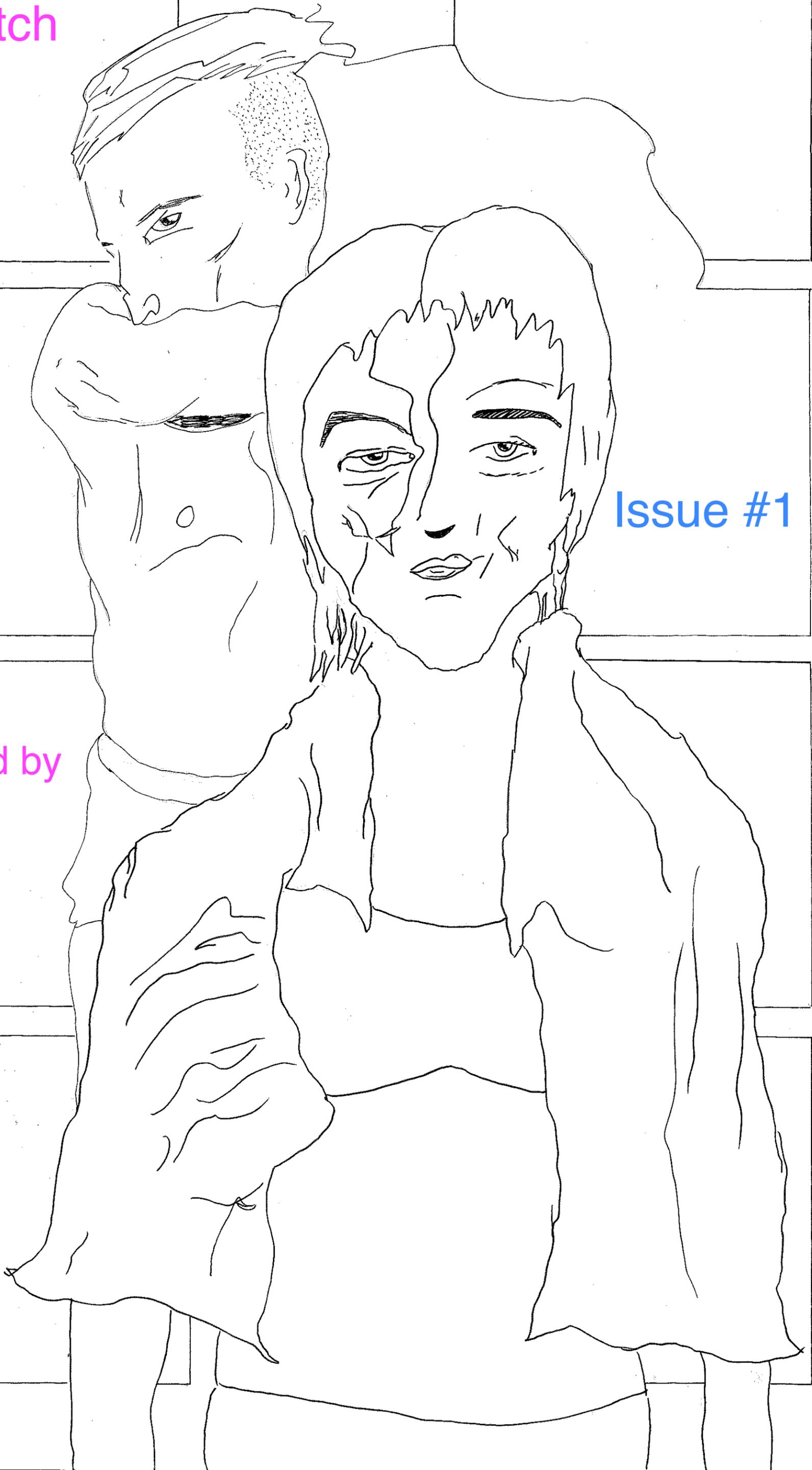


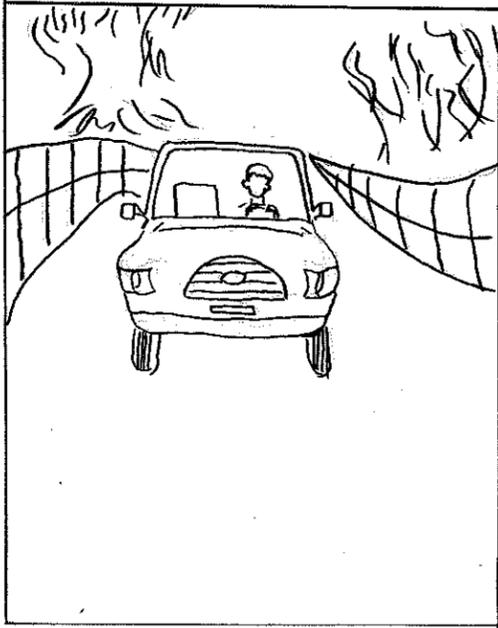
The Velvet Ditch

Issue #1

Written &
Illustrated by
Brendan
Steffen



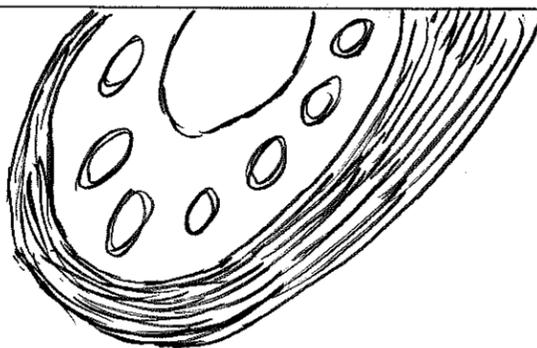
SHE INVITED HIM TO DINNER AT A RESTAURANT IN COLONEL, MISSISSIPPI.



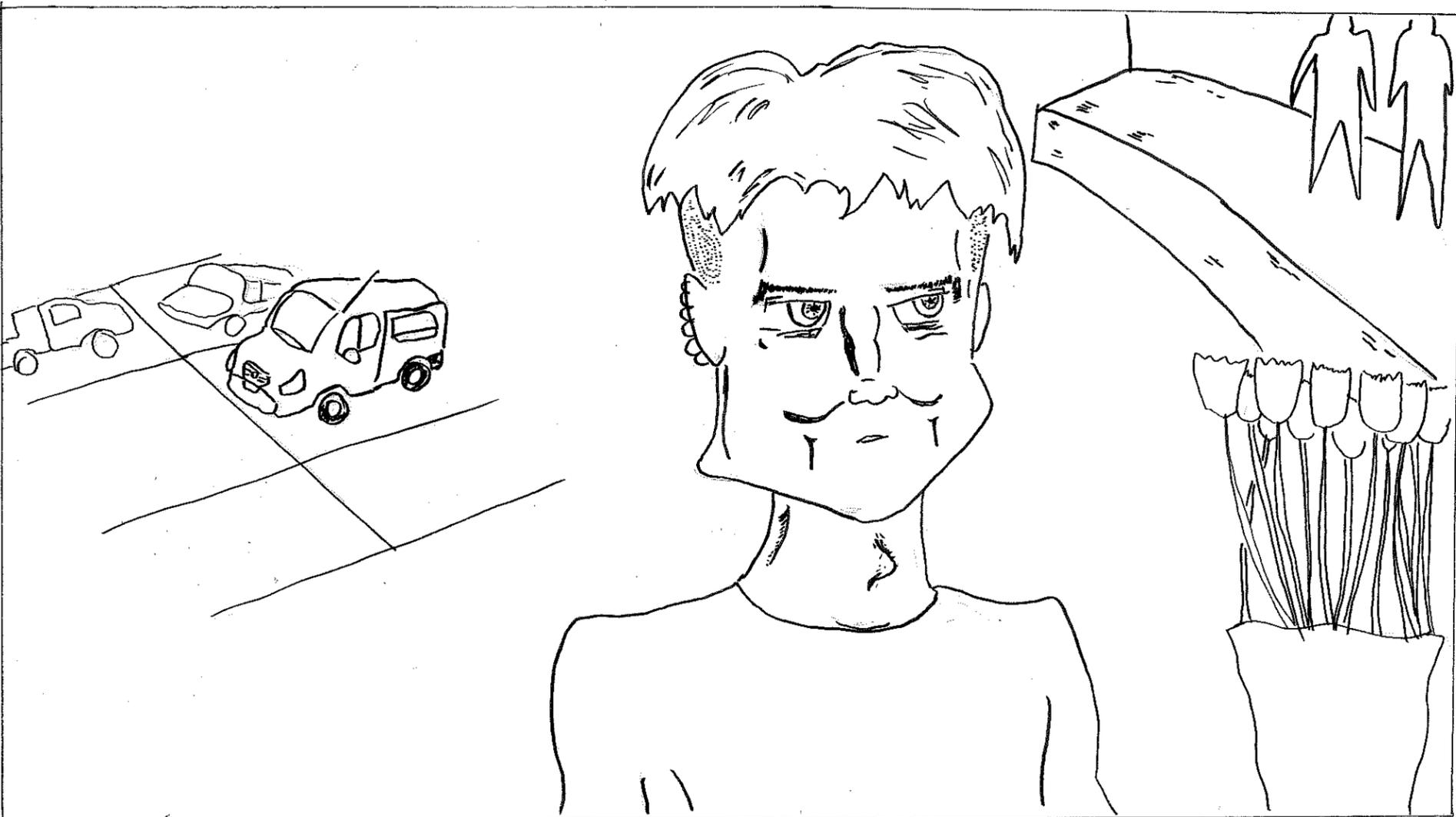
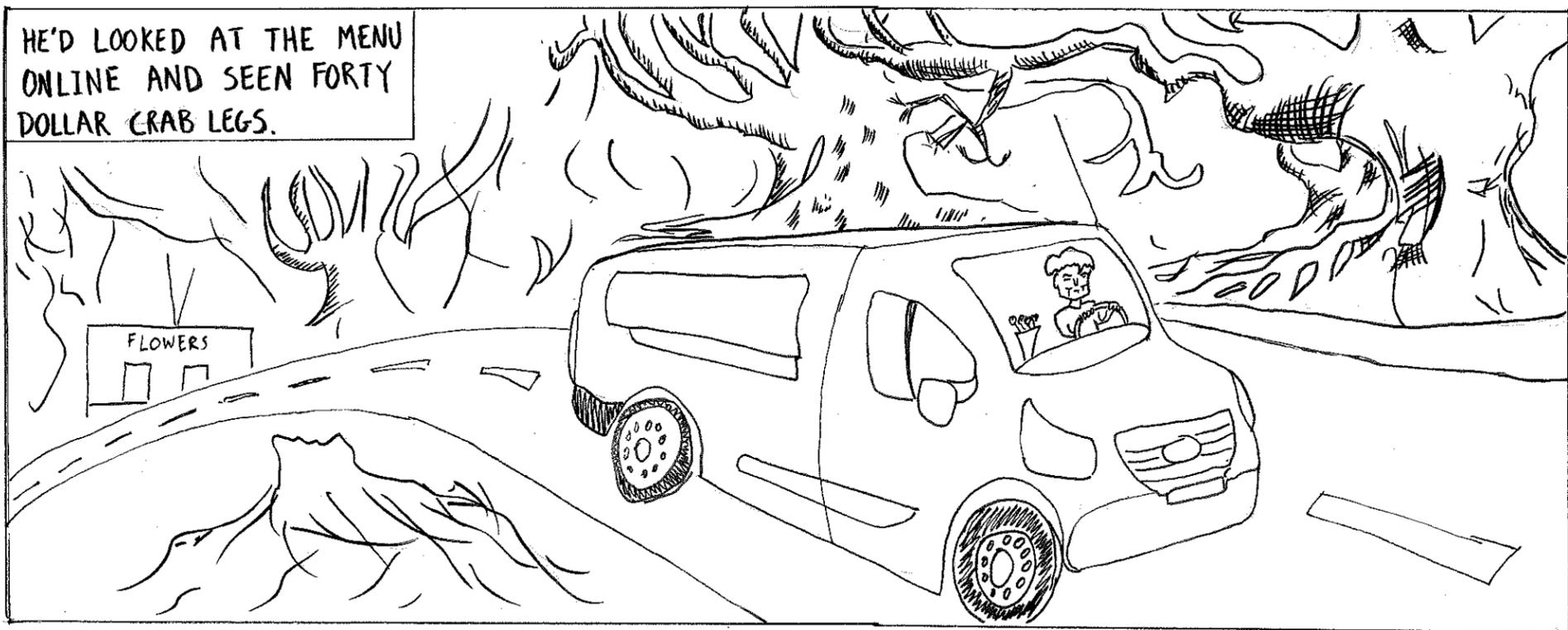
HE'D SAVED FOR A WEEK TO MAKE SURE HE'D BE ABLE TO PAY, BUT HE STILL WASN'T SURE IF HE'D HAVE ENOUGH.

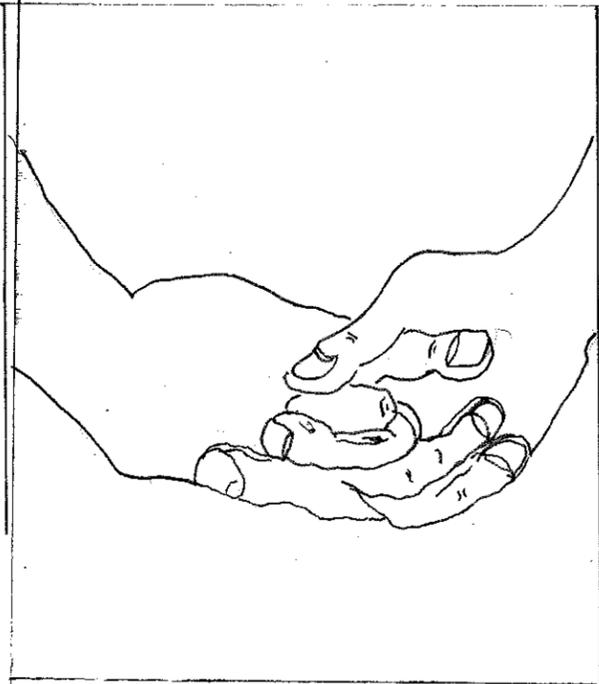


IT DEPENDED ON WHAT THEY ORDERED.



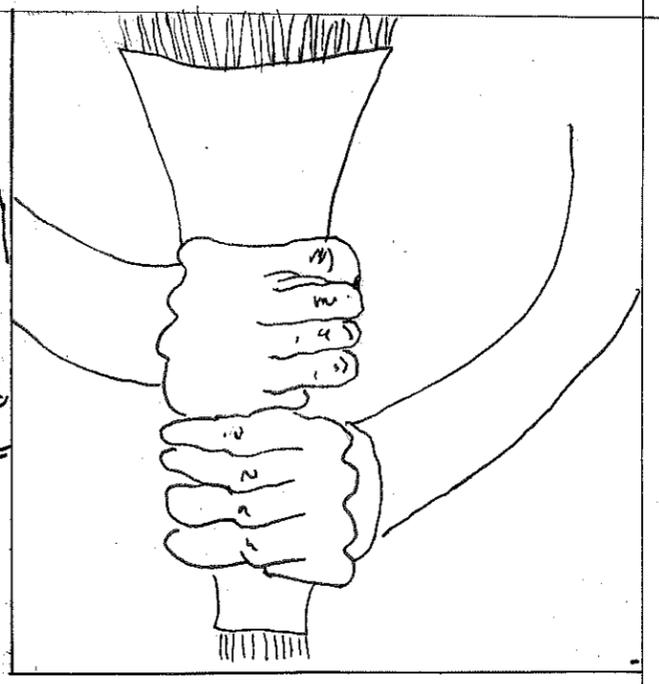
HE'D LOOKED AT THE MENU ONLINE AND SEEN FORTY DOLLAR CRAB LEGS.



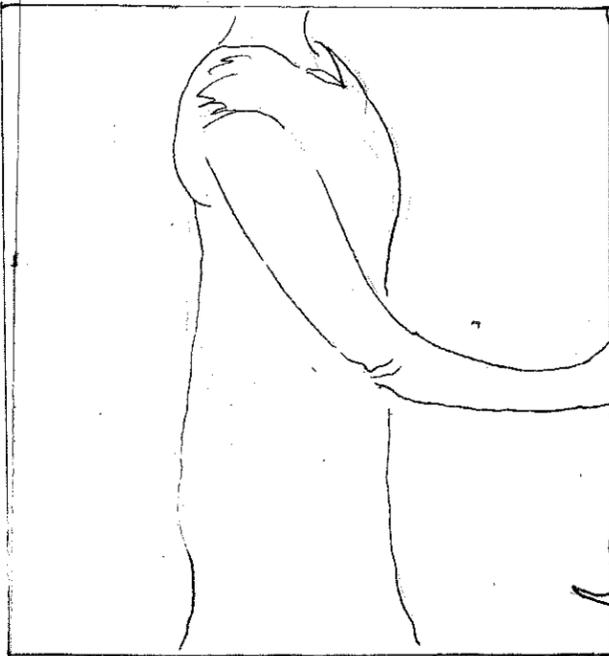


I WAS AFRAID YOU WOULDN'T SHOW UP.

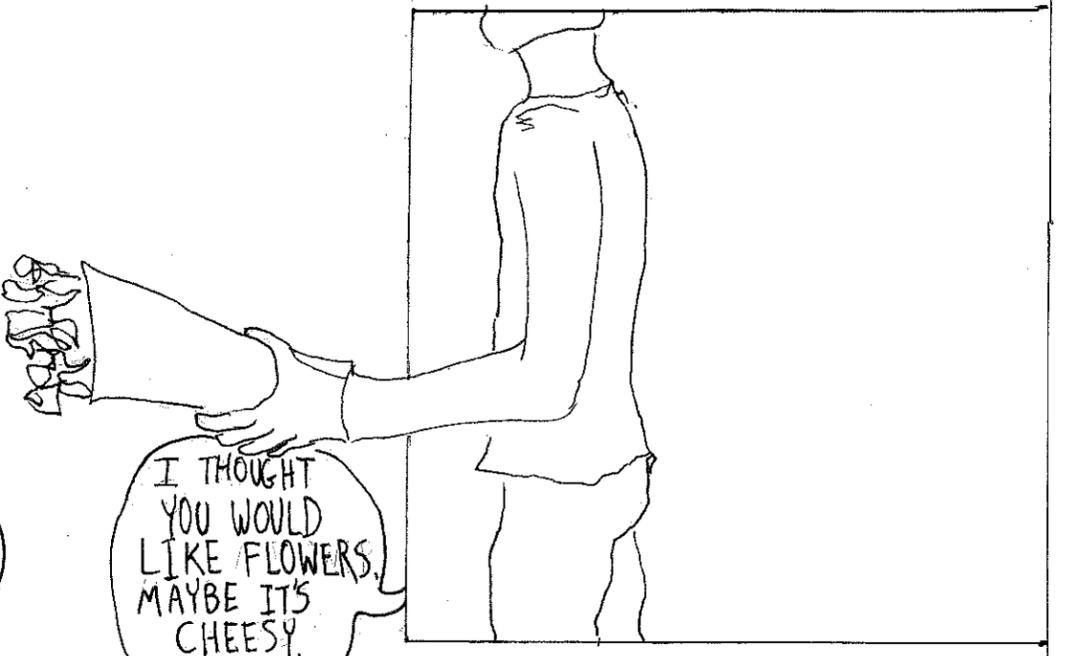
WHAT'S THIS?



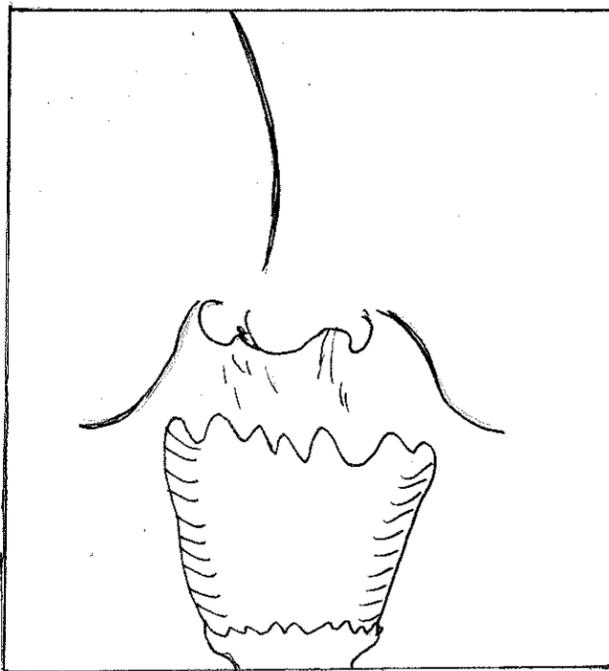
THERE WAS A LOT OF TRAFFIC COMING OUT OF MEMPHIS



AWW. THANK YOU.

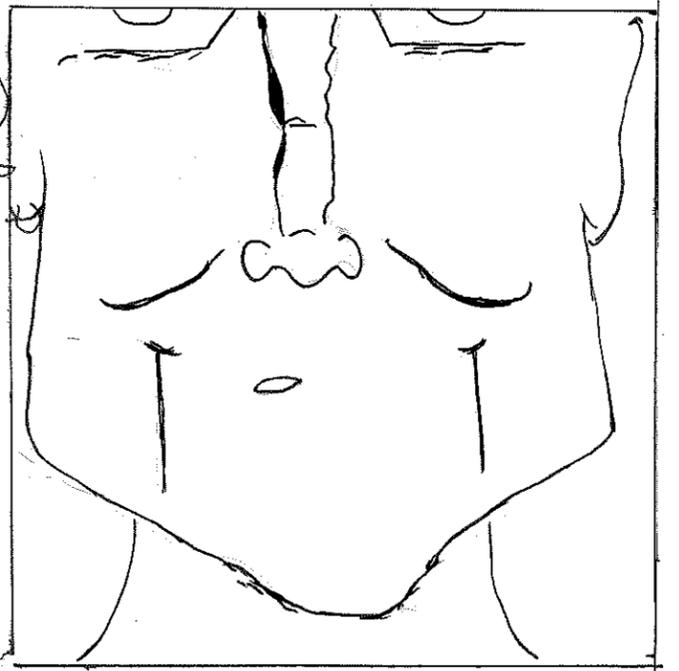


I THOUGHT YOU WOULD LIKE FLOWERS. MAYBE IT'S CHEESY.

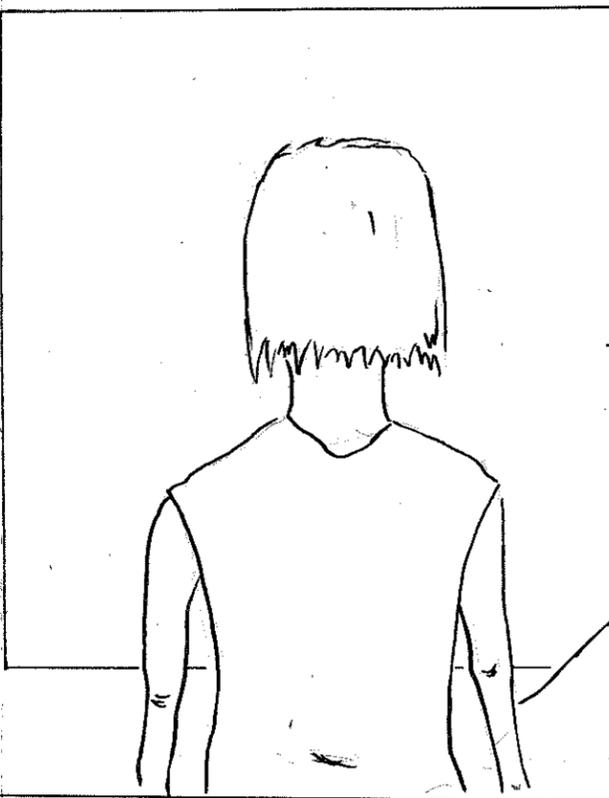


MM-HMM

ARE YOU HUNGRY?



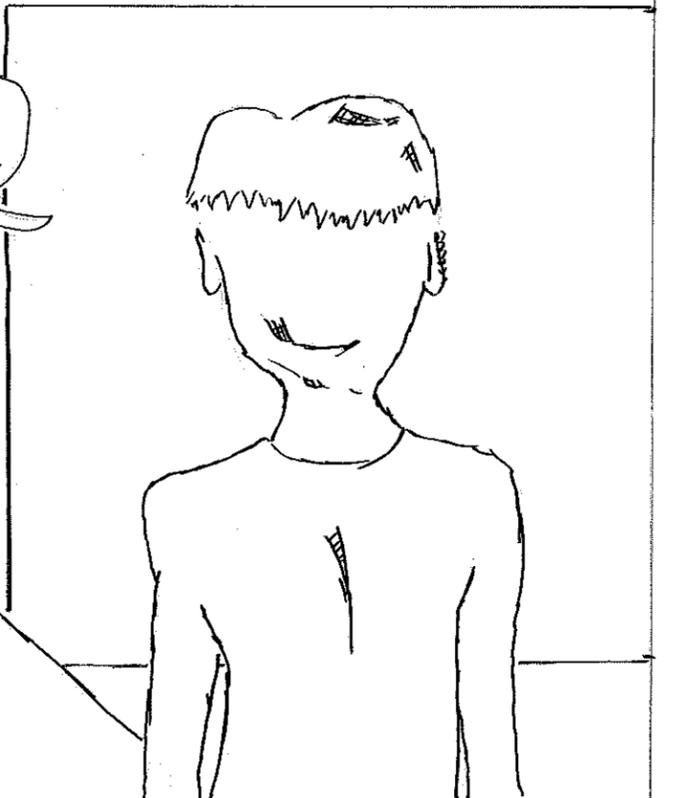
I'M SORRY, SIR. THIS RESTAURANT REQUIRES MEN WEAR A COLLARED SHIRT.

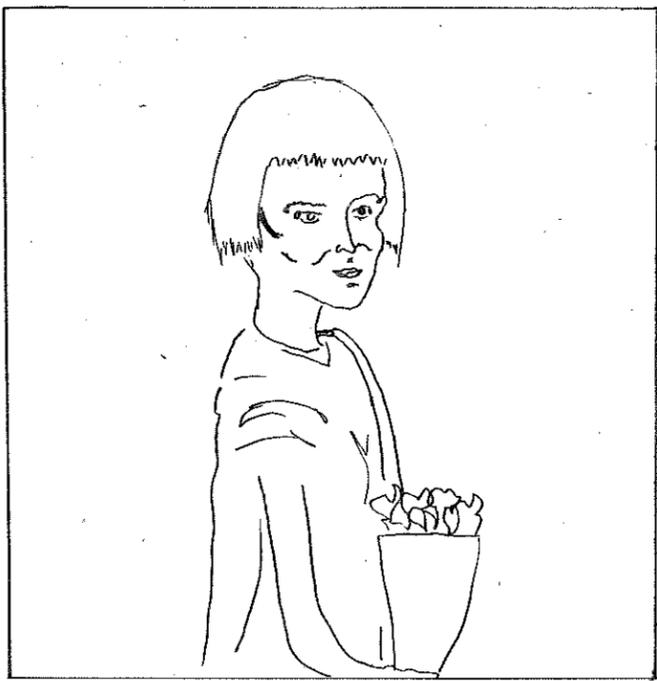
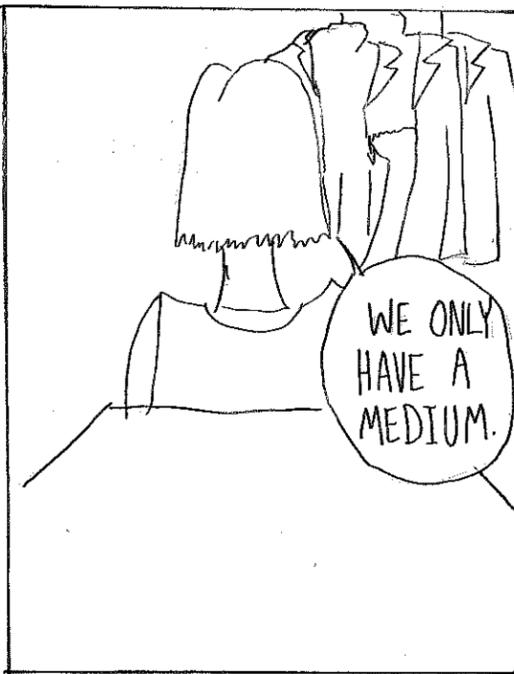
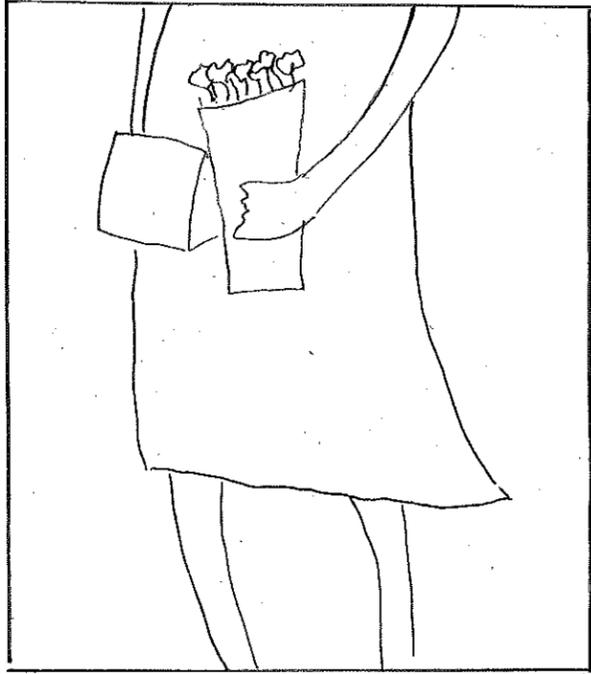
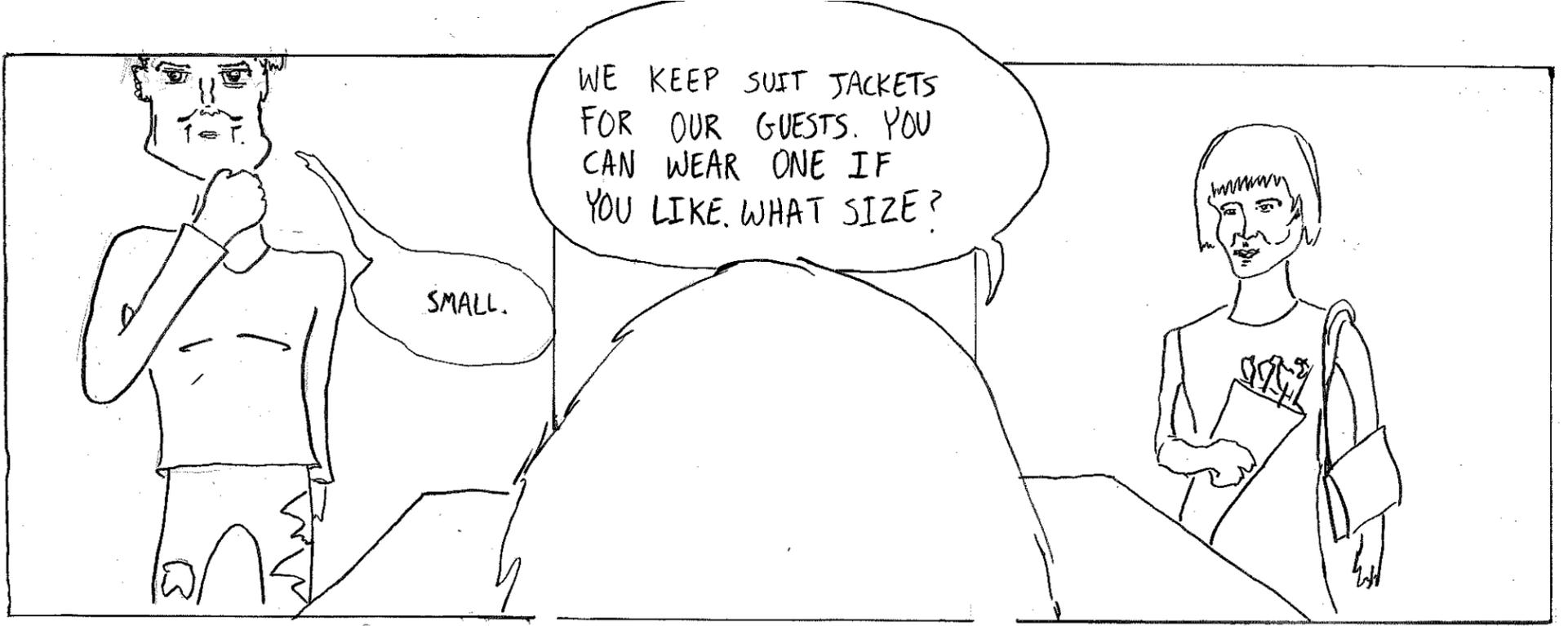


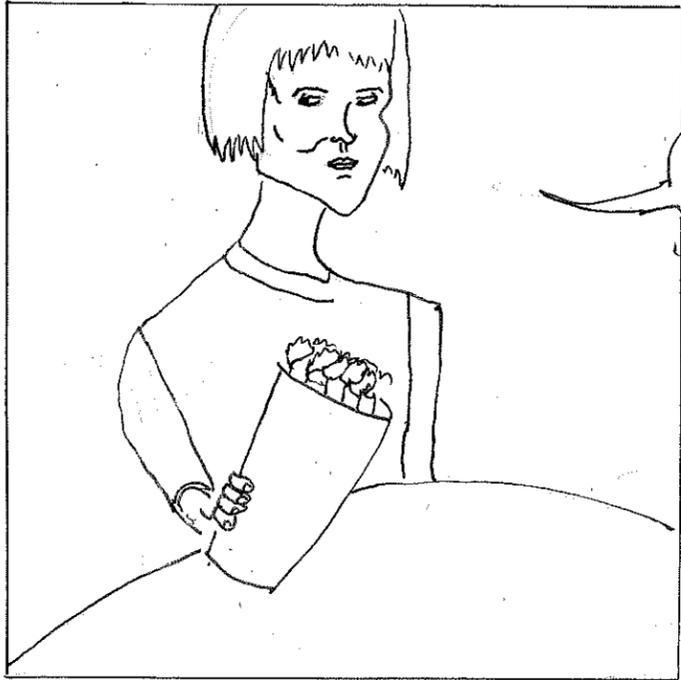
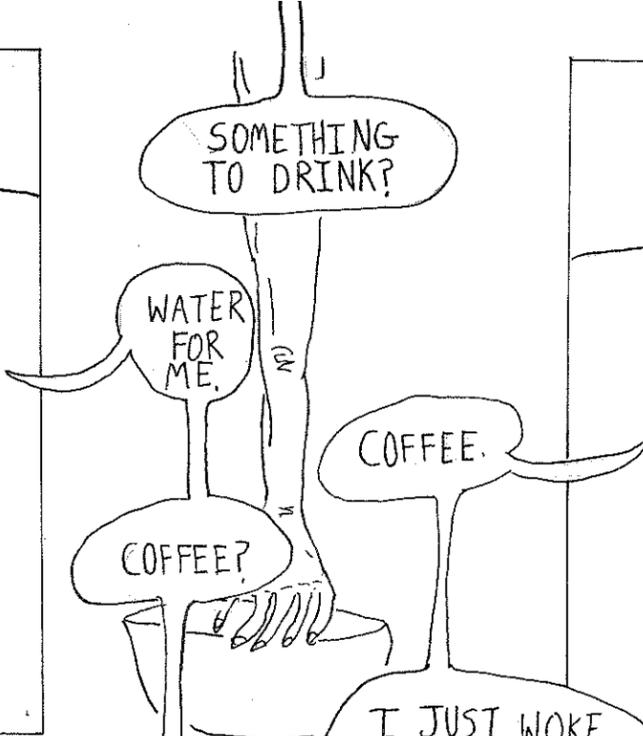
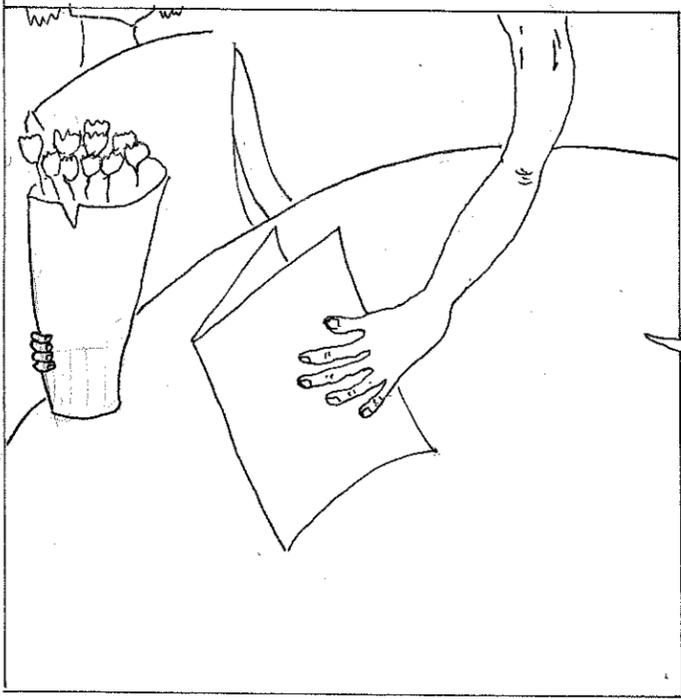
WE CAN GO SOMEWHERE ELSE.



I DON'T HAVE ONE.



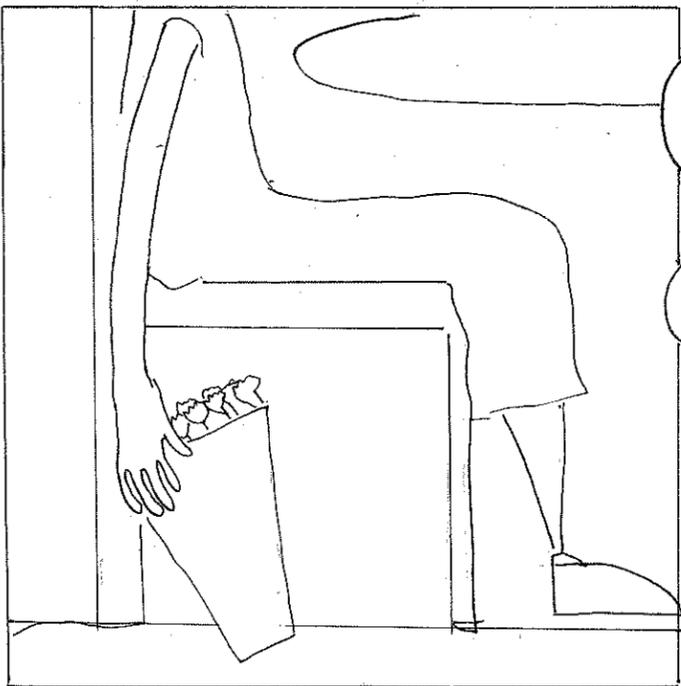
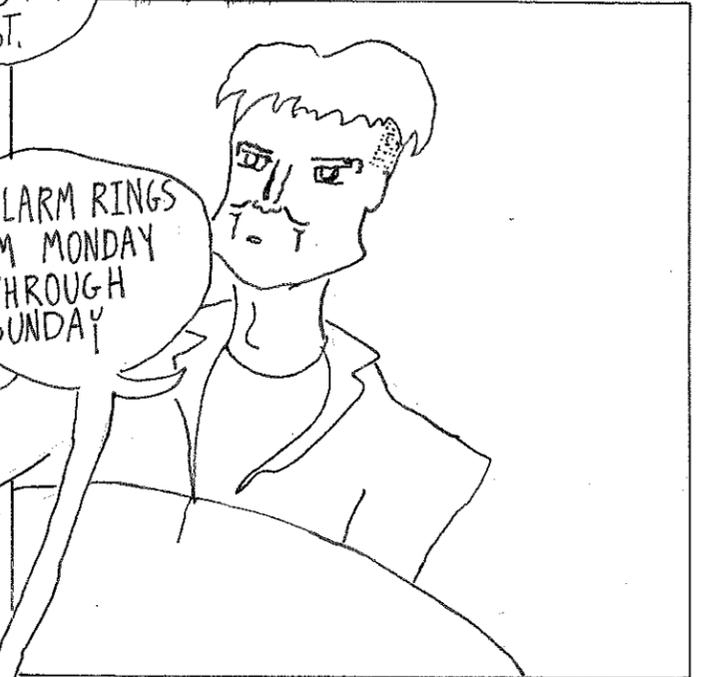




SO YOU KEEP THAT SCHEDULE EVEN ON YOUR OFF DAYS?

I JUST WOKE UP. THIS IS MY BREAKFAST.

ALARM RINGS 5PM MONDAY THROUGH SUNDAY

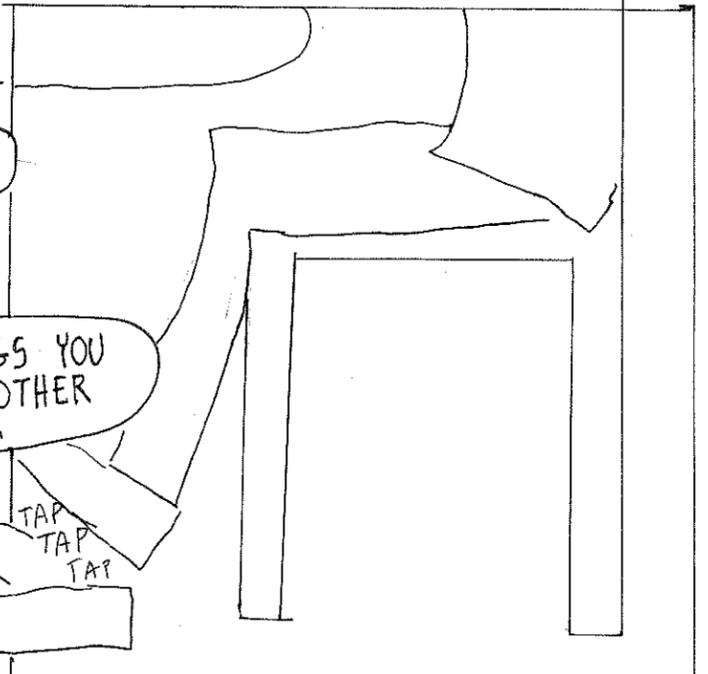


WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE WORK?

I HUNT.

WHAT CAN YOU HUNT AT NIGHT?

SAME THINGS YOU HUNT ANY OTHER TIME.



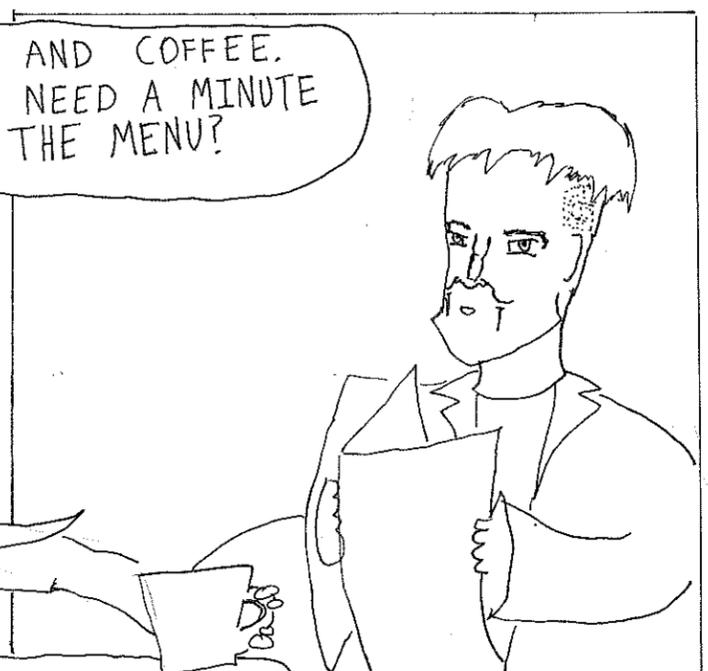
TAP TAP TAP



I THINK SO. DO YOU TAKE CREAM AT LEAST?

WATER AND COFFEE. DO YOU NEED A MINUTE WITH THE MENU?

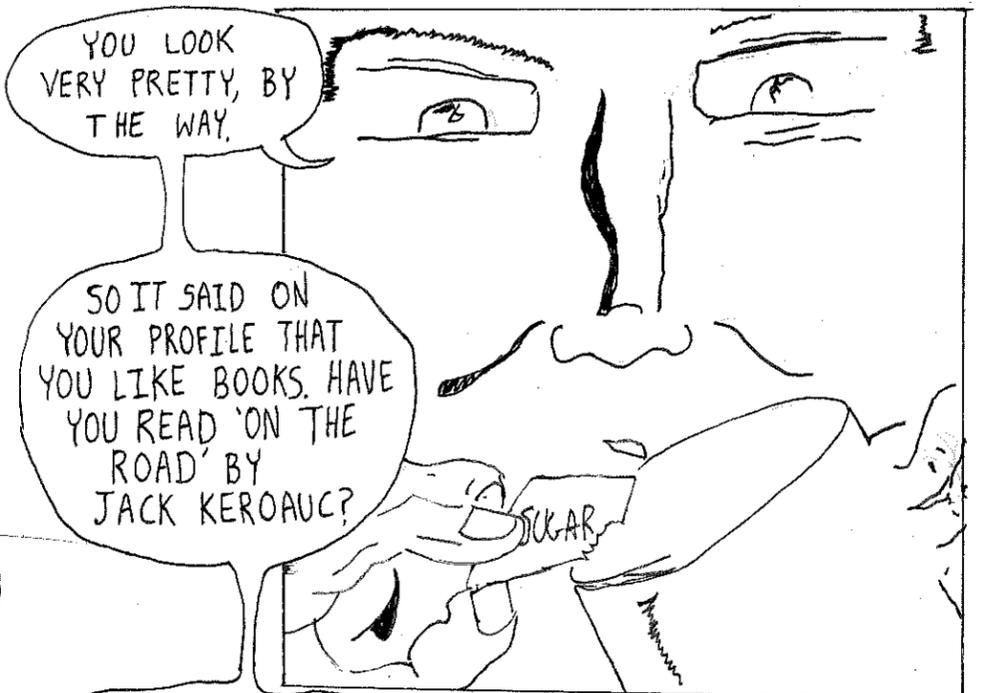
SUGAR.





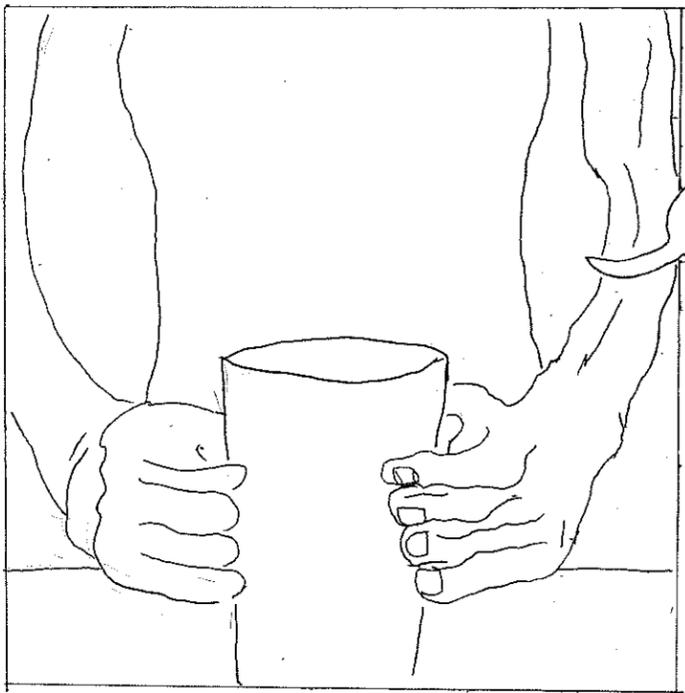
THANK YOU.

I HAVEN'T ACTUALLY, HAVE YOU?



YOU LOOK VERY PRETTY, BY THE WAY.

SO IT SAID ON YOUR PROFILE THAT YOU LIKE BOOKS. HAVE YOU READ 'ON THE ROAD' BY JACK KEROAUC?

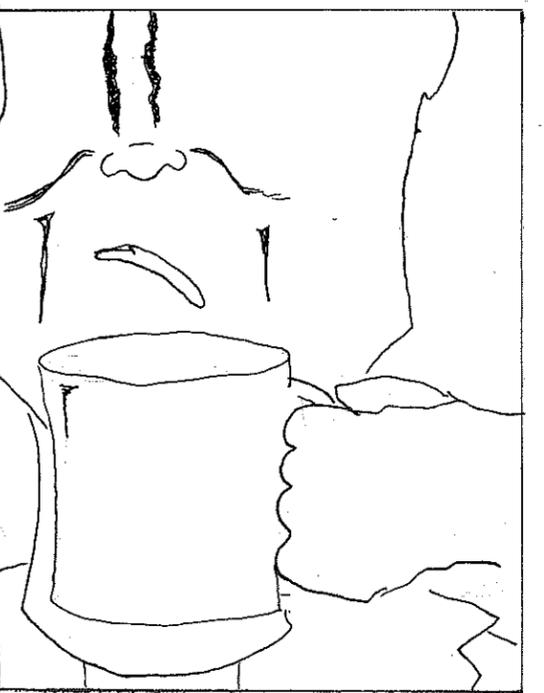


HUEY?

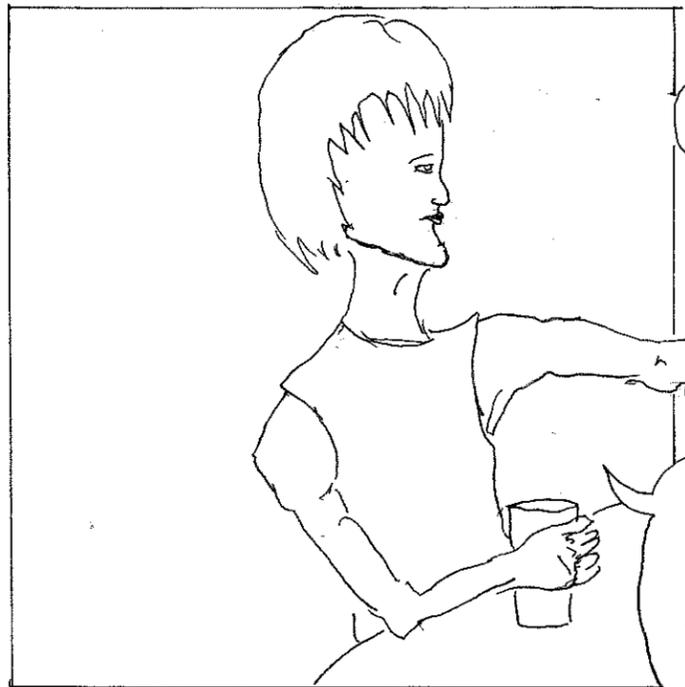
OH COOL, WHAT DO YOU PLAY?

I READ IT AT WORK SOMETIMES. A GUY NAMED HUEY RECOMMENDED IT TO ME.

I WAS IN A BAND WITH HUEY.



WELL, I WASN'T REALLY IN THE BAND. I WAS LIKE THEIR TOUR MANAGER.



WHAT BAND WAS THIS?

WHAT KIND OF MUSIC DID THEY PLAY? OR DID THEY NOT REALLY PLAY MUSIC?

THEY'RE NOT AROUND ANYMORE AND THEY DIDN'T REALLY GO ON TOUR. THEY JUST PLAYED A FEW SHOWS IN MEMPHIS.



SORRY, I'M JUST BEING A JERK.

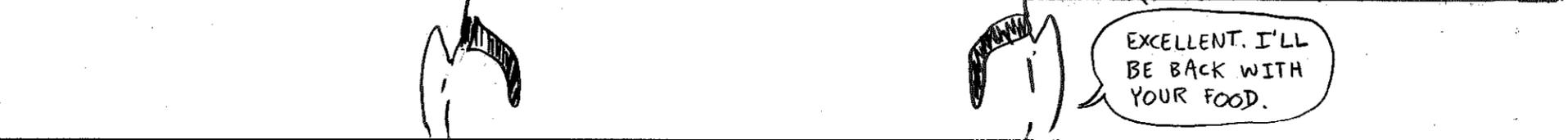
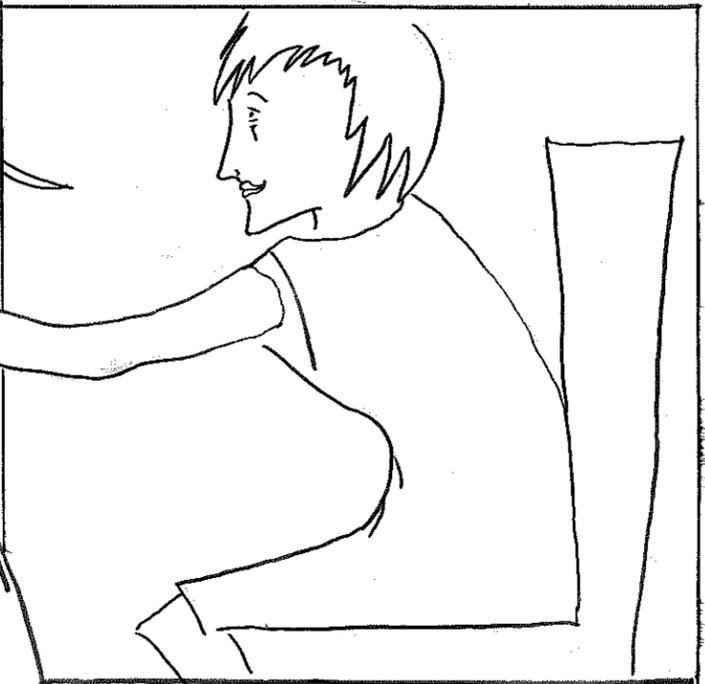
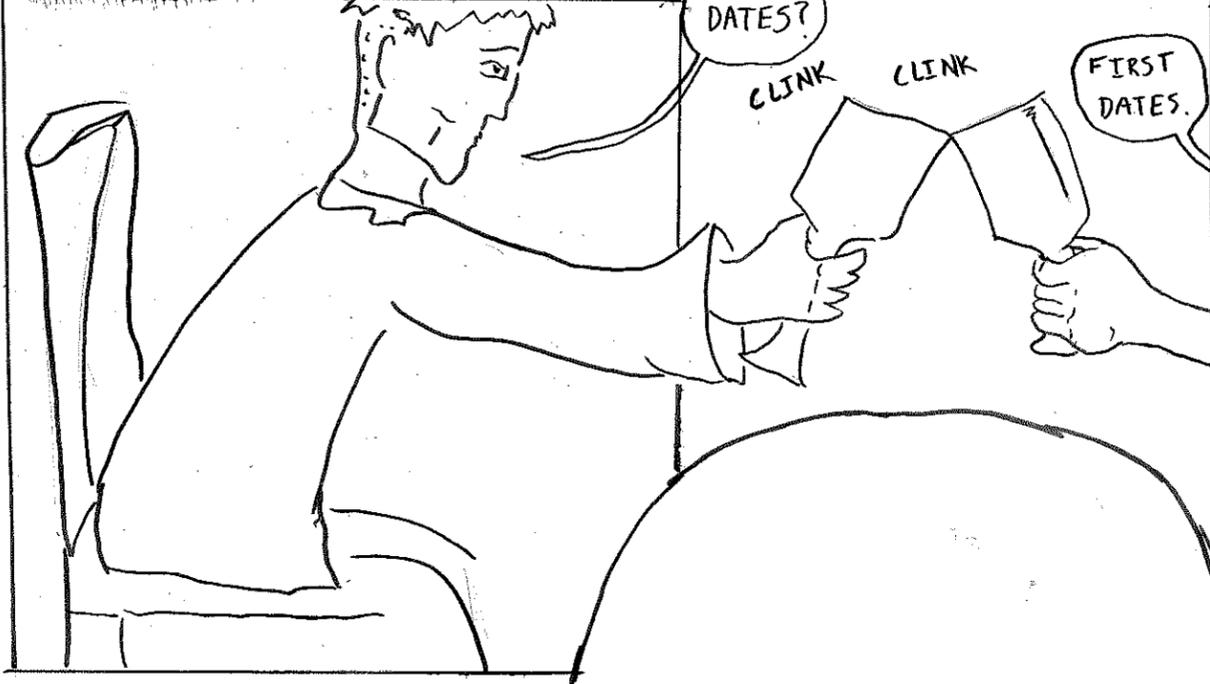
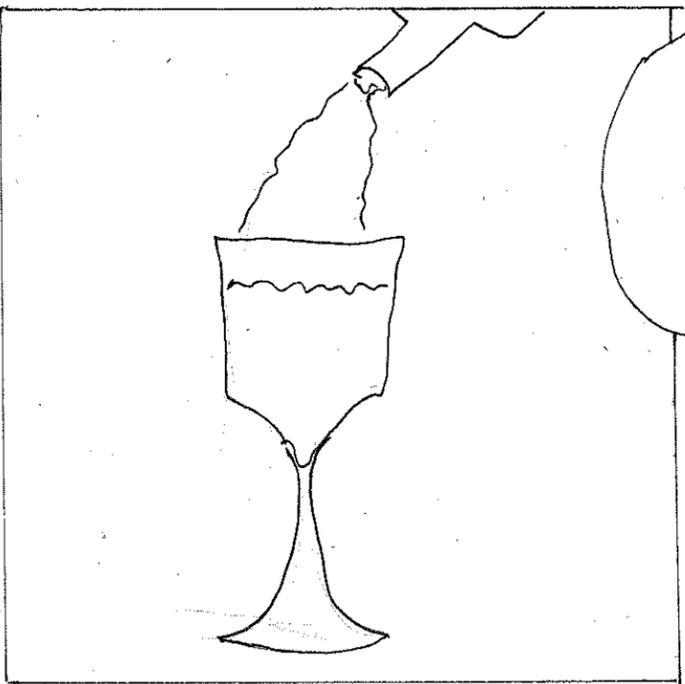
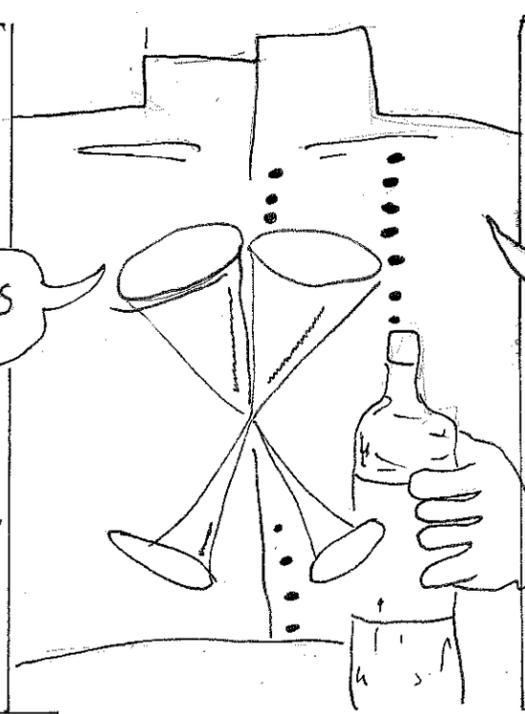
SKANK?

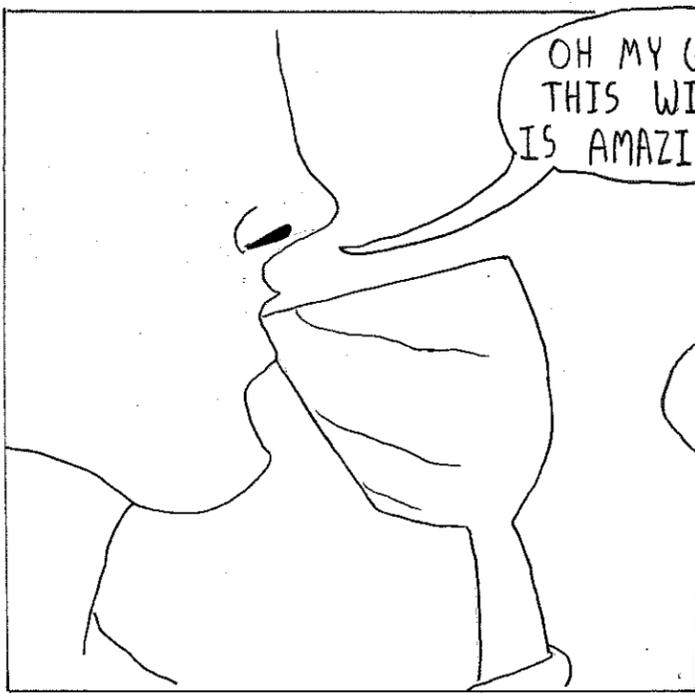
HUH?

SKANK MUSIC. THEY WERE CALLED THE CATAPULTS.

SKANKING. YOU DON'T KNOW? IT'S LIKE A DANCE.







HE'S THE HEAD
CHEF. HE OWNS
THE RESTAURANT.

THAT GUY
WAS WEIRD.

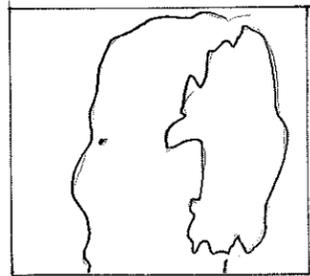
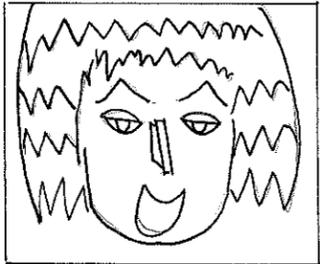
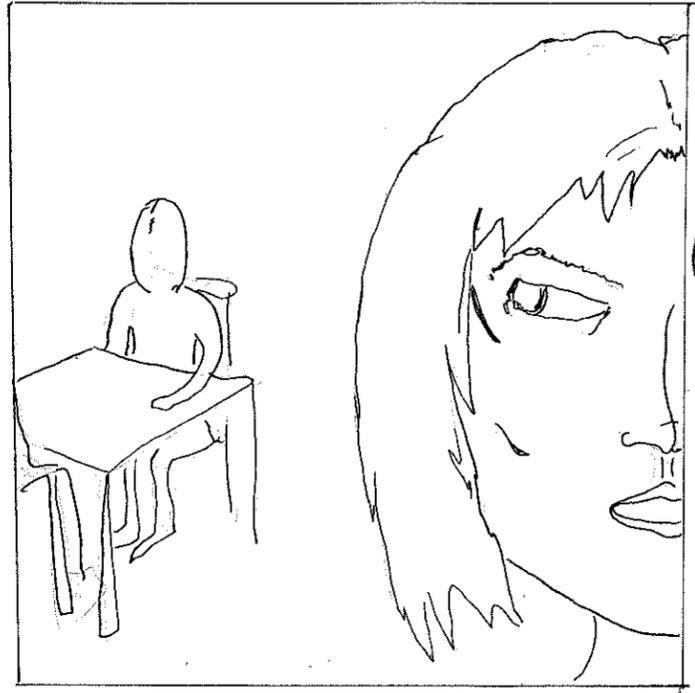
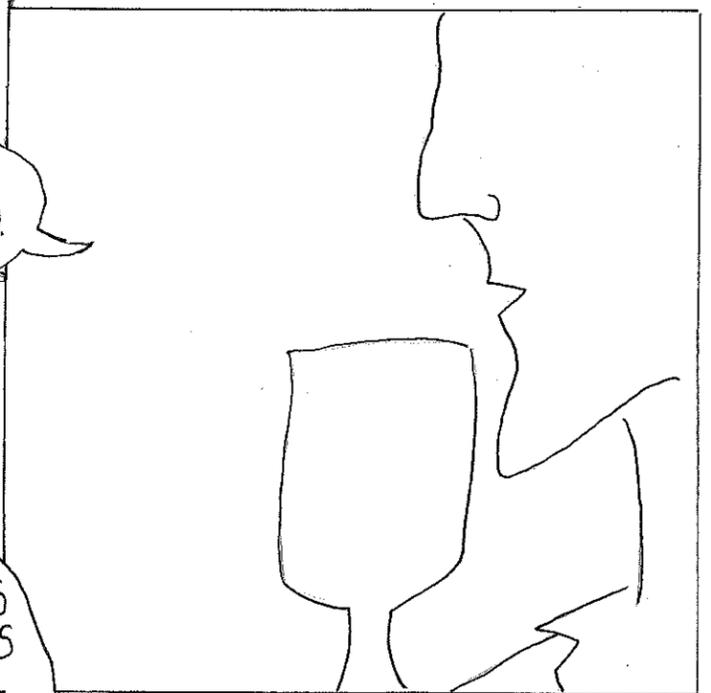
I GUESS HE WAS
RIGHT ABOUT US
BEING THE BEST-
LOOKING COUPLE.
EVERYONE ELSE
IS PRETTY
OLD.

HE DIDN'T
SAY COUPLE.

THAT'S TRUE,
PEOPLE.

THIS IS WHERE
THE ENGLISH DEP-
ARTMENT LIKES TO
EAT.

THEY'VE BEEN COMING
HERE FOR 40 YEARS.



I USED TO BE IN
THE ENGLISH PHD HERE.
COLONEL COLLEGE. THIS PLACE
IS WHY I DROPPED OUT.

NOT THE RESTAURANT.
THE FOOD IS GOOD.
JUST WHAT IT REPRESENTS.
LIVING IN THE PAST.
THE NEVER-ENDING NOSTALGIA.

HAVE YOU EVER
HEARD OF A WRITER
NAMED JOHN KENT?

NO.

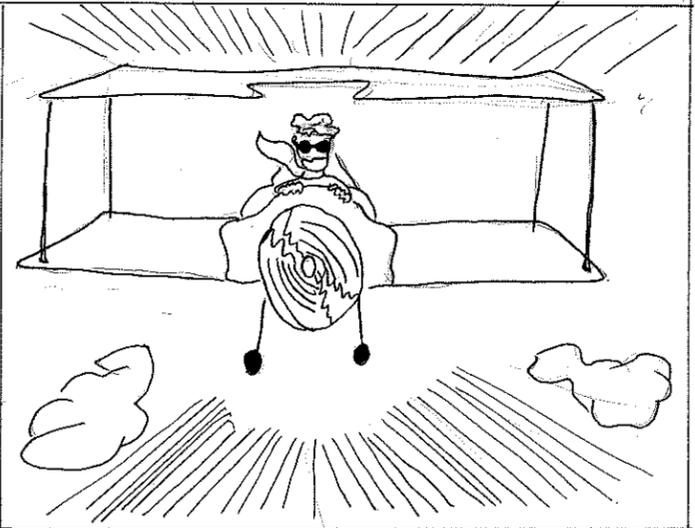




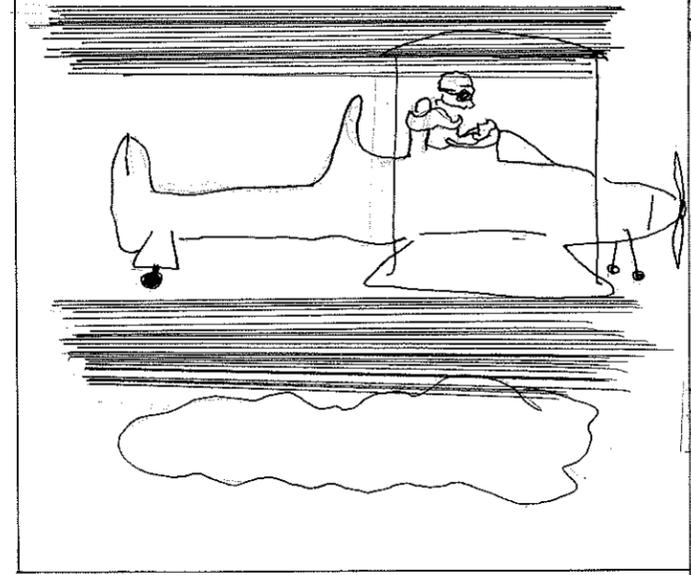
"HE WAS A FAMOUS NOVELIST WHO HAPPENED TO BE BORN IN COLONEL, MISSISSIPPI, LIKE EXTRAORDINARLY FAMOUS. HE WON THREE PULITZERS. IT'S AN AWARD YOU GET FOR WRITING BOOKS."

"I KNOW WHAT A PULITZER IS. JACK KEROUAC WON ONE."

"NO, HE DIDN'T. BUT ANYWAYS. IT WAS A TOTAL JOKE THAT HE WOULD COME BACK HERE TO TEACH. THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT HAS A PRETTY GOOD REPUTATION NOW, BUT BACK THEN THEY DIDN'T EVEN HAVE AN ENGLISH DEPARTMENT. THEY HAD SOMETHING CALLED 'THE CENTER FOR LITERARY & RHETORICAL ARTS.'"



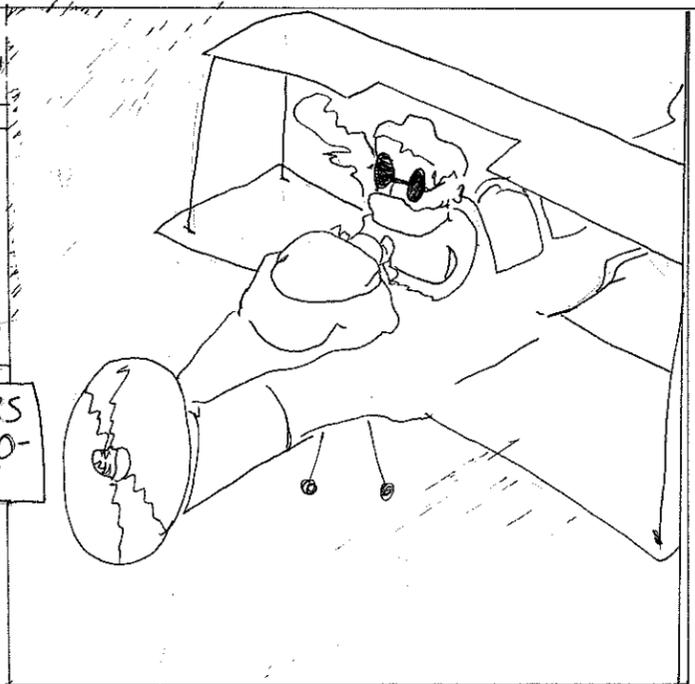
"PERSONALLY, I THINK HE WAS WORKING ON A NOVEL SATIRIZING ALL OF US, AND HE CAME BACK TO COLONEL TO COLLECT ANECDOTES. A LITTLE 'LOCAL COLOR.'"



"HE ATE AT THIS RESTAURANT AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK, WHO GOT TO SIT AT HIS TABLE WAS A SUBJECT OF MUCH VERBAL SPARRING IN THE CENTER FOR LITERARY & RHETORICAL ARTS."

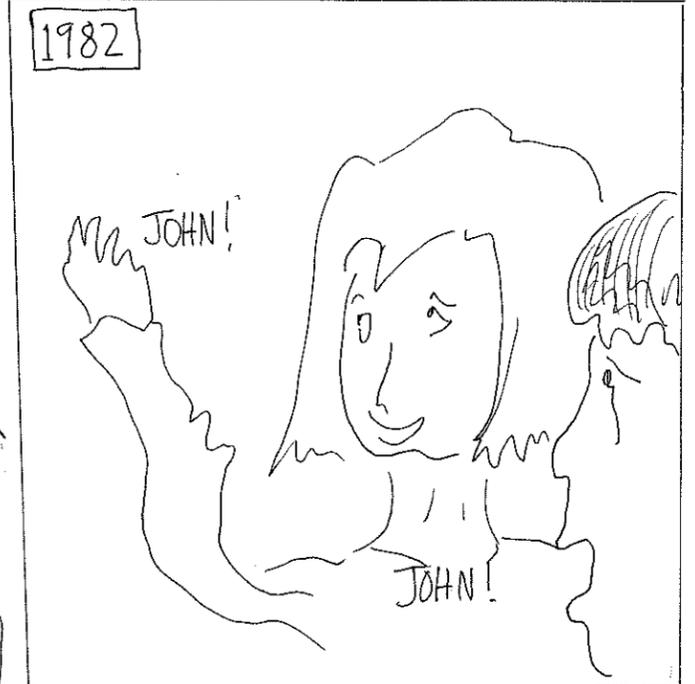
"I GUESS THE WINNERS WERE THE FOUR PEOPLE OVER THERE?"

"THAT'S RIGHT."



JOHN!

JOHN!



JOHN!

JOHN!

THEY KNEW JOHN KENT ONE YEAR AND THEY STILL COME HERE, SIT AT THE SAME TABLE, EVERY FRIDAY NIGHT, FOR FORTY YEARS.



THEY ENJOY IMAGINING THEY'RE IN JOHN KENT'S COMPANY.



WOW. THAT'S KIND OF...

PATHETIC?

MAYBE A LITTLE, I WAS GOING TO SAY SAD, BUT IF THEY ENJOY EACH OTHER'S COMPANY, I GUESS IT'S A GOOD THING.





"HE KEPT A BI-PLANE ON A LITTLE AIRFIELD RIGHT DOWN THE STREET FROM HERE."

"WHEN HE WASN'T TEACHING OR WRITING, HE FLEW."

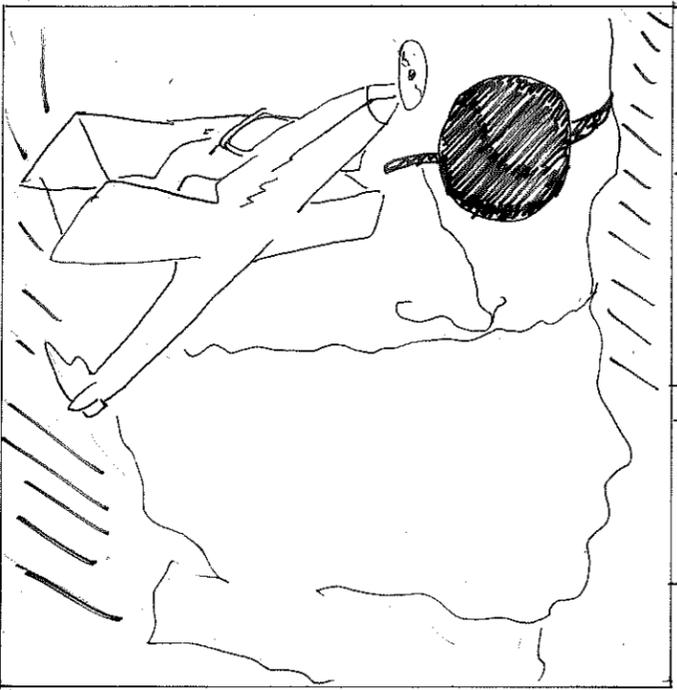
"SOMETIMES HE CAME INTO THE RESTAURANT AT ODD HOURS AND THE CHEF WOULD COOK HIM SOMETHING SPECIAL BEFORE HE WENT UP IN THE AIR."



"NOVEMBER 5, 11 PM, HE ATE SOME GOOD FOOD, DRANK A FEW GLASSES OF WINE, AND DROVE OUT TO THE AIRFIELD."

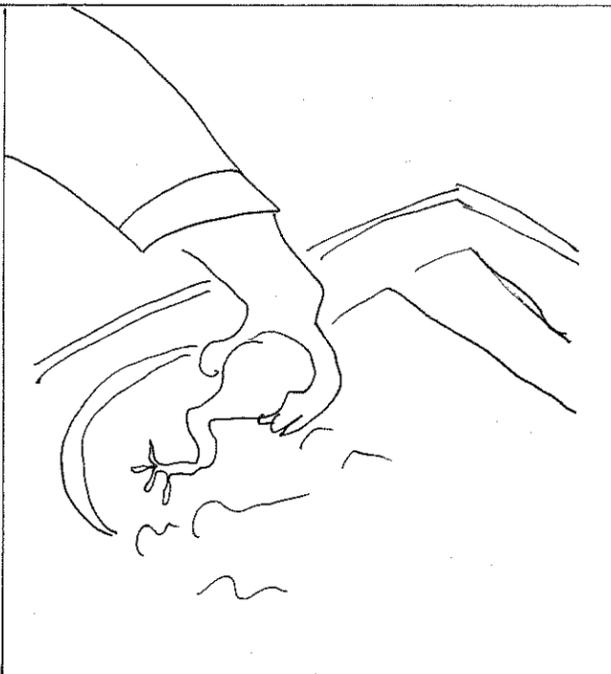
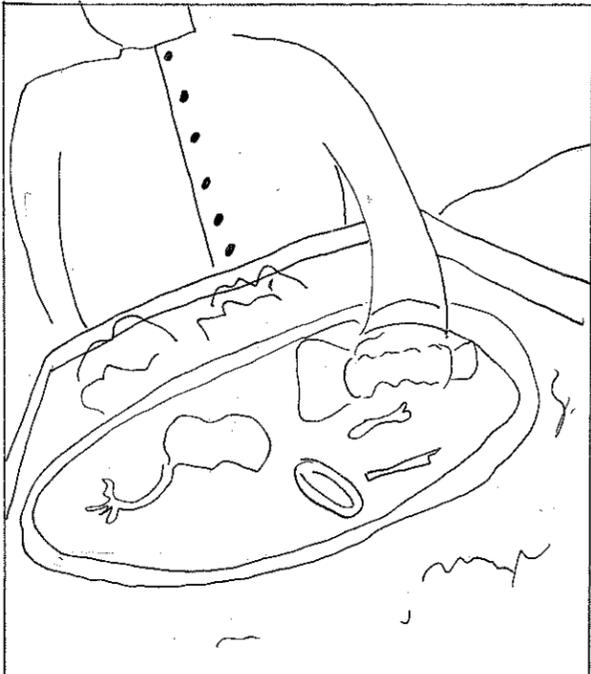
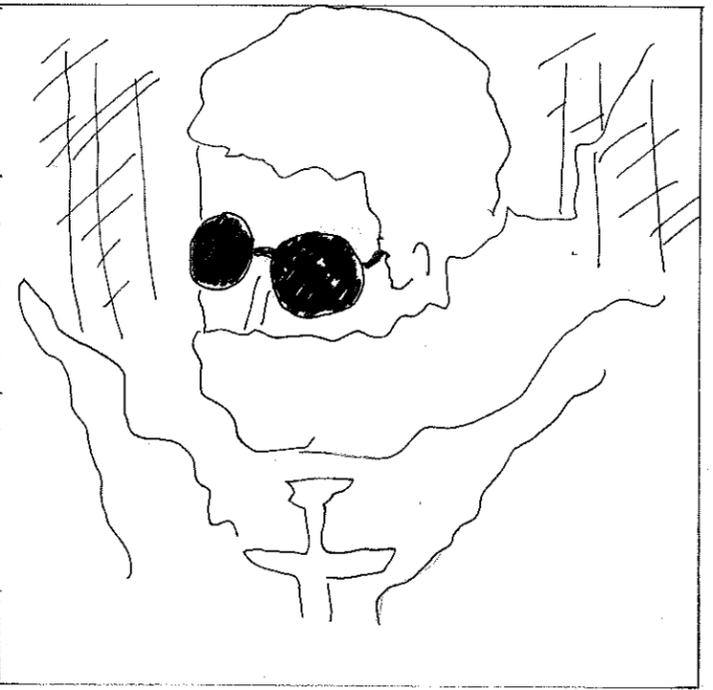
"THE FLIGHT RECORDS SAY HE TOOK OFF AT MIDNIGHT EXACTLY."

"THE PLANE WENT DOWN AROUND 12:50 AM."

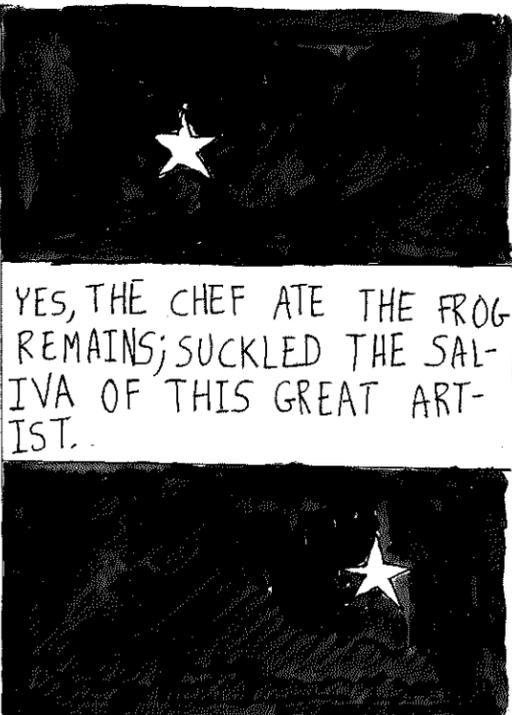
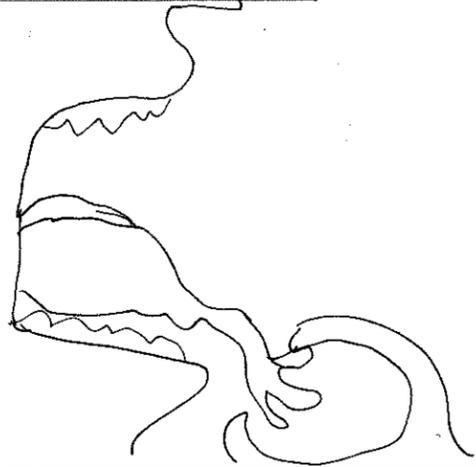


"BY THAT POINT, THE CHEF WAS THE ONLY PERSON STILL HERE."

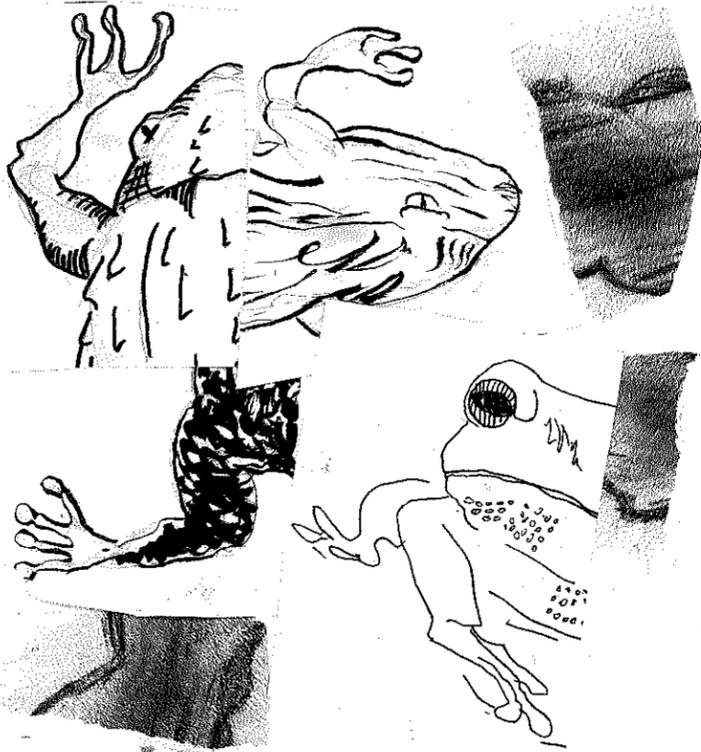
"HE'D FINISHED WITH THE FROG LEGS AND WAS WASHING JOHN'S PLATE."



EVEN THOUGH LAUREN HAD WRITTEN ABOUT THIS FOR HER DISSERTATION, IT WAS STILL DIFFICULT TO EXPLAIN.



YES, THE CHEF ATE THE FROG REMAINS; SUCKLED THE SALIVA OF THIS GREAT ARTIST.



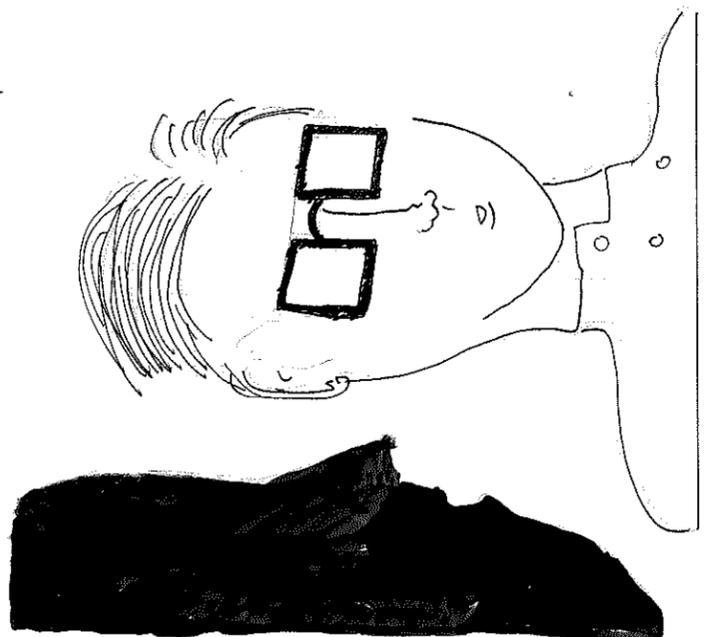
HE SORT OF FUSED WITH JOHN KENT'S SPIRIT.

WHAT?



THE CHEF SAID THAT WHEN HE ATE THE FROG LEG, HE WAS TRANSPORTED INTO A KIND OF ASTRAL PLANE, A SUSPENDED PURGATORY, DARK AND HEAVILY WOODED.

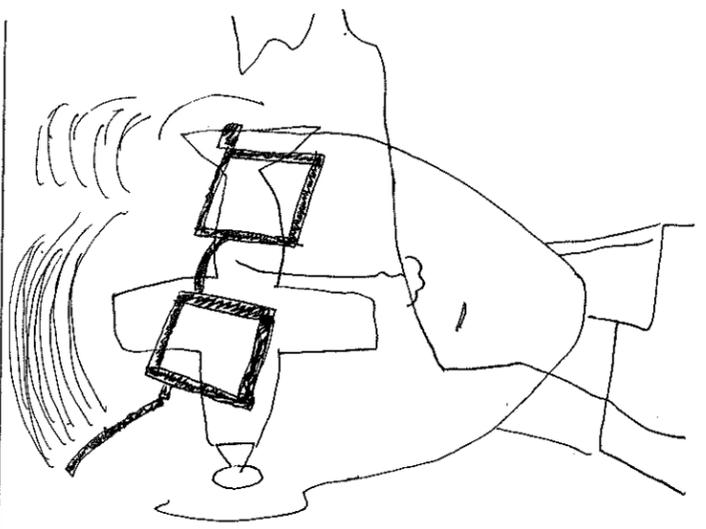
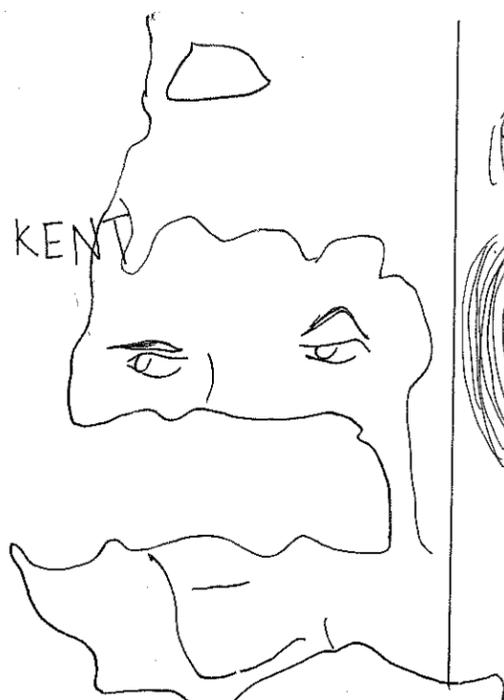
HE LAID ON HIS BACK STARING UP AT THE BLACK STARLESSNESS, AND WHEN HE TURNED HIS HEAD HE SAW THE PROFILE OF JOHN KENT'S DEPARTING SPIRIT.



THEN A BEAST EMERGED FROM THE WOODS AND DRAGGED



JOHN KENT



AWAY

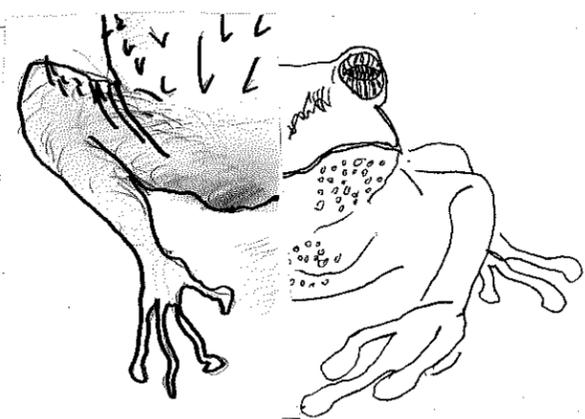


WHEN HE TOOK THE FROG OUT OF HIS MOUTH, THE HALLUCINATION STOPPED.

WHY DID HE CHEW ON A HALF-EATEN FROG LEG TO BEGIN WITH?



AS A WAY OF, I DON'T KNOW, TASTING GREATNESS? THEY WORSHIPPED JOHN KENT.



MAYBE IT WAS A POISONOUS TREE FROG GOT SNUCK IN THERE?

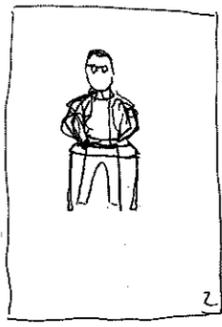
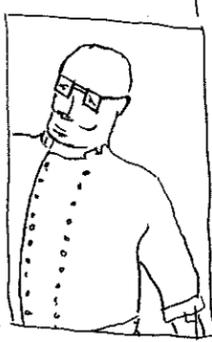
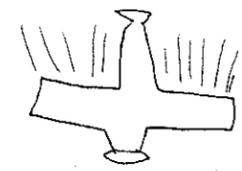
SOMETHING TO MAKE YOU SEE VISIONS WHEN YOU SUCK THEIR LEGS

YEAH, MAYBE.

TREE FROG, THAT WAS A DUMB THING TO SAY.

THE CHEF WENT OUTSIDE AFTER THAT. HE COULD SEE THE SMOKE FROM JOHN KENT'S PLANE IN THE WOODS BEHIND THE RESTAURANT.

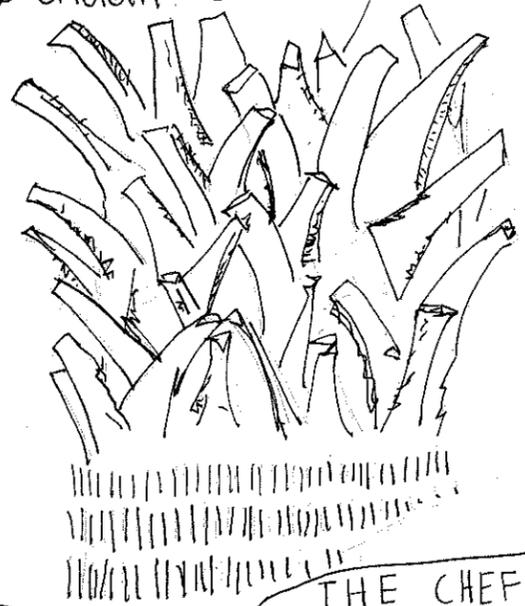
SOMEHOW, HE JUST KNEW THE TRUTH.

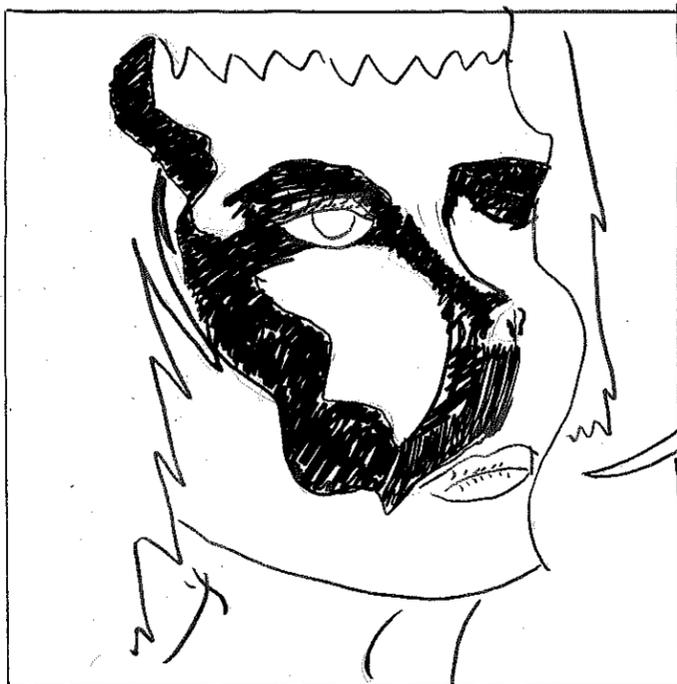


THE HUNGER ARTIST

Written & Illustrated

by
Brendan Steffen

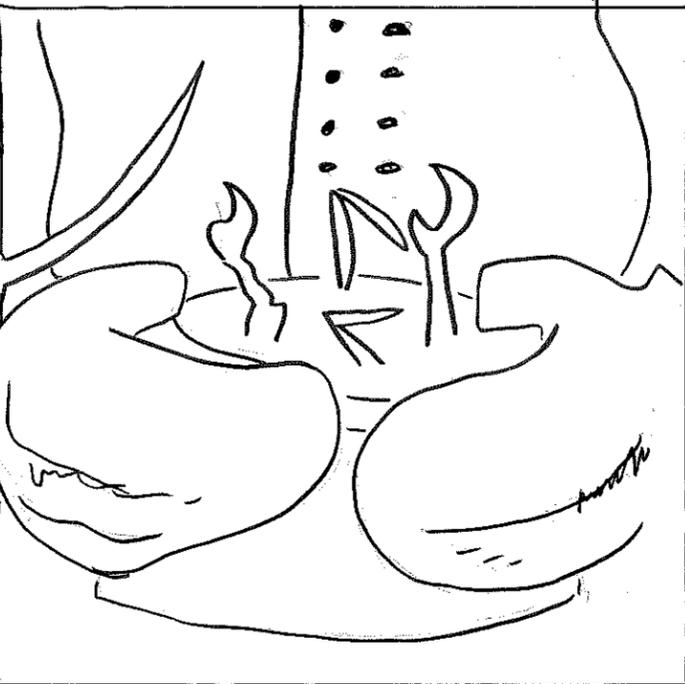




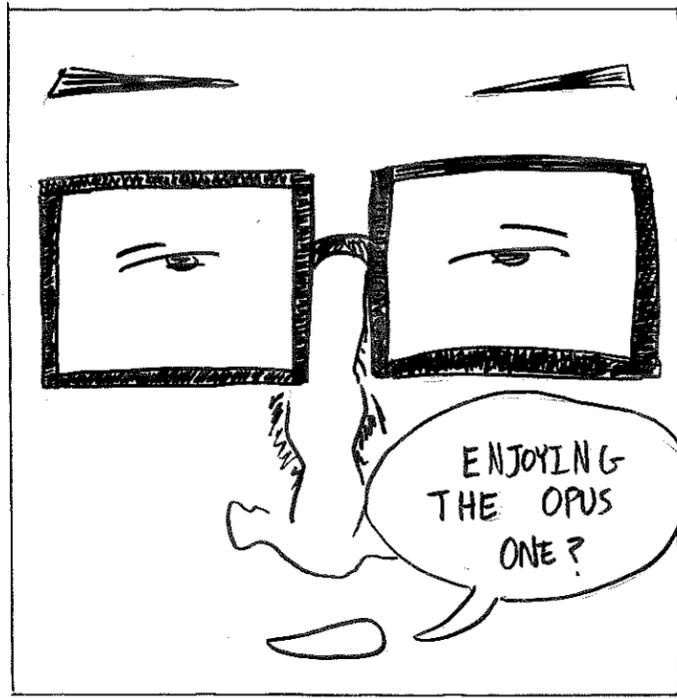
THE CHEF BROUGHT THEIR FOOD, A DOZEN CRAB LEGS IN A CROQUE POT.

WOW.

CAREFUL, IT'S HOT.

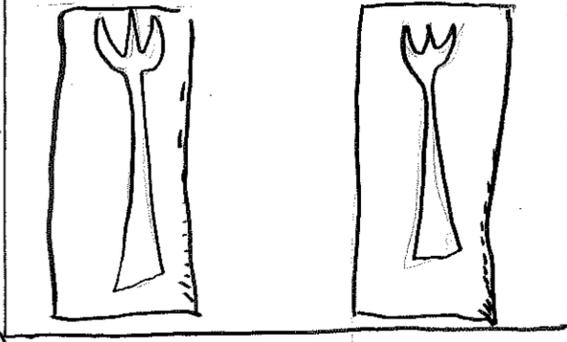


HE LOVED COOKING FOR YOUNG COUPLES, FIRST DATES, THE WAY A GOOD MEAL BROUGHT THEM CLOSER.



ENJOYING THE OPUS ONE?

PLUS, HE'D SEEN THIS GIRL BEFORE.



SEVERAL TIMES, IN FACT. SHE USED TO BE A REGULAR AT JOHN KENT'S TABLE. A PROMISING GRADUATE STUDENT, IF HE RECALLED.



IT'S DELICIOUS.



THANK YOU SO MUCH, SIR.

THE BOY WAS NEW. HE SOUNDED TOO RURAL TO BE A TOWNY, THOUGH HIS ACCENT ALSO HELD A LYRICAL QUALITY, A SELF-AWARE LILT.



IT'S GOOD.

THEY CALLED COLONEL 'THE VELVET DITCH', AND THE GIRL WAS CERTAINLY A DITCH-DWELLER, A HANGER-ON, SOMEONE WHO'D GRADUATED OR DROPPED OUT OR INDEFINITELY POSTPONED THEIR DEGREE.



GUESS I SHOULD GIVE THIS JACKET BACK.

THESE PEOPLE REFUSED TO MOVE ON, TO LEAVE COLONEL, TOO CHARMED BY THE TOWN'S LITERARY QUAINNESS, ITS ASSOCIATION WITH GREAT ART, JOHN KENT.



MY CAR'S PARKED OVER THERE.

UGH. THOSE ARE THE PROFESSORS. THEY ALWAYS DILLY-DALLY.

WHEN THE YOUNG COUPLE ASKED FOR THE CHECK, THE CHEF TOLD THEM THERE WAS NO CHARGE.



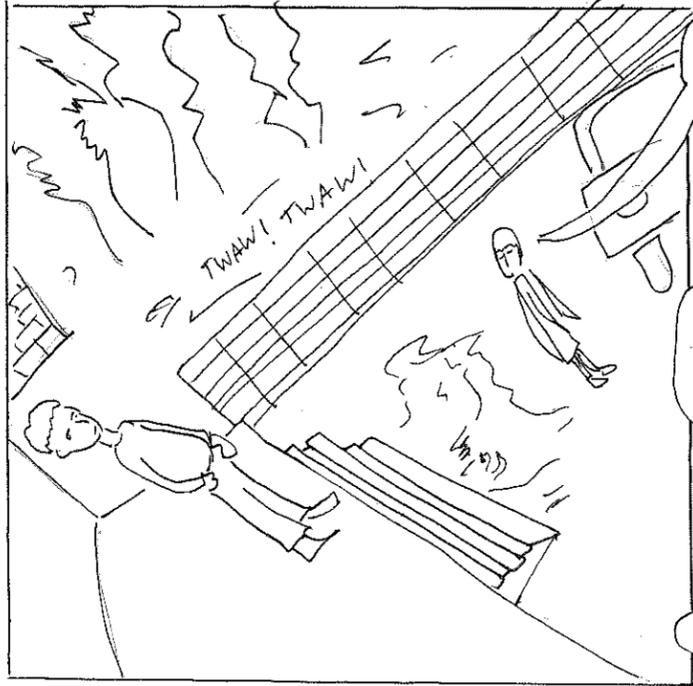
SO.



WE CAN GO BACK TO MY PLACE, BUT WE'RE NOT GOING TO HAVE SEX. IS THAT OK?



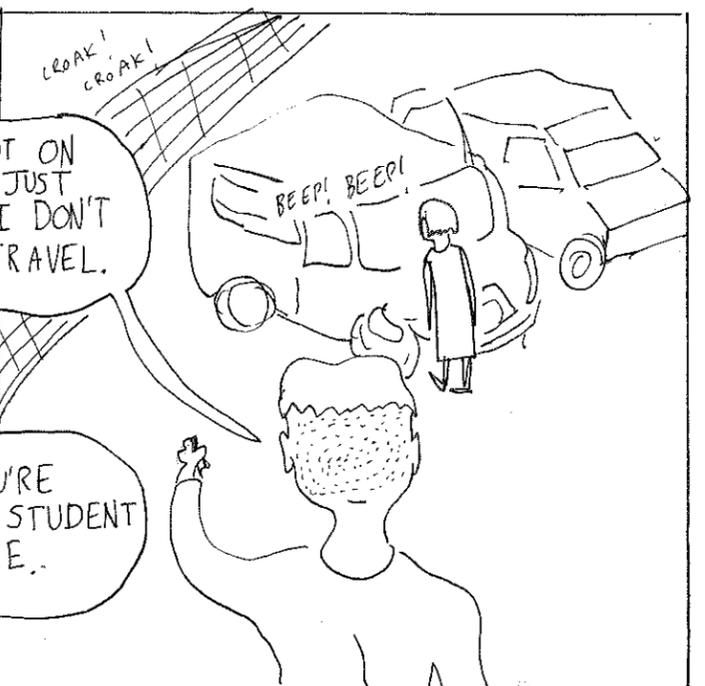
THAT'S COOL. I WASN'T EXPECTING ANYTHING. IT'S NICE JUST HANGING OUT. I NEVER GET TO DO ANYTHING. THIS IS MY FIRST TIME OUTSIDE OF TENNESSEE, ACTUALLY.



IS THAT BECAUSE YOU'RE ON PROBATION?

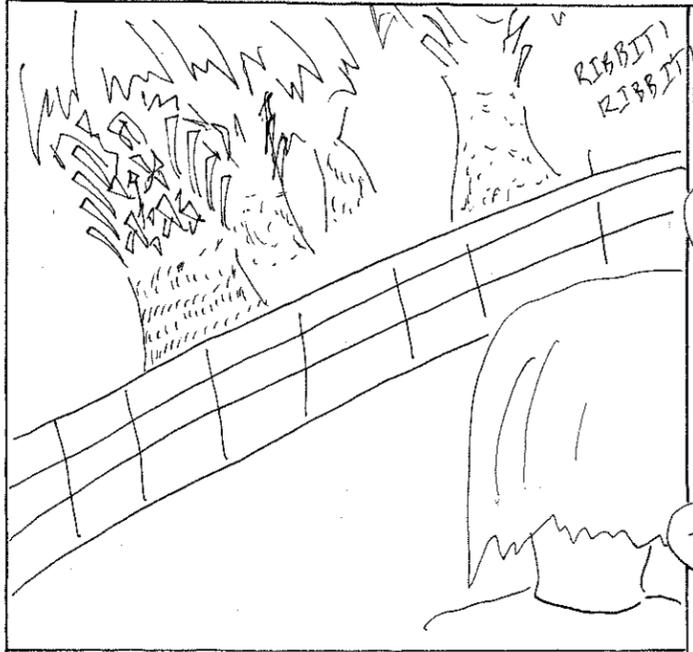
YOU CAN FOLLOW ME. I LIVE RIGHT ON CAMPUS.

RIGHT.



NO I'M NOT ON THAT. IT'S JUST BECAUSE I DON'T REALLY TRAVEL.

BUT YOU'RE NOT A STUDENT ANYMORE.



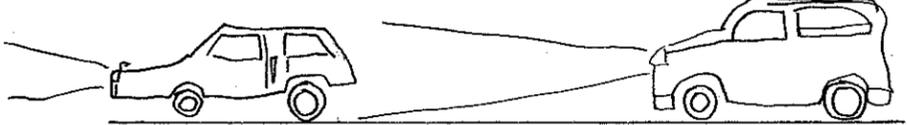
17 YEARS.

THANK YOU

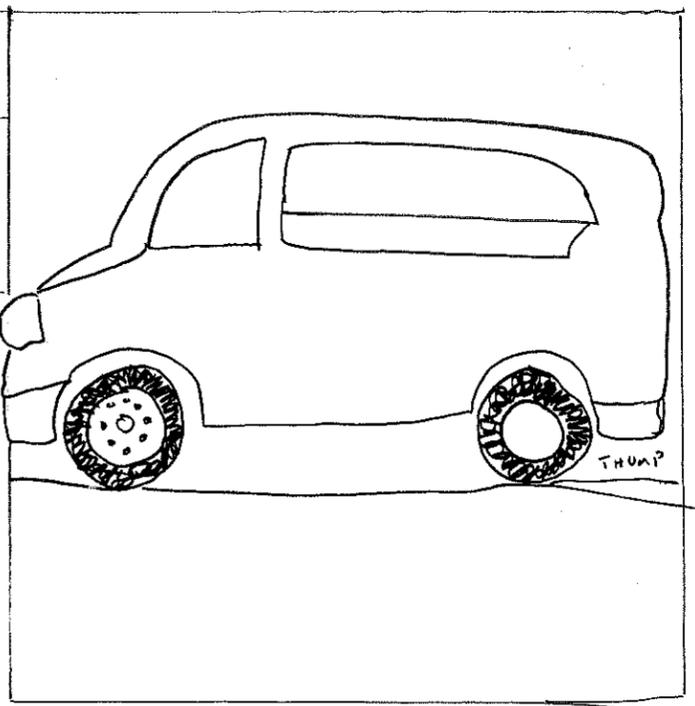
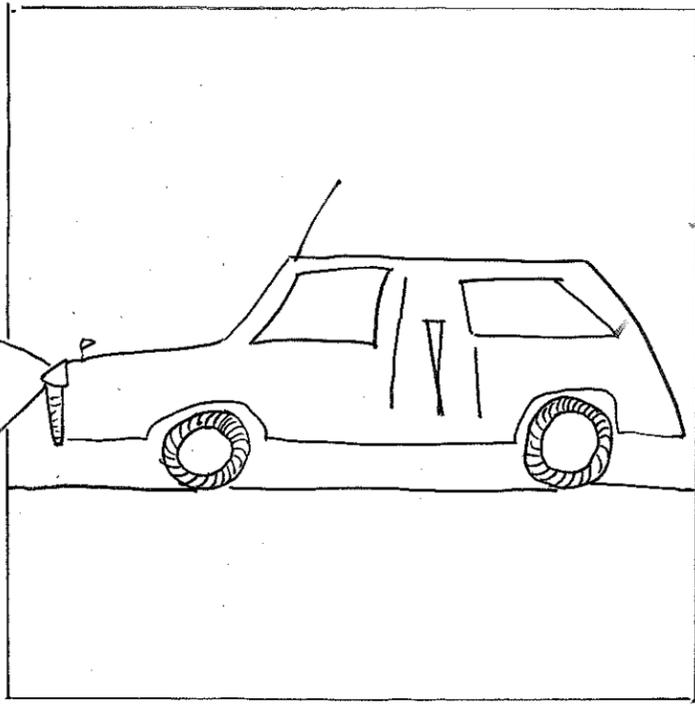


HOW LONG HAVE YOU LIVED HERE?

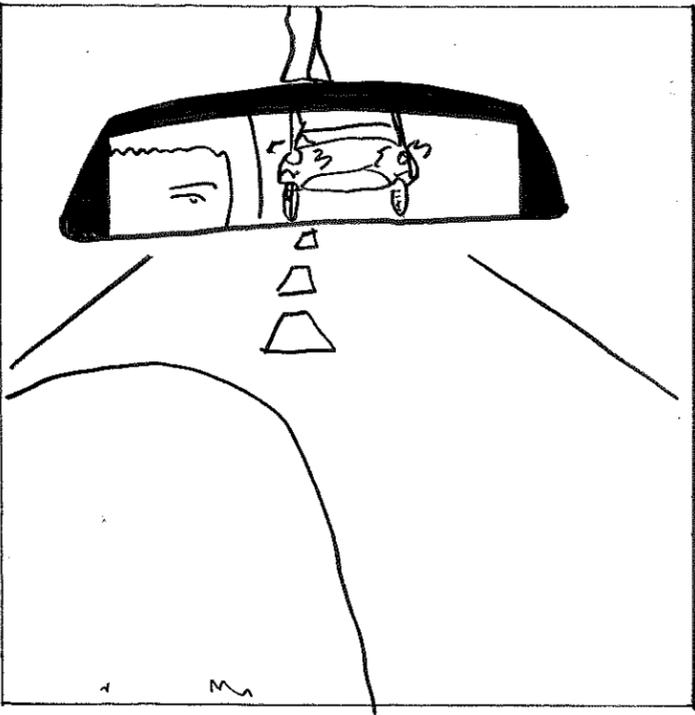
REALLY? YOU DON'T LOOK THAT OLD.



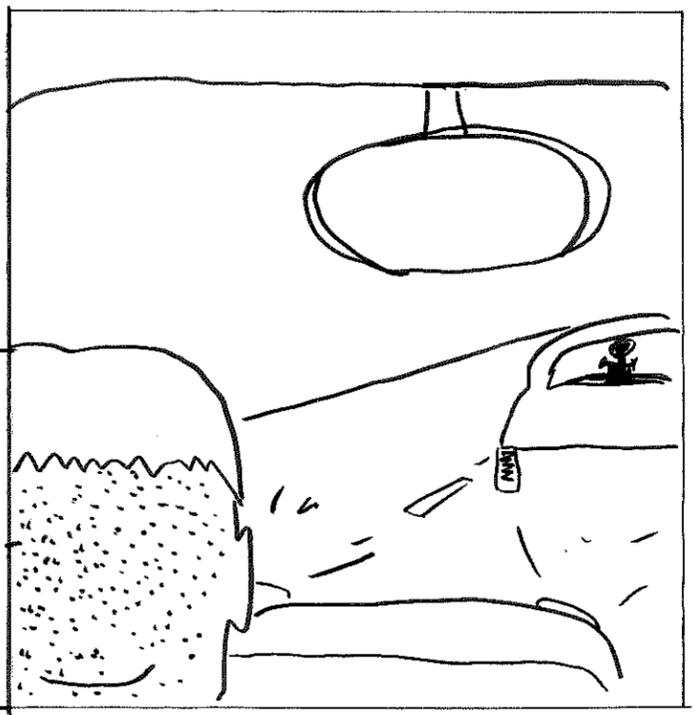
SHE WAS ACTING LIKE SOMETHING, ACTING CRAZY.



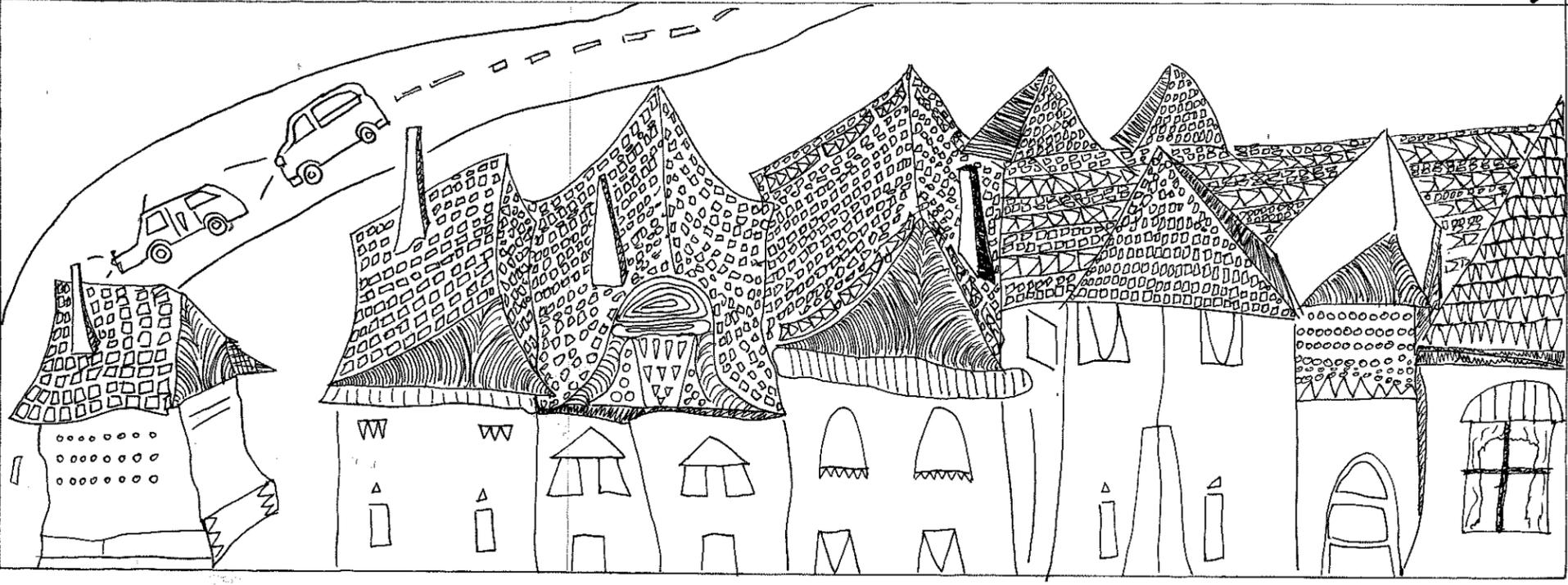
CRAZY TO TAKE HIM TO SUCH AN EXPENSIVE RESTAURANT, WHERE SHE WAS SURE TO SEE HER OLD COMMITTEE MEMBERS.

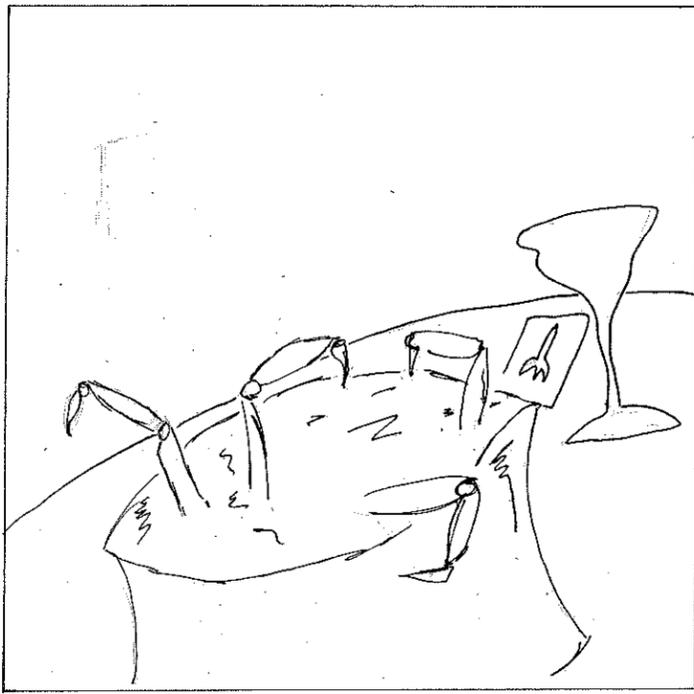


CRAZY TO TELL HIM THAT STORY ABOUT A BEAST IN THE WOODS. SHE WAS SURE THAT WOULD SCARE HIM OFF - CONVINCE HIM SHE WAS NUTS - BUT INSTEAD HE SEEMED CAPTIVATED.



SHE LIVED WAY THE FAR OUT IN GRAD STUDENT HOUSING ON THE EDGE OF CAMPUS.





BACK AT THE RESTAURANT, THE BROKEN CRAB LEGS STEWED IN POOLS OF COLD LIQUID BUTTER.

THE CHEF COLLECTED THEIR DISHES - CROQUE POT, CRAB SPOONS, WINE GLASSES, KNIVES.



OH. I THOUGHT YOU'D LEFT.

JUST TAKING A SMOKE BREAK, CHEF. WHAT'D YA GOT THERE?

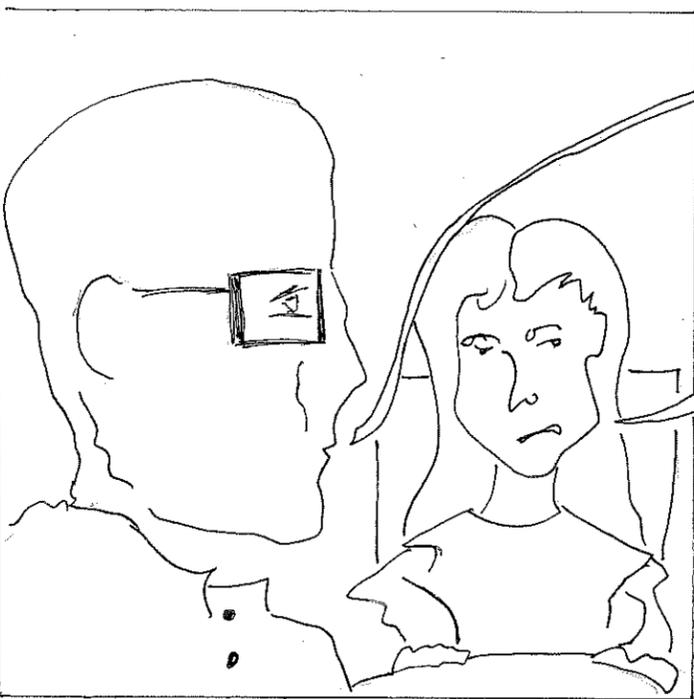
SHELLS. WANT SOME?

CAN YOU HEAR THE OCEAN IF YOU HOLD ONE UP TO YOUR EAR?

THAT'S JUST THE BLOOD IN YOUR HEAD, LAUREN WAS HERE.

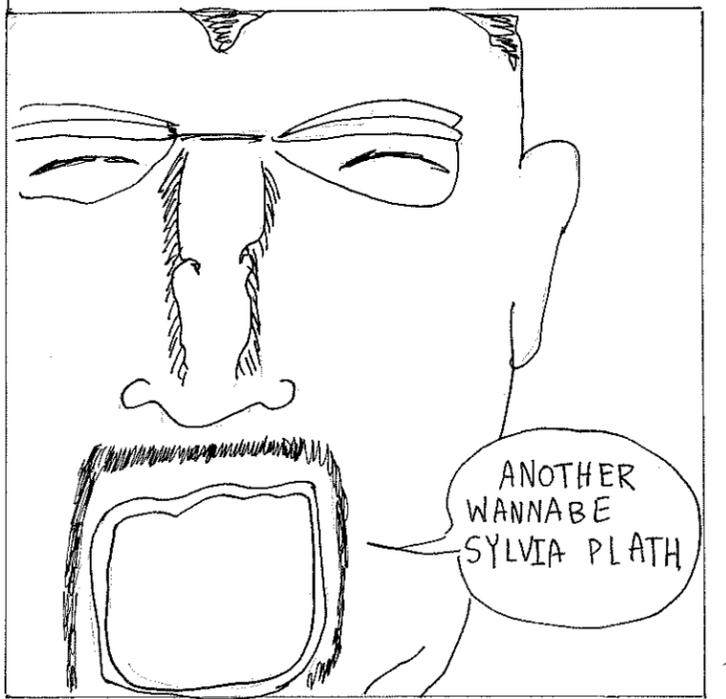


LAUREN?

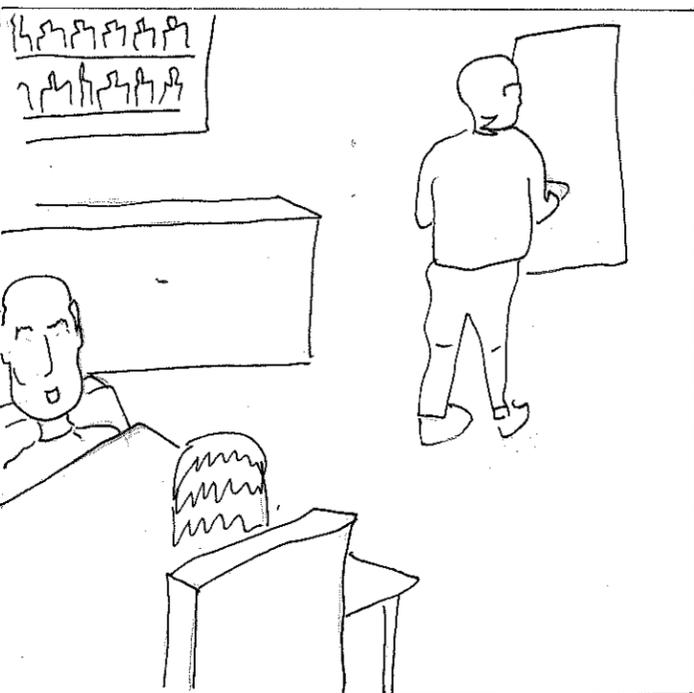


YOU REMEMBER LAUREN.

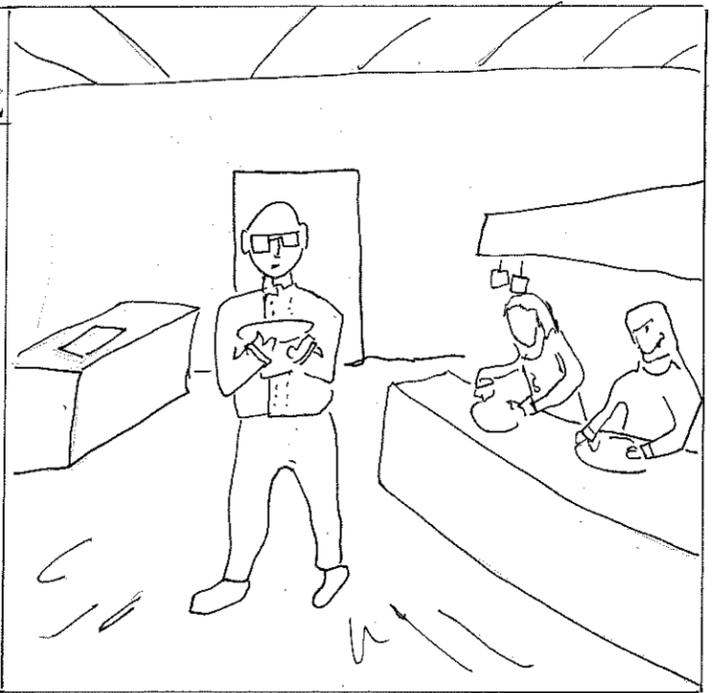
OH YES. SMART GIRL. CRACKED UP A BIT?

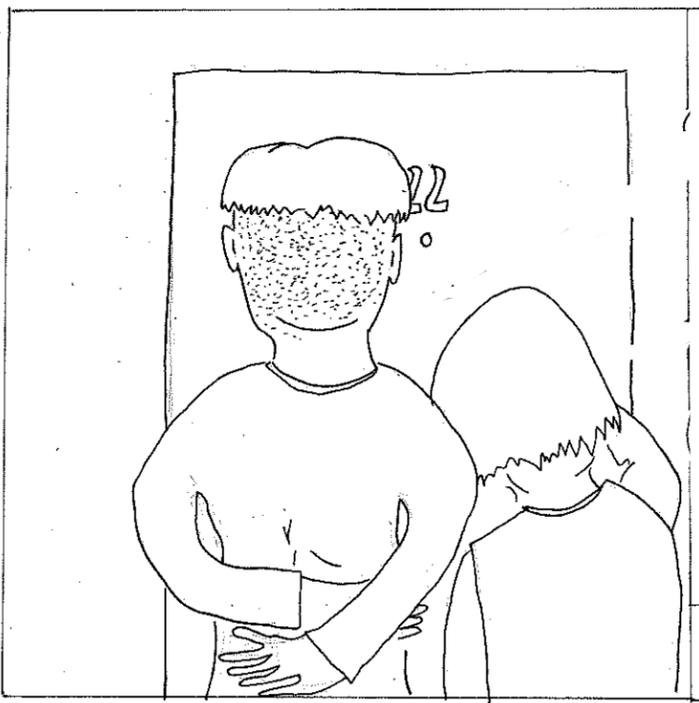


ANOTHER WANNABE SYLVIA PLATH



THE CHEF BROUGHT THE CRABS BACK TO THE KITCHEN, WHERE HE PLANNED TO WASH THE POT.





HER APARTMENT WAS ON THE SECOND FLOOR.



SO YOU USED TO BE IN JAIL?

THAT'S RIGHT.



HE COULDN'T BELIEVE IT. IT WAS EVEN MORE OF A DUMP THAN HIS OWN PLACE.

I'M SORRY. YOU CAN COME IN.



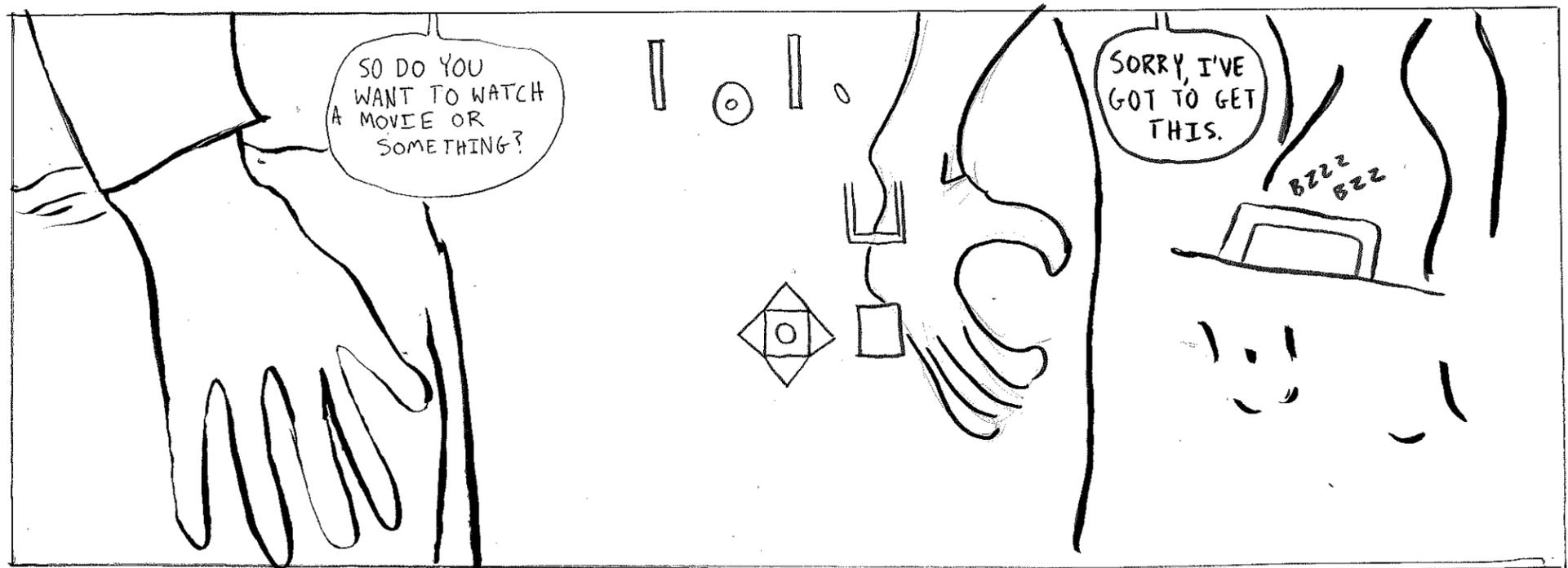
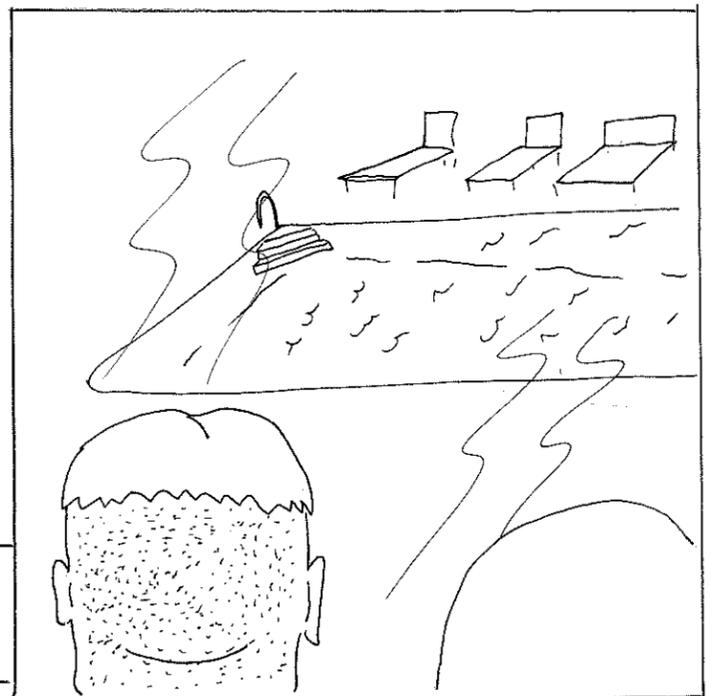
IT'S ALRIGHT. I APPRECIATE YOU TAKING A CHANCE ON ME.



OH COOL. DO YOU GET TO SWIM IN THERE?

YES, BUT I DON'T REALLY.

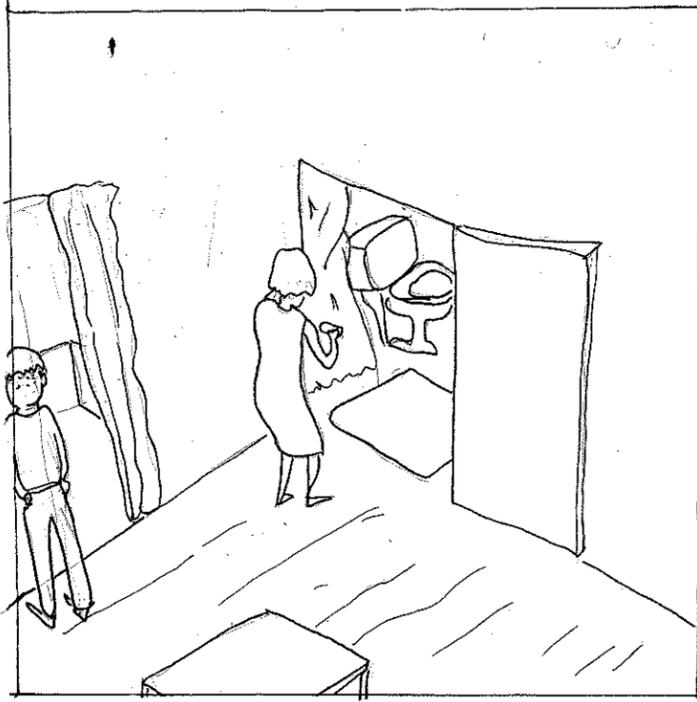
SHE HAD A BALCONY AT LEAST, OVERLOOKING A POOL.



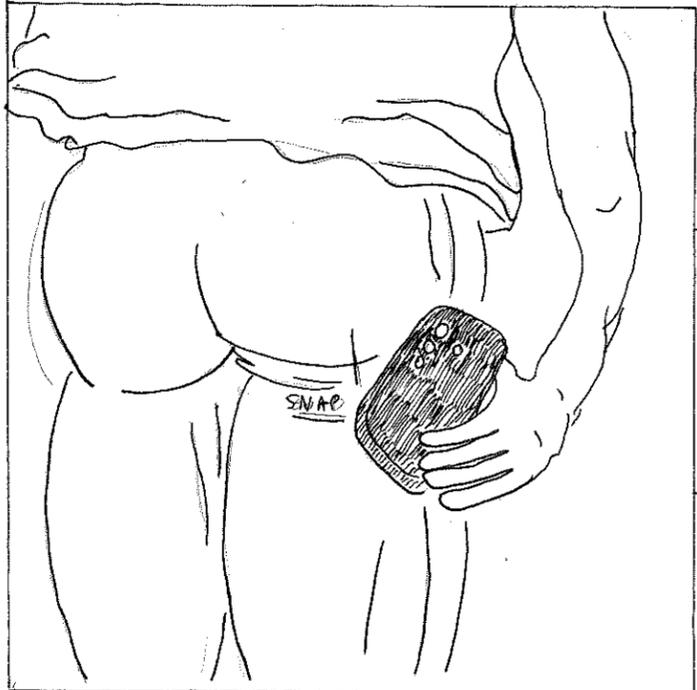
SO DO YOU WANT TO WATCH A MOVIE OR SOMETHING?

SORRY, I'VE GOT TO GET THIS.

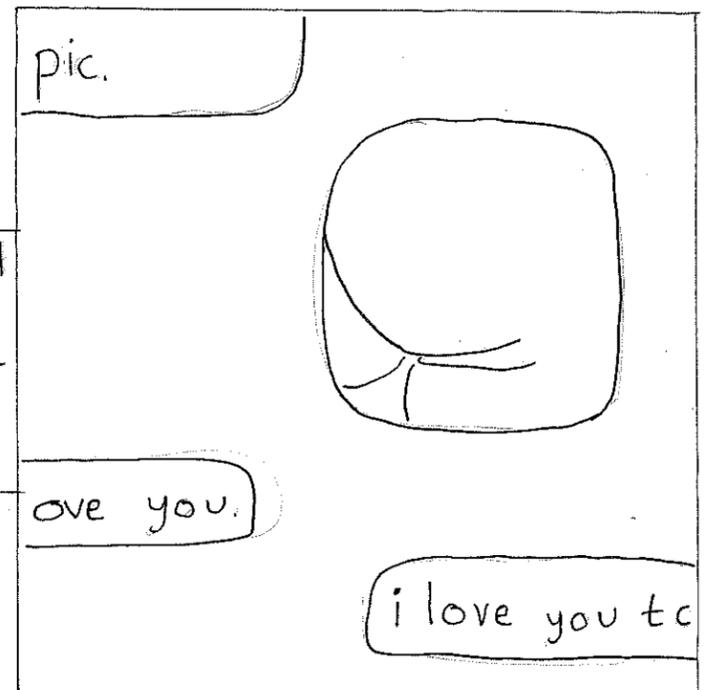
BZZZ BZZZ



SHE KNEW THAT IF SHE DIDN'T RESPOND SOON, TOM WOULD FOLLOW UP WITH A PHONE CALL.



SHE TEXTED HIM A PHOTOGRAPH STANDING IN THE BATHROOM MIRROR - SHE DID THIS REGULARLY NOW THAT THEY WERE LONG DISTANCE.



WHEN SHE RETURNED TO THE LIVING ROOM, JACK WAS LOOKING AT HIS PHONE. HAD SHE SENT THE PHOTO TO THE WRONG GUY?

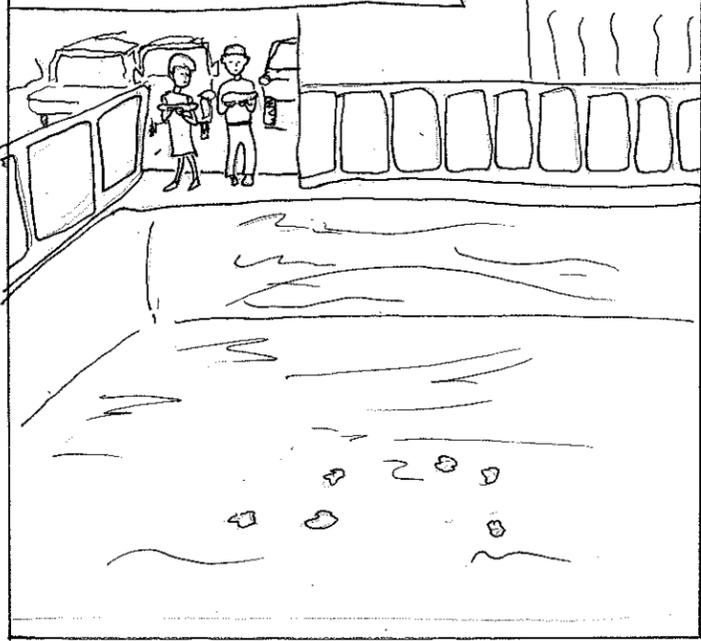


NO.

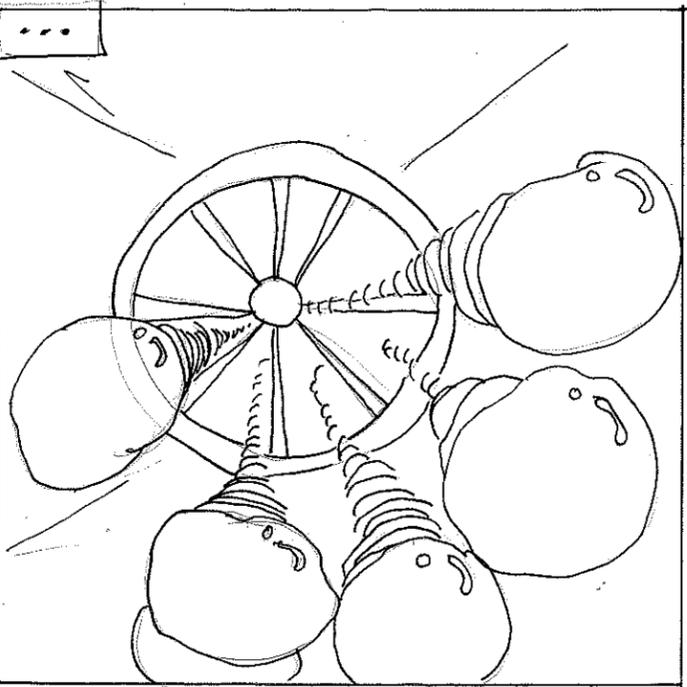
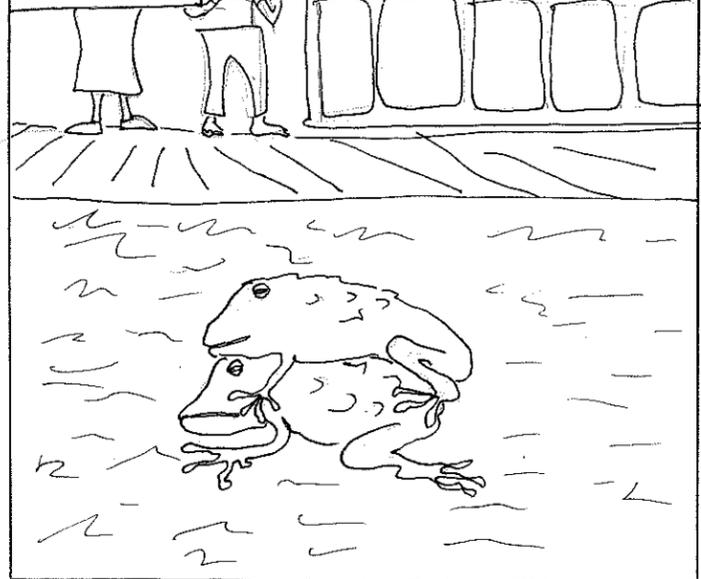
YOU THOUGHT I WAS LYING?
YOU WANT TO SEE THE POOL?



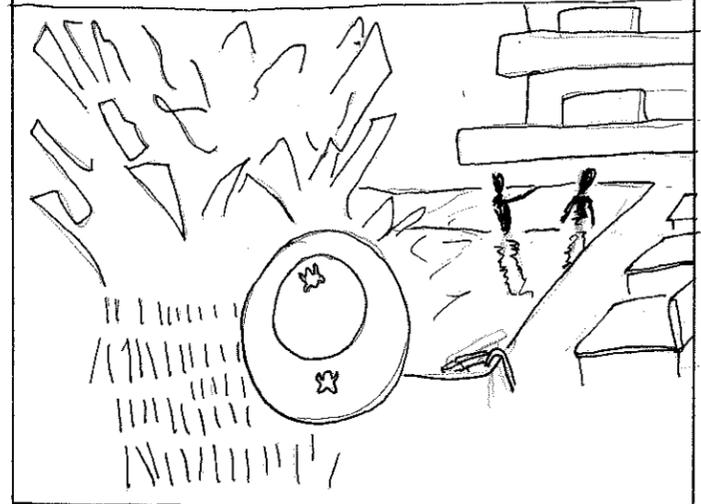
FROGS SWAM AT NIGHT.



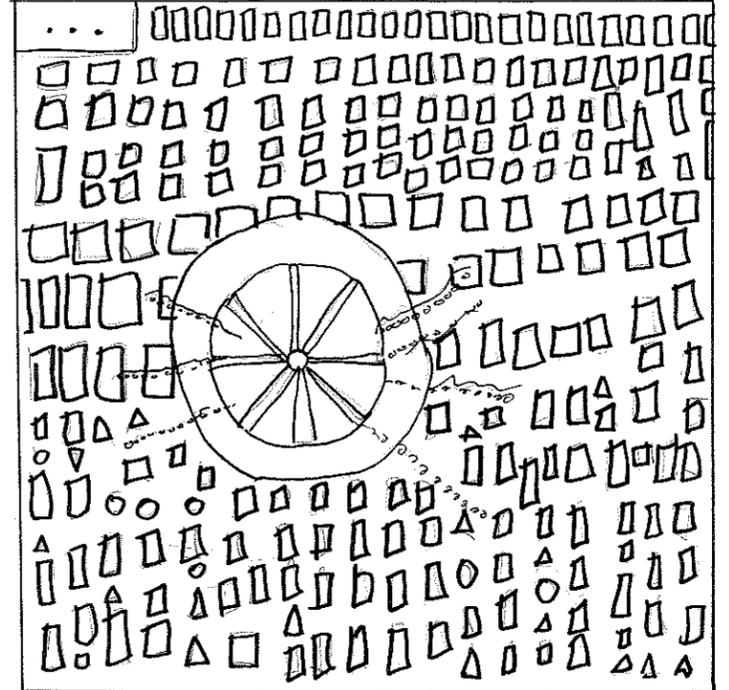
THE POOL DRAIN SUCKED THE EGGS AWAY...



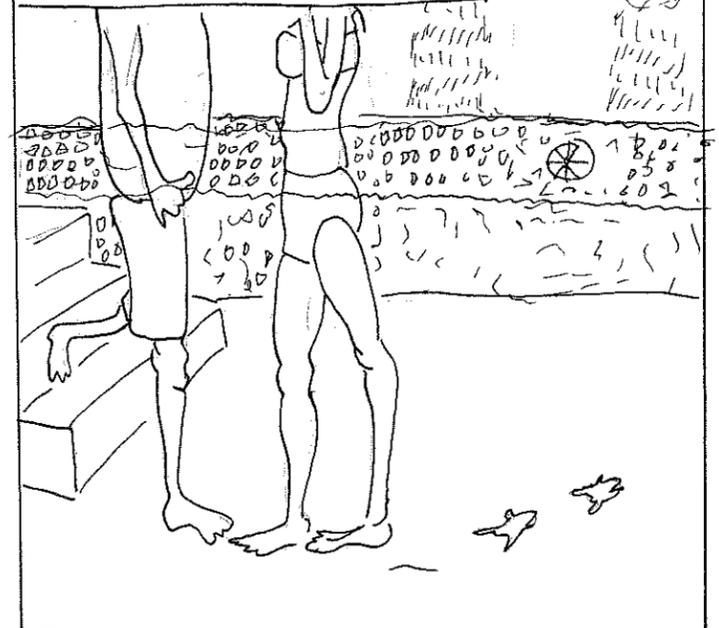
WHEN JACK AND LAUREN SUBMERGED INTO THE WATER, THE FROGS SCURRIED OUT AND CLIMBED BACK INTO THE TREES.



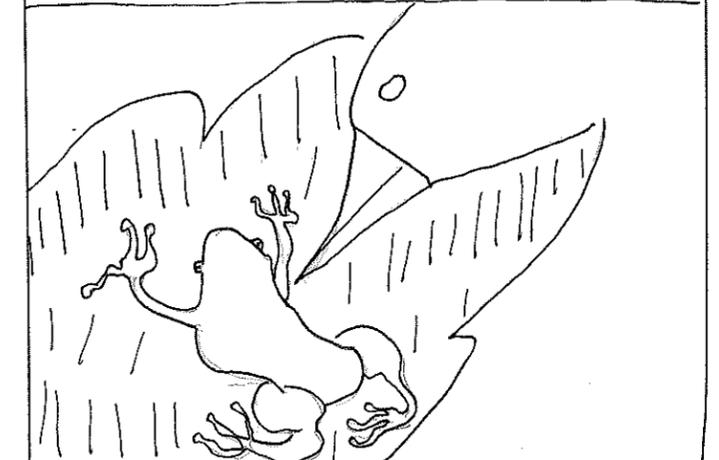
THEY MATED AND LAID THEIR EGGS IN VIOLENT CLUSTERS!

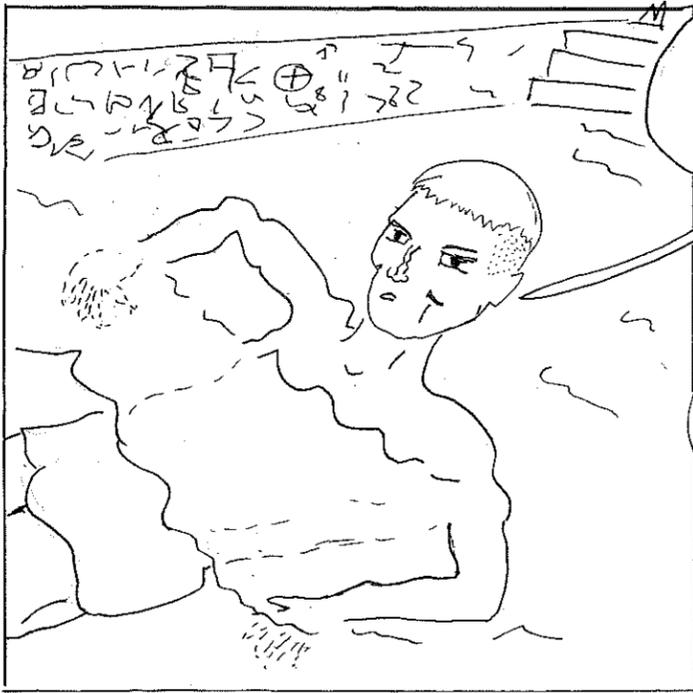


DOOMED COPULATION.



THEY WERE MEXICAN IN ORIGIN, SMALL AND YELLOW, AN INVASIVE SPECIES WHICH KILLED SOME OF THE NATIVE FROGS AND WERE IN TURN EATEN BY LARGE BIRDS.





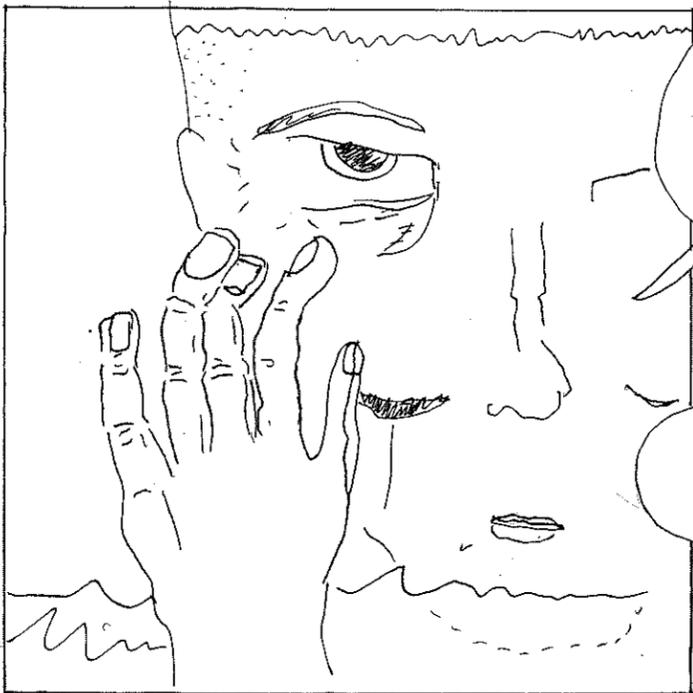
IF I LIVED HERE,
I WOULD SWIM ALL
THE TIME.

YOU SAY THAT,
BUT YOU WOULDN'T

WHO TOLD
YOU THAT STORY
ABOUT THE WRITER?



IT'S A SMALL
TOWN, PEOPLE GOSSIP.
IT'S VERY HIERARCHICAL.



SO BY EATING
JOHN KENT'S FOOD,
THE CHEF FUSED
WITH HIS SPIRIT.

WELL, REALLY IT
WAS THE CHEF'S
FOOD, IT WAS HIS
RECIPE.



I DON'T BELIEVE
IN THAT.

WHAT?



RECIPES AND
STUFF. FOOD IS
JUST FOOD. WE
ACT LIKE IT'S
SOMETHING
DIFFERENT, LIKE
IT'S ART OR SOME-
THING. MEANWHILE,
PEOPLE ARE LIT-
ERALLY STARVING.



THAT'S VERY
INSIGHTFUL,
JACK.

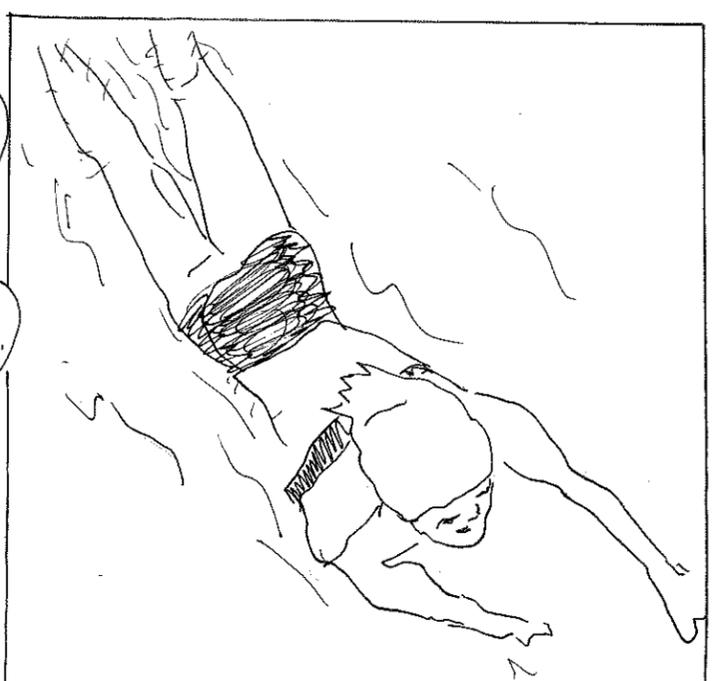


YOU'RE MAKING
FUN OF ME.

NO, I'M
SERIOUS.

IT'S OK.
I LIKE IT.

I'M NOT
MAKING FUN.



YOU WERE MAKING
FUN OF ME ABOUT
THE CATAPULTS.

YEAH, I
WAS.



HER OVARIES PRODUCED FEW EGGS, SO SHE COULD NOT HAVE A CHILD WITHOUT SERIOUS MEDICAL INTERVENTION.

I'M JUST KIND OF AN ASSHOLE SOMETIMES. I ALSO REFERENCED YOUR HAVING BEEN IN JAIL IN AN INSENSITIVE WAY, MORE THAN ONCE. I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHY. I'M SORRY.

THAT'S ALRIGHT. DOES IT BOTHER YOU?

SHE IS UNAWARE OF HER LOW EGG COUNT.

NO. IT'S JUST KIND OF FUNNY. YOU DON'T SEEM LIKE A CRIMINAL.

I HONESTLY DON'T FEEL LIKE I COMMITTED A CRIME, SO I DON'T LIKE BEING CALLED A CRIMINAL.

THE CHEF KNOWS. BACK AT THE RESTAURANT, HE GNAWS THE HOLLOW CRAB LEGS IN HIS BACK OFFICE.

YOU'RE RIGHT. I'M SORRY AGAIN. BASED ON WHAT YOU DESCRIBED IN THE CHAT, I DON'T THINK YOU COMMITTED A CRIME EITHER.

YEAH. I DON'T KNOW, SURE.

CAN I KISS YOU?

A MANDIBLE CUTS HIS GUMS AND THE VISION STOPS.

SCRATCH

HE HASN'T DONE SOMETHING LIKE THIS IN YEARS. USED HIS POWERS, HE LEAVES THE LOVERS UNDER THE ALIEN CALL OF FROG MATING, SPEAKING TENDER WORDS.