



MY NAME IS LOLA

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

ISBN 978-1-55238-735-1

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Home Again, Home Again

Yes, me too.

But no matter how strong our ties to Calgary, I still missed my family, and I always made a priority of taking the kids back to Texas to visit. In the summer of 1958, we went for a reunion with the Estes clan at a lodge on a huge lake in north Texas. In fact, we had a minor claim to fame as far as that lake was concerned because it was my father, the Preacher, who named it.

Thirty or so years prior, probably as another of President Roosevelt's public works projects, the Dennison Dam had been authorized for construction to control flooding and to generate hydro-electric power on the border between Texas and Oklahoma. During World War II, German prisoners of war were put to work helping to finish it, and in 1944 all was ready for its official opening. Sam Rayburn, my father's good friend who was speaker of the United States House of Representatives, was sent to officiate on behalf of the U.S. Government. Sam came to call on Preacher to ask his assistance at the dedication. He said the lake was going to need a name but that he hadn't been able to think of anything that would be acceptable to the Oklahomans as well as to the Texans, who both wanted to claim it. "Well," said Preacher, "why not call it Lake Texoma?"

Lake Texoma it became and so it still remains, a beautiful recreational lake with more than a thousand miles of shoreline. In the summer of 1958, we were all headed to the Lake Texoma Lodge

and were looking forward to learning how to water-ski. Ann and Ed brought their new boat – attached to their brand new turquoise Impala convertible – and the kids fell all over one another trying to be the first to get up on the skis.

Finally it was the grown-ups' turn, so Ruthie was the assigned spotter with my nephew Eddie driving the boat. I had watched all the kids gradually lift up out of the water onto the skis, so, following instructions, I centred myself over the skis, yelled to Ruthie that I was ready, and the boat took off. Well, I'm not sure what went wrong, but I simply couldn't stand up on those skis. I was hanging on to the rope for dear life, bouncing down the length of that lake on my bottom too terrified to let go, and Ruthie was laughing so hard she couldn't tell Eddie to stop. I don't think I've forgiven her yet.

By 1959, though, the kids were growing up and trips home were getting harder to orchestrate. Mary Lil had started school and Sidney was involved with his friends in all their junior high's activities. After Ruthie graduated from Central High School in June, she and I decided we'd drive down to the University of Colorado together to get her settled in her dorm room.

In those days, college kids didn't load up their backpacks with a couple of pairs of jeans and a few tee-shirts and call it a wardrobe. We spent *weeks* shopping: outfits appropriate to wear to class, outfits for weekend wear, party outfits, and formals both long and calf-length for dressy events. I still shudder remembering the number of pairs of shoes required to match all that! There were linens for her dorm room, her record player, her radio, and whatever keepsakes she felt she couldn't survive without. It took all summer to assemble all that paraphernalia, and it took most of the morning that early September day to load up the trunk and back seat of our current car. It was a coral and sand Oldsmobile that seemed about a block long, and I figured that even though we got kind of a late start, we could make up some time once we got to the highway. As we finally lumbered off toward the border, I was confident that if we had to we could find a place to stay overnight somewhere in Montana.

There's nothing more fun than a road trip with your daughter. We yattered our way through southern Alberta, made a stop at every potentially interesting roadside junk sale, and only noticed that it was starting to get dark after we crossed the border and realized that any evidence of human habitation was becoming more and more sparse. Then, the dusk became dark night. Oh yes, there were definitely stars in the sky, and for that matter we even had a sliver of moon. We knew that because our headlights were pointing straight up, like search-lights illuminating the heavens. We had so overloaded the car that the rear end was practically dragging on the pavement. However, that meant we couldn't see a thing *other* than the sky. The road ahead was in the pitch black of deep night. If there *had* been a sign directing us to a motel, we couldn't have seen it, and, besides, I was trying to drive using Braille – weaving between the rumble strips on the right shoulder and the rumble strips on the left shoulder to keep me centred on the road. It was a very long trip.

My solo journey back home in an empty car was much less eventful but, further to the wardrobe issues, I had some planning to do. Friends in Calgary had floated the idea that Ruthie might like to be a part of the Calgary Highlanders' Debutante Ball in the coming June, and Ted and I were delighted. We knew it would be fun for her to take part, and she would have a glimpse at a centuries-old British tradition that had made its way to the colonies around the world. Originally, the whole idea behind debutante balls was to provide an occasion where one might present his marriageable young daughter to suitable suitors of a certain similar social circle. (She sells sea shells by the seashore!) It was all rather anachronistic by 1960, and Ruthie certainly had no inclination to consider any suitors we might choose for her, but she *did* love a good party. However, this would require another wardrobe – for *all* of us.

When she arrived home from university in the spring, Ruthie was immediately swept up in all the pre-Ball festivities. There were brunches and afternoon tea parties hosted by all the girls' families, fittings for the white ball gown she would wear, and armpit-length

white kid gloves to purchase to wear with it. She learned to walk down the elegant Palliser staircase in her voluminous ball gown by feeling the back edge of each step before actually committing to it, so she wouldn't plummet into the girl ahead of her and topple them all like dominoes. There were curtsey lessons so none of the girls would wobble when they were presented to all the attending dignitaries, and dance classes with the Highlander cadets and young officers who would be the girls' escorts for the occasion.

The Calgary Highlanders are a light infantry battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and the young men in their scarlet dress jackets and Black Watch kilts seemed right at home in the baronial ballroom of the Palliser Hotel that night. And when the pipers and drummers led the sixteen girls and their escorts in for their presentation and introduction to Georges Vanier, the Governor General of Canada, and the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta, Percy Page, I have to tell you it was magical moment ... anachronistic or not.

Back in real life, Mary Lil and Sidney were happily engaged with school and their friends. It wasn't going to be as easy to break free from all that as it had once been, and our trips back to Texas became fewer and shorter. Besides, after ten years in Calgary I discovered I was feeling more and more at home. We had built close friendships with everyone on Ted's crew and from Canyon Meadows, and my church choir, and a great many from our volunteer work with the Philharmonic. I can't say we had learned to love the climate, but we most certainly loved the people.

We had met Beryl and Leon Libin over the back fence when we first moved to 10th Street, and they in turn introduced us to many of their friends and our other neighbours. And since I was about ten years older than Beryl, I became the go-to big sister in matters of emotional crisis. When Beryl turned thirty and was totally inconsolable, grieving over her lost youth, I grabbed Leon and told him to take all the kids for ice cream so I could comfort Beryl. He clamped his ever-present cigar between his teeth, piled the kids into the back seat of his car and took off, leaving Beryl and me to work through

this crisis over a slice of cheesecake. From that point forward, the kids adopted him as their surrogate father and invented every possible problem that might require an ice cream solution.

Frontier Geophysical had moved out to a new building on Acadia Boulevard in 1955 and by 1956 they were using the new playback technology, so Ted and the other interpreters were spending the majority of their time at the office in Calgary rather than out in the field. It seemed like we had finally sunk roots. Thankfully, we had planted them in what was rapidly becoming inner city.

Calgary was oozing beyond its borders so quickly that new subdivisions had to wait for paved roads long after the new home buyers moved in. I was always commiserating with friends who looked forward to winter freeze-up because, once spring arrived, out came the gumboots. But the pace of construction in those days was unbelievably frenzied; no one could keep up. That was the year that McMahon Stadium was built in only a hundred days. And the University of Alberta's Calgary Campus, next door to the stadium, opened to its first students that fall. It would take a few years before it finally seceded from the University of Alberta, but that political process certainly didn't get in the way of all the new buildings that shot up all over the campus. I remember thinking how nice it would be if the U of C was well-established by the time Sidney was ready for college.

You're probably thinking that anyone with *my* history of hopscotching through multiple homes would know better than to talk about sinking roots. I'd never stayed *anywhere* longer than ten years. Maybe I was getting so rooted that I'd forgotten that the geophysical industry *has* no fixed address. So even though we had recently been to a cluster of farewell parties for oil-industry friends who were being transferred back to the States, when Ted came home one day and announced that Frontier was going to have to make some pretty drastic changes, he completely took me by surprise.

Until the late '50s, geophysical contracts were awarded on a yearly basis despite the fact that the Alberta government prohibited

any activity during the month of April until mid-May because of road conditions into the back country. This meant that Frontier, along with all the other crews, had to stand down for that six-week period and the companies who had contracted their services were paying them despite that hiatus because there was just so much work they couldn't afford not to.

By 1961, however, the big companies started pulling in their oars and ceasing to out-source their work. They announced to the geophysical industry that contracts offered in the future would be short-term, if at all. At the time, Frontier had seven crews and one slim-hole rig. Sadly, some of the crew would have to be let go.

It was a very tough time. The guys at Frontier really were like an extension of our family, and Ted agonized over each one of them. Some wanted to find different jobs in the industry and others decided that the timing was right to go back to school to back up their on-the-job training with university degrees or technical diplomas. Ted was able to help with those transitions. But some of the office crew had been with him since the beginning, and they felt like they were losing the company they, too, had built. And justifiably so.

Ted had a lot of sleepless nights trying to figure out a way that would permit the fellows that had stayed with Frontier through all its transitions to keep the company and hopefully hang onto it through this rough patch in the economy. He approached Sandy McDonald, Ed Rutledge, and Dick Baillie with a proposition. Would they be interested in keeping Frontier if he could arrange financing that would enable them to buy it with no money down? He would keep 50 per cent of the company; they could buy the other half and pay him for it through their future profits. It would mean they would have to strip it to its bare bones for a while, but it would be their company. Ted would be the major shareholder, but he would be a silent partner. The company would be theirs to operate as they saw fit.

Dick Baillie still says that when that deal was offered to them, none of them could believe their good fortune. "It was incredibly generous. Anyone else would have just sold the company outright,

but Ted gave us a chance even though he knew we had no way to buy it from him. All of us were raising families in those days and were mortgaged to the hilt, so we had no capital to invest at all. And he had no way of knowing whether we could make a go of it. He simply trusted that we could. But there was even icing on *that* cake: he gave us the company membership to Canyon Meadows too!”

Ted wasn't a workaholic by any means, but what really drove him was an insatiable curiosity about new technology. The kids used to say, “Never ask Dad to tell you the time. He'll try to tell you how to build a watch.” All kidding aside though, he really did need to know how things worked, and nothing made him happier than trying to improve a new invention. So, when the guys agreed to take over Frontier, he kept a little office in their building and started researching options for his own future. He had always been the first to try out whatever was being touted as the latest and best equipment, so when some fellows arrived from Houston with a new idea for a seismic machine that would do the work of the subsurface reverberations without using explosives, Ted was very interested in what they had to say.

He asked them to leave their prototype with him so he could study it a little further and he found some pretty significant flaws that he thought could be addressed in the next iteration of the model. When he called them back, they immediately offered him a partnership. They needed him in Houston. Major investors, they said, were committed and lined up to move forward, and the seismic industry in the States was sold on the product. What they needed from him was his technical expertise to fine-tune the prototype along with his access to the very lucrative market in western Canada.

When he came home to tell me about the offer, all I heard was Houston. We could finally go back to Texas and be near my family once again! “But couldn't we live in Dallas instead?” Nannie and Lillian were still living in Denton in north Texas, and in Dallas I would be practically on their doorstep. And besides, I really didn't know Houston at all.

But so what! In Houston I'd be a whole lot closer to everyone, and the timing was perfect. Ruth Ann had decided to transfer to Michigan State in the fall in order to take Radio and TV Journalism, and Mary Lil was still little enough that changing schools in the third grade wouldn't be an issue for her. But most important, this would be a perfect transition year for Sidney. Like most adolescent boys, he was slacking off in junior high school, and I'd been talking about his difficulties with my sister Eleanor and her husband Mac. Mac was principal of the high school in Conroe, Texas, and Eleanor was an English teacher, so we'd been considering the possibility of Sidney spending a year with them to get him back on track scholastically. We could put him in school in September in Conroe then, when we moved to Houston in December, he could join us. This was almost too good to be true!

It's hard to explain how I was feeling about all this. Ten years before, when Ted announced we wouldn't be going back to Texas, I was devastated. But then I had only been in Calgary a matter of a few months, a few wretchedly *cold* months. This time was far different. This time I would be leaving close friends and connections to projects in which I was deeply invested. This time I would be leaving a city I loved.

I wasn't alone, of course. Many of the Americans we had arrived with in 1949 and 1950 were being transferred back to the States, so we were all being feted with going away parties and there were many tearful farewells. One of my friends who was on her way back to Midland moaned, "I can't believe this! Shell kept saying we'd only be here a year, and then another year, and then another. Finally, after eleven years, I decided I wouldn't spend one more winter without a fur coat, so I bought one just six months ago. Now I'll never be able to wear it again!"

We put Sidney on the plane in September in time for him to start the ninth grade in Conroe and then called the real estate agent about listing our house. This was the house I promised I would only leave in a pine box, and in many ways I felt that I was leaving the best

years of my life behind. We knew that our wonderful neighbours, the Libins and Roxy and Dick Shillington and the Tavenders, all of whom were so welcoming when we first arrived, could never be replaced.

It was with very mixed emotions that I wound up all my commitments to Grace Church and the choir, Wo-Shi-Lo, the Women's League of the Philharmonic, and the American Woman's Club. Would I ever again have a chance to be involved in such a meaningful way with women I had learned to admire so much? We played our last golf game with our friends from Canyon Meadows and Ted resigned from the Doodlebug Tournament Committee. Saying goodbye was very hard for both of us.

Along with the slump in the oil industry, the real estate market suddenly skidded to a dead stop and not much was moving in the housing market. This was unfortunate because Ted had promised to meet his new partners in Houston the first of January to finalize the deal and start to work. Like it or not, we'd have to pack up the furniture and leave the house in the hands of the real estate agent despite the fact that the winter months were bound to get even slower.

I'll admit that as time passed and we drew closer to Christmas, I was so looking forward to spending the holidays with all my family back in Denton that not even this hiccup in the housing market was worrying me. We had decided that Ted would fly to Michigan as soon as Ruth Ann's first semester at Michigan State was over, pick her up, and they would both drive to Grand Rapids to have a little visit with his parents. Then they would go to Detroit, buy a new car, and drive down to Texas to meet the rest of us in Houston. For the first time in a very long time, the whole Estes family would gather in Denton for Christmas. The only thing missing would be that old oak table. Nannie would have her children, their spouses, the grandchildren, and the great-grandchildren assembled to give thanks for the bounty that God had provided us. I was so grateful to know that all of us would be there to give thanks too.

As soon as Mary Lil was dismissed from school for the Christmas holiday, the moving truck arrived to load our furniture. They drove away with promises they would meet us in Houston, and Mary Lil and I boarded a plane for Texas.

Christmas in Denton was everything I'd hoped and, despite my sadness at having to leave good friends back in Calgary, I was so happy that we would be close enough to do this often, particularly because Nannie was beginning to age and I wanted to spend as much time as possible with her in the next few years. However, when everyone started back to their own homes, I was eager to get going. Ted loaded all of us into the brand new purple Chrysler, and we headed straight for Houston and – you guessed it – the Alamo Plaza Motel.

I found a wonderful new home in Hunters' Creek, a subdivision of Houston that was growing almost as fast as Calgary had. We all loved the house even though it was considerably grander than our 10th Street house, but I was pretty sure I could make it homey enough to suit us. There was an elementary school not far from the house, so I registered Mary Lil in the third grade and off I went to choose carpeting and tiles and plumbing fixtures and all those other little details that go with moving into a new place.

Every afternoon, I would meet Ted back at the Alamo Plaza at the end of his day at the office with all my plans for the new house. I guess I had so much on my mind with the rush to complete the purchase of the house and get it ready before the moving truck arrived, that I didn't notice that Ted wasn't having much to say. So, when another few days went by and he said we needed to talk, I was truly blindsided.

The whole deal, he said, was smoke and mirrors. The new technology was worthless. Basically this was a fraudulent scheme they'd tried to sell to Ted. We would be going back to Calgary. He would start a new company. This time he would get into the exploration and production side. Logistically and financially, it would only work if we went back to Calgary. We couldn't stay in Texas.

I can talk about it now, but at the time I doubt I could even form the words to express my disappointment. From the perspective of hindsight, though, maybe it's easier to explain why it was such a blow. I was forty-one. Ted was forty-six. I say that because, when I reflect back on what happened, I realize that it took place at a very vulnerable time in both our lives. I suspect that most of us look back at our forties remembering how we seemed to be flying apart at the seams with so many big transitions. It seems to be that decade when the kids start taking flight. And, if you'll forgive a golf metaphor, we all begin realizing that we've rounded the corner of our lives. We'd started the back nine. It was a time of reassessment.

I had just come from a perfect Hallmark-card kind of Christmas with my family, the family who had raised me believing that the very core of my being was nurtured by the values shared among us. Within that family, I was the youngest, and as such I undoubtedly felt the most loved and protected. At nineteen, I was the last to fly from that nest. I just happened to be the one that flew the farthest. For the past ten years, deep inside I had carried that longing to return. During that idyllic Christmas week with all my siblings, each one of them wrapped *my* little family in that circle of love. I was almost home. I know this is hard to understand, but it was maybe the first time that I had had to face the fact that it was long past time for me to move on. My own first child had flown the nest; my second would follow in a few more years. As much as I might have wanted to gather my children to me and stay in Texas sheltered by my extended family, that choice was absolutely unthinkable. I was no longer that youngest sibling. I had my own family; it was time. My home was with them.

This sounds like I had no idea how Ted must have felt. But I did. He would have given anything to make me happy. In fact, that's probably the reason he misjudged the people from Houston who brought him the partnership proposition in the first place. It *was* too good to be true, and I know that if he hadn't wanted so desperately to make me happy, he would have recognized that far earlier. All he

could do was to try to make amends. However, like many men, all Ted knew was to work harder to make up for my disappointment.

We came back to Calgary, took the house off the market, and waited for our truckload of furniture to arrive back from Texas. Ted built himself an office in our basement and worked sixteen hours a day, determined to fight his way out of the mess he blamed himself for making.

On that first morning back, I admit, it was very, very hard to put my feet on the floor.

Mary Lil went back to her third grade classroom and when her teacher asked the children to tell one another what they did for their Christmas holiday, she stood up and said, "We went to Texas and we took all our furniture along!"

Home again, home again, jiggity jog.



UPPER MOUNT ROYAL, 1949.



RUTHIE AND SIDNEY STUFFED INTO THEIR NEW PARKAS ... AND IT WAS ONLY OCTOBER!



TED WITH WILF AND GERRIE BAILLIE SHOWING OFF FRONTIER'S NEWEST TRUCK.



IN SUMMER, AT LEAST, THE WHEELS WOULD TURN ... UNLESS THEY WERE SUNK IN THE MUD.



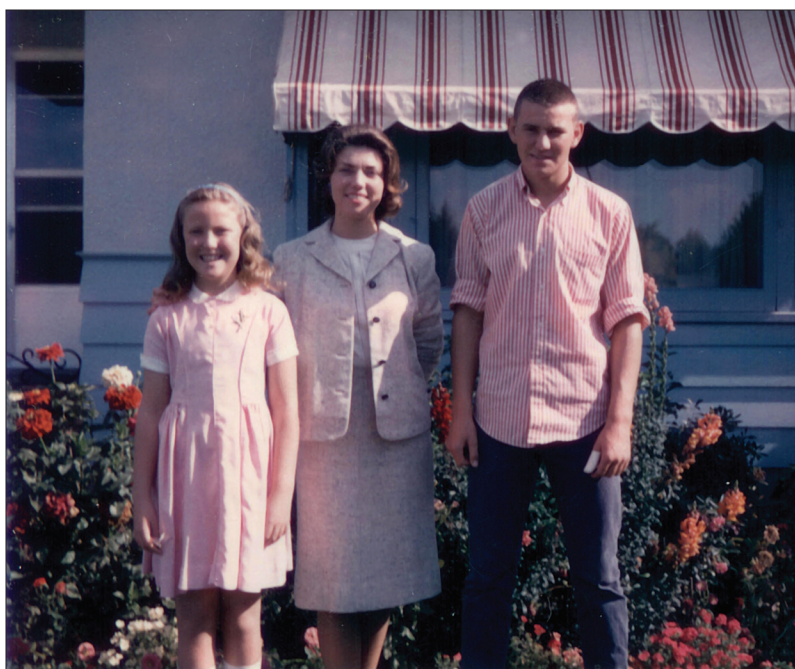
THE GUYS ON FRONTIER'S CREW.



A FRONTIER PICNIC.



JUST TO PROVE
THAT ONCE UPON
A TIME *I* BAKED
MARY LIL'S
BIRTHDAY CAKES!



THE KIDS WERE GROWING UP FASTER THAN THE FOLIAGE IN FRONT OF OUR HOUSE.



RUTHIE'S DEBUT.



SKIING AT SUNSHINE.



TED WITH THE MARTINSONS AND THE BAILLIES AT ONE OF FRONTIER'S SKI SYMPOSIUMS.