

The Indian in the Cupboard

By Lynne Reid Banks

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 Indian that 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 got his dearest wish--a skateboard complete with kickboard and krytonic 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--neighbors 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 get another disappointment about this 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 all 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 unordinary 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 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 around 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?"