

The Indian In The Cupboard

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 shut tight. 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 anymore, 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 toward its belt and came to rest clutching the handle of a knife smaller than the shaft of a tack.

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 lips were drawn back 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 hair flew and the fringes on his leggings fluttered. 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 door, his chest heaving, his knife held ready, and his black eyes quite 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.

"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 farther, 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 pinpoint. 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 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 just under three inches 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 skin of his arms. His legs were covered with buckskin leggings, which had some decoration on them too small to see properly. He wore a kind of bandolier across his chest and his belt seemed to be made of several strands of some shiny white beads. 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 details of the Indian's 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 that had been stuck in the headband had come out when the Indian fell and was now lying on the door of the cupboard. It was about as big as the spike on a horse chestnut, but it was a real feather. Omri suddenly asked, "Were you always this small?" "I not 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.