

For The Child

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There was once a self-proclaimed average man, a most self-denying and resolute laborer named Samuel Foll. He drove tractor-trailers for the better part of five decades, eyeing the United States up and down from a far north reach of the Appalachian Trail in Rangeley, Maine, to the trail's southernmost reaches in Georgia's Chattahoochee National Forest. Foll was a man who reached out with his hands rather than his mind, believing he had a better grip that way. He was a man of toil. As a part-time mechanic, full-time truck driver, and full-time husband, he dealt with many problems whose solutions required only a simple answer - something like "the monkey wrench", "Bentonville, Arkansas", or "the top drawer". And though Foll wanted to be only a man of calluses, grease stains and patchwork, the endless miles on the turnpike worked their way into his head.

Foll sought permanence though he was not painfully aware of it. In the years after his death, he was still leaving a mark. The time he had put into his work on cars and houses manifested itself in concrete and indisputable ways – because of him, somewhere an engine would start, a roof would not leak, brakes would not squeak, some gutters were clean, and windshield wiper fluid sprayed on a windshield instead of off it.

Years ago, he dropped out of high school because his father needed another hand on the farm. And without any great debate, Samuel Foll did what his father asked; he thought that the books seemed irrelevant to him, that to chase your own Great Whale while the farm failed was irresponsible. And while the academics claim that literature enriches the discussion about the time left to live on earth, that books allow a man to live on through his words, that there is resonance in our past, Foll knew better. He knew that if he held matches, a book could be burned. He knew that in time, a book could be stolen, lost, or forgotten. As for the lessons, the timeless knowledge of our past, although impossible to physically destroy, their keeper could easily bury them in dust without obsequious maintenance. Foll knew enough about rust to know that negligence marred everything.

When he was in grade school, young Samuel Foll mastered long division after an arduous two weeks of practice. Such mastery was at first satisfying to Foll, and was truly a testament to how hard he had worked on it. Two whole weeks later, he sat down with his mother, a pencil and a sheet of lined paper. He demonstrated how 87 apples would be properly spread among 4 people. And so after explaining that all but one would get 22 and the fourth would get 1, Samuel turned to his mother and she smiled "very good, Sam." As she walked away, Foll realized they did not have 87 apples, they did not even have 10 apples. He balled up the paper and threw it in the trashcan.

It was the following summer when Foll's father taught him how to change a flat tire. He watched his father do the procedure three times before he took his turn. It took Foll but two tries to get it right. And from that day on, whenever he needed to change a tire there was no

hesitation, there was instinct, there was only the automatic performance of muscle memory. And so Foll sought after physical competency, knowledge that truly made an impact.

Though the constant indomitability in his working life made him sacrifice much of his potential recreational and literary lives, he was not a man of pain, he was not a man of regret. He did not fight the life he lived, and so he lived to reap its rewards and to hand them off to those he loved just as quickly as they came. He was a man of acceptance, but it was a warm acceptance that felt less like resignation and more like satisfaction. And much of that satisfaction came from the brief and shining moments he lived at home.

His wife, Rosaline, was a purpose; she was, in and of her self, a destination. On his more pressing trips, Foll thought of her so vividly and unrelentingly that it seemed she sat next to him, parked faithfully in the passenger's seat. And even when he could not afford to imagine her scent as he narrowed his focus at a high-speed in an unfamiliar place, it still seemed that she was never far, that she merely lay softly sleeping behind the black curtain which divided the himself from the cab of his truck. As he neared the end of a long haul, it was not the house nor the yard, those privileges that he had worked so hard his whole life to earn, that he came to home to – it was her. He would park the enormous truck in the street outside their house. And there it would sit casting its larger-than-life shadow out over the quiet trees on the dirt of No. 6 road as Samuel Foll would walk into the house, take off his shoes and socks, and head straight for the bedroom. He would always lower himself slowly into the bed doing his best not to wake his wife. When she was sleeping, he would rarely kiss her, instead he did his best to lie silently beside her. He was tired but it was not for naught; he was tired for her. There was a certain warmth and comfort there knowing that she would wait for him as he worked, that his ring held her finger even when he was half the country away – and that she could sleep soundly knowing only that he would be back.

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It was late January and that year the Massachusetts' winter had worked to pile the snow into every corner of Franklin County. It was approaching the 0-dark-30 as Samuel Foll crept through the door and stepped into the quiet kitchen. There was a single light left on over the oven that proved luminous enough for Foll to make his way about the dim erubescence room. He stripped out of his sodden and gelid work-clothes and threw on the long-sleeved cotton shirt and pair of grey sweatpants that Rosaline had draped over the counter next to the woodstove. Both weary and eager, he noiselessly made his way down the hallway. He slowly twisted the plastic knob, wedged open the door, and entered the bedroom. Foll heard his wife's deep breathing and took in the delicate scent he had missed so indefatigably. He held his breath and slipped cautiously beneath the heavy winter quilt that depicted a small farmhouse with a fence and a pasture full of cows and sheep that was nestled beneath a banner that read plainly: "home sweet home".

He buried his face in the pillow and tried to align his breathing with Rosaline's. He thought of her excitement in the moment she would realize that he was home, of the breakfast she would make for him in the morning, and of the child she would soon bear him. The future was a strange place, Foll thought; though he had never been there, it seemed like some place he would like to go. Foll was left clues about the years to come in every daydream; he saw his

children, he saw the full spread on the table, and at the end of that table, he saw the proud mother of the family he was so very ready and willing to lead. And at this hour, the conscious slowdown of his respiration was enough to lead him swiftly into sleep.

Some time just after sunrise, Rosaline woke and noticed her worn and greasy husband with his face down in a deep sleep next to her. She let her elbows and knees sink into the mattress as she rose from bed, trying to wake him innocently. Despite her best innocuous efforts, he slumbered on. He had been gone for five days and during that time, although it surely was not her husband's longest trip, Rosaline began to feel that she was less and less a presence in the house, that she had not spoken a word since he left, that the sounds she could hear around her had very little do with her. She missed her husband not because she was a lonely woman who needed companionship but because she did truly love him and everything he did for her – and in his absence, that fact became clearer.

Her husband, Rosaline thought, was not the type of man you would light candles for, or litter Rose petals for, or the type of man with arms you would run across the road to jump into. She thought that instead of those fiery and ostentation exhibitions, Samuel Foll was a man who should be held onto, a man who should be coaxed to rest, to take a break, and a man to be watched, to be marveled at when he did finally sleep. And from those things, the hottest love crept quietly up from under sweater and settled around her neck.

Rosaline fell asleep quickly every night and slept soundly through the night most nights. Lately, she had been apparently having bad dreams; she would wake with a start, and though she could not remember what woke her, Rosaline would feel oddly unsettled. Perhaps it was the nearing of the end of her pregnancy, or perhaps it was the absence of Samuel, or most likely it was a combination of the two, she reasoned. Disconcerted or not, she filled her days mostly with cooking, knitting, dreaming of what was to come, and fireplace-maintenance. She had worked most of her adolescent and what there was of her adult life as an assistant at the schoolhouse in New Salem, and though she missed the activity, for the sake of the baby, she was glad the teachers whom she assisted had suggested that she take these months off.

And so she wiped the fog of waking from her eyes and made her way down the hall, past the bathroom and into the kitchen. The iron of the wood stove still gave off heat though by this hour its tenants had been reduced to mere embers. There was not too terribly much to look at out the window over the sink, she thought – just a whole mess of white these days. Bland or not, the landscape watched as she pulled strips of steak from a container she had prepared the night before. She put two pans on the stove, one for heating the strips of steak, one for making the two eggs over easy. She took more care, was more wary in making this meal than with those she had prepared for the past week. Knowing that the approval would come from her husband, the man who had bought the eggs and steak to begin with was motivation enough for her prudence.

Samuel Foll smiled as he dragged his feet to the kitchen. He slinked behind his wife, whose head was directly below the noisy stovetop fan and grabbed her by the hips. She smiled, turned her head and planted a kiss on his cheek. Foll took back his hands and buried them in the basket of split wood by the woodstove. He heaped a few pieces into the “fire” and took his place at the table that, as always had been set for two.

Rosaline brought his food to the table and Samuel thanked her as she took the seat opposite him. He began by tearing into the steak at once with his fork and knife while Rosaline sat and watched. She asked him much about the places he had gone on the last haul. He had made his way down to Fayetteville, Arkansas for one load, a place she had certainly never gone. Samuel told her about the way he could hear the night's trains rumbling on suspended tracks as he lay on his back in the truck's cab many miles away. She listened and imagined her own adventure to a place without January's snowfall. When he had finished his account, she told him of the skunk she had shot this past week as it had been trying to scramble its way into the house for hours. He listened and imagined pulling on his boots, grabbing a flashlight, and heading out into the back himself. He felt his own hand on the trigger as Rosaline stood by.

And though their stories delivered news not of the wildest adventures or the most scintillating of circumstances, they were important; their very telling was entirely necessary for both Samuel and his wife. For Samuel, he had seen an onslaught of things in this week on the road but his mouth remained silent, and his thoughts, his stories were pent up in his head. And for Rosaline, though she could have practiced her speech, could have screamed to declare her presence in the woods of New Salem, she had longed to cultivate words for a purpose – whether it be to entertain the one she loves, or simply to ask what he wants to do next. And so it was their exchange, the unmentioned and the unintentional maintenance that kept Samuel and Rosaline so tightly intertwined.

Rosaline brought over two cups of coffee and a small pitcher of cream. They stirred their cups, took a break from talking and listened to the high-pitched knocking of spoon against porcelain. They sat on the side of the kitchen at that small table for another hour sipping the hot coffee and talking until Rosaline hunched over held her hands slightly below her inflated stomach. She winced and stayed in the pose for a quarter minute – and with a jump in his veins, Samuel asked, “what’s wrong? What’s wrong?” She straightened up, moved her hands from her stomach to the tops of her thighs, supported herself and said that it was only normal, whether she knew it or not. Samuel agreed then sat back in his seat and tried to relax. They talked about where the baby would sleep and how much more exciting their lives would soon be. Rosaline told him about her waking in the night and he seemed to think it quite harmless. The merriment of anticipation was punctuated by moments of incubus for Foll; he knew that if they were to bring someone into this world, it would upon his shoulders that the baby would ride. But again, as his ardor toppled over, he knew that through sacrifice he had the power to make all three of their lives propitious.

Long after the remaining coffee had gone cold, Samuel heard a knock on their door. He walked through the kitchen and unbolted the thick wooden door. In the half-inch of snow that had accumulated on the doorstep stood Ralph Bashford, a man of fifty, who stood just under six feet tall, with a dark red beard and seemed to dress always in the blue work-pants and a flannel shirt. He was the head director of Bashford Trucking, inc. Samuel Foll invited him inside without hesitation. Ralph took off his boots, placed them by the woodstove, greeted Rosaline and then took the last seat remaining at the tiny oak table. Ralph asked Foll briefly about his last trip and then made small talk about the new bailer Ralph had recently bought. Growing impatient,

Rosaline asked what brought Ralph to their house on one of the coldest and most inopportune days of the winter.

Ralph Bashford sighed and began “Sam, you know Jimmy Abbot right?” Foll nodded. “Well, here’s the deal: he’s sick as a dog, got some serious pneumonia or something... wife took him to the hospital yesterday, and he’s not doing so good.” Foll and Rosaline agreed that the illness sounded terrible and that they only wished Jim the best. Bashford continued “tomorrow morning, he was scheduled to take that payload of steel from Fallon & sons down south for us.” Rosaline’s eyes narrowed and she jumped in “there’s no way, it’s just not happening; he’s been gone for a week already as it is.” Ralph took a breath and said “listen, Rosaline, we’re gonna pay 200% for this, we know its short notice – and god damn, it’s a big-money load for us, and we need a guy we trust.” Foll stood up and asked Bashford to excuse him for one second, he beckoned Rosaline and they stepped into their bedroom.

Samuel Foll sat his wife down on the bed and asked her “what do you think?” She said “No, it’s just not happening. You’re tired; you’ve been on the road for the past week! Look at you”, she grabbed his hands and put them up in front of his face “your hands are stained black from that damned steering wheel.” Foll dropped his hands and took a step to the side “Meg, I’m not tired. And plus, you heard ‘em – they’ll pay me double! And I mean, look, they need a guy they trust... and Ralph came here! He came to us, right to our house. He came to me as a first choice; we can’t really let him down, can we?” It was an easy answer for his wife, “yes, yes we can. He’ll understand. He really will. And Christ, the baby will be here any day, I’m surer of it every minute. Please, Sam, think of the baby, think of the future.” He looked at the floor, and then at her and asked “so you want me to pass this one up?” and she said quickly and firmly, “yes. Yes, Sam, I do.”

They walked out of the room together, made their way down the hall and into the kitchen where Ralph sat rubbing his frozen toes. Rosaline looked to Samuel and he said as the product of great deliberation “Listen Ralph, I’m real sorry but I can’t do it.” Ralph stopped rubbing his foot, took a breath, then hopped up to his feet and said “no worries Sam, you’ve been good for us, and you’ve been on the road for a while now, I get it. Don’t sweat it. But listen, I gotta run and find someone else though.” He quickly tied up his boots and gave Rosaline a wave and a smile. She worked at washing dishes, while like a good host, Samuel threw on his boots and walked out into the snow with Ralph. Though the walk took a bit too long for Rosaline’s liking, she was excited to see Samuel come back home through the heavy door knowing he had turned the offer down. He kissed lightly her on the lips, put his stained hand on her stomach and said “for the baby.” And she nodded.

A few hours later, Foll laced his boots back up and headed to bring a bit more of the firewood he had stockpiled in the yard. To his dismay, the black tarp that had been carefully placed over the pile had been almost completely dislodged under the weight of the fallen snow. He could not risk allowing the valuable pieces of wood to become sodden. And without gloves or a hat, he quickly worked to more stably stack the wood and rearrange the tarp. Already damp, the wood was heavier to move than usual. Though the icy wind bit his face and ears, within no time he could feel the sweat droplets forming on his chest and back as he felt the warmth billowing from the neck of his jacket. Once the woodpile was completely reorganized he headed

back into the house. Rosaline rushed over to the side door when he entered. She was worried about the frostbite because it is so easy to catch after dark, but Foll quickly brushed her fears aside by sneaking his frozen hands onto the small of her back to give her a more selfish problem. After Rosaline finished rubbing her back, she insisted he put on dry clothes and hop into bed. She ordered him to the bedroom as she rummaged about to find something dry and comfortable for him.

Samuel flopped into bed face first while keeping the wet bottoms of his pants off of the covers. The warmth of the room and blanket-warren quickly brought feeling back into his ears; his eyes stopped watering and the breath he drew no longer stung. Rosaline came in no longer than ten minutes later, saw him and had a quiet laugh, unsurprised. She gently stripped off the wet pants and slid on a pair of dark sweat pants, changed his socks, and wrapped the rest of him in the covers.

She turned off the overhead light in the room and lay next to him. He was back. How long he would stay was always uncertain, but she knew she would cherish the moments. Rosaline felt that she could hoard time with him, that she could tuck some small part of him into a sock in a dresser drawer and visit it when she missed him the most. She reached out, put a hand onto his ribs and felt herself getting one breath to the next time he would leave, or the next time she would see him again – she was never sure which, but was never wrong. Whether it was the past or the future with him, it did not matter. He was always back, and she was certain that perhaps one day he would be home for good.

About two hours before the sun would rise, Samuel Foll quietly rose fully aware of his wife's hand on his ribs. He carefully moved out from under her hand and rested it on a pillow. He stood up and took a few deep breaths before silently opening the bedroom door and stepping into the hallway. He slipped on the folded work-pants he had put in the hall closet the night before. He slowly buttoned the flannel shirt and pulled on his boots. And as ethereally as he had come the day before, he crept out the front door and climbed into the truck.

And if not for the footprints in the snow, Rosaline might not have believed her husband had ever returned. And if it were not always for the footprints in the snow, she would have never believed he would return.

The black steering wheel that had stained his hands over these years was as cold everything else in the cabin; even the textured gearshift seemed to have goose pimples. Foll felt reassured knowing that he alone was the bringing warmth to the space, and he released the emergency brake. Slowly the truck began to creep down No. 6 road. He started the ignition as he glided to the end of the street. He crept up the hills of New Salem. And somewhere along Daniel Shays' highway, somewhere by the guardrails, near the frozen reservoir, he thought of a long dirt path, down which he and Rosaline would lead their child. And how in the spring, in the light of early dawn, in the hours after light rain, thousands of bright orange newts would stand littering the path, waiting to be happened upon.