

Black Toilet Seats

by Liz Gibbons

The first long trip that I remember my family taking by automobile was in 1939 when my brother was four and I was six. A highlight of the trip was our visit to Mount Rushmore where Gutzon Borglum and his workers had nearly finished chiseling the faces of the presidents on the stone face of the mountain. Some of the scaffolding and bosum chairs, by which the workers were lowered, were still in place. Another memory of that trip was how cantankerous my brother was.

It started when we made our first stop to fill the gas tank in Illinois. My mother took my brother and me to use the restroom. My brother refused to use the toilet. It had a black toilet seat. My mother tried to reason with him. "It is just like the toilet at home." "No it isn't," he said stomping his foot. She raised the seat for him. No, he was not going to use it. He was adamant. In response to anything she said he became more cantankerous and obstinate. It was as if he was afraid of that toilet. When we returned to the car she told my father of the difficulty, and he said he would take my brother to the men's room. Good luck. The set up was the same, again a black toilet seat, and he stubbornly refused to use it.

Of course, you know the outcome. We got ten miles down the road, and my brother said he had to go to the bathroom. This was before interstates, so my father pulled onto the shoulder of the road near a stand of trees and took my brother to relieve himself behind a tree.

Unfortunately, we ran into dark toilet seats in several other gas stations, so it was the same scenario all over again: obstinate, stubborn, and cantankerous. My parents could not figure out why he was so fearful of toilets with dark seats.

This week I called my brother to find out why. He said Mom and Dad had sent him to Mrs. Robbins' nursery school when he was three. She was a grandmotherly woman who ran a good nursery school in her spacious home. The toilet in her bathroom was Victorian style with the water tank high on the wall, and you pulled a long chain to flush it. The toilet was dark in color. It made a lot of noise when flushed. To him, it was not a proper toilet. It was strikingly different from the two toilets in our home. He hated it, and he found it scary.

He does not know if Mom and Dad learned of his fear of Mrs. Robbins' toilet and his connection, in his mind, to any toilet with a dark seat. With our vivid imaginations as young children we have all survived things that scared us out of our wits: monsters lurking in dark closets or under our bed, things that go bump in the night, boogeymen, and in my brother's case . . . black toilet seats.