

1st paper reading: 31 Mar 2017, pleasantly wins beyond fugged.

The Tenant  
Victor Lodato

When Marie saw the ~~small~~ house, nestled almost invisibly among weedy hills and sycamores, she thought, jackpot. She thought, heaven. Hell, she thought, I could live and die here.

Of course, all she said to the McGregors was, 'It'll do.'  
The McGregors ~~owned the property and lived in the large house next door~~ — though ~~next door~~ was a relative term: the main house was at least a hundred yards away. Through the trees all Marie could see of it was a patch of pale blue siding / which, in the right mood, she could easily pretend was part of the sky.

The right mood was not uncommon lately. It often involved gin. Marie was careful not to put the empties in the recycling bin. She didn't wish to give the McGregors the wrong idea. There was something distinctly Christiany about them. Something to do with how polite they were — a politeness that seemed a bit performative, as if they were trying to make a good impression, not only on her, but on someone off in the wings. Marie often had the urge to look behind her to see who they were talking to. It was nerve-wracking — must be though surely it was worse for them. Believing in God was no doubt stressful like living under constant surveillance.

Marie was grateful for her freedom. And, lately, she'd become intrigued by the idea of something more. Anonymity. It seemed a very classy business card: cloud-white and completely blank. She'd hand them out to anyone who got too close.

Luckily the McGregors hadn't asked her to fill out one of those renter-information packets, or done a credit check. They'd been satisfied with her offer to pay the first six months in advance.

As soon as Marie signed the lease, she felt a weight lifted from her heart. Maybe this lightness had something to do with the land and the trees, which reminded her of the estate she'd grown up on, across the valley, in the Rincons.

Not that she'd been particularly happy there — but it was childhood and so, at a certain age, revered. And certainly it hadn't been terrible. Her parents had been decent people — though they'd had their edges, their sorrows. Their moods had oppressed her as a child, but now she saw it as a good sign, a sign that perhaps they'd wanted more than what they'd had. When they died five years ago on the highway, it had been their first trip out of Tucson in twenty years. They were going to Apache County to see the ruins, but made it only as far as Pined. A sleep-deprived trucker, carrying a load of frozen fruit, had swerved and toppled.

'Blueberries everywhere,' one witness had said. The caskets had been closed.  
The first month at the rental, Marie slept better than she had in a while. It was quiet, and the McGregors kept their distance. She'd told them she was a writer; she needed her privacy. The lie had come out of her with

such ease that she wondered if maybe she should write a book. Now that she'd stopped dating, she could do with a new hobby.

Mostly she read — and when she got up to look out the large front window, it was nice to occasionally see the animals. The McGregors had four piebald cows and a scattering of Buckeye chickens. Before renting the place, Marie had been asked if it was all right if the animals grazed, as they always had, on the entire property. Not at all, she'd said — let them roam.

Of course, she hadn't considered the shit — which, for weeks now, had been accumulating on what she thought of as her part of the land, though there was no fence to mark such distinctions. More than once, Marie had been wandering about the hills, musing on something she'd read, only to land disastrously in some fresh excretion. The cows were particularly prodigious, leaving behind mounds the size of Bundt cakes.

In addition to the shit, she hadn't thought about children. One afternoon a girl appeared — a preschoolish type called Lacy, who, in violation of her name, was indelicate and wild, chunky, and most disturbingly, a shouter. She often darted about, in white sneakers, on some manic escapade. Apparently she had a sixth sense about how to avoid the excrement. Her white sneakers remained pristine. When she leapt across the hills, it was as if she were preparing for flight. Her shouts had the shrill urgency of a crow.

All in all, though, it wasn't really a crisis — more of a nuisance. Neither the animals nor the girl ever came right up to the house. Still, after Marie had been there nearly three months, she wondered if she might talk to the McGregors about the possibility of a fence. Maybe just a little one around the rental house. She'd even be willing to share the cost.

But how to start such a conversation? Especially since she hardly ever spoke with the owners. Perhaps she'd say it was an aesthetic thing — not mention the child or the animals. A fence, she could say, would add to a feeling of home. She'd play up the romance of it. White picket sort of nonsense.

The funny thing was: despite the problems, she was settling in nicely here. What she'd felt on first seeing the place — that this was somewhere she might stay awhile — she felt still.

Plus, it wasn't easy to find furnished rentals in Tucson. All Marie carried now were three suitcases, and she had no intention of acquiring anything else. Other people's beds and dressers suited her just fine. The McGregors' cottage had a yellow Formica table that at first had made her wince, but now was a happy revelation each morning when she woke to it buttered in sunlight. Drinking coffee there seemed right, seemed familiar.

Careful, she thought.  
Because it was frightening, really, how quickly a person got used to things. Attachment was an octopus. Even when you cut off its arms, they grew back. You had to keep a knife in your back pocket. This was her ninth rental in five years.

100 MANY DASHES  
A Eager  
start here the book  
BLOX

How do she dream then?  
document  
Also, the conflict??  
Shouldn't she be a writer?  
or NOT

Fuck you??  
You just stop it  
You just stop it  
BUNDT CAKE

Two initial readings online left me w/ great feeling for this piece & now clin going to savagely discredit

Marie sighed. She knew the drill. She might allow herself a few more months here – but then it would be time to move.

When her parents died, Marie had been living in Phoenix – had been living there for nearly twelve years. That former life seemed a blur now: a job at an art gallery, a two-story townhouse, a tall man with a beard who'd stayed with her most nights and who she'd assumed she'd eventually marry. After the accident, though, she'd come to Tucson to attend to her parents' affairs, taking a leave from the gallery and telling the man that she'd be back in a few weeks.

She stayed for six months – the whole time in her parents' house, the house of her childhood, the house that she, as sole heir, had inherited. Her mother's dog was still around, a chocolate Lab, old and infirm now. It pained Marie to watch him limp and collapse, often at her feet, looking up as if there was something she could do. She fed him green beans from a can, his favorite, but eventually he stopped taking food. When the vet said it might be soon, Marie didn't hesitate: she put the dog to sleep.

It'd been the last bit of business. Still, she'd stayed on at the old place – wondering if she might invite the bearded man to live with her; he'd been down to visit several times and commented how much he liked the house. He'd also mentioned something about the two of them starting their life. 'Time to get to it,' he'd said. But the more Marie had thought about this phrase, the more it had rankled her. What was the man implying – that she was running out of time? What was she then? Thirty-nine? fuck you

Marie never invited him down again, and soon after, she began dating other men – brief affairs, usually less than a week. The sex was always conducted in her parents' bedroom. Marie felt like a spider, taking the men apart on her mother's best satin sheets. The orgasms often ended in tears, but they were glorious. Though Marie wasn't religious in any way, or inclined toward metaphysics, she had a sense that there was some higher purpose to these sexual encounters. She sensed somehow that she was feeding the dead. Giving them something for the road. Something better than cold blueberries.

Her parents had rarely touched her as a child – rarely touched each other. When the men left, Marie shuffled from room to room, sorting through her parents' stuff. They'd been hoarders of a sort. The nights she spent alone in the house, she often felt sick. It might have been her diet (green apples and cans of sardines). More likely it was the exhaustion of grief, which had been a full-time job back then.

Slowly, she'd got rid of almost everything. Every piece of furniture, all her mother's jewelry, her father's collection of Western art. She even sold the most valuable paintings – the small Dixon of a crazy sky chockablock with clouds, and the good-sized Blumenschein of a stoic Navaho draped in bright blankets and gesturing like some Martha Graham princess. *I offer peace* – or something to that effect.

As a child, she'd loved the paintings, hanging in every room like an extra window: desert landscapes of muted colors, as if recalled from a

RESTRICTED  
CLUNKY.

HAD YOU NOT SEEN HIM BEFORE?

TOO MUCH SUMMARY. GOT TO THE MEAT

dream; horses and riders kicking up dust under blue moonbeams; women patting tortillas outside adobes pinked with sunset. She'd stood before these paintings with her father, who'd explained how they preserved a history of light, how the light was different back then, before the cities were built. Romantic, surely, he'd said, but important, historical. Marie had wanted to live in that light; imagined that she'd become a painter one day.

Why had she told the McGregors she was a writer? Only now did she see that she could have offered a much more truthful lie.

For a while she completely forgot about the idea of a fence. But then summer came and the girl had friends and the animals had flies that were always getting into the house. She walked over to the McGregors' with some apple cookies. TALKED ON!

A boy answered the door. Older than the girl, probably around fourteen. Horsey-looking, but in an attractive sort of way. Marie was horsey herself. Handsome, her mother had always called her.

'Are your parents home?'

The boy stared dully, as if woken from a nap. 'They're at work.'

Marie glanced at her watch; it was nearly six. 'Long day, huh?'

The boy grimaced. He seemed a bit slow.

'I'm the renter. Next door,' she said, in case he wasn't up to speed.

'I know. I seen you.'

Marie smiled. She'd put the cookies on a ceramic platter; it was a bit heavy.

'You don't work?' the boy said.

'No,' replied Marie. 'May I give you this?'

'What is it?'

A piece of cow shit, she wanted to say. 'Cookies,' she told him. 'I made cookies.'

'Oh.' He immediately took them and peeled back the tinfoil. 'Can I eat one?'

'That is their purpose.'

He took a bite, said it was pretty good.

Marie chuckled up another smile. 'Maybe I could wait until your folks get home?'

The boy nodded, backed away from the door.

The house was a mess. When Marie walked in, she stepped on what might have been a piece of breakfast cereal. The sofa was piled with clothing. Open textbooks were scattered across a coffee table.

'Doing your homework?'

'I guess.'

The boy was as blank as the walls, which contained no decoration whatsoever. No mirrors or shelves or knickknacks, no paintings. The furnishings were a mishmash, and badly arranged. It all seemed very provisional.

Maybe they'd bought the house only recently. Marie realized she knew nothing about the family.

THIS IS THE DETAIL YOU NEED.

DUH.

'Have you lived here a long time?'  
'Forever,' the boy said. He was on his second cookie.  
The house was hot, and Marie untwined the silk scarf from around her neck.  
'So, are you, like, rich?' the boy asked.  
What a question, thought Marie. She was renting a shoebox from this idiot's parents. 'Yes,' she said. 'I'm loaded.'  
The kid nodded, munched. He was liable to finish the whole plate before his parents got home, lessening the effect of the gesture. She couldn't begin a conversation about a fence with a present of crumbs.  
'You know what? I think I'll come back another time. Maybe save some cookies for your sister?' suggested Marie.  
The boy stopped mid-chew. 'Oh, I thought . . . Sorry.'  
'No.' Marie blushed. 'Eat as many as you like. I can bring more.'  
The boy said he liked chocolate-chip best, and second-best, oatmeal.  
'Yes, well, we'll see. ~~No promises.~~ She paused at the door. 'You know, there's a lot of poop outside my house.'  
'The cows,' the boy said unhelpfully. 'We got it, too.'  
'I would imagine so. I was just wondering if maybe someone could scoop it.'  
'Don't need to be scooped. It's good for it to stay there.'  
'Good for what?'  
'I don't know. For like the grass and stuff, I guess. I'll tell my dad.'  
'Thank you.'  
'Uh-huh,' the boy mumbled, turning back to his books.  
Marie watched him. Terrible posture, a paper-thin tee stretched over the bow of his spine.  
He looked up. 'You know, my grandmother was supposed to live there, where you're living.'  
'Really,' said Marie. 'Could she not afford the rent?'  
'What? No,' the boy said. 'She died.'  
Marie adjusted her scarf. 'Well, that's . . . were you close to her?'  
'Nah. She wasn't from around here. Plus, she was pretty old. She had to put, like, oxygen on her face and everything.'  
Marie widened her eyes. 'Wow.'  
'I know,' said the boy.  
'Well, I'll be going,' said Marie. 'No need to tell your parents I was here.'  
'They're gonna figure it out.' He gestured toward the cookies.  
Marie sighed. 'Why don't you just . . .' She marched toward the couch and slid the remaining cookies onto a piece of the boy's notebook paper, then took back the platter. 'It'll be our secret.'  
'Should I tell them about the cow shit?' he asked.  
Marie glanced at the dirty carpet and said it wasn't necessary, she'd give his parents a ring.

actually good & tons of telling dialogue for the most part. ~~McGregor work unlike~~

the exposition

On the way back, she wanted to scream.  
Or gag. *Grandma's* house? And here she was, baking cookies for these people. When they should be attending to *her* needs.

That was the whole point of renting, was it not? You were supposed to have no concerns, no responsibilities. Landlords were the parents, renters the children. Not that Marie wanted to get familiar about it; it was just a metaphor.

I like chocolate-chip best! Well, he could go fuck himself.  
It was nearly sunset when Marie stepped onto her porch. She checked her shoes for muck before entering the house and then made some lemonade.

It wasn't *exactly* lemonade, but that's what she called it, should anyone ask. She put it in a thermos, added some ice cubes, and grabbed the car keys. She needed to be outside, closer to the mountains. The mountains always put things in perspective for her – made the smallness, the crushability of humans, seem valid.

The McGregors' place was near the Tortolitas – dreary jagged peaks with no water to speak of. Wild pigs and petroglyphs, the ruins of Honey Bee Village. The Hohokam were long gone, but their ancestors, the Tohono O'odham, lingered on, sick with sugar. Half of them had diabetes. No one painted these Indians. They were too fat.

Marie had briefly dated a native boy in high school, and for nearly a year she'd been mocked – accused of a fondness for Tohono O'odham scrotum. Her parents hadn't approved either. 'You can do better,' her mother had chided.

He was a sweet boy, a bit of a punk, with long shiny hair that smelled like bubblegum. *Albert*. She'd gone with him once to San Xavier and they'd eaten fry bread, wandered stoned through the Mission. They'd only kissed, fondled through cloth. Virgins, both of them. She'd never seen his scrotum.

Marie sipped her lemonade and drove toward Sanctuary Cove, where the land stumbled upward into craggy cliffs. It was easy to imagine flying into oblivion here – her old Volvo sprouting wings and sailing into the sainted blue. She parked at the trailhead and kept her eyes on the rocks, avoiding the development visible to her right – a vast beehive of red-tiled roofs where there used to be ranches and cotton fields.

This was the northern edge of the city. It would have been a breeze to hop on the freeway and drive away from Tucson. But every time she tried this, she found herself blocked – not by mountains or traffic or flash floods, but by something in her blood. It was as if she lived in some crazy psychic zoo, a woman trapped behind invisible walls of glass.

Marie wondered what held her here. It wasn't as if she thought she'd see them again. She barely expected to see herself. The light had changed too much.

Still, it was home – more than Phoenix had ever been. Marie kicked at some agate shards and wondered who was living in her townhouse. She'd never met the new owners. After selling her parents' home, she'd put the

WHO FUCK THE CARES!  
WHAT ARE YOU HIDING?  
NO SENSE

Diabetes?

NO ROCKS MTL

Phoenix place on the market. She'd done well on both. Add to that the paintings, the jewelry, the insurance payouts – yes, she was what that stupid McGregor boy would call rich. She should show him the suitcase one day, blow his dimwit mind.

Honestly, though, it was a burden. ~~Most people had no idea how much a suitcase stuffed with cash weighed.~~

Ha! She was drunk enough to laugh at herself. A rich woman complaining about her pearls: they're so heavy. Marie took off her scarf – one of her last good accessories – and let it go into a rising wind. Sometimes the invisible could be your friend. She watched the scarf fly up – a miracle, really – the purple streak of silk blending perfectly into the sunset.

~~More, more, she thought. She took off her sandals and threw them toward a dried-up ocotillo. One hooked near the top, bending a stalk like an overweight angel on a Christmas tree. Her head hurt quite a bit.~~

Every morning it was like this. Weeks passed in a kind of stutter: not every moment was there. She felt as if she were hopping between stones, but unaware of the hop – only the stone: a hard landing that jarred her skull.

One morning she woke splayed out on the floor with her head in a suitcase. It was half filled with clothing, and so in some sense a legitimate pillow. The question was: was she leaving or not?

She often found herself packing, but only in a half-hearted, desultory sort of way.

It was still summer, and changing residence during the summer was horrible. The temperature was steadfastly in the hundreds now, and even in the best rentals she'd be able to smell the previous tenants, catch glimpses of their sins. Too much light, too much heat – it exposed everything. Maybe she'd wait until August. Hopefully the monsoons would come and bring some air one could actually move through with purpose.

Summer was a time for stillness. The little house had peppy AC, and so other than runs to the grocery store Marie stayed inside. Her books came by post. She was rereading the Russians. The text, though, was ridiculously small, and since it hurt her pride to wear reading glasses, she ordered some large-print editions. *Anna Karenina* alone arrived in five volumes and was nearly two thousand pages. Reading it was a revelation – the oversized text making the book seem like a story for children, and for this reason all the more shocking. The sentences practically slapped you in the face, welcomed you afresh to the world of humans. The letters no longer ants, but ladybugs – the Os large enough to catch Marie's tears.

Sometimes she stood at the window and waved to the animals. They never waved back. Maybe they were afraid of her hair. It had grown quite a bit in the past few months, and she rarely combed it. There were butter blotches on all her T-shirts.

At least she kept the house clean – and this allowed her some degree of good opinion about herself. She was an excellent tenant. Even

SAVAGELY EDITING. SHOULD HAVE BEEN DONE  
when she vacated a place in the middle of the night, she left it immaculate. <sup>DONE</sup> the toilet scrubbed, the sinks spotless. She was always paid-up, and often left a little something extra.

Marie set early October as her departure date from the McGregors'. Until then, she'd read, sketch, drink her coffee at the yellow table. Yes, she reminded herself: she was sketching again. It was surely a good sign – though what she rendered in her little pads were no more than nervous doodles, swoops and swirls, a mindless sort of art, free of logic or ambition. Marie often did it for hours, forgetting lunch. In the evening, she cooked elaborate meals – and, despite the heat, baked a new dessert every few days.

Among the few possessions she'd kept were her mother's recipe cards. She looked through them, here at the McGregors', and in mid-July enjoyed Christmas cookies and rum cake. She made a lot of puddings, as well, to use up the eggs. Every week, someone left a large basket of them outside her door – though the culprit was stealthy, making the delivery before dawn. Mrs McGregor probably, doing her Christian duty. Eggs for the spinster.

When Marie opened the suitcase that contained the recipes, it was the first time she'd done so since she'd zipped it shut on a balmy January day nearly half a decade before. She wouldn't have been surprised to find the suitcase full of ashes or frozen fruit – like some gag prize on that game show her mother used to watch.

No such luck, though. <sup>THEY</sup> the case had kept its treasure. She sat on the rented bed and looked through some of the relics. A photo of her parents – her father in a snazzy shirt with lapels the size of pizza slices, and her mother in a dress that looked exactly like whipped cream. Their faces glowed – though that was probably a trick of lighting, some lie the living told about the dead.

Anyway, what Marie liked best about the photo wasn't the youthful beauty of her parents, but their stance, leaning against each other like they'd had one too many. They looked cheap and wild and happy. It made her feel lonely for a version of them she'd never known. For most of her life they'd been brittle and distant – generous with their wisdom, though, which usually seemed to be a story about how even amidst comfort and success the best of life was always behind you. Her grandparents, who'd lived on an old pony ranch on the Rillito, had radiated a similar wisdom. Sadness ran in the family like an eternal spring. Marie was awake to it now, the cold water coursing through her blood. This time of year, it was almost refreshing.

One morning, she stumbled outside to find another basket of eggs – and instead of taking them inside, she threw them, one by one, against a tree. The following week there was no delivery. Even the chickens kept their distance.

Emptiness. That was the reckoning of summer.

THE REAL STORY IS THE  
WOMAN + THE BOY. GO THERE,  
VICTOR

The little girl, too, seemed to have vanished. Probably it was too hot for her to be flailing about outside. She was no doubt lying in a torpor on the dirty carpet, eating from a box of breakfast cereal.

Marie sort of missed her, and sometimes on her midnight strolls she wandered across the imaginary line she'd set that separated the McGregors' property from hers. She got close enough to hear their voices. Sometimes she heard screams, sometimes gunshots – though that was probably just the television.

The knock was a box being nailed shut – a box she was trapped inside.

Then the knock was a bird against the glass.

Then it was a fist.

Marie woke to the McGregor boy standing behind the window, grimacing. She pulled up the sheets in case she was naked.

'I'll come around the front,' he shouted.

When she opened the door, dressed to kill in a moth-eaten serape, the boy said he was here for the pies.

'I haven't made any,' said Marie.

'No, I mean, I just thought I'd pick them up,' he persisted.

Marie felt slightly dizzy. She flattened down her hair and asked the boy what the hell he was talking about.

'The cow shit,' he said. 'I brought a bucket.' He held it up.

She stared at him a while before saying, 'Well, you certainly waited long enough.'

He shrugged. 'Been busy.'

Marie understood the correct phrase was, 'Thank you for coming,' but instead she said, 'I don't think one bucket's going to cut it.'

The boy said it would if he smashed it down. 'Plus I ain't gonna do all of it, just where it's bothering you.'

'And where is that?' asked Marie.

'I suppose where you can see it?' he said.

Fair enough, thought Marie – and though she had no more to say, she lingered at the door.

The boy looked down and coughed. 'Well, I better get started before it hots up.' Now that's fucking great.

She watched him from the window. He'd brought a filthy shovel, which he'd set against the egg-plastered tree. Out on the weedy hills he scooped and dumped in a white T-shirt that slowly soaked through. Marie peeked at the clock (8.40) and then at the thermometer on the porch (92).

The boy scanned the ground, bleary without sunglasses. He wiped his eyes, marching from pie to pie. Sometimes he didn't scoop the shit, but only crushed it with his foot and then mashed the dry bits into the earth. His boots were as big as a man's, and though he was skinny, he had a man's seriousness. He worked as if someone's life depended on it. When he saw Marie staring at him from the window, he waved. Marie backed away and faded into the house.

I'll give him a tip, she thought.

Though perhaps it was better to give him nothing. He was doing no more than basic upkeep, which was the owner's responsibility. Marie went to her bedroom and looked in the mirror. She was wearing the same clothes as the day before – a linen blouse so wrinkled from sleeping in it that it looked like the skin of an elephant.

After changing her outfit, she went back to the window. The boy was gone, and for a moment she panicked – a feeling that confused her. Then she saw him galumphing back from the main house with a wheelbarrow. He stationed himself on another hill and resumed his labor. When he took off his shirt, exposing a shockingly white chest, Marie winced. ~~The poor kid was going to fry.~~

Marie's mother had been pale, too, and had so feared the sun that she'd slathered on protective creams that made her even whiter. She'd often left the house looking like some kabuki empress. Living in the desert wasn't for everyone. You had to be tough.

Marie shut the curtains and lay on the couch. Volume two of *Anna Karenina*, a fat paperback, curled on the coffee table. She fetched it, and despite the dimness of the closed-up room, didn't bother to turn on a lamp. Another good thing about these large-print books was that you could practically read them in the dark – which, as far as Marie was concerned, was the perfect way to read Tolstoy.

When the knock came, she refused to get up. 'All done?' she shouted.

'Yup!' came the reply.

'Thank you!' chirped Marie – and when she didn't hear his boots moving away, she sighed and checked her pockets for cash. 'One second!'

His face was flushed and his shoulders pink. 'I got most of it, I think.'

Marie had the money in her closed fist. It was to be a gift and not an obligation. She waited to get a reading on the boy's greed. She could smell his boots. He seemed reluctant to speak.

'Yes?' said Marie.

'Yeah, I was just, uh . . . I was supposed to ask if maybe you wanted to come over for dinner sometime.'

Marie was speechless.

'My mom said sorry if she was rude about the eggs, she shoulda asked you if you wanted them. She said you could come on Friday or Saturday.'

'This week won't work,' said Marie. 'But tell your mother thank you.'

'Sure. My dad already told her you wouldn't come.'

When Marie said she was sorry, the boy shrugged. 'I wouldn't go either, if they invited me.'

Marie wasn't sure what to do with this information, but decided to defuse the confession with wit. 'But you *have* to go,' she said. 'You are their prisoner.'

The boy laughed and said he sure was.

It thought she was perma-wasted.

HERE PICKLE UP HERE VIC.

And then he told her his name was Harland. *- WHY?*  
'Well, Harland, maybe you'd like to come by in a week or so and clean up again.'

'I could, yes. If you want.'

'I do.' Marie extended her hand and opened her fist. It felt perverse giving the kid a hundred-dollar bill — but it felt wonderful, too. *→ too generous / 100 dollar bill*

'Oh,' said Harland. 'I don't — I don't have any change.'

'I don't want change,' said Marie. 'You worked hard.'

He was still staring at the bill as she shut the door.

The next time he came, there was little to do. After he scooped the pies, he gathered some dead brush, then scattered grass seeds on a balding hill.

Marie sat on the porch, reading.

'Do you always carry seeds in your pocket?' she asked him.

'Not to school,' he said. 'But around here it comes in handy.'

He was charmingly literal. If Marie was ever sarcastic or unkind, it seemed to go right over the boy's head. She found it best to keep things simple, though this was surprisingly hard. Simplicity was a kind of honesty, and Marie was out of practice.

'Would you like something to drink, Harland?'

'No, thank you,' he said — and then: 'Well, what are you drinking?'

'Oh, this is just . . .' Marie made a discouraging face. 'This is just lemonade.'

When Harland said he'd take some of that, Marie said she'd just poured the last of it. 'How about some milk?' *milk?*

'Milk's good,' he said. 'If it's cold.'

He removed his boots at the door and came inside wearing grubby sweat socks. The way he kept one foot atop the other, Marie suspected he was hiding a hole.

'Would you like to sit down? Cool off?'

He shook his head. 'I need to do some things for my dad.'

She handed him a glass of milk and a brownie, which he ate quickly, nodding in approval. *why?*

Marie had the money in her pocket, but she waited. 'Would you like another one?'

'I don't wanna be a pig,' said Harland.

'Please. I've already eaten five today.'

The boy approached the table and Marie pushed the plate of brownies closer to him. As he chewed, he looked around the room. There was no wall between the kitchen and the living area. Marie was glad the place was neat; no doubt the boy would be submitting a report.

'You sure got a lot of books.'

'Passes the time.'

'I guess,' said Harland. 'Do you use that chair?' He pointed toward the plaid-upholstered La-Z-Boy near the television.

Marie said, yes, sometimes she did.

'That used to be my chair. I used to come over here all the time before you moved in. After my dad built it for my grandma, there was, like, almost a year before you showed up. So it was kinda my house for a while.'

'Well, I won't be here forever,' said Marie.

Harland said he didn't think she would be. He walked over to his chair. 'You see all these cuts?'

'I was wondering about those.' The arms were covered with gashes, inside of which you could see the white stuffing.

'I made them,' said Harland.

'Did you?'

He nodded and sat down. 'With my pocketknife. Which I lost, by the way. So if you find it . . .'

He didn't say anything after that — only caressed the distressed fabric and stared at the wall with slightly raised eyes. Marie was tempted to grab her sketchpad in an attempt to capture what she was seeing, which seemed to be a face of exquisite beauty. Something about the tightly locked brow gave the impression of an animal preparing to pounce. It was some time before she realized that the boy was crying.

'I'm not,' he said before Marie had uttered a word. 'I just got some of that shit in my eyes.'

Marie pretended to believe him and turned away to pour herself more lemonade. She took a few swigs before speaking. 'I haven't seen your sister in a while.'

'Yeah, she was in some trouble,' grumbled Harland. 'She broke something.'

Marie asked if it was something valuable, and Harland said he guessed so, it was her ankle. 'Cast came off last week, but now she has to go to, like, resuscitation.'

'You mean, rehabilitation?'

'Something like that. I ain't got the greatest memory.'

'You also have terrible grammar,' said Marie. 'We really should work on that.'

When she sat on the couch — nearly a stumble — she saw that he'd pulled some of the stuffing from one of the gashes on the armchair. It looked like a tiny puff of smoke. He continued to tug at it until he'd made a miniature tornado. Marie stared at it, mesmerized.

'Stop,' she said. 'Don't make it worse.'

She was fading. It was a struggle to stay upright.

'I have to go,' said Harland.

'Me too,' mumbled Marie.

As the boy stood, she pushed the money into his hand.

He quickly checked the amount — and this time he didn't bring up the matter of change. 'All right then. See ya.'

He didn't come the next week. Marie, expecting him, had made gingerbread. She'd also stitched up the armchair with a sewing kit she'd found in one of the drawers. She couldn't remember the last time she'd used

THE TIME CONFUSING

old Saturday

THE GRAMMAR'S FINE, ITS THE DICTION.

How is she this fucking wasted

INCONSISTENT

a needle and thread. Her mother had certainly never sewn anything. As a child, if Marie ever ripped a shirt or a dress, it went right in the trash, or was cut into rags for the housekeeper.

It was satisfying work, stuffing the stray batting back inside the arms and closing the gashes with black thread. It gave Marie a sense of accomplishment. To have saved something that was essentially worthless – the impulse was almost religious.

Possibly she'd been overzealous, though, and put in too many stitches. The chair looked sort of gruesome now.

'I had to operate,' she'd tell Harland. 'But the prognosis is good.'

It was strange, then, when he finally showed up two weeks later with a gash across his forehead. For a moment Marie was confused, as if Harland's injury were somehow connected to the chair. The boy's cut was crudely mended with tiny adhesive bandages.

'Are you okay?'

'What?' he said – and when she pointed to his head, he told her it was nothing, it was old.

'You didn't have it the last time I saw you.'

'Maybe you didn't notice.'

'I would have noticed.'

Harland rolled his eyes – and when Marie asked him what did *that* mean, he said, 'Nothing. You were just a little . . .'

'A little what?'

'Listen, why don't you just tell me what you want me to do today – cause I won't have a lot of time now that school's starting up.'

'Is it September already? I had no idea. I need to get a calculator. I mean a – what do you call it? For the dates?'

Harland looked down.

Marie took a step back, in case he could smell her breath. 'Well, maybe you should do a little pickup outside and then . . .' She glanced out the window, looking for her train of thought. 'You know, I still want you to come by when you have school. I can help you.'

'Help me with what?'

'I don't know. English.'

'I'm past help,' said Harland. 'I failed like three things last year.' He squinted toward the hills. 'I better go get started out there.'

'Why bother? Just come in and have something to eat.'

'Nah. If I don't do any work –'

'Don't worry,' slurred Marie. 'I'll pay you anyway.'

'For what?'

'Well, we'll have to negotiate. Maybe you can read to me.'

'Are you kidding?' said Harland.

'Do I look like I'm kidding?'

'You look like you need to sit down.' He took her arm and led her to the couch.

HAM FISTED

The monsoons came late that year, and when they did, it was biblical. The skies cracked with demonic wrath, and the rain hissed when it touched the earth. The soaked hills gurgled and steamed. Frantic birds darted in search of blue, while the cows and chickens fled for the ark of higher ground, which was near the McGregors' house. Marie's cottage developed a moat, and when it finally dried, the shape of the land had changed. There were furrows that seemed perfect for planting a garden. Marie put in some collards and kale, tossed a few packets of wildflower seeds – lupine and bluebells. She cut away the carelessweed that had come up beside the porch.

The weather was finally cooler. When Harland came over now, he was usually dressed in a flannel shirt. Sometimes he matched his plaid chair perfectly. The cut on his head had healed, and though other bruises appeared now and then, he never offered explanations, and Marie didn't pry. She simply let him know that he was welcome to visit whenever he liked. Despite the open invitation, he came only once a week. Occasionally he didn't show, which set Marie on edge. It took some effort to keep herself from knocking on the McGregors' door. She'd started to worry about the kid. When he did visit, it was always a Tuesday (Marie had a calendar now), and always after school.

They were still on part one of *Anna Karenina*. Harland had tried to squirm out of it at first, but Marie had insisted. 'Reading it will improve you.'

'Do I need improvement?'

'I hate to tell you this, Harland, but we all do. It's our life's work.'

Sometimes, when she said things like this, he took away her lemonade and poured her a glass of milk.

'I just don't understand why I have to read it out loud.'

'That way, you'll never forget. The words will stick.'

For a while he remained unconvinced, stopping often to comment. After the very first sentence, he'd said, 'Well I coulda told you that.'

'Shut up and read,' she'd commanded.

'Why are the letters so big, though?'

'The better to see you with, my dear,' she told him – though she was pretty sure this made no sense. 'Come on.' She snapped her fingers. 'Read.'

'Everything was in con-fu – confusion – in the O-blon-skys' house . . .'

Marie often closed her eyes to listen to his nervous, halting voice – a harsh fiddle playing a waltz. She could picture him swaying on a tightrope, crossing the abyss of all he didn't know. Of course, the person up there in danger might have been her. She'd gotten so used to her loneliness, she didn't want to fall from it now. Sometimes she corrected Harland's pronunciation or explained a word he was unfamiliar with. *Calumny, epaulet, samovar*.

Marie made him read for at least half an hour. He didn't get dessert until he was done. While they ate, they talked a bit, but never about important things. They talked about the weather or school, about movies or places

No. GOOD,

bring up earlier

NOT A GOOD, NUANCED VIEW OF ALCOHOLISM.

THEY'RE HERE

they'd like to visit. Their conversations, after Tolstoy, were nothing much to record – but their silences, Marie felt, were literary. Harland, like her, was a great starrer, and they often looked at the wall as if there were a window in it.

When he went home, she often felt sad. She knew she was probably confusing things, thinking about something old, something that had nothing to do with the boy, but she chose not to examine this too deeply. Why tarnish with psychology something so simple and pure? A pureness perhaps slightly muddied already by the fact that she continued to give the boy, at the end of every visit, a hundred-dollar bill.

After he was gone, she often switched from milk to gin, though she never poured herself as much as she would have before. When she woke in the mornings now, it was not so much with a headache as with a dull sorrow that felt like an improvement.

They were dead. They would always be dead. So what if they hadn't been the most loving parents. Whatever unfinished business she had with them had to be settled here, among the living.

One morning, she even had the bravery to go to the suitcase of relics and take out the small Higgins she'd kept. The frame was long gone, and the canvas was wrapped tightly with two summer dresses and a madman's worth of twine. She released it from its swaddling and hung it in the living room, near the La-Z-Boy.

It was different from the ones she'd sold. This one was a simple painting of hills, very modest, almost abstract. It didn't attempt to tell a story. It was all about the light. Less a place than a feeling.

Harland, she hoped, would like it.

The next week, of course, he didn't come. But on a Wednesday morning Mrs McGregor did. She was dressed in a thuggish raincoat and bore no eggs. The small talk (*good morning, how are you, that rain!*) lasted all of thirty seconds before the woman got to it.

'I'm really not sure what's going on over here, but I sure as hell hope we won't need to call the police.'

'The police?' said Marie. 'Why would you call the police?'

'You tell me,' said Mrs McGregor.

Marie asked the woman if she'd like to come inside.

'What I'd like is to know what you and Harland are up to.'

'We're just – please, why don't you come inside?'

When Mrs McGregor stepped warily into the cottage, Marie gestured toward the books. 'Harland and I have been doing some reading.'

'Doing what?'

Marie realized how ridiculous this sounded, so she added: 'Plus, we eat. You know, he has a big appetite, and it turns out I'm quite a good baker. I actually just made strudel.'

'Are you drunk?' asked Mrs McGregor. 'Cause I seen the bottles.'

And I see where Harland picked up his lovely grammar, Marie wanted to say. Instead, she apologized.

'And what is *this*?' The woman pulled the hundreds from her pocket – snapped the fan of bills like a flamenco dancer.

'It's just a tip. A gift. He does some work outside and –'

'This is a pretty big tip for picking up cow shit.'

'Well, he does other things. I mean, he . . . honestly, there's nothing unwholesome going on.'

'And where do you get this kind of money, no job or nothing? Because if there's anything illegal happening over here –'

'There's not. I swear.'

Mrs McGregor snorted. 'Don't matter anyway, cause your six months is up.'

'Yes,' said Marie. 'I realize that. I was actually going to suggest paying another six in advance.'

'No. You keep your money.'

'I can pay you right now,' said Marie. 'In cash.'

Mrs McGregor suddenly looked exhausted. 'What are you even doing here, person like you?'

'I'm – I like it here. If you want, I'd be willing to pay a full year upfront.'

'Why would you do that? See now, that just makes me think there's something seriously wrong with you, lady.'

'Please,' said Marie. 'I'd really like to stay. Harland and I are just friends.'

'The boy is fifteen.'

'Well, what does that mean? You and I are probably around the same age. Aren't *you* friends with him?'

'No I'm not *friends* with him. He's my fucking son. We'll give you a week to get yourself packed.'

Marie started to shake. 'Okay, just let me – can we just talk about this?'

'No, we can't,' said Mrs McGregor.

Outside the open door, rain began to fall. The smell of creosote flooded the house. Marie crossed the room and sunk into Harland's chair. She looked at the Higgins – the hazy hills, the blurred light. When she stood again, she was shaking even more.

'You evict me and I'll report you.'

'Report me?'

'Yes. You and your husband.'

'For *what*?'

'As I said, Harland and I are friends.'

'And what does he tell you? Cause he's a liar, too.'

'How's the little girl?' asked Marie. 'How's her ankle?'

The woman's face turned a stunning shade of red.

'Do you think I can't hear you over there?' continued Marie.

When Mrs McGregor clenched her fists, Marie backed away.

Tommy



*I was so good thing. Shook up the*

The woman didn't move, though. Her eyes filled with tears. 'That's not your business.'

As they looked at each other, Marie could feel her own shame push against Mrs McGregor's, the force as real, as implacable, as opposing magnets.

It seemed a defiance of some physical law when Marie found herself touching the woman's arm.

'Please. I'm not doing anything to harm your son.'

'You better not be, lady.' Mrs McGregor pulled her arm away. 'Cause he's got enough of that already.'

In the silence that followed, a cow lowed. Both women looked at the floor.

'He's safe over here,' said Marie.

'So you say.' Mrs McGregor kept her eyes down. 'If we didn't need the cash, you'd be out on your ass.'

'I can drop it by tomorrow,' said Marie.

'Rent'll probably be going up.'

'That's fine.'

'Probably a hundred more a month.'

'Perfectly reasonable.'

The woman made a terrible sound, a defeated laugh, then put Harland's money in her pocket.

After she left, Marie couldn't breathe. And when she could, there was still the stench of creosote. She'd known that smell her whole life, had probably first smelled it from inside her mother's womb. It was the scent of Tucson – tarry, dank, a bitter cloy of chocolate. Once, as a child, she'd collected the leaves and tried to smoke them like the Indians used to. She was always doing crazy things, running around with boys. Her father had called her a desert rat. Her mother had called her disgusting, picking cactus spines from her arms and cholla stems from her clothing. Pushing her away after she'd groomed her: 'Go to your room now. I can't stand to look at you.'

The day after she'd delivered the money – a fat envelope of cash – Marie noticed Mr McGregor lurking around the hills, closer to the cottage than she'd ever seen him before. The next evening he was there, too. Marie stayed inside and tried to read, but it was no use – she couldn't concentrate. Was he trying to intimidate her? She locked the door and waited for Harland.

But the boy didn't come.

Marie wondered if she should pack. Run off during the night.

She hadn't done anything wrong, though. She decided to stand her ground.

Why had she thought these people were Christians? She tried to recall her first conversations with them, and suspected that what she'd seen as politeness was actually fear. Marie had shown up, that first day, dressed in Miu Miu slacks and a Burberry trench coat. The McGregors had been wearing the sartorial equivalent of mud flaps. Their big house was falling apart. They were clearly struggling, and desperate for a tenant. A tenant who

wouldn't mind the animals, or that the property turned into a cesspool whenever it rained.

Maybe Mr McGregor was planning to break into the cottage and rob her.

Do it, she thought. Take everything. What did it matter? For years, actually, she'd been hoping someone might relieve her of her burden. Though she kept some money in the bank, most of it was in the suitcase.

Marie liked the risk of it, the ease. Liked how it kept the dead from sleeping. How it kept them anxious, and therefore present.

Her parents had never been generous. As a child, they'd given her food and shelter, but never any money. And though they'd paid her college tuition, Marie had had to work two jobs to cover living expenses.

It was some kind of lesson, she supposed – possibly a good one. She'd become a capable girl. And the truth was: she'd never really minded that her parents were selfish, spending most of their money feathering their nest, their fortress in the Rincons. Still, it had been sad to watch them become nervous prisoners. After retiring, her father had grown paranoid. He'd had elaborate alarm systems installed on the property. He'd even taken down the paintings and locked them in a vault.

It had been Marie who suggested her parents take a trip. With her meager earnings from the gallery, she'd even paid for the lodge near Canyon de Chelly, as well as sent them a gift card for the gas.

Sometimes, under the spell of gin, she imagined they were grateful. She'd helped them escape, hadn't she? That house of privilege and padlocks, the old dog crapping under tables – it was nothing short of hell.

When Harland finally showed up a few weeks later, Marie was in a state. He knocked, as he'd done the first time, on the bedroom window.

'Come around the front,' she told him – but he said no, he didn't want anyone to see him.

Marie's heart was racing as the boy climbed through the window. She quickly led him from the bedroom into the living area.

'It's after midnight, Harland.'

'I'm sorry, Marie.'

It was the first time he'd ever said her name. 'Is everything okay?' she asked. 'Are you in danger?'

He told her he was just having a bad night, he couldn't sleep. 'I thought maybe we could read or something.'

'Do your parents know you're here?'

'No. They're in bed.'

'I'm sure your mother told you not to visit me.'

'She didn't tell me shit. She took my money, though.'

'I'm sorry.'

'I don't care. They need it more than I do.'

Marie, feeling dizzy, sat down, while Harland went into the kitchen and poured out two glasses of milk. 'I'll bring you some of the good stuff,' he said. 'From the cows. If you want it.'

'What about your sister?'

'What about her?'

'I'm worried about her.'

'Why?'

'Your father.'

Harland's face turned bright red – obviously a McGregor trait. 'My father?'

'I thought Lacy's ankle was –'

'No fucking way,' said Harland. 'That happened at school. No way! If he ever pulled that shit on her, I'd fucking kill him.'

'Don't say things like that. I'm worried about you, too.'

'Nah. I'll be fine. Anyway, now that he's got some money, he'll be calmer. Can we not talk anymore and just read?'

'Harland, I don't know if you should be here.'

'You want me to leave?'

He looked at her in a way she couldn't bear. She turned on the lamp and handed him volume one. They were only about a hundred pages in. Nineteen hundred more to go.

'Shit,' said Harland. 'We might be doing this forever.'

'It does have an ending,' said Marie.

'A good one?'

She tried to smile. 'You'll have to give me your opinion when we get there.'

Sometimes he came three days in a row, but then there were long stretches when he stopped by only once a month, or less.

'I'm here for the shit,' he'd often say when he arrived – which now meant Tolstoy. Harland wasn't a fan; he didn't care for Anna. 'She's a horrible person, don't you think?' he said one day.

When Marie shrugged, Harland said, 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing.'

'What? Is she like your favorite person in the world or something?'

'No. But I don't dislike her as much as you do.'

'She's just so selfish.'

'Well, I don't think Tolstoy liked her either.'

'Who's that?'

'The *author*?' said Marie.

'Oh, right. That's pretty weird, though. I mean, how do you write two thousand pages about someone you don't like? Then name the book after her.' Harland spooned up some pudding. 'So, is she, like, gonna marry that Vronsky guy?'

'I'm not telling you.'

So they kept reading – Harland always in his chair, and Marie on the couch. Some afternoons, there were fresh bruises. Usually, Marie made no comment, though sometimes she couldn't help herself: 'You will escape one day. You know that, right?'

It was Harland's turn to shrug.

'You will.' Marie liked telling him this, and it seemed that he liked hearing it.

Page by page, it progressed. Kitty fell ill, Anna got pregnant, Vronsky attempted suicide.

Every summer, the rains came and went. The yard flooded; the garden thrived.

Eventually, Harland started combing his hair differently – and when he was seventeen he grew it long, though Marie never got close enough to tell if it smelled like bubblegum. Sometimes he told her about his girlfriends, or a road trip he was taking with some buddies. Harland was driving now. Marie let him use the Volvo.

Sometimes, as he read, she sketched him. 'Don't roll your eyes.'

Whenever she offered money, he mostly refused it, but now and then he accepted it gravely with a nod: 'Probably I'll just give it to *them*.'

'That reminds me. I have some milk bottles for you to bring back to your mother. Don't forget to take them.'

'Do you need more eggs?'

'I'm good right now.'

When Harland got into college, Marie felt an almost painful pride. She'd helped him with his applications. He'd been accepted at two schools – neither great, both out-of-state. Harland chose New Mexico.

The day he left, Marie held back her tears, so as not to compete with Mrs McGregor. At the cottage, she offered him the final two volumes of Tolstoy – but Harland said, 'No. We'll finish it when I get back.'

Marie didn't argue. She gave him some money instead.

Outside, behind the careesweed, Harland leaned in as if to kiss her, but Marie only smirked and told him not to be dramatic.

He met a girl, of course. After college, he moved to Ohio. Whenever he visited Tucson, he always stopped by.

'I miss talking to you, Marie.'

She told him he could call her anytime.

But he never did.

For a while, Marie dated again – a man named Thomas, who cleaned out air ducts. 'You wouldn't believe what gets up in there,' he told her. She said she didn't want to know. He was funny; he liked to drink. They had a fair amount of fun. She didn't read much anymore, but she kept the books on her shelves. Occasionally she took one down and picked out a sentence – speaking it out loud, then swallowing it like a vitamin.

There were a few rough years, to be honest. *Hairy*, Harland would have called them. And it was true. Time was a beast, a hairy little fucker. Marie thinned out the loneliness with gin. She was well into her fifties now.

Twice a year she had dinner with the family. When she got sick, it was Mrs McGregor who took her to the hospital. The air-duct man was long gone. Marie got better, came home – but then, several years later, she collapsed one morning in the yard, a terrible pain in her gut.

'I did this to myself,' she said, but Linda (Mrs McGregor) said, 'Don't talk like that.'

At first, she thought it was a boy she'd known in high school – but the hair was the wrong color; the skin, too.

'You didn't have to come,' she said.

Harland just tilted his head: *don't be silly*.

'Did you fly here?' she asked him. 'From . . .'

'Ohio,' he reminded her.

'I used to know a song about Ohio, but I can't remember it.'

He sat beside the hospital bed and took her hand. 'It's bad, right?'

Mom says it's . . .'

'It's not good.' She handed him a magazine, something the nurse had left in the room.

'What's this for?'

'I don't have anything better. All my books are at the house.'

So, he read her an article about camping in the Apennines – but only made it through a few paragraphs before he stopped.

'Sweet boy, don't cry.' And then she told him, 'Go ahead, let it out,' because clearly he couldn't stop and she didn't want him to feel ashamed for it.

It washed over her and she felt clean.

As he dried his eyes, he laughed. 'The nurse asked if you were my mother.'

'What'd you tell her?'

'I told her, yes.'

Marie nodded.

'But I never really thought of you that way,' he continued.

She patted his hand, said she was very glad to hear it.

He didn't come again, or if he did, she didn't see him. She dreamed all the time now. The pain was gone. Often in her dreams she was drunk.

When she floated back to the small white room, there were sometimes guests: Linda and Lacy – even that Thomas fellow came by to visit. She never stayed with them long, though. She wanted to get back to her drunken dreams. Morphine was something else.

Marie wished that her parents had not gone so quickly; that they, too, could have had something like this. This dream of life, as you lay dying. It was more than she'd thought – her sixty-something years. Fascinating how quickly the mundane faded, and all that was left were the brilliant patches of color.

The small Higgins was left to Harland, as well as most of the money. Linda and Lacy were not neglected.

'She was a crazy fucking lady.'

Harland told his sister to shut up.

'Why are you keeping that piece of crap?' she asked as he lugged the La-Z-Boy into the back of his pickup.

He offered no explanation.

He spent a day going through her things – packed up most of the clothes and relics in a box for St Vincent de Paul. He debated over *Anna K*, and decided to leave her for the next tenant. He was pretty sure he knew how it ended. He left the recipe cards, too. His wife was a terrible cook and fussy about her weight.

As for the drawings, he took all he could find, though he didn't look at them until he got back to Ohio. And then he sat on his chair and went through them. Again and again, his face as a teenager – sometimes sullen, sometimes bruised, sometimes squinting like a pirate.

Harland shook his head, amazed that she'd somehow done it – improved him. Hell, she'd nearly made him beautiful.

Frightening realization that drunk reader  
is far more sentimentally vulnerable  
than sober reader.  
FINAL ANALYSIS.  
C- on the story. Too long. Overblown.  
Too many dead ends. Needs much tightening.  
There is a story here but much dead wood  
to pare back from the narrative. DO  
THE WORK. CUT THE EXCESS.  
AT LEAST 50% could go, probably  
65% + it ~~still~~ would be good.