

REFLECTIONS

Seasonal gifts

Mary V. Seeman MD

For a New Year's gift in 1959 (the year my husband and I got married), my friend Sasha gave us a perpetual clock. It had a dome of polished brass and never lost track of passing time. My husband's friend Christopherson gave us a large, black electric skillet. Barbara, who was a medical school classmate, said she'd cover the cost of a grocery bill — it came to \$14, a large sum in those penniless student days. My parents' friend, Mr. Grossinger, gave us a hand-carved, hand-painted wooden chess set. I remember these 4 gifts in particular because they both satisfied our immediate needs and prepared us for a future together.

We always referred to the clock as Sasha's clock, the skillet as Christopherson's pan and the chess set — though we grew too busy to keep playing chess, the game over which we first sparred and bonded — as Grossinger's chessmen. The clock, the pan and the chess set came with us whenever we moved — from Montréal to Detroit to New York, where the children were born, to the UK and eventually to Toronto.

The years have passed. We have 6 grandchildren now. Our second youngest grandson is a chess *aficionado*, an amazing young player who can beat me no matter how much he handicaps himself. He offers me 3 extra moves, and he still wins. He has even won using a *pion coiffé* (a capped pawn), which means that he designates a specific pawn at the beginning of the game as the one that will do the checkmating at the end, considered the equivalent of sacrificing a queen. He has tried predicting the exact square he will checkmate me on, but he hasn't got that one right as of yet. Because of his chess prowess, we wanted to give him Grossinger's chessmen as a birthday present when he turned 8. But we couldn't find them — they had disappeared one by one behind bookcases, underneath upholstery, chipped inside vacuum cleaners or inside the crevices of discarded toys. Like his chessmen, Mr. Grossinger, a lifelong bachelor who lived alone, died alone. My parents both outlived their friend, but they are gone now, too.

Needless to say, the food we bought with Barbara's money went quickly, and Barbara — I don't know what has happened to Barbara. We have lost contact. Best friends become old friends, then old acquaintances, and then they seem to disappear. Even Sasha's perpetual clock hasn't kept ticking. It died a few years ago, very nearly at the same moment as Sasha her-



© 2013 Thinkstock

self, whose heart suddenly stopped. Our generation is following in the footsteps of my parents and Mr. Grossinger.

When our children were still young, they pulled out the electrical connection of Christopherson's skillet; it no longer sizzles. But Christopherson himself has attained a hot reputation as a poet.

Last New Year's, I asked my husband if our marriage still sizzles like the skillet used to, and he said I was being too mushy. He said, "If you wanted poetry, you could have married Christopherson." Such direct emotional talk makes him uncomfortable. "I'd say we are getting by," he said, "even though groceries cost way more than \$14 these days. Be grateful that our hearts are still ticking, though it's true that when they race, they go irregular. Yes, we've lost our chess pieces, but not our marbles. We can still play the mating game without them, all the better since I no longer need a *pion coiffé*. So, to answer your question about the skillet, it may not be poetry, but the electricity still works."

Correspondence to: Mary V. Seeman, mary.seeman@utoronto.ca

Affiliation: Department of Psychiatry, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ont.

CMAJ 2013. DOI:10.1503/cmaj.131198