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There’s nothing like a birthday, an unexpected bloody nose, or waking up after only three hours of sleep to slap you in the face with your own physical vulnerability. There is also a call, as distinct as the ring of your mobile phone, the call of nature, and if you ignore it, it chimes back uncomfortably louder.

Ah, urine, the two-syllable liquid by-product you hardly contemplate while stirring sugar into your morning tea or sculling a bottle of water; the bodily function that interrupts a supermarket mission or forces us to seek sanctuary in a neglected roadhouse toilet. Weeee – if only the happy-go-lucky euphemism of the word could save us from those ‘desperate’ moments.

My most notable ‘desperate’ moment occurred whilst I was on a work charity walk. It was the third week of my starting my first ‘real’ job after university and I had just progressed from the ‘Hi, I’m extremely new and incredibly clueless’ stage to the ‘Hi, I kind of know what I’m doing, but I’m still feeling awkward around all of these new people’ stage. It was a luminous Friday and I was looking forward to walking at a leisurely pace for an environmental cause.

Minutes into the walk my attempts at bonding with members of my department were impolitely interrupted by an unmistakable sting. Surely not? I had been a responsible adult and prepared myself for this hour-long walk. I would just have to stop at the next public toilet, so I asked my walking group to be on the lookout. But after 20 minutes of nothing but suburbia, reality squashed down on my bladder and the hope of me conveniently finding a public toilet.
Recalling the behavioural-based interview I had endured to secure this position, I was drawn back to a particular question: Tell us about a specific situation in which you had to adjust to changes over which you had no control. How did you handle it?

I began to joke about being so desperate that squatting seemed the ideal solution. After the abhorrent facial expressions subsided, I realised that I was caught in a moment where breaking the social boundaries was not going to be daring or progressive. Even though it felt like all of my body-water had gushed to my bladder, I had no choice but to ‘hold on’.

Memory of what happened for the remainder of the walk has now, thankfully, been repressed. I do know tears were almost involved and I’d depended on a technique of pinching my hand as a means of distraction from my pelvic pain. A public park had finally provided me with a toilet and it was only when I walked out of the cubicle that everybody wanted to share their own horror stories of imminent bladder bust.

There was the time my manager was forced to squat on the side of the road during an unrelenting traffic jam or when another colleague sat down at a restaurant, ordered food, visited the bathroom and then walked out. Both people had sought out unconventional methods to rescue them from a potential ‘accident’ – but where were these stories previously? Telling them would have reminded me of my humanness and lifted the guilt I was feeling in regards to my vulnerability.

If only the abject was explored and accepted more widely within Western culture, we would feel more comfortable with our physical requirements and ourselves. Until then, I only hope that just one other person can relate to this experience – it’s all we can hope for.

By Autumn Royal