

What is Foolish, What is Weak

Theodore Wheeler

She lost two children because something was wrong with her blood. There was nothing for her to be forgiven about that. The two she had were strong. They were good boys, though pitted against each other. All she wanted was to have this one. She knew this one would be a girl. If God would let her have it, then she could be done.

Fred told her his theory about why things would turn out good this time, her back to him as she worked dough at the counter. Something about odd-numbered births. Fred was firstborn, Jake third, this one fifth. They were going to name her Emma Marie. That was already decided.

“Doesn’t that make sense?” Fred asked. Seventeen and still shy around his mother. Hat held with both hands over his thighs as he stood in the kitchen door, an outline from the band sweat into his hair, his twig-shaped scar turning from white to glowing white. Jake was easy to be around—the way he smiled and was handsome and always cracking jokes—but Ella found Fred easier to love. His always needing to please, to make some useful gift of his labor.

“Yes,” she told him. “That makes sense. Number five. You’re right, I believe.”

All she wanted was to have this one and to have it be a girl.

Once she started to show, with each of them, Ella pushed her arms into her steamer trunk to reorder the items. Moved by a mixture of reverie and premonition. Like what she found might project a sense of the child’s personality. The China doll was always on top. It’s white cotton shirt and pants. The brown swirls of hair chipped white in spots. When she packed the doll, years ago, she dreamed of giving it to a daughter. There

were reams of bridal lace she made during her engagement. All her sisters and her mother and her aunts helped with the sewing. All these years she kept the lace neatly folded in her trunk. Under that was the old bottle of Beaujolais that Richard Dana gave her. She was fourteen. He lived across the street on Milwaukee’s North Side. His third-story room was right across the room Ella shared with her three sisters, two cousins, and a widowed aunt who married a soldier once. Richard Dana was a scoundrel. The way he sat in his window and made eyes into the girl’s room. He was the kind of man who moved from neighborhood to neighborhood, city to city, because he wasn’t welcome anywhere. The family hoped Dana might be a good fit for Aunt Uli, that he was staring into the window for her. But it wasn’t so. He followed Ella from block to block when she went to school. He sent a goose to their house. He sent her cakes. When he asked to marry Ella, that was over the line. “You mean Uli,” her father said. “No,” Dana said. “The girl. Ella.” At least Ella wasn’t the youngest of her sisters. At least she was fourteen. But her father ran Richard Dana clean out of Milwaukee, it was said, and retched thinking about the food he’d eaten that had been sent by the odious Richard Dana.

Ella ran off with Dana a week later, bound for New York City. She’d always dreamed of running away. Ella never liked to talk about this. In Jackson County, out on the farm, only her man knew the story. She and Dana only made it to Chicago before her brothers caught them. They roughed him up, took him to the police, and, when the police didn’t want him, threw him in the Chicago River. (Those days, in 1894, tossing a man in a river was equally legal as absconding with a fourteen year

old girl.) Before that, at the station, Dana bought her unspeakable extravagances like French wine and Swiss chocolates and sweet Italian biscuits. Her brothers ate the chocolates and biscuits on the train back to Milwaukee, but Ella managed to hide the Beaujolais.

Keeping the bottle was wicked, Ella knew. Why such a thing should be transported across a continent was a mystery. That she kept it hidden even after she married and had kids. Ella thought about Richard Dana from time to time. What it would have been like if her parents were less upstanding and had agreed to marry her off to a man who stared in her window from across the street. There was an atom of appeal in being a woman like that—to cast off propriety at a young age, to only have Dana to escape before she could be free. Ella knew better, but there was something romantic about being cast out to sea.

A few years later her family set her up writing letters to Franz Strauss. Ella agreed to marry him. He was funny and had the most delicate, beautiful penmanship. His family owned what was billed as good land, in Nebraska. (There wasn't that much of it, she found out later; no Strauss man until her Fred had much of an idea what to do with farmland.) Mostly she wanted out of Milwaukee. That was the bargain.

She worried that she'd asked too much of God over the years. That there was a limit to love, to clemency, to indulgence, in God as there was in man. All she wanted was to have this one and she could be done.

Ever since she was a girl she'd planned to name a daughter Emma. A name similar to her own, with double-ems instead of double-ells. And how clever that em followed ell in the alphabet, just as Emma would come after Ella. Even after her first daughter was lost, she didn't budge from the idea. Her first girl was named Emma Helena (Ella's given name

was Helena) and this one was to be Emma Marie. She would have this one. It would be a girl. Then she would be done with the business of bearing and naming and burying kids.

Ella knew it was no use, but she said it anyway. "Don't go." She knew her man would come up with a lie and she would play along. "A quick tour," he said, and, "Best to tend the flock while I can." Ella stared right through to his heart, standing in the kitchen in her bathing robe, it's halves barely able to close over her; Ella so ripe, her bellybutton popped, her breasts stretched beyond themselves, her dark hair in braids, her pinched nose pinched. Her blue eyes stared into her man's mind, his heart, and saw nothing. "Don't go to Omaha," she said.

"I'm not. I won't. Just out to the little places where they wait for me. Those old women. I can't let them down."

She didn't know why he lied to her. A sin against your wife is a sin against yourself, the one body the two make.

"Why do you have to go?" she asked him. "What if I need you?"

"It's hope," he said. "Hope. Nothing will go wrong."

She thought of how Franz was partial to Epistles when he preached, and his favorite:

*God chose the foolish things of the world
to shame the wise;*

*God chose the weak things of the world to
shame the strong,*

*God chose what is low and despised in the
world, even things that are not, to bring to
nothing things that are.*

Once he was gone, Ella and the boys played cards. Ella preferred Old Maid and Gin Rummy and those sorts of games where there wasn't a

system of accounting to figure out who won and who lost – you’re either the old maid or you’re not – and she wasn’t required to pit one boy against the other. Once the boys were older, she played whatever they wanted.

They laid in the grass where it was cool, on a twine blanket the boys used when they slept in the pasture. Jake – he had a good heart, no matter what anybody said – ran to the house for two pillows to prop her and her swelled-to-bursting belly on her side. Two of the dogs bed down with her. A shepherd named Pferd and the black and tan dachshund she kept in the house. She called him Bismarck because he was such a proud thing. A dachshund chest begs for medals. Both dogs insisted on the blanket, which meant the boys lay with all but their elbows in the grass.

“Do you think he will make it back?” Jake asked her.

“Who? Your father? Oh...”

She had an untouchable way with the boys. She answered their questions only when she felt like answering, out of benevolence.

“Oh... I think not.”

Fred sat to attention, and the dogs with him. “Forgive me, Mother,” (that half-one-thing, half-another way of speaking, the way Fred said *Muther*), “but you must have faith. I believe Father will come home in time to see... to see the...” Fred lost what he was going to say. And with the question hanging in the air – to see what? what was it that stopped Fred from saying that simple phrase, *to see his daughter born* – Fred slumped back to his elbows on the twine blanket and the three of them examined their cards with tears in their eyes. Pferd and Bismarck had no idea what to think either.

“I love you,” Jake muttered. Then she had to relent and give what they wanted.

“Oh... you are right, Fred. I have faith in your father. Oh... you are right, Jake. I love you too.”

Before the hand was won she gathered the cards in a mess and set about stacking them straight. Somehow from her side, arms bowed around her belly, she stacked and shuffled the deck.

“I will be happy,” she told them, “when all this trouble is over.”

She remembered the look on Franz’s face after the last one came out still. (No, not that. Franz hadn’t been home for that.) A week later when he came home, the look on his face when she said she was done trying, that her blood was strange and had no more to give. “No, we’re not done yet.” His face incredulous and cruel as he said it, the heft of his Adam’s apple straining the skin of his throat to show he was in charge. “Have hope, darling. Who knows? Next time there will be no problems. The next time will be a girl.”

She refused him a long time, as she refused him from time to time before: when she’d mailed a letter of application to Concordia Women’s College, when she felt broken having birthed a baby as large as Jake, and birthed him alive. Theirs wasn’t such a large farm anyway. They didn’t need a dozen children to keep it going, like some of their neighbors did. Men around there averaged nine children, which required an average of two wives to bear all that fruit (each serving consecutively, to turn over upon amortization). Ella and Franz didn’t need more kids with Fred and Jake nearly grown. But it was hard to fight Franz’s logic every minute of every night. She wanted to feel the same things he wanted to feel.

She would have this one. It would be a girl. Then she would be done.

She was so big when she opened her eyes, when it was happening, that all she could see was that mound of herself under the blankets. Forget her toes, she couldn’t see the wall across the room. Couldn’t see the wallpaper and the faded design of

pine trees on the print.

If she could find the wall then Ella could find the door and look to see if the boys were inside. She didn't want them in the house.

Frau Bläschen had been there for all of them. Had worn the same cut of black dress, in linen or wool, with the same white brocaded collar stiff from her neck to her chest. The same way Bläschen dragged a table into the bedroom and laid out what Ella would need. Warm water, Lysol, all the old bedsheets, a little lard, a little whiskey, the instruments Bläschen inherited from her Mecklenburger mother in law, the whalebone picks and hooks and smooth paddles that could be useful.

Bläschen rolled Ella from side to side, hour after hour. Asked Ella if she could walk, but Ella couldn't walk. "Will there be a full moon?" Ella asked. "Babies like a full moon."

If there was a full moon it would be easier for the boys to keep an eye on the cows.

If they saw the bull coming it was best to run. She'd had to learn that. That among many things.

A full moon would mean the boys would have no trouble finding their way back to the house if she needed them. If only she could see the door, she could see if they had come back inside.

Bismarck whined outside the door. He shared the bed with her when Franz was away.

Bläschen washed Ella's face, her stomach, her legs, clucking the whole time, "*Tsch, tsch*. They let in the dog." Bläschen had to chase Bismarck out the door. "Don't allow them boys to bother you. They're here only for the biscuits. I will a stop to it make."

Yes, it was biscuits Ella made that morning. She didn't have time for bread dough because she felt in the back of her legs, in the strings, that she should hurry. Ella told Bläschen to leave the boys alone. "Don't tell them nothing. I will have this

child and it will be a girl and then I will be done."

"*Tsch, tsch*. Rest. Sleep."

Why hadn't she refused him every night? It doesn't work if she doesn't refuse him.

Em comes after ell. He'd smiled when she told him that. Told her that she filled him with hope like few others had; like *no one* ever, correcting himself. "Ella and Emma. The two most beautiful souls. The *three* most beautiful souls," he corrected himself.

She heard the honking of geese faint from the sky, from far above the house.

Bläschen had her sleeves rolled to her elbows, the thousand lines of her face running with sweat. "Come now! You must work!" The immaculate table in disarray. Bläschen's whalebone instruments upset in a pile.

What would happen to all the things in her trunk? The china doll. The bottle of Beaujolais. All the little trinkets she'd kept and treasured and catalogued in her mind to remember why they were important. The effort it had taken to get the trunk out to Jackson County, in the middle of forever.

All she wanted was to have this one. She knew this one would be a girl.