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Golubov's Ladder

by

S. Dorman

The front end of Rose Baysinger's '37 coupe nosed slowly down the dirt road. Her apprehensive glance in the rearview mirror found a pursuing, blue-black sky. Rushing wind upended the leaves on passing maples. Rose watched anxiously for a lane flanked by twin hawthorns.

"Fitting weather for an interview on lightning," she muttered. A cool gust blew into the cavernous car, brushing sweaty hair from her face. Rose's Alice-blue dress felt damp against the prickly woolen seat. She lifted sticky fingers momentarily off the big steering wheel before renewing her tense grip.

Beside her the tabby cat, Roosevelt, crouched on top of the seat, watching wildly diving branches and the white undersides of upturned leaves.

"No first name," said Rose to herself--or to the cat. "Just Golubov. Like he didn't have a mother to name him properly. Hope he's no stranger than that . . . hate featuring oddballs. According to Manny, he's perfectly harmless--just obsessed with lightning."

Roosevelt unhooked his claws and jumped down to curl up on the seat beside her. Large cold drops hit Rose's arm and splashed across the windshield. "Sleeping now?" She accused the cat while rolling up her window. She reached across to close up the passenger side. The windows were soon awash with rain. Lightning flashed, throwing a stroke into the oaks across the field on her left. The emphatic boom made her jump.

Lips compressed, Rose inched the vehicle along the muddy road, straining to find the hawthorn marked lane.

Standing beside the ancient, long-focus, Conley camera, Golubov viewed the electrical display from his front porch. The camera sat on a tripod, with red leather bellows extended. The man bent to check his light meter and set the brass safety shutter. He looked up again in quiet concentration, his large, bearded face unmoving, watching through the downpour for any discharge attracted to the tower that he had recently erected in the meadow. Constructed of steel girders and struts, metal wings below its crown stretched out to tempt the charge. Rarely, Golubov had seen St. Elmo's fire playing along their surfaces.

The wind gusted, laden with chaff from the meadow. Lit with flashes, the boiling thunderstorm moved across his land. A cloud-to-ground struck the tower. Golubov anticipated it and pressed the bulb, capturing its image. He switched plates and stood waiting for another stroke.

Rose Baysinger's shiny beige coupe went along the lane through trees, its wipers clicking. Staring into the open green meadow, she saw its strange tower. At that instant a tortuous discharge struck. Rose shrieked. The big steering wheel got away as a front tire lurched over a rock in the lane. Regaining control, she managed to keep her gaze on the tower as another stroke fanned up to the clouds in near silence.

Biting her lip, she braked the coupe and turned off the ignition. This plan for ridding herself of fear would come to nothing. Studying, writing, exposing herself this way would only entrench her cravenness. She tried reminding herself that a car was the safest place to be in this storm. Roosevelt nudged up against her, and she began stroking his soft fur. Presently she grew calm. The storm blew over, leaving the steel girders and dripping trees in peace.

Rose stared at the tower. "It resembles some old god . . . I know I've seen it somewhere . . ."

The ancient likenesses of her studies came to her, but this one was elusive. She started up the coupe and continued down the lane, soon pulling up beneath a rustling basswood near the house.

Golubov snapped shut the Conley camera and proceeded to fold up the tripod. The car door slammed. He looked down at Rose, frowning.

"Mr. Golubov?"

"I'm Golubov. What do you want?"

"My name is Rose Baysinger. I'm a writer from New York--a friend of Manny Foyle's . . . from *The Sun*?" She paused, but the man made no reply. "I need to see someone about lightning!" It was brightly said, but, not caring for his great size, black beard, and frown, Rose suddenly wished again that she had not come.

"What do you want to know?" Golubov felt a trifle less irritated. Truly he was glad to have attentive female company, but he was a cautious man . . . with people.

Rose bit back a sharp reply and refrained from jumping back into the car. You dour old man, she thought, though he looked no more than . . . thirty? She adopted a serious tone. "Manny says you eat lightning for breakfast. Is that boiled or broiled?"

There was silence. Then, to her relief, his frown smoothed out.

"Come ahead, Miss Baysinger. I guess I can answer some questions."

"May I bring Roosevelt?" The cat was rubbing against her sheer stockinged legs.

Noticing both legs and the cat, Golubov said, "Cats are welcome."

She crossed to the porch, taking in the weather stained house. It was otherwise neat, with a low hip roof crowned with a network of shiny, pointed lightning rods. She came up the unpainted steps, extending her hand. "Photographing lightning? Those things can't be easy to catch on film."

"Plates," he corrected her. "Glass, coated with emulsion."

She glanced at the now compacted camera on the porch swing. "Of course." Covering her embarrassment and irritation, she smiled.

What eyes, he thought. "Would you like to see some examples?" At her nod, he opened the screen door for her. Roosevelt sauntered in then jumped up onto an old upholstered chair.

Rose murmured as her gaze went round the open interior. Supporting walls had been replaced by bark covered beech pillars. She noted the rear kitchen with its black wood-burning range, the parlor area with brick hearth, a day bed near the front door. The wall on their right was lined with photographs, top to bottom. This led her gaze to the rear, where two doors were closed. Bathroom, darkroom? And why the birch bark?

"Living alone I've got no use for walls," he said, setting the tripod in the corner. He walked to the photo display. One group was comprised of pictures sent from different parts of the globe. "There are lightning watchers all over the world," he said, following a terse description.

"How different these are . . ." She pointed to strokes appearing fanned and straighter than others in the group.

"Structure-initiated discharges. They rise slowly from the structure to the cloud. Fairly apathetic in comparison with the living, hot bolt from heaven."

"Structure-initiated. Like the second stroke on your tower just now? There's something about that tower . . ."

"I call it St. Elmo. For St. Elmo's fire."

"What's that--no, wait. First, I want to ask about that funny thunder after the structure lightning." She was rummaging in her leather case for a notebook. "It sounded like a bag of water hitting the floor."

"Less current and no return strokes."

She had juggled her things, and was poised to write. "Less what?"

He smiled faintly, enjoying his position as keeper of arcane knowledge. "What do you know

about the relationship of thunder to lightning?" Now he was headed toward the kitchen.

Fumbling with her things, Rose followed, peeved at his superior attitude. She encountered it often enough in this work. "Just what everyone knows, Mr. Golubov. Air in the clouds collides while rushing in to fill a vacuum left by the electrical discharge."

"Very up-to-date. If you're a peer of Lucretius. The error lies in associating thunder with clouds. Expansion of the lightning channel itself--after that massive rapid input--that's what causes the explosion."

At a large sink, Golubov tipped a great ceramic crock, pouring golden liquid into a second crock covered in cheesecloth. Rose perched on a nearby stool and began transcribing what he said.

"And the funny thunder after the structure-related flash?"

"Not as much energy--nor as many strokes--traveling up and down the channel. Consequently, not as much report. Like I said--pathetic, even."

"Rather like the male ego."

Golubov flushed and growled, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Her tone was breezy. "I just wanted to take you down a peg for that crack about Lucretius."

He forgave her, saying, "Ever tasted hog-apple wine?"

"Never heard of hog-apples. They don't sound too appetizing either."

He started to object but she quickly amended. "Looks luscious, though. May I try it?"

He nodded, adding water from the pump to the fermenting juice. "Hope you can wait." He smiled for the first time. "It has to stand at least ten days."

They sat on the porch swing in sight of the tower, sipping black birch tea. Roosevelt wandered in the yard, cocking his head, watching wind whip up the leaves. Some of Golubov's lightning science had passed into Rose's notebook, and more was waiting. She leaned back, resting her head against the chain suspending the swing. "I've got to be getting back to the hotel, but I wanted to ask you about the lightning rods I noticed on my way in. Did you climb up and install them yourself, Mr. Golubov?"

"It's how I earn a living--such as it is in these times."

"And you write books?"

"But not for a living. No science degree, no book contract. I consult informally because my only credentials are experience . . . and I've learned a lot from the rods."

"I'd like to watch an installation. And we haven't even touched folklore yet."

"There's a job tomorrow. Some realty people in Dogleville want rods installed before the new owner moves in. Staying at the Medford in Little Falls, I suppose?"

"The only hotel for miles." She stood, smiling, holding out her hand. By the way, she wanted to ask, you do have a mother, don't you?

But Golubov was wondering how--and why--Rose Baysinger seemed to fall to the earth in his own field . . . like lightning from a cloudless sky.

Inexplicably, Golubov's broad, bearded face and serious eyes haunted her all night. Light from the street shone through chinks in the blind, and she tossed and turned in the half dark. Golubov . . . what is it? On the edge of consciousness she muttered. Are you just a man? The pale dawn dispersed her enchantment, as she had told herself it would. Rising, she said to Roosevelt, "Mr. Golubov is simply a nice knowledgeable man." She zipped her pants, explaining it all to the cat, "He just has a god in his yard."

He was meeting her for breakfast, and when the big man arrived, they left Roosevelt on the seat of his Ford pickup. In the Silver Spoon they had bacon and eggs at Depression prices, hot coffee for a nickel. On the street afterwards, Rose wryly smiled. "Lightning rods are thought of as quaint superstitious amulets, these days, Mr. Golubov. Is there really serious protection in them?"

He huffed at this, but then made an admission. "Some installers do perpetuate misleading myths

about them.”

“Like?”

He reached among the rods and neat coils of wire on the truck bed and pulled out two five-foot copper rods with spheres at mid-length. Tapping the tip of one with a forefinger, he said, “Like claiming these points dissipate static electricity. They’ll say it makes the rods less attractive to a charge in the air. But everything--rods, buildings, even people--all things send out charges that may or may not intercept the invisible, stepped leader of lightning. Rods protect by attracting a discharge and routing it to ground--harmlessly. This is how buildings, the contents of buildings, are saved.”

On impulse she said, “What about you--have you ever been struck by lightning, Mr. Golubov?”

Golubov hesitated strangely, heavily. For a moment, frowning, he seemed to forget her. Then he came to himself with a foolish grin, said no, and held open the door.

Rose slid in, watching as he came around the front of the truck, thinking again that this was a very strange man.

As they rode out of town, squall lines bore down on them. After a few miles, they turned down a lane and pulled up inside a barn just as the rain hit. They got out and stood in the doorway, watching the storm. Large white hens gathered about their feet, hoping for a meal. Roosevelt eyed their multitude disdainfully, then jumped up on the running board of the pickup for a snooze.

Rolling, dark clouds, forked with lightning, led out of the wooded hills across a field beyond the house, heading for them. Rose tensed and glanced up at Golubov. “What it is about--you? I’ve never seen so much lightning! Scares me silly . . .” She murmured this last, shivering.

He gazed intently into the skies above the large farmhouse, making no reply. Then. A flash of white light blinded them, coupled with sudden concussion. A powerful cold-flash struck the huge walnut that stood to one side of the barnyard. Sizzling, popping, it reft chunks of bark from the tree while passing to ground.

The hens ran to and fro, squawking hysterically. Rose pointed, her jaw moving without sound, as a luminous sphere tumbled toward them. It arced suddenly over their heads. Turning, they saw it splatter in a spray of liquid sparks on the truck door just above Roosevelt’s head. The cat squalled and danced in the air. He flew at Rose, and she caught him tightly. The chickens had scattered into the yard, tilting and reeling.

Trembling, she turned to Golubov. “What in the name of all that’s holy was that?!”

He smiled to himself. “Ball lightning.”

She stared after him as he stooped beside the Ford to examine scorch marks left behind.

“You’ve seen it before?!”

“Once.” He stood. The storm had passed off and rain now fell limpidly. A faint whiff of ozone lingered. He took her elbow and propelled her towards the riven walnut tree. A naked wound, with blackened incision, snaked upward to the entry point in an upper limb. The stricken branch, voluminous with leaves, hung to the ground. Golubov walked around the trunk, examining its spiral scar. Then he squatted and picked up two slabs of bark.

“Look.” He gestured with the pieces toward the tree. “The bolt struck along that axis.” He stood and moved his fingers along the exposed wound. “There’s a thin layer of living cells under the inner bark that offers the least resistance. The lightning went that route instead of coring the tree where all the dead wood is. It would have been destroyed otherwise, the whole tree, not just the branch.”

Watching him, Rose grew calm. She felt the scorched incision with her fingers. “Lightning must not be very wide.”

“Usually no more than an inch--inch and a half.”

A powerful gust lifted the leaves of the torn limb. Shivering, still clutching Roosevelt, the woman looked at the livid western sky. “Another storm, Golubov,” she wailed. “Can’t we do this some other time?”

He forgot lightning and looked down at her.
“Why are you smiling like that?” she demanded.
“You got rid of the Mister. I'm Golubov now.”

In the parlor area of Golubov's house, they sat on pine and upholstered chairs, drinking coffee while thunderstorms beat on the house. A small fire blazed in the grate of the fireplace. Rose's feet were curled beneath her, Roosevelt tucked in by her side. The notebook lay open on the chair's wooden arm. Why was he so fascinated by lightning? She sipped at the hot coffee, deciding it was time to ask about folklore . . . put aside the personal questions.

“Lots of lore,” he replied, reaching a great fist behind her to knock on the beech pillar.
“According to lore we're safe here--because beech was supposed to repel lightning.”

At his touch along her shoulder, she jumped up and went to the window, pretending to look out. Her sense of this man continued in flux.

Is Golubov really strange, or am I imagining things? Maybe it's just the lightning spooking me. Suddenly she found yourself gazing intently at St. Elmo through now slaking sheets of rain. As though in a trance, she murmured, “What about gods?”

What does this tower remind me of? It has a stance, of sorts, with its wings spread out like that. Again she let her mind run through the pictorial inventory that she had studied in preparation for this feature. The Thunder God of Accad . . . ?

She spun around, eyeing him quizzically. “Nimrod was fond of towers reaching into heaven . . . presumptuous, those ancients--wouldn't you say?”

He looked dubious. “That's something--coming from someone who lives in New York. How tall is the building you work in? Probably make Nimrod's tower look like a mole hill.” He reached over and began scratching Roosevelt's obliging head with his long broad fingers, continuing on with his talk as though she had not challenged him. “Lore tells us that Roosie here brought that lightning ball on himself. Cats were thought to attract lightning.”

Rose was bemused, but came away from the window to perch on the edge of her chair. She picked up the notebook and pencil, facing him. “So, what is the scientific explanation of ball lightning?”

“There is none.”

She stared at him. “All this studying . . .” She gestured toward his desk piled with notes, a shelf full of books and manuscripts, the wall papered in photos from around the world. “. . . The minds thinking about this phenomenon! And no one knows what causes freakish--”

“Science can't substantiate . . . something it can't get its hands on.”

“But you think about it--you must have a theory at least.”

Golubov stood and walked thoughtfully to the mantelpiece. Outside the window, wind was drawing peaceful breaths, spattering the glass with drops from overhanging basswood leaves. But, inwardly, this man was apprehensive.

These past two days with Rose had been what he wanted life to be. He was experiencing this friendly presence as resurrecting the joy of childhood. It seemed the drier life became, the more deeply he obsessed over his subject. Or, was it the reverse? This glad woman had a way of making him tipsy--and vulnerable. Publicizing was, after all, her business. She could make him look the fool in the pages of some magazine. There were other, more profound, ways in which she could hurt him. But, turning, looking again into those warm eyes . . .

Suddenly it was worth the risk. He downed the last swallow of coffee and set the cup on the mantle, hesitating only a moment. Then he announced, “I have this physical theory about Jacob's ladder. Since you do mention the culture of Nimrod, found in Genesis . . . I'm glad that you're willing--that you consider the Scriptures in your quest for knowledge.”

Her pencil still poised, she stopped. "Jacob's ladder." Her tone was flat. Where was this going?

"Remember the dream of Israel, in which a stair was set on earth reaching into heaven? Angels used it . . . and then there was Satan's fall from heaven--as lightning."

On the mantle beside him was a knobby mineral stone, about the size of his little finger, which had been fused when a bolt of lightning went to ground in sand. He had shown her this crystalline piece of heaven's wrath earlier, but now he picked it up and began absently fingering it as he spoke.

"Don't write this stuff down, Rose," he murmured. "This is for you only. You see--" he began then stopped. "This is what some would consider a bit unorthodox . . . but, there's a--an experiment . . . I've been contemplating. But maybe you'd think it . . . presumptuous." He grinned at her. "I mean risky."

Now he began pacing the floor, still playing with the fulgurite. "What if, Rose: What if lightning is . . . an energetic channel . . . from the spiritual to the material? Did you notice how careful, how . . . considerate the ball was today? It actually arced over us in order to avoid hitting us."

Rose's bemusement deepened. She gave him an odd look. "But those are rational expressions: caring, consideration. Rational expressions, Golubov, from nonrational freaks of nature."

"On the contrary, Rose: ball lightnings may be angels!"

He saw that the corners of Rose's pretty mouth twitched, but her gaze was neutral. He plunged on. "Do you know how many people have died by lightning--and then come back to life again? Rose," he said, hoping to rouse her, "I think that ball didn't hurt us because it was an angel."

Rose burst into peals of laughter. "Oh, Golubov, this is fun! What more?"

Golubov stopped in taut-jawed silence, reddening. He turned and set the fulgurite back on the mantelpiece. He stayed there, unmoving, staring out the window.

The woman's laughter subsided in stillness, where the only sound was the beating of the mantelpiece clock. An apology stuck stubbornly in her throat. It may have been rude, but laughter was the right response to that idea, and she refused to be hypocritical about it. Stiffly she said, "Maybe you'd better take me back to the Medford. It's getting late, anyway."

She ate without tasting her solitary supper at the Silver Spoon. She spent the evening in her room, tossing her notes aside when they began to look like gibberish. She watched idly as Roosevelt played with the laces of her tennis shoes. She picked up her Collier's and tried to read. Nine o'clock by the watch on her wrist. She was tired of chewing the cud of pride. Going over and over how stubborn and silly Golubov was, and the righteousness of her own thoughts.

"Enough!" She threw down her unread Collier's. Roosevelt raised a sleepy head.

Suddenly Rose found she was hungry for Golubov. Yes, hungry. Imperative that she see him instantly!

She grabbed her bag, rushed out the door. The wind blew in her teeth as she dashed from the lobby for the coupe. "These blasted storms!" she said, turning the key in the ignition. Down the highway she drove like a demon, as flashes lit the turbulent skies.

Golubov, Golubov. Of course you have a mother. And angels stop by hotel rooms, they remove limbs from ancient trees, they slide down lightning bolts and roll around like softballs: they're angels--they can do anything!

Tires spitting stones as Rose rounded the corner, the little coupe rumbled down the road, lightning on its tail. In the lane she gunned the engine as pelting rain shot up the windshield off the clicking wipers. Flashes illumined St. Elmo, yet she scarcely noticed as she thudded past. Rose pulled behind the pickup and stared up at the darkened house. Where was Golubov?

She looked back toward the tower, a cross-like titan in the midst of a storm: alternating dim or very bright. Movement below it caught her eye. Was that Golubov striding across the meadow toward the tower? Terror invaded her. She yanked the handle and heaved the door wide.

“Golubov, stop!” But the storm snatched her words away.

He was reaching for a support strut. Instantly a twisting, rolling, brilliant flash struck from the heavens. St. Elmo lit up from base to crown, riveting the man to the tower.

Rose screamed and lunged back into the car. Rigid with horror, she saw his body drop to the ground. She lay her head on the wheel, whispering, “Help me. I'm afraid.”

An idea came to her, and she started the car, turning it into the long grass. The wind began dropping. Reaching the tower, Rose dashed into slackening rain.

Great Golubov lay supine beneath the towering god. She flung herself on his big chest, listening for a heartbeat. Her fingers ferreted for a pulse. She put her ear to his nose.

No heartbeat, no breath. Golubov was gone.

The research of Rose's last story came to her, recalling what she had learned about the electric company's new procedure to revive victims of electrocution. This animated her.

She pushed repeatedly on his chest, listened again. Silence. She gave a cry and thumped him, listened. His great heart beat. Now she tilted his chin, pinched his nostrils, blew into his mouth. And again. His throat hissed lazily. He gasped.

Rose sat back, exhausted, staring at the living, breathing man. Her own breathing had quieted. Rain dripped from her bangs, her eyes and nose. She leaned close and cradled him in her arms, resting. The storm had passed over, leaving peace.

Golubov felt the hard earth, the fresh and drizzling rain on his face. And someone resting against him. His hands were scorched, his body tingling.

“Rose?” His voice was a croak.

She sat up. “Are you all right? I'm taking you to the hospital. Can you move, get up?”

A whisper: “Got to . . . to take that thing apart . . . help me?”

“What? What thing?” But she knew.

He shuddered, seeing the tower above him, remembering hell.

“Did you--see--was there anything--?”

He did not speak. There were no words for what he'd seen. For that experience.

How his vulnerability hurt her! “Please try to get up.”

He sighed, raggedly. Then he said all he could about heaven. “Brighter than lightning, Rosie.” And tears came to his eyes.

