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In a small village on the edge of a vast, harsh desert lived a little girl, Khadra, and her mother. The sun beat down on her village from early morning until night, soaking up all the moisture.



The heat was especially unforgiving during midday and drove everyone indoors.



Like any other little girl, Khadra hated being inside the house and wanted desperately to play outside with her friends, but her mother would not let her to do so. She was afraid that Khadra would get a heat stroke if she spent the afternoon outside.

So, Khadra spent the long afternoons staring out of the window at the sands which shimmered in the heat. she waited for sunset so that she could go out and play.

She wished for the weather to change so that she could spend more time outdoors. She loved her home and village but wished that it was a little less hot and sunny.

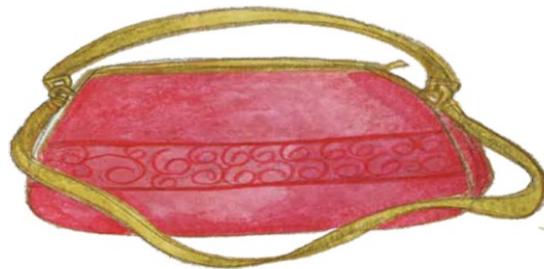


Little did she realise that very soon she would have the answer to her dreams.

One morning, Khadra was woken up early by her mother, because she was expecting a guest at their house.

Khadra did not really know who he was, except that he was her mother's cousin who was a traveller. Khadra loved to listen to stories, especially of distant, exotic, faraway lands and hoped that her visiting uncle would have a tale or two for her.

Khadra's uncle finally arrived in the hot afternoon carrying a very big bag behind him.



He had a friendly face with the most twinkly eyes Khadra had ever seen. Khadra was very intrigued by him.



Khadra couldn't wait for mealtime to be over, as she wanted to hear stories of her uncle's travels. She was also very curious to find out what was inside her uncle's heavy bag which he had placed carefully by the door.



Finally, lunch was over. Khadra started asking him to tell her his most recent adventures.

Her uncle said that he had recently been to another part of the world which had the most amazing forests and trees.

He described how many years ago that part of the world was also barren and dry - much like Khadra's village, but somehow the local people had found a way of changing all that.

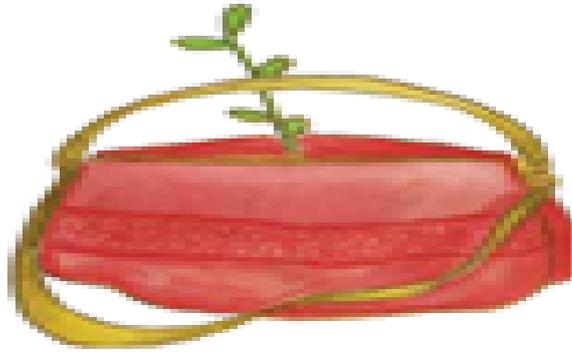


They had found a plant which could grow and flourish with very little water. Every time there was a happy occasion, like a birthday or a wedding, they planted a sapling to celebrate the event.

The intention was to encourage people to plant more trees. Soon, over time, the whole area became green.

Khadra's uncle asked her to bring his bag. Telling her to be careful, he invited her to open it. With excited fingers, Khadra untied the strings, and to her

surprise it was a small sapling in a pot. The plant had very strange leaves... thick and leather-like.



Her uncle said that the leaves were special and they stored water. This was the plant's speciality.

The plant could store every drop of available water from its surroundings, thus enabling it to survive long periods of drought.



Khadra's uncle said that this tree was a gift from him to her.



Khadra was overjoyed. This was the most exotic gift she had ever received. She gave her uncle a big hug and ran to her mother to share her excitement.

Before leaving, her uncle explained to Khadra how to plant and take care of the tree. He told her to find a place in her backyard to plant it there.

He also told Khadra to save a mug of water from her bath every day and use it to water the plant.

It needed very little water, he explained, as it survived on the morning dew.



As he departed, he reminded Khadra that once the tree had grown, she should collect the seeds from the plant's fruits. He told her to give these seeds to her friends on their birthdays, and to encourage them to also plant the trees.



That evening, Khadra gathered her friends in her backyard and narrated to them the events of the afternoon. She showed them the plant which she had been gifted by her uncle. Together they dug a hole and planted the sapling.



Time passed and Khadra's sapling flowered and grew into a large tree.

Its branches and leaves offered shade during even the harshest of summers.

No longer did Khadra have to stay indoors during the afternoons. She, along with her friends, spent happy hours sitting under the tree's shade or up in its leafy branches.



Birds that had never been seen in the village miraculously appeared and nested in the tree's branches.



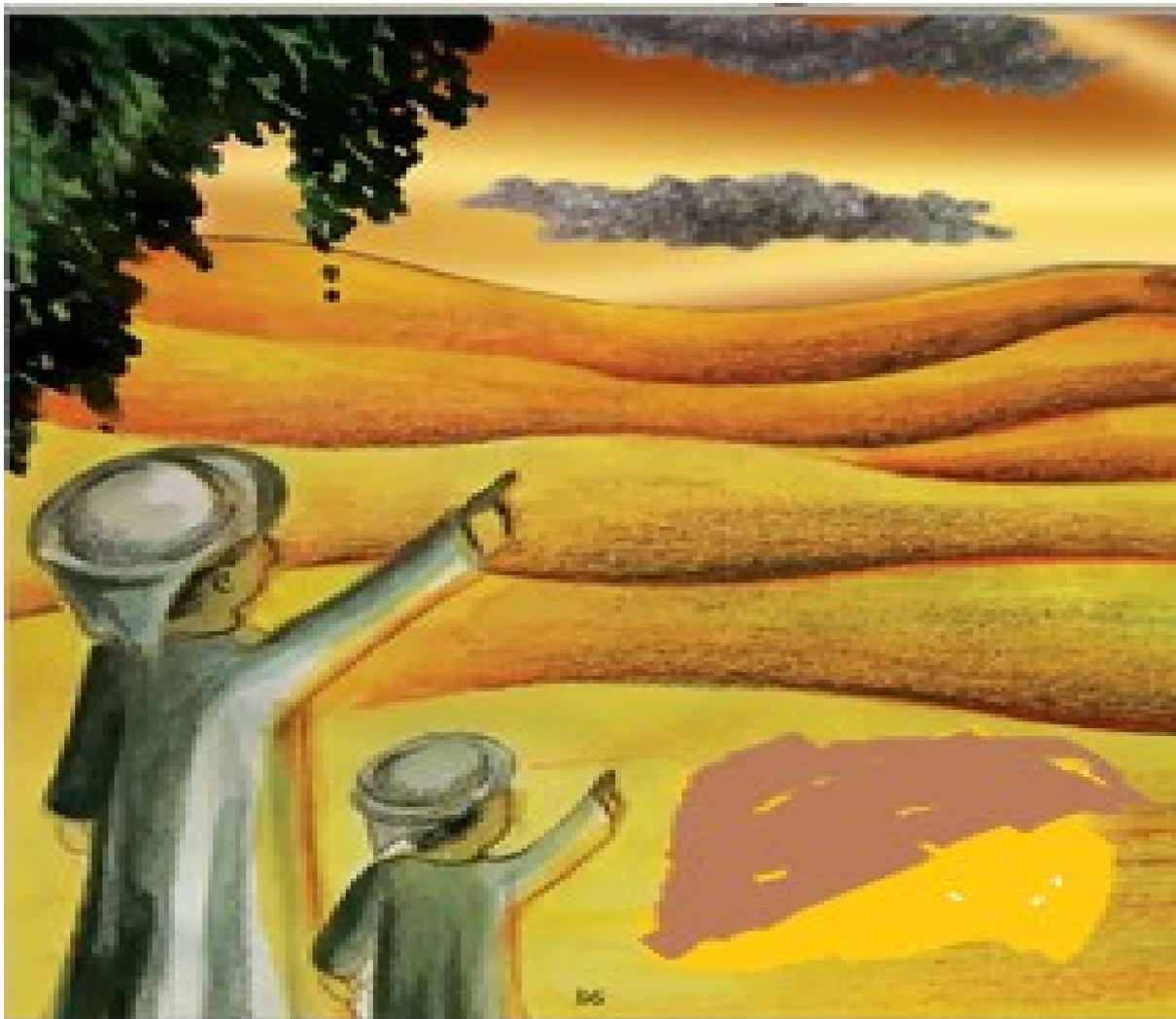
Following her uncle's instructions, her friends plucked the tree's berries and planted the seeds in their backyards.



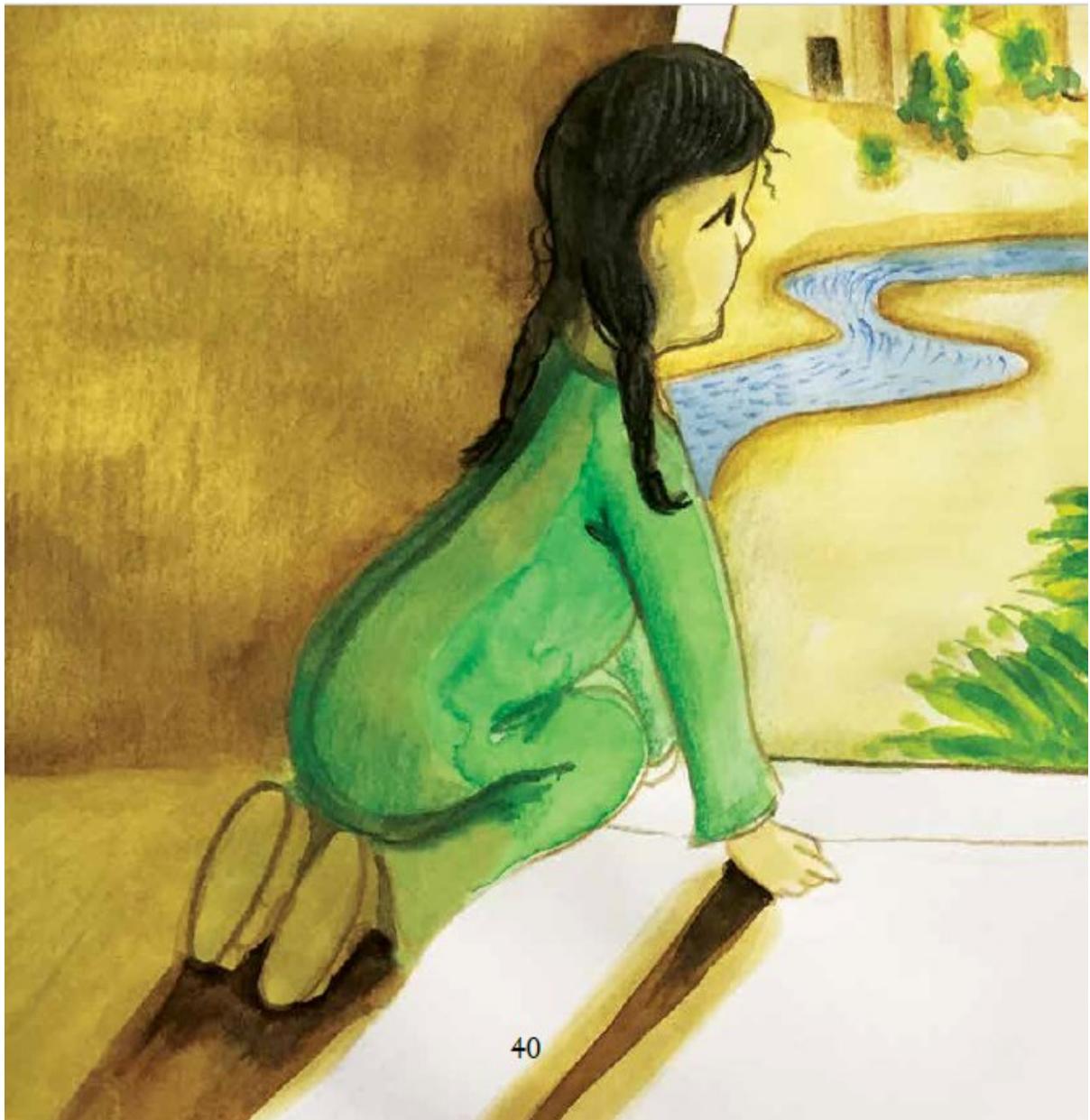
The backyard of each house in the village now had one or more trees.

No one noticed at first, but it did seem as if the evenings were becoming cooler.

Some of the villagers even saw clouds on the horizon - something which had not been seen in many years.



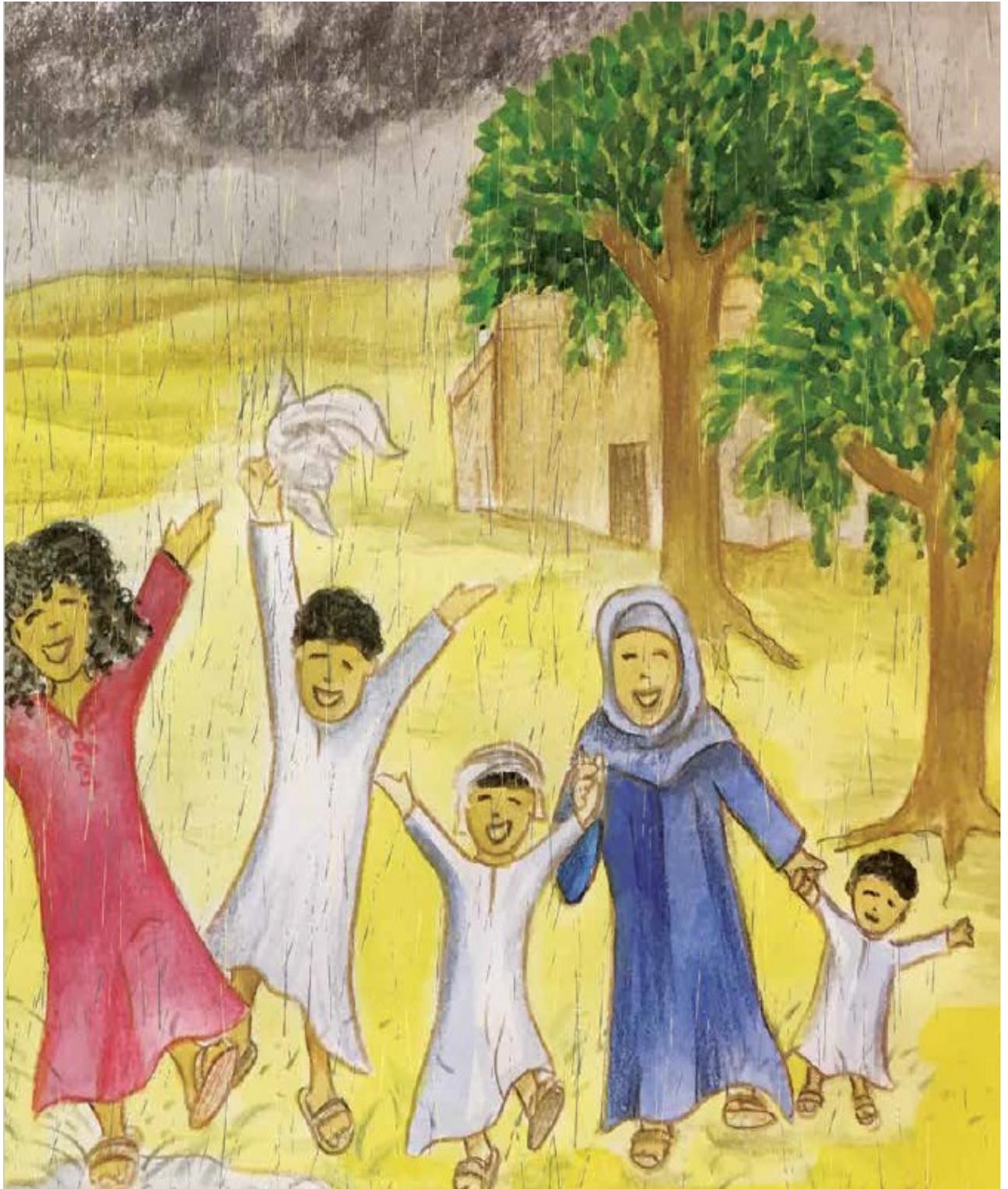
Khadra could no longer see the harsh desert sands from her room's back window.



Her tree of hope, with its lush greenery and chirping birds, offered a beautiful view instead.

And finally, the unthinkable happened!

Storm clouds filled up the sky and heavy drops of rain splattered on the dry earth.



Then Khadra ran to her tree and hugged its trunk tightly to say thank you.



It was indeed the tree of hope which had converted a barren land into a living green landscape.

The end
