

## Carry On By Sarah O'Connor

The sticker on the guitar case is ripped at the top, frayed white and faded red. I can only read the last two words of it, “carry on” which is all I need to know that it’s one of those old memes: “Keep calm and carry on.” It’s probably not even fair to call something used during the air raids a meme but here we are, it’s original saying made a comeback for a little while before becoming a joke. Keep calm and run away from zombies, keep calm and catch the snitch, keep calm and where a mask. Not that that last one was seen often, the meme was dead by then, but it still floated around on wine mom and some corporates socials. People trying to bring it back to it’s roots I guess but it didn’t succeed. How long has this guy had the sticker on his case? Five years, no, older, at least ten.

God I’m old.

I dig through my pockets and dump a handful of change into the case. I don't know how long it's been there; I rarely pay for anything in cash anymore and the coins feel warm and dirty in my palm. I take out my small bottle of hand sanitizer as they clatter into the case and rub my hands together wincing as the alcohol stings the cuticles I've picked away. I think he nods, whether in gratitude or to “Scarborough Fair” that he strums slowly (and badly) on poorly tuned strings. I only see the motion of it from the corner of my eye. I try not to look into too many people’s eyes now, try not to look at faces at all. Try not to have anyone look at mine either, which I have an advantage of.

My face has started sweating under my masks. I need to wash the top one anyways, just been too lazy to do it. It’s my favourite one, cloth and teal. In the winter it kept my face warm but now it stifles slightly. But I wore a mask for two years and it didn’t kill me, I prefer it now. I

feel naked without it, exposed, at risk. My skin doesn't appreciate it, almost thirty and I have a line of acne on my jaw, a couple more spots on my cheek, but the masks cover it so there's no point in caring about my looks, if anything the masks improved mine.

I only leave the house once a week, I've tried to stretch it out longer but no matter how much I stock up on I can't stop myself from going out once a week. My mind jumps ahead, reminding me that the stores could close again tomorrow without warning and that even though I have enough to tide me over for months and months that nothing lasts forever. Every outing is a risk, but a necessary one to ensure survival.

I checked the numbers before I left. The numbers aren't as widely recorded as they used to be, so I've had to search for some medical sites that keep the numbers updated. It wouldn't change anything; I'd still need to buy groceries. Not many of the stores do curbside or home delivery anymore.

It's a forty-minute walk to the drug store but that's also necessary. I don't trust the bus. The idea of sitting in an enclosed space with people coughing, sneezing into their hands and placing that same hand on the poles. I need the exercise and the drug store has enough food items so I won't starve even if the vegetables are limp and have to be eaten right away. I don't feel safe in grocery stores, I tried it once a few months ago and a man went right up beside me to grab a jar of coffee above my head. He didn't wear a mask, obviously, most people don't now that the by-law ended. I left my buggy in the aisle and walked back home after, had a long shower and ate crackers over the sink for dinner until the next week came and it was safe to try again.

I can feel the thin sheen of sweat under my two masks and imagine the pimples that will pop up soon. I try to peer inside the windows before I go in when a man nearly shoves me to get in and I'm reminded (again) that stores don't have capacity limits anymore. When I do finally

walk in I follow the same path up and down the aisles I've memorized from when there used to be arrows on the ground directing people where to go. No one follows it now, not that many people followed it then, and I press myself against the shelves when someone walks close to me, look down at the ground and hold my breath and wait for them to pass, skip whole aisles altogether that are too crowded.

The drug store has started letting customers use baskets again and I fill it with two cans of soup, a limp bundle of lettuce and a soft tomato, a box of crackers, Tylenol, cough syrup, a new box of disposable masks, Lysol wipes, and toilet paper. I already have more than enough of these items at home but it's good to be prepared, just in case.

I never takes long, I know where everything on my list is in the store and there's no reason for me to browse. I make a game of it, how quickly I can get in and out of the store. My best record is five minutes, my worst is fifteen but that was before a holiday weekend, when I should have known better.

When I get to the checkout I can see that I won't beat my record. The line isn't holiday long but it isn't short. We don't have to stand six feet apart anymore which means I have to stand close to a group of teenagers who are laughing and yelling or risk someone butting in front of me, which means longer in the store. Behind me an old woman snuffles, she coughs and though I don't see her I can feel the warm, wet breath of her on my neck and plan on another shower when I get home, make a mental list to wash my clothes immediately, to disinfect my items in the cart, to do all this before anything else when I get home.

The teenagers look at me and start whispering. They point, they laugh. I see one slide their phone out, pretending it's casual and meant to be held at that angle but know I'm being filmed. I ignore them, look straight ahead, imagine germs travelling down their throats and

infecting them. The teens choose the self checkout instead and I go to the cashier who does a double take when she sees me.

“Find everything okay?” I nod, place my items on the counter as she scans them. The plexiglass is still up, I hope it’s one of those forever things, a reminder, a just in case. “Stocking up?”

I nod, even with the masks I don’t like speaking outside and avoid it unless I absolutely have too. I don’t look at the old lady behind me, at the growing line behind her and the unmasked people. I do accidentally look at the cashier though, she’s young, early twenties, probably had her graduation on Zoom. She’s not wearing a mask and her face frightens me at first, as most people's do now. There’s no reason for it too, it’s a face with a nose and smile just like anyone else’s. But it's been covered for so long and at first the faces look strange to me, alien. I always flinch away out of embarrassment, avert my eyes as if I've caught them in a vulnerable moment, wait for them to cover up which doesn't happen anymore.

Without the mask it's easy to read her expression. Her brow furrows in concern, eyes flicker behind me to another customer in line, a shared glance and her lips twist up in a small smile. She avoids looking at me after that, focusing on my items and her screen but I don’t look away. I watch as she bites her lip to hide her smile, I see how clear her skin is and wonder if she wore a mask at all the past few years or claimed exemption so that she didn’t have to ruin her face. When the items are scanned I tap my card against the machine and as the receipt prints she bags my items.

The line is moving. I see the old woman who was behind me pass as she walks slowly out the door, wiping her nose on her sleeve. I take out my sanitizer bottle and squeeze more on my hands, rub them as the cashier looks at me holding the bag towards me. When I go to grab it she

says, “You know you don’t have to wear all that anymore. The pandemic was officially declared over two weeks ago.”

I refrain from rolling my eyes. “Better to be safe than sorry.” I grab the bag and her face twists into a smile again, her eyes flicker behind me and I turn to see another customer looking at me with the same smile, another behind him chokes on a laugh and stares at the ground. I bite the inside of my cheek when I see how long the line is now, how many people are watching me, how close they are together, none of them wearing masks. Despite my panic I glare at them, though it probably looks more like I’m startled than anything threatening, grab my bag and leave.

I have to stop myself from panicking when I walk home, even when my eyes start to itch with tears I have to tell myself that it’s okay. Try to repress that cashier’s smile, the old woman’s cough, the recognition that in that line of customer’s eyes I was a crazy woman, a story to tell at dinner. It’s just something I have to get used too, the same expression and reaction I’ve gotten from family and friends who I don’t see anymore, physically or virtually. I learned how to survive and after doing it for so long I don’t know how to stop.

When I enter my apartment I take a deep breath, wash my hands, and force myself not to cry as I remove my mask and disinfect the boxed items I’ve bought, wondering if I’ll ever remember what normal used to feel like.