

*ACROSS THE BRIDGE*  
by Nathan Lee Gadsden

*Installment #2 – THE FELLAS*

At Wendell's urging, Eddie led the way through the dinner line. He studied the fried chicken and sliced turkey briefly before deciding on the roast beef. Next, he shook his head at the mashed potatoes and pointed to the tray of rice. Finally, he chose the corn over lima beans.

After completing his order, the lady handed his plate and directed him to the dining room for bread, dessert, beverages, and condiments.

"Where you sittin'?" Wendell asked as he approached with a full tray in his hand.

"Doesn't matter," Eddie said.

"There's some fellas from the bus over there," Wendell said, motioning toward a corner near the doorway.

Just then, a tall lanky Black teenager stepped between them. He balanced his tray in one hand and clapped Eddie on the back with the other.

"I'll take my brother from here," he said to Wendell.

With his hand still on Eddie's back, the tall, lanky kid guided Eddie toward an empty table in the corner of the room near a milk dispenser. Eddie looked back and saw Wendell wave just before sauntering over to another table. When Eddie saw that Wendell wasn't sitting alone, he went with the other boy willingly.

"No salt," the Black kid declared as he and Eddie placed their trays on the table. He glanced around at the nearby tables, then walked over to one where six White students sat and talked as they ate.

"Excuse me, but you fellows don't look like you're using these," Dennis said as he leaned across their table and picked up the salt and pepper shakers in one hand. He flashed a wide grin at each of the students sitting at the table.

"Does it matter?" one of the students asked. Does it matter whether or not we mind?"

"Do I detect a slight tone of dissatisfaction?" Dennis mused while frozen with the shakers in hand.

"Look, man, no one's trying to start anything," the second one said.

"Don't suck up to him," the first one said.

"Shut up, man!" the second one barked. "Just shut up!" He looked at Dennis. "Why don't you just take the salt and pepper, man?"

"And I take it that no one else has a problem?" Dennis asked rhetorically.

No one responded. Without saying another word, Dennis turned and started back toward his table. His long, slightly bowed legs got him there in less than two steps, barely enough time for him to establish the

rhythmic bounce that responded to a silent reggae beat. In one motion, he sat down, slid the salt and peppershakers toward Eddie's tray, picked up an empty glass, and extended it in Eddie's direction. "Could you reach back and fill this with white milk?"

"Dennis Belle, my brother." He extended his other hand.

Eddie took the glass and shook Dennis's hand. After reaching back and he filled it and one for himself, then handed a glass to Dennis.

"Do you have a name, my brother?" he asked.

"Sorry about that. I'm Eddie Jordan." He sipped his milk.

"Where you from?"

"Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. What about you?"

"Cross state in Pittsburgh. That sort of makes us homies."

The two fell silent as they ate their food. Eddie stared at his plate as he ate, but periodically glanced up to see Dennis staring at him.

"I had your back." Eddie said.

"No doubt, my brother. No doubt!" Dennis pushed his tray away before he was half finished with his food. Then he sat quietly looking at Eddie while Eddie finished eating.

After finishing his apple pie and milk, Eddie looked over Dennis's shoulder and saw three Black students approaching them. He would soon find out that the student who led the way was Darnell Honeycutt, an 11th grader. He drew a lot of attention as he strode through the dining room beneath his huge Afro hairdo. As he carried his tray, he peered somewhat menacingly over his wire-framed sunglasses at each table as he passed.

Ronald Pleasant from St. Louis and Dan Early from Detroit followed closely behind. They were also 11th graders, and among the school's most gifted athletes. Ronald, a running back on the football team, was short and stocky and wore a close-cropped Afro. The hairdos of both Darnell and Ronald starkly contrasted the artificially straightened hair of the tall, muscular Dan Early, a star basketball player for Whitfield.

"What's happenin', young brothers?" Darnell asked as the three arrived at the table. He put down his tray and sat. The other two did the same, sitting on either side of Darnell.

"Good to see you again, Brother Darnell," Dennis said. "This is Eddie Jordan from Harrisburg, PA."

Eddie reached across the table, shook Darnell's already outstretched hand, and next shook the hands of Dan and Ronald, who introduced themselves by first and last name.

"Brother, you in the milk seat," Darnell advised.

"Milk seat?" asked with a puzzled look on his face.

“Don’t worry, Bro, the milk seat’s a tradition,” Ronald explained. Man sittin closest to the milk machine gets the milk... for everybody...Only one glass a piece. After that, get your own.”

“Make mine chocolate,” Darnell said “Always make mine chocolate.

But by the time Eddie decided what he was going to do; Dennis had gotten up and filled the three glasses. He handed them one by one to Eddie who passed them to the others.

Darnell took a sip of his milk and peered over his sunglasses at Eddie. “We understand, brother. You’ll catch on later.”

“I’m not trying to be smart or anything, but....” Eddie’s voice trailed off.

“Like I said, don’t worry about it,” Darnell said as he chewed a mouth full of food. “I’m more interested in whether you’re down with the brothers.”

“Every brother isn’t a brother,” Dan warned.

“Right on!” Ronald quickly agreed.

Eddie wondered what Dan meant by that statement.

Dennis stood up and walked behind Eddie’s chair. “I can vouch for this brother. Harrisburg brothers are always down.”

“Yeah, but who’s going to vouch for you?” Ronald asked while staring at Dennis.

“Brothers. Brothers,” Darnell pleaded. He picked up a roll from his plate, used his fork to scrape a pat of butter off a cardboard square, and spread it on the roll. He looked at Dennis and Eddie. “These brothers don’t mean any harm. It’s just that a lot of these brothers on campus aren’t really Black, if you know what I mean.”

Eddie wiped his mouth with his napkin, balled it up, and threw it in his plate. “I’m from *uptown* Harrisburg, man. I know I’m Black.”

“You play any ball in uptown Harrisburg?” Dan asked mockingly.

“A little football and basketball in junior high,” Eddie replied. “But I like basketball the most. I know how to run!”

“Do you plan to play for the school squad?”

“No doubt!” Eddie replied.

Dan reached across the table inviting Eddie to slap him five. “All right, my Brother. See you in the gym. We run pickup on Sundays ‘til the season starts.”

Eddie slapped the older boy’s hand and continued eating.

“Okay, okay. Enough of this basketball love fest,” Ronald said. “Brother Edward seems to be cool.”

Darnell, Dan, and Ronald looked up at Dennis. “And so, that leaves you!” Dan said.

“Hey, I’m cool,” Dennis assured them as he bounced back over to his chair. He picked up his tray. “I’ll check y’all later. I have to make it across campus to a meeting.”

“Yeah, I have to get out of here too,” Eddie remarked.

“Don’t go for anything stupid tonight,” Darnell advised.

“At the orientation meeting?” Dennis asked.

“No, afterwards. Don’t let those White boys get you hung up in anything stupid,” Darnell repeated. “At your meeting or at your meeting,” he said, pointing at each of them in turn.

Eddie nodded his head and got up from the table. “Catch you later.”

Dan and Ronald raised their fists. Darnell peered over his sunglasses and nodded his head.

Eddie followed Dennis as he bounced across the dining room toward an opening in the wall. There, they placed their trays onto a conveyor belt that ran into the dish room. As they walked toward the door, Dennis looked back at the table by the milk machine. Darnell turned around and looked at them. Dennis raised his fist as he and Eddie started walking toward the door, also, but then hesitated. “Just a minute.”

He walked toward the table where Wendell was sitting. As Eddie neared, Wendell got up and picked up his tray.

“Wendell!” he said loudly.

The red headed boy walked toward the dish room window.

“Wendell!” he yelled as his friend neared the window.

“Wendell!”

This time, Wendell turned and looked at Eddie, then turned away again and walked out the door.