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SHORT STORY: P.V.GEETHA LAKSHMI PATNAIK

HEADS OR TAILS?

It was 8 O'clock in the morning and Meera had just served breakfast to the family, when the telephone rang. Raghuram, her husband, was the first to reach the phone. Before he could pick it up, she remembered which day it was . . . It was April 1st - All Fools' Day!

"Be careful!" she cautioned. "I am sure that is my *Amma** calling to fool us as usual! Don't believe what she says!" *Amma* never let an April Fools' Day go by without trying to fool all of them. So they were always on guard every year on that day.

Raghuram was chuckling as he picked up the phone and said "Hello". Suddenly, he looked bewildered and said, "It's Priya. She is crying." Priya was her sister-in-law. Meera's parents were staying with her brother, Sharat, in Hyderabad, ever since *Naana*** had retired the previous year.

"Don't believe anything she says" Meera said, "This must be a new plan." However, Raghuram was not paying any attention to her words. He looked shocked as he exclaimed "What! . . . When?" Meera realized that something was wrong.

"Have you gone to the hospital?" A tense pause . . . "What did the doctors say?" Another pause . . . "No hope? . . . Oh, God! That's terrible! . . . What about Sharat? Is he there? . . . Okay, okay, don't disturb him . . . Yes, yes, we will start immediately."

Meera began crying as Raghuram came to her and said "Meera, you must have courage. There is bad news." "What happened? Who . . .?" She could not say the words. From Raghuram's expression, she knew somebody had died. But who was it? *Amma* or *Naana*?. . . "Please God, please God . . ." She pleaded silently.

“It’s *Mavayyagaru*+. He did not wake up this morning. They took him to the hospital. He is no more.” She burst into loud sobs as Raghuram tried to console her. Their one-and-a-half year old son, Rahul, kept looking at her, bewildered. He had never seen his *Amma* cry before.

The next hour passed in a blur. Raghuram called his office and her college, and told them about what had happened. The Annual Examinations were in full swing and Meera had invigilation duty. In view of the tragedy that had befallen, they were assured that everything would be taken care of. Soon they boarded the bus to Hyderabad and were on their way.

As Raghuram entertained the child, keeping him away from her, tears rolled down Meera’s cheeks, unchecked. She kept remembering the last conversation she had had with *Naana* three days earlier. “When are you coming, Meera?” he had asked.

““In a few days, *Naana*” she had replied. “Our Spot Valuation begins from the third of April.”

“It’s been almost a month since your last visit,” he had been quick to remind her. “I want to see the little one. I miss him.”

“Just a few days,” she had replied. “Do you know, *Naana*, he is able to say your name.”

His response had been filled with incredulity, “Is that so? Where is he? I want to hear him do so.”

Calling out to her son, she had prompted him, “Say hello to Gopal *Thaatha*++.” Rahul had said, “Hello, Gopal *Thaatha*” very clearly, proud to show off his newly acquired verbal skills.

Naana had been filled with joy and pride. “Good boy. Come soon, little one, I want to see you” he had said. Rahul had not replied, already having lost interest in the conversation. Meera had set his wriggling body down and he had gone off in a flash.

“Okay, *Naana*,” she had said, “I have to go now. We will be coming on the second of April.” “Okay, then,” he had said and disconnected the phone. The conversation kept repeating itself in her mind, again and again. How she wished they had made time to visit Hyderabad during the past month! They should not have waited for the summer holidays. Regret for all the lost time nagged her. She would never see *Naana* again . . . never hear his voice again . . . the thought filled her with grief.

Soon they reached Hyderabad and went to the house. It was a house of mourning. Everyone was crying and trying to console one another. *Amma*, however, was inconsolable. The shock of finding her husband unresponsive and lifeless was too much. Sharat was grief-stricken, but as the eldest child and only son, he had to take care of the formalities. Their younger sister, Preeti arrived that evening from Delhi with her husband, Praveen, and rushed to *Amma*. They hugged and shed tears together. The rest of the family had kept coming in, throughout the day, sharing

their sorrow and murmuring soft words of comfort. The cremation was scheduled for the next day as *Naana*'s younger brother would be arriving early in the morning by train.

Then, began the vigil. Throughout the night, Meera, Sharat and Preeti sat around *Naana*'s body, unable to believe that he was no more. Their lives had been dominated by his overwhelming presence, and now there he was - lying unknowing and uncaring.

Preeti, being the youngest, had been the closest to *Naana*. She began "Do you remember when all of us were punished for breaking the marble replica of the Taj Mahal?"

"Yes", said Meera, "Of course, I do. I was innocent that time. Both of you were responsible for it, but *Naana*, being *Naana*, had punished me too."

He had always believed in treating all of them equally, never favouring one over the other. They could smile now, tearfully, over that incident and many more similar experiences.

They had called him "Hitler" behind his back. A strict disciplinarian, he had been quick to admonish and slow to praise. *Naana* had not liked arguments or disobedience. Though they would fight like cats and dogs, the moment they heard him coming, they would become as quiet as mice. Things were different with *Amma*, though. She would keep calling, "Sharat, Meera, Preeti" but there would be no response at all. Then she would say, "I know you are somewhere near. Let me tell your *Naana*" and they would appear before her as if by magic!

It was only when they were grown up that they could appreciate all that *Naana* had done for them. A hard taskmaster, both at work and home, he had brooked no carelessness or sloppiness. Now, they realized that he had been harder upon himself. He had received many accolades for his hard work, integrity and commitment.

As they were lost in their reminiscences, Meera suddenly started crying again. She reached out to her *Naana*'s body and held his lifeless right hand. "I am sorry, *Naana*, I am truly sorry" she said, sobbing. "What is the matter, Meera?" asked Sharat. "Yes, what is it?" Preeti asked, tearfully.

Meera controlled her tears with difficulty. "Do you know, Sharat and Preeti," she said, "When I realized that something terrible had happened to either *Naana* or *Amma*, and I didn't know to whom . . . I don't know why, but I had made my choice".

"What choice, Meera?" Preeti asked softly.

Meera did not speak for a minute. Then she said, falteringly, "In those few seconds before Raghuram could tell me what had happened, I made my choice. . . . If it had to be either *Amma* or *Naana* . . . I would prefer it were not *Amma*!

"Please God, please God. . . let it not be *Amma*, please . . . please" was the thought that went through my mind . . . I am truly sorry for having made my choice. What kind of a daughter am I that I chose one parent over the other? " she asked in anguish.

