

a novel by agnes smedley

daughter  
OF  
earth



# daughter OF Earth

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afterword  
by paul lauter

the feminist press

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# daughter OF Fear

**by agnes smedley**



# one

Before me stretches a Danish sea. Cold, gray, limitless. There is no horizon. The sea and the gray sky blend and become one. A bird, with outspread wings, takes its way over the depths.

For months I have been here, watching the sea—and writing this story of a human life. What I have written is not a work of beauty, created that someone may spend an hour pleasantly; not a symphony to lift up the spirit, to release it from the dreariness of reality. It is the story of a life, written in desperation, in unhappiness.

I write of the earth on which we all, by some strange circumstance, happen to be living. I write of the joys and sorrows of the lowly. Of loneliness. Of pain. And of love.

The sky before me has been as gray as my spirit these days. There is no horizon—as in my life. For thirty years I have lived, and for these years I have drunk from the wells of bitterness. I have loved, and bitterness left me for that hour. But there are times when love itself is bitter.

Now I stand at the end of one life and on the threshold of another. Contemplating. Weighing. About me lie the ruins of a life. Instead of blind faith,—directness, unbounded energy; and instead of unclearness, I now have the knowledge that comes from experience; work that is limitless in its scope and significance. Is not this enough to weigh against love?

I gaze over the waters and consider. There have been days when it seemed that my path would better lead into the sea. But now I choose otherwise.

I recall a crazy-quilt my mother once had. She made it from the remnants of gay and beautiful cotton materials. She also made a quilt of solid blue. I would stand gazing at the blue quilt for a little time, but the crazy-quilt held me for hours. It was an adventure.

I shall gather up these fragments of my life and make a crazy-quilt of them. Or a mosaic of interesting pattern—unity in diversity. This will be an adventure.

To die would have been beautiful. But I belong to those who do not die for the sake of beauty. I belong to those who die from other causes—exhausted by poverty, victims of wealth and power, fighters in a great cause. A few of us die, desperate from the pain or disillusionment of love, but for most of us “the earthquake but discloseth new fountains.” For we are of the earth and our struggle is the struggle of earth.

The first thing I remember of life was a strange feeling of love and secrecy. I was a baby so young that I recall only the feeling—nothing else. My father was holding me close to his huge body in sleep. Was it the dawn of memory . . . or was it a dream!

I must have been no more than a year old—for it was



much earlier than those beautiful sunny days of my babyhood in the middle 1890's that I spent playing with my older sister Annie under a wide-spreading walnut tree down in the sun-flecked meadows. Above on the hill I heard the voice of my father, the deep beautiful voice, as he labored in the hayfields. My mother came walking down the long path, carrying two pails of water to our tiny log home on the hill. She was barefoot and the wind caught her loose-flowing calico dress and wrapped it close to her slender body.

If you went two steps beyond the well you came to a ditch shadowed by thick bushes and tall elm trees. On the further bank, far back under the clustering bushes, grew flowers so fat and velvety that a ray of sunshine withered them. They grew singly, and the blossoms hung in gentle sprays. Delicate secret thoughts of flowers they were. They were as living beings to my child soul and I talked to them as I talked to the wind in the top of the walnut tree down in the meadows.

We were very poor. But that I did not know. For all the world seemed to be just like our home—at least that world of ours that stretched for some two hundred miles across northern Missouri. The rolling, stony earth that yielded so reluctantly seemed to stretch far beyond the horizon and to touch the sky where the sun set. For us, this world was bounded on one side by the county seat and on the other by the Missouri River. The northern frontier was a town of a few hundred people. The south ended at—well, my father's imagination reached to a mysterious city called St. Joseph on the Missouri River. But then he was a man with the soul and imagination of a vagabond. People listened to his stories, filled with color and adventure, but they did not always

believe. For he was not one of them; he was almost a foreigner, in fact. His family was unknown to our world. They were not farmers, and some said they were unsteady, unreliable—a shiftless crew; that was the Indian blood in their veins . . . you never could trust foreigners or Indians.

Later the horizon of our world was extended to Kansas City. That was when the whole countryside was aroused by a young cousin of mine who ran away. In three months he returned—an educated man. He had learned to be a barber . . . and he wore store clothes!

As I sit here I think vaguely of love . . . of fire . . . of the color red. Was it that red bird that came to our cherry tree . . . was it the red cloak I wore as a child . . . now I remember, it was long ago:

I was building a fire—a lovely fire. My stove was made of stones but its back was the wall of our two-room log home. I built the fire on the side near the two tall cedar trees with the swing hanging between them. It burned brilliantly and beautifully, and would have been still more beautiful if my mother had not found it and tapped me on the head with her steel thimble. She was always tapping me with a hard steel thimble that aroused all my hatred. My beautiful fires, my glorious fires that she stamped out when she found them . . . it was like stamping out something within me . . . when the flame flared up it was so warm and friendly! Now I know the spiritual link between fire and the instinct of love. But my mother did not know it. She had gone only to the sixth grade in school. My father did not know—he had gone only through the third: a man didn't need more, he said. Education was only for women and

men who were dudes.

I remember my mother's thimble taps, and I remember a tough little switch that cut like a knife into the flesh. Why she whipped me so often I do not know. I doubt if she knew. But she said that I built fires and that I lied. What business that was of hers I was unable to see. As the years of her unhappy married life increased, as more children arrived, she whipped me more and more. At first I did not know that I could sometimes hit back at a person who deliberately struck me; but as time passed I learned that only by virtue of her size she had the power to do what she would with me. I longed to grow up.

She developed a method in her whippings: standing with her switch in her hand, she would order me to come before her. I would plead or cry or run away. But at last I had to come. Without taking hold of me, she forced me to stand in one spot of my own will, while she whipped me on all sides. Afterwards, when I continued to sob as children do, she would order me to stop or she would "stomp me into the ground." I remember once that I could not and with one swoop she was upon me—over the head, down the back, on my bare legs, until in agony and terror I ran from the house screaming for my father. Yet what could I say to my father—I was little and could not explain. And he would not believe.

My mother continued to say that I lied. But I did not know it. I was never clear. What was truth and what was fancy I could not know. To me, the wind in the tree tops really carried stories on its back; the red bird that came to our cherry tree really told me things; the fat, velvety flowers down in the forest laughed and I

answered; the little calf in the field held long conversations with me.

But at last I learned to know what a lie was: to induce my mother to stop beating me I would lie—I would say, yes, I had lied and was sorry, and then she would whip me for having withheld the admission so long. As time went on, to avoid a whipping, I learned to tell her only the things I thought she wanted to hear.

“I have but one child who is stubborn and a liar, and that is Marie,” she would tell strangers or neighbors. At first I was humiliated to tears; later I became hardened; later still I accepted it as a fact and did not even try to deny it.

It has been one of the greatest struggles in my life to learn to tell the truth. To tell something not quite true became almost an instinct. In pain and tears I have had to unlearn all that my mother beat into my unformed mind. It was difficult for her to beat my need of her love out of me. It took years, for with the least return of kindness in her my love swept back. I see now that she and my father, and the conditions about us, perverted my love and my life. They made me believe I was an evil creature . . . I accepted that as I accepted the statement that I lied; for they seemed infallible. Still there are tears I have never forgotten . . . childish tears that are said to have no meaning, and pain that children are said to forget. I am weary of memories of tears and pain.

In the west a deep blue cloud was rising and riding on the wind in our direction. It became black and a sinister yellow streak in the center grew and swept onward with it. In terror we watched the yellow streak—my older sister Annie, six, my toddling baby sister Beatrice, and I;

for the yellow streak meant danger. A cyclone was coming.

My father and mother were not at home. I had been building another fire behind the house when Annie's cry had interrupted me. She started to drag us across the big cornfield to a farmhouse far away, but suddenly she stood still and screamed with joy. We looked: there, turning a distant curve and sweeping down the long white lane my father and mother came, riding the two snow-white horses of which my father was so proud. Down the lane, faster than the approaching storm they came, and I heard the drum of the horses' flying feet on the hard white road. It grew louder and louder. They swung in at the gate, dashed up to the door, my mother sprang from the saddle and my father, without halting, dashed away with the horses to the stable.

In a few moments we were in the underground cave, my father following with mattresses, feather beds, blankets and an ax. My mother was screaming to him to bring the new sewing machine and the clock—her two most valued possessions—and to bar the door of the house. The wind before the approaching storm had already reached us. My father rushed down the steps, drew the cave door down against the flat earth and bolted it. Then we waited.

The cave was lighted only by a lantern. About us hung the damp odor of earth, of jars of canned fruits, of melons, apples, sweet butter and thick cream in crocks. It was just like going to a picnic to have a cyclone like this and to lie down in the soft warm featherbed and smell and hear and see and feel everything!

There came a great roaring, as of rain and wind, and something fell against the cave door.

"Be quiet," said my father to my mother. "If we're buried, I've got the ax."

"Suppose somethin' falls on the air-hole?" and she glanced up at the little wooden air escape in the middle of the cave roof.

"I'll cut us out, I'm tellin' you. There ain't no need losin' your head until somethin' happens."

I listened to his voice and knew that I could put him up against any cyclone that existed.

The roaring continued. My father's voice came from the passage leading up the steps to the door. "It ain't no cyclone"; and he unlocked the door and peered through the crack. "The house's still standin'. The cedars break the wind." A long silence. "The wind's goin' down. There ain't no danger."

"You never can tell."

"I know. I know the cyclone that struck St. Joe. It sucked up cattle an' horses in it, an' men an' houses an' fences, an' set 'em down miles away. It cut right across country fer sixty miles an' they tried to dynamite it to break it up. You could see it comin' fer miles, a long black funnel . . . it sucked up a smokehouse in one place an' left the house, ten feet away, standin' as clean as a whistle! I think there must 'a' been well nigh a hundert people lost in that there cyclone."

Long afterwards I remember telling a girl friend of mine that once a cyclone swept our smokehouse away, along with the horses and cattle, but left our house, just ten feet away, standing as clean as a whistle! Well nigh a hundred people were lost in that there cyclone, I related, and told her just how houses, fences, men and horses tumbled out of the air around us.

For I was my father's daughter!



Strange men from beyond the hills came to our farm and brought a huge black stallion. The women could not follow the men to the field where our horses ran loose, and we children were told to play behind the house. That was just reason enough for not playing behind the house. My father came to my mother, took money and went back to the field again. Then the men took the stallion away. Mystery hung over everything; and a secrecy of which no one spoke.

A few days before a baby calf had been born and I had seen it. It was I who brought the news of the marvelous event; but then my father and mother forced me to keep out of sight of the field where the mother and calf were, and where I had been but a few moments before. The thing I had seen I dared not talk about or ask about without "deservin' to have my years boxed."

Slowly I was learning of the shame and secrecy of sex. With it I was learning other things—that male animals cost more than female animals and seemed more valuable; that male fowls cost more than females and were chosen with more care. Even when my little brother was about to be born, we children were hurried off to another farmhouse, and secrecy and shame settled like a clammy rag over everything. At sunset, a woman, speaking with much forced joy and in a tone of mystery, asked us if we wanted a little brother. It seems a stork had brought him. But the woman's little girl of ten, very wise to the ways of the world, took us out behind the henhouse and explained the stork story with very horrible details and much imagination.

The next day my father bought a box of cigars from the town and distributed them among men who drove up to congratulate him as if he had achieved something

remarkable. They passed a whiskey flask around. A son had been born! I felt neglected, and when I ran to my father and threw my arms around one of his pillar-like legs, he shook me off and told me to go away. There seemed something wrong with me . . . something too deep to even cry about.

"Why?" I have asked over and over again, but have received no answer.

Our log home had but two rooms. In one stood our two beds; the other was the kitchen, dining, sewing and workroom all in one. In one bed my father, mother and baby brother slept. In the other, my two sisters and I.

One night I was awakened by some sound and I turned uneasily. It came again. It left me lying, tense with a nameless fear, my eyes closed, yet trembling in terror. An instinct that lies at the root of existence had reared its head in the crudest form in my presence, and on my mind was engraved a picture of terror and revulsion that poisoned the best years of my life. From that moment the mother who was above wrong disappeared, and henceforth I faced another woman. Strange emotions of love and disgust warred within me, and now when she struck my body she aroused only primitive hatred. Only a little later I heard her tell something that was not true, and the perfection I had thought hers, cruel though it was, vanished. For years afterwards she and I gazed at each other across a gulf of hostility. When she came to know that her word or wish had no influence upon me, she began to threaten me with my father. She failed; for he had never struck me and I knew he never would. She was fallible but he was not. His word was enough for me—I obeyed. To be like

him, to drive horses as he drove them, to pitch hay as he pitched it, to make him as proud of me as he was of my new baby brother George, was my one desire in life.

There was another day when my mother laughed at little George, sitting flat on the floor of our wagon bed as we all bumped along over a rutty road. His fat cheeks were trembling from the jolting, and when he saw my mother laughing at him, tears rolled down his face.

"That's it, laugh at the boy!" my father shouted bitterly.

Something gripped my heart and I crept up to my baby brother and put my arms around him. He snuggled against me and was comforted. My father glanced at us and said no more and my mother ceased her laughing. From that moment my brother George was dear to me above all things.

My grandmother was a tall, strong woman with stringy gray hair flying about her face, and eyes as black as the night when there is no moon. She went barefoot, smoked a corn-cob pipe, and wore loose-flowing Mother Hubbards. Since my grandfather was slowly dying of consumption, she managed their farm, as well as five grown sons and eight grown daughters. She had brought three daughters and two sons into this marriage; my grandfather had contributed the rest. Mildred, a daughter just my age, had been the fruit of the marriage of these two.

This grandmother of mine was, strangely enough, my aunt as well, for she was my father's elder sister. My grandfather always complained against the worthlessness of her family, against my father in particular. He had not intended to marry her, it seems. It had been an