

I'D SCRAPED UP ENOUGH CHANGE
TO BUY A CUP OF COFFEE.

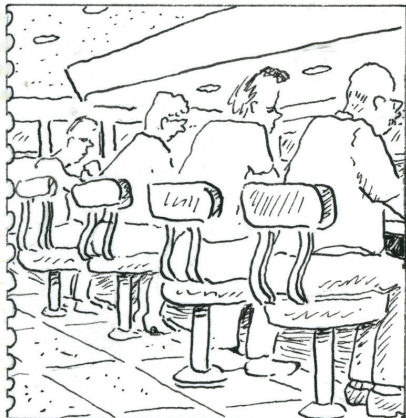


I'D WALKED THE SIX BLOCKS FROM SCHOOL.



IT FELT GOOD TO GET OUT OF THERE, AWAY FROM THE NEWS I'D
GOTTEN, AWAY FROM ART, OUT INTO THE FRESH AIR.

I'D DECIDED NOT TO GO TO DAVE'S, AN
UNTOUCHED MONUMENT OF A 1950S DINER.

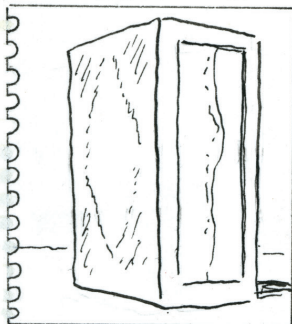


I HAVE FILLED SKETCHBOOK AFTER SKETCHBOOK
WITH DRAWINGS OF THE CUSTOMERS HERE, THEIR FAT
BUTTS CRAWLING OVER THE EDGE OF THE STOOLS.
I HAVE DRAWN THE COFFEE POTS...



SECURE IN THEIR BUNNO-MATIC STATIONS...

I HAVE DRAWN THE
NAPKIN DISPENSERS...



AND I HAVE DRAWN
THE WAITRESSES.

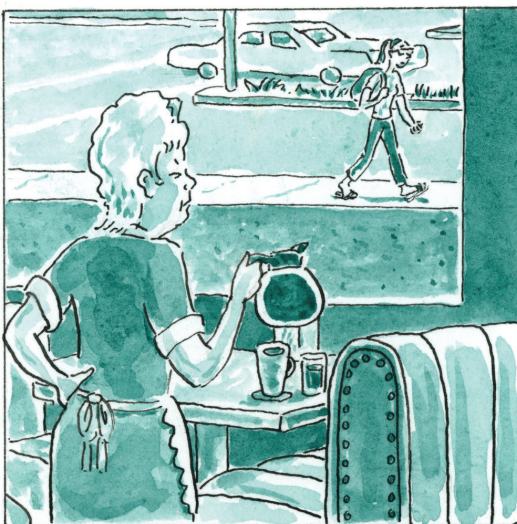


I ADMIRE THE WAITRESSES AT
DAVE'S, BECAUSE THEY ARE
NO-SHIT GAL'S WITH NAMES
LIKE BEA AND MYRNA, WOMEN
WHO KNOW ABOUT REAL LIFE,
NOT LIKE ME, A SNIVELING,
PRIVILEGED GIRL WHO HAS
DONE NOTHING BUT DRAW,
REPEATEDLY, MANY BUS
INTERIORS, NUMEROUS BUS DEPOTS,
AND COUNTLESS COFFEE SHOPS IN
ORDER TO TRY TO PIN DOWN
REAL LIFE.

I SHOULD ALSO ADD THAT I HAVE SPENT TOO MUCH TIME ALONE IN MY ROOM WITH TOM WAITS ALBUMS.



THESE WAITRESSES ARE NOT DISPOSED TO THINK KINDLY OF ME. ART STUDENTS ARE NOT GOOD TIPPERERS.



I NEED SOMETHING NEW.

I GET TO THIS PLACE. I'D ASSUMED IT WAS AN ABANDONED CHINESE RESTAURANT.



BUT THE SIGN SAYS "OPEN."



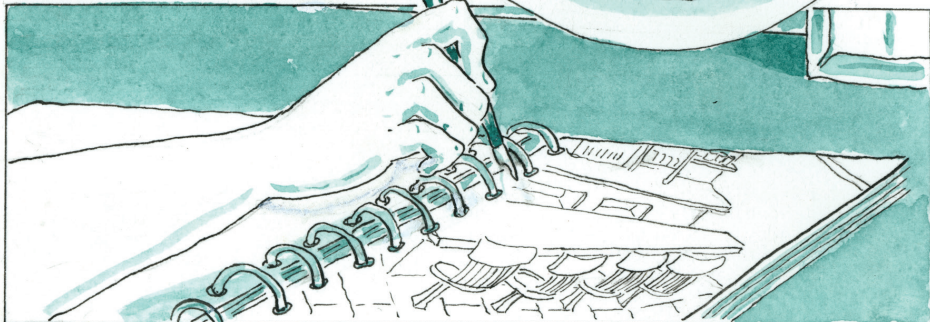
THE MINUTE I OPEN THE FRONT DOOR, THE SMELL OF COFFEE IS OVERWHELMING AND NARCOTIC,



TO MY SURPRISE, INSTEAD OF A TEENY, FACTORY-SEALED PLASTIC CONTAINER OF NON-DAIRY PRODUCT LIKE THEY GIVE YOU AT DAVE'S...



SHE GIVES ME A TINY BEAKER OF REAL CREAM ALONG WITH MY COFFEE.

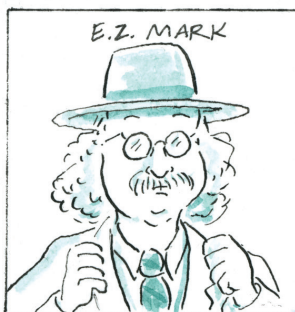


EVEN THOUGH I TOLD MYSELF I WOULDN'T, I PULL MY SKETCHBOOK OUT OF MY BACKPACK AND GET OUT MY FOUNTAIN PEN. I BEGIN TO DRAW THE WHOLE TABLEAU HERE.

AND NOW THIS GUY WHO IS NOT CHINESE, WHO HAS TWIRLED IN WITH THE CHINESE PARSLEY, PLOPS DOWN ON THE SEAT NEXT TO ME.

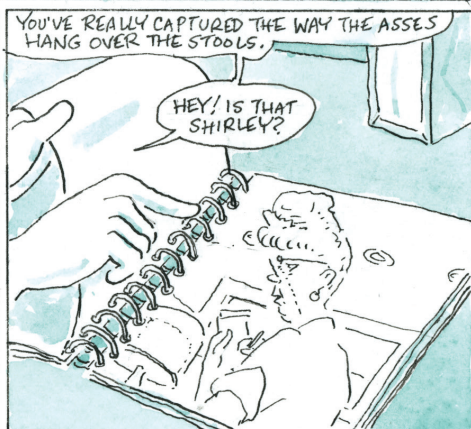
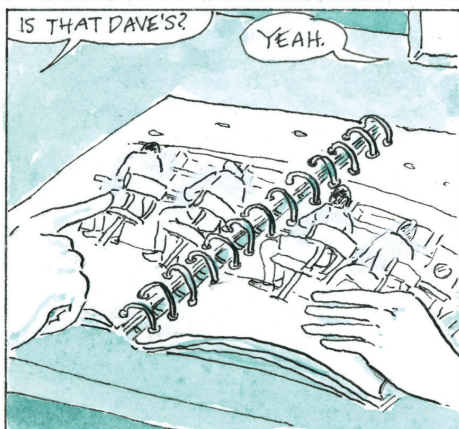


I INSTANTLY RECOGNIZE THE COMIC, DRUGGY ALTER EGO, ONE OF THOSE THINGS PEOPLE, ANYWHERE FROM TWO TO TWENTY YEARS OLDER THAN ME LIKE TO DO, GIVE THEMSELVES SILLY ALIASES:



THE SUBTEXT IS THE CONCEIT THAT THEY ARE ACTUALLY SO SUBVERSIVE AND DANGEROUS (SOMETHING TO DO WITH DRUGS OR REVOLUTION) THAT THEY MUST TRAVEL UNDER ASSUMED NAMES. I MISSED THE COUNTERCULTURAL BOAT BY BEING JUST A LITTLE TOO YOUNG, I USED TO REGRET THAT. THE LAST COUPLE OF YEARS, THOUGH, THE WHOLE HIPPIE THING HAS STARTED TO GET ON MY NERVES.

BUT LAZLO MERENGUE'S FACE IS WIDE AND OPEN. I CAN'T DISLIKE HIM.



I DECIDE TO TELL HIM MY SHIRLEY STORY.



LAZLO THROWS BACK HIS HEAD AND CACKLES. HE HAS SUCH A WELCOMING LAUGH.



IT IS A BUBBLING FOUNTAIN OF ENTRE NOUS.

HE CERTAINLY IS FORTH-
COMING, A SWITCH FROM
THE BROODING, WILLFULLY
OBLIQUE BOYS WHO'VE
BEEN DRIVING ME CRAZY
FOR THE LAST THREE
YEARS OF ART SCHOOL.
ABRUPTLY, I BLURT OUT:



I AM LONELY AND LUMPISH. I LACK ANY INSTINCT FOR THE
FEMALE MYSTERY.

THERE IS ONLY THE SMALLEST AWKWARD HALF-BEAT.



OH, SWEETIE,

I'VE GOT A
WIFE AND
KIDS. FOUR.

BUT I'M
FLATTERED
THAT YOU
ASKED.

HE PICKS UP MY SKETCHBOOK AGAIN.



ALL RIGHT!

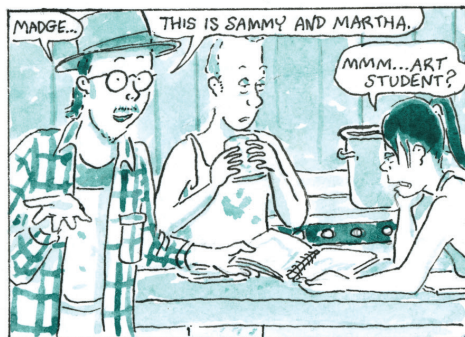
THE
IMPERIAL
ACHIEVES
IMMORTALITY
AT LAST!

I GET AN IDEA.
THIS IS ONE OF
THOSE MINGY,
FREELOADING
THINGS I HAVE
LEARNED TO DO
AS A STUDENT.





...SAYS LAZLO, CHANGING MY IDENTITY IN AN INSTANT.



SAMMY EXAMINES MY DRAWING AT EXTREMELY CLOSE RANGE.

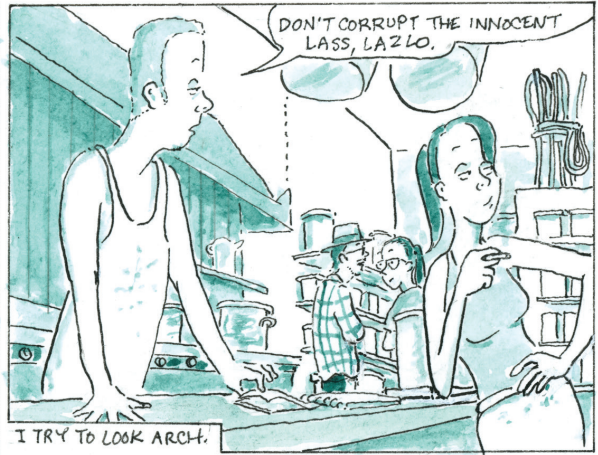


LAZLO GIVES ME THE TOUR.



AND THIS IS THE PANTRY, WHERE WE EAT OUR SHIFT MEALS.

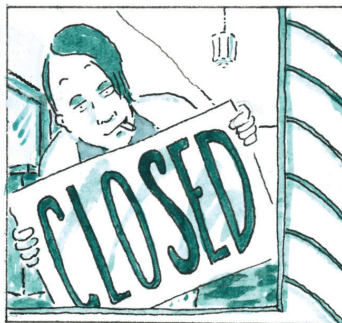




I KNOW YOU HAVE TO BEHAVE AS THOUGH DRUGS ARE SIMPLY MISCHIEVOUS FUN. THIS IS BEFORE THEY BECOME A MAJOR THEME.



ALL OF THIS SEEMS SO FAMILIAR THAT I FIND MYSELF TRYING TO REMEMBER WHERE AND WHEN I MET THESE PEOPLE. IT SEEMS LIKE WE'VE ALREADY KNOWN EACH OTHER FOR YEARS...



I AM TRYING TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO STICK AROUND, BUT...



I AM REMINDED THAT THESE PEOPLE, UNLIKE ME, ARE ACTUALLY WORKING.

