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## Stray Blades of Grass

THE DAY RENU MEETS SUROMA, she is not the least bit surprised to see this pressed-frock version of herself hunkered under the gardenia bush waiting for her. There have been clues—a forgotten water bottle once and a grubby towel spread to (now it's obvious) protect the frock. There has also been the anticipation building in Renu since her discovery of the park. And when Suroma—after some noises about Renu as intruder in Suroma's park, to which Renu replies with appropriately chastened trailing of toe in dirt and sucking of pigtails—deigns to share her name, the elusive trail Renu's mother had taken out of this world is once again visible to Renu.

"My mother's name," Renu tells Suroma, "is Suroma." Suroma is disdainful, maybe even disbelieving, and shyly Renu adds, "also."

"What of that?" Suroma enquires. "Your mother is the presswallih. I know because my mother gives her my school uniform, and all my other clothes also, for pressing."

"That's not my mother. That's my didi," says Renu miserably. The promised happiness of friendship with her mother's namesake is not materializing. And the return of her mother's name to her is rapidly coalescing into something solid in her chest; something with sharp edges. Water swallowed too quickly has done this to Renu; stuck itself like a knife in her throat.

"No, that's not your didi, that's your mother now. Everyone knows your first mother is dead. And you are the presswallih's new daughter."

When this fails to elicit the toe trailing of earlier, Suroma gives Renu a push, and an angry Renu bursts out, "Well your mother is an idiot who, who ..." and Renu doesn't have the experience trading insults with children, of middle-class or any other provenance, to know how to continue.

Suroma, the much worldlier Suroma, judiciously sums up this introduction to their new-found intimacy with, "You don't know anything. My mother is at least alive and she doesn't even have to work. She is home right now. And anyway, you can play with me."

Renu tries mightily, at first, to interest Suroma in the wonders of her world. She does not think names of birds important so introduces them to Suroma by their colours. On dun-coloured hillocks they ruffle their dun-coloured breasts. And then she points up from where vivid green trees break vivid sparks of green into the sky. “That’s just parrots,” says Suroma. “If you want, you can come to my house and see one the cook keeps in a cage.” Renu tries again. Her birds are everywhere, in soft clumps of dust, in wet grass, at the swaying tips of tender branches, in bushes thorny to their breasts. “But show me their eggs!” Suroma cries angrily. “What’s the good of just birds?” And Renu despairs.

Suroma prefers to read, and has glasses to prove it. Because Renu cannot read, at least not well enough to understand what she is reading, Suroma reads to her. She reads from Tagore, and the two girls weep together to think of the Kabulliwallah who must seek his lost daughter’s face in the face of another girl. She reads in English and tirelessly translates as she reads—the various adventures of Peter, Janet, and Jack, Barbara, Pam, Colin and George. “I want to be a writer someday,” she tells Renu, “you tell me all the stories you know.” But the only stories Renu can offer are the ones heard from her father’s superior, the senior pundit; the ones she enjoys about Krishna’s childhood antics stealing butter or sucking the demoness Putana’s breasts till he draws blood, leave Suroma disgusted. “You don’t understand. I want to hear all the true stories about your life. What is the temple like? What is your father like? Does he beat you? Is your new mother mean like Cinderella’s stepmother? What do you eat?”

Renu hangs her head and their friendship becomes one in which Suroma talks and Renu listens. Suroma tells Renu about the time she had seen an accident and how a disembodied hand had flown through the air and landed on her lap. Secretly, Renu is skeptical of this tale but knows better than to express her doubts. Instead, she tells Suroma about the time she found an eagle’s claw, the leg still attached to the claw, but chewed by rats. In truth, though Renu has seen this claw, its discovery had been made by the senior Pundit and had left Renu’s mother in a bad mood in the days prior to her death.



When her mother was alive, Renu’s feet cycled in sleep, tangling themselves in the rope of the charpoy. If her mother failed to lay a hand on her and whisper, “Sleep now, I will wake you in the morning,” Renu would surely thrash her legs, flinging them up from the waist till she woke. So when Renu’s mother died giving birth to baby Jai, Renu’s greatest fear

was not that there would be no one to whisper to her at night, to keep her in sleep, but instead that, without her mother, God's bright hot mornings would come to the temple compound and she, locked in sleep, would miss the glory.

Her father brought home a new wife—too soon for anyone's taste. But no one dared openly criticize the temple's junior pundit. And everyone agreed that the baby, who appeared to want to follow his mother, would need one if he was to remain. This marriage had the added benefit of bringing to an end Renu's clenched hold on night-time wakefulness. What she heard in the dark from her father's bed frightened her. She wrestled herself into sleep with balled-up fists and screwed-up eyes, and with legs stilled—all to reach sleep before her father found his way to the giggles emanating from his new wife.

When her mother was still alive, Renu's days were spent in the tangled-manicured paradise of her jungle park, which radiated from her home in the temple compound, and was for her the known universe. The tangled-manicured grounds were so because malis numbering in the hundreds would have been necessary to impose order on this vast stretch of land. When its great trees dropped soaked limbs at the end of the monsoon season, the pundits gathered other men to discuss what it would take to push city authorities for more staff and maintenance. The conversation concluded, as all such conversations did, in a hopelessness alleviated only in small measure by the insults Renu's father heaped on the malis: "Those lazy, worthless, third-rate jokers. Bloody bastards. Those Johnnies need a severe beating. That will cure them of sleeping the day away."

Renu could not imagine anyone ever willingly sleeping during the day. Nor did she understand her father's low opinion of the malis who, because they stayed away from these meetings, remained unknown to her. She revered them because her jungle park, she was sure, was perfect as it was. Its paths circled and circled and though hours of wandering brought no end to them (led her to no end/led her endlessly onward), they had never failed to bring her home.

After her mother's death, these paths that meandered in brick dust through the jungle park offered new wonders; most of them involving some stage in dying. From these wonders Renu came to know the precise place where time creased and tore sharply to allow a dung beetle, eased of limbs and wings and cradled in palm, to pass from frantic motion of appeal to dry shell. Once, she built a shrine and returned for a period to the same spot under a gulmohar tree where a dog had left a longer turd than any in dog history. She watched its snake-like existence crumble softly at the edges and

collapse to meet the furry earth, leaving behind a vague structure of fibres that, by remaining changeless, dissuaded her further interest.

In the morning, the red pathways were strewn with the casually dropped splats—some oblong and others perfectly circular—of cows making their way to forage in surrounding colony dumps. Crows pecked at these piles of what was still recognizable as chewed up grass, undigested grains. (And what was pecked at in the early hours was, by midday, pocked with minute holes through which vapor steamed—the *atma* leaving, but not to some afterlife where grass could come back maybe as the crow or even a cow this time. “No, gone was gone.” She was adamant on this point. And to confirm the absoluteness of endings, come evening, she checked: there was no evidence the splats had ever lent their *mehndi* green appeal to these crimson paths. The *mali* had passed through and gathered dung cakes to reconstitute with water and offer to the young plants grown in the nursery behind the temple compound.) As far as Renu was concerned, once dead, always dead—no rebirth, no recycle, regardless of the claims made by her father’s superior, the senior *pundit*.

But cow droppings did convince her that life could extend itself past death. What convinced her was not the grains, the crows, or even the *mali*’s trick of reconstitution. Having seen the grass blades whole and intact in those soft piles, she was sure that some further search of the void where her mother used to be would yield, whole and intact, the stray-blade extensions of her mother’s life. At night, lightning bugs flashing for mates left similar trails of their passing. With eyes squeezed, she watched them blink and spin in a plastic bottle. A swift shake of the bottle and a single blink of light extended into a zigzagging trail, tracing eternity, before the stunned creature was extinguished.

Renu’s only experience of desperation up to this point had been her need to wake up in advance of the sun. Her only experience of life has been within the jungle park that extended for kilometers from the temple center—north to the back of Gargi College for Women, south to Soami Nagar, east to Panchsheel Enclave, and west even to Shahpur Jat. These neighborhoods had been as distant to her as the people, mostly fat and old, who came after her mother’s death to the temple and chucked her under the chin, harshly, she felt. With her mother’s death, the neighborhoods became real, and metal turnstiles (how had she missed their parameter presence?), that stuck and pushed her back at her bony chest, turned with additional pressure and tripped her out into this new world. She was given a job—working aside her new mother as a runner in her new uncle’s business, picking up crushed and crumpled clothes from Panchsheel Enclave’s D-Block homes (D-16, D-18, D-33...D-91), and returning them pressed

and folded and neatly wrapped and—here was her part in it all—counted correctly or risk the swift blow to her head and the ringing it brought.

She was desperate now. Maybe it was the ringing in her head, but her dead mother—and she has accepted the death, its irrevocability—had a name once, and she could no longer remember it. Jai had grown so he no longer lay feebly on his back. Now his little fists pumped the air, cheering, when really he shouldn't, she thought sourly. She remembered that her mother was ammi to her but something else also—a name, a name, which one? Her new mother she called didi for she was just a few years older than Renu and not really old enough to be an ammi. She whispered, “ammi” to Jai when didi was not around. But despite her best efforts, when didi stepped under the cloth-strung bamboo poles that sheltered their little enterprise from the scorching heat blasted from sky above and radiated from tarmac below, Jai pumped that fist and cheered making “mi-mi-mi” noises as didi scooped him up and fondled him. “Yes,” she crooned, “I am your ammi. Say it my sweet, say ammi.” Renu was angry; angry enough to want to imagine taking the heavy, charcoal-filled, monster of an iron that glowed in the hands of her uncle and using it to press shut Jai's baby face. Instead, she stalked out to continue her running from D-13 to D-16 to wherever there might be a glimpse of the continuity she had divined for herself in slim blades of grass.

The first she glimpsed it was when, walking past the morning haggling of grandmothers, conducted over mounds of fruit, walking along the side of a green metal fence, low built, trailing her waist, she stumbled (how had she not known of this entrance, having walked this very route morning after morning) through a gap in the fence, through a turnstile, also stiff and unyielding, and then yielding, into a miniature of the world she had once inhabited. There was no tarmac here intruding into the oblong, almost circular, green of grass, only a soft path of red circling the grass—and trees, shrubs, and flowers, arranged high to low, from back to front, shielding D-Block Park's handkerchief breadth, the green map of a connection to her past.

In this miniature park she found herself a space suitable for observing wonders familiar and new. She spread someone's cast-off towel under the boughs of the gardenia and watched a bird perched above, not on a branch, but actually on a leaf. Her heart sped as the bird twisted and cocked its head at her. And the bird in turn, aware of her regard, hung in air to stare, and its heart slowed. That afternoon in the park she renewed her faith in: birds, trees, cow dung. The discovery of the park was proof that time possessed the ability to intersect itself. And when time broke apart, with a flutter and a flash of red heretofore hidden beneath wings and now revealed throb-

bing in flight, Renu was done crying and ready for this portent to reveal its meaning.

Jai progressed from crowing to rolling and was now crawling. But his antics didn't hold her, and daily she came to D-Block Park, resting between running her loads, sometimes below the heavy perfume of gardenia, and sometime between hedges of scentless star jasmine. She was mesmerized by the birds of this diminutive park. In the jungle park surrounding her home, the scale of her life and the scale of the trees were similarly large and unknowable. What she had concentrated on were the poisonous caterpillars, frogs and fire-ants marching across the paths. Then, her eyes had seen the ground below, and now she necessarily concentrated on the expanse above—and flight.



It is the late evening on the last day of June. Renu's knees wink slyly at her as she pumps them higher and higher. She holds in her a secret pride that if she lets herself she can outrace Suroma any day of the year. But today the race is not against Suroma—it is against time, and to Suroma.

Earlier that day, Suroma informed Renu that summer holidays are over in a week, and that she will have to go daily from her home to school, will have to wear daily her school uniform and not her play clothes, and the park will be a stop on her new schedule only in the evenings, and not even some evenings, since Tuesday and Thursday evenings she has to go to tennis lessons, and Mummy is also arranging for her Kathak lessons on other evenings.

It is evening on the last day of June, and Renu has been absorbing the idea that time will move forward and soon she will lose her friend. Already morning and afternoon have passed, and Suroma, who has taken to accompanying Renu on her rounds dropping off pressed clothes, has long since fulfilled this daily ritual and returned home. Renu is in the twilight park, hidden in the lower branches of their secret-club tree, absently searching for stray crumbs of gur and coconut, a treat which they keep hidden, and which provides them with an agenda—eating—for their secret-club meetings. A noise in the distance is growing nearer, and fearing its entry into her sanctuary, Renu scrambles down the tree.

She eases herself through the turnstile and sees the tail end of a group of eight or ten men, marching in the direction of A-Block. The men carry lanterns and sticks which they pump above their heads and the noise these men make is a noise of angry glee. Bystanders gather: some raggedly attired colony sweepers, and servant girls with thin hair and thin faces. Above,

in the balconies, screen doors slide open to allow housewives to lean over railings and witness the commotion. Chowkidars in their khaki uniforms lounge at the gates separating these housewives from the suddenly turbulent colony street. They wink slyly at one another—finally some excitement to break the monotony of their vigil.

Renu slides behind the gathering knots of people and hurries toward the press stand. She is likely to be scolded, but at least she will avoid getting slapped for lingering over this piece of street tamasha. Among the many lessons her uncle has imparted to her is the importance of keeping clear of trouble—especially the kind generated in the late hours by young men.

In the market, the lights have been lit against the approaching dark, and there is more noise—loud wailing of women. The women are outside the press stand's burlap awning. They take turns to enter and exit the structure, and with each circling, the wailing increases in tempo to subside again. Renu is scared because she sees no one she knows. Her didi, uncle and Jai are not among the circling women. Her feet tell her to fly back home to the temple compound where her father, she thinks, must be conducting the evening puja. But she has never made the trip home on her own and so late. She frightens herself imagining the temple empty, her father vanished as Jai, uncle and didi have.

Reluctantly, she draws closer and spotting her, the women pulse around her. "You poor, poor thing. God has spared this girl. Oh merciful God, you have spared this girl!" The women register in Renu's mind as a circle of crows. She mistakes for wings the arms they use to push her forcibly into their circle, and having hemmed her in, then to transport her into the shack. Inside, among the bundles of pressed and crumpled clothes, her didi is a bundle as well, an abject bundle, a bundle with a baby, a baby in her lap, a baby that lies still, as still as didi holds her tear-washed face. Renu understands how important it is to be still when all around crows are flapping their beastly wings and cawing and cawing. But in their caws, she hears what propels her from their midst.

She wheels to flee, her knees pumping and winking. Baby Jai is dead. He is dead, her chotu bhai, her little brother. He crawled because he is now able to crawl. And a driver, an employee of an A-Block family, backed his jeep without checking for the presence of crawling babies.

She has never been to Suroma's home before. She is not as familiar with A-Block, where Suroma lives, as she is with D-Block. Nevertheless she flies, she is sure, to Suroma's house. The driver who backed the Jeep is from A-Block, and the marching men were headed for A-Block, and that is where Suroma was headed for when she had tidily closed the door to summer and left Renu in the park. Renu flies, knowing that if she can head the men

off and reach Suroma, she will be a heroine. She will save Suroma, whose mother will be grateful because Suroma's father, as Suroma has boasted time and again, has a Jeep and employs a driver who drives Suroma in it everywhere.

A-Block is the neighbourhood Renu circumvents each morning on her way to her job. The streets are quieter than those of D-Block. There is no market here and the homes are smaller and tightly packed. All, however, have the same overhanging balconies as homes in D-Block, and today the balconies are filled with women and children. There are no chowkidars guarding these smaller homes; the husbands are yet absent and the housewives must defend themselves from the rude, young men who are shouting up at them and whose ranks have swelled considerably. Renu no longer races, but squeezes around and among the men as she tries to find Suroma's home.

The men demand that the driver be brought out. The consensus is that he is hiding behind the women and children. The women are silent, and only occasionally does one or another ask the men to leave, reassuring them that no one in A-Block drives a Jeep, that they are mistaken about the identity of the driver they seek. The men scan the numerous vehicles parked in front of these homes; among them are any number of Jeeps. But already, there is an air of something stale in the confrontation. Neither the men nor the women are convinced that there is a crisis here. Only one woman, the other women identify as a troublemaker-type, attempts from her balcony post to inject some heat into the standoff. "You people," she laughs, "think nothing of putting your babies on the street to get run over. Then you come and make demands. Is that not right?"

Renu hears it all, but really she is only concerned with finding Suroma. It is hard to read the house numbers inscribed on slate slabs and embedded in house walls because there are so many men in the way, and ducking between their hips and searching, she stumbles over the exchanged words of men and women, over their excitement and boredom, and it is with relief she finds herself once again tumbled through the turnstile and into the dark of her jungle park.

Again she runs, but the old familiar paths turn and twist under her and with great cunning steer her to the area beyond the nursery where the mali composts in a shallow pit. Here the path bumps up and gives her a push that sends her sliding under the barbed wire and into the pit, and there she stays for the night. There, her legs continue to run under her, pinned though they are between brambly branches—their motion fuelled even in the death-sleep she sleeps by the slow heat of all that molds there at the mali's behest. She runs there, in the pit, with all her might, and runs so



fast, she runs right past Suroma staring back at her from behind the broad back of the troublemaker-woman, and keeps on running past the little bier on which Jai is being carried (“*Ram nam satya hai*”), and past the old men counseling her father to make offerings to appease his first wife, past her loss and into the clear future of the morning sun, which rises and bathes her in light so she can be found.