

ACROSS THE BRIDGE
by Nathan Lee Gadsden

Installment #4 – HARMONY

As soon as Eddie entered the dining room at Rawlins, Dennis met him at the door, quickly escorted him through the food line, and hustled him to a table near the windows that looked out on the small quad.

You're going to love this," Dennis said eagerly as they set their trays on the table and sat down.

"We're forming a singing group! Rhythm and blues, baby!"

"Who all's in the group?" Eddie asked.

Dennis sat down again and gulped a swallow of milk. "Me, Danny, Will, Harold...and you!"

Eddie dropped his spoon onto his tray. "Man, you must be crazy. I couldn't carry a tune if you gave me a bucket."

"Don't worry about it. I'll teach you what you need to know. Besides, you got the rhythm, my man." He stood up and began doing the "Temptation Walk" again. "Come on, let's groove."

"But I can't sing."

"Don't worry about it." He began working the step harder.

"Okay! Okay!" Eddie agreed. "I guess it'll give me something to do up here. Now, would you please sit your ass down and stop looking like a fool."

Dennis swung his leg over the back of his chair and sat down as if the move was part of his dance routine. "So you're in, right?"

"Yeah, I guess I'm in, Eddie said. "But you haven't told me much about it." He continued eating his sandwich.

Dennis leaned closer to Eddie. "The plan is to get some gigs at dances, in town, or at other schools."

"Like they really want to hear our music."

"Are you kidding? Motown is hot! White folks love our music. And we need you up on that stage. You can help with the steps and manage the group."

“I’m nobody’s manager,” Eddie insisted.

Dennis stopped dancing, pulled his chair to him, and leaned on it. “It’s settled. That’s what we need. Especially with our first gig coming up in just over a month.”

“You set up a dance already?”

“Not exactly. But if we play our cards right we’ll be making our debut right here on this campus at the next mixer.”

“We have a band?”

“Not yet, but I’m working on it,” Dennis said. He got up and picked up his tray.

“What’ll we do for our music?” Eddie asked.

“Records for now. We just have to get started. Come on.” He carried his tray to the window that led to the dish room. Eddie picked up his tray and followed.

After the two had deposited their trays they left the dining room and walked down the hall to Dennis’s first floor bedroom where they got his turntable and two speakers and headed to the basement recreation room.

“You ever sing before?” Eddie inquired as sat down at a table in the rec room.

“All the time. Man, all we did was do-wop on the stoop. Summertime? That’s all we do...all night long. Older guys to the younger guys.”

“You look like you could’ve been a dancer.”

“Yeah, but being a dancer ain’t real cool in my neighborhood. My mom wanted to send me to dance school. I said, ‘yes,’ but Dad said, ‘Hell no!’ He won. The man was so damn scared of what other people might say about his only boy that he didn’t care much about what I thought.”

“Did you really want to be a dancer?” Eddie asked.

Dennis started to answer but paused as he continued flipping through the records. He seemed to stop to examine each record, but in reality, his mind was in the past. “I don’t know,” he finally answered. “Maybe. But that’s not the point. It’s just that he didn’t ask how I felt. He never does.”

“You’re only 15. You still have a chance to be a dancer if you want to.”

“And then where am I going to live? You don’t know my old man. He might kick my ass if he found out I was taking dance lessons.”

“Does he always beat you up?”

“Naw. He only hit me once. But he always threatens to kick my ass, but he gets too drunk to do it.”

“Seems to me you should be able to do your own thing,” Eddie said.

“As long as my dad agrees with it.” Dennis stood and walked to a pool table on the other side of the room. He turned and leaned back against the table facing Eddie again. “Man, if he only knew...”

“Knew what?” Eddie asked.

“It’s nothing.” Dennis quickly walked back across the room to the record player and put one of the 45s on the spindle. “I think this should be our opening number.”

“You never met a man that makes you feel the way that I do,” Dennis sang.

“That’s my part!” a voice yelled from the doorway.

Eddie turned to see Dan Early walking into the room closely followed by Harold Sanson and Willie Blades.

“Dennis, you know a tenor’s supposed to lead *Get Ready*,” Dan said.

“Don’t start, Danny boy,” Dennis said.

Harold waved his hand in Dan’s direction and walked over to Eddie. He pulled up a chair and sat down. “What’s happening, man?”

“Just trying to help get this show together,” Eddie replied.

“So you in, huh?” Harold said.

“Sure, why not?”

Willie soon joined the two of them. “Glad you in, brother. We can use your voice.”

“You might not say that after you hear me sing.” Eddie handed Danny a list of song titles he and Dennis had prepared.

“These are all Temptation songs,” Danny observed.

“That’s just to get us started,” Dennis explained.

“Me and Willie are ready to start chirpin’,” Harold said. He stood up and dropped the paper into Eddie’s hands, and did a few dance steps until he was standing next to Willie near the record player. The two began performing nearly synchronized dance steps as they sang do-wop.

Harold and Willie were practically inseparable on campus, but their appearances belied their nickname, “The Chicago Twins.” While Harold was a chubby dark-skinned boy who wore his hair in a short Afro, the thin light-skinned Willie’s hair was longer and wavy.

Dennis applauded as Harold and Willie brought their routine to a halt. “All right, fellas. Now, can we get back to checking out these songs.

Harold pulled up a chair and sat down. “Before we do anything, we ought to come up with a name for the group.”

Willie sat down next to him. “Yeah. Got to have a name.”

Dennis said, “I think we need to go over songs, but if you guys want to talk about names, go right ahead. What do you think, Eddie?”

“We should think about names and talk about it next time,” Eddie suggested.

“That doesn’t make much sense,” Willie argued.

Harold agreed. “No, it doesn’t. Without identity our music’s meaningless.”

“Okay, okay! Let’s pick a name,” Dennis relented.

The five spent the next hour or so debating names. Dennis argued for a name that sounded like those of popular rhythm and blues singing groups. But Harold and Willie favored an African name. “We’re trying to make a statement about our culture,” Harold said.

“The music *is* the statement,” Dennis argued.

Harold stood. “Let me toss out the first name – Zulu Nation!”

“Sounds good, brother man,” Willie agreed. He held out his hand with the palm up until Harold slapped him five.

“You guys are crazy!” Eddie said. “This is supposed to be an R&B group. Do-Wop. We need something like, uh, The Five Aces.”

“We can’t use that if we wanted to,” Dennis interjected.

“Why not?” Eddie asked.

“Some old group had that name; only there were four of them, I think.”

“My man Harold gave us a good name,” Willie said.

“I’m not ready to go tribal,” Eddie insisted.

“I think I have a solution,” Dennis said. “*The Naturals!*”

“That doesn’t solve anything,” Willie said.

Dennis stood. “Yes, it does. We want a name that sounds like an R&B group -”

“But we want one that’s about being Black,” Harold demanded.

“Exactly! That’s why *The Naturals* works so well,” Dennis said.

“How so?” Danny asked.

Dennis walked to the doorway and put his arm around Eddie’s shoulders and walked him back to the circle. “Think about this. What’s another name for an Afro hairdo?”

“A natural,” Eddie answered.

“Yep. And that’s the point,” Dennis said. “We’re tired of straightening our hair and lightening our skin. We want to be natural.”

“Works for me,” Dan agreed.

Dennis turned to Willie and Harold. “Well, fellas, can you deal with *The Naturals?*”

Harold and Willie looked at each other and shrugged.

“Great! We have a name!” Eddie nearly yelled. “Now, can we get to work?” he asked in a more subdued tone.

“You know what I say.” Dennis sang out. “Let’s do it! It’s time for The

Naturals to step out!” He gathered his lanky frame, spun around twice, did a two-step and strutted toward the record player.

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