



**ATENTADO
terrorista al vuelo**

The Cubana Story

CU-455

An essay, a short story and a poem that recount the story of the act of terrorism that destroyed a Cubana Airline full of passengers in the territory of Barbados on 6th October, 1976.

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The Cubana Story



*The Cubana Monument at Paynes Bay, St. James,
Barbados*

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This booklet is dedicated to the memory of the 73 persons who perished in the terrorist bombing of the Cubana Airline - the 24 members of the Cuban National Junior Fencing Team; the 11 Guyanese, most of whom were scholarship students; the 5 North Koreans; the 25 crew members; and the other 8 Cuban passengers.

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THE JOURNEY FROM TERROR TO LOVE AND LIFE



As we commemorate the 45th anniversary of the Cubana tragedy of 6th October 1976, let us embark upon a reflection on what we call “**The Journey From Terror To Love And Life**”. And let us begin by reminding ourselves of three terrorism-related acts that are integral to our story:-

- In the five month period between April and September 1997, the Caribbean nation of Cuba was subjected to a heartless and intense terroristic campaign of bombing that targeted the island’s tourism industry - the Cohiba, Capri, Nacional, Triton, Miramar and Copacabana hotels were all attacked with explosives, and an Italian tourist by the name of **Fabio Di Celmo** was killed!
- Approximately one year later- on 12th September 1998 - a team from the USA’s **Federal Bureau of Investigations** (FBI) swooped down on five Cuban men who were resident in the American city of Miami, arrested them, and

charged them with espionage and other related charges. The men- who subsequently came to be known as **“the Cuban Five”**- were in Miami for the express purpose of investigating the several anti-Cuba terrorist organizations based in that city, and forestalling any further terrorist attacks on Cuba. The **“Cuban Five”** were put on trial in Miami, and were convicted and sentenced to periods of imprisonment ranging from 15 years to life!

- Almost exactly three years later- on 11th September 2001- a group of terrorists attacked the **World Trade Centre** in New York City and the **Pentagon** building in Washington D.C., by flying three civilian airlines full of passengers into these structures. These events precipitated the declaration of a so-called “War Against Terror” by the President of the USA, and led to the American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and to the US assassination of the reputed mastermind of 9/11 - **Osama bin Laden!**

Many persons will readily recognise that these terrorism based events are all inter-related, and are at the very centre of the great political and human rights issues that the world is grappling with today. ***But what will escape most analysts and observers is that underpinning all of these developments is a tragic precedent setting event that occurred right here in Barbados some forty-five years ago- in the year 1976 to be precise.***

A full quarter of a century before the perpetrators of 9/11 conceived of the evil idea of using an in-flight civilian airliner as an instrument of terror, a cabal of anti-Cuba terrorists with links to the USA’s **Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)** demonstrated the devilish horror of such a concept in the skies over Barbados!

It was on the 6th day of October 1976 that, within minutes of a Cuban civilian airliner taking off from our national Airport in Barbados, a bomb that had been planted in the cabin of the aircraft exploded! As had been planned, the violent explosion caused the Cubana airplane to plunge into the waters of the Caribbean sea, in close proximity to the west coast of Barbados, and every single one of the 73 Cubans, Guyanese and North Koreans on board the aircraft perished in this precedent setting act of terrorism!

In the aftermath of the downing of the Cubana airline, the people of Barbados were faced with the horrendous task of retrieving the mangled, dismembered bodies of the victims- mostly young Cuban athletes and Guyanese medical students- from the Caribbean Sea, and of coming to terms with the shock and trauma that this unprecedented act of butchery generated in our small 166 square mile nation.



One week later - on 14th October 1976 - the government of Barbados appointed a **Commission of Enquiry**, under

the chairmanship of High Court judge **Denys Williams**, to investigate the causes of this tragic event. And in its report issued some four months later, the Commission noted that substantial evidence existed to identify **Ricardo Lozano** and **Freddie Lugo** - two Venezuelan passengers who had joined the Cubana flight in Trinidad and who had disembarked when the plane landed in Barbados - as the two functionaries who had been responsible for planting two bombs on the plane.

Furthermore, in evidence before the Commission, the representative of the Cuban government, **Senior Martinez**, explained that the Cuban government's own investigation had determined that Lozano and Lugo were subordinates of anti-Cuban, CIA supported terrorist organizations known as CORU and ICICA and run by arch-terrorists **Orlando Bosch** and **Luis Posada Carriles** - two veteran terrorists with an implacable hatred of the revolutionary, Fidel Castro led, regime of Cuba.

Needless to say, the Cubana mass murder in Barbados shocked the entire Cuban nation and brought about a national realization that the campaign of terrorism that had been launched as far back as the year 1960 against the Cuban Revolution by the Cuban-American mafia and their United States backers, had now reached a new level of barbarity, and that bolder measures would have to be taken in the future to foil the US based terrorists.

Although they were arrested in Venezuela, **Orlando Bosch** and **Luis Posada Carriles** were never held accountable for their role in the Cubana tragedy! Indeed, Carriles escaped justice altogether when he escaped from his Venezuelan prison, while Bosch benefited from a protracted eleven year trial marred by a contamination of the evidence against him, and was ultimately acquitted. Furthermore, in the years after

1976, both of these men of violence were permitted to reside in the USA, and were given comfort, succor and support by the several Cuban-American counter-revolutionary terrorist organizations stationed in the city of Miami.

Indeed, **Carriles** and **Bosch** became so emboldened by their US based support, that in the mid 1990's Bosch embarked upon a new conspiracy to assassinate **Fidel Castro**, while Carriles masterminded a terrorist campaign to blow up hotels in Cuba. And so, as we learnt earlier, counter-revolutionary terrorists found their way from Miami to Cuba and set off explosions at no less than six Cuban hotels in the year 1997!

In fact, so brazen and arrogant had the counter-revolutionary forces become, that the **Miami Herald** newspaper actually openly reported that Carriles was at the heart of these bombing operations, while Carriles himself, in a 1998 **New York Times** interview, publicly admitted to having organized the bombing campaign.

It was this intensification of terrorist attack on Cuba by **Luis Posada Carriles** - the butcher of 1976 - that led five Cuban patriots to station themselves in Miami in order to infiltrate the various terrorist organizations, and to collect advance intelligence that could be used to forestall pending attacks on their homeland!

But who exactly are these heroes that the world has come to know as the '**Cuban Five**'? Well, their names are **Gerardo Hernandez Nordelo, Ramon Labanino Salazar, Antonio Guerrero Rodriguez, Fernando Gonzalez Llort** and **Rene Gonzalez Sehweret**. And although we refer to them as the '**Cuban Five**', two of them are actually US citizens, having been born in the United States to Cuban parents. These five

sons of Cuba are all highly educated men of humanity, civility and decency. They are all dedicated family men - husbands, and in three cases, fathers- and pursue occupations ranging from cartoonist, to economist, pilot, engineer and poet.

Needless to say, the presence and activities of the **Cuban Five** in Miami posed absolutely no threat to the government and people of the USA. Their sole purpose was to discover and foil pending unlawful terrorist attacks against Cuba!

Indeed, so open and well-meaning were the Cuban authorities, that in June 1998 Cuba's Ministry of Home Affairs actually provided the FBI with dossiers of information on the acts of violence being planned in Miami, together with audio and videotapes which explicitly identified the malefactors. Ironically, it was this honest and constructive overture that the American authorities pounced upon and used as a springboard to launch arrests – not against the Miami based terrorists - but against the five Cuban patriots who had helped to ferret out the information.

And so, as noted above, on 12th September 1998, the “Five” were arrested in Miami, subjected to a biased and deeply flawed political trial, and sentenced to unjust and inordinately long prison terms!

Now, as far as we in the progressive Movement of Barbados were concerned, we Barbadians- more than any other people- had a duty to help to get the **Cuban Five** released, simply because, in a very real sense, the journey of these five Cuban patriots to their imprisonment in the USA began right here in Barbados with **Luis Posada Carriles** and the Cubana tragedy way back in 1976!

Indeed, we felt that the best way we could help to bring about their freedom was by raising our voices in condemnation of this egregious injustice, and by lobbying our government and fellow citizens to get involved in the international campaign to free the Five. And this is precisely what we did!

We became one small component of a massive world-wide Movement for justice for the Cuban Five. And great was our celebration when- in December 2014 - the last three of the incarcerated members of the “Cuban Five” walked out of their US jails for the final time and made their way home to Cuba!



But even as we still continue to bask in the warm after-glow of that remarkable “people’s victory”, it still behooves us as a nation to reflect deeply and soberly on the meaning of the Cubana tragedy and our response to it.

Put simply, October 6, 1976 was our 9/11, just as it was Cuba's 9/11! The citizens of the USA are not unique in having experienced the shock of a 9/11 type episode of terror. We Barbadians and Cubans had our own version of 9/11 way back in 1976! We Barbadians and Cubans therefore know something about terrorism and the pain and trauma that it causes.

But, to our credit, when we experienced our 9/11, our primary instincts were to pursue a course of the due process of law - to arrest the suspects and to subject them to a legal trial. It should be noted that in 1976, both Barbadian and Cuban Police and intelligence personnel travelled to the locations in which the culprits were being held in Trinidad (Lozano and Lugo) and Venezuela (Carriles and Bosch) - not for the purpose of assassinating them, or attempting to assassinate them- but for the purpose of ensuring that a proper legal process was put in place!

This is how nations, governments and people should behave! They must not succumb to the 'law of the jungle' nor to the evil philosophy that 'might makes right'. Rather, they must try to respect and observe the rule of law- even in relation to those who have no regard for the law- because that is the only way to ensure that justice is done and that civilization is preserved!

Almost thirty years after the tragic events of 6th October 1976, Mr. Ricardo Alarcon, the President of Cuba's National Assembly of People's Power, paid the ultimate compliment to the governments and people of Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago when he publicly stated that "Barbados and Trinidad, it must be said, acted with great dignity and honour", and acknowledged the "meticulous, rigorous, serious investigation done by people who respect themselves, people from

countries that are small but which know how to respect their sovereignty.”

It should be clear to us all that, as small as our country is, we have something of importance to contribute to the world, and that we must therefore take an interest in all of the great and urgent international human rights issues of our era and raise our voices to high heaven in defense of justice, dignity and humanity!

In this 45th anniversary year of the horrific Cubana tragedy, let us therefore all resolve to be active participants in the “Journey From Terror To Love And Life”!

David A. Comissiong



Cuban President, Fidel Castro, addresses a massive gathering in Cuba's Revolutionary Square in the aftermath of the Cubana bombing

FLIGHT NUMBER 455

by Juan Carlos Rodriguez



Two days later, still deeply affected by the tragedy, Rotman, flight officer in the control tower of Seawell airport in Barbados, declared to the press: “But who could hate these young people? Almost all the passengers on board were young. No, no sir, not only the athletes, I said almost all. The athletes, crew, Guyanese. Eight Guyanese were students and the three others were a grandmother, daughter and granddaughter. The girl was only nine years old. Yes sir, they were very young people. The crew also. All innocents and healthy. And if something like this could happen, precisely to them... Who can be in peace in this world?”

HE SHOOK THE ASHES from his pipe that fell in a cone in the ashtray and then returned to his seat. On the table there was a sandwich and juice that he asked for his lunch. He decided to eat them after getting off flight number 455.

“Seawell ramp, CU-455 prepared for take off.”

Rotman hears the Cubana pilot’s voice, takes the mike in his hand and presses the carrier :

“CU-455 received, authorized for take off. Temperature 30, altimeter pressure 29,94.”

“CU-455 received.”

He watched the plane through the tower windows. Waited for authorization for the next manœuvre. A few minutes later he heard.

“CU-455 authorized for revving.”

“CU-455 authorized for thrust.”

“Received.”

He watched the plane turn and then communicated:

“CU-455 authorized to taxi right front, along taxiway-Alpha waiting point, use second intersection, time 11.”

The metal giant began to move slowly to the end of the runway, turned 180 degrees and stopped.

“CU-455 authorized for Norman Manley, red route 11, we maintain a 350 degree right turn.”

Rotman presses again the carrier mike button.

“CU-455 authorized for take-off, surface winds 09508.”

Wilfredo accelerated and then giving power to the four motors for take-off began to taxi on the runway. He increased speed and lifted off after speeding up for two thousand three hundred meters. It was twelve fifteen. Rotman prepared to contact CU-455 for the last time:

“CU-455 take off 15, change to over 119,7. Report arrival of flight 180. Good day.”

After the pilot of flight 455 of **Cubana de Aviación** airline confirmed to the tower that it would inform when the plane reaches the height of eighteen thousand feet, Rotman leans back in his seat and took a bite of his sandwich.

The rejoicing in the plane continued spontaneously. After the tragedy, witnesses in Barbados said that the athletes boarding the flight were enjoying themselves. That is why no one noted the two seats up front that were empty. The Venezuelans, Hernán Ricardo, who had shown a false passport, and Freddy Lugo, had occupied them on the short trip (twenty-six minutes) from Trinidad to Barbados. On disembarking they had completed the mission of placing bombs in a Cubana flight making its regular flight from Guyana to Havana, with a stop-over in Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Jamaica and Santiago de Cuba. They had been preparing the mission for several months under directions of Hernán Luis Posada Carriles and another well known anti-Castro figure, Orlando Bosch Avila, considered by the FBI as the number 1 terrorist in America. Everything was ready, every detail adjusted with the precision of a watchmaker. That is why, in spite of the setbacks and

obstacles they had to avoid that day, Hernán and Lugo, on disembarking in Barbados and losing themselves in the city crowd, knew that the plane would not reach its destination.

EVERYTHING BEGAN AT DAWN when the flight captain prepared to take off from Timehri in Guyana. The control tower reported that the government requested a delay for a delegation traveling to Havana in route to their country. Wilfredo could not refuse. The request had come from high up. The interruption meant a twenty-seven minute delay.

For this reason, when Hernán Ricardo and Freddy Lugo arrived at Piarco airport in Trinidad and Tobago, the second stop-over, and asked about the Cubana flight, they were told it was delayed. In statements to the Police after the arrest of the terrorists, Charles Murray, traffic assistant, recorded that he offered to put them on a flight of BWIA's Sunjet Service that had a stop-over in Barbados on route to Miami. Very upset, Hernán kept moving his head from side to side. Mr. Murray, according to his statements included in the bulky court file, thought that perhaps they had not understood since he spoke to them in English. Then he pointed to the BWIA and said in Spanish "Barbados now". Ricardo exclaimed "No!" Although the answer was categorical, Murray, not understanding the reasons for this insistence, called a member of the Cuban sports group over to the desk (they had arrived the morning before on a flight from Venezuela) and asked him to serve as interpreter, as he had talked to him in English earlier. The unexpected incident, completely unplanned, and that compromised the terrorists, should have been enough to abort the plan. But Hernán, completely unperturbed, smiled to the young man standing in front of him and insisted on his wish to board the Cubana flight. And that was promptly translated to Murray,

who thanked him and issued the tickets. A short while later the two terrorists learned that the employees who had offered their services were on strike. Another unexpected situation.

The Cuban plane arrived in Trinidad and Tobago at eleven in the morning, local time. By radio, the captain was informed of the impossibility of using the cleaning and refuelling services due to the strike. Wilfredo decided to take the services in Barbados.

Anxious to arrive as soon as possible to the small island, he requested permission from the airport authorities to allow the passengers to carry the equipment themselves onto the storage compartment. Four athletes, enjoying the adventure of driving the luggage cars and carrying it on board, completed the operation in record time. Also the contagious enthusiasm spread to all the passengers: to arrive home as soon as possible without losing another minute.

Belkys and Daniel walked slowly hand in hand. She looked at the passengers who were preparing to board the Cubana flight. She read the emotion in the eyes of that girl over her adventure, accompanied by her favourite doll. Those young people who hugged the mother, the father, the brothers, and were locked in a fiery kiss to the girlfriend. *"Study hard"*. *"Write when you arrive"*. *"Don't fail to go to mass"*. Belkys thought they were students who had won a scholarship to study in the island. She was not mistaken.

"Are you a part of the crew of Cubana de Avación?" Belkys and Daniel slowed down. *"At what time do we arrive in Havana?"* the woman asked.

"If we leave on time and have no more delays," Daniel looked at his watch, *"at five thirty more or less."*

“My husband is a fishery official and has just completed his contract. We are returning indefinitely to Cuba; ten years away has been too much.”

“The Canary Islands, Mexico and now the Caribbean”, the man said without any sign of pride. “But this was the last mission”, he concluded.

“And the last plane”, the woman added.

Daniel and Belkys stepped back. On the steps to the plane they stopped.

“I’ll be back in a week”, he said, and they kissed strongly, as is common among sweethearts. They had been married several weeks ago and this flight would take them home to continue their honeymoon which had been interrupted for reasons of work. But at the last minute he was asked to stay on in Trinidad and Tobago for a switch with another crew member who was scheduled to fly over the Atlantic and had taken sick suddenly. Daniel was a flight engineer and Belkys a stewardess.

“I love you”, he said pushing her away softly.

“It’s the first time we fly apart, I’m going to miss you”, she added and they kissed again.

While Bebo, the flight attendant, counted the food trays, Teresa sprayed air freshener in the bathrooms and re-supplied them. She checked emergency supplies: bottles of oxygen, extinguishers, and life saver vests – placed under the seats.

For several months she checked for any object that did not correspond to airplane equipment. Then all the crew of this

route were called to a meeting and for four hours a Cuban Security official instructed them on a series of measures to be taken before and during the trip to prevent possible terrorist actions.

“Are you going to Cuba?” Belkys asked the Indian looking girl.

“No”, she smiled back “I’m going to Jamaica.”

“You have very beautiful hair”, Belkys told her while she adjusted her safety belt.

“So do my dolls.”

Belkys smiled and noted two women, also dark skinned, who accompanied the girl. *“Mother and grandmother”,* she commented. The older of the two denied with a shake of the head: *“aunt”,* she corrected, and placed a nylon bag on the rug in front of the girl’s feet.

“It seems that these young people are going to Cuba to study”, Belkys said and looked at the passengers sitting across.

“It’s true”, said one in perfect Spanish. *“How did you know?”*

“Ah, stewardesses develop an acute sense of observation. Thanks to that I noted that you intended to light a cigarette and I will have to tell you not to while the sign is still on.”

The Guyanese promptly put the cigarette back in the pack while they continued to watch through their tinted lenses. The three had eyeglasses with corrections. It was obvious that they felt like newborns, as if their whole life was centered on being on this plane where their real life was going to begin.

Sitting in the last seats were the fishery official and his wife. Both were happy to be going home. Belkys greeted them and checked their safety belts.

“Look”.

Belkys took the photograph the woman was showing her. It was the photo of a baby with only his face showing above the sheets as if getting out from hiding, with a broad mischievous smile.

“He is very pretty”, Belkys said and discovered a spark of pride in the couple.

Minutes later the plane was in flight.

A short distance from the pilot’s cabin, Octavio and Kiko, fencing trainers, occupied the first passenger seats.

“Did she go to bed with you?”

“She didn’t want to.”

“Ah! So then you asked her and she turned you down.”

Octavio’s expression didn’t fool Kiko.

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Meeeee!!” Octavio put his hand on his chest.

“Yooooouu!”

“Go to hell.”

Kiko got up and went to the back of the plane, upset. Octavio was satisfied. Now he could stretch out on the seats. He noticed the little girl opposite. She is really very pretty. Octavio remembered his little girl and Leila, his wife. He closed his eyes and imagined them at the airport.

A bit further back one of the Guyanese students made efforts to communicate with Alex, the new Central American fencing champion.

“Cuba...medicine...doctor.”

“You’re going to study medicine, that’s good. But doctor, no way, it’s still far off. You have the lock but are lacking the key.”

“Lock, what?”

“Forget it bro and have a drink.”

Alex took out a bottle from his jacket pocket with a disapproving look from Magaly.

“Don’t go getting drunk”, she interrupted the conversation.

The Guyanese took a drink and licked his lip.

“Are you a student?”

“Yeah, student, yeah, fencer.”

“What’s that?”

Alex sketched a feint in the air.

“Painter?”

“Hell...what’s this?”

Alex took off his safety belt and lowered his hand luggage that had a sword sticking out. He showed it to him and from his pocket he took out his medal.

“Ooooooh! I see, you’re a sportsman.”

The Guyanese took another drink and returned the bottle to Alex who copied him. Later he sat back in the cushioned seat grinning widely. Next to him, Magaly looked at him from the corner of her eye and poked him with her elbow.

“Let’s see if you arrive in Havana drunk and your father has to carry you to the Matrimony Palace.”

Magaly and Alex were fiancées and were getting married that evening. The families of both had made all the preparations.

Hernán and Lugo were seated behind the Guyanese family. They left the centre seat unoccupied and placed their hand luggage there. Hernán took a flask out of his hand luggage and took a drink of rum. When he withdrew the small glass cap from his lips he saw the little Guyanese girl slowly raising her head up the back of the seat. Then the bright black eyes appeared.

Felicita and Robertico, the youngest athletes, were sitting together and both tried to break the silence that was becoming embarrassing. Ever since they left Havana, this was the first time they were alone, as much alone as you can be on a plane. But they also knew that they were there right next to each

other through the complicity of both. Their looks gave them away.

Felicita felt that something was happening on board. She felt that her life was going to go through a radical change and that in the future, being alone could only be considered if her thoughts were on him.

Everything would begin in that plane, during the flight back home, and they would end going down the stairs, holding hands. But knowing him well, she knew it would not be an easy task, but a challenge instead, and began to feel uneasy.

And again she bit her nails.

She had made up her mind, although she would have to court him. That is why she was surprised when Robertico, after helping her adjust her safety belt, gave her the tape recorder and said: *"The tape is at the beginning, listen to it"*.

And now, with her earphones on, her face began to light up, while her heart started to beat rapidly and the emotion caught in her throat.

In one of the last seats, Irene was reading a book on architecture. She had just started her third year and would have to take several tests that had added up during the competition.

Next to her Gallo held on tightly to the seat arms. He was suddenly startled.

"It's only a tape recorder", she said to calm him. *"Planes are safer than cars. Muchsafer"*, she stressed.

In the aisle, Rosa, the foil fencer of the young team, started to swing her hips to the rhythm of the “Boney M”, to the beating palms of Alex, who had gone back with his Guyanese friend.

Ham and cheese sandwiches, juices and peanuts, Teresa said while she checked the tray. She popped some peanuts into her mouth and took the tray in her hands.

In her fifteen years of service she had flown almost all the routes of Cubana de Aviación but she had never felt so tired as this one of Havana-Guyana: three stopovers, two of only thirty minutes, passengers in, passengers off, farewells, welcomes, smiles down, smiles up, instructions, candies, breakfast, beverages, drinks, coffee, packs, aspirins. When she thought that she could finally catch a few minutes, a light in the galley lit up: landing. And start all over again.

But even so, she preferred to fly this route. For two years, no problems. Not like those crossing the Atlantic in those old planes that even the most enlightened called *La Milagrosa* (The miraculous). The fire that began in Madrid without landing gear. Or that passenger, Czech or Bulgarian – she never found out – who died in her arms: she wrapped him with a blanket and only told the curious, “*He has a fever*”. And the sea landing. The minutes of anxiety that followed the announcement by the captain: “*ladies and gentlemen, for technical difficulties*” – oil that was slipping out threatened to disintegrate the plane – “*we will proceed to a sea landing. Please remove your shoes and pay attention to the instructions of the crew. Thank you very much.*” Before, she didn’t know if she would be able to enjoy her old age with her grandson that was expected. Now, on the other hand ...

“Do we tell the passengers to disembark in Seawell?” Teresa asked the captain in the cabin and looked out on the sea in front of the nose of the DC-8.

“No, no”, Wilfredo doubted, but changed his mind instantly: “We have to load up the services we couldn’t in Piarco; yes, have them disembark. The trip to Jamaica is long.”

Hernán checked what he would do in five minutes: he would open the bag; take out the camera pack with the bomb inside; he’d put it in a pants pocket, and would go to the bathroom. Later the announcement of arrival in Barbados would be announced. That is why he shuddered when he heard the voice of the airline stewardess announcing the arrival in a few minutes.

First he looked at Lugo – sitting on the outer seat – who made a strange grimace. And later, the bag. Then he opened it, took out the photo camera and put it in his pocket.

He went out into the aisle and walked up.

He passed by Alex who was about to take a drink from his bottle. He overheard when the young man seated next to the youth, in what seemed like a Caribbean accent, said: *“Hey kid, this is like pumpkin for me, it is neither good for me or bad, quite the contrary.”*

“You’re going to drive him crazy”, he heard the young woman sitting next to him say.

Felicita and Robertico did not notice him. She had her eyes closed and he was whispering in her ear holding his hands in hers.

He walked ahead and stopped in front of Rosa, who was blocking the aisle trying to move aside. On the seat a tape recorder was playing reggae music.

“Didn’t you hear the stewardess?” He placed his hands on the back of the seats and rolled his eyes and growled, *“She’s not at home.”*

Rosa went back, took the tape recorder in her hands, and sat down. She clucked her tongue, but the eyes looking at the terrorist were radiant. She knew that there were only three hours that separated her from family that Alex called “the many”. Surely her father had rented a bus for all the family and was on the way to the airport. A longshoreman at the docks, he was proud of the youngest one of the numerous offspring. The one who had received most affection because she was conceived at an age when children and grand-children are together.

“Please”.

Belkys was right behind Hernán, who moved to let her pass.

“You must go back to your seat. We are getting ready to land.”

The fishery official and his wife looked out at the coast.

In the back seat, Irene did the same. She was thinking that at this time her father would be at the dairy farm after the second milking, adding honey to the fodder, filling the water trough, or curing ailment. All the memories of her father linked him to that routine. She only saw him with a *guayabera* once and it was very tight - the day that he went to the train station to

see her off after allowing her to accept the sports scholarship in the capital. Irene watched the beaches below.

The small island of Barbados - only four hundred thirty square kilometres, and two hundred fifty thousand inhabitants- could be seen below surrounded by a sea, like an oasis. The barbuda fig forests, from which the island derives its name, covered the coast right up to the sand of the beach.

A few seconds later, Hernán shut himself in toilet number two. He pressed the lock and washed his face with his free hand.. While he listened to the sizzling of the urine, he thought of the faces the passengers would have at the moment of the explosion- terrified, torn to bits, burned. He took out the camera case and placed it on the washbasin. He finished urinating. Then he took the bomb again and sat on the floor in front of the washbasin. He noted that there was a compartment with an opening to receive discarded napkins.

He placed a leg against the partition and pulled the compartment that gave away. Then he took the camera case and opened it. The explosive was in view and in the centre was the upper part of the fuse.

He dried the sweat speckling his forehead, looked at the time, and pressed the copper with his thumb and forefinger until he felt the acid bulb break. The tightened copper wire began to be eaten up. Seconds later, he withdrew the security pin, leaving the way free for the hammer. He knew that in forty-five minutes, when the wire holding it broke, it would project into the percussion cap, making the explosion.

He closed the case again.

Very carefully, like a first time father, he placed the bomb in the compartment, closed the partition, and pushed it in softly.

Posada and Bosch had told him that the cleaning services on board were done in Trinidad and Tobago, and that is why the stopover in Barbados would be only fifteen or twenty minutes.

In his seat, in the front part of the plane, Lugo seemed to be tuning the radio he had in his hand. In truth, he had just crushed the bulb that was hidden inside.

Another bomb.

Hernán urinated again and then tried to get out. Then it happened. The door didn't open. He pressed again and nothing. He checked the safety and noticed that he had pushed it back. He was locked inside, less than a meter from the bomb mechanism that had begun its countdown. He paled visibly and his fingers grabbed the lock. His eyelids turned red while he pulled on the door.

"Miss! Miss!"

His words came out strong although he tried to contain the panic.

"Miss, get me out of here!" he dried the sweat from his face.

"What's the matter, sir?"

It was the voice of Belkys who tried uselessly to open the door.

“Who is it?”

“I’m stuck”, he shouted, banging on the door repeatedly.

Shortly after a deep voice was heard.

“Take off the safety latch!” Bebo said with determination. Hernán obeyed.

A few seconds later, the door opened. Hernán’s face was livid, his shirt wet with perspiration, and he was breathing with difficulty. Bebo watched him. Belkys looked into his face. Teresa noted something.

“These Russians planes are shit.”

He almost spat out the last word.

“The only thing that happened to you is that you didn’t release the safety latch”, Bebo said and leaned over to demonstrate. *“Also, this plane is from the US.”*

“Return to your seat we are about to land” – Belkys told him.

In his outer seat, Lugo had turned and was looking out the window.

Belkys placed the seat of one of the Guyanese students in an upright position. She wondered if she should tell the captain about her concern over the strange conduct of the passenger. That had crossed her mind before. She remembered that Teresa had told her that the destination of the passenger was Barbados and the island was already in view.

A few seats back, Hernán covered his face, appearing to be reading a newspaper to avoid the curious looks of the passenger, but he couldn't understand the words. His nerves were shot and he was extremely anxious, wanting to get up from his seat and run to the door. But his fright wasn't because of the acid that was burning the tension wire of the bomb, nor because of the close to one hundred passengers around him whose lives meant less to him than a flock on their way to the slaughterhouse. But because of that damn door that didn't give way. Yes, he had a sign from the Lord. What he didn't understand was the delay. Why, when he had activated it? A few minutes later, while he disembarked, he felt eyes on his back. Several times this morning he had the same feeling on his neck.

THE PLANE SHOOK at twelve twenty three local time.

In the control cabin, a few seconds before, Wilfredo had given over command to the co-pilot and was preparing to inform Seawell of the reaching of eighteen thousand feet. At the very moment that he pushed the talk button on the microphone he felt that the plane was being torn apart.

"Be careful!" he shouted.

He took control of the ship and rapidly looked at the panel. He discovered yellow lights in one of the discs. At that moment, the siren under the flight engineer went off. Then he had no doubt: the pressure had gone down suddenly.

A dry blow behind him indicated that the cabin door had been opened with violence and he began to feel vibrations that are produced when the fuselage has been damaged. He held on tightly to the flight rudder.

Next to him, the co-pilot also heard the blow of the door when it opened suddenly, and he turned his body to look along the aisle to the passenger cabin. He saw enough to make his blood freeze. Then he had no doubt: an expansive wave of a powerful explosion had violently ripped off the door lock.

“Shut the door!” he yelled, and prepared to isolate the cabin from the black smoke and those screams that were beginning to invade the plane. *“Something exploded in the back, and there is fire”*, he said with emotion.

“Inform Seawell”, Wilfredo ordered and his voice sounded sure. He was trying to level off the plane. He pushed the rudder in slowly and the plane dipped its nose. Then he took the brake and pulled it in.

Above, the wing flaps lifted and the speed began to slow down.

In the control tower, the workers were busy with their routine.

Two planes had landed and another was in the air, still within the radial perimeter of the airport. Rotman was eating his sandwich absent-mindedly, while he looked to his left with attention, where the radio equipment was. He thought he heard something unusual because of its brevity- a word he didn't understand and a wave of static that sounded when the carrier button was pressed in the microphone.

He noted that the equipment operator was inclined forward and his face was shadowed with vexation. Then he realized that he was not mistaken. Something had happened in one of the two planes he had in flight. At that moment he heard a terrified but strong and sure voice.

“Seawell! Seawell! CU-455!”

Rotman frowned while he opened the talk key.

“CU-455 ... Seawell.”

“We have an explosion on board and are descending rapidly! There is fire on board!”

Rotman spat out the pieces of bread, ham and cheese, pushed his seat, and took the microphone from the young operator. He cleared his throat and pressed the carrier.

“CU-455 are you coming back?”

He had no response from the plane.

Half dozen men working the control tower surrounded the radio and stared at the speaker, anxious to hear the Cuban.

Rotman did not repeat the question. He knew that the captain would check the damages before responding. If the answer was affirmative it would be a sign that something serious was happening in the Cubana-455 that had taken off eight minutes ago. Something that could not be controlled by the crew. While he waited, he turned the radar screen and located the plane.

“It’s at twenty eight miles”, the operator said after making the calculations.

At that moment Rotman noticed how the plane was beginning a right turn.

He waited no longer.

He turned and located the red button on the wall above the control panel and pressed it. It was the emergency sign.

The explosion on board the plane was a devastating flash, horrifying.

The moment of the explosion, Belkys was welcoming the passengers over the speakers. Her voice was quickly interrupted, like the howl of a drowning kitten, and everything in the plane flew into the air.

In the fuselage, the explosion tore out an opening of about a meter in diameter. The air in the plane lost pressure and there was an escape of contained air. Uncontrollable, the force of suction dragged everything in its way: bags, trays, refreshment bottles, tins of juice and beer, glasses, candy that was being offered, arms, legs, viscera...

Automatically the compartments above the seats opened, freeing the oxygen masks linked by plastic tubes to a central deposit.

Suddenly the suction, diminished by the fire in the front, was spreading together with something more deadly: the smoke.

The bomb had exploded under seat number twenty-six where the little Guyanese sat. The burst tore her right leg off and the expansive wave was so strong that the security belt cut into her stomach until being tucked into the hip bones. Her long black straight hair that must have been the pride of her parents was now a tangled burnt mass of black wire. For several seconds after the explosion, her eyes flickered with intensity, amazement and, finally fear. Then the little girl died. The aunt and grandmother were a mass of flesh and bones.

Teresa was walking in the aisle, and the force of the explosion threw her against the roof. She rebounded and fell back, dying.

Panic had invaded the passengers. Some stayed tied by their safety belts, with oxygen masks on, moving their eyes from side to side, trying to understand what happened. Others ran in desperation looking for a place to escape from the smoke.

“Calm down! Calm down!” Belkys and Bebo tried to make themselves heard.

“Be quiet, damn it!” Bebo began to pull open the doors of the tour toilet. When he managed to open one he called to the passengers who were writhing, spitting, coughing, vomiting black smoke. *“Inside, drink water and wet your faces!”*

With one look at their faces he understood that they were terrified and paralyzed by fear. Suddenly the black cloud began to dissipate. Bebo realized that the Captain had opened the windows at the back of the plane and the smoke now blew out.

The smoke cleared enough and then he saw her. In the aisle, on the rug, there was a woman with her leg shattered. The bone had broken through and splintered and the bloody flesh could be seen. What impressed him most was that the woman barely complained, she just looked at what was left of her leg. Next to her another wounded passenger called for a doctor.

Those first moments almost everyone was out of their minds with fear. Only a few overcame their terror. They advised, begged, demanded, trying uselessly to control those who were hysterical.

Bebo looked down the aisle and saw the fire. He took the extinguisher and ran to it. If he could not put out the fire, it would spread. Then the opened windows would not be enough and the smoke would spread along that steel tube where they were now stuck.

"Get away!" he screamed, and then emptied the extinguisher into the flames and threw it down; he turned and ran down the aisle vomiting smoke. He crossed the toilet, separated Rosa who was wetting her face and pressed the water faucet. With his free hand he threw water on his hot face.

The toasted flesh of Alex burned and he howled like a bull. He opened his eyes and saw a great red gash. He tried to get up, overcoming the pain; the burns reached his soul. Magaly had stopped screaming and her body began to burn. Alex writhed at her side. A terrified scream escaped from his throat. His body was a human torch.

A few meters back, Octavio noticed the empty extinguisher that was swaying on the rug. He heard the screams of terror from the front and thought he heard the deep voice of Alex.

His mind shuddered. He turned and found the frozen eyes of a dead passenger. Her mouth was very open. He rapidly turned back and hit his head on the window and closed his eyes. Some metal shards had hit his back, damaging his spine and now he could not move his body.

Behind, a Guyanese student tried to move the motionless body of one of his compatriots. He had released the safety belt and was going to carry him when he saw a huge gap in his chest. Moving him, the boy fell to the floor and began to shake

violently. His leg kept kicking against the rug uncontrollably, while the other Guyanese tried to lift him. Unable to carry him, he dragged him to the back section of the plane. Bebo came across them.

“Put the oxygen mask on him!”

Later, he released the extinguisher foam over the flames. When these subsided a bit, he saw- horrified- a small body stained in red. To reach it, he had to overcome a twisted mass. The seats were like sharp knives. He tried to jump over them, but his right leg got caught and he felt the skin rip. He ignored the pain when he discovered the disfigured face of the little Guyanese girl. His stomach turned and bile rose to his throat. He coughed smoke and felt hot and suffocated. Before turning back, he looked at the shattered body of the little girl who held on strongly to the doll that, miraculously, was intact and with its eyes very open.

Bebo understood that the passengers near the explosion were dead or seriously injured and nothing could be done for them. Turning back, he noticed the face of the man sitting in the window seat. It was Octavio. His eyes were closed and his head rested on the window. His face was covered in blood.

Bebo continued on back. He lifted the body of Teresa and placed it on the empty seats. He decided to go to the galley to get another fire extinguisher. He felt a strong hot flash in his bladder and stopped at a toilet. He asked the passengers in the toilet to leave it for a moment and since these, two men and one woman, all squeezed in the one meter square space, looked at him with indifference, he went to another one.

While he listened to his urine he asked himself if he would get out of this hell alive.

Since the explosion, two minutes ago, made the plane shudder, Irene held tightly to the seat. She had put on the oxygen mask and helped Gallo. His eyes were popping and terror choked his voice.

“Talk, say something, speak”, Irene insisted again but Gallo was speechless.

He put his hand on his chest and squeezed tight his eyes, resisting a strong pain.

“It hurts”, he complained.

Irene put the oxygen mask on him, thinking that perhaps he couldn't breathe well.

“Take a deep breath”, she begged him. *“It seems we are going back to the airport.”*

She had noticed a slight inclination of the wings from the window.

“We are going back”, she repeated to Gallo.

Belkys passed, checking the oxygen masks and calming everyone down.

Irene looked at her disheartened and she leaned down to touch the face of Gallo.

“We are a few minutes from the airport”, she said, and coughed. She placed the portable oxygen mask to her face and took a deep breath.

Belkys went to the back of the plane.

“The worst is over, do you hear”, Irene whispered to Gallo. But his face tightened with pain.

“The saint made no mistake”, his voice was barely audible, *“I’m going to die.”*

He complained again and tried to lean forward but his seat belt held him back.

Irene looked around her and discovered a dense cloud of smoke that was moving over her head. Gallo let his head fall back and his neck muscles became rigid. Irene barely heard him. A few seconds later his stony eyes stared out at her.

His shiny brown eyes opened wide and a grimace came over his face in pain. He placed his hand on his chest and leaned forward. He writhed about and would have fallen to the floor had it not been for the seat belt.

Irene had never seen death before. She rested her head on the seat. She wanted to close her eyes and imagine it was last year, last week, the day before. Any moment before that blast.

Behind her the wife of the Fishery official had begun to pray while she held on to the arm of her husband who held the mask to her.

“God!” The voice of the woman was calm. *“Don’t let these children die, they are children. Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be Thy name...”*

Sobbing and trembling, Felicita hugged the flight attendant.

"I want to see my mother", she sighed.

That moment, the telephone rang in the galley and Bebo rushed to take it. At his side Belkys coughed several times until she threw up. With one hand Bebo took the phone while he held Felicita with the other.

"Speak, hello, I can't hear you!"

Belkys knelt on the rug and seemed to calm down after breathing in several times from the portable oxygen bottle. Bebo replaced his and inhaled while he saw a very young fencer a few meters back, putting away a tape recorder in his bag. It seemed ridiculous.

"Bebo, it's me, tell me what's happening back there".

"There's fire and a lot of smoke", he screamed. "There was an explosion in the center and there are many dead", he paused, then; "Teresa is dead. Do you hear me? There is fire and the worse is the smoke that is suffocating us"

"Are you using the masks?"

"It's difficult to keep the people in their seats. The worse is the smoke", he insisted and coughed several times.

"Keep calm", the voice of the flight engineer sounding comforting, although he imagined what was happening in the passenger section. "Buckle in. We are going back to Seawell!"

Communication was cut and Bebo realized that the line had been cut some where, probably by fire. He stopped trying to communicate again and bent down to Belkys.

He wiped the perspiration with his handkerchief. She looked up at him with eyes made teary by the smoke and tears and with a firm voice told him:

“Those who got off in Barbados”, Bebo frowned without understanding. *“The one who got stuck in the bathrooms...”* she managed to say.

Bebo opened his eyes wide.

“The sons of bitches!” he exclaimed. His eyes were wide and his lips trembled, *“the sons of bitches!”*

When he hung up, the flight engineer told the captain what was happening in the passenger section. Knocking was heard on the door again.

“Don’t open”, Wilfredo yelled.

If they had opened the smoke would have filled the cabin.

Since the explosion, about two minutes and forty-seven seconds ago, everything occurred very fast.

“Call back and report that we are returning”, he ordered the co-pilot, holding tightly onto the rudder vibrating with the wounded plane.

“OK, Seawell, CU-455, we request immediately, immediately, runway!”

In the control tower they heard the emotive voice of the co-pilot.

Rotman answered: *“CU-455 authorized to land”*.

He knew that it was in answer to a question before. He understood, watching the turn the plane was making on the radar screen. He stretched his arm and communicated through the land control frequency, with the airport fire chief who had his men on alert.

“Total emergency”, Rotman said, *“flight CU-455 with an explosion and fire on board, he will touch down on runway one”*, making a fast calculation he added, *“in about seven minutes”*.

“Is it very serious?” The voice of the airport fire chief sounded familiar.

“I’m afraid so, Andrew”, Rotman answered and sighed. *“I fear the worst”*.

Hanging up he gazed at the radar screen.

“Sir”, the tower team operator said, without hiding the emotion he felt, *“the turn of the Cubana is too wide. The speed is two hundred twenty knots way below for that height. I suggest you tell the captain to make a tighter turn and increase speed.”*

Rotman sat back in his chair. The green light continued to shine in the radar screen. Those in the tower looked at Rotman and didn’t understand his silence. He continued to watch the screen. The speed of the plane, close to four hundred kilometres an hour was, in truth, below what was established for that height and the turn to return to the airport was too wide.

Logically, in an emergency of this kind, a spiralling turn had to

be made, descending rapidly and reaching the airport in the shortest time possible.

“No, no,” Rotman said moving his head. He had broken the silence.

In the tower, those present understood that the chief wouldn’t make these indications to the pilot and asked themselves why.

Rotman was calm. He wasn’t concerned that in the floor below there were tape recorders that registered all the conversations between the land and air for future reference. He knew what to say to justify his denial. But the mere fact of thinking what kept the Cubana pilot from turning and coming down faster, made him shudder.

Inside the Cubana 455 command cabin, the pilots were tense. Three minutes and thirty-one seconds separated them from the voice -“Take care!”- and since then they seemed to have aged.

Wilfredo grasped the rudder, fighting the vibrations and the trembling of the plane. These convulsions and sudden depressurization confirmed that the explosion had ripped an opening in the fuselage, seriously damaging the structure in some point with the danger that the opening would increase. For this reason he was forced to make a pronounced turn and descend to a lesser speed than what was indicated in these cases. If he forced the ship it would disintegrate in the air.

“Lower the landing gear! Flaps in point zero!”

The co-pilot obeyed. He understood what the chief was trying: the pressure of the air on the wheels would increase

the descent. This maneuver is known by pilots as dirtying the plane.

He fought to descend rapidly for another reason: he knew the oxygen released automatically fed the flames. The oxygen valves were opened automatically when the plane's altitude reached between ten thousand five hundred fourteen feet and closed again when it was eight thousand feet. That is why he always checked the altimeter that now marked twelve thousand. He still had to descend four thousand feet more for the valves to stop feeding the fire ball he feared had filled the passenger cabin, by the terrifying screams behind the door.

Bebo discharged the contents of another extinguisher on the bodies of several passengers. When the fires receded, he was paralyzed: covered in foam, totally carbonized were the two bodies of Alex and Magaly intertwined and twisted.

On the seat, close to the couple, he discovered another body, also burned. The arms gripped the seat in a position that Bebo thought impossible.

The flames came back and he began to cough, exhaling the black smoke that threatened to cover him. He withdrew. Reaching the galley he had another coughing attack. Belkys who had recovered for a few moments offered the portable tank and Bebo filled his lungs with oxygen.

“Mother!” she said in a soft voice. “Is there no way to put this fire out and get the smoke out?”

Around her, on the floor and in the narrow toilets, the survivors were gathered, coughing, vomiting, crying and shouting.

The heat in that part of the plane was about sixty degrees.

Bebo returned the mask to Belkys who was on the verge of fainting.

“We should be over the runway”, he told her and Belkys did not seem to listen. The scarce forces she had threatened to abandon her, and the flight attendant held her for the second time to prevent her from falling. He helped her to sit on the rug. He looked around and his eyes stopped at Rosa and Felicita. Both seemed very young, almost children. They were seated, embracing in the interior of one of the toilets and, with their faces close together, were breathing from the same oxygen tank.

Bebo tried to stand up but his legs would not hold him. He let himself fall and dragged himself out of the toilet. He rested his back on the emergency door. He began to lose consciousness of reality and was aware of it. Everything was in chaos. He felt an enormous weight on his wounded leg. He had never gone through something like this and perhaps would not see the end.

“Shit!” He exclaimed and saw Belkys fall beside him, on the rug covered by a thick layer of soot. For the first time, the truth of what had happened hit him like a slap in the face.

In one of the back rows of seats, Robertico gripped the mask. He pressed it and inhaled desperately, but felt that the air did not enter his lungs. The last grain of the seventeen pounds of oxygen of his tank had just been expelled. He could get another but he did not have the strength. The next mask was almost in his reach. He felt his heart beating in his chest and a strong pressure exploding in his head. He was inhaling the

black lethal smoke. A strong breath passed from his lungs to his brains.

To run, flee, escape anywhere was his only alternative. Barely managing, he released his safety belt, rose and ran looking for the exit. When he found it, he began to bang it with legs and arms and finally with his head while he screamed in terror;

“Get me out of here! Get me out of here!”

At his feet, Bebo tried uselessly to take the almost empty portable oxygen tank.

Robertico fell beside him, without strength and dizzy. He let himself fall on the hot and black rug and covered his face with his hands that shook violently.

“I don’t want to die”, he sobbed.

The smoke continued to fill his lungs and now invaded his brain. He coughed repeatedly until he began to retch- deep death rattle like the banging of bones inside his chest. His mouth was open and he tried to scream but could not get any sound out. Then his vision fogged up. He began to move his arms around and shake his legs with violence. A fish on the boat deck.

By that time, four minutes and fifty-seven seconds had passed after the explosion that had caused the death by suffocation or burning of more than fifty passengers.

Suddenly, the release of oxygen was cut and the masks hung limply. In truth very few were able to use them. The soot covered the upper part of doors, screens, seats and, in spite of the opened windows, it was not enough to decontaminate the

air. The wood, cotton, paper and plastic - all materials used in the interior passenger cabin furniture - and other pillows, grills, wool of the seats, when they began to decompose by the heat, let off toxic gases: carbon monoxide, hydrogen cyanide, fluoride acid, chloride acid and nitrogen dioxide.

The inhalation of these toxic gases, combined, is more lethal than when breathed separately. Now, crammed in this steel sarcophagus, the few surviving passengers fought desperately to fill their lungs with the little pure air that entered the plane by the opening and the low altitude vents.

Through the window, Octavio observed down below what was coming closer. For a few seconds he contemplated the space in all its immensity. Lines of all shades of blue. A seagull glided softly on its calm and slow flight. The heat was now intense. The trainer heard the crack of wood and saw the plastic melt.

He screamed, but it was lost amidst others far away. He thought that everyone on the plane had gone crazy. He rested his head against the window and looked up to the sky. The sun was there. In his mind, the image of Leila appeared. He saw her preparing the boy to go to the airport. His eyes clouded up.

OCTAVIO WAS RIGHT. At that time his wife was on the point of leaving for the airport. Before she made sure that Tavito's bladder was empty and checked to see if the pudding was cool. Then she put it in the refrigerator. It was Octavio's favourite dessert. An hour later she reached the airport.

"The flight is delayed", the employee answered and left the counter. He knew that the plane had had an accident but he

was following orders of the manager. On the terrace, she noted an unaccustomed turmoil on the runways that, at first, she thought it was a plane being brought out from the hangar. When it was parked, she discovered that it had the logo of the Cuban Red Cross. Then she went down and repeated her question to the employee.

“At what time does Cubana from Guyana arrive?”

The answer stopped her short. The man had told her that the flight was delayed due to technical problems and advised her to go home and keep in telephone contact.

Leaving the airport with Tavito asleep over her shoulder, four Cuban sports officials got out of a car. None approached her, although they knew her. Leila had been a member of the national fencing team. They only gave a cold wave at a distance and hurried on. During her return home she asked the taxi driver to tune into the radio but heard no disturbing news. When she arrived home she called her brother-in-law. He left for the airport while she put her three-year old boy to sleep and sat on the sidewalk to wait. By midnight Octavio’s brother got out of a car, embraced her and holding back his sobs said:

“They’re all dead”.

Two weeks later they discovered the pudding still in the refrigerator. It hadn’t been touched.

The night of October 6 was a fateful day for the relatives of the travellers of flight 455. In the future nothing in their lives would be the same.

"The many" left the airport the following morning only after the manager assured them for the third time that there were no survivors. They would never get together again. Rosa's father retired shortly after. Then he dedicated his time to watch the women's fencing tournaments, silent and distant, although he had never understood the complexities of fencing.

When, on the following morning, Irene's husband got out of a jeep at the entrance of the farm, the old campesino did not come out onto the road as he was accustomed to do. He heard the news- apparently impassible -while he wrung his hat in his hands. He turned and disappeared in the nearby forest. He returned only the following morning, wet by the dew, his head down and his eyes bloodshot. In the patio in the house, a pig on a spit was half baked that was being devoured by vultures.

Sunday morning he used to sit on the porch of the bohio, leaning back on the stool, against the wall, looking over the newspaper photos of his daughter Irene, alive.

Months later, the Canadian insurance company, owners of the plane, deposited a large sum of money in the hands of the campesino. He returned it to the puzzled lawyer who, in face of the hard look of that man, gave up any idea of insisting.

In Alex's house, the preparations for his marriage were intact. Left on the table were the cake, snacks, cold salad, buns and twenty beer cases and two dozen bottles of rum. On the bed, placed together was the clothing they would have worn that night.

Felicita's mother took ill and died a year later. Then her father and brother moved to a smaller apartment because, as things stood, the house was over-whelming them.

The parents of Robertico no longer took part in official events and kept away from the press. They divided the insurance money into equal parts. It was the first time they agreed on anything without arguing.

Emilia, Bebo's wife, the flight attendant, dressed early that afternoon. She had called the airport and when she heard that the flight was delayed, her hands began to tremble. A while later she repeated the call and asked to speak to the control post. "*The plane had atechanical problem*". There was a great commotion from their side, saying that they were very busy. Emilia noted the disturbance in the voice and waited no longer. She left for the airport.

"*What happened to 455?*" The pilot, seeing his friend's wife looking disturbed and asking that question made him feel that she knew what happened. He embraced her and holding on to his emotions told: "*You have to be strong*".

Emilia fainted.

In Georgetown, capital of Guyana, the parents and brothers of those students were watching television when an announcer interrupted the program and gave the news report.

"*This isn't George's plane, it's another one*", said her mother, trying to convince her husband who was rushing to the phone.

Daniel, the husband of Belkys the stewardess, to whom he was recently married, remained in Barbados for two more weeks. One hour after the catastrophe he was on a motorboat in

the area where the plane had fallen to the sea. He helped to recover the remains of the plane and the passengers. In the morgue he recognized the body of a stewardess, but it was not Belkys. When he learned that Hernán and Lugo were arrested in Port of Spain he went to that neighbouring island and stayed around the police station for almost forty-eight hours. A Cuban official recognized him and when he asked what he was doing there Daniel answered that he was trying to get a gun to kill the two terrorists. Seeing the amazement of the diplomat he added: *“Don’t worry, I’ll shoot myself after so as not to compromise my government.”*

Two days later he was sent back to Havana.

The telegram notifying the acceptance of one of the fencers in the Faculty of Journalism was left on the chest - forgotten for years in the small wooden room where his mother lived.

Reading the roll call, the teacher read his name. All the students stood up and said” *“Present”*.

In Cuba the tragedy caused stupefaction, consternation, a feeling of horror, and as the causes of the disaster were uncovered, a suffocating indignation. For several days, an unending and uninterrupted line silently filed in front of the eight coffins that contained the remains of the bodies of the Cubans recovered.

A solemn act in a central plaza of the city gathered about a million angry people, and for three weeks the telephones of the offices of Cubana de Aviación didn’t stop ringing with condolences for the family of the victims.

Some who never recovered from the tragedy. The father of one of the dead fencers refused to accept the news and

remained in the airport for a week awaiting the arrival of his daughter. *“Some may say I’ve gone crazy”, he confessed to a journalist, “but I wish I really were crazy to believe in my fantasy. Then I’ll see her disembark.”*

Rotman looked at the wall clock and understood that the pilots of Cubana were about to fulfill the five minutes since the report of the fire aboard. But they needed three minutes to touch down. He realized that if a miracle didn’t happen that plane would unavoidably crash.

“Sea landing”, he said to himself and shuddered.

He pressed the talk button of the mike and tried to relieve the dramatic tension in the command cabin of CU-455 saying:

“CU-455 we have a complete emergency and continue hearing you.”

“If they had delayed five minutes in taking flight ...” The manager of the Cubana airline, who heard what Rotman said, looked at him in bewilderment.

Several days later, he would explain his words: *“The plane, due to the direction of the wind, rose in the opposite direction of its destination, Jamaica. Then he made a pronounced turn of one hundred and eighty degrees, a manoeuvre that prevented him from reaching the height rapidly. Situating himself in the 315-385 radials, he rose at three thousand feet a minute. If he had taken off five minutes later the explosion would have occurred at three thousand feet altitude and about twelve miles from the airport and not at a height of eighteen thousand feet and twenty-eight miles distance. He would only need three minutes to return”.*

Another thing that Rotman didn't realize at the time, and which he thought about many times, is that, also, if they had taken off only five minutes later the depressurization caused by the opening in the fuselage would not have released the oxygen masks at three thousand feet altitude, since at that height their use is at the discretion of the captain. Knowing about the fire on board, he would not have set it in function, to prevent the oxygen from contributing to the rapid propagation of the flames: even the crew, using the extinguishers could have put the fire out.

“Yes”, he commented many times when referring to that afternoon. *“They only needed five minutes. But those children were anxious to get home.”*

HE STOOD IN FRONT of the face of the stewardess. She was very pale and her hands were around her throat and then he understood that she had died of suffocation. He took out the photograph of his daughter and wife from his billfold and looked at them for a while. Now his face seemed calm and at rest. His white skin had become a dirty grey. He was covered in soot. He coughed several times. He look so vulnerable that, under the look of that generous man, it seemed that that terrifying reality had dissipated.

A fire blow made the door creak.

Bebo closed his eyes and rested his back and head against the toilet fixture. He took another breath and let fall the empty tank. His eyes were half closed, but his eyes couldn't be seen. His muscles were relaxing and he thought of the little girl at his side and she caressed his hair.

His arms and face were burned and the rest of his body was hot and covered by soot. A cloud of lethal smoke descended and covered his body. His vision clouded and he felt an unbearable pressure in his head. Suddenly his sphincters relaxed and he wet himself. He lay down and lifted his knee to his chest; he curled up, opened his mouth and died.

In the next bathroom, Irene felt coldness in that inferno. A Guyanese student who sought protection there pressed the faucet of the water basin. She swallowed some water, catching it in her hands opened like a flower; with his free hand the Guyanese wet her face. Later he helped her to sit on the toilet and knelt covering the cracks under the door with newspapers in an attempt to stop the smoke.

For a few minutes Irene felt better; at least she stopped coughing. Somehow some decontaminated air entered her lungs. The sight of the boy, who stayed at her side, kneeling very close in that narrow toilet, boosted her spirits. She wanted to talk to him but assumed he wouldn't understand her.

"I'm going to study medicine", he said in perfect Spanish and tried to smile, but his smile vanished at once.

"I'm going to have a baby", she told him and began to cry while she pressed her stomach.

About thirty centimetres from her body, in the waste compartment, the bomb was about to explode.

Wilfredo trembled, perspired, while he blinked furiously, holding on to the rudder. He could hear his own breathing like an animal caught in a trap. Smoke kept filtering into the cabin, and although the masks supplied oxygen it was unavoidable

that some of the toxic emanations pass to the lungs of the three men. The screams from the passenger section had stopped. The copilot took, with his eyes totally opened, the microphone and pressed the carrier again and shouted:

“We’re burning fiercely!”

The message was not received by the control tower because the plane was at very low altitude, but it was registered by the pilots of the Cariwest DQ-650 that was flying over that zone at a greater height.

At that moment the nose of the Cuban plane pointed up to the sky. The co-pilot, panicking, feeling the end near, looked at the captain holding on to the rudder. The tail cables had just burst as a result of the second explosion, the one in the toilet. The copilot misunderstood that Wildredo was trying to gain height. That is why he shouted:

“That is worse, Felo! Take to the water, Felo! Take to the water!”

Rotman shuddered when he heard that voice whose horrific sounds he will never forget for the rest of his life.

Wilfredo was clutching the rudder like someone falling from a high building holds his glasses to prevent them from breaking. His eyes were terribly opened. Then he felt a deep calm, as if time had stopped. He understood that his life ended there, at that time, although the worse was yet to come. At that moment the sea appeared before his eyes.

In the yacht, the tourists were gathered at the bow, watching the unusual flight of that plane that was issuing smoke from the wing and tail. They saw it raise its nose to the sky, seeming to stand still in the air and totally stop. Then it leaned over its right wing and fell.

“Cubana this is Cariwest 650. Can we help you in something?”

Rotman heard in silence. He knew that the DQ-650 was flying at that moment at five thousand feet of altitude above the zone where Cubana should be.

“Cubana this is Cariwest 650. Can we help you in something?”

Again silence. Rotman lowered his head.

The yacht approached. The waters were covered with masses of human flesh. Amidst the remains of the plane and baggage : a red cap with a silver plane on the brim, cassettes, baby clothes, a rattle, a doll with very open eyes, a fencing mask, seat cushions of the plane, several extinguishers, two oxygen bottles and half a dozen hand bags, all black. Like a cross, a sword stuck out of one.

On October 6, 1976, two Venezuelan terrorists hired by two others of Cuba origin, blew up a plane of the Cubana de Aviación airline in mid flight with 73 passengers on board, all civilians.

The Cubana Story

IN PHOTOS



Cuban Mothers in grief



Cubans march with posters of the deceased



The eleven Guyanese victims



Honouring the deceased members of the Cuban Fencing Team



Cubans demand justice



Fidel Castro embraces Carlos Alberto Cremata, son of a Cuban victim, during the ceremony to inaugurate the Cuban Monument in Barbados



Venezuelan Charge d'Affaires, Alvaro Sanchez Cordero, Cuban Ambassador, Sergio Jorge Pastrana, and Barbadian Ambassador, David Comissiong, laying wreaths at the Cubana Monument



Barbados' Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Jerome Walcott, looks on as Cuban Foreign Minister, Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla, lays his flowers at the Cubana Monument

Crash of A Cubana Airline

I

This is the spot
the view from land across water
across black cloud of
smoke and flaming cries

no podemos manejarlo!

and the water hushed
wind still
silence

no podemos manejarlo!

this is the spot
the view from land across water
across sea of salt memories
blue turning to blood
limbs liming lifeless

no podemos manejarlo!
and cubana is down

and from this shaded spot
this shaded experience
this shattering shock
word spread across country
across town

we can't control it!

down

down

cubana is down

down is

sinking down

down

down

down to trinidad

to guyana

down

down to

venezuela

look!

look to

cuba to

elcondor

experience

expert

explosives

cubana is down

cubana is down

down down

and the piper's son

plays around

with a tune on

the table tops of the u.n.

no podemos manejarlo!

no podemos manejarlo!

we can't control it!!!

II

Today
from this spot
this sore line of sorrow
we raise a new anthem
above the waves
to the fallen
a monumental lump
of marble and memory
that we will never swallow

no podemos manejarlo!
no podemos manejarlo!

by Winston Farrell

**IN MEMORIAM
ROLL CALL OF THE
SEVENTY-THREE CUBANA VICTIMS**

Wilfredo Pérez Pérez

Ángel Tomás Rodríguez

Ann Nelson

Miguel Espinosa Cabrera

Ernesto Machin Guzmán

Kim Do Yun

José Ramón Ferrándiz Lefebre

Magaly Grave de Peralta Ferrer

Gordon Sobha

Moraima González Prieto

Marlene González Arias

Silvia Marta Pereira Jorge

Miriam Remedios de la Peña

Juang Ne Ik

Maria Elisa Rodriguez del Rey Bocalandro

Armando Ramos Pagán

Rita Thomas

Armando Armengol Alonso

Valentin Ladrón de Guevara Quesada

Violet Thomas

José Pestana González

Roberto Genovevo Palacios Torres

Ki Bong

Guillermo Valencia Guinot
Eusebio Sánchez Domínguez
Margaret Bradshaw
Lázaro Serrano Mérida
Carlos Coquero Perdomo
Lázaro Justo Otero Madruga
Emilio Castillo Castillo
Carlos Cremata Trujillo
Raymond Persaud
Martí Suárez Sánchez
Jorge de la Nuez Suárez
Tomás Joaquín González Quintana
Jacqueline Williams
Ricardo Cabrera Fuentes
Leonardo Mackenzie Grant
Luis Morales Viego
Carlos Miguel Leyva González
Jan Sang Kyu
Virgen María Felizola García
Ignacio Martínez Gandía
Inés Luaces Sánchez
Milagros Peláez González
Harold Norton
Jesús Gil Pérez
Nancy Uranga Romagoza
José Arencibia Arredondo

Alberto Drake Crespo
Seshnarine Kumar
Cándido Muñoz Hernández
Ramón Infante Garcia
Enrique Figueredo Del Valle
Sabrina Harrypaul
Juan Duany González
Julio Herrera Aldama
Santiago Edenio Hayes Pérez
Orlando López Fuentes
Nelson Fernández Machado
Pak Je Chin
Jesús Méndez Silva
José FernándezGarzón
Demetrio Alfonso González
Manuel Permuy Hernández
Rawle Thomas
Manuel Abelardo Rodriguez Font
Julia Rosa Torres Álvarez
Jesús Robustiano Rojo Quintana
Argelio Reyes Aguilar
Sonia Coto Rodriguez
Alberto Mario Abreu Gil
Domingo Chacon Coello

THE CUBANA MONUMENT: A SACRED SPACE IN BARBADOS



*Members of the Cuban Medical Brigades assembled at the
Cubana Monument in Barbados*



*Barbados' Prime Minister, Mia Amor Mottley and
Cuba's President, Miguel Díaz-Canel*

**LONG LIVE THE SOLIDARITY BETWEEN
CUBA AND BARBADOS!**