

# I Made Oprah Scream

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I WAS ON THE OPRAH WINFREY SHOW, and I made her scream in front of a live audience. Can you believe that? She actually covered her mouth, bent over, came back up and let out an *ohmyGOSH!*—or words to that effect—in one sweeping, dramatic motion. All because of me. I can't remember her exact words, because I was blinded by the lights, and my legs were wobbling on those four-inch stiletto heels strapped to my ankles. So I was focused on trying not to fall and getting this whole thing over with as fast as possible.

But when I emerged from behind the curtain, there she was, waiting for me on center stage, all lit up with her Oprah smile, looking expectant (or was it impatience I saw), and then seeing her face change—the brown eyes growing big, the mouth forming a perfect O and then out came that unintelligible yowl telling me she was pleased, that I was doing okay, and that today's show was going to be a success. Imagine that. Me—a forty-three-year-old divorcee and kindergarten teacher with two kids of my own—who has nothing profound to share with the world, much less with Oprah Winfrey and her 10 million viewers. I've never written a book, never developed a tried-and-true diet, never discovered the meaning of life. I'm lucky to make it to school on time—much less understand the meaning of my own life or why I tend to be tardy. I made Oprah gasp in disbelief in front of millions. I still can't believe it happened, but it did.

MY BEST FRIEND, JULIE, who is a life coach, surprised me on my birthday. She managed to get two tickets to the Oprah Winfrey show, and she even drove us 362 miles to see it.

We live in Lake Grove, Minnesota, which is considered a bedroom community south of the Twin Cities. At one time, it was all farmland filled with miles of corn and wheat and barley that waved and *whistled* in the wind—bleeding into the hot summer sky, like some edgeless, endless amber ocean. But then developers came to town, took over the land, and parceled it out into condominiums, apartments, commercial centers, one-family homes. They rolled out miles of concrete roads, connecting everything together and stomping down any possibility of green life ever springing up again from our rich black soil.

I grew up on one of those farms—on land less than a mile away from the town home I bought after my divorce. I can't say my divorce from Mick made me a better person or uplifted my soul in any way, but it was the right thing to do. Mick is a good guy, but he wasn't ready to settle down. Still isn't, for that matter. But he makes me laugh, and, believe it or not, he's still one of my best friends. Most important, he's a good dad to our kids. Danny is ten; Gena, thirteen. Danny adores his Dad; Gena now realizes she's more of an adult than he is.

And then there was Larry. "He's tall, athletic, funny . . . *rich!*" Julie laughed when she said that. "Nice. Polite. Successful. He's perfect for you."

So Larry and I went out a few times, and as that old song goes—*zing went the strings of my heart*. How does one control the zinging tendencies of that tenderest of all organs? How do you control sensations that send you soaring to the clouds one minute, then tumbling back down to earth the next, then up again? I sure don't know.

It was the age-old struggle—head versus heart, fairy tale versus common sense. My heart told me I couldn't live without him. He turned me on. I felt alive when I was with him—excited, fulfilled. I couldn't stop thinking about him. Okay, it's corny; it's cliché, but I'll go ahead and say it anyway: *he completed me*. Okay?

But my head was telling me something else. *Whoa*, it whispered in my ear. *Step back. Take it easy; something's not right. Something's missing here. Something important. Don't rush into anything you'll regret.*

So that's what I was enduring for a month or so. My head, getting dizzy from the roller coaster ride, trying to tell me something. My heart, wanting more, not listening, luxuriating in the rush of it all. Fortunately, however, Larry made the decision for me.

"You're a wonderful woman," he said one night as we sat parked in his Porsche. "You're intelligent, funny, warm, kind, full of life. But . . ."

Well, you know the rest. He wanted to be friends, and he meant it. He really enjoyed my company and wanted me to be part of his

life. And—I have to admit, he was very kind when he said this: *there is no attraction*. “I wish there were,” he said, looking sincerely sad. “There isn’t. But I respect you so much.”

Ah, yes, respect.

I have to admit something else. I haven’t been completely honest here. So this is where I’ll give you the full picture, or as much as I can. Larry is CEO of a financial consulting firm in downtown Minneapolis. He owns a ten thousand-square-foot home in Lake Grove’s tonier section. He wears customized silk suits, gets facials, massages, and manicures every week, and is often pictured in *Twin Cities Magazine* attending the latest fund-raiser—holding a drink in one hand and a beautiful blonde in the other.

I, on the other hand, wear the same T-shirts and jeans I’ve had since I was twenty-one. When it’s cold, I cover them up with an old flannel shirt that’s quite faded and frayed. I do that because I find them familiar and comforting. Besides, I don’t have time to fuss or to figure out what I should wear today. It simplifies my life.

Now you can understand why Larry and I were not a good match—at least on a surface level, so to speak.

When dressing up, I usually wear a black skirt and white blouse; or a white blouse and black slacks. I don’t fuss too much with my hair either. It’s now a mousy brown streaked with gray (okay, it’s gray streaked with mousy brown), and it’s down to my waist. I haven’t had the time (or inclination) to get it cut. On special occasions, I twist it into a bun; or I wear it in a pony tail when I’m running late (which, as I mentioned, is most of the time).

I don’t have the time or patience for makeup either (or sleep, for that matter) so my eyes are a bit baggy and red-rimmed. My eyebrows have invaded my forehead—much like urban sprawl has invaded poor Lake Grove. And my skin—my best feature, actually—is starting to blotch in odd places, which I’m told is part of the aging process.

I am tall (five-foot-eleven), broad-shouldered, small-busted and have sturdy, child-bearing hips, but I have kept my small waist and thin frame.

People, being kind, have called me *handsome*. “You’re a handsome-looking woman,” they’ll say, or “striking” or “I bet you were once a beauty.”

Well, that brings me to why I was on the Oprah show and how I made her scream. As I mentioned, Julie wanted to celebrate my forty-third birthday—and also to console me for getting dumped by Larry. Unbeknownst to me, however, the theme of this show was “surprise makeovers for deserving teachers.”

Julie had nominated me for a makeover, citing my commitment to teaching, the extracurricular programs I introduced to help trou-

bled students, my being nominated for teacher of the year, my commendations from parents, principals, and coworkers—and, of course, my T-shirts, jeans, flannel shirt, unruly eyebrows, and long gray hair. Apparently Oprah’s producers felt up for the challenge.

So I was called up from the audience and tried to acknowledge everyone’s applause with a gracious smile, hoping the camera didn’t pick up the malevolent look I gave to Julie (who knows how much I hate such attention). Then I was hurried offstage and handed over to an army of beauty specialists, who—I swear—stepped back, frowned, and took a deep breath when they saw me coming.

Three hours later they brought me to a mirror to see my transformation. A camera crew was there to capture the moment. Needless

Cristóbal Balenciaga.  
*Evening Dress*.  
Silk, 1960–1962.  
*Evening Jacket*.  
Silk, cotton,  
and sequins, 1959.  
Cincinnati Art Museum.  
Gift in memory  
of Irma Mendelson  
Lazarus. Photograph  
by Walsh, 1999.

to say, I was dumfounded. Actually, there are no words to describe what I saw. This beautiful woman was standing before me. She had blond hair, highlighted in the right places and cut into a style called an angular bob. It was parted on the left, which meant I had to pull back hair that fell (like a curtain) over my right eye—a very sexy effect, Rudolfo, the stylist, assured me.

My complexion, now pink and ivory, was blemish-free, wrinkle-free, free of pores and texture and anything else resembling human skin. Gone were the pouches and puffiness I had learned to live with (where did they go? I missed them already). My eyes, dark and seductive in a way that scared me, were framed by no-nonsense brows plucked thin and pointing upwards. My fingers and toes still tingled from the buffing, poking, and polishing their nails recently endured.

The stylists decided I needed some glamour, so they chose a black cocktail dress, cut low, held up with spaghetti straps, and slit thigh-high along the side. Diamonds hung like chandeliers from my ears and in cascades around my neck. A security guard suddenly appeared to watch my every move. The shoes, they explained, called attention to my long legs, *which people would die for*, they gushed. Then they pushed me toward the curtain to get ready for the *big reveal*.

Afterwards, Oprah sent me home with the dress, the shoes, the underwear and suitcases filled with cosmetics that would last a year: foundations, concealers, blushes, brushes, lipsticks, lip liners, glosses, blemish removers, eye shadows, base shades, contour colors, mascara, eyeliners, and other “aids to maintain the illusion.” She also presented me with a \$5,000 gift certificate to Macy’s. The security guard took custody of the diamonds and then disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Needless to say, this experience changed my life. When I got home, I was featured in several local newspapers and interviewed on Twin Cities radio and TV talk shows. At school, Bert Lomax, our principal, convened a special assembly to honor my work and present me with a plaque that will be hung “in perpetuity,” he announced, in the school cafeteria.

But my students turned shy around me—which saddened me. They began to focus on the thick blond hair falling into my right eye and not on my words encouraging them to blossom and learn. Fellow teachers would compliment me on each new outfit I wore in *happy* voices that sounded forced and flat.

Gena and Danny were not as awestruck or impressed, however, which was a good thing, because it yanked me back to reality. I was merely a mom, after all.

“Let’s go,” Gena would yell, pounding on the bathroom door. “We’re late. You’ve been in there an hour.”

"I'm almost done. And it's only been thirty-five minutes. I've just got mascara to do, and I'll be all set."

"That's what you always say."

"Mo-o-o-m!" Now it's Danny whining at me. "I've got to pee. Hurry up."

So this gives you a sense of what went on every morning at our house, as I tried to resume a normal life, while maintaining the "look" that stunned Oprah and captured the world's admiration. But it wasn't all bad. This is also the look that brought Larry back into my life and helped me see my beautiful self in another new way.

He called soon after the show aired and, in a voice that had developed a strange purr I hadn't heard before, invited me to a cocktail party at the University Club on Summit Avenue. It was a fund-raiser for the Children's Theater, and a lot of politicians and corporate honchos would be there.

"Wear that black dress?" he murmured.

"Sure," I said. "And the same shoes?"

"Absolutely."

He didn't take his eyes off me the whole night. Nor did he remove the hand that clung to my waist and pushed me around the room, as he introduced me to friends and associates, all puffed-up and proud, like a car collector driving around a red Lamborghini and honking for attention: *See? My car's bigger than your car.*

That's when my head finally took control and talked some sense into my wishy-washy heart.

The next day I dumped a year's worth of cosmetics into a black garbage bag, tied it up with a plastic yellow ribbon and drove it to the local woman's shelter, who will distribute it to women learning to live better lives. The black dress, shoes, and silk underwear went into the garbage.

I'm keeping the new outfits I bought at Macy's, though, because they're well made and will probably last me another fifty years.

As for my sexy blond hair, I'm letting it grow out; and when it does, I'll cut it off; go short for awhile. Each morning I check the gray roots that are taking hold on the top of my head, and I feel stronger somehow, more myself. It's like watching weeds wiggle their way up through cracks in a sidewalk and slowly, inevitably, reestablishing their rightful place in a concrete world.

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