MILTON SENIOR – LOWER SIXTH FORM

All was not well to our north. The year began with the assassination in mid-January of the Congo's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, only six months after independence from Belgium. In the previous year, we'd witnessed the Belgian refugees in their mud-splattered cars passing through Bulawayo, heading for South Africa. They signalled a chilling early warning of the coming changes in Rhodesia, but my thoughts were elsewhere as I looked forward to the prospect of an exciting school year ahead.

There are some standard milestones in life, at least in modern society. First is starting school, and the second is moving from junior school to senior school. For me, the third milestone was unexpected.

At the end of Form Four, all my friends left school. Peter, my hitch-hiking friend, headed for Gwebi Agricultural College near Salisbury. Others left to join the Rhodesia Railways, a bank, a retailer, or one of the many industries operating in Bulawayo. Cousin Jean enrolled in the Teachers' Training College at Heany Junction, near the Llewellin Barracks army camp outside Bulawayo, while other girls opted for nursing at the Bulawayo General Hospital. As a result, I needed to make new school friends.

I've always gone against the flow, so when the school offered a new trial course from the Associated Examining Board (AEB), I jumped at the opportunity. Most of the Sixth Form pupils opted for the sciences or arts under the Cambridge Higher School Certificate (A-levels), but a handful of us enrolled in Rhodesia's first AEB course. The subjects included accounting, economics, economic geography, and economic history. I knew nothing about these subjects, and that is why I chose the course. The teachers described us as guinea pigs, which made us feel special.

Out of about ten pupils, only one came from my Fourth Form class, so John and I became friends, though we'd only been classmates over the previous three years. Although I recognised the other pupils, they were all new to me on a personal level. The accounting and economics teacher had a strong Afrikaans accent, which added another level of complexity to those subjects. The economic geography teacher had been my nemesis since Form One. My chief hope was the economic history teacher, who possessed an unrivalled reputation for teaching excellence in the school.

The accounting and economics lessons were held in an old, soulless classroom attached to the central school building. The elevated windows cocooned us, isolating us from the rest of the school.

Economic geography and economic history lessons took place in the brand-new, double-storey Sixth Form block. The picture windows overlooked proximate shady trees and the adjacent tennis courts, providing a collegiate ambiance found in certain established universities. We shared the upper floor with the arts pupils, while the science pupils occupied the ground floor.

The Sixth Form had an exclusive atmosphere, separating it from the rest of the school. It had its own head teacher, Reg Cowper, who was later to become head of the independent Sixth Form College, and then a minister in Ian Smith's government.

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Six weeks into the term, in early March, Cliff Richard and The Shadows were in town. An exciting occasion for me because I was a huge fan. I went with my new friend, John, on an unplanned visit to a record shop next to the Palace Hotel on Abercorn Street, where Cliff was signing autographs. I didn't have any paper with me, so I needed to content myself with a strip torn off a page John brought with him.

A sizeable crowd—for Bulawayo—scrambled on the pavement at the shop's front, but as we neared the door, a queue formed. I became more nervous as I progressed up the queue, conscious of the scrap of paper I held, while many others had bought records for Cliff's autograph. Then, there he sat, my hero, right in front of me. But I'd forgotten everything I wanted to say, and my throat was tight, so I could only mumble a thank you when he signed it. There was no sweet smell of new vinyl in our interaction, and I wondered what he thought when I, no lesser a fan, presented the scrap of paper to him. The following night, I watched Cliff and The Shadows perform at the Palace Cinema, an intimate venue for such world-famous entertainers.

I was now into popular music, and my mother bought me an HMV record player covered with white vinyl and tiny black dots. My first two seventy-five rpm records were Conway Twitty's 'Mona Lisa' and Brenda Lee's 'Let's Jump the Broomstick'. Thanks to the discount tray at Fenner Brothers on the corner of Fife Street and Ninth Avenue, my record collection soon grew. Cliff Richard's *Me and My Shadows* was my first LP.

Only two blocks down from Fenner Brothers, in the African Life building, on the corner of Main Street and Ninth Avenue, stood MacKay's, the newer and bigger record store. But I only ever bought one LP there. The shop allowed potential customers to play the records in soundproof booths, and I suspected they might not all be in pristine condition.

Only a month after Cliff's visit came news of Yuri Gagarin's first manned space flight, with the promise of an exciting new world.

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One Sunday in the second school term I'd spent the day in the Matopos. A little too much sun amplified the usual depressing Sunday evening thoughts of 'school tomorrow.' Soon after dinner, a dull pain gnawed at the right of my stomach. It worsened over the next hour, and by seven-thirty stabbing pains tore at my side. I walked to the nearby apartment block on the corner of Borrow Street and Selborne Avenue, where a public phone stood in the hallway. My unenthusiastic doctor suggested I take two aspirins and see him in the morning.

Though not reassured, I took his advice and retired to my bed. At about two a.m. I woke with excruciating pain, as if my stomach was about to burst. I walked to a friend's flat just around the corner, and he drove me to the Bulawayo General Hospital. On the car radio, Pat Boone was singing 'Moody River', which fitted well with my mood.

Just through the hospital's main entrance to the left stood the emergency department. On duty in the early hours were two junior doctors, who told me they couldn't admit me without my family doctor's approval. An hour later, at the hospital's request, my bleary-eyed doctor came in to confirm my admittance.

A nurse took me to the surgical ward at the end of the quiet, darkened passage. She commented that in the surgical ward, you usually left the hospital feeling worse than when you arrived, while in the medical ward it was the reverse. Her little joke did little to relieve

my throbbing pain. Mine was the second bed on the right, and when I was tucked in, she gave me something to help me sleep.

When I woke in the morning, the pain had receded to a dull, throbbing ache. Soon, they whisked me into the operating theatre, which was the last thing I remembered before waking up in the ward again, following my appendectomy. The next two days soon passed, watching the smart, uniformed nurses flitting about the ward that held about eighteen to twenty men. Their traditional white nurses' caps and uniforms with attached watches and scissors gave one confidence in their care.

I improved fast, which was a mistake. On Wednesday, they transferred me to the prefabricated rehabilitation ward in the garden on the east side of the hospital grounds. The small, barrack-shaped building was divided into six tiny four-bed alcoves, with three on each side of the central aisle. In the bed opposite me lay a teacher from my school, and next to me was a former German soldier from the Second World War. We were remote from the main hospital building and quite close to a building they said was the mortuary—possibly a joke made up by the older surrounding patients. We seldom saw a nurse, and time dragged. It also left a nagging worry that they might forget my discharge date.

As boredom took hold, my third stay in hospital proved no better than my earlier two hospital experiences. Thankfully, on Saturday they released me in the late afternoon. Rain fell in the morning until just after lunch, but the early evening sun glowed with that soft after-storm light, so common in Bulawayo. It resembled the pictures of heavenly light you might see in an illustrated Bible or a Jehovah's Witness brochure. A most suitable homecoming following my weeklong confinement. On my bedside radio, Dee Clark's 'Raindrops' was playing.

Oh joy! Home again, with Sunday to relax before returning to school to catch up on what I'd missed in the week I lay in hospital.

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In the third term, when the year-end exams approached, we got two weeks off to study for them. One morning, early in the study leave, Stewart, a boy in my class, turned up at my front door and suggested we study together. We'd not established any friendship in class, so it surprised me, and I wondered how he knew where I lived. Studying together is seldom a good idea because too often it turns into a social occasion and a distraction, but it was the start of a lifelong friendship.