

Mid-Life Crisis

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It was David's 40th birthday when he sat in his spacious office located in Battery Park City staring at the Statue of Liberty, a woman whose Greek toga had turned green from the weather elements. She wore a crown on her head and held a torch in her right hand. David, remembering the weekend activities with his family asked himself, 'What did I achieve in my life? I work hours a week managing my father's investment firm and get the clients' panicky calls when the Stock Market drops.'

David, a tall handsome lean man with black hair and brown eyes, ran five miles every Saturday and Sunday mornings. His wife Rachel, was a 5'4" tall slim woman who had east European facial features with short blond hair and blue eyes. They had two children. Michael, eleven years old in sixth grade, looked like his father. He was tall and athletic. Lisa, eight years old in third grade, looked like her mother with silky blond hair down to her shoulders. David's weekend's activities consisted of the following: on Saturday he went with his family to synagogue and on Sunday morning he watched Michael play soccer. In the afternoon, he watched Lisa playing softball often not catching the ball. David, who worried about the unfinished work from Friday afternoon, couldn't wait for the activities to end so he could go home and catch up on his work.

Rachel, who was brought up in an orthodox Jewish home, insisted that on Friday afternoon David leave the office early so they could attend the Sabbath service. Rachel

loved being a mom, cheered and told Michael and Lisa they performed well even when they didn't. The fathers who behaved like Rachel praised their children while the others screamed at them when their performance didn't meet their expectations. The ones who felt like David kept looking at their watches and responded to emails and text messages they received on their smart phones. David, unhappy with the weekend activities, asked Rachel, "Why do I have to attend the children's activities? I could use the time to catch up on the work I didn't finish Friday."

Rachel got angry when she heard this and said, "You don't spend enough time with your family because you come home late every night. The weekends are the only time we can be with you."

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David started his Monday morning by having breakfast at the Hollywood Diner located across the street from his office, reading the Wall Street Journal and eating two sunny side eggs, hash brown potatoes and whole-wheat toast. The diner's walls were decorated with large black and white pictures of the Hollywood actors and actresses from the 1950's era. Dawn, the waitress, interrupted his reading when she asked, "Mr. Silberstein, would you like another cup of coffee?"

"Thank you," he responded, without lifting his face from the newspaper, trying to extend the breakfast and not looking forward to getting his clients' panicky calls. On Friday the European Union announced that they might not bail Greece out of its financial crisis unless the government took drastic measures to fix the debt-ridden economy. *You*

better stop drinking coffee or you'll pay the price later' he told himself, remembering the affect it had on him in the past. The TV networks and newspapers had updates all weekend interviewing financial experts who predicted what the European Union would do. The day turned out to be worse than he expected. The Stock Market dropped four hundred points and the phones didn't stop ringing. David and his associates kept telling the panicking clients that their portfolios were invested in solid stocks and they shouldn't sell them. By noon David needed to get away from his office, put on his blue striped suit jacket and was ready to leave for lunch at the Hollywood Dinner when Nancy, his executive assistant, entered the office and said, "Mr. Green is on the phone. He would like to speak with you."

"What the hell does he want me to do? I can't control the market fluctuations."

Nancy ran her fingers through her long silky black hair and her big black eyes widened, something David noticed she did when she was stressed. "I tried to explain to him that the Stock Market is affected by the situation in Greece and will stabilize as soon as the European Union decides what to do, but he refused to listen. He's panicking and insists on speaking with you."

"Transfer his call" David told her, feeling the acid in his stomach. Mr. Green was one of the firm's oldest clients. Besides his personal portfolio the firm handled his company's two hundred employee retirement fund. By the time David managed to convince Mr. Green that the drop was temporary and there was no reason to sell stocks, the acid climbed up to David's throat, making him sorry he had the three cups of coffee that morning. At that moment he remembered Mr. Green's panicky calls asking for his

father every time the Market dropped and said out loud, "He won't change. I wish he'd followed my father's footsteps and retire to his home in the Plantation Bay Golf & Country Club in Ormond Beach, Florida."

Nancy, who sat in the chair across from David's desk with her legs crossed, said "He will still call. When your father visited us he asked me to remind you that Mr. Green has a large portfolio with us and he is a personal friend."

By the end of the day the Market stabilized and the bargain hunters started to search for good buys. "The Stock Market closed a few points down," David told Mr. Green when he picked up the phone. "I know," he responded. "I wasn't able to work and spent the entire day watching the CNBC News in my office."

"You're going to give drive your son crazy and give yourself a heart attack."

"Don't worry about me. At the age of seventy-eight I'm a seasoned investor who's seen the Market crash a few times. I knew you would have sold stocks if you felt it was necessary. Your father and I realized you would be a financial whiz when we saw how you invested your pocket money in the Stock Market."

His words reminded David about the career he didn't pursue when he graduated from Columbia University. When the closing bell rang, he let out a sigh of relief and looked at the statue of Lady Liberty standing erect, holding her torch against a bright orange sky that was slowly turning red, giving the illusion it was on fire. Relieved the day was over David called Rachel and said, "I'll be working late tonight and will have dinner in the city."

"Fine, what time do you expect to be home?"

"I'll catch the 9 p.m. train."

Nancy, who entered David's office to discuss Mr. Green's portfolio, looked at the large window that covered the entire wall and said, "It's a beautiful sunset. I should have brought my camera and tripod but I didn't feel like carrying them on the subway. Now I'm sorry I didn't."

"I told Rachel I'll come home late. Would you like to join me for dinner?"

"I was going to discuss Mr. Green's portfolio with you and then work on it."

"We can do it tomorrow morning."

"Great, while we eat, I'll show you the sunset photographs that I took last night at Jones Beach."

Nancy's words reminded David of the dilemma he faced when he graduated and told himself, *'She can separate the business world from her personal life by going to the beach and photograph sunsets no matter what time of the year it is. I wish I had pursued a career as a nature photographer.'*

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David's father retired five years earlier but was still involved. Once a month he showed up at the office making David unhappy having to listen to his suggestions. When David attended Columbia University his father often told him, "After you graduate you should join our family business."

"I'm not sure I want to do that."

"What would you like to do?"

"Get my Fine Art's degree and after I graduate attend photography workshops that the well-known photographers give."

"As a photographer you won't be able to make a decent living and support a family."

David was sorry he let his father convince him not to take the three month cross country camping trip with Susan, his girlfriend at the time, to photograph the National Parks. David's parents were not happy when they met Susan. His father viewed her as a source of distraction that would steer David away from the future plans he had for him and his mother disliked her after Susan told her that she didn't plan to have children. David, not realizing that Nancy stood next to him, looked at the Statue of Liberty becoming a silhouette against the darkening sky and said, "*I shouldn't have listened to him.*"

Nancy had a puzzled look on her face when she asked, "Who shouldn't you listen to?"

"It doesn't matter. It's a mistake I made in the past and can't change now."

Nancy was preoccupied and her black eyes widened when she said, "We can't change the past. I made my own share of mistakes listening to my mother. That's why I photograph. It helps me relieve my stress. I majored in Fine Arts and was supposed to become a professional photographer. Instead I listened to my mother's advice and ended up in the Stock Market."

Sorry he had mentioned his past David said, "We should go out to dinner. It's getting late."

They entered Villa Napoli restaurant where David often had dinner with Nancy and his clients. The walls that were covered with framed photographs of Naples' beaches that reminded David of the career path he didn't pursue. The owner gave them a warm smile, shook David's hand and kissed Nancy's cheek before he walked them to a table for four by the picture window that had a view of the East River. The patrons they passed by looked at Nancy's slim figure and long legs that her short dark gray skirt made noticeable. After having their prawn appetizers, Nancy showed David on her iPod the sunset photographs that she took the night before at Jones Beach. "You're a very talented photographer," he told her. "I was supposed to be a nature photographer and instead joined my father's firm."

"Why didn't you become a photographer?"

"It's a long story and I'd rather not discuss it."

Nancy, sensing his change of mood, put her hand on his, gave him her charming smile, something she often did, and said, "I was thinking about taking a week's photography workshop in Death Valley the first week in November. I hope you wouldn't mind if I take a two week vacation."

"Why do you need two weeks?"

"It's an intensive workshop. Every morning at 6 a.m we'll start photographing the sunrise and will finish photographing the sunset at 9 p.m. I'll need the second week to recuperate not getting enough sleep during the workshop."

“It sounds like a fun vacation. Have a great time.”

“Would you like to join me? They still have two spots available.”

It brought back unhappy memories of Susan looking sad when he told her that he had enrolled in Columbia’s MBA program and would not be able to join her on the cross country trip. Her words rang in his ears: “You are making a big mistake. I don’t think you will be happy working in the business world.”

Susan is a famous nature photographer now David told himself, remembering the pain he felt when he visited her photography exhibition of the National Parks. Susan, happy to see him, hugged and kissed him and didn’t mention the trip.

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David was surprised hearing himself say, “Sign me up for the class.”

Nancy smiled when she replied, “You’ll love the workshop and get addicted. Let’s go to B&H tomorrow evening and get your photography equipment.”

The minute David walked into the house he told Rachel, “I signed up for a week’s photography workshop in Death Valley in November.”

Rachel, unhappy said, “What made you decide to go on a photography workshop in Death Valley? Every time I ask you to photograph the children at their games you refuse.”

“I need to check the Far East Stock Market,” something he often said to prevent having an argument. He was sitting at his home office desk ready to check the photography school’s website when Rachel entered, stood in front of his desk with her

hands clasped in front of her chest and said, “I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to attend the workshop. It’s a heavy travel season and you might not be back in time for the Thanksgiving dinner that we’re hosting this year.”

“I’ll be back in time,” he told her, remembering previous holiday dinners with his parents telling himself he couldn't care less if he missed it.

The next morning as David was leaving the house Rachel stopped him at the door and said, “I don’t understand why all of a sudden you decided to go to a photography workshop. On holidays I’m the one who photographs the family with my point and shoot camera because you refuse to do it.”

David didn’t reply and rushed out to catch the 8 a.m. train leaving from Great Neck Station to Penn Plaza. When he walked into the office, Nancy gave him her charming smile when she said, “I enrolled you in the class, called our travel agent and asked her to book two tickets with Jet Blue to Las Vegas, reserve two rooms for us at Caesar’s Palace for Thursday and Friday nights, and rent a car from Hertz.”

“The class starts on Sunday. Why are we are leaving on Thursday?”

“It’s going to be an intensive workshop and we should relax before it starts. It’s a five hour flight to Las Vegas. On Saturday we will drive four hours to the Alpine Motel in Death Valley where all the photography teachers and students will stay. There are no cell connections in Death Valley and no phones in the rooms. The only way to make a call is by putting quarters in the public phone booth by the office.”

"It sounds great. The clients’ panicky calls are getting on my nerves.”

Nancy had a mischievous look when she said, “Mr. Green called again. When he was told you’re not in the office, he asked to speak with me and requested you call him the minute you walk in. He told me that he had a sleepless night worrying about the Market.”

‘Welcome back to reality,’ David told himself when he picked up the phone to call Mr. Green, anticipating he’d ask how the Market was going to behave.

The minute David heard his voice he told him, “The Market is up one hundred points. The bargain hunters are still buying Stocks.”

“I knew I could trust your judgment. Please give my regards to your father.”

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“Our flight will be leaving on time,” was Nancy’s greeting words when she saw David enter the Jet Blue terminal. They checked their luggage with at the Jet Blue attendant then went through the long security check where they had to take off their shoes, open the camera bags, and empty their pockets putting the content in a small plastic containers. After David and Nancy passed through the scanning device they took the camera bags to the coffee shop where they had cheese-danish and coffee with milk and sugar for breakfast. David mind drifted, remembering Susan’s words before she left for her cross country trip.

“You’re making a big mistake not coming with me. I hope you won’t regret it.”

Nancy’s voice interrupted his daydreaming.

“You should forget about the office for one week.”

“I wasn’t thinking about the office. I was wondering how my life would have been if I hadn’t followed my father’s advice to get my MBA and join his firm.”

“It’s funny that mention it. I was planning to pursue a career as a fashion photographer after I graduated from Parsons School of Design. My mother, who is a talented landscape painter couldn’t find galleries who would display her beach landscape and gave up on her career when I was born. She discouraged me from pursuing it saying it's a competitive field and as a woman I’d have a tough time getting a job. I keep wondering if I made a mistake listening to her. That’s why I photograph on weekends and attend a photography workshop once a year.”

“Our parents managed to screw up our lives.”

Nancy realized he was upset, put her hand on his and said, “Let’s enjoy the workshop and not worry about what we should have done.”

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On Sunday night they met Dawn, the instructor and Jessica her assistant. Dawn's welcoming words were, “We will have a fun workshop photographing Death Valley beautiful landscape. Tomorrow we’ll meet at 5:30 a.m. in the office parking lot and leave at 5:45 a.m. to photograph the sun rises. At 8 a.m. we’ll finish photographing and have breakfast at the motel coffee shop.”

David puzzled what the day schedule was going to be asked Dawn, "Are we going to photograph again after breakfast?"

"No. the sun will 'wash out' the images shadows'. The best time to photograph in morning is before the sunrises and at sunset time. Until noon everybody will work on

their images in the class room. Then Jessica and I will critique the photographs. At 5 p.m. we'll leave to photograph the sunset and will finish at 9 p.m. Remember, there will be plenty of color in the sky after the sun is gone. The camera sees colors that we don't. At the end of the workshop everybody will have beautiful images to take home."

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Nancy knocked on David's door at 5:00 a.m. holding a tray with a cup of coffee and a muffin on it.

"I figured you'd need it," she said smiling handing it to him. David thanked her, reminding himself how lucky he was having her as his right-hand person. It was still dark when everybody took their cameras and lenses out of the bags and mounted them on tripods using a flashlight. Dawn and Jessica walked among the students making sure they had everything they needed. Once everybody's cameras were mounted on the tripods, Dawn asked the students to form a circle around her and said, "We're standing on a salt field. When the sun rises it will give you the illusion that it's snow. You'll need to open the light meter one stop because the white salt will throw it off."

After David and Nancy finished their supper, he was ready to go to his room and was surprised hearing her say, "Let's photograph the dunes across the road. They will look different at night."

The bright full moon that looked like a person smiling face enabled them to see their shadows and the white dunes looked like pyramids against the black sky in the background. "I feel we are on a different plant," David told Nancy when he put his arm

around her slim shoulder and kissed her cheek. She turned, smiled and gave him a passionate kiss on his lips. The blood rushed to his head and he kissed her back.

Without saying a word David stood up, gave her his hand and together they walked to the motel holding hands. Nancy, still holding his hand, opened her room door and kissed him again. David felt his heart throbbing after they made love and ran his hand over Nancy's lean body feeling her smooth skin and said, "I feel I missed something out of life."

Nancy kissed him again and said, "I knew you're unhappy living with Rachel. It showed on your face every Monday morning when you come to the office discussing the weekend events. That's the reason why I suggested the workshop. I was hoping it will give us a chance to be together."

When they drove back to Las Vegas the workshop became a faraway dream. David sorry it ended kept visualizing the moonlight reflecting on the white sand dunes. "I would rather spend a couple more days with you rather than meet my parents at the Thanksgiving dinner," he told Nancy who had a mischief smile. David kept checking his mobile phone looking for a cell connection. The minute got one he pressed his home speed dial number and when Rachel answered he said, "I need to see a client in Las Vegas and will not be coming home on Sunday."

Rachel's anxiety reflected in her voice, "Thanksgiving is next week and you might not be able to book a flight back."

"I already made reservations with Jet Blue and will fly back on Wednesday."

Nancy smiled when she took her cell phone out of her purse, called the travel agent and asked her to change the Jet Blue reservation to Wednesday, extended their stay at Caesar's Palace, and arranged for a limo to take them to the airport.

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The Thanksgiving dinner at David's home didn't go well because his father said, "I'm surprised that you chose to take the photography workshop. You might have not gotten a return flight and missed the thanksgiving dinner."

David didn't respond and after his parents left he told Rachel, "I'll have to stay in the city a couple of times during the week to monitor the Far East Market fluctuations and on weekends fly to see clients."

"Why do you have to travel on weekends? It's the holiday season and we have parties to attend."

"It's a volatile Market and my clients are panicking. Before we buy Stocks I need to meet the company executives. I don't want to rely on the Stock Market analyst projections. Often they are wrong."

For the next five months David and Nancy stayed at the Plaza Hotel located on Fifth Ave and 57th street twice a week. The suit David booked had a view Central Park. After having dinner they often fed the horses carrots and then took a ride through the park covered with a blanket the horse owner gave them. The happy days ended when David and Nancy were in Cape May photographing the full moon that left a white ray on the calm sea. After they packed their photography equipment David turned on his cell phone

and saw the message waiting indicator blinking. Despite the fact that he knew it would spoil their weekend he told Nancy, "I better check my voice mail."

"You have two messages" the metallic voice told him. The first call was from Rachel telling him that his mother was arranging a birthday party for Lisa at the end of the month asking him not to travel that weekend. The second call was his father angry voice, "Rachel complained to me about you staying in New York a couple of nights a week and frequently travel on weekends. She suspects you're having an affair. What the hell is going on? I called the office. Nobody is aware of your business travel."

"What's the matter?" Nancy asked, realizing David was upset. "Rachel suspects that I'm having an affair and spoke with my father about it. He called the office and asked about my weekend travel."

Nancy's face was pale when she said, "We can't continue doing this. It's going to end up in an ugly mess."

"I'm not going back to my old life with Rachel."

"Are you sure you want to do it? Think about how it will affect everybody."

"I made a big mistake listening to my father in the past and will not repeat it again."

David was upset when he walked into the house hearing Rachel say, "I think you are having an affair and spoke with your farther about it.

"You are right. I would like to get divorced."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm not happy living with you and feel we would be better off parting ways. Let's have an amicable divorce. We shouldn't part as enemies. It will result in the children getting hurt."

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David mother shrieked when she heard that he planned to get a divorce. His father keeping his cool hoping he'd be able to change David mind as he had done in the past, said, "Let's go out to dinner and discuss it in a rational manner."

They had a couple of martinis before the father told David, "I'm surprised that all of a sudden you are having affair."

"I'm unhappy living with Rachel."

"Why? She is a good wife and you have beautiful children."

"I made a mistake letting you convince me to get my MBA and join your firm instead of becoming a landscape photographer."

"It was a wise decision. You are making an excellent living."

"It's your perception. You also convinced me to married Rachel despite the fact that we have different priorities in life."

David's father face turned red when he asked, "Are you having an affair with Susan?"

"No, I'm having an affair with somebody I love and share my passion for photography."

His father's hand shook and his face was red when he said, "You're a fool letting a childhood dream destroy your marriage. As a photographer you couldn't afford your high standard of living."

At that moment David remembered Susan's words before she left for her cross country camping "*You're making a mistake not coming with me. I hope you won't regret it.*"

His heart was throbbing when he gave father a defiant look and said, "I'm not going to repeat my past mistake listening to you."

The father got off his chair, knocked it off and walked out. David stared at his back and told himself, 'I will not let him rule my life again.'

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It took David two years to settle the divorce. Not wanting to affect Rachel's and the children standard of living, he agreed Rachel will keep the house, pay large alimony and child support. Michael and Lisa weekend visits became a nightmare. They didn't like Greenwich Village where David bought a brown stone, said they missed their friends and wanted to go back home before the weekend was over. Whenever Nancy suggested activities they told her, "You're not our mother and can't tell us what to do."

"I'm fed up with their behavior," David told Nancy. "I'll meet them for dinner every second weekend and then bring them back home."

"I don't think it's a good idea. Instead of spending the weekends in the city we should find for them outdoor activities that they'll enjoy."

“They resent being with you. It won’t help.”

“The next time they visit we should take them to Montauk Point where they will be able to meet kids their own age and swim in the ocean.”

The following Friday David and Nancy drove with the children to Montauk Point. Unhappy they gave her a hostile look. “Where are we going?” Lisa asked when she realized they weren’t heading toward Manhattan. “We are going to Montauk Point,” David replied. “We don’t want to go to Montauk Point take us home.” Michael responded. David knuckles were white holding the steering wheel. Nancy solved the problem when they entered Montauk Point's and saw the kite shop on the main street. “Would you like to fly kites?” She asked Michael and Lisa. Before they were able to answer she told David, "Park the car near the kite shop."

Michael and Lisa looked at the colorful kites and David could see they wanted to get one. Nancy feeling she would make more headway with Lisa told her "Choose a kite and I'll help you fly it,"

Lisa smiled when she picked up a two foot kite with orange, green and blue colors. Michael hesitated for a moment before choosing a three foot kite with black, red and white colors.

Lisa excited waved the kite in the air and said, "Let’s go to the beach and fly the kites.”

Happy they finally found something the kids wanted to do David told her, “We need to check in at the hotel before we go to the beach.”

When they got to the beach Michael told Nancy, “I don’t need your help to fly my kite,” and ran down the wooden steps leading to the beach. Lisa had a difficult time getting her kite in the air while Michael was able fly his for a short time before the wind blew it back to the sand. “Let me help you,” Nancy told Lisa who had tears in her eyes. Lisa hesitated for a second before she handed her the kite. Nancy held Lisa’s hand and started to run with her along the water’s edge ignoring the waves splashing against their bare feet. “Don’t fight the wind and release the string slowly,” she told Lisa while pulling back and forth on the string. After Lisa got the knack of it she smiled at Nancy, let go of her hand and started to run by herself, releasing the string and letting the wind blow the kite high in the air until it became a small dot.

“Would you like me to help you?” Nancy asked Michael seeing that he was struggling to keep his kite in the air. He hesitated unable to make up his mind, looked at Lisa running on the beach and said, "I guess you will be able to help me fly my kite."

It was a turning point in their relationship. Michael and Lisa looked forward to the weekends visit with David and Lisa knowing that depending on the season they will go skiing, canoeing or fly kites on the beach in Montauk Point. Despite the fact that kids kept telling their grandparents that they enjoyed meeting Lisa on weekend. David's father couldn't forgive him leaving Rachel, refused to meet Nancy blaming her for breaking up the marriage. When David pointed to him that not following his dream resulted in his mid-life crisis his father got angry and said, “You let a young man foolish dream destroy your marriage.”

The only time David spoke with his father was when they met for the monthly dinners that his mother insisted they should have hoping it would improve the relationship. David didn't look forward to the dinners having to listen to his father reminding him he was a fool leaving Rachel. It resulted in David having as little contact as possible with his father between the dinners. The only reason he agreed to attend the dinners was not want to upset his mother.

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It was another hectic afternoon. The Stock Market plunged four hundred points and the panicked clients called asking if they should sell their Stocks. David and his associates had a difficult time assuring them they were invested in solid companies and the Market would rebound. "Your mother is on the phone crying," Nancy told David when she entered his office. David upset picked up the phone and asked, "Why are you crying?"

"Your father had a heart attack. He's in North Shore Hospital."

"Should I come with you?" Nancy asked when he told her what happened. "Yes," he answered."

David sat next to his father's bed sorry their relationship was ruined hoping he would recuperate and they will be able to get along again. His father died the next day. David stood by the open grave looking at the coffin refusing to acknowledge that the man who had such a strong impact on his life was gone. He listen to the Rabbi eulogy feeling he spoke about a stranger who was a World War II hero who led a commando unit behind the German line. His mother sobbing sounded far away when he saw that Nancy held one of her hands and Rachel held the other.

