

## MILTON SENIOR – FORM FOUR

This was an eventful year. In May, the American U2 spy plane was shot down over Russia. In July, only five days after independence from Belgium, the Congo crisis erupted. We often saw the Congo mud-splattered cars passing through Bulawayo on their way to South Africa. And in November, the USA elected JFK as president.

It was also the year of Chubby Checker's *The Twist*, Elvis's *It's Now or Never*, and *Psycho* the movie.

A major polio scare early in the school year put everyone on edge, with pupils fearing the prospect of paralysis and ending up in an iron lung. Any absence from school triggered rumours of polio.

One boy in the class wore around his neck a small calico bag on a piece of string. By the second week, it looked oily and unwashed and exuded a potent odour. The bag of garlic, intended to ward off polio, proved most successful in warding off his classmates—and also vampires, suggested one classroom wag.

The municipal baths and cinemas closed while we all waited for the threat to pass. Rumour had it that polio returned every two years. We worried it might return the following year, but the Salk vaccine arrived instead, and we all breathed more easily. A few feared the needle, but the threat of paralysis was persuasive. Only two years later, the more palatable Sabin sugar-cube vaccine arrived, with everyone eager to taste it.

In Form Four, we were back in the main school building, which housed the oldest classrooms and the administration offices. In those classrooms, you could sense the history those walls must have witnessed. Pupils such as H. F. Verwoerd, former prime minister of South Africa, would have sat at the old desks we now occupied. Destined for greater things, his name sat prophetically on the honours board in the school's Beit Hall.

In an innovative move to prepare for the Sixth Form, the school split the A-stream pupils into science and arts-focused classes. By this point, science-focused students already knew which courses they hoped to undertake at university.

Meanwhile, my projected O-level distinction in French took an early hit. In Form Three I flourished in the competitive environment of the French class, but that teacher retired. In term one in Form Four, we faced an attractive young female teacher who gave us class assignments, telling us to raise a hand if we got stuck. She would then invite you to go up to her desk, where she would resolve your query. The approach didn't suit me, but not wanting to disappoint the attractive young teacher, I tried to keep up my interest in the French language.

I found it odd that the boys at the bottom of the French class in Form Three took a sudden interest in the subject, raising their hands so often. The previous year they'd been content to sit in the middle of the classroom, where the teacher would ignore them. But now, they hovered over her shoulder, showing an admirable interest in her explanations.

The weaker French pupils dominated her time in most lessons, but soon, stronger pupils also experienced difficulties with the assignments. I found this puzzling until someone explained to me why everyone suddenly was struggling with French. The boys were not

focused on their exercise books, where she pointed out their mistakes. Rather, from their vantage point, what drew their attention was the front of her low-cut dress.

In the second term, a tall, moustachioed teacher succeeded her, teaching French in the traditional grammar-based style English-speaking schools taught foreign languages. Boredom took hold, and I could see my projected distinction fast transforming into a failure.

In Form Three, my move from the bottom of the class in term one to the top for the rest of the year was my spontaneous decision. Simple pride prevented me from slipping down to the bottom again. Form Four showed me how narrow the margin was between success and failure.

My new favourite subject was now mathematics. The teacher's clear and relaxed approach suited me, and I practised learning the algebra formulas while playing darts in my bedroom at home. Everyone's maths improved, but the teacher warned us not to be tempted to enrol in maths at university. He claimed that university-level mathematics did not follow the simple logic of school maths. Who was it that said a schoolboy's gotta know his limitations?

Form Four made me realise that a good teacher was not one who liked you, but one whose teaching inspired you.

At the end of the third term, we'd be writing the Cambridge O-level exams, and it was decision time for many. Most Form Four pupils would leave school and look for a job. A proportion of A-stream boys would enter the Lower-Sixth Form, but many would leave school along with the bulk of the lower-stream pupils.

The approaching end of the school year produced an atmosphere of anxiety mixed with excitement—anxiety about the pending exams and excitement about the momentous changes that were coming.

Those leaving school needed to choose what job they wanted. Bulawayo was the head office and hub of the Rhodesia Railways, which offered apprenticeships and careers in administration. The bank was also a popular choice. Many boys went into the army or police force, and the girls into nursing. Bulawayo was Rhodesia's industrial centre, with light and heavy manufacturing industries offering a variety of apprenticeships and administration positions to school leavers.

Rhodesia was booming, and in those days, finding a job was easy. Further options for school leavers were the Gwebi Agricultural College in Salisbury and the Teachers' Training College in Bulawayo. Both possessed a proud record of producing skilled graduates.

The schools didn't offer career guidance, so many sixteen-year-olds often made lifelong career decisions based on family suggestions or friends' choices. Few would have possessed the maturity to make their own informed decisions.

For those moving into the Lower-Sixth Form, career choices were not a concern. I'd no idea what career I would follow. That decision could wait for another two years, when I'd be leaving school. How to spend the next six weeks over the Christmas break was the more pressing issue for me.