

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Terror

By Junot Díaz
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Junot Díaz is a Dominican American writer, creative writing professor, and editor. Díaz's work often focuses on the experience of immigrants. In this text, Díaz recounts his experiences with fear after getting beat-up as an adolescent. As you read, take notes on how Díaz describes fear.

[1] I got jumped at a pretty bad time in my life. Not that there's ever a good time.

What I mean is that I was already deep in the vulnerability matrix.¹ I had just entered seventh grade, was at peak adolescent craziness and, to make matters worse, was dealing with a new middle school whose dreary² white middle-class bigotry³ was cutting the heart out of me. I wasn't two periods into my first day before a classmate called me a "sand n—,"⁴ as if it were no big deal. Someone else asked me if my family ate dogs every day or only once in a while. By my third month, that school had me feeling like the poorest, ugliest immigrant freak in the universe.



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My home life was equally trying.⁵ My father abandoned the family the year before, plunging our household into poverty. No sooner than that happened, my brother, who was one year older and my best friend and protector, was found to have leukemia,⁶ the kind that in those days had a real nasty habit of killing you. One day he was sprawled on our front stoop in London Terrace holding court, and the next he was up in Newark, 40 pounds lighter and barely able to piss under his own power, looking as if he were one bad cold away from the grave.

I didn't know what to do with myself. I tried to be agreeable, to make friends, but that didn't work so hot; mostly I just slouched in my seat, hating my clothes and my glasses and my face. Sometimes I wrote my brother letters. Made it sound as though I were having a great time at school — a ball.

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1. Here, vulnerability matrix most likely describes an individual's risk of being attacked or getting hurt.
 2. **Dreary (adjective):** causing unhappiness or sad feelings
 3. **Bigotry (noun):** stubborn prejudice against other people or ideas
 4. a derogatory term for someone of Middle Eastern descent
 5. **Trying (adjective):** hard to bear or put up with
 6. a type of cancer that affects the blood and bone marrow

[5] And then came the beat-down. Not at school, as I would have expected, but on the other side of the neighborhood. At the hands and feet of these three brothers I dimly knew. The youngest was my age, and on the day in question we had a spat⁷ over something — I can't remember what. I do remember pushing him down hard onto the sidewalk and laughing about it, and the kid running off in tears, swearing he was going to kill me. Then the scene in my head jumps, and the next thing I know, the kid comes back with his two older brothers, and I'm getting my face punched in. The older brothers held me down and let the younger brother punch me all he wanted. I cried out for my brother, but he was in Beth Israel Hospital, saving no one. I remember one of the older ones saying, "Hit him in the teeth."

As these things go, it wasn't too bad. I didn't actually lose any teeth or break any limbs or misplace an eye. Afterward, I even managed to limp home. My mother was at the hospital, so no one noticed that I had gotten stomped. Even took my blackened eye to classes the next day, but because my assailants attended another school, I didn't have to tell the truth. I said, "It happened in karate."

My first real beat-down, and I was furious and ashamed, but above all else I was afraid. Afraid of my assailants. Afraid they would corner me again. Afraid of a second beat-down. Afraid and afraid and afraid. Eventually the bruises and the rage faded, but not the fear. The fear remained. An awful withering dread that coiled around my bowels⁸ — that followed me into my dreams. ("Hit him in the teeth.") I guess I should have told someone, but I was too humiliated. And besides, my No.1 confidant,⁹ my brother, wasn't available.

So I locked up the whole miserable affair deep inside. I thought that would help, but avoidance only seemed to give it more strength.

Without even thinking about it, I started doing everything I could to duck the brothers. I shunned¹⁰ their part of the neighborhood. I started looking around buildings to make sure the coast was clear. I stayed in the apartment a lot more, reading three, four books a week. And whenever I saw the brothers, together or individually — in a car, on a bike, on foot — the fear would spike through me so powerfully that I felt as though I was going to lose my mind. In *Dune*,¹¹ a novel I adored in those days, Frank Herbert observed that "Fear is the mind-killer," and let me tell you, my man knows of what he speaks. When the brothers appeared, I couldn't think for nothing. I would drop whatever I was doing and get away, and it was only later, after I calmed down, that I would realize what I had done.

[10] The brothers didn't pursue me. They would jeer¹² at me and occasionally throw rocks, but even if they weren't chasing me in the flesh, they sure were chasing me in spirit. After these encounters, I would be a mess for days: depressed, irritable, hypervigilant,¹³ ashamed. I hated these brothers from the bottom of my heart, but even more than them, I hated myself for my cowardice.

Before that attack, I had felt fear plenty of times — which poor immigrant kid hasn't? — but after my beating, I became afraid. And at any age, that is a dismal¹⁴ place to be.

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7. a disagreement
 8. the intestines
 9. **Confidant (noun):** a close friend with whom one shares personal secrets
 10. **Shun (verb):** to avoid something (or someone) out of fear or dislike
 11. a science fiction novel set in the future amongst an interstellar society
 12. **Jeer (verb):** to make rude and mocking remarks
 13. always watching for signs of danger
 14. **Dismal (adjective):** showing or causing sadness; very bad or poor

Given all the other c—¹⁵ I was facing, my adolescence was never going to win any awards. But sometimes I like to think that if that beat-down didn't happen, I might have had an easier time of it. Maybe a whole bunch of other awfulness would not have happened. But who can really know? In the end, the fear became another burden I had to shoulder — like having a sick brother or brown skin in a white school.

Took me until I was a sophomore in high school — yes, that long — before I finally found it in me to start facing my terror. By then, my older brother was in remission¹⁶ and wearing a wig to hide his baldness. Maybe his improbable survival was what gave me courage, or maybe it was all the Robert Cormier I was reading — his young heroes were always asking themselves, “Do I dare disturb the universe?” before ultimately deciding that yes, they did dare. Whatever it was, one day I found myself fleeing from a sighting of the brothers, and suddenly I was brought up short by an appalling¹⁷ vision: me running away forever.

I forced myself to stop. I forced myself to turn toward them, and it felt as if the whole world was turning with me. I couldn't make myself walk toward them, I could barely even look at them, so I settled for standing still. As the brothers approached, the ground started tilting out from under me. One of them scowled.

[15] And then, without a word, they walked past.

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15. The author included a curse word here for emphasis.
16. a period in the course of a disease when symptoms become less severe
17. **Appalling** (*adjective*): causing shock, disgust, or alarm

Text-Dependent Questions

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

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the main idea of the text?
 - A. Fear tormented and controlled Díaz until he no longer allowed it to.
 - B. Fear is the most dangerous weapon bullies have against someone who is different.
 - C. Fear allowed Díaz to prepare for future altercations with the brothers.
 - D. Fear never proves to be a useful or productive feeling.

2. PART B: Which section from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "So I locked up the whole miserable affair deep inside. I thought that would help, but avoidance only seemed to give it more strength." (Paragraph 8)
 - B. "They would jeer at me and occasionally throw rocks, but even if they weren't chasing me in the flesh, they sure were chasing me in spirit." (Paragraph 10)
 - C. "But sometimes I like to think that if that beat-down didn't happen, I might have had an easier time of it." (Paragraph 12)
 - D. "Took me until I was a sophomore in high school — yes, that long — before I finally found it in me to start facing my terror." (Paragraph 13)

3. PART A: How does Díaz describe fear in paragraph 7?
 - A. He compares it to a ghost.
 - B. He depicts it as a constant presence.
 - C. He presents it as a deadly cancer.
 - D. He personifies it as the brothers.

4. PART B: Which detail from paragraph 7 best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "My first real beat-down, and I was furious and ashamed, but above all else I was afraid."
 - B. "Afraid of my assailants. Afraid they would corner me again."
 - C. "An awful withering dread that coiled around my bowels — that followed me into my dreams."
 - D. "I guess I should have told someone, but I was too humiliated."

5. How does his brother's cancer diagnosis affect Díaz and his ability to cope with the beat-down?
