

SESSION 5

Readings: **Zora Neale Hurston, “Sweat”**
 Junius Edwards, “Liars Don’t Qualify”
 Ralph Ellison, “Cadillac Flambé”



Zora Neale Hurston, “Sweat”

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) was an American author, anthropologist, and filmmaker. She is associated with the Harlem Renaissance. “Sweat” was first published in 1926.

It was eleven o’clock of a Spring night in Florida. It was Sunday. Any other night, Delia Jones would have been in bed for two hours by this time. But she was a wash-woman, and Monday morning meant a great deal to her. So she collected the soiled clothes on Saturday when she returned the clean things. Sunday night after church, she sorted them and put the white things to soak. It saved her almost a half day’s start. A great hamper in the bedroom held the clothes that she brought home. It was so much neater than a number of bundles lying around.

She squatted in the kitchen floor beside the great pile of clothes, sorting them into small heaps according to color, and humming a song in a mournful key, but wondering through it all where Sykes, her husband, had gone with her horse and buckboard.

Just then something long, round, limp and black fell upon her shoulders and slithered to the floor beside her. A great terror took hold of her. It softened her knees and dried her mouth so that it was a full minute before she could cry out or move. Then she saw that it was the big bull whip her husband liked to carry when he drove.

She lifted her eyes to the door and saw him standing there bent over with laughter at her fright. She screamed at him.

“Sykes, what you throw dat whip on me like dat? You know it would skeer me—looks just like a snake, an’ you knows how skeered Ah is of snakes.”

“Course Ah knowed it! That’s how come Ah done it.” He slapped his leg with his hand and almost rolled on the ground in his mirth. “If you such a big fool dat you got to have a fit over a earth worm or a string, Ah don’t keer how bad Ah skeer you.”

“You aint got no business doing it. Gawd knows it’s a sin. Some day Ah’m goin’ tuh drop dead from some of yo’ foolishness. ‘Nother thing, where you been wid mah rig? Ah feeds dat pony. He aint fuh you to be drivin’ wid no bull whip.”

“You sho is one aggravatin’ nigger woman!” he declared and stepped into the room. She resumed her work and did not answer him at once. “Ah done tole you time and again to keep them white folks’ clothes outa dis house.”

He picked up the whip and glared down at her. Delia went on with her work. She went out into the yard and returned with a galvanized tub and set it on the washbench. She saw that Sykes had kicked all of the clothes together again, and now stood in her way truculently, his whole manner hoping, praying, for an argument. But she walked calmly around him and commenced to re-sort the things.

“Next time, Ah’m gointer kick ’em outdoors,” he threatened as he struck a match along the leg of his corduroy breeches.

Delia never looked up from her work, and her thin, stooped shoulders sagged further.

“Ah aint for no fuss t’night Sykes. Ah just come from taking sacrament at the church house.”

He snorted scornfully. “Yeah, you just come from de church house on a Sunday night, but heah you is gone to work on them clothes. You ain’t nothing but a

hypocrite. One of them amen-corner Christians—sing, whoop, and shout, then come home and wash white folks clothes on the Sabbath.”

He stepped roughly upon the whitest pile of things, kicking them helter-skelter as he crossed the room. His wife gave a little scream of dismay, and quickly gathered them together again.

“Sykes, you quit grindin’ dirt into these clothes! How can Ah git through by Sat’day if Ah don’t start on Sunday?”

“Ah don’t keer if you never git through. Anyhow, Ah done promised Gawd and a couple of other men, Ah aint gointer have it in mah house. Don’t gimme no lip neither, else Ah’ll throw ’em out and put mah fist up side yo’ head to boot.”

Delia’s habitual meekness seemed to slip from her shoulders like a blown scarf. She was on her feet; her poor little body, her bare knuckly hands bravely defying the strapping hulk before her.

“Looka heah, Sykes, you done gone too fur. Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been takin’ in washin’ for fifteen years. Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!”

“What’s that got to do with me?” he asked brutally.

“What’s it got to do with you, Sykes? Mah tub of suds is filled yo’ belly with vittles more times than yo’ hands is filled it. Mah sweat is done paid for this house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin’ in it.”

She seized the iron skillet from the stove and struck a defensive pose, which act surprised him greatly, coming from her. It cowed him and he did not strike her as he usually did.

“Naw you won’t,” she panted, “that ole snaggle-toothed black woman you runnin’ with aint comin’ heah to pile up on mah sweat and blood. You aint paid for nothin’ on this place, and Ah’m gointer stay right heah till Ah’m toted out foot foremost.”

“Well, you better quit gittin’ me riled up, else they’ll be totin’ you out sooner than you expect. Ah’m so tired of you Ah don’t know whut to do. Gawd! how Ah hates skinny wimmen!”

A little awed by this new Delia, he sidled out of the door and slammed the back

gate after him. He did not say where he had gone, but she knew too well. She knew very well that he would not return until nearly daybreak also. Her work over, she went on to bed but not to sleep at once. Things had come to a pretty pass!

She lay awake, gazing upon the debris that cluttered their matrimonial trail. Not an image left standing along the way. Anything like flowers had long ago been drowned in the salty stream that had been pressed from her heart. Her tears, her sweat, her blood. She had brought love to the union and he had brought a longing after the flesh. Two months after the wedding, he had given her the first brutal beating. She had the memory of his numerous trips to Orlando with all of his wages when he had returned to her penniless, even before the first year had passed. She was young and soft then, but now she thought of her knotty, muscled limbs, her harsh knuckly hands, and drew herself up into an unhappy little ball in the middle of the big feather bed. Too late now to hope for love, even if it were not Bertha it would be someone else. This case differed from the others only in that she was bolder than the others. Too late for everything except her little home. She had built it for her old days, and planted one by one the trees and flowers there. It was lovely to her, lovely.

Somehow, before sleep came, she found herself saying aloud: "Oh well, whatever goes over the Devil's back, is got to come under his belly. Sometime or ruther, Sykes, like everybody else, is gointer reap his sowing." After that she was able to build a spiritual earthworks against her husband. His shells could no longer reach her. Amen. She went to sleep and slept until he announced his presence in bed by kicking her feet and rudely snatching the covers away.

"Gimme some kivah heah, an' git yo' damn foots over on yo' own side! Ah ougter mash you in yo' mouf fuh drawing dat skillet on me."

Delia went clear to the rail without answering him. A triumphant indifference to all that he was or did.

The week was as full of work for Delia as all other weeks, and Saturday found her behind her little pony, collecting and delivering clothes.

It was a hot, hot day near the end of July. The village men on Joe Clarke's porch even chewed cane listlessly. They did not hurl the cane-knots as usual. They let them dribble over the edge of the porch. Even conversation had collapsed under the heat.

“Heah come Delia Jones,” Jim Merchant said, as the shaggy pony came ’round the bend of the road toward them. The rusty buckboard was heaped with baskets of crisp, clean laundry.

“Yep,” Joe Lindsay agreed. “Hot or col’, rain or shine, jes ez reg’lar ez de weeks roll roun’ Delia carries ’em an’ fetches ’em on Sat’day.”

“She better if she wanter eat,” said Moss. “Syke Jones aint wuth de shot an’ powder hit would tek tuh kill ’em. Not to huh he aint. ”

“He sho’ aint,” Walter Thomas chimed in. “It’s too bad, too, cause she wuz a right pritty lil trick when he got huh. Ah’d uh mah’ied huh mahseff if he hadnter beat me to it.”

Delia nodded briefly at the men as she drove past.

“Too much knockin’ will ruin any ’oman. He done beat huh ’nough tuh kill three women, let ’lone change they looks,” said Elijah Moseley. “How Syke kin stommuck dat big black greasy Mogul he’s layin’ roun wid, gits me. Ah swear dat eight-rock couldn’t kiss a sardine can Ah done throwed out de back do’ ’way las’ yeah.”

“Aw, she’s fat, thass how come. He’s allus been crazy ’bout fat women,” put in Merchant. “He’d a’ been tied up wid one long time ago if he could a’ found one tuh have him. Did Ah tell yuh ’bout him come sidlin’ roun’ mah wife—bringin’ her a basket uh pecans outa his yard fuh a present? Yessir, mah wife! She tol’ him tuh take ’em right straight back home, cause Delia works so hard ovah dat washtub she reckon everything on de place taste lak sweat an’ soapsuds. Ah jus’ wisht Ah’d a’ caught ’im ’dere! Ah’d a’ made his hips ketch on fiah down dat shell road.”

“Ah know he done it, too. Ah sees ’im grinnin’ at every ’oman dat passes,” Walter Thomas said. “But even so, he useter eat some mighty big hunks uh humble pie tuh git dat lil ’oman he got. She wuz ez pritty ez a speckled pup! Dat wuz fifteen yeahs ago. He useter be so skeered uh losin’ huh, she could make him do some parts of a husband’s duty. Dey never wuz de same in de mind.”

“There oughter be a law about him,” said Lindsay. “He aint fit tuh carry guts tuh a bear.”

Clarke spoke for the first time. “Taint no law on earth dat kin make a man be decent if it aint in ’im. There’s plenty men dat takes a wife lak dey do a joint uh

sugar-cane. It's round, juicy an' sweet when dey gits it. But dey squeeze an' grind, squeeze an' grind an' wring tell dey wring every drop uh pleasure dat's in 'em out. When dey's satisfied dat dey is wrung dry, dey treats 'em jes lak dey do a cane-chew. Dey throws em away. Dey knows whut dey is doin' while dey is at it, an' hates theirselves fuh it but they keeps on hangin' after huh tell she's empty. Den dey hates huh fuh bein' a cane-chew an' in de way."

"We oughter take Syke an' dat stray 'oman uh his'n down in Lake Howell swamp an' lay on de rawhide till they cain't say Lawd a' mussy.' He allus wuz uh ovahbearin' niggah, but since dat white 'oman from up north done taught 'im how to run a automobile, he done got too biggety to live—an' we oughter kill 'im," Old Man Anderson advised.

A grunt of approval went around the porch. But the heat was melting their civic virtue, and Elijah Moseley began to bait Joe Clarke.

"Come on, Joe, git a melon outa dere an' slice it up for yo' customers. We'se all sufferin' wid de heat. De bear's done got me!"

"Thass right, Joe, a watermelon is jes' whut Ah needs tuh cure de eppizudicks," Walter Thomas joined forces with Moseley. "Come on dere, Joe. We all is steady customers an' you aint set us up in a long time. Ah chooses dat long, bowlegged Floridy favorite."

"A god, an' be dough. You all gimme twenty cents and slice way," Clarke retorted. "Ah needs a col' slice m'self. Heah, everybody chip in. Ah'll lend y'll mah meat knife."

The money was quickly subscribed and the huge melon brought forth. At that moment, Sykes and Bertha arrived. A determined silence fell on the porch and the melon was put away again.

Merchant snapped down the blade of his jackknife and moved toward the store door.

"Come on in, Joe, an' gimme a slab uh sow belly an' uh pound uh coffee—almost fuhgot 'twas Sat'day. Got to git on home." Most of the men left also.

Just then Delia drove past on her way home, as Sykes was ordering magnificently for Bertha. It pleased him for Delia to see.

“Git whutsoever yo’ heart desires, Honey. Wait a minute, Joe. Give huh two bottles uh strawberry soda-water, uh quart uh parched ground-peas, an’ a block uh chewin’ gum.”

With all this they left the store, with Sykes reminding Bertha that this was his town and she could have it if she wanted it.

The men returned soon after they left, and held their watermelon feast.

“Where did Syke Jones git da ‘oman from nohow?” Lindsay asked.

“Ovah Apopka. Guess dey musta been cleanin’ out de town when she lef’. She don’t look lak a thing but a hunk uh liver wid hair on it.”

“Well, she sho’ kin squall,” Dave Carter contributed. “When she gits ready tuh laff, she jes’ opens huh mouf an’ latches it back tuh de las’ notch. No ole grandpa alligator down in Lake Bell ain’t got nothin’ on huh.”

Bertha had been in town three months now. Sykes was still paying her room rent at Della Lewis’—the only house in town that would have taken her in. Sykes took her frequently to Winter Park to “stomps.” He still assured her that he was the swellest man in the state.

“Sho’ you kin have dat lil’ ole house soon’s Ah kin git dat ‘oman outa dere. Everything b’longs tuh me an’ you sho’ kin have it. Ah sho’ ‘bominates uh skinny ‘oman. Lawdy, you sho’ is got one portly shape on you! You kin git anything you wants. Dis is mah town an’ you sho’ kin have it.”

Delia’s work-worn knees crawled over the earth in Gethsemane and up the rocks of Calvary many, many times during these months. She avoided the villagers and meeting places in her efforts to be blind and deaf. But Bertha nullified this to a degree, by coming to Delia’s house to call Sykes out to her at the gate.

Delia and Sykes fought all the time now with no peaceful interludes. They slept and ate in silence. Two or three times Delia had attempted a timid friendliness, but she was repulsed each time. It was plain that the breaches must remain agape.

The sun had burned July to August. The heat streamed down like a million hot arrows, smiting all things living upon the earth. Grass withered, leaves browned,

snakes went blind in shedding and men and dogs went mad. Dog days!

Delia came home one day and found Sykes there before her. She wondered, but started to go on into the house without speaking, even though he was standing in the kitchen door and she must either stoop under his arm or ask him to move. He made no room for her. She noticed a soap box beside the steps, but paid no particular attention to it, knowing that he must have brought it there. As she was stooping to pass under his outstretched arm, he suddenly pushed her backward, laughingly.

“Look in de box dere Delia, Ah done brung yuh somethin’!”

She nearly fell upon the box in her stumbling, and when she saw what it held, she all but fainted outright.

“Syke! Syke, mah Gawd! You take dat rattlesnake ‘way from heah! You gottuh. Oh, Jesus, have mussy!”

“Ah aint gut tuh do nuthin’ uh de kin’—fact is Ah aint got tuh do nothin’ but die. Taint no use uh you puttin’ on airs makin’ out lak you skeered uh dat snake—he’s gointer stay right heah tell he die. He wouldn’t bite me cause Ah knows how tuh handle ‘im. Nohow he wouldn’t risk breakin’ out his fangs ‘gin yo’ skinny laigs.”

“Naw, now Syke, don’t keep dat thing ‘roun’ heah tuh skeer me tuh death. You knows Ah’m even feared uh earth worms. Thass de biggest snake Ah evah did see. Kill ‘im Syke, please.”

“Doan ast me tuh do nothin’ fuh yuh. Goin’ roun’ trying’ tuh be so damn asterperious. Naw, Ah aint gonna kill it. Ah think uh damn sight mo’ uh him dan you! Dat’s a nice snake an’ anybody doan lak ‘im kin jes’ hit de grit.”

The village soon heard that Sykes had the snake, and came to see and ask questions.

“How de hen-fire did you ketch dat six-foot rattler, Syke?” Thomas asked.

“He’s full uh frogs so he caint hardly move, thass how. Ah eased up on ‘m. But Ah’m a snake charmer an’ knows how tuh handle ‘em. Shux, dat aint nothin’. Ah could ketch one eve’y day if Ah so wanted tuh.”

“Whut he needs is a heavy hick’ry club leaned real heavy on his head. Dat’s de bes

‘way tuh charm a rattlesnake.’

“Naw, Walt, y’ll jes’ don’t understand dese diamon’ backs lak Ah do,” said Sykes in a superior tone of voice.

The village agreed with Walter, but the snake stayed on. His box remained by the kitchen door with its screen wire covering. Two or three days later it had digested its meal of frogs and literally came to life. It rattled at every movement in the kitchen or the yard. One day as Delia came down the kitchen steps she saw his chalky-white fangs curved like scimitars hung in the wire meshes. This time she did not run away with averted eyes as usual. She stood for a long time in the doorway in a red fury that grew bloodier for every second that she regarded the creature that was her torment.

That night she broached the subject as soon as Sykes sat down to the table.

“Syke, Ah wants you tuh take dat snake ‘way fum heah. You done starved me an’ Ah put up widcher, you done beat me an’ Ah took dat, but you done kilt all mah insides bringin’ dat varmint heah.”

Sykes poured out a saucer full of coffee and drank it deliberately before he answered her.

“A whole lot Ah keer ’bout how you feels inside uh out. Dat snake aint goin’ no damn wheah till Ah gits ready fuh ‘im tuh go. So fur as beatin’ is concerned, yuh aint took near all dat you gointer take ef yuh stay ‘roun’ me.”

Delia pushed back her plate and got up from the table. “Ah hates you, Sykes,” she said calmly. “Ah hates you tuh de same degree dat Ah useter love yuh. Ah done took an’ took till mah belly is full up tuh mah neck. Dat’s de reason Ah got mah letter fum de church an’ moved mah membership tuh Woodbridge—so Ah don’t haf tuh take no sacrament wid yuh. Ah don’t wantuh see yuh ‘roun’ me atall. Lay ‘roun’ wid dat ‘oman all yuh wants tuh, but gwan ‘way fum me an’ mah house. Ah hates yuh lak uh suck-egg dog.”

Sykes almost let the huge wad of corn bread and collard greens he was chewing fall out of his mouth in amazement. He had a hard time whipping himself up to the proper fury to try to answer Delia.

“Well, Ah’m glad you does hate me. Ah’m sho’ tiahed uh you hangin’ ontuh me. Ah don’t want yuh. Look at yuh stringey ole neck! Yo’ rawbony laigs an’ arms is

enough tuh cut uh man tuh death. You looks jes' lak de devvul's doll-baby tuh me. You cain't hate me no worse dan Ah hates you. Ah been hatin' you fuh years."

"Yo' ole black hide don't look lak nothin' tuh me, but uh passle uh wrinkled up rubber, wid yo' big ole yeahs flappin' on each side lak uh paih uh buzzard wings. Don't think Ah'm gointuh be run 'way fum mah house neither. Ah'm goin' tuh de white folks bout you, mah young man, de very nex' time you lay yo' han's on me. Mah cup is done run ovah." Delia said this with no signs of fear and Sykes departed from the house, threatening her, but made not the slightest move to carry out any of them.

That night he did not return at all, and the next day being Sunday, Delia was glad she did not have to quarrel before she hitched up her pony and drove the four miles to Woodbridge.

She stayed to the night service—"love feast"—which was very warm and full of spirit. In the emotional winds her domestic trials were borne far and wide so that she sang as she drove homeward.

"Jurden water, black an' col'

Chills de body, not de soul

An' Ah wantah cross Jurden in uh calm time."

She came from the barn to the kitchen door and stopped.

"Whut's de mattah, ol' satan, you aint kickin' up yo' racket?" She addressed the snake's box. Complete silence. She went on into the house with a new hope in its birth struggles. Perhaps her threat to go to the white folks had frightened Sykes! Perhaps he was sorry! Fifteen years of misery and suppression had brought Delia to the place where she would hope anything that looked towards a way over or through her wall of inhibitions.

She felt in the match safe behind the stove at once for a match. There was only one there.

"Dat niggah wouldn't fetch nothin' heah tuh save his rotten neck, but he kin run thew whut Ah brings quick enough. Now he done toted off nigh on tuh haff uh box uh matches. He done had dat 'oman heah in mah house, too."

Nobody but a woman could tell how she knew this even before she struck the match. But she did and it put her into a new fury.

Presently she brought in the tubs to put the white things to soak. This time she decided she need not bring the hamper out of the bedroom; she would go in there and do the sorting. She picked up the pot-bellied lamp and went in. The room was small and the hamper stood hard by the foot of the white iron bed. She could sit and reach through the bedposts—resting as she worked.

“Ah wantah cross Jurden in uh calm time,” she was singing again. The mood of the “love feast” had returned. She threw back the lid of the basket almost gaily. Then, moved by both horror and terror, she sprang back toward the door. There lay the snake in the basket! He moved sluggishly at first, but even as she turned round and round, jumped up and down in an insanity of fear, he began to stir vigorously. She saw him pouring his awful beauty from the basket upon the bed, then she seized the lamp and ran as fast as she could to the kitchen. The wind from the open door blew out the light and the darkness added to her terror. She sped to the darkness of the yard, slamming the door after her before she thought to set down the lamp. She did not feel safe even on the ground, so she climbed up in the hay barn.

There for an hour or more she lay sprawled upon the hay a gibbering wreck.

Finally, she grew quiet, and after that, coherent thought. With this, stalked through her a cold, bloody rage. Hours of this. A period of introspection, a space of retrospection, then a mixture of both. Out of this an awful calm.

“Well, Ah done de bes’ Ah could. If things aint right, Gawd knows taint mah fault.”

She went to sleep—a twitch sleep—and woke up to a faint gray sky. There was a loud hollow sound below. She peered out. Sykes was at the wood-pile, demolishing a wire-covered box.

He hurried to the kitchen door, but hung outside there some minutes before he entered, and stood some minutes more inside before he closed it after him.

The gray in the sky was spreading. Delia descended without fear now, and crouched beneath the low bedroom window. The drawn shade shut out the dawn, shut in the night. But the thin walls held back no sound.

“Dat ol’ scratch is woke up now!” She mused at the tremendous whirr inside, which every woodsman knows, is one of the sound illusions. The rattler is a ventriloquist. His whirr sounds to the right, to the left, straight ahead, behind, close under foot—everywhere but where it is. Woe to him who guesses wrong unless he is prepared to hold up his end of the argument! Sometimes he strikes without rattling at all.

Inside, Sykes heard nothing until he knocked a pot lid off the stove while trying to reach the match safe in the dark. He had emptied his pockets at Bertha’s.

The snake seemed to wake up under the stove and Sykes made a quick leap into the bedroom. In spite of the gin he had had, his head was clearing now.

“Mah Gawd!” he chattered, “ef Ah could on’y strack uh light!”

The rattling ceased for a moment as he stood paralyzed. He waited. It seemed that the snake waited also.

“Oh, fuh de light! Ah thought he’d be too sick”—Sykes was muttering to himself when the whirr began again, closer, right underfoot this time. Long before this, Sykes’ ability to think had been flattened down to primitive instinct and he leaped—onto the bed.

Outside Delia heard a cry that might have come from a maddened chimpanzee, a stricken gorilla. All the terror, all the horror, all the rage that man possibly could express, without a recognizable human sound.

A tremendous stir inside there, another series of animal screams, the intermittent whirr of the reptile. The shade torn violently down from the window, letting in the red dawn, a huge brown hand seizing the window stick, great dull blows upon the wooden floor punctuating the gibberish of sound long after the rattle of the snake had abruptly subsided. All this Delia could see and hear from her place beneath the window, and it made her ill. She crept over to the four-o’clocks and stretched herself on the cool earth to recover.

She lay there. “Delia. Delia!” She could hear Sykes calling in a most despairing tone as one who expected no answer. The sun crept on up, and he called. Delia could not move—her legs were gone flabby. She never moved, he called, and the sun kept rising.

“Mah Gawd!” She heard him moan, “Mah Gawd fum Heben!” She heard him

stumbling about and got up from her flower-bed. The sun was growing warm. As she approached the door she heard him call out hopefully, “Delia, is dat you Ah heah?”

She saw him on his hands and knees as soon as she reached the door. He crept an inch or two toward her—all that he was able, and she saw his horribly swollen neck and his one open eye shining with hope. A surge of pity too strong to support bore her away from that eye that must, could not, fail to see the tubs. He would see the lamp. Orlando with its doctors was too far. She could scarcely reach the Chinaberry tree, where she waited in the growing heat while inside she knew the cold river was creeping up and up to extinguish that eye which must know by now that she knew.

To consider:

1. How is the story structured?
2. How is it narrated?
3. How is the marriage of Delia and Sykes presented?
4. “Sweat” was first published in 1926. What is its historical value? What is its literary value?
5. Who might be (and who might have been) the target audience for the story?

Junius Edwards, “Liars Don’t Qualify”

Junius Edwards (1929-2008) was an African-American writer of fiction and an advertising executive. Much of his work related to the Civil Rights movement.

Introduction

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.

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.”

“Oh, you did, did you?”

“Yes, sir.”

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

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.

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.

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.”

“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.

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.

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.

“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.

“Charlie.”

“Yeah, Sam.” Not looking up.

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

“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.

“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.”

“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.

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.

“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.”

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."

"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 opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.””

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.

““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.”

“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?”

“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.”

“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?”

“ . . . Mister Roger Phillip Thornedyke Jones.”

“Spell Thornedyke.”

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

“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?”

“1912.”

“There was another state in 1912.”

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

“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.”

“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?”

“Yes, sir.”

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

“No, sir.”

“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.”

“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 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.

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

To consider:

1. How is the story structured?
2. How does the author convey his message?
3. How does irony function in the story?
4. How does the story resonate in 2023?

Ralph Ellison, "Cadillac Flambé"

Ralph Ellison (1914-1994) is author of the novel *Invisible Man* (winner of the 1952 National Book Award), two books of non-fiction prose, *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986), and numerous essays, reviews, speeches, and pieces of short fiction. From 1970 to 1980, he was Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at New York University. "Cadillac Flambé" first appeared in 1973.

It had been a fine spring day made even pleasanter by the lingering of the cherry blossoms and I had gone out before dawn with some married friends and their children on a bird-watching expedition. Afterwards we had sharpened our appetites for brunch with rounds of Bloody Marys and bullshots [vodka with beef broth]. And after the beef bouillon ran out, our host, an ingenious man, had improvised a drink from chicken broth and vodka which he proclaimed the "chicken-shot." This was all very pleasant and after a few drinks my spirits were soaring. I was pleased with my friends, the brunch was excellent and varied - chili con carne, cornbread, and oysters Rockefeller, etc. - and I was pleased with my tally of birds. I had seen a bluebird, five red-breasted grosbeaks, three painted buntings, seven goldfinches, and a rousing consort of mockingbirds. In fact, I had hated to leave.

Thus it was well into the afternoon when I found myself walking past the Senator's estate. I still had my binoculars around my neck, and my tape recorder - which I had along to record bird songs - was slung over my shoulder. As I approached, the boulevard below the Senator's estate was heavy with cars, with promenading lovers, dogs on leash, old men on canes, and laughing children, all enjoying the fine weather. I had paused to notice how the Senator's lawn rises from the street level with a gradual and imperceptible elevation that makes the mansion, set far at the top, seem to float like a dream castle: an illusion intensified by the chicken-shots but which the art editor of my paper informs me is the result of a trick copied from the landscape architects who designed the gardens of the Belvedere Palace in Vienna. But be that as it may, I was about to pass on when a young couple blocked my path, and when I saw the young fellow point up the hill and say to his young blonde of a girl, "I bet you don't know who that is up there," I brought my binoculars into play, and there, on the right-hand terrace of the mansion, I saw the Senator.

Dressed in a chef's cap, apron, and huge asbestos gloves, he was armed with a long-tined fork which he flourished broadly as he entertained the notables for

whom he was preparing a barbecue. These gentlemen and ladies were lounging in their chairs or standing about in groups sipping the tall iced drinks which two white-jacketed Filipino boys were serving. The Senator was dividing his attention between the spareribs cooking in a large chrome grill-cart and displaying his great talent for mimicking his colleagues with such huge success that no one at the party was aware of what was swiftly approaching. And, in fact, neither was I.

I was about to pass on when a gleaming white Cadillac convertible, which had been moving slowly in the heavy traffic from the east, rolled abreast of me and suddenly blocked the path by climbing the curb and then continuing across the walk and onto the Senator's lawn. The top was back and the driver, smiling as though in a parade, was a well-dressed Negro man of about thirty-five, who sported the gleaming hair affected by their jazz musicians and prize-fighters, and who sat behind the wheel with that engrossed, yet relaxed, almost ceremonial attention to form that was once to be observed only among the finest horsemen. So closely did the car brush past that I could have reached out with no effort and touched the rich ivory leather upholstery. A bull fiddle rested in the back of the car. I watched the man drive smoothly up the lawn until he was some seventy-five yards below the mansion, where he braked the machine and stepped out to stand waving toward the terrace, a gallant salutation grandly given.

At first, in my innocence, I placed the man as a musician, for there was, after all, the bull fiddle; then in swift succession I thought him a chauffeur for one of the guests, a driver for a news or fashion magazine or an advertising agency or television network. For I quickly realized that a musician wouldn't have been asked to perform at the spot where the car was stopped, and that since he was alone, it was unlikely that anyone, not even the Senator, would have hired a musician to play serenades on a bull fiddle. So next I decided that the man had either been sent with equipment to be used in covering the festivities taking place on the terrace, or that he had driven the car over to be photographed against the luxurious background. The waving I interpreted as the expression of simple-minded high spirits aroused by the driver's pleasure in piloting such a luxurious automobile, the simple exuberance of a Negro allowed a role in what he considered an important public spectacle. At any rate, by now a small crowd had gathered and had begun to watch bemusedly.

Since it was widely known that the Senator is a master of the new political technology, who ignores no medium and wastes no opportunity for keeping his image ever in the public's eye, I wasn't disturbed when I saw the driver walk to the

trunk and begin to remove several red objects of a certain size and place them on the grass. I wasn't using my binoculars now and thought these were small equipment cases. Unfortunately, I was mistaken.

For now, having finished unpacking, the driver stepped back behind the wheel, and suddenly I could see the top rising from its place of concealment to soar into place like the wing of some great, slow, graceful bird. Stepping out again, he picked up one of the cases - now suddenly transformed into the type of can which during the war was sometimes used to transport high-octane gasoline in Liberty ships (a highly dangerous cargo for those round bottoms and the men who shipped in them) - and, leaning carefully forward, began emptying its contents upon the shining chariot.

And thus, I thought, is gilded an eight-valved, three-hundred-and-fifty-horsepowered air-conditioned lily!

For so accustomed have we Americans become to the tricks, the shenanigans, and frauds of advertising, so adjusted to the contrived fantasies of commerce - indeed, to pseudo-events of all kinds - that I thought that the car was being drenched with a special liquid which would make it more alluring for a series of commercial photographs.

Indeed, I looked up the crowded boulevard behind me, listening for the horn of a second car or station wagon which would bring the familiar load of pretty models, harassed editors, nervous wardrobe mistresses, and elegant fashion photographers who would convert the car, the clothes, and the Senator's elegant home, into a photographic rite of spring.

And with the driver there to remind me, I even expected a few ragged colored street urchins to be brought along to form a poignant but realistic contrast to the luxurious costumes and high-fashion surroundings: an echo of the somber iconography in which the crucified Christ is flanked by a repentant and an unrepentant thief, or that in which the three Wise Eastern Kings bear their rich gifts before the humble stable of Bethlehem.

But now reality was moving too fast for the completion of this foray into the metamorphosis of religious symbolism. Using my binoculars for a closer view, I

could see the driver take a small spherical object from the trunk of the car and a fuzzy tennis ball popped into focus against the dark smoothness of his fingers. This was joined by a long wooden object which he held like a conductor's baton and began forcing against the ball until it pierced. This provided the ball with a slender handle which he tested delicately for balance, drenched with liquid, and placed carefully behind the left fin of the car.

Reaching into the back seat now, he came up with a bass fiddle bow upon which he accidentally spilled the liquid, and I could see drops of fluid roping from the horsehairs and falling with an iridescent spray into the sunlight. Facing us now, he proceeded to tighten the horsehairs, working methodically, very slowly, with his head gleaming in the sunlight and beads of sweat standing over his brow.

As I watched, I became aware of the swift gathering of a crowd around me, people asking puzzled questions, and a certain tension, as during the start of a concert, was building. And I had just thought, And now he'll bring out the fiddle, when he opened the door and hauled it out, carrying it, with the dripping bow swinging from his right hand, up the hill some thirty feet above the car, and placed it lovingly on the grass. A gentle wind started to blow now, and I swept my glasses past his gleaming head to the mansion, and as I screwed the focus to infinity, I could see several figures spring suddenly from the shadows on the shaded terrace of the mansion's far wing. They were looking on like the spectators of a minor disturbance at a dull baseball game. Then a large woman grasped that something was out of order and I could see her mouth come open and her eyes blaze as she called out soundlessly, "Hey, you down there!" Then the driver's head cut into my field of vision and I took down the glasses and watched him moving, broad-shouldered and jaunty, up the hill to where he'd left the fiddle. For a moment he stood with his head back, his white jacket taut across his shoulders, looking toward the terrace. He waved then, and shouted words that escaped me. Then, facing the machine, he took something from his pocket and I saw him touch the flame of a cigarette lighter to the tennis ball and begin blowing gently upon it; then, waving it about like a child twirling a Fourth of July sparkler, he watched it sputter into a small blue ball of flame.

I tried, indeed I anticipated what was coming next, but I simply could not accept it! The Negro was twirling the ball on that long, black-tipped wooden needle - the kind used for knitting heavy sweaters - holding it between his thumb and fingers in

the manner of a fire-eater at a circus, and I couldn't have been more surprised if he had thrown back his head and plunged the flame down his throat than by what came next. Through the glasses now I could see sweat beading out beneath his scalp line and on the flesh above the stiff hairs of his moustache as he grinned broadly and took up the fiddle bow, and before I could move he had shot his improvised, flame-tipped arrow onto the cloth top of the convertible.

"Why that black son of the devil!" someone shouted, and I had the impression of a wall of heat springing up from the grass before me. Then the flames erupted with a stunning blue roar that sent the spectators scattering. People were shouting now, and through the blue flames before me I could see the Senator and his guests running from the terrace to halt at the top of the lawn, looking down, while behind me there were screams, the grinding of brakes, the thunder of footfalls as the promenaders broke in a great spontaneous wave up the grassy slope, then sensing the danger of exploding gasoline, receded hurriedly to a safer distance below, their screams and curses ringing above the roar of the flames.

How, oh, how, I wished for a cinema camera to synchronize with my tape recorder! - which automatically I now brought into play as heavy fumes of alcohol and gasoline, those defining spirits of our age, filled the air. There before me unfolding in tableau vivant was surely the most unexpected picture in the year: in the foreground at the bottom of the slope, a rough semicircle of outraged faces; in the mid-foreground, up the gentle rise of the lawn, the white convertible shooting into the springtime air a radiance of intense blue flame, a flame like that of a welder's torch or perhaps of a huge fowl being flambeed in choice cognac; then on the rise above, distorted by heat and flame, the dark-skinned, white-suited driver, standing with his gleaming face expressive of high excitement as he watched the effect of his deed. Then, rising high in the background atop the grassy hill, the white-capped Senator surrounded by his notable guests - all caught in postures eloquent of surprise, shock, or indignation.

The air was filled with an overpowering smell of wood alcohol, which, as the leaping red and blue flames took firm hold, mingled with the odor of burning paint and leather. I became aware of the fact that the screaming had suddenly faded now, and I could hear the swoosh-pop-crackle-and-hiss of the fire. And with the gaily dressed crowd become silent, it was as though I were alone, isolated, observing a conflagration produced by a stroke of lightning flashed out of a clear blue

springtime sky. We watched with that sense of awe similar to that with which medieval crowds must have observed the burning of a great cathedral. We were stunned by the sacrificial act and, indeed, it was as though we had become the unwilling participants in a primitive ceremony requiring the sacrifice of a beautiful object in appeasement of some terrifying and long-dormant spirit, which the black man in the white suit was summoning from a long, black sleep. And as we watched, our faces strained as though in anticipation of the spirit's materialization from the fiery metamorphosis of the white machine, a spirit that I was afraid, whatever the form in which it appeared, would be powerfully good or powerfully evil, and absolutely out of place here and now in Washington. It was, as I say, uncanny. The whole afternoon seemed to float, and when I looked again to the top of the hill the people there appeared to move in slow motion through watery waves of heat. Then I saw the Senator, with chef cap awry, raising his asbestos gloves above his head and beginning to shout. And it was then that the driver, the firebrand, went into action.

Till now, looking like the chief celebrant of an outlandish rite, he had held firmly to his middle-ground; too dangerously near the flaming convertible for anyone not protected by asbestos suiting to risk laying hands upon him, yet far enough away to highlight his human vulnerability to fire. But now as I watched him move to the left of the flames to a point allowing him an uncluttered view of the crowd, his white suit reflecting the flames, he was briefly obscured by a sudden swirl of smoke, and it was during this brief interval that I heard the voice.

Strong and hoarse and typically Negro in quality, it seemed to issue with eerie clarity from the fire itself. Then I was struggling within myself for the reporter's dedicated objectivity and holding my microphone forward as he raised both arms above his head, his long, limber fingers wide-spread as he waved toward us.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "please don't be disturbed! I don't mean you any harm, and if you'll just cool it a minute I'll tell you what this is all about..."

He paused and the Senator's voice could be heard angrily in the background.

"Never mind that joker up there on top of the hill," the driver said. "You can listen to him when I get through. He's had too much free speech anyway. Now it's my turn."

And at this a man at the other end of the crowd shouted angrily and tried to break up the hill. He was grabbed by two men and an hysterical, dark-haired woman wearing a well-filled chemise-style dress, who slipped to the ground holding a leg, shouting, "No, Fleetwood. No! That crazy nigger will kill you!"

The arsonist watched with blank-faced calm as the man was dragged protesting back into the crowd. Then a shift in the breeze whipped smoke down upon us and gave rise to a flurry of coughing.

"Now believe me," the arsonist continued, "I know that it's very, very hard for you folks to look at what I'm doing and not be disturbed, because for you it's a crime and a sin."

He laughed, swinging his fiddle bow in a shining arc as the crowd watched him fixedly.

"That's because you know that most folks can't afford to own one of these Caddies. Not even good, hard-working folks, no matter what the pictures in the papers and magazines say. So deep down it makes you feel some larceny. You feel that it's unfair that everybody who's willing to work hard can't have one for himself. That's right! And you feel that in order to get one it's OK for a man to lie and cheat and steal - yeah, even swindle his own mother if she's got the cash. That's the difference between what you say you believe and the way you act if you get the chance. Oh yes, because words is words, but life is hard and earnest and these here Caddies is way, way out of this world!"

Pausing, he loosened the knot in his blue and white tie so that it hung down the front of his jacket in a large loop, then wiped his brow with a blue silk handkerchief.

"I don't mean to insult you," he said, bending toward us now, the fiddle bow resting across his knee, "I'm just reminding you of the facts. Because I can see in your eyes that it's going to cost me more to get rid of this Caddy the way I have to do it than it cost me to get it. I don't rightly know what the price will be, but I know that when you people get scaird and shook up, you get violent. - No, wait a minute..." He shook his head. "That's not how I meant to say it. I'm sorry. I

apologize.

"Listen, here it is: This morning," he shouted now, stabbing his bow toward the mansion with angry emphasis. "This morning that fellow Senator Sunraider up there, he started it when he shot off his mouth over the radio. That's what this is all about! I realized that things had gotten out of control. I realized all of a sudden that the man was messing ... with ... my Cadillac, and ladies and gentlemen, that's serious as all hell ...

"Listen to me, y'all: A little while ago I was romping past Richmond, feeling fine. I had played myself three hundred and seventy-five dollars and thirty-three cents worth of gigs down in Chattanooga, and I was headed home to Harlem as straight as I could go. I wasn't bothering anybody. I didn't even mean to stop by here, because this town has a way of making a man feel like he's living in a fool's paradise. When I'm here I never stop thinking about the difference between what it is and what it's supposed to be. In fact, I have the feeling that somebody put the Indian sign on this town a long, long time ago, and I don't want to be around when it takes effect. So, like I say, I wasn't even thinking about this town. I was rolling past Richmond and those whitewalls were slapping those concrete slabs and I was rolling and the wind was feeling fine on my face - and that's when I made my sad mistake. Ladies and gentlemen, I turned on the radio. I had nothing against anybody. I was just hoping to hear some Dinah, or Duke, or Hawk so that I could study their phrasing and improve my style and enjoy myself. - But what do I get? I'll tell you what I got -"

He dropped his shoulders with a sudden violent twist as his index finger jabbed toward the terrace behind him, bellowing, "I GOT THAT NO GOOD, NOWHERE SENATOR SUNRAIDER! THAT'S WHAT I GOT! AND WHAT WAS HE DOING? HE WAS TRYING TO GET THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT TO MESS WITH MY CADILLAC! AND WHAT'S MORE, HE WAS CALLING MY CADDY A 'COON CAGE.'

"Ladies and gentlemen, I couldn't believe my ears. I don't know that Senator and I know he doesn't know me from old Bodiddly. But just the same, there he is, talking straight to me and there was no use of my trying to dodge. Because I do live in Harlem and I lo-mo-sho do drive a Cadillac. So I had to sit there and take it like a little man. There he was, a United States SENATOR, coming through my own

radio telling me what I ought to be driving, and recommending to the United States Senate and the whole country that the name of my car be changed simply because I, me, LeeWillie Minifees, was driving it!

"It made me feel faint. It upset my mind like a midnight telegram!

"I said to myself, 'LeeWillie, what on earth is this man talking about? Here you been thinking you had it made. You been thinking you were as free as a bird - even though a black bird. That good-rolling Jersey Turnpike is up ahead to get you home. - And now here comes this Senator putting you in a cage! What in the world is going on?'

"I got so nervous that all at once my foot weighed ninety-nine pounds, and before I knew it I was doing seventy-five. I was breaking the law! I guess I was really trying to get away from that voice and what the man had said. But I was rolling and I was listening. I couldn't help myself. What I was hearing was going against my whole heart and soul, but I was listening anyway. And what I heard was beginning to make me see things in a new light. Yes, and that new light was making my eyeballs ache. And all the time Senator Sunraider up in the Senate was calling my car a 'coon cage.'

"So I looked around and I saw all that fine ivory leather there. I looked at the steel and at the chrome. I looked through the windshield and saw the road unfolding and the houses and the trees was flashing by. I looked up at the top and I touched the button and let it go back to see if that awful feeling would leave me. But it wouldn't leave. The air was hitting my face and the sun was on my head and I was feeling that good old familiar feeling of flying - but ladies and gentlemen, it was no longer the same! Oh, no - because I could still hear that Senator playing the dozens with [insulting] my Cadillac!

"And just then, ladies and gentlemen, I found myself rolling toward an old man who reminded me of my granddaddy by the way he was walking beside the highway behind a plow hitched to an old, white-muzzled Missouri mule. And when that old man looked up and saw me he waved. And I looked back through the mirror as I shot past him and I could see him open his mouth and say something like, 'Go on, fool!' Then him and that mule was gone even from the mirror and I was rolling on.

"And then, ladies and gentlemen, in a twinkling of an eye it struck me. A voice said to me, 'LeeWillie, that old man is right: you are a fool. And that doggone Senator Sunraider is right, LeeWillie, you are a fool in a coon cage!'

"I tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that old man and his mule both were talking to me. I said, 'What do you mean about his being right?' And they said, 'LeeWillie, look who he is,' and I said, 'I know who he is,' and they said, 'Well, LeeWillie, if a man like that, in the position he's in, can think the way he doin, then LeeWillie, you have GOT to be wrong!'

"So I said, 'Thinking like that is why you've still got that mule in your lap,' man. 'I worked hard to get the money to buy this Caddy,' and he said, 'Money? LeeWillie, can't you see that it ain't no longer a matter of money? Can't you see it's done gone way past the question of money? Now it's a question of whether you can afford it in terms other than money.'

"And I said, 'Man, what are you talking about, "terms other than money," and he said, 'LeeWillie, even this damn mule knows that if a man like that feels the way he's talking and can say it fight out over the radio and the T.V., and from the place where he's saying it - there's got to be something drastically wrong with you for even wanting one. Son, the man's done made it mean something different. All you wanted was to have a pretty automobile, but fool, he done changed the Rules on you!'

"So against myself, ladies and gentlemen, I was forced to agree with the old man and the mule. That Senator up there wasn't simply degrading my Caddy. That wasn't the point. It's that he would low-rate a thing so truly fine as a Cadillac just in order to degrade me and my people. He was accusing me of lowering the value of the auto, when all I ever wanted was the very best!

"Oh, it hurt me to the quick, and right then and there I had me a rolling revelation. The scales dropped from my eyes. I had been BLIND, but the Senator up there on that hill was making me SEE. He was making me see some things I didn't want to see! I'd thought I was dressed real FINE, but I was as naked as a jaybird sitting on a limb in the drifting snow. I THOUGHT I was rolling past Richmond, but I was really trapped in a COON CAGE, running on one of those little TREADMILLS

like a SQUIRREL or a HAMSTER. So now my EYEBALLS were aching. My head was in such a whirl that I shot the car up to ninety, and all I could see up ahead was the road getting NARROW. It was getting as narrow as the eye of a NEEDLE, and that needle looked like the Washington MONUMENT lying down. Yes, and I was trying to thread that Caddy straight through that eye and I didn't care if I made it or not. But while I managed to get that Caddy through I just couldn't thread that COON CAGE because it was like a two-ton knot tied in a piece of fine silk thread. The sweat was pouring off me now, ladies and gentlemen, and my brain was on fire, so I pulled off the highway and asked myself some questions, and I got myself some answers. It went this way:

"LeeWillie, who put you in this cage?"

"You put your own self in there,' a voice inside me said.

"But I paid for it, it's mine. I own it ... 'I said.

"Oh, no, LeeWillie,' the voice said, 'what you mean is that it owns you, that's why you're in the cage. Admit it, daddy; you have been NAMED. Senator Sunraider has put the badmouth, the NASTY mouth on you and now your Cadillac ain't no Caddy anymore! Let's face it, LeeWillie, from now on everytime you sit behind this wheel you're going to feel those RINGS shooting round and round your TAIL and one of those little black COON'S masks is going to settle down over your FACE, and folks standing on the streets and hanging out the windows will sing out, "HEY! THERE GOES MISTER COON AND HIS COON CAGE!" That's right, LeeWillie! And all those little husky-voiced colored CHILDREN playing in the gutters will point at you and say, "THERE GOES MISTAH GOON AND HIS GOON GAGE" - and that will be right in Harlem!"

"And that did it, ladies and gentlemen; that was the capper, and THAT'S why I'm here!

"Right then and there, beside the highway, I made my decision. I rolled that Caddy, I made a U-turn and I stopped only long enough to get me some of that good white wood alcohol and good white gasoline, and then I headed straight here. So while some of you are upset, you can see that you don't have to be afraid because LeeWillie means nobody any harm.

"I am here, ladies and gentlemen, to make the Senator a present. Yes, sir and yes, mam, and it's Sunday and I'm told that confession is good for the soul. - So Mister Senator," he said, turning toward the terrace above, "this is my public testimony to my coming over to your way of thinking. This is my surrender of the Coon Cage Eight! You have unconverted me from the convertible. In fact, I'm giving it to you, Senator Sunraider, and it is truly mine to give. I hope all my people will do likewise. Because after your speech they ought to run whenever they even look at one of these. They ought to make for the bomb shelters whenever one comes close to the curb. So I, me, LeeWillie Minifees, am setting an example and here it is. You can HAVE it, Mister Senator. I don't WANT it. Thank you KINDLY and MUCH obliged..."

He paused, looking toward the terrace, and at this point I saw a great burst of flame which sent the crowd scurrying backward down the hill, and the white-suited firebrand went into an ecstatic chant, waving his violin bow, shaking his gleaming head and stamping his foot:

"Listen to me, Senator: I don't want no JET! (stamp!) But thank you kindly.

"I don't want no FORD! (stamp!)

"Neither do I want a RAMBLER! (stamp!)

"I don't want no NINETY-EIGHT! (stamp!)

"Ditto the THUNDERBIRD! (stamp-stamp!)

"Yes, and keep those CHEVYS and CHRYSLERS away from me - do you (stamp!) hear me, Senator?

"YOU HAVE TAKEN THE BEST," he boomed, "SO, DAMMIT, TAKE ALL THE REST! Take ALL the rest!

"In fact, now I don't want anything you think is too good for me and my people. Because, just as that old man and the mule said, if a man in your position is against our having them, then there must be something WRONG in our wanting them. So

to keep you happy, I, me, LeeWillie Minifees, am prepared to WALK. I'm ordering me some club-footed, pigeon-toed SPACE SHOES. I'd rather crawl or FLY. I'd rather save my money and wait until the A-RABS make a car. The Zulus even. Even the ESKIMOS! Oh, I'll walk and wait. I'll grab me a GREYHOUND or a FREIGHT! So you can have my coon cage, fare thee well!

"Take the TAIL FINS and the WHITEWALLS. Help yourself to the poor raped RADIO. ENJOY the automatic dimmer and the power brakes. ROLL, Mister Senator, with that fluid DRIVE. Breathe that air-conditioned AIR. There's never been a Caddy like this one and I want you to HAVE IT. Take my scientific dreamboat and enjoy that good ole GRACIOUS LIVING! The key's in the ignition and the REGISTRATION'S in the GLOVE compartment! And thank you KINDLY for freeing me from the Coon Cage. Because before I'd be in a CAGE, I'll be buried in my GRAVE - Oh! Oh!"

He broke off, listening; and I became aware of the shrilling of approaching sirens. Then he was addressing the crowd again.

"I knew," he called down with a grin, "that THOSE would be coming soon. Because they ALWAYS come when you don't NEED them. Therefore, I only hope that the Senator will beat it on down here and accept his gift before they arrive. And in the meantime, I want ALL you ladies and gentlemen to join LeeWillie in singing 'God Bless America' so that all this won't be in vain.

"I want you to understand that that was a damned GOOD Caddy and I loved her DEARLY. That's why you don't have to worry about me. I'm doing fine. Everything is copacetic. Because, remember, nothing makes a man feel better than giving AWAY something, than SACRIFICING something, that he dearly LOVES!"

And then, most outrageous of all, he threw back his head and actually sang a few bars before the noise of the short-circuited horn set the flaming car to wailing like some great prehistoric animal heard in the throes of its dying.

Behind him now, high on the terrace, the Senator and his guests were shouting, but on the arsonist sang, and the effect on the crowd was maddening. Perhaps because from the pleasurable anticipation of watching the beginning of a clever advertising

stunt, they had been thrown into a panic by the deliberate burning, the bizarre immolation of the automobile. And now with a dawning of awareness they perceived that they had been forced to witness (and who could turn away?) a crude and most portentous political gesture.

So suddenly they broke past me, dashing up the hill in moblike fury, and it was most fortunate for Minifees that his duet with the expiring Cadillac was interrupted by members of the police and fire departments, who, arriving at this moment, threw a flying wedge between the flaming machine and the mob. Through the noisy action I could see him there, looming prominently in his white suit, a mocking smile flickering on his sweaty face, as the action whirled toward where he imperturbably stood his ground, still singing against the doleful wailing of the car.

He was still singing, his wrists coolly extended now in anticipation of handcuffs - when struck by a veritable football squad of asbestos-garbed policemen and swept, tumbling, in a wild tangle of arms and legs, down the slope to where I stood. It was then I noted that he wore expensive black alligator shoes.

And now, while the crowd roared its approval, I watched as LeeWillie Minifees was pinned down, lashed into a straitjacket and led toward a police car. Up the hill two policemen were running laboredly toward where the Senator stood, silently observing. About me there was much shouting and shoving as some of the crowd attempted to follow the trussed-up and still grinning arsonist but were beaten back by the police.

It was unbelievably wild. Some continued to shout threats in their outrage and frustration, while others, both men and women, filled the air with a strangely brokenhearted and forlorn sound of weeping, and the officers found it difficult to disperse them. In fact, they continued to mill angrily about even as firemen in asbestos suits broke through, dragging hoses from a roaring pumper truck and sprayed the flaming car with a foamy chemical, which left it looking like the offspring of some strange animal brought so traumatically and precipitantly to life that it wailed and sputtered in protest, both against the circumstance of its debut into the world and the foaming presence of its still-clinging afterbirth...

And what had triggered it? How had the Senator sparked this weird conflagration? Why, with a joke! The day before, while demanding larger appropriations for

certain scientific research projects that would be of great benefit to our electronics and communications industries, and of great importance to the nation as a whole, the Senator had aroused the opposition of a liberal Senator from New York who had complained, in passing, of what he termed the extreme vapidness of our recent automobile designs, their lack of adequate safety devices, and of the slackness of our quality control standards and procedures. Well, it was in defending the automobile industry that the Senator passed the remark that triggered LeeWillie Minifees's bizarre reply.

In his rebuttal - the committee session was televised and aired over radio network - the Senator insisted that not only were our cars the best in the world, the most beautiful and efficiently designed, but that, in fact, his opponent's remarks were a gratuitous slander. Because, he asserted, the only ground which he could see for complaint lay in the circumstance that a certain make of luxury automobile had become so outrageously popular in the nation's Harlems - the archetype of which is included in his opponent's district - that he found it embarrassing to own one. And then with a face most serious in its composure he went on to state:

"We have reached a sad state of affairs, gentlemen, wherein this fine product of American skill and initiative has become so common in Harlem that much of its initial value has been sorely compromised. Indeed, I am led to suggest, and quite seriously, that legislation be drawn up to rename it the 'Coon Cage Eight.' And not at all because of its eight, super-efficient cylinders, nor because of the lean, springing strength and beauty of its general outlines. Not at all, but because it has now become such a common sight to see eight or more of our darker brethren crowded together enjoying its power, its beauty, its neo-pagan comfort, while weaving recklessly through the streets of our great cities and along our super-highways. In fact, gentlemen, I was run off the road, forced into a ditch by such a power-drunk group just the other day. It is enough to make a citizen feel alienated from his own times, from the abiding values and recent developments within his own beloved nation.

"And yet, we continue to hear complaints to the effect that these constituents of our worthy colleague are ill-housed, ill-clothed, ill-equipped and under-treaded! But, gentlemen, I say to you in all sincerity: Look into the streets! Look at the statistics for automobile sales! And I don't mean the economy cars, but our most expensive luxury machines. Look and see who is purchasing them! Give your attention to

who it is that is creating the scarcity and removing these superb machines from the reach of those for whom they were intended! With so many of these good things, what, pray, do those people desire - is it a jet plane on every Harlem rooftop?"

Now for Senator Sunraider this had been mild and far short of his usual maliciousness. And while it aroused some slight amusement and brought replies of false indignation from some of his opponents, it was edited out, as is frequently the case, when the speech appeared in the Congressional Record and in the press. But who could have predicted that Senator Sunraider would have brought on LeeWillie Minifees's wild gesture? Perhaps he had been putting on an act, creating a happening, as they say, though I doubted it. There was something more personal behind it. Without question, the Senator's remarks were in extremely bad taste, but to cap the joke by burning an expensive car seemed so extreme a reply as to be almost metaphysical.

And yet, I reminded myself, it might simply be a case of overreacting expressed in true Negro abandon, an extreme gesture springing from the frustration of having no adequate means of replying, or making himself heard above the majestic roar of a Senator. There was, of course, the recent incident involving a black man suffering from an impacted wisdom tooth who had been so maddened by the blaring of a moisture-shortened automobile horn which had blasted his sleep about three o'clock of an icy morning, that he ran out into the street clothed only in an old-fashioned nightshirt and blasted the hood of the offending automobile with both barrels of a twelve-gauge over-and-under shotgun.

But while toothaches often lead to such extreme acts - and once in a while to suicide - LeeWillie Minifees had apparently been in no pain - or at least not in physical pain. And on the surface at least his speech had been projected clearly enough (allowing for the necessity to shout) and he had been smiling when they led him away.

What would be his fate? I wondered; and where had they taken him? I would have to find him and question him, for his action had begun to sound in my mind with disturbing overtones which had hardly been meaningful. Rather they had been like the brief interruption one sometimes hears while listening to an F.M. broadcast of the musical *Oklahoma!*, say, with original cast, when the signal fades and a program of quite different mood from a different wavelength breaks through. It had

happened but then a blast of laughter had restored us automatically to our chosen frequency.

To consider:

1. What happens in the story? What motivates the action? How is it narrated?
2. What is the message of the story?
3. How do form and content interact in the story?
4. Who might be the target audience for the story?
5. How do the events of the last fifty years affect a reading of the story?

