



# The Boy with a Catapult

...when a person has a change of heart

**CONNECT** Sometimes when we are mischievous, we do things that hurt others. Tell the class about an incident where you were mischievous and hurt someone, or were hurt by someone else.

**REFLECT** When do you think a hunter becomes a protector? Think of a few situations where this can happen. How would the thoughts and feelings of a hunter be different from those of the hunted? Write them in two columns.

**IMAGINE** If you were an animal being hunted for fun and excitement, and you wanted to plead for mercy, how would you put across your request to the hunter? Write a letter or a poem appealing for mercy and a change of heart. Illustrate it.

## BEFORE YOU READ



**Bhisham Sahni** (1915–2003) was a Hindi writer, playwright and actor, most famous for his novel and television screenplay, *Tamas* (Darkness), a powerful and passionate account of the Partition of India. He was awarded the Padma Bhushan for literature in 1998 and the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship in 2002.

**The Boy with a Catapult** is taken from a rare collection of short stories, *The Best Thirteen*, published in 1983. The thirteen stories are from thirteen different languages of India. Some of the stories in the collection are *The Special Prize* (Assamese), *The Hungry Septopus* (Bengali), *Adal-Badal: The Exchange* (Gujarati) and *The Boy with a Catapult* (Hindi).



READ

Our class at school had an odd **assortment** of boys. But the oddest boy in the school was Bodh Raj. We were all afraid of him. If he pinched anyone's arm, the arm would swell up as if from snakebite. He was utterly **callous**. He would catch a wasp with his bare fingers, pull out its sting, tie a thread round it and fly it like a kite. He would pounce on a butterfly sitting on a flower and crush it between his fingers or else, stick a pin through it and pin it to his notebook.

It was said that if a scorpion stung Bodh Raj, the scorpion would fall dead. Bodh Raj's blood was believed to be so full of venom that even snakebite had no effect on him. He always had a **catapult** in his hand and was an excellent shot. His favourite targets were birds. He would stand under a tree, take aim and the next moment, bird cries would rend the air and a fluff of feathers would float down.

Or else, he would climb up a tree, take away the eggs and destroy the nest. He was **vindictive** and took pleasure in hurting others. All the boys were scared of him. Even his mother called him a *rakhasa*. His pockets bulged with strange things—a live parrot, an assortment of eggs or a prickly hedgehog. If Bodh Raj quarrelled with anyone, he would charge at him head-on like a bull or **viciously** kick and bite him. After school, we

would return home, but Bodh Raj would be off on his wanderings.

My father was given a promotion in his job and we moved into a large bungalow. It was an old-style bungalow on the **outskirts** of the city. It had brick floors, high walls, a slanting roof and a garden full of trees and shrubs. Though comfortable, it seemed rather empty and big, and being far from the city, my friends seldom came to visit me.



Brainstorm

Why did the narrator's family shift to a new house?

- assortment:** mixed collection
- callous:** insensitive
- catapult:** a device that is used to hurl stones or pebbles
- vindictive:** with the desire to hurt
- viciously:** in a violent and cruel manner
- outskirts:** a region on the boundary of a city, town, forest, etc.





The only exception was Bodh Raj. He found it a good hunting ground. The trees had many nests, monkeys roamed about and under the bushes lived a pair of mongooses. Behind the house, there was a big room where my mother stored our extra luggage. This room had become a haunt of pigeons. You could hear them cooing all day. Near the broken glass of the ventilator, there was a mynah's nest. The floor of the room was littered with feathers, bird droppings, broken eggs and bits of straw from nests.

My mother did not approve of my friendship with Bodh Raj, but she realised that I was lonely and needed company. One day, my mother said to me, 'If your friend is so fond of destroying nests, tell him to clean our storeroom. The birds have made it very filthy.' I protested, 'You said, it's cruel to destroy nests.'

'I didn't suggest he should kill the birds. He can remove the nests without harming them.' The next time Bodh Raj came, I took him to the godown. It was dark and smelly as though we had entered an animal's **lair**.

I confess I was somewhat worried. What if, true to form, Bodh Raj destroyed the nests, pulled out the birds' feathers and broke their eggs? Bodh Raj had brought his catapult. He studied the position of the nests under the roof. Near the ventilator, was the mynah's nest. I could see bits of cotton wool and rag hanging

out. Some pigeons **strutted** up and down a beam cooing to one another.

'The mynah's little ones are up there,' said Bodh Raj, aiming with his catapult.

I noticed two tiny yellow beaks peeping out of the nest.

'Look!' Bodh Raj exclaimed, 'This is a Ganga Mynah. It isn't usually found in these areas.'

'Where are the parents?' I asked.

'Must have gone in search of food. They should be back soon.'

Bodh Raj raised his catapult.

I wanted to stop him, but before I could open my mouth, there was a whizzing sound and then a loud clang as the pebble hit the iron sheet of the roof.

The tiny beaks vanished. The cooing and tittering ceased. It seemed as if all the birds had been frightened into silence. Bodh Raj let fly another pebble. This time it struck a beam. Bodh Raj was proud of his aim, but he had missed his target twice and was very angry with himself.

When the chicks peeped over the rim of the nest, Bodh Raj had a third try. This time the pebble hit the side of the nest,

**lair:** the resting place of an animal

**strutted:** walked in a very proud manner



a few straws and bits of cotton wool fell—but the nest was not **dislodged**.

Bodh Raj lifted his catapult again. Suddenly, a large shadow flitted across the room, blocking the light from the ventilator. Startled, we looked up. Gazing down at us **menacingly** was a large kite with its wings outstretched. The mynah chicks began fluttering their wings and shrieking loudly. What would the kite do?

The kite left the ventilator and perched on a **rafter**. It had folded back its wings. It shook its craggy neck, and peered to the right, and to the left. The birds' frightened cries filled the air.



'The kite has been coming here every day,' said Bodh Raj.

I realised why broken wings, straw and bits of bird flesh littered the floor. The kite must have ravaged the nest often.

Bodh Raj had not taken his eyes off the kite which was slowly moving towards the nest. The cries became shriller. I was a **bundle of nerves**. Bodh Raj raised his catapult and aimed at the kite.



### Brainstorm

What was Bhod Raj proud of?

- dislodged:** removed or forced out from a position
- menacingly:** in a threatening way
- rafter:** a beam that forms part of the framework of a roof
- bundle of nerves:** very nervous



'Don't hit the kite. It will attack you,' I shouted. But Bodh Raj paid no attention. The pebble missed the kite and hit the ceiling. The kite spread its wings wide and peered down.

'Let's get out of here,' I said, frightened.

'The kite will eat up the little ones.' This sounded rather strange coming from him. Bodh Raj aimed again. The kite left the rafter and spreading its wings, flew in a semicircle and alighted on a beam. The chicks continued to scream.

Bodh Raj handed me the catapult and some pebbles from his pocket.

'Aim at the kite. Go on hitting it. Don't let it sit down,' he instructed. Then, he ran and pulled up a table standing against the wall to the middle of the room. I didn't know how to use the catapult. I tried once, but the kite had left the beam and flown to another.

Bodh Raj brought the table right under the mynah's nest. Then he picked up a broken chair and placed it on the table. He climbed on the chair, gently lifted the nest and slowly stepped down.

'Let's get out of here,' he said, and ran towards the door. I followed. We went into the garage. It had only one door and a small window in the back wall.

'The kite can't get in here,' he said, and climbing on to a box, placed the nest on a beam.

The mynah's young had quietened down. Standing on the box, Bodh

Raj peeped into the nest. I thought he would pick them both up and put them in his pocket, as he usually did. But after looking at them for a long time he said, 'Bring some water, the chicks are thirsty. We'll put it, drop by drop, into their mouths.'

I brought a glass of water. Both the chicks, beaks open, were panting. Bodh Raj fed them with drops of water. He told me not to touch them, nor did he touch them himself.

'How will their parents know they are here?' I asked.

'They will look for them.'

We stayed in the garage for a long time.

When Bodh Raj came the next day, he had neither catapult nor pebbles. He carried a bag of seeds. We fed the mynah's young and spent hours watching their **antics**.



### Brainstorm

Why did Bodh Raj carry a bag of seeds?

**antics:** funny, playful tricks