

2018

Being Dorothy in Kuwait

Margaret MacInnis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/nelle>

Recommended Citation

MacInnis, Margaret (2018) "Being Dorothy in Kuwait," *Nelle*: Vol. 1, Article 35.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/nelle/vol1/iss2018/35>

This content has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the UAB Digital Commons, and is provided as a free open access item. All inquiries regarding this item or the UAB Digital Commons should be directed to the [UAB Libraries Office of Scholarly Communication](#).

Margaret MacInnis

BEING DOROTHY IN KUWAIT

It started with my daughter and Dorothy, as in Dorothy Gale of Kansas, of Toto, of gingham dress, and of course—of those ruby red slippers. Before black and white Kansas became Technicolor Oz, before the gingham dress turned cornflower blue, and before the ruby red slippers were discovered, my daughter Lila sat captivated before the television screen. When she and I began watching, *The Wizard of Oz*, she was three (and a half, she would add) to my forty-five. Beneath the comforter draped over us, on the sofa in our living room in Iowa City, Lila pressed herself against me.

“I’m not afraid, Mommy,” she said. “I just want to be close.”

“Okay,” I said. “You can get as close as you like.”

Honestly, I wasn’t watching the film as much as I was watching Lila, the expressions on her face more enthralling to me than the film itself. She sat in astonishment, sighing, gasping, pointing, and questioning everything, including the commercials that interrupted our viewing. During one of these commercials, I felt the sudden urge to share one singular detail from my past, not my childhood past, nor my teaching at the New England School of English past, nor my graduate school at Iowa past, but the past I rarely-to-never talk about—the years I spent teaching overseas while married to a man who is not Lila’s father.

My first instinct was to fight this urge. Revisiting these eight years of my life tends to make me—depending on the day, or the detail recalled—either sadder or angrier than I want to be. But in that moment on the sofa beside Lila, watching her watch Judy Garland skip down that yellow brick road, I wanted nothing more than to reveal one aspect of that life. I had to

say it. I was bursting with it. I had to tell her that “once upon a time, I was Dorothy.”

“You *were* Dorothy?” she asked, more confused than I wanted her to be.

“I mean I *played* Dorothy,” I tried to clarify. “On a stage.”

“Really?” She was staring at me.

I nodded.

“Daddy!” Lila shouted to her father, my partner, Ryan, who was folding clothes down the hallway. “Mommy was Dorothy!”

“Yes, she was.”

“Did you see her when she was Dorothy?”

“No, I didn’t. I didn’t know her then.”

“Oh,” she said, satisfied with his answer, and ready to resume watching the film. While she watched, she asked question upon question about my life as Dorothy.

“Did you have a dog named Toto?” she asked. “Were you afraid of the Wicked Witch?”

Happily answering her questions as they arose, each new scene warranting some new question, I was glad that I had told her, surprised in fact that remembering myself as Dorothy made me smile.

Lila was smiling, too, smiling and clapping when she asked with just a hint of shriek in her voice, “Did you wear ruby slippers?” She pointed to the TV.

“Yes, I did.” How vividly I recalled the dainty red-sequined shoes that had been hand-designed by a local seamstress and shop owner.

She tilted her head. “Where are they?”

I felt a stab of regret. How I wished I could have gone to my bedroom closet, removed the shoes from their place of safekeeping, and carried them to her. They would have been wrapped in tissue paper for protection. “Close your eyes,” I could have said. “Hold out your hands.” Ceremoniously, playfully, I could have laid them in her open palms. In her excitement, she would have torn away the tissue paper. When she

finally glimpsed the shoes through fluttering lashes, eyes half-closed, the look on her face would have been unforgettable.

Perhaps if I had glimpsed a little girl in my future through my own half-closed eyes, I might have fought harder for the shoes. Instead, I had to tell her that I didn't have them. I hadn't kept them.

I hadn't thought of those shoes in years. I had no idea where they ended up. I played Dorothy in the spring of 1998, twelve years before Lila was born. Occasionally, over the years, I'd recalled other aspects of being Dorothy, other aspects of that year as an expatriate teacher in Kuwait. I'd experience a flash of memory—the endless bickering, hot sand in my eyes, myself alone on an exercise bike pedaling as fast as I could—as if I were headed somewhere, as if I were moving forward. But the shoes I'd once wanted to keep as a memento of my time as Dorothy, the shoes I'd have to purchase since they'd been costly to make, I had not recalled.

On the sofa beside my daughter, I let myself consider the shoes. If I wanted them, Angela, the director, had told me one evening on our way to rehearsal, I would have to purchase them, for they'd been costly to make. Kuwait's Little Theatre, a British-run operation with a small budget, recycled and reused its costumes, but what could they do with ruby slippers? Angela had shrugged. Still, she explained, she couldn't give them to me; I'd have to at least pay what she paid.

I didn't drive in Kuwait, and if I could avoid being in the car with my former husband, a man who screamed and cursed in traffic the entire time we drove anywhere, a man who almost got us killed for giving someone the middle finger on the highway, I did. So, most rehearsal evenings I happily rode with Angela, her mass of red curls glistening in the hot, yellow evening sun, and her enormous sunglasses covered half her face. Some nights she tucked her curls under a scarf tied at the nape of her neck, reminding me of a woman on the run from a man who'd hurt her once too often. Even the most submissive women, the most damaged, can be pushed too far. Then

one night they disguise themselves beyond recognition, hiding under a scarf and tinted sunglasses, and abscond into the steamy, gritty Gulf night. I used to fantasize about doing just this, of driving off into the Kuwaiti night, but I knew there was nowhere for me to go from there, nowhere except the Kuwait Little Theatre, nowhere except to Oz.

Someday I may have to tell Lila more about my life in Kuwait, more about who I was in those years I spent overseas, and who I was leading up to those years, for she may want to know. She may need to know, just as I wanted and needed to know about my own mother, and the choices she made. Forty-five years after the fact, I'm still learning lessons about the woman who brought me into the world.

I couldn't remember how much Angela spent on the shoes, how much she wanted me to pay, but it couldn't have been much. So why didn't I buy them?

Regret swelled in my chest.

My husband wouldn't let me.

And I do mean "let" as in wouldn't allow, wouldn't permit, and though I'd begun doing things without his permission in Kuwait—auditioning for the part of Dorothy being one of them, I had no access to my own money. Even the cash I earned tutoring and giving private English lessons, eighty American dollars in '97 and '98, I handed over to him. How will I ever explain that to my daughter?

How will I explain the young woman who relinquished control of her entire life to her husband before he became her husband, the young woman I'd almost banished from memory? Almost. Here she stood now clamoring for my attention. I shushed her so that I could enjoy watching the rest of the film with Lila. I shushed her again so that I could lie beside Lila and read *Good Night, Moon* and *Are You My Mother?* As Lila nestled beside me in her bed, I knew we could both live without the ruby slippers.

Lying awake in my own bed, I had no choice but to give my twenty-something-self some attention. At twenty-four, I had been the proverbial walking contradiction. On one hand, I had accepted a teaching position in Istanbul and moved to Turkey alone, beginning what I then imagined would be a lifelong international teaching career; on the other hand, within weeks of being in Istanbul, I'd handed over control of my life to Misha, the Soviet-born-turned-Canadian man I married two and a half years later. At first, I'd welcomed the control, profoundly so, for I'd spent most of my life feeling out of it. I'd learned from my parents—a love-starved, teenaged mother and an alcoholic father, both of whom seemed most alive while in chaos.

When Misha entered my life, offering calm—or the semblance of it—in the form of complete control, I'd breathed a sigh of relief. Six years into the relationship, however, I found myself in Kuwait, frustrated and lonely, and growing increasingly defiant. I didn't want to be controlled any longer. I knew there had to be another way to live, another way to love. I wanted to be happy. I wanted to feel joy. And, one day, I discovered how much I wanted to be Dorothy.

In Kuwait, loneliness propelled me out of myself. When one of my teaching colleagues invited me to an audition of the British comedy "Habeas Corpus," I accepted. Misha rolled his eyes when I told him, but he hadn't tried to stop me. Since he hadn't forbidden me to audition, I joined a small gathering of amateur actors in the theater kitchen and read for the part of Felicity. I'd gone home that night with script in hand.

"No more," Misha said when "Habeas Corpus" closed. "Rehearsals take up too much time. You should be home."

I didn't argue.

The morning of *The Wizard of Oz* audition, I believed I was going only to watch, only to see the theater friends who weren't teaching colleagues, those I hadn't seen since "Habeas Corpus."

The entire English-speaking community of Kuwait had turned out to audition. I was only there to watch, I reminded myself. I hadn't told my theater friends I wasn't auditioning, though. How could I? How could I tell them that Misha had forbidden me to audition? How could I tell them that I was afraid of disobeying him because these days everything infuriated him, sending him into tantrum-like rages that exhausted me? Instead, I told my friends I was worried about the singing. I hadn't sung since junior high chorus, I explained, but I would take a script just in case. I held the script close to me as I walked up and down the theater aisles in search of an empty seat. I found one just as the Munchkin auditions ended and the Flying Monkeys took the stage.

I watched recalling that as a child I'd been terrified of the Flying Monkeys, burying my face in my mother's arm whenever they appeared, waiting for her to tell me it was safe to look at the TV again. How I missed my mother, the mother the former teenager had blossomed into. She'd have told me to audition. She'd have reminded me that I was an adult. I didn't need permission from anyone to do anything. She herself had learned this lesson late, after fifteen years with my father, whose permission she'd once needed to leave the house. Misha and I had been together for five years, married for three. During these years, he'd grown into his role as dictator, asserting more control over me as each year passed, and though I'd inwardly protested, outwardly I'd not only accepted it, but I'd sanctioned his reign. But something was shifting. I felt it even as I sat in my seat in the theater. I flipped through the script and found Dorothy's lines highlighted in yellow. The friend at the door had given me Dorothy's lines. I looked around the theater but couldn't find her. What would happen if I auditioned? What would it mean to me and my marriage if I were to take such a stand? People close to me had advised against moving to Kuwait with Misha. I'd be too isolated. Life would be too difficult. The strain might push one or both of us over the edge. I considered this all afternoon as I watched the

auditions. I considered this as I rose to my feet. I considered this as I made my way to the stage, realizing as I held the script against my chest, that my desire to play Dorothy was stronger than my fear—if I were to get the part—of what I'd face at home.

Later that night I tried to explain why I had disobeyed him both in auditioning and in accepting the role. My high school years had been so crazy and chaotic that I hadn't had time to explore who I was beyond my parents and their relationship drama. My interest in theater and acting, in anything beyond them, fell to the proverbial wayside. As I allowed myself to consider what I lost in those years, grief and anger overcame me, and I started to cry as I explained, "There are so many things I wish I had done, years I wish I could have back. I know I can't have them back, but now I have the chance to *be Dorothy*. It's a dream come true."

"You're pathetic," he said, turning his back to me. "Grow up."

Against Misha's wishes, I left the apartment for rehearsal four times a week. I stopped cooking on rehearsal nights. I stayed up at night learning my lines until I was sure he'd be asleep. I ignored him when he ridiculed my practicing dance steps in the living room and when he told me to stop singing because I sounded awful. "Those voice lessons are a waste of time, eh?" he said with a smirk.

Day after day, for months, he found new things to criticize about the show. Day after day, he berated me, telling me that he was fed up with me, with my stupidity, with the glitter from the set that I brought into the bed. Didn't I know I was a married woman with a husband to take care of? Didn't I know my home was my first responsibility? Still, I didn't quit. I refused to let him take Dorothy from me.

Opening night and each subsequent night people asked where he was. Didn't he want to see me as Dorothy? Didn't he want

to support me? I shrugged off the questions, but I knew his absence signified something, though who I was then couldn't have said exactly what.

He waited until closing night to attend the show. He came in late and sat in the back row. I tried to pretend he wasn't there. I didn't need him there—feigning support for me, feigning appreciation for the work the cast and crew had done. I didn't want him there. The realization startled me.

After the performance, the cast gathered in the theater garden for photographs. We were laughing and hugging and crying, and I fleetingly forgot that Misha existed. And then I saw him. Beaming, he began walking toward me. I barely recognized him and the smile on his face.

"You were amazing," he said. "I had no idea."

I was too stunned, and—after weeks of being harangued and ridiculed—too angry to respond. Luckily, other people wanted to talk to me, so I didn't have to answer him directly. I tried to avoid him, looking at him, talking to him, thinking about him, but he stayed close to me. I seethed. His presence was ruining the night. To say that for weeks he had made my life a living hell does not feel hyperbolic. Had he forgotten his treatment of me? Is that why he kept smiling at me? Is that why he put his arm around my waist on the way to the car? Is that why he held the flowers others had brought me?

As we drove home, he said he was "so surprised" at "how wonderful" I was as Dorothy. He was proud, he said, very proud of me.

Anger thickened in my throat.

Staring out the window, I sighed much louder than I'd intended.

I could feel him looking at me, but I refused to turn my head.

"Then why did you give me such a hard time?" I said, gaze fixed out the window.

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Look at me," he said.

"No."

"Look at me," he screamed.

I turned so that he wouldn't scream again. "What?"

"I did *not* give you a hard time. I don't know what you're talking about."

Flabbergasted, I turned back to my window. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I had to get out of the car. I reached for the door handle. Misha continued talking, his voice to my ears nothing but garble. When my shock subsided, I released the handle. Yes, I had to get out, but I could wait for the car to stop. As soon as it did though, I would grab the handle again, and I would fling open that door, and as soon as my feet hit the steaming tarmac, I would run as fast and as furiously as I could. I would not stop until I had left this life behind. I did not know in that moment that he would keep driving for two more years, that it would take two more years for me to fling open that door, and another two to outrun him, for he would follow me, refusing to completely let me go. He knew the paths I would take. He knew when I needed to rest. He knew that whenever I found myself on a dead-end road, I tended to retrace my steps. I'd look up, and there he'd be. Until no more. Until enough. Until at last.

Until fifteen years after Kuwait, I stand beside my daughter's bed, watching her, listening to the soft hum of her sleeping breath, so grateful for her presence in my life, a presence and a life I could not have fathomed the night "The Wizard of Oz" closed at the Kuwait Little Theatre, the night I told Angela I could not buy the ruby slippers. Someday my daughter will know that I ran. She will know that I fought. She will know that I was much more than a victim.

I was Dorothy.