

Mary Helen Stefaniak

SELF STORAGE

THE BAG LADY & THE COUNTRY BAND

The country western band was the beginning of the end for me and Nutty Squirrel. I should have known it the first time their van pulled into the parking lot with all its windows broken and the ghost of the words “Forever Green Landscapes” bleeding through brown paint on the sides. We’ve had runaway teenagers out here, migrant workers, illegal immigrants, bag ladies and gentlemen, a battered wife, a farmless farm family from out near Mechanicsville, and a gang of sneak thieves who used 44E to stash their loot. We had a punk rock group back in 1984—their van said “Presto Pest Control,” which turned out to be the name of the group—but we never had a country western band before. Lola said I should have seen it coming.

Knucklehead they call themselves. It fits. Four big guys, and it took them more than an hour to move their stuff into 9W, a 12-by-12-foot unit they jam-packed with at least ten speaker cabinets—all big enough to blow your eardrums out—not to mention keyboards, mike stands, amplifiers, drums, a soundboard studded with knobs and switches, and lights. Thousands and thousands of watts’ worth. If they ever figured out a way to plug in all those lights at once, we’d have a blackout up and down the frontage road this side of the interstate from Randy’s RVs to the standardized testing company. They also have a smoke machine. I couldn’t tell it was a smoke machine from across the parking lot when they were moving in, but Lola spotted it right away. “Look at that,” she said to me. “They have a smoke machine.” I worried about the alarms going off, but Lola said it wasn’t that kind of smoke. What’s a country band doing with a smoke machine, anyway? I asked her. Why all the electronics? Whatever happened to Hank Williams Sr. and Patsy Cline?

“They’re dead,” said Lola.

“What about Willie Nelson, for God’s sake?” You couldn’t picture Willie Nelson with a smoke machine. I couldn’t, anyway.

Lola said, "Times change."

Lola stores a whole household's worth of furniture in 27E. She was in graduate school studying the Philosophical Origins of Contemporary Thought when she discovered the first lump in her breast three years ago. She was thirty-three then. She specialized in guys like Kneecha and Highdigger, whose names she misspells more or less phonetically. A small act of rebellion, she calls it. In the flurry of medical procedures that followed her discovery, her dissertation languished, and philosophy began to seem like a cruel joke anyway, so she stopped paying tuition and got herself a job at the standardized testing company up the road. She started out as a test editor, using her obscure knowledge to find sample reading passages guaranteed to confound the average high school junior, but in the past year and a half she's had too many rounds of radiation and chemotherapy to hold down more than a temporary job. They moved her to the Test Registration Department in the basement. She opens envelopes there. She takes the registration forms full of endless dots out of the envelopes to see if each dot has been darkened completely with a Number 2 pencil. Lola's not the only former Ph.D. candidate opening envelopes down there.

But here's the interesting part. Do you know what happens if you screw up when you fill out your standardized test registration form? if you make stray marks? if you don't erase completely or use a Number 2 pencil to make your marks heavy and black? You know what happens? *They fix it for you.* That's right. After all those warnings in bold-face all-capital letters, if the computer can't read your dots they give your registration form to Lola—or to any one of the dozens of actual human beings sitting at long tables in a big, windowless room with piles of official test registration envelopes to the left of them and computer terminals glowing to their right—and one of them, after ensuring that your check is made out for the proper amount, personally enters your data into the great Central Processing Apparatus. Do as you're told and you get computer-processed. Screw up and they turn you over to the human beings. It's something to think about.

The country band makes a terrific amount of noise. I suppose they figure they've got no neighbors out here to call the police on them. (The standardized testing company doesn't count; Lola says it's so hermetically sealed and secure in there that a Cruise missile could land in

the parking lot and nobody in Test Registration would know it until quitting time.) So the Knuckleheads feel free to practice as loud as they please on Tuesdays and alternate Thursdays, and with their loading up the truck on Friday afternoons and bringing everything back on Sunday, it seems as though they're always around, we never have a moment's peace. The Tuesday/Thursday noise drove out the Bag Lady in 26W—who pretended to the end that we didn't know she was there and vice versa. Lola, who likes the country band, said, well, if the Bag Lady preferred the Muzak in the bus station to live country tunes, then let her go. I pointed out that an aversion to hearing "Take Me Back to Tulsa" taken from the top over and over again said nothing about the Bag Lady's taste, or lack of it, in music. Lola countered by reminding me that it was dehumanizing to call the Bag Lady a bag lady anyway.

"Her name is Emily," Lola said.

"How do you know?" I asked her.

"I saw it on her luggage tag," she said.

"How do you know she didn't pick that suitcase out of a dumpster?"

"It's on her Bible, too."

Now who's violating Bag Lady Emily's human dignity, I wanted to know: me, because I have to call her something, or Lola, who feels free to dig around in her things?

"I wasn't digging around," Lola said. "The Bible and the suitcase were both right out in the open."

"Out in the open behind closed doors," I said, which wasn't really fair of me since I, too, go around to all the officially unoccupied storage units now and again to make sure nobody's dead in any of them or doing anything seriously illegal.

Lola, whose perfect eyebrows had recently grown back in, raised the left one with disdain and said, "If you'd quit complaining long enough, I could show you how to two-step to that music. 'Light feet,'" she added, quoting Kneecha, "'are the first attribute of divinity.'"

With that, she left for work, leaving me to ponder a sobering question: if I couldn't find peace (never mind quiet or solitude) out here at Nutty Squirrel's Self-Storage Mini-Warehouse, among the orphaned things, the homeless goods, the forgotten objects of America, where the heck was I going to find it?

THE COMPANY OF THINGS

This is the kind of thing that can happen. For fifteen years I dissected cockroaches in Dr. Derkson's lab to study certain characteristics of their tiny brains. (Human brains have over 600 million synapses per cubic millimeter of cortex, whereas cockroaches have less than a cubic millimeter of brain all together, but ask yourself this: which is better at holding its territory?) I was Professional Scientific Staff, Researcher III, which means I made a nice little salary, enough to pay the mortgage, the taxes, the insurance, the car payments, the utilities, the telephone bill, the charge cards, and several magazine subscriptions. Then, in 1982, our NIH grant didn't get renewed. Too many labs studying cockroach brains, we heard, though Derkson was crazy enough to insist that animal rights people had something to do with it. Anyway, the lab was kaput. Principal Investigator Derkson was tenured faculty, but I was out the door. Luckily, I didn't have a family counting on me. I tightened my belt and updated my résumé. For two and a half years, the old man wrote me glowing recommendations—couldn't say enough about how skilled and reliable I was—but labs were downsizing all over the place, and when an opening did crop up, there were always ten other people as qualified as I was, and five of them were just as personable, and three were female, and two were better-looking, and one of them got the job. My unemployment ran out in six months, then my savings, and then my Principal Investigator killed himself, so there went my recommendations. I resorted to selling things, starting with the motorcycle and ending with the house. I never expected to fall into my life's work when I went to rent a place to store my meager furnishings, but one look at my stuff nestled in the little concrete cubicle that was mine all mine for a mere \$10 a month in those days, and I knew I was saved. I didn't have to share a bedroom in a house full of dental students. There was a place for me in storage.

Nutty Squirrel in Coralville, where I'm manager-slash-nightwatchperson, is my third location and the best set-up so far. Other places, I've had to move from unit to vacant unit, taking my padlock with me and improvising my internal security—all too often, nothing but a steel drum or piece of heavy furniture on the inside in front of the door. At Nutty Squirrel, the manager-slash-nightwatchperson gets

a free storage cubicle of his or her very own. Of course I'm not supposed to *live* in it, but as long as I do my job—keep everything secure, answer the beeper fast enough to prevent people from kicking in the door when they've lost their keys or forgotten their combinations (which I try to keep on file in the office), and occasionally harass a renter for nonpayment—the owner doesn't care where I live. He's seen the barnboard I put up over the concrete blocks in One West, and he's never said a word. So I get a private but not, alas, soundproof place to lay my head, free of charge, and there's none of this driving to work everyday either—another good thing, since I no longer have a cycle or a car. I shower at the Truck Stop, use the washroom in the front office, and take my meals where I please. In the winter, I come home from the heated office out front and burrow into a fat down-filled sleeping bag for the night. I get a lot of reading done in the winter.

The one thing I would change out here, though, if I could change anything, is the sign, which is up on top of a long pole, so you can see it from the interstate. The logo is supposed to be the silhouette of a squirrel, but it looks as much like a curled-up human fetus as a hoarding squirrel. It's like the picture my mother used to have on top of the TV of a cow that turns into the face of Jesus if you reverse your perception of figure and ground. I don't know how many times I drove by this place (when I still had wheels) and wondered what kind of business would have a fetus for a logo, when one day my brain shifted into a different gear and I got the picture. The only trouble is, once you've seen the fetus, it's hard to turn it back into a squirrel.

My friend Lola used to ask me if I didn't feel lonely out here sometimes, if I didn't feel like an intruder among other people's goods. Nothing, I told her, could be farther from the truth. I have always enjoyed the company of things. I feel more at home in self-storage than I've felt since I was small enough to crawl through the little door at the back of my parents' bedroom closet into the only scrap of attic we had in our Cape Cod. It was a close, dry, dusty crawl space full of *things*: pictureless picture frames, battered luggage, suits in plastic garment bags, records no one listened to, yearbooks from my mother's high school, plaid and pleated uniforms my older sister had outgrown, and toys not quite broken enough to throw away—a three-wheeled

dump truck, an ancient doll whose porcelain face was cracked from inner eyebrow to upper lip. There were books that smelled like books, beams that smelled like dry-rotting beams, and a long-forgotten Sun-beam toaster in the carton it came in. There were cardboard boxes bent into trapezoids and parallelograms, their box bottoms littered with reassuring stuff—a chess piece, a pencil stub, a Jack of Spades, a screw, a lump of modeling clay, a spool of red thread, most of it unwound and tangled around the other things in the box, everything coated with dust and disuse. Under the peak of the roof, a window shaped like a stop sign let in gray light, except for a circular spot I had cleaned with spit. The round, clean spot on the glass let in a beam full of dust motes that fell like a spotlight on this thing or that, depending on the time of day. It could make a bright white circle on a gray suit or a cherry red spot on a suitcase of maroon leather. No matter how long I stared, I could never decide which color the suitcase really was, or whether the somber gold drapes folded carefully over those hangers were really bright yellow like the spot of light, and not somber gold at all. Lola said that it was very postmodern of me to believe only in the surfaces of things.

I used to spend whole afternoons in the storage place under the eaves when I was a kid. Eventually, my mother would open the door and call through the closet, “Sweetheart, what are you doing in there—gathering dust?” And you know something? That’s exactly what I was doing. I was sitting on the floor among those things, hardly breathing, finding it harder and harder, as the light got grayer, to tell where they left off and I began, waiting for the blanket of dust that coated everything to gather on these arms and legs that might be mine or might not.

When I described all this to Lola, she said it sounded to her as if I’d come darn close to experiencing what Highdigger called the Radical Astonishment of Being. “Especially that part about the stuff in the bottoms of the boxes,” she said. “You were in touch with Is-ness and What-ness for sure. On the other hand,” she added, shrugging her narrow shoulders, “maybe you were autistic.”

This led us into a little argument. I said that people who are autistic don’t outgrow it, just like that. I know a thing or two about biology and brain development after all.

“Who said anything about outgrowing it?” said Lola. “Look around you, bud.” She was sitting in her Queen Anne wingchair, surrounded by all the other furniture and knick-knacks and what-nots she had inherited from her aunt and stored in cubicle 27E for lack of a house big enough to put it in. I was sitting on a hope chest at her feet. I reminded her that I didn’t always live in storage.

“No. Before this, you spent fifteen years in a one-man lab with cockroaches.”

When I pointed out that she *almost* had a degree in philosophy, not psychology, she laughed and patted my knee and told me that she didn’t need a degree in psychology to recognize living in a self-storage cubicle as a transparent attempt on my part to return to the womb. And then, when I maintained that my little concrete room was, if anything, more like a *tomb* than a *womb*, she tossed her bald head so that her sailor cap slid down and bumped into her ear. “Womb, tomb,” she said. “What’s the difference?”

I figured I had no choice then but to tell her about the crucial printing error in my first *Missal for Little Catholics*. It was in the *Hail Mary*, in the part that goes “Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” For some reason—human error? mechanical failure? divine intervention?—the “w” was missing. Blessed is the fruit of thy o-m-b, it said. This would have caused me no confusion, since I already knew the *Hail Mary* by heart, if I hadn’t learned the line wrong in the first place. Like everybody else in the first grade, I thought it went: “Blessed is the Fruit of the Loom, Jesus.” When I saw “o-m-b” in my *Missal for Little Catholics*, the first thing I did was to secretly consult my underpants and confirm my suspicions that “Loom” did not, in fact, end with a “b.”

Then I wracked my brain for a rhyming word that did. *Blank-o-m-b*, I needed. “Comb” was out, I knew that much, and “womb” would not have occurred to me in a million years, but it didn’t take me too long to come up with “tomb,” since the thing that had always impressed me most about Jesus was not the whole story about how He suffered and died for our sins or even that He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, but that He’d spent three whole days alone in that tomb. I could identify with that. So “tomb” it was. It made a certain kind of sense: Blessed is the fruit (well, the fruit was still a puzzle) of thy

tomb, Jesus. I told Lola how I used to sit in my own storage space behind my parents' bed and think about *Him*—sitting on a stone slab in the cool, cool dark, all wrapped in white linen and festooned with apples and grapes.

By the time I finished telling this story, Lola looked very serious, her eyes as huge as they always were after a round of chemo, when her fine-boned face got thinner than ever and all her hair fell out. After a long silence, she said it was no accident, this womb/tomb mixup of mine. She said maybe I was smarter than I looked.

THE APEX OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

You have to think of Lola as a convert to self-storage. When I first met her, she hated the whole concept. I was doing my rounds late one afternoon when I pulled up the overhead door to 27E, wondering what happened to the padlock, and there she was, sitting in her aunt's wingchair in the midst of all the stuff she'd inherited, sitting there bald as a billiard ball and so pale that she almost seemed to be glowing in the light from the door. She took me by surprise—there was no car in the parking lot and of course I didn't know that she worked at the standardized testing company, a five-minute walk from Nutty Squirrel. Before I could say "Excuse me," she launched right in as if she'd been expecting me.

"So," she said, "is this the culmination of Western Civilization?"

I looked around. She continued.

"Have we reached here, in this place, the apex of enlightenment? Is this the peak of human dignity and individual freedom toward which our history has tended—no, *striven*—for 5,000 years?" She paused dramatically, giving me a chance to wonder what she was talking about, and then, as if she'd read my mind, she said, "I'm talking about *this*, this edifice full of treasure, this tabernacle packed with objects, this shrine to the accumulation of goods." (She waved vaguely at a framed Nativity scene done in seashells on top of her aunt's dresser.) "I ask you. Is this place really so different from the pyramids of Egypt or the temples of the Aztecs? From the well-furnished tombs of ancient kings?"

She paused again and looked at me so expectantly that I said, "I don't know. Is it?"

“You’re damn right it is!” she said, smacking the velvet arm of the wingchair with her fist. I stepped back a little in the open doorway, thinking that she looked fiery, like Katherine Hepburn—a younger, balder Katherine Hepburn. She leaned toward me, narrowing her eyes, and asked with Hepburn scorn, “And do you know why? Do you know what makes this concrete box so different from the pyramids?”

This, I hoped, was a rhetorical question, but the silence that followed was so long that I knew she expected another answer. I ventured one.

“No mummy inside?”

She went stiff with indignation at that, then collapsed back into her chair like a dropped marionette. She was silent for so long afterward that I started to back out, reaching for the door to pull it down behind me. Usually I try to leave people alone out here, figuring that if they’ve resorted to spending the afternoon at Nutty Squirrel, the chances are good that they’re not looking for human company. I had pulled the door almost to the ground when her voice rose again from the gloom behind it.

She asked, “Did you say *mummy* or *dummy*?”

I knew right then we’d get along.

CITIZENS OF EL SALVADOR

Until the country band came along the only problem I ever had with illegals was making the Salvadorans understand about their cooking fire. That was in 1985, maybe ’86. Let me tell you, the first time I noticed smoke curling out of a surprising little hole in the back of the east shed, right under the roof, I panicked. I was *that* close to calling the fire department, but I grabbed an extinguisher instead and kicked open their unlocked door—a side opener not an overhead—nozzle at the ready.

There were thirteen people in 19E at the time—three men, four women, and six children, with one green card among them that they bought from the guy who brought them north—and they all dove, screaming, for the corners of the room. Mothers shielded children, crying “*No matarnos! Por favor—no matarnos!*” Babies wailed. Children wept. Men and women felt the bitter irony of so long and perilous a journey

as theirs ending thus. Smoke from the scattered twigs and charcoal filled the cubicle, making it hard to see and harder to breathe. Overhead, near the door that stood open behind me, a smoke alarm beeped frantically.

“What does it mean,” Lola asked me much later, when I told her the story, “*no matarnos?*”

“It means, ‘Don’t kill us.’”

“Jesus,” she said. “What did you do *then?*”

I ushered the whole group, all of us coughing and sniffing from the smoke, out into the alley. They huddled in a clump, children against the wall, adults shielding them, while I held up the fire extinguisher so they could see what it was. The panic subsided almost instantly, to the point where a young man and two small children followed me back inside and stood near the doorway while I sprayed the remnants of the fire, ruining their dinner. When I turned around, they were all crowded in and around the doorway, looking accusatory now. One of the women was saying something, but the smoke alarm was screaming so loudly over our heads that I couldn’t hear what. I saw a man signal to a teen-aged boy, who emerged from the crowd in the doorway and dragged a Louis Quatorze chair from a corner to a spot directly beneath the smoke alarm. The chair belonged in the cubicle next door with a lot of other antiques owned by a radiologist who was on sabbatical in Europe and had removed all of his more valuable furniture to storage before leasing his house to interns. The movers had forgotten the chair on their truck until after they’d already locked the other stuff up, so they put the chair in the neighboring cubicle—the one now occupied by the Salvadorans—and took off. I saw the whole thing from the office, but the radiologist had declined to reveal his padlock combination for the office files, so there was nothing I could do for his chair. Anyway, in less than a second the boy had jumped up on the chair, tugged the battery out of the alarm, and handed it to me, leaving two dusty footprints on the brocade seat. Now I could hear the woman, who had taken to repeating for my ignorant Anglo ears, “*La cena! La cena!*” as she pointed to the tortillas mixed up with the remains of the cooking fire.

“*La cena?*” Lola said.

“The dinner.”

“What did you do then?” Lola asked.

“I went out to Kentucky Fried and bought them a couple of buckets.”

“Is that all?” she said.

“And something to drink.”

“I mean, didn’t you feel as though you had to do something about them?”

Of course I had to do something. I introduced myself to the man who seemed to be the father of the boy who left the footprints on the chair. He shook my hand and thanked me for my kindness on behalf of the others. “We are citizens of El Salvador,” he confided. Then I went down to 32E and got them a microwave. The guy had a dozen of them in there, just sitting. All different brands. Probably stolen goods. I took one that was still in the box, just in case there was something wrong with the other ones. I didn’t want to irradiate the citizens of El Salvador. They’d had enough to put up with already.

BOMB SHELTER

The way the Salvadorans hugged the wall, shielding their children while the smoke alarm squealed, reminded me of the air raid drills we used to have at school when I was a kid, I told Lola. We had a bomb shelter in our basement, too. This was in the late fifties, when cars had fins like rockets and practically every basement had a bomb shelter, even if it was only the fruit cellar stocked with cans of beans and tuna and bottles of water, and maybe a chemical toilet tucked under a shelf in a corner. Crematoriums they were—or would have been in the event of a bomb—but everybody pretended they were shelters. The same way we pretended there was a point to having air raid drills at school, with the little kids lined up facing the walls on either side of the long corridor, away from the windows—so as not to be cut by flying glass—and the big kids standing over the little ones, their arms folded over their heads, everybody facing the wall, our eyes closed tight, so as not to be blinded by the big flash. I remember the cool tiles of the wall on my cheek, the sour breath of a sheltering seventh grader who’d had chocolate milk for lunch, the heat of another body so close to mine. To distract myself from overwhelming terror, I used to construct elaborate daydreams in

which I got everyone—my mother, my sister, my father and his newspaper, and, after a frantic search through the neighborhood while sirens wailed, Blackie, our dog, a beagle-cocker spaniel mix—into the fruit cellar just in time.

Womb or tomb. Take your pick.

LOLA THE LOPSIDED

When Lola is not feeling so great, she says, “You’ve heard of Pliny the Elder and Richard the Lion-hearted? Well, just call me Lola the Lopsided.”

Richard I’ve heard of; the other guy, no. “Lola,” I say, “everybody’s lopsided. One way or another.”

She says, “Shit. What are we here for, anyway?”

“We’re gathering dust,” I say. “Just like everything else.”

Lola sits looking at her legs, which are stretched out in front of her on the warm asphalt next to mine. Our backs are pressed against the wall of the west shed, whose concrete blocks hold the heat of the sun for hours, even after dark. The sun is almost down now—nothing left but a red blaze along the tree line like a half-filled glass of tomato juice.

After a long time of sitting, watching the tomato juice pale and our legs grow gray and fuzzy at the edges, Lola says, “Dusk.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“We are gathering dusk,” she says.

MIRAGE

The Salvadorans I told Lola about have long since moved on to a town about fifteen miles east of here, where a renegade priest used to make a career out of antagonizing his superiors by giving sanctuary to illegal refugees from brutal Latin American regimes, but word of Nutty Squirrel’s cozy concrete cubicles must have spread to the folks back home. Since the Salvadorans left, we’ve had one group after another in here. Lately, we get mostly migrant workers—occupancy going way up in July and August, when there’s seed corn to detassel and apples to pick. The majority are from Mexico, as far as I can tell, some of them strictly seasonal, others in more or less permanent flight from a life of assembling computer keyboards and garage door openers in factories

along the wrong side of the border. “We’re like a stop on their Underground Railroad,” Lola liked to say, knowing very well how nervous that kind of talk makes me.

Like I said, until the country band showed up, I never had a lick of trouble with my guests from south of the border—except for the one cooking fire incident. I was never even sure when one group left and another arrived, they were so discreet. Three months after Knucklehead moved in, things started to change. I remember waking early one morning in July—a little after 4 o’clock, as a matter of fact—to the faraway strumming of a guitar. It was pitch black inside, except for the red numbers on my clock, and for a moment, I didn’t know where I was. When you don’t have anything else to go on, a sound like a strumming guitar can conjure up a whole world for you. In that first moment of waking, if the door had flung open on the corkscrew streets of Toledo or a boulevard in Barcelona, or maybe a tree-lined plaza with a great big fountain in the middle and a volcano or two rising in the background, I wouldn’t have been a bit surprised. As it was, I hardly had time to remember that I was stretched out on my futon in One West, and to conclude that the Knuckleheads must have somebody new and uncharacteristically talented in their line-up, before the guitar was joined by a new sound. This was a hollow, melodic clopping like a wooden xylophone or a marimba. It was wonderful. It couldn’t be the Knuckleheads, I thought, as I looked at the clock. Then I remembered that the Mexican detassellers set out by five every morning for the K-mart parking lot, where an old school bus picks up workers and takes them to the cornfields for the day. They must have figured that nobody would hear their radio at this hour. It was careless of them. Uncharacteristic. I listened for a while, picturing the fountain and the volcanoes. Then I rolled over and went back to sleep.

HERESY ALFREDO

This is typical. Lola comes around the corner and down my alley all excited, with Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate open in her arms, struggling to keep the wind from turning the fluttering pages on her, looking, in fact, as if that fat blue book is the only thing keeping her from blowing away herself. She can’t keep anything down during therapy.

“Look at this!” she says.

“It’s a dictionary!” I say.

“But *listen*.”

I pat the warm concrete beside me and she slides down to sit with her back against the wall. When Lola worked in the Test Editing Department at the standardized testing company, where they actually make up some of the questions, she was always on the lookout for challenging reading passages and tricky vocabulary words. Now that she’s moved down to Test Registration, all she needs for her work are a computer keyboard and a letter opener, but she keeps the dictionary at her side out of habit and peruses it at half-hour intervals, when she and the rest of the envelope-opening, data-entering crew take a two-minute eye-saving break from their monitor screens. Sometimes, if she finds something interesting, she sends it upstairs to her friends and former colleagues in Test Editing. Usually, she just shows it to me.

“I’m listening,” I say.

““Manichean,”” she reads.

I say, “What?”

Lola is patient with me. “Man-uh-KEY-un,” she says again, spells it, and goes on: “A believer in a syncretistic religious dualism originating in Persia in the third century A.D. and teaching”—she pauses to get my utmost attention—“*the release of the spirit from matter through asceticism.*”

“Ah,” I say, unsure if she said “asceticism” or “aestheticism.” Also unsure which one is which. I figure this could be about fasting or about art.

She gives me a fleeting frown. “Now,” she says, raising one eyebrow. “Listen to *this*.” And she reads: ““*manicotti*: tubular pasta shells that may be stuffed with ricotta cheese or *meat*; also,”” she finishes rapidly, ““a dish of stuffed manicotti usually with tomato sauce.”” Letting the dictionary rest in her lap, she looks up at me with shining eyes. “*Manichean, manicotti*,” she repeats, enunciating like the teacher she should have been. “*What* do they have in common?”

“They’re right next to each other in the dictionary.”

“True,” she says, tapping the page in front of her with one long red fingernail. I can see both words there in her lap—first the heresy, then

the pasta. “But there’s more to it than that,” she says. “In the one, the ineffable spirit is trapped within matter, right?”—she pauses long enough for me to think, *That would be the Manichean*—“and in the other, a neat reversal, meat is enclosed within slippery white walls of pasta.” *The manicotti*. She beams. I’m lost, but I nod sagely. “Furthermore,” she says, practically beside herself with cleverness and delight, “if manicotti is to meat what matter is to spirit, then a parallel exists as well between *antimatter* and *antipasto!*”

“Are they going to put that on a test?” I ask her. I’m picturing those questions with a colon in the middle and a word on either side.

“They might,” she says, closing the Ninth New Collegiate with a triumphant *thunk*.

I’m glad I’m not a junior in high school.

PATSY CLINE

On another night, not long after I turned out the light to lie in the dark and worry about Lola, who’d spent the day at Mercy Hospital for tests to decide if she needed another lumpectomy or would they go with a round of steroids instead, all of a sudden I heard Patsy Cline singing “I Fall to Pieces.” The voice was strong and hard and clear as glass, but there was something odd about it. I’d heard the Knuckleheads play this tape at least a dozen times, and yet—*something* was different here. It hit me. Patsy Cline has back-up vocals and a band, but this voice was singing by itself, to itself, doing a perfect imitation of all the sadness in the world. It wasn’t Patsy Cline. Whoever it was had just stopped singing in mid-verse. Now *that* reminded me of the country band. Could I be hearing an audition? I sat up, thinking that I owed it to the woman who owned that voice to go out there and tell her that she’s much too good to be a Knucklehead.

She started singing something else—in Spanish, this time—and the guitar and marimba sounds I heard the other morning came in. I got up and opened my overhead door, lifting it three or four inches, the better to hear. The voice didn’t seem to be coming from the country band’s cubicle. It was from somewhere down at the other end of the alley where it intersects with the south storage shed. It occurred to me that this was Friday night and the Knuckleheads had packed up and left for the Dance-Mor hours ago. I listened to two more songs—“Stand

By Your Man” and another tune the band liked to practice—and then I heard some fool tearing up the frontage road at twice the speed anybody should be going on that gravel. A pickup pulled into the parking lot and barreled down the alley toward the Knuckleheads’ unit. It stopped, engine running. A door squealed open and slammed shut on a steady stream of cussing from somebody who sounded as if he’d had a few already. Somebody else—Bo the drummer?—was trying to shush him. Apparently they’d been sent to pick up something they forgot.

“Why the hell should I be quiet?” the first guy complained. “Think I’m gonna wake up some of the goddam junk they got stored out here? All these goddam people ain’t got the brains to get rid of junk they don’t need, no sir, they pay good money to keep it out here, so why the—”

“Shut up, for Christ’s sake, and listen,” said the other guy.

The Patsy Cline voice had gone back to singing “I Fall to Pieces.” Absolute silence from the two Knuckleheads now, then some whispers. Being only human, I pushed my door up an inch or two more. Before long, two pairs of cowboy boots clomped past. When I heard them far enough away, I pushed the door up and looked out in time to see the drummer—a lanky guy in jeans and boots and a striped Western shirt with the creases still in it—walking slowly, like a man in a dream, around the corner at the end of the alley, in search of Patsy Cline.

VISITING HOURS

Before Lola got out of the hospital, Teresa Maldonado had joined the country band, along with the Ramirez twins: Jorge on guitar and Hector—well, Hector played a wooden box full of gourds arranged to produce an octave and a half of tones that sounded like a marimba. Both twins sang back-up. They didn’t even have to know the song. They could pick up a phrase or two and harmonize it, just like that.

Lola’s doctors had opted for the lumpectomy—a word that will appear as the wrong answer on multiple-choice vocabulary tests across the nation for decades to come—and the surgery had gotten complicated somehow, so she was stuck in the hospital for more than a week. To cheer her up, I brought her a practice tape of Teresa, who could hardly speak a word of English, wailing “Stand by Your Man” with no trace of an accent, while the Ramirez twins took turns trading licks

with the steel player. I told her we had eight cubicles full of migrants at last count and they all opened their doors and spilled out into the alleys during Knucklehead rehearsals. “We had a regular street dance going last Thursday,” I told Lola. “Not just the Mexicans but kids getting off work from Hy-Vee and Kmart up the road—must have been twenty or thirty people. I was pretty nervous about it. I mean, where do those kids think the Mexicans came from? Aside from Mexico, I mean.”

Lola lay back on her pillows. She had a transparent look about her that I hadn’t seen before and a book—not the dictionary—lying open in her lap. “Those kids don’t care if the Mexicans dropped out of the sky,” she said. “Now listen to this.” And she read: “*The human nervous system develops from a hollow tube of tissue.*” She looked up at me and repeated, “A hollow tube.” I recognized her book as one that Dr. Derkson had given me when I worked in the lab: a hardcover edition of *Neuronal Man* that Lola must have borrowed. She hoisted it and said, “There’s more: *‘A groove appears on the surface of the blastula. The groove deepens, the sides of the groove curling up until they meet at the top, and the neural tube is formed.’*” She let the book go and looked at me. “Did you know that—about the neural tube?”

“Well, sure,” I said. It was pretty basic information. “From the neural tube, of course, you get your spinal cord and brain developing, and then—”

Lola interrupted. “Then Roussel was right,” she said.

“Rue Sell?”

“Not just Roussel. All of them. They were right.”

“Right about what?”

“Way deep down inside,” Lola said slowly, “human beings are entirely superficial. We are—a surface, curled up into a tube. A *hollow tube.*” She looked at me.

“Like manicotti,” I said, thinking that would lighten her up.

She looked stunned. “Like manicotti,” she repeated.

“Well,” I said briskly, “maybe what you say is true, in a manner of speaking,” but Lola wasn’t listening anymore.

“It’s the Absolute Emptiness of Being,” she said. Her skin was luminous, as if backlit from the inside. “Right here in a biology book. Who would have thought.”

THE BRIDGE

When I told Lola about Teresa and the Ramirez twins joining the band, I made it sound pretty friendly, but the fact was that plenty of arguments preceded the decision. The steel player wasn't sure he wanted to split the money even *one* more way (except for Bo the drummer, the Knuckleheads saw no problem in regarding Teresa, Jorge, and Hector as a single unit when it came to payroll). The drummer offered repeatedly to put one of his sticks right through the steel player's head, in one ear and out the other. "Shouldn't hurt him a bit," the drummer said.

Once they got the finances figured out, there was still the problem of Teresa's teeth. She couldn't have been more than twenty-four or twenty-five years old, but she had four teeth missing on the top—not counting molars—and three missing on the bottom, and the ones that remained were multicolored. No fluoride in the water in Mexico. No toothbrushes, either, I guess—at least not where Teresa comes from. With her mouth shut she was a sweet-faced woman with rich brown skin and black wavy hair that touched her shoulders. When she opened her mouth, all you saw were the gaps.

"So now we gotta buy her dentures?" the steel player complained.

"Just a bridge," said Bo the Drummer.

She needed two, one for the top and one for the bottom. I had a bad feeling, watching from the office as Teresa and the drummer drove off in his station wagon the following Saturday, with one of the Ramirez twins in the back seat as chaperone—or maybe as body guard. For more than a decade my, shall we say, neighbors and I had been pretending, in strict observance of self-storage protocol, that we didn't really exist. Teresa and the twins, along with all the people who opened their doors and even ventured out into the alleys during country band rehearsals, had abandoned the pretense. On rehearsal nights, I could only hope that cars on the interstate sped by too quickly for people to look down into the alleys between Nutty Squirrel's block-long storage sheds and see there was a party going on. I also hoped that Bo the drummer knew a dentist who didn't ask a lot of personal questions, like the patient's name and address.

Anyway, as I told Lola, most of the arguing and intrigue was lost on Teresa, who doesn't understand much English. And when the Knuckleheads weren't arguing, the rehearsals were wonderful to hear.

No more taking it from the top every three or four bars. Nobody had the heart to stop Teresa once she got going. The one time they tried—for technical reasons—she was so certain that the terrible squealing of the speaker was somehow her fault that she ran home and wouldn't come back. Bo the drummer had to go after her, pleading, with a Spanish-English dictionary.

THE GIG

Lola, who was out of the hospital in plenty of time for Knucklehead's first gig with Teresa and the Ramirez twins, showed up at the Red Stallion in a Dale Evans blouse and string tie, with a silver belt buckle the size of a saucer on her blue jeans, a cowboy hat on her fuzzy head, and a pair of hand-tooled boots on her feet. She taught me how to do the Texas Two-step, which is an actual dance, I found, very similar to the fox trot. By the end of the night, I could almost talk and dance at the same time.

"We're having a transcendent experience," she told me a little breathlessly out on the floor.

"Where did *you* learn to dance like this?" I asked her, counting *one-two-THREE-four* in my head.

"The truths are few," she said, "'and available to all.'"

We had only one bad moment, during the first break, when a drunk approached the table where Lola and I sat with Teresa, the twins, and a couple of Knuckleheads, and asked Teresa if she knew "This Crazy Life." Teresa does, in fact, know the tune—it happened to be on the song list for the second set—but she didn't have a clue as to what the guy leaning drunkenly over the back of her chair was saying to her. When the steel player answered for her, the guy got mad, said he was talking to the lady, etc., etc., and before you know it, the twins were on their feet in defense of Teresa and the drummer was pulling the steel player away from the drunk. This is it, I thought, this is it—but I was wrong, because all of a sudden it was time for the second set and all Knucklehead personnel headed for the stage. Couples and singles flooded the dance floor, a sizable contingent of Nutty Squirrel residents among them. The second set was even better than the first. Teresa sang "I Fall to Pieces" in a cloud of yellow smoke. The drunk nursed his beer at the end of the bar and left us alone for the rest of the night.

Lola was in the hospital again three weeks later, when the Knuckleheads made their triumphant return to the Red Stallion. (I went to visit her. She looked frail and groggy, said she was having trouble with headaches and couldn't sleep. She told me that only now could she really appreciate what Kneecha meant when he said, "Blessed are the sleepy ones, for they shall soon drop off.") It was practically standing room only at the Stallion on Saturday night, but my heart wasn't in it without Lola to bully me around the dance floor, so I left before the third set, which is when Immigration and Naturalization showed up, responding to an anonymous tip from an irate citizen nursing a grudge at the bar.

DISCONNECTED

Once I lived in a storage warehouse where a guy collected telephones. I don't know what he was up to, but his self-storage cubicle was a roomful of telephones, piled high in one corner and tumbling down on top of each other, with their cords all coiling and tangled from one to the next, so you wouldn't want to have to pick one of those phones and pull it out from the rest. Most of the telephones were old black models with dials instead of buttons. They were the kind of phone nobody wanted, colored wires sticking out of the bottoms of some of them, some of them upside down with the bottom plate off so you could see the bell.

When I was a kid, my father gave me an old phone like that for my very own. It was when they came out with princess phones in colors and my sister wanted a pink one to match the wallpaper in her room, so my father gave me her old one. One night at the supper table I complained about how nobody ever called me on my new phone, and my father explained that the phone wasn't *connected*. It was just to play with. My sister snickered.

After supper I went upstairs to see if I could make sense out of what my father had said. It wasn't connected, he said. I stared at the phone there on the table next to my bed, where it looked as if it might ring at any moment, although I'd given up that hope by now. I squatted down with my hands on my knees so that I'd be at eye level with the bedside table, expecting to see a space between the bottom of the telephone and the table top. It wasn't connected, he said. But he was wrong,

because the telephone rested squarely on the table, and the table was connected to the table legs and the table legs went all the way to the floor and the floor came all the way over to my feet, which were connected to my legs, which were connected to my middle and all the rest. I got mad at the phone then for making a fool out of me and my father and, reaching out, I swept it off the table with my arm. When it hit the floor, that phone finally rang. The dial also popped off and a few other things, including the bottom plate, so I saw the bell. I saw that inside the phone there was an actual bell. It wasn't the phone that rang, it was the bell inside it. When I pointed this out to my father (who came upstairs to see what had fallen), he thought I was exhibiting curiosity about the inner workings of the telephone, and so he screwed off both ends of the receiver to show me the colored wires and metal plates inside the smooth plastic place where you put your ear and the sprinkling can part where you put your words. Weeks went by before I could put a telephone receiver to my head again.

Every once in a while in the old storage place, from my own little cubicle there, usually in the dead of night when the traffic volume was turned down low, I would hear a jangle in Number 7 and I knew that a phone must have slid off the snake pile and hit the concrete warehouse floor. At first I used to have to fight the impulse to jump up, calling, "I'll get it!" I can tell you that it takes practice to let a phone go ahead and ring if it wants to. You have to teach yourself not to respond.

I answered the phone today at the Nutty Squirrel office, which is to my knowledge the only telephone on the premises. It was somebody from Mercy Hospital. It seems Lola had asked them to call me. They told me that she died.

"LET'S GIVE THESE SUCKERS A BREAK."

Lola taught me a secret about people who rent self-storage cubicles. Secretly, they wish the warehouse where they've squirreled away their most precious commodities would burn to the ground, taking the goods with it. Secretly, they rue the fireproof cement-block walls, the concrete slab of a floor, the absence of careless smokers and overloaded circuits, of extension cords hidden under the rug. Somewhere, deep

down, they despise the goods—“sic: gods,” Lola would say, her eyebrow aloft—that enslave them, the easy payment plans and plastic by which they are held in thrall.

Why else, she would ask, do we love the movies that stage the final fight scene in a mansion stuffed with *objets-d’art*, affording us the thrill of seeing gold-framed mirrors and stained-glass windows shattered, or the flawless polished surface of a dining table the size of a football field plowed with bullets? We all like to see the priceless vase knocked off its pedestal. We like to see the velvet upholstery and the leather—finer by far than the stuff we’ve scrimped and saved for, covering it with sheets to protect it from cats and children—slashed to shreds by a knife-wielding burglar. Most of all, we like the chase scenes that demolish not a Ford or a Toyota, but a Jaguar, a Mercedes, a Porsche. Maybe several.

Thus do we take our vicarious revenge against the goods for which we daily traipse to our deadening jobs, Lola always said, we who owe our souls to MasterCard and BankOne Visa.

“Kneecha puts it this way,” she said one night, brandishing a copy of *The Will to Power*. “Man finds himself in those goods which are his because he has previously lost himself in them.”

“You can say that again,” I said.

So Lola said, “Where a man’s treasure lies, there lies his heart also.”

“That’s not Kneecha,” I said.

“No, it isn’t.”

Lola, who was not feeling great at the time, had stood up then and dropped the book on the seat of her Queen Anne chair. She shivered and hugged herself for warmth. “Maybe we should torch the place,” she said. “Give these suckers a break.”

“I SPEAK ON BEHALF OF ORPHANED THINGS.”

All in all, the INS raid at the Red Stallion pretty much decimated our migrant population. Those who weren’t actually picked up at the bar were warned by a couple of teenagers who were out in the steel player’s pickup having an illegal drink when the blue vans arrived. They escaped on foot and sounded the alarm for the sleeping grandmothers and kids back here. They could have stayed, as it turned out. Nobody blew the whistle on Nutty Squirrel.

I was fitting my stuff into a small U-Haul truck—the same U-Haul I'd used to bring back enough gasoline (secured by the gallon at a half-dozen different stations) to send the orphaned goods of Nutty Squirrel wafting in billows of smoke to the sky—when I heard tires on gravel. Somebody had pulled into the parking lot in front of the office. If it was the INS, no problem; there were no migrants, legal or otherwise, on the premises. If it was my boss, Mr. Nutty Squirrel, then I could only hope he wouldn't take a peek into One West and spot my little stockpile of red gasoline cans. If it was a renter come to visit his or her goods, well, I was in no hurry. I'd give them time to say goodbye.

When I poked my head out the back of the trailer, I saw Bo the Knucklehead drummer opening the passenger side of his station wagon. He had Teresa with him. When she saw me, she smiled with her new white teeth and came dancing my way, uncertain on the gravel in the high-heeled boots they bought her for the gig. I hopped out of the trailer and closed the door on the gasoline cans in One West.

"*Buenas, buenas!*" she cried when she reached me, throwing her arms around me and taxing my Spanish to the fullest with a steady stream of history—where they had taken her mother and the Ramirez twins and all the others, how Señor the Drummer Bo had come to bail them out, how they had a plan (here she looked shyly at the drummer) to keep her in the States, how they were going to get work permits for her and the twins to tour with the band, how they all had me to thank for their good fortune. She still smelled like smoke from the Stallion; I know I smelled like gasoline. Bo the drummer came out of 9W with some Knucklehead equipment that he dumped in the back of the wagon before he came clomping over. (Never saw a man so awkward in cowboy boots as Bo the Knucklehead drummer.) He filled me in on the parts of the story I'd lost in the translation. He thanked me, too. I was glad that the band liked to haul every piece of equipment to every gig. Now that Bo had come back for that soundboard, their cubicle was empty except for a broken mike stand and some knotted extension cords.

Bo put his arm around Teresa on the way back to the station wagon. He hollered "*Vaya con Dios!*" to me out the window as they drove away. I could see her laughing at him in the passenger seat.

The visit from Bo and Teresa only renewed my resolve to give the rest of these suckers a break. In fact, I had a book of matches in my hand when the UPS truck pulled into the parking lot. The guy had me sign for a cardboard box, unmarked except for my name and the Nutty Squirrel address. It wasn't heavy. I waited until he left before I opened it and found a brass canister about the size of a two-pound coffee can. The top of the can bore the inscription, nicely embossed in the brass:

Lola Valorian
1959 - 1995
“a thing among things”

Independent Mortuary Service
Cedar Rapids

In the box with the canister was a brown envelope full of other envelopes and papers—copies of Lola's birth certificate, her driver's license (already cut in half), her library card (left whole), and a life insurance policy with the original beneficiaries crossed out (the word *deceased* handwritten above them) and my name penned in their place, all of it duly notarized at the bottom of the page.

After I went through the envelope, I said, “Hey, Lola.” Maybe I cried a little. It didn't matter, since nobody was there to see, although it probably goes to show that I'm not autistic.

So all of a sudden there I was with a room full of gasoline and a can full of ashes, and it's up to me what comes next. In the end, if you want to call it that, I put her life insurance into escrow to pay \$35 a month—adjustable as storage fees increase—for the next 124 years or so. The country band—renamed Teresa's Dynamite Ranch—recorded a song that made it to the Country Top Forty and then the band sort of fell out of sight, although they might be playing nightly in Branson, Missouri, for all I know. I bought one of their tapes just to hear the sound of Teresa's voice, but I haven't listened to it yet. By the time Mr. Nutty Squirrel found the gallons of gasoline in One West, I'd moved across town to Grandma's Attic, an old brick brewery building divided into 8 by 10's. I rent a third-floor unit with a window. Two old ladies live in the unit

right below mine. Sometimes I hear them laughing at night. Once a week I go to visit Lola where she rests like Tut, arrayed in brass on her wingchair and surrounded by her orphaned things, under the sign of the fetus, under the sign of the hoarding squirrel. Mummy or dummy, I always tell her, take your pick. It's a whole new world in here.