Fair to Partly Cloudy

David Phalen*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1983 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
Fair to Partly Cloudy

David Phalen

Abstract

In the spring after his 45th birthday, Joseph E. Skip fell in love with the channel six weather lady. Her name was Cathy Robertson and Joe fell in love with her during a delayed broadcast of the ten p.m. news that came on after the late movie. Joe was an avid watcher of late movies, and on the night he fell in love, he had fallen asleep while watching “It’s a Wonderful Life” (it was Jimmy Stewart week).
In the spring after his 45th birthday, Joseph E. Skip fell in love with the channel six weatherlady. Her name was Cathy Robertson and Joe fell in love with her during a delayed broadcast of the ten p.m. news that came on after the late movie. Joe was an avid watcher of late movies, and on the night he fell in love, he had fallen asleep while watching "It's a Wonderful Life" (it was Jimmy Stewart week). He had awoken to the most beautiful face he had ever seen. "If you're going to work in the morning, be sure you take your overcoat and galoshes, because it looks like rain."

Those were the first words he heard her speak and he was immediately taken with the slightly nasal aspect of her voice, the short, sharp, chirps of her laughter as she chatted with the anchorman, and the shy, sideways glance she gave at the camera when she was emphasizing a particular high or low pressure system. He especially loved the way she used an old-fashioned term like "galoshes" so unselfconsciously. The next morning he wore his overcoat and galoshes to work.

This immediately made his wife suspicious because it turned out to be 60 degrees and clear. "Why did you wear your coat and rubbers to work?" she asked when he arrived home that evening. "You're not doing anything funny on your lunch break, are you?"

Teresa Skip was very concerned that her husband was becoming a sexual pervert in his middle age. Ever since his hair had turned gray three years earlier, leaving him with a
ridiculous-looking, bushy, black mustache, he seemed to be less and less attracted to her. He now spent his nights in front of the television set, drinking beer, and it was very rare when he even attempted to initiate sex with her. Teresa was no fool; she read “Dear Abby” and watched “Donahue.” She knew that many men had trouble coping with middle age and sometimes turned to perverse, destructive outlets to compensate for their gradual lack of potency. She had visions of her husband, naked save his overcoat and rubbers, standing in back of some playground waiting to expose himself to some little girl—or, worse yet, some little boy.

“I thought it might rain today so I figured I’d better take them with me.” Joe didn’t have time for his wife’s inquisition tonight. He had taken the long way home from his office so that he could drive by the television station and perhaps catch a glimpse of Cathy. He hadn’t seen her, but he had driven by the building twice with his windshield wipers on so that, if she happened to be looking out of a window, she might think that her prediction had been correct. “I’m going to watch the news,” he said, throwing his coat and galoshes on the floor of the closet and rushing toward the living room. His wife stared after him in silent anguish.

Joey, his son, was stretched out on his stomach on the floor in front of the set.

“What are you doing?” asked Joe.

His son quickly turned his head to face him, “I’m watching ‘Soap,’” he said in a cautious tone.

“Well, I’m going to watch the news.”

“But you never watch the news.”

“I’m going to start tonight.”

“I thought you always said that the news depresses you.”

By this time Joe had reached the set. He quickly flipped the dial to channel six and turned to face his son. “You shouldn’t be watching that trash, anyway.”

Joey looked warily at his father. He had never been too sure what to think of the old man. On the one hand, his dad could, and had, gone berserk because he had had his elbows on the table during supper. On the other hand, his father had calmly accepted the fact that he didn’t want to continue with school and go on to college. He had even helped Joey to get the nighttime janitorial job that he now had in the building where his father worked as an accountant.

“That’s okay,” he said, pushing himself up from the floor.
“They’re all repeats, anyway.” He carefully made his way out of the living room and into the kitchen.

Joe, for his part, was just as confused by his son. He was ashamed that he couldn’t communicate better with the boy, but he was always glad that there was a little bit of distance between them. He was disappointed that Joey would never approach his own height of six-foot three, but he was proud that he managed to avoid the pitfalls of drugs and gang membership that so many other parents complained of. Mostly, he just felt sorry for the boy, feeling responsible for some egg and sperm mix-up that had made him like he was.

Joe had time to think these thoughts because the news portion of the program was still on when he changed the channel. As his son had said, he found the news boring and depressing. He was confused by the scale and complexities of world-wide issues. Local concerns seemed insignificant when they were compared with the concerns of whole countries and even the entire world. Thus, he found the news frustrating.

Suddenly, the news was over and she was on. Joe’s heart raced. He felt his cheeks begin to flush. It was like when he was in high school and had fallen in love with his French teacher, only the teacher had been several years his senior, and this girl was probably little more than half his age. The report itself was rather unspectacular (“Fair to partly cloudy tomorrow, sunny and warmer on Thursday”), but Joe was completely drained after watching it. He was utterly intrigued and infatuated with this beautiful woman who had such complete mastery over something as powerful and as mysterious as the weather.

Of course her mastery was nowhere near complete. In fact, her predictions were right only half of the time. But for a month Joe watched the channel six weather report and her weather became his weather. He held fondly to every word she said. If she predicted rain, he would take an umbrella to work, raising it over his head on his walk to and from the car, even if the sun shown brightly and storm clouds remained invisible to the “uneducated” eye. If she spoke of a fog alert, he would drive slowly and carefully along the freeway, confusing and exasperating motorists who mistakenly thought it was a clear day. He smiled serenely when he heard people complain about the temperature. He knew that on this day in 1922 it had been much hotter. or that this day in 1958 had been the coldest ever.
Things could have gone on in such a manner indefinitely if it were not for his wife’s near fanatical suspicion. She noticed her husband’s bizarre behavior on the days that Cathy was wrong and she began to see all manner of catastrophic occurrences in her future if she didn’t get to the bottom of Joe’s strange behavior.

Ironically, it was on one of the days that Cathy was right in her prediction that Teresa Skip found out about her husband’s secret love.

"It’s going to be a beautiful day tomorrow," Cathy had said on the late night broadcast of the news (she had said the exact same thing at 10 o’clock, when the show was taped). “So why don’t you pack a lunch and go out with the family to throw around the Frisbee for awhile.” One of the things Joe loved so much about her weather report was the way she made everything so personal. It was easy to forget that thousands of other people were watching and hearing the same report.

The next morning, Joe called in sick to work. He had Teresa pack a lunch and he got Joey out of bed at 9 o’clock (he had finished his janitor’s shift at 7). He herded the family into the car and began to drive. The day was everything that Cathy had miraculously predicted. It was clear and sunny and the temperature was in the mid-seventies. Much better than 1916, thought Joe, when it got up to 98 degrees, or 1943, when it was a chilly 38. When he saw a picnic area that he liked, Joe pulled over.

"This place is rather run-down, isn’t it, Joe?" was the first thing his wife said when they got out of the car. “The tables aren’t even painted and I’ll bet they’re just literally infested with termites and ants.”

Joe was only slightly annoyed by his wife’s complaints. His main interest for the day was to throw around the Frisbee with his son. “Joey? Are you coming?”

Joey was trying to sleep in the back seat. He had put in a hard night’s work and he couldn’t figure out why his father had got him up so early.

“Joey, come on," Joe said, slightly louder. “Let’s toss around the old Frisbee for a while.”

“Can’t I just stay in the car and sleep?”

“You could have stayed at home if you wanted to sleep,” Joe was getting impatient now. “Why did you want to come along if all you wanted to do was sleep?”
"You mean I had a choice?" Joey had always had trouble differentiating his father's requests from his demands.

"Of course you didn't have a choice! Now get out here and throw me the goddamm Frisbee!" This was definitely a demand, and Joey complied with only the slightest hesitation.

While Teresa prepared to serve the lunch at a nearby table, the two Joes played Frisbee. Joe had never been too coordinated in athletic endeavors and he found that throwing a Frisbee was a feat that required physical skills that he didn't seem to possess. All of his throws began to wobble only a few feet after they left his hand. The Frisbee would then tip sideways and travel a good distance to the right of his intended target. Joey was so tired from his lack of sleep that he could only shuffle slowly over to the spot where the disk eventually fell. Joey's throws, while straight, rarely had enough strength to reach Joe. So the father would have to rumble forward at full speed in order to catch them. Invariably, the Frisbee hit the ground just inches from his outstretched hands, and he would go running by, usually stepping on the Frisbee and almost always falling down in an effort to stop himself.

After about twenty minutes of the frustrating play, Teresa called them over for lunch. Joe was extremely disappointed by the results of the Frisbee game, but he had confidence that Teresa's lunch would make up for it. His son followed him sleepily over to the picnic table.

"Boy, I'm starved," Joe said to his wife. "What have you got for us?"

"I've got some spare ribs that were left over from last night and some grapefruit," Teresa answered.

"Spare ribs?" asked Joe Sr.

"Grapefruit?" asked Joe Jr.

"Well, you were in such a rush to get out of the house this morning and I was so flustered by the suddenness of this thing that I didn't know what I was doing." explained Teresa.

The two Joes looked at Teresa, then at the food, then at each other. "Well, let's dig in," said Joe, determined not to let these small setbacks destroy his picnic. Joe grabbed one oversized bone and bit into the meat surrounding it. Sauce smeared up into his mustache and along his right cheek. He attempted to wipe his face with his hands, but these too had sauce on them and he only succeeded in smearing his face up more.

"Do you have any napkins?" he asked Teresa.

"I forgot them."
"I don’t think I’m hungry," said Joey. "I think I’ll take a nap in the car."
"While you’re there could you get the ice cream?" asked Teresa.
"Ice cream?" asked the two Joes in unison.
"Yes," answered Theresa, looking at her husband. "It’s Blueberry Cheesecake. Your favorite."
"Where is it?"
"In the car. Under the front seat."
Joe put down his rib. "I don’t suppose it’s in a cooler?"
"Why, no. I didn’t have time to find a cooler."
"Let’s all three go and get it together, okay?" Joe was trying very hard to control himself.
The car, when they opened it, smelled like blueberries and rotting cheese. "Do you suppose it melted?" asked Teresa.
Joe leaned his head down against the top of the car door.
"Cathy, Cathy, Cathy," he whispered.
Theresa, hypersensitive after a month of suspicious behavior by Joe, heard the mumbling.
"What? What did you say? You said a name, didn’t you? You said Cathy," she almost screamed out the last sentence.
"Who’s Cathy?"
Joe, shocked by his wife’s outburst, was quick to console her, "Nobody, nobody. Only Cathy Robertson, the channel six weatherlady."
"The channel six weatherlady?"
"Yes, she said it would be a good day for a picnic."
"What?"
"Last night on the news. She said it would be a good day to have a picnic and throw the Frisbee around." He was embarrassed hearing himself say this.
"And that’s why we’re here?"
"That’s why."
"Do you always do whatever she tells you to?"
Now that so much was out, Joe felt he had to admit to the rest. "Yes."
"And that’s why you’ve been acting so strangely lately?"
Joe was amazed at the speed with which she had pieced it together. He had never thought of her as a clever lady. "Yes," he said.
"How long have you been having an affair with her?"
"An affair!" Joe was shocked. "I’m not having an affair. I’ve never even met her." He saw now that she really didn’t understand.
“Then when did she tell you to have this picnic?” Teresa glared at him in disbelief.
Joe spoke slowly to make himself clear. “I told you. Last night on the news. The 10 o’clock report and the late night rebroadcast.”
“You mean to tell me you listen to what she says on the news, and then you go out and do it?”
“Something like that. Yes.”
For the first time since the conversation began, Joey made his presence known. A sound came from him that seemed, at first, like choking. Then he broke into a fit of laughter that made him double over and hold his stomach. “You mean,” he spit out between laughs, “this is why...I can’t...watch ‘Soap’...anymore? Because...you’ve got a...crush on...the weatherlady?” The effort at speech sent him into even deeper spasms of laughter, and he leaned back against the car to keep himself from falling down.
Teresa looked carefully at her husband. Then she, too, began to laugh. It was a small giggle at first, which she managed to almost hide behind her hand; but, at last, she could control it no more and she burst into a honking series of gasping guffaws.
Joe stared at his wife and son. He was embarrassed and hurt by their laughter, their failure to understand him. “I’ve been foolish,” he said. “It won’t happen again.”
He walked back to the picnic table and cleaned up the disastrous lunch. The rib sauce had dried and hardened on his cheek and mustache and his face felt strange to him, like the face of an alien being. By the time he had returned to the car, Teresa and Joey had composed themselves to some extent.
They drove home in silence, with the exception of an occasional snicker from mother or son.
After the picnic incident, Joe once again lost his taste for the news. Joey went back to watching “Soap” at 6 o’clock, and Joe watched only the regular series and the late night movies. Teresa and Joey tried to be understanding and they never mentioned the incident, but Joe occasionally heard a quiet chuckle and he was sure they still remembered and thought him a fool.
About two months after the picnic, Joe again fell asleep while watching the late movie (This time it was Ronald Coleman week and the movie was “A Tale of Two Cities”). When he awoke, he saw the familiar map of the United States
with arrows designating high and low pressure systems. Standing in front of the map was Cathy. She was looking straight at him and talking in her smooth, slightly nasal, professional yet friendly voice. Joe’s heart skipped a beat. It was like the last two months had never really existed. She was looking at him in a forgiving manner, in a way that said, “I know you’ve been away, but now you’re back.”

"...so as you can see," her actual voice was saying, "there should be no break in this hot spell. Tomorrow will probably be hot enough to fry the proverbial egg on the proverbial sidewalk."

Again it was like she was talking only to him and not to thousands of others.

The next morning, as he bent over to kiss his wife good-bye, the front part of his jacket swung forward and hit her arm.

“What’s this?” she asked, reaching into his pocket.

“Nothing.” he quickly responded, gently pulling her hand out. “It’s only an egg. I thought maybe I’d have it for lunch.”