

THE ROOM

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This dispatch is adapted from a chapter of *The Road Here*, a larger work chronicling the unlikely chain of events that carried one man from collapse to a village halfway around the world into a life he never saw coming.

What had once felt like a distant idea – almost a year out – soon became months, then weeks, and finally days away. Time didn't pass; it dissolved. From the moment Willie booked the trip, it was as if the universe had hit fast-forward. And true to form, he met the countdown with a kind of fervent precision that would make an accountant sob with gratitude. He mapped out his pilgrimage with a detail so exacting it could've earned him honorary mention in *Travel + Leisure* – or at the very least, a polite bow from Rick Steves.

Though Willie loathed structure in most areas of his life – schedules made his skin crawl – he approached the logistics of

this journey with monastic devotion. Japan had become his second language, not in speech, but in movement. Over the past year, he'd memorized train maps and station layouts like a gambler memorizes tells. The Shinkansen lines, the MRT webbing – he'd cartographed them in his mind like a sacred text. He could tell you which platform in Shinagawa Station would get you to Gifu with a six-minute transfer in Nagoya, and where to stand to catch the car that opened closest to the station stairs. It was borderline obsessive. But he wasn't just prepared – he was tuned in, already halfway there in spirit. And while it was still a monumental leap, the state of Willie's spirit leading up to the jump off point, made the flights a mere formality. Though, he drilled those until they became part of his muscle memory too.

Two days before liftoff, Willie grabbed his backpack and slung another small fanny pack over his shoulder – the sum total of what he was taking to Japan – and drove to Old Town to stay with his old friend Suzi. She lived ten minutes from the airport and a thousand miles from the noise in his head. Suzi wasn't just a friend; they shared the same birthday, the same oddball timing, the same restless, generous spirit. Her home was like a temple wrapped in adobe and lavender. Quiet. Still. Sacred. The kind of place where even your thoughts speak softer. It was the right move – his nerves were humming like power lines, and he needed a place to come down gently before the flight.

That night, a breeze from the past blew in wearing a velvet soul and a warm smile. One of their mutual friends, Roxy –

deeply spiritual, unnervingly intuitive, a woman Willie had once briefly dated back when life was a little less bruised – showed up out of nowhere to stay the night. No agenda. Just beauty. The three of them walked into the heart of Old Town Scottsdale, shared a few drinks, traded old stories and new laughter, and slowly turned the volume of the world all the way down.

Back at Suzi's, they each found their corners of peace. No drama. No goodbyes. Just stillness. Willie's flight was set to leave at 7 a.m. – which meant a 4:30 a.m. wake-up and a quiet ride through the empty, dark desert to Sky Harbor. It was, in hindsight, the perfect sendoff. Not some grand fireworks farewell. Just a soft letting go. A gentle exhale before the plunge.

Willie's itinerary had him routing through San Francisco first – a short hop to the coast before the long haul across the Pacific.

Phoenix Sky Harbor – San Francisco
International

Flight Number NH7307

Departure: 7:05 AM

Seat: 01A

Flight Time: 2 hours

Distance: 707 miles

Of course, Willie had everything mapped and measured down to the minute. That was his way now – ritual as survival. As Suzi's car wheeled up to the curb outside Terminal 3, they came to a slow, quiet stop. Hugs were exchanged, soft and unceremonious, the kind

you give when there's too much left unsaid
and no time left to say it. Then he was off –
through the terminal, through security,
through that in-between space where you
float without tether until the gate agent calls
your number.

And despite it all – the wreckage he
was hauling around inside him like a duffel
full of bricks – Willie was still. No nerves. No
dread. No cold sweats. The man who once
had to be peeled off a puddle jumper in
Hawaii because his pulse outran his courage
now sat at Gate B4 calm as lake water.
Strangely, almost unnervingly, he couldn't
wait to get on the plane.

He watched through the thick
terminal glass as the sunrise flared against
the tarmac, jet engines kicking up heat
mirage. Something rose up in him – not

hope exactly, but something akin to it. A quiet knowing. A foretelling. The moment those wheels left the ground, everything that had broken him over the last half-decade – Maria’s unraveling, Louie’s passing, the quiet war inside him – would stay earthbound. That was the bargain he’d struck with the universe. He’d leave his ghosts in the terminal and take only his bones with him. And somewhere, high over the Pacific, he’d begin stitching himself back together.

Not whole, maybe. But something close enough to begin again.

Boarding was quiet. Uneventful. No frantic gate changes or crying toddlers or men in flip-flops shouting into speakerphones. Just a kind of hush, like the hush that precedes something sacred. His seat mate – already tucked into her aisle seat

– was mid-movie on her iPad, earbuds in, face softly lit by the flickering screen. Willie offered a courteous nod as he eased into the window seat, careful not to jostle her. She smiled, paused her movie, and within minutes they were chatting.

She was a bank executive. Recently back from a trip to Italy with her husband. They'd fallen in love with Florence. Willie said something charming about Michelangelo's David and managed not to sound like a guy who'd Googled it in the boarding line. By the time they finished exchanging travel tales and middle names, they might as well have known each other ten years. Willie had that effect. He was never long without a friend.

With the last bags stowed and the safety demo dutifully ignored, the plane

pushed off the gate and began to taxi. Still no anxiety. Willie was calm – eerily so, given his well-documented distaste for air travel.

Willie glanced at his seat mate's leg now bouncing a subtle but steady rhythm as the nose turned to face the runway. The engines spooled up, and they were off like a promise chasing its own tail.

Out the window, the familiar landmarks of Phoenix peeled away beneath. The curved brown ridges of the Papagos, the maze of suburban rooftops, the tidy tyranny of HOA-approved neighborhoods. Then: sprawl gave way to dust, dust to desert, desert to sky as they punched through a gauzy veil of cloud and leveled out.

Willie settled back in his seat and searched the corners of his spirit for the

feeling of release he'd prophesied on the ground...it wasn't there.

The flight attendant came by with a snack basket and a worn-out smile. A packet of peanuts was dropped on each of their trays, followed by drink orders.

"Coke," Willie said. He wasn't usually a soda guy – too sweet, too fizzy – but his throat had made the call for something with bubbles. As he sipped the half can of coke he was given in a plastic glass full of ice, he glanced at the peanuts, then at the small brass plaque above that read *First Class*, then at his seat mate.

"I know," she said.

"You're going to be floored by the difference once you're on the international leg," she added, with the certainty of someone who's seen things.

“Let’s hope so,” Willie said. They both chuckled.

The flight labored on. He found an opening between snack trays and other passengers to use the restroom, and settled back in his seat for the last 40 minutes of this leg.

Then, somewhere over the ragged peaks of the Sierra Nevada, it hit him.

Not like a thunderbolt. Not a panic. Not a vision. But something quieter. A shift in air pressure, like the cabin had filled with a different kind of oxygen – cleaner, lighter, almost holy. That feeling he’d hoped for on the ground, the one he tried to will into existence back at the gate? It arrived unannounced and filled him like a tide.

Relief. Real, bone-deep, soul-level relief.

It moved through him like music.
The tension that had choked his spirit for the better part of the last decade – the ache of Maria, the ghost of Louie, the hollowing out of a man who once believed in everything – unspooled and fell away, like old armor slipping from his shoulders into the Sequoia's below.

He didn't cry. But if he had, no one would've blamed him.

As the plane gradually dipped into its final descent, almost silent over the Bay, the wheels touched down as soft as a whisper. And as they taxied toward the gate, a voice – clear and sure, not his own – rose up from somewhere inside and said:

Things are different now.

Willie blinked, swallowed, and realized his palms were soaked. So was the

collar of his shirt. He looked like he'd just run a mile through monsoon season. But inside? He felt rinsed clean.

Three hours till the next flight. A business class ticket bought him full access to the Polaris Lounge. And after everything he'd just shed 30,000 feet above California, he figured he'd earned every amenity they had on offer.

Having never flown like this before, Willie approached one of the attendants in the lounge with that signature blend of earnestness and misplaced thrift that made him so damn endearing.

"Where do I pay for these?" he asked, eyeing the elegant buffet of juices, fresh coffee, ripe fruit, flaky pastries, and breakfast sandwiches laid out with all the quiet confidence of a five-star brunch spread.

The attendant smiled kindly.
“They’re complimentary, sir.”

Willie blinked, nodded like he didn’t want to seem too surprised, and grabbed a coffee and a Danish – just one, though he stared at a second long enough to make it blush. He settled into a wide, overstuffed chair beside a window overlooking the tarmac. The sunrise played tricks on the planes outside, and for a rare moment, he let himself sink into the feeling – new, clean, unrushed. If purgatory had a lobby like this, he thought, nobody’d be in a hurry to reach heaven.

That’s when he noticed it: a tall pair of glass doors off to one side, with a silver plaque that read simply *Showers*. He instinctively inhaled the collar of his shirt –

standard Willie protocol – and winced.

“Well, hell,” he muttered. “Why not.”

Still riding high on the strange gravity of this new version of himself, he wandered over and approached the front desk like a man checking into a weekend spa retreat.

“I’d like a shower, please, ma’am,” he said in a tone that split the difference between Thurston Howell III and a rodeo drifter trying to impress the concierge.

“Yes, sir,” she said with practiced elegance, leading him down a polished hallway lined with soft lighting and too-expensive wood paneling. She opened a door to a private suite that looked more like a high-end hotel room than anything he’d seen inside an airport.

“Here you are. Take your time. Help yourself to any of the toiletries – right over there.” She gestured to a silver tray, where soaps, shampoos, lotions, and tiny bottles of something called “facial elixir” were arranged like relics from a future Willie hadn’t planned on entering.

Inside, he stared at the gleaming fixtures and rain-style shower head like he’d stumbled into Narnia. He peeled off the travel grime and five years of heartache, letting the hot water work on him like a second baptism. By the time he emerged, steam trailing behind him, his dome freshly shaved and glowing like a jazz musician after last call, he looked more like a man on the first day of his new life than someone halfway to Tokyo.

He walked back through the lounge, grabbed an orange juice this time – something about Vitamin C felt appropriate – and made his way to the gate. His next ride? A 787-9 Dreamliner. The name alone sounded like a prophecy. His seat, dubbed *The Room*, and it was exactly that: a pod with a lay-flat bed, a privacy door, a 24-inch screen, and a meal service that would put some white-linen restaurants to shame.

They handed him a leather amenities kit with slippers, an eye mask, noise-canceling headphones, a travel toothbrush, and an array of elegant potions he'd never heard of but now, apparently, owned. He held the bag like it might grant him three wishes.

This was not the beginning of a trip. This was a threshold. A departure not just

from Phoenix, or San Francisco, or even the
ghosts that had trailed him all these years.

This was the opening act of
something holy.

San Francisco International - Tokyo Narita

Flight Number NH7

Departure: 12:00 PM

Seat: 07A

Flight Time: 11 hours, 20 minutes

Distance: 5,599 miles

Willie settled into his “room” – there’s no
other word for it – and let out a long breath,
the kind that leaks from your soul when
something inside you finally unclenches. If
the Polaris Lounge was the velvet handshake,
this Dreamliner was the cathedral.

The moment he sank into that seat – lie-flat buttons, private, appointed with all the fixings of a man who'd made better life choices – he felt that peculiar stillness deepen. Like something had opened inside him just wide enough to let in a bit of grace.

His previous seat mate had promised this would be a different experience entirely, and she wasn't wrong. The flight attendants – resplendent in their crisp, orchid-trimmed uniforms – moved with a balletic precision that defied gravity and jet lag alike. Willie told me they glided around the cabin like they were born of silk and intention, communicating in graceful nods and hands placed just so, one appearing the moment before the other disappeared. Like some kind of airborne tea ceremony designed to lower your blood pressure.

And then – *wait, this is a rear-facing seat*, he mused.

He hadn't noticed at first. Too caught up in the miniature universe around him – the menus, the slippers, the way the light hit the polished accents of his little flying apartment. But once he did, he grinned. *I'll be damned*, he thought. Facing backward. It fit. After the last few years, what better way to barrel into the future than looking at where you'd just been?

He wasn't facing anyone directly. In fact, it was just his row up against a bulkhead to the rear of the galley that was aft facing. His seat had a window, two in fact, and an aisle – a thin slice of quiet between him and the rest of the world. The solitude suited him. He told me later it felt like riding in reverse through everything he'd carried up to

this point. As if the flight itself was a symbolic extraction: pulling him out of a life that had done its best to swallow him whole and sending him into one where maybe – just maybe – he could breathe again.

The plane was a monster, that much he knew from the window in San Francisco. A flying city. Willie said he couldn't wrap his head around how something so massive could lift into the sky, but lift it did. When the engines opened up on the runway and the Dreamliner launched forward like a slingshot, he felt it in his bones. The strange pull of physics pressed him gently forward in that rear-facing seat, and for a split second he thought: *This is what starting over feels like.*

Then the nose tilted, the ground slipped away, and the ocean opened its wide

blue throat. Through the thick pane of reinforced glass, he watched the coast peel away below him, the California shoreline vanishing into haze and memory. Cities receded like regrets. Roads turned to veins. The past, it seemed, was shrinking behind him, mile by mile.

And with every thousand feet of altitude, something more fell away. Another part of the ache. Another shard of Louie's loss. Another remnant of the Maria storm that had torn up his life like a twister through the prairie.

He told me it was like watching all the broken pieces of himself dislodge, tumble off the plane, and plummet into the Pacific below – softly, like ash. He imagined them scattering across the water, swallowed up by the tide. Nothing left but salt and sky.

Sublime, he called it.

And with a stark realization he was a giant leap closer to the soul reset he set out on. This leg would actually take him *to Japan*. During that flight he said he felt his soul resetting its compass midair.

Save for a few polite shivers of turbulence spaced out like commas, the flight was exactly what Willie needed it to be – a reprieve from the world, wrapped in altitude and silence. The food was unlike anything he'd ever had, at 35,000 feet or elsewhere. Artfully plated, absurdly flavorful. Three full meals, plus an open invitation to indulge in snacks or spirits whenever the mood struck. Willie, never one to abuse hospitality but also never one to ignore it, opted for a few extra-dry Asahi's – crisp, cold, and served with the kind of reverence you'd expect in a

proper izakaya tucked down an alley in Osaka.

He watched a few movies. Napped. Opened his MacBook and pecked out fragments of prose – half-thoughts, haiku-stained journal entries, little meditations on motion and memory. He didn't push it. Didn't try to wring brilliance from the altitude. He just wrote what came.

Somewhere around the midpoint of the flight, the cabin softened. The lights dimmed. Curtains were drawn. Flight attendants floated through the aisles, helping passengers convert their pods into beds – tight corners transformed into cocoons. A ballet of bedding and whispered instructions. Willie followed suit, folding himself into his private space with the slow, practiced

movements of someone unwrapping
something precious.

One pillow tucked beneath his head.
Another pulled close to his chest like an old
lover he never got to say goodbye to. And
there he lay, long and low, wrapped in
warmth and altitude and silence.

He slept.

Not the light doze of travel-weary
tourists or the neck-cricked desperation of
coach sleepers, but a true sleep. A deep,
cleansing kind. Willie said later it felt like
hibernation, like his soul had slipped
beneath the ice for a few quiet hours to heal
in the dark. He dreamed of Japan – not the
Google version with beaches and lanterns,
but something ancient. Monks in saffron
robes. Temple bells echoing through cedar

forests. Peace. Not as a concept, but as a presence.

When he woke, the lights were still low, the hush still intact. He reoriented his little room – seat upright, tray stowed – and stared quietly out the window at a sea of clouds drifting slow beneath them like ghost ships. He asked for another Asahi. The attendant bowed and returned a moment later with an open can, condensation just beginning to bead.

Turning back towards the window, he saw it.

Not dramatically, not with any cinematic swell of music – but simply, like it had always been there, waiting for him. The coastline of Japan. Soft. Dreamlike. An ink-brushed landscape unfurling beneath the wing.

He didn't gasp. Didn't weep. Just sat there, watching, feeling something in his chest unfurl too. It was beautiful – yes – but it was more than that. It felt like a painting, sure. But more like a memory he hadn't made yet. Something sacred that had been tucked away for him.

And the voice – that same voice he heard whisper through his bones when he landed in San Francisco – came again. This time deeper, clearer. *Things are different now.*

As the Dreamliner glided across the coastline, on a slow, gradual descent into Japan's open palm, Willie watched the countryside come to life. Villages like specks of calligraphy. Roadways threading through green. It was like watching a story take shape

– one he hadn't written yet, but one he knew was his.

And in that moment, he didn't feel the absence of pain, or the simple relief of escape.

He felt beginnings.

That rare, holy feeling that your life isn't ending – it's just turning the page.

The giant plane eased onto the runway and made a dramatic brake to a slow roll to the gate. He arrived.

For the next 30 days, Willie explored Japan like a man trying to memorize a symphony – note by note, movement by movement, letting it seep into him. He didn't approach the country like a tourist ticking boxes. He moved like a pilgrim. Or maybe a ghost, retracing a life he might have lived in another time.

He knelt on tatami mats in temples older than the idea of America. Sat beneath paper lanterns that cast soft halos over steaming bowls of ramen so complex they could've been classified as poetry. He wandered Kyoto like a man under a spell, walking its narrow alleyways and cobblestone backstreets with reverence – eyes up, heart open. He bowed to monks, to shopkeepers, to the rising sun itself.

In Nara, he fed crackers to the sacred deer who bowed in return, their soft, unblinking eyes holding something ancient. In Inari, he climbed the endless tunnel of crimson torii, each gate like a beat in a meditative drumline, rising through the trees and winding up the mountain until the city fell away and all that remained was breath, and wood, and wind. He stood still in

Nagano as the snow monkeys soaked in hot springs and gave him a side-eye that suggested they'd seen men like him come and go for centuries.

In Hiroshima, he walked with his head low, heart heavy. He said the silence there was louder than any city he'd ever known. And in Osaka, he drank highballs and neat pours of Yamazaki, letting the caramel heat burn away things he didn't have names for. Somewhere along the way he tasted grilled eel so tender it made him swear under his breath, and sipped a yuzu cocktail that caught him off guard with its grace. Japan didn't just feed you. It seduced you. Slowly. Thoroughly.

There were moments of flirtation, too. Subtle. Gentle. A barista in a Kyoto café who complimented his film camera and

lingered a little longer than necessary. A waitress in Osaka who laughed at his attempt to order in Japanese and then brought him a drink he didn't ask for but loved. Willie never pursued any of them. He was still keeping his vow. But it was nice to feel seen again, even fleetingly. To feel like a man and not a husk.

He rode the Shinkansen like it was a chariot – silent, smooth, faster than thought – staring out at rice paddies and mist-covered mountains like they were postcards from a calmer universe. He took photos constantly. Not to post. Not to prove. But to try and pin down the pulse of the country before it slipped through his fingers. He said it felt like Japan had cracked him open and was gently putting the pieces back, rearranged, maybe even upgraded.

By the end of the month, his gait had changed. Slower, more deliberate. He spoke less. Smiled more. He'd learned a few dozen words in Japanese and used them with sincerity.

The man who boarded the plane in Phoenix with a fractured soul was still fractured – but now the pieces were starting to hum in harmony.

And then... Tokyo.

He would spend his last three days and two nights there – catch an event, explore the gardens, maybe wander a back alley bar or two, before heading back home. There was a rhythm to Tokyo that was different – edgier, faster. Willie could feel it in the sidewalk under his boots. It buzzed through neon signs and echoed in the way strangers moved past each other without

touching. It was electric. And maybe just a little dangerous.

He messaged me that morning:
*Tokyo's different. Feels like the volume's
been turned up.*

That was the last normal message I got.

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