

MILTON JUNIOR - STANDARDS 5

For me, standard five at Milton Junior was like a waiting room for high school. The teachers treated us with more respect. Our class teacher was the deputy headmaster and master in charge of the boarding hostel. He was a dignified person, the perfect teacher to farewell our junior school years. In that last year of junior school, I don't recall a single boy being caned.

My primary interest in standard five was cricket. A few of us often played, even without scheduled matches or practices.

Somehow, I got the idea I'd like to be a boarder in the school hostel. Perhaps I'd taken the Enid Blyton Malory Towers series too seriously. I convinced my mother to speak to the master in charge of the boarding hostel, but there were no vacancies. The master explained the places were for farmers' children or others who lived far away, not someone who lived only four blocks from school. Talk about dodging a bullet! Who would swap the freedom of the city streets for the prison-like confines of a junior school boarding hostel?

On my way home from school, I'd often see a lonely boy around the age of fifteen sitting on a tricycle in front of his house opposite the boarding hostel. He was always keen to say hello. Today, we would say he had Down syndrome. In those days, he'd be called a Mongol. People said they seldom lived longer than their mid to late teens. One day, towards the end of the year, he wasn't there anymore. I'm not sure of the reason, but assumed the worst.

The school year was ending, and the final exams in the school hall at Milton Junior were most important because they set your path for high school. It would be a trying week. The last exam was the English paper, which I worked through, taking extra care with my essay answers. With all the writing, my hand ached at the end, and I felt drained. That's when my alarm woke me. Time to face the English exam again. Wait! I thought that only happened in stories.

Exhausted, my brain wrote the English exam a second time, and I'm sure it affected my performance. But I didn't care. With the exams and junior school over, the long Christmas holidays lay ahead.

The thrill of inner-city living, rather than school, became my principal interest in standard five. Mum and I lived on the second floor of Garden Court on the corner of Grey Street and 14th Avenue. It remains the only place I've seen roughcast internal walls, man's greatest dust trap.

The real estate mantra, location, location, location, was what we now enjoyed. Living in an inner-city residential block meant my mother could walk to work, and I could walk to school.

My bed under the window looking onto Grey Street provided me with endless hours of entertainment. The passing traffic on the busy street fuelled my interest in cars and teased my imagination about the lives of the occupants. Where were they going and why?

At night, the car headlights added a level of romance to the scene as the cars bounced over the Grey Street humps. The very humps that are famous worldwide for developing Bulawayo's motor cycling world champions Gary Hocking and Jim Redman in the 1960s.

Best of all, the empty, dusty block of land next to the Matsheumhlope Stream, only one block away. That was where the Boswell Circus (later, the Boswell Wilkie Circus) used to

erect its big top. The younger kids loved Tickey the clown, but my favourite acts were the lion tamer who stuck his head in the lion's mouth, and the trapeze artists.

Another frequent visitor to that site was Luna Park, with its variety of thrilling rides. My favourites were the whip, the big wheel, the octopus, and, of course, the dodgems. I also liked the benign looking, but likely most dangerous, swing carousel with its chairs attached by chains to a central pillar.

When there were no visiting distractions, we needed to make our own entertainment.

The only place I found to use my air rifles was a tiny patch of isolated bush, a ten block walk down Borrow Street. I didn't want to kill anything, but I saw a little red bird sitting on a slender upper branch of a tall tree fifteen metres ahead. I raised my air rifle and without aiming, shot in the bird's direction. My intention was to frighten it when the nearby leaves shook, but to my surprise, it fell to the ground like a stone.

When I examined it, I discovered the pellet entered its head through an eye. I'd not appreciated how much the hours of practise in Willsgrove developed my accuracy. That was the last bird I ever shot, and somewhat chastened, I hung up my guns.

Few kids lived in the block of flats, but I was fortunate. A cultured Dutch couple lived next door, and I spent much of my time with their daughter, Mary-Anne, who became my best friend outside of school hours. In daylight hours, we'd spend our time hanging around the communal balconies or the pavement downstairs. At night, we'd play in her flat with her kitten.

In the flat above us lived an Italian lady, with two sons who spoke no English. Because of the language difficulty, we seldom hung out together. I didn't realise how poor they were until their mother prepared their dinner one evening. She gave them a soup bowl filled with milky tea, into which she put a slice of white bread sprinkled with sugar. It looked delicious, though it couldn't compare with my dinner later that night. I&J fish cakes, Cashell Valley tinned green peas, J Wightman and Sons boiled potatoes, and a splash of All Gold tomato sauce, yum!

Also on the floor above lived Malcolm, a boy of my age, who became a friend and later, my stepbrother, when my mother married his father. The union meant we needed to move to more suitable accommodation, such as Kingston Court on the corner of 17th Avenue and Galway Road in Famona.

Soon after we moved, Mary-Anne and her parents also left Garden Court, and we lost touch. I saw her only once more, when I bumped into her at a music festival, ten years later.