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## Leave a Message: A Beep and Expectant Silence. A Kind Ranger Returns the Call

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# Leave a Message

*A beep and expectant silence. A kind ranger returns the call*

**Elissa Ely**



IN THESE ANXIOUS TIMES, FILLED WITH MATTERS OF OVERWHELMING weight, thin worries can grow enormous. Maybe they feel easier to manage, maybe they give relief from greater unsolvable preoccupations, maybe we've reached a point where we can't tell the difference. Nonetheless, they are worries.

Section 6 of the Metacomet-Monadnock Trail in Holyoke's Mount Tom State Reservation—part of the New England Trail—covers about four miles out and back: a ridge stroll and a jaunty leg stretch on a chilly day. The Appalachian Mountain Club *Massachusetts Trail Guide* describes it as one of the more scenic sections of the 114 miles between the Connecticut border and southern New Hampshire. But I was worried about where to park.

The night before my hike, I called the ranger's office from home for answers. A hearty, pragmatic-sounding voice—a voice with a Swiss Army knife in its pocket and an Ironman watch on its wrist—invited me to leave a message. It felt like a personal invitation: *You there, the worrier who's lived in Massachusetts for 40 years but never hiked in the Pioneer Valley, leave your message here—it's just not a big deal.*

No one expects a human response to voice mail these days. We might as well toss ourselves into the tele-sea; the extensions we're told to press seem meant to drown us. But there were no buttons to press on the ranger's machine: just a beep and an expectant silence. I left my questions, all of them. Was this lot off Route 141 or Route 5? Was it hard to find? Were there plenty of spaces or only a few?

Then, lacking faith, I drove away on an errand.

This is why I missed the ranger's return call. He answered everything. The lot, it turned out, is midway between Route 141 and Route 5, along a road connecting the two, with entrances at each end, which makes it even simpler to find. His directions were perfectly clear, though somehow not quite clear enough for my anxiety. So I called a second time. And a second time, he called back. I recognized his voice with astonishment: Living proof that moral behavior still exists among strangers.

"It's after 6 P.M.," he said in a friendly, no-nonsense way, probably checking his Ironman watch. "I've gotta lock the gates. But what can I do for you?"

I asked my questions again.

*Hikers on Mount Tom in Holyoke, Massachusetts, a century ago. They probably rode the trolley from town then. Today, hikers must drive.* LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

“Hmm,” he said, as if he hadn’t heard them twice already. “Tree workers coming tomorrow. It’s gonna be a mess. I’d say the best way in is two miles from 141. Past the scenic views, past the picnic area, around the bend, on the right. Plenty of space. Free.”

In fact, the parking lot was impossible to miss. The trailhead for Section 6 of the New England Trail was also impossible to miss; slashes of white, with a useful bulletin board and a poster identifying the most endangered reptile in Massachusetts: the timber rattlesnake. If a hiker is “lucky enough to run into one of these shy creatures,” the poster added underneath a photo, would he or she please phone the station to report it? I wished the species much success with repatriation and hoped my luck had run out.

Section 6 was a lovely trail, with wild azaleas and windy bluffs and pastoral views to the checkerboard towns of Easthampton and Southampton below. Every now and then, as a reminder of the lower side of human nature, someone had spray-painted a rock or tree with graffiti. There could be no ignoring the gaudy initials entwined inside gaudier hearts, the solitary names signifying nothing, and a few RIPs for unknowns. Here were misdeeds of the shameless. Long ago, Mount Tom had been the summit of a trolley park, and maybe graffiti was part of the revelry. But it was still wrong.

I was swinging along, happy to think that in nippy weather an encounter with an endangered reptile was unlikely, when I passed a flat boulder near one of the bluffs. It was covered with misdeeds. In the center, in Day-Glo pink, some villain had sprayed:

## NOT ALL WHO WANDER ARE LOST

For some of us, graffiti is a rude and unnatural act. For others, it expresses the impulse to leave marks and commentaries of life for anyone who follows. I am one who has never been able to forgive graffiti on a rock that I feel should be covered with moss; even quotes from J. R. R. Tolkien, even from the great wizard Gandalf himself. Yet for once, the Day-Glo words spoke to me. I had been full of worry without reason or explanation—overcome by fear that had to do with not knowing where to begin. In these anxious times, I had been afraid to wander. This was clear now, and the rest of the out-and-back trail was clear, too.

Past 6 P.M., I got home. The parking lot and the reservation were closed, unless someone else, worrying unnecessarily, had left two or three messages.

In that case, my ranger—kind of a wizard himself—was probably on the line, reassuring them as he had reassured me that they would not be lost. Sometimes reassurance is the answer we need.

*Good night, stranger,* I thought, tenderly, and heard the gates lock.

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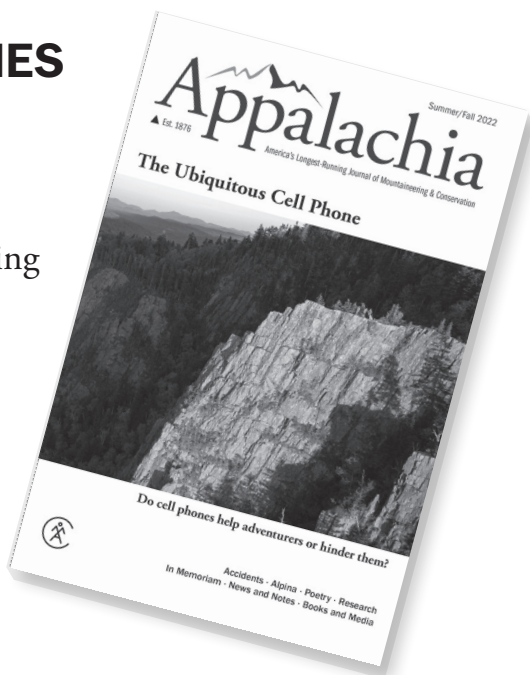
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