

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## Liars Don't Qualify

JUNIUS EDWARDS

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*Notwithstanding the abundant social and personal degradations and humiliations experienced by African Americans as a result of segregation and other racist denials of equal access and human dignity, nothing compares politically to the systematic denial of their right to vote. The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1870, established that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” But all through the South, that right was thwarted by the use of poll taxes and literacy tests, and by various informal kinds of obstruction and intimidation.*

*This prize-winning story, published in 1961 (before the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965) by Louisiana-born writer and entrepreneur Junius Edwards (1929–2008), poignantly recounts an episode of the latter. Will Harris, like Edwards an Army veteran, tries to register in his hometown somewhere in the South, but is given a hard time by two good ol' boys, Sam and Charlie. What is the purpose of their questions and comments? Why all the questions about Will Harris' job? What is the effect of the interrogation on each of the participants? What do you think of the way Will Harris conducted himself? What do you think of the end of the story, and Harris' encounter with the American flag? Has he lost his love of country? Were you in his place, would you have lost it?*

Will Harris sat on the bench in the waiting room for another hour. His pride was not the only thing that hurt. He wanted them to call him in and get him registered so he could get out of there. Twice, he started to go into the inner office and tell them, but he thought better of it. He had counted ninety-six cigarette butts on the floor when a fat man came out of the office and spoke to him.

“What you want, boy?”

Will Harris got to his feet.

“I came to register.”

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“Oh, you did, did you?”

“Yes, sir.”

The fat man stared at Will for a second, then turned his back to him.

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As he turned his back, he said, “Come on in here.”

Will went in.

It was a little office and dirty, but not so dirty as the waiting room. There were no cigarette butts on the floor here. Instead, there was paper. They looked like candy wrappers to Will. There were two desks jammed in there, and a bony little man sat at one of them, his head down, his fingers fumbling with some papers. The fat man went around the empty desk and pulled up a chair. The bony man did not look up.

Will stood in front of the empty desk and watched the fat man sit down behind it. The fat man swung his chair around until he faced the little man.

“Charlie,” he said.

“Yeah, Sam,” Charlie said, not looking up from his work.

“Charlie. This boy here says he came to register.”

“You sure? You sure that’s what he said, Sam?” Still not looking up. “You sure? You better ask him again, Sam.”

“All right, Charlie. All right. I’ll ask him again,” the fat man said. He looked up at Will. “Boy. What you come here for?”

“I came to register.”

The fat man stared up at him. He didn’t say anything. He just stared, his lips a thin line, his eyes wide open. His left hand searched behind him and came up with a handkerchief. He raised his left arm and mopped his face with the handkerchief, his eyes still on Will.

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The odor from under his sweat-soaked arm made Will step back. Will held his breath until the fat man finished mopping his face. The fat man put his handkerchief away. He pulled a desk drawer open, and then he took his eyes off Will. He reached in the desk drawer and took out a bar of candy. He took the wrapper off the candy and threw the wrapper on the floor at Will's feet. He looked at Will and ate the candy.

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Will stood there and tried to keep his face straight. He kept telling himself: I'll take anything. I'll take anything to get it done.

The fat man kept his eyes on Will and finished the candy. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his mouth. He grinned, then he put his handkerchief away.

"Charlie." The fat man turned to the little man.

"Yeah, Sam."

"He says he come to register."

"Sam, are you sure?"

"Pretty sure, Charlie."

"Well, explain to him what it's about." The bony man still had not looked up.

"All right, Charlie," Sam said, and looked up at Will. "Boy, when folks come here, they intend to vote, so they register first."

"That's what I want to do," Will said.

"What's that? Say that again."

"That's what I want to do. Register and vote."

The fat man turned his head to the bony man.

"Charlie."

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“Yea, Sam.”

“He says. . . Charlie, this boy says he wants to register and vote.”

The bony man looked up from his desk for the first time. He looked at Sam, then both of them looked at Will. Page | 4

Will looked from one of them to the other, one to the other. It was hot, and he wanted to sit down. *Anything. I'll take anything.*

The man called Charlie turned back to his work, and Sam swung his chair around until he faced Will.

“You got a job?” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Boy, you know what you're doing?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right,” Sam said. “All right.”

Just then, Will heard the door open behind him, and someone came in. It was a man.

“How you all? How about registering?”

Sam smiled. Charlie looked up and smiled.

“Take care of you right away,” Sam said, and then to Will. “Boy. Wait outside.”

As Will went out, he heard Sam's voice: “Take a seat, please. Take a seat. Have you fixed up in a little bit. Now, what's your name?”

“Thanks,” the man said, and Will heard the scrape of a chair.

Will closed the door and went back to his bench.

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*Anything. Anything. Anything. I'll take it all.*

Pretty soon the man came out smiling. Sam came out behind him, and he called Will and told him to come in. Will went in and stood before the desk. Sam told him he wanted to see his papers: Discharge, High School Diploma, Birth Certificate, Social Security Card, and some other papers. Will had them all. He felt good when he handed them to Sam.

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“You belong to any organization?”

“No, sir.”

“Pretty sure about that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You ever heard of the 15th Amendment?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What does that one say?”

“It’s the one that says all citizens can vote.”

“You like that, don’t you, boy? Don’t you?”

“Yes, sir. I like them all.”

Sam’s eyes got big. He slammed his right fist down on his desk top. “I didn’t ask you that. I asked you if you liked the 15th Amendment. Now, if you can’t answer my questions . . .”

“I like it,” Will put in, and watched Sam catch his breath.

Same sat there looking up at Will. He opened and closed his desk-pounding fist. His mouth hung open.

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“Charlie.”

“Yeah, Sam.” Not looking up.

“You hear that?” looking wide-eyed at Will. “You hear that?”

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“I heard it, Sam.”

Will had to work to keep his face straight.

“Boy, Sam said. “You born in this town?”

“You got my birth certificate right there in front of you. Yes, sir.”

“You happy here?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You got nothing against the ways things go around here?”

“No, sir.”

“Can you read?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you smart?”

“No, sir.”

“Where did you get that suit?”

“New York.”

“New York?” Sam asked, and looked over at Charlie. Charlie’s head was still down. Sam looked back at Will.

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“Yes, sir,” said Will.

“Boy, what you doing there.”

“I got out of the Army there.”

“You believe in what them folks do in New York?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You know what I mean. Boy, you know good and well what I mean. You know how folks carry on in New York. You believe in that?”

“No, sir,” Will said, slowly.

“You pretty sure about that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What year did they make the 15th Amendment?”

“... 18 ... 70,” said Will.

“Name a signer of the Declaration of Independence who became a President.”

“... John Adams.”<sup>1</sup>

“Boy, what did you say?” Sam’s eyes were wide again.

Will thought for a second. Then he said, “John Adams.”

Sam’s eyes got wider. He looked to Charlie and spoke to a bowed head. “Now, too much is too much.” Then he turned back to Will.

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<sup>1</sup> *John Adams (1735–1826) was the second President of the United States, serving in office from 1797–1801. A delegate from Massachusetts to the Continental Congress, he signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Only one other signer—Thomas Jefferson—then went on to become president.*

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He didn't say anything to Will. He narrowed his eyes first, then spoke.

"Did you say *just* John Adams?"

"*Mister* John Adams," Will said, realizing his mistake.

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"That's more like it," Sam smiled. "Now, why do you want to vote?"

"I want to vote because it is my duty as an American citizen to vote?"

"Hah," Sam said, real loud. "Hah," again, and pushed back from his desk and turned to the bony man.

"Charlie."

"Yeah, Sam."

"Hear that?"

"I heard, Sam."

Sam leaned back in his chair, keeping his eyes on Charlie. He locked his hands across his round stomach and sat there.

"Charlie."

"Yeah, Sam."

"Think you and Elnora be coming over tonight?"

"Don't know, Sam," said the bony man, not looking up. "You know Elnora."

"Well, you welcome if you can."

"Don't know, Sam."

"You ought to, if you can. Drop in, if you can. Come on over and we'll split a corn whiskey."

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The bony man looked up.

“Now, that’s different, Sam.”

“Thought it would be.”

“Can’t turn down corn if it’s good.”

“You know my corn.”

“Sure do. I’ll drag Elnora. I’ll drag her by the hair if I have to.”

The bony man went back to work.

Sam turned his chair around to his desk. He opened a desk drawer and took out a package of cigarettes. He tore it open and put a cigarette in his mouth. He looked up at Will, then he lit the cigarette and took a long drag, and then he blew the smoke, very slowly, up toward Will’s face.

The smoke floated up toward Will’s face. It came up in front of his eyes and nose and hung there, then it danced and played around his face, and disappeared.

Will didn’t move, but he was glad he hadn’t been asked to sit down.

“You have a car?”

“No, sir.”

“Don’t you have a job?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You like that job?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You like it, but you don’t want it.”

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“What do you mean?” Will asked.

“Don’t get smart, boy,” Sam said, wide-eyed. “I’m asking the questions here. You understand that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right. All right. Be sure you do.”

“I understand it.”

“You a Communist?”

“No, sir.”

“What party do you want to vote for?”

“I wouldn’t go by parties. I’d read about the men and vote for a man, not a party.”

“Hah,” Sam said, and looked over at Charlie’s bowed head. “Hah,” he said again, and turned back to Will.

“Boy, you pretty sure you can read?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right. All right. We’ll see about that.” Sam took a book out of his desk and flipped some pages. He gave the book to Will.

“Read that loud,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” Will said, and began: “When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the

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opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”<sup>2</sup>

Will cleared his throat and read on. He tried to be distinct with each syllable. He didn't need the book. He could have recited the whole thing without the book.

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“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they . . .”

“Wait a minute, boy,” Sam said. “Wait a minute. You believe that? You believe that about ‘created equal’?”

“Yes, sir,” Will said, knowing that was the wrong answer.

“You really believe that?”

“Yes, sir.” Will couldn't make himself say the answer Sam wanted to hear.

Sam stuck out his right hand, and Will put the book in it. Then Sam turned to the other man.

“Charlie.”

“Yeah, Sam.”

“Charlie, did you hear that?”

“What was it, Sam?”

“This boy, here, Charlie. He says he really believes it.”

“Believes what, Sam? What are you talking about?”

“This boy, here . . . believes that all men are equal, like it says in The Declaration.”

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<sup>2</sup> Read the whole Declaration of Independence at [www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-meaning-of-america/declaration-of-independence](http://www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-meaning-of-america/declaration-of-independence).

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“Now, Sam. Now you know that’s not right. You know good and well that’s not right. You heard him wrong. Ask him again, Sam. Ask him again, will you?”

“I didn’t hear him wrong, Charlie,” said Sam, and turned to Will. “Did I, boy? Did I hear you wrong?”

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“No, sir.”

“I didn’t hear you wrong?”

“No, sir.”

Sam turned to Charlie.

“Charlie.”

“Yeah, Sam.”

“Charlie. You think this boy trying to be smart?”

“Sam. I think he might be. Just might be. He looks like one of them that don’t know his place.”

Sam narrowed his eyes.

“Boy,” he said. “You know your place?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Boy, you know good and well what I mean.”

“What do you mean?”

“Boy, who’s . . . ,” Sam leaned forward, on his desk. “Just who’s asking questions, here?”

“You are, sir.”

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“Charlie. You think he really is trying to be smart?”

“Sam, I think you better ask him.”

“Boy.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Boy. You trying to be smart with me?”

“No, sir.”

“Sam.”

“Yeah, Charlie.”

“Sam. Ask him if he thinks he’s good as you and me.”

“Now, Charlie. Now, you heard what he said about The Declaration.”

“Ask, anyway, Sam.”

“All right,” Sam said. “Boy. You think you good as me and Mister Charlie?”

“No, sir,” Will said.

They smiled, and Charlie turned away.

Will wanted to take off his jacket. It was hot, and he felt a drop of sweat roll down his right side. He pressed his right arm against his side to wipe out the sweat. He thought he had it, but it rolled again, and he felt another drop come behind that one. He pressed his arm in again. It was no use. He gave it up.

“How many stars did the first flag have?”

“... Thirteen.”

“What’s the name of the mayor of this town?”

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“ . . . Mister Roger Phillip Thornedyke Jones.”

“Spell Thornedyke.”

“ . . . Capital T-h-o-r-n-e-d-y-k-e, Thornedyke.”

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“How long has he been mayor?”

“ . . . Seventeen years.”

“Who was the biggest hero in the War between the States?”

“ . . . General Robert E. Lee.”

“What does that ‘E’ stand for?”

“ . . . Edward.”

“Think you pretty smart, don’t you?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, boy, you have been giving these answers too slow. I want them fast. Understand? Fast.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What’s your favorite song?”

“*Dixie*,” Will said, and prayed Sam would not ask him to sing it.

“Do you like your job?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What year did Arizona come into the States?”

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“1912.”

“There was another state in 1912.”

“New Mexico, it came in January and Arizona in February.”

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“You think you smart, don’t you?”

“No, sir.”

“Oh, yes, you do, boy.”

Will said nothing.

“Boy, you make good money on your job?”

“I make enough.”

“Oh. Oh, you not satisfied with it?”

“Yes, sir. I am.”

“You don’t act like it, boy. You know that? You don’t act like it.”

“What do you mean?”

“You getting smart again, boy. Just who’s asking questions here?”

“You are, sir.”

“That’s right. That’s right.”

The bony man made a noise with his lips and slammed his pencil down on his desk. He looked at Will, then at Sam.

“Sam,” he said. “Sam, you having trouble with that boy? Don’t you let that boy give you no trouble, now, Sam. Don’t you do it.”

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“Charlie,” Sam said. “Now, Charlie, you know better than that. You know better. This boy here knows better than that, too.”

“You sure about that, Sam? You sure?”

“I better be sure if this boy here knows what’s good for him.”

“Does he know, Sam?”

“Do you know, boy?” Sam asked Will.

“Yes, sir.”

Charlie turned back to his work.

“Boy,” Sam said. “You sure you’re not a member of any organization?”

“Yes, sir. I’m sure.”

Sam gathered up all Will’s papers, and he stacked them very neatly and placed them in the center of his desk. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and put it out in the full ash tray. He picked up Will’s papers and gave them to him.

“You’ve been in the Army. That right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You served two years. That right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You have to do six years in the Reserve. That right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re in the Reserve now. That right?”

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“Yes, sir.”

“You lied to me here, today. That right?”

“No, sir.”

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“Boy, I said you lied to me here today. That right?”

“No, sir.”

“Oh, yes, you did, boy. Oh, yes, you did. You told me you wasn’t in any organization. That right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then you lied, boy. You lied to me because you’re in the Army Reserve. That right?”

“Yes, sir. I’m in the Reserve, but I didn’t think you meant that. I’m just in it, and don’t have to go to meetings or anything like that. I thought you meant some kind of civilian organization.”

“When you said you wasn’t in an organization, that was a lie. Now, wasn’t it, boy?”

He had Will there. When Sam had asked him about organizations, the first thing to pop in Will’s mind had been the communists, or something like them.

“Now, wasn’t it a lie?”

“No, sir.”

Sam narrowed his eyes.

Will went on.

“No, sir, it wasn’t a lie. There’s nothing wrong with the Army Reserve. Everybody has to be in it. I’m not in it because I want to be in it.”

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“I know there’s nothing wrong with it,” Sam said. “Point is, you lied to me here, today.”

“I didn’t lie. I just didn’t understand the question,” Will said.

“You understood the question, boy. You understood good and well, and you lied to me. Now, wasn’t it a lie?”

“No, sir.”

“Boy. You going to stand right there in front of me big as anything and tell me it wasn’t a lie?” Sam almost shouted. “Now, wasn’t it a lie?”

“Yes, sir,” Will said, and put his papers in his jacket pocket.

“You right, it was,” Sam said.

Sam pushed back from his desk.

“That’s it, boy. You can’t register. You don’t qualify. Liars don’t qualify.”

“But . . .”

“That’s it.” Sam spat the words out and looked at Will hard for a second, and then he swung his chair around until he faced Charlie.

“Charlie.”

“Yeah, Sam.”

“Charlie. You want to go out to eat first today?”

Will opened the door and went out. As he walked down the stairs, he took off his jacket and his tie and opened his collar and rolled up his shirt sleeves. He stood on the courthouse steps and took a deep breath and heard a noise come from his throat as he breathed out and looked at the flag in the courtyard. The flag hung from its staff, still and quiet, the way he hated to see it; but it was there, waiting, and he hoped that a little push

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from the right breeze would lift it and send it flying and waving and whipping from its staff, proud, the way he liked to see it.

He took out a cigarette and lit it and took a slow deep drag. He blew the smoke out. He saw the cigarette burning in his right hand, turned it between his thumb and forefinger, made a face, and let the cigarette drop to the courthouse steps. Page | 19

He threw his jacket over his left shoulder and walked on down to the bus stop, swinging his arms.