



MY NAME IS LOLA

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

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What's It All About?

Oh yes, I've heard all the scientific theories about why so many people have similar near-death visions despite their cultural differences, their religious beliefs, and their life experiences. Biologists say the dying brain isn't having a spiritual experience; it isn't travelling toward the afterlife. It's simply that its neurotransmitters are shutting down and that this happens the same way for every human being.

Okay. But my question still remains. Why? And that's the question Jean Ritchie, who wrote about this phenomenon, also asks. "If everything, including the soul and personality, is going to dust and ashes, why does the brain lay on this last wonderful floor show for people who are near death, or facing actual death, who relax into peacefulness and describe their wonderful visions? Why would the brain bother?" I can't answer that question nor, I would imagine, can anyone else. But I will say emphatically that this experience was a gift. And, as a result of that gift, I know with absolute confidence that when my own time comes I will make that passage anticipating the joy that awaits me when my family welcomes me back at that heavenly table.

The fact remained, though, they didn't want me yet. I wasn't finished with my job here. What in the world was I supposed to do? And then I had another birthday and along with it came another gift.

Mary Lil arranged with the Philharmonic for me to sponsor an annual children's concert that would be scheduled on a Sunday

afternoon each year to coincide with my birthday, so we can celebrate with balloons and streamers and a concert arranged especially for little people. It was a complete surprise. The CPO now insists that I welcome everyone from the stage – which is a good thing because there's nothing I enjoy more than an audience of children. I always tell them to make their parents behave and sit up straight, and to have fun applauding whenever they hear something they especially like. And, if they have time after the concert, to come find me and tell me what they liked best.

The first year, the CPO decided they'd start with a crowd-pleaser and presented *The Magical Forces of Nature*. It's full of wildly evocative music that paints sound pictures of the wind rustling through the trees, the songs of birds, and splashes in puddles – the sounds that children hear as they play outdoors. But the work also booms and crackles and roars with the stormy sounds that might sometimes frighten them. The children were absolutely transfixed. And sure enough, many of them made a beeline to me after the concert. I'm so accessible because, in my wheelchair, I'm at their level. Believe me, that's audience feedback at its best.

In subsequent years, the CPO commissioned a work for the children's concert called *Paint Brush for Piccolo*, which was great fun, and added *The Listener*, *How the Gimquat Found Her Song*, *Peter and the Wolf*, and *The Little Prince* to the repertoire. And recently, they have been very clever about hosting prior-to-the-concert casual Sunday brunches for the parents called 'Toast and Trumpets,' so the grown-ups will stay out of the way while their children have their faces painted and go to the petting zoo with the instruments.

How painfully I remember trying to introduce my own children to classical music. Each one of them could tell you stories about being forced into scratchy uncomfortable dress-up clothes only to be confined for two solid hours of unfamiliar music behind some big guy in the row in front of them blocking their view of the stage. It was torture. And it was equal torture for their parents because even we knew it was too much, too early. They all loved music

but they loved the music of their peers and, in those days, the CPO didn't have the wherewithal in their budget to offer music directed primarily to children. The amazing thing was that those early experiences didn't turn them off classical music altogether. Mary Lil undoubtedly remembered those horrible evenings during her own childhood and knew there had to be a better way. Along with me, today's children – and their parents – are the lucky recipients of her gift. I can't imagine a better way to celebrate my birthday and I look forward to it every year.

My world has definitely grown smaller as I've aged. I don't mean that I feel isolated or unconnected because, most assuredly, I'm neither. My weekly telephone calls to each member of the younger Estes clan continue, and we keep processing the news of the family through my nieces and nephews. My own children have finally accepted the fact that if they're within a hundred yards of those phone calls they, too, will be conscripted to talk on the various extension phones scattered about the house. As a result, all of us stay very well connected, and even my widely scattered grandchildren remember to call whenever they have news to report. Absolutely nothing makes me happier than to hear, "Hey Mammaw! Sup?"

My vision wasn't getting any better in 2008, but fortunately my hearing was perfect, so I spent lots of time on the phone discussing the merits of the Rozsa Awards' nominees. That was the year we initiated the Human Resources Award because we could see that this area of arts management was frequently a stumbling block, so we now had three awards to present. That year, Murray Kilgour from the School of the Alberta Ballet received the first Rozsa Human Resources Award, Bob Davis from the Rosebud Theatre received the Rozsa Innovation Award, and Les Siemieniuk from the Calgary Folk Music Festival received the Rozsa Award for Excellence in Arts Management.

The Folk Music Festival choice was a popular favourite with Calgarians, largely because of Les Siemieniuk's encyclopedic knowledge of folk music and his passion for nurturing the up-and-coming

young artists. Every year the event has attracted the very best of the genre, and the multi-generational audience that camps out on Prince's Island on blankets and lawn chairs for the duration of the four-day festival do so rain or shine. It's simply *the* place to be once Stampede is over in late July. In a review of last year's festival, Stephen Hunt wrote: "It's your one shot at a little old-time acoustic bliss in a twenty-first-century life engulfed by buttons. For one long weekend a year, our city gets to pull on its tri-coloured knit caps, lock arms with the oilsands exec sitting next to you, and river dance under the moonlight for a few hours."

I guess my world was getting smaller because I realized that so much of my enjoyment of the award recipients was based on hearing their stories at the Rozsa Foundation celebrations. As much as I would have loved to buy seasons tickets to every organization that had won the awards over the years, I knew I would have to rely on the reviews supplied by others – except in the case of my beloved Calgary Flames, of course.

I confess, even now when all they're bringing me is despair, I remain a diehard hockey fan schooled since the early '50s by the old Calgary Stampeders who played in a league comprised of eight teams housed across the western states and provinces. They played in the old Stampede Corral building where we could barely see the ice because of the hoarfrost expelled by every breathing body in the arena. If I remember correctly, it must have been real ice, not the artificial stuff, because the temperature in the Corral always seemed to be well below freezing. The only thing that building protected us against was blizzards, so we went to every game layered in long johns and loaded with blankets.

Those were the days when Gerry Couture and Sid Finney and Archie Scott and Max Quackenbush and Gus Kyle played along with Fred and Sandy Hucul. We all had seasons tickets to those games – all the ex-pats – all of us cheering for the Stampeders who were teaching us a game none of us, other than Michigan-born Ted, had ever seen played before.

After the Flames came to Calgary in 1980, and the '88 Olympics brought us the Saddledome, the-good-ol'-hockey-game got all citified and sophisticated and seasons tickets were hard to get. When they won the Stanley Cup in 1989, the delirious Flames fans went crazy – as did I! I take full credit for that Cup because I could tell Ken King was going to have a hard time keeping that bald head warm through all the playoff games, so I presented him with my old red wool hat to wear during those final agonizing weeks and obviously it worked its magic.

Since then, I've suffered through all their slumps and cheered them through nail-biting playoffs, but I've never given up on them, and anyone who chooses to visit me on game night had better like to watch it on TV because that's what I'll be doing. Mary Lil always loved to go to the Flames games, too, and she often went with friends who had two young sons who were big fans. One night, for some reason, none of them had tickets to the game, so Mary Lil suggested they come by my house and watch the game on TV since she knew I'd like the company. We had a great time and argued over the character flaws in the opposition, and the little boys grew mighty impressed by my encyclopedic grasp of hockey stats. So the following week their father called me and asked, "If we bring the beer and pizza, the boys want to know if we can come over and watch the game with you again?" On game night we were all in full-throated cheer when the front door opened and in walked Mary Lil. I think she was mad at me for stealing her friends, but she was a sport about it. Those little boys are all grown up now, but they still like to come by to watch an occasional game.

So it's not that my world is getting smaller; the world now is coming to me. Until this stage of life, I guess I'd met it head on. Thanks to Amy and Sally, who spoil me with their kindnesses and take care of all the household responsibilities these days, my visitors are always welcome. And, if there's a party going on, they'll get me there! But, as my home became the centre of my universe, I realized to my chagrin that I'd managed to collect an awful lot of stuff over

the years. Maybe, I thought, that's what I still need to do. Maybe the universe was telling me to start weeding it all out and getting my house in order.

Years ago, I'd started collecting Royal Doulton figurines and realized to my annoyance that I had absolutely no further interest in them, despite the fact that many collectors evidently keep up a brisk business buying and trading them. My nieces back in Texas had often admired them, so I decided to divide them up between the girls. However, even though I'd packed all of them in bubble wrap and Styrofoam, I realized it would still be a miracle if any of them survived the U.S. Mail, so I called Ruth Ann and Mary Lil and told them we needed to sweet-talk another airline into taking me to Texas. This time it went pretty smoothly, at least until we got to Customs. Obviously the agent was quite interested in the bulging carry-on bags and evidently thought we were international smugglers trafficking in priceless art pieces. The girls were gazing off into the distance trying to disassociate themselves from the whole confrontation, as if to say, "Who *is* this crazy old woman and why doesn't *somebody* have control over her?" However, the poor man finally had to admit defeat and we proceeded. A fork lift wasn't required to complete the transaction.

But what the trip back to Texas brought to the front of my mind was how quickly I was losing my family of siblings. I was the youngest of seven, so unfortunately I've had to say goodbye to my oldest brother and my sisters over the last ten years. My brother Charlie and I were the last of Nannie's and Preacher's family. I was desperate to have one last reunion where all the children and grandchildren could gather to hear the stories that had been told around Nannie's old oak table. When I got back home, I rummaged through my keepsakes and once again found her book. She had written her memoir, *Manners of the Manse*, in 1959, and, once I read it again, I started assembling all the photo albums that Karen had created over the years along with sixty-odd years of eclectic memorabilia.

The pile of papers strewn across my dining room table grew every day as I remembered where I'd packed away almost-forgotten keepsakes. One day, Mary Cristina came to visit, and, of course, I sent her on the mission too, until finally she stopped me and said, "Mammaw, what are you going to *do* with all this stuff?" I hesitated to tell her for fear I'd see that look teenagers give you when they think the plaques and tangles have taken over and tipped you into full-blown senility. But all she said was, "That's a good idea Mammaw. I love going to visit the old people in Texas – it'll be fun to take all this stuff along." Aha! If I could talk Mary Cristina into another trip, surely I could figure out how to talk someone into taking us. I targeted November, 2009. I would take the Canadian cousins to celebrate American Thanksgiving in north Texas with all the extended Estes family clan.

As much as I wanted to plan the logistics of the trip, we really had more immediate concerns because we were getting ready to celebrate another season of Rozsa Awards. That was the year that Tom McFall, the executive director and curator of the Alberta Craft Council received the honour. In only ten years, he had taken the organization from a position of looming deficit, which a succession of directors had been unable to find the way out of, to one of spectacular success. Under his leadership and strategic planning, he was able to implement great change almost upon his arrival, re-engaging member artists, eliminating the debt, and moving the operations to a more profitable and accessible venue in downtown Edmonton.

As he says, "Crafts are an integral and unique part of cultural heritage that are to be encouraged, developed and preserved for the cultural, social, educational and economic well-being of the people of Alberta." The Craft Council's artists include potters, glass sculptors, jewellery designers, fibre artists, and furniture makers. Tom's goal has been to gain recognition for fine crafts as a serious, relevant, and professional art form, and toward that intention the Craft Council presented an exhibition at the Smithsonian in 2007. Alberta

fine crafters continue to exhibit internationally and the Alberta Council is now among the largest and most successful in Canada.

After all the Awards excitement died down that spring and Mary Cristina was on her school vacation, I put her to work rifling through what she calls the largest filing cabinet on earth. I have a lovely yellow guest-room-come-office that's hardly ever used, so through the years I filled it with all the records and documents I knew I'd eventually have to deal with. By this time, there were piles of paper stacked on all the furniture as well as carpeting the floor and, since I was no longer able to bushwhack through it all, I'd send her on missions to find stuff I wanted to take along to Texas. She would tell you that as that summer wore on I became obsessed with this project, and that she lived in terror of misplacing anything I'd found, so maybe I was a little single-minded.

But it wasn't until I cornered my dear children that I realized I must have looked like some kind of deranged dervish. I told them we absolutely had to take the family back to Texas for Thanksgiving. They'd have to charter us a plane and, "Yes, I know I'm soon to be ninety, but that only means there's no time to waste, so get on it!" They knew this was no time to try to be reasonable. "I'm going to see my brother Charlie one more time and you're coming with me and that's that!" They scattered in three directions.

Practically before the day was out they found us a plane. All that remained was to find a medic who would not only declare me healthy enough to fly but would also volunteer to accompany me. Fortunately, I knew his phone number by heart. When he heard my request, he said, "Of course I'll go with you Mammaw. It will be my pleasure." Howie promised to meet me at the airport.

Oxygen was going to be a problem again, but my nephew had arranged for his doctor in Texas to give me a prescription so that I could have oxygen at the hotel where we'd be staying. Plus, we had a prescription for more portable tanks from my doctor in Calgary, and so that we could buy Department of Transport travelling tanks

for the plane. We were awash in oxygen. Had anyone struck a match, that plane would have launched like a rocket.

Mary Cristina, Mary Lil, and I went to the airport and boarded the plane with Howie to wait for the others to arrive. Unfortunately, he had brought his medical paraphernalia along and he insisted on taking my blood pressure. Not a good idea. He raised one eyebrow in the direction of Mary Lil and said, "Mammaw's not going anywhere unless her pressure comes down." I'm sure all *that* did was elevate Mary Lil's blood pressure, but they started to negotiate.

"What will it take to give her clearance to fly?" asked Mary Lil. It sounded to me like she was offering a bribe. I was willing to top it up if it would help.

"It's 190. She could stroke out. She's not going anywhere."

"So you're saying that if it's below 190, she can go." Mary Lil's good at this sort of thing. I was sort of enjoying watching the two of them battle it out when I saw Ruth Ann and her friend Mike arriving. They boarded the plane and immediately realized there was a battle of wills going on, so they were wise enough to stay out of the fray.

For the next hour or so, there was stony silence while we sat on the runway with the engines idling. I concentrated on thinking pleasant thoughts and Howie took my pressure every few minutes until finally he said, "It's 189. Let's go."

We took off and headed for Casper, where the customs agent and I remembered one another from the flight three years before. When he discovered Nannie's book was in my carry-on, I told him my hope was to use it to jump-start the old stories we'd grown up with so that Charlie and I could transmit all that family lore to our grandchildren as well as to the grand-nieces and nephews. Finally, once he finished rummaging through my bags looking for contraband, we had quite a nice visit.

There's nothing like celebrating Thanksgiving in north Texas. For one thing, it's the best time of the year. The heat and humidity are over but the winter rain hasn't started, so it's the best of all

times to gather the clan to celebrate. Some would say it's better even than Christmas because it's also the season of back-to-back football games. Not that the games get in the way; the multigenerational stories weave through the plays and no one even drops a beat when the occasional contentious call on the field interrupts.

Charlie and his wife Mildred had assembled every cousin, niece and nephew, grandchild, great-grandchild, and childhood friend within the state of Texas to give thanks for their son's remission from cancer, so their house was brimming with love. My nieces and nephews had all come, along with my grandson Scott and his wife Paige plus their boys Evan and Satchel. On our first evening, we all sat in a circle and told one another about the most significant thing that had happened to us in the past few months. We were family; we didn't need small talk. We knew what a luxury it was to share our stories with the people who care about us.

The next day was Thanksgiving. There were far too many of us to fit around their table, and neither Charlie nor I could remember what had happened to Nannie's oak table that had room for thirty of us, so he made reservations for dinner at the Golden Corral, the only place in town large enough. But of course we had to vacate the restaurant by two o'clock in the afternoon because that's when the entire state of Texas closed for the kick-off.

We all trailed back for more stories, and Louise Tobin, my childhood friend from Denton, regaled us with her checkered past. She had run away from home at sixteen to go to New York to be a singer, joined Benny Goodman's band, married Harry James – the famous big band leader and trumpeter – lost Harry to Betty Grable, the movie star – and then married Peanuts Hucko, the great jazz clarinetist. That was at the height of the swing/jazz era during the war years, so she certainly had the most exciting stories to tell, but everyone had his turn in the spotlight and we chattered on through the late night, full of turkey and trimmin's and old Texas tales.

As the "Remember Whens?" ebbed and flowed in and around the football games and the laughter began even before the storytellers

came to their punch lines, I suddenly realized that what I had so desperately wanted for my children wasn't just a connection to my family of seven siblings. The connection I wanted for them was both vertical *and* horizontal. It isn't a single lifeline; it's a densely woven and widely cast web. In the best of times, it's a hammock where you can rest and reflect on your good fortune with all the people who are happy for you. And, in the worst of times, it's a parachute supported by those same people who keep you from crashing.

It's the gathering that counts. It's the people around the table who love you, despite it all: your siblings, their spouses, their extended families, the children, their children, their friends, old friends, new friends.

Southerners will always ask, "And who are your people?" They don't mean to be nosey; what they want to know is how *your* extended web of family and friends relates to theirs. Inevitably, if you have any Southern connection at all, they will discover you're within three degrees of separation, and thus you're kissin' kin. You know their stories, or at least parts of them, and they know yours. They know you understand how the tragic history of the South, even four generations past, has shaped their character in ways no one from the North could possibly comprehend. Southern storytellers sprinkle their tales like seed pods across the South and, when they discover you're kin – no matter how distant – those stories will become part of yours so you will cast them even beyond. And when it's time for you to leave, they'll say, "Now y'all hurry back." And mean it.

But as we boarded the plane to come back to Calgary, I think I finally realized that I was going home; *truly* going home. Home, where we had raised our children and where they had raised theirs, was where I wanted to be as my own life was drawing to a close. Maybe for the very first time I truly understood that home isn't a geographic location. It's where your heart lives. I knew Charlie and I wouldn't likely see one another again – at least until we join our family at that heavenly table on the alabaster mountain. But if

we have told those stories just right, they'll find their way to our great-grandchildren's progeny, no matter where they might be.

And then I had an epiphany. I knew what I had to do.

It was time for me to tell *our* story. I would try to show how Ted and I had had the privilege of a charmed life. How we found one another in the depth of the Depression, and how we started with nothing except the values gifted to us by generations of honest, hardworking, and loving people. How they taught us that it's not what a man has, or even what he does, that expresses his worth. It's whether he has a kind and generous soul and is willing to work to leave this world a little better than he found it. How we built a life for our children and lived long enough to welcome *their* grandchildren. I would tell how along the way we were blessed with countless gifts of friendship and had a wonderful adventure. I'll say that we have had an extraordinary lifetime that has added new threads to the rich and multicoloured tapestry passed to us by our forebears. I'll try to show our great-grandchildren how each of us weaves our own stories textured by our own experiences, and then passes the loom along to their children. I hope they will understand that no matter what distance may separate us, what really matters are the threads between us that enrich our lives, and that the stories we pass along reinforce those ties with each telling.

I'll start by describing the taste of summer strawberries still warm from the rich black earth....



TED RECORDING THE DATA ON T.J.



CELEBRATING MY BIRTHDAY AT THE CPO CHILDREN'S CONCERT.



MAYOR BRONCONNIER CONGRATULATING BOB MCPHEE, WINNER OF THE FIRST ROZSA FOUNDATION AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN ARTS MANAGEMENT.



JUST A BUNCH OF FLAMES FANS! BILL, QUINN, AND NICK TODD.



THE KWONGS AND THE BELZBERGS HAVE BEEN WONDERFUL SUPPORTERS OF THE ROZSA FOUNDATION AWARDS THROUGHOUT THE YEARS.



THIS IS ME.... JUST BEFORE I OFFERED TO BLOW UP TRISTAN'S BALLOON.
(I WASN'T QUITE SO HAPPY A MOMENT LATER.)



CELEBRATING THE 2012 ROZSA AWARD WITH STEPHEN MCHOLM FROM THE HONENS COMPETITION.

MY NAME IS LOLA



WHAT A WONDERFUL ADVENTURE WE'VE HAD; WHAT RICH BLESSINGS WE HAVE RECEIVED.