

The Woman I Never Saw

I turned off Runion Creek Road up a narrow track that ran past a small house. After about one hundred yards I came to another small house in a reasonably well kept yard bordered by a white wooden stake fence. Two cars were parked to the right of the house. One was old and showed the familiar greenish signs of long disuse. The other was a white 1990s sedan that had seen better days but looked serviceable. As usual I announced my arrival with two honks of the horn. Plentiful guns in this part of the country make it a requirement to be clear about your intentions. You do not surprise residents with a knock on their door or, worse, run into them as you walk around a bush or corner. Towards the rear of the house was a wide, wide open door showing mostly darkness. I hollered through my open driver's side window: "hello, hello!" No response. "Anybody home?" More silence. That was odd with the door wide open and the usable car in the yard. Maybe they were in the woods hunting or getting firewood. Or maybe they were asleep. It wouldn't be the first time that I had wakened people with night shifts. Usually I do get out of the car though but this time I felt uncertain. It was as if someone was watching me. I decided to stay in the car until someone showed. I gathered some papers with policy information to help with my Obama pitch when the loud screams of a woman's voice pierced through the woods and my chest. "Get the fuck off my property!" It shook me up quite a bit. I hadn't encountered this kind of aggression before. But, it was not entirely unexpected. I yelled back, "OK, I'm leaving!" I looked at the house, the darkened door opening and the windows but saw no one. I put the truck in reverse. There was no place to turn around except at the back of the house, a place I couldn't very well go! "The owner of the voice yelled again, "and never come the fuck back here!" That much was clear. "Yes, ma'm, I'm out of here," I yelled. Carefully I backed up. I never saw her and couldn't determine where the voice came from so I figured that a further exchange would be unwise. Maybe she had a gun pointed at me, maybe not. The track was long and narrow and bumpy. Backing out was very uncomfortable. Because of the uneven terrain I couldn't always see where I was going and I had to stop frequently to pull forward a bit and correct my course. But, there was no other option. But finally I returned to the main road,

my face flushed and neck stiff from the strain. I blew a sigh of relief. This had been an unpleasant experience. Although I tried to evaluate and reduce the encounter it had an impact on all my subsequent visits. That angered me a bit. I had lost some innocence that was important to my campaigning. And, even though I tried hard to maintain my cheerful attitude I never felt entirely the same when meeting with people at their remote locations in the mountains of Virginia's Appalachia.

This experience may confirm the view many people have of the dwellers of Appalachia, especially the view of the more remote "hillbillies", but it would be incorrect. This was the exception. The vast majority of the people I met were polite and patient or even hospitable. Only two other men, one 70 and one 30 year old, right away told us to leave. The older man did talk with us a bit and even smiled when we did leave. The younger man was made to look somewhat foolish when we continued up the track to his in-law's house where, despite their staunchly Republican sentiments, we were received very well (see A Hog's Rescue).