

## Mary the Cancer Survivor

The old farm house was set back from the road about one hundred yards and separated from it by a large barn and a smaller equipment shed. The two utility buildings were in bad shape and half overgrown with vines. The corrugated iron roof was as brown as the boards that made up the walls and the big double doors hung towards each other as if to find support that the hinges no longer provided. The structures looked to be one storm away from collapse. The farm house was now covered with an off-white vinyl siding and the porch had been upgraded with a new concrete floor. The old windows were still the originals as they had been installed at least a century ago. They were covered with storm windows that, in the heat of the day, had only their mosquito screens down. The original door had been replaced with a glass panel one and had a modern storm door.

Our cheat-sheet said that the occupant was a 40 year old woman who voted sporadically. That meant that she hadn't voted in the last presidential election, at least at this location. I drove my pickup truck down the driveway to where it ended between the two old buildings. A red Jeep Cherokee was parked just beyond the gravel in a grassy spot. A few large trees stood near and behind the house. In the distance a long, regular line of trees showed where the old highway and the adjoining stream were and way behind that the mountains formed an uneven, grayish, band against the cloudless blue sky. Except for a few birds and the wind rushing in the leaves it was very silent. My campaign buddy, Ed Tallman, and I got out of the truck and walked the short distance to the house. Behind the screen one window was open. Someone was home. I stepped onto the porch and knocked on the door. It didn't take long and a woman opened the main door and pushed the storm door to just a crack. What I remember most about her, because it made me hesitate in my regular opening line, were her stunning deep blue eyes. I greeted her and explained that we were with the Obama campaign and asked if she had decided what to do yet. Often that revelation brings a negative response and occasionally it brings a very positive response if the resident is among the fairly scarce Democrats in the area. Her response was neither a rejection nor an approval. Instead she launched into a long explanation of why she hadn't received a lot of information and that the campaigns tended to emphasize the negative about the other rather

than the positive about themselves and that, in any case, people like her were too unimportant to make a difference to politicians. While saying all these things her voice sounded very pleasant – rich in mid-tones and flowing up and down. It was the perfect companion to her beautiful eyes. You must think that I was thoroughly in love by now and that, if I wasn't, I was surely out of my mind. Oddly, there was an unreal serenity about this woman. Ed must have felt it too because uncharacteristically he was completely silent and just stood there, watching and listening. I am sure that the idyllic setting among the old farm buildings, the tall trees, and the sounds of birds and leaves all contributed to the spell. But, it didn't matter – spellbound we were. I asked her what issues were important to her. She wasn't sure. As a clarification she told us of her current job with Wal-Mart. Most, if not all, of her co-workers had expressed their intention to vote for McCain. On purely economic grounds it made no sense for low income folks to vote for tax breaks for the wealthy so I regard these voters voting luxury issues such as guns, gays and abortion. Others like to refer to those issues as values. Well, they come at a price, a price the Republicans know these people will pay as long as their emotions can be riled up. Mary's emotions were flat. She had greater things than values to worry about. Her life and her livelihood were uncertain and she did not see how any of the presidential candidates was going to improve her lot. She said she wouldn't vote this year. Knowing that Wall-Mart did not pay benefits I asked her about health insurance. She said that she had a \$100 per month insurance through one of the social programs. However, it did not cover her pre-existing condition. This is indeed a problem with health insurance in the U.S. Companies are not required to cover medical conditions that existed before the individual insured her/himself. I asked her if she minded to share with us what that condition was. "Cancer," she said. It had been in remission for two years. She was rather upbeat about that, as she should I suppose. But two years was a short time and, if the cancer came back, she would not be insured against the very expensive treatment regime. I explained that under Obama's plan insurance companies were required to cover pre-existing conditions and that people with a small income as hers would receive a hefty tax credit to help pay the premiums. Obviously she liked that idea. The conversation took her away to the topic of her mother who still lived in Maryland – where she was from originally – the nice owner of the

house that she rented, the fairly cheap rent and the well insulated walls, and that she was a divorcee and had no children. She asked us for more information. Unfortunately I was out of printouts from the Obama website I promised we would be back or that we would mail it to her. Then she mentioned that she was worried about her job. It was Monday and her boss had told her to take a vacation day. Work was very light and he was considering laying people off. However, vacation days were unpaid at Wall-Mart since the company hires only part-time employees in its stores or warehouses. Mary had no choice but to comply. Of course she was losing income but that was better than having no income at all.

And, it age forty it wouldn't be easy to find another job, not in this economy. We could have listened to that warm, lively voice and stared into the depths of those bright blue eyes for a good while longer but, other than that, there were no convincing reasons to linger on. So we did our goodbyes, shaking hands and smiling and promising the information. It so happened that on our way to the hills the next day we passed by her house. But we did not to see her stunning blue eyes again or hear her pleasant voice. The red Cherokee was absent. Disappointed we left the papers in the door handle. We do not know whether she did go and vote, and, if she did, who she voted for.