

Kasoundra Kasoundra

The following is a guest post by Romy Ashby on December 11, 2014

For a long time, New York City was a treasure box of rarities and uncommon beauty, where no two blocks were alike. The ambiance of each neighborhood was made of all kinds of things and the many colorful people—the oddballs, iconoclasts, the funny intellectuals—who populated the streets. So many of those colorful people have disappeared with the relentless scaling up of the city, and usually nobody notices what happens to them. I feel sad when I come across the contents of someone's life out on the street for the trash. **A pervasive nightmare scenario in New York is the one of being poor, no longer young, and alone, and then losing one's apartment. This happened to the artist Kasoundra Kasoundra in a terrible way.** I would like to see her situation reversed, because it can be, but not without help.



Kasoundra, 2006, photo by Romy Ashby

Kasoundra lived for many years in a rent-controlled Upper East Side apartment. It was full of art and interesting objects, many of which she made. Many other things she found, or had been given, and each object had a story. She made a lot of her own clothes, read a lot of books and did volunteer gardening in Central Park. She had kitties who she loved. On her next birthday she'll be eighty. She has a crystal clear, youthful mind and a wonderful, original intelligence.

Her story is particularly frightening because, having been swept into a vortex of legal and bureaucratic incompetence and indifference, she not only lost her apartment, her pets and her belongings, but she lost her very freedom as well.

She's been stuck in a nursing home where she doesn't need to be, far outside the city, against her will, separated from her friends, for almost three years.

How could this happen? After an illness and a lengthy hospital stay, Kasoundra recovered. As she explained to me today on the phone, the hospital offered to assign her a legal guardian. She understood "legal guardian" to mean an advocate who would help her get her finances and affairs in order after her illness, so she agreed to have a legal guardian assigned.

"I thought it meant someone who would actually care about me," she said. "I never imagined that a guardian was someone who could put me away against my will. But he did. He was a disaster."

Kasoundra's right to live a full life was taken from her. She's not allowed to leave the nursing home, she doesn't have any of her own clothes or know where they are, and the courts did nothing to protect her from an appointed legal guardian who caused her immeasurable harm. Eventually that guardian was replaced by another one who is even worse.



In the Chelsea Hotel, late 1960s, photo by Liza Stelle

Kasoundra came to New York in 1960. She took jobs illustrating for the *New York Sun*, baling newspapers to drop at newsstands off the back of a truck, and she even worked as a mechanic. She lived above Puglia's restaurant in Little Italy for a while, and for a long time she lived on 12th Street before moving uptown. She met all kinds of people, seeking out the most eccentric and interesting characters to pounce on and keep as friends. She worked with Harry Smith, who she adored and refers to as The Cosmos for his exceptional ability to understand everything and anything. She worked with Olympia Press publisher Maurice Girodias as an illustrator. She befriended Alice and Ray Brock of Alice's Restaurant (she was later in the movie), and through Alice she met Liza Stelle, the daughter of jazzman Eddie Condon. For years she was a regular fixture at Eddie's apartment on Washington Square, which was always full of musicians and Village characters. There she met Hank O'Neal, an ex-CIA agent who had traded his old life for a new one of making jazz recordings, writing books, and taking pictures. One day, Kasoundra found an old wooden telephone booth on a sidewalk. She dragged it to Hank's recording studio on Christopher Street, and said, "You cannot get rid of this." Hank kept it, and he photographed people sitting in it for a long time to come.

On the phone, **Kasoundra described visiting Salvador Dali's studio to look at his work. "He sat there twirling his mustache," she said, "and I knew it was waxed!"** She told him which of his paintings she liked most and wished she could own. "It was a loaf of bread split in half," she said. You could see every pore in that loaf. You could almost take a bite out of it, it was so real!"

She told me how she'd found Hermione Gingold in the Manhattan telephone directory and called her up. "I love your movies!" she said. "I think you're just thrilling!" And Hermione Gingold said, in her deliciously funny voice, "Well, you must come up and have tea, dear." After their first meeting, Kasoundra visited as often as she could and always brought her flowers. She made herself laugh doing her own very accurate imitation of Hermione Gingold, who, she said, "had the most wonderful, lyrical way of being nasal."

Well-known people were much more accessible years ago, and Kasoundra knew many. But status has never mattered to her. She's an absolute egalitarian. If a person could converse on interesting subjects, they'd have her. She's always had great appreciation for distinctive people, and they in turn appreciate her. There's no one more distinctive than Kasoundra.

The Australian theorist Germaine Greer dedicated her book, *The Female Eunuch*, to five friends including Kasoundra when it was published in 1970. "For Kasoundra," the dedication says, "who makes magic out of skins and skeins and pens, who is never still, never unaware, riding her strange destiny in the wilderness of New York, loyal and bitter, as strong as a rope of steel and as soft as a sigh." Germaine Greer's description of Kasoundra still fits, 45 years later, but against the present context of her life it is heartbreaking to read.



January 1, 1974, photo by Hank O'Neal

In the forced confines of the nursing home she tries to keep her sense of humor as best she can. She teaches art to other residents for something to do. But it's very hard for her to not feel sad all the time. She's an animal lover not allowed to have a pet. **Her apartment on the Upper East Side was emptied out not long ago after years of legal limbo, and she has not been told where her belongings have gone. She's very worried about her art.** Her life's work was in that apartment, and she considers her works of art to be her children. She wonders about personal treasures, such as her gypsy fortune telling machine and her "Napoleon Desk," along with the rest of her furniture, her various collections, her clothes, and her many books.

When I asked her today what she wants most right now she said, "First of all I'd like my freedom. I'm sick of being stuck in this place, paid for with my government money, and I would like my property returned." She would also like a place to live, in the city, where she can see her many friends.

There is no logical reason why Kasoundra should be trapped so far from the city. What she needs now is a good lawyer willing to help right this wrong. Recommendations are welcome.

Some years back, Penny Arcade and Steve Zehentner of the Lower East Side Biography Project featured an episode devoted to Kasoundra and her art, filmed in her apartment uptown. [You can see an excerpt of that here.](#)

Romy Ashby writes the blog [Walkers in the City](#). To learn more about Kasoundra, and if you can help, please contact Romy through her web site, [RomyAshby.com](#).

Source: <http://vanishingnewyork.blogspot.com/2014/12/kasoundra-kasoundra.html>