
THE CORRECTION

SAMPLE

A NOVEL

JOHN HAZEN

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After getting my sixth Southern genteel refusal, I was ready to head to a more modest neighborhood, but I tried one more house. It was an immense white two-story mansion with four impressive pillars lining the front porch. I knocked on the door. The wood was so substantial that I wondered if anyone could hear my feeble knocking, but within a few seconds, the portal opened. Facing me was a mass of shoulder-length raven hair surrounding an alabaster face. The woman appeared to be about my age.

“Can I help you?”

I have a usual opening line that I’ve found effective, but I was so flummoxed by this beauty that I blurted whatever popped into my mind.

“Would you like encyclopedias?”

She laughed. “Who doesn’t like encyclopedias?”

I recovered somewhat. “Oh, you’d be surprised. The residents of six houses in this neighborhood have rejected me already.”

“Maybe it’s that opening line of yours.”

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“Perhaps it is. Maybe I should close the door and start over again. If every time I opened a door, I was greeted with such a lovely face, I wouldn’t care if I never sold another set of encyclopedias in my life.”

“Okay, now you’re hitting your stride. What’s a wombat?”

I don’t know why, but I was not blindsided by this question. “It’s a marsupial native to Australia.”

“Who fought in the Crimean War, and when was it?”

“The Crimean War was fought between 1853 and 1856. Russia lost to an alliance of the Ottoman Empire, England, Sardinia, and France.”

“Who was Zoroaster?”

“He was an ancient Iranian prophet who lived in the 6th or 7th century BC. He established Zoroastrianism, the world’s oldest continuously practiced religion that, in a nutshell, predicts the ultimate conquest of evil.”

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I was unsure why she asked all these questions, but I enjoyed it. I found it rousing.

“Who was Peter Minuit?”

“He was the third governor of New Netherland, which later became New York. Historians widely credit him with purchasing the island of Manhattan.”

She paused.

“Did I pass?”

“If I were to buy a car, I’d make sure that the guy selling me the car knew it inside and out. Why wouldn’t I ask the same of someone selling me a set of encyclopedias?”

“Fair enough. Does that mean you’re thinking of buying a set?”

“Not necessarily. I’m thinking that since you seem to have as much knowledge as the encyclopedia, it might be cheaper to marry you instead.”

“Is that a proposal?”

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“Not necessarily. It’s a little difficult marrying somebody whose name I don’t know or who doesn’t know my name.”

“I’m Joseph Vance.”

“I’m Olivia Wyatt.”

“Now that our introductions are out of the way, was that a proposal?”

“Not necessarily. I couldn’t imagine marrying someone who’s never even taken me out to dinner.”

“Would you join me for dinner this evening? Since I’m new to this city, I will leave it to you to pick the restaurant.”

“I never would have guessed you weren’t a native.”

“I do have a bit of a northern accent, don’t I?”

“I personally find it charming. I get off work at six. Pick me up then?”

“You’re working?”

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“Why, yes. I’m the nanny for the Robinson’s two children. You didn’t think I owned all this, did you?”

“So, I don’t suppose you’ll be purchasing a set of encyclopedias, will you?”

“No, but the Robinsons will, once I tell them how wonderful they are.”

“But you haven’t seen them yet.”

“If they gave you all that knowledge, they must be wonderful. Do you have a card?”

I produced one and gave it to her.

“Mrs. Robinson is due home from the hairdresser in an hour. Don’t worry, I’ll sell her on the need for all this knowledge for the kids. My sales pitch will be much better than yours. See you at six, then?”

I returned to my hotel to collect myself, clean up, and prepare for my date. I should have hit at least two more homes that day to drum up sales. One more sale would warrant a trip to this city. But I was too flustered and distracted to do more work that day. Her

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forwardness and sardonic humor got to me. I was still pinching myself at my good luck.

I had dated a few girls in my life, but no one other than Victoria on a steady basis. Olivia caught me off-guard and kept me off-balance. I spoke with her for ten minutes, but she was the most intriguing person I'd ever met.

When I went to this neighborhood earlier, I took a cab and walked around. This time, I drove my rental car and arrived back at the mansion at precisely six. She walked out, not in a dress or any attire I would imagine her wearing to a nice restaurant. She wore casual tan slacks and a loose-fitting white shirt. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She took one look at me in my suit and tsked repeatedly.

"This will not do. This will not do at all. You'll be totally out of place."

"Where are we going?"

"Eloise's, best restaurant in Charleston if not the Carolinas. But it's very casual. I guess I neglected to mention that, didn't I? We should go back to your

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hotel, and you can change. Let's be quick, though. That place fills up quickly."

We swung back to the hotel. She waited in the car while I ran up and changed. Less than ten minutes later, I was back down to the car.

"That's much better. Let's go."

She had me weave through the city as I headed east toward the port area. The neighborhoods became increasingly less affluent as we drove along. She had me take one more turn and then told me to turn into a parking lot next to what appeared to be a huge unpainted shack. The parking lot was packed, and I didn't think we'd get a spot, but she pointed to one right up next to the building, a spot that had a crudely lettered 'Reserved' sign in front of it. The parking space was directly in front of the main door, over which a red neon sign told the world they were at Eloise's.

Even before we got out of the car, we could hear the music of a jazz combo. Once we stepped out, the song was more distinct.

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“Ah, Duke Ellington, *Take the A Train*.”

Olivia looked impressed. “That is quite a set of encyclopedias, isn’t it?”

“I’ve acquired some bits of knowledge over the years outside of the encyclopedia. My Dad is a jazz fanatic. I’m going to know Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, and all the greats.”

We walked in, and the place was packed. The band, consisting of a female lead singer with a husky, sultry voice, a trumpet player, a clarinetist, a bass player, and a drummer, was in one corner. I surveyed the crowd who were all Black except for one table of six, two other customers, the drummer and now Olivia and me. Olivia was spying on my reaction as we walked in. I think she was gauging my reaction to walking into a room full of Black people. I was so into the band I hardly noticed who was there. I think that’s what she wanted to see because when I looked down at her, I saw her smiling up at me. I smiled at her in return.

When we walked in a few feet, a big black woman wearing a form-fitting red cocktail dress and extremely

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high heels rushed over. Her hair was piled up in a bun on top of her head. She picked Olivia up off the floor, gave her a bear hug, and spun her around. Olivia squealed like a five-year-old.

“You been away too long, Livy.”

“Auntie, I was here just last week.”

“Like I said, too long. Who have we here?”

“This is Joseph Vance. He just sold me a set of encyclopedias. Well, he sold one to the Robinsons, anyway. Joe, this is Eloise Walker. She owns this place.”

We shook hands. Eloise eyed me warily, but I passed at least initial muster as she welcomed me. She then took Olivia by the arm and led her to a corner table. They chatted as they walked along.

“We had a tough time reserving your table tonight. A couple rough hooligans tried to claim it, but your Uncle Oscar set ’em straight. He said, ‘Our Livy’s comin’ tonight so’s you better move them asses off those chairs if ya knows what’s good fer ya.’ ”

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“C’mon Auntie, Uncle Oscar wouldn’t scare a fly. You’re the one who told them to move their asses, right?”

She broke into a full-throated laugh. “Little lady-like me? I could never use such language. You two sit right down, and I’ll start bringin’ out some food to ya.”

Eloise left. I turned to Olivia. “It’s hard to hear over the band, but did you call her Auntie?”

“She’s my aunt. Actually, she’s more like a mother to me. My parents died of the influenza when I was two. Aunt Eloise and Uncle Oscar took me in and raised me. Before your mind runs all over the place, my dad was white and my mom was black. They couldn’t get married, but somehow, they figured out a way to have me. When they died, my father’s family wouldn’t have anything to do with me. My aunt and uncle took me in, no questions asked. They raised me as their own. Their world became my world. But then, because of my skin color, I’ve since had to straddle both worlds, never belonging in either.”

“That’s fascinating.”

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“You really think so, don’t you?” It was an observation, not a question. “This is always the place I bring my first dates. I don’t go out on a lot of second dates.”

“I can’t imagine any man not wanting to see you a second time or a third or fourth or fifth time.”

“You’re either very sweet or a very smooth talker. Given how you stumbled over your sales pitch, I’m leaning towards sweet. There’s something sweetly naïve about you. Not many guys I date are at ease when they walk in here. I’ve had some who instinctively put their hands on their wallets. Why are you different?”

“It all started in Charleston.”

“I thought you’d never been to Charleston.”

“Never have. This is my first time down here. My connection goes back three generations. My great-great-grandfather Efrem Reynolds was down here on business in the 1850s. While he was here, he became aware of the plight of an African slave who was being auctioned off along with his wife and young girl. He bought the three of them and then drove them north

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to New York. Along the way, they encountered a sheriff who questioned where he was taking the slaves and a road bandit they had to kill. In New York, Efrem set them free and set them up with jobs and a place to live. His story is part of our family lore. I thought I owed it to him to return and visit the places he wrote about.”

“Why did he do such a thing?”

“Efrem was in the tobacco trade. He did some business with the owner of the slaves and got to know the slave named Andrew. He couldn’t abide Andrew’s family being split up. It just wasn’t right.”

“And you said my story was fascinating.”

I was tempted to tell her that Efrem first heard of Andrew through a Correction that saved the slave’s life. I didn’t think that to be the type of thing you mention on a first date. I did want a second date.

Olivia excused herself. I assumed she just had to go to the bathroom, but when she returned with Aunt Eloise and an older gentleman who introduced himself as Oscar.

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“James, tell my aunt and uncle the story you told me.”

I did as she instructed. When Olivia brought them over, her aunt had the same wary look as when I first walked in. As I told her the story, I could see her visibly soften. By the end, there was a discernable tear in her eye.

“Auntie, James is looking to pay tribute to his great-great-grandfather by finding places he and Andrew and—what did you say the wife and daughter’s names were?”

“Eliza and Hannah.” I felt no need to advise her that she got my name wrong. Later, when I told her about it, she laughed and said she knew. She’d decided I looked more like a James than a Joe. We both laughed.

“Yes, Eliza and Hannah, do you think Ms. Lily can help him?”

“It’s worth talking to her. Why don’t you come by tomorrow evening for dinner, and we’ll ask her?”

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Eloise and Oscar got up to leave. They had a place to run, after all. But before they left, Eloise gave me a big hug, nearly as big as the one she gave Olivia when we walked in. Once they left, I turned to Olivia. “Who’s Ms. Lily?”

“Our neighbor. Nobody knows how old she is, but she’s got to be well over ninety. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s over a hundred. Her body’s failing her a bit lately, but she’s still sharp as a tack. A real feisty lady! She didn’t accept me, a white girl living right next door. She grew up a slave, after all, and then lived through the era of the Klan and Jim Crow. They lynched one of her husbands. It was natural she’d not warm up to any white people. I wore her down, though, and we’re very close now. She may be very cold to you, but if she sees you mean something to me, she’ll warm up to you.”

“So, I mean something to you, do I?”

She blushed for a second but then recovered quickly.

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“You mean at least as much to me as a set of encyclopedias.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



John grew up in a small town in Massachusetts, spent much of his life in the New York City area, and now lives in Florida. Inspired by Lynn, his wife of forty-four years, he pursued the dream of becoming an established author and has written seven suspense thrillers. John and Lynn love to travel, and the experiences of those travels, complemented by things he learned from degrees from Rutgers University, The New School, and New York University, buttressed by a lifelong passion for learning and a love of history, find their way into his writing. John's reading tastes are eclectic,

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ranging from histories to classic novels to an occasional piece of modern trash. His absolute “must reads” are Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, and Doris Kearns Goodwin’s *No Ordinary Time*.

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Thank you.

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