

01-04-2012

I almost April fooled myself: because of the change last night to daylight saving, I set the alarm so I would be sure to get up early enough to go with Silva to pick up Ann and Judy at the Habana Libre (once a guest of Diuska and Jerónimo got scammed at the airport because she asked someone, "Did Diuska send you?" and the person, being a quick thinker, said yes, took her to a casa particular in Habana Vieja, told her she shouldn't leave cash in her room and offered to hold it for her, with the obvious results). I had forgotten that my alarm is set to go off only on weekdays, but luckily I woke up before time.

After we picked up Ann and Judy I asked Luis to drop me off at the agro so I could get my shopping done in one outing. I didn't get much this time because I didn't have a lot of time for cooking. I kept my nose fairly close to the grindstone for most of the day and then went to meet Conner at the Rosa Negra for coffee before bike polo. The owner, Rafael, came out to say hello as we were leaving and I tried to talk him into playing. Drat, he just sold his bike. I had mentioned to him last time that I was hoping a Cuban would get interested in building bamboo bikes and he brought it up today, asking what I would need for it. He has a large space that would suit for the workshops. I wonder if some NGO could get a grant to bring a couple of guys from the Bamboo Bike Studio down to train someone in the technique.

When we got to the courts there was no one there, not even soccer players, which was a first. We were just getting the gear out of the duffle bag when a couple on bikes rode up. Oh goody, I thought, new players. Nope. They were journalists from *Juventud Rebelde*, there to check out the bike polo scene. Octavio, had published an excellent article on the health benefits of cycling a couple of weeks ago and I had e-mailed him to let him know about bike polo. He hadn't answered my e-mail so it was a terrific surprise to have him show up at the court. We talked quite a while about the game's history, rules, etc., and then Conner passed the ball around a bit to demonstrate. Neither of them wanted to try it; maybe they were worried about their bikes. It's too bad there weren't enough people there for a game; if they had seen how much fun it is they'd have been unable to resist. They asked me to give them a call some Sunday when we're playing and they'll come down with a photographer and do a story on it. Shortly after they left, some kids came along and started playing soccer so Conner and I ceded them the court. At first we thought we'd look for somewhere else to practise, but a big storm looked about to erupt so she decided the better part of valour was just to head home.

I recognized a couple of the soccer players and they said they were working on getting bikes so they could play again. I'll keep my fingers crossed for next week.

The dissidents were busy during the papal visit. They put a big banner up at Ciudad Deportiva saying *No queremos papa. Queremos carne*, a play on the word papa, that means both Pope and potato. At the mass in Cuba someone—who just happened to have a microphone and the cameras of a Miami TV station focussed on him—started shouting *Down with socialism!* What Cuban TV caught was just a bit of commotion off in a corner, but Univision got it all from beginning to end. How convenient that their cameras happened to be ready just when the guy started his display.

This afternoon I heard a man calling out that he was selling *palitos de plástico*, 50 for 20 pesos moneda nacional or 60 for one CUC. I thought that was pretty steep for stir sticks, and wondered why on earth

anyone in Cuba would even pay for stir sticks, there being several things in any kitchen that could do the job just as well. I asked Estrella about it later and found out that *palitos de plástico* are clothespins.

03-04-2012

We were pleasantly surprised on Friday that web access came back, having resigned ourselves to not having it again until this week. Should have touched wood. By the end of yesterday our access was gone again, and except for a couple of fits and starts, hasn't returned. The most frustrating thing is that sometimes when I try to browse I'll get as far as the Google front page, but when I try to search, nothing happens. I didn't check my Gmail until well into yesterday and I only got to read a few messages before losing the connection. We had an IT guy from Infomed here all afternoon today trying to figure it out but by the time he left we were still no closer to being able to navigate. I'm starting to worry we might not have the April issue ready in time.

Among the few messages I managed to pick up, there was one I almost wished I hadn't seen; my comadre in Chile had written to tell me that a young gay man who had been bashed by neonazis in March had died of his injuries. I hadn't heard about the beating so it hit me with full force and all I could do for several minutes was weep. If someone had asked whether my tears were of rage or of grief, I would not have been able to say.

One message I was grateful to have was that my friend Kitty's son was here in Havana with his partner. By calling their hotel every few minutes I was able to catch them on a five-minute bathroom incursion and invite them to dinner. Silva and I picked them up after work and then he dropped us at the Rosa Negra (where else!). After dinner we walked up to my place and visited for a bit. I was quite pleased that things just fell together perfectly so that I could have some time with them. I had met Dan briefly but never really had a conversation with him, and Carl was always so quiet as a boy that I didn't really know him, even less so as an adult. It's a lovely bonus when your friends' kids grow up to be people you enjoy too!



I also saw a message from a friend saying that some journalists had been arrested here during the Pope's visit. I'll have to investigate when I have web access again, but my skepticism gene kicks in whenever northern media report "journalists" being arrested here. There is a long history of Miami Cubans and US interests giving financial support to dissidents here under the guise of paying them as "reporters." They don't just report the news, they create it, by provoking incidents and then blogging—more often than not lying—about how authorities respond. A researcher at the Sorbonne published an article a while back exposing some of Yoany Sánchez's more egregious lies. Probably Cuba's most famous dissident blogger, she claims she doesn't have web access and that she's living hand to mouth, but he calculated her likely connection time and expenses based on her volume of Twitter and other internet usage and she has to be spending hundreds of dollars a month, I think he said upwards of \$800. He also presented evidence that she has to be using some sort of program or service to pad her Twitter following with false accounts, but I understand so little about Twitter (all I know is that the messages have to be short) that I couldn't follow that part at all.

No water all day either, on either side of the pasillo. I had filled the kettle before leaving last night and two of the two-litre pop bottles they call *pepinos* we keep by the sink for hand washing when the water goes off. I usually make at least two pots of tea a day so was pretty thirsty by the end of the afternoon.

I'm hoping to at least reduce the frequency of the external ear infections I've been plagued with since I got here by using divers' ear plugs in the shower to keep my ears dry. Silva showed up with them one day and wouldn't let me reimburse him for them (as the Cubans say, he's *mamey*!) They're soft silicon with a rigid applicator that you use to get them in and then you have to try to get the applicator out the plug slipping out with it. It's taking me a while to get in the habit of using them. If I forget about them until my hands are already wet, they're practically impossible to insert. Also, I have to hold them in place when I wash behind my ears or they pop out. I wonder how divers ever keep them in! I suppose the difference in pressure under water favours them staying put (I'm so glad I took Physics 101).

05-04-2012

There was a terrific electric storm at about 3 this morning; not that much rain actually fell, but the high winds, lightning and thunder were impressive. This morning we saw evidence of its passage in downed branches and even one large tree not too far from my place.

Esther María offered to make us a *tres leches* dessert if we would provide one of the ingredients. My assignment was to find something called *galletas de María*, which as far as I can figure out are either digestive biscuits or arrowroot. I've been to four stores so far and can't find them anywhere. Nor can I find rolled oats, and I ate the last of mine this morning. :(I hate to get trapped in a hoarding mentality, but next time I see them on sale I'll probably stock up for a good long time.

Graciela told me yesterday that the Minister's letter for my exit permit had gone through so I could go and drop off my passport and 25 CUC in sellos at MINSAP. I went to the post office and three banks before I could get the sellos, but struck gold at MINSAP: the lineup at reception to get the building pass is usually the longest part of the visit, but there was no one else there at all this morning, so I was able to go right in, and there was only one other person before me to see Nuria. She said my permit will be ready by the 18th. It will be nice to have it good and early for a change.

Silva's daughter was turned away from a class today because she was ten minutes late. With all the challenges people have with transportation here, it seems unfair and unrealistic to me for a prof to take such a hard line. And a professional university program—dentistry in this case—seems a tad late in the game to think you're instilling a habit of punctuality.

06-04-2012

Since today was a holiday—thanks to the Pope—I went to Gail's house to meet with her, planning to stay and work there the rest of the day. The power was off until noon, but we weren't finished much before then so it was ok.

I am continually moved by little instances of the way Cubans find a way to care for, beautify—by their lights—, rescue or rehabilitate cars, homes, bicycles, etc.. I have seen several versions, in various states of repair, of what I think must have been the first station wagon, a '52 Chevy, with a series of four or five

horizontal ridges across the back. The owner of one I saw today had carefully painted the ridges green to contrast with the café au lait colour of the rest of the car. Both appeared to be house paint; at least, definitely not automotive. I also saw a '55 Chevy Bel Air in two colours, white and a glittering metallic copper enamel that definitely did not exist in 1955.

It now feels like full summer, with highs in the low thirties, although it still cools off at night to the low twenties, eventually. I had to have a fan on at dinner last night and while I was working at my computer. So far I haven't had to sleep with the fan on, but it won't be long. When I get up in the morning, the first thing I do is open all the windows on the shaded side of the house and the balcony door. I open the window in the landing and leave the entry door only open half way, blocking the view of the hall from the landing, in case of the unlikely event that someone comes up the stairs, because I do my exercises in the buff when it gets this hot. This morning, though, someone did come up the stairs. I was doing a row-pull-up, so had my back to the hallway, when I felt a touch on the back of my neck. Did I jump! It was just Lilo, the landlords' boxer. Nothing like an unexpected cold nose on the back of the neck to get the adrenalin flowing in the morning.

07-04-2012

O frabjous day—mango juice is back on the shelves! I almost didn't bother going to the CUC store this morning, thinking I'd just do a quick market run for bananas, onions and green peppers, if I could get them, and get in a good long day of editing. I got out early enough though that it was still fairly cool and I felt like prolonging my walk a bit. I didn't have high hopes of finding either mango juice or rolled oats, having tried only a couple of days ago, but at least got lucky on one count and didn't spend my bag check money for nothing.

The bag check used to be inside the store and I could scan the shelves from the door before deciding whether to go in, but they remodelled a while back and put the bag check counter outside. Now you have to pay to check your bag whether or not you buy anything. Customers are not allowed to enter most stores with anything larger than a small purse. It's probably primarily crime prevention, but it also creates jobs. The downside, and a big one, is that it pretty much forces you to take plastic bags, except when you buy few enough items to carry to the bag check. The litre juice boxes stack nicely and are easy to carry to the counter, but if I had had a bunch of odd-shaped things, I would have had to accept a plastic bag.

09-04-2012

:-) No one at polo yesterday, not even Conner, so I just watched the kids playing bikeless polo for an hour. I found out today that the real name of the park where we play, which I know as Parque Acapulco, is Parque Ho Chi Minh. I knew there was a statue near the entrance but had never looked to see who it was. When we were going down 26th this morning there was a lot of visible security presence on the street and when we passed the park the Secretary General of the Communist Party of Vietnam was laying a wreath at the statue of Uncle Ho.

Hallelujah - web access again! I was browsing all day to catch up on MeSH terms and various definitions I wanted to check before getting back to authors, looking for primary sources where they had just said so-

and-so cited so-and-so saying... Actually, "browsing" is too passive a word for it, more like frantically scrambling around the web. I have sorely missed being in touch with friends in Canada, Chile, etc., but couldn't do more than answer a couple of messages containing direct questions for me.

On the way in to work this morning we were behind a truck piled high with potatoes for a couple of blocks. Two men were sitting close to the edge of the truck and a third had stretched out on top of the pile with his arm over his eyes. It seemed like a precarious place to take a nap. I was relieved when Silva passed; I kept worrying the driver might brake suddenly and the poor napper would end up as hash browns.

One of Silva's neighbours found rolled oats at Galerías Paseo so I went there after work. Eureka. The containers were only about half as big as the ones I used to get and cost almost as much. Another sign of creeping capitalism? And they're the quick-cooking kind, not the whole rolled oats I like (if I wanted my oats all mushy I'd cook 'em). but I got two boxes anyway. They should do me for a couple of weeks of breakfasts and with luck I'll find the good stuff before I run out again.

10-04-2012

I'm almost afraid to say this, but today was the second in a row with web access all day. OK, except for the times the power went off briefly. And there was water most of the day. Lunch was good too (I couldn't face yesterday's and had crackers and peanut butter at my desk): rice, red beans, a boiled egg, half a potato and some fufú. I mixed up the first four to make a sort of do-it-yourself casserole and gave my fufú—mashed boiled plantain—to Naty.

On the trip home I laughed out loud at the arrangement of decals on the back window of a '53 Plymouth. On the top were a Cuban flag and an image of Che; below, two much larger decals of the Industriales baseball team logo. At least they put the flag and Che above the baseball team. :-)

This morning at the sink I saw movement from the corner of my eye. There was a little bird on my balcony, I think the Cuban equivalent of a sparrow. The Spanish word, *gorrión*, seems more romantic somehow, although sparrow might have the same aura for a Cuban. Somewhere—Chile maybe?—*gorrión* is a slang word for melancholy, a usage I learned before I knew it was also a bird; I've always thought of sparrows as rather cheerful critters, so it surprised me to find out the original meaning. I'd like to get a good bird book and learn the names of the various winged creatures I see around the neighbourhood. Silva is a fixer for a guy in Connecticut who brings birdwatching tours here several times a year; maybe he can recommend one.

11-04-2012

I'm rarely surprised by any automotive phenomenon here, but today I was startled to see something that looked truly out of place (if that's possible in a place where there seems to be no end of ingenuity when it comes to keeping all manner of motorized vehicles on the road): a London cab, one of those big humpbacked things that looks like it came right out of a Keystone Kops silent movie—but painted New York taxi yellow! A mind-bending combination.

The fridge at work has finally stopped working entirely, after months of only cooling the freezer compartment. When I got to work this morning there was a small lake beside it. As luck would have it, today was the day Esther María brought her *tres leches*, thinking it would give us desserts for two or three days. By lunch time it had thawed a bit and she was unhappy about its consistency. Since I didn't know what to expect from a *tres leches*, I was quite happy with it. It was a bit like a frozen lemon cheesecake, nice and tart. We all had second helpings and there was still half of it left so she asked she persuaded someone in the International Affairs office to let her store it in their freezer until tomorrow. I hope she gave them a piece.

Early this morning I got an e-mail from Julio saying that someone from ETECSA had come to the house to install my phone but said he couldn't do it unless I was here. This baffles me. If I had to be here, why would ETECSA not have given me some warning that he was coming? They must make a lot of useless trips if they never let anyone know when they're going to arrive. I was able to call the installer, Orlando, on his cell and get him to come back tomorrow, supposedly at 9 am, but he asked me three times to call him at 8:30. I wonder what that's about. We start layout tomorrow afternoon and I can't afford to take the whole day off to wait for him. Even half a day. It's now more than two months since I paid my security deposit; I had planned to go to *Atención al Cliente*—effectively, the complaints office—this Friday if I hadn't seen any movement on it by then. They're only open the one day a week; I suppose they must not get many complaints, but whether that's cause or effect is anyone's guess.

12-04-2012

Whoo-hoo! I have my own phone now (833-4011, *por si las moscas*...) No more having to explain to non-Cubans that they have to call twice because Julio and Estrella pick up the first time. No more missing international incoming calls because the caller doesn't understand Estrella's request to hang up and call again. No more combing the stores for long distance cards so I can call home or Chile. No more having to limit my calls home to five minutes—what the ten-dollar card will cover—, or worse, having the card expire without a chance to say goodbye. I'd better not get carried away, though: calls to Canada are almost four bucks a minute, calls to Chile almost seven! Incoming local calls are free but outgoing calls cost an arm and a leg, so I'll have to remember to keep using the peso line for outgoing calls. When I want to talk to someone and Julio and Estrella's line is busy I can make a quick cell phone call or text them and ask them to call me on my CUC line. To help me keep from getting the CUC and peso lines mixed up, I had the CUC line put in the bedroom; the peso line is at my desk in the living-diningroom where I will be more likely to use it anyway, for calling authors, Gail, etc..

Ah, and I just realized one of the best things about it: I can unplug the peso phone when I'm not using it and I won't be awakened by whoever it is that calls Estrella and Julio at 6:30 most mornings. It happens so often I think it must be Aimee's day nurse calling to say she's going to be late.

Wonder of wonders, Orlando actually came when he said he would. Instead of the half hour he predicted it would take, it took an hour and a half, so I was glad I hadn't arranged a specific time for Silva to pick me up afterwards. He had to take the birdwatching guy to the airport at ten and Orlando didn't finish until 10:15. The birdwatching group's flight was an hour late so I didn't get to ENSAP until after noon, and had to be at Gail's at three for layout. What a scramble. Layout went pretty smoothly. We got

21 of 56 pages laid out and have two more sessions scheduled. I think the third one will have to be a marathon, because Gail still has six manuscripts to approve. She always has questions for the authors that didn't occur to me so it takes at least a day from when I get them back from her before I can send them for style correction, which takes a day or two, depending on how busy Carolyn is. All told I can't imagine we'll have much to do in our second layout session, a week from today, and our final session is only three days after that. This is going to be a nailbiter.

When I got home, Estrella told me that Orlando had come back in the afternoon and told her he made a mistake in leaving me the phone, that I had to pay extra for the phone because it was a CUC contract. He asked her to let him in the apartment to remove it. She said she couldn't do that and would have me call him. I distinctly remember being told when I signed the contract that the phone came with the line. Since my brain can be a bit teflonish at times, I called Silva to confirm: he was there with me when I went to sign the contract. In fact, the reason we both remember it so clearly is that he told the ETECSA rep that if lack of phones that was holding up the installation, he could lend me one for a while. She assured him they had phones and that one went along with the line. Silva's theory is that Orlando wanted me to pay him cash for it or take it and sell it and pocket the money.

13-04-2012

The telephone saga continues. Orlando called shortly after 7:30 this morning and told me he needed to take the phone back. I explained that I had been told when I signed the contract that it came with the line and he should speak to the agent at the ETECSA office and if he was right they could put it on my bill. Suddenly he didn't have any more to say. He must have thought I had just arrived in Cuba, to not know any better than to hand cash to an installer. Maybe I should get Conner to make me a *Soy extranjera...pero no comemierda* t-shirt.

This afternoon, just around the corner from my house, I saw a young woman whose hair was the same bright orange as her bicycle. Hmmm, maybe she's bike polo material.

Until recently I hadn't realized that there are regulations about internal migration in Cuba, specifically to the capital. I found out when two friends who are just that got married so one could obtain permanent residency in Havana. The city's infrastructure is strained as it is and the regulations are an attempt to contain population growth to avoid further pressure. Unfortunately, there is an interaction between what could be considered—in intent, if not in method—logical policy to put the brakes on urbanization and city-centrism and outright racism. The latter came to my attention because of a letter in today's *Granma*. As often happens, I missed the letter that provoked this one, but it seems to have been a rant by an *habanero* attributing the ills of crime, crowding, bad manners and general social decay in Havana to the influx of migrants from elsewhere in Cuba, particularly Oriente, which, not coincidentally has a predominantly black population. You don't have to be a sociologist to figure out that the writer was probably white; I heard the same rant from an older white *habanero* in the cola at the Cadeca a while back. Today's writer mentioned in passing some of the factors that are more likely to contribute the lamented social deterioration but focussed on a discussion of chauvinism and racism as reflected in common parlance and humour—e.g., jokes about country bumpkins—and media portrayals. And on mentioning the contributions of *orientales* to Cuban politics, science and culture. His closing words,

loosely translated, were: *In Cuba, as in the rest of the world, if migration is a problem, it's because of inequalities and poor distribution of resources, which is where our government and people need concentrate their efforts to reach the worthy goal of equality for all Cubans.*

14-04-2012

Well, I'm getting more cardio exercise now, running down the hall to pick up when my new phone rings. I didn't expect that to happen often, but my number is only one digit different from that of the Habana Libre Hotel. A clear majority of the calls I've had so far have been from people trying to get the hotel. One person called three times in a row, seconds apart, possibly thinking s/he had dialled incorrectly. At least, from the closeness of the calls I infer that they were all from the same person; each time s/he hung up as soon as I said it was a wrong number, not so much as a *sorry to bother you*. I just hope it doesn't start happening at night.

I was just settling down to work this morning when I got a call from a friend of friends in Canada. I had forgotten that Aaraón was going to be here from Mexico this week. As part of his graduate work in Waterloo he had made a film on migrant workers in Canada and was here to present it at a conference on Canadian-Latin American studies. I thought that since he was also a film-maker he'd enjoy seeing *Fresa y Chocolate*—the café; I'm sure he's seen the film—so suggested meeting there later. He was with another student from México, Argelia, and a Cuban friend, Fidel. Fidel and I had discussed plans on the phone and I had assumed when he said they'd see me in fifteen minutes that they were going to take a máquina from the Habana Libre along 23rd. Instead, they walked, and it took them almost an hour. I had assumed Fidel was from Havana, but he's from Sancti Espíritus and unfamiliar with the terrain. Anyway, once we were all there, we had a good visit. Aaraón particularly enjoyed the antique movie camera in the patio and the directors' chairs labelled with the names of a famous Cuban film directors...Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Humberto Solás, Sara Gómez. Afterwards we crossed the street to ICAIC headquarters so they could see more cinematic antiques and the posters covering the walls and ceiling of the atrium. I wanted to buy a copy of *La última cena*, but the compañera attending the booth had gone home.

Since they're leaving for Cienfuegos early tomorrow, Aaraón wanted to leave a copy of his film at the hotel reception desk for me to pick up later. I wasn't convinced I'd ever get it, so we caught a máquina to the hotel and said goodbye there. I walked back, just for the exercise and because it was such a lovely evening. I wish I had had my camera me to take a photo of a yard full of garden gnomes and other kitsch on 19th near Paseo. I guess a lot of people try to buy them: there are two signs saying, *no se venden*.

15-04-2012

Oh poop, no other bikes for bike polo today either. The boys seem happy to play a weird version of street hockey with the mallets, but I'm dying to play the real thing. It would be nice if I could play in Ottawa some time and not feel like I'm starting completely from scratch.

17-04-2012

No time to write more than brief things to jog my memory later...

A call at 2 am for the Habana Libre. Sigh. It jangled my nerves and it was a long time before I got back to sleep. Then I was so sleepy in the morning I didn't notice the shower curtain was outside the edge of the stall. I stepped out of the shower into a puddle.

It will be a miracle if the April issue gets out on time. Our desktop publisher was in an accident today; he's fine, but his car was totalled.

No lineups in the lunch room this week. All educational institutions are on holiday in honour of the anniversary of Playa Girón.

This morning I saw a van with the rear window almost completely covered with decals: at the top: *el 3men2* (the tremendous one; most Cubans wouldn't pronounce the esses in *tres* and *dos*) and below, *ni pita ni freno* (neither honks nor brakes); in between something too crude to transcribe. I suppose he thinks he's just the coolest, wittiest thing ever.

Beisbolitos spread with Nutella make a very fine dessert. I'll have to get another jar when I'm in Canada next month. I'm going to meetings in Oakland and Seattle and couldn't face the Miami airport, so will go through Vancouver and take a few days holiday to visit friends.

My friend is Maca coming for a flying visit next weekend, literally: she arrives on Friday at 11 pm and leaves on Monday at 6:50 am, taking advantage of the time between the end of her conference in Holguín and the return of her charter flight. I'm touched that she's going to so much trouble to come for such a short visit. And just praying my strongest agnostic prayers that we are actually finished with the April issue of the journal by then. Silva is already lined up for the royal tour on Saturday, her one full day here.

Adam, our desktop publisher, was in a traffic crash today; a tractor-trailer crunched his car on a right turn. He's fine, thank goodness, but his car was totalled. He thinks the driver was drinking. Coincidentally, there had just been an article in *Granma* about a crackdown on drinking and driving; people are getting their licences taken away. The culture is a bit like it used to be in Ontario in the sixties, with a high tolerance for booze behind the wheel; they're trying shift the norm with public education campaigns and combining that with more enforcement. They have quite a way to go. Last week I saw a man throw something I thought was a juice box out a car window and I made a comment to Silva about littering. *That's not the worst of it, he said, What he threw out was a rum container.* It was a public utility truck and quite early in the day. You can buy 240 ml tetrapaks of cheap rum for under a CUC in almost any store; I've seen groups of teenagers walking along drinking from them through straws. I'm glad they're upping the consequences and taking away licences, but according to Luis, people don't seem to worry too much either about driving without a licence.

18-04-2012

Another bad accident in front of ENSAP today, the third since I've been here. It looked like one car was trying to make a U turn at the entrance and the other one hit it from behind. There seemed to be about eight people in the car that was hit, so it must have been a peso taxi picking people up at the pediatric hospital next door. I jumped up as soon as I heard the squeal and crash and when I got to the window a

man was running away from the car with a baby in his arms, probably taking it to the hospital. Then a women ran toward the hospital with another child. The back end of the car was really crumpled and they had a lot of trouble getting the rear doors open to get the people in the back seat out, but it seemed that all the passengers were ok.

19-04-2012

Gail and I made a presentation today to a group of doctoral students in a course on scientific writing. Lila asked us to give the session on writing in English. The class had to be moved because of a power fairly affecting one wing of the building, the Center for Molecular Immunology, and when we passed a large cage full of bikes I commented enthusiastically; Lila said her son is an avid cyclist, so of course I pitched bike polo. She thinks he might be interested and suggested I go by and grab him some time when I'm going to the court; they live two short blocks away, to it's very handy. I try not to count chickens before they're hatched, but I can't help but hope he'll be enthusiastic enough about it to be the essential Cuban anchor we need for it to keep going when I'm not around. And if they have space, the location is perfect to keep some loaner bikes for the kids who don't have them. OK, settle down Chris. Those eggs haven't even been laid yet!

I've received many different kinds of speaker's gifts, but never an umbrella. This morning they gave Gail and me some very nice ones with the CIM logo on them. I tend to carry my collapsible one, more for shade than protection from rain, but it will be nice to have one to lend guests.

After a long layout session with Adam today we finally faced up to the fact that there is no way we can finish on Sunday as planned. Gail still has two research articles and a perspective for final editing and approval and she hasn't written up her interview with Mariela Castro yet. We decided to put final layout off until Wednesday, which means that least the two research articles will have a chance to go to Carolyn for style correction. It also means I get to play bike polo on Sunday, if some other people show up with bikes. If the promised thunderstorms don't happen to coincide with game time.

For days, the weather folks have been saying, "possible showers and thunderstorms." There was a respectable sound-and-light show while we were doing layout—thank goodness the power stayed on—but nary a drop fell. Havana's reservoirs are at 18% of capacity, slightly lower than when I arrived in 2010. Many other provinces are almost as badly off; Mayabeque's are at 27%. The highest levels I've seen reported are in Oriente, just over 50%. Lack of water is one of the limiting factors for Cuban agriculture; there is simply not enough to make all the theoretically arable land productive, even if they had the workforce, equipment and supplies for it.

Just before we reached Adam's house to drop him off after layout, we saw a group of young men standing in (the middle of, of course) the street chatting, one of them with a monkey perched casually on his shoulder. While not as popular as pets as dogs and cats are here, they're not rare enough to elicit second glances from most Cubans; but from gringas like me, for sure. Silva says they were very popular pets among the troops in Angola. They caught the monkeys by giving them candy and then putting a candy inside a jar with a mouth just wide enough for the monkey to put her hand in; when she grabbed

the candy and made a fist, she couldn't take her hand out of the jar. Not willing to relinquish the candy, she would be nabbed while pondering her dilemma.

21-04-2012

When thunder woke me this morning I grumbled into my pillow, *promises, promises*, but a few minutes later an unmistakable thrumming had me sitting up, smiling. *Finally!* It kept up for a good two hours. When it was easing off a bit, I stood in the window of the stairwell, drinking my tea and watching the street-turned-river. Drops of water ran down along the underside of the hydro cable to the front of the house, falling to the ground wherever they hit a kink. For a while, the light hit the running drops at just the right angle to light them up, making the cable look like string of white blinking mini Christmas lights. Oh to have the camera—and the skill—to capture such a moment!

22-04-2012

The news last night showed scenes from what looked like amazing Earth Day celebrations in Parque Lenin. I do wish they would discover the concept of advertising these things BEFORE they happen!

It rained steadily for another couple of hours in the late afternoon yesterday. I wonder how much difference it made to the reservoirs. Surprisingly, the power stayed on all day, except for a couple of short interruptions. On the other hand, the peso phone line went dead for a good part of the evening so I couldn't try to connect to check for mail until after midnight. I was able to get into Infomed but not the web so no Gmail. It's dead again today, and I can't use my CUC line for the internet because the Infomed account is linked to the other number (in any case, it would be prohibitively expensive). What a pain. To discuss a manuscript with an author I had to call her on my cell and ask her to call back on the CUC line. Fortunately, Cubans are quite familiar with these complicated arrangements.

I'm not sure it was related to the storm, but we didn't get water from the main last night, so there was almost no pressure this morning. I resigned myself to the proverbial "lick and a promise" and will go by Conner's to shower before bike polo. I can live with my unshowered self for a few hours, but Cubans are very sensitive to body odour and it would be antisocial to inflict it on others.

High hopes for bike polo tonight: Conner has recruited a couple of people with bikes! I'd be happy if we could even play two-on-two.

23-04-2012

Drat! Conner and her friend Otto came with bikes, but that was it. We let the kids play foot polo for about an hour and then when the big guys with the soccer ball showed signs of wanting to take over the court, had a bit of practice moving the ball around. If everyone who came once came all on the same day, we'd have at least two teams. I can't do anything until after the journal is put to bed on Wednesday night, but will spend some time on the phone on Thursday trying to get some other folks out.

I went to four different stores today, in four different neighbourhoods, in my fruitless quest for rolled oats. None to be had. Not even instant oatmeal. En route though, I got some entertainment that almost made it worth it: a man was standing stark naked in the shallows of the Almendares River while three women were bathing him. It was a sort of baptism ceremony that new members of santería go through

when they take their first vows, beginning their year of dressing in white, avoiding ocean bathing and I'm not sure what else. He must have an exhibitionist streak, because he was right beside the bridge with two more private options available to him very close by: one under the bridge and one just downstream a bit and around a curve in the river. Annet said his *santería* sponsors should have guided him, that it's unusual for them to have the rite in such a public place.

Anywhere else it would have stopped traffic. Not in Havana. Although, when I said that to Silva, he said it would have been an entirely different matter if it had been a woman.

24-04-2012

Ugh! This morning I found tiny white worms—larvae, I guess is probably the better word—on the lid of a cracker tin. I took the tin out on the balcony and blew them off; they'll just have to take their chances with the sparrows. I keep all my food in glass, plastic or tin containers, so I was mystified.

Later, when I decided to make cornmeal for breakfast (I still have no oats and was bored with toast), I realized where they came from. I had bought the cornmeal from a man outside the *agro* a couple of weeks ago and just pitched it up on the top shelf because I didn't have a jar big enough. When I took the bag down, I noticed minute holes in it, and on closer inspection could see little insects moving inside. My theory is that the cornmeal had larvae in it when I bought it and when the insects matured they managed to puncture the plastic bag to get out: the larvae on my cracker tin are the next generation.

Just thinking about it makes my skin crawl. On the weekend, once the April issue is done, I'm going to take everything out of the pantry, scrub it down and put new shelf paper in.

Annet told me today about something I wish I had seen. Kids here play a street game called *cuatro esquinas*, or four corners. It's a poor kid's version of baseball, played with a rubber ball and without a bat. They hit the ball with their hands and then walk the bases, which are the four corners of an intersection; they're not allowed to run except to get back to a base if they can't reach the next one. Anyway, there was a national *cuatro esquinas* championship last week. I can't imagine how they selected the teams, but it was a big deal and was televised. I'm so sorry to have missed it. I'm not a sports fan—other than bike polo—but that would have been worth watching.

I'm very nervous about meeting our deadline for this issue. We should have had everything proofed by this afternoon but when I had to leave tonight I still hadn't received the proof for the last research article; something to do with complications with the graphics. We don't have time to send the editorial, About the Contributors and the interview with Mariela Castro to Carolyn for style correction, so we have to be extra careful in proofing them; Annet and I and Esther María have all proofed About the Contributors, but Conner's still editing the interview and Gail hasn't even looked at my draft of the editorial yet. We have seven hours max tomorrow to do all the remaining layout because tomorrow night is Gail's last chance to spend some time with her son before he moves to Chile on Friday. If I had any nails left I'd be biting them.

26-04-2012

What a roller-coaster. we thought we were finished late Wednesday night and then when we saw the

full PDFs we found a whole bunch of errors and had to have another layout session with Adam on Thursday, fortunately not the marathon Wednesday night had been (it went closer to nine hours than seven; poor Gail was late for her date with her son). I called one of the authors to check on something on Wednesday night and she had a comment on almost every single paragraph of the article. She reads some English but doesn't know idioms so was worried about some constructions because they didn't parse at her level of grammar. We got it all fixed to her satisfaction and in fact, making it clear to her should make it clearer to our readers. Then Thursday morning there were two e-mails from her wanting to change other things.

Yesterday morning, when I thought we were finished, I stayed home to call the bank to get my card situation resolved so I can pay my taxes online and transfer money to my debit card to pay my rent. The last time I had called the help line they said I would have to call my local branch directly and I couldn't take the time off to do it during branch hours, 10:30 to 4. Thinking we were closer to finished than we actually were, I stayed home yesterday to make the call. I kept getting a recording telling me their branch hours, well into them, so I called Montreal again and when I told the person there how desperate I was she arranged a conference call with the branch and we finally got everything settled.

27-04-2012

Many frustrations today trying to connect. Since we had to check all the links to the PDFs before we could send out the e-alert about the new issue, it was more than a little stressful. We finally got going in mid-afternoon and everything checked out. There were a couple of typos needing correction but I couldn't get hold of Adam to find out when he'd have them fixed so when it was time for me to leave and I still couldn't get him, I gave Annet the go-ahead to send out the alerts. I figured it was more important to get the alert sent out before the weekend than to have everything perfect beforehand. In Cuba, at least, a lot of people read it on the weekends; Murlean says it is the opposite in the US, so she's not sending out the English alert until she gets back to Oakland on Monday.

I left work a bit early to meet Conner and Gail, a cheering up mission. Gail's son and his wife moved to Chile today, and she's understandably sad about it. On the way to pick Conner up I stopped by the Flora bakery to pick up whole grain bread but the cola was really long. If I hadn't been so hungry and the bakery hadn't smelled so good I might have waited in line, but I didn't think I could stand twenty minutes with the delicious smell of baking reminding me constantly that I was starving. Lunch today was pretty meaty so I just had some arroz moro and beets, and there was no water on either side of the hall all day, so I didn't even have my usual pots of tea to keep my blood sugar up.

We met for coffee at the Café Fortuna in Playa and then walked over to La Carboncita for dinner. It was pretty good, and both service and setting were pleasant, but it seemed expensive, CUC\$42 for the three of us. We could easily have fed six for that at the Rosa Negra.

We all laughed at this sign, posted by someone who had been asked at least one too many times if s/he knew where the carpenter's shop was.



My friend Maca was supposed to arrive tonight from Holguín and I had arranged to go to the airport with Silva to pick her up. Shortly after I got home from dinner, though, I got a call from her saying her flight had been cancelled. What a shame. It's hardly worth it for her to take the afternoon flight, since she has to leave on a morning flight before seven on Sunday to get her flight back to Toronto. And of course, there's the worry about what will happen if they cancel the Sunday morning flight!

29-04-2012

What a whirlwind. Maca called yesterday morning at 8:30 and said she was just about to get on a plane for Havana. I said great, see you soon and called Silva, who asked all the questions I had forgotten to ask: what's the flight number, what's the arrival time, what terminal? I had just assumed it would take the same time as her cancelled flight and arrive at the same terminal. Because my peso line isn't working, Silva did the detective work. First off he called the airport here and found out there wasn't a flight scheduled to Havana until mid-afternoon. He then called the hotel where the passengers from the cancelled flight had been sent and there was no record of her there. He had thought she was coming from Santiago de Cuba, and coincidentally a flight from there had been cancelled last night too, so there was nothing in the conversation to tip him off to the fact that he was calling the wrong airport and then hotel.

Once we clarified that she was coming from Holguín, he got on the trail again but met another dead end. Then it occurred to me to look at my cell phone to see where she was calling from. I couldn't call the number from my cell because I had only two cents left on my account and person at the other end wanted to get off the line quickly because the cell user pays the bill on a call from a land line. All she told me was that she had left for Havana. Silva then called her from his phone; that one was on his dime so she had all sorts of explanations and he established that she had been routed through Cayo Coco and was expected to arrive—about half an hour before! We rushed out to the airport but had to stop on the way for gas and I was worried that she might have taken a taxi to my place when she didn't find me waiting for her. What a relief to get there and find her flight was just arriving.

It was a short but intense visit. We went right from the airport to Jaimanitas, which I knew she would love, and even though we were all hungry, it made sense to go there before lunch, rather than doubling back. There was some sort of event going on at Fuster's house so we couldn't go through it or visit the studios, but they let us go in to buy some postcards. Bonus: we saw Isabelle Huppert—guest of honour at the French film festival starting this weekend—leaving just as we arrived. We hoped to get lunch at the Rosa Negra but the cola was too long so we went to La Pachanga near my house instead; Silva nipped home for lunch with his family and picked us up afterwards.

When we went past the fine arts faculty of the university we saw several large sculptures in the forecourt. They're getting ready for the Biennale. It starts sometime soon; I haven't paid attention to the dates because I knew I'd be either incredibly busy to gone during it. Maybe if I'll still be here for the next one.

Next stop, the Plaza Vieja and coffee at the Escorial. There was a bit of a wait for a table but Maca said the coffee was the best she'd ever had, so it was worth it. After that we went to the Cámara Oscura; the

sky was overcast so the images weren't as crisp as they usually are, but there were still lots of oohs and ahs as people realized they were seeing "real time" action in the streets around. The guide asked people not to use flash if they took pictures but too people ignored her, and the complaints of the rest of us. Even though the flash was red instead of white, it rubbed out whole sections of the image every time it went off.



It was raining lightly when we left the Cámara Oscura and by the time we got to the Plaza de Armas the booksellers had packed up their wares. Maca was looking for a particular book so we went to a couple of bookstores, neither of which had the one she wanted. I'm constitutionally incapable of entering a bookstore without buying something so I came home with a couple of finds.

In our wanderings we came upon a mural I had tried to find a couple of times after I first saw it. Just as I thought, when I gave up on it, it just popped up for me.

What I hadn't realized is that it's not a painting but a mosaic, made of tiny pebbles the size of mustard seeds, in different shades of brown.



We were late for both the lithography studio at the edge of the Plaza de la Catedral and the arts and crafts feria at the Almacenes de San José; they were just locking the door when we arrived. So we hopped back in the Lada and took advantage of the remaining daylight to show her the Capitolio and the Plaza de la Revolución —where she almost got hit by a bus trying to find the right spot to get a photo with the giant wall images of Che and Camilo.

Silva dropped us at the Rosa Negra where the cola didn't look too bad. It turned out, though, that a lot of people had just been seated, so the wait was over an hour. Some limonada frappes kept our spirits up while we waited. I was relieved that Maca found the food worth the wait. There was so much of it (I always forget and didn't warn her) that we skipped dessert and walked over that we skipped dessert and walked over to Fresa y Chocolate to see what the live music was. The only thing interesting about it was that the singer was also called Luis Silva, so we headed home to eat mangos that Julio's cousin had brought me Friday morning. Was that only Friday morning? It seems like a week ago.

She almost didn't get here and then she almost didn't get to leave. The water was off this morning and we got to the airport late, half an hour before flight time; they had already closed down the counter and were no longer boarding. Luckily the airline office was open and we were able to find someone with authority to get them to let her through. After we begged him to do something so she wouldn't miss her charter flight from Holguín to Toronto he called security guard to take her to the plane. She had to give me back the bottle of Santiago de Cuba rum that I had given her for her brother, because her backpack was now carry-on. I'll take it to Vancouver in May and ask Mike to take it to her. Better late than never.

The same goes for sleep. When I got home from the airport I slept for a couple of hours before starting what felt like my second Sunday. It took me a good part of the day to take everything out of my pantry, scrub it all down and put it all back. I even washed the cutlery drawer and all its contents. Very

satisfying. Now I'm off to bike polo, with high hopes of a good turnout after Conner's outreach efforts. More later.

30-04-2012

There was supposed to be more later, but I was so tired I was practically staggering when I got back from bike polo so I just did the minimum necessary to get ready for work today and crashed. I even turned off the alarm, giving sleep priority over breakfast. I woke up at 6:45 anyway, but I'm convinced I get better sleep when I know there's no alarm to set an arbitrary limit on it.

I went to the courts early to meet a friend, Nelson, who couldn't play at five but wanted to practice handling the ball a bit. He didn't show up after all, but a couple of them came early. One of them was the photographer from Juventud Rebelde and the other was from the Niagara bike club Conner had connected with through her Harley club friends. Henry said he had never even heard of bike polo until Saturday when Conner told him about it but was keen to try (once he started to play he seemed too good for that to be true but I'll have to take his word for it). His bike is a vintage Niagara that looked like it would be pretty slow on the court. Next to arrive was Rodney, on a BMX stunt bike, all tattoos and oily black ringlets; he's president of the extreme sports club. I had a hard time getting used to his thick Havana accent (I thought he was Ronnie until I heard Conner call him Rodney); when he was talking about extreme sports and mentioned he had a long board, I thought, *I know Cubans are resourceful, but what on earth sort of extreme sports could you do on a Lawn Boy?* We soon cleared up that little misunderstanding but I'm sure he thought I was an absolute ninny. Then there was Vladimir, with his five-year-old son riding behind him and his daughter Laura on another bike; she didn't play but lent her bike.

There were just six of us with bikes so I had to play every game. I got off to a good start, with a goad within seconds of the first joust, thanks to a good pass from Henry. I got three goals in all, only one of them against my own team. :-) I couldn't remember which end was ours and yelled for somebody to remind me but didn't get an answer. And guessed wrong. It was a sweet goal though.

Henry's bike was a bit slow compared to BamBi, even more so compared to Rodney's BMX, but he more than made up for it with a knack for handling the ball and amazing accuracy on goal. Whatever team he was on always won and he scored most of the goals in every game he played. Rodney was as fast as I expected, but his shots tended to go wide and he missed a lot of passes. Once he gets the ball handling down he'll be formidable. Conner was pretty fearless for someone only playing for the second time.

Faces fell when I said I was going to be out of the country for three weeks, until I asked if there was someone willing to take responsibility for the equipment and get it to the court every Sunday. Vladimir lives only a few blocks away and said he'd be happy to do it. Conner said sotto voce that it was a bit of a risk handing over the equipment, but there were two things that reassured me about him: the first was that he came to the court with his kids, and the second the look on his face when he was playing. When he said he would be there every Sunday to play, I had to believe him.

The photographer—I didn't catch his first name but I think his surname was Camarero— said he would send me a link to his website when he puts up the photos, and Rodney lent his bike to someone for one

game and filmed the whole thing. He's going to show it at the bike feria next Saturday. Too bad I'll miss it, but he said he'd put it on a CD for me when I come back.

It was the most fun I've had playing bike polo since the BikeaPOLOoza tournament in 2011. I couldn't stop grinning. I still can't. It looks like bike polo is really going to "take" here and I'm just chuffed.



I was kept busy today doing all sorts of cleanup/postproduction stuff today, including correcting one horrible sense-changing typo. After work I went by the Ateneo bookstore to see if they had a couple of books I had said I would find for Kathleen. No luck, but I did get a good shot of a Cuban port-a-potty, one of scores distributed around the streets of Vedado and neighbouring areas for tomorrow's May Day parade. They are actually just privacy cubicles stationed over sewer grates. Ewwwww! I think I'll just limit my water intake tomorrow.

So, another month flown by. I'll be away for most of May and probably won't collect many new names for my Y list, but April's harvest was pretty good: Yairama Yamandú Yanaisy Yancy Yanisleidi Yanisleidy Yariulbis Yassander Yelina Yenny Yerubi Yhemis Yisela Yonnier Yoraisi Yosbany Yoselyn Yudeisy Yuleisis Yulitza Yumara Yumuri Yurelis Yurislinnis