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## MY NAME IS LOLA

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

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## On the Road Again

*... just can't wait to get on the road again!*

Seismology was a pretty new technology back in the early '40s. What it made possible was a look into structures buried too deep to be found otherwise, so geophysicists were able to find hundreds of new anticlines and other oil traps that had never been discovered before. All the big oil companies were taking a second look at formerly productive fields that had seemingly run dry, so we were on the move ... again.

Bristow, Oklahoma. It was getting pretty clear that we weren't going to sink roots any time soon, so I figured I'd better get a little more efficient about the transition process. I've always admired the Indian women who could pack up their teepees and all their worldly goods and have them lashed to the back of a horse before breakfast. If I was going to be a nomad, I figured I'd better learn the tricks of the trade. Let's face it, we were accumulating more stuff; somehow I'd have to find a way to haul it along.

The dynamite for the seismic teams was packed in sturdy wooden crates for transport to all the sites, and I'd had my eye on those boxes ever since I'd been introduced to the field crew. I figured they'd make terrific end tables, and so what if the word DYNAMITE was stencilled in big red letters across the tops and sides. With a pretty piece of fabric draped over them, no one need know what they really

were. So, sing-singing the Depression-era mantra to *use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without*, I'd managed to expropriate quite a number of them. I knew if I threw a nice white table cloth over a few stacked boxes, my dinner guests never had to know what they were actually eating on.

But now that we were moving again, I realized they could serve a dual purpose. They'd make excellent packing boxes, too. I could wrap up the dishes in the linens and stuff everything into the dynamite crates so securely that nothing would even rattle. And, should some hapless volunteer be commandeered to help us load up the car, that giant red stencil would undoubtedly catch his attention. He sure wasn't likely to drop it. It was foolproof. We'd never break a single thing.

Bristow, Oklahoma: home of Gene Autry, the singing cowboy. We didn't have far to drive; Bristow is just south of Oklahoma City and there's not much to it. It was just another little community that was attracting lots of renewed interest by the oil companies because of its past performance in the boom of the late '20s.

This time, though, the whole crew was able to move into the same apartment complex. Ted and I claimed a downstairs unit with two bedrooms and, best of all, that extra bedroom was an actual room, not a Murphy bed, so I had hopes of inviting my family for a visit one day, should I ever acquire a telephone. Getting a phone was a major challenge in those days, particularly if you were of no fixed address, like we were. But I even found an extra chair so my potential guest wouldn't have to sit on a dynamite box.

The apartment had a big yard with a garage. Ted had the bright idea that we could build a trailer to haul all our stuff when it came time for us to move again. He had a company car by this time and I was driving his old one, so he thought he could find a two-wheel axel on a trailer bed that we could convert to something that would serve our needs. Between the two of us, we built up the sides and made it to fit what furniture we'd accumulated as well as all the dynamite boxes.

Ted found a nearby golf course, which made him very happy, and while we were there he also took flying lessons and got into photography in a big way, so when he got word that he had been promoted to assistant party chief and had a new crew to meet in Decatur, Texas, it seemed like our three months in Bristow had flown by. Both of us could hardly wait to try out that new trailer.

I was really excited about the move because it would mean we'd be close to my parents in Whitesboro, but since Ted had a few days off, we decided we could drive up to Michigan to visit his folks first – if we hurried.

I shifted into overdrive. After all, I was the packing queen by this time. Out came the dynamite boxes, dishes, linens, kitchen utensils, laundry equipment, pots and pans, foodstuffs, books, photography equipment, the clothes, shoes, golf clubs.... I was a machine. Wrap the dishes in newspaper, layer the books with lighter clothes, stuff the condiments from the ice box where they'd fit, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, and load it all into the trailer with the furniture.

By the time we finally bounced down the road to Decatur, I was glad to be getting somewhere I could unpack and get settled again, even though home would be another dusty, windy duplex right on the highway. The trucks would be roaring by day and night, but we were close to my family and I knew we'd have lots of company, so I was eager to unload the trailer. Ted started hauling in the furniture and then the dynamite boxes, but he was somewhat puzzled by the gloppy yellow drip that was oozing out of the box packed with the linens. The smell was pretty awful, too. One horrified look and I knew what I'd done. I'd been in such a hurry to pack everything I hadn't bothered to screw the lids tight on the condiments so, when I crammed them in upside down with the linens – so they wouldn't break of course – , one of the mustard jars oozed. And throughout the long drive, it kept oozing. By this time the jar was bare and dry. The linens weren't.

My family did visit, of course. In fact we had lots of company during our six months in Decatur. Most of them were kind enough

not to comment that our house smelled like a county fair hotdog stand.

The trailer was perfect, though. We lashed it to the back of the car and loaded it up. We were, (sing it with me Willie!) on the road again. We just couldn't wait to get on the road again ... because this time we were headed back to where we'd begun.

We had been married eighteen months. All that time we'd lived with our family of crew members, hopping back and forth between isolated little towns scattered across Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas, wrapped in a protective little cocoon. Did we really know what was happening in the world around us? Oh, most certainly we heard the news on the radio and read the headlines, but it was very far away and there was a strong movement toward American isolationism following Germany's invasion of Poland. There just didn't seem to be much political will to get involved in somebody else's war.

But over the last year, the headlines grew more frightening day by day. In March Finland surrendered to Russia; in April Denmark surrendered to Germany and Germany invaded Norway. Winston Churchill became the new prime minister of Britain, replacing Neville Chamberlain in May – while Adolf Hitler invaded the Netherlands. Then Belgium. Then Paris.

1940 was an election year in the United States. Franklin Roosevelt was up for re-election against Wendell Wilkie, an avowed isolationist, and a poll taken that fall indicated that even though Americans were mighty impressed with British courage in the face of overwhelming odds, 83 per cent still didn't think the United States should get involved. A week before the election, Roosevelt declared, "I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again and again: your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars."

Hindsight makes it pretty obvious that Roosevelt was only promising what was expedient for the purpose of getting re-elected. Merely weeks later, in his final fireside chat of 1940, he said, "The history of recent years proves that the shootings and the chains and the concentration camps are not simply the transient tools but the

very altars of modern dictatorships. They may talk of a new order in the world, but what they have in mind is only a revival of the oldest and worst tyranny.... In a military sense Great Britain and the British Empire today are the spearhead of resistance to world conquest. And they are putting up a fight which will live forever in the story of human gallantry.... The time has come for America to be the great arsenal of democracy.”

On January 10, 1941, he introduced Lend-Lease into the United States Congress. In February, we were on our way back to Olney, Texas. Ted’s job was to make sure the United States could fuel that arsenal.

My job, yet again, was to find us a place to live and that was getting more and more difficult because so many oil companies were converging on these little towns all at once and housing was less than scarce. However, there was a partially furnished house that we could have for about four months, so, since I knew we could be long gone in that amount of time, I took it.

But wouldn’t you know, the owner came back to reclaim it just as he said he would and we ended up being thankful for a two-room apartment behind a garage. The only positive thing about it was that it was on the ground floor. Anyway, we weren’t to stay long in that little apartment because I was, shall we say, highly motivated to find someplace cooler. By that time I was very pregnant. It was July in west Texas. You cannot imagine the heat. I finally found a wonderful little duplex, blissfully cool, but practically before I could even unpack all the dynamite boxes, Ted came home to tell me we had been transferred.

Living in Olney again, despite the heat, was wonderful. I had had an earlier miscarriage so everyone was pampering me through this pregnancy, and I saw lots of my mother as well as my sister Ann, who was also expecting and due about three months ahead of me, so I have very happy memories of that little town. It was chock-a-block with people just like us who were all working the oilfields in various capacities. Olney became famous for its One-Arm Dove Hunt long

after we left there, but this story's worth telling because it's a quint-essentially Texas-Roughneck Tale.

The Dove Hunt was the creation of two local residents, Jack Northrup and Jack Bishop, the One-Armed Jacks, each of whom had a limb amputated at the shoulder because of oilfield accidents.

While sitting at the local drugstore, in order to harass two eavesdropping strangers, the Jacks loudly began discussing how they planned to go dove hunting with their muzzle-loaded shotguns and bolt-action rifles. This loud-talk bravado was meant as a joke, of course. Either gun would be next to impossible to operate with only one arm, but eventually the Jacks did hold an actual One-Arm Dove Hunt. It was attended by six Olney residents who had lost arms, mainly due to oilfield accidents, as well as others who had heard of the event through the grapevine.

The event grew quickly, so the Jacks expanded the event to two days and included such features as one-armed trap-shooting, one-arm horseshoes, cow-chip throwing, and a 10-cents-a-finger breakfast on the day of the hunt. It's become quite the little revenue-generator for the town of Olney.

By October, Ted and I were on the road again. This time to Jacksboro, Texas, which was only a forty-minute drive from Olney so I could go back there for my pre-natal visits and to see Ann. Living accommodations in Jacksboro weren't exactly five star, but we finally found a lean-to that had been built by some enterprising landlord who knew a seller's market when he saw it. Practically anything with a roof would rent at whatever price the landlord imagined the market would bear. Frankly, Scarlett, we were glad to get it.

Truly, it was a lean-to the old man had built on the back of his house; he was using the rental revenue to support himself in his old age. He and his daughter lived in the actual house and the walls between us were so paper thin we could hear them talking to one another. Thankfully though, we were hardly ever there, what with Ted working out in the field and me going back and forth to Olney to see Mama and Ann.



Mama was still in Olney on November 30, 1941, helping Ann with her new baby boy when our daughter was born. I named her Ruth Ann after my two closest sisters because my sister Ruth never stopped complaining that she wasn't given a middle name like the rest of her siblings. The baby was happy and healthy and I was just fine, but in those days they kept new mothers in the hospital for ten days following delivery. While we were still there, the news came that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. On December 11, the United States declared war on Germany and Japan.

Oil exploration shifted into high gear.

Baby Ruthie and I left the hospital for Whitesboro so she could be cuddled and petted and I could complete my recovery through the remaining weeks of December. Preacher's parishioners brought us extra chickens and produce and covered-dish suppers because my large extended family now included high chairs full of toddlers and infants. We all huddled around Papa's radio every evening to hear how the country was mobilizing for war. Many of my Trinity classmates were signing up, mostly for the Marines. We all knew that it was unlikely we'd ever see some of them again.

Ted finally arrived for a few days of Christmas holiday, and, as always, it was hard for me to leave, but it was time for *our* little family to go back to the ramshackle lean-to in Jacksboro. I'm very sure the proprietor was no happier to see me coming with my newborn, who as yet hadn't figured out the difference between daytime and nighttime, than I was to see him and his *equally* noisy daughter. Thankfully though, before we had been back in Jacksboro a week, Shell decided to move its seismic operations farther west to Midland.

Midland – so named because it's halfway between Dallas and El Paso. Ted had been promoted to assistant party chief and would be working in the district office, but housing was still going to be a challenge, so we were instructed to check into the Alamo Plaza Motel until we could find a place to live.

Remember the Alamo. You'll be hearing about it often.

Midland wasn't a major metropolis by any stretch of the imagination, but it was definitely the biggest city we'd been assigned to so far. Smack in the middle of the west Texas desert, it's been called the High Sky City because it rests on an absolutely flat horizon of sand, unimpeded by anything other than an occasional tumbleweed that might take your eye off the dazzling, brilliantly blue sky. It's an indescribable blue that you'll never see anywhere else. And it's that same colour every day since clouds are practically unheard of in west Texas. Against that sky, nothing can compete. Even now, the giant office buildings of downtown Midland seem somehow false-fronted, as if they're only a temporary movie set destined to be torn down so the sky can take over again, like it's supposed to.

Mac McKenzie, Ted's party chief, and his wife Elizabeth invited us to dinner one evening to get acquainted with some of the other Shell people. But while I was reaching for something behind me, I slipped and fell on my tail bone. If you're cringing at this point, I know *you* know how that feels! The baby was so little that she still required round-the-clock attention and I, of course, was in terrible pain and hobbled by crutches. Elizabeth, bless her heart, found a young girl to help me with Ruthie and before long we inherited one side of a rental duplex from a geologist who had been in the Naval reserve and was called up to active duty.

Once I could start creeping along without my crutches, I discovered the Presbyterian church and volunteered to sing in the choir on the Sundays when Ted might be home to look after the baby, and I started exploring the town and introducing myself to my neighbours. And, once springtime brought green grass, Ted and Mac discovered they could slip away from the office for an occasional round of golf.

Neither of them knew it then, but that grass wouldn't stay green very long. Once the heat of the summer arrived it would burn like straw. The heat of the pavement could quite literally fry eggs. Seasoned veterans of the west Texas summer taught me to wear oven mitts so I could hold onto the steering wheel of the car. They were the ones I went to for advice on whether to open the windows in the

house so we could breathe, or to close them to keep the sand from blowing in and drifting up the walls. In the east Texas humidity, we used to complain that we could never really get dry after bathing in the morning. In west Texas we were plenty dry; venturing outside was like stepping into a blast furnace.

Not that that ever stopped either of us from thoroughly enjoying our Midland assignment. Ted had always been an avid chess player, and he went back and forth several times to Dallas and Fort Worth for weekend tournaments. Then he started a penny postcard game with a chess master who was a professor at Baylor University. As each decided on his next move, he'd mail the other a postcard describing it. My great-grandchildren are completely confused when I tell them this story. "What's a penny postcard? Why didn't they just Skype each other?"

Oh well, time marches on ... and so did we.

