



Spirit Nights

by

Easterine Kire

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INDIAN WRITERS

Chapter One

‘Grandmother! Look! I’ve caught three grasshoppers!’
The little boy ran excitedly to the old woman and held up his fist. She saw the crushed wings, legs and bruised green bodies of the insects he had caught.

‘Can we eat them?’ He was looking up eagerly at the grey-haired woman. The five-year-old had lost both his parents in a brutal enemy attack and his grandmother was the only parent he had ever known. He had only been a few months old when it happened. It was a wonder he had not been killed when their village was overrun and people were massacred in their own houses. Luckily for him, the killers had not seen the baby sleeping beside his mother and, having killed both adults in the house, the men escaped to avoid being caught in a counter attack.

‘We don’t eat grasshoppers, Namu. You can give that to our chickens and I will catch something else for you,’ his grandmother replied. She broke off a broad leaf and handed it him. ‘Here. Wrap them in this leaf and put it in your basket. We will take your catch home later.’

Tola, the old woman, worked hard to get enough food for the two of them. She had lost her husband ten years ago in a freak hunting accident. Namu’s father had been her only son, and with him gone, Namu was the only family left to her. Tola tried to teach him the most important lesson of life, how to

get food. They left early every morning to work at the *jhum* field where she had sowed hill rice. In the patches cleared for vegetables, she always had a good crop of chillies, tomatoes, egg plant, and beans growing. Native cabbages sprouted up in season, and if they plucked them before the caterpillars got to them, they made a nice addition to their evening meal. The tapioca and sweet potatoes grew wild and did well even though left quite untended. When they were out in the field, she would take her hoe and expertly dig out a few sweet potatoes for the boy. He loved to eat them raw, the juice dribbling down his chin. Namu was still too young to help, but he followed his grandmother around, carrying his little basket and imitating her as she plucked edible leaves and put them in her cane basket.

Tola checked the grain on the paddy stalks and satisfied herself that the ears were filling up. In three or four weeks they would turn yellow and be ready to be harvested. It was hard work, but it gave them food for a good part of the year. Like the rest of her fellow villagers, Tola owned a small terrace field down in the valley. Working in the field was a little less demanding than cultivating hill rice, and as she got older, the thought had crossed her mind that she should probably stop tilling the hill slopes altogether. Some years ago, she began to grow millet, which was also known by its native name, *the food of war*. It was so called because millet could be stocked for many months without spoiling, and when a village had been prevented by war from tilling their fields for months on end, they could still survive if they had millet in stock.

It was relatively easier to care for since the fast-growing millet plants required much less water than paddy. Weeding was done a few times during the growth season and the millet was always

harvested before the rice. Those villagers who had big plots of land planted millet all along the edges. Tola had done as they did, sowing the hardy cereal after the second rain. As long as she was able to, she would provide food for them in the one way she knew, by tilling the ancestral fields that she and her husband owned. She had given up tilling her father's fields as it was too much work. Besides, they had enough food for the two of them. One day, Namu would inherit all the fields and plots of land owned by her and her husband. He would also inherit her father's lands because she was his only child, and the only other male relative who might have made claims on the land had more than sufficient land of his own.

Tola's hoe suddenly struck a rock, forcing her to stop digging. She instinctively put out her hand to check that the blade had not cracked from the impact. Then she looked at the sky; the sun was behind the plantain trees, wearing a halo of orange mist through which you could see the diaphanous wings of evening insects. It would linger there until it set, but on the days when Namu was with her, she preferred to set off for home earlier than the other field-goers.

'Come on, Namu, it's time to go home,' she called out to the boy. He had struggled halfway up a young Nutgall tree, trying to grab a bird's nest on the upper branches.

'But it's not dark yet, Grandmother,' Namu pleaded.

'And what are you going to do with the dark when it comes?' she asked in a rough voice. Namu knew that tone well. It brooked no arguments. He slung his basket on his back and followed her down the narrow path until it joined with the wider field path.

In the autumn months, Namu and his grandmother trapped small birds and locusts and dragonflies. Tola had a long stick

with one end smeared with glue from mistletoe seeds, and she used it to trap unsuspecting dragonflies resting on paddy stalks. She taught Namu to smear leaves and branches with the glue and thoroughly cover the water surface in the stream with the smeared branches; at dawn, birds coming to drink water would get stuck on the leaves and wood. Early the next morning, the pair would run down to collect the birds they had trapped and they would take their catch home. Tola's job was to clean the birds and hang them over the fire to dry, while it fell to Namu to sweep the feathers into the fire and burn them. Tola cooked the meat with lightly pounded garlic and country ginger and red chilli. The broth was pungent and nourishing. In the winter months, she added three or four of the small, local tomatoes, after crushing them thoroughly so that the sourness would seep into the rest of the ingredients. The tomatoes gave the broth a tangy flavour that both of them liked.

As for the locusts and dragonflies, Tola always removed the wings and legs before roasting them lightly on the embers. She liked to sprinkle a little salt on top and serve the roasted meat atop warm rice. 'Eat, it's good for you,' she would tell Namu.

While the two were making their way home, Tola caught two green-backed frogs. As soon as they reached the house, she removed the entrails, chopped the meat and began to cook it in an old clay pot, adding fresh chilli, crushed garlic and tomatoes. Frog meat was considered medicinal in many tribes, and highly recommended for wounds and injuries, fevers and infections; people had such great faith in its healing properties. Boys were encouraged to catch them in the rainy season, and the surplus meat was dried over the hearth to be used sparingly. Frogs, river-crabs and snails were abundant in these months – seasonal food for the farmer.

The pungent aroma of crushed garlic wafted through the house.

‘My mouth’s watering, Grandmother. Are the frogs going to be tasty?’

‘Oh yes,’ she replied emphatically. ‘Not only that, frog soup will give you strong legs like the frogs!’

When it was ready, she ladled out broth and rice in a bowl for him and the boy kept blowing on his food.

‘Leave it alone for a while. If you burn your tongue, you won’t enjoy it at all, and that will be a great pity,’ she added. He was a good boy, typically energetic and overly fond of playing. But much of that energy was well spent on their excursions to the field. Sometimes in the evenings, when their meals were over, she would tell him about the old village of her childhood. He listened in great fascination to the stories of spirits visiting men and being hosted by them; he pestered Tola to repeat the story of the spirits dangling their legs on the rafters while singing courting songs. It was a picture that never failed to make him giggle. She would also tell him about his father and mother. The boy had a healthy curiosity about his parents but having had no memory of them, he was not acquainted with the bereavement that his grandmother always felt at the mention of them.

‘Will I meet them someday?’ he asked the first time she narrated their story to him. Initially, Tola did not know what to say.

‘Namu, I do believe you will meet your parents when you die. In our religion, we believe that one day after we all die, we will surely meet all our loved ones again in the world of the dead. The elders say that life continues in the land of the dead very much the same way as we lived it here on earth. That is why when we die, we are buried with some seed-grains, so that we may carry it with us, and plant it and have food in our new

homes. We always bury our dead with seed-grains. And we say that the dead travel along a road until they come to the place where the other dead are assembled.' She could not help feeling it was a rather lame explanation. Namu, however, was satisfied with her answer.

He was more interested in stories of his father when he was a lad like him. Did he go to the fields with his mother? Could he carry cucumbers in his basket like Namu did? Did he have a small dao like the one Namu had? His questions made Tola understand that Namu wanted to model himself on his father. Somehow that was important to his young mind, and she tried to tell him as much as she could recollect of his father as a young boy.