

A Good Story Makes a Brick Shithouse Cry

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“To be built like a brick shithouse” - (of a person) having a very solid physique.

It was an island from afar I saw once as a child and again as a man, and it was as though no time at all had passed between us. An island so remote and so cold that it was more of a cosmic afterthought, as God too, it seemed, had dragged his heels in finding a way there.

If he had thought that maybe someday a vagrant or two would find passage to this island, then perhaps he would have made the destination a far better reward than the journey. Yet it is the great power of the wanderer to make the most of both—to ensure that whatever is found on and at the end of the road is precisely what is needed, if not exactly what was wanted.

I find great comfort in this, if truly this is the case, as this island was of my own design, and so desperately did I wish for my wanderers to find joy in its discovery that any unpreparedness I may have felt seemed secondary to the significance of the story we were sharing together.

That is the beautiful nature of cooperative storytelling. It is not so much the conceit of a narrator who defines meaning for everyone, rather it is everyone that defines meaning for themselves, collectively. So it was that, by myself, I made a brick shithouse cry, for everyone.

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When I was in high school I learned a secret. It was not very well hidden, but it was kept very close to the heart of a then-stranger in my creative writing class. We had been paired together for a project, and I remember sitting down at his table to introduce myself.

He replied with a greeting and then with an apology.

“I’m sorry if I’m tired; I spent all night writing for a game I play.”

And I recall knowing exactly what he meant. We had never spoken, never before played a game—this one or any other—together, but I knew exactly what he meant, so I asked him:

“Are you talking about Dungeons and Dragons?”

And he said:

“Yeah.”

I remember he looked down when he said it, and what I first took as embarrassment was instead an honest hesitance, because, as I now know, to let someone into that world is to accept that they will see your most vulnerable self. That is the secret that I learned—not that we would play Dungeons and Dragons, but that this vulnerable self would be eroded from the marble it had been kept in.

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He introduced me to one other person whom we would play with—a large, strong blue-collar lad who would come to work carpentry and construction later in life.

This was a person I had never related to before. There was nothing for me to learn from a tradesman, I assumed, as he was simply not in my crowd. We did not share similar politics, career path, nor much else, I thought.

Then I discovered that the friend I had made in creative writing was often the guide and rarely the hero. Like me, he was a storyteller, and he wished to see others around him surmount odds—to prevail and grow great. It was Dungeons and Dragons that would filtrate these passions into wonderfully empathetic, perspicuous characters.

The tradesman would become a ruler, a king, a leader. He would set down his hammer and take up a crown, for he intended to build a strong brotherhood between us. The storyteller would become a sage, an explorer, a rebel. He would pull at the narrative's threads, and make choices not because they were the wisest, but because they would make for the best story.

And with this, I came to learn who they were as people. Not as characters, as people. With every story we would share, we would chisel away just a little more from the marble until I could stare into their soul and recognize it.

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Though they were the players and I was the guide, that did not mean that my own marble was not wearing down alongside theirs. I would not begin to presume what it is they see when they look beyond the stone, but I imagine they owe their gaze to the stories we shared together.

And as it all ended, a great evil was bested, people were saved, and the heroes of the tale ventured off into obscurity. We sat around the table, our island, and as if to make it known that I now understood them, I gave them gifts.

To the king, I gave a pendant of a crown, so that he may always be reminded of his nature—to be strong, to build, and to rebuild should it fall.

To the sage, I gave a pendant of the afterlife, so that he too may always be reminded of his nature—to be curious, to be accepting, and to be reflective of himself.

So it was that, together, we saw beyond our marble and wept.