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MY NAME IS LOLA

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

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If It Rains

It was 1930. Denton, Texas. The stock market had crashed the previous October. Herbert Hoover was president of the United States, and more than half of all Americans were living below the minimum subsistence level. Unemployment had hit 8.7 per cent. Within three years, it would climb to almost 25 per cent. And in Texas, the Depression arrived with unrelenting dust storms.

You've heard of the butterfly effect, I'm sure. I was only ten years old in 1930, and chaos theory was still to come, but I certainly witnessed its effects throughout that decade. What happened, from hindsight, was a predictable disaster. During World War I, more than a million acres of grassland in the Midwest were ploughed under and planted with crops to feed the armed forces. Then, throughout the decade of the '20s, when agriculture prices bottomed out and farmers were desperate to increase their incomes, they over-ploughed and over-planted those fields – fields that were really suited only for grazing.

It wasn't that they didn't know about soil conservation. The federal government, in fact, encouraged them to conserve soil fertility and stop erosion, but times were so bad during the Depression that landowners couldn't afford to use methods that might not pay for several years, and tenant farmers weren't about to invest any money in land they didn't own.

Then the butterfly metaphorically beat its wings at the precise moment to cause climatic chaos. And along came the drought, the heat, and the catastrophic wind.

When I was twelve, fourteen monster dust storms were recorded on the Plains. The next year, there were thirty-four, the following year thirty-eight. The year I was fourteen, it was estimated that 100 million acres of farmland lost all or most of the topsoil to the winds. At its worst, you could see the storm roiling in like a giant black tsunami hundreds of feet high – mercilessly intent on drowning everything in its path. Despite the heat of summer, doors and windows had to be sealed tight against the wind and dust. Still, butter sitting uncovered on the table would accumulate a fine coat of dirt.

We certainly weren't the hardest hit. Denton is in northeast Texas, north of Dallas. The worst storms were in the west Texas panhandle where farmers reported that the wind sucked the seeds out of the ground and blew tumbleweeds into fences so the dust drifted up and covered the fencerows altogether. A reporter from the Associated Press covered one of those storms. "We live with the dust, eat it, sleep with it, watch it strip us of possessions and the hope of possessions. It is becoming Real. Three little words achingly familiar on the Western farmer's tongue rule life in the dust bowl of the continent – if it rains."

The dust storms. They're what I remember most vividly about the years of the Depression, not the financial hardships. In fact, when we arrived in Denton on Labour Day in 1930, we were all thrilled to see a beautiful two-storey frame house surrounded by a huge shaded porch on two sides and an upstairs sleeping balcony for the hot humid summer nights. The manse sat high on a hill near the junior and senior high schools, and it was only about six blocks from downtown Denton. Plus, it was fully five blocks away from Cumberland Presbyterian Church where Papa would be preaching. Strangely though, we all kind of missed living next door to the church. However, with nine rooms and two baths, it was far and away our most luxuriously large home. Preacher had a study, we all

had huge bedrooms and the screened-in back porch easily had room for the old oak table as well as Mama's sewing machine. That house still stands – it's been designated as an historic site.

Denton was, and still is, a college town. Home to both the University of North Texas and Texas Women's University, it was the ideal location for our family of students ready to launch into professional careers. My sister Eleanor – with her recently bobbed hair – enrolled in the University of North Texas, then a normal school for the education of teachers, and the rest of the younger brood enrolled in Denton's public schools.

The porch swing had pretty much constant traffic in the five years we lived in Denton because the youth group of the church enlarged considerably with the arrival of our family and the subsequent arrival of the university students who gravitated to Nannie's hospitality. It was obvious that the old church with its red brick sanctuary was in need of major renovations, but, unfortunately, prior to October, 1929, the recklessly optimistic congregation had purchased a large corner lot with the idea of rebuilding. By the time Preacher received their call, it was clear to everyone that the debt they had incurred to purchase that lot would have to be cleared before any rebuilding or even renovations could be considered.

Once again, it was the women of the church who rose to the challenge. And, to their credit, they did accomplish a small miracle. Their fundraising campaign was successful in meeting many of the payments that first year. But the three-inch headlines that had announced the economic meltdown in 1929 only got worse as time passed. In 1931, unemployment rose to almost 16 per cent. Preacher announced to the congregation that he would take a voluntary reduction in salary provided that the same amount of money would be pledged on the new location.

But regular tithing continued to fall off and Sunday offerings were small. With three children in college and two in high school, Preacher's sacrifice didn't go unnoticed, but the simple fact was that the congregation couldn't possibly contribute money they didn't

have. How Mama did it I'll never know, but every Sunday at noon the old oak table was still stretched to its limit to include all the visitors who happened by.

One time, Kiowa Chief Lone Wolf arrived unexpectedly. He had become a great friend of Preacher during his ministry back in Oklahoma and had come to Texas to donate a buffalo to the McKinney Zoo. He had named it Charles William Estes in honour of my father.

Most of the visitors, though, were students. During the most desperate years of the Depression, as many as nineteen students lived with my family for at least a part of their school terms, and three of them boarded for the duration of their enrolments. Standing back in the fullness of time, what I remember most about those students gathered around the table was the fun we all had, not whether we actually had enough to eat. We laughed; we all sang. My sisters Ann and Eleanor both had beautiful alto voices and Ruth and I, the youngest of the brood, were sopranos. Both Charlie and Papa were tenors, and Mama could accompany us on either the piano or the organ and my oldest brother, John Dillon, played the trumpet, so music was virtually the required final course of every mealtime gathering. It hardly mattered what kind of music was requested, we could do it all: popular music, rounds, parodies. And naturally we all sang in the church choir, too.

I went through junior and senior high school in Denton. All of us were busy with our extracurricular sports and clubs, and, by this time, it also fell to me to help my brother Charlie look after Lady, Papa's Jersey cow. I suspect that Lady played a pretty important role in our family during those years in Denton. Free milk would have been an enormous bonus for a family as large as ours during those years. I do know that Preacher joined the Denton Farm Club and the Jersey Cattle Club, even serving as its president for one term. He volunteered much of his time with the 4-H Club for the boys and girls in the county, undoubtedly knowing how important it was for the children to learn to be successful farmers in those difficult times.

And, increasingly, Mama's lessons in self-sufficiency were also paying off as my older sisters were often called upon to run the household when both she and Preacher had to be away on church business. Of course, this isn't to say that it exactly ran like clockwork on those occasions. Like any household full of teenagers, if given a chance to slack off a little we were all more than willing to cut corners. And, since our brother Charlie was the only male in residence by this time, he had to take the brunt of his sisters' teasing, and most of the time he was pretty good-natured about it – at least until the Lydia Pinkham poisoning episode.

For anyone under the age of ninety, I should probably preface this story by explaining who and what Lydia Pinkham and her medicinal compound were. Oddly enough, Lydia (Estes) Pinkham was a distant relative, although I doubt my parents ever knew of that connection. Her ancestry in the United States dated from the seventeenth century, and her family had been neighbours and close friends of William Lloyd Garrison, the famous Massachusetts abolitionist. So, by the time Lydia was a teenager, she was actively involved in the anti-slavery movement and she also became a strong advocate for the early feminist movement.

The other thing you should know about Lydia is that, like most women of her era, she had very little faith in the medical establishment, and she was inclined to brew up folk remedies for various minor ailments, particularly if those ailments related to female complaints. So, mixing up a little pleurisy root, life root, fenugreek, unicorn root, and black cohosh, plus a generous dollop of alcohol, Lydia cooked up a recipe that brought nineteenth-century women flocking to her door. And by the twentieth century, Lydia Pinkham's Compound was being very successfully marketed from a family business out of a Salem, Massachusetts, factory.

I'm sure the only reason that Mama kept the pantry stocked with Lydia Pinkham's was because our family of teenage girls went

through multiple bottles of her tonic every month and it was cheaper to buy it in bulk. However, my sisters and I preferred it served chilled.

Nannie and Preacher happened to be away at a church meeting one particular October, so, for reasons of efficiency, one of us girls decided to pour two or three little bottles of Lydia Pinkham's into a milk bottle and keep it in the icebox.

Charlie, meanwhile, was at football practice.

Later that afternoon, he came home hot and thirsty and headed immediately for the icebox and, like all teenage boys, never bothered to find a glass. He went straight for the milk bottle, upended it, and drank the entire quart before he realized we were all watching him in horror.

From that time on, whenever we wanted to get his goat we called him Charlene. And, many years later when we told that story on him, he called us Charlie's Angels. (I think he was being sarcastic.) Yes, we were all growing up. During our time in Denton, four of my brothers and sisters graduated from college and two had married.

By this time, I was old enough to get in on the dating intrigue but, as you can imagine, Papa's rules about courting were pretty discouraging and more than a few young beaus were scared off the front porch before they could even make it through the front door. My older sister Ruth was smitten with young Tom Mitchell, but *he* was so frightened of my father that the closest he ever made it to the house was a half-block down the street where he hid behind a fence hoping that Ruth might venture outside. Finally, I was enlisted to be the lookout. When I heard Tom whistle for Ruth, my job was to divert Papa's attention while she slipped out the door to meet him. It worked pretty well, I guess; they were married a short time later and lived happily ever after.

It was 1935 when Preacher finally had to admit to himself that the economy couldn't support a rebuilding campaign, even though the congregation was growing at a healthy rate. However, there

were the diehard optimists among the flock who insisted that God would provide – eventually – if only he could hang on and continue to serve. But Preacher was no longer a young man. At sixty-one, he had had to face the reality that the Denton church couldn't financially support an assistant minister to help him attend to the increasing needs of the congregants and that he would have to find a smaller church. I would be starting my senior year of high school in the fall.

But, as I like to say, I am nothing if not resilient. Even I know how devastating it can be for adolescents to be uprooted from all their friends, but this had been a fact of life for all of us as we grew up. It wasn't that we learned to keep our friendships superficial. It was simply that we learned to make friends quickly and to appreciate each new adventure as it came. And too, every congregation had been an extended family who genuinely cared for us so we learned to expect the best of everyone we met.

Preacher responded to a call from a tiny, struggling church in Eastland, Texas, in the spring of 1935. Most of the congregation had moved away during the worst years of the Depression, but Franklin D. Roosevelt had been elected and almost immediately established make-work projects like the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Public Works Administration, and the Tennessee Valley Authority, at least slowing the free-fall of the plummeting economy. For the first time since 1929, there was a glimmer of hope and Preacher's irrepressible optimism returned. His job this time would be to rebuild the congregation, not the church.

Eastland is a tiny town about a hundred miles southwest of Fort Worth, and its claim to fame when we were there – even now, I suspect – is a horny toad by the name of Old Rip. What's a horny toad, you ask? Well, if you're going to believe this story, I'd better tell you a little bit about Texas horny toads.

First, horny toads aren't toads at all. They're not even frogs. They're lizards. And yes, they do have horns as well as scales. They're basically lazy. They're sit-and-wait predators. And if they're threatened they're likely to just sit there, hoping you'll not notice, I guess.

But if you're some especially hungry critter and insist on poking at it, it'll puff up its body to make it look hornier and thus more difficult for you to swallow. Should you appear to be considering pursuing this course of action anyway, the horny toad will then do something really disgusting. It'll squirt blood at you from its eyes.

The story goes that, when the Eastland courthouse was built in 1897, a horny toad was sealed in the cornerstone of the building. In 1928, when the current courthouse was being built, the original cornerstone was opened and Old Rip was found alive and undoubtedly spitting mad.

You can imagine the notoriety. I'm told he toured the country and, at the pinnacle of his fame, he received a formal audience with President Calvin Coolidge. However, the celebrity and the paparazzi were apparently too much for Old Rip and he died in 1929. His remains were placed in a glass casket and, should you wish a visitation, they say you can find him on view in the present courthouse.

Remind me to tell you about Jackalopes later on....

Eastland was unfortunately a boom-and-bust town from the word go. It had been sparsely settled by immigrants from the Old South just prior to the Civil War, but there were still frequent raids by the Comanche and Kiowa people and, following the war, the population declined. Eventually though, more settlers came to plant corn and cotton and to build cattle ranches, and, by the early 1880s, the railroad arrived. Then, with a booming cotton economy in the early twentieth century, it looked like Eastland was the place to bank on. However, a boll weevil infestation crippled the cotton production in about 1916 and farmers left the area in droves.

Then, almost on the heels of the last departing cotton farmer, a major oil discovery was made in Eastland county, which set off a spectacular boom that lasted into the 1920s. Thousands of speculators and wildcatters flooded into the area; the population more than doubled. But by 1922 the oil boom was over, too.

Nothing however, was more devastating to Eastland than the Depression. Cotton production came to a virtual standstill, oil

production barely limped along, but when Preacher arrived in Eastland, he was very interested in learning more about the oil industry. Little did any of us know that this education would be so influential in how my life would eventually turn out. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

What Preacher discovered in 1935 was a tiny church growing smaller with every passing month. There was no question of growing the congregation. People were leaving and no new Presbyterians were arriving. No one could make a living in Eastland. We were all very poor. I worked at the drug store after school and cleaned houses and babysat to make a little extra money. But I also played basketball and sang in the church choir and was in the drama club. And I met lots of boys who played football, so I was a pretty typical high school girl and enjoyed every minute of my senior year at Eastland High.

After I graduated in 1936, I went back to Denton to start college. However, I was only able to complete one semester because Papa simply couldn't afford to pay any additional tuition and I had to drop out. I came back to Eastland and starting working odd jobs as I could find them because I really wanted to be a nurse and I hoped I could save a little money and maybe get to return to college one day.

Papa faced the fact that the Eastland congregation could no longer support a minister, and he began to consider other options. He had never strayed far from his roots as an itinerant preacher, and the Depression years had seen the resurgence of evangelical revival tent meetings across the South, so when he heard that the famous Gypsy Smith was coming to preach at Abilene, he made a special trip to see him.

Smith was born in a tent in England to a gypsy family that made its living on the road selling notions from their wagon. His father was in and out of jail for various petty offences and while there met a prison chaplain who introduced him to the gospel, and eventually the whole family converted at a Salvation Army mission meeting. As the boy grew in the faith, he taught himself to read and write and began preaching and singing the gospel on street corners and mission

halls. Soon, huge crowds were assembling to hear him and, within a very short time, he began conducting evangelical crusades around the world, which eventually brought him to Abilene, Texas, in 1936.

Papa never forgot hearing Gipsy Smith. Had he been a younger man, I have no doubt he would have gone back to tent meeting evangelism after that powerful experience. In the end though, Preacher decided to accept the call to a church in Winters, Texas.

If we thought the dust storms had been bad in Denton, we were in for a real shock.