

## Lightning

Marilynn Shirley Stratton

It seems, to Rose — that when it comes to lightning — grown-ups expect children to swallow some pretty far-fetched stories. How lightning peeled the varnish right off the cedar fence, right beside a hydro pole, practically on top of where Dad was standing at the time.

How it ran along the telephone wire into the house and burst from the mouthpiece and turned into a fireball that bounced off all four kitchen walls and made that big burn mark on Grandma's mahogany sideboard before it just wore itself out. And how if Grandpa hadn't thrown his greatcoat over Mother, she'd have been killed, or scarred for life — like the mahogany sideboard — because Grandma had just wound Mother's long hair around those big steel curlers and the fireball would have gone straight for the metal, except for Grandpa's greatcoat, of course.

How Uncle Willie was struck by it when he was seventeen, carrying two milk-pails across the yard: knocked him down, didn't spill a drop of milk, and Uncle Willie was out cold for two hours and didn't know his own name for almost a week and the milk was soured. Clotted, right there in the yard, by lightning, but not a drop spilled.

How Gaylene Graham's cousin from Red Deer was killed by it because he touched a barbed wire fence when it struck — even though it hit the fence at the other end of the field — and how they had to bury some of the wire with him because it was melted right into his hand, Gaylene's father said, like a silver-blue scar.

Mary Ann's eyes open wide when grown-ups tell lightning stories, and she keeps saying "And then what? And then WHAT?" just the way Rose used to say it when she first heard the stories. Mary Ann hasn't even heard all the lightning stories once, yet. Rose has heard all of them, every last lightning story, fifty times. Maybe a hundred times.

Once, when Rose was only Mary Ann's age, before Mary Ann was even born, and she was visiting Uncle Willie's farm with Mother and Dad, Mother found her out in the yard during a rainstorm, standing at the base of a power pole, hanging on to the metal guy-wire with both little fists, wet face turned up to the ragged clouds resting on the parallel wires. Rose wanted a lightning story of her own, she said, sadly, after Mother had hugged her and yelled at her and rubbed her wet hair down with a towel.

Rose's teacher this year is Mr. Kapinski and Mr. Kapinski says (in his lovely deep voice) that lightning travels up from the earth, as well as down from the sky. It never travels up from the ground in any of the lightning stories Rose has

heard. When Rose tries to tell him about the peeled varnish and the fire-ball in Grandma's kitchen and the soured milk and Gaylene's cousin, Mr. Kapinski interrupts her. He says he is a "Science Major" and he draws a big diagram on the blackboard and labels it in bold chalk back-hand to show Rose exactly how lightning really works. Rose won't listen, at first; he didn't even care about HER lightning stories. But, later, when Mr. Kapinski leans low over her desk to show her the same information in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* — and again in the grade six Science book — all packaged in a dark, direct smile and the faint smell of Old Spice, she decides that he must be right. He is a Science Major, after all.

Rose has never had a man teacher before. Rose and Gaylene Graham talk it over — having a man teacher — on the long autumn walks to and from school every day. They decide that Mr. Kapinski is probably twenty-one years old and that his parents are probably rich and that they probably gave him his new tan Pontiac when he finished Teachers' College and that he might have a "fiancee" back in Edmonton. They decide that Mr. Kapinski looks like Fabian. They conclude that they could be in love with Mr. Kapinski, if he wasn't a teacher. They adore the way Mr. Kapinski dresses: draped trousers with narrow cuffs; V-neck banlon sweaters in every color over crisp white button-down shirts; thick-soled black leather shoes like the boys wear on American Bandstand. Mr. Kapinski dresses like the coolest high school boys, but on him, Gaylene says, it looks better. Over Rice Crispie squares and Freshie, at Rose's kitchen table, Gaylene says Mr. Kapinski has eyelashes to die for. Later, Mother says that Gaylene Graham is a silly girl and that ROSE had better not be talking such foolishness about ANY teacher. Gaylene Graham, Mother says, reads entirely too many Modern Romance magazines.

Last year, in grade five, when Rose had Miss Harvey, her favorite subjects were Arithmetic and Art, but this year, she is sure that her favorite subject will be Science. Mr. Kapinski is converting everyone in Latham — even the grown-ups — to Science. He has a Monday Evening Horticulture Society for the older ladies — Grandmas's friends — who grow African Violets and Gloxenias and Popcorn Geraniums in painted jam-tins on their window-sills. On Saturdays, Mr. Kapinski leads the Rock-Hound Excursions, scouting dry creekbeds for petrified clams and pieces of agate. Gaylene's father is one of the Rock-Hounds: he scrambles around in the coulees in his mechanic's coveralls, puffing and sweating, carrying a tiny Geologist's hammer and a little cloth bag for "samples," barking his shins on outcrops of shale and narrow ledges of limestone that he couldn't have named in August. He claims to have found a valuable piece of Snowflake Obsidian in the gully behind the Latham school, but the sample just looks like a streaky black and white stone, to Rose and Gaylene.

Mother has joined Mr. Kapinski's Amateur Astronomer's Club; they'll meet on clear Tuesday and Thursday nights — as long as the weather holds — in the

Latham Memorial Arena parking lot at the edge of town — away from the glow of the street lights — to observe Cassiopeia and Ursa Minor and Arcturus. Later in the season, if it stays mild, the Amateur Astronomers will track Orion as he stalks his hunting grounds in the winter sky.

Dinner time changes for the better, Rose thinks, since Mother joined the Amateur Astronomers. Now, Mother doesn't dwell on Dad's lapsed table-manners; she doesn't lecture Rose and Mary Ann on the delicate distinctions between "gossip" and "news." She talks, instead, of galaxies and nebulae and aurora borealis and blue stars. Rose doesn't think she's ever seen a blue star, but she likes the sound of it.

Rose doesn't tell Gaylene that Mr. Kapinski comes in with Mother, sometimes — for cocoa — late, after the Astronomy meetings: the "star-gazes," Dad calls them. Rose and Mary Ann are always in bed, by then; sometimes Dad is too. But Rose always reads, at night, on the sly, with a flashlight under the covers, so she always knows when Mr. Kapinski is there. She hears his deep voice — not his words, just the voice — and Mother's laughter. Mother seems to laugh a lot when Mr. Kapinski comes in for cocoa. Rose always finds an excuse to put on her pink chenille bathrobe and go down to the kitchen: a drink of water, a lost sweater she'll need in the morning that only Mother can find, a forgotten telephone message for Mother that might be buried under the stack of homework scribbles and Mary Ann's coloring books on the kitchen table. Rose hangs around, listening, as long as Mother will let her, studying Mr. Kapinski's dark side-burns and his lashes-to-die-for and his wavy oiled-back hair and his deep-set dark eyes. They're almost black, she thinks. After a while, Rose notices that Mr. Kapinski calls Mother "Fern." She's even more surprised to hear Mother call Mr. Kapinski "Ray."

Dad teases Mother about it. He says the new school-teacher is sweet on Mother and we'd all better watch our steps or she'll be running off to Edmonton with him and robbing the cradle to boot. He always winks at Mother or gives her a pat when he says it, and Mother just ignores him. Sometimes, Mother blushes when Dad teases her about Mr. Kapinski. Dad's always teasing and Mother used to always get mad; Rose doesn't remember seeing Mother blush about anything, before.

Gaylene tells Rose that she's definitely in love with Mr. Kapinski, even if he is a teacher. In six years, when I'm eighteen, Gaylene says, Mr. Kapinski will only be twenty-seven. I could be his fiancée, when I'm eighteen, Gaylene says. Nine years is no big deal, if you're in love when you're eighteen, Gaylene says. Look at Elizabeth Taylor. Liz Taylor is way younger than Michael Wilding. And Audrey Hepburn is half as old as Mel Ferrar, Gaylene says. Look at Grace Kelly and Prince Ranier. Rose thinks Gaylene's crushes are silly; Gaylene is always in love with somebody and she always picks fast high school boys or movie stars to be in love with. This isn't any different. There's no danger of anyone — not even Mr. Kapinski — loving her back.

Mother may be right about Gaylene; Gaylene can be a very silly girl, even if she is Rose's best friend; until Rose explains it to her, Gaylene thinks a "Science Major" is an officer in the army. Beside, Rose thinks smugly, Mr. Kapinski doesn't drink cocoa at Gaylene's house on Tuesday and Thursday nights. Rose will be eighteen three months before Gaylene.

In early October, Mother gets several letters, addressed in oddly familiar back-hand script. Rose knows the writing — she's seen it before — but she can't quite place it, can't pull an author out of the grab-bag of Aunts and second-cousins and girl-hood friends who correspond with Mother. Mother always sorts the mail when it comes, and reads some of it right away, but she doesn't open these new letters in front of Rose or Mary Ann. She always takes them, and a fresh cup of coffee, and goes to her sewing room. Once, when Rose passes the sewing-room door, she sees Mother — the letter open, spread on her lap — gazing out the window, smiling, like a cat with a secret. Mother looks up, sees Rose, and blushes. She folds the letter and puts it in the pocket of her apron. She asks Rose to start peeling potatoes for dinner.

Then an African Violet in an orange ceramic pot appears on the kitchen window-ledge. Mother announces that she's decided to try her hand at Horticulture and that the plant is a gift from Mr. Kapinski. Dad says that if Mother is serious about Horticulture, she doesn't need to join another club; he says there's a big garden patch that could use a good dig-up while it's still Indian Summer and there's lot of fresh fertilizer out at Uncle Willie's if she wants Horticulture.

Mother fusses over the violet — moving it to different windows, putting new soil in the pot, punching holes in the dirt with a fork handle — but the fuzzy green leaves turn wilted and damp. Mr. Kapinski arrives just after school, one Tuesday, to look at the violet. When Mother laments her lack of green thumbs, Mr. Kapinski catches one of Mother's slim hands in his and holds it up to the light. Such a pretty thumb, too, he says, softly, as though he has the power to will the thumb green with his voice and his touch. Mother snatches her hand away, almost too quickly, and laughs. Mr. Kapinski is still there at six o'clock when Dad comes home from the store; he stays to supper and then he drives Mother to the Astronomy meeting in his new tan Pontiac. No point in taking two cars, he says, when I'm driving anyway.

Rose finds excuses to stay up long past her bed-time and then stays awake, very late, until she hears Mother come home, but Mr. Kapinski doesn't come in for cocoa.

On Thursday, at dinner, Mother suggests that she will drive Mr. Kapinski to the Astronomer's meeting in the Studebaker — if it's all right with Dad — to pay back the ride, she says, and the plant. Before Rose can stop herself, words just seem to burst from her mouth. I'm coming, too, she says, almost yelling. Everyone — even Mary Ann — stops in mid-bite to look at Rose. Rose doesn't

know where those particular words came from. She had wanted to say something else entirely — or nothing at all. She swallows, hard; there are salt tears forming at the back of her nose; she takes a deep breath. I'm coming, too, she says, again, more evenly.

Nobody really argues. Dad says something about holding the fort at home and helping Mary Ann watch *Leave It To Beaver* and the *Bugs Bunny Hour*. Mother doesn't look pleased and she murmurs noises about late school nights, but nobody really argues as though they mean it.

Rose doesn't move to the back seat of the Studebaker when they pick up Mr. Kapinski, although she can tell that he wants her to. She juts out her chin and holds her ground. Mr. Kapinski scowls at her and wrestles a box of cardboard tube telescopes and old binoculars and folded star-maps into the back seat of the Studebaker; he swings in and sits beside the box. He's wearing charcoal drapes and a powder-blue sweater with a deep V-neck that shows dark, curling chest-hair at the bottom part of the V. He smells of Old Spice after-shave. Rose has never seen Mr. Kapinski dressed quite this way before, in this sweater, over his bare chest; she has never smelled Mr. Kapinski smelling this nice this much before. But there's something on his forehead. Rose stares at it for a long time. It's a zit, she decides, finally. Looks like rain, Mr. Kapinski says. Might be too cloudy to see much, he says, glumly.

By the time they get to the Memorial Arena parking lot, it is far too cloudy to see anything, even the moon. The Amateur Astronomers flee to their vehicles with the first splatters of rain, leaving Mother and Rose and Mr. Kapinski to rush around in the headlights of the Studebaker, rescuing binoculars, stuffing the tube telescopes into the cardboard box, capturing the star-maps before they escape on the rising wind. Mother's cotton skirt billows out, and flattens against her body with each sweep of the wind. Silt flies in the heavy air, gritting in Rose's eyes; her hair whips across her face with so much force that it stings.

The thunderclap and the lightning are simultaneous; the Memorial Arena parking lot is suddenly alight with a curious roaring silver-blue flash; Rose thinks, for a splinter of an instant, that this is what blue starlight must be like. A huge leafless aspen cracks in two — cleaves lengthwise, almost as though split by an axe — and the halves crash to the ground on either side of the Studebaker, just inches from the rear fenders. Mother screams.

Mr. Kapinski drops the box — he almost throws it — as he lunges past Rose to get to the car, knocking her down in the gravel. She lands, hard, on her knees and one elbow as the blue light crackles all around her, hissing and whining above the pipe-organ roar of the thunder. There is a peculiar burnt-feathers hot-rubber kind of smell to the blue air. Mr. Kapinski dives into the back seat of the Studebaker.

The gravel under Rose's knees turns to sludge as the clouds open. Huge raindrops pelt Mother as she drags Rose up from the ground; blades of blue light

stab the earth — again and again, sizzle all around them — as Mother pulls Rose toward the open door on the driver's side of the Studebaker. Mother packs Rose through the door and shoves her across the front seat and almost collapses in behind her, wrenching the door shut with both hands.

"Close the back door," Mother shouts over the wind and the thunder, at Mr. Kapinski, who is huddled, face-down, in a ball on the floor in the rear seat. His knees are pulled up to his stomach and his arms are wrapped around his head, covering his ears. He says something — Rose can't make it out — but he sounds like he's strangling.

"Damn it Ray," Mother yells, "Get up off the floor and shut the damn door before the wind rips it right off the damn car." Mother never swears.

Mr. Kapinski doesn't move. Mother has dumped her handbag on the front seat of the car; she's pawing through its jumbled contents, searching for car-keys. Rose crawls halfway over the seat-back, and straddles it, digging her bloodied knees into the upholstery for balance. She bends forward from the waist — twisting the upper part of her body, reaching, stretching — until she can get both hands on the door handle. It takes all her strength, all her concentration, to wrestle the door from the grasp of the wind. She can feel her elbow swelling. Mr. Kapinski is still making those soft strangling noises. Rose is careful not to touch him.

Rose hoists herself back into the passenger seat and braces her feet against the floorboards of the car as Mother guns the motor and pulls out of the parking lot in a wide arc, scattering gravel and mud and dead leaves, dodging fallen branches and debris, hitting the soft edge of the ditch and swerving back onto the solid gravel roadbed. Rose sees tube telescopes rolling across the ground, tumbling from the upturned box; star-maps whirl in the air, unpleating, climbing the wind like kites let loose from their strings.

Get out. That's all Mother says when they arrive at Mr. Kapinski's boarding house. Just "Get out." She doesn't turn around to watch Mr. Kapinski unfold himself from the floor of the Studebaker. Rose doesn't turn around either.

At home, while Rose sips cocoa, Mother bathes Rose's scraped knees and paints them with pink mercurchrome and fastens loose gauze squares over them with strips of adhesive tape. She pounds ice cubes with the rolling pin and funnels them into the hot-water bottle; she wraps it in a towel and ties it around Rose's swollen elbow. She throws the African Violet — orange ceramic pot and all — into the trash.

Lightning, Rose says loudly, sitting sideways in her desk at the start of Science class the next day, always comes from the sky. The Encyclopaedia is wrong, Rose says, to Gaylene. The teacher is wrong, Rose says. The diagram is wrong. Gaylene's eyes signal alarms; she is trying to shush Rose, warn her that Mr. Kapinski is listening to this bit of treason, but Rose won't be shushed. Rose

knows exactly who can hear her. The ground has nothing whatever to do with it, Rose says, more loudly. Lightning always goes from the sky to the ground, period, and that's how it works, Rose says, scornfully, and anybody who's ever seen lightning knows it.

How lightning split one of the big windbreak trees at the Memorial Arena parking lot — right in half — and the halves landed on both sides of the Studebaker, opened out like the two arms of a V, missed the fenders by less than an inch and there wasn't a scratch on the car.

How Mr. Kapinski won't ever say one more word about lightning.

Rose swings her bandaged knees around, turns her body to face the tidy back-hand Science notes on the blackboard, carefully arranges her sore elbow on the arm-rest of the desk, poses her head to stare straight past him.





## **Moebius Me-Be-Us**

A pupil saw himself reflected in his teacher's eyes  
and looked deeper  
to see himself reflected in her.

**William J. Hunter**



## **Another Dropout**

The way it am  
is not the way I were  
and the way it were  
is not the way I am  
so way and I and were  
ain't am  
and vice versa  
which is how it went in school today.

William E. Goding

## **Misty's Chrysalids Journal**

I really don't know about this novel,  
But there was a lot of bad luck  
In that one chapter.  
I feel afraid for what the father  
Does to his son.  
I don't know.

But you do know!  
You know that the world is falling apart,  
And babies are being sacrificed,  
That crops are burnt while people starve,  
That God is unforgiving and cruel.  
The kids are running from their parents,  
Who want to kill them!  
Neighbors spy on each other,  
And shoot arrows  
To shut each other up.

You do know!  
You see the horror in all of this,  
The tragedy, the despair.  
While others sit and read,  
And say how much they are enjoying  
All of the action in  
This novel,

You know,

You see,

You do.

I cry.

Michele Jacobsen