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The Royal Treatment

Every young girl dreams of being a princess, wearing a diamond-encrusted tiara, and residing in a medieval castle protected by a moat and a drawbridge. Every young woman realizes that, while some dreams may not come true completely, bits and pieces of a fantasy can be found in ordinary situations. The little luxuries that are afforded us during special times of the year can make us feel as regal as the Queen of England. As a Thanksgiving weekend tradition, my parents plan a day of culinary adventure and holiday cheer to make a mundane afternoon into something extraordinary. For my family, the Christmas season is welcomed with the tradition of family-filled frolicking in downtown Cincinnati.

Oh, to live the restful life a pampered princess! The day after Thanksgiving is the closest experience I will have to that life. There is nothing better to soothe the tired soul of a college student than sleeping late. Layers of warm fleece blankets, soft flannel sheets, and my grandmother’s down quilted comforter nestle me into a protective cocoon that warms me though the crisp, autumn night. When I finally rouse from my cozy lair, I slip on my plush velour robe and fur-lined booties to make the descent to the kitchen.

“Good morning, Cook. Beautiful day for an adventure, don’t you think?” I state aloud. I look around the kitchen only to realize that my princess fantasy has vanished upon my waking. No regal chef is available to prepare my meal. I decide that sweet pink grapefruit and creamy vanilla yogurt will satisfy my budding appetite and calm the fluttering butterflies in my stomach as I anticipate the day ahead.

As I finish breakfast, the hot shower beckons me with its revitalizing powers. The invigorating scent of the citrus shower gel and the powerful rush of steaming water enliven my senses and energize me for the day to come. My sister and I coordinate our outfits to prepare for any photo opportunities that will arise during the day. We can never be certain when the meddling paparazzi, also known as our parents, might try to capture a keepsake moment. I dab on bit of my favorite fresh and fruity fragrance, and I am ready to go.

“Ladies, your chariot awaits.” My dad’s deep voice bellows from the lower level of our house. “We have reservations! On a busy day like this, they won’t hold our table if we are late.” He smiles when he sees us come to the door. “They won’t hold our reservations, even for beautiful princesses like my daughters! Let’s go!”

My dad is always the comedian! There isn’t really a chariot or a limousine awaiting us in the driveway. Instead, we pile into our blue sedan to begin our adventure. The brief car ride to town helps fuel our excitement. Sentimental carols are playing on the radio and the spirit of Christmas grows stronger. There is eager conversation recounting the events of the previous night and wonderment of what our escapade will offer. It’s thrilling to drive by families setting up Christmas lights and other holiday displays. Some multi-colored lights are carefully placed as if outlining a gingerbread house, while other homes are accessorized with simple white lights. We wave majestically to the dedicated decorators. As we drive into town, we’re greeted by store window displays that are stocked with new toys adorned with red velvet ribbons. The season’s fashion trends are highlighted with red and green sparkling backgrounds. The sidewalks are filled with bustling shoppers bundled in warm clothing as they cautiously tote their treasured purchases. The city has been gift-wrapped in preparation for the holidays.

Arriving at our destination, we are greeted curbside by the valet service as the uniformed bellman from The Cincinnatian carefully opens our doors. The gracious treatment offered to guests of The Palace Restaurant is something everyone should experience. The professionally attired associates of The Palace treat their guests like members of the royal family. The maitre d’ welcomes my family and graciously accompanies us through the etched glass doors and into the golden-hued foyer. Every corner of the restaurant has been decorated for the holidays. Fresh pine garland wrapped with crimson velvet ribbon is draped along the cherry banisters of the staircases. Glittering snowflakes hang delicately overhead. Lifelike reindeer stand leisurely near the grand entrance to the restaurant. The lighted evergreen trees strategically frame the stone fireplace where the crackle of a warm fire brings a comfortable ease to the opulent setting. The soothing sounds of Christmas carols are being strummed on a gilded harp. The vision of my childhood castle fantasy has come to life.

As we stand atop of the lighted staircase, and gaze over the beauty of the formal dining room, it’s easy to imagine the shiny brass trumpets sounding to announce our arrival. In my mind I hear the maitre d’ say, “I now present the Cappel family.” I feel like Cinderella as she entered the ballroom for the first time. We gracefully descend the richly textured stairs and are ushered through the restaurant to find our reserved seats. We are shown to our table that is set with a crisp, white linen cloth, topped with sparkling sterling silver place settings, and adorned with crystal water goblets.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentleman. Welcome to The Palace Restaurant. My name is Francine and I am here to serve you today. Your wish is my command,” the woman states. Our server places snow white napkins on our laps as she graciously hands us the black, leather-bound menus detailing the overwhelming assortment of delicacies from which to choose. As we begin to peruse the extensive menus, a variety of freshly-baked buttered rolls seems to magically appear on our table. My sister comments on how cute the busboy is, but I can’t focus on anything beyond the menu in front of me.

The plethora of dishes that emerge from the kitchen can only be compared to the scene from *Beauty and the Beast* where the kitchen comes to life! It truly is an extravagant banquet. I take great pride in extending my culinary appreciation by trying something new each visit to The Palace. This year, I may choose the spicy sausage with penne pasta or be truly daring and order the smoked salmon and Caesar salad. No matter which entrée is chosen, it is imperative to save room for the crowning touch of the meal. The desserts offered at The Palace are impeccable and the selection is beyond comparison. A personal favorite is the crème brulée topped with a variety of seasonal fruits. This creamy custard concoction combines with the crispy sugar topping to create a heavenly experience for the mouth. A steaming hot cup of *café au lait* marks the end of our decadent meal. The day at The Palace is just as lavish as one could imagine.

As we don our woolen winter accessories to prepare for the blast of cold air, we are overwhelmed to witness the horse-drawn buggy waiting for us. As the coachman helps us onto the richly padded seats, the horses snort and whinny indicating their readiness. The driver cautiously directs the horses as we travel through the streets of Cincinnati. We pass the baby blue boxes in the Tiffany windows and dream of shopping in one of the most prestigious stores in the country. Seeing Fountain Square during this festive time of year is quite a treat! The ice rink is full of couples skating hand-in-hand as they enjoy the carols playing from the nearby speakers. Little children skating for the first time have wobbly ankles and red chapped faces, but they beg for one more time around the rink. The huge evergreen tree, which will be lit later in the evening, is the centerpiece of the square. The cool afternoon breeze brings the scent of street vendors’ warm, sugared almonds, fresh roasted coffee, and a variety of gourmet cocoas. The sound of jingling bells from the friendly Salvation Army volunteers sitting with their red buckets creates a sense of goodwill. Fountain Square is certainly full of Christmas spirit. From our perspective, riding high in the coach, it feels as if we’re in the parade for the Windsor wedding. Everyone pauses on the streets to admire the horses and our antique carriage. There is nothing like the sights, sounds, and scents of the Queen City during the holiday season.

“I think my nose is frozen,” my sister whispers in my ear. She is cautious not to frighten the horse with any loud noise. They are gorgeous animals, but we want to be sure they don’t get distracted for our final stop.

The sun begins to fade and the open-air construction of the carriage offers little protection from the plummeting temperatures. As our carriage returns to its station, we offer our heartfelt appreciation to the driver. We are relieved to find the valet has our blue sedan warmed up and waiting for our arrival. We make the journey back to our humble home. The life of a princess is fun-filled and adventuresome, but relaxing at home is a treasured reward. The rich food of The Palace has been exchanged for reheated leftovers from Thanksgiving. The excitement of Fountain Square has been replaced with watching NFL games on the television. Living the life of relaxation and luxury for the day is a wonderful experience I look forward to every November. Spending the day making memories with my family is irreplaceable.