



# THE INDIAN IN THE CUPBOARD

Lynne Reid Banks

*Illustrations by Brock Cole*

# Contents

16 Brothers



## 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 longhouse. 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 longhouse. 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.