

MOHAMED

MAALEL

THE  
EXTRAORDINARITY  
OF  
*MR PORT*

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ANNIVERSARY

**The extraordinary nature of Mr. Port is inherent in every man who demands wonders and every kind of extravagances from his life.**

He is not a pleasant man, for heaven's sake, nor a grumbling gentleman from another era. Mr. Port's peculiarity is to claim for himself what belongs to the lives of others. He is bold, obstinate, and in his telephone book appear few numbers - those that are sufficient for his social survival: his wife Gertrude; his daughter Amelia - whom he hasn't heard from in 10 years, who knows if the number has changed; and his analyst, Mr. F.

Don't think of Mr. Port as a rich man in search of more riches: he is not interested in money, rather it is the watermark that he passes through his hands every evening, before going to bed, that gives him great pleasure. He allows himself a few luxuries, often purely for fun: a public swimming pool that he rents only for himself, a solitary dinner on Thursday evenings at the Chez Nous restaurant on the main street, and a fleeting greeting to Mrs. Felicia.

Mr. Port is not interested in friendships, and could even do without family relationships. To his wife he prefers a glass of good vintage wine, to his estranged daughter a caress from a purebred cat, to his analyst a couple of valerian pills mixed with the previously listed glass of wine. Speaking of lists, Mr. Port likes to catalog his possessions according to daily use. In first place on this long list is his blue checkbook, while in last position there is a greeting card that his daughter Amelia gave him as a gift 10 years earlier.

Let us cherish the singularity of this man - Mr. Port is not a bad person at all, and he has never bordered on cruelty. Mr. Port, as he says of himself when a person asks him for alms, is a man of his own values, and if someone doesn't respect those values he could very well go to hell.

I met Mr. Port many years ago, when he liked to introduce himself by his first name, which I will avoid stating here. I was working at the STRAF Hotel, which had only been open for a couple of years next to the Duomo of Milan. I was a 25-year-old adult and responsible enough to seek independence away from my mother and father, Mr. and Mrs. Dolandi. To their sentimental precariousness - they loved each other just long enough to put me in this world, then spent the rest of the time blaming me - I preferred to invoke a better future in the city of great hopes. Mr. Port was for me the most memorable encounter of those bygone years.

"Good Friday morning, Mr. Receptionist. Don't you mind if I said hello to you first?" he asked me in a confident tone.

I remember well staring at him more than necessary. I noticed it from the way he touched his jet-black tie, and then unbuttoned, and then put the buttons on his jacket back together.

"Not at all, sir. Your tie is gorgeous, your suit is anything but obvious, and your cologne is one of the best I've ever smelled. Hints of jasmine, am I wrong?" I asked him, realizing that I had missed all the rules of good hospitality.

Mr. Port tapped the counter with his fingers a couple of times, then touched his nose and scratched it once, then twice, and finally three times, from right to left, vigorously. And then, he began ticking again, without saying a word. A long silence between him and me which only ended when another customer arrived, who simply greeted me with a gesture of conviviality.

"It's so unpleasant that people only say hello to people they already know. Don't you also find it unpleasant, almost repugnant?" he asked harshly.

"I probably agree with you sir. Don't you mind if I call you sir? I don't have your kind details yet."

Mr. Port then began to move his hands, then touched his nose a fourth, if not fifth, time. Was it perhaps a nervous tic, or an

illness he felt great shame about? The fact is that Mr. Port, still anonymous to me at that moment, forcefully took his passport and opened it next to me. With decisive gestures he began to read me each line, forcing me to follow his index finger which moved slowly and delicately. More generally, I can say that Mr. Port had well-groomed hands, perhaps with mint or almond oil, probably more minty given the smell they were giving off.

"My last name is this one, you follow me, right?" he warned me.

"Of course, Mr. Port, did I pronounce it correctly?"

"More than necessary. This is my nationality, this other data is not necessary for our conversational relationship. You're clear on the most important information, right?"

"Right. But I just have to make a photocopy, nothing else that could aggravate you."

He regained his composure and stood back straight and stared at me in silence. Every now and then, as I moved to complete the operational phases, Mr. Port smiled at me with satisfaction, almost pleased with my good practicality.

"You are a very practical man, Mr. Receptionist. Did you have a good education?"

"Enough to escape from my family."

"Well said, Mr. Receptionist. Tell me, has your family ever prevented you from becoming practical and responsible?"

"They expected me to become a lawyer. But I wanted to welcome people."

"Excellent thought, very pragmatic, Mr. Receptionist. Tell me, have you ever entertained the idea of becoming someone else?"

I looked at him confused, for the first time. Mr. Port had started preening back and forth, like a child in a sweet shop with a sizable note in his hand. He continued to look at me even when, with a very respectful and almost admirable gesture, I handed him a fountain pen. He held it with his right hand, then,

not satisfied, passed it to his left. Then he looked at me:

“Don’t you also think that it is really so limiting that our body chooses for us?”

I nodded in a sort of confirmation, but then I realized that it wasn’t enough, not for that gentleman who in the meantime was waiting for more than a confirmation.

“I think it’s really boring to entrust all our possibilities to a body that is aging in the meantime,” he continued.

Mr. Port composed his signature very diligently indeed: with his left hand he wrote his name, with his right his surname, with the final “t” bigger than the “p” of his surname. A small and meticulous detail that even Mr. Port noticed with veiled annoyance. Having understood his intolerance for his gesture, which was supposed to be dutiful but which in the end turned out to be practically incomplete, I moved the paper from under his somewhat widened eyes – those of a man who had read a lot but who doesn’t remember much.

I gave him the key to his room, a number that unfortunately I cannot reveal. Then Mr. Port looked at me for a fifth, maybe tenth time, and walked away towards the elevator where a few seconds later he disappeared.

I remember spending the afternoon reflecting on the dynamism of that man who didn’t leave his room for three hours, 45 minutes, and a few seconds. Mr. Port had ordered a very unusual room service indeed. He had asked for a salad made of only green leaves possibly bruised and with a few small holes, and some medium fermentation cheese. To drink, a glass of tap water with a basil leaf. He also asked that for the glass to be filled with the right hand. Last note, a very particular request, which made my heart skip a beat: “Please have everything delivered to me by the receptionist.”

When I reached his room, I knocked twice, ignoring the bell. Mr. Port welcomed me still fully dressed:

–“How did you know, Mr. Receptionist, that the ringing of the bell is not to my liking?”

“Maybe because I don’t like it as well, but this is a selfish

thought. I apologize for expressing it.”

“Don’t apologize,” he jumped. “Not with me, Mr. Receptionist. Come on in, I’ve decided to make you a new person.”

Mr. Port was thrilled that I didn’t respond to that request with words but with a pleased gesture that encouraged me not to hesitate too much on the edge of the room, the number of which - as I previously warned you - I cannot reveal.

All of his clothes were laid out on his bed, not distinguished by shade but by functionality, which I tried to imagine in my head. He convinced me to go to the balcony covered by long curtains, which he moved with great ease and shameless respect. Once outside, he asked me to look up at the sky, which was covered by large gray clouds promising rain.

“Have you ever been higher than the sky?” he asked me.

“My mother used to say often she was on cloud nine about something that actually annoyed me.”

“There is no measure for the sky, nor for the distance that separates us from the clouds.”

“It’s a great truth.”

“Tell me, Mr. Receptionist, how great is your desire for uniqueness?”

“More than necessary, I’m ashamed.”

“Don’t do it,” he said in a tone that seemed gruff.

He touched the edge of the balcony and pointed to the people moving below us.

“Do you know that right now we are above these people? Don’t you think it’s a useless waste of time?”

“Feeling above people?”

“Don’t be so frivolous, Mr. Receptionist.”

I felt guilty for my question being so tactless and lacking pragmatic. Mr. Port then indicated with a kind gesture that I

should return to the room. Only then I noticed his plate still full and the basil leaf floating in the water.

"It's my art, be pleased if I wanted to align the atmosphere of this room with my most personal vision of the world."

I simply nodded, respectfully, then headed for the exit. Mr. Port - who in the meantime had stopped beside his bed - looked at me straight and full of admiration.

"You, Mr. Receptionist, are a man of value and vision. When you return to your quarters this evening, think again about my proposal: do you want to be something other than what you already are?"

"I will, it will be my concern Mr. Port. I wish you a wonderful day."

That evening, while going home on the subway, I stared uninhibitedly and with considerable resentment at an engaged couple hugging in the chaos of the train. They were hugging each other, showing love for each other, not interested in a more considerable [NOT SURE THIS THE RIGHT WORD] and peaceful future. Who knows what Mr. Port would have thought, I wondered, saying that surname just enough to make a lady with a long brown fur turn towards me.

In my home, covered with posters of films I had never seen but for which I had great respect, I lay in bed, staring for a long time at the white ceiling covered with considerable white cracks. My white sheets - without a crease and smelling of bleach - covered a body full of issues. That night I dreamed I was a seagull: I was flying around my old house, the one I would inherit at the death of my parents, and I imagined Mr. Port giving me his arm. When I woke up, at twelve minutes past seven, I thought once again of the generous conversations with Mr. Port - both while silently chewing my rye bread, and when, always in silence, I washed every single layer of my body.

Once I entered the main door of the Hotel, I received very bitter news: Mr. Port had left earlier than expected, the previous evening to be precise. He had left no letter intended for me, not even a small note, no trace of his presence. I felt shocked, almost saddened, strongly betrayed: I promised myself that

from then on I would hate Mr. Port for the rest of my life.

At least until the next year.

I was busy filling out some notice when that scent hit my face enough to recognize it: Mr. Port stood erect and pleased, a face I had never forgotten.

“Good morning Mr Receptionist, once again I am the first one to greet you, what a strange twist of fate,” he said to me.

I had promised myself, in the previous months, that if I saw Mr. Port again I would behave in the most respectful but distanced manner possible.

“Don’t worry Mr. Port, welcome once again to our spaces. You don’t have to give me your document, I already have everything here. You stayed here last year, exactly three hundred and sixty-five days and six hours ago. But you left our facility early, I’m very sorry about that.”

Mr. Port observed me for a few moments, then with a respectful gesture he moved a few centimeters forward, towards me.

“Mr. Receptionist, don’t tell me that resentment has taken over your chest. It is a rule of good manners to preserve resentment only for a plate of overcooked pasta or a poorly cut fillet. You have already become something else last year, don’t make me think again about you.”

Then I took strength, while remaining cautious and firm in my position.

“Mr. Port, my deepest apologies.

I looked down.

“Would you like to accompany me somewhere?” asked Mr. Port.

I looked quickly at my colleague, waiting for her nod of agreement. Meanwhile Mr. Port watched us impatiently. I changed quickly, while Mr. Port stared with some curiosity at a jar of licorice candies made available for the customers. I thanked my colleague - I promised her to cover her shift the next day.

On the street, Mr. Port and I walked balancing the hips in the same way, matching every step. We didn't say any words, we both knew it would be a useless waste of time. Every now and then, as Mr. Port raised his head to the sky, I imagined what his past had been.

"This way," he announced after three hours, 15 minutes, and a few seconds of walking. I wasn't tired - that is intended only for unprincipled men. We had walked through much of the city, some narrow alleys, others larger and more pronounced. We arrived to a large dark green meadow with trees no more than a meter tall. Someone had kindly cut the grass earlier - it was no more than a few inches which brought great joy to Mr. Port.

"Please sit here, Mr. Receptionist. Exactly here, above this orange flower that clashes so badly with the compact green of this space. I can't stand the fact that nature chooses what I see. Don't you think so too?" he turned to me curiously.

"You're right, it's very annoying that nature has a plan designed for us."

Mr. Port nodded smugly, then remained silent. We sat in silence next to each other for five hours and 12 minutes. In that time we spent together, Mr. Port just breathed silently, without sneezing or panting, which made me really excited. My mother, when her husband was late, nodded to herself and panted at the door while I tried to read and memorize words in the dictionary. I watched the bright sky letting go to give way to the sunset, then to the darkness.

## **Finally Mr. Port spoke.**

"Tell me, Mr. Receptionist, were you happy when you were six years old?"

A few moments of silence.

"I'll explain. At six years old, do you remember a moment of great happiness?"

"I don't think I have ever been a happy child."

"Tell me: last night, as you were going to bed, did you feel happy?"

"I had a really bad day at work yesterday, Mr. Port. A customer..."

"Shut up," he interrupted me abruptly.

We were silent for another 10 minutes, my heart racing.

Mr. Port stood up without saying a word. He didn't ask me to follow him, but he didn't ask me to stay there either. For this reason - and for others that I only understand now but cannot say - I limited myself to following him, remaining a few meters away. I had disappointed him, I told myself. Why did I talk to him about my problems, as if he were a dear friend? How naive I was, how deluded.

Then he spoke, for the last time.

"If you want to become something else, all you have to do is stop being what you are. When nature understands that you being nothing is serious, it will try to give you everything necessary to be, I don't know, a lawyer."

"I don't want nature to choose."

"Then nature will just watch."

Mr. Port left that same evening and this time too he didn't say goodbye. I didn't mind. He came back to visit me every year, and each time we spent moments observing each other outside of nature, beyond our erect and aged figures.

In the meantime, I decided to end a good relationship with a girl who was nice and very energetic, which annoyed me. She was happy with her life, her destiny, her nature as a woman, always cheerful, euphoric, and not very in tune with the great chaos in my head.

"After all this time, why?" she asked me while I was helping her pack her bags.

"Because time, for me, is never a measure."

"It's not an answer, you never have an answer. You build landscapes in your head, smile when there is only silence around you, and it looks like your heart does not know love. I hate you."

“What a waste of time, hatred. This is why I don’t want to build anything else with you - you confuse time with hatred, and hatred with resentment, and resentment with a suitcase that you filled to the brim, aware that the two of us will never see each other again. Today, my dear, you are becoming something else. You should be happy about it.”

She closed the door aggressively, then there was only silence. I got dressed - the red tie, the freshly ironed white shirt, the black socks that smelled of detergent - and I went to work.

Mr. Port was there, sitting with a licorice in his hand and an unrecognizable smile.

“Hello Mr. receptionist, your tie is beautiful,” he said to me, in a childish and irritating tone.

“Mr. Port, it is good manners not to utter words with your mouth full.”

He stared at me, his eyes widening and his mouth opening. From there I could observe his black colored teeth and his petrol colored tongue.

“You’re funny, Mr. Receptionist.”

“Buffoonery is the art of those who have no bread for their values.”

“I like bread with Nutella, man.”

I sat next to him, watching Mr. Port swing his legs back and forth, first the right then the left. He banged his legs on the large armchairs in the lobby which greatly disturbed the people waiting at check-in. Meanwhile, my colleague was indicating me to join her with a curious gesture. But I decided to make her wait, with a further curious gesture (it was curious for me) but of great respect.

“You are a man of great vision, Mr. Port.”

"I want to be a lawyer when I grow up," he shouted.

I touched his knee, to urge him to silence. Then I was sorry, but not enough to apologize to him.

"You have become something else, haven't you Mr. Port?"

"Something else... something else," he stammered.

"After all your prerequisites, after your perfumed cologne and pressed tie, you wanted to be nothing more than a child. A child whose nature is still mute, silent, doubtful advancement."

"These licorices are good, Mr. Receptionist."

"You can eat as many as you want, Mr. Port, or would you prefer, boy? I will be here, every year you want. Your room, a number that only you and I know, will always have a special attention to you."

"Thank you, very good, more of this licorice."

Other than me, nobody, I mean nobody, ventured to ask further questions towards that clumsy, childish, but very good man. How curious was his way of life, how much vigor for his life. I admired that man more than I admired myself. And it was then, and more precisely while I was buying a pack of pasta that I would cook only with some oil and some chili peppers, that I decided to become something else.

## **And so it happened.**

I started writing about Mr. Port. I was doing it before going to work, before going to bed, before brushing my teeth, properly brushed first up and then down. I left the papers under the pillows in each room, with the hope that guests would take the story of such a unique man to heart. If one day you happen to stay at the STRAF Hotel, check under every pillow, every corner of the sheets, behind a hanging and often misunderstood piece of art: that's where my treasures are hidden.

For me, becoming something else meant not letting others decide - I didn't become a lawyer, I didn't have any type of

romantic relationship, and I decided to keep my job as a receptionist because I loved welcoming people. My something else was to remember Mr. Port, the man he had been, the child he had become.

Many years have passed since I last saw Mr. Port. I haven't met him since that moment, when he decided to become something else: a child. I promised myself so many things, eliminating every superficiality, every detail that was uninteresting in my evolution.

My evolution has nothing to do with nature.

To tell the truth, and I'm almost happy about this, there is a much simpler way to become something else. In fact, you only need one thing.

**But I can't tell you what this thing is.**

**I promised Mr. Port.**

**Actually, I promised it to Port the little boy.**

**And among all the moral values and the more purely ephemeral ones, the promises of a child must be kept.**

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# STRAFtellers

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