

The Very Secret Ballot

A Story by **Warren Kliewer**, *Secaucus, New Jersey*

I learned a lot from Alf Landon that fall when he ran for president, but from my mother, who had taken on the air of a spy for the past few weeks, I learned nothing. I was only five and not quite sure what was going on, but I did know a secret when I saw one. I thought there was a chance I'd learn something that November morning when she took me along to vote. The firehouse had been turned into a polling place for the day. A good thing too, people thought, because that way the town finally got some use out of the building. The fire truck didn't live there. We had only one in town, a small one, not much bigger than a pickup, and people were expected to put out their own fire. One of the firemen kept the truck in his front yard so his wife could use it to go to the store.

The voting booth was a canvas cubicle big enough for one person to stand in, but since I took up very little space those days, I squeezed in too. At age five, I was closer to my mother's shoes than to her face—they were black with straps across the arches—but I strained my eyes upward to watch what she was doing. Ballots were always paper those days. She had been given one, and a stub of a pencil as well. She poised the pencil above the ballot as she studied it, and I worried whether she would remember to return the pencil to the nice lady at the table who had given her the supplies and asked me my name. When the hand moved down to mark the ballot, all I could see was the underside of the rough wooden shelf she was writing on. I wanted to climb up and watch her mark the Xs, but she wouldn't let me.

And with good reason. It took me years to figure out why. After every election my parents held the same conversation. "Well, who did you vote for?"

my father would ask. My mother, barely able to contain her giggles, would answer, "I thought the ballot was supposed to be secret." After hearing that conversation enough times, I realized that at the age of five, I had had enough primitive reading skill to tell the difference between Alfred Landon (R) and Franklin Delano Roosevelt (D). She must have known that if she had let me watch, I would have known... and I would have told.

But I guessed. Standing next to her shoes, I closed my eyes, held my breath, and willed Mr. Landon to win. In every way possible, short of actually marking an X on a sheet of paper, I voted for him. But it did no good. Roosevelt won big. That made me a loser too. The next time we passed the firehouse, I avoided looking at it.

I am not a student of politics, but even I noticed how rapidly my unfortunate candidate's reputation declined. He became Alf the Joke. Words like "ineffectual," "reactionary," even "bigoted" crept into descriptions of him. Once when I was in college, I asked my mother how she now felt about him. She changed the subject. She was good at that—not noticing an abrasive tone of voice, not hearing questions she didn't want to answer. And then, some twenty years after Mr. Landon and I lost our foothold in politics, I was living in Topeka. While driving through a neighbourhood I didn't know, except that someone has told me I couldn't afford even to imagine living there, I passed the gateway entrance to a warmly elegant estate and saw "Landon" on the mailbox. Could this be? I wondered. I asked around. "Sure," I was told. "Nice man. Go see him sometime."

I didn't, but on one occasion thought I should have. It was on an unmemorable airplane trip with one bright moment. The conscientious stewardess offered me one magazine after another after another, and after I had rejected everything from *Time* to *Vogue* to *Field and Stream*, she tried again by rummaging around in a closet and found an old issue of *Esquire*, which I accepted with no hope. But I was surprised. It contained a long, loving portrait of Alf Landon as a gentleman, a man of integrity and civility who had made the mistake of wanting to be elected. The price he had had to pay to placate right-wing factions in his party was to present himself as an extremist. Well, I thought, that just proves everything we've all believed about what happens in the smoke-filled back rooms at political conventions. But there was another nagging question I couldn't get rid of. Was it possible that my mother had somehow been able to see through the Republican rhetoric to the character of the man? Was it possible that I had been smarter at the age of five than I was at forty?

Maybe so. In ruminating about Landon and my first lost election, I tried to remember a time when a winning candidate was known to be more intelligent than the loser. Has there ever been a time since John Quincy Adams when civility won an election? Maybe I really had been more perceptive at the age of five and a height of thirty inches, when I looked up at the underside of politics and saw only the backside of the ballot.

I imagine we'd all like to regain our childhood wisdom, the time when we knew very little but understood far too much. Maybe I should have adhered to my early rural Minnesota way of judging a person's character. How would I like to be stranded, I used to ask myself, with so-and-so in a farmhouse during a major two-day blizzard? That might still be a good test. A blizzard pares things down to three stark rules: Stay warm but make sure the house doesn't burn; plan your meals carefully because you'll have to make do with whatever is on hand; and keep your mind busy so you don't panic and do something foolish. Throughout the storm you'll have to listen to the whistling, wailing forces that are out to get you.

Under these circumstances, Adlai Stevenson would have been the perfect housemate, and together we could have philosophized our way through the ordeal. Jimmie Carter, after losing his second election, would have kept us busy during the storm making house repairs. Norman Thomas would have socialistically shared the duties. But how many of the political winners, under the stress of being rendered helpless, would have been worth talking to? I wonder if it's even possible for such a dominant personality to endure the presence of a higher power just on the other side of a two-inch door.

My mother had no power struggle with nature. She was a nurse, and she knew how fragile all human lives are. She understood the importance of making small, dignified protests against the inevitable, such a fluffing up the pillow of a patient who will soon die. It was her way of casting her vote for the loser, a civilized protest against inevitable calamity.

Why, I used to ask myself, does she keep doing this? Why vote at all? Very casually one day she told me a story about her father. He came home from town with some news. It was 1920. My mother was twenty-five. There was a new law, he told her and his wife, my grandmother. "You have the vote now," he said. "Use it." Both women agreed that they would.

Something about that story nagged at me for years. I was sure that brief conversation meant more than it seemed to. Below the surface, I was sure, there were layers I couldn't penetrate. Why would my grandfather have welcomed the vote into his family? Like the other Mennonites in the community he deeply distrusted the government—the one in Washington, the one in Saint Paul, and to some extent even the one in Windom, the county seat. Hadn't he grown up in the village in Russia, fearing any word that came down from St. Petersburg? During his childhood any message from the government was bad news. When the family moved to this country in the 1870s, he was literate in the Russian language, and my mother had told me that every day he kept up on the latest news all through the Bolshevik Revolution. Nothing in his inherited Mennonite distrust of government had prepared him for the day when woman suffrage culminated in the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. As he drove home from town—quite possibly remembering what "government" meant to him as a child—what made him decide to urge his daughter to vote? There was nothing in his past, I concluded, to prompt him to do so. And yet he did.

In 1920 church policies gave him no precedent, for women did not yet vote in congregational meetings. They were allowed to attend, and they certainly did, and there was no law saying they couldn't have opinions. I've heard a story or two from the older generation about a husband who, while driving the team and buggy to the Sunday evening meeting, listened meekly as his wife lectured him on how to vote. And then throughout the meeting she kept her eyes on him, monitoring his performance. As my grandfather urged his daughter to vote, surely he must have known that the difference between voting and controlling the vote may not be as great as it seems. And yet he did urge her to vote.

Did he urge her to vote in the 1929 church meeting, the first one when women were enfranchised in the congregation? Probably not. Church meetings were not "government." The members debated and voted on religious and moral issues. I remember one of them. Is it proper, they asked, to display a Christian cross inside the church? Outside the church? If so, what kind of cross? Questions like this one concerned no one but (as my mother used to put it) "our people." But in 1920 my grandfather was urging his daughter to start participating in the Government of the United States of America. In a few short words he had abruptly turned four centuries of Mennonite tradition in a whole new direction.

But my mother was no revolutionary, and so she voted for losers. I hope it helped keep the winners humble. I myself have found that of all traditional Mennonite attitudes, the one about distrusting government has been by far the easiest to follow. Even as a child I needed no Menno Simons or *The Martyrs' Mirror* to persuade me that government draws disreputable rascals the way a rotting carcass draws flies. Mark Twain was unfortunately not a Mennonite, though I wish we could claim him. For one the subject of government he was as pious as a country preacher. "It could probably be shown by facts and figures," he wrote, "That there is no distinctly native American criminal class-except Congress."

For many years my mother regarded Hubert Humphrey as a staunch member of the criminal class. But during his presidential campaign against Ronald Reagan she met Humphrey at the Cottonwood County Fair. She shook his hand, looked directly into his eyes, and changed her mind. I think she probably voted for that dedicated Democrat, though characteristically she refused to say. He lost, of course, as did all of her candidates.