

The interview

The most promising interview took place in Muhammad Ali's birthplace, Louisville, Kentucky. One of my former classmates had gotten¹ a job at *The Louisville Courier-Journal* and told me they were hiring. I went through the usual battery of interviews. When the day ended, I was drained but confident I'd landed a gig. They asked how soon I could start and told me to report to personnel the next day to complete my application.

The following day, when filling out the application, I ran across the question that always haunted me. "Have you ever been convicted of a felony? If the answer is yes, please explain." That queasy feeling returned to my stomach. I hadn't told them about my rap sheet, and I had another full year left on probation. *What should I do? If I don't tell, I've got this gig in the bag.* I left the question blank. When the personnel director picked up the application, I stopped her and whispered, "Excuse me. May I speak with you a moment?"

A middle-aged woman with an easy smile, the director said, "Sure, what do you need?" "I need to explain something to you. I left this section blank for a reason," I said, pointing to the application. "I have a criminal record. I served time. For armed robbery."

She stiffened² and looked at me. "Oh... Well, I'll need to talk with someone else about this... Wait right here. I'll be right back."

I squirmed in my hallway seat for more than an hour, trying to picture the high-level discussions that were probably going on. When the personnel director came back, she forced a smile. "O.K., we're all done... We'll be in touch with you soon."

She didn't offer to tell me what was said by her higher-ups, and I didn't ask. But her tone and expression gave her away. I knew the lowdown³. I knew I wouldn't get the job.

On the flight home, I cursed myself for letting them put me through that dog and pony show⁴. I kept asking myself over and over, *Why do you take yourself through this shit?*

I didn't get the job, of course. I don't remember what, if any, reason they gave for not hiring me, but I'm sure it was because I came clean. I couldn't handle⁵ that. I'd served my time. I'd been punished for the crime and suffered, I thought, more than enough. I wondered, *Why do I have to keep paying for it, and what benefit is there in telling interviewers the truth?*

That's when I decided to take a more realistic approach when dealing with white folks, including my parole officer, who insisted I tell the truth about my record when seeking jobs. I decided that from then on, I'd get my foot in the door first and prove myself. Then maybe, *maybe*, I'd tell them about my past.

Nathan McCALL, *Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America* (1994)

1. had gotten (US) = had got - 2. stiffen: *se raidir* (stiff: *raide*) - 3. I knew the lowdown: *je captais le message* - 4. dog and pony [pəʊni] show: *ici, mascarade* - 5. handle: *ici, accepter*

convict [kən'vɪkt] *vb.* (tr.): to pronounce (someone) guilty of an offence or crime.

felony ['feləni] *n., pl. -nies:* *Criminal law.* a serious crime, such as murder, arson, or armed robbery.

serve [sɜ:v] *vb.:* (a sentence, time) to go through a period of imprisonment.

probation [prə'beɪʃən] *n.:* *Law.* system of allowing certain law-breakers not to go to prison if they behave well and report regularly to a probation (or parole) officer for a fixed period of time.

record ['rekɔ:d] *n.:* facts known about the past of sb or sth.

Toolbox

Nouns: refusal [rɪ'fju:zəl], honesty • understatement *litote*.

Adjectives: honest ≠ dishonest, reliable [rɪ'laɪəbl] *digne de confiance* • (be) reluctant to *rechigner à / être peu disposé à* • scared of, (be) suspicious of sb *se méfier de qqn* • cautious ['kɔ:ʃəs] *prudent, deceitful* [dɪ'si:tfʊl] *fourbe* • startled *très surpris*, taken aback *déconcerté* • unfair *injuste*, disgusted = revolted.

Verbs: lie *mentir*, hide (the truth) • trust sb *faire confiance à qqn*, rely on *compter sur* • hesitate = waver • commit an offence *délict* • suspect sb of sth / V-ing *soupçonner qqn de qqch.* / V, fear sb might V *craindre que qqn V* • resent sth / V-ing *ne pas admettre qqch.* / V.