

The good doctor is in



ST ILLUSTRATION: ADAM LEE

My long-time friend Dr Loo Choon Yong was a leader even when he was a student



60something

Richard Lim

Lim Soon was bleeding from his forehead. Blood was coming out of my mouth. We had staggered out of the car, and were both in a state of shock.

The driver of the car, Henry, was unhurt. He had rammed into the back of a parked trailer in Clemenceau Avenue.

Lim Soon was the front-seat passenger. I was in the back and had dozed off when the accident happened. It was past midnight and Henry was sending us home after a party.

The other passenger in the back seat, Slimy Chew, was also unhurt. I didn't know it then, but he flagged a taxi immediately and fled from the scene.

As he would later tell us, he was afraid that if his mother found out that he was involved in an accident, he would not be allowed to go out at night.

I sat on the grass verge by the side of the road and a passing motorcyclist, who had stopped by, put his jacket over me.

Lim Soon came over to me and, touching his bloody forehead, said: "I got a lot of blood." I said: "Me too." We were frightened.

Henry went to a public phone to call Choon Yong, who had been out with us earlier and had driven home in his car.

An ambulance came, and we were taken to the Singapore General Hospital. I was X-rayed, and although I feared I had internal injuries and was coughing blood, it turned out that I had only bitten my tongue.

I was wheeled into surgery and under the bright white fluorescent lights, the doctors stitched up my wounds on the upper and lower side of my tongue.

Lim Soon's gash was not serious either. But the scar on his forehead remains to this day.

Meanwhile, Choon Yong had called our respective fathers, told them about the accident and reassured them we were all right.

We were all 17 years old then and in Pre-University 1, but Choon Yong already showed he had the makings of a doctor. He handled the calls like a professional.

Choon Yong is Dr Loo Choon Yong, executive chairman of private medical group Raffles Medical.

In April, he was named Businessman of the Year at the Singapore Business Awards. Last week, there was a story of him in The Straits Times, which trig-

gered my memories of that night so many years ago.

Lim Soon has been a general practitioner – and a very good one too – since he came out of medical school.

Henry, whom I have lost touch with, is a manager. Slimy Chew had gone into trading, lost a lot of money and the last we heard, was a croupier in Las Vegas.

Myself, Choon Yong, Lim Soon and a small group of former classmates have kept in touch all these years. We would meet a couple of times a year, often at my place, and till the wee hours of the night when we finally disperse, would revert to our rowdy teenage selves.

When Choon Yong started his first clinic in Cecil Street, I used to see him for my nervous stomach.

Once, when I complained about why I should be suffering from the annoying condition, he said: "But you are sensitive, you see. It's like the needle of a record player. The more sensitive it is, the finer the sound, but the easier it gets spoiled or broken."

I was flattered. I was no longer the sufferer of a nervous stomach, but a sensitive soul whose fate it was to have nervous conditions. I felt much better when I left his clinic.

This was Choon Yong the consummate doctor. He not only attended to your ailments, but he also actually made you feel almost glad that you had them.

My father was warded in Raffles Hospital twice for his prostate problem in the past few years. Each time, Choon Yong would make it a point to visit him in the ward and speak to him.

My father marvels at how successful my former classmate has become, but those of us who are close to him are not surprised.

During our Pre-U 1 days, when we cut classes to go camping at Changi beach – we often did without the tents and slept in the open – he already showed his flair for leadership.

He would assign us our various tasks and would lead us in the finger game of *lom cham pak* every morning to see who among us had to go to school and who could remain behind on the beach.

This was, of course, only during the months of January and February before the Senior Cambridge examination results were released, when there was some laxity in Pre-U 1 classes. We were model students after that.

It was unspoken among our group, but we saw Choon Yong as our unofficial leader. That is why he was the first person Henry called when we got into that accident.

And he was a prodigious student. When he was serving national service, he did his law degree by distance learning at the same time.

I still have a nervous stomach – it cannot be cured, it can only be managed – and although I am less given to flattery now, I like to believe that I am indeed a sensitive soul.

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