

Weather Bulletin
Suzette Haden Elgin

Everybody said my Uncle Hamp could of been a *federal* weatherman if he'd wanted to; he was that good. He had such a light hand for mixing weather that Tykire County's idea of a crime wave was somebody's dog killing somebody else's favorite rooster. It like to broke Uncle Hamp's heart when the word came down from Washington that Congress had voted an end to local weather and all the weather was going to be federal from now on, with only a transfer station in each state to send it along to us — exactly the same way the government handled climate management. And when they came and took all the mixers and amplifiers and such away to be recycled, I thought Uncle Hamp was going to cry. The fact that the government paid the county twice what the equipment was worth didn't seem to make him feel any less heartsick over it. "They've been talking about doing this for ten years at *least!*" my Mama said at the supper table that night, when Uncle Hamp kept carrying on about government intrusion into our lives and destroying family tradition and I don't remember what all else along the same lines. "Surely it can't come as much of a surprise to you, Hampton!"

"But that's just it, Sis," he said mournfully. My mother despised being called "Sis," but she'd had no luck getting him to quit it, especially when he was upset. "Anything they talk about that long in Washington, usually they don't ever *do* anything! The more they talked, Sis, the safer I felt!" Mama clucked her tongue at him and changed the subject with the kind of firmness that meant it was well and truly *changed*, and we finished supper discussing the problems we were having keeping the deer out of the garden and what we might could do about that. Uncle Hamp looked hurt, but Mama ignored him; he was her little brother and she loved him dearly, but she didn't intend to have him ruining everybody's supper with his political lamentations.

That didn't mean she wasn't concerned, mind. Mama had been a tranquillary in the Tykire County Choir from the time she was eleven — one of the youngest such there'd ever been, so that there were stories in the newspapers about her all over the country. She'd had two brothers besides Uncle Hamp in the choir, too — though Uncle Gandy hadn't lasted long, he was too impatient, and he'd gone off to Montana to raise bison for a living and done real well at it. And she had encouraged all of us kids to try out for the choir at one time or another. Most important of all, my sister Elizabeth was an *ecstatic*, and a mighty powerful one; plenty of big-city choir directors had come around trying to woo her away from us. Weather was a family tradition, and Mama cared about it as much as Uncle Hamp did. She just didn't believe in thrashing out trouble while you ate; it soured the stomach. She always claimed that arguing while he ate his meals was the main thing that had caused our Daddy to have the heart attack and die so young.

But later, once we were all sitting out on the porch, she brought it up again herself.

"Hampton," she said slowly, "I suppose Washington'll be after Elizabeth now."

"You know they will," he answered her. "And how do you suppose we'll keep her here?"

"We shouldn't try," Mama said. "Soloist for the Federal Choir, Hamp...that's a fine career, with a splendid future. We'd be selfish not to let her go."

"But you've always said she *couldn't*, Mama!" I put in, quick before Uncle Hamp could say anything. "Haven't you always said she couldn't?" It wasn't fair! Why should Elizabeth get to go off to Washington and be some kind of big deal, while I had to stay here and learn to run a laundromat or something? If I'd known they were going to federalize the weather I'd of *practiced* harder!

Of course, I'd only been a euphoric, and those are a dime a dozen — nothing like Elizabeth. Your basic mix, what Uncle Hamp calls "generic weather," is a quartet: two euphorics, a tranquillary, and a melancholic. However big the choir got, you kept that basic mix. With — supposing you were really lucky — an ecstatic to do your solos. Most choirs had to make do with synthetics for the ecstasy parts, and they didn't really work very well. Our county choir had known how lucky they were to have Elizabeth and were foolish enough to tell her so time and time again; I used to follow her around saying she wasn't so much, so she didn't get a swelled head over it. The Weather Burea was forever claiming that *next* year they were going to have the bugs out of the synthetic voices, but it never happened. Because, my Uncle Hamp said, it takes a human being to project a valid human emotion. The synthetic emotions might be *electronically* identical, he said, but "they've got no human *soul* to them! And that is what it *takes*, for them to have any effect!" If I'd heard him say that once, I'd heard it a thousand times. And—

"Johnny! Are *you* listening to me?"

I jumped; I hadn't been. I'd asked her the question and then gotten to thinking so hard I'd forgotten all about listening to the answer.

"No, ma'am!" I said. "I'm sorry."

"Well, what I *said* was, as long as Elizabeth had a future here in the county, and could move up to the state choir as she got older, I didn't see any reason why she should leave and go off to some big city. But thing are different now, child! We can't really expect her to give up weather and start working down at the WalMart, Johnny. God didn't make Elizabeth an ecstatic for her to just let that talent go to waste, you know — it's meant to be used. *Damn* Congress!"

"Amen," said my Uncle Hamp.

"So you think they'll be calling now for her to go to DC?" I asked her. I had sense enough not to remind her that she'd always told us kids that swearing was a sin.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, they will. Unfortunately." And she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

When I asked her and Uncle Hamp if it was *really* too late for me to take up weather and see if maybe I had some unsuspected talent that might take *me* out of Tykire County without having to suffer the horrors of going to college — which I'd rather be horsewhipped twice a day than do — they weren't even polite. I couldn't blame them. They'd tried hard enough, when I was little, and I'd paid no attention. They would warn me that if I didn't practice I was never going to get into a choir, and I'd smart off and tell them that was fine with me. It was my own fault. It's just that of course I didn't *know* it was all going to change and go federal! Shoot! Like Mama said: *Damn* Congress!

When six months went by and nobody contacted us about Elizabeth, so that I was starting to think maybe I could relax about it, Mama asked Uncle Hamp didn't it seem kind of funny to him that nobody'd asked for her yet.

"Yes, it does," he said. And he cleared his throat. "And that's not *all* that strikes me as way out of line."

"Like what, Uncle Hamp?" I asked, to be polite. I didn't really care, but it was polite to ask.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said crossly, and that made me a little cross myself. I mean, it was him and Mama that had brought it up in front of Elizabeth and me, after all. I almost started to complain about it, and then I thought....naah, it wasn't worth the bother. He'd been acting weird ever since they shut down the local choirs and he'd go on that way a while, probably, before he got over it.

"I don't mind them not sending for me," Elizabeth said peacefully, sounding to me like she meant it.

"You truly don't?" Mama asked her.

"No, Mama, I don't. It doesn't matter to me. I'd just as soon stay here."

I knew what she meant. I'd pretty much gotten over wanting to get away from here myself. Running a laundromat, or whatever they came up with for me to do, would probably be fine.

"You see what I mean, Carolyn?" my Uncle Hamp said, real sharp. Like I said, he'd been acting weird. "You *see* what I *mean*?"

"Hampton, please." Mama shook her head at him, and he took a deep breath and said all right if she was going to be like that and he got up and walked off the porch and down the sidewalk toward town without saying goodbye or even looking back at us. I guess he'd forgotten they had rain scheduled; he came back soaking wet and it gave him a sinus condition that lasted two weeks.

If I hadn't heard him talking on the phone — which strictly speaking I wasn't supposed to listen, but I had a kind of habit of doing it — I wouldn't of had any idea what he was up to. And you may wonder why after I heard what he was saying to Mr. Rackleigh at the Weather Bureau I didn't get excited enough to at least talk to him about it. I don't know why either; it just didn't seem to matter much.

He did say strange things. Not the part about Mr. Rackleigh being sure to keep him posted all the time on what was happening; that was normal. Uncle Hamp always wanted to know every last thing that was going on with the weather, and that was why he was so glad he'd gone to school with Mr. Rackleigh and could feel free to just ask him about stuff. The strange part was him saying, "I am *trying* to go on caring, Bill, but it's the hardest thing I ever did! It just keeps drifting off from me, you know? You have to keep yourself focused fierce and tight on caring, or you just forget...you just forget all about it."

I didn't have the least idea what that meant, but I didn't want to know bad enough to go through getting in trouble for listening when he was on the phone; I let it go by.

And then yesterday, it happened. Uncle Hamp came and got me and Elizabeth and took us to the old storm cellar out in the yard and sat us down in there and told us the whole thing.

"I've been suspicious," he said, looking grim, "but I wasn't sure. Now, I'm sure!"

What he was sure of was that the government was using the weather to *control* people. I suppose that's terrible.

"Before we started the choirs, kids," he said, his voice shaking, "awful things happened."

Well. As if we didn't *know* that! As if we were just babies. As if we hadn't ever studied history and learned about murders and wars and ethnic cleansing and all that kind of primitive stuff.

"And," he went on, "it was a miracle when we realized...should of realized a lot sooner, because Jung had written about emotional weather and emotions being contagious *long* before anybody got to thinking what that might mean...but it was like a miracle to be able to just make sure there was always a steady front of *wholesome* emotions moving across the country, so sicknesses like violence and despair couldn't ever build up enough to turn into storms."

"We do know all that, Uncle Hamp," Elizabeth said politely. "We study it in school."

"Yeah," I said. "We do that in civics class, Uncle Hamp."

"You study it, sure! But it doesn't really *mean* much to you — you've never known anything else. But those that can understand what it was like, how it was when one poor sick soul could carry an emotion infection around until he'd given it to a whole mob of other people...to them, it really does seem like a miracle."

"Yes, sir," we said, knowing we were going to be lectured at whether we liked it or not and might as well just resign ourselves and let it flow over us till he got tired. It wouldn't take near as long as it would if we tried to head it off.

"But now," he went on, "now they're not concerned any more to just maintain steady good weather. What they're doing *now* is, they're using the weather to keep every last one of us as placid as a damn *cow* all the time! Good docile little American citizens they're turning us into, that never have an independent thought of their own, just go through their days calm and quiet as a pond, doing their duty and not giving a thin damn about anything! And lord help us all, it's working....and I am pretty sure it's not just here in the States, kids; I don't see how it could be. I think it goes farther than just the States."

"But *how*, Uncle Hamp?" I challenged him. I mean, I'd seen it on tv, we all had, the Federal Choirs standing up their in their ranks and the weather map behind them showing the fronts moving across the country and all. It was just the same as ever, except it was getting sent out from DC the way the climate got sent out. "How could—"

He almost yelled at me, which told me how upset he was; he never yelled at us kids. "I know what I'm saying, and I know it's *true!* They've got full choirs standing there in Washington DC, kids, with the different color choir robes signalling the different kinds of emotions like always, and it *looks* as if it's the same. But I told Bill Rackleigh what to hunt for, and he found it, just like I knew he would. Damn them all, they've got filters and masks on all the equipment and they're not letting *anything* through but the tranquillaries!"

It hit me, then, and I heard him clearly where before I'd sort of had my mind halfway tuned elsewhere. It explained a lot of things. Why nobody ever got mad at anybody any more. Why nobody ever got excited about anything. Why everybody was so polite, like we'd all just had a charm course. I could see now how that would work, and it made perfect sense. What I *couldn't* see was why he'd had to drag us out to the storm cellar to talk about it. It had been more than fifty years since the domes went up all over and the government started piping in the climate — what *used* to be called weather — on a schedule. They didn't even let *small* storms in anymore, much less tornadoes, and a storm cellar was about as useful as a bustle. Which was why ours was so dank and clammy and mildewey and horrible; nobody'd been in here for years and years.

"I'm sure you're wondering why I brought you *here* to tell you this," Uncle Hamp said, reading my mind. "I did it because we're going to do a test, and what I need for doing it is right here. Stand up, you two, would you please?"

Elizabeth and I stood up, and stood there baffled, and he reached over behind us and whipped off an old rug that had been draped over stuff, and we saw it. We'd been sitting on the old weather mixer that Uncle Hamp had had when he was a teenager.

It was a beautiful thing. Purely beautiful! Made of black cherry wood, and mother-of-pearl inlays all over it, little hearts and birds and twining vines, and so many coats of polish laid on so lovingly by Uncle Hamp that you could see your face in it.

"You *hid* it!" I said. I was shocked. It was a federal crime, doing that.

"Yes, I did. I never had registered it, you know, and I was counting on them not even knowing I had it. I built it myself, by hand, out of a little bit of this and a little bit of that; and once I was able to buy a *real* weather rig I put this one away down here, just because it was so pretty and I couldn't bear to get rid of it. And it's been here all this time."

Elizabeth had been standing there without making a sound, until then; but she was like Mama, practical. She believed in getting on with things, and she saw clear. She looked him in the eye to stop him rambling on and on about the past the way he was inclined to, and asked him what precisely we were going to do. Uncle Hamp had never had a practical thought in his life, and much as we loved him we knew better than to count on him for anything like that. He was what my mother says they call "a romantic." There are no romantics in the weather choirs.

"We're going to find out whether it's possible to tweak the federal weather a tad," he told her. "Instead of damping you down, sweetness, the way we've always done before, we're going to have you project full bore just as powerful as you can. I'm going to do the mixing — and it'll take my full attention, because this mixer is out of the dark ages. And Johnny there, he's going to take his tv set out of his pocket and watch the weather map so we know whether anything happens or not. And then, depending on what we find out, we'll decide on what to do next. Okay?"

Elizabeth looked a little worried, and I expect I looked a little worried myself. There wasn't any *law* against doing what he suggested; I don't suppose it ever crossed anybody's mind that you'd ever *need* such a law. But still...

"It'll be all right," Uncle Hamp said firmly. "Trust me."

So we got it going, like he wanted. Uncle Hamp sat down behind the old mixer with his eyes on the levels and his hands on the levers, ready to boost Elizabeth as high as he wanted her to go. Elizabeth stood up and closed her eyes and folded her hands in front of her the way they teach you to do in choir, and just let loose. I expect it was fun for her, just that once, not to have everybody hollering at her to hold back, nobody yelling, "Easy, Elizabeth! *Easy!* Not so strong!" She tipped her head back and let er rip. And me, I pulled out my tv and concentrated on watching the weather map on that tiny screen the pocket sets have. It wasn't exactly easy; I could understand why Uncle Hamp hadn't thought he could mix weather and keep an eye on the tv at the same time.

We kept at it a while; half an hour went by, and I could tell Elizabeth was getting awfully tired. Uncle Hamp kept fiddling with the levers and the dials and asking me, "Now do you see anything, Johnny? Now? How about *now*?"

But nothing happened.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Hamp," I said. "It's just not working."

He sighed and rubbed his chin hard. And he'd just started to say maybe it was a crazy idea and we should give it up, when suddenly his face changed and he went absolutely white. His face turned white like fresh snow is white. *That* kind of white.

"Oh my god in heaven!" he shouted, and I swear I thought he'd gone out of his mind. He was like a windmill, turning everything off, using both hands, shouting at Elizabeth and me, shouting words I'd *never* heard him use that way before. "Oh god in heaven *forgive* me!" he kept yelling. "I must be *crazy*! Oh, Jesus! Oh my god!"

"What?" I yelled back at him, scared half crazy myself, "What??" And Elizabeth sort of sat down hard on the floor of the cellar like all the breath had been knocked out of her and stared at him.

"Well, *damn*, Johnny," said my uncle, and he was sobbing and crying, "naturally you don't see anything on the tv! Because for sure they're not going to broadcast a weather map that shows that there *isn't* any normal weather any more! Are they? That map's fake, too, Johnny and Elizabeth, and that has to mean that somewhere....somewhere that we don't get to see, for sure...there's *another* weather map that shows them what's *really* happening!"

"And on that one—"

"On that one, may god have mercy on me, I've had Elizabeth sending out a giant beacon that says, 'Here we are, fellas, come get us!' They can see exactly where we are, they can... Oh god, kids, never mind, I'll explain it later! Run, now! Just RUN!"

But it had taken him too long to figure it out, you see.

The men from DC were already there in the cellar door, which we hadn't known there'd be any reason to lock. One of them pointed his gun, first at Uncle Hamp and then at Elizabeth, and the gun made a soft little hiss and down they both went. I don't think they even felt the prick of the dart, it was that quick. And then the other man turned a laser on Uncle Hamp's old mixer and burned its guts out, just as fast, and they headed back out the door to whatever had brought them down on us. "Don't you worry, son," one of them said to me kindly enough, as they left. "You'll see. Everything's going to be all right now."

I remember that there for a minute when I saw Elizabeth and Uncle Hamp get hit with the darts I thought it was a *terrible* thing. I remember screaming, and feeling like I was going to throw up, and thinking there was something I ought to do. But I feel better now. I realize now that getting upset wouldn't change a thing. It wouldn't bring my uncle or my sister back. It's all water under the bridge. Like the man from Washington said — I can see that everything's going to be all right now.

And I'm just sitting here collecting my thoughts, you know? Because it was a little hectic there for for a while. In just a minute here, just as soon as I can brush myself off and put this rug over Uncle Hamp and Elizabeth, I'll go on up to the house and tell Mama what's happened.

She'll be sorry. No question about it. I'm sorry myself. It's a shame.

It's just a shame.

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