

The Death of Ted Dennis
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Ted Dennis was seventeen years old when he was arrested and prosecuted by whites. He was a Negro bachelor from Georgia, and he worked at different occupations: at seven, he was an errand boy in a grocery store; later, he was a wheelbarrow-pusher in an iron foundry; and then, when unemployment hit, he went away to a fairground, where he sat on a board over a water basin, teasing whites so they would throw hard balls at him, the balls hitting him in the head or plunging him into the water. The whites of his eyes were full and deep like cups, and he teased sharply, relentlessly, with the help of those cup-like eyes and his white-sparkling bared teeth, provoking the rage of the crowd:

“Whites, you nobodies! Show me what you’ve got, strike the n——r...”

The boss provided him with the words, but he lit the fire in them, and it became a matter of life and death with hard balls flying around his head, white fingers curling up, challenging, aiming and missing. Ted had great fun at this.

One day, someone distracted him from his “work”: a man in a checkered suit, with running eyes like darts, who seized him by his brown arm and asked:

— Your name?

— Dennis.

— Come with me...

Ted sensed danger, but he couldn’t place his finger on it. He shifted his eyes and lifted his ears like a hare that detected a dog was near; when he was brought to the station house, he was

like a mouse in a cat-corner, sensing that he had ensnared himself in a net. His heart told him what to do:

— Cry, wail, beg for any possibility of pity, but speak not one superfluous word; the word of a Negro is a string that the whites will wrap around their little fingers, and then tighten, ensnare, and twist, and they will strangle you to death with it...

He kept silent when they brought him a picture to identify, a picture of a white woman in her sixties. He looked, shifted his eyes and lifted his ears like a hare. The face was not foreign to him, for he had seen many such ladies in the kitchens where his mother washed laundry and cooked dishes, when, heated and sweaty, she would urge him with her apron:

— Skat, little Negro, worm! He won't just let me alone...

But now, their necks filled with red bloody malice; Ted was tormented with questions:

— Do you know the lady?

— I don't know her.

— Were you in her house?

— I don't remember.

— Do you like white women?

Dennis giggled like a boy.

— Did you rape her? Confess, bastard...

Someone struck him. At first, he was awake: conscious, brown, stooped like a ball. He was violently flung from hand to hand, and he fell on the stone floor and screamed and roared, and they tore pieces of flesh and clothes from him. After that his consciousness extinguished; big, brown, pupils that throbbed from sadness in bloodshot eyes, eyes of a tortured foal. He saw white linen pain around himself; the pain had a face: police, boys with flushed necks, in

checkered suits, “protectives,” as little Negro boys called them, as mothers held up as threats: “pro-tec-tives.” Smack, like hard balls in the head. But Ted was enraged, he mocked and provoked the rage of the whites all the more:

— White nothings! He-he. Let’s see what you can do! Hit the Negro again and again...

He laid cheekily on the floor, in a cell of the station house, a brown piece of burning pain. From the cut-up pieces of clothes and flesh came an animal moan mixed in with a sob from Dennis’s returned consciousness, the delicious pang of insulted Negro boys who sit on the sidewalk, brown bare feet folded under them, wiping away the tears spilling from their lonesome brown eyes, the eyes of orphaned foals, howling and hiccupping:

— I’m a little n——r! No one has any pity on a poor Negro, oh-ho-ho-hoy...

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There was a trial.

It was light and sunny in the courtroom. A big colorful crowd was assembled as though on a holiday, and they were seated elbow-to-elbow. Sunlight played in impish sheets, paddled around on the floor, danced on tense faces, teased the black-robed man who sat in the seat of honor engrossed in papers, jumped around the chain of Dennis’s brown arm, aimed at his big wounded eyes, which unceasingly blinked in the play of shadow and light.

It was a big trial. Newspapers had already drummed about this weeks and months earlier; pictures had been drawn of the “n——r-demon” who had desecrated white womanly honor. Days stood still. A hatred arose in Georgia — hot, restless, drunk — it rose with the blooming of peach trees and acacias, that blood-hatred of the Negro poverty of dirt and dust-alleys, of Ted

Dennis's seventeen-year-old brown life. Men and women brought the malice, in colorful decoration, into the courtroom, sprinkled it over the brightness of the sunbeams and poisoned them. But Ted understood little, and his cup-like eyes stared ahead, surprised, with a question addressed to no one:

— What do you want from Dennis? What did he do? ...

He was seated for interrogation on a soft velvet chair with a high back. The sun-splatters, turning silver against the iron hoops on his arms, made him squint; an animal fear came over him and nailed to his head an inherited Negro-thought:

— Dennis, danger! Do what you can: cry, wail, draw pity from white hearts, perhaps it will help, but — no superfluous word. They will use the word of a n——r to wrap a rope around you, entangling and strangling; n——r — hold your tongue...

— Your name?

— Dennis, Ted.

— How old?

— Seventeen.

— Occupation?

— I don't know.

— Can you read, write?

— I can't.

— Do you go to church?

— I don't.

— Do you understand your crime?

— I don't.

— Did you rape a lady?

— I don't know, sir.

— Did you confess to it?

— I don't know, sir.

As he was going back from the chair, a mixed ball of peril and pain burst inside him, and with a hearty straining he drew out a Negro children's refrain with a sob:

— I'm just a little Negro! No one has pity on a poor Negro, oh-ho-ho-hoy...

The sirs and ladies laughed. The black-robed one angrily struck with a gavel on the table.

After that, a man (a serious sir he was, with a lion's voice, bespectacled, in a gray suit) read out from a paper that "Ted Dennis, eighteen years old, confessed to his crime and signed a cross on the paper with his own hand and free will; the proof is here..."

The black-robed one looked over it seriously; he with the agile dart-like eyes and checkered suit confirmed everything, and after that the man who had been sitting the whole time at Dennis's right hand arose:

— My client has nothing to add...

In the courtroom a gasp swallowed the tense silence, but the whites of Dennis's eyes smiled, and his white sharp teeth bared just like in the game he used to play:

— Look what kind of stories the whites spun up! — He was compelled then to look at the cross that he had laid down with his own hand. His eighteen years dumbfounded him:

— The white man made a mistake, Jesus...

He was sentenced:

— To the gallows. Hanging by the neck, until he dies...

The sirs and ladies applauded and waved their handkerchiefs. The black-robed one struck angrily with the gavel. Dennis didn't quite grasp it; his cup-like eyes overflowed with brown enlarged pupils, standing still, and his shoulders shrugged:

— Gee! Hanging? Why? ...

Just as someone took him to lead him out of the court-hall, the tension of pain and fear of death burst out, and bitterness overflowed in a wild voice.

— Bastards! You have no pity on a n——r! May your intestines rot!

— I don't want to die!

— Killing Dennis, why? What has he done to them?

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In the evening, they came for him.

It was a quiet dusk; a setting sun burst, and with flowing molten gold it irrigated the heavens. The window-bars and the dusty prison windows waxed reddish. In the city the blossoming acacias and peaches smelled intoxicating. Suddenly, in the prison yard, there was a commotion. A mob — insects, elbow to elbow. Faces — goateed, clean-shaven, women old and young. All excited, enraged, distorted by bloody anger, with bitten lips; they pushed forward to the bars; they shoved each other, pushed, tore from each other flesh and bone:

— Bring the n——r here!

— Hand over the son of a bitch!

— The court is the people! The sons of Georgia!

— For our women's honor — let's settle it ourselves!

Dennis smelled danger. His brown flesh blew itself into little bubbles, goosebumps; fear of death sharpened in his eyes, danger rose on him from the corners, and like a mouse in a burning, kerosene-soaked trap, he began to run from wall to wall...

Then the bars and doors exploded. Hands — paws tore twisted, rusted iron bars from concrete and brick mounts. Dust, clay, ground-up ash-bricks crumbled and rose as clouds that bit in the throat. In the open hole, backs rolled on the ground, each struggled for a space, one pushed aside the next. Their fervor aided the whinny coming from all sides:

— Hand over the n——r!

— He—re!

— Caught the nasty son of a bitch! Here we are!

— Throw over the rope!

— They're taking him out! Clear the way!

They led Dennis out, his neck tied up in a rope, and he was pushed into the insect-heap. A red beam of light fell on his eyes. He squinted and opened his eyes again. The light tickled his eyelids, and the taut rope cut into the flesh of his neck and, choking him, pushed a bit of blue tongue out of this mouth.

Automobiles waited outside. In the first (into which Dennis was pushed) sat a man dressed in white: a white suit, white shoes, a white flower in his lapel. He wiped the sweat from his heated forehead with a white kerchief, rubbed his palms together, and moved from his place.

After him — a long chain of automobiles on black holiday. Body on body pushed forward, inside: to the heart, to the throat; his heart and his throat noisy, becoming intoxicated, so that the road expanded with the racket:

— Make way!

— They're driving the n——r!

— A brown dog!

The road was long and tangled. They traversed city streets, passed by flowers and acacia-gardens, peach-groves. Paved stone was replaced by raw, red, clayey soil. From both sides — dense forest; and in the middle — a clearing. Below — red clayey clods of dirt, like a cut-up rye bread that lies in the dark and waits for biting, hungry teeth...

Dennis laid in the corner. Eyes, whites and pupils, a burning play of white and black; his nostrils flared from the smell of the forest. The rawness of the night and the forest scratched at the ball of anxiety in his heart, and a strong longing came over him, to live a bit longer, to save himself among the grass and trees in the forest dark as night.

Like a cat he fingered the rope around his neck, touched the knot and tugged it, and when the noose finally became loose, he quickly threw it off and jumped out of the automobile...

He fled and fell on all fours; it was natural that Ted Dennis should dive here into the woods on paws, climb up slopes, hide himself in a pit, jump and climb further; the mob should whoop, whistle, make noise, with provoked clamor, bitten lips and deformed mouths:

— Catch the n——r! After him!

— Git 'im!

Automobiles halted. The mob scoured all the little empty spaces of the forest, climbed up slopes, sniffed all around pits and bushes. When one met with the next, he turned away his eyes in shame. One, a goateed man, shot from a hunting rifle with buckshot in all directions and spit with a curse, taking aim into the shadows of the forest. Ted, crawling, hid himself in the bushes, laid there breathless, a restrained hedgehog. He allowed himself one movement — a glance from

under his brow, and then he held his breath again. Torches were already ignited, a forest fire started, but the crowd hadn't yet sniffed him out...

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The lynch-party did not disperse. In small groups they whispered to each other like wolves licking themselves over, and a decision was delivered:

— The n——r, living or dead!

In the meantime, they sat by the fire to have a bite to eat, but the bites did not give them pleasure: they swallowed quickly the heavy, poorly ground-up pieces, like butcher shop bones, and they choked on them. Impatience spoiled their appetites.

Hunting hounds were brought and pet on their backs, and the hands of women caressed their fur, and one tracking dog sniffed out what they wanted from him:

— Get hold of the n——r, living or dead...

The hounds searched and recognized the smell of the living flesh: a crawling beast, cup-like eyes overflowing with white stiffness from fear, and in that stiffness, two burning pupils, tensed, prickly, a mouth opened wide, and white-shining bared teeth, ready to compete with hunting hounds in a pelt-tearing.

Ted Dennis did not run; he tried to make peace with the dogs. The tracking dogs turned about their tails, unable to decide. So a long time passed, a war-game between hatred and new friendship. The dogs rubbed Ted with their muzzles, rolled him in the grass, tore with their paws the tattered pieces of clothes on his body, and he caressed them, pet their ears and whispered into their ears with boyish pleading:

— Quiet, friends! Play, but don't bark...

— Ted wants to live, to run away; run with me...

He stood up — they dragged him down, he crawled — they ran after him; until the canine blood could not resist and it spilled out in hostile barking.

Dennis was caught.

It was already daybreak. Larks in the forest twittered. Grass exhaled nighttime dampness; a quiet-drunk aroma rose and the sun filtered in light and silver-drops. But the mob was weary and sleepy: faces — earth-colored, eyes stuck into blue pits, blood dried into balls of stiffness by over-boiled hatred. Lazily they traded suggestions:

— Hang it there in that spot! Where should it be dragged to?

They selected a tree that branched out in the middle in two directions, a smooth ram's head with two horns. A cheek-bearded man tightened the knot around Dennis's neck and the remaining mob drew the rope over the tree...

When Dennis was hung in the air, a beam of light poured in, sharpened, aimed at and hit the line of the elevated brow, and the overflowing cup-like eyes, set with dead pupils, played in the sun while the face was in shadow...

At his feet, a fire was started; when the flames reached to the bare soles, it had a whiff of brown steamed flesh. A dawn breeze seasoned it with the fragrance of dew-fields, distant peach-trees and acacias. And the lynch mob had fun. Earth-faces filled with blood. Nostrils flared and eyes sparkled savagely...

The wind picked up the smell of roasted flesh and carried it further away. All around lay spread out executioner-fields. Silent twigs with white heads swayed at dawn, approving of that which had occurred:

— Thus it was, thus it will be, alas: a n—r...

From very far away, somewhere at a brickworks, a factory smokestack burned. It whistled and hummed from deep within; thick, black smoke-clouds reached toward the forest, hissing forth with violence, with fervor.