



# THE DARK SKY INITIATIVE

by Kent Kosack

**UNDER** five layers of stratified atmosphere, clinging to an especially dry section of the earth's outer crust known as Sun City West, Arizona, in the last mom-and-pop hardware store within a two-hundred mile radius, bearing up under said atmosphere, nearly fifteen pounds of pressure per square inch, standing before his purchase of the latest red LED Christmas lights stacked on the counter before him, Oscar. He was bent over his shopping cart, bowing before the boxes like an acolyte before an altar, firing questions at a beleaguered cashier. "Do you know how much energy over-illumination eats through in this country alone? The sheer amount of kilowatt hours? It's staggering."

“You don’t say?” The cashier said, addressing the pale crescent of Oscar’s hairless pate, the only sliver of him visible above the boxes.

“Over-illumination,” Oscar continued, “unnecessary lighting, excess lighting. Street lights where no one drives or walks. Homes lit up for no reason other than the owner’s vanity or fear.” Oscar slapped the counter and through the plastic packaging the strings of little red LED bulbs, the least egregious impositions on the dark, evidence of Oscar’s magnanimity and willingness to compromise, trembled on the green wire like plump plum tomatoes on an overloaded vine. “Can you imagine the wattage we’re sucking up? The resources we’re burning through?”

“Cash or card?”

“Card. And you know what else? Just guess how much oil we burn, how much gas, how much shale we have to frack to keep these lights blaring? Not to mention the psychological consequences. The lack of sleep. The lack of stars. We’re blinding ourselves, our entire species.”

The cashier handed Oscar his receipt and nodded in the direction of the exit. Despite his anti-illumination stance, Oscar felt like the cashier could do with some additional brightness. *This is what the world has come to*, he thought, *what I’ve come to: a widower with creaky joints pissing away his time and*

*money trying to convince his neighbors, my so-called neighborhoods, who probably can't recall my name, who probably couldn't recall their own names if they didn't see it every five minutes when they logged onto their Facebooks (is it plural? How many are there? Does the world really need more faces, so many that they're collected and digitally bound? Christ, I'm sick of faces)—it was for these people that I drove out here and spent nearly a thousand dollars on red lights, efficient lights, so they have no excuse but to replace their own insidiously sparkling decorations, because decorate they must, because that's what Christ was all about; he was a prophet of lumens. It's for them. Not me. Though it is my Dark Sky Initiative.*

His bones creaked along with the wheels of his shopping cart, both body and cart more fit for the scrap heap than active service, as he rolled towards his car. The parking lot of the hardware store was marginally more subdued than the store's shadowless interior. He listened to the creak of the shopping cart's wheels and the fading sounds of Dean Martin's slurred crooning seeping out of the store. Martin's marshmallow world made him wonder how his own world had come to this. He supposed it all started with his theory.



Oscar, retired telescope salesman and former adjunct astronomy professor, had a theory: The Age of Enlightenment, contrary to popular belief, had ushered in an era not of wisdom, but of sleeplessness. A restless, glaring time of mass insomnia when people—armed with their tallow and blubber and gas-fueled lights—banished the stars into a realm of dim obscurity. Every generation since has suffered from insomnia. Oscar felt this to be the possible, if not probable, source of all modern anxieties. Not the assembly line or smog, not wage slavery or commodifying capitalism, not nuclear proliferation or the erosion of faith—artificial lighting was the culprit. It was the lamps and lightbulbs, the lit-up screens and ubiquitous headlights, that stole humanity's sleep and forced it to stumble through the world in a scintillating and self-inflicted stupor.

But Oscar, an apostle of the much-maligned dark, decided to push back, to reject what he could of this unsought radiance. In increments at first. He removed all his outdoor lights and his formerly lit patch of suburban life, his two-bedroom home and the quarter-acre of Arizona dirt it sat on became a haven of darkness. He swore the stars above, the southwestern constellations that the Anasazi had seen, were a bit brighter

because of it. This small act of terrestrial defiance yielded tremendous celestial gains.

Oscar was satisfied with this tiny victory while his wife was alive to enjoy it with him. They managed to make the most of their frugal retirement, exploring and escaping to even darker areas. Each fall, when quiet returned to the nation's campgrounds and the children and their yipping and crying were once again corralled into classrooms and penned in to playgrounds, Oscar and Lilith took to the road, leaving their craftsman bungalow in Arizona and setting out for anywhere with unobstructed and unpolluted views of the night sky.

Oscar felt safer and more at home in their camper than their wood and stucco house. Though mobile, the camper met all their needs, especially the astronomical. They had binoculars in all sorts of magnifications and telescopes with every possible filter: filters to view the moon's pale and gleaming surface and filters to look right into the heart of a solar flare. Stocked with modern amenities, yet their little caravan moved with ancient rhythms. At sunrise, they woke and at sundown they slept. For three or four hours only, like creatures in the richly-dark and restful days of the pre-lit age. Then they'd wake in the middle of the night, with the help of alarms first, but eventually developing a natural and synchronized cycle.

One of them would wake, usually Lilith, and would, using a headlamp with a red filter, prep for their nightly stargazing. The other, usually Oscar, would be slowly pulled from sleep by the movement. Fragments of red light shot before him, illuminating a lens, a book, a jacket, Lilith's hand. They'd wrap themselves in wool shawls, cradle cups of hot chamomile tea and view the stars: countless constellations, steady satellites, streaking meteor showers, distant planets. And then they'd slip into a deep sleep again until daybreak.

Every year, they'd explore their home state of Arizona and widen their circle, dipping into the dark sea of stars from the surrounding shores of New Mexico and Utah and Nevada. They made pilgrimages to Hawaii too, and observatories in dark zones across the country—in the fields of rural, eastern Washington; along the continental divide in Montana; in the badlands of the Dakotas. Even clear to Canada, days of northward driving culminating in nights lit by the calm, auroral green of the Northern Lights. A form of light pollution that moved even Oscar.

A life of gray-haired adventure. Years that were better than golden, years when the rest of their friends were grumpily chomping their way through early bird specials at the local chains and bragging about grandkids

they never saw, Oscar and Lilith were seeing not just the world, but the galaxy. Their dark years.



On their last trip together, camping along a river in eastern Oregon, the night so dry Oscar was certain he could hear the creak of his eyes in his skull as they shifted from the stars to Lilith, from the alien light above to the form, dark and familiar beside him—on this night, a different sort of dark descended. Lilith told him of the skin cancer that had too long gone undiagnosed, its late stages, how slim her chances were. All those hours of jogging in the sun had kept her heart young but poisoned her skin.

Lilith, after a long pause, a pause Oscar was incapable of filling, took his hand and said, “They’re just as beautiful below, aren’t they?”

“Beautiful?”

“The stars. Their reflection in the river,” she said, pointing at water. “The way they stay there, despite the river rolling by. How steady they look.”

“Yes,” Oscar said, “very steady,” though at the moment he felt nothing but resentment, resenting the stars their permanence, even if they’d eventually explode. He resented their projection of permanence. And resented Lilith, too, for renegeing on their deal, for using this cancer to break the clause and leave Oscar behind—Lilith, lean and lithe, Lilith the jogger, the green tea guzzler, Lilith and her mornings of organic eggs and oatmeal and yoga. She wasn’t supposed to precede Oscar, with his high-blood pressure and pot belly and sedentary ways. Not just cancer to Oscar, not a generalized sickness, but *Lilith’s* cancer, a specific disease come to spite her, and, in a way, him. For by the time Lilith passed—years of miserable treatment and Lilith in and out of hospitals and Oscar her chauffeur and jester, trying to smile and encourage and uplift but resenting her for allowing their adventures to end so soon—Oscar was old. Too old to drive long distances himself, too old to set up his telescope every night, too old for everything except sitting on his dark porch each evening and feeling that the only bit of youth still clinging to him, with grim tenacity, was his rage.

Oscar was furious. Angry at the pitying looks the young cast him, those smug creatures of smooth skin, defined muscles and thick hair. Angry at the diminishment of age—the weakening of his eyes and joints,

the slackening of his skin, the tufts of hair climbing out of his ears and the spreading circle of hairlessness laying claim to the top of his head. And he was angry at his neighbors for refusing him his little corner of darkness to die in. For their profligacy with their electricity, with their light. They had lights running along their walkways. Lights with immense wattage on either side of their front doors. Lights above their mailboxes, stuck in the grass, inside their pools. He felt as if he'd been swallowed by a garish casino, swimming in fluorescent and incandescent gastric juices that were slowly digesting him. There was no respite. Their lights were always on. *I can hear them humming*, he thought, *a low and persistent electric crackling, like a hiss or a taunt*. This reckless release of lumens ruining the night for Oscar, for the neighborhood, for everyone, Oscar generously assumed, must be due to a lack of awareness. Before he could get back to the darkness he so cherished, he decided a different sort of enlightenment was in order.

He became a publicist for the dark, shoving homemade flyers under the wipers of every car in a ten-block radius and stapling them to telephone poles, papering over lost kittens and offers of landscape services. Flyers explaining, through word and image, the deleterious effects of light pollution on humanity, on the sleep cycles of the entire neighborhood. Onlookers saw neither the arthritis in his joints nor the bunions bulging

against the side of his shoes. His haste made him hale again, determination incarnate. When his flyers failed to change hearts and minds, Oscar decided to personalize his propaganda and went door-to-door to spread the gospel of night. He put on his best golf shirt and shined his loafers and bought a new pair of orthotics and hit the ground. Wheezing, sweaty, he was still met with nothing but rejection. Kindly, rudely, with a smile or a smirk—rejected. The kooky crank down the block in the house with no lights. The one whose wife died.



A new strategy was in order. He would take a lead-by-example, experiential approach. He would host an astronomy night. What better way to engage his neighbors than by having them engage with the heavens? “I’m Oscar,” he said to himself, imagining introducing himself at the start of a tour, your local guide to the stars. “Lights off please. Lights off, eyes open.”

He invited everyone with individual flyers in mailboxes and wedged into front doors and two posters he had custom-made at a local print shop —“big,” he told the clerk, “big enough for the blind to see them”—which

transformed the long-unused camper in his driveway from a somber vestige of his mobile life with Lilith into a billboard for his cause. An invitation inveigling the whole neighborhood to come to his patch of earth and use it as a springboard to leap into the night skies. It would be perfect. He prepared bowls of snacks, of pretzels and ruffled chips and freshly popped popcorn. Made a pitcher of Lilith's much-lauded lemonade. Set up his lawn chairs and strategically placed binoculars on the various surfaces he'd laid out in the yard—nightstands taken from his guest bedroom, a folding card table, a few miscellaneous stools. A variety of stargazing stations, like an exercise circuit, so everyone had a chance to see something and see it in multiple ways. To make them astronomically fit.

They trickled in. It was a perfect night for stargazing. Mid-September and crisp and clear. The Nelsons from a few houses over came with their children. Loud kids who liked to scream while they rode narrow skateboards up and down the street. But Oscar was warm despite his distaste for children in general and for loud ones in particular. Tonight, he was a consummate host, a passionate guide.

One child fumbled with binoculars in one hand and a fistful of popcorn in the other, buttering the lenses before dropping them in the dirt. Oscar picked them up and said, exuding patience, "Look, you need to use

this star chart to locate the constellations. Want to see if you can find the North Star? It's the one sailors used to cross the world." He pointed out Orion's Belt and the North Star to a dozen children. And the Microscope, the Swan, the Peacock, the Eagle and the Dolphin to twice as many adults. Human labels to make sense of alien stars.

The turn-out was incredible. Better than expected and heartening: so many enthusiastic and appreciative neighbors, united under one marvelous sky and in the communal and eternal act of marveling at it. Oscar wished Lilith were there to see it.

He answered a battery of questions:

"Is the North Star always north?"

"Where are the Pleiades?"

"Do you have more popcorn?"

"Why can't we see the Milky Way?"

"Where is Mars?"

"What's in a Mars Bar?"

"What's in a Milky Way?"

He met some neighbors from farther down the block that he hardly knew and talked with others that he hadn't spoken to since Lilith's funeral.

People brought cake and wine. Someone brought a stinky but delicious lentil dip that also ended up smeared across a few sets of lenses. But Oscar didn't mind. He felt like a part of the community for the first time in years. Maybe, fully, for the first time ever. He explained his theory of enlightenment, the biphasic sleep cycle, the harmful effects of light pollution. He explained and people listened. "See that?" He asked and his neighbors' eyes turned up. They really looked, he felt. Finally, they listened.

But in the morning, in the light of day, he took stock and the inventory was dismal. Two sets of binoculars had been stolen along with one of his constellation identifying guides and his large planisphere. One of his folding chairs—Lilith's favorite, a trusty canvas and wire classic that was designed for generals to survey their campaigns in the field—had been ripped down the middle. He suspected heavyset Mrs. Bowers from two houses down. His yard was littered with empty cans, popcorn and popsicle sticks stuck into the earth like crude and tiny grave markers. He spent the day cleaning his sticky binoculars and finger-smudged lenses and gathering the garbage in bags. And that night, the lights of the neighborhood—the blue lights from dozens of television and computer screens, the dull orange and yellows of outdoor house lights, the bright LEDs of the new cars coming up and down the street—seemed brighter somehow, personal—

targeted. Like a spotlight beaming down. Illuminating his sadness, his loneliness, his rage.



Oscar spent the fall indoors, licking his wounds. He read and slept and read. He drank over-steeped English Breakfast tea, savoring the bitterness of the tannins along his tongue, ate seldom and waited, waited inside, blinds closed tight against the world. Waited for what felt like a long overdue death. But Christmas and the nation-wide explosion of light, like the lurid death of a star, came first.

Like many lonely souls, Oscar found the holidays a time to mourn rather than celebrate. The ravenous consumerism, the forced familial gatherings, the gaudy lights and tacky decorations—it nauseated him. This year, with no family for Oscar to see and no one to shop for, he felt liberated. He felt pleasantly apart from it all. *I'm an outsider*, he thought, *an alien observing the curious customs of another, less evolved species. I'm a comet zipping by*. He enjoyed the comfortable distance of this trajectory until his neighbors across the street—the tidy Samuelsons, father, mother, two

children, one cat, one dog—turned their home into a festive bonfire. The house, so over-lit, shone like a beacon, but Oscar wasn't sure if it was designed to repel, like a lighthouse warning of hidden reefs, or to lure, like the lethal glow of an electrified insect trap. The result maddened regardless of the intent. Oscar took it, so soon after his dark skies neighborhood initiative, as a personal insult. Even in his bedroom at the back of his house, blinds down and curtains drawn, he felt the light creeping in, seeping into his eyes, eroding his rest and his sanity.



Thus, the hardware store. He stocked up on the visually less-intrusive LED Christmas lights. If the neighborhood had to be lit, he thought, it may as well be with a dim red glow that would spare everyone's night vision and honestly illuminate the hellish side of the holidays. Oscar was determined to hit the dimmer switch on the neighborhood, to see the street smolder rather than flare.

He took the lights home and left them in a box at the end of his driveway with a sign that read: "Free Christmas lights to all. Far superior to

other lights, these LED bulbs will lower your electrical bill, delight your neighbors, and preserve our ability to see the stars. Happy holidays.” Though he felt neither happy nor holy, he added the last two words as a concession to seasonal marketing.

No one touched them during the day. But the next morning Oscar found his car trussed up with the lights, wrapped tightly and glowing like a giant, irradiated leg of lamb. Industrious hooligans had done quite the job. Even plugged them into the outlet by his garage so the car hummed red like a massive brake light. Oscar unplugged them and spent ten minutes working at undoing the knots before grabbing his pruning shears and cutting through the mess, dumping the lights in a defeated heap into the garbage.



The Samuelsons had put their lights up, on schedule, a week before Thanksgiving. They, most of the neighborhood knew, visited family in Chicago the first week of December. Oscar knew this too, and knew that he had to address this latest affront. He was tired of growing hoarse

preaching to deaf ears. Tired of hiding in the shadows of his house. He hatched a plan. He'd dismantle their glittering Christmas pyre, strip it bare. Who knows? If it went well, he'd undress all the ostentatiously lit homes on the block. Maybe even in the whole town. The state. The nation. He'd liberate them all from this pernicious light.

He waited until the second night the Samuelsons were gone, just to make sure their home was vacant. The lights came on at seven p.m. on a timer. The thoughtful Samuelsons didn't want to deprive the neighbors of their costly Christmas spectacle in their absence.

Oscar skulked over at eleven, sticking to what few shadows he found. It was cold and quiet and Oscar remembered his nights with Lilith, in basin and range country, alongside random roads and looking up. So many September nights, hand-in-hand, looking up. Starlight, cold earth, the warmth of Lilith's hand.

He unplugged the lights first. Most of the neighbors were either asleep or near to it, slack-jawed and slumping into their recliners in television-induced comas. No one would notice one house going dark. And if they did, they'd think it a harmless shortage or glitch. Oscar stood quietly for a moment, luxuriating in the darkness. The lights by the door remained on,

but with the Christmas lights off, the rich closeness of the night was immediate and palpable.

He climbed his ladder and began pulling out the staples that held the strips of lights to the roof, coiling the cord as he went. The task was repetitive but in a meditative way. He was enjoying himself. Moment to moment, staple to staple, he looked up. A crescent moon, waxing. It reminded him of his second date with Lilith. He had taken her to an observatory during a full moon. She was properly amazed by how close it felt through the large telescope, how tangible—the crags and cuts, the dark oceans, the pits and craters. A ravaged surface. A dead satellite, a hunk the earth had shed in a terrible collision long ago or a passing planetoid trapped by earth's gravity. Either way, it was stuck, trapped forever in earth's orbit. Oscar was more interested in distant stars and mysterious exoplanets but Lilith always had a space in her heart for their cold, mangled little moon.

Oscar sat for a moment, feeling the cool shingles through his thin slacks, feeling his age in the stiffness of his joints. His knees and ankles ached in the cold. His back ached from the bending. He knew he had to keep moving, to stay loose to finish the job. He stood again, too quickly, too eager, and a wooziness washed over him. He widened his stance to

stabilize himself and looked out across the neighborhood, at the various patches of light and dark, these suburbs he and Lilith had made home.

“Oscar, what are you doing?”

He felt Lilith there beside him, chastising. Not the last Lilith he saw, bleached white beneath the harsh hospital fluorescents, slack and wasting. No, here was Lilith of her youth. Tan and taut. Lilith, indomitable. Lilith, his love who left him.

“Hello, flower,” he said to himself, to her memory.

“Oscar, honey. Your back. Your stenosis. You’re going to hurt yourself. What are you doing?”

He imagined a hand on his neck, running over the bald spot on the back of his skull, pulling on his ear. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt another person’s touch. “I won’t let them take this from me. Not this too.”

“What?”

“The stars.”

He imagined Lilith smiling. “Honey, they’re still there. Just a bit dimmer. All you need to do is look up.”

He looked up and his eyes from the dry desert air started to water. He felt dizzy. None of the constellations looked familiar. The stars were suns of an unknown galaxy. Or perhaps it was the earth below him that he no longer recognized? He wiped his eyes, shook his head to clear it and stepped back. Something clutched at his ankle. His foot was tangled in the coiled cords of lights. He took a step forward to free himself, grew more tangled and reared back, a crazy pagan performing a dangerous jig for the stars. He imagined Lilith again beside him, delighted by his late-flowering interest in dance, by the suddenness of it, by the grace. His arms flailed as he dipped forward and reared back trying to kick free of the cords. But he only managed to kick himself free of the roof. He reached for the gutter, for a hand, for anything. In a downward rush, he fell. The lampposts looked like the Perseids seen through a set of good binoculars on a peak-viewing night. Swift streaks of light, speckling flashes. Dark and light. And dark again.

Oscar spent a cold and bruised night trapped in the lee of the house, wreathed in the shadows of the short winter days, wrapped and knotted in the disconnected light cords like a grotesque and forgotten present.

In the predawn dark, one of the more diligent members of the neighborhood watch found him. Oscar gave a cry when he saw the dim

bulb of the man's flashlight pass over him, highlighting his fragments: a broken leg, a flattened shrub, a damaged lump that may have been a man. Oscar crawled toward the four-inch diameter circle of light, out of the dark, wriggling with a rush of life, like a new sprout saluting the sun, like the light ahead led straight to heaven.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kent Kosack is a writer living in Pittsburgh, PA. He has an MFA from the University of Pittsburgh. His work has been published, or is forthcoming, in Sonora Review, Tin House (Flash Fidelity), the Cincinnati Review (miCRo series), Columbia Journal, Hobart and elsewhere. See more at his website: [www.kentkosack.com](http://www.kentkosack.com)

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