ANTHONY GROOMS  
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Lynching Uncle Rye: A Novel Excerpt

FROM THE ROCKER ON HIS PORCH, NOLAND JACKS SURVEYED THE ROWS OF NEW CORN THAT RAN FROM THE END OF THE YARD TO WHAT HIS EYES SAW AS A BLUR ON THE NEAR HORIZON, WHERE THE RIVER CUT HIGH BANKS THROUGH THE FIELD. 

The air had turned warm, but not yet heavy and insect-laden as it would in coming weeks, so there was no need to turn on the electric fan. Jacks avoided the fan whenever it was feasible. The breeze it made seemed artificial and it dried out his mouth and made it hard to keep his pipe lit. He liked to smoke and look at his fields, and he enjoyed the smell of the tobacco even more than its taste. He had experimented with a number of flavors, but he preferred apple. It had a sweet smell that was heavy in the air, but light in his mouth. Do you have Prince Albert in a can? He chuckled, remembering a joke. Do you have pig’s feet? Do you have oxtails? His father had told him those. How Spurgeon had known them, Jacks couldn’t imagine. But he did know that Spurgeon himself would never have played the prank, never would have asked a proprietor any of those questions: Do you have Prince Albert in a can? “Let him out, he’s suffocating?” Jacks laughed out aloud and shook his head.

His corn was knee high and bright green, the young leaves holding on to their yellow color. Soon they would darken, become bluer. Corn was as American as apple pie, he thought, more so, since apples came from Europe and corn originated in America, first grown by the Indians. You never heard of Indian apples, but Indian corn was as common as anything. His was a yellow dent corn, and he already knew he would make a good yield off of it. It would be ground to make good yellow meal for corn bread and grits. He stretched his arms above his head, breathed in the apple-vanilla smoke that clouded around him. Then he thought of an old song Spurgeon had sung.

Tobacco is a dirty weed. I like it.  
It satisfies no normal need. I like it.  
It makes you thin, it makes you lean,  
It takes the hair right off your bean.  
It’s the worst darn stuff I’ve ever seen.  
I like it.
Again, he laughed to himself. What pleasant memories he was having, remembering his father and enjoying the breeze that caused a wave to dance through the corn. Even now, he sat, in the same chair his father sat in when he surveyed the fields, looking for nothing, only enjoying what he saw. He had become his father, he thought, a man at last, a gentleman. He was a gentleman of the New South and one he thought Spurgeon would approve of. He remembered that it was on this very porch, not ten years earlier, when Spurgeon had turned to him, recognizing his maturity, saying, “I can’t tell you what to do, but be a man and you will learn to be a man.”

It had happened on the night of the lynching of Rye Johnson—“Uncle Rye,” as he had been known to the white families until his lynching; after which, he was called “Nigger Rye” or “That Johnson Nigger,” or “The Nigger Who Raped that Cuthbertson Woman.” It was a Saturday evening, early August, 1923, Jacks remembered. He and Spurgeon were sitting on the porch. His mother was indoors, cleaning the kitchen. From a long ways off they heard a car, first on the road, and then sputtering up the drive.

“Model T,” Spurgeon said. He did not take his eyes off the field, planted in tobacco, that lay before him. “That’ll be that ass Billy Venable.” Few owned cars in Talmaedge County at that time. “Ask him what he wants.”

Jacks had gone around the front, promptly obeying his father. It was indeed, Billy Venable’s Model T, no longer looking like a new car. Billy Venable was driving, and he blew on the horn, which sounded as much like a goose as it did a machine. Jacks counted six people in the car. Jake Cuthbertson was sitting in the front next to Billy Venable. In the back sat three men wearing white that Jacks did not know. Later he learned they were officials in the Ku Klux Klan, visitors from Alabama. Vernon Venable stood on the running board next to his uncle, Billy.

“Where’s your daddy, boy?” Billy Venable shouted.

“He’s ’round on the porch, sir,” Jacks answered, and as he turned to indicate, he saw his father come around the corner.

Spurgeon crossed his arms over his chest, holding his pipe in hand. “What can I do for you gentlemen this time of evening?”

“Oh, Spurgeon,” said Billy Venable, in an excited but comical way, “Come out with us tonight. We got some coon hunting to do.”
Spurgeon shifted on his feet and put the pipe in his mouth. "I don't reckon it's coon season, Billy."

The men in the car laughed. Vernon Venable laughed. All of them were drinking. "It's always coon season," Billy Venable said, and the other men in the car agreed. "Besides, we ain't fixin' to eat this coon. We might fry'im, but we ain't eating him." Again there was laughter.

Jacks wasn't sure what the men were talking about at first. He made eye contact with Vernon Venable, who beckoned to him with his head. There was a gleam of excitement in his eyes and he beamed a big attractive smile.

"Now, what this coon do to deserve getting fried?" Spurgeon asked.

Jake Cuthbertson volunteered. "Goddamn nigger took a shot at me. Near to hit me, too." The other men in the car laughed at his inflection.

"What nigger?" Spurgeon asked, his tone serious.

"That'll be Uncle Rye," Billy Venable said.

Spurgeon said nothing but sucked deeply on his pipe. He let the smoke come out of his mouth slowly and form a cloud around his head.

"Uncle Rye?" Jacks whispered, turning to his father. "Uncle Rye is a good ole boy. Uncle Rye wouldn't shoot at any body." Rye was a farmer and a lay minister. Approaching sixty, he had taken on the snow-headed appearance of a good ole Uncle Remus from the picture books that the white children read in school. Jacks liked him. He often came into the Venable feed store to purchase pig feed or crop seed. He settled his bills in cash, and because he was one of the few blacks in Talmaedge to own land, rather than to sharecrop, he rarely ran a tab at the store.

"What did you do to him to make him want to shot you?" Spurgeon asked.

Cuthbertson looked around at the other men. "Let's just say, that nigger and I had a discussion about a property line." Cuthbertson owned a small farm on the west side of the town of Bethel.

Spurgeon shook his head and smiled. "You got caught increasing your real estate, Jake?"

"Goddamnit, Jacks," Cuthbertson said. "Act like a white man."

Spurgeon cleared his throat. He stepped down to the top step of the porch. He spoke evenly. "Jake Cuthbertson, I don't reckon a piece of trash like you will ever tell me to act like man, white or not. I know what I am. I know I would have shot a piece of trash like you, if you had come moving my property mark. Uncle Rye ought to have killed you,
and I reckon he spared you just because you are a white man. Now, I am sorry for Uncle Rye. He's man of pride and courage, as far as I can see. But if you think you got to go off now and lynch him up, then that's your business. It doesn't involve me any."

One of the men from the back seat interrupted. "It does too involve you. It involves every white man. A nigger has shot at a white man. Could have killed him. Could have violated his home, his wife, his children. Maybe you will be next."

Spurgeon did not look at the man, but continued to address Jake Cuthbertson. "I can take care of myself and my own. If I know of a nigger that needs lynching, I'll lynch him. And I'll do it sober, and I'll do it myself."

"Spurgeon," Billy Venable said and laughed, "That's mighty unsportin'."

"Well," Spurgeon Jacks said, "I guess I don't see the sport in it. Now, I advise you to go on home and leave Uncle Rye alone. I reckon, if he is as smart as I think, he's already half way to Atlanta—"


"Well," Spurgeon said, stepping back onto the porch. "Then, you don't need me." He walked back to the side porch.

Jacks had liked the way his father had spoken. He admired his father's stature before the other men, and the calmness of his voice where the other men's voices had gotten jittery and feminine. Now he took the same stance as his father, on the top step, his arms folded. But then, Vernon Venable beckoned with his head again. He smiled and winked, and Jacks suddenly felt a rush of excitement. He shuttered to maintain control. He had never seen a lynching except on postcards and now there would be one in Bethel.

"Com'on Noland," Vernon Venable said. "You fixin' to miss out on the biggest thing ever happen in Talmaedge."

"This year," one of the men on the back seat said, and all the men laughed.

Jacks went to the side porch and found his father standing, in the dark now, the glow of the pipe lighting his face as he smoked.

"Papa," he started, his tone slightly pleading.

Spurgeon didn't move to look at him. "I ain't the one to tell you to go or not to go. You the only one can do that. But I can tell you this. It ain't
so easy as you might think to kill a man.” He turned to face Jacks, his face in the darkness. “If you go, even if you don’t so much as throw a pebble, you are in it as much as the man who ties the noose. You might just be a bystander, but no body is innocent, son. Even I, standing here, knowing it is Uncle Rye, am among the guilty. It is the guilt I bear for being who I am.”

The two were quiet for a moment. The car horn honked. “What must I do?” Jacks asked.

“Go,” his father said and sighed. “But be a man about it.”

“What does that mean, Papa?”

“You have to learn that for yourself.”

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Jacks rode on the other running board, across from Vernon Venable as the car sped over the bumpy road to town. He held on to the side mirror and braced himself against the back seat, so that his lanky body seemed to spread around Jake Cuthbertson. He turned his face over his shoulder to guard against the dust and flying gravel, but he also looked over at Vernon Venable. It seemed that Venable was carrying on a conversation with him, through his eyes, his smile, the nodding of his head and wind-blown hair. Jacks returned the smile, and felt genuinely the excitement that Venable seemed to communicate. But there was a knot in his stomach that had been tied by his father. Why hadn’t his father come? And what did he mean by being a man. He would watch someone die, he knew. He had never seen a dead man, but had read plenty about death in adventure novels and had seen pictures on postcards and in death portraits. Still he did not know what to expect, or how he would feel about it, especially since it was Uncle Rye, a man he knew. And his father had said it wouldn’t be easy.

Again, he looked at Venable, who seemed to be on the verge of breaking into song. Venable’s face was bright, lighted by the newly risen moon. Behind him, the forest, with its tangles of vines seemed to move. There was kudzu, of course, but also Virginia creeper, with its elegant circlet of five leaves, trumpet flower, honey suckle, feral wisteria, poison ivy, fox grape—all tangling, twining, twisting like a roil of snakes in the canopy.

When the car slowed, as it approached the town square, Venable signaled Jacks and jumped from the running board. The square was full
of people, the heaviest part of the crowd being in front of the small, brick jail, a wing of the tin domed courthouse. Mostly the crowd was men, but there were women and children, too. There was a good deal drinking, even though it was two years into the Prohibition. Venable had beer and offered it to Jacks. Jacks took the bottle, smelled it first, and when Venable laughed at him, took a sip. It was warm and tasted very bitter and he wanted to spit it out.

“You will like it better if you take a big mouthful,” Venable said and demonstrated. He winced, and laughed, wetness on his lips. The crowd jostled to and fro, expectant. Some asked when the lynching would start, and noted the lateness of the hour, though it was only just after nine o’clock. “But these things can take all night,” someone complained. Another said she objected to so much drinking, especially since the next day was Sunday. There were many strangers in the crowd, Jacks noted, and a few wore Klan robes of various colors. Some had on their hoods, looking like medieval priests, but none of them hid his face.

The crowd lurched and excited shouts and shooting came from the side of the square opposite the jail. The two young men went to investigate. When they got the story, Venable broke into high, choking laughter. A black man had come unsuspecting upon the crowd and had wanted to know what was going on. When he was told, he began to run and some of the people chased him, throwing stones, sticks and bricks at him. Someone had fired off some shots. “That nigger went lickety split,” a man said and laughed.

“Where’s that nigger Johnson,” someone else shouted. “We want that nigger Johnson.” Two women talked about Mrs. Cuthbertson, wondering how badly she had been violated. “How filthy,” one said, “to have that big, dirty, grimy baboon all over you. With all that hot nigger smell and sweat.” “I’d just like to see ’im,” the other replied. “We want Johnson!” a man shouted. “Nigger. Nigger. We want the nigger. Bring out the nigger now.” “Nigger. Nigger. Nigger,” the crowd chanted back. “Great God, bring out the nigger.” “Oh god of the fields, god of the moon, bring us the nigger,” they seemed to chant. “Now it the time for the killing of the nigger; Now is the time for the blood of the nigger.” “Hit’s time, Hit’s time. Eye of hog; tongue of dog; rattlesnake’s sting and buzzard’s wing. Hit’s time for the killing of the nigger.”

Again the crowd lurched, and this time rushed toward the jail house door where the sheriff had appeared with Rye Johnson. Venable pushed
through the crowd, Jacks following. Jacks did not recognize Rye Johnson, and thought for a moment that another black man had taken his place. But then he began to put together the man’s features, the white hair, the round face, swollen and missing its spectacles. The body was bowed, and as wobbly on its feet as a rag doll’s. It seemed to be leaning on the sheriff first and then the deputy. A great shout went up from the crowd, with hoots and hisses. Then it began to club Rye Johnson with stones and sticks, until the sheriff fired off his gun to calm them. “Here’s your nigger,” he shouted. “Eat him, if you can.” Then he pushed Rye Johnson into the crowd. For a moment there was a scuffle and fistfights broke out among the men as they vied to get to Rye Johnson. For a while, no one had control of Rye Johnson as he was pushed one way and then another, all the time being pelted and beaten with objects as well as fists. When he was pushed near Venable, Venable struck a blow to the top of his head. He turned, grinning to Jacks. Jacks clenched his fist. He saw his chance to strike the man, who was now, on his knees, his clothes tattered, his eyes round with fear. But Jacks could not bring himself to strike. When he saw Johnson’s eyes, more like the eyes of a giant bird, or toad, nearly completely black, all pupil, he felt he could strike. It made him feel strong to see the man’s fear, and he thought it would give him pleasure to strike him as Venable had done. The muscles in his arms quivered. He flexed his back and threw out his chest, but he did not clench his fist or raise his hand. His temples throbbed, pleasurably with tension and for the moment that was enough.

Then Rye Johnson fell and curled into a ball and the crowd showered him with spit, tobacco juice, and hawked-up phlegm. Suddenly, he jumped up, bowling into the crowd, as if to escape. The crowd fell back in surprise, as did Jacks, when the man, sickened and gray in the face ran toward him. Does he recognize me? Jacks thought. He remembered that the man had always been courteous, deferential, though not solicitous of him. “It’s a fine day, Young Mister Jacks,” he would have said with a nod. “A fine day, sir.” But then Rye Johnson turned away from him, and Jacks realized that the man was crazed, no more than a baited opossum or a trapped coyote, desperate for a last resort. It was then that Jacks relaxed his chest. There was no longer a sense of danger.

Someone shot a gun, and the crowd quieted. Rye Johnson lay on the ground again, in the middle of Main Street. His leg was crooked under
him, the shot having blasted open his knee. He let out a shriek, and
seeing he was down, the crowd moved in with axe handles and tire
irons. He turned over and over in the street, trying to escape the blows,
but each way he turned, he was struck. Once again the crowd stopped,
as a car backed into the street. The men in the car got out. Jacks
recognized them. They were the men from Alabama. It was Billy
Venable’s car and Billy Venable and Jake Cuthbertson were inside. The
men tied one end of a rope around Rye Johnson’s feet, bending the
broken leg back into place, and held onto the other end, like bronco
busters, and got into the rear of the car as it drove away. They dragged
Rye Johnson down Main Street, then turned just before reaching the
Venable townhouse, and dragged him down Poplar Street. Then they
went a short way down Dogwood Street, bouncing on the old
cobblestones, to the delight of the oohing and ahhing crowd as it chased
behind. “They are going to the old tree!” Someone shouted. Venable
tapped Jacks on the shoulder, and they took a short cut, down an alley
way and across a fallow field to the very edge of town. It was in sight of
Coon Bottom, where many of the blacks who worked as maids and lawn
men for the townspeople lived.

At the edge of the field stood a large old beech tree. Its silvery bark
shone in the moonlight and the wide spreading leafy branches cast down
a puzzle of shadows on the ground. The bark of the beech was smooth
and scarred with many initials and lover’s hearts; and, already, a noosed
rope hang from a low branch.

There were a few moments of quiet, and then the young men heard
the procession, headed by the honking car and followed by the shrill,
nearly child-like screams from the crowd. Once the crowd had
reconvened, one of the men from Alabama stood on the hood of the car.
His white robe lifted in the breeze and shone in the moonlight. In a
hoarse voice he spoke words that Jacks could barely understand. It
seemed he spoke in English, but then again, it seemed like a language
more ancient, more visceral, and rhythmic. It could have been Latin or
Greek. He gesticulated, throwing wide his arms as if to embrace the
moonlight. The crowd encouraged him with hoots and shouts, and when
he was done he cried out, “Thus always to niggers!” There was loud
drumming as someone hit a stick against a large can. Then a group,
perhaps five men, lifted Rye Johnson to his feet. The man had no fight
in him. He was naked, bloody from head to foot. Large pieces skin had
been rubbed from his face and chest. Suddenly, he was swinging in the air, and much to the delight of the crowd, he struggled, kicking at the air and trying to pull the rope away from his neck. Before he settled, the drumming came again, and two men came with cans of gasoline, doused Rye Johnson and set him on fire.

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In the morning the two young men sat in the back yard of the Venable’s townhouse. After the murder, they had lost sight of Billy Venable, and though Jacks had wanted to walk back to Woodbine, Venable convinced him to stay at the townhouse. They had drunk more beer, and gradually Jacks had come to like it, swallowing big, fizzy mouthfuls as his friend suggested. Venable still talked about the lynching. “That’s one nigger that won’t be troubling white women again.”

“I reckon not,” Jacks said. “But that wasn’t the problem to begin with, was it?”

“Who knows?” Venable said. “The trouble is . . . the trouble is . . . well, who knows what the trouble is? Anyhow, it was awful silly of those idiots to burn him up with a rope on him. Any fool knows, you need to chain him if you fixin’ to burn him. But anyhow it was spectacular. I never seen anything like it before—whoosh—and all that smoke and the nigger didn’t even scream.”

“No,” said Jacks. The image was fresh in his mind, the orange flames and the charring body.

Venable took a sip on his beer. He looked seriously at Jacks, eye to eye. Jacks could see Venable’s eyes still bright with excitement. “Have you ever wondered,” Venable said, “why it is that when you cook a chicken it smells so good and you want to eat it, but when you cook a man, it smells so foul.”

“No,” said Jacks.

“Have you ever thought about eating a man, like those cannibals in Africa?”

Jacks didn’t answer. He walked to the edge of the yard, where the periwinkle was beginning to warm in the sun, and he vomited.