

THE MUDDY FOOTPRINTS

When Marissa arrived home that evening, she noticed the muddy footprints entering her apartment building. They had stopped at the base of the stairway. She found this very odd. She could tell by the size and the type of imprint that they belonged to a man. She was familiar with most of the tenants in the building and knew they were more conscientious than this. She was surprised. Then she remembered her cat. He was always there upon her return and even that seemed odd and lent itself to a feeling of uneasiness.

She entered her apartment, shaking out her umbrella. It was nice to be out of the rain and out of the damp weather. She had often thought of moving to another climate. But she always ended up just thinking about it and never resolving to do it. She also knew her mother would not allow it. She had moved out of her mother's apartment just a year ago. That had been the most difficult thing she had ever done. Her mother had made it almost impossible and did everything she could to fill her with guilt. There was nothing physically wrong with her mother but she had used illness, aloneness, and everything else a person could use to keep someone bound and tied. At least, that is how Marissa felt living with her, bound and tied. Now, she just called on the phone rattling on about anything she could conjure up just to have a reason to call.

She had always hoped her Dad would return for her one day. But when he left, he never looked back. Knowing her mother as she did, she could understand why. She wondered through the years why he would leave her behind. She had tried locating him but any help from her mother to find him was ignored. She wondered if he left for the same reasons she wanted to. All she knew about him was that he wanted to have a ranch 'out west'. She often wondered if she should move west and see if she could find him.

As she was getting undressed, her mind wandered back to earlier that morning. She was on her way to work and had stopped to pick up a newspaper, like she always did. She liked to read it on the bus on the way to work.

This morning had been different. There had been a man watching her this morning. It was still cold and damp and he had his collar up around his face and a hat, low on his forehead. His shoes were muddy from the rain. It was hard to really see his face. His eyes had never left her until she boarded the bus and was out of sight. It was then that she had made the connection in her mind with the muddy footprints last night. She was apprehensive.

When she arrived at her stop, she realized she had never looked at her newspaper. 'This was something she did every single morning, she thought. She didn't get the same enjoyment reading on line. As she got off of the bus, she looked around almost expecting to find him waiting there, but she was relieved that she was wrong. Perhaps she had just made too much of it.

She walked the remaining distance to her work place. She entered the building, unnoticed, as always. She was just a blur to the many faces as she walked by. Mrs. Waters, the head librarian always stared at her as if she were an intruder. In the earlier years, she had smiled

or nodded and said hello or good morning, but now she would just look down and walk by. This seemed to satisfy Mrs. Waters. In the 9 years she had been there, she had applied for two promotional positions, but was turned down for both of them. She had stopped trying.

Her job had become instinctual and her every move mechanical. She worked in the basement where all of the old magazines and newspapers and other items of this type were filed. She was in charge of filing away all of the items that had been taken off of the racks and maintaining all of the functions of this lower floor. She was glad that she worked in this area, away from the other employees. The only company she had were part-time students that came and went, and people searching for research purposes.

She was forgotten in the rows and rows of racks of magazines and newspapers. She knew them all by heart and if you were looking for something very specific, she knew where to find it and could also tell you other things that matched it. She was very good at what she did, although no one ever noticed. She had never missed a day of work, nor had ever been late. Many of the patrons had praised her intelligence on a range of topics of which she was well read and well versed. But she often thought that this did not appear to be grounds for promotion. So she simply made the best of things, for she knew the other alternative was living with her mother. This is what drove her to excel, unnoticed.

She had taken the usual ride home on the bus that evening and the morning had been forgotten. She had taken out the newspaper from her bag that she always carried, and finally read it on the way home. She could see the wet streets and the buildings and lights transposed on its surface. She was finally home.

As she came to her building she remembered the muddy footprints and looked immediately to see if last night had repeated itself, and was relieved it had not. She made her way into the living room and noticed that her answering machine was blinking, alerting her that someone had called and left her a message. It continued to blink in the darkness. She turned on the light in the kitchen and the blinking faded somewhat, losing its importance.

She was not aware that outside *he* waited in the rain. He watched her motion through the window, deciding when he would make his move. What would she say? He smiled, anticipating the answer. He would do what he had to do.

She pondered the muddy footprints. "Maybe someone had a delivery or mail. It was probably nothing to worry about. She would fix herself something to eat and forget about it. She always tended to worry. Mmmh, hot chocolate sounded good!"

It was a perfect night to curl up and read her book. She would wrap herself up in her blanket and read and drink her hot chocolate. She had read several chapters before she had fallen asleep. Something had awakened her and as she sat trying to find out what it was, she heard the rasping at the door. "Oh, thank God, its Ramses", she thought. She opened the door and there was her male Siamese, soaking wet. He immediately ventured towards his favorite rug near the fireplace and began licking his wet mane.

“Well, I was beginning to worry about you,” Marissa said. Ramses stared at her and continued his grooming.

Ramses had followed her home one-day from a nearby restaurant. It was wet and cold that night too. She had then stopped at the market for some cat food. As she had left the store she remembered her mother telling her not to feed stray animals because "they will just keep coming back." She smiled at the cashier and told her she had to get home to feed *her* cat.

She had invited Ramses in about a year ago, with a constant disapproval of her mother. She watched him now, licking himself and removing splashes of water and mud on his feet. She always kept a rug near the fireplace where he could sit when it was cold. He liked that a lot. She watched him groom himself and was happy he was home.

Marissa begin reading again, and after a short time she let the rain’s rhythm take her to sleep. She was awakened abruptly by Ramses’ leap from the rug he was lying on to a quick escape underneath her bed. She was startled and now wide-awake, she looked around the room. As she brought her eyes into focus, she saw the muddy footprints across her rug, still wet from their intruder’s feet. She was startled and scared as she rose off of her chair bracing the wall. The footprints had come from outside her door, to her living room window, and ended there. They were large and appeared to be the shoes of a male occupier. This made no sense. She immediately looked outside and down on the street three stories below her. Had she left her door open? She realized she was biting one of her nails.

Her eyes skirted the wet streets and rooftops. And almost as if someone were reading her mind, she instinctively looked at the entrance to the alley across the street. She saw *him* immediately standing there in the rain. His black raincoat and hood caused him to appear surreal somehow. She knew he was watching her and at that moment she felt a chill on her already cold body. She shivered. She could feel the dampness coming off of the window and moved away from the window’s view.

He *knew* she had remembered him from the newsstand that morning. He smiled still watching her window.

She cleaned the footprints off of the rug. She felt safer with them removed from her personal space. He must have taken his shoes off to scare her. That must have been why the footprints did not go to her door, and out. They led only to the window, and to him outside on the wet street. She let these thoughts go through her mind as she scrubbed the rug, trying to forget.

It was dark outside so she went to the window and looked out again. She noticed that her *wet intruder* could no longer be seen below. She wasn’t sure if this made her feel safer or more apprehensive. She went to her door and made sure it was locked and bolted. It was.

“What could he possibly want?” She pondered. She turned off the only light left in the room, a small lamp in the corner by the window. It was almost dark now in the room, with

a small night-light casting its light from the hallway to the bedroom. The outside streetlights seemed drawn into her darkness and became more apparent now. She wondered if he could see her.

For the second time that evening she saw the answering machine, blinking in the dim room. With only the night-light, and because of the recent events, the light on the machine seemed brighter, and the message more urgent. She started to press the 'play' button and then realized she had hesitated, almost afraid.

She screamed when the knock at her door interrupted her action. She froze. She finally walked to the door, hoping someone familiar might yell through the door. But she said, "who's there?" No one answered her. She waited. Even though her body was cold to the touch, she noticed that her palms were sweating. She repeated the question, more urgently, but there was still no answer. She waited, standing in the small entrance with her arms crossed tightly. A voice replied, "let me in".

"What do you want"? She asked, trying not to sound frantic.

"You know", he answered her.

She could *feel* him outside the door. She looked around for a weapon, finding a kitchen knife in the sink that had not been washed.

"You go away, or I'll call the police!" She yelled out.

"No, you won't Marissa". He answered her.

She was more frantic now. How did he know her name? Only her initial was on the mailboxes by the entrance.

"Go away!" She was screaming now.

She saw the piece of paper he pushed under the door. She heard him walk away. She squatted down grabbing the note in her hands.

She saw the word 'Bliss' scrawled in red ink.

"How could he know about Paul?" No sooner had her mind formed the question, her heart gave her the reply, bringing her peace. "It was Paul". He must have followed her home to see where she lived. He was just playing with her. She was elated even though he had retreated.

She thought of Paul. She walked over to the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of him, but he was gone. She walked over to the sofa, calmer now, and sat down. She casually tossed the knife away onto the floor. Her mind wandered as it always did when she thought of him. To think he was just at her door told her that he was obviously thinking of her too.

Now his waiting in the rain was a gesture of love. She imagined how it would be. She knew he would own her soul when he took her, there would be no other way. He would transform her from a scared, timid person to the woman she wanted to be. She smiled to herself. She would become another person then. And in that time, she would leave herself behind, bringing only the transformation.

She felt the rush as if he were still there. She thought of him again, grasping her hair, then her shoulders, as he demanded his way. She was helpless and loving it, and would beg him for more. She knew at that moment there would be nothing else. No one else would exist for her. She was exotic and submissive in her thought, realizing her submission to him made him her prisoner. And she knew they would have no limits or boundaries.

“Say it”, she would demand!

He would whisper it as if in agony, as if in pain, a pain born long ago.

“Bliss”! He would say it almost as a sigh.

“Yes”! She would release him then, knowing they were one.

She would feel his desperation and his passion. She could see the sweat trickle down his formed chest.

She would look at his face. What classic features! She would wipe away the sweat from his brow as she gazed at him. This was the part she loved to think about. She would get to participate in his complete transformation. She would take him from a point of reckless passion, to surrender and finally to that peaceful state.

Lightening struck outside as if in answer to her thoughts and brought her back to the present. She walked over to the window and looked out again, reflecting. He was at the alley’s entrance again, holding his raincoat around him. She could see his outline looking up almost as if he were feeling what she felt. He knew, she thought. She realized that she felt flushed.

She undid the top button of her cotton shirt letting her breath flow more easily, as her neck became free of its cotton bondage. The second button, “ah, yes”. Her chest was pounding and her heart was still beating from her thoughts.

The man on the street felt her emotions. His hand bracing the wall braced so hard, a piece of the old brick structure crumbled in his hand. He cast it away...”she would let him in, eventually.” The rain fell harder as he wrapped his raincoat tighter around him. She went back to the sofa and covered herself with a blanket, falling asleep.

The next morning Marissa went through her usual dictates, but she felt different, more alive somehow. She went to the mirror and looked at herself. Her tousled amber hair hung straight, framing her face. Her complexion was flawless and only her alabaster face stared

back at her. She suddenly didn't feel as she had felt the night before. She knew she was plain. She could fantasize all day long, but in the end, this is who she was. She walked to the kitchen and poured her morning cup of coffee. She would get ready for work now. She was grateful every day for her job, knowing that it kept her from living with her mother.

She walked to the newsstand. She looked over and noticed he was there again. She smiled faintly. She would go along with his pursuit and let him decide when it was time. He watched her board the bus. She watched him through the window as he faded away with the distance. She remembered her answering machine. She had forgotten to check her messages.

She walked the remaining distance to her work place. As she walked she remembered the first time she saw Paul. In that moment she had felt the compulsion to know him – completely. She had written, “Bliss” in red on a piece of paper and placed it in a 1947 issue of National Geographic. She had seen him there before and she knew he always came to look at the old volumes. She would put them back on their shelf, noticing which ones he had picked out that day. She imagined them together. She had wondered how long it would take him to find her note there, but she knew it was their destiny. And she wondered what he would do or think when he found it. She would wait as long as it took.

But Paul was too methodical. Almost like an animal hunting its prey, he had somehow guessed. She had watched him that day. It was as if her thoughts had created that moment that would begin their destiny. He had picked up the issue of the magazine that she had placed the note in, and the paper had fallen to the floor. She had watched his tall frame lean down and pick it up. She had shuddered standing there watching him. And almost as if summoned, he had looked in her direction. Their eyes had met and she knew that he knew.

He had stayed in the library longer that day. He was actually doing research for a project he had been assigned to. He couldn't help but wonder why this conservative, plain looking woman had intrigued him. He never questioned her motives. Somehow he knew that she hadn't chosen him accidentally. It was more like she knew him already. She was nothing like the attractive women that he sought out and yet he was mesmerized somehow. She was fragile in her appearance, almost breakable in her delicacy, and somehow unreal. Her hair, copper colored, was tied back from her thin face. She always wore these plain glasses that didn't accentuate anything. Her eyes were emerald green and not by wearing contacts. He was used to searching for detail and he had observed a lot of detail during that short span of time. Her eyes, behind her brown rimmed glasses seemed larger than they were. Her complexion was alabaster and pale, but her complexion was flawless. It was smooth and he knew that if he touched her, she would be warm and her skin would be soft. She seemed so unsure of herself and scared in some way. He had noticed her long thin fingers were not manicured, just cut plain and filed. They possessed no color but her own, as did her face. He found himself fantasizing about her, not understanding why.

But he knew that the waiting would be to his advantage. He would come back. And each time, he would watch her desperation grown until there was no going back. He imagined what it would be like to own her fragility.

Marissa's mother had called the Library wanting to see her. She was hard and demanding when she didn't get her way, and today she had passed her old limits of being that way. She had demanded Marissa stop by after her work. She would make her dinner, she said. At the library, Marissa could not argue with her, so she acquiesced, not really wanting to.

She had taken a different route tonight on the bus to take her across town to see her mother. She had purposely moved closer downtown so that she could use the excuse of being near her job, but in reality she was putting as much distance between them as she could. She dreaded these visits, feeling that her mother held her hostage.

They had the same conversations with simple formalities so her mother could feel she was still in command of Marissa's life. For Marissa, she gave her what she needed and then when she headed home, she was free. This was a duty she didn't like, but felt she was forced to continue.

She was thinking of her father again and that her life could have been different, had she known him. She wondered if he ever thought of her or what happened to her. There was a part of her that never gave up hope that he would come looking for her one day. And when he did, he would help her stand up to her mother's demands and thoughtlessness.

Once she arrived, the questions started. Was she seeing anyone? She needed to approve, if she was. Why didn't she cut her hair? She didn't like her sweater or her coat. Why hadn't she gotten a better degree, why did she want to be a librarian anyway? She would never meet anyone, who would want her? This went on all evening until Marissa couldn't take it anymore. She excused herself a little early with a headache, and her mother began again, speculating on the reasons for the headache.

When she walked outside of the building, she almost felt as if she had been suffocated. She looked up and could see her mother at the window, yelling at her to call her when she got home. She waved pretending not to hear her screeching, but never looking her way, refusing to acknowledge her.

She caught the next bus on the corner and started on her way home. When she boarded the bus, she quickly glanced about and noticed a man in the rear of the bus. The light in that part of the bus had gone out and from where she was it was hard to see his face. But she knew it was the man in the alley, she knew it was Paul. She thought of talking to him but she felt that he wanted to play this game with her and it was exciting to her. When she stood up to get off of the bus, she looked towards him and she saw his lips form a smile. She couldn't see his eyes, but knew he was looking at her. It could not have been a coincidence that he boarded this bus at this time. She knew he had been waiting for her.

When she arrived home that night, she again noticed her answering machine light indicating that there was a message. She had forgotten to check it last night. She walked over to find out who had called and Ramses rubbed against her legs, wanting her attention.

She stroked his back and his ears as he purred in satisfaction. She knew he was hungry. All she wanted was some hot cocoa and a hot bath to erase the memory of her mother. She heard the rain starting again outside. The night seemed to invite the rain for company. Lately, they seemed continually paired.

She wondered if he would come to her door tonight since he had made it a point to follow her tonight. How much longer could she wait? She remembered how they had started this game. Now it was what she waited for, always on the edge. She didn't know when he'd play his next part. He only did it when it rained. Thank God they lived in Seattle, she thought.

Earlier that day he had sat in the library until her shift ended. He had waited outside the main entrance. She had slipped out the rear entrance. She knew he was waiting. She had the advantage now. He was growing as desperate as she was.

For him it had become an obsession. It had captured his imagination and it was the fantasy that he sought. The fantasy was like an old memory of a time forgotten long ago, now being replayed.

For her, it had moved her life. She had craved this kind of intrigue and she had come alive with it. She would spend time now in front of the mirror, looking at her reflection, wondering how he would see her. Tonight she stared at herself and removed her glasses. She knew that in the past few weeks, he had begun to see her differently. She had noticed and felt the shift and it had caused *her* to see herself differently. Maybe it was what she was feeling that made this so.

She walked over to the window. She appeared saffron in the lamp's light. He watched her below. He had forgotten how cold he had been minutes before. He could feel the sweat beads forming on his brow. She stood in the light's reflection in her nightgown. She had taken her hair down. He would wait all night if he had to, hoping for another glimpse of her, feeling no control of his will. She knew what he felt. She moved away from the window, relishing the feeling. She smiled in the dim light, knowing he was in ecstatic pain. She moved away from the window hoping he would come to her. If he didn't, she knew it would be soon.

She heard a light tap on the door. She heard his voice, "Let me in, Marissa?" He had almost whispered it, pleading.

"No", she answered him.

She waited for his desperation. And it was as if he knew his desperation would be his own salvation. He would make her wait.

She waited, wanting to hear his pleas. She waited to hear the doorknob turning over and over again, as he begged for entrance. But it never came. She opened the door, standing there, inviting his entrance. But he had vanished and it was her who now felt the desperation as she closed the door, leaning against it. Her tears fell gently down her warm face.

They had been playing this game for over two months now. He would go to her work place and pass her in between the racks of magazines, brushing himself against her very lightly saying, “excuse me”, in a whisper. It was if they were merely strangers. She would look away, feeling his eyes on her. She would smile as they passed. She never knew when he would come – he was just there. He had called and gotten her name, pretending he wanted to talk to her about a magazine that he had asked her about.

One day there was no one downstairs and he arrived. He had found her in one of the aisles putting away magazines from the cart she had nearby. He had removed her glasses and had looked into her face. Then he moved away, looking back at her. His eyes were dark and exotic, and his form overpowered her. She noticed his hands. They were long and artistic and she would imagine them moving over her hipline, his long tan fingers against her own pale skin.

She looked for him every day as she left the building. She would come to the main entrance and look out through the windows to see if she saw him. Then she would look out the back before she exited. She saw him leaning against one of the lampposts in the parking lot, his collar up, warding off the cold wind blowing. He watched her as she wrapped her raincoat around her as she opened her umbrella, seeking haven from the rain. She looked in his direction and then began her walk to the bus stop.

She would let him follow her to the bus stop. She boarded the bus and so did he. He sat behind her, his hands placed on the back of the seat, barely touching her. He was leaning so close that she could feel his breath on her hair and neck. But she sat motionless, as if undisturbed. She was glad he could not see her face, for she it was flushed and she felt nervous.

She let him follow her home; thinking tonight might be their night. It had seemed like an eternity. He was a few feet behind her. She walked slow and rhythmic. He watched her form and she was feminine and flowing in her movements. And they felt each other’s energy fill the sidewalk and spill onto the street. For them, if there were other people, they were merely props on a road to desire.

She had reached her door. She wondered if he would move himself in behind her. He wondered if she would leave her door open, inviting his entrance. He was on the stair landing, waiting for her decision. But she closed and locked it. He waited, smiling, for a few minutes. He walked out to the street. The rain poured down. He wrapped his coat about him and pulled his hat lower on his forehead.

As she entered her apartment, she heard the phone ringing. It brought her back to the present. It was her mother. She was asking the usual questions and demanding the same answers. Her mind wandered while her mother continued talking reverie. She remembered Paul placing a small piece of paper in her shirt pocket. They were in one of the tighter aisles and their bodies had actually touched as he faced her.

She pulled out the paper now from her pocket to look at it again. He had written his name "Paul" and on the other side of the paper he had written in red, "Bliss comes to those who wait!"

Her mother's voice brought her back to reality. "Marissa, are you listening to me?"

"Yes, Mother", she had answered her, pretending to be interested.

As they were hanging up, she heard a sound by the front door and saw a piece of paper as it was pushed through the other side.

She hung up and went to the door and picked it up. It was written in red and said "Bliss".

The last couple of days he had only been in the alley, not at her workplace. She imagined it was the darkness that drew him out. She felt relieved he was there.

She waited a few minutes then went to the window and looked out on the street. He was there. The rain was slow now, but the streets glistened, reflecting their surrender and mirroring their desire.

She took a hot shower. Her terrycloth robe always felt wonderful after a hot shower on a cold night. She undid the towel holding her wet hair and its copper pieces fell, hugging her back. She stared at her image and began putting on make up. She had never worn make up and until today had never even owned any. She watched the transformation and imagined his surprise. When he saw her he would realize how their foreplay had transformed her to the woman she now was. She dried her long hair, shaking it into submission for its part. She would wait no longer. She placed her feet in her new high-heeled shoes and stared at her reflection in her mirror. She let her robe fall to the floor. She went to the door and unlocked it, leaving it open a few inches. She walked over to the window, letting the saffron colored light embrace her once again. She looked towards the alley. She was glad that he hadn't been to the library for a few days. She knew these evening encounters simply make their desire stronger.

He felt her invitation and he felt his desire growing, his hands tightly closing as in desperation. He ran from the alley coming towards her apartment to her door. It was almost as if she could hear his footprints as they splashed on the pavement in their haste.

She walked to her bedroom, anticipating his entrance.

She heard the door hit the wall, knowing it was his anxiousness that had driven it there. She heard him close it desperately and lock it. She heard his heavy breathing and could hear and feel the wet footprints coming down her hallway.

He reached the entrance to her room, the rain dripping, leaving its wet trail. He said her name softly, "Marissa".

"Oh, my God"! She answered faintly.

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As he left her room that night, he could see a light flickering in her living room. It was her answering machine. He walked over and pressed play.

He heard the man's voice clear in its delivery, "Marissa, it's Paul. "I won't be able to come and see you for two weeks or so. My mother is in the hospital and I have to go to Minnesota. I will try and call again. But remember, Bliss comes to those who wait". His voice was gentle in its passion.