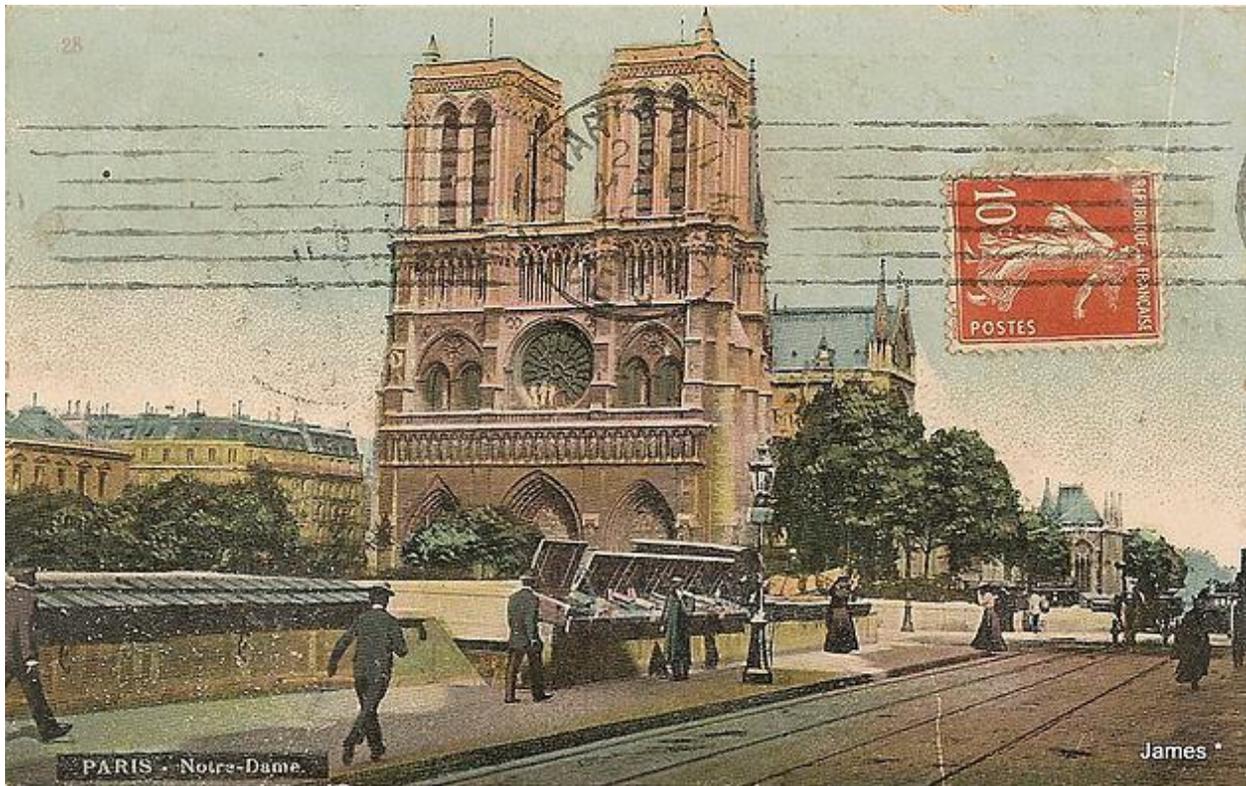


DM₉₅ BOUQUINISTES



Dan Morey

Gary and the Nymphs

As the ship departed Limassol harbor, a crowd of single cruisers gathered on the Solo Terrace for cocktails.

“Not impressed,” said Gary, vigorously stirring his Mai Tai. “The clubs were lame. Nothing but Eurotrash.”

Steve sat down next to him and popped open a can of Corona. “What did you expect? It’s a Greek island.”

“Uh-uh,” said Gary. “It’s half Turkish.”

“If you want to bang Turks, wait till we get to Istanbul. Ten bucks a pop. And those are the expensive ones.”

“Never paid for it in my life. Never had to.”

“Right. That’s why you’re forty-five and single.”

Gary lit a cigar and smirked. “Wouldn’t have it any other way, Steve-o. Fresh meat every night.”

A twentysomething girl in a tank top walked onto the terrace.

“Over here, baby!” said Gary. “I saved you a seat!”

She squinted at him. “Do I know you?”

“Not yet. But I got your seat right here.” Gary pointed at his face. The girl gave him a disgusted look, and kept walking.

“Uppity bitch,” said Gary, puffing on his cigar. “Ship’s full of ‘em. Hey, you doing the cabin crawl or the speed dating tonight?”

“Neither,” said Steve. “Private dance party.”

“Can you get me in?”

“Sorry, dude. Invitation only.”

Gary went to his cabin and put on his favorite speed dating t-shirt. It said “Cruise Single” on the front, and “Party Naked” on the back. He did his hair, slapped on some cologne, and headed for the Crow’s Nest lounge.

There was a woman in the elevator on the way up. Gary leered at her. She removed a copy of the ship’s daily bulletin from her purse and studied it.

“Speed dating, 9 o’ clock, deck 12,” said Gary. “Or we could just do it now.”

“Excuse me?” she said.

“You know. Do it. Right here in the elevator.”

The woman showed him her wedding ring, and got off on the Promenade Deck. Gary said, “Whatever, bitch.”

It was windy on the top deck and Gary worried about his hair. It wouldn’t take much to expose the bald spot he’d so carefully combed over. While other cruisers stood at the rail, looking out over the moonlit waters of the Mediterranean, Gary shuffled along the wall, his hand on top of his head. When he reached the Crow’s Nest, he ducked inside and found forty or fifty cruisers coupled up at barrel-shaped tables.

“Where do I go?” Gary asked the MC, who was wearing an eyepatch, a bandana, and an animatronic parrot.

“You’re late, matey,” he said. “We’ll get you in at the next change. Argh.”

A few minutes later, the MC pushed a button on his parrot and it let out a shrill squawk. The men stood up and changed tables.

“Start there, you scurvy dog,” the MC told Gary, pointing at a large blonde woman in a spangled blouse.

“No way,” said Gary. “She’s fat.”

“You have to start somewhere. Now walk the plank.”

Gary sat down with the woman and began to drum his fingers on the tabletop. She smiled and asked him where he was from.

“Pittsburgh,” said Gary.

“Do you work in a steel mill?”

“Sure, lady. Everybody in Pittsburgh works in a steel mill. What is this, 1950?”

“Well, what do you do?”

A waitress passed by, and Gary grabbed her sleeve. “Hey, who’s a guy got to go down on to get drunk around here?” The waitress took his order. “You’re cute,” said Gary. “Where you from?”

“Philippines, sir.”

“The Philippines! That’s hot!”

“Yes. Very hot. Especially in May.”

“I mean it’s hot that you’re from there. Filipino chicks are hot!”

“Okay, sir. I’ll get your drink now.”

“They’re not allowed to fool around with passengers,” said the woman after the waitress had gone. “They could get fired.”

“I’m worth it,” said Gary.

The parrot shrieked and Gary bolted out of his chair with an abrupt “Later!” His next partner was a studious-looking young woman in glasses.

“Librarian look,” said Gary. “Very hot.”

“I’m myopic,” she said.

“Smokin’! You hook up with anybody on the boat yet?”

She blushed and took a sip of her Cosmo. “No. I’m afraid I’m not much of a swinger.”

“Well you came to the right guy. I’ve been doing this for years.”

“Yes. I can tell.”

Gary wondered if she was taking a shot at his age. He was adjusting his hair when the waitress returned with his drink. “Thanks, babe,” he said, signing the receipt. “Stay hot.”

“What are your plans for Izmir?” asked the young woman.

“Don’t know,” said Gary. “They got any clubs?”

“Clubs?”

“You know, discos, or whatever they call them.”

“Oh. I couldn’t say. Most people are going to Ephesus.”

“What’s that?”

“The biblical city.”

“Ruins? Are you kidding me?”

“It’s a UNESCO heritage site.”

“The only biblical cities I’m interested in are Sodom and Gomorrah. Those people knew how to party!”

“I’m not going to Ephesus either. I’m taking the long excursion up to the lakes.”

Gary swilled his drink and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. “Your bangs are hot. I dig chicks with bangs.”

“I’m hoping to see a Eurasian spoonbill.”

“Sounds kinky. I think you and me could party, babe. What do you say?”

“And of course the pygmy cormorants at Lake Uluabat.”

Gary belched. “When’s this tour leave?”

“7:30.”

“A.M.?”

“Naturally.”

“Jesus. You sure you’ll be there?”

“Should be the highlight of the cruise.”

The parrot cawed, and Gary moved on to his next date.

“The ship has cleared customs, and anyone who would like to go ashore can exit on Deck 4. Enjoy your day in Izmir.”

The announcement awakened Gary, and he rolled out of bed onto the floor. When the throbbing in his head subsided, he sat up and looked at the clock. 7:45.

“Shit!”

He ran to the bathroom and vomited in the toilet.

One Gatorade was left in the minibar; he guzzled it down with a handful of aspirin. There was no time to shower or change, so he rushed out of the cabin in the rum-stained Hawaiian shirt and white pants he’d worn to the Midnight Luau. He tripped over his breakfast tray in the corridor (room service had been unable to rouse him), spilling a pot of coffee on the carpet. When he reached the security checkpoint on Deck 4, he shoved his I.D. into the card reader and stumbled onto the gangway. A member of the ship’s photography team, dressed as a Whirling Dervish, accosted him as soon as he hit the dock. “No goddamn pictures!” said Gary, pushing the ersatz Sufi aside. “I’m late!”

Cruisers jammed the terminal, buying postcards and maps and cheap souvenirs. Buses were lined up outside, and tour groups, led by guides with numbered signs, climbed aboard. Gary found a shore excursion rep and waved his ticket in her face. “Which bus? I’m late!” She looked at the ticket and said, “You certainly are. You were supposed to meet in the theater at 7:30.”

“I know, I know. Which bus?”

“First in line. Better hurry.”

Gary charged down the pier, bowling over anyone who got in his way. He boarded the bus, threw his ticket at the guide, and collapsed in an unoccupied seat. “This better be a hell of a tour,” he said, gasping for breath.

The young woman he’d met at speed dating was a few rows behind him, talking to a man with an enormous camera.

“Hey, baby!” shouted Gary. “Come sit with me!”

“Thanks,” she said. “But I’m already settled. We’ll talk later.”

“Whatever.”

Everyone on the bus was sober and subdued; they leafed through guidebooks and chatted quietly. Gary spotted a couple in matching “Bird Nerd” t-shirts and chuckled. The driver opened the door and let the final passenger on. It was Steve, decked out in a safari shirt, moisture-wicking shorts, and an outback hat.

“What the hell are you doing here?” said Gary.

Steve sat beside him. “You were with me when I bought the ticket, dude.”

“Jesus.”

Gary was snoring before the bus pulled out. The guide tapped his shoulder somewhere north of Akhisar. “Please wake up, sir,” she said. “I’m going to talk about the Greek mythology now.”

Gary snorted. “Greek? I thought we were in Turkey? Aren’t you Turkish?”

“Of course.”

“So what’s this Greek crap?”

“I will explain. Please listen.” She picked up the microphone. “Due to traffic, we will not have time for Lake Uluabat today.”

The group let out a collective groan. “What about the cormorants?” said the male Bird Nerd. “Yeah,” said his wife. “We want to see the cormorants.”

“There will be plenty of cormorants at Lake Manyas.”

“Not pygmy cormorants!”

The guide was unfazed. “Perhaps pygmy, and perhaps not. We will see. Also, missing Lake Uluabat allows us time to stop for the Greek mythology in the forest. Do you know the story of Hylas and the Water Nymphs? It transpired in this region. I will take you to the spring where Hylas was abducted.”

She went on to relate the myth in detail. Hylas, a beautiful youth, had sailed on the Argo with Hercules, his companion and lover. When the Argonauts went ashore in Mysia, Hylas was sent to the Spring of Pegae for water. As he bent down to fill his pitcher, the naiads embraced him, and pulled him under. Hercules searched and searched, but Hylas was never seen again.

“Are you telling me Hercules was a homo?” said Steve.

“It was not uncommon in those times for Greek men to take boys as lovers,” said the guide.

“Who cares about Hercules?” said Gary. “Everybody knows bodybuilders are queer. What I want to know is how hot those nymphos were.”

“Hot?” said the guide.

“You know, good-looking.”

“The naiads were very beautiful! Young and fair-skinned and always indulging in pleasures.”

“Sounds super-hot. I wouldn’t mind skinny dipping with those horny naiads.”

The guide took out a laminated print of J. W. Waterhouse’s Hylas and the Nymphs painting and passed it around. “Oh, my God,” said Gary. “They’re barely legal!”

“It’s like a wet dream,” said Steve. “Har. Har.”

When the bus parked at the trail head, Gary and Steve remained in their seats, judging the women birders as they passed.

“Five,” said Steve.

“Four,” said Gary.

“You’d do her.”

“If I was wasted, maybe.”

“Hey, there’s an eight!”

“Yeah, nice ass.”

“Let’s go!” said the guide.

“What about her?” said Steve.

“Six in looks,” said Gary. “But two in attitude. You can tell she doesn’t party.”

It had rained for two days prior to the ship’s arrival, and the forest was lush and green. Gary stood out in his Hawaiian shirt.

“Nice camo, Don Ho,” said Steve. “Good thing this isn’t a hunting trip.”

“Shhhh!” said the female Bird Nerd. “There’s a glossy Ibis up ahead. You’re going to scare her off.”

“His shirt already did,” said Steve.

When they reached the hidden spring, the guide stood at the edge of the water and said, “Feast your eyes on paradise, my friends.”

There were lily pads and ferns and brightly colored wildflowers everywhere. Vine-draped boulders formed grottoes behind the pool.

A bird of prey swooped below the canopy, and thirty cameras flew into motion. Shutters clicked like machine guns.

“Nailed him!” said the male Bird Nerd. “Saker Falcon!”

“Saker my ass,” said another birder. “That was a Merlin.”

“Saker!”

“Merlin!”

They compared pictures.

“Well, if you had a better lens you could see it was a Saker,” said the Bird Nerd.

“Please,” said the guide. “Try to enjoy the scenery. It was on this very bank that the nymphs ravaged Hylas away. After they tired of him, he was turned into an echo.”

Gary snuck away from the group to relieve himself in a grotto. When he finished, he sat down and opened a bottle of minibar bourbon. He drank it in a single gulp and tossed the bottle into the pool. While the guide lectured, Gary slept on the moss. When he awoke, the spring was deserted.

“Bastards left without me!”

As he was getting up, a hand emerged from the pool and threw the empty bottle at him. It hit his leg and rolled into the grotto. Someone giggled. “Who’s there?” said Gary. He leaned over the pool and saw a nude girl luxuriating in the shallows. She was gorgeous—white as alabaster, with blue eyes and a nubile body.

“Oh, my God,” said Gary.

More girls began to rise up from the water, some with lilies in their hair, others with bracelets of leafy milfoil. “Come play with us, Gary,” said the first nymph. “We want to party.”

“You do?” said Gary.

“We’re all perfect tens. No fatties allowed.” She held out her hand, and Gary took it. “This is the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” he said.

The nymphs closed around him, stroking his chest, massaging his thighs, licking his ears. Gary moaned, and they all plunged down together, disappearing in the depths of the spring.

“Wait!” said Steve. “We forgot Gary!”

The group was halfway back to the bus.

“I told him to stay with us,” said the guide. “Go get him if you want, but we cannot wait.”

Steve ran to the spring and searched all the grottoes. In the last one, he found a small bottle. “Gary!” he called out. “Where are you, Gary?”

The answer came from the grotto. It was his own voice, echoing back.

Dan Morey lives in Erie, PA where he relentlessly pursues the longnose gar, great northern pike and mighty bowfin in the weedy waters of Presque Isle Bay. His writing has appeared in many publications, including *Giant Robot*, *Sein und Werden*, *Eyeshot* and *Menacing Hedge*. Find him at danmorey.weebly.com.