



Nostalgia

By Dr Chong Yeh Woei

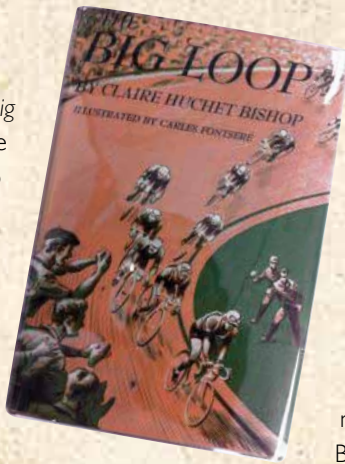
One of my favourite patients of our group practice is in fact not a patient of mine. He comes to see my cardiologist colleague and I happened to review him a couple of times when my colleague was out of town. He was here last week, just before Chinese New Year, and I bumped into him on my way out to lunch. He had done a CT scan of his sinuses and had been offered surgery by an ENT colleague. An Englishman currently retired in Majorca, he had told the nurse that he thought it was not life threatening and had pronounced, "I am about to board a plane in two hours to go back to Spain, poppet!" On hearing the word poppet, I had instant *deja vu* and told him that I had not heard that word used in a long time.

The word transported me back to primary school where I had a voracious appetite for British authors like Enid Blyton, Agatha Christie and PG Wodehouse. It was as if Scotty, the engineer from *Star Trek* had beamed me back to the world of Famous Five, Secret Seven, Miss Marple, Monsieur Hercule Poirot and the inscrutable Jeeves. I still remember reading these books under the cover of a blanket by torchlight when my mother had repeatedly told me to go to bed.

We both agreed that certain words had the ability to recall all our secreted and locked away memories, and cause them to come flooding back in an instance. We spoke some more and he said that he had just heard a remarkable quote from an American friend of his, who had visited the seedier part of Geylang for the first time and felt as if he wanted to be "de-pixelated from a documentary". We both had a laugh about the quote and my Englishman had exclaimed, "What a cracker!" That phrase sparked my amygdala and I was once again hurling back through space and time.

Nostalgia is such a potent force in our minds and is often triggered by words, music, smells and touch. Every July, I experience a strong dose of nostalgia when I watch the Tour de France on TV. I remember when I was about five, my mother went to a jumble sale and brought back a box full of books. There was a particular book with a yellow cover and a green spine that caught my attention.

The book, *The Big Loop* by Claire Huchet Bishop and illustrated by Carles Fontseré, was about Andre, a young French boy, who saw the Tour de France cyclists ride past his



front door and vowed to grow up to be a Tour rider. This was in the late 60s in Singapore, and my parents, friends, classmates and teachers had never heard of the Tour de France then.

I used to imagine it was the greatest story. In the book, Andre grew up to be a great rider and eventually won the Tour de France. For those who have no idea how tough the race is, it covers 3,600 km over 21 days. The terrain is challenging and it covers the Alps and the Pyrenees. An example is the infamous mountain stage which involves the Alp d'Huez that ascends a vertical distance of 1,140 m over a 14 km ride. It was only in the early 2000s when we finally received TV coverage of the event. Thanks to American cyclist Lance Armstrong, I started watching the race for the first time on TV. I juxtaposed the scenes of the riders with their modern gear and support vehicles on TV with the description of the race in the olden days described in the book. The book described riders carrying spare tyres wrapped round their bodies and changing the flat tyres themselves. They used to layer newspapers inside their jerseys as they ascended the mountains for insulation, and would whip out the newspapers in their wake as they flew down the steep slopes dangerously. However, seeing the awesome mountain stages with the familiar names of Col du Tourmalet, Col du Galibier, Mont Ventoux and the Alp d'Huez, brings waves of nostalgia back to me every July.

It is also the weekend and eve of Chinese New Year as I write this column. I was struck by how a friend of mine said that Chinese New Year meant less to him as his aged parents had moved on. The reunion dinner was more meaningful when he went back home to have dinner with his

folks. Having dinner with his sibs and their families did not mean as much to him.

Indeed, Chinese New Year brings back to me memories of house cleaning in the weeks before, buying of new clothes at High Street in those days, colourful night markets in Chinatown and Bugis Street, delicious reunion dinners, deafening and frightening explosions of firecrackers that started promptly at the stroke of midnight on the eve of Chinese New Year and went on forever.

I went to do a bit of reading about nostalgia and was surprised to find that it was first described as a malady in the 17th century in Swiss mercenaries fighting in the lowlands of France and Italy, who were pining for their native mountainous landscapes. Interestingly, nostalgia was thought to be a disease associated with melancholia and predisposing one to suicide.

Today, it is seen to be triggered by something that reminds an individual of an event or a memory from their past. The resulting emotions can range from pleasure to happiness to sorrow, triggering a desire to return to that time in the past. I have often felt this at this time of the lunar year and would find tears welling up in my eyes when listening to an old Teresa Teng number. Just the other day, my usual run seemed so short and enjoyable because I was listening to some late 70s disco numbers by the usual divas of that period on my iPod.

I guess my nostalgia about the cycling book is also more meaningful as it was my mother who had bought it. Sometime last year I found the book on Amazon and bought an original copy, as I have lost that hardcover with the yellow cover and green spine when we moved several times.

Is there some downside to nostalgia? I had a chance to speak to some of my junior doctors from SMA's Doctors in Training committee. As you all know, there is an ongoing painful transition from our British-based training system to the American-based residency programme. As the training programme for the residents is gearing up and sorting out its teething problems, we

are left with a sizeable residual number of young doctors under the previous BST and AST training schemes. They are truly the last of the Mohicans and have been facing difficulties such as taking the ABSITE examinations but not having the resources to be prepared for these examinations. This is because they are shouldering the clinical service workload, and the senior AST registrars are also burdened with teaching of the junior residents. As we transit the teaching systems, mindsets need to be changed on all sides, and the reality is that we need to look at the remuneration of our senior staff to reward them for teaching as well.

In my conversations with stakeholders, I realised that some of the nostalgia for the good old days is hampering our progress in traversing this massive tectonic shift. We have to realise that the resilient training of the old days have to give way to protected 80-hour weeks for the residents. Although the last of the Mohicans are not bound by 80-hour work weeks, they should also remember their own well being and performance, and know when to stop work, pass over and go home. Medicine as a profession does contain a lot of these nostalgic practices of the past. I hope that we can change our mindsets and pass these feelings of wanting to go back to the past when things were simpler; medical science was not so complex and patients were less demanding and less litigious. Let us save our nostalgia for our memories of classmates, friends, family, loved ones and the events around them.

I take this opportunity to wish you all a happy nostalgic Chinese New Year! **SMA**



Dr Chong is the President of the 52nd SMA Council. He has been in private practice since 1993 and has seen his fair share of the human condition. He pines for a good pinot noir, loves the FT Weekend and of course, wishes for world peace...