

No Ear for Languages

When they arrived at the music school, after two long subway rides and then snaking their way through the rush-hour sidewalk crowd, Marcy's ID card was somehow missing from her wallet. The guard at the security desk would not let her pass through to the bank of elevators behind her son Walter, even after she pulled out a driver's license to prove they had the same last name: Golden. But he was the weekday guard and he did not recognize Marcy as one of the mothers from the Saturday program.

"It's the rules," he said. He nodded towards Walter. "He can go up, but you don't have ID and your name's not on the list."

Meanwhile, a mother passed right through, followed by a tiny girl with a cello strapped to her back like a turtle shell.

"She didn't show ID," Marcy pointed out.

"She's on the list."

Walter's knuckles were white around the handle of his small violin case. Marcy knew, but didn't say aloud, that he needed to use the restroom. And the rehearsal was in five minutes.

"My son is a student of Professor Kröv. He has a rehearsal on the fifteenth floor and I need to take him up right now. I could leave my driver's license—"

"Professor Kröv ain't even here tonight," the guard said, shaking his head.

"No, no, his appointment isn't with Professor Kröv. It's with the accompanist. My son is rehearsing for the concerto competition."

The guard took a sip from his coffee.

Marcy and Walter stepped aside as a succession of people passed through the gate, straight to the elevators. Most swiped ID cards, but some did not.

"Mom," whispered Walter, "I have to—"

“I know,” she whispered back. And then suddenly she saw him, the pianist, whom she recognized from Professor Kröv’s performance class, which she and Walter had attended the month before. The pianist was wearing a camel-colored overcoat and a tall fur hat which seemed extreme for the weather, but then again, as she recalled, he had a shaved head which might get easily chilled. Marcy intercepted him between the revolving doors and the security desk.

“Mr. Clementine!” Mr. Clementine took a small step backwards, looking embarrassed at being accosted in the vestibule. He slid a slender hand from his glove and extended it to her.

“Please,” he said, quietly. “Everyone calls me Clem.”

Marcy explained about the lost ID card. “If you can just sign me in,” she added, “then we can go up.”

“Oh, I’m afraid that’s impossible,” Mr. Clementine said. “Only full-time faculty can put a name on the list. I can take Walter up myself. You’d probably be more comfortable waiting here, anyway,” he added, nodding at a cluster of tattered armchairs on the wrong side of the security desk. “The rehearsal space is quite small, and there aren’t chairs.”

“But Walter’s only eleven,” said Marcy. “I attend all of his lessons and rehearsals. I take notes. Professor Kröv insists.”

Walter was staring up at her, bouncing a little on his heels. There was a faint band of sweat on his forehead, just below his curly bangs. Instinctively, she reached over to touch his head. He pulled away, an action she registered with mild surprise.

“I’ll be okay, Mom,” he said.

“All right? Well, come on, Walter,” said Mr. Clementine. Walter trotted obediently through the gate, which had been lowered electronically by the guard to allow Mr. Clementine to pass. The mechanical arm swung back into position before Marcy could gather her wits.

“Well,” she said, to no one in particular. She watched the two of them, her little boy and the man with the tall fur hat, march towards the elevators. A set of doors parted as they approached, and they entered together without breaking stride. She caught a glimpse of Walter poking the button, then the doors popped shut, and they were gone.

“Well, fine,” Marcy repeated, still trembling from outrage. But it was not fine. Her distress over Walter’s predicament—what if he wet his pants?—was physical. Her heart was pounding and she was sweating inside her parka. She turned and walked to the little waiting area, which was in a drafty corner, close to the revolving doors. There were four chairs. A pair of women sat facing one another in two of the chairs, and a third was piled with shopping bags, coats, and a bright pink Hello Kitty backpack, which meant that one of them must have a girl near Walter’s age, who had also gone upstairs on her own. So maybe it would be all right after all. Marcy made her way towards the remaining chair, which had a large, dark stain across the upholstery. As she approached, the women, who had been speaking to each other in Chinese, fell silent. They regarded her for an instant, and then resumed their conversation.

After testing the fabric with her hand to make sure the stain was dry, Marcy dropped into the chair and felt in her jacket pocket for her cell phone. She considered whether to call Professor Kröv to ask for some kind of intervention. The professor, however, was difficult to communicate with even under the most favorable circumstances, let alone on a cell phone line with those two women yakking next to her.

And, to tell the truth, Marcy was afraid of Professor Kröv. During lessons she sat in the corner of his studio, taking notes on everything he said to Walter, piping up only if a look of panic crossed the boy’s face, in which case she would pretend that it was she, Marcy, who was confused, and ask for clarification. “Excuse me, Professor, but did you say the weight of the arm should be felt in the *wrist* or during the *rest*?” Then her heart would begin to race because Professor Kröv had a thick accent which grew thicker whenever he became self-conscious about its thickness. He also had a low tolerance for what he considered to be stupidity, and she knew from experience that he would burst into temper if asked to repeat himself more than once. If she didn’t get it on the second pass, she might never get it; then she and Walter would be in for a week of practice sessions fraught by confusion and tears, followed by a lesson of reprimands.

She decided not to call Kröv. As a distraction, she turned her attention to the women beside her. Although their faces were smiling and

their conversation was punctuated with laughter, there was something strained, or almost biting, about their exchange, and Marcy began to pick up on an undercurrent of competition between them. Not for the first time, she wished that she had followed through with her attempt to learn Chinese in college. Her then-boyfriend had been a Mandarin Chinese major and talked her into signing up for an introductory course. But Marcy had no ear for languages and it turned out that they were expected to memorize two hundred characters a week. This was an impossible task for Marcy, and she had dropped the class almost immediately. At the end of the semester her boyfriend had gone away to China for a semester abroad, and later transferred to a college on the West Coast. She had not thought about her brief, failed attempt at learning the language until two years ago when Walter began studying with Professor Kröv, and she realized that a third of the families in his studio were Chinese and that the most informative conversations between the other parents were being carried on right under her nose.

She wondered whether her then-self would have been moved by the predicament of her now-self to try a little harder in Chinese class. But she doubted it. Her then-self, a sarcastic poetry major, would have been appalled to discover that she was going to turn into an advertising copywriter who spent half her life in music school anterooms wishing she knew enough Chinese to eavesdrop on the other parents. Her then-self would not have done a thing to facilitate her deterioration into the sort of person who could not manage to talk her way past a security guard into the very building she had frequented every Saturday for two years. Her then-self, upon receiving a glimpse into the future, might have jumped off the George Washington Bridge.

The younger of the two women was luxuriously well put-together. She wore sharply creased wool slacks, Dolce & Gabbana boots, and a fur-trimmed jacket. Marcy calculated that the woman's outerwear alone was worth more than she had paid for Walter's half-size violin. Her fingernails were long, which signified that she was not a musician herself, and lacquered vermilion. Her hair was glossy and freshly cut with subtle-not-tacky reddish highlights, as though she had just emerged from a stylist that afternoon. The older woman was slightly built, wearing sneakers and a zip-up jacket that might have been pur-

chased in a children's section. Her hair was frizzy and her glasses rested slightly askew on her nose. In other words, she was the Chinese version of Marcy.

Marcy caught the eye of the older woman. In a gesture that she interpreted as friendly, the woman made a perfunctory effort to consolidate the pile of coats that had spilled over from the chair and was infringing on Marcy's armrest.

"Sorry!" she said turning to Marcy, who at once recognized her as one of the parents in the audience at Kröv's studio class. Marcy seized her entrance.

"It's no problem at all. By the way, I'm Marcy Golden. My son Walter is a student of Professor Kröv."

The woman nodded. "Golden is a beautiful name," she said. "Like the color. I am also named for a color. I am—" and then Marcy felt the familiar anxiety coursing through her as the woman pronounced her name, which slid straight through Marcy's unabsorbing mind. The woman did not introduce her friend, who sat watching them with an amused expression on her face.

"My daughter studies with Professor Kröv. Twelve years now," the woman said. "She's a senior. She's rehearsing with string her quartet, every Wednesday night."

"Who is your daughter?"

"Tiffany Lee."

"I heard her play in Professor Kröv's studio class. She's fabulous!" Marcy said, a little too ardently, as she scrambled to remember which of the glamorous mini-skirted older girls could be this woman's daughter.

"How old your son?"

"Walter is eleven," Marcy said. "This is his first year with Professor Kröv."

"Who'd he study with before?"

Marcy said the name of Walter's old teacher at the neighborhood music school in Brooklyn, but the woman did not react. Sensing that she had failed to pass some sort of assessment, Marcy added, "We just love Professor Kröv," although the words coming from her mouth felt somewhat untrue. Fear and awe, perhaps, but not exactly love.

The woman did not offer any further information and turned her conversation back to her friend, so Marcy was left to contemplate the predicament with Walter.

Professor Kröv often said that Mr. Clementine was his most valued pianist. He played for all of Kröv's studio classes and recitals, and it was Clementine that Kröv sent out to competitions and auditions with his students. But evidently Kröv did not trust him completely, for he had given Marcy a detailed list of instructions, everything from specific metronome speeds to an admonition that she not allow Clementine to play too loudly—to “cover” the boy—lest Walter be unable to hear himself and adjust to the equal-tempered intonation of the piano. Kröv had also instructed her that the piano in the rehearsal hall would be tuned sharp, and that it would be good experience for the boy to learn to modify his tuning because you never know how a piano will be tuned in any given hall. But none of this made a great deal of sense to Marcy or Walter because Walter had almost no experience playing with pianos. They had no piano at home, and in his five months studying with Kröv he had only been picked to play in one recital, a movement of unaccompanied Bach. Without Marcy there to run interference on his behalf, the rehearsal with Clementine could spin out of control. What if Walter became confused and frustrated by the tuning? As it was, he sometimes had trouble turning his violin pegs and had to ask Marcy to help him (though never in front of Kröv.) And for Walter, frustration inevitably lead to tears, further compounded by humiliation at crying in front of a stranger, and more tears. Such behavior would not go unreported to Kröv by Clementine.

Marcy watched the two women, hoping for a break in their conversation, so she could ask Mrs. Lee her opinion of how to handle the matter. Mrs. Lee's friend unzipped her purse and produced a sheet of newspaper covered in Chinese characters and Mrs. Lee regarded the article carefully, tipping her head to read it through her bifocal lenses. Both women laughed, a little tensely, Marcy thought, and the clipping was returned to its place in the purse.

“I wonder,” Marcy said, “if I could ask some advice.” The women exchanged a quick look, then both of them turned to smile brightly

at Marcy. But as Marcy opened her mouth to speak, Mrs. Lee's cell phone began to chirp. Mrs. Lee excused herself and began an excited-sounding conversation in Chinese. Mrs. Lee's friend smiled at Marcy, then extracted a small, leather-bound book from her purse and began to read, her face now blank with total absorption.

A gaggle of teenagers burst from the elevators and passed through the exit gates towards the chairs where the three women were sitting. Marcy registered that the kids, who had been laughing and joking in English seconds earlier, had suddenly switched to Chinese. Was it because they'd noticed her watching them, or was it in deference to their mothers? Teenagers made her uncomfortable; this had been true throughout her entire life.

There was a short, interrogating conversation with Mrs. Lee and her friend as the kids grabbed at the pile of coats on the chair. The Hello Kitty backpack was revealed to belong not to a child, but to a tall teenage girl with side-swept bangs and tight designer jeans. Marcy recognized her now: Tiffany Lee. Of course. Tiffany was Kröv's top student, and the concertmaster of the senior orchestra. Kröv had bragged about her during Walter's lesson, that she had made it to the semi-finals of a big-deal international competition and was applying to Yale and Juilliard. The second girl strode over to the younger mother, who was now standing, and handed over her violin case, which the woman strapped onto her own shoulder while simultaneously helping the girl on with her coat. A boy stood beside them holding up a cello case. He was a skinny kid with glasses and a weak jaw line. He must be quite a cellist, thought Marcy, to merit such elegant company. The boy stared down sullenly at his shoes as the girls chattered on, oblivious to him. Then they and their moms walked out the door and into the cold Manhattan evening without saying goodbye to Marcy or the cello boy.

A quiet gloom settled on the dingy waiting room. The cello boy slumped into one of the vacated chairs, pulled out some earbuds, and began fiddling with his music player. Marcy glanced tentatively in his direction, but he did not look up. The glare of the overhead lights bounced off the twin ovals of his glasses.

Marcy studied the boy openly now that he was immersed in the world of his music. He had a sprinkling of acne across the bridge of his nose, and he breathed through his mouth, revealing an uncorrected overbite, which Marcy found unexpectedly endearing. He was fifteen or sixteen—ages older than Walter, an age that seemed utterly remote to her.

The year she turned sixteen, more than half her life ago, Marcy had moved in with her dad and his second wife and their baby, to a house on a cul-de-sac in an unfinished development at the edge of a scruffy suburban woods, in Maryland. Her new high school was a modular building with a baffling layout of intersecting corridors. There were rooms with moveable walls that opened to reveal larger rooms, and classrooms that morphed into gyms, and back again. There was an equally baffling social hierarchy which would have demanded so much energy to navigate that Marcy had not bothered to try. She spent her afternoons roaming the crisscrossing deer trails in the woods behind her house with her dad's wife's collie, unimaginatively named Lassie, who required 45 minutes of brushing and burr-removal after each excursion. The novelty of these adventures for a city girl such as herself wore on through the summer and into autumn. The northernmost trail in the woods ended abruptly at the bank of shallow, rocky creek. On the other side of the water stood a 9-foot wrought-iron deer fence which delineated the property line of a stately old house. If pressed, Marcy would have had no idea how to get to the house or its posh neighborhood on the roads, and yet its back fence was a quick a ten-minute trail walk from her dad's backyard.

One November afternoon, just before twilight, she and Lassie stood together at the edge of the creek, peering through the deer fence, across the flagstone patio with its lichen-furred cupid sculptures, and into the picture window of the mansion. She was astonished to see a group of kids from her own school playing musical instruments in what she would later in life, thinking back on this night, understand to be a string quartet. But for the moment, the formation in which they sat was as unfathomable to her as the layout of the hallways in her new school. Marcy strained to listen, but was rewarded only with the gurgling of the creek and the whoosh of distant highway traffic.

Somewhere nearby a squirrel thrashed in the dry leaves, and Lassie whimpered at her side. Marcy had very little curiosity about the music itself, which she did not expect to like or understand. More interesting to her was the silent pantomime before her eyes, like TV with the volume off. Their movements were as foreign to her eyes as a game of polo or lacrosse. What sort of life was this, with its mysterious nomenclatures and equipage?

The most astonishing thing was, one of the violin players was *that* girl from her English class, the girl who wore bright-colored headbands in her gleaming, white-blond hair. Recently the girl had delighted their teacher when she recognized a quote from *Titus Andronicus*, a play that Marcy had never even heard of. Marcy hated this girl, with the safety and privilege of anonymity (the girl would never notice Marcy; she was a bug to her), and it was thrilling to spy on her now, invisible as an enchanted wood gnome in a fairy tale. The blonde girl swayed and bobbed as she played her violin. Her eyes were generally fixed on the sheet music resting on the stand in front of her, but occasionally she looked up and caught the eye of another player. The rest of them watched her nervously. Obviously, the blonde girl was in charge. At one point the blonde girl looked up from her music and straight out the window. A spear of terror shot through Marcy's heart. But it was a false alarm—the woods had darkened to the point that Marcy was invisible, she realized, and the musicians inside could only see their own reflections in the glass. The girl bent forward and rapped her sheet music with the tip of her bow, while the other three nodded gravely. Then she lifted her instrument to her chin, nodded, and they began again. Marcy stood watching them too long, her feet growing cold in her thin sneakers. Finally they placed their instruments into their cases, and filed out of the room. The blonde girl, last to leave, flicked off the lights.

Marcy's view was suddenly as dark as a curtained theater. Turning to leave, she could no longer see the familiar path. She closed her eyes, then opened them: the result was the same. It was a moonless evening. Behind her, the mansion's dim outlines. In front of her, the solid black woods.

Marcy tugged the leash, hoping that Lassie would possess the resourcefulness of her namesake and guide her home on the invisible

path. But the dog was stolid and a little stupid, or perhaps just too well-trained by the obedience classes that Marcy's father's wife had taken her to, passing the time during her pregnancy. Marcy stepped tentatively in the direction of what ought be the deer path, and a bramble stroked her cheek. The path felt uneven. Another step, and a branch grazed her forehead. She turned, to try another direction, but her foot was trapped—a snarl of roots tugged back, and she collapsed on the soft, pine-scented ground. With a sigh, Lassie sank into a furry heap beside her and began to lick Marcy's scratched face.

From down there she could see the sky, speckled with faint stars, one shade brighter than the shapes of trees. Slowly the noises of night creatures, nosing through the forest, filtered into her consciousness. Her ankle hurt. Marcy imagined a colony of violin-playing trolls beneath the earth, dancing and laughing mirthfully at her fate. She would awaken and find herself trussed and pinned to the earth with violin strings, like Gulliver in Lilliput. She lay for a while in a heap of dry leaves with Lassie breathing warmly at her side, feeling sorry for herself and wondering how long it would be before her dad would come looking for them with a flashlight. She was hungry and cold, and there was a whiff of wood smoke in the air that made her long to be indoors, inside her father's house, enjoying the comforts of a hot shower, her flannel pajamas, and microwave popcorn. No one had come to find her. Marcy stood up stiffly, shielding her face with her arms, and looked around. The window at the back of the mansion had gone dark, and in the soft glow cast by the security lights above the patio, her now-adjusted eyes could make out the subtle invagination of the trailhead that had brought her to this place. She brushed some bits of leaf-litter from her coat and Lassie's, and allowed the dog to lead her home.

The house was empty. The back door unlocked, the garage open, and her dad's car gone. Marcy wandered inside. They must all be out looking for her and Lassie; even the baby was gone. There was a pot roast still warm on the stove, three places set at the table. She helped herself to pot roast, carrots, and salad, and sat down to eat. Lassie settled in a heap on the floor beside her, her fur matted with burrs and prickleballs. Marcy slipped the dog a chunk of meat. Her dad's wife

would be mad when she saw the state of Lassie's pelt. A lecture, and a long evening of grooming would surely follow.

Only, it didn't. Later, after Marcy had moved back into her mom's apartment in Brooklyn, she sometimes wondered about the dog, what had become of her, and whether anyone had thought to comb her, to pull the burrs out. Collies need daily grooming or the fur grows hopelessly matted from neglect, and there is nothing you can do to remedy the situation. That is what her father's wife had always said.

Back at her old school, when they asked her what had happened down in Maryland, Marcy usually said "crib death". She blurted it out the first time, to avoid the complicated story about the accident, how her father and his wife had been killed, not because they were out looking for her and Lassie, but in their panic driving the baby, baby Caroline, to the hospital. Crib death; then a car crash. It was not Marcy's fault. They would have died no matter, whether or not Marcy had stayed out late in the dark woods. But it was too much to explain. Something was always lost in the translation. The simplified version stopped the conversation dead; that was the trick. After a few more times, the fib grew less cumbersome on her tongue, and soon it began to overtake the truth, even in her own mind, so that for a long time she imagined her father and his wife, and Lassie, still alive in their now-childless house on a cul de sac by the edge of a scruffy woods, somewhere far away, in Maryland.

That was so long ago, more than half her life ago. Marcy rarely thought about those years now. Now she had Walter to consider: his happiness, his nutrition, his education, and his complicated musical life. She began to worry again, about how was he managing in the rehearsal. Had he been brave enough to tell Mr. Clementine that he needed to use the bathroom? Had he been able to find the bathroom, and then to find his way back to the rehearsal room? Or, if not, had he been able to concentrate enough to make it though the rehearsal and still hold it in?

The cello boy in the seat beside her was snoring lightly. An unlovely string of saliva dangled from his open mouth. One of the earbuds had slipped out of his ear and Marcy could hear the thump thump bass of a heavy metal band. Where was his mother, she wondered? His rehearsal had been over for a while now, but no one had come to pick him up.

He probably had homework to do—it was a school night. Maybe he needed to borrow a cell phone. Marcy reached into her pocket and fingered hers. Beside it was a pack of Kleenex. When the cello boy woke up, she would hand him a tissue to wipe his mouth, then offer him her cell phone. She extracted a tissue from her pocket and creased it in her hand.

A janitor came by with a giant trash can on a push cart and parked it smack in front of the chairs where they were sitting. A smell of disinfectant rose up around them. The janitor whistled softly as he swept the floor, gathering bits of debris into a dusty mound. It was a familiar tune, rich and mournful, but Marcy couldn't place it.

The cello boy opened his eyes and looked around, with a startled expression on his face, his fingers flying to his wet cheek. Marcy handed him the tissue, but he shook away her offer, brushing his mouth with the back of his hand. He crammed the wayward earbud back into his ear and frowned into his music player.

Marcy lifted her feet above the janitor's broom as it probed beneath her chair for dust mites and candy wrappers.

"Getting late," the janitor said. "School's about to close." He pointed to a large wall clock.

"I'm waiting for my son to come down from a rehearsal," Marcy said. "Any minute now. He's been up there a while."

The janitor nodded. "Closing at eight," he said, and walked away, leaving behind the pile of litter and the bad-smelling cart. Marcy dropped the tissue, now moist from the sweat of her palm, into the can and stared at the clock. Three minutes to eight.

The cello boy slouched in his seat, one arm draped across his cello case, like a sailor with a floozy. Again, Marcy considered the offer of her phone, but just then the elevator doors sprang open and out stepped Walter with Mr. Clementine at his side. The two were laughing at some shared joke as they passed through the security gate. She waved, to catch Walter's eye. He stopped short and waved back, his face the expression of happy recognition she had known her whole life; the expression she lived for.

"*Ni hao, Wei Tao!*" Walter shouted, looking right past her to the cello boy.

“*Ni hao*, Walter-Jin,” said the cello boy, now standing. “How’s it going, man?”

“Good,” said Walter. “Hi, Mom.” He passed her his violin. “Just had my first rehearsal with your dad, Tao.”

“Solid,” said Wei Tao, shifting his cello onto his back. The boys headed outside into the cold with Marcy and Mr. Clementine at their heels. Mr. Clementine did not volunteer any information concerning how the rehearsal had gone. Marcy struggled for words. Her scarf flew up, covering her mouth like a cautioning hand. She pulled it back and held it in place with her ungloved fingers. “Your son plays cello?” she finally asked.

“He gets it from his mom,” answered Clementine softly. He and Wei Tao were heading towards the uptown subway. Marcy and Walter were going south.

“Bye, Wei Tao! *Zai jian!*” called Walter. “See you Saturday!” Below them, the trains were roaring like monstrous trolls. Marcy stared at her son for a second before touching him as lightly as possible on the shoulder, to propel him on, and on. Then together they descended into the moist bright yellow subterranean warmth.