

Zoo Bus · *Eileen FitzGerald*

ELISE OPENED THE BLINDS and peered through the dusty slats, sifting the traffic for buses. Her feet ached; bones crowded against other bones, almost as if she'd grown extras during her eighty-one years. She leaned against the windowsill. On the street below, a young sweet gum tree held out a scant offering of pointy yellow leaves.

It was just like Gertrude to be late. Elise thought of poking her head out the window, shouting, "Gerrrrruuuude!!"; she imagined her sixty-year-old daughter hurrying down the street, trailing a jump rope. Elise almost laughed at the idea of Gertrude coming when she was called, or doing anything she was asked to do.

On the sofa, Alex, her downstairs neighbor, was chewing his ice cubes, although Elise had asked him not to. She shook a finger at him. "Don't eat that glass, Alex. It's part of a set." From now on, she would give him hot drinks, nothing he could nibble. Alex was twenty, the age her husband, Bill, had been on their wedding day. Elise tried to remember what it was like to be so young, to believe that one's teeth were immortal. She looked at Alex's long legs, sprawled halfway across her living room. Bill had not been such a casual man; he was a man who sat up straight. He had not been immortal either; less than two years after they married, he was killed in a train yard accident. Elise wondered sometimes how her life might have been, if it could have been easier.

In the distance Elise saw the hulking form of a bus. She watched its slow, smoky approach, frowning when she realized that it was the zoo bus. Now it would be another half hour, at least, before Gertrude got home. The zebra-striped zoo bus was one of the few old buses that remained in the fleet; the gaudy paint job advertised the African veldt section of the zoo. When Elise had still been riding the city buses — before she broke her collarbone in the bus accident — she made it a point of honor to wait for the next bus, no matter the delay. No self-respecting person rode the zoo bus. Now it groaned to a stop, and Elise watched to see who or what would disembark.

Alex gave his ice another crunch. Usually when he visited, Elise asked him to help with some small task and then rewarded him with a \$20 bill. She decided to make him wait for his money today. She would let him wonder whether he should ask.

“Are you expecting someone?” asked Daniel, Alex’s new roommate. His voice startled Elise; she looked to see if she’d mistaken the straight lines of his black hair. She’d always assumed Orientals were boat people, unable to speak English. But Daniel’s voice was like a newscaster’s, pure American. Elise wondered what he was—Chinese or Japanese? Korean? She knew that Orientals greatly respected their elders. She pictured herself as an Oriental grandmother in a soft, red chair. “Tie my shoe,” she would say, and grandchildren would flock to her, anxious to help.

Below, the bus was already moving away, leaving behind a dirty cloud. A woman, grayish-brown hair twisted into a tight ballerina bun, stood on the grass patch that separated street and sidewalk, waiting to cross Brookside. Elise turned sharply from the window. “Of course she doesn’t look up. Not Gertrude.”

“Who’s Gertrude?” asked Daniel.

“The daughter,” said Alex.

“That’s right. My dutiful daughter.”

“Listen to this, Daniel—when Gertrude was a baby, she slept in a dresser drawer.” Alex laughed. “When it cries you close the drawer.”

“It certainly wasn’t like that,” Elise said stiffly. She turned to Daniel. “It wasn’t unheard of,” she explained, “to use a box or a basket for a cradle. It was the Depression. A baby doesn’t remember.”

“Is she coming up?” Daniel looked at Alex. “Should we go?”

Elise laughed. “We would grow cobwebs waiting for Gertrude.” She thought of the last time Gertrude had been in this apartment, the day of the last collarbone appointment, the same day the settlement money for the bus accident had arrived. At the doctor’s office, Elise showed the check to the nurse, cupping her hand over the numbers so Gertrude couldn’t see. “I don’t want her to slip arsenic into my soup,” she whispered.

“Don’t be silly,” said the nurse. “Your daughter loves you.”

After the doctor’s appointment, Gertrude and Elise walked to the door, not speaking. Inside the apartment Gertrude made Elise demonstrate her range of motion. “Can you close the shower curtain?” she asked. “Can you function on your own?”

“Of course.”

Gertrude stood like a stick figure, feet planted, hands on her hips. “Do you think it’s cute? Talking about arsenic?”

“That was a joke,” said Elise. “Levity.”

“Do you honestly think that’s why I’m here? For your money?”

Elise said nothing, and Gertrude left her alone then, with a vaguely aching shoulder and a single thought: The proof is in the pudding.

“Gertrude is a ne’er-do-well,” Elise declared. She shook her head, dismissing the topic. But it bothered her, the way Gertrude marched across the street without lifting her hand to wave.

“We’ll have lunch,” she decided. “Would you boys like lunch?” She knew Alex would go, but she wasn’t so sure about Daniel. Maybe he only ate rice.

“I can’t,” said Alex. “Homework.”

Elise turned then to Daniel. “You won’t make an old lady eat alone, will you?”

“Certainly not. Lunch sounds great.”

Alex lingered by the door until Elise ushered him out. “You study hard,” she said, holding his elbow, giving him a tiny push. Her pocket-book hung on the hook by the door; the \$20 she’d earmarked for Alex rested inside. She would use the money to buy Daniel’s lunch. “We’ll go to André’s,” she said. “Gertrude will probably be there, but we’ll just ignore her.” There was only so much Elise could do; she couldn’t force Gertrude to look up at the window and wave. But she could sit by her at the restaurant. She could sit so close that Gertrude would hear her breathing and know she was alive.

The door from the street opened into André’s sweet shop, where display cases of cakes and chocolates lined the walls. Crocks of jam in wonderful flavors—*fraise*, *framboise*, *cassis*, *citron*—and loaves of shiny, braided bread crowded the shelves and countertops. Elise tilted her head back and inhaled, tasting the rich air with her nose, gripping Daniel’s elbow for balance.

Behind the counter, two chocolate dippers were unloading trays of candies. Elise had spoken to the plumper man before; now she waved at him and smiled. “Did you fall in?” she asked, pointing to the chocolate smeared across his white apron.

“Franz dipped me,” he said. “I’m selling for \$10 a pound—going fast.”

Elise didn’t generally approve of fat people, but she forgave the chocolatier because he truly loved chocolate. “Save us a morsel of yourself,” she laughed. “First, I must think of my young friend’s good health. He’s

going to be a doctor.” She leaned a bit more heavily on Daniel’s arm.

The chocolatier patted his round stomach. “You skip the lunch,” he advised. “It’s chocolate that makes you strong.”

Before the bus accident, Elise had not often gone to restaurants, preferring simple meals of tomato soup and toast. But in the past few years she’d grown fond of eating out. She liked saying “water” or “tea” or “check” and having the item delivered to her table by a smiling young person. At André’s she’d become a familiar face; she’d made friends.

The sign in the front of the restaurant said: PLEASE WAIT TO BE SEATED, but since the hostess was away, Elise led Daniel through the closely spaced tables.

“Voilà!” Elise whispered. Gertrude sat at the far end of the room, reading, fork hovering over a piece of yellow cake.

“Shall we ask her to join us?” asked Daniel.

Elise sat at a table with a view of Gertrude. “Let’s wait to see what she does.” Fork in hand, Gertrude turned a page. The cake looked untouched, and Elise wondered what kind it was—was it sponge cake? Whatever Gertrude was eating, Elise would pay for it. She would buy Gertrude’s lunch, and Gertrude would be grateful.

Daniel stood beside the table. “Do you think she knows you’re here?” he asked.

“She knows.”

He looked at Gertrude, then back at Elise. “It seems funny, you sitting here and her over there.”

Elise patted Daniel’s hand. “Sit,” she said. “We’ll eat.”

Once seated, Daniel’s hands went to the container of white and pink packets, real and fake sugar. “Last year my mother and my sister had a terrible fight, and my sister ran away for two weeks. She took a bus to San Diego. I guess I know how it can be for a mother and a daughter, sort of ugly, even though you love each other.” Daniel unfolded the menu in front of him, flapping the laminated pages.

“We’ll get the special,” said Elise. “It’s always good.”

A waitress maneuvered through the tables, loaded down with dishes. A bottle of ketchup poked out of her apron pocket. “We’re ready,” said Elise.

“In a minute.” The waitress hurried to another table and began to dole out plates. When they had all been unloaded, the girl folded her arms and

surveyed the scene. She pressed her forearms with her hands, kneading the muscles gently, like a delicate pastry dough.

Across the table, Daniel sat quietly, and Elise noticed that his hair was brown. “Where did you get that hair?” she asked. “I thought Chinese hair was black.”

“It must be from being in the sun, playing tennis. Maybe it’s from eating at McDonald’s.”

“Does your grandmother have small feet?”

Daniel smiled. “I never noticed.”

Elise glanced over at Gertrude, at the piece of cake. It was just like Gertrude to order cake and then not eat it, to sit primly, back straight, legs crossed. She was wearing pale pink tights, a color that was charming for a girl but ludicrous for a sixty-year-old woman. If Elise complained, Gertrude would just say, “These are my work clothes.”

“Hi, I’m Sandy.”

Elise jerked her head, surprised to find the waitress inches away. The girl had one foot placed awkwardly in front of the other, almost as if she was pointing it.

“The special?” Daniel prompted.

“Not yet.” Elise motioned discreetly toward Gertrude. “Do you see that lady with the pink legs? What kind of cake does she have?”

Sandy squinted toward Gertrude’s table. She walked a few steps closer, then walked back. “Lemon.”

“Thank you,” said Elise. “We’ll have the special.”

Still the lemon cake sat undisturbed. Elise watched Gertrude’s fork, thinking of the man she had seen on TV, who stared at a spoon until it curled into itself. She stared at Gertrude, willing the fork to sink into the cake. But she felt Gertrude pushing up, against her downward gaze.

Gertrude was the one who had resisted reconciliation, the one who held a grudge. Elise had tried. It had been late in December, after the bus money was snug in a savings account at Mark Twain Bank. Elise had not seen Gertrude for several months, but it was Christmas, the season of families and love. Early in December, Elise had prepared little gifts for her neighbors and helpers — dates stuffed with almonds, rolled in sugar — and several boxes remained, stacked on the kitchen table. She decided to make a delivery.

Elise bundled up, pulled on her galoshes, tucked the foil-wrapped gift under her arm, and stepped outside. Clean snow blanketed the sidewalks and piled inside the empty swimming pool at the Oasis Apartments next door. In the street, cars had churned the snow into mush. Along the curb, the white drifts were freckled black. Elise plunged through snow and slush, across Brookside to the Twin Oaks. During the holiday season, the building glowed blue with Christmas lights; in daylight the strings looked like vines, the unilluminated bulbs like bitter fruit. Inside, the corridors were brightly lit, festooned with strands of garland, and many of the doors had wreaths. Elise knocked on Gertrude's door.

"Well," said Gertrude. "Hello." She stood in the doorway in a light blue jogging suit and her stocking feet. Her hair hung down her back in one long braid.

"Merry Christmas, Gertrude," said Elise.

"You're brave to come out in all that snow."

"I like snow," said Elise.

The women stood facing each other without saying anything.

"I've always liked snow," said Elise.

"Would you like to come in?"

Nothing in Gertrude's apartment matched, but it all fit together, bright colors and bold patterns, scarves and fringed pillows. The rooms seemed out of place in a retirement community. Elise, timid among such exuberance, kept her fingers curled tightly around the dates.

A big book called *Yoga with Judy* lay on Gertrude's coffee table. "What in the world?" said Elise. "You're learning to hypnotize people?"

"You've heard of yoga," said Gertrude. "It's for meditating and relaxing. It has nothing to do with hypnosis." Gertrude had swung her braid over her shoulder. As a little girl, she had sucked on the ends of her hair. Now she was pulling on it, stroking it like a pet. "What are you holding there?" she asked.

Elise thrust the shiny box at Gertrude. "Dates."

"How nice! I haven't had one of these for about a hundred years." While Gertrude plucked at the foil wrap, Elise examined the other items on the coffee table. She flipped through a stack of large black and white photos that showed Gertrude with students. The students were doing basic ballet exercises, pliés and stretches at the barre. But there was something in their poses, something floppy and off-balance.

“One of the mothers gave me those,” said Gertrude. “She called the newspaper, and the photographer sent the prints.”

Elise studied a picture of four girls and one boy, each stretching one leg back in an ungainly arabesque. “Like jellyfish,” said Elise. “No muscles.”

“That’s my special class. Didn’t you see my picture last Sunday?” She handed Elise a newspaper folded open to the society page. The most prominent photo showed Brice and Allen Antioch at a holiday party, each gripping a sequined wife with one hand, a drink with the other. The picture warmed her, and she remembered them as boys, when she had been their nanny. Elise had seen this picture already—she’d been pleased to see her boys having fun—but she hadn’t looked further down the page. Other pictures showed black debutantes, giggly and glamorous in long dresses. Then, at the bottom of the page, under the headline, “Special Nutcracker,” was a picture of Gertrude and the wobbly children.

Elise stared at the picture, mortified. They were mongoloid children. Gertrude was teaching mongoloids. Elise dropped the paper to the floor and wiped her fingers on her coat. It was horrible. She thought of Brice and Allen’s reaction when they saw Gertrude’s picture; she could imagine them laughing and laughing. She gathered up the foil that Gertrude had ripped from the box. She pressed the pieces into a tight ball and put it in her pocket. At home she would try to fashion a usable sheet out of the scraps. Gertrude could keep the dates—Elise had more boxes than she could use or give away already. But Elise would take back the foil; she would take back the box. “You’ll have to get something for these,” she blurted. “I need that box.”

Gertrude brought a plate from the kitchen and began unpacking the dates one by one.

Elise watched, her face hot, her mind crowded with images of deformed dancers. She grabbed the box. “Don’t be so fussy, Gertrude. They’re not glass.” She turned the box upside down, scattering sugar in a brief, gritty blizzard. Several dates bounced off the plate; they stuck on the table like squashed bugs.

Elise tucked the emptied box back under her arm. She took a date and held it in her fingers, pressing into the sticky softness. She wanted to slap Gertrude. She wanted to tell her not to walk around in her socks. “Thank you for helping the whole city to laugh at me,” she said. “Thank you for that lovely Christmas gift.”

In the bright corridor, she ate the date, hardly noticing its sweetness, although she felt the grains of sugar against her teeth. When she got outside, she cleaned her hands in the snow.

Walking home, Elise worked the foil wad with her fingers, pressing it tighter, harder, smaller. A cloying aftertaste hung in her mouth, a sickening taste of decay, of shame.

When Elise focused again on Gertrude's yellow cake, something seemed different. Gertrude had taken a bite. Elise took a deep breath; she stood and walked to Gertrude's table.

"How do you like the lemon cake, Gertrude?"

Gertrude looked up, her face calm. "Fine, Mother."

From so close, Elise could see the uneven surface of the frosting, where the knife had made dips and swirls. She wanted to shove her finger in. If I'm going to pay, she thought, I'm entitled.

"Was there something you wanted to say to me?" said Gertrude.

"Do you mind if I take a taste? I might buy a piece if I like it."

For a second it seemed that Gertrude hadn't heard, then she pushed the plate over. Elise picked a bit off the edge where the tines of the fork had made a jagged imprint. The crumb was so small it dissolved in her mouth; she could hardly get any taste from it, just a tiny tingle, a lemony pinprick.

The paperback book had fallen closed in Gertrude's hand. The title, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, didn't surprise Elise. Nothing about Gertrude surprised her, not even a book about motorcycle repair.

"In China," said Elise, "daughters respect their mothers. In China you would be a disgrace."

"Mmm," said Gertrude.

"You see," Elise said, pointing at Daniel. "Chinese."

"Yes."

"Answer me," Elise demanded.

Gertrude put down her fork. She folded her hands on the table, crossed her pale pink ankles. She said, "You haven't asked a question."

"I was nearly crushed by a bus," said Elise.

"Is that a question?"

"Don't make jokes. I could have died."

Gertrude nodded. "But you didn't."

Elise thought of smashing her fist into the cake, watching Gertrude's face crumple. "Tell me one thing, Gertrude—why should I buy this cake for you? Why should I?"

"There's no reason. I don't want you to."

"I have friends, Gertrude. Both young and old." Walking back to Daniel's table, Elise heard Gertrude's voice, quiet but clear:

"Then you must be very happy."

When the quiche came, Elise wasn't hungry. She ate bits of ham and left the custard.

"Why do you follow her around if it upsets you?" asked Daniel.

"I'm not following her. I'm living my life."

"Wouldn't it be easier to avoid her?"

"Gertrude is the one who is following me. She's the one who moved in at the Twin Oaks." Daniel nodded. He looked concerned. Elise liked him; he was so understanding and attentive. "You know, Daniel, we could make this a sort of ongoing appointment. I could treat you to lunch every Saturday. I could be your replacement grannie."

"I'd like to," said Daniel. "I would. Except that most Saturdays, I go cycling. But thanks. Thank you."

Elise knew he was lying by the way he stuttered. "How about another day?"

"I'd like to, but I have so much studying, huge amounts."

"You'll be old, too," she said, not caring if it made him feel bad. It was nothing but the truth. She gathered her belongings—pocketbook, scarf. "We'll split this one down the middle, shall we?"

Daniel cleared his throat. "To tell you the truth, I don't have any cash with me. Let me call Alex and have him bring me some money."

Elise let Daniel push his chair back, let him stand before she laughed. "I'm teasing," she said. "Didn't I tell you this was my treat?"

"I don't want to force you. I'll call Alex."

"I was joking," said Elise. "Joking."

At the cash register, Elise paid with a \$100 bill. She liked big bills, enjoyed hearing the little gasps when she handed them to clerks. She got seven or eight of them out of the bank at once, to save herself time.

Elise chatted loudly with the cashier, as if Gertrude would bother to eavesdrop. Daniel stood at her side, quiet as a bodyguard. Behind the counter, the fat chocolatier was straightening the candy.

Standing at the cash register, waiting for her change, Elise was overwhelmed by exhaustion. Her body was no longer hair and toenails and veins; her body had become an accumulation of aches. She took Daniel's arm, felt him stiffen his muscles to support her weight.

"Miss?" called the chocolatier as Elise turned to go. "Excuse me, miss." He motioned her toward the counter, then handed her a small object wrapped in shiny red paper. "A chocolate walnut," he said. "Because you are sweet."

Elise spread the Sunday paper on the kitchen table and worked her way through. She read more carefully now, more warily, but Gertrude's notoriety had not been repeated. Brice and Allen Antioch, on the other hand, smiled at her from the society pages almost every week. When Elise turned seventy, Brice and Allen had surprised her with a retirement dinner—the biggest part of the surprise was the retirement itself; Elise had expected to work until she was no longer able to. She hadn't outlived her usefulness once the boys grew up. She'd taken on other household responsibilities, like ironing and answering the phone.

At the retirement dinner, they ate on the Antiochs' finest china, on the tablecloth Elise had ironed that afternoon. The cook prepared lamb with mint sauce, baby carrots, new potatoes, lemon soufflé, and Gertrude—invited as part of the surprise—had embarrassed Elise terribly. Brice and Allen gave Elise a gold brooch and behaved marvelously; Gertrude wore slacks and refused to eat the meat. And she'd picked fights, blaming the boys for things that were not their fault, sticking her nose where it didn't belong.

"What do you think happens when a business moves out of downtown?" Gertrude had asked, elbows on the table.

Elise shot furious looks at Gertrude, who ignored her. The Antiochs didn't discuss business at dinner—Gertrude knew that. And they certainly didn't raise their voices. As Gertrude got louder, Brice's voice dropped to a murmur.

"The energy of the city is in Overland Park," Brice stated calmly. "That's a fact, Gertrude, I can't stop it. It made *sense* to move to Overland Park—I *live* in Overland Park."

"It's the little businesses that suffer," said Gertrude, "the ones that can't afford to move."

“This is business, Gertrude. We can’t worry about how our decisions might affect every wig store and dance studio on the block.”

“Of course not. And don’t worry either about how every empty building makes downtown less safe.”

Brice laughed. “So basically, if a ballerina gets mugged, it will be on my conscience.”

Allen coughed softly. “Brice, Gertrude, I think a truce is in order. I propose a toast.” He raised his wine glass. “To Elise, who loved us like a mother.”

Elise lifted her glass daintily. “To the Antiochs. To my boys.”

Elise had refused to speak to Gertrude until they were past the doorman, outside the Antiochs’ apartment building. Then she spat words out angrily. “I have never been so ashamed. You know perfectly well how to behave, and you refuse to do so.”

“I know how to behave,” said Gertrude. “But I will not curtsy to the Antiochs’ lemon soufflé. Those boys make me sick. You work there for forty years, and they give you a week’s notice and a snooty dinner. No pension, nothing.”

Elise spoke in a restrained, precise voice. “This was my dinner. The dinner in my honor, and you ruined it with your ugly talk and bad manners.” She felt tears rising, but she pushed them down. She didn’t need Gertrude; she had Brice and Allen. They weren’t her sons, but they loved her. She could count on them.

After that Elise had made no effort to see Gertrude, and years went by. Gertrude sent money every week, but since the checks were for differing amounts, it was difficult for Elise to rely on them. Brice and Allen didn’t send money, but Elise wore their pin on her coat and felt their love. After the bus accident, she had asked the desk nurse to call Brice or Allen as her next of kin. But they were both abroad, and Gertrude came instead.

Elise finished the paper and folded it. Sunday was a day so long and empty she could practically hear it flapping in the wind. The Antiochs had entertained on Sunday afternoons—leisurely parties with strawberries and champagne. Elise had been there sometimes, looking after the children. She decided that if anyone dropped in today, she would excuse herself into the bathroom and pinch her cheeks to make herself feel less drab.

On Monday Elise was restless. She considered taking a walk, but the weather was chilly, and she didn't really feel up to it. She used to walk around Loose Park quite frequently, but lately she was afraid of getting stranded. She didn't like the park as much as she used to anyway, not since the city installed a fountain in the middle of the duck pond. And she was uncomfortable with the number of black people who walked or jogged along the path. Loose Park seemed less and less like her park, and more and more like a park for anyone.

Elise walked from kitchen to living room to bedroom and back again, searching the floor for lint. She stepped into the hall, but she didn't expect anyone to be around on a weekday. She heard nothing at all, then, faintly, a typewriter downstairs, Alex or Daniel.

She could read or listen to the radio or turn on the television, but none of these sounded interesting. She thought of calling down to Alex and Daniel's apartment and asking who was typing. It didn't seem healthy to study so much. If they were doctors, they should know that too many books and typewriters could strain the eyes.

Elise didn't normally eat sweets, but she recalled a blueberry muffin mix tucked in the back of her cupboard. Brice and Allen had always clamored after cookies and cupcakes. She would bake and open the door wide and wait to see if any boys floated up from downstairs.

She took the box from the shelf, slit the cardboard with a knife. Inside was a sealed plastic bag of mix and a small can of wild blueberries. She poured the mix into a bowl, added water, oil, egg, then reached for the blueberries. But when she attached the can opener to the rim, she found that she couldn't squeeze with enough force to pierce the tin. She leaned her arm on the lever. But the opener slipped, nicking the skin on her wrist.

Taking the can and the opener, she went down the stairs. Once she had given Alex a can of green beans to open. Elise knocked softly on Alex and Daniel's door; she heard typing—the clatter of keys and the occasional ding of the carriage return. “Yoohoo,” she called. “Alex? Daniel?” No one answered. She stood in the dim corridor, holding the can; the label showed tiny blueberries, the color of dusk. The bulb overhead had burned out, and Elise felt uneasy, even though she was in her own building. Alone in the darkness, she thought of the bus accident, felt the lurch, the turning and tumbling in her stomach; she waited for the crunch of bones.

She remembered the concrete scratching against her neck and the strange cushion her bun had made, as if she were using a dinner roll for a pillow. She turned the can. Flat, paper berries spilled into her hand. She knocked harder. Nothing.

She rode downtown in a soiled cab, watched busy people rush by. Brush Creek trickled innocently, deceptively, within its cement banks, a dribble of dirty water; nearby buildings still showed marks from the flood. At 47th, the horse fountain galloped by, already shut off for the winter.

At the door of the brown brick building, Elise hesitated, clutching the blueberries. It would take Gertrude less than a minute to open the can. Not even Gertrude could refuse. She pulled open the heavy door. Inside, a narrow stairway led up to a glass door with black letters:

STAR GLAMOUR DANCE STUDIO

The stairs were speckled marble, pink and beige; at the center of each step, Elise could see an indentation where the marble had worn away. If she went up, she'd find a big, bare room, a wooden floor with dust along the edges. She'd seen enough dance studios to know that they were all the same—piano, mirrors, rosin, benches, students, mothers. She would not go up. She would not sit on a bench beside the mother of a mongoloid, watching Gertrude tilt heads and lift ribcages, watching Gertrude dance. She would wait for Gertrude to come down.

Framed recital photographs lined the walls—tap dancers in sequins and top hats, ballerinas of all ages. When Gertrude was just out of her teens, she'd been in the chorus of several shows in New York City, but on the wall in the stairwell there were no pictures of Gertrude dancing.

At the top of the stairs, the door opened then closed. Elise moved closer to the wall, pretending to study the photos. Her body tensed, anticipating an onslaught of mongoloid children. They would engulf her, pummel her with ballet slippers. Elise glanced nervously upward, toward the door, where Gertrude stood waiting.

“We seem to be leading parallel lives,” said Gertrude.

“I don't know know about that,” Elise said, confused and somewhat comforted by Gertrude's pink legs. She watched her daughter descend. At the bottom, Gertrude pushed the street door, and they stepped into the open air.

“What are you doing here, Mother?”

Elise held up the can of blueberries. “I can’t open this.” In her hand the can surprised her; it seemed so small and harmless. “I was making muffins.” She pushed the can toward Gertrude.

“I don’t understand. Do you want me to open it?”

Elise held the can and looked at the label, at its promise of plump sweetness and blue juice; she liked the way the tin held the berries in place. “No,” she said. “Take it.”

“I don’t really want it.”

“I want you to have it.”

Gertrude kept her hands in the pockets of her overcoat. “This is my bus,” she said.

Elise looked up to see a massive tire, an enormous bus. She took a step back, holding tight to the blueberries. The bus, camouflaged by soot, had snuck up on her. But she could see through the dirt to the black and white stripes below. Elise wondered if the pattern was authentic, if an actual zebra had posed while the artist traced and painted. Looking closely at the zoo bus, she noticed that the lines were blurred, the borders uncertain. The white stripes were dingy; the black stripes were gray. The door opened with a groan, and Gertrude stepped in. Elise glanced side to side to see if anyone was watching, then she lifted her foot to reach the step; clutching the railing on both sides, she hoisted herself up.

The driver wore a blue uniform with rolled-up sleeves. Elise expected to see him in khaki shorts and a safari hat. She expected to hear parrots and sultry tropical music. Gertrude tossed some change into the rattling metal money counter at the front of the bus. The door closed with a sigh, bureaucratic and indifferent.

“I’ll pay for both of ours,” said Elise.

“She already paid,” said the driver.

Elise opened her billfold and pulled out her money—three \$100 bills. She handed him one. “For mine.”

“Can’t change that. Exact change only.” The driver’s blue cap rested on the dashboard. He put it on, pulling at the slick, black bill.

Elise raised her voice. “Will a \$100 bill collapse our city’s economy?”

“Put that away,” said the driver. “Before someone knocks you down and snatches it. The other lady already paid for you.”

“She had no right to pay for me.”

“I have a schedule. Sit down or get off.”

Standing at the front of the bus, looking back, Elise felt as if she was about to enter a tin of sardines. Gertrude had taken a seat just past the middle of the bus, but Elise wasn't sure she wanted to sit there. She didn't want to sit beside a stranger either — someone who might turn out to be a criminal or a lunatic. The passengers sat with coats buttoned to their necks, shopping bags nestled at their feet, but years of riding the buses had taught her that there were no guarantees.

It would be best, Elise decided, to sit with Gertrude. She walked toward her daughter, grasping the metal headrests. She felt Gertrude's calm eyes but avoided looking into them — she didn't want to be hypnotized. Gertrude might be an expert by now.

Elise sat, the money folded in her fist. In the seat ahead, a baby in a yellow knit cap peeped over its mother's shoulder. The baby grimaced, then grinned, then began to cry. Elise jabbed the money toward Gertrude. "Take it then."

Gertrude's straight back barely touched the seat. Her hands, folded in her lap, were pale and freckled and wrinkled. "I don't want it."

"How much did you put in? Take what you put in and give me the change." Elise tried to drop the money into Gertrude's lap, but it fluttered to the floor.

Reaching to retrieve the bill, Gertrude whispered in Elise's ear. "Put your money away." Then, upright, in a more normal tone, she said, "You have to be careful. People kill other people for a bag of hamburgers."

"I don't want you to pay." Elise tried to push the money into Gertrude's hand again, but Gertrude wouldn't close her fingers around the bill.

"Really, Mother, it's my treat." She put her finger out for the baby to play with. "You're a sweet baby," she cooed. "Aren't you a sweet baby?"

Elise wanted to take Gertrude's finger out of the baby's grasp and put her own in. She wanted to touch the tiny fingernails, the little pompon on its cap.

"I had the toddler class this morning," said Gertrude, "eight little girls in tap shoes, very noisy. I'm getting too old for this."

"I could give you the whole hundred dollars," said Elise.

"I don't want your money."

Elise looked Gertrude straight in the face. "Don't you see? I can help you. I can put you in my will — I can give you money now. All you have to do is ask."

“I don’t need it,” Gertrude said firmly.

Silent, Elise sat and watched Gertrude shake her finger free of the baby’s grasp. Elise wanted to grab Gertrude’s finger and give it a twist. “You would want it well enough if no one was watching. You would help yourself—don’t pretend you wouldn’t.”

“If you say so,” said Gertrude. She reached up and pulled the wire that snaked around the bus above the windows. A sharp buzz sounded at the front of the bus.

“This isn’t our stop.”

“I’m getting out here.” She gazed steadily at Elise, who looked away. “I’m sorry, but whatever it is you want from me—I don’t have it.”

“I don’t want anything from you. I’m trying to give you something.”

“Excuse me,” said Gertrude.

Elise felt panicky; she held tightly to her purse. “I’m just trying to give you the bus fare. I’m trying to give you what I owe.”

“When you get to the street before your house, pull the cord, and the driver will let you out. You remember.” Gertrude edged past. She stood and walked away, tall and proud, like an African woman in a documentary, able to carry baskets in each hand, while balancing another on her head. Once she was off the bus, Gertrude stood on the sidewalk, facing the street. She was looking toward the bus, as if waiting for something else to happen.

Well, goodbye to you, thought Elise. Goodbye to Gertrude. Good ride. She watched the baby in front of her. As the bus pulled away from the curb, the baby’s head rolled from side to side, its neck flexible, unformed. Such a small baby—it was too early to know whether it would be sickly or ugly or mean. That tiny, lumpy package, that baby, could hold a lifetime of bitterness and hate.

The world through the window grew dim, day dissolving into darkness, and the zoo bus rolled along down Broadway. Elise wondered where the bus would take her if she rode to the end, if she’d end up at the zoo. If it were earlier in the day, she would do just that; she would go to the zoo—throw marshmallows at the elephants and ride a camel. She imagined walking through the zoo, pausing to look at a patch of pink, a flock of flamingos. There, at the edge of the lagoon, standing on one pink leg, was Gertrude.

Ridiculous. Gertrude was ridiculous. No one could love her.

Elise reached her hand out to the baby, but it didn't notice; its head was burrowed into the mother's shoulder. A circle of spit darkened the material of the mother's dress. Elise touched the baby's face with her finger and felt warm skin that was so soft it frightened her. The baby's eyelids opened halfway at her touch then closed heavily.

When Gertrude was a baby she slept in a drawer, but it was a drawer that Elise had removed from the dresser and placed on the floor. She would never have done what Alex suggested, closing the drawer with a baby inside. She would never do that. Elise had made the drawer into a cozy nest, and Gertrude had slept comfortably. Each night before bedtime Elise's husband, Bill, had filled a big mixing bowl with warm water and soapsuds. His hands were thick and oil-stained, and they colored the bath-water brown. But he loved to wash his baby, loved to dribble water from the washcloth onto her belly. Elise closed her eyes. She could see the dark-haired man, the dark-haired baby, the kitchen table, herself. She stood by the stove, watching Bill and the baby, waiting for the flatiron to heat; her long hair was tied back with a ribbon. When Elise opened her eyes, she was sitting in a bus that smelled of exhaust and sour milk. She tasted salt on her lips. She wanted to rush to the back of the bus and press herself against the window, push backwards through time and space as the bus rolled ahead. She wrapped her hands around the metal headrest of the seat in front of her and tried to stand, but the bus lurched beneath her feet, and she was standing and kneeling and clutching the seat.

Now? she thought. Would he love her now—a grown woman in pink tights? Would he love Gertrude now?

She called out to the driver, but her voice was swallowed up by the roar of the engine. A young man in a tan overcoat reached up and pulled the cord.

When the bus came to a stop, Elise stood and made her way to the front. All around her the passengers were goggle-eyed, like fish. She thought of the wobbly children in Gertrude's photographs, the awkward poses and soggy flesh. Her hands curled into fists. But if she saw the children in person, if she saw them dance. . . . She thought of watching Gertrude's early dance lessons, many years ago. Gertrude had practiced past awkwardness and uncertainty, her movements becoming so fluid, so flexible that Elise had been tempted to press against her daughter's skin and feel for bones.

Standing at the edge of the bus steps, Elise caught her breath. The steps were steep as a precipice, and they led into darkness; she wavered at the top, afraid of falling. But by sitting down on the step, she made her way, pressing her fingers against the black rubber treads, scooting one stair at a time.

She was on Broadway, somewhere in midtown—she wasn't sure where. In front of her an auto dealership displayed hundreds of parked cars, prices painted on the windshields. An endless string of plastic flags—brightly colored triangles—marked the border of the lot.

She could find Gertrude still. She could go to her. Slowly, Elise began walking, moving toward where Gertrude had been, navigating by the plastic flags which flapped and fretted in the wind.