



THE INDIAN IN THE CUPBOARD

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Trouble with Authority

What was left of the morning passed uneventfully. Omri even got a few sums done. By the time the first whiffs of school lunch were beginning to flood through the classrooms, Omri was congratulating himself on a stroke of genius in putting the two little men together. There had not been another peep out of either of them, and when Omri took an opportunity (when the teacher's back was turned) to open his pocket stealthily and peer down into it, he was pleased to see them, sitting in the bottom of it, face to face, apparently having a conversation, for they were both gesticulating with their arms—there was too much noise all around for Omri to be able to hear their tiny voices.

He had given some thought to the matter of their lunch. He would separate them for that, one into each pocket, and slip some dry bits of food down to them. Omri let himself play with the wonderful fantasy of what the other kids' reaction would be if he casually brought them out and sat them on the edge of his plate. ... Funny to think that he would certainly have done it, only a week ago, without thinking about the dangers.

The bell rang at last. There was the usual stampede, and Omri found himself in the line next to Patrick.

"Come on then, hand them over," Patrick whispered over his tray as they shuffled forward toward the fragrant food slots.

"Not *now*, everyone'd see."

"You said at lunchtime."

"After lunch."

"Now. I want to feed them."

"Well, you can have Boone, but I want to feed Little Bear."

"You said I could have them both!" said Patrick, no longer in a whisper. Others in the line began to turn their heads.

"Will you shut up?" hissed Omri.

"No," said Patrick in a loud, clear voice. He held out his hand.

Omri felt trapped and furious. He looked into Patrick's eyes and saw what happens even to the nicest people when they want something badly and are determined to get it, come what may. Omri slammed his empty tray down on the floor and, taking Patrick by the wrist, pulled him out of the line and into a quiet corner of the hall.

"Listen to me," Omri grated out between teeth clenched in anger. "If you let anything happen to Little Bear, I will bash you so hard your teeth will fall out." (This, of course, is what happens even to the nicest people when they are in a trap.) With that, he groped in his pocket and brought the two little men out. He didn't look at them or say good-by to them. He just put them carefully into Patrick's hand and walked away.

Omri had lost his appetite, so he didn't get back in the line; but Patrick did. He even

pushed a bit, he was so eager to get some food to give to the cowboy and the Indian. Omri watched from a distance. He wished now he hadn't been too angry to give Patrick some pretty clear instructions. Like telling him to separate them. Now that he thought about it, perhaps it wasn't a good idea to feed them in a pocket. Who wants to eat something that's descended between two layers of cloth and collected bits of dust and fluff? If he'd still had them, he would have taken them to some private place and taken them out to eat properly. Why had he ever brought them to school at all? The dangers here were too awful.

Watching, he suddenly stiffened. Patrick had reached the food slot now, and received his dinner. He almost ran with it to a table—he did try to go to one in the outside row near the windows, but a lunch lady stopped him and made him sit in the middle of the hall. There were children all around him and on either side. Surely, thought Omri, surely he wasn't going to try to feed them there?

He saw Patrick take a pinch of bread and slip it into his pocket. He wasn't wearing a jacket; the men were in his jeans pocket. Fortunately the jeans were new and loose, but still he had to half stand up to get the bit of bread in; when he was sitting down the people in his pocket must be pretty well squashed against his leg. Omri imagined them trying to eat, held down flat by two thick layers of cloth. He could almost see Patrick imagining it, too. He was frowning uneasily and shifting around in his chair. The girl next to him spoke to him. She was probably telling him not to wriggle. Patrick said something sharp in reply. Omri sucked in his breath. If only Patrick wouldn't draw attention to himself!

Suddenly he gasped. The girl had given Patrick a hard push. He pushed her back. She nearly went off her chair. She stood up and pushed him with all her might, using both hands. He went flying over backward, half onto the boy on the other side of him, who jumped from his place, spilling part of his dinner. Patrick landed on the floor.

Omri didn't stop to think. He raced toward him across the hall, dodging in and out among the tables. His heart was hammering with terror. If Patrick had fallen on them! Omri had a terrible, fleeting vision of the pocket of Patrick's jeans, with blood stains spreading—he clamped down on his imagination.

By the time he got there, Patrick was back on his feet, but now the other boy was angry and clearly looking for a fight. The girl on his other side looked ready to clobber him too. Omri pushed between them, but a stout lunch lady was ahead of him.

" 'Ere, 'ere, what's goin' on?" she asked, barging in with her big stomach and sturdy arms. She grabbed Patrick with one hand and the other boy with the other and kind of dangled them at arm's length like a pair of cats. "No fighting in 'ere, thank you very much, or it'll be off to the 'eadmaster's office before you can say knife, the 'ole boomin' pack of you!" She dumped them down in their separate chairs as if they'd been bags of shopping. They were both thoroughly tousled and red-faced. Omri's eyes shot down to Patrick's thigh. No blood. No movement either, but at least no blood.

Everyone began to eat again as the stout lunch lady stamped away, tut-tutting as she

went. Omri leaned over the back of Patrick's chair and whispered out of a dry mouth, "Are they all right?"

"How do I know?" said Patrick sulkily. But his hand crept down and delicately explored the slight bump on the top of his leg where his pocket was. Omri held his breath. "Yeah, they're okay. They're moving," Patrick muttered.

Omri went out into the playground. He felt too jumpy to stay indoors, or eat, or anything. How would he get them back from Patrick, who, quite obviously, was not a fit person to have charge of them? Nice as he was, as a friend, he just wasn't fit. It must be because he didn't take them seriously yet. He simply didn't seem to realize that they were *people*.

When the bell rang Omri still hadn't come to any decision. He hurried back into school. Patrick was nowhere to be seen. Omri looked around for him frantically. Maybe he'd gone into the toilet to be private and give the men something to eat. Omri went in there and called him softly, but there was no answer. He returned to his place in the classroom. There was no sign of Patrick. And there continued to be no sign of him till about halfway through the lesson—not one word of which Omri took in, he was so worried.

At last, when the teacher turned her back to write on the board, Patrick slipped around a partition, rushed across the room silently, and dropped into his chair.

"Where have you *been*?" asked Omri under his breath.

"In the music room," said Patrick smugly. The music room was not a room at all, but a little alcove off the gym in which the musical instruments were stored, together with some of the bulkier apparatus like the long horse. "I sat under the horse and fed them," he muttered out of the side of his mouth. "Only they weren't very hungry."

"I bet they weren't," said Omri, "after all they'd been through!"

"Cowboys and Indians are used to rough treatment," Patrick retorted. "Anyway, I left some food in my pocket for later if they want it."

"It'll get all squashy."

"Oh so what? Don't fuss so much, they don't mind!"

"How do you know what they mind?" said Omri hotly, forgetting to whisper. The teacher turned around.

"Oh ho, so there you are, Patrick! And where have you been, may I inquire?"

"Sorry, Miss Hilton."

"I didn't ask if you were sorry. I asked where you'd been."

Patrick coughed and lowered his head. "In the toilet," he mumbled.

"For nearly twenty minutes? I don't believe you! Are you telling me the truth?" Patrick mumbled something. "Patrick, answer me. Or I'll send you to the headmaster."

This was the ultimate threat. The headmaster was very fierce and could make you feel

about two inches high. So Patrick said, “I was in the music room, and that’s true. And I forgot the time.”

And that’s not true, added Omri silently. Miss Hilton was nobody’s fool. She knew it too.

“You’d better go and see Mr. Johnson,” she said. “Omri, you go too, chattering away there as usual. Tell him I said you were both disturbing the class and that I’m extremely tired of it.”

They got up silently and walked through the tables, while all the girls giggled and the boys smirked or looked sorry for them, according to whether they liked them or not. Omri glanced at Patrick under his eyebrows. They were in for it now.

Outside the headmaster’s office they stopped.

“You knock,” whispered Omri.

“No, you,” retorted Patrick.

They dithered about for a few minutes, but it was useless to put it off, so in the end they both knocked together.

“Yes?” came a rather irritable voice from inside.

They edged around the door. Mr. Johnson was seated at his large desk, working at some papers. He looked up at once.

“Well, you two? What was it this time—fighting in the playground or talking in class?”

“Talking,” they said, and Patrick added, “and I was late.”

“Why?”

“I just was.”

“Oh don’t waste my time!” snapped Mr. Johnson. “There must have been a reason.”

“I was in the music room, and I forgot the time,” Patrick repeated.

“I don’t remember you being especially musical. What were you doing in the music room?”

“Playing.”

“Which instrument?” asked Mr. Johnson with a touch of sarcasm.

“Just—playing.”

“*With what?*” he asked, raising his voice.

“With a—with—” He glanced at Omri. Omri threw him a warning grimace.

“What are you pulling faces about, Omri? You look as if someone’s just stuck a knife into you.”

Omri started to giggle, and that set Patrick off.

“Somebody just did!” spluttered Patrick.

Mr. Johnson was in no such jolly mood, however. He was scowling horribly.

“What are you talking about, you silly boy? Stop that idiotic noise!”

Patrick’s giggles were getting worse. If they hadn’t been where they were, Omri thought, Patrick would have folded up completely.

“Someone—did—stick a knife into him!” hiccuped Patrick, and added, “A very small one!” His voice went off into a sort of whinny.

Omri had stopped giggling and was staring in awful anticipation at Patrick. When Patrick got into this state he was apt to do and say anything, like someone who’s drunk. Omri took hold of his arm and gave it a sharp shake.

“Shut up!” he hissed.

Mr. Johnson got up slowly and came around his desk. Both boys fell back a step, but Patrick didn’t stop giggling. On the contrary, it got worse. He seemed to be getting completely helpless. Mr. Johnson loomed over him and took him by the shoulder.

“Listen here, my lad,” he said in fearsome tones. “I want you to pull yourself together this moment and tell me what you meant. If there is any child in this school who so far forgets himself as to stick knives into people, or even pretend to, I want to know about it! Now, who was it?”

“Little—Bear!” Patrick squeaked out. Tears were running down his cheeks.

Omri gasped. “Don’t!”

“Who?” asked Mr. Johnson, puzzled.

Patrick didn’t answer. He couldn’t. He was now speechless with nervous, almost hysterical laughter.

Mr. Johnson gave him a shake of his own that rocked him back and forth on his feet like one of those weighted dolls that won’t fall down. Then, abruptly, he let him go and strode back to his desk.

“You seem to be quite beyond yourself,” he said sharply. “I think the only thing I can do is telephone your father.”

Patrick stopped laughing instantly.

“Ah, that’s better!” said Mr. Johnson. “Now. *Who* did you say had stabbed Omri?”

Patrick stood rigid, like a soldier at attention. He didn’t look at Omri, he just stared straight at Mr. Johnson.

“I want the truth, Patrick, and I want it now!”

“Little Bear,” said Patrick very clearly and much louder than necessary.

“Little who?”

“Bear.”

Mr. Johnson looked blank, as well he might.

“Is that somebody’s nickname, or is this your idea of a joke?”

Patrick gave his head one stiff shake. Omri was staring at him, as if paralyzed. Was he going to tell? He knew Patrick was afraid of his father.

“Patrick. I shall ask you once more. Who is this—Little Bear?”

Patrick opened his mouth. Omri clenched his teeth. He was helpless. Patrick said, “He’s an Indian.”

“A what?” asked Mr. Johnson. His voice was very quiet now. He didn’t sound annoyed anymore.

“An Indian.”

Mr. Johnson looked at him steadily for some seconds, his chin resting on his hand.

“You are too old to tell those sort of lies,” he said quietly.

“It’s not a lie!” Patrick shouted suddenly, making both Omri and Mr. Johnson jump. “It’s not a lie! He’s a real live American Indian!”

To Omri’s utter horror, he saw that Patrick was beginning to cry. Mr. Johnson saw it too. He was not an unkind man. No headmaster’s much good if he can’t scare the wits out of children when necessary, but Mr. Johnson didn’t enjoy making them cry.

“Now then, Patrick, none of that,” he said gruffly. But Patrick misunderstood. He thought he was still saying he didn’t believe him.

He now said the words Omri had been dreading most.

“It’s true and I can prove it!”

And his hand went to his pocket.

Omri did the only thing possible. He jumped at him and knocked him over. He sat on his chest and pinned his hands to the ground.

“You dare—you dare—you dare—” he ground out between clenched teeth before Mr. Johnson managed to drag him off.

“Get out of the room!” he roared.

“I won’t!” Omri choked out. He’d be crying himself in a minute, he felt so desperate.

“OUT!”

Omri felt his collar seized. He was almost hiked off his feet. The next thing he knew, he was outside the door and hearing the key turning.

Without stopping to think, Omri hurled himself against the door, kicking and banging with his fists.

“Don’t show him, Patrick, don’t show him! Patrick, don’t, I’ll kill you if you show him!” he screamed at the top of his lungs.

Footsteps came running. Through his tears and a sort of red haze, Omri saw Mrs. Hunt, the headmaster’s elderly secretary, bearing down on him. He got in a couple more good kicks and shouts before she got hold of him and, with both arms around his waist, carried him, shrieking and struggling, bodily into her own little office.

The minute she put him down he tried to bolt, but she hung on.

“Omri! Omri! Stop it, calm down, whatever’s come over you, you naughty boy!”

“Please don’t let him! Go in and stop him!” Omri cried.



“Who? What?”

Before Omri could explain he heard the sound of footsteps from the next room. Suddenly Mr. Johnson appeared, holding Patrick by the elbow. The headmaster’s face was dead white, and his mouth was partly open. Patrick’s head was hung down and his shoulders were heaving with sobs. One look at them told Omri the worst. Patrick had shown him.