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Footprints By The Sea

By Mrs. Paul E. King

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Muriel leaned over the dining room table for a long while. Unbelieving, she toyed with the note in her hand. Could it be true? she wondered, reading the neat handwriting on the piece of paper for the third time. But yes, there it was; Bob was gone!



Snatching a light, all-weather coat off its hanger in the hallway closet she hurried outside. Where could she go? What should she do?

She walked rapidly toward the edge of the town, not caring really in what direction she went. Her heart was bitter. Bitter. So bitter in fact, and stubborn, until tears refused to come. All she could think of was self... Muriel Shriver. Let Bob go! If that's all he thought of her...!

The thought of Bob, plus her cutting, sarcastic words and his hurt look when she had left for work that morning, emitted a sudden flow of tears in spite of her resolve not to cry.

Her footsteps led her now along the ocean's beach. The sea spray mingled freely with her salty tears. Alone, but for the calling, circling gulls, she aimlessly trudged along the water's edge on sand packed by the ceaseless pounding of the surf.

Wisps of persistent afternoon fog seemed tangled in the trees atop the nearby cliffs and looming ahead, she saw the massive form of Towering Rock, its loneliness accented by the swirling gray mists of early fall.

With a quick thrust, she dug her hands deep into the oversize pockets. Her fingers found a soft handkerchief, Quickly, she used it to dab at her eyes. Replacing it in the pocket, she touched a small transistor radio. She had taken it on the last fishing trip she and Bob had had. What a time that was.

"Dear Diary," she remembered having written at the close of that particular day, "this has been a perfect day! What a day! Bob and I had the best time ever! We did such sweet little things together {foolish things, some would accuse), like feeding the fish instead of catching them, tossing loaves of bread to the gulls and just dangling our feet over the boat in the water. We wove enough dreams this one day and made memories so precious and sacred that they will last a life-time. Bob grows dearer to my heart each day. Sometimes I feel selfish . . ."

Irritated, she reached for the handkerchief. "I've got to think things out," she told herself as she headed for a familiar pile of driftwood that formed a secluded hideaway. Once inside the alcove formed by the heaped logs and timber, Muriel seated herself on the cool, soft sand. Her shelter reduced the wind's sound to a murmur. In the silence, her mind cleared and she could think honestly.

She remembered with sudden clarity and illumination her cutting words of the morning. "I'm not quitting my job, Bob. Nor do I plan to stagnate in any house for any man . . . including you! I'm a career woman!"

She remembered afresh the hurt look in his kind eyes as he said, "Look, Muriel, I didn't marry you to be a career woman. I married you to be my wife and the mother of my children!"

"And who, may I ask, wants to stagnate in a house surrounded by howling, squalling, squabbling brats? Not I!" she had rejoined icily.

"Well, I'm tired of being married to a 'career' woman!" Bob exclaimed. "I thought I made this clear before we married. I want a family and I want a wife who will stay home and keep house."

"You picked the wrong woman," she said tartly, highly irritated. "Why can't you be like father and mother and... ?"

"And allow you to have your own way again?" Bob said, finishing the sentence for her. "I'm tired of this, Muriel. I want a woman who'll be a real wife, mother, and housekeeper!" With those words, he had hurried upstairs.

Without saying good-bye, Muriel stacked the few breakfast dishes in the sink then hurried to Driskoll's fashionable department store where she was top consultant in interior decorating.

With unexcelled enthusiasm and fervor, she plunged into her work. She loved it passionately. Not once, in the course of the day, did she think of Bob's remarks. She had told herself en route to work that he would see how wrong he had been and how right she was.

Now, alone on the sand with the driftwood piled high, she wondered.

Almost unconsciously, she picked up a piece of driftwood. How ugly it looked! and how jagged it was! Nothing more, really, than a twisted, knotted, distorted looking thing. It was useless lying thus. How like her life! she thought suddenly. It had been cast up and cast out by sin's sea as a useless thing. And yet she remembered having seen some of the exquisite centerpieces Driskoll's had on display, made from just such knotty, ugly-looking wood as her hand was touching.

Several gulls circled above her and came to rest unceremoniously on a piece of the jagged timber nearby. They screeched and screamed mercilessly. "Deceived! Deceived! Deceived!" they seemed to be shouting at her.

Agitated, Muriel stood up. "Go away!" she shouted. "Let me alone."

With a loud final warning, the gulls rose easily in the air and disappeared behind the rock.

To her astonishment, Muriel found herself trembling. Weak, she sat down.

"What a silly girl I am!" she exclaimed. "Gulls can't talk."

At the same instant several other gulls flew by. "Deceived! Deceived!" they screeched accusingly.

Muriel's ears were ringing and her head felt dizzy. She leaned forward. Her head rested on a piece of the jagged driftwood. Had she been deceived? Had she?

As if projected on a screen for the world to see, her past loomed before her.

From her earliest years she had had her own way. As a small child, she learned that by throwing temper tantrums and feigning to strangle or faint, she always got her way and the things she had wanted.

She remembered the many times she had lied to her parents as a teenager; said she'd been to a girlfriend's house, when in reality she hadn't been there at all.

Hers had been a wild life. Oh, but she could be convincing! Innocent appearing, too.

"You little deceiver!" She almost shouted the words to the wind. Her past kept unfolding itself.

She remembered the first time she had ever seen Bob. It was at the grocery store. A funny place to meet, really. She'd seen him talking to an acquaintance of hers.

"I'd like an introduction to him sometime," she remarked to Beverly after Bob had checked his order of groceries out and was gone.

Beverly laughed uneasily. "He's a good man, Muriel. Too good for you or me . . . either one of us."

"Oh! And just what do you mean by that?"

"You'd have to get religious first," Beverly replied. "Bob's a wonderful Christian. He keeps inviting me out to church. Trying to convert me, I'm sure. And I sure could stand converting."

Disregarding Beverly's remarks about conversion, Muriel asked, "Where does he go to church?"

"It's the little holiness church on Wayne Street. But don't get ideas, Muriel. He's too good for you. You're a very selfish person. That's why you're so unhappy. Selfish people are always unhappy because they mind so much when they can't have their way and what they want."

"Now wait a minute!" Muriel exclaimed, anger rising in her cheeks. "Look who's talking!"

"I know," Beverly admitted honestly. "But you have always had everything you've wanted. And because your father and mother have always given in to you (like mine have to me), you think nothing matters in the world except your own happiness. Your heart is like a little closed-in circle, Muriel, with no one but you in the center."

"Thanks!" Muriel's exclamation was accentuated with a razor-sharp edge. "I don't need a sermon."

"But it's all true," Beverly continued, completely unabashed. "We're both in the same boat. That's why I understand you so perfectly. But I warn you, don't you dare make a play for Bob Shriver. You'd ruin the man!"

As she sat on the cool sand now, she remembered the past. How her conscience stung her! Whipped her! Lashed her now! She had been the aggressive one in the courtship. She had prided herself in getting Bob ... the man Beverly had said was "too good" for her!

"You'd ruin the man!" and Beverly's words tore their way into the inmost part of Muriel's heart now. Beverly was right!

"Ruin Bob?" she said, suddenly humble. A lone gull circled above her. "Yes. That's what I've done. I won him but ruined him. Beverly was right! He never goes to church. He doesn't read the Bible anymore-nor pray. And... and.., oh, my God! Be merciful to my lost soul! I'm dragging Bob with me to hell!"

With her head still resting on the piece of jagged driftwood, Muriel wept.

Was there hope at all for her? she wondered. Could God save her soul? Could He? She had resented the thought of bearing children and becoming a mother! And with medical science on her side, she'd had her own way again--much to the displeasure and hurt of Bob. Oh, she had been selfish indeed!

"Deceived! Deceived! Deceived!" the soaring gulls mocked.

Stripped completely of her pride, and feeling miserably wretched, wicked, and filthy within, Muriel sobbed.

Hour after hour, she wept and prayed. Her entire being, including her stubborn will, was broken, humbled.

A shy half-moon rose lazily over the crest of the horizon and peeked into the alcove of the piled driftwood. It spread a magnificent shimmering mantle of silver over the water. She noticed it not.

The circling, screeching, screaming gulls had long since put themselves to rest for the night. Of this, too, the kneeling, sobbing figure had no knowledge of awareness. Nothing was of any significance or consequence. Nothing... other than finding the God whom Bob had at one time known so well and loved so dearly.

Bowing in the shadows, out of sight of everything but the piled driftwood timber, Muriel felt that God had brought her to an impasse where there was no visible means of escape or deliverance.

Groaning, praying, sobbing and agonizing in the cool sand, she pled for mercy.

"Him that cometh unto Me I will in no wise cast out!"

The Voice, unmistakably clear, gave her anguished soul rise to faith. Where had she heard that before? Oh, yes; the minister in Bob's church had quoted it to her as she knelt at the altar that night. Anew her heart condemned her. All too well, she remembered that night. It had been a pretense on her part., to get Bob's attention.

But, tonight, things were different! She was truly repentant. Maybe . . . O, God! Grant it! Maybe . . . the verse was meant for even me!

"Oh, God!" she moaned, "I come to Thee. Don't cast me out."

Suddenly, without realizing what she was doing, Muriel was shouting. Shouting for joy. The old Muriel was gone!

With a zig-zag trail of cavorting footsteps that led from her driftwood hideaway to the house on Wilkerson Avenue, the new Muriel seemed to be floating on air.

Not until she stepped on the porch did she see the lights all over the house. Before she was fully inside the kitchen, Bob met her.

"Muriel! Muriel! Thank God you're safe!" he exclaimed, staring strangely at her.

"Oh, Bob!" was her only reply. She was so happy.

Pleasantly exhausted, she lay her head on his shoulder. Her tears soaked his shirt.

"Muriel, my dear," Bob said, folding her to him, "what has happened to you? Are you all right? Speak to me. Forgive me. I couldn't leave you."

"Thank God! Oh, Bob, I'm more all right than I've ever been. I found Jesus. He's living in my heart. I'm saved, Bob! Imagine! An old, dirty sinner like me . . . transformed!"

Before Bob could recover, she continued, "How could you ever live with me? I was the most stubborn, selfish and wretched woman who ever lived. But the new me is different, Bob. Oh, I feel so wonderfully new! So much like what God intended for me to be! I'll be a keeper at home and a mother. A real mother who'll teach her children in the right way . . . God's way."

Still in shock, Bob held his wife away from him and looked tenderly into her eyes. "Am I hearing right or is this a dream."

"It's a 'for-real' dream, Bob; you have a new wife--a saved wife.

"Thank God! And tonight, my dear wife, I came Home, too. There is no happiness found outside of Christ. Life has no meaning without Him, Muriel. We shall begin a new

life together. But come, you must be hungry. I have supper waiting in the oven," and Bob led his wife gently toward the kitchen.

Just as gently, Muriel guided him toward the easy chair in the living room. "I'm to 'guide the house' and be the 'keeper at home.' Remember? A loving and a dutiful wife always prepares her husband's meals. I begin my new God-designed career tonight. Right now! It's going to be a W-I-F-E and M-O-T-H-E-R career."

Beaming down on her, Bob kissed her on the nose then shoved her tenderly toward the kitchen.

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THE END