

## Mid-Life Crisis

It was the morning of my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday when I sat in my spacious office in Battery Park City staring at the Statue of Liberty standing tall against the blue sky asking myself what I had achieved in my life. It was a question I often asked myself every Monday morning after spending an unhappy weekend with Lara, my wife, Mike our ten year old son and Joan our eight year old daughter, watching them play soccer on Sunday morning and afternoon.

I couldn't wait for the games to end so I could go home to catch up on the work I couldn't finish on Friday afternoon because I had to rush home before sunset knowing I'd have to go with my family to synagogue. Lara, who loved being a mom, made sure we observed the Jewish traditions and cheered at the games telling Mike and Joan they performed well even when they didn't. The fathers who were involved in the game also praised their children whether they played well or not while others screamed at their kids when their performance didn't meet their expectations. The fathers, who felt like me and didn't care about the game, kept looking at their watches and responded to emails and text messages on their smart phones.

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My work mornings started by having breakfast at the small coffee shop across the street from my office reading the Wall Street Journal.

"Mr. Silberstein would you like another cup of coffee?" Dawn the waitress asked after I finished my second cup.

“Thank you,” I responded, not lifting my face from the Wall Street Journal, trying to extend the breakfast as long as I could, unable to face another day in my office.

*You better stop drinking coffee or you’ll pay the price later,* I told myself knowing the affect it had on me in the past.

*Don’t rush to the office. It’s going to be another tough day. The minute you walk in you’ll get your clients’ panicked calls asking about the market* I told myself, thinking about the morning news that the European Union might not vote for a solvent Greece.

The day turned out to be worse than I expected. The phones didn’t stop ringing after the stock market dropped three hundred fifty points.

I was putting on my overcoat ready to leave for lunch when Nancy, my executive assistant, entered the office.

“Mr. Green is on the phone. He would like to speak with you.”

“What the hell does he expect me to do? I can’t control the market’s fluctuations.”

Nancy ran her fingers through her long silky black hair that hung down to her shoulders, something I realized she did when she was stressed.

“I tried to explain to him that the stock market is affected by the situation in Greece but he wouldn’t listen. He’s panicking and insists on speaking with you.”

“Transfer his call,” I told her feeling the acid in my stomach. Mr. Green was one of our oldest clients. Besides his personal portfolio we handled his company's two hundred employee retirement fund. By the time I managed to convince him that the market drop was temporary and there was no reason to sell stocks, the acid climbed up to

my throat and I decided to skip lunch, sorry I had three cups of coffee that morning and reminding myself not to have more than one cup.

“I knew I could count on you to do the right thing. Please keep me posted,” he told me before he hung up the phone. At that moment I remembered how he behaved calling my father in a panic every time the market dropped and told myself:

*He won't change. I wish he'd followed my father's footsteps, retire in Florida and spend his days on the golf course.*

By the end of the day the market stabilized when the bargain hunters started looking for good buys.

“The stock market closed at fifty points down,” I told Mr. Green when he picked up the phone.

“I know. Unable to work I spent the entire day checking what was happening.”

“Let me worry about your portfolio. You're going to drive your son crazy and give yourself a heart attack.”

“Don't worry about me. At the age of seventy-five I'm a seasoned investor who's seen the market crash a few times. I knew you would have sold the stocks if you thought it was necessary. Your father and I felt you'd be a financial whiz when we saw how you invested your money in the market at the age of twelve.”

His words reminded me of the career I didn't pursue when I graduated from Columbia University and felt a knot in my stomach.

When the closing bell rang I 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.

“I’ll be working late tonight and have dinner in the city,” I told Lara when she picked up the phone.

“Fine, what time do you expect to be home?”

“I’ll catch the 9 p.m. train.”

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“It’s a beautiful sunset,” Nancy said when she entered the room. “I should have brought my camera and tripod but didn’t feel like carrying it on the subway. Now I’m sorry I didn’t.”

“Would you like to join me for dinner? I told Lara I’ll be home late.”

“I would love to. While we eat, I’ll show you the sunset photographs that I took last night at Jones Beach.”

Nancy’s words reminded me of the dilemma I faced when I graduated and told myself, *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 nature photographer.*

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My father had retired five years earlier. In theory he was still involved in the business but in reality he didn’t and I managed it. Since I was young he had had a strong influence over me, encouraging me to follow the market and invest hoping I’d join his

firm after I graduated from Columbia University. When I told him that I planned to get a degree in Fine Arts he smiled and said.

“Enjoy your photography classes, but get your MBA after you graduate. As a photographer you won’t be able to make a decent living and support a family.”

His words were ingrained in my mind and I was sorry I let him convince me not to take the three month cross-country camping trip to photograph the National Parks with Susan, my girlfriend at the time.

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My parents were unhappy when they met her. My father viewed Susan as a source of distraction that would steer me away from his future plans for me and my mother disliked her after hearing her say she didn’t want to be tied down with children.

Not realizing that Nancy stood next to me, I looked at the Statue of Liberty becoming a silhouette against the darkening sky and said in a loud voice.

*“I shouldn’t have listened to him.”*

Nancy had a puzzled look on her face.

“Who shouldn’t you listen to?”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s a mistake I made in the past that can’t be changed now.”

Nancy was preoccupied, looked sad and her deep blue 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 lower my stress. I majored in Fine Arts and

was supposed to become a professional photographer. Instead I ended up in the stock market.”

“Let’s go out to dinner,” I said, sorry I had mentioned my past.

The owner of Villa Napoli, where I often had dinner with Nancy and clients gave us a warm smile when we walked in, shook my hand and kissed her cheek.

As he walked us to a table by the picture window that had a view of the East River, the patrons looked at Nancy’s slim figure and long legs that her short dark skirt made more noticeable. I was preoccupied looking at the orange and yellow mosaic that the wind created on the black East River when I ordered the bottle of Borolo.

Nancy showed me the sunset photographs she took at Jones Beach the night before.

“You’re talented” I told her, again sorry I didn’t take the cross country trip with Susan choosing instead a path with which I wasn’t happy. Nancy sensed my change of mood, put her hand on mine and gave me her charming smile, something she had often done when she sensed I was upset.

“I was thinking about taking a week’s photography workshop the first week in November in Death Valley. I hope you won’t mind if I take a two week vacation. It will be an intensive workshop. Every day we’ll start photographing the sunrise at 6 a.m. and finish photographing the sunset at 9 p.m. I’ll need the second week to recuperate from 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.”

Her words brought back the unhappy memory of Susan looking sad when I told her that I would not be able to join her on the cross country trip because I had enrolled in Columbia's MBA program and her words rang in my ears:

*"You're making a big mistake. I don't think you'll be happy as a stock broker."*

*Susan is a famous nature photographer now*, I told myself, remembering the pain I always felt every time I saw her exhibitions. Whenever we met at her shows she hugged and kissed me but never brought up the fact that I should have joined her.

I was surprised hearing myself say,

"Sign me up for the class."

Nancy's eyes shined.

"You'll love the workshop and get addicted. Let's go to B&H tomorrow evening and get your photography equipment."

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The minute I walked into the house I told Lara, "I signed up for a week's photography workshop in Death Valley in November."

"What made you decide to go on a photography workshop in Death Valley of all places? Every time I ask you to photograph the kids at the game you refuse."

"I need to check the Far East stock market," I told her while walking into my study, something I often did to prevent having an argument with her. Before I was able to sign on to the photography school's website to check workshop information, she walked in and stood in front of my desk.

“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,” I told her, remembering previous holiday dinners with my parents telling myself I could care less if I missed it.

The next morning as I was leaving the house Lara stopped me at the door.

“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.”

I didn’t reply and rushed out to catch the 8 a.m. train leaving from Great Neck Station to Penn Plaza.

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When I walked into the office Nancy gave me her charming smile.

“I enrolled you in the class, called American Express travel and asked them 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 rented a car from Hertz.”

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

“We’ll be tired after the flight. It’ll take us about four hours to drive on Saturday from Caesar’s Palace to the Alpine Motel in Death Valley. It’s going to be an intensive workshop and we should relax before it starts. 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 on her face.

"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*, I told myself, picking up the phone to call Mr. Green, knowing he'd ask how the market was going to behave.

The minute I heard his voice I 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 when she saw me enter the Jet Blue terminal. We checked in our luggage, went through the security check and took our camera bags to the coffee shop where we had breakfast. My mind drifted, remembering Susan's words before she left for her cross country trip.

*"You're making a big mistake not coming with me and I hope you won't regret it one day."*

Nancy's voice interrupted my 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 you should mention that. I graduated from Parsons School of Design and was planning to become a fashion photographer. My mother, who is a talented landscape painter, 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,” I said out loud.

Nancy, realizing I was upset, put her hand on mine and said:

“Let’s enjoy the workshop and not worry about what we should have done.”

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On Sunday night we met our instructor and her assistant.

“You should go to sleep early. Tomorrow we’ll meet at 5:30 a.m. in front of the office and leave at 5:45 a.m. We’ll start photographing before the sun rises. At 8 a.m. we’ll finish photographing and have breakfast at the motel coffee shop.

After we finish eating breakfast you’ll be able work on your images until noon and then I’ll critique them in class. 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 goes down. At the end of workshop everybody will have nice images to take home.”

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Nancy knocked on my door at 5:15 a.m. holding a tray with a cup of black coffee and muffin on it.

“I figured you’d need it,” she said smiling and handing it to me. I thanked her and reminded myself how lucky I was having her as my right-hand person.

It was still dark when we took our cameras and lenses out of the bags and mounted them on tripods using a flashlight. The instructor and her assistant walked among us making sure we had everything we needed. Once our cameras were mounted on the tripods, the instructor asked us 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 compensate with the light meter accordingly because white salt will throw the meter off.”

I was ready to go to my room after we finished supper when Nancy said, “Let’s photograph the dunes across the road. They look different at night.”

It was a full moon that night and we could see our shadows. The dunes looked like white pyramids against the black sky giving us the illusion we were on a different planet. We sat on top of a dune and spoke about the day’s events when I put my arm around Nancy’s slim shoulder and kissed her cheek, thanking her for arranging the trip.

Nancy turned to me, smiled and kissed my lips. The blood rushed to my head when I kissed her back. Without saying a word I stood up, gave her my hand and together we walked back to the motel holding hands. Nancy, still holding my hand, opened the door, led me into her room and kissed me again.

I felt my heart throbbing after we made love and ran my hand over her lean body feeling her smooth skin. Nancy didn’t say a word, put her head on my neck and kissed me.

“I feel I missed something out of life,” I told her, staring at the ceiling.

She kissed me again.

“I know you’re unhappy with Lara. It shows on your face when you come to the office on Monday morning. That’s the reason I suggested the workshop. I was hoping it would give us a chance to be together.”

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When we drove back to Las Vegas the workshop became a faraway dream. I kept visualizing the white sand dunes that the moonlight reflected on, wondering if I was dreaming. I wanted to spend a couple more days with Nancy and didn’t look forward to meeting my parents at the Thanksgiving dinner. The minute I got a cell connection I called Lara.

“I won’t be coming home Sunday. I need to see a client in Las Vegas.”

Lara’s anxiety reflected in her voice.

“When are you planning to fly back? Thanksgiving is next week and you might not be able to get a flight.”

“I already made reservations with Jet Blue. I’ll fly back on Wednesday.”

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

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I had a difficult time being home wanting to spend as much time as possible with Nancy.

“I’ll have to stay in the city a couple of times a week to monitor the Far East market fluctuations and will have to travel on weekends to see clients,” I told Lara.

“Why do you have to travel on weekends? It’s the holiday season and we have parties to attend.”

“It’s a volatile market, my clients are panicking and I need to meet them to lower their anxiety.”

Our happy days ended in the spring when we were in Cape May photographing the full moon’s white ray reflecting on the calm sea water. After we packed our photography equipment I made the mistake of turning on my cell phone and saw the ‘message waiting’ indicator blinking.

“I’d better check my voice mail,” I told Nancy, knowing it would spoil our weekend.

“You have two messages” the metallic voice told me. The first call was from Lara telling me my mother was arranging a birthday party for Joan at the end of the month and asking me not to travel that weekend. The second was my father’s angry voice.

“Lara complained to me about you staying in New York a couple of nights a week and your frequent weekend travel. She suspects you’re having an affair. I called the office. Nobody is aware of your business travel. What the hell is going on?”

“What’s the matter?” Nancy asked seeing my facial expression change after I finished listening to the voice mail.

"Lara 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.

"We can't continue doing this. It's going to end up in an ugly mess."

"I'm not going to give up on you and go back to my old life."

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

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

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"I need to speak with you," I told Lara the minute I walked into the house.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm unhappy and need to change the way I live."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I made a mistake listening to my father convincing me to get my MBA and join his firm."

"I don't see what's wrong with that. You make an excellent living and have a nice family."

My mother shrieked when she heard that I planned to get a divorce and my father suggested we should go out to dinner and discuss it in a rational manner, hoping he'd be able to change my mind as he had done in the past.

When our main courses were served I told him,

"I made a mistake becoming a stock broker."

His face turned red when he asked

“Are you having an affair with Susan?”

“No, but I’m having an affair with somebody I love who shares my passion for photography.”

My father stopped eating and pushed his plate away.

“You’re a fool letting a childhood dream destroy your marriage. As a photographer you couldn’t afford your high standard of living.”

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It took two years for the divorce to get settled. I ignored my lawyer's advice and agreed that Lara could keep the house and I would pay the alimony and child support her lawyer demanded, not wanting to change her standard of living.

I bought a brownstone in Greenwich Village and Mike and Joan stayed with me and Nancy every second weekend. Their visits became a nightmare. They complained that 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.” I told Nancy. “I’ll meet them for dinner every second weekend and then bring them back home.”

“It’s not a good idea. Instead of spending the weekend in the city we should find outdoor activities they’ll enjoy.”

“It won’t help. They resent being with you. Whatever you try to do won’t make them happy.”

“Next time we pick them up we should go to Montauk Point. They will be able to meet kids their own age and enjoy swimming in the ocean.”

The following Friday we picked them up and drove to Montauk Point. Unhappy seeing Nancy they gave her hostile looks.

“Where are we going?” Joan asked when she realized we weren’t heading toward Manhattan.

“To Montauk Point” I replied, hoping Nancy was right.

“We don’t want to go to Montauk Point. Take us home,” Mike responded.

*Let Nancy deal with them*, I told myself staring at the road feeling the tension building in my body. Nancy solved the problem when she saw a kite shop on the beach as we entered Montauk Point's main street.

“Would you like to fly kites?” she asked Mike and Joan. Before they were able to answer she asked me to stop the car. We walked into the shop, they looked at the colorful kites and I could see they wanted to get one.

“Choose a kite and I’ll help you fly it,” Nancy told Joan feeling she would make more headway with her. Joan smiled when she picked up a two foot kite with orange, green and blue colors. Mike hesitated for a moment before choosing a three foot kite with black, red and white, happy he picked one larger than Joan’s.

Joan was excited when she said, "Let’s go down to the beach and fly them,” waving the kite in the air.

“We need to check into the hotel first before we go to the beach” I responded, happy we had finally found something they wanted to do.

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“I don’t need your help to fly the kite,” Mike told Nancy, refusing her help before he ran down the wooden steps leading to the beach. Joan had difficulty getting her kite in the air while Mike was able fly his for a short time before the wind blew it back to the sand.

“Let me help you,” Nancy told Joan who had tears in her eyes. Nancy held Joan’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,” Nancy told Joan while pulling back and forth on the string. Joan smiled at Nancy once she got the knack of it 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 Mike when she saw him struggling to keep his kite high in the air. Mike looked at Joan running on the beach grinning and hesitated for a second before deciding to let Nancy give him a hand.

It was a turning point in our relationship. Mike and Joan looked forward to spending weekends with us knowing we’d take them skiing, canoeing or flying kites in Montauk Point, depending on the season.

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My father, who never forgave me for leaving Lara, blamed Nancy for breaking up the marriage and refused to meet her. When I pointed out to him that not following my dream had resulted in the mid-life crisis that led to my unhappy married life he got angry and told me:

“You’re pursuing a young man's foolish dream.”

The only time we spoke was when we met for the monthly dinners that my mother insisted we should have, hoping she would be able to improve the relationship between us. I didn’t look forward to the dinners, listening to him reminding me I was a fool following a dream that destroyed my marriage. I tried to have as little contact as possible with him between the dinners. The only reason I agreed to attend them was because I didn't want to upset my mother.

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It was another hectic afternoon. The stock market plunged four hundred points and my panicked clients called all day inquiring if they should sell their stocks. I 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 said when she entered my office.

“What’s the matter?” I asked my mother the minute I picked up the phone.

“Your father had a heart attack. He’s in North Shore Hospital.”

“Should I come with you?” Nancy asked when I gave her the bad news.

“Yes,” I answered, grabbing my overcoat.

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I sat next to my father's bed, sorry our relationship had been ruined and hoped he would recuperate so we would be able to have an amicable relationship again. My father died the next day. I stood by the open grave looking at the coffin refusing to acknowledge that the man who had such a strong impact on my life was gone. I felt that the Rabbi who gave the eulogy spoke about a stranger who was a World War II hero leading a commando unit behind the German lines. My mother's sobbing sounded far away. Nancy stood next to her holding one of her hands while Lara held the other. I looked at them, regretting my father wasn't able to forgive me for pursuing my childhood dream.