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#40

Spring 2003



**Cape Cod
Diary**

by
Lydia Davis



deadly nightshade, a cardiac and respiratory stimulant, having purplish-red flowers and black berries

Cape Cod Diary © Lydia Davis 2003

Belladonna* pamphlet production and design, Bill Mazza:

www.mazzastudio.com

It is set in Geneva 9 and 36 pt, ITC Calson Medium and Bold, 9, 14 and 24 pt,
and ITC Officina Sans 9 and 10 pt.

Price is \$3 in stores or at events, \$5 signed copies,
mail order add 50¢ postage per item.

Belladonna* pamphlets are published periodically by belladonna* Books.

belladonna* 40 is published in an edition of 100—15 of which are numbered
and signed by the poet—for her Belladonna reading at Zinc Bar, NYC, March
28, 2003, with Suzanne Wise and Brenda Coultas.

Belladonna* is a reading series that promotes the work of women writers who are
adventurous, experimental, politically involved, multi-form, multi-cultural,
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dangerous with language.

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Cape Cod Diary



I try to document the different ship's horns I hear, hoping to identify the kind of boat and the meaning of the signal: is the boat leaving or entering the harbor; is it the ferry, or a whale watching boat, or a fishing boat? At 5:33 p.m. there is a blast of two deep, resonant notes a major third apart. On another day there is the same blast at 12:54 p.m. On another, at exactly 8:00 a.m.

The boats seem to come and go at all hours, and last night I still heard their engines sounding well into the early morning. The pier is so far away from here that the boats are the size of dominoes and it is not possible to hear their engines until the town is quiet.

I am living by the sea in a damp little blue-and-white room that smells slightly of gas from the gas stove. The only people I see are an old couple that live just outside town. Sometimes they have visitors as old as they are, and then they invite me to have dinner or tea with them.

I work in the mornings and early afternoon, then I go out to get my mail. If I shop, I might buy a pencil sharpener, a folder, some paper, and a postcard. Another day, I might buy some fruit, some crackers, and a newspaper.

When I came here, in July, I was not sure I should stay for the whole summer. I tried to plan it out. I thought I could visit the two old people. I could write many letters. I could walk to the library. I could swim. I could work most of the day, then go swimming, eat a small dinner, and read or write letters. Now I do not think it is enough, though I'm not sure what is missing.

A storm is coming, and the gulls cry over the streets. The gulls come over the land away from the storm. There is a heavy smell of fish in the air.

A short gust of wind, then calm, then the sea is dark gray and the rain comes down heavily, and the wind blows against the awnings. My neighbor in the room above me goes to his door, then begins walking around over my head.

The different groups of people here: the year-round residents, who are sometimes artists and often shop-owners; the tourists, who come in couples and families and are generally large, young, healthy, tanned, and polite; of these tourists, most are American, but some are French Canadian and of these, some do not speak any English; Portuguese fishermen, but they are harder to discover; some Portuguese who are not fishermen but whose fathers or grandfathers were fishermen; some fishermen who are not Portuguese.

I looked at whale jawbones in the museum this morning. Then I did some shopping. Whenever I go into the drugstore it seems that many people are buying condoms and motion sickness medicine.

Fog comes in over the next hill, foghorns sound, now and then boats whistle. Waves of mist blow like curtains, or smoke.

The noises here at different times of day: at 5 a.m., when sunlight pours into this room, there is relative quiet and that continues until after 8:30. Then there is increasing noise from the street: after 10 a.m., a gentle Central American music, constant, inoffensive plucking and pinging, as well as the sound of passing cars, voices in conversation, the clatter of silverware

from an upstairs terrace restaurant across the street; car engines turning over in the parking lot to one side of my room, people calling out to each other, laughing, and talking, and all of this then continues through the day and the evening and past midnight.

For two days I did not speak to anyone, except to ask for my mail at the post office and say hello to the friendly checkout woman at the small supermarket. When the storm began today I heard the footsteps of the man who lives above me going across to the door out to his deck, pausing there awhile, coming away again. The ceiling is low, and the sound of these footsteps is a very loud crunch, so that I feel the footsteps are almost on my head. When he comes home, first I hear the clanging of the street gate, then his brisk steps down the concrete walk of the alley, then the hollow wooden clatter as he climbs the stair inside the building, then the loud crunch over my head. Steps in one direction, then steps in another, then steps crisscrossing over the floor of his room. Then there is silence--he might be reading or lying down. I know he also paints and sculpts, and when I hear the radio going I think that is what he is doing.

He is a friendly man in late middle age with a loyal group of friends. I discovered this one of the first nights I was here. He had been away in the city for a few days celebrating his aunt's hundredth birthday, as I heard him tell his friends, and was loudly welcomed back by a hoarse-voiced, middle-aged woman trailing a string of other people coming to see if he had returned. I know he is friendly because of a smile and greeting he gave me on his way into the building once, a greeting that lifted my spirits.

Sometimes there are loud thumps from above. At other times he seems to be standing still, and there is something sinister in the stillness. Sometimes I hear just a few notes from a

saxophone, the same notes repeated the same way a few times or just once before he stops and does not play again, as though there were something wrong with the instrument.

There are two buildings here, one in front, looking out at the street, and the other behind it, looking out at the beach, with a small garden in between. Each house is divided into apartments or rooms, maybe six in all. The landlady of this property sells antique jewelry from a store in the building on the street. Most of the people who live in these buildings work here during the summer and come to these rooms every summer. They are all quiet and sober, as the landlady made very clear before I moved in. She calls my room an apartment, even though it is just a room, as though there were something vulgar about the word *room*.

I was wrong about my neighbor upstairs being the friendly man who once greeted me. He is barely polite. He has silver hair and a silver goatee and a rather unpleasant expression around his bulbous nose.

I was also wrong about the saxophone, which is not played by the man upstairs but by my neighbor across the patch of garden, a woman with a dog.

All week long I had heard people saying there would be a storm. I went out into its first fury, on the beach, to see it hit the water. After I had stood for a while sheltering my face under my hand and watching the buildings on the piers vanish behind the curtains and sheets of rain, I went down to the water's edge where the wind was much stronger, to see more closely how the rain hit the water. Then it blasted so hard that it lifted a rowboat off the beach where a man in a yellow slicker was dragging it up from the water, and turned the rowboat over. It lifted and flung

the sand against my legs, stinging them so hard that I hurried back into the shelter of the motel deck, on stilts off the beach, where plastic chairs were being slung around and tumbled into corners by the wind.

Now the rain is coming down steadily, and the streets, which were empty at the beginning of the storm, are filling with people again, and there is, again, a heavy fish smell in the air. I have hung my clothes to dry from nails in the beams and posts of my room, so that it is a forest of damp garments swaying in the gusts of wind from the door and the windows.

From within the town I can look out at the harbor and the sea beyond, but that view itself, because it hardly changes, becomes a sort of confinement, and then the streets, teeming with people, also become monotonous. Yesterday I went a little way out of town, and I saw low hills with scrub brush and dead oaks, dunes covered with dune grass, a marsh of bright green reeds cut through with channels of clear water, and all this was fresh to me, and exciting.

I see now, though, that this, too, would become monotonous if I watched it from my window every day from a house outside of town, and then I would need a glimpse of what I can see from here in town: the stone breakwater, the two piers stretching out into the water, the small boats all pointing the same way, the one big, old hulk beached at low tide and leaning to one side, and in the streets the thick crowds constantly stopping at shop windows, the carriages and horses with women drivers wearing men's formal black suits, their blond hair in topknots, the motley people in a row on the bench before the town hall watching other people walk and drive by, the tall black transvestite walking up the street in a sequin-covered red dress away from the Crown and Anchor, the tall white transvestite

standing next to the Crown and Anchor Hotel with his dress open over one lean leg all the way up to his hip, a creased angry look about his long nose under his wig and above his red lips. They are advertising a show at the Hotel, which is a large inn nearly opposite the very plain and tranquil old Universalist Meeting House set back over a lawn from the busy street. The church was built in 1874 and is now being restored with the help of a Restoration Fund started by a group of painters here. The painters are the most famous inhabitants of this place, along with the writers. Earlier inhabitants were: the Portuguese fishermen and occasional Breton and English fishermen; the whalers; the Pilgrims who first landed here in 1620 and did not stay for three reasons, only two of which I can remember—the harbor was not deep enough, and the Indians were not friendly; before them the Nauset and Pamet Indians themselves.

Today in the late afternoon I went to have a beer in the outdoor cafe next to the small public library, which is an old house shaded by an old oak with a circular wooden bench around its thick trunk. The waiter asked me, "Is there one in your party?" Edith Piaf was singing in the background. I said "Yes" and he brought my beer.

Today I am thinking about a recent mystery: On the day of the storm something washed ashore that was smooth, rubbery, and the size and shape of a dolphin's nose, though not the right color. It might have been the back of an upholstered plastic seat from a boat. For a day or two it remained there, moving as the water moved it, sometimes in the water and sometimes on the sand, always in about the same place. Then I didn't see it for a few days. Today as I was lying on the sand, a man in a ranger's uniform went under the deck of the motel,

dragged the thing out, and methodically tore it to pieces, separating it into different layers. Some layers he left lying on the sand, the rest of it he folded and carried away with him.

Every night, at about ten o'clock, people come around, especially to the hotel across the way, dressed in strange costumes—as ancient bearded cats, or tubby brown creatures who seem to be some kind of rodent. They come quickly into view, enter the bar of the hotel, come briskly out again, and go back the way they came. Always a few tourists, out for a stroll, look on with surprise and pleasure.

The faces of the tourists here reflect what they see all day long, the harbor, the old buildings, the other people in the streets, with wonder and pleasure. Only when they look in the shop windows, and seem to consider buying something, do they lose some of their wonder and happiness and recover an expression of intentness, care, weariness.

I have been with the old people again. The old man often sits in the passenger seat of the car waiting for his wife to return from doing an errand. He watches the people going past and he thinks his thoughts. Today he saw three women approach together, one of them feeble-minded, as he called her, her head bobbing constantly. The leader of the group stopped by the hood of the old man's car, set a pile of papers down on it and began searching her purse for something. She took a long time looking and the old man sat there watching her directly in front of him and also watching the feeble-minded woman, who also waited a long time, her head bobbing.

Out at the end of one pier tonight, two men were casting

very far out for bluefish. One remarked that the slapping of the lure on the water so many times might be frightening the fish. At the other pier, again, fishing boats were lined up side by side, thick clumps of nets hanging from the masts, dinghies tied down onto the tops of cabins, piles of new wooden crates, piles of baskets—only what was needed for the work.

When I walk to the beach from my room down the narrow alley on a boardwalk, the two wooden buildings leaning together above me, I pass, waist-high, the windows of the motel apartments; at certain hours women are working in the kitchens, there are snatches of conversations in the living rooms, people seem louder and at the same time more stationary because they are on vacation and therefore idle.

From the beach, at dusk, I see, against the sky, steeples, and on a roof what look like four white statues of women in robes against the sky, as in a cemetery, but then see that they are four white folded beach umbrellas with large knobs on top. In the water, small boats all face the same way on their moorings, only one suddenly, sometimes, moves independently, wandering a little, turning.

At night the Unitarian Universalist Church burns a light in its steeple in remembrance of those lost at sea.

At the end of the alley, my alley, where it opens into the street, as at the end of a spout, there is the life of the street, turbulent, eddying, unceasing until the early hours of the morning.

At dawn I was woken by a thrashing in the patch of garden outside my door. It was a skunk caught in some brambles.

Yesterday I took a walk in the rain and saw: tough-stemmed old stalks of Queen Anne's lace with their several heads waving in the wind and banging against a gravestone in the cemetery that has been allowed to go wild and that is posted with signs forbidding overnight camping; a woman awkwardly turning her car in a dead-end lane and crushing some tall stands of purple wildflowers outside the garden of a man who was on his knees inside the garden weeding a flowerbed; a uniformed nurse in a small paddock talking over the fence to a neighbor in the road about her horse; the oldest house in town, built of wood from wrecked ships, with a circular brick cellar whose technical name was included on a plaque at the site though I now forget the name; a street called Mechanic Street.

I was on my way to the Catholic Church, St. Peter's, with an onion-shaped steeple of dark painted wood, when the bell began to toll in the belfry of the Unitarian Universalist church to which I had at first intended to go; I was walking slightly uphill in a narrow lane where I could see the belfry close at hand; I hesitated, turned around, and went back down the lane and in through the flea market on the church's front lawn, into the church building, and upstairs into the chapel itself with its trompe-l'oeil interior. Even the columns that looked so real were not real columns; the sparse congregation and the minister might have been trompe-l'oeil too.

But the minister was a sensible young woman from the Harvard Divinity School, full of information and with an emphatic and direct manner, the music played on the organ was well chosen and performed, the soloist sang well from the organ loft, and the hymns were solid, familiar old ones. Downstairs, after the service, sweet lemonade was served, and rounds of toast covered with sliced egg and olives laid out on a table that

stood between the outer doorway with its bright sunlight and another doorway that led into the musty basement thrift shop.

Later, on the street, I smiled at a story the minister had told. A bronzed man on a motorcycle with impenetrable dark glasses and a bandana around his forehead passed me and gave me a long dark look.

Recent dreams about animals: I was about to take an exam given by Z. when a small animal, a shrew or a mouse, escaped and I went off to help catch it. At that point I discovered other loose animals, larger ones. I alerted people and tried to get the animals back into their cages. This was taking place in a school, and the animals were probably connected with the exam.

On another night I let four animals loose in a field—a brown-and-white goat, a palomino horse, and two other large animals, whose descriptions I was going to advertise so that they could be recovered. I stood watching the horse gallop into the field among other the horses.

Yesterday I was sitting in the back seat of the old people's car. We were driving out to the ocean beach. The old man made a statement that shocked me, though neither he nor the old woman noticed it. I sat there shocked behind the old woman, who had great trouble driving straight into the setting sun.

I take a long walk on the bed of a railroad track near the old people's house. The rails have been taken up. The bed is straight and narrow and is visible ahead of me for a great distance. A hermit comes ambling along with his black dog, which ranges around him. The old people's cat, which has been walking with me, turns broadside to the dog and arches its back.

Last night, after midnight, walking barefoot near the kitchen sink, I stepped on something slippery and hard. On the mat lay what looked like some animal part, a glistening innard of uniform color and texture. I bent down and examined it: it was a slug. I was afraid I had killed it. I picked it up: it was cool and moist. As I held it in my palm, this dollop of glistening muscle, two bumps appeared at one end of it and then grew steadily into two long feelers, as below them symmetrically two more bumps grew into slight protrusions which I guessed were eyes, and at the same time the body thinned out and became tenser and then the slug set off and glided around my wrist and up my arm.

Tonight I heard the footsteps of one of my neighbors returning down the concrete path, then there were more footsteps, then many more, and they continued for so long that I realized they were not footsteps: it was the rain. Heavy drops splashed on the leaves in the garden and on the planks of the wooden decks. Then, among the splashes of rain, I did hear the footsteps of one of my neighbors coming home, and it was the man above me, now walking over my ceiling.

My clothes are sour, the room is mildewed, and there is a smell of rotting sea creatures in the air.

Yesterday I rode a bicycle along a winding macadam trail past lily-choked ponds and then through a thin forest of young beeches.

This morning, I watched fishermen mending their nets before they set out to sea. They pull large comb-like things through the squares of the net and tie knots in it. One man holds the net, the other works quickly. Small clusters of tourists stand on the pier looking down at them respectfully where they work in the boats.

There were also three men fishing off the pier for mackerel, casting again and again, pulling up silver fish that fought hard, all muscle, then unhooking them and slipping them carefully into a styrofoam cooler where they flopped so violently that the cooler shook and thudded for a while after it was closed.

A bright red oil truck was fuelling the boats, stopping next to them on the pier where they were tied two or three deep alongside the pier, sending the long hose down into one, over one into the next, and then into the third. At the same time, a long steel cable that extended the length of the pier into what seemed to be a fish-packing shed was being wound mechanically onto a drum in one of the fishing boats. The winding went on and on. A group of tourists watched it carefully. The tourists also took pictures of the fishermen mending their nets. If a tourist asked a fisherman to smile, the fisherman would glance up soberly, with a neutral expression on his face, but not smile.

I went out to eat recently with the two old people and two equally old friends of theirs. We sat in a room surrounded by water and they all ordered lobster. The plates came, and the red lobsters looked pretty lying on their lettuce leaves next to their little white cups of melted butter. Now the conversation died and the table was silent except for the furious cracking, pulling, and prying of these four people, all in their eighties, who suddenly showed such physical strength, so intent on destroying their lobsters.

Today I started a story which I won't be able to continue because I can't think of any sensible way to go on with it. This was what I wrote: "The Man in the Post Office. I am having a complicated relationship with a man in the post office. He is the most charming postal clerk I have ever met. Anyone else would

agree with this. I was attracted to him soon after I arrived here, in this town, and everything has grown from that point.”

I can't think how to go on with it, because the relationship in the story would consist only of this woman's brief daily contacts with the postal clerk across the counter when she asks for her mail from General Delivery. If the man smiles and speaks to her, she is extremely pleased. If he pays no attention to her, she is hurt, and she feels this hurt for some time after. The word “complicated” refers to all the variations of feeling she has on his account between elation and depression. This is all the relationship ever amounts to.

The man at the post office knows my name, though I don't know his; there is the friendly checkout woman at the supermarket; last night there was a plump gregarious off-duty bartender attending the free movie at the public library, though I did not meet him or speak to him. He wore a cloth tied around his forehead and cowboy boots. He was there to see a 1954 movie. The other people there were mainly old people calling back and forth to each other. “Everybody's here!” someone cried. I listened to the bartender talk to the other people. Then we all watched the movie.

A plumber came to my room yesterday to fix the shower. He told me his family had lived here for generations. He said that these days, since there isn't much cod or haddock, the fishermen are taking shellfish off the Great Bank about six miles west of the tip of the land, where they have discovered beds that seem to be inexhaustible.

I have seen great crates of these shellfish that I thought were quahogs, coming up onto the pier, hoisted by a small crane on a boat. The crates were stacked up on the wharf, while

tractor-trailers from Maryland with their engines running prepared to load them. Seagulls ran around on the asphalt with their wings raised threatening one another over the scraps. Only one gull sat on top of a top crate and pulled the slimy, elastic flesh of a quahog up through the slats, leaning back as he pulled, bending forward to get another grip, and leaning back again in the midst of a great noise from the boats engines.

This was at twilight, and as the sky darkened, the lights on the boats grew brighter, and a handful of tourists watched, standing gingerly at the edge of the pier, as the young fishermen, bare-chested, wearing shorts and high rubber boots, went about their work steadily, maneuvering hooks, hoisting a dredger, then a large piece of grating, the boats engine throbbing, sometimes thundering.

On another night it was later and I was the only one watching as a boat set out to sea after blowing its whistle, a black fisherman running to the stern of the boat as it pulled away.

Sparks flew up from another boat where something was being welded or soldered.

It is the last day of August and the season is changing suddenly. A few days ago more crickets were singing and the air grows colder and colder.

I have not tried to write anything since the story I began about the postal clerk, until today when I wrote a story about a race involving patient motorcyclists. I will probably abandon this one too.

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