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The Steppingstone

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The Steppingstone

Everything has a start and story. Moving cars, couches, curtains, paperclips, chalk. Everything.

And once upon a time, there was a steppingstone. It was almost like all those other single slabs sitting in millions of yards.

But picture this one. Think about it hard.

Close your eyes. Breathe, think, see it for what it once was. Maybe it was a rock? Or because men want to recreate things found in nature to put in their natural guardians, maybe it was a piece of manufactured material.

Then shut your eyes harder. See it - the steppingstone. That steppingstone was born in a factory, made in a day. It was made for us, hence the name, steppingstone.

It could have been made by a human or machine. Some guy who worked at the factory to support his family.

Or, maybe it was first touched by a teenage girl at the steppingstone factory where she got her first summer job. She looked at the steppingstone, the first she ever inspected, and she put it back, on a stack of other stones that were almost the same. Pass! It was good, she thought. She smiled because she got it right. Then she looked at the steppingstone and saw its patterns, the greys and slate blue, with tiny slashes of black. And for the first time in her life, she realized what her parents were doing every day at their jobs.

And then the steppingstone was sent to a store, unloaded by the delivery guy, handled by the clerk. And it was the delivery guy's last day on the job. He took care to thank everyone on his route. As usual, he took great care to unload the stones, because for thirty-seven years that's what he did. Not one broken.

And he placed our steppingstone on the very top.

The delivery guy noticed how nice the colors looked. The greys and slate-blue, with tiny slashes of black. But he needed to go to the little party his wife arranged, so he just lightly brushed his fingers across the top. He smiled and turned to head home from work for the last time.

And the store is a garden store in Southern California, where the steppingstone sits, waiting to be bought.

Then, a company vice president from Escondido buys the stone for the garden project he is going to start. The vp is wound tight and works so hard that the steppingstone spends months in the dark. Months in a dusty, metal shed, sitting alone on a plywood floor.

But one day, the vp's wife has had enough. He's dejected and tired and is having a hard time seeing the point.

His wife loves him more than herself, so she sends him out into the yard to build the little path he planned long ago. A three-meter stretch from the pergola patio to the backyard barbeque set up.

And the vp hits the project just like all his business dealings - with vigor. Every Sunday, he digs and rakes, plants and pounds until the beautiful path is done. The steppingstone is put in its place. It's the first stone off the patio, the first step on the way.

The vp's children play the lava game. "Step off the stone, you're burning in lava," they scream. And they always make it to our steppingstone because it's the first step.

The two children are a boy and a girl. Two years apart. Many times, they fall apart because the little girl is sort of bossy, and she tells the little boy what to do. But the rifts only last a few moments, and they come back to sit on the steppingstone and the next stone over, and the little girl tells the little boy about everything she learns in school. The little boy knows the little girl is very smart.

But one thing steppingstones do not know is that human nature is shifting and moving, unlike a stone.

One day, the vp and his wife come outside, and the vp stands next to the steppingstone, nervously kicking into the stone's stony side. It has rained a lot this day, so the steppingstone is wet and slippery. The vp keeps rubbing the sole of his shoe on the steppingstone, and soon, all the edges of the stone are caked with grassy mud.

The vp goes inside, but his wife stays. She bows her head and stares down, right into the steppingstone's face. She studies the greys and slate blue, with tiny slashes of black. A heavy rain starts and beats the woman's back. She squats all the way down to the steppingstone and picks the grassy mud from its face. Her dress falls lightly on the stone. There is the smell of sweetness and sour. The woman stays there for a long time, even after the grassy mud is gone.

A few days later, the little boy and little girl come outside.

But this time, the little girl doesn't tell the little boy what to do.

This time, the little girl gives the little boy a snack because he is hungry, and they put their little paper plates on the steppingstone.

This time, the little girl wipes the little boy's face because it got dirty.

This time, the little girl holds his hand.

By summer they are gone, and the stone is soon buried under unkempt grass, because that's what happens to steppingstones when it all falls apart.

Erik Priedkalns