

“Learning to drive felt like becoming an adult, because you could essentially skip town,” Nancherla suggested.

“Or renewing your driver’s license,” Firestone said.

“Wait, when did you renew your driver’s license?” Nancherla asked, laughing. “Weren’t you in your twenties by then?” Firestone shrugged.

In the episode “Entering Your Dirty Thirties,” the hosts run through “Jo and Aparna’s Big List o’ Fears” (“Crane



Aparna Nancherla and Jo Firestone

comes, knocks you unconscious; nobody cares”).

“This is your year,” Nancherla reminded Firestone.

Anything to report from the other side of the big three-oh?

Nancherla extracted a rogue bobby pin from her hairdo and said, “You do start caring about things less, like what other people think.”

“Amazing!” Firestone said.

“And you get *very* horny. It’s like last call for your eggs.”

“Hot eggs!” Firestone hollered. “Can’t wait.”

—Emma Allen

DEPT. OF CURATION ONE MAN’S TRASH



NELSON MOLINA GREW up in a housing project in East Harlem, in an apartment where his mother still lives. “Starting when I was nine years old, in 1962, I had a passion for picking up,”

he said recently. “I had, like, a three-block radius. I would look through the garbage and pick up toys that people threw out, and I would fix them. I had two brothers and three sisters, and I was like Santa Claus to them.”

As if drawn by an irresistible force, in 1981 Molina went to work for the Department of Sanitation. His route, which he covered for thirty years, included his childhood neighborhood, and when he found something that he felt shouldn’t have been thrown away he put it into a special bin on the side of his garbage truck and took it back to the garage, on East Ninety-ninth Street. Today, items he recovered fill most of the building’s second floor—maybe a quarter of an acre.

Molina retired last year, but he returns to the garage three days a week to tend the collection, which he calls Treasure in the Trash. The items are arranged by category, and the displays are crisscrossed by aisles. The whole thing looks a little like the housewares department at Sears and a little like the closing scene of “Raiders of the Lost Ark.” Only two of the items got to the garage without having been thrown away: a 1985 photograph of Molina holding a Sanitation Worker of the Year citation that he’d just received, and the framed citation. In the photograph, he’s wearing a suit and tie and has a mustache like Omar Sharif’s in “Lawrence of Arabia.” Today, the mustache is gone, and he has less hair, but he’s still trim and youthful—too youthful, seemingly, to have six adult children, one of whom works for Sanitation.

“I’ve got bullhorns, lanterns,” he began. Nearby was a small black leather case with Marilyn Monroe’s picture on the side, and two long tables covered with typewriters, and an alcove filled with electric guitars, and a fully decorated artificial Christmas tree, and a copy of Lena Horne’s autobiography signed by Lena Horne, and a 1958 photograph album from the wedding of “Sheila and Donald,” and two West African talking drums (one inscribed “Welcome to Benin”), and four nineteenth-century stained-glass windows thrown out by a church on East Ninety-sixth Street, and some spring-mounted bouncing shoes, and

a framed print of the Mona Lisa with holes cut out where the eyes and mouth should be, and two diplomas awarded to a woman who graduated from Cornell Law School in 2003. (A reporter had no trouble tracking her down by e-mail, although she’s lived in Sweden for several years. “I actually remember the driver picking things from my trash and putting them in the cab of the truck, so I imagine more of my things are in the collection than just my diplomas,” she wrote. “I’m a pretty ruthless editor of closet space!”)

It’s impossible to visit Treasure in the Trash without coveting quite a few of the items, even though you suspect that if you went home an hour later and found the same items under your bed you would throw them out.

Over the years, Molina developed an acute ability to detect curbside treasure. “I’ve got these buildings that usually have, like, five or six bags,” he said. “And then all of a sudden they’ve got twenty-five bags, so my sensors start going off.” The reason for the increase could be a death, an eviction, a marriage, a divorce—all occasions for reckless disposal. “Or I’ll pick up a bag and something is sticking out, like a poster or a frame. Or my partner is throwing bags into the truck, and I’m listening to his bags. He doesn’t hear it, but I do, and I say, ‘Pull that one back out’—and there’s a brass candleholder.”

Treasure in the Trash isn’t open to the public, but there’s a chance that it will be someday. The garage on East Ninety-ninth is due to be demolished, and before the building comes down the Sanitation Department is hoping to move the collection to an accessible location. One of the people determined to preserve it is Robin Nagle, a professor at N.Y.U. and Sanitation’s anthropologist-in-residence. “In Nelson I see an outsider curatorial genius,” she said recently. “The collection is a history, and there are several narratives entwined. This will sound schmaltzy, but there’s a kind of tenderness and love in what he’s done.”

Molina has a similar view. “I love taking stuff out of the trash,” he said.

—David Owen