

# A Terrorist Plot Canceled the Show. But We Swifties Found Each Other on Cornelia Street.

I went to Vienna to see the Eras tour with my 13-year-old niece. When she heard Taylor Swift wouldn't be playing, her response was awe-inspiring.

Agnes Callard

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Swifties gather in Vienna, after the Austrian leg of the *Eras* tour was canceled.  
(Photo by Thomas Kronsteiner/Getty Images)

In her song “Cornelia Street,” Taylor Swift describes a nascent relationship on the brink of failure because neither party is willing to take the first leap: *we were card sharks, playing games*. She is about to end things, when all of a sudden, he proclaims his love—or, as Swift puts it, *you showed your hand*.

In Vienna, Austria, where Taylor Swift was to play three concerts last week, there is also a Cornelia Street. Strictly speaking, it is “Corneliusgasse.” It’s only two blocks long, flanked by stately white apartment buildings. There’s a small tree in the middle, and at one end is a flight of stairs, so it’s a dead-end street. Unless you live here, there isn’t much reason to visit Corneliusgasse.

That changed the night before Swift was due to start her Vienna shows, when a terrorist plot caused the cancellation of all three.

When my 13-year-old niece found out, I was in another room. Her screams reverberated around the apartment that her mom—my sister—had found for the three of us to rent in Vienna. I was sure she had injured herself somehow. *How do you call the ambulance in Austria?* I wondered as I ran toward the sound.

I was relieved it was only the concert. Only.

A 19-year-old man, who had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, had been arrested. He admitted to police that he had planned to kill “as many people as possible” outside the stadium. When authorities raided his home, they found it filled with knives

and homemade explosives. We were lucky to be alive, that was the main thing. Relative to that, the show was not a big deal.

Even though, for months, it had certainly seemed like one.

My sister and her daughter live in Durham, North Carolina, and I live in Chicago. The trip had been planned a year in advance, when my sister braved the European ticketing system, because we realized it was cheaper and easier to fly to Vienna than to get tickets for the remaining U.S. shows.

I made a special dress just for the occasion. I studied the lyrics to Swift's songs, all 400 pages of them—I'm a philosophy professor, after all—and organized them into a taxonomy, then printed it onto transfer paper, with each song in its proper album color and font, and ironed it onto a white dress.

*I guess I will never wear it now*, I thought morosely, that first night.

I've been a Swiftie since her 2012 album *Red*, or more specifically, since hearing this line of the title track: *Forgetting him was like trying to know somebody you've never met*. I'd wanted to go to the 1989 tour in 2015, but couldn't convince anyone to go with me. My niece was only 5 at the time.

In the intervening decade, she has more than made up for lost time, far outpacing me in her knowledge of Swiftie lore. In preparation for *Eras*, she had made 105 friendship bracelets, which Swifties trade in the long lines outside the stadiums. She had also made a 21-slide PowerPoint presentation, inducting her mom, a non-Swiftie, into everything about the show—the chants, the outfits, the part when someone in the crowd gets a hat.

"So much work, for nothing!" my niece lamented, a sentiment that must have been echoing through Vienna. Going by the numbers of tickets sold, there would have been about 200,000 disappointed people in and around the city.

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Non-Swifties are sometimes annoyed by the emotional excesses of Swifties—we can come across like a bunch of turtles without their shells. And it is easy to roll one's eyes at the abstract idea of teenagers moaning about a concert. But it is hard to be unmoved by sincere passion when it is staring you right in the face.

When I saw my niece wracked with the full force of her disappointment, I felt a kind of awe. Her sobs communicated so perfectly the feeling of having known exactly what you wanted—having waited patiently to get it—and then having it snatched away at the last minute. I wondered whether I was even able to cry like that anymore.

There is a time in life when one has just begun to feel intense feelings and has not yet learned the habits of tempering them. An adult warily eyes even joy, on the lookout for the cloud behind every silver lining. When misfortune comes, grown-ups insist on contextualizing: No matter how one is suffering, one can always envisage someone out there who is suffering more, and it is a mark of adulthood to force this imaginative act on yourself.



Swifties, let us know your thoughts on this taxonomy in the comments. (Photo courtesy of the author)



This rule has exceptions, of course—the most striking of which is romantic love. Adults will, sometimes for better but often for worse, allow themselves to be swept away by the full force of erotic passion. And I suppose this is what explains the otherwise mysterious affinity between, on the one hand, an adult woman who sings about unrequited love, forbidden love, destructive love, enduring love, and the many ardent fans too young to have experienced what she is describing.

If the old insist that passionate sincerity be served up only on a bed of love songs, the young will have to take it where they can get it.



“In preparation for *Eras*, my niece had made 105 friendship bracelets, which Swifties trade in the long lines outside the stadiums,” writes Agnes Callard. (Photo courtesy of the author)

Taylor Swift’s peculiar genius lies in her ability to manage untempered emotions; in her songs, the sincere expression of emotional pain represents a third way between denying what you feel and being utterly crushed by it. Consider “Shake It Off,” which is really a song about not having shaken it off at all. Swift wouldn’t be so well versed in rattling off all the things people say about her—*I stay out too late / Got nothing in*

*my brain... I go on too many dates / But I can't make them stay*—if she didn't care about insults. She *does* care, she *is* hurt, and the song manages to balance on the edge between drowning in that pain and ignoring it.

If Swift's young fans are learning, for the first time, how hard it is to find that balance, her older fans know all too well how many times we have failed to. All adults have squashed parts of ourselves in the name of compromise, lied to ourselves about how much we cared, and willed ourselves to stop feeling what we were feeling. Swift gives us hope that we still might, someday, find a way to do justice to our strongest emotions.

"Here I am, a 35-year-old woman, crying myself to sleep over a concert," was how one fan abashedly described to me her reaction to finding out that she wouldn't be seeing the *Eras* tour in Vienna.

But then we reflected that, in the world where Swifties "get some perspective—it's *only* a concert"—no one makes anything beautiful out of their sorrow.

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The morning after we heard the news, those 200,000 people woke up and found we were still in Vienna, we were still alive, and we were still Swifties. All over the city, we found each other, but especially on Corneliusgasse. Cornelia Street became the place where we showed our hand: We traded bracelets, shared sparkle face paint, admired each other's outfits. I got to wear my dress after all, though the correctness of my taxonomy was subject to some debate.

Above all, we sang. A speaker was hoisted into the air by someone in the middle of the crowd, or held out of an apartment window by Viennese who got into the spirit of things. Somehow every song, not just "Cornelia Street," seemed to be about us.

There we were, *shaking it off*. We were *down bad* but we had decided to *stay stay stay*. We could *do it with a broken heart*—thousands of them, in fact. We sang "Cruel Summer," in the knowledge that it was one. It was August, and we were singing "August," and when we got to the part about being lost in a memory—*I can see us / lost in the memory*—I could in fact see us, choking this tiny street with such a happy sadness, in what already felt like a memory. For us, *the smallest man who ever lived* was the 19-year-old who had plotted to kill us.

The city seemed to be inspired by the emotional excess, rather than annoyed. The police, sent to watch over our sing-alongs, accepted gifts of friendship bracelets cheerfully, as did the Imperial Crypt of the Habsburgs, which welcomed *Eras* ticket holders for free. Many Swifties reciprocated by leaving bracelets at the final resting place of drama queen and fashion icon Empress Sisi—recognized by us as the Taylor Swift of her time. The public swimming pools, right near the stadium where the concert was to have taken place, gave us tickets—also for free—with *Taylor Swift* printed on them.

At a restaurant near Cornelia Street, we sat next to a Viennese couple in their 50s who told us they had been skeptical about all this Taylor Swift business—how can



Taylor Swift fans gather on Corneliusgasse in Vienna, Austria. (Photo by Josip Mikacic/Alamy Live News)

one singer inspire such passion—until they saw my niece in her full getup. The woman confessed: “When I saw her, suddenly I realized, and tears came into my eyes.”

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I don’t feel the need to say that, in the end, what happened was a good thing, that this beautiful show of collective effervescence means “the terrorists lost.” It’s still true that we were deprived of something. The terrorists didn’t lose, and they didn’t win either, because life is not a game. If you think you are moving up on some divine scoreboard by unleashing violence on a crowd of people, those points you think you are scoring are not something that is happening in reality; they are a delusion.

In reality, there was pain and also joy. In a Taylor Swift song, there’s always room for both. But the energy of those three days was the energy that comes from diving into sadness, rather than avoiding it.

That first night, my niece still in tears, my sister and I jumped online to find out if there were tickets left for the remaining concerts in the *Eras* tour. Our other sister did the same, from across the ocean. The three of us were desperate to cancel out my niece’s pain, but we found that the remaining tickets were prohibitively expensive. My niece wasn’t on board with this plan anyways; she told us she wasn’t ready to think about trying for tickets elsewhere. If you don’t face your feelings, how will you ever know whether you *can do it with a broken heart*?

On our last night in Vienna, my niece and I made one final visit to Corneliusgasse, to trade the remainder of her friendship bracelets and say goodbye. We stood near the tree, which was itself adorned with beaded bracelets, and encountered a Viennese artist who was photographing braceleted wrists. He didn’t know anything about Taylor Swift, he said, but he had been so moved by the past few days that he wanted to create an artwork to honor the Swifties in Vienna, to make something out of the sadness.

Afterward, when she had traded her last bracelet, my niece and I headed up the steps of Cornelia Street, and she said to me: “Time to go home and make a hundred and five more!”

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