

Tricky



planet

by

jerry Beck

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Clay held out his stained coffee cup.

"Hey Jake, what's coming up?" he asked me with his usual smile, the first one I saw since getting up.

"My usual - garlic bagels and chive cream cheese," I said as he held open the door for me.

"Jive Cheese, alright buddy, I'll wait for youz on the way out," he said bending slightly.

Last Sunday, Clay and I were talking about high cholesterol, tax returns and vacation packages to Mexico because he wanted to get some cash together to go to Cancun for the winter. I told him I never went to Cancun when I visited Mexico, but was told that it was an over-rated tourist trap filled with fancy hotels and serviced by a lower than minimal wage staff who lived behind the scene in shanty towns like flies caught in a screen. Clay wasn't into hearing my negative impressions and said that everyone had to live in some way, some how and some where.

Clay knew how to treat me. When talking to you, he'd look you right in the eye. In all the years I've known him, I've never seen him show any shame, vulgarity, drunkenness or any disrespect to others, while I noticed many people doing the opposite to him. I'd see him sitting on the sidewalk or a bench happily telling stories to his street friends or anyone else who wasn't afraid of his cup or disfiguration. You see, Clay was a burn victim. He had bad scars on his hands, neck, chin and probably over half his body that was covered in clothes. Sure, Clay's situation and scars provided me with a perspective that made my daily turmoil seem insignificant; more importantly Clay kept a smile on his face no-matter what the weather or how much change he was carrying.

These smiles had no conditions attached to them. When I first saw Clay's smile I didn't trust it. I thought all beggars were good for nothings. Losers. I'm not proud of saying this, but some how Clay's smile provoked something deep within and I wanted to prove his smile was a fake, that he was just another jobless lazy mother fucker who really wanted to spit and yell and cuss and want you to feel sorry for him. I'm embarrassed to say, I even watched Clay hidden in my truck waiting for him to bark or bite one of the yuppies striding past him on their way to work. I wanted and waited for Clay to crack like a rotten egg on the sidewalk. That's how bad I wanted Clay's smile to fail and I waited and waited and watched for almost the whole day believe it or not.

"Giddy-Up"



Even with this knowledge I feel ashamed to admit that I couldn't seem to get beyond the impersonal, as if I'd drawn a line between us. Why? was it because of race? his poverty? or something on the other extreme like the fear of possibly striking up an authentic friendship? Every time I saw Clay these questions presented themselves along with Clay's unfailing smile.



I saw a similar smile a few nights back on a boxer's face on T.V. The boxer was struggling to reach his corner after getting knocked down in the 8th round by the Heavyweight Champion. The fight was stopped, but this boxer although groggy had a smile on his face that gleamed with pride and not defeat.

The sports commentator asked him what happened. "I guess he hit me in my blind spot. I gave it my all and he just won," he said with a smile after putting on a great fight as a huge underdog. This boxer's smile matched Clays and it gave me inspiration. Losing wasn't at the core of his smile. There was something different in it, like something that said I PUT MY HEART INTO IT and if I lose, win or draw that's what happened. The boxer and Clay had smiles about humility, they were smiles that gave a spontaneous gift to the world, pure and simple. They were smiles that anyone could see talked humbly about the truth in things. I saw it even after the other boxer was mobbed with fans. I ~~at~~ ill wanted to get to that forgotten corner and ask the man for his autograph and take him to dinner to talk about his life. That's how much that smile told me and that's the smile that Clay wore everyday when he played with teenagers in the park or fed pigeons stale bread.

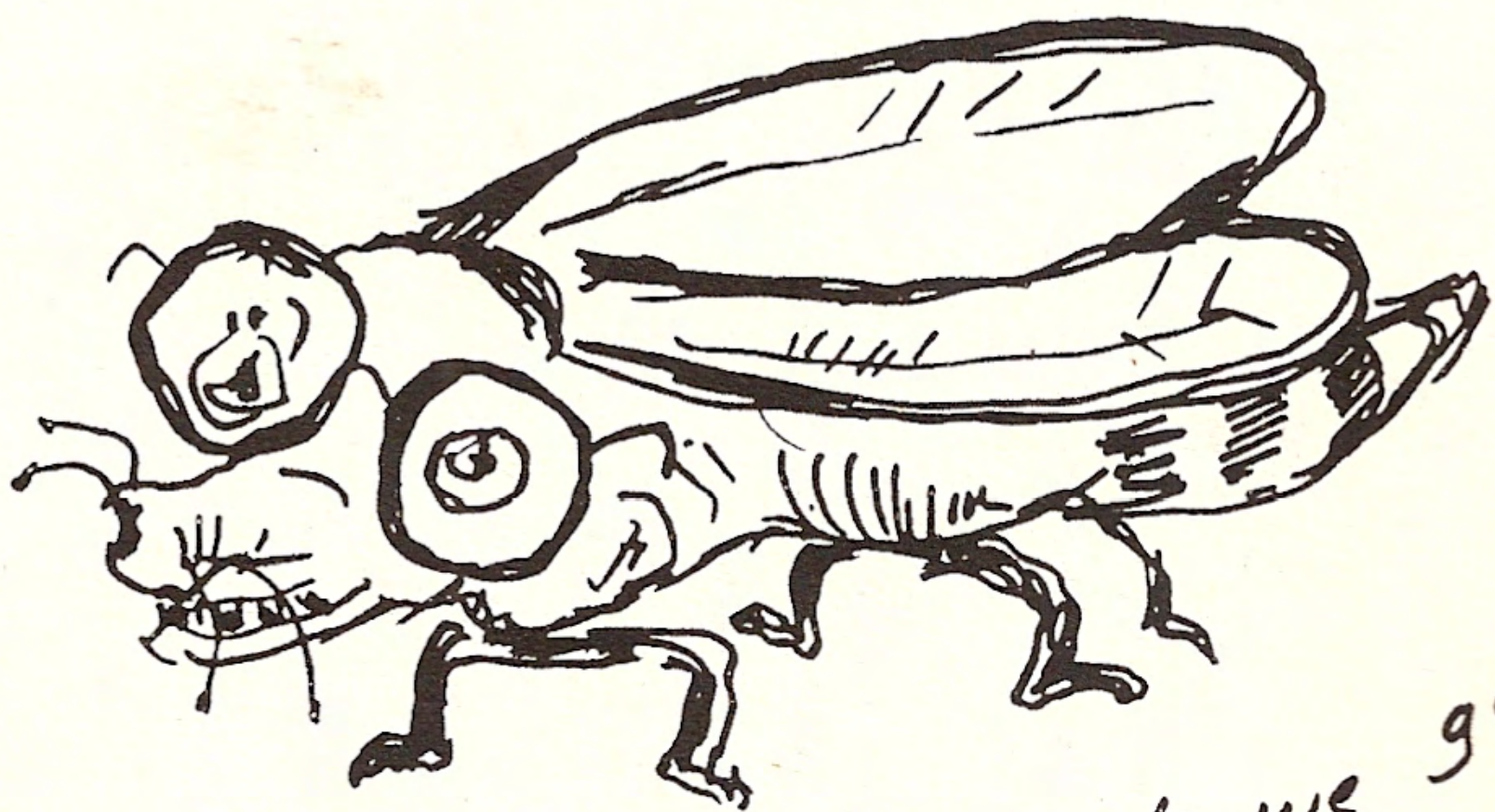
Why was I so adamant to witness his demise? Why so vicious towards that smile, so mistrusting? Why did I sit there watching him when I could have been reading the Sunday paper in peace? WHY? What was going on inside me as I watched him pick something off the sidewalk and study it as some people walked awkwardly by not wanting Clay to notice them or having to decide to go into their pockets, but Clay kept looking at some small thing of nature as if it was worth all his energy. What was that small thrown away thing? A few women walked by wanting to give him a hand out but didn't know how since Clay's cup was on the ground and his attention was ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ elsewhere, YOU know why Clay pissed me off? Because I knew that in some way I was worse off than him, that I was jealous.

Yes Jealous.

Jealous of his smile that shined above his hardships and everyday chores. Jealous, Yes me, the successful NEA award winner, yes me the guy with a new white truck, yes me the guy who won a ~~XXXX~~ a condo in a lottery, yes me, the guy who has a family who loves him, yes the guy with a girlfriend who hugs him. I couldn't stand myself in this state of jealousy as I watched Clay sitting against a brick wall with a coffee cup in his shriveled hand wearing that Perfect GOD dam smile smeared on his unshaven face. What's wrong with me? Why couldn't I revel and appreciate the ~~XXXXXX~~ serenity of it? I thought I let go of petty judgements years ago and now I was trying to surrender to Clay and soon something weird began happening as I stood in my straight jacket of pain, soon I began understanding the power of Clay's smile and its source. Soon I began falling falling into a space of recognition. Soon I began falling in love with this guy even though I knew I'd never tell him.



Two women were trying to get the ~~XXX~~ first ELVIS stamp. They arrived at the post office door at exactly the same time. It started out friendly enough, both chatty fans, but their smiles turned to hate when each was unwilling to take the second spot. One woman had a cassette machine. "Love Me Tender," was playing. The other woman had a large bandage on her left arm from a recent tattoo, supposedly an exact copy of the ELVIS stamp only larger but not life size. Both ended up having to go to the hospital with black eyes. The third person in line got the first stamp.



What ever you want we got!



I overheard a woman at the Alabama flea market yesterday. She was very old. Old but gracious and beautiful. She had soft skin and thin white hair that fell down below her shoulders. I could tell she was blonde in her younger days and her eyes were robin egg blue. Her skin was egg shell white and her blue eyes and white hair made her look like an albino. Her hand was shaking without a rattle. I was looking at some junk when I heard her start talking to her truck parked behind her.

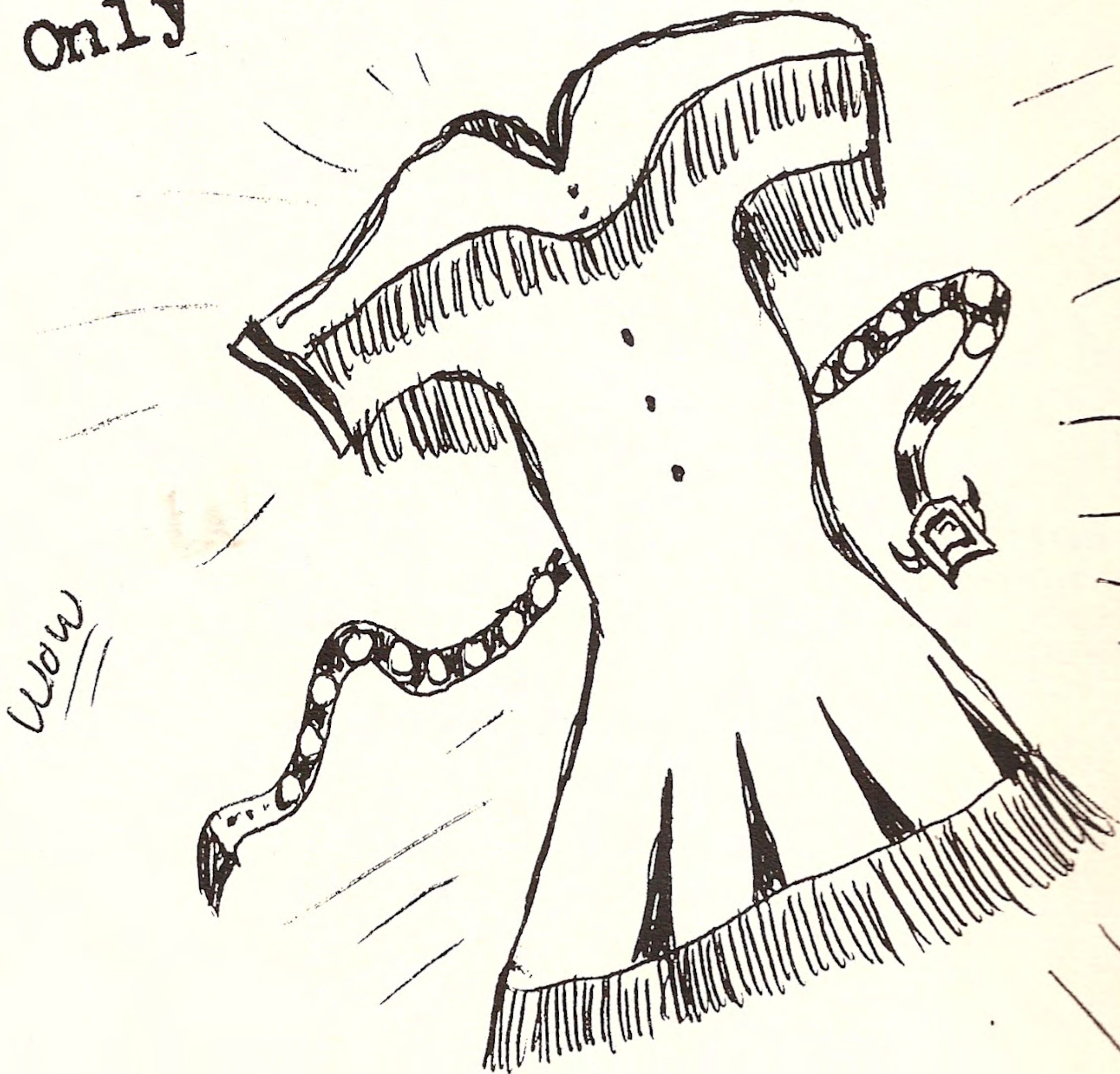
"Want a wash don't ya ole rover, well let me tell ya, as soon as I get enough cash for a clean clean bucket of water, I'm going to give yah a good ole country washin."

I thought maybe she was really talking to me because I hadn't had a shower for over a week, but then I thought maybe this was her zany way of getting people to feel sorry for her and want to buy her junk.

"I know this friend of mine," she mumbled in my direction. "She wants to be buried below Neiman Marcus, Yep, right below the towel section so she can smell their unused odor. She told me that she likes the idea of people shopping above her bones. Oh that crazy gal, she s , she's a shopping fool, one of them deal feelin, tag tossin, bag collectin ladies. Can you believe her? She wants to rest right there below them Neiman Marcus floors. Poor gal, wants no place in her life or death for some peace," she said as ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ she moved some rusty items from one side of the table to the next as if it was her own particular game of chess.

I noticed a really funky ~~cowgirl~~ cowgirl dress. It was pink with yellow leather fringes and snap on buttons.
"I really like that dress. Did you wear that?"
I asked.

"wear... child,
Only my beau Joe Harvey



and I ain't never

I was wild in that dress.

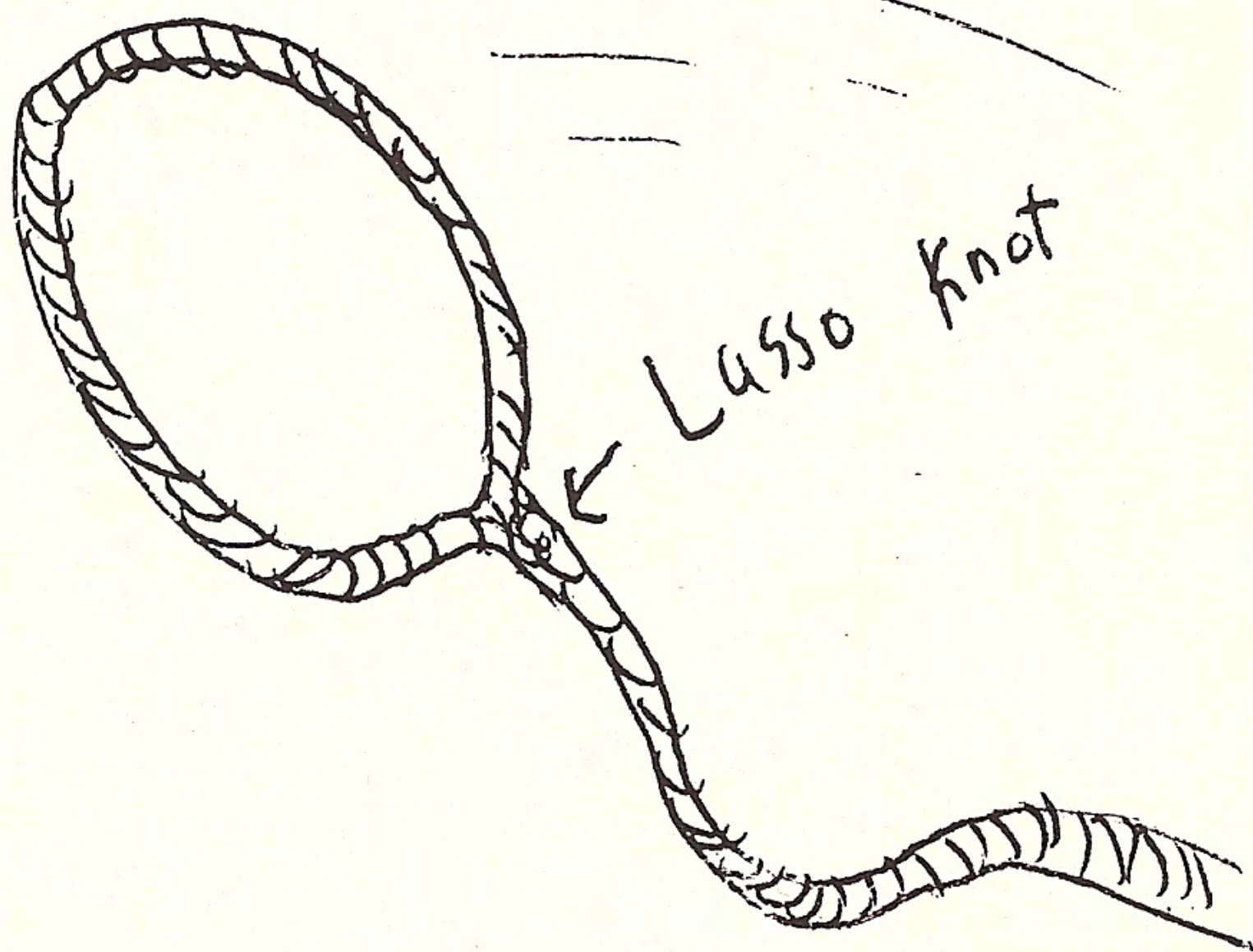
could handle me in that gown

yes,

yes,

that's

my dress.



been tamed since.



I had that when I lived in my big house, now I have a small house and my husband Joe is dead. We'd go dancing together and we always dressed up in our finest. Joe Harvey was one hell of a man. We sure made a racket on the dance floor. People called us the OKIE DOUGHKIES because we made some money entering dance competitions and we both came from Oklahoma City. One time we made \$ 2000 bucks and won a huge trophy. I sold that trophy a few weeks back for fifty dollars to some New Yorker on a spending binge who was collecting old trophies. It was a hard sell for me. He wanted it bad. More than I wanted the memory. Life gets like that. Objects only held you so tight and then wishhh, you're lucky if you can get some cash for em. Now my husband's dead and I don't dance no more, if you know what I mean," she said and put her shaking hand onto the pink dress and twirled some of the fringes in between her fingers as if she was coaxing a few more dance steps out of the colorful cowgirl dress.

"I bet you can still dance," I said.
"Yeah, well maybe just a little, alone with George and Hank," she said with a cracked smile.
"George and Hank?" I asked. "George Jones and Hank Williams, but dancing isn't meant to be done alone. That's not the way I was brought up. I've seen theyoung gals dancing by themselves, but it's not for me. Dancing is about love. It's a way of showing love in public. Joe Harvey and I were real smooth. He was a close heartin man, a real man by any standards. A gentleman. My only true love, the only man that gave me children and a nice home. But now he's dead. Dead for eight years and I'm finishing something he started and that's this here fleamarket stuff. You see, Joe Harvey loved

objects, loved to fix things, loved to figure out how things were made. He had an eye for good made stuff, but the audience ~~XXXXXX~~ has changed and there is no more money around for these here parts of unusable things. Everything is drying up and I can't seem to make it down to the big flea markets and I hate the big city air too," she said nodding slowly.

"Yeah I know, that's why I'm on this trip, to find places where the little things count," I said trying to feel a part of her.

"I see people storing away their cash like squirrels waiting for another depression. Lots of friendly people starving themselves from fear, thinking the world is creeping up on them in the night as if it was going to take a bite out of their life and money. I told them not to worry, God's got a grand plan and it ain't about money. Not spending won't getcha to heaven I keep telling em, but I'm jus an old woman, an old woman that lives alone in a small house. Where are you from?" she asked craning her neck to look me in the eye.

"I'm from Florida, but I live and work in Boston," I said.

"Boston, hey, now that's a glorious town. Joe Harvey, Ellen my ~~daughter~~ daughter and I spent a few nights in Boston. Ate Boston seafood, saw them red light shows, even got to see the Marx Brothers one late night. We were buying and selling. Found some cheap good stuff up in Maine. Good people in Maine. Been to Maine?" she said and changed her position and gracefully crossed her legs.

"Yep, I've been to Maine, great landscape and very quiet," I said and went back to lifting other unknown things off her cluttered table.

"What's this?" I asked her holding up some strange metal object.

"Don't know. A piece of old farm machinery I reckon. I think it was part of a crank device used in the corn trade, but I'm guessing. I'd call it a conversation piece or a paper weight. That's ~~what~~ what these things become when they lose their function. They become history and the weight of history catches up to you and things are no longer the same. They become dead weight or light conversation pieces. What's your name?"



"Jake, Jake Berdman," I said.

"Nice name Jake, Jake Berdman, Jake like a lake, lake Birdman, Birdman like soaring into the blue sky," she said impressing me.

"You're a poet aren't you?" I said with a smile turning my full attention towards her. "Jake, let me tell you, I'm too old to speak with a new voice, I'M just old. I ain't no poet, no movie star, no - I'm just alive, old and alive, that 's it and I sell junk at this here fleamarket and I talk to people like yourself until I get too tired and then I just sit and wait for someone to buy something or for the sun to set. God has given me a good long life, a good husband, a good daughter, two good grandchildren, one great grandchild, a bunch of good friends, a small house, a working truck, food and singing birds. I never asked for any of these, they just came my way, God's way. People don't recognize God's way, I'm afraid to tell you. They are complaining mostly about not having IT. ~~The "IT" is greed.~~ They are looking for everything and are greedy to get "IT". It's not how much people have today, it's how little they have right here," she said and pointed her shaky finger over her heart and nodded and I nodded too and felt something move in my heart that was different than ~~it~~ it's beating.

"Jake, I told my husband before we had our daughter that all I ever wanted from life was for God to give us good health and for us to keep our

sense of humor, that was it, because if we stopped laughing we'd be missing the point and don't think it was easy to laugh when the depression hit. No, we cried. Cried and cried. We ate potatoes for for a full year. I became a potato cook expert. I must have made a hundred different potato recipes. Once I tried mixing jello and potatoes. That's right potato red jello. My husband saw it and he just had to laugh. He had spent the day repairing farm equipment that wasn't being used. We were lucky. Back then the dirt rose to the surface and the sky sunk below the table, but we survived and we learned to laugh," she said looking over her table of junk as if each object told a different story only she could tell. I wanted to stay with her, but I couldn't and took my wallet out and bought that broken piece of farm machinery for \$2 and looked back over at that pink dress with the yellow leather fringes and recognized her wearing it years before.

I wanted to ask her to dance with me



but I knew that was the wrong idea.

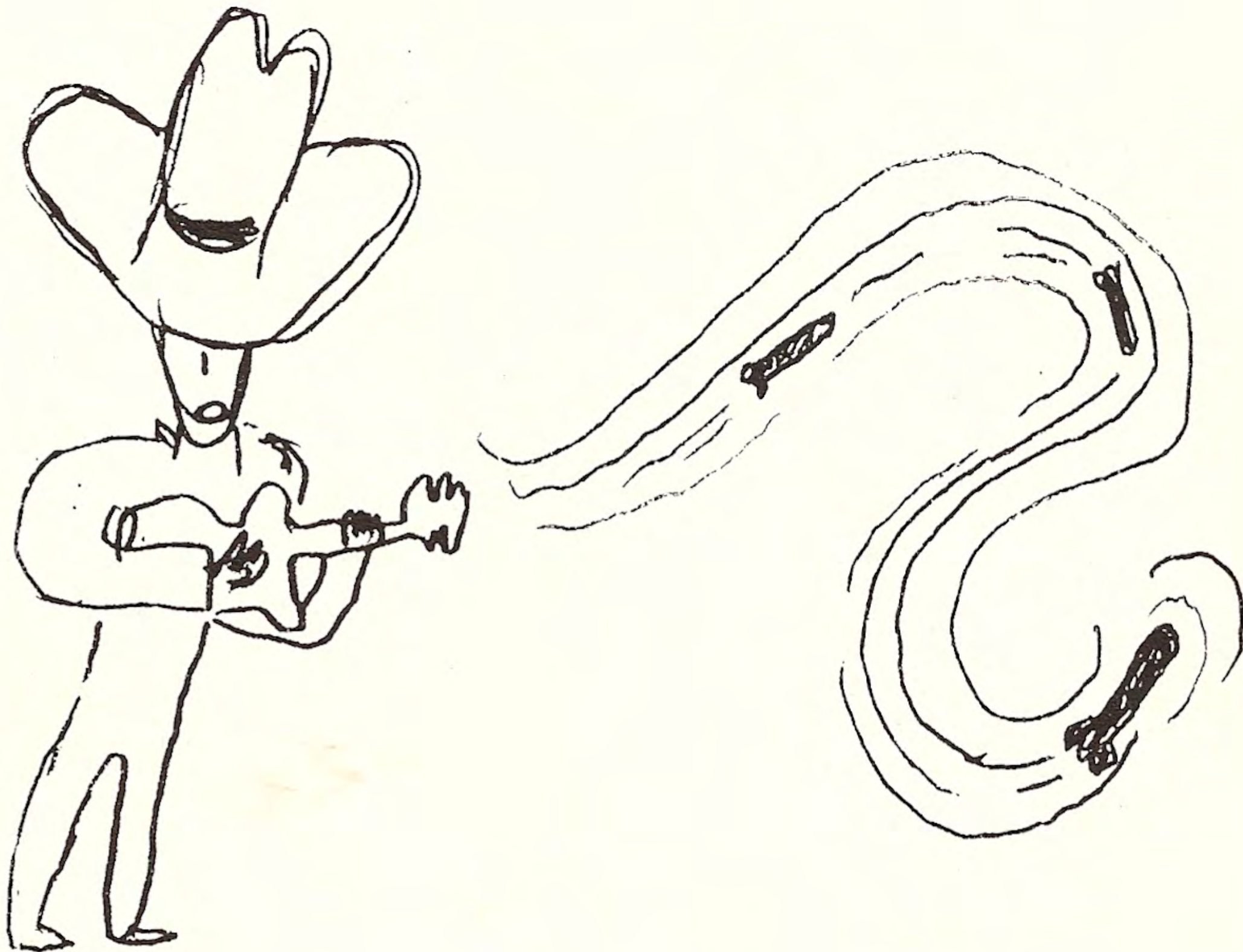
I die

Ideal



I do!

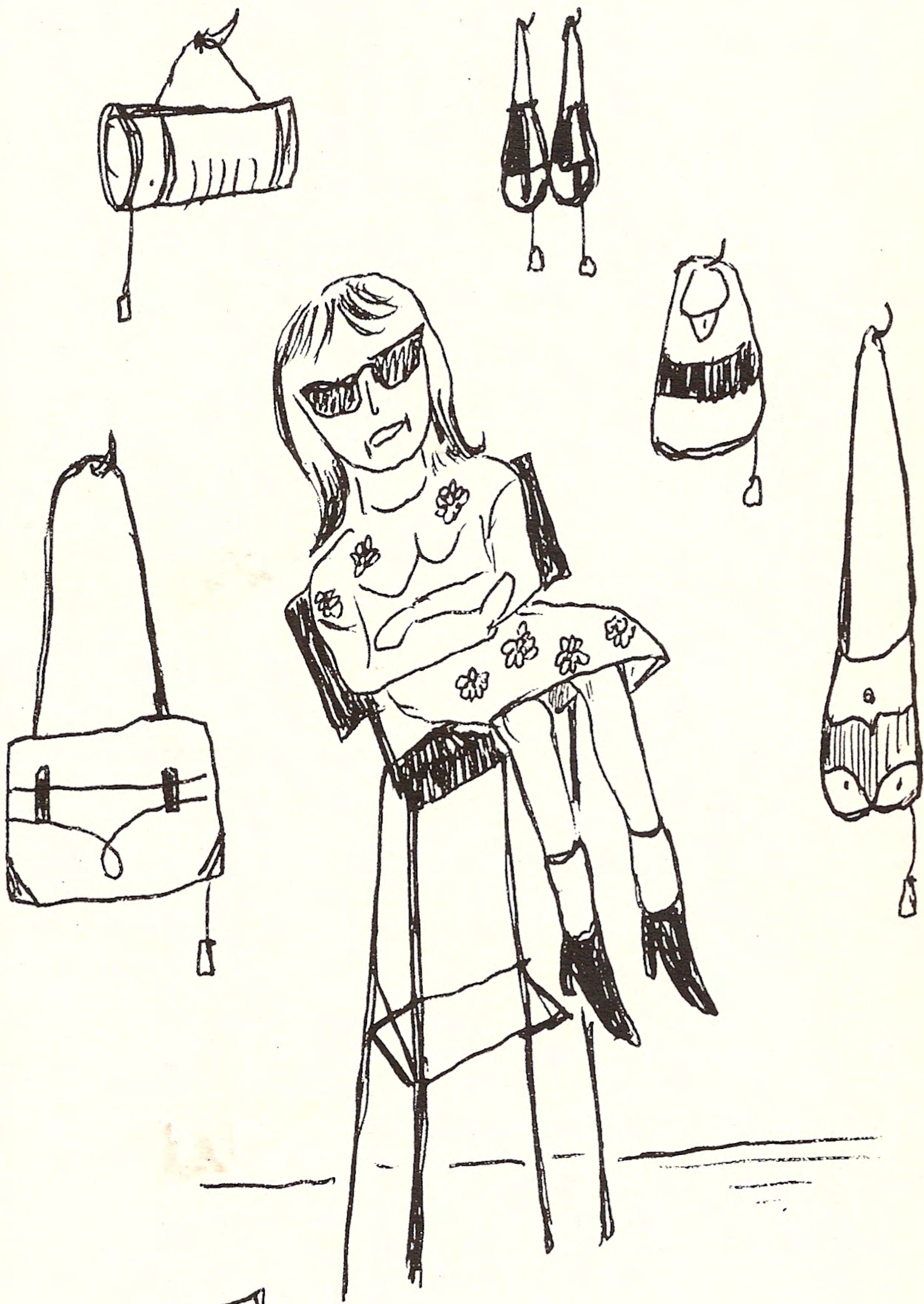
Love



~~How dare I fall in love with words after 36 years of hating them.~~

Country music is swimming in my heart like a lost torpedo. Swelling up with tears for my girl, sometimes woman, still a boy sometimes man; I'm a slide guitar in the hands of a lonely Badland player and she's playing with my fingers in front of a friendly fire. The smell of sassy weed elopes with insect repellent smeared upon our exposed flesh. We both have nasty stings that itch but we brave and bare it and push our shimmering still on fire marshmallows further into the red coals while listening to the cold river escape past our burning ears. Hey Buster, nothing beats a camp fire travelling up your clothes. The hot rocks flirt with the wind. The silence is amplified by the torrents of spring. We embrace in a bear hug. The man and woman move closer to the tent and then get scared and soon the boy and girl ~~XXXXXX~~ pack up and leave and head to the nearest Holiday Inn in pitch black.

XXXXXXX



HAND
MADE
in
the
SHADE

Yesterday I went to an arts fair and saw a young attractive woman wearing white socks and a short flowered dress. She had on a pair of sun glasses and looked upset slouched in one of those tall ~~XXXXXXXX~~ director's chairs in front of a booth displaying leather crafts. I figured she was watching her mother's booth and not her boyfriend's because she didn't have that taken look, it was more of a I'M BORED AND DON'T WANT TO BE HERE AND DON'T ASK ME ANY QUESTIONS LOOK, and I would have taken her anywhere she wanted to go with those little white socks, short dress and that look of hers. I was protected by a pair of sunglasses too, but would have married her because of the way she looked with those white socks, short flowered dress and that slouching body. I got an icecream cone to camouflage myself and watched her from a safe distance. I sat down near an old southern tree. One of those with the moss hair and bumpy roots that look like a family of fat snakes entwined around each other. I was never the pickem up type of guy. Too shy. Too unfamiliar with the techniques, of finding those perfect inspirational first words that work to melt two people together in passion. It was these special words that have cost me hundreds of possibilities with beautiful women, women that I immediately wanted to kiss, to know everything about, to sit and lick icecream together. Why do some people make you fly on first sight? How old is this woman? 15?

17? 22? 24? I wonder watching her girlish slouch with her arms crossed and that look on her face, that tough stubborn but dependable look. I couldn't help myself from wanting to keep her happy, wanting to know her intimately, her favorite flowers, her needs. I wanted to slouch in her arms. I wanted a family with her. I saw us traveling around the country from one arts fair to the next trying to sell my pictures or anything else that would mean a life together. SHIT I'd make bird houses, bird baths, bird candles, bird toys, bird clothes, bird whatever to bring to these small towns that love birds and she'd be sitting in my director's chair feeling stuck in her life with me and she'd be wearing those white socks, flowered short dress and slouching away from me towards something unknown called love.