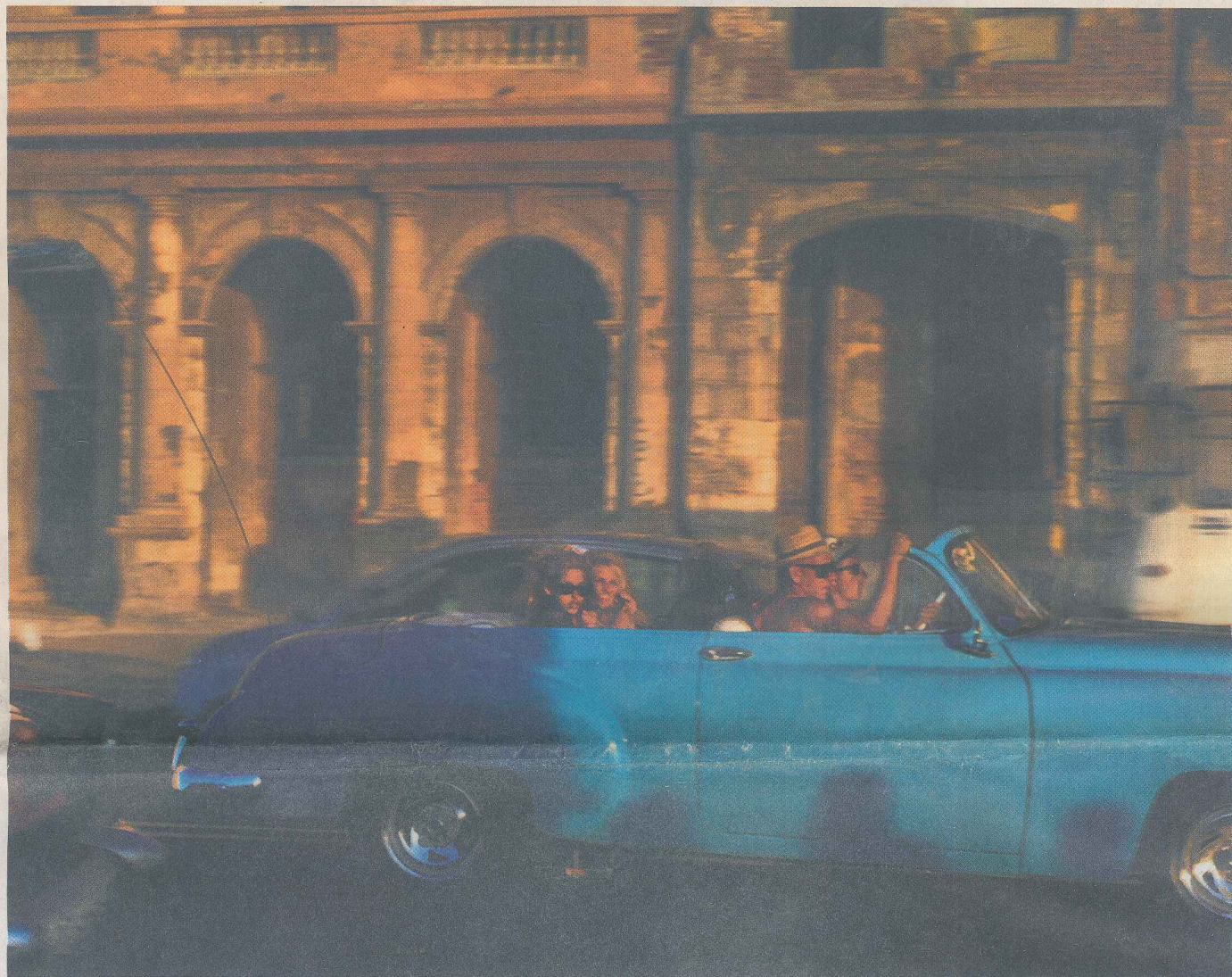


Havana on My Mind



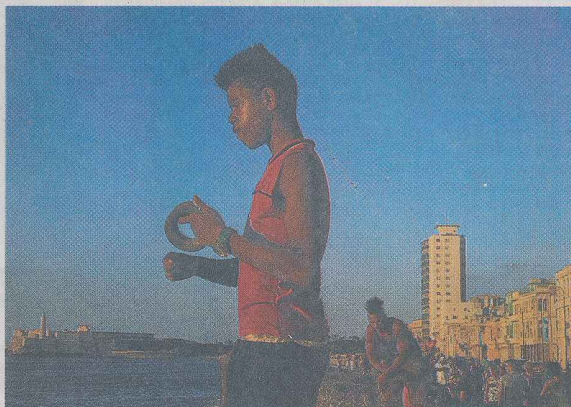
TODD HEISLER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

My cousin's neighborhood remains a kind of time capsule of the Cuba that I have come to love.

By MARIANE PEARL

My cousin Julia's porch in Havana is bare, except for three plastic chairs and a bench, but her front yard is a local hot spot where everyday life unfolds. On my last visit there, our gaze fell on a skinny man with green eyes and skin the color of dark chocolate sucking on an avocado seed as he eavesdropped on a shouting match between a couple of chess players. Another man, gap-toothed and wearing a baseball cap, came along to loudly mock them all. This joyous and endless cacophony amid the incomparable Cuban soundtrack of salsa music, the frantic crowing of a rooster and the barking of more dogs than I can count was music to my ears. A satisfying journey to Cuba for me involves dedicating time to giving in to my surroundings. So I settled in eagerly for the magic realism that is Julia's life.

When I saw my cousin two summers ago, we lounged on her cinder-block porch and I savored what it felt like to stay at her home — less concerned than ever before about Cuba's prying security apparatus. President Raúl Castro of Cuba was already opening up the country: allowing small private



CHARM OF A COUNTRY Top, in a vintage car cruising down the Malecón, Havana's evocative sea drive, one of its most quintessentially Cuban features. Above, fishing by hand on the Malecón.

businesses, easing some restrictions between Cubans and foreigners. The changes would culminate in the historic surprise announcement in December 2014 that Cuba and the United States planned to resume diplomatic relations for the first time in a half century. President Obama acknowledged that "50 years of isolation" didn't work. From where we sat, Julia and I couldn't have agreed more.

My cousin lives in Nuevo Vedado, a neighborhood near the town center of Havana, with its decaying and majestic colonial buildings and the Malecón, the broad seaside esplanade, roadway and sea wall, beaten by waves of white foam at high tide. In their aging splendor, these landmarks are reminders of a time when Havana, with its glittering waterfront, was the regional capital of gambling, sex and large orchestras. In Fidel Castro's Communist Cuba, the glitter is long gone, replaced by an absorbing pattern of multicolored weathered facades, which, taken together, have the beauty of an Impressionist painting. The casinos and other elegant venues have been replaced by a multitude of bars and restaurants.

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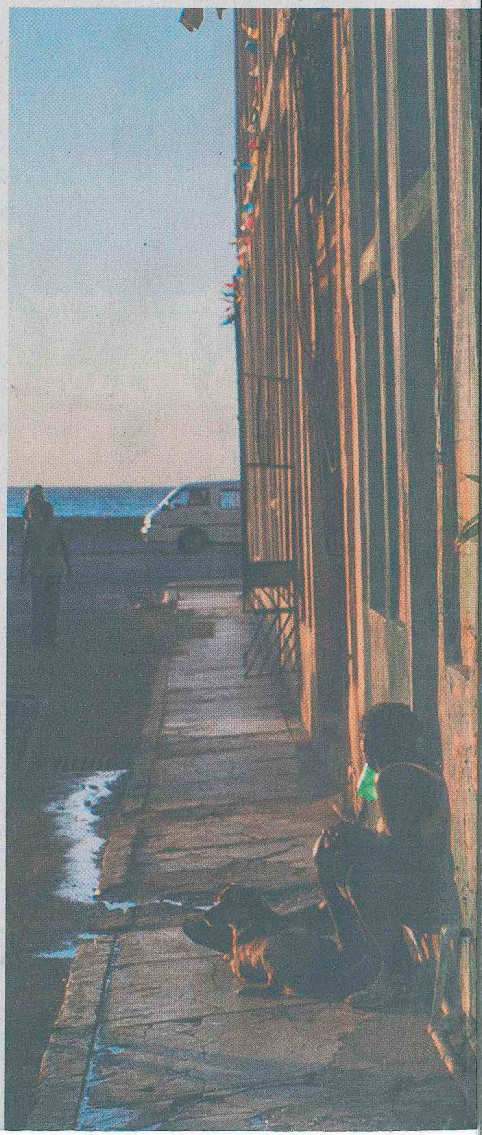
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rants with their trio of elderly musicians, playing the same tired repertoire of traditional country songs, like broken records.

The government for so long has allowed visitors to feast their eyes on what it has wanted them to see. But Cuba is changing fast. I hear that rich foreigners, among them Canadians and Russians, are buying the grand Cuban mansions. My cousin's neighborhood remains a kind of time capsule of the Cuba that I have come to love. Before too long, though, visitors may pine for a glimpse of the everyday Cuba that spills forth from rough-hewn porches like the one that fronts Julia's modest-size home.

I breathe in Cubanía, the mesmerizing vitality, sensuality and ready sense of humor that make up the identity of the people of this island nation. The culture runs in my blood. My mother was an Afro-Cuban who fell in love with my Dutch-French father, one of the first foreign professionals to join Fidel Castro's revolution, teaching mathematics at Havana University. They met at the famous Hotel Habana Libre, formerly the Habana Hilton, Mr. Castro's stronghold during the early years of the Cuban Revolution. This is where my father invited my mother and her two cousins over to his table for a drink. By the end of the evening, he gave the cousins each a rose; my mother, a kiss. My parents' love affair bloomed, but not their romance with Mr. Castro's revolution, and they left Cuba in 1966 after the birth of my older brother.

The laws regulating foreign interaction with Cuban people including my family members have been as unpredictable as the weather. I have been visiting Cuba since I was 9 and I have seen it through rough and sad times. During the early 1990s, when Cuba's gross domestic product plummeted after the fall of the Berlin Wall, my mother would prepare for our trips from Paris to Cuba by packing bras, soap and food. The toilet paper she took for her own mother was promptly displayed on the empty



shelves of my grandmother's home there was a hint of irony. For the longest time, even with my French passport, my travels there were viewed with suspicion by Cuban authorities. (I was also a journalist.) When buying an airline ticket there, like any French citizen, I was required to make a reservation in a government-run hotel for the length of my stay. But things are shifting in ways that I once would have thought unimaginable.

"Can you feel the dead rocking in their graves?" I asked Julia on the phone in December, after President Obama and President Raúl Castro announced the détente between the two countries. I was thinking of my parents, both now dead. My mother was not allowed to return to Cuba until 1989 because everyone who left was considered a traitor. Julia, I knew, thought of her father, my Tío Pepe, who fled Cuba for America on the Mariel boat lift, never to see her again. "I have prepared for this all my life," Julia told me, her voice filled with emotion. A proud and defiant woman, Julia wears her identity like a flag but politics are far from her mind. "I am in love with the idiosyncrasy of my people," she said.

Julia's neighborhood, previously ignored by tourists, despite its proximity to the city center, is now a treasure trove of guesthouses, actually family homes that have one room set aside for guests. Built in the 1930s, the neighborhood was populated by well-to-do Cubans who built an array of Cal-

My cousin's neighborhood, previously ignored by tourists, is now a treasure trove of guesthouses.

ifornia-style houses with small patios. Today, Julia's narrow street has deeply pocked sidewalks reminiscent of a lunar landscape. Roots of banana and avocado trees grasp the uneven concrete like oversized hands. Yet the neighborhood feels welcoming and pretty with residents' chairs lined up on the sidewalk. When the temperature cools, people settle outside to watch the great show of daily life as if it were a television series.

The number of residents far exceeds the available accommodations so the street serves as a live-in extension with neighbors enjoying the shade and the aromatic fragrance of tropical flowers. Behind Julia's house are intricate pathways and courtyards where smaller houses have been built, inhabited by families of eight or nine people. Yet even in such crowded quarters, it is sensuality that most permeates all things, from the drops of sweat on coppery skin to the beauty of the scarlet papayas to the Cuban women, who move their bodies, sculpted or not, with an unmistakable confidence.

On this day, Julia was giving me the low-down on Nuevo Vedado. With one hand taming her longest of unruly hair, she

pointed to the woman who lives directly across the street. Dalia is a single mother, she said, a military corporal and the local president of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. Fidel Castro had proclaimed that the committees are "a collective system of revolutionary vigilance," established "so that everybody knows who lives on every block, what they do on every block, what relations they have had with the tyranny, in what activities are they involved, and with whom they meet." But nobody goes to the committee meetings anymore, Julia said. Two or three years before, that same weary, uniformed woman would have reported me to the authorities as a foreigner staying on the block. My family in Cuba would then be questioned and questioned some more by authorities. Now, I looked at Dalia, ignoring me. Standing at her window in her cinder-block home, she seemed lost in thought, her gaze following a soney young man who cheerfully threw a beer can over his shoulder.

"Market economy," Julia said with a chuckle a bit later, nodding toward an old man who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, his wrinkles spreading like sun rays around his tiny beady eyes. He held a large plastic bag filled with empty cans. The government began laying off a half-million employees in 2010, saying the state payroll was bloated with inefficiency, and subsequently expanded permits for small private businesses in an attempt to allow former civil servants to build a private sector from scratch. Rogelio, the old man, said that he makes a dollar a day recycling cans and that he pays a modest tax to the state. Grabbing my arm with his long, skinny fingers he gave me the biggest toothless smile: "We recycle everything here, everything but the government." And cracking up at his own recycled joke he moved on to find the next can.

During my monthlong stay with Julia in August 2013, I met José, who drives people around for a living. He told me he paces inside his house for exercise for an hour every day at twilight. "I close all the windows," he said, "so the neighbors don't think I am crazy." At the local market, Julia introduced me to Silvio, the shoemaker who lives down the street and put together his initial capital "with whatever disappeared" from the leather factory where he used to work, a veiled reference to the petty theft in a country that for the longest time lacked basic goods such as toothpaste and toilet paper.

A few hundred meters away, a rural working train station doubles as a family's house. Trains go by so slowly that passengers can enjoy the sight of a dangling set of faded underwear drying on the clothes line outside

LIFE UNFOLDING At left, from top, in the Vedado neighborhood of Havana; the neighborhood "fixer," who somehow makes everyone's small appliances work again, center; and a group of boys playing bolas, a game of marbles. At right, women contemplate the scene from an apartment on a side street off the Malecón. Below, a boy stops his game of bolas in Vedado to wave at a vintage car.

the station. Later, I met an elderly man who introduced himself as a freedom fighter. He said he fought the guerrilla war with Fidel Castro and Che Guevara when Cuba was ruled "like a giant brothel." Ancient and rail-thin, the man seemed lost in reverie as he recalled the nights spent in the Sierra Maestra where he hid with the other revolutionaries: illiterate young men driven by the ideal of social justice. The old guerrillero in civilian clothes paused to slowly chew the mixture of corn, rice and chickpeas he eats every day at the retirees' canteen behind Julia's block. He recalled the mosquitoes that tormented them nightly in the mountains and how he feared for his life.

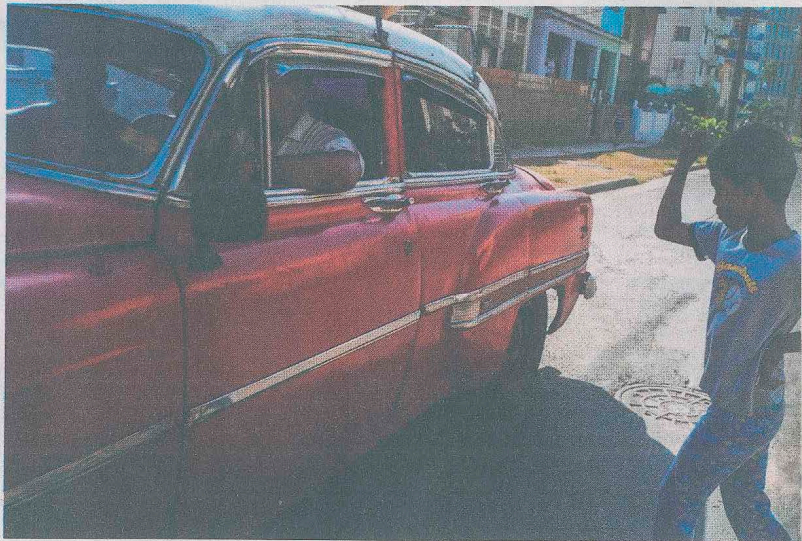
Now, he looked like a caricature of Cuban history, a relic, just like the giant billboards praising "socialism or death." The world defined by the Barbudos, the bearded rebels, is still very much on display to the delight of visitors who go to Cuba to experience a journey back in time and history: the slogans ("Ready to die for our ideals"); the flirty old musicians; and the country's weakness for uniforms, like the schoolgirls in short skirts and the young military trainees in tight fatigues.

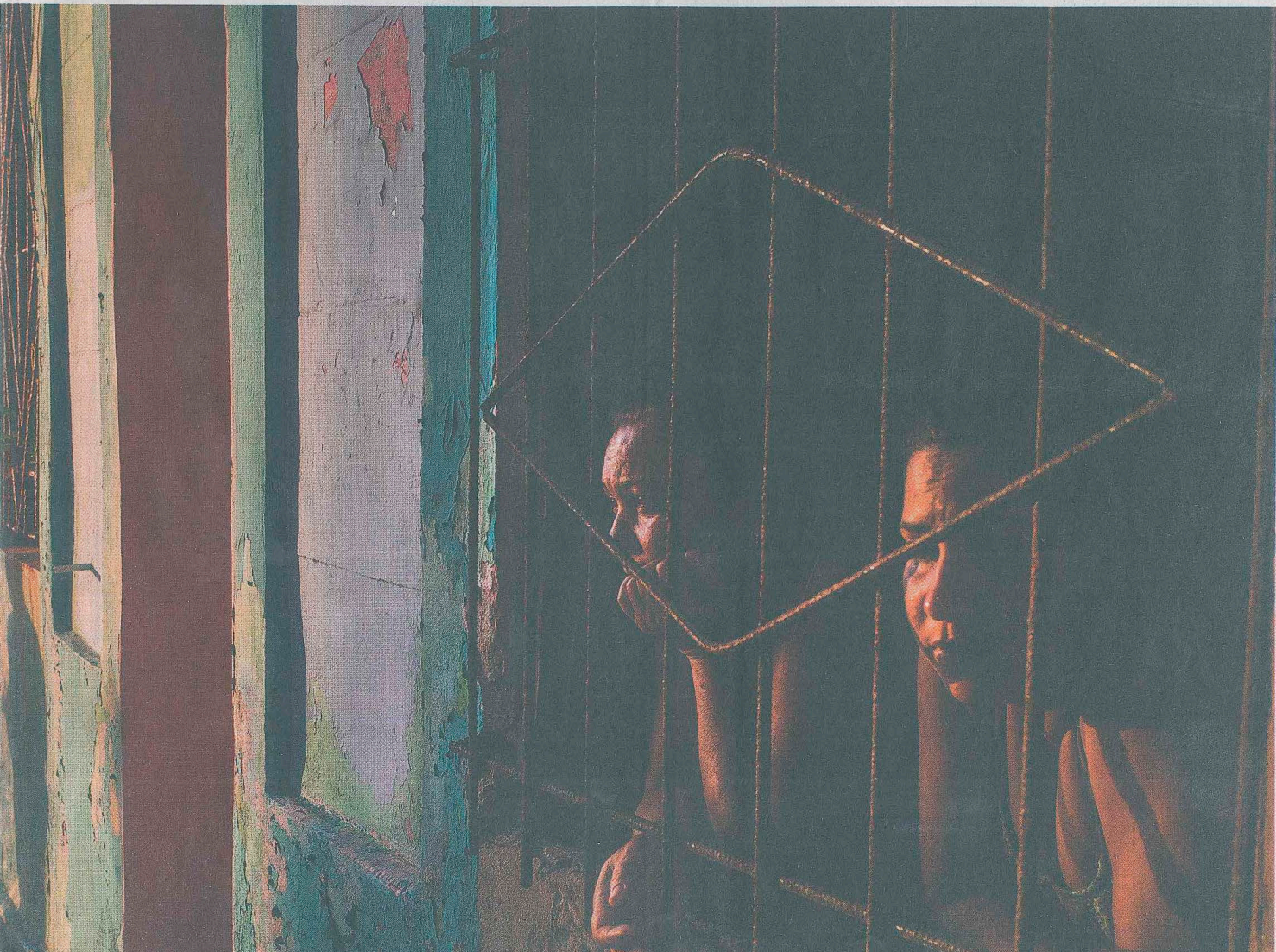
At the corner of Julia's street is the convenient vegetable store that is the subject of

much conversation on the block. The morning produce arrival could be something big or very little. It may be sweet potatoes, onions or fruit like a bundle of mangoes. The place is run by the Madman. His real name is Arturo and he has been managing the vegetable store, which looks like an abandoned warehouse, for more years than he can remember. "Why do they call you loco?" I asked him. "Because I am crazy to get out of here!" he answered, roaring in laughter. An antique cobalt blue Pontiac cruised by like a mirage, skirting around a giant pot-hole, complementing the worn beauty of the colorful buildings.

El Loco looked suddenly nostalgic. He pointed a dirt-stained finger toward a nearby avenue, where a bus, with passengers hanging like bunches of grapes on its sides, was lumbering by in a dark cloud of toxic fumes. "This, love, is revolution," he said enigmatically. Cubans nonchalantly crossed the road everywhere except at the traffic light. Farther away, I spotted a diminutive man with a large straw hat walking with a pig on a leash. "Bread!" shouted someone in the street and El Loco's customers were gone, rushing toward the bread vendor who broke into a spontaneous song about crusts, the bread of life and the

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY TODD HEISLER/THE NEW YORK TIMES, MARIANE PEARL (MAN AT WORK: TRAIN STATION)

cry of empty stomachs.

I sense that the humor is perhaps a defense mechanism, along with national pride and the fine national rum, for Cubans in Cuba who have sat on their porches all these years.

As I soaked in the goings-on of my cousin's neighborhood, I would see Julia often turn to smile her knowing, quizzical grin. Even in the summer of 2013, change seemed somehow on the horizon. I felt as if Julia and I had run a marathon through time and history, to land there together on her porch of broken mosaic tiles. There had been years when Julia wasn't allowed to enter the government-owned hotels where I was required to stay (I was a French citizen, and would acquire an American citizenship later.) Sometimes, she could come to the room but the police would knock on my door and ask probing questions. They wanted to know who I was and why I looked Cuban but not quite. We would play at confusing them when they asked questions, letting them assume that we were both Cubans. When I started speaking, they would realize I was a foreigner. We felt a small triumph at their shame and confusion.

Then, there was the time in 1998, when I took Julia to one of those state-run restaur-



rants for foreigners only, set inside an old colonial house, enveloped by bright flowering plants with large, swaying leaves. It was like dining in the middle of a jungle. Cuba exports lobsters but Julia had never tasted them nor ever fancied she would. But there we were. I had foreign currency; she had Cuban pesos. I was the privileged one; she was a local who didn't own anything. The meat, though tender and buttery, left a bit-

CITY AND COUNTRY Above, a rural train station serves trains and doubles as a family's house. Below, a sunrise over the Hotel Nacional de Cuba, a historic luxury hotel on the Malecón in Havana.

ter aftertaste for both of us. We felt segregated from each other.

Julia and I are the same age, 47. She looks like a striking replica of my mother — the caramel-colored skin, round face and wide, warm smile. She is also an expert at operating the Cuban system. When I first saw her in 1997, she was behind bars at a women's prison outside Havana, incarcerated under corruption charges for which she was eventually pronounced not guilty. She has tried her hand at selling handmade dresses. She has worked in factories and was sent many times to a rural camp to do so-called voluntary work for which she was given no choice, sawing tobacco leaves by hand. Nowadays, she is running a small business offering lunch (rice, plenty of it, black beans, pork, thinly sliced, and avocado) to students, workers and medical doctors from Nuevo Vedado, which is close to the main zoo. Even though the menu seldom varies, my cousin's lunches are sought after in the neighborhood.

One of her most faithful customers is the manager of the government convenience store who is in charge of delivering the rationed food distributed through the government supply booklet. The coupon book, a trademark of Fidel Castro's revolution, establishes the rations each person is allowed to buy through that system, and the frequency of supplies. The local manager serves 861 families and everyone calls him El Gordo. He is a middle-aged man with feline green eyes and dimples that make him look like a large baby.

"Do you mind people calling you 'Fatty'?" I asked him. "And what else are they going to call me, 'Love'? Matter of fact, I am fat!" he roared back. But on the day of our visit El Gordo said he wasn't feeling too well. He had drunk a mouthful of hydrochloric acid, mistaking it for rum, and his mouth and abdomen felt as if they were on fire. "I am glad I don't drink," I said. El Gordo turned to my cousin, flabbergasted, and pointed a fat thumb at me. "And what exactly does she live for?" he asked.

A pale, skinny woman in her 60s showed up to pick up her allotted ration of rice. I inquired about meat delivery that day. "Meat? What meat?" she responded, causing the other customers waiting in line to crack up. El Gordo showed me the rationed meat: It was pink, goeey, and I would swear I saw something moving in it. El Gordo called out to a young woman as she passed by in a sexy white blouse and slacks, her blond hair flowing in the tropical breeze: "You're so beautiful, it hurts," he said, still holding the scoop of meat, his mouth still burning. The old woman gave him a plastic

bag for the meat. So it looked as if she was going to cook it.

As we walked the neighborhood, Julia explained that we were on a meal-delivery tour reserved for special clients. Along the way, we came across a gregarious man with green eyes and curly hair who was about to undergo open-heart surgery that afternoon and confided that he couldn't wait to have sex again.

At the end of a dirt road, Julia showed me the local makeshift gym, entirely hand-built. Out came Silvio, a brawny, handsome man in his 40s with chiseled features and, in the rainbow range of Cuban skin tones, the color of mahogany. Covered in plaster and dust, he was a construction worker though he trained as a military nuclear engineer specializing in weaponry, a field where thankfully there isn't enough work. We ended our tour with 94-year-old Manuela, who lives two doors down from Julia's house. She still works as a part-time fortune teller, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. She said that spirits and dead souls come through her to talk to the living. In my session with her I saw her shake when she was "visited." The trembling stopped immediately afterward, and it all looked pretty genuine. As she read her tarot cards and little seashells, the old woman became glassy-eyed. She told me that I was going to be well and that I should not cut my hair; it was an important part of my charm.

That night, Julia and I took some friends to the makeshift 3D movie theater nestled in the bushes right by a garage with a carcass of a 1957 Mercedes. Hidden by banana trees, the little house with a neon cinema sign had been sealed off, its windows darkened. A large-screen plasma TV and three rows of wooden benches were waiting for customers. The theater offered mostly horror films, but we chose to reserve "Men in Black 3." The family that ran the operation charged us one U.S. dollar each, and a little boy distributed tickets made of toilet paper folded many times over. I turned around to look at the other moviegoers; they were all wearing 3D dark glasses, in line to see the same film. The theater is closed now, and Julia's porchside compañeros say it's because the authorities got wind of its popularity — and profitability. After the movie, as we walked back to Julia's house in the pitch-black darkness, discussing the changes in Cuba, we encountered a group of young people drinking rum and playing congas. They seemed happy and bursting with life. I inquired about the cause for celebration, but of course there was none. Living life as it comes is just what Cubans do.

