

Goombay Smash

By Jane Eaton Hamilton

The hotel was what your travel agent, a gay man who gave you an itinerary with a sixteen hour lay-over in Toronto, recommended. He showed you an advertisement in *Girlfriends* magazine. Two women sunning in chaise lounges were photographed from the rear; only two tanned, fit arms showed and then, beyond them, the swimming pool, and then, beyond that, some potted palms. It looked like paradise and you were keen to sign up. Now that you're actually here, you know that the resort is barely passable. Your room, billed as poolside but two buildings away from water, is undeniably cramped, with hardly enough space for all your and Marg's luggage, which in very short order open like orifices and ejaculate vibrators and sandals and hemorrhoid cream. Marg photographs this mess. In the window the broken air conditioner burbles; the room is as cold as a refrigerator. You spend your first night in the defrost drawer, huddling against the redoubtable if lovely Marg like a stick of celery. The good part is that, tossed together under the covers, you and she make love, and if there's a little something missing after five years together, at least she's having sex with you, not someone else.

The morning stretches out leisurely. There is a breakfast of sorts served in the dining room, with coffee, orange juice, toast and cereal. As promised in the glossy brochure, there are plenty of women. Only women, in fact, and they mostly they come in twos, like Arc animals. You and Marg take your plates to the courtyard and sit in partial shade at a white resin table. "Hey, Marg," you say and when she looks up at you, her startling eyes limpid and bored, you send her the visual equivalent of an elbow in her side. You want her to look at all the sets of twins. For instance, the two women who wear the same white serge baseball shirts, with black trim that says Key West as if it's a team. The women are young, probably in their mid-twenties. You can't for the life of you imagine what they do when they aren't busy with a tropical vacation: are they accountants? historians? This hotel, for all its inadequacies, doesn't come cheap. They have identical blond hair, spiky on top but roping between their shoulder blades in back. Are they perhaps actual twins? No, they smooch. They look longingly across their table at each other and rise to plant wet kisses on each other's lips.

It would be like kissing yourself, you think, and think about how many nights you've been left to do just that.

There is another couple who wear identically styled hair blown poufily back. One is

streaked blond and the other is brunette, but that's not what you notice. What you notice is the sameness, and their similar thin lips. When they depart, going off to do you don't know what with their day in paradise, another couple takes their spot. Though different in build, both of these women have masses of curly black hair cascading to their waists.

Maybe this is how American lesbians celebrate their anniversaries, you think. Never mind paper, silver, gold: American lesbians have hair anniversaries. If they make it two years, they part on the same side, five years they spike, ten and they bob. Twenty and they both wear buns in snoods.

"Psst," you say, "Marg. Look over there."

Marg says, "What, Joyce?" and looks up at you a little annoyed.

You point out the women with waterfall hair and try and explain about anniversaries, and how the two of you should get matching buzz cuts, but Marg just frowns and goes back to scraping out her grapefruit with a stumpy handled spoon.

You hope if you live to be ninety, you never look like anyone's clone. Unless it's Marg's. You would be Marg's clone if she asked. You would - if she asked.

You picked up a car in Miami and when you called your mother to say you were a bit hesitant about renting at the airport because of all the violence towards tourists, she said, "Don't be silly. They only kill Germans." Canadian, you drove down the southern seaboard through the linked group of southern Florida islands called the Keys. Because it is late October, every home or business you passed, just about, was decorated. Americans take their Hallowe'en seriously. In Vancouver, where you live, Hallowe'en is reserved for the few days immediately preceding the end of the month: a simply carved pumpkin on the doorstep, a demure bowl of candy in the foyer. But in Florida porches are massed in white cotton pulled out to resemble spider webs. These are huge, ten or twenty feet across. Black plastic spiders gallumph across the netting. In every second window, convincing fright masks made of rubber are displayed along with white sheeted ghosts or black sheeted witches. Maybe it's the tropics. Everything here is ripe and half rotten, even holidays. Even girlfriends.

Ways you have debased yourself for her:

1) you have danced naked to girl group songs in your kitchen trying to amuse her. *Stop in the Name of Love (before you break my heart)*

2) you have lain nude on your car, a gigantic hood ornament, in your garage that smells of dirty oil, waiting for her to raise the door with her remote

3) you have not complained when she called you jealous, a shrew, unbalanced, even if your friends were present

There is something disorienting about breakfast. For one thing, you are smack dab in the middle of a bunch of vacationing lesbians, which means you ought to feel like a hog in heaven. But you don't. Instead you feel pasty skinned and overweight, as if you carry the heaviness of Canada with you. No one looks at you. No one cruises you. You might as well be a pumpkin.

Vines hang down the sides of the buildings trailing things that look like red licorice ropes. Hibiscus shrubs bloom hot and pink, thrusting up deeply coloured stamens. Everything droops and drips. Oranges plump on leafy stems, shading from green to orange. The hot tub gurgles. Skeletons dangle from some of the palm trees. When you were thinking about taking Marg away somewhere, you researched palm trees and found out there were 3000 varieties. There are probably ten or twenty varieties around this courtyard. You try to dredge up names: coconut, saw cabbage, Royal.

You are almost positive Marg doesn't want to be here with you. She's made it clear. When you said, Let's get away, she said, Who? You and me?

While Marg finishes eating, you go to the office to ask for a room upgrade. You want a suite right beside the pool because, as you tell Camille, you didn't come thousands of miles to stay in a room the size of a closet. "I gave closets up years ago," you say, grinning stupidly. Camille doesn't think it's funny. There is a room you can change to at noon, she says, for an extra \$30 US a night; if you pack, Camille will see that your bags are moved. Even if you get back late, someone will be in the office to exchange keys with you. Camille is a strapping blond who wears a white shirt calculated to set off her dark tan. As far as you can see, there is only one of her. For a minute, you think she likes you. For a minute, you think she's moving your luggage as a favor and won't expect a tip. She asks if you and Marg have signed up for tomorrow's women only sunset champagne cruise. You say, "Should we?" as if Camille will know what's the right move to please Marg, then plunk \$80 US, which works out to something like \$8000 Canadian, on her desk and wait for a receipt.

Marg and you stroll out to discover Key West. You walk south to where a marker tells you you're at the southernmost tip of the continental US. Cuba, it says, is only 90 miles away. You think of the refugees trying to cover the distance by raft; you shake the thought, a responsible, work-a-day concern, away and try to concentrate on paradise. Walk to the water's edge. Point at your chest. Say, "Look, my little mung bean. These are the southernmost boobs

in the continental US."

Marg laughs, and sets up for a photograph - of your breasts - which you consider such a hopeful sign that you mention hair anniversaries again.

You watch pelicans dive bomb for food. You love their greedy pouches and how they skim the surface of the waves looking for fish.

It's hot out so every store becomes a relief, both from the heat and the street vendors. There's merchandise for sale that you'd never find in Vancouver, and lots of art galleries; while Marg leans on a door frame, assuredly bored, you buy three framed prints and arrange to have them shipped home.

On Duval Street, you buy a black ostrich feather, look hard at Marg and say, *For later*. Marg says, *What do you mean?*

Marg wants to tour the Hemingway House. Hemingway was never a favourite writer of yours but because Marg's happiness is paramount, you agree. Also, you see it as a chance to get off your feet, if only for a minute. Key West is supposedly a walker's paradise, but you can attest first hand that touring has hardly been like walking on clouds. Asphalt is asphalt and after a while, the balls of your feet ache no matter how pretty the scenery. And there's been some pretty good scenery. Especially the flora, the wild, untamable growth that loops and spirals through people's yards messy as intestines.

The house is a registered historic landmark. It's big and blocky, painted beige, with wonderful oval windows with green shutters. The grounds are perfect; philodendrons mass and climb banana palms, dangling leaves as big as boogie boards.

And in fact the tour is lovely, too - the house is warm and sweet. You long to reach out and run your fingers across the spines of the books in the many bookshelves, even though you know most of them were probably not Hemingway's. But many of the furnishings are genuine, things Hemingway and his wife Pauline accumulated in Spain, Africa and Cuba. There's a wonderful birthing chair in the master bedroom that belonged to Pauline; Pauline had two kids with Ernest and you wonder if she used the chair. A sign strapped across it says, "Please do not sit." You wonder about being a scofflaw and sitting anyhow. You wonder what you would give birth to.

Hemingway built the first pool in Key West. It is filled and blue and beautiful, much nicer than the chary one at the guesthouse where you're staying. Apparently it about broke Hemingway - even in the late 30s, the cost was \$20,000. That's why he sunk a penny--his last, according to legend - in the wet cement of the patio. Marg makes you stand beside it; she takes a photo of your toe.

Marg says her favourite thing is the catwalk from his second-storey bedroom to his office over the poolhouse.

"Aren't writers romantic?" she asks dreamily. Marg's other woman is a writer, sort of. A poet, sort of. Marg taps the brochure on your arm. "It says he wrote *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* here."

Marg once booked you into the Sylvia Beach Hotel in Newport, Oregon. The only room left was the Hemingway Room, which had a view of the parking lot and an even better view of the Dempsey Dumpster. Worse, it had a moth bitten deer head right above the bed. You dreamed that it fell and one of its antlers gored you through your heart.

One of the many, six-toed cats slinks around your ankles, its malformed paws flattening on the porch boards. The air smells of jasmine.

Mallory Pier: it's where you end up after a long afternoon of walking, staring the sun in its swollen orange eye as it winks into the Caribbean. Night falls, but all around you are hucksters. An acrobat totters across a wire strung fifteen feet above the boardwalk. A sword swallower pushes blades that look black and deadly into his throat. A boy of about fifteen grins while tourists take snaps of the iguana on his shoulder. A bearded man lets his parrot hop on tourists' shoulders then asks for donations. It's busy. It's noisy. It's colourful. It mirrors your mood. All that cacophony, that jostling, that competition for your attention. That's what it's like inside you. There isn't a calm neuron in your entire brain. They're all roused. They're all snapping and popping to the Latin music of the pier. You could burst into dance any second, something as disjointed and arrhythmic as a wooden puppet.

You're almost positive that she gives the other woman things you've given her.

Where is your watch? My watch? The watch I gave you for Christmas.

Where is that ear cuff I gave you? Ear cuff? I don't know. Did you give me an ear cuff?

This has been going on for months. Something has been going on for months. That's why you're here, why you planned this trip - to have Marg all to yourself, to have her undivided attention. At home, Marg is a very busy chef in a very busy restaurant and, as far as you can tell, also a very busy lover - although not in your bedroom.

At home, you have taken to watching the Discovery Channel while you wait up for

Marg. Recently, they had a week's special on sharks. Sharks, researchers contend, are as intriguing as whales and dolphins. But after watching eight specials, you don't agree. You don't see anything interesting about sharks. Not great whites, not whale sharks, not hammerheads. They don't vocalize. They don't breach. They don't even breathe air. They're fish, not mammals, and that's what the researchers seemed to forget. The only thing that intrigued you, especially considering the upcoming trip to Key West, was an aerial shot of a man and a woman standing in water just thigh high. Dotted around them, each within fifty yards, were seven great white sharks. According to the TV, the ocean is like that all the time; the announcer offers up the image to prove that sharks only rarely attack humans. They would only like you kicking on a surf board so that, from underneath, in their stupid, subterranean brains, you looked like a sea lion. You and Marg together - twin sea lions, with twin hairdos.

You and Marg recently bought a house together. Naively, you assumed this meant that the two of you were seriously committed. Because as a teacher you have summers off, you started to putty and scrape, mostly alone, in July. In early August, when you moved your bed to start painting the walls in there, a note fluttered to the floor from under Marg's pillow: *What am I doing?* it asked. *She's young enough to be my daughter.*

Although you are not personally that young, you know who is. Her name is Emma. She's the new sous chef at Marg's restaurant. She is young, skinny and married. She dresses in black. Marg brings home her poetry printed in zines which she leaves on the kitchen counter. When you get back to the guesthouse, your belongings have appeared miraculously in the "suite" beside the pool. At this guesthouse, where the rooms are the size of closets, the suites are the size of rooms. As far as you can tell, they are only called suites because of the sugar in a candy dish on the bedside table. Some women are having a party just outside your window; you and Marg decide to try the jacuzzi in the other courtyard, which is abandoned. But someone has sprinkled soap into it and when you turn on the jets, it begins to foam. At first it is hard to see the bubbles; in the dark night they make only the ghostliest, Hallowe'en outline, but after a while, the bubbles begin to pop against the bottom of your chins, against your lower lips, against your noses. When Marg inhales one she says, "Oh, for pity's sake. I think we should call it a night." You swat bubbles away, cupping them like breasts. You step from the tub after Marg, spilling suds, and pull a towel around yourself while Marg sets up a tripod. The empty burbling hot tub is caught forever on Kodachrome. You tiptoe through the breakfast room. You half hope the partying women will ask you to join them. You wonder if there is something identifiably Canadian about you that causes them not to. Perhaps your pasty skin reminds them of snow. Perhaps they understand that you are the kind of woman

upon whom your lover would cheat.

You crawl into bed beside Marg. You want to be held in her arms, but she has her shin in her hand. She is dotting After Bite where the mosquitoes have got her. Into her leg she says, "First there was nothing, and then there was *A Farewell to Arms*. I'm still trying to get over it."

The women outside hoot and holler. You lean across Marg and empty the candy dish into your palm. You wonder who has stayed in this bed before you, whether they number in the dozens or hundreds, whether they've left pieces of themselves behind in the form of stray hairs or dandruff or stains, whether they were new lovers or old, whether any of them fought. You are not fighting with Marg, of course, and that has to count for something. It is not exactly a honeymoon between you, but not fighting has to count for something. You think about Key West's narrow streets, the small salt box houses, their gingerbread trim.

You lie in bed listening to the party from which you are excluded. Marg puts down her After Bite and sighs. "I wish to hell they'd just shut up," she says, and as if in answer, you hear an interruption. Marg slides from bed and reports from the window. "It's the police," she whispers. "They've had a complaint. They're breaking it up."

It is after one when you finally slide into sleep.

You wake groggy, as if you were one of the drunks at the party. The sun bakes at the window. Marg is nowhere to be found. You stumble to the bathroom and remember that today is the day the guesthouse moves you back to your old room with the broken air conditioner. This room is booked. This is also the day of the sunset champagne cruise. Maybe Marg is at breakfast. Yes, yes, she is, scribbling furiously on a bit of paper she balls up and slips too quickly into her pocket. When you ask her what she wrote she says, "Uh. Thoughts for the day? Things we could do." A letter to Emma? you think. You look around you, desperate, as if one of the twin sets could help, could recommend a barber that would put your relationship right. You're aware that people are finally noticing you. But they don't seem very friendly. The twins in the Key West baseball jerseys actually scowl. Marg shrugs. She says, "I get the idea they think we're the ones who reported them."

You know Marg is missing Emma; you wonder if the ache is acute, if she came to breakfast alone because she couldn't stand to be near you another minute. You remember that once upon a time, things were new and fresh between the two of you. Marg's eyes danced the rumba (the "dance of loff") when you came into a room. You aren't hungry. You brave the shattering glances and serve yourself a small bowl of unflavored yogurt. It's sour. It puckers your lips.

After thumbing through tourist brochures, Marg has a plan for the day. She wants to rent scooters.

"Scooters? As in motorcycles?" Perhaps you screech, because three sets of twins turn to give you scathing glances. Has Marg seen how Key West drivers drive? Maybe she wants you to die. Maybe she wants the insurance money so that she can open a restaurant with Emma. Or you'll end up a vegetable and Marg, called upon to nurse you the rest of your natural born days, will smooch a tag team of women while you lie in bed watching, helpless, your back shattered. "I can't ride a motorcycle."

"See?" Marg says and passes you a brochure. She taps it. "They give you lessons on the spot."

That is how the two of you end up scorching through Old Town like Hallowe'en rockets. The scooters aren't so hard to manage, after all, but you'd prefer to stick to the back roads, where it doesn't matter if you give it too much gas and fly. You scooter out through a military base to a public beach. Like twins, you both have on one piece black bathing suits under your pants; you park and hot foot it across the sand to the seaweed ridden shore. The waves are tall; they slap against the beach and sound like Alka Seltzer. Marg insists you have to swim since you're here. Marg insists you can't come all this way and not get in any other water other than a sabotaged jacuzzi. So you run in. The water is surprisingly cold, like Canada's. There's an undertow. Seaweed wraps around your neck. You lie back and before a wave capsizes you, Marg snaps your picture. You are wearing thongs and this is mostly what will show up; two sizable blue floating feet.

Suddenly you scream. Something has brushed against your leg. You spring to your feet. There, undulating in the waves, is an alligator's tail. You scramble to shore. Gradually, the thing washes in. It's severed, about six feet long. The wound is red, ragged and fresh. The tail tapers off to nothing.

"I think it's a snake," Marg says, poking it with the leg of her tripod.

You look at her. "An anaconda," you say. Once, your brother's girlfriend called your brother's penis the anaconda of love. You told her you weren't interested in knowing.

"Go figure," Marg says, and leans in close for a picture. Severed, the tail can't do much. It can't do harm. It can't swim. It can't even scare you.

Marg has another idea. She signals and pulls over the the side of the stumpy road and tells you she wants to visit the graveyard. There's a gravestone she wants to show you.

You ought to have guessed this was coming. In all the places you've vacationed in your years together, Marg has wanted to see the graveyards. You think her interest is macabre. You think there is nothing to learn about the Greek or Indonesian population by looking at what kind of graves they make. Marg disagrees. Marg thinks houses of the dead capture the heartbeat of a nation.

"The dead don't have heartbeats," you mutter as she putters onto the thin, asphalt drive snaking through the cemetery. She leaves a sassy plume of blue exhaust behind her. When you pass a high rise of maybe forty graves, Marg stops. The graves are indented; they look like cubbyholes for school children. The white stone is blackening with age.

Marg peers at you and says, "We should talk. Something's been on my mind." She snaps pictures. Not of you, but of the condo graves. You are busy trying to knock down the kick stand of your scooter so that you can sidle over to the shade. Your flip flop bends. You bruise your toe and curse. You look up at Marg, who has produced a hanky and is swiping at her high cheek bones, her upper lip, the back of her neck.

"About Emma," she says. "You know Emma, that poet where I work?"

You don't know how to respond. Suspicion of Marg's affair is central to who you've become over the last year. You may not like it, but you're used to it. It's become the status quo, and really, you don't want Marg to rock this leaky boat. You don't want Marg to utter another word. But to forestall her, you know you have to say something. 'I love you' is what comes out.

Marg frowns at you, assessing, her eyes harsh and glassy. You stare back at her, a challenge. *Don't*, you think. *Don't say*. Finally Marg makes a noise in her throat and revs the throttle on her scooter. The bike surges forward; it's an instant more before Marg's torso follows.

It's very hot, very close, and the sun is beating down. The grass here is all scrubby, not really what, in Canada, you'd label grass at all. You listen to the surprisingly loud put-put of Marg's scooter fade into the distance before you turn the key on your own and try to catch up.

The grave Marg's been trying to show you has an odd stone. She stops and stabs a finger towards it, wordlessly: *I Told You I Was Sick*, B. P. Roberts, May 17, 1929 to June 18, 1979.

It did not occur to you, when you plunked down your money for the sunset cruise, that mostly what you were paying for was the privilege of drinking as much booze as you could pour down your throat in two hours. You are the next thing to a teetotaller and prone to

seasickness, and while Marg drinks, she won't imbibe enough to make this jaunt cost effective. You would both need to drink two thousand, three hundred and twenty-six margaritas to get back your money. All the twins, with whom you are in close proximity while the sky throws its razzle-dazzle over the horizon, ignore you steadfastly. The baseball twins wear matched purple tank tops with pink triangles in the spot where, ostensibly, their hearts are.

"Come on," says Camille, the women who moved your luggage from room to room for a tip of only \$200 US, the one who talked you into this cruise. "Have a drink. On me." She orders at the bar then passes each of you an orange concoction that looks poisonous as snake venom. Anaconda venom. "Goombay Smashes," she says, smiling, "an island tradition."

Goombay Smash, you think: The definition of a relationship that goes tits-up in the tropics. You look at Marg. It occurs to you - again - how beautiful she is. How alluring. The sky blankets the rocking boat. Obediently, you sip. Marg also sips, thin-lipped sips that quickly lower the froth in her glass.

"So, how long have the two of you been an item?" Camille wants to know, getting Marg a refill.

"Not quite long enough for snoods," you say, making Camille frown. The smash is sickly sweet, grenadine and rum.

"Ignore her," Marg says and leans to touch Camille's fit, tanned leg. "It's best to just ignore Joyce when she gets like this." Marg's hand doesn't move from above Camille's kneecap. The two of them exchange a look until you are forced to think: *Marg and Camille?* You berate yourself, but then Marg takes out her camera, arranges a shot of Camille, and asks you to move out of the way.

While you down your beverage, you stare at a sign advertising an organization called "Reef Relief." Accidental boat groundings damage coral, it says. "Brown, brown, run aground. Blue, blue, sail on through."

Perhaps, you think, this is what Emma is, what Camille could be, skiffs running aground on your sensitive reef, Skidoos slicing the tips of your living heart. You feel a sudden urge. You run to the side of the boat to ralph. Behind you is Marg with her lens pointed at your mouth.