

# Maureen

by Aymee Wall

The kids next door want Maureen to help them fight it. I keep thinking of them as kids but they're in their twenties and I'm only 35. Maureen hasn't said a word about the eviction notice or these fired-up neighbours, I've been here for days and I only just encountered the two moon-faced kids with identical round spectacles sitting on their side of the front stoop. They saw me get out a key and leapt up to start their spiel. I nodded and nodded and accepted pamphlets and a scribbled phone number and finally dragged the groceries inside, where I knew I'd find Maureen sitting in the green chair, plucking at her pant leg.

The apartment is warm and stale after the fresh air. I wonder how things next door are arranged, it's a decent size place but there are at least three or four of them over there, a rotating cast in the backyard every night drinking cans of Vieux Montréal. On Maureen's side it's darker than I remember it being on my last visit. It seems smaller, or she does. Something about the scale is off.

"I got some nice things," I say, setting the bags on the table. "I thought we could have a little cocktail hour, pretend we're out on the town." Maureen in the green chair with her hand going, slightly glassy-eyed already, just nodding, watching as I set out the cheese and the olives and the baguette, rinse the shimmer of dust off the wine glasses. Finally she heaves up out of the chair and over to the table, pushing back a limp lock of red hair, a box dye job losing its brief luster.

"So I met the neighbours," I say. "What's the story with the landlord? Did you get the same letter?"

Maureen waves a hand, pulls a glass of wine toward her. "Have you talked to your mother today," she says in response.

A new thing is Maureen asking after Mom. A new thing is Maureen getting nostalgic, a quaver that creeps into her voice around drink three or four. Another new thing is how early in the day drink three or four arrives. My mother is Maureen's sturdy little sister. She does not hesitate and she does not look back and she manages a dental office and runs the Tely 10 every year. She rarely visits herself, but she started sending me up for a week or two every couple of years once I was twelve or so.

I used to do a tight five about Maureen, had it ready to trot out at parties or dinners as a kind of origin story when I first left home myself. The cosmopolitan aunt, the black sheep who'd fled a life of salt beef and cabbage and bingo on the weekends to go live in the world. She was straight out of central casting, I'd say, and tell about Maureen flying home to Newfoundland for the first time after she'd moved up to Montreal, swanning back into town in a fur coat. "Now b'ys," they'd said. "If it isn't herself," they'd said.

When I'd visit as a teenager, we'd go to the movies and then for dumplings. We'd poke around the galleries and she'd let me go through her closet and she'd let me wear her perfume. Maureen in her forties then, the first lines around her mouth only making her more glamorous to me. She'd worked at the film board, something with papers and schedules and a phone ringing off the hook, right in the midst of the action—she'd only ever wanted to be part of it, the hustle and the energy. She was like Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday* but with the remnants of a Newfoundland accent and no husbands.

Now she stays in. Now she spends most of her days parked in front of her television surrounded by stacks of DVDs. She watches at least two movies a day, seems to survive on toast and tea and Jameson. I came here thinking we'd wear lipstick, go out into the world. But Maureen will not be talked into a gallery or museum, she will not go to the cinema, she is not interested in dining out. So we eat toast and tea and watch her DVDs. Thrillers from the 80s, old screwball comedies, Japanese film noirs. French New Wave and cheesy action movies. Maureen's taste had been eclectic. I keep catching myself using the past tense.

“Mom is fine,” I say, tearing off the end of the baguette. “You know, they can only evict you under really specific circumstances, I’m sure you guys would have a case if all the tenants get together.”

Maureen sighs and wrenches off a fistful of bread herself. “I don’t know how much of a fight I have in me, girl,” she says.

The neighbourhood has changed radically in the years since I started coming here. There is barely a trace left of what I used to think of as Maureen’s world. Now it’s all expensive yoga pants and expensive fried chicken. I remember Maureen sweeping me into a bar around the corner, flashing her eyes at me to stay quiet, look as tall as 18. We’d split a big bottle of Labatt 50 in little glasses and play the jukebox. Once she’d slipped me a twenty to play the VLTs—“go have a few waps now, my love”—and I remember feeling like it was some kind of test I’d failed because of how sick I felt watching the twenty dollars disintegrate and feeling no joy. That place is now a wine bar where they talk about skin contact.

I’m the only one complaining about this. Maureen barely seems to have noticed it. The creep of it. She only glances at the pamphlets I hand over, drinks deeply from the squat wine glass, still dusty at the base.

In my well-burnished anecdotes, Maureen is tough as nails and hard to shock. I had always shown up here with confessions, questions saved just for her, and once, at 18, pregnant, eight weeks, and Maureen had yelled down the phone at a receptionist, flourishing long strings of curses until she got the appointment we needed. “No, we can’t bloody well wait two weeks, so yes, you’d better find a Jesus spot because my niece has got to get on a plane again by the end of the week and where she’s going, let’s just say the options are limited.” She took me out for a steak and told me her own story, the money begged and borrowed, the married man looking at his watch.

She used to say, “Your mother doesn’t need to know about this.” She used to say, “Well, if nothing else you’ll get a good story out of it.” She used to say, “You know you can always come to me, whatever you need, if it’s money and I don’t have it, I’ll get it. You just come to me.” On the train in this time, I was already thinking how I’d tell her I’ve been lifting weights at the Y. How every week I

can bench press a little heavier and so every week I am that much closer to never again being unable to push the softening form of a middle-aged father of two off my chest. I was going to tell it all wry like that, so Maureen could nod and tell me her own story and let me buff the last raw edges of mine into something I could hold at a distance. But my turn for the confessional keeps not coming up this visit and it never seems the right moment for my questions.

I try to get her going on the apartment situation instead. “You might not even have to do very much,” I say. “The kids seem organized. You can probably just sign on with them.” What I don’t say is, “What are you going to do otherwise? Sit here getting sauced every day until they come in and carry you out body and bones? And then what?”

“Oh, Katharine, I don’t know,” she finally says. She gets up and goes into the little front room with the TV and sinks into her chair. “Hand me the whasisname,” she says. I can’t remember anymore if she’d always sounded so much like my mother or if this was some new slippage. I hand her the remote and go clear the kitchen table.

That night Maureen stoops over the stacks of DVDs a long moment and finally pulls out a movie. *Wanda*, with Barbara Loden, the only film she directed herself. Wanda leaves her husband and children and loses her job at a sewing factory in rural Pennsylvania and then just drifts along—getting left at an ice cream stand on the highway by some sweaty man in a suit, getting robbed in a movie theatre, and eventually winding up clinging to a twitchy thief who makes her pick the onions off his burger and snaps at her to do something with her hair. This bizarre passivity on her face the whole time. Maureen has her eyes fixed on the television, her expression unchanged, but soon I am driving my fingernails into my elbows, sitting with my arms crossed watching Barbara Loden absorbing every slap, every insult, Barbara Loden staring out the car window with that lank blonde hair spilling out from a lopsided ponytail on top of her head, until finally something breaks in me and I snatch up Maureen’s cigarettes and throw the pack at the television screen and leave the apartment.

In the morning, Maureen is up before me, she's frying eggs when I come into the kitchen. The pamphlets from the neighbour kids are neatly stacked on the table. She looks up from the stove and then back at the frying pan and she says, "Well, did you have a good walk last night." She says, "So have you forgiven me and Wanda and yourself too for all our inevitable human frailty." She says, "Here, sit to the table."