

01-01-2012

Well, 2012 is off to a good start. It's a perfect day, sunny but not too hot. I had two meals that I didn't have to cook myself. I sent a couple of articles off to layout and then spent the rest of the morning doing things that could be seen as chores but take on an almost ceremonial air when you think of them as setting your house in order for the year: cleaning all my footwear, sewing buttons on, organizing my pantry, etc.. I had meant to include putting some air in my bike tires, but couldn't find my pump. I'm sure I brought one back with me in November, but I'll be darned if I can remember where I put it. Tomorrow I'll roll it down to that little bike shop on Linea and get some air. Or maybe it would be prudent to walk down first, to make sure it's open, since tomorrow's a stat holiday.



Some photos from yesterday's walk
Puntilla:

The lacy—and scary—surface of the
pedestrian part of the Iron Bridge;

the prettiest Beware of the
Dog sign ever—whoops,
actually from Christmas Day, taken on my way to
Adrienne's for lunch;



to La

that's

and a beer stand by the Almendares near La Puntilla, all
stocked up for New Year's Eve.



Just about when I was thinking of making some lunch, Estrella came upstairs with a bowl of lentil stew Julio had made. With some buttered beisbolitos and a glass of mango tea, they were just right. I had made big batch of lentils yesterday, but these were very different from mine, flavourful but not as spicy, and with chunks of squash. I had gotten a bit tired of squash and stopped buying it a few weeks ago, but I enjoyed it in Julio's stew.

A lewd carrot from among my purchases at the agro
yesterday...just before it went into the lentil stew.

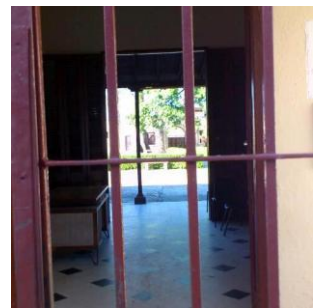


A long time ago I resolved not to make New Year's resolutions, but one of the things I wanted to do this year was get more cardio exercise. The year also started well in that respect: I walked all the way to Santos Suárez. Gail called in the early afternoon and asked if I wanted to go over for dinner. I set off down 26th St about 3 pm, thinking I'd catch a máquina as far as Ciudad Deportiva and from there grab a taxi to her place. There was not a máquina to be seen on 26th, and I saw only two taxis, one full of passengers. When I told the other driver where I wanted to go he wasn't interested; they're often choosy about where they'll take you (if they don't think they have a good chance of picking up a fare for the return trip they can't be bothered). By that time I figured I was more than half way there so just kept walking. I tried calling Cubataxi from Gail's after dinner but the line was busy so I ended up walking down to Lacret and Via Blanca to I guess all the taxistas were home eating pig with their families.

Dinner at Gail's was leftovers from New Year's Eve dinner at her ex-husband's house, where the entire extended family had gathered last night, including her in-laws as of last Friday. Her ex's current wife had made *frijoles dormidos*, black beans in a thick sauce. They were the best I have ever tasted. Gail said the secret was a tiny bit of cilantro. It was such a small amount you couldn't identify it as cilantro, but it raised the beans to a whole other level of deliciousness.



I'm not sure why I took only two photos on the whole walk, maybe because for the first half of it I was concentrating on looking for a taxi and not really paying attention to my surroundings. These are of a rather picturesque school in Cerro, not too far from Gail's house. One day I'm going to make a collage of photos taken of doors leading into courtyards.



My stomach is very happy about the trip, but my toes hurt. If I had known I was going to be walking for almost 90 minutes I would have trimmed my toenails.

It's not even 10 pm and I'm feeling really sleepy. No wonder: the Karaoke Kids were at it again last night, starting about 2 am, just when most of the other parties were winding down and I thought I could finally doze off. Eventually I had to get up and close my windows; otherwise there was no hope for sleep at all.

02-01-2012

I woke up at 6:30 and decided to lie there for a while and see if I could get a bit more sleep. When next I looked at the clock it was 9:30! I guess I needed it. After breakfast I walked down to the Malecón, stopping by the bike repair place on the way. He was open, but said I'd have to go to a *ponchera* to get air in my tires, which was strange because another fellow in the same place had said he would do it if I had an adapter for the Presta valve. I'm sure any bike shop must have a pump; for whatever reason, he just didn't want to bother.

At the mouth of the Almendares I saw a small boat the name Yosiel painted on the bow, an addition to my collection. Continuing my walk along the Malecón I saw a woman riding a bike with two of the long loaves of bread called *flautas* (think oversized baguettes) under one arm; whole families perched on the seawall just gazing at the water; and dozens of kids fishing, mostly boys. One man had a rod but had also slung four fishing lines directly over the wall, anchored by the spools in a neat row. Another man had a broken rod and was playing out the line with his bare hands. Ouch.

At 6th I cut inland and started a zigzag path toward home. Surprisingly, for a state store on a stat holiday, the tienda at 12th and Linea was open and, more surprisingly, there was no cola. Of course I couldn't pass that chance up. My reward was finding chickpeas, the first I've seen here outside the ENSAP cafeteria; they'll make a nice change from lentils. I now wish I had bought two packages—who knows when I'll see them again.

03-01-2012

Brrrr! Now THIS is a serious cold front. I don't know whether it was the howling winds or the cold that woke me at 4 am, but I had to get up and close all the windows and dig out my alpaca socks and an extra blanket. The day called for closed shoes with socks, long pants and long-sleeved wool shirt. When I got to Silva's car I turned back to get my wool cardigan, remembering that it's always colder out at ENSAP than it is in Vedado.

Silva and his family gave me a gorgeous pair of earrings that Gaby had made, large silver wire hoops with a red and white ceramic bead. They immediately became my favourites and I almost overlooked their other gift: peanut butter cookies decorated with chocolate chips. We enjoyed the cookies after lunch at work. Unfortunately, Annet missed out on them; she's having what she thinks is a gallbladder attack and didn't make it in today. Probably related to fatty holiday food.

Tonight I sat down to make a card/minibook for Silva and family to thank them and found both my glue sticks had dried up. How can that happen in humidity that sticks envelopes closed? Anyway, I improvised with some clear

nail polish and it seemed to work ok. Will see in the morning whether everything that was stuck down is still where it's supposed to be.

04-01-2012

It was even colder this morning. I had to add another layer and opted for longer socks. I don't mind the cold, but hate not being able to have the windows wide open; it makes the apartment seem so dark.

Conner had her interview today for her application for permanent residency and since it's practically on the route to work we dropped her off. She wasn't nervous at all, which seemed odd, given how much she's counting on it. I hope it went well.

Annet reported in this morning. It wasn't gallbladder but a fatty liver. It's not surprising, I guess; about 70% of obese people have fatty livers, and the increased fat load over the holidays probably precipitates a lot of crises. Anyway, she'll be off for the rest of the week. She hasn't had a thing except water since New Year's Eve. She's been "trying to lose weight" ever since I met her, but I hadn't notice any particular change in her diet; about the only thing you can do about cafeteria food is not eat it, but she never turned down a chance to finish the things I didn't eat at lunch. The threat of pain might change her eating patterns, where the hypothetical longterm benefit wasn't quite motivation enough.

Esther María brought me an orchid from her garden today. I wish mine would bloom. Maybe I coddle it too much.



Something in the trees across the street caught my eye this afternoon and I watched to see what was happening. After a minute or so the movement turned into a man leading a pair of black oxen. I love working here!

A good day all around. I made a lot of progress on a couple of manuscripts and still left work in time to get my hair cut. I went to a place on 23rd I had noticed when we were looking for Robaina's paladar. It's just on the edge of the big hole in the ground that's some sort of military area. The salon is at the back of the house, overlooking the "valley" and to get there you walk through high-ceilinged front room and wide hall with every available space covered with paintings. I asked if it was also a gallery and she said, well, you can buy something if you like it. The paintings are by Robaina and another fellow. I asked what had happened to the paladar and was told it had moved to Miramar, to the corner of 5th Ave and B St. Good to know I didn't miss my chance after all.

As for the haircut, it was not bad. I had asked what the price would be on Saturday and was told between five and seven CUC, so I was surprised when the bill was ten. I didn't realize there is an extra charge for drying. Anyway, on such a cold day it was well worth the extra three bucks not to have to go home with a wet head!

Naty asked me at work today if I had any harina pan left and it reminded me I hadn't made arepas in a long time, so that's what I had for dinner. Even though my oven now works, I still bake them in my makeshift stovetop oven.

Wow. I just found out that if I edit my photos in any way while the phone is plugged into the laptop, they show up! So I was able to transfer the shots I had taken this week. Will go back and insert them where they're relevant so they're not all bunched up in one spot. Wish I had had the phone with me on the way to work today to get a shot of an antique Norton motorcycle, maybe from the 40s or early 50s, painted bright yellow and green.

07-01-2011

I forgot to put the chickpeas to soak last night so have to put off my weekly cooking session until tomorrow. I have quite a few things I need to read this weekend and I find it too easy to get distracted at home, so I went to a café in Miramar that Conner had recommended. It was a good walk, may be half an hour, and I was able to get quite a bit done. It's a state-owned place, but you'd never know it; the managers have been given free rein with the decor and you could imagine you're in any funky café in Ann Arbor or Toronto, except that it has no WiFi.



It's full of antique typewriters, radios, accordions and sewing machines—the table I where I sat was one of the ones that folds up so the machine is stored underneath, but they had it in the working position, which didn't leave much room for my coffee. The two features I liked best in the front area were an ornate hookah about three feet tall and an old Canada Dry sign. The ceiling was entirely covered signatures and greetings from patrons over the years. I thought it had opened recently because I hadn't noticed it any of the several times I had walked along that stretch of 3rd Ave, but it's been there for seven years. Havana is full of such well-kept secrets. Conner just found out last week about the folly and gardens behind the 1830 and she knows the city better than most native Habaneros!

I had two cups of coffee, one an excellent cappuccino, during my 2 hours there, and unwisely set off home without checking out the bathroom. Part way home I thought I might not make it, so stopped at another café and had

an Americano just so I could use the washroom. I should have made it water (they don't do decaf here); am feeling a bit buzzed and may have trouble sleeping tonight.



Someone's kids did their best to brighten up the neighbourhood! (6th St between 3rd and 5th Aves)



Gail's house was robbed on Thursday night, while she and her son, daughter-in-law and Julian's friend, Ciencia, were all in the front room watching a baseball game. While they were cheering for Matanzas, someone got in the back door behind the kitchen and took Ciencia's knapsack (he lives in what probably were once maid's quarters there, a tiny bedroom and washroom), alarm clock and radio. In his knapsack were his wallet with carnet and driver's licence, as well as three flash drives, an external hard drive and his house keys. The police did the whole crime scene thing and said the thief was a child; apparently it's not unusual for an adult to involve a child, who can slip through smaller spaces. Gail had to get all the locks changed and Ciencia thought he'd have to go home to Matanzas to replace his carnet, but they found some of his stuff dumped not far away: the flash drives and his wallet with carnet and driver's licence, minus the small amount of money he had, of course. Obviously amateurs who didn't know what the flash drives were.

There was a two-page interview in *La Calle del Medio* with Camila Vallejo, the 23-year-old Chilean student leader who got higher ratings than Pres. Piñera in a recent poll. What an impressive young woman; it gives me hope. I needed to see that, after watching Inside Job last night and reading Fidel's essay about the rush to develop something called shale gas, that has a carbon footprint even worse than that of petroleum.

08-01-2012

This morning after breakfast I set off for the Rosa Negra with my folder of articles for proofreading but took a wrong turn and ended up making a huge detour along the edge of the Necropolis. I got to the café just as they were just closing for the hour between breakfast and lunch. When I asked if there

was any place else nearby that also served good coffee they decided to let me in, either because I didn't want a full breakfast or because they were afraid if I found good coffee somewhere else I wouldn't be back. They had some delicious-looking rolls on the counter beside the espresso machine, but I didn't want to push my luck. There were a couple of tables of people still finishing their breakfasts and I managed to get one article proofed before the second group started to leave. My espresso was only 25 cents so I left a 100% tip.

A couple of weeks ago the people next door took down their water tank from the roof and left various boards and cinder blocks lying around. I didn't think they'd go such a long time without a water tank, so began to wonder whether they meant to replace it. Where would the poor kitties shelter from the sun and rain then? Today they put up a new bigger one, also raised on cinder blocks so the kitties will still have their shelter. I'm looking forward to seeing them playing on the roof again. I've missed them.

09-01-2011

Someone called at 5:45 this morning, not for me; at least, I assume so because the phone only rang once. I lay there for a while fuming and hoping to get back to sleep. I was feeling annoyed with the caller and with the pigeons who were arrurrulling outside my window and was about to put a pillow over my ears when I noticed it was a bit brighter than it should be at 6 am. The clock said 7:45! I guess I just dreamed I was awake trying to get back to sleep.

So, it was a frantic start to a long day in which most of the time I felt like a juggler trying to keep all those plates spinning at once. I did manage to get quite a bit done, partly because I stayed an extra 90 minutes to simplify transportation after work. Angélica, who is on MEDICC staff in Oakland, is here to translate for a group doing an educational exchange and Gail invited Conner and me over for a working dinner around the redesign of the web site. Rather than picking me up at 5, Silva picked up Conner at her place at 6 and then me at 6:30, to take us over to Gail's for 7. Lunch in the cafeteria had proved mostly inedible (a wiener, which I won't eat, and watery, overcooked noodles with and a thimbleful of bland tomato sauce, of which I couldn't choke down more than a couple of mouthful), so I was very hungry by the time Gail served dinner.

It was worth the wait: pasta with an amazing rosé sauce that featured vodka and fresh herbs. Conner made garlic bread with fresh garlic and I had brought along the last of the parmesan friends brought me from Canada a while back. It was so good I broke my no-second-helping rule. It was the first time I can remember being uncomfortably full in Cuba; I'll try to

remember that feeling the next time I sit down to a truly delicious meal and am tempted to overeat.

10-01-2012

Had a bit of trouble getting to sleep last night because I was so full, then was awakened by voices at about 1:30. There were several people talking animatedly, not quite shouting. It sounded like they were right out in the street, but I couldn't see anyone; they must have been sitting on a porch somewhere close by. It's odd how some nights the street is dead silent and others it just hums with activity, and independently of what night of the week it is.

At breakfast I was treated to a close-up view of a dove preening in the tree outside my window. It wasn't more than three feet away from me; maybe the slats of the blinds kept it from noticing me sitting there, though it kept looking around in a predator scan every few seconds. It was such a pretty thing, pale gray with a black cap on its small graceful head. At first I tried to think how to I could get my camera out without startling it, but then just stayed as still as I possibly could, almost holding my breath. Between my sleepiness and its hypnotic movements as it swayed and bobbed, rubbing its feathers with its beak, I went into a sort of trance. It was only when the Radio Reloj announcer got all excited about it being *iocho en PUNTO de la mañana!* that I snapped out of it.

As we pulled up to ENSAP this morning I noticed a long line of men leading German shepherds down the opposite sidewalk, police dogs in training. I wasn't quite fast enough with my telephone/camera.



This afternoon I attended a roundtable with people who had participated in either the campaign that eradicated illiteracy from Cuba in 1961 or the rural medical program. It was spine-tingling to hear these people, most of them in their seventies, talk about their experiences then. When counter-revolutionaries killed one of the volunteer literacy teachers in early 1961, a young black man named Conrado Benítez, they probably thought they would scare people away from volunteering; instead, it galvanized a movement. The literacy brigade was renamed for him and the next call for volunteers brought out over 100,000 responses, mostly from teenagers. Just a few months before, a whole graduating class of doctors had voted to go to the countryside, as a group, to start the rural medical program; people who had been trained in hospitals with all sorts of equipment and a supervisor to turn to when they got in a muddle suddenly had complete responsibility for their patients, with nothing but their clinical skills and the most rudimentary

equipment, mostly without even electricity. I cannot imagine the courage it must have taken. It was the Institute for Agrarian Reform that gave both groups, teachers and doctors, logistical support to get started. So Cuba was doing intersectoral action on the "determinants of health" 15 years before the Lalonde Report!

11-01-2012

I'm sitting here in the dark, hoping my battery lasts long enough to get at least one manuscript ready for translation. We have our first layout session tomorrow afternoon and I'm counting on the morning to finish proofing the PDFs. A big storm came up in late afternoon and the power been has off since shortly after I got home from work. Thank goodness for my gas stove or I'd be awfully hungry by now. There was a period of about half an hour when I couldn't concentrate on work because the lightning was so close and frequent I couldn't pay attention to anything else, but after it settled a bit there was just the steady roar of the downpour, which was actually quite soothing.

12-91-2012

My battery ran down before ten and the power still hadn't come back so I just went to bed. I think it came back on about two this morning, judging from what the clock was flashing when I got up. When I turned on the water heater and put the coffee on the gas flames were almost non-existent, then disappeared altogether after a minute. I tried again at ten minutes later and it was ok. Last Thursday there was no gas at all the whole morning; Silva said his neighbourhood was affected too; it was probably system maintenance. I'm glad the work's getting done, but I do wish they would give us some warning.

Silva was a bit late picking me up because he had gone to the Hotel Nacional to pick up his bird watching client and the hotel was cordoned off.

Ahmadinejad [sp?] was staying there and they weren't letting anyone in until he had departed for the airport. Then he had to pick me up early at ENSAP to take me to Gail's for our layout session, because he had to go to the airport. Altogether it made for a very short morning and I didn't get all the proofing done I had hoped to. Fortunately, Gail had some other things to do before we were able to start so I had a chance to finish up.

Saw some more dogs being trained this morning, in the field at the corner of Boyeros and 100th, where I sometimes see the egrets. They were all different breeds though, including some small ones and some that were clearly mutts. Silva thought they might be sniffer dogs for the airport.

My tocaya next door moved away so I won't be hearing people yelling my name at all hours of the day and night anymore. nor the screaming when her granddaughter, Doly, has to take her bath. And there's a new family there now, Adriana and her husband and father, who has some sort of disability. They're filled the front porch with plants and it looks quite lovely. Unfortunately, they're also going to install some hideous fencing, which will rather ruin the effect. They have two parrots whose squawking annoys Julio and Estrella, but I don't mind it nearly as much as I did Doly's screeching.



14-01-2011

Some weeks time seems to go so fast that it makes me feel like I'm in a Keystone Kops movie and the projectionist keeps speeding up the reel. I should have gone to bed early last night but got interested in a Turkish film that came on after the weather, about a woman who leaves her abusive husband in Germany and goes back to her family in Turkey, only to be told by her father that she belonged to her husband and had dishonoured her family by leaving him. The script was fairly predictable but the acting was so good that I couldn't turn it off.

There was almost no water pressure this morning so I had to put off hair washing until tomorrow. I collected the enough dribbles in a bucket to clean up enough to go out in the street without offending.

The whole block between 17th and 19th was flooded when I went to the agro this morning. It could have been either a water main or a sewer but it didn't want to breathe too deeply to detect which. Also, my rule of thumb in Havana is to assume the worst and never step on wet pavement (except in the pouring rain).

Later in the afternoon I walked over to the Café Fortuna to do some reading and timed the walk—exactly 30 minutes, door to door. I mixed up my order and instead of chocolate Fortuna ended up with café Fortuna, which has whiskey in it. It took me longer to walk home because it was dark by then and I had forgotten my flashlight, which meant I had to slow down quite a bit. I was nervous about crossing the Iron Bridge in the dark, given its decrepit state, but the alternative was a very long detour.

When I went to open the shutters just now I noticed movement on a roof across the street where several lines of bright laundry were flapping in the wind. At first I thought I was seeing a naked man hanging laundry, but then realized he was lifting weights. In the interests of precision, I should clarify that I only actually saw his torso.

I had planned to go to a concert tonight at the Carlos Marx but don't have the energy. Think I'll crash early and try to get an early start tomorrow so I can go for a walk in the afternoon.

16-01-2012

No chance for a walk yesterday, at least not the long one by the water I had hoped to have. I was still working when Gen, one of our translators, visiting from the Maine, arrived at 6:30. I gave her a cup of tea to warm up with while I finished up one thing and then we walked up to the Rosa Negra for dinner. Alas, not only was it packed, there was a lineup. We were both starving, so backtracked to a place called El Diamante that I had noticed last weekend. It was much more expensive than the Rosa Negra and the food wasn't nearly as good, which explains why we were the only customers there.

Of course there were no vegetarian entrees, so we had a selection of side dishes, moros y cristianos, malanga fritters, french fries—and dessert, slightly overcooked flan with a small scoop of chocolate ice cream on the side. An odd meal, and the surroundings were agreeable, but also odd. Right beside our table there was a backlit stained glass mural about eight or ten feet square of the pyramids, with camels in the foreground. Perhaps there is some connection with the name; the server was new and didn't know. Nor could she tell us what spaghetti carbonara was, though she adlibbed impressively: "like bechamel only darker." After Silva's tale about arroz carbonara rice being described as barbecued, I plan to ask the server every time I see it on a menu and see what sorts of creative answers I get. I doubt it will compete with my collection of Y names, though.

Today was a blur. I didn't even have time to go down for my usual 10-minute lunch, just ate some peanuts at my desk and worked through. We had an editorial meeting in the early afternoon and the plan was to do layout right afterwards, so I absolutely had to get all the proofing finished and also had to get two manuscripts to style correction, so we wouldn't lose almost a whole other day. I was happy that several people arrived late for the meeting (in fact, I was counting on it) and asked Naty to just call me when everyone was there.

We did layout at Gail's and it went pretty smoothly. Cooper, Gail's German shepherd, who hadn't let out a peep when her house was burglarized, barked insanely when Silva arrived to pick me up.

Liliana sent me some rice pudding with Silva, in a container I had given them with some of the chickpea stew I made last weekend. Happily, I had

my spork in my bag and could dig right in—it was almost 8 pm and I hadn't had anything but the peanuts and multiple cups of tea since breakfast—I barely managed to restrain myself from finishing off the whole containerful. I asked Gail what it would cost to get my own telephone line so I wouldn't be so limited in when I can try to connect to the web and she said only CUC\$10 a month and the cost of connection time (local calls are charged at 8 cents a minute in the daytime and 5 cents a minute at night). It would be worth it to be able to stay online in the daytime longer than it takes to download or send an e-mail. The frequency of being able to connect might not be any better than with Julio and Estrella's line, but never being able to be on for more than a couple of minutes at a time means that if I do have trouble, the frustration is multiplied by the number of times I try to connect in a day. Except for these days when we are playing Beat the Clock for the January issue, I had just given up even trying because it made me want to tear out my hair. Gail said MEDICC would pay the installation fee so I think I'll go for it. I wonder how long the wait is for a line; I have the impression that it's not as long for a CUC line as for a peso line.

The same charges apply to a peso line as to a CUC line, but five cents of a Cuban peso is barely a penny. Since I'm only a temporary resident I'm not eligible for a peso line, but I can keep the extension for Julio and Estrella's line and when I need to talk to Gail about a manuscript I can just call her on the peso line and ask her to call me from her peso line on my CUC line.

There are two other boons: I can call Canada and have the charge put on my monthly bill, rather than having to buy the long distance cards that aren't always available. And, I can unplug Julio and Estrella's line when I go to bed so I don't get awakened by the early morning calls (there was another one yesterday at 5:30). Anyhow, I'm quite excited about the idea and only wish I had thought of it sooner.

Oh gosh, I wrote way more than I meant to after my late dinner and now it's almost bedtime. Think I'll just call it a night.

17-01-2012

The film at Cine Diferente tonight was The Laramie Project. Very powerful. We hadn't planned to stay for the debate but didn't get out quickly enough and got sucked in. One man kept saying that Matthew Shepherd had provoked his killers by coming on to them; the verb he used was *agredir*; if there were a direct equivalent in English it would be "to aggress." People tried to say that even if he had (and there was no evidence that that was the case), it didn't justify murder. But every time someone tried to say something he didn't agree with, he would shout them down. The moderator tried to get him to let other people speak but he just kept shouting that gays

were always doing disgusting things in public and coming on to straight men and that "That's violence too!" I was glad I got to hear Roque speak before bedlam erupted; he talked about what women have to put up with from straight men every day in the street and related both homophobia and violence against women to the machismo that is still far from eradicated in Cuba, never mind the world (gross oversimplification, but I'm too sleepy to go into detail). He submitted a manuscript for our theme issue on gender and health; after hearing him tonight, I'm really looking forward to reading it. Next month Cine Diferente is going to premiere a Cuban film about homophobia; one reviewer said it's going to have as big an impact as *Strawberry and Chocolate* did. We'll need to break our habit of arriving at the very last minute or we might not get in.

18-01-2012

On the news tonight there was an item about a horrific event in Havana in the early hours of the morning: a building in Centro Habana suddenly just collapsed, killing four people and injuring others. Centro Habana is the most densely populated area in Havana, so I imagine it was *many* others. It was just rubble in the scenes they showed, but judging by the surrounding buildings, it was probably one of those old four-storey buildings with a business (or two) on the ground floor and two or three apartments on each of the upper floors. It dramatically and painfully highlights the city's prevailing state of decay. As hard as they're working to fix and build, I just can't imagine them ever being able to "catch up." Silva says it's relatively new that they're publishing events like this in Granma; usually people just find out by the *bola*.

19-01-2012

Silva gave me a cooking lesson on the way to work today, a theoretical one at least. He explained to me how to make tostones and the thinner crisp plantain chips whose name I can't remember.

No water all day today, on either side of the hallway (there's usually water in the bathroom across the hall when we don't have any in our kitchen. I had a bit of tea left over from yesterday and some water in the pan, but once that was gone I got pretty thirsty. It's a good thing the weather is cool; that would have been really hard in the summer. Tomorrow I'll take a water bottle, just in case.

On the way home we gave a lift to a woman *pidiendo botella* in front of the pediatric hospital and she turned out to be a friend of Silva's from high school. She lives just around the corner from me. I enjoyed listening them go through the catalogue of classmates from back then: the alcoholic, the one who moved to the US, the doctors, the lawyer who quit to be an artist,

the one who introduced his girlfriend to his 70-year-old father and lost her to him, the cousins who started a business together and then one ran off with the other's wife, the one who died in Mexico. I couldn't keep up. Dania lives just around the corner from me. It seemed odd to me that neither one suggested getting together. Perhaps they took it for granted that they would; or perhaps the chance encounter was welcome but "sufficient unto itself."

Gail met with Mariela Castro today; she not only agreed to an interview for the gender and health issue, she was very supportive of the idea of having a forum after it the issue comes out, and had lots of suggestions for other people to involve.

I found out today that there's actually a name for the guys at the base where the almendrones start their routes, the ones who run around asking people where they're going and then directing them to specific cars. They're called *piqueteros*, or transportation facilitators. The drivers of course don't want to leave until their cars are full and the passengers want to get going as soon as they can, so the piqueteros' job is to keep things moving. I wondered why the drivers always hand them money when they leave. It's five Cuban pesos, or about twenty cents, their fee for coordinating the bedlam. If they get ten cars moving an hour (and at busy times that would be conservative), then they get about as much in a day as most Cubans earn in a month.

20-01-2012

I forgot my water bottle this morning and again there was no water most of the day. Most annoying. Though I did save some time, by not having to run to the bathroom as often as I usually do when I drink two pots of tea a day. Otherwise it was a pretty good day. Beets at lunch! Also, ETECSA announced that they're no longer going to charge cell phone clients for calls received. When will Canada get rid of that outrageous double-dipping? I wonder.

And tomorrow Alexis and Julia arrive! I'd be more excited if I weren't so anxious about getting everything done tomorrow before I have to leave for the airport, so I don't leave Gail holding the bag. She's had a rough month because she had to be off her thyroid medication for a long time before a radio-imaging study.

Damn. Forgot to call ETECSA today about getting a phone.

22-01-2012

We started layout at 9 yesterday morning and were still at it at 6:45 pm when I had to leave for the airport to meet Alexis and Julia. Two hours

standing in front of the international arrivals door gave me a tremendous backache, which I forgot about as soon as I saw them pushing their loaded cart towards me. I shouldn't say "loaded"; some of the other carts that were coming through looked like they should have been forklifts, so theirs looked actually rather modest by comparison. At least you could see their faces.



We stopped at a bakery on the way home and bought some bread. For some reason I never remember that the loaves are sold two to a bag, so we ended up with four. Perhaps my subconscious is telling me to eat more bread. Luckily there's room for a couple in the freezer.

Once we got home it was like Christmas for me: they kept pulling out gifts from friends and goodies they had brought (cranberries, apricots, chocolate-covered almonds, a jar of Nutella, parmesan cheese, Knorr soups...). Maude sent me a set of magnets she had made from photos of Alexis and our various pets. Gloria sent me a kit for making a small rock cairn (Julia thought that envelope was from Wikke, who often gives me chocolate, and when I saw the first rock I thought it was maple sugar and licked it), and there were cards and letters, some



from former students of mine in the MPH program. The pièce de résistance was my early birthday present from Julia, a beautiful bag she had made for me. It's messenger style but smaller scale with an extra-wide strap, and extremely comfortable. Red, of course. I'll try to get a good photo of some of her bags tomorrow. She is testing the waters for a home-based business making custom bags.

Today we lingered over coffee/tea and then breakfast before going to the agro, so it was too late to find good bananas. The peppers were pretty shrivelled up too, but I got some onions, cukes and carrots, and a papaya, which we immediately converted to a smoothie when we got home. It could have been a wee bit riper, but with a bit of lemon juice and sugar it was quite tasty. Then we set off for a walk along the malecón as far as H.

Our ultimate destination was Punto G, a cafeteria Conner had mentioned on her app, Habana Good Time, as having particularly good burgers, great service and moderate prices. We actually walked quite a bit out of our way, first because I thought it was on 23 between G and H; both Punto Gs are a

bit further south, one on Linea between G and H and one on 17 on the same block. We got almost to 23rd before Julia checked the app and found that out. We were closer to the one on 17th, which Conner had described as fancier and not as good, so walked down to Linea, only to find that one doesn't open on Sundays. So back to 17th we went. It wasn't particularly fancy, but the res Julia loved her burger, but Alexis was not so happy, because it contained pork or sausage. The batidos were pretty good, though they both liked my papaya better than the mamey they had ordered. Of course there were no vegetarian main courses so I just had *chicharritas* and toast with my papaya smoothie; not a particularly balanced meal, but it gave me enough energy for the walk the rest of the way home.



During our walk we saw a Pastors for Peace bus, a former Quebec school bus, brightly painted with exhortations to get out of Guantánamo, free the Cuban Five and "Be a real revolutionary: practice your faith." Possibly it's the same one I've seen before repainted or maybe they have more than one. This is the first time I've had a camera handy.

Now A and J are napping to recover from their outing and I'm taking a break before trying to go online to see how the issue turned out after I left last night. If I don't succeed right away I'll give up. I'm too tired to cope with the frustration of repeated attempts.

25-01-2012

Gail and I had a meeting today at ECIMED, Cuba's medical sciences publishing house; the purpose was to moot the idea of a visit by progressive scientific editors in October for an exchange with Cuban editors and health researchers. I had been told only the intersection and that the house had a sign on it; however, I didn't yet know the name of the organization and had been told the wrong intersection. I was happy to see Gail crossing 23rd, until I found out she didn't know where it was either, although she did know the name of the organization. Armed with that vital information, we decided to go in different directions and the one to find it would call the other's cell. I went into a business to ask and was told with great assurance that it was a particular building across the street, "right there where that old fellow is standing." Of course it wasn't there. Gail finally found it, three blocks away from the intersection we had been directed to. The meeting went well; the

Cubans were very enthusiastic about the visit and full of suggestions from who else to involve. Once it was over it was too late to go all the way back to ENSAP so I just went home. Alexis and Julia were still out on the bikes so I got a bit of work done in the meantime. We walked down to the Rosa Negra for dinner and it was a hit. For dessert I had the best lemon pie I've ever eaten. On the way back we stopped by the Indian restaurant that Luis had mentioned to check out the menu for future reference. In front of the restaurant was a beautifully restored antique MG with the restaurant name, Bollywood on the door; I suppose it's good advertising, but it greatly detracts from the car's charm. In the front garden there was a large Buddha, accompanied by an almost equally large black Labrador retriever and a white duck. Alexis and Julia made friends with the lab by scratching his back and belly through the fence while I went in to look at the menu. It's a good enough prospect for vegetarian dishes, but pricey: mojitos are four CUC! Mojitos at the Rosa Negra are only one CUC; with that price differential, I think I can live with pizza or side dishes and salad.

24-01-2012

I reserved our rooms for Cienfuegos next week today; am getting quite excited about seeing another part of Cuba, more of the "landscape." We were going to a concert at Casa de las Americas so had dinner at home. I made my pasta pseudo-Alfredo with oregano and basil from the balcony. It was not my most successful cooking effort. The poor-quality pasta broke into bits practically the minute it hit the water and it was a bit of a gluey mess by the time it hit the plates. The sauce was tasty enough but the pasta sucked it right up so it needed quite a bit more liquid.

The concert was part of a series of events associated with the Casa literary prizes. I thought it would be packed so we went early to get good seats. We had a good 45 minutes to wander through an art show on the first and second floors while we waited for them to open the doors of the third floor concert hall. The show was a mixture of installation, drawings and photography, none of it very memorable. The concert, on the other hand, was very much so. The group, Trio Trovarroco, is a group of three guitarists who blend baroque and traditional Cuban music with no-holds-barred eclecticism. The three guitars are a standard classical guitar, an acoustic bass guitar and a Cuban *tres*, the quintessential Cuban folk instrument. I was afraid Alexis and Julia might find it boring, but they were just as enthralled as I by their musicianship and humour. The last piece was a tour de force of musical references spanning three centuries, moving in and out of genres with breathtaking fluidity. In Canada the audience would have demanded an encore, but it doesn't seem to be the practice here. I don't know what they would have done, in any case; we were musically saturated by that point.

Before the concert started a young man named Adonis sat and chatted with us for a while. He works at Casa in the HR department, in something to do with technology and security. He lives way out in La Lisa and it takes him almost 90 minutes to get to work on public transit. He must really have wanted to see this concert, to stay so late with that long trip home afterwards.

25-01-2012

It was a most satisfactory birthday. Alexis and Julia came into the kitchen singing Happy Birthday and presented me with a top tube cover Julia had made and embroidered with "Havana Bike Polo." Now I really do have to get the sport started here. We had a leisurely breakfast and I made myself a riser cushion for my desk chair out of duct tape and paper retrieved from the recycling bin, before going out to do a few errands.



In the afternoon, we went to visit my friend, Lucrecia, in Baracoa. She told us stories about Victor from the time she met him just after the coup in 1973, when she had gone looking for her missing husband in all the temporary prisons where the military held the people they had rounded up. She agreed to take word from Victor and three other prisoners to their families but the message was that they had been told they were to be executed that weekend. It was a ruse to get them to talk and all of them survived and were eventually tried. When he was eventually sentenced, Victor ended up in the same prison as Luca's husband Norton; he became godfather to Carlitos, whom Luca was carrying at the time of the coup. I had heard some of the anecdotes, but much of what she said was new to me.

After a rest and some grilled cheese sandwiches (so happy to have good ketchup to go with them!) we went over to Luis's house for coffee and dessert. Gaby had made brownies with some of the cocoa powder A & J brought from Canada, and Liliana served them with copas of ice cream. Gaby had also made me a beaded chain necklace that happened to work perfectly with what I was wearing. Toby, their rambunctious yellow lab, had been consigned to the basement during our visit but when we asked to see him he was allowed up for a while, after clearing the table of anything breakable. He erupted in a furry yellow whirlwind, apparently determined to kiss all of us at the exact same instant. When we left, Liliana presented me with a whole family-sized flan—better known to gringos as crème caramel—to take home.

26-01-2012

My friend Enid arrived from Varadero this morning for a side-trip to Havana. I had arranged for Luis to give her a tour so went in to work a bit late so I could be at the bus station to introduce them. I also wanted to get the tickets for Cienfuegos on Monday. There was a bit of a set-to in the ticket line. When we arrived, we asked, as is the custom, who was the last person in the line so we would know who to keep an eye on as the lineup moved along. Then a group of people got off a bus and the first person, seeing someone with no one immediately behind her, just assumed that he was after her, rather than asking who he should follow. Everyone else from the bus just lined up after him, resulting in a bifurcation of the line about two people ahead of me. The people immediately ahead of me were Cubans and were ready to fight for their places. The people from the bus were tourists, the first one from somewhere in Central America and two after him from the Netherlands. I tried to explain the system to them and that he should have asked who he followed, not just placed himself behind someone. He was adamant that he was behind that woman; he didn't care a whit about the system— that was HIS place! The two behind him were equally determined; the taller Dutch man in a fetching navy cap tried to physically elbow me out of the way. When he muttered to his friend, "This is incredible. What a system!" I said, "It actually works quite well when people know the drill." Staring straight ahead without looking at me he said, "I can't hear you." I just gave up trying to explain, but I wish I had asked him if he wanted to learn anything about Cuba or just hold on to his European world view.

Alexis and Julia took the tour with Enid, though they had probably seen most of the sights last year. They were very keen on having lunch at the Laurel, near the Hemingway Marina, and that seemed their best chance. Apparently the prices had been jacked up since last year. It cost them CUC\$65 for lunch for the three of them. Dinner for four of us at the Rosa Negra was CUC\$17, and that was with a 10% service charge added. I guess I won't be recommending the Laurel again.

28-01-2012

The feeling of an incipient cold I had starting on my birthday really came to a head Thursday night. If Friday hadn't been my last day at work before my holiday, I wouldn't have gone to work. There were still some things to do for the January issue; Adam put it on line last night and I had to check the links and the e-mail alert. I actually felt better at the end of the day than I did in the morning. If I take it easy I'll probably be fine for Cienfuegos, so last night we just finished up leftovers and watched I ♥ Huckabees, which was a strange and entertaining blend of comedy and philosophy. Today we're just hanging out; maybe will go out to the Café Fortuna when it cools off a bit later.

29-01-2011

Didn't make it to Café Fortuna yesterday, but towards dark walked over to Bazar 43, which the kids had tried on Conner's recommendation in Havana Good Time and loved their barbecued chicken. It's a dance club after 8 pm, but even with the one CUC each cover charge and the 10% service charge, it just came to CUC\$17. I just had beans and rice, salad and french fries, but they had two drinks each and I had one, so it was still a bargain. The laser show that sprinkled everything with red and green dots was distracting, but for those prices you can't demand much in the way of ambiance. When we arrived they were showing America's Funniest Home Videos on a jumbo screen, to a background of loud American pop (Toto). When the server came over to tell us about the cover charge I asked if they would be playing any Cuban music; shortly afterwards, they changed from AFHV to Cuban music videos, at the same deafening volume. I love a gal who can take a hint.

Today we went for breakfast at the Black Rose, Alexis all excited about getting bacon and eggs. They had run out of eggs! I guess you have to get up early to get a gringo breakfast. They ordered chicken sandwiches instead and I got bread and butter and café con leche. We all had fresh juices, guava, apple and orange, all excellent, as was the coffee. My bread was a basket of tiny hot and barely bite-sized rolls; I managed to eat about half of them. The chicken sandwiches were on huge focaccia-like wedges; Alexis's only complaint was the onions that garnished them, which he carefully removed and awarded to Julia, and that the crust was a bit hard in places. The total bill, again with the 10% service charge, was not even close to eight dollars.



It's official: Bike Polo Havana was born today at approximately 5 pm. We rode down to Luis's house with the mallets and balls and went over to the cancha with Gabi's boyfriend, Hector, to meet his soccer buddies who wanted to try bike polo. Alexis and Julia and I did a little demo and explained the rules and right away everyone wanted to try it. We had three bikes for loaners and three people had their own. People were practically fighting to get their turn to try.

They picked it up amazingly fast; in no time at all they'll leave me in the dust. They want to play every Sunday at the same time and are seeing about getting court time for Saturday too. We left the mallets and balls at Luis's house, since Hector will be the contact person for the rest of the players.



One little guy, Chuve (nickname for Jesús), was playing on a bike way to big for him, but did quite well in spite of it. here he is in the joust with teammates, Alexis and Michel. He fell a few times and Julia gave him her top tube cover to keep, to use with whatever bike he plays on. They really do soften the landing a bit. I'd love to see him playing on a bike the right size for him.

Even the people who didn't play really got into it, cheering and heckling, doing the Wave. I always thought bike polo could catch fire here—the street vibe is so in tune with Cuban DIY culture—and now I'm convinced of it. I was glad Julia was there to show them women can play well too (I'm not a good model; so much time goes by between games that I'm a perennial newbie). Here's a shot that captures the general jubilation when she got the winning goal in one game. The two people not on bikes were the most jubilant: they were up to play in the next game and were just glad the game was over, regardless of who scored or won.



This month's crop of Y names brings my collection to 418. One of my favourites is Yusmel, which by the rules of Spanish spelling and pronunciation, sounds like "you smell." Together with Yusimi (pronounced "You see me"), I can imagine a whole range of "Who's on first?" routines that would only make sense to someone who is bilingual in English-Cuban. Yailsa Yaíma Yait Yaniela Yaniuska Yarie Yassek Yeniet Yensy Yexnis Yhaimaris Yhelrys Yoanni Yohán Yomas Yordan Yosiel Yosis Yovelky Yudelkis Yuldys Yulieska Yuliuva Yusmel

Tomorrow morning we leave for Cienfuegos. I'll have to write about that in February, because I won't take my laptop with me. We thought about taking the bikes, even went down to the terminal to find out what it would involve, but decided to travel light instead. I hadn't asked the person who arranged our lodging whether there's convenient storage.