

Footprint Hotel

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Rated: G

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Summary: Muddy footprints on a ceiling. In answer to a challenge prompt: footprints on the ceiling.

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Even though it had happened many years ago, it was still a story she told to anyone willing to listen – and everyone was willing. In the beginning, when she told the story, most people either didn't believe her or likened it to a ghost story or local myth.

She wished she could remember more of that evening when the stranger had come into her establishment and requested a room, but it had been like any other day to her, and he had appeared to be like any other weary traveler seeking a place to stay. She gave him room 12 on the second floor and would always remember that he had been polite and paid in cash. However, beyond his dark hair and gentle smile, she could not recall anything else about him. In those days, she didn't bother writing down the names of her guests. If they could pay and didn't exude bad vibes, she welcomed them. She supposed, in the end, that had been a good thing.

The weather had been dry that summer, but the dark clouds on the horizon promised relief. Unfortunately, it also brought flooding.

Twelve families lost their homes and many others lost cars and much of their crops, but somehow all lives had been spared. Only later would she realize why.

The next day came and went, and another, and soon stories of miracles that had occurred during the storm came to her ears.

Two separate families, trapped in their sinking vehicles in their attempt to get to higher ground, were somehow pushed onto dry land, away from the raging torrents. Another person swore someone had pulled them from the rushing water and placed them on a raft before disappearing. A handful of other similar stories surfaced in the weeks following, but the most mysterious event to her happened when she had gone into room 12 to prepare it for the next guest.

The man had headed out without announcing his departure, leaving the room key on the dresser. That wasn't

out of the ordinary, though she still wondered when exactly he had left. He had paid for three nights, but she was fairly certain he had only stayed for two.

Going in to prepare the room for the next guest, everything was pretty orderly and clean. Except for the ceiling.

Tan and brown footprints of faint, dried mud were on the ceiling, directly above the path from the window to the door, as if someone in muddy socks had paced back and forth.

She hadn't known what to think at first. Was someone playing a practical joke on her? But why? And how did someone get their footprints up there? She definitely would have noticed if someone had brought a ladder to the second floor. However, even if they had managed to sneak a ladder in, the footprints were way too orderly to have been done like that. It really was as if someone had been able to walk upside down on the ceiling!

She would forever kick herself for not taking a picture.

Other than herself, only her husband and daughter had seen the trail of prints before she had given up on making sense of it and had begun to clean the ceiling. The room needed to be ready for the next visitor after all. She had to make a living.

Which had given her daughter an idea.

Just as she was about to wash off the last footprint, her daughter came in and suggested she leave it be.

And that was how it began.

It had started as a fun mystery they told people who came to the inn, coupled with the miracles over the week of the historic storm. It had been easy to create tantalizing explanations of varying mythos.

A supernatural being had come in their time of need after being kindly served by the local inn.

One of their ancestors had coalesced during the night of the storm to prevent what had befallen him in his life from happening to them.

More tales explaining the mystery came about as time went on, each becoming more extravagant than the last.

Eventually, the footprint on the ceiling of room 12 on the second floor led her to rename her inn: 'The Footprint Hotel'. It became the town's biggest tourist spot, if only because there wasn't much else in the area, save for souvenirs made by the locals. But it did seem to be liked a great deal by everyone who happened to pass through. And it certainly helped pay for her daughter's education.

As the years went by, she never stopped hoping to see the man again, if only to thank him, whether or not he was actually responsible for the lives saved.

And then one day, she did.

It was all over the news. A man who could fly! They were calling him Superman, and he had just saved the recent launch to Space Station Prometheus.

She couldn't believe it.

But it was him.

His dark hair, skin tone, and soft smile matched what she remembered, and the fact he could fly and even float – surely he could walk upside down if he wished!

It didn't take long for others to make the connection, and soon it was the whole town's 'secret'.

Their town had once played host to Superman!

There was no other real explanation, and it was easy to admit that the likely truth was more exciting than any of the stories they had come up with before.

Of course, most people (visitors from outside of town) still likened the theory to wishful thinking because the general population fully believed Superman had only just arrived on Earth. Few even considered he could have been with them in hiding for years. It also didn't help that they only had a single footprint on the ceiling as 'proof' and years-old stories of rescues during a brutal storm. As tantalizing as it was, even she had to admit, from an outsider's perspective, it was entirely hoaxable.

But no matter; as the months went on, her fervor shifted to trying to understand what Superman had been doing in their town all those years ago. He was alone, that much was clear. Alone on, to him, an alien planet. Likely wandering from place to place, no doubt trying to avoid government detection (or at least she would be if she had been in his place).

And then the footprints that indicated pacing made sense. As well as the man's inconspicuous departure.

He hadn't wanted to be found or noticed. Perhaps, in rescuing the townsfolk, he had been afraid he had drawn too much attention to himself. Afraid he might have revealed too much.

The image of him pacing on the ceiling suddenly took on a different feel, and she was then very glad she hadn't recorded his name or anything that might have drawn untoward attention to him from the government. She had no love for the government, and due to her genealogy, it was obvious why, but that aside, she suddenly wanted to warn him.

She knew eventually the truth would come out. A reporter would hear the story from a tourist who had visited, and they would investigate, and then who knows what would happen. She already knew a number of people had managed to measure the footprint. How long would it be before one of them tried to compare it to a photo of Superman's boot? She was no expert, but she knew there were ways to take an image and get accurate measurements out of it.

So she began working on figuring out how to send a message to him.

She read every article possible about him, most coming from the Daily Planet and written by either Lois Lane, Clark Kent, or both.

She looked into the Superman Foundation and considered sending a letter, but what if someone other than him read it? Sure, the person reviewing his mail worked for him, so was hopefully trustworthy, but could she take that risk?

She couldn't.

So it was time for a road trip.

Her husband and daughter remained to tend to the inn, both fully supporting her self-imposed mission.

As she stepped off the bus and onto the bustling sidewalk not far from the Daily Planet, she hoped she would succeed. She had decided to go the most direct route possible of contacting Superman – without putting herself in danger, of course.

She nervously entered the Daily Planet and asked to speak with Clark Kent or Lois Lane. She was escorted to Mr. Kent.

"Hello," he greeted.

"Hello. Thank you for seeing me," she started, knowing this man's time was valuable. He was already a well-trusted reporter. Anyone who read the news knew his work of covering events was always accurate and thorough.

If only the same could be said of more reporters.

"It's no trouble. I'm always happy to see those who need to talk to me," he said.

She nodded, grateful she could get straight to it. "I do need to talk to you, it's very important. Is there somewhere...?"

"Of course. In the conference room," he said.

She wasn't sure why he seemed to be willing to hear her out, but she wasn't going to complain.

He allowed her into the room, then entered behind her and closed the door. "So, what is this about, Ms...?"

"Mrs. Deere," she answered. "I need to get a message to Superman."

"Oh," he said, understandably surprised. She suspected, by her appearance and age, he couldn't imagine why someone like her would need to see Superman. "Well, if you give me the message, I'll be sure to get it to him," he offered.

"I..." She was tempted, but before she had left she had promised herself to see this through completely. "I can't. I'm sorry. I must be sure it gets to him and only him."

Mr. Kent looked somewhat taken aback, or perhaps he was just confused.

“Well, I could let him know you wish to speak with him. I can’t make any promises on whether or not he’ll see you, but I can try?” he suggested uncertainly.

“Please, that would be wonderful. This is something he really needs to know.”

“Alright. If he agrees, where can he find you? Are you visiting Metropolis? Are you in a hotel?” he asked.

“I don’t have a hotel room yet,” she said, suddenly wishing she had gotten one before coming, but she hadn’t wanted to risk missing Mr. Kent or Ms. Lane.

“Alright,” he said, grabbing a pen and paper and jotting down an address. “Go to this hotel and tell them I sent you,” he said before also taking out his business card and signing and dating it. “This will get you one night.”

“Oh! Mr. Kent, I couldn’t! You don’t even know me!” she said, astonished by his generosity.

“It’s no problem, and this is as much for Superman as it is for you,” he said. “When you get into the room, unlock and open the balcony door. The manager of the hotel knows to always give people sent by me a room with a balcony. If Superman chooses to see you, he’ll drop by sometime this evening, before 8pm. Is that agreeable?” Mr. Kent proposed.

She carefully took the business card and square sheet of paper. Stunned.

“Yes. Thank you,” she said.

Less than an hour later, she was in her hotel room, balcony door unlocked and ajar.

She nervously sat on the corner of the bed, waiting with the television on a random channel just to create some background noise. She wasn’t used to the sounds of a city.

She jumped as a loud concussive sound echoed across the city. A sonic boom? Wasn’t there rules on how close jets could fly near cities?

She took a deep breath and changed the channel, tired of watching the talk show host attempt to keep the bickering people on the stage calm. She settled on a history documentary. At least she wouldn’t be losing brain cells while watching.

A rustling sound and knock to her right pulled her attention away from the archeologist exploring ancient tombs on the TV, and she was instantly met with a loud splash of color.

“Superman!” She quickly stood up and was immediately self-conscious, as well as astonished.

As kind as Mr. Kent had been and as hopeful as she often was, a large part of her had doubted Superman would actually show up. But there he was, bigger than life.

“Mrs. Deere? Mr. Kent told me you wished to see me?” he began, stepping forward.

She blinked and made herself focus. “Yes! Yes. And thank you for coming. Um. Well. I, uh, own an inn called

‘The Footprint Hotel’, but I only renamed it a few years ago. Um.... This is harder than I thought it would be,” she admitted.

Superman looked at her in bemusement but kept his expression kind instead of annoyed.

“Well, I assume you came a long way, so it must be important. Could you start at the beginning?” Superman asked patiently.

She took a deep breath and started over, taking his advice as he calmly crossed his arms.

“Four summers ago, my town experienced horrible flooding during a storm. Several farms were ruined and a dozen homes were destroyed, but no one died. Somehow, all who would have died were miraculously saved,” she said, watching him carefully.

He became still and his expression began to lose its bemusement and grow almost blank.

She continued. “During that same time, a young man visited my inn. He paid for three nights, though I’m fairly certain he only stayed for two. Afterwards, when I went to clean his room, I found muddy footprints on the ceiling, as if someone had actually paced across it. Anyway, long story short, I kept one of the footprints and it, along with the miracles and mysterious traveler, soon became a modern town legend.”

“And you think that traveler was me?” he asked after a moment.

“Was it?” she prodded, although she already knew. His eyes betrayed him.

“Why are you here?” he asked softly, resigned, uncrossing his arms.

“To thank you, and to warn you. I know through the years many people have measured the footprint and taken photos of it. My town has also already concluded the truth. One day that truth might come out, and the world will have questions for you. I don’t want you taken by surprise,” she explained. “That’s all, I promise.”

He slowly exhaled, and she was struck by the realization that her earlier words had made Superman nervous.

“Thank you. And sorry about tracking mud into your hotel,” he said after a long moment of hesitation.

She laughed. “Well, after the money I’ve made from people wanting to stay in my hotel because of that mud, I happily forgive you.”

He smiled and fully relaxed. “So the town is doing well?”

“It is. It’s grown. And the homes and farms were rebuilt after the water receded.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” he said, and she could tell he really was.

She was about to tell him about the families he had saved, but then his head tilted and his gaze panned away from her.

“I’m sorry. Sirens. I need to go,” he said.

“I understand. And thanks again,” she hurriedly said before he gave her another smile and vanished out the window in a blur.

She then heard a sonic boom, and the one she had heard before suddenly made a lot more sense.

With a deep breath, she went to the balcony and closed the door. She slept soundly that night, knowing she had accomplished what she had wanted.

Normalcy quickly returned the following week, although she had already lost count of how many times she had been asked to retell her conversation with Superman to her husband and daughter.

She smiled as she overheard someone telling tourists their town’s legend.

“And you really think it was Superman before he became Superman?” a child of the tourist group asked in wonder.

She continued down the sidewalk of the town square, missing the answer, more relieved than ever that she had gone to Metropolis and given their hero a heads up. She really was surprised the world didn’t already know Superman had walked among them for years before revealing himself.

How lonely he must have been. How he must still be at times. He’s the only one the way he is on Earth, and to have traveled the world for years while having to hide what he was, what he could do...

It all was so fantastic to think about.

How many people had he saved in secret? How many times had he done something that was explained away as a happy coincidence – assuming the world even noticed? How many times had he almost been discovered over the years? Was that why he hadn’t bothered to clean himself up before pacing on her ceiling? Had he been afraid someone would be able to identify him and was trying to decide what to do? Certainly possible.

She hoped he had at least one person who really knew him, though. Someone he could talk to and get help if he needed it. Obviously, he hadn’t gone by the name Superman during his travels, and, after speaking to him in Metropolis, it was clear to her there was more to him than what he presented to the world.

Why did he choose to help? Was he so grateful to planet Earth that he had decided to do what he could to help her inhabitants? She wondered if she would ever know. But either way, no matter what happened now, she

had done what she could and she was certain Superman would be able to handle whatever storm may come.

And they would continue to tell the story and show people the footprint on the ceiling.

THE END