



Chapter One

Next Exit: Nantucket

The story I am about to share with you is a story about addiction, but not the usual ones—no illegal drugs, wild sex or impulsive trips to Atlantic City. What I was addicted to were the behaviors that enabled me to climb up the corporate ladder—working endless hours, moving twelve times in twenty years for my job, putting myself about tenth on any priority list so I could attend the next “critically important meeting” even if it meant traveling on yet another weekend. I was addicted to *doing* better at work, and when I did, I felt that the corresponding increase in responsibility meant I had to do *even* better, because more people now relied on me. And with each promotion, doing better took a lot more effort than it did before. I was sacrificing more and more: I worked even longer hours. Work took over my weekends; I stopped exercising—it took up too much time that I could spend on e-mail and PowerPoint charts. I did it all in my quest to do my best.

I was a capable person, willing to work very hard, and my addiction delivered positive outcomes, so no one, including myself, knew I was slowly disintegrating. The only thing that kept me from completely falling apart was the relationship I had with my

husband, Michael. It was the one area outside of work I was willing to invest in. Everything else—family and friends, my weight, and even my health—lined up third, fourth and fifth behind Michael and work. And even my marriage involved a significant compromise: Michael and I lived in different cities because of our jobs and we only spent time together on weekends.

No one can lead such a two-dimensional life and stay sane and happy. But, like all addicts, I had to hit rock bottom before I could change. While I was feeding my addiction, I lost sight of what I loved at work—which was working with people I valued and achieving significant milestones together. At the time I walked away from it all, work had become nothing but completing the next spreadsheet or PowerPoint presentation. Work had turned into an infinite series of tasks on my to do list and I could only see the lists growing longer and longer, with no end in sight. Quitting seemed like my only option if I was going to save myself.

The day came when I just couldn't do it anymore. The Energizer Bunny batteries had run out. The 16-hour workdays, the non-stop travel, and the constant blitz of urgent e-mails became all too much. Here's insanity: I would fly from New York to India—a 14-hour flight—for a four-hour meeting, then I would hop on the 14-hour return flight as soon as my meeting was over. Why didn't I just put the brakes on? Simply, I was too tired to think about how to fix me *and* deal with all the problems at work. Work won.

"I can't do this any more," I said quietly to Michael, trying not to let the panic I felt in my stomach come through in my voice. He looked up from the sports section of the *The New York Times* with a questioning expression. It was a Saturday morning in November and we were standing outside a diner in suburban Chicago waiting for a table for breakfast, part of our usual weekend routine.

"I have to talk to you about something important. I know we both like to read the paper in the morning, but I really need to talk to you *now*." I didn't think I could wait one minute longer to say out loud what I had to say.

Michael folded the paper and waited for me to continue, a little surprised at the interruption since we both enjoy our weekend morning routine. He could see that I hadn't spontaneously burst into flames, so he was confused—how could it be urgent if I wasn't on fire or uncontrollably bleeding? I knew that he was secretly hoping that whatever it was would be quick, so I plowed right in.

"I can't keep working like this, I'm exhausted and I'm wearing out. I'm sad all of the time and I no longer get the energy from work that I used to. I want to quit my job." There, the dead moose was on the ground right in front of us.

I could hardly look at him; I was shaking and in tears. "OK," Michael said, then pulled me toward him in a big hug. "If this is what you need, do it. We can afford it, and I don't want you to be this unhappy."

He made it sound so easy and I realized it might be possible; instantly I felt months and months of worry fall away. I relaxed into Michael's arms and took a deep breath of cold, clean November air. I was calmer in that moment than I had been for the past three years. "I love you," I said.

Over breakfast, I tried to explain to Michael my overwhelming sense of despair, but I found that I just didn't have the words. I didn't know how to explain why it had taken me so long to decide to end a situation that was draining the life from me.

"Was there something that happened this week that you want to tell me about?" Michael looked at me expectantly.

"No, it wasn't any one thing. It's everything—everything makes me so tired." I had just ordered a Belgian waffle and was looking forward to the rush I get from carbohydrates and sugar. "To begin with, I'm sick of traveling. I'm sick of the pushing and shoving that comes with air travel. This week is typical—I will fly four times, tomorrow to Newark, Tuesday to Munich, Thursday back to Newark and Friday, back to Chicago. Flying so much is making me crazy. I get really angry with the other travelers for being in my way, or hitting me with their suitcases, or bumping my arm during a flight. I know this is just a symptom of working long hours and not getting enough sleep, but it feels like this is all that my life is, and when I look ahead, I see endless flights with herds of jostling, traveling sheep, all bleating in my ear, and I just want it to stop." My eyes were welling up with tears again as misery flooded over me.

Michael reached out his hand to reassure me. "It's OK," he said, "you're quitting. So now it's up to you as to how you want to make this work. We'll talk about it when you're ready."

My brain and heart were racing and I took a deep breath to keep from crying. Then suddenly a moment of pure calm descended. I knew what I needed to do—I needed to go home to Nantucket.

Have you ever been to Nantucket? If you have, you most likely understand why this would be the place to go when your life is falling down around you. If not, I will try to explain it to you. Nantucket is an island 30 miles off the coast of Massachusetts, an hour by fast ferry or just a quick hop by plane from the mainland. From our first visit in July 1995, I learned that you could travel to another world in just 12 minutes. You fly at 1,500 feet and the island is in view from nearly the first minute after take-off from Barnstable airport on Cape Cod. On sunny days, the reflection of the sun on the ocean bathes the island in a golden haze, and Nantucket is a beautifully wrapped present waiting just for you.

The magic continues well after landing. For me, the best part is the air: as it fills my lungs it somehow also quiets my mind—and this is tantalizing. Every time I'm on island I begin negotiating with myself as to when I can next come back and maybe stay longer. On our first visit, Michael and I explored the entire island, and discovering each new corner was like finding a favorite photo tucked away in the back of an old desk drawer. Nantucket is beautiful, but not spectacularly so. The natural vegetation is scruffy and very wild; it reminds me of my four-year-old niece's hair when she refuses to let her mother brush it for five days. The island has 81 miles of beaches, and while none of them are breathtaking or dramatic, they are each beautiful in a quiet, understated way. Let me describe Nantucket this way: when I first met Michael I thought he was handsome—but as I fell in love with Michael, I realized that no face would ever be as

handsome to me as his. Nantucket is like this. As I spent more time on the island over the years, its face became the one I wanted to see when I woke up every morning.

Nantucket's appeal sneaks up on you. After our first visit, Michael and I returned for vacations in 1996 and 1997 because we had both fallen in love with the place. The idea to buy a house there popped into my head one Saturday morning in January 1998 as we were reading the paper in bed. "At the rate we're going," I said to Michael, "we're never going to live anywhere. Our jobs keep moving us from place to place, we work in separate cities during the week, and we only meet up on weekends. But if we had a house on Nantucket, we'd have one place we could call home. Although we couldn't be there so often, when we were there, we'd love it." Ever practical, I added, "and we could rent it when we're not using it." "Why not?" Michael said, "If this makes you happy, go ahead." The following Monday, I was on the phone to a Nantucket real estate agent, Marybeth, and within two hours she had faxed me nine listing sheets of houses on the market. Five months later we owned a small house. At last we belonged somewhere; we had someplace to call home.

Seven years later, our house became my refuge when I took the option my stomach and brain craved—I quit my job and went home to Nantucket.

When I was younger, I never imagined that I would be president and CEO of a multimillion-dollar company. Before I joined Siemens in March 2002, I had worked for Kraft General Foods Europe and Diageo PLC in a variety of increasingly responsible roles, such as head of audit, financial controller and director of IT strategy. But I had never served as chief executive officer, so the jump to CEO was exciting for me. Siemens is one of the largest multinationals in the world, and I ran its U.S. shared services company with 1,500 employees. On an annual basis, my company was responsible for paying Siemens' 70,000 US employees their 1.9 million paychecks, managing almost \$400 million in travel expenses, and handling many other back-office functions, including managing the ninth-largest commercial fleet in the United States.

Michael and I were living together in Germany when Siemens offered me the CEO position, which was based in northern New Jersey. I moved to Hoboken when I started the job; Michael stayed in Germany until four months later, when he moved to Chicago, where he was the president of a very large company. We had always had a long-distance relationship; even after over seven years of marriage, we had only briefly lived together in the same house. Both of us traveled so much for work that maintaining separate homes and commuting to see each other from where our jobs were based was "normal" for us.

And this was true until November 2004, when I realized my every waking hour was devoted to either work or traveling to see Michael. On paper, my life sounded great, but the reality was very different. Sure, being a CEO was exciting—as I said, it was a huge promotion from everything I had done before and when I accepted the job, I was eager for the challenge. Living apart from Michael was also OK; this was more of the same for us. But it had never occurred to me that the scope of this job would increase my travel to the point where I was often in an airplane four or five nights a week. My

company's employees were in New Jersey, California, Florida and India and our customers were concentrated in more than ten states; this meant I was traveling at least 20 days out of 30, and when I added the trips to see Michael, I felt like I lived at gate 103 in Newark Airport.

In truth, it wasn't just the travel that was getting to me. Let me give you a snapshot of one of my workdays at that time. It's 8:00 AM and I'm in my car, driving to my office in Iselin, New Jersey. I've been awake for only a little over an hour and already I am so tired I could go back to sleep for the rest of the morning or even the rest of the day. The southbound lanes on the New Jersey Turnpike feel like a flattened hamster wheel—the faster I go, the more it seems like I am circling the same stretch of road—and driving 80 miles an hour only means that I am experiencing déjà vu faster and faster.

As I drive, I turn schizophrenia on and off like a light switch. Philosophical Denice asks, "Why am I here?" Existing-in-the-moment Denice answers, "Well, I got on Route 1 & 9 going south, crossed the Pulaski Skyway and entered the New Jersey Turnpike near Newark Airport." I keep up this internal dialog throughout the mind-numbing, 45-minute drive. I ask myself, "Why am I this tired?" Gee, could it be because I woke up four times last night and had trouble getting back to sleep each time? I forced myself to go for a walk in the morning (can I believe that I've gained 40 pounds in the last year?), but the exercise feels like it's sucked the life out of me instead of providing the endorphin rush that fitness nuts rabbit on about.

I arrive at work and I longingly look out of my window at a small strip of lawn surrounding the Siemens' suburban office complex, wishing I could be outside. This is how I know I am seriously depressed—who longs to be outside in an office park in New Jersey?

My work day is one meeting after another, but I can hardly concentrate on any of them since each meeting has that characteristic of the children's song "The Bear Went Over the Mountain": cresting one peak simply reveals the awful reality that there are endless mountains on the horizon. Because I run a service business, most of the things that cross my desk are problems for our customers, who are frustrated and angry. Good days are when I hear nothing, and as for praise, well, that is the holy grail of the service business and occurs with the same frequency as the 17-year cicadas.

This characteristic of our business was the same for all of my employees, not just for me, but as the leader, I felt a responsibility to make everything that had gone wrong better, and I put all of my evaporating energy into this. My employees, if I had asked them, did not expect me to fix *everything*. I expected this from me. This took a tremendous amount of energy and although it was exhausting, it was part of my DNA—I didn't know how to work any other way.

Back to my typical work day: I leave the office about two hours later than I had planned, and it is already dark when I get back on the road to battle my way home. (And I ask you, is there any other way to describe driving on the New Jersey Turnpike? Forget *Survivor* on TV; I was voting all the other drivers off the Turnpike on a daily basis!) I arrive home just in time to watch whatever stupid reality show is on TV at 10:00 PM and

eat a pint of Ben & Jerry's Peanut Butter Cup ice cream for dinner. I am so tired that I could care less that eating ice cream undoes all the effort I put into walking 16 hours earlier, and that the caffeine and sugar will keep me from easily falling asleep; yes, I am using the narcotic of ice cream to cheer me up—I am the poster child for comfort eating.

Finally, at midnight I drag myself to bed and I check e-mail on my BlackBerry just one more time before I turn out the light.

So if this was a typical day, why didn't I notice that my life was going off of the rails? I did notice—I just thought that I could manage it—even if it was unmanageable. We all know the cowboys at work who thrive on the insane; I was as macho about working insanely as the toughest cowboy. I was also a perfectionist, which meant I was willing to work “just a little longer” at something in order to do my best. I hated deadlines, not because I couldn't live by them, but because it meant whatever I was delivering had a hard stop and I couldn't keep working on whatever it was. The time needed to work like this kept growing and growing and somewhere along the line I stopped consciously choosing to put more time into work, I just did it. I traded time with friends, time for exercise, and time “doing nothing” to continue working on whatever project was at hand. The only time I protected was my weekends with Michael and even that was impacted because of my crazy schedule, no matter how much I tried to limit my travel.

That was why my life as CEO became so untenable. I felt like I was not consciously making decisions or trade-offs: work always came first. Now, I understood that it was me who was allowing work to push to the front of the line, but it didn't feel like a conscious act back then. There is an urban legend about frogs that is used as an analogy for people's reaction to change. It goes like this: if you drop a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will jump out. But if you put a frog in a pot of cold water and very gradually bring it to a boil, the frog will stay in the pot and slowly cook. (Please, animal rights folks—I am not endorsing this experiment. It's an urban legend—just ask Google.) This anecdote illustrates how we can build up a tolerance to intolerable situations. As CEO, I was the frog in the pot being slowly brought to a boil, about to be stewed. While I was by no means suicidal, I had lost the ability to jump out of the pot. Yikes! How the heck did I get here?

When I decided to quit, I couldn't answer this question. And though I hated that I couldn't answer it, I took some comfort from the fact that I knew where I would go when I walked out on my job—I was going to Nantucket.

“Peter, it's Denice. I'm sorry to bother you at home on a Saturday, but I need to see you urgently. Can we meet on Monday?” Now that Michael and I had decided I would quit my job, I wanted it over with. So that very afternoon, after I recovered from my meltdown in the diner, I called my boss Peter. My hand was sweating as I held the phone.

“Are you in New York?” Peter asked.

“Not until tomorrow afternoon,” I said “I'm in Chicago with Michael.”

“Come see me at home after you land and by the way, what’s this about?” Peter was a great boss but also a friend: he knew if I was calling him at home on Saturday that something was wrong.

“I have something important to talk to you about,” I replied, not wanting to tell him I was resigning over the phone.

I could hear laughter in his voice as he said “Well, I’m happy to talk to you on a weekend as long as you aren’t going to tell me that you’re resigning.”

It is true—silence *is* deafening.

Tears welled up in my eyes again and for a moment I was speechless from shock. My emotions were pounding on my vocal chords like an arcade Whack-a-Mole.

“Actually,” I croaked, “That is exactly what I am going to tell you.”

I mumbled something about talking about it when I saw him tomorrow, hung up the phone and looked at Michael. “I guess that didn’t go according to plan,” I blurted, still shaking.

“Think of it this way,” Michael said, “Now you both have some time to absorb this. It will probably make it easier tomorrow.”

While I wasn’t convinced talking to Peter in person would be easier, I knew I had to find some way to explain this decision to him. Peter and his wife, Heidi, have been friends of Michael’s since before I met Michael and I knew them both socially for many years before I worked for Peter. Because he was a friend as well as my boss, I felt that I owed him a good explanation of why I was resigning and definitely more than the standard two-week’ notice.

For the next 24 hours, I obsessed over what I would say to him. There was no middle ground—the question for me was simply whether or not to quit, never “how can I make my job better?” Still, although it came down to a black-or-white decision, I had to be able to explain to Peter, and everyone else, why I was taking such a dramatic step. Sure, the travel and long hours were stressful, but many people don’t up and quit their jobs for these reasons. I had to give more than exhaustion as an explanation. The problem was, I had no energy to understand all of the root causes that were propelling me into the binary decision of “quit or stay”—and I didn’t have any more answers to pull out of my survival kit bag.

New York was dreary and cold—not that matters could have gotten any worse at that point—when I reached Peter’s apartment building late Sunday afternoon. I was very nervous about what I was going to say, the explanation playing in my head still rang hollow.

Even after thinking of nothing else for the last 24 hours, the only explanation I could come up with was: I am too exhausted to continue working. Was that it? That’s the best I could do? I wished the elevator ride to Peter’s floor would carry me to the future when our meeting was already behind us and I had survived with some semblance of dignity. I was scared I was going to burst into tears and seem like an over-emotional, crazy person instead of one who had made a tough decision and was willing to follow through with it. I was afraid my words would not be sufficient when I met

Peter face to face: I knew I was hanging on by an emotional thread when I started looking for insight from the Muzak version of “Send in the Clowns” playing in the elevator.

As I stepped out of the elevator, Peter was standing in the doorway to his apartment, waiting for me. Uh oh. But he was holding a dishtowel in his hands and from the kind expression on his face, I knew my friend was answering the door, not my boss.

We stepped inside his apartment. We sat in the living room, making small talk. For a few glorious minutes, it almost felt like a social call. I stopped gulping air and tried to slow my breathing to a normal rhythm.

Then Peter asked me, “Do you have to quit?”

“Well, I have to stop working so quitting seems like the right answer,” I said, a bit confused. How can you stop working if you don’t quit your job? I continued, “I have been working full-time since I was 16. I’m 46. I am exhausted. I know this will sound illogical—but I am too tired to even know how tired I really am.”

“Do you need to leave Siemens, or do you just need to stop working?” Peter persisted.

“I need to stop working, but no—this has nothing to do with Siemens.”

“What about taking an unpaid six-month sabbatical?” Peter offered.

I was startled. This was very unexpected. The idea of taking a sabbatical had never even occurred to me. Everything up until this moment had been building up to a dramatic change—quitting my job—and I had already come to terms with my decision, and even felt a tiny bit proud for finally putting my own needs first. His suggestion of taking a compromise step felt almost like a let-down.

“I never thought about this. I’ve only been at Siemens for three years, so it never occurred to me that it would be an option.” Suddenly, a small ray of sunlight broke through the cloudy gray sky outside of Peter’s living room window, and my crushing sense of despair felt a little less overwhelming.

“Think about it,” urged Peter. “We can make this work as long as you are sure you don’t want to leave Siemens.”

As Peter was making his offer—a way to solve my problem without taking an irreparable step—I realized this was another good example of how overwhelmed and exhausted I was feeling. Normally, I solve problems. Yet now I had a huge problem to solve and my only solution was to quit, to walk away. It was hardly an excellent solution. At 46, I was too young to stop working—what would I do with myself for the rest of my life?—and I couldn’t afford to never work again since I didn’t have enough savings to cover 40 years of living expenses. Peter offered me the lifeline that I could not figure out myself; instead of sailing into uncharted waters, I could change my life while holding onto the tie line of the big boat of Siemens. This made me feel immediately better.

I left Peter’s house shortly after this, having agreed to take a six-month sabbatical and to give him enough time to find a successor for me. I hopped on the ferry from Manhattan to go home to my apartment in Hoboken and although it was still cold and gray, I felt the opposite of the weather—it was sunny in my world for the first time in months.

Peter's search for my successor took several months. It was the end of May 2005 by the time my successor accepted the job and I agreed to stay for one more month to hand over my responsibilities. While I had hoped to leave earlier, knowing I was leaving gave me the strength to continue. But, as my last day at work drew closer, I was getting very anxious. I was experiencing a constantly changing kaleidoscope of feelings, but only with dark colors. I felt guilty about leaving my team, but I also recognized that I did not have anything left to give them. Why not? Why didn't I have more? What was wrong with me? I also felt very sad—I was extremely close to the people I worked with in the three years I had been with Siemens and soon our contact would be reduced—if we really made an effort—to the occasional e-mail and sporadic phone calls. How could I leave them? What would my life be like if I was not with these people every day? And to be honest—we really couldn't stay in touch; it wouldn't be fair to my successor.

Saying good-bye to my employees was extraordinarily difficult for me. I went to all of our U.S. offices in New York, New Jersey and Florida, and at each one there were farewell parties and speeches and gifts. I knew I could not say good-bye without bursting into tears, so I let technology say it for me: I taped my farewell speech and played it during each of these events. As my good-bye video played, I looked into the audience, at all of the folks who had come to mean so much to me. At each good-bye party, I felt like I was attending my own funeral and I left each tribute feeling loved, exhausted and sad. Every final encounter with my employees was like the last 100 yards in a marathon: the goal was nearly in reach and I prayed I'd get there before my heart exploded.

Let me give you one example. To this day, tears still fill my eyes when I remember a conversation I had with Suzie, one of the team who paid supplier invoices, during my last visit to the Orlando office about two weeks before I stopped working.

"Hi Suzie," I said as I walked past her cubicle. "How is baby Daisy?" Suzie had given birth a year before and had named her daughter after her closest friend at work. Coincidentally, I had been in Orlando on the day they held Suzie's baby shower, so I had attended.

"She's fine Denise, thanks for asking," Suzie replied. "And I want to tell you something." She continued, "Do you remember last year when you attended my baby shower?"

"Sure," I said, "it was a hoot and I was happy to be included. Besides, I *never* turn down free cake."

Suzie smiled at my silly remark, but then she got more serious. "It's what kept me working at Siemens," she said. I must have looked puzzled, because she went on to explain, "I was very worried about my job because our division was not doing well. I had an offer from another company and I was trying to decide if I should leave Siemens or if I should stay. I was getting more and more anxious, especially since I was about to go out on maternity leave. As I was trying to make a decision about all this, you attended my baby shower. I thought, if the CEO can take the time to attend a baby shower, then our business must be doing OK, even if it looks bad right now. At that moment, I knew

that our business would succeed. I turned down the other offer and I went on maternity leave much calmer and excited about coming back to work.”

At that point, I couldn't see Suzie because of the tears in my eyes. The last three years were very difficult—but the good things had been equally amazing, and I understood, in that moment, why I had been able to keep going well after my Energizer Bunny batteries had run out.

Now multiply Suzie's story by 100 and you will understand what my last month was like. When my last day came, it was bittersweet and, honestly, just in time.

Ultimately, it took eight months to find my successor and for me to be able to finally leave my job, which I did in July 2005. When I finally left, the only nagging feeling I had was that I was walking away from something, not toward something. All my life I have been goal driven; I don't even go for a walk without a specific destination or purpose. Yet now I was jumping off the roof of my life with no idea of whether I would hit concrete or the clear blue sea.