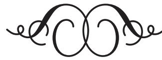
MY DEAR GIRL

The Art of Florence Hosmer



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Always for Dean

CONTENTS

Preface *9*

Introduction *11*

Chapter One: Lightning Drove Us Out *15*

Chapter Two: I Was Born in Woodstock *21*

Chapter Three: Nine Acres More or Less *27*

Chapter Four: We Talked Literature and Ate Chocolates *32*

Chapter Five: My Dear Girl *44*

Chapter Six: I Got Nothing of It *59*

Chapter Seven: Communication Is the Essential Point *71*

Chapter Eight: Where Do People Find Money? *89*

Chapter Nine: Esteemed By All *102*

Chapter Ten: "Love" and "Never" *116*

Chapter Eleven: I Didn't Appreciate the Good Points *120*

Chapter Twelve: A Half-Pint Like You *125*

Chapter Thirteen: Footprints in the Sands of Time *136*

Chapter Fourteen: Painting Is Only the Final Process *141*

Afterword *146*

Endnotes *148*

Works Cited *150*

Notes on Hosmer Collections *151*

Acknowledgments *152*

A Brief Chronology of the Hosmer Family *155*

Index *157*

PREFACE

If only I had lived in Sudbury sooner, I might have had a cup of tea with Florence Hosmer and walked with her through her house, the more-than-200-year-old house at the corner of Concord Road and Route 27. We might have been talking about her art, in particular the paintings in front of us on the walls of every room. Or we might have talked about the works she sold. We might have shared a secret or two. As it is, I have had to discover the artist the way a sleuth does, one clue after another, most of them waiting in the recesses of her home, some of the clues in paintings, some in letters and notebooks stuffed into dresser drawers, some lying in the attic, some in the small room off her studio, Alice's room. There I read my way through letters and notebooks that lay waiting, yearning, I like to imagine, to be read.

Some of the clues that lead me into Florence's life story come from the small towns where she was born and the towns where she had cousins, aunts, and uncles where she painted—Woodstock, Connecticut, Mason, New Hampshire, Grafton, Vermont—and from the city where she completed her training in art and where she maintained a studio, Boston, Massachusetts.

Why, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, except for the town in which she lived, Sudbury, is she pretty much an unknown artist? Why did someone who was acclaimed "one of the more prominent of Boston artists" in 1916 fall off almost all the charts of America's women artists of the early twentieth century?

The subjects here that interest me are twinned: Obscurity and Accomplishment. Emily Dickinson, reclusive, wrote more than 1400 poems. She did not publish a poetry collection. Artists like Gauguin and Van Gogh had little success at selling what they created. So far as we know, Tchaikovsky considered himself a failure.

Are there any measures we can count on to establish that someone is "important" enough for us to know? Is it a matter of stories? Is it that we come to care about the people whose stories we know—Van Gogh's ear, Gauguin's Tahiti, Monet's gardens, O'Keeffe's skulls? Or is it the art which, in the end, stakes its own claim? Florence Armes Hosmer loved to quote Ralph Waldo Emerson's observation, "Every genuine work of art has as much reason for being as the earth and the sun." Maybe it's that simple: Even one brilliant work of art has the power to take hold of us and ensure that its creator will live at least as long as the work endures.

I share Florence Hosmer's story not because I want to stake the claim that she was always a master of her craft or because I think that, in some way, she changed the course of history. I do not even assert that she was an early feminist, though one could make such an assertion. I have a simpler objective: I want to talk about the way she holds a mirror to her time and paints a disappearing era. I want Florence Armes Hosmer to come off the page as what one of her long-time friends called her, one spunky woman. I want us to explore what it means to want to be an artist, to work as an artist, and to lack acclaim. I want us to take into account those Hosmer works that insist their way into our frame because they are very, very good. I want us to give Florence Armes Hosmer her due as both artist and personality.

INTRODUCTION

Florence Hosmer was a pack rat. So far as we know, she saved all of it—postcards, birthday cards, letters, class notes, sketches, programs, newspaper clippings, her sister's diaries, books, paint samples, a beaded dress stored "for important occasions," her painter's apron, pins and needles, her Boston Public Library card—all of them souvenirs of a long life. Now they exist as stepping stones to lead us back into her life. It is a matter of emptying the drawers, the cupboards, the boxes, and the bags of all that has been saved, of sorting and deciphering, for she was not systematic. The letters cascade pell-mell from their cubbies and niches.

How many stories lie here, waiting?

It is a treasure trove, the mess of sundry items. The nib of her pen lies in a small handmade envelope beside the rag she used to wipe the ink from the tip of her pen. The blotting instrument with the brass knob that rocked across the blotter to dry ink is there. Her glasses are in a weathered case. The stained amber-colored leather that wraps around itself with gold velvet at the two ends, shaped something like a sterling teething rattle, is a sewing kit. Pins go into the two velvet ends and, on the interior, a silver thimble sits encased in the old leather. Where the torn satin lies, on the inside, there are seven needles and seven pins, in two layers of satin, stored by Florence and her older sister Alice from early in the 1900s. This once handsome object was well used, probably more often by Alice, who loved to sew, than by Florence.

The sepia photos are like silent vignettes flashed on a screen. The young woman in the first of a stack of photos wears an ankle-length skirt, her blouse is high-necked and the sleeves are long. She is laughing as she sits next to a gentleman with a tennis racket and

looks up at a gentleman standing, in side profile, near her. In the second photo, the woman's waist is cinched, her blouse crisp, and her straw bonnet has flowers and fruits around its shallow brim, a large ribbon bow at the back of the hat. Later in the sequence, the same figures are playing what looks to be croquet in a large, grassy field.

There are photographs of beautiful young boys and fashionably dressed young women, some of the women with large bows tying their long hair in place, but they are, for us, nameless. Not a hint of identification surrounds them. Their voices have gone silent and their stories have faded away. Even the silver key ring that belonged to Florence's dear friend Zoie Morse does not answer why, exactly, it is engraved with "To Our Generous Friend ZM from the children of Zuni, New Mexico, Thank you." After a while, there is no one to remember the object and its story as once dear and loved. After a while, even beloved objects have a way of metamorphosing into simple artifacts.

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Story: A factual or fictional narrative. The aim of a story: Finding the spirit of the thing itself. Where will the frayed pages and yellowed images lead? Are any of the voices audible? Does the story want to be told? Whose story is it, exactly? Does the story itself take charge or does the teller of the story? Can we know the truth to tell the story straight, to tell it without constraining it? If we have only the letters Florence received, which is the case— and not those she wrote because either they were thrown away or they are in someone else's attic or dresser drawers or cellar—what then of telling the story we want to tell and telling it whole?

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The jumble of detritus in the dresser drawers, in various nooks and crannies, in the attic, and spilling onto the stairs is a set of

clues waiting to be deciphered. This, if we can read the lines and between the lines, is where we find the realm Florence inhabited during a life that extended from 1880 to 1978. She was born not that long after the Civil War, lived to see women in America acquire the right to vote, made her way through the Great Depression, watched two world wars unfold, and the struggles for Civil Rights and Equal Rights. She painted what she saw until, late in her life, her vision began to fail her.

Chapter One

LIGHTNING DROVE US OUT

Florence Armes Hosmer often told of the fire, as if it was the beginning of everything. She spoke of how the family home in Woodstock, Connecticut, burned in the early 1880s after lightning struck and destroyed the farmhouse. She told of how her brother led her out of the house. She did not say whether it was Burt or Fred who took her hand. The story became almost mythic for her and certainly pivotal.

This is the way Florence told the story when she was interviewed in her home during the country's bicentennial. She was well into her nineties by then. Looking at the andirons in her fireplace, she said: "Those andirons [were] in the fireplace the time our house was struck by lightning. … That was in Connecticut when I was a year and a half old. … My brother came in from outside and woke me up." But Florence's memory was failing by the time she told this story. She also told that it was her mother who took her out of her bed and brought her downstairs, saving her. By the time she repeated the story, Florence couldn't be sure any more. The details became shadows dancing on the walls.

Memory: The sieve through which we sort the details of our life. Demonstrably unreliable. Except for a trail of artifacts, what else have we? Ah, yes. Witnesses. But they, too, from among the Hosmers who were contemporaries, are now all gone. We have only what they have written, photographed, or rendered in art. We build our stories on the evidence we have.

What Florence did recall when, in her old age, she shared reminiscences, is the kindness of Henry C. Bowen, Woodstock's most colorful and generous citizen, who also maintained a home in New York. An extremely successful entrepreneur, he was founder and editor of *The Independent*, an anti-slavery newspaper, and he was one of the most prominent benefactors of Woodstock Academy. Over and over again he infused his own money into the educational institution to assure its survival as well as the quality of education it provided.

Florence liked to point to the set of brown dinner plates and dishes that Henry Bowen gave to the Hosmers as he tried to help them get back on their feet. He would eventually make Florence's father, Edwin Hosmer, a groundskeeper at Roseland Cottage, the Victorian Gothic Revival home that Mr. Bowen built for his wife and family, a family that would grow to include ten children. Even today, the eye-catching pink "cottage" across the street from Woodstock Academy remains one of the most striking homes in Woodstock.

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What we do know is that the Hosmer family had a tough time of it in their final years in northeastern Connecticut. Fred, the brother one year older than Florence, wrote in December of 1896, "Our first Christmas at Walnut Cottage and our last I hope. It is so cold here. The wind comes in all around the house." Alice, 13 years older than her kid sister Florence was more definitive: "It is dreadful here. Can't keep warm, or get around anyway and Flor and Mama and I sleep together and can't rest any. We laugh and then get so provoked and aggravated … so much dirt from that great kitchen stove goes all over these two rooms."

Abbie Armes Hosmer, the artist's mother, tried to put the best face on a bad situation when she wrote to her brother Willard: "We have a very pleasant but humble house here in Montowese.

Everything about the house is nice and pretty but so much smaller rooms and so few … We hardly thought that we could unpack and move in at first … so we said that we would try and make the best of it, and at it we went … it looks and seems quite like home here now … We haven't forgotten what you did for us when the lightning drove us out of house and home."

It was never easy for the Hosmers. Like farm families everywhere, they worked from sun-up to sun-down. Florence's father, Edwin Barrett Hosmer, was born in Mason, New Hampshire, on November 9, 1840. Among the men from Mason drafted on 2 September 1863 to serve in the Civil War, he was, according to the military records of the town, "discharged for disability." Florence indicated in notes about her family that her father often suffered from severe headaches.

Reminiscing, Florence wrote:

> It was said my father Edwin Barrett Hosmer would probably have been a minister as he had a fine Christian character and gift of oratory. Often made speeches … but when a young man had a good deal of trouble with headaches.
>
> Had a fine bass voice and with Mother's lovely alto sang duets. They both sang in the choir. His father was deacon in her father's church, who was the minister in Mason, N.H. They were in the choir and came down to the front and were married one Sunday morning by Grandfather Armes, then went back up into the choir!

It was in September of 1864 that Edwin and Abigail Louise Armes married. A first son was born in Mason on October 16, 1865. He was sickly and lived only eight weeks. The little boy was unnamed.

Mason is a small town. In many ways it is a typical New England town—rural, scenic, a town with no apparent ostentation; the mountains beyond the rich farm land are beautiful and a comfort. Today roads wind around the gentle hillside curves but,

more than a hundred years ago, what roads there were must have rendered travelers great discomfort as they set out in stagecoaches or with horse and buggy.

In the summer, the fields are rich with corn and apples. Butterflies, bees, and black flies busy themselves by the church doors. The Congregational Church, which stood when Florence painted in Mason and visited her grandparents there, still stands, the old stalls for horses and carriages behind the church. Swamps punctuate the farmland; forests shadow the barns and fields. The old quarry that Florence once painted is no longer in use.

Edwin Hosmer's journal from his life as a young farmer holds a mirror to the days. The challenges remained constant. On January 4, 1877, for example, he wrote that he killed and dressed three sheep. Less than a week later: "This morning killed two sheep." On January 22nd, "Have been butchering. Killed and dressed four sheep." He gives us the homely details: "This day has been fearfully cold." As the seasons change, he speaks of cutting wood all day, of selling butter and vegetables, cutting apple trees, winnowing beans. In February Edwin records that, after a day of chores, "Went up to Father's. All came here in the evening." There is an accretion of daily details: "Abbie and I rode up to Father's this morning … bought a cow … a large thoroughbred Durham. We think she is a nice cow." And there was, throughout the life of the family, church. On March 11th, "We all attended church all day."

We know that all the Hosmers loved Mason and visited frequently. In one of the many diaries she kept, Alice, the oldest child, wrote: "Left on the 8 O'K train for Mason …Walked up—surprised them all." This was in 1903 when the Hosmers were located in Sudbury. The following year, Alice says about one of her Mason trips, "Reached Mason at 10:10 … Found all well and so many new pretty things to see. Visited the quarry in p.m."

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In a small yellowed booklet five inches high and three and three-quarters inches wide, Florence's grandfather, the Rev. J. L. Armes, who was born on January 22nd, 1811, penned his farewell to his children, a valediction the likes of which we no longer see:

> My Dear Children;—
>
> I am admonished that the time is near when I am to go and leave you, and I desire to say as my last words that I love you all …
>
> It has been a comfort to your father and mother that you have come forward to be useful members of society and that you have always been so kindly affectioned one to another, and to your parents, …
>
> I scarcely need to tell you of my indebtedness to your dear mother for the kindness and help I have received during our long journey together.
>
> … If I have done any good in the pulpit or out of it, it is due in a great measure to the prayers and help of her who has been my companion for life. …
>
> And now my dear ones, farewell, till we meet beyond the river.
>
> Very lovingly,
> Father

The Rev. Armes died, aged 87, the month after he wrote his farewell.

All the children wrote to and received long, often devout letters from their extended family, all of whom were deeply spiritual people as well as politically well-informed. Each family member freely expressed love and each remembered every family member's birthday with a letter, often a long one. God's grace and the importance of family were recurrent themes. If any one of the correspondents went silent, there would be a quick letter of inquiry to see if the person who had gone silent was well.

Life for the Hosmers was not noticeably different from the life of others in their community except, possibly, in one significant way. The family was exceedingly art-, literature-, and

music-oriented. Among the items saved and stored in Hosmer House in Sudbury, the last house where the entire family lived together, were subscriptions to *Scribner's Monthly,* some of the issues going back to 1875, and to *The Mentor*, whose motto was "Learn one thing every day." A November 1916 issue contained an essay on Rubinstein, Moussorgsky, Tchaikovsy, Rimsky-Korsakov, Glinka, and Stravinsky, while the May 1st issue focused on American pioneer prose writers.

The Hosmers subscribed to *The Independent: A Weekly Magazine,* and we know that the children regularly attended performances of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. One of the programs that Florence saved from the 1915-1916 season charms, these many years later, with its reminder, at the bottom of the page, "The ladies of the audience are earnestly requested not to put on hats before the end of a number."