

# Running Water

written by Holly

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By Holly Lisle

I've discovered this morning that I have a thing in my writing for the miracle of indoor plumbing. I am terribly fond of figuring out ways to include flush toilets, hot showers, and taps that turn water on and off.

I am grateful for hot running water and civilized sewage handling. It comes from my childhood, where on and off, I got to experience at first hand life without these wonders. They aren't conveniences. They are SO much more than conveniences.

When I lived in Alaska, we pumped water in from the Kwethluk River, which ran by our front door, and stored it in a giant cistern. We treated it with Clorox – the smell still takes me back to a time when that was the primary smell of drinking water. When the river froze over, my father and some of the boys from the boys' dorm, where my family and I lived, would go out and chip a hole through ice that was sometimes six feet thick to get down to running water.

And when it came into the house, it ran through our taps to the kitchen sink and the bathtub, but in one flavor only. Cold. If we wanted hot water, we got to build a fire in the wood stove, set pots and kettles onto its cast-iron top, and waited for them to heat up. Then we poured them into the old porcelain claw-footed tub and added just enough cold to make the water bearable. It chilled quickly enough on its own. Showers came only in cold; I was nine, and did not shower.

Our toilet was the euphemistically-named honey bucket – a big galvanized bucket hidden inside a plywood box that had a standard toilet seat affixed to the top. Clorox replaced flushing as the way to keep down smells, and once a day my

father had the privilege of carrying the honey bucket out to the dump downstream from our little cluster of houses. The boys in the dorm had the plywood outhouse – and when I was at the girls' dorm, I used their outhouse. We had old Sears' catalogs for toilet paper. And in an unheated plywood outhouse at forty degrees below zero, these trips were short and desperate.

Later, in Guatemala, we lived in Chiquimula, which I loved. It was a beautiful old town full of kind people. I was less fond of our shower. The shower drew its water from a bitterly cold mountain aquifer. We had an amusing little arrangement of black plastic pipes up on the roof that was supposed to create solar heat and that in fact did nothing whatsoever. At fifteen, I mastered the sixty-second shower, including washing and rinsing a head full of long hair.

You don't forget these things.

So now I discover that plumbing makes its way into my fantasy novels with startling regularity. My folks might be primitive, but by God, they find ways to have hot running water and flushable toilets. Some of the time, anyway.

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