

Carry On

*a short play that's not so much about baggage
as it is about what we carry and the ways in which we do it*

by Jennie Webb

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Carry On

- Characters:** **BETH**, 50-70s (if not older); any race; prides herself on being able to figure out where to put things, making sure they fit.
- Setting:** A place in which to contemplate transitions.
- Time:** The present.
- Synopsis:** *Carry On* finds a woman of a certain age weighing her losses and what she carries—how she’s been carrying it—as she looks ahead at a new and uncertain leg of her journey.

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Carry On

We see a woman of a certain age with a suitcase, which itself has likely seen a lot of miles. She's not holding it by the handle. She embraces it with both arms against her chest, like she's found a runaway child. Or as if it contains a forgotten treasure.

BETH:

When did it all start? Well, not start. But when did I start... acknowledging it? Something like that.

It was days away from the one year... "anniversary"—which sounds strange, as if it demands some sort of celebration—of my mother's death. And I was, what's the word, preparing myself? Or trying to. Trying to figure out how to prepare?

She sets the suitcase down on one end.

Okay. Let me just say this: my brother and I had a very good mother. Exceptional, as a matter of fact. When she died, pretty suddenly all things considered, I was... devastated. In my experience, losing your mother is devastating in a way that you never expected and no one warned you about because, well, they just couldn't have. It's impossible to comprehend until... it happens.

She considers the suitcase.

Anyway! I had set the date aside. I wanted to be in a sort of self-aware, self-protective space. I had no idea how it would hit me, that year marker, and I wanted to be able to cry for 24 hours if I wanted to!

But as we all know, in life—and probably in death, for that matter (I've no evidence to the contrary)... shit happens.

This particular shit had to do with my father—who was long divorced from my mother and not aging very conveniently or considerately at that point—and a close friend—who was valiantly fighting the good cancer fight. As it happened, the day's last minute scheduling meant that I'd be at the doctor's with my dad in the morning, and spending the afternoon with my friend at the hospital to get the ball rolling for her bone marrow transplant.

Shit.

Not at all what I wanted to fill my "Poor me my mom died one year ago now what?" day with. And I have to admit I was pretty upset about it. Not upset enough to abandon my dad and my friend, but definitely enough to wail to another friend over a few too many cocktails!

She grabs the suitcase, roughly picking it up by its handle.

"I cleared my goddamn calendar so I could stay home tomorrow and it was just supposed to be me and my dead mother and now I'm running around town to horrible places I don't want to be. What the fuck?"

BETH:

Only I'm sure I said fuck a few more times and must have sounded beyond piteous because after a bit, my always dependable, cut-the-shit friend said to me, "Jesus, Beth: Why don't you just take her with you!"

Very short pause.

"What?"

"Do what you need to do and just take your mother with you!"

I was about to ask her just what she meant by that. I mean, I did have a small container of ashes that I'd been meaning to spread in my garden, at my mom's request. (Good thing procrastination never seems to bother dead people, right?) So was I supposed to...?

She takes a new look at the suitcase she's holding.

But then, something happened.

She sets the suitcase down.

As I considered her words—"Just take your mother with you"—my hand moved to my heart...

Her hand does.

And in that moment, there she was. My mom. Right there, part of me. It was as physical and, I suppose, spiritual as anything I'd ever experienced.

And I don't give a damn if the martinis had anything to do with it, from that day forward, I've held her in just that way. She's in my heart and wherever I go, I take her with me.

She's very satisfied with herself. Then she considers the suitcase again, transferring it to another spot.

Now. Back to my cancer friend, who never even got close to a transplant. Dead the next year. Beyond tragic and I was, of course, feeling her loss. She was a photographer and saw the world in such a marvelous way. A real gift. And one day after she was gone, I was out for a walk and caught a glimpse of some graffiti on a street corner that I must have passed a million times but in that moment, the way the light hit it, it sort of cried out and demanded I stop and, suddenly, bam: I felt her. My friend. I was somehow looking through my eyes, but hers, as well. And every day now, when I think of her...

She puts her hands to her eyes.

She's right there.

BETH:

So for a while I felt very much... in good company? I didn't have to be sad. I just went merrily along, protected and fulfilled thanks to this new connection: the dearly departed and my body as a piece of carry-on luggage!

On a positive note, she moves to the suitcase, about to pick it up again, then stops herself.

But then my brother died. Quickly and traumatically and impossibly and it was unbearable.

Of course, we do bear it. We must bear it. We carry on.

Perhaps a look at the suitcase, then

All right. I know this sounds ridiculous, but after a few months of emotional hairpin turns navigating the bizarre business of death, what did I do but run smack dab into: "Oh fuck! Where do I put my brother!"

She takes stock of her various body parts.

At first I wondered...

She holds her heart.

In here, with my mother? (See, I'm making this up as I go along, so there are no compartmental rules.) But the truth is that as wonderful as my mother was, I couldn't do that to him. They had a very complicated relationship and it did not feel right to subject either of them to their inescapably explosive heart-to-hearts in perpetuum.

So what about my brother? I agonized over this for quite some time until one day, while I was driving, it struck me...

She holds her hands in front of her, 10 and 2.

My hands. My brother could fix anything. He was a do-er. He made things. And so... there he is. With me, every day. In everything I do.

She moves away from the suitcase.

Now, this was all a long time ago. But after it started, I began to, shall we say, reunite with others. My dear grandmothers?

She holds herself tight.

In my arms, one on each side. A friend who was entirely too full of life to have been taken...

She touches her mouth.

BETH:

She's here every time I smile.

When my father (finally) passed:

She points to her head.

He's here. Emotionally distant through the very end, that's pretty much where he lived.

A lover I lost a few years back? Ha ha. Guess where.

She wiggles her hips suggestively.

At one point, I even began to feel all of those sweet, sweet boys who got sick and died in the 80s when we were all so young and beautiful and nothing could hurt us...

She runs her hands over her thighs and torso.

They're here, in every muscle I used, on every dance floor, tingling with the joy and freedom that inhabited that particular time of music and parties and passion and late nights and illegal substances and such incredible possibility.

Maybe she tries her best not to look back at the suitcase before continuing.

It's a lot to carry with me. I'll admit that. But it's never been a burden. Quite the opposite! It's something that's comforted me. I never feel alone and the people I love will never be truly gone, so why should I dwell on those other times, times when I can't...?

She might move further away from the suitcase, feeling its presence or pull.

Right. And I have to tell you that over the past few years it's become something even more. Bigger than me: my... capacity for holding. Millions upon millions of needless deaths in a pandemic of fear and stupidity? The never-ending list of men and women and children struck down by police violence, mass shootings? Who can even count the lost families at our borders, the victims of warfare and genocide and blind hatred around the world? No, I don't know all of them. But it's as if, when everything changed—when time irreparably shifted and we were brought together in ways we never imagined—I changed, too. I expanded! And now, I can hold space for them. I can!

She now returns to the suitcase, but notices its frayed edges—perhaps she tries to smooth them out.

Only here's another thing, something else that's... happening. Whether I'm ready for it or not.

BETH:

To this body—my body. Which has been able to adapt to all sorts of containment demands, as it were! Overall, we have had a very good ride. Last month, I even started running!

Then just as quickly, I stopped.

It was my knees, you see. They decided this wasn't at all a good idea.

The other day, I looked at my hands. They'd become an old person's hands. How did that happen?

And let's be truthful: My vision's shot. I eat the wrong thing and my mouth hurts. I wake up in the mornings, everything hurts. And my heart: I don't know that it's working correctly, anymore. All too often I feel like it's being torn apart.

So for the first time in my life, it's occurred to me: Not that I'm in any hurry, mind you, but when I am gone—not in this body anymore—what happens to all of the...

She takes stock of her body again. But what is she searching for? Does she even know? Then she picks up the suitcase by its handle again, holding it in front of her.

And then there's this, and all it carries! All because I didn't have room, because I didn't have time, because I just didn't have the strength to let go while I was holding it all together...

She returns the suitcase to her chest, again embracing it—this time with a bit more uncertainty, but most certainly a sense of humor.

Without me, what is anybody going to do with a suitcase full of tears?

End of Play