

Is Fear the Hunter, Or Am I?

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College:

You are always on the precipice. It's as though you are clinging to the cold steel rungs of an infinite ladder suspended vertically in space. Above you the ladder stretches far beyond, swaying in an altitude wind. Your stomach recoils at the thought of continuing. Sweat drips down your back. Below, scuttling quickly up rung after rung, is something you cannot identify. The only thing you are certain of is that you can't let it catch you, and so you are left with only the option of conquering what juts into the unknown.

You can't just sit in limbo.

Up is bad, but so is down.

You swallow hard and begin to claw your way forward.

4th Grade:

You stand on the bright stage, facing an auditorium crowded with spectators. You are slightly aware of the fact that your sparkly red dress probably looks pretty good under the spotlights, but you are even more aware of the pressures swiftly mounting.

This was, after all, Battle of the Books Trivia.

You have crammed your head full of texts for this, and carried that baggage onto the stage. Now you are ready to rattle off obscure facts at the click of a buzzer.

Your 9 year old stomach churns as you mentally shuffle through an index of book titles, authors, details. You aren't quite sure where the anxiety is coming from, or even what anxiety is.

Either way, you think you shouldn't be feeling sick—because you love books, you know you do.

So why the nausea?

And the feeling doesn't go away as applause crashes down around your ears, as you hear some relieved team member sigh in relief: "Chloe's got it."

If anything, you're the one that's relieved when the night is over.

But you still automatically begin to plan for the next round.

4th Grade Summer:

You do your best to spread your towel evenly across the dirt, so you don't get your thrifted corduroy shorts dirty.

Heavy southern sunlight filters through the leaves of the bush you like to read behind, and speckles the brick behind you.

Eager, you open *Little Women* to the spot you left off at. It does not take long for the world around to dissipate, and the world within the pages to suck you in.

You are carried across London, Paris, and Rome as Amy March makes her world tour. You imagine yourself there, dressed in her clothes and admiring paintings and attending balls.

One day- you tell yourself-you'll do that.

But for now, reality stays so peacefully distant.

7th Grade:

You find yourself desperately wishing that you had taken that stupid ribbon out of your hair as you stand next to your final competitor, facing the rows of kids you have spelled down.

It's been so many hours, so many words and so many letters.

You worked so hard for this moment.

The room waits with bated breath as the moderator pulls another card for the girl next to you: "Umami."
"U-M-A-M-I."

You are unreasonably annoyed; that's an easy word for this late in the game.

In fact, you are so annoyed by this that you don't remember what exactly the word was that brought you down.

You lose the spelling bee to the word "umami." That 1st prize trophy is not yours, but you also find that you don't particularly care, because now the weeks of practice and anxiety are behind you.

This relief does not stop you from signing up for the middle school mock trial competition in two months. (You win this, by the way).

College:

People will tell you you're so impressive, you're so brave. But is it bravery if you're only running from something?

High School:

Through a series of random events you find yourself trying out for your high school's mock trial team.

You make varsity as a sophomore, which you chalk up to the prior experience you had previously punished yourself with in middle school. While at first you believe you have earned this placement, you soon begin to think that some kind of wild mistake has been made.

These kids are smarter than you, sharper than you, harder than you.

You write arguments and study facts with the acute fear of someone being hunted for sport.

You dread every competition, sitting awake the entire night before each one as you mentally prepare for every kind of objection battle and wily witness.

You get pretty badly beaten, more than once—but for some reason you can't explain, you keep going.

As you begin to win and gather compliments, a large part of you refuses to accept them.

"They're just being nice," you think to yourself.

Yes, the Colorado Bar Association was just being nice.

You think maybe you have found your calling.

After the last round you ever compete in, you hang up your blazer and find tears in your eyes. You have a hard time telling if they're tears of sadness, or tears of liberation.

College:

"Do I even like this?" is a question often repeated amongst your friends as you rile each other up on a semi-weekly basis.

"For all I know, I could go and hate it," your friend says, making a point she's established countless times before.

"Sometimes I sit back and think about the fact that I could actually enjoy my life," another adds.

Around and around you chase each other, until heart rates spike and palms sweat. Eventually, someone will gather the courage to speak the inevitable truth: "You know, none of us have to do this."

Courage is required to say this because, after a moment of drawn out silence, everyone will laugh. The person who spoke will feel ashamed for even suggesting an alternative.

"Yeah, right," you say.

College:

You feel as though you are always on the precipice. Too many times, you have looked out the window at the students lying on patches of sun-warmed grass and envisioned trading places with them.

Life does not need to be a constant bloody battle for the next thing. You know this. So why do you keep sharpening your weapon and darting into the fray?

You know that another person is nestled inside of you, one that is content to sit quietly, read her books, and take the days as they come. Sometimes, when you are so tired and worn down, she begs to take over. On occasion you let her, and for that period you are arguably a much better person.

College Summer:

The light is warm and sound washes over you in soft brown waves, even as the cavernous ceiling soars high above.

With so much time on your hands, you have taken to walking to one of your preferred places in London, the Victoria and Albert museum. You wander the halls, always discovering more—but eventually choose a room to settle down and read in. Today it is a vast hall adorned with towering paintings.

You sit in the center on a leather bench, entirely alone. Open in your hands is a new copy of *Little Women*.

As you read, chills rush pleasantly throughout your body: You are here, fulfilling a dream, traversing the same cities that Amy March once walked during her own world tour.

You have not known peace like this in years.

You arrive at the scene where Amy is reflecting on her time abroad, as you know you will when you are back home.

"I want to be great, or nothing," she says.

A jolt runs through you, and the words darken in color, getting so black they take over the entire page.

I want to be great or nothing.
The hall around you dissolves into blankness.
Great or nothing.
Great or nothing.
Great or nothing.

College:

Inevitably the next challenge floats its way enticingly over to you, and you cannot say no.

Even now, you are kicking yourself for doing what you always do: plunging into the depths. It comes back to standing on the precipice: you teeter on the edge. Before you is the black unknown. It pulls and it calls with a siren song that is not sweet. Behind, approaching quickly, is the monster that has chased you thus far. You don't know what the monster is, exactly. You are aware only of the fact that you can't let it catch you, and yet you wait until the last possible moment, until it bites right at your ankles—and then you jump.

“You worry too much,” your dad says. “Sometimes you just have to let some things go.”

Well, that's much easier said than done.

What if you did let things go?

Who exactly would you become—

The hunter or the hunted?