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MY NAME IS LOLA

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

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Growing Up in Texas

Papa always said that it was healthy for a congregation to move along to a new preacher every few years so, when he got the call from the folks in McKinney, he was ready for a new challenge.

We had a big Dodge touring car in the late '20s, large enough to fit the nine of us, but the drive from Hobart to McKinney, Texas, still took two days after factoring in visits with some of the Estes clan along the way. I remember driving up to the manse, which sat side by side with the church on Mounts Avenue. The church itself dated back to Civil War days and was in pretty rough shape, but the manse seemed big enough for all of us and the bag swing hanging from a branch of a huge shade tree in the front yard let me know there was a special place for me in the new house.

We piled out of the car to be greeted by the church elders, and Mama was relieved to discover they had stocked our new home with staples piled high in the pantry. Southern hospitality is no myth; the ladies of the congregation brought endless covered dishes to last until we could get unpacked and settled, so the transition to a new church family was almost seamless.

McKinney is only thirty-two miles north of Dallas, so today it's undoubtedly a bedroom community of the big city, but back then it still had the flavour of an old Texas county seat. It had been named for Collin McKinney, one of the signers of the Texas Declaration of Independence in 1836. In 1845, the Republic of Texas was annexed

to the United States, staunchly committed to slavery, with its constitution making illegal the unauthorized emancipation of slaves by their owners. William Davis heard the news and emigrated out of the Old South looking for fertile land. He brought his slaves along anticipating the day in the not-too-distant future when the extension of slavery would be the issue that would bring Thomas Jefferson's version of equal rights to a reckoning. Reasoning, I suppose, that north Texas was far enough away from the hotbed of political fist-cuffs over the states' rights issue, he bought 3,000 acres of good cotton-growing land and, in 1849, donated 120 of them for a town site. Ten years later, on the eve of the Civil War, the population of McKinney had ballooned to almost 5,000.

When we arrived in 1928, it was still full of cotton mills and gins, and it had a cotton compress and a cottonseed oil mill along with banks, schools, newspapers, and, dating from the 1880s, an opera house. Before long, Preacher was deep into plans for a new church building, and he moved the congregation to the theatre downtown so he could get to work clearing the site. Evidently Papa was just as successful cheering along the building campaign in McKinney as he had been in previous communities, and the McKinney congregation quickly pledged the full \$25,000 it would take to build a two-storey brick church, complete with classrooms, a women's parlour, a large dining room, and a private study.

That didn't mean, though, that it would be impervious to the cyclones that roared through north Texas every spring. There was a good-size storm cellar between the manse and the church, and we came to recognize that when the chickens in the yard started getting restless in the approaching wind, we'd better head for that cellar. Remembering those times now I suppose I was frightened, but my father would always say that we were being watched over and cared for, so it really just seemed like an exciting adventure.

When they excavated for the foundation of the new church, the builders pushed the rich black soil over toward our house and, to our delight, it was absolutely full of tarantulas. We had a grand old time

catching them in fruit jars but when Nannie discovered what we'd done, she about had a fit. So naturally my sisters and I blamed it on brother Charlie.

Poor Charlie, surrounded by five yattering sisters; can you imagine anything worse? Even our mother knew how difficult we all were – with the exception of our oldest sister, Lillian, that is. She was the perfect one. Whenever Mama was at the end of her patience with us, she used to shout, “Eleanor! You girls! Settle down!” I suspect she thought of Lillian as her ally in the fray, so Eleanor, the next in line, must be the one leading us astray.

We had left our oldest brother, John Dillon, back in Hobart to complete his final year of high school. My two oldest sisters, also of high school age, were starting to chafe a little against Papa's old fashioned sense of fashion. This was the era of the flapper girls with their bobbed hair, short skirts, and decidedly progressive behaviour. Shockingly, big-city girls back East were reported smoking cigarettes, drinking bootleg whiskey, and dancing the Charleston – showing their legs in a most unladylike way.

And then along came Cousin Willie. Preacher's first cousin lived in Itasca, Texas, not an exceptionally cosmopolitan town, but the day she arrived for a visit all sorts of havoc ensued. She was pretty and vivacious and we were all fascinated by her, especially when she decided my big sisters needed a twentieth-century makeover that would include cutting their long braided hair.

It may have been a small matter to Cousin Willie, but to us it was revolutionary. For generations of Southern women, hair was *never* cut. Little girls wore pig tails tied with ribbons until their hair grew long enough to braid and wind into neat little buns atop their heads. Sun bonnets were meant to keep the sun off their faces, of course, but they were also helpful in keeping their hair clean in the days when baths never came more than once a week. Those braids tucked into their sun hats kept their hair relatively dust free and up off their necks in the hot summer.

Bob their hair? Mama was probably flabbergasted when Willie suggested it, but she really couldn't think of a good reason to forbid it. Besides, what could Papa say? Willie was *his* cousin, after all. Truth be told, Mama was always more reasonable than Papa when it came to this sort of thing so, maybe a *little* reluctantly, she gave her permission – provided Papa agreed. However, when Willie armed herself with the shears, my sister Eleanor was the only one brave enough to go ahead with it. Lillian decided she wasn't quite ready to take the big step into the flapper age. But, bobbed or not, the older girls were growing up, and it wouldn't be long before they would need to go off to college, and that needed very careful consideration.

Much to my father's credit, there was never any thought given to educating only the boys. In her youth, my mother had been a teacher and, since the day she and Papa married, she was a full partner in their ministry. Of course, the girls would go to college. The only problem was figuring out how to afford to educate all seven of us.

Preacher successfully completed the big new church in McKinney, so was again looking for new challenges, but this time he needed to be even more strategic in his choice of locations. He would need to look for a congregation in a college town. And he would have to find a college sympathetic to the economic realities of a preacher's life.

Coincidentally, an old friend of Preacher's had situated in St. Louis and was serving as Secretary to the Presbyterian Synod. He began writing to my father about a congregation without a pastor in Rolla, Missouri – deep in the lushly wooded hills of the Ozark Mountains. The congregation wanted a new building and the farmers hidden back in the hollers needed a missionary. “Oh, and one more thing,” the search committee wrote, “Rolla is the home of the Missouri School of Mines and Metallurgy. The town really needs someone who can work with the college boys as well as the farmers in the hills and hollers.” When Preacher got out the map to see just where Rolla might be, the deal was settled; it was halfway between Nannie's family in Illinois and his back in Texas.

I was seven years old by this time and had not yet gone to school since, in Texas, children started later. As you can imagine though, as the youngest of seven, I had lots of siblings to read with me so I was more than ready to start school the September we arrived in Rolla.

It was a typical little college town. The college dated from 1870, and it was even then regarded as an excellent engineering school. The manse was surrounded by fraternity houses as well as by the junior and senior high schools. But even better, it had a big porch swing where the college boys who came courting my older sisters could pass the time until Nannie called them in to join us for supper.

She kept a permanent soup pot on the back of the stove and could throw in a handful of beans or fix hot biscuits any time of the day or night, should anyone – students or hobos off the trains – unexpectedly arrive. They must have thought the home cookin’ was worth the price because they inevitably stayed to dry dishes or bring in the wash from the clothesline or carry in the coal we’d collected from the tracks on the edge of town. Times were tough in Rolla, and if the trains lost a little coal passing through town, we could certainly find a use for it in our furnace.

The congregation in Rolla was so good to us I don’t ever remember actually going to a grocery store. Even though they must have been suffering too, the ladies of the church always came up with an extra chicken or some produce from their gardens. Being the youngest of five girls, I’m sure I never had anything new to wear until I was practically grown. But in Rolla, the hand-me-downs were at least new to me.

None of us ever had any walkin’-around money; I’m sure the concept of an allowance would have been totally incomprehensible to any of us, my parents included. Whatever salary my father made could scarcely cover the necessities and, though my mother played an equal part in their ministry, she received no salary at all. However, when weddings were held at the manse, rather than at the church, it usually meant the father of the bride was carrying a shotgun to make sure the groom did the right thing by his daughter. In those cases,

it was the custom for the father of the bride to pay the preacher's wife a small gratuity in thanks for providing the little wedding party with coffee and cake following the young couple's wedding. Nannie would discretely tuck the money away in her bodice to use for her necessities, pinning it to the chemise under her dress for safekeeping until she found a worthwhile place to spend it. Hence, the term 'pin money.'

I started the first grade a head taller than my fellow students, but when the teacher realized I could already read and print, I was bumped up to join the rest of the students who were my own age. It was there that I had my acting debut. It was my big chance. I was to play the starring role in the Thanksgiving pageant, the Princess of the Harvest. I rehearsed and rehearsed, but on the night of the performance as I marched proudly across the stage, my head held at an imperious angle no doubt, I fell over my own feet and dropped the ear of corn I was supposed to present to the Indian brave. I was mortified. I still cringe remembering it.

Still though, the most fun to be had was back at home where the engineering students gathered around the table so my sisters could help them with their English assignments. Or, if the older girls weren't around, they'd pull taffy or make cocoa with me. In the summer, our neighbour would let me have a bowl of strawberries if I'd weed the patch for him, and then we'd all line up on the porch to take turns cranking the handle on the ice cream freezer. To this day, I can close my eyes and summon the taste of those sweet summer strawberries and anticipate the frosty-cold strawberry ice cream that followed.

And when Papa bought our first radio, even more visitors came by. They'd gather around to listen to the political conventions, or the football games and music broadcasts from Chicago. The radio was a big Atwater Kent table model, complete with headphones, and it would become a focal point in our family in the coming years, but, when he bought it, no one could have anticipated how the news of

the world coming to us via that radio would soon consume *all* our attention.

Preacher was busy trying to inspire the dwindling Rolla congregation to remodel and enlarge their little church to accommodate the burgeoning population of young people, but money was scarce, so a minimal amount of work was completed. At the same time though, Preacher, accompanied by a Presbyterian missionary who carried along a portable pump organ, was making twice monthly trips into the Ozark hollers to preach at revivals.

Nannie once wrote, “Sometimes they would drive their Model T up damp creek beds and walk the rest of the way to hold a mission class on the front porch of some woodsman’s home where the folks from miles around would be waiting.” Those little ramshackle frame houses with sleeping lofts for the children and steeply pitched roofs overhanging extended front porches still dot the Ozark hills. In the autumn, you can spot them through the trees as you travel the back roads through the soft orange, yellow, and pinkish-red pastels of the falling leaves.

Back then, most of the people living in the hollers were very poor, but few ever showed much interest in moving down to the bottom where twentieth-century trade and commerce was taking place. Their ancestors were the Scotch-Irish who, for the most part, arrived in the Old South in the early 1700s skipping over the Virginia planter class altogether. They went straight into the mountains of Appalachia, and some worked their way south and west as far as the Ozarks of Missouri and Arkansas. Those who stayed there liked the relative isolation of the hills and hollers and had no inclination to move along. They could hunt deer, and most kept a few hogs for slaughter in the fall so they could make it through the winter. And no doubt there were some who kept a still to make moonshine for a little extra income.

There are all kinds of academic studies on their distinctive mountain speech. Some say it’s eighteenth-century Old English but, speaking as one whose own Southern accent has caused comment,

I can pretty confidently say that everyone in the South speaks with *some* kind of regional dialect. The only difference is that those who have chosen to stay relatively isolated tend to keep their distinctive speech patterns a little more true to their origins.

Whereas a Texan might say, “Y’all come; I’m fixin’ to fry up a chicken. Maggie, you might could bring a salad,” a woman from the Ozark hills inviting her friends from a neighbouring holler to supper on a chilly evening would say, “You’ns come along and bring wraps fer yer young’uns. I liketa froze last night; it’s airish over yonder and it’s commencin’ to snow.”

Rolla is still a little college town and the school, although re-named, is still regarded as one of the best schools of science and engineering in the Midwest. We were all sorry to leave Rolla, but I think it eventually dawned on Papa that his five girls weren’t likely to be interested in what this particular college was offering. He would have to find another college town – one that hopefully offered courses in the liberal arts. So we left Lillian and Eleanor behind, one in St. Louis in nurses training and the other at Missouri Valley College, and made our way back to Texas where a new congregation was waiting.