



READYTOREAD.it



Francesco Forlani

Calls

TURIN PALACE
HOTEL

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Calls

Valérie had been working for a Grand Hotel for around fifteen years. It had always been considered the most literary hotel in the whole world. There were so many writers, men and women, who had spent at least one night there, that they had to update the visitors' logbook each year, or to add new brass plaques with the names and surnames of the writers to the cafeteria tables. Ever since fifteen years ago, when she was first hired, there had not been one single staff member, from bellhops to waiters, or even the managers, who hadn't wondered how Valérie had managed to be hired in a hotel whose distinction was an almost maniacal need for its employees, in whatever position, to be good-looking. Because Valérie was not good-looking. Rather, the opposite. Some even swore they had never seen an

uglier woman than her. Valérie, though, was not an ugly person. Anyone she met on the short walk leading from one of the service entrances to the office, where she worked as a telephone operator, was greeted with a smile. Nobody ever thought she was an unhappy person. Perhaps, this was because of the quiet calm with which she performed every task at work. Quite the opposite, in fact. She behaved like someone who felt comfortable in her own skin, someone who identified not only with her body but, in some way, with the whole world around her. However, only she knew this, and no one else, because of the “rule”.

Each hotel employee, however, knew that Valérie’s voice was an extraordinary wonder. Whoever had been lucky enough to hear her speak, even just for a simple service announcement, had been mesmerized by it. Someone had even managed to secretly record a tiny bit of it.

There was a specific clause stating the relationship she had with the hotel, which mandated that she

was to remain invisible. She couldn't be seen by anyone, unless incidentally and unexpectedly along the short corridor leading to the small office where she, alone, carried out her duties as an operator.

The hotel could vaunt, among its most frequent guests, a particularly wealthy client who, according to all staff members, from the highest-ranking ones all the way down to the lowest, was especially loyal and generous because of Valérie's voice.

This is why when a request from the Client to meet Valérie was delivered to the manager's desk, the handwriting perfect on the hotel stationery, he had no choice but to summon all management to try to come up with a reply for that – to put it mildly – embarrassing proposition.

– What's the rule that you've all been taught since the moment you've crossed the *maison* threshold?

Faced with silence, he continued:

– There's still a chance in life to separate hopes and expectations. In a big hotel, there are no hopes, only the clients' expectations that can never be disap-

pointed. As you can imagine, the situation is quite delicate...

- Excuse me, sir - replied the restaurant chef, the first one in importance and rank out of the three. He was a fairly large man, his size also due to being almost two meters tall, which made him look well-proportioned under his slimming apron.

- What needs to be decided, with your final say in the matter, of course - he said, looking for his co-workers' attention - is if you agree to answer the request of the client honestly or dishonestly. The first will surely expose you to the huge risk of delivering your biggest client such a shock it could jeopardize not only the *maison's* reputation, but most importantly the turnover that is already weak as is, with the recent terrorist attacks and the global recession. On the other hand, if you planned an *escamotage*, the risk there would be even worse.

The golden rule in the hospitality industry is, in fact, to never offer the client a service different from what was promised. On that note, there was a ru-

mor circulating for a while saying that a restaurant in Caserta, "*Da Peppino si mangia male*" – Peppino's has bad food – had just shut its doors after barely one year of activity because, despite the name, the food was great and this was unforgivable. But besides all that, what is the truth, the reputation of a place, if not the perfect balance between expectations and their fulfillment? Beauty is the stronghold. At least this is what our hotel manager had advocated until now.

Of course, as the *maître d'hôtel* pointed out, it was still such a small chance, one in 207 to be precise, the exact number of employees. To which the manager reacted with his more stinging aphorism, the more ineluctable of the thousands of sentences noted down in his inseparable red notebook:

"A man who falls in the water and stays a few centimeters beneath the surface does not drown less than one who sinks to the bottom of the sea". To which all turned to the *maître nageur*, the hotel pool responsible, and the first one to laugh was the manager himself. The

meeting was postponed for another day, with the goal to find a solution to that puzzling setback that was close to ruining every sacrifice and proof of dedication shown by all so far.

And what of Valérie, in all of this? Had she heard something, at least a whisper of the tragedy that was happening on the nobler floors of the hotel? Nothing indicated that she knew anything of the issue, or that she was the one in the eye of the storm, because it was an actual eye, and not just any eye, but one that belonged to the biggest client of the hotel. In the morning, she had carried out each one of her assigned duties and, with her usual proverbial kindness, had answered each one of the clients' calls. She noticed only one strange thing, which was the absence of a call from *Milord* – her nickname for him, for that gentlemanly tone and the generous tips he had given her, that she would unexpectedly find in her paycheck at the end of every month. It's not as if the name of the benefactor was written any-

where; not at all, but a couple things had convinced her it was indeed *Milord*: her female intuition, and the fact that the *pourboire* would always be the same amount, a thousand two hundred euros. Luckily she didn't spend all of it in drinks, but also food, and in some cases she even allowed herself a small gift in the mall, a *Bois d'Hadrien* elixir or the purple vial of the *Tenue de soirée*. That's right, because Valérie had one particular whim in that wretched existence of hers, and it had a name: *Annick Goutal*. Since the moment she discovered the old St. Sulpice perfumery by chance, she had almost felt touched, as if by a caress, by that ancient scent, the deep feeling of being immersed in a world she had never stepped into before. In the perfume, existence itself seemed to remove the need for weight, for tangible matter, for a physical presence, beautiful or ugly. That immediate transformation into a cloud had given her the illusion of being an equal among equals for the first time. She now had nothing to be ashamed of, not of her body, nor of the terrible discrimination

that mother nature, now more than ever the evil stepmother, had hung around her neck, the label on a suitcase that one just wants gone.

After all, wasn't it her fate, not the first and certainly not the last, to be left at birth at the church steps by her parents? So what? There was not one voice in the world, not even the most beautiful one, that could compete with taking in all the scents in the whole world, all in a simple perfume bottle, or coming from the hedgerow of the Jardin du Luxemburg, which turned out to be another fundamental stop in Valérie's voyage on earth.

And what about the wealthy client? The one who unknowingly dared to challenge the first rule of his favorite hotel. What of *Milord* – as Valérie would have said. What were his titles? Was he married? She didn't know much about him, except for his age, clearly indicated in his ID, and his profession, also specified in his passport – although very imprecise with that vague *rentier*. And, of course, his true

CALLS

elegance. Little else. She knew nothing of his history, of the more authentic substrate of his lineage. Who, after all, could ever think of asking him who he was or where his fortune came from. The hotel world is like the foreign legion, the code of secrecy is everything.

No one knew anything or could ever imagine that it was indeed him, Valérie's dad, the client spending more time than anyone else under that roof.



THE AUTHOR

Francesco Forlani



Born in Caserta in 1967, an Aquarius, he lived between Paris and Turin. He founded the Paso Doble and Sud international magazines. He has published many books in both French and Italian. He also translated books from French and, in addition, was a poet, standup comedian and performer. He has written and interpreted many theatre plays. He is the editor of the Nazione Indiana literary blog. After working as a correspondent and a reporter, he now is the artistic director of Focus-in, an Italian-French magazine.



The Lounge of the Turin Palace Hotel,
harmonious mix of soft shapes and enveloping colors

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