

An Economist in Havana

Polly Cleveland

Summer, 2015

Ever since President Obama announced the surprise reopening of diplomatic relations with Cuba, just before Christmas last year, speculations have flown. Will the tiny Communist nation remain frozen in time, or will it now “open up” (a term unpleasantly reminiscent of major abdominal surgery) to the modern capitalist world? Will it follow the example of Russia and China, and gain the worst of capitalism—powerful monopolies and great inequality—and lose the best of socialism—a universal system of health, education and social safety nets? Or will Cuba find a middle way, to combine the best of both capitalism and socialism?

On impulse, I spent three weeks in Havana this July, a period coinciding with the opening of the Cuban Embassy in Washington DC on July 20. Nominally, I went to take Havana University’s top-rated Spanish immersion course for foreigners. But also, I’m an economist, and an inequality buff since long before it was fashionable. I teach a small graduate course on “Poverty, Inequality and the Environment” at Columbia University. I had long wondered how a tiny Caribbean country of extreme poverty and inequality could have so rapidly transformed itself, all while threatened and embargoed by its giant neighbor. I hoped for a glimpse of Cuba as it is today, and a sense of where it might be heading.

My trip was arranged by John McAuliff, sponsored by his Cuba/US People to People Partnership, Fund for Reconciliation and Development. Americans as yet can’t go as tourists, but it’s not hard to visit as part of a special educational or charitable group. For the last fifteen years, John has been arranging and leading visits to Cuba. On August 14, he joined the group accompanying Secretary of State John Kerry at the official embassy reopening in Havana.

I kept a daily journal, to which I have added notes.

Friday, July 3, 2015.

This is Jet Blue’s maiden Friday flight from JFK direct to Cuba. As we back away from the gate, the Jet Blue staff unrolls a giant blue banner reading “Welcome Cuba! Our Hearts Are Also Cuban.” The passengers cheer. Three hours later, in Jose Martí International Airport La Habana, we step down from the air-conditioned cabin—it’s like opening the door of a dishwasher in mid cycle. Due to the embargo, US credit cards and cell phones don’t work in Cuba; I have brought cash and a new unblocked international phone. After two hours in lines to extricate my baggage from customs and change dollars for Cuban tourist pesos or “CUC”, I wait in a third line to buy a Cubacel card for my new phone. Just then, a furious *tormenta* lets loose--a tropical thunderstorm. Everyone smiles; rain has been unusually scarce this summer.

John has arranged for me a *casa particular* (private home), a bed and breakfast in the home of Lázaro and Maria Elena. They occupy an apartment in a high-rise on the Malecón, in the Vedado district southwest of Habana Vieja (Old Havana). The Malecón, officially designated one of the seven wonders of Cuban engineering, is a massive seawall, promenade, and six-lane highway. It runs several miles along the Havana waterfront from a Spanish fort at the northern tip of Old Havana to another Spanish fort to the southwest. Old family photos show my mom and

grandparents in an open sedan on the Malecón in 1935; back then the well-heeled flocked to Havana for winter fun. Today, the Malecón attracts nighttime crowds and bands of musicians.

As we would say in Manhattan, it's an apartment to die for. One of four apartments on the eighth floor, it features a long living room with a balcony to the north and an eat-in kitchen and laundry to the south, with windows opening onto an alcove in the building. To the west, three bedrooms face the Malecón. On hot afternoons, a stiff breeze flows through the apartment from balcony to kitchen. The living room is elegantly decorated with original paintings and prints, sculptures and objects collected around world. There's a mahogany dining room table and sideboard. My bedroom has a comfortable double bed, a wardrobe, a TV and a DVD player. I have my own bathroom, with warm-water shower and matching avocado-green sink, toilet and bidet! The bedrooms all have air conditioners, which no one appears to use. At night I sprawl coverless under a ceiling fan, with my window open to hear the music from below. I sleep soundly.

Saturday July 4.

With help from the business center at the nearby Hotel Meliã Cohiba, I finally get my Cuban cell working and call my husband, Tom. Bad connection. So I buy a ticket for a hotel computer to email him. Catch 22. My password program doesn't recognize the computer and sends a verifying message to my gmail account, which of course I can't reach because my American cellphone is blocked. Later, in the noon sun, I pick my way with my cane over the cracked sidewalks of the neighborhood, stopping under huge lush green fig or ceiba trees to examine the architecture. Some new coats of paint on the fine old houses, but many very run down, surfaces gray with mildew. A short sixtyish woman stops me and asks where I got my taxi-yellow LL Bean tee-shirt. New York, I say. She's a doctor, she says, and asks about my heavy leg braces. CMT peripheral neuropathy. Yes, she knows all about that.

After a nap, for 25 CUC, I attend a performance of the famous Ballet Nacional de Cuba, directed by Alicia Alonzo. It's Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, danced to recorded music from the Disney movie plus selections from various well-known ballets—couldn't quite identify them—with one simple set. What a contrast with ballet in New York City! Eleven soloists from the Ballet Nacional, two students from another ballet school, and some 120 children. The children, some quite small, appear as courtiers, pages, birds, rabbits, chicks and ducklings, daisies, squirrels, poppies and jasmines. Little black bats swirl around the wicked stepmother. These kids are already well-trained. Cubans take ballet very seriously; there are several top ballet schools in Havana. And it's not elite entertainment as in New York City. The audience brims with fans, friends, parents, siblings and babies—who surely didn't pay 25 CUC admissions. Not only do all the dancers take a bow at the curtain, but so do all the staff who worked on the production!

By chance I'm sitting next to an American couple, Kathleen and Carter Dammon, from Denver Colorado. They came with an educational group. Like me, they're ballet fans. After the show, the three of us fall into conversation with Ernesto, English-speaking father of the very talented nine year old who dances Snow White as a child. Ernesto is the engineer for a Cuban radio station. He and Carter are Masons. We visit the grand Masonic lodge in Havana; Ernesto tells us how Masons in Cuba helped the Revolution, and continue charitable work today. We end up at a deluxe but almost empty bar/restaurant at the Plaza San Francisco in Old Havana. Ernesto worries about the younger generation of Cubans; they can make more money in the tourist trade

just out of high school than by continuing to college and professional school. He also tells us about the Havana housing market. Rents are nominal so apartments change hands by cash under the table. (We'd never get away with that in New York.)

Sunday July 5.

On an early stroll northeastward along the Malecón. I pass a big sign that reads in Spanish, No Swimming and No Fishing. Here, four fishermen are swinging weighted lines out to sea. One has just caught a six-inch fish; while it flaps, he cuts off its tail to use as bait. A couple of pelicans cruise by, close to the water. This stretch must be the gold coast of Havana, with a series of relatively well-maintained high-rises like mine—18 floors I think (some of the elevator buttons are missing or have been replaced with different numbers).

Lázaro takes me to a bank four blocks south on Linea, the main east-west drag. Cuba actually has a dual money system: Tourist pesos or CUC, trade at about 87 to the dollar, including a 10% penalty in retaliation for the embargo. CUC in turn trade at one for 24 Cuban national pesos. For convenience, assume that a CUC is a dollar, and a Cuban peso is 4¢. At the bank, at a heavily-guarded outdoor teller's window down a narrow alley, I change 50 CUC for 1200 Cuban pesos. Lázaro warns me never to carry much cash.

Then he puts me in an old Chevy jitney for 10 pesos (40¢) to the *Parque Nacional* (National Park). The Parque is a rectangular open plaza, nicely planted at both ends with giant trees and palmettos. It's kitty corner to the Capitol, which is under reconstruction. In the middle of the plaza stands a statue of Cuban patriot and poet José Martí (1853-1895), killed in a failed revolt against the Spanish. I arrive just in time to witness the ceremonial laying of a wreath in honor of Venezuela's late President, Hugo Chávez. North-south along the west side of the Parque runs the Prado boulevard, site of the original stone wall protecting Old Havana to the east from pirates and invaders. Rainbow fleets of vintage convertibles--Cadillacs, Buicks, Chevys, and Fords—lurk for tourists on the south side of the Parque. In Old Havana itself, to the east of the Parque, some grand old buildings are renovated; many seem in various stages of collapse, and blue sky shows through scaffolded skeletons of others. To judge by the laundry hung out on balconies, people still live in many near-wrecks. Wonder what they do for plumbing? I buy a map and spend two hours reading it in the handsome lobby of the Hotel del Parque on the north side, enjoying a café moka. (CUC 2.75, plus tip of 50 centavos.)

From here a pedicab takes me to Plaza Vieja (Old Plaza), the art center. Lots of tourist stuff: brightly-colored scenes of Old Havana with the cars, and the inescapable Che Guevara in his beret. In a small Galeria Cooperativa, I meet Daniel Aties Sans, a slim, dark skinned 40ish artist. He shows me his portfolio of paintings and sculptures. This guy is *good*. In fact he has received several international awards and has work currently in two foreign galleries: one German and one in Manhattan! I buy a small charming drawing of the traditional Cuban rooster for 10 CUC. Briefly, I wonder why an artist of this caliber is sitting in a gallery selling drawings to tourists.

Then through narrow streets to the San Francisco Plaza, then back to Plaza Vieja, and from there back to Parque Nacional. A young man approaches me ostensibly to practice English; after a chat, he asks for milk for his 90 year old mother. I give him 10 Cuban pesos. He appears outraged; they are worthless! I tell him "Mejor que nada!" (Better than nothing!) Many people have missing teeth, so obviously good health care does not extend beyond dental extractions. In fact, I pass a shop labelled *estómago-something*, the proprietor explains he doesn't treat

stomachs but extracts teeth! My University of Chicago pocket dictionary lacks many Cuban words.

When I look for a jitney back, a hustler misleads me into taking a shiny red and white 1955 Ford convertible. Instead of 10 pesos Cubanos I must pay 10 CUC. Oh well.

Monday July 6, 2015

My hosts charge 40 CUC a day for the room, including breakfast. In the morning, Maria Elena lays out a breakfast feast of yogurt, eggs ham, mango and *guyaba* (guava) juice, toast, sweet Cuban coffee—more than I can possibly eat—before she heads off to work. I make a sandwich for lunch from my breakfast. Esperanza (Hope) comes in five days a week to clean, wash and prepare food. She is practically a member of the family. I return from classes and sightseeing to find my ratty underwear neatly pinned to a clothesline running across the balcony.

This morning, I go to the University of Havana for placement tests, written then oral. The courses are given every month but August; at beginner, intermediate and advanced levels. The test isn't hard, but I still haven't nailed past subjunctive. The University, up on a hill, occupies a set of fine old limestone buildings around a beautifully landscaped plaza. In one corner, surrounded by palmettos, sits a green military tank, a trophy of the Revolution. The language classes will be held on the second floor of the science building. At the bottom of the grand limestone staircase, a poster shows a bearded young man in a beret: "Here I became a revolutionary." Upstairs, posters exhort students to avoid smoking, wash hands to prevent the spread of TB, and always use condoms.

Returning from campus, I get lost, ending up at the giant Hotel Habana Libre. Hot and exhausted, I take a *Coco* taxi home for 8 CUC. At this rate I'll be broke before I leave.

This afternoon, Lázaro takes me for a tour in a borrowed car. First, up to the University, he shows me where I can get transportation. Then we drive southwest along the Avenida Quinta highway, which used to be the Avenida de las Americas through the once-wealthy Miramar district. Many of the abandoned mansions along this route have been converted to embassies or offices. The Russian embassy stands out; it is an ugly gray tower with an observatory at the top, rather like an airport control tower. Here also is the American Embassy, still nominally Swiss.

Tuesday July 7, 2015

First day of class. I'm in intermediate as expected. Our teacher is Laura Rodriguez, late 20's, gorgeous enough for a *tele novela* (TV soap opera). There will be eleven of us students: Two young Americans, Ellie and Ryan, from an education group. Yong, chunky 40ish Korean judo instructor with round glasses. Vera, 40ish Austrian professor of economics and political science from Salzburg; Alicia from Brazil; Lana mid 30's from Lebanon and then Paris, but has lived 5 years in China; Lucas young multilingual globetrotter from Sidney Australia. Three young Russians: Bagraz from Russian Armenia and the handsome identical twins, Danilo and Gabriel, always in matching outfits. The twins will regale us with tales of macho derring-do: hunting pheasants, mountain-climbing, and hang-gliding. I'm by far the oldest in the class. Laura lays down two basic rules: arrive by 9 AM, and no English in class. (Some of us cheat by whispering in French). Student teachers from Colombia sit at the back, observing techniques for teaching foreigners. The classrooms have computers with large wall monitors. The monitor in our room doesn't work. Fortunately, the classroom air conditioner does work.

Immersion learning is exhausting. It's not just unfamiliar words. Cuban Spanish drops "s" with a vengeance, both at the end of words, and in the middle before a consonant. Thus *estás*, "you are" becomes *e'tá* and *buscas* "you search" becomes *bu'ca*. There's also that Cuban drawl for emphasis, as in Cooooba. Cubans immediately use informal second person singular *tú*, rather than more formal *usted*.

Class lets out at 1:30; we start for home at high noon daylight savings time. Cubans constantly complain about the heat, blaming climate change for an unusually hot and rainless summer. Reservoirs are some 40% below the normal level this time of year. It's around 95° (35C) in the shade in the afternoon, and a pleasant 85° (30C) in the morning. With a fan or the afternoon sea breeze it's quite bearable in the shade. However the airless elevator vestibule must be the hottest place in Havana. Many women carry umbrellas for shade. Not the men. Nobody wears hats—but me. Thank heaven for my broad-brimmed, well-aerated Canadian Tilly hat!

The water is not safe to drink. As typical in poor countries, contaminated ground water seeps into the pipes when pressure is low. My hosts boil water in big pots, then cool it and pour it into a large two part filter, made in Korea, with a faucet at the bottom. I have never drunk so much water in my life. I go through one big 1500 mL bottle on class days, and multiple glasses after I get home.

Wednesday July 8

I'm getting the hang of Havana transportation. For 10 CUC, if you don't bargain, you can take a ride in one of the vintage 1950's American convertibles, brightly painted on the outside, but totally decrepit on the inside. The Coco's—cute motor tricycles with bright yellow shells—cost almost as much. In Old Havana, pedi-cabs serve tourists and locals alike, for 2 CUC's if you know the score. Old Chevy sedans, known as *almendróns* for their almond shape, operate as jitneys. These run fixed routes along main roads, and cost 10 pesos, about 40¢. Cubans deploy an assortment of hand waggles to indicate to passing drivers which route they want. Be careful to close the door of an *almendrón suavemente* (gently) or the *chofer* will glare at you. The bright yellow *colectivos* mini busses are air conditioned and cost 5 pesos, or 20¢. Finally, there are the *guagua*'s (wawa's): regular busses which nominally cost 0.40 pesos, about 1.2¢; a fare-taker hangs out the right front window, accepting whatever small change passengers offer. *Guagua*'s are liable to pass their stops unless someone hollers. The stops aren't marked either. Would-be passengers gather in the best shade on the block, then run for wherever the *guagua* decides to stop.

I take the P5 *guagua* to class today. The P1 and P5 leave me four blocks from the University, a short uphill walk on Calle J (J street). Cubans reach out to help me on and off the bus and offer me a seat—not easy in rush hour, when we're jammed in like a bunch of asparagus. I get there fine, from Linea and Paseo to 23 and J. Coming back, from Calle L and 23 to Linea and Paseo, the bus is packed and I don't know how to signal—it skips Paseo leaving me a long walk in the baking sun.

In my effort to speak rapidly, I think my Spanish is deteriorating—I just throw out words. I understand maybe two thirds of words listening to a conversation, hence very little of meaning. Compounded by Havanan pronunciation, I often don't recognize words I know quite well.

Laura has asked us what we're planning for the weekend, so I check into tours at the Meliã Cohiba. The gentleman behind the desk offers me several glossy brochures. I pick out a tour to

an organic coffee plantation. He looks up the price. Very expensive. Also minimum ten people. In fact, he admits, the trip never runs.

On my way home today, I buy tomatoes, sweet peppers, an avocado, limes, a pineapple, and a bunch of bananas at a fruit and vegetable stand on the porch of a house three blocks from home. The seller is very courteous and careful to give me correct change. (It would be so easy to take advantage of me as a tourist, but that doesn't happen outside tourist hotspots!) Next to the fruit market, a man sits on a step, offering four limp bundles of herbs on an overturned crate. He's there every time I visit.

At the *minimercado* (mini-market) across the street from home, I buy four bottles of Presidente beer—my hosts' favorite—made in the Dominican Republic, and two small bottles of stuffed olives. Minimercados are everywhere, with the same limited merchandise: Ciego Montero bottled water and juices, Habana Club rum, sometimes beer (local or foreign), cigarettes, cooking oil, rice, beans, packaged biscuits, frozen hot dogs, and mayonnaise. Always mayonnaise. I never see olives again.

My young classmates go salsa-dancing and jazz-clubbing after class. I return late afternoon and collapse for a nap under the ceiling fan. Maria Elena and Esperanza ply me with food. I have been feeling a little guilty, as I'm taking more than breakfast and not contributing enough. Today, I make a deal with my hosts: all meals for 45 CUC a day, with just yogurt and coffee for breakfast. Maria Elena makes me a ham and cheese sandwich and banana for lunch, packed in a Hefty zip-lock bag. This bag is an heirloom, carefully washed and reused every day.

Thursday, July 9

Today we pay the University bill, 240 CUC for three weeks. Handicapped rights have not made it to Cuba. There's an awkward flight of five very steep steps with no handrail up to the administrative office. I make my way with the cane, grabbing door frames, and helped by fellow students. Here I stand or sit over two and a half hours in line, wondering what bureaucratic mystery awaits. At the front of the line, finally, one young woman fills in a small form in triplicate—using carbon paper, and gives me a receipt on a sheet from a dot-matrix printer—remember those, anyone? The whole process takes about 3 minutes, but 60 students x 3 minutes—you do the math. Welcome to the Cuban *cola*, or “tail”.

There are men's and a women's bathroom next to the classrooms, with high ceilings, marble stalls and handsomely tiled walls. However the toilets lack seats and it's bring-your-own-toilet paper. The tank tops are strapped down with plastic ties—lest thieves strip the plumbing? An *abuelita*, a tiny white-haired grandmother, presides over the bathrooms. She sits at a battered child's desk covered with a white shawl, on which she places a small chipped red plastic bowl. She motions to me and explains that she cleans the bathrooms, so she needs a tip. I give her a small coin. I have no idea what it's worth but she seems pleased. I ask her if she's paid by the University. No, it's just that the bathrooms would be dirty.

Back home, I visit the nearby Hotel Habana Riviera to buy a ticket for a tour to the World Heritage site of Viñales to the west. The Riviera, completed in 1957, was the dream project of mobster Meyer Lansky, modeled on Las Vegas casinos. Partners in the project included America's man in Havana, Cuban dictator, Fulgencio Batista. In the lobby, there's an exhibit of “found object” sculptures of giant animals, such as a hermit crab made of pick-axes. A cheeky sense of humor pervades Cuban art. Here's a four-foot high scorpion's tail plated in brass pesos,

entitled, “Ambivalence”. There’s a three-foot millipede stuck with postage stamps from around the world, entitled, “A Thousand Journeys.”

Friday July 10, 2015

This morning, just as I press the elevator button, the lights go out. Esperanza has a powerful flashlight handy right by the door, and helps me down the stairs from the eighth floor. At the university, other students report the same power failure.

Fig trees line the streets along my four block walk up Calle J to the university. The same scrawny but indestructible little trees that deck our homes and offices, here they are grown immense, with huge roots dropping from the branches. Palms and tall spreading acacias with brilliant orange-red flowers also shade the walk. At every corner along the way, vendors with little carts hawk assorted crackers, meat pies, meringues, and my favorite: salted peanuts packed into long slim white paper cones. This food costs only a few Cuban pesos at most—how on earth can all these vendors make a living? As I pick my way back down the four blocks in early afternoon, mopping my face under my big Tilley hat, I notice groups of mostly men of all ages sitting on steps or stoops under the biggest trees, chatting and laughing. They must be out to enjoy the afternoon sea breeze. Every afternoon, wherever I go, I see groups like this.

My hosts’ full names are Lázaro Mora Secade and Maria Elena Salar López. Lázaro is a retired diplomat. At 77, maybe 5’7” tall and white-haired, he is still slim and fit. He has the quiet, amused smile of someone who has seen it all and is at peace with himself. Lázaro is the eye of Maria Elena’s hurricane, as laconic as she is voluble. At 64, she still works, at the Cuban Association for Animal Production. Despite the heat, she always looks elegant in light linen pantsuits, with perfect hair and nails. They have been married 42 years and have raised four sons. Three have moved to Spain, Miami and Venezuela. “Economic refugees,” says Maria Elena. The fourth still lives at home. He’s a lawyer, but I only see him twice dressed in long pants, meeting with clients on the balcony.

Meanwhile, it’s been a week; what’s going on in the world? Yesterday *Granma* published a letter from Raúl, and today one from Fidel, both congratulating Prime Minister Tsipras on a no vote from the Greek public. *Granma* is the official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party. It’s named for the old clunker of a yacht on which Fidel Castro, Raúl Castro, Che Guevara, and eighty-two fighters slipped into Cuba from Mexico in November 1956. But there’s little international news in *Granma* or other publications. Mostly the same old encomiums to leaders alive and dead. *Granma* reminds me of *Pravda*, to which I subscribed while studying Russian in college. Each issue contained a pink notification slip from the FBI—a warning against indoctrination, or against boredom?

Saturday, July 11, 2015

Today is the tour of Viñales, a valley surrounded by strange, straight-sided limestone hills, in the mountains to the west of Havana. It’s 59 CUC, but much more after we get through tipping at every turn. Along the new super-highway, our guide Manuel points to the turnoff to the port of Mariel. With Brazilian help, they’re building a deep water container port. In fact, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo visited the Mariel Development zone in April. Billboards along the way proclaim: “Country or death: We will triumph”, “The Revolution Continues”, “Let’s take Care of Nature”

In the old city of Pinar del Rio we stop at a shop selling cigars, the primary industry out west. Then, turning onto the narrow road to Viñales, we pass horse-drawn two wheelers, and occasionally horse-drawn four-wheel six or eight-seater open busses. We stop at another cigar shop, where a man demonstrates cigar-rolling. Next to a tobacco barn, there's a field of sorghum, a grain grown for pigs. It's the summer crop; the fall crop is tobacco. This agriculture isn't organic; it's just primitive. The raw red earth lies exposed in deep ragged furrows. It was probably plowed by that handsome team of white oxen standing by the parking lot with its owner, posing for tourist pictures and tips. According to our guide, while the state owns the tourist shop, the farmer owns the land. After the revolution in 1959, tenant farmers became owners.

The road to Viñales now winds up through the hills. Whenever our big deluxe tourist guagua gets behind a bicyclist or horse cart, there's no passing. For a while, we're stuck behind a turquoise almendrón, spewing a volcano of black soot—did they fill the tank with cooking oil? In the villages along the way, the little houses are new, freshly painted, and all electrified. This is a showplace, prime tourist territory. In Viñales, we get lunch at a big tourist pavilion, serenaded by a salsa band—more CUC's—and take a boat ride through a cave. Besides the Che tee-shirts, the gift shops offer carved mahogany animals, including quite charming hummingbirds. A young woman and man, painted and half-naked, pose for tips as Arawak. These were original inhabitants of Cuba, quickly wiped out by the Spanish after Columbus arrived in 1492.

Back home, I struggle to understand as Maria Elena explains Cuban agriculture. Most of it is terribly backward, she says, like the tobacco farm I just saw. Later I will piece together a fuller story. Following the Revolution in 1959, Cuba implemented land reform legislation, designed by Che Guevara, limiting the size of private farms. Small tenant farmers became owners. After land reforms in Japan, Taiwan and Korea post World War II, small private farmers transformed agriculture into some of the most productive in the world per acre. Why not in Cuba? It's a complicated story.

When President Eisenhower imposed the embargo in 1960, Cuba turned to the Soviet Union. The Soviets bought sugar, at many times world prices, in exchange for oil, chemicals, machinery and food. Ignoring the small farmers, Cuba focused on production from nationalized sugar plantations, investing heavily in mechanization. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and a crash in world sugar prices brought on the Cuban "Special Period" of desperate shortages of food and fuel in the early 1990's. Hungry citizens turned in droves to organic farming, especially on vacant urban lots. Intensive organic farming has expanded dramatically since then, and food shortages have disappeared. However, according to the UN's World Food Program, Cuba still imports some 70% to 80% of the staples distributed through ration cards: necessarily wheat products, but also basics like rice, beans, cooking oil and some meat. Overall food imports are much smaller fraction of the Cuban diet, possibly under 20%--estimates vary wildly.

But the private farms still lag. What holds them back? As best I can tell, it's clumsy Soviet-style state management. Farmers operate under a contract with the state to deliver quotas of produce at very low prices. Some farmers can sell production above that quota in an official free market or in a semi-tolerated black market. Others have no market access, including producers of some important products like beef and dairy; coffee, tobacco, and rice. This system invites waste and corruption, and leaves farmers with little capital or incentive to improve methods—despite the availability of advanced organic technology developed by Cuban scientists.

Meanwhile, and this gives Maria Elena hope, when Raúl Castro became president in 2008, the government began loosening controls on private farms, and opening up state land for small organic cooperatives. Already thousands of Cubans have applied for chance to manage such cooperatives. She promises that before I leave, she'll arrange a visit for me to a cooperative near Havana.

Maria Elena wonders why the US has considered little Cuba such a threat all these years. Might Cuba eventually follow in the steps of Russia? She says no, because the Russian elite stole the public's oil and other natural resources. Private ownership is widespread in Cuba; here there are no great public natural resources to steal. Maria Elena and Lazaro own their apartment, bought with years of payments. The government maintains the exterior and the utilities.

Speaking of utilities, a neighbor comes by this evening for several buckets of water. How come there is water in this apartment, but not in another on the same floor? In this building, each apartment has its own cylindrical water tanks resting on cross beams in the alcove of the floor above. Due to yesterday's power outage in Havana, sufficient water didn't get pumped up to some of the water tanks.

Sunday, July 12, 2015

Early morning in the front garden of the building, the half-grown striped kitten who hangs out there is playing with a big green grasshopper. He belongs to a second floor occupant, and dines on canned tuna for humans. Keeping a cat requires access to a garden; there's no such thing as kitty litter. As for dogs, in Havana, there are *perros de calle* and *perros de casa*, street dogs and house dogs. Street dogs are beagle-sized or smaller, scrawny, filthy, with short nondescript (or missing) fur, pointed noses, floppy ears and curly tails. I have never seen one with a collar or leash. During the day, they seem mostly to sleep on sidewalks; presumably at night they scavenge garbage. As for house dogs, mornings and evenings, their owners escort them for a walk, properly leashed and collared: so far I have seen a German shepherd, a basset hound, an elderly yellow Labrador, a golden retriever puppy, a husky(!), a morbidly obese beagle, and assorted fluffy lapdogs. No mutts.

The National Museum of Fine Arts is closed. So I visit the Plaza de Armas (Plaza of Weapons), surrounded by grand limestone palaces. The ghosts of Spanish empire haunt this place, arrogant and cruel. I spend two hours in the Palace of the Captain Generals, now the City Museum. It was built in 1791. It's a massive, square limestone building around a central court. On a tall pedestal in the middle stands a white marble statue of Christopher Columbus with his hand on a globe. A pair of peacocks scratch and peck in the leaf litter under the tropical trees and palmettos behind him. On the ground floor there's an exhibit of religious objects, including a life-size model of a seated Christ dripping with blood. Portraits of bishops peer from the walls; glass cases display some actual gold and silver embroidered cassocks. How could they wear those heavy clothes? Why didn't they die of heat stroke? Maybe they did! Or maybe the artist just painted the clothes on them.

There's history in the second floor exhibit of copper utensils. Painted on the wall is a copy of a letter dated February 22, 1544, from the Governor of Santiago, Cuba's second largest city and first capitol. The letter, addressed to the Spanish king Carlos I, (later Hapsburg Charles V), requests tools to help process copper from the abundant nearby mines—operated by slaves.

At an Italian restaurant near the *Plaza de Armas*, I enjoy *bruschettas*, reading my new tourist guide to Old Havana. On a big TV screen over the bar, high divers compete in the Pan-American Games in Toronto. A Cuban has won the gold in Judo. On the international scene, only the Games seem to engage Cubans.

I arrive home to find my hosts waiting, obviously a bit annoyed. They had invited me to Sunday dinner of *langosta*--lobster, a Cuban treat. As I hadn't known, Cuban Sunday dinner happens at lunchtime!!! But they saved some for me, and I ate it for dinner at 7:30. Absolutely delicious, with mildly spicy red sauce on noodles.

The basic Cuban diet is grilled or sautéed pork, sometimes chicken or fish or eggs; with white rice, black beans, potatoes, cassava and a variety of yams. There's salad of lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, mild purple onions, avocados, and fresh long yellow beans (*habichuelas*). All heavily salted. And of course fruit: guavas, mangos, papayas, pineapples, bananas and some more exotic fruits I can't identify. For breakfast there's thick Cuban yogurt, which comes in tall wasp-waisted bottles; sweetened with Cuban honey. Cubans drink very sweet black Cuban-grown coffee in tiny cups. The alcohol of choice is beer or rum. There is a Cuban-grown wine, Soroa (I never tried it), but other wine is imported, primarily from Spain or Chile.

All Cubans, not just poorer Cubans, get a ration book, which entitles them once a month to buy staples at extra low prices: rice, grain, oil, molasses, refined sugar, fruit compote, salt, animal feed, coffee, and matches. Families in which all members work get special permission to jump the queue.

According to Manuel the Viñales tour guide, the fat and sugar-rich diet gives Cubans high rates of diabetes and cardiovascular disease. However, they now make their own insulin, and other medications. Yesterday's *Granma* featured a long article on Cuba's growing biotech program.

I have yet to see a Cuban smoking a cigar—probably too expensive—but many Cubans smoke cigarettes, including Esperanza. Cigarettes in the minimarket downstairs range from about 0.60 to 1.20 CUC a pack, with higher prices for longer and filtered varieties. Brand names include Popular, Hollywood, H Upmann 1844, Cohiba and, yes, Lucky Strike in the original pack design! Packs carry bold warnings such as, “If you smoke, you lose; be a winner,” or “Cigarette, Enemy of Health and Life,” or Pregnant? If you Smoke your Child May be Born Underweight”. Of course these brands, even the Luckies, are all made in Cuba.

What is happening in Greece? Or Syria? Not in *Granma*. But it does report a meeting last Thursday at which Fidel addresses “world population growth in the middle of climate change, the crisis of the growing scarcity of water, and international conflicts that produce higher prices.” At almost 89, he's still tuned in.

Monday, July 13, 2015

In the University garden before class I sit down next to a white-haired woman. She introduces me to her granddaughter who is skipping around the garden. On hearing I'm American, she launches into a tirade about the American embargo of Cuba. How it cuts off vaccines, antibiotics, insulin and chemotherapy drugs, so that children die. She herself has had three heart procedures here in Cuba—for zero pesos! But then, she complains, when she developed what I think was Bell's palsy, (a drooping side of the face due to a virus infection of the facial nerve), she had to

pay for treatment because the disorder was only cosmetic. Then she gets going on how her son, with an advanced university degree, has to drive a guagua.

(The embargo not only prohibits direct trade between Cuba and the US, it also impedes third-party trade with Cuba. Since most international trade is denominated in dollars, transactions frequently go through bank clearing-houses in New York City, where Cuba-related funds will be frozen. For example, if Cuba sells nickel to Brazil, and Brazil pays in dollars, that money is liable to be confiscated. In May 2015, the giant French bank BNP Paribas forfeited \$8.8 billion and paid a \$140 million fine for processing transactions on behalf of Sudanese, Iranian and Cuban entities. The third-party blockade explains why humanitarian groups regularly bring vital medicines to Cuba.)

In class, we describe our most recent vacations. The Russian twins recount a trip to Kyrgyzstan in which they participated in the local sport: Teams of horsemen struggle to wrestle a full-grown live sheep from the opposing team without dropping the poor thing. A cell-phone photo shows a rider galloping with the sheep slung over the saddle in front of him.

After class, I go to the university bookstore. It's a single large room, with sloping display racks. No bookshelves. In translation, there's a book by John Grisham; seven titles by Steven King; the Wizard of Oz; Isaac Asimov and various other Americas science fiction titles; 5 titles by Umberto Eco (Italian). Some Spanish novels. Children's books include the Narnia series; Winnie the Pooh; Mickey Mouse; an illustrated sex guide for children; various coloring books; and advice books like *How to Teach your Children Leadership*. A big *autoayuda* (self-help) section offers titles like *How to Stop Smoking*. The Religion section includes popular music. The Social Science section displays much on Fidel and even more by or on Che. A book by Frederick Engels, but no Carl Marx. Especially interesting: a *Who's Who in the CIA*, and what to do if you encounter an agent. I look up current CIA chief John Brennan. Under Miscellaneous, I find Shakespeare's Othello. I buy a history of Cuba.

Next the *Museo de la Revolución*, in a magnificent old limestone building once used for state receptions. Painted on one wall of the ground floor are four over life-size cartoons of "Cretins" who helped the revolution by inspiring resistance: former Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, Ronald Reagan, George Bush Sr. and George Bush Jr. The neatly painted sign on the elevator reads: *no funciona*. So I struggle up a grand marble staircase to the 2nd floor. I find exhibits of photos and documents from the beginning of the revolution in 1958 through 1980. There are many pictures of Fidel, Che and various revolutionary heroes. There's an image of Fidel in 1968 proclaiming they will "pull capitalism up by the roots and destroy parasitism". Also exhibits of the programs to teach the poor to read, and to bring health and education to the rural areas. There's a copy of, *Lectura Campesina*, a book to teach peasants to read. An exhibit showing how, in the name of "the humanization of labor" cane-cutting machines were introduced to replace machetes. (When the Russians withdrew subsidies around 1991, the machines were left to rust in the fields, and Cubans returned to machetes. Today in Havana, I regularly see men mowing the grass with machetes.)

There's an exhibit from 1977, the National Association of Small Farmers, "based strictly on volunteerism began the cooperative process of integrating into socialist forms of production." Yes, Fidel had the good sense not to follow the Soviet Union's disastrous forced collectivization.

In the final room I find an exhibit of photos of epidemics allegedly introduced by the CIA in the 1970's: swine fever, which killed a million and a half pigs; blue mold on tobacco; a sugar

cane virus; and Dengue fever—300,000 cases, about 150 fatalities, mostly children. Do I believe the CIA involvement? Given the Bay of Pigs, multiple assassination attempts on Fidel, and all the other official and unofficial attacks on Cuba, Cubans are justifiably paranoid. They can quote a U.S. State Department memo that the embargo serves “to bring about hunger, desperation and the overthrow of the Cuban government”. And as a Foreign Service brat, and an anti-drug war activist I have heard many stories... The Museum has a third floor, but no handrails on the stairs, so I may have missed 1980 to present.

This afternoon, a Cuban-American businessman visits Lázaro with glossy brochures for a scheme of growing fresh vegetables by artificial light in high-rise buildings.

Tuesday, July 14, 2015

Today turns out to be the last day of our teacher, Laura Rodriguez.

At 5 PM, I go to the business center at the Meliã Cohiba. (Meliã is a hotel chain; cohiba is a cigar variety). It takes over half an hour to buy and install three 10 CUC phone cards, which will entitle me to a total 8 minutes long distance. I call Tom and give him my number to call me back. Success! But he can't hear me clearly. So I say I'll email him. Ha!!! 14 CUC for two hours. But it takes me over an hour just to log on, and access is painfully slow.

Besides *Granma*, there is only one other daily paper, *Juventud Rebelde* (Rebellious Youth). Both are eight pages, and are published by the state, with the same staff, and even the same daily front page stories in a big box on the upper left, reporting statements by or stories about Fidel or Raúl. Today the twin papers report that a new book will be released today at 9 AM in the National Assembly of Popular Power: *Raúl Castro, un Hombre en Revolución* (*Raúl Castro, A Man in Revolution*). Since the weekend, both papers have bubbled with stories and pictures about the Pan-American games in Toronto, especially Cuban gold, silver and bronze medals. What else? *Rebellious Youth* has a front page story on a new Cuban internet search platform. A story inside, “Parliamentary Commissions: deep evaluation and criticism of the nation's challenges.” On page 3, Greece signs ¿Agreement or Sentence?”

This is the second day in a row I search for Presidente beer. No luck.

Wednesday, July 15, 2015

Due to last evening's *tormenta*, it's cooler today, 70's this morning. At 6 AM, still dark, they're still singing on the Malecón. At seven a loud rattling: a truck pumping water into the rooftop tanks of the little restaurant below.

I ride the elevator down with a 30ish blond woman in a white lab coat. Doctor?—Surgeon.—What kind of surgery?—Maxilo-facial. There was a big piece in yesterday's *Granma/Rebellious Youth* about Raúl thanking the Cuban doctors who served on the Ebola team in Africa.

The new teacher today, Darianny Denis, is harder to understand because she talks faster than Laura. While just as gorgeous as Laura, she's much darker-skinned. According to a class handout, the Cuban population of over 11 million is 63% white, 12% black, 24.9% mixed, and 0.1% Asian. How did they achieve such impossible precision? Maybe Havana isn't representative, but to me the majority falls into a broad spectrum from deeply-tanned not obviously “white” to clearly of African ancestry. With a shock, I recognize that Lázaro, in the middle of that spectrum, would count as “black” in the US. Before the 1959 Revolution, Cuba

was a highly-segregated, racist society. How much has equal opportunity erased the traces of that history, at least in the younger generation? Impossible to tell.

At the corner of 23rd and J, amazing, a bookstore in a tent! An aluminum frame covered by thin red plastic. And in the rosy gloom inside, books. Heaps of books! Even books in genuine (collapsible) bookshelves. As I browse, mopping my face with a bandanna, paydirt!!! *The Agricultural Model in Cuba*. It's an analysis of recent problems in Cuban agriculture with proposals for reform. The author, an economics professor at Habana University, turns out to be friend of my hosts. And the book costs 10 pesos, or about 40 cents US. In the US, a technical book like this more likely would cost \$40 or more. Maria Elena later gives me another book, *Views on the Cuban Economy: Between Economic Efficiency and Social Equity*—essays by eleven Cuban economists. Bliss! Or modified bliss, as I find a lot of words that aren't in my little Chicago dictionary.

Then I take the P5 guagua for a wild ride all the way around the Havana waterfront, down to the railway station. In early afternoon, when the guagua isn't jammed, I notice it's fairly clean and well-maintained, with Cuban pop music playing. Quite agreeable. From the station, I walk six blocks to the Parque Central, then a quick café at the Hotel de Parque Central. I pick my way around ditches and stacks of new sewer pipes as I head up the avenue for the Museum of Cuban Art. Wow! This stuff is stunning. I'm especially struck by the landscapes and prints of [Tomás Sánchez](#). An eight-foot cockroach climbs the wall next to the back entrance.

Still no Presidente beer.

Thursday, July 16, 2015

Early morning, sunrise on the Malecón. On the ocean, a perfect oval patch of ripples, maybe twenty by thirty feet. Wind? The water seems to boil, with big splashes around the edges. It's a school of tiny fish, driven to the surface by bigger fish. A fisherman grabs his gear and runs along the seawall to the patch.

Yesterday a building collapsed in the middle of Old Havana, near the Parque Central. Two stories, bottom un-occupied, on second floor 4 dead and 3 injured. Dead: a three year old, two 18 years, and one 60 years. The authorities are investigating the cause. (Of course this happens in New York too.)

After class I take the P1, which turns out to head south of Old Havana. Helpful passengers show me where to get off to take Avenida Monte northeast toward Parque Central. I walk an hour, shaded under the arcades of one of Habana's major shopping streets. Here are tiny food shops with takeout menus posted. Pizza is popular. Tiny galleries for people licensed *por cuenta propio*—to work for themselves. "Fix cellphones" everywhere. Hardware, especially faucets and other kitchen plumbing—every Cuban is a plumber; locks and keys, jewelry, watches, barber, hairdresser, clothes, flowers, butchers—with meat unrefrigerated laid out in the heat. Music disks—very popular. Fruits and vegetables. This is real, normal Cuba. Nobody pays me any attention except to offer a hand where I have trouble with steps.

Since Raúl Castro took over as President from Fidel in 2008, Cuba has substantially increased the number and type of businesses which qualify for *por cuenta propio* licenses, and removed restrictions on purchase of many items, like DVD-players and cellphones.

I return to the Galleria des Artes to look again at the Tomás Sánchez paintings I liked the first time. I overhear from a guide, he's immensely popular, with art for sale in the Marlborough Gallery in Manhattan. I buy a 2015 calendar of his paintings. Beautiful mysterious landscapes, but ultimately a bit much. He also has some amusing work, notably a print of "La virgin del melon" a crude virgin ascending above half a watermelon!

Milagro! Presidente beer has returned. I buy 5 bottles, 7 ½ CUC. Much appreciated at dinner. We have a guest, Layda Adán, retired professor of tourism. She tells me there's a big problem with Cuban tourist guides: they learn languages, but remain ignorant of Cuba's rich five hundred year history.

Friday, July 17, 2015

The elevator is stuck on the 7th floor, so I pick my way down the narrow stairway. Not too bad as the stairs are well built and there's a solid handrail.

Today is class excursion day, so we meet at ten. The university has made no plans, so the teacher leads us first to the Callejon de Hamel (Hamel alley), decorating with African themed art and furniture made from junk, including old bathtubs. All very brightly colored. According to a guide, the artist Salvador Gonzáles began the decoration in the 1990's—in the teeth of authorities who disapproved of any art that did not celebrate the Revolution. He was considered *loco*. Today, jazz and salsa bands play here in the evenings. I notice that the guide appears be already halfway through the new biography of Raúl. Lázaro has copy too.

Next our class goes to the *Museo Napoleónico*, next to the University. This is a magnificent house and garden, built in the 1920's by the wealthy Ferrara family. The museum houses the collection of Julio Lobo Olavarría, a sugar and banking billionaire, who left Cuba in 1960. A passionate admirer of Napoleon I, he scoured France for all things Napoleon. Here are portraits of Napoleon and his extended family; gold and mahogany furniture of the period; uniforms of commanding officers; swords, daggers and pistols; and personal items like Napoleon's pocket watch. Even a Napoleonic chamber pot! All beautifully maintained and displayed. Our very well-informed guide obviously takes great pride in the place. I ask her where the money comes from? "We have to keep begging the state." Admission is 3 pesos for students, the bulk of visitors.

Waiting for the P5 on Calle L, I crowd into in a bit of shade under a tree next to a biscuit vendor. I look up. Above the massive turquoise and white striped tower of the Habana Libre hotel, some twenty turkey vultures circle peacefully in the tropical updraft.

Back home, the elevator is working again, though it still makes perfunctory stops at the 7th floor. I find Lázaro standing on the kitchen counter, glaring at a pipe outside the window. The water pressure regulator is *kaput* (universal language). Lázaro has a huge tool kit open on the kitchen table. In my bathroom, there's only a tiny trickle of water. Lázaro lugs in a giant green bucket of water, with a plastic dipper.

Tom calls; there's a lag and echo on the line. I need your measurements so I can get you a classic Cuban shirt with four pockets.—A plastic shirt? —No, classic, like classical music, Mozart—Bozo? — What? The embargo has prevented US phone companies from upgrading antiquated underwater cables; international phone traffic goes via other countries.

Today is Youth Day in Havana, the opening of the Tenth Congress of Young Communists. All 500 young delegates have been presented with a copy of the new book, *Raúl Castro, a Man in Revolution*.

I buy four more Presidente; they are soon gone.

Because it's Friday, they'll be singing all night on the Malecón.

Saturday, July 18, 2015

At eight, I head southwest on the Malecón. The sidewalk is littered with cigarette butts, big deep potholes are stuffed with trash: plastic cups, cigarette packs, beer and soda cans, paper peanut cones. There are plastic mesh trash baskets bolted to metal frames stuck in the concrete, but they don't seem much used. (Despite all the environmental talk, Cuban toss trash without a second thought.) But soon the sweepers will come through with their carts and palmetto brooms.

A triangular black fin cuts through the water close to shore, but then a leg emerges—a snorkeler. From time to time he dives. What's he looking for? Further south where the concrete seawall is blackened, I see scratched: YNET ♥ ADRIANA and LAURA ♥ ALFRE.

At the Southwest end of the Malecón I find a great square block of a Spanish fort. In front is a sidewalk café, neat rows of clean new tables and chairs shaded by big white umbrellas. The little inlet in front has collected hundreds of floating objects: beer and rum bottles, plastic water bottles, stomach of some large animal—a pig?, shampoo bottle, grass, sticks, a woman's platform shoe, a dead chicken, a headless fish, melons, coconuts, a toilet seat cover... Nearby a fisherman has caught six tiny fish, five or six inches long. The last is still flapping in the sun. The fish turn pink when they die.

As I watch the fisherman, a man and a woman step out from the café onto the rocky shore. The man is middle-aged, black-skinned, slim with a slight pot belly, wearing a yellow tee shirt. The woman is tall, white, young, quite handsome, with flowing light brown hair, wearing a full-length flowery dress and sandals. An older white woman—her mother?—seats herself nearby. The man starts chanting in a strange language, gabbling like an auctioneer, walking around the woman. She stands looking out to sea, holding on her head a shallow palm frond basket, from which a pineapple sticks up. Suddenly the man yanks two half-grown white chickens out of the basket, swinging them by the feet. As the chickens peep and thrash, he repeatedly brushes them over the woman from head to toe. Then the two step to the water's edge and—so fast I didn't see it—he has pulled off the chickens' heads so that their raw red spines stick up out of their breasts while their wings still flap. For five minutes, the woman holds the birds over the water letting the blood drain. Then the man tosses the bodies into the sea. Next, one by one, he hands her fruits from the basket: lemons, guava, melons, and finally the pineapple. While he chants, she kisses each fruit, crosses herself with it, and tosses it into the sea. Finally, she picks up a large rum bottle and pours a viscous brown liquid—molasses?—into the sea. Then from a small bottle, she pours a thick golden liquid—honey? This accomplished, the man and the two women return to a small red car parked by the café. I ask the white-coated waiter what happened. He shrugs. “Una ceremonia de Santería.”

I'm curious to learn more of Lázaro's history, so I muster my best broken Spanish to interview him. But first he asks me why I'm interested in inequality. I tell him how at age 25 I read *Progress and Poverty* by Henry George, the great 19th Century American economist, reformer and politician. This led me to a PhD in Agricultural and Resource Economics at the

University of California, Berkeley, with a dissertation on how unequal wealth hinders productivity and growth. I tell Lázaro how the “neoclassical” economics taught in US is inherently biased to favor the rich; it starts from the status quo and asks only “how can we be more efficient?” It eliminates history and thus any consideration of inequality or justice. Lázaro has heard of Henry George. Cuban patriot José Martí, George’s contemporary, admired George and even lived in New York City at the same time. (There’s a statue of Martí on Manhattan’s Central Park South.) In our new Gilded Age, George is enjoying a revival.

Lázaro was born in 1938 in his grandfather’s house in the ancient Cuban town of Sancti Spíritus, 40 km east of Havana. However, he has lived in Havana since age 5. In high school, he joined protests against the 1952 second coup by Batista, and continued as a student organizer at the university. When Batista shut down the universities in 1956, he joined fighters in the Camagüey mountains in central Cuba. At dawn on the first day of 1959, Batista and his cronies fled to Santo Domingo, leaving the field to Fidel, Raúl and Che.

After the war, Lázaro studied electrical engineering at the University of Habana, then switched to world history. He didn’t finish here either. He became increasingly active as Secretary General of the Student Association, and then Secretary General of International Relations of the Young Communists, which required much international travel to meetings.

For five years, 1967-73, he worked for the Party on the Isle of Pines, now the Isle of Youth, south of Cuba. Here he met Maria Elena, who was sent there as a teacher. They married in 1973.

In 1973, for three years, he served as Cuban Ambassador to Zaire, in the era of Mobuto, and simultaneously, though he didn’t live there, Ambassador to Uganda, at the time of Idi Amin. Starting in 1978, for two years he served as Ambassador to Nigeria. On returning to Havana in 1980, he became Director of the Ministry of Foreign Relations, in which role he travelled each year to the United Nations in New York.

From 1989 to 1990, Lázaro served as Cuban Ambassador to Panama. As such, he witnessed the U.S. invasion of Panama in December 20, 1989, ostensibly to capture the brutal Panamanian dictator, drug trafficker, and CIA asset gone AWOL, General Manuel Noriega. In the process, even though Noriega had taken refuge in the Vatican embassy, US troops surrounded the Cuban Embassy and Ambassador’s residence, hindering him and other staff from coming and going, and periodically taking them in for questioning. Meanwhile, the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly voted to condemn the invasion as a gross violation of international law.

From 1990-93, Lázaro was Director for Latin America and the Caribbean in the Ministry of Foreign Relations. From then, until his retirement in 2012, he was chief of the Center for European Studies, which promotes cooperation with Europe. Last year, he published in Panama his memoirs of the Panamanian invasion: *Panama: We Have No Right to Forget*.

We stop for lunch. Maria Elena observes that after this distinguished career, they are now workers *por cuenta propio*—as bed and breakfast operators.

I chat with Maria Elena in the kitchen as she prepares dinner. I have observed that she not only makes breakfast and dinner for me and Lázaro and whatever guests drop in, she also washes the dishes. I ask what’s the state of *la liberación feminina* in Cuba? With a laugh, she replies, *Los hombres no disparan chicharos*. Literally, “men don’t shoot peas.” For the rest of my visit, I notice that Lázaro helps with the dishes, and even makes Sunday breakfast!

In the Galleria across the street, I buy Tom a light brown Cuban criolla shirt with four pockets. Let's hope he doesn't put an uncapped pen in a pocket. There's no more Presidente in the minimercados.

Sunday, July 19, 2015

Early morning I head south uphill on the Paseo, a wide avenue with a park in the middle. On both sides stand magnificent houses, now apparently occupied by various institutions. Heading west along 23rd; the sidewalks are well-maintained and the buildings nicely landscaped. Aha! Here's a *Supermercado* in an old Woolworth's building! I quickly itemize the merchandise. Most of the customers have come for eggs, sold in open cardboard trays of 30. Hardly convenient to carry. I see stacked industrial size cans of salted marinated vegetables, fruit salad, cabbage and peppers, pork, and Doña Delicias Catsup de Tomate. Jars and jars of mayonnaise. Bags of crackers. 50 kg sacks of rice. A few bars of soap in blue wrappers. Packs of 4 colored pencils for marking clothes. A leather bracelet. Sets of 4 plastic hair barettes. Sets of 12 rubber hair bands. Two cases of brightly colored underpants, one of women's and one of girls' (*bluser de niña*). Next a case of Dentex toothpaste, then one with a few screwdrivers, and then one with two 3 inch paintbrushes. There's a butcher shop in the corner, unrefrigerated meat spread on the counter. And a whole section of rum, with two bored shop-girls and no customers. At checkout, the usual long *cola*. A woman asks me if I can change 10 pesos. I can't. Small change is a problem in Cuba.

Perhaps in its next stage of reform, Cuba will learn from the thriving Emilia-Romagna province of northern Italy, the former Red region around Bologna. (I spent five weeks in Bologna in the summer of 2005, studying cooperatives.) Here, worker-owned cooperatives predominate, including some quite large manufacturers of machinery and tiles. Here also, small family businesses belong to cooperatives which provide bookkeeping, payroll, product development and other services. Smallish is beautiful; such businesses produce more goods and provide more employment per unit of assets than either large businesses, or the micro-businesses of desperation, *por cuento propio*. So, where the Cuban state presently produces or sells goods, perhaps it could start by leasing out the operations to the current employees, to sell at market prices. Watch such liberated enterprises discover that customers really don't want cans of ketchup so large they must practically roll them home! If this strategy raises prices relative to incomes—it probably won't—the state can increase the value of the coupon books.

I reach my destination, the Necrópolis de Crystóbal Colón (Christopher Columbus Cemetery). According to my guidebook, this huge cemetery (57 hectares) is world renowned for the quality of its sculptures and chapels. It's laid out in four squares, with a modest church in the middle. Along the main road toward the church, the white Carrera marble is indeed dazzling, with a display of giant angels, Madonnas, Jesuses and crucifixes on the tombs and chapels of the once rich and famous. Especially lovely is a chapel of the Mesa family in striped green and white marble, like the Duomo of Florence Italy, with delicate spiral columns. Tiny grey doves toddle between the tombs. Mockingbirds swoop and chase among the neatly trimmed ornamental trees. As I approach the church, I hear singing. Of course! It's Sunday morning mass.

In death as in life, it's location, location, and location. The richest tombs and monuments lie along the main drag; the simple folk must content themselves with the outskirts. That's where I turn. Marble gives way to polished aggregate and then to rough concrete. Plots shrink as do the passages between them. The cemetery is still active, but it seems families now content

themselves with tiny memorial plaques. In the northwest quadrant, I come across a team of men lowering a plain blue casket into a concrete tomb, part of a bank of unmarked tombs. The operation takes only a few minutes. I see no mourners. As I start to head out—it is now high noon and blinding flashes of sun ricochet off the angels—a short, deeply-tanned elderly gentleman buttonholes me. He has worked at the cemetery for 25 years. Have I seen *La Milagrosa*? (the miracle woman). No. He leads me to a spot near the central church, crowded with tourists snapping photos. The tomb in question is covered with fresh flowers. Legend has it that a woman was buried with her baby at her feet. When the tomb was reopened some time later, the baby was in her arms and the corpses hadn't decayed. I give my guide a CUC tip.

Monday, July 20, 2015

The P5 leaves me as usual in front of the bank at 23rd and J; by 8:30 there is already a long queue. A bookseller has laid out his wares on the sidewalk. *Granma*, *Rebellious Youth*, *Granma International* in English with a headline “Fidel Recognizes Outstanding Workers”. A humor magazine, *Palante*, with a cover cartoon of a bird nesting on the head of a woodcutter, a devastated hillside behind. The bird says “It's because you have cut down all the trees.” Two *Santería* guides, *Santería: Mysteries and Secrets* and *Santería: Rites, Divination and Magic*. Two cookbooks: *The Corn Chariot* (for tamales), and *The Chickens in my Pot*. Two books on the patron saint of Cubans: the Virgin of Cuba, or Our Lady of Charity, whose crowned and bejeweled image resides in a basilica near the ancient city of Santiago in the southeast. A thick copy of *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, which a customer snaps up the moment the vendor lays it down. Tiny 3x5” copies of *The Constitution of the Republic of Cuba*. I buy one for 10 pesos (40c).

Today the Cuban Embassy officially opened in Washington DC. My hosts have been glued to the TV all evening.

Tuesday, July 21, 2015

Walking up J to the University, I pass the blue van of Pastores por La Paz (Pastors for Peace). They have travelled here via Mexico, to arrive in time for yesterday's opening of the Embassy in DC.

I buy myself a white Cuban-made criolla linen pantsuit for 65 CUC. Soon after arriving, I gave up on cotton tee-shirts and undershirts, opting instead for thin, light cotton blouses, which I wear with shorts. In Cuba, no one cares if your bra shows. Cubans dress casually; formal work dress consists of long pants for men, jeans included; pants, skirts or short dresses for women. But you can't keep a good fashion out of Cuba, especially since Cubans can watch dubbed pirated American movies for free—the embargo prevents copyright enforcement. Many younger women wear the same colorful tights as the young crowd in New York—I can't imagine how one can pull them on over sticky skin, let alone get them off later. Another popular American fashion: finger and toe nails artfully painted in many colors and designs. I have seen tattoos on arms of some men, but not women.

The apartment is a circus this evening, with the phone ringing every few minutes, and friends and neighbors simply dropping in. One neighbor I think has a plumbing crisis. This building is a true cooperative.

Presidente is in stock again. I buy six bottles.

Wednesday, July 22, 2015

At the University today, the Russian twins are no longer identical. To much giggling from the class they demonstrate how *una muchacha* (a girl) gave them individualized ragged hairdos worthy of a street dog, all the while chatting on a cellphone tucked between shoulder and ear.

In Sunday's *Tribuna de La Habana*, there's a letter to the editor under the heading "Change of Address for the Moon." The writer, married with two minor children, writes as follows: In 2010, his mother inherited an apartment in Havana from her son, his brother, killed in an accident. So the family decided to move to Havana. The first problem was that a person had moved in illegally. It took until 2013 to get him out. By then his mother, his two children, and he himself had succeeded in changing their address to the apartment, but this has been impossible for his wife. The writer continues that they have followed every step required, without result. "Why, he asks himself, since we are formally married, and must stay together to raise our children correctly; if the fundamental cell of society is the family and its nucleus is marriage, how is it possible that there are such obstacles? We hope to reunite ourselves, in order to achieve the stability and peace that we have been seeking for five years". According to Maria Elena, it is very difficult to get permission to live in Havana because the state tries to restrict population movement into the cities, Havana especially. This creates great hardships, and many subterfuges. There's a Cuban New Year's tradition: walk around the neighborhood carrying an empty suitcase—a symbol of permission to travel.

Under Raúl, Cuba is considering lifting restrictions on movement and travel. The Revolution understandably prioritized helping the impoverished and neglected peasants, at the expense of the cities. Maybe leaders still view cities as dangerous, immoral, and potentially counter-revolutionary. But as Jane Jacobs reminds us, cities breed innovation. By bumping into you, I discover that your technique solves my problem. So let the ambitious and creative come to Havana. Let the biotech nerds rub shoulders with auto mechanics and computer whiz kids. There's a massive repair project underway to turn Old Havana into a tourist El Dorado, and rightly so. But make all Havana an El Dorado for high tech innovation too, as well as a great center for art and music. Yes, liberate Havana!

Thursday, July 23, 2015

This morning, our teacher Darianny is late. A fiftyish teacher from the adjoining classroom invites us in; we spend the period commenting on photos displayed on her wall screen. To our surprise, she puts up a whole series of images from a recent Cuban gay pride march on the Prado. It includes a picture of a man wearing lipstick and a beret—"the Che of Gay!" exclaims the teacher. "Soon we will have gay marriage!" We burble bad Spanish on how great it is that gay people can now live open lives in Cuba. Not the Russian twins. "This is unethical", says one. "They belong in the hospital", sniffs the other.

This afternoon, it's the long-awaited trip to a cooperative, with Maria Elena and Aurelia Castellanos Quinero, President of the Cuban Association of Animal Production for Havana Province. Finca La China (China Farm) turns out to be a small animal husbandry operation cum zoo, on the southwestern outskirts of the city. It's a six person operation: a husband and wife team plus four more. As we pull in, we pass a line of about 20 milk cows heading up a path. The sleepy bull is tied by the nose to a post at the entrance. Inside, we see a long low rabbit breeding shed; the females have numbers and American names like Wilma, Gloria and Lana. The baby

bunnies are beyond cute. I notice a man sitting next to a row of cages, making notes in a big log book. This is a scientific operation, keeping careful records on each animal.

We visit chickens. There are chickens for eggs and for eating, and “fancy” chickens from all over the world, including a pair with fur instead of feathers. Plus: a pair of flamingos, a half grown ostrich, peacocks, turkeys, “fancy” pigeons, quail, parrots, goats, sheep, pigs, a native Cuban agouti, and...a couple of rhesus monkeys! Some of the chickens run loose in an enclosed orchard. Here we walk on springy turf to pick lemons, limes, guava, mangos, pomelo, coconuts. Behind us we hear the soft thunk-thunk-thunk of a tall windmill water pump. Following us around is a small pack of *perros rateros*, rat terriers—a cat-sized breed, white with black and brown patches.

Tour over, we sit in a shed drinking first lemonade, then coconut milk. I ask the middle-aged operator, Guillermo, how long he has been *jefe de finca* (farm chief) and what he did before. He has been here five years, and has built up the operation from nothing. Finca La China is part of a group of six similar operations, which share supplies and services, and whose managers regularly meet in a round open-air conference hut across the yard. Before the Finca, Guillermo tells us, he managed a tourist operation. The farm was his dream, but it took a while to qualify with the government. I ask him if there’s something I can send to him on John McAuliff’s upcoming return to Cuba August 14. Yes, a *chapeadora*. A what? A couple of crude sketches later, this turns out to be a weed-whacker.

I can imagine Cuba becoming a powerhouse of organic farming. First, the small size of farms precludes the kind of high-energy, high-chemical monoculture that destroys environments and will ultimately prove unsustainable. Second, farmers--and the would-be farmers lining up for land grants—are well educated and thus better equipped for the high levels of management skill and innovation required to operate intensive organic farms. Just multiply Guillermo by ten thousand! Cuba’s organic bees will thank you.

Before we leave, Guillermo loads us up with a flat of 30 regular eggs and another of quail eggs; guavas, lemons, limes, pomelos and mangos; a bag of giant yams and another of yuca (cassava) roots; a five-liter container of raw milk, and a freshly-killed rabbit. At home, Maria Elena and Lazaro sort and prepare the food. Lazaro peels the yams and pomelos; Maria Elena peels the yuca and simmers the milk. All evening friends and neighbors stop by for portions.

Throughout the cooperative trip Maria Elena and Aurelia chatter like machine-guns. I barely catch a word.

Friday, July 24, 2015

My last day. This morning, a pair of little yellow eyes looks up from my plate—fried quail eggs! “Next year in New York,” says Maria Elena. A *taxista* picks me up at 11:30. I’ve been told to get to the airport at 12, for a 4:45 flight! I can barely manage my luggage, now stuffed with books. I find myself happily chatting in Spanish with the fiftyish *taxista*, Luis Ernesto. He’s a geologist by training, but worked for years as a manager of tourism. Three years ago, he took up taxi driving *por cuenta propio*, strictly on call. He has his own Facebook page. It’s easy talking with him; he slows the flow for foreigners. Maybe there’s hope for my Spanish yet!

What about hope for Cuba? First, although the embargo has little public support, it won’t end any time soon—simply due to Congressional partisan paralysis. But even when the embargo eventually ends, there’s no way Cuba will suddenly “open up” to the US. It’s both a matter of

national pride after fifty-five years of resisting the northern bully, and a matter of good practical sense. The “Special Period” privation of the early nineties has taught Cubans the folly of depending too much on food imports. And for Cuba’s private farms and organic cooperatives to flourish and expand, they will need many years of protection from imports like super-cheap subsidized rice or chicken from the US. Second, Cuba’s educated population potentially gives it enormous advantages in biotechnology, pharmaceuticals and other sophisticated enterprises. As with agriculture, that may mean standing up to multinational corporations seeking to suppress innovations that threaten their monopoly positions—which in turn means staying out of international “free trade” deals like the Trans Pacific Partnership. Finally, there’s large-scale renovation of infrastructure and buildings now in progress in Havana. Soon the city will return as a great cultural center, attracting visitors not only for beaches, but for museums, art and music.

Friday, August 14, 2015.

Home in New York. On CNN, the America flag rises in front of the US Embassy in Havana as John Kerry speaks—miraculously sweat-free in blue blazer and tie. The ocean sparkles behind him. I feel so much hope, and curiosity about the future. I can’t wait to return.