

The Great Outdoors

Both horse and man seemed to sniff the air, tasting its freshness and testing it for danger at the same time. The pony was still making circles with his nose when Little Bull sprang onto his back.

The pony, startled, reared slightly, but this time Little Bull clung on to his long mane. The pony's front feet had no sooner touched the path than he was galloping. Omri leapt to his feet and gave chase.

The pony's speed was remarkable, but Omri found that by running along the lawn beside the path he could keep up quite easily. The ground was dry and as Indian and pony raced along, a most satisfying cloud of dust rose behind them so that Omri could easily imagine that they were galloping across some wild, unbroken territory...

More and more, he found, he was able to see things from the Indian's point of view. The little stones on the path became huge boulders which had to be dodged, weeds became trees, the lawn's edge an escarpment twice the height of a man... As for living things, an ant, scuttling across the pony's path, made him shy wildly. The shadow of a passing bird falling on him brought him to a dead stop, crouching and cowering as a full-sized pony might if some huge bird of prey swooped at him. Once again, Omri marvelled at the courage of Little Bull, faced with all these terrors.

But it was not the courage of recklessness. Little Bull clearly recognized his peril and, when he had had his gallop, turned the pony's head and came trotting back to Omri, who crouched down to hear what he said.

'Danger,' said the Indian. 'Much. I need bow, arrows, club. Maybe gun?' he asked pleadingly. Omri shook his head. 'Then Indian weapons.'

'Yes,' said Omri. 'You need those. I'll find them today. In the meantime we'd better go back in the house.'

'Not go shut-in place! Stay here. You stay, drive off wild animals.'

'I can't. I've got to go to school.'

'What school?'

'A place where you learn.'

'Ah! Learn. Good,' said Little Bull approvingly. 'Learn law of tribe, honour for ancestors, ways of the spirits?'

'Well... something like that.'

Little Bull was clearly reluctant to return to the house, but he had the sense to realize he couldn't cope outside by himself. He galloped back along the path, with Omri running alongside, and, dismounting, re-entered the carton.

Omri was just carrying it up the back steps when the back door suddenly opened and there was his father.

'Omri! What on earth are you doing out here in your pyjamas? And nothing on your feet, you naughty boy! What are you up to?'

Omri clutched the box to him so hard in his fright that he felt the sides bend and quickly released his hold. He felt himself break into a sweat.

'Nothing - I - couldn't sleep. I wanted to go out.'

'What's wrong with putting on your slippers, at least?'

'Sorry. I forgot.'

'Well, hurry up and get dressed now.'

Omri rushed upstairs and, panting, laid the box on the floor. He opened the flap. The pony rushed out alone, and stood under the table, whinnying and trembling - he had had a rough ride. Full of foreboding, Omri bent down and peered into the box. Little Bull was sitting in a corner of it, hugging his leg, which Omri saw, to his horror, was bleeding right through his buckskin leggings.

'Box jump. Pony get fear. Kick Little Bull,' said the Indian, who, though calm, was clearly in pain.

'Oh, I'm sorry!' cried Omri. 'Can you come out? I'll see what I can do.'

Little Bull stood up and walked out of the box. He did not let himself limp.

'Take off your leggings - let me see the cut,' said Omri. The Indian obeyed him and stood in his breech-cloth. On his tiny leg was a wound from the pony's hoof, streaming blood onto the carpet. Omri didn't know what to do, but Little Bull did.

'Water,' he ordered. 'Cloths.'

Omri, through his panic, forced himself to think clearly. He had water in a toothmug by his bed, but that would not be clean enough to wash a wound. His mother had some Listerine in her medicine cupboard; when any of the boys had a cut she would add a few drops to some warm water and that was a disinfectant.

Omri dashed to the bathroom, and with trembling hands did what he had seen his mother do. He took a small piece of cotton-wool. What could be used as a bandage he had no idea at all. But he hurried back with the water, and poured some into the Action Man's mess-tin. The Indian tore off a minute wisp of cotton-wool and dipped it into the liquid and applied it to his leg.

The Indian's eyes opened wide though he did not wince. 'This not water! This fire!'

'It's better than water.'

'Now tie,' said the Indian next. 'Hold in blood.'

Omri looked round desperately. A bandage small enough for a wound like that! Suddenly his eyes lighted on the biscuit tin. There, lying on top, was a First-World-War soldier with the red armband of a medical orderly. In his hand was a doctor's bag with a red cross on it. What might that not contain if Omri could make it real?

Not stopping to think too far ahead, he snatched the figure up and thrust it into the cupboard, shutting the door and turning the key.

A moment later a thin English voice from inside called: 'Here! Where am I? Come back you blokes - don't leave a chap alone in the dark!'

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Omri felt himself grow weak. What an idiot he'd been! Not to have realized that the man and not just the medical bag would be changed! Or had he? After all, what did he need more just than a bandage of the right size for the Indian? *Someone* of the right size to put it on! And, unless he was sadly mistaken, that was just what was waiting inside the magic cupboard.

He unlocked the door.

Yes, there he was - pink cheeked, tousle-headed under his army cap, his uniform creased and mud-spattered and blood-stained, looking angry, frightened and bewildered.

He rubbed his eyes with his free hand.

'Praise be for a bit of daylight, anyway,' he said. 'What the -'

Then he opened his eyes and saw Omri.

Omri actually saw him go white, and his knees gave way under him. He uttered a few sounds, half curses and half just noises. He dropped the bag and hid his face for a moment. Omri said hastily:

'Please don't be afraid. It's all right. I -' Then he had an absolute inspiration! 'I'm a dream you're having. I won't hurt you, I just want you to do something for me, and then you'll wake up.'

Slowly the little man lowered his hands and looked up again.

'A dream, is it? Well... I should've guessed. Yes, of course. It would be. The whole rotten war's nightmare enough, though, without giants and - and -' He stared round Omri's room. 'Still and all, perhaps it's a change for the better. At least it's quiet here.'