

## **The First Two Pages of “Strong Stomach” by Zoë Z. Dean**

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An Essay by Zoë Z. Dean

“Strong Stomach” is a memory. It’s one for the narrator, Johnny, obviously, but it’s one for me too—only in my case it’s twisted far out of shape. My grandfather, like Johnny’s, was a coal miner and a font of colorful life stories, including one about a butcher who had sold cheap horsemeat that he’d eaten because it was all he could afford.

The similarities thankfully end there. Richard—my pawpaw, as we said when I was growing up—was compassionate, laidback, and in possession of a strong core integrity. He’d led a hardscrabble, rough-and-tumble life, and he’d come out of it considerably more capable and accomplished than I’ll probably ever feel; he successfully built his own house just to see if he could, while I once put a self-assembly bookcase together backwards. He wouldn’t have pointed out the gulf between our lives, but it certainly occurred to me.

Over time, that contrast gathered up a lot of assorted flotsam-and-jetsam ideas about generational differences, personal and wide-scale revisionist history, and how the American Dream—even when someone pulls it off—can create estrangement and resentment. Then one day, abruptly, Johnny’s voice came to me, and I started writing.

From the start, the story was naturally first-person retrospective and what I think of as a bystander story, one where the key dramatic actions aren't the narrator's.

This is a format I like and feel comfortable with. I'm more of a bystander than a participant, too: I don't want to live an especially dramatic life. Besides that, the first-person retrospective makes the words come more easily—there's an intimacy to the inspiration, once I pick up on the character's voice—and because it comes across as the narrator consciously telling a story and thinking it over, it tends to hit a kind of ruminative quality that I often need to write something. For me, what makes a story stick in my mind and eventually work its way onto the page is the ambiguity I feel about it. If I'm sure of the right and wrong of a situation, I don't usually feel driven to write about it; I like being torn in different directions.

When a character is relating something they've experienced, something that's stuck with them but they can't quite successfully interpret, that gels especially well with my own internal approach.

What Johnny viscerally feels about his grandfather's story as an adult—what he's taken from it in the long run—is very different from what he felt about it as a child, and I knew from the start that that was a key part of *my* story.

More than the roughly defined “official” generations, I’m interested in how people’s outlooks change—or don’t change, or only seem to change—as they get older, so it felt both natural to start the story in Johnny’s (relative) old age and then have him look back. It lets there be layers of the stories we tell ourselves and others: an older man tells us about how, when he was a boy, an old man told him the story of something that happened when he was a young man.

We start with Older Johnny, and we start with resentment:

I tell everyone who asks that I’m retired. Not a lot of people do ask, not as many as I’d want to. After forty-five years of work, I feel this peace and quiet like a bruise, so much worse than the dry-rot ache of the carpal tunnel I have in both wrists. Someone ought to ask what happened to me. A month ago I had the face of a younger man—someone still “plugged-in,” my granddaughter would say—and now I’ve got that droopy, hound-dog look of the old, and all the gardening and crossword puzzles on earth won’t put that flesh back up on my bones where it belongs.

I wanted Johnny to be going through an almost universal transition—feeling a loss of power and prominence now that he’s older, not being sure what to do with his life once he’s no longer working—and for that to be sympathetic. But I also wanted to show the way that universality and particularity intersect; Johnny has some of the default concerns of someone of his age and situation, but he comes at them in his own way.

And he is, to put it plainly, a deeply unpleasant person to spend time with. He’d be an unbelievably frustrating narrator for a novel, but I thought I could ask

readers to put up with him for eleven pages. If nothing else, they get warned up front, because the first two pages are full of Johnny's bitterness.

He doesn't just resent that he's become peripheral to society, he resents that the other people in his life don't prioritize him as, somehow, the central figure of the story. He admits that people *have* asked him about his life and his retirement, but he still isn't asked often enough about it to satisfy him. He apparently spends enough time with his granddaughter to have picked up on some of her lingo ("plugged-in"), but he doesn't noticeably value her company. Crucially, none of these people get names, not even his granddaughter. He wants people to pay attention to him, but he doesn't give any of it back. He's just not particularly interested in others.

He's also relentlessly negative—in the next paragraph, he goes on to be dismissive about TV—but in a way that I hope is interesting to read, at least at short length. It's interesting to write, in its way, because he's perceptive enough to address (some of the) holes in his arguments and because he's also aware of his own faults. The transition point for the story, for me, happens not quite at the scene-break where we change time periods but just before that, where his criticism of others and his criticism of himself intertwine:

I watch them, these men that have gotten all their muscles from the gym and all their scars from appendectomies, these men mugging for the camera as they describe the taste of the beetle or the bone, and

even though I haven't lived any harder than they have, I think, each time: *Weak*.

The “even though I haven't lived any harder than they have” bit is pivotal for me: I need that little fillip of self-knowledge in his case. He knows that he's working off a kind of inherited wisdom here, something that he's internalized from a previous generation. I like the idea of him being aware of that kind of subliminal hypocrisy. Unreliable narrators are always great to write, and unreliable narrators who poke at their own unreliability without completely overcoming it are sometimes even more fun. Johnny can come close to realizing that it's unfair to judge other people for living up to standards he hasn't lived up to either, but at the same time, he still feels like he owns these “hard” experiences a little more just because he's heard about them.

This section ends, then, with a man noting that he's dealing with inherited wisdom; the story goes on to show just what that wisdom is, and hopefully parts of it come as a surprise. But I wanted the story's essential conflicts about the push-and-pull between generations, memories, and broken, unpleasant people to be set up from the start. The wonderful cheat of it all is that it really did come embedded in the voice, like taking dictation straight from the character, so it was easy to begin this. So easy, in fact, that I think I mistrusted it a little, because I filed it away for almost a year before I took another look at it, decided I liked it, and sent it to *EQMM*, where Janet Hutchings was kind enough to give it a home.

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Zoë Z. Dean loves all stripes of crime fiction. Her first short story, “Getaway Girl,” won the Robert L. Fish Award in 2015 and was listed as a Distinguished Mystery Story in *The Best American Mystery Stories 2015*; “Charcoal and Cherry” received the 2018 Thriller Award for Best Short Story from the International Thriller Writers. Her latest is the short story “Strong Stomach,” in the May/June 2021 issue of *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*. She lives in Connecticut and can be found on Twitter at @ZoeZDean.