



MY NAME IS LOLA

by Lola Rozsa,

as told to and written by Susie Sparks

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It'll Just Be a Year

"Calgary," I sighed. "Where's Calgary?"

"In Alberta." Ted looked a little frightened.

"Where's Alberta?" I could tell he was feeding me bite-size pieces of information.

"In Canada. Western Canada."

"There's oil in Canada?" Surely someone had made a mistake.

"We'll only be there a year. It's just a temporary thing. Shell pulled most of its operations out of there years ago, so they're just following up on something that happened up there recently. We will be back home in a year. It will be fun."

"What happened up there? You said something happened up there...."

"Imperial found something at a little place called Leduc, and another called Redwater. Shell just wants to have another look."

"But why us?" Surely there were geophysicists working closer to Canada than we were in Louisiana.

"Apparently, at Leduc they found the oil in a Devonian coral reef much like we've had experience with in the west Texas plays. They want to send us because we are familiar with the structures and we have the technology they need up there."

"A year. They *promised* a year?"

"Absolutely."

I looked him straight in the eye. "Are you *sure* they said only a year?"

"That's what they said. We will be home in a year." Ted was smiling to reassure me, and I really think he believed it, but all the reassurance in the world wasn't doing a thing to calm me down.

"Do we have to learn to speak another language?" I had barely had a chance to get used to Louisiana Cajun.

"No, they speak English in western Canada," Ted laughed, "but you might consider learning French in case we ever have a chance to go to Quebec."

What about Ruthie; were there schools? Where would we live? I was betting there wouldn't be an Alamo Plaza Motel, and I shuddered to think what we might have to live in. Canada, for heaven's sake! How would I ever break this to Mama? Papa had passed away just over a year before and I could scarcely bear to be a day's drive from her. After he died, she sent me the letter she found in his typewriter awaiting more news. It was addressed to me. I was still a long way from healing that terrible loss. How could I leave Mama so far behind to grieve alone? Where's the atlas? Had I unpacked the atlas yet? I'd better find out exactly where we'll be going before I call Mama. How would we get there?

"How will we get there? Do planes fly up there?"

"Sure, but I have a better idea," said Ted. "Let's buy a new car and drive up there with the kids. We will see the country on the way and it will be an adventure. I mean how often does anyone ever get a chance to do something like this? This will be something we will remember all our lives."

"You're *sure* it'll be just a year?"

"I'm sure; apparently there's some issue with Canadian currency. American employees can't be paid longer than one year in Canada. And Shell's also guaranteed they'll send us back to the States to jobs comparable to our current ones."

I could tell he'd been composing this speech for quite a while. His mind was definitely made up.

I called Mama. Her first response was, “Well! How nice. That’s wonderful dear. You’ll be close to Ted’s parents in Michigan.” Obviously her geography was as sketchy as mine.

“No, Mama, we’re closer to them here than we’ll be in Calgary. It looks like Calgary’s a million miles from anywhere. How’d you like to come help me pack?”

After Papa died, my eldest sister, Lillian, the nurse, came back to Whitesboro and talked our mother into moving with her to Denton where the family had grown up with so many friends we had stayed close to through the years. The two of them moved into an apartment together but, since then, Nannie had been travelling all over Texas and Louisiana visiting all her new grandchildren. Of course she would come.

We hauled out the dynamite boxes yet again but, since Shell was moving so many people to Calgary, we found out that they would do all the packing and heavy lifting and we wouldn’t have a thing to worry about until the truck arrived to move us into our new homes. Mama and I and the children could spend our time together visiting with my brothers and sisters while Ted went to Houston to get his instructions about immigrating to Canada.

Ted took advantage of a few days off to fly to Michigan, where he bought a brand new Buick fresh off the production line. It was electric blue and had three portholes along each side, so we turned lots of heads driving that car. New cars of any kind were still pretty scarce in those post-war years, and this one was so outrageously over the top that people couldn’t resist looking into those portholes trying to figure out why in the world they were there.

I found out later that one of their designers – apparently still mourning the loss of his wartime fighter plane – built a prototype of a car he hoped Buick would put into production. He installed four yellow lights on the hood of the car wired to the distributor so they would flash on and off as the pistons fired – simulating the flames from the fighter planes. Evidently, Buick loved the idea but decided to dial it back a notch and bored portholes in the sides instead. Why

portholes made more sense than exhaust jets I don't know. They were a design feature I never could understand.

It was definitely a comfortable ride, though, and certainly roomy enough for the five of us, so we dropped Nannie off in Denton, drove over to say goodbye to Ann and Ed in Olney, and then pointed its nose north. I knew about Denver, of course, and it was fun taking the kids to Custer's Last Stand in Montana, but with every mile it was getting bleaker and more barren. This was late April, so even though there wasn't much snow, spring had definitely not sprung on the northern plains. But there was a warm wind blowing like crazy. It *felt* like spring, but somehow it wasn't, and the brown and barren earth seemed to know that.

Eventually, way off on the horizon, I could see a tiny building with two giant flags flapping in the wind. We drove up wondering whether this was the right place; there wasn't another thing in sight. No people, no cars, no sign of human habitation at all. A few minutes went by, and then a man appeared out of the building, shambled over to the car, and leaned in the window. He looked into the back seat at the kids and said, "Where are you from, and where were you born, and where are you going?"

Ted answered, "I was born in Michigan, my wife was born in Oklahoma, my daughter was born in Texas, and my son was born in Mississippi. We have come from Louisiana. We are on our way to Calgary where I have a job waiting for me."

The customs officer was obviously confused. "Well how the hell did all of you ever get together?" And then, without another look, he waved us through with no further ado.

That was April 26, 1949. We were officially landed immigrants.

I didn't know it then, but the big oil companies had been very interested in Alberta at one time because of the gas that had been found through shallow drilling in the Turner Valley area southwest of Calgary, as well as down near Medicine Hat. In fact, as early as 1914, a great flurry of wildcatters and promoters flocked in after a discovery well produced natural gas along with a condensate called

'naphtha.' They stripped off this hydrocarbon mixture from the gas and found it was pure enough to burn in cars without even refining it. Because of its odour, they called it skunk gas. Huge excitement brought investors who practically threw their money at anyone willing to form an oil company and, within twenty-four hours, more than five hundred new companies were listed on the brand-new Calgary Stock Exchange.

Nothing much happened after that and most of the little oil companies disappeared, but one called Royalite eventually found a spectacular natural gas cap in Turner Valley and under it was enough oil to make Turner Valley Canada's first major oilfield.

Then the Depression intervened, which was arguably even worse in Alberta than it had been in the United States, so there was no more capital to invest to keep it going. Of course, once the war began, production started up again and peaked in Turner Valley in 1942, but then no one seemed interested in Alberta until 1946, when Imperial decided to take one last look before they, too, would abandon the search.

Rumour had it that Imperial had drilled 133 dry holes in Alberta and Saskatchewan up to that point, but some diehard geophysicist talked the company into one last play based on an anomaly he'd found after shooting some seismic logs on a farm owned by Mike Turta, just south of Edmonton. No drilling had taken place anywhere within a fifty-mile radius of that farm, but he had a hunch.

I've been told that, at first, the crew thought the well would be a gas discovery. But nothing was happening. However, at about five thousand feet, drilling sped up and the first bit samples showed free oil in the dolomite reservoir and, by continuing to drill another sixty feet, they found what they were looking for.

On February 13, 1947, Imperial invited all kinds of dignitaries to watch them bring in the well. Shivering in the bitter cold, the first thing they saw was a spectacular column of smoke and fire as the crew flared the first gas and oil. Then N. E. Tanner, Alberta's Minister of Mines and Minerals, turned the valve to start the oil

flowing and the Canadian oil industry made a giant leap into the modern era with the discovery well that Imperial named Leduc #1.

Leduc #2 was drilled about a mile southwest of #1 and on May 10, at about the same depth, #2 struck an even bigger Devonian reef, which turned out to be the most prolific geological formation in Alberta, the Leduc Formation.

Exploration exploded! It seemed that every oil company in the world was racing to get to Alberta, and one major discovery followed another until a spectacular find in Redwater in 1948 finally got Shell's attention. The four lonely guys in Calgary, who'd been left all those years after the Turner Valley field basically closed down, were holding an office for Shell. They knew they'd better find a bigger space. They were about to be invaded.

But as we were making our way north from the border on April 26, 1949, all I was concerned about was where we were going to find a place to lay our heads. Apparently there *was* no Alamo Plaza Motel in Calgary. We were going to have to stay at some railroad hotel called the Palliser. I just hoped it was clean and had hot water.

Ted told me he'd found out there were about 100,000 people in Calgary, which was a very large city in my experience, and that it had some really big buildings, but he'd also heard that it was basically a dusty cow town. They had some kind of rodeo every year. It sounded pretty rough. I closed my eyes and mumbled a fervent prayer: please – just let there be hot water. When I opened them, we were pulling to the curb in front of a baronial castle that I swear must have been lifted straight out of the Scottish highlands.

And when I carried little Sidney up the staircase into the hotel, I was convinced they had moved the castle's entire contents along with it. Mahogany panelling everywhere, crystal chandeliers, rich tapestries hanging on the walls, heavy velvet drapes on all the windows, gorgeous oak furniture; I decided there would probably be hot water after all.

Early the next morning, after Ted slipped out to go to work, I lay in bed afraid to open my eyes in case I'd imagined it. But, sure

enough Toto, we weren't in Kansas anymore! I could hardly wait to get the kids up and dressed so we could start exploring our new city.

The skeleton staff in the Shell office was frantically trying to find more office space, so Ted was conscripted by Sutton Metz, the exploration manager, to find a corner somewhere to set up the geophysicists and geologists. Shell was bringing in every available American employee who had had any exploration experience, along with an administrative staff that could maximize the minimal time they had to buy up leases on likely looking sites. I knew I was going to be a single parent, yet again.

The kids and I went downstairs to breakfast in the hotel's big dining room and were introduced to the fresh-from-the-brick-oven crusty bread that the Palliser was justly famous for. And, as soon as I introduced myself to the Scottish waitresses and housemaids, they practically fought over who would get to look after Sidney and Ruthie, so I could start house-hunting.

That first day, though, we just explored downtown Calgary. Stepping outside the hotel, we could see the Hudson's Bay building and just down the street was the big Calgary Herald building across from the Lougheed Building. Eighth Avenue was obviously the main downtown thoroughfare, but there were hardly any cars on the street. Obviously, manufacturing in Canada hadn't caught up yet, but there were plenty of people in Calgary who would be customers as soon as things started rolling off the production lines.

Business people on the street were dressed to the nines. The men wore wool suits, and fedoras, and some were still wearing spats on their shoes. The women were all gussied up too, with hats and gloves. That crazy wind was still blowing a gale so no one was wearing a coat, and I remember thinking we'd have a lovely long summer to get settled.

Sidney spied the trolley coming down the street and forever after wanted to "ride the bell car" the minute we'd leave the hotel for any reason. That first day, though, I was in a hurry to find a newspaper to find the house-for-rent ads. I needn't have been in a rush. There

was nothing. The Canadian farm boys had come home from the war looking for places to live in the cities, and I realized we'd have to get on Shell's list and wait for a company house. It looked as though we'd be staying at the Palliser for quite a while.

I was told that Rideau Park School was relatively close to downtown so, within a few days, I left our little guy with the chambermaid who volunteered to look after him, so I could register Ruthie. She marched right in and took her place in the second grade as though she was a veteran, which I guess she was. By this time she had been in four different schools. What she remembers, though, was being shy because in the beginning the other children teased her for talking funny. But back at the hotel, it wasn't long before she made friends with everyone on the staff, and they would regularly take both the children to the kitchen for milk and cookies still warm from the oven as soon as she returned from school each day.

And it wasn't as though my children were a novelty at the Palliser. By the time we had been there for a month or so, the place was riddled with American oil company kids all chasing one another through the hallways and slamming doors and riding the elevators to hide from one another. You would have thought the staff, not to mention the other *guests*, would have gone berserk with all the commotion. To the contrary, everyone was amazingly understanding besides being so very helpful to all of us mothers, who were basically on our own trying to keep the children in school and on some kind of regular schedule.

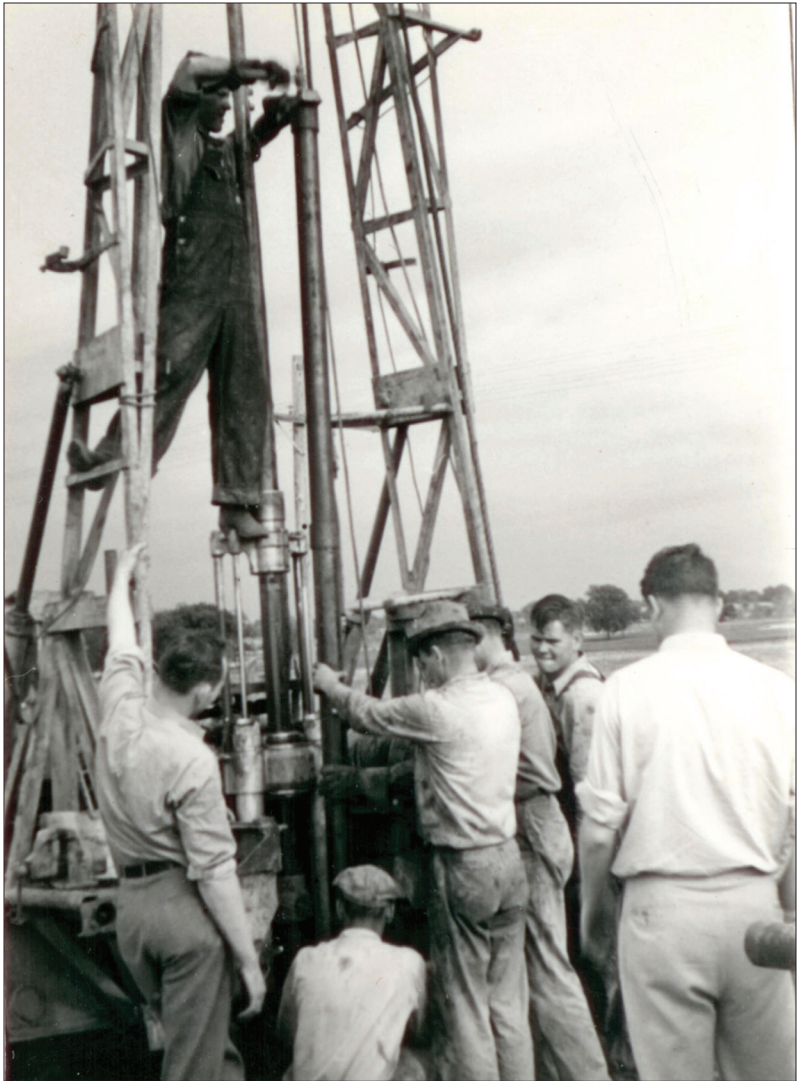
At one point while we were there, Sidney came down with a cold, and after a few days the chambermaid, who looked after him while I took Ruthie to school every morning, said he was running a fever and she was worried about him. I realized I needed to find a doctor, and the hotel put me in touch with Dr. Prieur, from the Associate Clinic. He came over to see him right away and announced that he had developed pneumonia. Dr. Prieur came every evening to check on him until he recovered. I was so grateful for his kindness and for the concern of everyone at the hotel.

Ted worked long, long hours and was often out in some field or other on the weekends, so the children and I spent the next two months really exploring the lay of the land. One day we rode the streetcar all the way to Bowness Park, and on another we found Grace Presbyterian Church, so I enrolled the children in Sunday school and asked if I could join the choir. The church was fabulous, a huge sandstone sanctuary built in 1912 that included an upper balcony with gorgeous stained glass windows and lovely oak pews arranged in a semi-circle around the raised pulpit. Upstairs, behind the choir loft and the organ, there were Sunday school rooms and a nursery. And, in the basement, there was a big dining room with a kitchen along with a church hall. I was really looking forward to meeting some of the congregation.

Sunday morning dawned, I dressed the children and off we went to church. Dr. Frank Morley, the minister, started the service as I expected he would with the reading of the scriptures. After that, I was lost. The hymns were totally unfamiliar, and by the time he got into the sermon I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. Maybe I'd made a mistake. Maybe this wasn't a Presbyterian church at all. I flipped through the hymnbook, and aside from a few Christmas carols and *Jesus Loves Me*, it might have been Greek. I looked around at the congregation to see whether they were as confused as I was, but apparently it was just me.

So, not to seem unfriendly, at the end of the service I joined the congregation in the church parlour for coffee, held out my hand to the closest person to me and said, "Hello, my name is Lola. My family has just joined the church and I'm so eager to get to know you all." Fortunately, it was Dr. Morley's wife, Mary. She would come to be one of my closest friends.

Mary welcomed me and introduced me to so many others that by the time Shell found us a little house on Westmount Boulevard, I was feeling right at home. And finally, at long last, the moving truck arrived from Baton Rouge. We were actually going to get our family settled for the duration of our year in Calgary.



SHELL RIG, 1938.



THE ESTES CLAN ASSEMBLED AROUND THE OLD OAK TABLE AT THANKSGIVING, 1939.



TED, LOLA, AND BABY RUTHIE WITH HER PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS IN MICHIGAN.



TED AND LOLA NIGHTCLUBBING IN DETROIT.



TED WITH HIS NEW 1949 BUICK – COMPLETE WITH PORTHOLES!