

Oscar and the Mountain

Oscar sat at his small desk and set about writing his novel. He professed his scientific mindset and thought to himself “all the people who read this will think I am of good character; that I am wise and rarely make a hasty decision. ‘A man of science’ they will say.” He wrote of days gone by from his own life – a time when he worked performing important scientific investigations, drove Chevy Camaro’s, and knew the codes to important security gates that guarded illustrious astronomical observatories. “But oh! The windows need to be washed. They are all speckled with a fine dust that has blown in from some far off land – baked dry by an unforgiving sun, no doubt. But ah! That reminds me of the desert sands in Arizona – when I drove so carefree down the Interstate and my shopping bags blew noisily in the hot, dry wind. How poetic I am! I shall write a few paragraphs and get to the windows post haste.” He wrote for a while and grew bored of himself. “Perhaps I should check the news” he mused. “Yes, every person of good character, who is considered wise and interesting reads the news. This is widely known, so I shall do it myself.”

Record temperatures point to likely extreme heatwaves this summer

proclaimed the Irish Examiner. “Well now – the summer in Arizona is a thing to behold. You think Ireland can get so extreme as that? Hah! They have a monsoon season there!” he muttered triumphantly as he clicked on the headline, taking him to the full article. Scanning the text, he fumbled over the words like an irregular stone skipping on water: “Soaring temperatures... much of the world... Thailand... New York... yes, yes, but what has this got to do with me? What of my dear Ireland? It is so pleasant here and I should wager that all those people would give their right arm to live here, in such a pleasant place as I do.”

Uninterested, he closed the page and continued muttering unintelligibly and scrolling through the headlines: “Something about Russian billionaires... Joe Biden...” a high pitched “Ooh!” escaped him as he read:

Landlord ordered to pay €13k to woman he tried to evict while she was pregnant

“What... an... eejit” he enunciated – each word reverberating dramatically with the elevated importance of an American presidential speech. He continued: “Has he no heart? Well, I’m glad I’m not in that rat race – no, not me! Evicting a poor woman like that at such a time – I would never be so callous. She was probably of poor character though – I see no mention of a husband. Perhaps she was an unruly tenant? Pff, yes – I’d wager it. This is how people are – you really can’t trust anyone.” His attention waned: “Wow, how dull this article is – so full of facts and figures. Don’t people know how to write any more? I’d wager I’d do a much better job. Ah yes, my novel... Arizona... now...” Oscar began to type:

“One vehicle leaving Base Camp, headed for The Ridge – any downhill traffic, please advise.” I cheerfully announced, mimicking an American accent as I thumbed the talk button on the CB radio and theatrically replaced it on the hook. The old black Chevy

Camaro's all-leather interior had seared my bare arms in blotches as I floored the accelerator, or what I would later call 'the gas',

"Yes, yes, this is wonderful – the people at my writers' group will love it! Look at my use of imagery; and nearly every word has a carefully placed adjective, giving it context and ..." Just then, the door to his study opened and his wife entered thunderously, loomed over him, and gave a sceptical glance at the document on the computer screen. "Oscar, you haven't sent a birthday message to your nephew yet. Everyone on the family Whatsapp has done it and we'll be the last again – if you do finally get around to it."

"Okay, okay, I'll do it now; can't you see I'm writing, Emer? Look – look! It's going very well by the way; I really think I'm on to something here. I'm using my..." The hopeful author trailed off deferentially as his wife exited with an audible sigh, a secret roll of the eyes, and a slight, but noticeable, shake of the head. "I'll just finish this paragraph and then straight to the birthday message" he thought. "So, where was I? Ah yes, flooring 'the gas' down Interstate 19! I love that: 'flooring the gas'. I wonder if I could get away with saying it in Ireland? No, no – on second thought, people would think I was putting it on. I would probably end up mimicking an American accent and they would think it an affectation and this would damage my reputable character. No, I will speak with a proud Irish accent and use Irish phrases and the people will like me all the better for it. Now... ah yes, I-19."

The old black Chevy Camaro's all-leather interior had seared my bare arms in blotches as I floored the accelerator, or what I would later call 'the gas', down Interstate 19 – windows down, bags full of food blowing noisily in the hot, dry wind; but I had now swapped for an off-road vehicle, which felt sturdy and safe along the dirt road that wound its way up and around the dusty brown scrubland of Mount Hopkins. I bounced contentedly along the corrugated indentations of the mountainous path and pulled over to enter the six-digit code at the security gate guarding the astronomical observatory above, which twinkled in the midday sunlight like a bright star painted on a pale blue canvas.

"American government security gates – wonderful! Who will not think me a fine fellow now? Who will not enjoy my company all the more after hearing my American tale? I love it! Now, what of my chores? I believe there were several – ah yes, a birthday message for my fine nephew. I shall write him something clever and witty using all of my skills as a learned writer of great literature and he shall be overjoyed at being worthy of such a labour. I've read the collected works of Anton Chekhov after all! What fine company I keep."

Dearest nephew Conor – named for the high king of Ulster! How are you on this fine day of your birth? All the best birthday wishes from all of us here in beautiful Kilkenny. You, and your splendid family, of course, are most welcome to come visit us anytime – indeed, at the drop of a hat's notice. We haven't seen you in such a long time and, as you know, we have many lovely rooms for you all to stay in. Emer would love an excuse to break out the new linens for such venerable guests as you! We shall have a wonderful feast with the finest of wines and celebrate your glorious 18 years on this Earth. Lots of love, Oscar, Emer, and Callum (and Beatrix the dog!) 🐶🍷🍷🍷🐶

The landlord and wannabe author mumbled victoriously to himself: “Ah great, Conor will love that – he loves dogs. I remember that about him and he will be glad I remembered such a detail. Now, I would very much like a shower to freshen myself up and put me in right mind for the rest of these chores. Hmm? What were they again? I really should make a list! Such a writer as I and I can’t even make a small list of chores – what a concept!”

Oscar hesitated as he hovered the mouse cursor over the shutdown button on the computer screen. He had an unquenchable fire in his belly over his story. He felt that he had a unique insight into the authentic operations of a real American scientific facility and that, perhaps, he could inspire some lowly Irish student, who dreamt of the stars, to pursue a career in science that they would otherwise just cast off as though it was some mere fancy. “You’re literally reaching for the stars”, their vulgar peers would say. Probably, their unsupportive parents would think them foolish and would say to them that they should whittle away their hours collecting rents, contributing to actual society – real people with real problems. “More like arranging plumbers for obstreperous tenants” he vented as his thoughts became words, “... who complain endlessly of ‘the cost of living these days’ and the damn weather! Who cares if it’s going to rain? There’s galaxies out there! Billions of them! If only they would ask – I would tell them all about it.”

He would regale them with the details: “I discovered one, you know?” and they would gasp and say “Really? What do you mean – a galaxy? You?” “Oh yes – in the gamma-radiation spectrum, no less! I wasn’t always a landlord – I had a life before all this, you know? I reached for the stars... once.” The 53-year-old’s age pressed down on him like never before – as if the heavens were falling and he was Atlas, condemned for all eternity to bear the great mass of the celestial spheres. He felt a sudden compulsion to write:

As a student who enjoyed the works of Isaac Newton, James Clerk Maxwell, and Albert Einstein, I had never heard of such things as “the political left” or “right”, so as I scanned the radio stations and heard Rush Limbaugh’s brand of American conservatism for the first time, I began furrowing my brow and blurting comments of disapproval to things I didn’t yet know I was passionate about. My heart rate soared like some space-bound rocket and my small-town Irish self couldn’t process these new, egregious feelings, so I twisted the FM dial and had soon returned to Earth, laughing and enjoying the Arizonan sun to the beginnings of Alice’s Restaurant by Arlo Guthrie.

I arrived at the Ridge Dorms and put away my food, taking the time to raid the cupboard, which had an open door - a sign that an astronomer had finished their shift and their stash of food was available for all to scavenge. “Jaysus, Twinkies” I softly protested as I shook my head and replaced the foul treats. After a quick shower, I packed some snacks for the long night ahead and proceeded to walk the scenic, one-kilometre road to the telescope compound to plot elevations and plan an observing schedule for the evening.

The budding author paused. A thought slowly formed in his mind like an image being downloaded over a nineties dial-up modem: “Is... this... boring?”. Insecurities crushed him as if he was a common housefly, obliviously perched under the unforgiving advance of a cheap, plastic fly swat.

He recalled all of the Luddite naysayers in his life and theorised what they might say of his trite, derivative text: “He’s just a landlord – and he writes like one” they’ll laugh; “What a sap! Trying to relive his youth – get over it already” they’ll scoff; “Who does he think he is? Arthur C. Clarke or something?” they’ll... his thoughts diffused. A new thought coalesced: “I wonder if I could turn it into a sci-fi novel? Hmm? Yes, people like sci-fi – that could work! I’ll have an alien craft visit me at the telescope and I’ll articulate my encounter with great clarity and insight. It will almost seem real to the unsuspecting readers and they will be unsure if I fabricated the whole thing or if it really happened to me! Oh, how clever!” Oscar began typing “alien encounters” into the internet browser’s search bar.