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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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And So We Begin

Stroud, Oklahoma. It was everything Ted had warned me about; a tiny hopeful boomlet just south of Tulsa where, in the fall of 1939, the wind was still blowing and the sand was still drifting. Today there are fewer than three thousand people in Stroud, but we arrived not long after Route 66 brought all kinds of rest stop amenities like motels and gas stations and restaurants.

Back in 1915, the legendary outlaw Henry Starr, along with his sidekick Lewis Estes (no relation, I hope), and six other bad guys attempted to rob two of the town's banks simultaneously. But the town heard about the dastardly deed while it was in progress and quickly took up arms, forming a citizen posse. They ran down Henry and his pal Lewis, wounding them both in a gun battle, but the rest of the gang escaped with all the money. Henry and Lewis were the only two of the eight culprits who had to go to the state penitentiary. Not much had happened in Stroud since, at least not until Shell got interested in what might be percolating beneath the subsurface geology.

Miraculously, Ted's party chief on the seismic crew had found a duplex for rent in Stroud so he and his wife snatched up one side and alerted Ted that the other side was available. It was a little grey-shingled house with a bright, sunny kitchen, and I discovered that if I opened the front and back doors at the same time, the dust would blow right through. We moved in with my one suitcase and one

small box of wedding gifts. Fortunately, Ted had a chair, a lamp, and a folding table because, although it was advertised as furnished, the three-room duplex really only came with a bed, a couch, and a night table. We loved it! It was perfect. We were well and truly married.

However, I think if you'd asked either of us if the Depression had finally come to an end, we'd have laughed out loud, especially from our point of view in that dusty little town in central Oklahoma. But the fact was, the country *was* getting back to work in 1939, largely because of the ominous war cloud looming on the horizon.

The day we got married, the British declared war on Germany. And the next day, the United States publicly declared neutrality.

But President Roosevelt borrowed a billion dollars in 1939 to rebuild American armed forces and, by December of 1941, manufacturing had shot up by a phenomenal 50 per cent. So I'm pretty sure the multinational oil companies were very aware of what was happening. Shell's regional head office in Tulsa was pulling out all the stops; exploration was their top priority.

The Shell seismic crew had been sent to Stroud to check on some likely-looking plays, so the crew's job was to take the next step – to help head office decide whether to drill. Drilling, as you know, is very, very expensive. I've been told that about 85 per cent of "likely-looking" comes up dry, so the oil business is not for the faint of heart. It takes a gambler's instinct combined with a very sober second thought to take those well-informed risks that may, just may, pay off.

Ted's crew consisted of two crews working together: the field crew and the office crew. The field crew had a land man whose job it was to negotiate access to the site with the property owner. He was actually sent out ahead of the crew by the Tulsa office, but he hung around for the duration of their assignment to take care of any difficulties that might arise. The other guys on the field crew, who came to be known as jug hustlers, used truck-mounted drilling equipment to drill a series of holes for the dynamite anywhere from 60 to 300 feet deep at designated locations mapped out by the office

crew – the party chief, his assistant, the geologist, and the geophysicist – who did the actual science of the work. Then the reel truck crew would lay out cable a quarter of a mile on either side of the shot hole and drop the geophones so the jug hustlers could attach them to the cable. The shooter would load the holes with the appropriate amount of dynamite and, at the direction of the scientists, set off the charges sequentially. The reverberations of the explosives echoing through the different formations of the successive rock layers below would be recorded through the geophones onto a long piece of photographic paper.

The next step was to wash the records – prepare the photographic paper for an analysis of the tracings by the geologists and geophysicists – and that was the stinky part. Occasionally, when no one else was around, I would go down to the office to do that part for Ted, and I swear those tapes must have been washed in formaldehyde. Then the crew would rush those records back to the Tulsa office where they were added to the rest of their information about the site's drilling potential.

The crew worked together, travelled together, and most often lived together. Exactly as Ted had warned, we were a big family. We had all the positive benefits as well as all the inevitable problems that go with that close relationship, so I felt right at home. Mostly, we were young, full of energy, excited about our futures, and enthusiastic about the adventure. Some had families of small children, but at that time Ted and I were among the few childless couples. However, most of the crew were single guys. The little towns didn't have much in the way of recreation so we made our own fun, and the wives tended to be the crew's good-will ambassadors so we all got to know the local people, too.

The first thing I did, of course, was to find a church family and offer to sing in their choir. Then I found the grocery store. This was a real novelty; I'd never had to shop before. The ingredients for most of our meals back home just magically appeared in our pantry so it was kind of fun learning that I could cook anything that Ted and I

might like. I remember that eggs were 10 cents a dozen, but pork chops were horrifically expensive at 10 cents each. Our rent was \$20 a month, so Ted's salary of \$95 had to be budgeted pretty carefully to ensure we had gas money to travel back and forth to Whitesboro for visits.

But just as I was getting thoroughly nested in my new home, Ted came in one evening to announce that we'd be moving. It was November 2. Our stay in Stroud had lasted two months. I remember thinking, it's a good thing I was raised by an itinerant preacher who believed he should be able to accomplish what he'd set out to do in five or six years. I guess geophysicists just work a lot faster. Obviously, Tulsa hadn't been much impressed by those tapes. We were on our way to Winfield, Kansas.

Compared to Stroud, Winfield was a metropolis. Today it has about twelve thousand people and it's probably not much larger than it was back in 1939. But when we drove up there I was relieved to see that we weren't too much farther away from my family than we had been in Stroud because Winfield sits practically on the northern border of Oklahoma, almost directly north of Whitesboro, where my family would be gathering for the upcoming holidays.

It's a beautiful little town situated along the Walnut River and Timber Creek. In fact, it's been named as one of the best one hundred small towns in America, and Ted was very pleased to discover that it had a wonderful golf course that today advertises itself as having "carpet-like fairways with feisty bent-grass greens." He'd played a lot back in Michigan and was an exceptionally good golfer, but life on a seismic crew hadn't given him much of an opportunity to work on his game.

However, first things first. We had to find a place to live and that was getting harder and harder because these small town landlords had figured out that seismic crews were notoriously unreliable. Leases meant nothing. We might stay for a year, but then again, we might be there only a few weeks. Who knew? I would patrol the streets looking for rental signs, but no matter how charming I was,

once the landlord discovered what my husband did for a living, the door would be slammed in my face.

Finally, though, I found an upstairs apartment with three rooms and a bath – plus a door that opened on a Murphy bed. I liked to call it our guest room. It was across the street from a little convenience store and not too far from a Presbyterian church. And best of all, it was only \$20 a month. The rest of the crew was very envious of our good luck because all the oil companies seemed to have discovered Winfield at once, so there was very little housing of any kind to be had by anyone.

By that time, I had my new-town routine pretty well under control. I'd set off for the church first, find out when the choir was scheduled to practice, and promise I'd be there on the assigned evening. Then I'd start introducing myself to the merchants around town. One of the wives on the crew, however, just never seemed to get it. She had no interest in meeting the locals and was completely convinced she would have nothing in common with any of them, so of course she was very lonely with her husband out in the field much of the time. I was discovering though how much Mama had taught us about making good friends quickly and getting involved in a helpful way in whatever community we happened to land. Quite frankly, that may have been the best life lesson I ever learned.

Within a very few weeks, we were off to Whitesboro to celebrate Nannie's birthday and of course went back for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Yes, I know. I suppose I really wasn't trying too hard to wean myself away from my family. But when we'd go back home for special occasions, *everyone* in the family was there. The old oak table was stretched to its limit to accommodate not only all my brothers and sisters but also their spouses and babies, and whichever members of the congregation were too far from their own homes at the holiday season. My heart was still there. And to add to the poignancy of our warm family reunions, the talk inevitably turned to the sadness of war where other families were suffering unimaginable grief.

That Christmas of '39, we talked about the fact that British conscription had increased to cover men between the ages of nineteen and forty-one, and I know that Ted and his brothers-in-law worried about whether they would get to do their part, too. Ted, of course, was working in an essential industry and was needed at the home front, but I was hearing about more and more of my Trinity classmates who were considering joining the Canadian troops that had already arrived in Europe.

We drove back to Winfield after the holiday to settle in to winter in Kansas, and before long Ted asked whether I'd like to go with him to Tulsa. He'd set up a meeting at the regional office to discuss the possibility of heading up his own crew as party chief, so I roamed the big city and had a wonderful time window-shopping and people-watching. By the time we were ready to go home, however, a norther blew in and we knew we'd better get on the road fast. The storm worsened with every passing mile, and before long the snow was coming at us horizontally. We were in a white-out. I'd been a pretty self-confident Texas driver for a long time, but this was my first blizzard, and it had me scared to death so, even though Ted was driving, my knuckles were white and I was offering up fast and fulsome thanks that I'd married a Michigan man who knew how to handle it.

Spring came eventually though and with it the premiere of *Gone with the Wind*. Now I'm sure this wasn't its *first* premiere; I think that one was in Atlanta. But they must have released it all over the country at about the same time – along with its over-the-top publicity about Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh. Everyone was excited about seeing this new movie, so much so that the party chief gave the whole crew the day off so we could all attend.

We knew it was almost four hours long so the women all packed picnic lunches for the intermission and we made a day of it. I know all the hoopla sounds silly now, but *Gone with the Wind* really did make movie history. It was the longest sound movie ever made at that time, the first feature film shot in Technicolor, it received ten

Academy awards and, to this day, no movie has ever made more money. It cost \$3.85 million to make and its box office take was \$400 million. And, speaking as a Southerner, it was darn good Civil War history too, except of course that it sentimentalized slavery. But when Scarlett stood there in her ragged dress on the burned-over fields of Tara and, with her clinched fist held high, vowed, “As God is my witness, I’ll never go hungry again!,” I could hear generations of Reconstruction-era Southerners pulling themselves up by their bootstraps and living another day by the sheer force of will.

Ted loved it too, and we watched it again several times after it came out on TV. But ironically, I think he might have identified with Scarlett’s stubborn refusal to submit to insurmountable odds even more than I did. I had grown up with six closely spaced siblings in a noisy, laughing, singing, story-telling, fun-loving family. But Ted had been raised by parents whose two primary values were the importance of education and hard work. They were both lovely people, but they made it clear that the subject of their extended families wasn’t open for discussion. Dad Rozsa said that the last day he ever spoke Hungarian was the day he landed on Ellis Island. “The first day of my life started at that moment,” he said.

You cannot imagine how very different our backgrounds were. My family revelled in one another. We all talked at once and told stories on each other and learned about those who had come before us from parents who were not only natural-born storytellers but were also professionally trained to teach the history and values and ethics of their forefathers through storytelling. All of us adored our parents and each other, and we were wrapped in a close nurturing bond that was made even stronger by the church communities we lived among and who cared for us all our lives. What we learned were the people skills.

Ted’s parents were, of course, very proud of their three exceptionally bright children. Both Ted and his brother John earned scholarships to Michigan Tech in the hardest years of the Depression. They had to get in and get out fast because there was no money to

keep them there any longer than absolutely necessary. There was no time for recreation or entertainment anyway, but clearly they were only there to get an education – the best education that could lead to the best job opportunities. What Ted developed was an eclectic intellectual curiosity along with a very strong work ethic. Both served him extraordinarily well his entire life.

On April 15, Ted came home to announce we were moving again. We had been in Winfield for six months, an eternity in seismic speak.