ABSTAINING ADOLESCENTS
OR THE SON ALSO RISES

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Take what Time calls "another De Vriesian tumble down that rabbit hole where love and lechery are humorously blurred with a yearning for the Absolute." The tumblers include: sophisticated moving man Ted Peachum, beer heiress Snooky von Sickle, uniformed cop Kathy Arpeggio d'Amboise, and a set of amorous triplets. Says Time: "The book is full of De Vries' happy wordplay, metaphysical Wiffle Balls, witty oxymorons, perversely amusing ironies, the author's ticklish ways with the jargon of three generations ..." (1980 advertisement, Consenting Adults or The Duchess Will Be Furious by Peter De Vries)

In the Park Avenue office of Dr. M. Tobias Parsimonious, New York's pre-eminent psychiatric practitioner on obsessive verbal compulsions, Mrs. Chauncey Van Snoot sits alone. It is midafternoon. From the examination room, connected to the office by a door next to the windows, where Dr. Parsimonious is examining her twelve-year-old son, Hillary, Mrs. Van Snoot hears muffled voices.

Dr. Parsimonious enters. Before he closes the door behind him, Hillary calls out: "Don't worry, Mom, it's only alliteration."

"Paroxysms of paronymous paronomasia, I am sorry," he addresses the woman as he crosses to the chair behind his desk. He nods his head vertically, wearily, as he speaks.

"My initial diagnosis was correct." Sitting in his chair, he begins rearranging the crossword puzzles scattered about his desk.

"Ah, Doctor. How am I going to tell my husband?" Mrs. Van Snoot breaks into a lugubrious lachrymose lament. "I can't even pronounce the words."

"That's the technical name of your son's disease, Mrs. Van Snoot. It has a more common, cognitive cognomen. 'The De Vries Syndrome.' Do you know it?"

"'No but I saw the movie."
"'You did?"
"'My husband will never understand."
"'Understandable."
"'God, Doctor ..."
"'Just Doctor is sufficient."
"'I mean, Doctor, is it, you know ... Will it ..."
"'Do you mean is it a terminal illness, Mrs. Van Snoot?"
"'No, I know it has nothing to do with computers."
"'Ha, ha. Very good, Madam. But I do have to be frank with you --
not my brother, the gynecologist, of course, though I can see as he might say, the fetus doesn't stray far from the womb. Anyway, Madam, medical science cannot say for certain that the disease is fatal. We can only say for certain that all those who have it are eventually doomed.

"That's clear."

"On the bright side, there are many known sufferers still alive."

"But I gather, Doctor, that over the years many sufferers have succumbed."

"Precisely."

"Oh God!"

"Please not again, Mrs. Van Snoot. I appreciate you're distraught and I do value your opinion, but..."

He stops as the woman breaks into body-shaking sobs. Embarrassed, the Doctor starts a double-acrostic waiting for Mrs. Van Snoot to control herself.

"Money's no object, simply the object of our affections. My husband and I have no objection to the objective of curing our son."

"It would be abject if money were an object. Being subjective about your objective."

"Isn't there any cure, Doctor, anything that can be done?"

"No, I am afraid not. This was borne out strikingly in the case of the grim reaper who met the grim reaper on his deathbed."

"Doctor, you mean there are no remissions?"

"Well I don't want to be remiss in what I tell you. There are no remissions that we are aware of in the case of adults. But quite honestly, Madam, I've never heard of the onset of the disease at such a young age. That's why we've got to try and look for the silver linings."

"You mean you think my son is a freak of some kind?"

"No. No, just unique."

"I guess I should have realized it."

"Well that's what I'd like to talk to you about, Mrs. Van Snoot. Do you mind giving me some history on your son?"

"Not at all. One of the first things I remember is the time he was thrown out of first grade."

"For what?"

"I don't know the details exactly, but it had something to do with being fresh to his teacher. She apparently described something as being conspicuous by its absence and he called her an ox and a moron."

"Classic. Classic characteristic."

"You mean Latin or Greek?"

"No, typical."

"Nothing was ever typical with Hillary."

"How's that?"

"When he was ten, he tried to climb up to the roof of our apartment building."

"That seems a healthy bit of aerobics. Stair-climbing."

"Doctor, he was trying to climb up the front of the building from the sidewalk to the roof. It's twenty-two stories."

"Oh my."

"When his father asked him why he did it, he replied: 'Because it's there.'"
"Amazing metaphysical verbal range. A veritable cornucopia for research."

"He always had trouble at school. From the very first day."

"How so?"

"Doctor, I think you've been treating these patients too long. You're starting to talk just like them."

"No fear, Madam. I have a thorough check-up every three months."

"I hope so. I was telling you about Hillary's first day in school. These older boys tried to knock his head into his clavicle."

"Did you find out why?"

"Not really. It seems they were asking him, 'Who are you?' At first he didn't respond. But apparently after the third or fourth time, he blurted out the name of some Italian woman."

"What?"

"Yes. Anna Forra or something. The boys thought he was mocking them and -- bam!"

"Dear, dear."

"I think a watchdog would be more help for Hillary."

"Yes. Sorry about that. A little slip -- like a woman wears in summer. Ha, ha. Yes. Well, I get that from your brother Frank."

"A congressman's mail."

"Saints preserve us!"

"In New Orleans they won't. They're losers there."

"Doctor Parsimonious, I'm going to scream!"

"Of course, Oh, I am sorry. Verbal ping-pong. Great exercise."
"I thought you didn't want to discuss how I became pregnant."
"Please now Mrs. Van Snoot, I won't interrupt you. You were telling me that father and son don't talk."
"That's right. It happened when Chauncey, my husband, grew a beard. Hillary began calling him Hirsute Van Snoot."

Later, that evening, in the den of their apartment located in a building overlooking the 57th Street Bridge, Mrs. Van Snoot relates the story of her visit to Doctor Parsimonious to her husband.
"What did Hillary say when you told him what the Doctor said?"
Chauncey asks his wife.
"He was furious. You should have heard him. A lobotomy would be too good for that charlatan, Hillary said. Sodomy would be better. The Doctor didn't know enough to practice hippotomy."
"Oh God."
"No, Hillary said that wasn't even the Doctor's real name. Greed was his middle name, but Doctor Parsimonious changed it."
"Where's the boy now?"
"In his room. He is going to construct the world's longest palindrome."
"What brought that on?"
"He overheard the Doctor calling me Madam a few times, so Hillary said he wanted to show how much better at it he was than the Doctor."
"Is there any money in that?"
"Chauncey, really."
Feeling rebuffed, Mr. Van Snoot crosses the room to sit on the leather couch beside his wife.
"Doesn't he ever stop?" he asks her.
"Well certainly not when he's eating. Tonight he demanded alphabet soup for dinner. He held his nose and put his whole face into the soup bowl. I swear he would have drowned himself if I didn't pull him out."
"Maybe you shouldn't have acted so hastily."
"I didn't. ... I was too preoccupied noticing the Y he had painted on the flat of the iron."
"Lola, my dear. Do you realize what could have happened if ..."
"I know. How do you think I feel. Comfort me with apples."
"The De Vries Syndrome."
"Acute case, the Doctor said."
"Well I'm glad he thinks it's funny," Mr. Van Snoot nasally sniffled."
I wonder how funny he'll be when I don't pay his bill."
"What do you mean?"
"We'll get his dunning punning."

Dinner time, four days later. The Van Sniotes -- mother, father, and son -- are seated at a table in the elegant dining room of The Plaza Hotel.
"I don't understand why we had to eat here," Chauncey grumbles.
"Hillary insisted," says Mrs. V. S.
Hillary listens to his parents without speaking. A waiter arrives at the table.
"Good evening," he intones. "I am Reuben, your waiter for tonight."
"Reuben, Reuben," Hillary shouts.  
"Oh that's my son, Roosevelt Reuben Reuben. Do you know him?"

"No he doesn't," Mrs. Van Snoot to the rescue.  
"I'm sorry, Madam."

"Don't call me Madam," Mrs. Van Snoot responds as simultaneously Hillary blurs out: "Pity poor palindrome."

Quizzically, Reuben eyes the twelve-year-old. "May I get you a cocktail?" he asks.

"Two blood of the lambs for my parents and a witch's milk for me," Hillary answers before Mr., or Mrs. Van Snoot can speak.

"Oh God," the waiter screams.

"Don't tell me Doctor Parsimonious is eating here too," roars Mrs. Van Snoot, rising from her seat to get a better view of the restaurant patrons.

"Madam. Ah, excuse me. Ma'am. If I were a betting man I'd give eight-to-five your son has The De Vries Syndrome."

"Oxymoron," Hillary fires back.

"Chaucer. That's it!" Mrs. Van Snoot shrieks.

"What dear? What is it?"

"Now I know why Hillary was thrown out of the first grade."

"Just a damn minute, everybody," Mr. Van Snoot commands. Then addressing the waiter: "How do you know what The De Vries Syndrome is?"

"Sir. I am a devout Dutch Calvinist. Mr. De Vries is our vates."

"What is a vates?"

"A seer, sir," Hillary interjects.

"A prophet, sir," Reuben continues rapturously, "with honor. When I call my wife 'Mrs. Wallop' it is with the purest endearment. Sir, when I just talk about it I hear America singing to the glory of the hummingbird. Madder and madder the music until I am floating through the fields of clover."

"Can't we simply eat dinner and stop this persiflage?" Mrs. Van Snoot asks successfully terminating the waiter's saccharine de scant.

"Of course, Mad -- er, ah -- Ma' -- ah, ah -- Lad -- Mother of 'The De Vries Syndrome' boy."

He takes the orders of the two adults without incident.

Then his face lights up like Times Square on New Year's Eve. "And you young man for your dinner at The Plaza," his voice rising in cres cendo with each word, "you will have?"

"The Mackerel Plaza," Hillary screams, so loudly it frightens two horses pulling hansom on Central Park South, causing them to rise up on their hind legs -- their front legs waving in the air. For his part, the waiter falls to his knees in front of Hillary, saying, "You leave me forever panting."

"What's going on?" Chauncey demands, standing up between the waiter and his son, fearful that Reuben is a pervert of some sort. Two more times he asks the same question, receiving no answer.

Hillary's words are drowned out as his mother hollers "Duck, Reuben! Duck!"

But she is too late, and the waiter too dilatory, as Chauncey cracks him over the head with a metal table plate.

Reuben seems oblivious to the blow as tears of joy rinse his face.
Slowly he crumples to the floor.

"Let's get out of here," the elder Van Snoot orders.

He hurries out of the restaurant, mere et fils close behind. At the door, he asks his wife to remind him to send "our crooked landlord" a check for this month's rent.

"The rents of wickedness," Hillary mutters.

"Hillary," directs Mrs. Van Snoot, "if you don't cut this out we're all going to starve to death on the vale of laughter."

"If you do, let me count the ways," Reuben calls out to them from where he is sprawled on the floor of the restaurant. He is doubled up with convulsive laughter. As two of his fellow waiters try to lift him to his feet, he waves them away with great effort gasps: "Don't worry. I'll be without a stitch in time."

It is almost a year later, the office of Doctor Parsimonious. He sits at his desk fussing with some papers, waiting for his next appointment. A man in his late twenties, Ivy League dress, thick eyeglasses, quite intense, enters. He is Rupert Ribald, a graduate student in linguistics at Harvard. The men exchange greetings and sit down. Ribald takes out a block of blue-lined yellow paper places it on the desk across from the psychiatrist, and begins to take notes.

"This is for my doctoral dissertation Doctor, as I wrote you."

"Your droll doctoral dissertation, I assume."

"Well it won't be doctrinaire."

Doctor Parsimonious turns in his chair to look out his window through the haze of carbon monoxide hovering over Park Avenue.

"Such a tragedy," he says. "What a loss!"

"Park Avenue?"

"No, the boy."

"That's what I wanted to ask you some questions about, Doctor. Since this will be the first Ph.D. thesis on Hillary Van Snoot, I wonder if you, as his doctor, think you could add anything to the public record -- without violating your oath, of course."

"Hippocratic?"

"Don't be hypocritical, I mean."

"Thank you. Well there is not much really. Even months later, I am unable to understand how the boy could drown in the kitchen of his own home."

"What about the alphabet soup the autopsy showed in his lungs?"

"Incomprehensible."

"You know he is becoming a leading cult figure at Harvard."

"So I understand, Mr. Ribald."

"Rupert, please."

"Sorry we don't serve any in the office."

"I thought you could get everything from abecedarius to zeugma here, Doctor."

"If you walk through the tunnel of love you can."

"How about if I creep into your tent?"

"Maybe you should see me as a patient, Rupert."

"I can't afford fifty-minute hours."

"Well, when in Rome..."

"Doctor, in Italy, psychiatrists charge by the declarative sentence."
"Impossible."
"Impoverished."
"Sterling, young man."
"Not by the pound."
"Bravo -- or Bravissimo, Senor. Ha, ha. It is a pleasure to assist your research." Dr. Parsimonious gets up from his chair and begins striding about the room doing a series of finger, arm, and breathing exercises.
"Doctor, do you think we'll see his like again?"
"As his doctor, no."
"Now about the movie we're planning."
"Yes. I thought the young Roddy MacDowell would be perfect to play Hillary."
"And you, Doctor?"
"No I'm too old for the part."
"No, your part."
The Doctor's upper lip begins twitching up and back over his top teeth. "Is there any way you could make up a pastiche of Humphrey Bogart clips from his old films?"
"I'll ask the director, though he has more of a feel for twelve-year-olds,"
"So many of them do."
"Doctor, can we get back to the boy's death? His last supper was a chicken without feathers."
"Quite apropos. I've ruled out foul play by anyone suffering from a mutation of 'The De Vries Syndrome."
"But the father did have the funeral procession pause outside of Elaine's on its way up to the cemetery in Westport."
"Mere acknowledgment."
"Sort of an epistemological pit stop?"
"More like a father's eponymous wish for his son."
"And Doctor, those bizarre people at the cemetery?"
"A few disgruntled writers looking for some last words."
"And his epitaph?"
"On his tombstone, right where it should be."
"Do you agree, Doctor, that it's the longest palindrome known to man?"
"Yes, unfortunately. 'A man, a plan, a canal, Panama.'"
"I gather, Doctor, you're upset with Mr. Van Snoot?"
"Well of course. I can understand his wanting to show off his son to mankind. But he didn't have to put in that part underneath."
"You mean where it says -- 'Hillary showed you, Doctor Parsimonious.'"
"Of course. I mean I didn't create 'The De Vries Syndrome' or cause Hillary to be afflicted. Mr. Van Snoot's anger toward me is mis-directed. Why, he won't even pay my bills. No matter how hard I try, he simply returns them with the words 'not funny' written on them."
"Don't be disgruntled, debilitated, depressed, Doctor. Disabuse!"
"I feel better already."
"Good then. Let's get to the important part. What does Hillary's life teach us about the disease?"
"It supports what medical science has always said. All sufferers..."
THE JOY OF LEX

This is the title of a new British book on wordplay by Gyles Brandreth, in the spirit of Willard Espy's The Game of Words and two Almanacs (although without Espy's delightful light verse). Acknowledging material from Espy, Verbatim and Word Ways ("Mary Had a Lipogram" in August 1969, "Croakers and Swift Croakers" in May 1973, "The Night Before Christmas" tree-shaped poem in November 1973), he touches all the standard bases of wordplay: long words, new coinages, malapropisms, palindromes, anagrams, crosswords, acronyms, graffiti, old words (from Poplollies and Bellibones), puns, repartee, various jargons, curious surnames, rebuses, party word games, excessive verbiage, Scrabble, picture-prose (such as the Mouse's Tail from Alice in Wonderland), howlers and boiners, tongue twisters, pangrams, alphabetic verse, homonyms, word squares, daufinitions and the Devil's Dictionary, word ladders, venereal terms, abbreviations, refractory rhymes, and last words by famous people.

Although very little in the book is original, it draws on so many sources that most readers will find something new to them. (In books such as Brandreth's and Espy's, the way in which the material is presented is at least as important as the novelty of the examples.) For instance, I had not previously seen the vocabulary test (taken from Word Power by Hunter Diack), made more difficult-than-necessary to evaluate because the reader must create and check his own definitions instead of select them from multiple choices; nor had I known about Professor Abel Jackson's collection of more than a thousand onomatopoeic words (from "several hundred thousand" comic strips (John McClellan, take note). Finally, he has the most complete "translation" of British words into American English that I have ever seen.

The Joy of Lex was published by William Morrow in 1980, and is available in cloth binding for $10.95.