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The Portable Veblen

Written by Elizabeth McKenzie

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The Portable Veblen

Elizabeth McKenzie

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For James Ross Cox

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"If you love it enough, anything will talk with you."

—G. W. Carver

THE PORTABLE VEBLEN

1

End the Attachment!

Huddled together on the last block of Tasso Street, in a California town known as Palo Alto, was a pair of humble bungalows, each one aplot in lilies. And in one lived a woman in the slim green spring of her life, and her name was Veblen Amundsen-Hovda.

It was a rainy day in winter, shortly after the New Year. At the end of the street a squirrel raked leaves on the banks of the San Francisquito Creek, looking for pale, aged oak nuts, from which the tannins had been leeched by rain and dew. In muddy rain boots, a boy and a girl ran in circles, collecting acorns, throwing them, screaming with delight in the rain. Children did this every day, Veblen knew, scream in delight.

The skin of the old year was crackling, coming apart, the sewers sweeping it away beneath the roads. Soon would come a change in the light, the brief, benign winter of northern California tilting to warmth and flowers. All signs that were usually cause for relief,

yet Veblen felt troubled, as if rushing toward a disaster. But was it of a personal nature, or worldwide? She wanted to stop time.

The waterway roared, as frothy as a cauldron, a heaving jam of the year's broken brambles and debris. She watched the wind jerk the trees, quivering, scattering their litter. The creek roared, you see. Did water fret about madness? Did trees?

With her walked a thirty-four-year-old man named Paul Vreeland, tall and solid of build, branded head to toe in a forge-gray Patagonia jacket, indigo cords from J. Crew, and brown leather Vans that were showing flecks of mud. Under her raincoat, Veblen wore items of indeterminate make, possibly hand-cobbled, with black rubber boots. She was plain and mild in appearance, with hair the color of redwood bark, and eyes speckled like September leaves.

They stopped at a mossy escarpment in a ring of eucalyptus, redwood, and oak, and a squirrel crept forward to spy.

"Veb," the man said.

"Yes?"

"I've been insanely happy lately," he said, looking down.

"Really?" She loved the idea of spending time with someone that happy, particularly if insanely. "Me too."

"Tacos Tambien tonight?"

"Sure!"

"I knew you'd say sure."

"I always say sure to Tacos Tambien."

"That's good," he said, squeezing her hands. "To be in the habit of saying *sure*."

She drew closer, sensing his touching nervousness.

"You know that thing you do, when you run out of a room after you've turned off the light?" he said.

"You've seen me?"

"It's very cute."

"Oh!" To be cute when one hasn't tried is nice.

"Remember when you showed me the shadow of the hummingbird on the curtain?"

"Yes."

"I loved that."

"I know, it was right in the middle, like it was framing itself."

"And you know that thing you do, when telemarketers call and you sort of retch like you're being strangled and hang up?"

"You like *that*?"

"I love it." He cleared his throat, looked down at the ground, not so much at the earth but at his footing on it. "I am very much in love with you. Will you marry me?"

A velveteen shell came up from his pocket, opening with a crack like a walnut. In it gleamed a diamond so large it would be a pill to avoid for those who easily gag.

"Oh, Paul. Look, a squirrel's watching."

But Paul wouldn't even turn, as if being watched by a squirrel meant nothing to him.

"Oh my gosh," she said, examining the alien stone, for which she'd never yearned. "It's so big. Won't I smash it into things, won't I wreck it?"

"Diamonds can't be smashed."

"I can't wreck it?" she asked, incredulously.

"You can't wreck anything. You only make things great."

Her body quickened, like a tree in the wind. Later, she would remember a filament that passed through her, of being glad she had provided him happiness, but not really sure how she felt herself.

"Yes?" the man said.

The squirrel emitted a screech.

"Is that a yes?" Paul asked.

She managed to say it. Yes. Two human forms became as one, as they advanced to the sidewalk, the route to the cottage on Tasso Street.

Behind them, the squirrel made a few sharp sounds, as if to say he had significant doubts. As if to say, and she couldn't help translating it this way: *There is a terrible alchemy coming.*

Such was the engagement of Veblen Amundsen-Hovda, independent behaviorist, experienced cheerer-upper, and freelance self, who was having a delayed love affair with the world due to an isolated childhood and various interferences since. At thirty she still favored baggy oversized boy's clothes, a habit as hard to grow out of as imaginary friends.

That night in her cottage the squirrel paced the attic floor. Rain pelted the rooftop and a low-pressure system whipped the tall trees the town was named for. When his acorn lost its flavor, the squirrel hurled it in a fit of pique, and Paul banged on the wall from below.

You want a piece of me? Only bottled-up jerks bang on walls from below.

The squirrel had his resources. All he had to say was *End the attachment* and the leaves would fall. It was an important job in autumn to visit all the ones he'd planted and stare down their boughs. *End the attachment*. The trees went bare. The days grew short and cold.

That night in bed, she fell upon Paul with odd ferocity, as if to transform or disguise the strange mood that had seized her. It worked. Later, holding her close, Paul whispered, "You know what I'll remember forever?"

"What?"

"You didn't say 'I'll think about it' when I asked you. You just said *yes*."

She felt the joy of doing something right.

Overhead came a Virginia reel of scrapes and thumps, embarrassing at this juncture, as would be a growling intestine under the sheets.

"Do you think it's rats?" Paul asked.

"I'm hoping it's squirrels."

"This town is infested with squirrels, have you noticed?"

"I'd rather say it's *rich* with squirrels."

"The rain's driving them in," Paul said, kissing her.

"Or they're celebrating for us, prancing with joy."

He butted her gently. "My parents are going to be blown away. They'll say I don't deserve you."

"Really? No way."

"What'll your mother say?" Paul wanted to know.

"Well, that it happened fast, and that she'll have to meet you, immediately if not sooner."

"Should we call and tell them?"

"Tomorrow."

She had an internal clock set to her mother's hunger for news, but sometimes it felt good to ignore it.

"What about your father?" Paul asked.

"Hmm. He'll just say we'll never be the same."

"We're old enough not to care what our parents think, but somehow we do," Paul admitted, philosophically.

"That's for sure."

"Because they allowed us to exist."

She had once concluded everyone on earth was a servant to the previous generation—born from the body's factory for entertainment and use. A life could be spent like an apology—to prove you had been worth it.

Pressed against him, aware of the conspicuous new ring on her hand catching on the sheets, she jolted when he uttered in his day voice: "Veb, those noises don't bother you?"

Not wanting to be mistaken for a person who resides obliviously in a pesthole, she explained, "I have this strange thing. If someone around me is bothered by something, I feel like I'm not allowed to be bothered."

"Not *allowed*?"

"It's like I'm under pressure from some higher source to remain calm or neutral, to prevent something terrible from happening."

"That's kinda twisted. Do you spend a lot of time doing that?"

She reflected that leveraging herself had become a major pastime. Was it fear of the domino, snowball, or butterfly effect? Or

maybe just a vague awareness of behavioral cusps, cascading failures, chain reactions, and quantum chaos?

"It's instinctive, so I don't even notice."

"So we'll never be able to share a grievance?"

"Oh! I'll work on it, if sharing grievances means a lot to you."

He sniffed. "I don't think it's unreasonable to dislike the sound of gnawing rodents near our bed."

"True." She laughed, and kissed his head.

In the night she reflected that the squirrel was not *gnawing*—in fact, maybe it was orchestrating a master plan.

And Paul, she would discover, had many reasons to object to any kind of wild rumpus heard through walls, but had yet to understand the connection.

And she herself could withstand more than her share of trespasses by willful beings.

These embedded differences were enough to wreck everything, but what eager young couple would ever believe it?

In the morning, moments after Paul went out to buy pastries, a fluffy *Sciurus griseus* appeared on her bedroom sill. Its topcoat was charcoal, its chest as white as an oxford shirt, its tail as rakish as the feather in a conquistador's cap. The western gray sat with quiet dignity, head high, shoulders back, casting a forthright glance through the window with its large brown eyes. What a vision!

She sat up in bed and it seemed quite natural to speak to the animal through the windowpane, though it had been a long while

since she had known any squirrels. "Well, then! You're a very handsome squirrel. Very dignified." To her amusement, the squirrel lowered its head slightly, as if it understood her and appreciated the compliment. "Are you living upstairs? You're a noisy neighbor, and you kept Paul up all night long!" This time, the squirrel picked up its head and seemed to shrug. A coincidence, surely, but Veblen hiccuped with surprise. And then the squirrel reached out and placed one of its hands onto the glass, as if to touch the side of her face.

"Oh! You're really telling me something!" She extended her hand, but the new ring seemed to interfere, flashing and cold on her finger. She pulled it off and set it on the nightstand. With her hand unadorned, she felt free to place the tips of her fingers on the glass where the squirrel's hand was pressed. The squirrel studied her with warm brown eyes, as if to ask: *How well do you know yourself, and all the choices you could make?* As if to tell her, *I was cut loose from a hellish marriage, and I want to meet muckrakers, carousers, the sweet-toothed, and the lion-hearted, and you don't know it yet, but you are all of these.*

"I—what?" Veblen said, mesmerized.

Then, with a flick of its tail, it dashed away.

She jumped out of bed and threw on her robe and hurried out the back to see where it went, spying nothing but the soft winter grass and the growing wands of the lilies, the wet brown bed of needles beneath the Aleppo pine, the weathered fence line filigreed by termites, the mossy stones by the garage, the lichened roof. She was proud of her humble cottage on Tasso Street.

Then she went back inside and grabbed her phone to spring the news on her mother. Nothing being fully real until such springing.

And nothing with her mother ever simple and straightforward either, and that was the thrill of it. A perverse infantile thrill necessary to life.

Linus, her stepfather, answered. "Hello?"

"Oh, hi, Linus, morning! Can I talk to Mom?"

"She's asleep, dear. I'd say try in another few hours."

"Just wake her up!"

"Well, she had a hard night. Had a reaction to the dye on a new set of towels we brought home. She's been flat out since yesterday afternoon."

"That's sad. But I need to talk to her," Veblen said, grinding some coffee.

"I'm afraid to go in there, you know how she gets. I'll open the door a crack and whisper."

Veblen heard the phone moving through space, then her mother's cramped voice issuing from her big, despotic head obviously at an angle on a bolster. She was never at her best in the morning.

"Veblen, is something wrong?"

"No, not at all."

Out the window, young moths flitted from the tips of the juniper. A large black beetle gnawed the side of the organ pipe cactus, carving a dwelling of just the right size in the winter shade.

"What is it?" asked her mother.

"A squirrel just came to the window and looked in at me."

"Why is that so exciting?"

"It held out its paw. It made direct contact with me."

"I thought you were over that. Dear god. Do Linus and I need to come down and intervene?"

Melanie C. Duffy, Veblen's mother, was avid at intervening, and had intervened with resolve in Veblen's life at all points, and was especially prone to anxiety about Veblen's physical and mental health and apt to intervene over that on a daily basis.

"Oh, forget it. Maybe it was trying to see my ring."

"What ring? I'm trembling."

Veblen blurted: "Paul asked me to marry him."

Silence.

"Mom?"

"Why did you tell me about the squirrel first?"

She found herself in earnest search of an answer, before snapping out of her childhood habit of full accountability.

"Because you like to know *everything*." She pulled her favorite mugs from the cupboard, wondering when Paul would get back.

"It's very odd you told me about the squirrel first. I haven't even met this man."

"I know, that's why I'm calling. When can we come up?"

"You said at Christmas it was nothing special."

"No, I didn't. I just didn't want to talk about it yet."

"Didn't you have any sense of wanting my input?" And such an ironic question it was, for there had already been so much input, so much.

"Of course. That's the point." She held the phone tenderly, as if it were an actual part of her mother.

"I feel excluded from the most important decision of your life."

"No, Mom, I'm calling you first thing because you're the most important person to me."

There followed a silence, for her mother tended to freeze up and ignore compliments and love, and court instead all the

miffs and tiffs she could gather round, in a perpetual powwow of pity.

"Well. Did you say yes for all the right reasons?"

The coffeemaker gurgled and hissed, a tired old friend doing its best. "I think so."

"Marriage is *not* the point of a woman's life. Do you understand that?"

"By now."

"Do you love him?"

"I do, actually."

"Is everything between you, good, sexually?"

"Mom, please! Boundaries or whatever."

"Don't say *boundaries* like every teenage twerp on TV."

It bothered Veblen's mother that most people were lazy and had given up original thought a long time ago, stealing stale phrases from the media like magpies. Fair enough. The problem was that her mother always overstated her points, ruining her credibility. Veblen had learned to seek out supporting evidence to give her mother's unique worldview some muscle, and in this case she'd found it in the writings of the wonderful William James: "We must make search rather for the original experiences which were the pattern-setters to all this mass of suggested feeling and imitated conduct."

"Okay, Mom. *That's private*. Better?"

"Yes. It's very important, and it's also important to avoid hackneyed phrases, especially snide ones, which sound very déclassé."

Veblen pressed on. "We have things in common with his family and they seem really nice."

"A nice family counts for a lot, but it's not the be-all and end-all. What do you tell him about me?"

She could hear her mother scratch her scalp, raking dead skin under her nails. "Good stuff. You're hard to sum up. That's why we have to meet."

"I don't know, Veblen. Nobody likes me when they meet me."

Veblen replied faithfully, "No, not true."

"Historically it's quite true. Especially doctors. Doctors abhor me because I don't kowtow to them."

"He won't be your doctor, he'll be your son-in-law."

"I've never met a doctor who didn't wear the mantle of the doctor everywhere."

Veblen shook her head. "But he's in research, it's different."

From bracing them in defense since girlhood, her guts were robust, her tolerance for adversity high. By clearly emphasizing all that was lacking in others, by mapping and raising to an art form the catalog of their flaws, Veblen's mother had inversely punched out a template for an ideal human being, and it was the unspoken assumption that Veblen would aspire to this template with all her might.

"It's very interesting that you've chosen to marry a physician," her mother noted, with the overly crisp diction she employed when feeling cornered.

"There are a lot of physicians in the world," Veblen said.

"We're not paying for a big wedding. It's a complete waste."

"Of course I know that."

"He'll expect one if he's a doctor. They're ambitious and full of themselves!"

"There's only one answer to this—to come visit right away," Veblen pressed.

"He'll have a field day, spinning all kinds of theories about me."

"This is happy news, Mom! Would you please cool it?"

"What does Albertine think of all this? I suppose you've told Albertine all about it?"

"No, I haven't told anybody, I already said that."

In the background she could hear Linus consoling.

"Linus is asking me to calm down," Melanie said. "He wants to check my blood pressure. Who will you invite?"

"To the wedding? We haven't thought about it yet!"

"We have no friends, which is humiliating."

Why was it suddenly humiliating, after years of hiding away from everybody? Veblen watched a single hawk circling just below the clouds.

Linus's voice came on the line. "Your mother's face is flushed and her heart is racing."

"A little excitement won't hurt."

"I need both hands now, I'm going to say good-bye. You'll come see us soon?"

"We'll come soon," said Veblen.

She washed down tabs of Vivactil and citalopram. The coffee was piping hot. She twisted a clump of her hair. What was that list again? *Muckrakers, carousers, the sweet-toothed, the lion-hearted?*

Sometimes when Veblen had a deadline for a translation she couldn't tell anyone she had a deadline because it was work she wasn't paid for, and furthermore, it wasn't a real deadline, it was a self-imposed deadline. What kind of deadline was that? Could Paul appreciate her deadlines? It would mean a lot to her if he could.