

HAVING NEVER KNOWN her natural father, it eventually became an obsessive and lifelong operation to find him. This is the story of a heart-wrenching and emotionally charged journey half way across the world; one of tenacity, sheer grit and strength of character. A lone journey of self discovery; it reveals through hilarity and tears something of the determination that many of us must dig deep to find when challenged with personal and life changing decisions.

## **Your Mother Wore Army Boots**

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**Your Mother  
Wore Army Boots**

*Rosie Knight*

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Rosie Mychajlow-Knight asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

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## *Vancouver Can Wait*

I felt sorry that I had flown thousands of miles only to see the inside of Vancouver Airport but it was still a pleasure in itself. The thriving busy airport had enough to occupy me in my transitional escapade and having to occupy three hours until my next flight didn't pose a problem.

The ladies' toilets alone kept me entertained with their 'no-touch, wave your hand past the sensor' toilet facilities, which would flush at the mere presence of your backside sticking out. It was a mastery of skill trying to pull everything up and put everything back without getting sprayed, bleached and flushed. The paper towel emerged mechanically and mysteriously as I naively reached out, looking for a button to press. I looked around furtively making sure no-one had seen the confused small town girl. It seemed like a futuristic adventure and, eventually making my way to the coffee shop, I took several 'interesting' photos for posterity, but not of the toilets.

Arrivals were flooding the galleried areas and I felt tempted to jump in a cab and look at the city. The airport was only 13km south of the city centre. I had already done my homework before leaving home and knew that the taxi into the city was around twenty-five dollars but I couldn't take any risk, even though I knew there were more internal flights. Sadly Vancouver would have to wait.

Dad had said there would be somebody waiting for me at the other end and I could not form a picture in my mind as to how I thought our meeting would be.

I felt so near and yet so far and realised I couldn't jeopardise missing my internal flight. I had already done the round of

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checking for my 'Domestic Flight' venue via the information staff and had wandered the length and breadth of the airport to get my bearings.

There were a few people hanging around the Domestic Flight area and having re-checked my suitcase in at the desk, I felt secure enough to settle down and pretend to read intelligently like a well-seasoned traveller.

Dad had said, 'There will be *somebody* there waiting for you... I don't know if any of your sisters would be able to make it... that's up to them'. It really was a ride into the unknown.

I found it hard to concentrate on any reading and I began to reflect upon my experience so far. I had been amazed by the pristine scenery as we had flown over the wondrous Coastal Rockies and the wild country below. I wanted to experience more now and felt I needed to delve into the diversity of the natural beauty of which I had only had a glimpse. I had been totally blown away by the forest interiors and the fjords cutting through the bottom of the mountains. I wanted to experience firsthand the charming old-world villages and houses I had studied on the internet.

Canada had already surprised me and I was itching to understand everything it had to offer along with my new family. Penticton seemed like a family orientated and compelling place to live but up to now, I had only seen pictures. I had grown up with an image of what Canada was about and my recent research had completely opened my eyes to a new and exciting world. A Penticton summer's day averaged ten hours of sunshine and ranked it higher than Honolulu, making tourism its biggest and busiest industry. Along with fruit which was the sustenance of their wine making industry in the area I realised that I was 'Peach City' bound and in for a treat in this undeniable, festival-ridden entertainment zone.

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Embroiled into the moral values of the town I knew Dad would be surprised at how much research I had done. It was important to me. I wanted to understand why he had spent most of his life in this town; what it meant to him and what the town had given him. Time was slipping away and, looking perpetually at the huge expanse of the colourful, international screen clock and video high above me, I realised I how close I was to my vision.

Selling the British Columbia area destinations through each short video I watched, fascinated, as Penticton flashed before my eyes, realising that I was now only little over an hour away from meeting my father. My internal organs felt like they were fusing into one big uncontrollable lump and I was doing my best to keep my thoughts in a sensible box.

I made my way to the Domestic Flights lounge and soon found myself talking to a chatty, friendly Canadian woman. She was my perfect and most welcome distraction. Her name was Diane. She was on her way to Penticton to meet her sister who was recovering from breast cancer. After making all the right noises I sympathised with her plight and she asked me what I was doing in Canada.

I laughed and said, 'You'll wish you'd never asked me. There's not much of a short version!'

Fascinated, she listened to my microcosmic version told for full effect and she sat open mouthed as I told her how very close I was to meeting my 'new' father. Visibly moved she put her hand on mine and looking with compassion into my eyes she gently squeezed my hand.

I suddenly felt tears welling up and, given the opportunity to express myself through her kind sympathy, sniffled inelegantly. I tried to recover with a forced laugh saying, 'Oh well, I'll know

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what it's all about soon, hey?' She gave my hand a gentle squeeze then fumbled for a tissue.

'Oh my God!' she drawled, 'you are sooo brave, coming all this way and on your own. I told her it wasn't so hard when the 'reward' was in sight and that having spoken to Dad several times I would not have taken the gamble had I felt anything negative in our communications. She insisted that my courage was admirable and that she had never heard of or experienced anything like it close hand. I laughed.

'Yes, it's the sort of thing you always read about in women's magazine supplements but you never actually meet anyone that it has happened to!' She laughed heartily in agreement.

We chatted until our flight was announced and making our way through to the exits talked about what to expect at the other end. I subtly changed the subject back to her sister and the reasons for her own visit but she was now totally unmovable and engrossed in my living adventure as it happened. She was a calming comfort to me at a point where my nerves were, due to the tiredness probably about to give out. She kept me going. She held my hand as we checked our tickets in to the smiling assistant, squeezing my hand tightly as we were ushered through to the smaller internal aeroplane waiting on the tarmac.

As we casually boarded the plane, a smiling assistant greeted us. He was a tall, middle-aged, grey-haired man and I mused, a very casually dressed air steward. I wondered whether he was *actually* cabin crew. He offered a friendly helping hand to each passenger as they made their way up the steps and as Diane and I had previously realised, we weren't seated near each other and sadly we made our way to our respective allocated seats. She was a couple of seats back from the front of the plane. I was right over the huge turbo blades, which stared



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ominously at me through the window. I secretly prayed that they wouldn't fly off and lacerate me to death but suddenly realised that I would be plummeting to the earth at several hundred miles per hour clutching my soggy tissue so it wouldn't matter anyway. I was aware of my now irrational thoughts and felt fidgety and extremely tired. I had held myself together well so; smiling inwardly I thought, 'You've earned a little madness' at this point.

I looked around the plane surreptitiously studying my fellow passengers. As I glanced back, I was met with smiles from a couple of casual looking travellers. They looked like they were on a regular bus trip. I guessed that this was their regular route across the vast country I was now part of. I could hear people chattering away in French and again this brought home to me the bilingual country I had descended upon.

The flight attendant that had helped us up the steps had now closed the door. I heard the roar of the engines and looked out to see the propellers turn rapidly and hypnotically into a haze of vapour. The close proximity made me tremble and I felt my seat shudder violently. I wanted to move and felt suddenly unsure about my seating arrangement. My long-haul fatigue was beginning to control me and I fought it as best I could. I glanced across to my right and saw a woman reading casually and twiddling a handkerchief in her hand. She wiped her nose in a nonchalant manner and suddenly I felt calmer.

The unconventional steward stood at the front of the plane for the usual 'in flight' safety instruction and as he turned on the pre-set tape a woman's voice spilled forth over the intercom. A rich Canadian tone led us via English and French to look at the floor's safety lighting and the emergency exits but on each instruction, we looked submissively at our host who, mimicking the well-practiced words crossed his eyes in a clown like manner for each serious instruction. As he continued to pull

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grimaces and contort his face, I was confused and, looking around, saw everyone laughing hysterically at his unprofessional antics. I found myself laughing aloud with everyone and his unscheduled silliness dispersed the last of my nerves.

The tape now over, he switched it off heaving an over dramatic sigh of relief and grabbed hold of the small hand held microphone.

‘Good *evening* ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard your flight to Penticton. He offered a quirky grin.

‘We will be arriving in approximately forty minutes. In the meantime, please make yourselves comfortable and I will be round shortly with your meal. Ha! Not really, it’s a cup of cocoa and a small pack of biscuits!’ The plane was in uproar as we all laughed hysterically.

‘Oh... and by the way... if you don’t like the person you are sitting next to, please move NOW!’ Everyone looked around smiling a quirky smile at each other, not daring to speak or indeed move.

I could just see the shoulder length, auburn hair of Diane right at the front of the plane. I was hoping she would have been my new travel companion for this last leg of the journey.

I settled down into my seat knowing that I was so close now. I felt suddenly calmer and knew it was going to be all right. The plane took off into the darkness and I looked down onto the brilliantly jewelled city of Vancouver. It looked like a giant, diamante brooch; with striking colours and twinkling lights. I was fascinated to see it so close up and stared contentedly out of the window.

I was interrupted suddenly by the presence of the attendant who was offering me a small wicker basket selection of pre-packed biscuits.

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‘Tea? Coffee? Or how about Cocoa?’ He asked with a mischievous smile.

I thanked him saying ‘Cocoa’ and then he did the rounds of the plane. My drink arrived shortly and after about twenty minutes in the air, I could see a smiling Diane making her way down the aisle.

‘Hi!’ she offered and, smiling gratefully up at her appearance, I stood up to let her sit at the window seat.

‘My God! You must be feeling really nervous now,’ she said, but I suspected she was more nervous than I was at this point. She chattered nervously.

‘I wanted to move and come and sit with you earlier but when that guy said, ‘If you don’t like the person you’re next to I didn’t *dare* move!’ she said animatedly. We both laughed outrageously at our mirrored and embarrassed actions. I told her it was ok and thanked her for joining me.

She grabbed my hand.

‘*Who* do you think will be there?’ Oh my God this is *sooo* exciting, are you *nervous*?’

She was whipping me up into agitated state and eventually I had taken on her excitement and anticipation of this first meeting with my father or, whoever might be with him at the airport. Diane and I laughed nonsensically saying maybe the local Penticton Band will be there on the tarmac ready to greet me or even the local press. It helped to ease the mounting tensions and Diane was now sharing and contributing to this adventure with me.

The steward arrived with a drink for Diane and asked bluntly.

‘Whereabouts in England are you from?’ I was surprised at his question.

‘Derbyshire.’ I said smiling.

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‘Not from Nottingham?’ He enquired.

‘You know Robin Hood Country?’ Most people knew that and I had incorrectly assumed he was Canadian.

‘Oh I’m from Norwich, but I’ve lived in Canada a few years now.’

I was taken aback slightly.

‘Mmm...’ I mused ‘well then if you are a true Norwich man you will know what it stands for then?’ I was being flirtatious with my daring question but he came back with a cheeky smile and a nod.

‘Oh, I certainly do.’ The answer was enough. As he walked away smiling, Diane whispered curiously.

‘What *does* it stand for?’ I leaned towards her and whispered daringly;

‘k’Nickers Off Ready When I Come Home!’ She giggled loudly and I saw the steward turn around and laugh knowingly our way.

Our silliness helped me to cope with the wonder of how the meeting would manifest itself at the other end.

‘Do you think any of your *sisters* will be there? My *God* I bet you didn’t cater for *five* of ‘em?’ she shrieked. I laughed out loud realising that they would all have her velvety Canadian accent and wondered if they would be able to understand my Midlander accent.

How could I know whether any of them would care enough to show up, to greet me or genuinely take me into their hearts or their lives?

Diane and I were holding hands tightly as we realised that the forty minutes flight had disappeared quickly in the flurry of fun, excitement and expectation.

I was now beginning to wonder if anyone *would* be there to greet me and if I would be bundling myself into a cab looking for Dad’s apartment.

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The flights all the way through had run to perfection and with no delays. I knew Dad would have checked arrivals at Penticton. I still asked myself whether he'd be there knowing that there might be some difficulty for him making his way there alone. He was a very sick man. Diane had marvelled at his tenacity and welcoming attitude to my connecting with him.

'You guys are gonna have *so* much to talk about! And my God! How's he gonna cope with *six* girls!' she squealed.

I couldn't calm her down and I asked her if her sister would be at the Penticton airport to greet her.

'Oh *sure!* She'll be there,' and almost brushing the subject aside we stopped talking as we felt the back thrust of the engine and knew we were coming into land. I suddenly felt shaky and sickly all at once. I had lost it completely, now exhausted from the long flight; my mind was in an uncontrollable whirl. I couldn't contain any thoughts and my body had taken over any rational movements. My legs felt as though they had turned to jelly.

'Not long now, honey...' Diane smiled and squeezed my hand gently. She realised I was now out of control with my emotions and said tenderly, 'It's gonna be ok, Rosie, he's gonna love you the way you love him and it's gonna be *fine*, honey'.

The tears started to flow down my cheek and she offered me a tissue. I apologised.

'Hell! If you can't cry at a moment like this when *can* you cry?' and pausing she looked tenderly into my eyes.

'I'm *so* happy for you...' I felt guilty crying at my wonder-filled situation when I knew her sister had just come through a life threatening condition with her cancer.

We felt the plane descend and the roar of the engines almost drowned us out. We sat silently as the plane buffeted us up and

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down. We could hear people sighing aloud at the unpredictability of the plane's erratic movement.

We were almost down and reassuring me once again, Diane said, 'I'm coming out with ya!' I thanked her saying I would be grateful and honoured have her at my side. It would make a difference.

The plane came to a standstill and I looked out of the tiny window as the propeller ground slowly to a halt. The steward asked us to remain in our seats until the seatbelt lights had gone out.

As the minutes dragged, Diane and I reached under the seats for our travel bags and we smiled at each other.

'Nearly there, honey,' she assured me in an almost sisterly fashion. The moment was almost upon us. Watching the lights go out we unbuckled our belts and stood up together moving slowly out into the aisle.

'Do you think he'll be there?' I asked apprehensively. We edged our way to the front of the plane.

'He *will* be there, honey, I just *know* it... he's gonna be *sooo* happy to see you. This is a special thing you're doin' you're a special lady!' I smiled a weak smile back at her in thanks of her kindness.

I stepped aside not daring to go through the door. I thanked the steward and he smiled a cheery goodbye nod. Diane went ahead of me.

'What does he look like?' she asked excitedly. I said, 'Well he *might* be in a wheelchair or even on crutches so you couldn't really miss him'. I had no way of knowing because we had not discussed the finer details.

We both made our way down the shaky metal steps to the tarmac. We were in darkness and only a few yards away from the lights of the tiny airport building we looked left and right around the people ahead of us.

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‘Can you see him?’ She asked frantically. I told her I couldn’t see a thing and felt the panic setting in. She was still holding my hand tight as we made our way through the open door of the terminal reception.

As I made my way through with Diane at my side, we were both suddenly taken over by womanly screams.

‘Oh my *God!* I’m so *proud* of you, pretty lady! You are *sooo* brave’. I felt the sudden tight squeeze of a loving hug and saw the stunning face of Lisa my second youngest sister. I saw a beautiful young woman with a lustrous, dark shoulder-length hair and deep set brown eyes.

Smiling happily she thrust a dark wooden photo album into my hands;

‘These are a few memories of your family, I hope you like them, they’re *yours*... it’s a start!’

Diane was in the embrace of her sister and she smiled at our tender moments with tears in her eyes. I whispered a small, hidden ‘thank you’ to her and no-one knew.

I looked down to my left and sitting on one of the pale blue padded seats, I saw Dad watching bewilderingly at the special moment. He had almost blond/grey hair swept tidily across to one side and a healthy looking tan. I noticed the protruding stomach he had joked in shame about due to lack of exercise. How could he exercise he had prosthetic legs but despite that stood up sharply and confidently to greet me. He didn’t actually look ill at all; on the contrary I was surprised at how healthy and strong he looked. He looked nervous and slightly tense. I leaned over and gave him a tearful and lingering hug.

Still shaking I said cheerily, ‘Well I *made* it!’

He looked at me lovingly.

‘You *sure* did honey, you’re here now!’

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Taking a deep breath, I looked around the back of Lisa to wave a fond farewell to Diane who was disappearing out of sight with her sister. She turned and gave me a wave. I never saw her again.

Lisa turned to Dad.

‘You ok, pop?’

We both helped him up onto his crutches and Lisa moved to pick up my very heavy suitcase. I told her not to pick it up saying it was extremely heavy and she dashed off to get a trolley from outside the main door.

As Dad and I stood shakily outside the airport double doors he hung on tightly to one handheld crutch and as Lisa took a first photo of Dad and me he squeezed me tightly and comfortingly as I wrapped my arms around him. We hugged each other, relieved and happy and as he pulled me close into him as we smiled for the camera.

As Lisa hurled my case onto the trolley, we made our way through to the quiet front road where Dad’s faded blue and cream Thunderbird stood majestically waiting to take us back to his apartment. Once I had bundled myself into the back of the car Lisa took the wheel and almost shouted.

‘You ok in the back there, Rosie?’ I said I was and felt a huge surge of relief that our meeting was calm and serene. I had to take a big breath at that moment. ‘My *God* I’m in Canada... on my own with people I have never met before.’ The transference of spirit had already begun with that first phone conversation with Dad. This was only the beginning.

If everything had ended right there and then I had already asserted my rights; had started replacing old ‘messages’ with new ones and learned that acceptance was my priority at that moment in my life. I would never be a product of my past again... only of my future. My head was reeling and I was tired



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from the long-haul flight. I felt my chest heave as I drew a long deep breath. I could relax now. I really had 'arrived' in more ways than one.

We drove along a wide deserted road and I couldn't see a lot through the blackness. Dad said that he realised that I must be tired and we were going straight back to his apartment. I could feel my eyes closing with the sheer weight of the journey and the bewilderment of how our meeting might be. I was a long way from home but felt very comfortable with Dad and Lisa. I didn't feel like a stranger.

Lisa was a blessing. She launched her love over me like rainfall. I was totally overwhelmed and responded as naturally as I could. They both perpetually checked if I was ok and after only a five-minute drive in the car, we pulled up outside a tall grey tower block with balconies. They were all adorned with flags, flowers, and decorations of every description. Dad told me later that they weren't allowed to hang wind chimes up.

'Those damn things would keep you awake all night!'

Lisa helped us both through the main doors of the building after Dad had punched in the security code. The wide electronic door folded open slowly and we made our way left towards the double lift. The cabinet in the middle of the foyer was stacked with crafts, knitted goods and home made cards, obviously made by some of the residents. The place was deadly quiet and as it was now around 11.30 at night, I didn't expect to see any of the residents socialising about the building. I had noticed that most of the lights were out in the block.

Dad stood leaning against the lift wall with his crutch firmly under his arm. I asked him if he was ok. He gently rubbed my shoulder saying, 'I am now you're here, sweetie'. I smiled weakly saying I was too. I felt the sheer exhaustion creeping over me and the whole trip seemed to be catching up now.

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Getting out of the lift Lisa and I lugged the suitcase several yards up the corridor with stifled giggles and Dad put the key in the door.

We were as quiet as possible so as not to wake up the other residents and eventually we found ourselves in Dad's living room. Dad motioned to the main bedroom.

'That's your room darlin' you can have Queenie! I got the 'Hidabed' but we couldn't find it!'

Lisa and I laughed at his late night joke. She gave me another welcoming hug and I thanked her for picking me up. Lisa gave dad a goodnight hug and kiss.

'Well you guys, I'm gonna get going, I'll ring you in the morning. So glad you're here Rosie! She gave me another lingering hug.

'You must be *exhausted*; we'll see each other tomorrow, ok?'

She turned to Dad;

'Pop, see you tomorrow!'

She went through the door closing it quietly behind her.

HAVING NEVER KNOWN her natural father, it eventually became an obsessive and lifelong operation to find him. This is the story of a heart-wrenching and emotionally charged journey half way across the world; one of tenacity, sheer grit and strength of character. A lone journey of self discovery; it reveals through hilarity and tears something of the determination that many of us must dig deep to find when challenged with personal and life changing decisions.

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