

ALYCE MILLER

Tish, Love

My sister Letitia was seventeen when she disappeared for two and a half days. Returning from a walk to the family's flat on Horlgasse Strasse in Vienna, she took a wrong turn at the intersection of two streets with almost identical names. It was a mistake my mother explained could have been made by anyone. Those two and a half days were described by my two youngest brothers as the longest and darkest of their lives. As afternoon of the first day turned to evening, and my parents' fruitless searching came to an end, my mother phoned the Vienna police to file a missing person's report. Learning Letitia was seventeen (and American), they dismissed her worries. Most likely she's run off with a boyfriend, we see this all the time. My mother protested. No, you don't understand. She's not like other girls. She wouldn't run away. It took the intervention of an upstairs neighbor whose husband was on the police force to convince the authorities that this was no ordinary seventeen year old. *Sie ist etwas geistig behindert.*

The disappearance was broadcast on Viennese radio and television. *American girl missing.* My mother asked they not use the word "retarded" in case Letitia should hear or see the broadcast. I think the word they chose in German was the equivalent of "special," but of course I wasn't there. "You realize," my father said, turning to my mother that first night, "that we can never go home again."

A black and white studio portrait of Letitia at age one still sits on the piano in my father's music studio. Her expression is one of pure joy, immense eyes turned upwards. Her mouth is slightly parted, as if in pleasure or song. Her hands are clasped just above the embroidered trim of her white cotton dress. At the bottom of the photo, someone, probably my mother, hand wrote in "*Caro nome,*" the title of Gilda's aria from *Rigoletto*. *Sweet name, you who made my heart throb for the first time.*

My baby sister was weightless as air. Lying in our arms, tiny marionette limbs dangling, she'd fix on us her enormous blue-eyed stare.

A family friend described her as “a face full of eyes.” We smothered her with love—how could we not?—this exquisite doll-like creature who endured the rough-and-tumble games, even smiling agreeably when we dragged her at night from crib to caves and forts constructed from blankets and chairs. She withstood the bumps and knocks without complaint. Amazed by her imperviousness to pain, we tested her: fed her hot peppercorns from our salami, waiting for her eyes to water; and later, ordered her to run barefoot through snow. We were thrilled by her stoicism. Nothing seemed to faze her, not even when she tipped over in the cardboard box we towed her around in and fell forward on her face.

We loved her so much we failed to recognize how long it took her to walk. Or how in reality her speech was limited and often incomprehensible.

She was the baby sister I’d always wanted.

I was barely eight when my mother began the trips with Letitia into the Cleveland Clinic. Only vaguely aware of phrases like *delayed development*, I disregarded their seriousness. In my translation there was nothing alarming, nothing different from my mother’s worried rants about grocery bills or repairs on our aging, secondhand car. Hard, though, to dismiss the taut expression dominating my mother’s face, a map of the day’s frustrations and disappointments. One night, after the Cleveland Clinic, my mother wore sunglasses to conceal eyes swollen from crying. I hated her for the deception. In the bathtub, she painstakingly washed away the greasy circles of gel from Letitia’s scalp where electrodes had been attached to her head. The intimacy of her sorrow angered me. Troubled words and phrases passed sotto voce between my parents. Long after they imagined us asleep, I’d listen to their late-night exchanges strung out like tired laundry, repeating over and over the same information, as if suddenly something would be revealed in a new, surprising way. *Slow to develop, didn’t walk until after two, still isn’t talking at four.* And my mother’s staunch refusal to have her labeled: *What do they know? Nothing! They just don’t know!*

It was true: my sister often gave wrong answers on tests, but we knew it was deliberate. Bored and fed up, she’d surely had enough. Whatever kinks in her brain they were hoping to unknot, she was refusing. Watching through a two-way mirror, my mother

witnessed repeated stubborn refusals to match common objects with their names. When the humorless tester asked Letitia to point to the picture of mother and baby, she loosened her gaze from the page and allowed it to roam from wall to ceiling and then around the room before plunking her index finger down onto the roaring tiger. My mother, mute behind glass, rose to protest. How could the tester have missed Letitia's sly glance and the defiant curl of her mouth? Yet into the record went the wrong answer. It added up to a low I.Q.

Spurred on by our mother's consternation and whispered doubts, we went to work on our sister. *What's this, Letitia?* We'd grill her, pointing to our faces. *Eyeeeeee????*, she would crow, screwing a sharp, tiny finger right into our sockets. *Letitia's killing us, Mom!!!!* *Owwwwww!* We'd incite her to do it again, and again, and again. *What's this, Tish? Eaaaaaaar?????* Shrieks of pain. Joyful pain. *Ear? Ear? Ear? Mom, Letitia is killing us! She's killing us with words!*

Over the years the tune had variations on its refrain. *Borderline retarded. Educably mentally retarded. Dull normal.* One professional advised my mother to put Letitia in an institution and "forget about her."

That's when the testing stopped. We moved again. Letitia began public kindergarten. She wore OshKosh B'Gosh overalls and little blue Keds sneakers to school, a cheery little cabin at the bottom of our long street, tucked under big elms long before the blight. One of us would walk her there. Sometimes for no apparent reason she would fall down. She was clumsy but hearty. She would get back up unabashed. She learned to laugh at herself.

At school, she made friends easily, was cheerful and sweet, and beloved by all. No one seemed to mind she couldn't do a lot of things the others could. She was funny and quirky.

My mother said, "We're going to love Letitia for who she is."

My father stood in the doorway sternly observing my brother and me. We were stretched out on the floor with our sister, imitating her telegraphic speech. "Stop baby-talking to your sister. You'll make her retarded!" he ordered. That word fell from his mouth like a heavy weight. *Retarded!* What was he saying? We had a cousin with Down's syndrome, so we knew what real retarded was. Letitia

wasn't retarded. She was lively and funny. She talked to us. Besides, how could we make her retarded? The moment turned unreal. What had we done? What else could we do?

My brother and I hatched a plan. We would work harder; we would prove to our parents she had the power of speech. For weeks, maybe even months, we besieged her with words, plied her with questions, forced her to repeat what we said. We'd try to put words in her mouth, demanding she say the words back, over and over. She was a patient, long-suffering sister. Sometimes I pinched her cheeks hard between index finger and thumb until tears of frustration welled up in her eyes. We converted her nonsense chatter into sentences, which morphed into stories, which we then relayed to our mother. "Guess what Letitia said today."

And we would begin the litany.

"She said that? Really?" Our mother's forehead smoothed out, eyes brighter with hope.

What I want to say about my sister becomes both celebration and lament. It starts with the failure of words—both hers and mine. Easy to romanticize her unconditional love, the generous spirit, the tender heart. Easy to remind ourselves how "lucky" we are—she's funny and bright and responsive to the world around. As an adult, she continually surprises. Hard to reconcile the clarity one day with the glitchiness of mistakes the next. The burner left on, the scraps of paper strewn throughout the house, the front door left open.

Six months ago, I was named Letitia's legal guardian. When writing "Miller v. Miller" on the petition to declare her disabled, I felt the oddness of being my sister's adversary in a legal proceeding that was ultimately meant to benefit her. In front of a jury and judge, we would have her stripped of her legal rights so that she could receive protection.

Some advocates of retarded citizens oppose guardianship. But recent patient privacy laws, for example, can leave disabled citizens in a kind of legal limbo. If a doctor determines a patient isn't competent to give informed consent for a procedure, there is no one else who can. Next step: an emergency court order.

We expected no hitches. After all, Letitia's was a clearly documented history of special education classes and sheltered workshops, I.Q. tests and evaluations, all the benchmarks of a child-

woman who simply could not manage basic affairs without help. Beyond that paper trail, hers was also a story of a woman exercising her fullest potential, a person who simply and plainly loved life, who doted on her family and friends, had memorized the name of every animal and baby on her street, collected stamps, and loved classical music and soap operas with equal passion.

As required by law in that state, three experts testified: a social worker, a psychologist, and a medical doctor. All stated the narrow facts that would help her family accomplish our goal. Her guardian *ad litem*, a court-appointed attorney, was there to represent her best interests. The social worker opened by saying "Miss Miller presents very well. In fact, it took me ten minutes of conversation with her to figure out that guardianship was appropriate." She went on to explain to attentive jury members (none of whom, we learned during *voir dire*, had a disabled family member), that Letitia had volunteered detailed information about each family member, including cousins, down to occupations held and names of pets and children, as well as anecdotes of her various travels and life experiences. We all know this side of Letitia: when she is on fire; when she likes and trusts someone; when the neurotransmitters take wing across the synaptic gaps and bind to membrane receptors; when the firing synapses are at their most plastic.

This is the Letitia she might have been if only. . . .

But then the social worker had laid out ten dollars in coins and bills and asked Letitia to identify, to perform simple addition and subtraction. How much change are you owed if you spend \$6.45? Without pausing, Letitia said she should receive a five, three ones, and a handful of change.

Everyone smiled, including the judge. My parents looked stricken. I had to remind them *Right now this is what we want to hear*.

The social worker went on. *Reading level: grade two*. Then how, I sat wondering silently, can Letitia decipher notes my mother makes to herself in her private date book, or even letters left on the table? "Why do you have to go to the doctor's at nine tomorrow?" she'll ask my mother slyly. My mother started writing entries in Italian or German. "Don't forget," Letitia would remind off-handedly, "you have a dentist appointment at the Zahnarzt's on Thursday."

Sometimes it's hard not to believe Letitia is tricking us, that it's all a charade.

In the courtroom, my mother touched my arm. *Please tell them all the things she can do. Please let them know that too.*

On the witness stand, I was asked to describe my sister. Where to begin? And then I began. *There are some things you can't quantify. How do you measure the gift of love and of compassion? Or a loyal heart?* It's that she can't—but she also can—. My words and feelings were suddenly at cross-purposes.

The jury listened. I was now asking the court to let Letitia keep her right to vote. There were questions from her attorney—had she voted before? Yes. Did she know who the candidates were? We thought so. The jury left the room. The judge smiled at us and made pleasant banter. The social worker and the attorney chatted too, each saying in one way or another, that Letitia was remarkable. Pride bloomed in me. *Yes, she is.* My father coughed and fought back tears. My mother eagerly offered how Letitia attended a year of regular school in England when she was twelve and how she could identify paintings by their artists. After deliberating half an hour, the jury returned and announced their decision: Letitia could retain the right to vote. Her legal designation was therefore partially disabled. She was placed under my full guardianship.

“What’s a guardian again?” Letitia had asked me several times the night before the hearing. We were at a restaurant where she was wolfing down her favorite meal, triple cheeseburger with steak fries and Coke. Earlier, at her request, we had driven down to the courthouse so she could see the building where my parents, one of my brothers, and I were all going without her in the morning. *Someone to help you manage your money, affairs, and property. Someone to help you make medical decisions.* “We will always talk about what you want me to do,” I assured her. She nodded, eyes enormous with earnestness. “Nothing will change, it’s just that now you will have some legal protections.”

She took all this in.

“Do you remember what being a guardian means?” I asked, hoping that repetition would deepen her comprehension.

Letitia paused, then studied me with luminous eyes. “It means,” she said tentatively, not wanting to get it wrong, “it means you’ll be like Mom and make me dinner?”

Some of the residents at the school believe a “guardian” is like a “guardian angel.” Sometimes I imagine myself spreading my wings over my sister as she sleeps. My child sister who will never completely grow up.

It was just a little over two years ago that Letitia, who has lived all her life with my parents, moved, with our encouragement, into a private residential school. She likes the idea that she has “two homes” in “two states.” At her school there are 400 residents, each unique as the proverbial snowflake, ranging from those who are virtually indistinguishable from staff, to others whose physical and emotional challenges are readily apparent. Letitia accepts everyone. It’s not that she doesn’t see difference, she simply doesn’t care. Besides, she likes the idea of helping. “I walked Molly back to her dorm today,” she’ll say brightly. “She can’t see very well, so I am her eyes.”

The first year she lived there, I visited her once a month. Compelled by anxiety about her well-being, I would drop in to check up.

“It’s so beautiful here,” Letitia often remarks, taking in the span of rolling green farmland, some of which is visible from her dorm room window. Cows graze in the pasture across the driveway. She lives in horse country now, and rides in a special therapeutic program the school provides. Nothing is perfect; it is, still, an institution. There are times I am almost choked with agony as she mounts the steps of the institutional bus to be delivered to some event. Disappearing inside, she is gone, and I am left with glare reflecting from the windows. I want to call out to indifferent passersby, “Do you know that’s my sister? She loves animals and children. She knows the difference between a Picasso and a Rembrandt. She makes the best scrambled eggs and mint tea from scratch. She can fold laundry into perfectly symmetrical stacks. She loves music. Hey, you! Do you know she can also ride a bicycle and row a canoe? She’s better at jigsaw puzzles than I am!”

We were told early on that Letitia had *speech impediments*, but the truth was she had limited access to language. By age three, when most children are talking in clear sentences, Letitia relied on a broken syntax of mostly nouns—desire was expressed without the verb. *I water*. We read to her for hours, talked to her, helped her painstakingly copy out the alphabet, then words, then letters.

Over the years it became clear she wasn't holding out. It's just that sometimes she is on and sometimes she isn't. Sometimes the brain chemistry works and sometimes it doesn't. What made her able to get up one morning while I was still asleep, and clean my kitchen, wash and fold my laundry, and feed the cats? And how to explain the following morning, when she got befuddled and pulled the knob off the dryer, forgot how to start the washer, and broke a plate, seemingly baffled by the very things she did so easily the day before?

When Vienna happened, I was living in California. I know only what was reported: the discovery of her on a railroad platform thirty miles out of the city, exhausted and hungry, holding the stub of a train ticket someone had bought for her. The soles of her feet were worn raw and covered in blisters. An Austrian woman with a child in a pram had noticed her and figured out who she was from the descriptions on the radio. Hearing her limited German, the woman was instantly suspicious. She asked Letitia to wait with her baby while she went a few feet away to phone.

Letitia's version of events focused on mostly bits and pieces of fact, and her excitement that the baby's name was Wolfgang. *Like Mozart*, she said cheerfully.

Upon her return to Horlgasse Strasse, Letitia was uncharacteristically quiet. Setting her curiosity aside, my mother quietly bathed Letitia's battered feet, pausing to hug her, as if to reassure herself that the return was real. She fed her. Then Letitia slept for a very long time. When she awakened, she seemed no worse for the wear. Soon she was back to her usual chipper self. My family waited for her to explain. They waited. And waited.

Questions led to dead ends and shrugs and "I don't know." Letitia would artfully change the subject. Embarrassment maybe? Reluctance to relive the experience. We backed off. Had something happened? Over time, innocuous bits and pieces emerged, but mostly she focused on Wolfgang and his mother. When asked where she'd slept the first night, she mentioned "two men" who took her home. You could have heard a pin drop in the silence that followed. No, she didn't know who they were. Then she changed the subject again.

Whose lives, we wondered, had she passed through? What did people make of her, an American girl with two long brown braids, wearing beat-up sneakers and overalls, sitting uncertainly in a rail-

way station thirty miles outside of town, trying to find the words that would lead her home?

When we were children, Letitia served as a litmus test of my friends' true natures. We didn't use the word "retarded" then. Somehow it didn't seem right. Retarded children had Down's syndrome, PKU, brain damage, birth defects. I'd say: *My sister's a little slow. She has a speech impediment. You have to be patient.* There was no imprimatur more important than my mother's pronouncement that a particular friend was *good with Letitia.*

Strangers, though, could be cruel. People would recoil when they heard her speak. How I dreaded hearing, "What's wrong with her?" This, followed by the hard stare, a lip curling in disgust. Did Letitia notice? If she did, she never said.

Please, Letitia, please, don't act weird. Please talk more clearly.

Another brother was born, then another. I entered adolescence. Letitia became the pesky younger sister I pummeled to keep from touching my private stuff. "What doing, Alyce?" she would whine, snooping around my room. "What doing, sister?"

"Get out!" I would say, pushing her roughly, suddenly embarrassed by her intense stare and the truncated sentences that weren't even real sentences. "Get out of my room!" Impatience mounted. Sometimes I slapped her. She was stubborn, and I was—well, terrified. She was getting older. She needed to act more normal. At night she had a terrible habit of noisily sucking her tongue in sleep, and sometimes I'd get up and pinch her mouth so hard she'd awaken, startled, eyes brimming with tears. I wanted only to make her stop, not to hurt her. I wanted her to stop pretending altogether. I'd seen her act normal. Startled out of sleep, she would stare out in the dark with surprise, while deep, slow anger burned in me. "Stop it!" I'd hiss. "Just stop it!"

Over the years, as we all left home, a mutual dependence grew up between Letitia and my parents. For years, she and my mother have been best friends, despite the arguments over unmade beds, uncombed hair, clothes heaped around the room, the trails of toast crumbs through the house, the forgetfulness and careful acts.

From the time she graduated high school at twenty one, Letitia worked from seven to three each day in a sheltered workshop.

Mornings she got herself up with an alarm, dressed, made oatmeal and coffee, and headed out to wait for the bus. Evenings after dinner and weekends she spent mostly at home, often in her room watching television and listening to music, or taking walks to burn off her restlessness. She lived for the moments when she ran into people she knew: neighbors, friends, my father's students. Occasionally she went to the movies with friends or out to dinner with a boy. The staff at the workshop were fond enough of her that sometimes one of them would call to invite Letitia to go bowling or skating or swimming. But mostly her schedule was the schedule of our slowly aging parents who were often asleep by nine. I began to worry that her life was slipping away. I asked her if she wanted to try a group home.

"Uh-unh," she'd shake her head rapidly. "Mom needs me. I take care of her."

Up through her early thirties she still entertained dreams of living independently. She would announce, "When I'm married I'm going to tell my husband . . ." or "If I have a baby, I'll name her . . ." She watched her normal peers move on to adult lives and keenly followed their trajectories and vicissitudes. College, then wedding announcements in the papers, births of children, not always in that order, and sometimes no marriage at all, divorces, and visits home. She can tell you details about anyone she's ever known. And she recognizes the gaps between her life and theirs.

When Letitia is with my parents, she has to inform them when she goes out. If no one's around, she leaves notes on the kitchen table.

Dear Mom Dad

Gone for walk towndown, I go shopping presents, get gown night, love best you parents of the world in very best. See soon

Tish, Love.

She reverses letters, writes some upside down, inverts syntax, omits words, and randomly inserts periods and commas. At holidays, when we're all together, she writes everyone notes, as well. Waiting on the kitchen table one afternoon was this one: *Dear Sis and Bortha-in-Law, don't forget tv watch video tonight you get store video for me, favorite movie, popcorn too.*

The scrawl is a mixture of print and cursive, “p’s” and “b’s” and “s’s” often written like mirror reflections. An occasional “e” upside down. Capitalization and punctuation are hit and miss, with commas popping up unexpectedly. Her notes are composed on scrap paper, the backsides of leftover pages of my father’s book manuscripts and articles on singing, so that in turning over one of Tish’s notes, one is apt to find not just words, but a photo from *Gray’s Anatomy* of a glottis or larynx.

Voice box. Site of speech and song. My sister’s speech, her unique idiolect, her Stein-esque spareness, her voice in the world. If you listen, you’re likely to overhear her singing an aria or talking in another room.

Pure joy.

When she reads she often substitutes near synonyms—pony for horse or red for orange. Or she might show off a little, referring to red as *rouge* or *rote*, enjoying her little foray into foreign languages.

If only we could reach inside her head and tighten some screws. She’s so close. So near. . . . That’s what we used to say.

When she was almost six, Letitia asked for a bicycle. Afraid she’d fall, my mother refused. But Letitia persisted. She wanted a bike, a blue bike. No, came the answer. No, no, no. She pestered and pestered. A bike, a bike, a bike. Finally, a neighbor girl overheard and remarked to my mother, “She’s been riding my bike all summer.”

When Letitia’s sixth birthday arrived, so did the blue bike, shiny, with streamers hanging from the handlebars. Despite the snow on the ground, Letitia took her bike out for what she now calls “a spin” while we all watched. Motion begot motion. It was after getting the bike that she began to use verbs.

Fleet as a ghost in her long white nightgowns, Letitia sleepwalks occasionally, floating through the house. About three years ago she fell down a flight of stairs but didn’t tell my mother, concealing her injuries with long sleeves. A week later, my mother noticed she was holding her arm strangely. Letitia insisted it was nothing. On closer inspection, my mother discovered swelling and bruises, and rushed her to a doctor, where it was determined the arm was broken. When asked why she didn’t tell anyone—“I didn’t want to be any trouble.”

This high threshold for pain is not uncommon with retarded adults. Letitia eating peppercorns, walking barefoot in the snow. Letitia falling down the stairs.

Growing up, I wanted Letitia to be like me. And I was terrified I would be like her.

"I know I'm a little coo-coo, aren't I?" she remarks disarmingly, spinning one index finger next to her temple. "Crazy Letitia."

Sonically-oriented, she often thinks in puns. At the Palais du Papes (pronounced "pop") in Avignon, she stuck a finger inside her cheek and pulled it out to make the sound of a bottle being uncorked.

Once, as I drove her home from visiting a friend at a group home, Letitia chatted nonchalantly about the residents. "Jimmy has cerebral palsy. He has seizures. He has to wear a helmet. Juan doesn't talk. Nelson used to be a girl. Heather has Down's syndrome."

I listened.

"Down's syndrome," she paused for effect, "now do I have a little of that?"

For more than a year, Letitia worked day in and day out filling up thick binders with recipes from magazines. At last count, there were thirty-plus binders in the attic. Next, she began filling binders with photos and postcards of cathedrals from around the world. "My project," she would refer to it. "My books."

A recent email from Letitia: *Dear Sis, please send carthdal photo, look on internet for Salisbry.*

Sometimes she can read, other times she can't. What prompted her one day when she was visiting to pull a Dover edition of Wordsworth off the bookshelf and haltingly read the first four lines of "We Are Seven"?

"Can I have this book?" she asked. "Can I have Wordsworth?"

Sometimes I still think she is tricking us, like the time she described how my father was yanked off a Czech train by armed guards who caught him snapping photos (*we were so scared*, she reported). "And then," she ended dramatically, "while Daddy was standing on the platform, they confiscated his film."

“Confiscated!” I exclaimed. “Letitia, where did you learn a word like that?”

Thrilled, she collapsed into giggles. “I don’t know, but I surprised you, didn’t I?”

Years ago, during a period of singlehood, I visited my parents. Several different male friends of Letitia’s from the sheltered workshop dropped by over the course of a week. The most memorable was the boy-man, Charles, with a high forehead, sunken eyes, and a perennially concerned expression. He arrived one night just after dinner. My cagey sister suddenly high-tailed it upstairs with the excuse that she had “something to do.” Minutes passed. Charles sat on the edge of the sofa, waiting. “She’ll be back,” I assured him, not so certain. Charles just stared, wordless. His impassive expression never changed. It became obvious, from the muffled sounds of television emanating from upstairs, that Letitia had blown him off. Feeling sorry for him, I apologized for Letitia’s bad manners and suggested he might want to get on with his evening, phone her later. He still didn’t move. Finally, I asked if he was waiting for something. “Can I go to the bathroom now?” he mumbled. After he lumbered off in the right direction, I assumed he’d left. But about half an hour later, the sensation of being watched startled me from my reverie. Looking up, I was shocked to see Charles standing in the doorway, staring. “Oh, you’re still here,” I said, surprised, trying to decide if I was obligated to suggest he tuck in his shirt and zip up his pants.

He began to speak, haltingly. The words were labored, but clear. He kept wringing his hands. “Would you like to go walking with me?” he asked.

It was then it dawned on me what my sister had done. Confronted, she admitted cheerfully. “I took your picture to the workshop and showed everyone! I don’t want you to be lonely.”

My generous sister had fixed me up.

Though pointless to speculate, it’s irresistible not to wonder what Letitia could have been, her brain returned to normalcy. Letitia as a researcher, a doctor, a musician, or a veterinarian. What quirks of nature allow her flashes of brilliance only to have her recede into hesitation, frustration, and silence? What does she really know?

And how does she know? Why was it that, when she came to spend a week with me in San Francisco years ago, the girl who allegedly could not tell time was suddenly calculating the three hour difference between East and West Coasts? What vagaries of the brain prevent her from distinguishing between five dollars and five hundred, but also allow her to examine closely the quality of a shirt or sweater before she buys it? What about her hilarious slips—"homeless" for "hummous" and "grandma seizures" instead of grand mal—reconciled with her attention to the proper pronunciation of names of people she knows and loves? Like many of her kind, Letitia remains indecipherable, a unique combination of qualities that, rearranged, would give us someone not at all like Letitia. *We are very lucky.*

Once Letitia overheard my parents discussing an article they'd just read on cloning. Without missing a beat, she suggested that they could have her cloned. "Just think, two of me," she remarked cheerfully. "That's so while one of me goes to work, the other one can stay at home with Mom."

Years after Vienna, when I was in my late twenties, Letitia and I set off on a walk after dinner with my parents. Darkness was falling, and she warned me that my mother did not permit her to walk after sunset in the cemetery "because of the bats." The world for her was not a place of real dangers. We padded across a thin layer of snow in air too frosty for what I was wearing. I was ready to turn back when Letitia began to talk, out of the blue, about Vienna.

She was first recalling how she'd lived in several different countries, and then how in Vienna she'd gotten lost. And then, in as fluid a speech as I've ever heard from her, she launched into the story as if it had all happened yesterday. What should have been a ten-minute walk ended up approaching two hours. Details surfaced. Gaps were filled, chronologies ironed out. She talked about being afraid, worried, cold, and hungry. She'd walked for miles, in search of something familiar. She was mostly concerned about worrying my mother. She was matter-of-fact and factual. She described people she met and the things she had seen. I waited, with agony, for the smoking gun, the body in the closet, the terrible thing that had befallen her and consigned her to silence all these years. But, on the contrary, the details were unremarkable. Sometimes she would

stop and rest. The first night two men she met took her home and fed her soup. She slept on their sofa. She thought they were Iranian, or maybe Turkish. I pressed. Arab, she revised. Maybe Italian. What language did they speak? Not German or French was all she could tell me. The obvious questions sat right on the tip of my tongue. I didn't ask if anyone had harmed her. Instead, Who bought the train ticket? She wasn't sure. The second night she spent in the same train station where Wolfgang's mother discovered her the next day.

"She knew I was American because of my accent," she explained. "She heard about me on television. She called the police and they called Mom. Are you proud of me?" I turned my head in the dark so she could not see me crying.

When I gained control over my voice, I asked, "Why didn't you tell us this before? It's really an amazing story."

In the darkness, I heard her signature chuckle, a combination of ruefulness and whimsy. "Because I couldn't," she said matter-of-factly. "I didn't have the words back then."