

THE ILLUSIONIST

Facing another year of number-crunching servitude under the credit-snatching E. Forest Greg, Rita called a headhunter. Rich Paris had just the opportunity for her: a fast-growing *Fortune* 500 with great fringes, competitive salary, and innovative people. She agreed to lunch, but warned she wasn't about to become another Gretchen Schmidt, pigeonholed at thirty. "Trust me," he said. "You want to hear this."

After Greek salad and jasmine tea, Paris ordered their table bussed and put on white, sequined gloves. He set a black top hat on the ivory table cloth and began placing things in the hat, like a number two ranking in *Who's Who* of Financial Services; skyrocketing earnings; holistic mentoring by one of three PPCs (Personal Performance Consultants). An industry-leading stock purchase plan and an 18-floor miniature golf course were other facets of this work-hard, play-hard culture with branches in Brussels and London.

Next, with a sparkling smile, Paris drew feathers from Rita's cap, presenting each in its best light before placing them in the hat. There were her immaculate transcripts, a semester in Florence, three volleyball state championships, two early promotions, and four blue ribbon citations as a volunteer for the Special Olympics. Paris added a tender letter of recommendation from Rita's first manager, Oak Hall, who called her the pearl from a grain of sand.

Finally—nothing up this sleeve or that—Paris reached into the hat and drew forth a mother of pearl career with immaculate feathers and blinking blue eyes. He let it flutter-balance on his finger while Rita caught her breath, then he extended his hand to her. For a moment, Rita wondered about busy-season overtime. But she held her tongue. Any doubt, she knew, and it might all vanish as if it had never been.

