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MY NAME IS LOLA

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

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Keepin' On

I came home from Ted's funeral to an empty house.

Oh, I suppose there may have been other people there, but, for me, the house was empty and I was alone. The chatter going on around me couldn't penetrate the fog of grief that lay over me, and the thought of spending the rest of my life without Ted was physically painful. For a very long time, I felt like my life had ended too; I couldn't imagine how I could continue to live without the half of my heart that had ceased to beat. We had lived together for sixty-six very full and very happy years, and there aren't many in this world to whom that gift has been given. I was eighty-six years old – old enough to have comforted too many widows as they grieved their own losses – so I knew how lucky I was to have had Ted by my side for so many years. Yet, even knowing that to be true, rational thinking was powerless against my grief, and many, many weeks went by before I could put my feet on the floor.

One morning, after Sally, my caregiver, had wheeled me into the kitchen insisting that I eat something, I noticed she had left the door to the pantry ajar. I turned back to the table to see that she had poured cereal into a bowl for me, and suddenly I was flooded with memories of all the children and all the visiting relatives gathered in the kitchen, lined up so that Ted could record their heights on the pantry door. I could hear them all laughing as Ted grabbed a cereal box to balance on the tops of their heads in order to draw a straight

line “to record accurate data.” I turned back toward the pantry door and there were dozens of perfect horizontal pencil lines measuring the growth of each of the grandchildren, the great-grandchildren, the in-laws, the Estes kin, and more than a few totally innocent bystanders who had been caught up in the whole process.

It was so Ted. It never mattered why we were all gathered or what we may have been celebrating, Ted liked to collect the data. I started smiling, and of course I shed more tears, but, for the first time in a very long time, they were tears of happy memories.

We were such an odd couple. Ted liked to be up and at 'em before dawn; I was a night owl and could barely form words before noon. He was so intelligent and so creative, but, living inside his head the way he did made him feel a little awkward with people, so he counted on me to steer him through the social occasions, and together we made a pretty good team. We really never even argued with one another. The kids say, “No, but the two of you had some pretty spirited debates even though Dad would usually admit defeat before you did.” I suspect he just decided, whatever the issue might have been, it wasn't worth the time he expended defending it.

By Easter, I was at least sitting up and taking nourishment, and the kids insisted we all go to the Country Club, as usual, for the children's celebration. There would be a bunny and an Easter egg hunt and candy-filled baskets and entertainment for the little ones. How could I refuse? Karen and her family had just returned from their trip to Disneyland, and Tristan and Emma wanted to present me with my very own Minnie Mouse ears and tell me all about their adventures. Fuelled by all that Easter candy, they were having a wonderful time, and Tristan was totally captivated by the clown making balloon animals. He could make anything on demand, no two of his creations were alike, and finally Tristan begged him for some of his stock so he could try to make his own.

Try as he might though, Tristan simply could not blow up any of his balloons ... nor could his parents ... or his grandparents, for that matter. When I couldn't bear to look at that disappointed little

face any longer, I said, "Here Tristan, give it to me. I'll blow it up for you." Now, as you can undoubtedly appreciate, I'm a veteran of countless birthday parties and have blown up a great many more balloons than I care to remember. I was absolutely confident that even while attached to my oxygen tank I could blow up a child's balloon, for heaven's sake.

I stretched it horizontally and vertically once or twice, held it to my lips, gave a mighty blow and blew the balloon – and my teeth – clear to the opposite end of the table. Both Emma and Tristan shrieked in terror and ran to hide their heads in Karen's lap while all *my* children collapsed in hysterics. I adjusted my Minnie Mouse ears, signalled the waiter to retrieve the errant dentures, and glared at my children in that universal mother glare that says they'd better settle down and behave – or else! They didn't; it just made the whole fiasco even funnier. I think it was the first time any of us had had a good laugh in a very long time.

So, party tricks aside, life around me went on as usual. As Ted had hoped, Stephen Schroeder from One Yellow Rabbit Theatre received the foundation's Award for Excellence that spring. He wrote, "One Yellow Rabbit found good value in the Haskayne Business School marketing audit. The students who participated were organized, well informed in advance, and did a lot during the process to enhance their understanding of our company (including attending a couple of performances). They also showed good insight, and asked excellent questions. Although some of them were not as knowledgeable about the not-for-profit sector at the beginning of the project, they quickly adapted their thinking appropriately. Interestingly, the students' conclusions tended to support the direction of OYR's own internal strategic planning which is currently underway. It is very useful to have an objective analysis conducted by a third party in conjunction with internally-driven strategic planning."

A year later, Stephen was honoured by the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta's Distinguished Artist Award, and additionally recognized as one of Calgary's Top 40 Under 40 in *Calgary Magazine's*

prestigious survey of the talented young entrepreneurs who work to promote the city and make it more competitive and vibrant. In their article about him, they noted that Stephen continues to mentor managers of smaller arts organizations and still finds time to produce some shows and choreograph short dance works. Clearly, he has been able to successfully marry the disciplines of business and art to his company's enormous benefit.

However, I think the board was coming to the realization that, without the creative drive toward innovation, the arts organizations would be risking the very thing that artists know is crucial to growth. It's a delicate balancing act to ensure that both exemplary management and creative innovation grow side by side, so the board agreed they needed a way to indicate that fact to developing organizations. Those that may not be mature enough to be considered for the Award for Excellence in Management should be encouraged to submit their nominations for an Innovation Award. The conversations about how best to develop criteria for such an award continued for several months until it was finally decided that it would be presented for extraordinary innovation in *one* area of arts management: financial, human resources, governance and business systems, partnership development, or community engagement, along with sound business practices in all areas of company endeavour.

I'm afraid I was peripheral to many of those discussions that spring simply because I was so mired in my own misery that I could barely follow the conversations. The kids were wonderful and visited often, and Ted came by frequently to watch the golf tournaments on TV with me. But Ruth Ann and Mary Lil became alarmed enough about my lingering despair that they decided I'd have to be physically wrenched out of it. They said I needed the healing balm of tropical breezes. They were right, of course. Some of our happiest times were in Maui with our family and friends, so they were pretty sure if they could get me back to Hawaii, I'd start realizing there was still much to enjoy and more to look forward to. In retrospect,

though, I think both my daughters would agree that it would have been easier to launch a payload to the moon.

I should preface this story by saying that there were sufficient physical limitations to make any airline very, very nervous about taking me anywhere, and both Mary Lil and Ruth Ann knew that, too. I was riddled with osteoporosis, and every time I tripped over my feet or stumbled against a wall, I broke something or other. So I was confined to a wheelchair, plus I was tethered to an oxygen tank. And, lest we forget, Hawaii is eight hours away. But, like their parents, I'm afraid, my daughters refuse to acknowledge that *anything* might present an impossible barrier. These may have been annoying little speed bumps on the way to our destination but, as they said to every harried airline official unfortunate enough to answer their phone calls, "Not to worry, we can take care of that."

My guess is that the two of them eventually worked their way up the corporate ladder to the airline's CEO who finally gave up when they said they had found a way to pack along enough oxygen in a tank that was guaranteed to pass the very rigorous standards demanded by the airline safety regulations. (Not that I'm suggesting that NASA is missing anything, but perhaps an audit of their inventory might be in order.) The night before our departure, they both came to pack everything I could conceivably need. I was glad that Mary Cristina was coming along for many reasons, not the least of which was that I could see we were going to need an extra Sherpa to transport all the equipment. But I was trying very hard *not* to say what I was thinking.

When we arrived at the airport the next day, the girls unloaded everything, transferred me to an airline-sized wheelchair, folded up my chair and added it to the mountain of luggage, and we all offered up a fervent prayer that somehow it would all be there when we arrived on the Big Island. By the time we finally made our way to the departures lounge, the three of them were sweating, and I had started giggling at the absurdity of the whole exercise.

When the flight was called, I needed to sit near the front of the plane because I couldn't walk down the length of it to get to the bathrooms. But even a short stroll on a bumpy flight was a challenge, and it took the three of them to hold me upright and steer me down the aisle. We had to clear U.S. customs in Vancouver, made a crazy transfer to ground oxygen, and, eventually, even though the flight attendants kept eyeing my enormous oxygen tank with quite a lot of apprehension, eight hours passed without any real disaster and the pilot announced we'd be landing in Kona within a few minutes. By this time, I was having great fun and could hardly wait to see what would happen next. As we started our descent, the plane banked far enough to the left that I could see out the window to the landing strip, and that's when I realized we had forgotten one teensy problem.

The little Kona Airport had no gangways; the only way off the plane was down a steep and very narrow flight of steel steps. The attendants suggested we wait to deplane until everyone else was off the flight. I thought that was a very good idea because I knew it was going to take at least that long for somebody to figure out how in the world they could get me, the wheelchair, and the monster oxygen tank down those stairs – together. As soon as they opened the door, however, the soft evening breeze wafted in carrying the scent of the tropical flowers and the sounds of the birds cooing in the nearby palms. Mary Lil and Ruth Ann were right. All I needed was the healing balm of that breeze. I could feel it go to work the minute it hit my lungs.

Hmm, I thought, I've forgotten how quickly the sun sets in Hawaii. Our fellow passengers were scurrying to the terminal to claim their baggage. No doubt they were in a hurry to get where they were going because, as I remembered it, the only road around the island was cut through miles of black lava and, at night, visibility was really an issue. Thank goodness the girls had the foresight to reserve a car, I was thinking. If we hurry we can get to the Mauna Lani before it gets too dark.

We watched as the last of the passengers disappeared and then the pilots deplaned, and, just before she slipped out the door, the final flight attendant said that if we could wait until the cleaning crew finished tidying and restocking, they would take us down on the hydraulic lift at the back of the plane that was used to empty the garbage. With a cheery wave she was gone.

Okay then. That sounded like a plan.

We continued to watch the terminal as slowly the lights blinked off one by one, and the gate closed. I desperately wanted to ask whether anyone thought our luggage might still be accessible, but I knew if I opened my mouth I'd start laughing and I'd never be able to stop. Pretty soon, sure enough, the garbage truck pulled up beside the plane and, as promised, the crew gathered the debris and prepared the plane for its next departure. When they were finished, they helped the girls wrestle me into the wheelchair and down the aisle and out the rear door to the hydraulic lift. They pushed a button and the garbage and I slowly descended to the truck waiting below. At least it descended to the *top* of the garbage truck which was – oh I'd guess – maybe ten feet off the ground? The plan evidently was to dump me and the garbage from that height because that was as close to the tarmac as the hydraulic lift could go.

It was a head-scratcher.

By this time, the girls and I were *all* hysterical. None of us had the least bit of composure. We were laughing so hard we could barely catch our breath and Mary Cristina collapsed, tears streaming. Finally, Mary Lil choked out, "Now what?" We were getting dangerously demented and the poor service crew was desperate to get rid of us. Somehow they were going to have to figure out how to pluck me off that lift.

Necessity, with a generous dollop of desperation, was the mother of invention on that very late night because, within a few minutes, a fork lift appeared from somewhere out of the dark. It came at me with its fork waving menacingly close to any number of vital organs,

but eventually it settled itself and very neatly picked me and the chair off the hydraulic lift and deposited us both on the ground.

A quick but heartfelt thank you had to suffice because we knew we had to hurry to get to the rental car office to claim our transportation. But, of course, that office had closed too. The minute the last passenger left the terminal, despite the fact our mountain of luggage was still strewn on the carousel, everyone in the place headed home.

Mary Lil took off across the lava toward the highway to flag down a passing car and, as luck would have it, the first one to stop for her was a taxi driven by a singing cowboy, a paniolo from the Parker Ranch up the mountain in Waimea. By the time they got back to pick up the rest of us, they were both in full voice and our Tex Ritter let us know that Loretta Lynn was a resident of the Big Island and he assured us she'd love for us drop by to say howdy. He loaded us and our gear into his cab and, singing all the country and western songs that fifty-six years at the Calgary Stampede had ever taught us, we barreled on down the highway to the Mauna Lani.

It was the most fun I ever had with my boots on! And from that moment, I knew I could keep on keepin' on.

Our trip back to Calgary was comparatively uneventful, unless of course you're counting the transfer through the Los Angeles airport at five a.m. By that time I was laid out on a stretcher – accompanied by Ruth Ann, Mary Lil, and Cristina plus a retinue of paramedics – not to mention the same mountain of luggage. I figured I'd better make the most of the opportunity, so I donned my sunglasses, wrapped my hair in a very chic silk scarf, gave a royal wave to all the curious onlookers, and nodded encouragingly to the lady I heard telling her friend, "That must be Elizabeth Taylor."

We got back to Calgary in time to announce that the Rozsa Foundation Award for Innovation in One Area of Arts Management would be open for nominations in the coming year and we eagerly looked forward to awarding two prizes in 2007. By this time, the Excellence Award's value had grown substantially, and it included both cash and educational benefits.

We had decided to open the field of nominees to arts organizations throughout the province and, much to my delight, Tony Luppino from the Art Gallery of Alberta in Edmonton received the award that year. Like other entrepreneurial winners, Tony was a master at engaging the art-going public by offering classes for school children as well as adults. He challenged people to think beyond their comfort zones to consider expressing their own creativity in novel ways, and naturally this process reinforced the public's interest in repeated visits.

He later wrote to thank the Foundation and said: "The Rozsa Award for Excellence in Arts Management has had an immediate and lasting positive effect on the Art Gallery of Alberta and on my own approach to leadership within that organization. Donna Finley of Framework was able to join the Board retreat and bring not only a business strategy building expertise but the so-important 'outsider' perspective to the review. Her questions and insights from other non-profit Arts organizations undergoing high risk transformations were valuable. The most successful element in the Award benefits package was without a doubt the marketing audit by the Haskayne School MBA class."

That same year we awarded the Rozsa Innovation Award for the first time. It went to Xstine Cook, the founding director of the Calgary Animated Objects Society. I was so interested in reading about Xstine. Her organization's mandate is to engage emerging and established artists, creating a community of artists learning from one another and experimenting with their ideas. She wrote: "Spawned in the shadow, or shall we say stench, of a chicken factory in 2003, the Calgary Animated Objects Society, a.k.a. CAOS, burst onto the Art scene with a mandate to develop and promote the Arts of puppetry, mask, and animated objects. Bringing the world's best manipulators to Calgary is our primary obsession. The International Festival of Animated Objects (IFAO) is a biennial celebration of the Arts of mask, puppetry and all things animated."

With each Rozsa Award, I felt that I was learning more about the arts community in Calgary, and now throughout the province, than I ever had imagined existed. Ted and I had been so involved with the music community that we hadn't really had the luxury of expanding our horizons, but these annual celebrations introduced me to some of the most fascinating young artists I had ever met, and my learning curve was steep indeed. Fortunately, they were all kind enough to humour what I'm sure were my pretty elementary questions about their work, and they were very generous with their time with me. Each age has its rewards and, for me, this was absolutely the best part of my tenth decade.

Unfortunately, however, every age also has its downside and on my way through the last half of that decade, I discovered the road downhill is pretty rocky. The spirit is willing but the flesh is hopeless, I'm afraid. It seemed every time I turned around my blood pressure would rocket up or bottom out for no particular reason, or I'd break something or other, and Amy and Sally, the wonderful caregivers who looked after me, were hyper-alert to any change at all. That meant I spent far too much time in ambulances and emergency rooms – so much so that I was on a first-name basis with the EMS folks as well as the nurses in the Rockyview Hospital's Emergency Room. It got to the point that we'd instantly recognize one another and I'd insist on catching up on the continuing sagas of their lives, which were, after all, much more interesting than *my* litany of aches and pains.

I decided that if I was to cope with this ageing process, I would have to force mind over matter. If it didn't hurt too much, going forward I'd ignore whatever I broke next. However, practically before I made the announcement to anyone mildly interested in hearing it, sure enough, I fell again. This time I landed on my side and could tell I was developing a bruise, but I made up my mind there was no way I was going anywhere. I could heal at home just as easily as at the hospital. And that's that!

Well, a day or two went by and every time I took a deep breath it felt like a rhinoceros was sitting on my chest and, since I had trouble getting enough oxygen anyway, I realized maybe this wasn't going to be one of those times I could heal at home. Very grudgingly – but in agony by this time – I allowed the girls to take me to the Rockyview Hospital. Apparently I had broken a couple of ribs in my fall, and the nurses in Emergency loaded me up on morphine to ease the pain before they transported me to a room. And then they topped up the morphine with more morphine.

What happened later I honestly don't remember, but apparently the girls felt that I was sedated enough to get a night's rest so they left to go home. Mary Lil said she went to her house to get fifteen-year-old Mary Cristina settled for the night, but before she went to bed, decided she'd better go back up to the hospital to check on me. When she got to my room, she could see that my breathing was laboured and that my eyes had glazed over, and she was frightened enough to call the nurse, who came in and listened to my heart and lungs. She told Mary Lil to get the family back as quickly as possible.

Ruth Ann and Karen came immediately, and Mary Lil asked Ted to pick up Mary Cristina and come to the hospital, saying that I was sinking fast. When they arrived, I was apparently flailing about and calling out Ted's name as well as the names of all my family, and then I guess I fell back on the bed and stopped breathing altogether. Mary Lil said she assumed that I had died because for several minutes I didn't draw a breath. They were sitting next to me on the bed and, a few minutes later, I took a shallow breath and opened my eyes for just a moment. The nurse told them my pulse had returned and that it appeared that I was going to be okay, so eventually they left to go home for the night.

The next morning, Mary Lil came back to the hospital and found me sitting bolt upright in my bed despite my broken ribs. The nurse had braided my hair, and Mary Lil said I looked like a young girl – smooth skin, bright eyes – she said I was glowing like a new

bride. Even though I knew I couldn't make what I had to tell her make sense, I could hardly wait to try.

I told her I remembered her brother coming in and kissing my cheek, but then when I looked up I could see a big oak table high on a brilliant white alabaster mountain, and sitting around that table were my mother and father and my siblings – and then I saw Ted. I was so happy I was there, and I called and tried to climb up the hill to get to them. I called out their names but they wouldn't help me. They were all there; I tried and tried to climb up to them. I could see them perfectly clearly, and I knew they could see me too, but they wouldn't help me. So I came back.

It was truly the most beautiful experience I've ever had. However, for obvious reasons I was pretty reluctant to repeat that story to anyone I didn't know well because I knew how crazy it sounded. A day or so later though, Jack Stewart, the minister from Grace Presbyterian Church, came in to visit me and I asked him what he thought. "It's perfectly obvious Lola," he said, "they didn't help you because you're not ready yet. They were telling you to go back and finish what you need to do."

What did I need to finish? What else did I have to do? I decided I'd better find out what that was.