

# Pay Attention

By Jim Turner

It should have been a very simple fix with no surprises, at least none that would cause me to use bad words. I have done this kind of repair before on other tanks and sinks, and I expected to be finished with two upstairs toilet tanks in a half hour or so. I strode through the automatic doors at Lowe's Home Improvement, nodded hello to the greeter and marched with authority down the first aisle till I saw the sign for plumbing. I didn't need help. I knew where I was going. I hooked a right at the last row and stopped about midway down. There, hanging in a neat row, was the selection of flexible water lines, displayed in ascending order according to length. They were attractive little dudes sheathed in stainless steel mesh and built for durability.

The thing is, I am zealously working to shed my image as a hapless and feckless homeowner by methodically catching up on some long overdue repairs to our house. Construction of our home was completed in early 2002, so some of the original equipment is beginning to notify me of its pending demise. Besides the mere age of the building, I have heard several disturbing stories recently about islanders who have returned after a lengthy absence to discover their houses have been flooded. One of the suggestions to avoid this tragedy is to systematically switch out all the old water feed lines on toilet tanks and sinks and dishwashers and moonshine equipment. Throw away PVC and copper feeds and replace them with the new and improved flexible ones. It should be a piece of cake, right? You only need a small adjustable wrench and some flexible knees.

I did not bother to measure the distance on my existing fixtures from the tank bottoms to the water inlets protruding from the floor. Exhibiting the same confidence I had shown when walking directly to the water lines in Lowe's, I assumed that I could eyeball the little devils and pick the right one for my project. To be safe, though, I picked two 16-inch lengths. Better to be too long than too short, I reasoned, and I made my way to the checkout lanes.

While standing patiently with nothing better to do, I began reading the label attached to the replacement part. Right there on the bright red and white tag with the 45-digit UPC code was the word "faucet." Oops. Man, I'm glad I saw that before I got home.

Finally I returned home with the proper tags clearly indicating they were for toilets. Then, using my flexible knees and medium adjustable wrench, I began to remove the old line. I was really clever, almost professional. I shut off the intake valve, flushed the toilet, removed the excess water and took off the old line. Damn that was easy. Then I began to attach the new line and recognized pretty quickly that it might be just a tad too long. The old line measured 12 inches, and the excess length of the 16-inch line refused to be flexible enough to connect at both ends. I guess I should have used a measuring tape to start with.

The next day I moved through the automatic doors with a little less authority, nodded to the greeter and walked the short distance to the returns desk. "I need to exchange these for two shorter lines," I said. Then, back in front of the display, I took two 12-inch lines from the toilet section. So back at the exchange desk I traded the two 16-inch tubes for two 12-inch tubes, and the clerk said I owed 96 cents more. That seemed weird and I commented about how shorter was more valuable. I didn't even get a smile.

Forty-five minutes later, my flexible knees and adjustable wrench had attached the line on toilet #1, turned on the water and checked for leaks. Take that, plumbing service. This is where I need to tell you that my wonderful wife of 52 years often says to me, "You don't pay attention." When one of us notices blood dripping from one of my body parts and I don't know how the mishap happened, she says, "You don't pay attention." If my driving maneuvers incite road rage from another motorist, she says, "You don't pay attention." So I really dreaded letting her know I needed to go back to Lowe's—again. But this was not my fault. Both of the most recently exchanged lines were designed for toilets and each was 12 inches in length. The difference was in the diameter of one of the connections.

My loving and understanding wife rolled her eyes and began to say, "You just don't . . ." but I was already out the door. The returns clerk gave me an odd look as I explained that the toilet tank water leads, 12-inch lengths, were mixed up on the display rack and the 1/2-inch fittings were intermingled with the 3/8-inch fittings.

The greeter raised one eyebrow as I passed him. I ducked my head and moved off toward the plumbing section. Soon I returned to the exchange clerk with the correct part, the perfect size, indestructible flexible water feed braided in stainless steel. This was the Superman of all water lines. She made the exchange, and after some pitiful begging on my part, she wrote a note for me: "Dear Mrs. Turner, I want to assure you that your husband was not at fault when he made his last purchase of the flexible, stainless covered, non-destructible toilet water lines. This was all Lowe's' fault and we take full responsibility. We hung the items with the diameter sizes all mixed together, which caused him to select the wrong line for his needs. I do, however, have one little request for your future plumbing projects. Either accompany your husband and help with the replacement part selection or call Island Plumbing. Thank you for your continued patronage."

A few days following that not-so-simple-after-all plumbing project, we were out and about together and I was enjoying one of my favorite pastimes, people watching. The tourists were still teeming everywhere, filling what should be "locals only" parking spaces and walking four abreast on sidewalks and streets and grocery stores and anywhere they pleased. There were all makes and models of folks, some eating ice cream cones and some not. Many required a second look, especially the attractive ladies with their dripping Ben and Jerry's flavors. I guess my rotating head had finally given me away when my handler caught me looking a bit too long at a passerby. "What are you doing?" she asked. "I'm just paying attention," I said.

Maybe one day I will learn to think before I speak.



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