

a short story by
PREETI SHENOY



THE FROGS

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The child was persistent, and even when her mother tried to distract her with a lollipop, she wouldn't concede.

'Me want . . . me want . . . me want . . .' she kept repeating on loop, pointing to the small figurine of the green frog placed in the middle of the dining table.

It was an ugly frog. Or perhaps it was a toad — Esha couldn't tell. It had eyes that looked in two different directions. It was painted a dirty green. The strokes were rough, quick, barely masking the plaster of paris or clay, or whatever it was that it was made out of. Esha could not understand why her daughter had taken a fancy to it.

'I am sorry, Aparna aunty, Neeru is being a pest today,' said Esha, apologising for her toddler.

'It's okay. I would have gifted it to her you know, but it's . . . it's just that I made it especially for your uncle. It was a gift, I made it myself . . .' Aparna trailed off.

'No, no, Aparna aunty, I wouldn't even dream of taking it from you. Children have to understand that they can't simply go anywhere and demand to play with things that do not belong to them.'

But Neeru would not give up. 'Me want . . . me want . . . Frogu . . . frogu . . .' she continued in the whiny, annoying way that only two-year-olds can. Her demands were gradually growing louder. Esha tried to take Neeru to the other side of the room, but she screamed and kicked in protest.

'No, no frogu. Frogu needs to go to school. He can't go with you,' said Esha.

'NO . . . I WANT FROGU. I WANT FROGU.' Neeru's decibel levels increased as she arched her body backwards and made fists of her hands.

'Look, Esha, why don't we just leave with the frog? Aparna aunty, I will return in intact in the evening. Neeru is very cranky and on the verge of falling asleep. It will be difficult to bear the cacophony she will make on the way home if we refuse,' said Anuj, stepping in.

Aparna's eye twitched. This was the problem with modern-day parents. The slightest hint of displeasure that their little prince or princesses showed, and they would placate them, give in to their demands.

'I am not sure that is a good idea,' Aparna said, pursing her lips.

'Aunty, please. I promise I will see that it doesn't break,' said Anuj.

Esha looked at her husband helplessly.

'Frogu-frogu-frogu,' Neeru's whines had turned into loud chants now, and it was almost impossible to have a conversation over the din that she was creating.

Suddenly Neeru leapt out of Esha's grip and lunged at the frog. She lost her balance, hitting her head on a corner of the dining table as she toppled over.

She began to bawl so loudly that Aparna thought her eardrums might rupture. Esha rushed forward to examine her and was relieved that Neeru was unhurt. Despite her fall, the girl did not forget the frog.

'FROGU . . . ME WANT . . . ME WANT,' she said as soon as she regained her balance.

Her parents seemed to be used to the yelling and the tantrums. But Aparna's head had begun to hurt and she could sense a migraine coming.

Between Anuj's fervent pleas, Neeru's howls and Esha's helplessness, Aparna had no choice but to yield.

'All right. Take it then. But please be careful with it. If she drops it, it will break,' said Aparna, as she reluctantly handed over the frog to Neeru.

Little Neeru finally quietened down when she saw that she was getting her way. Esha apologised profusely for her daughter's behaviour again. But Anuj said, 'Relax, Esha, it's just something Aparna aunty made. I am sure she can make many more like that.'

Aparna was silent for a whole minute while Esha squirmed, embarrassed and uncomfortable.

Finally, Aparna said quietly, 'Yes, I can make another one. Do not worry about it.'

When they left, Aparna sat at her dining table and gazed out of the window, watching their receding silhouettes, Neeru perched on Esha's hips, clutching the frog, and Anuj walking ahead towards the car. She

stared at the empty space on her dining table where the frog had been placed.

It had been three years now since Ganesh had died. Aparna did not miss him at all. In fact, his death had been perhaps the most liberating experience for her. She was surprised — she hadn't expected it to be so. Thirty-four years of marriage is a lifetime, especially if you were married off at eighteen to a man a good thirteen years older than you.

Ganesh was a traditional man. He believed in God, in waking up early and working hard. Every morning he would devoutly say his prayers before setting off for the oil refinery company at which he worked. He considered himself a good husband and, in due course, Aparna had dutifully produced the mandatory two children, which was necessary to be 'accepted' into Ganesh's large clan.

Aparna had been a lonely child, raised by an elderly aunt. Her mother had passed away when she was three. She had been drying clothes on their balcony, with little Aparna away at kindergarten, when a large concrete block had fallen from the parapet above and crushed her instantaneously. On any other day she would have been at work, but for some reason she had decided to stay home that day. The contractor and the builder had been arrested.

Aparna had no memories of her father or her mother, and her aunt had no photographs of either of them. When Aparna started asking questions about her mother, her aunt was not very forthcoming and Aparna had to extract the information out of her in bits and pieces, which she did over the years. 'She was very foolish,' she would say. When she asked about her father, her aunt told her that he was a good-for-nothing and her mother should have never got involved with him in the first place.

Aparna's mother had left home for Mumbai when she was seventeen, in the hope of becoming an actress. She had got a few modelling assignments but her acting career refused to take off. After a few years of trying hard and failing to get any substantive roles, she had finally ended up taking a job on the sets as personal secretary to an assistant director. The pay was a pittance, but she never gave up hope. After a few years she had met Aparna's father, an assistant cameraman, and had fallen in love. She had given birth to Aparna out of wedlock.

She had never returned to her hometown and her family had ostracised her for the shame that she brought upon them.

Right from when Aparna was a child, her aunt had made it clear that she did not enjoy having Aparna around. Her aunt was a spinster and had retired after long service in a post office as a clerk. After she retired, she had decided not to return to her hometown. With her savings, she had bought a small house a few miles from where she had worked all her life, and had settled down in Kumily, in Kerala. She had looked forward to a quiet retired life, but instead she had been saddled with Aparna.

Aparna had quickly learnt to be quiet and cause no trouble. She did her best to please her aunt. As she grew older, she turned into a diligent and responsible child. She learnt to cook, shopped for vegetables, and made herself useful around the house. But no matter what she did, it was difficult to please her aunt.

Her aunt had a small vegetable and herb garden which she tended to lovingly. Aparna learnt the names and medicinal uses of all the plants — *kizhanelli*, which was useful for jaundice; *kurunthoti*, which helped with arthritis; *tazhuthamme*, which helped alleviate body ache; *arutha*, which helped to ease the symptoms of wheezing, and many more such herbs and plants native to the region. Aparna would carefully tend to the plants, weed the beds, water them, spray pesticide when needed and wash all the garden tools. She would sweep up all the fallen leaves and watch the plants carefully for any signs of caterpillars or insects.

Her aunt was secretly pleased to see Aparna take an interest in her garden, and the girl became an indispensable helper. However, her aunt never expressed this. Every few months she would sigh exasperatedly and say that, but for this misfortune of Aparna's mother passing away, they would not even have met. Aparna would then work harder in the garden and around the house.

As soon as Aparna turned eighteen, her aunt insisted that she get married.

‘I want to study, Periyamma,’ Aparna said in a small voice.

‘What study? If you refuse this proposal, you are not likely to get any other. This proposal itself was so difficult to find. We are fortunate that they decided to overlook the family antecedents. Your mother has

left you a legacy — you are the daughter of the woman who ran away and got pregnant. Don't forget that,' her aunt said.

It was a weight Aparna had grown up with. At family gatherings, people would point at her and whisper about her. A few tried to ask her about her life in Bombay. 'What was your father like?' a relative had asked at a wedding.

'Shut up, you lot. She doesn't even remember her mother. What will she know of her father?' Periyamma had fiercely retorted, and that had shut them up. Even though she was not very kind to Aparna, she was strangely protective of her.

So when Periyamma decided that the marriage proposal was a good one, Aparna had no choice and quietly agreed to get married to Ganesh. It would make her Periyamma happy.

'Be practical, Aparna. Do whatever it takes to make him happy. I am seventy-seven now. I am not going to be around forever. This way, I can be at peace that you are well settled,' Periyamma advised her.

Aparna remembered her aunt's advice and learnt to mask her feelings with Ganesh. She was eager to please him and would nod, smile and agree with whatever he said. She was repulsed by the thought of having sex with him, though; she was frightened, too. But he mistook her demurrals and hesitation for shyness. She lay still as a corpse and clutched the sheets as he satisfied himself. She never denied him sex. She learnt to endure it. He was happy when she got pregnant. She was happy to make him happy. She learnt about contraceptives and spacing out children from the gynaecologist at the local health centre where he took her.

Ganesh's initial postings to Digboi and later Bongaigon meant that she had to send both her girls to a boarding school, as Ganesh was not too happy about the schools in these places.

'Education is something we cannot compromise on,' he always said.

Eventually Aparna adjusted to married life and fell into a pattern like most couples do. Ganesh had rules for everything and Aparna had to follow those rules, whether or not they made sense to her. If she forgot, she incurred his wrath.

For instance, the laundry had to be done every day — you could not pile up clothes to be washed the next day. The lamp at the altar had to be

lit every single day by Aparna, and she had to do this after she bathed. He insisted that her long hair be tied in a damp towel as she perambulated the tulsi plant. Only after this could the lamps be lit. It was a ritual set in stone. On Thursdays, the lamps had to be washed with tamarind so that they shone. Aparna also had to ensure that there was always rice for dinner. If she forgot to cook it, he would sigh, cook it himself, and remain silent for the next five days. Over time, Aparna learnt how to please him and how exactly to behave so that there would be harmony in the house.

Every year, in the summer, Ganesh would take his annual leave and they would travel to Ooty and stay in the company guesthouse where their daughters would join them from their boarding school. It was a cost-effective arrangement. There were only minimal charges to be paid for the guesthouse, and each year Ganesh's LTA was used only for travel to Ooty and back.

The summer vacations were uneventful, and once they ended, their daughters would return to their schools and Aparna and Ganesh head back to Bongaigon.

On one occasion a few years back, they met another family, the Godboles, who were also vacationing at the guesthouse, and Aparna was surprised to discover another side of Ganesh. With her, he never spoke much. He usually buried himself in his newspaper or television. Theirs was a marriage conducted in silence. Any attempts at conversation were met with monosyllabic replies.

But with the Godboles, Ganesh seemed to transform into a new individual. Gone was the taciturn man, and in his place was a funny, amusing, entertaining chap. Mrs Godbole threw her head back and laughed at all his stories. Aparna stared in disbelief. There seemed to be some kind of chemistry between Mrs Godbole and Ganesh. They hit it off immediately and were soon chatting like old pals. Several times Aparna caught Ganesh staring at Mrs Godbole. She wasn't sure if it was because of her deep-cut blouse, which showed off her cleavage, or her unpinned saree pallu that kept sliding off her shoulder, or because Mrs Godbole was strikingly beautiful, with light green eyes, a straight narrow nose, full lips, a flawless complexion, and long brown hair. Whatever it was, Ganesh could not take his eyes off her. And she

returned the favour, though what it was in Ganesh that Mrs Godbole saw, Aparna couldn't tell.

'How come you never speak to me like that?' she asked that night, after they had sex. Aparna still hated the sex. She had never been satisfied, never had an orgasm, all through these years of marriage. She had thought that she would have gotten used to it by now, but that had not been the case. Even after all these years, there was no variation in how he did it. She could almost time it now. He would reach for her roughly and grab her breasts. It was a signal for her to remove her clothing and spread her legs. She would oblige, as she felt it easier than putting up a resistance. After that, he would get on top of her, and after a few thrusts it was over. She would shut her eyes and bear it — the ordeal lasted only a few minutes.

'Eh? Speak to you like what?' he replied.

'Like how you were at dinner today, when we were dining with the Godboles.'

'What is there to talk?'

'You had so much to talk to them about.'

'Come on, I was just being friendly. Mr Godbole is likely to be posted to Bongaigon in a few months.'

'Oh, I see,' Aparna said.

There had been a change in Ganesh's behaviour ever since. It was subtle, but Aparna did not miss it.

When the Godboles moved to Bongaigon, Ganesh insisted on inviting them over almost every other weekend. Either they would be at the Godboles' house, or the Godboles would be over at theirs. Aparna gritted her teeth and bore these social interactions.

In the same way that a maestro can pick up even the tiniest discordant note in a finely tuned instrument, Aparna could tell that Ganesh had fallen for Mrs Godbole. She noticed the small changes in him: in how carefully he dressed, his change of perfume, and how he rushed to have a shower as soon as he returned from yet another late-night meeting. Aparna never managed to catch them at anything though — no inappropriate text message, or intimate conversation overheard. Ganesh was much too careful.

After Ganesh had served his full term, they retired and decided to settle down in Coimbatore where he had inherited ancestral property.

Their daughters were both in the US now, one pursuing a career in design and technology, and the other in metallurgical engineering.

Aparna loved the vast expanse of space that surrounded the bungalow and started growing a pretty garden. It reminded her of Kumily and the many hours that she had spent in the little garden there, the only time when her aunt would be nice to her. Aparna found solace in her garden and planted many trees. She soon extended her expertise to fruits and vegetables, and a steady stream of Ganesh's relatives visited her beautiful garden. She even won the horticultural society's prize for the 'best home garden' two years in a row. Ganesh was indifferent to all of this.

One morning, a couple of days before his birthday, a package arrived. It was Aparna who received the courier, as Ganesh had gone to the local club to meet his friends.

Never had Ganesh ever received anything for his birthday. Their daughters would always schedule a Skype call to wish their Appa, but they had never sent anything, and Aparna knew that, if they had, she would have been looped into the surprise. The package certainly was not from her daughters.

Aparna was curious. She wanted to know what it contained. She carefully inspected it and could see that it was sealed shut with only a sellotape. She knew that she could smoke it open. It was a little trick she had learnt in school, where you held a boiling teakettle and directed the spout (and the smoke) towards the edge of the box. The tape gave way and Aparna prised it open with a knife. Inside was something enveloped in white tissue paper. She wondered what it was. She unwrapped it, and inside was a ceramic statue of two frogs. They were holding a large leaf, which served as an umbrella, and both were sitting under it, lost in each other's eyes, the male frog's arm going around the female frog's bottom. There was a little ivory card too. Aparna's heart was pounding as she opened it and read it. It said:

I saw this at a store and simply had to get it for you. Hope this doesn't cause too much ruckus. If it does, she will settle down. I've got your back. Or rather, you've got mine! Happy birthday in advance.

There was no name on the card.

Aparna re-wrapped it carefully and used the kitchen knife to apply some transparent glue, sealing the package to make it appear as though it

had never been opened.

When Ganesh came home that evening, she smiled sweetly and handed it to him.

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘where did that come from?’

‘I don’t know, you ought to tell me,’ she said.

A thin film of sweat appeared on his forehead and his eyes shifted uneasily.

‘Aren’t you going to open it?’ Aparna asked him, watching his discomfiture.

‘I will. I need to use the bathroom first,’ he said and vanished.

He was hoping that, when he emerged, she would be busy in the kitchen and would have forgotten about the packet.

Instead, she said, ‘Open it, let’s see what it is.’

He had no choice then.

He unwrapped the packet and looked at the frogs. She saw him slyly pocketing the note that had come along with it. She pretended she hadn’t noticed.

‘Oh, what a lovely little statue. Who sent it?’ she asked.

He scratched his head and appeared puzzled as he turned it round and examined it.

‘What an odd gift. Maybe my office association sent it. I can’t imagine anyone else having this address,’ he said.

‘Why two frogs?’ she asked.

‘I have no idea, Aparna. Do you want me to check with them?’ His tone was that of a headmaster dismissing the class.

On Ganesh’s birthday, Aparna rose early and cooked all his favourite dishes for him while he went for his morning walk. Breakfast was pongal to which Aparna added generous dollops of ghee.

‘Delicious,’ he said as he took a second helping.

At lunchtime she said, ‘I have made your favourite vegetable to go with your rice today, just the way you like it.’

‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘Pavakkai, and kara kuzhambu, the way your mother used to cook it,’ she said.

‘Oh, thank you. This is turning out to be a great gastronomic good day,’ he said, looking pleased with his alliteration.

‘I also baked a chocolate cake for you,’ she said. That was one of her other specialities, and she had perfected it over the years. Her chocolate cake was sinfully rich and delicious — a real culinary delight.

She watched him eat everything with relish.

‘Happy birthday,’ she said, and he smiled.

It was the last meal he ate. The autopsy showed cardiac arrest and the doctors said that the reports revealed nothing unusual. Aparna handled all the autopsy-related formalities by herself. She filled out the details in the death certificate, wryly observing that his birth and death anniversary were now one and the same. She tipped the attendant, the man who did the actual stitching up of the body, generously. She had heard that these men did a shoddy job if they were not tipped.

Anuj, her husband’s nephew who lived in Coimbatore, was in Delhi that day on a business trip, and her daughters being in the US meant that it would take them at least twenty-four hours to reach. So the body was kept in the hospital morgue.

Her daughters arrived for the funeral, as did his family. But as per Hindu rites, the daughters were not allowed to light the funeral pyre. It was his brother’s son, Anuj, who performed all the ceremonies.

Her daughters stayed with her for a week and then returned to the US. As soon as they left, the first thing she did was to dispose of all Ganesh’s belongings. She was meticulous about it, scouring every corner of the house, gathering everything that belonged to him: clothes, his glasses, medication, books, pens, writing pads — nothing was spared. She put them all in a gunny sack. She looked at the statue of the two frogs that he had received for his birthday. Then she added that as well to the pile in the gunny sack. The gardener took it all away gratefully.

Her daughters called every now and then from the US.

‘Amma — are you okay? Are you lonely? Are you managing fine?’ both kept asking.

‘Look, luckily I have my garden and it will keep me busy,’ she replied. She meant it.

Whenever her daughters called, they always asked about the garden. Aparna would tell them about the pumpkin that grew, or the champa tree which gave flowers, or the bitter gourd and brinjals which she managed to grow.

During one such conversation, her elder daughter said, ‘Amma, I keep meaning to ask you but it always slips my mind, what is the name of that tree with white flowers in the centre of the garden? It is so pretty.’

‘Indeed it is. It is the *odollam* tree. We also call it *othalanga maram*,’ said Aparna.

‘How do you know the names of all these plants, Amma?’ asked her daughter.

‘When you are interested in something, you will always find a way,’ she replied.

Anuj and Esha’s visits became a regular occurrence after her daughters left. He had appointed himself as his aunt’s caretaker.

Aparna did not like these visits. They would always come around at mealtime, and then would show no signs of leaving. Aparna would then be forced to ask them if they would like to eat. They never refused. Aparna noticed that they never once invited her over to their home.

Shortly after Ganesh passed away, their daughter was born. Then they started coming over with the baby.

‘You know, I feel it is Ganesh Chittappa reborn as Neeru. See, she even resembles him,’ remarked Anuj on one such visit.

Aparna looked closely at baby Neeru and she could indeed spot a resemblance.

On one such visit, Anuj and Esha discovered that Aparna had picked up a new hobby. She had started making tiny figurines using plaster of paris. One of the very first things that she created was the frog.

‘Aunty, how do you manage to learn all this?’ Esha had asked when she first set eyes on it. Esha found it ugly back then too, but she was too polite to say so.

‘When you are interested in something, you will always find a way,’ Aparna answered.

Over the last two years, their visits had become predictable. Every Sunday Anuj would call up Aparna and inform her that they would be coming over. With a little baby, there were not too many options open to them for an evening out. Aparna’s home was the perfect getaway.

Aparna resented these visits even more now. She did not say anything, but her anger and irritation grew each time they visited. This visit, when Neeru had insisted on taking the frog, had been the last straw. Aparna decided that it was time these visits stopped. She would simply

have to muster the courage to put an end to them. But first she must see that Anuj returned the frog figurine, which his bratty daughter had insisted on taking.

Anuj did not come back that evening with the frog figurine. Aparna was growing restless by the minute. She detested people who did not keep their promises. She picked up the phone many times to call him, but she thought it would seem churlish and she refrained.

By mid-afternoon the next day, Aparna was frantic to have the frog back. She didn't want to ask for it directly so she baked two of her trademark chocolate cakes and invited Anuj and his family over. 'And, oh, don't forget the frog figurine,' she added casually.

When they came over, she cut the pieces carefully and served them.

'Tasty, tasty,' said Neeru as she gobbled her piece, which she insisted on eating all by herself. She got it all over her pretty little frock, and there was chocolate smeared around her mouth.

'Eat child, your uncle loved it too,' she said.

When Anuj and his family left, the solitary frog was placed carefully back on the dining table.

That night she was woken up from her sleep by a phone call. Anuj could barely speak.

'Aparna aunty . . . I am calling to tell you, Neeru is . . . Neeru is . . .' and he broke down.

Aparna went over immediately. She took over all the hospital proceedings. It was the same attendant who had done the autopsy on her husband. The moment he saw Aparna, his eyes lit up.

'Madam, same like last time? Femur and humerus?' he asked.

She nodded.

The parents were too distraught to notice.

Aparna clutched the packet that the morgue attendant handed to her. 'Yes, they will do very nicely indeed,' she thought as she hurried home.

The funeral was attended by many relatives who all mourned and wept. Aparna comforted Anuj and Esha and was a pillar of strength.

Over the next few days, Aparna created a little figurine. It was a baby frog, and she placed it carefully in the centre of the dining table. The other frog now had a companion.

Then she went out to water her *othalanga maram*¹.

¹ The botanical name of the tree is *Cerebra Odolla*. It is ubiquitous in many parts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu and is infamous for its poisonous harvest. The soft tiny fruit has seeds extremely toxic that they can stop a human heart. The kernels contain chemicals like cerebrin, cardenloide and cardiac glycoside toxin, which block the calcium ion channels in the heart muscle, almost always fatally, if ingested. Autopsies do not detect this, and the taste can be easily masked with strong spices. It is also called the 'suicide plant'. Between 1989 and 1999, there were more than five hundred cases of fatal *Cerebra* poisoning in Kerala alone.