

*Roberta Joy*

a one-act play  
by Aaron Ricciardi

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## The Travelers

**Roberta**, a jovial yet acerbic 87-year-old woman with dementia who is played by an actor in her twenties or thirties. She has a great nasal laugh and a thick midcentury American accent, e.g. Bronx. She wears something summery and comfortable, like a cover-up over a bathing suit. She has a full face of make-up on, and she looks elegant.

The **Woman**, Roberta's middle-aged daughter who cares for and checks on her. She is exceedingly patient and exhausted. She takes on other forms when Roberta's mind needs her to. She has an extremely mild version of Roberta's accent, approaching no accent at all. She wears something nondescript and unremarkable, like she'd thrown on clothes in a dash for the door. She doesn't have make-up on, because she doesn't care how she looks right now.

The **Old Lady**, Roberta's debilitated 87-year-old current self, but also the current selves of all the other feeble elderly women who live with Roberta at the Carlisle, an independent living facility in Lantana, Florida. She has a great nasal laugh and a thick midcentury American accent, e.g. Bronx. She walks with a walker. She wears something formless that a few years ago she wouldn't have been caught dead in, like a sweatsuit. She has a full face of make-up on, but it's an absolute mess; she somehow still looks elegant, though.

The **Young Lady**, Roberta's 12-year-old self, a spitfire. She has a great nasal laugh and a thick midcentury American accent, e.g. Bronx. She wears something a girl would've worn to school in the late 1940s, like a blouse and a plaid skirt. She has some make-up on and looks elegant, like a kid who's eager for adulthood.

## The Journey

Since this lives in the imagination—Roberta's, mine, and the audience's—let the tone be playful, let the pace be fast, and let the set be spare.

“Neal, I have two words for you, and they’re not ‘happy birthday,’ so shut the fuck up.”

—Roberta Joy Williky, 1934-2021

For Beam

*Sunshine.  
Two poolside strap lounge chairs.  
Reggae music plays, a low hum.  
On one of the chairs is a phone.  
The phone rings, for a while.  
Roberta comes in schlepping luggage.  
She eventually notices the phone with surprise, picks it up,  
and sits down on one of the chairs.*

**Roberta**

Hello? I can't understand you. I can't hear you. Oh! Oh oh, good morning. I'm good, just busy over here. Well, I just embarked! The cruise! It's leaving now basically. It's been a complete calamity getting here. A complete and total calamity. Well to begin with the service leaves a lot to be desired. They're making me schlep my own bags, like some kind of porter! But the moral of the story is, here I am, schlepping all this shit, and I'm looking all over the place for my husband and he's nowhere to be found. So I'm looking and looking all over for him—carrying all this luggage, mind you!

*A Woman appears and sits on the empty chair.*

**Roberta**

I don't know where he could be. It's not like he's never traveled before. We've cruised basically everywhere a person could think of to cruise. We've been all over.

**Woman**

I know. You love to cruise.

**Roberta**

I do. I really do. And I never get seasick. Neal, too. We could spend eternity on a boat.

*Roberta notices the Woman.*

**Roberta**

Excuse me, miss—you can't sit there.

**Woman**

Oh.

**Roberta**

That's for my husband. I'm waiting for my husband.

**Woman**

Okay.

**Roberta**

So please, if you don't mind.

**Woman**

Alright. But I don't think he's coming.

**Roberta**

Don't make me laugh! Neal miss a cruise? Not for all the tea in China! Now, if you'll pardon me, I'm on the phone.

**Woman**

I know. You're on the phone with me.

**Roberta**

With you?

**Woman**

Yeah.

**Roberta, into phone**

Hello?

**Woman**

Hello.

**Roberta**

Oh my god, is that hysterical! Is that not just hysterical! It's you I'm on the phone with!

**Woman**

Yeah.

**Roberta**

Isn't that just absolutely hysterical? You're the cruise director!

**Woman**

Uh huh.

**Roberta**

How long have you been doing that?

**Woman**

A long time.

**Roberta**

You must love it.

**Woman**

Sometimes.

**Roberta**

It's a wonderful job. They take you all sorts of places. Do they treat you well?

**Woman**

Sometimes.

**Roberta**

It's a beautiful ship. It's brand-new. There's an ice rink. I want to go for a skate.

**Woman**

You have to be very careful. Please fall so easily.

**Roberta**

Not me. I'm a very good skater, since I'm a little girl. I'm not gonna fall.

**Woman**

It's my job to worry.

**Roberta**

You take good care of us. I was just telling my friend the service on this ship is wonderful.

**Woman**

Aren't you nice.

**Roberta**

What are the odds that I'd be on the phone with the cruise director. This is perfect. Listen, would you do me a favor and make an announcement about my husband over the loudspeaker? Say Roberta is waiting for him by the pool. That's me. He's Neal.

**Woman**

We don't have a record of him on the ship.

**Roberta**

You're joking.

**Woman**

I'm not, unfortunately.

*Roberta gets up and dances in place to the music.*

**Roberta**

I love this part, when we're about to leave, and you stand at the railing and wave.

**Woman**

It's fun, huh?

**Roberta**

And that smell when they do the barbecue! You smell those hot dogs?

**Woman**

Can I get you one?

**Roberta**

A hot dog?! I don't eat hot dogs!

**Woman**

You had one yesterday.

**Roberta**

You must be confusing me with somebody else. I haven't eaten red meat in about a hundred years. Haven't had a cigarette since God knows when. But I do love a hot dog. And a cigarette. What I wouldn't give to sit in my living room and smoke a cigarette in a bathrobe again. Or in the backyard—in my bathing suit, baking in the sun, smoking a cigarette. When I die, I want a cigarette and a hot dog.



*An Old Lady waddles past them slowly,  
using a walker, kind of dancing to the music.*

**Roberta**

Jesus, would you look at that old lady. She doesn't look well. They shouldn't allow her by the pool! She'll fall!

**Woman**

As long as she uses her walker, she'll be fine. That's why she has one.

**Roberta**

Well she's an eyesore.

**Woman**

That's not nice.

**Roberta**

Somebody that old has no business being here.

**Woman**

People get old.

**Roberta**

There really are so many old people.

**Woman**

In general?

**Roberta**

In this place! Everywhere you look: old old old. They look terrible, smell terrible, can't talk about anything that doesn't put me right to sleep. You sit in the dining room, you try to converse with them, and it's like talking to a hermit crab. Cruising used to be a young person's game. You'd get dressed up and go for dinner at a certain time and sit with the same people. And you could really make friends at your table. Now, it's a free-for-all with all these old people with the walkers. They look like garbage, eat like dogs, can't string a sentence together, can't even sit up by themselves. And they're everywhere.

*The Old Lady leaves.*

**Roberta**

Where is she even going?

**Woman**

Her muster station.

**Roberta, *laughing***

Child's play!

**Woman**

What do you mean?

**Roberta**

I don't do that shit.

**Woman**

Everyone has to go to their muster station before we set sail.

**Roberta**

Not me!

**Woman**

But we check your rooms to make sure you're at your muster station—you have to learn what to do in the event of a sinking.

**Roberta**

I told you, lady: I cruise a lot. Neal and I stay put in our room and we don't make a peep, like we're Anne Frank.

**Woman**

It's for your safety!

**Roberta**

You don't get it. This is my boat. I don't have to be trained at the muster station. It's my boat. I got it all handled.

**Woman**

This is your boat?

**Roberta**

Of course!

**Woman**

Which boat?

**Roberta**

What's so confusing about this? This boat! The boat we're on! The Roberta Joy. It only says it in giant blue cursive on the back.

**Woman**

Oh.

**Roberta**

What other boat would I be talking about?

**Woman**

I guess I was confused.

**Roberta**

Don't worry. It's alright. People get confused! No need to be embarrassed. This boat, the boat we're on, is called the Roberta Joy. You got that? The Roberta Joy. That's my first name and my middle name. It's named after me. Neal named it. He bought a boat and slapped my name on the ass. He's always been romantic. But a fuckin' pain in the ass, I swear to god. I spend my life chasing after him. Why can't he stay put? I know how to stay put! I mean, I travel, but when I'm meant to. When it's booked. When it's appropriate. Not when someone's waiting for me by the pool.

**Woman**

Attention, passengers. Will Neal please stop being a fuckin' asshole and join his wife at the pool? Neal, please stop being a fuckin' asshole and join your wife at the pool. Thank you.

**Roberta**

I like having the boat, but there's always a problem. If it were up to me, I'd sell it yesterday. You know it burned down.

**Woman**

It did?

**Roberta**

Well, there was a fire.

**Woman**

That's too bad.

**Roberta**

Too bad? It was too good! It was a laugh-out-loud hysterical circus sideshow, okay!? We're on the boat and something catches on fire and we have to call the Coast Guard. Where could he be? Neal? Neal! Neal! Where could he be?!

**Woman**

I gotta go.

**Roberta**

Alright. I'll see you for mah-jongg.

**Woman**

There's no mah-jongg.

**Roberta**

Oh, is today canasta?

**Woman**

No. There's no game today unfortunately.

**Roberta**

No game? There's always a game!

**Woman**

Not today.

**Roberta**

Why didn't anyone tell me?

**Woman**

I'm telling you now.

**Roberta**

But this is very last-minute! I'm in the car schlepping to get there on time and you tell me *now*?

**Woman**

I'm sorry. I forgot.

**Roberta**

You really are a very forgetful person. It's a major problem.

**Woman.**

I'm sorry.

**Roberta**

I'm sorry too. I really am sorry.

**Woman**

I'm gonna get off the phone now though.

**Roberta**

Fine, get off the phone, suit yourself. I don't know, people think you really have nothing in the world to do.

**Woman**

I love you.

**Roberta**

I have to get ready anyway.

**Woman**

I love you.

**Roberta**

Alright. I'll see you around the ship.

**Woman**

Okay. I love you.

**Roberta**

I love the shows.

**Woman**

What shows?

**Roberta**

The shows at night, the singing and the dancing. You know I did the plays at camp.

**Woman**

You did?

**Roberta**

Sure, when I was a kid.

**Woman**

You never told me that.

**Roberta**

I was in Oklahoma.

**Woman**

The musical?

**Roberta**

Sure!

**Woman**

You were?

**Roberta**

I loved it, yeah.

**Woman**

I love you.

**Roberta**

I love you, yeah.

**Woman**

Buh bye.

**Roberta**

Talk to you tomorrow.

*The Woman leaves.*

*The Old Lady waddles with her walker past Roberta, slowly.*

*The Old Lady nods hello at Roberta.*

*Roberta nods hello at the Old Lady.*

**Old Lady**

When I die, I want a cigarette and a hot dog.

**Roberta**

What a small world!

*The Old Lady leaves.*

*A Young Lady runs on and sits on Roberta's chair with her.*

**Roberta**

Hello.

**Young Lady**

Hello.

*Roberta makes a call on her phone.*

*The Woman appears.*

*The Woman cannot see the Young Lady.*

**Woman**

Hello?

**Roberta, whispering**

You're not gonna believe this.

**Woman**

What?

**Roberta**

You are *not* going to believe this.

**Woman**

Are you okay?

**Roberta**

The kids are here again.

**Woman**

Okay.

**Roberta**

All o' them.

**Woman**

Which kids?

**Roberta**

I'm not sure. But there's a lot.

**Woman**

Are they your kids?

**Roberta**

What are you crazy?! I don't leave my kids to wander around some woman's apartment!

**Woman**

They're in your apartment?

**Roberta**

Wherever I am now. I don't like any of this furniture.

**Woman**

You have nice furniture.

**Roberta**

Sure, it's nice, but it's not my things. Besides, they're messing with all of it.

**Woman**

Who?