

## Descriptive Passages

### Passage A

Everyone has a place that calls to them, a place where they flourish, where their best self emerges and they remember true happiness...For me, it's the Scalamandre townhouse, home of the greatest hand-woven silks in the world, on East Fifty-seventh Street and Third Avenue in noisy, dirty, delicious Manhattan...

When I come to the city, I call friends, most of them in the design business, and we swap stories over a glass of wine and baked chicken at the Cattleman West Restaurant. I have had these friends since my days at Parsons, where I majored in fibres. I went on to take graduate courses, focusing on interiors...

New York City is the place where all art comes home to roost. This is certainly true of my trade, as there is not a fabric woven anywhere in the world that cannot be had in one of the showrooms here. When I earned my full ASID ( American Society of Interior Designers) credentials, the first thing I did was push open the doors of Scalamandre's...

The windows are showstoppers. They combine classic elements with a touch of humour-usually there is a chair covered with a signature pattern, backed by the latest wallpaper, with a chest, mirrors, and decorative boxes as accent. Once it was a moss-green velvet tuffet trimmed in a Medici floral print with a fringe knotted with crystals. On a plump canvas mushroom sat a bowl of porridge. A black velvet spider on a silver cord hung from the ceiling. Little Miss Muffet on Third Avenue.

Franco Scalamandre is not only a great weaver, he's a serious historian in the field of fibers. His research of Italian antiquities often inspires his designs. He reissued silkscreen prints of velvets woven with metallic accents that were used in the Medici palaces in the 1500s. The collection was so luscious, there was a time when I used a touch of Medici in every house I decorated.

Scali's is a typical Upper East Side townhouse, long and thin like the women who live in the neighbourhood and beautifully maintained. There is never a streak on the polished tables, a curl in the seam of the wallpaper or a nick in the floorboards. It has the feel of a private home, with its round Roman foyer featuring fresh dahlias in a silver pitcher on the Biedermeier entry table. Over the table hangs a chandelier of smoked Venetian glass with bobeches so delicate they look like spun sugar. At the foot of a grand stair case is a bust of Marie Antoinette. The carpet runner is a ...tan leopard print...The spiral steps twist like a swizzle stick up to the fourth floor.

A sign at the foot of the stairs directs you through the building. The first floor is fabrics, the second, wall treatments, the third, trims and fringe and the fourth, private offices. No decorator worth his salt ever takes the small service elevator for fear of missing a new display. In the back room of the first floor, the fabric samples are hung on racks in billowing streams from ceiling to floor. Each sample had its own clamp and hanger, so you can see the fabric at full height and width. I love the sound the fabric makes when I flip through the racks- *whoosh, clink. Whoosh, clink.* Imagine the waves of colour, sumptuous silks, glossy taffetas, crisp plisses and stiff organzas. Even the sturdier fabrics-wools, linens and cottons-are displayed with imagination in every possible color combination and weave...

When your stack of swatches appears in a crisp envelope...you can take it home and dream. I have several corkboards that become my template for a job. I arrange swatches, paint chips, sample tiles and photographs (for inspiration) that become the components of my design. When a board is filled, it's a vibrant collage that becomes a work of art in its own right.

From *Rococo* by Adriana Trigiani. Courtesy of Pocket Books, 2005

## Passage B

We talked on and off, looking at the line and at where we thought it ended in the water. I glanced over every now and then to see what progress they were making with the fire but always my eyes came back to the water. After a while the rod shuddered once and he took a proper grip of it and lifted the tip...The sound of the reel moved steadily up the scale. There was a sparkle of silver in the shadow of the bridge and he raised the tip of the rod and let it down again, winding furiously as he let it down. The water glittered as it broke and the fish turned and writhed and slapped on the surface of the water as on a hard surface of glass and the fish broke and fell through the glass but leapt straight out again as if from a boiling pan, flashing and slapping and breaking the glass...

He took a few sheets of newspaper out of an oilskin bag at his feet and wrapped the fish in them...He laid the rod and the net along the length of the wall and we walked down to the fire...Dan poured the tea. We had only two cups and we gave our guest one and used the other between us...Dan had the potatoes boiling but there was nothing else on the fire yet, apart from the tea on the very side...After a few minutes he undid a little packet and rubbed a scrap of raw fat around the pan...Once the fat could be heard he took the chops out of their newspaper and laid them on the pan, all hissing and spitting out hot fat, sharp on the skin...Dan turned the chops and herded them around the pan. There were two enamel plates with blue rims the same as the rims of the cups but the fisherman wouldn't take any food. He said he had to be getting back, that he thought there was a hatch starting, that there would be a rise soon, that the light was getting just right. I could see no change in the light. It was too early and too bright, but he thanked us for the tea and threw the dregs of his tea into the air in a long arc. The arc hit the grass with a flat splash. He set the cup down gently on the grass and reset it a few inches closer to our bundles and tipped his cap and went back up to the gate and up to the bridge and leaned over to look in the water, shading his eyes. There were tea-leaves left clinging to the sides of his cup.

The sausages and the pudding were cooked first and the three of us ate them from the two plates while we waited for chops and the potatoes to cook. Dan stuck a fork in a chop and cut it where it lay in the pan and lifted it up and studied it and put it back in the pan. We ate the chops and the potatoes with our fingers and with chunks of bread we tore off the loaf, sucking on the bones and pushing the chunks of bread around the plates, leaving swirls on the clean faces of the plates as though they were scoured...When there were only a few streaks left Jack and I duelled on the plate for them with our bread.

'Alright, let's hit the trail,' I said.

From *Track and Field* by Cormac James. Courtesy of New Island Books, 2000.

## Passage C

For most of the year, The Bee Park in Manorhamilton, Co Leitrim, operates as a GAA and soccer pitch. But for one Saturday each July, it becomes the venue for the Manorhamilton Show.

Every summer all over the country, similar fields in towns and villages are temporarily transformed into (fairly) friendly battlegrounds where people fight it out in classes that range from Best Homemade Apple Tart, to Best Two Heads of Point-Shaped Cabbages, and best Charolais Cow...

There are 271 competition categories at Manor Hamilton, so the judging process goes on all day, at several venues around the grounds. There are dogs to be judged to find the one with the waggiest tail; cut-flowers, wild flowers, photographs, artworks and specimens of handwriting to be scrutinised; cattle, sheep, horses and poultry in dozens of categories; trestle tables of home-grown vegetables, duck eggs, hen eggs, knitted jumpers, jams and home-baking.

There is even a class for Best Bucket of Garden Compost, and traditional cake from your Home Country ("confined to non-nationals").

This year's prize fund is €16,000, a pot which comes from a combination of sponsorship, the gate, and competition entry fees. While the prize-money for some of the livestock categories goes into the hundreds, the majority of the first, second and third prizes are modest: €15, €10 and €5 respectively.

But Manorhamilton Show, in common with many of other summer shows, is not about winning money. It's partly about the community-local people supporting local events. And it's partly about pride. Pride in your farm animals, your home-baking and your organically grown vegetables...

Meanwhile every rabbit in Leitrim must be trying to figure out how to get into the horticulture tent. The tables are laden with lovingly grown carrots, lettuces, Swedes, cabbages, scallions, courgettes and many other vegetables. One look at this glorious, fresh produce and you'd never want to buy another sealed bag of salad leaves or out-of-season vegetable in your life...

At 11am, the Home Industries and Horticulture tents close for judging. By then each tent is bursting with exhibits. On the home-baking tables, there are scores of cakes, tarts, buns, jams, biscuits, scones and breads. Some look perfect, and some look-well, home-made. Burnt biscuits and tarts, sunken sponges, Day-glo cheesecakes, melting icing.

There are so many exhibits here that three judges have been allocated to home-baking. There are several other judges examining photographs, paintings, craft, handwriting and knitting.

Outside, several livestock classes are simultaneously being judged, and the bellow of cattle competes with a Christy Moore song blasting through the loud-speakers.

From *It's showtime for the queen of tarts* by Rosita Boland. Courtesy of *The Irish Times*, August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

## Passage D

There is a band of suburban woodland where the dog and I sometimes walk, which was probably once a shelterbelt along the margin of a large estate. The trees here are tall and old, a hundred years at least and probably more. Clustered together, the trunks of beech and oak are remarkably straight, close planted and free from lower branches.

A beaten path of old bark shreddings runs in a thick shadow through the woodland and narrow subsidiary paths wind through the trees. These minor paths, no more than a foot wide, are something of a mystery, for it hard to imagine how they remain open; few people walk here and children rarely play. Perhaps there are foxes – or even badgers – following regular nightly routes. By day this is a curiously empty stretch of woodland, with no small birds. Rooks, jackdaws and magpies forge on the grasslands and verges nearby and their cries sound in the distance, but here nothing stirs; no robin sings and no blackbird or thrush roots in the leaf litter.

At one end of the main path there is the ghostly remnant of a tree far older than the rest, a great jagged stump five feet high and perhaps ten feet in diameter. Bracket fungi grow on its decaying sides and in summer cranesbill with its purple-pink flowers blooms in the rooted top. The red-berried spires of wild arum at the foot brighten the autumn. A mature horse chestnut nearby scatters its shining brown nuts, symbols of the onset of autumn to take home and display until the gloss fades. This year's shells are green and spiky; those from previous years still lie dully decaying on the path, mangled with acorns and beech mast.

Another feature attracts interest as we walk along – a massive heap of shreddings left by some official body. The rough surface is cool to the touch, but burrow down and there is fermenting warmth beneath. With the ending of summer the heap with its pungent smell of decaying bark has produced a spectacular display of fungi: pale cream, flat-topped toadstools; cone-shaped and delicate ones, of soft almost translucent blue-grey; yet other fungi that are low swelling masses of amorphous shape hugging the surface. And the fungi along the main path are stranger still, erupting overnight as low branched, coral-like shapes.

From *The Irish Gardner* by Mary Davies, Oct/Nov 2009

## Passage E

More cars! More action!.. That's what last weekend's Modified Motors Live show in Rathcomac, Co Cork, promised madly enthusiastic fans of souped-up cars...

I know nothing about cars. The only time I ever drove was when I was a student staying with a doctor in Grosse Pointe, a wealthy suburb of Detroit, and he let me cruise his Cadillac up and down the cul-de-sac. It was an automatic, with a lever that had P for park, D for drive and R for reverse-easy for a novice.

I have never learned how to drive. What put me off initially was a gut feeling that I would never be able to co-ordinate putting my foot on the clutch pedal while changing gears. Then I realised that I didn't really need a car; I live within walking or cycling distance of everywhere I need to go on a regular basis.

It was only later that I realised that cars were a menace to society, especially in cities. That was in the 1980s, when Dublin Corporation's engineers were slicing up linear chunks of the inner city to create dual-carriageways to cater for cars coming in from the suburbs; High Street, Clanbrassil Street and Parnell Street are among their dubious legacies...

So here I was at the Cork Marts, which had been transformed into a fantasy fairground for those who have a fetish about cars. Not ordinary cars, mind you, but ones that have been fitted inside and out with all sorts of gizmos-angel eyes and carbon lights, Ganador mirrors and Alpine speakers and, of course, engines that could easily "do the ton".

I realised that I didn't know the language. What are angel eyes anyway? Or vented wings, induction kits, HKS manifolds, racing headers, lightened flywheels, welitic suspension, 18-inch RS5 black alloys and trimmed GTL bucket seats? About the only thing I could take in was that one of the cars had "166mp recorded on the dyno".

The Modified Motors website promised that the show's "trade village would be packed with all the latest parts and accessories-"from wheels and sound systems to bodykits and performance parts". You could also "check out the latest gadgets and 'must have' products for your everyday life, whether it's the latest phone or games console".

This was a whole new world to me. I remember being taken as a child to see stock-car racing in Shelbourne Park, where cars bashed each other to bits. But what was happening at Cork Marts was altogether different. Here, the cars were pampered objects of desire, in spick and span condition for the best show and shine contest.

There were eight trophies "up for grabs" on the day. Apart from best show and shine, awards were given for best-in-car entertainment, best interior, best Euro ( for cars made in Europe), best Jap (that's Japanese to you), best club stand and a public vote for best in show. A bit like Crufts, but with out all the fluff.

From *I can't stand Jeremy Clarkson* by Frank McDonald. Courtesy of *The Irish Times*, July 29th, 2009.