



The Dragonfly's Tale

This book, by Kristina Rodanas, is based on an ancient Zuni story kept alive for centuries by tribal storytellers.

Two powerful spirits, the Maidens of the White and Yellow Corn, watched over a village sending warm winds in the spring and friendly rains in the summer to nourish the cornfields of the Ashiwi people. And year after year the people harvested more than they could eat.

One day while watching children at play having a mud fight, the Chief got an idea for showing off his people's wealth by having a mock battle with food made from corn as weapons!

The two Corn Maidens, disguised as beggar women, came to the village. A small boy and girl offered them food, but one of the elders quickly snatched it away saying "good food should not be wasted on beggars who were too lazy to grow their own corn." The maidens were aghast at seeing their precious gifts of corn being thrown away, and they decided to teach the people a lesson.

At the moon's rising silent armies of mice, gophers, bugs, and birds carried away every crumb of food. They tunneled into the storerooms and stole the corn. The next morning when the people discovered their corn was missing, they did not care, for they thought they had plenty to last through the winter. But winter was long, the warm winds arrived late, and the rains never came to moisten the soil. The corn plants withered in the hot, cracked earth.

The Chief and his council decided to go to neighbors and ask for food. While they were gone the little boy and girl who offered the Corn Maidens food were left alone hungry and scared. To comfort his sister, the boy made a butterfly by carving its body from the core of a dry cornstalk and its legs from straw. He cut the wings from a brittle corn leaf. The leaf was narrow so he had to make long, slender wings. He painted the insect with bright colors and the thin pigment spread making the eyes very large and forming a delicate pattern of lines in the corn-leaf wings. It did not look exactly like a butterfly, but he was proud, and in comforted his sister.

That night she told the creature, "Please fly away and find us some food to eat." Later the boy heard a soft buzzing sound. The butterfly flew into the night. As it went on its journey to the Corn Maidens, it grew tired and rested on the tassel of a corn plant. Then it flew to another and another. When the butterfly reached the Maidens and told them about the children, they summoned their messengers to deliver food to them. When the children awoke, their house was filled with food.

The children planted corn which grew quickly. When the villagers returned and saw the ripening corn, they knew they were once again blessed by the Corn Maidens. The boy and girl were sleeping at the edge of the cornfield holding the little insect made from a cornstalk. "It was the children who were blessed," said the Chief. "Let us honor the Corn Maidens, and let us learn from the children who have received their gifts. Then perhaps, we too, may share in the blessing."

From then on the people were respectful and did not take the Corn Maidens' gifts for granted. And in summer, when the corn begins to bloom, the little insect appears. It hums from one corn tassel to the next. It is known as the Dragonfly!