



L to Rs Chee Leok, Meng Kin, Pak Yean and Peter in the water, as photographed by Maynard



Sea, sand and friends, with Meng Kin on the far right

# Memories of a Shiny Star

## – *Of Sea, Sand, Stars and Mersing 1971*

By A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean

The five of us: Lim Meng Kin, Goh Chee Leok, Peter Yong, another friend Maynard Chen (who was studying in the US and back on vacation) and myself, packed into my rickety Austin 1100 and headed north by road to Kuantan. That was the year 1971, just after the second year Medicine examination.

En route to our destination, we reached the town of Mersing in the late afternoon, and decided that we would first head for the beach, before checking into a cheap hotel for the night. We saw an unmarked road which cut through a plantation in the direction of the sea and followed it, thinking that the beach would be just a short drive ahead.

On and on we drove. Minutes ticked by. The tarred road became a bumpy dirt track that meandered through the plantation. Such was the impetuosity of youth that we still continued to drive on – just following the sound of the sea, never fearing danger, never fearing being lost and never fearing that my old car might break down in the middle of nowhere.

After about half an hour, the salty smell of the sea breeze and the vista of an open pristine beach greeted our senses. There was not a person, nor even an attap hut in sight – just the sea, the sand and us. We rolled up our trousers and waded into the lapping waves like little children. Maynard (who was of course not in the resulting photo, top left) captured that moment in time with his camera. He also took another rather stylistic shot of the four of us sitting pensively on a fallen tree trunk, staring into the horizon (top right).

Before long, the wondrous panorama of sunset was upon us. We marvelled and took in the moments. But it was getting dark. We would certainly get lost retracing the labyrinth of tracks to reach civilisation. So we decided to sleep in the open that night. We had no camping gear, not even a match to start a fire. Dinner was leftover confections in the car.

But the stars shone brightly for us that night. As we stretched out on the sand, enveloped by darkness, we were enthralled by the tapestry of brilliant heavenly bodies in all their majesty. Meng Kin pointed out the various constellations to us and told us inspirational stories about them. The

conversation soon drifted to philosophical musings like, “What created the universe?”, “Who created God?” and “Why am I here?”

The tempo of the conversation was interrupted after a while by water lapping at our feet and we had to beat a hurried retreat to higher ground. Starry-eyed we gazed into the sky, five young men staring at the vast infinity confronting us.

Periodically, the thread of discussion would be lost when someone interjected, “Don’t talk rots!” to bring us back to terra firma. More mundanely, someone would scurry into the pitch darkness to relieve himself. We were taking flight from the grind of our studies, and by serendipity got to spend the night under the stars on a desolate beach. That night, the stars in the heavens shone brightly to evoke awe and reverence in us. We talked and talked until we fell asleep on the bare sand.

We slept soundly as it did not rain that night. We were not bitten by mosquitoes either, for they would not have survived in such a desolate place. We woke up at first light to the sound of lapping waves, hungry but happy.

42 years on, the imagery of sea, sand and stars, and the banter of friendly voices still reverberate in my mind as I bid goodbye to Meng Kin. He recounted to us inspirational stories of the stars that night. He too was a shiny star to many in his life. **SMA**

### Epilogue

A eulogy for Meng Kin can be found in this issue of SMA News (see page 14). Peter practises in Vancouver and was in town early this month with his wife for a visit. Chee Leok is a dermatologist and was Director of the National Skin Centre. Maynard, a scientist who obtained his PhD in Chemistry from Cornell, is now back in Singapore. Pak Yean is a physician and a past President of SMA.



A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean was President of SMA from 1996 to 1999. He and A/Prof Lim Meng Kin were medical school classmates and friends.