

2015

Maidenhair

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Recommended Citation

Murray, Laurie J.. "Maidenhair." *The Iowa Review* 45.3 (2015): 145-150. Web.
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview/vol45/iss3/22>

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Maidenhair

I stand peering into a scene that is meant to be private. In an Old German Lutheran Church in Waldoboro, Maine, a young bride-to-be sits alone in silent meditation. Head down. Eyes lowered. Expression solemn. Around her shoulders, shafts of light touch her long flowing hair, giving it the appearance of strands of golden thread. A wreath of delicate white flowers, a solitary oak leaf, and maidenhair fern circle her head. In the quietness of this moment, no one else has joined me. I feel like an intruder, viewing something that is meant only for the eyes of God, but I can't tear my eyes from her. *Maidenhair* holds me captive.

I came to the Farnsworth Art Museum, located in Rockland, Maine, several hours ago. It has been over three years since I have been to the Farnsworth. I don't remember seeing the painting *Maidenhair* by Andrew Wyeth at that time, but today it was one of the first paintings that I noticed when I entered the Wyeth Center. *Maidenhair* is tempera on panel, a medium that Wyeth often used in his work. The Old German Lutheran Church, built in 1772 near the Medomak River and later moved to its present location, became the setting for *Maidenhair* after Andrew Wyeth saw the church and felt compelled to use it for this painting. Set against a ghost-white wall, this painting seemed to be drawing me to come closer.

When I first arrived, I stood beside *Maidenhair* for the longest time before moving to an adjacent gallery room that held landscapes of the blackened craggy cliffs at Owl's Head and the blue hills surrounding Camden Harbor. Next, I entered the museum's library and sat for about a half hour in an overstuffed leather chair located in front of a large fireplace. My thoughts kept returning to *Maidenhair*. After looking at the special art exhibitions of Paul Caponigro and Louise Nevelson, I made my way back to the Wyeth Center and now stand once again in front of *Maidenhair*. I am glad the museum is quiet, with no other visitors on Level 4 where other works of Andrew Wyeth are on exhibit. I am here alone with the young *Maidenhair* bride-to-be. I stand in the silence.

The bride-to-be in *Maidenhair* seems to be waiting for her betrothed, bound by religious convictions and tradition. There is no hint of celebration in the church except for the wreath of flowers and ferns upon the bride-to-be's head. The maidenhair fern has delicate leaflets on black stems and once had been used as a medicinal herb. Today the fern is

rare in the state; its last known existence is in Franklin County. I wonder if it had been so rare in the day when it had been placed on the head of the maiden.

I see a young woman whose cheeks are ruddy and whose lips are full. There is a fragile sweetness about her oval-shaped face. Her eyes hold a hint of subtle blue. Her straight hair falls below her shoulders. She wears a cream-colored smocked dress that almost blends with the inside of the church. A decorative design runs the length of the bodice with fabric that is shaped through pleating. Its embellishment contrasts with the plainness of the church. The collar is buttoned tightly around her neck and down the length of the front of the dress.

Frayed worn flannel shirts. White T-shirts that had yellowed. Cast-off work socks. These were the garments in my wardrobe for the first twenty years of my marriage. I don't remember the day that I began to wear my husband's clothing. I just did. Shortly after I had my first child at the age of eighteen, I would pull one of my husband's plaid, button-down flannel shirts over my T-shirt for warmth. I had come from a large family, and most of the time I had worn hand-me-downs during those growing-up years.

Our budget had been tight during those first few years of marriage, and we worked hard to save enough money to buy our home. Two and a half years later, our home became a reality. We finally had our house in the country. We were still young, in our early twenties. It was around that time that I began to wear Matt's¹ flannel shirts almost every day. The shirts had served their purpose for him. He had put them to use and no longer needed them. Matt had told me repeatedly for years that his preference for my clothing was jeans and his flannel shirts, nothing else. I sought to please him, and so these cast-off shirts became mine. Almost all the other pieces in my wardrobe had been purchased from garage sales. Frequently, I paid only fifty cents for a dress or a quarter for a sweater. I thought I was getting a bargain. Sometimes a hole would need to be mended or perhaps a button sewed on, but I was a good seamstress. I didn't mind.

Matt's demands on things pertaining to my appearance tightened as the years wore on. No make-up. No pierced ears. No jewelry. No perfume. No contact lenses. He said I didn't need them; they were not necessary. I remember the only time I truly felt feminine was when I took the hairbrush that had belonged to my grandmother, stood in front of

1. Not his real name.

the mirror, and ran the bristles down the length of the flowing chestnut-brown hair that fell down over my shoulders and hung down the middle of my back. Every evening before I went to bed, I would brush my hair until it shined.

Maybe he was right. Feminine clothes aren't necessary when you spend your day hauling armfuls of wood to stack for the woodstove or when you butcher white-tailed deer. As a teen I had wanted so desperately to be strong. I wanted to be able to do the things that my brothers did. After I got married, I pitched right in to help my husband, no matter the task. When I first started to help Matt cut and stack the wood, I was enraptured by his praise of my hard work. I could hold my own as far as anything requiring physical labor, and my apparel seemed practical, at least at first. However, slowly over the years, I also began to wear some of his other clothing.

Looking back on it, I wonder if I wore this type of clothing because I wanted to please him, but it must have been more than that. I can understand wearing the flannel shirts when cutting wood or doing other chores around our home in the country. What I still struggle to understand is why I wore his cast-off yellowed T-shirts and work socks. I don't think it was about money. It is characteristic of abusive intimate partners to be extremely jealous and fiercely possessive, and Matt was both. He accused me of adultery on several occasions. He insisted that since my mother had been unfaithful in her marriage to my father, I would follow suit. Matt made it quite clear that he did not want me to dress in a way that might attract the glances of other men. I think now that I must have worn his cast-off clothing as a shield or a barrier so that no man would look at me.

I remember one day in particular I wanted so desperately to feel feminine. We had been invited to the wedding of Matt's cousin. I had gotten a pretty white dress with thin blue and red stripes that ran lengthwise down the front of it at a garage sale. All it needed was a belt. I did not have one at the time, so I took a navy-blue satin ribbon, cut just the right length of it, placed it around my waist, tied a bow, and hoped my dress would look like new. With birthday money I had saved, I bought a new pair of tan sandals with thin straps especially for the occasion. I still remember how I looked in the mirror that day and how I saw the reflection of a beautiful woman standing before me. I stared at her for the longest time. She had a flawless complexion and warm brown eyes. Her cheeks held an earthy glow, bronzed by hours in the sun while gardening. She looked like her mother. The woman in the mirror seemed like

someone I once knew, a woman who had been hidden for years. Those few, fleeting moments of feeling beautiful did not last long.

Matt hollered from inside the house and told me to get our two children and put them in the car because it was time to go to the wedding. Just before I stepped into the car, he saw me. “What in the hell do you have on your feet.”

“Look at my new sandals. I bought them with my birthday money,” I said excitedly as I twirled around, the wind catching my skirt.

I saw his neck muscles tighten as his face began to redden, and he moved toward me, grabbed my right leg with a jerk, forcefully twisted the sandal, and yanked it off my foot. He did the same with the left foot. I nearly lost my balance and grabbed the side of the house as I sought to right myself. I caught a glimpse of my young daughter and son in the backseat of the car and muffled out a plea: “No, Matt. Please. No.”

Matt snatched the sandals, walked across the dusty dirt road in front of our home, stopped at the barbed-wire fence, and heaved them into the neighbor’s pasture across the road where several Holsteins grazed and cow dung lay strewn in the afternoon sun.

“Get into the house and put your other shoes on,” he screamed while he waved his hands in the air. “We are going to be late and it’ll be your fault. Move it, I said.”

I remember how I ran up the warm sidewalk in my bare feet before I slipped into the house, the screen door banging behind me. I trembled as a feeling of panic came over me. I knew the only other shoes I owned were my tennis shoes that were covered in dried dirt from my garden, and I knew I didn’t have time to brush it away. For a few minutes that felt like hours, I sat on the bottom step of the porch, rubbing them repeatedly with the underside of the hem of my dress before I laced them up.

On that warm July day, I went to the church for the wedding and tucked my feet under the pew in front of me so none of my husband’s relatives would see my shoes. I remember the shame I felt as I sat there and how a shaft of sunlight shone through the stained-glass window upon me as I entwined the blue satin ribbon through my fingers. After the wedding, I sat alone in the hot car during the reception, wrapped my arms around myself, rocked back and forth, and hummed. I always hummed when he exploded in anger. Always.

The church where the young *Maidenhair* bride-to-be sits has no adornment, no stained-glass windows or religious symbols. The shadowed presence of a balsam fir appears to be moving about by the wind

through a single-pane window, and a single shaft of light, which filters through the window at the back of the Old German Lutheran Church, spills across the rear wall.

Inside the church, box pews, encased in paneling and closed with metal latches, have been constructed on the floor of the sanctuary until they fill the church. I wonder what the *Maidenhair* bride-to-be thinks about the box pews. She sits in hers alone. At the back of the church, a door is left slightly ajar. I wonder what lies on the other side.

I notice the rough-cut frame that surrounds the painting. A half-inch wood lining gives the visual appearance of a window. The abstract motif on the frame is a series of simple oval geometric shapes that do not seem to connect, and they swirl around the painting, endlessly repeating the pattern. That is the way that the cycle of abuse works as well, all the phases repeating over and over again until the woman finally begins to understand and hopefully gains the courage and strength to leave.

I stand once again peering into a scene that is meant to be private. Past the wooden frame, I see her. Head down. Eyes lowered. Expression solemn. Around her temples, gray hair has begun to replace the chestnut-brown hair that surrounds her face. Lifting her grandmother's hairbrush, she slams it against the cold, hard mirror. "I hate you. I hate you," she screams to the reflection in the mirror.

I feel my pulse quicken, and every breath seems labored. It is just a memory, I tell myself, something from my distant past, an act that I did countless times over the years. I look at the painting. Part of me wants to unlatch the box pew where the *Maidenhair* bride-to-be sits, take her by the hand, and run out of the back of the church until we reach a meadow that borders the Medomak River. We could sit along the shore among the wildflowers and the maidenhair fern. We could be safe. Oh God, I must tear her from this place. Please help her. Oh God, please help me.

It is then that I remember another woman who ran to a meadow beside a river. On the day I left my home and my abusive marriage in Pennsylvania, I drove for three hours to Cook Forest along the Clarion River in the Allegheny National Forest with my cocker spaniel sitting on the car seat beside me. When I finally stopped driving, I sheltered among ferns underneath a hemlock tree. I stretched out my red-and-black plaid felt blanket over the pine-needle forest floor on the riverbank, sat upon it, and stared at the water moving over the rocks. For the longest time, I watched American goldfinches as they flitted among the lavender phlox before I finally fell asleep with my dog cuddled close beside me. I did not think Matt would look for me there. It was my special spot, a place

that always felt safe to me. On this same riverbank, my grandparents used to take me and my brothers and sisters for picnics. We would run and play in the meadow and swim in the sun-warmed river water, but on that day in May more than seven years ago, I made my decision not to return to my home or to my husband.

A tour guide at the Farnsworth Art Museum enters the gallery, walks by, and nods in acknowledgment that I am there, standing in front of *Maidenhair*.

Slowly I zip my jacket, breathe deeply, and wrap my floral silk scarf around my neck. As I begin to take a step down the granite steps, a shaft of sunshine comes through the museum window and lights the walkway to the door. The tall white-haired tour guide looks my direction once again and says, "That sure is a beautiful scarf you have on today."

"Thank you, sir. It sure is," I say with a smile and step into the brisk Maine afternoon.