

(bragt på dansk i Weekendavisen i oktober 2008)

Hope on Honeysuckle Lane

She belongs to the middle class. At first, she was a Hillary-fan. Then she bought a "Vote for Obama" sticker and stuck it on her car. If it all goes wrong, she can live with McCain. But not Palin; that woman scares her. She is Paula Brown, a much courted American voter.

By Lili Ochsner, chief sub-editor at Weekendavisen

Annapolis – Every day, she sits around for hours in her enormous soft chair, zapping and clicking her way through TV debates and web sites whilst sharply, knowingly, and mercilessly trying to drive presidential candidates, vice presidential candidates, politicians, political analysts, journalists, and everyone involved to play exactly that happy end she's got playing in her head. And they listen, since she –who is a 58 year old middle class citizen and a former Hillary Clinton supporter– is one of those inscrutable women from the baby boom generation counting 78 million citizens that both Republicans and Democrats woo with all their might ahead of the elections on November 4.

Democrats hope that she has forgiven them for choosing Obama as their candidate instead of Hillary and forgiven Obama for choosing Joe Biden instead of Hillary as his Vice President. Republicans hope the former Hillary-women have found a new heroine in Sarah Palin, or –alternatively– are so charmed by McCain's status as a hero from the Vietnam war that they will forgive him for choosing the Alaska-based "pit bull wearing lipstick".

It has been 40 years since Paula and my ways parted. That was the year when Martin Luther King and Bob Kennedy were shot, and society was marked by conflicts between parents and their offspring, between students and teachers, leftists and rightwing people, Blacks and Whites, women and sexists. Soldiers were coming home in coffins from Nam, and the divorce rate was skyrocketing.

My year as a member of an American family and as a high school student was over; and in Denmark –where the same winds were blowing, though not as strongly– the welfare society received its wayward daughter with generosity. Over the next 40 years it gave me a free education and money to live on during the studies, financial aid during pregnancy and motherhood, rent subsidies, hospital stays, and medical attention. All the state asked for was taxes, and lots of them.

"It must be such an easy life, you Danes live," Paula stated in the few mails we interchanged during the years.

Paula left our shared home in New Jersey in order to spend what she calls the best years of her life at college, paid for by her father with money he had saved during his whole life so that his eldest daughter –who was bright and independent– could get to have a successful adult life as a wealthy lawyer. But Paula's wild years as a political rebel and a hippy in Washington and San Francisco resulted in only a fraction of an

education in political science, half an education in gardening science, and an adult life as a homemaker. She says it was a choice she made, since both children and her husband too suffer from ADHD to varying degrees. So the family money in the form of inheritance and financial help were crucial in order to secure Paula a good life even during her adult life.

“My mother in law paid for my kids to go to private school; and thanks to the family money I’ve been able to devote myself to the job of supporting the kids’ teachers, so that in spite of my kids’ ADHD they have succeeded in getting both an education and a job. In the local school, all that would have happened was that they would have been forever taught at the lowest level. They never would have gone on to college, and they wouldn’t have gotten through the troubled adolescence in a good way if I hadn’t chosen a life as a stay-at-home mother. When they were small, I drove them hundreds of miles every week: to school, to their playmates’ houses, to sports training and matches. I helped them with their homework every evening; and when it was time for them to choose a career, I took adult lessons in graphic design at the locale college and talked the talented teacher into teaching children too. Here, both my daughter and my son found their niche. Both of them work with graphic design today. I have delivered to well functioning citizens to society; it could easily have been otherwise.

Today, Paula lives in the state Maryland, one of the wealthiest states in the USA. Two big cities –the capital Annapolis and Baltimore– as well as the vicinity to Washington D.C. attract citizens with high educations and good salaries to Maryland. It has always been Democratic heartland except where Paula lives. The Marine’s big cadet academy in Annapolis is the reason why Paula’s family has neighbors on both sides that have set up signs in their gardens up by the road urging to vote for McCain. Paula’s own home –a former tobacco barn– is placed so deep into the woods that Paula has chosen instead to buy stickers for her car that say to vote for Obama and vice president Biden, plus a sticker with a W crossed out by a fat, red line.

“This is the USA, and here we are totally open about our opinion, even if we disagree with the neighbors; and George W. Bush has been a catastrophe for the country. No way should we have another Republican President; and that was the reason why I supported Hillary Clinton. I expected her to have the best chances of getting elected; but right from the beginning I’ve been quite happy with Obama too. For me it’s not about getting a woman or a Black man elected; it’s about getting a President who’ll work seriously on giving the Americans a new politics. I want a leader who can gather talented people around him or her and get this country to function in an intelligent way. Not by creating fear or asking God for help.”

Health insurance and Iraq

“The current administration trusts Big Business. It believes that if Big Business gets rich, we all get rich; including the middle class. But this is not true, because Big Business is greedy, and it’s not OK to earn billions on other people’s diseases, as is the case now. We need public health insurance for the middle class. Poor people are on welfare, and the rich can pay for themselves. In the middle class, the prices on insurances are so high now that women can’t afford to get a divorce because they depend on their husbands health insurances that are paid for by the husbands’

employers; and the young ones can't leave home. Our daughter is 28 years old now and still lives at home because her salary doesn't allow her to pay both rent and health insurance. And even though my husband Hal and I belong to the middle class, we can't afford a health insurance that I'm comfortable with."

Paula listens with disbelief when she hears that Danes with salaries like her husband's pay more than 50 per cent in taxes. "That must be hard on a young person in good health, with no kids and no car," she observes. Tax is not something they talk about in the circles where she moves; but she would be surprised if anyone pays more than 35 per cent. Most people do not pay over 25 per cent; but she would like the really rich to pay more.

"There are people out there who can't remember if they own seven or eight houses. If they don't wish to contribute more to society, well, they can go buy themselves a desert island to live on! Unethical banks and mortgage providers have exploited the naivety of uneducated people and offered them loans they never will be able to pay. This whole house of cards built on slippery mud would never have been raised if the politicians had got their act together and regulated the market."

There is a pronounced nervousness in society, and Paula explains how she personally makes sure that the family does not owe other money than the loans in the house and the two cars. In the day-to-day life, money is spent very cautiously; and the family saves up for its yearly holiday week. The whole set-up is only possible because Paula's mother in law pays part of their expenses.

Therefore, Paula does not get it that a President has been sloppy enough to get the USA involved in a "costly and impossible" war in Iraq.

"We've been fooled into this war," she says and is puzzled to hear how meek the debate about the war in Iraq is in Denmark. In the USA the war has polarized the population. Most people are against the war.

"We discuss it openly and vehemently. At one point, the opponents of the war in Iraq were accused of being unpatriotic, but now at least we've agreed to not confuse matters. You can be against the war and still support the young men and women who risk their lives out there. After all, they have only chosen to get a job in the Army; they haven't decided that we should invade Iraq. Most of them would probably agree with me that right from the beginning we ought to have spent all the money and the energy in Afghanistan. My brother who has a career in the Marine behind him agrees with me."

"For sale" signs

To Paula, health insurance and Iraq are the most important election issues. Nonetheless, she finds them oddly irrelevant these days, for what will Obama or McCain be able to accomplish when one of them takes on the job as President in January, if the credit crisis is not over or has got worse? Paula sees unsettling crisis signs everywhere.

Friends and acquaintances have lost their jobs: Down Honeysuckle Lane and out on Generals Highway, weather-beaten "For sale" signs can be seen in front of the houses at a strikingly high frequency, testifying to a market that has grinded to a halt. At best, the houses have been left by families that have found work elsewhere in the country and have set them up for sale. Other houses have had wooden plates bolted to windows and door openings, having been left by owners that leave interests, mortgages, and homes behind them. In front of the big Mall, Paula notices the many vacant parking lots compared to just a few months ago; and on Saturday night, people are no longer queuing up in front of the restaurants.

On Monday afternoon on her way home from shopping, Paula gets a call from her husband Hal: "Hurry home, the Congress has rejected Bush' bail-out. The stock market is plummeting. It's all over the news."

Back home by the kitchen table, Hal says: "No-one have houses build or kitchens installed when a crisis like this comes along. And building is what I do for a living." He glances defeatedly at the television where Democrats and Republicans shrilly try to put the blame on each other for the failure of the bail-out that should be happening NOW.

The next day, the stock market has gone up again and Paula drily remarks that after all, it probably will not be this week that the USA goes bankrupt and money mongers go throwing themselves out the windows. The local newspaper *The Capital* –dubbed The Crab Wrapper due to its frequent use first as a plate and then as wrapping paper for Annapolis' 'national dish': huge, red, greasy, boiled blue crabs– merely mentions the crisis shortly on page 4. On the front page, the newspaper comforts the readers with the details of a robbery in the local mall only 10 minutes from Paula's home and the story of a life saving helicopter that has crashed in the woods.

"There's something almost reassuring in normal life simply going on as usual," says Paula.

The pioneer girl

Thursday evening Paula is back in her TV chair. She has been waiting for this show the whole week: the first debate between the vice presidential candidates, Joe Biden and Sarah Palin.

"Mom, did you know that Palin wants women to pay for their hospital examination in case they are raped?" asks Paula's daughter Rachel indignantly. "Can you imagine?! If someone calls the police to say there's been a forced entry in their house, they don't have to pay for the police officers' investigations. But if someone breaks into my lower body, it's just my destiny, and I can only have evidence of a crime established if I can pay for it. Dear Ms Palin: Keep religion out of my body!"

"Exactly," intones Paula. "Palin sets women's rights back a 100 years. During the eight years with Bush, I've been sick and tired of religion taking up so much space in politics. So now, when Palin the Fundamentalist says: 'This is a Christian country', I get angry. There are a lot of different religions in this country, and many atheists. It's

arrogant to proclaim one's own religion the only right one. USA isn't like that. Faith is a private matter that belongs in the church and the private sphere, not in the public sphere. On top of it, Sarah Palin does not believe in science but in Intelligent Design."

Hillary was Paula's favorite at first, because "she is a Social Liberal, she has a plan for public health insurance, she's knowledgeable, she supports women's rights; and also because to this day, I actually don't know her religion if she has one. That's how it should be."

"Sarah Palin is not an evil woman: She believes she can make a positive difference, and I like the fact that she supports her pregnant, unmarried daughter, now that as a politician she has prevented her from getting the sex instruction at school that could have helped her daughter not to get pregnant in the first place without planning for it. I think Palin's neat, she's got a cute charisma; but she knows nothing, she lacks experience, she's not a leader, and she is nowhere near having the level to become a President in dangerous, global times. McCain is an elderly man with cancer; we don't know how long he will be among us."

"I was happy on behalf of the Nation when the Republicans chose McCain as their candidate. He is independent, he does a great job for the war veterans, he is aware that the middle class must have some sort of public health insurance; and as opposed to many others in his party, he doesn't tell lies. But when he chose Palin as his Vice President, my choice was made easy. It was an impulsive choice, and I don't like that. A President shouldn't be impulsive. Plus he acts condescendingly towards Obama. During their first hour and a half long TV debate, McCain didn't look at Obama even once; he smiled condescendingly when Obama was speaking; and he kept repeating: 'Obama doesn't understand ...'"

"I always study very closely how the candidates behave on TV while their opponent is speaking. It reveals quite a lot about their character. And a real President argues. He does not bully an opponent."

Paula has sunk down deeply into her soft chair. The debate between the vice presidential candidates is well underway, and already during the first 15 minutes Sara Palin has consolidated her image as an All-American gal. Perkily as a pioneer girl on top of a prairie wagon, very feminine but with a man's aggression she shoots left and right but mainly left. She scatters expressions like 'drill, baby, drill', 'gotcha', 'you betcha' og 'Joe Six-pack' around her, waves and winks. She's been in training camp for days at McCain's ranch and now she shows she has got the courage to be herself: not a Hillary, not an elitist academic from Washington DC, but a cheery, proud politician from Alaska.

"She drives right into the hearts of the Americans in their homes," Paula sighs and falls remarkably quiet. This was the worst thing that could happen. Now Paula can only hope for Sarah Palin to make a complete fool of herself at the election meetings all over the USA. The elections are still almost a month away.

When –at the end of the debate– Palin puts forward her wish to give more power to the Vice President in the legislative work, Paula fights her way out of the deep chair:

"God forbid! She wants to change the Constitution! It's for a good reason that in the past, the USA divided the power into legislative, judicial, and executive power. We don't want any despotic power; and a Vice President shouldn't be anything but exactly a Vice President."

Something big still might happen

Almost 72 million Americans watched the debate between the vice presidential candidates along with Paula, but the polls the next day show that it has not changed anything. Obama is still ahead with seven percentage point; and even though Republican women celebrate Palin's contribution, the TV channels' independent focus groups find that she has been just a bit too cute and folksy.

"But I won't breathe calmly till the elections are over and Obama have got the 270 electors on his side that he needs. I don't trust the voters. They have let me down time and again, and last time around only half of them voted. And worst, under 30 per cent of the young people voted," says Paula.

"We *will* vote, and it looks a lot better than you think, Mom," says her 25 year old son Mike, who has called in with his girl friend Maggie from the Philippines. She works for the American Humanist Association; an organization that fights for atheists' rights in an increasingly religious society.

Mike and Maggie find facts about the latest developments in the election campaign on a private blog on the Internet: www.electionprojection.com.

"There are almost 20 million political blogs on the Internet, all strongly biased. But I've found a blog that's being written by a very rightwing young Republican. I strongly disagree with him, but so far he's been right in his predictions of election results, and I trust his calculations. According to his blogs there's no doubt: Obama's gonna win!" says Mike and continues:

"Americans have a deep yearning to follow an idealist; and even if many voters still feel they don't really know Obama, we acknowledge that there's no way he can do worse than Bush. All citizens –and that's including babies and geriatrics– are in a situation right now where each of them has to pay 2.300 dollars in order to save the economy. But who's getting that money? Is it being used right, and are they coming back for more?"

"We have to get the best brains to save us from this quicksand. It's not a job for Joe Six-pack; nor is it a job for normal folks like us. If I have to have brain surgery, I prefer to have an elite surgeon do it rather than a nice guy. So McCain and Palin aren't the answer," holds Mike.

"I wouldn't be too sure of the outcome," observes Paula. "The election campaign is beginning to get real ugly now, and something big still might happen that changes everything."

Captions:

1117 Honeysuckle Lane, the Brown-Taft house. Once, thousands of African slaves toiled in the tobacco fields around it. The slaves were among the first in American history, and they were shipped directly from Africa to the harbor in Annapolis a few miles from here. Big, black, beautiful birds circle in the extremely damp heat above the luxuriant woods. "Those are vultures," explains Paula. "They're ugly when they land."

"Do we avoid mentioning the elephant in the living room?" asks Paula rhetorically. "No, Obama's skin color only interests my parents' generation. Our kids' generation has made us middle-aged color blind."

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