

Ballerina

by Larry Strattnr

His mother was a ballerina. Few pictures of her remained in his possession. His favorite was of her *en pointé* in elegant costume. Her arms in perfect position, her fingers curled expressively as if stroking silk, proof there is more to ballet than leaps and twirls.

Her name was Ruth. Considered star material by many who saw her dance, she had an offer to go to Hollywood. She was born at the right time to ride the wave of dance extravaganzas in cinema. His picture of her on point was taken when she was very young. An aunt told him Ruth's ballet career ended around the age of six. He had only ever seen his mother dance with his father in a ballroom, at which she was also excellent. But ballrooms are not Swan Lake.

The Great Depression or its grasping tentacles twisted the life out of his mother's dreams. Her little hometown on the banks of a northeastern river was remote. Money to bring her to places where her talents would be seen was not at hand.

In a museum he happened to see a painting by colonial artist Thomas Sully, titled "Anne Rawls." It stunned him. Looking at him out of the painting was his mother's air of easy elegance, even though her life had little ease. He had another picture of her, a pastel on paper. Drawn in her late teens or early 20s, the picture was not a masterwork, yet her abundant wavy, auburn hair, delicate features, perfect pale skin and blue eyes reflected a striking woman.

She also had the gift of perfect pitch and sang to him and near him as she worked around the house. Her songs to him were stupefying since he could not even begin to carry a tune.

He was the oldest child. She had married young and bore seven children. The seventh, which did not live to his first birthday, almost killed her being born.

As her eldest child he was present for most of her married life. As far as he could tell his father was largely not present, working his fingers to the bone to support the large family he seemed not able to curtail.

He grew up Catholic. His father and mother remained obedient and observant communicants for their entire lives, among their offspring this diligent observance did not universally persevere.

A caged bird, singing, was how he always thought of his mother. He talked with her for hours throughout his boyhood doing his best to learn what she could teach them, which turned out to be many things.

Never occurring to him until he was much older was, she had given away an entire other life to be a mother. Sadly, he could not say he thought motherhood was all she had to give the world. She was a well, surprisingly deep, of knowledge, but also of philosophical acuity seldom seen in irascible mankind. Stories abounded in his family of mother's one or two sentence assessments of a complex problem ending with her softly spoken solution, a non-judgmental and effective answer in full.

French was a second language to her. She spoke it fluently. He could not imagine where she had learned; in her tiny riverside town? She was also a strong grammarian. He found himself wishing she could have edited his work as he strove to perfect it. Even these many years later he struggled with adherence to the rules she knew so well.

In some photos, now hung on his wall of memories in dime store frames, she looks happy. In some, she looks bemused. She never looks as if she gave up an entire life to be his mother. He could not imagine what such an expression would look like.

She was gone from his life for some years and he was also approaching his sunset. He guessed from her came his love of the beautiful words he always sought and seldom managed to find. Also, from her, seemed the gift of love of others, however different, a quality he struggles to maintain.

He accepts by now he may never fully know her. He only sees her face inside his pictures. What can pictures tell? A one-dimensional tale. He is certain though he feels her in his blood; and hopes to see her once again, *én pointé*.

