

ACROSS THE BRIDGE
by Nathan Lee Gadsden

Installment #3 – INITIATION

As Eddie walked back to his dorm from dinner, he reflected on the history that he had already heard since being on campus.

Whitfield Academy dates back to 1770 when George Adams decided that the aristocracy of New England needed a boy's boarding school in southern New Hampshire. For the next 180 years, Whitfield educated the male children of New England's richest White families. The first non-White student to attend the school was the son of a prominent Black family of attorneys. He was enrolled as a day student -- he wasn't allowed to live in the dormitories -- and remained as such until he graduated in 1955. Seven years later, three Black students became the first to live in a dormitory. Eddie later learned that they lived in Winthrop Hall where he would be housed his first year at the school.

After entering the dorm, Eddie was greeted by one of the seniors who stood at the door of the first floor student lounge and greeted students as if they were about to attend a secret ceremony of some sort. "To all who enter here, the secrets of Whitfield are nigh! Draw ye close together! He repeated his mantra to each boy or group of as they entered the room.

Other than the new students, only the student guides remained from the returning students who had welcomed them earlier in the afternoon. The guides called each of the new students by name handed out brown envelopes.

As Eddie began thumbing through the contents of his envelope, a short, chubby boy walked up to the sofa and asked if he could sit down.

"Free country," Eddie said.

"That's not altogether true," the chubby boy responded. He sat on the green vinyl sofa next to Eddie and extended his hand. "I'm C. Thomas Eddington, IV. My friends call me C.T."

Eddie shook his hand. "Eddie Jordan"

"What? No nickname?" C.T. said with a puzzled look on his face.

"Just Eddie...that's all." I don't need this, he thought.

C.T. rubbed his chin. "Let's see, what's a good nickname for you?"

Eddie leaned closer to C.T. and stared into the chubby boy's eyes. "Just Eddie," he nearly whistled through clenched teeth. He was trying to keep calm.

C.T. stared into Eddie's face for about half a minute, until a smile spread across his own face. "You want to check out my butterfly collection later on?"

This boy must be crazy, Eddie thought.

A tall gray-haired man who had just entered the room caught Eddie's attention. Several of the guides walked over to him and spoke with him for a few minutes before clearing a path to the front of the room. The distinguished looking man then strode to the front of the room. He wore a white short-sleeve shirt and gray pants. As he walked he periodically pushed his wire frame glasses back from the end of his nose.

After he reached the front of the room, one of the guides raised his voice. "Excuse me! May we have your attention, please! The meeting is about to begin!"

Eddie glanced at his watch. Right on time, he thought.

"Good evening." The man spoke in a deep voice that commanded everyone's attention. "My name is Mr. Ford. I am your dormitory director. Now I'm sure you've been properly welcomed throughout the day; however, let me add my personal note. Welcome to Whitfield Academy!"

Led by the guides, the students applauded.

For the next hour, Eddie and the others listened as Mr. Ford guided them through the papers in the envelope. "You'll hear more about school rules at tomorrow's all-school meeting." After methodically answered questions about life in the dormitory, he excused himself and left.

"Before you go, some of the upperclassmen would like to have a few words with you," one of the guides said from the back of the room.

The other guides began closing the drapes against the fading light of the setting late summer sun. A stream of upperclassmen came through the door. Some carried punch bowls, bags of potato chips, cookies, sodas and other snacks. Along with the new students, they set up tables, made punch and put snacks in bowls.

Everyone ate snacks and mingled until about 9 o'clock when Dave Hendel walked to the front of the room. "All right, everybody. You new guys have been welcomed to the academy so much that you're all probably ready to run home." He was the only one to laugh at his attempt at a joke. "And now...it's initiation time," he continued.

The upperclassmen began to move the chairs and sofas back to the walls. They moved the tables over toward the grand piano. The new students joined in and made the job go faster.

"This might not be for the weak of heart, so if you don't think you can take it, you might want to leave now," Dave suggested.

Eddie started to walk out the door, but Wendell stepped in front of him.

"I know you got some heart, Eddie. I mean you being from uptown Harrisburg and all."

"Very funny, but I don't have time for this crap," Eddie said.

“Aw, come on, Eddie. Have a little fun.”

Eddie stared at Wendell and admitted to himself that he was curious. He shrugged his shoulders, walked over to a chair near the door, and sat down. Wendell sat down in a chair near his. After everyone else had sat down, Henry Miller stepped up to the front of the room and waved for quiet.

“Okay everyone; choose a partner,” he ordered after everyone had quieted down.

The boys mumbled some amongst themselves as they looked around the room. Most just paired off with whomever they were sitting next to. Wendell pointed to Eddie who nodded his head.

Several of the upperclassmen passed out small leather paddles, which set the room off in chatter and some nervous laughter.

Henry quietly spoke to Dave for a minute and then returned to the front of the room.

“All right; first of all, only one paddle to each pair. Now let me explain what we are about to do. The name of this game is Paddle Your Partner.

Chatter, moans and grunts rose across the room.

“Now, now. Settle down,” Henry urged as he waved his arms.

“Take it easy,” Dave said.

The room quieted down enough for Henry to continue. “The game is simple. We lock the door and turn off the lights. Everyone has to take off his pants for bare bottom paddling.

“What!?” a group of students yelled at the same time.

“That’s right!” Dave said. “Now quiet down and listen to Henry.”

“Aw man, they startin’ something freaky,” Eddie whispered to Wendell.

Henry continued. “You and your partner will take turns swatting each other until one of you can’t take it anymore. That person is out, and you must quickly find another partner. The last man standing will be afforded all of the social privileges of a second year student.”

After listening to the mumbling and grumbling, Henry instructions and signaled for one of the upperclassmen near the light switch to turn off the lights.

Just before the lights went out, Dave yelled, “Paddle hard and paddle fast.

“Man, this is too freaky,” Eddie whispered to Wendell.

“Shhhh!” Wendell whispered back with his finger to his lips.

“All right, gentlemen, quiet please!” Dave ordered. After everyone complied he spoke again. “Lights.”

Just after the lights went off, Wendell leaned over and whispered to Eddie. “Just sit there and don’t do nothin’.”

“What?” Eddie whispered back.

“I said, just sit there and don’t do nothing,” Wendell whispered again.

Eddie sat still and tried to stare through the darkness, but the room was now pitch black. Soon he began to hear loud swats. The sound was repeated all over the room. Some of the swats were so loud that they echoed off the walls. They came faster and more furious. He also could hear groans and yelps every time a paddle hit what sounded like naked flesh. Periodically one of the boys would yell for his partner to stop.

Then, the room was suddenly flooded with light and Eddie looked around the room. Most of the students were rubbing their eyes as if they were trying to get them used to the light again. Eddie’s eyes quickly settled on two students, one was bent over with his pants around his knees. He was rubbing his red behind. The other was standing behind him with his pants down around his knees; he was holding the leather paddle high above his head, ready to swing. The two were the only ones who had actually done it. The room erupted with laughter. Some people jumped up and ran toward the door; others fell on the floor laughing.

“How did everybody else know?” Eddie wondered out loud.

“I overheard somebody at check-in telling someone else. No one told them fellas.”

“And know one told us,” Eddie observed.

Wendell looked at him strangely as the two boys ran across the room. One struggled to unlock the door, and the two nearly fought each other to get out. The last one to run out of the room did so in tears. As the laughter in the room continued, Dave and Henry hustled over and shut the door.

Eddie stood up and gazed around the room at students doubled over with laughter. He shook his head and reached for the door.

“Where you going?” Wendell asked.

Man, that’s not right,” Eddie said while shaking his head.

“Aw, those fellas’ll be all right. Nothin’ but a little harmless fun.”

Eddie unlocked the door, walked out, and closed it behind him. He slowly walked up the stairs, still shaking his head. When he got to his room he stood at the door and looked down the hall. One of the embarrassed students lived down the hall. He thought for a moment about going to his room but changed his mind. Instead he

unlocked his door, pushed it shut, and flopped on the bed without turning on the lights.

As Eddie took off everything except his underclothes, he prayed that his demon would not visit him that night.