

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Terror

By Junot Díaz
2015

*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. **Skill Focus:** In this lesson, you'll practice identifying an author's central idea and how they support it. This means paying attention to the evidence they give for their central idea and the details they provide to clarify it. As you read, take note of the details that reveal the author's "terror" and how he reacts to it.*

[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 **dreary** white middle-class bigotry² was cutting the heart out of me. I wasn't two periods into my first day before a classmate called me a "sand n—,"³ 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.⁴ 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,⁵ 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.

1. describes a situation wherein a person has a high risk of emotional injury
2. **Bigotry (noun):** unfair or negative opinions about a group of people based on traits such as religion, ethnicity, gender, etc.
3. a derogatory term for someone of Middle Eastern descent
4. **Trying (adjective):** hard to bear or put up with
5. 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 spat⁶ 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 bowels⁷ — 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,⁸ my brother, wasn't available.

So I locked up the whole miserable affair deep inside. I thought that would help, but avoidance⁹ 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.

6. a disagreement

7. the intestines

8. **Confidant (noun):** a close friend with whom one shares personal secrets

9. **Avoidance (noun):** a state of keeping away from or not doing something

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 crap 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 remission¹⁵ and wearing a wig to hide his baldness. Maybe his improbable¹⁶ survival was what gave me courage, or maybe it was all the Robert Cormier¹⁷ 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 appalling¹⁸ 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. refers to a cancer patient's status when their symptoms have decreased or the cancer has stopped growing

16. **Improbable (adjective):** not likely to happen or come true

17. well-known author of young adult fiction; famous for *The Chocolate War*, *I am the Cheese*, and *After the First Death*

18. **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. Which of the following identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. Accepting fear showed Diaz how dangerous it is to be different.
 - B. Fear tormented and controlled Díaz until he no longer allowed it to.
 - C. Fear allowed Díaz to prepare for future struggles with the brothers.
 - D. Accepting fear allowed Diaz to accept being controlled by his enemies.

2. What is the best meaning of the word “assailants” as it is used in paragraph 6?
 - A. companions
 - B. neighbors
 - C. attackers
 - D. allies

3. Which piece of evidence from paragraph 7 best reveals Diaz’s constant fear?
 - 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.”

4. In paragraph 10, the author says, “Even if they weren’t chasing me in the flesh, they sure were chasing me in spirit.” What does the speaker mean by this?
 - A. He felt afraid even when the brothers were not around.
 - B. He was worried because the brothers were faster than he was.
 - C. He was confused because the brothers did not physically want to hurt him.
 - D. He felt concerned when he realized that the brothers were following him home.

5. How does the author feel about himself when he says, “I hated these brothers from the bottom of my heart, but even more than them, I hated myself for my cowardice”? (Paragraph 10)
 - A. He feels confident.
 - B. He feels proud.
 - C. He feels weak.
 - D. He feels alone.

6. What inspired Diaz to stop running away? (Paragraph 13)
 - A. learning from his brother how to fight back
 - B. knowing he is equally matched to fight the brothers
 - C. reading a book about how to get even with enemies
 - D. reading stories of others who courageously faced frightening things

7. Which piece of evidence best reveals the idea that facing a fear requires determination?
- A. "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)
 - B. "Whatever it was, one day I found myself fleeing from a sighting of the brothers, and suddenly I was brought up short by an appalling vision: me running away forever." (Paragraph 13)
 - C. "I couldn't make myself walk toward them, I could barely even look at them, so I settled for standing still." (Paragraph 14)
 - D. "And then, without a word, they walked past." (Paragraph 15)

8. Summarize the text in 4-5 sentences.

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. How did Díaz allow his fear of the brothers to control his actions? When have you witnessed or experienced the power of fear? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, media, or history in your answer.
2. What does it mean to be brave? What motivates people to be brave? How did Díaz finally confront his fears, and what was the result? Do you think Díaz acted bravely? Why?
3. What does it mean to feel alone? How did Díaz's feelings of fear exaggerate his feelings of loneliness? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, media, or history in your answer.