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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 Home Front

Shell was evidently tired of looking at worked-over geology in Texas so they promoted Ted to party chief, gave him a new crew, and decided we should go north to Vandalia, Illinois.

I'm sure I must have groaned audibly when Ted told me. Illinois would be very far from Whitesboro. I bundled up Ruthie and made a hurried trip to Whitesboro to say goodbye to my family, and by the time we'd made it that far, she was having a wonderful time with all her toys in her backseat play pen. Both of us were singing every song I'd ever learned as we drove along, and the whole trip had become a delightful adventure. After we left Whitesboro, I drove on up to Illinois looking forward to visiting with my grandmother and elderly aunts and to introducing them to the baby, but all they did was cluck at me for taking her on such a dangerous trip all alone and fuss at Ted for allowing me to do it. From my perspective, though, it seemed pretty odd that these intrepid pioneer women would have even given it a second thought.

Vandalia is about sixty miles directly east of St. Louis. I kind of wondered whether those Yankees thought we were carpetbaggers when we all descended upon them to plunder their resources. But, if you know your petroleum history, you'll remember that the Illinois Basin had been plundered long before. It all began back in about 1905, peaking three years later at 34 million barrels a year, becoming the third most productive area in the United States before it declined

again. But, what with the advancements in seismology, Shell wanted to be there in September of 1943 to see whether any more oil could be wrung out.

We moved into a motel at first, and then quite quickly found an absolutely perfect house. It was big, with cavernous rooms and a huge yard. We unloaded the trailer and the dynamite boxes and then Ruthie and I started to explore. For about twenty years back in the nineteenth century, the little town of Vandalia was the state capital, and Abraham Lincoln started his political career there, but when we arrived it was teeming with transients all looking for the same thing.

However, Shell changed its mind, I guess, because within six weeks we were on the road again, this time to Bay City, Michigan. Well, I thought, at least we'll be closer to Ted's folks. When we arrived, I realized my Michigan geography was a little sketchy. Michigan is a big state and Grand Rapids might have been relatively closer than Midland, Texas, but it was hardly next door to Bay City.

We moved into a little cabin right on Lake Michigan which, in the summer, would have been wonderful. However, by this time it was late fall and cold and rainy, so we moved back to town to a three-room apartment in the upstairs of a house. We stayed there almost a month until I found a perfect house with two bedrooms and a huge yard.

I was so proud of myself. This was absolutely ideal for all of us. There was lots of room and Ruthie was learning to walk, so she would have ample roaming space. I unpacked, made up the beds, and within a couple of hours realized I might have been less than thorough in my initial assessment. As I tucked Ruthie into her crib for the night, I ran the water into the tub looking forward to a long relaxing bubble bath after the move. I stepped in with one foot – yelped – and stepped right out again. No hot water. Wrapping myself in a towel, I ran to the kitchen to test the hot water faucet and decided the landlord had turned down the thermostat on the tank. Then, just moments after the ink dried on the lease, I discovered there *was* no hot water tank. This was long before anyone had

thought of disposable diapers, so the diaper pail was by this time brimming over and a crisis was at hand.

For a solid year we lived in that house, with a bucket of water permanently simmering on the back burner of the stove. Don't talk to *me* about your housewifely trials and tribulations! At least not until you've lived a year hauling hot water.

The year wasn't wasted though. I spent every free moment trying to find something else and finally jumped at the chance to rent a duplex on, would you believe it, Park Avenue. It was kind of dingy but it had an actual washing machine in the corner of the kitchen and came complete with a hot water tank. Ruthie was, by that time, out of diapers and life was good, despite the war rationing.

To get a book of ration stamps, we had to appear before a local rationing board and each person in the family – including babies – received their own book of stamps. If you wanted to buy gas, the driver had to present a gas card along with the ration book plus cash. If you were caught sightseeing or aimlessly driving with no apparent reason, you could get fined. Every drop of fuel was essential for the war effort.

Tires were the first to be rationed, then gasoline to further discourage people from using their cars. By 1943, you needed ration coupons to buy typewriters, sugar, bicycles, clothing, fuel oil, coffee, shoes, meat, cheese, butter, margarine and lard, canned foods, dried fruits and jam. Lots of communities had big Victory gardens so families could keep produce on their tables and share it with others, of course. And, since silk and nylon were rationed too, more than a few women took to drawing black lines down the backs of their legs to make them look like they were still wearing stockings. Some things you just couldn't get at all, like new cars and appliances. Everything coming off the production lines was directed toward the war effort.

Our next stop was Alma, Michigan, in March of 1944. The only thing we could find there was a two-bedroom apartment owned by the local mortician.

June 6 was D-Day. It was beginning to look like the tides of war were finally turning. We stayed in Alma through the summer, though, and then moved to Flint, the big-city manufacturing hub where the war effort was booming along at maximum capacity.

Flint, thanks to the burgeoning automobile industry of the early part of the century, was ideally set up to convert to wartime production and, the young woman who rented us her home told us that since her husband had been called into service, she was going to work in one of the factories.

In Michigan though, the story of Rosie the Riveter wasn't quite the sociological transformation that it was in the rest of the country, simply because it had always been a blue-collar working-class town and women had been part of that workforce for the previous twenty years or so. The only difference was that, prior to the war effort, women hadn't been employed in so-called 'male' jobs, so a propaganda campaign targeted young women telling them that women could be "militant partners in the struggle to defeat the enemy ... heroines who helped their men in wartime." Clearly, the War Manpower Commission was setting them up for short-term employment. Following the war, the men would take their rightful places back in the economy.

Be that as it may, women eagerly signed on. Young women, married women whose husbands were overseas, older women – all stepped up to offer their services and were in fact extremely good at the "male" jobs they were expected to do. Most loved every minute of the experience and knew what they were doing was of critical importance to the Allied forces so, in hindsight, it might be hard to understand why most American Rosies retreated dutifully back to their kitchens after the war was over. In truth, though, this blip on the historical timeline of women's history, was really just a blip. What that experience accomplished in the long run, though, did make a very important difference. It showed that women *could* do it all. They *could* go to work and be successful in important positions of responsibility, manage their homes, and raise their children – all

while helping to win a war. It would just take another twenty-five years and another generation for their daughters to mobilize and make it happen again.

We stayed in Flint for just over a year. Our house was practically brand new and it was completely furnished. It had two bedrooms, hot water, and neighbours with two teenage daughters eager to babysit, so we often drove over to Detroit to see the baseball games and hear some of the big bands and jazz greats of the era. My childhood friend from Denton, Louise Tobin, had run off to New York when she was only sixteen to be a jazz singer and I always hoped I might find her on one stage or another.

We stayed there through the end of the war – at least the war with Germany – until we moved back to Bay City for four months. Then, since Ted was called back to the Tulsa office for a temporary posting, Ruthie and I stayed with my parents in Whitesboro through Christmas until, on January 1, 1946, we were transferred back to Midland.

At last, the war was over. And our days on the seismic crew seemed to be over, too. Ted was to move into the district office, and we knew the drill. We drove right back to the Alamo Plaza Motel and, since the war's end had brought thousands of servicemen back home, I knew that finding housing was going to be a Herculean task, despite the fact that Shell had promised Ted a company house.

I needn't have worried. I'd barely transferred our clothes from the suitcases into the motel's closet when Elizabeth McKenzie, Mac's wife, called to ask me to come along to a coffee party where I could meet some of the other company wives. Her phone rang while I was there; it was Ted calling to tell me he'd been transferred to the district office at Jackson, Mississippi.

So we moved into the Alamo Plaza Motel in Jackson instead. (See? This is why I told you to remember the Alamo!) And there we stayed. It wasn't so bad, really. The motel had a swimming pool to retreat to through the heat of the afternoons that summer, and Ruthie started kindergarten, so I spent my days house-hunting.

Jackson was unlike any other community we had ever lived in. It was still a very Old South culture where life was lived in leisure and the old mimosa and magnolia trees provided a shady escape for ladies who still napped through the sultry afternoons. I found a church right away, of course, and introduced myself to everyone I met hoping to discover someone who might have a lead on houses that might be coming on the market. But what I was discovering was a far different environment than I'd ever experienced before.

When we arrived in Jackson in 1946, the white and African-American populations were of almost equal size, but the old social conventions of the antebellum South still hung on. There were laws firmly entrenched to prevent the integration of public schools, public facilities, churches, swimming pools, and recreation fields. Nor would that change anytime in the foreseeable future. The state constitution at that time included both literacy tests and poll taxes, which pretty much guaranteed that African-Americans wouldn't be permitted to vote as long as those old prejudices crippled any progress toward a better future.

By May, I found a house that could be ours to rent provided we bought all the furniture in it. That wouldn't be a problem, so we moved in and once again I started building a nest. The house had a lovely yard surrounded by honeysuckle bushes and a cute little garage that had been built into a play house so Ruthie was very happy. We nestled in for a long stay and, in September of 1947, our son Theodore Sidney was born.

In fact, we stayed such a long time in Jackson I was beginning to think we could get rid of the dynamite boxes. I not only volunteered to sing in the choir, I was even able to get to church on Sundays *and* on the evenings we had choir practice. And since the children and I walked to Ruthie's school every day, we'd introduced ourselves to the other families and very quickly we had a whole crew of neighbourhood friends along with those who worked with Ted at Shell. It was in Jackson that we met Wilf and Gerrie Baillie, who would become a very big part of our lives, but of course none of us knew

that then. All I knew was that it was beginning to feel like we were sinking roots at long last.

But no. I should have realized that Ted's frequent business trips into New Orleans were happening too often to be a reasonable enough expense to get by Shell's accounting department and, sure enough, before little Sidney was even two months old, we were transferred again.

Ted was, by this time, the chief geophysicist in the New Orleans office so, since Mama was still with us in Jackson, having come to help out while I was in the hospital, she just stayed with us to help pack up the house. And, once she got the hang of the dynamite boxes, we were a pretty efficient team. Within a few days, the car was loaded and ready to go, so I put her on the train back to Texas and off we went to Louisiana. It was October of 1947. The war was over and, thankfully, the economic hardships of the Depression were too.

After Pearl Harbor in 1941, American contributions of money, industrial output, petroleum, technological innovation, food – and especially soldiers – turned the tide not only on the progress of the war, but also on the American economy itself. Unemployment was a thing of the past because so many people stepped up on the home front to move from low-productivity jobs to high efficiency occupations that were better managed through better technology. Everyone seemed to be working much harder and a lot smarter. And despite the fact that 40 per cent of the GDP was going overseas, Americans had accepted the necessity of higher taxes to pay for the war, whereas, before 1940, only about 10 per cent of employed people paid any income tax at all.

Personal income was at an all-time high. The hugely successful war bond drives convinced many Americans to invest their discretionary money in bonds that could be had at 75 per cent of the face value and expect to get their return when they matured at the close of the war, so personal saving was high, too. And wage and price controls were able to ensure that another recession wouldn't develop

before post-war manufacturing could gear up to satisfy the demand for new products like cars and appliances and furniture for all the returning veterans and the coming baby boom.

Post-war America looked far different than it had before. There was a huge migration of farmers into urban centres through the Depression years and wartime, and that, combined with the thousands of returning servicemen, created a truly critical housing shortage.

Shell, by this time, had finally admitted that, with so many desperately looking for someplace to settle and get on with their lives, the company would have to start buying up what real estate they could find to house their employees. What they'd done in New Orleans was to buy an entire apartment block out in Metarie, near the airport.

This was our first sub-tropical climate, so we had to get used to the cockroaches and other assorted bugs, as well as the almost daily four-o'clock rain that made Metarie, sitting at about three feet above sea level, a permanent bog. Hot and humid in the summer and damp and drippy in the winter, we were all living in a constant state of dank.

But there *were* bonuses that made life in New Orleans really fun. Ted became the unofficial host assigned to schmooze the visiting firemen from Shell's head office, so we were enlisted to show them the best of the city, including the incredible restaurants in the French Quarter. I think we both gained about fifteen pounds in Antoine's alone!

Eventually, though, I learned to cook Cajun. For the uninitiated, I should let you in on its secret. All you need is a whole lot of scrap seafood and about a bushel of spices. We could go over to the fish market or to Lake Ponchartrain and, for practically nothing at all, buy washtubs full of fresh shrimp, oysters, and every other critter that happened to swim by. When you get home with your catch, take your cast iron skillet and make up a roux. Just fry up a little celery with some garlic and a couple onions along with whatever

leftover pork you might have on hand, plus a little flour to thicken it, along with everything on your spice rack. This is key: *lots* of spice. Dump all that in your biggest pot with some tomatoes, a handful of okra, maybe a little chicken broth, and then add the shellfish. And if a few friends and neighbours happen by unexpectedly, just throw in some red beans and a little rice to the mix and voila! Be careful about the coffee, though. In New Orleans, the coffee's so strong your spoon stands up in the cup.

It wasn't *all* about the food, though. We'd inevitably waddle out of Antoine's or Brennan's or Galatoire's and head for the jazz and blues clubs to hear that incredible music, and that's when Ted started getting interested in learning more. He hadn't been raised in a musical home, but with me and my family all singing whether invited to or not, he had been fully immersed in music ever since we'd met. He bought us tickets to the New Orleans Symphony that first year and really became quite a serious student of classical music as time went on.

We were in New Orleans for the big hurricane of 1947, and, as I've said, Metairie is only about three feet above sea level so we were pounded by the storm as well as the storm surge from the gulf through the big canals. I'd been in more than a few tornados growing up but, as frightening as they were, they were over in just a few minutes. That wasn't the case with hurricanes. You knew they were coming and, when they got close, the noise alone was terrifying beyond belief. There were storm shutters on almost all the windows, so we sealed ourselves up in the middle of the apartment hoping that the banging and crashing wasn't a sign that the huge palms and live oaks were flying through the air. But of course that's exactly what was happening.

After the storm was over, the snakes that had been displaced by the sea water were littering the grounds around the apartment, and one afternoon I heard Ruthie outside shrieking her little head off. Before I could get to her, a neighbour who had been cleaning his

shotgun ran to her rescue, shot the snake that had cornered her, and carried her home.

Ruthie was able to complete first grade as well as the first half of the second in one of the parish schools in New Orleans before we were transferred to Baton Rouge in February of 1949. I'm sure I wasn't thrilled about moving again, but I could do it practically in my sleep, and it barely created a ripple in our day-to-day lives. I found another school for Ruthie in Baton Rouge and offered up a silent prayer that she could stay there to at least finish her school year, but when Ted came home in April with that look in his eye, I knew we were at it again.

This time, he made me sit down before he'd tell me where we were going.