Where are we?
Think they’ll give us hot chocolate for free?
If this is Pizza Palace where’s the Pizza Princess?
This is Mary. She lives here too.
That’s where the pigeon man lives!
I wanna go on a roadtrip.
I bet it’s haunted.
I want’em all!
Here’s a fact: if you research Astoria, NY, you will undoubtedly be overwhelmed by articles raving about its immense diversity and abundance of quality restaurants. It is no secret that the northwestern corner of Queens can boast endlessly of fantastic taverns, hookah bars, butchers, and an uncanny ability to nearly always be within a five block radius of a Hellenic gift store, yet I find that Astoria has even more to offer than tasty food and a rich culture. Situated a comfortable fifteen minutes from Manhattan, Astoria has found the sweet spot. It’s where the urbanism of the city and the charm of a small town are synthesized; it’s the kind of place where kids make up stories about their town’s own pigeon man.

It is simple enough to recognize the diversity of Astoria. There are landmarks of diversity dotting its map: the Greek American club on 23rd avenue, the Maltese club on Astoria Boulevard, the Czech beer garden on 24th avenue or Laguli’s Bakery on Ditmars. These are, without a doubt, significant members of the community; they’re the sort of places that make it onto the “Top Reasons to Live in Astoria” (Roleke). However, Astoria has the misfortune of adopting the significantly negative connotations that are unfairly attributed to the entire borough of Queens. Due to my immense adoration and bias, I cannot articulate why somebody might not fall in love with Astoria, but according to a writer’s experience with moving to Astoria, “Telling people you’re moving to Queens is like telling them you have a history of mental issues or that you have a cancer with a high survival rate or that you were in a terrible accident as a child. They’d be remiss to actually dismiss you or express repulsion, but the information has an interesting way of cloaking you in this very thin ick” (nyc pudding). Perhaps Astoria appears so unattractive because it is not known for its thriving art community or vintage shops, yet I insist that thanks not only to its diversity, but its uncanny ability to regenerate a sense of child-like wonder, that living here is an enriching experience for just about anybody (especially an artist).

There is a certain magic in visiting a community that seems to have forgotten. However, Astoria is not one of these places. Instead we have certain “hidden gems” of the past placed within a modern context, a contrast so powerful that it becomes even more precious than a place that is steeped in antiquity. Walking into Old Astoria, you find two streets of Victorian houses and antebellum mansions juxtaposed against an enormous apartment complex called Shore Towers (FNY). The site of a black and white Victorian home feels like a new discovery each time you lay your eyes upon it, and the fact that it’s in the shadow of Shore Towers make you want to save it. This sensation, discovery followed by attachment, is what solidifies one’s love for Astoria, and it is one that is consistently felt all over Astoria’s map. I have felt it when standing on the platform of upper-L on 31st street, and noticing a Victorian house hidden behind all the storefronts with no visible entrance (Ruhling), and never do I feel it so strongly as when I visit Steinway Mansion. Situated on top of a hill and flanked by factories is the property that used to belong to William Steinway of Steinway & Sons pianos (Green). It is a fantastic home in its own right, but what is even more sensational is the feeling one gets when they know that such a magical place exists, tucked between a power plant and a coffee factory, just a few blocks away. The charm does not stop at the sights that you see in Astoria. There is certainly a great degree of child like wonder sparked by the people who occupy the neighborhood. It is safe to say that there are, admittedly, a few homeless characters well known around the area. Depending on who you are, this may or may not be charming to you, but no matter who you are there is no doubt that you will be fascinated by the story of Astoria’s most famous street-dweller, Cadillac Man. Living under a railroad viaduct, Cadillac Man won’t reveal his real name, but claims that he gets his nickname from having been struck by a Cadillac on six different occasions in 1994. Cadillac Man is a favorite of many Astorians (I have a friend who takes great pride in having once exchanged a head nod with the famed homeless man) and has even written a book and been the subject of a documentary. He is the sort of character that seems to only exist within movies and urban legends; yet, we are blessed enough to have him here in Astoria. There is another character that is suspected to live in Astoria who also meets the qualifications of an “urban legend”. As the Ditmars area of Astoria lives primarily in the shadow of crisscrossing bridges and railroad tracks, there is a lot of real estate for New York’s pigeon population.

At the site of one of the so called “pigeon bridges” one can often see giant flocks of pigeons flying repeatedly in what seems to be a calculated circle. I cannot seem to find any evidence online that somebody is orchestrating these pigeons (although I did find out about a couple who nurses sick pigeons), but on one special occasion while my friends and I were watching the show, a man stopped and proclaimed “Pigeon flying! It used to be illegal, y’know?” Whether or not The Pigeon Man truly exists is trivial, it is the fact that Astoria is a place that fosters these sort of characters and this brand of child like wonder that makes it such a special place.

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