

Footprints in the Sand

A LOST POEM RETURNS TO BLESS ITS WRITER. By Una McManus

Paul Powers lay in intensive care, hooked up to a jungle of heart monitors and intravenous tubes, tormented by memories of the horror that ripped across his teenage daughter's face as she reached for his hand, slipped, and tumbled into a forty-foot-deep glacier pool. He could still hear Paula's screams, muffled by the thunder of water, as her broken body spun out over the falls at Golden Ears Park in British Columbia.

If only I had reached out a little farther . . ., Paul thought wildly, again and again. *If only my heart hadn't given out . . . If only . . .*

He tried to pray, but God seemed far away on that tragic day. The church youth outing that morning had turned gruesome when Paula suffered a near-fatal fall, the sight of which gave Paul a heart attack. As his wife clamored over the slimy rocks to reach him, she slipped and broke her arm.

Paul tried to think of a comforting Scripture verse, but his thoughts slithered out of grasp. Suddenly he felt a cool, light touch on his arm. He tried to focus, but because of heavy medication, the nurse at his bedside kept drifting in and out of his awareness.

"Mr. Powers, I know you're worried about your wife and daughter," she said softly. "Could I share this poem with you? It may bring you comfort."

His mouth dry, Paul could only nod.

The nurse pulled a card from her pocket, cleared her throat, and began:

One night I dreamed a dream.

I was walking along the beach with my Lord.

Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life.

For each scene, I noticed two sets

of footprints in the sand,

one belonging to me

and one to my Lord.

When the last scene of my life shot before me

I looked back at the footprints in the sand.

There was only one set of footprints.

I realized that this was at the lowest

and saddest times of my life.

This always bothered me

and I questioned the Lord

about my dilemma.

"Lord, you told me when I decided to follow You,

You would walk and talk with me all the way.

But I'm aware that during the most troublesome

times of my life there is only one set of footprints.

I just don't understand why, when I needed You most,

You leave me."

He whispered, "My precious child,

I love you and will never leave you

never, ever, during your trials and testings.

When you saw only one set of footprints

it was then that I carried you."



Margaret Fishback Powers has experienced God's faithfulness first-hand.

The nurse drew a deep breath, visibly moved. She looked at Paul. "Nobody knows who wrote this poem, but we know it was inspired by God," she said.

Paul struggled against his drug-induced stupor to form his words.

"I know who wrote it," he said weakly. "My wife wrote that poem *for me!*"

"There, there, Mr. Powers," the nurse patted his hand. "Why don't you rest now."

"But my wife *did* write it . . ."

Paul mumbled as the medication pulled him into a dark, fitful sleep.



Twenty-six years earlier, Paul Powers proposed to Margaret Fishback on a beach in Kingston, Ontario.

"How would you feel about having our wedding at the end of June?" he asked.

"Paul, I'd love that!"

They grabbed each other's hands and dashed in and out of the water as the waves rolled up on the shore. Their wet feet made deep footprints along the water's edge.

"Look, Margie, two sets of footprints side by side—just like our life together will be," said Paul. "But look—the waves have washed away one set of footprints!"

"Oh, Paul!" Margaret gasped. As a budding writer, she always appreciated poetic images.

Then she stopped and frowned.

"I'm afraid, Paul," she said.

"Maybe our dreams are going to wash away like those footprints. Will our marriage be strong enough to weather troubled waters when trials come?"

Paul tightened his grip on her small hand.

"Margie, if we love each other enough to fight for what we have, we'll make it," he said, his youthful face suddenly serious. "And when

the most troublesome times come, that's when the Lord will carry us both."

"That's a beautiful thought, Paul," Margaret said. "God will carry us and leave just one set of footprints—his."

The setting sun cast long shadows as the young couple walked back to the car. They continued to observe

two sets of footprints—and sometimes only one where the waves had lapped away at the sand.

Later that night at a restaurant, Margaret grabbed a paper napkin and began writing furiously.

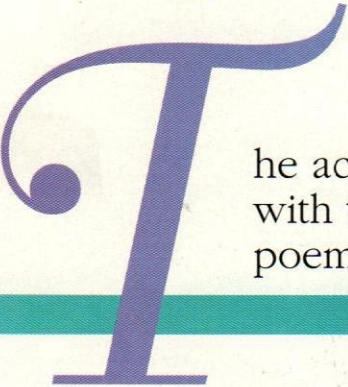
"What are you writing, dear?" asked Paul. During their courtship, he'd grown accustomed to Margaret's sudden bursts of creativity.

"Oh, just another poem," she said, flashing a grin. "It's some thoughts about our conversation on the beach and the missing footprints."

Paul reached across the table and touched her arm. The year was 1964, and life stretched before Paul and Margaret with all the promise of an unspoiled beach.



The Powers had been married for fifteen years when they moved from Ontario to British Columbia. They hoped Paul's health



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would benefit from a warmer climate and that their Little People's Ministry would expand in a new location.

Since their marriage, Paul and Margaret had ministered to youth. They criss-crossed the continent, singing, entertaining, and teaching biblical truths to children at churches and camps. When their own daughters, Tina and Paula, were old enough, they joined the family ministry as ventriloquists.

Margaret continued to write poetry and songs about her faith in God, including her "Footprints" poem, and the family often used them in their handouts.

During the twenty-five-hundred-mile move to British Columbia, Margaret had wanted to keep her six boxes of writing in the family van, but Paul had objected. The boxes would take up precious leg room on the long journey.

"They'll be safe with the moving company," he assured her.

Reluctantly, Margaret parted with her boxes—never to see them again. The Powers' furniture, clothing, pictures, and dishes arrived at their new home; however, the six boxes disappeared without a trace.

Dozens of frantic telephone calls to the moving company produced nothing. Soon after, it went out of business. Sick at heart, Margaret struggled to accept her loss.

"I went through a period of grieving as if someone had died," she says. "I waited two years before I gave up

hope. As a writer, it was a tremendous blow to lose my work because it was a diary of my life."

This blow intensified when Margaret saw "Footprints" written in calligraphy on a gift store plaque three years later. Margaret and Paul wrote the woman whose address was on the plaque, but she denied using Margaret's poetry. Still, other poems by Margaret appeared on plaques by the same woman.

Suddenly, "Footprints" seemed to take on a life of its own. Margaret saw it everywhere—on coffee cups, plates, key chains, posters, and greeting cards—always attributed to "Author Unknown."

Over the next few years, "Footprints" captured the hearts of millions of people around the world. Through its message of God's gentle, abiding presence, many lives were healed and many souls were saved.

But Margaret's own soul struggled. Should she try to stop people from using her work without her permission? Friends urged her to sue for copyright infringement, but after much prayer and counseling from mature Christian businessmen, she and Paul decided that, as Christians, they would not sue.

At her darkest hour, Paul bought Margaret a gift that helped turn her life around—Dr. Schuller's Possibility Thinkers Edition of the Bible (Thomas Nelson).


"That Bible was a ray of light in my canyon of bitterness," admits

Margaret. "I learned that 'When the going gets tough, the tough get going.' I saw that I needed to let my loss go and get on with life, my family, and our ministry.

"For the first time in all my years, I appreciated the power of positive thinking," she continues. "In the depth of my turmoil and pain, thinking positively helped me hang on to the Lord like a drowning man hangs on to a lifesaver."

Although she began to heal from her loss when she decided not to sue, full acceptance didn't come until the dreadful waterfall incident four years later.

"The accident finally made me realize that my relationship with the Lord and my family takes precedence over any poem I've ever written," she says. "When I was faced with losing my husband and daughter, things took on a different perspective. During the many months it took for Paula to recover, I came to appreciate just how fragile life is.

"I'm glad God has used that poem to comfort so many people—even without my name on it," she says. "Initially, the loss of my work was devastating, but God had a greater purpose than I could have imagined. People in prison or who have contemplated suicide have written me about how that poem turned their hearts toward the Lord." 



To request your "Footprints" mug, see the envelope in the center of the magazine.