

TROUBLE IN WONDERLAND

Life leaks in at the edges. We recently returned from a visit to Mount Desert Island, Maine. A highlight, as usual, was Wonderland, a nature trail that Michelle and Barack Obama famously hiked a few years ago. And as Lynn and I entered the trail (past a woman in sneakers who wanted to give us a survey about ticks), I imagined the Obamas strolling with pretend casualness as their retinue of Secret Service agents swarmed around them.

It's a half-mile walk through forest before the trail hits the coastline. We passed returning hikers with long-lensed cameras and collapsible walking sticks. The depth of Wonderland's silence felt strange to my New Jersey ears. The path tilted with irregular planes of stone. I found a clearing, and, with middle-aged gusto, urinated against a tree. I told Lynn there should be a sign: *Number of Tourists Who Have Urinated Here This Season*. And each subsequent tourist changes the number. Lynn did not find this amusing.

A stout woman with dark hair and a daughter dressed entirely in pink passed us from behind: "How much longer till the water?"

"About ten minutes," said Lynn. "Stay straight ahead. It will absolutely take your breath away."

"So make sure you take sufficient breath now," I added.

I thought about the slogan of the Maine Board of Tourism: "Maine: The way life should be." This melodious phrase adorns everything out here: tote bags, key rings, bumper magnets – and what's particularly pleasing is that I actually know the guy who wrote it. My old friend Michael Townsend was an advertising writer; one of his accounts was the Maine Board of Tourism. The agency had spent weeks trying to generate a memorable catchphrase. Nobody could come up with the right words. Michael told me: "One morning I took a shower. Walked up to the steamed-up mirror. And I said out loud: 'Maine: The way life should be.' He knew he had it. So did everybody else. 'It might be the only sentence I'm remembered for,' he said, 'but most writers don't even get that.'"

As we continued our walk, the temperature in Wonderland dropped; the wind rose; and breaking ahead, the path suddenly opened to granite boulders extending 200 feet to the water like an uneven theatrical stage. The pink stones looked like enormous packs of playing cards; huge fallen chess pieces. The cliff surface was a piecrust scored with a wayward knife. And the noise! Waves assaulted the stones; water vapor rose in a fog. As I stood there, in my Panama hat, I thought this must be exactly what the first settlers witnessed all those hundreds of years ago: the hard edge of America.

In the midst of this grandeur, Lynn's cell phone rang. Even here, woe had found us. A caretaker of Lynn's 90-year-old mother in Lima, Ohio, called to report that her mother was weak and incoherent. And, standing on the stones, where, unbelievably, a cell-phone signal had managed to reach us, Lynn went into full-press Clara Barton. We walked back

through the woods, and her calls were non-stop now: the visiting nurse, the neurologist, the home-care service, the hospital, a retired doctor who'd lost his own mother to a cerebral hematoma. Sub-cranial bleeding. A CAT scan....

The calls continued, and by late afternoon, as we sat at a picnic table at Beal's Lobster Pier (the oldies station playing "Jesus is Just Alright"), the message came through that Lynn's mother was, miraculously, all right. The test results were fine. We'd ordered two-dozen clams to take home, but later that evening, when Lynn realized they were still alive in their plastic bag, she insisted we return them to the sea. We did. At least two seemed to have survived – shooting up tiny streams of air bubbles in gratitude.

We returned to Metuchen to find my dear friend and neighbor - she's extremely private; let's call her Garbo - had been admitted to Robert Wood Johnson Hospital with an irregular heartbeat. We visited her in room 417, where her husband was keeping vigil 12 hours a day. Garbo, whose character is defined by her optimism, told me: "I feel like I'm on a shipboard cruise."

For several forlorn post-vacation days, I walked by her house in the mornings to see the front door closed and the driveway empty.... I have one of those telephones that speak, and last night it announced: "Call...from...Garbo." She was home! The doctors had found the right balance of medicine. She was alive. And to add to the celebration, Lynn's mother had become stronger, more coherent. Even her sense of humor had returned. And I felt a sensation I rarely experience anymore, that I was in the presence of a benevolent universe. *The way life should be.*