

## MILTON JUNIOR - STANDARD 3

Day one at a new school blends anticipation and anxiety. I was called a *chum* when I started in kindergarten at Newmansford Primary School in Queens Park West, and in England, the other kids called me an African. Now, having returned to Bulawayo, I was a chum once more. It didn't concern me, because, as an outsider, I felt unique, having lived in four different countries, and one of them, twice.

Standard three at Milton Junior was my third school, so I was becoming accustomed to being the new boy. It would be the first time I'd wear a school uniform, but what I most liked was my new brown leather satchel, which I would wear on my back. Inside, I carried my pencil box, Croxley fountain pen, a small bottle of Quink, a twelve-inch wooden ruler, and sandwiches.

New pupils needed to complete certain formalities in the school office before joining the class. When I finally arrived, a single empty desk remained in the middle of the room. Not my favourite position, as I preferred to sit to one side, a row back from the front.

It seemed to me a desk's location betrayed the occupant's personality. A correlation existed between the grinning faces in the back row and visits to the headmaster's office. The front row focussed on the teacher and seldom got into trouble. Meanwhile, the middle row occupants enjoyed a better work-life balance.

The size of the school grounds impressed me. Three cricket pitches and cricket nets stood between the classrooms and the school boarding house. A tennis court stood alongside the boarding house, and on a lower level next to the Matsheumhlope River lay the rugby field.

Milton Junior was built in the typical government school layout with three wings forming a U-shape, and the school hall filling in the fourth side. Opposite the entrance to the school hall stood the kindergartens, with standards one to five, working their way around the U to the principal's office.

Beyond the principal's office stood a single large empty classroom that was used for other occasional purposes, such as visits by the school doctor, and in my case, elocution lessons. The school hoped to eliminate my lisp and round out my vowels. Under a visiting teacher's supervision, five of us from different classes practised phrases such as 'how now brown cow' and 'Hanibal crossed the Alps'. Though I understood the purpose of practising the first phrase, I didn't see what the second one achieved.

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The school year began in summer, and to my dismay, I discovered the last two periods on Friday each week would be at the Bulawayo Municipal Swimming Bath. At age ten, I'd yet to learn how to swim. The teacher warned there would be consequences for anyone who did not bring their swimming costume.

This was unwelcome news, as my inability to swim would be exposed to the entire class. I'd end up looking like a fool. In those days, few homes boasted pools. Yes, I'd splashed around in rough-sided concrete pools once or twice, but they were shallow and not big enough to swim.

As is usual in such situations, Friday came around faster than I'd normally wish. We all assembled in a crocodile formation for the teacher to march us down to the public baths next door. I was certain this wouldn't end well.

On a beautiful Bulawayo day in early February, we walked in the shade of the tall trees that lined Borrow Street. There, up ahead, stood the ominous entrance to the baths. The turnstile clicked away like hungry jaws, swallowing each pupil as they passed through. Even before following my classmates, the strong odour of chlorine greeted me.

Like the song of the Sirens, the pool's humid atmosphere and the alluring chlorine odour drew me closer. The turnstile disgorged us onto an area of the greenest grass and an expanse of sapphire blue water, surrounded by enormous trees shrouding this magic world. It was like a glimpse of paradise. But I knew wondrous visions lulled one's senses to the hidden dangers they held.

Our teacher handed us over to the bath's superintendent, Mr Gordon Bridger, and hurried back to the school to conduct spelling tests for those who'd forgotten their swimming costumes.

The blue water sparkled in the sunlight, looking lovely from our position on the edge of the pool. Why spoil the effect by jumping in and making a splash?

Mr Bridger asked us, 'Who can swim?' One boy, rumoured to have a pool at home, put up his hand. 'Right! You can jump in, but stick to the shallow end. Who can doggie paddle?' My friend put up his hand. 'OK! Demonstrate it to the class.' Barry jumped into the pool and waded out ten metres from the shallow end. Then he doggie paddled towards us as we all watched in awe. He had style, making me proud to be his friend.

So far, so good! The pool was a picture. We were still dry, time was passing, and only one boy could swim. I liked it like that. Then came the inevitable moment. Mr Bridger instructed us to get into the pool and try to doggie paddle.

The first blessing was the warm Bulawayo water. The second blessing; splashing in the shallow end qualified as good enough.

After my first visit to the baths, I looked forward to repeating the experience. With virtually the entire class unable to swim, I was in good company, but things soon improved. Putting my head underwater in the shallow end never bothered me because when I ran out of breath, I stood up. I realised I could swim breaststroke underwater, so why not try it on the surface? That simple realisation, rather than mastering some mysterious technique, was the key to learning how to swim.

I soon discovered the tuck shop in the corner by the entrance. My favourites were the pink cachous, the sweet cigarettes, and the rock candy mice with their string tails.

The men's and women's change rooms, both screened by tall hedgerows, ran the length of the pool. At the far end, past the diving boards, stood the boys' and girls' change rooms. Grassed terraces stepped down from the hedgerows to the sandstone apron surrounding the pool. Patches of sun and shade ensured the comfort of all.

The Borrow Street baths became a haunt of mine for many years. I loved the green surrounds, the blue water and sky, and the chlorine in the pool. Can you smell it? If I close my eyes, I can.

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The one thing I learnt in standard three had nothing to do with classwork. The smallest boy in the class was the go-to person if you couldn't open your ink bottle. Often the ink dried, sealing the lid in place, especially after a weekend. One day, after struggling with the top of my ink bottle, I took it to him, and he opened it with no difficulty.

For him, opening the bottle was effortless. How could he be so strong? I asked him what his secret was. He explained he was left-handed, and it was easier to push open the top of a bottle with your left hand than to pull it open with your right. Soon, I tried it, and it worked. Although my left hand is weaker than my right, I resort to my left to open any stubborn lid. Technique will always beat brute force.

But brute force was required one morning when I had an altercation with another boy. Our class mistress sent us to the headmaster's office to be punished. His secretary told us to sit in the two chairs outside his office door. We waited and waited, and when he emerged, he told us a long wait, expecting a caning, was punishment enough, so we could go. The light treatment we received disappointed only the class mistress and the grinning faces in the back row.

Our dispute remained unresolved, and someone suggested we could settle it in the boxing ring at break-time. The next day, after we'd eaten our sandwiches, we went to see the gym master about organising a fight. He told us we were too late and should have come earlier. He said we could return at the end of classes to have our fight, but we weren't willing to delay home time, so that ended the matter.

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Each morning, our family would head into town in my uncle's black Vauxhall Velox. On his way to work, he'd drop my female cousins at Townsend Girls' High School and Coghlan Junior Primary School. My male cousin and I would walk down Borrow Street to Milton Junior.

At one o'clock, my uncle would pick us up in front of Children's House in Twelfth Avenue and drive home to Willsgrove for lunch. Afterwards, the adults and the girls would return to town for work and extracurricular activities, while my male cousin and I would explore the bush around our property.

One day, our teacher asked me to stay behind after class, as she wanted to talk to me. I thought I must have done something wrong, but she said she'd noticed I didn't take part in afternoon sports, and I should consider it. This was not a suggestion I welcomed, as it would clash with my time for digging up ant nests, catching frogs and trapping birds.

Our class mistress was the school tennis coach, and she kept up a gentle pressure to coerce a handful of us to attend her weekly tennis lessons. Soon, her focus settled on a tall boy with a strong backhand, and two or three weeks later, I slipped away unnoticed. I was later to discover only a minority of boys in the class took part in afternoon sports.