

01-06-2012

All those months wishing for rain and now we have it with a vengeance. There's been terrible flooding in Mayabeque, the province immediately to the west of Havana and it looks like we're next. Yesterday was rainy most of the day, but it seemed like a monsoon. Here are a couple of shots from the ride home, not very good ones because the windshield was a bit foggy—we had to keep the windows up because of the high wakes from other vehicles. The streets were like rivers and there were times we could hardly see the car in front of us. We saw a small car stranded on top of a concrete median, possibly the result of hydroplaning ; after that I kept thinking that if we didn't hydroplane someone else would hydroplane into us.



I read that the third tropical storm of the season is to be named Chris, but I haven't heard any mentioned by name yet; perhaps none of the ones so far have been big enough to merit names. It's interesting that they moved the weather to early in the news hour tonight, rather than half an hour into it, after sports. I guess they realized that people were impatient to know about the impact of the storm and, even more, what might be in store overnight and tomorrow. They always put Rubiera—rather than one of the other meteorologists—on when the weather is particularly bad, because he has such a calm, authoritative presentation. It's almost the opposite of reassuring for me, though: when I see him, I immediately think, *uh-oh, what's up now?* Silva says Rubiera's a neighbour of mine, but I've yet to see him on the street. Though I might not recognize him without the map of Cuba and flickering satellite images as a background.

04-06-2012

I would have thought that after all that rain there wouldn't be a drop of humidity left in the air, but it's as bad as ever, if not worse. The air is like a hot elastic film stretched over everything, including my mouth and nostrils; it feels stagnant, even with every window in the apartment open. I have to keep moving or I'll fall into a stupor. They don't report the humidex here, but it must be in the forties.

It was lucky I left the conference when I did on Friday. Carlitos and Annet were storm-stayed at ENSAP and couldn't leave until 8 pm. Incredibly, there was no blinking 12:00 on my clock when I got home on Friday indicating the power had been off, nor did it go off over the weekend. It was too hot and humid to go out so I got a fair amount of work done. I did go to the agro but had absolutely no interest in cooking up my usual mess of lentil, bean or chickpea pottage on such a hot day so just got some bananas, onions, green peppers and the last lonely misshapen carrots of the day. I chopped everything up fine, sauteed it with trail mix, hot sauce and soy sauce and some spices, then threw it all in the rice cooker with the rice and some of the rehydrated mango slices Alexis and Julia brought me. It made a

pretty tasty pilaf and didn't heat the place up as much as the stove would have. I think it will do for three more meals, if I don't get greedy.

It looked like it was about to rain again late yesterday afternoon, but I went down to the court at five anyway. No one there; or at least, not to play bike polo (these Cubans must be made of sugar; they stay away if it even looks like there's a chance of rain, as happened last week). I waited about half an hour and then went over to 17th and 22nd to practice ball handling. Some kids there shooting baskets and were interested in knowing what sort of sport I was practising. If I'd only had the duffle bag with me! A couple of them had bikes and would have come over to try it out. They kept on with their baskets while I pushed the ball around; when it got away from me they would kick it back to me and they were terrific about fetching it when it went into the grass, so I hardly had to get off my bike at all. The surface of the *cancha* was quite uneven; it was a test of my cycling skills to avoid the worst holes, as well as the many reddish-brown smears that I later realized were probably just red Cuban mud, tracked onto the court when someone had to recover a ball off side.

Had a lovely surprise yesterday, a call from my brother, Mike. Particularly welcome since all ten times the phone had run earlier in the day it had been people asking for the Hotel Habana Libre. I always make sure to tell them to dial 838 instead of 833 and the same last four numbers. One guy really pushed his luck: he asked if I happened to know the number of the pharmacy at or next door to it! Anyway, it was wonderful to here his voice and my sister Sue's, especially since I've been feeling more than a little homesick since my trip. To be in Canada but not home was harder than I thought it would be.

Some people braving rush-hour traffic today, on their way to do some plumbing. I trust the driver took it easy on the curves!

I heard from one of the new bike polo fans today that there's going to be a cavalcade of bikes, Harleys and antique cars on Saturday, leaving the Regla ferry dock and arriving at La Piragua Park, near the Hotel Nacional, to salute British Culture Week or some such. Unfortunately, they're scheduled to leave the dock 3:30 pm. Since it takes an hour to get there by bike from my place, that means at least two hours of the highest UV exposure. I don't feel like adding to my risk of a second skin cancer, or even a sunburn. Maybe I'll meet them at La Piragua at 4:30 and avoid the worst of it.



It turns out Liliana did have dengue, after all. Silva said there have been several cases of dengue in his neighbourhood. Since they live practically at the edge of the Almendares River, it's pretty hard to keep the mosquito population down. He said he stopped the polyclinic epidemiologist in mid-sentence when he started the lecture on what they need to do at home to prevent mosquitoes from breeding. He's practised *control de foco* for 25 years, and whatever mosquitoes there are in his place weren't born there. He suggested that, rather than blaming the victim, the health department should take a look at the park across the street where kids assemble and leave their trash, full of little places to collect water when there's as much rain as there has been lately. And the mess beside the garbage bins, where someone looking for bottles to collect for the recycling fees tosses them aside when he finds something more lucrative, so instead of being in the bin for collection when the truck arrives, they're rolling down the street. I can't remember his other examples, but he had lots of them; he's pretty eloquent when he gets riled up.

05-06-2012

I worked from home today to make some headway on some manuscripts without the distraction of e-mail, but first went out to an optician to have my new glasses adjusted. They were too loose and kept sliding down my nose, which of course threw off the focus. They still do slide a tiny bit, but I don't think enough to affect my vision, nor do they fall down so far that they pinch my nose. I should have taken my old pair with me to have backups made; if anything were to happen to these I'd be more or less helpless. I suppose I could go back to my old pair even with the old prescription, but the difference is pretty dramatic and I would probably have to choose between being helpless without them and getting a headache with them.

I brought a printer with me from Canada to use at home (some parts of editing just have to be done on paper, or at least, I can't seem to do it on screen) and today I finally got it set up. The only room in the apartment with three-pronged outlets is the one that I don't officially rent (hence the heavy-duty extension cord into the living room to keep my laptop powered). I thought of offering to pay Julio to have a grounded outlet installed in the living room, but when I saw how much more crowded it would look with the extra table I'd need to move in for the printer, I decided to set it up in the "guest" room and just move my laptop in there when I need to print something. Unfortunately I didn't think of bringing home some paper, so I couldn't print the manuscript that actually spurred me to finally take the printer out of the box. Ah well, one step at a time...

06-06-2012

One step forward and two, etc.. Today was as futile as yesterday was productive. The power went off a couple of times at ENSAP, once for over an hour, and when it was on the internet connection was excruciatingly slow. A plague of tiny black ants in the kitchen at ENSAP had me frantically cleaning every possible surface to get rid of any possible sweet residue that might have been attracting them. Esther María says they come indoors when there's going to be a heavy rain, so maybe we're in for another deluge like last Friday's. To make matters worse, I forgot to get my flash drive from the computer when I left so didn't have the electronic versions of the manuscripts I printed to do go over a last time before sending them to Gail. Anyway, I feel so sluggish with the heat that I probably wouldn't have gotten much done tonight anyway. Maybe I'll just call it an early night and try to just plough through things tomorrow.

The customs exemption for food that has been in effect for four or five years has just been eliminated—too many people were using it more to run unofficial import businesses than to help out their families. There is still 10 kilo exemption, which is a sizeable amount of food to bring to a family but less likely to be the basis for a lucrative business reselling bulk food from Costco.

Silva mentioned today that Gabi had had a good time and a late night dancing with friends last night. When I said I was surprised that she was already up after being out late he said that she wasn't up. He heard about her night when he brought her a café con leche while she was still in bed, as he has done every day for his kids (sometimes Liliana does it) since they were children. As usual, she drank it up, said *Estaba rico. Gracias, Papá* and went back to sleep. Gosh, I'd better not let Alexis find out about this: he'll think he had a deprived childhood!

08-06-2012

Julia and Estrella had the house painted this week, but just the front of it. It reminds me of a long joke about epidemiologists and statisticians and the colour of sheep in



Scotland, but I can't remember anything but the punch line: "Well, they're white on *this* side, anyway."

After dropping me off last night Silva saw the scene of a car crash near the cemetery and realized one of the cars belonged to a good friend of his son, Luisi. He stopped to find out if Fidel Raúl (no kidding; that's his name and they always use both barrels) was ok and ended up going on an errand to let the boy's grandmother know what was happening. A woman, a lieutenant colonel in Ministry of the Interior, had run a stop sign and broadsided his car; lucky for him it was a newish car (his mother is Spanish) and had airbags, or he might not have survived. A MININT official who arrived on the scene didn't realize most of the bystanders were from the neighbourhood and knew Fidel Raúl and he started coaching the officer to say he had been talking on his cell phone (he doesn't have one) or smoking (he quit last month). One of Fidel Raúl's friends *did* have a cell phone and recorded the official's remarks. As it turned out, it wasn't necessary because the driver acknowledged she was at fault. The MININT people tried clear the crowd and get the car moved but people refused to go and blocked the car from being towed, saying it wasn't going anywhere until the insurance investigators arrived. Good for them.

Esther María brought me some organic brown rice this week and I made a yummy pilaf for dinner tonight (and two more meals besides). I'm so glad of the rice cooker in this heat. I wonder if I can cook the lentils I got this week in it. It's worth a try; if they don't work I can always toss them in a regular pot later to finish softening them.

I finally came up with a system to make sure I don't forget my flash drive in my computer at work (it probably happens at least once a week, usually when there's something I really want to work on at home). I attach the padlock from the metal grille on my office door to the lanyard on the flash drive. I guess it's not impossible to forget to lock the grille, but it hasn't happened in two years, so it seems a reasonably promising system. We'll see.

09-06-2012

Yesterday was my day to get clean sheets and towels from Estrella, but we both forgot. At least, I had remembered this morning long enough to take my dirty ones down to her on my way to work. She usually brings them up when I get home and if she forgets I go down during the evening. It was only when I was on my way to bed midnight and that I saw the naked bed and realized that both of us had messed up. Of course, they had long since retired for the night. I improvised a bottom sheet from the mattress liner in the guest room and used a t-shirt as a pillowcase. It was too hot to need a top sheet. I used up all my facecloths in lieu of a towel. But I slept fitfully, partly because of the heat and partly because of an unsettled feeling of not really being *in* bed but *on* it. Maybe I need to put an alarm on my phone on Friday nights; Saturday mornings are challenging enough without facing them half asleep.

Friday's *Granma* was full of interesting tidbits. Official condolences to Oscar Niemeyer on the death of his only daughter at age 82; I wonder how old *he* is—I didn't even know he was still alive. An eco tourism center featuring Canadian ponies. Cuba now has 27.7% of its land forested, from a low of 13.4% in 1959 (they're working systematically to meet the original Rio target of 29.3% by 2015). A review of an art exhibit that seemed to be a sly commentary on the kitschification of Cuban popular culture. The usual mix of letters complaining about abuse by and of *cuentapropistas* and an article about the need to develop a culture of paying one's taxes. And a notice of traffic rerouting on Boyeros for the next couple of weeks while they repair a bridge; that means a new strategy for getting to work, since there are no side streets in that area to take. We'll have to go along 51st in Playa to 100th to avoid the detour.

A mutiny almost erupted at the Cadeca this morning, where I stopped to change some CUCs into *moneda nacional* before going to the agro. After the (very long) line had stopped moving for an appreciable length of time, a security guard came out and explained that the cashier had been taken ill and his replacement had arrived, but it would take some time to do the handover of the cash drawer; it is all done manually and of course neither employee wants to be held responsible if things don't add up. he thought it might take up to an hour! The grumbling at that was nothing compared to the response to his next news: people who normally collected their pension there would not be able to do it today; I didn't get the reason. After much gesticulating and yelling, about half the *cola* evaporated. So many people left that it was hard to tell anymore who was supposed to be behind whom, a critical factor in keeping the peace in Cuban queues. The two women who proceeded me both left, but the gentleman before them kindly let me know that now I was to follow him. I pondered leaving a couple of times and deeply regretting not bringing a book—my current read being a fat hardcover—but decided to tough it out. I probably had enough pesos for today's shopping, but if the same thing or similar were to happen next Saturday, I would have wasted time on two separate occasions. Compression of morbidity. :-)

I left for La Piragua just after four this afternoon and my timing was perfect: I got there just as the last of the cavalcade was arriving. I had biked down to 13th, thinking it would have more shade than 17th—almost all streets here are one-way and they were the closest going in the right direction. Not so, at least until after Paseo; I realized later that I should have gone the other way, to 21st. coming home was a cinch; La Piragua is at 19th and O, so I took 19th all the way, and it has lots of trees.



A warm welcome from bicipolo buddies and some new friends.

John and Bambi,
(Lupe in the background)



It was a treat to see all the lovingly-preserved antique cars, motorcycles and bikes. My bamboo bike got a good share of attention, but the music was too loud to explain to much about how I made it (since the immediate occasion was a salute to British Culture Week, it featured equal parts Adele and the Beatles). This looks to be a '53 (or so) Mercury with an improvised air conditioning system. Typically Cuban and a candidate for my Franken-car book, if I ever do it.



If i had to pick a favourite among the motorcycles, I think this beauty, a vintage Indian, would be the one.

A rainbow of Whizzers, which I had never heard of before today, but which must have been popular in the 1950s.



More automotive jewels, and an architectural one.



I found out afterwards that there was an interesting art exhibit in the building right across the street.



Fido checking out the gents'...

My favourite part, of course.



10-06-2012

Well, today we had the bikes for polo, but couldn't get the court! When Conner and I arrived it was still available, but while we were waiting for the others to arrive some kids started playing soccer and showed no disposition to cede it any time soon. Rodney took a nap on his BMX while we were waiting, something I had never imagined possible, much less seen, before. After about 45 minutes we gave up and four of us rode down to check out the courts by the skate park behind the Hospital Clínico. We must have looked an odd assortment, two men and two women, aged from early twenties to early sixties, clearly from at least three different cultural tribes and on four different kinds of bike: a BMX, a mountain bike, a 1940's classic Niagara and my BamBi.



The courts will be perfect, if we can get them: enclosed tennis courts with shade in the afternoon. All of them were occupied but one, and it was padlocked; one of the "regulars" hanging around mentioned that it was being repaired. We decided to arrive next Sunday at 3 pm, when most Cubans will be indoors watching soccer on TV, and see if we can get in then. Henry and Conner both live in Play so headed home from there and Rodney and I went to look at another potential spot, a parking lot in a sports complex near the Plaza de la Revolución. It's a more central location, but not nearly as nice. Not much in the way of shade, and both ends are open, so there'd be a lot of chasing after the ball after goals. In both places we'd have to improvise goal posts. Maybe I can talk a visitor into bringing me some traffic cones, but it will likely be late fall before I have any more visitors.

12-06-2012

No water at work all day yesterday—anywhere in the building, not just our kitchen—and because I don't like to leave the kettle full over the weekend I didn't even have the one pot of tea I can usually count on for hydration. Gail brought some juice boxes for the staff meeting in the afternoon. It helped temporarily, but after a while we were even thirstier. I'd better be more consistent about taking a bottle of water to work with me. I'm working from home today and drinking endless cups of tea; it's easier, if not faster, to boil water than to filter it. I drink two cups out of every pot and put two cups to cool to have later as iced tea.

I went to the state optical store first thing today to order a pair of backup glasses; their Visa machine wasn't working so had to go to a Cadeca to withdraw money on my debit card to pay for them. The lenses aren't photoreactive, but in every other respect are identical to the ones in the pair I got in

Vancouver for ten times the price. I doubt the state is subsidizing glasses heavily enough to account for the entire difference, so opticians in Canada must be making a healthy profit.

The flame trees are in full bloom and some of the streets in Playa, where they line both sides, are breathtaking. I didn't get my phone out quickly enough to get some of the best displays, but this is pretty nice. Imagine the whole block lined with these on both sides, with the branches overlapping overhead.

Nor did I get it out quickly enough to get the 1930s Cadillac hearse painted in vivid lime and acid green. Silva said it looked like a cucumber.



14-06-2012

I stopped off at Lila's place after work yesterday to give her some tips on what to see in Toronto when she passes through on her way back from China in October, and to copy some files she has for me to a CD. The power was off so we just had tea and talked about Toronto. It turns out they'll only let her stay two days in transit and she's undecided about it. She really wants to see Niagara Falls, and it doesn't make a lot of sense to go in to Toronto for two nights if she's going to spend a day in NF. I said I'd look up hotel rates in NF today and see if there are any with a shuttle from Pearson. There are, but it's not free. It might be worth her while to stay at a cheaper place near the airport and just take a bus into NF for the day.

Lila's son is interested in playing bike polo, but won't be out this weekend because of Father's Day. I wrote Nelson today to tell him about the change of venue, but I think he'll be busy with his daughter.

Walking through Parque Acapulco afterwards I saw two groups of people working out in adjacent patios (I'm not sure what else to call the smaller seating areas the park is subdivided into): some kids maybe 7 to 10 years old and a group of older people, mostly women, doing some gentle stretches. Maybe in preparation for Tai Chi? I would have taken some pictures if only I had had my cloak of invisibility with me. :-) Along 26th there were three different checkers games going on on sidewalks or steps. I've seen a lot of sidewalk dominos and chess, but it's the first time I've seen public checkers.



I thought I would take a stroll through the Chinese cemetery on the way home, but it was already locked for the evening. I've meant to visit it for the almost two years I've been here and have never gotten around to it. It's so close, there's really no excuse. I managed to take a photo through the gate.

The good news when I got home was that my shower attachment is fixed: Julio had put the hose on at the wrong end, which was why it didn't seem to fit and kept falling off the base. Perhaps my plumbing woes are over. ¡Ojalá! Now all I have to do is perfect my timing for turning the water heater on: I have to have both hot and cold on full strength to get enough pressure, so if the heater is on too high or for too long I have to ratchet back the hot water, losing pressure, and if it's not on long enough or the flame is too low, I have to have a cold shower to get enough pressure. Another important piece of timing is how long to leave the hot water running in the bathroom sink to get all the air bubbles out of the system before I hop in the shower. Sometimes it takes a very long time for them all to emerge and if I miss one

it can entirely stop water flow to the shower at the most inopportune times. The art and science of dealing with Cuban plumbing...

This morning I picked up my glasses at the *óptica*. I was wrong. They differ from the ones I got in Canada in a second way: the lenses are about five times thicker and the glasses weigh proportionately more. Oh well, they were always meant to be just a backup pair. I had come to take for granted the improvements in lens technology for my weird prescription; it's been a very long time since I've rocked that Coke bottle look!

I'm enjoying the new route to work. Today I noticed two more pieces of art left by the Bienal. Although I think the shoe is actually from the 2010 Bienal, the hammer smashing the globe is new (I didn't see the plaque, but I suspect it's an allusion to capitalism). I love that the successive Bienales are making Havana's already interesting streetscape even more so.



A little further on, Silva noticed someone carrying what I thought was an orchid and explained that the person had just somehow inserted a couple of orchid blooms into the stems of a *curujey*, a much cheaper plant, and was going to try to sell it as a mature blooming orchid. Sure enough, while we were waiting at the light someone came along and bought it. If Silva could see the trick from thirty feet away because of the difference in the foliage, I wonder why it wasn't noticeable to the buyer who was in touching distance; obviously he was not as knowledgeable about orchids as Silva, or about *curujey* either.

Tuesday's *Granma* had items on the front page about Alberto Juantorena and Teófilo Stevenson, whose names I first heard when I was here in 1976 and they were making news in the Montreal Olympics. Coincidentally, I confused them this week; that is, I attributed Stevenson's sport (boxing, gold in Munich, Montreal and Moscow), to Juantorena, who was a runner (gold in 400 and 800 meters in Montreal). Someone had offered to introduce me to Juantorena, who is now vice-president of the sports and rec institute (equivalent to a deputy minister), in aid of getting bike polo recognized as an official sport—it would be fantastic if we could; not only might we have a chance for an assured regular place to play, but we could host tournaments to which US citizens could come without risking a fifty thousand dollar fine for breaking the embargo. Juantorena has just been named to the world athletic Hall of Fame.

Sadly, the news about Stevenson was about his death at sixty from heart disease. Though not considered a particularly bright light—after a few too many blows to the head in his boxing career—he was well loved, and particularly respected for choosing to stay in Cuba, despite repeated lucrative offers from promoters who wanted him to go pro in the US. When he was asked if he ever regretted not taking the opportunity to become a millionaire, he said, *I'm rich in many ways. I'm rich because I'm happy, because I'm Cuban, because I live in Cuba. I'm rich because of the society I live in. I'm very rich because I'm respected and loved. I'll never regret my choices.*

15-06-2012

I'm still shaky from something that happened on the way home tonight. It started to pour just before five so I suggested to Annet it might be prudent to catch a lift with Silva when I left. She had to go by Graciela's to pick up some keys, so we went through Marianao to Playa. The rain was quite heavy as we went up what I think must have been 41st in Marianao and most of the traffic slowed right down. Not so

a small bus that sped past us on the right. I barely had time to think it was going way too fast for the rain-slick road conditions when it swerved in front of us, missing us by about a metre, crossed into the oncoming lane, spun around and came to rest with its nose on the median, facing us, about six inches from a post it had managed to miss. As we passed it, we saw that the first of the oncoming cars had managed to stop no more than two inches from the side of the bus.

So many pieces of luck went into it ending up an anecdote rather than a tragedy, a series of tiny accidents of timing. Had it not happened right at an intersection, the bus might have bounced off the raised median and back into our path. Had we been going any faster, Silva might have lost control of his car. Had the oncoming traffic been any closer, or travelling any faster, the bus would have been hit head on, or from behind after it stopped.

For once I wasn't starving when I got home. Must be the after-effects of adrenalin.

17-07-2012

I made some good headway on a couple of manuscripts yesterday and then went out for pizza with Gail and Conner at a new place a couple of blocks from Conner's apartment. Like many of the new *paladares*, it's in a carport, so sheltered but open to the breezes (enabling Conner to savour her after-dinner cigar without choking Gail and me). The pizza was good, the milkshakes excellent and the bill came to only \$6 each, including tip. I wish it were in my neighbourhood! Conner's *barrio* is particularly good for eateries because of Casa de la Música brings a lot of customers to an otherwise residential area.

I had to wake up Julio and Estrella when I got home shortly before 11. They hadn't realized I had gone out and so had put the chain on the door when they went to bed. It's reassuring to know I'm quiet enough that they don't notice whether I'm home or not. Because my hearing is not what it used to be, I sometimes worry that my music is loud enough to disturb them. I asked Julio about it once and he just laughed and said Estrella had the same problem and he hoped their TV didn't bother me! In the evenings when we have both doors open I sometimes do hear their TV, but it's not loud enough to bother me. Sometimes when we're watching the same thing—usually the news, occasionally a concert—there is a slight delay in reception in one of the sets that creates an annoying interference that I avoid by turning my TV up a bit, if theirs isn't too loud. Rarely, theirs is loud enough that I turn can turn my sound off. It reminds me of when I had a friend who lived across from a drive-in movie theatre; she could watch the movie on the big screen and listen to it on her radio. Her friends were pretty envious!

I borrowed back the bike from Esther María for Conner's visiting friend, Lourdes, for transportation and bike polo while she's visiting. She and Conner went to Esther María's to pick it up and then met us at the *cancha*. Sadly, there was an unfortunate mishap on the way. Conner was looking back to check on Lourdes and just at that moment a stray dog ran in front of her bike. The bike and dog survived, but Conner has a badly sprained ankle. I improvised a pressure bandage for her out of a bandana and a couple of lengths of pantihose I had been using to tie my polo mallet to my top tube and she headed home, promising to have it x-rayed at the Cira García (because she had injured it previously). Of course she didn't. Lourdes stayed and we played two on one against Henry, the only other person who showed up. He trounced us anyway. The *canchas* at the *patinódromo* have some advantages: full shade after 5 pm; they're enclosed, so no out-of-bounds balls; and there are bleachers if we ever get to the point of having a tournament with actual spectators. On the other hand, they're more out of the way



and we're not likely to recruit new players among passers-by. I also miss the graffiti and the general liveliness of the Parque Acapulco.

After a pretty good ten days, connectivity ground to a halt again this weekend and I only got about half of what I intended to do accomplished, which will make for a pretty frantic day tomorrow.

19-06-2012

What a crazy week this is turning out to be. At ENSAP yesterday everything was off that could be off, for a good part of the day: water, electricity, web connection. I had planned to start working from home every Tuesday, but I got almost none of the things I needed the web for done yesterday so had to go in to ENSAP today. If I'm caught up even minimally by Thursday I'll work from home then.

It turned out I would have had to be there anyway, for a meeting with some high mucky-mucks to start planning the itinerary for a professional exchange in November with editors of medical and health journals. We have almost a hundred journals on the invitation list, out of which we hope to get 20 takers. That's part of the reason I needed to be there today; we have to get the invitations out ASAP and I have to send them individually, mentioning the person's name and journal in each message. There's also a lot of fiddly editing, because the terms are different depending on whether it's a US journal, an international journal with US editors, or an international journal with non-US editors (in which case we have to explain the terms of the US embargo limit MEDICC to having US residents and citizens on such exchanges and ask if there is an active editorial board member who might be able to represent the journal on the exchange. Outside of the meeting this afternoon I madly sent off invitations as fast as I could, but still have about 30 more to do tomorrow.

And two more manuscripts came back from translation yesterday. And there's the gender forum next Friday (based on the April issue of *MEDICC Review* on gender and health; five of the authors are panellists, along with Mariela Castro, whom Gail interviewed for it overwhelmed. We can't legally organize an event, so CENESEX, the National Center for Sex Education, is hosting it, but of course we're doing all the work). I'm feeling more than a little overwhelmed.

But at least there's relief in sight on the weather front: it's only going up to 31 tomorrow. Whoohoo! A blessing for the summer solstice.

Poor Naty. Someone poisoned her dog on the weekend, she thinks to keep it from barking while they broke into her house.

Silva had told Conner he would give her a basin to soak her ankle in but forgot to drop it off today so we'll go by in the morning; I'll put together a little care package for her: a few boiled eggs, lentil soup, a chocolate bar, a thermos of mango iced tea and yesterday's *Granma* to read.

21-06-2012

I spent almost the entire day yesterday on the editorial exchange and didn't get a lick of editing done until after dinner, so I'm working from home today to try to catch up. Gail called first thing this morning to tell me the managing editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine* had responded right away to say he was interested in knowing more about the trip. And an editor from *Social Medicine* who replied to say she definitely wants to come is a MEDICC alumna from a professional exchange years ago.

Gail and Bill's article about health care in Cuba was released in the American Journal of Public Health this week, as well as Conner's (invited!) article on Cuban biotech in a Scientific American special publication. We have to include this sort of qualitative information when we talk to potential MEDICC funders about impact. *MEDICC Review* will always be a niche publication so can never hope to have the kinds of impact factors that the big general-interest journals get, but I don't think impact factors calculated on citation rates truly get at impact anyway. They do say something about impact on other scientific research, but only infer ultimate impact on practice and policy decisions through a logic model that says the more your work is cited the more influential it is. We need to look at what actually happens as a result of what we publish (for example, the Salvadoran Minister of Health taking an offprint of an article on chronic kidney disease to a UN discussion about the health risks of agrochemicals). That sort of qualitative information is harder to collect—we learn about some of it by accident or because an author lets us know—without a system to make sure we get it all, it's just a string of anecdotes.

So glad I got the good news before another piece that raised my blood pressure. This is the "error" message someone trying to use Google Analytics from Cuba gets: "We're unable to grant you access to Google Analytics at this time. A connection has been established between your current IP address and a country sanctioned by the US government." Google had already banned users in Cuba from accessing Google Earth, Google Desktop Search, Google Toolbar and, ironically (since it promotes the benefits of free software), Google Code Search. The economic impact of the blockade in 2010 was estimated conservatively at \$104 billion. If there were a only way to capture and channel the energy from emotions generated—from annoyance through frustration to rage— it could heat (or cool) a small country!

It poured rain all day and I drank pots of tea and slogged away at my manuscripts. I had planned to go to a concert with Conner and Lourdes tonight, but I couldn't spare the time: the power was off for almost five hours and my laptop battery ran out after three. I had printed the Spanish versions to check the translations on screen against them, so was able to read ahead to see where there might be ambiguities. Still, it set me back quite a bit.

22-06-2012

On the way to work this morning I saw a car with something a bit more philosophical than the usual stencilled on the rear window: *Envy doesn't kill, but it mortifies*. The play on words doesn't work so well in English; in Spanish, it's more obvious that etymologically *mortify* is *deadify*. The driver turned off before I could get my phone out to take a picture, unfortunately. But I still had it out when we got to ENSAP and I was able to capture this beauty. Too bad about the chainlink fence.



Steady rain for most of the day and the power went off four times at work, usually for only about fifteen minutes. The last time it happened just after I hit Send to turn a manuscript I'd been editing over to Gail. I hope it went actually went. I didn't stick around to find out—it was almost six. I'm going to take tonight off and watch a movie, then get up early and put my nose to the grindstone for the rest of the weekend.

28-06-2012

This week has been a blur. All I can remember about it is that it stopped raining and got very hot again and that we had constant problems with hydro. I've been taking my laptop to work because I can't afford any down time just now, but yesterday I forgot to take the adaptor. During most of the morning I

was switching back and forth between the PC and the laptop. To save battery charge, I would turn the laptop completely off when the power came back on. Only later did I think that maybe powering up again would use as much charge as just leaving it on for a little while. I don't have the data or tech savvy to even guess whether or to what extent that's true.

I heard yesterday that Rodney, president of the extreme sports club, had been hit by a car while riding his bike and had two dozen stitches in his head. When I called to see how he was doing he confessed that his habit had been to just wear his helmet for stunt riding. *Now* he plans to wear it whenever he's on his bike. He's pretty sure he'll be out for polo next Sunday, weather permitting.

When I told Silva I thought it was ironic that Rodney does all these extreme sports and he hurt himself just riding his bike around the neighbourhood, he told me his own story, even more ironic: he didn't use to wear a bike helmet either until he crashed in traffic. Into an ambulance. In front of a cemetery. There seemed to be a message in it for him, he said. He's worn his helmet faithfully, even on short jaunts, ever since.

I'm peeved with the Canadian embassy. They refused to give Silva's daughter, Gabi, a visa to visit her brother in Halifax. Reading between the lines, I surmise that they think she'll jump ship. Idiots! She's 40% of the way through dental school, which is FREE here.! What could she expect to do in Canada as an illegal immigrant that could even remotely justify giving up a profession!? It seems another example of our unutterable smugness: *well OF COURSE she wants to move to Canada. Doesn't everybody?*

I'm haunted by something I read this morning. Gabor Maté's *In the Realm of the Hungry Ghosts* has been my breakfast table reading the past few days—someone left it here a while back; wish I could remember who—but it's not the book (though it's haunting enough). When I opened it this morning a piece of paper fell out, a library circulation slip. On the back, in a child's printing, were the words: *Mommy how could you own such a terrible thing?* The book shows no sign of having ever been a library copy, and anyway, it's hard to imagine a child who doesn't write in cursive yet forming such a judgment about a book. I keep looking and looking at the paper with its childish lettering and wondering what the terrible thing was.

Ah, to be a detective in novel and have it lead me into mystery and adventure. I'm afraid all it will lead me into is mystification. Why the verb, "own" instead of "do" or "say"? What could the terrible thing be whose terribleness would be recognized by a child? Not a vibrator, a dial phone, stock in WalMart or an Elvis portrait on velvet. A gun? A piece of taxidermy? One of those old-fashioned crucifixes (crucifixes?) with a Jesus bleeding gorily? Someday I'll invite a bunch of writers over and use it as the first line for a spell of writing practice...

30-06-2012

Gail and I met on Thursday to talk about submitting an abstract for a conference in Chile in January. Possibly because we had recently been discussing socially accountable medical education, the phrase, "socially accountable medical publishing" popped into my head and it set us off on a great brainstorming sequence. I can't wait to get the July issue out of the way so I can actually start working on it! I googled the phrase first thing yesterday morning and it doesn't appear yet, so that's encouraging. :-)

On 26th yesterday morning we saw a cart driver trying to whip his poor horse into crossing a raised median; of course, when the horse felt the resistance of the wheels against the high curb, it figured it

couldn't go anywhere and stopped. Silva yelled at him to go to the corner where it was legal to turn and the guy told him to mind his own business (in less polite terms).

The forum on gender was a great success, with almost 60 people there—and on time! Well, except for Mariela Castro, who was a bit late, but got there before the first panellist spoke (whew! I was nervous for a bit—I'm sure a good part of the big turnout was having her on the program). Since Mariela's involvement in the April issue was as interviewee rather than author, she was the one person whose content we couldn't predict. She was excellent, though; she has her uncle's gift for speaking off the cuff both passionately and coherently, and she actually managed to stick close to the 10-minute time limit.



Mariela just couldn't wait to read her copy of *MEDICC Review*!



Dr Daysi Navarro, an endocrinologist who had an article on menopause in our April issue wasn't on the panel but was active in the debate afterwards. Discussion was lively (and all over the map, reflecting the range of presentations. It showed no sign of slackening off when it was time to move to the galleried porch where the refreshments were served.

That was when I had my only disappointment of the afternoon: all the sandwiches had three ingredients: ham, pepperoni and cheese. At our very first organizing meeting for the forum I had specifically asked that they make sure the caterer provided a vegetarian choice, even giving the example of a cheese sandwich, so I asked Mine and Naty what happened. Naty shrugged, *Oh, you can just take the meat off*. I tried that, but both the bread and the cheese were covered with grease from the pepperoni. I didn't comment further, but was irritated and hurt. Virtually every day of my life in Cuba I have to "make do" to be able to eat: in the ENSAP lunchroom, picking pieces of chicken out of the *arroz moro*, picking pork rinds out of the cornmeal mush, separating tiny bits of ham and hot dog out of the yellow rice; and at restaurants, improvising a meal out of side dishes from menus lacking one single vegetarian main course and— if beans aren't among the side dishes that day—often going without protein. I had hoped that at least at an event on which I supposedly had some influence I'd be able to get something I actually *wanted* to eat.

The word "diversity" had been bandied about quite a bit in the forum debate and it was painfully ironic to encounter zero sensitivity to my dietary diversity among coworkers who have witnessed my daily lunchroom challenges. Possibly my emotional response was excessive because I hadn't had time for lunch and was hungry and cranky (this was at 5 pm; I had had nothing but tea since breakfast at 7:30). Still, I have to find a way to raise Naty and Minerva's consciousness on this point without throwing a shadow on their accomplishment; they really did do a first-rate job of organizing the forum.

After the forum Silva took Naty and Hilda home and on the way we picked up a woman from NY who had wanted to meet with Gail to ask about medical publishing in Cuba; since Gail has family visiting from Chile this week I agreed to sub. He dropped us off at the Rosa Negra and we walked back to my place after dinner to continue talking. She is doing a thesis on the effect of commoditization of knowledge on scientific production and wants to know about the Cuban model as a possible comparison. She argues that generation of new scientific knowledge has depended for centuries on the free flow of knowledge in a "commons" that researchers visit iteratively at every phase in the process. When it was only the products of applied research that were commoditized, new knowledge could still be generated, but the trend in scientific publishing now is to commoditize even basic research. Even some so-called open-

access journals have a period of six months to a year when scientists have to pay for access. This not only exaggerates asymmetries between developed and developing country scientists, but threatens the sustainability of the whole enterprise. Anyway, given Gail's and my discussion about socially accountable medical publishing the day before, we had lots to talk about! So much for my idea of having an early dinner and getting a couple of hours of editing done last night.

Then this morning breakfast took much longer than usual as I caught up on four issues of *Granma* I didn't have time to read during the week (good thing I did my produce shopping before breakfast). There was a half-page article on how to grow moringa and how to use the various parts; it's being touted as a new miracle crop (fast growing and drought resistant; all parts of the plant are useful; leaves are said to have more vitamin C than oranges, more calcium than milk, more iron than spinach, etc.). I've had moringa tea and dosed my black beans with moringa leaf powder. The tea is tolerable; the powder is not very palatable so really needs something well seasoned as a vehicle. It remains to be seen whether it works as a cash crop; Cubans not being particularly receptive to new foods, it will depend on an international market opening for it.

And Mary came by to pick up her sunglasses, forgotten last night. Another two hours of talk. Now I really do have to settle down to work! How can June be over when I just got back from my trip?

I haven't had time to linger over the papers searching out Y names this month, so there aren't many new ones. Maybe I have most of them now (usually when I start thinking that I get a bumper crop the following month). Anyway, here they are: Yadik Yargeril Yargeris Yariel Yatsel Yayly Yenisei Yenly Yenry Yirina Yiyi Yoamis Yohana Yudayra Yuleisy Yumary Yuris Yurky




Centro Nacional
de Educación Sexual

FORO "GENERO Y SALUD en CUBA"
29 de junio de 2012
Consejo Nacional de Sociedades Científicas de la Salud

Programa

2:30 p.m.	Café y Bienvenida
3:00 p.m.	Panel *
	• Leticia Artilles: <i>Incorporando una perspectiva de género al sistema de salud cubano: realidades y retos</i> • Marta Núñez: <i>La mujer cubana de hoy y el cáncer de mama</i> • Yasel Santiesteban: <i>La salud mental en cuidadores de niños y adolescentes con VIH/SIDA en Cuba</i> • Dixie Edith Trinquete: <i>La telenovela cubana y el debate social</i> • Alberto Roque: <i>El derecho de las personas transexuales a la atención en salud</i> • Mariela Castro: <i>El género en revolución</i>
4:00-5:00 p.m.	Debate

Stonewall Inn