Bright Stars, holding her around the waist so that he, she, and the horse made one unit that could not be separated during whatever kind of unearthly journey they had to make together through the unknown regions of time, space—proportion.

Little Bear raised his arm in the Indian salute.

Omri put his hand on the door. He nearly couldn't do it. He had to set his teeth. Boone and his horse stood patiently, but the Indian's horse started to prance and sidle. It put up its head and gave a long, challenging neigh.



"Now!" cried Little Bear.

Omri drew in his breath, closed the door, and turned the key.

He and Patrick stood frozen with the sadness, the strangeness of it. The magic was working at this moment. . . . Both of them silently counted to ten. Then, very slowly, Omri, whose hand had not left the key, turned it back again and swung open the door.

There they were, the two plastic groups—forms, outlines, shells of the real, real creatures they had been. Each boy lifted out his own and helplessly examined it. The life-giving details were blurred—plastic can't show fine beadwork, the perfection of hair and muscle, the folds of hide, the sheen of a horse's coat or the beauty of a girl's skin. The figures were there, but the people, the personalities, were gone.

Patrick's eyes met Omri's. Both were wet.

"We could bring them back. Just as quick," Patrick said huskily.

"No."

"No . . . I know. They're home by now."

Omri put his group—the Indian, the girl, and the horse—on the shelf nearest his bed where he could see it easily. He laid the beaded belt—still real—beside it. Patrick slipped the mounted cowboy into his pocket, keeping his hand around it almost as if to keep it warm.

Then Omri took the key and left the room.

His mother was in the kitchen getting everyone a hot drink before bed. She took one look at Omri's face and her hands became still.

"What's happened? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Mum, I want you to keep this key. I lost it. Lucky I found it again; you told me it was important. Better if you keep it. Please."

She nearly refused, but then, looking at him, she changed her mind and took the key from him.

"I'll get a chain and wear it," she said, "like I always meant to."

"You won't lose it, will you?"

She shook her head, and suddenly reached for him and hugged his face against her. He was shaking. He broke away and ran back to his room, where Patrick was still standing with his hand in his pocket gazing at the cupboard.

"Come on, I'm going to put all sorts of medicines in it," Omri said loudly. "Bottles of pills and stuff Mum's finished with. We'll pretend it's a doctor's drug cupboard, and we can mix lots of them together. . . ."

His voice petered out. Those were silly games, such as he had played—before. He didn't feel the slightest interest in them now.

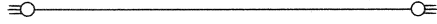
"I'd rather go for a walk," said Patrick.

“But what shall I do with the cupboard?” asked Omri desperately.

“Leave it empty,” said Patrick. “In case.”

He didn’t say in case what. But he didn’t have to. Just to know you *could*. That was enough.

Glossary



Biscuits—cookies

Football—the British word for
the game of soccer

Lorry—a truck or van

Toffo—a brand name of candy