

PROTAGONISTA

Cubans often asked me how much I paid, per diem, to live in Havana. Begrudgingly, I would confess my rent, knowing it was a setup for their outrage. Sure enough, upon hearing the price tag of my guest bedroom, they would suck back their saliva. “Too much,” they’d rule. The *señora* of my *casa* was *aprovechando*—taking advantage.

But my Cuban friends didn’t live in *la Casa de Delbis*. They didn’t know about my *señora*’s full array of offerings—ancillary services I would have been helpless in Havana without. Far more than a surrogate relative—the classic *mama cubana* who shoveled rice heaps onto my plate—Delbis was my intra-Cuba travel agent, my money-changer, my 24-hour pharmacist, my black market go-to, my accent coach, and finally, my history professor.

I’d packed some Cuban history books in my suitcase, but half turned out to be scathing anti-Castro memoirs, written by Cubans who hadn’t set foot on the island since 1959; the others were simply too dry to compete with real-time Cuba. As for Havana’s bookstores, they were a mockery of selection, stocked with two main genres: Che Guevara tributes and exposés on CIA plots to assassinate Castro (which, by recent Cuban estimates, total 638). My best hope for learning what had happened in the last half century was to ask a Cuban—a Cuban with candor, a knack for storytelling, and enough privacy and hours of the day to take me back in time.

To tease a seminar out of my *señora*, I had to prolong breakfast, until the study abroad students were out the door. Then, Delbis was free to take a seat—side-saddle, always—and light the day’s inaugural cigarette. What I adored about her accounts of the past—beyond the Spanish curse words—was the way Delbis distilled the course of the Cuban Revolution. Plenty of important chapters were omitted—the 1970s, for example—but Delbis treated me

to the most dramatic national episodes—those that imprinted 11 million lives, hers foremost—and had some bearing on the economy of the individual.

To follow a Delbis history lecture, I had to decode as well as translate. Delbis would omit her president’s name, instead miming a long beard from her chin. Other times, she would use an indefinite pronoun, expecting I’d detect its capitalization. “*Ese Señor*” → “That Man” → Fidel Ruiz Castro.

Whenever I sensed Delbis meandering backwards down the Cuban timeline, I stayed put and ate more bread. Once, I paused Delbis and fetched a notebook and pen from my guest room. “Look,” she called to her niece, who was washing the breakfast saucers at the sink, “We’ve got a journalist here.” Then my *señora* resumed, a swell of authority in her voice.

1957. The Cuban Revolution grew up in the mountains, and so did Delbis Gomez. She was born in the easternmost province—the very tip of Cuba—in a town called Baracoa. When her uncle came to visit, westward bound, Delbis begged him to take her along, to escape what she calls “*pobreza espantosa*.” Horrific poverty. Once in Havana, Delbis worked as a maid, teaching herself the chores her mother had always handled, cooking and cleaning for strangers. Letters back home to Baracoa reported that life in the capital—in the blaring capitalism of the capital—was grand. “If I told my mother the truth, she would have sent someone to get me.”

Meanwhile, Castro’s guerilla forces were camped in the Sierra Maestra, preparing to advance west. When the Batista regime spread rumors that Castro had been killed, *New York Times* reporter Herb Matthews traveled to the mountains to find out. His article begins: “the rebel leader of Cuba’s youth, is alive and fighting hard and successfully in the rugged, almost

impenetrable fastnesses of the Sierra Maestra.” Castro, who Matthews depicted as “a powerful six-footer, olive-skinned, full-faced, with a straggly beard,” more than charmed his interviewer. “Here was an educated, a dedicated fanatic, a man of ideals.” Matthews reported that Castro had 40 rebel troops. In actuality, Castro tricked Matthews, ordering his few men to run laps and repeatedly courier messages to him during the interview. What Matthews called “a formidable movement of opposition” was a band of 18 guerillas.

Delbis served her foreigners hot milk in white teacups. The milk was powdered, but Delbis compensated by dropping spoonfuls of raw sugar in the kettle. A shot of dark *café cubana* was optional. The faux milk was a desert at the improper end of the day. By 10 a.m., I’d saturated my bloodstream with the equivalent of a quarter acre of Cuban sugarcane.

I once came across a Havana travel guidebook, written in 1953. The author, W. Adolphe Roberts, recommended lingering at the breakfast table. “The good local beverage [is] made by pouring a little essence of coffee into a cup of hot milk, and buttered toast, rusks, or biscuits.” I’d never heard of rusks, but the word seemed a perfect fit for the *casa’s* rock-hard bread slices. Cuba produces one type of *pan*: a portly loaf with the deceptive appearance of doughy Italian. It’s coarse, tasteless, and doomed to go stale within 24 hours. Delbis, too thrifty to buy fresh bread until we’ve sawed through the full two-footer, heats the stale slices on the stove, and serves them, part-charred.

“Pursued in this leisurely way,” wrote Roberts, “a Havana breakfast is cheap and also gives an insight into manners and customs.”

January, 1959. Batista fled Havana on New Years Eve, 1958, leaving the new year and the Republic of Cuba to 33-year-old Fidel Castro.

In black-and-white photos taken in the first days of the historic coup, there’s no pavement to be seen. Havana’s streets are overrun with celebrants.

“People hung signs on their front doors,” Delbis told me. “They wrote, ‘THIS IS YOUR HOUSE FIDEL,’ and hung it outside. Everywhere.”

On January 8th, Fidel addressed the crowds, “The actions of the people in Havana today . . . the crowds that filled the streets for kilometers—all of that was amazing, and you saw it; it will be in the movies and photos—I sincerely think that the people went overboard.”

My first month in Cuba, I bought trinkets. Delbis asked to see them. She liked to know where her guests spent their money, and how much. Sheepishly, I pulled out my Che Guevarra drink coasters, knowing they branded me a tourist, if not a fool. “He was a beauty,” said Delbis, beholding “El Che” through the glasses halfway down her nose. Che bit a fat cigar and looked askance at someone beyond the photo frame. “Oooey!” Delbis groaned with pleasure. Her niece, Yanis, who moved from the *campo* to work for *la señora*, agreed, pretending to swoon.

“I know that the young people are deeply imbued with the enthusiasm which will change the Republic,” Fidel remarked in one of his first speeches. At the time, Delbis was not yet 20. Nor was she deeply imbued with enthusiasm. She happened to be dating a man, Jorge, who was deeply imbued with enthusiasm. Delbis dumped him.

“He had shit in his head,” she told me. “All day long he was, ‘The Revolution *this*, and the Revolution *that*, and it’ll be a new Cooo-ba, and you’ll see. . . .” Delbis impersonated. She then swatted the air like the smell of ideology hung over her breakfast table.



"The two of you . . . argued about politics?" I asked, unclear on the break-up terms.

"Argue? Ha! I wouldn't talk a lick of politics with him. He was the one trying to turn me into a 'soldier of the Revolution!'" she loaded her voice with sarcasm. "The man never quit." Jorge wanted to marry, to start a new life, in a new Cuba. Delbis declined. She kept dating. She kept working. She kept sending money to Baracoa. There was no welcome sign on her door.

April, 1959. When Fidel Castro traveled to Washington, D.C. for a five-day diplomatic visit, he had not yet declared Cuba socialist. According to his official biographer, he was ideologically "undecided"—still. Vice President Nixon met with Fidel for two hours and twenty-five minutes; Eisenhower had golf plans, out of town. Fidel's biographer interprets this as an insult—a deliberate insult. One with a lasting sting.

Delbis waited up for me the night I flew into Havana. We'd only emailed, never met, but she knew I was planning to stay longer than a typical vacationer. I had a fellowship, interest in writing, open plans. She wanted my business.

The *señora* who greeted me was old enough to be a grandmother, but had the charisma of a lounge singer—one you'd find lying atop the grand piano between shifts, high heels flicked off. She was plump only around the middle, stick skinny from thigh to ankle. She dyed her hair a bold crimson, a shade which looked three minutes from a raging violet.

Delbis was a caricature of the *señora* I expected to find in Havana, chain smoking over a pot of *frijoles negros*. Whenever I wrote fiction, conjuring up Cuban characters for short stories, a *madre cubana* routinely elbowed her way into the cast. There was no better counterweight to the loud rhetoric of revolution than the crass,

unrestrained, smoker's voice of Delbis Gomez.

"Fidel is a master," wrote Che Guevara. "At the great public mass meetings, one can observe something like the dialogue of two tuning forks whose vibrations interact, producing new sounds. Fidel and the mass begin to vibrate together in a dialogue of growing intensity, until they reach the climax in an abrupt conclusion crowned by our cry of struggle. . . ."

I kept track of the code names she used. The Horse. The Boss. Santie Claus. Choo-choo. My favorite was Fifo. Delbis said "F-ifo!" like she was beckoning a puppy. She also called him, delighting in her sarcasm, *Nuestro Padre*, Spanish for the Lord's Prayer.

May, 1959. "No one has the right to be selfish when his people is hungry," Fidel said in a lengthy May speech. "No one who feels like a Cuban, no real patriot, can fail to understand that this measure will be of benefit to the Nation." That month, he began redistributing land.

Craving a glimpse of Havana at this point—teetering between a free market and full-blown communism—I asked Delbis what Havana looked like. The storefront displays I passed on Obispo were bleak and dusty, the mannequins pathetic. Before?

"*Habia de todo*," Delbis answered.

There was everything.

I awaited specifics—details to refurbish *Habana Vieja* back to late 1950s splendor. But Delbis repeated: "*Habia de todo*." Much later, it was W. Adolphe Roberts who let me stock the Cuban shelves and grocery aisles with "everything":

"Loaded counters of fruits and vegetables

. . . more than it would seem possible to sell, in view of competition outside. Meat, poultry, and fish stalls at which if you have a squeamish stomach it would be well not to look too closely. Dairy, grocery, candy, flower, basket, hardware, woodwork, and leather-goods shops . . . a retail liquor store, tiny bars, restaurants, coffee stalls, fruit juice stands, a billiard parlor; booths for secondhand items of every description, and a shop where images of the saints, crucifixes and other objects of piety are offered. . . . Stallholders are wont to set out rows of vases containing vivid flowers. The market is loud with the singing of caged birds."

1960. On July 5th, Cuba nationalized all U.S. companies. The next day, July 6th, Eisenhower canceled Cuba's 700,000-ton sugar quota. The Soviet Union, on July 8th, announced it would purchase all 700,000 tons.

I had a hard time trusting that young Delbis was as cynical as old Delbis claimed. The woman cussed like a sailor, and yet she had a girlish aura, a romantic bent. Even if I believed Delbis was born jaded, I still suspected that a poor *campesino*, hailing from horrific poverty, would be the first to hear the bugle call of revolution.

It's in Delbis's "Everything" Lecture that I catch sight of that teenage girl—her young wonderment. Delbis favorite store—the warehouse of Havana splendor, where saleswomen passed for models and customers came from Paris—was called *El Encanto*.

W. Adolphe Roberts agreed with my *señora*, calling the Encanto "one of the best department stores in the world," though tempering "*habia de todo*" to a claim that "virtually anything" could be bought there. When Delbis described the jewels and designer clothes sold at the Encanto, she raised her hand to her forehead and pinched her fingernails together. "*No puedes imaginar!*"

No, I could not imagine. I could not see in the windows. What I could see was the reflection in the glass: Delbis's wide eyes, lips puckered. That groan: *Ooey!* Delbis could not be a proselyte to the young Revolution. For the first time, her pocket book was filling with *pesos*. Young Delbis was looking forward to squandering them—on everything.

"What told you inside that you were a revolutionary?" a journalist asked Castro.

"There are circumstances that turn people into revolutionaries: the era, the historical conditions, the social situation in which they live, and the profound experience in their lives," he replied. "I wasn't born a revolutionary, but I was born rebellious."

W. Adolphe Roberts closes with an aside: "A well-known oddity of Havana shopkeepers is not to use their own names, but to adopt some philosophical, poetical, or otherwise high-flown label." He offers *El Encanto* as an example. In Spanish, it means "enchantment."

1961. "What does Cuba expect to have in 1980?" Che Guevarra asked an audience in Uruguay. "A per capita income of \$3,000 more than the U.S. has now. And if you don't believe us, that's all right too: we're here to compete. Leave us alone, let us develop, and then we can meet again in twenty years, to see if the siren song came from revolutionary Cuba or from some other source."

That April, a week before the Bay of Pigs offense, a bomb exploded at the department store on Galiano. All seven-stories of *El Encanto* burned to the ground. It was not rebuilt.

1962. President Kennedy banned all trade



with Cuba. In Washington, the ban became known as “the embargo”; in Havana, “*el bloqueo*.”

As Cuba rearranged its wealth, Delbis took some. She got an apartment, a doctor, a job. As a secretary at the Union of Cuban Artists and Writers, she worked in a stately building on Havana’s embassy row.

By 1968, all private economy was obsolete in Cuba.

1969. There was not enough sugar to go around. Castro decided to ration and also decided that Christmas was interfering with the sugar harvest. Cuba was now an atheist nation; December 25th could be erased from the list of official holidays. National resources and enthusiasm were diverted towards the sugar harvest of 1969. Castro set an ambitious goal: ten million tons.

Delbis spent Cuba’s last Christmas at the Tropicana, the famed Vegas-style dance show, on a date. This time, her date was apolitical. When Delbis refers to this date, she doesn’t use his name. He is “*el papa de Alexis*”—the man Delbis would later marry, at age 27.

I heard few details of the Christmas Eve date at the Tropicana because Delbis was more comfortable talking about Choo-Choo than her unnamed ex.

“Choo-choo said that what children needed wasn’t loads of presents, but to face reality,” Delbis exhaled her cigarette smoke, then slapped the table. “How are you going to go banning the day Christ was born?”

I didn’t answer, just nodded.

“They made some kind of lottery for Christmas presents,” Delbis flicked her hand in the air to convey the obvious: that a national Christmas raffle was a lousy scheme. “Alexis won once. So he got to pick from the first round.” She explained that round one was a child’s only shot at a decent toy. “Otherwise:

forget it! Alexis wanted a bike. But his dad said no.”

I didn’t I find out why Delbis’s marriage ended until I’d sat through months of breakfast lectures, decades of Cuban history. “*El papa de Alexis*” wasn’t a dedicated fanatic, like Jorge, like Choo-Choo. He was just an alcoholic.

1970. Castro announced that the great sugar harvest—though the largest harvest in the history of the Republic of Cuba—fell short of the national goal by 15 percent.

I didn’t spend Christmas in Havana because I was homesick. Also, because Delbis promised I’d miss nothing of cultural value in Cuba. “People don’t even make ham anymore.”

Back in my hometown, I set out to purchase some credible Cuban history. After a slow stroll around Barnes & Nobles, I settled on a fat biography of Fidel Castro. It looked both exhaustive and even-handed. On the cover, Fidel’s face was eclipsed by the shadow of his olive green cap. The biggest quote on the book jacket, outsizing all blurbs, was from Fidel himself: “You may paint me as the devil as long as you remain objective.”

I asked Delbis if there was ever a time when things in Cuba worked. After thinking for a while, she answered, “The eighties,” but immediately hedged, “That’s not to say that life was a marvel! Not at all. But people lived okay. People could buy things. You took the money your job paid you, and you bought what you needed.”

1989. With the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, Cuba lost six billion dollars in aid per year. The economy shrank between 35 and 50 percent. Facing economic ruin, Castro declared a Special Period: “a peacetime strategy for withstanding an exceptionally serious situation.”

“There were no fat people left in Havana,” said Delbis. Plenty of other things—beyond *gordos*—went scarce when Cuba lost Soviet aid: electricity, cheese, petroleum, chicken, water, butter, toilet paper, beef, holidays, fans to wave away the heat.

But Delbis did not turn our Special Period class into a catalogue of shortages. She kept it brief, relying on the extinction of obesity to do most of the work. Delbis knew that her pupil, a 22-year-old American, couldn’t fathom an 18-hour blackout if she sat at her table all day, eyes closed, fan off. Better to implant an image of a bone-thin Havana, so that when the pupil walked the streets, each time she passed a round-hipped woman, a thick-bellied man, the pupil would rewind one decade, subtract twenty pounds.

I met the German guy in the *casa* kitchen, the day before he left Havana. Alexis made the introduction, effusing, “Karl’s more Cuban than the rest of us!”

Later, over breakfast, Delbis unpacked her son’s euphemism. The German guy had taped posters to the walls of his guestroom: “One Mao, one Lenin. And one Che.” Now that he was gone, Delbis made her disgust plain. The six-month guest was a flaming communist. I made a note to myself: no more revolutionary drink coasters.

Delbis harbored no fondness for the German guy, but did credit him for bringing a celebrity into her *casa*. While studying Marxism at the University of Havana, Karl made friends with sons of high-level government officials. On the night of his goodbye party, the *casa* patio filled with students. Among them: the son of Carlos Lage. Delbis wasn’t sure of Lage’s title, but assured me he was “the Boss’s” right-hand man. “They say he’s the one who fixed the economy.” On the *casa* patio, Lage’s son danced.

1992. Carlos Lage (Secretary of the Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers) gave a televised speech: “The socialist bloc is no more . . . there are no more agreements, no more preferential prices . . . I believe that it is not possible to define the number of years that this Special Period will last. . . . As Fidel was saying in the assembly: ‘This will take a long time.’”

Delbis knitted to make extra money. She sold the knitted products in a market, but few Cubans could buy knitted products. Spare money, like spare fat, seemed to go extinct. Delbis was hungry, single, and raising a son in his teens.

“Bring the photo of Alexis,” she called over my shoulder, to her niece.

Delbis’s son was a surgeon who spent most of his time in the E.R. His torso was so stocky that it looked swollen. In the photo Yanis brought to the kitchen table, Alexis was wearing an army uniform. “Military service,” Delbis explained. His face I recognized instantly, but the body below shocked me. Just under the ribs, between breast pocket and belt buckle, his torso caved in.

“Do you want *café*?” Delbis changed the subject. No more on the Special Period. “That’s a misery I’d like to forget.”

1992-1993. Both years, at the International Book Fair in Havana, the *Bible* was the best-selling title.

“I’d had it up to here with rice and beans.” Delbis returned to the Special Period. I didn’t reintroduce the topic. I simply remarked that Cuban cuisine lacked variety. Delbis did not appreciate this remark, particularly not at her kitchen table. Rather than point to the *blo-queo americano*, as many Cubans would, Delbis brought me back into the Special Period, deep-



er, for a relativity lesson.

"Every meal it was rice and beans, rice and beans. Eggs! If you were lucky. I'd had it up to here." Delbis pinched two fingers together at her eyebrows. "To go to bed with an empty stomach? No no no."

There was a day she sat in her parlor, hungry and dispirited, when Alexis came home. He walked past her to the kitchen, and Delbis listened. She heard him open the fridge. Delbis knew what was inside the fridge: nothing. She heard him open the cupboards, the closets. Delbis knew what he saw: nothing, nothing. She didn't call out to Alexis. She was too hungry. She began to cry.

"*No te pongas así*," said Alexis. "Don't get like that." Delbis was empty. Her son was empty. She cried. Alexis came back to the parlor. "*Mami*: that fridge was full of meat once, and it'll be full again. *No te pongas así*."

And that was it. Delbis concluded Lecture II on the Special Period—definitively, this time. "That's what kept me out of despair." Alexis.

Her *casa* was on 64 Jovellar, four quick blocks from the ocean. When Delbis emailed potential guests—whether in Vancouver or Rome—she mentioned this. They could walk to the ocean. Though Delbis did not walk to the ocean. She didn't leave the *casa*. It may not have been a conscious policy, but I noticed every time I forgot my key to 64 Jovellar: *La señora* was always *en casa*.

1994. Summer came, bringing more heat, more despair, pushing Cubans away in rafts. Delbis remembered the speech. He went on television and said that those who wanted to go and abandon the Revolution could go right ahead. The government stopped patrolling the coastline. People began leaving in broad daylight, dragging floatation devices straight down Jovellar Street. Delbis watched. She saw the makeshift boats that were supposed to get

her *compañeros* to Key West. "With a prayer," Delbis said, shaking her head. 32,000 Cubans fled to Florida, though my text didn't clarify whether that was the total that left, or arrived.

During those special years, Castro's speeches were all punctuated with the same mantra. "Socialism or Death!"

"There are two classes of people in Cuba." Delbis enjoyed dismantling His great social experiment over breakfast rusks. "Those who have dollars and those who don't."

Until the mid-nineties, the American dollar was prohibited in Cuba. However, as Special Period conditions grew especially egregious, Cubans did what *revolucionarios* never do: they protested. Rumors spread through Jovellar Street: Fifo was preparing to announce something—major—to Cuba, live. It was common for Castro to go on television; it was not common for Delbis to tune in.

"The year was ninety . . ." Delbis groped for the right fleck on the Cuban timeline.

"Three?" I offered. I'd heard the dollarization lecture many, many times.

"Ninety-three," Delbis nodded immediately, though if I'd said ninety-six, she might have nodded just the same, less concerned with dates than drama and dollars. Delbis's loose chronology reminded me of a college history professor who railed against the treatment of decades as contained eras, with traits we could analyze in papers. History doesn't care about dates, he told his amphitheater of note-takers. Historians do.

"*Ese señor* went on TV and said he was going to change something—with deep regret." Delbis enunciated each word as if my Spanish were remedial. "Something that went against the principles of the Revolution. And that as a result, we'd see inequality. We'd see people who had more than their neighbors. People who had

less than their neighbors . . .”

Why was I such a rapt student of this woman? It was true that I distrusted official texts, but Delbis was as biased as any Miami memoirist or Castro sycophant. Long after I left Cuba, toting hundreds of pages of notes, I re-read The Jovellar Lecture Series. I cross-referenced with library books. But it was Delbis’s accounts—her language, her context—that kept me transfixed. She told history as I loved it: tethered to one set of dreams and decisions. If I went to a library to fill in the macro-level blanks, it was because Delbis had piqued, and particularized, my interest first.

“He said the dollar would be *despenalizado*.”

If Delbis was supposed to feel expelled from the Garden of Eden, she did not. “The first time I held a dollar in my hand, I felt like a rich woman.” She’d waited the bulk of her adult life for this turn—for His permission to leave the collective flock. Still, Delbis had the tenacity of a twenty-year-old, fresh from the *campo*, stirred by the capital, possibility, everything.

Fifo’s televised forecast would soon prove true: the neighborhood changed. Among the faded facades of Jovellar Street, Delbis’ *casa* stood out now, painted fresh blue.

1998. The Pope came to Cuba for a five-day visit. Millions watched his outdoor masses on television. “Do not be afraid,” he said to Cubans. “You are and should be the protagonists of your own personal and national history.”

Ten days prior to the papal visit, Castro gave a speech: “Cuba is not changing. Cuba is reaffirming its position, its ideals, its objectives.” When Pope John Paul II arrived, Castro changed out of his familiar military fatigues and, to the shock of the Cuban public, wore a formal black suit. “The world is the one changing.”

“I ran into Jorge again,” Delbis told me,

pressing her hand against her lips to suppress a smile that was already loose and large.

“*What?*” I nearly squealed. “Here? Where!”

It happened at a corner market. The Havana market, unlike the floor plan of the old *Encanto*, was easy for me to visualize. Cuban markets were uniformly colorless and stocked with the ten or so raw foodstuffs available on a given day: crates of orange tomatoes, cucumbers (always), broccoli (rarely), cauliflower (never).

“Delbis?”

The other shoppers looked up from the tomato bins.

“*Que?*” Delbis didn’t recognize him.

“I had no idea who he was,” she told me, proud that age had disguised the beau more than his belle. “Almost 30 years had passed. *Imaginate.*”

“What dreams and ambitions do you have at this point in life?” asked a journalist.

“I imagine that when you say, ‘at this point,’” Castro clarified, “you mean now that I am over 60—or rather, after a long participation in the revolutionary struggle?”

Jorge walked Delbis home, carrying an identical ration of greens as Delbis. They took a familiar route. This was the same Havana—but grayscale, slouching on its pillars, molting Spanish tiles into the dust. Jorge asked Delbis if she’d like to go out. Delbis said yes.

“He was quite charming, still,” Delbis told me. She looked fond only briefly. “I thought he would have changed.” Her head shook. “Forget that! It was like speaking to a blind man. The man couldn’t see a speck of reality.”

My hope fell. Delbis said goodbye. *La señora* went back to Jovellar, alone.

“Very briefly, I would say that they are the



same dreams and aspirations I had when I first considered myself a revolutionary, a long time ago. I continue to dream the same dreams, to think exactly the same way.”

1996. Carlos Lage is credited for saving the Cuban economy during the Special Period. He coaxed Fidel towards aperture. Foreign companies were invited to invest and build hotels. In 1996, there was no infrastructure to host foreigners. But Lage recognized that hotels could generate the wealth that sugar mills once had. So the rhetoric of the Revolution relaxed. Planes came from Barcelona, Toronto, London. By 1999, Cuba was expecting 1.7 million foreign guests. Socialism, or death, or tourism.

I could no longer tolerate the breakfast rusks. I'd tried buttering them, but buttered rusks tasted like sandpaper with grease. I begged my *señora* for an alternative condiment.

“Can we have jam?”

Delbis gave me a displeased look. “They don't sell that kind of thing in *pesos*. If you want *special* food in Cuba, you need dollars. You need to go to La Chopping.”

La Chopping was a favorite topic of Delbis Gomez. It was the brusque Cuban pronunciation of “shopping.” My *señora*, hacking off the letter ‘g’ every time, spoke of these stores with reverence, as if they were the Cuban equivalent of Tiffany's. All Choppings had glass windows and glass doors. A blast of air-conditioning hit customers; an attendant seized purses.

Cuban women—the ones who work government, *peso*-paying jobs—griped endlessly about Chopping prices. You needed American dollars to go Chopping, and inconveniently, this was not America. What they neglected to say about the Chopping products was that they were non-existent in Cuba, pre-dollar; nothing in the Cuban culinary tradition calls for a Chopping run. Those women who craved Chopping items craved novelty, exclusivity, everything a com-

mon Cuban was not supposed to have.

Mayonnaise in bottles, cheese in individually-wrapped slices, European cereal, canned corn, frozen chicken nuggets, oyster crackers in little bags, stereos, tomato as paste, corn for popping, tuna, liters of diet cola, and, yes, strawberry jam.

I bought myself jam. As I smeared it on my rusk, Delbis inspected the label. “He blames all of Cuba's problems on *el bloqueo*. What *bloqueo*?”

Delbis considered herself rebellious and realistic. She once paired the adjectives together in the same sentence—“*Soy rebelde y realista*”—sounding pleased by the alliteration. Thanks to these traits, I lived in a *casa* where the bread was petrified and the computer, hidden. Internet access was illegal in Cuba. In the back corner of Delbis's kitchen, there was a tall clothes bureau concealing a computer, which honked and beeped every night at 7 p.m. as it connected to the worldwide web, using a code Delbis bribed a state technician to use. There were a few government laws she was comfortable disobeying: those that interfered with business.

“Look at your jam.” Delbis set the bottle down, as my teeth forced through a loud rusk. “*El bloqueo* is a load of shit.” The jam label read “Del Monte. Bottled in Mexico.”

1997. The Cuban government granted citizens the right to rent rooms in their homes—no more than two, and only after taxes, paperwork, and numerous inspections. Each Cuban renter, after passing through the bureaucratic hoops, received a blue triangle sticker to put on her front door, to make her *casa* a legal “*casa particular*.”

2000. Delbis Gomez pressed a fresh blue seal against the chipped wooden door of 64 Jovellar, welcoming vacationers inside. First, she rented her spare bedroom. Then her son's. Alexis could sleep on a cot in her bedroom. For years, he did. Yanis fit there, too.

After hosting a few lecherous Italian men, Delbis decided to corner the study abroad market. Marxist propaganda on her walls was preferable to prostitutes in her beds. Once she recruited the right clientele, Delbis wanted to expand. Her apartment had lofty ceilings—unused height in the eyes of an entrepreneur whose pocketbook was just filling with dollars. She spent thousands of them squeezing another floor of bedrooms into her *casa particular*, and hundreds more bribing a state architect. The new rooms had to be sketched into her original property designs.

The neighbors had plain view of Delbis's front door, plain view of the blonde backpackers trickling in and out. Someone must have counted. Someone called inspectors. Inspectors came to check. Delbis slipped American bills into their sweaty palms, cursing as soon as her door was shut. She'd get all that money back, in years of rent payments. Still, because she knew that envy was the root of her bureaucratic troubles, Delbis was furious.

"They think I'm a rich woman," Delbis vented to me one night, after shooing away a drunk neighbor. He rapped on her door and stood there swaying, a potted plant in his arms, demanding payment in American dollars.

"I wouldn't buy that plant from you for two dollars," she'd said, not rising from her rocking chair. "For half a dollar. Go."

I recognized the man from across the street. Day and night, he sat on his stoop. Loitering was a popular pastime on Jovellar. Neighbors glared from balconies, gossiped through windows. When they probed to find out how much *la señora* charged, they weren't sucking back their saliva out of concern for the naïve foreign guest. They'd just done the math, multiplied the number of backpackers by the per diem dollar rate. Delbis Gomez's income made any state salary, even a physician's, even her son the physician's, look like a pittance.

In response to the allegation that Cuba supported "tourism apartheid," Castro gave a twelve-hour speech to the National Assembly.

The government would consider ways to let Cubans share in the luxuries of the vacation industry, Castro promised. The bulk of the 12-hour tirade, however, he spent taking these particular luxuries and inserting them into Cuba's macro-economic equation.

"For every five [Cubans] staying two or three days in one of those hotels, the country would have one less ton of meat to distribute to the people. For every six or seven people, we would have one less ton of powdered milk to distribute. . . . We would have to expend foreign currency . . . for every bottle of any kind, for every pillow, for every carpet, every can of paint. All these expenses are in foreign currency."

May, 2004. George W. Bush announced plans to tighten the 42-year-old embargo against Cuba. Across the Florida Straits, Castro wasted no time reacting. Though the U.S. restrictions were not yet implemented, he closed every Chopping store. Clerks were called in to work after hours—all night—removing products from shelves, hiking prices to offset the new *bloqueo*. It was a peacetime strategy for withstanding a (potentially) exceptionally serious situation. Castro was preempting Bush.

As my 50s-era taxi careened down San Lazaro, I knew something was strange. A crowd had gathered in front of the glass windows of the Chopping. They were peering through the glass, like it was Christmas Eve and Santa's elves were making a comeback in Cuba, unloading American-made goods straight onto the Chopping shelves.

"You haven't heard?" As soon as I entered the kitchen, Delbis began.

"No." I was too preoccupied to focus on anything but my visa. In 24-hours, my tourist card was due to expire. To renew it, I had get to



Immigration early the next morning and battle a Cuban line: long, shapeless, and hot.

Indeed, it was all three. To pass the time, I did what my *señora* taught me to never do: purchase a Cuban newspaper. Delbis called *Granma* (“the Official News Source of Cuba and the Communist Party”) shit. Judging from the way Cubans recycled old *Granmas*, plenty of her countrymen agreed. In Cuban bathrooms, I often found newspaper scraps—hand-ripped—in a stack beside the toilet.

On the back page of my *Granma*, there was an authorless editorial. It began by establishing that Cubans would now pay 30% more for household items, then cited the reason: *Presidente Bush*. The editorial reminded Cuban readers that they could endure any hardship, that they were a sturdy, noble, resourceful, prevailing people, as demonstrated years ago in the Special—

“You’re missing a document,” a perturbed immigration agent told me when I finally reached the desk. “We need proof that you’re in a legal *casa particular*.”

I felt hot with panic. Immigration was closing in an hour. Tomorrow, I would be an illegal alien in a country with no official American embassy. I hailed a cab and told the driver to take me to Jovellar Street. If anyone could deliver me from Cuban bureaucracy in under sixty minutes, it was Delbis Gomez.

But when I pulled up to the fresh blue façade and yelled Delbis’s name through the metal window bars, her floor-mopper called back, “*No esta*.”

“*No esta?*” I must have misunderstood. Delbis was always home.

“*Fue a la Chopping*,” she replied. “With Yanis. Hurry and you’ll catch them.”

I could not imagine Delbis Gomez stepping foot on a sidewalk, but had no time to try. I ran, knowing that once Delbis got inside the Chopping, I’d have to withstand another long, shapeless, inferno-hot line.

Six blocks later, I was standing on Belascoin

at Galiano, the very corner where W. Adolphe Roberts told his reader: “you have come to an all around shopping street, as North Americans understand the term.” Both Galiano and Belascoin, like all streets beyond the tourism nucleus, were in disrepair. Their ionic columns stood like tree trunks, leaking sandy innards onto the sidewalk. Crowds of women with mesh bags stood in line, ready to chop. I scanned the crowd for crimson hair. Delbis was not in the line.

Finally, she appeared: meandering along the shoulder of the road, buses and cabs flooding past. I watched my *señora*’s slow gait like man’s first steps on the moon. Here was the woman who trained me at her breakfast table—to bargain, to hitchhike, to smell bullshit, to dip rock-hard bread in hot candy milk. Outdoors, clutching her niece’s elbow crook as if any sidewalk could send her into a gutter, Delbis looked older and tentative—but regal. More regal than ever.

Delbis smiled at me, then puckered her lips and groaned—“*Oooy!*”—upon seeing the mob of Choppers. Her gaze vacated to make room for the busy scene. The moment had all the makings of a Delbis history lesson. It was melodramatic, microeconomic, and scripted by Fifo himself. She wouldn’t have missed it.

“Delbis, I need help.” In a few terse commands, Delbis told me where to find the “blessed paper” back at the *casa*, then sent me running. “*Apurate!*” Hurry up.

Later, once I was a legal alien again, once our *casa* was refortified with toilet paper, Delbis would recount her Chopping spree. “You should have seen people scrambling for cooking oil!” she would say, gritting her teeth as she imitated the frantic aggression in the food aisles. “We got two bottles, but they were pushing and pushing . . . a woman with a headscarf grabbed SIX!” Delbis would shove out her elbows to impersonate the oil-monger. “*Que locura!*” Another of her favorite words: “madness.”

That was all May 2004 turned out to be.

Una locura. It was not, as many Cubans feared, the first day of a Highly Special Period, marking the demise of all fat people. Though in Delbis's case, that was never the risk. So long as she had a particular house, with particular guests, paying in a particular currency, to wipe with toilet paper, not *Granma* newsprint, Delbis was safe atop her pedestal, queen of Jovellar.

Which explains the smile I caught Delbis wearing, just outside the *Centro Habana* Chopping. The Cuban panic drill was a charade, simulating a crisis far behind her. Like the Special Period, it was a historical episode she would narrate, over rusks, and Delbis didn't need Fifo, or the Horse, or the Boss, or even the Pope, to tell her she played protagonist.

