

THE STUDIO

My Dad's studio was the first to be built. It stood on a small hill toward the front of our property nearest the road. The studio had a large north-facing window as northern light was the most advantageous for artists because of its lack of shadows. I see Dad sitting in a large untidy room at a drawing table next to the window working on mockups for the illustrations that would go into the childrens' books he was illustrating. He is balding, wears horn rimmed glasses and has a slight paunch. Even in his thirties, he could pass for a man of fifty. The room is filled with books. There are samples from his publishers, collections of romances of the Canadian northlands, nature books, children's books. There are tempera paints and watercolors, colored pencils, India ink, paper and stacks of paintings against the walls. The *Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, *Look*, *McCalls* and *The National Geographic* spill out from the shelves. Every evening he goes through these magazines with a scissors, cutting out images he might need for his illustrations, filing them in four large cabinets against the front wall. Sometimes my brother Freddy and I have to pose for Dad, pretending to be sitting on a horse (a wooden chair) or cross-legged on the floor (me) weaving an Indian basket. Dad's illustrations never rise to the quality of those of his friends, John Clymer or Bob Lougheed, artists who, during the era of the great illustrators were the names everyone knew. His figures are sometimes a bit awkward and stylized, like the figures that appeared in his pulp illustrations. He is much more fluid—even elegiac--in the watercolors he paints for himself of the Canadian north woods or of the Depression-era streets of the Ontario mining towns of Sudbury and Coppercliff, where he grew up—towns in which tall, narrow rooming houses abut giant slag heaps, where women in black skirts, babushkas covering their heads walk along board sidewalks or hang out washing against a sulfurous sky. He had caught perfectly a time and place that have long since vanished. After breakfast Dad would head to his studio to work, coming into the house for bathroom and lunch breaks and then returning until it was time for supper.

He depended on his agent in New York for commissions. A free-lance artist's work was labor intensive and precarious and Dad would often work on a set of illustrations only to have them criticized by some supercilious art director at one of the big publishing houses in the city. He would then have to correct the picture or do it over according to the standards required by the commercial market. Sometimes, he would work for a month on some drawings only to have them turned down, which meant that he hadn't made any money for

that month. Growing up as the only child of a poor widow, I think he felt a special obligation to be able to support his family and this was continually being thwarted. I often observed him coming home from one of these trips, his shoulders sagging, as if they were carrying a great weight. With each rejection he seemed to grow more diminished, his large frame slumping and his chest hollowing out a bit more. It gnawed at him. I worried about Dad. He was a gentle, shy man who wasn't cut out for the competitive free-lance world and his humiliation lay like a shroud over my childhood.

Until we had enough money to build Freda a studio, she conducted her portrait painting in the small dining room next to the kitchen. Eventually, John Sotire, our nextdoor neighbor and successful contractor, built a large studio for Freda onto the side of the house which one entered through a Dutch door from what had been the dining room. The studio had a sky-light and north-facing picture window looking out on what could hardly be called a yard, more like something between an overgrown vacant lot and a jungle. Freda loved wild things. Instead of manicured Kentucky bluegrass, we had Burdock, stinging nettle and witch grass. Poison ivy and poison oak hid amid the tangle of vines and trees on our hillside like an assailant ready to pounce with disfiguring acid.

Starting slowly, Freda began to build up a clientele through word of mouth. No business woman, she couldn't keep her accounts straight and wouldn't even think of marketing herself, but it wasn't long before a steady parade of women and their children arrived at our door to have their portraits painted. The women were always slim and beautiful and their children didn't look as if they ever played in mud. They came from places like Greenwich and New Canaan and Darien—home to Wall Street investors and corporate chieftains who mostly spent their time away from home while their trophy wives continually remodeled their gilded cages, played tennis, went horseback riding or hung out at the country club pool. Places like Greenwich were just a few miles from Springdale but continents removed from our working class neighborhood. I would peek slyly at the clients through the front window as they approached our door and marvel at the evening gowns and velvet and lace dresses they brought with them and left with Freda. When I got older I got to model in some of these exotic clothes so that she could get the shape of the folds in a dress or the shadow of a neckline.

In the middle of Freda's studio stood a large square model's stand on wheels, where Freda's portrait subjects posed in their evening gowns on a Victorian settee she had bought at

the thrift shop or where children sat, or rather squirmed, holding their favorite teddy bear or model ship. In front of the model stand stood a large easel and to the side a belle époque standing mirror. On a rolling metal cart stood several coffee cans stacked with brushes and a glass palette covered with paints. Two little round vials of linseed oil and turpentine were clipped to the side of the palette. Against one wall there was a floor-to-ceiling bookcase that housed Freda's art books and magazines, files of photographs and portrait notes, color sketches, a turntable, stacks of gramophone records, and drawers full of old erasers, charcoal sticks, pastels, paint tubes, rubber bands, rubber cement and other paraphernalia. Frames of various sizes and canvases were stacked against the walls and in the corner sat boxes containing the fabrics that she used for backgrounds—velvets, pieces of tapestry, toile—and a large doll about the size of a three-year that she dressed in the clothes of her child portrait subjects. Sample portraits covered the walls, portraits of her neighbors or of me, or of one of the many young people who hung out at her studio whom she had coaxed to sit with the promise that they could have the painting for free when she was done with it. On the back of the Dutch door she had taped paintings of some of her favorite artists that she had cut from art magazines: Mary Cassatt, John Singer Sargent, Frans Hals, Johannes Vermeer.

Freda's work day began after breakfast at about 10:00 AM, finishing at 10:00 PM when she would put her brushes in the turpentine to soak, wrap her palette with tinfoil and stick it in the freezer next to the moldy bread and freezer burned string beans until the next morning. Breaks for tea and lunch or dinner--when she remembered it--or trips to the photo or frame shop or thrift shop or out to lunch with one of her many friends would round out her day. I would often accompany her several times a year to area art shows where she entered one or two of her paintings and came home with dozens of first prizes.

Clients would pose once to get the initial composition that she washed onto the canvas with burnt sienna. A second sitting was required to do a color sketch. I see her now, standing in front of the easel, a mall stick between thumb and forefinger. Her head moves back and forth between the subject on the stage and the canvas in front of her, eyes squinting to blur some of the detail so that she can concentrate on the basic shapes. A partially finished portrait is on the easel. She dips her brush into titanium white, approaches the canvas and puts a dab into the corner of the iris. She is wearing an old shirt, some dark pants and clip on earrings, all bought at the thrift shop. She never shopped anywhere else. Her thick chestnut hair is tied back in a ponytail. Growing up I never thought of my mother as beautiful, but

when I look back at her photographs I realize she was stunning. Her one concession to beauty were the earrings that she was never without. “I feel naked without them,” she would often tell me.

On the gramophone a record is playing. It may be Maria Callas or Renata Tebaldi singing arias from *Norma* or *La Traviata* or *Madama Butterfly*. Or it could be Eddie Arnold, or Burl Ives or Gene Autry, or later on Nana Mouskouri or Karen Carpenter. Like her taste in people and other living things, Freda’s taste in music was eclectic. A serial monogamist, she would play the same artist over and over again until a new love came along. Those early “cowboy songs” are still lodged somewhere at the synaptic level. I can feel the undulation of the horse’s flanks in the lilting rhythm of Gene Autry’s “Red River Valley” and hear the clinking of the “Spurs That Jingle Jangle Jingle.” In my memory, those ersatz “cowboys,” whose range was never farther than an MGM movie lot, meld with the pictures my father was painting for a *Child’s Pop-Up Book of Cowboys* and with the brand new cowboy outfit I got to own when I posed as a pigtailed cowgirl leaning over a split rail fence for John Clymer’s *Saturday Evening Post* illustration.

After making the color sketch of her portrait subject, Freda would take a series of photographs that she would work with for the remainder of the time. Since this was well before the age of digital photography she would have to take the films to a camera store and wait for a week until they were developed as thumbprints from which she would choose the one with the best lighting, pose and facial expression. She would then go back to the store to have the best ones enlarged as eight by ten prints. A klutz when it came to anything mechanical, she invariably came home with thumbprints that were either too light or too dark or where the photo was non-existent. Roll after roll of films were spoiled because she had forgotten to take the lens cap off or had set the aperture too low or too high. The client would then have to return for another photo session and another two weeks would have gone by. She never got the knack. Always conscious of our precarious financial condition, when I was old enough to understand the importance of money I would silently chafe at this waste of money and lost work time.

During the time when the clients did not have to sit, Freda would fill the burnt sienna sketch with color and texture and form, walking back and forth from the palette where she mixed the colors to the easel where she applied the paint. She spent her life on her feet. A finished portrait could take up to a month or two to complete. After the color sketch and the

photos, clients would return for a final sitting to make sure she had gotten it right. Sometimes, however, when the clients came to collect the final painting, they would complain about some little aspect that they didn't feel flattered them enough, so Freda was obliged to work on it some more. There was no "overtime" payment for this extra work and because she refused to require a down payment until much later in her life, she would be left without income while her wealthy clients took their time about coming back.

Freda could never keep track of what she spent or how much she was owed, didn't believe in invoices or receipts and could never ask her clients for an adequate down payment. She set her prices low even when she could have commanded twice as much from her wealthy clients. "Oh, I couldn't do that to good friends," she would explain. Not unfrequently these "good friends" would conveniently forget to pay her after they had picked up their finished portrait, going off to Europe or the Caribbean for months at a time. Freda could never bring herself to go after the money, and we would be left to scrimp for the next month or two. This could get bad when Dad was also out of work. When we didn't have enough money to pay the telephone or electric bill she would just lean on God to deliver—and, miraculously, he would. Sometimes it was an old check lying in a drawer that she had completely forgotten about or a long delinquent customer who was finally paying what she had been owed.

The portraits that were ordered by some of her many more plebeian admirers, like Lutheran Pastor Bernhard Johnson who ordered portraits of every member of his family and paid on the installment plan, were showered with praise. He turned out to be one of Freda's best marketing agents, telling everyone he knew what an incredible artist she was, sending other plebeian clients to her door, which meant weeks of work at subsistence pay if you added up all the hours it took to create one painting.

Our home was known throughout the area as the place where the ditzy nonconformist portrait painter lived and worked. For the inhabitants of *Leave it to Beaver-land* it was an exotic and colorful planet light years removed from the beige landscape of Eisenhower's America and for the next several decades it would become a kind of *Commedia dell'arte* for those seeking to escape the saccharine existence of life in suburbia. They didn't even have to go to Broadway to experience Auntie Mame. She was right here in Springdale—a woman who didn't seem to care about etiquette, cleanliness, or Dr. Spock's advice on parenting. She could both shock and thrill clients, neighbors and even visiting salesmen.

In the 1950s well before the Internet, many products were sold by salesmen who went door-to-door. The Fuller Brush company sent men (commonly known as the “Fuller Brush Men”) to sell brushes of various kinds to stay-at-home moms—hairbrushes, vacuum brushes and so on. The brushes always came with a lifetime guarantee and the men would ask to come into your house to explain about the different features of each of the brushes. Freda had no use for brushes since she never cleaned the house, but she would let the men come in, offer them a cup of tea and let them go through their elaborate sales pitch which included demonstrations of what each of the different brushes could do. At the end of the half-hour session when it was time to commit to a purchase, she would say, “Oh, I have my own brushes” and then produce the can containing her paint brushes with a little laugh. I don’t know what these men must have thought about this woman, but if I happened to be home and caught her in the act I would seethe with humiliation at the shameless way in which she led them on.

Most of the time, however, her outrageousness was the source of delight for neighbors and friends. There was the time she had her friend and neighbor, MaryAlicia (we called her M’lisha), pose for a sample portrait and let it be known to the neighborhood that a famous opera star from Europe had come to have her portrait done. The news immediately traveled through the neighborhood alighting it with curiosity. Alma, our next-door neighbor, tried to pry the information out of her.

“Freda, can you tell me who it is?” she asked breathlessly one day when having tea with Freda.

“She wants it to remain a secret,” Freda replied conspiratorially. “She doesn’t want the publicity.”

On the day it became known that the famous woman would arrive, a half dozen neighbors all clustered around the windows of 18 Edgewood Avenue hoping to catch a glimpse of the famous star. Creeping up to the large picture window they saw that the person sitting on the model’s stand was their friend and neighbor, MaryAlicia. Freda and her faux opera star then came to the door and invited the gullible crowd in for tea where they all had a great laugh.

Everyone who ever entered our door was invited to a cup of tea. It was in Freda’s studio that the hoi palloi could let it all hang out, that desire to throw expectations and obligations to the wind--a secret desire to paint or to write or to have an affair that they had

never dared admit to themselves. In Freda's studio sitting at a card table covered with a dirty gray tablecloth over cups of tea and stale Hob Nobs they unburdened themselves. It was better than having to pay for a therapist. Clients and neighbors, the young, the middle-aged and the old, small business owners and handymen, the lonely and the exhausted, poured out their tales of woe over philandering husbands or children who were getting into trouble or parents who didn't understand them or affairs that went sour. Freda was all ears, an eager voyeur lapping up others' troubles and gossip like a hungry cat over a bowl of milk, telling her guests that they should "follow their bliss" wherever it led and proselytizing them on the virtues of vegetarianism. From each of these visits in Freda's studio the clients or guests would leave, feeling that some miracle had happened over those stale cookies and lukewarm tea and Freda would just have made another "best friend." Freda's recounting of those stories her guests told her was how I learned that the life of the privileged was not all it was cracked up to be, and that the not so privileged could be as interesting as any of the characters in the Dickens novels I devoured as a teenager.

It was in Freda's studio under my mother's benevolent gaze that Doris Jenney, whose husband Bob, the creator of the cartoon, *The Cisco Kid*, but a morose stay-at-home hypochondriac, found her own desire to paint, spreading canvas after canvas with a thick patina of bright flower bouquets as if to counter the gloom that pervaded her own home, until there was no more room in their little house to store them all. It was in Freda's studio that Gene Passaro, the owner of a gas station in Springdale with an invalid wife at home found his own bliss. ("Find your own bliss" was Freda's mantra for everyone who came into her orbit.) Gene was constantly "dropping by" to see Freda. I think he was probably in love with her as he came so often just to bathe in her aura. M'lisha, who had divorced an alcoholic husband and was rearing her daughter, Roberta, in a tiny doll's house at the top of our hill, began her writing career in Freda's studio. There were, after all, so many characters who floated through Freda's house that she had a cornucopia to draw from.

Though it wasn't easy growing up in this bohemian environment my siblings and I always thought of ourselves as different from our working-class playmates, superior in some inexplicable way because we had opera and books and art in the house, though at the same time I wanted to have a regular mother like my working class friends—one who would bake cookies, help me with my homework, talk to me about my day and wouldn't embarrass me.

Ironically, my working-class friends envied me. They loved to hang out at 18 Edgewood Avenue because it was so different from the stultifying measure of their own homes.

At the age of eighty-three Freda suddenly stopped painting, declaring that she had no more interest in it. It was as if a spigot of creativity had abruptly been cut off. One of the last paintings she did was of our daughter, Jennifer, but I saw that the colors had become muddy and the execution more primitive. Perhaps it was the cataracts, but by this time her memory was also fading. I felt terribly sad that the light had gone out of this vibrant woman and tried to persuade her to keep her hand in by doing some sketching of those around her, but she was having none of it. She was as irascible and contrary as ever.