

**SHUT
YOUR
MONKEY**

SHUT YOUR MONKEY

HOW TO CONTROL YOUR
INNER CRITIC &
GET MORE DONE

by Danny GREGORY

HOW

HOW Books, 2016

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Danny has written many internationally bestselling books on art and creativity. He is also cofounder of Sketchbook Skool, an online creativity school that has inspired tens of thousands of students around the world. He is a frequent speaker on creativity at schools and corporations around the world.

For more, visit dannygregory.com.

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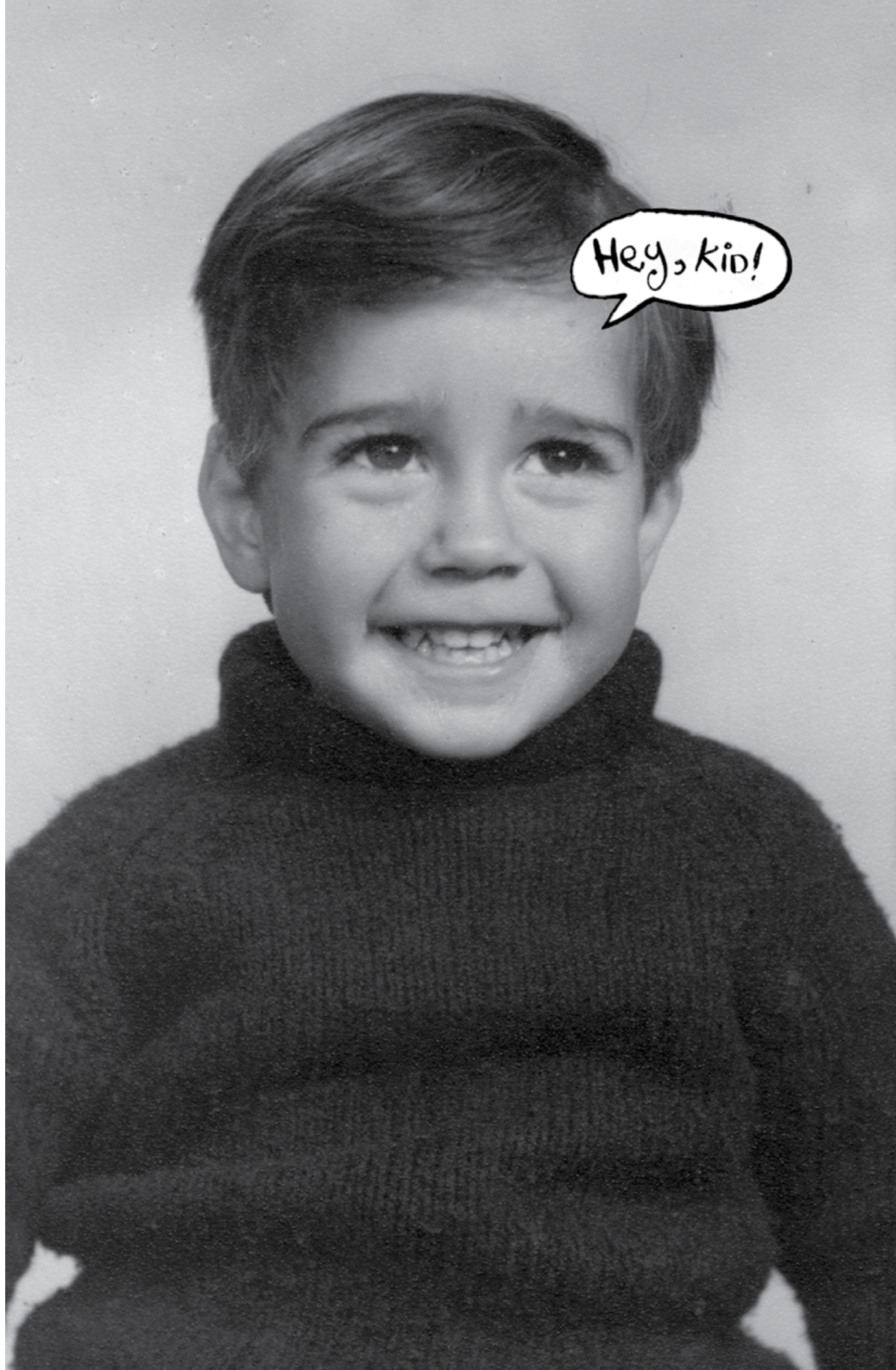
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PSSST!



Hey, kid!

The
VOICE
in Your Head

I WROTE THIS BOOK FOR ME

I wrote this book for the same reason I've written more than a half dozen others. Because I wanted to read it and couldn't find it in my bookstore. A book about a creature that lives in my head.

Ever since I was fairly small, I've heard this little voice that provides a running narration for most of the things I do. It comments on my decisions, it tells me what other people were thinking about me, it points out bad things that might happen if I do one thing or another. And it hardly ever shuts up!

While this voice clearly lives in my head, I knew it wasn't really me. It didn't sound like me and it didn't help me. It limited me. It scared me. It kept me up at night. If this voice was me, it wasn't the me I wanted to be.

Eventually I started to look for ways to get away from this voice. Or at least to listen to it less. It may not be possible to completely turn it off forever but I just wanted it to matter less, to stay out of my way. As I grew older, the voice troubled me less about certain things and took up other causes instead. Instead of saying I was zitty, it called me wrinkled—that sort of thing. Clearly, the solution wasn't to wait it out. Instead I had to outwit it.

I started to poke around and I realized that every creative person I came across had the same sort of problem. In fact, most everyone with a mind did too. So if the voice is in every head and yet those heads manage to do incredible things like invent the iPhone, learn Italian, and have retrospectives at the Guggenheim, it is possible to fight this voice and win. Many people have.

So I did a lot of thinking and reading and talking to experts and I came to understand this voice and what it wanted. And I also learned how to avoid its influence . . . well, most of the time.

SHUT YOUR MONKEY

Important confession: I will admit to you now, at the beginning of this book, while you still have time to find your receipt and return it to the bookstore, that I still occasionally fall victim to this voice. Even while I was writing these very pages, the voice intruded, stuck out a foot, distracted and almost sabotaged me several times. But, despite these setbacks, I do know, after all this searching, how to get past this powerful force and get on with my life. And I will share all I learned with you.

Together we'll unravel the causes of this pesky demon and the many ways it can affect you. Along the way, I will tell you about my own struggles with my inner critic. I'll also share some examples from the many, many people who have told me tales of their struggles.

And finally we'll get to the solutions—strategies that won't just shut down the voice in your head, they'll help you to do great work, achieve your ambitions, and ultimately help make the world a better place.

The voice in your head is not evil, but it does evil.

It is powerful, but its power can be broken.

And now more than ever in the history of our brainy species, we need to take it on and prevent it from preventing us from addressing the many challenges our world faces today. I hope when we're done, you'll find these ideas and strategies useful. And if you don't, I hope you will write your own book and tell me where I can buy a copy.

PSSST!

Here you are, minding your own business.

Maybe you're gazing out the window, daydreaming about your future.

Or you're wandering through a bookstore, looking for inspiration to refocus your life.

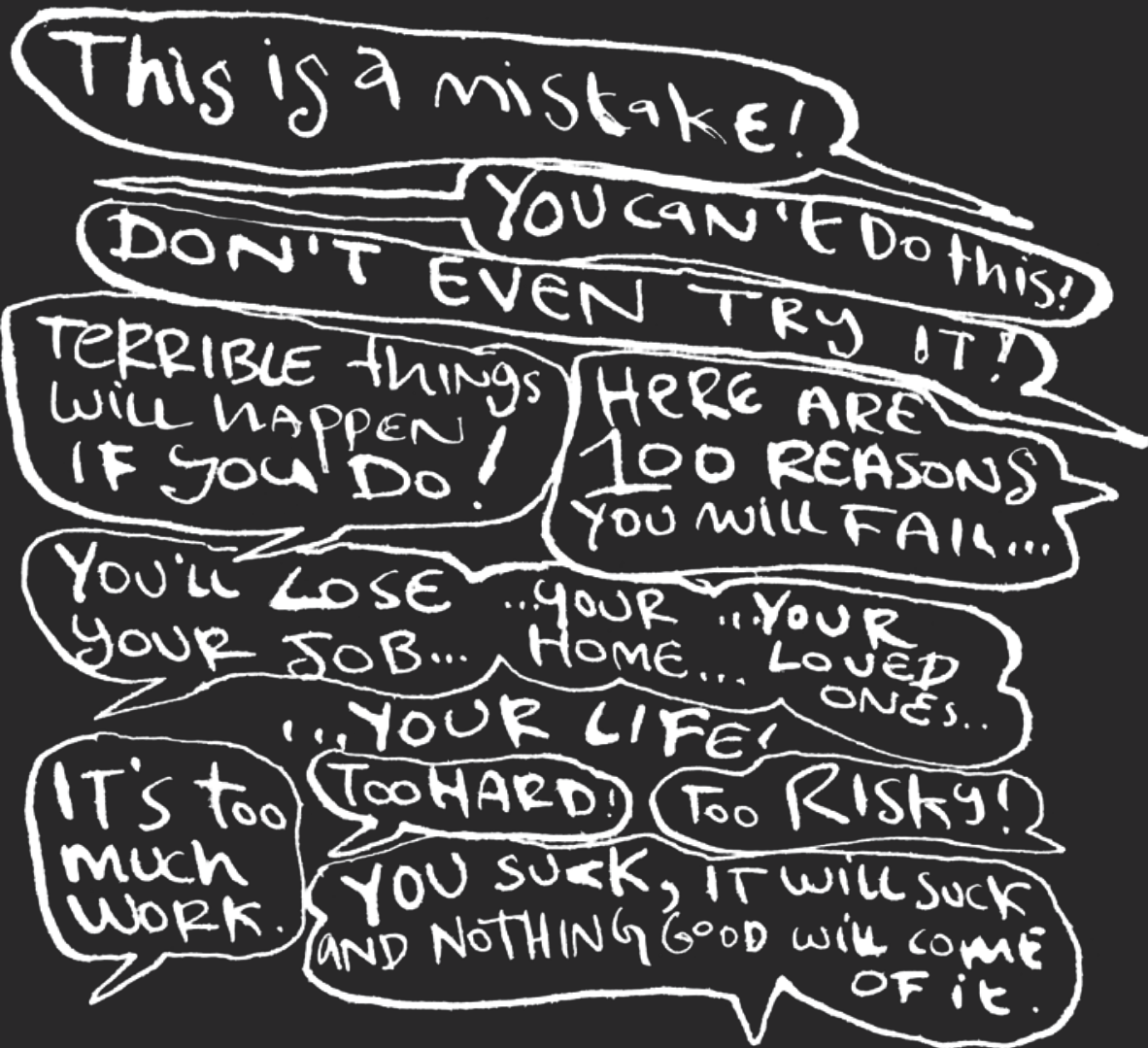
Maybe you just got off the phone with your old school mate who told you he quit his job to start his own business.

Or you just got briefed on a new project at work and you're staring at the blank screen of your computer.

Or maybe it's 3 A.M. and you are just staring at the ceiling, much too wide awake.

Your attention shifts inward, to a spot behind your eyeballs.

A little voice starts up back there and it's murmuring, just to you.



THE VOICE IN YOUR HEAD

The voice is here to warn you that what you are doing—or thinking of doing, or just thinking about thinking about doing—is a terrible idea that will destroy your life. It tells you the dire consequences that are about to fall on you. How your life will unravel—maybe even end—if you take the step you are contemplating. It is here to worry you, to scare you, to stop you.

The voice makes you second-guess yourself. You can go from the verge of making a decision to backing away, to asking others' opinions, to questioning your judgment, to trashing everything you have ever accomplished, dismissing every bit of praise or encouragement you have ever received, doubting yourself to the core.

This voice uses more than just words. It messes with your body, your nerves, your sweat glands. It makes you physically anxious. It squirts adrenaline into your bloodstream, ties your guts in knots, releases butterflies to flop around your tummy, and gushes cold sweats down your pits and brow.

It knows you well. In fact, it sounds like a caring friend, concerned and just here to protect you from a horrible decision. It's a familiar old voice, one that's been whispering in your ear as far back as you can remember.

It's the voice of the inner critic, the opposition, the prosecutor, the worry wart. It's the voice of doom.

If you hear this voice, and I know you do, you're not crazy. You're not a loser. You're not alone. You're just human.

But despite how common this predicament is, it's also very damaging. The voice has the ability to limit your potential, crush your happiness and derail your dreams.

And we're going to stop it.

THE VOICE AND THE MAKER

More than anything, the voice messes with creative people. And in one way or another these days, most of us are involved with creativity. New ideas, new directions: these are the situations that make the voice jabber loudest. Why? Because the voice hates change and risk and whenever we rearrange the mental furniture of our lives, it freaks out. The voice fears the unknown and the different because they can't be controlled.

This is an important thing to remember: When the voice starts up, it's because you are trying to change something. And if you are going to be a functioning person on this ever-turning planet, you will have to eventually make change too. So to be happy (or even functional), you are going to have to learn to shut that voice down.

WHO AM I AND WHAT DO I KNOW?

Throughout this book, I am going to share stories from my own life and career to show how the voice can limit you—and how to shut it down.

I have been a creative person my whole life and people have been paying me to make things for over thirty years. I've been a copywriter, an author, an illustrator, a creative director, an advertising executive, and an entrepreneur. I have created many, many new ideas with millions of dollars at stake. I have had many briefings, deadlines, presentations, reviews, awards, and failures. I have spent lots of times staring at blank pages and empty screens, wrestling with that voice inside me. I've made some poor decisions, mismanaged relationships, limited and tortured myself—all because I listened to the voice when I should have known better.

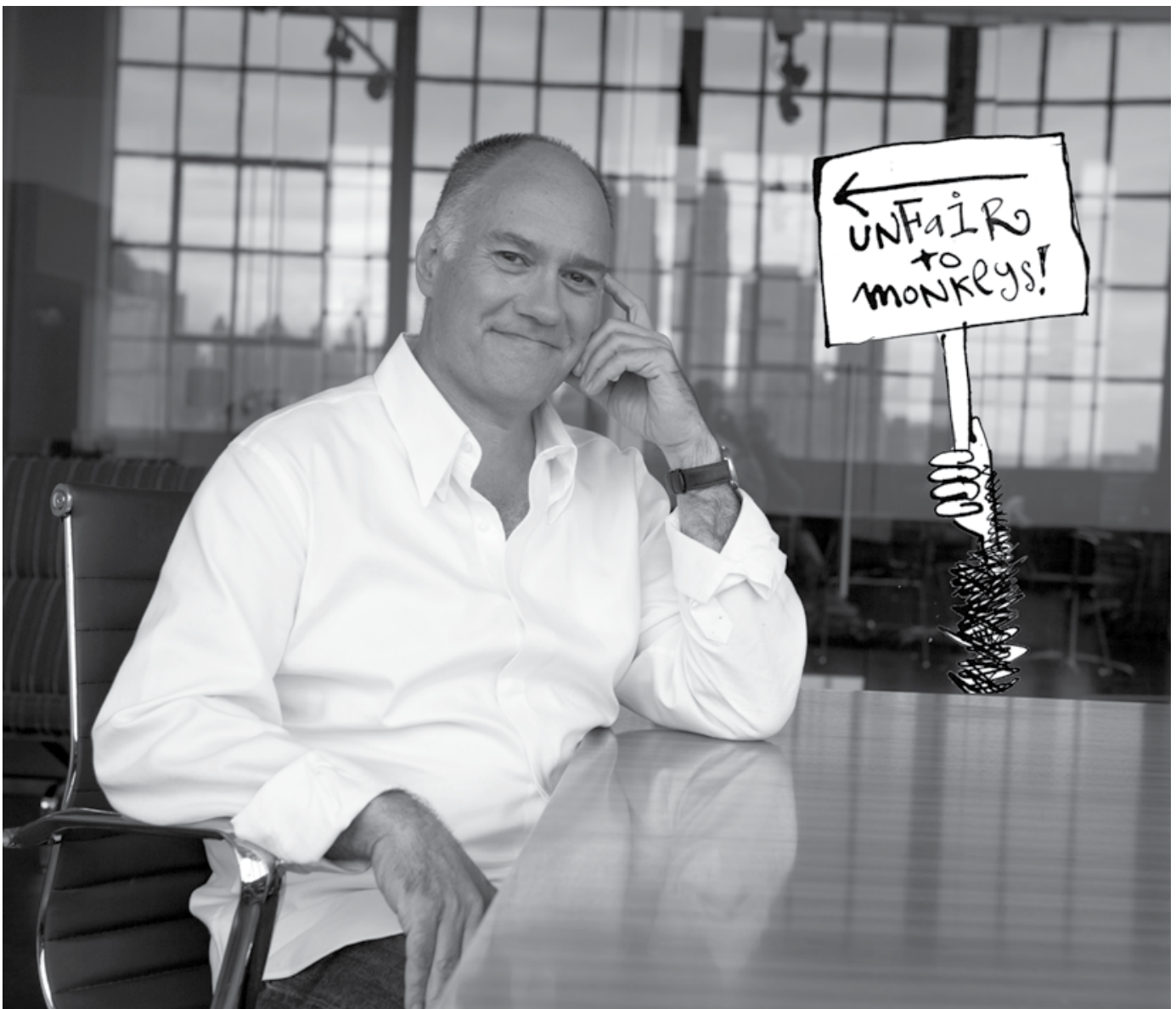
I have also worked with lots of other people who have this same little voice ringing in their ears. I've collaborated with and managed hundreds of people who are paid to be creative too—art directors, copywriters, designers, producers, photographers, illustrators, directors, and editors. Every single one of them has faced this same problem, with varying degrees of success. I've seen it drive some people to limit or even sabotage their careers. I've seen it turn great potential into mediocrity. I've seen the voice make people misbehave, waste time and money, and lose clients. And I've worked with some people who used the voice to their advantage, spurring themselves on to new and greater creativity, solving big, important problems.

I've also been a teacher, helping people learn to discover and express their creativity. I have written books, led workshops and classes. And time and again, I've seen people beat themselves up before they even begin, muttering harsh judgments, ripping up work, cursing and threatening to quit. I've seen people leave art school, quit jobs, stop making their own art, and crush their dreams. And I've helped them to face those fears and turn them into positive, creative habits that have changed their lives.

SHUT YOUR MONKEY

Over the years, I have figured out how to overcome all the many damaging effects of this voice in our heads. I did it by studying the enemy, by dissecting the voice, its origins and causes. I have studied its behavior and strategies for monkeying with my mind. I have researched different techniques and discussed them with experts—artists, teachers, and psychologists. And I have discussed these ideas with lots of frustrated creative people—and have seen how these techniques can bring them relief and new direction.

Helping win this struggle is particularly important to me because I feel creative people have the power to save the world. The human race faces so many challenges these days, but we also have so many new tools to solve them. The idea that some stupid, nattering voice in our heads might stop us from creating solutions is scary. So let's silence that voice and get to work!



THE INCESSANT NARRATOR

First, we need to spend some time understanding the voice in our heads. After all, it plays a big role in our lives, narrating every minute of every day. Most of the time we aren't paying it much attention, but it's still in there, narrating the story of our lives, giving play-by-play commentary on every move we make. So we need to isolate it and pin a mic on it to understand what it is saying and why.



ANGIE'S MONKEY TALE: Angie is the mother of three young boys. She recently took an art class and started creating for the first time since she was a kid herself. As soon as her kids took a nap, she sat down to draw and the voice woke up: "But you should be cleaning. When the kids are awake, you need to be spending time with them. You only have a year off, and then you go back to work. Don't waste this year making drawings no one will ever care about. You should start supper. You should organize the toy room. You should go pay bills. You should wash the sticky floors." She told me, "There are always a million 'shoulds' that the voice can throw at me. And sure, I hear all the people that say I need to take time for myself. That I should take some time to do what makes me happy. That I will be a better mother. The problem is, this voice, the one yelling at me, is so much louder."

LISTEN TO THE VOICE

So what does it sound like? Listen to it for a minute and pay attention just to the quality of its voice. It shouldn't be hard to hear. I'm sure that as you read this book, the voice is very noisy and complaining. It doesn't like to be discussed and scrutinized and much prefers that the focus stay on you and your many flaws. But let's ignore the protests for now and concentrate instead on the style of the voice.

Does it whisper? Does it have an accent? Does it sing? Does it echo? How old does it sound? Is it high-pitched or low-? Does it sit right against your ear or is it deep in your head?

Now, try to put a body and a face to that voice. Make it a creature.

How big is it? What does it smell like? How does it move? Is it an animal? Is it a demon? Is it a bank of fog or a chorus of mice?





I imagine it looks a bit like Gollum.

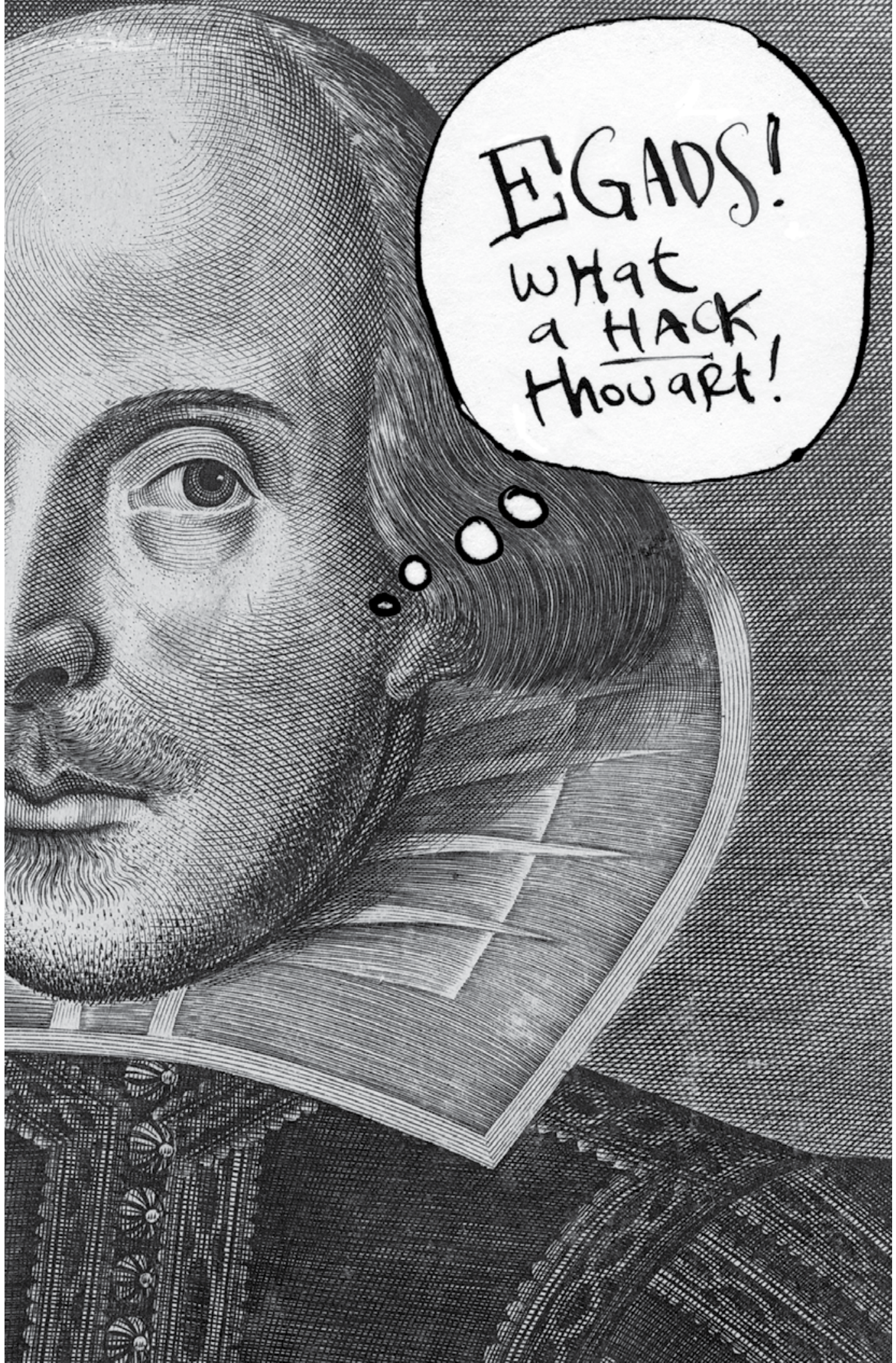
It's whiny and creepy and lives back in the dark cave of my skull. It never rests and has big, glowing eyes that constantly dart around in fear. It has a mouthful of sharp little teeth to nip at the edges of my mind and it smells musty, of cold sweat and old fish. So, like Gollum . . . but meatier and covered in grey-brown fur that's fairly oily, like an unwashed mutt.

I call this lovely thing "the Monkey." It jabbars and hoots like a monkey and it smells like one too. Only worse.

Maybe my picture fits your creature too. If not, just substitute your species in for the rest of the descriptions I'll give you. I'm pretty sure they'll still fit whether you imagine you're carrying around a snake or a gargoyle, a gremlin or a gopher with a chainsaw.



Yo!

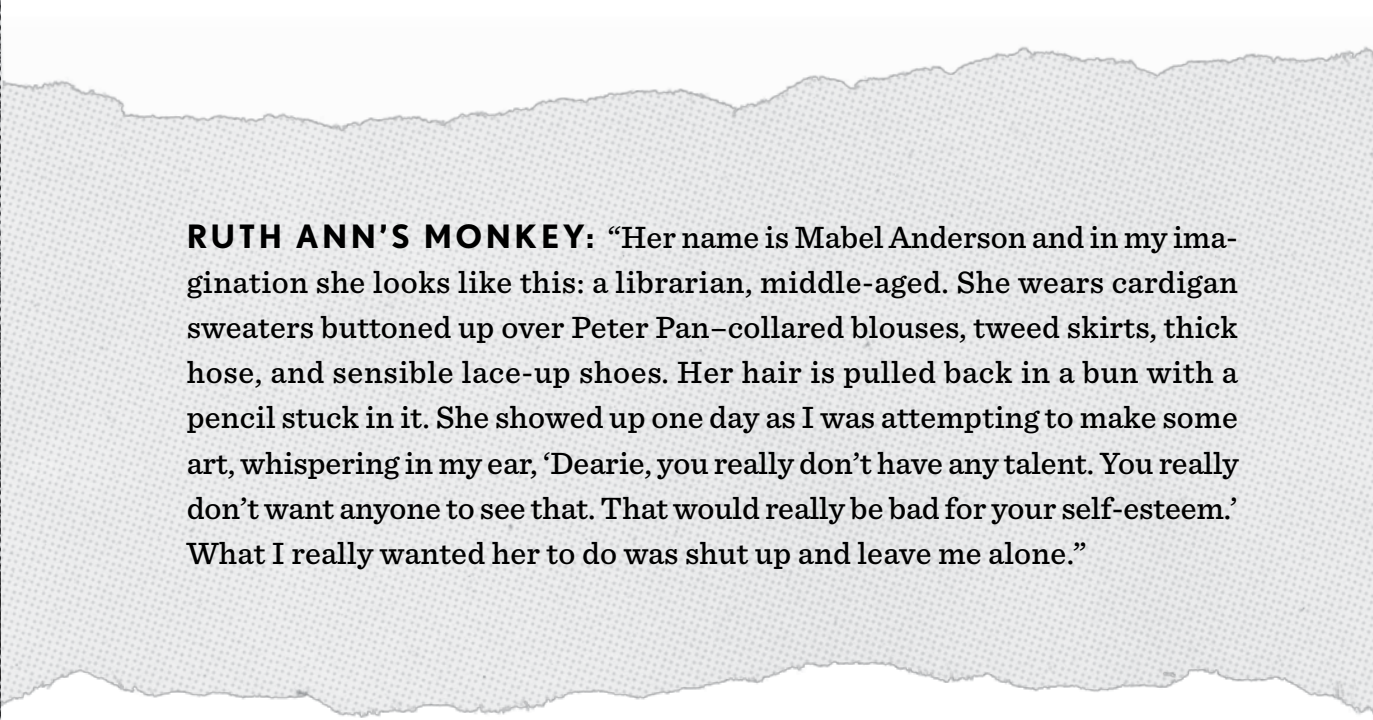


EGADS!
what
a HACK
thou art!

ONLY PSYCHOS NEVER WONDER IF THEY'RE NUTS

The only people who don't have monkeys camping out in their heads are sociopaths. Literally, they are the people who were somehow raised with no guilt, no risk aversion, no brakes . . . no monkey. The rest of us—Bill Gates, Lady Gaga, Gandhi—we all live with the monkey glowering at the back of the cave, driving us crazy now and then. So don't worry, there are six billion of us hosting the monkey; you're in good company.

Every successful creative person goes through periods when they fear they are frauds. That they have somehow conned the world into thinking that they are any good. And that any minute, the knock is going to come on the door. They can't imagine that the truly great people struggle as much as they do. Or they worry it's all too easy, that this success must be some sort of devil's bargain which will be stripped from them at any moment. It's normal to fear success. When you stop worrying, you become a pompous windbag with an over-inflated ego. Then your standards slip, and you slide down the slick slope to suckdom.



RUTH ANN'S MONKEY: “Her name is Mabel Anderson and in my imagination she looks like this: a librarian, middle-aged. She wears cardigan sweaters buttoned up over Peter Pan-collared blouses, tweed skirts, thick hose, and sensible lace-up shoes. Her hair is pulled back in a bun with a pencil stuck in it. She showed up one day as I was attempting to make some art, whispering in my ear, ‘Dearie, you really don’t have any talent. You really don’t want anyone to see that. That would really be bad for your self-esteem.’ What I really wanted her to do was shut up and leave me alone.”

Meet
Your
MONKEY



KELLY'S MONKEY TALE: Kelly's monkey is relentless. "When I'm at work, the monkey mind chitters about how I have nothing worthy of saying. If what I do say doesn't fit with the conversation, or it doesn't make sense to someone, it tells me it was right. That I'm stupid, and that I don't belong there." Kelly's passion is to be a writer and she has taken many classes and worked hard to perfect her craft. "The monkey mind tells me I'm wasting my time. That I should just accept things as they are. That I don't know enough people, that no one likes me anyway. That I'd never manage to convince someone to buy one book, never mind enough books to make it a sustainable business." At the end of a yoga class, as the instructor guided the students through a relaxation exercise, her monkey whispered: "You know you're only here so that someone will touch you." Kelly started to well up, then desperately tried to distract herself so that when the lights went up, she wasn't sitting there, sobbing.

YOUR OWN WORST ENEMY

The monkey is a formidable foe.

It is more devious than you and it has plenty of time on its hands. It is there 24/7, waiting and watching for you to make a move, to even contemplate a move, and it is ready to trip you up. It can use everything you know against you, push every button, pull every lever—and it is unrelenting. It has the keys to the file room and knows the combination of the vault in your skull. Don't let that get you down. But don't underestimate it either.

MONKEY IN THE MIDDLE

The monkey has opinions about most things. It's a busy little voice and it can think of a good reason to be afraid of most decisions, of any impending event, big or small. It can give you umpteen reasons to do something tomorrow instead of today; to ask for more and more people's opinions before you make a move; can tell you what that stranger at the cocktail party will reply if you say hi.

That it could be a TUMOR.
The PILOT'S PROBABLY DRUNK.
That GIRL'S too hot FOR you.
Do you SMELL Smoke?

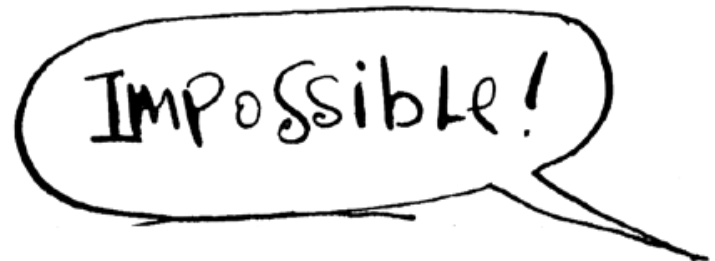
EZGI'S MONKEY TALE: Ezgi is a freelance writer from Istanbul who has been wrestling with her monkey her whole adult life. "I started to see 'it' as a grumpy old lady. She likes to poke me with the needle in her hand and is really good at knowing what my soft spot is. She makes impressive entrances in the beginning of projects and says things like 'You are just seeking attention like a little girl. That's why you write. You're insincere. And these ideas are no good. You were never good at finding ideas anyway.' When I remind her of my past achievements, she answers, 'You might fool people once or twice, but this is not the case this time.' She never forgets to pay a visit to me after a rejection. Whenever an editor responds to me with 'No,' she screams back 'No! No! No!' while dancing. She crows, 'I told you so! I told you so! What were you thinking, sending your childish story to this prestigious magazine?' She hurts me mercilessly, but never forgets to remind me her intentions are all good. She says, 'I may sound harsh but I just don't want to see you suffering, honey.' Somehow I doubt it."

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF THE PROJECT

Through all my years in advertising, the monkey came along for the ride, contributing something unhelpful to every step of the creative process. I'll take you through one of my typical projects, complete with monkey annotation. See if it sounds familiar.

Every project begins with a briefing session. All of the creatives file into the conference room carrying pads and pens and Thermos cups of coffee. The strategist and account executives sit by the screen, rearranging their PowerPoint slides. The strategic brief appears onscreen, outlining the target, the objective, the strategy, and the various client deliverables. The monkey pulls up the Aeron chair next to me, ready to narrate.

*This brief is absurd.
This project makes no sense.
Has anyone thought this through?
Nobody could solve this problem.
This product sucks the big one.*



After the meeting, I sit down to work in my office and the commentary continues. But now, instead of just being critical, the monkey tries to distract me.



*Hey, we have plenty of time 'til this is due.
Open your browser.
Wait, check out Facebook.
I'm hungry and I have to pee.
Let's go to lunch.*

Then when I start to come up with ideas, it takes a different approach.

*I don't know, that idea seems sort of weird.
Hasn't that been done already?
Can't you come up with anything original?*



And just because I've left the office and gone home, the monkey keeps working. It'll wake me up in the middle of the night.



Well, I guess you still haven't thought of anything.

Deadline's approaching.

What if you never think of another idea?

What if this is the last assignment they ever give you?

I see they are hiring at Subway.

Weeks pass and we're finally ready to present. As I start to set up our ideas, I hear the voice in the background.

*Meh, I don't think they like it.
Whoa, I totally don't think they understand it.
Ho! Look at that look on that one's face.
You better go back and explain that again.
I think your fly is open.*



And after the presentation, after everybody's congratulating us on how great our work is, the monkey whispers in my ear:

Dude, you'll never come up with anything this good again.

I've been going to creative briefings for three decades and it gets easier—but not easy. Nonetheless, I have never not had an idea at all, never not come through. Dozens of times each year, year after year. The key? Practice. Experience. Perseverance. Head down. I don't always win each creative shoot-out, but I'm not afraid to glove up.

I'm sure you have the same sort of track record, no matter how many obstacles the monkey's kicked in your way. Try to remind yourself of that next time the monkey-go-round starts up.

MONKEY SUBSPECIES

You'll find that, while you have basically one monkey, it wears many masks.



THE BLUNDERER: You can't do this. Don't even try. You will fail. Don't humiliate yourself. You suck.



THE NIT-PICKER: Here's a long list of all the things you screwed up. They all matter equally. If this isn't 100% perfect, it utterly sucks.



THE FAKE: You are a fraud and an impostor. Everyone knows you can't do this. They're all laughing behind your naive back, you lying fool.



THE PARANOID: They're laughing and sneering, because no one likes you. Or trusts you. Or admires you. Or could ever love you. And they can't wait to see you screw up.



THE HOLY MONKEY: You are sinful and childish, have no self-control, and think only of yourself.



THE GOSSIP: Look at what idiots everyone else is. Imagine what they are saying about you.



THE WORRIER: Look, just be anxious. Because if you worry about absolutely everything, at least you are prepared for the inevitable disaster.



THE LUG: Let's forget it. Come curl up in a ball on the couch, watch Judge Judy, and empty another quart of Chunky Monkey ice cream.



THE CHEAP CHIMP: You will soon be broke. And homeless.



DR. MONKEY: And dead. You have been totally ignoring all the horrible diseases rampaging around inside you. And you don't floss enough.



THE UTOPIAN: Your life could be so perfect, so much better than this, if only you would listen to me. Instead, it sucks. As do you.



THE BLACK HOLE: *(Emits a deep, dark, silent, soul-sucking creative void broken by a throbbing alarm blaring, "Warning! You'll never achieve anything again, ever.")*



THE FUGGEDABOUT-IT: Tomorrow's another day. So's the day after next Thursday.



THE TIGER MOM-KEY: You will never live up to your potential and you'll bring us nothing but shame.

BEHAVE LIKE A MONKEY

The monkey can make you behave a bit like a monkey yourself.

If you find yourself quarreling with others and venting emotion inappropriately, chances are that you're not working, not creating, not thinking, not doing. Or alternatively, you may find yourself overworking, nights and weekends (on projects fueled by drudgery and obligation, not passion), living out of balance, out of harmony, out of fast food containers, far from your true self.

In my career as a creative director, I've run into a lot of people who are driven to melodramatics by their monkey puppeteers. They act out. Client questions your decision? Throw a fit. Need to cover up a blunder? The best defense is a good serving of self-righteous indignation. They're always drawing attention to themselves, making excuses, being prima donnas, making outrageous demands. A bigger office, a longer title, no brown M&Ms in the dressing room!

In the short run, this strategy might shift things your way. But eventually, instead of being famous for making things, you'll be notorious as a dysfunctional basket-case.

MARTHA

I knew a copy writer who'd spend the weeks after a briefing very busy, complaining. Her name was Martha. She'd say:

"We need a lot more information. When is the deadline? That's ridiculous. We're far too busy already! Do they expect me to do this all by myself?"

And if we briefed other teams too, Martha would say,

"Why are they working on my project? I'm not going to compete with these people! It's a waste of my time. I should just walk out of the room. I DESERVE RESPECT!"

Then the night before the assignment was due, Martha would get to work and . . . she'd have to stay up all night. Sometimes her ideas were great, often they weren't. Then she would complain about how tired and overworked she was, or how bad the brief or the product were.

Martha and the monkey managed to protect her with a thick layer of complaints. Despite all the good work that she (occasionally) did, Martha was part of the very next round of layoffs. Her monkey kept its job.

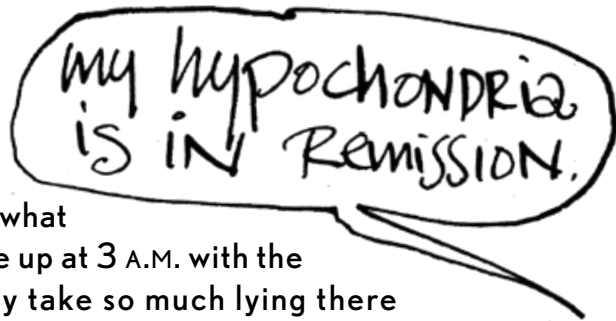


SICK AS A MONKEY

The monkey doesn't want what's good for you. He wants you slow and weak and distracted so he can have his way. A popular monkey game is monkey-ing with your health—mental and physical.

Am I unproductive because I am depressed? Or is the other way around? I should get that mole checked.

My tooth! My stomach! My back!



Get busy making something and see what happens to your mood. When I wake up at 3 A.M. with the ape chattering in my ear, I can only take so much lying there in the darkness. So I crawl out of bed, go to my desk and draw or write something, anything. It's a miracle cure. My back won't hurt, my allergies will recede, my bank account will get in balance. My mind is eased, the chimp goes back to sleep and so do I.

MONKEY ON YOUR BACK

Why do rock stars overdose? The monkey.

What happened to Tiger Woods and Michael Jackson? The monkey.

THE MONKEY LOVES
FRENCH FRIES
AND BUZZFEED.
DRINKING
CHOCOLATE CAKE.
INSOMNIA
SCIATICA.
REAL HOUSEWIVES.

Anything that fills the hole
that comes from NOT DOING
what your true passion calls for.

DOOM

The monkey doesn't like new things. It doesn't like change. It is always worried—especially about things that haven't even happened yet.

That's why it excels at pointing out the dark clouds on the horizon. It can show you the most far-fetched possibilities, how a scaffold could collapse on your head, a taxi could ride up on the sidewalk, a pigeon could crap on your lunch if you don't eat at your desk. It has you up at night worrying through every scenario, trussing yourself up with belt and suspenders, an umbrella, a raincoat, galoshes, and a lightning rod.

Worry and fear are the best ways to protect yourself. Hunker down, stay put, shut up.



THE MONKEY MOVES THE GOAL POSTS

It's dangerous taking advice from the monkey, and not just because its advice is often terrible.

Its convictions may sound rock-solid, but the monkey will switch sides in a hot second if it will rattle your cage.

It can say you're not good enough—or too good.

Lazy or a workaholic.

Too pushy or too laid back.

It can say you should settle for the easy way out—or that you always refuse to go the extra mile.

The monkey will tell you exactly what your life should be like. And then it'll show you how incredibly far your life is from this perfection.

If you say, "Okay, I'll change. I'll get a new job, new haircut, new gym, new attitude . . ." the vision that the monkey holds out will slowly change, showing it's a mirage you can never achieve.



TAKE THE RED *PILL*

The monkey likes steady, reliable habits. It wants to program you so you always respond the same way, no matter whether it's appropriate or not, in your best interests or not.

MEET A STRANGER



FEEL shy.

YOUR BOSS CALLS



Get Tense.

E-MAIL ARRIVES



DROP EVERYTHING.

TRAFFIC SLOWS



GET ANGRY!

**FOR MORE, VISIT
DANNYGREGORY.COM**

This excerpt from
Shut Your Monkey
is a gift from
Danny Gregory &
Sketchbook
Skool.

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is available at a
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