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### **I'M UNCLE SAM, THAT'S WHO I AM**

When Willie returned to Mississippi in the summer of 1962, it was just as awful as he remembered it. It was hot as hell, but at least he didn't have to work in the fields anymore. He slept on the couch in the tiny apartment that his Mom and Robert had moved into in Lexington. He had to get out of Chicago, but now what? He talked to some guys he knew who were playing college basketball in Mississippi, and he was trying to figure out if he could go play at Jackson State, Delta State, or some other nearby all-black college or university. He figured that any school could use a 6'8" big man with his skills.

In August his brother told him he had been drafted into the Army. He had already taken his physical and was due to head to Fort Jackson, South Carolina for basic training in mid-September.

"For real?" Willie laughed, "my big brother is going to be a soldier? Are they actually goin' to let you carry a gun?"

"They sure are," Robert said, "and keep laughing, funny man, because you might get drafted, too. Ain't nothin' special about you."

"Oh, shit, you're right. I'd better find out."

So Willie took a walk to see Mrs. Smith at the draft board office, which was downtown just off Courthouse Square. He was worried

that Robert was going to be right, and Mrs. Smith was going to tell him he was about to get drafted.

“It was comin’ up to Vietnam and the draft still was in existence at that time. And normally, if you was black, during those days, even if you was in school, you pretty well knew you was gonna get drafted. It was gonna be a miracle to save you.” Willie said.

In fact, the efficient white men of Lexington did their best to make sure as many young black men got drafted as possible. Some of Willie’s friends would be walking in town and a white guy might act really nice to them for no reason, and it would usually be someone who had never paid any attention to them in the past. “Hey, how you boys doin’? they would say with a smile. “What’s your name? What plantation do you live on? How old are you boys?” They were just gathering information to give to the draft board.

Willie walked into the draft office and saw her sitting behind an enormous solid oak desk. Every young black man in the county was afraid of Mrs. Smith. Her hair was pulled back tight against her scalp and a pair of tortoise shell eyeglasses rested precariously on the tip of her nose. On the desk in front of her was an enormous book that contained the names of every young man in Holmes County, and the only thing more fearsome than Mrs. Smith was her book, as it seemed to have the supernatural power to foretell their future.

“Mrs. Smith,” Willie said tentatively.

“Boy, what do you want?”

“My name is Willie Harris, and I came to ask, ma’am,” Willie said, “I came to ask you if you can tell me if I am going to be drafted, or not.”

“What month were you born, boy?” Mrs. Smith said.

“August of 1941.”

Mrs. Smith stuck her chubby little pink fingers into the middle of the book and turned over more than half the pages, causing the front

cover to land with a thump on the desk. She turned a few more pages, and then peered closely.

“Willie Darnell Harris. Yes, you are scheduled for a physical on September the twenty-third. You are gettin’ drafted into the Army. You will get a notice in the mail soon,” she said.

“Ma’am,” Willie said, “I am planning on going to college in September. Do you think you can give me a deferment so I can go to school, ma’am?”

Mrs. Smith gave Willie a blank stare.

“Boy,” she said, “you are goin’ to be drafted into the Army and you will have a physical on September the twenty-third.”

Willie took that to mean the answer was no. When she turned away from him and acted like he wasn’t there, he took that to mean their conversation was over, so he turned around and went home.

When he got home, he told Robert what Mrs. Smith had said.

“So what are you going to do?” Robert asked.

“Well, some of the guys I play ball with told me that they have real good basketball teams in the Air Force. Now every Wednesday the Air Force recruiter comes to Lexington. Next Wednesday I am goin’ to talk to him and ask him if I can enlist in the Air Force, instead of gettin’ drafted into the Army,” Willie said.

“Hmmnn,” Robert said.

“Why don’t you go in with me? I can ask the recruiter if he will take both of us as a package deal,” Willie said.

“The Air Force, huh? Okay, you ask him, and we’ll see what he says,” Robert said.

So the following Wednesday Willie went back downtown and saw the Air Force recruiter. On his way he was thinking that he would need to pass a physical exam before being accepted. Robert had already passed his physical for the Army, and Willie thought that if

Robert could pass it, there ain't no way he would fail it, being the athlete in the family.

When he met the recruiter, he asked him about enlisting in the Air Force, and told him how Mrs. Smith said he was going to be drafted into the Army in a few weeks.

“If you haven't been sworn in yet, you can switch to the Air Force. If you come down next Wednesday, I will bring you to Jackson for your physical and written exams, and we can get it all taken care of,” the recruiter said.

Then Willie told him that Robert had been drafted into the Army and asked if he could join him in the Air Force.

“Bring him along, if he wants to come,” the recruiter said, “If he hasn't been sworn in yet, he can switch, too.”

Willie went home and told Robert the recruiter said he would take both of them. They agreed at that time that they would go into the Air Force together as brothers. When Willie told Robert about the written test they would have to take, Robert knew there was no test he couldn't pass, being the smart one in the family.

As they got ready for the trip to Jackson the following Wednesday, they both got a little excited and scared at the same time, thinking about what could be a great adventure, or a complete disaster. Evie listened to them with a mixture of pride and sadness. She was proud that the boys were getting the hell out of Lexington and doing something meaningful, but sad that she would be losing them. They were all she had, and having recently turned 60, things seemed to get a little bit harder to do every day.

Robert and Willie gave Evie long hugs and said goodbye the next Wednesday. The recruiter drove them 60 miles south to the state's capitol city and they both had no problem passing the Air Force's physical and written exams. The Air Force had them stay at a small base outside Jackson for a few days and booked them on a flight that

would leave the following Monday for Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, where they would go through basic training. The flight was the night of October 1, 1962.

While Willie and Robert were planning their future, most of the rest of Mississippi was focused on what was happening in Oxford, three hours north of Jackson, and the home of the University of Mississippi, the school lovingly known as Ole Miss by millions of Mississippi residents and alumni. The term “Ole Miss” was first applied to the school in 1896, and it quickly became synonymous with the university. The term was chosen because it evoked nostalgia for the state’s white majority—as it was originally used as a sign of respect by slaves when they spoke to their plantation owner’s wife.

In the late summer of 1962, a 29-year-old Air Force veteran and Mississippi native named James Howard Meredith was getting close to accomplishing an audacious goal he set more than a decade earlier: he planned to become the first black student at the University of Mississippi. Meredith’s heritage was African American, British Canadian, Scottish and Choctaw, who were a Native American people who lived in the Southeast. But due to the color of his skin, he was nothing other than a black man to the white folks in Mississippi. He was raised on a large farm owned by his father in Koscuisko, just 30 miles east of where Willie grew up. The Merediths and their extended family were self-sufficient, and James’s father, Moses Meredith, raised them in an isolated environment. His family members were not allowed to go on white folks’ property, or even visit black folks who lived on white folks’ property, and his father also guided James’ actions and planted the seed of his bold mission.

“My father was the principal in everything I did before he died. Stand up. Don’t give in,” James said.

James had served his country for nine years during the 1950s, and after leaving the Air Force in 1960, he studied for two years at historically black Jackson State University and twice applied for admission to the University of Mississippi, his admission being denied both times. In 1961, with the help of the NAACP, he filed suit against the university, claiming he was denied admission solely because of the color of his skin. A number of different courts agreed with Meredith's claim, and the university was ordered by the courts to admit him. One of the things standing in Meredith's way was the governor of Mississippi. Ross Barnett was elected in 1960 and was a staunch segregationist and white supremacist. He was also a Baptist Sunday school teacher who said during a gubernatorial campaign that "The Negro is different because God made him different to punish him. His forehead slants back. His nose is different. His lips are different, and his color is sure different." He ran unopposed in that election, garnering 96 percent of the vote. The registered voters in Mississippi at the time were almost entirely white.

The flagship universities in some other southern states had integrated fairly uneventfully during the 1950s. But in 1961 a riot broke out at the University of Georgia when two black students were admitted, ending 160 years of segregation at the school. And as in Mississippi, a federal judge had ordered the school to admit the students. At the beginning of 1962 the University of Mississippi, the University of Alabama, and the University of South Carolina were all still white only.

Toward the end of September the federal government had become involved in an attempt to enforce the court order that Meredith be admitted to the university. President John F. Kennedy sent 500 U.S. Marshals and thousands of members of the National Guard to try to maintain order in Oxford as thousands of white Mississippians had gathered on the campus to protest integration of the school. On

September 30 a riot broke out as the protestors hurled rocks and bricks and fired shots at the federal troops. Two people were killed and there was significant property damage.

On the night of the riot upstate in Oxford, Willie and Robert were getting driven through the capitol city of Jackson to the airport for their flight to Texas for basic training. Willie knew what was happening upstate and he could see the anger spewing out of people down in Jackson because they didn't want any blacks going to Ole Miss.

"I think one or two people got killed that night. And me and my brother were sitting in the backseat with these two Air Force sergeants, and they were taking us to the airport. And I never forgot, and me and my brother never said one word, and they was talkin' about killin' niggers and they oughta turn the dogs loose on those niggers, and me and my brother were sittin' there in the backseat," Willie said.

Willie breathed a sigh of relief when the car pulled into the lot of Thompson Air Field at 11 pm for the flight to San Antonio. But then he thought about being up in the sky. They would be flying commercial on Braniff International Airways and the reality of being miles up in the air in a metal tube scared the bejesus out of him. When he was working in the cotton fields as a teenager, every now and then he would hear a roar from above and look up to see a jet streaking across the sky, its puffy white tail painted on the brilliant blue tapestry. Willie would be jealous of the folks on the plane who were going anywhere other than goddam Clifton Plantation, but then he would think holy Mary Mother of God, what is keeping that plane up in the sky, and what kind of crazy person would get into one of those things and leave the earth? He was glad it wasn't him. Well tonight, it was him.

There was the plane sitting on the runway: it was a Boeing 707, one of the big boys. He took one look at it and almost soiled his boxers. Willie thought about the plane crashes he had seen on the news, like the American Airlines flight earlier that year that went down right after taking off in New York City, killing all 95 people aboard. He had never seen a plane up close, and now he could see all the little rivets holding the shiny metal panels together. What if one of those rivets pops off when we are going 500 miles an hour at six miles above the earth? And that causes the one next to it to pop off, and then another. Then what? We're screwed, that's what.

What am I doing? he thought. Kids who grow up picking cotton on plantations don't fly on jumbo jets. Yet here he was. Willie and Robert were directed toward the staircase leaning up against the plane door. Willie's legs had the jelly roll blues as he walked across the tarmac, and he ascended the steps very slowly, one at a time, until finally Robert, who was behind him, gave him a little shove in the back, laughed, and said, "Get moving, you big baby." When Willie got to the top of the stairs, he ducked his head to get under the doorway and a perky little flight attendant said, "Welcome aboard!" He had no response. He found his seat, which was next to a window. It figures. Of course, being so tall he had to bend his knees awkwardly and painfully just to wedge himself into the seat. He started to sweat a little when the plane started to roll down the runway, and then faster, and faster, and faster, until he felt the wheels jump off the ground, and his stomach was in his throat. If there was anything that made it worse, it was that the flight was at night. You can't see shit at night when you are on the ground, so how are you supposed to know where you are going when you are way up in the sky? It was madness. It was only a 90-minute flight, but it felt like 90 hours to Willie. He panicked every time every time they hit a bump of turbulence, his fingers digging into the armrests, and he

knew then that people weren't meant to ride with the clouds between their knees.

Somehow, miraculously, the plane eventually landed in San Antonio. It bumped on the runway a few times and then they were back on terra firma. Willie could relax a little bit, until he started thinking about the start of basic training the next day, and the fact that he had committed to doing this for the next four years. He supposed that if you are in the Air Force, they might actually want you to fly on airplanes. He hoped not.