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2013

My name is Lola

Rozsa, Lola

University of Calgary Press

Rozsa, L. "My name is Lola: as told to and written by Susie Sparks". University of Calgary Press, Calgary, Alberta, 2013.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1880/49851>

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MY NAME IS LOLA

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

ISBN 978-1-55238-735-1

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Hello, Charlie!

Winters is south and west of Abilene, deep in the dust bowl. By the time we arrived, the wind had blown pretty much non-stop for years. Worse was the drought. By 1937, the water table had about dried up and what remained was so alkaline it was barely potable. It tasted dreadful and it was so hard that it was virtually impossible to make suds to wash our clothes.

The large red brick church was in good repair though, and certainly adequate for the members of the congregation, as was the manse for our now-small family of four. I went to work that year cleaning houses again and picking up odd jobs when I could, while my older sister was able to go back to Denton to resume college in preparation for a career as a teacher. But my father was obviously in failing health. He was diagnosed with pernicious anemia, although frequent transfusions seemed to revive him and he struggled on as he always had.

The manse had a wide expanse of lawn between the house and the church so, just as they had at all their postings, Nannie and Preacher resumed the summer garden parties for the town's children. And there were lots of them because Winters attracted great numbers of migrant workers at cotton-picking time. White, brown, and black children roamed the streets while their parents worked, and some inevitably got into trouble. Occasionally Mama and Papa were called for assistance with "delinquent" children, but both of them

knew that most of those troubles could be solved with a little extra attention. On Saturday afternoons, Mama would set out the ice-cream freezer and bake a big cake, and the children would assemble on the lawn to sing and play games and have fun.

The garden parties attracted so many children that eventually Preacher and Nannie needed a little extra help on Saturday afternoons so they appealed to the congregation for volunteers. A few stepped up but, much to Preacher's consternation, most made it clear that they opposed "missionary work." They had hired him to devote his time and effort to the older members of the congregation, not for those "dirty youngsters." It was this point of friction between Preacher and the elders of the church that eventually caused him to resign.

For the first time, he had no specific plans. But, as we all knew, God opens new windows of opportunity when these things happen. Indeed, Preacher was so unconcerned about our financial future that he had negotiated with the powers that be at Trinity University in Waxahachie to enrol me as a full-time student and to give me some financial aid. Plus he was able to find a job for me waiting tables in the dining hall that would help defray the other costs of my education, so in September, 1938, I started back to school. And almost immediately, a new future opened for Nannie and Preacher when he was offered the pulpit at Whitesboro, Texas. They would serve there very happily for the next ten years.

Trinity University is now in San Antonio and it's still affiliated with the Presbyterian Church. In 1938, however, Trinity was in Waxahachie, where it had been since 1902 when it had relocated from its first site in Tehuacana, Texas. It had been founded there shortly after the end of the Civil War by a few hardy pioneers from Cumberland Church stock who believed in the transformative power of higher education, particularly if that education was absorbed far from the hurley-burley of commerce and other distractions. As a result, students and faculty could only get to the university by horse-drawn carriage from the train station that was six miles away.

It was a co-educational school from the beginning, undoubtedly thanks to its Cumberland Presbyterian roots, and it had a decidedly progressive curriculum with literary societies for discussion and debate. However, by the turn of the twentieth century, it was clear to the trustees that the school would have to relocate to survive, and it was moved to Waxahachie – a cotton-growing community and a railroad hub. At the time, it was one of only four accredited colleges in Texas.

Unfortunately though, the fall-out of the 1929 financial disaster meant that colleges were devastated by declining enrolments and, by the time I arrived at Trinity in 1938, it had been placed on probation and was teetering on the brink of collapse. Whether I even knew that at the time, I don't remember now. I just knew I was very lucky indeed to be starting over. After two years of general studies, I could work toward my nursing degree – as I'd always hoped.

Mama and Papa drove me to Waxahachie, and we all sat down with the dean to decide which, if any, of the courses I'd taken back in Denton would transfer, and where I might be most useful. I enrolled as a freshman, was assigned to a room in Drane Hall, and met my roommate, and was then introduced to Mr. and Mrs. Ragsdale, who ran the dining hall. They were happy to give me a job waiting tables for the freshmen boys and told me I would work five days a week and wrap sandwiches for them on the weekend. That sounded like a walk in the park! I was used to feeding the multitudes, thanks to Mama's hospitality, so a couple of tables of freshman boys was hardly worth notice. So, after settling me in my dorm, Nannie and Preacher left me to get acquainted with Waxahachie.

It was a pretty little town – hilly and full of Victorian gingerbread houses back in those days – and the town square had several churches and a beautiful big stone courthouse surrounded by huge oak trees. Today, it's a charming southern suburb of Dallas that has retained the old-fashioned feel of a wholesome little community, where pink-blossoming crape myrtles shade wide neighbourly streets.

Most of the students when I was there were kids from cotton farmer families because Waxahachie is right in the middle of the nation's largest cotton-producing county. And even though it was a place where everyone knew and looked after everyone else, the college made sure the freshmen weren't corrupted by the exposure to big-city living too quickly. For the first semester, we weren't even allowed to *speak* to upperclassmen. And of course all the girls were strictly monitored by Mrs. Dodd, the Drane Hall matron, who locked the doors at ten every night. However, despite all the safeguards, I'm proud to say I was almost immediately chastised for contravening the rule against fraternizing with upperclassmen.

The tradition at Trinity was that during the first semester the second-year students broke in the freshmen with harmless little pranks and reminded us that we were too insignificant to address them in any way. But one of the sophomore girls recognized that I probably wouldn't be easily cowed into submission and decided that she should show me the ropes. She and her upperclassman friends piled me into her car and we drove downtown to a dance hall that I'm *sure* Preacher would never have approved of.

And that's where I met Charlie. He was not only an upperclassman, two years older than I, he was also a football player. And even better, he knew how to dance. And, by the end of that evening, so did I. Charlie walked me back to Drane Hall and Mrs. Dodd met me at the door. Not only was I late, I was obviously guilty of a more serious infraction and she let me know it with both barrels.

I obviously wasn't much dissuaded by her lecture because Charlie and I, by the end of that first semester, were an item, despite the fact that I was very busy with both classes and work in the dining hall. I took the usual array of first-year courses: English, biology, French, public speaking, and bible. I confess that I flunked biology that first semester, but I still maintain that it was because the prof mumbled and I couldn't understand a word he said. However, I loved English and was good at it.

Classes started at nine o'clock, but I was up by six to get into my waitress uniform and to the dining hall by seven so I could be finished cleaning up in time for my first class. I remember that the meals were pretty Spartan, especially for all those ravenously hungry farm boys. But we always had lots of fried okra and beans of every size, shape and colour.

I'd dash back to the dining hall at noon to wait lunch tables, then run back to be in time for my afternoon classes. Most days, there'd be a little break between the last class and the dinner hour, so, if Charlie didn't have football practice, we'd sit on the lawn under a shade tree to study together. And on the days he did, I was there to watch because I'd joined the Lancerettes, the pep squad for the college teams.

We hung around with three or four other couples that year. They called us Sweet-Lola-and-Charlie, and if we happened to be late coming home, my roommate would make sure our dorm room window was unlatched so I could climb in. Once in a while, Charlie would borrow a car so he could take me home to visit his family in Ferris, Texas, and at Christmas we drove to Whitesboro to visit mine, and I suppose everyone thought we were destined for marriage once we graduated.

In fact, when we both came back for the second semester, we took up just where we'd left off and spent even more time together since Charlie wasn't playing football and, as centre, he was too big to play basketball. However, my sister Eleanor was due to have her second baby in March and Preacher insisted that I leave school and go to help her through her recovery in Denton. Charlie dutifully borrowed a car and drove me up there then back again to Trinity a few weeks later.

I worked hard to catch up with the classes I'd missed, so by the end of term in June, I was ready to go work at a Christian camp in north Texas that Preacher had found for me. Charlie had to go to football camp at Trinity all summer, so our plan was for me to finish at the camp and join Charlie back at Trinity where I could

work in the dining room to support myself. That way, we could see one another in the evenings, and we'd both be ready to start the fall semester together. Charlie would be a senior.

Then Preacher interfered again! This time he announced that I'd have to spend the rest of the summer with my sister Ann in Olney, Texas. She was a new bride and needed some company. I was devastated. Why did I need to babysit Ann? She was a grown woman; she could find her own friends. I wanted to go back to Trinity to be with Charlie. But there was no way I could budge Preacher once he got an idea into his head.

So very sadly, I wrote to Charlie and let him know – then packed my bag for Olney. It didn't take much packing in those days; I only owned four hand-me-down dresses plus a skirt and sweater. Anyway, Preacher picked me up for a very stony-silent drive out west to deposit me at Ann and Ed's home.

Olney was a little nondescript town in north central Texas until the 1920s when a plentiful supply of crude oil was discovered, and then a huge gusher blew in and oil derricks sprouted like weeds. The town, shall we say, got to be pretty rough and tumble after that. Saloons and houses of ill repute took root almost as fast as the oil derricks until a law-and-order sheriff arrived to whip things into control, so by the time I arrived it was pretty dull.

Ann and Ed took pity on me as I moped around missing Charlie with nothing to do, so finally, on June 24, they planned a bridge party to introduce me to some of their friends. I, of course, had never dealt a hand of cards in my life because that was another of Preacher's taboos, but Ed said that he'd met a fellow on one of the seismic crews outside of town who knew how to play and would teach me....