THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW

By A. M. Homes, from her collection by the same title, to be published in September by HarperCollins.

There are things I do not know. I was absent the day they passed out the information sheets. I was home in bed with a fever and an earache. I lay with the heating pad pressed to my head, burning my ear. I lay with the heating pad until my mother came in and said, "Don't keep it on high or you'll burn yourself." This was something I knew but chose to forget.

The information sheets had the words "Things You Should Know" typed across the top of the page. They were mimeographed pages, purple ink on white paper. The sheets were written by my fourth-grade teacher. They were written when she was young and thought about things. She thought of a language for these things and wrote them down in red Magic Marker.

By the time she was my teacher, she'd been teaching for a very long time but had never gotten past fourth grade. She hadn't done anything since her Things You Should Know sheets, which didn't really count, since she'd written them while she was still a student.

After my ear got better, the infection cured, the red burn mark faded into a sort of a Florida tan. I went back to school. Right away I knew I'd missed something important. "Ask the other students to fill you in on what happened while you were ill," the principal said when I handed her the note from my mother. But none of the others would talk to me. Immediately I knew this was because they'd gotten the information sheets and we no longer spoke the same language.

I tried asking the teacher, "Is there anything I missed while I was out?" She handed me a stack of maps to color in and some math problems. "You should put a little Vaseline on your ear," she said. "It'll keep it from peeling."

"Is there anything else?" I asked. She shook her head.

I couldn't just come out and say it. I couldn't say, You know, those information sheets, the ones you passed out the other day while I was home burning my ear. Do you have an extra copy? I couldn't ask because I'd already asked everyone. I asked so many people—my parents, their friends, random strangers—that in the end they sent me to a psychiatrist.

"What exactly do you think is written on this 'Things to Know' paper?" he asked me.

"Things You Should Know," I said. "It's not things to know, not things you will learn, but things you already should know but maybe are a little dumb, so you don't."

"Yes," he said, nodding. "And what are those things?"

"You're asking me?" I shouted. "I don't know. You're the one who should know. You tell me. I never saw the list."

Time passed. I grew up. I grew older. I grew deaf in one ear. In the newspaper I read that the teacher had died. She was eighty-four. In time I began to notice there was less to know. All the same, I kept looking for the list. Once, in an old bookstore, I thought I found page four. It was old, faded, folded into quarters and stuffed into an early volume of Henry Miller's essays. The top part of the page had been torn off. It began with number six: "Do what you will because you will anyway." Number twenty-eight was: "If you begin and it is not the beginning, begin again." And so on. At the bottom of the page it said, "Chin San Fortune Company lines 1 through 32."

Years later, when I was even older, when those younger than me seemed to know less than I ever had, I wrote a story. And in a room full of people, full of people who knew the list and some who I was sure did not, I stood to read. "As a child, I burned my ear into a Florida tan."

"Stop," a man yelled, waving his hands at me. "Why?"

"Don't you know?" he said. I shook my head. He was a man who knew the list, who probably had his own personal copy. He had based his life on it, on trying to explain it to others.

He spoke, he drew diagrams, splintering poles of chalk as he put pictures on a blackboard. He tried to tell of the things he knew. He tried to talk but did not have the language of the teacher.

I breathed deeply and thought of Chin San number twenty-eight. "If you begin and it is not the beginning, begin again."

"I will begin again," I announced. Because I had stated this and had not asked for a second chance, because I was standing and he was seated, because it was still early in the evening, the man who had stopped me nodded, all right.

"Things You Should Know," I said.

"Good title, good title," the man said. "Go on, go on."

"There is a list," I said, nearing the end. "It is a list you make yourself. And at the top of the page you write, 'Things You Should Know.'"