The Midnight Footprints
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In a snug village at the edge of a whispering wood, mornings began with warm bread and cheerful birdsong. But lately, something odd appeared in the square. Huge footprints stamped across the cobblestones, each one as big as a cartwheel. Nobody knew who made them, and nobody had ever seen the visitor. The village buzzed with whispers before the sun was even up.

Ben was eight years old, small and wiry, with tousled dark brown hair and large curious green eyes. He wore a mustard-yellow jumper, blue shorts, and red boots, and carried a small canvas satchel for his notebook. While others gasped at the prints, Ben knelt down and studied them. 'They're big,' he murmured, 'but they're not scary.' He traced one with his finger and wondered.

At breakfast, Milla leaned over the fence. She was nine, tall for her age, with black hair in two puff buns and a daisy tucked behind one ear. 'My brother says it's a monster with giant claws!' she said, eyes wide. Ben shook his head. 'Monsters don't leave neat footprints,' he said. 'These are just feet. Big, padded feet.' Milla shivered anyway.

Gran listened from her rocking chair, her lavender shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Her silver hair was pinned in a neat bun, and her round glasses caught the light. 'Ben,' she said gently, 'fear grows fastest when nobody asks questions. If you want the truth, you must go and look for it.' Ben nodded. That night, he decided, he would follow the footprints.

The village grew dark and quiet. Ben pulled on his red boots, tucked his notebook into his satchel, and slipped outside. The footprints glowed faintly under the moon, leading past the bakery, past the fountain, and toward the old oak tree. His heart thumped, but his curiosity was stronger. Step by step, he followed the tracks into the shadows.

At the edge of the square, Ben heard a soft rustling. He peeked around a barrel and gasped. A huge creature stood there, three metres tall, with soft moss-green fur and enormous padded feet. Its round amber eyes blinked slowly, and its long floppy ears twitched. It carried a woven satchel across its chest. Ben froze, but the creature didn't roar. It simply bent down.

The creature picked up a fallen branch and tucked it into its satchel. Then another, and another. It moved quietly, tidying the streets as it went. Ben watched, his green eyes wide. 'You're not a monster,' he whispered. The creature looked up, surprised. 'No,' it said softly, 'I just like to keep things tidy.' Its voice was warm and gentle.

Ben stepped out from behind the barrel. 'My name is Ben,' he said. The creature tilted its head. 'I am called Moss,' it replied. 'I come at night because I am shy. The village is so lovely, and I want to help.' Ben smiled. 'You collect branches,' he said. 'That's kind.' Moss nodded. 'I don't want anyone to trip,' it said.

Ben opened his notebook and drew a quick sketch of Moss. 'I can tell the village,' he said. 'They think you're scary, but you're not.' Moss's ears drooped. 'What if they don't believe you?' it asked. Ben thought for a moment. 'Then I'll show them,' he said. 'But first, can I help you collect branches?' Moss's amber eyes sparkled.

Together, Ben and Moss walked through the village. Ben gathered twigs while Moss carried the heavy branches. They worked quietly under the moon, and the square grew neat and tidy. 'I've never had a helper,' Moss said happily. Ben grinned. 'I've never met a creature like you,' he replied. 'Tomorrow, I'll bring my friends.' Moss nodded, a little nervous but hopeful.

The next morning, Ben ran to Milla's house. 'I saw it!' he said. 'It's not a monster. It's a gentle creature called Moss, and it collects fallen branches to keep our streets clean.' Milla's eyes widened. 'Really?' she said. 'Then the scary stories were wrong.' Ben nodded. 'Will you help me tell everyone?' Milla smiled her gap-toothed smile. 'Of course!'

Ben and Milla stood in the square with Ben's notebook. They showed the villagers the sketch and told them about Moss. At first, people gasped, but Gran spoke up. 'Ben asked questions instead of spreading fear,' she said. 'That is always the braver choice.' The villagers looked at the neat, tidy square. Slowly, they began to smile.

That evening, the whole village gathered in the square. They carried lanterns and baskets of apples. When Moss appeared at the edge of the shadows, everyone stayed calm. Milla stepped forward and waved. 'Hello, Moss!' she called. 'Thank you for keeping our streets clean!' Moss's ears perked up, and its amber eyes shone with surprise and joy.

Moss walked into the square, its big padded feet making soft thumps. The villagers waved and offered apples. 'We're sorry we were afraid,' said the baker. Moss smiled its wide, friendly smile. 'I understand,' it said. 'I am shy too.' Ben stood beside Moss, his green eyes bright. 'Now everyone knows the truth,' he said. 'Curiosity and kindness are better than fear.'

From that night on, Moss became the village's nighttime friend. Every evening, it collected fallen branches, and every morning, the villagers found a tidy square. Children left little notes of thanks, and Milla drew pictures of Moss with a daisy behind its ear. Gran said, 'A question asked with an open heart can turn fear into friendship.' The whole village agreed.

And so, the mystery of the midnight footprints was solved. Ben learned that being curious and kind was always the best way to discover the truth. The village learned to wave hello to their helpful friend, and Moss no longer hid in the shadows. Every night, its big padded feet left gentle prints, and every morning, the village smiled.