

THINGS I USED TO KNOW

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Editor's note: This short story illustrates Josh's theory of truth in fiction.

Here's how it starts. It's a Tuesday, after dinner and after dishes, and I switch on the TV—my wife's favorite show. *Detective Murphy*. It's about a man who solves crimes by using his photographic memory. And instead of plopping down next to me like she always does, Tracy opens the hall closet and pulls out a plastic shopping bag. It's white and blue and says "Old Dominion University" on it.

From this bag, she pulls, of all things, a math book—a thick, blue, hard backed monster with the title *Discovering Geometry*. Understand, my wife is not a student. She's thirty-three years old. She works as a hygienist at Tidewater Dental Plaza and has for the past ten years, and she already has a college degree. It's just a Tuesday, and my wife is standing in the hall holding a geometry textbook.

She crosses the living room and puts the book on the kitchen table. Then she pulls out of the same white bag a protractor, a ruler, a yellow highlighter, a pad of graph paper, and three mechanical pencils. She lines these things up to one side of the book like army men.

This whole time, she doesn't say anything. She sits down and opens the book.

Our show's starting. The opening's got dramatic music, black and white flashes of taped-off crime scenes, chalk outlines, smoking guns, that sort of thing. Tracy loves it. She never misses it.

"You coming?" I say.

She shakes her head. I stand and take a few steps toward her.

"What's up?"

She doesn't answer right off, and she gets this look, like she's peering out the window at something far away.

"I'm thirty three years old," she says without turning to look at me. "There are just some things I want to know."

She kind of nods a little, as if that's all that needs to be said. Then she opens her book, clicks a pencil a few times, and starts reading.

When Tracy and I watch TV, she usually tells me about that day's patients during commercials—the sixteen-year-old girl who had seven cavities or the four-year-old boy who screeched like a devil through his entire exam. But today, none of that. Instead, this.

I try watching *Detective Murphy*, but I can't. I face the TV, but out of the corner of my eye, I really watch her.

She sits with a straight back. She holds a pencil and follows along with it in her book. She doesn't look thirty-three, I think. She looks maybe twenty-five. Tracy's short and slender and has clear, pale skin. Studying like she is, bent over, with her curly blonde hair draping down to the book, she kind of looks like she could still be in college. It's strange.

She picks up the yellow highlighter, marks something, and dutifully returns it to its place with the other army men. She tucks a lock of her curly hair behind one ear.

Then she looks up. I focus on the television and fake a yawn, like I haven't been staring at her for the last ten minutes.

"Hey" she says. "What's a vertex?"

"A vortex?" I say. "Like a black hole?"

"No. A *vertex*. It's with an 'e'."

Vertex, I think. I know this word. There was a time when I used it. I think back to my college math classes. I remember chalk dust and carefully drawn angles and hard-backed chairs, but "vertex" doesn't mean anything. I remember where I sat—four rows back and to the left, and I remember Dustin Taylor, the student who sat in front of me, and the musty smell he gave off one day after walking to class in the rain, but I can't remember this.

"I should know," I say, and I really do want to remember. "I knew once. Something about a point on a line, or an angle, or something like that. It's been too long."

I finished college twelve years ago. I graduated with a degree in criminal justice, and today I'm a clerk at a juvenile court. I don't use geometry.

She flips to the back of her book, looking, I figure, in a glossary. I mute the TV and face her. I wait for the answer. She turns back to the front of the book and keeps reading. If she finds out what a vertex is, she doesn't tell me.

Now, that's how it starts. That really is how it starts. But that's only a part of it.

What happens next is Tracy spends the next seven nights the exact same way, perched at the kitchen table, flipping quietly through a book. She studies *Discovering Geometry* for the first five nights, even over the weekend, and on the sixth and seventh nights, she studies a new book—*Principles of Artistic Photography*. Sometimes when she studies, she looks up from her books to ask me questions—"What's a focal point?" "What does 'refraction' mean?" "How do you find the area of a circle?" She asks maybe a dozen questions this first week, and I can't answer a single one. Refraction, I tell her, has something to do with light, but the other answers are completely lost, buried too deep to be dislodged.

She walks in the door on the eighth night, still dressed in her dental hygienist's scrubs, and she's carrying a big, clunky camera. It's black and silver and heavy-looking.

"What's this?" I say.

"This," she says gesturing to the camera with one arm like she's a game show hostess, "is Horace."

"Horace," I repeat. My wife has purchased a camera and given it a name.

She raises the camera quickly to her eye and snaps a picture of my face. Then she laughs a high, girlish laugh.

"Come on," she says, and she giggles. She runs, really runs, to the bathroom and takes a close-up picture of our showerhead. She darts to the kitchen, opens the fridge, and takes a picture of its insides, an empty jug of milk and molding leftovers wrapped in Saran-wrap. Streaking to the bedroom, she jolts to a stop in the hallway and gets a shot of an air vent by the floor. Then she's off to the garage.

"Tell me if you see any good shots in here," she says.

I switch on the garage lights.

"No," She turns them out. "Let's use ambient lighting."

She takes a picture of our fertilizer cart, tipped over in one corner.

Ambient lighting. I have no idea what she's talking about. So instead of racing with her to the backyard, the coat closet, the pantry, I go to the bedroom and rifle through drawers 'til I find a little spiral notebook, the kind that can fit in a shirt pocket. I open to an empty page, and I write on it, "ambient lighting, refraction, vertex." These are things I'll look up later, and scanning my list, thinking of what else I should add to it, I realize something.

Not one of these words is brand new to me. They're all familiar, like empty containers, like that milk jug in the fridge. Once there was substance to it, but today, nothing. Hollow. This list—it isn't of things I need to know; it's of things I used to know but that in the draw of time have vanished into nothing.

I put the notebook in my pocket. What else has been lost? What other bits of knowledge has time slowly stolen away? In college, I studied Spanish for two years. Today, I know only the basics. *Hola. Como Está? Que pasa?* I don't even know how to say the colors. I can't order dinner or even ask to use the bathroom. I took a chemistry class, but today I can't name more than ten elements off the periodic table—just the basics. Hydrogen, oxygen, helium. I don't know the difference between an adverb and an adjective. I don't know how many meters are in a mile. I don't know what makes something float or sink. So I reach back into my pocket and pull out my notebook. I sit on the bed and start writing.

Another week. For seven more nights, she studies. A vertex is the corner point in a shape, so a square has four of them. Ambient lighting is the kind of lighting that happens naturally—no light bulbs allowed. Refraction is when light bends, like when a light ray goes into water. It's why a straw looks bent where it goes into a drink.

I learn all these things. I even find a copy of the periodic table online and spend a good thirty minutes studying it, but by the time I figure all this out, Tracy's used the terms "aperture," "congruent," and "hypotenuse." And I've filled up both sides of six little notebook pages.

Then on a Saturday, I find Tracy standing in the bathroom holding two small cards, the kind that paint stores give you with color swatches on them.

"We need to paint in here," she says. She turns her head, looking from wall to wall.

"The paint looks fine," I say.

"Yeah," she says. "But every wall in our house is the same color."

She's right. It is. Every wall is a simple tan, and it's been this way for five years, since we bought the house. Tracy, I think, likes the tan color. Tan, she always says, matches everything. It's an earth color, she says. You can't go wrong with tan.

"Which one do you like better?" She hands me the two little cards.

"They're both yellow," I say.

Tracy narrows her eyes and lets out this little puff of air.

"They're not yellow." She puffs again. "These two colors are lemon sunrise," she points to one, "and genteel canary," then the other.

She's messing around. She must be. Tracy and I once mocked a store clerk who tried to sell her a dress because it was "a lovely shade of burgundy." At least, this is what I think until Tracy squints at the wall, at the cards in my hand, and back at the wall again.

"We're not painting the bathroom yellow," she says. "Yellow isn't even really a color—it's a family of colors. It's a category with all these sub-colors beneath it."

"Sub-colors," I say.

"Yes, sub-colors." She leans a shoulder against the wall and cocks her hip out. "Now which sub-color do you like better?"

I overlap the cards and hold them against the wall. I stare at them. I squint. I concentrate and turn the cards into the light.

The two colors are, I swear, perfectly identical.

"Look," I say. "These colors..."

And then she does something. She looks up and with both hands tucks her hair behind her ears. This is a habit of hers. Like I said before, Tracy has the smoothest, whitest skin, and when she looks up to do this, her neck is tender and touchable and probably the softest thing I'll ever

see in the flesh. She's had this habit—this thing she does with her hair and her neck—for as long as I've known her.

"These two colors," I say, "will both look great, but I like the lemon sunrise."

"How come?" She takes a step toward me.

I pause.

"It's very rich."

"Rich," I think, is a word I should probably add to my notebook.

She takes the cards from me and presses them against the wall, one in each hand.

"Is it too rich?" she asks, and I feel like I'm in college taking an exam.

"I don't think so," I say. "Rich is good in this small of a space."

She's still pressing the cards against the wall. It looks like she's trying to get them to stick. She doesn't say anything. She closes one eye. I'm not sure what that'll do, so I close one eye and look at the wall. No difference.

"I think I'll go with the genteel canary," she finally says, and she throws my card, the lemon sunrise card, into the trash by the toilet.

Hours later, I move a roller, heavy with paint, over my bathroom walls. The tan I've known for years vanishes in single strokes behind a new color. A color that is not yellow. A color I do not know.

Months later, it's still going. She finishes *Discovering Geometry* and starts *Fundamental Trigonometry*. When we go places, like out to eat, she stops as we're leaving and says, "Hang on a second while I grab Horace." She starts photographing everything—car headlights, street graffiti, neatly arranged cans of peaches in the grocery store. She gets more books—*Introductory Astronomy*, *Basic Music Theory*, *America: Its History and People*.

I can't just keep rolling with the punches. I know that much, so I decide to buy her a dress. This is something I did years ago, during those first few years we were married. Out of nowhere, I'd buy her something—a striped dress or a classy-looking blouse. I'd put whatever I bought on the bed, and when she saw it lying there, she'd put it on and wear it for the rest of the day. I'd sit on the couch, and she'd find reason after reason to walk in front of me, strutting her stuff like a straight-backed model.

So on a lunch break one day, I dart over to the mall.

A mannequin at a store called *Traditional Chic* is wearing the perfect dress. It's purple, and Tracy's always looked good in purple, and it's form-fitting, and Tracy's always looked good in things that are form fitting, and it has short sleeves and these little buttons down the front—like thirty of them from the neck to the knees. This is a good dress for Tracy. This dress is definitely her style. In this dress, she'll kill.

But in the store, I can't remember her size.

I hold up dresses—a four, an eight, a ten. I picture Tracy and how she might look in each one. No way she's a ten. Way too big, I find a six. Maybe. Maybe a four.

I realize something. I can't get a dress that's too big. She'll be insulted. It'll be like I'm saying, "Here's how big you look in my eyes," and I can't get a dress that's too small. That'd be like I'm saying, "This is the size I'd like you to be." She'll think I want her to lose weight, and I don't. I just want to buy her a dress.

Another thing I can't do is linger in this store for too much longer. I'm a man, and this is a woman's clothing store, and after a while all of my holding up dresses and staring at them is going to start looking creepy.

She's a four or a six. I've decided that much.

And here I do something that I maybe shouldn't. But I'm so frazzled, so everywhere, that I call her.

"Hey," I say when she picks up. "What dress size are you?"

"I'm working," she says.

"I know," I say. "What dress size are you?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I'm at the mall. I've found you a dress." Nothing. Silence. Maybe stunned silence.

"It's burgundy," I say. *Burgundy*. No joke. I really say that.

"I'm doing a cleaning," she says.

"Four or six? Which one? It's one of those, right?"

I wait. I hear dentist office sounds in the background, a ringing phone and maybe a drill.

"I never wear dresses," she says. It's true. She doesn't. We don't go to fancy dinners. We don't go to weddings or funerals. We sometimes go to church, but when we do, Tracy wears slacks.

"Don't spend money on something I'll never wear," she says. "Buy me shoes. I need running shoes. I'll wear running shoes. I'm a size seven."

She hangs up.

There's nothing to do. I could buy her shoes, but that wasn't the point. I could buy her chocolates, but that feels too young, too high school. I could hit Barnes & Noble and buy myself a book, one on poetry or pottery or something, and tonight I could plop down next to her at the kitchen table, but that feels small, like a dumb college kid trying to hit on a pretty girl in the library. There really is nothing to do.

When I get home, I head for the closet, and I know there's no reason to do it, but I can't help it. I check the tag on one of her old dresses. She's a size six.

Time passes like this. A lot of it. Tracy memorizes the Preamble to the Constitution. She reads *The Federalist Papers*. She studies Charles Dickens and Jane Austen. She subscribes to a magazine called *Astronomy Now* and learns to pick out constellations in the night sky. She learns what an equinox is. She buys a biography on Beethoven. She skims through *The Qu'ran* and starts using the word “non-linear.” She reads *The New York Times* online. She registers as a democrat.

She stops asking me questions.

She frames her photographs and starts hanging them around the house. She doesn't ask me my opinion of them, or whether I'd like to have them hanging in my home. She especially doesn't ask me whether I'd like a close-up of a yellowed, decayed wide-opened human mouth with three missing teeth hanging over my couch. It just appears.

And then, in late summer, I'm walking down the hall, and there I am, a picture of me, I mean, hanging above the thermostat. It's a black and white shot. I've never seen it before. I didn't know she'd taken it, and I'm not even sure when she would have. It's a picture of me from behind, and I'm walking down the street where we live. I'm about three houses down from where she took the picture, so there's a lot of other stuff in it—a cloudless sky, the neighbors' houses and lawns, and mailboxes and cars and things, but in the center of all of this, there's a little me, walking slowly away.

But listen. In this picture, my hands are at my sides, and I don't really know how to describe them, but what I want to say is that my hands look heavy. In this photograph, even from three houses away, it looks like my hands are made of lead. It looks like carrying my hands around has been wearing me out. My head's down, and my shoulders are stooped, and I could maybe live with this sudden photograph of me showing up above my thermostat, if it weren't for those awful hands.

So I need to do something. Something drastic. I don't give her a choice about it. On a Tuesday, I leave work early. I drive home and pull her camera—“Horace”—out of the closet. I'm in the parking lot at the dental plaza at 4:50, waiting in my Chevy. When she comes out the front and sees me, she doesn't look surprised at all. She doesn't wave or smile. Her face stays blank, and she walks slowly over and gets in.

I put her camera in her lap.

“Horace,” I say, “wants to take pictures at the botanical gardens.” We have these gardens here, like 150 acres of carefully manicured roses and dogwoods and things.

“Sounds good,” Tracy says, but there's no girlish pleasure in her voice, no lilting or sing-songing.

In the car, I try to talk.

“Let's hear about today's patients,” I say.

“Nothing special today,” she says, and she turns on the air conditioning. “Just the same old thing.”

At the gardens, I take her to Mirror Lake. I don’t know if it’s a real lake or if it’s manmade, but it’s full of these huge goldfish, and standing on the shore, we can see them swimming underneath the water.

She takes a few pictures of them.

She walks around a bit, taking pictures of reeds and flowers. She takes a picture of a few lily pads floating on the lake. They have large purple flowers growing out of them.

“Water lilies,” Tracy says, mostly to herself I think. *Nymphaea odorata*.

I don’t know how she knows this.

We hang around the shore for ten, maybe fifteen minutes. There’s no wind, so the leaves make no noise, and the gardens are green and still.

If I were younger, I’d take her hand right now, and that would mean something. But today, I can’t, because it would mean something else, so instead, I muster the courage to speak.

“I’ve been trying to keep up with you,” I say.

“I know,” she says.

“I’ve tried everything—learning, faking, ignoring.”

“I know.”

She takes a close-up of where the water touches the shore.

“Where did I go wrong?” I say.

“Nowhere,” and she at least looks at me now. Her blue eyes are clear and bright and lovely.

“Time passes,” she says. “That’s all. I guess it’s pretty normal.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” I say. I hunch and pick up a stone. It’s smooth and flat. I still know this, so I curl the cool rock into my palm, and fling it low over the lake. It skips seven times before the rock disappears beneath the surface.

“I could never do that,” Tracy says. “If I tried a million times, I could never skip a rock.” The ripples from the seven skips grow and merge and form a momentary water chain.

“Yeah, you could,” I say. “Anyone could.”

The sun is setting now, and the sky isn’t blazing full of color, and it’s not the most magnificent thing I’ve ever seen. But the sky does look that way it only can for maybe ten minutes a day, like it’s an old, grainy photograph. Then I get this idea, this kind of strange idea.

“I can teach you,” I say. “I can teach you to skip a rock.”

I rifle through dirt and leaves until I find the perfect stone. It takes a minute, but there it is, half-buried, so I pry it gently out of the earth.

I reach out my hand and hold it for her to take.

She looks at it.

“I can teach you,” I say.

Then everything kind of stops and fades off. It’s like there’s no sunset, no sky, no rippling water. There’s just me and her and my outstretched arm and this stone.

She needs to take this from me. If she doesn’t, maybe there’s still hope. Maybe we can still go on, but even so, everything depends upon this, and she needs to take this stone. There are things I still know, and I can do them—we can do them—if she’ll only take this stone. I’m burning and shaking, and the muscles in my fingers are tight. My hand is lead, and I have to steady myself against the weight of this just to keep my arm out there, and it’s all I can do to keep from dropping this thing—this little, hard, heavy, perfect thing.

So she needs to take this. I need for her to take this.

Please take this. ☾