

MILTON JUNIOR - STANDARDS 4

In standard four, our male teacher possessed a fearsome reputation. A lot scarier than my old headmistress and her twelve-inch wooden ruler back in England. The classroom proved to be a centre of caning excellence. The sound of two thwacks on some unfortunate backside soon developed the monotony of a diesel generator. Minor transgressions brought a firm response, and many paid the price.

Often, during the last period on Friday, an African delivery man would come to the classroom door with a thick bundle of Education Department approved canes. The official approval of those canes somehow gave them more weight. Our teacher would leave the menacing items on his desk until the end of the period, when he'd lock them in his cupboard. Everyone knew he would break the whole bundle a little before the next delivery. When the teacher punished someone, pieces of broken cane would often fly across the classroom, startling an innocent watching the spectacle. The safest time for wrongdoings was in that brief pre-delivery period, which most often begun late on a Wednesday afternoon or early Thursday morning. This was where we all learnt about the concept of lead times. Standard four taught us if you don't provoke the beast, you won't draw its attention. But some, including the back-row boys, never learnt.

Break time, the best part of the school day. Second only to home time. We'd get our plastic sandwich boxes from our satchels and inspect the 'delights' our mothers, or the house servant, had prepared for us. Often, they included a piece of fruit, peanut butter, or jam sandwiches, and a cordial. And if you weren't happy, you might find someone willing to trade. This taught us how to negotiate a win-win deal.

During one break time, I noticed a few boys teasing an effeminate red-headed boy they nicknamed Liz. A year my junior, he was in standard three and only nine years old. Before too long, he gained a fair-haired companion nicknamed Alice. The novelty soon wore off, and the teasing stopped when it became plain they didn't mind the taunts. Before this, I'd not been aware of homosexuality or heard the word *transgender*. Then, the word *gay* meant light-hearted and carefree, and was usually associated with parties and celebrations. Later, it intrigued me that at their young age; they exhibited the mannerisms and speech patterns of certain demonstrably gay adults.

We would spend most break times chatting with friends or taking part in one of the several games. A favourite was *stingers*, a running, fast-moving game, where many boys could play. In a large group, three boys would be *on*, and they'd use a tennis ball to sting one of the remaining boys in the game. If stung, you would replace the boy who stung you. It was like a reverse *piggy-in-the-middle*. You could only use your fist, protected by a wrapped handkerchief, to fend off the ball.

Another popular game was *bok-bok*. One team would form a caterpillar line against a tree or wall, with each boy putting his head between the legs of the boy in front. Members of the opposing team would run and jump onto the caterpillar line. The team with most members on the caterpillar won. Success would depend on the early jumpers getting far enough forward on the line to leave space for the later jumpers.

With luck, you'd find a game of miniature cricket played with an old, sawn-off cricket bat and tennis ball. Though only a casual break time activity, an umpire controlled the game. Anyone whose cricketing skills were not well regarded often got that role.

Somehow, with no effort on my part, and no proof of ability or latent talent, I found myself in my house cricket team. This unexpected honour launched my love of the game. A grove of eucalyptus trees flourished along the edge of the main cricket field, and it became a target for every batsman trying to hit a six. The inevitable search for the ball amongst the fallen branches and gum leaves gave the batsman a little extra time to bask in the glow of their achievement.

My fascination with small creatures, particularly aquatic ones, brought me to the rear gate on the north side of the school. A short bridge, straddling a deep, crystal-clear pool, connected the school grounds to the dirt lane that ran between the school and Bulawayo's Municipal Swimming Bath. At the bottom of the pool lived several green platannas, sometimes known as the African clawed frog. I wanted them and spent several hours planning how I might trap them. It was futile. I found no means of capturing the creatures that disappeared under sunken wood or rocks as soon as they saw you.

Soon, I'd be going into standard five, where I'd be one of the seniors. It was the point where we transformed from kids to boys.