



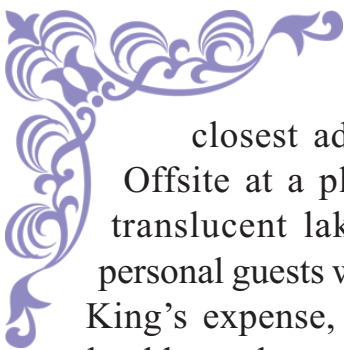
A Fiscal Fairy Tale

By Tom Brown

The word went forth as it did once a year, every year, by courier and by whispers, by elevated speech and by e-mail. The King at last had chosen the dates for the major meeting of all key players in the kingdom, and so the word went forth. And the word was: *Offsite!*

Each year, the King relished the chance to call together his best knights, his key

Cindrella



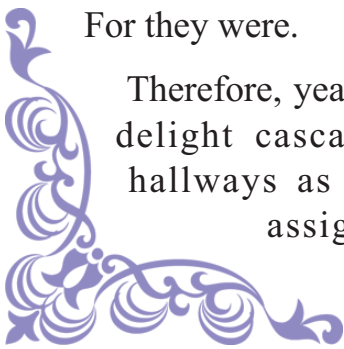
ministers, and his closest advisers for a three-day Offsite at a plush lodge alongside a translucent lake. Spouses and other personal guests were freely invited at the King's expense, as no monetary limits should ever be set for an Offsite. It was a special time for boundless celebration.

There were always elaborate spreads of food for each and every meal: carved ham for breakfast, filets upon croissants for lunch, and enormous shrimp for dinner. Freshly baked cookies and handmade ice cream punctuated the meetings in the afternoons, which only seemed fitting given the delectable just-from-the-oven strudel that came during the morning breaks.

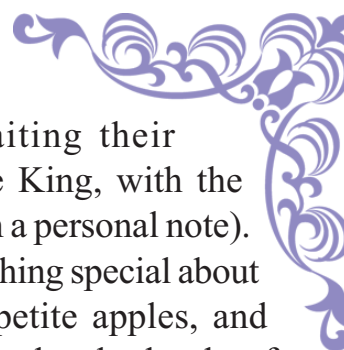
Linen tablecloths covered each and every table, except in the meeting room itself, where stately stuffed chairs ringed the impressive oak table that seemed to intimate that only big decisions were to be made upon its shiny surface.

When invitees — having come by airplane, helicopter, car, coach, or limousine — checked into the lodge, bellmen snapped to! The arms of all the helpers spiraled downward as servants bent over to convey, “Your most unreasonable wish is my most desired command!” In the lodge, all who served the King and his consorts knew the King's men and women expected to be treated like managerial royalty.

For they were.



Therefore, year upon year, whoops of delight cascaded down the hotel hallways as guests entered their assigned lodging and discovered the



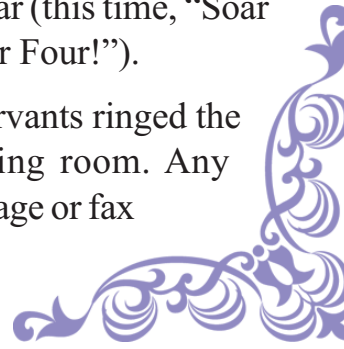
enormous basket of “surprise” treats awaiting their arrival (courtesy of the King, with the royal stamp waxed upon a personal note). There was always something special about the wrapped cheeses, petite apples, and crisp crackers hidden under the bottle of expensive wine nestled in the shredded plastic grass. Knights have been known to

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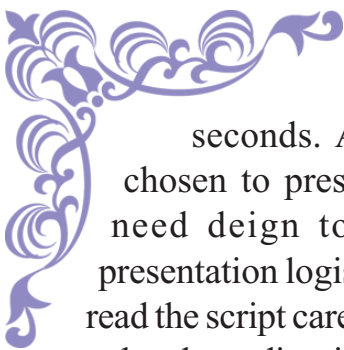
weep at this annual act of thoughtfulness by His Highness.

And yet such excellent edibles fell into the shadow of the Offsite itself. An array of personalized business goodies always awaited all participants. Rich leather portfolios, engraved with each attendee's name, served as the place card for assigned seating. Those who made the most profit during the current year always seemed to end up sitting close to the King.

Inside everyone's new case were well-researched and heavily edited status reports on each and every business in the kingdom. They could be found in separate binders, right next to the monogrammed pens that conveyed the King's personally picked theme for the current year (this time, “Soar for More *Before* Quarter Four!”).



A full entourage of servants ringed the perimeter of the meeting room. Any special message or package or fax was conveyed to its



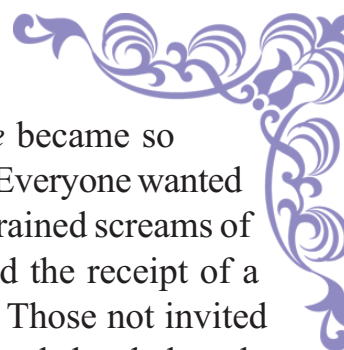
designee within seconds. And of those ministers chosen to present to the others, none need design to manage any of the presentation logistics: each merely had to read the script carefully written by minions so that the audio-visual attendants could flip flipcharts, move over overheads, slide ahead

With such pomp, this is how the word Offsite became so revered in the kingdom.

the next slide, or maneuver the mouse in synch with computerized graphics.

The King sat at the front, of course, in full view of everyone else so that he could be heard in case he wanted to whisper some comment or question of consequence. He rarely did. Instead, hands set upon his rotund tummy, he beamed and added an occasional “Ooh!” as each courtly presentation announced a level of economic success only dreamed about at the start of the year — to which all in the room applauded, even the servants. At key moments, most around the table scribbled something short and barely-legible on their monogrammed notepads.

Such fun could continue for hours. Alas, the business sessions always adjourned early so the King and company could play croquet, or golf, or tennis, or polo — or whatever each and every guest wanted to do. It was the way that all could unwind before the onerous demands of the banquet and dancing that capstoned each Offsite day.



With such pomp, this is how the word *Offsite* became so revered in the kingdom. Everyone wanted to be invited, and unrestrained screams of joy always accompanied the receipt of a personalized invitation. Those not invited looked on in jealousy and drooled at the regal invitation.

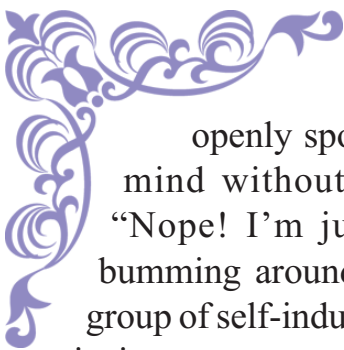
Then there was Cinderella.

“What do you mean? I say! *What exactly do you mean?*” shouted Cinderella’s vice president, the person in the kingdom to whom she directly reported. The VP was so flustered that she slammed down the phone on which she was talking, while simultaneously conversing with Cinderella.

“I don’t want to go to the Offsite. It’s a huge waste of time! I’d rather do real work,” said Cinderella, her raven locks drooping down her forehead. Far from being timid about the subject, her phrasing was direct, reflecting the common sense that guided her words.

“You? You! You... *not* go to the Offsite? That, that has never — *never* — been done before. *Everyone* wants to go to the Offsite! It’s what we all live for. It is the supreme invitation. To go to the Offsite, to be *invited* to go to the Offsite — is the be-all, the very pinnacle of serving the King. You *have* to go to the Offsite! You must. You must. You simply *must!*” The VP shouted so loud that her secretary entered her office uninvited, thinking something dire or dangerous must be afoot.

When the secretary retreated, Cinderella, her pale face exhibiting an almost naive honesty,



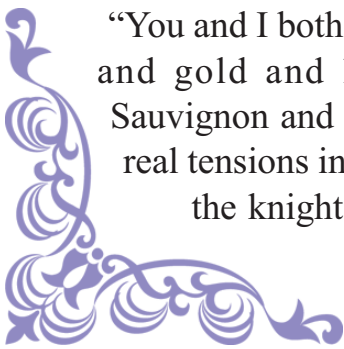
stared at the VP and openly spoke her convictions and mind without the least indecision. “Nope! I’m just not going. Listen, bumming around for three days with a group of self-indulgent ministers and their insincere spouses just isn’t something I want to do. This wasn’t in my contract. It’s not in my Statement of Work. I never shook hands on this. Forget it! I’ll stay here; you

Gussy yourself up so that every prince wants to dance with you before anyone else.

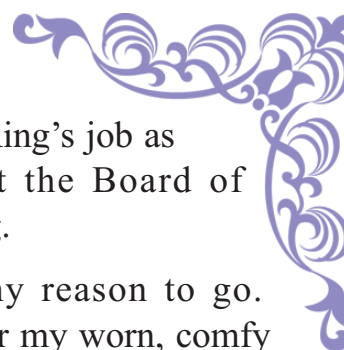
go! Call me if anything happens that I don’t already know.”

The VP, whom Cindrella once considered almost a “stepmother” because of the generous counsel she imparted when Cindrella first came to work, was aghast at Cindrella’s stunning illogic. She started to speak, but all that came out was a stuttered “Wha... Wha... Whattttt... Wha...” as her eyes watered from the anger rapidly blooming on her reddened face.

“C’mon,” Cindrella urged, “you and I both know that everything at this pompous affair is an act — total histrionics — done by everyone to make the King feel like things are just peachy here.



“You and I both know that all the glitter and gold and leather and lace and Sauvignon and snails can’t conceal the real tensions inside this kingdom! Half the knights orating their carefully scripted kisses and



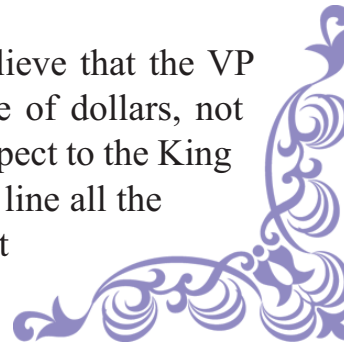
comments are actually plotting to snatch the King’s job as soon as they can get the Board of Chancellors to go along.

“I just don’t see any reason to go. Besides, I’d rather wear my worn, comfy jeans than go out and buy an evening gown for all the ballroom dances.”

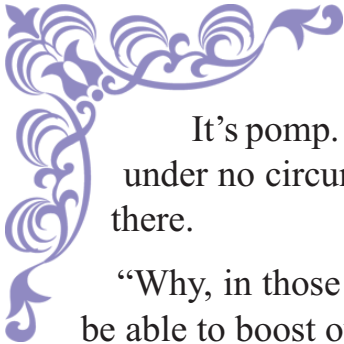
The VP was indignant and enraged. She still didn’t know what to say, and she surely didn’t know how she’d explain Cindrella’s rebellious attitude. How could she possibly tell the King and his top ministers that beautiful and smart Cindrella, her best-performing subordinate, wouldn’t be coming to the Offsite because — because *she flat out didn’t want to?*

“Cindrella!” she yelled. “Cindrella,” now spoken in a softer tone, then rising to a shriek, “YOU ARE GOING TO THE OFFSITE!” The VP collected herself and held up her hand to keep Cindrella from replying.

“Now, here’s my personal credit card. Buy whatever clothes you need. They will be on me. Buy good stuff — the best; I’ll expense them somehow. Don’t worry about it. Just get whatever you need. Gussy yourself up so that every prince wants to dance with you before anyone else.” Then, as an afterthought, “Why, I know... Cindrella, you can even fly to the resort *First Class!* Okay?”



Cindrella couldn’t believe that the VP thought this was a case of dollars, not sense. “With all due respect to the King and everyone down the line all the way to you, I’m not



going to the Offsite.
It's pomp. It's *pompous* pomp, and under no circumstance do I want to be there.

“Why, in those three days, I just might be able to boost our market share another point each day by staying here and getting my real job done. *That* makes overwhelming sense to me! Tell 'em I had to stay home to help my sisters with a home improvement project.... Tell them whatever you like!

Oddly, Cinderella was completely unshaken after the encounter.

“But, for the last time, I'm not going to the Offsite.

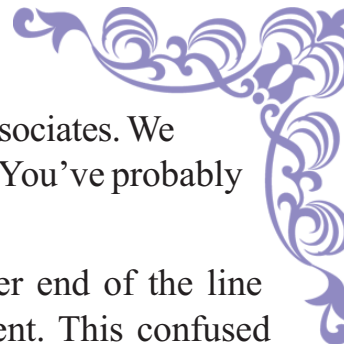
“Not! Not! I'm not going!”

With those exclamations of finality, Cinderella politely excused herself, leaving her VP stammering some unintelligible patter about “career-limiting moves” followed by “Cinderella! CINDERELLA!” spoken with a detectable level of panic.

Oddly, Cinderella was completely unshaken after the encounter. She went straight back to her desk and resumed her work, much as if nothing unusual had happened.

The phone rang, and at the sound of the jingle Cinderella gulped, thinking it might be her VP, or worse. “Hello,” she squeaked.

“Cinderella!” the voice chimed through the telephone line.



“This is Frances Fairy — of Godmother and Associates. We do executive recruiting. You've probably heard of us.”

The voice on the other end of the line was perky, even ebullient. This confused Cinderella, since she didn't know anything about Godmother and whoever it was.

She spoke with hesitation. “Yes?”

“Hey, Cinderella, we happen to have a senior position now open in another kingdom. Based on our research, this would be just right for you — and a huge promotion!

“Any chance you could fly out for an interview? I can send a coach to pick you up immediately; there's a plane leaving on the stroke of midnight.”



The End



Illustration and layout by Mac Thornton

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