

Rolling Luggage

Amanda Vilanova

I'm in a department store. The signs around me, all written in English, boldly advertise 40 to 50 per cent reductions on American products. The announcements on the store's loudspeakers, however, are all in Spanish. The invisible orator overpronounces every syllable to counteract the Puerto Rican accent's typical speed and alleged lack of clarity. How these contrasts capture my country's unique history is lost on me today, I'm too busy trying to keep up with my mother. She walks ahead of me, as usual. For most of my life, she's been leading the way with her swinging hips everywhere from parents' evenings and family outings to shopping trips and big decisions. She knows exactly where we're headed as she weaves through shoppers who wear shorts, flip-flops and jackets because it's boiling hot outside, but the air conditioning in the mall is always a tad too cold.

My mother stops in the middle of the corridor, pops a hip and points. 'These are the ones,' she says. In front of us, poised on a plastic stand, are four matching

rectangular boxes with wheels. Each metallic pink trunk shines under the store's LED lights. I grab a carry-on suitcase, push the button on the handle, pull it up and swivel, enjoying the seamless 360-degree turn. I run my hands down its hard shell, then knock on it twice to hear its hollow strength. I imagine myself conquering the Big Smoke with one of them trailing behind me. '*Nena*, you'll look like a princess walking around with these. You must be ready, you may just bump into Prince Harry,' my mother says with a wink. We laugh at the absurdity of her last statement but hope these empty rolling things are a gateway to the success of my aspirations.

After packing so much that the bags are fit to burst, my mother's expression changes. Suddenly serious, she invites me to sit on her bed, then places something in my hand. 'Your father gave me this ring,' she says. 'I want you to have it.' I feel the gold ring's weight; watch the amber stone with small diamonds on either side catch the light. '*Mami*, I can't take this,' I say. '*Sí*, you can,' she replies. 'If you're ever in trouble ... you sell it. All women need insurance and you won't always call your mother.' I meet her gaze and understand the true meaning of distance. When my mother drops me off at the airport, she helps me glide the bags onto the conveyor belt, then waits until I go through security. We wave at each other, teary-eyed, and have no idea that this is the first of many goodbyes like this one; that this date will be a marker, cited as a 'before and after' when telling stories about our lives.

I arrive at my destination, the largest airport I've ever seen, and stand next to a conveyor belt. I spot the overfilled, pink containers gliding towards me and give a sigh of relief. I feel like a princess for all of two seconds, then am relegated to peasant status as I roll the heavy bags onto relentless trains and down streets that didn't make it onto London postcards. I pray that the room I've rented, via a random website, exists. I pray that the days to come will favour me. I pray that the weight of the amber ring on my finger won't have to disappear. When I finally unpack, the suitcases turn into empty wonders, all potential, like first days in new places.

Over the years, I will re-fill the bags and drag them from house to house. I will drop them down staircases, transporting props for my first show. I will watch them rolled along by those who become friends good enough to aid me. I will load them onto buses, trains, and airplanes. They will be laughed at and praised by my future companion. Their wheels will twist along south-east London streets I never knew existed but are now my preferred haunts. They will survive changes, hits, and bumps with style. The bags remain with me almost ten years on from my arrival. And on those sad days when I wonder if I will ever truly thrive so far away from my homeland, I stare at the metallic pink trunks, take in every little beaten-up section and remember what they represent. I came accompanied by my loved ones' care, strength, and faith in me. I look down at my left hand and smile. If I have an ounce of what these cases are made of and a pinch of my mother's dazzling authority, I

may just conquer this conqueror's land with an amber stone poised on my left hand.

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She holds a BA in Comparative Literature from the University of Puerto Rico and an MA in Acting from the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. She writes fiction and drama in English and Spanish, and is interested in bilingualism and the migrant experience. In 2019, she wrote and performed *Hurricane Diaries*, a piece that explored the history of her native country, at the Blue Elephant Theatre. She has also translated various plays for Puerto Rican theatre companies like Puerto Rico Theatre Lab.

A recording of this piece can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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