QUARTERLY PRESS REVIEW

FOR ADVANCED EFL LEARNERS

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A Wonderful World

RESEARCHERS FOUND THAT suicide rates drop after U.S. presidential elections in states that support the winning candidate, and that suicides drop even further in states that support the loser.

It was determined that stockmarket returns in predominantly Muslim countries are nine times higher during the holy month of Ramadan than they are the rest of the year.

Girls with younger brothers lose their virginity later, and girls with older brothers experience menarche later.

Women who drink regular beer are at increased risk for psoriasis, but women who drink light beer are not.

A man's likelihood of picking up a female hitchhiker was correlated with her breast size, and a man's likelihood of infidelity to a female partner was correlated with his financial dependence on her.

A new species of titi monkey, which has a bushy red beard and mates for life, was discovered in Colombia.

American students exhibit an inferior understanding of the "equals" sign.

At Stonehenge, archeologists discovered a second henge; in the Sistine Chapel, a brain stem and spinal cord were discovered in God's neck; and on Bulgaria's Sveti Ivan island, the bones of John the Baptist were unearthed.

It was revealed that the human buttocks tan poorly.

Three liger cubs were born in a Taiwanese zoo whose keepers had allowed an African lion and a Bengal tigress to cohabitate.

Previous attempts to separate the couple, said the zoo's owner, had made the lion "very angry."

Beavers reintroduced to Scotland through the Scottish Beaver Trial had produced offspring, the first beavers to be born in the country in 400 years.

Polar bears were eating the eggs of barnacle geese, and both Greenlandic polar bears and Svalbardian glaucous gulls were suffering from industrial contamination.

Moose malnourished in childhood are at greater risk of developing arthritis in old age.

Female mongooses were found to coordinate their litters in order to keep other mongoose mothers too busy to kill rivals' pups.

Adult moongooses were seen teaching their children how to open plastic Easter eggs filled with rice and fish.

Neurologists identified the regions of the brain responsible for baby talk.

Scientists concluded that the female ancestor of all human beings lived 200,000 years ago and that frogs learned to leap before they learned to land.

In Nevada, Christians prayed for the relocation of Bubba, a 700-pound black bear with a bulletproof skull who steals peanut butter from the poor.

Ethnoprimatologists recommended ways for villagers in Guinea to avoid or defuse chimpanzee attacks.

"Keep calm," advised Kimberley Hockings of the New University of Lisbon.

"Try not to scream."

Five hundred people were attacked and four children were killed by Peruvian vampire bats.

The brains of gregarious locusts are 30 percent larger than those of solitarious locusts of the same species, according to neuroscientists who bred the insects over three generations.

Aphids living on plants that produce the same pheromone whereby the insects announce that ladybugs are eating them become inured to the smell and are themselves likelier to be eaten by ladybugs.

Pea aphids will drop to the ground in the presence of a lamb's breath.

Optimism was observed among happy pigs.

It was determined that Americans will estimate a cheeseburger to have more calories if they are first exposed to a salad, that Australian children were being fed junk food from the age of one month, and that Britain's fattest orangutan, who had been eating mostly marshmallows and jelly, needed to eat better.

A baby's first bowel movement reveals fetal cigarette-smoke exposure.

Rich American girls without live-in biological fathers are precocious in developing breasts; if the rich girls are African-American, they are also precocious in pubic hair.

Children as young as four were found to understand irony, and whereas ironic mothers tend to ask rhetorical questions, ironic fathers tend simply to be sarcastic.

Westerners can infer the emotions of Japanese people through their voices but find their faces inscrutable.

Israeli scientists found that children learning to read Arabic, unlike those learning to read Hebrew or English, do not use the brain's right hemisphere; other Israeli scientists discovered a nanoparticle shaped like the Star of David.

Researchers found that the perception of Barack Obama as a Muslim varies inversely with his approval rating.

Among U.S. pedestrians, blacks and Hispanics are at much greater risk than whites of getting hit by cars and dying as a result. "Minorities are much more likely to get injured by this mechanism and much more likely to die by this mechanism," said Adil Haider of Johns Hopkins University.

"It's a double whammy."

Scientists observed that a drunk female college student will sometimes be tricked by her female friends, who pretend to take her for food and then put her in a cab home in order to prevent the intoxicated woman from going home with a strange man.

The largest study of its kind found that married couples do not become more similar over time, unless that similarity is aggression.

It was revealed that British spies formerly used human semen as invisible ink; the practice fell from favor due to the manifestation of a foul odor when fresh semen was not used and due to mockery directed at the technology's inventor.

Bright redness is a surer indicator of health in rural cardinals than in urban ones.

Ugly female sparrows settle for ugly males, but ugly males make better fathers.

The pigment that makes jaundice yellow and previously was thought to exist only in animals was discovered in the petals of the bird of paradise.

Korean scientists who tested darkedge-wing flying fish in a wind tunnel concluded that flying fish glide as well as wood ducks.

Biologists devised a method for sampling the DNA of dolphins from their blow.

Cocaine addiction can be treated with Ritalin.

Supernova dust was found in a meteorite.

Researchers established that declines in bee pollination may owe less to dwindling bee populations and more to climate

change, which has upset the synchronization of bees' emergence from hibernation and plants' first flowering.

In Britain, where it was estimated that the loss of bees would cost the economy $700 million a year, bumblebees were inbreeding, entomologists were studying the nectar-gathering strategies of bumblebees, city bees were gathering more diverse pollens and eating better than country bees, and Edinburgh was attempting to make itself more attractive to honeybees.

A scientist discovered a new species of sweat bee in downtown Toronto, bringing the total number of perspiration-loving bee species in Canada to eighty-four.

Birds unfamiliar with non-striped bumblebees avoid them instinctually, suggesting that birds fear the sound rather than the sight of bumblebees.

The Libyan oasis bees of Kufra were found to have lived in isolation for the past five millennia.

Biologists made progress in determining what makes a bee a queen.

Honeybees are smarter in the morning and are not fooled by the midnight sun. ♦

Fiction in the Age of E-Books An Interview with Paul Theroux

HOW WOULD YOU characterize the state of fiction today? Are we producing more or fewer good writers than in the past, and more or fewer good readers? How have the writing life and the reading life changed since you were starting out, 40 years ago?

Paul Theroux: Fiction writing, and the reading of it, and book buying, have always been the activities of a tiny minority of people, even in the most-literate societies. Herman Melville died in utter obscurity. F. Scott Fitzgerald's books were either out of print or not selling when he died. Paul Bowles was able to live and write (and smoke dope) only because he wrote for Holiday, the great old travel magazine. Nor are writers particularly highly regarded. A few years ago, Boston – a city of writers and thinkers – needed to name a beautiful bridge and a graceful tunnel. The first was named for a recently deceased social worker and civil-rights activist, the second for a baseball player. This happens in most U.S. cities, partly from ingrained philistinism and also from the non-reader's fear of books, of writers in general. Many aspects of the writing life have changed since I published my first book, in the 1960s. It is more corporate, more driven by profits and marketing, and generally less congenial – but my day is the same: get out of bed, procrastinate, sit down at my desk, try to write something.

You're an inveterate world traveler. Is literary culture more healthy or less so outside North America? What geographic differences do you see, and how have those changed over time?

Literary life used to be quite different in Britain in the years I lived there, from 1971 to 1989, because money was not a factor – no one made very much except from U.S. sales and the occasional windfall. And many of us were reviewing books or writing pieces for the same poorly paying magazines. Salman Rushdie, Christopher Hitchens, Jonathan Raban, Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes, and I – all well-paid today – were regulars on the New Statesman. Japan, Germany, and India seem to me to have serious writers, readers, and book buyers, but the Netherlands has struck me as the most robust literary culture in the world.

What does the advent of the e-reader mean for reading – for the health of narrative storytelling as a form, for the market for fiction, for the future of books? E-readers certainly make it easier to tote lots of novels and other texts while traveling. But don't we lose something – in sustained concentration, or in a sense of permanence, or in the notion of a book as an art object – in the migration away from the codex?

Movable type seemed magical to the monks who were illuminating manuscripts and copying texts. Certainly e-books seem magical to me. I started my writing life in the 1940s as an elementary student at the Washington School in Medford, Massachusetts, using a steel-nibbed pen and an inkwell, so I have lived through every technology. I don't think people will read more fiction than they have in the past (as I say, it's a minority interest), but something certainly is lost – the physicality of a book, how one makes a book one's own by reading it (scribbling in it, dog-earing pages, spilling coffee on it) and living with it as an object, sometimes a talisman. Writing is one of the plastic arts, which is why I still write in longhand for a first draft. I can't predict how reading habits will change. But I will say that the greatest loss is the paper archive – no more a great stack of manuscripts, letters, and notebooks from a writer's life, but only a tiny pile of disks, little plastic cookies where once were calligraphic marvels.

Does the migration to e-readers increase access to good stories or diminish it?

Greatly increases access. I could not be more approving. But free libraries are full of books that no one reads.

What has the Twitter-ization of our attention spans, and the hyperlinking of our storytelling, and the Google-ization of all our knowledge meant for imaginative literature as an art form and a vehicle for transmitting ideas?

In a hyperactive world, the writing of fiction – and perhaps the reading of it – must seem slow, dull, even pedestrian and oldfangled. I think there is only one way to write fiction – alone, in a room, without interruption or any distraction. Have I just described the average younger person's room? I don't think so. But the average younger person is multitasking. The rare, unusual, solitary, passionate younger person is writing a poem or a story.

You just finished a book tour: Did you find that e-reading, the varying ways of reading, are affecting your readers, or your audience, in any way?

I liked being able to say that anyone could download my work, or my Atlantic short story, on their Kindles. "You want to read me? Log on and download" – I liked leaving them no excuse. Non-readers are full of the dumbest excuses.

Do you think of yourself primarily as a novelist, or as a travel writer, or as a journalist, or none of these? What are you working on now?

I am a fiction writer, who loves traveling and has managed to make my travel into a narrative form. I am writing a novel at the moment – with my right hand. With my left hand, I am compiling an anthology of the books that have thrilled me.

Your work has been noted, perhaps unfairly, for its misanthropic view of the world. Yet in a recent NPR interview, you said that the secret to being a successful traveler is, in essence, to be polite. How do you reconcile your misanthropy (if that's a fair characterization) with your politeness?

I am probably a crank, as most writers are. But far from being a misanthrope, I hold the view that you get through life best by understanding that most people have it much worse than you do – really difficult lives, almost unimaginable hardship. So I grin like a dog and wander aimlessly and am grateful for my life.

The inevitable question: What's your advice for a young person who wants to grow up to become a fiction writer?

Notice how many of the Olympic athletes effusively thanked their mothers for their success? "She drove me to my practice at four in the morning," etc. Writing is not figure skating or skiing. Your mother will not make you a writer. My advice to any young person who wants to write is: leave home. ♦

A Death on Facebook

by *Kate Bolick*

I MET SUSAN SEVERAL years ago, when she was hired by the magazine where I worked as an editor. She was an assistant in a different department, so we had very little day-to-day contact. I somehow learned that she went to nightclubs a lot, and I once overheard her tell a colleague that she wanted to be the editor in chief of a magazine someday. It was a snippet that stayed with me, as her partying lifestyle seemed contrary to such a career goal, and for a while whenever I passed her desk I would worry over the incongruity. Eventually I found resolution in the idea of Bonnie Fuller, doyenne of celebrity journalism. That's what Susan meant, I decided: she would be an editor like Fuller, rather than someone bookish, like the legendarily reticent New Yorker editor William Shawn. She even had a haircut like Fuller's.

Eventually Susan quit the magazine. There must have been a goodbye party, with the customary boutique cupcakes and plastic Champagne flutes. Months wore on, maybe even years. Much to our collective shock, one Wednesday morning our parent company announced it was shutting down the magazine, and by Friday we no longer had jobs. At first I was intoxicated by the novelty of solitude: it was late January, a nice time of year to spend the day reading on the sofa. But in the weeks to come, I started to miss popping into colleagues' offices to get their daily romantic updates, or just making absentminded loops through the corridors, halfheartedly hunting for chocolates.

So it came to pass that I started logging on to Facebook. And, like seemingly everyone else I'd ever met, eventually Susan "friended" me. My policy has been always to accept whoever asks,

no question, and never to friend anyone myself. (In this way I maintain the fiction that I'm not an active user.) I glanced at Susan's picture – that pretty smile and Bonnie Fuller shag – clicked "confirm," and unconsciously relegated her to the vast, benign category of "friends" with whom I never interact, but who constitute a comforting background chorus.

Susan would accept no such fate. Straightaway, photos of her nightlife dominated my news feed. Her status updates were bubbly shrieks of uppercase letters and exclamation points. I considered "hiding" her – this is the function that allows you to make a friend invisible without going so far as to "defriend" her – but that seemed excessive. Susan was, after all, my envoy to an alternate universe of abandon. Twenty-five years old and barelegged in winter was a variety of fun I'd never known before.

Then, in the spring, a man – George – entered the frame. At first he appeared with other men, the whole group at a table in a bar, offering pints of beer to the camera. But quickly everyone else fell away and he emerged in photographs with Susan alone, his arm thrown around her. At first the gesture was friendly and drunk, but over time I could track the way his arm both relaxed and tightened, his hand cupping her shoulder, and see him taking possession.

It turned out that George lived in London, and in the fall Susan posted images from a visit: the couple in a crowded pub, or on a bridge at sunset. By now I habitually clicked through Susan's photo albums, a diversion far better than popping into a colleague's office for a romantic update. Here, I had the satisfaction of a love plot unfolding right in my living room, complete with revolving backdrops and the suspense inherent in a long-distance relationship. When was her next trip? Oh look, George is coming to town! At this I felt relief: I took it as evidence that he was as committed to her as she was to him.

But that was nothing compared to my delight the December morning I logged on to Facebook and was greeted by a photo of Susan and George grinning madly on an enormous gray sofa, Susan presenting the back of her hand to the camera to show off the diamond on her finger. I have never known that kind of happiness with a man. Without thinking, I started to type a note of congratulations into the comment box, but midway through I erased it and logged off. I hardly knew this person. When had I become such a voyeur?

Still, I continued to devour her fairy tale. Here George was introducing her to his parents; here she was introducing him to hers. A year had passed since Susan had friended me. We never exchanged messages, or commented on one another's postings, or saw each other in person (save for one early, awkward encounter in a furniture store, during which it took me a moment to place who she was). Yet I thought about her often, even when I wasn't on Facebook, as I would any close friend in a similar joyful circumstance. More, in fact: her news thrummed inside my chest as if it were my own. I wondered where the wedding might take place, what she would wear. Being a voyeur isn't so bad, I decided, as long as you've been invited – and you don't tell anyone.

In late January, I traveled from my Brooklyn apartment to a remote Vermont farmhouse belonging to a friend of a friend. She was leaving the country for two weeks, and I'd agreed to take care of her animals. It was a brave little house with a big, tumbledown barn and fields that sloped into forests beyond. The days were bright with snow, the nights forbiddingly dark. I had to drive 20 miles to get Internet access. But one evening I made an exciting discovery: balanced just so on a windowsill, my iPhone had snatched a stray sliver of signal and garnered 50 e-mails. News from beyond! As the messages downloaded, excruciatingly slowly, I boiled water for tea, stoked the furnace, and settled into an

armchair, pleased to see a message from a former colleague with Susan's name in the subject line: had I actually been invited to the wedding shower?

It was a mass e-mail. "It's my great displeasure to be the bearer of such horrible news, but Susan passed away on Sunday," it read. "It was very sudden and I believe it happened in her sleep. I don't have any other details; a friend of hers sent me a message via Facebook."

A loud sob broke out of me, like a bark. It was a frightening sound in that too-quiet house. I stood up, heart racing, and paced the rooms, switching on any lamp I could find. But the rooms weren't familiar to me, and their features – shelves sagging with books I'd never read; ropes of garlic garlanding a cupboard; decades of dirt caking the floor seams – only enlarged my sense of unreality. Even the smudged windows framed a night so black that I could see nothing there but my own pale face. How do you cry for someone you hardly know? And for what was I crying? Susan or her story? ♦

Hornets the size of batteries

by *Jonathan Franzen*

In the early nineties, when I reached the point of having no money at all, I began to borrow people's houses. The first house I sat belonged to a professor at my alma mater. He and his wife were afraid that their son, a student at the college, would throw parties in their absence, and so they urged me to consider the house my private and exclusive home. This was already something of a struggle, because it's in the nature of a borrowed house that its closets will be hung with someone else's bathrobes, its refrigerator glutted with someone else's condiments, its shower drain plugged with someone else's hair. And when, inevitably, the son showed up at the house and began to run around barefoot, and then invited his friends over and partied late into the night, I felt sick with powerlessness and envy. I must have been a repellent spectre of silent grievance indeed, because one morning, in the kitchen, without my having said a word, the son looked up from his bowl of cold cereal and brutally set me straight: "This is my house, Jonathan."

A few summers later, having less than no money at all, I borrowed the grand stucco house of two older friends, Ken and Joan, in Media, Pennsylvania. My orientation occurred one

evening over Martinis that Ken gently chided Joan for having "bruised" with melting ice. I sat with them on their mossy rear terrace while they enumerated, with a kind of mellow resignation, their house's problems. The foam mattress in their master bedroom was crumbling and cratered; their beautiful carpets were being reduced to dust by an apparently unstoppable moth infestation. Ken made himself a second Martini, and then, gazing up at a part of the roof that leaked during thunderstorms, he delivered a self-summation that offered me an unexpected glimpse of how I might live more happily, a vision of potential liberation from the oppressive sense of financial responsibility that my parents had bequeathed me. Holding his Martini glass at a casual angle, Ken reflected to no one in particular, "We have... always lived beyond our means."

The only thing I had to do to earn my keep in Media was mow Ken and Joan's extensive lawn. Mowing lawns has always seemed to me among the most despair-inducing of human activities, and, by way of following Ken's example of living beyond one's means, I delayed the first mowing until the grass was so long that I had to stop and empty the clippings bag every five minutes. I delayed the second mowing even longer. By the time I got around to it, the lawn had been colonized by a large clan of earth-burrowing hornets. They had bodies the size of double-A batteries and were even more aggressively proprietary than the son in the first house I'd borrowed. I called Ken and Joan at their summer house, in Vermont, and Ken told me that I needed to visit the hornet homes one by one after dark, when the inhabitants were sleeping, and pour gasoline into the burrows and set them on fire.

I knew enough to be afraid of gasoline. On the night I ventured out to the lawn with a flashlight and a gas can, I took care to recap the can after I'd poured gas into a burrow, and to take the can some distance away before returning to throw a lighted match at the hole. In a few of the holes, I heard a piteous feeble buzzing before I set off the inferno, but my empathy with the hornets was outweighed by my pyromaniac pleasure in the explosions and by the satisfaction of ridding my home of intruders. Eventually, I got careless with the gas can, not bothering to recap it between killings, and there came then, naturally, a match that refused to be lit. While I struck it on the box, again and again, and then fumbled for a better match, gasoline vapors were flowing invisibly back down the slope toward where I'd left the can. When I finally managed to ignite the burrow and run down the slope, I found myself pursued and overtaken by a river of flame. It expired just short of the can, but it was an hour before I could stop shaking. I'd nearly burned myself out of a home, and the home wasn't even mine. However modest my means were, it was seeming preferable, after all, to live within them. I never house-sat again. ♦

A Month in Cuba

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 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 – 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.

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
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). 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 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 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 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, 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 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 shop-

ping. 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. 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. After exchanging my money, 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. 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 fl our 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.

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.

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 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, budgetbusting 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 tourist s 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. ♦

Side by...

The Circus at Luxor

by *V.S. Naipaul*

I WAS GOING TO EGYPT, this time by air, and I broke my journey at Milan. I did so for business reasons. But it was Christmas week, not a time for business, and I had to stay in Milan over the holidays. The weather was bad, the hotel empty and desolate.

Returning through the rain to the hotel one evening, after a restaurant dinner, I saw two Chinese men in dark-blue suits come out of the hotel dining-room. Fellow Asiatics, the three of us, I thought, wanderers in industrial Europe. But they didn't glance at me. They had companions: three more Chinese came out of the dining-room, two young men in suits, a fresh-complexioned young woman in a flowered tunic and slacks. Then five more Chinese came out, healthy young men and women; then about a dozen. Then I couldn't count. Chinese poured out of the dining-room and swirled about the spacious carpeted lobby before moving in a slow, softly chattering mass up the steps.

There must have been about a hundred Chinese. It was minutes before the lobby emptied. The waiters, serving-napkins in hand, stood in the door of the dining-room and watched, like people able at last to acknowledge an astonishment. Two more Chinese came out of the dining-room; they were the last. They were both short, elderly men wrinkled and stringy, with glasses.

...by side

Cirkusz Luxorban

fordította *Tárnok Attila*

EGYIPTOMBA TARTOTTAM, de üzleti okokból Milánóban megszakítottam a repülőutat. Karácsony hete volt, üzleti ügyek elintézésére alkalmatlan időszak, így Milánóban kellett kivárnom az ünnepek végét. Csúf időt fogtam ki, a szálloda sivár és elhagyatott volt.

Egy esős este, amikor vacsora után hazaindultam, két sötét öltönyös kínait pillantottam meg, amint kilépnek a szálloda éttерméből. Ázsiaiak mint én, gondoltam, hárman bolyongunk az iparosodott Európában. De ők nem néztek rám, és mint kiderült, nem magukban voltak. További három kínai került elő az étteremből, két fiatalember, szintén öltönyben és egy halványbőrű fiatal nő virágmintás tunikában, és nadrágban. Őket másik öt fiatal kínai, egészséges nők és férfiak, aztán még vagy egy tucat, aztán már meg sem tudtam számolni őket. Megtöltötték a tágas, szőnyeg borította előcsarnokot, és lassan, beszélgetve indultak felfelé a lépcsőn.

Legalább százan voltak, percekig tartott, amíg a hall kiürült. A pincérek, karjukon fehér kendő, az étterem ajtajában állva úgy bámultak, mint akik csak kis késéssel fogják fel, milyen meglepetésben volt részük. Utoljára még két kínai került elő az étteremből. Alacsony, idősödő férfiak; ráncosak, inasak, szemüvegesek. Egyikük egy tömött pénztárcát tartott apró kezében, de ügyetle-

One of them held a fat wallet in his small hand but awkwardly as though the responsibility made him nervous. The waiters straightened up. Not attempting style, puzzling over the Italian notes, the old Chinese with the wallet tipped, thanked and shook hands with each waiter. Then both the Chinese bowed and got into the lift. And the hotel lobby was desolate again.

'They are the circus,' the dark-suited desk-clerk said. He was as awed as the waiters. '*Vengono dalla Cina rossa.* They come from Red China.'

I LEFT MILAN in snow. In Cairo, in the derelict cul-de-sac behind my hotel, children in dingy jibbahs, feeble from their daylong Ramadan fasting, played football in the white, warm dust. In cafés, shabbier than I remembered, Greek and Lebanese businessmen in suits read the local French and English newspapers and talked with sullen excitement about the deals that might be made in Rhodesian tobacco, now that it was outlawed. The Museum was still haunted by Egyptian guides possessing only native knowledge. And on the other bank of the Nile there was a new Hilton hotel.

But Egypt still had her revolution. Street signs were now in Arabic alone; people in tobacco kiosks reacted sharply, as to an insult, when they were asked for *Egyptian* cigarettes; and in the railway station, when I went to get the train south, there was a reminder of the wars that had come with the revolution. Sunburnt soldiers, back from duty in Sinai, crouched and sprawled on the floor of the waiting-room. These men with shrunken faces were the guardians of the land and the revolution; but to Egyptians they were only common soldiers, peasants, objects of a disregard that was older and more rooted than the revolution.

All day the peasant land rolled past the windows of the train:

nül bánt vele, mint akit nyomaszt a felelősség. A pincérek kihúzták magukat. A pénztárcás öreg minden modorosság nélkül, kissé tétovázva az olasz bankjegyek fölött, borravalót nyújtott át és megköszönve a kiszolgálást kezet rázott mindegyik pincérrel. Aztán mind a ketten meghajoltak és beszálltak a liftbe. Az előcsarnok újra kiürült.

– Ez egy cirkusz – jegyezte meg a sötét öltönyös recepciós. Ő is, mint minden pincér, elámult a közjátékon. – Vengono dalla Cina rossa. A vörös Kínából jöttek.

MIKOR ELJÖTTEM Milánóból, havazott. Kairóban, a hotel mögötti elhagyatott zsákutcában, kopott kaftánt, dzsibát viselő, az egész napos böjtöléstől eltompult gyerekek fociztak a fehér, meleg porban (még tartott a ramadán). A kávézókban, melyek kopottabbak voltak, mint ahogy emlékeimben éltek, görög és libanoni üzletemberek a helyi francia és angol nyelvű napilapokat olvasgatták és lankadt lelkesedéssel azt latolgatták, milyen lehetőségek rejlenek a rhodesiai dohányban most, hogy betiltották. A Múzeum még mindig egyiptomi idegenvezetők törzshelye volt, akik a helyismereten kívül semmiről sem tudtak. A Nílus túlsó partján egy új Hilton szálloda nyílt.

De Egyiptomban még mindig polgárháború dúlt. Az utcatáblákon csak arab nyelvű feliratok álltak, a dohányárus, mintha zaklatnák, túl élesen reagált, ha az ember egyiptomi cigarettát kért, és a vasútállomáson, amikor délre utaztam, még mindig találkoztam a forradalmat kísérő harcok jeleivel. Napbarnított katonák guggoltak, hevertek a váróterem kövén, nemrég érkezhettek haza szolgálatból a Sínai-félszigetről. Ezek a nyúzott arcú emberek voltak a forradalom rendfenntartói, de a helyi lakosok szemében egyszerűen csak katonák voltak, földművesek, megvetettek, s ez a megvetés mélyebben gyökerezett, mint a forrada-

the muddy river, the green fields, the desert, the black mud, the *shadouf,* the choked and crumbling flat-roofed towns the colour of dust: the Egypt of the school geography book. The sun set in a smoky sky; the land felt old. It was dark when I left the train at Luxor. Later that evening I went to the temple of Karnak. It was a good way of seeing it for the first time, in the darkness, separate from the distress of Egypt: those extravagant columns, ancient in ancient times, the work of men of this Nile Valley.

THERE WAS NO COIN in Egypt that year, only paper money. All foreign currencies went far; and Luxor, in recent imperial days a winter resort of some style, was accommodating itself to simpler tourists. At the Old Winter Palace Hotel, where fat Negro servants in long white gowns stood about in the corridors, they told me they were giving me the room they used to give the Aga Khan. It was an enormous room, overfurnished in a pleasing old-fashioned way. It had a balcony and a view of the Nile and low desert hills on the other bank.

In those hills were the tombs. Not all were of kings and not all were solemn. The ancient artist, recording the life of a lesser personage, sometimes recorded with a freer hand the pleasures of that life: the pleasures of the river, full of fish and birds, the pleasures of food and drink. The land had been studied, everything in it categorized, exalted into design. It was the special vision of men who knew no other land and saw what they had as rich and complete. The muddy Nile was only water: in the paintings, a blue-green chevron: recognizable, but remote, a river in fairyland.

It could be hot in the tombs. The guide, who was also sometimes the watchman, crouched and chattered in Arabic, earning his paper piastres, pointing out every symbol of the goddess

lom.

Megművelt területek suhantak el egész nap a vonatablak előtt. Iszapos folyómeder, zöld mezők, a sivatag, fekete sár, a shadouf, fuldokló és düledező, lapos tetős, poros városok: az iskolai földrajzkönyvek Egyiptoma. A füstfelhőbe vesző naplementében az ország évszázados fáradtság benyomását keltette. Amikor Luxorban kiszálltam a vonatból, már sötétedett. Késő este a karnaki templomot kerestem fel. Jó volt így, Egyiptom nyomorától elszakítva, a sötétben látni először a Nílus-völgyi emberek munkáját, a különleges, már az ősi időkben is ősinek számító oszlopokat.

ABBAN AZ ÉVBEN Egyiptomban nem használtak fémpénzt, csak bankjegyeket. A külföldi befektetők kimenekítették a pénzüket, és még az éppen letűnt birodalmi kor közkedvelt téli turistacélpontja, Luxor is az egyszerűbb utazóknak nyújtott kikapcsolódást. A Régi Téli Palota nevű szállodában, hosszú fehér köntösben a folyosókon ácsorgó, kövér néger személyzet a tudtomra adta, azt a szobát bérelhetem, ahol azelőtt személyesen Aga Khan szállt meg. Óriási, bútorokkal zsúfolt szoba volt, de kellemes, régies hangulatú. Terasza a Nílusra és a túlsó part alacsony, sivatagos dombjaira nézett.

A síremlékek a dombok alatt húzódtak, de nem csak a királyoké, és nem mindegyikük volt ünnepélyes. Az ősi művész, aki alacsonyabb rangú személyiségek életét örökítette meg, gyakran szabadabban dolgozott: az élet örömeit formázta meg, a madarak látogatta és haltól hemzsegő folyó bőségét, az evés-ivás örömeit. A világ egészét ábrázolta, benne mindent a maga helyére tett, a megszerkesztettség szintjére emelt. Munkája olyan művész látásmódját tükrözte, aki nem ismert más kultúrát, a sajátját azonban gazdagnak és teljesnek élte meg. Az iszapos

Hathor, rubbing a grimy finger on the paintings he was meant to protect. Outside, after the darkness and the bright visions of the past, there was rubbled white sand; the sunlight stunned; and sometimes there were beggar boys in jibbahs.

To me these boys, springing up expectantly out of rock and sand when men approached, were like a type of sand animal. But my driver knew some of them by name; when he shooed them away it was with a languid gesture which also contained a wave. He was a young man, the driver, of the desert himself and once no doubt he had been a boy in a jibbah. But he had grown up differently. He wore trousers and shirt and was vain of his good looks. He was reliable and correct, without the frenzy of the desert guide. Somehow in the desert he had learned boredom. His thoughts were of Cairo and a real job. He was bored with the antiquities, the tourists and the tourist routine.

I was spending the whole of that day in the desert, and now it was time for lunch. I had a Winter Palace lunch-box, and I had seen somewhere in the desert the new government rest-house where tourists could sit at tables and eat their sandwiches and buy coffee. I thought the driver was taking me there. But we went by unfamiliar ways to a little oasis with palm trees and a large, dried-up timber hut. There were no cars, no minibuses, no tourists, only anxious Egyptian serving-people in rough clothes. I didn't want to stay. The driver seemed about to argue, but then he was only bored. He drove to the new rest-house, set me down and said he would come back for me later.

The rest-house was crowded. Sunglassed tourists, exploring their cardboard lunch-boxes, chattered in various European languages. I sat on the terrace at a table with two young Germans. A brisk middle-aged Egyptian in Arab dress moved among the tables and served coffee. He had a camel-whip at his waist, and I saw, but only slowly, that for some way around the rest-

Nílus vize a képeken kékes-zöldes sáv: felismerhető, de távoli, elvarázsolt folyó.

A sírkamrákban nagyon meleg tudott lenni. Az idegenvezetők, akik gyakorta az őrök szerepét is betöltötték, guggolva arabul társalogtak, Hathor istennő szimbólumait magyarázták, és koszos ujjaikkal végigsimítottak a falfestményen, melyet amúgy feladatuk lett volna megóvni. Így kerestek néhány piasztert, papírpénzben. A szabadban a múlt nagyszerű víziói és a sötétség után csak a fehér homok maradt, a szemkápráztató napfény és néha egy-egy kéregető gyerek dzsibában.

A szememben ezek a kölykök – akik nyomban előugrottak a kövek és homokbuckák takarásából, ha turisták közeledtek – sivatagi állatkáknak tűntek. De a sofőröm némelyiket név szerint ismerte, és olyan ernyedt kézmozdulattal hessgette el őket, amely integetésnek is beillett volna. Fiatal volt még ő is, a sivatagban született, és semmi kétség, egykor ő is dzsibát viselt, de felnőttként megváltozott. Nadrágban és ingben járt, és kényes volt az öltözködésére. Megbízható, korrekt embernek ismertem meg, a sivatagi idegenvezetők túlbuzgósága nem volt jellemző rá. A sivatagban valahogy megtanult unatkozni. Kairóról és egy rendes állásról álmodozott, elege volt már az ősi emlékhelyekből és a turistákból.

Egész nap a sivatagot jártuk. Az ebédidő közeledtével azt gondoltam, a sofőr elvisz majd abba a kis étterembe, ahol korábban szendvicseket majszoló és kávézgató turistákkal találkoztunk. A hotelben én is kaptam élelemcsomagot. Ám ismeretlen úton egy pálmák övezte, kis oázishoz értünk. A kiszáradt rönkházban nem voltak turisták, a környékén nem parkoltak autók, mikrobuszok, csak a közönséges öltözetű egyiptomi kiszolgáló személyzet várt. Nem volt kedvem itt maradni. A sofőr először vitatkozni akart, de aztán unottan az új étteremhez vitt, és meghagyta, hogy később visszajön értem.

house the hummocked sand was alive with little desert children. The desert was clean, the air was dean; these children were very dirty.

The rest-house was out of bounds to them. When they came close, tempted by the offer of a sandwich or an apple, the man with the camel-whip gave a camel-frightening shout. Sometimes he ran out among them, beating the sand with his whip, and they skittered away, thin little sand-smoothed legs frantic below swinging jibbahs. There was no rebuke for the tourists who had offered the food; this was an Egyptian game with Egyptian rules.

It was hardly a disturbance. The young Germans at my table paid no attention. The English students inside the rest-house, behind glass, were talking competitively about Carter and Lord Carnarvon. But the middle-aged Italian group on the terrace, as they understood the rules of the game, became playful. They threw apples and made the children run far. Experimentally they broke up sandwiches and threw the pieces out onto the sand; and they got the children to come up quite close. Soon it was all action around the Italians; and the man with the camel-whip, like a man understanding what was required of him, energetically patrolled that end of the terrace, shouting, beating the sand, earning his paper piastres.

A tall Italian in a cerise jersey stood up and took out his camera. He laid out food just below the terrace and the children came running. But this time as though it had to be real for the camera, the camel-whip fell not on sand but on their backs, with louder, quicker camel-shouts. And still, among the tourists in the rest-house and among the Egyptian drivers standing about their cars and minibuses, there was no disturbance. Only the man with the whip and the children scrabbling in the sand were frantic. The Italians were cool. The man in the cerise jersey was opening another packet of sandwiches. A shorter, older man in a white

Az étterem zsúfolásig telt. Napszemüveges turisták kutattak az enyémhez hasonló élelemcsomagok kartondobozai közt, és különböző európai nyelveken társalogtak. A teraszon ültem le, két német fiatalember asztalához. Egy arab öltözetű, középkorú egyiptomi fürgén járkált az asztalok körül, és kávét szolgált fel. Derekára kötve egy teveostor lógott, és csak később vettem észre, hogy az étterem környékén, tisztes távolságban a homokdombok körül sivatagi gyerekek nyüzsögnek. A sivatag és a levegő tiszta volt, a gyerekek pedig nagyon koszosak.

Az étterem tiltott terület volt a számukra. Ha egy szendvics vagy egy alma csábítására túl közel merészkedtek, az ostoros ember tevéket riogató kiáltást hallatott. Néha kiszaladt közéjük, az ostorral a homokra csapott, és a gyerekek szétrebbentek, remegő, homokcsiszolta lábaik körül hullámzott a dzsiba. A gyerekeket szendviccsel csalogató turistákra nem szólt senki. Egyiptomi közjáték zajlott, egyiptomi szabályokkal.

A turistákat mindez nem zavarta. A két német az asztalomnál oda se figyelt, az angol egyetemisták az étterem üveggel leválasztott belső részében Carter és Lord Carnarvon ásatásairól vitatkoztak. Ám ült a teraszon egy középkorú olaszok alkotta csoport, ők, amint megértették a játék szabályait, szórakozni kezdtek. Almát dobáltak jó távolra, hogy a gyerekek érte fussanak. Azután feldarabolt szendvicset hajítottak a homokba, amivel rábírták a kölyköket, hogy egész közel jöjjenek. Hamarosan megpezsdült az olaszok körül az élet. Az ostoros pincér pedig, mint aki érti, mit várnak el tőle, a terasznak csak ezen a sarkán őrködött, kiáltozott, csapdosta a homokot és keresett néhány piasztert, papírpénzben.

Egy élénkpiros sportmezt viselő magas olasz felállt, és elővette a fényképezőgépét. Közvetlenül a terasz lábánál helyezett el ételt, a gyerekek odaszaladtak. De ezúttal, mintegy a fénykép kedvéért, az ostor nem a homokra csapott, hanem a gyerekek

suit had stood up and was adjusting his camera. More food was thrown out; the camel-whip continued to fall; the shouts of the man with the whip turned to resonant grunts.

Still the Germans at my table didn't notice; the students inside were still talking. I saw that my hand was trembling. I put down the sandwich I was eating on the metal table; it was my last decision. Lucidity, and anxiety, came to me only when I was almost on the man with the camel-whip. I was shouting. I took the whip away, threw it on the sand. He was astonished, relieved. I said, 'I will report this to Cairo.' He was frightened; he began to plead in Arabic. The children were puzzled; they ran off a little way and stood up to watch. The two Italians, fingering cameras, looked quite calm behind their sunglasses. The women in the party leaned back in their chairs to consider me.

I felt exposed, futile, and wanted only to be back at my table. When I got back I took up my sandwich. It had happened quickly; there bad been no disturbance. The Germans stared at me. But I was indifferent to them now as I was indifferent to the Italian in the cerise jersey. The Italian women had stood up, the group was leaving; and he was ostentatiously shaking out lunch-boxes and sandwich wrappers onto the sand.

The children remained where they were. The man from whom I had taken the whip came to give me coffee and to plead again in Arabic and English. The coffee was free; it was his gift to me. But even while he was talking the children had begun to come closer. Soon they would be back, raking the sand for what they had seen the Italian throw out.

Ididn't want to see that. The driver was waiting, leaning against the car door, his bare arms crossed. He had seen all that had happened. From him, an emancipated young man of the desert in belted trousers and sports shirt, with his thoughts of Cairo, I was expecting some gesture, some sign of approval. He

hátát érte, és még hangosabb kiáltás hangzott. A közjáték még mindig nem vonta magára az étterem turistáinak figyelmét, az autók és mikrobuszok árnyékában ácsorgó egyiptomi sofőrök sem néztek oda. Csak az ostoros pincér és a homokban bukdácsoló gyerekek lettek izgatottak, és az olaszok felhőtlen jókedvvel élvezték a kialakult helyzetet. A piros mezes még egy szendvicset csomagolt elő. Egy fehér öltönyös, alacsonyabb, idősebb ember is felállt és fényképezőgépe beállításán igazított. Ételdarabok repültek, az ostor csapkodott, a pincér kiáltozása morgolódássá folyt egybe.

Német asztalszomszédaim még mindig nem észleltek semmit, bent az egyetemisták továbbra is hevesen polemizáltak. Észrevettem, hogy remeg a kezem. Letettem a szendvicset a fém asztallapra, ez volt az utolsó döntés, amire emlékszem. Csak akkor tisztult a fejemben a gőz, amikor már majdnem az ostoros pincérhez léptem. Kiabálva téptem ki a kezéből az ostort és a homokra vetettem. Arcán meglepettség és megkönnyebbülés ült.

– Fel fogom jelenteni Kairóban!

Megijedt, arabul kezdett mentegetőzni, a gyerekek nem értették a dolgot, egy kicsit odébb szaladtak és onnan figyeltek felénk. A két olasz a fényképezőgépével matatott, a napszemüveg takarásában nyugodtnak látszottak. A társaság nőtagjai hátradőltek a székükön és engem méregettek.

Kiszolgáltatottnak éreztem magam, amit tettem hiábavaló volt, hamar vissza akartam jutni valahogy az asztalomhoz. Mikor leültem, újra a kezembe vettem a szendvicset. Minden pillanatokon belül történt, senkit nem zavart meg. A németek rám bámultak, de én közönyt éreztem feléjük, ahogy most már közömbös volt számomra a piros mezes olasz is. Az olasz nők felálltak, a társaság indulni készült. A sportmezes tüntetőleg a homokba rázta a dobozokból a maradékot.

A gyerekek nem mozdultak. A pincér, akitől elvettem az os-

smiled at me with the corners of his wide mouth, with his narrow eyes. He crushed his cigarette in the sand and slowly breathed out smoke through his lips; he sighed. But that was his way of smoking. I couldn't tell what he thought. He was as correct as before, he looked as bored.

Everywhere I went that afternoon I saw the pea-green Volkswagen minibus of the Italian group. Everywhere I saw the cerise jersey. I learned to recognize the plump, squiffy, short-stepped walk that went with it, the dark glasses, the receding hairline, the little stiff swing of the arms. At the ferry I thought I had managed to escape; but the minibus arrived, the Italians got out. I thought we would separate on the Luxor bank. But they too were staying at the Winter Palace. The cerise jersey bobbed confidently through bowing Egyptian servants in the lobby, the bar, the grand dining-room with fresh flowers and intricately folded napkins. In Egypt that year there was only paper money.

I stayed for a day or two on the Luxor bank. Dutifully, I saw Karnak by moonlight. When I went back to the desert I was anxious to avoid the rest-house. The driver understood. Without any show of triumph he took me when the time came to the timber hut among the palm trees. They were doing more business that day. There were about four or five parked minibuses. Inside, the hut was dark, cool and uncluttered. A number of tables had been joined together; and at this central dining-board there were about forty or fifty Chinese, men and women, chattering softly. They were part of the circus I had seen in Milan.

The two elderly Chinese sat together at one end of the long table, next to a small, finely made lady who looked just a little too old to be an acrobat. I had missed her in the crowd in Milan. Again, when the time came to pay, the man with the fat wallet used his hands awkwardly. The lady spoke to the Egyptian waiter. He called the other waiters and they all formed a line. For each

tort, odajött hozzám, kávét töltött és újra mentegetőzni kezdett, ezúttal arabul és angolul. A kávét ingyen adta. Amíg beszélt hozzám, a gyerekek közelebb merészkedtek, és hamarosan szedegetni kezdték, amit az olasz a homokba szórt.

Erre nem voltam kíváncsi. Sofőröm a kocsi ajtajának támaszkodott, csupasz karját keresztbe fonta. Mindent látott. Tőle, a sportos inget, nadrágot és derékszíjat viselő, Kairóról álmodozó emancipált egyiptomitól elvártam volna némi egyetértést, valami gesztust. Vastag ajkával, keskeny szemével rám mosolygott. Eltaposta a cigarettáját a homokban és lassan, szuszogva eresztette ki a füstöt. De mindig így dohányzott, nem tudhattam, mire gondol. Ugyanolyan korrekt és unott maradt, mint korábban.

Bárhová mentünk is aznap délután, mindenhol láttam az olaszok borsózöld Volkswagen mikrobuszát. Mindenütt feltűnt az élénkpiros mez. Lassanként már a távolból is felismertem emberem lomha, imbolygó, apró lépteit, sötét szemüvegét, a gyérülő hajvonalát, a karok kissé merev hintázását. A kompnál már azt hittem, megmenekültem, de befutott a mikrobusz, és kiszálltak belőle az olaszok. No, majd a luxori oldalon elválnak útjaink, gondoltam, azonban ők is a Téli Palotában szálltak meg. A piros mez magabiztosan mozgott az előcsarnokban hajlongó egyiptomi személyzet, a bár, az előkelő étterem friss, vágott virágai és rafináltan hajtogatott szalvétái között. Egyiptomban abban az évben csak papírpénz volt forgalomban.

Egy-két napot maradtam még Luxorban. Kötelességszerűen megnéztem Karnak templomát holdfényben. Amikor visszatértem a sivatagba, messziről elkerültem az éttermet. A sofőr megértő volt. Anélkül, hogy győzelemérzetét kimutatta volna, a pálmák övezte rönkházhoz vitt. Aznap több vendég volt, négyöt mikrobusz parkolt a környéken. A házban hűs félhomály, kevés bútor. Középen összetolták az asztalokat, körülöttük

waiter the lady had a handshake and gifts, money, something in an envelope, a medal. The ragged waiters stood stiffly, with serious averted faces, like soldiers being decorated. Then all the Chinese rose and, chattering, laughing softly, shuffled out of the echoing hut with their relaxed, slightly splayed gait. They didn't look at me; they appeared scarcely to notice the hut. They were as cool and well-dressed in the desert, the men in suits, the girls in slacks, as they had been in the rain of Milan. So self-contained, so handsome and healthy, so silently content with one another: it was hard to think of them as sightseers.

The waiter, his face still tense with pleasure, showed the medal on his dirty striped jibbah. It had been turned out from a mould that had lost its sharpness; but the ill-defined face was no doubt Chinese and no doubt that of the leader. In the envelope were pretty coloured postcards of Chinese peonies.

Peonies, China! So many empires had come here. Not far from where we were was the colossus on whose shin the Emperor Hadrian had caused to be carved verses in praise of himself, to commemorate his visit. On the other bank, not far from the Winter Palace, was a stone with a rougher Roman inscription marking the southern limit of the Empire, defining an area of retreat. Now another, more remote empire was announcing itself. A medal, a postcard; and all that was asked in return was anger and a sense of injustice.

PERHAPS THAT HAD BEEN the only pure time, at the beginning, when the ancient artist, knowing no other land, had learned to look at his own and had seen it as complete. But it was hard, travelling back to Cairo, looking with my stranger's eye at the fields and the people who worked in them, the dusty towns, the agitated peasant crowds at railway stations, it was hard to

negyven-ötven kínai üldögélt csendesen beszélgetve. A Milánóban látott cirkuszi csoport tagjai lehettek.

A két idősebb kínait egy hosszú asztal végénél pillantottam meg egy filigrán hölgy társaságában, aki mintha már kiöregedett volna az akrobata életkorból. A milánói csoportból nem emlékeztem rá. Amikor fizetésre került a sor, a tömött pénztárcás ember megint ügyetlenül bajlódott a bankjegyekkel. A hölgy szólt az egyik egyiptomi pincérnek, aki odahívta a kollégáit, és felsorakoztak. A hölgy minden pincérrel kezet fogott és ajándékot nyújtott át, egy borítékot, talán pénzt, egy medált. A bozontos pincérek mereven és komoly testtartással álltak, mint az olyan katonák, akik kitüntetésben részesülnek, a tekintetüket félrefordították. Aztán a többi kínai is felállt és halkan duruzsolva, nevetgélve, könnyed, botladozó léptekkel kiszállingóztak a visszhangos rönkházból. Nem néztek rám, aligha vettek tudomást a többi vendégről. Öltözetük ugyanolyan kifogástalan – a férfiak öltönyben, a nők nadrágban –, mint Milánóban, az esőben. Olyan tartózkodóak, olyan jó külsejűek és egészségesek voltak, egymás felé olyan csöndes elégedettséget sugároztak, hogy az ember alig hitte el róluk: turisták.

Az egyik pincér – arca még mindig ragyogott a büszkeségtől – csíkos, koszos dzsibájára tűzte a medált. Az színét vesztett agyagból egy kínai arcot mintázott, semmi kétség a cirkuszigazgatóét. A borítékban élénk színű, kínai rózsát ábrázoló képeslapok voltak.

Rózsák, Kína! Birodalmak találkozása. Tőlünk nem messze állt az a szoborkolosszus, amelynek lábszárára Hadrianus császár látogatása alkalmából verset vésetett. A folyó túlsó partján, a Téli Palota nevű szálloda környékén egy kőtábla kevésbé finom kidolgozású római felirata az egykori birodalom déli limesét, a visszavonulás határpontját hirdette. Most egy távolabbi, másik birodalom éreztette jelenlétét. Egy medál, egy képeslap és

believe that there had been such innocence. Perhaps that vision of the land, in which the Nile was only water, a blue-green chevron, had always been a fabrication, a cause for yearning, something for the tomb.

The air-conditioning in the coach didn't work well; but that might have been because the two Negro attendants, still with the habits of the village, preferred to sit before the open doors to chat. Sand and dust blew in all day; it was hot until the sun set and everything went black against the red sky. In the dimly lit waiting-room of Cairo station there were more sprawled soldiers from Sinai, peasants in bulky woollen uniforms going back on leave to their villages. Seventeen months later these men, or men like them, were to know total defeat in the desert; and news photographs taken from helicopters flying down low were to show them lost, trying to walk back home, casting long shadows on the sand. ♦

mindennek ellenértéke csupán harag és az igazságtalanság érzete.

TALÁN AZ VOLT CSAK a tiszta kor, amikor az ősi művész, más világot nem ismervén, megtanulta szemlélni a sajátját és azt teljesnek érezte. Amikor visszaindultam Kairóba, nehéz volt nekem is így tekinteni a földekre, a hajlongó emberekre, a poros városokra, az izgatott földművesek tömegére az állomásokon, nehéz volt idegen szemmel elképzelni, hogy valaha létezett az ártatlanság kora. Talán az a szemlélet, amelyben a Nílus csupán egy kékeszöld sáv, tiszta víz, talán ez mindig is csak fantázia volt, a vágy tárgya, amit csupán a síremlékek kedvéért ábrázoltak így.

A buszban nem működött a klímaberendezés. De talán ez sem igaz, hiszen a két néger kísérő, a falvakból magával hozott szokás szerint jobban szeretett a nyitott ajtóban üldögélve beszélgetni. A homok és a por beáramlott a buszba és egész nap nagy volt a hőség, míg csak le nem szállt az este és fekete nem lett minden a vörös ég alatt. A kairói váróterem félhomályában még több katona hevert a Sínai-félszigetről hazatérőben, a gyapjútakarókba burkolózó földművesek szabadságuk idejére látogattak haza a falujukba. Tizenhét hónappal később ezek az emberek, vagy épp ilyenek mint ők, totális vereséget szenvedtek a sivatagban. Alacsonyan szálló helikopterekből lefényképezték őket, amint irányt veszítve próbálnak hazatalálni: alakjuk hosszú árnyékot vet a homokon. ♦