



Footprints

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He was about halfway to the train station when he noticed them glistening eerily on the sidewalk.

His head was tilted forward, partially because of the bitterly cold Chicago wind and partially to protect his eyes from the freezing rain that struck the skin of his face like thousands of tiny needles. If he hadn't been looking down, he probably would've never noticed the oddly glistening footprints.

The glistening was, of course, due to the city lights shining on the slippery wet sidewalk, he told himself. Nothing odd or eerie about that. Still, he couldn't recall ever seeing such a perfectly visible set of footprints before. Left, right, left, right, seemingly exact in stride and width, a perfectly straight path in the same direction he'd been heading.

On a whim, he placed his left foot in the center of one footprint and his right foot in the center of the other. While the person who'd left the prints obviously had larger feet (his own shoes easily fitting within each print), the width apart and length of stride felt comfortably like his own. As his second foot came down to form a matching pair, an odd memory of an old poem suddenly popped into his head.

The poem was something he'd once seen hanging on a wall, about walking next to a spiritual figure like Jesus, or Buddha, or someone like that. In the poem, there were two sets of footprints, and then just one. And at the times when there was only one set of prints, that was when the spirit was supposedly carrying you through hard times.

Odd that he'd remember something like that. He wasn't normally a very 'spiritual' guy. Must've been something on his mom's wall when he was kid, he thought to himself. She really went in for all that religious crap. Pictures of saints and stuff on the walls. Such a good, God-fearing, churchgoing woman ... except when she was beating

the crap out of him.

He didn't notice that he'd begun walking again, one foot after the other, left, right, left, right. He also failed to notice that each step landed perfectly within a glistening footprint.

Yeah, good old Mom. He'd loved her with all his heart, but after that beating with the electrical cord when he was twelve, his grabbing for the lamp and swinging it at her head had just been self-defense, a protective reflex.

And then there'd been that cheerleader in high school.

All he'd wanted was to take her to the dance ... just one lousy dance. He could still hear her laughing at him, mocking him. When the police found her car that night, wrapped around an old oak tree, they'd said it was a shame the way kids drove so fast, and just bad luck that her brakes had gone out at that moment.

Left, right, left, right, left, right. His pace quickened as he thought about all the women, all the heartless bitches who had used him, treated him like dirt ... like his ex-girlfriend.

They'd lived together for months, even talked about marriage. Then he'd arrived home one night to find all his stuff, his CDs, clothes, everything, scattered on the wet sidewalk in front of their apartment, in the pouring rain. He'd been pissed, *really* pissed. And she'd seen it in his eyes, had known he'd be back and would make her pay. It'd been just too damned bad, the way she'd fallen from the fire escape landing to the sidewalk below, just like his stuff.

And then came all the others, the faceless women. Faces didn't matter, as they were all the same. He walked the city's streets almost every night, now. Dark alleys, brightly lit sidewalks, it didn't matter where. The police were stupid, powerless, and he was a god, taking life and giving death to all the faceless bitches. He used a knife now, as there was no longer a need to fake accidents. He was all powerful, uncatchable, dispensing justice with a flick of his knife. Just one quick flick....

"POLICE!! Someone call the POLICE!"

Yelling ... someone was yelling.

He stopped and shook his head, like someone suddenly waking after unexpectedly dozing off. As his sight cleared, he saw her lying on the sidewalk before him, covered in blood. And, in his hands, his own pocketknife, also covered in blood.

It didn't make sense. She was a complete stranger, someone he'd never seen before. And ... and, the memories he'd just relived, moments before ... they weren't his. He'd loved his mother and had married his childhood sweetheart. He was still happily married after twenty years, with two kids, a dog, and a nice house in the suburbs. What was going on? What was happening to him?

As a crowd began to gather around him and a siren sounded far off in the distance, he noticed something else. Beyond the gruesome

sight at his feet, there were no more footprints. He looked down at his shoes, now covered in blood. He was standing in the last set of prints. Two oddly glistening footprints, rapidly disappearing in the freezing mist.

It was all too much to register, to deal with ... the blood, the young girl's dead body. He felt himself falling, down, down, down. The lights, the people, the noise and lights around him seemed to be fading away. As he hit the ground, his mind numbly registered that someone was kicking him in the ribs.

The last thing he saw before completely losing consciousness was the sole of a large shoe, rapidly approaching his face. And all he could think of, at that moment, was that he didn't recognize the footprint.



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