

TKRAGHU

Dickey's school show

tkraghu

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Chapter1

Old Shanta was relaxing on her ancient easy chair, catching the evening sun .She was on the terrace of her single storey house. A tall fruit bearing mango tree growing in the compound formed a nice green leafy back drop. A gentle breeze was blowing across her face. The slanting rays of the setting sun caught the diamonds in her ears, made them shine brilliantly. Her head was thrown back, with her long grey hair falling behind in a graceful drop. She was proud of her long hair. Years of use of ammonia based dyes had bleached the hair and the silver in them glowed in the sun. Her broad fair forehead was bare, slightly lined on account of age..Lines around her eyes indicated how gracefully she had aged. A long cushioned couch was set in front of her chair and she stretched her legs to touch the edge of the couch with her toes. The stretch of muscles seemed to calm her disturbed nerves. Most evenings she had somebody to keep company sitting on the comfortable couch , sipping coffee and munching hot pakoras. Today she was all alone. There was no friend at her side, there was no tea and of course no pakoras. A wry smile danced in her face and vanished.

She was alone in the house. Her son sharad and daughter in law with two grand children had gone out to see a film. They will have their dinner and return home late. They had left no food for her. The fruit bowl on the dining table had two bananas and an orange. There was some cold milk in the fridge. She had to manage on her own for any food. Her family was angry with her and they showed their displeasure this way. There was still some time for her to worry about her supper.

She looked around her. She could see the neat line up of flower pots. The jasmine creeper had worked her way right up to the tallest part of her house. A green bushy thulasi was glistening in the sun. It was her favourite plant. She never failed to water that plant every morning after chanting Sri Krishna's slokas.

She remembered the hot words uttered by her son in the course of heated arguments between mother and son. It was not the first time. It was becoming more frequent in recent days. It was always about money. According to her son, he was always short of it while she had pots and pots of it stashed away some where and she was so miserly that she would not help her only son fund his daughters education through medical school and high school. He was blind to

the fact that his wife had expensive tastes and blew a great deal of their savings gambling away at the card table at the club.

Yes, it is true that Shanta had seen very affluent days. After all that is said and done, her husband was a supreme court Judge and she herself held a position of professor of Religious Philosophy at the university. They had lived well, travelled far and wide, built this house and seen a son and daughter graduate and settle down well in life. The husband wife Duo had a spiritual streak in them and they supported so many worthy causes that they could save so little of what they earned.. It never mattered to them that they were throwing away money .They thought they had sufficient money to tide over the retirement phase. The son never believed a word of such explanations.

But today's argument was not about money.. In fact, for any one else, it was over a trivial matter. To any one but Shanta.. She should not have reacted the way she did. It was her fault this time. Yet she could not forgive her son and family for what they did. How could they take out an item from her cupboard and hand it over with out her consent , to be put out for auction.. An item which she had treasured and preserved over thirty long years. It did not appear to be improper at all for her son and his wife.. She could not take it at all and she threw words left and right. Sharad and family felt the same and they left in a huff to clear the air and she was left behind alone, crying.

She decided that she would visit her grand daughter's school and meet with the Principal and take back the item deposited by her grand Daughter Aarti for display in the Art and Craft exhibition and subsequent auction to raise money for the school. The item was an exquisite carpet of wool and silk garnished with gold threads and embedded with pearls and semi precious stones. It was completely done by hand by Shanta over twelve months, spending a fortune. In fact she made two like that .One was gifted away to the shrine at Ajmer. She had hoped to present the second one to the most extra ordinary friend, who had saved her husband. She was not sure that the friend would appreciate the gift because he was too rough to like any thing so delicate and beautiful like her carpet.. But she kept the carpet and maintained the friendship.

Only recently ,her grand daughter Aarti had taken a sudden interest in knitting and shanta had helped her to learn the basics of knitting and how to make intricate designs using wool and silk threads. During one training session, shanta had taken out the carpet made by her to show Aarti a sample of her

own work. The girl was so excited that she wanted the whole world to know what her dear Granny had created. Without telling her, Aarti removed the carpet and submitted it to the school, for display in an Art and Craft exhibition to be held at the time of school annual day celebrations. Aarti did not inform her grand mother about it. It did not strike her at all that what she was doing was not proper. When Shanta came to know about it she blew her top. Sharad took his daughter to task for her action and tried to assure his mother that item would not be auctioned and would be brought back immediately after the exhibition. Shanta would not hear a word of this explanation and she insisted that they should get back her carpet right away. Sharad lost his patience and told her simply to go to hell. He decided to go out for the evening with his family leaving his mother alone to fend for herself. Shanta was now ruling over the matter and planning her moves to retrieve her treasure.

Shanta had her own standing in the society and had friends who would help her without reservation. It was a school originally promoted by her husband and presently run by ex service men organisation promoted by her friends. So it should not be such a difficult job to get her item back. She decided that she would show her son how she could take care of her own assets.

With such thoughts crowding her mind, she called up her friend Kaddu (short for Kadambari), a leading supreme court lawyer and, a long time friend. When the soft voice of Kaddu came on the line, she felt encouraged to open her heart out. She poured everything over. Kaddu listened to all that patiently. Shanta finally said, 'that is it Kaddu. I have to visit the school tomorrow, first thing. Will you please tell Dickey to pick me up from my house and drive me over to school. After all, it is his school, you know'

Kaddu laughed out aloud and shouted at Dickey who was nearby, conveying what Shanta wanted. She said to Shanta, 'it is okay dear. You heard me shout at Dickey. He will be there to run you over to his school. Only request is go easy on him. He is not at all like your Sharad. He does not like being shouted at especially by old ladies like you and me.'

They all laughed together. Shanta put the phone back in its place.

She closed her eyes and tried to relax. Her mind was doing a flash back of time she spent knitting the carpet. The smiling face of her long dead husband danced in front of her eyes. She murmured softly 'do not worry Vikram. I will get our

treasure back. Dickey is there to help” .Five kilo meters away , at Friend’s nest
Dickey was asking kaddu ’what has she done now?

Chapter2

By the time he was thirty, Vikram had established himself as a powerful lawyer and an accomplished speaker. He took on speaking assignments on legal topics to law schools. His marriage with Shanta was already four years old and every thing looked rosy. Both Shanta and Vikram came from families where education was given top priority and development of social interest was a natural progression. They made an ideal pair, well on the way up in the social ladder. One, as a fighting Lawyer and other as a spirited academician with a flair for religious philosophy. It threw them in the company of educated lot embracing all religious beliefs with out any of the despicable dogma. So when the invitation came from Ajmer to address the first convocation meeting of the newly formed corporate Law school, they were both excited. Vikram's parents had been worried over the fact that even after four years of marriage Shanta had shown no sign of interest in having a baby. So when Dr Jehangir mentioned that a visit to Ajmer dharga would do the trick, shanta pressed Vikram to take up the assignment. It was slated in the beginning of winter season and climate in Ajmer would be just fine. Shanta had begun work on a new carpet. She visited hyderabad for pearls and kancheepuram for gold threads and Bangalore, Bellary for semi precious stones and colourful beads. She had spent some time with a weaver's family to get to know about weaving frame and tools required to hand knit a carpet with in the frame. She had settled on a knitting routine and hoped she would complete the carpet in time for the Ajmer visit. As per suggestion of Dr Jehangir, she had decided to present the woollen chaader(carpet) to the shrine. Shanta and Vikram decided they would take in pushkar, Jaipur and Ajmer in one trot.

The speech at the convocation was a huge success as the new law graduates enjoyed a lively interaction with a young firebrand of their own kind and his young wife. So when the couple entered the shrine at Ajmer, there were many young friends to felicitate their visit and a meeting was arranged with the chairman of Dharga committee, a bearded Mulla who showed proper appreciation of the gift brought by a couple embracing different faith. So it was a grand occasion when the thin chaader was unpacked in front of the tomb. The blue of the wool and yellow of gold and red stripes of silk in an intricate floral design caught every one's breath. The chairman was so astounded by the quality of work that in his brief acceptance speech he mentioned, "this dharga has received gifts over centuries from many a royal houses and Princely patrons but

nothing matched the extraordinary beauty of humble offering from the visitors from south.”.As the excited couple stepped outside the portals of the sacred tomb, shanta already felt the small swell in her abdomen. She told Vikarm about it and Vikram laughed. He did not believe in miracles. For him God was every where and he saw more of God in body of good people, their deeds and words. He set store more by the blessings of living good souls than long dead ones inspite of their religion . Sharad was born exactly ten months later and was named after the season in which they had visited the dharga.

As shanta waited in the hall , she wiped a tear from her eyes as memories flooded her mind. The twin of that chaader was lying in the school cupboard some where.It had to be retrieved and restored to the place where it belonged.

The Doorbell rang and she walked towards the door to open it. She saw the cheerful face of Dickey swirling his golf cap in his hands and sporting a big toothy smile. He said, ‘hello shanta, you took your own time reaching the door. I thought the bloody bell was not ringing. My mind was already thinking of hundred different ways to smash down the un willing door. You saved your precious door in the nick of time”

Yes, sir, at times , I also play the saviour,’ she gave him a tight hug, lingering there for a moment, savouring the contact with a strong body of a trusted friend .”welcome, home, Dickey” she told him with a warm smile ,slowly unwinding herself from his grip. She had kept a cup of tea ready for him and she offered the same to him. With a word of thanks, Dickey took the proffered cup and asked if her Children were around. She informed him that she was alone and in a hurry. She should be back home before the daughter in law returned from her clinic.

They locked up the house and got into the car with Dickey taking the wheel.. Before turning on the ignition, he asked ‘Shanta ,here we are. My car is all ready to go. where would you like to go first?”

Oh, let us run first to the school and meet with the Principal.

Shanta, Can’t you just call her over to your place and talk. She will be very happy to visit you, you know that.

No. This is a serious matter and I would like to deal with out Sharad and his wife getting to know about what I talk with the Principal

Why? what is the problem?

It is not yet a problem. But if I do not act immediately it can turn out to be big problem.

For the School?

No, not for the school. For me , personally

How? I am not sure that I understand.

Do not worry, Dickey. Nobody has ever accused you of being very smart. Just drive me to school and watch me talk to the Principal, you will understand every thing.

‘Shanta, I would like you to explain to me what your problem with Principal of the school is. It is our school and presently I am the director of the school board and I am entitled to know, before you confront the principal, using me as your shield or battering ram which ever suits you.’

Well—

I am waiting,

Dickey. Here is the problem. You know Aarti, Sharad’s younger daughter. She has handed over my chaader to the School Principal for display in the school sponsored handicraft exhibition and auction. She has done it with out my knowledge and permission.

UH, UH

Which Chaader?

You know the one.

Dickey frowned.

Did you talk to Sharad.

Yes I did.

What did he say?

He said I am making unnecessary fuss over an ancient chaader that is worth zero value presently. The child wanted to display some thing and took the

chaader. He said he would get it back after the exhibition. He does not see any thing wrong in the child removing an item belonging to me from my room with out my permission.. I know it for a fact that once it goes on display, it won't come back to me. So I asked him to get it back. He refused point blank and insulted me by saying I am behaving like a school girl myself.

Dickey did not want to be a party to a family tiff. He said in a worried manner, "so, you want to take back that item."

Yes, very much.

"Suppose the Principal says that goods once submitted for exhibition can not be taken back till exhibition is over. What will you do?"

That is where you come in

"What do you mean?"

You will tell the Principal to return the item to me with out making any issue about it.

"Seems simple. Is it not?."

Dead simple.

"Shanta, you know when I get involved, things do not stay simple. They grow into a monster and get me into more trouble. Is there any thing called retirement in your dictionary .It pains you and kaddu to see me live happily."

Stop grumblng and start driving. You are our hero and act like one.

Yes, madam

The car raced towards the school.

Chapter3

The National model school was 4 kilometers away from Shanta's house. Built on a two acre plot of what was once a thriving farm land. The place boasted of an inspiring landscape with back ground of boulder strewn high lands.. The place was well removed from the bustle of city by a long straight road lined with tall leafy trees that formed a nice canopy. The school consisted of four large buildings forming a square all round a sprawling play ground. The roads on all sides of square were meticulously clean. All buildings were painted white, all doors were painted brown and all buildings had terracotta Mangalore tiles of golden brown. The buildings were functionally sound and aesthetically eye catching. The high ceilings and polished brass fittings all over, gave an impression of simple elegance for a school.

The entire school was brain child of Justice Vikram and funded by his friends. After passing a ruling in a sensational scandal in school administration in control of powerful vested interests supported by slimy politicians, the judge vowed to show the world how a school should be run. The Judge and his wife invested all their life savings in the project. Dickey and his friends stepped in to offer protection to the judge when his pet project was threatened by the politicians. Judge died leaving the school in the control of Dickey and His cousin Col Prabhu. Today it was recognised as a model school, strong on discipline, sports and all round development. Its Scholastic achievements were not in any way less praiseworthy. But the school believed scholastic development was by product of healthy mind free from pressures and stresses of excessive competition. The judge had implicit faith in Dickey's ability to implement his ideas. The brief speech he had given at the time of fare well meeting for first batch of class ten students was engraved in the main hall of school. All he said was 'reach out with full conviction and commitment in every one of your endeavours and the glory will find its way towards you'. Conviction and commitments were the principle motto of this school.

The school was now run by ex service men and their family. Dickey was convinced that defence forces of India represented all that was best in the country and even after retirement, the servicemen could take up a role in the shaping up of the youth of the country. He and his friends from the "friend's nest" ensured that the school had every resource required for its upkeep and development.

Dickey drove his car straight to security bunker and signalled to the guard operating the bar that formed a barrier for vehicles entering the school premises. The bar lifted and he drove through towards the main admin building. Security guards were in place at strategic places. The entire campus looked as though transplanted from some cantonment.. The security Chief a retired Sargeant from Dickey's unit stepped out to greet the visitors. By the time Shanta and Dickey got out of the car in the parking place, the security chief was at their side. A smart salute towards Dickey and a neat Bow to the old lady, completed the welcome ceremony.. An engraved name plate pinned on the bright blue shirt showed his name as Ashok Reddy.

Dickey asked "All well ,Ashok.? School looks rather deserted.'

Yes sir. It is vacation time, you know. Maintenance work is going on. We should be ready for the reopening by next week.

"Is the Principal Madame in?"

No, not yet. It is time for her arrival. Shall I open the Chairman's chamber for you to wait? I will inform her of your visit.

Dickey and Shanta walked behind Ashok Reddy, who led them towards the Chairman's chamber. They climbed a flight of stairs and walked into a familiar room as Ashok opened the door wide for their entry... Ashok took leave and shanta leaned back on her sofa enjoying the comfortable feeling. The feminine touch of Kaddu was clearly visible in the colour scheme and type of furniture, curtains and book shelf. . Shanta remarked as such and Dickey smiled. He opened the refrigerator and took out two bottles of cool drink and offered one to shanta and occupied chair behind the working desk.

'You are serious about taking back your item?'" Dickey enquired.

Shanta took a sip and placed the bottle back on the table and replied, 'yes. It has been missing from my cup board for the last two weeks. I think it was removed just before school closed for vacation... I do not want that piece to be displayed in any exhibition nor auctioned. It is too valuable an item and I expect to keep it with me till my call time.'

Principal Nalini tapped at the door. Dickey looked up and smiled at her. He invited her to come in and meet with Shanta. She sat alongside Shanta and made polite enquiries about her health. Nalini was a natural public relation

expert. She knew how to deal with friends of directors, family members of founders of school.

After polite exchange of courtesies, Dickey asked Nalini if she was aware of the fact that Shanta's grand Daughter Aarti was a student of her school.

Nalini answered promptly, 'Yes, Of course, I know Aarti in class 11. She is one of our star students. She gets along very well with other students and the teaching faculty.'

Shanta said, 'I have come here to talk about her. I understand that you are planning to organise an Exhibition of art and handicraft items, alongside the annual day celebrations. It seems you have invited students to present articles made by them for display and auction.'

Nalini said, 'Yes, that is right. I thought it is a good way to make the visitors aware of the skills acquired by our students in the field of art and handicraft. Auction was an afterthought, an idea mooted by one teacher. The idea was to allow the students earn some money for their efforts.'

Shanta said, "That is a very nice idea. Do you know that Aarti also has submitted an article for display?"

It was more of a statement than a question.

Nalini replied promptly, 'Has she? I would not know about it. You know we have a committee for organising this exhibition. Certain teachers are assigned to the committee. They deal with submissions'

The answer came so smoothly that Shanta was taken aback. Dickey stirred in his seat, becoming suddenly alert.

Shanta kept pressing, "I remember Aarti telling me clearly that she handed over her item to you personally. You were very impressed with what you saw. You said some very nice things about it"

Is that so? Well, I do not remember anything like that. I do not receive any thing direct. I always ask students to deposit the exhibits with specified teachers concerned.'

Shanta kept herself on the subject, "Well, she clearly told me that you took it in your hand. The point I am trying to make is that, that particular Item was made

by me and it was taken out of my room and handed over to you without my permission or consent. I am upset about it and would like to collect it back. That is the reason for my present visit. Please arrange for it to be returned to me now.”

Nalini stared at her. She said, 'It is absolutely improper on the part of Aarti to have brought that item here without your consent. I will definitely speak to her about it. About your wanting to take the item back, you will have to talk to concerned staff dealing with exhibition. Now that you are here, you can talk to the person concerned. I will advise them that you are here and want to talk to them'

Dickey got a distinct feeling that Nalini was talking very glibly without any flutter. He was sure that she was covering up something. He made up his mind to look into the matter.

Dickey said, 'you don't expect an old Lady to go about enquiring with your staff. You please talk to your staff and arrange to collect the item submitted by Aarti and forward it to me.'

He then turned towards shanta and said in soft way, 'Now, Shanta, do not get upset. I will deal with the matter.'

He got up from his seat to indicate to Nalini that the purpose of calling her over to his room was over. He said, 'That is all, Nalini. You may leave now. But please make enquiry and arrange to get Shanta's item back. I will now drive her back to her place'

Nalini stood up, shook hands with Shanta and assured her that she would get her article back and not to worry too much. She bowed her head toward Dickey and walked out. Dickey waited for the door to close behind Nalini and then called his security chief on intercom and requested him to come up and see him immediately. While they waited for Security chief Ashok Reddy to arrive, shanta said in a low voice, 'did you notice how coolly she lied. Aarti clearly described how excited Nalini was, when that chaader was in her hand. She made a remark that it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen in her life. NOW SHE SAYS, SHE DOES NOT KNOW ANY THING ABOUT IT...I am shocked, Dickey.'

Dickey said, 'I got the same impression. Do not fret, Shanta. I will get to the bottom of this affair. You must relax now.'"

Ashok Reddy knocked and entered. Dickey explained the matter to Ashok and then said, "Ashok, do me a favour. Go and check with the head of the exhibition committee if there is one such thing. Shanta says that Aarti had handed over the item to Nalini in person. She wants to take back her item. Please arrange to collect it and return it to her."

'Just now?' asked Ashok

Yes please, if possible. Shanta is getting pretty worked up about it and it affects her health. At her age it is not nice. Ashok smiled at Shanta and said he will go immediately

Dickey said, 'Do that Ashok .Be discrete about your enquiries. Do not tip your hand to Nalini. We have to know what game she is playing. She is very new to our school. If she is not our kind of person, we have to take corrective action. It may be that we are going overboard with our suspicions. Let us be smart and find out what is going on.

One more thing, Ashok. Please tell one of your drivers to drive my car and drop Shanta at her place.

Ashok left the room. Shanta waited till the driver was ready and then left the place. Dickey walked with her up to the car, helped her to get in .He returned to his room, with a scowl in his face and plunged into work

Dickey opened a cupboard and took out a folder containing the file pertaining to appointment of Principal Nalini. He realised that he did not know too much about her back ground .He studied the certificates and reference letters and remarks made by the interviewing committee. A small worm of suspicion became active in his mind. He decided to wait for Ashok to make his report before taking any action.

Chapter4

Ashok Reddy casually walked up to the Administration building and climbed up the staircase to the first floor where the teacher's common room and convenience facilities were located. He pushed the door and walked into the sprawling and well-furnished Room used by the teachers... Stella the class xi teacher was pouring over a newspaper spread over a glass topped table, with a pair of scissors in one hand ready to snip off a bit of the paper containing some interesting news item... She looked up to see Ashok Reddy walk towards her. She dropped the scissors and raised a hand in greeting and asked, "Hello Ashok, How are you and what brings you to this drab staff room.

Ashok responded cheerfully, "HI Stella, I am just looking around. If you call this drab, I do not know what you will say about my cubicle. I wanted to check with you on one matter. Stella, do you know Aarti, the granddaughter of Judge Vikarm. I think she is in your class."

Yes, Ashok. I know her pretty well. A smart kid. What happened to her?' she asked with genuine concern in her tone.

"Nothing.' Ashok did not want to rush.

"Then, why this visit?" Stella probed.

'Did she submit any article for the exhibition?'

Stella was silent

"Why are you asking about it, now?"

'So she submitted an item?' The question hung in the air for some time.

Stella stared at him.

' Well, I want it back.'

You want it back?

Yes .I want to take it back to the house. Aarti's grandmother was here this morning asking for it. The chief has asked me to collect it from you and return the same to the family. It seems the kid had brought it here without informing any one.'

"It is not here, Ashok."

‘Why? What happened to it?’

Nalini gave it away.

She did? To who?

Satish Agarwal.

Ashok whistled.

‘Are you sure?’

Yes. Nalini was fascinated by that stuff. She talked about it with Satish Agarwal, who has been visiting her frequently in recent days. Once when he was here, she asked for that item to be brought to her chambers to be shown to Satish. It never came back to the locker’

Are you sure?

Yes. I asked Nalini about it as there was an entry in the register.

“She asked me to write in the register that the item was returned as per request.”

And you did.

‘No I did not .The register still says item was moved to principal’s room.’

But you are not sure that she had given it away to some one?

‘I am sure. I asked about it again. She told me that Satish Agarwal took a fancy for it and bought it away outright.’

Are you sure, Stella? This is important.

‘Yes, I am sure. Why is there any problem?’

Not yet. Stella, I suggest you forget the whole thing. Forget that I asked about it. And do not mention my interest in the item to Nalini. Is it clear?’

Stella nodded her head, with a confused look in her large face. Ashok came close to Stella and patted her hand in a friendly gesture and walked out.

Ashok made a formal report to Dickey about his conversation with Stella. Dickey listened to it without interrupting and then asked, “Who is this Agarwal? Ashok, you know anything about him?”

Ashok replied, ‘No, not much. But in recent days, he has been visiting our school rather frequently. I will check this out.’

Dickey showed some concern, ‘Yes, you do that Ashok. Agarwal is a common name. But I remember that I had put away Prakash Agarwal, who was involved in a scandal. Judge Vikram had passed a rather harsh sentence and Prakash sent his goons to threaten the judge to change the verdict. I had to deal rather strongly and the man ended up in the jail on a 15 year sentence. I hope this Sathish is not related in some way. If he is related, then we have a bigger problem on our hand. Please investigate him and let me know. We will inform the police if necessary.’

Ashok walked out to his room... He took out the visitors register and ran through the entries and underlined the entries pertaining to Sathish Agarwal’s visit. He noted down in his cell phone, the car numbers and telephone numbers. A call to the RTO’s office and obtained the residential address.

He decided to call on Sathish Agarwal’s house just to case the joint. He remembered what Dickey had said about possibility of Sathish Agarwal being related to Prakash Agarwal. PUT AWAY BY HIM FOR GOOD. He remembered the story that was going around the units about how Dickey took on the Hyderabad based goons in a fierce encounter that left behind half a dozen goons maimed and almost killed.

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