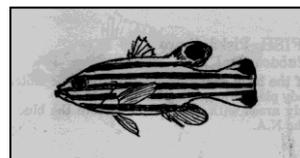


**Mister
Mardi Gras**



the Percy



Meet Mister Mardi Gras

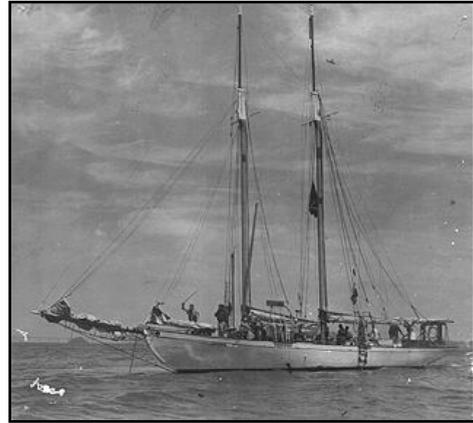
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September 1962

We were anchored just offshore in the calm bay in front of the complex of buildings owned by Jules Hietkoning, a leftover from the internment camp days of the 1940's. His property was a cluster of old buildings with walls made of mud and stone and sealed sandwich-like with thick stucco. There was a workshop for the making of tortoise shell novelties and a store for selling of jewelry and souvenirs. Also, Jules had a massive darkroom that was loaded with antique cameras and equipment. Jules was a fine photographer, black and white, of course, as color was still some years away. All of this in one manner or another was attached to his home, which lay centered in this array.

Just across a wide street from this complex were the open sea and an excellent anchorage for visiting yachts. Island and sea were separated by a wall, which was hardly more than a gathering of coral rubble cemented together. This kept the road in place as well as keeping the sea from entering his house. The wall seemed to be the namesake of the town, which was called Kralendijk, meaning Coral Dike.

At the roadside Jules had a series of small rooms in which he had his passport photo studio. Also, there was an open yard filled with all sorts of local animals. Jules was an extremely compassionate man who loved animals and strange people alike. His proudest possession was a dog-eared *Life* magazine that featured him with his feathered friends, the flamingos. It was not a zoo that Jules maintained but rather a temporary sanctuary for some of his down-on-their-luck friends. A broken wing here, a fish hook in the beak there, or worse, a spear gun wound in the back of a giant sea turtle.



Jules had built a small wooden ramp, which we called Heit's Pier that protruded out into the bay a few yards. It made a good landing stage for the *Valerie Queen's* shore boat but was a rickety thing at best with most of its legs gone, the pilings having long ago been eaten away by sea worms. But what the hell, it added to the excitement of a dusty day's landing. We had been anchored here since our arrival three months ago, and I had to remind Percy that we still had a date in Antigua. However, with hurricanes ripping up islands to our north and the *Queen* without a crew, which we couldn't have afforded anyhow, it seemed that this small island was to be the end of the road for us.

This part of the township was called Playa Pabou, a section of the waterfront that stretched from the customs house which was a little to the south of us to Playa Lechi, just a little over a mile to the north.

It was explained to me that it was called Pabou because the sun sets on this side of town. Playa Pariba was the other side where the sun rises. It all made good sense to me, except that the street ran north and south.



Percy and I had come to know every rock, coral, chamber pot, fish and piece of junk on the Playa Pabou seabed, from the surface to the bottom of the drop-off at 130 feet deep. Collecting small aquarium fish was what it was all about, the main reason we dove. The salt-water aquarium business was big in Europe, and there never seemed to be enough fish to supply the demand. We had several European accounts clamoring for these small fish. We had found most of the species required to fill their needs right here in Playa Pabou, but Percy and I were always on the lookout for that elusive fish which would be the first "whatever" and bring a golden price, but that seemed to be hoping for too much.

The *Queen* being a flat deck ship (not cluttered with cabins) had room for our holding tanks on deck, a bad idea at best. The passport photo business being what it was on an island with only 4,000 inhabitants left those rooms unused for most of the year, so Jules allowed Percy and me to use them for our aquariums, which made our *Queen* a very happy ship indeed. Now we could expand the holding station for the small marine tropical fish that we were collecting daily from the reefs. Our new

aquariums in truth were nothing more than wooden whisky boxes lined with cheap plastic tablecloths. These aquarium boxes were very important to the business for maintaining healthy fish prior to shipping.

That mythical L. D. that I speak of elsewhere surfaced again and became our aquarium's tooth fairy, donating an old piston pump that we rigged to the sea to keep seawater flowing through the boxes to keep our zoo alive. Before the pump was installed, neighborhood kids like the Chirino's and the Craane family daily dragged hundreds of buckets of seawater up to the holding station to



flush the boxes and were paid one cent per bucket for this chore. These boys were our Gunga Dins. (Percy on the left, Win de Grijis with the turtle.)

The aquarium business was a risky undertaking at its best, at times dangerous, and demanded not only difficult collecting skills, but also a huge range of luck when shipping. A freight handler breaking a container in Curaçao, a plane lay over in Venezuela or a cold snap at the Amsterdam airport destroyed our precious cargo. As I said, risky, and that's an understatement.

It was a devilishly hot humid September morning. September at our latitude 12.5 N was our equinox, which had sweat dripping by eight in the morning. Another blistering day promised. There had already been a lot of hard swimming this morning, and if collecting didn't improve there was going to be a lot more while searching the deep.

Rock beauties and pygmy angels were what the Germans were screaming for and they became the order of the day, but we were having trouble gathering the pygmies.

June 25th had been my birthday. I had just turned thirty-eight, an event hardly worth mentioning, after the previous day's two-tank deep dives off the back of the boat all the while breathing that damn imported bottled air. There was definitely something in that foreign air that I must have been allergic to. I often found myself nauseous and with fits of shaking. I wasn't normally overly concerned with that so much, but it was happening just too frequently. Frankly, too damned frequently, but Percy and I considered it part of the business. However, last night had been particularly rough on me. Along with the shakes I had lost what little food I had eaten, and I couldn't afford that.

The jungle sores on my legs were not healing, and the infection on my shin where the whore had bitten me was still quite inflamed. All in all, I was a mess, not a kid anymore at thirty-eight, and was starting to worry about my lifestyle.

Percy and I had dreamed of getting our own compressor one day. We felt it imperative that we become independent from our imported bottled air. Just the hassle of getting it to Bonaire was a nightmare. Further, it concerned me that our present diving techniques could not be used for the tourist divers. I could see it all so clearly that the tourist divers had to come one day. The fact was that there had been no hordes of tourists of late. However, I knew of two on island today. Even so, I was confident that here in this bay lay our future. But one day... One day, I swore to God, we would find our tourist divers, and then we would all be in clover. But we would have to drastically change our ways.

This morning, since first light, Percy and I had been free diving along the drop off. Anything not to have to breathe that damned air. However, as bad as it was, it was all that we had. I was still struggling to best eighty feet while Percy was free diving a hundred with ease. Percy, the hunter, had shot a few yellow tail snappers, which we had sold for enough money to buy several breads, a can of butter and five pounds of funchi. The ship's stock of maple syrup was inexhaustible, more than enough to last forever.

Percy hated the stuff, but I found energy in every spoonful. While in Columbia, syrup and bananas had been my mainstay for months.

We had developed a technique for netting the deeper guys, the royal grammas and pygmy angels, for example, who liked 50 foot plus water, where usually more than a minute was required to net them. I would drop down using two small hand-held sweep nets and would start playing the fish. When my minute was up, Percy, who had been hyperventilating while watching me from the surface, would dive down and hover above me, then slide his hands down my arms to take the nets into his hands without missing a play, and the fish would be ours.

There was a flat coral slab of an island that lay about a quarter mile off shore. It was a non-committal piece of real estate, round and flat like a parlor table. God must have had a reason for putting it there, but it was just about the most worthless thing I had ever seen. However, it did have steep walls that were solid with rich marine life. Good for sightseeing but lousy for snorkeling for the shallower fish. We did see many big game fish there, and Percy thirsted for these, but why bother when all the big fish we could ever shoot were on the main island as well? The place was no good for our kind of fishing. However, it might be of some future value someday.

Percy and I used to row the *Queen's* shore boat across the channel every now and then "just for a look see." Last week, in fact, we were there and discovered four English boys who had set up a diving camp and were doing some scientific work. Nice fellas, nice camp, but the best was their portable air compressor, a gasoline engine driven thing, small but impressive. It appeared to have been built in a motorcycle shop, but it worked and the boys were very happy with it. Percy and I were mad with jealousy. The boys told us they would be happy to sell it to us for 600 guilders when they left as they really didn't want to have to drag it all the way back to England with them. They were leaving on the 16th.

Financially, our whole venture was a mess. Chartering the *Queen* was out of the question, and then, by whom? Day sailing was impractical because of her size. In those days, sport divers who would be willing to pay to dive with Captain Don were few, and for the most, they were macho. Hunting and slaughter was their game, not mine. I hated shooting the fish, I hated the taste of blood in the water, and I hated the stink of dead fish. I shot them only for survival. The fact was I would almost rather starve than to have to eat a fish, a fact that really upset Percy.

We had just received a telegram that the Germans needed more Pygmy Angels, and if we wished to keep their account, we had better deliver. We had been eating on their money, so there was little choice of what we had to do. Just north of a dry rooi (today's yacht basin), we had discovered a wonderful colony of pygmies, quite deep on the side of a steep coral rubble hill, which dropped off into several hundred feet of water or more. An unimaginative dive, just a dirty hill littered with a lotta junk and hundreds of old tires, but the pygmies thrived here.

We had been scuba diving at the eighty-foot level for some minutes. The bright red ribbon I wore that served as my depth gauge had long since gone maroon. The curious side of me always wondered just how much air I had left. An old strapless watch told me the time. Free ascents from any depth less than 75 feet were considered quite normal, but jumping for the surface raised hell for the little fish held captive in our collection bottles. I had collected maybe a dozen pygmies and a few grammas when I became aware that Percy was no longer around.

Then I saw it... A bubble train well off in the blue, and I knew he was fooling around again at the bottom of the hill. This wasn't the first time he had slid down the mountain, and I worried that one of these deep dives would be his last. When you start with only 1,100 pounds of air in your tank, you should avoid the deep stuff. I think he thought himself a Greek sponge diver who could get away with anything.

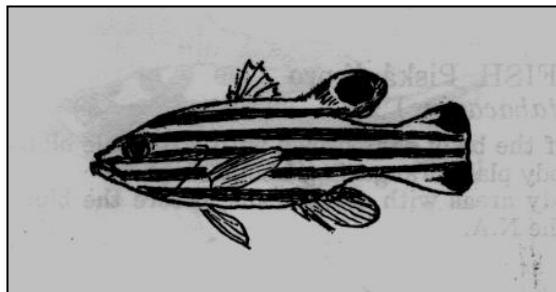
I had just collected one more pygmy and was stuffing it into my holding bottle when Percy slid up past me, easily kicking his way up the hill. I looked at his plastic bottle as he went by and thought that it was empty. Damn him, I thought, sightseeing when we badly needed fish for the German account. I knew some anger as I turned and followed him up the hill.

Slow and easy was the name of the game when bringing fish up from depth. At maybe 50 feet my ribbon turned a dirty red, and I stopped for a little decompression, not for myself but for the fish, then stopped again at around twenty. Percy was waiting at ten feet, and I thought it strange that he was doing a third stop, but I gave it little thought. Percy was smoking and sitting on the beach when I crawled out of the water. I shucked my tank onto the sand and turned to face him, holding up my bottle for him to see that it was full. He just watched me for a moment, then reached down and lifted up his bottle.

I had to move closer to see what it was he was trying to show me. There was only one fish in his bottle. My first impression was pink, red, some yellow, and long and narrow with some black spots on the fins. "Sweet Jesus!" I whispered.

Percy laughed and flipped his cigarette butt out into the water. "Mardi Gras," he said.

"Meet the Bonaire surprise, Mr. Mardi Gras."



My drawing of Percy's Mister "Mardi Gras" before we sold it to de Boor in the Netherlands in September 1962.

Fin - almost

Footnote: Concerning the fish.

1963 scientific paper "Studies on the Fauna of Caribbean Islands." Dr. John E. Randall described a new species as "one of the most complexly and beautifully colored of West Indian fishes" which he named *Chorististium carmabi* in honor of the Caribbean Marine Biological Institute (CARMABI), adding that a colored drawing by Donal A. Stewart of the fish first discovered by Percy D. Sweetnam in September 1962 leaves no doubt of its identity as *Carmabi* (a/k/a "Mardi Gras"). Δ

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