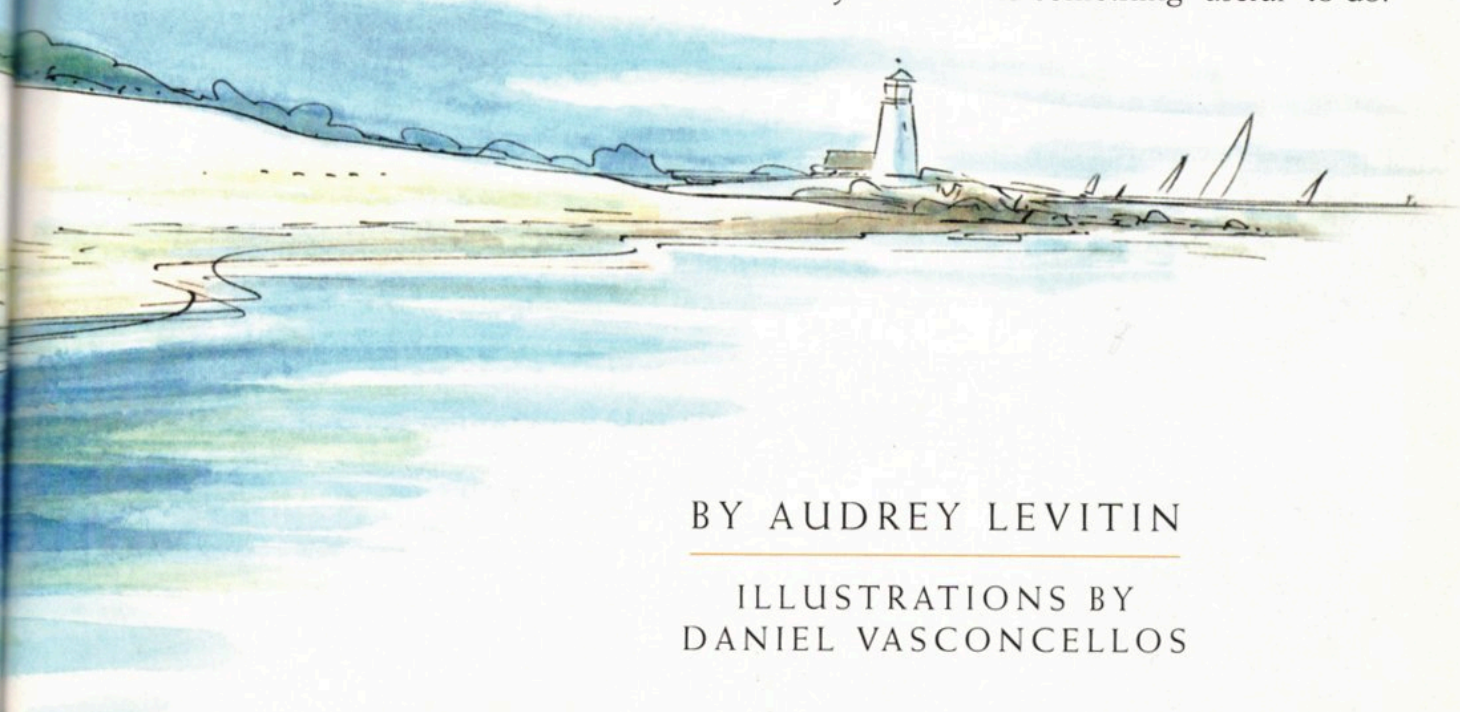




# A Workaholic's REFUGE

The beauty of Cape Cod affords a working wife and mother deeper love and appreciation for her husband and children.

LAST SUMMER MY FAMILY AND I WENT TO CAPE COD, where I discovered the healing power of nature and relaxation. Like most working mothers, I have come to value productivity over virtually everything else. My responsibilities include raising two children—Josh, 13, and Nina, 9—and a high-pressure job in Manhattan. My husband, Nick, and I commute into the city from New Jersey, rushing morning after morning from home to school drop-off, to the bus, to the office. I hate, just hate, wasting time! Without activity, I get edgy and sullen, and start to ponder the meaning of life. These mini existential crises end only when I find something “useful” to do.



BY AUDREY LEVITIN

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# A Workaholic's REFUGE



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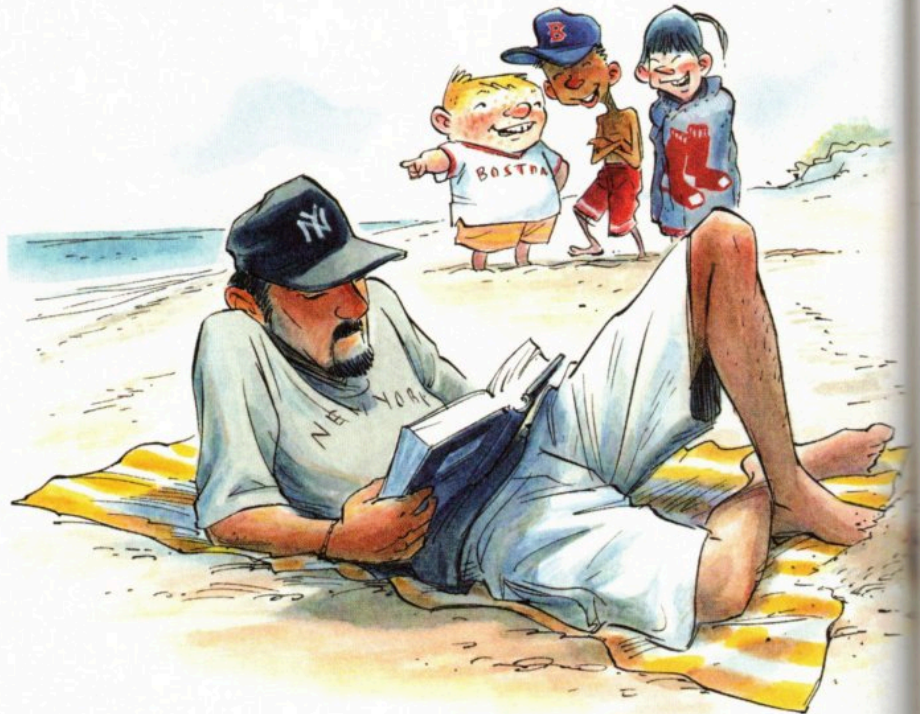
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Vacations have never helped me unwind. One family outing that comes to mind was a weeklong visit to the Jersey shore. Following some bad advice, we stayed at a particularly cheesy motel in a very honky-tonk town. It had a boardwalk with water parks, roller coasters, and restaurants specializing in steak subs dripping with onions and grease and filled with customers wearing Marlboro cigarette packs rolled up inside the sleeves of their T-shirts.

In light of past experiences like this one, I went to Cape Cod for the

first time with a mild sense of dread, along with the hope that this vacation might be different. After all, I reasoned, we were going to rent a cottage next to our cousins Boris and Natalia and their six-year-old son, Anton, and I loved spending time with them.

So off we went to Chatham. And like most of life's spiritually deepening experiences, there was a required period of suffering prior to surrender and revelation. The trip began with suffering: a normally five-hour ride took seven, extended by congestion at the Bourne



*W. Wells*

Bridge, which was designed for local travel rather than the thousands of people who go to the Cape at the same time each week.

We arrived at the cottage, one of seven surrounding a large open field in a cul-de-sac. New England cottages are not necessarily filled with the creature comforts Americans take for granted. Our residence was small, with one couch and a television that didn't work well. The beds were lumpy, and the bathrooms had semi-functional showerheads that transmitted a steady, heavy stream of either very hot or very cold water.

**My husband  
Nick would  
sit at the beach  
reading, sporting  
his Yankees cap—  
oblivious that  
he was in Red Sox  
territory.**

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## A Workaholic's REFUGE

Like most workaholics on vacation, I longed to go shopping. But my cousins, who are Russian émigrés, have not yet taken to the American custom of spending money as a form of entertainment. With shopping out of the question, our days went something like this: wake up, pack for the beach, sit on the beach, go home, cook dinner, talk, read, go to sleep, wake up, do it all over again. For two days, I was really annoyed.

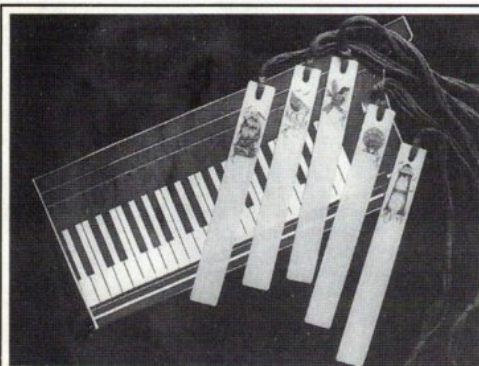
On the third day my New York City restlessness surrendered to the reality that there was truly nothing productive to do. In that moment of revelation I opened my eyes, as if some kind of hypnotic spell had been broken, and realized I was in a very heavenly place.

The Cape steadily eclipsed my Manhattan hour-by-hour, day-by-day, busy-being-busy madness, which eventually gave way to the moment-to-moment importance of relationships and nature.

I became obsessed with sweetbriars. I was mesmerized, drawn in, by these flowers, and spent long moments pondering why I found them so beautiful. They were everywhere, blanketing Chatham as if they sought to replace grass. Sweetbriars were as compelling to me as poppy fields were to Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*.

In my opinion, the weather was great—neither invariably sunny nor 85 degrees; such ideal conditions make me yearn futilely for a long-gone childhood vision of summer. The first week in August alternated between cloudy but warm, and breezy and cool. At times all I wore was a bathing suit; other days I pulled on a sweater. Drizzle and sun showers punctuated the summer, and fog made an appearance.

We went to the beach. The ocean was very different from the Jersey shore



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**My busy-being-busy  
madness eventually  
gave way to the  
moment-to-moment  
importance of  
relationships  
and nature.**

where the waves are forceful and intimidating. In Chatham the water was relatively warm and calm, the effect, I'm told, of Nantucket Sound. Two bodies of water surrounded our beach: On one side was a very shallow lagoon, without waves, where children would surf on small boards; on the other side the ocean stretched before us.

We read books and *The New York Times*. Natalia slept with her small son lying next to her. Boris and I conversed in that stream of consciousness kind of way that unfettered time allows. We talked about work, the news, corporate team building, philosophy, politics, and family. We told jokes.

Nature and relaxation work together to renew and revitalize love. In Nick I have the best of all worlds. He is an artist with blue-collar skills: an actor, photographer, writer, and video producer, he's also a guy who knows how to assemble furniture and change

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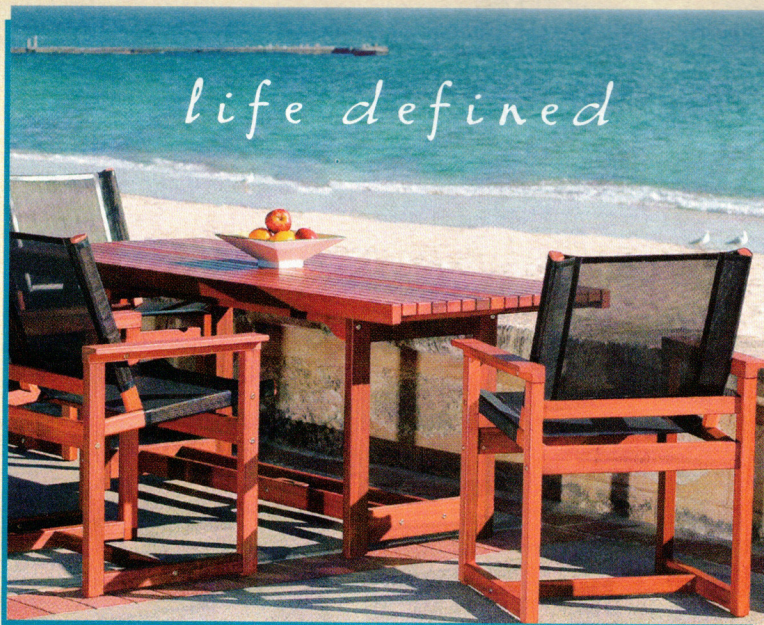
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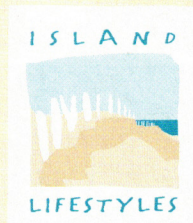


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tires. He would sit at the beach reading yet another massive tome on how the Middle East conflict might be settled, sporting his Yankees cap—oblivious that he was in Red Sox territory—and snoozing on and off. In the evenings, we would go to our lumpy bed, read some more, and doze off. Not much needed to be said, but we felt very much in love.

My daughter, Nina, and I argue a lot. She asks for things she cannot have and I say no. She has big green eyes, long curly brown hair streaked blond by the sun, and cheeks that beg to be squeezed. Her charms, however, are matched by her will, and she and I seem to be developing a power struggle-based relationship.

In Chatham, things were different. She played with her cousin or ran up and down the soccer field with the other kids in the cul-de-sac. At the beach she was in the water most of the day. We would take breaks and she and I and Anton would build sandcastles. The pleasure derived from these simple activities will help Nina and me see that our relationship goes beyond the boundaries she thinks I set to thwart her desires.

On one of several day trips, we found Nickerson State Park in Brewster—a place surprisingly like the Berkshires in a seaside locale. We went swimming and canoeing at Flax Pond, one of eight freshwater ponds, which to this city girl looked like a really big lake. We shared a small beach with fewer than two dozen people.

My son, Josh, and I swam in the lake, splashing and talking, I don't remember about what. In that moment, it was just the two of us. No job to think

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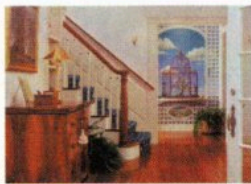
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## A Workaholic's REFUGE

about, no TV, nothing to distract me from this wonderful boy. Josh is an absolute dream. He is great looking, with big brown eyes and curly dark hair. Funny, smart, and easy, he plays chess, speaks Hebrew, and loves Jim Carrey and Mike Myers. He also has an astonishing spirituality—he easily talks with our New Age friends about healing, and interjects God and issues of right and wrong into his conversations.

In the lake, Josh looked at me with his big brown eyes and said, "Mom, I think we are having a special moment."

Indeed we were, and in that moment I understood what memory is. I had always thought of memories as bittersweet, equating them with unpleasant experiences or loves lost. When Humphrey Bogart said to Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*, "We'll always have Paris," I thought, so what, it's over. But it wasn't. And neither is our family vacation to Cape Cod. No matter where I am or what I'm doing, I'll always have the beach, my talks with Boris and Natalia, my companionable time with Nick, my sandcastles with Nina, and my moment in the lake with Josh.

On a slushy, cold Manhattan day, phones ringing, deadlines looming, I think of Nickerson State Park, and wonder if there are any sweetbriars in New Jersey. 📍

*Audrey Levitin is a vice president with the Vantage Consulting Group, a fundraising firm based in Manhattan. She has been a development professional for over 15 years and speaks frequently to many organizations on philanthropic trends. She lives in West Orange, New Jersey, with her husband, Nick, and their two children, Josh and Nina.*



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