

THE DELAHOUSSAYE CIVIL WAR

By Benjamin Soileau

WHY WE LIKE IT: *This is the first example of epistolary fiction we've published. It was a style that enjoyed great vogue during the 19th Century and into the fin de siècle. But belle-lettres faded with the advent of communication technology and is—a little sadly--seldom encountered these days. It's a challenging approach because the narrative lens is necessarily boxed in. But this is also an asset because so much can be implied by what's left out. All fiction of this type stands or falls on the voice of the speaker and *The Delahoussaye Civil War*, we are happy to report, stands both tall and proud. We get to know the brothers intimately through Douglas's pleading letters and a whole family history begins to materialize in our imagination. Tone plays a big role here and a spectrum of emotions-- from exasperation to resignation, from anger to self-deprecation, rise and fall as if summoned by gravity—in a voice that registers deeply. Minor characters spring to life on the page and details of setting and history are smithed with an enviable lightness of hand. If Soileau's effulgent prose doesn't tickle the neuron pathways in your brain you need your synapses tested, kiddo. Quote: 'Welcome is a peculiar girl. She thinks deodorant causes Alzheimer's. She's all about the natural way. I never imagined I'd love a woman with more armpit hair than me, but it actually makes me crazy. That Vidalia onion smell about her even. Lord. If you only knew the things she did to me in private, your head would explode. If you get in touch with me, I'll tell you. If that doesn't make you bite, then I guess it's a lost cause. Uncle Mackey used to say if your head cracked open it would just be a bunch of fish and girls spilling out of it' *Five stars.**

The Delahoussaye Civil War

A series of letters, contents of the manila envelope sent by Delmont D Delahoussaye, postmarked Baton Rouge; as read by Sheriff Gentle Tom Squamish

Dear Del,

How do you do? It's been a while, I know. It's pine needle season here. It's like each needle is alive, crawling in from the Fall to accumulate wherever I am, just like your pubes always did. Ha

Ha. All I do is sweep.

I was thinking about those pine trees at the old house, how we used to put a ladder to them in a storm and hug those branches toward the top, laughing our asses off while we whipped around.

I just thought I'd write you an old timey letter to say I'm still alive out here. I know you don't do email or any of that social media stuff.

I sure hate that we're on opposite sides of the fence with all this shit. I hope it's only a fever. I hope that text you sent was only bluster. But I just wanted to say I'm remembering the pine trees. We have Doug Firs up here, too big for ladders, and they never run out of needles to sprinkle on me. But because it's mostly wet all the time, they stick to my shoes and track inside, and then they get up in everything.

OK, brother. Things have changed. I met a girl. I'm a different man now. Call me. Or write me back too.

Your brother, Douglas

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Dear Del,

Maybe you didn't get my letter. I wanted to tell you I met this woman, Welcome. Seriously, that's her name. She's from California. Go figure. It sounds good to say. Welcome. I'm in love, really, is mostly what I want to talk about. Well, and some other things too.

I'm sorry about that phone call. I was blacked out. I must have said something bad for you to fire off that text. I suspect it was just rooster crowing, that whole bit about you having lost a brother.

Come on, now. I hope not too hard of any feelings. I want to talk to you about Welcome.

Call me.

Your Loving brother, Doug

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Dearest Del,

Did you change your number maybe? I got your voicemail that one time, and talked until it cut me off, but ever since then it's just locust chirping like a fax. These letters aren't bouncing back so I presume they're either following you to a new address or you're playing possum. I'll go ahead and tell you. Me and Welcome are getting married. If you are stonewalling me then I sure hope my engagement breaks through.

I'll go ahead and say it. I'm sorry for whatever it is I said on election night. I was out of my mind and I'd probably had a case of beer before stumbling outside to call you. If I swung low, it was only to wound you. You can't take a drunk seriously. But I haven't had a drink now in 91 days. I want you to be the best man at me and Welcome's wedding. How's that for out the blue? I think it would be a good way to put this pothole in the rearview, brother.

I have so much to tell you. Now will you get in touch with me? We want to have the wedding soon. Give Mindy and Dwayne my love. He must be getting big. Is he girl crazy too?

Your humble big brother,

Douglas

p.s. I'll go ahead and just say it. I came into some money. I was at the casino playing The Price Is Right because I was going crazy trying not to drink and the machine starting clanging and sirens going off, like it was malfunctioning, old Bob Barker and his girls smiling bright. I went all in on craps too and was truly touched, but in the end, what I'm saying, is I won boocoo. Like four hundred thousand boocoo. I'm keeping the trailer and my job. I'm going to make that money work for me, but anyway, the first thing I did was charter a boat, and I paid for all the fellows at work to come, and that's how I met Welcome. We must have had a hundred of what they call rockfish and the captain of the charter told us about these girls that cleaned fish for the boats. So we get to the marina and these three girls in bikinis were in the fish house sawing up

those motherfuckers like gangbusters. Welcome and her two sisters call themselves The Slime Slingers, and of course those drunk cowboys pay out the ass for it.

Anyway, so one thing and another, and now I want you to be my best man. Hurry up and get in touch with me. All my info on here is correct in case you had the wrong address or number, but everything's the same as before. Well, sort of. Ha Ha.

Hurry,

Douglas Delahoussaye

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Del,

What the shit? I'm between worried and red assed to be honest. I've apologized. I'm hoping you and Mindy are out of town.

We just eloped to the courthouse. I'd always wanted a big wedding with toasts and all that cake splatter stuff, but I never heard from you, and Welcome and her sisters are fighting, and we can't just wait around for the world to start acting right, so we stepped into our new lives alone. The guys at work were the only people interested, and what one's had them brought their significant to meet us after at Buffalo Wild Wings.

Married life suits me. Welcome is a peculiar girl. She thinks deodorant causes Alzheimer's.

She's all about the natural way. I never imagined I'd love a woman with more armpit hair than me, but it actually makes me crazy. That Vidalia onion smell about her even. Lord. If you only knew the things she did to me in private, your head would explode. If you get in touch with me, I'll tell you. If that doesn't make you bite, then I guess it's a lost cause. Uncle Mackey used to say if your head cracked open it would just be a bunch of fish and girls spilling out of it.

Doug

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Delmont,

I contacted CJ. It took some work, but I found him. He said he saw you at Phil's Oyster Bar, and that you were having a time, drinking and carrying on. He said you still got the same truck with the same damn stickers on it. He mentioned you and Mindy weren't together. Are y'all are on the outs? I sure hope you're doing OK.

I hate that I have to track you down through old acquaintances, just to find out if you're alive. We're all we've got left, so we can't let something like politics come between us. Still, I'll just never understand it Del, how you can lift up such a shit ass as that. I mean, y'all bought a lemon, and now I got to be drinking old lemonade for four years, so you can't blame me for being sore. You wouldn't want Uncle Mackey being president, would you? Hell, this joker makes Uncle Mackey look like Gary Cooper. But I'm done, Delmont. I won't talk about it anymore.

I just want to be your brother again.

Douglas

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Del,

I'm going to be the bigger man here. You can use these letters for your paper airplanes, but I'm going to my grave with a clean slate. Saint Peter won't be able to say I didn't try. I imagine you got in some stupid accident and you're bedridden and that Mindy has to read these letters to you, and she's just too broken up to be able to write me back. It makes it tolerable.

Remember that joke you used to tell about why the blushing bride was smiling so big at her wedding because she knew she'd given her last blow job? I guess I get it now. Ha Ha.

Married life isn't quite what I thought, but then again I never thought someone would ever marry me. Welcome won't let me wear deodorant, but I don't think she cares as much about my getting Alzheimer's as just not liking the smell. She buys the organic stuff, and even though it doesn't work, I use it just to make her happy. I'm learning it's about compromise. And picking your battles. I've learned not to engage with her about petty stuff like her talking on the phone every single minute. It's just not worth it. I guess you already know this stuff, but I would be grateful to have your counsel, you being the expert on such matters.

The laundry room is her little office. She put a lamp in there with her toe scraping tools, and she'll sit on the dryer and talk on the phone all day. I've found it best to leave her to it. I watch a lot of TV waiting for her to come sit with me. And if you thought Uncle Mackey was tight with money, look out! She won't let me touch any of it, not even for dinner and dancing. I don't see the point in having it if you can't spend it, but she swears I'll thank her ten down the line. And hey, we'll only be in our fifties then, and so can enjoy the juice of our fruits growing now. She's helped me get my ducky's straight. She's got a mind for it. So, I still go off to work every day, and everything's about the same as before, except for there's a woman home when I get there, and that's a good thing. Welcome has taken to being a house wife. She claims she's never cleaning a fish again. Fuck fish, she says. She has nightmares about fish. Isn't that funny?

The one thing she did allow we splurge on was a Roomba, and that thing skittles around twenty-four-seven, and it never runs out of pine needles to suck. OK.

Your Brother, Doug

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Dear Mailbox,

I dig your cave, Box. Thanks for giving me shelter from the bad weather. I saw it on the news. I bet you don't believe global warming is a hoax, sitting out in the elements at the end of Dell's driveway. It's easy for old boss man Del to wave it away, him tucked away in the air conditioning, spilling Little Debbie crumbs all over himself in front of the TV. I'll bet you get lots of coupon books from Little Debbie, thanking Delmont Delahoussaye for his lifelong dedication. When Del was little, Box, he used to climb up in the pantry like a rat, sniffing the LD's that Aunt Tonk hid from him, and he'd sit on the couch all night watching Mama's Family, and he'd eat the entire goddam carton by himself, world be damned.

I just wanted to say Hi, Box. It's nice to stretch out where it's dry before the gate drops and Delmont's ugly mug blots out the light. You're doing your job, though, Box, getting me to the beachhead safe and sound under heavy fire. Alright, Bill! Coupon! Religious Pamphlet! Look alive, men! Some of us ain't coming back!

Yours Forever, Doug

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Dear Del,

I'm regretting a letter I sent to you. It was mean-spirited and lowdown. I was not in a good place.

I wish I'd sat on it some more.

I feel ashamed and ask your forgiveness. And this to the universe too. Sorry.

Douglas Delahoussaye

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Dear Del,

Say cheese. Say CHEEEEESE, Delmont. Ha Ha.

Happy Christmas dickface.

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Dear Delmont,

How'd you like my Christmas card in its pretty yellow envelope? Where you moving, Del?

I know you're getting my letters and I know you got that Christmas card. And a For Sale sign in the yard? After CJ asked me in a nice way to quit bothering him, I hired some crazy old man named Booger to do it. He's the one told me to send the yellow card, and he watched you jog out the house in a bathrobe right after the postman dropped it. He said you ripped it open before you even got back inside. I guess there's a good sized hole in a bedroom window that you don't seem bothered to fix anytime soon? You're not selling a house like that. Who keyed your truck?

Mindy? If I was you, I'd at least spray paint over it or something. Who the hell leaves a truck parked in their driveway that says HERPES MONSTER on one side and CHEATER on the other for all the neighbors to see? Mister Booger said you just sit around all day and go out sometimes at night and that in the week he was watching, you brought two different women home and that one of them was old enough to have had you. My question is what kind of woman gets into a truck that has those things scratched on it? Not a nice one, is my guess. What's gotten into you, Delmont? Where's Mindy and Dwayne? I hope you're not having some kind of midlife crisis. That PI wants me to give him more money, and it's tempting I tell you. But I know enough for now. Call me or something. Write me back. It's good to get your thoughts down. It helps to sort things out. Easy does it. Just take it easy.

Your BROTHER, Douglas D Delahoussaye

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Dearest Del,

Well, the el shitto has hit the fanno, brother. I've been on the couch for a week, ever since Welcome found out I hired an investigator, and he was one of the cheap ones. She liked to broke a gasket over it. She's still not talking to me. I've never seen someone so angry, except that one time when Uncle Mackey beat your ass so bad.

Anyway, I'm the one won that money and what I invested in was a noble thing. She'll come around. There's never any good news on TV, so I made friends with the Roomba. It makes a good pet, bumping around the coffee table, like it can't get enough pine needles to eat. Guess what I named it? That's all for now, old brother pal.

DDD

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Del,

It's gray and gloomy, go figure. The summers up here are dreamy, but damn if I'll never get used to the long wet winters. They just stretch on.

But here's some silver. Welcome's ready to start forgiving me. She's fixing up a special meal on Friday night when I come in from work and it's turning out to be a real date. In my own house.

Ha Ha. I'm ready to get back into bed with her, but she says one thing at a time. I can't honestly imagine Welcome cooking a proper meal, but we'll see. She's pretty good at making Eggos and Boyardee, but she seems excited about trying something new and I want to encourage it. I guess I took Aunt Tonk's suppers for granted growing up. She could sling it.

I've made myself pretty cozy on the couch. You should see little Dell get after the pine needles. He hunts them, and then gets so excited humping a cluster of them. I laugh my ass off watching him. It's a true chortle, those pine needles flying up into his mouth like rain pellets on tin. It sounds like he's talking then, in his own way.

I also wanted to tell you I had the weirdest dream that you and I had a child together. He was young, about twelve, I guess, and he was the perfect person. I don't know his name. He had my brains and your good looks and charm and he lived at the farm where Uncle Mackey was training him to be president. We showed up at the same time for some scheduled visit and it was good seeing you. It was so real. It was the old Uncle Mackey too, before he hit his head. It was very pleasant and very real and when I woke up I decided.

I, Douglass D Delahoussaye, revoke my political affiliation, and hereby agree to register as a Republican. I will even send you the card to prove it. All hail, King Dummy. Shit, we can even make Uncle Mackey Vice President. Fuck it. Nothing matters anymore. I'm serious, Delmont. All you have to do is reach out and I'll do it and then we never have to talk about it again. (Little Del just found him a scatter of needles and while he was sucking them up it sounded like he was choking a little, getting worked up, like he's excited about this venture.)

I'm encouraged about how you will take this olive branch, brother. I'm ready to be your brother again. Wish me luck on my date tomorrow night. Today's Thursday. Friday seems like forever.

Your Brother, Surrendered,

Doug

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Dearest Delmont,

I am grateful to be writing this letter to you. I've been twirling in a fevered eddy in death's harbor. I saw the devils or angles maybe, stirring in the shadows on that creaky old pier, scuttling with their ropes to tie up and dock me. I was ready to let them do it too, I was so goddam sick, but the powers that be saw fit to put me on an outgoing current, back into the open swells to sail another day.

Jesus, but I was sick. I only just got back on the couch from the bathroom where I lived on the tiles by the commode. I took my hydration from the sink in there, although, I didn't keep much of it down. It's hard to explain, but the bathroom I was in was like a time capsule. It was only four days, but it seemed like four years. It still feels like there's a sun-baked, squashed possum in my tummy, and a metal tang in the back of my throat, but it's ten times better than where I was a few days ago. Welcome says it was something in the ground pork she used for the casserole, but she didn't get sick. Then again, she's got the abdominal constitution of a pelican, her coming up on her father's slop. She's talking about making the grocery store pay for selling us spoiled meat, but I don't even care. I'm just happy to be alive. I'm looking forward to getting back to work on Monday. None of the fellows at work checked in on me, which goes to show that we're all we've got. When it comes down to it, I mean, family is all there is.

When I was down on the tiles, and I thought I was dying in there, the thing that came to mind was when Uncle Mackey beat you that time, which is strange because I hadn't thought too much about it in the last thirty-five years, but I have to tell you the truth now.

You know that back room in the barn we weren't supposed to go in where he kept that half a broke down tractor? I was in there rooting for whatever, and I found this cigar box tucked away behind these big cans of rat poison. It was all these photos, like polaroid pictures of Uncle Mackey with these kinds of frog women. I don't know how else to describe it. They were naked, but waxy or something, froggish, and Uncle Mackey was in the pictures too, wearing ladies underwear, laughing with them. Maybe he had a wig. I didn't look at them long, didn't want to. I slid the box back best I could and when I came out that room he was standing in the barn looking dead at me. The scariest I've been ever, that. I panicked and told him I was looking for some box you'd told me about, but that I couldn't find it. It just came out. He slapped me up pretty

good, making sure I hadn't really seen it, I guess, and I could've won an Oscar for my performance, because then he went off looking for you, I guess. I don't think I ever went into that barn again.

So that's why that happened, Del. It was my fault, but I think I might have used it for leverage against you. Like telling you it was for this or that reason. Like he beat you because it was your fault that Mama and Daddy checked out. I think I might have said something like that once.

Jesus, I sure am sorry for that one.

I thought it might be good for you to know this. I believe it's what kept me fighting in that bathroom, my wanting to come clean about it, even though I hadn't really thought about it all these years. I feel a thousand pounds lighter already.

Things are on the up all around. Welcome came creeping down the hallway to check on me and laid down with me. It was good to have her so close and to smell her. I wasn't up for doing anything more than that though, which goes to show how tired I still am, but it was a tender moment we had. She feels bad about how our date night turned out, so she's going to try again tonight. I hadn't been able to eat anything more than Saltines, but she's determined I get something down. Light and healthy. Guess what she's making? Fish. She's sticking with the one thing she knows how to cook, even though she swore it off forever. I guess that's love, huh brother? She promised she won't mess it up this time and I believe her.

In other news, little Del got something caught in his throat, and quit working. He still comes on, but he just makes this awful sound and he isn't eating. I look forward to fixing him this weekend when I get my juice up. There's already pine needles stacking up and I haven't even been outside. It's a crazy world. From where I sit on the couch I can see the trees they come from swaying out the window. There's a bad wind storm building, supposed to throttle us all weekend,

and I can't help but imagine whipping around up in those treetops, away from all the strife down here. I got half a mind to snatch my neighbor's extension ladder and see if I can't make those branches up top. Pass a good time for a change. Ha Ha. Remember us doing that?

Well, the mailman ought to be here soon so I need to go put this in the box. I sure hope you're doing OK, Del. I hope you're sorting things out. My offer still stands whenever you feel like taking me up on it. All you have to do is reach out. Quit wasting time. This will all just be a bad dream down the line. Don't make me chase you, Del.

Wish me luck tonight on my date. I'm ready to get back in bed with Welcome, and get to getting my house in order. All I want is for everything to be the way it was before.

your brother

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story came about in the wake of the last election, thinking about how many relationships must have been damaged by its particular ghastliness. The story took an epistolary form when I realized that you can block someone on social media, but a good old fashioned letter will always find its mark. I quickly understood that all the correspondence would be from the same man, and it became a challenge to see what it might reveal about the silent brother.*

I always have Ray Carver somewhere near, and maybe I was inspired by his story, "Why, Honey?"

BIO: *Benjamin Soileau is from south Louisiana. His fiction has appeared in Prairie Schooner, Colorado Review, Opossum, Grist, Louisiana Literature, Bayou, Superstition Review and many other journals. He won the 2018 Rumble Fish Quarterly New Year's Writing Contest, and is a special mention in The 2020 Pushcart Prize Anthology. He is a stay at home daddy-o in Olympia, Washington. Reach him at bsoile2@gmail.com.*

