THIRTY DAYS AS A CUBAN

Pinching pesos and dropping pounds in Havana

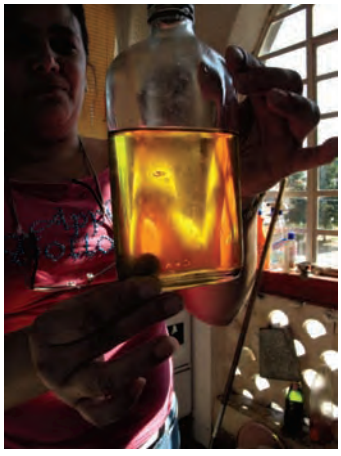
By Patrick Symmes

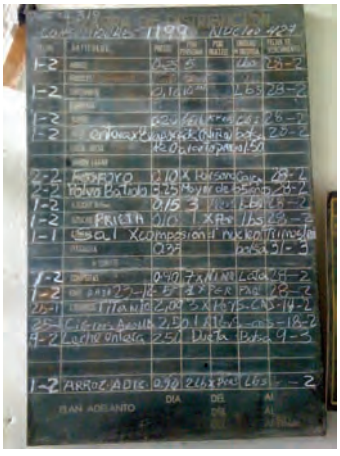
In the first two decades of my life I don't believe I ever went more than nine hours without eating. Later on I was subjected to longer bouts—in China in the 1980s, traveling with insurgents in remote areas of Colombia and Nepal, crossing South America by motorcycle, deeply broke—but I always returned home, feasted, ate whatever, whenever, and put back on what weight I'd lost—and more. I'd undergone the usual trajectory of American life, gaining a pound a year, decade after decade. By the time I resolved to go to Cuba, and live for a month on what a Cuban must live on, I was 219 pounds, the most I'd ever weighed in my life.

In Cuba the average salary is $20 a month. Doctors might make $30; many people make only $10. I decided to award myself the salary of a Cuban journalist: $15 a month, the wages of an official intellectual. I'd always wanted to be an intellectual, and $15 was a substantial kick above the proles building brick walls or cutting cane for $12, and almost twice the $8 paid to many retirees. With this money I would have to buy my basic ration of rice, beans, potatoes, cooking oil, eggs, sugar, coffee, and anything else I needed.

I knew it would be hard to give up food, and so I began my Cuban diet while still in New York City, shaking off nine pounds in the two months before my departure. Time and again, as I prepared for this trip, horrified friends speculated on what food I was gorging on, what special items I was rushing to consume. Their operating assumption was that being deprived of some cherished item for thirty days was an unbearable test. They were worried about ice cream. In my experience, no one who is hungry craves ice cream.

My first half hour inside Cuba was spent at the metal detectors. Then, as part of a new regimen, unknown in my previous fifteen years coming here, I was given an intense but amateurish interrogation. This





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A monthly oil ration, photograph by Patrick Symmes; A shop on Calle Industria, photograph © Lorenzo Castore/Agence VU/Aurora Photos; A standard ration board, photograph by Patrick Symmes

had nothing to do with me: all foreigners on the small turboprop from the Bahamas were separated out and questioned at length. The Cuban government was nervous about solitary foreign travelers because Human Rights Watch had recently been through, on tourist visas, and a State Department contractor, also traveling on a tourist visa, had been caught distributing USB drives and satphones to opposition figures. Tourists were dangerous.

As in Israel, an agent in plain clothes asked me detail-oriented questions of no importance ("What town are you going to? Where is that?"), designed to provoke me, reveal some inconsistency, or show nervousness. He didn't look in my wallet and ask why, if I was staying in Cuba for a month, I had less than twenty dollars.

The supervisor's gaze settled on the other passengers. Passed.

"Thirty days," I told the lady who stamped my tourist visa. The maximum.

There was a sign hanging from the airport ceiling with a drawing of a bus on it. But there was no bus. Not now, a woman at the information desk explained. There would be a bus—one—tonight, around 8 P.M., to take the airport workers home.

That was six hours from now. Central Havana was ten miles away. Since taxis cost about $25—more than my total budget for the next month—I was going to have to walk.

The same woman pulled from her uniform pocket a couple of aluminum coins, which she gave to me: 40 centavos, or about 2 U.S. cents. Out on the highway, a few miles from here, I might find a city bus. And in Havana I might find, must find, a way to survive for a month. I had to shoulder my knapsack and start walking, the aluminum coins clicking in my pocket. I strolled out of the terminal, across the parking lot, out the driveway, and turned down the only road, putting the outside world behind me with a steady slog. Every few minutes a taxi would pull up, beeping, or a private car would stop, offering to take me for half the official price. I walked on, slowly, past the old terminals, along scrubby fields. Billboards trumpeted old messages: BUSH TERRORIST. After forty minutes I passed over a railroad crossing, came out to the highway, and got lucky. The bus for Havana was right there. An hour later I was in central Havana and on foot, searching for an old friend.

The first people I spoke to in the city—total strangers who lived near my friend[1]—brought up the ration system. With no prompting from me, they pulled out their ration book and bitched.

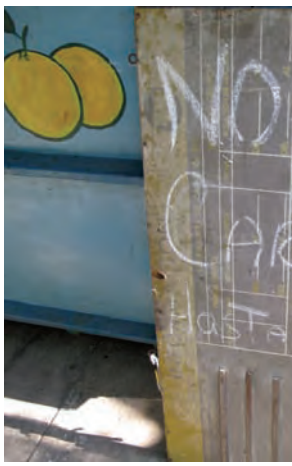
The book—called the *libreta*—is the foundational document of Cuban life. Nothing important about the ration system has changed: although it is now printed in a vertical format, the book looks identical to the one issued annually for decades.

[1] *For their protection from the Cuban state, certain persons in this article will go unnamed.*

What has changed is the ink: there is less written in the book. There are fewer entries, for smaller amounts, than even in 1995, during the starving time of the "Special Period." In the intervening years, the Cuban economy has recovered; the Cuban ration system has not. In 1999, a Cuban development minister told me that the monthly ration supplied enough food to last just nineteen days, but predicted that the amount would soon climb. It has declined. Although the total amount of food available in Cuba is greater, and caloric consumption is up, that is no thanks to the ration system. The growth has occurred in privatized markets and cooperative gardens and through massive imports, while state food production fell 13 percent last year and the ration shrank with it. It is commonly agreed that a monthly food ration now contains just twelve days of food. I was here to make my own calculation: how could anyone survive the month on twelve days of food?

There is one ration book per family. Goods are distributed at a series of neighborhood bodegas (one for dairy and eggs; another for "protein"; another for bread; the largest for dry goods and everything from coffee to cooking oil to cigarettes). Each store has a clerk who writes in the amount issued to the family. My friend's neighbors—husband, wife, and grandson—had received a standard ration of staples, which was, per person:

4 pounds refined sugar
1 pound crude sugar



A daily bread ration, photograph © Alfredo Falvo/Contrasto/Redux; An *agro*, photograph by Patrick Symmes; The meat annex of an *agro*, photograph by Patrick Symmes

1 pound grain
1 piece fish
3 rolls

They laughed when I asked if there was beef.

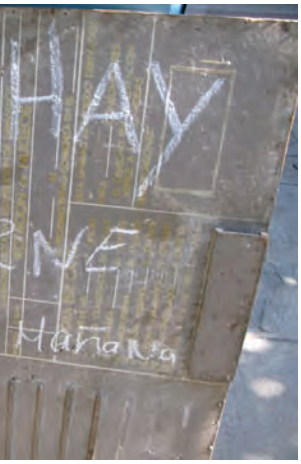
"Chicken," the wife said, but this produced howls of protest. "When was there chicken?" her husband asked. "Well, that's true," she said. "It has been a few months." The "protein" ration was delivered every fifteen days and was ground mystery meat, mixed with a large amount of soy paste (if the meat was pork, this was falsely called *picadillo*; if it was chicken, it was called *pollo con suerte,* or chicken and luck).

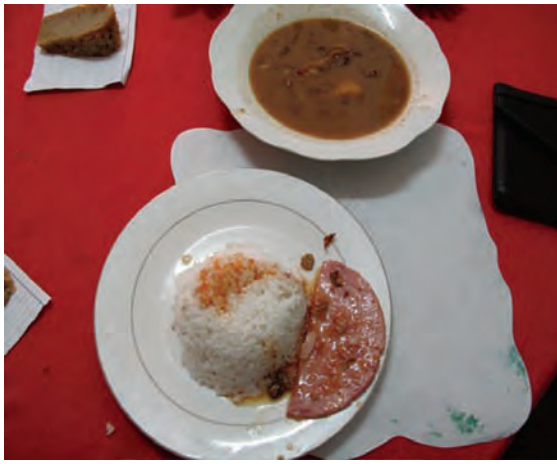
refrigerator. I unloaded my pockets, stashing away the food I had bought in the Bahamian airport: some bagels, a can of fruit punch, sandwiches, and—my emergency stash—a packet of sesame sticks from the airplane. With a fourteen-hour trip from New York behind me, I ate one of the sandwiches and went to sleep.

On my second day, I gnawed on a sesame bagel, absentmindedly consuming the whole thing, as if there would always be another. According to a calorie-counting application on my cell phone, the bagel had 440

rehearsal in progress. A Russian rocker, backed by more than thirty musicians, was working through his set in preparation for some later gig. They had been issued bottled water and tea, which I consumed in large amounts. Tea's astringent taste—mediated by lots of sugar—finally made sense to me. This was the drink of the novice monk, the cold and hungry. It was an appetite killer.

There had been catering. Only one and a half cheese sandwiches remained, abandoned on a napkin near the string section; during a crescendo I stuffed them into my pockets. I walked the hour back across Havana to my room,





Usually there was enough for about four hamburgers a month, but so far in January they had received only one fish each—usually a dried, oily mackerel.

And there were eggs. The most reliable of all protein sources, these were called *salvavidas,* or lifesavers. There used to be an egg a day; then it became an egg every other day; now it was an egg every third day. I would have ten for the next month.

The husband spent a full quarter of his tiny salary on the electric bill. The family survived only because, in his job as a state chauffeur, he could steal about five liters of gasoline every week.

Eventually my friend appeared and squired me off to a private home in the Plaza neighborhood, where I had arranged to rent an apartment for the month—the one expense left out of my accounting here. It was spartan, in the Cuban style: two rooms, cushionless chairs, a double burner on a countertop, and a half-size

calories. Everything I ate for the next month would be entered on that little keypad, recorded, summed up by day and week, divided into protein, carbohydrates, and fat, graphed in scrolling bars. An active man of my size (six foot two, 210 pounds) needs about 2,800 calories a day to maintain his weight. I had no other food supplies yet, and I finished breakfast when the housekeeper working for my landlord gave me two thimbles of coffee, larded with sugar (75 calories).

Just as Cubans exploit loopholes to survive, I worked my obvious foreignness to my benefit, wandering that day in and out of fancy hotels few Cubans could enter. This gave me access to air-conditioning, toilet paper, and music. I blew past security at the Habana Libre, the old Hilton, and rode the elevator to the top floor, which offered commanding views of Havana at dusk. The nightclub wasn't open yet, but I barged in anyway, discovering a

passing dozens of new stores, butcher shops, bars, cafeterias and cafés, pizza joints, and other prolific suppliers of hard-currency food. I lingered, looking at the immense frozen turkey breasts for sale in a shopwindow.

By the time I got to my room, the sandwiches had disintegrated in my pockets, a mass of crumbs, butter, and cheese product, but I ate them, slowly, dragging the experience out. I'd always scorned the Cubans who cheered the regime for a sandwich, but by day two I was ready to denounce Obama for a cookie.

On the morning of the third day I walked for more than two hours through Havana in search of food, burning 600 calories, the equivalent of those cheese sandwiches. I had wrongly assumed that I could simply buy the food I needed for the month. But as an American I was ineligible for the ration, through which rice costs a penny a pound. As a "Cuban" living on $15 a

A ration book, photograph © Alfredo Falvo/Contrasto/Redux; A $0.25 meal purchased at a subsidized canteen, photograph by Patrick Symmes

month I could not afford to buy food outside the system, in the expensive dollar stores. Cubans called these small stores, which sold everything from batteries and beef to cooking oil and diapers, *el shopping.* After hours of frustration, unable to buy any food at all, I rode the bus back to my apartment.

I had no lunch. I tried reading, but I had brought only books about hardship and suffering, like *Les Misérables.* I started with an easier, more comic take on loneliness and deprivation, *Sailing Alone Around the World* by Joshua Slocum, and consumed 146 pages on my first day. Slocum got across the Atlantic on little more than biscuits, coffee, and flying fish, and I took particular satisfaction when, mid-Pacific, he discovered that his potatoes were ridden with moths and was forced to chuck the valuable rations overboard. But then he would do something unconscionable, like cook an Irish stew or call on some reserve of smoked venison from Tierra del Fuego. A passing boat even tossed him a bottle of Spanish wine once, the bastard. Reading at this rate, books were another thing I would run out of.

Finally, unable to lie still any longer, I raced out of the house and, following a tip, found a house a few blocks away with a cardboard sign on the gate reading CAFE. Behind the house there was a barred window, and I put the equivalent of 40 cents through the bars. A woman passed out a roll filled with processed lunch meat. For another 12 cents I got a small glass of papaya juice. Although I tried to eat slowly, lunch vanished within moments. At this rate—half a dollar a meal—my entire cash supply would be eaten up, and I left her back yard vowing to eat almost nothing for dinner.

Worse news awaited me in the morning when, upon dressing, I discovered that the zipper on my pants was broken. In another effort to look and feel Cuban, I had brought only two pairs of pants. Pants are one of the many non-food items distributed by ration, and that meant, typically, one pair a year. Most Cubans got along with just a couple of items of clothing of each type. So the broken zipper would have to be repaired—there were no pants in January. A few feeble attempts to repair it myself failed. I was going to have to spend some money, or trade something, for a tailor's work. Breakfast: coffee, two cups, with sugar. 75 calories total.

I went food shopping on day four, a ludicrous experience. By chance I had ended up taking an apartment near the largest and best market in Havana, which was neither large nor good. The market was an *agro,* meaning a place for farm produce. These are sometimes referred to as farmers' markets, but there was no farmer-meets-consumer bonhomie, only a roaring, crowded, sweaty pen of stalls selling the same narrow band of goods at prices set by the state: pineapples, eggplants, carrots, green peppers, tomatoes, onions, yucca, garlic, plantains, and not much else. There was a separate room specializing in pork, with quivering heaps of dull pink meat turned over by bare-handed men and measured out by dull knives. Meat was beyond my reach, though "fat" was listed at only 13 pesos (or 49 cents) a pound.

I waited in line to change my entire stock of money—eighteen hard-currency *pesos convertibles*—into the regular Cuban pesos.[2] The resulting pile of worn, dirty bills added up to 400 pesos, worth about $16 at the Havana street rate. Then I fought through the crowds to buy one eggplant (10 pesos), four tomatoes (15), garlic (2), and a small bunch of carrots (13). At a bakery counter a woman selling bread rolls affirmed they were only for people with ration books—but then threw me five rolls and greedily snatched 5 pesos out of my hand. The only love came from the tomato vendor, who threw in an extra nightshade.

[2] *Cuba has two currencies, the valuable peso, officially called the CUC, and known as the* kook, fula, chavita, *and* convertible*; it was introduced to eliminate the presence of foreign currency and to be valued roughly equivalent to the U.S. dollar, at least before the 20 percent exchange fee. Then there is the lowly peso (known as the* peso*). Cubans are paid in the regular peso, and to get anything important they must trade twenty-four of these for one CUC. A tiny box of stir-fried noodles in Havana's Chinatown was priced at "75/2.5," in regular pesos and CUC, in either case representing about 15 percent of the average monthly income.*

I bought three pounds of rice for a little more than a dime, and some red beans, spending a catastrophic $2 for what would, in the end, produce only a handful of meals.

Young hustlers followed me to the exit muttering, "*Shrimp, Shrimp, Shrimp.*" Outside, a man saw me coming and climbed into a tree, descending again with five limes, which he offered me (it was not a lime tree but a drop zone for his black-market produce). I staggered home under the weight of the rice and vegetables, looking, as my landlady later observed, like a divorced man starting his new life.

The accumulated calories inevitably led me to speculate on the other side of things: money. How would I survive a couple of weeks from now, if I was spending the equivalent of $2 at a pop? I continued to hoof it everywhere, taking the hour-long walk just to wander through the tourist hotels of Vedado (without ever spotting another stray sandwich), or stand with my face pressed to the iron grille of some restaurant, watching, with four or five Cubans, the band play a mambo for foreigners.

Every day I was approached by Cubans who said, in one phrase or another, *Give me money.* My own options would be grim in the weeks ahead. Should I stand on the street corner, demanding dollars from strangers? How hungry did you have to get before you became like the teenage girl I overtook on a Vedado sidewalk that afternoon, who, holding a baby on her hip, turned to me and said, *Deseas una chica sucky sucky?*

If I was going to suck something, I knew what it would be. I found myself watching the Ladas as they rolled past, trying to see how many had locking gas caps. With some tubing and a jug, I could get five liters of gasoline and sell it through a friend in Chinatown. But all the cars in Cuba had locking gas caps or were themselves locked behind gates at night. Too many men, harder than I, were already working that line. This was no island for amateur thieves.

I needed coffee, but all stores were barren of this staple. Even the hard-

currency *shopping* in the neighborhood carried no coffee, and repeated tours of the dollar supermarkets in Vedado and at various hotels had revealed no coffee all month. I had once seen a pound of Cubacafe, the dark, export-grade stuff, for sale at a movie theater in Old Havana. But it was 64 pesos, and even while jonesing I could not pay that much or walk that far. From the window of my bathroom I could see that the ration store was open, and so I wandered over.

There were five satchels of coffee on the shelf. It was the light-brown domestic brand, Hola, which sells for a little more than a peso for the first four-ounce bag, and 5 pesos a sack after that. A dozen people were jostling for bread and rice, so I had time to study the two chalkboards listing which goods were available. The larger board listed basic ration goods. Your first four pounds of rice cost 25 centavos; the next pound was 90 centavos. No more than six pounds of rice were allowed in a month, to prevent overselling for profit. The smaller chalkboard listed "liberated products," a briefer list of cigarettes and other items that could be bought without limit.

I called out *El último,* and was now holding a place in line behind the previous last customer. Pretty soon a woman with a plastic bag arrived, cried *El último,* and I lifted a finger. Now she was last.

I was served by a smiling but agitated man. He was tall, black, with a scruffy partial beard. He waved his hand when I asked for coffee. No words were necessary: a foreigner cannot buy on the ration, and there was no coffee anyway. I played for time, holding up my end of a conversation in which he was silent but for gestures. *No coffee anywhere? I've been all over the city looking for coffee. Nobody has any. I really like coffee. You know what I mean?*

"Cubans drink a lot of coffee," he finally said. Our bond established, I wiggled my head back and forth and asked, Wasn't there *somewhere* to get coffee? "No," he said.

Really? Maybe someone had some? A little bit?

He wiggled his head. The *maybe* gesture.

Who?

"Mrs. ——," he said.

Where was that?

As though guiding a blind man, he came out from behind the counter, took my arm, and led me out onto the street. We went only ten steps down the sidewalk. He turned into the first doorway and absentmindedly grabbed the ass of a passing woman. ("Hey!" she cried, furious. "Who's that?") We stopped at an apartment located directly behind the ration store. He knocked. A woman with a baby answered.

"Coffee," he said.

I produced a 20-peso bill. She handed me one satchel of the Hola and 5 pesos back.

"That's all?" It was three times the price listed at the counter a few steps away, but I found later that Cubans also paid this markup.

He nodded. His name was Jesús.

We went back to the store. "Bread?" I asked. He consulted with his supervisor, who gave a "No" loud enough for the whole store to hear.

I asked again. He asked his boss again. No *no* this time. I handed over the 5-peso note and got five rolls.

From then on, I could buy whatever I wanted. With Jesús on my side, no questions were asked. I never needed a ration book for the common staples, and for the rest of the month I paid the same price as Cubans for the same shit food.

On the sixth day I walked to the suburbs, strolling out of my neighborhood, Plaza, through Vedado and to the west, past the immense Colón cemetery, home to the mausoleums and soaring angels of Cuba's once-rich families, as well as the concrete sepulchers of her middle class. A young man named Andy fell into step with me for a while, excited to hear about America ("We all want to go there") and inviting me to a barbershop owned by his friend. Alone again, I passed the occasional café, studying each of these tiny stands. One offered "bread with hamburger" for 10 pesos, the lowest price I had seen yet. But that was still too much for today.

I joined the world of the long-range pedestrian, working my way down a

dozen avenues and more than twenty streets in the course of an hour and finding a small bridge over the Almendares River that separates Havana proper from Havana greater. Exiles wax nostalgic about the Almendares, whose twisting route is overgrown with vines and immense trees, but I always found it depressing or even frightening: a humid, muddy border between the gritty city and the expansive (and expensive) houses of the western suburbs. From a low oceanside bridge I could see what remained of the sailor scene: a dozen sunken hulks, a few collapsing houseboats, and abandoned boat shacks. Only two boats were in motion: a police launch and a dismasted microyacht of twenty feet or so, apparently incapable of reaching Florida.

I made a right turn into Miramar, passing some of Cuba's grandest mansions and many embassies. This was "the zone of the moneybags, foreign firms, and people with lineage," a prostitute says in the book *Havana Babylon*. "Living in Miramar, even in a toilet, is a sign of distinction."

I was pursued by two women waving a gigantic can of tomato sauce and shouting "Fifteen pesos! It's for our children!" I went on but later realized I had made a mistake. At 15 pesos for a restaurant-size container, the tomato sauce had been good value. Stolen food was the cheapest food. And nothing could be more normal here than wandering around with a huge can of something.

A few blocks later I stumbled on the Museum of the Interior Ministry. The museum was staffed by women in khaki MININT uniforms, with green shoulder boards and knee-length skirts. The entrance fee was 2 CUC, they told me. I couldn't pay that, of course. How much was it for a Cuban, I asked? Wrong question. You don't bargain with MININT.

I said I would come back another time, but dawdled in the entrance hall, which had its own exhibits: racks of machine guns, photos of the big MININT headquarters near my apartment, and oversized quotes from Raúl Castro and other officials praising the patriots at MININT for protecting the nation.

One of the women, hair in a tight bun, watched me. Although I took no notes or pictures, she was shrewd.

"Who are you?" she asked.

I smiled and turned to leave.

"Are you a journalist?" she demanded.

"Tourist," I said, over my shoulder, and racewalked away.

"Are you accredited here?" she called after me.

I continued westward on foot for another half hour. I was coated in sweat by the time I reached the house of Elizardo Sánchez, one of MININT's targets.

When I told Sánchez I had walked here, as part of spending thirty days living and eating as a Cuban, he showed me his *libreta*. "They call this the supply booklet, but it's a rationing system, the longest-running one in the world. The Soviets didn't have rationing for as long as Cuba. Even the Chinese didn't ration this long." Shortages began soon after the revolution; a system for the controlled distribution of basic goods was in place by 1962.

After fifty years of Progress, the country was effectively bankrupt. In 2009, peas and potatoes had been removed from the ration, and cheap workplace lunches had been shrunk down to snack-size portions. "There was talk of removing things from the ration, or getting rid of it entirely," Sánchez told me, repeating the rumor that captivated all Cubans. But the talk had died on January 1, 2010, when the new *libretas* were handed out, like always.

Sánchez was happily ignorant of the domestic arts. "Four pounds of rice at 25 centavos," he said, trying to recall his monthly allotment. "I think. And, uh, a fifth pound at 90 centavos, I think. Let's consult the women. They dominate on this matter."

He called to his common-law wife, Barbara. Aside from being a lawyer who worked on prisoners' cases, she cooked and was helping her mother and another woman run a bakery out of the kitchen. They had bought a bag of flour "on the left," meaning it was stolen flour bought from a connection. This cost 30 pesos. With this and some ground beef purchased under the counter at the butchers, they made tiny empanadas that they sold for 3 pesos apiece, or about eight for a dollar. This was how Cuba got along: the ration stores were staffed by neighbors, who stole and resold ingredients, which were then reworked into finished products and sold back to these same neighbors. Eight empanadas would make a lunch, but a dollar was inconceivably beyond my budget. Barbara gave me two, each of which I demolished in a bite.

She listened blankly as I explained my attempt to live on the ration. "It's a great diet plan," she said. Another dissident visiting the house, Richard Rosello, piped in. He'd been filling a notebook with the prices of goods on the parallel markets, also called the clandestine or black-bag markets. "One problem is food," Richard said, "but another is how do you pay your light bill, the gas, the rent? Electricity has gone up four to seven times in cost compared with before." Elizardo was paying nearly 150 pesos a month for electricity—a quarter of the typical salary.

How to get by, then? "Cubans invent something," Barbara said. One trick was "overselling" your cheap, rationed goods at market prices. I'd finally scored my allotment of ten eggs this way. Without a ration book I could not buy the eggs legally. But at dusk the night before, I had waited near my local egg shop and made eyes at an elderly woman who'd emerged with thirty eggs—a month's supply for three people. She'd bought them for 1.5 pesos each and sold me ten of them for 2 pesos apiece. She immediately spent the money on more, turning a profit of three eggs and change. We both walked home gingerly, afraid of smashing a month's protein with a single misstep.

Barbara now pointed out a terrible mistake in my plan. In recent years, most sources outside Cuba reported that the ration includes five pounds of black beans. But it had been years since this was true. This month, the allotment was just eight ounces.

Ten thousand calories had just evaporated from my month.

To make up for this blow, Barbara decided to treat me to a "typical" Cuban lunch. This began with rice, at four or five dry pounds per person each month the mainstay of Cuba's diet.

Each citizen could eat about as much cooked rice per day as fits in a condensed-milk can. It was low-quality Vietnamese rice and variously called "creole," "ugly," or "microjet" rice, the last a mocking reference to one of Fidel's plans to boost agricultural production with drip irrigators. A typical lunch included half a can of cooked rice (the other half saved for dinner); it was a gooey mash, but it tasted good enough, sauced by my hunger.

Next was a bowl of bean soup. It had only a handful of beans, but the broth was rich, flavored with beef bones. ("Ten pesos a pound for bones," Barbara noted. "Many people can't afford it.")

I hadn't tasted meat in six days.

Then she gave me half a *small* sweet potato. "Much better nutritionally than potato!" Elizardo called from somewhere down the hall.

There was also a fried egg, although, as Elizardo noted with another shout, "Eat that egg today and you won't eat one tomorrow." Or the day after.

The egg was wonderful. With my shrunken stomach, the whole meal, including the two little empanadas, was perfectly adequate. I chewed on the bones, extracting small bits of meat. This was the best I'd eaten in days. Barbara carefully preserved the oil from the frying pan.

Richard, with his little notebook of prices, pointed out the math of eating this way. A "monthly basket" of rationed food (which actually lasted just twelve days) cost 12 pesos a person, by government calculation. For the next ten days, people had to buy the same food for about 220 pesos on the various free, parallel, and black markets. That still got you only to day twenty-two. A month would run about 450 pesos—more than the entire incomes of millions of Cubans, and that didn't account for clothes, transport, or household goods.

No one could afford cups and plates anymore. These were stolen from state enterprises when possible and traded on the black market. Clothes had to be bought used, at swap meets called *troppings*, a play on the hard-currency *shoppings*. Those who ran out of food went rummaging in dumpsters, or became alcoholics to numb the pain, he said.

Elizardo came back in. "This isn't Haiti, or Sudan," he said. "People aren't falling over in the streets, dead of hunger. Why? Because the government guarantees four or five pounds of sugar, which is high in calories, and bread every day, and enough rice. The problem in Cuba isn't food, or clothes. It's the total lack of civil liberty, and therefore of economic liberty, which is why you have to have the *libreta* in the first place."

As in the rest of the world, the problem of food is really one of access, of money. And the problem of money is one of politics.

On the seventh day I rested. Lying in bed with Victor Hugo, lost in the test of man's goodness, I could forget for an hour at a time that my gums ached, that saliva was bathing my throat.

Havana was changing, as cities do. The historic zone had been placed under the control of Eusebio Leal Spengler, the city historian. Leal had been given special priority for building supplies, labor, trucks, tools, fuel, pipes, cement, wood, even faucets and toilets. But this was not why the people loved him. Instead, my friend explained, the "privileged" access to supplies simply meant that *there was more to steal*.

A friend of mine was renovating in hopes of renting rooms to foreigners, and indeed within a few minutes there was a screech of truck brakes and a great horn blast. Her husband signaled to me urgently, and we threw open the front door. A flatbed truck was waiting. In sixty seconds, three of us unloaded 540 pounds of Portland cement bags. The husband passed some wadded bills to the trucker, who promptly roared off. They had made money off cement destined for some construction job. We spent half an hour moving the bags to a dark corner in a back room, covering them with a tarp because they were printed with blue ink, marking them as state property. Green printing was for school construction. Only cement in red-printed bags could be bought by citizens, in state stores, at $6 a bag.

Unlike most Cuban functionaries, Leal had actually made a difference in

people's lives. He rebuilt the old hotels; my friends took 540 pounds of cement for their new tourist bungalow. He restored a museum; they looted tin sheeting for roofs. He sent trucks of lumber into the neighborhood; they made half the wood vanish.

The State owned all. The people appropriated all. A ration system in reverse.

Helping to steal the cement was my first great success. For half an hour of labor, I was paid with a heaping plate of rice and red beans, topped with a banana and a small portion of *picadillo*. At least 800 calories.

The second week was easier, my two little shelves well stocked with bags of rice and beans, some sweet potatoes at 80 centavos a pound, and my bottle of smuggled whiskey still half full. I had nine, and then eight, and then seven eggs, though the refrigerator was otherwise barren.

I had given up luxuries like sandwiches (or sandwich, singular: I had bought only one, but the expense still haunted me). On day ten I found I had 100 pesos left. As with the eggs, I could imagine a careful, slow reduction over the next twenty days, but my budget and diet could be equally ruined by a slip that left a yolk on the floor. It all came down to a question of how long the rice would last: with just 5 pesos per day remaining, I could afford no major purchases for the rest of my stay. I learned to suppress my appetite, walking past the queues of Cubans buying tiny balls of fried dough for a peso apiece. My only indulgence was a bar of stiff peanut butter, handmade by farmers, which sold for 5 pesos in the *agros*. With restraint, this little slab of about six tablespoons of crudely ground, heavily sweetened peanut could be made to last two days. The poorest *campesinos* could be seen nibbling on these packets of peanut butter, carefully rewrapping after each bite.

Another thing I had in common with most Cubans was that I did absolutely no work during my thirty days. That is to say, I worked hard and often at my own projects—I hauled cement and shoveled gravel for food, and wrote a lot—but it was not state labor, not the kind of work that is counted in the columns of official Cuba, where more than 90 percent of people are state employees. Why should I get a job? Nobody else took theirs seriously, and the oldest joke in Havana is still the best: They pretend to pay us, we pretend to work.[3]

So I had time on my hands. That night I heard music and found a series of stages set up along 23rd Street, culminating in a good rock band playing under a rising moon. I sat on the pedestal of some heroic obscurity—the statue of a mother thrusting her son toward battle. After a while a small girl, seven or eight, came and sat on the stone.

"*Caramelo?*" she said. Sweet?

"I don't have any."

"None?"

"No."

"Not one?"

"No."

Then the usuals: where are you from, where do you live, why are you here? And again: "Some money?"

"I don't have any."

"But foreigners always have so much money."

"Yes, in my country I have money. But here, I live like a Cuban."

"Give me a peso?"

I can't. I'm playing a game, my dear. I'm pretending to be broke. I'm living like your parents for a while. I haven't eaten in nine hours. In the past eleven days I've missed 12,000 calories off my normal diet. My teeth hurt so badly.

Or, in Spanish, "*No.*"

I finally strode home to a long-awaited celebration. It was Friday, and tonight was the weekly Eating of the Meat. Although the day had so far been one of my worst—less than 1,000 calories by 9 P.M., with a huge amount of walking—I was determined to make up for it with a feast. I prepared rice, put a single sweet potato in the pressure cooker—known to Cubans as The-One-Fidel-Gave-Us, because they were handed out in an energy-saving scheme—and poured a precious glass of whiskey (250 calories) on the rocks, all with a side of yesterday's beans and rice. Of necessity the portions were small.

From the freezer I drew my protein, one of four breaded chicken cutlets for the month. I fired the stove carelessly and burned the cutlet black, though at the table it proved cold and soggy on the inside. It was not chicken. It was not even the "formed chicken" it claimed to be. The principal ingredients were listed as wheat paste and soy. Close inspection revealed no chicken at all. I was eating a breaded sponge with only 180 calories. Ah, for a McNugget.

In the end, I crossed the 2,000-calorie barrier for the first time in ten days, just barely. Discounting for a huge amount of walking and a little dancing, this left me at my familiar benchmark of 1,700 calories. But my stomach was full when I went to bed.

Or so I thought. After two hours of sleep, I woke with insomnia, the companion to hunger. From 1 A.M. until dawn I lay in bed, five hours of swatting at mosquitoes, tossing, reading Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas *père*.

Still, I can't compare my situation to real hunger. As Hugo notes, "Behind living on a little lies the art of living on nothing." I sank into thousands of pages of nineteenth-century France, two authors describing revolution, forced marches, and real starvation. "When one has not eaten," Hugo writes, "it is very queer. . . . He chewed that inexpressible thing which is called the cud of bitterness. A horrible thing, which includes days without bread, nights without sleep." So came the dawn, my twelfth.

Suddenly, fortune and happiness. The next night, as I sat in front of

[3] *Those Cubans who ignore the summons to official labor can be charged with "dangerousness," a vague offense punishable by up to four years in jail. Dangerousness is "pre-crime," Elizardo Sánchez said—the police nipping your bad attitude in the bud before you have a chance to commit an actual crime. There are regular campaigns to arrest young people who try to avoid work or the draft, and this year it was particularly relentless, a sign of nervousness. "It's not easy to hide from the government," Sánchez told me. "Boys are required to register themselves for military service at fifteen. They change their address sometimes, but it doesn't work. It's very hard for a young person to hide. Cuba is a dossier society. From first grade onward, the police stop children and ask for I.D. They can radio in and get everything."*

my apartment watching the street, my neighbor came walking down the alley holding a phone. A phone call. For me.

It was a friend of a friend, visiting Cuba with her boyfriend. They were verifiable ain't-we-grand Americans, and I instantly smelled free food. They'd landed in Havana and, unfamiliar with the city or Spanish, were inviting me to dine with them.

We went for a walk around Vedado and I carefully avoided pleading for food, playing the stoic. They bought dinner at a tourist restaurant, and for the first time I ate pork.

The next afternoon we met again. I took them to see a Santería initiation, an hour of steamy drumming in a tiny apartment, complete with three separate acts of possession. Another invitation to dine at a fancy restaurant followed.

More pork!

Cubans marinate *lechón,* the innocent little suckling pig, with garlic and bitter orange, and slow-cook it until you can eat it with a spoon. Along with the glistening fat and protein, we were served a platter of rice and beans, exactly what I ate twice a day in my own kitchen. The platter would make four meals for me, I explained.

"Excuse me," the boyfriend said, helping himself. "I'm just going to eat your Thursday."

Like the hundreds of Cubans whom I have fed over the years, I sang for my supper. The lore of Afro-Cuban cults. The history of buildings I had never seen before. Strolls in the shoes of Capone, Lansky, Churchill, and Hemingway. Socialism jokes. The arts of the ration. The secret of the daiquiri. Both of those nights I had some pork, rice and beans, and a pair of cocktails.

Despite the meat I was hardly better off—just 2,100 calories each day, compared with my usual 1,700. But the meals added to my psychological well-being. I had carried off a respite, a vacation, from the grinding anxiety of seeing my dry goods evaporate.

The next morning I found a woman riffling through my garbage. She wanted glass bottles or anything valuable: I gave her my broken pants. She was eighty-four years old, the same age as my mother, and lived on a pension of 212 pesos a month, or a little over $8. She scavenged in the trash for items—to the fury of my housekeeper, who considered the trash her own resource—and worked as a *colero,* or professional line-waiter, for five families on this block. She took their ration books to the bodega, collected and delivered the monthly goods, and was paid a total of about 133 pesos for this. She was sucking on an asthma inhaler that cost 20 pesos, or about 75 cents, but only the first one came at that price: others had to be bought on the black market at several dollars apiece.

In return for my pants, she mentioned that the "free" bakery was stocked. This was the non-ration bakery, where anyone could buy a loaf. The price is four times that of the ration bakeries, but there is much more bread. I retrieved a plastic bag, walked eight blocks (passing three empty ration bakeries), and bought a loaf for 10 pesos.

As I walked home, a woman passing the other way asked, "They have bread?" She doubled her pace.

Then, as I passed a chess game under a shortleaf fig tree, a man looked up and asked the same.

"Yes, there is bread," I told him.

He toppled the pieces, rolled up the board, and both players decamped for the bakery.

Breakfast had been a tiny, hard plantain, bought from a man in an alley. With coffee and sugar, it was less than 200 calories. Lunch was an egg and two slivers of the new bread, for another 380.

There were three dollars in my wallet and seventeen days to go.

A catastrophic mistake. I had been afoot all afternoon, my blood sugar bottoming out, and when I passed an alley with a small piece of cardboard reading PIZZA, I stopped and bought one. The basic pizza—a six-inch disk of dough smeared with ketchup and a tablespoon of cheese—cost 10 pesos. But I impulsively supersized my order, adding chorizo. It was now a 15-peso snack.

In my apartment I set the little

pizza down and stared in horror. 15 pesos was an incredible, budget-busting 60 cents. I could have bought pounds of rice for that amount.

Staring at the puny thing, smaller than a single slice in America, I began trembling. I had to sit down. Then I burst into tears. For a good ten minutes I wept, cursing myself. Moron! Fool! Idiot!

I had spent a fifth of my remaining money on impulse. Now I had just 64 pesos to survive the next seventeen days. What would happen to me now? How would I eat when I ran out of beans, which were already low? What if there was another mistake? What if I was robbed? How would I get to the airport on the last day if I didn't have even a few pennies for bus fare?

Crying releases not just tension and fear but endorphins. Around the time the pizza had cooled down, I had, too. I ate it carefully, with a knife and fork, and a glass of ice water. This "meal" lasted less than two minutes. It was the low point of my month.

An hour later, there was a knock on the door. The child of one of my neighbors was outside. "*Patri!*" she cried. "*Patri!*"

I went out. She handed me a shoe box. It was heavy and covered in packing tape. Someone had stopped by—another American visiting Cuba—and dropped it off. In the kitchen I cut it open and found a note from my wife and young son, and three dozen homemade tea cookies.

I ate ten cookies. Ambush to escape. Tears to peace. Damnation to joy.

I rationed the rest of the cookies: five per day until they ran low, then two per day, and finally I disassembled the box with a knife and ate the crumbs out of the corners.

Once a day I indulged my vanity, standing shirtless in front of a mirror and staring at a man I had not seen in fifteen years. I had lost four, then six, then eight pounds. But the stomach and mind adjust with frightening ease. My first week had been pained and starving. The second was pained and hungry. Now, in my third week, I was eating less than ever but was at ease both physically and mentally.

I had my worst day so far, eating just 1,200 calories. That was the intake of an American POW in Japan during WWII.

I went back to my friends the cement thieves, and after much waiting, the woman cooked me a generous dinner, cackling with laughter over "your experiment." She had fried (in oil stolen from a school) some ground chicken (bought from a friend who stole it), which she served with the "ugly" rice from the ration and a single tiny beet. After the meal, she even made me some eggnog, but in a Cuban serving—one mouthful, in an espresso cup. There were also a few spoonfuls of papaya (1 peso each, at a cheap market she recommended), cooked down in sugar syrup.

"It's impossible," she said of my attempt to be officially Cuban. For survival, everyone had to have "an extra," some income outside the system. Her husband rented a room to a Norwegian sex tourist. Her neighbor sold lunches to the workers who'd recently lost their canteen meals. Her own mother wandered the streets with pitchers of coffee and a cup, selling jolts of caffeine. Her friend around the corner stole the cooking oil and resold it for 20 pesos a pint. Another neighbor stole the ground chicken and resold it for 15 pesos a pound. ("Good quality, a very good price, you should get some," and I did.)

Her meal was the only one I ate that day, the calories undercut by an astonishing walk not just across Havana but completely around it, passing in a giant loop down the carbuncled streets, through big hotels, past dim houses, among people sleeping without roofs, sitting on packing crates, onward all the time, hours in rotation through noon, afternoon, evening, on wide avenues and in narrow alleys, across Plaza, Vedado, Centro, Old Havana, into Cerro, out through Plaza again, into Vedado again, two, four, six, eight miles, past the bus station, the sports stadium, burning holes in my shoes, and then to bed.

My feet hurt. But there wasn't the slightest complaint from my stomach.

I used to say that 10 percent of everything was stolen in Cuba, to be resold or repurposed. Now I think the real figure is 50 percent. Crime is the system.

On the sidewalk in front of my ration store one day, I saw a teenager with a punk-rock haircut, idling in his shiny Mitsubishi Lancer and playing with what I mistook for an iPhone. "It's not an iPhone," he corrected me. "It's an iTouch."

These sell for $200, or 5,300 pesos. Some people have money, even here. The only certainty is that they didn't make that money in any legitimate way.

I walked to the sweeping Riviera, where the gaming floor was cleared by nationalization just a year after it opened. (Meyer Lansky, the owner, famously said he had "crapped out.") In the gym I weighed myself: 200 pounds. In 18 days I'd lost ten pounds, a rate that would result in hospitalization in the United States.

On the way home, a woman asked me where the P2 bus was found. I mangled the answer. "Oh, I thought you were a Cuban," she said.

Lose weight, change nationalities. I laughed off her mistake and went on, but a minute later she was chasing me down.

"Hey, invite me to lunch," she said. "Anyplace." I shook my head, *no.*

"Lunch," she called after me. "Dinner. As you like."

At home, I opened the fridge and counted: five eggs left.

Like the woman looking for the P2, I'd become direct. I walked two miles out to Cerro, a bad neighborhood. This took me right through an alley lined with rusting wrecks of trucks, past a crumbling sports stadium, through an overgrown park and a grove of trees, to the front door of the Ministry of the Interior. This is the famous building with a giant Che Guevara on it. It was guarded by a couple of red-bereted soldiers. The MININT building is constantly photographed because of its signature Che sculpture, but you don't want to go inside. I ignored the guards and strolled out onto the vast broken asphalt of the Plaza de la Revolución. On the far side, walking carefully, I cut past the entrance of a low but massive building sitting at the top of

a sweeping driveway. This was the Council of State, the nucleus of the revolutionary system, where Raúl Castro oversaw his top functionaries. Special-forces troops with pistols and batons guarded the entrance ramp; the government feels secure enough that only a couple of pistols stood between me and Raúl.

Wandering, sometimes in circles, I passed out through Cerro and other neighborhoods until I found the house of Oswaldo Payá, one of Cuba's most important dissidents. We talked about politics, culture, neoliberalism, and human rights, but what caught my attention was his own personal economy. "My salary is 495 pesos a month," he said. "That's about ten meals for four or five people. Wages don't cover a fifth of our food needs. A 10-peso sandwich, with a 1-peso drink, is half my daily salary. With me going to my job and coming home, my three kids going to school, we spend about 12 pesos a day on transport—that's 50 to 60 percent of our total income." He himself survived thanks to a brother in Spain who sent money. "The paradox is that the workers are the poorest people in Cuba. We're all worse off than the guy who sells hot dogs in the gas station on the corner" (a hard currency enterprise). Most people had no CUC and went home hungry every night. "I don't say everything in Cuba is bad, or terrible. That's because we have distribution schemes to feed the poor, to give benefits. But that's another way of domination, keeping people eternally poor. Free my hands, I'll start a business and feed myself."

I asked him where someone would get the money for an iPod Touch, or any of the other gizmos, luxury goods, modern cars, sound systems, and sleek clothes that were increasingly common in Cuba. "A salary . . . is equal to poverty," he said. "They all have to rob the system to survive. That's the tolerated corruption of survival." A tiny middle class had emerged: "Businessmen, mostly ex-officials, people who run restaurants. All of them are regime people. Most are ex-military, or from the Ministry of the Exterior, and so on. They have connections. They are inside the system. They are untouchable." And there was a third, incredibly small but "indescribably" well-off group within the leadership, "with big houses, foreign travel, everything. The Cuban people know this group exists, but you will never see them, there is no way."

During an hour of talk, his wife, Ofelia, another human-rights activist and domestic servant, brought me a glass of pineapple juice. Oswaldo began to wrap up and urged me to come back for a meal and a *mojito* "anytime."

I stayed in my chair. All this talk of *future* meals had my mouth coursing with saliva. Ofelia saw this, and soon I heard frying in the kitchen.

We ate tomato soup, tomatoes, rice, and yellow lentils. She served some protein, a gray mash that I took for government *picadillo* because it tasted like soybeans and scraps of something that had once been an animal. But Ofelia dug the wrapper out of the garbage can. It was "mechanically separated" turkey meat from Cargill in the United States, part of the hundreds of millions of dollars worth of agricultural products sold to Cuba every year under an exemption to the embargo. It was almost inedible, even in my hungry state, but Ofelia was beaming. "It's much better than the turkey we used to get," she said.

On the way out, Oswaldo tried to hand me 10 pesos. "Every Cuban would do this for you," he said. He told me to spend it on food, but I declined, pushing the bills away. I couldn't take cash from a source, though I didn't scruple at the meal. He insisted. In the end, to avoid walking home, I accepted a 1-peso coin for the bus.

Oswaldo walked me out through his gritty neighborhood, full of staring adolescent boys, to a bus stop.

"Wear long pants" was his final advice. Only tourists went around in shorts.

I'd long ago finished my whiskey, and I was hard-pressed to enjoy Cuba without a drink. Oswaldo Payá had put the bug in my ear, declaring, "Having a drink is one of the rights we all have." It was time to make some liquor.

The only food I possessed in superabundance was sugar—I hadn't even bothered to pick up my allotment of "crude" sugar, because in three weeks I'd gone less than halfway through my

four and a half pounds of refined white sugar. The process of making rum is simple, at least in theory. Sugar plus yeast equals alcohol. Distillation equals stronger alcohol. I had never distilled before, but I'd recently toured the Bushmills distillery in Northern Ireland and, fortified by notes from *Chasing the White Dog,* by Max Watman, I blundered my way toward bliss.

The first step was making a wash, or low-alcohol solution. I already had the sugar. I walked to the free bakery, where a disappointed crowd was waiting for the machines to turn out a new batch of bread. At the back door I flagged down a baker and asked if I could buy some yeast. "No," she said. "We don't have enough ourselves." In the now-familiar ritual, I hung out for a while, chatted her up, and soon she was shoving half a bag of yeast—made in England—through the fence. I tried to pay her, but she refused.

After reverse-engineering Watman's prose with a calculator, and converting to metric, I could only hope I was in the ballpark. A kilo of sugar would require slightly more than a gallon of water. In true Havana style, the water proved the biggest obstacle: tap water in the city is thick with magnesium. My landlord had a Korean water purifier, but it was broken. It took thirty-six hours to scrounge a single gallon of purified water. Then I scrubbed out my pressure cooker, tested and repaired its rubber seals, sterilized it, and dumped the water and sugar in. Watman didn't mention how much yeast to use; I went with "half," on the theory that a screwup would still leave me enough for a second shot.

Mix, close, wait. In four hours the pressure cooker—The-One-Fidel-Gave-Us—was almost bubbling over with a scummy brown foam that smelled deadly.

Distilling requires a hose. I tried a large hardware store in a hard-currency shopping mall on the Malecón, then a hardware *shopping,* and finally asked a gas-station attendant. He told me to look for a man standing by a small card table on 3rd Avenue. After much discussion of alcohol, this grease-covered man, a black-market plumber straight out of *Brazil,* gave me a yard of filthy plastic tubing. I spent two hours trying to clean hardened grease out of this tube. Heat, soap, a rag, and a disarranged coat hanger made no dent. I couldn't have my booze tasting like an old Chevy.

Finally I asked a gardener working on a neighbor's yard if he could *conseguir* me a bit of tubing appropriate for distilling firewater. He thought this request the most natural thing in the world and returned in half an hour, having lopped off a yard of somebody's garden hose.

For the next two days I checked the pond scum in the cooker. It attracted fruit flies and gave off a gentle hiss.

The gods were smiling, and so were the prostitutes. For more than a week I had been fending off the attentions of a young lady who walked past my apartment. She was a classic example of the Cuban economy in action: hot pants, gold chains, blue eye shadow, platform sandals, and inch-long acrylic fingernails painted the colors of the Cuban flag.

"Psst," she would say, calling my attention to these attributes. I often sat outside my small apartment to relieve the feeling of being trapped indoors. She would look through the iron gate along the road and summon me. *Psst.*

I resisted. But she was, like the many Cuban prostitutes I have talked with, a charming and intelligent survivor beneath the blunt *jewwannafuckeefuckee* propositions. We spoke once, then again a few days later, and then our third conversation lasted a long time. She kept trying to get into my apartment—did I have a light for her cigarette? some coffee? a beer or soft drink?—and I kept stringing her along, enjoying her tales.

Her cleavage started ringing once, and she pulled out a cell phone. A tendentious conversation followed, in English. When she hung up she said, "He wants to fuck me in the ass." *Cogerme en el culo.* Cubans, especially prostitutes, are direct about sex. Also race. "Black guys always want to do it in the ass," she continued. "I don't like black guys, even though I consider myself black. I'm the lightest in my family, my mother is black, my sister is black, but I think black people smell bad. That guy has a lot of money. He's some kind of big man in the Cayman Islands, he's really rich. He offered me $150, but I told him no. Now he says he's going to pay me $300 just to have dinner."

"I don't think so," I observed.

"I know. I keep telling him to call my cousin. She loves black guys."

All our conversations began and ended with a proposition. Because, over a week, I had repeatedly turned her down, she now said, "I thought you were a duck." A what? "You know, *maricón. Un gay. Homosexual.*"

She was a nurse, twenty-four, from Holguín. She worked twelve-hour shifts to earn vacation time, then every four or six months came to Havana for a long break to "dedicate myself to this," she said. In a rare euphemism, she said she was a *dama de acompañamiento.*

"Most of the girls have pimps, you know, but not me, so I have to look after myself." In addition to a phone, her cleavage concealed a small serrated knife, which she snapped open and waved around.

"You know why we do this," she said, "right? It's the only way to survive. I have a daughter, I love her so much, she's precious. I miss her. So I do this for her. Why don't you give me a hundred and I'll come upstairs right now?" (Eventually she offered me the "Cuban price" of $50.)

I told her I didn't have any money. I explained what I was doing. The ration. The salary. That I had already lost ten pounds. "I don't have a peso," I told her. She asked for a pen, wrote down her phone number, and handed it to me. Then she pulled, from one of the minuscule pockets of her hot pants, a single peso coin, which she handed to me.

"That's so you can call me," she said.

That was another terrible day for food, the worst yet. Between dawn and midnight I ate rice, beans, and sugar that totaled just over a thousand calories. I got up at three the next morning and finished the

rice. Nothing left but a fistful of beans, two sweet potatoes, a few tiny plantains, three eggs, and a quarter of a cabbage.

Nine days to go.

I went to the ration shop, found Jesús, and bought coffee, a pound of rice, and some bread, all at Cuban prices—14 pesos total, or about 60 cents. That was the end of the money. But with the scraps of food, and the generosity of various Cubans, and a stomach shrunk to the size of a walnut, it would be enough. I knew I was going to make it.

I walked the next day to the house of Elizardo Sánchez, the human-rights activist. An hour and ten minutes each way. "Everything is fine now," I told him, delirious with low blood sugar. "Even the prostitutes are giving me money."

I was in his house for an hour. He offered me a glass of water.

At last the great day of escape was here. Not my departure, which was still eight days away, but the alcohol. The brown wash had stopped bubbling after four days—when the alcohol content reaches about 13 percent it kills off the remaining yeast. I sterilized the garden hose and, using a bent hanger, fixed it to the vent on top of the pressure cooker. I struck a match, and in ten minutes I had alcohol vapor, and then a steady drip of condensation into the empty whiskey bottle sitting in a bowl of ice.

Ignorant, and a disgrace to my Virginia roots, I cooked the wash too hot and failed to throw away the initial stripping run of low wine—a harsh and even toxic alcohol. But after four hours the heart run had produced a liter of milky booze, and I had the naive sense to quit before the dregs could poison it. I should have made a second distillation, a spirit run, but couldn't be bothered. At four in the afternoon I finally sat down with a glass of warm white dog.

Thirty seconds after I started drinking I had a stomachache. The alcohol content was low, but so was my tolerance, and I was quickly giggling. The gardener came by and tasted some, with a sad face. I woke up at midnight with a headache, and this pattern continued for the last week of my residence. Instant stomachache; mild drunk; headache. The two or three hours in the middle were well worth it. When I left Havana there wasn't a drop of lightning left.

There wasn't much of me left either. In mid-February I walked one last time to the Riviera, weighing myself in the gym. I was down eleven and a half pounds since my arrival.

More than eleven pounds gone in thirty days. I'd missed about 40,000 calories. At this rate I would be as lean as a Cuban by spring. And dead by autumn.

I finished out with a few tiny meals—the last of the ugly rice, a last sweet potato, and the quarter of a cabbage. On the day before my departure I broke into my emergency stash, eating the sesame sticks from the airplane (60 calories), and opening the can of fruit punch I'd smuggled in from the Bahamas (180). The taste of this red liquid was a shock: bitter with ascorbic acid, and flooded with sugar, to imitate the flavors of real juice. It was like drinking plastic.

My total expenditures on food were $15.08 for the month. By the end I'd read nine books, two of them about a thousand pages long, and written much of this article. I'd been living on the wages of a Cuban intellectual, and, indeed, I always write better, or at least faster, when I'm broke.

My final morning: no breakfast, on top of no dinner. I used the prostitute's coin to catch a bus out toward the airport. I had to walk the last 45 minutes to my terminal, almost fainting on the way. There was a tragicomic moment when I was pulled out of line at the metal detectors by men in uniform because an immigration officer thought I had overstayed my thirty-day visa. It took three people, repeatedly counting it out on their fingers, to prove that I was still on day thirty.

I ate a dinner and a breakfast in the Bahamas and gained four pounds. Back in the States, I put on another seven before the month was out. Put on nationality, change weight. ■