

Grandmother on the Bus

by Nicole Barnabee

It was a warm, pleasant afternoon, so Grandmother held her hat in her lap, atop her purse. She kept her back very straight, her hands neatly folded, so that those crowded around the bus stop could see that she was a proper, refined lady. She was unaccustomed to taking the bus—it seemed such a low form of transportation—and the people standing all about made her apprehensive, made her wish that she'd just called a taxicab. Who could tell where these people were from, or what they might do? At least a taxicab offered the privacy of a backseat, rather than the close company of strangers. But her granddaughter was afraid of taxi drivers, and would not have come otherwise. Besides, her daughter had insisted:

"It's so much cheaper than a cab, mom. And, besides, it'll do you some good to spend some time with other people."

While Grandmother appreciated thriftiness, she regarded "cheap" as something unclean. But her daughter had insisted, and her granddaughter would not ride in a taxicab; travelling alone made Grandmother almost as apprehensive as travelling on the bus.

A trio of black teenagers were moving up the sidewalk towards the stop, talking loudly and jostling each other in a playful, boisterous fashion. Grandmother watched them out of the corners of her eyes, the wrinkles in her face growing deeper as they grew nearer. Her hands tightened on the brim of her hat, and by the time they came to a halt, a few feet away, her knuckles were white and her entire visage was puckered, raisin-like.

Grandmother lowered her eyes, trying to appear inconspicuous, for this obviously was one of those street gangs she'd heard so much about. She slid to the very end of the bench, as far from the boys as possible. Her granddaughter stood at that end, staring resolutely down the street in the direction the bus would come. She did not look down at Grandmother's movement.

At that moment the bus came into view. A great sigh went up from the assembly, and even the boys suspended their conversation. They watched the bus, and Grandmother watched them, closely.

The bus pulled up presently, brakes squealing as it came to a lurching stop. Grandmother rose to her feet, moving immediately towards the door. Her granddaughter followed at a more subdued pace, remaining behind Grandmother in the boarding line, but not too closely.

Grandmother lifted her skirt with one hand, gripping the railing with the other, and mounted the bus' steps with as much dignity as the slight tremor in her legs would allow. One of Grandmother's stockings had fallen down, revealing a shriveled, blue-veined calf to those still in line; her granddaughter quickly looked away, blushing.

Grandmother took a seat as close to the front as she could manage. Her granddaughter hesitated, glancing about at the other seats before sitting down with a studied casualness, beside Grandmother, but as close to the aisle as possible. She did not look at Grandmother, but immediately began to stare at the front of the bus, where passengers continued to board.

The older woman gently reached out and touched the younger's sleeve.

"Would you like the window seat, dear?"

Her granddaughter stiffened, turning her eyes towards Grandmother with great difficulty.

"No, thank you."

"I remember how you always used to want the window seat; you used to cry and throw a fit when you couldn't get it. Why, one time when your Uncle Charlie wouldn't give it--"

"I remember, grandmother."

Her granddaughter's eyes had already returned to the back of the driver's head; her answer's stern finality shocked Grandmother into silence. A few passengers in adjacent seats looked at them with lazy interest; Grandmother noticed, and wondered if perhaps she had been talking when she should have been silent, or if perhaps she had said the wrong words, or spoken too loudly. Perhaps her speech was simply too old-fashioned, but Grandmother could never have brought herself to adopt that 'slang,' that perversion of polite English that had grown so popular in spoken conversation.

"Of course you do, dear," she said, trying with awkward flattery to breach the rift she felt between them. "You're not a little girl any more, are you? You're a beautiful young lady."

She patted her granddaughter's arm gently, trying not to notice, but unable to ignore, the striking difference between her wrinkled fingers and the smooth, unblemished skin of her granddaughter's forearm. Her granddaughter did not move, nor acknowledge the touch.

The black teenagers were getting on the bus; as they moved past, one jostled her granddaughter, but continued on without a word of recognition or apology. The lines in Grandmother's face drew towards each other again. Perhaps, by taking up her granddaughter's cause, she could yet make amends, somehow connect the two of them.

"I remember a time when children learned manners," she said, in a mock-conversational tone, but one designed to carry, to penetrate the ears of the offenders and shame them appropriately. "I remember when people used to respect each other."

Her granddaughter blushed very deeply, and looked down at her lap.

"Grandmother, please..."

People were looking at them, now, more than had looked before. The teenagers stared blankly; surprise appeared on the faces of others. Perhaps they had never heard a mind spoken before, perhaps speaking one's thoughts had become taboo since Grandmother's time. But it seemed, Grandmother reasoned, that no one corrected children anymore, and therefore her words deserved—no, needed—to be spoken.

"Members of society used to be able to conduct their business without you...young ruffians making nuisances of yourselves," Grandmother continued. She felt the stares of the people around her, heavy and uncomprehending. The teenagers especially seemed unmoved by her words; sullenness, more than any look of contrition, had crept into their dark-eyed gaze. It was as though she was speaking in tongues; they looked at her as though she were a spectacle, her words affecting them as much as if she had been spouting gibberish. "Can't you people learn your place?" she finished, desperately trying to make her thoughts known.

Her granddaughter had been growing redder and redder all this time; at Grandmother's final statement she turned on the woman, embarrassed and outraged.

"Grandmother, for Chris's sake!"

Grandmother had been finished, would have been more than willing to settle into a dignified silence, the better for her audience to digest her words. But her granddaughter's outburst deflated her; she looked at her granddaughter with utter confusion, her face collapsing into a wrinkled mess, as she attempted to sort out where she had gone wrong. Her granddaughter stared back for a moment more, then deliberately turned her eyes away. The other passengers turned back to their business, save for the uncouth, who continued to stare. The bus driver pulled shut the doors, and with a rumble the bus went on its way.