

What the Mud Keeps

By Chuckowski

There's a stretch of road out past Shady Cove where the asphalt forgets what it was trying to be.

It frays at the edges. Turns to gravel. Then dust. Then something you drive on out of habit more than trust.

That's where I was headed the night I found the tracks.

Didn't have a reason worth defending. Nobody ever does when they're driving away instead of toward. The radio kept losing a song it didn't deserve to finish, my coffee tasted burnt down to its sins, and the sky hung low like it was thinking about pressing charges.

I pulled off near the Rogue and killed the engine.

Silence didn't arrive. It replaced.

You ever notice that? Out here, quiet isn't the absence of noise—it's everything else stepping forward. The river dragging over stone. Wind worrying the trees like it's trying to remember their names. Your own breathing, suddenly suspect.

I stepped out. Lit a cigarette I wasn't planning to smoke.

That's when I saw them.

Footprints.

Not just big—*committed*. Pressed so deep the mud had folded around them, like it didn't want to let go. Each step looked less like movement and more like a decision that couldn't be undone.

I didn't get excited.

Didn't scare, either.

Felt... recognized.

Like I'd just arrived late to something that had already decided I'd show.

"Hell," I said, flicking ash into the dark, "you picked a hell of a place to be real."

No answer.

Just the river, doing its long, tired talking.

I followed the tracks.

Of course I did.

That's the problem with people like me—we say we want quiet, but what we mean is we want something that explains the noise.

The tracks led into the trees.

And those trees don't behave. Sound goes in wrong. Distance bends. You start to feel like you're not walking through them so much as being *filed away*.

I kept going.

Because turning around would've meant admitting I knew exactly what I was avoiding.

I was a dozen steps in when I heard it.

Not a growl.

Not a warning.

A sigh.

Heavy. Old. The kind of sound that doesn't ask for attention because it knows it already has it.

"You're stepping in them," a voice said.

Low. Rough. Not loud—but it didn't need to be.

I looked down.

I was.

My boots had landed inside the prints without me noticing. Heel to heel. Toe to toe. Like I'd been trying them on.

"Yeah," I said. "Guess I am."

"Most don't," the voice said. "They walk around."

I turned.

He was there, not emerging so much as *deciding to be visible*.

Tall. Not in a way you measure—more like the trees had lent him their idea of height. Hair thick as underbrush. Eyes—

Not wild.

Not even wary.

Just... patient. Like he'd already seen the end of whatever I thought this was.

"You gonna keep borrowing my steps," he asked, "or you got any of your own?"

I almost laughed.

Didn't.

"Depends," I said. "These seem to know where they're going."

"They don't," he said. "They just don't pretend otherwise."

That landed somewhere I didn't have a name for.

I took a drag, realized I'd burned the cigarette down to the filter without noticing, and dropped it.

"You been watching me?" I asked.

"Yes."

No weight to it. No apology.

"For how long?"

He tilted his head, listening to something under the ground.

"Long enough to know you don't like where you stop."

I glanced back toward the road. Couldn't see it anymore. Wasn't sure I could've found it if I tried.

"Yeah," I said. "Well. Stopping's never been my strong suit."

"Not true," he said.

I frowned. "Oh yeah?"

"You stop all the time," he said. "You just call it something else."

The wind shifted. Or maybe I did.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He stepped closer. Not threatening. Just... undeniable.

"It means," he said, "you circle."

I felt that one.

Not in my head.

Lower.

"Everyone circles," I said.

"Not like you," he said. "You return to the same ground and act surprised it remembers you."

I let out a breath that didn't help.

"You got a name?" I asked.

He looked at me like I'd asked him to shrink.

"Names are for summoning," he said. "You don't want that."

"Try me."

He considered it.

Then shook his head.

"You wouldn't use it right."

Fair enough.

We stood there a while. Not awkward. Not comfortable either. Just... shared.

"You write," he said.

"Sometimes."

"When it breaks through," he said. Not a question.

"Yeah."

He nodded once, like that confirmed something he already knew.

"Then you're doing it wrong."

I blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You wait for it to hurt enough to be honest," he said. "That's backwards."

I felt something in me push back. Reflex.

"Honesty usually does hurt."

"Not if you practice it," he said.

That one stuck.

I didn't have a quick answer for it, so I didn't give one.

He gestured toward the ground. Toward the tracks. Toward the mess mine had made of them.

"Look," he said.

I did.

His prints had been clear before. Directional. Intentional.

Now they were ruined.

Mine cutting through. Doubling back. Smearing edges. Turning something deliberate into something... arguable.

"Stories do this," he said. "People think they're following something true, but they keep stepping over it until it looks like them instead."

I swallowed.

"That supposed to be advice?"

"No," he said. "It's a warning."

"For what?"

He met my eyes then. Really met them.

"For when you go back and write this," he said. "You'll be tempted to clean it up. Make it mean something it didn't."

I opened my mouth.

Closed it.

Because he was right.

He stepped back.

The trees didn't move for him. They just... accepted him.

"Wait," I said. "What was I actually looking for out here?"

He paused.

Considered me like you'd consider a question that didn't deserve lying.

"Permission," he said.

“For what?”

He gave a small, almost-smile. Not kind. Not cruel.

Accurate.

“To stop pretending you’re lost.”

That did it.

No big reaction. No collapse.

Just something quiet inside me... giving up its argument.

I looked down at the mud again.

At the tracks.

At mine inside his.

At the places I’d stepped wrong. The places I’d stepped twice. The places I’d tried to erase and only made deeper.

When I looked back up, he was already gone.

Not hidden.

Finished.

I stood there a while longer.

Long enough to notice something I hadn’t before.

There was only one set of tracks leading into the trees.

Mine.

I followed them with my eyes all the way back to where I’d come from.

Same depth.

Same spacing.

Same weight.

I looked down at my boots.

Mud-caked. Familiar.

Fitting a little too well.

The river kept moving like none of this required witnessing.

I got back in the truck.

Didn't start it right away.

Just sat there, hands on the wheel, feeling the shape of something I wasn't sure I wanted to name.

Out in the dark, the ground held everything exactly as it happened.

Or exactly as it needed to be remembered.

That's the thing about footprints.

They don't prove where you went.

They prove what you were willing to carry to get there.