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opening extract from

The Indian in the Cupboard

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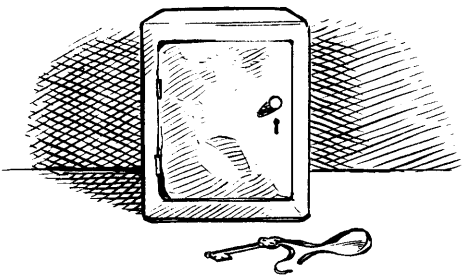

Chapter One

BIRTHDAY PRESENTS

IT WAS NOT that Omri didn't appreciate Patrick's birthday present to him. Far from it. He was really very grateful – sort of. It was, without a doubt, very kind of Patrick to give Omri anything at all, let alone a secondhand plastic Red Indian which he himself had finished with.

The trouble was, though, that Omri was getting a little fed up with small plastic figures, of which he had loads. Biscuit-tinsful, probably three or four if they were all put away at the same time, which they never were because most of the time they were scattered about in the bathroom, the loft, the kitchen, the breakfast-room, not to mention Omri's bedroom and the garden. The compost heap was full of soldiers which, over several autumns, had been raked up

with the leaves by Omri's mother, who was rather careless about such things.

Omri and Patrick had spent many hours together playing with their joint collections of plastic toys. But now they'd had about enough of them, at least for the moment, and that was why, when Patrick brought his present to school on Omri's birthday, Omri was disappointed. He tried not to show it, but he was.

"Do you really like him?" asked Patrick as Omri stood silently with the Indian in his hand.

"Yes, he's fantastic," said Omri in only a slightly flattish voice. "I haven't got an Indian."

"I know."

"I haven't got any cowboys either."

"Nor have I. That's why I couldn't play anything with him."

Omri opened his mouth to say, "I won't be able to either," but, thinking that might hurt Patrick's feelings, he said nothing, put the Indian in his pocket and forgot about it.

After school there was a family tea, and all the excitement of his presents from his parents and his two older brothers. He was given his dearest wish – a skateboard complete with kick-board and cryptonic wheels from his mum and dad, and from his eldest brother, Adiel, a helmet. Gillon, his other brother, hadn't bought him anything

because he had no money (his pocket-money had been stopped some time ago in connection with a very unfortunate accident involving their father's bicycle). So when Gillon's turn came to give Omri a present, Omri was very surprised when a large parcel was put before him, untidily wrapped in brown paper and string.

"What is it?"

"Have a look. I found it in the alley."

The alley was a narrow passage that ran along the bottom of the garden where the dustbins stood. The three boys used to play there sometimes, and occasionally found treasures that other – perhaps richer – neighbours had thrown away. So Omri was quite excited as he tore off the paper.

Inside was a small white metal cupboard with a mirror in the door, the kind you see over the basin in old-fashioned bathrooms.

You might suppose Omri would once again be disappointed, because the cupboard was fairly plain and, except for a shelf, completely empty, but oddly enough he was very pleased with it. He loved cupboards of any sort because of the fun of keeping things in them. He was not a very tidy boy in general, but he did like arranging things in cupboards and drawers and then opening them later and finding them just as he'd left them.

"I do wish it locked," he said.

"You might say thank you before you start complaining," said Gillon.

"It's got a keyhole," said their mother. "And I've got a whole boxful of keys. Why don't you try the smaller ones and see if any of them fit?"

Most of the keys were much too big, but there were half a dozen that were about the right size. All but one of these were very ordinary. The un-ordinary one was the most interesting key in the whole collection, small with a complicated lock-part and a fancy top. A narrow strip of red satin ribbon was looped through one of its curly openings. Omri saved that key to the last.

None of the others fitted, and at last he picked up the curly-topped key and carefully put it in the keyhole on the cupboard door, just below the knob. He did hope very much that it would turn, and regretted wasting his birthday-cake-cutting wish on something so silly (or rather, unlikely) as that he might pass his spelling test the next day, which it would take real magic to bring about as he hadn't even looked at the words since they'd been given out four days ago. Now he closed his eyes and unwished the test-pass and wished instead that this little twisty key would turn Gillon's present into a secret cupboard.

The key turned smoothly in the lock. The door wouldn't open.

"Hey! Mum! I've found one!"

"Have you, darling? Which one?" His mother came to look. "Oh, *that* one! How very odd. That was the key to my grandmother's jewel-box, that she got from Florence. It was made of red leather and it fell to bits at last, but she kept the key and gave it to me. She was most terribly poor when she died, poor old sweetie, and kept crying because she had nothing to leave me, so in the end I said I'd rather have this little key than all the jewels in the world. I threaded it on that bit of ribbon – it was much longer then – and hung it round my neck and told her I'd always wear it and remember her. And I did for a long time. But then the ribbon broke and I nearly lost it."

"You could have got a chain for it," said Omri.

She looked at him. "You're right," she said. "I should have done just that. But I didn't. And now it's your cupboard key. Please don't lose it, Omri, will you."

Omri put the cupboard on his bedside table, and opening it, looked inside thoughtfully. What would he put in it?

"It's supposed to be for medicines," said Gillon. "You could keep your nose-drops in it."

"No! That's just wasting it. Besides, I haven't any other medicines."

"Why don't you pop this in?" his mother suggested, and

opened her hand. In it was Patrick's Red Indian. "I found it when I was putting your trousers in the washing-machine."

Omri carefully stood the Indian on the shelf.

"Are you going to shut the door?" asked his mother.

"Yes. And lock it."

He did this and then kissed his mother and she turned the light out and he lay down on his side looking at the cupboard. He felt very content. Just as he was dropping off to sleep his eyes snapped open. He had thought he heard a little noise... but no. All was quiet. His eyes closed again.

In the morning there was no doubt about it. The noise actually woke him.

He lay perfectly still in the dawn light staring at the cupboard, from which was now coming a most extraordinary series of sounds. A pattering; a tapping; a scrabbling; and – surely? – a high-pitched noise like – well, almost like a tiny voice.

To be truthful, Omri was petrified. Who wouldn't be? Undoubtedly there was something alive in that cupboard. At last, he put out his hand and touched it. He pulled very carefully, the door was tight shut. But as he pulled the cupboard moved, just slightly. The noise from inside instantly stopped.

He lay still for a long time, wondering. Had he imagined it?

The noise did not start again. At last he cautiously turned the key and opened the cupboard door.

The Indian was gone.

Omri sat up sharply in bed and peered into the dark corners. Suddenly he saw him. But he wasn't on the shelf any more, he was in the bottom of the cupboard. And he wasn't standing upright. He was crouching in the darkest corner, half hidden by the front of the cupboard. And he was alive.

Omri knew that immediately. To begin with, though the Indian was trying to keep perfectly still – as still as Omri had kept, lying in bed a moment ago – he was breathing heavily. His bare, bronze shoulders rose and fell, and were shiny with sweat. The single feather sticking out of the back of his headband quivered, as if the Indian were trembling. And as Omri peered closer, and his breath fell on the tiny huddled figure, he saw it jump to its feet; its minute hand made a sudden, darting movement towards its belt and came to rest clutching the handle of a knife smaller than the shaft of a drawing-pin.

Neither Omri nor the Indian moved for perhaps a minute and a half. They hardly breathed either. They just stared at each other. The Indian's eyes were black and fierce and frightened. His lower lip was drawn down from shining white teeth, so small you could scarcely see them except

when they caught the light. He stood pressed against the inside wall of the cupboard, clutching his knife, rigid with terror, but defiant.

The first coherent thought that came into Omri's mind as he began to get over the shock was, "I must call the others!" – meaning his parents and brothers. But something (he wasn't sure what) stopped him. Maybe he was afraid that if he took his eyes off the Indian for even a moment, he would vanish, or become plastic again, and then when the others came running they would all laugh and accuse Omri of making things up. And who could blame anyone for not believing *this* unless they saw it with their own eyes?

Another reason Omri didn't call anyone was that, if he was not dreaming and the Indian had really come alive, it was certainly the most marvellous thing that had ever happened to Omri in his life and he wanted to keep it to himself, at least at first.

His next thought was that he must somehow get the Indian in his hand. He didn't want to frighten him any further, but he *had* to touch him. He simply had to. He reached his hand slowly into the cupboard.

The Indian gave a fantastic leap into the air. His black pigtail flew and the air ballooned out his loose-fitting leggings. His knife, raised above his head, flashed. He gave a shout which, even though it was a tiny shout to match his

body, was nevertheless loud enough to make Omri jump. But not so much as he jumped when the little knife pierced his finger deeply enough to draw a drop of blood.

Omri stuck his finger in his mouth and sucked it and thought how gigantic he must look to the tiny Indian and how fantastically brave he had been to stab him. The Indian stood there, his feet, in moccasins, planted apart on the white-painted metal floor, his chest heaving, his knife held ready and his black eyes wild. Omri thought he was magnificent.

"I won't hurt you," he said. "I only want to pick you up."

The Indian opened his mouth and a stream of words, spoken in that loud-tiny voice, came out, not one of which Omri could understand. But he noticed that the Indian's strange grimace never changed – he could speak without closing his lips.

"Don't you speak English?" asked Omri. All the Indians in films spoke a sort of English; it would be terrible if his Indian couldn't. How would they talk to each other?

The Indian lowered his knife a fraction.

"I speak," he grunted.

Omri breathed deeply in relief. "Oh, good! Listen, I don't know how it happened that you came to life, but it must be something to do with this cupboard, or perhaps the key – anyway, here you are, and I think you're great, I don't

mind that you stabbed me, only please can I pick you up? After all, you are my Indian," he finished in a very reasonable tone.

He said all this very quickly while the Indian stared at him. The knife-point went down a little further, but he didn't answer.

"Well? Can I? Say something!" urged Omri impatiently.

"I speak *slowly*," grunted the miniature Indian at last.

"Oh." Omri thought, and then said, very slowly, "Let – me – pick – you – up."

The knife came up again in an instant, and the Indian's knees bent into a crouch.

"No."

"Oh, *please*."

"You touch – I kill!" the Indian growled ferociously.

You might have expected Omri to laugh at this absurd threat from a tiny creature scarcely bigger than his middle finger, armed with only a pin-point. But Omri didn't laugh. He didn't even feel like laughing. This Indian – *his* Indian – was behaving in every way like a real live Red Indian brave, and despite the vast difference in their sizes and strengths, Omri respected him and even, odd as it sounds, feared him at that moment.

"Oh, okay, I won't then. But there's no need to get angry. I don't want to hurt you." Then, as the Indian looked

baffled, he said, in what he supposed was Indian-English, "Me – no – hurt – you."

"You come near, I hurt *you*," said the Indian swiftly.

Omri had been half lying in bed all this time. Now, cautiously and slowly, he got up. His heart was thundering in his chest. He couldn't be sure why he was being cautious. Was it so as not to frighten the Indian, or because he was frightened himself? He wished one of his brothers would come in, or better still, his father... But no one came.

Standing in his bare feet he took the cupboard by its top corners and turned it till it faced the window. He did this very carefully but nevertheless the Indian was jolted, and, having nothing to hold on to, he fell down. But he was on his feet again in a second, and he had not let go of his knife.

"Sorry," said Omri.

The Indian responded with a noise like a snarl.

There was no more conversation for the next few minutes. Omri looked at the Indian in the early sunlight. He was a splendid sight. He was about seven centimetres tall. His blue-black hair, done in a plait and pressed to his head by a coloured headband, gleamed in the sun. So did the minuscule muscles of his tiny naked torso, and the reddish skin of his arms. His legs were covered with buckskin trousers which had some decoration on them too small to see properly, and his belt was a thick hide thong

twisted into a knot in front. Best of all, somehow, were his moccasins. Omri found himself wondering (not for the first time recently) where his magnifying glass was. It was the only way he would ever be able to see and appreciate the intricate embroidery, or beadwork, or whatever it was which encrusted the Indian's shoes and clothes.

Omri looked as closely as he dared at the Indian's face. He expected to see paint on it, war-paint, but there was none. The turkey-feather which had been stuck in the headband had come out when the Indian fell and was now lying on the floor of the cupboard. It was about as big as the spike on a conker, but it was a real feather. Omri suddenly asked:

"Were you always this small?"

"I no small! You, big!" the Indian shouted angrily.

"No—" began Omri, but then he stopped.

He heard his mother beginning to move about next door.

The Indian heard it too. He froze. The door of the next room opened. Omri knew that at any moment his mother would come in to wake him for school. In a flash he had bent down and whispered, "Don't worry! I'll be back." And he closed and locked the cupboard door and jumped back into bed.

"Come on, Omri. Time to get up."

She bent down and kissed him, paying no attention to the cupboard, and went out again, leaving the door wide open.