

The only thing on stage is a chair. There are three spot lights above it, one in the middle and two on either side.

A man in his late thirties, wearing a well used suit, walks on and sits down. He is carrying a briefcase which is then placed on the floor beside him. There is a moment before he speaks.

RALPH

There are moments in life that you never forget. You never forget them because they teach you a lesson. My moment happened on a plane, on my way home for Thanksgiving. (pause) My morning began as usual: I got breakfast at my usual café, read my usual section of the paper, all of those things. The flight wasn't until the afternoon and since I was leaving to go to America I wasn't afraid of lines or traffic. (pause) My family is from Alberta. They're very traditional. Nothing so very interesting actually happened that day except that I was flying to America. Once I got to the airport I was through security quickly enough to grab some lunch. There was a woman there. She was very beautiful. We had a conversation that involved her family and I discovered that she was from California. "I've never been to California," I said. "I was raised in Canada." "Oh," she said, "Is it cold in Canada?" I said only in the winter. "It never gets cold in California," she said. "And it's always so dreary here." She lengthened the word so that it sounded more like dreeeereee and pouted with red lipsticked lips. I didn't have anything to say to that. I asked her how long she'd been across the ocean and she said that it had only been a few weeks, she was a student. Art. As beautiful as she was, that tidbit of information threw me off a tad. But I pursued, knowing that we were headed in different directions once the flights were called, and that she probably didn't find me very interesting anyway. Then she began ordering us drinks. It was at this point that I should have stopped and thought to myself, "Hey, Ralph. She's too young, she's too pretty, and she's just bored." I should have thought, "There is no way she's flirting with you," and I should have thought, "Three martinis is an awful lot of alcohol to consume right before getting on a ten hour flight." But I didn't think those things. I enjoyed the company of a young, attractive lady and sipped at the drinks until my flight number was called and I had to race

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lopsidedly down the terminal.

Ralph loosens his jacket, puts the briefcase under his seat and removes a pamphlet from his pocket as he speaks.

After I was on the plane I realized how foolish I 'd been. I sat down and loosened my jacket and put my bag under the seat in front of me. I took out one of the complementary magazines that they leave in the back pockets of the seats and read through the safety features of the plane. I rolled my shoulders, I breathed deeply, and I tried to relax. But it wasn't working. Something was nagging at me.

Through the little windows I remember seeing the airport slowly drift away. I remember hearing the engine start up and the children saying, "Goodbye house! Goodbye!" I remember feeling the buzz of alcohol in my body, making my skin feel slightly numb and my head feel slightly heavy. And I remember remembering what I forgot to do before getting on the plane, what people constantly forget to do and what mothers are always telling children before leaving on ten hour trips across oceans. I'd forgotten to use the bathroom. It's no big deal, I told myself. I don't even have to use the bathroom. And, the pamphlet told me there were two bathrooms on the plane, right beside the exits. It was going to be okay.

These thoughts reminded me of another trip I'd taken when I was a young child. We were in a car on our way from Vancouver to Whistler, and I had been dared by my younger sister to drink an entire bottle of Gatorade before the trip. I was young and impulsive and didn't think of the consequences this might have on our small vacation to the Rocky Mountains, or how my actions might affect my mother. I drank the entire bottle of Gatorade, and as a result had to stop seventeen times in three hours. My family treated me differently after that. Everyone became suspicious as to how I survived the half hour bus ride to school.

I remember my mother singing before we left, "Don't forget to take a leak, we won't be back for another week!" Of course, we were only going to be gone for a few days and since we were in a car and I wasn't one of those children against gas station bathrooms or hiding behind bushes, the song didn't really mean anything to me. I was young then. It's been a few

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years since that trip.

Anyway, it was about that time that the stewardess asked if I wanted anything to drink on the flight. I automatically replied, "Yes, please, some water." I don't know why I replied with that. Then again, maybe I was thirsty after the martinis. The woman beside me asked for the same. I looked at this woman and had a vague sense of familiarity. She smiled at me through tight lips but didn't say anything.

The plane started to rumble down the runway.

The man kicks the floor to create a rumbling noise. He begins softly but gets louder and louder until he's holding onto the edges of his seat, then stops abruptly. Two of the three lights flicker and go out, leaving the middle light above the chair on.

"Good afternoon and welcome to WestJet. Please remember to store your baggage in the overhead compartments, or under the seat in front of you. Today's in-flight movie will be *Inception*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Ellen Page. Once the plane has reached cruising altitude, our stewardesses will bring your complimentary drinks. Food can be purchased and will be available after drinks have been served, for your convenience. We hope you have a safe trip, and thank you for flying WestJet. (pause) Also, due to technical difficulties the washroom at the back end of the plane is out of order. There is still one washroom at the front end of the plane. We are sorry for this inconvenience and if you have any questions, don't be afraid to ask. Thanks again for flying WestJet."

He fidgets, loosens his tie or clenches his hands. Speaking, he rolls the pamphlet into a ball.

I decided that I would play it safe. I could still feel the remains of the alcohol in me and imagined for a moment the liquid running through my body. It would have reached my intestines by now, I thought. And I knew from high school biology that it was in the intestines that the most water was absorbed. I still had some time. I would be able to wait until the seat-belt sign was off and we were free to walk at our will around the plane; a notion that I was somewhat uncomfortable with. How many people would see me walking, no, galloping toward the front of the plane, pushing elderly out of the way just to find relief in an in-flight lavatory? How many people would judge me, like my family did? Could I wait? Was I able to bear it out to save my pride and face from the scrutinous eyes of strangers?

I was planning an escape route and watching the people sitting

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in the aisles, seeing myself through their eyes running down the plane in a panic, when I realized that someone was speaking to me and had been trying to get my attention for some time. The woman beside me looked slightly frightened at my behaviour. I realized that I'd clenched the pamphlet into a tight ball and was ripping the ball into shreds. I stuffed it into the seat pocket and gave her a smile. It was disastrous.

"Hello," I said. "Hello," she said. "Are you alright?" "Oh, yes, yes, I'm fine, don't worry about me... are you alright?" "I'm fine." She had an adorable little dimple in her cheek when she smiled, though I distinctly remember that her eyes were disapproving. We were about the same age. She might have been a little older. "Have we met before?" I asked. "Collage, perhaps?" "Are you from London?" "No, Alberta." "No." She was right, I was one of the few on the plane who didn't have the London accent. She didn't sound like she was initially from there, either, but I didn't pry any further into her whereabouts. It seemed to me that just talking with her was helping my disposition, but she was sitting at the edge of her seat and nearly had her arm in the aisle.

The stewardess came out with drinks. It was all I could do not to jump over the lady and climb over the seats.

"So why are you headed to Phoenix?" I asked. I put the water as far away from me as possible. The liquid swished around in its plastic cup, but as I watched it became suddenly inviting. My throat was parched and my tongue felt swollen. I'd missed the poor woman's answer, but it was hard to me to care. For a few moments I was engulfed in a sort of backlash of dehydration. Instead of swollen I felt dry, like my skin was too tight. I needed to drink this water or I would collapse in a heap of dust. I swallowed the whole glass in one fowl swoop and immediately regretted it. It sloshed into my empty stomach. The woman had watched my internal conflict, and now I was sure she thought I was crazy. When I finally replied with an acknowledgement to her answer she gave me a look that made me think of a sickly dog. Out of politeness alone, I was sure, she so quietly that I wasn't sure if I was meant to hear, said "You?"

My family usually had Thanksgiving dinner in my parents house in Phoenix. It was always difficult for them to find what they needed; the turkey, especially, but they always pulled through. I'd asked them on many occasions why they didn't just switch to the American Thanksgiving, when turkeys would be easy to find and they could celebrate with their friends.

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Their answer was that they didn't believe in the American Thanksgiving. They thought it was far too close to Christmas. It was ridiculous to have two turkeys so close together. But at least it would be easy to find turkeys, I'd said.

As a kid we had Thanksgiving with my family on my grandparent's farm, and everyone within a block was invited. I missed those dinners. Uncle Rob would have brought a fresh turkey from his farm, instead of defrosting a frozen one from who-knows where. The mashed potatoes were still delicious, though.

My mouth began to water, which made me think of swallowing, which reminded me of what I'd done, which punched against my stomach like a boxer would to a bag. But I refused to give in. The woman was attempting a conversation and there was no way I was going to give up that kind of distraction.

"I'm visiting my parents for Thanksgiving," I said. "But isn't Thanksgiving in November?" "Yes, well, we're from Alberta. They like having it in October." "That's interesting." From the way she said it, she made the word sound more like 'weird.' I knew it was going to be impossible to keep talking forever, and the in-flight movie was going to start right before they started wheeling out lunch. This was the perfect opportunity to politely excuse myself. But it was in that moment that I recognized where I'd seen her before. She looked incredibly like the girl I'd had the drinks with, back at the airport. But how unlikely would that be, if they knew each other, or if they were related? I had to ask.

I watched as the stewardess walked to the back of the plane to retrieve the cart they used to carry sandwiches in. I knew that once they had the cart in the aisle, it would be at least ten minutes before I could get by and casually make way to the front of the plane. I knew that I only had a few moments, maybe even a few seconds, to ask the question. But I didn't know how to word it. It came out in a jumble of confused utterances. She looked frightened again.

"What's your name?" I concluded. "Charlotte," she said. "I'm Ralph. It's nice to meet you Charlotte. I apologize for my rude behaviour, it's just that, I swear that I recognize you from somewhere and I was having some drinks with a young lady at the airport..." It didn't come out right at all. There was nothing that would rescue me from this embarrassment. And then she saved me, like an angel swooping down from the heavens with a sympathetic look and the quiet reserve of understanding.

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“Was she wearing a tight, red dress and claiming to be an art student?” She said. “I think so,” I said. “That was my sister. She always does this to people. I’m terribly sorry... did she promise you anything?”

Although the wording confounded me, the relief of sanity washed through me for the first time that day. I was about to say, oh well that explains everything! And we would have laughed and had a pleasant conversation about her sister and how many drinks we’d had, and how I had to run to catch the plane, but it was at that point that I noticed the stewardess walking by our seat and all that came out of my mouth was a complete and terrified, “NO!”

Charlotte didn’t talk to me much after that. I tried to continue talking about her sister but she raised her eyebrows or twitched her nose at every word I said, as if I was a dog begging for food and she was correcting my behaviour. The fear that someone on the plane might see the distress in my eyes was increasing. This woman was a lost cause; I would need to find other ways of occupying my mind from the bathroom.

The bathroom. The glorious closet of water, made to save souls like me from the torment of congestion. A room of freedom and relief. The toilet, with its rim of a beautiful target, into which, if I aim correctly, would drain my worries away. That’s what I had to avoid.

I turned my attention to the in-flight movie, watching in my peripheral vision the cart that still blocked the aisle from any lateral movement. My headphones buzzed with the sound of static. I grasped at my seat.

The film brought instant gratification. DiCaprio is truly a wonderful actor. But after a few minutes of actionless, boring talking my mind began to wonder. It wasn’t as though the film was bad, it just wasn’t very good; I managed to finish it a few days later and still think that the ending could have made more sense. But anyway, instead of listening to the film I began thinking about the static in the headphones.

The sound of static rises slowly until it's almost as loud as Ralph's voice, but he should be getting louder and louder until right before 'It stopped my breathing...'. At that time the static noise also stops.

It didn’t make any sense, but the static sounded so much like rain that I instinctually glanced out the window to make sure that it wasn’t. And then the rain got louder.

I was at the part in the film where the protagonist is trapped inside a room that fills with water. My heart began leaping in

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my chest, my hands grasped the armrests of the seat as if I thought I would drift on this imaginary river, Charlotte was giving me pained looks that I didn't recognize until afterwards; I was hyperventilating. The combination of static and waterfall noises were pushing me over the edge. I looked frantically at the stewardess pushing the cart, knowing that my eyes were wild and beastly. I knew she would misunderstand. She came running at me with a glass of water in her hands, letting sweet droplets fall unhindered to the floor as if to mock me. She shoved the glass toward my mouth and I could do nothing but swallow. *(pause)* It stopped my breathing, that was true. My heartbeat settled and I noticed two things that were oblivious to me in my panicked state: first, someone had taken off the headphones and I was listening once again to the quiet hum of the aeroplane. Secondly, absolutely everyone that I could see was staring in my direction.

There was no hope for me after that. I could no longer be afraid of being noticed. Everyone thought I was crazy; everyone was keeping an eye out for any more of my peculiar behaviours. The stewardess put out a tab for me. I was constantly under the eyes of someone. Charlotte was given a new seat.

Which meant that there was absolutely no way I could get to the bathroom.

My fears collided with my hopes, that at the end of this day I would be free of this pain and that I would never have to see any of these people again. I didn't even have to go back to London. I could barricade myself in America, in a house made of bathrooms, where I could run water all the time and collect fountains and not have to worry about judgement. But what would happen if I couldn't make it to the end of the flight? I avoided looking at the display screens that flickered between the film and our destination time. I didn't want to know how much time had passed or how much remained. I relaxed a little after Charlotte was moved away from me; there was no one treating me like an untrained animal.

I realize now that no one actually knew what my desperation was coming from. They couldn't see the bloated feeling I felt below my stomach, the tenseness between my legs where I had to clench. They didn't realize that the sweat pouring out of my skin and making me look like a horrible, unclean creature was something my body had to do to keep me from exploding. I was trapped in a solitary world where all I could think of was letting go.

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It might have been some sort of punishment, or a scene in some story where all the writer wants to do is torment his creation. It might have been a blessing, to teach me the lesson I never learned on that trip to Whistler so long ago. Maybe it was a prank, or a trick, played on me by people from my childhood bus rides to school, or that woman in the red dress. I will never know what caused me to sit in a state of constant deliberation and denial for so long a time.

The plane started to descend.

The stewardess offered me another glass of water, which I refused as politely as I could without uncrossing my legs and buttoning up my shirt. My tie was ludicrously out of position. My hair was a mess. I thought of the water they'd forced into me on this flight, the drinks I'd so regretfully consumed beforehand. I thought of Charlotte and how these moments might forever be stuck in her memory as they do in mine, and I finally thought of the glorious bathroom that I would be able to use once we landed and I was far enough away from these witnesses.

The two lights on either side of the chair flicker back on, and he pulls the briefcase out from under the seat.

When we landed I was given a choice. I could get up and run, or I could wait like an obedient gentleman for the people in the seats ahead of me. It was a curious moment to be considering the first option, but I knew I wouldn't take it. I waited like everyone else. Then I ran. I ran as hard and as fast as my legs could carry me with as much liquid I was holding in my gut. When I got there I had no time to aim or adjust, so I sat on the toilet and felt myself dangling freely above the inviting waterline. I was free, free, free to do what my body was asking me to do since I got on the plane from the beginning of the trip. But nothing happened.

I had lost my moment. It was too late.

I sat there for a while, feeling the water inside me settle and swoosh, but I couldn't get rid of it. This feeling would last until my next moment, when I was able to stop and think about my actions, when I could easily reach a bathroom from my hotel room in Phoenix. But this wasn't it.

When I reached my family, ashamed and slightly worried for my health, they asked me, "Hey, Ralph. How about it, do you want to take a leak before we get in the car?" And I said, "No.

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That's okay. I can hold it."

Ralph gets up, tightens his tie, and walks off stage. Curtains fall.

The End.