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— 1 —

Why I Hate *The Wizard of Oz*

Imagine having the land of your birth, a place about which you have complex and wildly ambivalent feelings, reduced to a black-and-white cartoon. Someone asks you where you're from, and when you reply "Kansas," this well-meaning stranger grins and blurts out, "Where's Toto? Oh, that's right. We're not in Kansas anymore!"

You get this in New York, Indiana, California. Even as far afield as Paris, you get it. "Kansoz! Ah, oui. Les munchkins!"

How to say you hail from a place uninhabited by tinmen and sweet little girls in pinafores, a demanding, starkly beautiful place with twenty-mile views, sunflowers as big as your head, and night skies so clear that you might believe yourself to have been born among stars? Where the wind blows without cease and flies bite like vampires and the stink of the slaughterhouse overhangs everything like a toxic cloud. Where it's not unusual for a kid like you to receive his first shotgun at ten, drive a wheat truck at twelve, and solo in a Beechcraft Debonair at fourteen or fifteen.

"Does that sound like Oz?" you want to ask.

But you don't. Why bother?

When the tornado came and swept you away, as you knew all along it would, it was not to drop you into some Technicolor fantasy, but rather into the same world of Applebee's and Best Buy the jokesters inhabit. That's the context here; that's the reason you refuse to join Dorothy's fan club.

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Bullet in the Brain

One of my fourth-grade teachers, an ancient nun named Sister Urban, expressed concern about a tendency I had to “blank out” during class. One minute I’d be paying attention, but the next I’d be staring off into space, completely unresponsive. Twenty or thirty seconds might go by before the “episode” ended and I’d “return to consciousness,” seemingly unaware that any of it had happened. Needless to say, it wasn’t long before my mother dragged me off to see our family doctor, who examined me briefly before suggesting that I be seen by a specialist in Wichita, three hours away.

“Do you really think that’s necessary?” my mother asked.

“Who knows?” Dr. Baum said, shrugging. “But in these kinds of cases, I’d say it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

In the days to come, the phrases *these kinds of cases* and *better safe than sorry* became a kind of mantra my mother repeated whenever she felt pressed to justify the trip—either to herself, to one of her neighborhood friends, or, most important, to my father, whose standard response to reports of illness or injury was some variation of “Hell, just look at him. There’s nothing wrong with that kid.”

As it happened, I agreed with my father’s assessment. Deep in my bones, I knew I was okay. However, that didn’t mean I was going to let an opportunity as sweet as this pass me by. The way I saw it, a trip with my mother to the big city of Wichita was bound to yield all manner of riches. At the very least, we’d get to eat lunch at McDonald’s or Burger King (neither of which existed in Dodge City circa 1974), and should we happen to venture into a sporting goods store or, better yet, a *mall*, well, who could say what merchandise I might not talk her into buying me?

Although she spent many happy summers in the Flint Hills town of Maple Hill, my mother was born and raised in Wichita, where she moved after her mother married for the second time. In a way, you could say my mother had two diametrically opposed childhoods. In the first, she was the beloved only child of a single mother, with two sets of grandparents and various aunts and uncles playing a part in raising her. In the second, she was the much-older sister of four younger siblings, the youngest of whom, Scott, was born after she had left home to attend St. Mary of the Plains College in Dodge City. When my mother was still in her teens, her mother's health began to decline rapidly ("dropsy" and "women's troubles" were a couple of the terms doctors bandied about), and the result was that the younger kids in the family didn't have the same experiences or opportunities that she had while growing up. And the younger they were, the worse it had been. My mother felt guilty about this, but what could she do? She had her own life to live, and live it she must. In a way, that's what the town of Wichita came to mean to her. It was the scene of an escape, a necessary but bittersweet breaking away.

Our appointment was set for midmorning, so we had to leave the house at around 5 a.m. My father must have carried me to the car, because I remember nothing before I woke up in the back seat of our 1964 Impala wagon.

"How much longer?" I asked, rubbing my eyes.

"Not long now," my mother answered. "A little over an hour."

"Are we going to stop to eat?"

"I packed a breakfast for you," she said, smiling at me in the car's rearview mirror. "It's in that paper sack at your feet."

I pulled the bag onto the seat beside me and was disappointed to find it filled with apples, bananas, and other healthy things.

"What about after the appointment?" I asked. "Are we going to stop then?"

"We'll see," my mother answered, finishing a cigarette and tossing the butt out the car's window. It irked me how easily she evaded my attempts to get a promise on the books.

At the hospital, we had to wait an hour before it was my appointment time, and then another hour before the doctor was able to see me. My mother spent the time flipping through magazines while I ransacked the pay phones looking for change for the vending machines. I was conscious of everything—how big and sophisticated the hospital was, how the old and seriously ill were wheeled around on aluminum gurneys (beds on wheels!), how many of the patients and hospital workers were of a sort I'd never encountered before (I remember in particular a Hindu woman with a red dot on her forehead).

The doctor was a short man with wiry black hair. He spoke to me in flat, adult tones, with a minimum of the falsetto condescension I associated with doctors.

“What do you know about the test we’re going to run today?”

“Nothing,” I confessed.

“Well, it’s called an EEG, and it’s pretty simple. We’re going to put some electrodes on your scalp. Those are to capture your brain waves. Once we’ve captured them, we’re going to send them to San Francisco. Do you know where that is?”

“California.”

“Right. And do you know *how* we’re going to get your brain waves to California?”

I shook my head.

“Telephone wires. When you get back to school, you can tell your friends that your brain waves were sent to San Francisco via telephone wires.”

“Does it hurt?” I asked.

“Not a bit.”

I remember a dark room, blinking lights, the coolness of the cream they put on my skin, and the elaborate hooking up of the electrodes. The promised “call to California” was delayed several times before it finally went through. Then the lights came back on, and the nurses pulled the electrodes off one by one.

“When do we get the results?” my mother asked.

“The doctor will call you.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” the nurse repeated.

Outside it was sunny and warm. It was lunch time, as nearly as I could tell. “Can we stop and get some food?” I asked. “Where are we going to eat? Can we go to McDonald’s?”

“It’s too early for lunch,” my mother replied as we climbed into the Impala. “Have an apple if you’re hungry.”

Something had changed while I wasn’t paying attention. In the hospital she’d been patient and upbeat, but now that the appointment was over, she’d become distracted and nervous. She gripped the steering wheel with both hands and leaned forward in her seat, as though trying to look through a dirty windshield. Having thrown one cigarette out the window, she promptly lit another. All of this was very unlike her.

“What’s the matter?” I asked. “Don’t you think the appointment went well?”

“It went fine.”

“Well then?”

“Well, nothing,” she answered irritably. “Stop bugging me and look out your window.”

I did as I was told, noticing right away that the street we were on looked nothing like the ones we’d driven in on. Those streets had been busy and wide, full of stoplights and gas stations and fast-food restaurants. This street was smaller and shabbier, with weathered houses and ramshackle apartments on either side. Weeds grew up through cracks in the sidewalks, and some of the houses had cars and motorcycles parked in their beaten front yards. A couple of these cars were up on blocks, not a wheel or tire in sight. Dogs strained at the end of their chains, barking at us.

“Where are we?” I asked. “Did we make a wrong turn?”

“No, we didn’t make a wrong turn.”

“Are we lost?”

She shook her head. “We’re just going to check on something. Then we’ll be heading back home.”

“Check on what?”

“Uncle Scott.”

“Oh,” I said.

Uncle Scott was my mother’s youngest half-sibling. Born in 1952, he was only a couple of years older than my oldest brother. There were a lot of pictures in the family photo album in which Scott appeared alongside my brothers David, Alan, and Tom as just another shirtless, skinny kid posing against a backdrop of rolling plains. But in other ways, Scott was nothing at all like us. His mother, my grandmother Malinda, had died when Scott was nine years old, and his father, Guy, died five years after that. For a while, Uncle Scott’s older brothers, my uncles Danny and Randy, took care of him. When that situation ran its course, Scott bounced around between the houses of various relatives in Kansas and Oklahoma. In 1969, after years of truancy, he dropped out of school for good, and not long after that, he received his draft notice. By 1971, at the age of nineteen, he was humping an M-16 through the jungles of South Vietnam.

My memories of Uncle Scott begin in the spring of 1973, when he stayed with us after returning home from the war. He was a thin, wiry dude with green, almost yellowish, eyes, curly brown hair, and a perpetual hangdog grin. Everything was funny to him in a dark, sarcastic way. He responded to news both good and bad with an understated laugh—*hee hee hee*—and a lazy shrug of the shoulders, as if to say, “Well, what do you expect?” This demeanor of his stood in stark contrast to the default mode of the rest of my family, which tended toward disciplined earnestness and a belief that everything would turn out all right if you just worked hard and followed the rules.

I remember one pheasant season—it must have been the Thanksgiving after Uncle Scott got back from Vietnam—when it was suggested to him (by my mother, no doubt) that he might enjoy going

hunting with my brothers Alan and Tom, both of whom had recently taken up the sport.

“Of course, you’d need to buy a hunting license,” Alan remarked, “and to get that, you’d need to have taken the Kansas Safe Hunter course.”

Uncle Scott laughed. “Right. Hunter’s safety. But how would they know if you *hadn’t* taken the course?”

“You have to show them your card,” Alan said.

“Well, just tell them you lost it, *hee hee hee*.”

“Yeah, but they’ll ask for your number off the card,” Alan said. “They have to put the number on your license.”

“So you rattle one off. G152DOA74, *hee hee hee*. What could be easier than that?”

My brothers and I just sat there, looking at him. Needless to say, no pheasants were hunted that Thanksgiving weekend.

I was eight years old, that age when time is divided into big, uncomplicated categories like Halloween, Christmas, and Summer Vacation, when Uncle Scott came to stay with us. I watched cartoons every Saturday morning in order to keep up on the toys being offered as prizes in the different breakfast cereals. Then, on Saturday afternoons, I’d “help” my mother shop for food, locating all of the brands that had been advertised that morning and dragging them one by one to our cart.

“No,” my mother would say, shaking her head firmly. “I already told you. We can’t afford that one.” Except that sometimes she relented. Perhaps three or four times a year, for reasons I could never understand or predict, she’d consent to the purchase of Cap’n Crunch or Lucky Charms or one of the other “expensive” brands. The Saturday before my Uncle Scott returned home from Vietnam offered up one of these inexplicable windfalls. Almost without trying, I got her to buy me a box of Count Chocula containing a small brown Frisbee with an image of the Count himself embossed on it. Never in the history of breakfast cereals had there been a prize so sweet.

With nine people living in five bedrooms, space was always at a premium in our house, and when Uncle Scott came to stay, that situation only intensified. Rather than asking the returned hero to sleep on the couch or on a cot in the TV room, my mother gave Scott one of the basement bedrooms normally occupied by my brothers Joe and Steve, which meant they had to move in upstairs with my brother Paul and me. Other things changed as well. For years we had sat down to the evening meal at precisely six o'clock, and woe be unto the boy who failed to return home on time. However, now that Uncle Scott had come to stay with us, dinner would sometimes be put off until seven or even eight o'clock while we waited for him to return from one of his jaunts about town or to wake up from one of the long naps he liked to take most afternoons.

The worst violation of these codes of ours occurred on Easter Sunday. As with the six o'clock dinner hour, the agenda for this holiday had been established long ago. We'd rise early, raid our Easter baskets, hurry to make the ten o'clock Mass at Sacred Heart Cathedral, and then eat a large Easter lunch sometime around noon or one o'clock. But this time, though Paul and I were up at the crack of dawn as usual, we weren't allowed to touch our baskets or eat much of our candy because "Uncle Scott's not up yet." He still wasn't up when we left for Mass at 9:30 that morning or when we returned home at 11:15. This alone was an astonishing fact to behold. Never in my life had I seen an adult sleep so late (both of my parents habitually rose before six), and yet Uncle Scott was just getting started. Noon came and went. One o'clock. Two. By then I was beside myself with anger and frustration. Was Easter itself going to be called off because of one man's inability to get his ass out of bed?

I complained bitterly to my mother, but all she'd say was that we'd eat Easter dinner "when Uncle Scott gets up, not before," adding, in a cruel twist, that no more candy was to be eaten lest we ruin our appetites. I stewed over this injustice in my room, but finally I could take no more and crept down the basement stairs to have a look in Uncle Scott's room. Pushing the door open slowly, I stuck my head inside.

All was quiet except for the sound of Uncle Scott's labored breathing. Pushing the door open farther, I crept into the room on all fours like a soldier negotiating razor wire. I could see everything fine because Uncle Scott had left a reading lamp on above his head. In fact, the lamp shone directly into his ghastly white face. *My God, how can he sleep like that with a hundred-watt bulb shining directly into his eyes?* I wondered.

A moment later, I saw something that to my mind was even more horrifying. Sitting atop a stack of paperbacks next to the bed, filled to the brim with crushed cigarette butts, was my Count Chocula Frisbee. Uncle Scott had turned the treasure upside down and used it as an ashtray.

My mind slowly filled with rage. *What the . . . ? How on . . . ? WHY!?*

But even as these thoughts reverberated through me, I knew that any desire for retribution was pointless. My mother wouldn't hear a word against "poor Scott." The most I could accomplish in the way of revenge would be to ruin the man's afternoon nap, and so, on the way out of there, I shoved a Jethro Tull tape into my brother Joe's 8-track and turned the thing on full blast.

The image of the desecrated Frisbee was the first thing that came to mind when my mother informed me that we were on a mission to "check on" Uncle Scott.

"Do you even know where he lives?" I asked.

"It's somewhere around here," she answered. "Quit worrying and help me look. Maybe you'll spot him."

We rolled down street after street of dilapidated houses. After thirty minutes of what seemed like aimless searching, my mother began to stop people on the street to ask if they knew where Uncle Scott was staying. Most of the people she asked expressed surprise at our stated mission. I remember in particular a skinny black man with an unkempt Afro who leaned into the window on my side of the car and asked, in a wine-coated voice, "Who the hell are *y'all* looking for *down here?*"

Just the way he said the words *y'all* and *down here* was enough to

make my blood run cold, but my mother, for her part, appeared unfazed. “Scott McDonald,” she answered calmly. “He’s about your age and build, brown hair and green eyes. The last time I talked to him, he said he was staying with friends somewhere near here.”

The man laughed. “Friends, huh? That’s a good one. I’m sorry, lady, but I don’t think I can help you.”

“Well, thank you all the same,” my mother said.

“You’re welcome,” the man said, shaking his head.

A former cheerleader and homecoming queen, my mother was a tall, angular woman with high cheekbones and large, expressive eyes. Even if I’d been incapable of perceiving her beauty, I still would’ve known all about it, because throughout my childhood, other people, particularly my mother’s friends, were forever pointing it out to me. *Seven kids and a waist like a ballerina! How does your mother do it? Do you know who your mom reminds me of? Susan Sarandon, that’s who!* Now here she was on a street without a name asking favors of the sort of people she never came into contact with in the usual run of her life. Evidently no part of this troubled her, but the same could not be said for me. Try as I might to avoid it, I couldn’t help but imagine terrible things happening to both of us, and of course I blamed Uncle Scott for all of it. Didn’t he have a phone she could call to “check up” on him? What the hell was wrong with him anyway? Why couldn’t he be counted on the way virtually all of the men I’d grown up around could be?

Then a man, pretty much a carbon copy of the first guy, except that this man was white, approached our car and told us he would take us to Uncle Scott.

“Oh, thanks so much,” my mother said.

I expected the man to climb into the car with us, but to my surprise he led us down the street on foot, walking in front of our red Impala like Daniel Boone leading a wagon train of pioneers into the wilds of Kentucky. At the end of a narrow street of broken asphalt, we came upon an oblong clapboard house that looked more like a cow shed or an army barracks than an actual house. The house had no

number or mailbox, and all of the windows had been covered from the inside with blankets and cardboard.

“This is the place,” the skinny man said, leaning in my window. “I’d go up there and get him for you, but there’s people in there who don’t like me.”

“I understand,” my mother said. “You’ve been very helpful as it is.”

Here the man paused significantly. “You wouldn’t happen to, you know, have a dollar or two for a hungry vet, would you?”

“Sorry, of course,” my mother said, digging in her purse.

“Keep the money low,” the man said, his hand coming though the car window to snatch up the five-dollar bill she offered. “People are watching.” Then he was gone, limping up the street in the direction from which we’d just come.

I wanted to say to my mother that she’d overpaid the man, that he’d almost certainly given us bogus information, that we should leave now while we were still alive, but I could get none of this out before she abandoned me there with orders to “keep the windows rolled up and the doors locked” while she was gone. I can still see her walking up that broken sidewalk and pounding on the door of that ramshackle building. Everything about her, from the peach-colored dress she wore to the way her purse hung from her slender arm, cried out that she had no business stepping foot in that neighborhood, let alone pounding on doors and making demands of strangers. I wanted to roll down that window and shout for her to come back at once. I wanted to say to her, *What about me, Mom? Don’t you understand that I’m big enough to sense the danger you’re in and yet not nearly big enough to do anything to protect you? Am I really supposed to just sit here in this locked car and hope for the best? How long am I supposed to wait? A minute? Five minutes? An hour?*

Then the door to the house opened and a shirtless man with tattoos up and down his arms appeared. The two of them exchanged a series of frantic words and gestures, then the door shut again and my mother resumed her pounding. A few seconds later, a second man opened the door and yelled something at my mother, whereupon

she put both hands on her hips (a gesture I knew well) and yelled right back at him. Finally the door opened wider and Uncle Scott appeared. I recognized him despite the fact that he looked nothing like the shorthaired, clean-shaven soldier I remembered from the year before. Apparently that version of Uncle Scott was gone forever, replaced by a version with long, bushy hair and a three- or four-day growth of beard. (I remember thinking, *My God, he looks like Shaggy on Scooby-Doo.*) They talked a minute on the doorstep, then Uncle Scott disappeared back into the house, and my mother walked back to the car and got in.

“Who are those people?” I asked as soon as she shut her door.

“I don’t know,” she answered.

“Where’s Uncle Scott? Is he coming?”

“Yes.”

“Are we going to leave soon?”

“Yes! Now stop asking so many questions.”

Her hands shook as she lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out the window.

A few minutes later, Uncle Scott came out of the house in sandals and a green army jacket and got into the front seat of the car with us.

“Hey, Champ,” he said as his shoulder bumped into mine.

“Hey,” I said, moving over.

His right hand was covered in a dirty white bandage, but I didn’t ask about that. I was waiting for one thing and one thing only, and that was to get the hell out of there.

We went to a nondescript diner with a long buffet where old people piled their plates high with fruit and cottage cheese. Since I’d been holding out hope for McDonald’s—A&W at the very least—this choice of restaurant was a great disappointment to me. When my mother, scanning the menu, asked what looked good to me, I shrugged and said I didn’t care. I think I ordered a hot dog, while Uncle Scott ordered meat loaf and coffee.

After the waitress left with our orders, Uncle Scott laughed and shook his head in that pathetic, hangdog way he had, as if the world we lived in was nothing but an elaborate joke and his part in the cosmic drama was not to take any of it too seriously.

“How have you been doing?” my mother asked him. “Are you working?”

“I was until this happened,” he answered, holding up his bandaged right hand. As my mother and I watched, he unwound the dirty bandage to reveal a pinky finger that was swollen to twice its usual size with a series of ghastly black stitches running up one side.

“Oh, Scott,” my mother said. “Have you seen a doctor?”

“Sure. How do you think I got the stitches?”

“I mean lately,” my mother said. “It looks infected.”

“Oh, it’s all right,” Uncle Scott said, rewinding the bandage around the injured hand and dropping it into his lap again.

Our food arrived, and I tore into mine, polishing it off in a matter of minutes along with two large glasses of root beer. For his part, Uncle Scott just pushed his meatloaf around the gravy on his plate. He took a few bites of mashed potatoes, then called the waitress back and got a refill on his coffee.

“The whole time I was in the army, it was nothing but *meat loaf, meat loaf, meat loaf*,” he laughed. “You’d think that in a place like Vietnam they’d serve you *rice* or something, but you’d be wrong about that. Uncle Sam likes his meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and gravy.” Here he looked directly at me, as though noticing me for the first time. “You had to see the doctor, huh? What about?”

“Something to do with my brain,” I answered. “They hooked me up to San Francisco, but we won’t get the results for a while.”

This brought another of his trademark laughs. “Your *brain*, huh? Well, don’t listen to them. What the hell do doctors know about what goes on in our *brains*?”

“If you’re not working,” my mother interjected, “then what are you doing?”

“Oh, you know. This and that. I get by all right.”

"It doesn't look like it to me, Scott. You don't look *well*."

He shrugged the comment off and, reaching across the table, shook one of my mother's cigarettes out of its package. "You mind?"

"No," she answered. "Go right ahead."

I could feel the tension rising between them, and I tried to diffuse it by asking questions.

"Uncle Scott, how long were you in Vietnam?"

"Eleven months and fourteen days."

"What was your job?"

"I was a grunt, son, the lowest of the low."

"Did you shoot anyone?"

"Robby!" my mother said.

"It's all right," Uncle Scott laughed from behind a wall of smoke. Turning to me, he added, very matter-of-factly, "Your Uncle Randy was in a helicopter gunship. I'm pretty sure he shot a lot of people. But I was just a grunt. I got shot *at* some, but I never returned the favor. Truth is, I went through the whole war without even firing my weapon at anything more than shadows."

I nodded, sorely disappointed by this confession.

"I did get really scared once, though. Do you want to hear about it?"

"Sure."

"Scott," my mother began.

"Oh, stop worrying," Uncle Scott responded. "I won't say anything to *damage* the kid or anything."

He told a strange story about an unsettling couple of hours he'd spent on guard duty while the rest of his unit slept nearby.

"We were camped on the edge of a clearing in the jungle, some godforsaken place we'd humped to that day, and it was my job to watch the clearing and report on any, quote unquote, suspicious activity." Dragging from his cigarette, he used his clawlike fingers to make quote marks in the air. "But the thing is, when you're that scared, *everything* is suspicious. The wind is suspicious. The moon and the clouds moving across the moon are suspicious. The sounds of the

jungle at night—insects buzzing around, monkeys screaming—hell, it's *all* suspicious. After a while, your eyes get to playing tricks on you. You begin to believe you can see things that may or may not be there. And what I saw, late that night, just as sure as I'm sitting here, was a gook coming out of the trees and beginning to crawl toward us across the clearing."

I could feel my mother flinch at the word *gook*, but I was enthralled.

"Really?" I asked. "What did you do?"

"What did I do?" Scott repeated, as though posing the question to himself for the first time. "Well, I'll tell you what I didn't do. I didn't shoot off a flare, or go wake someone up and ask for help, or any of the other things I probably should've done. I still don't know why. I guess I was just too goddamn scared."

"Scott," my mother said again, but he held up his hand, stopping her.

"I just kept sitting there, squinting my eyes in the dark, praying to God they were playing some kind of trick on me. I'm telling you, it was *terrible*, the worst night of my entire life by a long shot. I wanted to yell out to the guy in the clearing, *Hey, you stupid goddamn gook, can't you see I've got a gun over here and I'm going to have to put a bullet in your brain if you get any closer?* I kept imagining myself squeezing the trigger of that gun. *Bam bam bam bam*—right through his brain. But the more I imagined it, the more scared I got."

"Then what happened?"

"Yes, finish your story," my mother said.

"I will, but you're not going to like it," Uncle Scott said, crushing his cigarette in the ashtray and taking another one from my mother's pack. "Morning happened. The sun came up, and by the light of day I saw very clearly that the gook I'd been so worried about all night long was a fucking water buffalo."

"You're kidding," I said.

"No, I'm not."

"A water buffalo?"

"Yeah, *hee hee hee*, a fucking water buffalo!"