

At 11pm on a warm California night, I made one of the biggest career decisions of my life. Surrounded by four concrete walls, I hunched over a long white table in the production loft of a design studio.

The maximum length of a booklet that will fit into a standard CD case is 32 pages. On this night, I was carefully cutting out all 32 pages of this booklet, gluing them together, and assembling the pages in their proper order. On the booklet's cover, an aging rock star's face gazed into the distance. The interior pages held lyrics and chords for every song on the forthcoming album, which I had diligently crammed into the 32 page format as elegantly as I could.

Decades ago, this musician sold out countless concert halls and is still considered one of the most revered best-selling musicians of all time. Now, at over 70 years old, he is still pumping out albums, but times have changed since the release of his first album in 1966. And yet, the hall-of-famer insists that he receive his design changes by overnight mail instead of the universally accepted PDF-by-email format.

He actually wants to be mailed an entire CD jewel case *as if he just picked it up off the shelf of Tower Records*.

For over ten rounds, I painstakingly print, cut and glue each sheet of paper so the 32 page handcrafted booklet fits perfectly inside the jewel case cover. I place the back cover and spine artwork into the clear plastic case and snap the pieces together. I use a homemade jig to carefully cut out the circular CD design and paste it on top of a blank CD. I marvel for a second at how much it looks like the real thing.

As I run downstairs to my computer station to reprint a page of the booklet that I haven't cut just perfectly, the weight of this effort feels like a car crashing into an immovable boulder. I sit down in front of my screen, press print, and slog back upstairs to the production room to cry. Emotions flooded my body. Why was I doing all of this? What was the point?

Why couldn't we have just convinced the old man to look a fucking PDF?

And what hit me like a knife in the chest was, why was I doing this ALONE? My boss had said we'd do this together, but five minutes before 6, he decided he'd go to the Dodgers game instead.

I had never wanted to work for "the man," but here I was, toiling towards the wee hours of the morning for a project I found stupendously inefficient.

So that night, with only the large format printer and my x-acto blade to act as any kind of sounding board, I made my final decision.

I would leave this place. It had been good to me, and I had served it well. I had learned more than I ever could have wished for. Yes, there was still more I could learn. I wasn't the best

designer in the building. In fact, I was probably the worst. But I solemnly accepted that I needed to move on.

My dream, since I was a little child, was to become an artist. I longingly envisioned myself as an independent woman making a living off her own creativity. Yes, I had this amazing job at an award-winning design studio, but none of this work was mine. Some of my designs made it onto the shelves of Walmart or into the hands of every Taco Bell customer, but they never had my name on it nor would I ever be professionally associated with my creations.

My time didn't belong to me. Some days in the studio were so jam packed we didn't have time to breathe. Pump out a presentation in two minutes flat? I don't know if it can even be done — but I'm doing it. Presentation is at 3. It's 2:59:24. I press print, expertly time my run up to the printer, and stroll into the meeting, presentation in hand. Is it perfect? I don't know, but it damn well better be. I pray that the stars are aligned as I anxiously leave the meeting room. Meetings are for the art directors and *senior* designers, not me.

Other days in the office are dense with boredom, the majority of us pretending to stare at pixels on the screen until 6pm rolls around and we are released into the flow of our lives again. And yet, why was I getting paid for an 8-hour day? How did that make any financial sense at all?

My frustration with the business systems that entrapped me grew like poison ivy, choking out any joy I may have felt at my job in its early days. If this were MY business, I could have taken those dull days off and learned a new skill or done something fulfilling. But no. I had to sit and stare into the high-resolution oblivion of my Mac screen, the emotional high point of my day being when I accidentally opened Microsoft Excel instead of Adobe Illustrator and experiencing genuine shock and disdain at the aesthetically displeasing interface on the screen.

So that night, alone in the studio loft when 11pm rolled around, I finally made my decision. On one hand, I had this job that most designers would have killed for. I should be grateful. My parents were so proud. They would take their friends to Target and say, "my daughter made this limited edition *Twilight* DVD set!" How could I let them down?

On the other hand, I knew this life was unsustainable. I didn't want to spend my whole life in a concrete box, no matter how hip and mid century modern the furniture was. I had some amazing projects under my belt, but I wanted more ownership of my work, my time, and ultimately, my life.

Did I have what it took to actually freelance? I didn't have enough money to take any time off and figure it out. Sure, I already had some freelance clients on the side, but you can't live on gift cards to an overpriced Hollywood diner and a two hundred dollars a month making Botox ads for a local med spa.

I put in my two weeks notice, but I didn't become a successful freelancer right away. In fact, I didn't become a full time freelancer at all. I didn't have the skills I needed. But I did make ONE step in the right direction. I left in search of new experiences.

Before I made the final decision to leave my first dream job, I heard that nagging voice whispering in my ear for months. It had been telling me that this was not the life that was meant for me, no matter how much I loved the glamorous projects and the badge of honor that comes with late nights of suffering with your team.

Do you hear a similar nagging voice in your ear? If you do, will you be so lucky to have your decision so clearly handed to you by an obstinate rock star on a lonely night in the office?

Sometimes, it's our worst nights that teach us our best lessons. If it weren't for that particular night, I may have stayed at that job for much, much longer. And yes, I would have become a better designer for it, but sooner or later, we all have to listen to the quiet voices that tell us, "It's time to move on."