

1949: Riders in the Sky
by DC Diamondopolous

Eleven a.m. and not a cloud in the sky as I took off from Oaks Field headed for Miami.

Beside me was my copilot and best-man-to-be Ross, whistling “Riders in the Sky.”

“She sure is swanky, Junior,” Ross shouted above the engine’s hum. He ran his hand over the Cessna’s instrument panel.

“Twenty-first birthday is a biggie.”

“Must have set your old man back a buck or two.” Ross yawned. “Some bachelor party, huh?”

“Those two broads sent me to the moon and back.”

Ross chuckled. “Sure you want to get married?” He cracked his knuckles. “No more fun like last night.”

“Who says?”

Still, I couldn’t wait for my wedding night with Peggy. I’d found the perfect location on Cable Beach to tie the knot. Old fashioned, Peggy wouldn’t have sex before marriage—worth the wait. She was gorgeous, stacked, and in love with me. It didn’t hurt that her father owned a chunk of Miami.

Ross tapped the compass. “It’s going haywire.”

“It happens. Especially in this part of the ocean.” I knew Ross preferred flying over land.

“Clock works,” he added.

The clock on the dash read 12:10, same as my Rolex. The fuel gauge showed just over half a tank. The other dials spun.

“Come in Miami, this is Flight 24,” I yelled over the Cessna’s drone. “Compass not working. Locate me will you, roger?”

“Flight 24, you’re on course.”

The cabin lights flickered.

Ross squirmed.

“Flight 19 disappeared here,” I said in a loud whisper, whooping and pretending to shiver.

“Fat-head.”

A dense fog advanced toward us.

“Miami, this is Flight 24, can we fly above the fog, roger?”

The radio crackled, sputtered, then cutout.

“Now what?” Ross said, breathing hard.

“Don’t worry.” I pulled back the yoke but couldn’t fly above it. Now I worried. “I’ll have to go around it.”

The fog followed our movement. Particles clung to the plane like static electricity. Beads of sweat broke out on my forehead. Since ten, I’d flown with my father in all kinds of weather, but this fog was weird. “I’ve never seen anything like this,” I said, trying to hide my nervousness. “No wisps of mist, no sun rays.”

Ross remained silent—not typical—as the fog swallowed us.

My heart racing, I glance over at him.

“Ross?”

He was slumped in his seat, eyes closed.

“What the hell? Ross! Wake-up!”

Before me, nestled in the fog, appeared the top of a dome.

The Cessna’s engine stopped.

My God we were going to crash. I gasped with fear, when a sudden drowsiness overpowered me. My last sensation was being sucked into a hangar that opened before me.

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Junior awoke shaking. He found himself on his back on a cold slab. Liquid swished around him. A cold clamp covered each eye. He howled. Nothing came out. His arms and legs couldn’t move. The stink of rotten seaweed hovered in the air. A high-pitched note rose from the fluid and pinged nonstop.

Where the hell was he?

Spider-like tentacles ran down his chest. He screamed silently. Something went into his bellybutton, without pain. His heartbeat thrashed in his ears. Voices sounded like creaking doors. Over his right eye, the clamp snapped back. He saw a flash of silver. They plucked out his eye. Then put it back and replaced the clamp. Piss ran down his thigh.

The creatures treated him like a guinea pig, prodding and probing. Where was Ross? Would he see Peggy and his parent again? He begged God to let him live, promised to be a good husband and a better man.

* * *

We found ourselves hurtling through a tunnel.

Ross screamed, “What is this?”

I wrestled to control the Cessna inside the vacuum of a vortex. “Fog’s lifted. Stay calm.”

The walls of the passage were opaque and hazy, wide enough for me to fly through, but closing. Vertical mist-spirals swirled.

I accelerated to 100 knots and kept the plane steady as we flew inside the cavity. If the wings touched the walls I feared we’d be crushed. A speck of blue appeared at the corridors end.

“Is that sky?” Ross asked.

“Think so.”

“God help us,” he cried.

The walls of the vortex closed fast.

We shot out into blue sky. With the Miami skyline visible, I slowed the plane to land and looked behind.

The vortex had vanished. “It’s gone. We made it.”

“Holy mackerel,” Ross whooped. “Great flying, Junior.”

Tears stung my eyes.

The clock on the dash read 12:15, same as my watch. We’d be landing on time at 12:35.

“Miami, this is Flight 24—”

“Where the hell have you been Flight 24?” the controller asked. “Prepare to land.”

I pressed the yoke forward to 50 knots. Ocean Drive never looked so good with its pink and green hotels, palm trees, and beaches.

The landing gear released, we touched down.

On the runway, in his overalls and yellow vest, Fred waved two wands.

As soon as we parked, he darted toward us.

I opened the cabin door.

“Where’ve you been?” Fred hollered. “You’re two hours late.”

“What do you mean? It’s 12:35.” The fuel gauge showed half a tank. If we had flown an extra two hours, it would be near empty. “We’re right on time.”

“No you’re not.” Fred showed me his watch. It read 2:35. “We thought you crashed and sent out a search party.”

The vortex was crazy enough to describe, but I had no explanation for the missing two hours.

Peggy charged out of the departure door and ran toward us. My parents followed.

I jumped out of the seat and sprinted to them.

“We thought you were dead,” Peggy said, sobbing.

“Oh Peggy. I’d never leave you.” I took her in my arms. “I promise to be a good husband and a better man,” I said surprised by my tenderness and an unsettled feeling.