

## Living With Maria: Part 1

Written by x-22

### *Freedom.*

Well, maybe not freedom, so much as a new start. It wasn't as if she was moving for the first time; it was barely a month since she moved out from Adrian. Reminded of that, she decided she did need a fresh start. And before breaking up with her boyfriend, when she was in school, she had lived three years with her secondary school friend Antonia. Living with the hard-working baker's apprentice was the reason Claudia no longer was a size 38<sup>1</sup>. And that she was no longer in school; her flatmate's apprenticeship income had been too tempting not to get a job. If nothing else, moving meant that her clothes shop job was within walking distance. Well, within the distance of a fairly *long* walk. Except in winter. And maybe not if it rained. She might have to get a bus card.

"I said 'Well here we are!'" came the annoyed interruption of her thoughts, "I'm sorry if you can't hear me up there in the ozone layer!"

"I hear you, shorty!" Claudia lied, turning to face her soon-to-be roommate, Maria; slowly, so as not to suggest she had been shaken out of her thoughts or anything.

With just three inches or so between them, there seemed little cause for the 'short jokes' at Maria's expense, but those who had grown up with her would always remember her as the shortest, and so it had stuck with her. It was of equal habit to Maria calling Claudia fat, despite her lack of significant obesity; no hard feelings all around. Of course, Claudia was a little soft around the middle, but then Maria had broad hips and shoulders, making her look even shorter than her 5'4", so perhaps there was a grain of truth to the habitual name-calling.

Craning her neck with exaggeration and mock indignation to meet her friend's eyes and pouting with lips bright pink in the cold autumn air, Maria let Claudia take in her annoyance for a brief moment before returning her gaze to the building in front of them. She made her way to the door, leaving Claudia with a view of the dark hair cascading over her shoulders; Maria probably had the thickest locks of hair Claudia knew, and it certainly contrasted with her, to Claudia, delicate features; pronounced cheekbones, slender nose – perfectly straight save for a slight curve at its tip – and full little lips on her small mouth. Still, her strong jaw and piercing grey eyes suggested she was stubborn and clever, rather than timid and dull.

Following her friend through the doorway – after Maria had opened the lock with a triumphant 'hah!' - Claudia briefly considered if Maria was beautiful. She certainly wasn't waifish with her hourglass shape and some subtle muscle from some martial arts or the other remaining under that soft skin. Involuntarily Claudia drew a comparison to herself: Not shapely, just a bit flabby all over.

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<sup>1</sup> US size 10, UK size 12

Her average body had not been graced with more pronounced hips or anything after her three-year binge that had been living with Antonia; all those extra dinners and doughnuts had mostly just settled evenly all over her. Her face had also just puffed up, her cheeks rounder, her chin softer. It wasn't much, but Claudia certainly noticed. Not all the time, but sometimes. She didn't mind all that much, but occasionally, when reminded...

"Tell... Jimmy I... won't be home for Christmas..." Claudia panted in the middle of the seventh flight of stairs, falling to her knees with a strangled croak, one hand grasping feebly in front of her.

"Oh, come on, it's just one more floor, you big baby!" Maria said sternly before failing to suppress her laughter.

"Forget it, I'm done for!" the fallen soldier protested with a smile. Brushing dust off her knees, she got up, breathing heavily, but no longer with exaggerated panting. "Why did we rent a fourth floor flat??"

"To get some exercise," Maria said solemnly, helping Claudia to her feet, managing to keep her deeply serious face for about two seconds before the two burst into howling laughter.

"Thank God for furnished flats!" Claudia exclaimed as they closed the door, "I'm not up for hauling sofas up those stairs!"

"Yeah, well... oh, hi! You must be Marcus!" Maria smiled energetically as a third 20-something-year-old shuffled into the hall, hand running through his short, sand-coloured hair as the little brunette jumped on him, "I'm Maria!"

"Uhm, hi?" he said uncertainly as he warily stretched out his other hand to meet Maria's, eyebrows raised above his slender glasses in mild surprise or amusement as she shook it enthusiastically.

"Claudia," she said, snaking her hand past Maria to get a similarly short "Marcus" and a cautious smile in return.

"So, you're the ones renting the upstairs rooms, then." Marcus stated, possibly for his own benefit.

"That's right." Maria nodded, "Don't worry, we don't bite!"

"Speak for yourself!" Claudia chuckled as she struggled out of her scarf.

"Well, I guess you know where the kitchen is and everything?"

With both's assurance they did, Marcus shuffled down the hall with a "See you, then" and closed the door to his room behind him. The two girls looked at each other, shrugged, smiled and went up one more staircase to take a look at their new home.

A little old, but fortunately not run down or aging, the two rooms and adjoining living room were a bargain for two young women working as unskilled labour and with precious little saved up. With upstairs and downstairs bathrooms and a kitchen shared with only one other, Claudia could excuse old-fashioned wood panelling and a creaking staircase.

"I hope Marcus isn't driven mad by us running up and down the stairs," Maria joked. "You know, with him living under it and all?"

"Running up and down stairs?" Claudia countered with mock ignorance, before adding, with a laugh; "We have a TV, bathroom - and, look; refrigerator – up here. Why would we need to go down the stairs?"

"To go to the kitchen?" Maria suggested.

"You make a fair point," Claudia admitted, opening the fridge, "but look here; freezer compartment."

"So, we're only going to eat ice cream?" She did not sound convinced.

"You know..." Claudia said thoughtfully, with mock revelation, "That's not a bad idea."

"You keep on dreaming, girl," Maria chuckled, "I'm going to start unpacking these boxes."

Maria standing up, hands on her hips, Claudia lounging in the corner of the sofa with a soda can in her hand, the two fresh tenants surveyed their new domain. Covering the most of two of the living room's walls was an old sofa, though fortunately not quite as old as the room itself. With the TV set up across it, Claudia had already found her favourite spot in the whole flat, though the comfortable armchair at the sofa's short end came close second. Facing its long end were the doors to their rooms, through the door at its right was the loft storage room with its refrigerator and blessed freezer compartment.

With most of the unpacking done, some DVDs had been placed in shelves next to the television and some clothes had found their closets. After about two hours, with a few boxes left only partially emptied, however, they had decided they were bored and called it a day.

"About time for dinner, then?" Claudia asked, emptying the can.

"Yeah," Maria agreed, rummaging through a box, retrieving a casserole pan, "I thought we could have lasagne."

"Isn't that pan a little big?"

"Nonsense!" Maria protested, "Bigger is *always* better, and besides, lasagne keeps forever; we'll have food for days..."

"That was *good* lasagne!" Claudia exclaimed, reclining on the sofa, hands folded over her belly, feet resting on the table for optimal gut accommodation; just to their left were the pitiful remains of their dinner, only a few scoops of sauce and bits of meat having escaped the onslaught.

"Yes. Don't mention food." Maria said calmly, eyes in a book as she turned a page.

"You shouldn't eat so much, then," Claudia chastised her, holding her puffed out belly to show how "little" *she* had eaten. No reply was forthcoming.

"So, what's that you're reading?" she continued in the voice of one who is undeniably bored.

"*Technological Advances of World War II*," came the disinterested reply.

"Oh. Right." Claudia did a poor job of sounding convinced. "Exciting."

"And you're watching *Celebrities Gone Wild*." Maria countered, still preoccupied with her reading. Claudia gave the TV a quick glance to confirm this before answering.

"Well, I'm bored," was her defence, continuing with a groan: "and too full to move."

"Most perturbing." Maria said slowly, absently, before reaching the end of a page, closing the book around her bookmark and continuing cheerfully: "I'm pretty sure it's just because you're too *fat* to move!"

"But I'm fat because I eat so much!" Claudia protested, puffing up her cheeks, laughing. Maria let their laughter die down before indicating the TV, just as celebrity pop singer Christy Dogface slipped in her own vomit, exposing a black censor mark under her skirt.

"How about we watch a DVD instead?"

"Yeah..." Claudia groaned, making a half-hearted effort to get up from her nearly horizontal position, "So, who's going to put it in?"

"Oh, sod it!" Maria exclaimed, easing her belt a little lower, inching downwards in the sofa, "Let's just see what's on Showtime!"

Lying awake in bed, Claudia was grateful she felt too heavy to move after their prodigious evening dinner; she sensed the faint craving for lasagne leftovers – there were a few spoonfuls left in the fridge... – in the back of her mind and she was pretty sure that if she ate another bite, she would rupture spectacularly. *And then Maria will complain about the mess*, she joked to herself.

Just lying here, looking at the ceiling, thinking; it all felt a bit weird, didn't it? First night in a new flat, with a new roommate. The previous times had all been different: With Antonia, it was the first time away from home, but she had known her for years, so there was a sense of security nonetheless. Moving in with Adrian had probably been weird as well, but most likely she had been too much in love to pay it any heed. If nothing else, she had known him pretty well before she did move in. It was a different story with Maria, who she had only been acquainted with through Antonia and seen precious little of. She was an opinionated little person, Claudia had soon

determined, and she had always felt the brunette was a little too smart to properly get along with; people waxing poetic about politics and stuff like that was Claudia's brain's cue to shut down. It had been different now, when they had been alone to plan the move, however. Claudia had always found Maria funny, but now that heated discussions of important issues were kept to a minimum, there was less fuss associated with the entertainment value. And she obviously knew how to make lasagne. It was probably because she had an Italian mother. Or was it Romanian? *Whatever*, Claudia decided and began to drift into a sweet, gluttony-fuelled sleep.

Faced with the choice of postponing the house-warming party or inviting people to sit perched on a maze of partially unpacked boxes, Maria and Claudia had quickly decided to draw up an abbreviated guest list; one short enough to fit between them instead. They had even coaxed out Marcus downstairs.

"So, you're a nurse, then?" Maria teased, plopping down on the armrest next to him.

"Well, I work with disadvantaged children," he answered evasively, shying away from Maria's sudden appearance.

"Oh, those poor little things!" she exclaimed, either with sympathy or sarcasm in her voice, before jumping up from the sofa and addressing the guests:

"Thanks for coming everyone. If anyone's hungry, I've made pierogi..." she announced, indicating the platters with her hand, giving Claudia an exasperated look as *her* hand reached out for another dumpling – on the half-empty platter.

"They are great!" she assured the others, swallowing her last catch, another pierog firmly between thumb and index finger. The guests distracted with helping themselves, Claudia gave a confident smile to counter Maria's still slightly unbelieving look.

"You're right, they *are* great," agreed Julia, Antonia's skinny little friend, and turned to her flatmate: "We should get the recipe."

The other guests gave murmured assent to this, and for a while, attention was on Maria and her pierogi, which Claudia helped herself generously to, making the best of the distraction.

Trudging up the stair, hoping her exhausted carcass would carry her to the top, Claudia cocked an eyebrow when she heard animated tunes cascading down from a desktop loudspeaker in their living room. Finding Maria curled up with a book in the sofa, she felt she had to intervene:

"I'm not sure if you are aware of this, and correct me if I'm mistaken, but I think that's pre-war pop you're listening to."

Putting away her book, Maria leaned over to her laptop:

"You would rather I put on some Wagner?"

Claudia's mouth opened. And closed again.

"You, my dear, are one bonkers babe," she chuckled, shaking her head, "Are you sure you work at an auto accessories shop?"

"Not a fan of classical music, then?" Maria smiled, theatrically removing her hands from the laptop, making it absolutely clear she was not about to do anything mad with it, "So what do *you* listen to?"

"Metal." came the curt answer, but before Claudia could elaborate, Maria cut her off:

"Oh, like Nightwish? They're cool." Maria brightened, obviously pleased to find common ground.

"Well, yeah..." Claudia said hesitatingly, "I was thinking more Death/Thrash; you know..."

"Noise, screaming and disharmonious racket?"

"Well, I was going to say 'like Disturbed or Strapping Young Lad or something,'" Claudia explained, dejectedly, sounding uncertain if she should be a little annoyed or not.

"Let's hear it then!" Maria said encouragingly, scooching over and inviting Claudia to take control of the digital jukebox.

Lounging in the moss green armchair, laptop placed appropriately enough in her lap, Claudia cast Maria surreptitious, sceptical glances across the remains of dinner. A few hours had passed since they ate, but cleaning up the bowls and plates just so happened to have been postponed.

"We made a deal;" Maria reminded her, "You would let me listen to Cole Porter, if I made dinner."

"Yeah, I know," Claudia acquiesced, not wanting to discuss the matter.

"Well, I guess I have tormented you enough," Maria laughed, switching the music off, "I hope it was worth it."

"Oh, *it was*," Claudia assured her, giving the dishes a brief, clandestine survey, "In fact, is there any chicken left?"

"Afraid not." Maria had to admit, "Feeling a bit peckish?"

"Oh no. No, I was just wondering." Claudia lied, trying to sound casual, "No, really, you don't have to get up..."

Plodding over the threshold with a tired yawn, Marcus tossed his keys onto the drum table in the hall. Waiting for a moment, he wrenched free of his outdoor garb when the key bunch had settled safely, close to the tables' edge. Shoes off, he made his way to the little storage room at the end of the hall, opening the freezer in search of a quick dinner.

"Did I...?" he asked himself, looking down on the obvious absence of frozen pizza. Looking up

with a face deep in thought, he eventually gave up, shook his head and left the room, met halfway to the door by Maria coming down the stairs.

"Hi!" she smiled brightly.

"Uh, yeah, hi. I was just going to the shop. Need anything?"

"Not really. Bye!"

And with a mumbled goodbye, Marcus scooped up his keys and left.

Stumbling through the door once more, Marcus safely deposited three more pizzas in the freezer. *Just a few minutes on the sofa*, he told himself, barely able to keep his eyes open. *Just a few...*

"Another pizza, dear?" Maria asked sweetly, the aroma preceding her up the stairs. Planted firmly in the armchair, beer can in hand, Claudia simply gave a brief murmur in protest before Maria put the plate down on the armrest.

"You sure Marcus doesn't mind us eating his pizza?"

"Of course not!" Maria said confidently, "He's got a whole heap of them; last I checked there were three left."

"Oh." Claudia mumbled, putting her free hand on her stomach. Returning to the late-night crime solving on the television, she grabbed a slice of the little pizza. And another, and another, stopping her steady chewing only as Maria got up in the corner of her eye, grabbing the empty plate.

"I don't think you need to make any more."

"Oh, it's no problem!" Maria assured her cheerfully, "You only eat as much as you want."

Her flatmate on the verge of disappearing down the stairs, Claudia tried to stop her again:

"If I eat as much as I want, I'll explode," she warned her, jokingly solemn.

"Nonsense!" came Maria's dismissal of her warning, "If worst comes to worst, you'll just puke a lot."

And with that happy assurance, she was gone. Lightly rubbing her belly, Claudia uttered a strained 'ouf' and unbuttoned her trousers.

A few moments later, Maria was back; the fourth pizza had obviously been in the oven.

"Oh, I don't know..." Claudia tried unconvincingly.

"Oh come on, it's just a little portion pizza." Holding the plate at eye level, she added: "Look, it's only wafer thin!"

"Don't say that!"

"Don't worry, I'm not forcing you," Maria assured her, putting down the plate, "Just say no."

Uttering a sound that was part sigh, part groan, Claudia gave up and slowly began to munch away. On the TV screen, the cops had just found evidence turning the entire case upside down.

Waking up past noon, it took some time before Claudia mustered enough strength to pad sleepily into the living room, finding Maria already up, watching something in black and white explode on the TV screen.

"Slept well?"

Grunting ambiguously, Claudia collapsed on the sofa. Her nightie top being a little old and consequently a little too short and her pyjamas having poor elastic and consequently sagging a little, along with her slouched posture saw her unusually exposed midsection seemingly chub out on all sides. Catching sight of her belly unrestrained by her trousers, Claudia gave it a little slap before covering it up as best she could.

"How many pizzas did we eat last night, anyway?"

"Well, *we* shared one..." Maria said slyly, pausing meaningfully, "I'm not sure, but there were three left last I checked."

Briefly content with the answer, Claudia brushed her tangled hair out of her eyes.

"Wasn't it three left when I asked you after pizza number three as well?"

"Maybe; I wasn't paying it much attention."

A few more minutes passed as they watched more stock footage make war upon each other, and listening to a man narrating something Claudia was too sleepy to quite understand.

"Have you had breakfast?" she ventured eventually.

"Yes." Maria replied, adding cheerfully: "I'll go make you some."

"Damn those stairs!" Claudia cursed loudly as she fell over and into the bed, with her trousers just above her knees.

"I will be sure to inform them," came Maria's even reply from the open door to the living room. Following an exasperated grunt, some more loud cursing and – judging from the noise – wrestling an alligator in her bedroom, Claudia emerged with a look of vexed annoyance.

"Climbing those monumentally stupid stairs every day..."

"*Almost* every day," Maria corrected.

"Well, I've been gaining muscle in my legs from it." To make her point, she made an annoyed gesture with her hands to show what she was talking about.

"Maybe you're just retaining water," Maria ventured flatly, a little smirk lurking in the corner of her mouth.

"Wha- no, it's those blasted stairs, I tell you!"

"If you say so." Maria gave her a genuine smile, before casting a glance at her cell phone clock, "Don't you have a bus to catch?"

"No, I've decided to walk today," Claudia explained unsuspectingly as she pulled her top over



her head. "Wait, what??"

"It's ten minutes to."

"Fuckfuckfuck!" Trying to untangle her arm from the top, Claudia stormed down the stairs to the main floor, turning to shout "Stairs did this!", only to promptly lose her balance, crashing impressively down the steps.

"Well, you see..." Claudia began hesitatingly, trying to explain her injury over the phone, "... I, uh, must have slipped on something on the stairs."

"Yes it hurts like hell," she assured the store manager, giving her swollen foot a quick lookover. "Yes, I will do that."

"Thank you," she said pleasantly and, looking up at Maria with a smile, concluded; "Yes, I'll be fine."

"Oh, you poor thing." Maria's voice was at once comforting and straining with suppressed laughter at what a pitiful sight Claudia made; shoulders drooping, right foot propped up by pillows on the table, her tummy sticking out adorably because of her hunched posture, "Here, I've made you nature's own all-purpose remedy."

"Chicken soup?"

"No, chocolate, silly!" Maria giggled, producing a large cup of hot chocolate from behind her back. Smiling greedily with delight, Claudia grabbed the cup eagerly.

"Oh, you're too kind!"

"Don't worry about it," Maria smiled back, throwing a blanket over her injured friend, "Victor will be over in about an hour and we'll get you to a doctor."

"Okay," Claudia nodded, licking off the thick smear of cream covering her upper lip, adding "Oh, could you pass me the remote?" just as Maria disappeared into her room. Obliging placing it in Claudia's lap, she once again made it to her door before being halted:

"Oh, and maybe a tiny little thing for breakfast?" the sofa-bound Claudia asked sweetly, "You know, since you won't have me risk further injury. Fried eggs, maybe?"

"I'll dig out the bacon." Maria smiled with cheery resignation.