

## **Some Trees I Have Known: Maeve**

There's generative power in being a survivor. This applies as much to humans as to trees.

The presence of the courtyard maple glimpsed outside the Art Deco window convinced us to relocate from an overpriced temporary rental on the Upper East Side to Hudson Heights, a barely known neighborhood near The Cloisters and Fort Tryon Park.

First seen in leafless January, the arboreal presence offered a maple branch to urban existence, a daily dose of lush green come spring and summer, that extended deep into November. The last of the leaf-bearers to turn gold-yellow, then burnished brown.

Planted in the yard of the building next door, hidden roots reached under our building's cement courtyard, as generous arms arched branches over a chain link fence, providing cooling shade and the calming solace of dancing leaves.

Ignoring the fence line, the tree inhabited both yards. Each south-facing apartment looked out on this generative arboreal happenstance, a verdant sanctuary from the hustle beeps and brake squeaks of garbage trucks, Fresh Direct deliveries, and Con Edison jackhammers.

My writing desk overlooked the courtyard with its sliver view of the Hudson River, a greening patina over my work life as a digital producer, online educator, and video artist, seeking good news in the bipolarity strife zones of clickbait media.

I named the maple Maeve, after the Irish goddess. A survivor, a life-giver, a warrior.

Late afternoon mid-January, a window-side branch commotion compelled a glance up from the virtual world of my desk. Extraordinary. A Red-tailed Hawk had landed in the maple tree, setting the overstory swaying.

Never before had a bird of prey appeared so close to the building. Bathed in western exposure, the maple existed in a narrow flyway, a stopover for passing swallows, doves, and house finches, absent of nesting residents. Only tiny city songbirds inhabited this sparse naturalscape on spring and summer mornings, flitting among the leaves looking for insects. But no birds had ever alighted in winter.

How did this fierce raptor locate this hidden alleyway refuge?

But here she was, a fearless Red-tailed Hawk, an urban hunter perched with an immobilized pigeon, nestled on a branch.

I ran for my camera on an urge to capture photographic proof. Blinking in disbelief, I hurried to the bedroom for a better view. The video ran for a full minute, followed by a series of stills taken in numb amazement.

The hawk positioned the dead pigeon in a V of the branch. A crimson gape hole where the pigeon's head once turned and bobbed, a wound gleaming in bright contrast to the dove grey of a lifeless body splayed in the bough nexus.

Dead in an instant from a fierce talon-grab as the hawk descended from the sky.

Through the viewfinder, the autofocus zoomed in as the hawk hopped to another perch, bob-walking along, pumping its tail, fanning out pale rust-apricot feathers, the urban dove meal in momentary abeyance. Her insouciant torso turned, displaying a cream-white breast plate scalloped in pale terracotta feather-curves. She hesitated, without hurry or jolt, a golden sphere-eye scanning in profile, watching briefly before alighting into the alleyway, leaving the body of the dead bird behind.

Twilight streaked blood orange on the skyline.

By nightfall, the pigeon's body had disappeared, a whisper wind of awe, a one-time, lifetime visitation.

Somehow, when archiving the footage, I accidentally erased it.

For many months, houses sparrows nested in Maeve's branches, chirping every morning, until a noisy, invasive window replacement project scared them away for an entire year. A sheet of plastic from the construction taunted me until I descended with a broom handle to dislodge it.

The birds' absence that following summer led to a tent caterpillar infestation. Raggedy leaf clusters hung in ghostly webbed colonies. Unable to summon birds, I asked the super to bring in arborists to help mitigate the blight. They began snipping branches on our side of the fence, reluctant to enter the adjoining lot over private property concerns. The tree had no concept of 'property.' I assured them it was important. *El arbol esta infirma*. Some rudimentary Spanish convinced them, and they took loppers to the other side, taking down as many reachable insect-

ridden limbs in a clandestine operation, then carted them away. *Gracias, gracias*, I thanked them.

Despite poor soil, roots half covered by cement bags and trash, the tree recovered, a miracle of endurance.

Eventually sparrows and wrens returned.

In autumn, tawny yellow overtook the green, marking the shift of seasons, a golden skirt scattered over the two yards by November's end, wind reanimating each year's transition toward winter. By December, bare branches silhouetted morning windows, a lone tree mitigating brick patterns along a sliver view of river, a mind walk of daydreaming escape.

Some mornings rose-wisp clouds floated above the rooftops, a blush glow on the snow-covered Palisades across the Hudson River. The maple tree breathed in a branch-nodding dance as nests of snow cradled the v-crooks of her wingspan.

The maple endured neglect, a lack of mulch and plastic detritus strewn around its base, which blew in from unlidded trash cans. I periodically cleaned up the yard, in tiptoe-trespassing stealth, gently touching her trunk to say hello.

When brick masons piled bags of cement for weeks over the roots, I finally moved them over, letting in the rains.

And still she survived, shimmering waves of emerald every season, healing me with breathing leaves, healing anyone who remembered to look out the window.

--Kathleen Sweeney, an excerpt from *The Book of Awe Project* (2024)

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