



The Portable Veblen: A Novel

By Elizabeth Mckenzie

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Longlisted for the 2016 National Book Award for Fiction

Finalist for the Baileys Prize for Women's Fiction

An exuberant, one-of-a-kind novel about love and family, war and nature, new money and old values by a brilliant *New Yorker* contributor

The Portable Veblen is a dazzlingly original novel that's as big-hearted as it is laugh-out-loud funny. Set in and around Palo Alto, amid the culture clash of new money and old (antiestablishment) values, and with the specter of our current wars looming across its pages, *The Portable Veblen* is an unforgettable look at the way we live now. A young couple on the brink of marriage—the charming Veblen and her fiancé Paul, a brilliant neurologist—find their engagement in danger of collapse. Along the way they weather everything from each other's dysfunctional families, to the attentions of a seductive pharmaceutical heiress, to an intimate tête-à-tête with a very charismatic squirrel.

Veblen (named after the iconoclastic economist Thorstein Veblen, who coined the term “conspicuous consumption”) is one of the most refreshing heroines in recent fiction. Not quite liberated from the burdens of her hypochondriac, narcissistic mother and her institutionalized father, Veblen is an amateur translator and “freelance self”; in other words, she's adrift. Meanwhile, Paul—the product of good hippies who were bad parents—finds his ambition soaring. His medical research has led to the development of a device to help minimize battlefield brain trauma—an invention that gets him swept up in a high-stakes deal with the Department of Defense, a Bizarro World that McKenzie satirizes with granular specificity.

As Paul is swept up by the promise of fame and fortune, Veblen heroically keeps the peace between all the damaged parties involved in their upcoming wedding, until she finds herself falling for someone—or something—else. Throughout, Elizabeth McKenzie asks: Where do our families end and we begin? How do we stay true to our ideals? And what is that squirrel *really* thinking? Replete with deadpan photos and sly appendices, *The Portable Veblen* is at once an honest inquiry into what we look for in love and an electrifying reading experience.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Will these kind, if somewhat confused, young people find their ways out of the past and to each other and a happy shared future? The reader can't help rooting them on. McKenzie's idiosyncratic love story scampers along on a wonderfully zig-zaggy path, dashing and darting in delightfully unexpected directions as it progresses toward its satisfying end." --*Kirkus*, starred review

"Offbeat and winning...(Veblen)'s one of the best characters of the year. McKenzie's funny, lively, addictive novel is sure to be a standout."--*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"A literary novel with a squirrel subplot may sound improbable, yet McKenzie adroitly skirts the line between plausible and the absurd. Veblen, the book's heart and spirit, wins us over with her sense of wonder about the natural versus the man-made world — a wonder that suffuses the entirety of this quirky, engaging novel." —*The New York Times Book Review*

"McKenzie has crafted a story that beneath an entertaining, clever surface, is deep and wise and complicated....With so light a touch and yet more serious and beautiful and relevant than many a weightier novel, *The Portable Veblen* has the feel of an instant, unlikely classic." —Jeff VanderMeer in the *Los Angeles Times*

"Riotous ...A delightfully knotty synthesis of psychological study, philosophical inquiry, romantic page-turner, and economic critique."—*Electric Literature*

"A delightfully cockeyed love story that enfolds two splendidly dysfunctional families and a winningly persistent squirrel."—*More Magazine*

"Funny and engaging and imbued with a very particular sensibility that might be described as 'quirky' if that term had not become trivialized by its overuse; despite being full of jokes and turns of phrase that make a reader laugh out loud...*The Portable Veblen* is a serious and, at times, sad book. And there is a talking squirrel."—*Chicago Reader*

"Full of vibrant passages that practically leap off the page and twirl around the room. Veblen and Paul become richer, more nuanced characters as the book continues, thanks in part to McKenzie's deft and amusing exploration of the conflicts between them and their parents. She also unleashes her satirical powers on Big Pharma and the defense industry."—*Dallas Morning News*

"[Veblen] is a rich, well-rounded character...McKenzie...weaves in historical and cultural factoids about the Bay Area that truly make the novel zing...Satirical, funny, and satisfyingly clever, *The Portable Veblen* weaves multiple narrative threads into a seamless whole."—*KQED*

"Irresistibly comedic...McKenzie...has an appealingly light, playful touch... 'The Portable Veblen' is about how very squirrely family dysfunction can be — and about how, as many of us never get tired of reading, love sometimes can conquer all."—*Seattle Times*

“Modern romance, Big Pharma, and one very intuitive squirrel collide in McKenzie’s clever, winningly surreal novel...McKenzie has a pitch-perfect ear for a certain kind of California kookery...It’s hard not to be charmed by Veblen’s whimsy. Grade: A–.”—*Entertainment Weekly*

“A sweet, sharply written, romantic comedy about the pitfalls of approaching marriage... McKenzie imbues her characters with such psychological acuity that they, as well as the off-kilter world they inhabit, feel fully formed and authentic...With its inspired eccentricities and screwball plot choreography, McKenzie’s novel perceptively delves into that difficult life stage when young adults finally separate—or not—from their parents. In the end, *The Portable Veblen* is a novel as wise as it is squirrely.”—*Maureen Corrigan, NPR’s Fresh Air*

“One of the great pleasures of reading Elizabeth McKenzie is that she hears the musical potential in language that others do not...Her dialogue has real fizz and snappity-pop. It leaves a bubbled contrail. Ms. McKenzie’s ear is not her only asset. There is also her angled way of seeing things. The hats on all of her characters sit slightly askew...For all its charm, bounce, radiant eccentrics and diverting episodes involving drug companies and squirrels, that is what ‘*The Portable Veblen*’ is about: shaking the demented ghosts of our youth so that we can bind with clean spirits to someone in our adulthood...A novel of such festive originality that it would be a shame to miss.”—*Jennifer Senior, The New York Times*

“A winning satire of contemporary mores...McKenzie has written a funny, deeply critical book with the heart of a cynic and the texture of a soufflé.”—*Boston Globe*

“A smart charmer about a brainy off-center couple who face up to their differences — and their difficult, eccentric families — only after they become engaged...[*The Portable Veblen*] is ultimately a morality tale about the values by which we choose to live...McKenzie’s delightfully frisky novel touts...a world in which ‘underdogs and outsiders’ like Thorstein Veblen, her appealing cast of oddballs and nonconformists, and even bushy-tailed rodents feel ‘free to be themselves.’”—*NPR.org*

“Clever...This novel is like vegetables cut on a bias: slightly skewed, pleasing to look at, and, thanks to its skilled chef, a joy to consume...A funny and well-written novel about family, love and the perils of misplaced ambition.”—*BookPage*

“Ambitious...[McKenzie’s domestic scenes] accurately and funnily capture the complexities of modern families, made knotty by the work we’re encouraged to do in our individual lives. Think *The Corrections* meets *The Wallcreeper*—where the warring wants of career-centric success and familial harmony converge, tension and comedy emerge.”—*Huffington Post*

“[A] funny, philosophical novel...Oddball characters and plot turns abound, including talking squirrels and bureaucratic ironies worthy of ‘*Catch-22*.’ But a sober question occupies its core: Do our parents' best intentions do us harm?”—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“A wild ride that you will not want to miss... rambunctious and sober, hilarious and morbid, [with] strong echoes of Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut...This unforgettable novel offers a heartfelt and sincere investigation into the paradoxical nature of love, familial as well as romantic.”—*Elizabeth Rosner, San Francisco Chronicle*

“No matter how many novels you’ve read, it’s safe to say you’ve never read a novel like *The Portable Veblen*. *The Portable Veblen* brings together its disparate themes and worlds with confidence and dexterity,

making the standard well-made novel seem as timid as—well, as a squirrel.”- *Slate*

“McKenzie skewers modern American culture while quoting from a panoply of voices, with Frank Zappa, Robert Reich, and, of course, Thorstein Veblen among them. The result is a wise and thoroughly engaging story in a satirical style comparable to the works of Christopher Moore and Carl Hiaasen.”—*Library Journal* (starred review)

"Will these kind, if somewhat confused, young people find their ways out of the past and to each other and a happy shared future? The reader can't help rooting them on. McKenzie's idiosyncratic love story scampers along on a wonderfully zig-zaggy path, dashing and darting in delightfully unexpected directions as it progresses toward its satisfying end and scattering tasty literary passages like nuts along the way." —*Kirkus*, starred review

“Offbeat and winning... McKenzie writes with sure-handed perception, and her skillful characterization means that despite all of Veblen’s quirks—she’s an amateur Norwegian translator with an affinity for squirrels—she’s one of the best characters of the year. McKenzie’s funny, lively, addictive novel is sure to be a standout.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“A clever morality tale set against the verdant paradise of Palo Alto. McKenzie’s story of an ambitious young neurologist and the seductions of the darker side of the medical economy is both incisive and hilarious.” -Abraham Verghese, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Cutting for Ston*

“Man oh man, do I love this book! I have never read anything like it. I can't believe how funny it is given that we're dealing at times with pharmaceutical fraud, irreparable brain injury, and comatose veterans. (Family dysfunction, on the other hand, is always funny)... Audacious, imaginative, and totally wonderful: The whole book zips and zings.”-Karen Joy Fowler, PEN Faulkner winner for *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*

“*The Portable Veblen* is the squirreliest novel I ever read. I enjoyed it completely.”-Ursula K. Le Guin, author of *The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*

"Wildly entertaining and overflowing with piercing emotional truths, this audacious novel gives us an irresistible portrait of a sensitive young woman navigating the kaleidoscopic freakscape we call modern America. With casual aplomb, Elizabeth McKenzie tosses off sentences that will delight and bowl you over with their insight and hilarious truth-telling....An elegy for our dying empire, full of wisdom and finely tuned grace notes about the secrets of the human heart."-Gabe Hudson, author of *Dear Mr. President*

“*The Portable Veblen* is an authentically strange—and genuinely funny—depiction of how the dysfunctions of childhood stubbornly follow us into adulthood.”-Teddy Wayne, author of *The Love Song of Jonny Valentine* and *Kapitoil*

"Only Elizabeth McKenzie could make a novel—a great novel—with such weird and wonderful ingredients. *The Portable Veblen* gives us squirrels, love, family dysfunction, sex, marriage, medical science, and something called the Pneumatic Turbo Skull Punch, all swirled into a funny, beautiful, heartbreaking story.

The Portable Veblen is about all of these things but mostly it's about that most important of subjects: what it is to be human."-Christian Kiefer, author of *The Animals* and *The Infinite Tides*

"A deeply observed universe where heroines are named for economists and the high stakes of capitalism are set to collide with the chatter of small wild animals. In a work both humorous and wrenching, everything casts multiple shadows while McKenzie tracks the distance between individuals, measuring the wildly human hope that love, might in the end, conquer all." —Samantha Hunt, author of *The Invention of Everything Else* and *Mr. Splitfoot*

"In scalpel-sharp prose, *The Portable Veblen's* gleefully perverse narrator seduces us with the story of a charming young woman soon to wed a handsome doctor. But strange shadows flicker just off the page and then begin to bleed into the story of the romance. The ethics of parenting, the disasters of war, corporate greed, the essential meanings of translation and invention, and the sacrifices of self to wedlock: these are some of the themes that surface in this extraordinary book. Oh, and also--what really is the soul of a squirrel? I was knocked out, giddily so, by *The Portable Veblen.*"-Nelly Reifler, author of *Elect H. Mouse State Judge* and *See Through*

"*The Portable Veblen* is a funny, modern love story, but also the story of everything that comes before love, its dark prerequisites and murky prequels...A wonderfully insane novel with talking squirrels and lunatic parents and comedic plot twists...populated by some of the most real, fully written characters I've met on any page. Don't miss it."-Lydia Netzer, author of *How to Tell Toledo From the Night Sky*

Praise for Elizabeth McKenzie's *Stop That Girl*

"Vibrant and clear, these connected stories present a portrait of a family whose members are funny and hurtful and real, and watching them touched by time and change is very affecting. There is a lovely expansiveness here; surrounding the humor is the recognition that life is a serious deal."-Elizabeth Strout, author of *Olive Kitteredge*

"McKenzie is an accomplished humorist and a developed stylist, and she wastes no time dazzling the reader with her clean direct language, her simple but searing use of metaphor and her unflinching eye. The paragraphs are put together with razor sharp concision, and the book is rich in both narrative and linguistic surprise. An original."-*The New York Times Book Review*

Praise for Elizabeth McKenzie

"A wonderful talent."-Jane Hamilton, author of *The Book of Ruth* and *The Map of the World*

"McKenzie has a wonderful eye – and a relishing appetite – for the craziness that is everywhere in ordinary things if you know how to look."-Tessa Hadley, author of *Married Love* and *Accidents in the Home*

About the Author

Elizabeth McKenzie is the author of a collection, *Stop That Girl*, short-listed for The Story Prize, and the novel *MacGregor Tells the World*, a *Chicago Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Library Journal* Best Book of the year. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Best American Nonrequired Reading*, and the Pushcart Prize anthology, and has been recorded for NPR's *Selected Shorts*.

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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 a plot 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 leached 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.

Paul didn’t know she took antidepressants, but she also didn’t talk about what toothpaste or deodorant she used (Colgate and Tom’s).

And he didn’t realize she hadn’t graduated from college either. That embarrassed her, and was probably something he should find out soon. It simply hadn’t come up. Since when you marry you are offering yourself as a commodity, maybe it was time to clear up details of her *product description*. Healthy thirty-year-old woman with no college degree. *Caveat emptor*.

In spite of her cheerfulness in the presence of others, one could see this woman had gone through something that had left its mark. Sometimes her reactions seemed to happen in slow motion, like old, calloused manatees moving through murky water. At least, that’s how she’d once tried to explain it to the psychiatrist who dispensed her medications. Sometimes she wondered if she had some kind of processing disorder. Or maybe it was just a defense mechanism. One could see she was bruised by all the dodging that comes of the furtive meeting of one’s needs.

• • •

FOR SEVERAL YEARS before meeting Paul, Veblen had steered clear of romantic entanglements, haunted by runaway emotions and a few sad breakups in the past. “No one will ever understand me!” she often cried when feeling sorry for herself. Sometimes it was all she could do not to bite her arm until her jaw ached, and take note of how long the teeth marks showed. She had made false assumptions in those early experiences, such as that love meant becoming inseparable, and a few suitors came and went, none of them ready for all-out fusion. She began to realize she hadn’t been looking for a love affair, but rather a human safe house from her mother. A legitimate excuse to be busy with someone else. An all-loving being who would ever after uphold her as did the earth beneath her feet.

She came to recognize her weaknesses through these trial-and-error relationships, and lament that she had them. In a tug-of-war of want and postponement she continued with her deeply romantic beliefs, living in a

state of wistful anticipation for life to become as wonderful as she was sure, someday, it would.

Veblen's best friend since sixth grade, Albertine Brooks, smart and training as a Jungian analyst in San Francisco, had been alarmed by the sudden onslaught of Paul: Veblen, she felt, had unprocessed shadows, splitting issues, and would be prone to animus projections and primordial fantasies with destructive consequences. But Veblen only laughed.

Over the years, they had discussed, almost scientifically, the intimate details of their romances—for Veblen starting with Luke Hartley in the back of the school bus returning from a field trip to the state capitol. Sure, he'd paid heaps of attention as they marched through the legislative chambers, standing close and gazing raptly at her hair, even plucking out a leaf. Sure, he asked her to sit with him on the bus. Yet it wasn't until the last second, when he touched her, that she believed he might have feelings for her. She told Albertine about his milky-tasting tongue and roaming, hamsterlike hands, and then Albertine prepared her for the next step, of unzipping his pants. And with Albertine's pragmatic voice in her ear, that's what she attempted next time she and Luke were making out on the athletic field after school. A difficult grab under his weight, shearing her skin on the metal teeth—as she grasped his zipper he pushed her away and groaned, "Too late."

Too late? Wow. You had to do it really fast or a guy didn't want anything to do with you. She pulled away, staring dismally over the grass, a failure at love already.

But Albertine said later, "No, you dummy. He meant he'd already ejaculated!"

"Huh?"

"What were you doing right before?"

"Just rolling on the lawn, kissing."

"Okay, exactly."

"You mean—"

"Yes, I mean."

"Oh! So that's good?"

"Good enough. It could have been better."

In that instance, Albertine helped Veblen overcome her habit of assuming fault when someone said something cryptic to her.

"So you think he's still attracted to me?" she asked.

"Yes, Veblen."

"Wow. I thought it meant I blew it."

"He *wished* you blew it."

Veblen wrinkled her nose. "But you don't actually *blow* on anything, do you?"

"No," said Albertine, pityingly.

Albertine had, for her part over the years, partaken of a number of gritty encounters that had led to a surprising lack of heartbreak. Veblen could never dive in with someone like that and not feel anything. She'd always admired Albertine, who put her ambitions before her family or guys, and didn't cling to anybody but Carl Jung.

She frequently lent Veblen books to help with her psychological development, but none of them seemed to address the central issue: Veblen's instinctive certainty that the men who asked her out would not understand her if they got to know her better.

Then along came Paul. Little more than three months ago they had been strangers at the Stanford University School of Medicine, Veblen a new office assistant in Neurology. There, every morning, she took to her desk wedged between the printer and the file cabinet, threw her bag into a drawer, pulled out her chair, logged in. Horizontal ribs of light flickered across her desk, signaling her last allotment of morning. Later the sun would hit the handsome oak in the courtyard and make its sharp leaves shimmer. In between, she'd harness her fingers and drift away, typing up the minutes from the Tumor Board or a draft of one of the doctors' professional papers or case notes. She was amazingly good at *dissociating*, alleged to be unhealthy, but which she had found vital to her survival over the years.

Across the office sat Laurie Tietz, a competent, muscular woman of forty with a pursed mouth that looked disapproving at first, but really wasn't. Veblen felt uncomfortably watched the first time Paul stopped by to see her, but no, it was only the set of Laurie's lips. Veblen liked her, despite being captive to her daily conversations with her husband about their home improvements and shopping lists. "Pick up some cheese and light bulbs today, don't forget. Love you."

That was the part she hated—when Laurie said "Love you."

Dr. Chaudhry would arrive carrying his briefcase and a Tupperware tub filled with snacks made by his wife. He was a small, quiet man with large round eyes, a shaggy mustache covering his lips, slightly bent aviator glasses, and broken embroidery sticking up like ganglia from the fabric of his white coat. *Lewis Chaudhry, MD*.

From her desk on any given day, she could see squirrels hurling themselves through the canopy of the trees, causing limbs to buckle and sweep. She started to realize that squirrels were the only mammals who lived right out in the open near humankind.

SELECTED GUNS FOR SMALL FURRED GAME.

Despite this aura of neighborliness, recipes for squirrels were included in the *Joy of Cooking*. Was this a curious case of misplaced trust?

That was the day Chaudhry approached her with a manila envelope—the "envelope of destiny" she and Paul came to call it.

"Do you know where to find the research labs?" Chaudhry asked her.

"Sure."

"Find Paul Vreeland. Then tell him the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

Veblen raised her eyebrows. "Wouldn't that be kind of—awkward?"

“Tell him it’s coming from me.”

She still wasn’t crazy about the idea. “Why? What did he do?”

“He had a great opportunity here and he’s throwing it away.”

“Gee, that’s too bad.”

“He is not the first,” Chaudhry said.

That hall, with its sharp smells and vibrations and a high number of bins for hazardous waste, was unknown territory for her. At last someone directed her to Vreeland’s lab, and she entered after knocking a few times without response. Curled over a buzzing table saw, with his dark hair hanging over his safety goggles, he looked every bit a mad scientist absorbed by his master plan.

“Dr. Vreeland?” She cleared her throat. “Hello? Excuse me!”

Her nostrils contracted from the stench of singed flesh. Maybe she tottered or blanched. He glanced up and ripped off his goggles, his elbow sending a row of beakers off the table while the saw screeched on, spraying a curtain of red mist onto his lab coat and the wall.

“Oh shit!” Glass snapped and crackled under his soles as he threw the switch on the saw and covered the gory mess with a blue apron. An ominously empty cage sat atop the stainless steel slab. “Sorry, I didn’t hear you come in. God.”

“Yeah, sorry, I knocked, I wasn’t sure—”

He insisted it was his fault, not hers, he didn’t mind that she came in, hours would go by when no one came in, he’d get wrapped up and forget the time, and when she asked what he was doing he began to explain his work, mentioning apologetically that small mammals were suited to neurological research because one could easily expose the cortex, apply special dyes or probes or electrodes directly, to observe the activities of neurons and test for humans, and in his case, for the men and women of the armed forces, who needed breakthroughs fast.

“Basically I’m moving toward a breakthrough for brain injury treatment,” he concluded, smoothing down his hair, and it was at that moment she realized how adorable he was. “I’m a little obsessed right now. I dream about it at night.”

“Is that all you dream about?” she asked.

He might have blushed. “Well, maybe I need a new dream,” he said, with an endearing look on his face.

“Oh, well. Sorry to cause such a ruckus,” she said, wondering why she had to sound so weird. Who said *ruckus* these days? “It was for this,” she said, handing him the envelope.

“Oh, from Chaudhry. Finally.”

As he glanced into the envelope, she picked up the product literature for the Voltar bone band saw.

“Wow, are these features really great or something?”

“What features?”

She read them off: *“Diamond-coated blade has no teeth and will not cut fingers! Cleans up quick and easy! Wet blade eliminates bone dust! Splash guards and bone screens included!”*

“It’s always a little shocking to see the commercial underbelly of research,” he agreed. He had dimples, and friendly eyes. “There’s this whole parallel consumer reality in the medical and defense industries; it takes some getting used to.”

And right there, Veblen had been lobbed one of her favorite topics: the gargoyle of marketing and advertising. “I believe it. But what’s weird about this—marketing is supposed to kindle the *anticipatory daydream*, supposedly the most exciting phase of acquisition. But here, what would be the daydream?”

“Freedom from bone dust, of course—which is very exciting. Look at this thing,” he added, springing over to open a drawer from which he removed a two-and-a-half-inch disk that resembled the strainer for a shower drain. “This is the titanium plate we screw on after a craniotomy.”

“Oh, really?” From the sleeve she read: *“Reconstruct large, vulnerable openings (LVOs) in the cranium! Fully inert in the human body, immune to attack from bodily fluids! Cosmetic deformity correction to acceptable levels!”*

They both laughed nervously.

“Weird. Are ‘large, vulnerable openings’ so common they need an acronym?” she asked, suddenly blushing.

“Um, yes, as a matter of fact, they are.”

“Oh.”

“And it’s good,” he added.

“Why?”

“Well, I mean, if the LVO is the result of a procedure to improve the condition, then it’s good.” He tossed the plate back into the drawer, and went to the sink to wash his hands.

“I’ve seen those at the hardware store for about ninety-five cents,” Veblen said.

“Try between two and three thousand for us.”

“That’s crazy!”

“Yeah. So. I was about to take a break. Want to get something in the café?” he asked, looking away.

“Oh? Sure, why not.”

They had coffee and oatmeal raisin cookies together, on the palm-potted atrium where the staff went for air. This was early October, warm and bright. Veblen wore a thin sweater inside the hospital, but peeled it off, conscious of her freckly arms, wondering if the invitation to the café meant he liked her. She was still afraid to assume such things.

“What do you do here?” he asked.

“Administrative-type stuff,” said Veblen. “I move around. I was in Neonatology for a year and a half,

Otolaryngology almost three years, and this is my third week in Neurology.”

“Are you—going into hospital administration?”

“No, this is just for now. I do other stuff, like I’m pretty much fluent in Norwegian so I do translations for this thing called the Norwegian Diaspora Project in Oslo.”

“Wow, that’s interesting. Are you Norwegian?”

She was Norwegian on her father’s side, and further, she’d been named after Thorstein Bunde Veblen, the Norwegian American economist who espoused antimaterialistic beliefs and led an uncommon and misunderstood life. (A noble nonconformist. A valiant foe of institutions and their ossified habits of mind.) The Diaspora Project had a big file on Thorstein Veblen, and thanks to her, it was getting bigger all the time.

“And I’m a major typer,” she added. “Like, I’ll type the lyrics of a song while I’m listening to it.” Why had she said this? It was only a side pocket of her whole entity.

“So you’re—the typing type.”

“I see myself more as a publisher.” Then it was a matter of explaining how as a somewhat obsessive child she’d carry her portable typewriter around in its case, was never without it really, paying visits to neighbors down the road, teachers and friends, to type up poems, recipes, memories, anecdotes, whatever the person had to share, in order to present them with the supporting documents of their consciousness. A traveling scribe.

“One of those old manuals in a case?” He looked at her, intrigued. “Wasn’t it heavy?”

“I didn’t notice. It was covered with stickers.”

“Like a hippie guitar case.”

“Yeah, but inside it smelled like a hundred years old. Every time I’d open it I’d feel like I was in another world.”

This was a sure badge of her youthful dorkdom. But she felt what she said meant something to him, or could. He asked the usuals, but without the pat cleverness so detestable in flirts. He was no flirt. She learned he’d done his residency at UCSF, gotten the fellowship at Stanford, all the markers of success, and now Hutmacher Pharmaceuticals, one of the giants, had picked up the rights to his research and his device, had flown him to Washington, and the Department of Defense was involved. After the New Year, he would be heading a clinical trial at the veterans’ hospital in Menlo Park.

“Wow, that’s great. Is Dr. Chaudhry sad you’re leaving?” She led him on.

“Basically. He’s a good guy. A little play-by-the-rules, but for him it works.”

She thought she understood, had context for Chaudhry’s earlier remarks. Paul was up and coming. Chaudhry was holding on.

He was handsome in a rumpled way, with a great smile. He had the air of an underdog, despite his accomplishments. He seemed sad and sober and boyishly hopeful, all at once. A sparrow swooped at crumbs.

“Need to get back?” he asked.

“Probably.”

“I take hikes in the hills,” he said. “Um, would you like to come along, sometime?”

“Yes, sure.”

Paul had a funny look on his face, and smoothed back his hair again. “How about Saturday?”

They met on Saturday. The stakes were greater. Glimpses of untold vistas lay ahead as they walked with put-on carelessness, kicking rocks and plunging hands in pockets, bumping into each other every now and then. With every step, options jettisoned. Both recognized an affinity, one without an easy name. Maybe the rural surroundings where they had been raised, and hints of great backlogs of family folly. She thought he was more adorable by the moment.

They had dinner together that night.

The first kiss came not unforeseen outside his car, in the moonlight; great long kisses outside her house, the slight rub of his whiskers chafing her face in a kind of rough ecstasy, the cool tip of his nose that brushed her cheeks. He smelled like juniper berries and warm laundry.

“The look on your face when you came into the lab—”

She laughed. “What did I look like?”

“You have a very expressive face, a beautiful face.”

Something was worrying her: “You know, I know it’s important to help the men and women of the armed forces, but you’re not torturing animals, are you?”

“Yes, we’re secretly waterboarding our rodents. It’s hard to pour the water down their little snouts, but as the saying goes, *Ve have our vays*.”

She pushed him. “They have feelings, just like we do. If only they had a translator.”

He looked at her closely. “Thank you for pointing that out. So what do you think?” he said, stroking her hair. “Should I come in?”

Was it too fast, or should one simply act? “We just met—yesterday.”

“We could play cards.”

“Right.”

“Or not.”

“True.”

He kissed her face, her eyes. “But I’ll leave.”

It seemed he was already there, under her skin. She didn’t know when she’d wanted to kiss someone this much. “It’s okay if you don’t.”

“Oh, if I don’t?”

“Right.”

“Leave?”

“Yes.”

“You mean stay.”

“Stay.”

“Ah.”

“Come on, then.”

“I will. I will come on.”

It was a night of wonders. She was so attracted to him it was scary, and would require management. For the first time, she didn't tell Albertine everything, or her mother. She kept it all to herself, a milestone of significance.

All along she basked in the big-picture assumptions he made, the lack of ambivalence over whether or not they'd proceed. In three months, they'd become nearly inseparable. His certainty relaxed her, gave her the room to reflect on her own hidden restlessness. When he said things like *We're made for each other. You're perfect for me*, she felt embraced like never before, at last taking the chance to examine the perplexing knot it all produced, without the added fear of losing him.

2

SAUERKRAUT AND MACE

As it turned out, Paul had gone shopping for more than breakfast.

She watched from the window as he wrestled something from the trunk of his car. Under a clearing sky, a newly minted object threw its shadow onto the walkway, coffin-shaped, about two feet long.

“Oh my god, a trap?” she said, at the door.

“It's my stated goal to keep pests out of our lives,” he announced, and she thought nervously of her mother.

“What if we don't agree on what's a pest?”

“Veb, I got no sleep last night. You should be glad I didn't get the guillotine kind.”

The packaging boldly proclaimed:

Humanely TRAPS, not KILLS:

Squirrels

Chipmunks

Shrews

Voles

and other Nuisance Critters!

“I hate the word *critters!*” Veblen said, displacing her negative feelings onto an innocent noun.

He persisted, pointing to the fine print. “Look at this.”

Squirrels can cause extensive damage to attic insulation or walls and gnaw on electrical wires in homes and vehicles, creating a fire hazard.

“Paul, don’t you see, that’s propaganda to motivate you to buy the thing.”

“But it’s true.”

“This morning it came to the window—I think it wants to befriend me,” Veblen said, quite naturally.

“You can make other friends. This squirrel isn’t a character in a storybook. Real animals don’t wear shawls and top hats and write poetry. They rape each other and eat their own young.”

“Paul, that’s an excessively negative view of wildlife.”

Nevertheless, he seized the wooden chair from beside her desk, took it through the bathroom door, and dumped it in the bathtub, to stand on it and shove aside the square of white, enameled plywood covering the opening to the attic. She provided him with the flashlight from her bedside drawer. His thighs flexed like a warrior’s. A strange little riddle began in her head:

The man pops squirrels, the man pops mice—

(What man? Not Paul?)

With a riddle-me-ree he pops them twice;

(Twice? Isn’t once enough?)

He pops his rats with a riddle-me-ree

(Oh no, it *is* Paul!)

He popped my father and he might pop me.

(How terrible! Was Paul experimenting with squirrels?)

“Nesting materials in the corner,” he yelled. “God. Looks like fur on the beams!”

Was this the stuff married life would be made of, two people making way for the confounding spectacle of the other, bewildered and slightly afraid?

“Paul, did you know, the year Thoreau spent at Walden Pond, he spent a lot of time totally enchanted by squirrels?” If squirrels were good enough for Thoreau, after all, what was Paul’s problem?

“No, I didn’t.”

“Have I told you about the great squirrel migrations of the past?” She steadied the chair.

“You must have been saving it up.”

“Yeah. Squirrels are actually one of the oldest mammals on earth!” she told him, with curious pride.

“They’ve been in North America at least fifty million years. That’s a long time, don’t you think? I mean, people brag about their relatives coming over on the *Mayflower* in 1620, so I think squirrels deserve a little respect, don’t you?”

She could see him scanning the corners of the attic for entry holes, and he didn’t reply.

“Anyway, settlers and townspeople across North America wrote in their diaries about oceans of squirrels that would flood through the fields and over the mountains, as far as their eyes could see! Can you imagine it? It was like an infinite gray blanket. At times, whole tides of them were seen swimming across rivers, like the Hudson, and the Missouri, and the Ohio. Even Lewis and Clark witnessed a migration! In 1803. In southern Illinois in the 1880s, it was reported that four hundred fifty *million* squirrels ran through this one area, almost half a billion!”

“This is true?”

“Yes! It’s very well documented.”

“Sounds like a Hitchcock movie.”

For the record, she wished he’d said “Wow!” or “Amazing!” or something flavored with a little more curiosity and awe, because those mass migrations had always represented something phenomenal to her.

“The solidarity is what I love about it, all of them deciding it was time to go and then setting out together,” she tried, for she loved Richard Rorty’s writings on solidarity and had no trouble applying it to squirrels.

“Probably in a blind panic, burning with mange.”

“Paul!”

“I don’t have the same feeling about squirrels, Veb.”

This was upsetting for some reason. Although Paul wasn’t the only person who thought squirrels were nasty, furry bastards with talons like birds and the cold hearts of reptiles.

Even Beatrix Potter’s *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*, a classic of children’s literature, by an introverted woman who generally adored small animals, offered up a pesky idiot-squirrel who riddles a landed authority figure into a fury. But was Nutkin as frivolous as he was made out to be? She had a few theories about that.

“Thorstein Veblen would say people hate squirrels,” she called up to him, “because that’s the only way to motivate expenditures on them—such as buying traps or guns. It’s the same with stirring up *patriotic emotionalism*, because it justifies expenditures for defense.”

“Uh, what?” He took the sleek apparatus in his grasping hands, then was back on the chair stuffing it somewhere in the dark near the hatch. He said, “I’ll check it every day, you won’t have to think about it. I’ll take it up in the hills where it will live happily ever after. Okay?”

“Whatever, just do it!” she said, biting into her arm.

In addition to biting herself, another way Veblen dealt with emotional distress was to fixate on ideological concerns.

Unhappy that Paul was stuffing a trap into her attic, registering a loss of control that would come with a growing relationship and further compromise, she began to think bitterly about how phenomena in the natural world no longer inspired reverence and reflection, but translated instead into excuses for shopping sprees. Squirrels = *trap*. Winter’s ragged hand = *Outdoor World*. Summer’s dog days reigned = *Target*. Same with traditions—marriage was preceded by the longest shopping list of all, second only to the one after the birth of offspring.

“Paul, take this trap. You impute it with awesomeness because you acquired it and you now believe it’s the crystallization of your desires.”

“Can you bring me a piece of cheese or something?”

She trudged into the kitchen, to look for a snack a squirrel might *not* enjoy. She had an idea.

“Veblen?” he called.

“Coming.”

“A piece of bread is fine.”

“Okay, just a minute.”

Shortly, she carried in a plate with her offering.

“What’s that?” asked Paul, peering down.

“Sauerkraut sprinkled with mace.”

“Why?”

“I hear they love it,” said Veblen.

She heard him set the plate into the trap with a clap.

• • •

THEY SPENT the afternoon walking and talking about all they were about to face. It would come back to her later that Paul barely mentioned his family that day. Instead he talked a lot about his vision of their material future—the signing bonus for the trial and stock from Hutmacher Pharmaceuticals would allow them to buy a house. “You don’t want to stay in mine?” she asked, surprised. She loved her house.

• • •

HER OWN VISION of the future was of happiness in the air. Something was baking. Children were playing games. There were flowers and substantial trees, and birds were singing in their nests. She was living with someone who was laughing.

Paul gave a sample of laughter.

“That works,” she said.

• • •

SHE WAS STILL very pleased with her little house, and how she’d found it.

Nearly five years ago, having finally escaped from home, she’d been sleeping in her old Volvo by the San Francisquito creek and checking out listings by the dozens for days. She’d seen rooms in dingy, greasy-smelling houses in Mountain View, tiny, dark rooms in houses full of guffawing male engineering students, and a room in the house of a high school science teacher filled with exercise machines.

It was a warm night in September, that night. She had a soulful bottle of beer and a slice of pizza on University Avenue, then walked the neighborhood in the glow of dusk, down streets named for famous poets: Lowell and Byron and Homer and Kipling and the tormented, half-mad Italian poet Torquato Tasso. She crunched the sycamore and magnolia and locust leaves on the sidewalk. Just before she reached the end where the street met the arroyo, she passed a small house so overgrown with vines that the windows were no longer visible. The yard was neck-high with weeds and ivy and morning glory, and in the gentle air of evening she heard the flap of a tarp on the roof, laid over the old shingles to protect them from rain. The chimney was missing a few bricks. Swatches of animal hair were mixed in the litter of leaves up the walkway, as if various creatures regularly rolled on their backs there and stretched out in the sun. The site of the abandoned house, or possibly the dwelling of an old eccentric, filled her with warmth and hope, and perhaps because she lingered there thinking how this might be a positive instance of *absentee ownership*, she fated her meeting with the person who came down the narrow driveway between the two bungalows, from a yard choked with the summer’s industry of honeysuckle and jasmine.

This was Donald Chester, wearing his grubby Stanford sweatshirt stained with motor oil and paint. He was a retired engineer who’d grown up only a few blocks away in the 1930s, and attended the university as a day student before, during, and after World War II. Palo Alto wasn’t always so swank, he told her. Back then, a settlement of hoboes camped around the giant sequoia by the train station, rough wooden shacks on Lytton Avenue housed kids who went without shoes, and rabbits were raised in hutches in the grassy fields behind them for supper. Before the university came in 1896, sheep, goats, horses, and mules grazed on ranch land. And before that, when the Spanish began to deed land grants, tule-gathering tribes swept through the tidal flats in bunched canoes, fleeing missionaries. If his parents, who’d struggled through the Depression eating rabbits and mending their socks until there was no more sock to mend, only the mending, could have seen what happened to dreamy old Palo Alto, they’d get a real kick out of it.

Yes, Donald Chester knew the owner of the wreckage next door. She was an elderly woman who lived in New York with her daughter, who would neither let go of the house she’d lived in as a young bride nor maintain it, and Veblen said that was good. To her it looked enchanted. To which he said, *Let’s see what you think after you look inside*, and brought out some flashlights. It was one of those magical strokes of luck that a person enjoys once or twice in a lifetime, and marvels at ever after.

She followed him behind the place, where there was a modest garage built for a Model T, with the original wooden door with a sash, hollowed by termites, like cactus wood.

The back door hung loose off its hinges, and a musty odor surrounded them in the kitchen. Old cracked linoleum squeaked underfoot. A bank of dirt had formed on the windowsill, growing grass. But the huge old porcelain sink was intact. And the old tiles, under layers of silt, were beautiful. Donald Chester laughed and said she must have a great deal of imagination. In the living room, water stains covered the ceiling like the

patterns in a mosque. She told him about the house in Cobb and the fixing she and her mother did to get it in shape, all by themselves. (She'd been only six when she and her mother moved in, but they'd worked side by side for weeks.) She knew how to transform a place, wait and see. Donald Chester took down her number and said he doubted anything would come of it, but he'd give her a call. And the very next day he did. The widow took a fancy to the idea of a single woman fixing it up. She priced the place nostalgically, a rent about the same as single rooms. Veblen sobbed with disbelief. She'd saved up enough money over the past few years to get the whole thing off the ground.

She loved the tiger lilies, which were out. She kissed them on their crepey cheeks, got pollen on her chin. For the next week, she started on the place at dawn, ripping vines off the windows, digging dirt from the grout, hosing the walls. One day Albertine came down to help. They pried open the windows to let in fresh air and barreled through the place with a Shop-Vac. Another day Veblen climbed onto the roof and tore off the tarp and discovered the leaks, and patched them. It wasn't rocket science. She cleaned the surface of every wall with TSP and every tile with bleach, and painted every room. Then she rented a sanding machine and took a thin layer from the oak floors, finishing them with linseed oil and turpentine. She kept a fan blowing to dry the paint and the floors all day long.

Donald Chester pitched in. He lent her tools and brought her tall tumblers of iced tea with wedges of lemon from his tree.

"You like to work hard," he remarked, when Veblen came out of the house one day covered in white dust.

In the kitchen, the old refrigerator needed a thorough scrubbing, but the motor worked, and the old Wedgewood stove better than worked. The claw-foot tub in the bathroom had rust stains, but they didn't bother her very much. The toilet needed a new float and chain, no big deal. She had the utilities changed to her name. She played her radio day and night, and by the fifth night, give or take a few creaking floorboards and windows with stubborn sashes, the house welcomed her. The transformation absorbed her for months to come, as if she'd written a symphony or a wonderful book or painted a small masterpiece. And she'd stayed on these last five years despite the hell-bent growth all around, conveniently located halfway between each parent in her outpost on one of the last untouched corners of old Palo Alto. One day the widow or her daughter would get an offer they couldn't refuse. But for now, it was hers.

The two buildings had never been remodeled or added on to, and provided the same standard of shelter as they had when built in 1920, which was plenty good. Now a week did not go by when real estate agents didn't cram business cards into the mail slots, hoping to capture the deeds and promptly have the little houses bulldozed. She and Donald liked to feel they were taking a stand.

For her first meal on Tasso Street, she boiled a large tough artichoke from Castroville and ate it with a scoop of Best Foods mayonnaise. She took the thistles out of the heart and filled it like a little cup. She listened to an opera on the radio, live from San Francisco, *La Bohème*. Surrounded by the smell of fresh paint and linseed oil, the smooth floors, the clean glass, the perception of space to grow into, she was too excited to sleep.

As she often was at night now, with Paul beside her. The sharing of simple meals and discussing the day's events, of waking up together with plans for the future, things that feel practically bacchanalian when you're used to being on your own.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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