

SIGNIFICANT OTHERS,
by Jeanne Marie Laskas

THE FIRST STONE

Mack, the builder of walls, is out in the front yard looking down at about 300 hunks of sandstone. He's a slim man with a ponytail, and a tattoo that makes his arm appear encircled with barbed wire. He's got a cigarette in one hand, and with the other he's rubbing his chin, examining the stone. Perhaps he's thinking about what I told him when he arrived this morning. "This is an important stone wall," I said. "This is the wall that will announce our front yard! This is the *gateway*, the *approach*, the point of *entry* into the land of us!"

He nodded a few times. I went on to explain that, due to the importance of this wall, we should probably think in terms of a focal point, one stone that can speak on behalf of all the other stones. We should pick the most beautiful stone and feature it somehow.

"Right," he said. "So why don't you pick out your favorite stone here and I'll set it aside."

Great idea. I walked among the stones. Wow. They were all so beautiful. I couldn't pick a favorite. I just really couldn't decide. So I changed the subject, slightly. I said basically we wanted this stone wall to be a wall that *invites people in*, not a wall that acts as some cranky fortress, so somehow we wanted to communicate *warmth*, a kind of familiarity and approachability.

"Okay," he said cheerfully. He then asked me to pick out the warmest, most familiar and approachable stones I could find and he'd set them aside. I walked among the stones. It was hard to decide. I told him this could take days.

"Right," He said. "So I'm just going to get started here, okay?"

I smiled at him, tilted my head, said I'd



be up in the house if he needed anything.

And so here I am in my office watching Mack, the builder of walls, from my window. He crouches like a toad. He lights another cigarette, stares for a moment, then bounces up, picks up a flat, bluish stone. *That one?* No, not *that one!* I dash down. "The steps!" I say. "Wouldn't that make a better stone for the steps?"

He puts the stone down, looks at me.

Hmm. And why do I get the feeling I'm telling a musician how to play his instrument?

I'm just going to get started here okay?" Mack says.

Righto. I can take a hint. I go back to the house, climb the stairs to my office, sit at my computer. A blank screen. A new chapter to begin. A chapter in a book with a lot of chapters with lots of characters and lots of bits of dialogue. It's like one giant heap of sandstone, is what it is. Making order out of chaos, we're all in the same lonely game. I wish I had someone here to ask me questions, to wonder with me what this story is about, to inspire me with questions about a focal point, to wail and whine and groan. Oh, the angst! If you're a painter or a quilter or a carpenter or anyone who has ever made anything, you know it too. My mother and I used to do this. She'd be downstairs staring at a blank canvas. I'd be upstairs staring at a blank screen, and we'd meet for tuna fish at noon and moan. After wood the magic would hit her, or hit me. It didn't matter who got the courage to start first. One would start and

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the starting would inspire the other to get started.

Outside I can hear the skip loader. I see Mack zooming back and forth on the nimblest wheels. He's got a giant hunk of sandstone in the bucket, he's placing it just so, he hops out of the skip loader and leaps toward the wall, touching it, marveling at the position of this,

his latest, greatest stone. He continues moving around like a bumblebee buzzing among flowers with a purpose as pure as it is mysterious. He's in the zone, all right. I know better than to interrupt him now. And what if I just sat here at my blank screen and put down one word? One tiny word. How hard can it be?

Nine hundred words later, I go out see. Mack is covered in sweat, he's breathing hard, he sees me approaching and has a look of fear in his eyes. I'm his reader, I'm his listener, I'm opening night, I'm his only hope for applause.

It's gorgeous!" I say to Mack, because it is. There's on stone pinker than all the others announcing the curve. There's a duet, two thin slabs sitting amid a circular pattern of fat bulbous rocks as if mocking them. A stone joke! This wall isn't even half finished and already it's about the most intriguing stone wall I've had the occasion to meet.

I ask Mack how he did it. How did he know what stone to put where, how did he come to create order out this heap of chaos?

"You start with one stone," he says, rubbing his brow. "Then you put the next one on. After that, you put another. The thing of it is you can only put one stone at a time." □

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