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Silent Dancer

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Silent Dancer

Mary T. Michaels

. . . Her memories became a wonderful reality as we danced ballet steps and laughed in the corridor. The silent and impersonal atmosphere of the nursing home was quickly changing into a lively and happy home for the sick and elderly. Who would have ever thought that a few minutes of listening and caring could change one person's outlook on life?

She would sit motionless except for her frail hands that nervously clenched a monogrammed handkerchief. Her small, aged figure hunched in a chair as she stared blindly out the window. I thought I saw a tear running down her rough, drawn-out face as I watched everyone walk past her as if she didn't exist.

For some reason, which I can't explain, I felt compelled, maybe by concern and maybe by curiosity, to find out what thoughts this old, frail woman had prisoned inside. Never, until now, had I seen anyone so withdrawn and removed in the two years I worked in the nursing home.

Curious about her background, I asked the nurses what they knew about her. They told me she had been a ballet teacher in her earlier years. The nurses also told me that she was very senile, and that I shouldn't waste my time talking to her because she wouldn't understand me. But somehow I felt that there was more to her than met the eye.

What was this woman staring at? Was she looking for something? Or was she looking for someone to look back?

I decided to go over and try to talk with her. Feeling a little uneasy I said, "Hello, Anne, How are you today?" At first she didn't reply. I asked the question again and slowly she said, "It doesn't matter how I am." It was then I realized she was capable of communicating with me.

As we made our first eye contact, I saw warm and understanding eyes staring back at me. "Anne," I said, "The nurses were talking the other day and they told me that you used to teach ballet."

Her voice and face showed surprise, "They were talking about me?"

"Why, yes," I told her. I continued to ask her about her past experiences as a ballet teacher. Suddenly she volunteered, "Years ago, I received an award for the best ballet teacher in the state."

For the first time since she had arrived at the nursing home, I saw her facial expression change from cold and blank into smiling interest as she raised her eyebrows and her pale cheeks became filled with color.

As if we had known each other for years, I asked her if she could show me a few ballet steps.

"I can't do that, I'm too old." She shook her head.

"Anne, you will never be too old to do the things that make you happy. There's no such thing as too old."

She stood up in her flannel nightgown and pink fluffy slippers, and we held hands together and began to dance . . .