

Name: _____ Class: _____

A Cobra in the Garden

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Mahani Zubaidy Gunnell has written for Highlights. In this text, Gunnell discusses her time living in Borneo, a large island of the Southeast Asian country Indonesia, and the cobra that lived in her garden there. As you read, take notes on how Gunnell feels about the cobra in her garden.

- [1] From the sky, parts of Borneo look like the top of a giant broccoli. Much of the island is tropical rain forest. It's the world's third largest island, and it lies in Southeast Asia, on the equator.

I lived on Borneo in a small town called Miri. My home was at the edge of a forest, and I was fortunate¹ to have many wild animals visit my backyard.

I should say that it was I who was the visitor. I lived on land that was once home to many kinds of wildlife. I was glad that some of the animals stayed while others continued to pass by in their search for food.



"The cobra in the garden" by Dennis Bond is used with permission.

A troop of long-tailed macaques (muh-KAKS) visited most mornings and afternoons. I always wished for them to leave soon. Macaques are monkeys with shorter faces and smaller bodies than those of African baboons. They live in groups of about twenty animals led by a strong male. Long-tailed macaques can be aggressive, so I made sure that our trash cans were securely covered and that no food was displayed in the house.

- [5] In the yard, the monkeys were a joy to watch. They browsed on bamboo shoots and young leaves and ate wild figs from a fig tree in the garden. Each time, the macaques stayed for about twenty minutes.

During the first week in our home, I found a clutch² of leathery eggs crumpled and empty in a bed of soft dirt under the bamboo grove. I was told they were the eggs of a black spitting cobra. The snake was common in the area. Poison from its bite can kill a person in one to six hours, and the snake can squirt venom with accuracy for up to eight feet, aiming at the eyes.

However, a cobra makes its living by eating small animals such as rats and mice. It strikes at humans and other large animals only in self-defense. We could live with our cobra by being careful not to surprise or scare it.

1. **Fortunate** (*adjective*): lucky
2. a group of eggs

As a family, my husband and I and our three children thought of ways to be on the lookout, especially when we stepped into the yard. We made up chants and rhymes that we recited aloud or in our hearts so that we were alert and aware whenever we set foot outdoors. One went:

Cobra, cobra, are you there?

Please don't fall onto my hair.

One afternoon, the cobra surprised me. All six feet of it was stretched on the lawn. Its skin was jet-black. It glistened³ in the sun and was startling against the green grass.

- [10] I froze, scarcely daring to breathe. I was about to place one foot back carefully when the cobra began to slither away from me. In its haste,⁴ the cobra bumped against a stone. It raised its head and for one moment spread its infamous⁵ hood. As scared as I was, I could not help noticing how magnificent it looked.

We saw her several more times in the garden. (Because of the eggs, we decided it was a female.) That part of the yard became known as her sunning spot.

It turned out that it was not her only favorite place. One Sunday afternoon we had friends over for lunch. We had just finished eating, and a few of us were sitting on the veranda⁶ when one of the guests saw the cobra.

The snake was on a branch of a frangipani tree, less than ten feet from where we were sipping tea. The tree was in full bloom, covered in pink blossoms whose honey-sweet perfume filled our home.

Everyone came out to see the cobra, and chairs were arranged as if for a concert. The cobra lay still. Only through a pair of binoculars could we see her breathing. She seemed to enjoy all the attention.

- [15] She remained still as we ate ice cream, took turns with the binoculars, and read out loud from books on poisonous snakes of Asia. As soon as it seemed we were losing interest, she slinked majestically⁷ along the branches toward an oil-palm tree, whose fronds extended close-by.

We were awed⁸ by her beauty. As we stared openmouthed at her grace, she missed a branch and fell splat! to the ground. We burst out laughing as the cobra recovered and wriggled up the palm tree.

I joked with my friends that it was funny the way the cobra was showing off so much that it got a little too sure of itself and fell. My friend replied that snakes probably do not think like humans.

By then, we had known the cobra for more than a year. Sometimes it felt as if there was not a moment I did not think of the cobra.

3. **Glisten (verb):** to shine or glitter

4. **Haste (noun):** speed or hurry, often made with urgency

5. **Infamous (adjective):** well known for some bad quality

6. a roofed porch

7. **Majestic (adjective):** having or showing impressive beauty or dignity

8. **Awe (noun):** a feeling of respect and wonder

In fact, I developed the habit of imagining the snake's thoughts. Then I realized that a snake would naturally stay near the oil-palm tree. Its nutty palm kernels⁹ are a rich source of food for mice and squirrels, and therefore the tree was a great place for a cobra: small mammals are the cobra's favorite meal. I had often raked under the frangipani tree, which stood next to the oil palm, and I had not once realized that the cobra might have been over my head on its branches!

- [20] We shared the garden with the black spitting cobra for the rest of our stay and were sad indeed when we had to move and leave the island of Borneo.

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9. the edible seeds from the fruit produced by the oil-palm tree

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement expresses the central idea of the text?
 - A. Gunnell grew to respect and appreciate a part of nature that she had feared at first.
 - B. The beautiful yard around Gunnell's home taught her to better appreciate nature.
 - C. The cobra taught Gunnell that animals are often deadlier than they originally appear.
 - D. Gunnell learned that she really should fear wildlife and the things she couldn't control.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "In the yard, the monkeys were a joy to watch. They browsed on bamboo shoots and young leaves and ate wild figs from a fig tree in the garden." (Paragraph 5)
 - B. "However, a cobra makes its living by eating small animals such as rats and mice. It strikes at humans and other large animals only in self-defense." (Paragraph 7)
 - C. "It raised its head and for one moment spread its infamous hood. As scared as I was, I could not help noticing how magnificent it looked." (Paragraph 10)
 - D. "I had often raked under the frangipani tree, which stood next to the oil palm, and I had not once realized that the cobra might have been over my head on its branches!" (Paragraph 19)

3. PART A: Which statement best describes the relationship between the woman and the cobra?
 - A. The woman fears the cobra but the cobra is unafraid of the woman.
 - B. The woman and the cobra avoid each other as much as possible.
 - C. The woman admires the cobra while the cobra is unaffected by the woman.
 - D. The woman admires the cobra while the cobra really dislikes the woman.

4. PART B: Which TWO quotes from the text best support the answer to Part A?
 - A. "It strikes at humans and other large animals only in self-defense. We could live with our cobra by being careful not to surprise or scare it." (Paragraph 7)
 - B. "As a family, my husband and I and our three children thought of ways to be on the lookout, especially when we stepped into the yard." (Paragraph 8)
 - C. "One Afternoon the cobra surprised me." (Paragraph 9)
 - D. "In its haste, the cobra bumped against a stone. It raised its head and for one moment spread its infamous hood." (Paragraph 10)
 - E. "The snake was on a branch of a frangipani tree, less than ten feet from where we were sipping tea." (paragraph 13)
 - F. "We were awed by her beauty." (Paragraph 16)

5. How do paragraphs 16-18 contribute to the development of ideas in the text?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. What would you do if you encountered a dangerous animal? How would you treat it? How would you make sure you're safe around it?
2. In this story, the author discusses how the cobra is dangerous to humans. Do you think that the cobra is a bigger threat to humans, or that humans are a bigger threat to the cobra? How does the text explore how animals and humans can live together in nature?
3. In what ways does Gunnel find the cobra beautiful in the text? How is the snake's beauty different than what we typically find to be beautiful?