DON’T KNOW WHAT STARTED IT. A BUNCH OF men came by my Uncle Ed’s place and said there was going to be a party down at the Square, and my uncle hollered for me to come on and I ran with them through the dark and rain and there we were at the Square. When we got there everybody was mad and quiet and standing around looking at the nigger. Some of the men had guns, and one man kept goosing the nigger in his pants with the barrel of a shotgun saying he ought to pull the trigger, but he never did. It was right in front of the court house, and the old clock in the tower was striking twelve. The rain was falling cold and freezing as it fell. Everybody was cold, and the nigger kept wrapping his arms around himself trying to stop the shivers.

Then one of the boys pushed through the circle and snatched off the nigger’s shirt, and there he stood, with his black skin all shivering in the light from the fire, and looking at us with a scared look on his face and putting his hands in his pants pockets. Folks started yelling to hurry up and kill the nigger. Somebody yelled: “Take your hands out of your pockets, nigger; we gonna have plenty heat in a minnit.” But the nigger didn’t hear him and kept his hands where they were.

I tell you the rain was cold. I had to stick my hands in my pockets they got so cold. The fire was pretty small, and they put some logs around the platform they had the nigger on and then threw on some gasoline, and you could see the flames light up the whole Square. It was late and the streetlights had been off for a long time. It was so bright that the bronze statue of the general standing there in the Square was like something
alive. The shadows playing on his moldy green face made him seem to be smiling down at the nigger.

They threw on more gas, and it made the Square bright like it gets when the lights are turned on or when the sun is setting red. All the wagons and cars were standing around the curbs. Not like Saturday though—the niggers weren’t there. Not a single nigger was there except this Bacote nigger and they dragged him there tied to the back of Jed Wilson’s truck. On Saturday there’s as many niggers as white folks.

Everybody was yelling crazy ’cause they were about to set fire to the nigger, and I got to the rear of the circle and looked around the Square to try to count the cars. The shadows of the folks was flickering on the trees in the middle of the Square. I saw some birds that the noise had woke up flying through the trees. I guess maybe they thought it was morning. The ice had started the cobblestones in the street to shine where the rain was falling and freezing. I counted forty cars before I lost count. I knew folks must have been there from Phenix City by all the cars mixed in with the wagons.

God, it was a hell of a night. It was some night all right. When the noise died down I heard the nigger’s voice from where I stood in the back, so I pushed my way up front. The nigger was bleeding from his nose and ears, and I could see him all red where the dark blood was running down his black skin. He kept lifting first one foot and then the other like a chicken on a hot stove. I looked down to the platform they had him on, and they had pushed a ring of fire up close to his feet. It must have been hot to him with the flames almost touching his big black toes. Somebody yelled for the nigger to say his prayers, but the nigger wasn’t saying anything now. He just kinda moaned with his eyes shut and kept moving up and down on his feet, first one foot and then the other.

I watched the flames burning the logs up closer and closer to the nigger’s feet.

They were burning good now, and the rain had stopped and the wind was rising, making the flames flare higher.
I looked, and there must have been thirty-five women in the crowd, and I could hear their voices clear and shrill mixed in with those of the men. Then it happened. I heard the noise about the same time everyone else did. It was like the roar of a cyclone blowing up from the gulf, and everyone was looking up into the air to see what it was. Some of the faces looked surprised and scared, all but the nigger. He didn’t even hear the noise. He didn’t even look up. Then the roar came closer, right about our heads and the wind was blowing higher and higher and the sound seemed to be going in circles.

Then I saw her. Through the clouds and fog I could see a red and green light on her wings. I could see them just for a second; then she rose up into the low clouds. I looked out for the beacon over the tops of the buildings in the direction of the airfield that’s forty miles away, and it wasn’t circling around. You usually could see it sweeping around the sky at night, but it wasn’t there. Then, there she was again, like a big bird lost in the fog. I looked for the red and green lights, and they weren’t there anymore. She was flying even closer to the tops of the buildings than before. The wind was blowing harder, and leaves started flying about, making funny shadows on the ground, and tree limbs were cracking and falling.

It was a storm all right. The pilot must have thought he was over the landing field. Maybe he thought the fire in the Square was put there for him to land by. Gosh, but it scared the folks. I was scared too. They started yelling: “He’s going to land. He’s going to land.” And: “He’s going to fall.” A few started for their cars and wagons. I could hear the wagons creaking and chains jangling and cars spitting and missing as they started the engines up. Off to my right, a horse started pitching and striking his hooves against a car.

I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to run, and I wanted to stay and see what was going to happen. The plane was close as hell. The pilot must have been trying to see where he was at, and her motors were drowning out all the sounds. I could even feel the vibration, and my hair felt like it was standing up under my hat. I happened to look over at the statue of the general standing with one leg before the other and leaning back on a sword, and I was fixing to run over and climb between his legs and sit
there and watch when the roar stopped some, and I looked up and she was gliding just over the top of the trees in the middle of the Square.

Her motors stopped altogether and I could hear the sound of branches cracking and snapping off below her landing gear. I could see her plain now, all silver and shining in the light of the fire with T. W. A. in black letters under her wings. She was sailing smoothly out of the Square when she hit the high power lines that follow the Birmingham highway through the town. It made a loud crash. It sounded like the wind blowing the door of a tin barn shut. She only hit with her landing gear, but I could see the sparks flying, and the wires knocked loose from the poles were spitting blue sparks and whipping around like a bunch of snakes and leaving circles of blue sparks in the darkness.

The plane had knocked five or six wires loose, and they were dangling and swinging, and every time they touched they threw off more sparks. The wind was making them swing, and when I got over there, there was a crackling and spitting screen of blue haze across the highway. I lost my hat running over, but I didn’t stop to look for it. I was among the first and I could hear the others pounding behind me across the grass of the Square. They were yelling to beat all hell, and they came up fast, pushing and shoving, and someone got pushed against a swinging wire. It made a sound like when a blacksmith drops a red hot horseshoe into a barrel of water, and the steam comes up. I could smell the flesh burning. The first time I’d ever smelled it. I got up close and it was a woman. It must have killed her right off. She was lying stiff as a board in a puddle, with pieces of glass insulators that the plane had knocked off the poles lying all around her. Her white dress was torn, and I saw one of her tits hanging out in the water and her thighs. Some woman screamed and fainted and almost fell on a wire, but a man caught her. The sheriff and his men were yelling and driving folks back with guns shining in their hands, and everything was lit up blue by the sparks. The shock had turned the woman almost as black as the nigger. I was trying to see if she wasn’t blue too, or if it was just the sparks, and the sheriff drove me away. As I backed off trying to see, I heard the motors of the plane start up again somewhere off to the right in the clouds.

The clouds were moving fast in the wind and the wind was blowing the smell of something burning over to me. I turned around, and the crowd
was headed back to the nigger. I could see him standing there in the middle of the flames. The wind was making the flames brighter every minute. The crowd was running. I ran too. I ran back across the grass with the crowd. It wasn’t so large now that so many had gone when the plane came. I tripped and fell over the limb of a tree lying in the grass and bit my lip. It ain’t well yet I bit it so bad. I could taste the blood in my mouth as I ran over. I guess that’s what made me sick. When I got there, the fire had caught the nigger’s pants, and the folks were standing around watching, but not too close on account of the wind blowing the flames. Somebody hollered: “Well, nigger, it ain’t so cold now, is it? You don’t need to put your hands in your pockets now.” And the nigger looked up with his great white eyes looking like they was ’bout to pop out of his head, and I had enough. I didn’t want to see anymore. I wanted to run somewhere and puke, but I stayed. I stayed right there in the front of the crowd and looked.

The nigger tried to say something I couldn’t hear for the roar of the wind in the fire, and I strained my ears. Jed Wilson hollered, “What you say there, nigger?” And it came back through the flames in his nigger voice: “Will one a you gentlemen please cut my throat?” he said. “Will somebody please cut my throat like a Christian?” And Jed hollered back, “Sorry, but ain’t no Christians around tonight. Ain’t no Jewboys neither. We’re just one hundred percent Americans.”

Then the nigger was silent. Folks started laughing at Jed. Jed’s right popular with the folks, and next year, my uncle says, they plan to run him for sheriff. The heat was too much for me, and the smoke was making my eyes to smart. I was trying to back away when Jed reached down and brought up a can of gasoline and threw it in the fire on the nigger. I could see the flames catching the gas in a puff as it went in in a silver sheet and some of it reached the nigger making spurts of blue fire all over his chest.

Well, that nigger was tough. I have to give it to that nigger; he was really tough. He had started to burn like a house afire and was making the smoke smell like burning hides. The fire was up around his head, and the smoke was so thick and black we couldn’t see him. And him not moving—we thought he was dead. Then he started out. The fire had burned the ropes they had tied him with, and he started jumping and
kicking about like he was blind, and you could smell his skin burning. He kicked so hard that the platform, which was burning too, fell in, and he rolled out of the fire at my feet. I jumped back so he wouldn’t get on me. I’ll never forget it. Every time I eat barbeque I’ll remember that nigger. His back was just like a barbecued hog. I could see the prints of his ribs where they start around from his backbone and curve down and around. It was a sight to see, that nigger’s back. He was right at my feet, and somebody behind pushed me and almost made me step on him, and he was still burning.

I didn’t step on him though, and Jed and somebody else pushed him back into the burning planks and logs and poured on more gas. I wanted to leave, but the folks were yelling and I couldn’t move except to look around and see the statue. A branch the wind had broken was resting on his hat. I tried to push out and get away because my guts were gone, and all I got was spit and hot breath in my face from the woman and two men standing directly behind me. So I had to turn back around. The nigger rolled out of the fire again. He wouldn’t stay put. It was on the other side this time. I couldn’t see him very well through the flames and smoke. They got some tree limbs and held him there this time and he stayed there till he was ashes. I guess he stayed there. I know he burned to ashes because I saw Jed a week later, and he laughed and showed me some white finger bones still held together with little pieces of the nigger’s skin. Anyway, I left when somebody moved around to see the nigger. I pushed my way through the crowd, and a woman in the rear scratched my face as she yelled and fought to get up close.

I ran across the Square to the other side, where the sheriff and his deputies were guarding the wires that were still spitting and making a blue fog. My heart was pounding like I had been running a long ways, and I bent over and let my insides go. Everything came up and spilled in a big gush over the ground. I was sick, and tired, and weak, and cold. The wind was still high, and large drops of rain were beginning to fall. I headed down the street to my uncle’s place past a store where the wind had broken a window, and glass lay over the sidewalk. I kicked it as I went by. I remember somebody’s fool rooster crowing like it was morning in all that wind.
The next day I was too weak to go out, and my uncle kidded me and called me “The gutless wonder from Cincinnati.” I didn’t mind. He said you get used to it in time. He couldn’t go out hisself. There was too much wind and rain. I got up and looked out of the window, and the rain was pouring down and dead sparrows and limbs of trees were scattered all over the yard. There had been a cyclone all right. It swept a path right through the county, and we were lucky we didn’t get the full force of it.

It blew for three days steady, and put the town in a hell of a shape. The wind blew sparks and set fire to the white-and-green-rimmed house on Jackson Avenue that had the big concrete lions in the yard and burned it down to the ground. They had to kill another nigger who tried to run out of the county after they burned this Bacote nigger. My Uncle Ed said they always have to kill niggers in pairs to keep the other niggers in place. I don’t know though, the folks seem a little skittish of the niggers. They all came back, but they act pretty sullen. They look mean as hell when you pass them down at the store. The other day I was down to Brinkley’s store, and a white cropper said it didn’t do no good to kill the niggers ’cause things don’t get no better. He looked hungry as hell. Most of the croppers look hungry. You’d be surprised how hungry white folks can look. Somebody said that he’d better shut his damn mouth, and he shut up. But from the look on his face he won’t stay shut long. He went out of the store muttering to himself and spit a big chew of tobacco right down on Brinkley’s floor. Brinkley said he was sore ’cause he wouldn’t let him have credit. Anyway, it didn’t seem to help things. First it was the nigger and the storm, then the plane, then the woman and the wires, and now I hear the airplane line is investigating to find who set the fire that almost wrecked their plane. All that in one night, and all of it but the storm over one nigger. It was some night all right. It was some party too. I was right there, see. I was right there watching it all. It was my first party and my last. God, but that nigger was tough. That Bacote nigger was some nigger!

AFTERWORD
On the origin of the story, by John F. Callahan, Ralph Ellison’s literary executor: Ralph Ellison was no stranger to Esquire. As a college student in the thirties, he read early issues in black barbershops around Tuskegee, Alabama, and back in Oklahoma City, when he went home on vacation. In a 1958 letter to Saul Bellow, Ellison noted “the impact of the old Esquire magazine on kids in the provinces.” He singled out a Thomas Mann essay, Hemingway’s “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” and Fitzgerald’s blues-toned “Crack-up” pieces. To the end of his life, the author of Invisible Man was proud of “The Golden Age, Time Past,” his memoir of the jazz scene at Minton’s during the forties that Esquire published in January 1959.

Despite Ellison’s affinity for Esquire, “A Party Down at the Square” is his first work of fiction to appear in the magazine. My discovery of the story happened by accident. After Ellison’s death in 1994, I was searching through the Ellisons’ Riverside Drive apartment in Manhattan, looking for additional pages from his novel in progress. About to give up, I saw Mrs. Ellison point in the direction of a battered cardboard box under the dining-room table. “Have a look,” she said. I did and found no pages from the novel, but, at the bottom of the box, under various personal effects, I came across a brown imitation-leather folder with RALPH W. ELLISON embossed in gold letters on the front. Inside, bulging with manuscripts, was a manila folder labeled EARLY STORIES. The stories were typed on paper brown with age and beginning to crumble. Here and there, passages were crossed out and revisions inserted in Ralph’s stylish, emphatic, and hasty hand.

Tucked between two autobiographical stories was an untitled story about an Alabama lynching told entirely in the voice of a young, white narrator. From the first line—“I don’t know what started it”—to the last—“That Bacote nigger was some nigger!”—I was bowled over. While much of Ellison’s novel in progress is told by white voices, northern and southern, I had never encountered him writing in a voice that was a cross between Huck Finn and Nick Adams.

The story was so different from Ellison’s other fiction, at first I couldn’t help wondering whether the story was his. Then I spotted numerous cross-outs and revisions in what looked like his hand. Comparing the handwriting with inserts on the other manuscripts, I found they matched, even down to the idiosyncratic way Ellison made the paragraph sign—two straight lines intersected by an all-but-closed circle.

The story was his all right, and although I find no evidence that Ellison submitted the story for publication, it retained a place in his working memory. I discovered this when, going through his notes for the novel in progress, I read the following cryptic message scribbled at the bottom of a page: Book of stories. Story of lynching and airplane. Have Fanny look up. Could he have forgotten the cache of unpublished early manuscripts lying around at the bottom of a cardboard box like shipwrecked treasures on the ocean floor? I do not know, but along with his other previously unpublished stories, what he called the “story of lynching and airplane” can only add to Ellison’s range and reputation as a writer.

“A Party Down at the Square” is a tour de force, in part because, as Ellison, in a later, unpublished reminiscence on becoming a writer, remarked, telling the story “presented its own difficulties of convention.” By narrating a lynching in the voice of a Cincinnati white boy visiting his uncle in Alabama, Ellison defies the “segregation of the word” he found still lingering in American literature in 1946 when he wrote “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity.” As a young writer, he crosses the color line, slips under the skin of his white narrator, and looks around. The boy speaks an idiom so unself-consciously reportorial that it becomes self-conscious and conscientious. In his last words, the boy tries both to declare and to disguise his respect for the murdered black man: “God, but that nigger was tough. That Bacote nigger was some nigger!”
The repetition of the word *nigger* denies, affirms, and again denies the sense of mystery and equality Ellison celebrated in “Brave Words for a Startling Occasion,” his speech acknowledging the National Book Award for *Invisible Man*, as that “mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy” he felt had all but disappeared from American fiction after classic nineteenth-century writers yielded to the moderns in the 1920s. His technique in “A Party Down at the Square” compels readers to experience the human condition in extremis, as mediated by a stranger hell-bent on observation and not the act of witness. Except for the black victim, the participants and spectators are white folks from near and far titillated by the slow, excruciating torture of the “Bacote nigger”—for what crime or affront the narrator gives not the slightest hint. (He probably does not know.) Intriguingly, almost fifty years later, in “An Extravagance of Laughter,” an excerpt of which appeared in Esquire, Ellison characterized the ritual response to lynching in terms imaginatively realized by his early story: “Hence their deafness to cries of pain, their stoniness before the sight and stench of burning flesh, their exhilarated and grotesque self-righteousness.”

Matters are exactly so in “A Party Down at the Square.” The onlookers are horrified by the sizzling flesh of a woman electrocuted by a live wire knocked free when the TWA pilot, in the confusion and fury of a cyclone, mistakes the lynching’s ring of fire for airport signal flares. But the lynchers’ revulsion is brief; they turn back to the business at hand as if only the veritable end of the world could divert them from burning the black man alive.

The narrator does not remark on the contrast between the human and natural aberrations of lynching and the cyclone. His morality is a commitment to be noncommittal; for him, accuracy depends on neutrality. As the action moves inexorably toward ritual violence, the narrator’s detachment becomes more chilling because he has no relation either to the “nigger” or to his own conscience.

Yet in his strange, terrible, and powerful fashion, Ellison’s young white witness does testify about the impression left when the black man’s pain is most indelible: “I’ll never forget it. Every time I eat barbeque I’ll remember that nigger. His back was just like a barbecued hog. I could see the prints of his ribs where they start around from his backbone and curve down and around. It was a sight to see, that nigger’s back.” But the white boy’s most telling response comes from his insides when, to his shame, he throws up. His sensations are his response, and they signify a resistance to values he’s been taught not to question. Ellison’s sleight of hand leaves readers feeling that what’s happened will not blow over in the aftermath of nature’s storm.

There’s nothing like this story in the rest of Ellison’s work. Where did it come from? Did he begin it as an exercise to see how far he could push Hemingway’s brand of understatement and carry on spurred by vivid memories of the Alabama he traveled through while playing jazz gigs with a band of student musicians from Tuskegee? In essays and letters, Ellison has written of that time and place in a deliberate, formal, sometimes ornate, almost Olympian style. But here, with the alchemy of imagination, he transmutes his feelings and observations into a character everyone, including perhaps Ellison himself, might have thought beyond his powers.

In any case, I like to imagine him chuckling at his story, which he filed but did not forget, seeing the light of day in Esquire, whose pages were hospitable to much of the contemporary writing he admired while he was becoming a writer in the late thirties.