

One Small Detail

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Rated G

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Summary: A good newsman notices detail.

These characters are not mine. Thanks to Lynn for betaing at short notice and to GooBoo for being the GE.

I stare at the front page of the morning edition of the Daily Planet.

Under the masthead, there's a one-word headline, two paragraphs giving a taste of the story that continues on the second, third, fourth, and fifth pages, and a huge, colour photograph of a man lifting a rocket into space.

I've been in the newspaper business for forty years, but I know this story will change my world, my life, and my job forever.

When I was starting out as a junior reporter, my editor taught me the importance of detail.

He used to say, "Perry, not everything you notice will be included in a story, but if you don't notice something, it definitely won't be there. And that small detail could be what sets your story apart from the rest."

In the early days, one of my tasks each morning was to buy a cup of coffee from the stand outside the office and take it to my editor. One morning when I put it on his desk, he said, "Describe the vendor."

I had to think back, wading through my early-morning haze of sleep-deprivation, a few thousand ever-circulating Elvis facts, a cache of embryonic story ideas, and a long list of ways to convince my editor to let me write them. To my dismay, I discovered my memory bank held little about the coffee vendor I'd spoken to just five minutes earlier. "Dark hair, medium build, average height," was the best I could offer.

My editor slapped his desk so hard that his coffee sloshed onto a pile of papers. "You've just described eighty per cent of the men in Metropolis," he growled.

I was still contemplating whether I should offer to clean up the coffee when he told me to go and get him another one.

As I waited in the queue, I stared at the vendor, memorising every detail. He had a short, well-kept beard — how could I have missed that? - and on closer examination as I paid for the coffee, I noticed a thin line of irregularity in the bristles, stretching from his left cheek down to his jaw.

I took the second cup of coffee back to my editor, but to my great disappointment, he didn't ask for a description of the vendor. He gave me the pile of stained and soggy papers and told me to re-type the damaged ones.

I did so, frustrated that I was wasting time when I could have been chasing down real stories.

Over the following days, I studied the vendor's face until it became more familiar than my own. Then, I moved on, memorising the facial details of the people waiting in the queue, the passers-by, the office janitors. When the vendor was replaced by a middle-aged woman, I had her face committed to memory in less time than it took her to make my editor's cappuccino.

Three months later, a body was found in the alley next to our office block. The victim had been brutally stabbed to the throat and chest. The police talked to us during their initial

investigation, but no one had seen anything. One of the senior reporters wrote the story, but the case stalled due to the lack of a weapon, a motive, and a suspect, and it slipped from the first page to the sixth page to disappearing from the news altogether.

Until, ten days later, two detectives came to our office and asked everyone to look at a photo of a man they wanted to question.

No one recognised him. When my turn came, I looked at the face. The man was bald, wore glasses, was clean-shaven, and had nondescript features.

I was about to shake my head and say I'd never seen him before when I noticed something. I drew the photo closer and peered at his face. There was a faint scar running down his left cheek to his jaw.

I mentioned this to the officers. That evening, the former coffee vendor was arrested. He was charged with murder and later convicted.

My editor allowed me to write the story. It was my first front-page by-line.

I had learned my lesson well. A good newsman notices detail. It became a habit so ingrained that when Superman flew through the high window and gently deposited my best reporter in the bullpen, it wasn't the blatant defiance of gravity or the flashy cape that lodged in my memory, but the little freckle perched above the right side of his mouth.

I pick up the morning edition and turn the page. Jimmy's zoomed-in shot of Superman's face is staring back at me. My eyes automatically scan the superhero's upper lip. If he ever grew a moustache, would the bristles grow more sparsely over the freckle?

I doubt I will ever know the answer to that question.

I return the paper to my desk and sit back in my chair.

I have learned well, but as a teacher, I have to accept failure.

Lois Lane, my great hope for the newspaper business into the next millennium, hasn't yet learned the importance of detail.

Or if she has, she is so overwhelmed by the powers, the physique, and the body-hugging spandex that she missed something so small and seemingly inconsequential as a freckle.

And, she's so busy ramming home her lofty position as top dog to the new reporter from Smallville that I doubt she could improve much on my 'dark hair, medium build, average height' effort if I were to ask her to describe him.

Perhaps I should tell her the story of the coffee vendor.

Or perhaps not.

THE END