

NIGHTMARE AT 20, 000 FEET

By Richard Matheson

"Seat belt, please," said the stewardess cheerfully as she passed him. Almost as she spoke, the sign above the archway which led to the forward compartment lit up—fasten seat belt—with, below, its attendant caution —

NO SMOKING

Drawing in a deep lungful, Wilson exhaled it in bursts, then pressed the cigarette into the armrest tray with irritable stabbing motions. Outside, one of the engines coughed monstrosly, spewing out a cloud of fume which fragmented into the night air. The fuselage began to shudder and Wilson, glancing through the window, saw the exhaust of flame jetting whitely from the engine's nacelle. The second engine coughed, then roared, its propeller instantly a blur of revolution. With a tense submissiveness, Wilson fastened the belt across his lap. Now all the engines were running and Wilson's head throbbed in unison with the fuselage.

He sat rigidly, staring at the seat ahead as the DC-7 taxied across the apron, heating the night with the thundering blast of its exhausts. At the edge of the runway, it halted. Wilson looked out through the window at the leviathan glitter of the terminal. By late morning, he thought, showered and cleanly dressed, he would be sitting in the office of one more contact discussing one more specious deal the net result of which would not add one jot of meaning to the history of mankind. It was all so damned ... the plane began to move, at first lethargically, like some behemoth struggling to overthrow the pull of its own weight. Then with more speed, forcing off the drag of friction. Wilson, turning to the window, saw the dark runway rushing by faster and faster. On the wing edge, there was a mechanical whining as the flaps descended. Then, imperceptibly, the giant wheels lost contact with the ground, the earth began to fall away. Trees flashed underneath, buildings, the darting quicksilver of car lights. The DC-7 banked slowly to the right, pulling itself upward toward the frosty glitter of the stars. Finally, it leveled off and the engines seemed to stop until Wilson's adjusting ear

caught the murmur of their cruising speed. A moment of relief slackened his muscles, imparting a sense of well-being. Then it was gone.

Wilson sat immobile, staring at the **NO SMOKING** sign until it winked out, then, quickly, lit a cigarette. His stomach felt awful. He glanced up at the signs beside the two lavatories. Both, illuminated, read

OCCUPIED

He pressed out his third cigarette since takeoff and, turning off the overhead light, stared out through the window. Along the cabin's length, people were already flicking out their lights and reclining their chairs for sleep. Wilson glanced at his watch. 11:20. He blew out tired breath. As he'd anticipated, the pills he'd taken before boarding hadn't done a bit of good.

He stood abruptly as the woman came out of the lavatory and, snatching up his bag, he started down the aisle. His system, as expected, gave no cooperation. Wilson stood with a tired moan and adjusted his clothing. Having washed his hands and face, he removed the toilet kit from the bag and squeezed a filament of paste across his toothbrush. As he brushed – one hand braced for support against the cold bulkhead – he looked out through the port. Feet away was the pale blue of the inboard propeller. Wilson visualized what would happen if it were to tear loose and, like a tri-bladed cleaver, come slicing in at him. There was a sudden depression in his stomach. Wilson swallowed instinctively and got some paste-stained saliva down his throat. Gagging, he turned and spat into the sink, then, hastily, washed out his mouth and took a drink. Dear God, if only he could have gone by train; had his own compartment, taken a casual stroll to the club car, settled down in an easy chair with a drink and a magazine. But there was no such time or fortune in this world.

He was about to put the toilet kit away when his gaze caught on the oilskin envelope in the bag. He hesitated, then, setting the small briefcase on the sink, drew out the envelope and undid it on his lap. He sat staring at the oil-glossed symmetry of the pistol. He'd carried it around with him for almost a year now. Originally, when he'd thought about it, it was in terms of money carried, protection from holdup, safety from teenage gangs in the cities he had to attend. Yet far beneath, he'd always known there was no valid reason - except one. A reason he thought more of every day.

How simple it would be ...here ... now...

Abruptly, Wilson sat erect. Lips pressed together, he rewrapped the pistol and thrust it into his bag, putting the briefcase on top of it, zipping the bag shut. Standing, he opened the door and stepped outside, hurrying to his seat and sitting down, sliding the overnight bag precisely into place. He indented the armrest button and pushed himself back.

Now what? he thought.

He didn't want to read, he couldn't sleep. And there were still – he checked his watch – seven to eight hours left before Los Angeles was reached. How was he to spend them? He looked along the cabin and saw that, except for a single passenger in the forward compartment, everyone was asleep. A sudden, overwhelming fury filled him and he wanted to scream, to throw something, to hit somebody.

Wilson was a bad flyer. Excess motion always made him ill. Maybe he should have taken another few dramamines to be on the safe side. And, naturally, his seat was next to the emergency door. He thought about it opening accidentally; about himself sucked from the plane, falling, screaming. Wilson blinked and shook his head. There was a faint tingling at the back of his neck as he pressed close to the window and stared out. He sat there motionless, squinting. He could have sworn – Suddenly, his stomach muscles jerked in violently and he felt his eyes strain forward. There was something crawling on the wing! Wilson felt a sudden, nauseous tremor in his stomach. Dear God, had some dog or cat crawled onto the plane before takeoff and, in some way, managed to hold on? It was a sickening thought. The poor animal would be deranged with terror. Yet, how, on the smooth, wind-blasted surface, could it possibly discover gripping places? Surely that was impossible. Perhaps, after all, it was only a bird or – The lightning flared and Wilson saw that it was a man!

He couldn't move. Stupefied, he watched the black form crawling down the wing. Impossible! Somewhere, cased in layers of shock, a voice declared itself but Wilson did not hear. He was conscious of nothing but the titanic, almost muscle tearing leap of his heart – and of the man outside. Suddenly, like ice-filled water thrown across him, there was a reaction; his mind sprang for the shelter of explanation. A mechanic had, through some incredible oversight, been taken up with the ship and had managed to cling

to it even though the wind had torn his clothes away, even though the air was thin and close to freezing.

Wilson gave himself no time for refutation. Jarring to his feet, he shouted: "Stewardess! Stewardess!" his voice a hollow, ringing sound in the cabin. He pushed the button for her with a stabbing finger. "Stewardess!"

She came running down the aisle, her face tightened with alarm. When she saw the look on his face, she stiffened in her tracks.

"There's a man out there! A man!" cried Wilson.

"What?" Skin constricted on her cheeks, around her eyes.

"Look, look!" Hand shaking, Wilson dropped back into his seat and pointed out the window.

"He's crawling on the –" The words ended with a choking rattle in his throat. There was nothing on the wing. Wilson sat there trembling. For a while, before he turned back, he looked at the reflection of the stewardess on the window. There was a blank expression on her face. At last, he turned and looked up at her. He saw her red lips part as though she meant to speak but she said nothing, only placing the lips together again and swallowing. An attempted smile distended briefly at her features.

"I'm sorry," Wilson said. "It must have been a –" He stopped as though the sentence were completed. Across the aisle a teenage girl was gaping at him with sleepy curiosity.

The stewardess cleared her throat. "Can I get you anything?" she asked.

"A glass of water," Wilson said.

The stewardess turned and moved back up the aisle. Wilson sucked in a long breath of air and turned away from the young girl's scrutiny. He felt the same. That was the thing that shocked him most. Where were the visions, the cries, the pummeling of fists on temples, the tearing out of hair? Abruptly he closed his eyes. There had been a man, he thought. There had, actually, been a man. That's why he felt the same. And yet, there couldn't have been. He knew that clearly.

"Oh, God" –

"Here's your water, sir. "

Twitching sharply, Wilson opened his eyes.

"Would you like a blanket?" inquired the stewardess.

"No." He shook his head. "Thank you," he added, wondering why he was being so polite.

"If you need anything, just ring," she said.

Wilson nodded. Behind him, as he sat with the untouched cup of water in his hand, he heard the muted voices of the stewardess and one of the passengers. Wilson tightened with resentment. Abruptly, he reached down and, careful not to spill the water, pulled out the overnight bag. Unzipping it, he removed the box of sleeping capsules and washed two of them down. Crumpling the empty cup, he pushed it into the seat-pocket in front of him; then, not looking, slid the curtains shut. There – it was ended. One hallucination didn't make insanity.

Wilson felt chilled. It had been so clear, so vivid. How could the eyes see such a thing when it did not exist? How could what was in his mind make the physical act of seeing work to its purpose so completely? He hadn't been groggy, in a daze; nor had it been a shapeless, gauzy vision. It had been sharply three-dimensional, fully a part of the things he saw which he knew were real. That was the frightening part of it. It had not been dreamlike in the least. He had looked at the wing and ...

Impulsively, Wilson drew aside the curtain. Only inches away, separated from him by the thickness of a piece of glass, the man was staring at him. It was a hideously malignant face, a face not human. Its skin was grimy, of a wide pored coarseness; its nose a squat, discolored lump; its lips misshapen, cracked, forced apart by teeth of a grotesque size and crookedness; its eyes recessed and small – unblinking. All framed by shaggy, tangled hair which sprouted, too, in furry tufts from the man's ears and nose, birdlike, down across his cheeks.

Wilson sat riven to his chair, incapable of response. Time stopped and lost its meaning. Function and analysis ceased. All were frozen in an ice of shock. Only the beat of heart went on – alone, a frantic leaping in the darkness. Wilson could not so much as blink. Dull-eyed, breathless, he

returned the creature's vacant stare. Abruptly then, he closed his eyes and his mind, rid of the sight, broke free. It isn't there, he thought. He pressed his teeth together, breath quavering in his nostrils. It isn't there, it simply is not there!

He opened his eyes – to shrink against the seat-back with a gagging inhalation. Not only was the man still there, but he was grinning. Wilson turned his fingers in and dug the nails into his palms until pain flared. He kept it there until there was no doubt in his mind that he was fully conscious. Then, slowly, arm quivering and numb, Wilson reached up for the button which would summon the stewardess. He would not make the same mistake again – cry out, leap to his feet, alarm the creature into flight. He kept reaching upward, a tremor of aghast excitement in his muscles now because the man was watching him, the small eyes shifting with the movement of his arm. He pressed the button carefully once, twice. Now come, he thought. Come with your objective eyes and see what I see – but hurry.

In the rear of the cabin, he heard a curtain being drawn aside and, suddenly, his body stiffened. The man had turned his caliban head to look in that direction. Paralyzed, Wilson stared at him. Hurry, he thought. For God's sake, hurry! It was over in a second. The man's eyes shifted back to Wilson, across his lips a smile of monstrous cunning. Then with a leap, he was gone.

"Yes, sir?"

For a moment, Wilson suffered the fullest anguish of madness. His gaze kept jumping from the spot where the man had stood to the stewardess's questioning face, then back again. Back to the stewardess, to the wing, to the stewardess, his breath caught, his eyes stark with dismay.

"What is it?" asked the stewardess.

It was the look on her face that did it. Wilson closed a vice on his emotions. She couldn't possibly believe him. He realized it in an instant.

"I'm – I'm sorry, " he faltered. He swallowed so dryly that it made a clicking noise in his throat. "It's nothing. I – apologize. "

"Well," she said finally and cleared her throat, "if you ... need anything. "

"Yes, yes. Thank you. Are we – going into a storm?"

The stewardess smiled hastily. "Just a small one," she said. "Nothing to worry about. "

Wilson nodded with little twitching movements. Then, as the stewardess turned away, breathed in suddenly, his nostrils flaring. He felt certain that she already thought him mad but didn't know what to do about it because, in her course of training, there had been no instruction on the handling of passengers who thought they saw small men crouching on the wing. Thought? Wilson turned his head abruptly and looked outside. He stared at the dark rise of the wing, the spouting flare of the exhausts, the blinking lights. He'd seen the man – to that he'd swear.

Suddenly, Wilson thought about war, about the newspaper stories which recounted the alleged existence of creatures in the sky who plagued the Allied pilots in their duties. They called them gremlins, he remembered. Were there, actually, such beings? Did they, truly, exist up here, never falling, riding on the wind, apparently of bulk and weight, yet impervious to gravity?

He was thinking that when the man appeared again. One second the wing was empty. The next, with an arcing descent, the man came jumping down to it. There seemed no impact. He landed almost fragilely, short, hairy arms outstretched as if for balance. Wilson tensed. Yes, there was knowledge in his look. The man – was he to think of it as a man? – somehow understood that he had tricked Wilson into calling the stewardess in vain. Wilson felt himself tremble with alarm. How could he prove the man's existence to others? He looked around desperately.

Like an inquisitive child, the man was squatted on the hitching wing edge, stretching out his right hand toward one of the whirling propellers. As Wilson watched, fascinatedly appalled, the man's hand drew closer and closer to the blurring gyre until, suddenly, it jerked away and the man's lips twitched back in a soundless cry. He's lost a finger! Wilson thought, sickened. But, immediately, the man reached forward again, gnarled finger extended, the picture of some monstrous infant trying to capture the spin of a fan blade. If it had not been so hideously out of place it would have been amusing for, objectively seen, the man, at, that moment, was a comic sight – a fairy tale troll somehow come to life, wind whipping at the hair across his head and body, all of his attention centered on the turn of the propeller.

How could this be madness? Wilson suddenly thought. What self-revelation could this farcical little horror possibly bestow on him? Again and again, as Wilson watched, the man reached forward; again and again jerked back his fingers, sometimes, actually, putting them in his mouth as if to cool them. And, always, apparently checking, he kept glancing back across at his shoulder, looking at Wilson. He knows, thought Wilson. Knows that this is a game between us. If I am able to get someone else to see him, then he loses. If I am the only witness, then he wins. The sense of faint amusement was gone now. Wilson clenched his teeth. Why in hell didn't the pilots see!

Now the man, no longer interested in the propeller, was settling himself across the engine-cowling like a man astride a bucking horse. Wilson stared at him. Abruptly a shudder plaited down his back. The little man was picking at the plates that sheathed the engine, trying to get his nails beneath them. Impulsively, Wilson reached up and pushed the button for the stewardess. In the rear of the cabin, he heard her coming and, for a second, thought he'd fooled the man, who seemed absorbed with his efforts. At the last moment, however, just before the stewardess arrived, the man glanced over at Wilson. Then, like a marionette jerked upward from its stage by wires, he was flying up into the air.

"Yes?" She looked at him apprehensively.

"Will you ... sit down ... please?" he asked.

She hesitated. "Well, I –"

"Please."

She sat down gingerly on the seat beside his. "What is it, Mr. Wilson?" she asked.

He braced himself. "That man is still outside," he said. The stewardess stared at him. "The – the reason I'm telling you this, " Wilson hurried on, "is that he's starting to tamper with one of the engines." She turned her eyes instinctively toward the window. "No, no, don't look," he told her. "He isn't there now. "He cleared his throat viscidly. "He – jumps away whenever you come here. "A sudden nausea gripped him as he realized what she must be thinking. As he realized what he, himself, would think if someone told him such a story, a wave of dizziness seemed to pass across him and he thought:I

am going mad! "The point is this," he said, fighting off the thought. "If I'm not imagining this thing, the ship is in danger."

"Yes," she said.

"I know," he said. "You think I've lost my mind."

"Of course not," she said.

"All I ask is this," he said, struggling against the rise of anger. "Tell the pilots what I've said. Ask them to keep an eye on the wings. If they see nothing – all right. But if they do..."

The stewardess sat there quietly, looking at him.

Wilson's hands curled into fists that trembled in his lap. "Well?" he asked.

She pushed to her feet. "I'll tell them," she said.

Turning away, she moved along the aisle with a movement that was, to Wilson, poorly contrived – too fast to be normal yet, clearly, held back as if to reassure him that she wasn't fleeing.

He felt his stomach churning as he looked out at the wing again. Abruptly, the man appeared again, landing on the wing like some grotesque ballet dancer. Wilson watched him as he set to work again, straddling the engine casing with his thick, bare legs and picking at the plates.

It was at that moment that the man pried up one edge of a plate. Wilson gasped. "Here, quickly!" he shouted, noticing, up ahead, the stewardess and the pilot coming through the cockpit doorway. The pilot's eyes jerked up to look at Wilson, then abruptly, he was pushing past the stewardess and lurching up the aisle.

"Hurry!" Wilson cried.

He glanced out the window in time to see the man go leaping upward. That didn't matter now. There would be evidence.

"What's going on?" the pilot asked, stopping breathlessly beside his seat.

"He's torn up one of the engine plates!" said Wilson in a shaking voice.

"He's what?"

"The man outside!" said Wilson. "I tell you he's –!"

"Mister Wilson, keep your voice down!" ordered the pilot.

Wilson's jaw went slack.

"I don't know what's going on here," said the pilot, "but –"

"Will you look?!" shouted Wilson.

"Mister Wilson, I'm warning you."

"For God's sake!" Wilson swallowed quickly, trying to repress the blinding rage he felt. Abruptly, he pushed back against his seat and pointed at the window with a palsied hand. "Will you, for God's sake, look?" he asked.

Drawing in an agitated breath, the pilot bent over. In a moment, his gaze shifted coldly to Wilson's. "Well?" he asked.

Wilson jerked his head around. The plates were in their normal position. "Oh, now wait," he said before the dread could come. "I saw him pry that plate up."

"Mister Wilson, if you don't –"

"I said I saw him pry it up," said Wilson.

The pilot stood there looking at him in the same withdrawn, almost aghast way as the stewardess had.

Wilson shuddered violently. "Listen, I saw him!" he cried. The sudden break in his voice appalled him.

In a second, the pilot was down beside him. "Mister Wilson, please," he said. "All right, you saw him. But remember there are other people aboard. We mustn't alarm them."

Wilson was too shaken to understand at first. "You mean you've seen him then?" he asked.

"Of course," the pilot said, "but we don't want to frighten the passengers. You can understand that. "

"Of course, of course, I don't want to –" Wilson felt a spastic coiling in his groin and lower stomach. Suddenly, he pressed his lips together and looked at the pilot with malevolent eyes. "I understand," he said.

"The thing we have to remember –" began the pilot.

"We can stop now," Wilson said.

"Sir?"

Wilson shuddered. "Get out of here," he said.

"Mister Wilson, what ?"

"Will you stop?" Face whitening, Wilson turned from the pilot and stared out at the wing, eyes like stone. He glared back suddenly. "Rest assured I'd not say another word!" he snapped.

"Mr. Wilson, try to understand our –"

Wilson twisted away and stared out venomously at the engine. From a corner of his vision, he saw two passengers standing in the aisle looking at him. Idiots! his mind exploded. He felt his hands begin to tremble and, for a few seconds, was afraid that he was going to vomit. It's the motion, he told himself. The plane was bucking in the air now like a storm-tossed boat. He realized that the pilot was still talking to him and, refocusing his eyes, he looked at the man's reflection in the window. Beside him, mutely somber, stood the stewardess. Blind idiots, both of them, thought Wilson. He did not indicate his notice of their departure. Reflected on the window, he saw them heading toward the rear of the cabin. They'll be discussing me now, he thought. Setting up plans in case I grow violent.

The little man dropped down again and Wilson saw that what he'd thought was correct – the man had pressed the plate back into place before jumping away, for now he was prying it up again and it was raising easily, peeling back like skin excised by some grotesque surgeon. The motion of that wing was very broken but the man seemed to have no difficulty staying balanced.

Once more Wilson felt panic. What was he to do? No one believed him. If he tried to convince them any more, they'd probably restrain him by force.

The little man had glanced across his shoulder as the pilot passed, as if he knew there was no need to leap off any more, that Wilson's capacity for interfering was at an end.

Wilson suddenly trembled with mind-searing rage. I'll kill you! he thought! You filthy little animal, I'll kill you! Outside, the engine faltered. It lasted only for a second, but, in that second, it seemed to Wilson as if his heart had, also, stopped. He pressed against the window, staring. The man had bent the cowling plate far back and now was on his knees, poking a curious hand into the engine.

"Don't," Wilson heard the whimper of his own voice begging. "Don't." Again, the engine failed. Wilson looked around in horror. Was everyone deaf? He raised his hand to press the button for the stewardess, then jerked it back. No, they'd lock him up, restrain him somehow. And he was the only one who knew what was happening, the only one who could help. "God!" Wilson bit his lower lip until the pain made him whimper. He twisted around again and jolted.

"No!" - Wilson was shaking so badly now he couldn't stop. No one had heard. No one knew. Suddenly, Wilson bent over and slid his overnight bag out from under the seat. Unzipping it, he jerked out his briefcase and threw it on the carpeting. Then, reaching in again, he grabbed the oilskin envelope and straightened up. From the corners of his eyes, he saw the stewardess coming back and pushed the bag beneath the seat with his shoes, shoving the oilskin envelope beside himself. He sat there rigidly, breath quavering in his chest, as she went by. Then he pulled the envelope into his lap and untied it. His movements were so feverish that he almost dropped the pistol. He caught it by the barrel, then clutched at the stock with white knuckled fingers and pushed off the safety catch. He glanced outside and felt himself grow cold. The man was looking at him. Wilson pressed his shaking lips together. It was impossible that the man knew what he intended. He swallowed and tried to catch his breath. He shifted his gaze to where the stewardess was handing some pills to the passenger ahead, then looked back at the wing. The man was turning to the engine once again, reaching in.

Wilson's grip tightened on the pistol. He began to raise it. Suddenly, he lowered it. The window was too thick. The bullet might be deflected and kill one of the passengers. He shuddered and stared out at the little man. Again the engine failed and Wilson saw an eruption of sparks cast light across the man's animal features.

He braced himself. There was only one answer.

He looked down at the handle of the emergency door. There was a transparent cover over it. Wilson pulled it free and dropped it. He looked outside. The man was still there, crouched and probing at the engine with his hand. Wilson sucked in trembling breath. He put his left hand on the door handle and tested. It wouldn't move downward. Upward there was play. Abruptly, Wilson let go and put the pistol in his lap. No time for argument, he told himself. With shaking hands, he buckled the belt across his thighs. When the door was opened, there would be a tremendous rushing out of air. For the safety of the ship, he must not go with it. Now. Wilson picked the pistol up again, his heartbeat staggering. He'd have to be sudden, accurate. If he missed, the man might jump onto the other wing – worse – onto the tail assembly where, inviolate, he could rupture wires, mangle flaps, destroy the balance of the ship. No, this was the only way. He'd fire low and try to hit the man in the chest or stomach. Wilson filled his lungs with air. Now, he thought. Now.

The stewardess came up the aisle as Wilson started pulling at the handle. For a moment, frozen in her steps, she couldn't speak. A look of stupefied horror distended her features and she raised one hand as if imploring him. Then, suddenly, her voice was shrilling above the noise of the engines. "Mr. Wilson, no!"

"Get back!" cried Wilson and he wrenched the handle up. The door seemed to disappear. One second it was by him, in his grip. The next, with a hissing roar, it was gone. In the same instant, Wilson felt himself enveloped by a monstrous suction which tried to tear him from his seat. His head and shoulders left the cabin and, suddenly, he was breathing tenuous, freezing air. For a moment, eardrums almost bursting from the thunder of the engines, eyes blinded by the arctic winds, he forgot the man. It seemed he heard a prick of screaming in the maelstrom that surrounded him, a distant shout.

Then Wilson saw the man. He was walking across the wing, gnarled form leaning forward, talon twisted hands outstretched in eagerness. Wilson flung his arm up, fired. The explosion was like a popping in the roaring violence of the air. The man staggered, lashed out and Wilson felt a streak of pain across his head. He fired again at immediate range and saw the man go flailing backward – then, suddenly, disappear with no more solidity than a paper doll swept in a gale. Wilson felt a bursting numbness in his brain. He felt the pistol torn from failing fingers. Then all was lost in winter darkness.

He stirred and mumbled. There was a warmness trickling in his veins, his limbs felt wooden. In the darkness, he could hear a shuffling sound, a delicate swirl of voices. He was lying, face up, on something – moving, joggling. A cold wind sprinkled on his face, he felt the surface tilt beneath him. He sighed. The plane was landed and he was being carried off on a stretcher. His head wound, likely, plus an injection to quiet him.

"Nuttiest way of tryin' to commit suicide I ever heard of, " said a voice somewhere.

Wilson felt the pleasure of amusement. Whoever spoke was wrong, of course - as would be established soon enough when the engine was examined and they checked his wound more closely. Then they'd realize that he'd saved them all. Wilson slept without dreams.

The End