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MY NAME IS LOLA

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

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And Now We Are Five

We brought Mary Lil home and introduced her to her big sister, who became like her second mother, and to her brother who I'm sure instantly recognized that eventually she would interfere with his toys, so she'd better keep her distance. I've often thought what a luxury it was to have such widely spaced children. It gave me a chance to devote my full attention to them one at a time and to savour their baby years. But of course it also meant they had nothing in common with one another until they grew up. Compared to my family of six siblings in ten years, my three children had a very different experience. I suppose there are advantages to each kind of family. On that day, however, I thought ours was perfect. The baby and I settled in to get to know one another through a long, cozy winter and she grew happy and healthy.

By the time she was close to two years old, I found a wonderful woman who could look after Mary Lil and the other two children occasionally so I could join Ted on the golf course out at Canyon Meadows. I had never played golf, but Ted loved the game and was a fabulous teacher, so that made it easy for me to gain enough confidence to sign up to play with the ladies on Tuesday mornings. And slowly, with a little extra coaching from Harriet Watson, I discovered I could play well enough not to embarrass myself too often.

They say there's no such thing as a casual golfer. They're right. It's probably the most frustrating – and addictive – sport ever invented.

The problem is, in eighteen holes *every* golfer can hit at least one perfect shot. Perfect. Obviously that shot is in there somewhere – you pulled it out this one time. Why shouldn't you be able to pull it out again? String a few of those together and you could play the tour. But, of course, you can't. It's gone. Never to be repeated.

The next day, you hit a *different* perfect shot. The same thought goes through your head. But no, it too vanished the moment it left your club.

I have a friend who's a tennis player. She says that if you hit 10,000 forehands and 10,000 backhands and 10,000 lobs, and 10,000 drop shots, eventually you can play a pretty decent set of tennis. But in golf you *never* hit the same shot twice. The ball is always on a different slope or in a different rough, or the pin is in a different position, or the distance between you and the green requires you to use a different club, or the wind is blowing a different direction, or your socks don't match the colour of your tees. (I threw that last one in there to see if you're paying attention.)

The point is, golf is not an easy game. The Scots invented it, as you know, and, being good Calvinists, I suspect their motive was to make it a test of character. I quickly learned that my only opponent was myself and one of me was likely to lose. If I couldn't have fun just being in the moment enjoying the day and the company of my golfing partner, then maybe this wasn't going to be the sport for me. Worst case scenario: I could always play tennis. Tennis is far less expensive and it seldom takes four hours to play. Unfortunately, however, I loved to play golf from the moment Ted handed me my first five iron. I was instantly addicted.

That summer drew too quickly to a close, but I was happy to get back to some of the things I liked to do in the community. Ted and I had remained very faithful to the Calgary Symphony Orchestra while they were playing downtown at the Grand Theatre. So, when it was announced that Alberta would be celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the province by constructing state-of-the-art performing arts theatres in both Calgary and Edmonton, we were both very

supportive of the movement to upgrade the Symphony's musical professionalism to match that of their new home.

Contrary to Calgary's prevailing image as a cow town, the city had had an enthusiastic arts community almost from the day the North-West Mounted Police built Fort Calgary in 1875. The Mounties' primary duty was to establish friendly relations with the people of the First Nations, but, to do that, their first two priorities were to push the whiskey traders back into Montana and then to maintain law and order. They made friends with the ranchers scattered in the area, many of whom had ventured west directly from the sophisticated cities of the east where they were accustomed to the finer things of civilized society, so the officers occasionally hosted receptions and welcomed any visiting musicians. Rumour has it that these soirees at the fort were well lubricated by the evidence seized from the whiskey traders, but this was undoubtedly very helpful in encouraging an appreciation of many things.

The first Calgary Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1910 by violinist A. P. Howell and, in 1947, the New Calgary Symphony was assembled by Clayton Hare, who combined the old orchestra, comprised largely of community volunteers, with members from the Mount Royal College Orchestra. They performed about ten times a year in the old Grand Theatre on 1st Street West to loyal and enthusiastic audiences.

By 1955, however, their audience decided that Calgary deserved a professional Philharmonic Orchestra. The Dutch conductor, Henry Plukker, was approached to find out whether he might be willing to come to Calgary and oversee the considerably complex transition from amateur to professional musicians. He agreed. For a price. The transition had begun. This would take more than enthusiasm; it would take development funds.

Shortly thereafter, Percy Smith who owned another seismic service company, approached Ted one day with his hand outstretched. Ted knew Percy, of course, but he was caught flat-footed when, instead of greeting him as a fellow oilman, Percy said he was on a

mission on behalf of the new Philharmonic Orchestra. Would Ted write them a cheque for \$1,000?

In hindsight, that first \$1,000 seems like an easy ask. And, in truth, it was. Ted loved the music and Percy knew that if he could get Ted and others like him on board, they would become far more than season-ticket subscribers, they would be development partners for life. It was an excellent strategy on Percy's part because it was frankly a win/win proposition. The orchestra provided Ted with the immeasurable pleasure of their music, and he, in turn, offered them his services throughout the years as a board director and frequent contributor, and throughout the years he happily immersed himself in his study of classical music. And 'immersion' is definitely not an exaggeration. Anything worth doing, according to that man I lived with, was worth doing to excess. He built himself a fabulous stereo system so he could listen to the recordings of the music the orchestra was planning for the current season, and then compare the different interpretations of the compositions after he heard the orchestra's performances. Unfortunately, he expected the rest of the family to appreciate those subtle differences, too. But to his credit, the musicians in the orchestra recognized that Ted, even though he wasn't a trained musician himself, was extraordinarily well informed about their art. In fact, at one point many years later, they invited Ted to select the music for the upcoming season.

Within two years, the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Henry Plukker moved out of the Grand Theatre and into the newly completed Jubilee Auditorium, where audiences of a thousand or more came to hear each new concert, growing their own appreciation of the music accompanied by the growing strength of musicians' performances.

At about the same time, I was hoping to get more involved with music because I loved singing in my church choir and, through Ted's interest I had also learned to appreciate classical music and thought I might be able to help with some of the fundraising too.

The Women's League of the Philharmonic was launched in 1955 to raise money for the orchestra and to help grow an appreciation for classical music through the schools and eventually to offer music scholarships too. Molly Mooney was the first president of the League and I volunteered to help – along with others, of course – so for the first several years we brainstormed all kinds of wild schemes to raise money.

But then someone brought in a great idea. What would we think about holding a used book sale? Just between you and me, I'll admit I was perhaps a little dismissive of the effort it would take. I thought, how hard can this be? I'm a veteran of the Grace Presbyterian Church Christmas Cake Bazaar marathons after all. A few phone calls, a day selling books ... no problem.

Before I go any further, I think I should explain the truly awesome phenomenon of voluntarism in Calgary. There must have been something in the water in those days because I've never seen the equal of it anywhere else. It was as though Calgarians were absolutely helpless when approached for assistance with whatever cause was being peddled at the moment. They seemed physically unable to say no. I don't mean that they were just quick to write a cheque. They wrote the cheque *and* they stepped up to the plate to help make it happen.

And it wasn't a new phenomenon. Nor was it peculiar only to the male half of the population. I suppose it might have started with the homesteaders who came to the Prairies and realized they'd better help one another raise their barns and get their wheat in before the frost just so they could all survive the winter. But then, as early as 1912, they decided that Calgary needed an exhibition to advertise the limitless possibilities that awaited new immigrants to the west, and the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede was born. I'm told by the historians that the very first parade was attended by an estimated 80,000 people – a number made even more impressive when you know that the population at that time was only 60,000!

This monumental annual effort has always required the incredibly intense labour of literally thousands of volunteers. But then at about the same time, the Calgary Local Council of Women was organized and started raising funds and providing the womanpower to address the needs of the community's less-advantaged people. Unlike most communities I had been familiar with in the South, voluntarism in Calgary didn't necessarily restrict itself to the churches and the Rotary clubs. *Everyone* did their part, including the unchurched. The Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Mothers' Milk Fund, the Library Society, the Children's Hospital Society, the Calgary Horticultural Society, the Lions Club, the Calgary Humane Society, the United Way, and, yes, the American Woman's Club. More and more and more charitable organizations sprang up to do good works, raise funds, and provide services where necessary. By 1955, it was obvious that the progeny of those early volunteers were still drinking the magic water.

I may be getting ahead of myself here, but just to prove my point, I'll add one thing. The 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary was run *entirely* by volunteers; 10,000 volunteers. That had never been done before. Or *since*, for that matter.

As you can see, I wasn't joining a bunch of amateurs. The idea had been proposed by one of the American women who had seen it done in her hometown back in the States, but these women of the Philharmonic knew what it would take and how to get it done. Calgary's Benny the Bookworm Sale was officially launched and Nadine Blake, the new president of the Philharmonic Women's League, mobilized the troops.

Who knew Calgarians were such voracious readers? As I recall, this was the first used book sale conceived in Calgary, so we thought our most difficult hurdle would be in explaining the concept to potential donors. Not so. People fell on us practically weeping in gratitude the minute they found out we'd be relieving them of their old books. That first year, we offered to pick up books all over town, and the donors welcomed us with open arms. Open, but not empty.

Grocery bags, cardboard boxes, suitcases and trunks – all full to the brim with books. We should have gone armed with dollies to move the haul out to our cars, but none of us expected such a bounty of riches.

We stored our collected trove in our basements until the day prior to the sale and then lugged the books downtown for sorting. There was a little store across the street from the Hudson's Bay that permitted us to use their premises for three days: Thursday for sorting and assigning to tables, Friday morning for the finishing touches, Friday afternoon and Saturday morning for the sale.

So, on the assigned Thursday, we sorted and priced everything – in those days that even included *National Geographic* magazines – and then opened the door promptly at noon on Friday. However, it was quickly obvious that book lovers are closet hoarders too, because as soon as we opened for business, there were our donors ... buying more books.

We should have realized we were creating a monster, but I suppose we were giddy with our success. At the end of the day, we counted our money and we were just short of \$1,000. We looked at each other and then, without a word, all of us opened our purses and added enough change to make it an even thousand. We could hardly wait to schedule it on our calendars the next year. We proudly presented our cheque to the board of the Philharmonic and told them there was more where that came from.

What we didn't expect, though, was that all those voracious readers scheduled it on *their* calendars, too! And they told their friends. They were waiting for us, armed with books and dangerously overstocked. We had unwittingly created a Rube Goldberg perpetual motion machine we'd never be able to stop. Benny was a flow-through supplier for book junkies.

The next year remains a bit of a blur. The original twenty of us obviously weren't going to be enough to handle the onslaught. We expanded. We knew we couldn't manage the pick-up-and-delivery system we had started with, so we made our phone calls and launched

a little advertising campaign to invite donors to bring their cache of unwanted books down to the Philharmonic's office. The staff would store them. (Needless to say, *that* didn't work a second time.)

The next year, we made a giant bookworm out of papier mâché. It was about twelve feet long and three feet around, and we painted it such a garish shade of yellow-green that we were afraid it might frighten small children. But what the heck, it was terrific advertising and we lugged Benny around everywhere we went.

A store across from Eaton's donated their space, and the same hours were advertised, but this time we had people lined up down the street waiting to get in. Joyce Matthews and I thought to bring in a record player so the customers could hear the music of the Philharmonic as they shopped, and that seemed to be another magic ingredient. We made *more* than a thousand dollars and, even before we hustled the last customer out the door, our new president, Jean Funnell, whose husband was the manager of the Bay, suggested that we move the sale there the next year. Suggested is probably not quite the right word. She insisted.

Sure enough, the Bay turned out to be the perfect venue. They could receive and store the books for us and, on the expanded two and a half days of the sale, people were lined up before the store opened. Those that couldn't squeeze into the area reserved for the book sale were forced to shop through the department store until the previous buyers made room. It was a licence to print money. We made so much profit that we weren't even resentful of the few books left unsold at the end of the day. Those were sent to the correctional institution just out of town.

We kept the sale at the Bay for several years then moved out to the new Chinook Shopping Mall following the suburbanites as the city grew. There used to be a party game that everyone played during those expansionist times. Someone would look around at a room crowded with guests and ask, "Is there anyone here who's actually a native of Calgary?" Invariably, there would be only be a scattered few. Everyone seemed to be from somewhere else. But Calgary

was the perfect place for that to happen because it meant that there weren't social barriers that excluded anyone. In the decade between 1950 and 1960, the city's population *more* than doubled. With all the immigration of the previous ten years, Calgary had reached its tipping point and had become a city that took pride in its ability to absorb its newcomers. Strangers were welcomed and invited to get involved. The Philharmonic thrived and continued to accommodate those people who were new to classical music and in fact jumped at the opportunity to introduce their music to the uninitiated.

The Women's League arranged for all the junior high students in the city to have a morning at a live Philharmonic concert, thanks to the generosity of the bus companies, the Calgary Public School Board, and the city Police Services. And, before long, we even had enough money to award two music scholarships each year. Benny the Bookworm made all that possible.

Benny gave me a chance to be a small part of that success, and I remain grateful to this day for everything those experiences taught me. I found out how to inspire others to get involved, and how a successful advertising plan is launched, and how to engage the media and business leaders in a civic project, and how to leverage one donated gift to enable three others to follow. I realized that if I really listened to people, they were invariably telling me what they hoped could happen. All that remained was for me to help that process along. Most people are genuinely happy to help; sometimes they just need to know *how* to do that.

You know the old saying about it taking a village to raise a child? Well, it also takes the whole village to build a healthy community. Never think that a few people can do it all; it truly takes all of us contributing whatever time and talent we can share. I loved being a small part of Benny's success, but I also saw so many other community projects going on at the same time that I was – and remain – truly humbled by the generosity of thousands of others, so many of whom were *new* Calgarians. These were people who had only recently arrived and yet they wholeheartedly poured their support

into making this city one that we are all so proud of. I remember being at a party one time when, once again, the familiar question was asked. “Is anyone here actually a Calgarian?” There was a pause, and then a man stood up and said, “Yes, I’m a Calgarian. By choice.”

Me too.