

01-01-2015



I am the proud owner of a Cuban flag, but not a flagpole. However, a trouser hanger works just fine, and both flag and hanger have had a good workout this season, with so many things to celebrate. My flag isn't quite impressive as the one on the right, displayed on a building in Habana Vieja identified as the Doña Leonor Pérez Cabrera maternity home (to give an idea of relative scale, the building's windows are easily twice the size of the one visible in the upper part of the photo of my house. Given the age of the building, I think it was probably a maternity home in the sense that's more common

in North America (i.e., for unwed mothers), rather than current Cuban usage, a facility where women at high risk or from isolated rural areas spend their last weeks of pregnancy, to ensure access to specialized care in case of emergency.



It seems to me that the greetings and shouts of *¡felicidades!* are especially jubilant this year. Just imagining the Five at home—finally!—with their families and friends, sharing the celebrations, still brings tears to my eyes. Adriana's and Gerardo's story is especially moving. She wasn't allowed to visit him even once in the 16 years he was in prison. Having her ova frozen before she turned 40 was a huge gesture of optimism, since he was serving two consecutive life sentences plus 17 years. The US agreement to facilitate the insemination was an early concession during the negotiations leading to the December announcement, and now he's here for the last weeks of her pregnancy and will be with her for Gema's birth! I'm so happy for them my chest hurts.

Alexis and Teresita might have bitten off more than they could chew for their New Year's Eve dinner and show at Cimarrón (formerly Juana la Cubana): there were more than twice the usual number of tables, but not nearly twice the usual number of staff. The result was an understandable degree of chaos and messed-up orders. Which their warmth and eagerness to set right made us forgive readily. We slipped out just before the actual show started, fearing we'd be stuck for at least another hour if we didn't get while the getting was good. We were sipping dark Santiago rum when cheers and shouts announced that midnight had arrived. I got through to Alexis and Julia on my second try, but no such luck with Chile.



One of the things Cubans do at midnight on New Year's Eve is throw water out the door, supposedly to toss out all the worry and illness of the old year. The thing is, says Leisi, you have to watch where you step on New Year's Day, because if you step in someone's water from the old year, all the worry and sickness comes to you. Some people also follow a custom I saw in Chile, of taking a suitcase outside if you want to travel in the new year. Here you're supposed to walk around the block three times for it to take effect. Being careful where you step, I suppose. In rural areas, they burn life-size rag dolls representing the old year. I keep thinking I saw it in Bejucal, but it was on a video Leisi showed us. We weren't there on New Year's Eve.

Today we took the hop-on/hop-off tourist bus to Habana Vieja (with one stop at the Plaza de la Revolución for photos) and did a whirlwind tour of the four major plazas and the Hemingway-related spots Mike was eager to see. Lunch didn't go very well (the microbrewery in Plaza Vieja wouldn't serve less than a full meal and we only wanted sandwiches; we then went to a place near the Basilica San Francisco de Asisi, where the waiter scammed us. I feel terrible when that happens to visitors, not just because of the sour note to their stay, but because I fear it will stick in their memories more than their many positive experiences here.



Jorge took us to the bus terminal at five and negotiated a price for a car to take the kids to Varadero. It was a bit more than usual (CUC\$70; most of my guests have gone for \$50 or \$60), but it is, after all, New Year's Day. They sent me a text later to let me know they'd arrived ok. When I told Jorge the driver had taken a longer route to avoid tolls, he shook his head in disgust.

So, now to get a bite to eat (veggie rice from New Year's Eve at Cimarrón, with some black beans) and try to get a bit of work done.

02-01-2015

I was the only person in the building at ENSAP today, apart from the security guards. Luckily for me, the electricity stayed on throughout—there was no one there to turn on the generator if it had gone off.

This photo of a *fotingo* comes with a bonus: one of the newly painted zebra crossings on Boyeros. *Fotingo* is usually translated as jalopy, but this one is obviously so lovingly maintained the term does it a disservice. I read somewhere that the term originated in the practice of having one foot in the car and pushing with the other: put your foot in and go! Fernando Ortiz, in his *Catauro de Cubanismo*, suggests it could also be related to Ford, a popular brand for cheap taxis. He also mentions that it has an obscene meaning in the underworld argot of eastern Cuba. Another word to be careful about if/when I travel to Oriente (along with *fruta bomba*, which is the term used in Havana for papaya because *papaya* is considered crude; the opposite is the case in Oriente).



This little tree growing out of the side of a house in Habana Vieja seems like a metaphor for Cuba. Surviving against all odds.

As does this car, with so many adaptations to keep it on the road that its original form is barely recognizable. Sadly, it may turn out that it's a better metaphor for the Revolution than for Cuba as such.



Veronica came over for a bite after Cuba Libro closed and after she left I realized I had forgotten my flash drive at work. By that time it was too late— i.e., I was too tired—to make the trek out to ENSAP to get it. I usually try to relax a bit on Friday nights, but because I took two days off with Emily and Mike I had been thinking of working through. I guess my subconscious had other ideas.

03-01-2015

Jorge's mom ran out of cooking gas this morning and he had to go pick up her tank to get it refilled. Since she lives near ENSAP, it was convenient for me to go with him and pick up my flash drive. As I climbed the stairs to my office, I had a moment of apprehension: what if it wasn't there, and I had actually lost it? I haven't backed up since I got back from Chile. Can that really be only three weeks ago? It seems like forever! Anyway, it was there, and before I do any more work, I'm going to do a backup.

I went to the agro when I got back looking for onions, but there were none. I didn't really need anything else there, but I stopped at the bodega and got a flat of eggs. They're cheaper there than from the street vendors: 1.5 Cuban pesos each, or about six cents. The vendors buy them at the bodega and sell them for 2 pesos each, a mighty markup, but they have to sell a lot of eggs to make a living, about 24 cents on a dozen eggs.

A bird dropped a doodie-bomb on me at Cuba Libro this afternoon. According to Cuban folklore, it means good luck, as does stepping in dog dirt. Ha. I think someone just made that up so people wouldn't feel so bad about it. I wondered if it was this little one, on one of its trips to collect nesting material (although the size of the splat suggested it was from something closer to the size of a pigeon). When I showed this photo to Conner, she said, *Aha, now I know why that fern won't grow!*



The big official state celebration of the anniversary of the M-26 victory rotates across the country over the years, and this year it was in Santiago de Cuba. Conner found out that after the official ceremonies, Raúl visited his (and Fidel's) hometown in Holguín. This is unusual for him, so the speculation is that



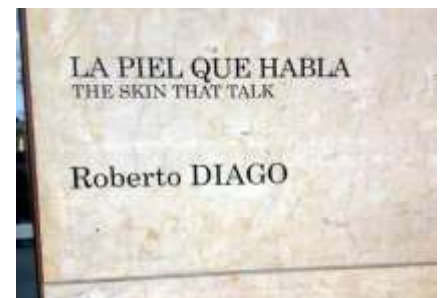
Fidel may be dying (or already dead) and Raúl went to make arrangements and be with people there before the news breaks.

My neighbours, Leo and Consuelo, went one better on the person who stuck the tree in the pothole at the corner. They filled it with stones, after their daughter fell in it—with her two-month-old baby, Nicole, in her arms. She didn't break anything, but had a few bruises and scrapes; Nicole was fine.

04-01-2015

I met a friend of an Ottawa friend for coffee in Plaza Vieja this afternoon. We hadn't met, but once we started talking we discovered we had a lot more friends in common, including my first connections in Cuba in 1976, colleagues from my days in Health Canada, and my across-the-street neighbours in Waterloo. I love those coincidences. We met at the Escorial, which has possibly the best coffee in Havana, but they didn't have any ground coffee or beans to sell, so I took a roundabout route back to the piquera to visit the Casa del Café. They had Serrano only in 1-kg bags, and not vacuum packed. Because I don't make coffee very often at home I don't usually get the large bags, but I got two this time. Conner needs some for Cuba Libro, and I want to send some to Leisi's mom.

The art gallery across from the Casa del Café provided sad proof of Gail's theory that the bigger the print, the higher the chances of missing a typo. I felt like going in and volunteering to proofread for them before they invest in expensive signage.



It took quite a bit longer to get home than it took me to get to Plaza Vieja and I barely had time to change for bike polo. The turnout wasn't big, but we had enough for two full teams, and one person to fetch the stray balls out of the trench at one end of the court. Tomás brought his son, David, whose sprained wrist has finally healed. He did really well, even got a goal.

Aldo was in a terrible mood when he started, full of stories about how his ex-wife is making his life miserable. She won't let him take their three kids, but doesn't seem to concern herself much about them. She left them with her mother over the whole Christmas–New Year period while she went off to Pinar del Río with a new boyfriend over the holidays. Aldo picked them up and took them to his place for the week, but he was indignant on their behalf that she had left them. This was the first time I had heard him speak seriously about anything, without once lapsing into his part-rapper, part-clown braggadocio. Once he started playing—and got a couple of goals—he recovered his usual ebullience. Here he is setting up his first goal of the day.



Alejandro arrived late, but we were surprised he arrived at all, since his wife had a baby girl three days ago. When we pestered him for details he shocked us by saying he couldn't remember her name: *it's too complicated!* My guess is that it's a candidate for my list of Y names (if not already on it), something like Yumisleydi or Yhasnaiby.

05-01-2015

We were supposed to have our first layout session this afternoon but Aram had to take his daughter to the hospital. Something respiratory. I was almost relieved that we couldn't do layout; even so, I didn't even get through all my email, never mind my to-do list for the day.

So far the Five have been appearing together pretty much everywhere (rather like the Dionne quintuplets), but today Gerardo was missing from an event. Gema must be on her way!

Niurka came over for tea this evening and commented on something I've noticed too: there seems to be an upswing in manners and friendliness since December 17, when the last three of the Five came home and détente with the US was announced. The other day I saw a bus stop in the middle of a block to pick someone up (bus drivers are notorious for their rudeness in Havana, I'm sorry to say) and in Santiago when we were changing buses on the 31<sup>st</sup> a young man wearing earbuds spontaneously offered advice on which bus lineup we should be in. Even the almendrón drivers seem to be less aggressive with other drivers and more chatty with their customers. Niurka had examples from her polyclinic and a neighbourhood pharmacy, and said she thought more people in stores and on the streets are saying good morning and thank you. She wondered if the general hopefulness aroused by the recent news had made people somehow more aware of the civic values lost in the Special Period, or at least, more optimistic about the chances of recovering them, and willing to go out of their way to try to make it happen. Wouldn't it be lovely if there were something like a civility snowball effect!

06-01-2015

Gema was born this morning, weighing 7.7 kg. Everyone is walking around grinning, as if we were all proud aunts and uncles. I wonder how many other people were watching the news tonight with tears streaming down their faces.



07-01-2015

Cuba Libro was packed tonight for the launch of Shirley Langer's novel, *Anita's Revolution*, about a young woman in the 1961 literacy campaign. Shirley said that part of what motivated her to write the book was the disbelief of many Canadian friends when she would tell them about the campaign. Come to think of it, it does seem farfetched that a poor country of 6 million people, with 25% adult illiteracy, blockaded and besieged by the most powerful nation on earth, could eradicate illiteracy in less than a year. Much less than a year, as it turned out, because the Bay of Pigs invasion occurred that same year. That anyone would have even the audacity to even *imagine* it amazes me (in fact, Fidel announced in the UN that Cuba would be free of illiteracy within a year and only then came back to Havana and instructed Armando Hart, then Minister of Education, to *make it so!*)

Three former literacy brigadistas were there (two of whom were characters in the novel) and spoke a bit about their experience. One of them turned twelve while she was in the campaign; she taught seven adults to read and write during her seven months in the countryside. The experience was as transformative for her as it was for the people she taught. The campaign used popular education methods and the young teachers lived and worked with their pupils, learning as much from them as they taught, and helping with chores, crops and child care. And as much as it transformed the individuals—alphabetizers and alphabetized—it also transformed the nation, bringing together people of all colours and social strata, people who might never have met otherwise, or if they had, would not have had more than superficial exposure to one another, bound by roles that until 1959 seemed immutable. Trying to take it all in leaves me breathless; it's the mental equivalent of seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time.

Anyway, *Anita's Revolution* now has a permanent place on my bookshelf to lend to visitors (it's a quick read: I finished it in three bedtime sessions, without having to stay up too late on any one night). I'll probably give away several copies of it too, if I can get more. Shirley only brought 13 and I didn't want to be selfish and buy up too much of the stock. I'll keep the one I did get for visitors and order more from Shirley's website when I go to Canada. A Spanish translation will be released by the Cuban press, Gente Joven, at the Havana book fair in 2016, so I'll be able to get some copies for Chilean friends too.

09-01-2015

False alarm this morning. Jorge texted me at seven to say he'd be a bit late this morning, he was at the hospital with Elizabeth. I was sure she was in labour. Turns out, she thought so too, but she wasn't.

Today there was a mix of good and bad news at work. Indira was feeling out of sorts this week, and today we learned she has dengue (not hemorrhagic, thank goodness). Gail got an exclusive interview yesterday with Dr. Félix Báez, the Cuban doctor who contracted Ebola in Africa. That's a scoop! He goes back to Sierra Leone on Tuesday.

But she's more worried about a different assignment. Rumours are circulating that Fidel's in a coma, and his resounding silence about the return of Gerardo, Tony and Ramón, as well as the birth of Gema makes them seem all too credible. Pierre wants her to write something so she'll have it ready, but she says she just can't, she's "not the *New York Times*."

When I went online today to see about ordering some copies of *Anita's Revolution* so there'll be a reasonable chance of getting them while I'm in Canada in May, I found out that Shirley has translated some of Robert Munsch's books into Spanish, including *Love You Forever*, which I tried to find in Chile for Elizabeth and Jorge

My throat was scratchy again last night and I've had a couple of sneezing fits today. Oh dear. I really can't afford to get sick right now.

10-01-2015

A loud thunderclap woke me from sleep after a night punctuated by a series of short, fierce storms. Realizing it was useless to try to go back to sleep, I got up and started to make the bed—and stepped in water. I looked up first. Nope, no ceiling leak. Then down: a shallow pool of water occupied half my bedroom floor, extending under the bed and wardrobe. It was still storming and I could see water running down the wall at one corner of the AC under the east window (I had attributed a previous similar flood to rain coming in through the persianas because I hadn't closed the glass casements). Since it was raining so hard, I couldn't (ok, didn't want to) go out onto the balcony to get the mop, so I used a microfiber travel towel and a broom handle to which I had attached an s-hook to with duct tape (to open and close the upper persianas). Fortunately, I had a basin under the sink, so there was no need to venture into the downpour to fetch the bucket either. It took close to 40 minutes to mop up all the water, about a gallon in all.



Estrella and Julio will get someone in to close the gap. Spray foam insulation would work perfectly, but I don't think it's allowed in baggage or carry-on. Pending a better solution, I "caulked" it with a clean floor cloth. It won't entirely prevent flooding if the downpour is extended (as it was this morning), but will reduce the amount coming in. (The whitish streaks on the baseboard under the right corner of the AC are from the water running down)

In the meantime, Lilo peed in the living room, maybe because I was tardy with her daily cheese treat (I shudder to think what will happen when I can't find cheese in the stores). By the time I noticed it, the rain had stopped, and I was grateful that I could get the mop and didn't have to use my towel for that cleanup (towels can be washed, but the thought...eww!). BTW, I use the word *mop* loosely. A Cuban mop consists of two unattached pieces: a large floor rag, and long stick like a broom handle with a wooden crossbar at one end to spread out the cloth. Cuban women expertly wrap the rag around the bar in such a way that they can use it just like a regular (business end attached) mop, but whenever I try it, the cloth keeps falling off.

And because it never rains but it pours (Cubans say *llueve sobre mojado*), there is now no doubt at all that what I have is a cold. Just what I need in the middle of journal production.

Yesterday's *Granma* had a full page article on a strategy to reduce traffic crashes (includes plans to improve the inspection system, link the vehicle inspection and licensing databases, and crack down on distracted driving; this particular report didn't mention improving roads!). The death rate last year was just over 6 per 100,000 population and they're aiming to reduce it to 5 by 2020. I'm not sure what it is in Canada; will have to check on Monday.

Gosh, the TV news is making me all sentimental these days. Tonight it was a story about a twenty-three year old woman born without a vagina and with her bladder opening directly to the outside who has had a healthy baby. She had fifteen different reconstructive operations. Entirely free, of course. Only in Cuba!

Conner found out from a reliable source that Fidel is ill, but not dying. Yet. I hope Cubans get a good while to enjoy the hopeful atmosphere that has reigned since December 17 before they have to deal with that.

11-01-2015

Another example of lack of proofreading, or maybe overconfidence in mastery of English.

And I found out today that the origin of *panqué* to refer to the dry-ish cupcakes or coffee cake rings they sell at Carolina down the street isn't a confusion with the English word *pancake*. It's a cubanization of *pound cake*, which makes a lot more sense.



I ran out of rolled oats yesterday, but luckily I have lots of quinoa from Chile. I cooked some plain in the rice cooker last night and this morning had it with peanuts, milk and brown sugar. It was ok but I'd rather have oats. I think I'd enjoy it more hot, but the chances of me taking the time on a work morning to cook porridge are vanishingly remote (this is one of the few occasions when I wish I had a microwave), so it's a good thing it's at least ok. Tomorrow I'll try it with maple syrup. And keep looking for rolled oats.

Too sick for bike polo today. I thought I'd advance quite a bit in editing but connectivity problems have taken up a lot of time. First I couldn't send a message from Outlook so I had to go into Gmail. It took ages to open Gmail, and then only in basic mode. I needed to attach two files but only one would stick, so I sent the first, saying I'd send the second one in a separate message. Then I couldn't get it to send, no matter what I tried. I sent Techy a text message saying not to hold her breath for the second email, I'd send it to her tomorrow. All that took up about an hour and now I think I need a nap.

Well, that thought didn't last very long. Aldo stopped by to ask why no one showed up at bike polo today.

12-01-2015

Curiouser and curiouser. The first item on the 8 pm news tonight was about Diego Maradona receiving a letter from Fidel on his departure from Cuba to go home to Uruguay. It was rather a lengthy piece, with several shots dwelling on Fidel's signature, and Maradona read part of the letter aloud. Clearly it's meant to counter the rumours that Fidel's dead or in a coma, but it makes it even more strange that he hasn't said anything publically about the return of the Five.

No connectivity at all at ENSAP today after 10 am, not even email. Gail said she got into Infomed ok, so it wasn't the server. Must have been something within ENSAP. I didn't even notice until I tried to search for a MeSH term about in the early afternoon. By that time I had quite a stack of messages in my Outbox, which I hope will go out first thing tomorrow when I fire up my PC. In any case, it's almost sure we're not going to have enough material for a second layout session on Thursday. Aram and I will have to do it without Gail; next week; we can't afford to wait for her to get back from the States. We're already really pushing our limits with final layout on the 26<sup>th</sup>.

13-01-2015

I awoke to the roar of a fumigation truck going by. Someone on the block must have dengue.



This morning I poured a bit of boiling water over my quinoa and used my milk full strength (I buy 3% and mix it 2-to-1 with filtered water to make 1%—cheaper and healthier). It wasn't quite hot porridge, but a bit more porridge-y than when it comes right out of the fridge. I'm redoubling my efforts to find rolled oats. Also, I don't think my maple syrup is going to last 'til my next trip to Canada. Uh-oh.

Grrrr!!! Still no connection today. ENSAP is back up, but not us. And the phones are making me crazy. I can't always get a dial on the direct line at my desk and when I do manage to talk to someone, the connection drops a couple of minutes into the conversation. There's one in the other room that's an extension from the switchboard and I have to go there to try to dial out; 9 times out of ten I get a busy signal as soon as I dial 9 for the line. With Indira and Techy both down and me not in the most productive condition I'm getting anxious about the January issue. We won't have enough material to do a second layout on Thursday, and then Gail will be away. Aram and I will have to do it without her next week and let her give us her corrections when she gets back. Either way, it's going to put a lot of stress on the Jan 26 session.

And no water (hence, no caffeine) until about 2 pm. I was feeling prickly and impatient and miserable with my cold and just wanted a cup of hot tea. I had to remind myself to count my blessings: Esther María has pneumonia and Indira has dengue, so I'm getting off easy.

Everyone's wondering what in heck is going on that they publicized a letter from Fidel to Maradona but there's been nothing from him about the Five. BTW, there's a nice billboard of the Five at 26<sup>th</sup> and 51<sup>st</sup>. They're flashing the gesture from the *Obama, Gimme Five* campaign in the US.



On a happier note, I finally went to Kenia and got my hair cut. I arrived in the middle of a lively discussion about religion. A young and zealous client was explaining her biblical truth to Kenia and the other hairdresser and another client and they were all trying to share their contradictory world views with her, all simultaneously and at the top of their lungs. Every once in a while Kenia tried to get me to come in on her side (she's in the *eat, drink and be merry* camp, and believes in neither a supreme being nor an afterlife) but I preferred to remain a somewhat bemused spectator. I was mildly concerned that her vehemence might cause her razor hand to slip, but I managed to escape with my neck intact and a reasonably good haircut (unfortunately, the very nice highlights Cindy applied in October are all gone; an indication of how badly I needed a cut).

14-01-2015

Last night when I went to bed, I thought a dose of cough syrup would make it more likely I'd get some sleep, so I opened the fridge door and took a small swig from the bottle. Right away I knew I had found the bottle of bleach that Rosita said was missing. I turned on the tap and started guzzling, then remembered that tap water wasn't a good idea, for other reasons (oh dear, all I need to top it off is a bout of gastroenteritis during journal production!) I finished off what was in the bottom of the kettle and then drank all the filtered water I had in the fridge.

Rosita left me a note last week saying she was concerned because she couldn't find a bottle of bleach she had put aside, but she didn't mention what kind of bottle it was. I imagined an old detergent bottle.



never thinking that after she had to go to emergency when she mistook bleach for water a couple of months ago she would again make the mistake of storing bleach in a container meant for something a person would drink! I had brought back a couple of small bottles of an expectorant–cough suppressant from Chile, and I guess she fetched the bottle out of the recycling bin. I remember finding it in a cupboard a couple of weeks ago and thinking I had just forgotten to put the cough syrup back in the fridge after the last time I used it. I didn't think about it again until last night.

When I finally got to bed it was about one a.m. and I was too agitated to sleep. Also, my throat hurt; it felt like heartburn, but I remembered learning that you're not supposed to try to correct acidity when someone swallows something caustic because there might be an exothermic reaction. Of course I couldn't remember a thing about dose, so I got up and started googling to try to find out whether it was ok to take a Tums after drinking bleach. I couldn't find anything helpful so I played it safe and sucked on some aniseed candies I got in an airport. It was four a.m. before I turned out the light. I had asked Rosita to let me know when we had connectivity back at ENSAP, so I unplugged the phone, just in case she tried to call me really early. That meant I was able to sleep until nine. It's just as well I called when I woke up—she just sent me an email when she couldn't get me on the phone and I didn't go online. We could both have been waiting for a long time.

It was a short and intense day. We all had so much mail piled up (incoming and outgoing) from being without it for two days that we used up our bandwidth quota by 3 pm. All day I was so nervous about getting a bout of gastro because of drinking from the tap last night that I was afraid to fart, but at least there's nothing acute. As Gail said, the bleach probably killed whatever bugs I ingested. My throat is sore, but that's probably still partly because of my cold.

I brought work home tonight, but just now I think I sleep more than I need to keep manuscripts moving. I think I'll just unplug the phone and crash.

17-01-2015

Thursday and Friday are just a blur to me. I still don't feel caught up from my two days of no internet and one night of almost no sleep. Friday night Leisi stopped by after a stint at Cuba Libro (local resource person for a visiting group) and brought me a panatela from her mom. I took it to work on Friday, along with a jar of chocolate hazelnut spread, for a special *merienda* (snack) to celebrate Esther María's first day back at work after her pneumonia.

Have been looking all over for butter to go with the four potatoes Niurka's mom sent me this week, but no luck. I have such a craving for mashed potatoes and butter. I'll try a couple of other places tomorrow and if I come up empty I'll just have to eat them fried. Or maybe I'll make a Spanish omelette, if I can get an onion. Potatoes are a treat, in any guise.

In front of ENSAP there's streetlamp base that passersby use as a trash can. Today I saw that someone had decided to make it a bit more attractive.



I met a fellow Canadian in Cuba Libro last night and connected him with Niurka because he's not happy staying in Old Havana, where he's bugged by the constant come-ons for various purposes (licit and illicit). He was to phone me today to get another contact for a friend of Niurka's in Varadero, for the night before his departure, but my phone is out of order. I don't tend to give my cell number to

foreigners, because of the high charges for getting a call from a land line, but in this case I wish I had. Maybe he'll think to call Cuba Libro and ask there.

There are signs of movement on the currency front. A while back, it was announced that Cuban pesos could be used in state stores that until then only accepted convertible pesos, and now they're releasing some large-denomination bills to facilitate their use (200, 500 and 1000 Cuban pesos, equivalent to 8, 20 and 40 CUC). There was a two-page spread in *Granma* with photos of both sides of the bills and descriptions of the various antiforgery features. Curiously, the print year is listed as 2010.

My break today was dinner with the brother and sister-in-law of a Waterloo friend. We met at Cuba Libro, hung out for a bit and then walked down to Cimarrón for dinner. I enjoyed meeting them, and they may also be good connections for MEDICC—Ross is a nurse and Barb a social worker, involved with the family medicine residency program in Williamsport, PA. They both want to come back to Cuba and see some of the health system (this trip was a people-to-people exchange with the Bryn Mawr alumni association). I suggested they might want to check out MEDICC's trips. I introduced them to Veronica (who is also from PA) at Cuba Libro and it sounds like they'll connect again when she finishes at ELAM and goes back to the States to do her residency.

18-01-2015

I gave up on finding butter today and cooked the potatoes Niurka gave me, hoping to make potato salad. When I opened up a new jar of Hellman's mayonnaise, I almost cried. It was rancid. I brought it from Canada some time last year, but had a smaller jar already open and don't eat mayonnaise that often, so it's been in the pantry for several months, at least. The label said to refrigerate after opening, but I probably should have done it right away. Cuban mayo is dreadful, and I can't get good olive oil to make my own (even if I were so inclined), so no potato salad for me for a while. Ah well. I mashed some of the potatoes with a bit of milk and some *merkén* (a smoked pepper from southern Chile) and froze the rest. The mashed taters were ok, but I really missed the butter. I couldn't be vegan if my life depended on it.

There were enough people for two teams today and two extra people to chase out-of-bounds balls. I just played one game; I'm coughing quite a bit still, though it's not clear whether it's from my cold or the bleach burn. Laura came out, and amazed us all by how good she still is after not playing for months. Ken was here from Vancouver, with a bag of condoms for Cuba Libro that I agreed to deliver tomorrow.



I was wrong about a Y name being the explanation for Alejandro not being able to remember his daughter's name. It's Samantha de la Caridad.

One of the Cuban cooperants in Africa has died, not of Ebola but of cerebral complications of malaria.

19-01-2015

The last of the translated articles from our project with *The Lancet* are with the authors for approval. Today I sent a Susana—who is editing the Spanish supplement—a message saying that if she didn't hear by tomorrow from those who received their manuscripts on January 5, we'd have to assume that the translation was ok. Actually, I sent several messages, cc'ing the respective authors. All except for Richard Horton: somehow I just couldn't bring myself to deliver an ultimatum to the editor of *The Lancet* (even though he, more than anyone, should understand the urgency), so I just sent him a carefully worded

note asking if he could let me know when I could anticipate his approval, or give me permission to approve the translation on his behalf. His coauthor, Pam Das, answered and said he's travelling until Jan 16 and that she'd take a look at it and consult him.

Robin Thom and Elizabeth came by Cuba Libro while I was there and I finally got a chance to ask Robin if he was related to Ron Thom. Yep, his eldest son. Not related to Linda Thom, though. Robin's an odd bird; he kept wanting to talk about the rumours of Fidel being dead or in a coma, with many significant glances and sombre comments on how profound the impact will be when the news is announced. I got the sense that what he most wanted to do was impress us with his sources and political insight. Neither Conner nor I have much interest in fuelling speculation, and in any case Cuba has gotten along for the past five years without him, so the impact will be more emotional than practical. And he had previously undermined his claim to political sophistication when he announced to Conner—on the strength of an hour's acquaintance—that he was a good friend of a senior CIA official.

No sign of an ETECSA repairperson today. They told me 72 hours, and it's been 48 now. Niurka has friends in ETECSA and is going to try to nudge them along.

I had no sooner finished typing that line when my phone rang!

Another piece of good news today: there's now a wholesale supply system for animal fodder and other things farmers need. Previously their only choices were to pay exorbitant (for them) retail prices, or deal with the black market. Of course that applies to pretty much everyone in the new private sector, because before it was created there wasn't a need for wholesale suppliers—state enterprises got what they needed from state suppliers. Cuba needs to establish in a few months or years a whole complex system (not only the various supplies and services the market needs, but even a tax collection system!) that in other countries developed over decades to centuries. It boggles the mind.



The careful lettering on the back of this old beauty says *Mi amiguito el pipi*. My little friend the *pipi*. Neither Jorge nor I could figure out what the owner meant to convey by it. *Pipi* can be just what it sounds like, pee, or it can be a little boy's word for what the pee comes out of, as in wee-wee. We both agreed that it was a crime to deface such a beautiful classic car with a lame slogan more likely to elicit vicarious embarrassment than admiration from passersby. Of course, someone who calls his wee-wee his little friend probably responds to such things quite differently than we do.

21-01-2015

There's a movie starting today at the Chaplin Theatre that I'd really like to see—I hope it's still on by the time the January production push finishes. It's called *Vestido de Novia*, which could be translated as *wedding dress*, or, more literally, *dressed as a bride*. The ambiguity might be deliberate; the movie is fictional, but based on the story of the first transsexual woman in Cuba.

Am feeling more than a little stressed this week. The December 17 announcement has wreaked havoc with our production schedule, largely because Gail is constantly in demand for interviews and comments. And she had to go to the US this week for a speaking engagement. At the same time, we keep running into obstacles with the *Lancet* project. We hired a supplement editor to take some of the

weight off my shoulders, but it's not as if I can wash my hands of it. *Lancet* style is very different from ours and I need to decide in which cases it's ok to leave things as is (e.g., they handle author information differently and they didn't give us all the information we need to do it entirely in our style). Also, there were some errors in the English text, and any correction made in the Spanish has to come with an editorial note indicating what the original said). The authors aren't always responsive when we ask them to approve the translation (one has been due since December and not a peep), or they start editing text rather than just correcting errors in translation and Susana needs reassurance about when she can reject an author's suggestion. And then I have to write the author with the final version and explain that some of their suggestions were overrule. Anyway, the upshot is that there are many more steps than we had anticipated, and I'm having to see each manuscript more times. With so many mss flying back and forth for the *Lancet* and the January issue, I live in fear of overlooking one. Fortunately *Selecciones 2013* is in good shape and the translation of the CKDu issue won't need my attention until later in February.

Esther María and I went to the Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention this afternoon to present the journal. Parked in the front patio was this trailer, called the *Carrito por la Vida*, which they take around to community events and health fairs. Too bad the fence was in the way and I couldn't get a clear shot.



22-01-2015

Yesterday when I said goodbye to Elizabeth, I said, *Any day now!* because her bump definitely looked lower than it was last week. And sure enough, this morning Jorge called at 8 to tell me that Leah had arrived safely. Elizabeth's labour started last night and Leah was born at 1 am. On the way to ENSAP we went by the hospital so Jorge could drop off her lunch (it must be a law of the universe that hospital food has to be dreadful). I couldn't go in outside of visiting hours, but he pulled up across the street from the hospital and Elizabeth stood by the window with Leah in her arms and waved at me. Jorge showed me some photos on his phone, most of which were out of focus—nerves of a new dad—she looks beautiful, in the photos where I could actually see her.

I wish I had time to follow the news more closely. There are press conferences after every session of the US–Cuba talks. The real policy junkies are following the talks play by play, but all I get to see are the excerpts they show on the evening news—enough to be able to tell that Josefina Vidal is one sharp cookie! In response to a question about a US press release that talked about the US pressuring Cuba to improve human rights, she responded that the word “pressure” is not a word that is used for this type of discussion and that Cuba does not respond to “pressure,” from whatever direction. Then she went on to say that Cuban has some concerns of its own about human rights in the US and has some experience in supporting human rights, in Cuba and elsewhere, that could interesting to share.

Havana is crawling with journalists here for the talks. It's been good for business at Cuba Libro, but that in turn has interfered with Conner finishing up her interview for the January issue. I hate to pressure her, but my stomach is in knots from wondering how we're going to pull this one off.

23-01-2015

I did a double-take this morning when I saw a photo in Granma of Raúl welcoming the vice-president elect of Uruguay, Raúl Sendic Rodríguez. Then I realized it must be the son of the Raúl Sendic who founded the Tupamaros and spent years in prison.



I received several early birthday presents today: Silvita brought cake and profiteroles for merienda and I was serenaded with the Cuban equivalent of happy birthday. Gail dropped in for the mini party and gave me some silver earrings, stylized daisies. Mery called to say happy birthday and Daniel came over with a bouquet of roses. I haven't had such a fuss made over my birthday for a very long time.

But by far the best present was Gail saying that we're going to have to put the journal out in early February because it's just not humanly possible to get it done by the end of January. I was so relieved I could have sworn my neck grew two inches longer!

A group of Cuba Libro regulars went to see *Rent* tonight, the first Cuban production of a Broadway musical (or was it off Broadway)? I was interested initially, but they didn't get enough tickets from everyone who wanted to go, and I felt too tired to go and stand in line for rush seats.

24-01-2015

Elizabeth and Leah went home from the hospital this morning. After Jorge got them settled in, and it stopped raining, Jorge picked up the cake he had ordered for me for the Havana Bike Polo third birthday party tomorrow. When he showed up with it, he had another cake for me, along with four beautiful pink roses, birthday presents from him and Elizabeth and Leah. They must be heritage roses; they have the scent I remember but rarely encounter these days (the peach-coloured roses have almost no scent at all). Wow, I am utterly spoiled.



I wish I had seen last night's press conference after the Cuba-US discussions. Conner said there was an incident that perfectly illustrates how Jacobson is totally outclassed by Josefina. A reporter asked her how the US could talk about cooperating with Cuba in fighting Ebola and at the same time continue a policy of effectively offering Cuban doctors in Africa a bounty to defect to the US. She was at a loss, just stumbled around trying to come out with a coherent, never mind plausible, response. I would love to have seen it. It's too bad she couldn't have just come out and said, *You're right. It's indefensible.* But then, I suppose she does want to keep her job.

Brrrr, there's a REAL cold front coming in: high of 21 tomorrow (perfect bike polo weather!) lows of 12 predicted for Monday and Tuesday, 11 for Wednesday! I'll be grateful for my alpaca socks from Chile. (Just out of curiosity, I searched for *alpaca* with Google Desktop and it seems I have almost that exact same thought every year in January! ☺)

Spent almost the whole day trying to wrangle the *Lancet* manuscript lineup into order so I can plan a layout calendar. Some are ready for Aram (of course, I can't send him anything until we finish the January issue or he'll implode); some need to be reformatted to MEDICC Review style, some had translations approved by authors but Susana hasn't sent me finals version yet, and some still haven't been approved by the authors. When I wrote Jeanette Vega and Patricia Frenz to ask their approval of the translation of their commentary, I asked for a response within a week and said that after that I would have to consider it was ok, since we are in a time crunch. Patricia sent me a snippy note saying she really thinks all authors should give their explicit approval of the translations but she would do her



best to review it within the week. It's certainly our strong preference to get explicit approval (or why would be bother sending them to them at all!), but how long are we expected to wait? I thought a week was plenty of time to review 1100 words; the longer papers get more time.

25-01-2015

Awoke this morning to texted birthday greetings from Silva, Jorge and Indira. I've now passed the age my mom was when she died. I guess it's all gravy from here.

The rice cooker is turning out to be a real boon. Not only can I can cook a whole week's worth of quinoa at one time, but it's given me a way to have hot quinoa porridge for breakfast without having to take time to cook in the mornings. I leave a bowl of cooked quinoa on the counter overnight so it's already at room temp when I get up, then add the peanuts and put it in the rice cooker (bowl and all, so I don't have to wash the rice cooker every day) on the *keep warm* setting and the kettle on to boil while I do my exercises. Then I just pour a small amount of boiling water over it, and voilá...hot porridge all ready for milk and brown sugar. Maybe I won't want it hot once the weather heats up, but now it's a real treat. And by then maybe I'll find rolled oats and go back to my muesli breakfasts.

A terrifying thought just struck me: what if I don't find rolled oats before I run out of quinoa?



Good turnout for bike polo today (it's amazing what the promise of food will do). If they would only stop squabbling about the legality of almost every single goal, we'd have a lot more playing time. Here Harry shows he's not intimidated by Tomás' size (he's nicknamed the Thomas the Tank Engine, for obvious reasons).

The plan was to start playing at 4 and adjourn to Cuba Libro for cake (to celebrate Havana Bike Polo's third anniversary) at 6. Conner is leaving for the US early tomorrow morning so had asked that we be there right at 6 so she

could close at 7 and go home and pack. I left the court at about 5:30 so I'd have time to organize the door prizes. The guys were just supposed to finish up a game and go along, but I'm pretty sure they started another one. We were still waiting for them at 6:45. We had just decided to go ahead and cut the cake when they came rolling up. They sang Happy Birthday in English to me and then *Felicidades en tu Día* for Havana Bike Polo. Here they are toasting me. The photos we took out in

the garden are even worse; we all look like zombies.



Only one photo from the whole evening turned out ok. Aldo looks uncharacteristically subdued. The beads are a birthday gift from Cuba Libro and the princess crown/hat is CL's Official Birthday-Person Hat. One is not permitted to celebrate one's birthday in CL without donning it.

26-01-2015

Gail had no power at her place today so she came over to ENSAP to work before our afternoon meeting. The problem with having her working in the same room is that she keeps consulting me about things

while she's writing and I can't concentrate on my own work. The main point of our meeting was to rejig the production schedule for a new publication date. We came up with something we think will work and have it come out only five days late. We'll see what Aram and Jeannie and Murlean say from their end.

The only problem with it is that I need to be at work on Tuesday to field corrections from Jeannie and Murlean and forward them to Aram. I had planned on taking Tuesday off to spend with friends who arrive Monday night; I had hoped to give them a general introduction to the city on Monday and Tuesday because they don't speak Spanish. Maybe I'll see if Leisi wants work as a tour guide for a couple of days.

Estrella just told me that Julio's in hospital; he had some chest pain late last night and went to emerg. Since he has a history of heart problems, they decided to keep him overnight for observation. She told Aimee that he's on vacation so she won't worry; Estrella says she gets very agitated when she's upset. I suppose it's a good thing that she's still aware enough to miss him.

26-01-2015

The security guards at ENSAP have been trying to get me to adopt this tabby. I guess they think I'm a good bet because I always stop to scratch her behind the ears on my way in and out of the compound. Despite living rough, she's very sweet and affectionate and loves to be around people. I would love to take her, but it would be irresponsible of me. For one thing, Lilo would probably tear her limb from limb.



Veronica brought me a birthday card and some incense today, along with container of soup that had pretty much every kind of root vegetable grown in Cuba. Just the thing for this chilly weather. I had saved her a piece of cake from the birthday party and she had that for dessert while I had the soup for dinner. She's finding it hard to study these days, distracted by thoughts of what comes next after she graduates in July.

The stress is mounting with three translation projects going into final stages at the same time as the January issue. There's going to be a real crunch for Carlitos' time, since he has to do the html for the January issue and hasn't finished doing the PDFs for the translation of the CKDu issue. One author in the *Lancet* supplement is getting crotchety about the way we translated *social accountability*. He wants to use *rendición de cuentas*, which is the act of accounting for something, not the condition of being accountable. So now I have to try to research how it's used in Latin American discussions about social accountability.

27-01-2015

The rocks Leo and Consuelo put in the pothole at the corner seem not to have been very effective. I don't suppose anyone's going to fall in it as long as this tree is there! I took the first photo yesterday and the second one today. I think part of the tree fell down into the hole. The flash on my phone's camera isn't bright enough to show how deep it is, but it looks to be at least six feet.



Today it was so cold at ENSAP that I had to put on the wool socks I keep in my bottom drawer, just in case. I used to laugh at the Cubans' scarves and caps when the temperature went down to the low twenties, and now I'm just as bad. Well, not quite. No cap yet. Although I was tempted to pull my hood up a couple of times.

Tomás just stopped in with a birthday present just now—a large earthenware mug. It has nice thick walls and will keep my tea hot a long time.

Lovely as it is to have my birthday just go on and on, it was even more exciting that he brought some butter, which just arrived today at the store where he works today. Even better, it's from Osorno in southern Chile, a region renowned for its dairy products. He remembered me moaning about not being able to find it and picked up three packages for me. What a dear.

In a variant on the O. Henry's *The Gifts of the Magi*, in which a woman sells her hair to buy a watch chain for her husband for Christmas and he sells his pocket watch to buy combs for her, just yesterday I finished the last of the potatoes Niurka gave me. Despairing of ever finding butter, I added the taties to the rest of Veronica's soup, boiled them down a fair bit, sprinkled it with merkén, and voilá, charquicán for dinner. So, no mashed potatoes dripping with butter any time soon. Ah well, it's almost February and potatoes should be arriving soon.

28-01-2015

When Estrella passed on her copy of *Granma* to me this morning I saw that there was a long article by Fidel. Once again, to misquote Mark Twain, rumours of his death have been greatly exaggerated.

Jorge and Elizabeth had to take Leah to the doctor for her PKU test today, so I got to work late. Even later because we stopped off at their place on the way so I could meet Leah. I didn't get to see her awake, but she's pretty beautiful asleep. I finally got to see some of the home improvement projects Jorge has been working on for years: a wall with beer bottles set in endways, letting light in but maintaining privacy, shelves made of railway ties, and a coffee table cum bookcase made from wooden crates—several steps up from the milk crate structures of my student days!



All day I kept thinking it was Thursday—and panicking every time I thought of what I had to do before final layout tomorrow, until I remembered that it's the day after tomorrow.

Now I really have to get to work on the editorial.

29-01-2015

It went down to 6.5 degrees in Mayabeque last night, the eastern part of what used to be Havana.

Province (i.e., not far away). I wonder if that's a record. Tonight and tomorrow night are expected to be equally cold, and then it should gradually warm up again.

I thought I'd get the editorial done today, but spent most of my time dealing with authors of *The Lancet's* universal health coverage supplement, and on one of the manuscripts for this month that had some errors in the tables no one noticed until the PDF stage. That meant a couple of calls to the author, and some bad moments when I thought we might not be able to fix it in time.

Julio is having his angiogram tomorrow and will find out whether he needs a stent or a bypass.

30-01-2015

I finally sent a draft of the editorial off to Gail at one am. She told me she wouldn't look at it until this morning, so it was probably in part a matter of work expanding to fill the available time, but I really struggled with it. We wanted to avoid sounding too rah-rah, but it's hard to talk about maternal and child health in Cuba without slipping into it. Their accomplishments are really extraordinary. When I was doing research for it, I found a World Bank report with a map of countries showing how they were doing versus the Millennium Development Goals. I was shocked to see Cuba in red, for "far from meeting" the target on maternal mortality. Then I realized that it was because the target was to reduce the maternal mortality ratio by three quarters between 1990 and 2015; since in 1990 Cuba's was just over 40 per 100,000 live births, very low compared to most other countries in the hemisphere. Reducing that by three-quarters would mean getting it down to 10 per 100,000. It's not realistic to expect to be able to sustain the same rate of decrease once you reach the lower end of what's possible. By comparison, the proposed target under the Sustainable Development Goal for improving health over the lifespan is to reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to 70 per 100,000 live births, much higher than the current Cuban one. Not that the Cubans are complacent about it (far from it), but I get defensive on their behalf.

We worked on layout from 10 until about 5:30; we weren't quite finished, but Aram had to leave. He'll send us all the low-res PDFs to proof without the editorial and then send the editorial separately when Gail gets it to him. I have company arriving tomorrow so I want to get as much proofing as I can done tonight and tomorrow morning.

Oh dear. Julio can't have a stent put in and may need bypass surgery. I didn't quite understand the explanation his cousin gave me (perhaps he didn't fully understand it himself).

31-01-2015

My friend Wikke arrived this morning from Jibacoa. What a shame Cuba Libro is closed—Wikke brought some books to donate and I think she would have enjoyed meeting the CL Gang of Three (not to mention a few of the regulars). We did a bit of shopping in the neighbourhood (this spectacular example of a classic Ford was near the agro, sadly defaced with decals motor oil) and had a light lunch, then set out for a first tour of the city. We hopped on the hop-on/hop-off bus at the cemetery and hopped off in Habana Vieja, to make the circuit of the four plazas. We stopped for coffee at the Escorial, where the service is as bad as the coffee is good. But what can I do? It's the best coffee in Havana, and then visited two of my favourite places in the old city: the cámara oscura and the Mother Theresa garden. The Plaza de San Francisco was wall to wall people and noise, but the Mother Theresa garden was as calm and welcoming as ever. I always feel such a huge relief when I walk through its gates.





On our way over from the Plaza Vieja, we glimpsed a ceramic mural from a doorway and I stepped in to ask if it was by Amelia Peláez, a Cuban painter and ceramicist. *No*, I was told, *but it's by a disciple of hers, Marta Arjona*. Then when we entered the garden, I was explaining to Wikke that the ashes of several illustrious Cubans were buried there, and the first plaque we read was that of Marta Arjona, of whom I had never heard until less than 15 minutes previously.

I'm not sure whether the bird is for sale or meant to be decorative.



I love this sculpture of a family engaged in parallel play: the mother painting her toenails, the father reading a newspaper and the daughter playing a hand-held video game. Is it social criticism or just portraiture? I don't recognize the game console, so it must have been after Alexis' highschool years (thank goodness I escaped that particular tech tsunami).

The plaza outside was so thronged because of the Buddy Bears, an exhibit of bears painted by artists from different countries, in a pose meant to suggest they were all joining hands, to symbolize friendship and tolerance. We agreed that the Canadian bear was one of the least imaginative, although it did convey something of the northern cold. The throngs were such that it was almost impossible to get a clear shot of any of them, but there were some nice accidental vignettes in compensation.



The only shot I could get of Cuba's bear was from behind. Too bad. It was smoking a big cigar. Not a good public health message, but couldn't be more cubano!

Dinner at Cimarrón. After Wikke went to bed, I proofed the issue and sent corrections to Aram. And that's it for January! Except for the Y names (now up to 1049): Yaney Yanibis Yansamill Yasunari Yaite Yelsy Yessi Yhemy Yoha Yoriander Yorki Yorshanka Yudeimy Yudelmi Yurisleidy