



Heart of the Mountain *Patricia Brown Davis*

Tales from the Black Abyss

“But I don’t want to go out there!”
“It’s all they have.”
“But the grass is wet and it’s dark!”
“I’ll give you a flashlight.”

I put my slippers on and scurried out into the night. As scary as this was for a nine-year-old, it was better than the alternative. If I didn’t go, the next morning I’d be carrying a chamber pot from the upstairs bedroom out there to dump, rinse, and return to its place back upstairs under the bed. With that thought in mind, I made a beeline to my grandparents’ outhouse.

I ran down the path as quickly as possible, feeling the tall grass whip against my pajama legs, which were wicking the dew from the blades of grass. All kinds of creatures seemed to lurk just beyond the flashlight’s beam. The path was long, the building foreboding.

I directed the light beam onto the handle of the old latrine and pushed open the creaking door. Gingerly, I stepped up into the small dark space and looked around to make sure nothing else inhabited the room.

Quickly, I shut the door and set the flashlight on the floor with the beam shining towards the ceiling. I didn’t take time to study the flowered wallpaper, the calendar, or the padded burgundy velvet-covered toilet seat that hung on the wall as a joke. It was a three-holer—I chose the medium sized one.

Pulling down my pajama bottoms, I hiked myself up over the hole. Balancing on two hands, I tried not to let my bottom touch the rough wood. All the while I was wondering and hoping I wouldn’t fall into the black, odorous abyss. How far down was it to the bottom? Were there living things that lurked down there just waiting to grab onto the first butt that exposed itself? If I fell in, would my family hear my cries for help?

Short work was made of the affair. Jumping down from the platform, I hiked up my pajamas, grabbed the flashlight, opened the door, and raced out into the night. Sprinting back up the path, I had a strange feeling I’d left something undone. Oh yeah, I didn’t have to flush!

As a child, this was my lot (and everyone else’s) when we visited my mother’s parents, Leroy and Lula Love Graham, on their rural farm on the border of Tioga and Lycoming counties. It made me feel lucky that in all of

the houses I grew up in, we always had a “flushable.” However, there were still many places in the area—farms, cabins, and camps—that still had “functioning” outhouses.

Dad’s side of the family had a cabin on Waneta Lake, in the Finger Lakes. Like the rest of the cottages there at the time, it also had an outhouse. Usually, when we were there, the place was filled with relatives and friends—and food and drink. It was summer, and it was hot. There was always plenty of iced tea, lemonade, and assorted adult beverages. This meant the outhouse was a particularly busy place. And adults were pretty clever at getting their “dibs in” on who would be next. This was not always a good thing for a small child, who usually did not plan very far in advance for bathroom breaks.

Mom’s answer to this for me was to use an empty three-pound Spry can. (Spry was Proctor & Gamble’s answer to their competitor, Crisco.) The upside of this was that I did not have to subject myself to the “black abyss” and the ensuing odor it exuded. However, a lack of privacy was the bitter trade-off for this. Since one-piece bathing suits were fashionable for girls, and I was always wearing one, it meant stripping down the entire suit to go to the bathroom. I was just old enough to feel really embarrassed if I had to do this, and was ever so happy to instead be swimming and just let “it” go in the lake, until I was reminded that “it” was something that I might gulp while swimming.

I’m embarrassed to reveal outhouses were also part of Halloween chicanery among my friends and I as high school students. Tipping one over seemed an easy feat, since they usually had no foundations and were designed to be set on their sides for cleaning. I recall

a time when a couple of boys were made to ride home in the bed of an open truck after extracting themselves from an odoriferous black abyss where they ended up while trying to tip one over. Then there was the time someone inside hollered out as a couple of classmates tried tipping one over.

I attended Middlebury Elementary School, now the site of the Middlebury Fire Department. There were two inside bathroom facilities, one each for the boys and the girls. Each had several stalls, and all toilets were unflushables! Educational facilities in the 1950s had not caught up with the residences of the area. The rooms were not heated. No one lingered there, which I’m sure teachers would consider an advantage over today’s modern school bathrooms.

When I think of the thousands of gallons of water used in our flushables today, I begin to think of how “green” these old unflushables were. There was no worry about plumbing or freezing pipes in the winter. People did not linger long in one, either. On the other hand, one often had to plan ahead.

Every time I travel to Third World countries, I think of those childhood days. Those unique and funky travel stories could fill another page or two. When I saw the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* recently, I was reminded of my outhouse exploits. Though life was much simpler then, a flushable is one practical convenience I’d rather not do without.

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COURTESY PATRICIA BROWN DAVIS

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