



THE INDIAN IN THE CUPBOARD

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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 prowling, 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 homemade 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.

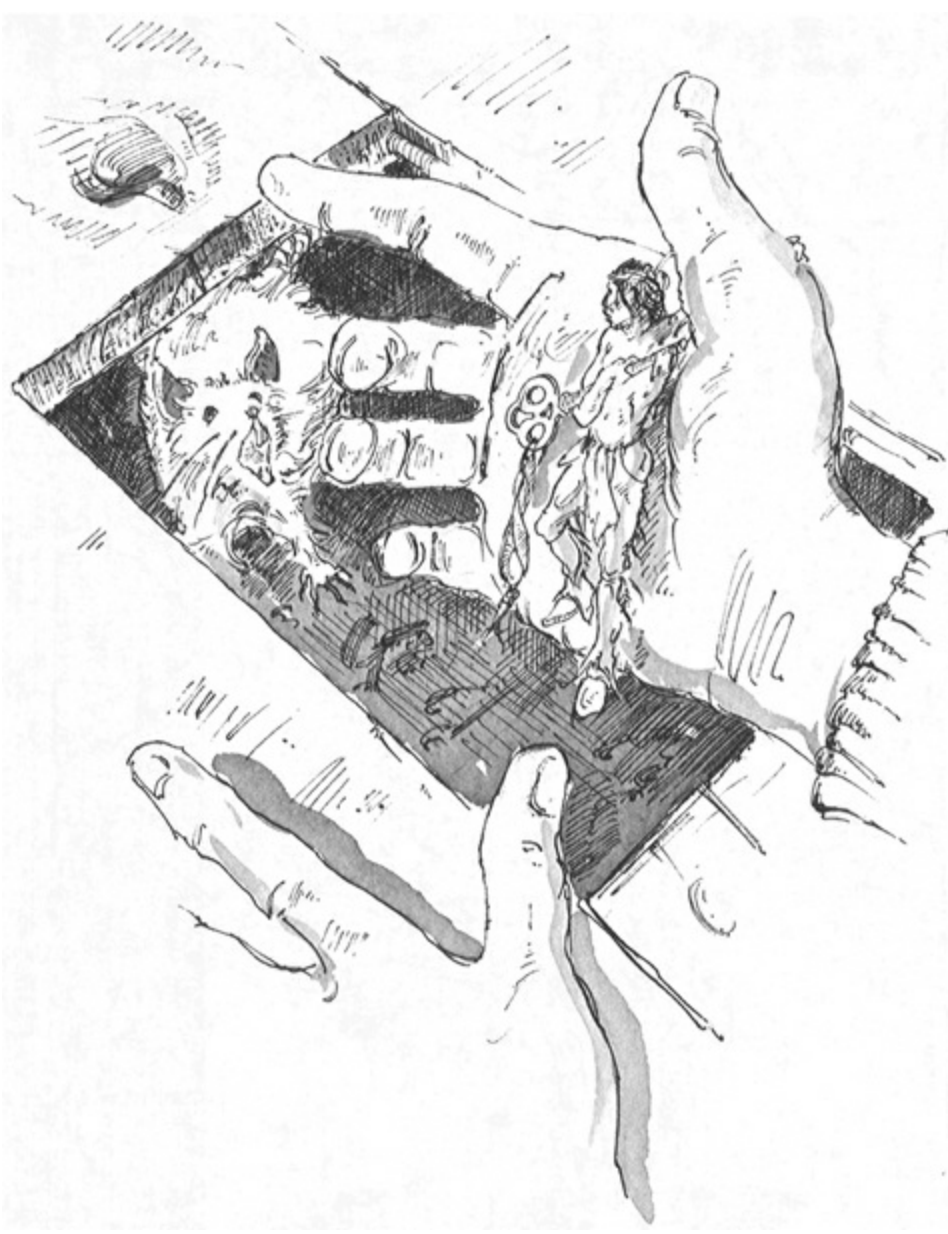
Omri pulled the lamp back out of the hole and thrust his arm in instead, his hand open. Almost at once, he felt Little Bear run into it. Omri closed his fingers just as something warm and furry brushed against their backs. He snatched his arm out, grazing his knuckles against the splintery wood.

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 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 plasstick 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.”