

THE PROBABILITIES

By Wendy MacLeod

*A middle-aged man stands in front of
a Doppler Radar map of the U.S.*

WEATHERMAN

While it's true you don't need a weatherman to tell you how the wind blows, you DO need a weatherman to tell you how the wind WILL blow. Hence the weather report. The lowly weather report. Elevated to the top of the news only when a hurricane threatens or a blizzard is blowing in. Brought to the forefront of our concerns only when we're planning a wedding, a ski trip...a college graduation.

A beat.

Which brings us to our topic: Why Weather Matters.

In the old days, the weather forecast was called the Probabilities or the Indications. They were humbler then because what the barometer might indicate at the moment it was read did not necessarily predict what it *would* read. The barometer might fall, the temperature might plunge, and children might be frozen to death on the prairie as in the Great Dakota Blizzard of 1888, which some people call The Children's Blizzard, not because they *caused* it but because they were the *casualties*. It would be as if we were to one day call the war in Iraq: the Poor Soldiers from Depressed Towns War. Or: The Innocent Iraqi People Trying to Go About Their Daily Lives But Getting Blown Up Instead War. But I digress.

The single most chilling thing about the Children's Blizzard, the pun is regrettable but unavoidable, is that the *lucky* children caught by the blizzard on their way home from their one-room schools, the children who couldn't see their hands in front of their face much less their big brother, the *lucky* ones found the occasional haystack to hole up in to wait out the storm. Let's say they crammed their little bodies into haystacks as best they could but a single foot stuck out. By dawn, that foot was frozen to the bone. Literally. Like a leg of lamb left too long in the freezer. When the child returned home to her family, the foot would thaw, the nerves would remember pain, the tissues would rot and the foot would have to be amputated. The child's beauty was now marred, her marital prospects limited; she'd have been rendered useless in 19th century farming terms. There were no kneeling busses then, no wheelchairs, and even if there were, no pavement, no linoleum to wheel them around on. Only prairie. In any case, the lucky ones surrendered a foot or two but survived the night.

The unlucky ones survived the night, only to...when morning came and the wind dropped, in their eagerness to get home, see their mother, their father, their big brother, their dog,...only to stand up and drop dead.

If I might take a moment to correct a common misconception. When a groundhog hibernates, and groundhogs *do* hibernate, his heart slows to 5 or 6 beats a minute, the bare minimum to keep the organism alive until spring. The groundhog that you typically see on television on February 2 is from a zoo, the real groundhogs being holed up in their burrows with their hearts beating glacially.

A similar thing happens to a human heart in sub-zero temperatures and, having been slowed, it cannot then be asked to suddenly return to its normal rhythms. The children's hearts, having stood, for fifteen hours, the strain of wind chill factors beyond our comprehension, could not stand the simple exertion of standing up again. It was, as they say, a shock to the system. So they survived the night only to drop dead the next morning. And of course some of them didn't survive long enough to drop dead. They were frozen solid as they slept, purportedly in a fetal position. Everything that was once warm and liquid in their body was no longer warm or liquid.

The weather is a bitch, but in this case it was a particular bitch as that morning it was 45 degrees and the little scamps marched off to school without hats or gloves or even coats. Later in the day, the temperature would plunge...20, 60, 75 degrees. WEATHER CHANGES, PEOPLE! You *try* to tell your children! You try telling them that even though it's not raining now, they should bring their anorak because rain is *predicted*. It is *probable*. But it's like telling them they're likely to be 46 one day. They don't *not* believe you but it's irrelevant.

You may be wondering what 19th century South Dakota has to do with you, but *The Children's Blizzard* thematically underscores our topic: Why Weather Matters. Those of you who'd like to know more about THE CHILDREN'S BLIZZARD I refer you to David Laskin's book of the same name, which, although slow in parts, is excellent. I would have liked a little more information on the formation of the Army Signal Corps, but maybe that's just me. Did you know that weather reports were relayed by raising flags? From a relatively central location like...Minneapolis. The flags told the telegraph operators what the weather would be. The telegraph operators told the local papers, and the local papers printed the forecast in the next day's edition, so by the time the forecasts saw print it was like saying: *it's*

going to rain yesterday.

One more brief historical illustration. A man ordered a barometer from Abercrombie and Fitch--this was in the days when it was a store for outdoorsmen rather than a purveyor of belly shirts. The barometer arrived at his seaside home in Providence, Rhode Island on a glorious September day. He took it out of the box, only to see the needle stuck as low as it could possibly go, pointing hysterically to Stormy. He packed it back up and angrily headed to the post office to ship this lemon back for a refund. By the time he returned home, the Great Hurricane of 1938 had hit, and his house was gone. Believe the barometer. Ignore it at your peril.

How does one become a Weatherman, you ask? I know you didn't really. It's not one of those things people dream of becoming. We all learn the little poems: *Red skies at night, sailor's delight, rain before seven gone by eleven.* But that's as far as it goes for most people. At best it's a stepping stone to the anchorman's desk, where you tell people about man-made disasters: the war, the economy, who got elected, who took the money, who went to jail. Well the *weatherman* tells you about acts of God. If you think I'm being self-aggrandizing, check your insurance contracts. If we look at it logically, *hierarchically*, doesn't an act of God beat an act of Man as an Ace beats a Jack? I think so.

But since you have no interest in becoming a weatherman, let's re-frame the question: *WHY does someone become a weatherman? Why, for example, did I become a Weatherman?*

Is it hyperbole to say I try to capture the poetry of the world around us? The very unpredictably that is life. The transience that defines what it means to be human. The pathetic fallacy. It rains and we're depressed. We're depressed and it rains. Which comes first?

I watched clouds as a child. They spoke to me in a private language that nobody else seemed to understand. *Let's go on a picnic*, my mom would say. *No, don't*, I'd say.

A portentous pause.

She ignored me at her peril. And she did. Ignore me. And it *would* rain. And we'd eat our bologna sandwiches in some state park picnic shelter that smelled of urine, everyone insisting we were having fun anyway. We weren't having fun. Or even if we were, we would have had *more* fun if we'd waited until tomorrow. It was going to be nice tomorrow.

Correction. It wasn't going to be *nice* tomorrow. It was going to be *sunny*. When did we decide that sunny is nice? The sun is as cruel as the wind or the snow or the...have you ever gotten a sunburn? The sun isn't *cruel* either. It's not nice, it's not cruel. It's just doing its job. Which is all we can ask of anyone.

As a weather forecaster, I try to avoid the cliches: "It's gonna be a scorcher." "It's raining cats and dogs out there." "Get out your parkas!" "It's looking like a messy rush hour." Because poetry demands poetry. Mare's tail, mackerel sky, dog's eye. Cumulus, cirrus, nimbostratus, altostratus. They sound like vocal ranges that only gods can reach. Like a good father, I try to *prepare* people for what is likely to come. The probabilities. As the Norwegians say: *there's no bad weather, only bad clothing*.

Let's say that your child is away at college. Let's say they're in their final year, a month away from graduation, like the perennial police detective about to retire. Let's say you're not there to tell them, to *remind* them to wear a coat. Let's say it's April, *ostensibly* spring, but not *actually* spring because unbeknownst to this...boy, let's say he's a boy, a freak April snowstorm is gathering in the West and traveling across Ohio towards his little college town. Let's say that it happens to be a Saturday night and this college student is going out "partying," a euphemism for drinking to excess. Let's say in the early hours of the morning this boy wanders away from a party in an off-campus apartment, perhaps he's headed home, perhaps he merely wanted a breath of fresh air before returning to the party, having gathered enough courage to ask a certain girl to dance, but at any rate nobody sees him go. The party is overcrowded, over-amplified, underlit, and his friends there *would* be concerned about him and his blood levels if they weren't drunk themselves, so drunk that they're passing out, hugging toilet bowls, and in one notorious case later to come before the college Judicial board, pissing on the host's textbooks. Has the boy checked the weather forecast? He has not. Because this is not a world of newspapers, television and Doppler radar but rather a world of Riverside Shakespeare, Hobbes and Rousseau.

The boy does not come home that night. His roommate assumes that he's "gotten lucky" or "passed out somewhere," which indeed he has. He has passed out in a vacant lot across from the apartment where the party was held, in an otherwise respectable neighborhood of faculty houses and community centers and ball fields. Have you forgotten about the weather system moving in from the West? By this point the boy would have forgotten about it, if he'd ever known about it, because he was asleep. I like to think he was asleep, rather than

comatose. I imagine him dreaming of his childhood room with its chess trophies, his Golden Lab sleeping at the foot of the bed, remembering the outing with his father where they tested out a model airplane in a lot very much like the one he's sleeping on. And while he's dreaming, his body temperature steadily drops with the thermometer, drops to groundhog, drops to nothing. Hypothermia. That Greek bitch.

The next morning a neighbor, he is in fact a tenured philosophy professor, a little groggy because last night's student party kept him awake, steps out into his driveway to get his newspaper, sees a red sneaker against the snow in the lot across from his house, thinks nothing of it, and returns to his poached egg and his 3-year old who demands to know where he's been. Shortly thereafter a security vehicle drives by, sees the same red sneaker, realizes it's attached to a student, and having been trained to round up the inebriated, like a ball boy rounding up wonky serves, stops the car.

Later, after the boy is taken away in an ambulance without its siren on, people come to see the lot as if it will offer up the secrets of the boy's final hours. People leave bouquets wrapped in cellophane as if they might redeem the lot, where no doubt a few years on, someone, some one who is merely grateful to be close to the community center and the ball fields, will squeeze in a kit home. The lot is not to blame, of course, but they want to blame something: the boys' friends, the college, the parents...

Who is to blame? The weather. *Weather matters.* Listen to the weather forecast and you will know the future. Ignore it at your peril. Call your loved ones tonight. Tell them...

The man's voice cracks. He collects himself.

Tell them the barometer is falling. The temperatures are plunging. Tell them a storm is gathering in the Rockies and may be here as soon as seven a.m. Tell them to get out their parkas. Tell them it's going to be a messy rush hour.