

14-01-2013

Possibly my worst trip back to Cuba since I've lived here. I had hoped to write a draft of the editorial during the trip, but I shut my finger in a door the night before and it hurt too much when I let it get below heart level, so I spent the whole day trying to figure out how to prop it up in such a way that I could relax and fall asleep without my hand flopping down. Not too successfully.

I nearly took the tip of the finger off; Lore and Dante had some steri-strips on hand (from when Antonio jumped off a couch and split his eyebrow open) and I was relieved not to have to spend my last few hours in Chile in an ER waiting to get stitches. No one had the nerve to do the sterilized paperclip procedure and I was too chicken to do it on myself, so besides being purple, my fingernail feels too tight for my finger. I came as close to fainting as I've ever come in my life; I was standing at the sink running cold water over my hand while Ximena went to get ice, and my muscles just gave out on me. I slid to the floor like a big overcooked noodle. Alexis and Julia were having a nap and missed all the excitement.

We spent two hours on the tarmac after the planned departure time because the plane's fancy toilet system broke down and none of them would flush. There was an announcement that connecting flights would be held for us, but when I looked at the board to see the gate number it showed "regular call," while other flights showed "delayed." I sprinted to the gate and got there in time; my heart rate hadn't yet returned to normal when we started taxiing.

I don't think I'll ever fly LAN again, at least not on that route. Other airlines have a 23 kg weight limit per bag; LAN's limit is 23 kg total for two bags. So I paid \$120 overweight each way. MEDICC will cover one way, since I had at least 10 kg of paper on the way there, reprints and copies of the journal for the conference; I brought about half of it back, plus printer cartridges and other office supplies.

At immigration I made the mistake of picking the line next to the one for the crew and diplomats. For some reason, they didn't open that window and an officer just flagged all the crew to go ahead of the rest of us plebes in line. Why she didn't go and work the booth rather than standing there shoosing crew members ahead of tired and seething travellers I don't quite understand; there must have been several flights arriving at the same time as ours, because at least fifteen people went ahead of us.

Then when I passed the health check they told me I had to go to my family doctor within 72 hours because I was coming from a country that had

diseases that could be a threat to Cuba. When I said I didn't have a family doctor here the cheerful officer told me to go to the family doctor and nurse consultorio for my neighbourhood. He handed me a card with a dire warning about the consequences of flouting the quarantine act (\$500 fine or up to two years in jail). Oh well, it will give me a chance to see the base of the health system pyramid.

The crowning touch: when I called Silva to tell him I was almost through customs he had bad news for me: his car had been impounded because of his illegal propane conversion kit. He has to go to the police station tomorrow to find out what the penalty is and when he can have his car back. The taxi driver I got had a *taxímetro* instead of charging a flat rate; it looks like the \$25 flat rate I'd been charged before isn't gouging after all, unless this guy rigged the machine to rack up miles faster. It came to \$31.

Oh yes, and the yerba buena plant on my balcony is dead, as is the basil. I had thought the basil a goner when I returned from Santiago in November, but it started to grow back; now it looks beyond help. Ah well, I still have the oregano. Before I replace the basil and yerba buena I'll have to develop a plan for keeping them alive when I travel. One that doesn't involve depending on Julio and Estrella for watering; they have too much else to worry about.

Conner called tonight to welcome me back, talk some bike polo business, and warn me that there's cholera in Havana and to boil or filter my water. It's a good thing I'm already in the habit. Still, there's something sinister about the very word.

Just have to include this photo from Chile.

17-01-2012

I was too busy with journal stuff on Tuesday and Wednesday to go to the consultorio so went this morning. I showed the nurse the card from the airport health officer and she took me in to see the doctor immediately, but she didn't even examine me, just asked if I had fever or diarrhea. Then she wrote my name down in the file she keeps for 1312 19th St and said if I have any problems Julio and Estrella can help me navigate the system. So I guess I'm registered in my neighbourhood clinic now. I wonder if that means I can go there for regular treatment.



Aram and I did some layout yesterday, only about 15 pages (out of 48), so it didn't take long. He didn't receive one of the files I sent him.

Daniel took me to ENSAP on Tuesday since Silva still didn't have his car. He swung by a couple of places in Centro Habana to try to find a part for Gail's car. No luck for him, but I got a shot of this graffito that says, *Let's talk less and do more.*



Pável, one of the journalists who visited the cancha during the summer, made this video for Cuba Absolutely. <http://vimeo.com/57144106> Fortunately, Conner sent the link to me the day before I left Chile, so I was able to view it. It's pretty well done, though I'd rather see more bike polo action and less of me talking about it. It shows better than my still photos how Rubencito good is with bike and mallet (2:45). It's working pretty well as a t-shirt commercial: four people have e-mailed me to order them since it went up!

Damn, it's Rebe's birthday today and I forgot to send her a note. I thought of it yesterday but once I get to work everything else flies out of my head. I'm too tired to stay up 'til 11 to try to connect. And the cold I've been fending off for several days just caught up with me. Think I'll have a rum toddy and go to bed early. Thank goodness I got the first draft of the editorial off to Gail before I left work or I'd feel compelled to work on it tonight.

18-01-2013

Well, I spent a long time in bed, but I can't say I slept that much; my nose kept filling up and I'd have to wake up to blow it so I could breath. The power was off this morning, but at least there was gas so I didn't have to brave a chilly shower. And I had a good hot cup of tea with lots of honey and lemon. Coincidentally, yesterday Annet sent a home remedy recipe around: chopped garlic left to steep overnight in honey; it makes a terrific cough syrup. I thought the garlic flavour would be repellent, but it's ok. The only problem is, it makes me crave honey garlic ribs.

I went to Cira García to order my vaccine drops and then to work. Luckily Aram had four more manuscripts laid out so I printed them for Annet to proof and as soon as she was done came home to finish my proofing. Esther María will pick up the folder tomorrow morning and do hers over the weekend (she attended a meeting in Washington this week and offered this solution). So all that will be ready for Monday's session with Aram, but Gail still has two more manuscripts to approve and return to me; they may or may not need further input from the authors and then have to go to Carolyn

for style correction. Bottom line: there is no way Monday can be our final layout session. I'll do that one with Aram for everything but the two pending manuscripts and we'll do the rest, including ads and covers, on Wednesday.

It's a relief not to be still struggling with the Monday deadline, especially because the power's still off and now the phone's out too. I have a couple more hours on my laptop, but can't send anything to Carolyn until the phone is connected again. I suppose I could go out to a hotel business centre, but that's the last thing I feel like doing now. I just want to finish my proofing so Esther María can have the folder tomorrow morning, and then crawl under the covers.

There are actually covers now, not just a sheet. A cold front came in last night and the temperatures plummeted (low this morning of 15, expected to be 13 tomorrow). I haven't closed the glass casements yet, but I have my cozy Andean alpaca socks on and a shawl that I can don and doff as my changing temp demands. Which it does. Frequently.

Oops, just remembered that I'd better take advantage of daylight to finish my proofing, since there's no way of knowing when the power will come back on. Better quit ditzing around with this and get back to work.

21-01-2013

Saturday's *Granma* had a full page article about cholera, an interview with the national director of epidemiology. He says the Havana outbreak is nearly finished. It was traced to an asymptomatic carrier—not mentioned in the article, but the *bola* on the street is that it was a visitor from Oriente. I'm actually surprised it didn't happen earlier, given the lamentable state of hygiene on interprovincial trains. Not that I've experienced it myself; I'm waiting for service to improve before I risk wasting hours of my scarce holiday time baking on the rails somewhere between Havana and the back of beyond.

The cold front didn't last very long, but it was nice while it lasted. There's something comforting about wooly socks and bundling up when you're sick. It wouldn't have been nearly as pleasant in hotter weather. I stuck around the house and proofed articles Saturday and Sunday; I didn't even feel up to going to the agro for veggies; or even watching bike polo, much less playing it. Conner came by on her way there and left me a jar of honey—just in time too; I had run out yesterday morning. The sore throat as such is one, but if I cough too long it gets irritated. Gail sent me over some cough suppressant syrup this morning so I'll probably sleep better tonight. My voice is almost recognizable today; the unusually quick recovery (touch wood) is likely due to not pushing myself to keep doing everything on my list but actually taking

care of myself. What a concept. Maybe we do learn a few things from experience.

Went to Cira García this morning to pick up my vaccine drops and when we left we saw two young men with yonkis crossing 5th Avenue. One was carrying a two white hens and the other a white kid (as in baby goat). They were on their way to be sacrificed in a santería ceremony, poor things. Dang, why can't I remember to have my phone out and camera ready all the time?

Which reminds me of this photo that I forgot to include in my December journal. I didn't have my phone with me so Christie took a pic of a meat truck on delivery near the store where we stocked up on Serrano coffee. If I weren't already a vegetarian, this might have turned me...



Aram and I did a second layout session this afternoon. Just two more articles to come back from Carolyn, and the editorial and front matter. We should be able to do it all on Wednesday, even if we don't get started until mid afternoon. Aram's son was called up for military service and he has to take him to...wherever it is he has to take him. He's not sure when he'll be finished, but I can't imagine he'll spend the whole day there.

Silva passed a fisherman on the malecón today and thought he looked like he was sick; he was leaning against the seawall and shaking. When Silva asked him what was wrong, he said he was having a reaction to jellyfish stings (it took me a moment to realize that *barquito portugués* wasn't a small Portuguese boat but the Portuguese Man 'o War). Silva took him to the polyclinic where the man's wife works and waited to make sure he was ok. I guess it was the man's lucky day; most people would not have noticed him, or would have thought him drunk rather than sick. Apparently that was the case with a good number of people today: Silva said it must have been a long time since he dragged himself out of the water, because his clothes were almost dry.

My finger is healing nicely; it doesn't hurt at all and the edges of the cut stayed together even after the steri-strip finally fell off. It's numb though, as if the fingernail were on too tight; it does feel odd when I type. The swelling seems to have resolved completely though; maybe there's some slight sensory nerve damage.

22-01-2013

My voice is almost recognizable today and my throat feels a lot better, after my best sleep in well over a week, almost eight hours. Gail sent me over some cough suppressant syrup yesterday and a swig of it at bedtime was just the ticket.

My phone bill arrived this morning and I was surprised at the amount. There were just two calls, on a long one on December 17 that I had absolutely no memory of making, to a Quebec number I didn't recognize. I decided to call the number tonight, just to satisfy my curiosity. A woman answered in French and I tried to explain in my by now fairly rusty French why I was calling. I must not have been making any sense to her at all; I was trying to remember how to ask if it was a residential or a business number when she said very politely that she was sorry she couldn't help me and goodbye. Almost immediately I remembered that Christie's boyfriend, Pascal, had called his mom to let her know they arrived ok. How embarrassing. Now I don't know whether to send her my apologies through Christie or just let her go on thinking it was a fluke call from some lunatic.

More bola about a devastating fire in the polo científico last week, in the Center Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology: the lab that produces the Cuban hemophilus influenzae b vaccine was completely destroyed. The first rumour was that it was the Heberprot-P lab, but it turns out it was only damaged; they have the equipment and supplies to keep producing for this year. I have to wonder whether it was sabotage. There hasn't been anything in the paper about it.

25-01-2013

We finally finished laying out the January issue and correcting the proofs today—a good way to celebrate my birthday. And we didn't have to stay up all night doing it, which happened on my first birthday here. I don't think I have an iota of energy left for celebrating.

This morning I didn't even remember it was my birthday until Julio and Estrella showed up at my door with flowers. After that, it was impossible to forget, with a steady stream of phone calls and e-mail messages popping up. I had to turn my back on my computer so I could finish reviewing the proofs before Aram came at 1 to do the corrections (if I had more self-discipline, I might have been able to just ignore the notices popping up every so often, but I'm constitutionally incapable of not reading something once I know it's there).

More surprises in the afternoon. Méry brought flowers over from Gail and said I was invited to her house for cake after work. When Silva came to get

me, Liliana was in the car with an armful of presents: some Russian cherry jam, a heart-shaped ceramic pendant, a basil plant to replace my dead one, and—they saved the best for last—a bag of potatoes. Gail and Conner were hard at work on the briefing book for the Atlantic Philanthropies visit next week, so the cake break was brief. The Cuban birthday song is one I haven't



heard before; like Happy Birthday, it seems to be sung off-key by most people, so I'm not quite sure what the actual tune is.

One of the people gathered for cake and birthday wishes was Hildita, the former executive assistant in the minister of health's office and a longtime ally of MEDICC. She now helps out with logistics and ministerial relations (Gail has a knack for nabbing the best people the minute they become available). I can see how her practicality, sense of humour, warmth and patience—not to mention institutional memory—would have made her an asset in any minister's office. No wonder they prevailed on her to keep postponing her retirement; she must be well over seventy, and only retired in late 2012. She is tiny and round and twinkly, with blindingly silver hair and two white hairs on her chin that I have to restrain myself from grabbing and yanking out at the roots.

I forgot my cell phone at Gail's and Conner said she'd bring it by when she finished the briefing book. She showed up at the door with the cell phone in one hand and in the other the rest of the cake, which I had forgotten "accidentally on purpose." Julio and Estrella love desserts so I was able to get rid of all but one piece of it.

My birthday dinner was a huge bowl of mashed potatoes with butter, and a boiled egg. The latter added as an afterthought because I felt guilty eating only mashed potatoes for dinner (even though I'm a quarter Irish). It was scrumptious. I made the mistake of leaving the piece of cake on the counter and it was covered with tiny ants by the time I went back in the kitchen.

Another birthday surprise when I stepped into the shower: Julio had installed the new shower head Susana gave me in Chile. Now I have a normal, functioning shower and can wash my hair without getting a crick in my neck from holding the showerhead with my chin while I lather up. It doesn't solve the pressure problem, but every little bit helps.

26-01-2012

Stayed up way too late last night watching movies and reading the week's *Granma*, but if you can't goof off on your birthday, when can you? I almost

turned over and went to back to sleep this morning when a peek from under my sleep mask told me it must be closer to nine than seven. With all my visitors, travel, conferences, getting sick as soon as I got back from Chile, and the scramble to get the January issue out, it must be the first Saturday in well over two months that I've gone through my usual routine (laundry, marketing and cooking). Very satisfying, soothing even. I've been feeling oddly dislocated lately and this seemed to be just what I needed to get anchored again. I was gratified when the vendor where I usually get my bananas asked where I'd been all this time. The cola at the CADECA was too long to face, so I just used the moneda nacional pesos I had on hand: for 23 pesos, less than a dollar, I got two large bunches of bananas, six good-sized tomatoes and four green peppers! It's a good thing I still have onions and garlic from before I left for Chile: at the prices they're charging, I would definitely have had to put up with the lineup and change some CUC to get any.

So now I'm set for the week's meals, with a stock of lentil stew, quinoa, and boiled potatoes. With eggs and cheese in the fridge, I can mix and match to have something different every night. The basil Silva and Liliana gave me is fantastic; it has a faint anise flavour—in fact, they call it *albahaca anisado*; I don't know what the equivalent is in English. It makes a heavenly salad with sliced tomatoes, even without the buffalo mozzarella.

Now back to work. Theoretically, I could slow down now; there are just a few followup things to do related to the web version of the journal and normally it's the best possible time to take some time off, but I want to get ahead as much as possible on manuscripts I have in hand so I can take a bit of time when two of my Blackwell sibs are in Havana with their respective spouses, some friends, and maybe even my godson and his girlfriend. It seemed a forever away for a very long time and now it's imminent. I'd better get organized!

27-01-2013

My birthday just keeps going on and on: cake and presents at bike polo today. Two (!) packages of Serrano coffee from the club, and some organic soap and a hemp backscratcher from Conner. And a Will Magid cd, which I love already. The cake was also in honour of Mari, whose birthday was on Saturday. She's Henry's wife and our newest recruit. I had to sneak a peek at her registration form to remind me of her name, as she had only come once before. Since it's María de los Ángeles, I wasn't sure how much of the handle she used (some would use just



María, others the whole shebang); I was relieved to hear she preferred just Mari.

For a change, I was the first to arrive at the court. Otto and Leonora arrived with the key a few minutes later. As soon as Otto opened the gate a group of young men entered the court with a soccer ball. Otto explained to them that the court was reserved for bike polo and they got quite shirty about it. For some reason they thought they were there first; quite apart from the fact that INDER had given us this time slot, there was no sign of any soccer players when I arrived, so they had no argument that I could see. Otto seemed to be itching for a fight and I was afraid things were going to escalate, but they eventually went off, after exchanging a few insults with him. Testosterone, sheesh! Here's Otto goofing around trying to get the gate open.



There are five women playing now, including 12-year-old Laura, who has really improved, by the way. She made some great saves in goal, managed to steal the ball from her dad and even from Michel a couple of times, and even got a goal. She's not afraid to get in the corner and try to dig the ball out, nose to nose with much bigger players. At the end of the day we had boys-against-girls game, Conner and Laura and I against Michel, Vladimir and Chachi. Very unequal teams, since Michel is the best player in the club, and Vladimir is probably tied with Henry for second strongest, while Laura and I are among the weakest. They trounced us, of course, but we made them work for their goals, and they didn't bagel us. Leonor is looking more comfortable on the bike and doesn't have to tap out as much as she did before I went to Chile.



Here's Michel wearing his fetching pink glasses with no lenses. I guess they're meant to make him look intellectual, in an Elton John-ish way. He seems to be letting his yonki grow in.

Choncho showed up with a bike that had no brakes. We agreed to let him play if he stayed close to the goal; Otto's idea, I guess the rationale was that he couldn't pick up much momentum if he had to hang back.

Of course, he kept "forgetting" and careening full tilt down the cancha (as can be seen in the photo). It's a miracle no one got hurt, at least, not badly. There was



a massive pile-up at the goal at one point, and Michel's hand was run over, but nothing was broken. I think we have to make it a rule that you can't play without brakes (no one here has fixies, so we won't get into that argument); it's too dangerous, especially with a player as aggressive as Choncho. He actually threw his mallet to try to stop a goal. Henry was reffing and gave him a minute penalty; we later talked about it and said he should have been kicked out of the game, period. I hate to see too many rules introduced, but we do have to give some thought to safety, especially since some of our players are minors.

Several of the players were talking about going to the *marcha de las antorchas* tonight, but I'm too exhausted even to think about it. Tomorrow is the 160th anniversary of the birth of José Martí and the date is traditionally marked by a midnight student march from the university steps (historic site of student demonstrations, and at least one famous massacre) through the streets, pausing at important places. This being a "big" anniversary, and also the 60th anniversary of the time when Fidel led the march with what became known as the Generation of the Centennial, the march will be even more massive than usual. I do hate to miss it, but the polo started me coughing again; as dubya's daddy said, wouldn't be prudent.

28-01-2013

Last night I had a very vivid dream about my friend, Patricia, a writer. She was extolling the virtues of what she described as a writing box, something she had ordered from an online catalogue. It consisted of a large crate with a built-in desk. Nothing was said about sound. Her writing space in Vancouver faces a view that not only has mountains as a backdrop but is full of constant activity: trains coupling and uncoupling under her window; in the middle ground, bikes, cars and pedestrians in the park on the other side of the tracks; and further away, on the water, cruise ships, freighters and tugboats, and float planes landing and taking off. I

A meeting at Gail's this morning to talk about the Atlantic Philanthropies visit starting Wednesday took way longer than I expected and then when I got to ENSAP finally there was no internet connection. Apparently the air conditioning broke down in the room where the server is located and they had to shut it down during repairs. It had to be today, when I needed to check the links to all the PDFs for the January issue! Finally I gave up and went back to Gail's to use her connection. The links were ok, but for some reason two thirds of a byline got left out of the abstract for the article on Heberprot-P.

I took a photo of the newly gardened area next to the trash bin on Gail's corner, but for some reason my laptop doesn't recognize it, even when I crop and rotate it while the phone is linked. I miss a lot of action shots because it takes so long for the phone to decide to take the picture. Oh hey, it finally popped up. Maybe I just need to be more patient. The idea is that if the area is planted, people will be less likely to just toss their trash on the ground beside the bin instead of into it. I know it doesn't look like much of a garden, but it seems to be working.



I tried to get a shot of a horse cart when we passed it but only managed to get the horse; I wonder if there's a phone with a faster camera or if it's a generic problem with Android phones. Or maybe mine is just a lemon. Today I had to do a hard reboot because the camera stopped working entirely. I kept getting a message saying it wasn't "available."



There seemed to be more than the usual number of photogenic cars on the road today (and that's saying something!). I missed my chance yesterday to get this old Ford that someone has lovingly embellished, but we saw it again today and Silva got a shot of it.



Then there was this beauty with engine trouble on 26th.

29-01-2013

I got up in the night and tried not to let too much light hit my eyes to avoid becoming too wakeful. Bad plan. I walked right into the corner of the wardrobe on my way to the bathroom. The pain woke me up much more than a bit of light would have and an ice pack on one's face makes it rather difficult to get into the cozy-warm zone conducive to sleep. Eventually I just resigned myself to starting my day a couple of hours earlier than usual. And with a slightly black eye. Doesn't look too bad so far; with my glasses on it's hardly noticeable. And it only hurts when I look skeptical or suprised.

30-01-2013

Yesterday I looked at today's menu in the lunchroom and decided to bring some instant soup Valeria and Ximena had brought me from Chile. I wasn't at all interested in greasy yellow rice with chunks of pork fat, split pea soup in pork broth and mashed plantain. I even remembered to bring the soup packets, but—sigh—there was no water the whole day, so I couldn't make it. Thank goodness I'm not allergic to peanuts.

The Cuban penchant for slapping totally unrelated auto insignia on vehicles isn't limited to private cars. This bus has a big VW symbol on the back, but it was assembled in Cuba from (I think) Chinese parts. I don't quite get it; it's not as if someone will ever mistake a Lada for a BMW or a Polaquito for a Peugeot. Are they just meant to be decorative, or is there some magical thinking going on?



I think I mentioned Michel's yonki earlier. I'm not sure if it's just a Cuban thing or is more generalized; the head is shaved on back and sides and the hair on top sticks up like a brush. I think Grace Jones had one for a while, decades back, but here it's definitely a guy thing. It's a Cuban transliteration of "junkie," but I doubt many of the boys who wear the do realize that. Silva called Michel "Cepillo" the first few games of bike polo, but soon everyone seemed to have the do so it no longer worked as a distinguishing characteristic. Today at a stoplight someone handed us this flyer for a musician (?) who has taken it as his stage name. I'm not tempted by this particular show, but it reminded me that it's been a while since I've heard live music.



Visitors arrive tomorrow from Nicaragua and Canada and I'm taking tomorrow afternoon and Friday off, so I'll close up shop for the month and send this out tomorrow morning.

Up to 725 Y names now, although not many additions to the list in this short month: Yadelkis Yaily Yanise Yarami Yaroldi Yerly Yéssica Yissi Yisús Yomer Yovani Yumeri

Oh, maybe I should add Yonki, for 726. ☺

