

## The Lost Art

by Anka Dangan

A stuffed gorilla dressed in a fuchsia string bikini, sunning itself shamelessly in a lawn chair on a business park sidewalk, is first to meet and greet all VA-VA VOOM customers. Once inside this swimsuit shop, loud oranges, yellows, reds and blues scream from all corners of the walls. In the showroom, not much larger than 400 square feet, one can easily feel claustrophobic as swarms of swimsuits begin to close in.

A faux version of speckled granite wallpaper clings to the cash wrap desk. A miniature inflatable doll wearing a pink and white polk-a-dot bikini graces the countertop. Next to her a thick glass vase hugs seven fully bloomed but never dying red roses. Behind the counter a tribute to the United States hangs valiantly at the top of the ceiling. The first faceout displays an American flag string bikini, the other an army fatigues swimsuit, the third a red, white, and blue Budweiser-print string bikini.

A memory collage covers the mirror behind the counter. Pictures of children sitting on a swingset, a postcard from France, a photograph of a 1980's bride and groom, and several Polaroids of girls posing in bikinis bring life to the decrepit gray walls. A sheet of white lined paper distinguishes itself from the rest of the taped art. Trimmed with hand-drawn hearts and colored rainbows, the homemade greeting card says:

*My nana lives upstairs  
She loves to sew  
She is my mommy's mommy  
Nana loves chocolate  
She makes me pretty clothes  
and I love her  
Happy grandparents day!*

There is still no sign of a shop owner. A minute or so passes before the proprietor comes out from the back room.

She looks just as laid back as the stuffed gorilla. Wearing white sweats paired with an oversized cheetah-print silk blouse, and brown men's socks tucked into a pair of lambskin moccasins, Jeanne Cancelleri aims for comfort. At seventy-three, Jeanne's barrel-shaped body has shrunk to a liberal five feet. Cropped strands of silver form her crown of glory. Heavy black crayon lines the lids of her faded green Irish eyes. Hands steady as a surgeon's yet wilted as leather have kept this seamstress in business. Jeanne is the oldest renter in the Cypress business park. She has been at the same location for over fourteen years.

With only an hour and a half left 'til closing, Jeanne's willingness to entertain customers begins to fade. Who can blame her? After all, every Monday evening at 7:00 p.m., she earns a weekend pass to twenty-four hours of freedom. Though Jeanne usually spends her only day off working, she still looks forward to running to the bank, Post Office, and grocery store, then returning in time to fix a pork roast dinner for her grandkids.

This particular Tuesday, however, she spent most of her time trying to salvage a

leaky fridge.

Wednesday morning is busier than usual. She has an appointment with an ATM technician. After fourteen years of being a CASH ONLY store, Jeanne has decided it's time to purchase a debit machine. Jeanne's son-in-law, who drives her to work daily, helps her navigate through this new technology. Jeanne does not like the idea of having to spend \$850 to install this gadget. She also does not like having to pay a monthly service charge of \$10. But what can she do? Times are changing.

Jeanne is no different from any other seventy-year-old woman. She's like a dying dinosaur. She doesn't like change. She remembers when hairspray first came out and how times have changed since then. Women's bodies have changed, the styles of suits have changed, California has changed . . . everything just keeps changing.

Jeanne remembers the first day she came to California. It was 1946. She was only fourteen years old when her family hopped into an RV and drove from Akron, Ohio to California. The streets of Pasadena looked like gold. There were palm trees everywhere. And the people—there were pretty people everywhere. Not like Akron. Goodyear Tires had a big manufacturing plant in Akron and the pollution made everyone's skin bad. But in California everything was clear. You could see the mountains from miles away.

Orange trees. There were lots of orange trees too. In fact, orange trees were the only islands separating the two sides of traffic during the 1940's. Because there wasn't much traffic back then people could just stop their cars and pick oranges right off the center dividers. But that is not the case today. Today, in some parts of California, you can't even paint your house the color you want much less build a fence without getting permission.

Jeanne recalls a story about a gentleman who was recently sued on People's Court for wanting to build a platform in his backyard. His neighbors thought the platform was too high and therefore was encroaching on their privacy. Jeanne doesn't understand this kind of protest. She believes that everyone has a unique idea of what is beautiful and what is not. She also believes this is precisely what causes neighbors to get into rifts. "Everyone wants different things. But this guy, he just wanted to build a paradise in his backyard."

Jeanne always starts her day with coffee. But today, the debit machine demonstration interrupts her morning ritual. She pounds her first cup of black coffee at 11:30 a.m. and tops it off with a USA Gold value-priced cigarette. Jeanne tries not to smoke in the store. Leaning on the entrance door, she takes in the tar and the empty parking lot.

Back at the counter, her disposition has changed. Jeanne's shoulders sink to her side; the deep lines around her mouth soften. She appears more at ease despite her raspy voice. She smacks her lips together. With only minutes to spare till noon, Jeanne prepares to clean, cut, and sew.

Before she goes to the back room, the room where all the sewing takes place, Jeanne fiddles with the radio. She wants to listen to the Peace of Mind CD while she works, but can't seem to find the CD button. The boombox delivers nothing but static radio frequency. Jeanne doesn't know much about radios. Her daughter bought this radio and the CD inside it last Christmas. This is the only CD that Jeanne listens to

because it sounds like waves crashing on the shore. The two young girls that used to work for her loved listening to hip-hop. It drove Jeanne crazy.

Technology bugs Jeanne. She is as hopeless with the remote control as she is with the radio. She thinks she's stupid for not knowing how to operate a computer, debit machine or cell phone. In truth she deliberately avoids using these gadgets. Once, though, Jeanne came very close to dabbling with computers. It was during the 1950's when she was working for O'Keefe & Merritt, an oven manufacturer. She held a position in the payroll department for two to three years—until the company asked her to relocate back East for computer training. Jeanne hated the idea of working on computers so much that she quit her job. Jeanne hated wearing business casual and sitting at a desk even more.

The oven manufacturing job presented many firsts for Jeanne. It was the first and last time she would work a 9 to 5 job. It was also the first and last time she would ever have to answer to anyone but herself. Jeanne spent most of her twenties running a restaurant with her husband. She dedicated her thirties and forties to a catering business.

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A seventeen-year-old Asian girl walks into the store. Jeanne forgets about her battle with the boombox and makes her way to the counter.

“Hello, Hon. Can I help you?”

“No, just looking,” she says. The lone customer makes herself at home. She plops onto the floor and starts rummaging through the \$1.00 bikini bin. She finds a handful of possibilities and asks to try them on. “I have eleven, do you want to count?”

“No, honey. That's okay,” Jeanne replies.

The customer spends an eternity behind the closed curtain. Twenty-five minutes pass and still no decision on the suits. Meanwhile Jeanne closes the open cash drawer and props herself onto the stool behind the counter. She waits.

The phone rings.

*Good afternoon, VA VA VOOM.*

*Speaking, yes, yes.*

*I can't understand a word you are saying.*

*It's too fast and too sharp.*

*Yes ma'am.*

*Yes ma'am.*

*I don't think so.*

*Okay, bye bye.*

That was American Express soliciting Jeanne for business. Jeanne closed her account with American Express six months ago. She enjoyed using this card for years, especially when traveling to Europe. Her husband Joe was the primary cardholder; Jeanne, being his wife, received a second card in her name. Together, they had been loyal cardholders since 1970. But when Joe died in 1992, Jeanne forgot to take his name off the account. Apparently American Express forgot as well. That is until Jeanne's purse was stolen last Thanksgiving.

As soon as Jeanne discovered that her wallet had been stolen during a trip to the grocery store, she called the police, her bank, and the credit card companies. Although panic did not set in until twenty-four hours later because she had paid for the groceries with cash. It was only when Chase called to confirm a \$990 purchase that Jeanne realized she was in trouble.

Jeanne spent an entire Saturday trying to straighten out this mess. Matters got worse when she called American Express and Sears to close the accounts. She received a lashing from both companies. They told her that they could not speak with anyone but Joe Cancelleri since he was the primary account holder. Moreover, if she wanted to close the accounts, Joe would have to put in the call. Jeanne was furious. She told them, "My husband has been dead for fourteen years now. What do you expect me to do? I'm the one who pays off the charges every month." The credit card companies made her feel as if she were doing something illegal. She thinks they had something against her. Like she wasn't good enough to be a cardholder on her own.

The lone customer finally tears the curtain open. She decides to purchase three bikini tops, but not before she does a final run through the \$10 Mix-n-Match bin.

It is 1:15 p.m. The phone rings again.

*Good afternoon, VA VA VOOM.*

*Yes ma'am.*

*Go right ahead, ma'am.*

*When did you want to come in?*

*I can't hear you too well.*

*You don't need an appointment.*

*Okay, bye bye.*

Another caller on a cell phone. Sounds like an echo chamber.

This is it—Jeanne's first sale of the day. Eager to make her purchase, the young Asian girl approaches the counter. The total comes to \$3.21. The customer only has \$3. Jeanne says, "That's okay hun. Just give me the \$3. That's fine. Here let me get you a bag. There you go love. Bye bye."

Time for a cigarette break.

Another hour passes without a single customer in sight. Jeanne figures it's time to settle down and get some work done. It is 2:15 p.m.

Jeanne heads to the back room. She gets ready to cut and sew black Lycra material. Inventory has been low on black bikini bottoms for weeks now. Girls like black bikinis. They think black makes them look slender. Jeanne positions herself in the coffee-stained swivel chair, puts on her eyeglasses, and begins to feed the Lycra through the needle's steel plate.

Jeanne has been sewing since she was five. Her grandma sat her on push-pedal sewing machine when she was just a kid and taught her how to sew. Everybody in the South sewed, even her uncles. They used to make the kids' dresses out of flour sacks. They would wash the sacks out real well, hang 'em to dry, and then turn 'em into the most beautiful cotton dresses. But sadly, according to Jeanne, "sewing has become a lost art."

Before WWII, most women stayed home to cook, clean, and sew for their families. It was a normal way of life. Then when the war came most of the men went

into the service and the women had to work in the factories. The women got a taste of working outside the home and soon they stopped sewing. Consequently, sewing has become a lost art. Women don't want to hassle with sewing anymore. By the time they buy a pattern for \$7 and spend \$3 per yard for material, which isn't even quality, they've already spent \$20. They'd much rather go out and buy a dress for that money than waste their time sewing. Plus, they don't have time to sew. Nowadays, both husband and wife have to work to make ends meet.

Jeanne's only granddaughter, Madison, takes sewing classes. Jeanne forgets the name of the sewing center but she remembers that women from her generation teach the class. They meet once a week for two hours and the kids always leave with a finished product. This makes 'em feel proud. Madison has already made a couple of decorative pillows and once she even made a purse from an old pair of Levis jeans. Jeanne gave Madison a sewing machine when she was nine years old. She is ten now. Jeanne believes it's important to teach kids early.

Jeanne tried to teach her own kids to sew. Her youngest daughter, Jody, never learned. But her oldest daughter, Jaime, learned to sew when she was in grade school. She left the craft during high school and picked it up again when she became a mother. Though she did not have the luxury of sewing clothes for long. Jaime was killed in a car accident in 1981. She was just twenty years old when she died. Robbie, her son, was just eleven months old when he became motherless.

Jeanne does not like to talk about her daughter's death. She only mentions her daughter in passing when she talks about her grandson Robbie. She keeps a picture of him on her memory mirror behind the counter. He is all grown up now—about twenty-five or so. When he graduated from high school in Oregon, he came down to California to live with Jeanne. The five years they spent together were wonderful. Robbie would help Jeanne carry the groceries up the stairs, dine with her, and lock the doors at night. She misses Robbie terribly. But he could not weather the cost of living in Southern California. So, he moved back to Oregon to live closer to his father.

Jeanne looks forward to Memorial Day weekend because Robbie is coming to visit. He wants to spend his birthday weekend with his grandma.

Jeanne enjoys celebrating life. But she frowns upon things that remind her of the fleeting nature of life. In fact, she refuses to go to funerals. Jeanne believes that by the time a person reaches her age, he grows tired of looking at death. One day she sat down and figured out that between her and her husband's family, only six members remain. She has lost nineteen aunts and uncles, eleven in-laws, her mother, her father, her middle sister, her husband, and her first-born daughter during the last two decades. Now only Jeanne, her daughter Jody, her son-in-law Bill, and her three grandkids—Robbie, Madison, and Marshall—remain. This Memorial Day weekend will be the first time her entire family is under one roof.

Jeanne finishes feeding the Lycra material to the needle. An impressive zigzag stitch appears on the outskirts of the bikini bottom in less than twenty minutes. She attributes such precision to her Kenmore sewing machine, the one she bought from Sears years ago. Most seamstresses depend on commercial sewing machines to give them the greatest return on their time and money. But no heavy-duty sewing machines for Jeanne. She says, "I can't help it. I'm just too old-fashioned. I can't part from my plain old sewing machine."

Still, a sewing machine is only as good as its captain. Sewing suits is not an easy job. The hardest part of sewing a suit is trying to control the Lycra fabric in such a way that the stitching doesn't veer off course. Jeanne should know. She went through a stack of seamstresses trying to find someone, anyone, who might possess this unique ability to control elastic.

First, there was the Mexican seamstress. Jeanne explains, "I couldn't speak Mexican and she couldn't speak English, but when I gave her a few Halloween costumes to sew she did a good job. As she should. Halloween costumes are made of cotton. Cotton is much easier to handle than elastic." It was a different story altogether when Jeanne gave her five thongs to sew. She couldn't even recognize the suits much less sell them. Jeanne believes it takes a bit more knowledge in handling elastic than seamstresses realize.

Then there was the Samoan. She appeared two feet taller and wider than Jeanne. Even so, Jeanne gave her a chance. When it came time for instruction, the Samoan seamstress became confrontational. As the intimidating apprentice sat there watching Jeanne sew she said, "You're doing it wrong. You not supposed to sew a suit like that." Jeanne knew it wouldn't work out. In fact, none of the seamstresses ever worked out.

From that moment on Jeanne decided to do all the sewing herself. After all, she was the only one who could handle stretchy material. Jeanne realizes that sewing swimsuits is not for everyone. Sometimes she even wonders how she became so skilled without ever taking a single sewing class. What's more puzzling is that Jeanne never imagined sewing suits for a living. She just got thrown into it.

It was back in 1977, when Jeanne's daughter's friend, Desiree, moved in with the Cancellaris. Desiree, or Dizzy Desie, as Jeanne likes to call her, was competing in a beauty pageant and needed a swimsuit. Dizzy Desie bought a one-piece bathing suit but it didn't fit her petite 5'5" body. She asked Jeanne if she could alter the suit. Jeanne tried but did not succeed. Her only other option was to take the entire suit apart and start from scratch. Jeanne finished the suit. It fit Dizzy Desie just right.

Jeanne can't remember if Dizzy Desie won the pageant. But she does remember that Dizzy Desie possessed an entrepreneurial spirit well beyond her years. At just sixteen, she negotiated her first business deal with Jeanne. Dizzy Desie asked Jeanne to make twelve French Wrap bathing suits so she could go to the beach and sell them. And sell she did—almost all twelve in one day. Dizzy Desie paid Jeanne for the material and pocketed the rest. Each suit sold for \$20. The overhead was no more than \$7.

Soon after, Jeanne was on her way to mass-producing swimsuits. Though Jeanne was too old to put on a suit and advertise it like Dizzy Desie, she was not too old to sell suits at the swapmeet. She landed a spot at the Cypress College swapmeet twenty-six years ago. It was the type of gig that meshed with a fifty-year-old woman. She worked weekends only and had the rest of the week to finish special orders. She earned enough money for cigarettes and gas. Plus, it kept her busy.

Jeanne would have never left the swapmeet. She loved not having to be confined to a store for six days a week. But when her husband Joe died she had no choice. There was no one to help her set up and tear down the booth any longer.

Joe Cancelleri was born to Sicilian immigrants who settled in New York during the early 1920's. Joe moved to California after having served in WWII. He became smitten by California, particularly by the Hollywood Jazz scene. When Jeanne met Joe

he was working as a road manager for Peggy Lee, the famous Jazz singer of the 1940's, and her husband, Dave Barbour, the guitarist in Benny Goodman's band. Joe stopped working for Peggy after just one year into his marriage with Jeanne. Joe was thirty. Jeanne was twenty.

A decade passed before they started a family. Jeanne's doctors were upset with her for waiting so long. They told her that she would have greater complications with delivery because her female organs were more mature than those of a sixteen-year-old. This did not scare Jeanne. She was happy with her decision.

Joe spent thirty years trying to provide for his family. He worked as a restaurateur, a real estate agent, and a photographer. When that got to be too overwhelming he went into the furniture business. Joe retired from selling furniture in his early 60's and started investing time in Jeanne and her swimsuits.

Joe passed away in March of 1992, during Jeanne's twelfth year at the swapmeet. After her husband's death, Jeanne took a five-month hiatus from suit making. By the time she decided to go back, it was August and swimsuit season was nearing its end. Jeanne had to improvise. She figured she could rent a storefront across from the swapmeet, and make her bread-and-butter Halloween costumes. Jeanne had intended on renting the storefront for only two months (October-December 1992). But somehow two months has turned into fourteen years.

Jeanne can't imagine doing anything else for a living. She has yet to grow tired of sewing. She has been sewing all her life. Jeanne sewed school clothes for her girls from grade school well into their teen years. She remains proud of the fact that she could make her children's clothes from scratch while other parents shelled out hundreds of dollars for back-to-school clothes. She also made shirts and pants for her husband before he retired. She even made both of her daughters' wedding gowns. A true privilege for Jeanne as she continues to sew for leisure and profit.

Yet, customers, not money, keep Jeanne coming back for more. Jeanne believes, "money's no good if you're miserable earning it. Whether there's money or not, I enjoy coming here every day." Jeanne enjoys work because of the customers. She boasts, "my customers are loyal to the letter. One of my girls, Michelle, has been with me since she was thirteen years old. She is thirty now and married. She still sends me postcards."

From time to time, Jeanne's customers ask if she's ever going to quit. Jeanne says, "I'm gonna have to quit. I'm gonna die someday." They say, "No. You can't die."

Jodi, the surviving daughter, and Bill, her husband, would also like to think that Jeanne will live forever. They moved in with Jeanne shortly after Joe died in March of 1992. Jodi and Bill were married in September of 1991 and were living in Newport Beach at the time. These newlyweds spent nearly every weekend with Jeanne so that she did not have to grieve alone. But they soon grew tired of the gypsy lifestyle. Jeanne knew it had become taxing to them. Instead of moving back to the comfort of their own home, Jodi and Bill decided to merge their lives with Jeanne under one roof. Since Bill is in construction, he agreed to build Jeanne a 1200-square-foot. apartment above the Cancelleri garage. Jeanne, her daughter, her son-in-law, and her two grandkids have shared the same residence for the last thirteen years.

Still, Jeanne thinks a lot can change during the next ten years. "My granddaughter will be twenty, my grandson will be seventeen and me, well, I might be dead. Who

knows? Maybe Jodi and Bill won't even want to live in my house anymore. It will be too big and too empty for them. It's just too difficult to keep up with."

Jeanne made three bikini bottoms on Monday. Today she finishes one. Bikini ties take up the rest of her time, piled in a cardboard box like long cords of black licorice. Jeanne grabs what appears to be a silver skewer and pulls it through a 3-foot long bikini string. The purpose of a "turner" is to pull a thin strand of material from the outside in so the seams don't show.

Ties can be tedious. First Jeanne has to cut the material, sew the edges together, cut off the excess string, and then flip the material with the turner. Each bikini requires three strands of string—one wraps around the neck and shoulders, the second wraps around the chest to the middle of the back, the third is pulled through the bikini bottom right at the hips.

Jeanne used to order bikini strings from a manufacturer. That is, until customers grew increasingly touchy about their strings. Once a customer complained that the strings on her bikini fell apart in less than a year. Jeanne fixed that problem. She started making her own. She has not received a complaint since.

Tie time is interrupted. Jeanne suddenly remembers the customer who called earlier and promised she'd be over right away. "I wonder what happened to her? I told her she didn't need an appointment to come in. And no one else came in today except that little Asian girl." These things puzzle Jeanne. She doesn't understand why a customer would say one thing and do another.

Jeanne finishes the last bikini string. She leaves her sewing machine and heads towards the showroom. Time for another cigarette break. Leaning on the entrance door, staring into the empty parking lot, Jeanne says, "I sure wish I'd get some customers. I could use some. It's nice out today. I wonder where everybody's at?"