

THEODORE
DREISER

DAWN

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF EARLY YOUTH

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deserted and almost broken in health. For a time we thought she would die. Dr. Woolly took her in hand and by degrees restored her to health, so that the following spring she was up and around and returned to Chicago.

Again, my father returned from Terre Haute about the time Amy's child arrived, and there was a most darksome period of explanation, crimination and recrimination. In fact, he cherished a bitter feeling toward Amy to his dying day. (I do not know how he reconciled this with his religious injunction to mercy, etc., etc.) Then on top of all this, he himself was taken seriously ill with bladder trouble, and for a long time we thought he would die. From a weight of about one hundred and eighty-five, he wasted to one hundred and thirty-five or thereabouts. His body was as lean as that of the arrow-pierced Saint Sebastian. He prayed much, took his medicine regularly, groaned, and occasionally shrieked with pain.

But in the midst of all this, there was for me a most interesting inspirational school life. There were two women teachers in this High School at the time who came to exercise a most hopeful and helpful influence over me, to make for somewhat more of optimism in connection with myself than hitherto had been. One of these was a tall old maid from Malden, Massachusetts, a certain Mildred Fielding, who at thirty-three or thereabouts was for the first time in her life finding herself moderately attractive, and thinking, no doubt, therefore, that the world was not so bad. As I afterwards learned from her, she had had a very hard life. In her youth she had been poor, socially nobody, cursed with an ungainly form, protruding teeth, in short, every physical disadvantage which could afflict a young and otherwise healthy girl. At last she had fought her way up to being a teacher and in addition had had her teeth straightened, her hair properly dressed, had learned to wear appropriate clothes and only now was beginning to reap the fruits of her long struggle. In spite of all her difficulties, she had retained a sweet, gentle and lovable disposition. Her attitude now was one of broad tolerance and generosity. At thirty-five, her light brown hair, grey-blue eyes, and pink complexion made her seem younger than she was. It was this woman who was destined to come to my aid in a very curious way some two years later. Just then, as director of the High School recitation room, she was in touch with me, my studies in connection with algebra, physical geography, general history, botany, and so on, being recited to and corrected or directed by her.

The other teacher—Alvira Skarr, I think her name was—who controlled the study room, was a very different type. Small, red-haired, finicky, and showy in a material and yet conservative way, she was at the same time lively, friendly and attractive. She wore gold-bridge glasses and a showy gold watch fastened at her breast by a jeweled pin. A taste for appearing in new dresses of rich material and talking of her family in Erie, Pennsylvania, indicated either a plentiful supply of money or a good salary. I think it was the former, for her salary could not have been more than twelve hundred dollars a year.

Both of these women, soon after my entrance into first year High, evinced a genial personal interest in me and my views and aspirations, which flattered me not a little, and by degrees seriously affected my personal estimate of myself. It must be remembered that I was then at the age when one is most easily influenced. Miss Fielding, to my surprise and embarrassed pleasure, frequently assisted me after school with my algebra, with which I had some difficulty. More, and at the same time, she appeared to be aware of our local history, and while this troubled me not a little, at the same time it was coupled with, in her case, a tender and quite obvious solicitude as well as desire to fortify me against any depressing effect our home troubles might be having on me.

Thus, one afternoon, and quite out of a clear sky, in the midst of an explanation in connection with an algebra problem, she paused and said: "Theodore, I want to say something to you. It is not prompted by anything but a real interest in you and your welfare." I instantly shivered with the thought that she was going to tell me I was not sufficiently trained as yet for the work I was undertaking and would need to return to the previous grade. But instead she went on: "I can see that you are not like the other boys and girls here. You are different, Theodore. Very sensitive. Your mind is very different. You understand well enough where you are interested. It is only where you aren't that you do so poorly. But you mustn't let that worry you. You must study and go on, for your mind will find its way. I know it!" And then looking directly into my eyes, her own lit with a warm, tender, even affectionate, glow, she concluded: "But there is something else. You mustn't mind my saying this, Theodore, because I am fond of you and want you to succeed in life. And you will, if you wish. Please don't mind anything that is said or done in a small town like this, and don't let it hurt you. I was brought up in one, and I know how small people can be and how

they talk. But please don't let it affect you. You will soon grow up and go away and then all that has happened here will seem as nothing to you. It is only you that can hurt yourself, not the actions or words or opinions of anyone else. You understand me, Theodore, don't you?"

I was moved almost to tears, and so grateful that though I wished to speak, I could not. Instead I merely looked. But she must have gathered what I felt, for she laid a gentle, caressing hand on my arm and added, smilingly: "Now shall we see if we can solve this?" I tried to follow her, but seeing that I could not, she said: "Well, we'll put it over until to-morrow. You might look it over to-night. It will come to you." And—reluctantly, as it seemed to me—she walked away, and I gathered up my books and hurried out.

But the thrill of it! The bracing, encouraging thrill! Instantly and because of this strong, affectionate support, I felt so much better about everything. Pooh! Warsaw and its people! What of them? Who were they? Had I not just been told that I had a different and good mind and that once I was out in the world I could get along? Supposing our family was talked about—evidently it was, since she chose to refer to it—was that certain to affect me? She seemed to think not, had practically assured me that it could not. I felt so much braver, stronger, walked with an air, a trifle of vanity swelling in me.

And better—if such things really are better—this was added to, if in a lesser degree, by Miss Skarr. My interest in English and world literature seemed to appeal to her. As busy as she was—and she was in charge of a very large roomful of scholars—she too (possibly at Miss Fielding's behest) managed to find time to talk to me and to point out books in which I might be interested, some lectures that were occasionally given on literature at the home of Professor Saunders, our school superintendent, and lastly, after learning I was half German, urged me to take a German course which she was conducting and which would open the door to Schiller, Goethe, Heine and others. I could read a little German, and here was all this superior wisdom at my hand. At once, my estimate of my father's native land (hitherto, because of his religious dogmatizing, exceedingly low) rose. I joined the course, and during the remainder of that year, along with ten others (one of them Nata Weyler, if you please) scanned—cursorily, as one may guess—a history of German literature.

Unquestionably, I think, I progressed as fast intellectually dur-

the rest of the flora and fauna of the world, I was growing toward fruition or bloom without knowledge of the processes involved. The art of the jumbled streets, the rancid alleys, the little cars jingling along all day for profit, the little stores, the dirty river, with its dark, inscrutable waters: all moving, soothing, beautiful, rewarding. It was like listening to an enticing symphony. Most of all, the art of the accidental experiences of individuals appealed to me: the bits of death, wealth, fame, failure, with which the newspapers were crowded. Life was a living, dancing picture; it was a realm in which on every hand plays and operas were being enacted. People whispered to each other of their unutterable tragedies or believed their salving hopes; they sat on commonplace chairs and told of doings which were related in texture to the great novels as I knew them. I was beginning to suspect already that life was better than any book. Who could transfer to me by writing the life that I was seeing and feeling? No, the thing was inviolate, perfect in itself; it encompassed all in its perfection, was all perfection. Why, right in my own home, as I saw it even then, was the best time ever, only it was slipping away. My mother, my father, my brothers and sisters, my life and all that had hitherto been a part of it! All! That was the thing I was beginning to feel and see as an undertone. This perfection was not static, although forever young, forever dramatic, forever tense. Only I and all others who were now moving along and out of it, were not permanently of it, in this form, anyhow. We, too, all of us, were fading and eventually ending. Ah!

But just as I was beginning to think that the material aspects of my necessities were about as bad as they could be, there arrived on the scene, and at the office of Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett & Company, that tall New England spinster of my Warsaw school days—Miss Fielding, if you please—from whom I had parted without a word and had heard nothing of since leaving except that she had accepted a position in Worcester, Massachusetts, the year after I left school. Nevertheless, here she was, called to become principal of an outlying Chicago High School—Irvington, I think—and her proposal after explaining that she had just been over to see my mother and secured my address, was that I resign the work that I was now shirking and spend the next year, or two, at best, at the State University of Indiana. And at her expense, if you please! And in order to discover whether or not I had a peculiar bent or aptitude which I could develop and then follow to success. For she was insistent of her conviction that such was the case. More, that under the circumstances it was my duty

to go, since having taught me one year in Warsaw she had not been able to get me out of her mind. And since now she had more money and a good position and was feeling so keenly about this, well . . . therefore.

But imagine my astonishment, as well as my doubts, plus, if you will believe it, not a little shame in regard to my work here—not my idling and discharge but the commonplaceness of it all, if you please, and especially after all that had been said to me in Warsaw in regard to my possibilities. Ah! In consequence, instead of acquiescing with alacrity, as might have been expected, I retreated, pretending to be interested not in the work so much as the prospects of this place, and so, and as usual, made a gauche spectacle of myself, as you may well guess.

But Miss Fielding! Her eyes! Her sympathetic, helpful smile! How clearly I see her looking at me as of yore in Warsaw!

“Now, Theodore,” she explained quickly when she saw my puzzled and uncertain look, “I have come here especially to do this, and you must help me. I have the money. I do not need it myself, and it is something I want to do for you and for myself, and you must let me do it. I have thought of you ever since you left Warsaw. I know so much more than you think; I understand you, Theodore, so much better than you think I do. And I need to do this for myself. It is a shame you shouldn’t have been permitted to finish your high school work there.” (She did not know that I had personally deserted it.) “You are too young, really, to know the importance of finding yourself. A year or two at college, if it doesn’t do anything else, will make you think.”

She hurried on over many points relative to education and my life which I have forgotten. The principal thing was her intense enthusiasm for me, her determination to make me leave this work, the joy she insisted would be hers in assisting me in this way.

That I speculated much on the fortuitousness and fortune of this is natural. It was such an unexpected and almost spectacular way out of my difficulties. I forgot to say that my father in the interim of the spring months had again returned to Terre Haute and that my mother alone was left to judge of the import of this proposition. As usual, I shifted the responsibility as lightly as I could to her, whereupon Miss Fielding said she would at once return and place the matter before her.

As anyone might have known, it was not difficult to convince my mother. When did she ever balk at any scheme which would

give happiness or advancement to her children? As I recall it, she was greatly impressed and even astonished at this windfall in my direction. That a woman so well-placed (for she was by now, as I have said, a principal in one of the outlying high schools of Chicago) should look me up in this fashion was, to say the least, a great tribute to me in her eyes. I think my standing in the family rose at once, and to a very high point. Also I remember pluming myself on my individuality and feeling that there must be something to me after all. Why not? Was not Miss Fielding actually inviting me to her rooms in order to give me some advice, instructing me in the general nature of the work at the State University and the character and personality of one David Starr Jordan, who was then President of this college. More, as she made clear to me at this time, she had resented the, as she put it, unjust disrepute into which our family had fallen in Warsaw. It was all petty and unfair and dangerous to my personal moral and budding talent, if any.

“You need not feel so badly about it, Theodore,” she said, although by this time I was not feeling badly about it at all. Quite other things were filling my mind, as you have seen. “I tell you, the world is full of half-concealed shames and tragedies. But they are not really important here, there, or anywhere. What I want you to do is to study and develop your mind. Read philosophy and history. You will see how life works and how mistaken or untrue most beliefs are. Read Spencer. Read a life of Socrates. Read Marcus Aurelius and Emerson. You have the capacity for rising high in the world, and I want you to do it. Don't let any little beliefs as to family scandals or disgraces lower your personal pride. Your life is yours, and people will take you as an individual, and only so. They will not trouble about your family if you are all that you ought to be.”

I felt, for the time being at least, that I was one of the most important youths that ever was.

down there, and get interested in prohibition?" he suggested. "It's the coming political issue. The party that advocates it will be *the* party! You could get somewhere that way. You may laugh at me now, but you won't laugh at me ten or fifteen years from now. I'm going to stick to it and get somewhere politically."

If he is alive and has witnessed how, without the support of any party but solely by the machinations of moralists and reformers, prohibition was foisted upon Americans, and that quite without consent of the governed, he probably does not think so highly of his political judgment or his imagined dominant party.

But if no one was especially stricken at my going, one was especially pleased, and that was Mr. Thomas Purdon. I did not personally tell him but reported to Mr. Hibbard, who had originally hired me. A rather puffy and vain old gentleman, he eyed me philosophically. "Now you see how it is," he commented. "We take young men like you in here to teach them the business and keep them here a year or more and then they resign. Where are you going?"

I told him.

"College! Very good! You'll probably do better there than with us. The only pity is that you couldn't have known before working here so long what you were interested in. Anyhow, good luck." He waved me out with a fat smile and a fat hand.

But Thomas Purdon, Esquire, was angry because he had not had the pleasure of discharging me. "I hear you're goin' Saturday," he said to me on the afternoon of the same day as he approached where I was working. "Well, that's good. You wouldn't have lasted another year. I told Mr. Bartlett as much last Christmas. Well, that's what they get for listenin' to whiners."

If I had had more courage, I would probably have given him a beating, but not being of the fighting kind at the time, the thought of the swiftly approaching change consoled me and I did not so much care.

The State University now beginning to dawn on me as a reality worried me not a little, for I was most puzzled as to what I was to do once I got there. In a rough way possibly I might be said to have had a notion, yet I did not know. Life—as to its built-up technicalities, at least—was seen by me through a glass, darkly. One thing I saw clearly enough, and that was the interest and value of knowledge in general, but as for special knowledge, the enormous advantage to the individual of technical equipment in a given field,

how different! I heard Miss Fielding and others repeat and repeat how important it was to fix on some particular technique and acquire it, since in America specialization was already in such great demand, but the import of that failed to lay hold of my mind in any thoroughgoing way. Technique! Technique! I could scarcely grasp the meaning of the word. And as for specialization, in what field should I specialize? Law, medicine, engineering, education, what? With the aid of Miss Fielding I had secured a catalogue of the curriculum of the University, but, if anything, was more puzzled than ever. Languages, the sciences, sociology, biology, history, law, a long list! Positively I could scarcely grasp what was meant by any or the lot of them. True, there was the dictionary and the encyclopedia, but in the main it was almost useless for me to consult either. The foundation or study whereby one comes to understand the terminology of a given branch of science, trade, or art had never been laid or made by me.

In answer to my various inquiries, though, which indicated a very dubious and no doubt confused state of mind, Miss Fielding said a very intelligent thing. Roughly it went something like this: "You have never had any direction in your mental life, Theodore. No one appears to have had sufficient knowledge to understand or guide you. Nevertheless, you are mental. Your reading and your interests show that. Go down there and pick out such things as interest you and study those. The catalogue speaks of various examinations, but I can have those waived for the present. What you will do will be to learn what is being done by some people, and why. That will help to clear up your own thoughts. You will find out what other young men are intending to do and why. In the course of time that will tend to make clear to you what you would like to do, and why. So don't worry. Go! Pick out from this catalogue anything you think really interests you, and study that. I will write to Dr. Jordan and I am sure he will let you do this. I will give you a letter to him."

And so, heartened as well as soothed by this advice, I looked over the catalogue and found that I liked history, literature, old English, English literature, and such generalities. It was stated in the catalogue that either algebra or geometry or trigonometry as well as Latin were compulsory unless I had already taken these. Regardless of whether I should succeed or fail in these, I decided on geometry and Latin; since such things as chemistry and physics were closed to me the first year unless I had done some high school

work in preliminary studies, which I had not, I decided not to bother about these. Even so, how I ever came to get into the University without preliminary examinations—which would have quickly debarred me—I cannot say. Apparently the correspondence between Miss Fielding and Dr. Jordan resulted in my being admitted without examination, and so the coast was clear. With some little money I had saved—very little—and some the family provided, I secured a very cheap new suit and overcoat. My linen and underwear were put in good condition, and my belongings packed in an old trunk. Miss Fielding, on my leaving, handed me fifty dollars, wished me good luck, and told me that I should hear from her regularly. My mother kissed me good-bye and cried. Al suggested archly that I should not get a “swelled head” and Trina remarked that there would probably be no living with me when I returned. En route, as I also recall, the train ride seemed an exciting adventure. How remarkable that so suddenly I had been lifted out of that hardware house and into this so very different form of existence! I was to be a student, become . . . what? Alas, I could not say what, could not even think what!

enough as long as they were interesting or amusing. But of a sudden, some fine morning, I would find myself bored or would conclude that I was wasting my time or being made a dunce of, whereupon presto, unless greatly moved by sympathy, I would call a halt. If sympathy interfered, I might gracefully and gradually extricate myself (as I often did) as gracefully and gradually as one may without being too much bored.

But to return to this youth, David Ben O'Connor. (And by the way, that name has come back to me now for the first time in twenty years.) He was a most precocious youth or man of twenty, lean, somewhat swagger after the small town standards of the Middle West, of good standing here and at home. He was possessed of that amplitude of means (furnished by his parents, of course) which permitted him to dress smartly, travel here and there as freely as he wished, and amuse himself in such fashion as would have completely exhausted my meagre year's allowance in a month or week, even. My mother had very justifiably decided that she had no money for this educational adventure and that if Miss Fielding was determined that I should go, she must pay my way. So all I had was the sum of fifty dollars or thereabouts monthly, with something extra for tuition fees, out of which various things besides board and room had to come: laundry, entertainment (almost enforced lecture courses, I mean), clothes and the like. Naturally, I was troubled and cautious as to my expenditures and viewed any proposition to entertain or be publicly sportive with a nervous eye.

Nevertheless, this did not render me immune to O'Connor or others of his type who later, and through him, I met. Rather, having means and finding me to his liking, as I say, he was seemingly determined to shower entertainment upon me, had I not persistently stood out against it. For one thing, and at once, he was wanting me to go to Indianapolis or Terre Haute or Louisville or this or that other place each week-end. And willing and anxious to pay all expenses, which I determinedly declined. The thought of anything so parasitic was a little too much for me. Failing that, and most speedily, I was introduced to this and that Phi Beta Kappa brother, as well as several girls with whom socially he had become intimate, and this in spite of all my lacks and fears. For occasionally on the street or in his room, when we chanced to be together, would be a girl, and before I could think yes or no or decide, there I would be, introduced. Thus, there was Eva Casper, for one, whom we met on the street one day, and to whom as well as her girl companion

AFTER BLOOMINGTON and its easy college life, it will be obvious that the home life from which I had been so suddenly extracted should seem less attractive—most suggestive of the economic and social struggle that would await me once my college year was over. And at the same time, and because of the idling I had done and was doing, and the feeling that apart from mere color—the functioning of this particular university as an institution or social organism—it had meant and probably never could mean much to me, I was troubled by the thought that honestly I could not accept another year from Miss Fielding or anyone—that it was really unfair to go on from this point and that I should tell her so.

At the same time, it was the Christmas period, always seemingly dull in the commercial world to which I should have to turn. And how hard to say to Miss Fielding, as well as to my mother and others, that here as in other fields I did not appear to fit in, was once more a failure! And then start out in the cold to look for a job! Whereas if I said nothing and returned, I should at least be as comfortable as I was before. And when the college year ended, it would be spring and I could so much more comfortably seek work then. Whereas now. . . .

To my discredit let it be said that I chose the easiest way, and with obviously no such qualms of conscience as should have deterred me, "elsen" (as we used to say as children) I would not have returned. One thing I did do was to talk to Miss Fielding, who seemed, whatever I said—and I know that I did not boast of my progress—to feel that I should continue for the rest of the year

anyhow. And her argument was quite the same—or nearly so—as it was in the first instance. That I need not expect that I could fit myself for any definite thing in a year. I could not. And that was not the idea. What was really desired was that in some modest way mentally I should begin to find myself. Wonderful! I thought. But supposing she should guess how I was “finding” myself—what it really was that was troubling my chief sensory faculties, or at least responses.

Just the same and thus heartened I returned, but with somewhat of a more serious view than before. Obviously, as I saw it now, I could not enter upon any technical course which would get me anywhere in any reasonable course of time; so why bother? As for the general and quite conventional and more or less literary courses I was pursuing, well, as I argued, it was, with my wholly deficient equipment, the best that I could do. One thing that I could do, though—or at least I thought I could—was to take my mind off girls and sex and put it on my selected studies and their related reading. And to that end, I decided that it might be best if I moved. For before Christmas, not only Sutcliffe but Hall and others had remarked that I seemed to be bothering with a lot of social as well as athletic nonsense which could in no way benefit me—which was true. For Levitt and O'Connor—the one interested in football and athletics in every form, the other in girls, college society and his superior social connections—and the two of them finding relatively common denominators in not only law but me—had come to a sort of gentlemen's agreement not to quarrel but rather to be sociable. And so it had been that sometime before Christmas, the large one-time living-room, which was now equipped with a bed and our books, had become a rendezvous for all sorts and conditions of students, from those who liked society and law and girls to those who liked to play cards and talk athletics or college politics—a development which appeared to me and Hall and Sutcliffe to spell the end of all serious thought, and brought about the conclusion on my part that as much as I liked O'Connor and Levitt, it would be best for me if I separated from them and went, as in the beginning, my way alone.

And so it was that not more than two weeks after my return, and after duly looking here and there for some quiet place in which I was not likely to be disturbed, I found one at the extreme east end of the town, near the college, where because of a boarding club which was a part of the same, were assembled—at meal time only, not otherwise—some of the abler though poorer, and incidentally

LIFE WAS not so bad, though, now that I had a girl, even though I could not afford any of the various pleasures—theatres, concerts and the like—that I wished to share with her, nor yet compel her to yield to my desires. For at least I had her as a companion, lovable and devoted. She seemed so sure that one day I would marry her, and even talked of how many children we were to have and where we would live—talks which on my part seemed so baldly hypocritical that at times afterwards I was ashamed of myself. For did I really want to marry her, or any girl? I knew I did not. And as for children—in my position and on my wages—nonsense! What I really wanted was one or more of those hoyden girls of the laundry, who never gave marriage a thought—some vivacious, daring creature like Lissitina Cella, who could play and not care. . . . Curses on her for not returning my smiles! Some other fellow was being preferred to me—that was plain!

Then there was a new and actual pleasure and pride which had come upon me since leaving college, and that was the knowledge that if I could not be anything else, I could be seriously intellectual if I chose—acquire a general if not extensive education, even though I had to work so industriously and long. For during the summer, as I have indicated, Sutcliffe had appeared on the scene, ready to take up the struggle for existence, but at the same time reading and philosophizing as before. And he it was, plus Miss Fielding, (who came over occasionally to look me up or invite me out to Irving Park—where she now taught—of a Sunday) who urged me to find myself and think high thoughts and not bother about material joys. And this thought, not so soundly gotten hold of by me