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The Bulbul Catcher

Habib Mohana

Assistant Professor of English,
Degree College # 3,
Dera Ismail Khan,
Pakistan

His satchel bouncing on his back, Yahiya was heading home when he noticed a boy flying a bird. It was a red-bottomed bulbul bird. Yahiya slowed down to get a close-up look. The boy carried the bulbul perched on a metre-long stick with colourful thread attached round the bird's waist, and when the boy ran, the bird was on the wing, chasing the perch stick. Having a bulbul as a pet was such fun that it was every kid's dream. The proud owners flaunted their bulbuls wherever they went. The only places off-limits for bulbuls were mosque and school.

Once a bulbul had spent a couple of weeks with its owner, the owner could detach the thread from the stick, then when the owner moved the stick, the bulbul would reflexively become airborne and continue to chase its perch, the loose thread dangling down its belly like a broken antenna.

Upon reaching home, Yahiya asked his father to buy him a bulbul.

"This is a cruel practice! The bulbuls feel stressed in captivity," his father lectured.

Then Yahiya approached his mother for the money to buy a bulbul but she said she did not have any.

Yahiya bawled and rolled about the beaten-earth courtyard, but no one listened to his pleas.

Next day at school — Yahiya was in grade 4 — the students read and chanted a poem about a bulbul. The poem was lavishly illustrated with pictures of bulbuls, plants and flowers. Yahiya pictured himself flying with the red-bottomed bulbuls over the village green, pictured himself warbling, warbling like any other bulbul, flitting in the air and perching on branches.

Next morning Yahiya shouldered his schoolbag, took half a rupee from his mother and left. But instead of going to school, he went to his friend Haron's house. They hid their schoolbags under wheat chaff in the barn there and darted towards the village orchards, stopping only to buy some dried date fruits from a shop along the way. The twosome climbed over the five-barred gate of the orchard and moved stealthily to a clump of guava trees that was famed for being a

favorite haunt of the bulbuls. This orchard belonged to an old, hunchbacked neighbour who mostly kept to his adobe hut and was unaware of the boys encroaching upon his property.

The orchard was alive with the chirping of birds. The two boys slumped down in a grassy spot by the guava clump. They removed the stones from the dates, chewed the pulp into a stiff paste, rolled it into a small ball and stuck it on the tip of a stick which they planted in an old gnarly guava tree. Then they hid behind some bushes. After some time a pair of bulbuls landed on the stick and fell to pecking at the date-pulp lollipop, the two friends peering at the birds between the lacy branches all the while. Stomachs full, the bulbuls flew away. But in no time another pair arrived and found the feast on the stick.

When hunger pinched their own tummies, the truants remembered the date fruits in their pockets. They devoured them, washing them down with cool water from a nearby stream overhung by gigantic mulberry trees. Towards noon, they set off towards their homes. On the way they bumped into a few of their class fellows returning from school.

“The teacher was furious at you. Tomorrow he’ll tan your hide,” they cried, gesticulating wildly. They got malicious pleasure from the thought of the teacher spanking the two truants. Had it been possible for them at that moment they themselves would have dragged the truants off to the schoolmaster’s house.

Yahiya picked up his satchel from Haron’s house and sprinted home. When he reached home his mother already knew about his truancy and she would not let him touch his lunch. To avoid his father, he bolted for the street.

He wandered the streets, nervously waiting for dark.

Evening prayers had finished when like a wary cat he returned to his house. His father was dining on unleavened chapattis soaked in a spicy curry. Yahiya tried to sneak past when his father spotted him. The old man pushed his meal aside and flew at his son, thrashing him. When the beating session was over, his mother brought Yahiya water and asked him to wash his face but he kicked over the water pot. She asked him to move onto his charpoy cot but he sat glued to his place on the ground, sobbing. She brought him dinner on a platter but he would not eat.

Yahiya’s sobs subsided in bed. With his father his account had been settled but the fear of the schoolteacher lurked in his heart. In his mind Yahiya heard the swish of the flexile green cane that the teacher loved to land powerfully on truant students’ rear-ends.

Next morning Yahiya was in school and his eyes were locked on the cane propped against the teacher's rickety chair. But it had slipped out of the teacher's mind that Yahiya was absent yesterday.

In the afternoon the herds of cows were returning from the pastures. Yahiya and Haron plucked hairs from the tails of cows. They sat down in the street and twisted the tough hairs into loops to trap bulbuls.

On Sunday the boys set up the snares right on the date pulp bait they planted on the gnarly guava tree. When the bulbul is pecking at the soft date lollipop, there are chances that its leg, neck or wing will get entangled in the loop. The boys hid themselves in the droopy bushes and waited for the bulbuls to begin snacking on the sticky sweet. After a long wait, an unwary pair landed and started pecking at the date paste. The boys held their breath. Beads of sweat started forming on the tip of their noses. When the birds were gorged, the female flew away without a hitch but when her companion flapped its wings to fly, its right leg got entangled in a loop snare. The jolt sent it swinging upside down. A scream of terror escaped its beak while at the same time a slushy dropping hit the ground like a blob of toothpaste. The boys scrambled to get the bird free, while the bird screeched, flapped its wings, and bit at their hands. Haron carefully loosened the hair loop around its leg and had the bird in his fist. He could feel the wild pounding of its tiny heart. The boys were euphoric.

"I will keep this bulbul. Tomorrow we will catch another one and that will be yours," Haron promised.

Haron pulled a cord from his pocket and asked Yahiya to hold the bulbul's wings out of the way. Deftly he tied one end of the cord around the bird's waist and saw to it that it was not too tight. He attached the other end to a small wooden rod. He tried to make the bird perch on the rod but the bird would not co-operate — it had stiffened its claws. Eventually, at last, the bird conceded defeat and curled its claws around the stick. It looked misshapen, exhausted and disoriented.

Yahiya looked at Haron's bird with envy.

Haron closed all the remaining loop traps. "We have to do so, otherwise the birds would get ensnared and kill themselves by hanging," he explained.

Next day after school, the two boys returned to the guava tree. They righted the nooses, concealed themselves in the bushes and waited for the birds to alight on the bait and drive themselves into the snares. But the birds, suspicious, would not even look towards the bait. Yahiya's wish of having a bulbul did not get fulfilled that day.

The next day was a holiday. Fearing that Haron might not give him the bulbul if they caught any, Yahiya went to the orchard alone. The deep silence and long dark shadows stirred fear in his heart but he toughened himself up against his fear. He righted the loop-snares, squatted down in the usual lair but once again the bulbuls gave the bait a wide berth. At lunchtime Yahiya left for home without closing the snares shut.

The day after that, the two friends skipped school and went to the hunting ground. They were so engrossed in their talk about bulbuls that they hardly recognized when they had reached the guava clump. Then they stood aghast because on the guava tree they saw a white-cheeked bulbul hanging dead by the neck.

Haron brought it out of its noose: the bird was stiff and hard as a stuffed animal. He placed it on the palm of his hand and gazed at it from different angles then angrily hurled it into the grass. "You killed it, you bloody fool!" he flared at Yahiya. "It died because of you. You should have closed the snares shut."

Haron thundered out of the orchard.

Yahiya picked up the dead bird and placed it on his palm. He wished there was a magic, a panacea that could bring it back to life. Tearfully he stared into the stiff glassy eyes of the dead bird. A flight of angry bulbuls hovered over his head and they hooted and screeched like nightjars. He felt as if the tall grass would wrap its stalks around him and squeeze him to death. He stuffed the dead bird in his pocket and hightailed it out of there.

In the evening his father spanked him for truanting but Yahiya did not feel the pain — he was thinking about the pain the bulbul must have felt when it was hanging upside down from the stick. He went to bed. When he heard his father snoring, he pulled out the dead bulbul from his pocket and placed it on his chest. He stroked its little head with his forefinger, smoothed its tail-quills, then gently pressed its beak as one presses a baby's nose. He was caressing its back when he fell asleep.

That night he dreamt that the dead bulbul had become alive and had flown to his house on its own accord and it perched on his shoulder when he was going to school, and he felt so good. His schoolmates wanted to stroke the bird but Yahiya would not let them have this privilege.

In the morning when Yahiya woke up, he fumbled for his bird but it was missing. He looked under his pillow and under the charpoy but it was not there either.

“Looks like the doing of the cat,” his mother said, pointing to the feathers that lay scattered in the courtyard.

His mother placed his breakfast before him. But instead of eating Yahiya searched the rooms for the cat to punish it. He climbed up on the roof hoping to catch the cat catnapping there.

“You are a fool, you think the cat is waiting for you to be caught and walloped? Come down and eat your breakfast, you are getting late for school,” his mother shouted.

Reluctantly he sat down to eat his breakfast. But it seemed to have a weird smell. He broke a piece of paratha bread and put it in his mouth. He felt as if he was chewing a ball of feathers. His stomach heaved. Pushing the breakfast aside he stumbled towards the bathroom.