

**I got this Oprah gig**  
**(from the book *Depression The Comedy* by Jessica Holmes)**

In my 20s I soaked up every motivational philosophy I could get; from Oprah

“You become what you believe”

to Herman Melville

“It is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation”

to Blake from Glengarry Glen Ross

“Always be closing.”

I felt like there was an answer to every problem, and I could only succeed or fail by my own chutzpa. And ya know something Pat? (May I call you Pat?) It worked. For all the embarrassing times I had to pay my dues by wearing a mascot costume, doing pool-side comedy, or impersonating Martha Stewart while handing out stinky cheese to party-goers who were completely embarrassed for me, I’m happy to say, it all paid off! Unfortunately the payoff came smack in the middle of my undiagnosed depression, so I’ve basically experienced *great* success and been extremely sad about it. That’s the state I was in when my hero came to town.

In the spring of 2012, my blackberry beeped with the happy news that THE Oprah Winfrey was blessing Toronto with a visit. I rose from the comfort and safety of my blue sofa, stretched out the kinks, and walked to the next room where my computer sat in its 48<sup>th</sup> hour of rest mode.

*This would be so much easier if I had one of those old people scooters.*

I took the cat off the keyboard, nodded up at Oprah on my vision board and ordered a pair of tickets for her one-day-only show. “Oprah can turn our luck around” I told the cat, who pretended not to hear me. Back to the sofa I went, proud of having done a thing.

Less than 24 hours after the irresponsible purchase, I got a call from a producer I’ve worked with asking if I’d mc the event.

Me: Just a sec, I gotta sit up for this.

Producer: Huh?

Me: This is a big deal. Really. Thanks. (sigh) But, shoot. I already bought tickets. Can I get a refund?

Producer: No.

Me: Oh well. I'd love to mc regardless. Neat.

*Neat?*

A major coup for my bucket list and all I could think was "neat"? Neat is a 30%OFF promo code for GAP. Neat is finding jeans under the bed that smell clean enough you wear them a third day in a row.

Me: Something doesn't add up here, kitty.

Cat: (silence)

I sat with the news for a few minutes, waiting for the moment when it would feel real, when I would believe it. A therapist later told me that depressed minds are like a sieve that only allow negative information to pass through.



My brain's little sieve continued to accept neat, and some d⊕ubt. But none of the deservedly

**\*E\*P\*I\*C\***

Twenty minutes later, when I couldn't push past feeling doubtfully neat I decided to ignore the news. I didn't call my agents who would have drummed me up a mountain of publicity:

## **“Medium-Town Girl Opens for Greatest Human”**

Nor did I drop the standard humble-brag online “omg Oprah must have terrible taste cause I'm one of her 'Favorite Things' lol #blessed #lucky #annoying”. Didn't start writing customized jokes, or visualize receiving a standing ovation so grand that a defeated Oprah, standing backstage, shrugs and says to Gail “no point trying to go on after that”. Instead, still splayed out on the sofa with Dr. Phil on pause, I made a whiny mental list of all the gigs that had been promised to me but never materialized. It's kind of a given in the entertainment industry that things fall through. It happens at the A list level: “they just booted Terrence Howard out of the next Iron Man” and at my humble Canadian level: “things fell through and you won't be the next Stephanie Massicotte”(she's a weather girl in Saskatoon). I even had a sold out show opening for one of my idols cancelled the night before due to a contractual dispute between them and the producer (maybe not enough rose scented candles or green m&ms? I never found out anything beyond “these things happen”). Insecurity is such a given that most actors learn not to get invested until they're actually on set, just to make sure they don't yell “smell you later a#&hole” at the manager of the restaurant where they're waiting tables until they know the starring role was a sure thing. But there's a difference between not counting your chickens before they hatch and telling eager, available chickens to f%&k off. I knew I'd been in a funk lately (by lately I mean a few years) but I assumed my personal lack of fanfare was either me needing more iron in my diet, or having off-the-charts humility.

*I guess I'm so grounded giant career coups slide off my back!*

Intimidated by the pressure to make the most of this rare and exciting opportunity, I thought it wisest to tuck into a ball and go back to watching Dr Phil chastise deviants.

*Peace.*

Months passed. I had a gig here and there, and otherwise spent my days lamenting how the grass is always greener anywhere but here. “I bet the people who work at banks aren't sobbing about failed potential and eating ice cream out of the bucket with a fork they dug out

from the sofa cushions right now”. A nagging buzz kept telling me to seize the day and splash my news across the internet, but the stronger that feeling got the more I clung to my sectional for dear life and turned up the volume on reality shows to distract me. I knew something wasn’t right, but sort of the same way you don’t pick at the corners of trippy 70’s wallpaper because there may be pastel botanical 50’s wallpaper underneath, I felt like if I just kept pressing ahead I could out-ignore the abyss forming beneath me.

*I just have to keep my mind occupied.*

Watching Tyra Banks tell a girl that she had to smile less with her mouth and more with her eyes while I practiced along at home made me feel like I was doing something.

*I have goals!*

My husband texted from upstairs “are you picking up the kids from school today?” and I texted back “no, I’m working.”

I hadn’t been to the school yard in months. I felt like a fraud around people. I avoided hanging around the school, the park, and the local pool (to be honest I stopped going to the pool when I started appearing on tv and was approached by a fan in the open concept showers who wanted to know all about the biz while her kids curiously eyeballed my naked body).

*Yup. Home alone is the place for me!*

The night before the big show, when no one told me otherwise, I figured I was actually going to be allowed to host. I slept at the Intercontinental Hotel to ensure a smooth morning (one without kids rubbing toothpaste on my dress or asking rapid-fire questions like “what are teeth made of?” while I say “I’m too busy to answer you” but really I never have answers and don’t want my kids to feel insecure because their mom lacks general knowledge). A thousand other women had the same plan, and the hotel was booked to capacity. I guess we all called down for breakfast at the same time because there was a two-hour wait for eggs and toast. On an empty stomach I showered, straightened my hair, and slipped into a beautiful white silk sheath dress one of the sponsors had sent over (they don’t do that when you work at a bank, I noted gratefully). I put on my nude five-inch heels and felt instantly important.

*Look what's happening to Jessica Holmes... I mean, me!*

Security (by this I mean well-groomed guys in suits and earpieces) was abundant, and a good thing too because the audience was testy after hours of standing in line with no assigned seating. It was so chaotic that Oprah made an unplanned walk through the audience to make up for it, shaking hands and thanking people for their patience. People tumbled over each other to grab at her or snap frantic selfies or shout “you are Jesus reincarnated” and security steered her backstage.

I watched it all on a monitor in the wings while I sipped coffee through a straw and ate packets of sugar because sugar is a form of food. Apparently there was a whole greenroom somewhere but I was trying to play it cool and look like I belonged and therefore couldn't bring myself to ask “hey, where are the snacks at?” Although Oprah's company was producing the televising of the event, a separate Canadian company was producing the live components, and I seemed to have fallen in the cracks between the two, other than one of the Chipendale-inspired security guards telling me “Oprah and Celine Dion are friends, so don't use the Celine camel toe joke”. I had a mouthful of sugar in that moment so I just nodded and gave a thumbs up.

Finally I was announced, and I danced onto the stage in front of 9000 giddy Oprah fans, handing over the reigns to my inner muse, and committing to my act. I opened with a request that the audience take a deep yoga breath, hold it in, and “forgive the long lines” (which got a good laugh). I told jokes, did some impressions and sang a song as Celine Dion, complete with the camel toes chorus (sorry sexy security guard, but it was too difficult to find an alternative rhyme for “paint your heart with my highs n lows” on an empty stomach).

I felt relieved to finally be up there. Adrenaline pushed me past my lethargy. My mind was so calm. Like when you jump into a lake and realize how quiet it is underwater. No “what ifs”, no jealousy, no comfy sectionals to lay on while agonizing over wasted potential. None of it. I did a good job up there.

Overall it was an incredible show! World-renowned experts on self-actualization like Deepak Chopra and Iyanla Vanzant gave deep and charming insights into the soul. One of the guest speakers was Tony Robbins, a man whose 30-day motivational cassettes (yes, cassettes!) had fueled my early career success. After I introduced him I came off stage and texted Scott to

pick up celery if he got the chance. When the first show was finished, a new audience came in and we repeated the process. More jokes, more speakers, more sugar.

Four hours of feel-good anecdotes and hoopla later, the 2<sup>nd</sup> show drew to a close. Security shoed everyone but me out of the backstage area.

And there she was.

The Oprah.

She walked off stage into the wings and stood 12 feet away from me in a beautiful red dress. Smiling at no one in particular she slapped her hands on her hips with a satisfied exhale.

*This is my moment!*

I just stood there, looking at her like some hungry old timey orphan staring into a pastry shop window. Paralyzed with insecurity. I wanted to at least say a polite “thank you Ms Winfrey” but all I could muster up was “ ”. A moment later her team whisked her away and she was gone. <sup>1</sup>

When I got home that night I looked up at my vision board, made years earlier with pictures of nature, musicals, Africa, veggies, and Oprah watching over it all like Glinda the Good Witch.

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All my aspirations had materialized (except for the ridiculous ones like vegetables) and even now, with this new milestone under my belt, the most optimistic reaction I could summon was, again, neat. I unfolded the list of takeaways I had jotted down that day.

*If I just pull myself up by the bootstraps and focus on the positive  
and eat healthier and play with more kittens  
then I can outrun this dark cloud.*

I had written myself notes like this before, trying to keep up with Jones' of the smoothie-drinking, yoga-doing, list-completing crowd. Bucking up (and drinking coffee) could channel moments of fleeting motivation where I'd eat more celery and run around the block and focus desperately on the positive, but inevitably I'd land back on the sofa, feeling like a bigger failure than before, looping back over my insecurities like a broken record.

*I've wasted my career.  
People are embarrassed for me.*

All the good advice in the world can't fix a funk when that funk is a depression.

**But** here's the great thing about us humans; whether we face great physical or emotional hardships, or like in my case, lose the will to dream, somewhere in the far corner of our minds, we still reckon something better *could* come along. There are times in life for lofty goals of

success and creative fulfillment and self-actualization and making your own marshmallows or whatever other “favourite things” Oprah is championing. And then there are times when you need a simpler objective. Beneath my vision board, I taped up a new mantra; a placeholder, just till I felt less like a human turd. It’s a line from Dory, when she’s lost in Finding Nemo:

just  
Keep  
Swimming.