

JUDGES' COMMENTS

The writing is beautiful and the story both compelling and relatable, but it's the subtle, yet effective way the author works in themes of prescriptive gender roles that makes this a standout.



SPAN

Dungeons (& Romeo) & Dragons (& Juliet)

Tina and I didn't talk about whether we liked D&D; what mattered was that we were allowed to play

BY ALISSA YORK
ILLUSTRATION MIN GYO CHUNG

I CAN SEE MYSELF, 13 YEARS OLD and standing at my bedroom window, staring down. In the parking lot below a boy is doing tricks – quick figure-eights into wheelies, a sudden break as he balances on the pedals, perfectly still. His ball cap hides a face I know by heart: sea-green gaze, the down of a nascent moustache. I long for him to look up from beneath the brim of his cap – Juliet on her balcony, Romeo

lovesick in the bushes below. Only in my case the garden has been paved over, and Romeo is in love with his BMX bike.

He was my brother's best friend and, like my brother, he was a whole grade older than me. Unlike Ben, whose every feature reflected a masculine distortion of myself, Ryan was wholly other. His arms were what I thought about most. They were golden, literally shimmering in a haze of sun-bleached hairs. His legs, too. He was always in shorts, walking with a bounce as though there were springs in his calves. The ball cap rarely left his head – navy blue, the runic "NY" of the Yankees embroidered across his brow. *Not You*, it read. *Never You*.

TINA AND I DIDN'T TALK ABOUT whether we liked D&D; what mattered was that we were allowed to play. For once, we were inside the clubhouse – or more specifically, Ryan's townhouse, five down from my

own. He lived there with his mother and younger brothers, his dad having moved north with a new wife. The layout of the place was identical to ours. Going over for a game after school, I invariably felt a disorienting sense of coming part way home.

I played to be near him. The games themselves tried my patience – ambush rolling into battle, battle tumbling into trap. *You come to a door, the door is locked. You come to the edge of a pit.* Weaponry was a bottomless subject: broadswords and hatchets, a dizzying array of blades. Mace, my mother's apple pie spice, became a spiky, metal-headed club.

Everything came down to chance. The dice were cut like gems – 12, even 20 polygonal sides. Before you could set foot in the dungeon you had to roll your character into being, trait by trait. I became a fighter, having scored high on strength and constitution, with middling charisma and an alignment of "lawful/good." I envied

Tina's elfin thief – all dexterity and intelligence along "chaotic/neutral" lines – but only until Ryan handed me my figurine. Nadia, I called her, my little lead-cast self. She was a loaner, still part of his collection, but I loved her as though she were my own. Her impressive breasts draped in chain mail. Her waist-length hair painted black by his careful hand.

He loved to draw. Always on graph paper in fine-tipped pen – dungeon plans, of course, but also speed boats and spaceships, race cars and planes. He copied pictures of guns with eerie accuracy – AK-47s, Walther P38s. Occasionally he included a human form in a helmet and mirrored mask, never anything with a face. Never, for instance, the girl sitting cross-legged close by.

Again I watch myself, watching him. Why did I never pick up one of those pens and draw something of my own? Years later, having stared for some minutes at Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* in a book, I found a pencil and tried my hand. Somehow I slipped over to the right side of my brain. *Forget the idea of a woman; what do you actually see?* The results surprised me, but it was the *doing* that held the true reveal. Was this what Ryan had experienced, hunched over his thin blue grids?

He and Ben took turns as Dungeon Master. There was no question of myself or Tina assuming the role; our characters were newly minted, with scarcely enough experience points between us to keep from falling under every wizard's spell. Besides, we were lucky to be there. Outside, the boys generally jumped on their bikes and left us behind, and the only other indoor occupation was Space Invaders, a game in which I soon lost focus and burst into pixelated flames. At least with D&D I could sit across from Ryan on the grey wall-to-wall, watching him set up the cardboard screens behind which he would lay out a world.

His dungeons were meticulously designed – sinks and squeezes, subterranean woods. *You come to a fork in the tunnel. You come up against a wall.* There were beasts in those labyrinths: White Apes and Were-cats, the lesser-known Gelatinous Cube. Best of all was the Lurker Above, a chameleon-sheet of living tissue that flattened itself to cave ceilings and hung in wait. One day when I rolled a six or a 16, the Dungeon Master I loved dropped one of them down over me like a cloak. I did what any player would, swearing and rolling the dice to fight my way free. In my mind, though, I was quiet. I was like one of those divers I'd seen on TV, floating up into the shadow of a manta ray's wings.

Not long after that, Ryan rode up on his bike beside me and swung down. We walked a block and a half in silence before he reached, eyes forward, for my hand. Suddenly, magically, we were *going out*. He never said it to me, but I said it to myself and to Tina, who obliged me by repeating it. Even Ben had to admit it was the case. It had no effect on the games, but afterwards Ryan and I would engage in long, wet bouts of necking, always on the couch in full view of the group. Even though his mother was at work. Even though his posterbed bedroom – Lotus and Lamborghini, Farrah Fawcett on all fours – stood empty upstairs.

It took him weeks to graze my breast. He pressed himself against me exactly once. We were kissing in his front hallway, the others already gone outside, when he backed me up against the wall. Eyes fluttering, he made a sound. I only understood when he ran upstairs to change his shorts.

The following day – can that be right? The very next day? – he left to visit his father up north. He was gone for an eternity, two whole weeks. By the time he came back, I had

disappeared from his field of view. He phoned for my brother, and my brother went over for a game.

I should've known it wouldn't end well. We'd seen the Zeffirelli film in school: Juliet in that gorgeous red velvet dress, Romeo crashing the party to catch sight of her across a crowded room. *O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!* One glimpse and he changes course. The ultimate female role.

I remember her in Technicolor. Her breasts squashed behind gold brocade in the balcony scene, the nurse haranguing her to come her back inside. *I come anon*, for Christ's sake! Can't a girl get a breath of night air? And later, veiled in black at her secret wedding, or steering the white mass of that honeymoon nightdress, the ghost ship in which she navigated the narrows of her world. Juliet is the sun? Maybe. I can recall sitting on that grey carpet, burning. But how would it feel to be a planet? To be a boy?

Imagine roaming Verona's lanes or New York's storied West Side with your crew. *When you're a Jet, you're the swingin'est thing; little boy, you're a man; little man, you're a king!* Meanwhile, presumably, Juliet glows. *Such a pretty face, such a pretty dress, such a pretty smile, such a pretty me!* Who wouldn't rather be Romeo, or even careful Benvolio? Better yet, Mercutio, shouting the odds, howling his poetry in the streets.

I played him once during an acting stint in my early 20s, not the original sidekick but the lippy facsimile in Ann-Marie Macdonald's 1980s feminist mash-up, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*. I played Desdemona too, but it's the trouser role I remember best. I had swung my fair share of blades in Ryan's well-drawn dungeons, but Mercutio was my only true taste of swordplay.

O calm, dishonourable, vile submission! I'll never forget the thrill. ☒