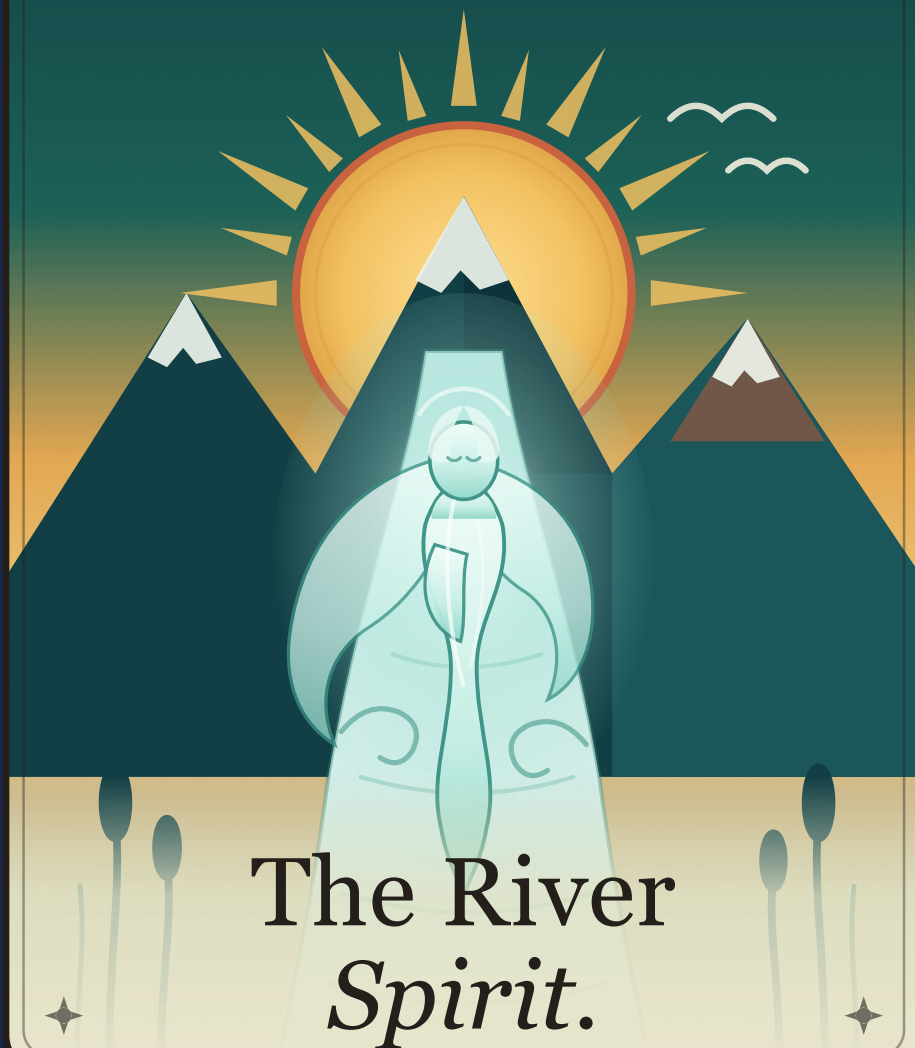


—A NAVRITTO STORY—

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The River
Spirit.

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The River Spirit

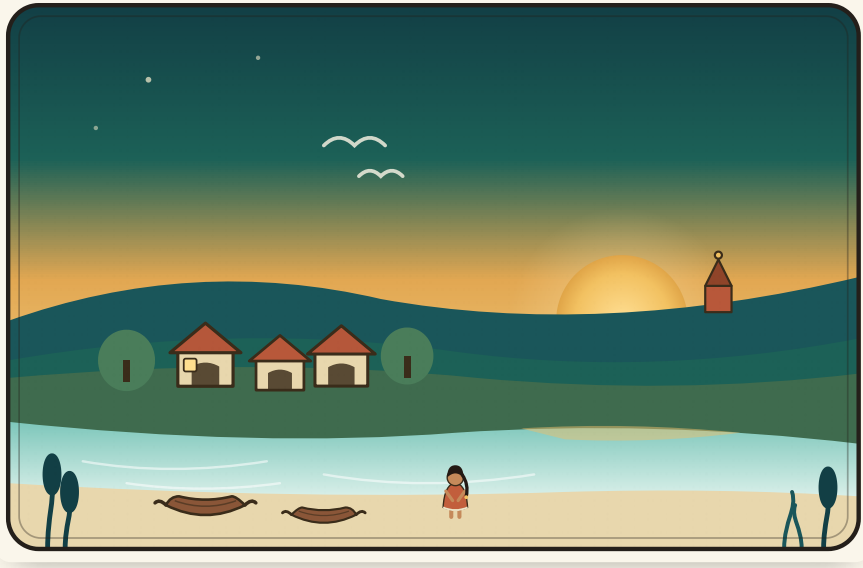
Written & illustrated by Navritto.

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First edition, 2026 · Published by Navritto Solutions Private Limited · navritto.com

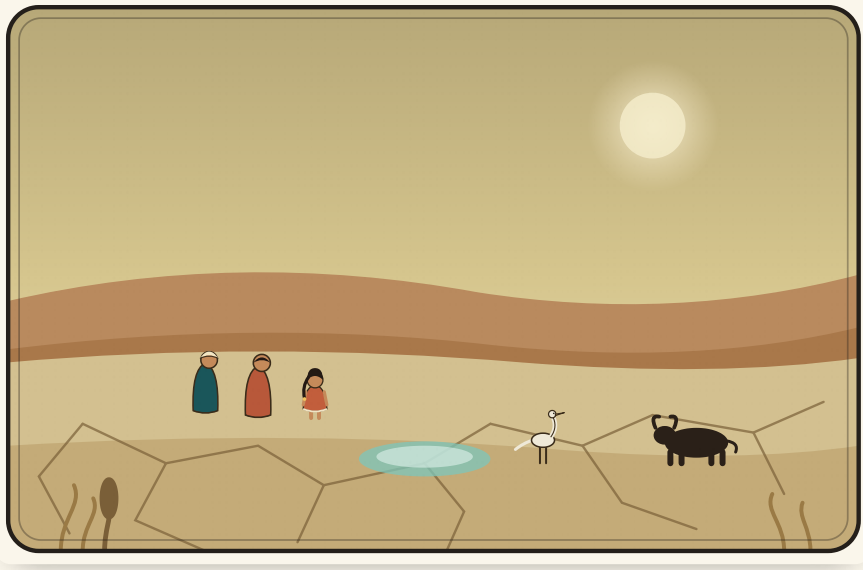
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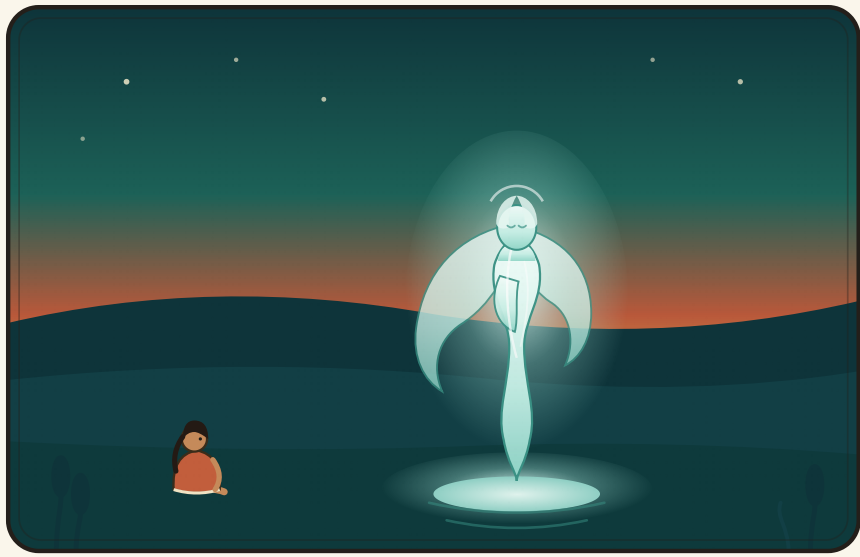
On the banks of the river Reva stood the little village of Champa, and everyone in Champa agreed on one thing: the river kept secrets. It carried their boats and their washing, it filled their pots and mirrored their moon — and whatever a person could not bear to hold, they whispered to the water at dusk, and the river carried it away and never gave it back.

Ila, who was eight and quick as a minnow, loved the river best of all. She knew its shallows and its deep green pool, and she thought it the kindest thing in the world. She did not yet know how much it held.



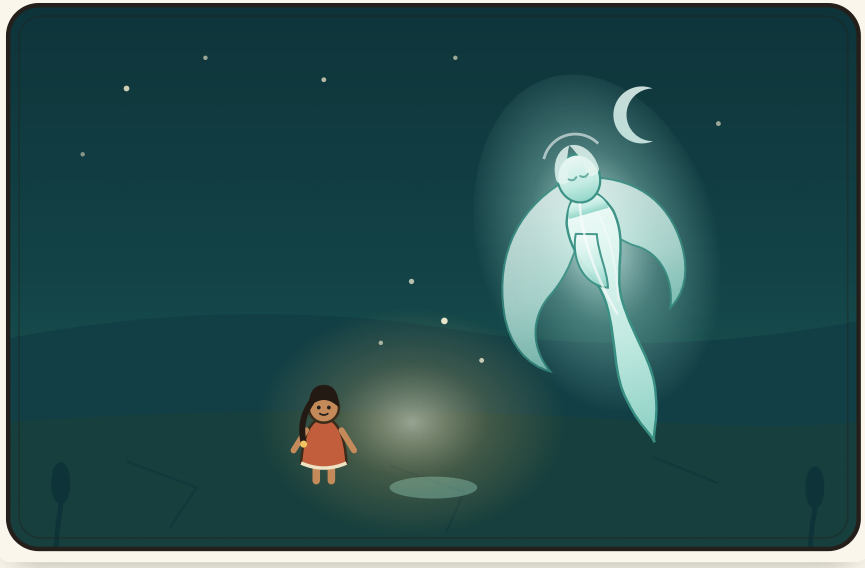
That summer the rains forgot to come. The Reva, which had always been wide and slow, drew back from its banks like a shy child. First the shallows dried to warm mud. Then the reeds bowed and browned. Then, one grey morning, the great green pool — the deepest part, where the river was said to have no bottom — shrank to a puddle you could step across.

The wells went low. The buffaloes lowed. The whole of Champa came down to the bank and stared at the cracked earth where the river used to be, and no one knew what to do.



On the third dry evening, Ila sat alone by the last of the water when it began to shine. Up from the shrinking pool rose a figure made all of river — her gown was current, her hair was falling water, and her eyes were the calm green of the deep. The River Spirit had come up at last, and she was tired.

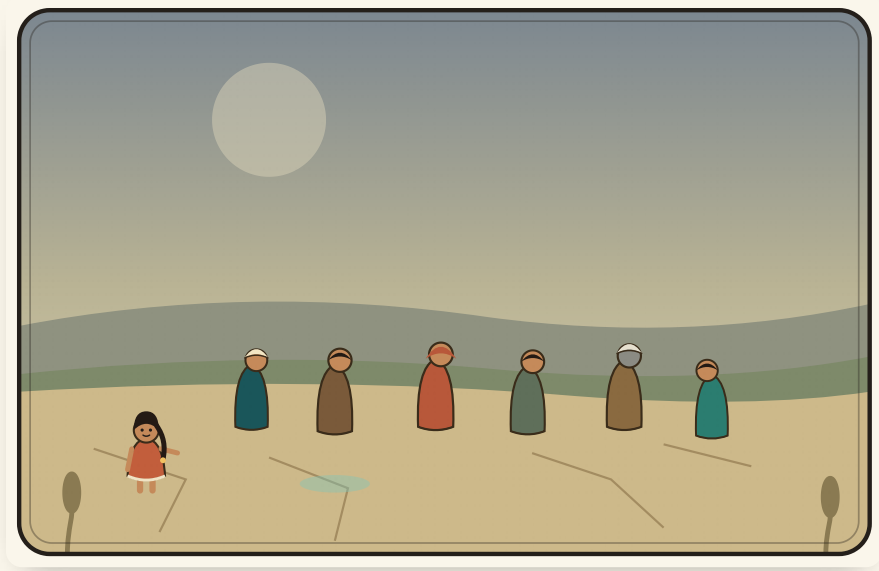
“Little one,” she said, and her voice was a stream running over stones, “I am not dying. I am holding my breath. For years your village has fed me its secrets, and I have grown too heavy to flow. Every lie, every buried wrong you gave the water — I carry them all still.”



“Then let them go,” Ila whispered. “Pour them out.”

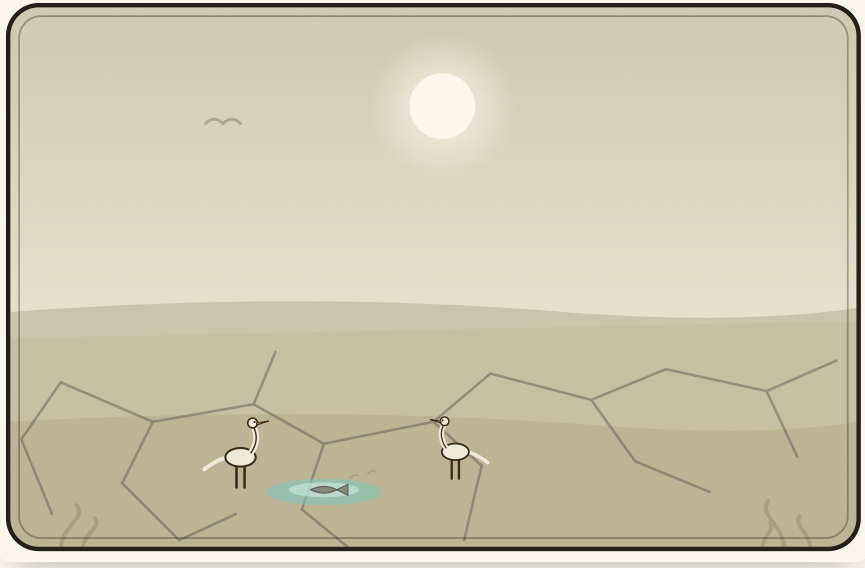
The Spirit shook her shining head. “They are not mine to pour. A secret returns to the river only when the one who hid it speaks it aloud, in daylight, where everyone can hear. Do that, and for each truth spoken I will breathe out, and the Reva will rise. Keep them buried, and I must keep holding my breath — until there is no river left at all.”

Then she sank back into the puddle, and the shine went out, and Ila ran all the way home.



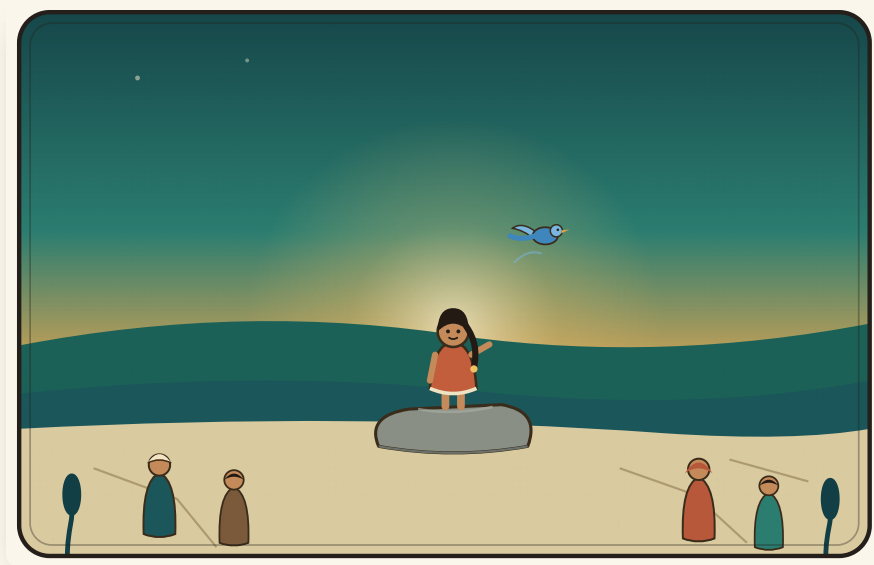
By morning the whole village knew. But when Ila told them what the river asked, the grown-ups looked at their feet.

For everyone in Champa had given something to the water. The potter had whispered a broken promise. The two Devi brothers had drowned the quarrel that split their father's field. Old Ramu the lender had let slip a heavy, secret shame. Each of them had trusted the river to swallow it forever — and now the river was asking for it back, out loud, in front of their neighbours. One by one they turned away. They would wait for rain, they said. Surely the rain would come.



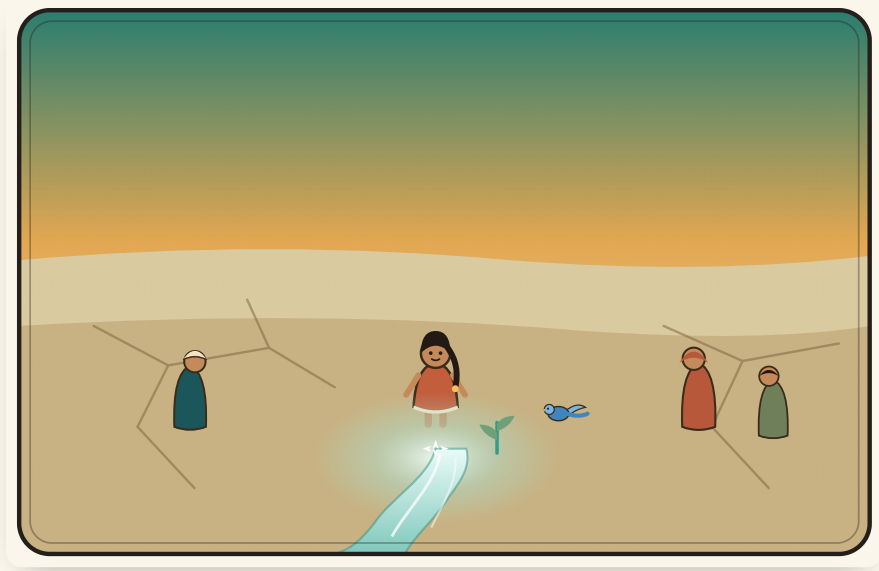
The rain did not come. The sky stayed white and hard as a bone. The last puddle in the pool dried to a dark stain, and the few fish that were left gasped in the shallows until the herons took them. The little ones cried for water in the night, and the old ones grew quiet, which was worse.

Still no one would speak first. A buried secret is a heavy thing to lift, and each person in Champa was sure that theirs was the heaviest of all — too shameful to say, too big to be forgiven. So they said nothing, and the river shrank, and the village grew afraid.



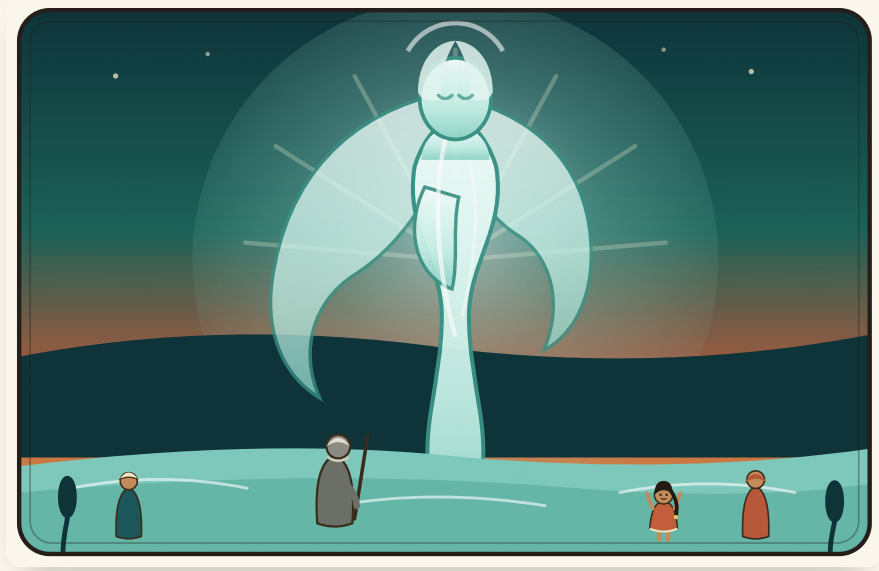
Now Ila had no great secret. She was only eight. But she had one small one, and it had sat in her chest like a swallowed stone for a whole year.

So the next morning she climbed onto the flat rock above the dry pool, where the whole village could see her, and before her courage could run off she said it loudly: “Last spring I opened the potter’s birdcage and let his blue bird go free — because I could not stand to see it beat its wings. And when the cat was blamed, I said nothing. I’m sorry. It was me.”



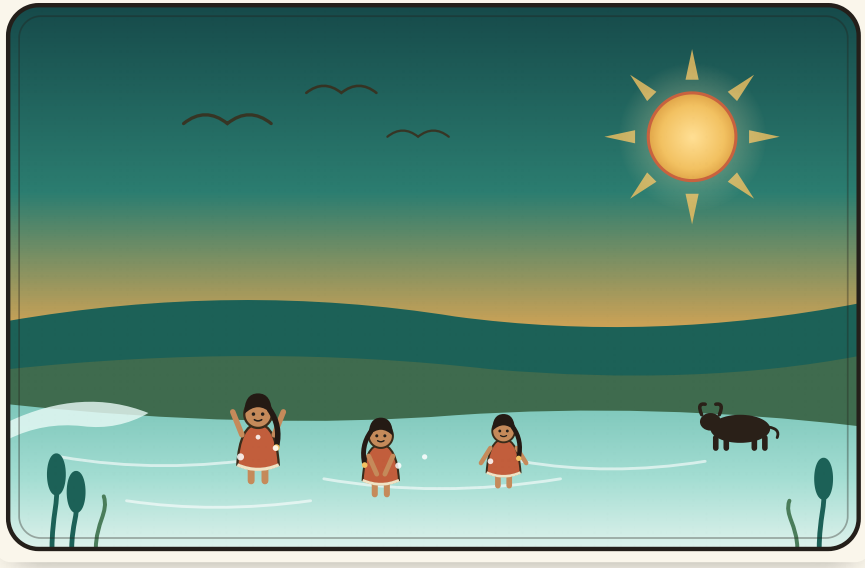
For a moment no one breathed. Then the potter began to laugh — not unkindly. “I always wondered,” he said. “I forgave that cat long ago.” And at Ila’s feet, in the cracked mud, a thread of clear water welled up and began to run.

The village stared. A child had lifted her stone, and the river had answered. And so, made braver by someone so small, the grown-ups began. The Devi brothers admitted their quarrel and shook hands over it. Ramu the lender confessed the false weight he had kept on his scale. With every truth spoken aloud, the Reva rose a hand’s width, cool and clear.



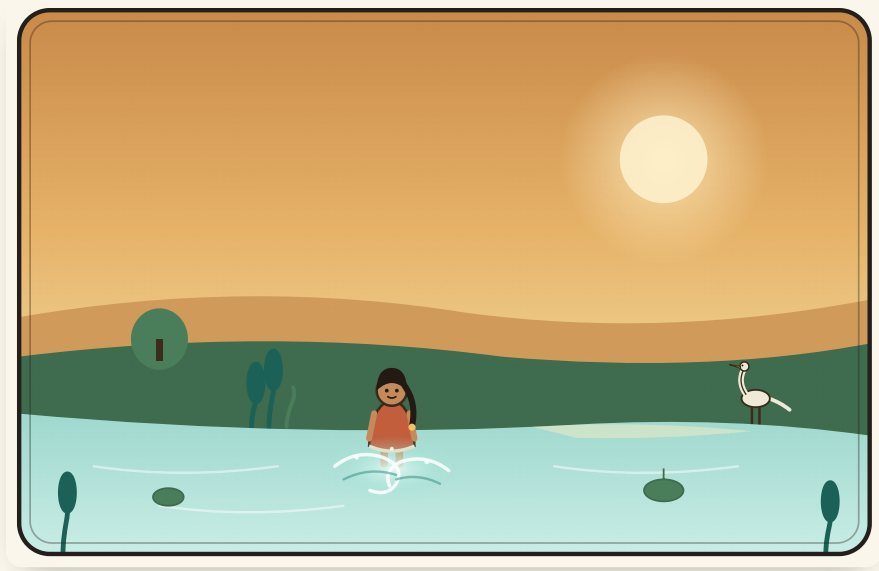
At last only the headman was left, and his face was grey. He was the oldest man in Champa, and long ago — before Ila was born — he had quietly dug a channel to send the river through his own fields first, in a dry year much like this one. The water had pooled strangely ever after, and it was into that deep, wrong-made pool that the village had whispered its secrets for a lifetime.

“It was my doing,” he said, and his old voice shook. “The pool, the secrets, all of it. I am sorry. I have been sorry for forty years.” Then the earth trembled, and the Spirit rose up bright and enormous — and breathed out.



The Reva came back all at once, the way a held breath rushes out. Water thundered down the old channel and filled the green pool to its brim and spread wide across its banks, cool and silver and alive. The reeds lifted. The buffaloes waded in to their knees. The children of Champa shrieked and splashed and drank from their cupped hands, and the herons wheeled up laughing.

And the River Spirit, no longer heavy, no longer holding anything she had not been given freely, flowed as a river is meant to flow — light at last.



After that, Champa never buried its secrets in the water again. When something grew too heavy to carry, folk learned to say it aloud in daylight — to a friend, or to the whole village on the flat rock — and let it go the honest way. And the river ran clear and full for them always.

As for Ila, quick as a minnow, who had lifted her small stone first of all: whenever she waded into the green pool on a hot afternoon, the current curled warm around her ankles, the way a river says thank you. And she understood, and she smiled, and she never told anyone — because some things are not secrets at all, only gifts.

✦ THE END

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