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Front yard angels show off spirit of ailing woman

By Jennifer Warnick
Herald Writer

EVERETT -- Back when being neighbors was less of a geographic distinction and more of a relationship, nearly every neighborhood had a Cleo Rodgers.

She's the one who invites all the kids on the street to use her pool in the summer. She even takes a dip with them.

She's the one who, with her bright red walker, strolls the mile and a half up and down Federal Avenue chatting with the neighbors who are out getting their mail, taking the trash out or gardening.

She loves knowing everyone and loves helping neighbors meet each other.

She's festive, too, and loves the Christmas season. She shares her paintings and crafts with the people who live around her.

Today, rather than being home with her family, 86-year-old Cleo Rodgers is in a hospital bed at Providence Everett Medical Center.

After staying active for years and maintaining a full social calendar of Beta Sigma Phi luncheons and activities at the First Presbyterian Church on Wetmore Avenue, Rodgers fell ill a couple of weeks ago.

Doctors discovered she has pancreatic cancer, and on Tuesday told the gray-haired grandmother and her family that she doesn't have long -- maybe a few weeks.

But while she is away from home, evidence of her latest project on Federal Avenue remains.

Rodgers is an angel planter. As she did last year, Rodgers orchestrated the placing of almost two-dozen painted wooden angels up and down her street.

In summer and fall 2002, she had angel shapes cut from plywood and invited neighbors to paint and individualize an angel for their yards.

Everett Mayor Ray Stephanson, a former neighbor of Rodgers, promised her the wooden stakes from his political signs. Neighbors helped attach the angels to those stakes and stick them in lawns.

Last Christmas Eve, vandals knocked all the angels over. But another neighbor made more plywood cutouts, and Rodgers had more painting parties this year to replace the damaged cutouts.

As part of her frequent walks, Rodgers would ask people if they wanted an angel for the holiday season. If they said yes, an angel would pop up on their lawn.

Seeing the angels delights Rodgers, and others who wander the neighborhood. Once, a preacher from a church across town knocked on her door and told her he wanted to start something similar in his neighborhood.

"I can't tell you where it comes from, exactly," said her daughter, Susan Rodgers of Kingston. "My mother is like Mrs. Santa Claus. She loves giving and adores children. Maybe this is just her little gift of peace and

love."

Driving on the street, the angels vary. There are soccer, baseball and cowboy angels. There are girl, boy, black, white and Asian angels.

"Everywhere an angel," Susan Rodgers said, adding that her mother is creative and loves colors.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Cleo Rodgers' home. She has hot-pink shag carpet in the living room, multicolored Christmas bulbs in her chandelier and a rainbow of colored glass bottles in the dining room window. One entire wall in the living room is covered, floor to ceiling, with framed paintings of flowers. A bright-colored Tiffany-style lamp hangs above the pastel-colored couch.

Another window ledge is packed with dozens of Father Christmas crafts -- stuffed, porcelain and just about every other kind of Santa there is. Rodgers made them all.

Neighbor Rich Nesting said Rodgers loves painting, and every few years would paint the panoramic landscape she can see from her front window. On occasion, she also would have neighbor kids over on a Saturday for watercolor painting classes.

She painted and signed a portrait of Father Christmas for the Nesting family, which hangs in their home every year for the holidays.

"That will always be part of our Christmas decorations," Nesting said.

He said she was the one who helped him get to know other neighbors when he might not have gone out of his way to meet them. She introduced everyone around.

"She's very outgoing and loves to know everyone and to talk to everyone. When we first moved in here, it did not take her long to come over, introduce herself," Nesting said.

Nesting said Rodgers started the angel project because she wanted Federal Avenue to stand out, as does Lollipop Lane in Marysville.

The woman who made a difference in the hearts, minds and yards of Federal Avenue residents is probably too sick to make it home for Christmas.

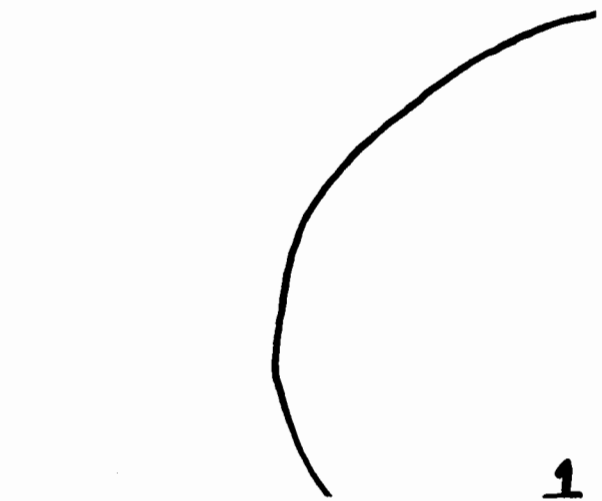
But as long as the angels are there, she will be, too, neighbors say.

Her son, Tom Rodgers, said that thanks to his mother, a 40-year resident of Federal Avenue, there wasn't a stranger in the neighborhood. Only friends.

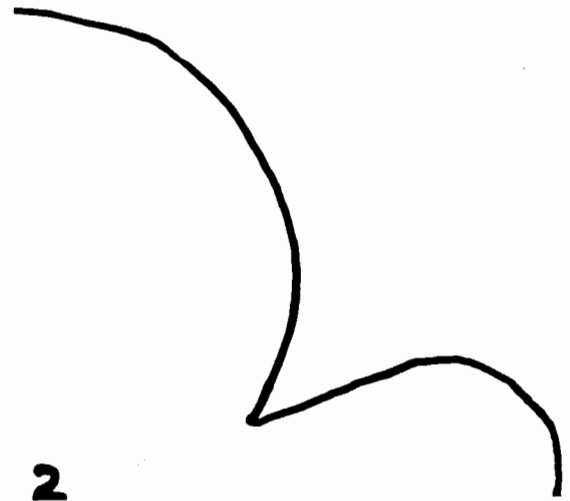
"And she's going to look down on Federal Avenue as an angel one day," he said.

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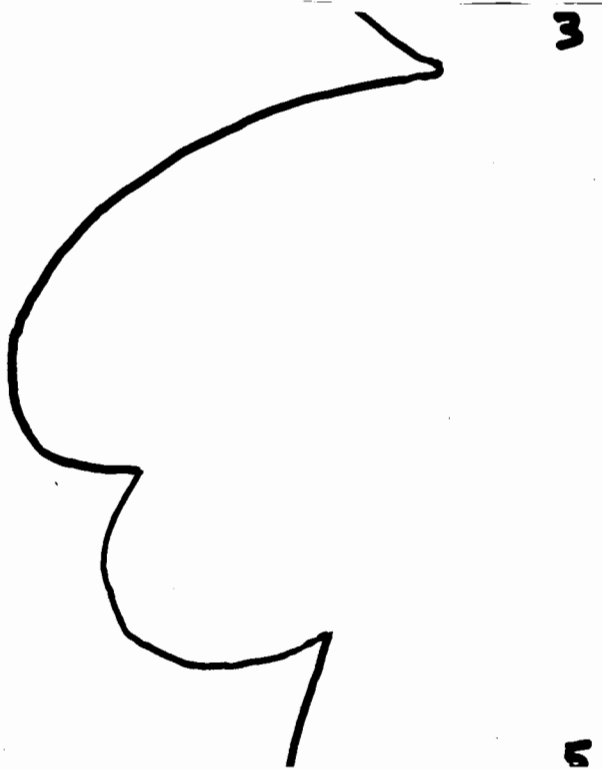




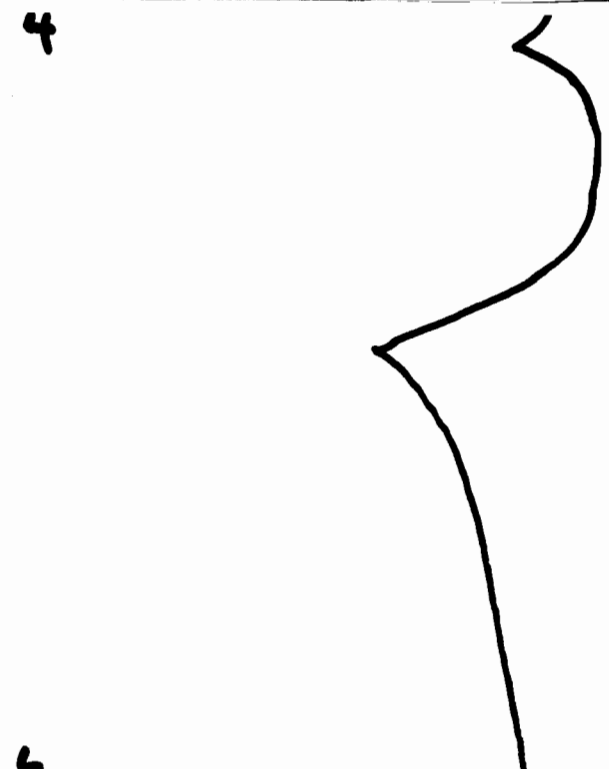
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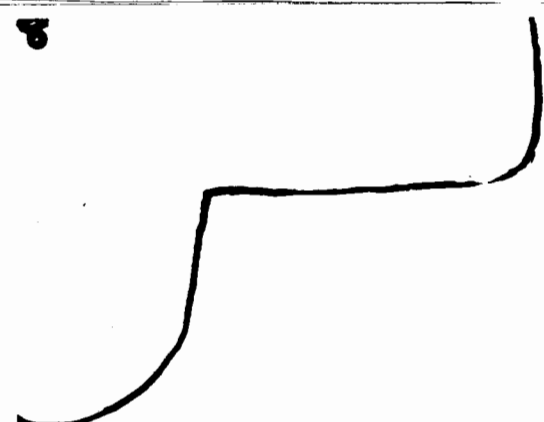
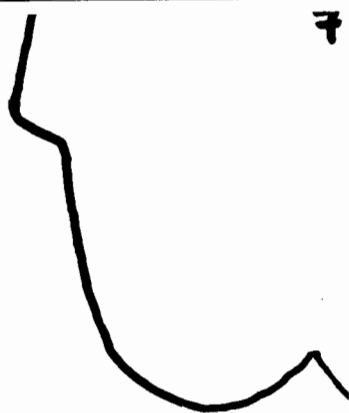
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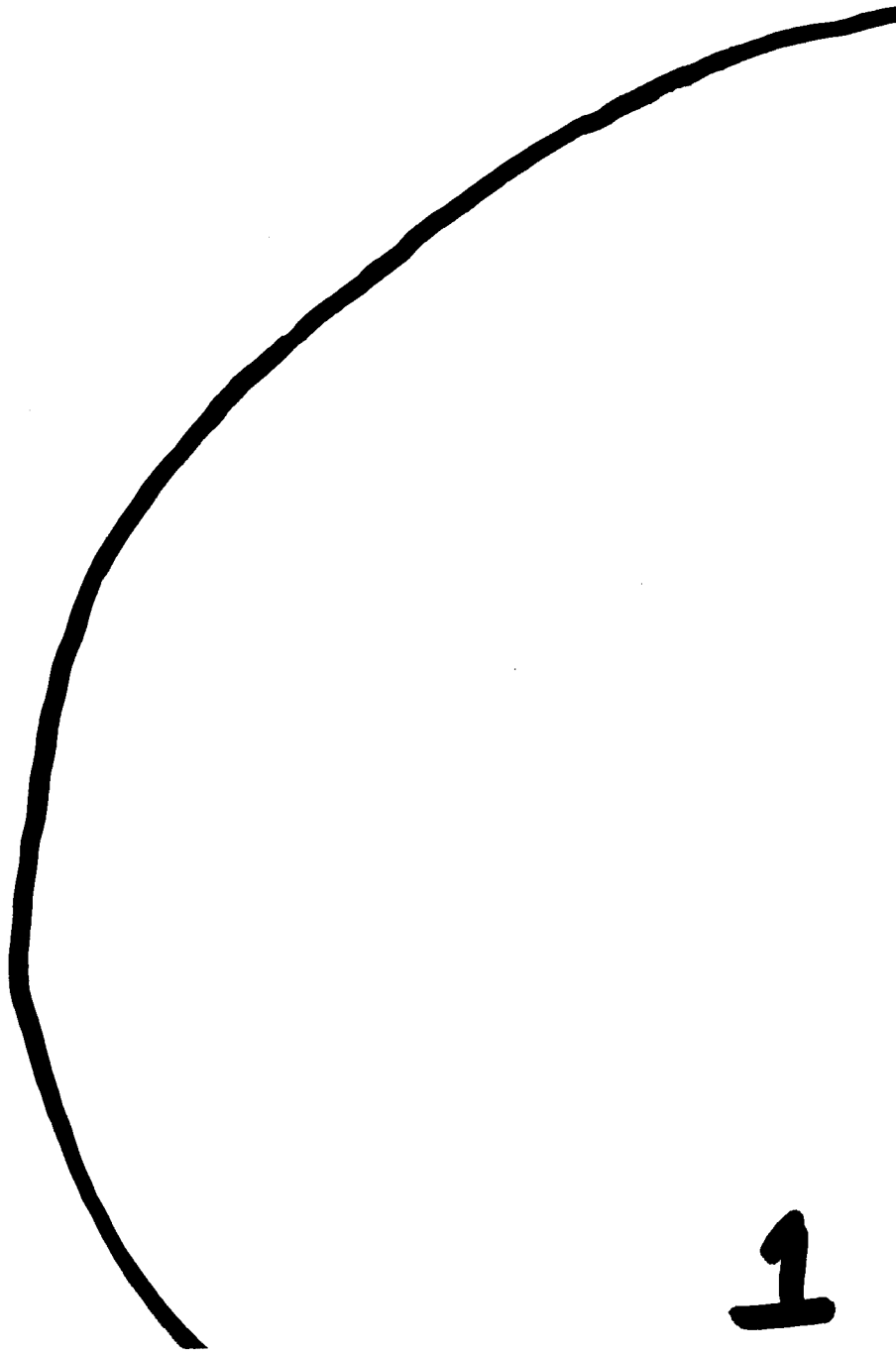


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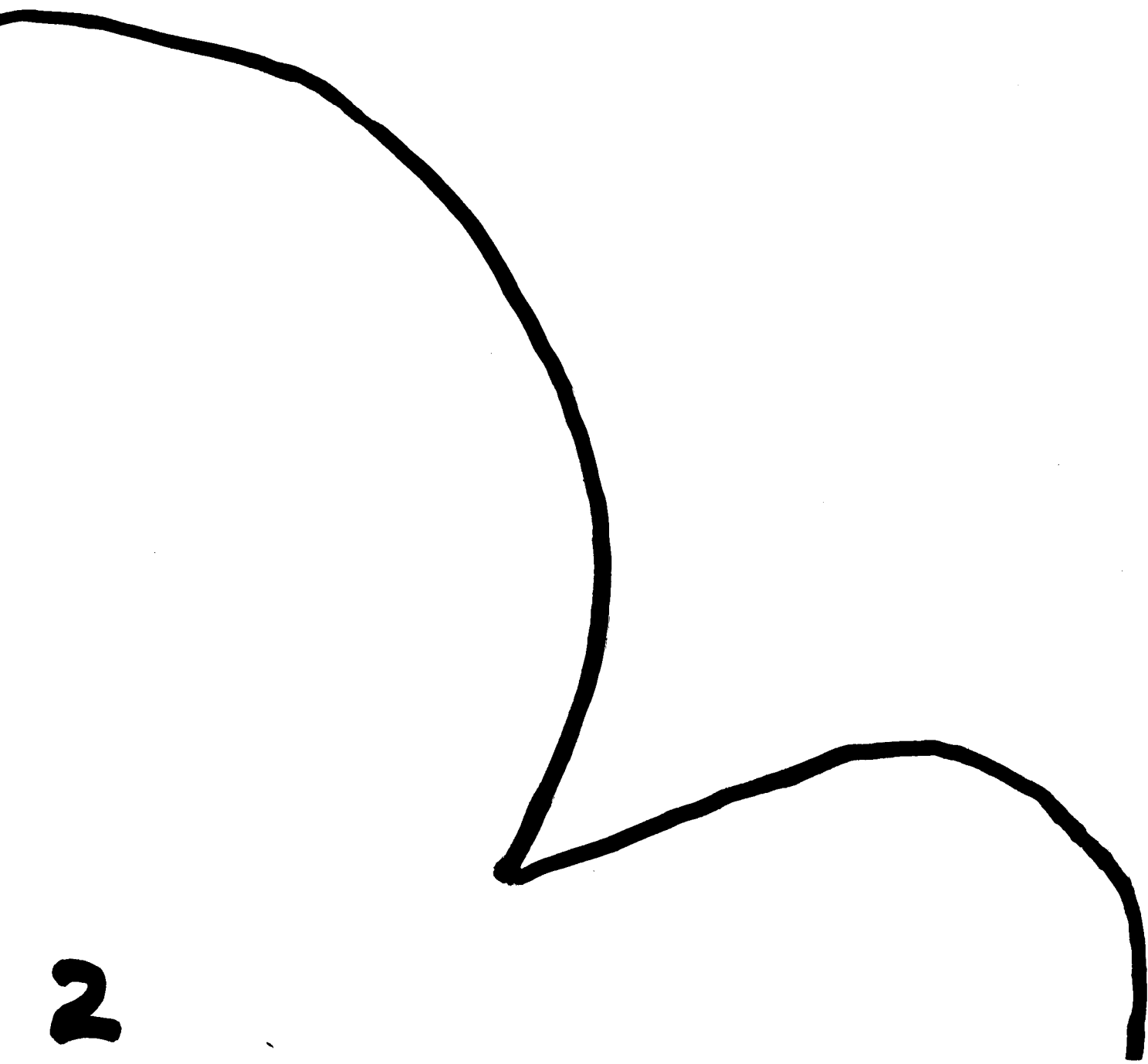


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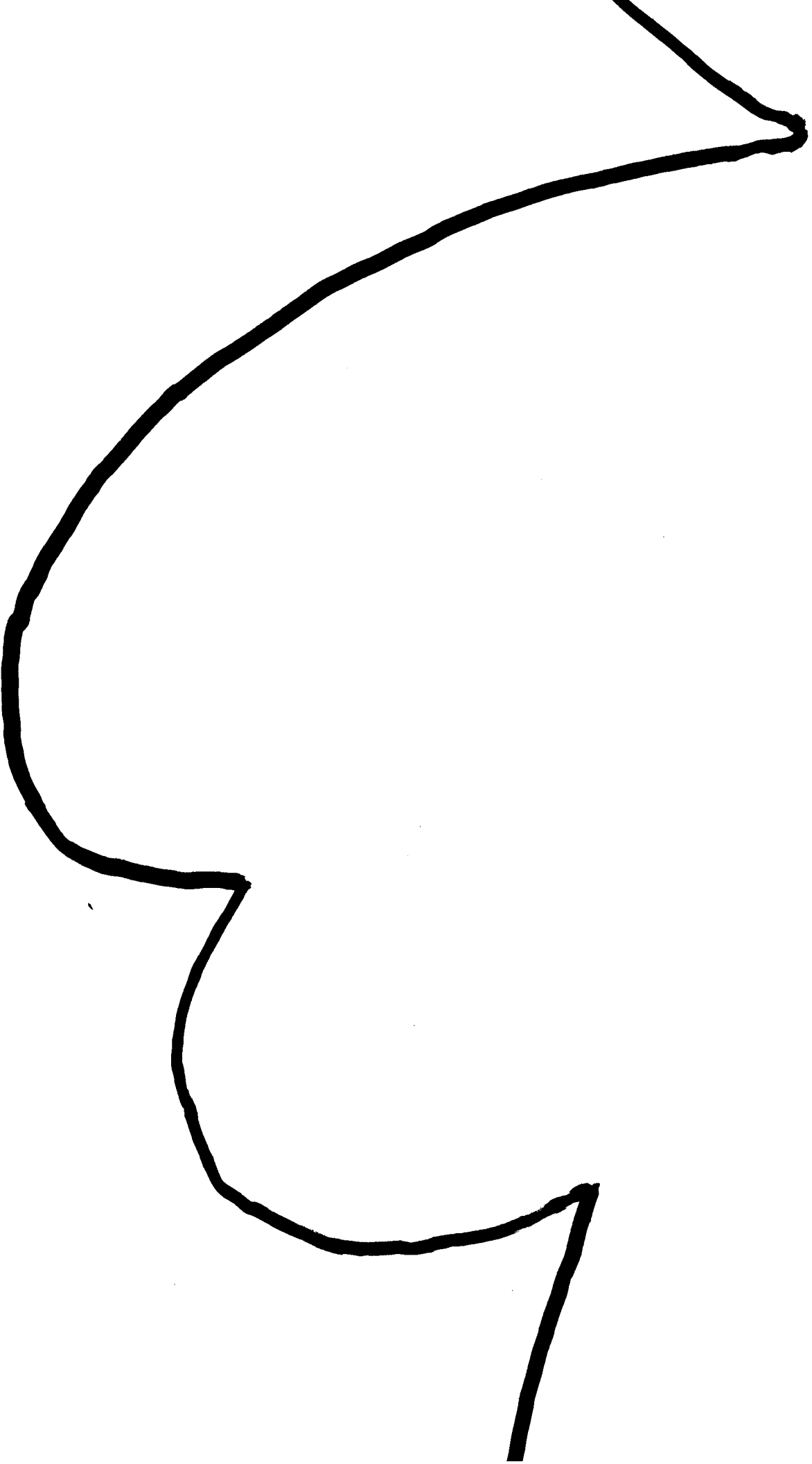


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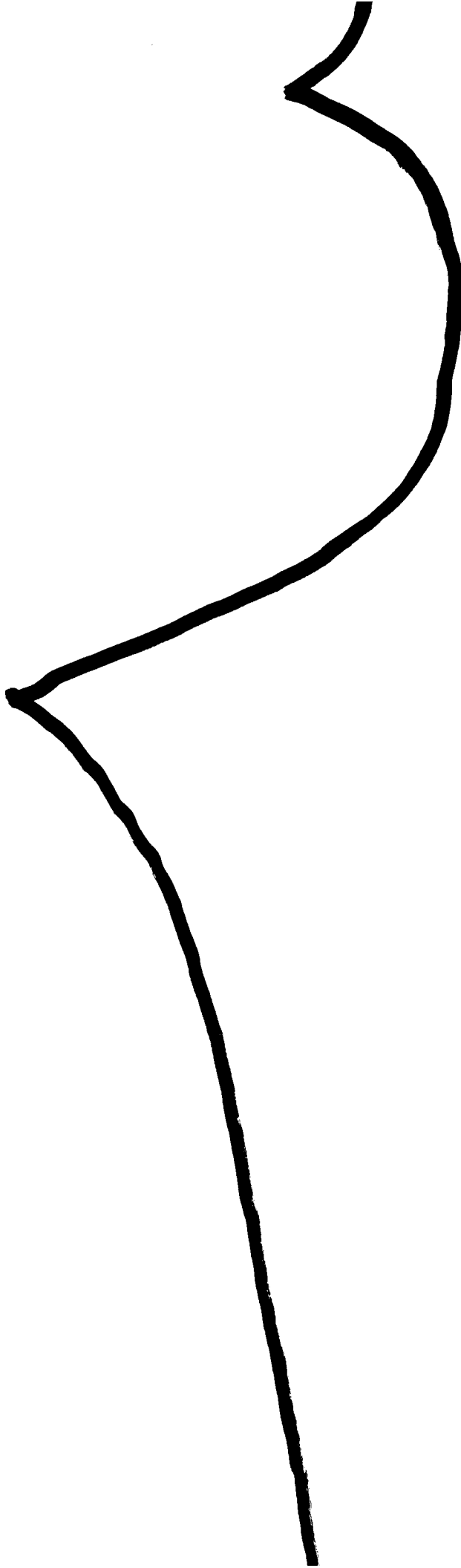
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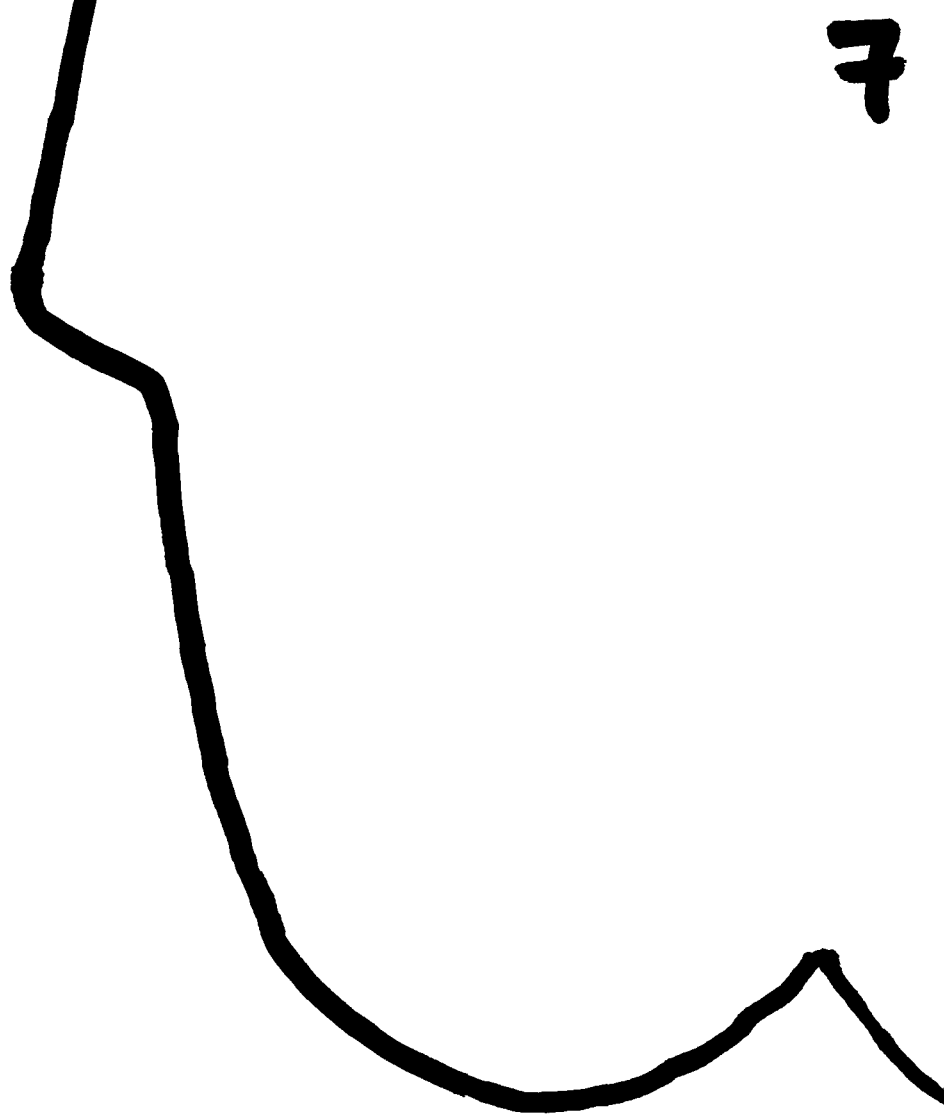


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