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MY NAME IS LOLA

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

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The Fabric of Our Lives

The taste of ripe summer strawberries still warm from the rich black earth transports me back to the screened porch of my childhood where I impatiently wait for my turn to crank the ice cream freezer. Fat rain drops hesitantly plopping into the dry dust of late summer reminds me of oncoming gully washers – grateful relief from the dust storms of north Texas. And each time the scent of hot biscuits fresh from the oven wafts over me I’m enveloped once again in Mama’s love. I wonder why it is that I can bring back those little distant memories with such pleasure and yet scarcely recall the real hardships we had to endure during those Depression years.

But from the long perspective of my tenth decade, I’ve decided that it’s like looking at a pointillist painting. Stand too close and all I can see is the minutia. Stand back and I understand how the warp and woof of learning and experience have constructed the much-layered and multi-coloured fabric of my years. I see now how the unbroken thread that runs through my life has been a longing to return to those memories of home – a longing for my children and grandchildren to have the opportunity to store up those perfect moments. I see now how those family gatherings around the huge oak table that once belonged to my parents so strongly influenced my own life and shaped the way I would raise my own children. I’ve always wanted them to experience what seemed like an idyllic childhood and to see how they too have been enveloped in the love

of the family that raised me. So I begin this story with a time long before I was born because, as we like to say in Texas, the fruit never falls far from the tree.

We never knew most of our ancestors, of course, but around that big oak table their stories were passed down and became ours, and their values formed the character of those who came after them. And now, because I've just celebrated my ninety-second birthday and have the privilege of the *very* long view of our family's history, I've realized how so much of who we have become was determined by those who came before us.

My mother, Nannie (Morris) Estes, was among the progeny of intrepid English immigrants who arrived in North America long before the Revolutionary War and whose descendants pushed south into Virginia and became tobacco planters. Their descendants, in turn, worked their inherited lands until they were leached out and became worthless, and then they were forced to make decisions that would ultimately determine their futures in tragic times.

Most antebellum Virginians chose to stay in the South, so their children packed up their slaves and household goods and made their way in successive emigrations through the Carolinas into Tennessee and on to Georgia, Alabama, or Mississippi. But *my* two maternal great-grandfathers in Virginia, twenty years prior to the Civil War, freed their slaves and gave them what little land they still owned. And then they loaded their own families into covered wagons and made their way west across the Blue Ridge to Ohio and then to Illinois.

Historians have named this trek out of the Old South the oil-slick migration because extended families travelled together and, as the adult children inevitably married, their spouses and extended families joined them and oozed west and south along with them. But by the time the South seceded in 1860 and the first shots of the Civil War were fired, my formerly Southern ancestors were putting down roots in Illinois, learning to farm corn and to raise horses. And by the time I was old enough to go visit them, there were Alexander,

Morris, Zink, Pinell, and Bennet cousins all living close by. The extended family had, for the most part, stayed together.

My father's forebears, two brothers who emigrated from Italy to the United States in the early nineteenth century, were apparently descended from the notorious d'Este family who were famous for fifteenth-century political intrigue. It's said they were patrons of poets, artists, and scholars, and one of them, Alfanso d'Este, the Duke of Ferrera, was the husband of Lucrezia Borgia.

The brothers settled first in Tennessee, changing their name to Estes. However, by the time their American descendants started their trek to the western frontier, all pretence at aristocracy was lost to the harsh reality of survival in a wild and unforgiving environment. While trying to cross the Missouri River in a wagon train, my great uncle's wagon was swamped, all their possessions were lost, and tragically one of their children was drowned. Nothing remained except to continue, so he and his wife buried their child and kept on.

Grandfather James Estes and his wife Anna (Baron) Estes finally settled in the small prairie community of Grandview, Texas, where he took up farming and she birthed their first child in 1874. That boy, Charles William Estes, would become my father. Three additional children followed in rapid succession, but in 1885 their mother died, leaving eleven-year-old Charles to help his father care for his younger siblings. Undoubtedly this loss was catastrophic for the young family, but Charles had been raised with a strong religious faith and even stronger work ethic so, despite their real poverty, he was still able to attend school sporadically. To help support his family, young Charles packed water, served as a janitor, built fires at the schoolhouse and the church, and served as a clerk and delivery boy and as a day labourer working on farms and ranches. Eventually he was invited to live with relatives residing in Meridian, Texas, and Uncle Jim Robinson, a judge, encouraged him to study using his extensive law library as a lure, and for about six months Charles gave serious consideration to becoming a lawyer.

In the end though, he turned away from the law and attended summer normal school and then taught in the county for three years. My mother loved to tell about what happened when the teenaged teacher took two of his students aside as they arrived at the school obviously not presentable enough to join the rest of the students. Their clothes were dirty, their faces grimy, and their hair uncombed. Charles led them to a washbasin, handed them a bar of soap and a comb, and told them to join the class as soon as they had cleaned up.

However, at the end of the day when these children returned home, their father took exception, and the next morning he rode his mule to the school to confront the young teacher. Belligerently, he shouted toward the school's door, "I sent these chil'ren to school to git larnin,' not to git baths and their hair combed and parted!" But Charles had heard the bully was on his way so he came out to the schoolyard to meet him armed with the axe he used to chop wood for the school's stove. The confrontation was short. From that time on, *every* student arrived at school with face shining and head neatly combed.

When he was twenty-one, Charles resigned his position as school teacher and accepted his true calling. Before his mother died, he had been part of a devout Christian home where the Christian principles lived and taught by their mother formed the character of each of the children. Family lore has it that at the age of six Charles led his younger siblings in a game of camp meeting, insisting that he be the preacher. And by fourteen, he had joined the Cumberland Presbyterians at Old Rock Church near Valley Mills, Texas.

The Cumberland Presbyterians were a break-away sect of the rigidly Calvinist Presbyterians who preached a doctrinaire theology largely incomprehensible to the uneducated people of the frontier. The division, which had started even before the Revolutionary War, culminated with the Second Awakening in about 1800 when unschooled itinerant preachers travelled the sparsely settled frontier collecting people for revivalist camp meetings and river baptisms.

No longer would the Presbyterians be all head and no heart, at least in the South.

Word of mouth spread the news that a preacher would be holding a religious revival meeting and people would start to assemble, some from very far distances, which meant they needed to camp overnight if they were to participate throughout the several days of the revival. In truth, camp meetings were often the best entertainment going. The people on the frontier worked hard to make a barely subsistence living, so if there was any diversion to be had, these farmers jumped at the chance. Some undoubtedly came out of sincere religious devotion; others came out of curiosity. It was the preacher's job to make sure the latter left as born-again believers.

Through the several days of the revival, emotions ran high. Once one speaker exhausted his message, the next would jump up on the stage to take his place so there was virtually non-stop preaching and gospel singing from morning until late at night. People expected to be emotionally overwrought; they sang, they cried, they went into trances and shouted exaltations. It was all about casting out sin and welcoming the Lord into a changed life.

At twenty-one, my father was licensed to preach in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church at Waco, Texas, and immediately began leading revival meetings and gospel-singing, pausing only in August when he was needed to help pick cotton with his brothers and sister. But within a year, the church sent him to Indian Territory, (which became the state of Oklahoma in 1907), and he became the full-time pastor of the Cumberland Church at Davis. He made \$25 a month. A hardship pay supplement wouldn't have been out of line, but unfortunately no one seems to have thought of that at the time.

Indian Territory was a dangerous place to be in those days. It was to have been a sanctuary created for all the displaced tribes that President Andrew Jackson had driven off their ancestral lands in the southeast, but that plan was short-lived as wave after wave of white settlers encroached. In the spring of 1899, a United States marshal was murdered, and my father, by then known as Preacher Estes,

was assigned to officiate at his funeral. He stood on a tree stump in the Davis Cemetery and quietly delivered a message on law and order. Then, following the service, he enlisted several others to help him patrol the town because he fully expected retaliation. On the following Sunday, Preacher conducted his regular morning worship service with his rifle leaning against the pulpit.

Shortly after, he accepted a call to Indiana to assist with the gospel-singing at revival meetings and stayed to marry Jesse Gayle Morgan, a young music teacher whose home was in Washington. Almost immediately they each decided to enrol at Cumberland University in Tennessee to complete the necessary training to be ordained for the full work of the ministry, and their subsequent adventures in the small parishes of rural Indiana affirmed their calling.

In 1903, their first child, Barron Morgan, was born, and the following summer they brought him home to Texas where Preacher was to lead camp meetings near Meridian. It was a wonderful opportunity to introduce his young wife and son to his family, but tragedy struck a few months later when they returned to Indiana. Their second child, Mary Evangeline, lived less than three weeks after her birth. Then Preacher became very ill with the flu and his fifteen-month-old son developed pneumonia and died within a few days.

It's hard to imagine from our perspective today that such a tragedy could occur, but this was still the medical middle-ages, long before antibiotics and long before we learned to appreciate the necessity of sterile medical instruments. Three years later, when Preacher's wife delivered their third child, she never recovered from the delivery and died when baby John Dillon was only a few months old.

Preacher was left alone to raise his newborn. His own family was far away in Texas and Oklahoma. The ladies of his congregation helped out as they could with the cooking and housekeeping, but that very difficult time forever changed my father. From that point forward, he never permitted any family member to go through any health crisis alone. It was an ethic that would be indelibly imprinted in all of us.