



GOLDEN BOOK HOTEL STORIES

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# HOTEL MILÓ

~ LACERNA ~

*The Miló is an imaginary Golden Book Hotel situated in the town of Lacerna, which is also imaginary, as are the characters of course.*

*However, the hotels that offer this story are not imaginary – for years now, our **Golden Book Hotels** have tangibly linked their image with the gracious gesture of offering a book to guests and friends.*

*The story is part of a series of episodes written by a number of our best authors, amateur writers whose work and literary talent we are committed to promoting. Happy reading!*

member of

**GOLDEN BOOK HOTELS**





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**EBOOKCROSSING**

**GOLDEN BOOK HOTELS**

*Lacerna, 1st July 2011*

*The Miló Hotel, recently appearing in the Golden Book Hotels, is an exclusive, elegant but very particular hotel. It is said that it is able to change shape according to its guests' secret wishes, and even to let them travel through time and space.*

*A mysterious legend surrounds the hotel concerning its builders, the Miló family, whose women were suspected of witchcraft. Not many people know the truth about the hotel, but I am among those who do. For years I worked at the reception desk, and if I had not resigned, I would certainly have been the next manager of the hotel. I left the hotel in the hands of Guido, the present manager, the young and inexperienced clerk Anna, and Pietro, the bizarre man Friday with an obsession for music. Together they will have to learn to live with the mysteries of the Miló hotel and manage its guests.*

*Do you think it's an easy job?*

*It's not at all, especially if you don't know the whole truth about the Miló.*

*Perhaps Guido, Anna and Pietro's responsibilities are beyond them, but – even if I can't be sure things will go as I have planned – I have faith in them.*

*It is a long story waiting to be told.*

Mario

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a hand holding a string of light blue beads. The hand is rendered with soft, painterly strokes, showing the texture of the skin and the intricate details of the fingers. The beads are arranged in a neat, slightly curved line. The overall color palette is warm and soft, with hints of purple and pink in the background. The illustration is framed by decorative orange corner ornaments in the top-left and bottom-right corners.

GOLDEN BOOK HOTEL STORIES

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# Double room

by

Francesco Manzo

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## Francesco Manzo

(1959)



An engineer, he works on industrial installations in the Mediterranean Basin. A voracious reader, he had never written anything, apart from a few technical-scientific articles, before entering and winning Eureka! Literary competitions with his brilliant stories and beginning his successful partnership with Golden Book Hotels. As well as travelling and reading, Francesco loves dedicating his free time to his touring bike, his wife and his two children, not necessarily in that order.

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## Double room

Alberto will be here in a few hours.

After five years, he'll come down to the Miló hotel once more.

Ever since I saw his name on the list of reservations, I keep going back over the evening I met him.

It was the day when I rebelled against the rules and put my job and my future on the line.

Yet today I still don't know if Alberto guessed at my role in the episode that involved him. Nor would I be able to say if he ever knew my name or could remember my face.

I only hope that what I did for him was not in vain after all. But what's the point of wondering too much.

He'll soon be at the Miló.

I'll soon know.

The Miló. That strange building that stands where Viale Murata ends and the sea begins had always fascinated me.

I would observe it from the beach during the long walks along the strand I took with my father in all seasons.

I'd grown up, and I had lost my father, but I still continued running on the beach, because doing so made me feel good, and to do so I had to feel good.

And the Miló was still there, reassuring me with its presence.

I knew that the five-storey building, with its sinuous façade and a roof that made me think of a sleeping dragon when I was a little girl, was a well-known hotel listed in all the tourist guides, but I only knew its outside appearance. On the other hand, I've always lived in Lacerna, and the hotels in your own town are the ones you never go into.

I was twenty the first time I happened to set foot inside the large room, just inside the main entrance, that constituted the hotel's foyer.

I should have left some accounts documents at reception and gone.

Instead, I stayed for over an hour that afternoon, entranced by the elegance and harmony of the décor in the reception area. The elegance was not intimidating, but invited you to relax and give yourself over to the hotel's hospitality.



I thought it would be wonderful to work in that setting with its delicate colours and hushed sounds, and I was even more convinced when I saw Mario, the receptionist.

He was ten years older than me, and I didn't think he was particularly good-looking, even if he had regular features, very well-groomed dark hair and expressive, black eyes. I would probably not have noticed him if I had met him in the street.

However, behind the wide solid walnut desk, Mario struck me because he exuded self-confidence and competence. He seemed to be the affable controller of the destiny of whoever approached him for one reason or another. This definition only occurred to me some time later; there and then I just thought that he was the man I would like to spend the rest of my life with.

Perhaps he had been impressed by my blonde hair, or my emerald green eyes inherited from my father. He held out his hand and asked my name.

"Anna," I replied, and felt embarrassed that I was blushing.

I stayed chatting with him for a long time that afternoon. I also met Pietro, the night porter, an odd character with

big glasses and bouffant, curly hair, who hung around the hotel also during the day. He joined us, showing off his repertoire of steps. In his syncopated, concise speech, he explained that over the years he had put together a huge collection of different footsteps and ways of walking, stealing them with his cassette recorder from the people he met. He claimed he could figure out people's character and dreams from their footsteps. He said the hotel was the richest mine he had ever found. Watching him affectionately, Mario said he had never known a night porter he could describe as normal.

"What about my steps?" I laughingly asked Pietro.

He made me cross the foyer several times, watching my feet at first with amusement and then with absorbed, serious interest. For a moment I thought I had unsettled him, but then luckily he started laughing and said "You have confident, harmonious steps. You could do anything in life. You could even become a perfect receptionist!"

The three of us laughed light-heartedly for a long time. Saying goodbye, they both invited me to come back.

At home that evening, I thought that working at the Miló would be the best thing that could ever happen to me.

I went back to my part-time job as a secretary in the



*"I knew that the five-storey building, with its sinuous façade..."*

dusty office of an accountant instead, dreaming of a more engrossing job and a love that would have given meaning to my life, and cheered only by the long runs along the strand that I continued to do every morning, and which gave me the strength to go on.

In fairytales, the characters' dreams usually come true to restore the world to its proper order. When it happens in real life, it's only because sooner or later you have to pay the price.

A fortnight after my visit to the Miló, the hotel manager, who I'd sporadically had telephone conversations with about accounting matters, unexpectedly phoned me. He needed an administrative assistant, and asked me if I knew one.

A week later I started the job, and everything was as I'd dreamed it would be. The hotel's hushed atmosphere was reflected in the mood of the employees and guests, creating a calm, harmonious environment. The work didn't weigh heavily on me at all; on the contrary, I enjoyed spending a large part of my day in an exclusive, cordial little world.

The only thing that turned out not to work well was my passion for Mario. I soon realised that I was enthralled

by his strong character, that I hung on his every word and copied everything he did, while I tried to spend most of my time with him. We always went out together. His enthusiasms and his hobbies became mine. He was interested in travelling and adventures and we talked for hours about the trips he would like to make. Until after a while, I realised that I had stopped doing the things that I liked, and I began to feel a veil of unhappiness enshrouding my spirit more and more every day.

I spoke to Pietro about it, because I felt that hidden behind his bizarre sense of humour was the only person who could understand me.

And he didn't disappoint me. "I sensed it from your steps," he said with a slightly sad smile. "They've changed. You don't run on the beach any more."

I realised I couldn't go on like that any more and decided that at a certain point I would have to leave Mario, even if it meant leaving my job at the Miló hotel.

I would go back to being a part-time secretary in a dusty office, but I would have started running on the beach again.

I wrote a letter of resignation and waited for the right time to hand it in. But I couldn't make up my mind.

There was a part of me that never wanted to leave the Miló, or Mario.

My unhappiness kept growing, though, and one rainy November morning I left home certain that I would find the strength to cross the foyer and deliver the letter into the manager's hands.

As often happens while we struggle to make decisions that seem so important, life takes turns that can make our anguish irrelevant in just a second.

That very morning, Mario was not at work. He had sent a letter giving in his notice definitively and without explanation.

According to Pietro, he had become tired of seeing others travelling, and with an unexpected leap had crossed over to the other side of the desk.

I was relieved and sorry at the same time, but my nagging doubt was whether I would really have found the courage to hand in my notice that morning. Fate had given me back my job at the Miló, but I was not sure that I truly deserved it.

The loss of his receptionist was a bitter blow for Guido. He considered reception to be a key factor in running a hotel. You start off in reception, and if you are good at it you can become hotel manager. Guido had chosen



*"...and a roof that made me think of a sleeping dragon when I was a little girl..."*

Mario to ensure reception was perfect, and perhaps, as was rumoured, to take his place when the time was right.

For the next four weeks, he rolled his sleeves up. He covered all the most important shifts at reception himself, while he also continued to be the manager of course.

We employees knew that the situation was not sustainable. Although the Miló was not very big, it still needed a proper staff. It was clear, however, that Guido was taking his time in coming to a decision. He was preoccupied, and we often saw him in the hotel foyer, lost in thought before the big window overlooking the sea. We expected him to call experienced candidates to put through a shrewd selection process. Nothing happened for four weeks, though.

The wait for Guido's decision became spasmodic as the days went by. Rumours began circulating. It was said that the hotel was for sale, or about to close, and so it made no sense to look for a receptionist. Someone hinted perhaps that was the reason for Mario's sudden departure; he'd found out about the owner's intentions and hadn't thought twice about looking for a new position.



Pietro also seemed to have become irritable, and that was saying something about someone like him. Without a receptionist, our lives seemed to have become uncertain.

At the end of the fourth week, in the early afternoon of a wintry day barely warmed by a weak sun, we heard Pietro and Guido talking excitedly.

I thought Pietro had caused some problem with a guest, but instead, he came out of the manager's office with a calm expression and smiled at me as he walked past.

I was about to ask him what had happened, but I didn't have time. Guido appeared at his door and asked me to come into his office.

The only thing about the Miló that had not captivated me at first sight had been Guido. He must have been almost sixty; some old photos he kept on his bookshelves told the tale of kilos gained and hair lost. The end result was seated before me; a tall, corpulent man, almost bald, with a severe expression. He looked like an austere university professor.

He asked me to sit down and said he had been watching me work for a long time. He had seen how easily

I got on with suppliers, agencies and the rest of the hotel staff. He explained how important the role of receptionist was for the hotel to run well. There's a right room for each guest, he said. Small or large, looking right out over the sea or a bit further back, with a view of the town's rooftops, every room has its own personality, and it must resonate with that of the guest. Many guests came back to the Miló also because they expected to find "their" room, sometimes more welcoming than that in their own homes.

I asked him why he was telling those things to me of all people. He replied that he was convinced that I had the right qualifications to work in reception. Not a job but a mission, he said. He knew that I was maybe still too young, but was sure that it would not be a problem. As he walked me to the door, he called me by my name for the first time.

"Don't let me down, Anna," he said.

We spent many days going round the rooms and learning their idiom, made up of sizes, views, furnishings and colours. Those that impressed me most were situated in the west wing and overlooked the sea. I imagined how wonderful it must be, especially on summer



*"...was a well-known hotel listed in all the tourist guides..."*

evenings, to look at the bay, empty then of boats and bathers, and admire the long stretch of sand, the sea and the orange-streaked sky.

I saw a solitary figure running on the beach. It occurred to me that it could have been me if I'd found the will to put on my running shoes again. In reality, though, I hadn't been running for months.

"I would have thought that these were the most sought-after rooms," said Guido, interrupting my train of thought. "But it's not always the way. The sea can be frightening and intimidating. Not everyone can stand listening to its voice on a windy night. You need stable people at peace with themselves to put up with the sight and sound of the sea."

The summer arrived slowly as I helped welcome guests. I carried out the registration formalities, and in the meantime I asked seemingly routine, casual but never intrusive questions to get a feel for their personalities, if they were new guests, or their mood that day if I already knew them.

Then I handed them the keys to their room.

I was at his side, trying to get a sense of that complex, magical job, and every day I learnt something more. I accompanied the guests to their rooms, or at least

to the lift, and I questioned them discreetly to understand the secret that tied them in some way to the room Guido had chosen.

And one day in July, five years ago, the time came when Guido had to resign himself to leaving me on my own. After many months, he went off in the middle of the afternoon for the first time. He had neglected his boat for too long, he told everyone with a smile. In reality, it was unlikely the mistral that been sweeping the bay for three days, making the summer day almost cold, would have allowed anyone to go out to sea.

I guessed that he was trying to reassure the rest of the staff, and probably himself too.

Pietro arrived at seven o'clock, four hours before the start of his shift. There was not much coming and going among the guests that evening, and few arrivals were expected.

Among these was a couple who having come into the foyer, stood to one side talking.

She spoke in an undertone, he nodded.

The girl was thin, tiny, with short, neat, black hair; she was dressed simply in jeans, shirt and a white cotton T-shirt open at the front. She was not beautiful, and seemed defenceless and determined at the same time.

The boy, tall, brown-haired and blue-eyed, continued nodding in agreement with her words.

How do you give the ideal room to a couple? I felt as if I had forgotten everything I'd been taught for a moment.

Their names were Alberto and Rita I saw from their documents. They would be staying for two days.

They seemed a very close-knit couple. He did most of the talking, but with an awkward air, as if he was reciting a list he had learned by heart. They wanted lactose-free milk for breakfast because she had an intolerance; they would not be using the hotel's private beach because Rita didn't like sunbathing. Pietro came over to the desk too, drawn by the conversation.

I tried to reassure them as much as possible, explaining that we would do everything possible to meet their requests.

Reassure them, those were the key words I thought.

With a smile, I gave them the key to room 303. I remembered the delicate pastel green floors, the warm-coloured, simple, practical furniture and the atmosphere lighting that could be dimmed. I was sure I had chosen the right room. Pietro offered to take their luggage to the lift.



*"...but I only knew its outside appearance."*

“A special couple,” he said after he accompanied the two guests.

He fiddled about with the computer behind the desk for a few minutes. Then a series of sounds with a fast, decisive rhythm were heard.

“Rita’s footsteps,” he said, “short, unhesitating, all the same, up to the lift.”

He clicked on a second soundtrack. I prolonged, at times uneven rustle was heard. “Alberto,” he said, “uncertain, reserved, dragging.” He began to play with those sounds, mixing them together and synchronizing them with a music track from his collection.

“She is anxious but strong. A despot,” he went on. “He’s tall and robust but weak, a dreamer. She has taken him prisoner and drags him with her. He would like to escape, but he doesn’t have the strength.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Footsteps never lie.”

Pietro’s words kept on running through my mind during the following hour.

Like Alberto, I’d been a prisoner of someone stronger than me, and perhaps I would not have had the strength to free myself on my own if chance or fate had not come to my aid.



Would I be able to do something for Alberto?

Maybe I could, but the if idea that was beginning to take shape in my mind was successful, I would have betrayed my mission at the Miló.

Looking the other way was not like me, though.

By now it was after nine o'clock; I made up my mind, unhooked the key to room 105 from the board and headed towards the lift.

A quarter of an hour later I was back in the foyer and swinging the key to 303 before Pietro's eyes.

"I said we had a problem with the plumbing," I said, "and I moved them to another room."

"You gave them 105, the room nearest the sea," he said, looking at the board. Then he shook his head in disapproval.

On nights when the mistral blew, my father held my hand as we watched the sea from the beach. I covered my head with a scarf to protect myself from the sand driven by the wind and we stayed there watching that impressive spectacle that strikes your sight and hearing. That is why I know very well how a night when the mistral blows inspires the soul of dreamers who admire the power of the sea, while it breaks the ties that bind us to the rituals of every day.

That is why I can imagine how a night when the mistral blows can intimidate despots and the intolerant, making it clear how futile and precarious their control over the world around them world is.

I stayed late in the foyer of the Miló that night five years ago, waiting for some consequence of my actions to manifest itself, while the mistral streamed howling through the funnel of Viale Murata.

At one in the morning we heard raised voices coming from the first floor. The voices grew louder until we saw Rita come out of the lift with her suitcase. She crossed the foyer and went out of the hotel door without once looking back.

As she left the hotel, I couldn't help noticing Alberto silhouetted against the open doors of the lift, in pyjamas and wearing what I thought was an expression of relief on his face.

I woke early the next morning. The mistral had given way to a gentle breeze. I felt an irrepressible desire to put on my running shoes and run along the beach. I ran along the shoreline until I was breathless, wetting my feet and breathing in lungfuls of the iodine-charged air.

Passing in front of the Miló, I thought with a trace of melancholy of its guests. People the hotel offered a short break to, to catch their breath before they continued scrambling along the rocky road of life. As far as that mission was concerned, I had undoubtedly failed. And I would happily accept all the consequences. But I didn't feel that I had failed in my responsibilities as a human being, and that is what counts in the end. I crossed the threshold of the hall halfway through the morning.

Pietro was behind the reception desk. Evidently he had not gone home yet after the previous night's eventful shift.

He looked exhausted. A few days later I found out that he had spent a long time in the manager's office.

He managed to wink and give me a smile as I went to see Guido.

I went in and handed the manager my letter of resignation, the same one I had written months before.

He didn't bother to look at it. He tore it into four pieces and ordered me to go back to my post at the reception desk.

If you exclude the lines around his eyes and the still-brown but thinner hair, Alberto hasn't changed so

much. He has the same air of an awkward dreamer as five years ago.

The woman who accompanies him with quick, decisive steps is dark and tiny. She's not wearing jeans, but a short, apparently very simple skirt. Her name's not Rita, but for the rest she has a slight resemblance to her, and a determined expression like hers.

I look at Alberto and the woman with him, and I feel as if I've gone back five years.

I expect a sign from him, a hint that means he remembers me, the Miló and that night with the mistral when I tried to change his life.

There was a long moment of silence between us.

"Could you give me room 105?" he finally asked with an embarrassed smile.





drawings by  
**Anna Parisi**



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