



THE INDIAN IN THE CUPBOARD

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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 massacree!”

“Not dead,” said Little Bear scornfully. “Plasstick.” 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 plasstick! 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.