

Against All Odds
ASTORIA BOOKSHOP

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NEW YEAR'S EVE

Astoria Life

The key to your community



Feeding New York

City Harvest Continues to Provide Food for The Hungry

Astoria Life

The key to your community

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On the Cover

A City Harvest employee delivers bags of fresh cabbage. City Harvest feeds more than one million hungry New Yorkers each year.

Photo courtesy of City Harvest



You could be an Astoria Life community contributor!

Virginia Watson is a new transplant to Astoria and enjoys exploring her new community and sharing it with others. It's easy to join the community conversation; email articles, photos, and information to the email shown below.

Get involved! Send your photos, stories or events to:

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Life Lessons and Advice on The 'N' Train

An Astoria resident shares her experience on the train with her son and strangers.

by Catherine Kapphahn
Community contributor



Astorian Catherine Kapphahn.
Photo courtesy of Maki Hirose

Radek, my two-and-a-half-year-old son, peered around the edge of his stroller to watch the subway doors glide shut. “The N train?” He pointed to the metal ceiling.

At the next stop, an elderly Latina lady, leaning on her cane, entered and sat down beside me. Her hair was pulled back in a neat bun. She pushed her eyeglasses back onto her narrow nose and caught sight of Radek, his longish blond curls bouncing,

his bright blue eyes, curling eyelashes, his round cheeks. She drew in her breath, placed her hand on her heart and smiled, “Oh!” she said, “Yours?”

I nodded.

She shook her head in disbelief. I looked at Radek curiously; he smiled sweetly, tilting his head. She sighed. “He looks like baby Jesus child. I laughed.

“Exactly like a baby Jesus child.”

I guessed that she was Catholic, maybe Dominican or Puerto Rican. She had a clear image in her mind of the toddler Jesus.

“Your first?” the Latina lady asked gently.

“Just him, yeah,” I said ambiguously.

“You must have another one. You must,” she said urgently, then murmured, “He needs someone, company. My son, he asks me now, ‘Mama, where are my brothers and sisters?’ And I feel so bad. He is alone.” She shook her head sadly.

I am an only child and my Croatian mom, who died when I was 22, was an only child. On her side there is no one left.

I prepared to get off at Astoria Boulevard, unlocking the stroller brake, spinning Radek toward the door. Radek waved at the Latina lady. She clapped her hands in delight, “Bless the baby Jesus child!” I waved goodbye, knowing that I’d probably never see her again, but in that brief subway encounter, she shared an intimate part herself, her spirituality and her regret.

Later that week, my husband, Radek and I climbed aboard the N train; it was full of people headed to the city. An African-American woman plopped down beside us, laughing at her friend’s joke. He held onto the horizontal pole above our

seat. He wore a flashy white jacket with blue stripes. When the woman began talking to Radek, he leaned forward in his stroller and shyly burrowed his head into my knees.

“Oh, he doesn’t want to be talking to you. He wants his Mama!” said the gentleman in the striped jacket. They both cracked up. Radek peeked at them. “I wanna get out,” he demanded. I lifted him onto my lap. He stood on my thighs, leaning toward the woman, then away.

“Now, how old?” the woman asked.

“Almost three,” I said.

“In a couple weeks, August 29th,” my husband jumped in.

“That’s Michael Jackson’s birthday!” the gentleman exclaimed, and they both nodded approvingly. I started bopping up and down, singing, “A, B C; easy as one, two, three.” Radek bent his knees up and down to the rhythm. The woman swayed, the gentleman grooved, and my husband did a little snapping.

“Oh yeah, that Michael Jackson...” They shook their heads, smiling nostalgically. The gentleman made eye contact with my husband. “Now, when he going to have a brother or sister?” he asked.

“Yeah, he needs a sister,” the woman said, slapping her thigh. “You need to get busy,” the gentleman encouraged us.

I blushed. “Do you need a sister?” my husband asked Radek.

The truth was we hadn’t tried to prevent pregnancy. Deep down, I wanted Radek to have a brother or sister, so he wouldn’t be alone after we were gone.

The train flew underground beneath the East River, jostling us from side to side. I strapped Radek back into his stroller. “We’re getting off at the next stop,” I told him.

He furrowed his brow. “I wanna stay.”

My husband and I stood up.

“Now, the next time I see you guys on the train, I expect to see two!” the man said grinning.

We chuckled as we squeezed through the crowds.

Ever since Radek was a newborn, bundled in a sling against my chest, people on the subways of New York City have spoken to me in a way that some people might find intrusive, but that I can’t help but appreciate. Before Radek, I remember disappearing into myself during my travels through the city. Maybe it used to be easier to gaze inward, but these days, I can’t stop myself from looking outward, as if there, among strangers, I will find the answers I need.

Catherine Kapphahn is a 2011 Individual Artist Grant recipient from the Queens Council on the Arts. She is a lecturer at Lehman College in the Bronx. She lives in Astoria with her husband and two sons.