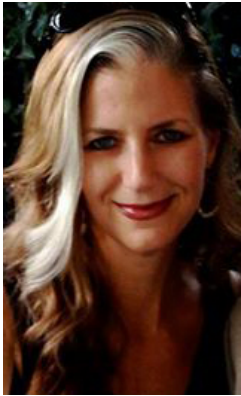


When Weather Gets Weird

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor



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Greetings, reader. It's a Tuesday morning, and I'm writing from my kitchen, wearing flannel pajamas, a heavy sweatshirt, a brown cape that my husband loathes, and my daughter's fuzzy pink pig slippers. (They're actually fuzzy pink *lamb* slippers – I know, I bought them – but she insists they're pigs, and you have to pick your battles with 12-year-olds.)

My drapes are shut tight against the semi-arctic air that invaded our semi-tropical climate yesterday. We have central heat, but it just isn't cutting it. According to my weather widget here on the ol' computer screen, the temperature is climbing back toward normal (49 for the high today) and by Saturday, we'll be up in the 70s. Of course, by the time you read this – over a week from now – there's no telling where we'll be. 85? 35? Who knows? My widget doesn't do 10-day forecasts. Or windows. (Sorry. Mac humor.)

Forgive me for sounding like a little old lady, but *they just don't make weather like they used to*. Modern weather is so fickle. It doesn't know what it wants to be. I remember when the weather was reliable. Dependable. You could count on it. You could plan your wardrobe – and even your mood – around it. There was a time when summers were hot and winters were (relatively) cold – even in the South. You actually had "summer clothes" and "winter clothes," and you packed each set away at the end of its season. This is not a fairy tale, boys and girls. This is how it was in the olden days.

I have a photo of myself at a Homecoming game in high school. It must have been October – Homecoming was always in October – and I'm wearing a wool kilt, reddish plaid, and a yellow crewneck sweater over a white button-down. (Go ahead and laugh. Get that out of your system. It was the early 80s and you had two choices – preppie or Madonna. Though you can't see them in the picture, I fear there were penny loafers involved in this ensemble.) The thing is, we always dressed like this in Alabama in October – because we could. October meant brisk

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temperatures and bright-colored leaves and wool skirts for Homecoming. Always.

Granted, north Alabama is not southern coastal South Carolina. When I moved to the Lowcountry, about 20 years ago, I had some serious adjusting to do in this climate. Far from physical, most of the adjusting was emotional. I had very clear, strict, deeply ingrained ideas about what weather went with what season... and the clothes that were appropriate therein. Our Lowcountry climate assaulted those notions – challenging them, even mocking them. I'd see somebody wearing sandals in November and feel shocked, my sense of decorum violated. Shorts in December seemed a moral affront. I was living on Fripp Island at the time, and despite the beachy casualness of most residents – and the mild climate – I was resolute in my seasonal observance, donning boots and sweaters while others were flip-flopping about in tee-shirts. It was uncomfortable and extremely silly, but I couldn't seem to shake my upbringing. My mother had taught me that nice girls don't wear linen after Labor Day, and by God, I was a nice girl!

Over the years, I learned to lighten up... figuratively and literally. The coast has a culture of its own, and inlanders' fashion rules just don't apply. I learned to keep sandals and flip-flops at the ready all year – there would always be a warm day or three in December – and that wool was hardly ever an option. I slowly developed a sense of what "winter" in the Lowcountry meant, and developed my wardrobe accordingly. While I collected plenty of light sweaters and jackets over the years, I do not own a coat.

Which was a problem yesterday as I drove my daughter – also coatless – to school in 19-degree weather.

Lately, all bets seem to be off, thanks to climate change. (And no... I am not going there. Everyone seems to agree that the climate is changing; we will not be discussing the "whys" or "what-to-do-about-its" here.) Scientists mostly agree that "superstorms" like Sandy, while not necessarily more frequent, are probably "juiced" (given more power) by the changing climate. But I'm not even talking science, here. As usual, I'm just speaking anecdotally. My own observations tell me that here in the South – not just the Lowcountry – we are having more warm days in winter, even as our cold snaps are getting colder. In short, the weather has become less predictable and more extreme. Not only does this mess with one's wardrobe – it can mess with one's internal equilibrium. I can never quite settle into the season, anymore. (Unless it's summer, of course, which has remained entirely predictable – hot as hell, 24/7 – and is the one Lowcountry season I'd rather *not* settle into.)

But I'm trying to view this new reality from a more positive perspective – to look at "the bright side," as they say. It occurs to me that some of my favorite memories were made during freaky, fluky weather. When weather goes haywire, it's like a welcome break from reality. Especially if you're a child. All your expectations are over-turned, your ho-hum existence suddenly super-charged. Unless you find yourself directly in harm's way, even "scary" weather can be kind of fun. (Am I allowed to say that?) My childhood in Alabama was punctuated by occasional tornado warnings, and they always brought a strange frisson of excitement. I remember the thrill of huddling in the bathtub or the closet or whatever we'd deemed our latest safety zone. As long as the twister didn't come too near our house – and it never did – it was a rousing adventure. (I realize I have just cursed my family by putting these words out into the universe. Please keep us in your prayers.)

I went to college at Sewanee, on a mountaintop in Tennessee, where fog was a constant companion but snow was pretty rare. One April, my pals and I spent Spring Break in Florida, then returned to campus to finish out the semester, only to experience a 10-inch snowfall. This was *big* snow for Sewanee... and especially for April. I remember how marvelously odd – almost subversive! – it felt to don parkas and mittens AFTER Spring Break, our tan faces peeking out beneath woolen hats, our sun-streaky, lemon-juiced hair wrapped in scarves. We trudged around campus the best we could (most of us southern kids, without the right footwear), hurled ourselves down hills on "sleds" made of trashcan tops, snapped pictures of our beautiful white mountain, huddled together in the pub over beer. (You could do that back then, if you were 19.) Snow in April. Who'd have imagined? Who could have dreamed?

Maybe my favorite snow story of all is this one: A few Februaries ago, we awoke one Saturday to find that it had snowed overnight. In February! February is practically spring here in Beaufort! My daughter, who was eight at the time, had seen snow only once before, as a tiny girl on vacation in northern California, but never here in her own backyard. She was ecstatic. We'd been planning a ski trip to North Carolina, so she actually had some cold-weather clothes for a change. She threw her new parka over her pajamas, and dashed outside. "It's not much snow!" I called as she ran out the door. "Just a light dusting! A little powder..." I hoped she wouldn't be disappointed.

A few minutes later, I looked out the kitchen window and saw the funniest, sweetest, most heartbreaking sight: There was my snow-deprived child, my little Lowcountry girl, lying on her back in that light dusting of powder, frantically waving her arms and legs with a look of pure joy on her face. Snow angels. How did she even know about those? TV? The movies? There were patches of grass everywhere, and there really wasn't much powder, and Amelia's efforts were rendering only the slightest approximation of anything resembling an angel. But she didn't care. There was finally snow in her hometown – in February! – and it had been a long time coming. This was heaven, and by golly, there would be angels!

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This is a memory that never fails to lift me out of my latest funk or doldrums *du jour*. Maybe there's something to be said for fickle weather after all.