

# Something lost, something gained

BY ALICIA VON STAMWITZ

**I**t was a raw morning, a week before Christmas. I was unenthused and late getting started on my Christmas shopping. I had a horrid cold and was buried in work. My two-year-old daughter, Teresa, had just learned to kick off her Mary Janes every time I turned my head.

Four years earlier, my husband, George, and I had moved to St. Louis. Each year since, we had made the nearly 2,000-kilometre trek back to New Hampshire to celebrate the holidays with our families. Siblings, spouses and friends would gather around the dinner table at his

parents' country home. We'd regale each other with stories and head outdoors afterward to frolic in the snow. Then we'd stretch out on the den floor to chat and doze before the hickory log fire.

This year would be different. George and I would spend Christmas in St. Louis. And I was dreading it.

I suppose I was an easy target as I trudged through

the mall that day — a tired red-nosed young mother distracted by her wailing child. And then it happened: after I'd bought only one gift, someone pinched my wallet from my jacket pocket; I didn't notice it was missing until I went to make a second purchase.

The cashier was sympathetic as I sank into a chair. It was bad enough that we would be alone at Christmas, that we would be string-

ing lights on a scrawny Midwestern pine, that we would be dining on a tiny Cornish hen for two instead of a succulent turkey for 20. Now this.

A security officer phoned George, and he soon appeared at my side. While I sat glumly, he filed a police report, called our creditors, then drove me and Teresa home. I crawled into bed with Teresa beside me. She fell asleep almost immediately. I tossed, then slept.

I awoke sometime later in a room transformed. A sudden sun drenched the bedroom in light. The ancient radiators groaned and popped, warming the room. Teresa's breath on my cheek was sweet, musky. I turned to face her. The day's events surfaced, and I suddenly realized how vulnerable she and I had been. If I had caught the robber in the act, he or she might have panicked. Teresa could have been hurt. Instead of a wallet, my daughter could have been taken from me.

This alarming realization cut through everything, catapulting me through memory's wormhole to the year before her birth. I considered the wanton combination of chance and genes that had produced this little person with my big ears, my temperament, my eyes. There would never be anyone else in this world exactly like her. And I couldn't imagine my own life apart from her. It was a brief, wordless journey — yet it remains with me, deep and indestructible.

"If we had a keen vision of all that is ordinary in human life," the novelist George Eliot wrote, "it would be like hearing the grass grow or the squirrel's heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which is the other side of silence."

Our first Midwestern Christmas was quiet and ordinary, yes. But I was as happy as the magi at the manger, dying in the roar of a child's heartbeat.

*Alicia von Stamwitz is a writer in St. Louis.*

