MILTON SENIOR – FORM THREE

This was the year the Morris Mini-Minor made its appearance, the Soviet Union launched its first satellite, Luna One, and Buddy Holly died in a plane crash.

Form three at Milton Senior started much like form two, a middle ground between the first-year novelty and form four, when we would sit for the O-level Cambridge exams. Sport remained my focus, with study just a chore.

Up to this point, I'd not considered the difference a teacher could make. For me, it all depended on how they treated you. Some I liked and others I didn't. A few made it clear they liked you, which put you under pressure to try a little harder not to disappoint them. Even better were those who barely noticed you in the crowded classroom, with numbers touching the high thirties to mid-forties.

Since form one, I'd not considered any school subject as a favourite, and this continued into form three. I did OK in most subjects, but my pet dislike was French. I'd little interest in the language, and my interest in France didn't extend further than Brigitte Bardot.

In form three, a hot, prefabricated classroom served for French lessons, making my distaste for the language even stronger. I half-dozed in the late-morning, soporific atmosphere. Little wonder I was always near the bottom of the class.

The French teacher used a unique method of teaching. The front desk on his left was position one in the class. From there, the positions spiralled inwards, ending in the middle of the classroom, where I usually sat.

The teacher would ask a question, beginning at position one. The first pupil to answer correctly would move ahead of those who didn't. Next, the teacher would ask another question from the point where he received the correct answer, and so on, giving every pupil the chance to answer a question. Then, he'd start at position one again. It resembled a game of musical chairs based on one's proficiency in French. At the end of class, the teacher logged your seating position, which you would occupy when you began the next lesson. Based on a golf scoring system, the leading pupil would accumulate the lowest score.

The usual faces always sat at the top and bottom of the spiral. One sleepy afternoon in the second term, the number one position couldn't answer a question, and it passed all the way down the spiral until it came to me. Almost the entire class didn't answer correctly. It hadn't happened before, and with my thoughts far away, I'd not listened to the question. Too embarrassed to ask the teacher to repeat the question, which the entire class failed to answer, I just uttered *pas*, the second part of the French negative and one of the few French words I knew.

'Move to the top of the class,' said the teacher. Surprised? No, astounded, I picked up my things and walked to the number one position and made myself comfortable. I realised the view from the number one desk looked much better than from the middle, surrounded by French failures.

Just then, the bell sounded, and the teacher logged the numbers for each pupil. Now, I had a problem. I was embarrassed sitting near the room's centre, so I was determined to stay away from there. That afternoon, I vowed to myself that I'd hold on to a position at or near

the top. The teacher had made a game of the French lessons, and it awakened my competitive spirit.

From that point on, I held the number one position, or close to it. It felt like flicking a switch, but I can't explain how I did it. Perhaps the difference was in keeping my focus on the teacher rather than the end of class. Thereafter, my worst position was one day at number six, and that felt like a failure. I became obsessed with French, and in my spare time, I read an entire French novel set in the snow-bound forests of Canada. When asked about it, I said French was my hobby.

The year-end report predicted I would get a distinction in French in the Cambridge O-level exams.

Spoiler alert!

It was the only subject I failed.

In the meantime, I'd joined the Guild of St Richard with my cousins, Peter and Jean. Friday night meetings in the church hall were social gatherings of young people between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. The members came from various schools across Bulawayo and also included recent school leavers. The mixed gatherings of genders, ages, and talents helped the social development of the members. At fifteen years of age, I was one of the youngest there.

Every Friday night was a party or dance, and one of the gifted older boys played the piano and sang to entertain us. There'd always be a raconteur holding court by the hot water urn in the hall's kitchen, while a few older boys would smoke outside on the pavement. Members would bring friends to the Friday night get-togethers. Some would return, while others drifted away. It provided a constant turnover of fresh faces and gave us a wonderful way to meet people outside school or our usual social circle.

The Guild of St Richard also held chaperoned camps on long weekends, taking us to scenic spots and sites we wouldn't otherwise visit. I'll return to this topic in a later chapter.

At home, we'd made yet another move. This time to Windsor Court, a block of flats in the north-west of the Bulawayo city grid. A business occupied the premises downstairs, with four flats upstairs. The flats each featured a large open veranda, separated from the neighbours by a tiny wall only two bricks high, giving a sense of spaciousness.

The time at Windsor Court was short, as after seven months, my mother moved out, taking my sister and me. So, we ended the second half of the year at Miclea House on the corner of Wilson Street and Selborne Avenue. Malcolm and I remained family, and we all stayed in touch because of our sister Melody.

Miclea House was a spacious first-floor one-bedroom flat with a small kitchen and a bathroom with a bathtub, basin, and toilet. Few Rhodesian flats boasted showers in those days. Mum and Melody took the bedroom, and I moved into the enormous lounge with my old Bakelite radio. My bedroom comprised a two-door wardrobe, desk, and a bed at one end of the lounge. A second bed for visitors acted as a settee under the wide windows overlooking Wilson Street, while another settee made up the lounge area. We ate our meals at the kitchen table.

Businesses occupied the ground floor, with two levels of apartments above. Ours was on the second floor., with a partial view looking down Selborne Avenue. The location was convenient, only one block to the city hall, and two and a half blocks from the Borrow Street

swimming baths. My mother walked to work in the city centre, and I rode my bicycle to school. Melody attended a creche each workday, travelling by the creche's VW Combi.

My mother employed a housemaid, Alice. After a brief period, Alice asked to take a month's leave to return to her village. She brought a large Ndebele woman as her suggested replacement. Anna was not fat, but big: tall, broad, big-boned, with huge hands and feet, and dark weathered skin, though not old. She dressed for the interview in a chiffon party dress, and Mum was unimpressed with her appearance. We suspected Alice had brought an unattractive replacement to secure her own position.

Anna had no experience as a housemaid, and Mum was reluctant to employ her. But as the arrangement was only for one month, Mum relented. Two years later, Alice returned, expecting her job back. It was too late. Anna had endeared herself to us and was now a part of the family. She continued to work for my mother for another twenty years.