

01-11-2015

Only Tomás and I were at bike polo today, and only one mallet. He played with a branch he found at the side of the court and still beat me. It started to pour but we kept playing. In some places the water was two inches deep; when I'd whack the ball it would hardly budge. Even Tomás couldn't hit it more than a few feet (of course, he was handicapped as well by playing with a forked stick in lieu of a mallet). Finally we gave up and rode home in the deluge, trying to guess where the potholes were under the stream the street had become. Where it was really deep and murky looking I'd lift my feet and coast through, thinking there was likely backed up sewage in it. I washed my shoes and socks as soon as I got home—who know what's in the water—but just hung the rest of my soaked clothes up to dry.



Vladimir called about five minutes after I got out of the shower. He had and Yslandys had come by and shouted up to the window (a Cuban habit that irritates me no end; I don't know what they've got against doorbells, or even knocking). When I didn't appear, they went on to the cancha. At that point the sun was out, but by the time they got to my place a second time it was pouring again. They waited out the storm at my place and then headed off home—almost a two-hour ride! Now that's dedication to bike polo.

Breakfast this morning: peanuts and crumbled (somewhat stale) digestive biscuits with milk and a dollop of maple syrup. I have a boiled egg left for tomorrow and am counting on breakfast in the airport on Tuesday. If for some reason I can't resolve the carnet situation tomorrow I'll shop for groceries.

02-11-2015

Todo resuelto. When Jorge didn't arrive at 8:30, I was afraid today might be another day when everything went wrong, like Saturday. I was just about to call him just before 9, when Elizabeth called me to say he was tied up with the birdwatching group that arrived early this morning. When she couldn't estimate when he might be Available I got really nervous, since in even the best-case scenario (being able to leave tomorrow), I can't come back before January 25. I called Gail's place and Mery sent Irán (yep, that's his real name; and Estrella's new housekeeper's name is Dahomey, Mey for short) over to take me to Immigration. When I got there, the woman who took my thumbprint again showed me the typed instructions she had received for the carnet, with the typo indicating expiry in 2008. As if to say, *See, it wasn't my fault! I just copied onto the carnet what I read on the approval letter.* But good grief, didn't she read what she was writing!?

I asked if I could have it right then, but they said no, it has to go to the sponsoring ministry; Nuria would have to come and pick it up, or send someone for it. When I asked if I could use a phone to call Nuria to see if that was possible, she said there was a public phone in the waiting room, but you need to have a phone card to use it. She must have sensed my dismay, because she excused herself and went to the other office. When she came back she said a MINSAP courier happened to be there and would take the carnet to Nuria. What luck! I went to the Air Canada office (near

MINSAP) to rebook my flight and then to Nuria's office on the off chance the courier would be there soon. I was in luck again: she arrived about five minutes after I did.

As it happened, I couldn't rebook at the AC office: I had only the reservation code for Air Canada vacations, and what they needed to retrieve my file was the ticket number. But stopping in there gave me the illusion of forward motion and meant less time cooling my heels in Nuria's waiting room.

So I'm all set: Have carnet will travel. I left a photocopy for Yoyi so she can make sure the phone doesn't get cut off at the end of December.

24-01-2016

It's good to be back in Havana and the street vendors hawking their sundry wares—in one half-hour stretch today I heard offers of bleach, crackers, mops and pails, onions and garlic, and peanut candy. The supermarket comes to me like the mountain to Mohammed. I still prefer to buy produce directly from the agro and other things from the store, but I feel for the people who spend all day walking and calling out, often met with resentment by people who couldn't find what they wanted at the agro and now have to pay the vendor's markup. I wonder whether it's feet or throats that are sorest when they get home at night (I've heard the pregones as late as 10 pm, so it's a very long day for some).

Leah was a baby when I left and is now a toddler. One my mom would have described as a "going concern." It seems unlikely that she could remember me from early November, but she certainly gave every appearance of being completely at ease with me.



It was worth getting up in the wee sma's to get to the airport by 6:30 am. I was home in Havana by 2 pm and unpacked by bedtime. An earlier bedtime than usual, because I hadn't been able to sleep on the plane. And not only was I unpacked, I had everything actually put away, and there is a neat row of shopping bags by my door, each labelled with its destined recipient.

So I'm very grateful that Air Canada introduced a second flight on Saturday. It makes re-entry much less stressful. Shortly after five I took a break from unpacking to go over to Cuba Libro with bag of books and miscellaneous stuff for Conner and her staff. I thought I would get a café con leche, but they were busy with a group, so I didn't stay long.

The cold front that came in yesterday brought a heavy downpour that left low-lying parts of the city flooded. Some of the group at CL didn't know where they'd be staying last night because they were booked at casas particulares affected by flooding. They seemed pretty cheerful, notwithstanding.

Toby didn't recognize me immediately and barked a couple of times. Then he stopped mid bark and started jumping up and kissing me and yelping. He was looking pretty cute in his winter coat, courtesy of Conner's sister in NYC. Conner isn't really a dog person to begin with, and even less a person who would put clothes on dogs, given her druthers, but she admits that he looks spiffy. Only a

Cuban would think it warranted at 20 degrees, but it's supposed to go down to 10 tonight. Glad I left my Chilean alpaca socks here!

I had forgotten how cold it can get here in January. I left my coat and boots with the driver (for Sharon to pick up on Monday) and brought only two long-sleeved tops, one of which I wore on the plane. The other is a hoodie that will have to act as an extra pj layer.

Rose and Sally arrived shortly after three and were still assembling their bikes when Tomás called to see when I was planning to leave for bike polo. We agreed to aim for four, and almost made it. In any case, when we got to the cancha there was a soccer game going on, of course. Unlike most of the past year, they refused to vacate it when they finished the game that was under way. We explained for the umpteenth time that we had permission from INDER to use the court, but they were obstinate. They said they had priority, and also that their member of parliament had said bikes weren't supposed to be on the court. That's weird, because it's INDER's court and they knew it was a game involving bikes when they authorized us to use it.

Anyway, after Tomás, Vladimir and Alexander got tired of the shouting match (Conner and I steer clear of altercations among Cubans) we rode off down 23rd to try our luck at the Parque Acapulco, original home of Havana Bike Polo. The court there was full of skateboarders, so we set up the goals in the walkway between the court and the playground and played two on two. It was a tight space, even for that—but a good chance for me to practise sharp turns. The space has even more opportunities for the ball to go out of bounds than our usual court, and the ball was harder to retrieve from some of them. It was fun though, and it was good to be back in the old neighbourhood. In the tighter space, our ace players didn't seem to have as much of an advantage over us duffers, and no one could get up enough of a head of steam to have a bad fall.



I thought I had a slow leak but in my first game it turned out to be a puncture. Rose subbed in for me, but unfortunately I didn't think of taking pictures until later. Sally preferred to spectate. I filled the tire and rode partway home, then decided to walk the rest of the way (the *ponchera* on 26th was closed). A puncture's fairly easy to fix here; a bent rim not so much.

25-01-2017

I had a meeting with Gail scheduled at noon so tried to get myself organized as quickly as possible in the morning. When I went to hook up the new monitor I brought from Canada (the fungus on my old one had spread so much it's now truly unusable) I couldn't find a place to Insert the power cord, just two USB slots. That

was alarming; I thought I might have brought the wrong cables. I looked front and back, but didn't think of looking on the underside. Fortunately, Abdel did.



When the time for our meeting came, I walked Gail with a big chocolate cake, accompanied by the rest of the team, bearing gifts. Surprised doesn't quite cover it. Gail gave me two bracelets made of red seeds and tiny seashells; she couldn't make up her mind which was nicer so she got me both. Jerrontay gave me a beautiful scarf decorated with silver baubles. He also brought some chocolate-covered pecan clusters with quinoa. Rosita wasn't there but sent me three beautiful, hand-formed

espresso cups, in green, blue and yellow. I'd love to have a whole table setting. When I called to thank her for the cups, she said the potter is a neighbour, and offered to take me to visit.

My feline friend at ENSAP was posing by the gatehouse when I left today, so I just had to take this. Wish I could take the model home too.



Jorge and Elizabeth arrived at five with another cake, this one a vanilla cake topped with candied mango, lemon and guava. I was still too full of sugar from chocolate cake and pecan clusters to even try it. I gave some to Julio and Estrella and took the rest over to Cuba Libro, where I was presented with yet another cake, this one by Nancy, who makes the best cakes in Havana. I was grateful that Julio and Estrella gave me flowers instead of a cake!



Before going out to dinner with Rose and Sally, I ran home to put the remainder of the CL cake in the fridge for tomorrow and there on the table was a present from Veronica, a chocolate bar and a notebook with a bicycle on the cover. Conner joined us for dinner. One of the CL regulars works there as a mime, covered in metallic paint and moving almost imperceptibly. At least, when they're busking on the Street you can hardly see them move. At the restaurant, he moved slowly from table to table, offering paper roses. I thought he should have either moved more quickly or much more slowly; it felt kinda creepy.

Rose got the *grillada del campo*, a mixed grill with enough meat to do the most fervent omnivore for a week; Sally had curried chicken and Conner had Chinese

soup and a salad. When I asked her what was in the soup, she said lots of mystery meat, but it was tasty. I had my usual veggie omelet, which was big enough for four people. They forgot my *frijoles negros dormidos* but the server gave me lots to take home when I had them pack up three quarters of my omelet to take home. There's probably enough for three more meals.

Another CL regular sent us a round of drinks after dinner. He's not one of the ones I know well, so I have no idea what he does, but it must be lucrative, if he can buy rounds of drinks in a restaurant where the bill is in CUC.

Conner and Vladimir went to INDER today and got a letter authorizing us to use the court from 3 pm until closing every Sunday, the deal we've always had (too bad we didn't it a long time ago). The official said the local member of parliament has no say whatsoever regarding the court; it's INDER's court and bikes are fine on it. And she was pretty steamed that the football players were still obstructing us. There's lingering resentment from the time someone there pulled strings to make INDER take the lock off the gate; the court has certainly deteriorated since then.

I finally found an email address for Gladys Bécquer, VP for physical culture at INDER and wrote her to ask advice on how to get formal state recognition of bike polo as a sport. I dropped Gail's name, in case it helps. A long time ago she said she'd send me Gladys's email address but forgot about it and I forgot to follow up.

All in all it was a pretty good birthday and I am feeling very blessed. There were only two sour notes: Carlitos moved to the US earlier this month, and Aram tendered his resignation today after a fight with Gail. I don't know whether he's serious or just trying to get some leverage. We're up a creek without him, since he did the programming for posting the journal. He was supposed to teach it to Carlitos but never did, and now Carlitos is gone anyway. WE really can't afford to have one person on the team be indispensable.

This beauty passed us on Boyeros today. For once, I was ready!



26-01-2016

Rose and Sally went off to Jaguey Grande this morning. I found out at almost nine this morning that they were under the impression they could use ATMs just as in Canada. Since their guidebook was from 2015 and I was away for most of the last half of 2015, there was always a chance it had changed without me knowing about it, but when I looked at the text I saw the clause they had overlooked: SOME debit and credit cards, and be sure to check with your bank to find out if yours is one of them. This created a bit of a crisis, because a driver was coming to pick them up at ten (they planned to ride from Jaguey Grande to Playa Girón, Trinidad and Cienfuegos and back to Havana). Luckily, Jorge's car wasn't full so we gave them a lift, first to a bank (or what I thought was a bank and is now a post office) and then to a Cadeca, where they succeeded in changing some money. There is still an ATM in the bank-cum-post office. Rose tried to use it, and although there was no message rejecting her

card, no money came out. She had better check her account online to make sure her account wasn't charged.

Aram got over his pique and wants back in; Gail met with him today and the deal is that he'll stay on for the April issue, on probation. The conditions are that he'll improve his communication with her (and the rest of the team) and train another programmer/designer to back him up. He wanted to go ahead with the website redesign, but she said no, we'll do that when we agree that he's staying on longer term. She's dubious about him being able to change ingrained behaviours he's been practising for 17 years! And they've been having blowouts about his lack of communication and resistance to direction about twice a year since I arrived.



I was trying to get a shot of a roadside flower vendor but this cyclist got in the way. Not in the way of the vendor, but of the flowers.

Also from today's commute, an old Jag in pretty good condition (apart from the brake lights).

Tonight I met a friend of a friend at Cuba Libro to pass on a gift.



Lillian teaches Spanish as a second language at University of Havana. She's in a terrible living situation. Her husband died eight years ago and Lillian lives in her mother-in-law's house in Casa Blanca, with her two adult kids. The physical conditions are dreadful (frequent flooding, for one), but what's worse is that there is constant upheaval because her mother-in-law is demented. Not a great setting for class prep. She takes the ferry into Havana every day. I don't know what Val told her about me. When she said she needed to find something else and I said I'd ask around to see if there's anyone who rents in moneda nacional, she said she couldn't afford rent on a teacher's salary. It made me wonder whether my friend had told her she might be able to move in with me. I wish it were an option.

This is what Jorge's dashboard looks like now. It feels weird to ride in a car with all its electrical innards exposed.

Julio just came upstairs to tell me about a news report that US firms can export approved goods to Cuba with credit (before they had to pay cash on the barrel). Payment can't be in US dollars, and of course, US firms still can't buy anything from Cuba. Oh well, *algo es algo*.



27-01-2016

Yesterday I forgot to remind Rose and Sally to turn off the water heater before they left, and today the water pressure was so low that it took me a full 20 min to shower. I use the term "shower" loosely. I had to fill a bucket to soap up and then refill it several times to rinse off. It was agonizingly slow to fill, with the barely perceptible dribble of water from the tap. To make matters worse, it was a hair-washing day.

Gail needed to cash a large-ish cheque from NBC and was worried that BFI would close her account if she showed up (BFI isn't supposed to let permanent residents have accounts) so asked me if I would do it for her. First we went to the NBC office where a cheque was made out to me (three cheques, actually; the fellow writing them is left handed and kept smudging the ink. She was worried they might not cash the cheque if there was anything at all wrong with it so he had to try again. I was nervous, in spite of—or perhaps because of—a good deal of rather cloak-and-daggerish coaching. As it turned out, they gave me no hassle at all. I even managed to change some of my own Canadian currency into CUC while I was at it, saving a trip to a Cadeca. The exchange was painful though: for CDN\$1930 I got CUC\$1300, exactly two months' rent. I.e., my rent has gone from \$650 to almost \$1000 Canadian since the loonie started its nosedive.

Veronica moved to my place today from the casa particular where she was staying while Rose and Sally were here. I gave her the keys yesterday but just realized she doesn't have one for the gate, so if she gets in after ten I'll have to let her in. Or ask Julio to leave the padlock off until after she gets here.

28-01-2016

Brrrr! 6.6 degrees in Hatuey last night, only one province away.

Yippee—Gladys Bécquer wrote back and wants to meet me to talk about bike polo! I'm seeing her on Feb 11. It will be my first time inside Ciudad Deportiva, which I've passed ten or more times a week for the past six years.

Another cold front coming through. There was rain a good part of the day, and the power at ENSAP went off several times. Always, of course, at the point of maximum inconvenience. I confess to some strong language the third time I lost power in the same manuscript.

It's supposed to go down to NINE degrees on Saturday, and pour rain on Sunday. Oh well, then I won't feel conflicted about attending Leah's birthday party instead of playing bike polo. She turned one year old on the 22nd, but they put the party off so I could be there.

Leisi had a gig at Cuba Libro this afternoon and was still there when I got there. She is still having trouble with her eyes and can't use her contacts, but I think she looks lovely in her spectacles. Her friend Brian isn't writing her every day anymore, but she seems quite philosophical about it.



29-01-2016

A pretty good day. The power stayed on all day, probably because I brought my laptop to work. ☺ And we didn't run out of our browsing quota until 4 pm, which I found odd, because Esther María was there today, but not yesterday when we were cut off shortly after one pm.

This is Jonathan, demonstrating how Cubans dress when it goes below 25 degrees. His grandmother said he insisted on the flip-



flops, after being in closed shoes all day at school. I know exactly how he feels. I hate closed shoes.

Jonathan lives down the block with his grandmother; they were among the first close neighbours to check out Cuba Libro when it opened. His mother had died (of a heart attack, at 27!) about 6 months before and he was one sad little boy. He quickly became a favourite and has really blossomed over the two years since.

I stopped at the store at Camaguey and Boyeros on the way home and was thrilled to find milk AND mango juice AND lemon juice AND vinegar. Many's the time I've gone all through the store and found not one single thing on my list. Alas, no rolled oats, but between the bag I brought from Canada and the one Veronica brought, I should be ok for this trip. I can bring more from Chile when I come back in April. I grabbed as many boxes of juice and milk as I could carry, but when I got to the till I discovered I had only ten CUC with me. The cashier let me leave my stuff on the counter and served the next person in line while I ran out to borrow another ten from Jorge. Tomorrow I'll go to the agro and maybe get lucky.



More finds from the morning commute, or maybe one from the morning and one from the afternoon.

I was hoping to watch Séptima Puerta tonight but it was pre-empted by some awards show, I'm not sure if it was just for music generally or for some genre. Most of it seemed to be a combination of traditional Afrocuban music and hip-hop.

30-01-2016

The beer tent beside the agro has been torn down, to make room to expand the market. Rolando wasn't there and the young fellow with the next stall was taking care of it for him. His eastern accent was so thick I couldn't quite get whether R is gone permanently or just off for some reason. It was a good market day, even though I didn't get there until after noon. I got carrots, green peppers, cucumbers, onions and a cabbage for 140 pesos cubanos (\$8 Canadian). Last year the same amount of stuff would have been about 100 pesos cubanos; everyone is complaining about how much produce prices have gone up, but I have no way of knowing if this is a true price difference or if Rolando's neighbour is rounding up the total.

The shopping goddess (spellcheck wanted to make that shopping gouda ☺) continued to smile on me at the Panamericana, where I got lentils and cheese (gouda, this time really). I've given up even looking for rolled oats.

Had to laugh when I saw this sign at a new shawarma place on 17th street.

After the agro trip I went up to 23rd to get the INDER letter laminated to flash at the soccer players if they give us any more



grief on Sunday. I did four copies, one to post at the court, one to take to Gladys Bécquer when I see her (it also commented on how well we maintain the court for all to use), one to have in the equipment bag, and a backup.



I saw this kitten on 22nd, just before the Callejón de 21, my usual shortcut to 23rd. A little boy was talking to it fairly seriously, so I asked she was his and he said, no, because she scratched a little girl. When I asked if that meant she used to be his and he got rid of her because she scratched the girl, he just shook his head, as if to suggest complications I couldn't possibly understand.

I was just about to leave for the art opening at Cuba Libro when I got a text from Rose saying that Lukas had been delayed at customs so and they were going to get some dinner. I had just turned off the gas under my lentil stew so suggested it would be quicker for them to eat here. When we finally got to CL, Conner said Liam—a young transgender Cuban who wanted to meet Lukas— had just left. We're hoping there'll be another chance before Lukas leaves on the 7th (I think). The reason she was held up is that she was bringing 11 cell phones into the country and the customs officers probably thought they were to sell. She meant to just give them away, but was told that each of the three people travelling together could bring in one free and two more for \$30 each in duty. Since they were bringing them in to give away, they abandoned all but the three they were allowed to bring in free. Lukas had a few more in packed luggage that didn't get noticed.

CL was still packed when we got there, but we had missed a performance piece by one of artists. From the description Conner gave me, I probably like her painting better than her performance. I am always so awkward at such gatherings. Unless it's work related (i.e., I'm compelled to mingle) I tend to stick with people I know. I saw a man I thought was Alexis Abreu (whose painting we used for the April 2015 cover of *MEDICC Review*), sitting by himself and looking about as uncomfortable as I felt. My shyness and uncertainty about whether or not it was he kept me away. Then it suddenly hit me that he, whoever he was, was probably even shyer than I, and probably knew fewer people. I made my mind up to go over and say hello, but when I got to where he had been sitting, he was gone. Another missed chance to do a small kindness, all because of my wretched self-consciousness. I thought somehow I'd be over it when I finally "grew up." Maybe I'm just not grown-up enough yet.

31-01-2016

Tomás came over early this afternoon and picked up my wheel to take to the ponchera to fix (I am so spoiled!) and when he brought it back at three I had to tell him I couldn't play bike polo anyway. Elizabeth and Jorge had postponed Leah's first birthday party just so I could be there, so I couldn't miss it. He was going to pick up the mochila at Conner's anyway, in case others showed up. The rainstorm promised/threatened for today didn't transpire, so I hope they had enough players.



I thought the party was going to be just a few family members, but there must have been sixty people there, about ten of them kids under eight. Alexis turned one and two in Chile and we didn't have a party either time. Then when I got back to Canada I discovered the rule of one guest per year of the birthday child's age, which made things quite manageable, at least until about six. I could never have imagined such a production for a first birthday. Leah took it all in good stride (speaking of stride, it was amazing to see her walking; since I got back last week, she's always been in her car seat or in someone's arms when I've seen her). In fact, all the kids were surprisingly calm. I didn't see a single tantrum or fight.



I was glad I had made a second batch of lentils this afternoon and had some before going to the party. All the savory food had meat in it, even the salad, so my food was all sweet. Elizabeth brought me a plate containing, in ascending order of size and descending order of preference a tiny guava empanada, a small éclair and a huge piece of birthday cake. I swear the icing alone was two inches tall, and, as is traditional, the cake itself was drenched with syrup. I couldn't wait to get home and eat something plain.

One of the guests is a member of Cuba's national water polo team. When I asked if water polo is popular in Cuba he said not really; the only people who play it are on the provincial and national teams. There is no feeder system as such, but kids are introduced to it in primary school, and if they enjoy it and excel at it they are streamed to the provincial teams, often going to special athletics schools where they get both their academic education and athletic training. All free, of course, which is why Cuba does much better in international competition than other countries with comparable populations. Alfredo (?) started out in competitive swimming and switched to water polo when he was about 12.

Yikes, another month gone. I considered combining this with the last half of February because I've had so little time here in January, but since it goes back to October, I think I'd better not stretch it out any further. Will finish with one of my smallest batches of Y names ever. I thought I was close to 1300 names, but I must have miscounted earlier. Looks like only 1212 with these: Yary Ycel Yeniley Yerisleydys Yodany Yuliya