

# 11

**THE** **FUNDAMENTAL**  
**QUESTIONS**

A Guide to a Better Story by **Aaron Mendelsohn**

# THE BEST TIME TO ASK (AND RE-ASK)

## THE 11 FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

IS WHEN YOU'RE...



Considering a script or book idea

Breaking a story

Creating a pitch

Outlining your project

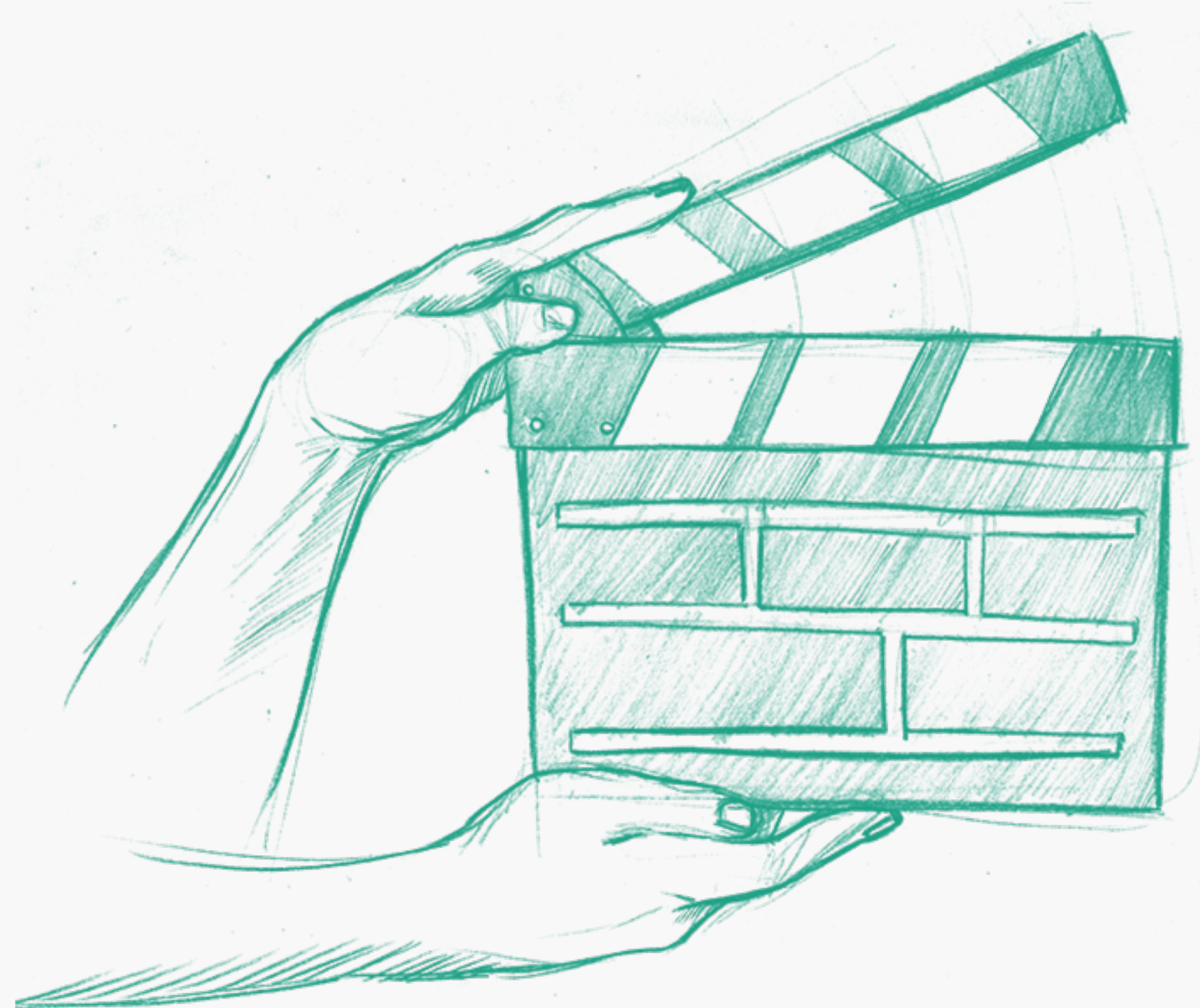
Writing your project and hitting a wall

Starting a rewrite

About to begin production

# THE 11 FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

WORK FOR...



Books

Film

Pilots and television series

Short Stories

Short films and videos

Web series

Plays

True stories and biographies

Comics and graphic novels

*Any kind of story*

## THE 11 FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

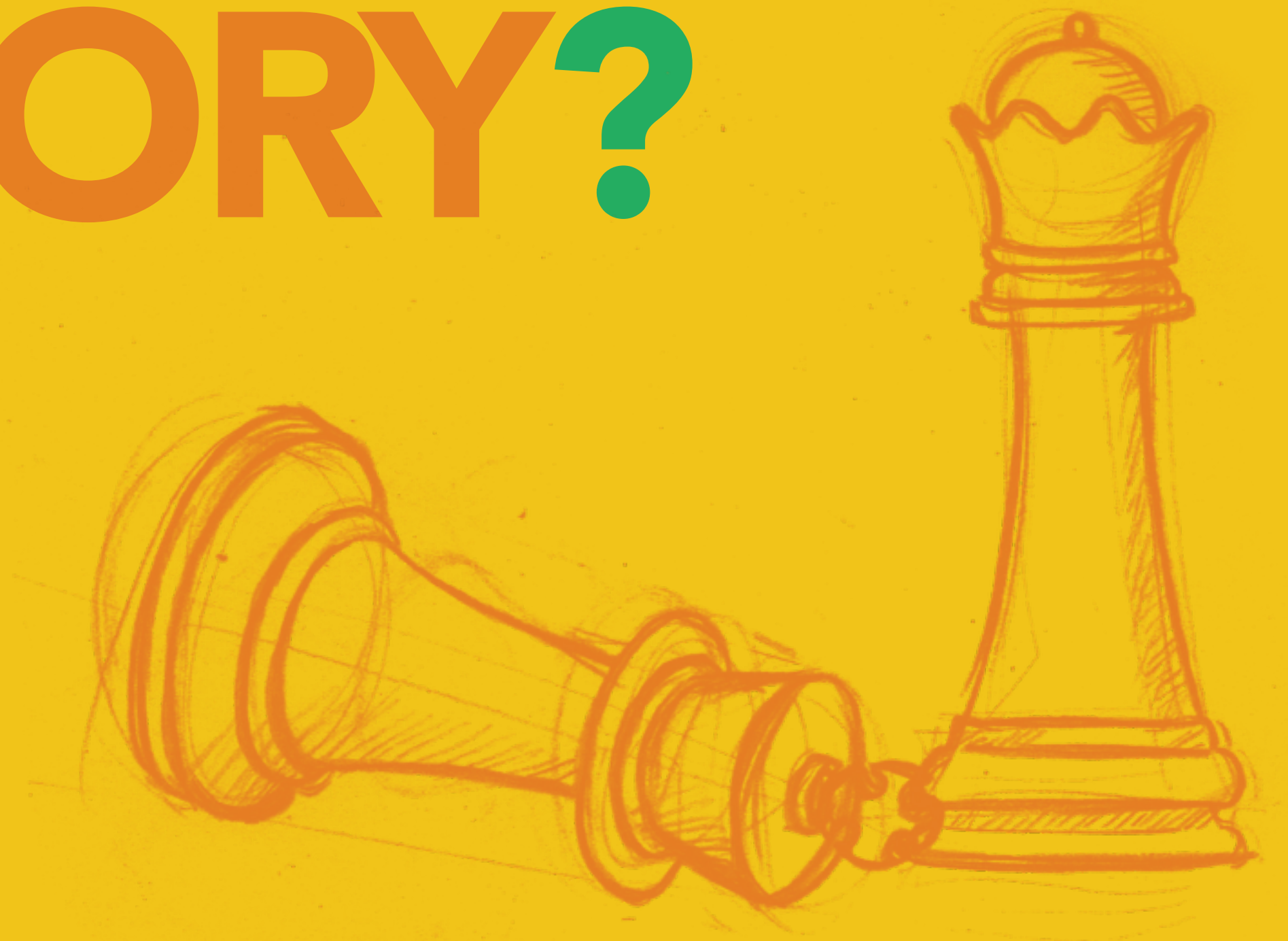
### TEST THE **STRENGTH** OF YOUR **STORYTELLING**

The key is to **accept the answers** and **incorporate them into your story** even if it means **changing your outline, book or script**.



WHAT IS AT  
**STAKE**  
IN THE  
**STORY?**

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WHAT DOES THE CENTRAL CHARACTER AND/OR THEIR WORLD **HAVE TO LOSE IF THEY DO NOT ANSWER** THE CALL TO ACTION OR FAIL TO ACHIEVE THEIR CONSCIOUS OR UNCONSCIOUS DESIRES?



Martin Luther King knows what's at stake in **SELMA**: civil rights for all African-Americans.

Examples:

**JAMES BOND, THE AVENGERS:** The world.

**THE SOPRANOS, THE GODFATHER,  
MODERN FAMILY:** The family.

**HUNGER GAMES:** Katniss's life, which will bring about the revolution.

**WHEN HARRY MET SALLY:** Their friendship.

**GAME OF THRONES:** Good over evil.

**THE KING'S SPEECH:** Uniting a nation against the Nazis.

**WALKING DEAD:** Humanity's survival.

**LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE:** The family, and getting to the pageant on time.

# WHAT IS THE ANTAGONISTIC FORCE(S)?

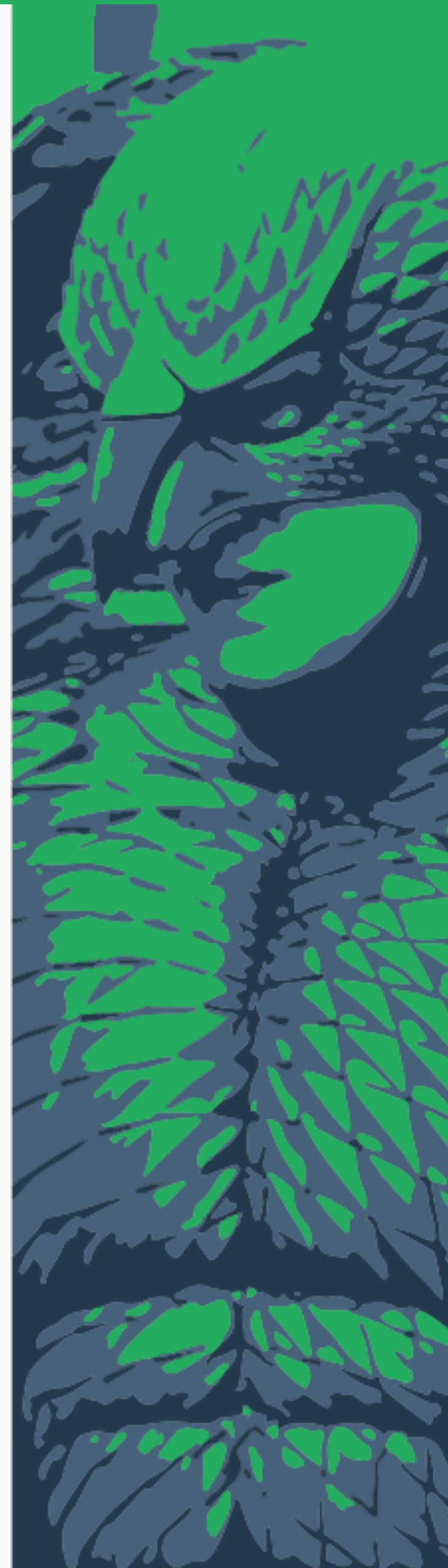
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AN **ANTAGONISTIC FORCE** IS A PERSON, GROUP OF PEOPLE, FORCE OF NATURE, AND/OR AN ASPECT OF YOUR CENTRAL CHARACTER'S PERSONALITY THAT **STANDS IN THE WAY OF THEM ACHIEVING THEIR GOAL.**

A story can have multiple antagonistic forces.

Antagonistic Forces in **BIRDMAN** include Riggan's daughter, his co-star, a theatre critic and his own alter ego.



## Examples:

**THE GODFATHER:** The Feds, rival gangsters and family dynamics.

**THE TRUMAN SHOW:** The Director, Truman's wife and best friend.

**WALKING DEAD:** Zombies and humans.

**THE MARTIAN:** Martian threats and earthbound setbacks.

**KING'S SPEECH:** The king's speech impediment.

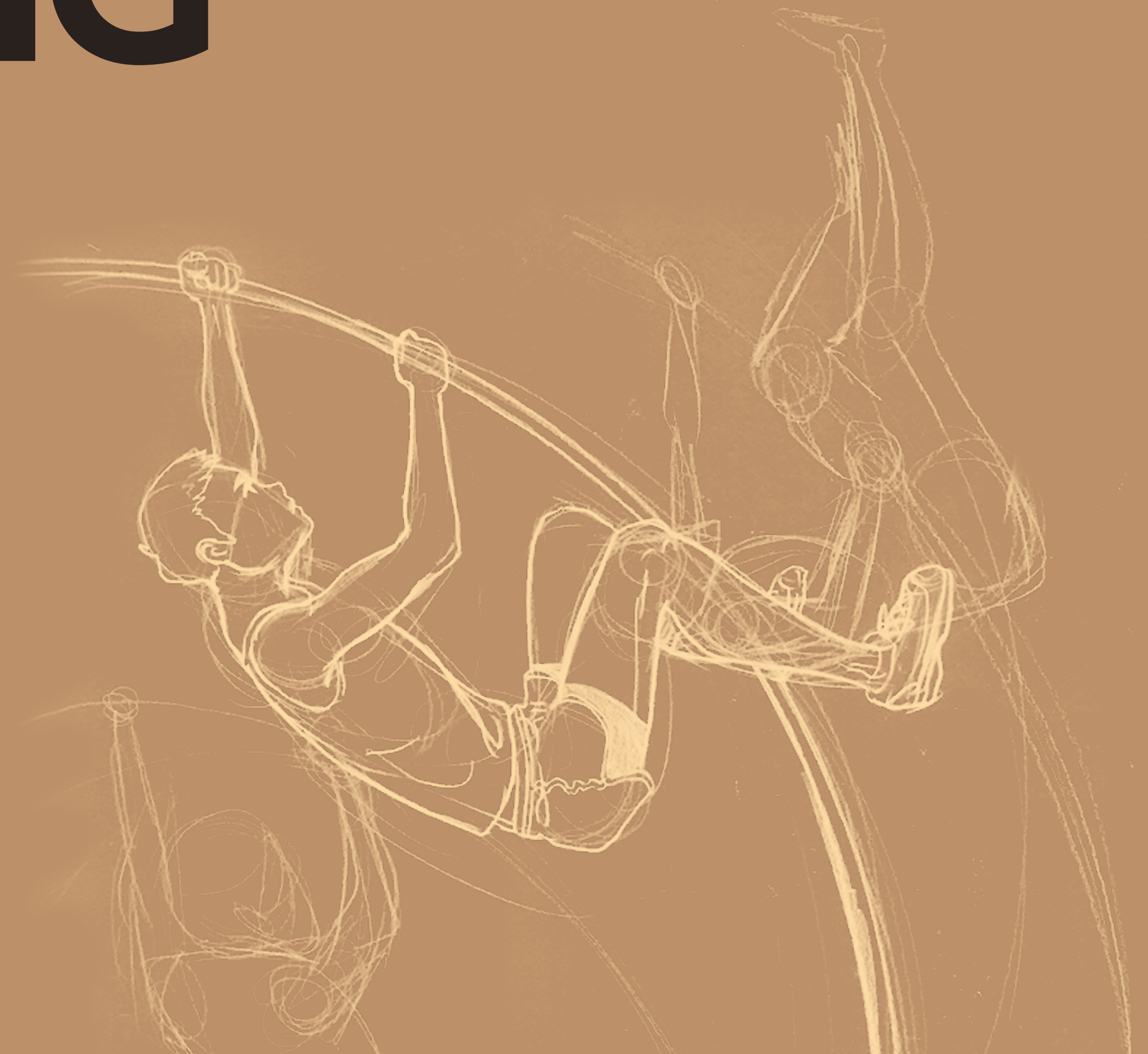
**LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE:** The family's issues.

**INSIDE OUT:** The destructive powers of the mind.

**MAD MEN:** Rival ad agencies, Don's infidelity and self-destructive behavior.

WHAT IS THE  
**OVERARCHING**  
CONFLICT?

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THE OVERARCHING CONFLICT IS THE  
**PRIMARY CHALLENGE** (OR SERIES OF CHALLENGES)  
YOUR CENTRAL CHARACTER  
FACES ON THEIR JOURNEY.

It is fueled by **antagonistic forces** and the  
**fatal flaw**, and it often **defines the journey**.

**MEET THE PARENTS:** In trying to impress his fiancée's parents, Greg continually makes things worse.



## Examples:

**BOYHOOD:** Mason struggles to survive a childhood beset with instability and abuse.

**BIRDMAN:** Riggan is determined to make it to opening night in spite of numerous set backs and self-doubt.

**24:** Jack Bauer has 24 hours to stop an imminent attack.

**GRAVITY:** Ryan fights against the forces of nature and her own defeatism to get back to earth.

**THE BIG BANG THEORY:** The guys' social awkwardness creates conflict in their friendships and dealings with the opposite sex.

**THE GODFATHER:** The more power Michael amasses as the Godfather, the more it destroys the people he loves.

**WHAT IS THE  
CENTRAL CHARACTER'S  
LOWEST  
POINT?**

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## THE LOWEST POINT

TYPICALLY COMES AT THE END OF THE SECOND ACT WHEN THE CENTRAL CHARACTER IS **SEEMINGLY DEFEATED BY THE ANTAGONISTIC FORCE(S)**.

This is often a result of the central character's **stubborn pursuit of their conscious desire** and/or their **succumbing to their fatal flaw**.



The Lowest Point in **WHEN HARRY MET SALLY** is when Harry and Sally have sex, because it threatens their friendship. (Remember the Central Idea?)

## Examples:

**MEET THE PARENTS:** The wedding is called off due to Greg's missteps.

**BREAKING BAD:** Walt's actions lead to the murder of his brother in law, and drives him and Jessie against each other.

**STAR WARS:** Luke loses his mentor as Vader murders Obiwan.

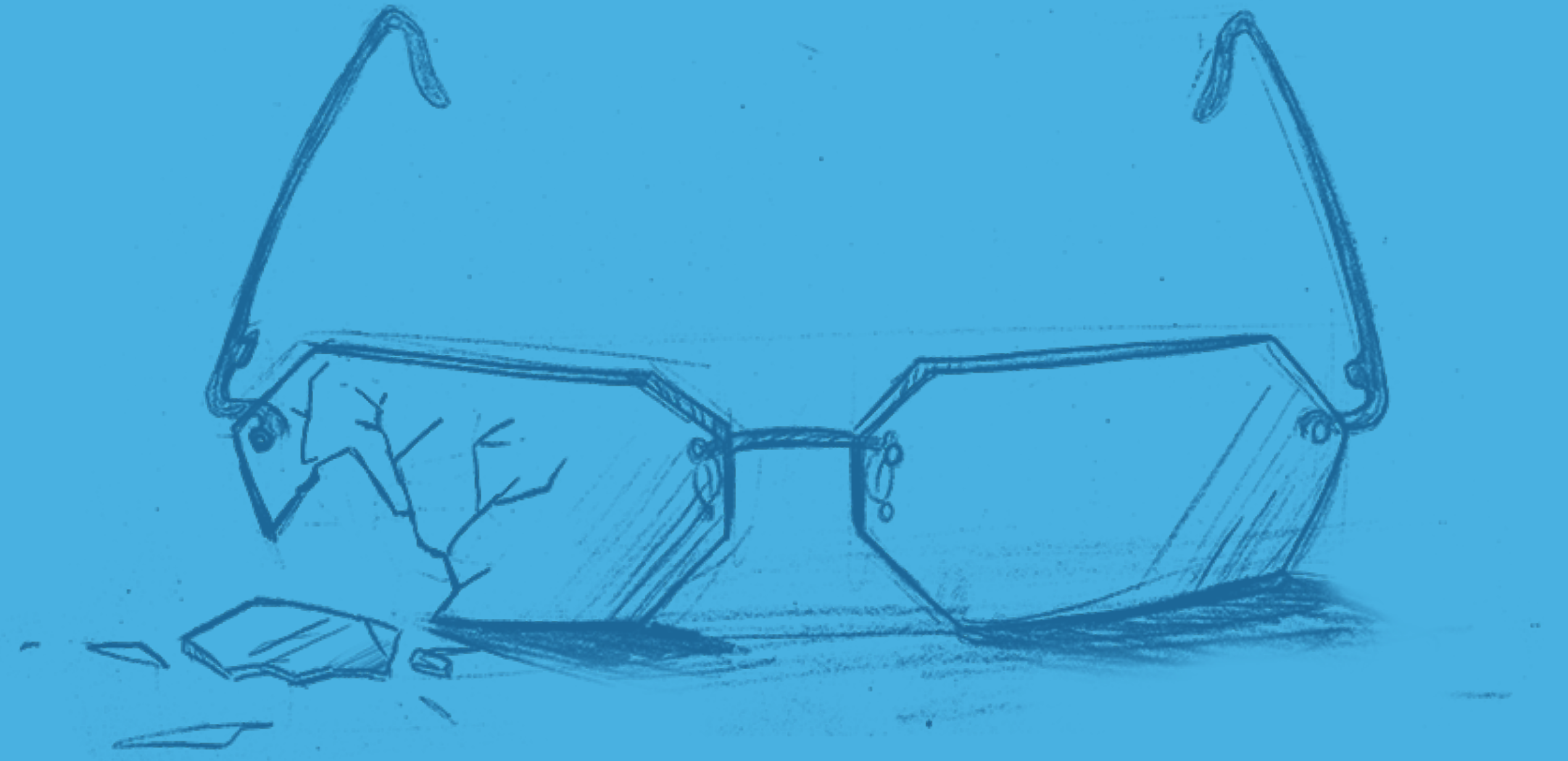
**GRAVITY:** Ryan shuts off the oxygen supply to kill herself.

**THE SOPRANOS:** As the business starts to crumble, Tony is forced to murder his nephew Christopher, and Dr. Melfi drops him as a patient.

**THE MARTIAN:** The probe that's bringing Mark crucial supplies blows up during launch.

**INSIDE OUT:** Joy attempts to get back to Headquarters without Sadness and ends up in the Memory Dump.

**SKYFALL:** Bond has enabled Silva to get close to his real target: M.



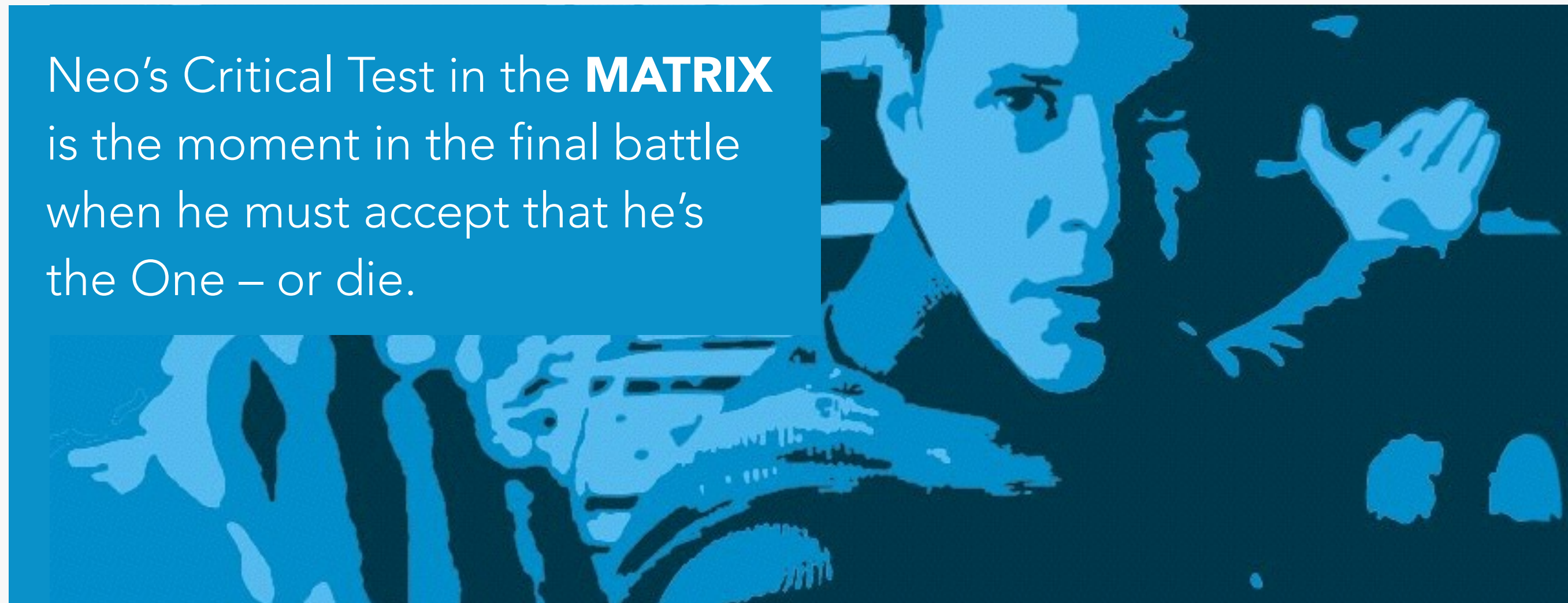
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**WHAT  
IS THE CRITICAL  
TEST?**

THE CRITICAL TEST IS THE **ORDEAL OR DECISION** YOUR CENTRAL CHARACTER IS **FORCED TO CONFRONT** AT THE END OF THE STORY THAT WILL **LEAD THEM TO VICTORY OR DEFEAT.**

It's the **biggest test** they have yet faced, and the choice they make **reveals whether or not they have completed their arc.**

Neo's Critical Test in the **MATRIX** is the moment in the final battle when he must accept that he's the One – or die.



## Examples:

**STAR WARS:** Luke chooses to battle the Death Star rather than collect his reward money and flee. Later, he'll face a second Critical Test when he chooses to use the Force to blow up the Death Star.

**ALIEN:** Ripley decides to fight the Alien.

Breaking Bad: Walt puts himself at extreme risk to save Jesse's life.

**LOST:** Jack realizes he must sacrifice himself to save his friends and the island.

**THE KING'S SPEECH:** The King is faced with the daunting challenge of having to deliver a critical speech to the nation.

**FRIENDS:** Ross goes after Rachel before she leaves for Paris.

**LORD OF THE RINGS:** Return of the King: Frodo must drop the Ring in the volcano.

**INSIDE OUT:** Joy chooses to let Sadness try to stop Riley from running away.

# THE 11 FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

- 1 Do you know what your story is about?
- 2 How are you honoring or subverting your genre?
- 3 What is the Central Idea?
- 4 Who is the Central Character(s) and what is their Conscious and Unconscious Desire?
- 5 What is the Central Character's Fatal Flaw?
- 6 What is the Call to Action?
- 7 What is at stake in the story?
- 8 What is the Antagonistic Force(s)?
- 9 What is the Overarching Conflict?
- 10 What is the Central Character's Lowest Point?
- 11 What is the Critical Test?