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PREVIEW

COME TO WHERE THE FLAVOR IS
STORIES AND ESSAYS

by

Jean E. Delehant

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Marly Swick

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 1995

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PREVIEW

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Come to Where the Flavor Is

Stories and Essays

BY

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GRADUATE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

COME TO WHERE THE FLAVOR IS
STORIES AND ESSAYS

Jean Elizabeth Delehant, Ph.D.
University of Nebraska, 1995

Adviser: Marly Swick

Eruptions--both emotional and intellectual--occur when assembling diverse writings into a "unified" manuscript. Melville's *Pierre* refused to do so: life, to him, was "a bitter drug," his writings "separate draughts" to be taken individually, never to be consumed all at once. The stories and essays compiled in Come to Where the Flavor Is do, perhaps, reflect this bitter drug of life; yet through comedy and pathos, each piece attempts to transcend life's difficulties--if only for a moment's surcease from anger and alienation. In six works of fiction, characters do find ways to connect: two troubled women find comfort in unlikely brothers; a recovering alcoholic seeks the "cream" in unsatisfying unions; harried mothers discover strength in friendship; a divorced lawyer finally moves from restraint to action; and, in a satirical sketch, a lonely wife sees hope--literally--on the horizon. Six works of creative nonfiction present a diverse "How-To" book of this writer's life: How does

one "detoxify" life's bitter draughts? How does one deal with life-long nicotine addiction, or with a brother's addiction to alcohol? How does one find joy as an overworked, underpaid female? How does one breathe beneath the oppressive shroud of sexual assault? How does one live with an impossible mother, and how does one live without her? Whether the draughts are tinged with broad satire or stark seriousness, each attempts to lessen bitterness, to locate comfort and remedy in the ultimate whole of life.

PREVIEW

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"Love Scents" in Laurus, Shadows, and The Nebraska Review; "Sunburst" in Shadows and South Dakota Review; "Our Stories" in Many Mountains Moving: A Literary Journal of Diverse Contemporary Voices; "All in the Grip" in Iowa Woman; "Provocative Title" in Lullwater Review; "Come to Where the Flavor Is" in High Plains Literary Review; "We, The Cripples" in Iowa Woman and adapted for readers' theater by the University of Northern Iowa in Unspoken Violations; "Poverty in Academe: The Migrant College Worker" in The Chronicle of Higher Education; "When You Need A Real Lawyer" in The Prairie Barrister, Journal of the Academy of Florida Trial Lawyers, and Trial Talk; "My Mother, The Depression Monger" in Iowa Woman; "Her Mother's Voice" in Iowa Woman and anthologized in The Sage Within: The Spiritual Lives of Everyday Women by Hummingbird Press.

I. Fiction

PREVIEW

Love Scents

Bett, my ex-wife, sends me a letter each month on scented stationery. Normally this would please a man--normally a man might be flattered by it--but these aren't the scents you'd hope to find in the mail. Today it was Clorox. Last month, bug killer. Another month, she'd sprayed the envelope with Bactine. You never forget the smell of Bactine, once you've smelled it. Sometimes she drenches the paper with a scent I can't pin down, but there's no mistaking the gist of it. Right Guard--I'll never forget that month. She knows I hate the smell of Right Guard.

She thinks this is funny. Our son could easily carry the letters to me--he's here today, in fact--but no, that would spoil her entertainment. Today's Clorox letter had a stickum-note attached. She said she needed to see me--would nine o'clock tonight be okay? This has me curious. She's never included a personal note before. The letters she sends are not real

letters--they're bills actually, bills for my half of Michael's daycare and uninsured medical. She keeps track, and I send her a check each month, in Michael's backpack. The system works well enough, I suppose, but would it kill her to act like an adult for a change?

Michael and his friend Gabe are playing G.I. Joe out on the front porch. Michael is ten, Gabe is a couple of years younger. They don't know I can hear them, which gives me the chance to see what they're really up to. I pour myself a drink and carry it to the living room.

"Kill-kill-kill!" yells Gabe.

"I killed you first," says Michael. "You're dead, man. You can't kill me if you're already dead."

I sit on the couch and sip at my drink. Gabe's dad and I were law school roommates in the early Seventies. Dick Gibbons and I were pacifists. Dick attended the campus peace rallies and demonstrations, but I never went to them. There was never any violence at those things--this is Des Moines, after all--but the marching and shouting made me edgy. Dick said it was a great place to pick up women.

The boys are still hard at it.

"Hey," says Michael. "Somebody stole my lasers."

"I did not," says Gabe. "My lasers are black. Yours are putrid green."

I lift my feet to the coffee table. Dick and I thought it great to buy houses so close to each other. It's a lovely neighborhood here--older brick homes, a scattering of stucco, lindens and maples forming an archway over the street. We had hoped our sons could pal around just as we had in the old days. But our plans didn't turn out so smoothly. Gabe and his mother still live four doors down, but Dick moved out a couple of years ago. When it hit the court records that Dick was making payments to another woman's baby, Margo Gibbons took it personally. Then, to top it off, Dick's girlfriend wouldn't have anything to do with him. He found a little apartment across town and, like me, sees his son on a set schedule.

At least I got to keep the house. Bett didn't want it--she said there was nothing here but "bad vibes"--but I don't think the memories were all that terrible. She had said the same thing about an old duplex we used to rent, then she moved back into the exact same duplex with Michael. She left six months after the Gibbons broke up. I suspected she wanted to make herself available for Dick Gibbons, but nothing ever came of it. We used to get together with the Gibbons quite a bit, and Bett and Dick seemed too enthusiastic around each other. It embarrassed me at

times, and I think it embarrassed Margo Gibbons, too. Bett wore a tad too much perfume, a few too many rings and bracelets. She drank more than usual. Dick had that look about him I'd seen a thousand times before--that all-attentive look he used on women. I thought they'd run to each other after our divorce, but apparently Bett was smart enough not to hook up with a guy making double sets of child-support payments. She's not dumb.

The boys clamor across the porch, then burst through the front door. Michael stands a head taller than Gabe, though they have the same sandy-brown hair. Gabe is bare-chested, Michael is wearing the white Drake T-shirt I bought him. They could be brothers.

"We're going to play Nintendo," says Michael. "It's hot out there."

"Did you pick up your toys?" I say. Sometimes I sound like a father.

"We're not done yet," says Michael. "We just need to cool off."

Their faces are red and moist from the heat. I'm glad to see them playing together like they used to.

"Okay," I say. I point to the door. Michael remembers and closes it. They both smell of little-boy sweat.

Gabe wipes his chin against his shoulder. It's been a while since I've seen him. Margo is a travel agent, and they're out of town a lot. "Hey Gabe," I say. "How you doing?"

"Fine," says Gabe.

"How's your mom?"

"Fine."

"How's your dad?"

"Fine."

"How's your dog?"

"He's dead."

This one throws me. "What?" I say.

"He's dead," says Gabe. Then he follows Michael to the basement. I don't say anything, though I probably ought to ask some questions, say something consoling. It doesn't seem right for a boy to lose his dog like that. It's bad enough his parents divorce, but to have his dog die? It doesn't seem right. "My," I say finally, but Gabe and Michael are already running the television downstairs. I hear the Nintendo music, Tchaikovsky's "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairies," computerized in blips and beeps. I hear them bomb each other's warships.

* * *

Bett hasn't answered her phone all afternoon. I've made Kool-aid for the boys, caught up on a couple of files, called some clients, but I've had no luck getting hold of Bett. I've wanted to tell her it's okay for her to come by tonight, but then it dawns on me that she already knows it's okay, I'll have nothing better to do on a Saturday night.

In the living room, I stare awhile at our wedding picture. I run my finger over our faces. The picture is nearly fifteen years old. It sits on the mantel. Bett never liked the photograph--she said it made her look like Trisha Nixon--but I think she looks radiant, sensuous. The photographer positioned me slightly behind her, my hand at her waist, pie-eyed in love. I've heard men say how nervous they were at their wedding ceremonies, how they panicked at the sight of that strange, white being looming down the aisle. But I was spellbound by Bett. She appeared like Glinda in The Wizard of Oz, floating softly, I thought, as in a surreal, glowing bubble of light. I would follow her anywhere. She would grant my every wish.

I know that when most couples divorce, pictures of their mates get stashed in the attic, relegated to the archives. The last time I visited my sister Karen in Council Bluffs, she pulled out a photo album in which

she'd pasted little black strips over the eyes of our ex-spouses, making them look like child-abuse victims. Like everyone else, I nearly removed our wedding photo when the decree became final, but I resisted the impulse. Keeping it out in the open has become a personal challenge for me. I tell myself I can handle it now. I can face it like a man, I say.

I walk to the kitchen and fix myself another drink. Then I phone Margo Gibbons. I'm hoping Michael can stay at her house during Bett's visit. Margo answers, friendly as ever. She still speaks with an Oklahoma drawl left over from her childhood.

"I'll cut you a deal," I say. "I'll feed the boys dinner if you keep Michael for a while."

"Great by me," says Margo. "It's too hot to cook anyway." She lowers her voice conspiratorially. "Is this a juicy date you've got going? Come on, fess up."

"I'm not telling," I say. "It's privileged information."

Margo exaggerates a sigh. "You lawyers," she says. "What kind of friend are you? The only thrills I get anymore are vicarious."

"Okay," I say. "I'll tell you. It's Bett." I try to sound mysterious. I lie some. "She says she needs to see me. She says she can't go on any longer this way."

"What?" says Margo, a little too quickly. "She said that? I mean, is that really what she said?"

I curl the phone cord around my finger. "In so many words," I say.

"Well," says Margo. She seems to have distanced herself from the receiver. Then she speaks up again. "Well," she says. "That's something. I guess Michael ought to spend the night with us. Give you and Bett some time together?"

"Oh, no," I say. "I couldn't ask you to do that. Besides, I see Michael so little these days--"

"But this is a special occasion, right? You can return the favor next time I fly to Bimini with Warren Beatty."

Margo manages to talk me into it and I hang up the phone, secretly pleased at the arrangement. I very nearly call her back to ask her over for dinner, but I stop myself. I don't want her here in case Bett arrives early. I don't know what I want, not exactly. I don't know what Bett wants. She just landed a promotion at work, so I don't think she's after me for more money. It could be a problem with Michael, though I doubt it. Michael has improved so much since the early days of our separation--for four months, he rocked in his bed at night, even in his sleep. But

he's a tough kid, really, a lot like his mother. He's doing okay.

Which leads me to think Bett may be interested in me. Her scented letters haven't fooled me--I know she still cares, at least a little. Her letters remind me of Jerry Busby, a boy I knew in kindergarten. Jerry had a crush on a girl named Lizzie, and during recess he'd kick her in the shins with his pointy-toe cowboy boots. That's the way I interpret Bett's letters--pointed kicks in the shin to catch my attention. Bett hasn't dated much since our divorce--Michael informs me of the goings-on over there--and I gather she hasn't found anyone who meets with both Michael's and her own approval. She works long hours at General Casualty, which doesn't leave her much time for tripping the light fantastic. I can't believe she's taken up with one of her co-workers; unlike the rest of them, Bett has a central nervous system. After a year and a half of checking out the competition, I may not look so bad to her now. She looks better than ever to me, even if she does act adolescent at times. I read in an article somewhere that male lawyers tend to marry women who would make good witnesses on the stand: wholesome, conservatively dressed, girl-next-door-Mary-Tyler-Moore types. Although Bett careens along the cutting edge,

the article more or less described her, Margo Gibbons, and my other friends' wives. But we're not married to them anymore. The article never said anything about that. The article never mentioned how to stay married to them. The article never mentioned a thing about how to get them back.

* * *

Gabe and I clear the dinner dishes while Michael gathers his overnight gear. We've eaten hamburgers cooked on the grill, corn-on-the-cob, ripe cantaloupe for dessert--the bounty of summer, Bett used to say. We prepared dinner tonight as a cooperative venture--Gabe shucking the corn, Michael slapping the beef into patties, me tending the grill--and we all seem happy now, satisfied with ourselves. Michael comes bounding down the stairs with his backpack. I check its contents, send him back upstairs for his toothbrush and underwear, then the three of us walk the half-block to Margo's house.

The cicadas drone noisily. It's still full daylight, the heat hasn't let up yet. But it feels good trailing along the sidewalk behind the boys, all of us taking our time. In the grass beside the curb, a

black squirrel stiffens itself upright as we approach. Michael fakes a leap and the squirrel skitters away. The boys run laughing into the mist of a neighbor's sprinkler. I maneuver around it, then onto the sidewalk again. The boys shriek in the surprise of the cool spray, then rush to the dry end of the sidewalk. They shake water from their arms and legs like puppies.

Michael and Gabe reach the Gibbons' house first. It's a Georgian brick, an elegant home with neatly-trimmed bushes and shrubs. Margo tends the yard as well as the flowers in back. Her garden was featured once in the Sunday Register. Gabe opens the front door and Margo comes to greet us. She's wearing a white bathrobe with her hair wrapped in a towel. She bends to squeeze Gabe, who pushes away, embarrassed. They both have the same dark eyes.

"The troops return," she says. "Gabe, where's your shirt?"

Gabe shrugs and Michael follows him into the house. Margo stands barefoot, holding the screen door open. She's not unattractive, although Bett was always the better-looking of the two. Margo's skin seems toughened by the sun. Her features are narrow, her nose and chin angular. Her mouth is too wide for her face.

"Gabe did have a shirt on," she says. "There's no telling where he left it." She pokes at the towel on her head and laughs. "I'm quite the fashion statement myself. Just got out of the shower."

"You probably sweat a lot in the yard," I say, and then I want to choke it back. I glance awkwardly at her feet. A prominent tan line cuts across her ankles where her socks have been. "What I mean is, you look cool. You look a lot cooler."

She's still holding the door open. I stand on the sidewalk like an idiot. "Hey," I say. "I'm sorry to hear about your dog."

"I don't know what happened to him," she says. Her eyes wander past me toward the street, as though she's still looking for him. "One minute he was in the front yard, then I looked up and he was gone."

This relieves me. "You mean he's not dead?"

"Oh I hope not." She leans against the doorframe. "I'm hoping he's wandering around out there. I can't bear to think he's dead--I'm hoping someone found him, gave him a nice home."

"I'm sure he's fine," I say. It occurs to me that I can't remember what kind of dog they had. I can't think of his name. It was a little black dog, I remember that much. "Anybody would want him," I say.

"He's probably safe somewhere, tearing up somebody's begonias."

I check my watch. It's after eight o'clock. A moth flutters against the hem of Margo's terrycloth robe. "You'd better get that door closed," I say. I thank her for taking Michael. She smiles and brushes the moth away, watching me through the screen as I turn toward the street.

Walking back home, I think again of Bett and my step quickens. She is always on time--that was never a problem with her. I've been watching the clock since the mail came at noon. My stomach tenses. I breathe in deeply, determined to concentrate on something else. I let my eyes take in the neighborhood. Humid as it is, it's a beautiful evening. The lawns are green and lush here, even in the dead of summer. Most everyone hires a lawn service, though some of us still cut our own grass. I'll never forget when we first moved here, seeing Margo Gibbons out mowing her yard. I was driving home from work at about five-thirty. It was a scorching hot day--far worse than today--and Margo must have been at least eight months pregnant. There she was, plodding along like a workhorse behind her lawnmower. What made it worse, she was wearing a heavy-looking denim dress. It clung tightly to her

hips and stomach. Her hair matted against her forehead. Without even waving to her, I continued driving home. I felt stupid, then, standing in my driveway, holding my briefcase, wondering what to do. Women's Lib was fine, but this seemed ridiculous. My suit and tie felt hot. I became angry at Dick Gibbons. Why couldn't he mow the lawn, at least while she was pregnant? Why couldn't he hire it done? I became angry at Margo too, angry at her for wearing that oppressive dress. Why were they putting me through this? I remember trudging into the house and pouring myself a shot of vodka from the freezer. Bett assured me that pregnant women were allowed to continue any activity they were used to doing. But I felt guilty for the rest of the evening, guilty for a long time afterwards. I don't know why women get to me this way.

* * *

After a quick shower and shave, I make a final check of the house. I stack my files and the Saturday paper, switch on the porch light. The boys forgot to pick up their toys, so I toss them haphazardly into a cardboard box: muddy tanks, a Jeep with one wheel, improbable-looking soldiers missing heads and limbs. I