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(a short story)

from the style manual

"She uses the word 'absolutely' like a nervous tic. It's a word that should never have acquired an adverbial form, and should have remained the domain of physicists and philosophers speaking of ultimate truths."

by
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THE. THE HUMOR OF ARTICLES LIKE "THE" IS MINIMAL, which is why one, for surprise effect, should end a sentence or two with the word "the." Try "the."

Joy. The word is imprecise, often misused, especially as a woman's name (for greater effect you may want to call your offspring "Pirouette," or even maybe "Maurice Chevalier"). When used as a noun in regular prose, the only acceptable form is as follows:

"Joy is in the dishwashing liquid Pantheon, next to Dawn, and second only to Palmolive."

Haveta. Contraction of "Have" and "to," commonly used colloquially, but an equally good replacement for the more officious "must," to loosen things up a bit.

Common: I haveta go to the bathroom.

Common: I must deliver the serum to the Institute.

Exemplary: "I haveta see the President, and I haveta go to the bathroom, too."

"But what about the serum? Must you keep the scientists at the Institute waiting?"

"Hey, didn't I just tell you what I haveta do??? Or don't you speak English?"

13. Avoid fake words ending in -gate.

They have worn out their stays in political reportage and should henceforth be mobilized exclusively for tracts and monographs on gardening and Chinese horticulture. In fact, what does "Watergate" mean anyway? Is it not the device that allows for adequate amounts of water to irrigate land difficult to garden, and especially perfected by the Chinese, who, for thousands of years before Nixon's visit, already maintained entire systems of watergates with which to provide adequate moisture for lowland rice fields? The buzzword synonymous with scandal in the Beltway should be more properly "sluice."

Graham cracker. Some prude amongst the stylists and grammarians with whom I keep company gets very cranky over the Graham

cracker. She avers that Graham is synonymous with all whole wheat, and, as adequate tribute to the man who brought the world whole wheat (Sylvester Graham, circa 1851), some changes should be made. Therefore, your Wheatables and Wheat Thins, your Triscuit and Pepperidge Farm "Entertaining" Hearty Wheat Crackers will all become "Graham" and Graham crackers proper will be forced to give up their exclusive claim. And that is only the beginning, because there's also a whole spectrum of wheat cracker products in the "International" section of the supermarket, with smart names and sophisticated auras: your Breton and WASA (The Original Crisp Bread), your Vivant and Stoned Wheat Thins, your Old London Melba Snacks, Carr's Whole Wheat Cracker (By Appointment to H.M. the Queen), McCormick Champagne Crackers and your dearly quirky Ak-Mak. All gone if this linguistic Corbusier would have her way. Should we remove "Graham" from its term representing those cinnamon-bespangled sheets that we slowly savored in kindergarten, shaping them with our teeth into Texas and Californias, pistols and top hats until they finally merged with nothingness? The

serendipity that these very crackers have for their homonym a common nickname for Grandmother (Gram or Grammy)...I have no more to say on this subject. If my colleague wishes to slam a portal to the past, she has taken on the wrong opponent.

(Colleagues will note that my animosity towards Ms. V_____’s “Graham” project has nothing to do with our failed amorous encounter.)

Joy. Maybe consider naming her “Bear Trap,” “Delusion,” or even “Dullard.” There she is, Ms. Joy V_____, who perhaps should consider changing her name before she even touches Ak-Mak, which she now eyes haughtily in the exoticalia aisle. She is wearing a grey sweatshirt which admits to the world that this particular stylist has no style, that she thinks the supermarket like her living room or garage. Here I am, close on her heel, linen suit, natty cane and straw boater, entering the land of Goya and Kikkoman products, dinner party “Grahams” and soy milk. I will say “Good day” in the most appropriate way possible. Which is difficult, I haveta admit. The correct and appropriate uses of

the spoken word are yet to be catalogued. Even more difficult: close up, it seems her tee-shirt is something that she retains from her estranged husband's family reunion. It says "The V_____ Family 32nd Annual Reunion!!!" under which, in small print, the names of at least 300 V_____ Family members.

Absolutely. She uses the word "absolutely" like a nervous tic. It's a word that should never have acquired an adverbial form, and should have remained the domain of physicists and philosophers speaking of ultimate truths. She says she wants to see me again. "Absolutely," she says. But she is now cradling the Ak-Mak box with a destructive gleam in her eye. Perhaps she enjoys stringing me along like this while she lollygags in the exoticalia aisle in her husband's 32nd family reunion sweatshirt. I am 54 years old! I cannot be left hanging in the maelstrom of her changing emotions, battering whole ships into driftwood and then WASA. And to this (which I phrase, of course, somewhat differently) she says, "You're right. Absolutely."

Graham cracker. I am now baking a pie because in three hours Ms. Joy V_____ will enter my third-floor studio apartment for dinner. I will make a Graham cracker crust, assuring her of its *specificity*. But I balk. Another style question arises, this time halting my progress. The recipe on the back of the Graham cracker box calls for "16 whole Graham crackers, broken into pieces." If you haven't eaten Graham crackers lately, you might not remember that each "plank" of Graham cracker is segmented, the perforations baked in. Now, is a "whole Graham cracker" the "plank" or one of the plank's subsets? Sixteen planks seem excessive, while sixteen subsets seem too little. I then go into a little verbal hallucination based on the possibility that a "whole" Graham cracker can mean both "of whole wheat" and "*in toto*." The meaning of "broken into pieces" then slips away. One might have said "crumbled." Broken into pieces, however, merely implies separating them at the perforation. In addition, the grammar (another word not unlike Graham) is mystifyingly faulty; the elusive comma between "whole Graham crackers" and "broken into pieces" gives one the impression that these impos-

sible crackers must be both whole and broken *at once* before they are able to enter into the crust. Was Sylvester Graham a Christian who believed in the resurrection? A millenarian? I shall look this up, since it seems that promises of becoming whole after one crumbles into the grave are encoded into this recipe.

I consider the possibility of an impending sluice.

The phone. Who else? Why else? "I hope you didn't go through a whole lot of trouble." She emphasizes the word "whole," as if to show off her demonic telepathy. She claims Mr. V_____, depressed, despondent, had called her. She feels obliged to go to him. I think of the 300 names on the family reunion sweatshirt, and wonder whether she mistakenly surmises that I radiate a preternatural shield against despondency! Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce to you my plants! My sole confidants! I bite my lip, I'm about to cave in, when I am visited with an inspired thought that allows me to hold tight to the WASA of another floundered encounter. Could it be this easy?

"Do you haveta?" I ask, in perfect pitch.

Within the hour, she is ringing my apartment buzzer,

prepared to stay even through the long debate that will surely follow the presentation of dessert.

17. Think of the word as octopus.

You are the ink.