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FOOTPRINTS

by

Ben Dearden

The last time Jane and I walked together was also the first time it snowed that season.

Normally banter pushed its way through the crisp air, but tonight we let the silence rule for a minute. She was leaving soon, not by desire or by coincidence, but by mutually acknowledged necessity. I'd be taking a separate path a few weeks later. I didn't know where, but I did know that I didn't belong here once she left. Strictly speaking, there was nothing tying us together but an impenetrable friendship and maybe a few years of unresolved romantic tension that had passed its expiration date. Now the two of us would glance at it every once in a while, wondering if compatibility could go bad.

"Are you going to be alright without me?" asked Jane. I knew her well enough to hear the concern stirring deep under the teasing. My jacket was thick and stiff, and the way it pressed on my arm almost made me feel like she had linked hers in mine, but she hadn't.

"I was fine for the better part of two decades before you," I said.

Jane shook her head, trying to show her face to talk and hide it from the cold that crept down her collar. "Another thing I need to teach you. Definition of the word 'fine.'"

"Really, I was. I mean, yeah, I can think of some people who would disagree. . ."

"Your mother, your exes, your psychologist," she started.

"My teachers, my childhood friends, my minister. . . See, I know how to make a list, too." Some might be offended by my apparent flippancy, but Jane and I knew each other too well. She grinned at me, and as I grinned back, it wasn't just our amusement that clicked, but also that deep, rolling sadness, that quarter-inch of mud at the base of my lungs. Perhaps one day it would rise to fill my lungs and heart and drown me in heavy earth, or maybe I'd be able to plant something in the dark soil and turn it into something better or something worse. It depended, I suppose, on what seed I swallowed, what seed of faith or doubt would send its roots creeping through my veins, what fruit would cloud my dull eyes or lie glimmering behind them.

Maybe it would be a melanchol-tree. I considered sharing the pun with her, but I didn't feel like it tonight. That might be the closest to sadness I ever really got. Failure to share puns.

"You really have come a long way," she said, tightening her grip on my arm. No, wait, her arms were at her sides. It was no more than the stiff pressure of the cold on my jacket.

"Is that sincerity I'm detecting?" I asked. "Whatever happened to the Jane Harlan I knew?"

She used her shoulder to check me off the narrow sidewalk and into the lightly-dusted, half-maintained lawns.

"I think I get one moment of sentimentality throughout this whole thing, don't I?"

I shrugged. "Have I ever been able to stop you from taking a moment of anything you felt like? Actually, a better question: Have I ever been able to stop you from anything?"

"No, and you never will," she said, spunk and sass conquering sentiment, as per norm.

I laughed. "That's the girl I . . ."

I trailed off. Someone was tromping around the corner in heavy winter boots, and we put our conversation on hold as they passed, not out of embarrassment or shame. I thought there was a beauty to it that paralleled the drifting snow. It was just decency and custom, throwing a fig leaf on before all passers-by.

We waited a respectful amount of time before we resumed, nothing to disturb the icy silence but the soft *wish, wish, wish* of my Converse through the frosted grass.

Heh. Frosted grass. It was funny, because it sounded like frosted glass, the material that you built . . . nevermind.

"What are you going to do for the first six months?" asked Jane.

"Oh, cry while eating buckets of ice cream, of course," I said. "At which point I'll move on to moping, which will probably last me three months by itself, followed by . . ."

I stopped, noticing something in the snow and took a breath which, for the first time in weeks seemed to enter and leave my lungs entirely clean, unsullied by the mud.

"What?" she asked, when I didn't respond for five or six seconds.

"Nothing," I said, looking at the prints in the snow. She probably wouldn't understand. She was much too practical.

Jane hadn't noticed, but next to the long scuffs of boot tracks and the leaping, limping path of the optimists in sandals, there was another set of tracks: slow, simple, spaced like those of a sleep-walker and completely barefoot. If I had to guess, I would say that they were a girl's, though that instinct could be wrong. The steps were light, and yet they cut all the way through the snow, the grass underneath still green and hale, not bent and muddy like the grass underneath the boot tracks.

"What are you looking at?" asked Jane. I didn't want to tell her though, because she would give me an explanation. Some sorority initiation ceremony, or a dare. Maybe it was an overenthusiastic barefoot runner. I didn't want to hear any of that. Jane liked stories, but she turned them into rabbits and chased them around the world until they were worn and hiding in a corner. Then she would display them proudly to everyone who asked and never even notice that her journey had taken her through the Hanging Gardens or that she had asked directions of the Basque street-Christ.

"Just appreciating the snow," I lied. I suppose I didn't want our relationship to end with dishonesty, but I would write her a letter as soon as I figured out why I cared so much that these tracks were mine to see and not hers.

She sighed with every part of her body but her mouth. I wondered if she had learned when I was shutting off, when I was following my own rabbit, not to kill it but to see where it led me. Either way, she didn't respond, and I didn't move. We stood there in the tranquil dark, waiting.

"Come on," I said, offering my arm. Even in that act, I knew that this summer was indisputably ending, the fall leaking away too. Or

perhaps it was already over, and now, with Jane, I was reminiscing and re-enacting. Still, she smiled and took my arm. She was gentler than normal, even gentler than the pressure of my stiff coat. As we walked, I concentrated on her breathing and the slow, bare footsteps ahead. Neither wavered from their steady rhythm forward.

In a few minutes she stopped, and I realized that we were in front of her apartment. "You should get back," she said. "It's cold, and you're tired."

I nodded, though my gaze was to the east, still following the tracks.

"But I know you won't," she said, more to herself than me.

"Hmm?" I asked.

"I saw you following those tracks with your eyes and figured you would ask me about them if you wanted me to say anything. So go for it," she said. "Figure out where they go."

And in a moment, something boiled together within me, fusing together the sadness and romance of an end; the gift and curse of contentment with which I was born; the loss, the gain and all the tension there, romantic and religious; before Jane and after her.

I leaned forward and, for the first time, kissed Jane on the cheek. She leaned into it as I drew away, almost stumbling forward in an astounded stupor. In the three seconds before her analytical mind caught up with what had happened and made me stay for interrogation and declaration of intentions, I laughed and told her, "I don't care where those footprints go. I only care that they are there."