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MY NAME IS LOLA

by Lola Rozsa,
as told to and written by Susie Sparks

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Acclimating to Calgary

Well, yes, the moving truck did arrive. But when they started unloading, it was obvious that only part of our stuff was on it. It seems that the Robinson's furniture took precedence over ours, so not all of our belongings got loaded on this particular truck. Mr. Robinson was the new vice president of Shell Canada and his comfort and well-being were definitely more of a concern to the powers that be than ours. We were assured the rest would be along eventually – hopefully before our year was up.

At that point, it hardly mattered. We had a wonderful little house on Westmount Boulevard that had been abandoned when one of the geologists had to go back to Chicago, so Shell said we could move in there until they got their real estate sorted out. It was finally almost summer. After that spell of warm wind in late April, it got cold and even snowed once or twice in May, but now spring had arrived complete with dandelions and June was glorious.

As I was exploring our little bungalow, I stepped out into the backyard and was completely confused by the clothes line. It was much higher than I could reach; there seemed to be a little platform on one end with steps leading up to it, but how in the world was I supposed to reach the rest of the line? My next door neighbour was outside and saw me puzzling over this problem and rescued me. She came over, we introduced ourselves, and she explained that the line was on a pulley. “It has to be up high so that in the winter the sheets

won't drag on the snow. You just stand on that platform and pin the sheets and clothes to the line, then yank on the pulley to make room for more."

She and I became great friends. She directed me to the closest grocery store where I could get meat and canned goods, and explained that a green horse-drawn cart would be by once a week with fresh produce, and that the milk man would deliver our milk every morning and leave it in that little box built into the house by the back door. And, if I didn't want to bake my own, a bread man would be by once a week to take my order. I couldn't imagine why the milk would require its own housing, but I thought it impolite to question what she seemed to think was perfectly obvious.

We arranged the bits and pieces of our furniture and unloaded our suitcases and, as the kids and I walked over to the little elementary school where Ruthie would complete the second grade, we introduced ourselves to everyone we met along the way. Before long, all the horse-drawn wagons started appearing at my door just as my neighbour promised. The kids and I were amazed that the horses knew exactly where to go and when to stop and start up again; the drivers never even had to hold their reins.

The Chinese man on the green-grocer's cart had lots of wonderful fresh greens and carrots and potatoes and other root vegetables. But unfortunately, I learned that, as delicious as the bread man's fresh loaves were, I was expected to slice them. However, that was nothing compared to the problem with the margarine. For some reason, the law said we couldn't have coloured margarine because the dairy farmers didn't want us to think we were eating butter. So the margarine came in a white slab – looking just like a hunk of lard – with a little packet of orange food-colouring that we could knead into it if we wanted it to turn an appetizing butter-yellow.

I don't want to sound ungrateful. After all, we had all just come through food rationing; so, believe me, these little oddities weren't enough to annoy me. They were just odd. It was summer, with neither stifling heat nor humidity, the evenings were long and

gloriously cool, we were nestled snug in our little house and all of us were perfectly happy. I could hardly wait until Nannie could come for a visit.

Before long, that rodeo I'd heard about arrived with a huge parade that must have included every horse in the province. My neighbour told me to get everyone a cowboy hat, dress up the kids in western duds, and bring along a sleeping bag so they could sit on the curb and get up close to the whole spectacle. And it truly *was* a spectacle. There were cowboys and Indians and floats and marching bands, and big cars full of dignitaries, and little cars full of Shriners – sort of like the Fourth of July – only much better because it lasted a full week. It was the Calgary Stampede! We did the whole thing that July: the rodeo, the midway, the grandstand show, the fireworks. We square-danced in the streets and went to neighbourhood Stampede barbecues and Shell Stampede parties, and ate pancakes and sausages, and beef and beans for seven straight days ... and nights. By the time it was over, I was glad Nannie said she couldn't make it until November. I think Stampede might have killed her.

She had promised to come for Thanksgiving though, so we started going to the mountains to plot out some sightseeing trips for when she arrived, and Ted and I both fell instantly in love with the Rockies. We were so afraid that we wouldn't have a chance to see everything before our year was up that it seemed that we found a way to spend at least a part of every weekend on the road to Banff that summer. He was our resident geologist, of course, so the trips were a long lecture series on what had happened to fold and erode the mountains and what layers of rock were more interesting than others. In those days, before the Trans-Canada Highway, the old Banff road was often mired in mud so it took a whole day to get there. We'd take along a picnic supper and stay overnight at Becker's Bungalows on Tunnel Mountain where the chipmunks and deer were so tame the kids could feed them by hand.

Shell provided company cars for the guys who had to be out in the field, but they were not to be used for pleasure trips, and

everyone who had a company car had to take a solemn pledge to abide by those rules. But all of us were excited about seeing everything there was to see in the Rocky Mountains, and the men, of course, could hardly wait to go fly-fishing, so if sometimes the rules were bent a little, there was an unspoken agreement that no one in Shell's administration office needed to know.

One glorious weekend that summer, a couple of the geologists who had heard about a mountain stream full of trout decided they'd get an early start and sneak up to Banff on their way out to the field. The company car was loaded with groceries for the crew so they parked it just off the access path to the stream under some pines to make sure the car didn't get too hot – as well as to provide some camouflage, I suspect – then took off up the path with their fishing tackle.

They spent the whole day fishing – and catching – and finally meandered back down the path just at dusk. As they rounded the bend to find where they'd hidden the car, they heard a terrible racket and took off running to see what the commotion was all about, then skidded to a halt at the hood of their car, which was shaking like it was about to explode.

Arming themselves with their fishing poles, they crept closer and realized that whatever was inside that car had entered through the trunk, slashed its way through the back seat, and was obviously dining on those groceries. And, at the very instant they figured out who the culprit was, the intruder decided dinner was over, pushed his way out the driver's side by ripping the door off the hinges, and shambled off into the brush.

When they told the story later on, they said at first they figured they could claim a horrible highway accident – maybe a scenario involving being rear-ended by a monster transport truck. But, after closer examination of the wreckage, they realized they weren't going to be able to account for the fact that most of the upholstery had been eaten, and the claw marks where the trunk had been gashed open were also a little suspicious. In the end, though, they knew they'd

never get away with it; there was just no way in the world they could get rid of that very pungent and completely unmistakable smell.

Needless to say, the rules around the company cars got considerably more stringent, but then, out of the blue, in the middle of August, Ted got a call saying that Shell had just bought a house on 8A Street. Would we like to claim it? It was perfect for all kinds of reasons. It was an almost brand new bi-level with a big living room, dining room, kitchen, and three bedrooms with lots of room upstairs for little Sidney's crib and a playroom for Ruthie. She could walk to Elbow Park School, and at the bottom of the hill there was a huge park surrounded by giant poplars. There was a baseball diamond on it, and we were told there was a skating rink there in the winter. I think that's what cinched the deal for Ted because, of course, he had learned to skate as a boy in Michigan and was eager for the kids to learn while we lived in Calgary.

There was also a lovely little stone church across the street from the park and, since I still couldn't decipher Frank Morley's sermons, I toyed with the idea of switching churches. However, one Sunday at a high-church Anglican service convinced me I'd better stay with the Presbyterians.

We moved in just in time for Ruthie to start third grade at Elbow Park Elementary. That fall was spectacular with blue, blue skies against the yellowing leaves and the soft warm days lured all of us outside for long walks by the river nearby. Our neighbours, Roxy and Dick Shillington, became our instant best friends. He was a dentist and she had been a school teacher, and their little Barbara was just a year or so older than our Sidney, so we spent a lot of time together that fall.

Builders were working furiously to frame in as many houses as they could, but the land west of us was still mostly open prairie where the older boys in the neighbourhood took their BB guns to shoot gophers. One day, Roxy and I got so involved in the conversation we were having in the backyard that when we looked up, we realized suddenly that both Barbara and Sidney were missing.

Calling and threatening wasn't getting us anywhere, and we were both beginning to panic as it started getting dark. We couldn't imagine where they'd gone, but I was mighty afraid they'd toddled off down to the river. Finally though, with their backs to the setting sun, we could see three-year-old Barbara tightly clutching two-year-old Sidney's hand, dragging him back home across the prairie.

Sidney never *did* think common-sense rules applied to him. He was constantly wandering off and getting into mischief, but we soon figured out that he just needed to see how things worked. One afternoon that fall, Ted arrived home early, bringing along a visiting fireman from Shell. If I remember correctly, we were going to take him out for dinner, but Ted poured him a drink and we were having a nice visit in the living room. I should have realized that 'having a nice visit' *should* have rung a few warning bells. If we were having a nice visit, where was Sidney?

Almost before I had processed that thought, in toddled Sidney with the sprinkler, dragging the hose behind him. Before any of us could react, he lugged it all the way into the living room, set it carefully in the middle of the carpet, and let 'er rip. I went for Sidney, knowing that if Ted got to him first there wasn't going to be a happy outcome. With the visiting fireman collapsed in hysterics, Ted leaped out of his chair and threw the sprinkler and hose outside while I rescued Sidney and deposited him in his room so I could distribute towels.

Roxy invited us to share Canadian Thanksgiving with them that October. I couldn't understand why it would have been moved from November where it belonged, but I was polite enough not to question that one too closely either. As October drew on, however, I began to understand. Suddenly, it was dark. And cold. The yellow poplar leaves piling up in the gutters were frozen in the morning, and I had to buy long cotton stockings and woollen mitts and a hat for Ruthie to wear to school.

By mid-November, it was *seriously* cold. Giving thanks at that time of year would have been next to impossible! Nannie was on her

way to celebrate American Thanksgiving with us, but my Canadian neighbours kept assuring me that the strange warm wind that had welcomed us to the border in April would be back several times throughout the winter, so there'd undoubtedly be a Chinook at some point while she was with us. "That's the best thing about Calgary," they said. "It never stays cold too long."

They lied.

It wasn't that I deliberately misinformed Mama, but I may have not told her the whole truth, so when she arrived she was truly alarmed. As I stood at the door every morning wrapping Ruthie up in her parka and snow pants, with yards of wool scarf around her face, stuffing her feet into her snow boots, her head in her toque and her mitts over her sleeves, Nannie was wringing her hands moaning, "I cannot *believe* that you would even *think* of sending that child out in weather like this!" I'd lift the scarf and shove a spoonful of cod liver oil into Ruthie's mouth and push her out into the dark of the morning so she could slide down the hill to school. She'd climb back up it at noon because there were no provisions for lunch at the schools in those days. Children walked home for lunch; that was just the way it was, no matter what the weather. And by the time she walked home in the afternoon, it was dark again.

And no, it wasn't just the shock of our first Canadian winter. It *was* seriously cold! Even the Canadians admitted that. Planeload after planeload of American wives and children arriving from Oklahoma and Texas and Louisiana were landing daily at the Quonset hut they called the Calgary airport, and some of those women took one look out the window and refused to get off. Those that did deplane were sorry they hadn't asked what the temperature was before it was too late. That winter it bounced between 30 and 45 below Fahrenheit and stayed there for months ... and months ... and months. From our vantage point on the top of that hill, every morning I could see the smoke rising from the chimneys – straight up – not a breath of wind – icy, bitter, brutal cold.

But life went on, even for those of us from the hot-house tropics. Everyone learned to let their cars idle while they ran errands or went shopping to keep them from freezing up. (Yes, I too can hear all the environmentalists groaning.) There was one woman who ran into a drugstore to pick up a prescription, leaving her baby in the car to stay warm. From his perch on the front seat, he could just reach the gear shift. And pull it out of park. Unfortunately, the car was idling so fast that it drove itself right into a bus coming down 4th Street. There was no damage to the baby, but I was told his mother never recovered.

The men used to take the batteries out of their cars and bring them inside overnight to keep warm. We women were smarter. We learned that both Jenkins Groceteria and the Hudson's Bay Company stocked groceries and would take our orders over the phone and deliver them for a price ... which we were glad to pay.

And that little cubicle for the milk next to the back door? It may have helped keep the milk from freezing on most winter mornings, but that year the bottles came off the wagon with the cream already sitting two inches above their rims. They were frozen solid before they could even make it to the protection of the milk chute.

Most of us had grown up in the Deep South, and we wanted so much to experience everything we possibly could that winter. We knew we weren't likely to have another chance once our year was up, so almost every Friday evening we'd drive out to Bowness Lagoon or trudge down to the community rink with our first pairs of skates, determined to learn how it was done. Of course, all the kids picked it up pretty quickly and were mortified to be seen with their parents, who were gamely pushing around kitchen chairs like rickety old folk pushing their walkers.

Fortunately, I had Michigan-born Ted who could hold me up for at least one turn around the ice accompanied by *The Tennessee Waltz*, which was apparently the only recorded music the community owned. It was probably a very good thing because, by the time Patti Page warbled through the whole tragedy of her lost love, I had

frozen solid and needed to escape back to the shack to warm up. There was always a circle of frozen wool mittens sizzling on the lid of the pot-bellied wood stove, and I discovered that if I took off my skates and held them close to the flames for a few minutes they might stay warm enough to thaw out my feet once I put them back on.

We should have picked up on the clue that *our* families were the only ones out there that winter. One of my friends found out why that was. She was determined that her children would learn to skate while they were in Canada, so every afternoon, as soon as she got the boys back to school after lunch, she would bundle up her three-year-old and off they'd go to the rink. She'd stuff her little girl into her parka and snow pants over layers of long johns and sweaters, packing her in so tight she could barely bend her knees much less pick herself up off the ice when she fell. And that was a problem because my friend was equally stuffed and equally inflexible. Finally, after about a week of this torture, her next door neighbour peeked her head out of her front door as they were leaving for the rink and hollered, "Mary Ann, I think you should know that not even *Canadians* make our children go skating when it's 40 below!"

Unfortunately, Ted had to spend much of his time in the field with the seismic crews that winter and their trucks and machinery constantly froze solid. Worse yet, there was no escape from the cold, and he was seriously afraid that the guys might freeze to death if they were left there overnight. He started sketching out plans for a transportable trailer that could serve as an office during the daytime and sleeping quarters at night. He looked up a Mr. S. D. Southern, who had started a little trailer company a couple of years prior, and talked him in to building a prototype based on his design. Before long, Mr. Southern's company could barely keep up with the demand. That company became ATCO Trailers.

We were neither mad dogs nor Englishmen, and there was definitely no heat in the midday sun, but we all liked to party, so not even *that* winter could discourage us from throwing together a bridge game or a pot luck supper whenever the mood struck. Frankly,

there was a little bit of self-defence in our flash-mob socializing because, as much as we loved most of our neighbours, there were *some* Calgarians who resented the invasion of 1949.

Understandably so; we *were* a mob, and we *did* talk funny. Worse yet, most of us were finding places to live during a time of an extreme housing shortage thanks to the largess of the American oil companies. And those of us *without* company houses had large enough salaries to afford what homes that did come onto the market. To make matters even more uncomfortable all around, the companies – whose business, after all, wasn't actually real estate – were buying up as many houses as they could assemble, and they all seemed to be clustered in and around Mount Royal and Elbow Park, probably for reasons of management efficiency. But what they were creating was an American enclave in the southwest quadrant of the city that grew larger day by day.

This meant that all our kids were going to the same schools, we all seemed to attend the same Presbyterian and Baptist churches, and let's not forget the old resentment about the late arrival of the Americans into the war. But we invited our Canadian neighbours to join us for casual suppers and discovered they kind of enjoyed being introduced to jambalaya and cornbread. Then, of course, they happily reciprocated so we could try steak and kidney pie and prime rib with Yorkshire pudding.

But, more to the point, the fact was that in this relationship it was Canada supplying the raw materials and the U.S. corporations supplying the industrial capacity. We were there for a year to introduce the Canadian employees to the newest exploration technology. Then we'd leave. But it was made clear in many ways that some people thought that, once we were through pillaging their resources, we'd take the money and run.

Well, I figured, the only defence is to kill them with kindness. I volunteered to help out with any project that needed doing. I sang in the choir, of course, and quite literally got in up to my elbows in the annual Grace Church Christmas cake bazaar. (I hasten to clarify

that this was an old and well-established tradition at Grace Church; I was just naïve enough to offer to help out.) I know you're going to think I'm exaggerating, but there's no hyperbole expansive enough to convey what actually happened that November.

The women of the church assembled in the basement kitchen every weekday morning. (Henry Ford would have been proud.) One woman was assigned to crack dozens of eggs as fast as she could, and another measured the bulk fruit. That poor soul had to pick through all the raisins to remove their stems. Another divided the fifty-pound flour sacks into manageable portions, and so on until we all manned the huge spatulas to pour the batter into individual loaf pans that we'd take home to bake in our own ovens. We'd bring them back to the church the next morning to wrap for the sale, and then start the whole production line again. Those Christmas cakes had become so popular over the years that they were almost all sold before we even started buying the ingredients. The bazaar was a significant fundraiser for the church and, as I say, it was an outstanding success. But I promise you, it was definitely a job of work.

Maybe I was just so busy through November and December that it simply didn't register on me that the American invasion wasn't slackening off. One newspaper columnist wrote that, on average, twelve babies were born every single day that year. More astonishing, thirty-one *new* people immigrated to Calgary each day – young people like us – at least in part responsible for launching that baby boom.

Yes, it's true that Ted was still working very long hours. And it's also true that he was up north very frequently checking on likely looking plays. But Nannie was there and we were keeping one another company, so I suppose I just didn't notice that there was no talk at all about our next assignment. We spent our Christmas together and there were lots of Shell parties to celebrate New Year's Eve. We invited all the Texans to our house on New Year's Day and Nannie fixed black-eyed peas to bring us good luck in the new decade. Maybe I just didn't hear the men talking among themselves

about the fact that the company hadn't started making plans to send us home in the spring.

By mid-January, though, even I knew that Shell had discovered that Leduc and Redwater represented only the tip of a very, very large iceberg as far as the potential for Alberta oil was measured. Send people home? Not a chance. Shell needed *more* people; there would be no transfers. If an employee insisted on going back to the States, the company wouldn't guarantee him a comparable job. Everybody was needed in Alberta. Currency controls were a thing of the past. American corporations were on a massive hunt to locate and develop these resources; the Canadian economy would be fused even *more* closely with that of the United States.

Ted came home from the field one afternoon in late January. We still hadn't had a Chinook. He said we needed to talk. I felt sure I knew what was coming and I steeled myself to hear it.