

Jehan

Jehan and Amir waved goodbye to their father and trudged down the dusty lane to school. They passed courtyards where women were grinding spices ready for the day's cooking. Jehan breathed in the smell of coriander, cumin and garlic. A few girls guided their goats down the path out to the fields while older boys raced ahead of them, laughing. No birds sang this morning.

Amir swatted a fly. 'It's so hot that the walls on our house are cracking.'

Jehan hoped Amir would be all right at school today. On very hot days their mother often kept him home to let him play in a big bowl of water. Jehan sighed. After school he would have to get more water from the canal to top up their barrel.

A fly landed in the corner of Jehan's eye. Even though it was early, sweat ran down his back. Grey clouds curled above the Earth. '*Abu* said the monsoon rains won't come with clouds so high in the sky.'

'*Ummie* said the monsoon won't come for two weeks,' Amir replied. 'I wish it would hurry up – I like rain. It's cooler.'

'*Ji*.' Jehan agreed – this was like living in a house made of glass.

When they reached the school he took Amir to the youngest class before walking to the Year 4 room. His teacher, Mr Nadeem, had plenty to say in the first lesson about the monsoon. 'There has been a weather warning,' Mr Nadeem said. 'Tell your parents there could be flooding.'

Jehan shot up his hand. 'Why, sir?'

'It's hotter than usual,' Mr Nadeem said. 'Snow is melting early in the Karakoram Mountains, filling the rivers. Our Indus River may not be able to hold all the water once the rains come.'

Jehan caught his friend Badil's eye. Would that be scary or exciting? He imagined they could play in the water as if it were a lake and make a raft out of oil cans and wood.

That afternoon, Jehan and Badil set up an old petrol drum at the end of their lane to play cricket. Badil brought a flat piece of wood to use as a bat and Jehan brought his treasured tennis ball.

Badil rolled the ball in his hand. 'You're good at finding useful things,' he said. 'This is much better than scrunched-up newspaper.' He ran down the dusty pitch and bowled to Jehan.

Bang! Jehan watched the ball curve up and drop onto the thatch roof of his house.

'Four!' Badil cried.

'*Nay*, that was a six!'

Amir ran out of their house. 'Can I play?'

'If you fetch the ball from the roof,' Jehan said.

Amir was only four but he jumped up the wooden steps until he reached the top. He held the ball high.

'Throw it,' Badil called.

'*Nay*, I'll bring it down. Then I'll have next bat.'

Jehan grinned. Even though Amir was five years younger than Jehan, he was sharp.

Just then, their mother poked her head over the courtyard wall. 'Jehan! Why are you playing when the goats are still in the field? Go and get them, and take Amir with you.'

Jehan groaned but said, '*Ji*, yes, *Ummie*. Want to come?' he asked Badil.

'Certainly.'

'Fetch another bucket of water, too,' Jehan's mother added.

Jehan was sick of chores. Looking after goats was better than fetching water, but cricket was the most fun of all. One day he might be a famous cricketer and play in the Pakistani team against Australia. Then he'd have a real bat, knee pads and helmet.

'I wish it would rain. Then you wouldn't have to carry water and we could keep playing cricket,' Badil said as they reached the canal.

'You're lucky,' Jehan said. 'Your big sister gets your water.' Jehan thought of Badil's sister with a full pot balanced on top of her head. He wished he had a sister.

An old buffalo wearing a blindfold plodded mechanically around the well, turning the wooden water wheel. Amir screwed up his nose at the smell of her dung.

Jehan called to her, 'Salaam, Kali.' Fresh water splashed into the brown canal and Jehan scooped some out with his bucket. Just as he was bending over, Badil gave him a push. Jehan toppled headlong into the canal with the bucket. The water wasn't deep and Badil jumped in too. They poured water over each other with the bucket; then tried to paddle like dogs but Jehan's knees scraped on the bottom of the canal.

Jehan noticed Amir watching them. 'Hop in,' Jehan called. 'The water is cool.'

'*Nay*, I won't,' Amir said.

Finally Jehan and Badil climbed out and Jehan filled the bucket again.

‘I want to carry the water,’ Amir said.

It meant they had to walk slower and Jehan soon grew annoyed. ‘Give the bucket to me, Amir, or we’ll never get the goats into the courtyard before dinner.’

‘You’re mean.’ Amir ran off toward the field.

‘Little brothers are so frustrating,’ Jehan said.

Badil grinned. ‘I wouldn’t know. I’m the little brother in my house.’

‘Ao, come,’ Jehan said. ‘The sooner we get the goats in, the sooner we’ll play more cricket.’

But the goats didn’t want to go home. They’d found a juicy patch of grass and were happily munching. Amir sat further away with a white-faced baby goat on his lap.

‘You have to help, Amir.’ Jehan pointed towards the river. ‘You stand over there so they don’t run that way. I’ll herd them up from behind.’

‘Nay.’

Jehan felt like shaking his brother.

‘I’ll carry the bucket.’ Badil held out his hand.

Just then a cool wind blew up. Huge clouds rolled lower over the mountains in the distance.

Badil gave a whoop. ‘The sky is getting darker. Looks like it will rain. I can smell it!’

‘Ji.’ Jehan stared at the clouds racing closer. ‘Amir, take the little goat home, quickly.’

Amir looked at the sky and then, for the first time ever, did what Jehan told him.

The goats were extra skittish, but Jehan and Badil managed to drive them to the courtyard. Just as the rain began to fall, Badil dumped the water in the barrel and raced to his house next door, slamming the wooden gate behind him.

‘You took your time, Jehan,’ his mother said when they walked inside.

He glared at Amir. Then he felt a pang and ruffled Amir’s hair. He was only four after all. ‘The monsoon might be starting, *Ummie ji*,’ Jehan said.

‘But it’s too early.’ She looked out the window. The clouds were filling the whole sky. She frowned.

‘Mr Nadeem said the river might flood this year,’ Jehan said.

His mother looked at him sharply. ‘Bring everything in.’

Fat drops of rain fell on their heads as they worked. Even Amir carried pots, mats and stools inside while Jehan brought in the *charpai* that he and Amir slept on. Even before they had finished the rain poured down and the boys splashed each other, enjoying the cool relief.

Later that night after spicy potato curry and *chapattis*, Amir asked for a story. ‘The one about the giant boat and the animals,’ Amir begged.

Their mother glanced at their father sitting on his *charpai*. ‘Very well,’ she said, ‘but up on your *charpai* first, both of you.’

When they were settled on top of their *razai*, their quilt, she told the story of Nooh and the huge boat he built for everyone before it rained. But no one wanted to join his family. They didn’t know what rain was. Only the animals came.

‘We know what rain is,’ Amir said.

‘*Ji*.’ Their mother kissed them goodnight. ‘You are my beautiful boys.’ She laid her hand on their heads in blessing. ‘Remember that even in difficult times *Khuda* is always with us.’

Jehan liked the muted sound of rain on their straw roof. It felt safe.

Amir cuddled into Jehan. ‘I wish we had a dog,’ he whispered. ‘It could help with the goats. I’m a bit scared of the big ones.’

‘I didn’t realise.’ Jehan hugged him. ‘You’re right about a dog. Maybe a black Labrador.’

‘*Nay*, a reddish brown one with nice fur to brush and a happy face. Like Uncle *ji*’s.’

‘A golden retriever,’ Jehan whispered. ‘We could ask Uncle *ji* for a pup.’

Amir yawned. ‘Tell me a story about a dog.’

‘*Teik hai*, okay. What about the jackal that tricks a tiger and saves a life? The jackal is just like a dog.’

Amir didn’t answer and Jehan felt a rhythmic breath of air against his cheek. Ever since Amir learned to crawl he’d slept with Jehan. It was like having a living teddy bear. Nothing seemed as scary with Amir beside him.

Jehan was drifting into sleep when he heard his father murmuring. ‘The rain sounds different this time. It’s too early and heavy, the wind too strong.’

His mother said, ‘I hope the river doesn’t rise higher than its banks.’

Jehan hoped so too. His village was barely a kilometre from the river and all of their houses were made of mud.