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Amy Again

When you are very young adults always ask, "What do you want to be?"

I never said, "I want." I always said, "I am Amy and I am a dancer."

I can't remember when as a child I didn't dance. Mam put me in dance class to try and tire me out as I was never still. The teacher said, " She is the most flexible student I've ever had." At ten, I started attending ballet school in London and at thirteen danced Clara in the Nutcracker. I was well on my way to becoming a professional.

The war changed all that.

At first the war didn't affect me. Every day I attended dance classes, and some evenings danced in the ensemble. For a while I shared a flat with three other dancers. There were lots of parties, lunches and dinners and laughing with friends, and meeting wonderful people involved in ballet. Then the blitz started and everything changed. Night after night the sirens sounded and we ran to the tube station to spend the night. Then performances with the younger dancers were cancelled and I had to move back home with Mam and Da. The Christmas truce seemed almost more frightening because of the silence. Through it all, I tried to keep stretched and practiced as much as possible.

Mam started one of the first mobile canteens so I was recruited to help serve. I still stretched and did ballet classes when I could. Later, when permanent canteens were set up I worked there. British, Canadians, Dutch, French resistance fighters were all there. On my nights off I danced the jitterbug and drank smuggled alcohol. I was eighteen and thought myself very grown up. As the war progressed, everyone seemed to be rushing towards an uncertain future and wanting to experience all life had to offer. Many of my friends dated or even married servicemen, and I was no exception.

I met Ron in 1943 and fell madly in love with the tall, lanky, blonde, Canadian. I was fascinated by his stories about his beautiful home far away from what he called "old, stinking and crumbled London". He was fascinated about my being a performer but admitted to never having seen a ballet. He was sure after the war I would get a good job dancing and thought maybe he would stay in London after the war.

We married and moved in with my parents when Ron wasn't on the base. I had our first son, Andrew when Ron was fighting in Holland. I rejoined the ballet company after Andrew was born but when I became pregnant again, the company didn't invite me back. My dance career was over. I got a job in the greengrocers to help with expenses. Ron refused to stay in London after the war, so plans were made for the boys and I to emigrate.

In May 1946 I boarded the Queen Mary with hundreds of other war brides, many with children. We landed in Halifax. Halifax docks seemed busy and exciting much like London and my thoughts were that Canada was a good place to be. We war brides boarded the train full of optimism for our new home.

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We passed through Nova Scotia and New Brunswick at night and woke to Parisien sounding Montreal. I was sure then Canada was going to be almost like home.

How wrong I was. For hours and hours the train passed by heavily wooded hills and scrubby farmland. The train stopped at tiny villages that seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. When the conductor came to tell me my stop was next my heart sank. My trunks were set on a small wooden platform lit by one weak light bulb. I cried as the train whistle moaned and the caboose disappeared around the next bend heading to Toronto.

Ron arrived in an old farm truck and drove us to a village about 5 miles away. He had rented a small house that had no running water or indoor plumbing and assured me that would be done as soon as he could afford a plumber. He did find an old friend who was a plumber and we soon had running water and a bathroom of sorts. Unfortunately he also reconnected with his old girlfriend and soon moved out leaving me with two babies and no job. For the first time in my life I didn't feel like dancing.

Luckily for me, the plumber's wife was also a war bride. She introduced me all around the village. Soon I was cleaning homes and barely making ends meet.

I was cleaning for the town doctor when he asked me if I could take his calls in his office and be a superintendant for the apartments he owned. My pay was living in one of the two bedroom apartments plus a salary to look after my boys.

After three years I divorced Ron and was prepared to bear the shame of being a divorced woman. However, by that time I knew almost everyone in the village and found people sympathetic and supportive. I missed London and dancing but was

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settling into my new life. I had wonderful friends and felt good about myself. I began to feel more at home.

One day my friend May saw my picture album and asked to look at it. When she saw my ballet portraits she was astounded. I had kept my dancing out of usual conversation as it was still painful to remember what might have been. Then May said something I had never considered. "Amy, would you be interested in teaching dancing to the kids? This village could use more activities for our young folks."

Almost before I knew it, the dancing school was started. Doc said, "Clean out the storeroom. Surely it is big enough at least for a start." My friends signed up their children for one dollar a lesson and gave me records to use and a promise to help sew costumes. I had seven students for ballet and five for tap dancing. With groceries now costing ten dollars a week, looking after my boys would be easier.

Being less worried about money revived a part of me I thought I had lost forever. I began to move again to music. Every tune presented possibilities and I felt I was not just a mother struggling to live, but a woman regaining her potential.

The dancers worked very hard and by March I knew we should do a recital. At first I thought just the parents would come but my friends insisted grandparents, friends and community members would love a show. With trepidation I rented the Town Hall for the last Friday and Saturday evenings in June. I placed an ad in the weekly paper and started to make posters. The newspaper printed up tickets and all the mothers took tickets to sell.

A week before the recital my friends placed a reminder notice in the weekly news and told me most of the tickets were sold. The Town Hall would be full, both nights.

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Recital night arrived and the basement of the Town Hall was a hive of activity. Mothers organized costumes and powdered and rouged little faces while I made sure records and announcement cards were in order. I was too busy to be nervous until just before I was to give a welcoming speech.

I walked onstage and saw the audience. The audience was smiling and I felt overwhelmed with gratitude. These people were my friends and were supporting me and wishing me success. My nervous jitters disappeared. I said my welcome speech and my son displayed the poster for the first number.

Dance followed dance until all the dancers and myself took final bows after the last piece. Then to my surprise, my friend May, came onstage and presented me with a dozen roses while the audience stood, applauded and asked for more.

That wonderful evening was seven years ago. So much has happened since then. I now rent a larger room in the Armories and teach two evenings a week. I have fifty-two students.

Two years ago I met Bram, a Dutch immigrant who was a ballroom dancer before the war. My original students are now entering high school and together Bram and I teach them the waltz, foxtrot and even the jitterbug. They teach us the newest dances they see on American Bandstand. I have a feeling Bram and I will dance together for a long time.

I'm no longer an abandoned war bride struggling to support my family. I have good friends, a steady job in the doctor's office and a respected and profitable dance studio. That was not my original idea of how my life would be, but it is my life now and I can say once again, "I am Amy, and I am a dancer."