

Afraid of?

Aubrey Roemmich

"It's all nonsense. It's only nonsense. I'm not afraid of the rain. I am not afraid of the rain.

Oh, oh, God, I wish I wasn't."

– Ernest Hemingway, From *A Farewell to Arms*

—I have never been brave. I'm far too nervous to be brave. I do not even have the courage to acknowledge the things I really fear. Instead, I have spent my entire life hiding behind superficial fears and excuses. As a child, I always felt things deeply. I feared failure, loneliness. Before I could even articulate these anxieties, I was contemplating my own worth in comparison to the people and events around me. How then does a child tell her mother that she is not afraid of the monkey bars, but she's afraid that she will fail at them while all her classmates don't have an issue crossing the rungs?

She doesn't. She simply says, "I'm afraid of heights."

"What are you afraid of?"

"Spiders."

—I'm not sure when I decided that spiders and bugs were so scary. They just always have been. Maybe it's from watching my mom make my dad kill all the bugs in the house. Maybe it's from the giant barn spiders that used to make webs above our front door. But they always made me feel small, helpless, vulnerable. I hate feeling vulnerable. The creeping, crawling feeling moves up my spine, wrapping my chest in constricting webs of weakness. I cannot show you my weakness in fear you will find it makes me ugly. I am independent, stable. My knees should not shake over something so small. A bug should not make me feel weak.

"I've always been afraid of snakes."

"Now that I think of it, I've always been wary of large animals."

—When I was in elementary school, my friend and I walked our neighborhood attempting to sell Girl Scout Cookies. Our neighborhood was nice and safe. The perfect place to raise a family with a white picket fence and a couple of dogs. Family friendly dogs were a staple of my childhood, along with my fear of any animal on four legs with sharp teeth. Two little girls, their hair in ponytails, with scuffed knees, denim shorts, and five-dollar Old Navy flip-flops, walk up and down driveways holding a clipboard and loose change. Parents answer doors, kids say hi, and friendly dogs are held by their collars—until one house with no one home and a dog lounging on the porch. I saw his leg twitch, but that seemed insignificant till after. As my friend rang the doorbell, the dog jumped up, snapping its teeth and lunging for our arms and legs. We ran, but I ran faster. No one was hurt, yet I couldn't stop shaking for the rest of the day. I don't like the unpredictable nature of animals. I don't like the wild lurking in the shadow of their minds.

"They only bother me when I'm walking alone."

"Yeah, walking alone makes me nervous in general."

—I actually really enjoy walking alone. It's the most peaceful part of my day. I like going on walks in the morning when the sun is waking up. The fresh air in my lungs and the blood running through my legs revives my spirit, but it's not safe. As a girl it's not safe to walk alone. One of the essential parts of being a girl is being taught to be afraid: park by lights, don't travel alone, go to the bathroom in groups, keep your location on so your friends can find you, ask a man to accompany you to your car, door, building. People scoff and say it's paranoia, but I can't enjoy walking alone when men follow too closely. I can't enjoy walking alone when my sisters whisper, "Be careful or you won't make it home."

"Especially at night!"

"Now that you say that, I've never really liked the dark."

—My childhood home had a basement and a “basement” basement. The basement’s windows sat on the ground (perfect to climb in and out of). The basement was nice, finished, but the “basement” basement was unfinished. The floor was cold concrete, the skeleton walls created a see-through maze resembling a cage, and the single window was trapped by the window well (home to all sorts of eight-legged devils). The worst part of it all was the ever-present darkness fought back by a single exposed lightbulb. When my little sister was born, my room was moved to the basement. Every night I hid in bed waiting for the darkness of the “basement” basement to creep up the stairs to my room and swallow me. Darkness, I’ve come to realize, is the ultimate embodiment of the unknown. My parents (and a few cruel kids as well) used to joke that I was a know-it-all, but the thing is, I don’t know it all, and that scares me. I don’t know what’s in the dark. I don’t know what’s not known. The uncertainty of life, the darkness eats away at me. When I face this dark abyss, I’m seven years old again hiding in my bed as the darkness gnaws at my bones.

“Honestly I’d live in the dark if it meant I never have to speak in front of people again.”

“I’d rather do that than ever take another math test.”

—I’m smart, I know I am. But if someone even asks me to complete simple addition, I swear my brain melts. I took an economics class, and I understood the concepts, but I simply could not get my brain to wrap around the graphs and calculations. The thing is, I should have understood fine. The math hardly exceeded a high school level. My one claim to fame is good grades, and that class made me feel stupid. The worst feeling in the world is feeling stupid, inadequate. I hated that economics class, but I spent the most time on it because I had to. C’s may get degrees, but C’s don’t get into law school. When I was in fourth grade, I got a C on a spelling test. I remember being upset about it, and my teacher comforted me by saying, “It’s okay, C’s are average.” When I got home that night, I comforted my mom by saying the same thing. She responded, “You are not average, and I never want to see another

C again." Of course, as a fourth grader I internalized this to mean that the only way I can please my parents is by being perfect. If I'm not smart, then I'm not anything, and of course I know none of this is true and my worth as a human is not defined by academic success and I work myself into a panic over simple things like one bad economics grade and at the end of my life I will probably regret how much time I spent on this class but the point still stands: there is nothing more nauseating than simply not understanding.

"What's your greatest fear?"

"Deep water."

—Murky depths swirling underneath me have always made me nervous. I've been told that drowning is a peaceful way to die, but here's the thing: it's not the act of drowning that makes me wary of deep water, but rather the untouchableness of it. We won't ever really know what's down there, what's hiding, what it's capable of. Often, I feel like my mind is a swirling torrent of insanity. What am I capable of? What is my mind capable of? Do I really want to delve into the waves of my own unconscious? At least at the lake there is hope of someone saving me. Life preservers are there in abundance. Who will save me from myself? I can save myself from everything else, but not the darkness of my own mind. Our minds are powerful, and too often they are cruel. Yet there is no escaping the electrical impulses that shape my psyche. At the end of the day, the thing that scares me the most is myself.

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