

Dreams of Passion Fruit

The Fontainebleau Hotel is the crowning glory of Aldwych, an establishment that has been the temporary home of countless household names, anonymous financiers, dignitaries and the odd lottery winner. Its opulent façade, originally planned as a homage to Gothic Revival, had eventually been sacrificed at the altar of Art Nouveau, to mixed reviews from critics at the time. Palatial and imposing, the exterior attracts a high number of craning necks on any given day, proof that experts cannot always accurately predict popular acclaim. Guests without a standing reservation usually look at a period of six to nine months for room availability; that is, if they want a standard double room – the deluxe suites, for instance, require booking twelve months in advance.

Cas does not want to know how much guests pay; it would probably make him cry. If one day he has money, real money, he will not spend it here. No matter how beautiful or historic a building is, it is not worth it for him.

This morning, Cas cannot stop to admire the intricate wallpaper in the lobby or make small talk with Kevin, the concierge. He knows time is of the essence – guests at this hotel are not expected to be patient. All three lifts are on their way down; meanwhile, he checks his uniform for creases, he straightens up his name tag and wipes his glasses. A quick look at the grandfather clock behind him reminds him that the Fontainebleau Hotel has been here for decades, and he is only here for a short while if everything goes according to plan. This is his first job at a hotel, and he hopes it will be his last. The middle elevator arrives in the lobby and Cas hops in.

He has been called to room 815, on the eighth floor of this luxury hotel. Casimiro has been told his name is too long and complicated for guests to read on his tag, so he has been invited to choose an alternative, and he chose Casi, but HR shortened it to Cas, as the hotel has an unwritten policy of favouring the trendy over the genuine. And they would not want to disappoint their guests.

Once at the door of room 815, he knocks gently but confidently, and when the guest opens the door, he smiles sympathetically.

“I am so sorry you had to experience this, madam,” he says before he even has a chance to step into the room.

This is a standard phrase he has been instructed to learn and spit out at every negative guest experience. Flavia, his manager, is Brazilian like him, but she has been able to retain her entire name on her name tag, as it is deemed guest-friendly. Her theory is that most customers accept feeling uncomfortable with the hotel having an unpronounceable French name, as it gives it a touch of sophistication, “of ooh la la,” she says and giggles.

Casimiro laughs too. He likes talking to her in Portuguese during their breaks after all the rooms have been cleaned in the morning. They often catch up over coffee and any pastries left from the continental breakfast.

“These people,” Flavia says with unconcealed disgust, “they want the level of the Savoy but want to pay more like Premier Inn. But the staff here is nice. It’s a family.”

Casimiro knows this will not last forever and he will move on to a new job eventually. Even though he appreciates the friendliness and the free food, he will leave this hotel family behind one day.

“I will clean right away,” he tells the woman in room 815. He can tell she looks tired, overnight flight, most likely. He proceeds to change the sheets with a big smile on

his face, trying to convince her that she has made his day by finding a tear on the sheets right after checking into this five-star iconic London hotel.

He shakes his head, “Oh, I see what you mean, this is broke, broken, I see the gap, the hole. Sorry. So sorry you have to experience this problem, madam.”

He has practiced this look of outrage on his face, of an unforgivable mistake being made, a mishap that could be ruining people’s stay at the hotel. He is fully aware that the world has bigger problems, but he has been trained to treat every request as a serious matter. He pulls the sheets towards himself briskly and throws them on the ground while he shakes his head as if they were a disappointing child, as if the percale sheets should have known better, what with their 400-thread count and their lack of pedestrian polyester.

Then Casimiro resumes his smiling and, in order to reassure her while she stands awkwardly in front of him, says, “I will make this bed with new sheets right away. I will make sure they are fine. Apologies.”

“Yes, please, that would be so kind, we only just arrived, and we were about to take a nap, you know... jetlag, but we noticed the sheets are torn.”

Where is the other half of *we*? Casimiro wonders if the other guest meant to be in the room has gone down to reception to enquire in person about the status of the sheet replacement. If Flavia were in the room, she would remark – in Portuguese – that these are the people who spend inordinate amounts of time filling in surveys to complain about anything that doesn’t go their way right away every single minute of every single day. “Like children,” Flavia would say. “Tantrums, tantrums, tantrums.”

The female guest hopes Cas doesn’t think she tore the sheets with her boyfriend having some kind of epic Cirque-du-Soleil-type experience on the bed. She still can’t say the word *sex* even when talking to strangers in her head. She has paid a lot for that room, and she expects decent bedding, which is why she called housekeeping; so was it really

necessary to travel down eight floors and accost Kevin? Despite her protests, her boyfriend has gone down to the lobby to talk to the concierge, in person, hoping to receive some kind of compensation for this minor headache. The embarrassment is starting to seep through her underarms, so she decides to speak to Cas to distract herself.

“Where are you from?” she asks.

“Brazil. From Brasilia, you know? The capital.” In his experience, nobody knows.

“Yes, the name, yes, I’ve heard of Brasilia but I’ve never been,” she replies.

She has never heard of Brasilia and is sure the capital of Brazil is Sao Paulo. Or is it Rio? Maybe Cas could be right, and the capital is not Rio but Brasilia? She would double-check on her phone later, after her nap. She had never been to Brazil, but her last serious boyfriend had been to Rock in Rio in 2015, as he was a big fan of Metallica and Os Paralamas. Their relationship had come to an end during that trip, while he was away in Brazil. He had called her from the stadium halfway through the concert and screamed into his phone that she should be as happy as he was right now, and that wasn’t going to happen if they stayed together. She could hear a song in the background; “Enter Sandman” played live in front of thousands, people screaming while her heart disintegrated over a man who did not have the decency to send the message *after* the show. No wonder it took her so long to trust men again. Meanwhile, Casimiro silently stretches the fitted sheet and tucks it in, corner by corner. She snaps out of her memory and adds, “My hairdresser is Brazilian. Lovely lady. Always cheerful. Lively clothing. Very hard-working.”

Casimiro grins, hiding his discomfort, worried that she might ask whether he knows her hairdresser because, of course, all Brazilian people must know each other.

“Have you been here long?” she asks.

“A month. No. two month. Thank you.”

“Do you like London?”

“Thank you for asking. Yes, still very new. Very cold here.” He shivers as if to explain his words to her, as if she too were speaking a second language and needed the visual. But he can tell she is a native English speaker – she speaks in short sentences so that he can understand. *I’m not an idiot*, he thinks, *I’m just nervous, because I’m new at this job and English is my third language, after Portuguese and Spanish*. He smiles to overcompensate like he does every time he is interacting with hotel guests.

“Do you miss the weather in Brazil?” she asks.

“Yes,” he replies instantly. “And my family. And the friends. And my old job. I was engineer in Brazil.”

Casimiro knows his Italian grandparents, who abandoned Sicily after the Second World War, would be perplexed at the thought of him choosing London over Italy. They are no longer alive, and Casimiro now thinks he might understand better than ever what it must have been like for them back in 1949, with no mobile phones and no Air Italia flights. They knew nobody in Brasilia. They met on the boat to South America. The voyage, weeks’ long. The language, a mystery. The food, an adventure.

Now, Casimiro thinks, all I need is to save money for a few months and go back to breakfasts of guava and mango, and feijoadas for lunch.

From his uniform’s pocket he retrieves a lavender eye pillow and places it on the bed. These are for deluxe suites exclusively, not for standard rooms like 815, but Cas wants to make a difference and knows these don’t cost much to the hotel. Flavia taught him this little trick – it doesn’t take much to make these people happy, they have everything money can buy, what they want is to feel special, that somebody cares about them. Sometimes it’s an eye pillow, sometimes it’s a small bottle of cognac. He has learned how to read each guest and is confident he gets it right by now.

“There... it is ready.” You could bounce a coin off that king-size bed – this is perhaps his best work yet. He admires it for a second, then turns around, ready to leave.

She walks towards him. “Thank you. *Gracias*. I really need to rest now. You’ve been so kind. My name is Jane, by the way.” She shakes his hand and hands him two notes – fifteen pounds in total. Casimiro has registered the fact that she has spoken in Spanish instead of Portuguese, but he doesn’t bother to correct her. He knows better than to contradict a guest.

“Hope you are satisfied,” he says. “If you are satisfied, please leave me good review. Thank you, thank you. Have a nice day.” Guest comments are sure stepping-stones to earn a bonus at the end of the year, Flavia told him. Yes, the bonus is something he needs if he is to return home soon.

Flavia reminds him of his mum, who is still in Brasilia. “Life is just three days long, son,” his mum always says, “and we are already on day two.” He tells himself that this will all be over before he knows it.

Casimiro will wait until he is in the staff room to count the money, but he can guess it will be between one and two hundred *reais* once he converts it. It was a good-looking bed. He closes the door of room 815 and thinks of passion fruit.