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# Reader's Digest

72ND YEAR

MAY 1993

An article a day of enduring significance, in condensed permanent booklet form

## DRAMA IN REAL LIFE®

His daring attempt to rescue his family would be a  
contest of love against evil

# Rendezvous in Cuba

BY PETER MICHELMORE

**I**N THE EARLY TWILIGHT, Orestes Lorenzo, 36, switched on the ignition of the green-and-white aircraft and spoke into his radio microphone: "Cessna 5819 X. Departing runway. Heading south."

Orestes needed no clearance to take off from the little airport in Marathon, Fla., but he wanted to alert other pilots of his position. On this Saturday, December 19, 1992, he could not afford a single mistake.

Accelerating the twin-engine six-seater, he took off, climbing to 1000 feet. A map of the north coast of Cuba was spread across his lap.

*I'm too happy to be nervous, he thought. It had been 21 months since he had seen his wife, Vicky, and their two sons, Reyniel, 11, and Alejandro, six. Soon, if his plan worked, the months of utter desolation would end.*

"It's a suicide mission," a friend had warned. If Cuban radar spotted him, rockets or MiG warplanes would shoot him down. An informer might have caught wind of his plan, and he could be flying into a trap. His fate then was certain. *If they catch me, they kill me.*

His worst fear, however, was that



Vicky and the boys might not be at the rendezvous. Fingering the rosary around his neck, Orestes prayed, "Please God, let them be there."

Entering Cuban airspace, Orestes switched off the wing-tip lights and eased the Cessna toward the sea. Flying ten feet above the waves to avoid Cuban radar, he leveled the aircraft. Thirty minutes into the flight, he saw the silhouette of the city of Matanzas on the horizon. Soon he made out the road that ran east from the city, and the bridge where the road crossed the Canimar River. *That's my mark.*

Now he climbed to 100 feet, banking to line up with the road. Ahead he saw his landing site: a new, two-lane highway that branched off the old road. Vicky and the boys, wearing bright orange shirts and caps, should be waiting by the roadside a half-mile in. He had allowed only a single minute for landing and takeoff.

A high, rocky hill loomed off the Cessna's right wing, blocking his view. In an instant, Orestes realized that unless he climbed hundreds of feet, he wouldn't be able to see if his fam-

ily was there until he made the turn toward the new highway. *There is no time*, he thought. Praying again for God to deliver his wife and boys, he lowered his wheels. *I've got only one shot at this. It's all or nothing.* He roared around the hill at 100 miles an hour, his wheels barely 12 feet above the highway. What he saw then made his heart jump.

ORESTES HAD LAST HELD his slender wife in his arms on a warm morn-

ing in March 1991, when they stood outside their apartment building at Cuba's Santa Clara air-force base. "Wait for news from me," he whispered into her soft brown hair. "If you are not able to leave, I will be back for you. I may come in a balloon, a plane, a boat, or swimming," he said. "But I'll be back."

Maj. Orestes Lorenzo, deputy base commander, then strode off for what was scheduled as a rou-

tine flight in a Soviet-made MiG-23 attack bomber.

This time, the major set his course north. Eighteen minutes later, he circled the Key West naval air station on Boca Chica Key three times with wings wagging. Immediately on landing, Orestes climbed out of the cockpit and said in Spanish to a group of curious airmen: "I ask

ILLUSTRATION: DAN BURR



for political asylum and protection."

He heard his request translated to an officer, and was fearful he would be led off to prison. But a smile spread over the officer's face. "Welcome to the United States," he said in words that needed no translation.

AT THE SANTA CLARA air-force base, security officers stormed Vicky's apartment and denounced Orestes as a traitor. Calmly, Vicky denied any knowledge of her husband's plan to defect. The next day, a state psychologist came by. "Your husband betrayed the revolution," the woman said heatedly. "He betrayed you. He'll have other women now. He'll get married again."

Vicky replied: "You have no understanding of what love means."

Vicky had been 18 and deeply in love when she married Orestes in 1976. But later, her husband's duties as a combat pilot in Angola meant long absences. In 1986, he was assigned to a four-year course near Moscow. Vicky, Reyniel and baby Alejandro joined him, and finally they had extended time together.

As he lost his heart to his family, Orestes questioned the loyalty to the revolution that had been hammered into him since boyhood. When he was seven years old, his father, an education-ministry official, tested him with a question: "What would you think if your mother and I decided to leave for the United States?" Little Orestes had dutifully replied, "I would rather you both die than be traitors to the fatherland." Now his

own son Reyniel was seven, and Orestes cringed at the thought of those same words on his young lips.

During their time in Moscow, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms were finally unmasking communism's failure. Orestes hoped for change in Fidel Castro's repressive communism when the family returned home in July 1990. Instead, Cuba was more rigid than ever.

"How can I tolerate it when my children can't think the way they want?" he said bitterly to Vicky. "I can't stand aside any longer."

"Then you must leave," she said.

Orestes plotted his escape, hoping that, if he made it to America, Castro would let his family join him. Hadn't Cuba repeatedly stated that people wanting to leave the island could do so if they had visas from another country? But Orestes had only fallen for another Castro lie.

Less than three months after Orestes defected, Vicky received official U.S. documents by mail, approving issuance of a visa. She presented them at the Cuban immigration department in Havana. "Permission to leave is denied," an official said icily. "Your husband had the guts to fly off in a MiG to America. Now let's see if he has the guts to come back and get you."

Living with her parents in a suburb of Havana, Vicky was kept under constant police watch. Telephone calls from Orestes were intercepted and sometimes cut off.

IN OCTOBER 1991, seven months after defecting, Orestes tried to embarrass

Castro into letting his family go. In shortwave broadcasts to Havana, he accused the dictator of holding them hostage. "It's an attitude of vengeance against two small children," he said.

Orestes won the support of the Valladares Foundation, a human-rights organization chaired by Armando Valladares, who had been a political prisoner in Castro's brutal prisons for 22 years. Co-chairman Elena Amos and director Kristina Arriaga took on Orestes's cause as their own.

When Castro visited Madrid last July, Orestes went too, and began a seven-day hunger strike, chaining himself to one of the main gates of the city. The dramatic appeal had no effect on Castro. Neither did a direct appeal to Gorbachev.

Orestes began flying lessons in propeller aircraft. "I must fly to Cuba to get my family myself," he told Arriaga.

IN CUBA, Vicky could sense the noose tightening. A man came to the apartment one day and murmured, "I can get a boat. I can get you out of here."

Vicky knew the penalty for attempting to escape the island: three years' imprisonment. If caught, she would lose the boys to the state. It was exactly what Castro wanted—to avenge Orestes's defection. "I will never leave illegally," she said. Her visitor stomped out, and Vicky felt her hands shaking. She had escaped a trap.

Another visitor brought a message that made Vicky's heart beat

faster. Virginia Gonzalez, a member of a Mexican advocacy group for the mentally ill, had traveled with friends to Cuba once before, bringing Vicky food and medicine from Orestes. This time she brought something more from him: a hand-drawn map of his intended landing spot and a code to use on the telephone.

The next day Vicky, Gonzalez and the children drove to the planned rescue site. Vicky realized her husband had chosen the highway because there was little traffic.

"It might not happen for two or three months," said Gonzalez. "If I talk to you on the phone about Mexican parties, it means the plan is still on. If I don't, it means everything has stopped."

At Veradero Beach, she purchased fluorescent orange T-shirts and caps for Vicky and the kids. She also slipped Vicky a small wooden cross. "Hold on to this," she said. "It will keep you safe."

ORESTES TESTED the used Cessna that the Valladares Foundation had bought with a donation from Elena Amos and pronounced it in good condition. "I have my license. I have my plane," he said. "I am ready to go."

At 6 p.m. on Friday, December 18, 1992, he phoned Gonzalez in Mexico. "Everything is ready for the party tomorrow," he said.

He heard her sharp intake of breath, then asked about his family. "They're fine," she said. "They look like carrots." Now he knew they would be dressed in bright orange



shirts. On a second telephone, Gonzalez called Vicky in Havana for a three-way conversation.

"Your father is thinner now, but he's okay," said Vicky. The code meant that she agreed with the plan.

"I'll send you money to buy a TV and a VCR," said Orestes in code, setting the pickup for the next day. "So soon," Vicky responded, adding quickly, "Please send the children shoes in sizes 5½ and 6½."

Vicky hung up with pulse racing. Orestes would be coming for her and the children between 5:30 and 6:30 p.m., when the sun would be setting.

AT THE AIRFIELD, Orestes and Arriaga went over the radio call signs he would use. Before departing, he left her a note: "Those who fail do so because they wait for things to happen. Those who succeed do so because they make things happen."

AFTER A SLEEPLESS NIGHT, Vicky left the apartment with the children at 8 a.m. They wore jeans and shirts, their only luggage a backpack containing bathing suits, orange T-shirts, caps and a Bible. The boys looked forward to a day at the beach. Vicky could not risk telling them the truth.

To her relief, Mamey Beach—a mile from the rendezvous point—was nearly deserted. Her watch showed 12:30. It was sunny, but cool—not a good day for swimming.

In midafternoon, with both boys restless, they climbed to a small restaurant above the beach. Entering, Vicky

felt her knees tremble. Three policemen were staring at her. "Just some water, please," she told a waiter.

Nervously sipping her water, she sensed the policemen still watching. *Do they know?* Curbing her panic, she herded the boys down to the beach. She knew they must act like a family enjoying the afternoon. "Go for a swim, boys," she urged.

Alejandro put on his suit and headed for the water, but Reyniel protested. "Reyniel, this is a matter of life and death. Please, go swim!" The boy did as he was told. Sitting on the dry sand, Vicky opened her Bible but could scarcely read. *I need you, God,* she thought.

At 5 p.m., they put on their orange shirts and caps and made their way over the old coastal road to the rendezvous site. There, Vicky heard the roar of an approaching truck. A bus pulled out behind it, preparing to pass.

ROUNDING THE HILL, Orestes saw the whole scene in one nerve-jangling moment. About 100 feet ahead, a large boulder had rolled into the middle of the highway. Adjacent to this, on the right, was a tall road sign. Less than 500 yards ahead, and coming toward him, a bus was attempting to pass a truck. But most vivid were three figures in orange hurrying along the roadside.

His brain held a single thought: *Get the plane down!* But there was no space to land. *How?* His instincts as a combat pilot took command.

With inches to spare, he tilted his wings to clear the rock and the road

sign. He saw the bus and the truck still headed his way, both drivers trying to swerve to the side. Two feet from the ground, he yanked the throttle back, eased up the nose of the plane, then felt the wheels drop to the roadway. He hit the brakes and swung the plane in a U-turn. His right wing missed the braking truck by yards, so close he saw the driver's face contorted in fear.

Vicky and the children, facing away, did not see the plane until it thudded down on the road. For a second, she was stunned. Then she heard herself screaming, "Run! Run! It's Daddy!"

Reyniel, sprinting ahead, threw the backpack away. "Daddy!" he cried, scrambling up the short ladder to the open door of the plane.

"In the back," his father ordered, giving the boy a push toward the rear seats. Alejandro was next, then Vicky. Now Orestes faced the plane down the road. Tires squealing, it was airborne in moments.

Turning north, Orestes shouted in triumph, "I did it! There's your answer, Castro! I did have the guts!"

Vicky and the boys could not stop their tears, but Orestes kept his com-



Orestes Lorenzo reunited with his wife and sons

posure. "Don't look down," he called. He was flying six feet above the dark sea, the spray off the waves sprinkling the cabin windows. Past the range of Cuban rockets, he gained altitude. Flying one-handed, he surrendered to the hugs and kisses of his wife and children. At 6:30 p.m., the radio crackled with Kristina Arriaga's voice.

"Bicycle One to Bicycle Two," he responded into the mike. "There's a plane full of love heading your way."

*Orestes Lorenzo's daring rescue of his family touched a chord in America. Newspapers and talk-show hosts clamored for interviews, and on the streets of Miami, fellow Cubans clapped him on the back. But no acclaim could compete with the joy he felt at being with his wife and sons. "It is a triumph of truth against lies," he says, "a triumph of love against evil."*