

A Pebble for Dickey

## Chapter1

Kamala clutched tightly, the dark pebble , in her closed fist. She felt the scaffolding give way under her foot and she heard the screams of terrified workers falling from different heights as the entire scaffolding at the construction site collapsed. A steel girder supporting the scaffolding had worked loose causing all joints to come apart. Forty odd workers fell, mostly women , standing at different heights of the structure to carry steel baskets of pre mixed concrete to be poured for the terrace roof of 5 story building under construction. Kamala was standing on a wide wooden board when she fell. Somehow she kept her hold on the board, squatting on it like a surfer riding the waves. The board and she were dropping from a great height. She enjoyed the thrill of the freefall and was amazed how skilfully she had balanced and kept looking at the rushing floor. When she was a clear six feet from the ground, she separated herself from the board and jumped with both feet together and immediately on contact with ground she rolled over her head and felt the board drop on her back driving all the wind out of her chest. She smiled and closed her eyes, still clutching the pebble.

She was lost to the world for the next half hour or so. She came to her senses when a pair of municipal workers grabbed her hands and feet to lift her to be transferred to a waiting ambulance. She opened her eyes and signalled to them that she was alright. The workers left her to attend to other injured people. Kamala opened her fist and looked at the shining black stone. She put the stone to her eyes and forehead with a strange devotion and mumbled a word of thanks, , "Thank you, Krishna. You have done it again."

She looked around her. It was chaos all over the place. Many of her friends were badly hurt. Ambulances were moving about lifting people and removing them to hospital. The young engineer, though dazed by the disaster, remained calm and resourceful, guiding the rescue work. Kamala moved slowly testing her limbs and stood up gingerly. When she could stand up without help, she was relieved and a smile lit up her brown unlined face. She hastened to help her friends.

It was a nasty accident , first one at this site. They had put up wooden board walkway over the scaffolding , in a zigzag pattern to help the workers climb from floor to floor, carrying concrete to be poured over for casting the roof. Kamala and her friends had climbed up these heights with out trouble.it was tough but it was safe, till now. At 40 + kamala did not have much choice . She was stuck to this job. These days the daily wages were decent. Government had built nice flats for construction workers and she had a decent place to live and sleep.

A doctor came over to look at her. Already people had begun to talk about her miraculous escape. The doctor looked kind and soft. He held her hand, looked into her eyes and spoke, “they say, you floated down like a feather. You look alright for a person who has dropped 50 meters , without getting her legs smashed .I see no sign of shock, you are not shaken up. How did you manage it?” His question was sincere.

Kamala smiled, “Yes, I could control my fall. Krishna told me what to do. He always tells me what to do.”

Who is this Krishna?

Kamal showed him the black pebble. ”Krishna is inside this pebble.’

A STONE?

“Yes, a stone .Not ordinary one. This one is special.”

How is it special?

“you will not understand.”

Try me.

“leave it. I can not explain it. He is there alright and He helps. He helps all those around me.”

The doctor was staring at her.she was asking him;

‘Look , tell me how did you come here so soon after the accident. It never happens in most accident sites. But to day, you are all here, you , the ambulances, the nurses the whole lot .how?

Do you know how?" She asked the doctor.

I do not know .please tell me

It is because, my Krishna here called you up.'

The doctor would not believe this.

He asked softly, ' madame, if your Krishna is so concerned, why did he cause the accident in the first place?.'

Kamala 's eyes flashed in a strange show of anger, 'My Krishna did not cause the accident.' She wanted to go on but remained silent

"Go on madame, you were going to tell us some thing". The doctor was prodding her.

Your Krishna was not able to stop the accident. He saved you and let others suffer. Your Krishna is unfair, biased. Not a good god , is He?. You were just plain lucky.

The doctor was enjoying her discomfiture.

Kamala looked straight into his eyes and said softly, "Have you heard about karma. We all have to go through such things because of karma, so my good doctor, be good to every one and may be Krishna too would be good to you."

She stood up and walked away without even looking at the effect her words had on the doctor.

Doctor stared at the ground. Slowly he packed his bag and walked towards the engineer who was waiting for him.

Engineer took him by hand and said with emotion, "thank you, Doctor ,for coming in so promptly on our call. The ambulances have carried 10 workers to the hospital for further examination and treatment. Your nurses have done a fantastic job. Tell me, sir, are you always so ready? I am really amazed'

Doctor was modest, " to be honest, I am also surprised.. It just happened that we were ready at that point when your call came through. There is one worker in your gang who had a ready answer to that question."

What was that?

She said it was all her Krishna's doing. I am a Christian and tempted to agree with her. Anyway, please tighten up your scaffolding. Krishna may sleep on his job and you may not be so lucky every time.

Engineer smiled, and said, "I will definitely attend to that. So, you talked to kamala and came under her spell. She is a strange woman but a good one at that."

Doctor returned to his hospital. Before leaving the accident site, he looked around for kamala. She was not any where in sight.. He drove away. His mind was full of questions about Kamala, Krishna and the black pebble.

## Chapter2.

There was no work to do after the accident. kamala went to collect from the locker room her bag containing a tiffin box and water bottle. She felt hungry after all the excitement of accident. The pebble was rolled into the folds of her saree and tucked into her waist. She found a leafy tree that threw a big circle of shade. She sat on the grass spreading a towel .She took out a handkerchief size plastic sheet from her bag and placed the pebble on that sheet. She washed her hands with water from the bottle and with wet hand she wiped the pebble clean and with end of saree she dabbed at the pebble to make it dry. She began to talk to the stone.

Eh , Krishna, you saved me again today. I should be thanking you. But my mind thinks differently. Who would have missed me if I had died. No one. is there anything left for me to do?. The old man had said that I am here for a purpose and I can leave the world only after that purpose is served. like sabari in Ramayana. I do not know what my purpose is and you are also not telling me much.”

She remained silent as though she was listening to someone. The face was absolutely at peace, no hint of tension.

A CHILD WAS TALKING TO HER;”WAIT KAMALA.ALL IN GOOD TIME.NOW STOP COMPLAINING AND GIVE ME FOOD. I am hungry

“Of course, Krishna. I am sorry, it is well past your normal lunch .Just a moment. Here is your food.

She opened her lunchbox. Sour smell of fermented curd rice and hot pickle filled the air. “You know Krishna, this is end march. The heat is so terrible even the best curd rice will turn sour.so please, for my sake accept this humble offering.”

There was sound of a child laughing. The pungent smell vanished. She scooped a little food in a spoon and touched the pebble. The food seemed to disappear in thin air

She cleaned the pebble and put it back on the sheet. Now, I will eat, okay?

Uh, uh .came the sound

She patted the pebble smiling sweetly and ate peacefully. she cleaned up her vessel and drank some water. wiping her hands dry, she lifted the pebble tenderly and put it in a toy cradle .She folded the plastic sheet meticulously and returned it to her bag. This was her regular ritual. She thought she would sleep for some time. The agent shouted from somewhere , “Eh kamamma, the truck is leaving , you want to leave now?”

“Yes sir, give me a minute”. she quickly packed up all her stuff in her bag, taking care to wrap the pebble and tuck it in her waist.

She had her own one room tenement in hyderbasti .It was constructed for workers by the government. All houses were alike all neatly laid out in a cluster. The place was reasonably clean. Living alone for long time, she had developed this habit of talking to herself. People found it strange that she spoke to the pebble and as though it had soul of its own, it seemed to talk back to her. Many thought she was crazy, but she never cared.

She used a key to open her door and entered. she was telling the pebble, “remember , first thing to do is to thank our swamiji for saving our lives today.”

The pebble continued to talk to her.

‘Yes, dear. Swamiji saved us all, it could have been a major tragedy. The poor doctor does not understand these things being a Christian. But he did a great job today, why not include a word of thanks to the good doctor.’

Kamala agreed readily

“ Sure, Krishna. you have a good man there. take care of him, will you?. Hope we will meet up with him soon.”

She put her bag away in a cup board after removing her tiffin box for cleaning. There was a small cup board in a corner in which she had kept a framed picture of Lord Krishna in His famous child form. There was another picture of a bearded old man adjacent to it. she kept the pebble on a piece of clean cloth in front of krishna’s picture .She then proceeded to sweep her room clean. She lit her stove and kept a kettle of water to brew some tea .She kept the flame low and went to her bathroom for a refreshing bath and changed her clothes. She ran a comb through her hair and made herself pretty with a dab of kumkum on

her forehead. She stole a look in the mirror and chuckled, not bad for a 40+ woman. The kettle made a sound and she made some tea. She filled her cup and put it on the table. Then she stood in front of the pictures, with her hands folded, palms together, her head low... The evening sun swept through the window lighting up the pictures. As pictures go, they were ordinary pictures. She looked at the Oldman with wide open eyes. It was not a picture for her. It was a sort of divine manifestation. The eyes that stared from his face were very bright, broad forehead and shapely nose. He must have been extraordinarily handsome in his younger days. Kamala was talking to him now, "Swamiji, today you performed another miracle to save us all. The scaffolding gave way and all workers fell from heights. Luckily no one died. Some had broken their legs and some escaped with minor injuries. There was a good doctor to attend to the injured workers. I know you will say it was Krishna who saved every one but I know Krishna did it for you. The doctor laughed when I told him so. I got so angry that I wanted to say some thing nasty. I remembered your words of advice that I should be nice to every one. So I spared him. But I must say that he and his staff of nurses did a great job today. Bless them, swamiji. Such people are rare these days."

She stood silent for some time as though she was listening to some one. Then she said, "Yes, I will be kind to him. I do not know when I will meet him next."

She bowed her head and stepped back. The tea was now right temperature to drink. She found some biscuits and decided to have a meal of tea and biscuits. She took the pebble out and kept it in her lap and went through motions of offering tea and biscuits. She said, 'Krishna, do you know that this tea and biscuits taste so delicious after you taste it.' She completed her meal and there was a shine of intense contentment and peace in her face.

She closed her eyes and leaned back on her chair. Events of past 15 years flashed in her eyes in a fast rewind and stopped at the stage of time when she first met the swamiji. And how she got her pebble.

### Chapter3

A young Kamala was walking fast in the afternoon sun. It was month of May and sun was torrid. She had pulled the end of saree to cover her head. The hot radiation from the tar road hit her in the face roasting it to a fine blend of reddish brown. She had more than a mile or so to cover before she could reach her hut in the outskirts of the city. Her hut was situated amidst a cluster of thatched huts in a clearance beyond the big hospital. She was just beginning to see its profile shimmering in the hot sun. She wanted to pause and have a sip of water, but decided she would hurry home. The road was deserted and she saw no movement of vehicles. Every one preferred to stay indoors to escape the heat.

She walked and walked. Soon she was with in touching distance of old man who was walking in front , ahead of her. He had been in her sight last few minutes..

She noticed that his steps were becoming wobbly.

He was swaying from side to side trying to maintain his walk.

She knew he would collapse any time .She had seen many people suffer heatstroke during long summer months.

She hastened her steps to come close to him and caught up with him just as he collapsed. She caught him in her strong hands. She pulled him over to side and found a tree near by. She made him lie on the ground in the shade. She looked inside her bag and took out a long bottle of water. she sprinkled some water on his face and put the water bottle to his lips. He drank eagerly and sat up in a fit of cough. She moved and put him against her chest to make him a little more comfortable. With one end of saree she waved in front of his face. The wind generated by this makeshift fan revived him. He stayed put leaning against her soft body and opened his eyes. He moved a little to look at her and smiled at her. His eyes were very bright and she saw those eyes were very kind.. He tried to speak. She offered him some more water and he drank some more. He wiped the bottle clean and returned it to her. He said softly, "Thank you , dear. You are very kind."

Kamala found her tongue. She said, "Oldman, you should not be out on the road in this heat"

I know dear, but I am in a hurry.

'where do you want to go?'

Hyderbasti.

But that place is far away. You can not walk to that place, not in the condition you are presently in. If you don't mind, you can stay with me for the night and proceed to hyderbasti in the morning

The old man considered her offer.

I came here to visit a hospital. can you take me there. I have to see a doctor there.

"Yes, I will help you to reach the hospital. It is near by.

She walked ahead and he followed her holding her hand. kamala found the hand soft but it had some strength. They came to the hospital.it was a two storied building of old type design, standing on its own ground with lot of trees all round it. She saw many people sitting under different trees. There was car standing at the portico and a well dressed but tired looking man standing close to the car in the act of opening it. He saw kamala and Oldman. His tired face changed to one of anger. from where he stood, he stopped kamla and the Oldman in their tracks with an unexpected outburst, " you have come a long way,Oldman."

'and just in time, I hope' returned the Oldman, jerking himself free from kamala's hold.

The words came out spontaneously. There was no attempt to greet each other.one could make out that there was no love lost between them. kamala could touch the intense sense of hatred trading between the two. she realised they knew each other .

The Oldman said calmly, I have come to take charge of what is mine. what is justly due to me . as per your own commitment made long long ago.

The younger man retorted, 'there is nothing that even remotely belongs to you. I have made no commitment. you are wasting your time. now go away.'

The Oldman stood his ground. he had expected this .he said maintaining his calm. ." I am asking you one last time. Settle now and you will live well with all that you possess. if not , doomsday is not far off. I am the only person who can save you. After all these years, god has sent me back here. I will save you as per His will but all help will be conditional."

Your helping days are long over, Oldman. I am amazed that you still talk about god after what all you went through. You are a doddering old fool. I have no use for help, not your help anyway.so please go away.

Oldman laughed. 'okay, I will go away now. But your dooms days are closing over you. I can see all that as clearly as I see you now

I see this smart building built with my money, being ripped apart and put to flames. Thirty days That is all you have. My words always come true.'

The younger man laughed. "You have suffered a stroke, Oldman. Sun stroke. you are blabbering. Go home and sleep. you will see everything in new light once you wake up after a good night sleep. I am tired , I have had a busy day."

He got into the car away drove away without another look at the Oldman.

The Oldman kept staring at the speeding car .His eyes were blazing. All his muscles were drawn tight over his old body. The hold on the young woman's hand was too tight. With great effort he brought his emotions under control He said haltingly, 'let us go my dear. Those people who drive double speed to their hell are blind to red lights on their way

I am the red light he jumped now.

A pity, he did not wait to listen to what I had to offer.

I am sorry we are going to lose a good doctor..

They walked to kamal's hut. There in over a kerosene lamp. The old man told an extra ordinary story. Kamala listened with her jaws dropping.

## Chapter 4 .

At the age of 35 Dr Kamalkanth was a world renowned Paediatrician specialising in infantile surgery. He had worked at the Guy hospital in London and subsequently joined a well known hospital of , child trust group showing amazing surgical skills to cure children. His services received excellent reviews and he was awarded Fairchild medal for services rendered by him.

He nursed a desire to establish in India, an academy of surgical excellence to train Indian doctors in advanced surgical methods and procedures. .once he found a good sponsor he took leave of England and landed at Hyderabad to set up his academy. .His concepts were new , teaching methods were advanced and facilities offered excellent training. He brought in imaging systems, fibre optics camera system, keyhole surgery techniques, local desensitisers to avoid complicated anaesthetics , remote monitored simulators into teaching labs, so that doctors could train in real time situations and gain formidable skills. The exercise proved to be great boon to a society starved off credible surgical skills in a growing population domain.

He married a girl from an influential family and the couple went on to build a name for their unique skills and enterpreunership.The result was a chain of hospitals all over AP , nothing big but every one compact, well managed systems using locally available skills and resources. These hospitals became extremely popular with common man as there was no exploitation or commercialisation. Service and trust combined and thrived.

At Hyderabad, they added child care unit to the hospitals to help working mothers to keep their children safe while they were busy at work. .This became popular as children got good food, medical attention and sound basic education. Shanta, the wife of Dr kamalkant was the brain behind the idea and she took every effort to make it a big success.

Dr kamalkant enjoyed his work and cherished the contribution he and his family were making towards the society. They steered a clear course avoiding too much public attention, political leanings and turf warfare. They cultivated an image of social workers and stayed away from being accused as commercial exploiters as most corporate houses in medical domain, were known for.

The couple had two sons. Like all working mothers, shanta put her children also in the same child care centre showing to everybody that her confidence and pride in the enterprise she had started.

The disaster struck one day with out any warning. SIX CHILDREN DIED IN THE CENTRE AND FOUR MORE DIED IN THEIR HOMES AFTER BEING TAKEN HOME IN THE EVENING BY THEIR MOTHERS. This was the opportunity eagerly waited for by the distractors and low profile business rivals of Dr Kamalkant. There were many who did not like the popularity and patronage enjoyed by the couple in the eyes of society.. They donned the hats of moral policemen and began to rise a big stink about the incident. A shocked doctor soon found out that the cause of death was poisoning of milk powder used by the centre and supplied by a disgruntled vendor. He was not even allowed to disclose his findings, but was subjected to intense criticism in public domain .The media blew it into a big thing, whipping up an uncalled for public out cry. In all hue and cry raised by the media, it was conveniently forgotten that one of the victims was Doctor's own younger son. Police and municipal authorities moved fast and in a fast and rather harsh procedure, slammed the doctor into a cell The doctor was dragged all over courts, his licence to practice was revoked and all his hospitals spread across the state were taken over Shanta fought tooth and nail but authorities were in no mood to settle or listen to reason. Shanta was unhappy with the way doctor had reacted to the crisis and legal procedures he took up. She moved out of his house to be with her parents while the doctor languished in the jail. In a matter of 6 months, a celebrity doctor was cut down to the size of a petty criminal out to make a fast buck.

The police investigation did find out about the contaminated milk supplied by a vendor who wanted to teach the purchase manager a lesson for not increasing budgetary sanctions for milk supply. Government used this fact to prove irresponsibility on the part of management in this case, Dr Kamal kant. His reputation as a social well wisher was tarnished and he was labelled as another capitalists bent on exploitation and profiteering at the cost of human lives. Kamalkant was hoping that his wife would move the matters to higher courts, but she lost interest in him when he was sentenced to 15 years of imprisonment by a determined jury who had pre judged him based on media

reports and sensational reviews in the press. Reason went for a toss and the doctor took one blow after another in silence.

One property that surprisingly remained untouched by the authorities was an unregistered, partly completed hospital building built for the doctor by a friendly builder. One of the doctors from the childcare centre approached Dr Kamalkant in the jail and struck a deal with the doctor in total secrecy. The deal was that the premises would be kept in safe custody by the young doctor, so that when Dr Kamalkant came out of jail after serving his term, he will have a place to live and rebuild his future. Kamalkant signed the papers in good faith and young Dr Shankar Reddy started a new career with great faith and promise of carrying on with good work started by kamalkant.

The doctor never met Shankar Reddy again

## Chapter5

Kamalkant was now a broken man and his mind turned to spirituality. Because of his exceptional surgical skills, the prison authorities allowed the prison hospital to use his services for which fees were paid to his prison account. While keeping up his skills in tact, Dr Kamal kant also developed himself spiritually by reading lot of books and calling for new books to be added to prison library.

Shanta continued to ignore him as she believed he had bungled the entire case by trusting lawyers of inadequate capability to put up effective defence. Kamalkant stopped thinking about his family and thin coat of vairagyam covered his mind set. In recognition of services rendered and good conduct through out the term, he was released after 12 years. When he emerged out of Tihar jail, near Delhi, far away from Hyderabad, he was a totally different man, with out any ambition or hatred against any one. He tried to contact Shanta but she did not respond and he gave it up. He decided, he would not go down south. During the jail term, the fees paid for his services and other allowances had amounted to a sizeable sum with which he could sustain himself.

He travelled north, roamed about in the hills and reached gandaki river. As he was bending down to scoop water in his hands from the river, he found the stone. HE PICKED IT UP AND EXAMINED THE SHINING PEBBLE, HE FOUND A SENSE OF ELATION IN HIS MIND. The stone was heavy. The sun's rays hit the stone and in the reflected beam of light he found new meaning to his life. He felt the stone was cleaning him inside out. He had heard his Brahmin friends talk about saligrams which they kept in the puja rooms. He had heard them tell about power of these pebbles when kept and worshipped daily. They called their pebbles by different names of gods. He wondered if the pebble found by him also had some unknown power.

He examined the stone sitting on the river bank while drying himself in the sun. A worm had drilled a hole in the stone to make a home for itself while it remained submerged in the river water. To his keen eyes, the hole looked like some one leaning against a cow and holding a flute in hand. He called out softly, 'venugopala' and put the stone to his ears. He distinctly heard the tunes

of long forgotten melody on Krishna sung by his mother. Kamalkant was thrilled that he could recognise the song after all these years. He cried out like a child repeating name of Krishna .From that day, the stone remained with him close to his body. He felt divine agencies were now beginning to direct his life. He spent many evenings in isolation talking to the stone and one fine day, the stone talked back.

Some thing in his mind told him to go to Rishikesh, . He found an ashram who could use his skills in return for a roof and board. .He began an altogether new life He was now past 65 years and his spiritual leanings made him pick up friendship with all people who came to rishikesh for mental peace

The Ashram authorities found kamalkant had amazing skills at organising events. Over stressed people from big cities like Mumbai, Calcutta, Ahmedabad etc found it rejuvenating to spend a few peaceful days at the ashram. The spiritual discourses by kamalkant became a great hit and his advice on health matters were very helpful. kamalkant worked on combining the concepts of health and spiritualism, perfected it and prospered. Soon the ashram had a health spa, yoga clinic and counselling desk. Kamalkant was a new man with flowing grey hair and matching long beard. The ashram authorities soon made him a director and he was now officially referred as swamiji..

Life seemed to settle nicely to a routine keeping swamiji happy and busy forgetting those days of suffering behind bars. Swamiji kept attributing all his success to the black stone in his hand. He maintained it in a divine form ,an ikon .He performed puja to the stone and offered milk and fruits before his meals. He would talk to the stone calling him Krishna and telling him about the work done by him every day. The stone seemed to listen and occasionally uttered a word or two in appreciation. The rational mind of the doctor termed it as his own imagination on account of loneliness and lack of understanding companion in his life. But that changed soon when the stone became down right chatter box admonishing at times and advising him when he needed some.

One day after his morning puja, the pebble talked to kamalkant. He heard , 'Kamal, will you please take me out in the open today. I would like to look at the sky and hills around this place.'

Kamal was puzzled. He said, 'sure Krishna'. He took the pebble in his hand and walked out to the garden with in ashram compound. The sky was grey and it was very cold out in the open.

It had been a very hot summer in the plains and winter had set in earlier than usual. visitors to the ashram would be very less in number and after new year traffic will pick up. Today, dark clouds were clinging to the hill tops and there was a hint of rain. The stone shook in his hand and he heard the stone say, "There is going to be a cloud burst in the hills and there will be huge landslide. Many people will suffer. why don't you go and alert the authorities. Stop people from travelling".

Kamal knew what he had to do. He rang up the hospital and advised them to test their state of preparedness to handle a sudden landslides. He also asked for a meeting with military regulators to stop movement of vehicles in the hill roads. The commander of military camp gave him time to talk. THE COMMANDER WAS AMMUSED THAT A SWAMIJI FROM LOCAL ASHRAM WAS GOING TO TALK TO HIM ABOUT POSSIBLE LANDSLIDES. The army usually took control of hill roads during winter months. The commander was busy organising supplies for long winter months. He listened to the swamiji with respect but laughed out when the good swamiji began to advise him on what he should do .

The commander said rudely, 'that is enough swamiji. we will take necessary precaution. but let me tell you, it is too early for landslides. The rains will not be so heavy during this period, they pick up strength a little later only. Anyway thank you for your concern and we will take steps to face any disaster".

Kamal felt like a fool talking about non existing danger.

Swamiji returned to ashram a little disillusioned. Late in the evening he heard a great explosion in the military camp in the hills and saw a huge ball of fire rising in air.

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