

IN RUDDICK COMMONS

We always head out early, undeterred by rain, heat, fog, humidity, or wind. Both of us, my dog and I, need to start each day in Ruddick Commons far more than we need to be comfortable. I leash her until we have passed through the break in the fence on Burnell and have quit the island of privet, manicured lawns, and hydrangeas for the other island that is the Commons. I hear that each of Nantucket's preserves has its own enticements. We haven't yet ventured into all of them. We will, eventually; but for this year, my first with a new young dog, the benefits of routine far outweigh novelty.

I discovered the therapeutic virtues of routine when my last dogs and I were the only year-round residents of a Maine island of 4 square miles. Over seven years (twenty-eight seasons), we came to know its skeleton, muscles and tendons, its blood vessels and skin. I named distinctive patches of moss (Ireland, Manhattan, India), peculiar trees (Rip Van Winkle, Birch Bayh), and the glacial erratics that had happened to come to rest on the spans of ledge along the shore (Boatstone, Aunt Bee, Gibraltar). We knew the paths of the deer herd and coyotes. We knew which of the ancient apple trees still bore fruit and where the best seaglass washed ashore. We were able to notice infinitesimal changes and, while my canine companions seemed to record such tweaks without awe, I marveled at them. Experiencing the cycle of life day by day in one small habitat

eventually filled me with wonder, faith in the “big picture,” and peace in my soul.

When, in May, we entered the Commons for the first time, the paths were clotted with daisies and purple-tipped grass that brushed my calves. There was mud in the furrows of the main trails. After two weeks of sliding around in soaked sneakers, I ordered a pair of waterproof mocs on Amazon. They give me the look of Olive Oyl or an extra large elf or a medieval serf, but my feet have stayed dry ever since. Even after the mowers carved out a maze of paths in mid June, dew lingers long on morning trails, along with fairy quilts (the dollar spot mycellium fungus, but don't tell the fairies). There are hazards as well: thistles, juniper, stumps and clumps of felled trees.

By August, the vegetation that lines the entry path leafed out and was draped in a mantle of grape vine, forming a blessedly cool tunnel to the open heath. The hula-dancing tupelos had full umbrella canopies. The arrowwood blossoms (poor man's hydrangeas) had turned to berries and were already purpling up for fall. Berries on the cedar sentinels standing watch in the meadows were polished blue, and the bayberries, still green in their clusters, promised to be silver gray for Christmas. Grapes and raspberries were hanging in clusters. High summer.

As for the creatures, well... the largest doe is one bold mother. She has raced my dog, who is not an instigator, snorting at her to keep away from the thicket where her

fawn must be hidden. A younger doe has often followed us for a time. The crow family has grown from two to six. They no longer sound the alarm when they see us, proving they actually can recognize individual faces. We have, apparently, made the safe list. One day, only twenty odd feet ahead of us, a hawk dive-bombed a rabbit and carted it off, the entire attack taking mere seconds.

On foggy mornings, when even the water tower has disappeared and we are in the center of the Commons, we could be on any moor anywhere. My mind wanders. We might meet Heathcliff up ahead. Or a Quaker. I need a new chicken recipe. I sing a couple Rogers and Hammerstein songs. I've been collecting odd sticks, and have stashed them under a tree. So far, I have a clavicle, a tibia, a bird wing, a wild boar head with tusk, a Colt 45, a crowbar, and a few cormorant heads. One of these mornings, I will remember to bring my phone and shoot a few photos. My last island rises in the gray. Here, as there, every day is both different and the same. It must be time to start naming the trees.